

International Symposium

Pyramids and Progress

Perspectives on the Entanglement of
Imperialisms and Early Egyptology (1800–1950)

**Call for
Abstracts**
March 1, 2021

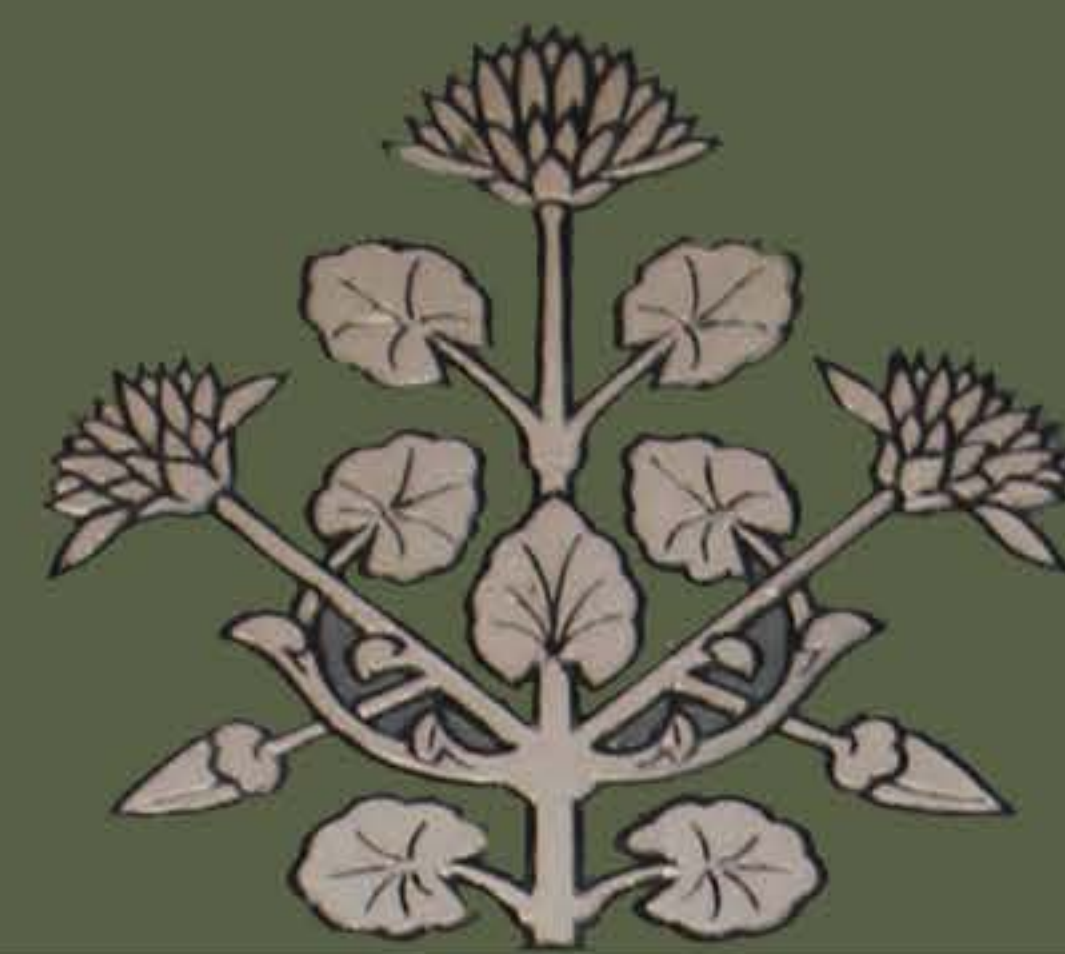
8–10 November 2021
Brussels, Belgium



Old Post Office, Korenmarkt, Ghent. Sgraffito by Prosper Cornelis (1913)

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The emergence of the discipline of Egyptology, traditionally set in 1822 when Champollion deciphered the Rosetta Stone, is intrinsically linked with nineteenth-century imperialist endeavours culminating in the formal British protectorate of Egypt. This foreign dominance only came to an end after the 1952 revolution. The discovery of the Rosetta Stone was itself the result of the Napoleonic campaign to Egypt, which effectively reflects the confrontation between French, British, and Ottoman imperialist aspirations.

The role of imperialistic competition in the development of Egyptology as a discipline is still poorly understood. At the same time, while many modern historians working on global imperialisms have a keen interest in Egypt, Egyptology is hardly prominent in their work. However, the degree to which imperialistic strive went hand in hand with an interest in and exploitation of the pharaonic past, is reflected in books like John Ward's *Pyramids and Progress* (London, 1900), which deals with how the generosity of the British empire restored Egypt to the glory of its pharaonic past by technological innovation.

At a time when the European and American elites surrounded themselves with Empire style furniture, collected Egyptian antiquities, or travelled to Egypt to admire its monuments, a natural interest emerged in fostering political, diplomatic and commercial involvement in the land on the Nile. The imperialist competition between Britain, France, and Germany expressed itself, among other things, in the creation of colossal museum collections and of the first academic chairs in Egyptology. This tendency was by no means an exclusively Western phenomenon: the Ottoman pashas and khedives also aspired to create a national museum collection and to protect Egypt's heritage. Later the grandeur of ancient Egypt also became a point of inspiration for Egyptian nationalists. It is pre-eminently a period of political transformations, with both vanishing empires (Austria-Hungary, Ottoman Empire) and emerging ones (USA). Smaller nations played their own role on this big international stage, such as Belgium with its expansionist policies which led to a proportionally strong foot on the ground in Egypt during the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.

Imperialism in this period is an ambiguous and dynamic concept that manifested itself in many ways: from formal and informal imperialisms with military, political and diplomatic components to various kinds of commercial and industrial expansion. The ways in which imperialistic aspirations expressed by both western powers (Europe and USA) and empires in the eastern Mediterranean (Ottoman Empire and Egypt) were entangled with the scholarly ambitions of intellectuals interested in ancient Egypt form the topic of this symposium to be held in Brussels, Belgium, on 8–10 November 2021 (the Palace of the Academies and the Royal Museums of Art and History).

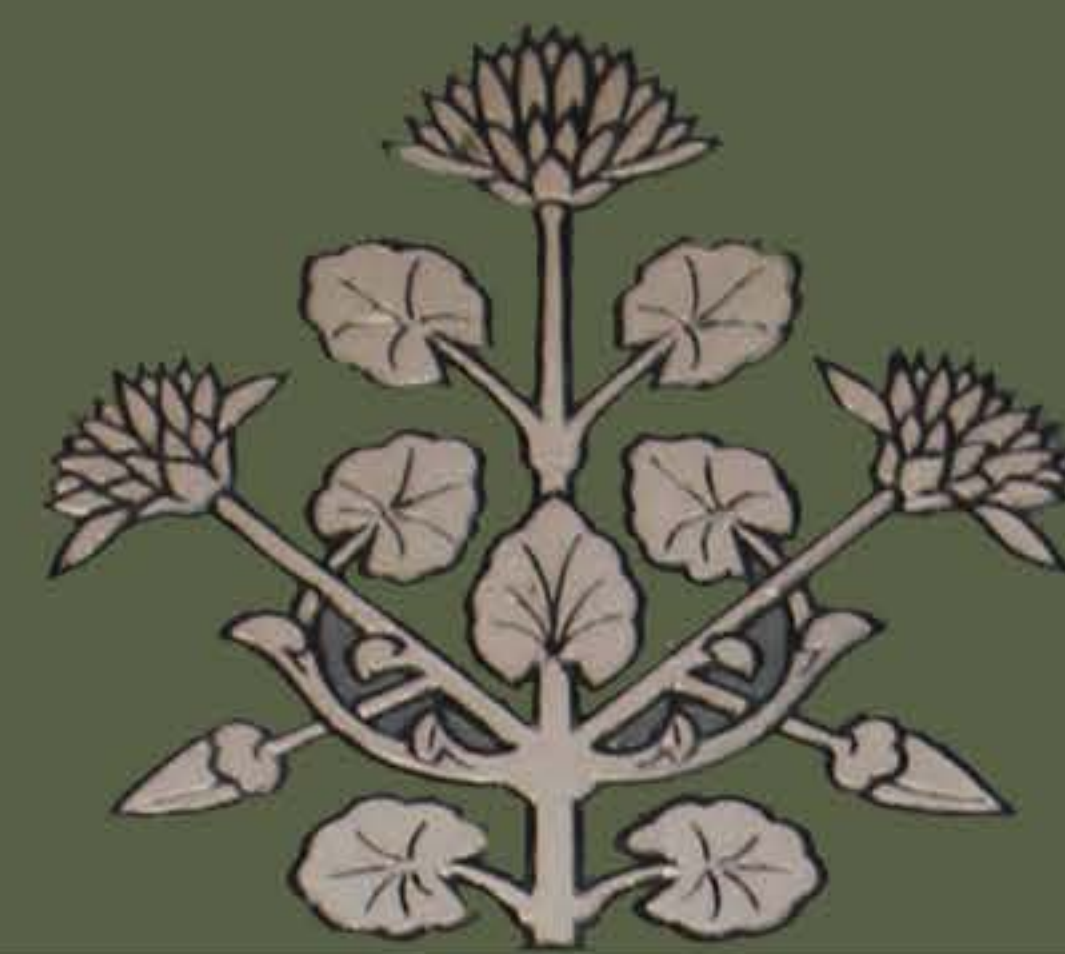


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Four angles will be used to focus on the debate: structures, actors, networks and discourses.

Structures include government agencies, the diplomatic corps, banks, commerce and industry, political organisations, scientific institutes and museums. The interaction between the Ottoman Porte and the Egyptian viceroys representing him on the one hand, and western stakeholders on the other is of paramount importance. Exchanges, mutual reinforcements, but also tensions and conflicts within and between structures are relevant issues.

Individual **actors** functioned within this framework, but also helped to shape it, and in many cases they exerted their influence in different domains. An example is Lord Cromer, the British Consul-General under whose tenure the first Aswan dam was built, but who also was among the founding fathers of the Archaeological Survey of Nubia, which aimed to document the threatened monuments in that part of the Nile Valley.

To understand the functioning of these structures and actors, and the **networks** in which they operated, it is vital to study the **discourse** of the time. Here, political, economic, religious, and scholarly discourses are deeply intertwined. For instance, the positivist emphasis on 'progress' could express itself in terms of economic, technological, and moral development, but also in terms of an expected evolution of human culture.

This symposium on the eve of the 200th anniversary of the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs aims to cast wide open the discussion between modern historians and Egyptologists, and to take stock of two centuries of political, economic, and scientific entanglement in Egypt. It is organised by the EOS project 'Pyramids and Progress: Belgian Expansionism and the Making of Egyptology 1830–1952', a collaboration between egyptologists and historians of KU Leuven, UGent, ULB, the Royal Museum of Mariemont, and the Royal Museums of Arts and History.

Call for papers

The organisers invite proposals for contributions by **1 March 2021** (papers, poster presentations), to be sent to **pyramidsandprogress@gmail.com**. The proposals should include a title and abstract (max. 250 words). Given the limit of papers that can be accepted into the conference programme, a final selection will be made by late March.

A peer-reviewed proceedings volume will be published in the series *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* (Peeters Publishers, Leuven).

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Confirmed keynote speakers

Donald Malcolm Reid (Georgia State University USA)

Hana Navrátilová (University of Reading, UK)

Floris Solleveld (KU Leuven, Belgium)