

[Rose on Minkin, 'Imperial Bodies: Empire and Death in Alexandria, Egypt'](#)

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Shana Elizabeth Minkin. *Imperial Bodies: Empire and Death in Alexandria, Egypt*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019. xiii + 199 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-5036-0892-4.

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Empires are messy business. Despite the stated goal of imperial projects to create ordered societies in the image of their metropolises, local conditions rarely allowed for this to happen: “Empire was always a locally constituted experience” (p. 9). In *Imperial Bodies: Empire and Death in Alexandria, Egypt*, Shana Minkin uses the bodies of dead imperial subjects as a way to both clarify and complicate the imperial experience in Egypt. Alexandria, whose image as a cosmopolitan entrepôt is both celebrated and critiqued, is a particularly fertile ground for examination given its large resident foreign population, many of whom were born there, died there, and never imagined living anywhere else. Despite the passports they carried, these imperial subjects may well have considered themselves Alexandrines and possibly even Egyptians. While a number of postcolonial works have focused on the bodies of colonized subjects, Minkin raises interesting questions about the nature of empire and impact of imperial projects on the bodies of imperial subjects. She describes how the hybrid identity of an Alexandrine in life was erased in death and replaced by an absolute imperial identity, claimed by a consular agent, given a funeral in the appropriate religious institution, and buried in a foreign cemetery.

This book seeks to complicate the idea of British colonial Egypt as fully British, both in the sense that British interests alone dominated among European imperial interests in Egypt, and in the sense that Egypt was fully under British control. Minkin argues that in Egypt “imperial power asserted itself not through unilateral assertions of the colonial state but through the local consulate’s attenuated claims of belonging. Empire, rather than claim the colonized state as belonging to it, presented itself as belonging to the colonized state” (p. 2).

Imperial Bodies walks through the process of dying and death, taking the reader on the imagined journey from sickbed to burial plot. Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of the foreign hospitals in Alexandria. Minkin argues—correctly—against the prevailing historical narrative that foreign-operated hospitals were distinct from (or parallel to) the development of the state medical system, and of their depiction as agents of control for the foreign population, and not charged to serve the indigenous (p. 19). Foreign hospitals were charitable institutions whose mission went well beyond serving members of their national colony in Alexandria but treated patients of different nationalities and creeds, including the poor, most of whom were poor Muslims. The importance of foreign hospitals to the local health infrastructure, she argues, is reflected by the fact that the Egyptian national government often provided subvention funding to keep the institutions operational.

However, the chapter provides more of a corollary to the prevailing historical narrative than a corrective. While successfully arguing that foreign hospitals were local institutions, by not including medical institutions normally considered local—the government hospitals—the chapter reifies the two systems as separate and distinct.

Chapter 2 describes the process through which the dead were identified as foreign, claimed by their respective consulates, and identified or re-identified as imperial subjects through the bureaucratic processes of death inquiries, the issuance of death certificates, the publication of death notices, and funeral rites. When consular agents claimed the dead, they were performing an act of imperial reclamation—hybrid identities became simplified and fixed: “Claiming a body for France or Great Britain thus bolstered the number of people—both dead and alive—who needed French or British governmental aid and authority” (p. 51). So, too, did the staging of a funeral create an often spontaneous, improvised community in which friends and complete strangers were brought together under the umbrella of nationality or religion, sometimes with mere hours’ notice. The funerals of notable individuals—Minkin describes the rites for a French archbishop—provided the opportunity for imperial agents to stage grand events showcasing the strength and size of the local imperial colony.

Once funeral rites were completed, the dead had to be buried; and cemeteries comprise the focus of chapter 3. Cemeteries, of course, require suitable land, which needs to be acquired from local authorities through various means—donation, purchase, appropriation. As with funeral rites, cemeteries also required the affixation of firm labels upon their corpses—in this case, religious affiliation, which could prove messy as these were not always congruous with nationality. The cemeteries of Alexandria, as elsewhere, provided a link between the living and the dead, and a physical locus for communal celebrations. Foreign colonies had to negotiate with each other—Anglican and Scottish, French Catholic and Maronite—as well as with the Alexandria Municipality and Egyptian government over the physical locations where imperial subjects would be laid to rest. Cemeteries, Minkin argues, were a visible reminder of the imperial legacy on Egyptian soil, and, like other major government monuments, their placement within the urban setting was important.

The final chapter examines the written archive in which living and dead imperial subjects were inscribed. Minkin opens with a French woman—Pauline Borivent—whose birth was registered by her father at the French consulate in Alexandria in 1908. Even after Pauline moved to France, her marriage in 1960 and death in 2003 were certified by the consulate in Alexandria. Here, as in chapter 2, Minkin emphasizes the permanence of the subject’s identity upon their death. One could be born a European national in Alexandria, marry a national of a different country, perhaps converting to a different Christian denomination in the process—death literally provided the last word on the subject: “If one’s death was registered as French ... that was a final act, an unchangeable placement of the imperial dead under the auspices of French protection and governance in Alexandria” (p. 101). The ways that deaths were investigated and recorded, just as the site where one would be buried, were dependent entirely on where one died; these final bureaucratic acts were symbolically important for both the imperial power and the surviving relatives.

Imperial Bodies is at its best when it is dealing with the messiness and hybridity of the imperial subjects at its core. The tension between the ways that imperial subjects in colonial settings saw themselves and the way that they were viewed by their government representatives complicates the

idea of a European/local binary. One of Minkin's most valuable contributions to the scholarship is the idea that "foreign" nationals born in Egypt, who lived their lives in Egypt and lived nowhere else can—and should—be considered Egyptian. Her analysis is reminiscent of Will Hanley's in *Identifying with Nationality: Europeans, Ottomans, and Egyptians in Alexandria* (2017). While his work focuses on the ways that imperial powers tried to claim living subjects in absolute terms, Minkin's creative examination of the bureaucratic processes that followed death reinforces the understanding that colonial identities in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Egypt defied attempts at categorization.

Where *Imperial Bodies* is less successful is as a work of late nineteenth-century Egyptian history. Given the book's focus on fluid and malleable identities, Minkin's simplistic treatment of the "Egyptian national government" is unsatisfying. Her narrative provides a not-always accurate impression of institutional continuity through the financial crisis of the 1870s and into the British occupation. For example, she refers to a "Health Ministry" as early as the 1870s and as late as the 1910s. There was no such ministry; the pre-occupation Conseil de Santé was dissolved due to its refusal to comply with official British positions on the origin of the 1883 cholera outbreak. It was replaced with a new, more compliant Sanitary Department—later renamed the Department of Public Health—housed within the Ministry of the Interior and run by British directors at least through World War I; it did not achieve ministry status until the 1930s.

Additionally, while Minkin's assertion that Egypt was not as fully under British control after 1882 as often assumed is correct, the "Egyptian-ness" of the national government during that time period is not self-evident; government organs need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. It could just as easily be argued that some ministries were hybrid Egyptian-European institutions representing competing imperial claims for limited government funding, as the Egyptian national budget was approved by the British consulate, which also controlled the Treasury. While the Egyptian state is not the main focus of the book, the oversimplified treatment of it is distracting and difficult to set aside entirely.

Imperial Bodies is most useful for students of empire, particularly those who work transnationally; one hopes to see future companion volumes exploring these issues in other colonial settings that continue to complicate the European/local binary. The book also provides a fascinating glimpse at the possibilities available to scholars who work in areas where access to formal state archives is politically sensitive or off-limits entirely. Minkin herself was denied access to the Egyptian State Archives after 2011, the same year the building housing the Alexandria Municipality archives burned down. Her construction and use of an alternative archive—the bodies of imperial subjects—is inventive and instructive. That she was able to construct such a lucid and clearly written work under the circumstances is commendable. Despite its flaws, *Imperial Bodies* is worth reading for the questions it raises about the nature of empire and the role that colonial bodies—in this case, cadavers—played in the construction of imperial projects.

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