

Book Reviews

Lucia Carminati, *Seeking Bread and Fortune in Port Said. Labor Migration and The Making of the Suez Canal, 1859-1906*, University of California Press, Oakland, 2023.

Well researched and superbly written, *Seeking Bread and Fortune in Port Said* sheds some light on the formation and transformation of a migrant society in Port Said between 1859, when the digging of the Suez Canal began, and 1906, the year of the inauguration of a faster railway line linking Port Said to other Egyptian cities. The book shows how a desert place on the Mediterranean coast of Ottoman Egypt became a bustling city of several thousand inhabitants, connected both to the world and to the rest of Egypt. The first merit of this book is that it helps decentralise the history of modern Egypt, which until recently was focused mainly on Cairo and, to a lesser extent, Alexandria. The author shows how a research on a supposedly peripheral site, such as Port Said, is likely to shed light on the broader dynamics that characterized the history of nineteenth-century Egypt: the contestation of power and sovereignty, the growing encroachment of foreign powers and the evolution of models of urban governance.

While acknowledging the competing roles of the three main institutions claiming sovereignty and control over the Suez Canal region (the *Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez*, the Egyptian government and the British-controlled Egyptian state after 1882), the book goes beyond state-level analysis to focus primarily on individuals and their daily lives. Drawing on the mobility turn (which has helped shift attention to local and mundane transactions) and recent developments in migration studies examining “global mobilities from below” (McKeown, 2004), the book departs from previous accounts of migration in modern Middle Eastern history. While these works have mainly focused on the history of specific groups – national and diasporic groups, religious minorities – *Seeking bread and Fortune in Port Said* looks at the ordinary lives of groups from diverse backgrounds.

Indeed, as Carminati shows, Port Said became home to people from the Ottoman provinces, Upper and Lower Egypt and Southern

Europe, among others. The author combines the perspectives of microhistory and the knowledge of everyday life, which focuses on ordinary individuals and the material aspects of their daily actions. In doing so, the book departs from previous studies on the Suez Canal, which have focused mainly on economics and politics on the one hand, and on urban planning and architecture on the other hand. As well as bringing to life the ordinary people “who made the canal project possible” (p. 11), the book aims to show how seemingly insignificant details and ordinary trajectories can affect “the formation of an unequal migrant society” (p. 6).

To trace these multiple fragments of life, the book draws on numerous and untapped archival documents and published sources in different languages, collected in Europe, Egypt and the Middle East. Underlining the inherent power of archives and the selective nature of sources, the author acknowledges with a touch of regret that Egyptian workers are less represented than other individuals in the narrative. Focusing primarily on the lives of non-Egyptian migrants, the book follows their trajectories as they settle in the Canal region (chapter 1), seek work opportunities (chapter 2), cope with the restructuring of the labour market after the inauguration of the Canal, in 1869 (chapter 3) and participate in leisure activities (chapter 4).

Chapter 1 begins with the concession signed in 1854 by the Egyptian government granting Ferdinand De Lesseps exclusive powers to set up the *Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez*, and ends in 1865 with Port Said – that six years earlier was still a desert – being home to several thousand inhabitants, identified as both Egyptians and Europeans. The author shows how, over the course of these ten years, the canal became a “universal meeting point” (p. 26), forming part of an autonomous circuit for the movement of people and goods, while at the same time building on pre-existing patterns and networks of mobility. She analyses the different labour regimes, from the system of forced labour (or *corvée* officially instituted by the Egyptian administration in 1862, and abolished two years later) that linked the canal to the rest of the country, to the recruitment of a workforce that was both local and international. While highlighting how structure and agency were involved in these migration flows, the author argues that the control of this mobile workforce was an essential aspect of French, Ottoman and British diplomacy of the mid-century.

Focusing on the employment opportunities available in the Canal region, the second chapter analyses a divided labour market where work hierarchies and wage variations were based on supposed national, racial and ethnic divisions. Carminati shows how orientalism, emerging nationalism, climatology and geographical determinism merged in the

taxonomy developed by the *Compagnie's* officials and contemporary observers to divide groups of workers and hierarchise them. Without going into detail, the author argues that these distinctions not only concerned the workplace, but also translated into urban segregation and aimed to be a “tool of control” (p. 111). The chapter goes on examining the workers’ agency to circumvent regulations and controls. These « mundane transgressions » (p. 112) took the form of desertions, acts of insubordination and strikes. Finally, this chapter reintegrates women (married and unmarried) into the narrative and presents them as active participants in the migration process by examining the few employment opportunities available to them outside domestic service and prostitution.

Chapter 3 examines the social and working conditions that prevailed after the completion and inauguration of the canal (1869), when many workers lost their jobs. It also examines patterns of urban governance before and after the British occupation (1882), as an unstable and unemployed population posed a number of challenges for the authorities responsible for policing the area. With the creation of customs and coastguard posts and the establishment of a quarantine, Port Said became the site of “multiple forms of control and regulation, as well as the site of intense conflicts” (p. 152). Indeed, the chapter shows the extent to which the control of this mobile population, often engaged in illegal activities, gave rise to conflicts between the police, local government, the *Compagnie's* leaders and consular officials, leading to often ineffective measures to control and restrict migration. Carminati argues that one of the reasons of the difficulties in establishing order was the multiplicity of legislations that coexisted in the country as an effect of the Capitulations. In this sense, this chapter reflects on the continuities of models of governance, with the British occupation of Egypt (1882) representing, according to the author, a “moment of transition” (p. 115) rather than a turning point.

Chapter 4 looks at the leisure activities available to this migrant society (casinos, brothels, drinking establishments, etc.) and analyses how these places did not only help to define social, religious and ethnic boundaries, but also became sites for performances of masculinity and gender-based definitions of respectability. Varying the scale of analysis, this chapter portrays Port Said as a terminal for the global flow of goods and people, maps out the locations of brothels and other leisure activities, and zooms in on drinking establishments. According to Carminati, this ground-level perspective allows us to examine how individuals both contributed to forging and transgressing groups’ boundaries (p. 157). Whereas reading, publishing activities, and festivities, were mainly organised along national and religious lines, alcohol con-

sumption emerged as a mixed activity where individuals from different backgrounds interacted. The chapter then focuses on prostitution. After 1860, Port Said became “a promising new fairground for prostitution” (p. 185), linking the city to the regional, national and global trajectories of sex work. Closely monitored, these activities contributed to the city’s bad reputation, which nevertheless continued to develop and attract migrant workers.

Throughout the four chapters, and focusing on the everyday life of migrant workers, Carminati describes ‘unevenness and inequality’ as the two central features of Port Said’s migrant society. A focus on residential and educational strategies could have shed further light on this central topic. Similarly, a closer examination of linguistic practices and workplace interactions might have highlighted forms of collaboration and competition on the ground as shown by Angelos Dalachanis’s recent work on Italian and Greek workers at the *Compagnie du Canal* (2022). These few remarks in no way detract from the quality of this excellent book, which makes an essential contribution to the history of modern Egypt. With its emphasis on ground-level analysis, it offers a new perspective on the major processes that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century: increased domestic mobility and immigration, urbanization, transformation of urban governance and growing foreign influence. *Seeking Bread and Fortune in Port Said* will undoubtedly be of interest not only to historians of Egypt, Mediterranean migration and specialists in late Ottoman port cities, but also to scholars of global history.

References

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