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ARTICLE

Boom Cairo: Egypt in Disaster, 1787

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During the month of Ramadan, on Tuesday, June 26, 1787, two hours after the afternoon prayer, or about 5:30 p.m., an "alarmingly dreadful event" (*ḥāditha mahūla muzʿija*) occurred in Cairo.[1] An explosion ripped through the heart of the city's commercial district, sparking a massive fire, toppling buildings, killing dozens, and pulsing buckling ripples and emotional shockwaves through the city. Late 18th-century urbanization produced countless such disasters around the world.[2] This one occurred at a particularly trying time for Cairo, and Egypt generally, and serves as a barometer of Egyptian society and the economy in this period.

The primary force driving Egypt's troubles in the 1780s and 1790s was ecological crisis. The base of Egypt's environmental economy was, of course, the Nile. Too high or too low a flood could devastate the countryside and Egypt's cities, destroy agricultural wealth, attenuate food production, and kill humans and other animals alike. Two of the 18th century's lowest floods occurred in consecutive years, 1783 and 1784.[3] This proved massively difficult. One year of poor floods was tough but could be ridden out thanks to grain storage, basin irrigation techniques, and other protective measures.[4] Two years of bad floods however could be ruinous, leading to food shortages, eventual famine, and then massive human and animal losses. By late 1784, "many men and animals had perished from hunger."[5] Weakened bodies proved especially vulnerable to disease. Witness to the twin scourges of hunger and plague in the winter of 1783–84, French philosopher and Orientalist C. F. Volney guessed that "famine carried off, at Cairo, nearly as many as the plague."[6] Hundreds of dead bodies continued to be removed from Cairo and other cities and towns into the fall of 1784, likely because the previous years' food shortages had weakened people's immunities.[7] The combined forces of drought, famine, and disease persisted in 1785, decimating rural populations. Volney estimated that Egypt lost one-sixth of its total population

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[1] ʿAbd al-Rahman ibn Hasan al-Jabarti, *ʿAjaʾib al-Athar fi al-Tarajim wa-l-Akhbar*, 4 vols., ed. ʿAbd al-Rahim ʿAbd al-Rahman ʿAbd al-Rahim (Cairo: Matbaʿat Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyya, 1998), 2: 214.

[2] For the global perspective, see Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 167–321.

[3] The lowest flood of the entire period from 1737 to 1800 was in 1783, and the third lowest of that period was in 1784. H. G. Lyons, "On the Nile Flood and Its Variation," *Geographical Journal* 26, no. 3 (1905): 406.

[4] On these provisions, see for example Kenneth M. Cuno, *The Pasha's Peasants: Land, Society, and Economy in Lower Egypt, 1740–1858* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 17–18, 143–44.

[5] Al-Jabarti, *ʿAjaʾib al-Athar*, 2: 120–21, 132.

[6] Constantin-François Volney, *Travels through Egypt and Syria, in the Years 1783, 1784, and 1785: Containing the Present Natural and Political State of Those Countries, Their Productions, Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce; with Observations on the Manners, Customs, and Government of the Turks and Arabs*, 2 vols., trans. from French (New York: Evert Duyckinck, 1798), 1: 122.

[7] Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Hatt-ı Hümayun 29/1361 (13 Şaʿban 1198/1 July 1784).

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between 1783 and 1785, a conclusion he derived from "received opinion."[8] Although initially this may sound like an exaggeration, Daniel Crecelius seems to concur, ascribing the drop in Cairo's population from 300,000 to 263,000 at the end of the 18th century to "plagues, famines, and political crises."[9] Human plagues indeed took countless numbers in multiple years at the century's end—in 1788, 1791, 1792, and 1799; and epizootics ravaged animal populations in 1784, 1785, 1787, 1788, 1791, and 1792.[10] Weather events also adversely affected Egypt in these years. Excessive rain in 1790, for instance, destroyed agricultural land and flooded parts of Cairo, and an abundant rainstorm (*maṭaran ghazīran*) lashed Cairo again in November 1794.[11] Droughts, floods, famine, disease, and human and animal death all led to crisis at the end of the 18th century.[12] Irrigation canals remained dry, food could not be harvested, people fought over dwindling resources, many fled their homes, price gouging surged, and elites enacted "oppression" (*jawr*) and "tyrannies" (*maẓālim*) of all kinds.[13] Mayhem gripped Egypt.

It was during these twenty years of acute ecological hardship that the 1787 explosion tore through Cairo. The one source that preserves this history is ʻAbd al-Rahman ibn Hasan al-Jabarti's well-known chronicle, with its well-known biases, most salient for us his desire to paint Mamluk officials as a cause of political disorder and corruption in Egypt at the turn of the 19th century.[14] Needless to say, having other sources for this story would be desirable, but instead of seeing this lacuna as a handicap, I make al-Jabarti's account a part of my analysis, engaging in a kind of close reading that allows us to learn something about narrative and history.[15] In his telling, al-Jabarti likens the blast to an earthquake, a revealing analogy that invites us to consider the event as he did—that is, as a natural disaster. This comparison only works so far, as we will discuss, but if we for the moment follow al-Jabarti's lead in conceptualizing the explosion as a natural disaster, we will quickly come to realize, as nearly every scholar of natural disasters does, that there was nothing "natural" about it.[16] In a recent formulation of this idea, Saptarishi Bandopadhyay writes, "While floods, plagues, earthquakes, and famines are real, there is no such thing as 'a disaster' outside of narratives, techniques, and practices of political struggle."[17] The histories of a single hurricane, heat wave, or earthquake cannot be understood only by studying their immediate ecological contexts and social impacts but must be explained through an understanding of the narrative forms that capture them in text and deliver them to readers, and the political, economic, cultural, and social circumstances that helped to produce their effects, made them what they were, and conditioned their results. In this way, the 1787 explosion affords us an opportunity to analyze a period of crisis in Egypt in the 1780s and 1790s. Like recent earthquakes in Turkey, Syria, and Morocco; the port of Beirut detonation; flooding in Derna; and countless other disasters in the Middle East and elsewhere, the Cairo blast bores a deep core into layers of Egyptian political, economic, and environmental history. If, instead of as aberration, we take disasters as a condition of life on earth, then understanding their catastrophic and productive functions, both as individual events and systemic elements of politics and society, becomes an imperative. As an epochal bellwether, this emergency helps reveal the emergent histories of late 18th-century Egypt.

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[8] Volney, *Travels through Egypt and Syria*, 1: 122.

[9] Daniel Crecelius, "Egypt in the Eighteenth Century," in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 2, *Modern Egypt, from 1517 to the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. M. W. Daly (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 77. André Raymond cites the figure of 260,000 for Cairo's population in 1798; "La population du Caire et de l'Égypte à l'époque ottomane et sous Muḥammad ʿAlî," in *Mémorial Ömer Lûtfi Barkan* (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient Adrien Maisonneuve, 1980), 169–78.

[10] For 1784, see Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Hatt-ı Hümayun 29/1361 (13 Şaʻban 1198/1 July 1784); Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Hatt-ı Hümayun 28/1354 (7 Zilkade 1198/22 September 1784); and Volney, *Travels through Egypt and Syria*, 1: 121–22. For outbreaks in 1785, see Ismaʻil ibn Saʻd al-Khashshab, *Khulasat ma Yurad min Akhbar al-Amir Murad*, ed. and trans. Hamza ʻAbd al-ʻAziz Badr and Daniel Crecelius (Cairo: al-ʻArabi li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawziʻ, 1992), 24–25; and al-Jabarti, *ʻAjaʼib al-Athar*, 2: 133–34. On disease in 1787, see al-Jabarti, *ʻAjaʼib al-Athar*, 2: 208, 210, 213, 222; and in 1788, see 2: 243, 246, 258, 261, 263. For 1791, see Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Cevdet Dahiliye 1722 (Evasıt Ramazan 1205/15–24 May 1791); Ismaʻil ibn Saʻd al-Khashshab, *Akhbar Ahl al-Qarn al-Thani ʻAshar: Tarikh al-Mamalik fi al-Qahira*, ed. ʻAbd al-ʻAziz Jamal al-Din and ʻImad Abu Ghazi (Cairo: al-ʻArabi li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawziʻ, 1990), 58; al-Khashshab, *Akhbar al-Amir Murad*, 33–34; and al-Jabarti, *ʻAjaʼib al-Athar*, 2: 294–95. On the epidemics of 1792, see Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Hatt-ı Hümayun 209/11213 (29 Zilhicce 1206/18 August 1792). There is no internal evidence for the date of this case. The date given is the one assigned by the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi. For examples of British correspondence about diseases in Egypt in 1791 and 1792, see the following reports sent by the British consul in Egypt, George Baldwin, to London: National Archives of the United Kingdom, Foreign Office 24/1, 183r–185v (4 July 1791), 191r–196v (12 July 1791), and 211r–212v (21 June 1792). On plague in 1799, see Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Hatt-ı Hümayun 245/13801A (3 Zilkade 1213/9 April 1799).

[11] Al-Jabarti, *ʻAjaʼib al-Athar*, 2: 292–93, 389.

[12] For more on the crises of the 1780s and 1790s, see Daniel Crecelius, "Egypt in the Eighteenth Century," 76–78, 84–86; Alan Mikhail, "The Nature of Plague in Late Eighteenth-Century Egypt," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 82, no. 2 (2008): 249–75; Alan Mikhail, "Unleashing the Beast: Animals, Energy, and the Economy of Labor in Ottoman Egypt," *American Historical Review* 118, no. 2 (2013): 317–48; and Alan Mikhail, "Ottoman Iceland: A Climate History," *Environmental History* 20, no. 2 (2015): 262–84.

[13] "Oppression" and "tyrannies" are al-Jabarti's words; *ʻAjaʼib al-Athar*, 2: 396.

[14] There might be traces of the explosion, for instance, in the estate inventories of those who died, but it seems unlikely that any archival material would offer the same narrative heft as al-Jabarti's text, and I have found no other narrative sources about it.

[15] For an analysis of the various uses to which authors have put al-Jabarti's work over the past two centuries, see Mario M. Ruiz "Orientalist and Revisionist Histories of ʻAbd al-Rahman al-Jabarti," *Middle East Critique* 18, no. 3 (2009): 261–84.

In a now sizable and growing literature on disasters in the Middle East, some scholars have usefully analyzed singular events in all their complexity. More than any other phenomenon, plague has received the most attention.[18] It was a recurrent feature of medieval and early modern life in the Middle East and elsewhere. Urban fires and earthquakes proved less common but still significant events and have garnered some study.[19] As Yaron Ayalon has shown, earthquakes and fires were conceptually linked not only because the former often led to the latter, but because they, unlike other disasters, "destroyed villages, urban quarters, and sometimes entire cities instantly."[20] Earthquakes and fires were immediately destructive, coming seemingly from nowhere, unpredictable, and beyond human control. In contrast to many slow-moving environmental crises, an earthquake, fire, hurricane, or volcano destroys at breakneck speed, endowing these events with social and political meanings distinct from plague, famine, or other more regular destructive forces such as the flood in Egypt. Their immediacy created different phenomenological experiences of disaster, which prompts the need for different interpretative frames than those derived from studying other kinds of natural disasters in the Middle East. Among the many examples from the existing scholarship on individual fires and earthquakes, Marc David Baer shows how the Istanbul fire of 1660 advanced an imperial religious politics.[21] Ayalon argues that an event like the 1759 earthquake in Damascus allowed the Ottoman state an important occasion to "reassert imperial authority and patronage."[22] And Nancy Reynolds opens up the multiple political, social, spatial, and economic meanings of the 1952 Cairo fire.[23] Building on this body of scholarship, and leaning on important urban histories of Cairo, this article examines the 1787 Cairo explosion as a singular event—unique in a canvas of disease, flood, earthquake, and fire—that pushes us toward new analytical terrain.[24] This history of the blast reveals how individuals experienced disaster, meditates on disaster as a genre of history and challenge to normative understandings of temporality, offers a history of Egypt's changing commercial life and class structures, and models an analysis for centering the place of disaster in interpretations of politics. Much as it sliced through Cairo, the explosion helps us see the strata of deeper histories.

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[16] For recent collective efforts to take stock of the literature on natural disasters, see Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna M. Hoffman, eds., *The Angry Earth: Disaster in Anthropological Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, ed., *The Sky is Crying: Race, Class, and Natural Disaster* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006); Nitzan Lebovic and Andreas Killen, eds., *Catastrophes: A History and Theory of an Operative Concept* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014); and Jacob A. C. Remes and Andy Horowitz, eds., *Critical Disaster Studies* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021). Useful for my thinking have also been Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000); Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Yaron Ayalon, *Natural Disasters in the Ottoman Empire: Plague, Famine, and Other Misfortunes* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Andy Horowitz, *Katrina: A History, 1915–2015* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

[17] Saptarishi Bandopadhyay, *All Is Well: Catastrophe and the Making of the Normal State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 10.

[18] See, for example, André Raymond, "Les Grandes Épidémies de peste au Caire aux XVII^{e} and XVIII^{e} siècles," *Bulletin d'Études Orientales* 25 (1973): 203–10; Michael W. Dols, "Plague in Early Islamic History," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94, no. 3 (1974): 371–83; Michael W. Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977); Michael W. Dols, "The Second Plague Pandemic and Its Recurrences in the Middle East: 1347–1894," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 22, no. 2 (1979): 162–89; Daniel Panzac, *La peste dans l'Empire Ottoman, 1700–1850* (Leuven, Belgium: Association pour le Développement des Études Turques, 1985); Nasir Ahmad Ibrahim, *al-Azamat al-Ijtimaʿiyya fi Misr fi al-Qarn al-Sabiʿ ʿAshar* (Cairo: Dar al-Afaq al-ʿArabiyya, 1998); Stuart J. Borsch, *The Black Death in Egypt and England: A Comparative Study* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005); Mikhail, "Nature of Plague"; Sam White, "Rethinking Disease in Ottoman History," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, no. 4 (2010): 549–67; and Nükhet Varlık, *Plague and Empire in the Early Modern Mediterranean World: The Ottoman Experience, 1347–1600* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[19] On fires, see David Prochaska, "Fire on the Mountain: Resisting Colonialism in Algeria," in *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa*, ed. Donald Crummey (London: James Currey, 1986), 229–52; and Suraiya Faroqhi, *A Cultural History of the Ottomans: The Imperial Elite and its Artefacts* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 198–201. On earthquakes, see N. N. Ambraseys and C. P. Melville, *A History of Persian Earthquakes* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982); N. N. Ambraseys, C. P. Melville, and R. D. Adams, *The Seismicity of Egypt, Arabia and the Red Sea: A Historical Review* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Elizabeth Zachariadou, ed., *Natural Disasters in the Ottoman Empire* (Rethymnon, Crete: Crete University Press, 1999); Mohamed Reda Sbeinati, Ryad Darawcheh, and Mikhail Mouty, "The Historical Earthquakes of Syria: An Analysis of Large and Moderate Earthquakes from 1365

An Individual Disaster

The explosion occurred in the shop of a druggist (*ʿaṭṭār*) named Ahmad Milad located in the al-Bunduqaniyin Quarter, a section of Cairo's crowded central marketplace.[25] Perusing his wares, a group of customers from Yanbuʿ, the Red Sea port city on the Arabian Peninsula, queried Ahmad about the various types of gunpowder he sold and, as they bargained with him, asked to see one particular variety in action: "English gunpowder" (*bārūd Inkalīzī*) that he

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B.C. to 1900 A.D.," *Annals of Geophysics* 48, no. 3 (2005): 347–435; Nicholas Ambraseys, *Earthquakes in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East: A Multidisciplinary Study of Seismicity up to 1900* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Faroqhi, *Cultural History of the Ottomans*, 202–3.

[20] Ayalon, *Natural Disasters*, 93. On the connections between earthquakes and fires more generally, see 87–105.

[21] Marc David Baer, "The Great Fire of 1660 and the Islamization of Christian and Jewish Space in Istanbul," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 36, no. 2 (2004): 159–81.

[22] Ayalon, *Natural Disasters*, 108.

[23] Nancy Y. Reynolds, *A City Consumed: Urban Commerce, the Cairo Fire, and the Politics of Decolonization in Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

[24] The urban history of Cairo is vast. The most relevant works for this article include Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Cairo: 1001 Years of* The City Victorious (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971); André Raymond, *Artisans et commerçants au Caire au XVIII^e siècle*, 2 vols. (Damascus: Institut français de Damas, 1973–74); André Raymond, *Cairo: City of History*, trans. Willard Wood (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2001); and Khaled Fahmy, "An Olfactory Tale of Two Cities: Cairo in the Nineteenth Century," in *Historians in Cairo: Essays in Honor of George Scanlon*, ed. Jill Edwards (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2002), 155–87. It remains the case that Cairo's Ottoman centuries are one of the least studied and therefore least understood periods in the city's history. Ottoman Cairo has been described as a kind of static ideal type, part of "the Islamic City" (Abu-Lughod) or "the Traditional City" (Raymond). Abu-Lughod describes late 18th-century Cairo derisively as "the Augean Stables." We await robust urban histories of Ottoman Cairo that show the historical variegations, particularities, and complexities of the city over these three hundred years. For a recent study of the architectural history of certain buildings in Ottoman Cairo, see Chahinda Karim, *Ottoman Cairo: Religious Architecture from Sultan Selim to Napoleon* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2021).

[25] This section is based on the account of the blast in al-Jabarti, *ʿAja'ib al-Athar*, 2: 214–16. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own, and all quotations are from these pages.

had acquired from Europeans (*min al-Firanj*).[26] He had enough of it to fill two barrels and another smaller vessel (*baṭṭa*).[27] It was from the latter that he poured out for his patrons a little bit of the gunpowder onto the tray he used to count money. His customers then funneled it onto a piece of paper (*kāghid*) and lit a tow fuse (*qiṭʿa yedek*) to watch it explode.[28] Part of the novelty of English gunpowder was that it could ignite while on paper without burning the paper itself. The men from Yanbuʿ liked what they saw and told Ahmad they wanted to purchase some of the powder, and so he began weighing out for them the quantity they specified. The men then transferred what Ahmad measured to their own containers to carry the gunpowder out of the shop. After they had tested the small sample on the piece of paper, the men from Yanbuʿ had thrown the tow fuse onto the shop's bench (*maṣṭabat al-ḥānūt*). This would prove a fatefully careless act. As Ahmad poured the gunpowder onto his measuring scales and then his customers transferred it to their own containers, they—imperceptibly—released some powder dust into the air. Unbeknownst to them, a few individual grains (*ḥabbāt*) of the powder wafted over to the shop's bench, hit the tow fuse, and ignited. Even before they could feel the heat on their skin or register the sight of the flames in their brains, fire was on the loose. It hit the powder in the men's hands, in the small vessel, and then in the barrels and detonated, crackling with a boom that sounded like "the great cannon" (*al-midfaʿ al-ʿaẓīm*), the cannon being the most common Cairene experience of gunpowder in action. When the fire exploded the two powder kegs, the entire structure of the store burst open. The power of the blast threw the whole frame of the building, its roof and supports, and the floors above it, with homes and rooms, into the air with nowhere to go but down.

The ember that had begun in Ahmad's shop soon engulfed the whole neighborhood in an inferno. In the blink of an eye (*fī ṭarfat ʿayn*), Ahmad's building with his store and all the floors above it had been reduced to a heaping pile (*kawm*) of burning wood and metal that looked like the accumulation of a hundred years. In that rubble were people: those who had been on the floors above the shop at the time of the explosion and innocents crowded in the marketplace outside the building. Both those standing on the street and passersby had no chance to escape. In that late afternoon of a summer Ramadan, most of the residents of al-Bunduqaniyin were out and about, as were those of the nearby neighborhoods of al-Sabʿ Qaʿat and Shams al-Dawla, gathering items for that evening's meals, buying gifts, and relaxing with friends in shops and cafés. Ahmad shared the street with other druggists, oil dealers, public weighers, and money changers; sellers of *kunāfa*, pancakes, watermelons, and *ʿabdallāwī* melons; and barbers and coffee purveyors.[29] Into these throngs, up into the floors above Ahmad's shop, into neighboring structures, and, of course, through Ahmad and his erstwhile customers, the explosion fired debris and projectiles. Alongside the gunpowder, Ahmad sold items made of lead, tin, copper, kohl, lodestone (*maghnāṭīs*), and sulfur, as well as weights that looked like cannon balls (*shibh al-julal*). When the powder ignited, everything in his shop became a weapon, just like cannon balls (*mithl julal al-madāfi`*), as the store burst it walls. It was as if a bomb had exploded, setting off a chain reaction of other ignitions. The building opposite Ahmad's went up in flames. Another structure across the street from Ahmad's shop, a closed spice warehouse, had its large door studded with nails (*mismārī*) obliterated, not only setting the entire structure ablaze but leading to a secondary explosion that fired out even more shrapnel. The initial blast's shockwaves rippled throughout the city, far beyond Ahmad's shop and the immediate area. As far away as al-Azhar and the shrine of al-Husayn, the ground buckled. It is here in al-Jabarti's narrative that he relays how many assumed it was an earthquake (*ẓanūhā zalzalatan*). As fear set in and confusion reigned, women screamed "from every direction" (*min kulli jiha*). In nearby al-Hamzawi, as sparks showered them, some merchants who kept their wits about them tried to salvage as much of their wares as they could. Later that evening, after an unspecified amount of time, but what one presumes was no more than hours, the agha (a high-ranking military official) and wali (a police administrator who served under the agha) arrived on the scene to assess the situation and oversee the eventual quenching of the fire.[30]

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[26] Traditionally, "English gunpowder" referred to a ratio of 75% saltpeter, 12.5% charcoal, and 12.5% sulfur; Gábor Ágoston, *Guns for the Sultan: Military Power and the Weapons Industry in the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 157. Different balances of ingredients produced different qualities of gunpowder. Generally speaking, the higher the percentage of saltpeter, the better the quality. At the end of the 17th century, experiments at the Izmir gunpowder works produced a variety of English powder made up of 83.3% saltpeter, 10.4% sulfur, and 6.3% charcoal.

[27] In their English translation of al-Jabarti's text, Thomas Philipp and Moshe Perlmann render *baṭṭa* as "a small pottery jar"; ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Jabarti, *ʿAbd al-Raḥman al-Jabartī's History of Egypt: ʿAjāʾib al-Āthār fī al-Tarājim wa-l-Akhbār*, 4 vols., ed. Thomas Philipp and Moshe Perlmann (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1994), 2: 233. Edward William Lane describes it as a vessel, flask, or bottle and likens it to "a kind of leathern pot, or bottle, of which the body is nearly globular, with a short and wide neck" (duck-like, we might say); *An Arabic–English Lexicon*, 8 vols. (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1968), see "*baṭṭa*." Hans Wehr refers to it as a "leather flask"; *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 3rd ed., ed. J. Milton Cowan (Ithaca, NY: Spoken Language Services, 1976), see "*baṭṭ*."

[28] *Kāghid* and *yedek* are two of the many Turkish words associated with the military that made it into Egyptian Arabic. We might also consider the Turkish spelling of English in "English gunpowder" in this vein. The dominance of Turkish in Egyptian military vocabulary is an important marker of the strong martial character of Ottoman rule in Egypt. Generally on Turkish loanwords in Arabic, see Ahmad Fu'ad Mutawalli, *al-Alfaz al-Turkiyya fi al-Lahjat al-ʿArabiyya wa fi Lughat al-Kitaba* (Cairo: Dar al-Zahra' li-l-Nashr, 1991).

[29] According to Lane, *ʿabdallāwī* "is a sort of melon, abounding in Egypt, of little flavour, eaten with sugar, said to be thus called in relation to ʿAbd Allah Ibn Tahir, a governor of Egypt on the part of El-Mamoon." He cites others who claim it is one of the names of *Cucumis chate*. Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon*, see "*ʿabada*" and "*ʿajara*."

Squelching the flames was the end of only the first stage of this disaster. As lead and copper ripped through al-Bunduqaniyin, the dense democracy of the market meant indiscriminate violence and destruction. Whoever happened to be there at the time, relaxing in a café or just passing through, "whether high-class or lowly" (*sawā' kāna 'ālīyan aw mutasflan*), became a victim of the hot metal. In the midst of tragedy, this shared experience of suffering by rich and poor alike might have been the foundation for some sort of solidarity of recovery, a way of seeing past the divisions that otherwise reigned. Instead of class or gender or military status, people now had another basis of connection—the shared experience of being victimized by the blast, knowing that the same destructive materials that passed into their bodies also passed through their neighbors, that the smoke they inhaled had singed another's lungs. Shared experiences can lead to the solidarities of a "disaster utopia," but not always, of course.[31] In this case, they did not.

In the piercing early light of the day after the blast, city officials enlisted two hundred laborers to clear the site and recover bodies. Rather than an act of civic duty, an operation of humanitarian rescue, or even just the work of clearing and restoring a busy urban district—and far from any democratic sense of equality in victimization—it quickly became apparent that city officials and the laborers they employed saw the disaster as an opportunity for personal enrichment. Of course, the spoils of destruction were not shared equally among the governing and their minions, but everyone grabbed as healthy a slice of the smoldering pie as they could. Those who got nothing were the victims and their families. As al-Jabarti relates, representatives of the city's authorities, those he condemns as both perpetrators and beneficiaries of this ruin, cordoned off the area, sealing the street at both ends to prevent anyone from entering to look for their loved ones or property. If someone asked about items lost in the blast or even personal possessions they could see in the rubble, the assistants of the wali and agha told them that they were holding all items to determine exactly to whom they belonged, a rather sorry pretext for keeping people away. Those who lost family members and homes, businesses, and other properties in the blast found themselves victimized yet again in its aftermath. They had their surviving personal effects stolen from them, often as they looked on, and were only able to retrieve the bodies of their loved ones through bribery (*ilā bi-darāhim*).

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[30] Cairo was built chiefly of stone. This helped in preventing the spread of the fire and the extensive burning of structures that occurred in most early modern urban fires in cities built primarily of wood, such as Istanbul and London. On this comparative point, see Fredrik Thomasson, *The Life of J. D. Åkerblad: Egyptian Decipherment and Orientalism in Revolutionary Times* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 85. On fire in Istanbul, see Baer, "The Great Fire of 1660"; and Faroqhi, *Cultural History of the Ottomans*, 198–201. On London, see Jacob F. Field, *London, Londoners and the Great Fire of 1666: Disaster and Recovery* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

[31] This phrase is from Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (New York: Viking, 2009).

With the blast zone cordoned off and people kept at bay, workers could operate freely. They stole many things (*shay'an kathīran*), whatever they found, whatever they wanted, from the destroyed shops and homes: retail merchandise, cash, household effects, vases, and women's jewelry. When the workers pulled out the dead body of an oil merchant from under his store, which had collapsed and killed him, they took the chance to seize a large sum of cash. A silk dyer's destroyed house was similarly raided, a chest of European coins proving a particularly choice prize from this residence. Authorities even took the opportunity of the explosion's aftermath to break into shops that had escaped any damage to steal from them. This egregious act prompted shop owners to yell from beyond the fenced area, all to no avail. This was officially sanctioned theft, a free-for-all, bedlam. "The gate of booty" (*bāb al-ghanīma*) had been flung wide open. Even the solemnity of dead human bodies could not stop this greed. Authorities stripped corpses of any desirable possessions, including sliding jewelry off women's lifeless bodies.

Although their primary concern was seizing the properties of the dead, officials knew they had to contend with the mortal remains of the necropolis tell before them. We could explain this imperative through an analysis of religious ethics, stench and revulsion, urban sanitation, or a seemingly innate human desire for mourning and restoration.[32] In a gruesome scene, with bodies strewn everywhere, workers discovered around one hundred corpses, not including those they could not reach under the mounds of rubble. One of those known to have died but whose body was never found was the imam of a small mosque close to Ahmad's shop. The blast had destroyed his mosque, causing it to cave in and crush him to death. Of the hundred or so bodies that were found, many of those of people on the street or near the shop at the time of the blast had been vaporized beyond recognition. Workers also recovered pulverized, burned, and incinerated bodies from the destroyed floors above Ahmad's shop and the higher floors of surrounding buildings.

The grisliest description came from ground zero of the explosion—Ahmad's shop. After stealing from it—again "many things" (*shai'an kathīran*), including monies that had been buried in the rubble of the structure and therefore spared the fire—workers found Ahmad himself, his rent flesh burned black like charcoal (*mithl al-faḥm*). They retrieved six pieces of his body, including an unspecified number of his limbs, placed this all in a cloth bag, and buried it. They never located the rest of his body, including his head. For what must have been four very long days, workers on the site devoted themselves to unearthing, exhuming, and extracting bodies and then to burials. Al-Jabarti ends his account with the statement that "this event was one of the most calamitous ever recorded" (*kānit hāthihī al-ḥāditha min aʿẓami al-ḥawādith al-muzʿija al-mu'arrikha*). His final line is "to be an eye-witness was very different from merely hearing about it."[33]

A Disaster Individual

Throughout his rendition of the explosion, al-Jabarti emphasizes individual persons and individual details. The explosion was a force felt by Ahmad, his neighbors, the men from Yanbuʿ, as if they are people we as readers know or should know. Al-Jabarti makes clear that he himself was there *in person*, as an eyewitness to the event, impressing upon us that one had to be there, as he was, to truly grasp the enormity of the disaster.[34] We might ask about the nature of al-Jabarti's presence. That is, how did al-Jabarti learn of the details he relates? How did he know, for example, of all that transpired in Ahmad's shop before the explosion: the particular detail of Ahmad's customers igniting a small amount of gunpowder on paper to test it, that the men were from Yanbuʿ, or even that the blast occurred in Ahmad's shop and not one near it? Clearly al-Jabarti was not in the shop with them. Did he glean these specifics from others or from stories circulating after the blast? Did he get this information from city officials perhaps, and, if so, how did they know? Did *he* merely hear about it? How much license did he take with his descriptions? These are real questions left unanswered by this single account of the explosion. The blast's aftermath is easier to grasp than its prehistory. It killed identifiable people: the oil merchant and silk dyer; even without recovering his body, we know the imam died. Al-Jabarti makes us feel the viscerality of individual death by describing Ahmad's decapitated body, at least the six parts of it that were found. It is hard not to imagine the pain he describes in our own bodies—of burned flesh, of what it would be like to see a part of our body detached from us. Particular recognizable city officials targeted specific people for theft. We know who owned the chest of coins; jewelry was slipped right off the women who wore it. Everything is distilled to a single unit—individual grains of powder, the blink of an eye, an arm, a bracelet, a person.

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[32] As Thomas W. Laqueur argues, attending to human remains is a cultural practice that has existed (and exists) in all human societies and must be historicized. The dead body is never just dirt. *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[33] I borrow this translation from Thomas Philipp and Moshe Perlmann; al-Jabarti, *ʿAbd al-Raḥman al-Jabartī's History of Egypt*, 2: 235.

What is the purpose of this attention to detail? As a narrative strategy, it works to evoke the scene, to make us feel the impact of the event. Our individual subjectivities empathize with the victims. We are generally accustomed to thinking of natural disasters as large events of enormous effect. The number of dead are many, the destruction widespread, the landscape changed. Yet, the experience of such events is also the experience of individuals, each different from the other. A single human person in a single human body experiences drowning or heat or sickness. The sensation cannot be translated to another or understood by another unless she goes through it herself, and even then her feelings and experience no doubt will differ. Death is the ultimate unknowable, of course, but if one survives an event so harrowing as drowning or heatstroke, she may be able to relate something of it through narration, art, or otherwise. Nevertheless, we might argue that we are always, ultimately, still faced with the unknowability of other people's lives, of their experiences, whether in the past or present, no matter the collectives to which we imagine ourselves belonging.

The body is the interface between the person and the world.[35] So, when al-Jabarti describes the heat of the explosion or the physicality of decapitation, he is attempting to capture how one human experienced disaster, to give an individual sense of a wider phenomenon, to hopefully induce us to translate ourselves to the individuals in the scene, to empathize. Although it is impossible for us to feel the force of the blast, the power of narration, of detail, brings it closer, asking us to feel the pain of the injured, the roofs falling on us, the warm bloodletting as the metal cuts. Such details help to form what Thomas W. Laqueur terms "the 'reality effect' . . . through which the experiences of others are represented as real."[36] Differently, the human suffering of the explosion described by al-Jabarti brings us closer to meeting Jennifer L. Derr's ambitious charge to read "pain from the archive."[37] The moment just before pain, when the knife first pierces us and we are yet to bleed, when we know we have been hit but do not yet feel it, is a moment held still, almost out of time, a millisecond that seems to last for an hour. We all feel pain. But can we feel the pain of others? How might we translate this universal yet seemingly indescribable experience? Can a historical text capture it? Can the historian describe it? In his comparatively detailed and expository account of the explosion, al-Jabarti poses these questions to us, admitting in the same breath the inadequacy of his own genre of chronicle writing about historical events, obligating us, if we are being honest, to ask similar questions about the limits of our own analytical writing as scholars. Even as he writes, he knows he cannot do justice to the moment he relates, that no reader can understand the magnitude of the event from his words, experience the emotion and fear, hear the trill of the women's screams, smell the charred flesh and rotting corpses, feel the fire. After all, being "an eyewitness was very different from merely hearing about it."[38] Operating at the edge of language, text fails us.

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[34] On the emergence of the authorial voice in 18th-century Arabic chronicles, see Dana Sajdi, *The Barber of Damascus: Nouveau Literacy in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Levant* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); and Nelly Hanna, *Ottoman Egypt and the Emergence of the Modern World: 1500–1800* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2014), 31–66.

[35] For useful insights from sensory history, see Mark M. Smith, *The Smell of Battle, the Taste of Siege: A Sensory History of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Mark M. Smith, *A Sensory History Manifesto* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021).

[36] Thomas W. Laqueur, "Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative," in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 177.

Al-Jabarti's final thought is not simply a universal statement about the present's inability to ever truly grasp the past, of the impossibilities of experiencing the subjectivities of others. The explosion was a particular kind of event. It was far from a "normal" disaster. We see this pointedly in the timescales used to describe the explosion and its effects. What happened in a flash, in the blink of an eye, in al-Jabarti's words, produced a pile of rubble that looked like the accretion of one hundred years. The blast, like the suspended first instant of pain itself, seemingly bent the normal temporalities of history and therefore our accustomed means of narrating it. How could a century occur in a millisecond? What otherworldly force could compress time in this way? Where did all this debris come from to bury a city? How to translate the magnitude of *this* calamity?

Part of the answer to these questions brings us back to al-Jabarti's emphasis on the individual detail—the specific person, the single grain of powder, the particular structure that toppled. Al-Jabarti's account helps to disaggregate different kinds of disaster. The explosion was an individuated, human-produced catastrophe, one with a clear cause and obvious effect. Trusting al-Jabarti, we know who was responsible for the blast and, through forensic work after the blast, the identities of most of its victims. This made the explosion vastly different from other disasters in Egypt. The most common cause of human and infrastructural destruction in Egypt's history was, of course, the annual flood. Of all the various causes proposed for the flood over the millennia, a single human and his actions was never one of them.[39] Its causes were divine or natural or otherwise beyond the human realm. Moreover, even as the Nile's waters killed, they gave life, making the annual ravages that often accompanied the riches of the Nile flood the vital and productive, indeed highly anticipated and desired, event that formed the entirety of Egypt's agricultural life.[40] Unlike the explosion, Egypt needed the flood. Disease was the next most common hardship to befall Egypt. However, here too, a disease like plague, because of its regularity and ubiquity in Egyptian life, became somewhat domesticated—a regularized, expected, and accepted part of life in Egypt, akin to an ecological force like the flood, one that also could not be ascribed to a single human like Ahmad Milad the druggist.[41] Over centuries, such natural phenomena came to be assimilated into politics, society, family life, and so on—and had therefore become constructive, even "normal," elements of society, expected and integrated into

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[37] Jennifer L. Derr, *The Lived Nile: Environment, Disease, and Material Colonial Economy in Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 8.

[38] Al-Jabarti, *ʿAbd al-Raḥman al-Jabartī's History of Egypt*, 2: 235.

[39] For various explanations of the flood over time, see Robert O. Collins, *The Nile* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 12–26.

[40] Alan Mikhail, *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 38–81.

[41] Mikhail, "Nature of Plague."

Egyptians' understandings of their environment and lifeways. The flood was indeed welcomed at the end of every summer with an elaborate set of celebrations.[42] The ubiquitous death produced by disease and other calamities likewise served an important social function thanks to funeral and burial rites and the legal infrastructure around inheritance, for instance.[43] However, even for Egyptians habituated to regularized disasters, even in as difficult a period as the end of the 18th century, the explosion proved of a different order altogether.

Grasping for analytical description, al-Jabarti falls back on the language of natural disaster—an earthquake. This is the closest analogy he can make. Like an earthquake, the booming force of the explosion originated in a particular place, sonically rippled out in all directions, and shook the ground to destroy everything. It spread everywhere, irrationally, immediately, without warning, and with no possibility of human action against it. People did not know where the blast came from, what produced it, how long it would last, or how to explain it. It produced fear at a distance. It was otherworldly, not predictable like the flood, not expected like plague, a force of nature that disturbed the normal course of events, instantaneously destructive and beyond human control. Like an earthquake, it was a disaster that one had to experience to grasp fully; merely hearing about it would not do. The blast was further akin to an earthquake, a hurricane, or a volcano in that it killed quickly, and, indeed, its speed is part of the reason for its analytical utility. Such, as we might call them, disaster spikes in the historical record help us understand changes that otherwise creep imperceptibly overtime. In this way, the explosion was like cardiac arrest, an instantaneous disruption that announced a much longer hidden history of the slow accumulation of arterial plague over decades. It was fast change—a bolt to the heart of Cairo's social body. Such an exogenous shock turned the inside out. What for years had been inside Ahmad's shop, inside his and others' bodies, latent energy inside gunpowder, suddenly discharged and splattered all over the streets. Bringing into the open what had heretofore remained enclosed—that which teemed imperceptibly under the surface—is one more way the blast proves analytically useful. There is a reason "bombshell" can mean revelation.

Al-Jabarti's explanatory recourse to earthquakes only worked to a point. Even if it seemed to come from nowhere, the explosion differed from an earthquake, disease, or flood in that it was clearly human-caused, a realization that only emerged after the initial shock wore off. If we believe al-Jabarti, we even know the name of the person responsible and what he and his customers did to spark the explosion. As a product of humans, it obviously did not originate in nature and did not operate in the ways other natural disasters did. Nevertheless, al-Jabarti describes it as being *somehow* natural, because a force such as this that acted in ways beyond the human was only known to come from the nonhuman world. Perhaps we might say it was a kind of in-between event, in between human and nonhuman. Recourse to God was often made by chroniclers and other observers when discussing earthquakes, diseases, and floods, but here no mention of God is made, because none is required.[44] We do not need to explain why this bad thing happened, to seek out the unknown reasons why the disaster occurred. We know why. It was Ahmad and his customers' carelessness. Their human folly released into the world a force of such violence that it acted outside of the known bounds of history and reality, bending time and killing with unpredictable destructive power.

Dwelling for a moment with gunpowder as the key catalyst of the event, that agent of instantaneous effect helps us to understand the seeming otherworldliness of the explosion.

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[42] Paula Sanders, *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 99–119; Heba Mostafa, "The Nile as Nexus: The Nilometer at al-Rawda Island between Veneration and Mediation in Medieval Islamic Egypt," in *The Nile Delta: Histories from Antiquity to the Modern Period*, ed. Katherine Blouin (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 421–52.

[43] On these points, see LaVerne Kuhnke, *Lives at Risk: Public Health in Nineteenth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 69–78; Mikhail, *Nature and Empire*, 230–41.

[44] On overcoming the notion of Muslim fatalism in the face of disaster, see White, "Rethinking Disease," 553–55.

Gunpowder enacted a kind of alchemy, unleashing exponential orders of magnitude of force infinitely beyond what its dust-sized particles seemed capable of. If harnessed properly, carefully, it could give so much—in warfare or mining, for instance—and yet it could destroy everything around it if managed injudiciously. By harvesting and altering natural resources such as saltpeter, charcoal, and sulfur, human endeavor released gunpowder's forces into the world—heat, energy, fire. If let loose, these elements could act beyond human design, intention, and scale in deadly, unforeseen, destructive, and often long-term or permanent ways, another example of how our actions in and on nature—here in the form of Ahmad's recklessness—produce unintended consequences that may destroy us. Gunpowder, therefore, helps us to further understand how the nonhuman can act seemingly of its own accord, we might say with its own subjectivity.[45]

Gunpowder, with its otherworldly potential and rules of operation, was nothing new or novel for Egyptians, as the mention of the cannon in al-Jabarti's account intimates. Indeed, gunpowder came to Egypt before most other places in the Middle East. Accounts by al-Qalqashandi (1355–1418), al-Maqrizi (1364/65–1442), al-ʿAyni (1360–1451), Ibn Khaldun (1332–82), and Ibn Iyas (c. 1448–1524) place its first usage in Egypt in the 1360s.[46] Although gunpowder and its power were known in Egypt in this period, it only won widespread military adoption at the end of Mamluk rule.[47] When Sultan Selim's Ottomans conquered Egypt in 1517, they assumed control of Egypt's saltpeter industry, making it a state monopoly.[48] Seventy villages produced saltpeter for Ottoman Cairo's gunpowder works.[49] Two caravans brought it from these villages to Cairo every week, where the supply was inspected for quality. Even just a few decades after its conquest, Egypt had already emerged as a major supplier of gunpowder for the Ottoman army and its Mediterranean fleet, delivering between 162 and 216 metric tons by the middle of the 16th century and then 270 tons by the beginning of the 17th century.[50] These totals made Egypt one of the top producers of gunpowder among the empire's major works in Istanbul, Baghdad, Aleppo, Bor, Selanik, Gelibolu, Izmir, Erzurum, Buda, and Temeşvar. According to Gábor Ágoston's summaries of Ottoman gunpowder outputs in the last three decades of the 16th century, Egypt produced the largest overall stock of any of the empire's powder works.[51] In the 1680s, his estimates placed Egypt either as the top producer or second to Istanbul.[52] By the end of the 18th century, Egypt's supply to the empire had waned, either because of technical challenges to saltpeter collection and shipping or because local authorities preferred to keep more of it in Egypt for local purposes.[53] Given its foreign provenance and his merchant networks—his was English gunpowder obtained from Europeans—Ahmad Milad's supply of gunpowder was likely not from locally produced stocks, but was rather more of a specialty item, a luxury good not to be wasted on military uses. In Egypt in the late 18th century, gunpowder was therefore a widely known commodity, used for elite consumption and military purposes, in common circulation and yet still considered dangerous, destructive, and mysterious.

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[45] For direction on this point, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

[46] David Ayalon, *Gunpowder and Firearms in the Mamluk Kingdom: A Challenge to a Mediaevel Society* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1956), 2–3. On the introduction of firearms technology to the Middle East and early Ottoman Empire, see Ágoston, *Guns for the Sultan*, 15–21. All the dates in this sentence are from the second and third online editions of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

[47] Ayalon, *Gunpowder and Firearms*, 107–8; Ágoston, *Guns for the Sultan*, 58.

[48] Ágoston, *Guns for the Sultan*, 146–47. It also seems that soon after their conquest in 1517 the Ottomans quickly refurbished or rebuilt Cairo's cannon foundry (180, n. 68).

[49] Ibid., 147.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid., 152.

[52] Ibid., 153.

[53] Ibid., 148.

Bust

While a single human and a few grains of powder sparked the explosion, Egypt's contemporary political and economic system produced the conditions that made possible the blast and its widespread effects. Ahmad was one of countless Egyptians who participated in the growing market opportunities afforded to Egyptians, mostly urban Egyptians, in the last few decades of the 18th century. In the second half of that century, much of the rural economy, as numerous scholars have shown, transformed from subsistence to commercial agriculture.[54] Reflecting global processes, Egypt's transformation involved the emergence of local market relations embedded within global markets in commodities such as sugar and cotton, changes in land tenure, extractive and exploitative agricultural and labor practices, the impressment of animals, and economic stratification. One result of these complex developments was that a small group of landowners grew increasingly rich and powerful, amassing large amounts of land and commodified laboring capacities that they then used as a means of gaining political authority. Some of those rural cultivators displaced by the growth of individual farming magnates went to Egypt's cities to work in new sectors opened up by economic expansion. These formerly autonomous sovereign small-hold farmers often became wageworkers, and sometimes unpaid workers, in a changing economy. The capitalization of agricultural commodities, the emergence of market relations, the growth of Cairo, and the internationalization of Egypt's commerce were all a part of its late 18th-century economic transformation.

Ahmad's shop stood at the center of Egypt's concentrating urban wealth. In the roughly 18 hectares (0.069 square miles) of his immediate area—the neighborhoods of al-Bunduqaniyin, Khan al-Khalili, the al-Azhar Mosque, and Ghuriyya—there were 116 caravansaries and 40 markets.[55] André Raymond estimates that a full 90 percent of the commerce of Cairo's "agents, merchants, and artisans" were located in that district. In another measure, he cites that of the total 34 million para value of all of Cairo's estates, 30.1 million paras, or 88.3 percent, belonged to individuals in this area. This was therefore Cairo's densest nub of capitalist accumulation. What we know of Ahmad's shop tells us something about the nature of the period's economic and social relations. First, it was clearly an international world, with foreign merchants regularly visiting as integral players in the market. "At the end of the 18th century," Pascale Ghazaleh explains, "Cairo was the crossroads of regional trade routes that led east, via the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, and northeast, toward the Fertile Crescent and Anatolia."[56] Into the early 19th century, trade with points east remained the most lucrative for Cairene merchants and represented part of the draw of Cairo for commerce and commercial actors from all over the Middle East and Europe. Indeed, the merchants from Yanbu' across the Red Sea were there in Cairo buying gunpowder that Ahmad had acquired from European suppliers.[57] Further to this point, the foreign currency found in the aftermath's rubble and references to money exchangers point to the swirl of specie in Cairo's commercial districts and the varied origins of those using them.

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[54] See, for instance, Raymond, *Artisans et commerçants*; Peter Gran, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt, 1760–1840* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1979); Alan R. Richards, "Primitive Accumulation in Egypt, 1798–1882," in *The Ottoman Empire and the World-Economy*, ed. Huri İslamoğlu-İnan, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 203–43; Kenneth M. Cuno, "Commercial Relations between Town and Village in Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth-Century Egypt," *Annales Islamologiques* 24 (1988): 111–35; Cuno, *Pasha's Peasants*; Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, *Women and Men in Late Eighteenth-Century Egypt* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995); Raouf Abbas and Assem El-Dessouky, *The Large Landowning Class and the Peasantry in Egypt, 1837–1952*, trans. Amer Mohsen with Mona Zikri, ed. Peter Gran (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011); and Mikhail, "Unleashing the Beast."

[55] This sentence and the following two are from Raymond, *Cairo*, 255.

[56] Pascale Ghazaleh, "Trading in Power: Merchants and the State in 19th-Century Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 1 (2013): 75.

[57] Egypt and the Hijaz had longstanding connections. See Suraiya Faroqhi, "Coffee and Spices: Official Ottoman Reactions to Egyptian Trade in the Later Sixteenth Century," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 76 (1986): 87–93; Suraiya Faroqhi, "Red Sea Trade and Communications as Observed by Evliya Çelebi (1671–72)," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 5/6 (1991): 87–105; Colin Heywood, "A Red Sea Shipping Register of the 1670s for the Supply of Foodstuffs from Egyptian *Wakf* Sources to Mecca and Medina (Turkish Documents from the Archive of

The increasingly international character of the Egyptian marketplace contributed to Cairo's ever more intricate urban density.[58] In the effort to maximize profits, both the physical market and the economic market created tight quarters where mistakes might not be limited to those who made them but would be experienced by many; where few strictures, practices, or regulations were in place to try to prevent an accident; and where a specialist in one field, a druggist like Ahmad Milad, felt the need to dabble in something outside of his expertise, even something as dangerous as gunpowder. In these ways, Egypt's late 18th-century economic transformation both made possible Ahmad's life as an urban merchant with international ties and helped to produce the explosion that would end his and others' lives.

The story of the explosion also exposes the increasing class divides and individual interests and greed given host to and encouraged by the period's growing capitalist economic relations. Al-Jabarti suggested initially that the blast's effects might be democratically experienced by rich and poor alike. This predicted equality of suffering never materialized, however, and was quickly overtaken by what was perhaps more predictable. City officials with political power, the wali and the agha whom al-Jabarti sought to castigate as representatives of a corrupt Mamluk elite, harnessed their authority to take advantage of the calamity to benefit themselves economically over commoners and the poor. Highlighting the greedy actions of this elite is yet one more way in which al-Jabarti accentuates the place of individuals in his account. Citing the trite platitude of an unnamed poet offers little comfort: "'the afflictions of a people are another's profits'" (*muṣā'ib qawm 'inda qawm fawā'id*). The graft and greed of the privileged are not a surprise in any circumstance, but especially when, as Janet Abu-Lughod describes the situation in Cairo, "the elite lived in an entirely different world from the bourgeoisie and the masses," with "minimal contact" between groups.[59] As Cairo boomed for some, it busted for far more.

Between the rich and poor, another class emerges from the story of the explosion—middling laborers who sought advantage where possible. These are the two hundred men who flooded into the blast zone to grab what they could. Ruling authorities sponsored these underlings' theft of the blast victims' personal belongings and their shops' possessions. This was part of how elite patronage worked. These poorer and less powerful minions—we might think of them almost as antecedents of the 20th century's *muwaẓẓafīn* (civil servants)—would get some scraps from the spoils. With this incentive and a desire to maintain their connections with officialdom, they readily participated in a system of sanctioned thievery as both victims and perpetrators in an unequal world. Defending the borders of the cordoned off area and keeping at bay victims and their families, the city's two hundred workers combed through the rubble for money, jewelry, and wares. They benefited from this budding capitalist political edifice, "a basically unpredictable and hostile system," to borrow again from Abu-Lughod, one in which "the 'public good' . . . so often implied a confiscation of their [commoners'] money (in taxation, tribute, and special levies), their time and labor (in the corvée), or their prerogatives (dress, customs, religious observances, and the like)."[60] After picking through piles of bodies and debris for whatever morsels they could salvage, the wali's and agha's men eventually scrubbed this highly valuable real estate of any trace of the viscera left in the explosion's wake.

'Abdurrahman "Abdi' Pasha of Buda, I)," *Anatolia Moderna* 6 (1996): 111–74; Husam Muhammad 'Abd al-Mu'ti, *al-'Alaqat al-Misriyya al-Hijaziyya fi al-Qarn al-Thamin 'Ashar* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriyya al-'Amma li-l-Kitab, 1999); and John L. Meloy, *Imperial Power and Maritime Trade: Mecca and Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* (Chicago: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Chicago, 2010).

[58] Raymond, *Cairo*, 216–25.

[59] Abu-Lughod, *Cairo*, 71.

[60] Ibid., 70.

Needless to say, the losers in this whole affair were ordinary Egyptians, certainly those one hundred anonymous individuals who lost their lives and were denied the dignity of a proper burial, but also the vast majority of Egyptians who were cut out of the era's increasingly hierarchal elite politics. The dismemberment of Ahmad and his neighbors did not handicap the increasingly robust Egyptian body politic. It continued to pump blood to the sturdy musculature of a burgeoning form of state power and capitalist commercial relations. The economy, like the flood, had always existed, of course, but it was rechanneled at the end of the 18th century by new social and political infrastructure, new ideas, practices, and forms. It could give and it could destroy in unprecedented ways. The density and international character of the marketplace, Cairo's increasing wealth gap, the incentives to cut corners for profit—all of these helped to produce the explosion as a social event. Instead of taking the disaster as an indication of social ills in need of solution, ruling authorities saw the forces that caused the explosion and its cruel aftermath as good for business, as emerging from and aiding in the development of authoritarian mechanisms that protected their investments of power, resources, and privilege.

Al-Jabarti's patient detailing of the blast and its aftermath then is ultimately one story about the emergence of something new on the landscape—a new political order at the end of the 18th century, which through salaried functionaries, the reshaping of the urban form, and military and fiscal resources, as well as graft, theft, impunity, and monopoly power, proved capable of extracting meaning and value from what was previously only incomprehensible destruction. His rendition of the Cairo explosion of 1787 helps us analyze the politics of disaster, the place of the individual in the collective experience of catastrophe, the impossibility of knowing the singular feelings of others even as we share suffering, the deficiencies of history, and the function of pain in the politics of opportunity afforded by commercial expansion and economic exploitation. In disaster, power operates on individuals and the aggregate of society; both planes of analysis prove necessary to interpreting these dual phenomena and their dialectics.

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