

Napoleon Bonaparte in Egypt

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During the years 1793 up until 1797, Charles Magallon, the French Consul in Egypt, recommended to the Revolutionary Directory in Paris that, for political and economic reasons, the occupation of Egypt by France would be not only beneficial but also a political stroke obliging England to take note of the territorial acquisitions of the French Revolution.

Napoleon Bonaparte, owing to his popularity among the masses having converted him into an object of distrust and suspicion in the eyes of the Revolutionary Council, figured that it would be prudent for him to leave France temporarily.

Having had access to the reports from Consul Magallon, he persuaded the Revolutionary Council to occupy Egypt and the French expedition sailed from Toulon on 19th May 1798.

Avoiding an encounter with the English fleet under the command of Nelson, the French expedition to Egypt disembarked at Alexandria on the first of July 1798.

Napoleon held the conviction that Egypt was one of the keys to the world, and he planned to strike a blow against English power, by occupying this territory, which would also open the route to India.

But one inherent weakness in any confrontation with England was that France did not have at its disposal a powerful fleet. On the first of August 1798 Nelson destroyed the French fleet at the Battle of Aboukir Bay, thereby interrupting communications between the French army and their bases in France.

In vain did Napoleon execute a brilliant campaign, occupying Cairo during the battle of the Pyramids. Also the Delta and Upper Egypt, and by this feat the entire nation was subjugated in three weeks.

But the reality is that, in consequence, his whole campaign came to be shattered.

Napoleon sailed from Cairo on 10th February 1799, his destination being Syria. In two months he captured El Arish, Gaza and Jaffa, winning the battle of Mount Tabour.

However Napoleon did not accomplish the defeat of Admiral Sidney Smith, the defender of Acre, and so lost the battle for Syria.



Fig. 1 Napoleon and his epoch

Frontispiece to
"Napoléon in Egypt"
by Barthélemy and Mery.

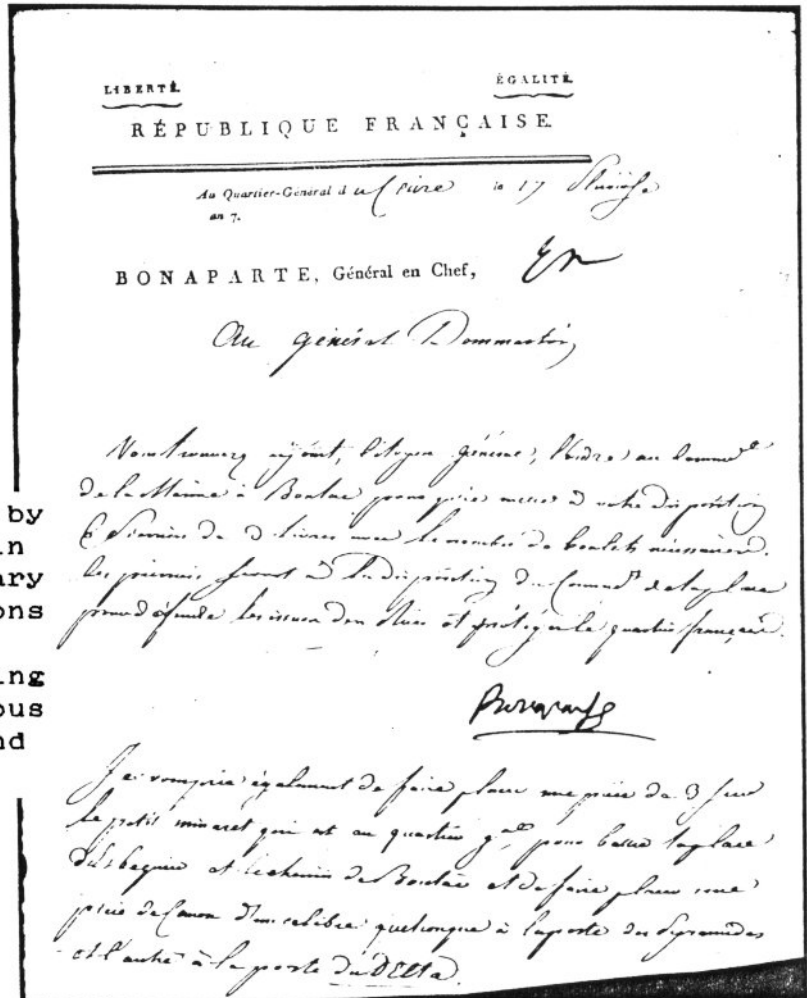


Fig. 2 Letter signed by Napoleon Bonaparte in Cairo, dated 5th February 1799, giving instructions to General Dommartin regarding the positioning of artillery in various places, in and around Cairo.

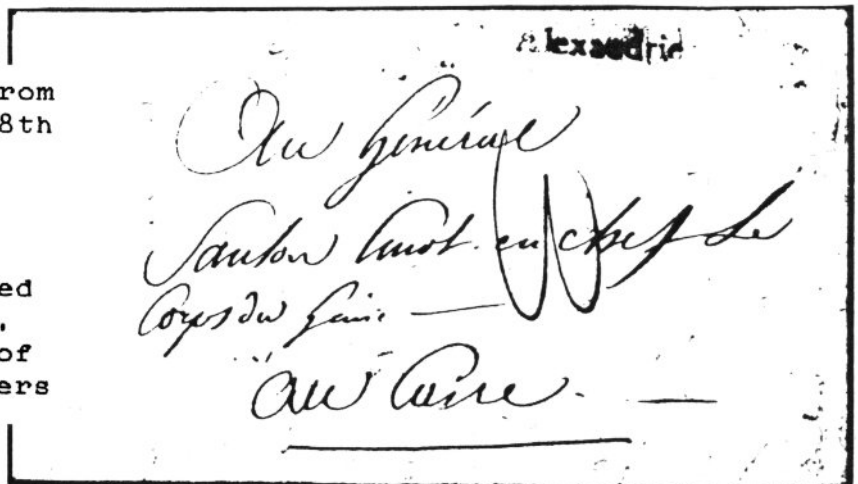


Fig. 3 Letter from Alexandria, dated 28th July 1800, from Monsieur Sorbien, commandant of a battalion of engineers, addressed to General Sauton, Commander-in-Chief of the Corps of Engineers

Napoleon Bonaparte in Egypt - continued

Napoleon returned on 14th June 1799 to Cairo and in August of the same year he abandoned his army and left Egypt in a swift little ship, making good his escape yet again from the English fleet.

Meanwhile however the Turks, who had been occupying Egypt before the arrival of Napoleon, disembarked at Aboukir, but were repulsed on 15th July 1799, and were defeated in the Battle of Heliopolis on 20th March 1800 by the French troops.

Notwithstanding, with the arrival before Alexandria on the first of March 1801 of an army under the command of Sir [Ralph] Abercromby, escorted by the British fleet under the orders of Lord Keith, the scene changed and there was a series of battles which produced, from the time of the landing of the English at Aboukir Bay on 8th March 1801, up until the surrender of Cairo by the French on 27th June 1801, thirteen thousand French who were re-embarked on a course to France from Rosetta on 31st July 1801. By now, solely continuing the struggle, was General Menon and 4,500 men in Alexandria; but they also yielded on 2nd September 1801.

Thus ended Napoleon's adventure in Egypt and Syria.

We ought to make evident that in spite of this unfortunate adventure, Napoleon's presence in Egypt has handed down to us a most interesting heritage, over the whole of the scientific and artistic points of view.

Napoleon's expedition was accompanied by 165 French scientists, artists and writers. In Cairo, the learned Frenchmen founded the famous Institut d'Egypte, dedicated to the study of the antiquities, language, agriculture and medicine of Egypt.

The most outstanding of their achievements were the report of an initial idea for the future Suez Canal, and the discovery of the Rosetta stone with inscriptions in Demotic, Greek and Hieroglyphs giving the key to the translation of Egyptian Hieroglyphs, for until that time it had not been possible to decipher the language.

Although there were faults in small details, it is obvious that the French had organised a very efficient postal system.

The use of special messengers, ships, camels and donkeys was normal, but we can surmise that the French were also making full use of the Turkish postal system, which provided established places available to receive the mail transported to there by donkeys and camels from the interior, and sent by means of carrier pigeons to the cities and the more important towns of the country.

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Fig. 4 i Official letter from F. G. Rouvier, Chief of Staff, Commandant of the Nile Military Marine at Boulac (the river port of Cairo), addressed to Citizen Barrano, Public Prosecutor at the Military Court in Alexandria.

ii The letter is dated 22/8/1798 (5th fructidor, eighth year of the French Republic).

iii Mark: LE CAIRE (in red)

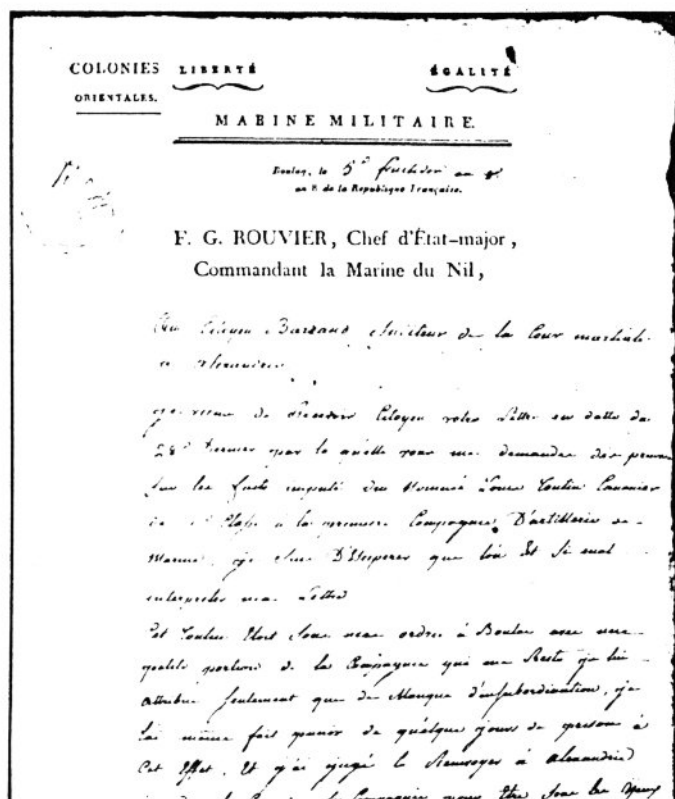
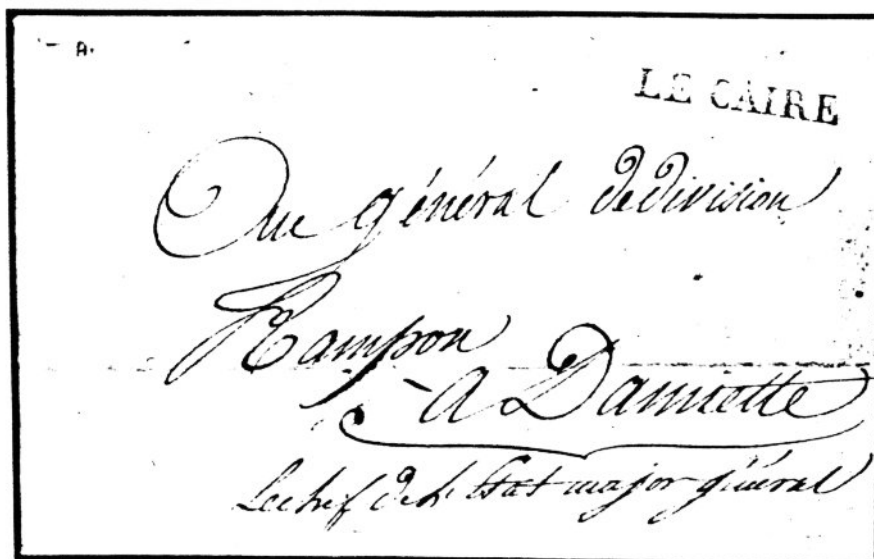


Fig. 5 Map of Cairo published in France in 1763.

Fig. 6 i Official letter from General de Brigade (= Brigadier-General) Lagrange, Chief of Staff to the Army in Cairo, addressed to General of Division (= Major-General) Rampon, in Damietta.

ii dated 27th September 1800 (ninth year of the French Republic, 6th Vendemaire).

iii Mark: LE CAIRE (in black)



Napoleon Bonaparte in Egypt - continued

It is known that there were six central points ready to receive and despatch military and governmental mail, namely Cairo, Alexandria, Damietta, Rosetta, Benesouef and Siouth. The marks of these cities are illustrated in this study.

It is possible that there existed other marks, because the French had established military stations in other places, like Katieh, Bilbeis, Benesseh, Esna, Assouan, Qena, Tanta, Suez, Kosseir, Samanoud, Aboukir, Girga and Fayoum. We can suppose that postal facilities had existed between the important centres, though personally I do not know more centres than those listed above.

C. Th. J. Hooghuis, Madrid

[transl. JAG]

Notes by Editor

Referring to illustration number 10 (receipt for purchase of dromedaries) the manuscripts, which may not be easily legible in the actual printed copies of The QC, are translated below.

The French text: "We, the undersigned, certify that Sheik Mahomet Satini has received from General Donzelot the sum of sixty thousand mudins the price of twelve dromedaries at the rate of five thousand mudins each. (Signed) at Siouth on the third Thermidor, year 8 of the Revolution."

The Italian text: "Received for 12 Dromedaries purchased by General Donzolo from Sheik Mahamet Salini for 5,000 Para each dromedary. Total: 60,000."

From this it is clear that the unit of currency mentioned in the French text, a mudin, is equal to one para.

In case some Circle Members have difficulty with the French "Etat-major" I can positively advise that: in the singular it means "Staff" and particularly General Staff, "Chef d'Etat-major" is "Chief of Staff"; the plural (états-majors) means Headquarters.

Figure 7 shows the French civilian title of "directeur des revenus en nature et du mobilier national"; the Spanish has "Director de Hacienda" (Estate), and my translation: "Director of revenue in kind and chattels" is clumsy. Citoyen Reynier would probably have made a diligent Gauleiter in Hitler's Europe, harvesting produce and manpower for the occupying power. The local population are likely to have seen nothing unusual in Napoleon's occupation.

My thanks are due, firstly to our Circle Member in Spain, Mr C. Th. J. Hooghuis (ESC 126) for making available, through the good offices of Major E L G MacArthur (ESC 125), his most interesting and unusual article, with the excellent material illustrated, including all six of the French postal town-names; also to Mr John Firebrace (ESC 71) for his help in advising the British equivalents of Napoleon's officers' ranks, and in other ways, not least for the suggestion that I speak to the French Embassy in Knightsbridge, Military Attaché's section. This resulted in friendly and willing help, thereby avoiding some gaffes. Those gaffes which have not been avoided are all my own work! - Editor.

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Fig. 7 1. Letter dated 8th March 1800, addressed to the Citizen Reynier, director of "revenue in kind" and "chattels" in Cairo, from the Inspector of the Second Region, in Benesouef.
ii Mark: BENESOUEF (in red)

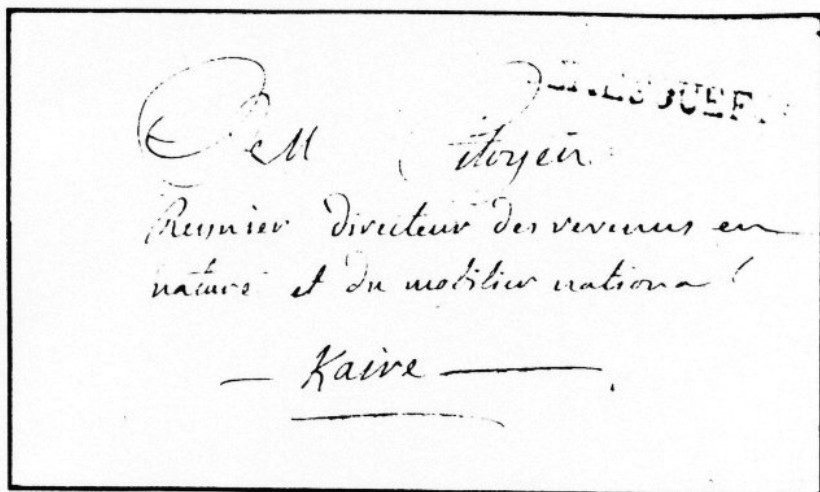


Fig. 8 1. Undated letter from General Moran of Damietta, addressed to Major-General Belliard in Cairo, to inform him of a 2-day inspection by Captain Vidal with the Dromedary Corps and exploring the route towards Syria.
ii Mark: DAMIETTE (in black)

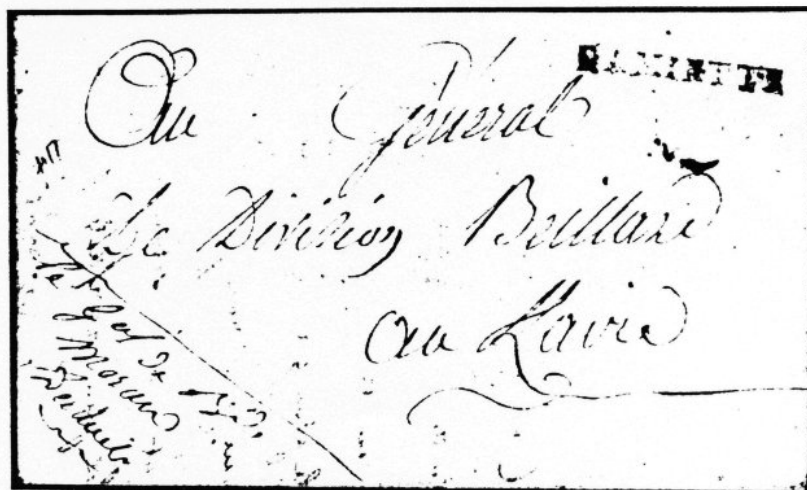


Fig. 9 1. Outer cover from Rosetta addressed to General Regnyer, commandant of the First Division of the Army of the East.
ii Mark: ROSETTE (in black)

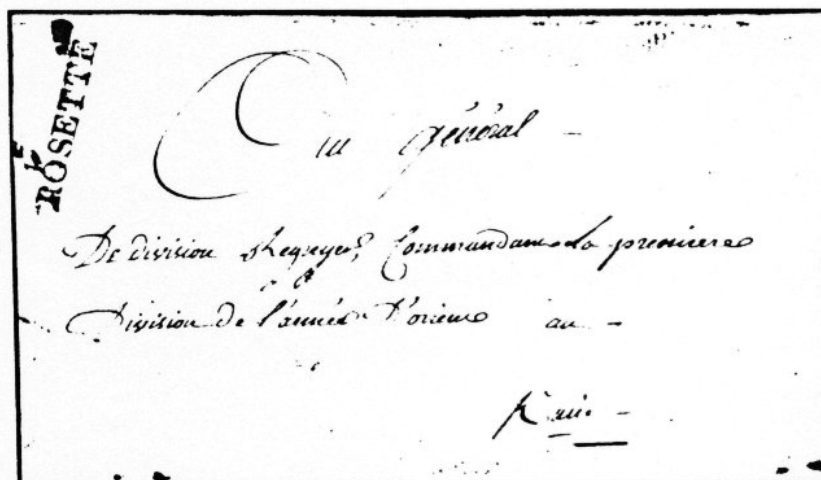


Fig. 10

i Receipt for one purchase of twelve dromedaries for the French troops in Siouth, Upper Egypt, on 24th July 1800.
 ii The receipt, for an amount of 60,000 mudins, was written in French, Italian and Arabic and signed by the Chief of Brigade Commanders in the Siouth Region, General Eppler.

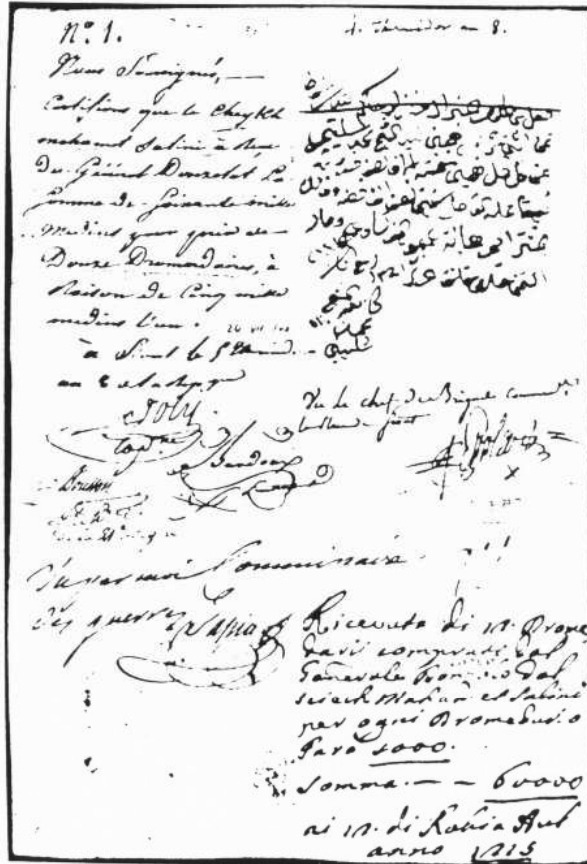


Fig. 11

i Letter from Siouth dated 23rd December 1800, addressed to Citizen Reynier, director of "revenue in kind and movable property" in Cairo, advising the sending of five barges of wheat.
 ii Mark: SIOUTH (in red)

