


ROUNDTABLE

An Unhappy Happy Port: Fin-de-siècle Port Said and Its Connections and Disconnections of Water and Iron

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A joke appearing in the folds of a Cairo-based newspaper published in Italian in 1895 must have fallen flat with Port Said's inhabitants. But the irony was not amiss. The jest suggested that the town, whose toponym could be translated to "happy port" given the Arabic meaning of *sa'īd*, ought to be renamed "unhappy" due to the sad state of its public services. Readers may have smiled mirthlessly in agreement with the author, who claimed the Egyptian government treated the city "as if it were less than a village." Many were under the impression that Cairo wanted to scrap this "unhappy happy port" from the rest of Egypt.¹ Continuing the wordplay, British journalist George Warrington Steevens wrote in 1898 that Port Said "would be wonderful if it were not unhappy," stuck as it was between its riotous past and its doubtfully industrious future.² Puns based on Port Said's name must have circulated for a while. Already in 1875, a French author had ironically remarked that this town's auspicious name seemed quite unjustified.³

Waves of optimism and skepticism marked the newly minted town through the ebb and flow of its history. The inauguration of the Suez Canal in 1869 may have facilitated communication between Port Said and other harbors in the Mediterranean basin and worldwide, but it is unclear whether it actually bridged the distance between the town and the rest of Egypt. Between 1870 and 1900, the daily average of one and a half vessels crossing the canal had multiplied tenfold, pushing observers to predict that Port Said would continue to progress "especially with the growth of dealings between the Far East and Europe."⁴ On the other hand, reaching Port Said from the interior remained complicated. At the end of the 1860s, one could make it to Port Said by taking the train from Alexandria or Cairo to Ismailia, the nearest point on the Cairo-Suez line, and from there hopping on the small mail steamers slowly chugging northwards.⁵ Only in the early 1890s would a narrow-gauge railway under the management of the Suez Canal Company link Port Said

¹ *L'Imparziale*, 21 September 1895, "L'Elettrico di Port Said," 2.

² George W. Steevens, *Egypt in 1898* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1898), 27.

³ Pierre-Henri Couvidou, *Itinéraire du canal de Suez* (Port Said: A. Mourès, 1875), 44. Of course, Sa'īd was also the name of the Egyptian governor/*wāli* (r. 1854–63) who approved the Suez Canal project and the excavation beginning in 1859 by the *Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez*, henceforth "the Suez Canal Company" or "the company."

⁴ Centre des Archives Diplomatiques à la Courneuve, Paris, France (CADC), Affaires économiques et commerciales (AEC), Correspondance consulaire et commerciale, Port-Saïd (CCCPS), Vol. 1: 1867–1877, Port Said, 19 June 1870, Pellissier, French Consul in Port Said, to French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 82 recto; G. B Danovaro, *L'Égypte à l'aurore du XXème siècle* (Alexandrie: J.C. Lagoudakis, 1901), 126.

⁵ Richard Allen, *Letters from Egypt, Syria, and Greece* (Dublin: Gunn & Cameron, 1869), 24, 26.

to Ismailia. Notwithstanding Port Said's faster linkage via iron tracks, contemporary and later accounts never reached an agreement about its status in relation to the rest of Egypt.

In its first decade, between 1859 and 1869, Port Said became a destination for fortune-seeking migrants from the rest of Egypt, countries around the Mediterranean and beyond. It offered numerous opportunities to make a living, including toiling at the worksites or dealing with tourists.⁶ In 1869, the canal works reached completion, the town's population touched 10,000 individuals, and consuls and vice-consuls of qualified communities took residence there (*min kāfa al milal*).⁷ Around the same time, Port Said's harbor was crowded with shipping, most of which was large tonnages of coal to replenish the tanks of vessels transiting through the Suez Canal.⁸ At first, Port Said was awash with optimism. The brand-new city "projected faith in the future," some declared in 1864.⁹ It was destined, a company official wrote in 1867, to become "a big city of trade with great traffic and high-rising buildings."¹⁰ At the onset of the 1870s, some swore it was meant to fulfill a great destiny; its prosperity was assured.¹¹ Others even predicted that it would rival the main commercial cities of the Mediterranean, to the point of undermining Alexandria's trade.¹² Port Said was bound to become the center of human solidarity, a French observer proclaimed in 1875.¹³ When, in the mid-1870s, the Egyptian government sought to have its authority over the lands occupied by Port Said residents recognized, the occupants signed rental agreements, certain that the country's circumstances would remain florid.¹⁴ In 1879, Egyptian geographer Muhammad Amin Fikri described it as a "recent city" whose situation pointed towards an extremely good future.¹⁵ Buoyancy persisted through the 1880s. To justify how promising Port Said's destiny looked, some mentioned all the vessels stopping by its port, all the stores opening in town, and all the "peoples from the whole southern Europe that were hastening to it."¹⁶ In 1893, a visitor triumphantly declared that the canal had made Port Said "a center of communication between the east and the west, and the wealth and mercantile enterprise of the nations of Europe are making it grow fast in importance."¹⁷

Others acknowledged the town's chances for future development but felt less certain about Port Said's long-term prospects.¹⁸ Potential telltale signs may have been there all along. British observers eagerly presented what they saw as a French undertaking in particularly bleak terms. In 1860, one of them argued that the early laborers who had reached the Isthmus of Suez had their "extravagant hope for profit" frustrated, their enthusiasm

⁶ *Al-Mu'addab*, 30 August 1925, "Bur Sa'id. Mađina, Haditha, wa Mustaqbalha," 3.

⁷ Mubarak, *al-Khitat al-Tawfiqiyya al-Jadida*, vol. 10, 58.

⁸ Allen, *Letters from Egypt, Syria, and Greece*, 26. For the ways in which coal transformed the Red Sea and the Middle East, see On Barak, *Powering Empire. How Coal Made the Middle East and Sparked Global Carbonization* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020).

⁹ Casimir Leconte, *Promenade dans l'isthme de Suez* (Paris: N. Chaix, 1864), 95–96; Harry Alis, *Promenade en Égypte* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1895), 10.

¹⁰ *L'isthme de Suez*, 15–19 June 1867, Doctor Aubert-Roche, "Rapport," 226.

¹¹ CADC, AEC, CCCPS, Vol. 1, Port Said, 26 June 1871, Pellissier, French Consul in Port Said, to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 158r.

¹² Paul Borde, *L'isthme de Suez* (Paris: E. Lachaud, 1870), 32–34; Raoul Lacour, *L'Égypte d'Alexandrie à la seconde catacte* (Paris: Hachette, 1871), 458.

¹³ Couvidou, *Itinéraire du canal de Suez*, 57.

¹⁴ Dar al-Watha'iq al-Qawmiyya (DWQ), Diwan al-Dakhiliyya (DD), 2001-009687, Port Said, 14 January 1880, Ramacciotti, Cancellieri, Rossi, Boschi, Citty, Lombard, Serris, German, Duc, Stannich, Cendo, to Ibrahim Rouchdy Pacha, Governor General of the Canal and Port Said, Petition.

¹⁵ Muhammad Amin Fikri, *Jughrafiyat Misr* (Cairo: Matba'at Wadi al-Nil, 1879), 289.

¹⁶ Archivio della Sacra Congregazione per l'Evangelizzazione dei Popoli o de "Propaganda Fide," Rome, Italy, Scritture riferite nei Congressi, Egitto, Copti, Vol. 23, 19 October 1885, Jacobini M. Domenico, Report about meeting in Naples with Cardinal Moran about the plan to erect a new apostolic vicariate in Egypt, 189.

¹⁷ Nunda Lall Doss, *Reminiscences, English and Australasian: Being an Account of a Visit to England, Australia, New-Zealand, Tasmania, Ceylon Etc.* (Calcutta: M. C. Bhowmick, 1893), 24.

¹⁸ APF, Fondo S. C., Egitto, Copti, Vol. 23, Frascati, 17 September 1885, Massaia Cappuccin, to Cardinal Prefect, 187r.

dissipated, and their weariness made acute by the imposed solitude. In 1865, another foreboded that Port Said would ultimately prove a failure.¹⁹ In 1872, Port Said appeared to some as paralyzed by a “hand-to-mouth” system, which prevented it from becoming “one of the largest commercial depots in the east.” In 1876, the *Cook Tourist Handbook* unceremoniously declared that, at best, there was “nothing in particular to see in town.”²⁰ At worst, others added, it was an “uncomfortable place, built on low sand and surrounded by sea, lakes, and sand.”²¹ In the mid-1870s, the French consul himself wrote that the town had remained “a simple entrepot of coals and staples to provision the boats transiting through the Suez Canal.” Hopes that Port Said would prosper appeared shattered. Its role as an exporter of indigenous goods and an importer of foreign goods, the consul continued, was abysmal. It was distant from agricultural land and “almost entirely isolated, because of the lack of quick means of communication.”²² A Baedeker travelers’ guide published in 1878 sounded an ominous warning about Port Said: “It was expected that the prosperity of the place would increase rapidly, but its progress has hitherto been very gradual.”²³ By 1880, the above-mentioned residents were trying to get out of their rental contracts. They could not keep up with the hefty governmental fees, costly building maintenance, and preservation of stored goods in the face of local sea and wind conditions. Further, the country’s circumstances had reportedly become “very critical.”²⁴ The locally dispatched nuns of the French order of the Bon Pasteur found that, despite the art and ingenuity that had poured into Port Said, effecting the city’s metamorphosis into an ostensibly “European city,” the town was still “in a desert.”²⁵

Port Said never developed into a city comparable to its rival Alexandria, remaining a relatively small town of passage.²⁶ In the aftermath of the First World War, it would still be cursorily dismissed as a “transit port.”²⁷ It has been argued that, soon after the Suez Canal’s inauguration in 1869, the Egyptian government tried to divert trade from Port Said, hindered the construction of a water canal linking it to Ismailia, and sponsored a Cotton Exchange in Alexandria.²⁸ The seamen who happened to be interrogated about the canal’s viability by the French consul in Port Said in 1870 confessed: “if the passage from one sea to the other is *possible*, it remains nonetheless very *difficult*.”²⁹ Some commentators of the time discoursed that the prevailing winds, coral reefs, and narrow character of the Red Sea made sailing through the canal challenging. The waterway, they claimed, posed additional hurdles to steamships because navigation in it demanded a greater consumption of coal than in the open ocean, implied higher risks, and thereby triggered steeper insurance

¹⁹ The National Archives, London, UK, Foreign Office 423-1, Alexandria, 26 April 1860, Robert G. Colquhoun to Lord J. Russell, Report by J. Coulthard; PRO 30/22/93/57, 10 April 1865, Sir H. Bulwer, to Lord Russell, 336–38.

²⁰ John Steele, Thomas Gray, and Marshall Simpkin, *The Suez Canal: Its Present and Future; a Round-about Paper* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1872), 11; Thomas Cook (Firm), *Cook’s Tourist Handbook for Egypt, the Nile, and the Desert* (London: Thomas Cook & Son, 1876), 229.

²¹ The British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, Mss/Eur/C739 John Wilberforce Cassels, November or December 1879.

²² CADC, AEC, CCCPS, Vol. 1, Port Said, [nd] August 1876, Saint-Chaffray, French Consul in Port Said, to French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 445.

²³ Karl Baedeker, *Egypt. Handbook for Travellers. Part First: Lower Egypt* (Leipzig, 1878).

²⁴ DWQ, DD, 2001-009687, Port Said, 14 January 1880, Petition to Ibrahim Rouchdy Pacha, Governor General.

²⁵ Archives de la Maison-Mère du Bon Pasteur, Angers, France, HC 43 Port Said, De notre Monastère de Port-Saïd, 6 January 1881, 16.

²⁶ Valeska Huber, “Cosmopolitanism on the Move: Port Said around 1900,” *Global Urban History* (blog), 20 June 2017, <https://globalurbanhistory.com/2017/06/20/cosmopolitanism-on-the-move-port-said-around-1900/>.

²⁷ Derek Hopwood, *Tales of Empire: The British in the Middle East, 1880-1952* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989), 68.

²⁸ Kenneth J. Perkins, *Port Sudan: The Evolution of a Colonial City* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 13.

²⁹ CADC, Affaires économiques et commerciales, Correspondance consulaire et commerciale, Port-Saïd, Vol. 1: 1867–1877, Port Said, 19 June 1870, Pellissier, French Consul in Port Said, to French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 80 verso.

costs.³⁰ What is more, before vessels were fitted with electric light in 1885 (which would become compulsory by the end of the century), all canal-bound traffic had to stop at night.³¹ In the mid-1880s, even if the canal could accommodate the passage of the largest man-of-war in the world, it was still too narrow to allow two vessels to go abreast of or pass each other. Therefore, stations with a broader margin of water had been established and the canal was worked on the same principle as a single line railway on land. At the close of the 1880s, the construction of a second canal or the broadening of the existing one was under contemplation.³²

The Suez Canal, defined by Anouar Abdel-Malek as the embodiment of “the great epoch of international imperialism in Egypt,” multiplied Egypt’s links to the outside world and channeled a vast flow of international traffic through the country.³³ Yet, while bringing Egypt closer to the rest of the world, the canal may have failed to bridge Port Said’s distance from the rest of Egypt. According to historian Zayn al-‘Abidin Shams al-Din Najm, it was due to its isolation that the Port Said Governorate requested, as early as 1871, that Khedive Isma‘il create railway connections between the town and Damietta, to the west on the Mediterranean shoreline, and between the town and Ismailia, to the south along the canal. Shams al-Din Najm claims that the railway project took off despite sizeable obstacles. Yet, he clarifies, “for unknown reasons, orders were transmitted to the governorate to disassemble the project [...] and send all equipment and utensils to Alexandria.”³⁴ At the onset of the 1880s, reaching Port Said still implied traveling via railroad to Ismailia and then journeying a six further hours by an inferior bateau-omnibus, a small steam launch. This lengthy form of locomotion was disagreeable and rife with “certain dangers on the canal.” For many years after the British occupation in 1882, “no serious attempt was made to join Port Said and Cairo by railway.”³⁵ In 1887, delegates of the “English, Austro-Hungarian, Italian, Hellenic, French and Spanish colonies,” boasting to represent the entire “Port-Saidian Population,” petitioned the khedive about several problems they identified in the state’s treatment of their town (especially when it came to taxation). They reminded the Egyptian ruler that, during his visit to Port Said in 1881, he had promised to connect the city to the networks of the Egyptian railways, recognizing that a railroad would foster local commerce and regional prosperity.³⁶

A narrow-gauge railway under the management of the Suez Canal Company finally connected Port Said and Ismailia in 1892. Even if travel times decreased by half an hour in 1895,

³⁰ Gerolamo Boccardo, *Il Bosforo Di Suez in Relazione Col Commercio Del Mondo e Segnatamente Col Commercio Dell’ Italia* (Forlì: Febo Gherardi Editore, 1869), 11–13.

³¹ T. Holmes, *Heart and Thought. Memories of Eastern Travel* (Bolton, UK: J.W. Gledsdale, 1887), 110; T. N. Mukharji, *A Visit to Europe* (Calcutta: W. Newman & Co., 1889), 16; Mabel Loomis Todd, “The Amherst Eclipse Expedition,” *The Nation* 72, no. 1874 (30 May 1901): 432; Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tentacles of Progress: Technology Transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 26. Mukharji, *A Visit to Europe*, 16; Loomis Todd, “The Amherst Eclipse Expedition,” 432.

³² Mukharji, *A Visit to Europe*, 15.

³³ Anouar Abdel-Malek, *Egypt: Military Society; the Army Regime, the Left, and Social Change under Nasser* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 7; Charles Philip Issawi, *Egypt in Revolution; an Economic Analysis* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 26.

³⁴ Zayn al-‘Abidin Shams al-Din Najm, *Bur Sa‘id: Tarikhuha wa-Tatawuruha, mundhu Nash‘atiha 1859 hatta ‘Am 1882* (Cairo: al-Hay‘a al-Misriyya al-‘Amma lil-Kitab, 1987), 134–36.

³⁵ John Ninet and Anwar Lūqā, *Lettres d’Égypte: 1879–1882* (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1979), 128. Entry is from Zagazig, 11 April 1881. E. A. Wallis Budge, *By Nile and Tigris, a Narrative of Journeys in Egypt and Mesopotamia on Behalf of the British Museum between the Years 1886 and 1913* (London: J. Murray, 1920), 77. Entry is dated 1886–1887.

³⁶ Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes, France (CADN), Archives Rapatriées du Consulat de France à Port-Saïd (ARCFPS), Carton (C) 149, Port Saïd, 26 December 1887, Delegates of English, Austro-Hungarian, Italian, Hellenic, French and Spanish colonies, to Khedive, Petition of the Port-Saidian Population.

people continued to mockingly compare the shuttle train to a snail.³⁷ Tourists, among others, relied on this connection. While some did not bother to look out the carriage windows, as their tour guides disdained this leg of the journey, breathtaking views were repaid to those who did: on one side, the vessels proceeding along the canal seemingly glided over the sand dunes; on the other, fishing boats, camels, and flocks of birds animated the surface and the banks of Lake Manzala.³⁸ Still, many voiced the need for improvements. In 1898, Muhammad Rashid Rida praised the virtues of a potential railway line connecting the northern Egyptian coast at nearby al-'Arish all the way to Basra.³⁹ Around 1900, according to a handbook tailored to English-speaking tourists, a new line was being laid to bring Port Said into direct communication with Cairo via Qantara.⁴⁰ In a report produced in 1901, Italian diplomatic representatives concluded that a lack of communication with the Egyptian interior hindered the commercial development of the town.⁴¹ No trains carried produce from the cotton and wheat fields to this isthmus port, where steamers offloaded coal and then travelled empty to Alexandria to collect their homeward freight. According to Steevens, the above-mentioned British journalist, it was the responsibility of the Egyptian government to construct a proper rail connection with Cairo and the interior, enabling Port Said to "be the port of Egypt at once, as Alexandria is and Damietta was."⁴² Indeed, around this time, other maritime entrepôts in the region were improving their port facilities and connecting to the countryside via railroad.⁴³ Other commentators pointed fingers at the Suez Canal Company and wrote that, still in 1900, it refused to cooperate in the creation of more efficient overland alternatives to the narrow-gauge railway.⁴⁴ The combined problem may have lain with the fact that the company was entitled to all customs dues at Port Said and that, for this reason, the Egyptian government may have been disinclined to construct a line connecting the interior to this center.⁴⁵ Cairo, in fact, must have known that Port Said did not thrive on trade with the Delta, as Alexandria ostensibly did, and instead lived off the steamers anchored in its waters. An article published by *al-Ahram* (The Pyramids) in 1900 cleared any possible doubt by clarifying that, whenever traffic came to a halt in Port Said, the city's commercial activities stopped, its wherewithal interrupted, and its population plunged into hunger, begging from charitable associations while bank and society representatives looked the other way.⁴⁶

In 1902, representatives of the Egyptian government advanced a set of requests to the company designed to alter Port Said's status quo, which were subsequently accepted. First, the government demanded that the company shoulder the expense of transforming the existing railroad into a standard-gauge railroad to connect with the state rail network in Ismailia. At least two passenger trains would travel every day in each direction, one of

³⁷ Luigi Dori, "Esquisse historique de Port Said. 1900–1914," *Cahiers d'histoire égyptienne* Série VIII (July 1956): 327; Lionel Wiener, *L'Égypte et ses chemins de fer* (Bruxelles: Weissenbruch, 1932), 426–30.

³⁸ Alis, *Promenade en Égypte*, 12.

³⁹ Muhammad Rashid Rida, "Mashru' Sikka al-Hadid bayna Bur Sa'id wa-l-Basra," *al-Manar*, vol. 1, no. 19, 7 Rabī' al-Awwal 1316/26 July 1898, 348.

⁴⁰ J. Murray (Firm), *A Handbook for Travellers in Lower and Upper Egypt* (London: J. Murray, 1888), i. "Addenda 1900–1901."

⁴¹ Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *Emigrazione e colonia. Raccolta di rapporti dei RR. agenti diplomatici e consolari*, vol. II (Roma: Tipografia dell'Unione Cooperativa Editrice, 1906), 281.

⁴² Steevens, *Egypt in 1898*, 25.

⁴³ Michael J. Reimer, "Urban Government and Administration in Egypt, 1805–1914," *Welt des Islams* 39, no. 3 (1999): 312–13; Relli Schechter and Haim Yacobi, "Rethinking Cities in the Middle East: Political Economy, Planning, and the Lived Space," *Journal of Architecture* 10, no. 5 (2005): 502. Also see Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800–1914* (London: Methuen, 1981), 246; Charles Philip Issawi, *An Economic History of the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 5.

⁴⁴ *L'Imparziale*, 24 November 1900, "Linea Cairo-Port Said," 3.

⁴⁵ Richard Tangye, *Reminiscences of Travel in Australia, America, and Egypt* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1883), 232.

⁴⁶ *Al-Ahram*, 1 July 1900, "I'lanat Bur Sa'id," 1.



Figure 1. Train leaving Port Said, Egypt, 1907. Eugen Fürst Lwoff, AVQ-A-004137-0151, album collection, Alinari Archives, Florence.

which would stop at all canal stations. People and goods with a company permit would travel for free. Second, the government requested that the Suez Canal Company enlarge Port Said's harbor (this would be achieved between 1908 and 1928), specifically the section designated as Bassin Chérif, to facilitate the on and offloading of cargo. In exchange, the two parties agreed to create a "duty-free zone from standpoint of customs" around the port, allowing the Egyptian government to only levy taxes on goods that entered or exited this zone. For example, the coal deposited on the eastern bank—offloaded by some vessels and onloaded by others—continued to be excluded from the government's purview. Additionally, the government forfeited its right to tax materials destined for company use. Thus, the government acquiesced to the company and its claim that a "duty-free zone" would increase Port Said's maritime traffic and boost its role as a regional hub for goods.⁴⁷ Different possible trajectories for the railroad were factored in, mainly touching on the sensitive issue of whose land ought to be employed for its construction, whether the Egyptian state's or the territory designated as the company's "estate" (*domaine*) along the canal.⁴⁸

Aside from trade, these agreements also impacted the movement of migrants. Parties of Italian laborers, for example, showed up in Port Said only to be turned away. It would take until 1903 for the Egyptian government to gradually undertake the construction of the new railroad, for which it recruited mainly "indigenous" labor for paltry salaries.⁴⁹ By 1906, trains on a new standard-gauge railway were trudging through the desert expanse between Ismailia and Port Said, where the old train station remained in place. Travelers could now more easily move from Cairo to Port Said and back.⁵⁰ The novel standard-gauge connection renewed people's hope that the new railroad would finally bring about Port Said's "splendid maritime and commercial future" (Fig. 1).⁵¹

⁴⁷ DWQ, DD, 2001-020454, Cairo, 1 February 1902, President of the Council of Ministers Moustapha Fehmy and President of the Company Prince Auguste d'Arenberg, *Convention relative au Chemin de fer a voie normale d'Ismailia a Port Said et au port de Port-Said* (Cairo: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902); CADN, AR, Le Caire, Ambassade générale, C268, Cairo, 4 February 1902, Company, to Cogordan, French consul general in Cairo; Archives Nationales du Monde du Travail à Roubaix, France, Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez, 1995 60 090, 4 November 1902, Commission consultative internationale des travaux, Meeting minutes, "Port de Port-Said," 12; Paul Reymond, *Le port de Port-Said* (Le Caire: Impr. Scribe égyptien, 1950), 109–11, 118.

⁴⁸ CADN, AR, Le Caire, Ambassade générale, C268, Cairo, 29 August 1899, French consul general, to French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Ligne de Port-Said."

⁴⁹ Ministero degli affari esteri, Commissariato dell'emigrazione, *Bollettino dell'emigrazione*, 1902, no. 6, "Emigrazione in Egitto," 65–66; 1902, no. 12, "Egitto," 79.

⁵⁰ Panait Istrati, *Vie d'Adrien Zograffi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 408; Olivier Hambursin, ed., *Récits du dernier siècle des voyages: de Victor Segalen à Nicolas Bouvier* (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2005), 129. See Dori, "Esquisse historique de Port Said. 1900–1914," 327.

⁵¹ Danovaro, *L'Égypte à l'aurore du XXème siècle*, 126.

Yet some maintained that Port Said really was “not in Egypt, but ad Ægyptum,” the same label often applied to Alexandria, Port Said’s illustrious neighbor to the west.⁵² This idea presumed that Port Said was in, but not truly of, Egypt (at least until the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company in 1956). Because of its geographic isolation, the French consul in town claimed in 1874 that Port Said was “part of Egypt only in name: from Egypt it has only taken, to come into existence, a location theretofore occupied by the sea and brackish waters.” It was, he continued, the “exclusive creation” of European activity and ingenuity. Even its soil was artificial and had to be crafted from scratch. Such reasoning implied that “declaring it a duty-free zone would have been a logical conclusion” and he ridiculed the Egyptian state’s efforts at control as nothing more than attempts to establish “a harmful fiscal system.”⁵³ In August 1882, the British occupation army’s first landing in Port Said, after its bombardment of Alexandria in July, integrated the canal region into a broader Egyptian narrative (and so perhaps did the strikes by Arab coal loaders in Port Said to protest Britain’s invasion). Yet Port Said, as highlighted by Valeska Huber, continued to impress some as “much more intricately connected to the European, Asian, African and Australian destinations it was serving than to Egypt itself.”⁵⁴ Western contemporaries often approached the canal region as an isolated desert that French genius and the Suez Canal Company’s technological innovations had turned into a hospitable and lush corridor.⁵⁵ In this view, Port Said amounted to a sheer European enclave;⁵⁶ no more than the creation of a company under a “universal” name, but mostly foreign and distant from Egypt’s governmental purview and population.⁵⁷ Some in Egypt as well may have deemed this area marginal and under the full control of foreigners. They looked at Port Said as “a gate, but a gate open on a passageway rather than on a country, a region, or a continent.”⁵⁸ In 1965, Janet Abu-Lughod wrote off Port Said and the other Suez Canal cities as places removed “from any hinterland except the outside world.”⁵⁹

Others, however, asserted that Port Said was linked with the rest of Egypt, as both a supply-base and significant actor in the national economy.⁶⁰ Some, such as urban historian Fu’ad Faraj, even romanticized Port Said and suggested it embodied a point of encounter for heterogeneous peoples and cultures, a spot where the so-called West and East merged. Author al-Sayyid Husayn Jalal, whose books—similar to Faraj—were published in Cairo, defined the canal as “one of the waterways through which world trade flows,” playing a key role in facilitating maritime transport and influencing “human life in the East and in the West.” Nostalgia-infused accounts similarly narrate that the

⁵² Khaled Fahmy, “The Essence of Alexandria, Part I,” *Manifesta Journal* 14 (2012): 68.

⁵³ CADC, AEC, CCC, Port-Saïd, Vol. 1, Port Said, 20 February 1874, Saint-Chaffray, French Consul in Port Said, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Paris, 300r., 300v.

⁵⁴ Perkins, *Port Sudan*, 14; Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities. Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869-1914* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 83, 138. See also Sylvia Modelski, *Port Said Revisited* (Washington, D.C.: FAROS, 2000), 57–58.

⁵⁵ Lucia Carminati, “Port Said and Ismailia as Desert Marvels: Delusion and Frustration on the Isthmus of Suez, 1859–1869,” *Journal of Urban History* 46, no. 3 (2019): 622–47.

⁵⁶ Frédérique Bruyas, “Aménagement de la ville de Port-Saïd, le point de vue de l’architecte,” *Égypte/Monde arabe*, no. 23 (September 30, 1995): 131–68.

⁵⁷ Frédérique Bruyas, “Port Said (Égypte), lieu d’articulation du local au mondial. Zone et ville franche: question d’échelles,” *Annales de Géographie* 2000 (2000): 152–71.

⁵⁸ Carminati, “Port Said and Ismailia as Desert Marvels”; Hélène Braeuner, “À la frontière de l’Égypte. Les représentations du canal de Suez,” *In Situ. Revue des patrimoines*, no. 38 (February 12, 2019): 1; Arnaud de La Grange, Véronique Durruty, and Thomas Goisque, *Nouvelles d’Afrique: à la rencontre de l’Afrique par ses grands ports* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003).

⁵⁹ Janet Abu-Lughod, “Urbanization in Egypt: Present State and Future Prospects,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 13, no. 3 (1965): 330. See also Bruyas, “Port Said (Égypte), lieu d’articulation.”

⁶⁰ A. Sollety, “Port-Saïd,” *Annales de Géographie* 43, no. 245 (1934): 510.

Suez Canal spawned a new world and bridged the Orient and Occident, producing no less than a “modern utopia.”⁶¹

Overall, three notes ring loudest above this cacophony of voices. First, overemphasizing that fin-de-siècle Port Said was in Egypt but not truly of Egypt legitimizes the Suez Canal Company’s claims over the port’s commercial potential and de-legitimizes the Egyptian government’s comparable ambitions. Second, it downplays the interaction between Egypt’s canal and railway systems. Whether they developed in unison or discord (Lionel Wiener, author of a 1932 study of Egypt’s railroads, for example, believes that “if the Canal established a linkage between the two seas, it posed an obstacle to terrestrial communication between Africa and Asia”⁶²), they ought to be studied in parallel. Third, exaggerating Port Said’s remoteness overshadows the connections that people’s movements established with the rest of Egypt. At the same time that Port Said came to be regionally and globally interconnected, the Isthmus region became an autonomous circuit for people and things, with people’s migratory trajectories tied to both other Egyptian regions and countries elsewhere. Meanwhile, authorities in Cairo tried to extend their reach to the canal banks. Egyptian officials did not appear to be in full control of Port Said’s population, but neither were company bureaucrats or foreign consular personnel.⁶³ Port Said’s history cannot be written by taking into exclusive account its supposedly European foundations, which affixes its history to that of Europe and approaches the latter as the sole producer of change for humanity.⁶⁴ Neither, however, should Port Said’s history be discussed solely in terms of its Egyptian character. This port-town was arguably a “hybrid Euro-Oriental” city far from the “regionally authentic” locales with which older area studies have been mainly infatuated.⁶⁵

As argued by Israel Gershoni and others, Egypt has a “historiographically thick description.”⁶⁶ Nonetheless, Port Said is an elusive presence in Egypt’s historiography in either Arabic or other languages. Indeed, there may be serious limitations to what one can learn from a localized study: for instance, being drawn into a swamp of particulars or losing sight of larger comparative contexts.⁶⁷ Relying on individual lives to explore collective experiences may also end up conjuring a confusing patchwork of unrelated details.⁶⁸ There are elements of Port Said’s history that make it exceptional, including its peculiar location, natural environment, its genesis as a settlement that began from scratch at mid-century, or the fact that all its inhabitants came from elsewhere. As brilliantly shown by Huber, few other places around the turn of the twentieth century seemed to embody the triumph

⁶¹ Fu’ad Faraj, *Mintaqat Qanal al-Suways* (Cairo: Matba’at al-Ma’arif wa Maktabuha, 1950), 219; al-Sayyid Husayn Jalal, *Qanat al-Suways wa-l-Tanafus al-Isti’mari al-Urubbi, 1883-1904* (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-Misriyya al-’amma li-l-Kitab, 1995), 478; François Zabbal, “Introduction. Dossier Le Canal de Suez, Une Utopie Moderne,” *Qantara. Magazine Trimestriel de l’Institut Du Monde Arabe*, no. 106 (January 2018): 27.

⁶² Wiener, *L’Egypte et ses chemins de fer*, 427.

⁶³ For further elaboration on these points, see Lucia Carminati, *Seeking Bread and Fortune in Port Said: Labor Migration and the Making of the Suez Canal, 1859-1906* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2023).

⁶⁴ Elena Chiti, “Quelles Marges Pour Quels Centres? Perceptions Arabes et Européennes d’Alexandrie Après 1882,” in *Étudier En Liberté Les Mondes Méditerranéens. Mélanges Offerts à Robert Ilbert*, eds. Leyla Dakhli and Vincent Lemire (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2016), 498.

⁶⁵ C. A. Bayly and Leila Tarazi Fawaz, “Introduction: The Connected World of Empires,” in *Modernity and Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean*, eds. C. A. Bayly and Leila Tarazi Fawaz (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 9; Julia A. Clancy-Smith, “Locating Women as Migrants in Nineteenth-Century Tunis,” in *Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources*, eds. Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry J. Katz, and Mary Elizabeth Perry (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 37.

⁶⁶ Israel Gershoni, Amy Singer, and Y. Hakan Erdem, *Middle East Historiographies: Narrating the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 7.

⁶⁷ Gavin D. Brockett, “Middle East History Is Social History,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 2 (2014): 383. I am also inspired by Alan Barenberg, *Gulag Town, Company Town: Forced Labor and Its Legacy in Vorkuta* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 5–6.

⁶⁸ Krista Cowman, “Collective Biography,” in *Research Methods for History*, eds. Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 95.

of engineering and the conquest of distance as Port Said.⁶⁹ If a “typical” Egyptian city ever existed, Port Said cannot be deemed as such, but some of its seemingly exceptional characteristics make certain phenomena stand out. For example, Port Said’s apparent separateness from the Egyptian interior renders it a valid case for examining mobility opportunities and power struggles at the provincial level, while simultaneously revealing the constraints on what company and state administrators or workers could accomplish towards their goals. Like other provincial and non-metropolitan Egyptian centers studied by Nancy Reynolds, Port Said provides unique angles on Egypt’s urban experience.⁷⁰ And, similarly to maritime cities elsewhere around the world, this port-town was also a point of ingress from and egress to the wider world; a site of convergence for people and things on the move, and the lightning rod for heightened contemporary anxieties related to developing port-cities.⁷¹ It would be tempting to question this place’s relevance to world history or even Egyptian history, but even unrealized plans mattered to the extent they made real the visions they embodied.⁷² As crucial as end results might have been, “the potential paths, roadblocks, and stakes associated with each trial are far more significant in understanding the lived experience of historical actors,” as Sibel Zandi-Sayek has persuasively shown for Ottoman Izmir.⁷³ The failures of colonists (whether aspiring or actual), as argued by Nicholas Thomas, are still fertile ground for exploring the complex and loosely interconnected agenda of colonialism and deflating the ideology of colonial power as a totalizing and crushing structure.⁷⁴ On the whole, Port Said’s unfulfilled promises may reposition this apparently obscure place into the spotlight of Middle Eastern studies.

⁶⁹ Valeska Huber, “Multiple Mobilities, Multiple Sovereignties, Multiple Speeds: Exploring Maritime Connections in the Age of Empire,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 48, no. 4 (2016): 764.

⁷⁰ Nancy Y. Reynolds, “City of the High Dam: Aswan and the Promise of Postcolonialism in Egypt,” *City & Society* 29, no. 1 (2017): 216.

⁷¹ Brad Beaven, Karl Bell, and Robert James, “Introduction,” in *Port Towns and Urban Cultures: International Histories of the Waterfront, c.1700-2000* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 5.

⁷² David Alff, *The Wreckage of Intentions: Projects in British Culture, 1660-1730* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 6–7.

⁷³ Sibel Zandi-Sayek, *Ottoman Izmir: The Rise of a Cosmopolitan Port, 1840-1880* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 187.

⁷⁴ Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism’s Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1994), 166–67.

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