global dis :connect

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How did a longstanding tension between ideas that environments determine human destinies but that places could be terraformed to ‘escape’ the limits of climate shape imperial interference in Mesopotamia between 1780 and 1920?

The problem

Today, concerns about human effects on the climate are perhaps greater than ever. For much of human history, however, the opposite was true, and the effects of climates on people was often the more pressing concern. Environmental determinism – the notion that people are shaped physically, culturally and even morally by climate – was often used by imperial agents to justify empire in the nineteenth century, and the legacies of this continue to echo in problematic ways.

Core interest

Mesopotamia was of expanding geopolitical and imperial competition between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. This project traces especially British, French and later German imperial activities in this period amidst attempts to open new highways to India and resurrect lost ‘civilisations‘ and agricultural productivity.

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My research highlights imperial knowledge as pursued and resisted by a diverse range of historical actors, many of whom have been rendered absent in connected stories of global circulation and empire. In focusing on geographical features like rivers and deserts as laboratories of imperial and scientific knowledge making, this project also reveals the disconnected moments environmental categories emerged from imperial practices.

Preliminary results

Environmentally determinist categories have always been political, and bound up in attempts to divide, define, and control. In examining imperial terraforming in Mesopotamia, this research traces how climatic determinism was used to justify colonialism and inequality. Understanding this history matters today, not least because deterministic ideas are being reconfigured in new and troubling ways, for example in language around so-called ‘climate refugees’ and ‘climate conflicts.‘