

In the face of such changes, Frembgen's research acquires a double value. Soon it will not only be an important ethnographic documentation, but also a precious historical one. His text is rigorous and very informative, and lavishly illustrated with high-quality photographs, to the point that we may regard these as a worthy accomplishment in the category of visual anthropology. The volume will remain as a tribute, if not to a disappearing world, then certainly to a changing world; to a way of life—as is the case today with most traditional cultures—that has to reinvent itself in the face of the challenges posed by modernisation, possibly without forsaking its past.

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## **Rivers of the Sultan: The Tigris and Euphrates in the Ottoman Empire**

**By Faisal H. Husain. x, 264 pp. New York, Oxford University Press, 2021.**

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In *Rivers of the Sultan: The Tigris and Euphrates in the Ottoman Empire*, Faisal Husain offers a political, social, and environmental history of the region surrounding the Tigris and Euphrates rivers roughly between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Husain suggests that the conquests of Sultan Süleyman I brought integrity, stability, and institutional control across the region, which had never been ruled by Istanbul in its long political history. Following the conquests, these rivers inevitably became Ottoman and sultanic because they were controlled by a centralised political elite sharing a common culture. In contrast to current historical scholarship's tendency to treat the Tigris and Euphrates in isolation, *Rivers of the Sultan* adopts an inclusive and unifying perspective for the rivers and the region surrounding them.

The book consists of three parts as well as an introduction and a conclusion. The first part, 'The Amphibious State', details the construction and maintenance of Ottoman sovereignty both on land and water in the eastern frontier. Husain shows that the operation of fortresses and shipyards on these rivers could only be achieved by a stable unifying political order, capable of fiscal control and of garnering the goodwill of its subjects. In turn, fortresses and shipyards contributed to strengthening Ottoman power in the region.

In the first chapter, 'Fortresses', the author analyses the establishment of an Ottoman administrative and military presence in the region, enabled by the effective use of river transportation. The supply of provisions and arms from Aleppo, Diyarbakır, and Mosul to the fortresses of Baghdad and Basra, thanks to the availability of seaports, docks, rafts, and bridges, stabilised Ottoman authority in this volatile frontier. Husain also discusses Ottoman use of the *kelek*, 'an ancient raft made of timber and brushwood bundles laid upon inflated goat and sheep skins' (p. 28). This unique method of transportation,

which was designed and assembled in the Tigris and Euphrates, created a new construction industry and an administrative organisation in the upper Tigris.

In the second chapter on 'Shipyards', Husain offers a significant complementary contribution to the literature on Ottoman naval history, which mostly examines the imperial navy's activities in the Mediterranean or the Black Sea, by revealing the unknown history of the Shatt River Fleet, which operated in the fluvial system of the region. The Ottomans built two shipyards at opposite ends of the Tigris and Euphrates basin—Birecik in the north and Basra in the south—which eventually became the administrative centres for the Ottoman navy operating on the Tigris and Euphrates. The author analyses how the natural resources of the Tigris and Euphrates basin were harnessed to serve the needs of the regional river and imperial fleets. He also studies the structure of the river fleet, which was mostly composed of frigates, and its use for military purposes in this unconventional landscape.

The second part, 'The Water Wide Web', is composed of three chapters (3 to 5). In the third chapter, 'Arable Lands', Husain underlines that the Ottoman Empire reconciled three imperatives to manage hydrologic commons: the principle of traditionalism, the Circle of Justice (which brought a sense of royal responsibility for the welfare of the peasants), and a commitment to water management. Unbalanced high and low water levels on the rivers created difficult and unpredictable farming conditions. Levees were constructed on both sides of each river to control the destructive effects of flooding. However, the existence of such tall levees required water to be pumped with mechanical devices from the rivers for irrigation. The Ottomans actively supported two types of lifting devices. The first was a waterwheel called a *dolap* and the other was a device utilising pulleys powered by human or animal power, called an *öküz dolabı*. In addition, three ancient canals (one on the Tigris and two on the Euphrates) served as another engineering solution to the rivers' challenges. The Ottoman government managed these three canals by recruiting manpower to dredge the canal beds and provide regular maintenance. In addition, it appointed superintendents to oversee irrigation works and, when necessary, despatched specialists.

The fourth chapter, 'Grasslands', examines the political order and organisation of the nomadic pastoral societies of the alluvial plains. Here, the author looks beneath the surface to reveal the patterns that were difficult for European outside observers to identify. This chapter explores how the Ottoman government created and managed three large herders' associations (Aḥşamat, Qara Ulus, and Qara'ul), uniting traditionally divided tribes. Aggregation of seemingly disparate social units enabled the government to control, monitor, count, and tax the mobile population. Joining one of these associations granted herders benefits such as royal protection as well as royal justice. Grassland judges migrated with herders seasonally to dispense justice whenever needed.

The fifth chapter, 'Wetlands', challenges the dominant narrative on the desertification and expansion of arid lands in the post-Mongol period. Husain examines Ottoman policies to protect and incorporate the wetlands of the Tigris and Euphrates for its economic interests. Instead of reclaiming the land with drainage projects to expand farms and settlements, as ambitiously implemented by some early modern states, the Ottomans preferred to rely on conventional systems of marsh exploitation, paying particular attention to the cultivation of rice and the husbandry of water buffalo, except for small-scale drainage efforts to make the marshlands more suitable for growing wheat and barley.

The final section of the book, 'The Rumbblings of Nature', deals with the impact of changing natural conditions on the Ottoman polity's relation with the Tigris and Euphrates basin. The sixth chapter, 'Havoc', offers a vivid description of the turmoil triggered by a prolonged drought and a poorly made canal project, which altered the course of the

Euphrates' channel southwest of Baghdad in the late seventeenth century. The long-established provincial Ottoman administration was not able to handle the chaos resulting from the channel shift, which coincided with outbreaks of plague and rural uprisings. Despite the Ottoman government's efforts to find a solution by sending an engineering expedition in late 1701, it was too late to restore the Euphrates to its original bed. The drought, channel shift, and rural uprisings created a fatal synergy and made it difficult for the Ottoman government to provide harmony and peace in the Iraqi frontier.

In the seventh and last chapter of the book, 'After the Flood', Husain investigates the long-term impacts of the channel shift on environmental conditions, the relationship between the ruler and the ruled, the dissolution of herders' associations, and the loss of territorial gains and the clash of tribal confederations with the Ottoman authorities. The Ottoman imperial centre empowered Hasan Pasha, official governor of Baghdad, to restore order. However, this move contradictorily resulted in the establishment of a provincial dynasty called the Pashalik of Baghdad, which controlled the most important positions in the Ottoman provincial government.

Husain deserves praise for his extensive employment of archival material, mostly from the Ottoman Archive in Istanbul. This material usually presents the perspective of the Ottoman government. Are there any local sources that may enable us to see a different point of view? Perhaps court records or other local material could add to the environmental history of the region. In addition, the author could have shed light on human engagement with nature and the impact of government environmental projects on the people of the region. After all, agriculture, climate, and human lives are interwoven, especially in an agrarian society.

The author, finally, misses an opportunity to use the *kelek*, which was adapted to and built for local conditions and resources along the rivers, and the Ottoman maintenance of irrigation canals as a means to more broadly discuss Ottoman engineering knowledge and skills in the early modern period.

*Rivers of the Sultan* is a well-written, engaging narrative that successfully combines the histories of agriculture, navy, engineering, and politics. Ottoman historians from various disciplines will find this book attractive and will be impressed by the author's connective and integrative perspective.

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