Review of Middle East Studies, 49(2), 173–204
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BOOK REVIEWS

Zeinab Abul-Magd. *Imagined Empires: A History of Revolt in Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. vi + 201 pages, acknowledgements, bibliography, art credits, index. Paper US$29.95 ISBN 978-0-520-27553-9.

The unfolding of the Arab Spring since December 2010 has ushered in a new wave of writing on revolutions: their causes and possible futures. Zeinab Abul-Magd's *Imagined Empires* stands out as an original, archive-based genealogy of revolts in Egypt from the Ottoman conquest in the early sixteenth century until the end of the British occupation in the mid-twentieth century. Framing the study around the theme of "revolt" may have enabled the author to capitalize on the contemporary political moment, but it prevented her from utilizing the exceptionally rich archival material base on which she relied. *Imagined Empires* is noteworthy for its observations about the history of the Egyptian south more than for its overarching argument about empires and revolts.

Abul-Magd rejects the widely held assumption that Egypt was historically a unified polity centered on Cairo. Instead, she suggests that Cairo and Qina were the capitals of two independent, often antagonistic, polities in the north and south of Egypt respectively. The author's aim is to narrate the history of revolts in Egypt as seen from the south. With this mind, the narrative line is rather straightforward. On the eve of the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517, the south enjoyed political and economic autonomy and intercommunal symbiosis. Since then, this state of harmony has been repeatedly threatened by the imperial ambitions emanating from or facilitated by the rulers of Cairo. Although these imperial quests never succeeded, their failure caused environmental disaster and instigated violent revolt. This narrative applies with surprising consistency over more than four centuries to the imperial projects of the Ottomans (1500–1800), the French (1798–1801), Muhammad Ali and his dynasty (1805–1882), and the British (1882–1950). In the epilogue, the author reminds us that the Egyptian revolution of 2011 followed the same script, only this time in response to American imperialism.

To support this symmetrical narrative Abul-Magd engages with a number of theoretical frameworks, albeit problematically. For example, in the

https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2016.41 Published online by Cambridge University Press

introduction and on the book's back cover, she describes her study as a "microhistory" of the province of Qina. However, except for an endnote in which the author states that she "uses the term *microhistory* differently from its original meaning" (157), there is no allusion to this historiographical approach anywhere in the book. When referring to world-systems theory, the author describes the Ottoman center's relationship to Qina as "a reversed core/periphery relationship" (22). However, the dynamic she describes conforms to the simplest iteration of world-systems theory, in which the core (i.e., Istanbul) relied on extracting taxes and grains from the periphery (i.e., Qina). In discussing the British occupation, she asserts that "[t]heoretical narratives about efficient imperial capitalism … apply to many places in Latin America and Asia, but not to Egypt" (124). This sweeping statement is unsubstantiated, but the message it is meant to convey, namely the particularity of the history of the Egyptian south, is clearer when considering archival materials.

Imagined Empires is based on research in a number of archives, including those of several departments within the Egyptian bureaucracy and the British Foreign Office, and on Arabic chronicles and European traveler accounts. However, it is within the recently uncovered shariʿa court records from the towns of Egypt's south, especially Qina and Isna, that the most innovative aspects of the study are to be found. Abul-Magd searched these records for moments of revolt or dissent, and she located many. More significantly, however, she unearthed fragments of a little studied historical dynamic that potentially could transform our understanding of Egypt's history, not only that of its south.

For example, the book has a strong emphasis on the amicable relationship between two "native" groups in Qina: the Copts and the Arabs. It does not attempt to define either group, treating their boundaries as self-evident and their identities as unchanging. Hence, the author describes Shaykh al-ʿArab Hammam Ibn Yusuf's (d. 1769) rule of the "native, tribal regime in the south" (19) as a "golden age" for "Coptic peasants" (33). To explain the Coptic accountants' decision to join the administration of the French occupation of Egypt thirty years later, Abul-Magd insists that they did so only to "manipulate" and "exploit" the French (43). However, if we shift the focus from this unwarranted attempt to prove intercommunal harmony or patriotism, the shariʿa court presents us with a more complex picture. The Isna court records a firman from Sultan Selim III in 1801 stating that the Copts were forced to collaborate with the French and sanctioning their "return to their home places" to resume their commercial activities "as they used to do in the past" (42). This significant statement, left unexplained in *Imagined*

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Empires, suggests not only sour communal relations but also an intervention on the part of the imperial center to support communal reconciliation in a remote province by rewriting recent history and attaching the Sultan's seal to it.

Comparably, the author's commitment to demonstrating how Cairo-based rulers consistently oppressed the south eliminated the possibility of asking how the state functioned in the south or, more radically, questioning the very concept of the state. To clarify, in 1846 groups of armed bandits (*falatiyya*) were active in attacking both government and privately owned properties in Qina. The government's response was to order the shooting of bandits. However, this order was qualified more than once. Initially, the watchmen of a state-owned plantation were instructed "[f]or public safety reasons … to shoot at the gang only after sunset in the caves were they hid" (92). A few months later, a number of government officials submitted a written pledge to the shariʿa court of Qina in which they avowed to shoot bandits while absolving themselves from paying the shariʿa-stipulated blood money (93). These examples indicate more than a fierce resistance that the "oppressed women and men" of Qina directed at Muhammad Ali's "colonial regime" (89). They demonstrate the Cairo-based government's attempt to protect the property regime without disturbing the social order. Furthermore, they may hint at the government's insecurity about the weight of its own top–down administrative orders, which leads to the validation of such orders through appealing to shariʿa courts.

Notwithstanding the effectiveness of its interpretive framework, the research underlying *Imagined Empires* is impressive. It is bound to form the basis of a clearer understanding of Egypt's early modern and modern histories.

DOI:10.1017/rms.2016.41

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Asma Afsaruddin. *Striving in the Path of God: Jihād and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. x + 370 pages, acknowledgments, bibliography, index, index of Qurʾanic verses. Hardback US$65.00 ISBN 978-0-1997-3093-3.

***J**ihād* means literally "striving," but it is the normal word for aggressive war on unbelievers in the Islamic legal tradition, hence the usual translation "holy war." *Shahīd* means "witness," but it is applied in the Islamic pious tradition, starting with hadith, to someone who dies in battle, evidently

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