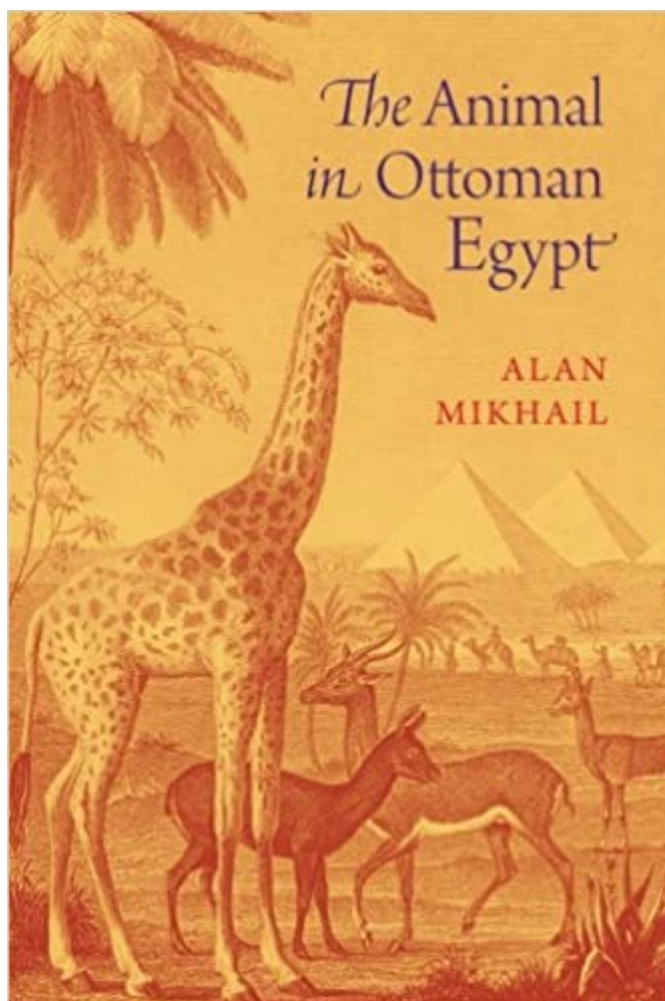


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# The Animal In Ottoman Egypt



## Synopsis

Since humans first emerged as a distinct species, they have eaten, fought, prayed, and moved with other animals. In this stunningly original and conceptually rich book, historian Alan Mikhail puts the history of human-animal relations at the center of transformations in the Ottoman Empire from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Mikhail uses the history of the empire's most important province, Egypt, to explain how human interactions with livestock, dogs, and charismatic megafauna changed more in a few centuries than they had for millennia. The human world became one in which animals' social and economic functions were diminished. Without animals, humans had to remake the societies they had built around intimate and cooperative interactions between species. The political and even evolutionary consequences of this separation of people and animals were wrenching and often violent. This book's interspecies histories underscore continuities between the early modern period and the nineteenth century and help to reconcile Ottoman and Arab histories. Further, the book highlights the importance of integrating Ottoman history with issues in animal studies, economic history, early modern history, and environmental history. Carefully crafted and compellingly argued, *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt* tells the story of the high price humans and animals paid as they entered the modern world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The book is well researched and supported by copious archival and manuscript resources from Europe, North America, North Africa, and Asia.... Mikhail marshals abundant evidence to support his thesis about the dramatic changes in human-animal relationships wrought by modernization."

--Tobias J. Lanz, *Environmental History* "Camels, donkeys, dogs, and water buffalo have their histories too, and in this compact book Alan Mikhail deftly shows just how closely intertwined they, and the histories of other animals, were with the human history of Ottoman Egypt. Carefully researched, lavishly illustrated, and engagingly written, this book sets a high standard for the historical study of human-animal relations and opens new vistas on the history of Egypt." --J.R. McNeill, author of *Mosquito Empires* "In this deeply and imaginatively researched book, Alan Mikhail uses insights drawn from the new field of animal history to revisit major transitions in Egyptian history, including modernization, urbanization, and integration into global networks. Particularly striking is the way his argument encompasses both the material conditions of animal existence, such as labor and disease, and the more abstract impact of religion, law, and politics." --Harriet Ritvo, Massachusetts Institute of Technology "This is a fascinating book, which uses the diminishing presence of animals in various key locations to shed light on major social transformations in late 18th and early 19th century Egypt. Everything from climate and bacteria to foreign imperialists and their new technologies shaped the new Egypt that we see emerging in this book; each of these agents of change gets its due in Mikhail's intricate story." --Kenneth Pomeranz, University of Chicago

Alan Mikhail is Professor of History at Yale University. He is the author of *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History*, which won the Roger Owen Book Award of the Middle East Studies Association, and editor of *Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa*.

Great!

This is a quite unusual topic that is likely to get fewer readers than the book deserves. I started it a year ago and put it down, then recently decided to reread it. The preface may be the best thing in the book, a funny and wonderfully written one that's difficult to describe, but is likely to make the re-reader really like this author. The book is based on a great deal of archival work, and focuses on Egypt from about 1770 to 1820. This period includes the Napoleonic invasion, and the rise of Mohammed Ali, a formidable and ruthless Albanian who came to rule Egypt for decades. The term "Ottoman" is therefore mostly notational after a certain point. Mikhail advances a claim that he makes a strong case for, but I'm not entirely convinced. He sees Egypt's people and animals as actors together in a traditional society, but after about 1800, diseases and other conditions greatly

reduced the number of animals so when there was need for labor, animal muscle came to be replaced by human muscle, often in the form of corvee labor, especially under Muhammed Ali, when its large scale use caused great suffering among the peasants. This book argues that human muscle replaced animal power and the peasants were referred to (and treated like) in the same terms as animals had been. The weakest point in the book is explaining this transition. The first section details animals in Egyptian life, using court documents, wills and such, and this really is fascinating material and at the same time, does much to create a reality of what could have been boring stuff. Animals included buffalo, cattle, camels and sheep primarily. There's also an extended and surprising section on dogs in Muslim society, more complex than is usually thought (the common understanding that dogs are seen in Islam as impure and polluting is a gross simplification; dogs provided security, companionship, were used in hunting and sometimes as pets). Large populations of dogs in Cairo and elsewhere were seen as useful in eating garbage, and were in fact given some legal protection. It's only after about 1800 that their usefulness was found lacking and they came to be seen as a danger in the form of disease. The section I found most interesting is on charismatic megafauna, an odd but common term for animals such as giraffes and elephants. These were used in ceremonies and as gift items in diplomacy, such as lions standing as symbols of rulers' regal power or sending a rare creature such as a giraffe to European monarchs as a present. Mikhail considers himself an animal historian--that is, his focus is on animals as active parts of history, more of an ecological approach than the usual historical narrative. This focus is attracting an increasing number of historians, and is producing some fascinating work. So, consider this book an early effort. I hope we see more books by this author, it's a promising and innovative field of history.

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