



Mirage: Napoleon's Scientists and the Unveiling of Egypt

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Little more than two hundred years ago, only the most reckless or eccentric Europeans had dared traverse the unmapped territory of the modern-day Middle East. Its history and peoples were the subject of much myth and speculation—and no region aroused greater interest than Egypt, where reports of mysterious monuments, inscrutable hieroglyphics, rare silks and spices, and rumors of lost magical knowledge tantalized dreamers and taunted the power-hungry.

It was not until 1798, when an unlikely band of scientific explorers traveled from Paris to the Nile Valley, that Westerners received their first real glimpse of what lay beyond the Mediterranean Sea.

Under the command of Napoleon Bonaparte and the French Army, a small and little-known corps of Paris's brightest intellectual lights left the safety of their laboratories, studios, and classrooms to embark on a thirty-day crossing into the unknown—some never to see French shores again. Over 150 astronomers, mathematicians, naturalists, physicists, doctors, chemists, engineers, botanists, artists—even a poet and a musicologist—accompanied Napoleon's troops into Egypt. Carrying pencils instead of swords, specimen jars instead of field guns, these highly accomplished men participated in the first large-scale interaction between Europeans and Muslims of the modern era. And many lived to tell the tale.

Hazarding hunger, hardship, uncertainty, and disease, Napoleon's scientists risked their lives in pursuit of discovery. They approached the land not as colonizers, but as experts in their fields of scholarship, meticulously categorizing and collecting their finds—from the ruins of the colossal pyramids to the smallest insects to the legendary Rosetta Stone.

Those who survived the three-year expedition compiled an exhaustive encyclopedia of Egypt, twenty-three volumes in length, which secured their place in history as the world's earliest-known archaeologists. Unraveling the mysteries that had befuddled Europeans for centuries, Napoleon's scientists were the first to document the astonishing accomplishments of a lost civilization—before the dark shadow of empire-building took Africa and the Middle East by storm.

Internationally acclaimed journalist Nina Burleigh brings readers back to a little-known landmark adventure at the dawn of the modern era—one that ultimately revealed the deepest secrets of ancient Egypt to a very curious continent.

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Jacki says

I found this to be a great introduction into the scientific and political climate of the time period. I had no real knowledge of what Egypt was like at this time, so I was particularly interested in how the people lived, and how the soldiers and scientists adjusted, not just what finds and developments they were making. I would definitely recommend as a supplement to a history or archeology class.

Jay Rubenstein says

Despite what I do for a living, I get easily bored with history books. Not this one. A great cast of characters and a great setting. It answered one of my biggest questions as a tourist to the British Museum -- how did the Rosetta Stone end up in England if Napoleon discovered it? As for Napoleon, he comes off looking worse than expected, his Egyptian expedition a bigger disaster than I'd imagined.

Glenn Robinson says

A book about the time the French were in Egypt and the scientists that went along with the army. Interesting bio's on engineers, inventors, historians and more. Wrapped in is the individual stories of how they survived the French Revolution, dealt with poor logistical planning by Napoleon and life in Cairo at the turn of the 19th century. This was a time when the ancient Pyramids were new, the Sphinx still half way covered by sand and no one knew what to make of the monuments in Luxor.

William says

Again I am reminded of why I fell for French civilization shortly after starting French 1 in high school back in 1970: the French are so un-English! They may have done a lot of "bad" (Napoleon is not really much better than Hitler in many aspects), but their desire to bring their civilization to others while studying and preserving the local civilization is commendable for a colonial power, I suppose. The text is poorly written, but it is written with enthusiasm, which excuses some things.

Rob says

An interesting history focusing on the little known Egyptian campaign of Napoleon's war. A little bit less focus on the campaign than I would have preferred, but a large focus on the para-scientific and scholarly expedition that accompanied the French Army of 36,000 to Egypt. It could have used a bit more background on the scholar's accomplishments before the expedition, but even so, without this book I would have had no idea that Fourier accompanied Napoleon to the desert for three years.

Larissa says

I wanted to like this book more than I did. It's filled with colorful characters adrift in unfamiliar surroundings, forced to improvise, explore, and keep from turning on each other. Juicy anecdotes abound, and the writing is smooth and engaging. The narrative moves along efficiently, balancing portraits of individual scientists with a broader account of the French expedition to Egypt. In the end, though, the details never seemed to fully cohere into an argument for the significance of the French scholars' activities - of why or how the expedition should figure in our understanding of later developments. Additionally, we don't get a sense of how the events in Egypt might shed light on the normal scientific practices and assumptions of Napoleonic France, or of the responses to French science from Muslim thinkers. This is a pleasant read, but it leaves the reader wanting something more substantial.

Quoth_a_raven says

An interesting but poorly organized account of Napoleon's ill conceived invasion of Egypt. While the subject matter was interesting and the prose engaging, the author frequently repeated herself, and many tidbits of information were repeated almost verbatim in several chapters. There was an attempt, I think, to find a satisfying middle ground between a chronological account of the invasion and a biographical account for each of the scientists involved. Regardless of organization, I learned a lot about the time, and the author's excellent use of primary source material painted a vivid picture of Egypt at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Yazeed says

Very disappointing.

This book is about the scientists and scholars that accompanied Napoleon in his quest to invade Egypt in 1798, not about the invasion itself.

Sadly, the author has a typical orientalist view of the French invasion, or "expedition", to Egypt. According to her, the French, regardless of all their crimes and brutality that they have committed in Egypt, are civilized and enlightened because they had fancy French names, and eat baguettes and croissants. While the Arabs who were generous to them were naive, and the ones that fought back to protect their homeland were backward extremists and zealots.

Well, maybe the part about the baguettes wasn't true, but you get the idea. I just stopped half way through, and couldn't finish it.

Cindy says

I really don't like Napoleon.

Steve says

In 1798, the young French Republic is at war with just about everyone in Europe who doesn't want the French brand of revolution to spread. The nation needs a victory somewhere and Napoleon, never one to pass up an opportunity, decides to take the French Army to Egypt to secure a base by which grow an empire.

In addition to ships and men to mount this expedition, Napoleon takes a group of 150 scientists along to document this strange land that belongs to no European power and has little factual documentation that didn't originate from the Crusades centuries earlier.

The "invasion" is a disaster from the get go. The French raid Malta for gold and then lose it at sea. They arrive in Alexandria and no one local takes them seriously. Unprepared for the desert and dressed for Europe, the French quickly succumb to the heat, the sand fleas, the gnats, the sand-induced eye infections, and mosquitoes. All this before they even face their first battle.

They slaughter the Mamelukes outside of Giza and try to rule from Cairo. The locals don't like these hairy white men that don't bathe and live in filth and the French don't like these non-Christian sexually deviant people who are ignorant of public sanitation and uncivilized.

Such a match made in Hell can only get better. Napoleon launches an utter failure of an offensive against the British never getting close to his target of Syria. His army collapses due to the plague as the British destroy his entire navy in port.

Like the Rudy Giuliani or George W, Bush of his day, he was never one to let reality get in the way of his vision and was quite unscrupulous when it came to saving his own skin. Under the cover of darkness, he abandons his stranded army in Egypt for France because "France needs him more."

His underlings, who are really pissed about this, deal as best they can for the next few years before the British, quite mercifully, allow what's left of this army to return home.

This is the background for this book that is about the scientists, their activities, and the birth of modern Archeology.

They were treated as second-class citizens by the soldiers and only because it was Napoleon leading this mission did they live to see Egypt. The General fancied himself a scientist of sorts and accorded them military escorts and private accommodations once Cairo fell. This didn't go over well with the Army but they couldn't complain too much.

The point is that the scientists were the first post-Enlightenment academics to visit Egypt with the purpose of cataloguing everything they could. Those that signed on to this adventure weren't sure on the final outcome but they felt their careers would be immeasurably advanced by being the "first" in recent memory to come to the Nile and its environs.

With most of their gear sunk in the harbor at Alexandria, they had to make due and they did such a great job that they were improvising all kinds of materials for the Army to use that they weren't going to receive anytime soon from France.

The scientists explored insects, the local flora, the climate, the phenomenon called a mirage, and the remains

for the Pharaonic civilization. Their drawings were unparalleled and their research exacting for its time.

Hoping to get a leg up on their contemporaries, they mailed off findings and reports back to Paris that never made it due to British interception. Undeterred by the lack of response, they established their own Academy in Cairo and proceeded as an official scientific institution of inquiry and discovery.

As the French situation deteriorated, so did the physical conditions of the scientists. Their research was increasingly forced to be pragmatic for the French cause; ways to build a Suez canal, medical care for soldiers, and supplying water for the locals.

Eventually, the French capitulated to the British and, as part of the negotiations, they asked for the findings of the scientists, having followed their developments throughout the occupation.

Negotiations ensue and the British get the Rosetta Stone but not after the French had copied the contents. This is what leads to the cracking to the Egyptian glyphs by the French years later and making the mystical legible.

Upon their return, the "Egyptians", as these scientists call themselves, find the world has blown past them. With most of them unable to find work as they once had and obsessed by visions of the desert, they began to put their works together. What results is a multi-volume book, begun in 1802 and finished in 1828 called "the Description of Egypt" that became a runaway smash and cause a sensation in the fashion and design worlds for anything Egyptian.

It wasn't the reaction the scientists expected but it seemed to be welcome nonetheless.

A good read about a great topic.

University of Chicago Magazine says

Nina Burleigh, AM'87

Author

From the author: "In 1798, more than 150 scientists, engineers, artists and doctors traveled to the Nile Valley with Napoleon's army. Hazarding disease and war, his "corps des savants" risked their lives in pursuit of discovery, found and preserved the Rosetta Stone, and became the world's first archaeologists. Theirs was also the first large-scale interaction between Europeans and Muslims in the modern era."

Laura says

The stories recounted in this book are fascinating and it's sobering to realize how readily men's lives were thrown away because of Napoleon's delusions. I found the author's style sensationalist at times. She was also occasionally incorrect with small details. As an art historian, the one that leapt out to me was her discussion of a famous painting of Napoleon at Jaffa as by Jacques-Louis David, The painting in question is by Baron Gros. If such an obvious art historical error was made, what errors might have occurred in fields other than my own?

The sufferings of the scientists who Napoleon led to Egypt were extraordinary, and it is interesting to read of their discoveries and the lengths many went to for their studies.

Jackie says

The title, *mirage*, is experienced, but not scientifically explained for the reader. Scientific lists finish the book, again, without the explanations so wanted. To summarize: Napoleon brought his troupes and savantes to Egypt at the end of the 1700s, he himself a wannabe scientist. Only one out of nine people (soldiers/savantes) survived. The savantes did the most work, but the best invention is the metronome. However the 40 volume book they published in serial form in the early 1800s showed great biological and beautiful discoveries.

Mike says

At the end of the 18th century France, eager to establish itself as a colonial power on a par with its neighbor and rival, England, sent General (and celebrity) Napoleon at the head of an army to Egypt to secure the land. At the time Egypt was a legendary place. Like any territory hovering at the edge of reason all sorts of mythical attributes were assigned to it. Hieroglyphics were more than words, they were magical writing.

Along with the army, a select force of the best french students, scientists, and teachers was sent to document the land; more pragmatically they were also to devise the means by which France could enforce its way of living in a novel terrain amidst a foreign people.

In brief, things didn't turn out so well. The desert brutalized the unaccustomed soldiers and savants, the natives were not well subjugated, the English had the military advantage, and the Black Plague decimated the occupier's ranks. Napoleon left in disgrace, leaving those he left behind to suffer the reality of France's folly, yet managed to translate his disgrace into victory once back in France.

Using this as a backdrop *Mirage* explores the stories of the talented intellectuals who made that historic journey. They opened Egypt to western society, cataloging ruins and mummies, flora and fauna, and unearthing what became key to later unlocking the (real and non-magical) meaning of Hieroglyphics, the Rosetta Stone. Ironically enough the Rosetta Stone now (20009) sits in the British Museum as it was captured by the English shortly after its discovery by the French. After contact French society became enamoured of things Egyptian; so too the indigenous of Egypt began to rediscover the value of the ruins they occupied, and stopped using them only as convenient places to dump garbage and bodies or sources of building materials. So too was it that modern archaeology began, and with it the looting of ancient artefacts and relics.

As I see it there are two main themes in this history: that of the intellectual's compromise with power, and the (often painful) chaos that accompanies great transitions. General Napoleon left Egypt to later become Emperor, student savants came to Egypt boys and returned as men, the Revolution in France crested, and the Age of Reason gave way to the Romantic Era. With belly usually full and mind not occupied on mere survival the intellectual is empowered to critique the cruelty of the system that makes possible their lives. A soldier's honor is steeped in pain; of rulers even the best must come to terms with the blood shed at their behest, the myth of peace. No savant will ever abolish suffering, what then are the angels of their enterprise?

Thank you GoodReads for the spellcheck; otherwise this review would have been marred by some cat named

Napolean.

Ben says

Napoleon's core of scientific adventurers in Egypt is arguably the greatest singular event to straddle those two reductive "Ages" of European history—ie the Enlightenment and the Romantic. It is also a complete disaster. What a ride! Of course, Mirage is great as an audiobook for road trips b/c the actor takes relish with all those French names... I mean relish in the most literal sense.

With a few tweaks, Mirage would also serve well as a turn-based strategy game. I'm thinking Risk meets Oregon Trail (of the Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium fame).

Your Engineers capture: Hathor Temple.
Retrieve: Dendera zodiac.
Skill points needed = 15.
You don't have enough points!
Send to: Cairo for more Engineers.
Attack: Marmaduke Horde
Fight points needed = 64
You don't have enough points!
Your bones shall add sands unto the desert.
