Abstract

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Enframing Cairo Through Its Maps: A Critical Reading of Maps of the City from Napoleon’s Atlas to the Early 20th Century

There is a general assumption among critical geographers and historian that making of the modern state in the late 18th century to the early 20th century went hand in hand with the development of objective and precise mapmaking tools and techniques. Maps emerged as rationalizing tools of control and appropriation of land and resources, their spread is usually correlated to the increased rationalization of bureaucracies of the early modern state. The goal of this paper is to (1) test the validity of this argument in the case the making of the modern state of Egypt by looking at the maps of its capital Cairo, and (2) explore how the Cairo was cartographically represented in the late 19th century to the early 20th century to construct multiple realities that served the interest of the modern state. The study critically rereads three sets of maps that were created in the context of the birth of the Modern State of Egypt: the maps of Cairo charted by the French Expedition (1798-1800), the map of Grand Bey under Khedive Ismail (1874), and finally the maps of the Comite de Conservation des Monuments de l’Art Arabe (1924). The maps are situated within the social and political context of their production to understand the purpose of their making, their integration within the bigger body of accumulated knowledge about the city, and their further implications on the city. Three main purposes were found behind these maps: a tool of documentation for colonial appropriation, a tool of planning, and a tool of defining and constructing modern typologies within the city.