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# Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa, Alan Mikhail, ed., (Review)

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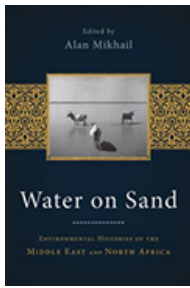
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## ***Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa***

**By:** Alan Mikhail, Editor, editor

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### ***Review by***

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This volume, written by multiple authors, attempts to bridge the gap between Middle Eastern studies and environmental studies. Its editor argues that environmental studies has heretofore lacked a focus on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), while MENA studies have lacked a focus on the environment. Most notably, this volume does not concentrate on the presumed inherent fragility of Middle Eastern ecosystems, as do earlier works on the topic; nor on their inherent unsuitability for human settlement. Its focus remains on the transformative nature of human effects on the environment, especially within the relatively short term of decades or centuries rather than millennia. Also, its chapters take pains to include not only geological, geographical or meteorological data, but also the “mass of human observations, anecdotes, poetry, narratives, bureaucratic records, and chronicles recorded on paper about relationships between humans and other parts of the environment” (p. 5). Insofar as the book’s chapters exhibit continuity, it certainly accomplishes this goal, in addition to providing a great deal of material to reflect upon for scholars of other disciplines within MENA studies.

The volume’s first chapter is its most general, and in many ways its most compelling. J. R. McNeil of Georgetown University enumerates the various geographical, environmental and climactic “eccentricities,” (p. 29) that characterize the MENA region. Notably, this is the volume’s one chapter that does not pay tremendous heed to documentable human sources. Rather, it focuses on the physical sciences, making the argument that the eccentricities of the region prohibit broad expanses of continual settlement. Furthermore, because the expanses of arable land and grassland were not broad swaths with long, continuous borders, but rather small regions with fractal and often changing borders, McNeil calls this the “mosaic” of grassland and arable land: “This fragmented pattern maximized the interaction between pastoralists and farmers, between tribal confederations and agrarian states” (p. 34). This interaction led in turn to lactose tolerance among adults—an example of the environment’s modifying humanity rather than the other way round. The rewards of exchange between pastoralists and farmers, “combined with the good transport opportunities afforded by the interpenetration of sea and land, and with the abundance of pack animals... encouraged commercial development very early in the region’s history” (p. 36). Large agrarian empires were simply unable to form as they could in many other parts of the world.

In the subsequent chapter, Richard W. Bulliet of Columbia University goes into great detail with documented human sources in order to explain why the number of large mills for grinding grain, as well as the status of the miller, was so much higher in Western Europe during the medieval period than it was in the Middle East. Because Western Europe essentially lacked marginal lands suitable only for pastoralism, increased animal husbandry of necessity decreased the plant food available for human consumption; thus, Western Europeans turned to water power and wind power to grind their grain. By contrast, the essentially zero cost of fodder in the MENA made it more economical to use animal power for the same purpose. Bulliet includes documents from 13th century England detailing the relative costs of maintaining working animals, as well as modern name registries, in order to buttress his conclusions. Whereas Smith and Miller, in their various translations, are both extremely common surnames in nearly all populations derived from Western European origins, the word for “Miller” in Arabic is much, much less common than the equivalent for “Smith”. Bulliet argues that this speaks to the comparatively low status of the miller in the MENA, given that milling with animal power did not require the technical expertise necessary to maintain and operate complicated machinery. Bulliet then goes on to use modern documentation of the increasing populations of camels and donkeys in Pakistan to illustrate how animal power in the larger MENA region can still serve as an economical substitute for machine power. This is the sort of well-sourced, comparative analysis that makes *Water on Sand* a valuable addition to the library of any scholar of the MENA interested in how environmental studies might pertain to their particular subfield.

In the following chapter, Sam White of Oberlin College addresses the “Little Ice Age” of the early 17th century and the disastrous effects even a very small climactic shift could have upon marginal regions—in this case, the economic and political stability of the Ottoman Empire. Subsequent chapters examine fishing techniques in Ottoman Istanbul; the cyclical effect of plague on the population of Cairo in the 18th century; the equestrian culture of Central Asia; ecological and political changes wrought by the construction of the Aswan Dam in Egypt; the environmentalist movement in Lebanon; the role of water as at least as important as oil in the making of the modern Saudi state; and the history and politics of land reclamation

in Egypt. Of note among these chapters is the work of Diana K. Davis of the University of California. Davis, who explores the means by which a superficial concern for the natural environment was used by French colonists in North Africa for political purposes, to deprive native pastoralists of their land rights. Davis provides repeated examples of colonial authorities' framing the traditional activities of pastoral peoples as disruptive to the natural environment: "Such environmental disruption, the French story claimed, had been occurring since the Arab nomad 'invasions' of the eleventh century, the so-called Hilalian invasion. This claim was based on a combination of observation of the landscape, unfamiliarity with traditional Algerian land-use practices, and a highly selective reading of certain medieval era texts like the work of Ibn Khaldun... what the French never understood during the colonial period was that traditional North African land-use practices were largely ecologically appropriate and thus 'sustainable' for the population levels of the early to mid-nineteenth century" (p. 164-5).

Davis is perhaps too generous to the French, but nevertheless, successfully makes her point that environmentalism, as in so many other regions and eras, was intimately tied to politics.

*Water on Sand* will aid most any scholar interested in expanding the scope with which they view their particular sub-field. Many of the chapters may be too specific for direct relevance, but they are all well-sourced, well-written, well-argued, and often quite interesting. The scholars, editor and publishers are to be commended.

