

INTERLUDE: BYGONE BUFFALO AND LINGERING VALUE— A PREHISTORY OF PLENTY

The sun has risen, oh so very beautiful.
Come on. Let's go milk the water buffalo.
—A popular Arab song

I am a rare cock, I am a clever cock!
. . . for the water buffalo I got a bride.
—A Palestinian fable

Palestine was certainly flowing with milk and honey—at least as far as Ottoman records are concerned. From its inception, the people of Palestine experienced the Ottoman rule (1516–1917) through changing urban architecture, the construction of large-scale water and road infrastructures, and most notably, annual taxation. Taxation, which enabled the growth and maintenance of the empire, was initially based on a series of surveys that the government used in order to estimate and negotiate the structures of production and profit. This system, imposed on the predominantly rural population of Palestine, was dedicated to agriculture and the trade of its products. It consisted of few taxable categories, such crops, animals, and market activity.¹ While many animals were involved in and central to daily life and practice in Palestine, including donkeys, horses, camels, sheep, cows, and chickens, only three were taxed throughout nearly four hundred years of Ottoman rule: bees, goats, and water buffalo—the principle producers of milk and honey in the area.²

The last surviving early survey in the Arab provinces was taken in 1596–1597, a time in which the Ottoman Empire was arguably prospering in terms of population, production, and funds.³ Hence its registers, which demonstrate a knowledge of the land and its predicted value, supply us with an image of plenty. They also mark a period of transformation: an end to the era of the direct taxation system (*tapu resmi*) and a shift to the tax farming system, in which local individuals were granted temporary (*iltizam*) and later lifelong (*malikâne*) authority to collect tax. The new system was based on an assessment of monetary value rather than on knowledge by kind; the state no longer knew how many animals lived and produced within its territories, but calculated their production's worth instead.⁴ The change, which resulted in a gradual decentralization of the power of the state and the strengthening of local elites, aligned with larger political, economic, and environmental challenges that unfolded during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁵

In Palestine, the southern part of the Syrian provinces that was often considered marginal to imperial interests, local elites gradually shaped the agricultural economy in relation to the land's diverse ecology and changing tenure. A decades-long investment in growing cotton and olive trees for the soap industry in the hinterlands as well as wheat and barley in the central and southern regions was expanding in the seventeenth century in order to satisfy regional demands.⁶ The strengthening of the coastal plain and its ports in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries went hand in hand with the expansion and sheer growth of Palestinian production as well as Palestine's deeper integration into the global economy, as the cases of olive oil, sesame seeds, and citrus fruits exemplify.⁷ In addition to an Egyptian occupation that was short-lived (1832–1840) but had a decisive impact, the Ottoman reformative period of the nineteenth century, known as the *Tanzimat*, saw dramatic changes to managing lands and people under its rule. It also brought the survey system back to life, reviving the old empire-wide means of knowing the land. Following regional military conquests, European involvement in Palestine became apparent first through surveys, mapping, and flora and fauna collection projects, then land purchasing and private concessions over resources and parts of the country, and finally settlement. An examination of the 1596–1597 survey therefore allows for a look into the ways in which the Ottoman rule understood life in Palestine on the brink of wide-scale changes.

Bees and goats were central to the livelihood of the great majority of villagers in Palestine during the Ottoman period.⁸ Almost every village among the many hundreds counted in the late sixteenth century paid annual fees for beehives and goats, presumably often including sheep.⁹ As we will see in the following chapters, milk and honey were produced seasonally, according to regional vegetation and reproduction patterns. Bees were raised in stable clay hives, and goats and sheep were herded across the Palestinian landscape. Goat milk and honey were brought to urban markets during production seasons, and unused milk was processed into dried cheese and butter. Beyond milk and honey, the people of Palestine utilized other bodily substances of animals: they ate the meat of sheep and goats on special occasions, used goatskins to carry water or churn butter, used goat hair for tents and manure for hut construction, and applied bee stings to wounds and used honey as medicine.¹⁰ Goat and sheep manure were also central to maintaining the fertility of soil, connecting the presence and movements of these animals to the agricultural economy as a whole, and prominent crops such as wheat, barley, olives, cotton, vines, beans, vegetables, and watermelons.

The third animal recognized as important to Palestinian life and the economy through taxation records is the water buffalo, locally known as *Jamus/a*. According to the records of the 1596–1597 survey, the people of Palestine paid approximately 65,000 Ottoman aspers (*akçe*) for the buffalo.¹¹ Considering the known rate of 4 to 6 *akçe* for every water buffalo being milked, it seems that about 13,600 female water buffalo lived and produced in early Ottoman Palestine, along with an estimated population of about 200,000 people.¹² It is a striking number, which stands in stark contrast to the underdocumented and nearly forgotten history of this creature in Palestine.

It is assumed that water buffalo arrived in Palestine from South Asia with the Muslim conquest at the turn of the eighth century, but some archaeological evidence undermines this claim.¹³ Some accounts hint at the increasing importance of the animal to the region; writing in the early fourteenth century, Mamluk bureaucrat Shihāb al-Dīn al-Nuwayrī, for example, described the use of water buffalo as in protecting against lions, tilling the soil, carrying loads, and pulling wagons in the lowlands and coastal areas of Syria. He noted that “the milk of the water buffalo is among the most delicious and richest of all types of milk,” and spoke of the intimate relation established

between the animals and their herders in Syria and Egypt, arguing that “the herders call each animal by its own name, which it recognizes when called to be milked.”¹⁴ Water buffalo became key to the regional economy during the Ottoman period. As historian Alan Mikhail demonstrates, female water buffalo were the single most valuable animal in Ottoman Egypt.¹⁵ Indeed, according to late nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, the main tenders and breeders of water buffalo had most likely arrived in Palestine from the surroundings of modern-day Sudan with the Egyptian conquest in the 1830s, possibly as slaves.¹⁶ They settled in mud huts near water sources such as the Auja River and Kabara wetlands along the western coast, or Lake Huleh and the Jordan Valley in the northeast. In addition to keeping buffalo for milk and to plow, they made their living from papyrus mat making.¹⁷ They were Bedouins, commonly referred to as the Ghawarneh tribe, of the lowest social and economic strata, and had experienced discrimination for their origins, living arrangements, and color.¹⁸

Based on the extent of the research, and considering that their tenders left little record, it is difficult to tell how water buffalo lived and have been managed in Palestine, and how that changed over time. But some folkloric evidence helps give a sense of their value. One example is a Palestinian children’s fable, which was documented by two different ethnographers in the early twentieth century and features a trickster cock. At the beginning of the story, the cock finds a grain of corn. He brings it to a woman at a mill and asks her to grind it. After grinding, he asks for his grain back, thus forcing the woman to compensate him, which she does by giving him some flour to bake a loaf of bread. The cock then continues to manipulate people he meets by offering them the food he holds and then asking for it back after it has already been eaten. By this manner, the cock manages to replace the loaf with a bunch of green onions, the onions with a young sheep, the sheep with a camel, and the camel with a water buffalo. Finally, he tricks a big poor family into eating the buffalo. Unable to give the animal back on the cock’s request, the head of the family offers one of his seven daughters instead. The cock then crows, “I am a rare cock, I am a clever cock! For the grain I got a loaf, and for the loaf I got a bunch of onions, and for the onions I got a kid, and for the kid I got a camel, and for the camel I got a water buffalo, and for the water buffalo I got a bride.”¹⁹ In this hierarchy of value, notwithstanding the outsmarting bird, water buffalo are positioned at the top of the plant and animal kingdom. The story illustrates not only

that water buffalo were important, though. The value of water buffalo as depicted in the fable is, in fact, also comparable to that of human beings.

In addition to such accounts, oral histories confirm the significance of this animal to Palestinian Arabs in the early twentieth century. Warda al-Abdallah (born 1922), a Palestinian 1948 war refugee from the village of Mallaha near Lake Huleh, for instance, recounted the different practices revolving around water buffalo, noting their outstanding value and the superior quality of their milk.²⁰ While milk was the main crop drawn from the body of buffalo, hence determining the manner by which these bovines were raised and bred, buffalo were used in the fields too, and their meat became food in special circumstances, such as on the death of a close family member. Like in the case of goats, the skin of buffalo was made into water or butter containers, and their hair was used for mattress making. Muhammad Qasim Muhammad (born 1926), a herder, mat maker, and later refugee from Jahula, detailed the daily rhythm of moving the animals to the woods and water, and then back to the village. Water buffalo were easy to work with (in comparison to cows), he observed, and tended to wait to be picked up from the village's different owners in the morning.²¹ Ahmad Ismail Dakhoul (born 1918), a refugee from the nearby village of al-Salihyya, explained how water buffalo labored to plow and detailed the various kinds of dairy products made from their distinct, rich milk.²²

By the late nineteenth century, water buffalo disappeared from Ottoman enumeration records and were marginal to the censuses of the British rule that followed (1917–1948).²³ According to British estimations, their numbers decreased substantially during the first half of the twentieth century, with 4,480 buffalo counted in 1942—about a third of the early Ottoman estimations.²⁴ The above depictions of value and use therefore describe a reality in which the number of water buffalo as well as their significance to the governing power were already substantially diminishing. It was value recognized in the midst of a process of obliteration.²⁵

European and US travelers to Palestine, a vocal element in the growing multifaceted intervention in the land from the mid-nineteenth century on, were mesmerized by the appearance and size of water buffalo, and considered their presence a proof that Palestine was the abundant land of the Bible, a “land flowing with milk and honey.” Writing about his visit to the Huleh plain, US missionary William McClure Thomson remarked in 1859 that its soil was “extremely fertile.” Describing the life of the Ghawarneh

people, he explained that they “make large quantities of butter from their herds of buffalo, and gather honey in abundance from their bees. The Huleh is, in fact, a perpetual pasture-field for cattle, and flowery paradise for bees. . . . Thus this plain still flows with milk and honey.” Along with this tendency to equate Palestine with the scriptures, the figure of the buffalo carried different meanings. In his book, Thomson discussed at length the bodily features and habits of the buffalo, highlighting their dark color, monstrosity, and tendency to wallow in the water:

Large herds of buffaloes lie under the covert of the reeds and willows of the many brooks which creep through this vast marsh, and we shall see them all day, as we ride round it, wallowing in the mire like gigantic swine. There are larger than other cattle in this region. Some of the bulls are indeed rough and monstrous fellows, with bones black, and hard “like bars of iron.” With the aid of little Oriental hyperbole I can work up these buffaloes into very tolerable behemoth.²⁶

A similar unfavorable understanding of the animal is reflected in the development plans and writings of British and Zionist experts in the early twentieth century. They, too, thought that the soil of the Huleh was fertile, but considered its body of water a swamp, a source of disease and stagnation that necessitated large-scale drainage.²⁷ Such efforts to reveal the Huleh’s agricultural potential entailed dramatic landscape manipulation, which the behavior of water buffalo interrupted: “There is nothing more destructive to artificial channels than uncontrolled cattle,” observed a group of British consulting engineers to a Zionist funding body in a report on the reclamation plan in 1936. “They trample down the banks to get to drinking water, [and] the buffalo likes to wallow and creates nasty muddy pools.”²⁸ This perceived disturbance was translated into official restrictions on their grazing and use of water sources, which challenged formerly established ways of living with buffalo.²⁹ Water buffalo, wrote colonial veterinary officer I. Gillespie in 1943, “are confined to the Huleh area in the Galilee District where the presence of marsh land provides a suitable habitat. As reclamation of the region proceeds, the buffalo will become less important. For the time being they provide milk and traction for their Arab owners but if the area is drained it will become more economical to substitute them.”³⁰ Lake Huleh’s drainage was completed in 1958, under the State of Israel, and soon developed into an ecological crisis.³¹ Water buffalo finally disappeared from their last habitat, official records, and public memory, along with their tenders, knowledge, and value.³²

By the mid-twentieth century, the land and its creatures were radically transformed. The changing governing regimes and growing settler population, which adopted the notion of a land flowing with milk and honey as a plan for managing Palestine, chose other animals as the basis for its implementation. It is this long history of animal enumeration, use, and value as well as the relinquishment of water buffalo and their tenders that we should consider before delving into the story of *Milk and Honey*.

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Milk and Honey

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