Pastoralism and the Mediterranean Environment

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The environmental history of the post-1500 Mediterranean (including the Middle East) has the potential to add significantly to our understanding of the history of the region. However, this is only if it is understood as a perspective (and not just a new specialization) that has the power to transform how we view familiar subjects. A ghettoized environmental history takes us nowhere nor do environmental histories that claim to explain everything. Let's take the role of pastoralism as one example of how an environmental perspective can reshape our understanding of the history of the modern Middle East.

Pastoralism was vitally important to the early modern Mediterranean state and economy. It provided the wool and other animal fiber for the regional textile industry as well as the horses, camels, and other transport animals upon which agriculture, trade, and cavalry forces depended. Pastoralists had a significant impact both upon land use and the structure of the state. Yet despite pioneering work by Braudel, McGowan, and a few others, we lack a proper understanding of how the post-1500 Mediterranean was shaped by pastoralism.[1] Here is where an environmental perspective can be most helpful.

Until the end of the 18th century (later in some areas) the Mediterranean was a major supplier of wool both to its indigenous textile industries and to handloom weavers in northern Europe. The importance of wool to the economic fortunes of imperial Spain and Renaissance Italy, notably Florence, is well chronicled.[2] However, it was also an important component of the economy of southwestern France.[3] The regional economy of the Balkans was crucially linked to wool production. Balkan wool continued to play a role in the eastern European market down to the 20th century. Mazower informs us that the economy of Salonica was driven by the ladino-speaking Jewish community's monopoly on the production of Janissary woolen uniforms.[4] The wool in question came from Macedonia, Bulgaria, northern Greece, and eastern Albania. However, greater Syria (Bilad al-Sham) and Iraq also produced wool for the local carpet industry as well as for handloom weavers.[5] Ottoman Anatolia (especially eastern Anatolia) was also well known for its wool production. Again both carpet producers and handloom weavers were the main beneficiaries. Although I am aware of no studies that specifically focus on the wool economy of modern Egypt, one can piece together some of the elements from the work of Garcin, Raymond, and Walz.[6] Needless to say, the Maghrib was a major wool producer as well. The more we see pastoralists as intimately linked to the Mediterranean wool industry, the better we can understand their role in the regional economy.

For environmental historians, pastoralism also presents important land use and range-management issues. The impact of sheep and goats on semiarid rangelands is a topic much discussed and often mystified[7] but nonetheless crucial to engage. Some have argued that land devoted to pastoral production is unavailable for agriculture. However, although pastoralist land use may at times be in conflict with agriculturalists, this ignores important complementarities. What was the economic footprint of pastoralism in the wider region? How did this change in the 19th century with the advent of private

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property in land, intrusive states, and new technologies? What was the optimal herd size for rangelands of different types? These are historical subjects with important scientific aspects. It may be possible (with suitable precautions) to project backwards some of the findings of present-day rangelands ecology.

Then there's the political dimension. Pastoralism was hardwired into the premodern power structures of the Mediterranean region. In Iberia, Italy, and Sicily the old elites were closely linked to pastoralism—think of the Spanish mesta and the comparable choreographed migrations in southern Italy detailed by John Marino.[8] However, pastoralist power was also integral to the structure of the state in the Balkans and the Arab Mediterranean. Tribal and rural groups—Turkmen and Bedouin among others—were important political players in the Ottoman provinces well into the 19th century.[9] Rural magnates, whether of tribal or state origin, were key opponents to state reform policies in Spain, Italy, and Greece as well.

Finally, there are the energetic dimensions of pastoralism. Prior to fossil fuels, the energetic resources controlled by pastoralists were significant supplements to human power. In this respect we can think of them as portable energy-storage units.[10] Horses and other large ungulates were a major source of traction power for agriculture and agro-industry. They also provided the punch to cavalry (and the elites linked to horse culture). Sheep and goats along with cattle provided a major source of protein to humans (if in a very skewed social-distribution pattern). Water power and wind power were relatively minor additions to the regional energy total. What then was the energetic contribution of the pastoralist sector to the Mediterranean regional economy?

The role of pastoralists in the regional economy and ecology has until now been poorly understood. For this reason I urge we assemble a collaborative research project focusing on the pastoral economy and ecology of the Mediterranean since 1500 CE. It might be expected to yield major dividends.

NOTES

[1]Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); and Bruce W. McGowan, *Economic Life in Ottoman Europe: Taxation, Trade, and the Struggle for Land, 1600–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[2]On Florence, Gene A. Brucker, *Florence: The Golden Age, 1138–1737* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984). See also Carla Rahn Phillips and William D. Phillips, Jr., *Spain's Golden Fleece: Wool Production and the Wool Trade from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); and David R. Ringrose, *Spain, Europe, and the "Spanish Miracle," 1700–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[3]Emmanuel Leroi-Ladurie, *Les Paysans de Languedoc*, 2 vols. (Paris: Mouton, 1966).

[4]Mark Mazower, *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims, and Jews, 1430–1950* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

[5]Dina Rizk Khoury, *State and Provincial Society in the Ottoman Empire: Mosul, 1540–1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Sarah D. Shields, *Mosul Before Iraq: Like Bees Making Five-Sided Cells* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000).

[6]Jean-Claude Garcin, *Un centre musulman de la Haute-Egypte médiévale: Qus* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire, 1976); André Raymond, *Artisans et commercants du Caire au XVIIIe siècle* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1999); and Terence Walz, *Trade Between Egypt and Bilad as-Sudan, 1700–1820* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire, 1978).

[7]Edmund Burke III, "The Big Story: Human History, Energy Regimes and the Environment," in *The Environment and World History,* ed. E. Burke and K. R. Pomeranz (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2009).

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[8]Julius Klein, *The Mesta: A Study in Spanish Economic History, 1273–1836* (London: Oxford University Press, 1920); and John A. Marino, *Pastoral Economics in the Kingdom of Naples* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

[9]Norman N. Lewis, *Nomads and Settlers in Syria and Jordan, 1800–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Martha Mundy and Basim Musallam, eds., *The Transformation of Nomadic Society in the Arab East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[10]Burke, "The Big Story."

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