

ROUNDTABLE

Asyut in Modern Times: The Problem of Invisibility

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If a major city, the major administrative capital of the south and an integral part of how the system reproduces itself, is invisible beyond an occasional passing reference in the familiar narrative of the history of a country, something has gone amiss. Such is the situation of Asyut, a city so invisible that even the English spelling of its name is elusive—variably Asyut, Assuit, Assiut, Siout, or even Essiout—sometimes appearing to be a deliberate attempt to retain an ancient pharaonic or biblical rendering. So why is there this invisibility and how can it be overcome?

Two possible approaches to this dilemma come to mind. One involves a consideration of the kind of empirical work that scholars have undertaken to answer the question: Is there something about the work that produces these results? The other involves a consideration of the paradigm on which this work is based. The latter is a more logical place to begin, given the dearth of secondary literature on Egyptian provincial history.

In turning to a consideration of the paradigm underlying the Anglo-American narrative of modern Egypt, one encounters the persistent assumption that Egypt is a stagnant oriental country, the embodiment of oriental despotism, a country in which an autocratic Cairo elite rules over a rural periphery.¹ So dormant and invisible is this periphery within this paradigm that for the most part it tends to escape our attention. This is the implied explanation that the paradigm provides for Asyut's invisibility, as well as that of other Egyptian cities, and indeed Egypt as a whole before the coming of the West in 1798.

This gets expressed in contemporary scholarship in a number of often oblique ways. For some, national history no longer matters; what matters is computer usage, most of which is in Cairo, not the periphery. For others, the very inclusion of the periphery would be a threat to the national narrative. For still others, among them orientalist and religionists, history ought to be an appendage to language or religion, so of course the center is what matters, not the periphery.

The question is, why does this paradigm remain in place today? Are its proponents still, in effect, colonial historians? Do they set out to deny Egypt a useful version of its history because they are afraid of or opposed to Egyptian nationalism?² This seems far-fetched. Anglo-American scholarship on modern Egypt may put too much emphasis on Egypt's connection to Europe and too little on the internal dynamic or on provincial history, but that in itself does not make it colonial or even neocolonial. In some colonies provincial history was studied and in some it was not. One finds, for example, that in various British colonies, such as, India, South Africa, and Nigeria, colonial historians did study regions outside the capital and other major urban areas. The neglect of provincial history in the case of Egypt therefore needs more of an explanation than simply that of colonialism.

To pursue the matter, and to do so without falling into Egyptian exceptionalism or abandoning the idea of colonialism as an influence altogether, requires that one try to find examples of places other than Egypt where Anglo-American scholars seemingly neglected obvious parts of the subject which they purportedly were studying, and never thereafter set out to correct their earlier mistakes. In other

¹Peter Gran, *Persistence of Orientalism: Anglo-American Historians and Modern Egypt* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2020).

²Assia Djebar, *Les Nuits de Strausbourg: Roman* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1997); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004). The idea of Egyptian decolonization has not penetrated Anglo-American thought to the extent that the idea of North African and Palestinian decolonization has, Edward Said's *Orientalism* serving as an unfortunate reminder.

words, we need to determine if this practice is somehow part of a pattern.³ First, I considered the early Anglo-American scholarship on Africa and the New World. In this writing, scholars often glossed over the slave trade and the killing in the process of highlighting what interested them. What interested them, initially at least, were the achievements of their compatriots, men who introduced democracy and rule by law, and in doing so proved, to themselves at least, that indeed they were the bearers of civilization, that is, they were the people carrying out God's will.⁴ The subject of precolonial African history continues to be neglected to this day. Following a line of interpretation such as this, we may begin to understand the problem of invisibility besetting modern Asyut, doing so by taking what one could term a longsome meta-historical view.

What we find in so doing is that before Hegel codified the oriental despotism theory in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* in the early 19th century, the paradigm's basic framework was already in place. The modern West grew organically out of its own past, a past extending back to the Bible. Following this way of thinking, Egypt was the Egypt of the Bible, meaning the Egypt of Exodus.

But why Exodus? Here, it may be recalled that it was in Exodus that God had clearly allowed for the killing of large numbers of individuals to save the Chosen People. And it was clear as well that most of those killed were not particularly evil, they simply were in the way and on the wrong side. Of course, the book of Exodus and this particular part of it lends itself to a number of interpretations. However, as it came to be understood in the white, male-centered, Anglo-American culture, if God's people were following His commands and other people died, no one was to blame for their deaths. Given what the Anglo-Americans themselves had done or at least countenanced in creating their empires, it is not surprising to find that this story, understood in this way, became central to their heritage, which then in turn became a part of our own idea of ourselves as Westerners. Thus, one finds even today Western scholars continue to picture Egypt along the lines of Exodus, continuing to put aside subjects, such as those of provincial studies, that might call that picture into question. In times past, at least, there seemed to be no alternative. After all, would we teach our children that their ancestors were mass murderers or that they were God's chosen people? That was not a choice.

Before pursuing this interpretation further, I want to rule out other possibilities. After all, perhaps there is some other explanation for Asyut's invisibility. Perhaps it was simply a lack of access. On examining this possibility, however, it does not appear that access was in fact the issue. Since the mid-19th century, there has been an ongoing American connection to Asyut thanks to the Presbyterian missionaries, the Lilian Trasher Orphanage, the Rockefeller projects, the USAID projects, and then later the Fulbright projects. However, over this long period of time, American scholars interested in Egypt have not yet written a book about modern Asyuti history, preferring instead literature, medieval history, or various modern Cairo-related subjects, although if they were interested, they draw on the holdings of Dar al-Kutub (National Library) in Cairo. How else can this neglect be interpreted except as a by-product of our Euro-American identity, expressed through the oriental despotism paradigm that in turn needs to make this city invisible?

The neglect of the subject of Asyut and its history is obviously undesirable. What can we, as Euro-American-based scholars of Middle East studies, do at this point to confront this situation? I can think of two main possibilities we might consider, apart from and in addition to urging graduate students and other scholars to take up Asyut as a subject. First, we could contribute by entering into the ongoing fray around America as Western. This traditional view is today in crisis, confronted by a rising wave of diaspora-based alternatives, but as yet is unable to reinvent itself. In this context, we could introduce the point that if Americans were to go beyond a total reliance on Western-ness for identity and make greater use of Asian, African, and Latin American roots, it would diminish their need for an orient and, hopefully along with it, the need for Egypt to always be pharaonic.

A second possibility is that we could contribute to the reformulation of the meta-narrative of world history. We could contest the idea that there is such a thing as an orient or a people without history, and

³Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

⁴Chris Toensing, in "Chosen People Ideology" (*Middle East Report Online*, 20 January 2012), presents a summary of my argument.

we could argue that such ideas exist simply as ways of enhancing the relatively weak meta-narrative of the rise of the West.

Consider the following. Over the past five centuries, powerful elements have been colluding with one another on a world scale to promote the development of capitalism, doing so to their own benefit but at the expense of ordinary people. What we have been living through, therefore, contrary to what we have been taught, is better characterized as a rise of the rich than the rise of the West.⁵ Evidence for this abounds, but world historians until now have tended to ignore it.

Let us return now to the existing historiography touching on Asyut and engage what there is to engage. In a recent work, the historian Zeinab Abul-Magd broke with various long-term assumptions, demonstrating that the actual way the Egyptian state ruled Upper Egypt amounted to internal colonialism or settler colonialism, but not oriental despotism.⁶ There was no Cairo core surrounded by a periphery, but rather a war zone where the Sa'idis resisted the attempts of the state to make Upper Egypt a colony. Asyut was the administrative center. The evidence for this that Abul-Magd presents—and that the well-known Egyptian historian 'Ali Barakat adds to in his work—highlights the repeated uprisings in Upper Egypt against the landowning class and the state since the 19th century.⁷ The evidence is persuasive. There is little doubt that, at least in certain periods of the 19th century, the history of Qena, Sohag, and even Asyut fit this paradigm. For the most part, however (and this is once again my own view) the Upper Egyptian elite of the Nile Valley arguably has been integrated into the Cairo power structure bureaucratically, militarily, politically, racially, and culturally more than one would typically expect to find under settler colonialism, this in contrast to the elites of the Nile Valley periphery, that is, the Sinai, the Western Desert, and Nubia, which are not so integrated.

For this reason, in the study of the Nile Valley from the mid-19th century onward, I prefer a variant of this model, one more indebted to Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony in Italy than to Maxime Rodinson's theories of world capitalism and settler colonialism.⁸ Nile Valley Egyptian history can be better understood, in my view, as an "Italian Road" model than as a model of settler colonialism. I mean by this that the more powerful north exploits the south as cheap labor. It does not seize the land of the south, it imposes taxes and debt on it. Gramsci, writing as a southerner, characterized this dynamic as that of a "Southern Question," meaning that the south was at an impasse. As it "developed" and as its regional wealth increased, it did not become more prosperous and independent, but rather it became more underdeveloped, its different areas having no connection to one another, its goods and services mainly produced to supply the north.⁹ Asyut appears to be the "capital" of this type of south, as Naples is in Italy.

The utility of the Italian Road model for our purposes is twofold. First, it overcomes the problem of the invisibility of Asyut by clarifying the role it has played in modern history. Second, it clarifies how the city differs from the other major cities of Egypt, which are mostly in the north. In contrast to the cities of the north, Asyut, we find, is a city that has two overlapping and slightly conflicting sets of dynamics.

First, there is the dynamic of the great families, their entourages, and the service sector which provided for them. The wealth of these families permitted them to be cosmopolitan, to live in Asyut, or Cairo or Alexandria or Europe as they preferred. One could hypothesize that some who remained in Asyut had a connection to the production of specialties for export or for the tourist market, for example, the dyed fabrics, the handcrafted ivory and ebony products, the woven goods, the textiles, the pottery, the shawls, the carpets and, of course, the raw cotton, more so than did those members of the elite who lived elsewhere and primarily on land rent.¹⁰ In any case, there then came the 1919 Revolution with its violent confrontation in Asyut between the British and the growing and somewhat uncontrolled mass

⁵Peter Gran, *The Rise of the Rich: A New View of Modern World History* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

⁶Zeinab Abul-Magd, *Imagined Empires: A History of Revolt in Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).

⁷'Ali Barakat, *al-Qarya wa-l-Sulta fi Misr fi al-Qarn al-Tasi' 'Ashar* (Cairo: GEBO, 2018).

⁸Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Maxime Rodinson, *Israel: A Colonial Settler State* (London: Pathfinder Press, 1988).

⁹Peter Gran, *Beyond Eurocentrism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), chs. 3–5; Peter Gran, "Upper Egypt in Modern History: A Southern Question?" in *Upper Egypt: Identity and Change*, ed. Nicholas Hopkins and Reem Saad (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2004).

¹⁰F. Moore Gordon, "Notes on the Industries of Asyut," *L'Égypte Contemporaine* 1 (1910), 337–39.

population. For some of the elite families, this was a turning point; they chose to definitively leave for Cairo. After the revolution, their estates fell into the hands of managers and lesser family members.¹¹

Second, there is the dynamic linked to the population growth just alluded to. In the 20th century, Asyut's population began to grow more rapidly as the surrounding villages were merged into the city. This led to the expansion of the bureaucratic apparatus needed to keep law and order. The combination of these developments led to an increase in the commerce referred to above. Further study might show that in this context administrators decided on using a sectarian approach to divide and rule. This remains to be studied.

Following the Italian Road model, it also is implied that the culture of Asyut differed from that of the cities of the hegemonic northern part of the country. This remains unstudied as well, and until such a study is carried out the characterization of culture that we have is the one provided by writers of the dominant oriental despotism paradigm. In such works, regional cultures are mainly folk cultures. There is no north-south division in culture worth noting.

My impression, to the contrary, is that the provincial classes had a formative role in what we call Cairo culture, and moreover that culture differed according to whether or not there was a middle class in a given region. It was the middle class in Egypt, which was largely in the north, that led the national struggle, the struggle for rule by law and for higher public education. The role of the Asyuti intelligentsia was different.

Here, one might recall that Gramsci's analysis of Italy involved both a sociology of cultural production and a sociology of the types of intellectuals. Gramsci found that the south of Italy produced a few elite intellectuals of a philosophically liberal idealist sort who became the "great" intellectuals. He meant by this that they were accorded a high status by the rulers because they were an embodiment of the oppressed region who acted as if they were above it all, writing about truth, beauty, ethics, and civilization. Such writings sutured the north and south together, making the country seem to be one harmonious whole. Of course, Gramsci did not mean they were great thinkers or that only the south of Italy produced idealist philosophers, but rather that this was a feature of the organization of culture. For Gramsci, such a figure was the Neapolitan philosopher Benedetto Croce. For Egypt, such a figure would be the philosopher Taha Husayn, an Upper Egyptian.

Of course, when it comes to the actual political practice in any country, contradictions appear. For example, Qusur al-Thaqafa, a branch of the Ministry of Culture, tries to find and publish creative work from all over Egypt. One of its series, entitled *Zuhur al-'Aqalim*, or "Beautiful Flowers of the Provinces [or countryside]," suggests a belief on the part of the ministry in the existence of a natural spontaneous creativity found randomly in the countryside that might provide an interesting contrast to the literary high culture of Cairo. At the same time, however, the Egyptian State Broadcasting Service has been dividing Egypt into regions in its programming.¹² Upper Egypt has its own programs. Presumably this was done for commercial reasons, to maintain a certain audience level. This would suggest that the oriental despotism model is not the only guiding practice.

Here one might ask where the Egyptian historiographical tradition stands on such matters. Nearly all the main areas in which historians have been successful are dominated by Egyptian scholarship. A large Arabic language repertoire of historical works awaits anyone studying social, economic, political, or cultural issues on a national level, but not necessarily on a provincial one. Why? Why should this be the case regarding Asyut?

On a general level, what one finds is an acceptance of but also a rejection of the oriental despotism paradigm, albeit for different reasons than those previously introduced in the discussion of Anglo-American historiography. Not surprisingly, however, as time has passed, there has been more and more criticism of the paradigm on the part of historians.

From the middle of the 19th century onward, the oriental despotism paradigm was the one imposed by both the monarchy and the colonial presence. In that period, the royal family, beginning with Khedive Isma'il, promoted Egyptology. Biblical archaeology was in vogue, Thomas Cook was running tours,

¹¹Uthman Fayd Allah, *Madinat Asyut* (1940; Cairo: Qusur al-Thaqafa, 2010), 172.

¹²Hilmi Shalabi, *Tarikh Idha'a al-Misriyya: Dirasa Tarikhiyya, 1934-1952* (Cairo: GEBO, 1995); Heidi M. K. Abdel-Rahman, "Running Head-Women, Regional Development, the Role of North Upper Egyptian Radio" (MA thesis, American University in Cairo, 2010), 43, 50, 56.

tourism was booming, and this was all based on the idea that Egypt by its nature was pharaonic. In this period as well, the royal family hired historians to defend this view and, insofar as it held sway, certain ideas were imposed: among them, that 1798 marked a watershed between the backward past and the modern present, and that Muhammad 'Ali was the founder of modern Egypt.¹³ Elsewhere, however, such ideas continued to be contested. In Upper Egypt, memories of Shaykh Hummam, the ruler of the Hawwara of the late 18th century, have remained alive, as have memories of the Asyuti political figure 'Umar Makram.¹⁴

Following a decision on the part of the French government in 1998 to celebrate 200 years since the Napoleonic invasion of 1798, a group of Egyptian scholars from the departments of history and French civilization, mainly from Cairo University, produced a major book raising questions about the significance of the Napoleonic invasion. What made the book possible, politics apart, was the fact that there was already a movement to open up the field of Ottoman Egypt and investigate whether or not the received ideas of stagnation and decadence would stand up to empirical research.¹⁵ From the early work of the historian Nelly Hanna in the 1980s, and later from the work of others, including Nasir Ibrahim and Magdi Girgis in the 1990s, one gains the impression that Egypt clearly did have periods of cultural and commercial development in early modern times and, that being the case, the use of 1798 and Napoleon as some absolute dividing line would no longer suffice.¹⁶ The question becomes: what would?

To sum up, I argue that the oriental despotism paradigm has been and continues to be an obstacle to the study of Egyptian history, limiting the growth of certain kinds of knowledge—one example being the study of the modern history of Asyut. The retention of this paradigm may be explained in terms of the continuing hold of the Anglo-American identity of Western-ness.

I wrote this essay in the belief that there will be some further evolution of Anglo-American identity in the foreseeable future beyond Western-ness, permitting the researcher to take Egyptian history as a neutral subject. With such thoughts in mind, I proposed here a Gramscian-inspired Italian Road paradigm as a possible alternative to that of oriental despotism, one that would bring to light the role of Asyut as the capital of an oppressed region.

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¹³Yoav Di-Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 155.

¹⁴'Umar Makram is commemorated in Asyut with a statue, a street, and a mosque. Was he the first leader of Egypt, or was it Muhammad 'Ali? The Hawwara remain active today; see <https://akhbarelyom.com/news/newdetails/2927251/1/-> (accessed 29 June 2020).
صوّر قبائل للجهيـش والشروطة الوارة وال عرب وال أشرف بقنا-ي علون-دعهم

¹⁵Peter Gran, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), chs. 1–4.

¹⁶Nasser Ibrahim and Raouf Abbas, *Deux cent après Expédition d'Égypte, Vision Égyptienne* (Cairo: Dar al-'Arabiyya li-l-Kitab, 2008). Nelly Hanna's early scholarship includes *Construction Work in Ottoman Cairo 1517–1798* (Cairo: IFAO, 1984). Nasir Ibrahim, *al-Azamat al-Ijtima'iyya fi Misr fi al-Qarn al-Sabi' 'Ashar* (Cairo: Dar al-Afaq al-'Arabiyya, 1998); Majdi Jirjis, *al-Qada' al-Qibti fi Misr* (Cairo: Mirit, 1999).