

Brokering the Orient. Towards an entangled history of Belgian diplomacy in Egypt between 1830-1914

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Pyramids & Progress

Belgian expansionism and the making of Egyptology, 1830-1952

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In loving memory of Nourhan Nassar.

Long before international long-haul flights dropped off tourists at Cairo International Airport or one of the coastal resorts on the Red Sea, travellers to nineteenth-century Egypt usually reached the country by boat through the port of Alexandria. During their stay, the *Place des Consuls* was a popular landmark frequented by most of the foreign visitors. As the name suggests, this square was the epicentre of diplomacy in the city as it concentrated the diplomatic missions of most of the western countries for decades. Equally central as the position of this square, was the role of the foreign diplomats after which it was named. During the long nineteenth century, all sorts of actors in the world of diplomacy forged connections between the country they represented, other western subjects in Egypt, a wide variety of Levantine actors, and their Egyptian hosts. Whether it were envoys, consuls, attachés or translators, they all played a role in brokering relations between business, political, cultural and scientific elites.

Despite the presence of dozens of Belgian diplomats in Egypt between the independence of Belgium in 1830 and the First World War, most of the literature has so far only ventured into either the diplomats of major imperialist powers or the antiquarian interests of the Belgian representatives. This literature review will show how a systematic and in-depth analysis of the intermediary role played by Belgian diplomats will provide a new take on both international and intercultural relations in Egypt during the long nineteenth century and the history of Belgian expansionism.¹ Through the assessment of the existing literature and current trends in the disciplinary history of Egyptology, Belgian colonial history and the cultural history of diplomacy, I will integrate the common grounds of these perspectives into one historiographic foundation with the application of an *entangled history*-approach.

On the one hand, the embedment of the diplomats into the historiography of Egyptological practice allows us to have a look at their involvement in a wide range of activities with a cultural character. One can look at the sphere of Egyptological interest as a place of contention between the imperialist powers in Egypt, as a meeting ground for both national and transnational imperial elites, and as an instrument for imperialist purposes.² On the other hand, the literature about the history of Belgian expansionism in Egypt allows an analysis of the diplomatic and political role of the Belgian diplomats. Thanks to this two-fold approach, the artificial divide between the diplomats as either cultural or political actors will be put to the test and I will argue how an analysis of diplomats through the lens of cultural brokerage offers a more integrated look at these versatile and flexible actors.

Beyond Capart. New perspectives on the history of Belgian Egyptology

A first strand of literature which looks at the role played by diplomats in the social-cultural life of nineteenth-century Egypt is the historiography of Egyptology. Before diplomats entered the scope of scholars of Egyptological history however, the field had to go through a series of evolutions. Until recently, the historiography of Egyptology focussed on highly attractive episodes and actors such as the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb by Howard Carter, the Napoleonic Egyptian Expedition, or the debates labelling either Jean-Francois Champollion or Thomas Young as the true first decipherer of hieroglyphs still resonate, especially to outsiders.³ The appearance of the biographical dictionary *Who Was Who in Egyptology* – first published in 1951 and recently updated with a fifth edition – contributed to this tendency.⁴ In its slipstream, national perspectives on the history of Egyptology in for example the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany were published as well.⁵ To conclude, this first wave of interest into the history of Egyptology was came to an end with the publication of a whole list of studies venturing into the phenomenon of Egyptomania. Notably Dirk Syndram, Jean-Marcel Humbert, and James Stevens Curl have proven to be influential.⁶

Thompson's *Wonderful Things. A History of Egyptology*-trilogy can arguably be seen as the culmination of the aforementioned tradition.⁷ While some have called it a 'rare treasure of Egyptology and historiography', others have criticised it for being a flawed chronological overview of the respective national schools and their leading intellectuals.⁸ Despite its flaws it should certainly be credited for creating a more clear narrative and addressing a larger audience. However, one must look beyond these publications to get a grasp of Egyptological history and look at lesser-known or more creative accounts of Egyptological history by, for example, Thomas Gertzen. Not only did he write a more systematic disciplinary history of Egyptology, he also published original sources in his *Einführung in die Wissenschaftsgeschichte der Ägyptologie*. In accordance with Gertzen, the idea that it is time to turn away from the idea that the essence of Egyptology can be understood by focusing on the most notable scholars by biographical study has gained ground.⁹

Along these lines, one of the most influential scholars responsible for a revitalisation of the scholarship on the history of Egyptology is without doubt Donald Malcolm Reid.¹⁰ With his diptych *Whose Pharaohs?* and *Contesting Antiquity*, he has set two of the foremost examples to everyone who wants to connect the histories of Egyptology, political history, cultural history and the history of national identity.¹¹ At the same time, Arabist Elliot Colla too attempted to avoid nationalist interpretations by writing a perceptive view on Egyptology through the combined lenses of science and empire.¹² For Colla, supposedly non-scientific influences surrounding the field such as esotery or the commercial exploitation of Egyptology should be taken into account as well.¹³ William Carruthers' edited volume *Histories of Egyptology*, which draws heavily on Colla's ideas, and Stolz's comprehensive *The Lighthouse and the Observatory: Islam, Science, and Empire in Late Ottoman* on the interplay of religion, science and politics are important points of reference which emphasise the persistent need for these kind of approaches.¹⁴

At the same time, the view on the actors which were involved in the making and practice of archaeology and Egyptology has broadened significantly. Stephen Quirke and Wendy Doyon are credited for highlighting the contribution of Egyptian labour forces to the discipline.¹⁵ Countering the persisting androcentrist narratives, others have reclaimed a place for forgotten female Egyptologists.¹⁶ Moreover, studies on the links between general imperialist, national imperialist or

even national-socialist ideology and Egyptology can serve as points of reference in the study of the involvement of diplomatic actors.¹⁷ Especially Eric Gady's monumental study on Egyptology as part of the French political-diplomatic presence in Egypt is a prime example of this approach.¹⁸ A combination of the abovementioned tendencies can help us to arrive at a deeper understanding of the intertwined play of *Science and Empire* on the Egyptian scene.¹⁹

In Belgium, research on the history of Egyptology has recently crystallised in the inter-institutional *Pyramids & Progress* project funded by the intercommunal EOS-programme of FWO and F.R.S-F.N.R.S.. Drawing on an extensive analysis of unpublished and so far unexplored archival sources, this consortium aims at embedding the history of Egyptology in Belgium in the history of Belgian expansionism.²⁰ So far, Eugène Warmenbol, Marie-Cécile Bruwier and Jean-Michel Bruffaerts have done seminal work for this revitalisation of Belgian Egyptological history.²¹ With his essay-based history of Belgian Egyptology and Egyptomania, Warmenbol elaborated the connections between the Belgian fascination in Egypt and freemasonry, the amateurish character of Belgian Egyptology in the nineteenth century, and the lack of institutional and academic support for the subject.²² Bruwier on her part has written on themes such as collection building at the *Musée Royal de Mariemont* and the connections between the Walloon industrial elite and Egyptology.²³ Last but not least, Bruffaerts has written a wide range of publications on the life and works of 'the father of Belgian Egyptology' Jean Capart.²⁴ In the works of Warmenbol, Bruwier, Bruffaerts, but also in the overview *Ceci n'est pas une pyramide*, diplomats were only assessed as second-tier actors.²⁵



Traditional views on Belgian Egyptology in a nutshell. Made by artist Mark Severin in 1941, this work of art portrays Jean Capart as a local chief running towards Nekhbet, main deity of the site of Elkab which has been under study by Belgian Egyptologists since 1937, and Tutankhamun. (© Art and History Museum Brussels)

First of all, the scholarship on Egyptological history is an important stepping stone to look at the cultural activities of the diplomats and their connection with all sorts of actors related to the

making of Egyptology. Throughout the nineteenth century, foreign diplomats in Egypt contributed to the formation of all sorts of scientific societies, cultural institutions such as museums, or they served as intermediates between the different parties involved. Secondly, the attention for diplomats in the history of Egyptology helps to transcend two of the main dynamics in the current historiography of Belgian Egyptology: the attention for Jean Capart and the focus on artefacts in Belgian collections.²⁶ Belgian Egyptological history can thus transcend the limits of its internal approach, while historians of science and empire will be able to strengthen their analyses with the insights provided by the historians and Egyptologists ‘from the inside’. The story of how diplomats contributed to the formation of Egyptology is an important common ground in this regard.

Coburgs & Co

While it is clear that the histories of Leopold II’s Congo Free State and those of Belgian Congo can be categorised as colonial history, it is much harder to label Belgium’s presence elsewhere in the same era. Despite a whole list of attempts to gain colonies on almost every continent throughout the nineteenth century, the only territories where Belgium installed its “colonial” rule were Congo – a colony in the true sense of the word since the upheaval of the Free State in 1908 – and Rwanda and Burundi, a B-class mandate awarded to Belgium by the League of Nations under the name Ruanda-Urundi in 1922. While one should always be aware of the heterogeneous character of Belgium’s other foreign endeavours in the age of empire, the term expansionism is the most fitting to describe the amalgam of industrialist investments, commercial presence, diplomatic intervention. Although it mainly focusses on the enlargement of Belgian economy towards non-European markets such as China, Central Asia, South America and Egypt, it can take several forms. In Vandersmissen’s definition the term expansionism also covers the ‘export of industrial goods; the conquest of natural resources; the creation of networks of influence; the establishment of trading posts and multinational corporations; but also the export of a political and scientific model and the formation and training of foreign elites’.²⁷ This does not imply however that within the broad array of people who contributed to Belgium’s colonial expansion and belonged to what Vincent Viaene has called the “colonial party”, imperialist ideas were completely absent.²⁸ Nor does it want to deny the context of imperial struggle between the French and British colonial empires over Egypt and the contribution of Belgium’s expansionism to this instability.

In contrast with the United Kingdom and especially France, in Belgium the Egyptian case has received only limited attention from historians of international relations. Most of the histories of Belgium's nineteenth century relations with areas outside of Europe have been written from the perspective of colonial history. Especially Jean Stengers has done seminal work in earning a place for the work on Leopold II's imperialism in both the Belgian historiography as well as international comparative research.²⁹ Despite this rather unsurprising focus on the Belgian colonial expansion into Central-Africa, historians such as Albert Duchesne, Emile Vandewoude, Ginette Kurgan-Van Hentenryck, Eddy Stols and more recently Jan Vandersmissen, Jan Anckaer and Houssein Alloul have successfully been able to integrate the histories of pre-Leopold II and non-Congolese expansion into the narrative.³⁰ Thanks to them, a more holistic interpretation of the global character of Belgian diplomatic, industrial and commercial presence has been able to gain ground. Especially Anckaer's study on the diplomatic relations between Belgium and the Ottoman Empire during Leopold I's reign can help to grasp the world in which Belgian diplomats in Egypt worked.³¹ Together with the publications on Belgian expansionism in Egypt which have been written at for example the Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences, these works are the historiographic backbone on which an analysis of Belgian diplomatic presence in Egypt can rely.³²

In order to understand the responsibilities the diplomats had, the challenges they faced, the legitimacy on which their presence was based and the contexts in which they operated, the historiography of Belgian foreign affairs is an important guide as well. With regard to foreign policy, the first and foremost paradigm was Belgium's neutrality which was rooted in the European post-Napoleonic geopolitical balance of power. Nonetheless, one notices an active and opportunistic interpretation of this line of conduct on the imperial scene. As Maartje Abbenhuis has argued, we should challenge popular views on neutrality as a synonym for passivity.³³ International politics in nineteenth century Egypt surely offered a context which put the Belgian neutrality to the test. One can question for example Belgium's stance towards Egypt's initiatives to gain independence from the Ottoman Empire, the rivalry between France and the United Kingdom to gain control over the country, but also the spill-over of the late nineteenth-century troubles in Sudan to Belgian Congo. Martin Kroger's *Der ägyptische Knüppel: die Rolle der "ägyptischen Frage" in der deutschen Aussenpolitik von 1875/6 bis zur "Entente cordiale"* who posed similar questions about the role of Egypt in belle époque German foreign policy must be seen as an important example in this regard.³⁴

Notwithstanding the new insights an analysis of Belgian diplomats in Egypt can bring to our understanding of Belgian international relations in the nineteenth century, the main ambition is to unravel the intermediary role the diplomats played. As such it aligns with a whole strand of studies looking at the transformation of the role and milieu of diplomats against processes of globalisation and internationalisation.³⁵ A dive into 'the diplomats' world', as Markus Mösslang and Torsten Riotte called it, can teach us more about the day to day realities the diplomats faced, the variety of tasks they had, their non-official and private enterprises, etc.³⁶ This kind of research on diplomatic culture and the diplomatic corps as a socio-professional group has entered Belgian historiography through the work of Michael Auwers and several others.³⁷ Whereas we used to have a quite anecdotic and (auto-)biographic image of the cultural history of Belgian diplomacy, thanks to this kind of publications we now have a more systematic view on this subject.

However, so far most of these studies have written these cultural histories of Belgian diplomacy from a 'Belgian' or 'metropolitan' perspective. The degree to which diplomacy was

linked with Belgian nobility, the history of the foreign affairs office in Brussels, the existence of factions within the Belgian corps have been studied in this context.³⁸ This has resulted in a diffusionist interpretation which has not sufficiently recognised the reliance of Belgian diplomacy on local elites, the integration of non-Belgian agents into the corps and the way Belgian diplomacy rode on the tails of already existing networks. Taking into account for example the social background of the Belgian diplomats in Egypt, their professional networks and how they were a part of the foreign diplomatic corps which was hosted in Egypt, one can get a better view on how they interacted with all the actors surrounding them.

Disentangling the cultural history of Belgian diplomacy

The real challenge in writing a history of Belgian diplomatic presence in Egypt is to find a way to present the complex day to day realities these actors faced, their very different backgrounds and careers, and the heterogeneous character of this corps. Entangled history, a field which is based on Fernand Braudel's *longue durée* perception of time, which has become a central feature of the *Annales*-school, offers a solid foundation to reimagine diplomacy with an analysis of the field's entanglements with other societal forces at play. Whereas in the past historians with similar ideas have drawn their inspiration from *Transfergeschichte* or Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmerman's *histoire croisée*, entangled history stands out because of its attention for "mutual influencing, reciprocal or asymmetric perceptions, and intertwined processes".³⁹ The criticism of postcolonial thinkers such as Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Walter Dignolo and Dipesh Chakrabarty on the lack of subaltern voices and the distorting effect of western hegemonic discourse has in its turn given a better insight into the colonial and postcolonial entanglements in world history.⁴⁰

As *The Brokered World: Go-betweens and Global Intelligence, 1770-1820* by Simon Schaffer, Lissa Roberts, Kapil Raj, and James Delbourgo has showed, a fruitful way to look at the formation of these entanglements is to look at the role of what they called go-betweens. Defining a go-between as 'not just a passer-by or a simple agent of cross-cultural diffusion, but someone who articulates relationships between disparate worlds or cultures by being able to translate between them', diplomats are most eligible to be seen as go-betweens who brokered relations. So far, most of the publications which have looked at diplomatic go-betweens have focussed on early modern diplomacy.⁴¹ However, as Jürgen Osterhammels has made clear in *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, the nineteenth century too was an era during which the world got intensively more interconnected.⁴² Against this backdrop the French and British empires professionalised their diplomatic representation and newly found nation-states such as Germany, Italy and Belgium assembled or created their diplomatic corps.

From a theoretical point of view too, entangled history is a suitable point of view to look at the Belgian diplomatic presence in Egypt. Being the most important feature of entangled history, the attentions for the relational entwinements can unravel the ties between Belgian diplomats in Egypt and the khedivial government, all sorts of Belgian investors, other diplomatic corps, the economic-financial apparatus, foreign diasporas, etc. As this variety of relations suggests, the relational approach of entangled history demands a holistic heuristic exploration of the available source material. Two of the main concepts which go hand in hand in this regard are 'reflexivity' and 'pragmatic induction'. Rather than applying theories or models, entangled history pleads to envision a 'world in which social and political entities are not simply monolithic and self-sufficient, but invented and constructed, ever-changing through a great multitude of interactions,

relationships, and processes of exchange.’⁴³ According to Werner and Zimmerman the reflexive ‘pragmatic induction leads to a readjustment of the principles and the logic of the inquiry while it is being conducted’.⁴⁴

If you look into the history of Belgian diplomats in Egypt those kinds of reflections sound oddly familiar. To what degree can someone like Etienne Zizinia, for example, be considered as ‘Belgian’? He was born in current day Greece on the isle of Chios, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire, he fled to Marseille in France and he went to Egypt which was formally part of the Ottoman Empire, but tried to gain independence at the same time. Although he most certainly was one of the most influential members of the Belgian diplomatic corps in nineteenth century Egypt, one can surely question his ‘Belgianness’.⁴⁵ In this context, one can surely question the diplomat’s attitudes towards the Egyptian past or the related processes of self-definition and othering shared amongst the Belgian diplomats.⁴⁶ The same applies to what can be defined as a diplomat. An inclusion of consuls into the scope already enlarges traditional views on diplomacy and gives a look at how these actors filled in the gap until Belgium appointed its envoy in 1883 in Cairo, but there are other actors which are much more difficult to classify.⁴⁷ Edgard Bérard, a Belgian oculist and physician at the European hospital of Alexandria was for example Belgium’s ‘consular representative at the Conseil Sanitaire, Maritime et Quarantenaire d’ Egypte’. Although he was not formally a part of Belgium’s diplomatic corps, his membership in this council can most certainly be described as ‘diplomatic’ in nature.



The Zizinia Palace on the Place des Consuls in Alexandria, home of the (in)famous Chios-born Zizinia clan, before the Bombardment of 1882. Gustave Le Gray, 'Palais Zizinia [Alexandrie]', 1862. Both Stephanos (Étienne) Zizinia as well as his son Ménandre Zizinia acted as consuls for Belgium and were renowned for their archaeological appetite. (© Bibliothèque nationale de France, <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb42468815v>)



The Zizinia Palace on the Place des Consuls in Alexandria after the Bombardment of 1882. L. Fiorillo, 'Le Palais de M. le Comte Zizinia (ruines)', 1882. (© DigitaltMuseum, <https://digitaltmuseum.se/011015260730/le-palais-de-m-le-comte-zizinia-ruines-detta-fotografi-nr-22-ingar-i-en>)

The entanglements of Belgian diplomats in Egypt is also visible when one looks at the different contexts in which they operated, the motivations behind their appointment and the relations they had. Mustafa Aga Ayad, a south-Egyptian former slave trader who was consul for Russia, the United Kingdom and Belgium must be on his turn addressed from a whole other perspective. Since he was a member of one of Luxor's most notorious clans of antiquity traders, he must be contextualised with the work of Fredrik Hagen and Kim Ryholt on antiquity trade in Egypt between 1880 and 1930.⁴⁸ Other representatives of Belgium had nothing to do with neither the belle époque world of Alexandria, nor the touristic hotspot of Luxor. Noel Henry Beyts', a rather unknown consul for Belgium in Suez between 1890 and 1905, has to be seen as an actor who was deeply rooted in the Red Sea transport sector. As an agent for Port Saïd and Suez Coal Company and general agent for the Khedivial Mail Line, his appointment demands to be analysed with Valeska Huber's *_Channeling Mobilitie_s* on mobility in and around the Suez Canal.



*Mustapha Agha Ayad, an Egyptian ‘Jack of all trades’ and consul for Belgium in Luxor from the 1870s until the beginning of the 1880s. He can be seen seated alongside his family in front of the colonnade of Amenhotep III in the temple of Luxor amidst which he would later construct his house. Serving simultaneously as consul for Russia, the United Kingdom and Belgium, Agha Ayad was a notorious actor in the world of nineteenth century Egyptian diplomacy and Egyptology. (© British Library Board; Sylvie Weens, ‘Mustapha Agha Ayad’s House inside Luxor Temple: Providing a Timeline for Its Photographic Record (Pl. XLII-XLVII)’, *Memnonia*, 27 (2016): 135–147.)*

Conclusion

For too long, scholarship on diplomacy has tried to look at their subjects from perspectives which were ought to give a clear-cut look at the life and work of diplomats. This approach has however resulted in an unrealistic view on what Belgian diplomacy in Egypt really looked like. An entangled history approach however, allows to look at the Belgian diplomatic corps in a way that respects the heterogeneous character of their activities. Whereas previous developments in the history of Egyptology have brought the role Belgian diplomats played in the creation of the discipline into general attention, these studies so far failed to give an encompassing view on these actors. The same applies to the historiography of Belgian colonial expansion in which Belgian diplomats in Egypt have mostly been addressed as actors who either forged diplomatic connections between Belgium and the Egyptian government or facilitated the economic penetration of the country by Belgian entrepreneurs. Since the emergence of Egyptology and Belgian expansionism in Egypt were mutually intertwined, an in-depth analysis of the Belgian diplomatic corps as an intertwining force can result in a better and non-monolithic view of both phenomena.

Thanks to this approach, it is possible to fully cover all aspects of their role and respect the heterogeneous and continuously changing character of their activities. One can for example bring together the research on the links between the Walloon industrialists and Egyptology on the one hand with an analysis of the contribution of Belgians to the creation of cultural institutions of late nineteenth century Egypt. An entangled history of the Belgian diplomatic corps in Egypt can merge the knowledge we already have and create a better understanding of the role diplomats played as cultural brokers forging ties between science, industry, politics, commerce, etc. In the long run this kind of research can contribute to a more global and encompassing view at Belgian nineteenth century expansionism or the expansionist factor in the history of Belgian humanities.

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Références

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