Discussions of Egypt’s political place in the world tend to come attached to fairly standard narratives. For example, scholars working in the field of international relations have often described the period connected to Egyptian decolonization in terms of a particular chain of events. The story goes that, in the years following the Free Officers’ coup of July 1952, the British occupation of Egypt finally ended, and the United States jostled for influence in the country at the same time as the Cold War grew in resonance. Meanwhile, after Gamal Abdel Nasser had usurped Muhammad Nagib as the Free Officers’ leader in 1954, the coup started to become constructed as a revolution. Eventually—and particularly after the Bandung conference in 1955, the cataclysm of Suez in 1956 and the creation of the United Arab Republic in 1958—Soviet planners moved in, the Egyptian state became massively centralized and Third World and Pan-Arab identities increased in importance. Simultaneously, in addition to histories of his eventual undoing after the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, studies of the increasing consolidation of Nasser’s political power abound.¹

However, as Laura Bier has noted, there are alternatives to this (fairly linear) decolonization narrative. Discussing the set of practices that she terms Egyptian state feminism, Bier asserts that ‘what such studies leave out are the countless struggles to define the content and meaning of the [Nasserist] project that occurred in other arenas.’² This chapter deals with one such arena. Archaeological practice—and the representation of archaeological remains more generally—helped to define Egyptian state projects during the post-1952 period and also forged connections between Egypt
and wider political processes: the spread of the Cold War, for example. In this manner, archaeological work comprised one of ‘the countless struggles’ to constitute the meaning of Egyptian decolonization, and unlike certain political narratives, the history of archaeology in Egypt makes clear that the process of defining and dispersing decolonized political power in the country not only occurred from the top down. This process also occurred, perhaps literally, from the ground up as archaeological field work took place. After briefly discussing archaeological representations from Egypt’s decolonizing era and discussing the historical background to the practice of archaeology in Egypt, this chapter illustrates this thesis by concentrating on an excavation carried out just south of Cairo in the mid-1950s at the site of Mit Rahina (ancient Memphis). This case study emphasizes the necessity of bringing the role of archaeological work, hitherto barely discussed, into wider discussions about decolonization and the Cold War.3

[B] Archaeological Representations in the Egyptian Media

A vastly contradictory set of political spheres engulfed Egypt and its archaeological remains, and representations of archaeological tourism during the period of Egyptian decolonization provide a convenient introduction to them. The drive to attract foreign visitors to Egypt’s archaeological sites had long played a role in defining the country’s place vis-à-vis the rest of the world.4 After 1952, this drive would also become a potent indicator of the complexity of Egypt’s decolonization narrative, at least in terms of the touristic representations that circulated around Egypt’s archaeological spaces and the heterogeneous political narratives to which these representations could be connected. These representations attest to a country with a
constantly—and perhaps purposefully—fluid relationship with various political contexts. This complex situation belies the meta-narratives imposed upon Egypt in histories of international relations, and starts to suggest how people actually mediated those meta-narratives, at least in the press.

For instance, the *Egypt Travel Magazine* attempted to attract an English-speaking audience to the country. However, the representations contained within the publication also indicate the heterogeneous discourses being mobilized around Egyptian archaeological sites. Take issue number 75 of November 1960: the publication carried the name of the *Egypt Travel Magazine*, but the front cover of this issue also carried the discreet reminder—as a subtitle in a much smaller font—that Egypt officially constituted the southern region of the United Arab Republic (a political union with Syria that had begun in 1958). Egypt, as the cover made clear, possessed multiple identities, and inside this issue, stories relating to archaeology further attested to this situation. At a time (just two years after the Suez Crisis) when British relations with Egypt had apparently suffered, an article entitled ‘First British cruise arrives’ had a remarkably upbeat tone. The article noted that ‘this is the first time that a cruise composed entirely of British tourists and organized by the Royal Mail Lines has touched port at Alexandria since the *Iberia* in 1955.’ The article also discussed how ‘all [the passengers] were able to visit the Pyramids and Sphinx.’

While clearly a promotional ruse, this transparent attempt to woo further British visitors demonstrates how the lure of Egypt’s archaeology placed the country within multiple conflicting international sphere: whether the pan-Arab United Arab Republic or a Britain attracted by the romantic lure of Egyptian antiquities. Other articles also melded discussions of archaeology and the attraction of other international constituencies to Egypt. For instance, one piece discussed the visit of
Hamengkubuwono IX, the Sultan of Yogyakarta and the Minister and Chair of the Superior Council of Tourism in Sukarno’s Indonesia. The article noted that the Sultan had come to Egypt to inspect the country’s tourist facilities, and he had also visited archaeological sites in Luxor. Meanwhile, another article reported the visit of the (American) Chairman of Rotary International and his wife, who visited the pyramids, located in ‘Egypt, the crossroads of a new world’. They also attended a dinner in Cairo’s Nile Hilton, which, after its construction during the second half of the 1950s, was the preeminent establishment for visitors to the country’s archaeological sites. The Nile Hilton potently signified Egypt’s contradictory relationship with the American power structures that the country’s revolutionary leadership had apparently rejected: as Annabel Wharton has noted, Conrad Hilton tied his growing hotel network to ‘Free World’ ideals circulating within the US. Thus, from the front cover of the Egypt Travel Magazine onwards, there is a political ambiguity in the articles that the publication contains that is hard to reconcile with any straightforward narrative of Egypt’s nonaligned place in the world.

The Arabic language press also indicated the complex political spheres enveloping Egypt’s archaeological sites. Every time celebrities or international dance and theatre troupes visited Egypt, it seemed that the press corps—presumably in collusion with state tourism representatives—would make the visitors undergo a photo opportunity at the pyramids and ask them for some positive words about the country. Yet these opportunities also revealed the deep ambiguities of Egypt’s place in the world. In January 1958, for instance, Akhir Sa’a, a weekly illustrated magazine, pictured the Hollywood star Linda Christian in front of the pyramids. The accompanying report emphasized Christian’s more local background (‘the woman born in Palestine and who lived in the East’). However, the accompanying pictures
also made clear the apparent allure of Hollywood glamour to readers in Egypt, illustrating the star beaming in the spotlight atop a camel. Even at a time when the Soviet Union had taken an apparently increased role in Egyptian life, then, America’s influence over Egypt never entirely faded. Press representations provide a convenient, if not necessarily very deep, introduction to such a contradictory political whirl as it manifested itself around archaeological sites. However, events at the sites themselves were significantly more meaningful.

[B] Practising the Modern in Archaeology

Archaeological practices on the ground echoed, and perhaps helped to constitute, this political ambiguity. One excavation, a collaborative exercise between the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (University Museum) and the Egyptian Department of Antiquities, provides a particularly helpful example. Beginning in 1953 and ending in 1957, these two institutions negotiated, carried out and closed down their work at the site of Mit Rahina. This process, including the act of excavation itself, attempted to come to terms with and also influence the political direction a decolonized Egypt would take—from both the American and the Egyptian side. On one level, as the excavation’s quick termination suggests, this attempt failed. However, on another level, archaeological practices indeed aided the constitution of Egypt’s now-revolutionary future. Away from meta-narratives of international relations, the definition of Egypt’s future place in the world thus took place on, and also in, the (archaeological) ground.

Some historical context makes clear why this political act of archaeological definition occurred. Both after, but also prior to, the Free Officers’ coup of July 1952,
archaeological work in Egypt existed within a state of more general political flux. The coup was one event in a much longer anti-colonial struggle, and among the matters comprising that struggle, antiquities had proven a longstanding source of contention. After 1922, when the discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb had coincided with Britain’s unilateral granting of nominal (if not actual) independence to Egypt, Egyptian claims to ownership and control of antiquities found in the country became increasingly vocal. More importantly, they also became increasingly successful.12 Egyptian government officials now placed the representatives of the largely Western infrastructure of institutions dedicated to excavating in, and removing artefacts from, Egypt on the defensive by threatening their ability to carry out these acts.13 Among other institutions related to the Egyptian past, officials worked hard to make sure that the Department of Egyptian Antiquities (or Maslihat al-Athar al-Misriyya), the government body in charge of administering ancient archaeological sites and the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities in Cairo, became comprised of an increasingly Egyptian staff. Since its foundation in the nineteenth century, members of the Department, many of whom were foreign, had worked under a French director. That director would remain French until after the Free Officers’ coup of 1952. However, the institution’s (often British) mid-level employees were increasingly embattled, as more Egyptians laid claim to their jobs in the period from 1922 onward.14

Debates about Egyptian modernity, as well as its gradual construction, helped to constitute this process. Indeed, the establishment of a thoroughly Egyptian Department of Egyptian Antiquities occurred at the same time as the modern Egyptian nation-state became an increasingly manifest entity.15 Thus, the enactment of this process made the country’s past a central part of its move toward decolonization. From 1925, the newly founded (and explicitly modern and secular)
Egyptian University in Cairo started to train the state’s citizens in various facets of Egyptian archaeology, institutionalizing the past as a phenomenon that an appropriately educated group of Egyptian citizens could tackle. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education took charge of the Department of Egyptian Antiquities, alongside various other institutions that dealt with Coptic and Arab antiquities. Placed under the appropriate Ministry, antiquities administration became a field within which Egyptian citizens could not only claim appropriate, trained understanding: now, they could assert the ability to work in this field, too, by citing the authority of rational, even technocratic, expertise in administering archaeological work in their country.\textsuperscript{16} In turn, this action helped to realize the possibilities of decolonized Egypt by pointing to the inevitability of a wholly Egyptian-run country.

The events of July 1952 confirmed the potency of this specifically Egyptian body of modernist technocrats. For the first time, an Egyptian, Mustafa Amer, previously Rector of Faruq University in Alexandria, became Director of the Department of Egyptian Antiquities. Subsequently, in 1953, a change in the law centralized all government departments related to Egypt’s ancient past into one new Department of Antiquities, also under Amer’s control.\textsuperscript{17} In this context of national modernization, the cooperative work at Mit Rahina took place, representing one, but certainly not the only, attempt by archaeological practitioners from elsewhere to stake their claim to continued relevance within this modernizing (and soon to be revolutionary) Egyptian world. Significantly, then, this attempt also illustrates how archaeological work that took place in this decolonizing context could become entwined with much wider political ideals, helping define what decolonization in Egypt actually meant.
[B] Developing Egypt from the Ground Up

The University Museum’s representatives purposefully tied the excavation at Mit Rahina to discourses of development and modernization. At least in the US context, these discourses had become increasingly incorporated into Cold War policies. At this stage, tying archaeological work to such modernizing practices also provided the perfect point for American entry into Egypt, particularly as many of the technocrats now employed by the Egyptian Department of Antiquities had themselves appropriated discourses of modernization over the previous few decades. Thus, the practice of archaeology in Egypt led to the potential materialization of conflicting political ideals in the country as Egyptian and American experts met.

Egyptians such as Mustafa Amer had gained their positions of leadership by mobilizing the rationalizing discourses from which contemporary theories of development and modernization had gained prominence. Originally trained in Egypt, but also possessing a Master’s degree in geography from the University of Liverpool, Amer emphasized the need for Egyptians to produce modern scientific knowledge: he believed that such knowledge constituted ‘a prerequisite for Egypt’s entry into the modern world’. Embodying the increasing prominence of discourses of expertise (khibra) and scientific and technical development in Egypt, technocrats like Amer were deeply amenable to furthering this work on the ground as a national, and now revolutionary, project directed toward constituting Egypt’s future modernity.

Meanwhile, the University Museum’s representatives had other reasons to take serious heed of development and modernization discourses beyond their obvious applicability to the Egyptian context. These reasons, inherently tied to American conceptions of the early Cold War, varied from institutional self-interest to the
apparently altruistic. They also indicated how, even when not set forward by official US government programmes, such Cold War discourses still made their way into the decolonizing world.\textsuperscript{20} In the US, government policy linked development and modernization practices, which had historically coalesced in the Tennessee Valley Authority of the interwar New Deal, to the promotion of the national (and thus also ‘Free World’) interest. Point Four, the US technical assistance programme announced by President Truman in his January 1949 inaugural address (and renamed and reconstituted several times, eventually becoming USAID), aimed to show the ‘underdeveloped’ world the worth of American values of democracy and political community. Government officials viewed this work as a means of building the right sort of decolonized nation: one that subscribed to liberal democracy and capitalism, which would welcome the arrival of those values through the transfer of scientific and technological expertise offered by Point Four representatives.\textsuperscript{21}

Such values possessed obvious appeal for the employees of the University Museum most closely involved with the Mit Rahina work. For instance, Rudolf Anthes, Curator of the University Museum’s Egyptian Section and in charge of the work at Mit Rahina on behalf of the institution, believed in the cultivation of a certain type of modernist liberty. A German \textit{émigré}, Anthes was a trained Egyptologist who had worked in Berlin’s collection of Egyptian antiquities, held at the city’s Neues Museum. During the Second World War, the Nazi regime persecuted him due to his opposition to their ideologies; however, at the end of the conflict, he had ended up as Director of the Berlin collection. But due to the division of the city, Anthes then had to work in East Berlin while living in its West. He eventually seized the opportunity to move to Philadelphia and work for the University Museum, and also became a quiet proponent of certain, although certainly not all, Free World ideology.\textsuperscript{22} A
supporter of liberal ideals of citizenship, US development work clearly appealed to him.

The University Museum’s Director, the archaeologist Froelich Rainey, also had great interest in American development policy. Rainey had worked for the State Department during the Second World War and had links to the fledgling CIA and broader US foreign policy circles. Now, as Rainey planned a massively increased programme of international research work for his Museum’s employees, his movement within these official and quasi-official foreign policy networks clearly aided the formulation of his agenda. At one point, Rainey even placed CIA operatives among his excavation staff. More potently, however, Rainey formulated the University Museum’s potential Mit Rahina work extensively in the style of US development policy. Rainey clearly saw—and believed in—the potential benefits of this policy for the promotion of his institution and his country. At the time of the initial Mit Rahina suggestion, he had apparently proposed similar work in Iraq, Turkey and Afghanistan.

Indeed, a consideration of the initial proposals for the excavation put together by Rainey and Anthes during 1953 and 1954 reflects how efficacious the two men found constructing an archaeological project that could make use of development and modernization policy. At the same time as US development experts worked with Egyptians on a land reclamation programme known as the Egyptian American Rural Improvement Service, so the University Museum proposal suggested naming the forthcoming excavation work the ‘Egyptian-American archaeological research programme’. This new programme echoed the cooperative nature of US development initiatives, a collaboration initially proposed by Rainey in a letter to the
Egyptian historian Shafiq Ghurbal, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Education.\textsuperscript{26}

The project called

for work under the direction of Egyptians and Americans, [the]

publication of results in both English and Egyptian [\textit{sic}] if technically possible, agreement of the cooperating institutions on the site or sites to be excavated, and a division of [excavated] objects within the terms of the current Egyptian Antiquities Law.\textsuperscript{27}

After a visit to Egypt in the first half of 1954, during which he discussed these proposals with government representatives including Amer, Anthes further refined these goals. The two organizations would still work together; additionally, the expert practitioners that the Museum promised to provide would also train Egyptians in the field, aiding the development of the Department of Antiquities’ workforce (if also in a way that suited the University Museum). Finally, the Museum agreed to bear much of the financial burden of the work, including publication, though the refined proposal did not make clear whether any excavated artefacts would ever return to America, leaving the possibility temptingly open.\textsuperscript{28}

The proposed Egyptian-American archaeological research programme represented a compromise solution buried in the contradictions of contemporary politics. On one level, through its adoption of development discourse, the programme opened archaeological work in Egypt to non-governmental cooperation with American institutions and practices at the same time as American political leaders worked to assert their, and their country’s, influence in the Middle East more generally. However, on another level, the proposed work allowed Egyptians to assert their own national development prerogatives, in particular by making use of the resources offered by the University Museum, at a time when decolonization
proceeded swiftly. In practice, the two sides never completely resolved this issue, reflecting the problems encountered as US diplomats and technical assistance representatives sought to bring decolonizing states on side during the early stages of the Cold War. As much as the official levels of the political world, archaeological practice was an arena in which the wider meanings of Egyptian decolonization became real.

[B] Shaping Land, Shaping People at Mit Rahina

As work at Mit Rahina took shape on the ground, problems related to the work became increasingly clear. In particular, when translated onto the ground the work highlighted the practical limitations of US-style development aims. Indeed, the ground on which the project took shape played a central role in this situation. Land occupied a major place in development and modernization projects: as earlier examples like the Tennessee Valley Authority had shown, the use and shaping of land could potentially mould the actions of the people who lived and worked on it.29 Similar, then, to other US development projects such as the land reclamation scheme carried out by the Egyptian American Rural Improvement Service, the programme at Mit Rahina transparently attempted to mould people through controlling the ways they lived and worked on the archaeological site. Rudolf Anthes himself noted in April 1954 that ‘the Egyptians[,] if they are going to be efficient [archaeologists] in the future ... can’t do that without adapting themselves to the methods of European researchers.’30

The work at Mit Rahina attempted to achieve this aim by shaping the practices and views of its Egyptian trainees as they carried out their work in the field along
these ‘European’ (or, more broadly, Western) lines. This regulation, as became clear throughout the excavations, was to take place through the University Museum field team’s guidance of their trainees’ excavation, recording and timekeeping practices, in addition to some of their domestic habits.  

Archaeologists working in Egypt long had understood the possibilities their field practice possessed for forming such disciplined subjects: the British archaeologist William Matthew Flinders Petrie, for instance, had connected such regulated work to his early twentieth-century eugenicist ideals. Now, the linking of the Mit Rahina work to Cold War ideals of modernization provided a new, up-to-date justification for this practice. Furthermore, the University Museum, which was also offered other potential sites, had excavated at Mit Rahina both during and for a few years after the First World War. Beyond regulatory practices, then, returning to the site provided another chance to demonstrate what the University Museum could do in Egypt.

However, making the work collaborative made implementing Western ideals at the site significantly harder. Chronologically parallel to the Egyptian American Rural Improvement Service and the Mit Rahina excavations, the Egyptian government had set up its own land reclamation programme, which it named Tahrir (or ‘Liberation’) Province. The programme attempted to demonstrate that Egypt could undertake modernization projects without foreign aid, and also undertake them on a large, even totalizing, scale by not only reclaiming land, but also using that process to construct an idealized Egyptian community. As Egypt’s new leaders began to reshape the country as a revolutionary nation-state, so the shaping of the land through its reclamation played a vital part in this process, much as it did at Mit Rahina.

Thus, beyond the other reasons that played a role in the choice of Mit Rahina, after meeting with Amer, Anthes noted that the ‘site anyhow must be done since the
area is claimed by the peasants’. The work at Mit Rahina closely fit evolving modernization plans in Egypt. Indeed, Anthes’ use of the word ‘peasants’ aligned closely with this policy, which characterized the peasantry and the land they worked as an object of reform. As in Tahrir Province, that land could now be reclaimed and redistributed for the peasantry’s agricultural use. Choosing to work with this Egyptian modernization process was not necessarily problematic per se. However, the diplomatic choice of Mit Rahina as an excavation site caused significant problems, since the land there presented considerable difficulties in terms of its archaeological excavation.

Indeed, the problems that the University Museum team encountered at the site made the demonstration of their expertise there almost impossible, rendering their proposed application of American development objectives increasingly difficult. Mit Rahina was located in the waterlogged earth of the Nile Valley’s floodplain, unlike many other archaeological sites in Egypt, which were more normally located on the country’s desert fringes. Anything extracted from the site was therefore found in something of a congealed mess, and during the excavations, diary entry upon diary entry illustrates how these circumstances, in addition to the way in which they created odd patterns of archaeological remains, made it difficult for the University Museum team to understand the material that they excavated. Indeed, in one particularly memorable instance in 1955, Anthes bemoaned:

But why, for God’s sake, did they use these brick built squares as a deposit of broken (and fragmentary) pots? It may have some meaning that so many bottom pieces were found; did they use these as flower pots?? But no flowers are found!37
Anthes’ exclamation verges on the meaningless, which in itself is telling: none of the University Museum team could understand the site where they had volunteered to work. For most of their time there, they simply could not give the site meaning. Ironically, the work at the site coincided with an increasing awareness among archaeologists elsewhere of the importance of understanding the earth itself, whether waterlogged or otherwise, for constructing interpretations of the past. In particular, the stratigraphic relationships of archaeological remains visible in the vertical ‘sections’ at the side of excavation trenches had started to take on new meaning at this point in time as a means of understanding the relative chronologies of past human action that those sections embodied. In the post-World War II era of decolonization and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, archaeologists outside of Egypt claimed that their work could be applied around the world to an extent never before possible, helping them to understand the entirety of the human past in all of its variation. One archaeologist in particular, Mortimer Wheeler of the University of London’s Institute of Archaeology, even went so far as to claim that ‘there is no method proper to the excavation of a British site which is not applicable — nay, must be applied — to a site in Africa or Asia.’\(^{38}\) Wheeler subtly suggested that his own stratigraphic technique could be applied exactly where many of the world’s decolonizing nations were located, and it thus seems unsurprising that Anthes would later, in 1965, note in relation to Mit Rahina that:

we learned by our own experience the fact which is elementary outside of Egypt, that only a coordinated system of horizontal and vertical cuts [in the ground] is adequate for the understanding of a site which has accumulated under changing living conditions ...\(^{39}\)
Unfortunately, Anthes and his co-workers only realized the applicability of new forms of archaeological stratigraphy at Mit Rahina at the very end of the second excavation season, when the method’s inadvertent application in one particular trench allowed them finally to understand the relative chronology of the remains they had uncovered at the site. After two seasons of scrabbling around Mit Rahina, and particularly after a second season during which the team took time to read material that highlighted the importance of stratigraphic sections in understanding complex archaeological remains, a section was eventually applied to the site that helped to make sense of what the team found within their excavation trenches. However, even then the team only applied this section accidentally: one excavation trench at Mit Rahina was so large that in order to undertake work there it became necessary to leave a central baulk, a ‘relief wall’, standing inside it until the very last minute. This baulk, when finally prepared for clearance so that the entire trench could be understood as a whole, revealed how the complex assortment of remains in the site had become formed and connected over time. Thus, only after staring at this section did Anthes realize, ‘our site now stands in a more significant position with regard to the whole Memphis area than could be realised before.’ Only at the end of the second season of work could this claim to authority be made, and only then could the team’s expertise be justified.

Indeed, notes made by Anthes make clear that despite efforts to assert the University Museum’s control, in addition to Western ideals, at Mit Rahina, local cultural forms seem to have consistently made themselves felt during the excavation. On-site practices reinforced Egyptian working hierarchies that had developed over the previous few decades. The group of skilled archaeological workers known as Quftis, who hailed from the town of Quft in Upper Egypt and who had formed a powerful
comprador body since the time of Petrie’s excavations in Egypt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, seem (from the available evidence) to have taken charge of much of the excavation work and also of the local villagers who laboured for the project. Excavation practices thus mobilized field-based social practices that had developed throughout the decades prior to 1952, lending a significantly more ‘local’ flavour to the proceedings than had perhaps initially been imagined.

Meanwhile, Egyptian insubordination also became an issue. Possessing little authority on the site, the University Museum team had little control over those individuals who the Department of Antiquities presented for training. In 1956, for example, the Department offered up Ibrahim ‘Abd el-Aziz, one of its employees, yet ‘Abd el-Aziz did not adapt well to discipline. On 17 March, Anthes complained that ‘Abd el-Aziz ‘does not appear before breakfast’. By 19 March, he pointedly noted that ‘Abd el Aziz [sic] has not shown up.’ By 5 April, Anthes commented that ‘he is clever enough, but you can’t rely on him.’ Later in the month, ‘Abd el-Aziz had not arrived again, and Anthes phoned Amer to tell him that ‘I should like to have him [‘Abd el-Aziz] removed because we do not need him and do not want him any longer.’ At Mit Rahina, the American development work that the excavation so obviously reflected received short shrift. In the archaeological sphere, attempts to influence the course of Egyptian decolonization from the Western side therefore appeared inconclusive.

[B] Cancellation and Continuation

After two seasons at Mit Rahina, both partners in the excavation wanted to cancel their involvement. Indeed, the University Museum’s management had consistently
expressed doubt about the efficacy of sponsoring the dig. Certain individuals who sat on the institution’s Board of Managers suggested that the excavations had not produced the artefacts that the Museum had so desired in its initial proposal. Therefore, the Board, together with Rainey, whose motivation for supporting the work also seemed to dwindle as Mit Rahina failed to produce what he perceived as any useful results, used the 1956 Suez crisis and its aftermath as a pretext not to continue with the renewed excavations that Anthes had planned, much as on certain levels, US involvement with Egypt itself slightly declined at this point in time. Indeed, Anthes’ inadvertent success at the site at the end of the second season, and also his connected hope for improved work there, won him little institutional favour under these circumstances.\(^{48}\) The work at Mit Rahina seemed not to have produced anything of much value, whether in terms of artefacts or in terms of appropriately trained Egyptians.

The attitude behind this cancellation also demonstrated a striking disconnect from changing Egyptian discussions about antiquities, which emphasized that Egyptian relations with the wider world were as influenced by fields like archaeology as political practice more generally. In particular, these discussions, reflecting the manner in which US-style practices at Mit Rahina had failed to counter various Egyptian assertions of power, started to mirror the Egyptian state’s own increasing assertiveness. Despite the presence of international excavation teams in the country, discussions increasingly attempted to make certain that Egyptian hands would take total control of Egypt’s material past, whether in the field or elsewhere, at the same time as Egyptian officials took increasing control of the country’s future, particularly after Suez. Such control did not merely extend to the Egyptianization of the Department of Antiquities. Debates also took place in the Egyptian press, influenced
by policy rumblings emanating from the state’s structures of governance, as to whether the government should further regulate the country’s antiquities trade. 49

Meanwhile, under the terms of a cultural exchange agreement with Egypt, Polish archaeologists had also recently started excavation in Egypt. 50 Members of Western institutions perceived this move as a rejoinder to their own work. Indeed, Anthes and certain members of his excavation staff expressed concern that Western influence in Egypt would dwindle and Soviet influence increase if Western archaeological work did not continue uninterrupted. 51 The excavations at Mit Rahina may not have formed an explicit part of US policy in Egypt. They may not even have been that successful by 1957. However, it is clear that at least some of the University Museum’s Mit Rahina team were distraught not to have the further chance to influence the practices of Egyptians in the way that had originally been set out. Yet, as they voiced this desperation, it was also starting to become clear that that chance would not exist.

The Egyptian government did not wish the Mit Rahina work to continue, and the Department of Antiquities’ communication with the University Museum mirrored the state’s increased assertiveness post-Suez. Indeed, a bluntly purposeful letter arrived in Philadelphia in October 1957. Written by the new Director of Egypt’s Department of Antiquities, Muharram Kamal, the letter, distinctly underwhelmed by anything Rainey’s failed institution had done or now had to say for itself, stated that the Department could not renew the University Museum’s excavation permit, because it now wanted archaeological excavation work to take place in the Egyptian region of Nubia: the soon-to-be-initiated construction of the new Aswan High Dam would lead to the flooding of the region’s antiquities. 52 Post-Suez, the Egyptian government began entirely to dictate terms to Western archaeological missions, even as it
apparently did the Poles a significant favour by allowing them to take home certain antiquities. The University Museum’s archaeologists would be welcome in Nubia, but their efforts at Mit Rahina had clearly served little purpose.

Indeed, the planned construction of the new Aswan High Dam had already led to a 1955 report, prepared by the Department of Antiquities and distributed internationally, outlining which Nubian sites would need to be excavated before flooding occurred.⁵³ However, while the Department of Antiquities had previously requested international assistance, representatives of the institutions that might have provided this help had also felt more or less free to ignore the plea. Excavation in Egypt had historically taken place north of Nubia, and work outside of the more southerly, and potentially much more artefact poor, region represented a far more attractive prospect to institutions like the University Museum, even at a site like Mit Rahina.⁵⁴ Before Suez, the Egyptian state could not get foreign archaeologists to listen to its message.

Afterwards, however, this situation changed: Egyptian assertiveness following Suez dramatically altered events. Indeed, Kamal’s written order for directed archaeological excavation in Nubia reflected wider state policy and the consolidation of the power of an Egyptian technocracy: the ideal order of the day had become modernization work directed by Egyptian state experts. Under Amer’s directorship, the Department of Antiquities had gone some way toward this outcome, but under Kamal’s lead the institution went further. Could archaeologists from countries like the US find a way once again to attempt to assert their own priorities and ideologies? Only time would tell.

[B] Conclusion
Archaeological work in Egypt reflected the country’s wider decolonizing experience, suggesting that postcolonial Egypt was constituted as much through an apparently innocuous field like archaeology as through top-level political discussions. The University Museum attempted to use the Mit Rahina work not only to foster its own influence in Egypt, but also to bring American political ideals into Egypt as the Cold War gathered pace. However, the particularities of the Egyptian situation meant that those involved with implementing these ideals found them hard to practice, much as other US attempts to work with the country seemed to fail. Eventually, too, the Egyptian government took a much firmer stance with the University Museum, cancelling its work and directing further archaeology toward Nubia. This assertive move echoed post-Suez political realities, as Egypt became an increasingly assertive state on the world stage.

On some level, then, archaeology adds little new insight to the story of Egyptian decolonization: the course of archaeological events seems to reflect political meta-narratives of the era more generally. However, events at Mit Rahina illustrate the particular ways in which this meta-narrative could emerge: in this reading, failure in cooperative fieldwork contributed to the path of Egyptian decolonization as much as events surrounding the Suez Canal. In a different, more successful, situation, the Museum may have kept working at the site, and the development programme it attempted to put into practice may have been implemented. The realities of decolonization in Egypt thus did not come about in as straightforward a manner as has otherwise been suggested, hinting that a more nuanced historical investigation of this historical period is necessary.
[A] Key Texts


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1 I conducted the research for this article as part of my doctoral work at the University of Cambridge, funded by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council; additional travel support to research the material featured in this article came from Darwin College, Cambridge, and the Royal Historical Society. I would like to thank Eleanor Robson and Jim Secord for their helpful supervision, and also Elisabeth Leake and
Leslie James for both the original chance to present the paper and also the chance to publish it in this volume.


3 The only other discussion of archaeology in this historical context seems to be Bloembergen, Marieke and Eickhoff, Martijn (2011), ‘Conserving the past, mobilizing the Indonesian future: archaeological sites, regime change and heritage politics in Indonesia in the 1950s’, Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, 167(4), 405–436. Given the lack of literature on archaeological practices in the Middle East and North Africa in this period, it is currently difficult to understand the extent to which archaeological practices in Egypt at this time were in any way exceptional for the region.


5 The publication also had a French edition, albeit with the same (English) name.


13 Supra note 4 details this infrastructure.


16 The first chapter of my doctoral dissertation (forthcoming, University of 
Cambridge) addresses this process of Egyptian institutional reform as it related to 
 antiquities.
17 Ibid. On Amer, see El Shakry, Omnia (2007), The Great Social Laboratory: 
Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt. Stanford: Stanford 
University Press.
18 For modernisation and development work in general, see Ekbladh, David (2010), 
The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American 
Princeton: Princeton University Press. For this work in Egypt, see Alterman, Jon B. 
El Shakry (2007); Mitchell, Timothy (2002), Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, 
19 El Shakry (2007), 68 (her words, not his).
21 Alterman (2002); Ekbladh (2010).
36.
23 Rainey, Froelich G. (1992), Reflections of a Digger: Fifty Years of World 
Archaeology. Philadelphia: University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.
24 Froelich Rainey to Shafiq Ghurbal, 21 April 1953, Expedition Records: Egypt, Box 
38, Folder 3, Archive of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and 
Anthropology, Philadelphia (UMA).
25 Ibid.

Supra note 24.

Copy of (presumably final) Mit Rahina proposal, 15 June 1954, Expedition Records: Egypt, Box 38, Folder 3, UMA.

Ekbladh (2010).

Alterman (2002); Rudolf Anthes’ 1954 diary from Egypt, entry for 12 April 1954, Expedition Records: Egypt, Box 39, Folder 2, UMA.


Anthes (1965), 6–7, makes a point of noting this work; Clarence Fisher, one of Anthes’ predecessors at the University Museum, led it.

Alterman (2002).

Supra note 30, entry for 11 April 1954.


Anthes’ 1955 field diary, entry for 7 March 1955, Expedition Records: Egypt, Box 38, Folder 10, UMA.


Anthes (1965), 2.
Discussion of this realisation is found in Anthes (1965), 59.

Anthes’ 1956 field diary, entry for 28 April 1956, Expedition Records: Egypt, Expedition Records: Egypt, Box 38, Folder 12, UMA.

Anthes (1956), 8–9.

For the history of the Quftis, see Quirke, Stephen (2010), Hidden Hands: Egyptian Workforces in Petrie Excavation Archives, 1880–1924. London: Duckworth.

Supra note 41, entry for 17 March 1956.

Ibid., entry for 19 March 1956.

Ibid., entry for 5 April 1956.

Ibid., entry for 17 April 1956.

Correspondence reveals the actual rationale for cancellation: Letter from Froelich Rainey to Percy Madeira, 15 October 1957, Expedition Records: Egypt, Box 46, Folder 1, UMA.

A selection of articles appeared across the Egyptian press from June 1957 onwards after Charles Muses, an American esoteric philosopher who the Egyptian government had granted permission to excavate at the site of Dahshur, attempted to remove a number of antiquities from Egypt. See Carruthers (2014 forthcoming) ch. 5.

Wente, Edward F. (1957), ‘untitled letter’, Newsletter of the American Research Center in Egypt, 26, 4; Wente states that the agreement was ‘between Egypt and communist countries’, although the date of the accord is unclear.

See Helen Wall to Rudolf Anthes, 4 May 1957, and Rudolf Anthes to Helen Wall, 5 June 1957, Expedition Records: Egypt, Box 38, Folder 9, UMA.


54 For one assertion of the desire to excavate at non-Nubian sites even as the Nubian work began, see John Biggs, Jr. to Froelich Rainey, 22 December 1959, Administrative Records, Director’s Office, Froelich Rainey, Box 17, Folder 10.