

EDITORIAL FOREWORD

When three articles with an environmental history theme were accepted in quick succession through our peer review process, it seemed like an opportunity to organize an *IJMES* Roundtable on how the incorporation of environmental history into Middle East studies affects our understanding of the region's past and present. We did not know that, as this issue was going to press, the United States would be facing what is widely considered the worst environmental disaster in its history, with over two million gallons of oil pouring into the Gulf of Mexico every day. As Giancarlo Casale points out in his contribution to the Roundtable, the catastrophe underscores both the concerns of today's students and the need for a reevaluation of the humanities that may culminate in a full-fledged "environmental turn."

Yet the three articles we present here would hardly seem to fulfill what Casale describes (with some humor) as the new demand of his university administration for humanities scholarship that provides "solutions" to today's environmental problems. They all deal with periods prior to the 20th century, and none look at ongoing environmental degradation except, in one case, as a discourse to be critiqued. Together they suggest the range of approaches and subject matters that might fall under the category of "environmental history." What the three articles have in common is not so much an interest in nature—which has long been a major concern of Marxist historians, among others—but an insistence that what we call "nature" is not composed solely of static and passive material, that it is not simply a set of resources to be extracted, worked on, and used by humans. It has powers of its own and actively shapes human history.

Thus, Sam White calls for a revision to the standard historical narratives on Ottoman disease by looking at, among other things, the role of environmental conditions in shaping Ottoman mortality from 1500 to 1800. Alan Mikhail challenges the imperial "hub-and-spoke" model of Ottoman historiography by examining the irrigation system of Fayyum in 18th-century Ottoman Egypt, showing how it connected various parts of the empire and arguing that its functioning was a constant negotiation between local Egyptian knowledge, Ottoman bureaucracy, and "the agency of natural processes such as rainfall, siltation, and plant growth." Finally, Arash Khazeni argues that 19th-century Persianate travel accounts about the Central Eurasian steppes were not only "part of the global imperial venture to classify and reclaim the natural world" but were also actively "marked by the material encounter with the steppes."

The five short essays in the roundtable offer a diverse range of perspectives on the question of how an environmental approach might affect scholarship on the Middle East. One recurring theme, raised in different ways by Diana K. Davis, Edmund Burke III, and

Richard Bulliet, is the role of pastoralism in shaping the region's history. Another is the call to remain cautious and critical of potential pitfalls in the practice of environmental history. Several authors warn of a turn (or return) to environmental determinism. Davis criticizes narratives of "environmental orientalism" that are historically embedded in colonial power relations. And both Casale and Aaron Shakow turn a critical—though far from dismissive—eye toward the links between environmental history and science.

The second main focus of this issue, and the topic of two full-length articles, is the study of post civil war Lebanon. Craig Larkin draws on the concept of "postmemory" and his own interviews with Lebanese youth to explore the "memory of a generation of Lebanese who have grown up dominated not by traumatic events but by narrative accounts of events that preceded their birth." Nisreen Salti and Jad Chaaban analyze the allocation of public resources by successive postwar Lebanese governments, finding that public funds have been channeled "along a vector remarkably consistent with political concern for sectarian balance" rather than equitable development or social justice and that Lebanese confessionality has been "further institutionalized in the new constitution as amended by the Ta'if Accords."

In this issue's review article, Dina Le Gall looks at how recent books on Sufis and saints signal "a remarkable transformation in scholarship on Sufism." This includes greater historical contextualization of Sufi movements and practitioners as well as new challenges to the paradigms of decline and elite versus popular religion.

There are a few recent changes in the journal's format. This is the second issue featuring an *IJMES* Roundtable, which is essentially a revival of the "Question and Pensées" section launched by our editorial predecessors, Judith E. Tucker and Sylvia Whitman. The name change reflects our efforts to encourage presubmission discussion among the authors by circulating drafts of one or more essays in advance and/or launching an e-mail discussion among all the contributors. Another change to *IJMES*, introduced in this issue, is that each full-length article will now begin with an abstract. Although this has traditionally been a feature of more science-oriented journals, the rise of new media has increased its usefulness for the humanities. We thank Nikki Keddie for suggesting this format change as well as for calling for more frequent editorial forewords to highlight the main themes in each issue and general *IJMES* news.

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