



M. FERDINAND de LESSEPS

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# THE SPOILIATION OF SUEZ

BY  
PIERRE CRABITÈS

INTRODUCTION BY  
DR. GEORGE A. REISNER

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## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

M. FERDINAND DE LESSEPS . . . . .	<i>Frontispiece</i>
	<b>PAGE</b>
TRACE OF THE SUEZ CANAL . . . . .	xxviii
(From <i>La Science and La Vie</i> , Paris, 1931)	
	<b>FACING PAGE</b>
H.H. MUHAMMAD SAID PASHA . . . . .	64
H.H. ISMAIL PASHA . . . . .	108
BENJAMIN DISRAELI . . . . .	176
(Rischgitz Art Studio)	
LORD CROMER . . . . .	196
(Rischgitz Art Studio)	
THE STATUE OF DE LESSEPS AT THE ENTRY OF THE CANAL	224
(From <i>La Science and La Vie</i> , Paris, 1931)	

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TO

HIS MAJESTY KING FAROUK  
THE FIRST OF EGYPT

## CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFACE . . . . .	xi
INTRODUCTION BY DR. GEORGE A. REISNER . . . . .	xiii
CHAPTER	
I. MUHAMMAD ALY . . . . .	1
II. THE STRANGLE-HOLD . . . . .	14
III. THE STRANGLE-HOLD TIGHTENS . . . . .	22
IV. PROPAGANDA . . . . .	31
V. 'L'AFFAIRE SE FERA' . . . . .	39
VI. THE 'COMPAGNIE UNIVERSELLE' . . . . .	51
VII. SUBSCRIPTIONS . . . . .	61
VIII. RECONCILIATION . . . . .	72
IX. FOUNDERS' SHARES . . . . .	81
X. NAPOLEON INTERVENES . . . . .	93
XI. THE ACCESSION OF ISMAIL . . . . .	102
XII. THE STATESMANSHIP OF ISMAIL . . . . .	113
XIII. THE OPENING OF THE CANAL . . . . .	124
XIV. INSOLVENCY . . . . .	133
XV. THE INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION . . . . .	145
XVI. ISMAIL MALIGNED . . . . .	154
XVII. THE PATRIOTISM OF A JOURNALIST . . . . .	166
XVIII. WAS DISRAELI OUTMANŒUVRED ? . . . . .	176

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIX. CROMER'S FATAL MISTAKE . . . . .	187
XX. THE BRITISH OCCUPY EGYPT . . . . .	204
XXI. NEUTRALITY . . . . .	218
XXII. THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR . . . . .	230
XXIII. THE WORLD WAR . . . . .	240
XXIV. AFTER THE WORLD WAR . . . . .	249
XXV. TO-DAY AND TO-MORROW . . . . .	261
INDEX . . . . .	271

## PREFACE

**T**HE Introduction to this work has been written by George A. Reisner, the distinguished American Egyptologist. His narrative deals exclusively with that field in which his name commands universal homage. It is definitely segregated from my subject.

I deem it but fair to Dr. Reisner to stress the fact that he has not seen my MS. I have not outlined my theme to him. It is thus obvious that he is not responsible for the views expressed by me. We so often disagree that he probably does not accept my deductions.

It is a great honour to me to have our close and unbroken friendship of many years cemented, as it were, by the appearance of his name upon my title page. I have now returned to my native state after having spent twenty-five years in Egypt. He prefers to remain in the land whose history is indissolubly linked with his fame. Thousands of miles now separate us, but he is constantly present in my thoughts.

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*October, 1939.*

# INTRODUCTION

BY

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## *Navigation Canals in Ancient Egypt*

**E**GYPTIAN civilization was based from its earliest beginnings in the Predynastic Period on agriculture. Human advance over the Neolithic Period was made possible by the discovery of a more assured physical basis of life. This consisted in the use of agriculture, the artificial cultivation of plants to add to older sources of food, by hunting, fishing, and pasturing cattle (largely for the supply of milk). The discovery of the cultivation of plants, first found in a wild state, led to the introduction of the plants which yielded the hard food grains, spelt (wheat), barley. It was the use of hard food grains, which could be stored from year to year, which gave mankind its first safe existence, freed it from the uncertainties of hunting, fishing, and the pasturage of milk cattle. Even with hard grain, no great advance could be made until the late neolithic tribes moved into the Nile Valley and found a perennial source of water for cultivation. Thus from the beginning the physical basis of life in Egypt has been agriculture, and inseparably bound up with agriculture has been the use of irrigation canals to distribute the water to the areas wanted for cultivation. The slope of the river bed has made it possible to take off water at higher

levels and run it down to back fields higher than the water in the river opposite those fields.

It is not within my purpose to write a history of irrigation canals in Egypt. On the slate palette of King Narmer, the second king of Dynasty I, there is a picture of the king with a hoe, apparently digging an irrigation canal. From all the succeeding great periods, in particular the Middle and New Kingdom, there is abundant evidence of the excavation of irrigation canals, some like the Bahr-el-Yusef of considerable size and length. The point to be emphasized is that the Egyptians from the earliest dynastic times and probably earlier were familiar with the technical means used in the excavations of water canals.

Agriculture in the rich valley of the Nile created a surplus of labour. One man working on a specified piece of ground could in the black land of Egypt produce enough grain and other food stuffs not only for himself but for a number of other persons, who were left free to perform other services, the digging of canals and the improvement of the old household crafts. It was this surplus of labour which led to the formation of centres of particular industries favoured by local materials and local atmospheric conditions. The chief known local manufactures were hard stone weapons in the cataract region, the flint weapons and instruments in certain districts of the limestone region, pottery in the *tuff* district of Keneh, and flax in Lower Egypt. The products of these favoured localities attained an easy superiority over the similar products of other localities, and as they became known, a demand for them was created throughout the valley. The river had of necessity

placed on the shore or on an island at each difficult place in the navigation where the trading fleet was exposed to attack while in transit. Thus the trade with the South was protected by a series of garrisoned forts.

In his eighth year, when Sesostris led an army southwards for the final conquest of Nubia, he had a canal made along the western side of the island of Sehel to facilitate his passage through the First Cataract. This canal, which was probably a revetted water-way, was about 79 metres long, 10·5 metres wide, and nearly 8 metres deep, and was named 'Beautiful are the Roads of Khakauwra (Sesostris III).' But as far as we know no other similar work was carried out at the other cataracts.

This canal of Sesostris III at the First Cataract, better made than that of the chain of five made by Weny, probably at the same place, was also executed for a special purpose. It was probably used by all craft during Dynasty XII and perhaps later, but in the reign of Thothmes I, in Dynasty XVIII, that king proceeding southwards found the canal impassible and had Turi, the Viceroy of Ethiopia, clear it out again.

It is to be noted that this canal at the First Cataract was, as far as the records go, the only canal made to facilitate navigation to the South, navigation which carried the most important traffic of the Middle and New Kingdoms outside Egypt itself, and practically this traffic was with a country occupied by the Egyptians. This seems all the more remarkable when we consider the difficulties encountered in the passage of the cataract country during low Nile (see *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts* (Boston), No. 163, Vol. XXVII, p. 64, and No. 174, Vol. XXIX, p. 66).

caused the development of boat building, for ferries across the river and for interurban transport among the adjacent villages of each tribal district. It is not possible to trace the details of the development of water transport, but it is clear from the objects found in Egyptian graves of the Predynastic Period that the products of local industries were distributed even in the Predynastic Period. As the Egyptians of that period used ships and boats, it is only reasonable to suppose that distribution was by ship along the great water-way formed by the Nile itself.

Between the mouth of the Nile and the First Cataract there is no serious obstruction to navigation in the Nile. The ships sailed southwards with the prevailing north wind and drifted or were rowed northwards with the current. Thus the transportation of the products used by the Egyptians was easily and efficiently carried out by river transport in view of the comparatively narrow strip of inhabited land which lay on each side between the river and the desert. This has been true from predynastic times until the present day, when considerable quantities of bulky products, grain, straw, pottery, etc., are still transported by sailing ships sometimes from one end of Egypt to the other. In this traffic it was seldom that the irrigation canals could be used except in certain seasons; but it is clear that wherever practicable, the Egyptian sailors used any water that was deep enough to bear their river boats.

The necessity for navigation canals did not arise until trade had expanded beyond the limits of Egypt itself. Commercial relations appear to have been already open with Ethiopia and the Lebanons as early as the beginning of Dynasty IV, in the reign of

Sneferuw. In Dynasty V, the evidence is certain from the temple inscriptions of Sakara that trade was then open with the land of Punt, which I take to be somewhere in the region of the Somali coast. The Egyptians travelled to the Lebanon coast in ships, and Sneferuw is recorded to have brought back forty shiploads of cedar wood from there in his twelfth or thirteenth year. Mr. Alan Rowe has recently found in a collection of antiquities in Jerusalem an Egyptian copper axe (found at the mouth of the River Adonis) such as was used for dressing wood, which was inscribed with the name of a crew of Cheops. This transport by sea across the end of the Mediterranean and up or down the Nile from between its mouth and Memphis continued thereafter for thousands of years, but required no specially made navigation canals on either end.

The trade with Ethiopia and Nubia, the region between the First Cataract and the district now known as the *sudd* region, was on an entirely different basis. A good deal of trade had taken place in pre-dynastic times by means of market to market trading, and this market to market trading continued during the Old Kingdom and the Middle Kingdom. We know of two great markets, Assuan itself (meaning 'Market Place') and another at the Second Cataract called Iken. But the bulk of the material as far as it was in large quantities must have been transported by water in the protodynastic times. This fact requires an understanding of navigation in the cataract region. During high water (July to October) the cataracts are navigable by ships of moderate size. At the present time the date harvest of Dongola is carried to Wadi Halfa by sailing boats which make two to

four trips a season. The difficulty comes in the other eight months, when the water is low and the cataracts are filled with water swirling among the half-exposed rocks. The first hint of the opening of a way through the nearest of the cataracts, that at Assuan, is in Dynasty VI. In his autobiography, Weny, a great official of Menera, relates that His Majesty sent him to Wawat to dig five canals and to construct seven boats for the transportation of granite to Memphis, three cargo boats and four towing boats (manned by rowers). Wawat lies in the granite and sandstone region between the First and the Second Cataract, and there can be little doubt that the five canals were made in the First Cataract itself to permit the passage of these boats loaded with granite for the king's pyramid. The operation would have consisted in shifting aside a number of boulders at five different places, probably along the western side, to secure quiet passage around the most dangerous places, no great matter for the experienced stone workers who built the pyramids. But we have no knowledge of the size of the canals or as to how long they continued in use. Weny states that he accomplished the whole business, including the building of the necessary boats, the making of the canals, and the removal of the stones, in one year. This canal, consisting of a chain of clearances, was not for commercial purposes in the ordinary sense, but for the transportation of blocks of hard stone by the public works department of King Menera. But it was certainly used for the local traffic and probably by other royal expeditions passing southwards. The trade with the South was in the Old Kingdom principally carried out by royal trading expeditions, which worked their way along

the Nile by the usual methods of trading parties in uncivilized countries, the payment of baksheesh and the formation of personal friendships between the caravan-leaders and local chiefs, friendships based mostly on mutual benefits. These expeditions were accompanied by a military escort apparently only sufficient for protection against small raiding parties. During Dynasty V and before, they seem to have passed along the river, but our meagre information brings no mention of canals through any of the cataracts. It is probable that they were out several years and passed the worst cataracts during high water coming and going. But in Dynasty VI, owing to constant difficulties and the growing exactions of the riverine tribes, a leader named Harkhuf opened a road out to the west of the river and carried his goods on three hundred asses. This oasis road appears to have been used frequently during Dynasty V.

Our next clear view of the southern trade comes in Dynasty XII, when the route was by ship along the river. The vigorous kings of that period were not the men to brook any interference with the royal trade nor to pay baksheesh for liberty to pass. King Amenemhat sent up a military expedition, which punished the tribes ruthlessly. Sesostris III sent up an expedition so strong and successful that from that day he was reckoned as the conqueror of Ethiopia and deified as a great god in the temples built in Nubia by the Egyptians of the New Kingdom. In his reign and in that of Amenemhat III, the Egyptians established a line of forts held by Egyptian soldiers extending through the Second and Third Cataract and ending in a fortified trading station at Kerma ('The Walls of Amenemhat'). These forts were

The third important trade route of the ancient Egyptians led from near Thebes across the desert to the Red Sea coast (by the road now known as the Keneh-Kosseir road) and from there by ship to the land of Punt, which I take to be somewhere in the region of the Somali coast. The chief object of this traffic was a supply of myrrh and incense. This traffic was carried on regularly during Dynasty V and VI and was probably in existence even earlier. The procedure was for the expedition after reaching the coast to build its ships on the spot, obtaining the wood from the coastal forests. The assistance of the local desert tribes was utilized for bringing the logs. In the reign of Pepy II, a leader named Pepynekht was sent to the Red Sea coast to rescue the remnants of an expedition, which, while building boats for Punt, was surprised and massacred by the local tribes (see Breasted, *Ancient Records*, Vol. I, p. 163).

It is to be noted that the eastern trade with Egypt ever after took this water route until the coming of the steamship. Even when the residence of the king was at Memphis, the same route was followed and the goods brought down the Nile by water. The reason for this lies in the prevailing north wind of the Red Sea, which made the trip northwards to Suez long and tedious for sailing ships. It is in connection with this eastern traffic that the question has arisen of the construction of a water-way from the Nile near Cairo through the Wady Tumilat to the Bitter Lake and thence to the head of the Gulf of Suez. There is no clear evidence of the construction of such a water-way until the reign of Darius. Up to that time the cost of the opening of such a road

was entirely disproportionate to the extent of the incense trade, and the advantage of such a road was considerably diminished by the navigation of laden ships in the Red Sea. With Darius, a new consideration came into play, the communication and the transport of troops and goods between Egypt and the mouth of the Tigris-Euphrates or the Persian coast. In his reign the project of connecting the Nile and the Red Sea by a canal would have presented considerable advantage. He had the project carried out and the Nile-Red-Sea water-way was apparently used to a certain extent during the Persian Period. But it is probable that the old difficulty of manœuvring sailing ships up the Red Sea remained and no great use was made of the canal.

The statement that a Cairo-Suez water-way was made by the ancient Egyptians lacks any confirmatory evidence. The pictures on the temple of Deir-el-Bahri, which record the despatch and return of the great expedition sent to the land of Punt by Queen Hatshepsut, are often cited as proving that the Egyptian fleet left from Thebes and returned to that city by water. It is assumed that they must therefore have passed through a Wady Tumilat canal. As a matter of fact there are only two representations of the fleet, one arriving at the land of Punt and the other leaving the land of Punt for the temple of Karnak. It is perfectly obvious that the expedition was on its way to Karnak from the moment it left Punt, and the inscription ought not to be interpreted to mean that the expedition proceeded all the way by water. Considering all the facts the only sensible conclusion is that the fleet of Hatshepsut was built on the Red Sea coast near Kosseir and set sail from

that place as had been customary for a thousand years before her time, and when they returned they transported their booty across the desert to Thebes by porters and asses.

One searches the long series of Egyptian inscriptions in vain for any reference which might be interpreted with reasonable probability as indicating a water-way between the Nile and the Red Sea. After the construction of the canal by Darius, Strabo, towards the end of the first century B.C., asserts that this canal was originally dug by Sesostris. Strabo's evidence of what he saw in Egypt during his sojourn there is fairly reliable, but any statement regarding an event over two thousand years before his time is hardly of more value than the tale of a modern dragoman.

Thus we come to the first canal in the Wady Tumilat. The evidence of Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus is explicit that a canal was begun by Necho from one of the branches of the Nile, apparently through this valley, and abandoned because his learned men warned him of the danger of flooding Egypt with sea water through this canal. After the conquest of Egypt by Cambyses, Darius I completed this canal begun by Necho. These plain facts were confirmed by the excavations carried out by the engineers of Napoleon and the officials of the Suez Canal Company. During the construction of the modern 'Fresh Water Canal,' they found at places a revetted canal bed which was 50 yards wide and 16-17.5 feet deep, which corresponds well with Herodotus' description of a canal in which triremes could pass each other with comfort. Two stelæ of Darius have been found along the lower course of

the canal at Ghaluf and el-Mashuta, the presence of which confirms the statement that Darius completed the canal.

The first question is why Necho began this water-way. Psametik I, the father of Necho, had been placed on the throne of Egypt by the Assyrian Ashurbanipal after his conquest of Egypt. He had been freed by the revolt of Shamash-shum-ukin of Babylon against his brother Ashurbanipal and had begun a policy of offensive against the eastern power distracted by its internal war. He had seized Palestine and Syria and after the rise of the new Babylonian power Psametik developed his policy by forming an anti-Babylonian alliance with the remnants of the Assyrians. His son Necho (609-593 B.C.) continued this policy and was utterly routed at the Battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. by Nebuchadrezzar, the last great conqueror of the land of the Two Rivers, and was forced back to Egypt. Necho was saved by the death of Nabopolassar, the father of Nebuchadrezzar, forcing the latter to return to Babylon to secure the succession. Nebuchadrezzar returned to the conquest of Syria and Palestine and took Jerusalem for the first time in 597. Necho was clearly a man of resource and courage. It must have been in this period, between 605 and his death in 591, that Necho formed the idea of opening a water-way between the Nile and the Red Sea. I can find for this work no plausible justification in the trade relations of Egypt. The extent and profits of that trade appear not to have been of any considerable amount and there appears to have been no question of Egypt functioning as a centre of exchange between the Mediterranean countries and India. In view of

Necho's relation with Babylon, I would suggest that he undertook this canal for some political or military reason. I surmise that he may have considered the possibility of attacking Nebuchadrezzar in his own country by sea, possibly having received some assurance of support from the home enemies of the great king. In any case the canal was never completed. While Herodotus' statement that 120,000 men perished in the undertaking is manifestly absurd, the undertaking must have been a great strain on the resources of Necho after his severe losses in the war with Nebuchadrezzar. It is of interest that the reason for the cessation of the work is given by Herodotus and Diodorus as the fact that the salt water of the Red Sea might invade Egypt through the canal. This idea that the level of the Red Sea was higher than the Nile cropped up again during the examination of the region by the engineers of Napoleon I.

Darius I obviously wished to open water communications with Babylon, as I presume to have been the intention of Necho, but with a very different motive. Darius had made Egypt a Persian province. He had need of an expeditious route between Egypt and Persia, or at least the Tigris-Euphrates water-way, for the transport of troops, provisions and the tribute levied by him on Egypt. His triremes manned by slaves could have passed up the Red Sea by rowing against the north winds. The object of the canal was therefore principally administrative and military. It is improbable that any great transport of trade goods could have taken this route, for that trade as far as Egypt was concerned was never of any great extent and still found the old route by land

from the neighbourhood of Kosseir to the Nile more convenient.

The Wady Tumilat Canal, completed by Darius, probably remained in use during the Persian Period. By the time of Ptolemy II, Philadelphus (285-246 B.C.), the canal had fallen into disrepair, and that king of Hellenistic Egypt opened it up again. His primary object seems to have been the importation of war elephants from the Somali coast for his army. Ever since the Persian Period the exportation of Indian products had been growing by reason of the extension of the distribution to Western Asia and Southern Europe and beyond. It seems probable that the canal would have been useful to the traders engaged in this commerce, but as a matter of fact the greater part of the traffic continued to pass by land from the Red Sea to the Nile. Apparently Trajan also reopened it, probably again for military reasons.

After the conquest of Egypt (A.D. 640) Amr ibn el-As, under the Caliph Omar, reopened the Wady Tumilat Canal for the transport of grain from Fostat to Suez, where it was transhipped to Jeddah. The canal was of no great use after the transfer of the Caliphate to Damascus and had fallen into disuse again within a hundred years of its reopening.

The history of the Wady Tumilat waterway brings out clearly the salient fact that it was constructed in the beginning for political and military reasons by Darius. Each time it was cleared it was for some special reason. Every time it was cleared and the special reason ceased to act, the canal fell again into disuse and became blocked. It is obvious that the canal did not at any time serve the commerce of

Egypt. The reason lies in the practicability of the old trade routes from the eastern coast of Africa, from the Yemen, and from India, which all converged on the Red Sea coast near or at Kosseir, and continued by land to the Nile. This route was preferred to one which reached Suez by the Red Sea because of the tediousness and labour of working sailing vessels up the Red Sea against the north wind. At no time do the means of the merchants of this trade seem to have permitted the employment of heavily manned triremes, which might have carried the goods more expeditiously northwards.

In conclusion the ancient Egyptians possessed the technical means and the labour necessary for constructing a great navigation canal wherever it was profitable. They used the river and the irrigation canals for all internal transport in ships of large size and small size. They made one navigation canal through the First Cataract in the Middle Kingdom, and they used the great Nile branches in the Delta for the transport of the Syrian and Mediterranean trades. But they were a practical people and having no need for a water-way between the Red Sea and the Nile or the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, it never occurred to them to open a canal through the Wady Tumilat. No attempt was made to open this canal until the reign of Necho (about 600 B.C.) and his motives, as well as those of Darius I, who completed the work, were of a military-administrative character, a conclusion which is certain in the case of Darius and very probable in the case of Necho. Every attempt to reopen this canal was based on some special reason unconnected with the transport of commercial commodities. The bar to the development of the

eastern trade with Europe continually lay in the prevailing north wind in the Red Sea. It was not until the steamship was developed as a means of transport that the passage up the Red Sea became practicable and a short and convenient route could be opened by the cutting of the sea to sea canal which is now known as the Suez Canal.