

**Mapping Modern Palestine:
Mythical conquest and scientific dispossession**

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August 30, 2011

Prepared for non-exclusive use by UNRWA/BMU’s statistical mapping project

Palestine’s first modern map was the product of a colonial errand. In the spring of 1798, with only Britain left standing in the way of his empire, Napoleon Bonaparte pointed his warships toward Egypt. His imperial goal: to block British access to the Red Sea route to India, Britain’s most valuable colony. His mystical goal: to conquer the East in the style of Alexander the Great, Bonaparte’s spiritual role model. To help his troops take the region for France, he welcomed Paris’s top scientists aboard the expedition, charging them with making the foreign territory readable. As the head scholar would later recall, the line between scientist and soldier often blurred: “We were many times obliged to replace our weapons with geometrical instruments, and in a sense, to fight over or to conquer the terrain that we were to measure.”

Although the expedition ended in disaster, Bonaparte’s scientists would return home to produce an encyclopedia, *La Description de l’Égypte*. It was an epic work, depicting to Western audiences the Eastern Mediterranean as an ancient, mythical land. But accompanying its sketches and studies on archeology and historical geography, the encyclopedia also detailed the region’s plants, animals, minerals, medicine, water sources, demography, and agricultural practices as the French troops encountered them *circa* 1800. A 47-sheet topographic map complemented the multi-volume work. Several of these sheets, detailing the coastal region between Al-Arish and Sidon, would together comprise Palestine’s first modern map (Figure 1).

[Figure 1: Napoleon’s Palestine]

While Palestine could have been mapped in a number of different ways, Bonaparte’s Palestine was one of coastlines and terrain—a Palestine for naval and ground warfare. Yet it was also a cartography inspired by myth. The mapmakers, who labeled their sheets “Palestine, or the Holy Land,” made certain to map far enough inland to include the historical Christian sites: Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Nazareth. Over the next century, the work would trigger a frenzied Western curiosity in the region’s ancient and biblical geography. And as a declining Ottoman Empire opened its ports to foreign travel, this curiosity could be satisfied through real-life

experience. Pilgrims, missionaries, merchants, and explorers increasingly traveled to Egypt and Palestine in the nineteenth century—at a time when their governments were seeking a response to the Eastern Question: How, their politicians wondered, might they prepare their interests in the region as the Ottoman Empire crumbled? Many of these new travelers wittingly helped their governments answer this question while embarking on their mythical journeys. And following in the footsteps of Bonaparte, they came to the Eastern Mediterranean armed with the modern methods and tools of scientific discovery.

The Protestant Reformation and the Scientific Revolution together helped fuel this new enthusiasm. While for centuries the Bible had been understood as a complex literary work, rich in symbols to carefully interpret, the Reformation encouraged a new relationship between people and Scripture. Rather than relying on the priesthood’s interpretation of Holy Writ, Protestant leaders declared that everyone had the right to read the Bible—and indeed, everyone must if they were to properly follow God’s directives. In practice, however, people came to understand Scripture in conflicting ways which led to fundamental disputes over said directives. Consequently, Western Christianity splintered into sects, each based on its own biblical interpretation, each believing theirs to be the correct one. For the most conservative factions, the Bible was to be understood literally; its every word as factually true. And following Francis Bacon, counselor to King James I of England and a pioneer of the Scientific Revolution, they agreed that even the most sacred doctrines must be verified scientifically because all truth was one. Thus, biblical scholars and explorers came to Egypt and Palestine to prove exactly that. And armed with geometric instruments and a modern ethos, they sought to assemble facts to confirm their faith was true.

Key to this belief in biblical inerrancy, which first gripped the United States and Britain in the nineteenth century, was its apocalyptic vision: God would soon bring this era of history to an end; Jerusalem would be the stage. Their task, as they understood it, was to help usher it along. Accordingly, their relationship to Palestine would be one of “rediscovery” and “reclaiming.” This rediscovery, however, would be a Protestant one as the Orthodox and Catholic faiths had long had communities in Palestine. Additionally, when the explorers came to reclaim many of the important New Testament sites, they found that the Orthodox and Catholic sects already occupied most of them. They responded by turning to the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible). The geography of the “chosen people” would come to predominate many of their concerns. The story, directly following the Exodus narrative, describes the Israelite conquest of Canaan, the “Promised Land.” After killing and removing the indigenous Canaanites as demanded by God, the Promised Land is parceled out to the twelve tribes of Israel. For the nineteenth century explorers, this narrative shaped the geographical imagination: their mapmakers drafted a Palestine thus, according to God’s boundaries: “from Dan [Banias] to Beersheba.”

[Figure 2: Ordnance Survey of Western Palestine]

In the 1870s, Palestine’s shape was first carved out in the Ordnance Survey of Western Palestine, a monumental effort carried out by the Palestine Exploration Fund (Figure 2). Founded in 1865 by British biblical archaeologists and clergymen, the Fund sought to institutionalize archaeological, geographic, and historical research in Palestine. While the Fund often portrayed its activities as purely scientific, its conquering ideals were voiced famously at the inaugural ceremony by its first president, the archbishop of York. Speaking to an audience in London he announced: “This country of Palestine belongs to you and to me. It is essentially ours. It was given to the Father of Israel in the words ‘Walk the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it, for I will give it unto thee.’ ... We mean to walk through Palestine in the length and in the breadth of it because that land has been given unto us.”

The Ordnance Survey was to become a foundational cartographic project, which all maps of Palestine continue to utilize as a reference point. Several mapmakers had already surveyed Jerusalem, the Dead Sea, and other religiously significant sites and physical features. But what made the Fund’s Survey distinct was that it was the first to map the Holy Land as a unity, producing a bounded Palestine for the first time on paper—one from Dan to Beersheba. The work, which took six years of field work and produced 26 sheets of maps on a detailed topographic scale, was considered the most reliable map of Palestine during the next half-century. But such sophisticated cartography was possible only through mutual cooperation with the British War Office. The Fund, which often doubled as a cover to gather military intelligence, pointed out that the Survey “would be of great importance as a military map should the Eastern Question come forward and Palestine ever be the scene of military operations”.

When the question did come forward in the First World War, General Edward Allenby studied the Fund’s publications. In December 1917 his troops captured Jerusalem, delivering the city as “a Christmas present” to the British people per Prime Minister David Lloyd George’s request. Before the War’s end, Britain and France would draft a secret arrangement to carve up the spoils. The plan, known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement (Figure 3), gave France control over south-eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, Syria and Lebanon; Britain was to take the area roughly comprising Jordan, southern Iraq, and Palestine. But because resistance movements worldwide were giving colonialism a bad name, rather than labeling these areas “colonies”, Sykes-Picot used the euphemism “zones of influence” instead. For the British, Palestine would prove important for commercial reasons. Their dominion over its ports at Haifa and Akka was to facilitate petroleum extraction from Mesopotamia through a pipeline reaching the Mediterranean. Additionally, Palestine’s proximity to the Suez Canal, opened in 1869, would provide a territorial buffer from hostile incursions in the east.

[Figure 3: Sykes-Picot]

But myth continued to fuel British interest in Palestine. It had become a received idea to many in Britain that, as a prelude to the end of the world, the Jews would one day return to the Holy Land and convert to Christianity. The Palestinians, as far as they were concerned, were

temporary usurpers. Thus, as he was instructing Allenby to take Jerusalem, Lloyd George was also directing his foreign secretary, Arthur Balfour, to declare the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. At the Paris Peace Conference after the war, the Prime Minister, a devout evangelical, invited representatives from the Zionist Organization to help negotiate Palestine’s official boundaries. At the Conference, Lloyd George declared to the French that Britain’s army would occupy Palestine “as defined in accordance with its ancient boundaries of Dan to Beersheba.” After examining biblical maps to see what this meant, the French agreed. But the Zionist Organization hesitated. They hoped to push the northern border eastwards so that it left all of Mount Hermon’s waters inside Palestine. The success of a Jewish State, their representatives argued, would greatly depend on Jewish agriculture. The French protested. When the talks threatened to come to a standstill, the Zionists recommended that Lloyd George quickly accept the original offer to avoid further delay. The borders of Mandate Palestine, from Dan to Beersheba, officially went into effect on March 7, 1923.

[Figure 4: British Survey of Palestine]

Palestine, from Napoleon on, was drawn up to meet the needs, not of the Palestinians, but of the Europeans. Despite the fact that they comprised about 90 percent of the population in 1919, the Palestinian community was never consulted about the fate of their own country at the Paris Peace Conference. They were once again ignored during the Mandate when the British re-mapped Palestine, this time as a cadastre. At the behest of the Zionist movement, Palestine now became a parceled grid of property lots to facilitate Jewish land purchases (Figure 4). The map destroyed the indigenous communal land system—Europeans refused to conceptually fit it into their doctrines of private property. Palestinians were simply required to conform. The Zionist movement’s cartography also transformed the land to suit its needs. Their maps continued reviving an ancient Israel, erasing the Arabic place names in use for centuries by the Palestinians, replacing them with biblical Hebrew names. After the creation of Israel in 1948, during which an estimated 700,000 Palestinians were violently expelled from the land, Israeli cartography, no matter how secular, never ceased to understand Palestine in terms of the nineteenth century’s mapmakers. It was they after all, who in the 150 years leading up to the Nakba, first produced the fantasy of a Palestine without Palestinians. Thus for “modern” Palestine, such myths, as we have seen in the history of its mapping, have been among the most powerful forces in conquest and dispossession, no matter how scientific the conqueror’s methods, no matter how rational his techniques.

Recommended Reading:

Cartography of Palestine

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- Edney, Matthew (1997) *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Said, Edward (1978) *Orientalism*, New York: Random House.