In the insightful and beautifully written *Rivers of the Sultan: The Tigris and Euphrates in the Ottoman Empire*, Faisal H. Husain offers a new interpretation of early modern Ottoman history framed around what he calls the “twin rivers.” He begins with the sixteenth-century Ottoman conquest of Baghdad, which marked the first time that the Tigris-Euphrates basin was united under one political authority. Husain’s desire to restore unity to a river basin which has been largely divided both historiographically and politically in the twentieth century goes against the grain of much environmental history, which tends to emphasize mismatched political and natural geographies.

*Rivers of Empire* is divided into three parts—“The Amphibious State,” “The Water Wide Web,” and “The Rumblings of Nature”—which broadly speaking trace Ottoman state making, governance, and state remaking in the Tigris-Euphrates basin between the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the first section, Husain focuses on military infrastructure, showing how the empire managed the circulation of people and resources in order to construct and maintain a naval presence on the Shatt al-Arab river. He argues that without this persistent military presence, Ottoman rule in what is now Iraq might have looked more like it did in the Arabian Peninsula—a region, notably, without any navigable rivers (p. 38).

The second section focuses on modes of rule in the alluvium, with one chapter devoted to each of the region’s three major ecosystems. In each case, Husain highlights “ecological diversity and the success of human opportunism and ingenuity in integrating arid and wet zones along with arable areas into systems of production” (p. 60). He shows how Ottoman authorities incorporated and profited from existing practices of cultivation, including in wetlands, which are more often seen as unprofitable and hostile to state control—and therefore subject to drainage and other projects of control. Husain is equally attentive to what those cultivation practices entailed. Here is where his creativity with sources becomes particularly clear, for example through his use of water buffalo.
colonies recorded in tax registers to document the extent of wetlands (p. 99). The second section is also where Husain intervenes most clearly and decisively in the historiographies of the early modern Ottoman Empire, on the one hand, and of irrigation and rule in West Asia, on the other. Scholars have long argued that the Ottomans owed their longevity to pragmatic and flexible practices of rule. Here, Husain shows that Ottoman pragmatism was as much an ecological story as anything else. At the same time, he details a history of irrigation in the region that has long been ignored in favor of a narrative of infrastructural collapse and desertification post-Mongol invasion. Husain's intervention, in both cases, emphasizes local agency and its role in shaping environmental practice and forms of imperial authority together.

In the third section, Husain rewrites the history of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Iraq, arguing that what is often portrayed as the collapse of Ottoman rule had its roots in the avulsion of the Euphrates. He shows that the disaster was as much man-made as it was natural, both in that it was sparked by a man named Sheikh Dhiyab breaching a levee in order to irrigate his crops, and in that Ottoman officials ignored the course change for several years to focus on other priorities—long enough that it became nearly impossible to return the river to its former bed. Husain argues that this disrupted the balance in the countryside between cultivated land and marshland, which disrupted the balance between the interests of Ottoman authorities in Istanbul and local power-holders (p. 127), leading to the rise of new tribal powers in the countryside and ultimately to localized rule (the “pashalik of Baghdad”). In addition to showing how the Tigris and Euphrates both enabled and limited Ottoman rule, this third section is an important addition to an environmental history literature that often relegates disasters to their own subgenre. And this section, even more than the others, raises thorny and important questions about the limits and overlaps of the “human” and the “natural.”

It is when focusing purely on the “natural” that the book is somewhat less convincing. Husain returns in the conclusion to the question of the “natural physical unity of the river basin,” which he says has been disrupted by the “artificial political divisions” of modern times (p. 149). And yet he also notes that the Ottoman Empire was the only polity in the long human history of the Tigris and Euphrates to politically unite the whole basin of the twin rivers. It is clear that this early modern political unity had an important impact on the history of the rivers, and the empire. But it is not clear that such unity is “natural,” except insofar as scientists take this as an “article of faith” (p. 5). Husain goes further than many historians in incorporating scientific evidence, and his explanations of how tree-ring and cave-ice data complement more traditional historical source analysis are clear and convincing (pp. 113-114). But at times I questioned his reliance on modern scientific concepts (kinetic, biome, energy) to explain the actions and motivations of his early modern subjects. Are concepts like these universal enough to be meaningful in recounting histories that long predate them? Of course, all scholars have to strike a balance between actors’ categories and modern analytic terms, and the debate over how to use scientific sources is a much larger conversation among environmental historians. Husain’s work represents an important contribution to this debate.

Overall, Rivers of the Sultan argues convincingly that we cannot understand the persistence of the Ottoman Empire “in an ecological vacuum,” that we need environmental history to understand Ottoman history. Husain's work will appeal to historians of the Middle East and environmental historians but is accessible enough for undergraduates. With its focus on the twin rivers, it is also a valuable and original contribution to the growing historiography of global rivers.
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