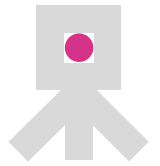


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The City and the Territory Imagining Cairo and Egypt

Guest Editor: Harald R. Stühlinger



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Manipulative Iconographies of Nile Dams: The Political Image

Charlotte Malterre Barthes *The inauguration of the barrage across the Nile at Aswan by the Khedive of Egypt and the Duke of Connaught yesterday marked a fitting manner the completion of one of the greatest engineering feats the world has ever witnessed.*¹

A group of fourteen men poses, stern faces looking towards the camera, the Low Aswan Dam towering in the background. The identified westerners on the image are Sir Cecil Rhodes, his personal doctor Leander Starr Jameson, his close friend Charles Metcalfe, and a team of men

identified as “in charge of construction of the dam” (fig. 1). The picture was published after Rhodes’ death, in April 1902, in *L’Illustrazione Italiana*, a weekly printed in Milan. It was originally part of a two-volume album of 50 images, *The Nile Reservoir Works at Aswan and Asyut*, documenting the construction of the Aswan Dam and the Asyut Barrage. In the middle of the Anglo-Boer Wars, when Rhodes was visiting the Aswan Dam on a trip, the British imperialist said that it was: “to see the world before [I] die.”² Rhodes’ party reminds one of other existing photographs taken at the very same location of groups posing in very similar situations: dapper white men in suits, possibly with some engineers of the dam, a few ladies on donkey-back, and local guides.³ These images - taken by D.S. George (a local commercial photographer commissioned to document the construction of the Dam) before the inauguration - point to the newly built Aswan Dam as a construction site and a location worthy of being visited by western tourists and British travelers alike. A controversial figure, Rhodes was certainly impressed by the waterworks and the achievement of his fellow men; an accomplishment he hoped to topple with his “Cape to Cairo” train line.



Figure 1
D. S. Georges, Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902),
Leander Starr Jameson (1853-1917) and Charles
Metcalf (1856-1912) together with those in
charge of construction of Aswan Dam, Egypt,
1901, from *L’illustrazione Italiana*, Year XXIX,
No 16, April 20, 1902. Source: De Agostini
Picture Library, Getty Images.

Both schemes are to be understood in the context of the British colonial project, where infrastructures were tools to subdue nations and control their resources. In contemporary eyes, the image of Rhodes at the Aswan Dam exudes colonial pride, masculine superiority and white supremacy. And, although other photographs depicting groups of jolly visitors could be dismissed as innocent because of the leisurely impression they convey, they are but two sides of the same coin, encapsulating a moment of victory over the elements -here, the Nile.

There is, in Egypt, a legacy of monumental infrastructures and modern water projects presented as national technological achievements. Premier examples include the Delta Barrages, the Low and the High Aswan Dams and the recent Toshka Project. These projects have served as governmental instruments of political hegemony and social control and have diverted attention from other pressing matters.⁴ In the historical nation-building discourse

1. ‘The Inauguration of the Barrage across the Nile at Assuan the Khedive of Egypt and the Duke of Connaught Yesterday’, *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* 1902, 4.

2. Robert I. Rotberg and Miles F. Shore, *The Founder : Cecil Rhodes and the Pursuit of Power*, New York: Oxford University Press 1988, 657.

3. These images were taken by the photographer D.S. Georges, in 1901.



Figure 2
Felix Bonfils, *Barrage du Nil, près du Caire (Égypte)* (Damietta branch of the Barrages).
Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington D.C.

of Egyptian grand plans, there is a long list of irrigation and hydraulic infrastructures partially inspired by colonial technocracy and associated with agricultural prosperity. All rulers of modern Egypt from Muhammad Ali in the first half of the 19th century to current President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi have exhibited increasing efforts to harness Nile waters through large-scale building projects. Stated goals of these massive undertakings have included food security and self-sufficiency, agricultural innovation, and industrialization, while simultaneously serving vested political ambitions. From British colonial rulers to Cold War blocks' political maneuvering all the way up to contemporary politics of international financial institutions and global forces, media (e.g., press, images, film, radio broadcasting) have been produced and utilized to promote infrastructural achievements.

Emancipating the country from the Sublime Porte (the Ottoman Empire), the Khedive Muhammad Ali Pasha, who ruled from 1805 to 1848, first ordered infrastructural measures to control the Nile waters in the modern era.⁵ Even though Napoléon had briefly occupied Egypt (1798-1801) and left a disastrous impression, in his desire to modernize Egypt, the Khedive accepted the help of French engineers, educators, and scientists. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the first project was – in part – inspired by the French Saint-Simonian follower Barthélemy-Prospér Enfantin who had come to Egypt in a messianic mission, and was introduced to the Pasha in 1834.⁶ Works on the barrages located at the Nile division between the Rosetta and Damietta branches had already started haphazardly in 1833. The Delta Barrages are thus the first modern infrastructural works on the Egyptian Nile that aimed to increase agricultural production as a result of rising national demand.⁷ A city was to be built next to the infrastructure, named *Al-Qanatir al-Khayriyya* (literally, the Benevolent Bridges). Enfantin worked on the project with his associates until 1836, when he abandoned the undertaking because of an outbreak of plague.⁸ Later on, when the project was discussed again by Linant de Bellefonds – Chief Engineer of Egyptian Public Works – the Khedive suggested utilizing the stones of the Giza Pyramids for the construction of the Barrages; an idea fortunately dismissed. In 1842, Muhammad Ali hired the French engineer Eugène Mougél (later to author the first draft of the Suez Canal for Ferdinand de Lesseps)

4. Jeroen Warner, 'The Toshka Mirage in the Egyptian Desert – River Diversion as Political Diversion', *Environmental Science & Policy* 30 (2013).

5. Ottoman Viceroy of Egypt, also known as Sultan Mehmet Ali.

6. Saint-Simonianism was a French political and social movement of the 19th century, inspired by the ideas of the Comte de Saint-Simon, centered on a perception that industrialization and scientific discovery would have profound changes on society. A religiously minded ritualistic group, led by Enfantin was founded after Saint-Simon's death.

7. Built in 1820 under the supervision of French engineer Pascal Coste, who was under the Pasha's architectural patronage, the Mahmoudiyah Canal links the Nile with the harbor of Alexandria, avoiding the turbulent waters of Rosette and providing fresh Nile water to the city. The canal was constructed using 300,000 forced laborers. There was an existing, yet derelict, canal, built in Antiquity, called the *Ashrafiyya* Canal.

8. See Matt K. Matsuda, *Empire of Love. Histories of France and the Pacific*, New York: Oxford University Press 2005.



Figure 3
Gabriel Lekegian,
Barrages du Nil, rive est, vue générale, 1890-1906
(Damietta branch of the Barrages).
Source: Digital image courtesy of the
Getty's Open Content Program.

to continue the project. Works resumed in 1845. Composed of two barrages, each over the two Nile branches, the project includes the Rosetta section (465 meters long, 4.8 meters wide, West Branch) and the Damietta section (545 meters long, 4.8 meters wide, East Branch).⁹ The Nile Delta Barrages were completed in 1862, allowing over 300,000 hectares of the Nile Delta to switch from basin to perennial irrigation, thus increasing agricultural output.¹⁰ The barrages were photographed by Felix Bonfils in the 1870s (fig. 2). In a short series, Bonfils documented the Damietta Branch, the bizarre neo-medieval architecture of the dam, the gates, the tower, and the lift-bridges. There are other pictures depicting waterworks on the Nile by Bonfils, as well as an almost similar shot by another important and prolific photographer of the time, Gabriel Lekegian, taken at a later time (1880s). He stood at almost the same vantage point at an equivalent time of day (fig. 3). Contributing to conveying an image of a modern Egypt able to manage its own resources, these are possibly indicative of an emergent

interest in modern hydro-infrastructures, with photographs of technical achievements gaining popularity among the public. Unfortunately, it quickly surfaced that the new barrages had structural flaws and could not resist Nile floods. Under pressure from the Khedive who wanted rapid completion, Mougel had used Nile mud, sand and insufficient concrete for the foundations. Cracks appeared in the walls and, in 1867, a whole section of the Rosetta Barrage broke off. The barrages lingered, unused. Two decades later, with financial collapse looming, Egypt became a British protectorate. The colonial forces that came to Egypt with technocratic beliefs “in the powers of technology in the form of irrigation infrastructures” were disdainful of Muhammad Ali’s efforts to control floods, guarantee food security and promote cotton production.¹¹ Nevertheless, aware of the Delta Barrages’ economic importance, the occupiers undertook costly reparation works that were completed in 1890. The Delta Barrages marked the start of irrigation works of the 19th century. Yet, it was their failure in restraining the floods that prompted the construction of the Low Aswan Dam. The occupiers were now solely interested in capitalizing on the country’s main economic resource, cotton, which they exported to Britain. Thus, the primary motivation the British had for erecting another dam was to have water available year-round. The colonial administration was shifting away from the culture of sustenance food crops to an export-oriented cotton economy, a water-demanding crop. This move was concealed in a modernization discourse and the Western conception that the Nile waters had previously been underutilized. Based on such assumptions, and with the underlying aims to serve foreign interests and fuel European banks with debt repayments, more hydraulic infrastructures were established along the Nile.¹²

9. See Robert Hanbury Brown, *History of the Barrage at the Head of the Delta of Egypt*, Cairo: F. Diemer 1896.

10. Samir Raafat, ‘The Delta Barrage’, *Cairo Times*, 21 August 1997.

11. Diana K. Davis, ‘Imperialism, Orientalism, and the Environment in the Middle East’, in: *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa*,

eds. Diana K. Davis, Edmund Burke, and Timothy Mitchell, Athens (OH): Ohio University Press 2011, 6.

12. Dams were built by the British colonial powers in Sudan at Sennar (1925), Jebel Aulia (1937), Roseires (1966) and Khasm el Girba (1966) to provide additional water storage against floods.



Figure 4
The first stone of the Assuan Dam, photographer unknown. Source: Jean Brunhes, 'Les Grands Travaux En Cours D'exécution Dans La Vallée Du Nil' [Réservoir D'assouan Et Barrage D'assiou], from *Annales de Géographie*, no 39, 1899), 243. Online source Persée, France.



Figure 5
Duke of Connaught laying foundation stone of Assuan Dam, Egypt, photograph by De Courcey, from *L'illustrazione Italiana*, Year XXVI, No 12, March 19, 1899. Source: De Agostini Picture Library, Getty Images.

In 1899, an international commission, composed of British Benjamin Baker, French Auguste Boulé and Italian Giacomo Torricelli, set the location for a new dam at the first Nile cataract at Aswan, 1000 kilometers south of Cairo. The British consul-general Evelyn Baring defended the project and proposed a five-year construction plan. The Egyptian national budget was to finance the dam over a 30-year period. Private investors (e.g. bankers Ernest Cassel, Baron Maurice de Hirsch, Karl Mayer von Rothschild) also helped to fund the project. Under British control, built by British contractors, supervised by Italian masons, with Egyptian labor force and capital, the Low Aswan Dam had been conceived as a gravity dam with a granite wall and cemented rubble infill measuring 1.9 kilometer in length and 54 meters in height.¹³ In order to save the archeological island of Philae from being flooded 5 months a year, the building project is a reduced version of the one designed by the engineer William Willcocks in 1894. The Duke of Connaught, son of Queen Victoria, laid the foundation stone on 12th of February 1899; both ceremony and stone were documented in photographs and published (figs. 4 & 5).¹⁴

Figure 6
D.S. George, Khedive Abbas Hilmi II, amidst distinguished guests, during the opening ceremony of the Aswan Dam, Aswan, Egypt 1902. Source: Science & Society Picture Library, Getty Images.



The image of the ceremony, showing a large crowd around a stone and a mast, was taken from a distance. Each group is identifiable; Western ladies with sunshades, the *fellahs*, British and Egyptian functionaries, all gathered under festive flags blowing in the wind, the first constructions works of the dam in the background. On the same trip, the Duke also laid the foundation stone of an Anglican church in the city of Aswan, in line with the British colonial project to implement religious and linguistic infrastructures. The dam was rapidly completed and inaugurated jointly by Khedive Abbas Hilmi, great-great-grandson of Ali, the Duchess of Connaught in the presence of the Duke, Cassel and the British Ambassador Lord Cromer on 10 December 1902. British newspapers celebrated the promise of greening the desert: "the dam (...) is expected to make the Egyptian desert a garden by controlling the sediment laden waters of the Nile."¹⁵ (Fig. 6) There is a little crowd of men in frocks and women in Victorian-style dresses gathered around the royalty in the images of the event taken by the previously mentioned D. S. Georges. A few *tarbooshes* – the Ottoman formal hat – among the silk sunshades and pith helmets is a sign of the presence of Egyptian officials. Bentwood chairs are lined up to allow the company to be seated while the ribbons are cut. Locals in traditional attire are standing in the distance, as if strangers to the scene. The British were

13. The main contractor was Messrs. John Aird & Co., a British company commissioned by the Egyptian government (in colonial hands). Sylvia Nasar, *Grand Pursuit: The Story of Economic Genius*, New York: Simon & Schuster 2011, 182.

14. Jean Brunhes, 'Les Grands Travaux En Cours D'Exécution Dans La Vallée Du Nil [Réservoir D'Assouan Et Barrage D'Assiou]', *Annales de Géographie* (1899).

15. 'King Edwards Sister-in-Law Who Dedicated Great Nile Dam', *Chicago Daily Tribune* 11 December 1901.

to accelerate the modernization of the country's irrigation system with the construction of other cement barrages downstream (the Sifta Dam, Isna Dam, Nag'Hammadi Dam). These minor waterworks, however, did not benefit from a similarly glamorous exposure nor attract the interest of many photographers. If documented at all, they were considered mere technical works. But large hydro-infrastructures were soon to find their way into contemporary popular imagery again with the construction of the High Aswan Dam. Premises of a large dam at Aswan, "The Aswan project" as it was termed, came to the fore almost immediately after the Low Dam's completion. The Egyptian Government discussed it in 1919.¹⁶ Yet, negotiations from 1929 to 1939 revealed that the project might be unfeasible. As the Low Dam threatened to overflow for a third time in 1946, the decision was nevertheless taken to build a second dam a few miles upstream – a decision confirmed by the Free Officers after the ousting of King Farouk (reign: 1936-1952). Rooted in a modernist rationale, the first Aswan Dam paved the way for the largest hydro-power infrastructure based on foreign expertise in Egypt: the High Aswan Dam. Displaying Egypt's capacity to modernize, nurturing its national pride and legitimizing the new regime, it propelled the nation into a new stage of development. Abundant literature exists on the political, economic, and diplomatic intricacies surrounding the construction of the High Aswan Dam in the Cold War

context.¹⁷ After the Suez crisis, the Soviet Union stepped in in 1958 and provided the financial and technical assistance the USA had promised and reneged on. This alliance was given due political weight by a highly symbolic ceremony marking the first stage of building the High Dam. In 1964, Gamal Abdel Nasser and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev met at Aswan, pressing a button to divert the Nile, with President of Iraq Abdul Salam Arif and President of Yemen Abdullah as-Sallal at their side (fig. 7). The image is powerful and technical in nature, a far cry from the Low Dam inauguration ceremony. The picture was not taken from a distance but facing the protagonists, as if the viewer was on site – in fact, it is a television shot. There are no women, but Caucasian males in suits and plenty of Egyptians in military uniforms. Put in perspective with earliest images of waterworks inaugurations, the picture depicts both a political and technological shift. Foreigners are outnumbered and, in front of Nasser and Khrushchev, the gigantic tectonic move of diverting the Nile is only represented and acted by a tiny electric control box.

Political changes are made even more visible in more recent ventures, such as the Toshka Project. In a dark suit, wearing aviator-style glasses, President Hosni Mubarak stands confidently, arm on the railing, overlooking blue waters. The pumping station that carries his name towers in the background. This scene is captured in a press photograph from 2003,



Figure 7

Vasily Yegoro, President of Egypt Gamal Abdel Nasser, First secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Nikita Khrushchev, President of Iraq Abdul Salam Arif and President of Yemen Abdullah as-Sallal (from left to right) visit construction site of the Aswan Dam to divert the Nile, Aswan, Egypt 1964. Source: TASS, Getty Images.

16. See Terje Tvedt, *The River Nile in the Age of the British. Political Ecology and the Quest for Economic Power*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press 2006.

17. See Elizabeth Edith Lytle, *The Aswan High Dam*, Monticello, Ill.: Council of Planning Librarians 1977.



Figure 8
Then-President of Egypt Hosni Mubarak traveled to the Toshka project, to inaugurate the largest pumping station ever built, named after him. Mubarak Pumping Station, Lake Nasser 2003. Source: *Al-Haram*, January 2003, Rights: Pending authorization by Al-Haram newspapers.



Figure 9
Then-President of Egypt Hosni Mubarak visits the Toshka project and the Sheik Zayed Canal construction site, 2001. Source: *Al-Haram*, January 2001, Rights: Pending authorization by Al-Haram newspapers.

during one of the many inaugural visits that the then-President of Egypt took to the Toshka Project.¹⁸ The site is composed of the largest pumping station ever built, a 310 kilometer-long water channel, and a target of 1 million hectares of irrigated fields for crops and fruits, all part of a new Nile Valley vision that includes three schemes aiming to convert parts of the Western Desert into an agricultural and industrial area.¹⁹ A collection of such images documents President Mubarak inspecting various development stages of the construction site located around the Toshka Depression in the desert region west of Lake Nasser (figs. 8 & 9).

What can be extracted by such a compilation, and how to make sense of the political role of photography in this context? Images of hydro-infrastructures and their inaugurations served various purposes. From asserting power over natural resources by colonial powers, to establishing the image of a self-sustaining nation and presenting dams as nation-building and political leverage tools, to the plain manipulative use of images for propaganda purposes, there is little innocence in the iconography of dams.

Early images of the structures, while documenting Egypt, contributed to the image of a well-managed country with a harnessed Nile. Inauguration pictures with prominent guests, while emphasizing the claims of colonial powers of being able to bring modernity further, give proof of the investment efforts undertaken by the occupiers. Nasser's images intend to show the world the non-aligned friendship and challenge the expected inability of the subaltern to accomplish complex technological achievements.

In the case of the Toshka Project, the fact that the president is alone on the image shows a clear attempt to claim the infrastructure as a presidential project, positioning Mubarak in a long line of Egyptian rulers who have embarked on large-scale schemes. One cannot help but remember Sir Cecil Rhodes' arrogant posture at the Low Aswan Dam. The infrastructure rising in the background – a stable, massive, physical undertaking made to impress whoever is to see the image, is symbolically conveyed. To conclude, one way to approach these images is to perceive how, despite paradigm changes (framing, equipment, context, etc.), they mirror and construct an image of a country modernized by its rulers through large waterworks and render visible the enduring status of infrastructures as a political instrument. They also attest to the political relevance of water infrastructures to Egyptian governing powers and the desire of succeeding regimes to exhibit confidence in schemes that are to solve Egypt's water supply, food security, and overpopulation issues through gigantic enterprises.²⁰

18. See Exhibition: *Contingency Plans: Living with Unstable Grounds*, curated by Adam Bobbette and Daan Roggeveen, University of Hong Kong / Shanghai Study Centre, 2014.

19. The Western Desert is a part of the Sahara Desert, with 681,000 square kilometers including the oases, East Uweinat, Toshka and Darb El-Arbian areas.

20. Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, 'The Toshka Project: Colossal Water Infrastructures, Biopolitics and Territory in Egypt', *Architectural Design* 86, no. 4 (2016).