

For most Westerners, mention of Egyptian history evokes images of pharaonic antiquity. The Egypt of the Church fathers, of centuries of Islamic history, and of modern times pales before Western fascination with the pharaohs. While flattered by Western appreciation of the pharaonic era, modern Egyptians give far more weight to the Arab/Islamic era of their national past. This paper analyzes some of the ideological uses which both Westerners and Egyptians have made of a third era, Egypt's millennium of classical Greco-Roman rule between Alexander the Great in 332 BCE and the Islamic conquest of 641 CE.

Given the centrality of Greek and Latin classics to Western consciousness since the Renaissance, it comes as no surprise that European imperialists in Egypt believed they were resuming an interrupted classical *mission civilisatrice*. Napoleon masqueraded as Alexander and Consul General Lord Cromer measured his Egyptian record against those of the proconsuls of imperial Rome. Britons fresh from Oxford and Cambridge stepped ashore reciting Herodotus, and Flaubert read the *Odyssey* in Greek as he sailed up the Nile. Europeans founded the Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria, the Alexandria Archaeological Society, and the classics departments of Cairo and Alexandria universities and dominated them into the 1950s.

If a majority of Egyptians were deaf to this classical discourse, a few pointed out that the Greek legacy in science and philosophy had been foundational for medieval Islamic intellectual achievement, from which Europeans later borrowed. Some wondered if the West's devotion to its classics might be a key to its current dynamism, a formula to be borrowed along with factories, railroads, parliaments, law codes and Louis XV décor. The resulting classical discourse by Egyptians had far less drawing power than Islamic, Arab, or Egyptian themes in constructing modern national identity, but it drew in such prominent thinkers and politicians as al-Tahtawi, Mustafa Kamil, Lutfi al-Sayyid, King Fuad, and Taha Husayn.

In the decades between World War I and Nasser's revolution of 1952 classical dreams quite at odds with Cromer's strident imperialism flowered with such writers as E. M. Forster, Robert Graves, and Constantine Cavafy. Establishing viable classics departments at Egyptian universities was an uphill battle during these years. The unwavering support of Taha Husayn, one of modern Egypt's great scholars and men of letters, was critical.

When Egypt unilaterally abrogated the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty in 1951 and dismissed all British employees of the Egyptian government, the loss of classics professors at Cairo and Alexandria universities was a severe blow to the field. Nasser's Free Officers knew nothing of classics. The revolutionary government's nationalizations of the late 1950s and early 1960s decimated the large Greek, Italian, and other European colonies which had helped sustain the Greco-Roman Museum and Alexandria Archaeological Society.

Yet for all the odds against it, classical studies survived decolonization in Egypt and continue to contribute to postcolonial discourse. Abandoning the field would mean leaving leave an entire millennium of the national past entirely to interpretations by foreign scholars.

The Roman era is the least congenial from the standpoint of Egyptian nationalists. The Romans reduced Egypt to provincial status, squeezed out grain for export to Rome, and persecuted its increasingly Christian population. Alexander the Great, on the other hand, can be viewed as liberating Egyptians from the Persian yoke, and the Ptolemies made Alexandria a world center of commerce and learning. In the 1920s and again in the 1980s, Egyptian playwrights presented Cleopatra, the last of the Ptolemies, as an Egyptian patriot struggling to preserve her country's independence in the face of Roman imperialism.