

Classical Ghosts: Greco-Roman Influences on Enlightenment Travel Writings in Ottoman Egypt

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## Introduction

By 1900, Egypt was under the de facto control of the British Empire. Whereas diplomatic decorum still connected Egypt with the Ottoman realm, the reality was more straightforward. The dynasty of Muhammad Ali Pasha continued to claim dominion over Egypt, but effective power laid in the hands of the Consul-General of Egypt, Evelyn Baring, first earl of Cromer.<sup>1</sup> While the ramifications of Cromer's governorship over Egypt (1883-1907) would make for an interesting study all in itself, what is striking was Cromer's life-long obsession for the classical past. An anecdote relayed by Ronald Storrs to a visit to Cromer's Cairene residence markedly shows Cromer's enthusiasm for all things classical:

Lady Cromer handed me a Latin invitation which the Lord [Cromer] had received from the University of Aberdeen . . . and bade me answer it in the same tongue. [I] undertook to do it most cheerfully: I had no books of any kind, but furbished up a good Roman roll, which I gave to her when she came to tea. She hadn't been gone an hour when I got a note, asking me to luncheon and telling me the Lord had called it 'devilish' good. I found the old man very much pleased about it: he said he felt an infernal hypocrite signing it, and was quite sure he'd be found out, etc. Gave me a copy of his translation from the Greek Anthology, and hoped that the Varsities [sic] would retain Greek.<sup>2</sup>

While the Cairene streets bustled below in the Egyptian-*amiyya* of Arabic and Turkish, Cromer would never learn either language during his tenure as governor.<sup>3</sup> Instead, Cromer prided himself on his philological contributions through his many translations of Greek and Latin inscriptions found in Egypt.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of his choice of hobbies, why was Cromer drawn to the classical epoch and not necessarily towards the indigenous languages of what were his nominal charges, the Egyptian people? And was he alone in sharing this hobby?

Lord Cromer was but the last vestiges of a long-lasting tradition in Western thought that prioritized the works of Greco-Roman writers in providing knowledge and context to the understanding of history, geography, and ethnography.

In postcolonial historiography, the focus of historians has been on how the colonized interacted with the colonizers. On how individuals and societies navigated and resisted empire. Postcolonialism's contributions to historical scholarship as an anecdote to the once-dominant imperial apologetics of the early twentieth century has illuminated our understanding of the cost and impact colonialism had on so many human societies. But the question of what *motivated* and what *informed* Westerners has been dominated by analyses of capitalistic motivations, orientalist assumptions, realpolitik, geopolitics, racism, or other malevolent forces. What has not been given sufficient attention are those assumptions undergirding Western motivations and actions, namely the reliance and authority to classical writers when classical writings had a force over Western thought that no longer exists today.

The focus of this case study is to examine how these classical assumptions guided Western travellers to Egypt during the Enlightenment. Predating the de facto incorporation of Egypt to Britain's Empire by over a century, we are able to see the extent and breadth of how classical writers informed travellers on the geography, history, and ethnography of Egypt. The travel narratives of eighteenth century would form the foundation of later writings, studies, and travels to Egypt of the nineteenth century, when the fallout of Napoleon's invasion would transition to the Egypt of the Muhammad Ali dynasty, and ultimately to Egypt's financial ruination and incorporation into British hands. Despite the distance in time and space between Enlightenment travellers and ancient writers, a discourse emerged as the travellers incorporated the burgeoning scientific innovations of their time, and synthesized that with classical texts. This process occurred in the context of travellers describing a predominantly Islamic and Arabic-speaking society that postdated the era of Hellenistic and Roman-ruled Egypt. Essentially, Westerners unfamiliar with Ottoman Egypt fell back on sources, authorities, and motifs that

could give a modicum of sense and guidance, all as a stopgap before any expertise would emerge in the next two centuries. In much the same way Orientalism was relied on to contextualize the West's contact with the East, so too did Classicalism sought to make sense of the unknown.

### **Travel Literature and Orientalism**

As a genre of literature, travel narratives have been the mainstay of entertainment and interest for as long as written history. The exploration of the world outside the familiar, outside of home has gripped audiences since time immemorial. From the *Anabasis* to Marco Polo to the *Travel Channel*, travel narratives as a genre are indicative of a long-standing interest audiences had for such works. In tandem with entertainment, travel narratives also reveal exotic locales that informs those as to the eccentricities and uniqueness of that location. Before the specialization of disciplines in academia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, travel narratives formed as an importance source of knowledge production.

Edward Said's thesis on the nature of Orientalism has been foundational this type of cross-cultural and cross-media analysis. According to Said, Orientalism:

[is] rather a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of "interests" which...it not only creates but also maintains.<sup>5</sup>

By this Said suggests that Orientalism, instead of being a mere literary trope, was a systemic framework of knowledge so pervasive, and so universal as to subsume the humanity of those outside "the West" by making "the East" be both simpler and inferior.<sup>6</sup> Orientalism was not an ideology, but is instead the "constrained" understanding of the complexity of those assumed to be oriental.<sup>7</sup> In the context of colonialism, Said does not view Orientalism as a post-hoc creation

of wily propagandists justifying the evils of imperialism, but as preceding colonialism and even causing colonialism in the first place.<sup>8</sup>

Given the power inherent in literary productions to not only convey meaning on the individual level to the reader, but also to perpetuate systemic epistemological frameworks on the collective scale, we can try to ascertain what meaning individual writers gave (knowingly and unknowingly) to the regions they sought to depict. But we have to remember that these individuals – be they writers, historians, politicians – were simply human.

In describing the multifaceted origins of Orientalism, Said gives examples of the eclectic mix of scholars associated with the movement's genesis. "By and large, until the mid-eighteenth century Orientalists were Biblical scholars, students of the Semitic languages, Islamic specialists, or, because the Jesuits had opened up the new study of China, Sinologists."<sup>9</sup> This variation of the scholastic origins of Orientalism indicates that Orientalism, while a systemic monolith that has colored our perspective of Westerners for centuries, is also a variegated, contradicting web of tropes and assumptions. Orientalism is an interconnecting web, structurally supporting itself throughout all aspects of society. But missing in Said's description were the role of classical works in the repertoire of Orientalism.

### **The Classics**

In this, we cannot deny the centrality of the Greco-Roman past informing and inspiring Westerners about a different and idealized reality for Western society. Despite lacking details regarding Western-Egyptian encounters, Philip Ayres's study on the classical culture among the English demonstrates an example of the hegemonic strength the classics held among high society.<sup>10</sup> Such a hold was not limited to an understanding about the past. Rather, it was an all-pervasive idealization that crossed into politics and the arts. Ayres cites the adoption of Roman

republicanism in the speeches and writings of men like James Thompson and Edmund Burke as being but one manifestation of this idealism.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, if we understand the role the classics played in the thought of American and French Revolutionaries, and the rise of Neoclassical art and architecture during the eighteenth century, we can see that the Greco-Roman past held enormous sway in the thoughts and attitudes and aesthetics of the Enlightenment.<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that the role of the classics as authority sources were unchallenged. Rather, discourses on the utility and relevance to the classics as an authoritative source of knowledge were common in the Enlightenment, and there did not exist a clean and simple transition away from the authority of the classics among scholars in the intervening centuries.<sup>13</sup> In other words, whereas contemporary scholars may be as skeptical to the authority of classical sources as they would be in rehashing old Orientalist tropes, the transition between then and now was a messy and contradictory process, with writers emphasizing the classics on individual terms.

One such writer was the Danish explorer Frederik Ludvig Norden and his *Travels in Egypt and Nubia* (1757). Norden's travels through Egypt and Nubia were originally published in Danish, translated by Peter Templeman into English. The first thing that strikes the reader is how the travelogue is formatted. Norden is fond of the use of footnotes, and when detailing Egypt's sites and sounds, Norden is compelled to contextualize those observations with various authorities. While some of these are modern, others like Herodotus, Lucian, John Tzetzes, Strabo, Juvenal, and Tacitus are frequently cited.<sup>14</sup> An example is Norden's visit to the ancient city of Memphis and modern Giza, where Norden is disappointed by the parochial state of the site, which Norden describes as being a flat plain with a village or two.<sup>15</sup> He contrast modern Giza with a description of Memphis from Herodotus's *Histories*, where Herodotus recounts the ancient earthworks built by Pharaoh Menes to counter the frequent floods of the city.<sup>16</sup> This

code-switching of the language between describing contemporary Egypt with the Egypt of antiquity is all too common in Norden's work. More importantly, this is indicative of a contextualization of the discrepancy between contemporary Egypt with the Egypt familiar to any reader of Herodotus or any ancient writer. While this may seem as a trifling point, the vast reliance of ancient writers to contextualize Egypt is notable for the absence of any Islamic or Egyptian source that could fill in the gaps of knowledge regarding contemporary Egypt.

### **Lost Antiquities.**

Travellers to the Middle East all uniformly commented on the ruins and antiquities of the region, noting the location of ancient battles, ancient wonders, and ancient shrines. But each traveller was motivated to undergo the journey for different reasons, and not just for historical tourism. For Norden, the desire to establish trade agreements with Ethiopia necessitated travel up the Nile River.<sup>17</sup> For others, Egypt itself was the destination, as the storied and mysterious history of the land proved seductive to the curious far-and-wide. Nonetheless, until the discovery of the Rosetta Stone in 1799, much of Egyptian history (written in hieroglyphics) was unknown. What instead provided historical context to would-be travellers were the accounts of the Greeks and Romans of Egypt. Not surprisingly, the travel narratives to Egypt were filled with references with Greco-Roman authority and sights.

A common thread that unites most travel narratives to Egypt during the eighteenth century was the role Alexandria played as the entrepôt of all commerce and travel to and from Egypt. Thus the narratives open with the sights and sounds of Alexandria as the traveller's first taste of Egypt. What unites them is a disappointment that the Alexandria of the Ptolemies, of Caesar, Anthony, Cleopatra, and Pompey is nowhere to be found. But that does not stop the traveller of trying to glean the antiquities of Alexandria.

William George Browne is indicative of this trend. W.G. Browne's expedition to Egypt (1792-1798) was a lofty project that attempted to describe as much as possible of the country, from the geography and ethnography of Egypt, to the flora and fauna of his stops and travels.<sup>18</sup> Norden starts his narrative with a familiar refrain of most travel literature of Egypt: the voyage into Alexandria.<sup>19</sup> Entering Alexandria, Browne provides his readership with what he considers to be the most relevant aspect of Alexandria: its Greco-Roman past.<sup>20</sup> Oddly, these references to Alexandria's classical pedigree are made for the lack of physical reminders Europeans encountered when travelling to the Ottoman-controlled city. Browne remarks that Alexandria, "exhibits very few marks, by which it could be recognized as one of the principal monuments of the magnificence of the conquer of Asia, the emporium of the east, and the chosen theatre of the far-fought luxuries of the Roman Triumvir, and the Egyptian queen."<sup>21</sup> Here, Browne is referencing Alexander the Great, the Ptolemaic history of Alexandria, and the infamy of Cleopatra's rule. Much like Norden, Browne is also disappointed that the Greco-Roman heritage of Alexandria is nowhere to be seen.

Likewise, Carsten Niebuhr, during his travels across the Middle East in the 1760s, prefaces the arrival of his expedition to Alexandria in 1761 to prepare his readers to the reality of the situation of the ancient city:

Alexandria, or Sandria, as the Turks and Arabs call it, is situate upon a narrow isthmus, between a peninsula and the walls of the ancient city, and dividing the two harbors. The ground on which the modern city stands, seems to have arisen out of the waters. Although long since divested of its ancient splendour, yet the remains of the magnificent build-ings which it once possessed, - palaces, temples, and mosques, with a plentiful intermixture of palm-trees, - give this city an aspect of beauty and dignity, when viewed from the harbour.<sup>22</sup>

While seemingly appreciative of a beauty despite the loss of ancient Alexandria, Niebuhr condemns the "Mahometans" in breaking down the "finest" monuments in the construction of



buildings that pale in comparison to their former glory.<sup>23</sup> According to Niebuhr, only one classical monument remains, the Obelisk of Cleopatra.<sup>24</sup>

Not to be outdone, Norden would echo the same sentiments as Niebuhr and Browne on the sad state of Alexandria, where Norden would even entitle the first chapter “Ancient Alexandria,” to describe his initial encounter to the contemporary harbor of Alexandria.<sup>25</sup> Norden spends considerable time trying to see the invisible sights of Greco-Roman Alexandria when he arrives in Alexandria. Norden describes his initial sight of two fortresses guarding the dual harbors of the city: “The entrance of the new port is defended by two castles, of a bad Turkish structure, and which have nothing remarkable but their situation; since they have succeeded edifices very renewed in history.”<sup>26</sup> Norden is uninterested in the fortresses except for one detail: they were built from the remains of the Lighthouse of Alexandria.<sup>27</sup> Thus, in prioritizing his initial sight of Egypt, Norden is sticking with the classical epoch and not Egypt of his day. That Norden would spend considerable time in describing Alexandria’s so-called “Canals of Cleopatra” only furthers the point of a preference of the ancient over the contemporary.<sup>28</sup>

After devoting several pages of his narrative on the ruins of the Little Pharillon on the Alexandrian harbor, Norden concedes that:

If we are to credit history, and what that tells us of the grandeur of the ancient Alexandria, it would be very difficult for us to limit it to an inclosure [sic] of so little extent. But without engaging ourselves in what one wishes it might have been, we may better confine ourselves to consider what remains of that famous city.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, the hope to find Alexandria, as a treasure trove of Greco-Roman ruins and monuments needs to be replaced with an appreciation of the history of the city for whatever remains standing.

## Geography

In addition to relying on classical histories to inform travellers (and audiences) of the historical importance of the regions, in question, there is also the use of such sources in informing the geography and ethnography of these regions.

W.G. Browne's narrative is indicative of the fusion between nascent geography with classical work. As with Norden's fascination with the canals of Cleopatra, Browne focuses attention to the canals of Cairo. Given Cairo's emergence in the Middle Ages, there is no reference to the city by classical authors. Nonetheless, Browne invokes Herodotus, Pliny, and Ptolemy in citing that this is analogous to the site of ancient Pharbalbus.<sup>30</sup> Thus a connection and familiarity is forged between Cairo and an understandable Greco-Roman context.

In the realm of ethnography, Brown demonstrates both a reliance and skepticism of classical thought in forming opinions on the people of Egypt. Browne cites Herodotus's proto-ethnographic description of the skin complexion of the Egyptian people vis-à-vis Greeks and sub-Saharan Africans, but Browne retorts that Herodotus's testimony is nonetheless "not as strong" as Browne's own observation on the matter.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, in describing the practice of excision among Egyptians and communities along the Nile Valley, Browne invokes Strabo's testimony to show a continuous use of the practice from ancient to modern times.<sup>32</sup> Lest we think that Enlightenment-era travellers were simply reciting classical works habitually and uncritically, there was in fact a discourse as individuals sought to make sense of the mixing and melding of ideas during the Enlightenment. Browne's reliance and critiques of ancient writers is indicative of that trend.

But most significant in the intersection of classical works and the geography of Egypt are the Cataracts, and their role in demarking the southern border of Egypt. Herodotus's definition of

Egypt from the Cataract of Elephantine to the Mediterranean would remain the de facto border of Egypt until the late nineteenth century, at least to the Western imagination.<sup>33</sup> One can look at the 1787 map of Egypt (Figure 1 below) by Sawyer and Bennett to see how Westerners used Herodotus's borders regardless of any reality on the ground.<sup>34</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The classical works of Greece and Rome provided context to travellers unfamiliar with Arab or Islamic history or geography, with the last extensive source material the West had on the region. While this study was brief, the use of classical themes was an example in the influence of the Greco-Roman past in informing assumptions and expectations of Westerners in Egypt. Westerners entering Alexandria were expecting a city that no longer existed. Travellers into the interior used classical works to make sense of the people and geography of Egypt. The classics were but one asset in the toolset of travellers in contextualizing unfamiliar spaces. But it is one that is often overlooked and ignored by current historians, especially in the context of the eventual imperialism of the region. Lord Cromer's philological hobbies are one example of how deference to the Greco-Roman past continued into the twentieth century. The ghosts of the classical past only existed because the classical past was exalted above the long history of Islamic Egypt. The Greco-Roman past may no longer have a hold on the public imagination when it comes to Egypt. But the travellers detailed above were the forerunners of those who would bring back the history of Pharaonic Egypt. In a strange way, has anything really changed?



Figure 1 – Sawyer and Bennett’s “Africa” (1787)

<sup>1</sup> “Baring, Evelyn, first earl of Cromer (1841–1917),” J. G. Darwin in Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2008, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30583> (accessed December 3, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Donald M. Reid, “Cromer and the Classics: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Greco-Roman Past in Modern Egypt,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 32, no. 1 (January 1996): “Cromer and the Classics,” 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Malcolm Reid, “The Changing past: Egyptian Historiography of the Urabi Revolt, 1882-1983 by Thomas Mayer,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 22, no. 1 (1989): 173-174.

<sup>4</sup> Reid, “Cromer and the Classics,” 7.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 12; Italicized words and hyphens appearing in this and all other quotations are those from the texts themselves. I do not emphasize nor highlight texts.

<sup>6</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 40-41.

<sup>7</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 40.

<sup>8</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Philip J. Ayres, *Classical culture and the idea of Rome in eighteenth-century England*, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> Ayres, 35-49

<sup>12</sup> In the context of the American Revolution, one can see how the classics influenced the assumptions of the age when Washington was alluded as the American Cincinnatus, while the Federalist and Anti-Federalists appropriated *nom-de-plumes* that harkened back to the early days of the Roman Republic.

<sup>13</sup> Li., L. 2010. "Ancients and Moderns". In *The Classical Tradition*, edited by Anthony Grafton et al.. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. [https://libproxy.library.unt.edu/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/harvardct/ancients\\_and\\_moderns/0](https://libproxy.library.unt.edu/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/harvardct/ancients_and_moderns/0)

<sup>14</sup> Frederik Ludvig Norden and Peter Templeman, *Travels in Egypt and Nubia*. (1757. <http://www.kb.dk/books/kubsam/2009/apr/00003/>):Norden, xxxvii – xl; The name of Frederick Ludvig Norden depends on the source being examined. Some sources has his middle name as “Lewis” or “Louis.” For the purposes of simplicity, Norden will just be used to describe him; Warwick Wroth, “Norden, Frederick Lewis,” in *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Sidney Lee (New York: MacMillan and Co., 1895): 104-105, <https://archive.org/stream/dictionaryofnati41stepuoft#page/n3/mode/2up>.

<sup>15</sup> Norden, 75; Norden spells the city of Giza as “Gize” in his manuscript.

<sup>16</sup> Norden, 75-76; Norden spells the name of Menes as “Meens.”

<sup>17</sup> Michael Carhart, *The Science of Culture in Enlightenment Germany* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007): 29-31.

<sup>18</sup> William George Browne, *Travels in Africa, Egypt, and Syria, from the Year 1792 to 1798*. By *W.G. Browne*. London: Printed for T. Cadell junior and W. Davies, Strand, 1799): 14-17.

<sup>19</sup> This is a rather obvious point given that sea travel was the quickest and most direct route from Europe to Egypt, but the lack narratives detailing a land approach from Palestine to Egypt is curious.

<sup>20</sup> Browne, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Browne, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Carsten Niebuhr, *Travels Through Arabia and Other Countries in the East Performed by M. Niebuhr, Now a Captain of Engineers in the Service of the King of Denmark*. Translated by Robert Heron. With Notes by the Translator; and Illustrated with Engravings. In Two Volumes. (Perth: Printed by and for R. Morison junior, 1799): 20-21.

<sup>23</sup> Niebuhr, 21.

<sup>24</sup> Niebuhr, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Norden, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Norden, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Norden, 2-3.

<sup>28</sup> Norden, 17.

<sup>29</sup> Norden, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Browne, 83.

<sup>31</sup> Browne, 163.

<sup>32</sup> Browne, 347; Excision is also known as Female Circumcision or FGM.

<sup>33</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, ii. 17-18.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Sawyer and John Bennett, “Africa, with all its States, Kingdoms, republics, Regions, Islands, & cca.” Map, *A general atlas, describing the whole universe: being a complete*

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*collection of the most approved maps extant; corrected with the greatest care, and augmented from the latest discoveries. The whole being an improvement of the maps of D'Anville and Robert*, David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, 1787,

<http://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/s/kj24t5>; This is evident in the frequent forays by powers in Cairo exerting territorial control down the Nile, such as Muhammad Ali's conquests of Sudan in the 1820s.