

Introduction

Port-Said will remain for me the great crossroads of maritime routes where my heart has felt and recorded the pulsation of the arteries of the universal life of our planet. Here, I had the clear vision, the precise feeling of the diversity of human destinies, which snatches the husband from his wife, the son from his mother, the lover from the lover, and throws them violently in space, where they are drawn to more harmonious affinities than those they try to create through familiar ties. Often, our true kinship and our homeland are at the antipode of the place where we come into the world and live as strangers.

—PANAÏT ISTRATI, 1934

ON APRIL 25, 1859, 150 picketers, drivers, sailors, and laborers gathered on the northern Egyptian shore some thirty miles east of the city of Dumyat (Damietta). The group included 125 Egyptian workers. The rest were individuals identified by various sources as Greeks, Austrians, Italians, French, and Maltese.¹ The motley crew was in the hire of the Hardon enterprise, a French contracting firm that executed the first phase of work at the behest of the *Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez* (Universal Company of the Maritime Canal of Suez; hereafter the Company). The Company, “universal” in name and French in substance, had been conceived in 1854 to undertake the excavation of a waterway across the Isthmus of Suez (see figure 1).² As Edward Said once mused, the name of the company eventually created in 1858 “was a charged one and reflected the grandiose plans” that its founder, the French diplomat Ferdinand de Lesseps, harbored for this region soon to enter the world-historical theater.³ According to the blueprints that representatives of the Company and the Egyptian state arduously drew up, thousands of workers would labor to unite the Mediterranean and the Red Seas, thus fulfilling a millennia-old dream. By bringing down the bridge of land that still united Africa and Asia, the new channel, to be officially inaugurated in November 1869, was meant to abridge the time and space that



FIGURE 1. Map of the Suez Canal and its surroundings, 1869. *Source:* Paris: Lanée, List No. 10599.002, David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries.

separated Europe and Asia. It would cut in half the time needed to shuttle between Europe and India, or China, or Australia.⁴

Subscriptions to the canal project were first opened to a heedless public in 1858 and only about half were taken up. Hence the Egyptian government agreed to secure the undertaking by buying almost all the rest of shares. For the next decade or so the Egyptian government incurred increasingly onerous financial obligations. Those commitments, coupled with the shock that the domestic economy received from the international depression of 1873, ultimately forced the Egyptian administration to sell its canal shares to the British government at dirt-cheap valuation in 1875, declare bankruptcy in 1876, and thereafter endure Franco-British financial and political control and occupation by Britain in 1882.⁵ Neither a formal colony like India, nor a mandate like Palestine, nor even a protectorate as it would become during World War I, Egypt in the last quarter of the nineteenth century occupied an awkward and unique “semicolonial” status.⁶ Ironically, Britain had initially resisted the canal project out of fear of French and Russian ambitions in the Mediterranean and in the belief that the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire would keep them at bay.⁷ Still, shortly after the canal’s inauguration British vessels had suited themselves: they were the most active and outnumbered the French, ranking second in activity, five vessels to one.⁸

When workers flung their pickaxes and first hit Egypt’s marshy coastal soil on that late April day of 1859, not only did they initiate the so-called Suez Canal, but they also founded the port town of Būr Saʿīd (hereafter Port Said) in the guise of its northernmost labor camp (see figure 2). As the Egyptian official ‘Ali Mubarak noted, the city’s name originated from the coupling of the French word “port” and the name of the then ruler of Egypt, Muhammad Saʿīd Pasha (r. 1854–1863), heir to Muhammad ‘Ali.⁹ The toponym of the newly created port would forever remind posterity of Saʿīd’s role in carving a novel waterway for the world. Saʿīd had in fact signed the two concessions setting out the terms under which the Suez Canal was to be constructed. The first one, formulated in 1854, prescribed the adaptation of two “sufficient” entries for the canal: one on the Mediterranean and the other one on the Red Sea. It also decreed that the Company could establish one or two “ports” servicing the canal but lacked a clear indication of where exactly they ought to be positioned. The International Commission that gathered in 1856 to discuss plans for the canal clarified Port Said’s specific location.¹⁰ This city-to-be was to be emplaced in the bay of Pelusium, also known as the gulf of Tinnis, nestled at the center of a crescent of shorelines

comprising the beaches of Egypt, Tripoli, and Tunis in the west and the coasts of Syria in the east.¹¹ Its proximity to deeper waters and prevailing winds facilitated setting sail. Moreover, this was the point where a longitudinal depression traversing the isthmus encountered the Mediterranean. In the words of a contemporary canal enthusiast, nature had “prepared itself these places for the easy and inexpensive execution of the direct canal between the two seas.”¹² Through the roughly 129 kilometers (about 80 miles) separating the bottom of the Pelusium gulf in the north to the uppermost tip of the Suez gulf in the south, the highest altitude amounted to no more than sixteen meters (about fifty feet), and there were two considerable depressions, namely the once-dry Bitter Lakes and Lake Timsah.¹³ The excavation of the canal was to proceed southward, from newly established Port Said to centuries-old Suez. Since most tools and provisions would be imported from Europe, this scheme promised to control costs and prevent delays. As the digging made strides, the artificial waterway advanced, and supplies could be more easily transported to the bridgehead marching into the isthmus desert.¹⁴

The canal excavation and the erection of Port Said created both a fresh interface between Egypt and the Mediterranean and untrodden ground for confrontation among the Egyptian administration, the Ottoman government, and Western powers. They also engendered a novel urban environment, new employment opportunities, an unprecedented migratory trajectory for job seekers in and out of Egypt, and a peculiarly unequal migrant society. In Port Said, everybody was a newcomer. As On Barak pointed out, it was “initially a tabula rasa with no one then ‘native’ to it.”¹⁵ Yet not all new arrivals began in the same way. Throughout the nineteenth century, Egyptians were conscripted, drafted for public works away from their homes, prevented from leaving them, and struggling to get away if they so wished.¹⁶ Some did manage to move about Egypt in search of work by, for example, leaving their native Upper Egyptian hometowns, heading for Suez, and ending up in the Nile Delta.¹⁷ Meanwhile, foreigners poured into Egypt, where they would settle not just in Alexandria and Cairo but also in Port Said, Ismailia, and Suez, among other locations.¹⁸ To European individuals on the move, Eastern Mediterranean ports were more accessible than many European or US destinations because the use of passports and nationality documents was still not standard, and even when such documents were required, the law was not systematically applied.¹⁹ Immunity was granted to those foreigners hailing from countries that had negotiated so-called capitulations, agreements



FIGURE 2. Groundbreaking in Port Said, 1859. *Source:* Marius Etienne Fontane and Edouard Riou, *Le canal maritime de Suez illustré; histoire du canal et des travaux* (Paris: Aux bureaux de l'Illustration A. Marc et Cie., 1869), 24–25.

between the Ottoman sultan and the European powers dating back to the sixteenth century that dictated that foreign powers had a prerogative over their own subjects residing in Ottoman lands.²⁰ In the nineteenth century capitulatory privileges remained more extensive in Egypt than anywhere else in the Ottoman empire.²¹ These privileges included the very ability to cross the Egyptian borders and move about the country. All Europeans were admitted without distinction and allowed entering, settling, working under mostly no restrictions, and enjoying the additional benefits of exclusive consular jurisdiction and exemption from taxes.²² For the states and societies on the Mediterranean's southern shores, as noted by historian Julia Clancy-Smith, these displacements were neither inconsequential nor necessarily benign.²³

How did the Egyptian administration cope with the arrival of Egyptian nationals and foreigners in the Isthmus of Suez? How did bureaucrats from the Company's ranks deal with the swelling and peripatetic isthmus population? How did the modes and options for mobility change all along the canal when the British unfurled their occupation army into Egypt in the summer of 1882? This book addresses Cairo- and Paris- or London-centered perspectives, but it also capsizes them to grasp at new angles and ask: How did isthmus-bound individual and collective trajectories differ from one another? Who were those who moved to, dug, erected, and inhabited Port Said and the other fledgling towns along the nascent waterway? How did newcomers respond to the authorities' dictates on and off the canal work-sites? How were different groups of migrants incorporated into the isthmus's labor regimes? What licit or illicit behaviors did they partake in? What options did men and women from different migrant groups have for their

wherewithal or leisure? How did their relationships with Company cadres, Egyptian bureaucrats, and British colonial officials evolve? Finally, is it even possible to identify these workers on the move as a homogenous group of people and label them all as undifferentiated “migrants”?

If, as Ulrike Freitag and others argue, the life of migrants can be read “as a text that is rich in detail about the whole of society,” then the mobile population of Port Said and the Isthmus of Suez can potentially illuminate the multifaceted Egyptian context through which they moved.²⁴ At the same time, this book breaks apart that apparently uniform category of “migrants” and accounts for differences in the types, strategies, and implications of their displacement, comprising travel, nomadism, purposeful relocation, and flight, among others. If approached expansively, the notion of “migrant” accommodates everyone—merchants and mamluks, saints and shaykhs, lumpen proletariat and high rollers—and satisfies none.²⁵ Similarly to what Zachary Lockman argued about “workers,” such generic labels divert attention away from local subjectivities and the meanings of individuals’ actions.²⁶

Mobility is “a resource that is differentially accessed,” geographer Tim Cresswell has claimed. The act of moving between locations ought to be unpacked and approached as a productive nexus of meaning and power. Mobility, according to Cresswell, becomes “socially produced motion,” at once comprising the empirical reality of movement, ideas about it, and subjective experiences thereof.²⁷ These are racialized and gendered. Moreover, as illustrated by geographer Doreen Massey, differentiated mobility is not just about who moves and who stays still. Different individuals and social groups are placed in distinct ways in relation to these uneven flows and interconnections. Some people are more in charge of this somehow differentiated mobility than others. Some initiate flows and movements; others are effectively constrained within undesirable, undocumented, crowded, and dangerous options of mobility.²⁸ As acknowledged by the so-called mobility turn in the social sciences, the concept of mobility or “mobilities” ought to embrace large-scale movements of people, objects, capital, and information across the world but also more local, daily, and mundane transactions, as well as instances of fixity, stasis, and immobility.²⁹ Both mobilities and moorings do not just happen in places, presumed to be fixed, given, and separate from those passing through.³⁰ They are constitutive of specific arrangements of power and space.

Seeking Bread and Fortune argues that the differentiated mobility of a diversified workforce and the formation of an unequal migrant society produced Port Said and enabled the realization of the Suez Canal project.

Between the 1850s and the 1900s three different but at times overlapping managerial elites and their subordinates—the French Company, the Egyptian government, and after 1882, the British-controlled Egyptian state—opposed one another in claiming control over the canal region. They all substantially failed to single-handedly impose the social order they envisioned over the unruly and elusive isthmus population. But the measures and practices they enacted gave way to a profoundly unequal migrant society, one in which supposedly ethnic or racial differences and gendered notions of respectability dictated uneven access to relocation, employment, lawful behavior, and leisure. This study examines the disparate sets of norms and practices of rule that, through five decades, different institutions attempted, chiefly in Port Said. At the same time it highlights the actions undertaken by migrant individuals and groups to counter the obstacles in their way. Overall, it takes stock of external interferences—the state’s or others’—imposed on such actions and of the different and unequal ways in which people experience either domestic or cross-border movements.³¹

In other words, this work overcomes the dichotomies between “structure” and “agency” and institutional “strategies” and individual “tactics” that Michel De Certeau identified in his classical study on people’s appropriation of quotidian life.³² This Port Said-grounded history rejects binary frameworks by showing that neither institutional representatives nor migrant groups appeared homogenous or acted coherently. Port Said’s residents were neither completely subject to controlling authorities nor fully autonomous in navigating their relations. At the same time, they were not unfailingly engaged in systematic or revolutionary subversion. Some of them appropriated the modes of action that were being imposed on them to advance their own interests, often at the expense of others in comparable circumstances. In the vein of other recent work on the history of labor in the late Ottoman context, this study privileges a complex social order rather than a scenario animated by idealized workers and mechanistic capitalism.³³ Moreover, it does not isolate women from other mobile workers. Often depicted as “unfree” and thus denied broadly construed autonomy, female migrants add to the complexity of labor and migration history because they set out for distinct reasons and followed migration patterns that differed from men’s.³⁴ In Port Said and elsewhere on the isthmus, individual migrants pursued different and at times contradictory goals, while the proponents of social control that theoretically governed their lives were most of the time unwilling to follow or incapable of implementing unified agendas.

Seeking Bread and Fortune also argues that the creation and sustenance of an apparently peripheral spot such as Port Said altered circuits of mobility within Egypt and the Mediterranean. Not only did this brand-new hub play a novel role in connecting the Mediterranean and the Red Seas and provisioning passing ships, but it also forged a newfangled arena of connectivity with locations farther down on the canal banks. This arena was fed by flows coming from the rest of Egypt and abroad, but it also functioned independently from them. Recasting the Isthmus of Suez in this light shows how this region was at once self-contained and connected to sites elsewhere.³⁵ Moreover, Port Said operated as both inlet and egress for things and people that were both documented and unaccounted for. It was traversed in all directions by substantially unhindered movements weaving together the Mediterranean, the canal, and beyond. Stowaways from Mediterranean and Red Sea ports, for example, resurfaced from steamship steerage crannies in Port Said, their often unintended destination. Customs-free, contraband, or stolen stuff circulated in and out of the canal area in ways that went unsupervised. Although surveillance measures, such as Customs, came to be established in Port Said and made it into a checkpoint intended to serve both Egypt and the canal, “sans-papiers” and goods still found ways to enter and exit with ease. They turned Port Said into a unique living contradiction as both a gateway and a getaway spot, a chokepoint and a conduit, where “fixity” and “flow” converged and lay bare constantly shifting power relations.³⁶

Port Said created its own orbit and timeline. If observed from this spot on the Isthmus of Suez, the period from the late 1850s to the early 1900s appears to have embraced both momentous change and substantial continuity. Around 1859 this quiet strip of land, theretofore inhabited by scattered fishermen and nomadic Bedouins, witnessed the unprecedented arrival of people and goods from the rest of Egypt and farther away. As a seemingly forlorn outpost on the eastern Mediterranean coast of Egypt, Port Said struck many as isolated and detached from the Egyptian interior. To the eyes of the French consul dispatched there, this town was in 1874 “part of Egypt only in name” because of its position and isolation. It produced nothing, had no outskirts, and lacked “a sufficiently easy and quick way to communicate with the rest of Egypt, with the [Egyptian] government willing to do nothing about it.”³⁷ Its apparent seclusion was meant to cease in 1906, when a standard-gauge railway promised to connect it to the Egyptian railway network and, by extension, to the rest of the country more efficiently than in times past. The tide turned in other ways as well. In 1907 the country registered an economic