

MIT Seminar on Environmental and Agricultural History

When Animals Stop Working: An Economy of Labor Transformation in Ottoman Egypt



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In the land-based agrarian world of early modern Ottoman Egypt, animal wealth, labor, and movement were the bases of social and economic life. Relations between humans and various classes of animals were, however, radically altered at the end of the eighteenth century by a combination of climatic, epidemiological, political, and economic processes associated with the onset of the Anthropocene. In the new human-animal world livestock were no longer a central pillar of economic, social, and political life. This diminished role for animals led to a radical restructuring of the rural world. Thus, as Egypt moved from being the most lucrative province of the Ottoman Empire to a nineteenth-century centralizing state, human-animal relations changed more fundamentally between 1770 and 1830 than they had for millennia before that. This paper traces this change at the turn of the nineteenth century to understand political, social, ecological, and economic history through one of the most basic of all human relationships—those with other animals.

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2:30 to 4:30 pm

Building E51 Room 095

Corner of Wadsworth and Amherst Streets, Cambridge

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