

# Book Review

- Michael Christopher Low. *Imperial Mecca: Ottoman Arabia and the Indian Ocean Hajj*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. Pp. xx + 392. Illustrations, Notes, and Index. \$35.00 (paper).

World history has often been viewed as a “border-crossing” discipline where analysis is not confined to conventionally defined boundaries, as Kerry Ward, Laura Mitchell, and Ross Dunn observe in *The New World History: A Field Guide to Teachers and Researchers* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2016). Rather, they argue, “inquiry should embrace whatever geographical, social, or cultural field is appropriate for seeking answers to the questions posed. Border posts between countries or geographical markers between continents should not predetermine the scope of the investigation” (7).

Michael Christopher Low’s *Imperial Mecca: Ottoman Arabia and the Indian Ocean Hajj* is a striking exemplar of this description. At the center of his story is the hajj, a core practice of Islam and a specific instance of what David Tweed argues in *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006) is a common religious inclination to traverse “natural terrain and social space beyond the home” (123). Low situates his story in the midst of a historical transformation in the hajj. In the mid-nineteenth century, the steamship began to liberate Muslim pilgrims in the Indian Ocean world from captivity to the monsoons, dramatically increasing the scale of travel and exponentially increasing the number of pilgrims. Many pilgrims remained in and around Mecca, forming a large diaspora community while remaining British subjects.

By the late nineteenth-century, two empires fought for oversight of the hajj and control of the Hijaz, the eastern littoral of the Red Sea where Mecca is located—a space at the margins of both empires. The Ottoman Empire had worn the mantle of protector of Islam’s holiest sites since the end of the Abbasid caliphate in the early sixteenth century. But “infrastructures,” as Timothy Mitchell points out in “Life of Infrastructure,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34, no. 3 (2014), “arrange the interaction of human lives with nature” (438). By the nineteenth century, the Ottoman sultanate struggled to maintain control without rapid communication and transportation infrastructure linking this distant outpost to Istanbul. This meant that the Sharif of Mecca functioned semi-autonomously. Britain, which had co-constructed the Suez Canal and zealously guarded it as a fragile tether

connecting the metropole to its Indian Ocean empire, also ruled the world's largest Muslim population. Anxious about Muslim radicalism after the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion, it was also thirsted for a greater empire. It was thus keen to gain a foothold in the Hijaz, offering the two-pronged argument that it had a duty to protect its subjects there and that the Turkic Ottomans were not legitimate rulers, as only Quraysh Arabs could make this claim.

Low's book, fifteen years in the making and employing sources in Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, and Turkish, provides a complex, richly-textured analysis, illustrating the fruitfulness of transcending traditional area studies regions, as it portrays a dynamic arena peopled by a large array of actors. As Low notes in the preface, "At its core, this book is a transregional, connective, and comparative study. It situates the Hijaz and Arabian Red Sea littoral between two rival imperial powers. From a spatial perspective, the Hijaz appears as a liminal borderland between the Ottoman Empire's Arab frontiers and a British-dominated Indian Ocean. In order to represent some facsimile of the transregional, multiethnic, and multilinguistic texture of this time and place, the pages of this book are populated by a dizzying *mélange* of Ottoman officials, Arabs, Europeans, Indians, Jawis, and diasporic Hadramis" (xi).

Low ends up touching on several major themes in world history. Imperial conflict—in the form of diplomacy, espionage, and military force—is central to the book's argument. So were international sanitary conferences in the era that saw the emergence of a new self-conscious awareness of internationalism. As a book about the hajj, *Imperial Mecca* is fundamentally about global Islam and its Hijazi diaspora, but it is equally about the Christian identity of the British Empire and its assumptions about its Muslim subjects. Technopolitical control of travelers had religious dimensions, as well as racial and class features. Physical geography and the physical distance of imperial centers from the Hijaz shaped pilgrimage patterns and rivalry over the region. Various nineteenth-century technologies shrank that distance and offered increased control—steamship and infrastructure construction, telegraphs and railroads, and the maintenance of water infrastructure—while print culture helped to foster a global Islamic identity. The history of disease is also key to Low's analysis. Cholera, endemic to India, was a routine problem for pilgrims. Debates about its etiology and mitigation take center stage in *Imperial Mecca*, particularly over the question of quarantining passengers. Commerce also plays an important role through the British steamship transport industry and Bedouin camel transport.

Low's detailed argument can only be summarized here. He organized the book into three parts of two chapters each. Part one, "Extraterritorial Frontiers," explores "the intimate relationship between European extraterritoriality and the Ottoman Hijaz's exceptional autonomous legal status" (35). The first chapter, "Blurred Vision: The Hijaz and the Hajj in the Colonial Imagination," analyzes conflicted British views of the hajj in the late nineteenth century. A "semilegendary brew of fact, fiction, and phantom connections"

coalesced into an Islamophobia that drove paranoid fears about the hajj as a mechanism for radicalizing Muslims (77). This prompted some British officials to envision their empire as Islam's new protector. A competing and more tempered understanding, which ultimately prevailed, recognized that overt interference in the hajj would unnecessarily stoke outrage from Indian Muslims. In Chapter Two, "Legal Imperialism: Foreign Muslims and Muslim Consuls," Low analyzes the consequences of the majority of the world's Muslims becoming European subjects through imperialism. This historical anomaly prompted the British to dramatically stretch the meaning of the Capitulations with the Ottoman Empire, which originally offered limited protections to European traders and residents in the Ottoman Empire, to encompass British control of all British Muslims in the Hijaz. The Ottoman government unsuccessfully contested this view, asserting that British consular activity there was a courtesy, but not recognized in international law. In effect, British legal maneuvering constituted a form of imperialism.

"Ecologies of Empire," the second part, investigates the global epidemiological and environmental problems the hajj caused in the late nineteenth century and, in the process, offers a global environmental history of cholera. In "Microbial Mecca and the Global Crisis of Cholera," Low considers the ways that successive nineteenth-century cholera outbreaks prompted international concern and British arguments for increased extraterritorial control of their subjects in the Hijaz. Ironically, the stubborn refusal of British India's imperial agents to acknowledge the subcontinent as the source of cholera was the chief impediment to effective international regulation. They clung to a miasma theory of epidemiology in the face of a growing global acceptance (including by Ottoman leaders) of human transmission. Chapter Four, "Bedouins and Broken Pipes," explores Ottoman efforts to supply sufficient fresh water to pilgrims and residents of the Hijaz. Although the Ottoman government engineered appropriate hydraulic projects, they faced insurmountable local resistance from urban elites and Bedouins, suspicious of quarantine hospitals, water storage facilities, and other infrastructure developments that impinged on traditional patterns of life in the region. Consequently, the Ottoman government sought foreign support, which left them "ensnared in the infrastructures of Britain's empire of state" (200).

The final part, "Managing Mobilities," examines how the hajj became "ensnared in an interimperial web of conflicting regulations and practices governing passports, quarantines, shipping firms, pilgrimage guides, camel drivers, and even the legal interpretation of Islamic ritual itself" (207). Chapter Five, "Passports and Tickets," shows how the Ottoman Empire's spiritual identity impeded its political actions. Its attempts to lead a Pan-Islamic community that welcomed all pilgrims hampered its ability to impose regulatory practices that would have reduced disease. British dependence on an inconsistently applied passport system deeply compromised its ability to regulate the transport process. Instead, due to the Sharif of Mecca's autonomy, Hijaz's urban elites functionally controlled the transport

system, creating a monopoly and, on occasion, imposing indentured servitude on pilgrims as payment. In the final chapter, “The Camel and the Rail,” Low explores transportation dynamics in the Hijaz. The Ottoman Empire constructed a telegraph and rail system from Syria to the Hijaz to link this distant outpost more closely to the metropole. At the same time, organizers of the ostensibly pre-modern technology of camel transport proved adept at adjusting to the realities of the developing Indian Ocean pilgrimage services monopoly, profiting from a complex set of fees levied on pilgrims dependent on animal conveyance once they disembarked from their steamships.

An epilogue traces the legacies of this imperial rivalry for the modern hajj. The contest was finally resolved in Britain’s favor by World War I, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and the establishment of Hashemite control over the Hijaz. The British takeover sent “shockwaves that would reverberate from Istanbul to India” (39). Only in the wake of the Suez Crisis of 1956 would the region and the pilgrimage—both intimately linked to global Islamic identity—begin to be decolonized.

*Imperial Mecca* is a rich, rewarding text examining the Ottoman-British contest over the hajj in the late nineteenth-century. It is also a model of world history scholarship that places a nuanced, sophisticated argument into a clear analytical and comparative framework. Its textured engagement with many world history themes would make it a welcome text in an upper-division undergraduate or graduate course in world history or modern history. This same richness might make it challenging to use in many survey courses, whether high school AP courses or introductory undergraduate courses. Material drawn from one or more chapters, however, would make for engaging lecture or student inquiry. Given the current global situation, Chapter Three, “Microbial Mecca and the Global Crisis of Cholera,” would undoubtedly resonate the most with students, particularly the sobering example of British reluctance to accept emerging scientific evidence of the disease and its transmissibility.

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