



**Jennifer L. Derr.** *The Lived Nile: Environment, Disease, and Material Colonial Economy in Egypt.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019. 264 pp. \$26.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-5036-0965-5.

**Reviewed by** George M. La Rue (Clarion University)

**Published on** H-Africa (May, 2020)

**Commissioned by** David D. Hurlbut (Boston University)

Building large dams on Egypt's Nile produced changes on a multitude of scales from the global to the microscopic. The river itself was tamed, reducing its annual cycles of flooding—which had swept away old debris and deposited life-giving silt—to a perennial flow, making perennial irrigation and agriculture possible and changing the lives of all who sought to flourish along its banks: humans (peasants, landlords, capitalists, imperialists, doctors, and others), animals (cattle and snails), crops (cotton, sugarcane, maize), and microscopic creatures responsible for diseases (“Egyptian ophthalmia,” hookworm, malaria, schistosomiasis) in humans.

The book is divided into two principal parts. The first takes up “the relationships among authority, capital and the materiality of the perennial Nile” (p. 12). Chapter 1 describes efforts to tame the river in the nineteenth century, discussing the Egyptian and British engineers who did so, with particular emphasis on the period after 1882. The building of the first modern dam, Khazn Aswan (completed in 1902 and raised higher in 1912 and again 1934) is the subject of chapter 2, including the roles of imperialists, global and local capitalists, imported engineers learning to control the Nile on the job, and the laborers who moved the

massive amounts of materials needed for the dam. While tracing the history of this new perennial Nile in central and southern Egypt, chapter 3 addresses the transformation of political and economic authority there and emphasizes sugarcane as the major crop which attracted the capital to build the dam, influenced its design and functioning, and led the cash crops in benefiting from its construction.

The second part of the book argues that the changes in the Nile flowed into the very bodies of the human inhabitants of the region. Just as colonial engineers had to learn to control the river itself, colonial medical practitioners were called in to treat the human bodies affected by the new labor regimes resulting from taming the Nile, growing a new mix of crops, and the consequent changes in the disease environment. Chapter 4 follows the development of a “new normative Egyptian body” and the development of colonial medicine to treat the diseases that affected it, including those microbial diseases mentioned above and pellagra, caused by the nutritional deficiencies which resulted from the introduction of maize instead of the earlier millets. Chapter 5 covers the interwar period, when British colonial doctors were replaced by scientists from the Rockefeller

Foundation who also had to learn not just the medical aspects of fighting the diseases but their social and economic contexts, often ignoring both their colonial predecessors and a generation of Egyptian medical professionals who had studied Western medicine and knew how to apply it in their own land. A concluding section brings the study briefly through World War II and the Nasser era into the 1970s and 1980s.

To treat this vast range of material is a daunting task, and the author has set some limits. Geographically, the delta—less affected by damming the Nile—gets less attention, as does cotton, its main cash crop, which has been well documented by others. Similarly, the Sudan, which had its own agriculture projects (notably the Gezira scheme), is only mentioned tangentially, though one wonders if there might not have been some useful comparative material and shared imperial personnel between Sudan and Egypt (beyond Lord Kitchener!) (pp. 61-64, 130). Chronologically, the book focuses on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with some references to earlier times. Those range from the pharaonic to the Mamluk and Ottoman eras, with more attention to the years from Mehmed Ali on. While some references are made to the introduction of modern medicine under French influence (notably Clot Bey via LaVerne Kuhnke), there is little reference to the French impact on the Nile itself, other than the work of Linant de Bellefonds. Missing are Pascal Coste, Charles Lambert, and other Saint-Simonian engineers who had an impact on the Nile, such as starting the Nile Barrage, and certainly the French were responsible for setting up the Muhandiskhanah, Egypt's training school for engineers, some of whom, including Ali Mubarak, were sent on to the French École Polytechnique (pp. 17-23). Thus when Scott-Moncrieff (appointed inspector general of irrigation in Egypt in 1883) scoffed at the qualifications of Egyptians trained at the Muhandiskhanah, he was not just denigrating Egyptians, but also discounting French engineering training, even though he himself had only learned about irriga-

tion on the job in India, rather than in his course of military engineering. The Suez Canal also receives attention more for its negative impact on Egypt's finances, rather than as an example of an earlier project that had impacts on the construction workers' health and attracted international engineering and financial talent.

On the medical front, diseases caused by parasites such as schistosomiasis (called Bilharzia in Egypt) and hookworm get the bulk of the attention, because their increase was directly correlated with perennial irrigation in the twentieth century. By contrast, malaria, which had long been present in Egypt, scarcely appears in this book, though one might wonder whether perennial irrigation might increase its impact on local human populations. Pellagra, associated with the increased production and local consumption of *zea mays* (maize), was first noticed in Egypt by Fleming Ment Sandwith, and was noted as a consequence of perennial irrigation. Yet the reasons for its increased adoption in peasant diets are not investigated here. Why did Egyptian peasants embrace this crop? Was it because under ideal conditions, it produced more calories per unit of land and labor than other grains? Was it actively promoted by imperialist dietitians?

This work accomplishes its goal of exploring “the scalar, material, and bodily histories of agrarian colonial economy; it is also an argument for the centrality of a dynamic and material environment in our readings of political economy” (p. 3). In doing so it provokes broader questions about similar actions and actors in adjacent eras and regions, and parallel cases elsewhere. This book will be particularly useful for scholars and advanced students interested in the links between imperialism, environmental transformations, political economy, and the very real but unforeseen health impacts on colonial subjects.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-africa>

**Citation:** George M. La Rue. Review of Derr, Jennifer L. *The Lived Nile: Environment, Disease, and Material Colonial Economy in Egypt*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. May, 2020.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54747>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.