“Re-Affirming Borders: Egyptological Practice, Nuclear Science and America in Egypt”

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While often perceived as harmlessly academic, Egyptology has played a major role in constructing borders – national and intellectual – in the Middle East, a process aided by US power. This paper investigates one historical episode – the development of radiocarbon dating at the University of Chicago – in order to explain how this process has occurred and why the boundaries it re-affirms need to be re-considered.

Utilizing Secord’s work on *Knowledge in Transit*, the paper argues that the interaction of Egyptologists with nuclear scientists during the development of the technique of radiocarbon dating – a development entwined with the Manhattan Project and American military-industrial power – reified ideas of ancient (and therefore also modern) Egypt. These ideas were (and still are) intimately connected with problematic colonial and racial notions.

As such, as the US sought to assert its power in Egypt, Egyptologists such as John Wilson of the University of Chicago aided it by re-asserting (to borrow from Abu el-Haj) previous *Facts on the Ground*. However, they also framed their help in terms of age-old Egyptological questions, perpetuating the idea that they were simply disinterested academics furthering the cause of modern science. It is unsurprising, then, that the scholarship put forward by those such as Wilson not only borrows from previous problematic Egyptological traditions, but also finds echoes in the work published by Egyptologists today. Under the banner of modernity, problematic practice was legitimized.

Then as now, Egyptologists have removed themselves from the process – aided and abetted by America – of constructing national borders and identities in the Middle East. They have also protected their work from accusations of intellectual violence; Egyptology appears harmless. This paper moves beyond such representations to suggest that the borders of Egyptological work (and what they conceal) need to be more closely considered; problematic practice – of regional impact – lurks behind them.