


BOOK REVIEW

State, Peasants, and Land in Mid-Nineteenth Century Egypt

Maha A. Ghalwash (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2023). Pp. 328. \$69.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9781649032775

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Historians have long sought to understand how Egypt's large class of peasant cultivators weathered the upheavals of the 19th century. As the source of Egypt's economic power, its agrarian workforce is rightfully deserving of such attention. And, as Maha Ghalwash demonstrates, there are still many archival records relating to their circumstances that have yet to be explored. In *State, Peasants, and Land in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Egypt*, Ghalwash examines taxation, law, and landholding patterns during the reigns of Muhammad `Ali's lesser-known successors `Abbas Pasha (r. 1848–54) and Sa`id Pasha (r. 1854–63), offering a detailed and accurate account of the peasantry's socioeconomic position at mid-century.

Ghalwash's primary objective is to challenge the view that the rural policies of `Abbas and Sa`id led to widespread dispossession of the peasant cultivators and their impoverishment. She contends that Egyptian policymakers at mid-century were guided by a principle that they shared with the Ottoman elite in Istanbul, namely, that "the state was to maximize its revenues while also maintaining the productive capability of its subjects" (p. 4). Additionally, she sets out to demonstrate that laws and tax policies were not only designed to keep peasants secure and productive on their own holdings but that these efforts were largely successful. Ghalwash clearly wishes to avoid treating peasant cultivators as passive beings who are acted upon by administrators, and highlights how cultivator "engagement" with administrators informed revisions to law and administrative procedure. In other words, Ghalwash seeks to show that the mid-century Egyptian state was the opposite of the rapacious entity that historians frequently assume it to be. On the contrary, it was attentive to peasant cultivators, and enacted policies that benefitted them. Not all Ghalwash's readers will agree that rural policies were beneficial to peasant cultivators, but she makes a compelling case that administrators were paying close attention to production at the village level. As a result, this book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of how rural policies were crafted.

Given Ghalwash's desire to present the mid-19th century as a time when Egyptian administrators advanced the welfare of cultivator communities, it is unsurprising that she builds upon Ehud Toledano's rehabilitation of `Abbas Pasha in *State and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Egypt*. Toledano presented `Abbas as a talented administrator and part of a Turco-Circassian elite that was "Ottoman" in its cultural and political inclinations. While this portrait generated some skepticism when it was published in 1990, the view of the Egyptian elite as sharing cultural affinities with their Istanbul-based peers is now the mainstream view of the field. For her part, Ghalwash goes a long way in corroborating Toledano's claim that `Abbas ran a competent administration. Now and then her claims that mid-century policies were designed to and did benefit peasant cultivators—in particular, the poorest cultivators—seem overstated. However, her evidence does solidly support her

contention that cultivators enjoyed greater stability and state accommodation in the mid-19th century than they experienced either before or afterward during that tumultuous century.

One great strength of the book is that the brevity of the period covered allows the author to examine her topic with admirable depth and breadth. Ghalwash consulted the multiple law codes issued in this period on ownership rights and taxes, land-tax registers, tax-reassessment registers, court records from both the shari‘a and “secular” courts, and registers of landholdings for four sample villages. These four villages, whose cultivator communities are often the focal point in each chapter, are located in the Nile Delta, or Lower Egypt. One could therefore question the scope of Ghalwash’s data. Are the trends identified by her representative of Egypt as a whole? Or, should she have presented them as pertaining only to the Delta? Ever since the publication of Zeinab Abul-Magd’s *Imagined Empires: A History of Revolt in Egypt*, historians have been more circumspect about presuming that socioeconomic trends prevailing in the Delta were necessarily replicated in Upper Egypt. Aside from this quibble, Ghalwash is to be commended for consulting this wide variety of sources and producing a painstakingly thorough analysis of rural life.

The first three chapters present what Ghalwash refers to as “institutional context” (p. 21). Chapter 1 deals with the Land Codes of 1847, 1855, and 1858; Chapter 2 examines tax assessment, while Chapter 3 takes up tax collection. In these chapters, the author convincingly paints a picture of large numbers of peasants, dislocated by the policies and public works projects of the Muhammad `Ali era, seeking a return to villages where they had previously cultivated modest tracts of land. The measures described by Ghalwash in these chapters suggest that administrators often worked aggressively to reestablish this population with the goal of maximizing both the amount of land under cultivation and the number of people productively engaged in cultivation. In her discussion of these measures, Ghalwash truly shines. For example, her discussion of *ramya*—an administrative means of taking land from those who could not cultivate and redistributing it to those who could—makes it clear why intimately detailed studies such as hers are so valuable. The practice of *ramya* was rife with potential for dispossessing those with the least means and clout at the expense of those better situated. However, Ghalwash’s delve into the granular details of its beneficiaries shows that in this period it was an important means for smallholders and landless peasants to acquire land. On the other hand, she identifies several revisions in the workings of *ramya* that from 1858 would ultimately reorient it toward benefitting more prosperous cultivators. Similarly, across these chapters she acknowledges, on several occasions, that the administrative policies that most helped the poorest and least productive members of the peasantry were quickly altered or abandoned.

Ghalwash’s goal in these first three chapters is to show that administrators struck a balance between maximizing revenues and “protecting the economic viability of the peasantry” (p. 22). Given her observations on *ramya* and many of her findings, however, it is not clear to me that administrators saw their actions to secure a smallholding peasantry as a benevolent gesture that was in tension with the state’s need for revenue. It is entirely possible that administrators took action benefiting smallholders because they did not believe that revenues could be maximized without a peasantry of productive smallholders. This belief was prevalent in the Ottoman theory of statecraft that Ghalwash herself has identified as an important influence on Egyptian administrators. Perhaps Egyptian administrators simply did not believe that an agrarian economy dominated by large estates held by privileged households and tended by landless tenant sharecroppers would yield as much tax revenue as one sustained by peasant smallholders. In short, Ghalwash’s work raises more questions about what kind of rural economy Egypt’s modernizing administrators sought to establish than she acknowledges. It is also possible that the administrators’ motive was more political than fiscal. Attempts to settle uprooted and indigent peasants and to ensure their access to a means of subsistence may have been made to preserve civil peace.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the size of cultivator holdings in the four sample villages, with Chapter 5 exploring the situation of peasant women. Just as the first three chapters were able to dispel the notion of administrative indifference to the peasantry, Chapter 4 demolishes the sweeping generalization that the peasants were reduced to landless poverty in the mid-19th century. What emerges, instead, is a far more complex picture in which a small number of holders, typically two to four, controlled approximately half of the village lands, leaving the remaining land divided among the village cultivators in holdings that were mostly small, typically between one and two feddans. Ghalwash's characterization of these precarious circumstances as a modest improvement for the peasantry since the reign of Muhammad `Ali is perhaps sunnier than the data warrants, but she is undoubtedly correct that this is not a picture of ruin. Her argument that women saw a small, but meaningful, shift toward greater acceptance of their rights to inherit and hold land is persuasive and well-supported.

The most serious shortcoming of *State, Peasants, and Land in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Egypt* is that the author declines to explain the ultimate significance of her findings. She establishes that for a brief period in the middle of the 19th century Egyptian cultivators experienced a moment of relative respite and security in between two periods where their solvency and their grip on the land were under far greater threat. But why does this finding matter? Does knowing of this respite, for instance, change our understanding of how "modernization" unfolded in Egypt? Ghalwash's decision to frame her conclusions narrowly and to eschew considering the broader implications of her work deprives her study of a more forceful historiographic intervention. Nevertheless, future scholars working on rural history in Egypt will surely thank her for this contribution to the field. Rich with detail and well-organized, this book provides a panoramic view of the realities of village landholding in the mid-19th century.