

BOOK REVIEW

Elizabeth R. Williams, *States of Cultivation: Imperial Transition and Scientific Agriculture in the Eastern Mediterranean*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023. xi + 425 pages.
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It is often a difficult task for historians to study the history of the former Ottoman Arab provinces (mainly the territories of modern Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia) to the 1930s. Two practical factors make such a historical endeavor challenging. The first is the difficulty of adequately grasping the different contexts produced by the different imperial, colonial, and nation-states that dominated the region over this long period. Such an endeavor requires mastering the late Ottoman, British, and French colonial periods and subsequent nation-state periods. Second, this kind of history writing requires the ability to effectively read and comprehend the archival documents produced by all these states and other relevant primary sources; thus, the historian must overcome this diversity of primary sources. In *States of Cultivation: Imperial Transition and Scientific Agriculture in the Eastern Mediterranean*, Elizabeth R. Williams attempts to meet this challenge.

Williams contextualizes the sometimes overlapping but often conflicting visions of economic development, agricultural production, and scientific agriculture developed by the dominant states in the eastern Mediterranean, with a particular focus on the territory of present-day Syria and Lebanon, from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1930s. Focusing on the agrarian transformation of the region, the author points out that the Ottoman, French, Syrian, and Lebanese officials who planned economic and agricultural development projects in the region had shared technocratic ideals but developed divergent agricultural policies, practices, and institutions by their imperial, colonial, and nationalist goals/motives. While the existing literature sees World War I as a turning point and treats the pre-war Ottoman and post-war French Mandate administrations on different planes, Williams brings these two periods together on a common plane, revealing their similarities and contrasts regarding economic and agricultural development. According to the author, the commonality that makes it possible to analyze these two periods together is the concept of “state space.”

Within this general framework, the book comprises five main chapters apart from the Introduction and Epilogue. Chapter 1 examines the agricultural transformation of the eastern Mediterranean, an essential part of the Ottoman Empire, through the reforms and projects undertaken by the Ottoman central and provincial state officials to increase agricultural production and the revenues of the central treasury from the Tanzimat period to World War I. These reforms also aimed at making the region an

integrated part of the Ottoman state space, undermining the authority of provincial elites and making the region more controllable and legible for the central administration. Chapter 2, again focusing on the late Ottoman period, deals with the efforts of Ottoman state officials to utilize globally widespread scientific agriculture to increase agricultural production in the region. Focusing on the projects – model fields, agricultural schools, and agricultural publications – to produce and disseminate scientific agriculture, the chapter argues that such modern practices did not merely imitate the agricultural knowledge produced in western Europe but also took into account local agrarian knowledge and even applied it to new agricultural methods and tools.

Chapter 3 points out that in the immediate aftermath of the war, the French Mandate officials saw the region as a periphery where the raw materials (especially grain, cash crops, etc.) needed by the industries in the metropole were produced, provoking a reaction from local elites and technocrats who saw the region's agricultural wealth as a resource for building a national economy in the region. Chapter 4 focuses on the conflicting visions between Syrian nationalist technocratic elites and French Mandate administrators over the production and implementation of scientific agriculture in Syria during the 1920s. While local landowning elites favored policies that would consolidate agricultural infrastructure within a national economy and a scientific agricultural education that would integrate local agricultural knowledge, French officials sought to disseminate agricultural expertise and agricultural education that would increase the region's dependence on France and France's influence in the countryside, disregarding local agricultural knowledge or even labeling it as irrational. The last chapter, which also brings up the adverse effects of environmental factors on agriculture, addresses the discontent that the Mandate's policies that ignored these ecological effects and the needs of the region caused among both local landowning elites and cultivators in the 1930s. The author believes that the Mandate administration's agricultural policies led to a growing political mobilization and resistance against the Mandate.

Williams undertakes the difficult task of focusing on agrarian transformation in the eastern Mediterranean over a long period. Still, the book has several features that make it possible to meet this challenge, some of which are problematic in themselves. First of all, treating this long period on a common plane through the concept of state space, Williams uses it as a theoretical tool to explain how the states that dominated the region from the mid-nineteenth century onwards considered agricultural development and transformation. The author describes state space as "the product of an array of institutions and technologies designed to organize and manage the creation of a seemingly homogenous but hierarchical space that facilitates surveillance, control and the reproduction of power," referring to Lefebvre (p. 14). On the one hand, this concept allows the author to distinguish the differences between the Ottoman and French Mandate periods. Williams argues that in the pre-war period, central and provincial Ottoman officials viewed the eastern Mediterranean as part of the Empire and thus envisioned a unified imperial state space integrated with the rest of the Empire. In contrast, the French Mandate officials who administered the region in the post-war period envisioned the eastern

Mediterranean as a fragmented colonial state space that served the interests of the French metropole, particularly its demand for raw materials.

On the other hand, although Williams makes a distinction between Ottoman and Mandate concepts of state space, she usually uses the concept of state space to analyze the eastern Mediterranean during the Mandate period. The author explains in detail the fragmented concept of colonial state space based on the hierarchy between the French metropole and the region, prioritizing the needs of the metropole and accordingly dividing the region into statelets that produced the crops needed by it. She also places this concept at the center of her analysis and relates it to the agricultural projects and practices implemented in the 1920–1930s. However, the analysis of the Ottoman concept of state space lacks such a focus and detailed explanation. While the author explains the incentives and projects that motivated the Ottoman officials to pursue policies and practices for the transformation of agriculture in the eastern Mediterranean in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, she mostly does not attempt to place the concept of state space at the center of this analysis. This sometimes makes it difficult to grasp the similarities and contrasts between the Ottoman and Mandate periods.

Second, Williams also refers to various environmental factors (drought, locusts, field mice, sunn pest) as one element that shaped the region's agricultural transformation and their potential to exacerbate existing social, economic, and political tensions, contributing to the Middle Eastern environmental history literature. However, this emphasis on environmental factors is not an analytical tool that permeates the whole of the book, because while the author analyzes the impact of the environment on agriculture and politics in the region during the Mandate period, she does not do the same for the late Ottoman period. This gives the impression that environmental factors were an add-on that emerged with the Mandate in the colonial period. However, as recent studies of Middle Eastern and Ottoman environmental history have shown, environment was a factor that had the potential to shape politics, society, economy, and agriculture in the eastern Mediterranean in the late Ottoman period. Therefore, historicizing the effects of the environment on agricultural transformation during the Ottoman and French Mandate periods would have made the study much more fascinating.

The third feature of Williams's work is the emphasis on the multiplicity and diversity of human actors. Williams successfully distinguishes between Ottoman and French state officials, local technocratic elites, mostly from powerful local landowning families, and poor cultivators regarding their views on scientific agriculture and agricultural development. The fourth related feature of the work is that it is based on strong research using a variety of sources. Drawing on both official state archives and a wide range of private primary sources (from official correspondence to parliamentary debates to personnel files in Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, French, and English), the author is thus able to specify the various actors that constitute one of the focal points of the study and to historicize the extended period, with all its continuities and contrasts. This is one of the key features that gives the research its strongest quality. In conclusion, Williams makes an insightful

contribution to the literature on the region by providing a comprehensive account of the agrarian transformation in the eastern Mediterranean in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in its economic, social, political, and environmental aspects.

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