

Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia, & Africa: An Encyclopedia

Suez Canal: 1250 to 1920: Middle East

Contributors: Andrea L. Stanton & Edward Ramsamy & Peter J. Seybolt & Carolyn M. Elliott

Print Pub. Date: 2012

Online Pub. Date: May 31, 2012

Print ISBN: 9781412981767

Online ISBN: 9781452218458

DOI: 10.4135/9781452218458

Print pages: I215-I217

This PDF has been generated from SAGE knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

University of Denver Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey University of Vermont University of Vermont
10.4135/9781452218458

10.4135/9781452218458.n112

In this period, the Suez Canal was regarded as the navigational and trade route that connects two continents, Asia and Europe. It is an artificial (human-made) waterway system that cuts through the territories of Egypt and serves as the link between two seas—the Mediterranean Sea, from Port Said beside the Al Qabuti territory of Egypt adjacent to Port Fouad in Sinai (another Egyptian territory that was occupied by Israel from 1956 to 1982), and the Red Sea, from its city of Suez on the Gulf of Suez—as the starting point for delivering big shipments from international steam and commercial ships and mid-sized shipments from local ships.

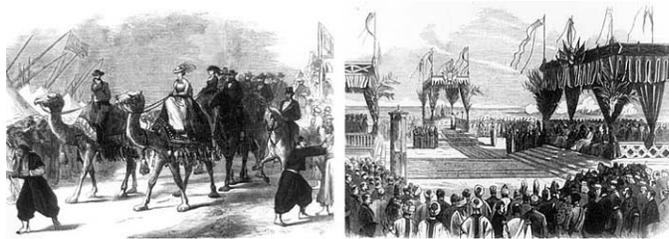
Construction began in April 1859, and the Suez Canal opened in November 1869; it took 10 years to complete it. According to the statistics provided by the Suez Canal Authority of the Arab Republic of Egypt, the canal was 164 kilometers (102 miles) long and 8 meters (26 feet) deep in 1869. After multiple projects to enlarge it, the canal is 193.30 kilometers (120.11 miles) long, 24 meters (79 feet) deep, and 205 meters (673 feet) wide as of 2010. It now consists of the northern access channel of 22 kilometers (14 miles), the canal itself of 162.25 kilometers (100.82 miles), and the southern access channel of 9 kilometers (5.6 miles).

Development Team

The Suez Canal project was initiated and engineered by French diplomat and businessman Ferdinand de Lesseps. He was able to get the concession with the help of his friend M. S. W. Ruysenaers, the consul-general of Holland in Egypt, who persuaded Sa'id Pasha, the *Wali* (an Arabic term for “governor”) of Egypt and Sudan, who enjoyed virtual independence from the *sultan* (an Arabic term for “emperor”) of the Ottoman Empire, to sign it. The agreed and signed concession paved the way for the establishment of a financial company called Universal Suez Ship Canal Company, or simply the Suez Canal Company. After a decade of difficulty building the canal with the

use [p. 1215 ↓] of forced labor of domestic workers, mostly Egyptians and Sudanese, and opposition from the British Empire, the canal was completed and was successfully inaugurated in 1869, providing a positive economic boost and monetary incentives for the half publicly (Sa'id government) and half privately (de Lesseps investment) owned Suez Canal Company. This groundbreaking project also made possible a shortcut for travel and a practicable and easier trade route from Asia to Europe without using the British-monopolized “Cape route,” a route from India south to the tip of South Africa and then north toward Europe.

At the inauguration of the Suez Canal in November 1869, the Austrian Empress Eugenie appears at Port Said, Egypt, on a camel (left). Religious ceremonies precede the inauguration (right). The project had dramatic effects on both the ecosystem and economy of the region.



The Building of the Suez Canal

There were signs of attempts to create a human-made canal from the time of ancient Egypt (through the Isthmus of Suez), Arab invasions, and the Persian Empire to the Napoleonic Era (Napoleon Bonaparte's expedition to locate the remnants of an ancient waterway passage that connected the Gulf of Suez to the Nile River) but they failed, and some projects did not materialize. However, de Lesseps had the will power and aggressiveness to persist in creating the canal—a triumph that gave him fame and glory. De Lesseps did not hesitate to ignore his detractors and criticism from the British Empire or the insurmountable political challenges in British-French-Egyptian affairs.

With the generous concessions given by Sa'id, de Lesseps gained full authority to build the canal and, based on D. A. Farnie's research, this concession excluded Egyptian

ships from any special privileges and exacted no payment from de Lesseps in return for the grant of the right to benefit Europe at the expense of Egypt. This also led Sa'id to believe that with the completion of the Suez Canal he would gain full independence from the sultan of the Ottoman Empire; thus, he initially funded the project along with the Suez Canal Company as the immediate and primary financier.

Corruption and misgovernment in Egypt resulted in the 1875 financial crisis, forcing Isma'il Pasha, the *Wali* and *Khedive* (equivalent to “viceroy” of the Ottoman Empire), to sell his share to Great Britain, making the Suez Canal Company an Anglo-French property. In 1882, Britain invaded Egypt and subsequently controlled the entire company and the Suez trading route until 1956, diminishing the Cape route.

The Impact of the Suez Canal

The Suez Canal had tremendous impacts on the geological environment, the result of altering the geography of the Suez, and on human and marine lives inhabiting its surroundings.

First, it shortened the distance and time for trade between Asia and Europe. It helped the cotton trade of Bombay in 1870, served as the entrepot trade of the Mediterranean in 1870–74, enabled the shipping of frozen meat from Australia to Europe in 1877–96, developed the export trade of India during 1882–96, and accommodated the Persian oil trade during the booming years of the oil industry. In short, it opened new trades and helped the economies of Asian and European countries. However, it entirely benefited France and the British Empire in extracting trading port taxes and strategically maneuvered the geopolitics of the region.

Second, it destroyed the Mediterranean ecological system, aided by invading species from the Red Sea that endangered many local and endemic Mediterranean species. This is called Erythrean invasion or Lessepsian migration (named after Ferdinand de Lesseps), used to describe any animal migration over human-made structures.

Despite its challenges—political, social, and ecological—the opening of the Suez Canal is one of the most far-reaching historical achievements of humans in 19th century.

Nassef M. Adiong *Middle East Technical University*

10.4135/9781452218458.n112

Further Readings

Farnie, D. A. *East and West of Suez: The Suez Canal in History 1854–1956*. London: Oxford University Press, 1969.

Karabell, Zachary. *Parting the Desert: The Creation of the Suez Canal*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

Linda Hall Library, Kansas City, Missouri. "The Search for the Ancient Suez Canal." http://www.lhl.lib.mo.us/events_exhib/exhibit/exhibits/napoleon/suez_canal.shtml (Accessed November 2010).

Stewart, Gail. *Building History: The Suez Canal*. San Diego, CA: Luscent Books, 2001.

Suez Canal Authority. "Canal Characteristics: Stages of Developing the Suez Canal." <http://www.suezcanal.gov.eg/sc.aspx?show=12> (Accessed May 2011).

Vogt, D., and Dave Franklin. "The Building of the Suez Canal." <http://www.helium.com/items/1767008-construction-of-the-suez-canal> (Accessed November 2010).