

Faisal Husain. *Rivers of the Sultan: The Tigris and Euphrates in the Ottoman Empire*. Oxford University Press, 2021, 264 pp.

*Değerlendiren:* Mohammad Hossain

*Rivers of the Sultan*, a finalist for the 2022 George Perkins Marsh Prize awarded by the American Society for Environmental History, was written by Faisal Husain, an environmental historian of the Ottoman Empire with a geographical focus on its Eastern provinces in Anatolia and Iraq. The book examines the role the Tigris and Euphrates played in the establishment of Ottoman state institutions within the river basin between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and is among the latest in a line of works aimed at exploring the early modern Ottoman Empire along the intersections of environmental, political, and economic histories. Going beyond environmental aspects of the Tigris-Euphrates basin, Husain tries to incorporate environmental history into the larger tapestry of the history of Ottoman Iraq. In this respect, he aims to offer a new interpretation of how an instance of river avulsion in the Euphrates upset the political balance in Ottoman Iraq at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, culminating in the weakening of Istanbul's influence and strengthening the regional Pashalik administration's hold on Baghdad (p. 143).

The book adopts a regional approach to the question of early modern Ottoman expansion and integration in the Euphrates-Tigris River basin of Ottoman Iraq, significantly expanding on earlier research by well-known scholars such as Rhoads

 Ph.D. Student, Ibn Haldun University, mohammad.hossain@ibnhaldun.edu.tr

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7529-3387>

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Murphey on irrigation projects in Ottoman Iraq, as well as Cengiz Orhonlu and Turgut Işıksal on navigability and transport on the Tigris-Euphrates River systems (Murphey, 1987, pp. 17-29; Orhonlu & Işıksal 1963, pp. 77-102). Ottoman Iraq has also been the topic of recent monographs by Ebubekir Ceylan and Christoph Herzog, both of whom highlighted the importance of the Tigris-Euphrates River system for transport and communication (Ceylan, 2011; Herzog, 2012).

Husain divides his book into three main sections consisting of seven chapters. The first section broadly discusses the establishment of Ottoman rule and the transformation of the infrastructure of riverine control in Ottoman Iraq, primarily through fortresses and shipyards. The author spends two chapters looking at the unification of the Tigris-Euphrates basin under Ottoman rule in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as being significant in more than one way: It enabled the Ottoman administration to on one hand become adept at the administrative and economic micromanagement of the basin and on the other to attain unrivalled military superiority through shipyards such as Birecik and Basra and a strong navy, granting it the upper hand with regard to external threats such as the Safavids, as well as internal threats such as the local rebellious tribesmen. The Ottomans also introduced naval artillery in the form of the gunboat to Iraq's fluvial landscape in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which the author notes to have been a "forgotten episode of the Military Revolution" (p. 42).

In the well-written and comprehensive second section, the author extensively discusses the concept of the water wide web as a term referring to a hydraulic network connecting different groups situated in the alluvium of the Tigris-Euphrates, namely the farmers, the pastoralists and the marsh dwellers, as well as how Ottoman rule between the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries interacted with them. The environmental aspects and peculiarities of crop cultivation in the arable lands of Ottoman Iraq (as compared to Ottoman Egypt) meant that local farmers and the Ottoman administration had to cooperate with and supplement each other's efforts in ensuring adequate irrigation facilities. This section also discusses the significant impact of herding associations such as the grasslands-based *Ahşamat* [sheep herding pastoralists, from the Persian *hasham* meaning attendant] and the marsh-based *Cemmasat* [water buffalo herders, from the Arabic *jamus* meaning water buffalo] in terms of how they functioned within the ecology of the fluvial landscape, as well as their interactions with and dependence on farmers and the Ottoman administration. The services and mediation capacity of the Ottoman administration were vital to the co-existence of the three groups, helping to maintain order on the one hand while providing a stable source of income for the Ottomans on the other, a narrative which the author supplements with extensive data from Ottoman tax records. However, the author does not delve

into discussions about Ottoman relations with herders in the Kurdish regions to the north of Iraq, which leaves one with a rather fragmented picture of Ottoman policy toward pastoralists and can be construed as a missed opportunity for much-needed critical and comparative analyses in this regard.

The third section features the book's most original contribution and looks at the transformation of the political landscape in Ottoman Iraq in response to critical environmental changes in the fluvial landscape of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, which resulted in the consolidation of power into the hands of the Pashalik of Baghdad and the weakening of the imperial center's grasp. By taking the example of a river avulsion that occurred between 1687-1702 and eventually led to a change in the Euphrates' direction of flow, the author uses court chronicles to show how the Ottoman administration had tried but failed to revert the Euphrates' direction of flow. This eventually led to social disorder, famine, power being usurped by pastoralist tribes, the imperial hold on Iraq weakening, and power localizing in the hands of the Pashalik of Baghdad, which began to exclusively manage the fluvial landscape to meet its own needs. Meanwhile, the author's contention of the Pashalik resembling a "state within the Ottoman state" (p. 136 and Chapter 7 in general) comes dangerously close to sounding like a teleological narrative, although one must note that he does express reservations in the conclusion about whether one can really say that the Pashalik of Baghdad had had separatist tendencies (p. 142).

Upon weighing its strengths, the book is quite rich in terms of drawing upon Ottoman archival resources such as the *mühimme defterleri* [Important Affairs registers], *tapu tahrir defterleri* [cadastral surveys], and court historian's chronicles that contained the accounts of Ottoman and European travelers, among a host of other primary sources. The author deserves praise for his extensive end notes consisting of primary archival material and a bibliography of secondary sources running over more than 100 pages. While these hold a promise for intriguing side trips into academic rabbit holes and are guaranteed to excite researchers of early modern Ottoman history, the simple listing of a plethora of archival sources without relevant annotations means what these sources refer to and why they are listed in the first place are not always clear. Moreover, an abundance of sources can turn out to be a double-edged sword, leading one to prioritize some voices over others. The lack of a meaningful sociocultural lens in *Rivers of the Sultan* means that the narrative is often led by state sources, with the interests of the Ottoman imperial and provincial administrations, its "intelligent control" (p. 37), effective tax policies, and grand strategies taking precedence over that of others (i.e., farmers, workers, pastoralists, *ulema*, women). This makes for a rather state-centric narrative and could potentially

lead to forming mistaken assumptions regarding the power and capabilities of the early modern Ottoman state. However, while conscious attempts to balance this narrative on the part of the author do minimize the damage, they sometimes also fall flat, such as in the case of labeling the *ulema* as a “pro-Ottoman priestly caste” representing the “propaganda arm of the Ottoman government” (p. 38).

The book also has its share of flaws and shortcomings in terms of presentation and organization. Scholars who are accustomed to receiving an idea of the scope, themes, and scale of a book by taking a quick look at the table of contents would be understandably mystified at the rather poetically penned chapter titles. Moreover, the book is missing not just the lists of tables, illustrations, and figures used in the book, but also the list of abbreviations and terms used, as well as very importantly any chronology of the events the work traverses. In terms of organization and argumentation within the work, the writing and expression of ideas come across as uneven in some places, with literary expressions and metaphors sometimes feeling unnecessary or a bit overdone. Moreover, for a work claiming to cover a period of three centuries, the book is rather concise, the main text spanning a mere 150 pages out of a total of 263.

For serious students of Ottoman history eager to listen to the voices of young researchers in the “crowded parlour dominated by numerous conversations” that is Ottoman history (p. 13), the flaws listed above should not detract from the readability of the book, as it has its fair share to offer in terms of novel ideas and ways of understanding Ottoman history. The book has been written in a fluid style of prose consisting of extensively researched endnotes and has something to offer for both the common reader and the student of early modern Ottoman history. In light of some of the shortcomings noted above, readers might be left hoping these issues will be addressed in future expanded or revised editions of the work.

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