In 1829, the first dissection lesson to be performed in Egypt was delivered in a newly constructed medical school at the outskirts of Cairo. The lecturer was a French doctor who had recently arrived from Marseilles, and the audience were young students who had just graduated from al-Azhar University-Mosque, Egypt’s 900-year old centre of Islamic education.

This lecture takes its cue from this historic moment of opening up human cadavers in the name of modern science. It describes how dissection was instituted as a central practice in the Qasr al-‘Aini School of Medicine, Egypt’s first institution of modern medicine that had been founded two years earlier, in 1827. It also follows the increasing reliance of a budding legal system on autopsies as a prime means to establish legal proof in criminal cases.

At the heart of the lecture is a fundamental question: to whom does the body belong? Is it to the “person” inhabiting it, or to the modern state that lays a fundamentally new claim on it? Does it belong to the community in which it used to live, and which honors and protects it after death? Or to God who, according to classic Islamic dogma, entrusted it to man to fulfill His wish in this world?

The lecture will attempt to answer these large questions not by reading manuals on Islamic jurisprudence, secular legal codes, modern medical textbooks or public hygiene blueprints. Rather, the lecture is based on a close reading of legal and medical documents housed in the Egyptian National Archives, documents which are revealing of how different segments of Egyptian society understood and reacted to the disturbing practice of opening up cadavers. As such, the lecture suggests how forensic medicine can be a lens through which a Muslim society’s encounter with modern science can be understood.