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## NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

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### **Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa**

Diana K. Davis and Edmund Burke III, eds.

Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2011, 286 pp., \$59.95 Hardback / \$29.95 Paperback

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In the last half-decade scholars of the Middle East have begun to take environmental history seriously. Occasional examples emerged prior to this time, including a few addressing the region's limited water resources, as well as notable works such as Diana K. Davis's *Resurrecting the Granary of Rome* (Ohio University Press, 2007) and Toby Jones's *Desert Kingdom* (Harvard University Press, 2010). The field expanded dramatically following a 2010 special issue of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* focusing on environmental issues. 2011 was a particularly important year for the field with Cambridge University Press publishing two award-winning books: Alan Mikhail's *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt*, which explores the management of natural resources in Ottoman Egypt, and Sam White's *The Climate of Rebellion in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, which addresses the impact of the little Ice Age. Since that time Mikhail has published *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt* (Oxford University Press, 2013) and edited *Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa* (Oxford University Press, 2013). Others have contributed books covering disease, natural resources, and other subjects.

*Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa* was also published in 2011 and represents the first edited volume to focus specifically on Middle Eastern environmental history. The collection covers a great deal of geographical space, with three chapters focusing on Egypt, two addressing colonial North Africa, two centered on Palestine/Israel, and one each covering Turkey and the Persian/Arabian Gulf. Both the individual parts and an important debate underlying the entire volume represent a wonderful contribution to the new but rapidly growing field of Middle Eastern environmental history.

The underlying tension within the volume centers on the meaning of "environmental imaginary," a theoretical frame employed in two very different ways by contributing authors. Davis's introduction offers one interpretation: an "environmental imaginary," she explains, is "the constellation of ideas that groups of humans develop about a given landscape, usually local or regional, that commonly include assessments about that environment as well as how it came to be in its current state" (p. 3). The implication is that such ideas about nature are *genuinely held* by certain groups of people. Other chapters, however, suggest that "environmental imaginaries" are *knowingly fabricated* in pursuit of particular political or economic goals.

Those scholars who assume genuine belief, however misguided, present environmental imaginaries as a new angle on a standard critique of Orientalism. Europeans colonizers arrived in the region with preconceived notions not only of Arabs and Islam, but also of Arabia, the Sahara, the Nile, and desert oases, imaginaries based on biblical imagery and a glorified Roman past. Colonial administrators used this imagined environmental past to blame local inhabitants for the degradation of the land. Developmentalist Europeans then sought to "improve," "restore," "normalize" or "repair" the land (p. 4). If North Africa was

once the granary of Rome, France shall make it so again! If Mesopotamia, as the cradle of civilization, once flowed with milk and honey, Britain must restore the land so badly damaged by the natives! It's a compelling frame, and the chapters focused specifically on this version of environmental imaginaries complement each other well.

Among the most successful chapters is Davis's "Restoring Roman Nature." In clear and engaging prose Davis argues that "the imperative of restoring what was incorrectly perceived as a deforested and desertified environment to its mythical former fertility under Roman administration became... an integral part of notions of French imperial and, to a certain degree, national identity" (p. 60). Using a wide variety of sources, many from Frenchmen living in North Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Davis convincingly establishes the French vision of North Africa's environmental past (a fertile granary of Rome) as well as the French belief in the Arabs' destruction of the region. Since French national identity was, according to Davis, closely tied to French claims of carrying the Roman banner back to Africa, French administrators used this imagined environmental history to embark upon major construction projects. They reforested Algeria with eucalyptus trees (native only to Australia), planted vast fields of wheat in Morocco, and established extensive olive and fruit orchards in Tunisia (pp. 72-3). Of course, rebuilding such a depleted environment also meant that the French depopulated both forests and lands designated to be "reforested" where North African Arabs and Berbers earned their livelihood. In the imagined history of Roman North Africa there were no Arabs, so the colonial policy did not consider their needs.

Another notable chapter is Priya Satia's examination of British imaginings of Iraq's environment, "A Rebellion of Technology," which is based on a similar understanding of environmental imaginary. For the British in Iraq, she explains, there were "two contrasting images," the Fertile Crescent and the barren desert (p. 23). Her goal is to explain how "Iraq became the site of such dramatic environmental imagining and how, in the early twentieth century, British fascination with nature's strange countenance there ironically produced a colonial state with a narrowly technical vision" (p. 23). Ultimately the British supported the use of airplanes for controlling Iraq, firmly believing that Iraq, more than anywhere else, was a perfect fit for this new technology. It was flat and arid, with long expanses difficult to traverse on land but easy to survey from the air. Despite contemporary historians' acceptance of this claim, Satia argues that air power was actually unsuccessful due to "pilot disorientation," "visibility problems," and the Arabs' ability to "hide in watercourses, hillocks, and other features of the allegedly 'featureless' landscape" (p. 40), failures directly linked to an erroneously imagined environment.

The contributions above clearly suggest that colonial administrators firmly believed in their interpretation of the environment. Among the book's more creative chapters is Leila Harris's account of environmental change in contemporary southeastern Turkey, which provides an interesting contrast of the two versions of environmental imaginaries. She "emphasize[s] a narrative approach that calls attention to stories that are told about environmental issues," incorporating governmental views, scientific perspectives, and farmers' opinions, among others. There is a definite sense in Harris's chapter that some of the actors in question are sharing stories that are, perhaps, communally held, while others are *making up stories* "in order to contest [other] imaginaries" (p. 194). In contrast to European misunderstandings of Middle Eastern environments based on their readings of biblical and classical texts, Harris's analysis provides a bridge to contributions that highlight *fabricated* environmental imaginings. Rather than "a constellation of ideas," these writers interpret environmental imaginaries as propaganda designed to justify a particular end.

Jeannie Sowers elucidates the history of the (still unbuilt) New Valley Project, a "parallel Nile" that is meant to provide Egypt with a second river valley for farming and

population distribution, by analyzing perspectives from Egyptian water experts, agribusiness firms, Egyptian nationalist reformers, Mubarak-era officials, environment scientists, and opposition journalists. It is a well-researched and written account, with a theoretical focus based on political scientist Maarten Hajer's concept of "story-lines." For Sowers, story-lines are a purposeful explanation in order to justify technological intervention. In discussing arguments for the New Valley Project, Sowers describes the governmental imaginary as "the Mubarak regime's propaganda" (p. 168), and highlights the importance of investors in the creation of governmental story-lines.

A merger between political and environmental imaginaries in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is the focus of Samer Alatout's essay on the United States' Johnston Plan to create a unified water management system throughout the Jordan River watershed rather than following national political boundaries. For Alatout, both the political and environmental imaginaries present in this situation were clearly created for a purpose: to strengthen political boundaries and maximize land holdings. The other chapter focusing on this region is Shaul Cohen's explanation of why there is no real Israeli or Palestinian environmentalism. The answer is that environmentalism is fully subservient to the nationalist cause—once again a strong example of an environmental imaginary put to use very purposefully, in this case for political purposes.

As Leila Harris points out, this book takes serious the need highlighted by William Cronon to "tell not only stories about nature but also the stories about stories about nature" (p. 207). *Environmental Imaginaries* offers competing methods of interpreting those stories. Assessing motive can be a tricky business, but in this collection scholars are divided into two camps: those (generally writing about the colonial period) who accept imagined environments as culturally genuine, and those (most often writing about more recent times) who interpret imaginaries as purposefully created stories. This is not an insignificant detail: are colonial administrators more or less to blame for damage inflicted in the name of recreating a biblical Middle East in which they really believed? Would Palestinians and Israelis be more apt to cooperate on environmental issues if they did not question each other's political motives? This book raises the question, why do historians interpret colonial powers and more local or regional actors in such different ways?

Many of the individual chapters provide important contributions to the new push for an environmental history of the Middle East. The book's underlying tension between "genuine" and "fabricated" imaginaries leads to a sense of disjointedness at times. Yet this question is essential to understanding how people interpret and portray the environment at different times and in different places, and offers a compelling opening for future research on the subject.