

The Aspect of Water Supplies in the British Policy towards Egypt and Sudan: the Role of the Nile in Relations between Great Britain and France at the End of the 19th Century

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The goal of this article is to analyse the “blue thread” of the need to secure supplies of water for Egypt, which pervades the British imperial policy and also impacts international relations from the end of the 1880s, particularly in relation to France. This article works with Terje Tved's theory about the importance of the irrigation water for British interests in Egypt and about the motivation of British to invade Sudan when Egypt reached its water limits. Another problem which is discussed in this article is the possible role of Nile waters in the Fashoda Incident (1898) which is frequently considered as a symbol of British-French competition in North-East Africa and also the French plans on the Nile in general.

[Nile; Egyptian Irrigation; British Interests in Egypt; Egyptian Cotton; Fashoda Incident; Occupation of Sudan]

“When¹ eventually, the waters of the Nile, from the Lakes to the sea, are brought fully under control, it will be possible to boast that Man, in this case the Englishman, has turned the gifts of Nature to the best possible advantage.”² This observation by Evelyn Baring, British Consul General and Agent in Egypt during the 1883–1907 period, from his book *Modern Egypt*, indicates to what extent the British understood the Nile's

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² CROMER (E. BARING), *Modern Egypt*, Vol. 2, London 1908, p. 461.

important to Egypt and also the importance of the river's role in their concept of the empire.

Securing supplies of water for Egypt gradually became a key element of the British policy – but why and when did this occur? Were the ideas regarding utilisation of the enormous potential of the water in the Nile on one hand and the limits of its use in Egypt on the other hand one of the main reasons why the British occupied Sudan, as Norwegian historian and geographer Terje Tvedt states, to the contrary of the “mainstream” theory that this occupation was the result of British “concerns about borders” arising as a result of competition between European powers in the region?³

The goal of this article is to analyse the “blue thread” of the need to secure supplies of water for Egypt, which pervades the British imperial policy and also impacts international relations from the end of the 1880s, particularly in relation to France. The Fashoda Incident in 1898 is frequently considered a symbol of British-French competition in North-East Africa, but does this episode, written by an expedition led by ambitious Major Marchand also have a “water aspect”?

In the case of Egypt, water, as an irreplaceable material, was a key requirements for the survival of its population and the key to prosperity. At the end of the 19th century the Nile River also became a keystone of the imperial interests of Great Britain in Africa, and therefore also found itself the focus of attention in Paris. This article endeavours not to be, in the words of Terje Tvedt, “blind to water”,⁴ to consider the Nile an important element of policies and international relations and to utilise and process other types of material, such as technical, hydrological reports, projects, etc. to view British (and French) involvement in the Nile basin from an alternative viewpoint.

³ T. TVEDT, Hydrology and Empire: The Nile, Water Imperialism and the Partition of Africa, in: *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 39, 2, 2011, pp. 173–194. The “Blind to Water” mainstream historiography may be represented by the influential monograph about Victorian imperialism: R. ROBINSON – J. GALLAGHER, *Africa and the Victorians. The Official Mind of Imperialism*. London 1961.

⁴ T. TVEDT, *The Nile in the Age of the British, Political Ecology and the Quest for Economic Power*, London 2016, p. 20.

The Beginnings of the “Blue Thread” – the Roots of British Interest on the Nile

During the 19th century the British considered the Nile, and sufficient water in the river, to be important for several reasons. The first reason was their economic interest, chiefly in relation to production of high-quality long-staple cotton, which was increasingly becoming an irreplaceable raw material for the English textile industry.⁵ Another reason was support of the Egyptian economy, so that the country would be capable of repaying its loans to foreign creditors, particularly English banks. And finally, the British considered the overall stability of a country, which provided a connection to the “*jewel of the imperial crown*” – India – to be important. The importance of Egypt as a transit node increased after the Suez Canal was opened in 1869. All these reasons were closely related to the water in the Nile, assurance of which logically became a keystone in the British Empire’s policy towards Egypt and gradually de facto towards the basin of the longest African river.

British merchants had played first violin in Egypt since the first half of the 19th century. For example, 187 British ships docked in the harbour at Alexandria in 1845 transporting 46,220 tons of goods in a total value of £869,947, which is significantly more than French merchants managed (68 ships, 11,719 tons worth £364,898).⁶ Cotton gradually became export article number one. Muhammad Ali (1805–1849) started large-scale cotton production in Egypt. The beginnings of mechanisation and development of cotton production in Egypt was linked to British merchants from 1820 and their numbers increasingly dominated this sector.⁷

The textile industry in Lancashire in England was dependent on supplies of cotton. At the beginning of the 1860s 80 % of all cotton in

⁵ Long-staple cotton spread in Egypt after 1821 thanks to French textile engineer Louis Alexis Jumel. It replaced the previously widespread, but poorer quality short-staple cotton and also quickly replaced wheat as the most important Egyptian export crop.

⁶ The National Archives London-Kew (hereinafter TNA), Foreign Office (hereinafter FO) 881/44 – Stoddart to Palmerston, On Egypt and on the Policy of Great Britain in that Country, February 1847.

⁷ W. BEINART – L. HUGHES, *Environment and Empire*, Oxford 2007, p. 142; G. ALLEAUME, An Industrial Revolution in Agriculture? Some Observation on the Evolution of Rural Egypt in the Nineteenth Century, in: A. BOWMAN – E. ROGAN (eds.), *Agriculture in Egypt*, Oxford 1999, p. 341.

the warehouses of the local textile factories came from plantations in the southern states of the USA. After the Civil War erupted in 1861, this “cotton dependency” was revealed as very problematic, because the price of the raw material increased significantly as the conflict progressed. Egypt became one of the main alternative suppliers due to easy access and the high quality of local cotton.⁸ While 596,200 kantars of cotton were exported from Egypt in 1861, 721,052 kantars were exported a year later and 1,181,888 kantars were exported in 1863.⁹ With regard to British imports of Egyptian cotton, in 1861 Britain imported 365,108 kantars worth 1,546,898 pounds, a year later it imported 526,897 kantars worth 3,723,440 pounds and in 1863 a total of 835,289 kantars worth a total 8,841,557 pounds was imported. In subsequent years the volume of exported cotton remained above one million kantars and the price above 12 million pounds.¹⁰ The rising volume of exports resulted in increasing production, during the 1885–1889 period nearly 3 million kantars of cotton was produced on average per year, and during the last decade of the 19th century the average volume of production was 6 million kantars.¹¹ However, long-staple cotton (*Gossypium barbadense*) is a plant that requires regular and abundant moisture, so you could say that one end of the highly profitable cotton fibre stretching between Manchester and Cairo began in the waters of the Nile.

Under the rulers Abbas I. (1849–1854), Said (1854–1863) and Ismail (1863–1879) the Egyptian economy found itself in great difficulty thanks to a policy of enormous loans and credit. The creditors were frequently British banking houses, for instance in 1864 Khedive Ismail obtained a loan from the English banking house of *Fruhling & Goschen* in the value of 5,704,200 Egyptian Pounds and another loan in the sum of 3,000,000 Egyptian Pounds from the same bank two years

⁸ “kantar” – unit of weight; its size varied, 1 kantar is approximately equal to 50 kg; R. OWEN, *Cotton and Egyptian Economy 1820–1914. A Study in Trade and Development*, Oxford 1969, pp. 89–90; Ch. ISSAWI, *An Economic History of the Middle East and North Africa*, New York 1982, pp. 30–31.

⁹ A. E. CROUCHLEY, *The Economic Development of Modern Egypt*, London 1938, p. 263; BEINART – HUGHES, p. 142; J. VALKOUN, Egypt under Khedive Ismail, in: *Prague Papers on the History of International Relations*, 2, 2010, pp. 84–85.

¹⁰ OWEN, p. 90.

¹¹ R. OWEN, A Long Look at Nearly Two Centuries of Long Staple Cotton, in: A. BOWMAN – E. ROGAN (eds.), *Agriculture in Egypt*, Oxford 1999, p. 349.

later, in 1867 he obtained a loan of 11,890,000 Egyptian Pounds from the *English Bank of Oppenheim, Nephew & Co.* and a number of other private and public loans from other creditors.¹² George J. Goschen (1831–1907), a member of Russell’s government and the director of the *Bank of England*, whose authority the Khedive’s administration had the take into account, personally protected the interests of English holders of government bonds in Cairo in 1876.¹³ In 1882 Egypt’s foreign debt reached the sum of £100,000,000 with an annual debt service of £5,000,000, most of which ended up in Britain.¹⁴ In any case, it was in the interests of British creditors to support Egypt’s ability to repay its debts and this ability was dependent on water in the case of a country whose main economic sector was agriculture. The equation was simple, especially when the most lucrative export commodity was “thirsty” cotton and sugar cane: if there is no water – there will be no harvest, if there is no harvest – there will be nothing to repay the debts with.¹⁵

After control over Egypt was actually assumed following the Urabi Revolution in 1882, securing sources of water by sufficient use of the Nile became a key priority for the Brits. Reformation of the Egyptian irrigation system had been commenced with the participation of French experts during the rule of Muhammad Ali (1805–1849), but many projects had not been completed and others were damaged at the turn of the eighteen seventies and eighteen eighties. During the Urabi Revolution, Egyptian nationalists sabotaged a number of water works, because they realised their importance to the Khedive’s pro-European administration and to the economic interests of foreign powers.¹⁶ Henry Villiers Stuart (1827–1895), who carried out an

¹² A. C. TUNÇER, *Sovereign Debt and International Financial Control, The Middle East and the Balkan 1870–1914*, London 2015, p. 32. Other creditors included for example the Anglo-Egyptien Bank or the Imperial Ottoman Bank, in which British financiers had significant interest. More about Egyptian foreign loans: R. OWEN, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800–1914*, London 1993, p. 127; CROUCHLEY, pp. 119–120.

¹³ TNA, FO 407/9, Correspondence respecting the Finances of Egypt, 1877, Nos. 141, 142, 143, 144.

¹⁴ TVEDT, *The Nile in the Age*, p. 21; CROUCHLEY, p. 145.

¹⁵ The volume of exports of sugar cane could not compete with cotton, in spite of the fact that it became a sought-after export commodity, particularly at the end of the sixties.

¹⁶ TVEDT, *The Nile in the Age*, p. 20; N. SMITH, *A History of Dams*, London 1971, p. 188.

inspection trip through Lower and Upper Egypt, mentions the possibility of an “enormous increase in yields (of cotton) in the Delta, if irrigation is assured” in his report, he also believed that there was great potential in the event of sufficient irrigation of the area of Upper Egypt.¹⁷

At the initiative of Evelyn Baring, British Consul General and Agent in Egypt, royal engineers who had extensive experience from irrigation projects in India were invited to the country in order to reinforce the *Egyptian Irrigation Department and Works* operating under the *Ministry of Public Works*.¹⁸ These engineers, led by Colin Scott-Moncrieff (1836–1916), started systematic work on the Nile and the country’s irrigation system.¹⁹ One of the first issues that these British engineers had to deal with was the *Delta Barrage*, a non-functional project by Muhammad Ali dating from the eighteen thirties, which Frenchmen Maurice Linant de Bellefonds (1798–1883) and Eugène Mougel (1808 to 1890) were involved in. As a result of damming the Rosetta and Damietta branches of the Nile, this project should have raised the level of the river and therefore the level of the water in the canal system, which could have been made shallower as a result.²⁰ Partial modifications to the dam in 1884 contributed to increasing yields from the harvest (particularly cotton), and overall revitalisation of irrigation, the most important element of which was naturally repairs to the Barrage, contributed to an enormous increase in the area of usable soil, which led to the volume of cotton production doubling during the period from 1888 to 1892.²¹ In addition to renovation of the Barrage,

¹⁷ TNA, FO 633/49, Reports by Mr Villiers Stuart, M.P., respecting Reorganization in Egypt, 1883.

¹⁸ William Willcocks (1852–1932), Robert Hanbury Brown (1849–1926), Justin C. Ross, William Ried etc. For more detail see C. ANDERSEN, *British Engineers and Africa 1875–1914*, Cambridge 2011; E. SANDES, *The Royal Engineers in Egypt and the Sudan*, Chatham 1937.

¹⁹ Egypt was divided into 5 “district” for easier organisation for the purpose of maintenance and establishment of irrigation. The head of each district was the head engineer. TNA, FO 633/49 – Further Correspondence respecting Reorganization in Egypt, Dufferin to Granville, No. 43, February 1883.

²⁰ More about the Delta Barrage: J. MAZANEC, The Delta Barrage – the Most Expensive Bridge of Its Time? The First Attempts at Taming the Nile, in: *Prague Papers on the History of International Relations*, 2, 2017, pp. 21–31; R. H. BROWN, *History of The Barrage at The Head of Delta of Egypt*, Cairo 1896; R. H. BROWN, *The Delta Barrage of Lower Egypt*, Cairo 1902.

²¹ CROUCHLEY, p. 148; In 1879, i.e. before the barrage was repaired, cotton production

the Rosetta canal was also completed, the Ismail and Ibrahim canals were made deeper, several pumping stations were established, modifications were made at the Faiyum Oasis and tens of smaller projects were also realised.²² The British essentially realised that the wealth of Egypt is dependent on water and its irrigation system.²³

It may seem that the British held a monopoly over all the innovations in relation to the Nile in Egypt in the eighteen eighties, but this was not completely true. For instance in 1880 the Frenchman de la Motte proposed construction of a dam at a site called Gebel Silsila.²⁴ Two years later American Cope Whitehouse designed a dam at Wadi Rayan, which he vainly strove to have realised for several years – against the negative standpoint of the British-Egyptian administration.²⁵ A number of similar projects also existed “on paper”.²⁶

The turn of the eighteen eighties and eighteen nineties revealed several weak points in the British efforts on the Nile. The rising volume of profitable cotton production was paradoxically one of these weak points – in 1886 cotton was grown over 866,000 feddan, in 1893 this area increased to 966,000 feddan and a year later to nearly 1,100,000 feddan, which increased demands for irrigation at specific times of the year significantly.²⁷ Another concern for members of the British administration was the population boom – in 1873 there were 5.3 million people living in Egypt.²⁸ By 1882 the population had risen to 7.9 million and at the end of the century in 1897 there was a population of approximately 9.7 million living in Egypt.²⁹ The increasing number of

achieved 3,186,060 kantars, in 1884 this volume was 3,630,000 kantars, i.e., nearly half a million kantar more, OWEN, *Cotton and Egyptian Economy*, p. 197.

²² J. ROSS, *Report of the Administration of the Department of Irrigation for the year 1890*, Cairo 1891; J. ROSS, *Report of the Administration of the Department of Irrigation for the year 1889*, Cairo 1890; C. SCOTT-MONCRIEFF, *Irrigation Report for the year 1888*, Cairo 1889; SCOTT-MONCRIEFF, *Irrigation Report for the year 1887*, Cairo 1888.

²³ R. TIGNOR, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule in Egypt, 1882–1914*, Princeton 1966, p. 112.

²⁴ Central Archives Diplomatique du Nantes (hereinafter referred to as CADN), 353 PO – 2/273, Note relative au projet de Monsieur de la Motte.

²⁵ C. COOKSON-HILLS, *Engineering the Nile: Irrigation and the British Empire in Egypt, 1882–1914*, Ph.D. thesis, Queen’s University, Kingston 2013, pp. 255–266.

²⁶ TVEDT, *The Nile in the Age*, p. 22.

²⁷ OWEN, *The Middle East*, p. 218.

²⁸ Ministre de L’Intérieur, *Statistique de L’Égypte Année 1873*, Caire 1873, p. 13.

²⁹ OWEN, *The Middle East*, p. 217; J. WATERBURY, *Hydropolitics of The Nile Valley*, Syra-

people naturally required more water. The weak floods in 1888–1889, when the fields in some areas could not be irrigated at all, demonstrated the destructive power of drought, however, excessively powerful, uncontrollable flooding was just as dangerous.³⁰ At the beginning of the nineties the demand for water in Egypt slowly began to reach the limits of the available capacity and the gentlemen in Cairo and London were forced to consider what should be done next. With regard to the need to retain more and more water, it seemed that construction of more dams would be inevitable, the pressure of various groups of society and the circumstances could no longer be overlooked if the British wished to maintain their position on the Nile and protect their interests. Nubar Pasha (1825–1899), the Egyptian Prime Minister, concisely summarised the position of Egypt in his well-known quote: “*The Egyptian question is the irrigation question.*”³¹ Egypt’s water capacity was nearly exhausted, however the water capacity of the Nile offered much greater potential. The logical way to acquire more water and protect against the uncontrollable flood wave lay further up the river, which people in London and Cairo, who were familiar with Nile hydrology, were most probably well aware of, and so their attention was directed towards Aswan and further south – to Sudan.

Up River – the British Journey to Sudan

The report dating from 1894, executed by engineers from the Ministry of Public Works under the leadership of William Willcocks, provided hard data. It would be necessary to store 1,500,000,000 m³ of water every year for future agricultural requirements in Lower Egypt. Upper Egypt, with a less developed irrigation system, would require a supply of 950,000,000 m³ of water every year to the north of Asyut and a supply of 1,160,000,000 m³ every year was estimated for the area to the south of Asyut.³² If storage of this volume of 3,610,000,000 m³ of water could be achieved, then the area of farmland in Egypt would be increased from 4,955,000 acres to 5,555,000 acres and revenue could increase from 32,315,000 Egyptian Pounds to 38,540,000

cuse 1979, p. 36.

³⁰ W. WILLCOCKS, *Report on Perennial Irrigation and Flood Protection of Egypt*, Cairo 1894, p. 8. Willcocks also considers the period of 1877–1878 to be similarly critical.

³¹ TVEDT, *Hydrology and Empire*, p. 176.

³² WILLCOCKS, p. 9.

Egyptian Pounds.³³ The question was, where to get this water, or more precisely, where to store it.

William Willcocks came up with a solution in 1894, when he proposed construction of a dam on the first Nile cataract at Aswan.³⁴ The original plan was to make a reservoir, which would contain 3,700,000,000 m³ of water.³⁵ Even though this was a project for the “largest dam in the world” it started to become evident that, from the long-term aspect, it would be unable to meet the demands of the thirsty Egyptian agriculture, because for technical reasons (chiefly due to the amount of sediment carried down from the Ethiopian highlands) the dam could only offer the capacity for storage of just 2,500,000,000 m³ of water.³⁶ However, this estimated capacity was reduced even further, because it originally assumed the flooding of ancient temples on Philae Island, which resulted in a wave of outrage across Europe.³⁷ British and French archaeologists protested, as well as for example M. E. Boulé, a French member of the international Technical Commission, which evaluated Willcocks’ project: “[...] I said, and I insist, that I absolutely refuse to be linked to such a proposal. If I agreed (with Willcocks’ proposal) I would deserve to be condemned by the public opinion of all of Europe.”³⁸ Robert Collins calls reduction of the capacity of the dam, which was actually initiated by Sir Benjamin Baker (1840–1907), to be a foolish effort to gain the support of the French – the temples in Philae were described in the famous *Description de l’Egypte*, which was very popular in France.³⁹ Reduction of the capacity of the planned

³³ Ibidem, p. 5.

³⁴ There had been speculation about construction of a reservoir at this site since 1891, when Willcocks was appointed *Director of Reservoir Studies*, however, a specific plan only arose from the report dated 1894. R. OWEN, *Lord Cromer, Victorian Imperialist, Edwardian Proconsul*, Oxford 2004, p. 287.

³⁵ W. WILLCOCKS, *Egyptian Irrigation*, Vol. 2, London 1913, p. 686.

³⁶ M. ABBAS, *The Sudan Question, The Dispute over the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium 1884–1951*, New York 1952, pp. 77–78.

³⁷ The final project of Aswan dam could only store 1,065,000,000 m³ of water; WILLCOCKS, *Egyptian Irrigation*, p. 686.

³⁸ CADN, 353 PO – 2/274, *Rapport de la Commission technique désigné pour examiner les projets de réservoir du Nil*, Le Caire, le 10 avril 1894. *Rapport de M. Boulé, Inspecteur général, Membre du Conseil général des Ponts et Chaussées à Paris*, Le Caire, le 18 avril 1894. More about the “Philae case” see ANDERSEN, pp. 137–160.

³⁹ R. COLLINS, *The Nile*, London 2002, p. 144; *Description de l’Egypte*, Vol. 1, Planche 26, Paris 1809.

dam by over half would save the monuments on Philae Island, but this would mean that Egypt would still need 2,610,000,000 m³ of water, which had to be found somewhere. Due to the sediment carried by the water from the Ethiopian Highlands, this had to be somewhere above the of tributary of the Atbara River, in front of which a solid dam of the usual type could not be built, because it would be at risk of breaking due to the build-up of sediment.⁴⁰ British “Nile tamers” logically started to focus their attention even higher up the river – because their success in Egypt depended on sufficient supplies of water!

Because long-term assurance of supplies of water in Egypt was impossible without development of the Upper Nile, the Brits decided to occupy Sudan. But where did the idea to control and utilise the Upper Nile originate?

Explorer Samuel Baker (1821–1893), who set out on an expedition to the source of the Nile in the eighteen sixties, which provided extensive knowledge about its hydrology, wrote the following in 1867: “*From immemorial, the rise of the Nile has been watched with intense interest at the usual season, but no attempt has been made to insure a supply of water to Egypt during all seasons. . .*” Baker speaks of the possibility of creating “*great reservoirs on various levels of Egypt, from Khartoum to the Mediterranean,*” he mentions a “*series of dams or weirs on the Nile, which could raise the level of the river (to the level necessary for irrigation)*”.⁴¹ William Garstin (1849–1925) wrote in his report about the planned Aswan Dam in 1894: “*I think, then, we may confidently predict that, if a reservoir be successfully constructed, it will only one of a chain which will eventually extend from the first Cataract to the junction of the White and the Blue Niles in Khartoum.*”⁴² He also assumed that when the Aswan Dam was completed and people realised its benefits, construction of another dam to the south would simply be a matter of time.⁴³ A year later, on 24 January 1895, Colin Scott-Moncrieff asked a rhetorical question at the end of his speech at the meeting of the Royal Institution of Great Britain in

⁴⁰ TVEDT, *Hydrology and Empire*, p. 180.

⁴¹ S. BAKER, *The Nile Tributaries of Abyssinia and The Sword Hunters of The Hamran Arabs*, London 1867, pp. 566–568. Baker was also the first to mention the possibility of constructing a dam on the first Nile cataract at Aswan (p. 567).

⁴² *Reservoirs in The Valley of The Nile – prepared for The Committee of The Society for The Preservation of The Monuments of Ancient Egypt*, London 1894, pp. 10–11.

⁴³ TNA, FO 407/131, Lord Cromer to Earl of Kimberley, Annual Report, Inclosure 3 in No. 51, *Note upon the Public Works Department for the year 1894*.

London: “is it not evident, that the Nile from Lake Victoria Nyanza to the Mediterranean should be under one rule?”⁴⁴

After the death of Gordon in the eighteen eighties, Lord Cromer, a pivotal figure of the British establishment in Egypt, expressed his opinion against occupation of Sudan – “all the authorities here (in Cairo) except myself are in favour of an advance on Dongola. The Egyptian authorities favour the idea, because they regard it as the first step towards the reconquest of the Sudan.”⁴⁵ Cromer believed that Britain was not materially prepared for occupation of the country and that the circumstances were not in its favour. However, Cromer changed his opinion at the beginning of the nineties and started to write about North-Sudanese Dongola as just a springboard for further progress in the direction of Berber and Khartoum.⁴⁶ The water management situation in Egypt certainly played a role in this, whereas during the eighties many projects were realised and there was “room for improvement” in the field of securing supplies of water, but Egypt started to reach its limits after 1890.

From 1885 the Mahdist state in Sudan also represented an obstacle to discovering the hydrology of the Nile – in the nineties the river was still mostly unexplored and shrouded in mystery.⁴⁷ Another issue was the loss of access to data from the nilometers in Khartoum, from which daily telegraphic reports about the water level in the river were sent to Egypt from 1885. The water managers were able to regulate the system more accurately thanks to this data.⁴⁸

The goal of the British was to launch a campaign against Sudan not only under the flag of the Union, but under the flag of Egypt

⁴⁴ C. SCOTT-MONCRIEFF, *The Nile. Notices of the Proceedings at the Meetings of the Members of the Royal Institution of Great Britain, with Abstracts and Discourses delivered at the Evening Meetings*. Vol. XIV. 1893–1895, London 1896, p. 418.

⁴⁵ TNA, FO 633/6, Lord Cromer to Lord Rosebery, No. 50, February 23, 1886. General Charles Gordon (1833–1885) was killed by the Mahdists during the fall of Khartoum in 1885. His death became a symbol, which was subsequently used as propaganda during the Sudan campaign.

⁴⁶ TVEDT, *Hydrology and Empire*, p. 183.

⁴⁷ In 1895 Colin Scott-Moncrieff himself, one of Cromer’s chief water management engineers, marked the southern-most point of the Nile that he had personally visited. This was Philae Island, he only knew about the rest from the travelogues and reports of Baker, Speke and others. SCOTT-MONCRIEFF, *The Nile*, p. 405.

⁴⁸ There was another functional nilometer at Dakle in 1875 on the Nile tributary of the Atbara River. TVEDT, *The Nile in the Age*, p. 26.

(or under both flags at once), for political and economic reasons. Another challenge was acquiring the necessary funds. The Egyptian government finally requested release of 500,000 Egyptian Pounds from the reserve fund, which was successfully achieved on the soil of the International *Caisse de la Dette* Commission, which supervised Egyptian funds, thanks to British diplomatic support. As a result, Egyptian soldiers were deployed using Egyptian funds.⁴⁹ In 1897 Cromer asked London for financial support, also in part because he was concerned that the Egyptian budget would be unable to cover the expensive Sudanese campaign and the costly investment into construction of the dam in Aswan, which he considered crucial: “*we have all of us here been working at this reservoir plan for several years, and I confess that, now that we have so nearly attained success, I am very unwilling to let the opportunity slip by.*” He considered the most logical route to be first of all to complete the dam and then to launch the campaign against Sudan, however “*one cannot always choose in advance,*” and it was too late to cry over spilt milk.⁵⁰ The financiers in London decided to support the dam project and the Sudanese campaign was financed from the Egyptian budget.⁵¹

And what does this all mean? The Brits only entered Sudan when Egypt’s water potential had been exhausted. The campaign to conquer Sudan was launched under the command of Horatio Kitchener (1850–1916), Sirdar of the Egyptian Army, in 1896. The campaign was subsequently renamed *The River War* by a young soldier and news reporter called Winston Churchill. The primary goal of this campaign was to secure a sufficient supply of water for Egypt and its cotton plantations by controlling the Upper Nile. As Churchill said: “*In the account of the River War the Nile is naturally supreme. It is the great melody that recurs throughout the whole opera. The general purposing military operations, the statesman who would decide upon grave policies, and the reader desirous of studying the course and results of either, must think of the Nile.*”⁵²

⁴⁹ TVEDT, *Hydrology and Empire*, p. 184.

⁵⁰ TNA, Cabinet papers (hereinafter CAB) 37/44/27, Lord Cromer to Marquess of Salisbury, June 5, 1897.

⁵¹ TNA, CAB 37/44/29 Treasury to Foreign Office, No. 3, June 2, 1897.

“The Nile – a Great Melody that recurs throughout the Whole Opera” and Many Potential Conductors in the Hall

The Brits had considered the entire Nile Valley under their sphere of influence and under their control since the beginning of the eighteenth century. Control over the river became a crucial matter. Regarding the enormous area of the region it could be presumed that London, or more precisely Cairo, would not be the only players in the game. Concerns about occupation of strategic areas on the Upper Nile and the possibility of harming Egypt through regulation of the river did arise, but was there any actual risk of danger?

In his work about nilometers, which was published in January 1889, Colonel Ardagh (1840–1907) mentions the hypothetical possibility of the rulers of Ethiopia cutting Egypt off from the water supply. Although he admits that there are no indications that something like this would happen, in the same breath he adds that Egypt would be subject to the whims of any advanced civilisation that would expertly control the Atbara, White and Blue Nile and the Bahr al-Ghazal rivers. According to Ardagh the interests of Egypt and Sudan are inseparable.⁵³ In December of the same year Evelyn Baring wrote to Salisbury about the activities of the Italians, who, in his words: *“perhaps find Abyssinia rather too hard a nut to crack. Anyhow they are now evidently making serious advances towards the Sudan. If they are allowed to do this they will soon clash with our Egyptian policy. If they succeeded they will do permanent harm to Egypt and to us [...]. I hope you will say ‘Hands off’ to them as regards Kassala and the Nile Valley [...]. The matter is really one of great importance.”*⁵⁴ The Anglo-Italian protocol was signed on 15 April 1891, whereas the Italian government pledged to refrain from executing any water management project on the Atbara River, which would markedly influence the flow of water into the Nile in Article III of this protocol.⁵⁵ The Italians did not represent a real threat to British plans in the Nile Valley

⁵² W. CHURCHILL, *The River War, An Account of the Reconquest of the Sudan*, New York 2006, p. 4.

⁵³ TNA, PRO 30/40/9/6, J. C. ARDAGH, Nilometers, in: *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography*, January No., 1889.

⁵⁴ TNA, FO 633/6, Evelyn Baring to Lord Salisbury, No. 150, December 15, 1889. Kassala is a Sudanese town on the Mareb River near the borders with Eritrea – it can be considered an access point to the area of the Atbara River, a major tributary of the Nile.

⁵⁵ TVEDT, *The Nile in the Age*, p. 40.

in the nineties. In his speech on 24 January 1895 Colin Scott-Moncrieff actually describes them as a “*nation that is consistantly the most friendly towards us (the British)*”.⁵⁶ With regard to Ethiopia, a treaty of friendship and business relations was concluded with Emperor Menelik II on 14 May 1897. Thanks to skilful diplomacy, the Brits were able to resolve a potential headache and acquire another safeguard against the Italians.⁵⁷

From the aspect of controlling the White Nile, it was strategic to acquire control of its source and therefore the region of Buganda, which was the site of the outflow from Lake Victoria Nyanza. The Brits declared a protectorate here in 1894.⁵⁸

The treaties concluded with Germany (24 June and 1 July 1890) and the Belgian King Leopold II in 1894 could be considered another victory achieved without practically any shots being fired. For the price of several concessions these documents confirmed the Nile Valley to be a British sphere of influence.⁵⁹ After conclusion of these treaties only the French remained in the Nile Valley, as the only other “potential conductor” in addition to the Brits. Were the interests of Paris a threat to the British-Egyptian plans in North-East Africa?

French interests in the area of the Upper Nile were marginal. The area of the Egyptian issue, which continued to incite a feeling of injustice and nostalgia in relation to the times of Muhammad Ali, when France played “first violin” in Egypt, in the French, was only unified by events in the nineties. The Anglo-German treaty dating from 1890 resulted in noisy protests in Paris and the so-called Grey Declaration dating from 1895, when, during his speech before the chamber of deputies, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs

⁵⁶ SCOTT-MONCRIEFF, *The Nile*, p. 418.

⁵⁷ TNA, WO 106/219, Précis of Events on the Upper Nile and Adjacent Territories, Appendix F. Another agreement was subsequently concluded with Menelik II in 1902, in which the emperor pledged to refrain from building or permitting construction of any works on the Blue Nile, Sobata or Lake Tana, which would stop the flow of Nile waters, without an agreement with the government of His British Majesty and the government of Sudan. This agreement continues to influence events in the Nile Basin to this day, for instance in relation to the dispute regarding construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

⁵⁸ TNA, WO 106/220, Short History of Events on the Upper Nile, 1899, pp. 2–3.

⁵⁹ TVEDT, *The Nile in the Age*, p. 43; ROBINSON – GALLAGHER, p. 293. One of the concessions to Germany was withdrawal from Helgoland Island in the North Sea for example.

Sir Edward Grey (1862–1933) informed the French that “*Any interference in the Nile Valley could be considered an unfriendly act and would be so viewed by England*”, caused even more outrage.⁶⁰ He de facto bluntly declared the Nile Valley a British sphere of influence.

The French position in the Nile area was not considered strong and this is also demonstrated by Cromer’s letter to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Lord Kimberley (1826–1902) dated June 1894, in which he writes that he will be vigilant if the French start moving in Africa. “*I can probably counter them here,*” and he also adds that he personally has no problem ceding large territories in the interior but that he considers the coast with the water ways to be important – and the Nile the most important of these. “*I think that the French should be kept outside of the Nile Valley.*”⁶¹

France (on the contrary to Britain) had no complex concept encompassing utilisation and development of the Nile’s water supply. Despite this there is a theory for use of the Nile by the French as a sort of “water weapon” against the British and their interests down river. This theory work with the concept of constructing a dam higher up the Nile and possibly opening it suddenly and flooding everything below it, particularly Egypt. The Nile is linked to the so-called Fashoda Crisis in 1898 in relation to this idea. Can the “blue thread” be discovered here?⁶² Was this crisis a true reason for concerns in London and Cairo? The goal of this article is not a complete analysis of the Fashoda Crisis, rather it is concerned with the water aspect.⁶³

The chimeric Fashoda theory as a key to controlling the Nile can be described as follows. Between 1892 and 1893 the French decided to

⁶⁰ TNA, WO 106/219, p. 14; R. BROWN, *Fashoda Reconsidered, The Impact of Domestic Politics on French Policy in Africa 1893–1898*, London 1970, pp. 34–35; G. N. SANDERSON, *England, Europe and The Upper Nile 1882–1899*, Edinburgh 1966, pp. 114–115.

⁶¹ TNA, FO 633/6, Lord Cromer to Lord Kimberley, No. 217, June 2, 1894. The report also proves that the Brits were interested in Sudan chiefly because of the Nile, the remainder (particularly the southern area of the country) was worthless to them, in the words of Lord Salisbury, it was “*wretched stuff*”. TNA, PRO 78/5051, Minute on a report, October 20, 1898.

⁶² Fashoda is a town on the White Nile in the northeast of South Sudan, now called Kodok.

⁶³ Details regarding the issue of the Fashoda Crisis J. VALKOUN, *Fašodská krize 1898: vyvrcholení britsko-francouzského soupeření v oblasti horního Nilu*, in: *Historický obzor*, 21, 7/8, 2010, pp. 146–153; D. BATES, *The Fashoda Incident of 1898: Encounter on the Nile*, Oxford 1984.

expand from Lake Chad in the direction of Bahr al-Ghazal and into the valley of the Upper Nile. The Fashoda Fortress located by the source of the Nile was the strategic centre of this region.⁶⁴ The French believed that construction of a dam at the site of the source of the Nile could weaken the British position in Egypt.⁶⁵ The name of French engineer Victor Prompt is frequently mentioned in relation to this idea. He allegedly expressed the idea of damming the Nile at Fashoda for the purpose of exposing Egypt to the threat of drought or sudden flooding within the terms of his speech “*Soudan Nilotique*”, held on 20 January 1893 at the Cairo *Institut Égyptien*. His words influenced French Minister of Foreign Affairs Théophile Delcassé (1852–1923) who disseminated them in imperialistic circles in Paris.⁶⁶ Prompt’s speech allegedly also convinced the Brits that it was essential to occupy the upper reaches of the river in order to prevent the French from constructing a potential dam.

Terje Tvedt refutes this theory. Victor Prompt never mentioned the words historians Brown, Lewis and others attribute to him in his speech. In his speeches, of which there were several, Prompt spoke about the waning flow of the Nile as a result of climatic changes or reduction of water supplies, of the fact that Egypt should quickly occupy Sudan in order to secure water supplies, which could not be secured within its own territory, or about potential construction of three new dams between Khartoum and Aswan. He also discussed use of the Blue Nile for irrigation of Sudan, which, as he believed, would not impact Egyptian agriculture.⁶⁷ In his speech in January 1893, (which was mainly intended for an Egyptian auditorium) he again emphasised occupation of Sudan and also spoke about a potential dam in Uganda, from which Egypt could profit.⁶⁸ He did not support the Brits in their ambitions on the Nile (and Cromer does not mention him in his correspondence with FO), on the contrary he pointed out the potential risks

⁶⁴ BROWN, *Fashoda Reconsidered*, pp. 23–24.

⁶⁵ D. L. LEWIS, *The Race to Fashoda, European Colonialism and African Resistance in The Scramble for Africa*, London 1988, p. 48.

⁶⁶ BROWN, *Fashoda Reconsidered*, p. 33; LEWIS, p. 48, etc.

⁶⁷ See Prompt’s speeches at the Institut Égyptien dated 26 December 1891 on the topic of Réservoirs d’eau de la Haute-Égypte, for example. CADN, 353 PO – 2/274.

⁶⁸ TVEDT, *Hydrology and Empire*, pp. 185–186; TVEDT, *The Nile in the Age*, pp. 44–47.

to Egypt arising from the British presence at the source of the Nile in Uganda in his speeches. He never mentioned any French dam.⁶⁹

Neither Prompt, nor anyone else believed that Fashoda was the key to the Nile. Fashoda is not located by the source of the White Nile, which is located 600 km to the south in Uganda, which was a known fact in the nineties.⁷⁰ Nor was it feasible to build a dam at Fashoda – this is impossible due to the landscape, because the entire region is flat, and then also because there is nothing to use as building material within a radius of several miles, because Fashoda is surrounded by swamps.⁷¹ Major Marchand also only had a handful of men available with insufficient logistics.

From the hydrological aspect Fashoda was completely unimportant, the presence of a French military unit did not represent any significant threat to British control over the river and was therefore no threat to the British position in Cairo. Marchand's expedition, playing the role of scarecrow threatening British-Egyptian interests in the Nile Valley, could serve as a reason to occupy South Sudan, which may have been worthless from the aspect of its interior, but offered enormous water potential thanks to its marshes, which the Brits purposefully worked with subsequently.⁷² The Fashoda Crisis in 1898 was not part of French plans to control and develop the Nile River, because the French had no such plans.

Even though Fashoda itself is worthless from the hydrological aspect, the international impact of the Fashoda Incident can be linked to the "blue thread". After Marchand departed in November 1898 and following the factual defeat suffered by France in this case, both parties signed a convention to define their spheres of influence on 21 March 1899. This concerned a convention concerning the area to the east and west of the Niger River and on the Upper Nile, expanded by Article IV, which basically made the valley of the longest African River an exclusively British matter.⁷³ Colin Scott-Moncrieff's dream

⁶⁹ TVEDT, *Hydrology and Empire*, p. 186.

⁷⁰ E.g., from Samuel Baker's travelogues and reports. He had been to the African lakes and was also very familiar with Fashoda, because it was his seat when he was appointed governor of the region under Khedive Ismail in the sixties. Ibidem.

⁷¹ ROBINSON – GALLAGHER, p. 376.

⁷² W. GARSTIN, *Report upon the Basin of The Upper Nile with Proposals for The Improvement of that River*, Cairo 1904.

⁷³ The document is sometimes also known under the title of the "Nigeria Convention".

(and probably the dream of many other men in London and Cairo) became reality – the Nile River, from Lake Victoria Nyanza to the Mediterranean Sea *de facto* fell under the control of a single government.⁷⁴ The “Nile Symphony” had found its conductor.

Conclusion

After the cannons of British warships roared off the coast of Alexandria on 11 July 1882 and the occupation of Egypt commenced, securing supplies of water for Egypt – and thereby stimulation of the Egyptian economy, became a crucial matter for London due to Great Britain’s economic interests and its desire to maintain stability in the country. The chief export commodities, sugar cane, and most importantly “thirsty” cotton, grown on an increasingly larger scale, as well as the population boom, brought Egypt to the limits of its water potential at the end of the eighteen nineties, even though development of the water management system continued.

Reports by Cromer’s engineers and other archive material confirms the thesis of Norwegian historian and geographer Terje Tvedt, that securing supplies of water for Egypt in the interests of maintaining their own position, was the main motive for the British-Egyptian campaign against Sudan in 1896. It was not about becoming the “master of the desert”.⁷⁵ Sudan had enormous water potential, Cromer knew this, he was not interested in creating a buffer zone, he was not interested in the expansive interior, he was interested in *waterways and the Nile in particular*.⁷⁶

The Fashoda Incident in 1898 is often considered a symbol of British-French competition in North-East Africa, however, there is no direct interest in water on the French part. First because Fashoda is worthless in relation to control over the river. Secondly because France had no complex concept encompassing use and development the Nile as a supply of water. By signing the expanded Nigeria Convention dated 21 March 1899, the Brits became a hegemon in the basin of the longest African River and the Nile had no further significant impact on relations between London and Paris.

TNA, FO 93/33/173.

⁷⁴ SCOTT-MONCRIEFF, *The Nile*, p. 418.

⁷⁵ ROBINSON – GALLAGHER, p. 272.

⁷⁶ TNA, FO 633/6, Lord Cromer to Lord Kimberley, No. 217, June 2, 1894.