CHAPTER 12

The Integration of Historical Cartography into the Present Day

The Darfur Case

Lucia Lovison-Golob

Introduction

In 1875, a group of eight British civil engineers, one doctor and several assistants and servants undertook an expedition to the Darfur region to identify a possible route for a railway, starting from about six miles upstream of Old Dongola along the Nile River to Darfur’s capital Al Fashir (also called El Fasher) in north-western Sudan. The railway was never constructed, but in 1881, a map and a book based on the expedition’s survey were published in the United Kingdom.¹ The 1875 expedition map specifies the Sudanese region’s topography, place names and drainage system, and presents a possible route for the railway. The map also identifies a network of water wells in an area where the precipitation has decreased from about 500 mm/year in the early 1900s to about 200 mm/year or less around 100 years later. This information was relevant at the time of the expedition and remains so at the present time because, in order to build a railway, a certain level of water supply is required, even though today the supply can be obtained through sources other than water wells.

The 1875 expedition map is now part of the Afrterra Foundation² holdings and became part of the Afrterra digitisation project. This project, undertaken with funding from the Afrterra Foundation and Suffolk University, Boston, seeks to digitise one of the largest private collections of historical maps of Africa in the United States. During the digitisation project, it was decided to investigate whether the railway track that was identified by the 1875 British survey might still be a possible route for a railway today. Soon afterwards, it was decided to investigate whether a railway might be constructed along this route, more than 137 years after the expedition.

The 1875 expedition represented by itself a unique endeavour in a period of local unrest and upheaval. Britain regarded Egypt and Sudan as a critical strategic region for British interests, and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 increased Britain’s focus on this area. In 1874, the Darfur region came under Anglo-Egyptian control. Within this historical framework, the British expedition to Al-Fashir in 1875 was encouraged by the then ruler of Egypt and Sudan, Khedive Ismail I, who would abdicate in 1877, two years before his death, in favour of his son Tawfiq.

Britain lost its control of the Darfur region from 1883 to 1898, when the area came mostly under the control of the Mahdists, who succeeded in capturing the capital, Khartoum, in 1885 where they killed Governor-General Charles Gordon. However, in 1899, Britain took back the region, which was then governed jointly by Britain and Egypt. This situation continued until 1943, when the British agreed to allow self-government in some parts of Sudan. Darfur, as part of Sudan, became independent in 1956.

Currently, the region has two primary railway lines: one runs in a north–south direction between Cairo and El Khartoum, while the other runs in a north-east–south-west direction from Port Sudan along the Red Sea to Nyala in southern Darfur, via Khartoum, and continues south to the main city of Wau. These two railway lines are characterised by 4725 kilometres of narrow gauge track (where the gauge is narrower than 1.435 mm or the standard gauge), called Cape gauge. These single-track railways were built initially from Wadi Halfa to Abu Hamed in 1896 and in 1897 by General Horatio Herbert Kitchener for military purposes – to fight the Mahdists. Having met with Cecil Rhodes a few weeks before the beginning of the construction of the first segment of Sudanese railway, Kitchener insisted on using the same gauge width as Rhodes was laying between Kimberley and Bulawayo.

The objective of this article is to describe the feasibility analysis of the railway route that was outlined by a geodetic survey of the 1875 expedition from Old Dongola to Al Fashir or Tendelti for the region of Darfur, so as to allow an evaluation as to whether it is possible to construct the railway line at the present time.

Data and Methods

Study Region
The region is located in the south-eastern part of the Sahara desert, and corresponds largely to a semi-arid plateau ranging from an elevation of 1000 m to

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3 El Khartoum or Khartoum, capital of Sudan.