



Yoav Di-Capua. *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. xv + 389 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-25732-0; \$36.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-25733-7.



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Published on H-HistGeog (November, 2011)

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What is Modern Egypt? The Politics of Historiography

The *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past* is a thorough study of modern Egyptian historiography that constructs the Arab past through an Egyptian lens. Neither the Pharaonic nor the Greek and Roman periods are highlighted as markers of a specific Egyptian identity. Likewise, the early history of Islam, when Egypt was conquered, the Fatimid, Mamluk, and Ottoman rule before the Napoleonic “expedition” in 1798 are spared out. The past, it seems, starts with the “house” of Muhammad Ali, which ruled Egypt from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the “revolution” of 1952.

Yoav Di-Capua is not interested in studying the conceptualization of Egypt’s remote past by its historiographers. Others have done this already, he claims: “The story of how modern Egyptian nationalism utilized Egypt’s many pasts (Pharaonic, Greco-Roman, Arab, Islamic) has been told often and well.” Rather, he sets out to “turn to a systematic investigation of the means by which Egyptians made sense of their modern past” (p. 5). The leading question of his research concerns the direct interconnectedness between politics, the state, the nation,

nationalism, and identity as they are cast into different historiographical molds, concepts, and visions. In this respect, the study sometimes blurs the fact that the focus on the history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a heuristic tool for Di-Capua rather than a realistic description of Egyptian historiography. Historiography is seen as part of the national project, and therefore national history. “Urabi and the national uprising, Lord Cromer and anticolonial nationalism, and Saâd Zaghlul and the national party play a prominent role, as historical figures and historiographers joined forces to achieve Egypt’s independence.

The book is about the history of a modern national historiography in and about Egypt which started, roughly, in the 1920s; took most of its methods and goals from European national history; and has remained there ever since, even when European historiography took a different path and was influenced by the succession of (linguistic, cultural, and postcolonial) “turns” (p. 338). The focus of the research, however, is not on the very recent developments, but on the 1920s to the 1960s, nearly

fifty years in which Egypt experimented with a constitutional monarchy, a parliamentary system, political diversity, secular-religious competition, and anti- or post-colonial politics. A special emphasis lies on the distinction between modern and contemporary history (*tarikḥ muâasir*), which, in the 1940s, became prey to âpartisan historiography,â both nationalist and Marxist (p. 220).

Di-Capua uses a chronological order for his history of modern Egyptian historiography, starting in the 1890s and moving to the year 2000. The subjects of his chapters vary, however: Some deal with historiography proper, while others focus on the royal archives (chap. 3), a certain school of historiography (chap. 5), or the âofficialâ hegemony over historiography (chap. 8). As already mentioned, the agents of history and historiography tend to merge. Therefore, it is not always easy to tell for all issues whether he is dealing with history or with historiography. Di-Capua is aware of this fact and tries to counterbalance one with the other. For example, he writes: âAt the basis of this ... account lies the understanding that a work on historiography must also engage with the actual contents of history books and not merely with the surrounding circumstances of their creationâ (p. 150).

This is, in short, a book on historiography and history alike, which turns its attention to otherwise overlooked discussions on nation, nationalism, and national representation. In my view, it succeeds in establishing a close link between historical events, political agents, reflection on sources, methodological considerations, and history

writing, particularly with regard to the turbulent 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. The aspirations of the different parties, namely, âroyalâ versus ânationalâ history (with its main protagonists Muhammad Shafiq Ghurbal on the one hand and âAbd al-Rahman al-Rafiâi on the other), are clearly set apart. This is also true for other individuals, groups, and ideologies. What is lacking, however, is a thorough appreciation of those inside the political-ideological who, at the same time, are outside or at the margins of the historiographical battlefield, namely, the Muslim Brothers. From a historical point of view, they are clearly under-represented, as they were not very much concerned with the secular history of Egypt.

Sometimes, Di-Capua capitulates before his own detailed account and cannot see the wood for the trees anymore. For example, he mentions two books of âAbd al-Khaliq Lashin and âAbd al-âAziz Ramadan from around the year 1975 and adds: âFollowing the publication of these books, Gamal Abd al-Nasser died, the revolution ended, and Anwar al-Sadatâs regime eventually forced Lashin to flee the countryâ (pp. 233-234). In 1975, in fact, Nasser and the politics of his regime were already dead, and the features of Sadatâs rule had become clear enough. In spite of such a lapse, the meticulous elaboration of the process of history making via history writing makes for instructive reading. After having finished the study, one is inclined to think that Egyptian historiography would certainly benefit from being exempted from such an important historical role.

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Citation: Susanne Enderwitz. Review of Di-Capua, Yoav, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt*. H-HistGeog, H-Net Reviews. November, 2011.

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