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Constructing Modern Egypt:
Experts, Dams, and the Transformation of the Nile, 1882 – 1970

My dissertation project deals with research on water engineering in Egypt between 1882 and 1970. I am concentrating on the Aswan Dam, which in the past has been Egypt's most important hydrological project. From the British occupation of Egypt until its completion during the Nasser regime, the Aswan Dam has always been a part of the country's ambitions for modernization and progress. Since the Nile has always been Egypt's most valuable natural resource, water engineering has historically been accorded central importance. Thus, my dissertation intends to outline the far-reaching dimensions of this engineering technology, going beyond the technical and engineering aspects. Knowledge and environmental history form the backbone of my research.

Taking the ideology of modernization as a starting point, my research is divided into three rather abstract topics: knowledge/perception, space, and nature. Firstly, I would like to discuss the British water experts' networks in Egypt, exploring their mindsets, ideologies, and discourses, as well as the resulting consequences. This is will help determine the effect of colonial domination discourse on Egyptian elites' and experts' knowledge order and perceptions of nature, thereby examining to what extent these experts were "created" or "invented" by these processes. The aim of this section is to reconstruct their knowledge order in the framework of modernization and progress paradigms which were created by the expert networks and that in turn determined, to a great extent, the future Egyptian discourse on infrastructure planning.

The second section of the dissertation deals with the spatial dimension of the changing perception of nature and its impact on social structure and the construction of a national identity in Egypt. Furthermore, I will discuss how water engineering knowledge and the subsequent creation of a mentally-constructed territory can be imagined as a "knowledge space."

Finally, I would like to combine the results of the first two sections and discuss which conclusions can be drawn from nature itself and whether, and in what way, the handling of water resources has changed during the course of the processes described above. I will argue that the scientific-technological belief in universal feasibility has led to both an increasing ignorance about the ecosystem of the Nile and to inappropriate handling of the resource of water

Aside from historical sources from the national archives of Egypt, Great Britain, and the United States, which contain material on the Aswan Dam and its technical, energetic, water management, electrical aspects, etc., other sources, such as contemporary literature on the Nile, professional articles and travel reports by engineers and officials, are of great importance to my project. These sources can provide insight into the perception of water as a natural resource and the contemporary understanding of nature in general.

The goal of my dissertation is to demonstrate how Egypt was "constructed" by engineers and experts through the technology of water engineering, an aspect which has always been extremely important to the country. This "construction" is true in two senses. Firstly, in a literal sense, as seen from a technological and scientific perspective. The economic backbone of the modern Egyptian state was facilitated by the building of dams and irrigation systems. Secondly, one can consider Egypt's construction by water engineering and the ideology of modernization on an intellectual level, providing a frame of reference for Egyptian elites and their endeavour to construct a modern and progressive Egypt. Thus, in a drastic way, modernization and planning

ideology were inherently connected to the natural environment, or to put it in the words of Timothy Mitchell, “Nature was not the cause of the changes taking place [in the Nile Valley]. It was the outcome.”