

Multiple Mobilities, Multiple Sovereignties, Multiple Speeds: Exploring Maritime Connections in the Age of Empire

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What can we gain by looking at maritime spaces? Does this enable us to work towards a global history of the Middle East that moves beyond at times arbitrary geographical and disciplinary borders? In this essay I argue that maritime spaces might be particularly suitable for exploring the boundaries of Middle East studies and their interconnection with global history. By implication, the study of Middle Eastern maritime connections might be especially well fitted to develop new and more complex global histories. To make this point, a specific and perhaps unusual maritime site in the Middle East will be assessed. The Suez Canal opened in 1869 and quickly turned into a major artery of traffic between Europe on the one side, and Asia, East Africa, and Australia on the other. More importantly for our purposes, it is located at the very heart of the Middle East, where Africa and Asia, the Mediterranean and the Red Sea (and with it the Indian Ocean world), and water and desert intersect.

By looking at this site rather than at an entire sea, and drawing on my recent book *Channelling Mobilities*, I aim to connect the history of the Middle East with global history, paying particular attention to *multiple mobilities*, *multiple sovereignties* and *multiple speeds*.¹ If the history of globalization has often been described as one of flows and interconnections, examining the Middle East locality of the Suez Canal can help us to develop more sophisticated histories and theories of globalization and transnational history.²

While conventionally many global history approaches have followed, perhaps paradoxically, an isolationist strategy—by looking, for example, at one migratory or diasporic group, one commodity, one idea—it is important to find ways to adopt a more integrated approach.³ In the field of migration, for instance, it is necessary to think about spaces where we can study *multiple mobilities*. The Middle East is particularly well suited for this endeavour, as it is in this region that many different mobilities interconnected. This interconnection is particularly noticeable in the Suez Canal: tourists and colonials used it as a shortcut between Europe and Asia or East Africa; troops turned it into a barometer of interimperial competition, where empires observed each other's troop movements; workers such as seamen, coal heavers, and canal laborers pointed to the importance of making the invisible workings of globalization visible; pilgrims traveled through the canal between North Africa and Mecca; stowaways and other illicit travelers offer us insight into the dilemmas of identification faced by modern empires, and en route they encountered caravans, camel riders, dhow skippers, and many others. Discovering their stories allows us to write a multilayered, deep social history of globalization, which obviously needs to be based on a variety of sources including travel descriptions, photographs, letters, police records, and official and private archives.

Is this history of multiple mobilities specific to the Middle East? In some respects it is a global story that could be uncovered when looking at other port cities such as

Cape Town or other canal zones such as the Panama Canal opened in 1914.⁴ In fact, in many travel descriptions the harbor town of Port Said on the Mediterranean entry of the canal is depicted as a generic pop-up city constructed from scratch that one might encounter anywhere in the world. Yet there are at least two compelling points that make the harbor town of Port Said, the canal, and perhaps the Middle East more generally particularly well suited for a history of multiple mobilities. For one the canal came to symbolize globalization and acceleration in particularly salient ways. Around the turn of the 20th century, few other places could capture the triumph of engineering and the perceived overcoming of distance to a similar extent. And with the stark contrast between desert and maritime mobilities, as well as between steamships and traditional Red Sea shipping, it clearly moved the theme of mobility or different mobilities to the forefront.

Beyond including multiple mobilities into one analytic framework, global histories should take multiple and overlapping sovereignties and hierarchies into account. To this end, it is necessary to develop frameworks that capture the complicated landscape of international zones marked by competing levels of authority. In the region of the Suez Canal, for example, the British occupational power was complemented by the local Egyptian government and its police force as well as the consulates that catered to the large international community under the Capitulations. It was also complemented by the predominantly French-administered Suez Canal Company and its police force, as well as other private companies such as shipping companies with authority over the seamen working for them or coaling companies responsible for migrant coal heavers. A third level of sovereignty was the nascent “international community” backed by an international convention of 1888 guaranteeing the neutrality of the canal and by other international conferences regulating specific forms of mobility such as the Mecca pilgrimage, trafficking of women, and slavery in the Red Sea.

It is also important to highlight how this interchange and rivalry between multiple sovereignties—imperial, local, commercial, and international—played out in practice. Just like in other harbor cities, in Port Said seamen on leave for a day often got into fights on shore. In such cases, the Egyptian police, shipping companies, different consular courts, and the Mixed Courts (if Egyptians were implicated) all got involved. When these cases appear in the consular court records, as they frequently do, they illustrate the different agencies in charge and at times competing during such incidences.

Combining multiple mobilities and multiple sovereignties leads to a third area worth highlighting. Some of the mobilities mentioned above encountered very specific restrictions and limitations, resulting in different speeds rather than universally accelerated flows and connections. So despite the references to the “triumph of engineering” and the “overcoming of distance” dominating many travel accounts of the Suez Canal, the canal region was a fundamentally ambivalent place—a boundary as well as a connection. The experience of very different speeds of passage paradigmatically highlights the tension between openness and control, acceleration and deceleration, and the political process of channelling different mobilities which marked this earlier phase of globalization.

This process of slowing down certain mobilities and speeding up others can be supported by two examples. The pilgrims traveling via the canal to Mecca were subject to quite different forms of regulation than, for example, troop transports between Britain

and India. This difference could materialize in the passes they needed to carry or sanitary controls they had to undergo. The case of Mecca pilgrims also illustrates the limits of such controls. The French colonial archives contain long lists of clandestine departures of pilgrims from North Africa for the years in which French imperial rulers had banned the pilgrimage. A second example, often connected with the pilgrim traffic, at least in the eyes of the colonial powers, was the field of disease control. During cholera and plague outbreaks, the Suez Canal became an intricate buffer zone, allowing movement between Europe and Asia to remain open while enabling attempts to safeguard Europe from infection and epidemics. Different speeds seemed to be a suitable answer to this dilemma. While some groups were identified as disease carriers and were subjected to strict controls, which of course slowed them down, other travelers were deemed free of disease and could pursue their journeys without disruption. Yet these occasions also complicated the clear distinction between “modern” and “traditional” forms of mobility that some contemporaries wanted to draw. It is here that camel mobilities entered the picture. In order to patrol the desert borders of the canal effectively, camel riders had to be employed. So the canal represented not simply the coexistence of “modern” and “traditional” forms of mobilities, but the complex interaction between different forms of mobility in order to control others.

The case of the Suez Canal and the prisms of multiple mobilities, multiple sovereignties, and multiple speeds clearly demonstrate that the Middle East represents a very exceptional space, given the density of interconnections, the difficult institutional status of many regions, and their problematic fit into larger colonial empires. Paradoxically, it might be because of rather than despite these specificities that the Middle East is particularly well suited for attempting to understand larger global processes underway around 1900. The same holds true for the Mediterranean in the context of the current wave of globalization, of which it is emblematic in terms of refugee movements, political fragmentation, and religious conflict.

Yet, when attempting to rethink the region’s oceanic connections, it might be useful to look beyond the Mediterranean as well. Few maritime histories point to the close intersection of different maritime worlds by, for instance, comparing and connecting the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, a task that can be facilitated by studying junctures such as the Suez Canal.⁵ Some maritime histories have furthermore tended to disconnect the sea from the land in ways that might not be helpful in writing such new histories. Harbor towns such as Port Said can serve as hinges between the sea and the land, enabling us to study both mobilities and the control regimes intended to fence them in.

Although there are surely shortcomings associated with such approaches—specifically, in attempting to connect the local with the global, they can at times neglect national or regional stories—the study of port cities such as Port Said, but also Alexandria and Beirut (to name only a few), allows us to connect social and international or imperial histories in new ways.⁶ What is more, the study of harbor towns and of the maritime and terrestrial spaces to which they provide access enables comparisons with other straights or waterways.⁷ In this manner we can tease out the specificities of a global Middle East and redirect the history of globalization from approaches that stress unrestricted flows or the growing homogenization of different world regions, to those that focus on obstacles and restrictions as well as connections.

NOTES

¹Valeska Huber, *Channelling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²For such a focus on flows and connections, see, for instance, Emily S. Rosenberg, *A World Connecting, 1870–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

³The histories of one commodity are especially legion by now. For a recent work, see Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).

⁴See, for instance, Alexander Missal, *Seaway to the Future: American Social Visions and the Construction of the Panama Canal* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008); Julie Green, *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal* (New York: Penguin, 2009); and Noel Maurer, *The Big Ditch: How America Took, Built, Ran and Ultimately Gave Away the Panama Canal* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁵Leila Tarazi Fawaz and C. A. Bayly, eds., *Modernity and Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). It is no coincidence that the book carries an image of the Suez Canal on the cover.

⁶See, for instance, Will Hanley, *Nationality Grasped: Identification, Protection, and Law in Turn-of-the-Century Alexandria* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming); and Andrew Arsan, *Interlopers of Empire: The Lebanese Diaspora in Colonial French West Africa* (London: Hurst, 2014).

⁷For literature on the Panama Canal, see n. 4. See also Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865–1915* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005).