

A British View of Egyptian Agriculture

(1840)

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After the French invasion of Egypt (1798-1801) had been repulsed by combined Ottoman and British forces, Muhammad Ali (1805-1848) began a process of asserting Egyptian autonomy from the rule of the Ottoman Sultan, which entailed both military/bureaucratic reforms and economic reforms. Along with increasing taxes and central administrative control over crop production and distribution, Muhammad Ali expanded trade with Europe and encouraged foreign investment in Egyptian agriculture and industry. In the 1830s cotton cultivation was expanding substantially, and would continue to expand until the late 1860s, due to increasing European demand and the American Civil War. By the 1870s, the Egyptian state was heavily indebted to European banks, due to spending on the Suez Canal and other government projects. In 1876 the Egyptian state declared bankruptcy, and in 1882 the British occupied Egypt in the name of protecting the interests of British investors from a nationalist uprising.

In the distribution of agricultural productions the government generally takes the initiative, by determining what quantity of a particular article shall be cultivated in a given district, and at a price fixed upon before the time of delivery. By this arrangement most of the produce of the land comes into the hands of the government on terms determined by itself; and, in fact, the government, considering itself possessed of the fee simple of the lands, looks upon the **fellahs** as labourers under its direction, who may abandon, as indeed they frequently do abandon, the lands whenever the conditions of cultivation are not satisfactory to them. When the fellah is poor, the prices paid by the government scarcely allow him to exist; but when the holder of the lands has capital for seed, and can afford to wait for the returns, I believe the price allowed by the government will give from 15 to 20 per cent. on the outlay of capital; at least such was the assurance I had from some of the natives, who were cultivating lands on an extensive scale. In bad and sterile years the government furnishes to the fellah his seed. Certain quantities are placed for this purpose in the hands of the authorities, who distribute them among the poorest peasants, according to the quantity of land they hold. They repay the advances with interest after the harvest. When the produce is large, the fellah usually lays aside a sufficient provision of seed.

The excuse alleged for forcing a particular cultivation in Egypt is, that the lazy habits of the fellahs would induce them to abandon cultivation altogether, or at all events only to produce the articles necessary for their own consumption, and such as required the smallest application of labour, were not the despotic stimulant applied. On one occasion, when I suggested to **Mahomet Ali** that a greater latitude left to the cultivator would lead to an increased production, he replied, "No! my peasantry are suffering from the disease of ignorance to their true interest, and I must act the part of the doctor. I must be severe when anything goes wrong." . . .

But of all the agricultural produce of Egypt cotton is incomparably the most important, and it is an article whose introduction is wholly due to the enterprise of Mahomet Ali. The average growth of this article, as regards her relations with foreign countries, may be said to fluctuate from 100,000 to 150,000 bales per year, the bale being about 2 cwt., the price varying from 8 dollars to 20 dollars per quintal [*qantar*]. Years have been when the whole quantity has not exceeded 50,000 bales.

Cotton is not willingly cultivated by the fellah, and would probably be scarcely produced at all but through the despotic interference of the **pacha**. When the grower is rich and influential enough to protect himself against the exaction and the dishonesty of the collectors and other agents of the government, cotton production at the price paid by the pacha is profitable; but when the poor fellah is at the mercy of the

officers of the state, his situation is frequently most deplorable, and he is pillaged without mercy; often when the cotton he produces is of superior quality he gets only the ordinary price, he is cheated in weight, and cheated by being kept out of his money; indeed, the functionary too often dreams of nothing but to extort from the suffering fellah whatever he can get hold of.

Another cause for the unwillingness with which cotton is cultivated is, that it produces only one crop per year, while many other fruits of the soil give two or three harvests.

It is not believed that the average produce of cotton exceeds two cantars per feddan, and in many parts not more than one cantar; but I am informed that, with proper attention to irrigation, to cultivation, and to gathering the wool, seven or eight cantars would be a fair average production at a price of 2 piastres per cantar. I believe the cultivator is not badly paid: much, however, depends upon the cost of irrigation, which is the principal expense. . . .

No advances are ordinarily made to the fellah by the pacha; he requires the payment of the **miri** [land tax] after the harvest; the fellah is obliged to deliver all his produce to the pacha, who pays the cultivator from 112 to 150 piastres, the quintal of 120 pounds, according to the quality, the fellah being required to deliver it in the principal town of the district. He receives a document for the value of the cotton; if he have not paid his contributions, the amount is deducted from them; if he have, he gets his money little by little at the convenience of the director of the district. The price of labour in the Said [Upper Egypt] is from 20 to 30 paras a-day for field labour. In lower Egypt it is 30 to 40. The expense of living is about half the price of labour. There are abundance of fellahs whose expenditure is scarcely $1/2 d.$ per day. The cotton grounds should be removed from the inundations of the Nile, either by dikes, or their elevated position. On the contrary, wheat, pulse, etc. succeed best in the inundated lands. For these, the sowing takes place in the month of November, after the retreat of the waters; but of cotton in March or April. There the introduction of cotton has interfered little with the means of producing wheat, etc., but has principally driven maize out of cultivation. The arrangement for cultivation is, that the commanders of the provinces, according to the orders of the pacha, direct the quantity of feddans to be sown with cotton in each village, after an examination of the localities. The head of the villages sub-directs to each fellah the quantity of feddans he is to sow. When produced, the cotton is delivered as above described. There was at first some resistance on the part of the fellahs to cotton cultivation; but as it really interfered little with other produce, they have willingly adopted it, as the pacha has assisted them with wells and water-wheels, which have greatly tempted them. The first price paid by the pacha was 175 piastres; but the reduction of that price has led to a diminished zeal and an increased neglect. . . .

The principal source of receipt is the *miri* or land tax, which appears to be considered throughout Egypt as an equivalent for rent. It is levied according to the estimated value of the soil, though in that valuation there is much of favouritism and abuse. The maximum land-tax is 64 piastres, about 13*s.* per feddan, the lowest in the cultivated districts is 38 piastres, 7*s.* 6*d.* per feddan. In the Delta and in Lower Egypt the higher rent is generally paid. In Middle Egypt, I found the average rate to be about 42 piastres, say 8*s.* 6*d.* A native proprietor of 208 feddans in the neighbourhood of Cairo told me he paid 25 purses -- 125 *l.* sterling, which makes about 125. per feddan. The owner informed me he had paid for his tenure of the land about three years' purchase, and considered the fee-simple as vested in him. There is nothing to prevent the land-tax being increased to any extent, except, of course, the power of the land to pay it with profit to the holder; but at the present rate of the land-tax there is little difficulty in obtaining grants of land from the government.

Two millions of feddans are subjected to the *miri*, of which in 1833, 1,850,000 were in cultivation.

In many districts the fellahs are much in arrear; there is generally a year's taxes due, and in some districts two or three years. When the irrigation of the Nile is insufficient, or excessive, it is often impossible for the cultivator to discharge the demands of the government, but a favourable year allows him to get rid of the arrears.

Of late many tracts of land have been transferred to capitalists who have consented to pay the arrears due, and who in consequence employ the fellahs as day labourers, taking from them the responsibility of discharging the land-tax, and of delivering the stipulated quantity of produce at the prices fixed by the pacha. In such cases the wages paid to the fellah seldom exceed 40 paras per day, or $2\frac{1}{2} d.$ I visited some districts in which from 300 to 800 feddans had been taken by capitalists, and I have reason to

believe the investment had been profitable.

When the burden of arrears is increased to an intolerable weight, the peasants frequently abandon the spot, and the lands are granted to applicants on such conditions as the government may think fit to impose. . . .

It is not difficult to account for the unproductive speculations of the government of Egypt. There is in the mind of the viceroy a boundless fund of curiosity, and an eager desire to avail himself of every thing which represents European civilization; hence he frequently lends a willing ear to the suggestions of adventurers proposing one and another scheme of improvement, wholly inapplicable to the condition and circumstances of Egypt. Whatever seems to promise additional strength or wealth is too suddenly adopted, and, as a natural consequence, often too suddenly abandoned, when the first experiments have failed. I heard the pacha estimate the cost of the different attempts he has made to introduce improvements from Europe at 60,000,000 of dollars, or 12,000,000 *l.* sterling. The efforts to improve the country, and to advance its manufacturing and agricultural development, are no doubt meritorious in a high degree; but many of them required for their success means and instruments such as Egypt is not at present in a condition to furnish.

Heavy as are the amount of taxation and the expenses of government, it is impossible to estimate the extent of pillage, and the losses which occur in the transfer of the taxes from the pockets of the people to the public treasury.

It may be estimated that a sum of little less than 4,000,000 *l.* sterling is paid by the cultivators of the land, which makes an amount of taxation of more than 2 *l.* per head. This is as much as is paid by the population of Great Britain, nearly twice the average amount paid by the people of France, and four times that contributed by the Spanish nation to the expenses of their government.

There can be no stronger evidence, however, of the productive powers of the Valley of the Nile; and were nothing taken from the payers of taxes but the amount which really reaches the public coffers, there might be an accumulation of property in the hands of the producer. . . .

Glossary

Fellah, pl. fellahin

Peasant. The term *fellah* refers specifically to settled peasants who cultivate the flooded or irrigated land of the Nile valley. In 1846, the estimated population of Egypt was approximately 4.5 million, the vast majority of which consisted of settled peasants. Most peasants had either small plots or no land at all, and in the nineteenth century, as the demands of the state increased, peasants were subjected to *corvée* labor.

Mahomet Ali, also Muhammad Ali, or Mehmet Ali (1805-1848)

As an officer in the Albanian contingent of the Ottoman army sent to repel the French invasion of Egypt (1798-1801), Muhammad Ali was able to negotiate the political instability of the period, and emerged as governor of the Ottoman province of Egypt in 1805. After eliminating his opponents, including Egypt's former rulers, the Mamluks, Muhammad Ali initiated a series of reforms to increase state control of the economy and to strengthen the military. During this period, Egypt began to industrialize, and production of cash crops greatly increased. Using his modernized army, Muhammad Ali was able to exert control over the Sudan and Syria, and in 1832 he launched an attack against the Ottomans, who avoided conquest only with Russian and British assistance. Muhammad Ali was the first of a dynasty that ruled Egypt first as *Khedives* (viceroys), then as Kings, until the Revolution of 1952.

Miri

A tax paid by the peasant in return for use of land. The *miri* tax was generally set at about 10% of total production, but was frequently supplemented with additional taxes, such as animal taxes, as well as obligations such as an annual period of forced labor for the state. Prior to Muhammad Ali's reign, production of crops in Egypt generally occupied peasants about 150 days of the year, with the land inundated for much of the remaining period. Peasants could thus supplement their income with craft production or other forms of labor. With Muhammad Ali's industrialization and military policies, the workload of peasants increased to about 250 days per year, straining their financial situations.

Pacha, also Pasha or Pasa

In Ottoman usage, the term *Pasha* referred to a military commander. In the Ottoman administrative hierarchy, provincial governors were also military commanders. In modern usage, the term refers to the rank of general in the Turkish army, and is also used as an honorific title.

Analysis Questions

1. According to the report, what were the major crops produced in Egypt in the 1830s? Why were Egyptian peasants opposed to cultivating cotton?
2. What does the author see as the main problems with Egyptian agriculture? What does he suggest as solutions? What are the biases of the author, and how do they shape his view of Egyptian society?
3. What policies had the Egyptian government adopted to encourage expanded cultivation and increased productivity? What were the main obstacles that peasants faced in their work?
4. What were the main expenses of the Egyptian peasant (fellah)? According to the report, were most peasants successful or unsuccessful at meeting their expenses? Was the standard of living of Egyptian peasants improving, or not, and why?
5. What were the main problems faced by peasants, and how could they overcome those problems?