

**Raiders of the Lost Past**  
**Nineteenth-Century Archaeology and French Imperialism in the Near East**  
**1798-1914**

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*An honors thesis submitted to the  
History and French Departments of Rutgers University*

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(History) and Professor Mathilde Bombart (French)*

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DESCRIPTION  
DE L'ÉGYPTE,  
OU  
RECUEIL  
DES OBSERVATIONS ET DES RECHERCHES  
QUI ONT ÉTÉ FAITES EN ÉGYPTE  
PENDANT L'EXPÉDITION DE L'ARMÉE FRANÇAISE,  
PUBLIÉ  
PAR LES ORDRES DE SA MAJESTÉ L'EMPEREUR  
NAPOLÉON LE GRAND.

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I – PLANCHES.



A PARIS,  
DE L'IMPRIMERIE IMPÉRIALE.

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M. DCCC. IX.

Figure 1: Title Page of the *Description de l'Égypte*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Like a complex archeological site, this thesis bears the individual marks of many people. Foremost among these are my two advisors to whom I owe a transparent debt of gratitude: Professors Matt Matsuda and Mathilde Bombart. Throughout this entire process both Professors Matsuda and Bombart supported me with their guidance and scholarly wisdom. Professor Matsuda has been an attentive and dedicated advisor who generously expressed his faith in my ability as a historian during the rougher moments of the thesis writing process. His unique historical perspective and his incisive, analytical comments dramatically influenced the conceptual arguments found herein. Professor Bombart has known me since her first semester at Rutgers and I am extremely grateful that she participated in this project. She presented me with challenging historical questions and a critical approach that helped shaped this work for the better. Together, both Professors Matsuda and Bombart made writing this thesis a rewarding experience.

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The staff of the Archives Nationales de France deserves recognition for making the time I spent poring over nineteenth-century documents as enjoyable as poring over

nineteenth-century documents can be. I must also thank my dear friend and mentor Dr. Catherine Healey who treated me to a fine French dinner, sage advice, and plenty of encouragement during that bleak January in Paris.

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## INTRODUCTION

The zodiac of Dendera is an enigmatic looking slab of sandstone that hangs unassumingly from an alcove ceiling in the Musée du Louvre's Egyptian gallery. It depicts falcon-headed figures kneeling reverently and supporting a disk that contains a series of spiraling astrological symbols: the scales of Libra, the arachnid body of Scorpio, the gushing vases of Aquarius. Lines of delicate hieroglyphic script encircle this mystical scene, daring the bemused onlooker to interpret it all. But most tourists simply walk past the Dendera zodiac, unaware of its ancient significance or the story of its discovery. For the curious, the museum's curators have provided a multilingual explanation of the zodiac's astrological symbolism and a brief account of its ancient history. But nowhere does the museum explain how this extraordinary artifact ended up where it did. Perhaps more visitors would pause and crane their necks if they knew the zodiac had, in fact, been blown out of a temple ceiling with gunpowder and then had been the subject of a politically charged boat chase down the Nile River. The true story of the Dendera zodiac's acquisition plays like an adventure film, but it is a story that the Louvre would rather not tell. Its tale is emblematic of the French imperial experience, and like many other antiquities in the museum the zodiac is the subject of an ongoing heritage battle. The Egyptian government claims that the French plundered the zodiac from the Temple of Dendera in 1821. But trying to prosecute a 190 year-old crime is never easy.

The man leading the attack is the sixty-two year-old Egyptologist Dr. Zahi Hawass. To American television audiences he is best known as an energetic showman, passionate about his native Egypt's ancient monuments. He regularly makes appearances on The History Channel where, clad in jeans, a work shirt, and an oilcloth fedora, he crawls

through burial chambers and waddles up step pyramids on prime time. He is also the lordly Secretary General of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, and to the Western museum community he is a ubiquitous burden, constantly hounding museum administrators and curators with questions about provenance. In a part of the world where foreigners have historically monopolized archaeology, Dr. Hawass has made it a point to reclaim Egyptology for Egypt. To this end, he has launched a campaign to hunt down any antiquities that he believes were illegally lifted from the land of the pharaohs during nearly two centuries of imperialist collecting.

"We're not treasure hunters," Dr. Hawass assures the *New York Times* in an October 2009 interview.<sup>1</sup> "If it's proven clearly that the work was not stolen there shouldn't be any problem."<sup>2</sup> But in most cases he asserts that the artifact in question was certainly stolen. Yet, whom does Dr. Hawass accuse of theft? Can past looters be brought to justice in a modern court of law? Arguably, they cannot. The men responsible for the acquisition of the zodiac of Dendera perpetrated their archaeological crime nearly two hundred years ago and even then Muhammad Ali, the Pasha of Egypt, dubiously authorized the artifact's removal. This fact, however, does not stop the Egyptian government from demanding that its cultural heritage be repatriated. According to Dr. Hawass such antiquities are "the icons of our Egyptian heritage" and therefore ancient Egyptian relics should be considered the rightful patrimony of modern Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Michael Kimmelman, "When Ancient Artifacts Become Political Pawns," *New York Times*, 24 October 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/24/arts/design/24abroad.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/24/arts/design/24abroad.html?_r=1) (accessed October 25, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Navine El-Aref, "Antiquities Wish List," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 14-20 July, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/751/eg7.htm> (accessed March 10, 2010).

Similarly under attack is the Rosetta stone, which was hauled away to the British Museum from Egypt as a spoil of war in 1801. And just last October the famous painted limestone bust of Nefertiti at the Neues Museum in Berlin became the target of Dr. Hawass's latest restitution crusade.<sup>4</sup> In these cases, the Egyptian government has waved the bloodied shirt of European imperialism with a great deal of nationalist emotion; holding Western museums responsible for their past transgressions.

The fact that ancient stone can elicit such reactions is a testament to the lingering specter of Europe's overseas engagements during the nineteenth-century. For, in contemporary debates over cultural patrimony the history of imperialism resonates with potent clarity, a legacy to which European archaeology is accused of being an unscrupulous accomplice. This revelation tends to perturb our preconceptions about archaeology. Romantic notions of Indiana Jones aside, contemporary impressions of the discipline portray it as an extremely well organized and methodically executed science – professionally carried out in well-marked grid units with fine pointed brushes, theodolites, and measuring tape. Moreover, the archaeologist is depicted as a preserver, an individual who nobly proclaims that a certain artifact “belongs in a museum.” Thus, in the public imagination archaeology is often seen as an impartial science. Its goal: simply to ascertain more about human civilization by studying its remains. But, as will be revealed, archaeology is a young science and its professionalization a recent evolution. In reality it was born alongside a Europe that in racing towards modernity, expanded its frontiers across the globe in search of land, resources, and knowledge. The fact that, today, these artifacts remain in the hands of once exploitative powers seems a perversion

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<sup>4</sup> Kimmelman.

of justice to those from whom their cultural heritage was seemingly robbed. The debates are bitter and in early October 2009, the Supreme Council of Antiquities suspended France's long-term excavation at Saqqara over the Louvre's refusal to turn over five 3,200 year-old frescoes illegally obtained from a dig site in Thebes in 2000 and 2003.<sup>5</sup> The French Ministry of Culture got the message and promptly handed over the artifacts. While, to a certain extent, these controversies are the product of modern realpolitik, they are also firmly rooted in the past. Only by examining the story of how Europe amassed its impressive collection of archaeological booty can one begin to approach the contemporary issues at stake. Perhaps then can one begin to tackle the most pertinent question of all: "Who owns the past?"

This paper seeks to better understand such controversies by investigating how archaeology was indeed used as a tool of nineteenth-century European imperialism, and by revealing that it was politicized and manipulated to effectuate the broader agendas of nationalism, colonialism, and empire. The craze for antiquities that swept across Europe in the wake of Napoleon Bonaparte's 1798 Egyptian campaign touched off two very important historical developments: the birth of archaeology, and the willingness of European nations to compete for the collection of artifacts across the globe in the effort to secure international prestige and perpetuate the semblance of cultural superiority. It would be wrong to assume that imperialism in the nineteenth century was merely limited to the colonization of foreign lands and the exploitation of native populations and their resources. As this topic hopes to illustrate, the archaeological excavations financed by

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<sup>5</sup> Kimmelman.

European nations such as France sought to impose foreign stewardship over history itself and to introduce a European influence into geographical areas not directly controlled by these powers (for example, Egypt was a province of the Ottoman Empire). Furthermore, the European fascination with the monumental remnants of the “Great Civilizations” (ancient Assyria, Egypt, Greece, and Rome) promoted a sense of cultural dominance in succession and consequently the ancient past was used to legitimize policies foreign and domestic. Foremost, archaeology was a generative, discursive process that was constructed by particular individuals and groups. The interpretation of Egyptian, Assyrian, Phoenician, or Roman artifacts generated an entire host of ideas about those ancient civilizations that were then selectively distilled to support ideas of European supremacy. Thus, this paper will trace the various historiographical, intellectual, and political consequences of appropriating ancient history.

Because European archaeologists were dispatched to practically every corner of the globe, the scope of this topic is inherently large. In that respect the present work will use France as a case study. France represented one of the largest and most dynamic imperial powers of the nineteenth century. The French were also the pioneers of modern archaeology. The scientists that accompanied Napoleon to Egypt were the first to undertake an extensive survey of the Nile Valley’s monumental archaeological remains, and their work laid the foundation for the eventual institutionalization of the discipline. Elsewhere, the French were the first to decipher hieroglyphs, uncover remnants of the ancient Assyrian civilization, and systematically organize knowledge about the ancient Phoenicians. France’s archaeological legacy is impressive, which is why it is surprising that it is often overlooked. In general, less is known about French exploits than



comparable British endeavors (which have been prominently celebrated in contemporary literature and film). Thus, a focus on France adds to existing scholarship. Presently, no work has yet to be exclusively devoted to the study French archaeology and its connection to imperialism.

Additionally, the geographic scope of this paper has been limited to the Near East. For the purposes of this thesis, the Near East has been defined as encompassing North Africa, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Mesopotamia. The Near East (also referred to as the Orient herein) was selected because it was the location of the nineteenth century's most important archaeological discoveries and because it was a significant target of French imperial and colonial attention.

Scholarship in this area has been rather spread out amongst historians, archaeologists, Egyptologists, and postcolonial commentators. In general, the duty of chronicling the history of archaeology has fallen to archaeologists themselves. Consequently, archaeology has received little historiographic critique, shielded instead by its perceived scientific and empirical merits and characteristics. Nonetheless, many archaeologists/historians such as Margarita Díaz-Andreu, Brian Fagan, Neil Asher Silberman, and Nabila Oulebsir have begun challenging the notion of archaeology's supposedly "value-free" development. As Díaz-Andreu writes in *A World History of Nineteenth-Century Archaeology*, archaeology is not a "neutral social science as previously presumed," and in order "for a correct understanding of the history of archaeology it becomes essential to evaluate the impact of the framework in which it

developed.”<sup>6</sup> That is to say, within the context of an increasingly nationalistic and imperialistic Europe. Subsequently, these writers have re-approached the role that archaeology played in the nineteenth century from different angles and in doing so, have highlighted how this particular discipline influenced and was influenced by European imperialist rationalizations and thought. In addition to Díaz-Andreu’s survey on the intersection between imperial politics and European archaeology in the nineteenth century, Brian Fagan’s *The Rape of the Nile* presents an in-depth account of nearly two centuries of European plundering in Egypt, while Silberman’s *Digging for God and Country* offers a critical look at the political and religious implications of archaeology undertaken in the Holy Land, and Oulebsir’s *Les Usages du patrimoine: monuments, musées, et politique coloniale en Algérie, 1830-1930* analyzes the link between patrimony and colonial archaeology in French Algeria.

The conclusions of this paper rest heavily on the foundation of various primary sources that were obtained from the Archives Nationales de France in Paris. The primary materials consulted consisted of original mission proposals for archaeological excavations and their subsequent findings, as well as the personal correspondence of various agents and archaeologists employed by the French government. Documentation located in series F/17/29331/1 - 3014/B and F/17/17265 - 17294 provided information about French archaeological missions to Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and North Africa that were undertaken by archaeologists such as Charles Clermont-Ganneau, Ernest Renan, and Louis-Félicien Caignart de Saulcy and financed by the Ministry of Public Instruction. Additionally, series F/21/546 - 547 provided valuable information concerning the

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<sup>6</sup> Margarita Díaz-Andreu, *A World History of Nineteenth-Century Archaeology: Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.

extensive excavations carried out by Victor Place at Nineveh in Mesopotamia from 1851 to 1855; and the documents uncovered in F/17/2930 and F/17/17155 - 17156 revealed the inner workings of the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire and the Commission d'Afrique du Nord respectively.

Collectively, these sources permitted a better understanding of the justifications that were used to launch and finance archaeological endeavors, and thus trace them back to the wider French imperial dialogue. They highlighted which antiquities the French were looking for, what they considered to be valuable acquisitions, and why. Competition for ancient artifacts was particularly fierce between France and Britain, and these documents provided insight into the international tension that defined nineteenth-century archaeology. Consequently, this paper was better able to evaluate the extent to which archaeology was perceived to be a tool of national prestige and imperial expansion. Other sources, including Dominique Vivant-Denon's amusing account of his travels in Egypt with Napoleon, *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte pendant les campagnes de général Bonaparte*, and the letters of French archaeologist Paul-Émile Botta (discoverer of Assyria) also greatly enhanced this work's narrative.

Lastly, the conceptual framework for this paper was informed principally by the historiographical problematics presented by cultural historian Edward Said in his works *Orientalism* (widely considered to be the founding text of postcolonial studies) and *Culture and Imperialism*. His approach in evaluating Europe's cultural constructions of the Near East proved invaluable in synthesizing this paper's critical methodology. Said's arguments analyze how the West constructed the Orient as a concept politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively in the years

following the Enlightenment. He argues that Orientalism – the Western approach to systematically understanding the Orient – was more than just a field of knowledge invented by nineteenth-century European scholars; it designated a “collection of dreams, images, and vocabularies available to anyone who has tried to talk about what lies east of the dividing line.”<sup>7</sup> Essentially, Orientalism was both the lens through which Europeans observed the East and the means through which they explained it. Orientalism permitted the “appropriation of one culture by another, apparently stronger one.”<sup>8</sup> Thus emerged, “a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in [...] historical theses” where the West monopolized knowledge and forbade the Orient to represent itself, to “have a voice.”<sup>9</sup> This concept of Orientalism will be an important analytical undercurrent in the present work, as archaeology provided one of the principal outlets for Orientalist perception.

This thesis has been divided into five chapters, each one highlighting a series of case studies and character sketches in a different region of the Near East. Throughout the following pages we will follow General Bonaparte’s *savants* into Pharaonic tombs, villainous antiquities traders along the Nile, biblical scholars on a crusade for knowledge, and army officers well read in the classics across the deserts of Algeria. Thus, we will trace the remarkable history of nascent archaeology and observe how imperial, colonial, and national ambitions were cloaked in the mantle of history and science. In doing so we

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<sup>7</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 73.

<sup>8</sup> Said, 42.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

shall visit a number of thematic elements that are pertinent to understanding this subject. We will continuously investigate the logic of institutions and individuals and how archaeology was a science that evolved through various “degrees” or “scales” of individual and institutional commitment. This relationship will be particularly important as we explore the role that the nation-state played in the development of archaeology. We must also remember that, because this thesis uses vignettes as a vehicle for historical analysis, the pleasure of adventure invariably dulls the more incisive facets of critical history. The conscientious historian must recognize that the stories recounted herein are artifacts in and of themselves of a distinct nineteenth-century mentality that we shall analyze throughout the thesis. Seen under this angle the reader should be cognizant of the distinctions between the romanticism of archaeology and the designs of imperialism, as the two are tightly intertwined.

The first chapter focuses on Napoleon Bonaparte’s Egyptian campaign and discusses the historic context of the invasion along with French perceptions of the Orient at the dawn of the nineteenth century. In doing so, we will look at how the legacy of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution helped to institutionalize archaeology by placing the appropriation of the past in the service of the nation. Napoleon famously brought with him a small army of scholars to conduct an unprecedented survey of Egypt and the scientific component of the campaign will receive particular attention. In particular, we will chronicle the experiences of Dominique-Vivant Denon, the adventurous artist appointed by Napoleon to record the archaeological remains of Egyptian civilization while accompanying the Armée d’Orient deep into Upper Egypt.

Moreover, this chapter will analyze the repercussions of Napoleon's "opening" of the Orient and the wave of Egyptomania that spread across the Continent.

After the French surrendered to British forces in 1801, Egypt became a hive of archaeological activity. The second chapter will focus on the heated competition between the British and the French along the Nile for Egyptian artifacts. We will encounter such individuals as Bernardino Drovetti, who worked on behalf of the French government to ruthlessly acquire antiquities. It is here where we shall pick up the intriguing story of the zodiac of Dendera and discuss how its removal was paradigmatic of the evolving imperial nature of archaeology. We will also encounter Auguste Mariette, an amateur archaeologist and antiquities plunderer who would later (and in an interesting turn of fate) oversee the creation of Egypt's Antiquities Service in an attempt to stem the fervent and commonplace looting of antiquities in the Nile Valley.

Moving to Mesopotamia, the third chapter will analyze the role archaeology played in constructing overtly nationalistic dialogues. Here we will witness the transformation of archaeology into an institutionalized discipline fully supported by the machinery of the Nation. Firstly, we will chronicle the rivalry between the French diplomat-archaeologist Paul-Émil Botta and the Briton Austen Henry Layard between 1843 and 1848 and observe how their attempt to unearth evidence of ancient Assyria around the supposed biblical city of Nineveh was emblematic of the larger nationalistic rivalries of the nineteenth century. We shall also encounter Botta's successor, Victor Place, and examine how he attempted to "nationalize" ancient history, synthesizing the ancient Assyrian past with the French nation.

Subsequently, in the fourth chapter, we will turn to France's mid-century archaeological exploits in the Holy Land undertaken by Louis-Félicien Caignart de Saulcy, Charles Clairmont-Ganneau, and Ernest Renan and investigate how archaeology assumed religious significance as a means of providing evidence of the Bible's authenticity as well as a means for France (under Napoleon III) to position herself diplomatically in the Near East amid rising political opposition from Britain, Prussia, and Russia.

Lastly, the fifth chapter will engage the colonial dimension of archaeology by investigating how archaeological missions and patrimonial institutions (museums, antiquities services, historical commissions) aided in the solidification of French hegemony across North Africa. Starting with the 1830 invasion of Algeria, we will look at how the French expeditionary force played a considerable role in the appropriation of archaeological data for France's colonial ambitions. By using Roman remains as a precedent for the colonization of North Africa, the Armée d'Afrique was able to synthesize historic lineages with the invading armies of Rome. Here, the imperial history of the classical past was declared to be the patrimony of the French nation and thus justified its conquest of Algeria. Similarly, we will look at the development of an imagined classical heritage in Tunisia as the foundation for eventual French domination. We will also investigate the interesting shift concerning the use of antiquities that took place throughout France's North African possessions, that is to say, why antiquities were left *in situ* rather than exported to the metropole – a development unique to colonial archaeology.

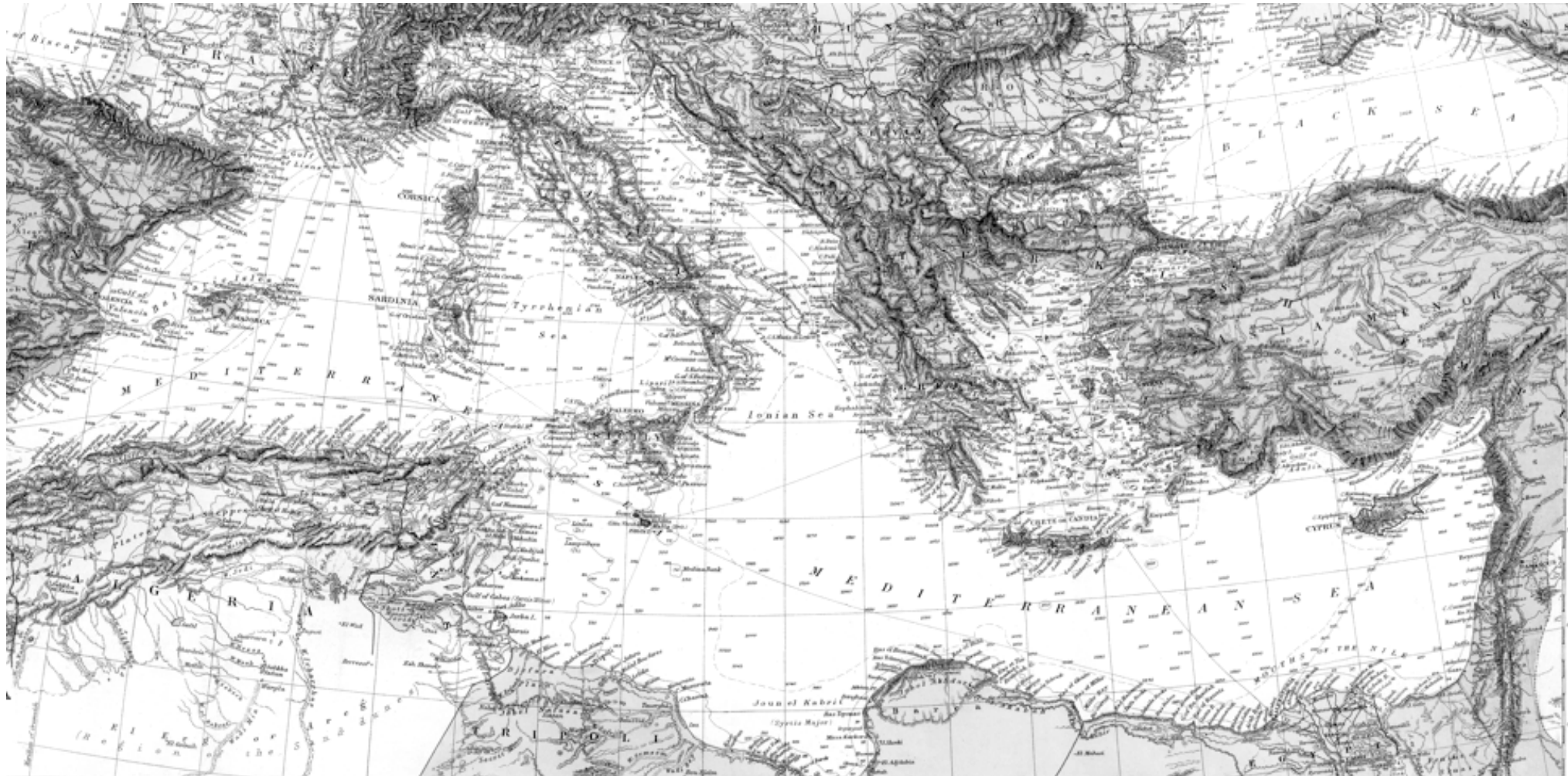
\* \* \*

Foremost, archaeology was birthed in the throes of conquest. On 22 June 1798 a fleet of French warships were anchored off the coast of Malta – halfway to an unknown destination. Until this point, most of the men onboard had not been told the true objective of the expedition, where they were going, or why. Not that it mattered. Their leader, Napoleon Bonaparte, was capable of inspiring unwavering loyalty. Now General Bonaparte ordered his commanding officers to read a proclamation revealing their destination to be Alexandria and that they were going to conquer Egypt for France. It would be an episode that would have significant historical repercussions, one that would forever change the nature of relations between the Occident and the Orient. “Soldiers!” Bonaparte’s proclamation exclaimed, “You are going to undertake a conquest the effects of which, on the civilization...of the world, are incalculable.”<sup>10</sup> He was absolutely correct.

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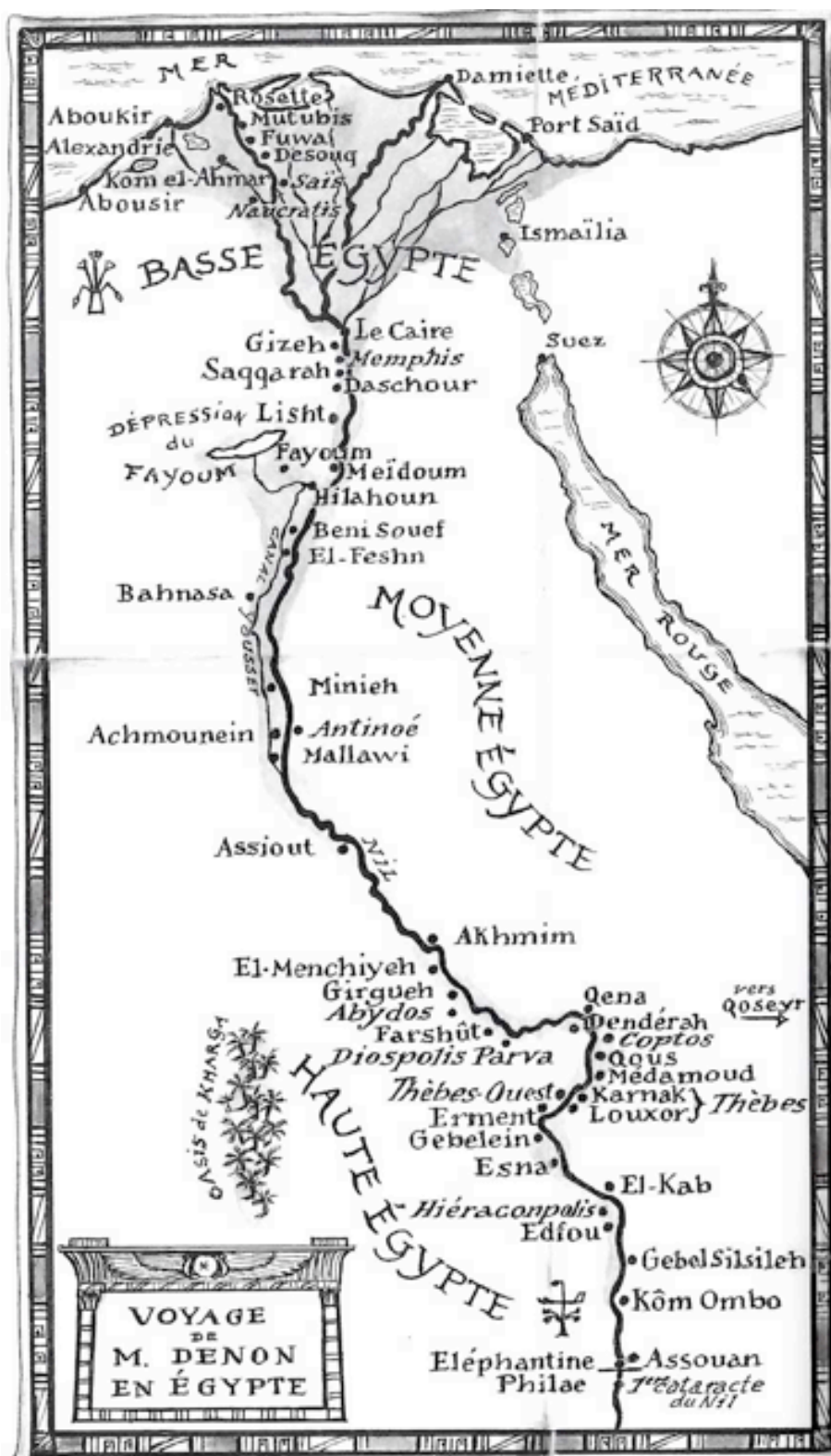
<sup>10</sup> Cited in Terence M. Russell, *The Discovery of Egypt: Vivant Denon’s Travels with Napoleon’s Army* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2005), 13.





France and the Mediterranean  
(Edward Stanford, 1901)

Source: David Rumsey Historical Map Collection



Map of Egypt  
(Dominique-Vivant Denon, 1802)

Source: Dominique-Vivant Denon, *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte pendant les campagnes du général Bonaparte*.

## Chapter 1 Napoleon on the Nile

SOLDIERS! FROM THE HEIGHT OF THESE PYRAMIDS  
FORTY CENTURIES OF HISTORY LOOK DOWN UPON YOU!

~ Napoleon Bonaparte before the Battle of the Pyramids<sup>1</sup>

At dawn on 1 July 1798 the inhabitants of Alexandria crowded a bleak shoreline to stare, in confusion, at the floating city that had materialized, as if by magic, from the empty, storm-swept horizon. An armada of three hundred ships – *tricolores* fluttering from their topmasts – covered the vast, black expanse of Abukir Bay like a forest. They had transported 50,000 men, 1,000 pieces of artillery, 700 horses, crates of scientific equipment, an Arabic printing press, a customized library containing practically every pertinent work on ancient and modern Egypt, and 150 of France's foremost scientific minds across the Mediterranean to the hostile, desiccated fringe of Africa.<sup>2</sup> At the water's edge, hundreds of longboats tossed in the raging current as thousands of French soldiers, wet, exhausted, and seasick, gathered themselves into formation. Among them: a twenty-nine year old Corsican general named Napoleon Bonaparte. As head of the newly formed Armée d'Orient he had arrived to spread the enlightened ideologies of the Revolution and establish a new and lucrative French colony in the Nile Valley. The conquest of Egypt had begun.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Brian Fagan, *The Rape of the Nile: Tomb Robbers, Tourists, and Archaeologists in Egypt* (New York: Westview Press, 2004), 43.

<sup>2</sup> Terence M. Russell, *The Discovery of Egypt: Vivant Denon's Travels with Napoleon's Army* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2005), xviii.

The Napoleonic adventure in Egypt occasioned the first major intersection between East and West and brought forth the crushing momentum of modernity to a society well outside of the European teleological current. That is to say that France arrived in Egypt with her bronze cannons and brass instruments in a “noble” effort to hurl a country of mud brick houses and donkey carts into, as Edward Said explains, the cultural orbit of Europe, to colonize it, and to restore its former glory. Such an undertaking opened Egypt – and the rest of the Orient – and set in motion a series of Orientalist processes that would come to “dominate cultural and political perspectives” for the rest of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Thus, by directly engaging a foreign culture, by making supposedly rational and scientific observations, the Occident was allowed to reinforce preconceived notions of its own superiority.

The Egyptian expedition was also witness to two other very important developments: firstly, the birth of archaeology as an institutionalized science, and secondly, its use as a political tool. Since the emergence of the first powerful empires the past has continuously been used to justify even the most absurd actions and opinions, but archaeology added another, more tangible, dimension to this paradigm. Archaeology was able to point to seemingly undeniable physical proof, to pull from the sand hard evidence that could be measured, recorded, and placed behind glass. It would play a subtle, but influential role in legitimizing the imperial ideology of the nineteenth century. As we will see, Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt facilitated this evolution and would spark an insatiable curiosity with all things ancient.

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 42-43.

To better understand France's attraction to the Near East one must briefly understand the history that these two share and the developments made during the Enlightenment that provided the foundation for Napoleon's expedition as well as the immense interest in the ancient past. French engagement in the East began with another famous emperor: Charlemagne. In the eighth century the King of the Franks concluded a treaty with the Abbasid caliph, Harun al-Rashid, assuring French protection of the Christian pilgrimage sites in the Holy Land.<sup>4</sup> Three hundred years later, French knights took up the cross to defend their faith and reclaim the land of the Bible – from Antioch in Anatolia to Damietta in Egypt – for Europe, thus assigning another level of myth and veneration to the Orient. By the eighteenth century the Kingdom of France had established an enviable diplomatic and economic relationship with the Ottoman Porte and the Bourbon kings were proclaimed the official protectors of the Catholic Church in the Near East.<sup>5</sup> Such an association assured a steady stream of luxurious goods to France's Mediterranean ports, not to mention a flood of exotic tales from returning merchants and sailors.

Thus, in the collective imagination, the Orient became synonymous with the lustrous glitter of gold, the musty fragrance of incense, the smoothness of silk, and the opulent decadency of Arab despots. It was also considered the seat of European civilization and religion, a mysterious land of lost knowledge, and the location of the Bible's most amazing miracles. It was paradoxically well known and utterly unexplored.

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<sup>4</sup> Neil Asher Silberman, *Digging for God and Country: Exploration, Archeology, and the Secret Struggle for the Holy Land, 1799-1917* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 64.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 63.

In this historic context one can better comprehend the turn eastward that took place during the Enlightenment. Eighteenth-century scholars were fascinated by the origins of mankind and of the evolutions of its languages and religions. This meant seeking out and understanding the primitive. Indeed, French culture in the eighteenth century was permeated by an unprecedented interest in the exotic. For *philosophes* the Orient provided a mirror in which one could contemplate the state of European civilization from a savagely pure angle and find inspiration. Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, Voltaire's literary allusions to the East, Galland's French translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* attest to an immense curiosity for this part of the globe. Additionally, a growing number of French adventurers and diplomats published popular accounts of their travels to the Orient. Among these individuals was a young orientalist and intrepid travel-writer named Constantin-François de Chassebouef, *dit* Volney. Volney spent four years in Egypt and Syria between 1782 and 1786, and his travelogue, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*, was published soon after in two volumes. Not only did it become a smashing bestseller, but it also provided one of the first comprehensive descriptions of the region. More than a decade later his work would accompany Napoleon's vast library onboard the general's flagship, the appropriately named *Orient*.

Following France's humiliating defeat in the Seven Years War (1756-1763), political and commercial interest in the Nile Valley increased dramatically. The French had lost their colonial possessions in India and North America to the British and thus many began to "[eye] the Near Orient as a likely place for the realization of the French colonial ambition."<sup>6</sup> Egypt was the logical choice. By the 1770s a larger number of

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<sup>6</sup> Said, 81.

French merchants operated in Cairo and Alexandria. Officials in Paris were convinced that the country had immense commercial potential and that the Nile Valley was rich in untapped natural resources. It was also considered to command a strategic geographical position as well, joining together Africa with Asia and the Mediterranean with the Red Sea (and thus the Indian Ocean). Therefore, French control of Egypt would check British colonial expansion and maintain the geopolitical balance of power in the East. “Master of Egypt,” Napoleon rationalized in 1798, “France will eventually be the master of India.”<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, Egypt was under weak Ottoman control – perfect for annexation. In the words of one of Louis XVI’s counselors, it seemed that “Egypt belongs to nobody” save those who could control it.<sup>8</sup> Since the thirteenth century those who had succeeded at controlling Egypt were the Mamelukes. The Mamelukes were a powerful warrior caste derived from Balkan slaves who had at one time been pressed into Ottoman military service as elite fighters. They ruled autocratically, apart from indigenous Arabs, and had a reputation for violence and harsh taxation policies. In the opinion of French *philosophes*, the Mamelukes were considered an affront to the values of the Enlightenment, and later, the Revolution. In this respect, an invasion of Egypt could be legitimized philosophically as liberating an oppressed people from tyrannical usurpers.

Ultimately, the French Revolution suspended all thought of a colonial endeavor in the Orient until 1798. By then the armies of the Republic were on the offensive, pushing the Revolution beyond France’s borders in a crusade to liberate Europe from the shackles

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in Maurice Besson and Robert Chauvelot, *Napoléon Colonial* (Paris: Société d’Éditions géographiques, maritimes, et coloniales, 1939), 72. “Maîtresse de l’Égypte la France sera, à la longue, maîtresse de l’Inde.”

<sup>8</sup> Nina Burleigh, *Mirage: Napoleon’s Scientists and the Unveiling of Egypt* (New York: Harper, 2007), xi.

of tyranny. A young Bonaparte had defeated the Austrians in Italy and only “Perfidious Albion” remained. However, as long as the English maintained their naval superiority, a direct assault against the British Isles was considered out of the question. The old tactic of severely crippling Britain by cutting off her trade routes to India was reassessed. Some considered it sheer folly. Napoleon Bonaparte certainly did not. But perhaps only he could have undertaken such a bold adventure.

Fascinated with the Orient since his days as a schoolboy at Brienne, Bonaparte had always dreamed of a campaign in the East.<sup>9</sup> He had read the travelogues of French adventurers in the Orient, and as a young boy in Corsica he had even made the acquaintance of Volney. Moreover, the opportunities for immense personal glory were not lost on this ambitious student of history. “We must go East,” a restless Napoleon told his secretary, Louis de Bourrienne, at the end of the Italian campaign in January 1798. “All the great men of the world have there acquired their celebrity.”<sup>10</sup> In the young general’s opinion, “This little Europe” was a mere “molehill” and that: “There have never been great empires...except in the Orient.”<sup>11</sup> In particular, Egypt provided an ideal backdrop for his next adventure. It was a land where mighty and decadent empires had been ruled over by pharaohs, Ptolemies, and imperators; and conquered by the likes of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. Bonaparte was well aware of this potent historical precedent as well as the comparable destiny that seemed to beckon him.

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<sup>9</sup> As a young boy he wrote a short story in which French soldiers affected the daring rescue of slave girls from an Ottoman harem. Burleigh, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Louis de Bourrienne, *Mémoires de M. de Bourrienne* Vol. 2. (Bruxelles: Auguste Whalen et H. Tarlier, 1829) 30. “Il faut aller en Orient, toutes les grandes renommées viennent de là.”

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. “Cette petite Europe...c’est une taupinière. [...] Il n’y a jamais eu de grands empires...qu’en Orient.”



Consequently, Napoleon, with the support of foreign minister Charles-Maurice Talleyrand (who had espoused the idea of an Egyptian campaign years earlier) petitioned the Directory with a plan for the invasion of Egypt. As we have seen, the political and economic benefits were extremely desirable. If successful, France would not only strike a blow against a rival, but establish a colony in heart of a legendary country. To this end, Talleyrand evokes classical history and the role of the French as the benevolent successors to the Romans in his report to the Directory:

Egypt was a province of the Roman Republic; it must be one of the French Republic. The conquest of the Romans marked the era of decline for this beautiful nation; the French conquest will be the one of its prosperity. The Romans ravished Egypt of its illustrious kings of the arts and sciences; the French will remove the most frightful tyrants that have ever existed.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly this was to be more than military conquest. It was to be a *mission civilisatrice* inspired by the Enlightenment and fueled by Reason against Despotism. And the Egyptians, a people born of a once great civilization, were to be among the primary beneficiaries of this new rationality. The French – liberators first – had come to install liberty and equality and restore the once faded glory of ancient Egypt. Thus, unraveling the country's millennia-old mysteries would be of particular interest to the expedition.

Egyptian civilization had never been completely forgotten due mostly to the accounts left by Greek and Roman writers and the continued presence of monumental ruins that still peeked above the sand. Muted sphinxes posed silent riddles, lofty lotus-

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<sup>12</sup> Cited in Besson and Chauvelot, 45-46. "L'Égypte, fut une province de la République romaine, il faut qu'elle en devienne une de la République française. La conquête des Romains fut l'époque de la décadence de ce beau pays ; la conquête des Français sera celle de sa prospérité. Les Romains ravirent l'Égypte à des rois illustres dans les arts, les sciences, les Français l'enlèveront aux plus affreux tyrans qui aient jamais existé."

crowned columns eternally supported long-vanished ceilings, towering obelisks adorned with indecipherable symbols pierced the sun-baked horizon – these antiquities were larger and older than anything in Europe and they prompted an endless stream of frustrating questions. Detailed knowledge about who the Egyptians were, what religion they practiced, or how their society functioned was nonexistent. Until Napoleon's expedition, fantasy more than fact provided the foundation for the majority of theories concerning the origins of the ancient Egyptians. Hieroglyphs proved equally intriguing and perplexing to European scholars. Some believed these ancient ideograms had the power to unlock some ancient magic or bestow the secret of true knowledge. One academicien conjectured that the Egyptians had founded a colony in China and therefore hieroglyphs had developed from Chinese characters.<sup>13</sup> Few actually believed that such sacred writing had been used for quotidian purposes. Perhaps they did not want to. Other questions also piqued the curiosity of scholars. The process of mummification and the methods used to construct the Pyramids chief among them. Ultimately, the *savants* that embarked with Napoleon hoped to find the answers.

Yet, going about a systematic survey of the country's ancient past would be an unprecedented task. Nothing of the kind had ever been attempted before. Moreover, not one of the *savants* that landed at Alexandria in the days following the French fleet's arrival was an archaeologist. Archaeology as a member in the pantheon of European physical sciences had yet to be invented. While Europeans had busied themselves with the collection and study of artifacts (some of them even Egyptian) since the Middle Ages, this kind of antiquarianism was an intellectual pastime reserved for well-learned

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<sup>13</sup> Fagan, 44-45.

gentleman in frock coats and ruffled lace. The arranging of potsherds and fragments of bizarre inscriptions behind glass was the product of sheer curiosity. The institutionalization of archaeology was to be a product of the French experience in Egypt during which the appropriation of the past would be placed directly into service of the nation. General Bonaparte as a product of the Enlightenment was particularly sensitive to the power of history. He was also a devotee to the eighteenth-century pursuit of universal knowledge. At his induction into to the Institut de France Bonaparte claimed, “True victories, the only ones that cause no regret, are those made over ignorance.”<sup>14</sup> Convinced that his expedition in Egypt would constitute a “true victory,” the ambitious general organized a second army, an army of scholars, to help him rediscover land of the pharaohs. Napoleon had come to conquer Egypt not only with sharpened bayonets, but with sharpened pencils as well.

The Commission des Sciences et des Arts (Commission of the Sciences and the Arts) that accompanied the Army of the Orient was composed of nearly 150 experts representing fields in architecture, art, astronomy, botany, cartography, chemistry, engineering, geology, mathematics, medicine, music, printing, oriental languages, and zoology. Among them were such luminaries as Claude Louis Berthollet, a pioneering chemist and organizer of the Commission; Nicolas Conté, a one-eyed, hot air balloonist and mechanical genius; Joseph Fourier, discoverer of the greenhouse effect; Gaspard Monge, inventor of descriptive geometry; and Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, a leading

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<sup>14</sup> Burleigh, 5.

naturalist and early defender of evolution.<sup>15</sup> These men, among many others, were to become the foremost experts in all things Egyptian. Most of them would endure, with remarkable energy and resolve, three brutal years in a hostile land accomplishing a variety of tasks, from building irrigation canals, to capturing crocodiles, to measuring – with uncanny accuracy – the height of the Great Pyramid of Giza. Ultimately, the Commission’s work would be the most famous and enduring aspect of one of Napoleon’s most unsuccessful military campaigns.

Following the occupation of Cairo at the end of July 1798, such elites were organized into the Institut d’Égypte, an academic institution modeled on the prestigious Institut de France. Housed in the harem chamber of an elegant palace requisitioned from the vanquished Mameluke overlords its purpose was to hold scholarly debate on the scientific discoveries made in Egypt as well as to handle the campaign’s public relations. According to the Institute’s founding document, it served to achieve three principal objectives: spread the Enlightenment throughout Egypt, study the historical and natural aspects of the Nile Valley, and provide useful information to the occupying authorities.<sup>16</sup>

Through the Institute archaeology found its first venue of institutionalization. The archaeological findings of the Commission were presented to its members, and papers with topics ranging from the methods of ancient Egyptian craftsmen to the “selection, conservation, and transportation of ancient monuments” were regularly read and debated.<sup>17</sup> It was in this learned body that one of the most historic finds of the expedition

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<sup>15</sup> For a detailed and entertaining account of the principal *savants* who accompanied Napoleon into Egypt see *Mirage: Napoleon’s Scientists and the Unveiling of Egypt* by Nina Burleigh.

<sup>16</sup> Burleigh, 71.

<sup>17</sup> Fagan, 49.

was first studied: the Rosetta stone. One member, however, did more to bring the ancient splendors of Egypt to the fore than any other: a fifty-one year old artist, diplomat, and amateur pornographer<sup>18</sup> named Dominique-Vivant Denon.

While not technically a member of the Commission, he was, however, personally assigned to the expedition by General Bonaparte and would serve as the Commander-in-Chief's advisor on artistic matters. In this capacity, Denon was well placed to be the first to systematically record and illustrate Egypt's ancient monuments. His vivid sketches and his evocative written accounts would inspire not only the members of the Institute, but an entire continent back home. In an era without the rapid exchange of live media, writing and illustration served immensely important functions in bringing to life the exotic and unimaginable.

Born into a wealthy, *ancien régime* family, Denon became a gifted artist and engraver. He had also been graced with a witty intellect, tremendous personal charm, and nearly infinite amounts of inextinguishable energy; all of which he utilized to his advantage while frequenting Parisian salons as young man. He quickly caught the attention of influential court officials and was invited by Louis XV to be keeper of the royal gem collection. It was rumored that he provided a similar service to Madame de Pompadour.

Unable to be constrained by court life, Denon entered the diplomatic service and secured posts in St. Petersburg where he acted as a representative to the court of Catharine the Great, and later, under Louis XVI, in Naples, where he was the

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<sup>18</sup> In 1793 Denon published his *Oeuvre priapique* – a collection of highly explicit sketches (even by French standards) that became quite popular among the Parisian intelligentsia during the Revolution. Fagan, 49.



Figure 2: Napoleon and his *savants* at the Institut d'Égypte



Figure 3: Dominique-Vivant Denon  
(1747-1825)

ambassador's personal secretary and Chargé d'Affaires. Unfortunately, the course of the French Revolution quite literally reversed his fortune. With his property seized and his aristocratic name proscribed (his original surname, De Non, expediently underwent a transformation sometime after 1789), Denon found himself on the street relying on his artistic talents to forestall an unpleasant trip to the guillotine. Fortuitously, he came to the attention of the neo-classical painter, and premier artist of the Revolution, Jacques-Louis David. Through David, Denon was able to reintegrate into high society and made the acquaintance of Josephine de Beauharnais, the future wife of Napoleon Bonaparte. Thus, it was only a matter of time before Denon wisely attached himself to the young general's ascendant course through French history.

Despite his age (the average Commission member was twenty-five years-old) Denon was eager to make the journey. From the outset it was his desire to travel deep into Upper Egypt and record the magnificent ruins of temples and palaces that had been so tantalizingly rumored to exist further up the Nile. "I had all my life desired to make a voyage to Egypt," Denon writes.<sup>19</sup> "I would see first, and see without prejudice; I would tread across a part of the Earth hitherto covered with the veil of mystery and for two thousand years closed to Europeans."<sup>20</sup> A month after landing at Alexandria he had precisely this chance.

Following Napoleon's victory over the Mamelukes at the Battle of the Pyramids, Murad Bey, the Mameluke chieftain, escaped south with the remainder of his army into the deserts of Upper Egypt. Intent on bringing his wily enemy to complete submission,

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<sup>19</sup> Vivant Denon, *Voyages dans la Basse et la Haute Egypte pendant les campagnes du générale Bonaparte* (Paris: Promeneur, 1998) 35. "J'avais toute ma vie désiré de faire le voyage en Egypte..."

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 152-153. "J'allais voir le premier, et voir sans préjugé; j'allais fouler une terre couverte de tout temps du voile du mystère, et fermée depuis deux mille ans à tout Européens."

Bonaparte ordered General Louis-Charles-Antoine Desaix (a rugged war veteran complete with saber scar across one cheek) to organize an expeditionary force and track Murad down.<sup>21</sup> The mission was considered extremely dangerous and would involve a year of harsh guerrilla warfare, but unwilling to miss an opportunity to explore the ancient ruins of Egypt, Denon signed up. At first his elegant, ruffle-cuffed presence puzzled the rough-and-ready recruits he marched with, but he proved to be as hardy a trekker as any of them. His charisma and clever sense of humor made him popular with the men and he quickly became a dear companion of Desaix. In December 1798, as the other *savants* were enjoying the cool pleasure gardens of Cairo, Denon set out for the dusty, sun-scorched plains of the Sahara.

For nine perilous months Denon calmly shared the miseries of the French army. He endured forced marches of thirty miles a day, constant assault by invisible biting insects, and debilitating bouts of ophthalmia – a painful bacterial infection of the eye that afflicted everyone on the campaign. Not to mention the mortal danger posed by surprise Mameluke attacks. But the only complaint Denon ever made was aimed at the constant necessity of Desaix's men to keep moving. Little mattered to Denon except capturing, with his sharp, aesthetic eye and omnipresent lead crayon, every magnificent site he saw along the way. Often he found himself in the midst of gunfire, sketching board laid across his knees encouraging his fellow soldiers to return volley by frantically waving his drawing paper.<sup>22</sup> Some days he would ride dangerously ahead of the army, while on others he would straggle far behind – all in an effort to maximize his time among temples and tombs.

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<sup>21</sup> Burleigh, 171.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



It is important to note how Denon's amusing story is emblematic of the "imperial romance" narrative and thus must be approached critically. The colorful account of his travels cited herein was first published in Paris in 1802 as *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte pendant les campagnes de générale Bonaparte*. It was an extremely successful book that excited the European popular imagination and while it is autobiographical in nature it also knowingly capitalized on the apparent romance of France's Egyptian experience. Throughout, Denon fashions himself as a daring hero who treks across the dunes of Northern Africa, clambers through mysterious temples, and braves the attacks of scimitar-wielding natives; all the while upholding the civilizing imperative and a certain sense of European integrity. In this regard, the character of Denon foreshadows (and perhaps provides inspiration for) that well-known archetype perpetuated by the imperial literature of the late nineteenth century and the radio and pulp serials of the early twentieth. Furthermore, the storybook quality of Denon's journey fits into the larger narrative framework that we will continue to encounter – one that prominently places explorers and soldiers in exotic locales, thereby disguising the more sinister designs of Europe's colonialist ambitions under the mantle of science and high adventure. To this degree archaeology helped to significantly romanticize and dramatize the overseas exploits of the nineteenth century because it was capable of producing historically potent images pregnant with ancient grandeur and mystery.

Nonetheless, Denon's obsession for the antiquity of Egypt produced startling results. His accurate and detailed drawings of ancient Egypt's most important architectural structures and the numerous copies of hieroglyphic inscriptions he made

would prove invaluable to scholars. Among them the many sites he visited, the temple complex at Dendera made a lasting impression on him. Denon reached Dendera in mid-January 1799.<sup>23</sup> So impressed was the army with this ruin that they stopped for a day to explore.

Dendera was the site of the striking Temple of Hathor. Hathor was the ancient Egyptian sky-goddess (often rendered as a cow) and became closely associated with the worship of the dead. Its beauty stemmed from its remarkably pristine condition. Denon remarks: “What power! What riches! What abundance! [...] Never did the labor of man show me the human race in such a splendid light. In the ruins of Tentyris [i.e. Dendera], the Egyptians appeared to me to be giants!”<sup>24</sup> The French army wandered through the ruins where General Desaix himself made a significant archaeological discovery. Accompanied by Denon, he stumbled upon a small shrine built onto the roof of the temple. Set into the ceiling was an immense circular zodiac. This ancient map of the heavens depicted Leo, Virgo, Libra, Taurus, Gemini, and Cancer spiraling inwards amid lines of hieroglyphic script. Beside it was a striking portrayal of Isis – goddess of nature and magic – in high relief. Desaix and Denon instantly recognized the zodiac’s importance and later, upon the discovery’s announcement to the Institute, it would become the subject of much scientific speculation. Some believed that it held the key to deciphering hieroglyphs, while others argued that through interpretation of the position of the astrological signs the age of the temple could be, in effect, backdated. On a later trip to Dendera, Denon would suffer hours in the dark, guano-smeared temple annex craning

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<sup>23</sup> Denon, 185.

<sup>24</sup> Russell, 144.

his neck and working by candlelight in order to make a detailed copy. His devotion seems clear:

The floor being low and the room dark I was able to work for only a few hours of the day. Neither these difficulties nor the multiplicity of the details – and the great care required in not confusing them in so inconvenient a posture – abated my ardor. The desire of bringing to the philosophers of my native country a copy of an Egyptian bas-relief of so much importance made me patiently endure the tormenting position required in its delineation.<sup>25</sup>

And once more we see the self-formation of Denon as the romantic scholar-hero, that noble, yet imaginary archetype who endures the hardships of the Orient for the enlightenment of his fellow man. Two decades later the zodiac of Dendera would itself become involved in a dramatic episode of adventure movie proportion that nearly resulted in a diplomatic confrontation between France and Great Britain.

But in January Denon had to be content with a rough drawing, for despite the discovery the army was due to set out that evening. Denon eloquently recalls both the excitement and frustration he experienced while trying to realize his ambitious quest:

With my pencil in my hand I passed from object to object distracted from one by the inviting appearance of the next. Constantly attracted to new subjects – and again torn from them – I wanted eyes, hands and intelligence vast enough to see, copy and reduce to some order the multitude of striking images that presented themselves to me. I was ashamed at representing such sublime objects by such imperfect designs, but I wished to preserve some memorial of the sensations I here experienced. I feared Tentyris would escape from me forever, so that my regret equaled my enjoyment.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Cited in Russell, 210-211.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Ibid., 145.

Night approached and Denon still lingered among the ruins in artistic ecstasy until a commanding officer personally escorted him back to the advancing army on horseback.<sup>27</sup>

The army continued to march south until they reached the sprawling, awe-inspiring ruins of ancient Thebes on 27 January 1799.<sup>28</sup> As the French rounded a bend in the Nile they were met with an incredible panorama of the ancient city that had once been the capital of Egypt's powerful kingdoms. As Denon recounts in his *Voyage*: "At the sight of these scattered ruins the army froze and spontaneously clapped their hands as if the occupation of this capital's remains had been the goal of their glorious toils and completed the conquest of Egypt."<sup>29</sup> He later confided, "The delicate sensibility of our soldiers made me feel proud...of calling myself a Frenchman!"<sup>30</sup> One lieutenant recounts a similar moment when the entire army paid another impulsive and emotional tribute to antiquity, this time in front of the massive temples of Amun at Luxor and Karnak. "Without an order being given, the men formed their ranks and presented arms, to the accompaniment of the drums and the band."<sup>31</sup>

One can see the immense effect that the ancient world produced, engendering respect and reverence among its beholders. Here, at the intersection of past and present, the French make a symbolic appropriation of ancient Egypt's former glory. Napoleon and his armies are portrayed as humble, sensitive admirers who pay homage to their

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<sup>27</sup> Denon, 192.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 194. "L'armée, à l'aspect de ses ruines éparses, s'arrêta d'elle-même, et, par un mouvement spontané, battit des mains, comme si l'occupation des restes de cette capitale eût été le but de ses glorieux travaux, eût complété la conquête de l'Égypte."

<sup>30</sup> Russell, 147.

<sup>31</sup> Fagan, 52.

ancient predecessors and thus represent themselves as the worthy inheritors to a splendid, but unconnected past. Subsequently, they construct historical narratives in which the French Republic is the terminal point in a long teleological constant that began in ancient Egypt. The physical remains of Thebes and other sites are the stage upon which such a spectacle is emotionally played out, complete with the rustle of regimental banners, the echo of musket fire, and the rolling rumble of snare drums. The indigenous Arabs, with their backwards customs and ignorant grasp of history are pushed aside. As Said reminds us, the Egyptian campaign was foremost a colonial adventure and that the romantic notion of scientific discovery had merely transformed the French military experience in Egypt “from a clash between a conquering and a defeated army into a much longer, slower process, obviously more acceptable to the European sensibility enfolded within its own cultural assumptions.”<sup>32</sup> Archaeology permitted Napoleon’s soldiers to discriminatorily reach beyond the Islamic reality of Egypt for an ancient fantasy that erased any native role. With the sudden arrival of the French and their amazing tools of science, even some Egyptians were unable to comprehend that such architecture could be the product of an ancient, non-European race. Denon recalls how an elderly sheik once approached him as he was sketching the Temple of Luxor and asked, pointing to two towering obelisks, “Was it the English or the French who built these ancient monuments?”<sup>33</sup>

By February 1799, Denon’s travels had taken him as far south as Aswan and the First Cataract of the Nile. Here he encountered the island of Philae, which sheltered the Temple of Isis as well as the sacred tomb of Osiris. Amid these ruins the French

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<sup>32</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 33.

<sup>33</sup> Russell, 149.

discovered evidence of Roman occupation in the form of an engraving upon a fallen obelisk. On a temple pylon nearby the French inscribed their own contemporary epitaph as a testament to the Armée d'Orient's furthest descent along the Nile. The inscription consecrated the conquest of Egypt by General Bonaparte, his defeat of the Mamelukes, and the landing of General Desaix on the island of Philae.<sup>34</sup> Denon also made note of a small Egyptian temple that had been constructed during the Roman period called the Kiosk of Trajan. He considered it one of the most beautiful edifices he had yet to encounter and advocated for its removal to France:

The Kiosk of Trajan is one of the most beautiful that can be conceived. It is in a perfect state of preservation and is so small it...gives one the desire of carrying it away. If ever we should be disposed to transport a temple from Africa to Europe, this of which I am speaking should be selected for the purpose.<sup>35</sup>

This fixation with possession is a prominent theme in France's archaeological experiences with the ancient world. It seemed better that the remains of Egyptian civilization be placed in the stewardship of those who appreciated them. Denon was shocked to find how the local Arabs had made use of such majestic ruins. Many served as foundations for cluttered mud brick houses while others had their limestone slabs hauled away as building stone or crushed to make fertilizer. Still other temples were transformed into pens for livestock and garbage. Denon was nearly stoned to death when he entered a complex of dark, rock-cut tombs outside of Thebes, having unintentionally

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<sup>34</sup> Russell, 179.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

trespassed on the property of what he considered to be “hostile nomads.”<sup>36</sup> To the French, already prejudiced by their enlightened sensibilities, such splendid antiquities, with their potential to unlock the mysteries of man’s ancient past, needed to be explored, recorded, and preserved from “savagery.”

By summer Denon was back in Cairo with a multitude of vivid stories and even more vivid sketches (over two hundred). Before he could give a detailed account to the Institute, however, he was whisked back to France with Napoleon. Militarily the campaign was beginning to fall apart, and Bonaparte had heard rumors that the political situation in Paris was precarious. The French army would remain in Egypt for another two years before finally capitulating to the British. Nonetheless, Denon’s experiences and beautifully rendered portfolio inspired his fellow scholars to embark on voyages of their own and continue his archaeological exploits.

In particular, two young engineers named Jean-Baptiste Prosper Jollois and Edouard Devilliers du Terrage became Denon’s devoted successors.<sup>37</sup> They had been stationed in Upper Egypt to dig irrigation ditches, but they found capturing the country’s vestiges of antiquity a far more interesting use of their drafting and surveying skills. As a result, the work they produced was even more extensive and detailed than Denon’s. They began at Dendera where they completed an architectural survey of the site, even attempting to restore the temple to its former glory with the tips of their pencils. All summer long they enthusiastically filled drafting books with ground plans, elevations,

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<sup>36</sup> Russell, 148.

<sup>37</sup> Burleigh, 176.

historical renderings, wall carvings, and hieroglyphs. As historian Nina Burleigh states, Jollois and Devilliers would “set the standard for modern archaeological fieldwork.”<sup>38</sup>

In a month a dozen more savants joined them. Historian-archaeologist Brian Fagan recounts, “Pencils ran out, lead bullets were frantically melted down as substitutes, and a vast body of irreplaceable information was recorded for posterity.”<sup>39</sup> Some of the last orders Napoleon gave before departing in August 1799 included the creation of two antiquities commissions so as to expand the work already being undertaken by Jollois and Devilliers. These teams would become responsible for the impressive amount of archaeological information later published in the monumental *Description de l’Égypte*. Throughout it all they removed hundreds of antiquities, small and large, from the sites they explored.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps the most important, and certainly most famous, archaeological moment of the Egyptian expedition was the accidental discovery of a half-ton of black rock that would forever change mankind’s understanding of Pharaonic Egypt: the Rosetta stone. It was uncovered by a soldier named d’Hautpoul while reinforcing coastal defenses to the north of the city of el-Rachid (Rosetta) in the Nile Delta.<sup>41</sup> The stone was among numerous other granite slabs being recycled for the fortifications, but it stood apart because it clearly bore a series of inscriptions. His commanding officer, Lieutenant Pierre François Xavier Bouchard, reported the find to the Institute and the stone was

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<sup>38</sup> Burleigh, 184.

<sup>39</sup> Fagan, 53.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 50.



expedited to Cairo. Upon seeing the inscriptions – rendered in hieroglyphs, demotic (the script of documents), and ancient Greek – the congregated *savants* immediately understood the importance of the find. Being properly educated eighteenth-century men most of them could read Greek. Suddenly, the possibility of deciphering the sacred writing of the Egyptians finally seemed tangible. Unfortunately, for the French, Napoleon's glorious campaign soon took a turn for the worse.

Only a month after triumphantly landing at Alexandria, the French experienced a crushing defeat. On 1 August 1798, Admiral Nelson and the Royal Navy ambushed the entirety of the expedition's fleet in Abukir Bay. Nelson had been chasing Bonaparte across the Mediterranean ever since the general's departure from Toulon in the spring. The battle proved a decisive victory for the British and quickly reversed France's strategic position in the Nile Valley. Suddenly, the young Alexander had become a victim of his own victory. Trapped in Egypt, it was only a matter of time before the Army of the Orient surrendered for the right to return home. The French held out until August 1801.

General Jacques-François de Menou eventually succeeded Bonaparte as the campaign's Commander-in-Chief and negotiated the Treaty of Alexandria with General Hutchinson of the British army.<sup>42</sup> The capitulation agreement granted the French, as well as their personal belongings, safe passage back to France onboard British vessels. However, it also granted the British the right to seize all of the antiquities and other scientific information gathered by the Commission of the Sciences and the Arts.<sup>43</sup> In particular, the British wanted to obtain the Rosetta stone. News of its discovery had

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<sup>42</sup> Fagan, 54.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

spread to London, whetting the appetite of British scholars who were eager to advance their own knowledge of ancient Egypt. Outraged that the British had transformed the Commission's intellectual property into a political pawn, the *savants* put up a fierce resistance. The mild-mannered zoologist Geoffrey Saint-Hilaire became a hero to his compatriots when he defiantly declared the following to British diplomat Sir William Hamilton:

Without us this material is a dead language that neither you nor your scientists can understand. Sooner than permit this iniquitous and vandalous spoliation we will destroy our property, we will scatter it amid the Libyan sands and throw it into the sea. We shall burn our riches ourselves. It is celebrity you are aiming for. Very well, you can count on the long memory of history: You also will have burnt a library in Alexandria!<sup>44</sup>

The British relented slightly and allowed the French scholars to keep their journals, maps, specimens and other material. But they were adamant about obtaining the antiquities. Menou tried to claim the Rosetta stone as his personal property, but he could do little, except be spiteful, when a squad of armed redcoats arrived at his tent to haul away the stone. Defiantly, and in retrospect, rather ironically, Menou shouted at the departing British: “*Jamais on a autant pillé le monde!*”<sup>45</sup> – Never had the world been so plundered.

The Rosetta stone traveled to England onboard the HMS *L'Égyptienne* accompanied by a Colonel Turner who described it as a “proud trophy to the arms of Britain – not plundered from defenseless inhabitants but honorably acquired by the

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<sup>44</sup> Cited in Fagan, 54.

<sup>45</sup> Cited in Burleigh, 216.

fortune of war.”<sup>46</sup> Apparently, the Rosetta stone had been laundered by spoils of war. This telling episode foreshadows the broader, nationalistic overtones that archaeology would assume throughout the nineteenth century. Ultimately, the British took possession of an impressive amount of archaeological treasure from the French – all of which would become the foundation for the British Museum’s Egyptian collection. The Rosetta stone would be its crowning piece. Since its installation in the British Museum the famous stone has only left Britain once: for a special exhibition at the Louvre in 1973.<sup>47</sup> It has never been displayed in Egypt.

Back in Paris Denon had already written up the account of his exploits along the Nile, which became the first international bestseller of the nineteenth century. *Voyage* was immediately translated into several languages and captivated readers in every part of the social spectrum. Denon’s reputation was further enhanced when Napoleon appointed him director of the Musée Central des Arts (the Louvre).<sup>48</sup> In this capacity Denon oversaw the expansion of the museum’s collections – often achieved by the Emperor’s conquering armies who “liberated” fine art in Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the German states. Despite this, the Louvre would not have a proper Egyptian collection until after the fall of the Empire. However, what the French had lost in antique treasure they made up for with an unprecedented addition to human knowledge: the *Description de l’Égypte*. This was to be the most enduring legacy of Napoleon’s ill-fated Egyptian adventure.

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<sup>46</sup> Cited in Burleigh, 216.

<sup>47</sup> Fagan, 55.

<sup>48</sup> Russell, 256.

The *Description* comprised twenty-two massive volumes and took nineteen years to publish in its entirety. A special bookcase, adorned with ancient Egyptian motifs, was even constructed to house the colossal work. The first volume appeared in 1809 and was dedicated to “Sa Majesté l’Empereur Napoléon le Grand” while the last was released in 1828 during the Restoration and the reign of Charles X. Every scientific and archaeological observation of the Commission and the Institute was printed in the *Description*. In the *préface historique* written by Jean-Baptiste Joseph Fourier, the Institut d’Égypte’s secretary, the *Description* justifies the mission’s undertaking and represents the work as the successor to the knowledge comparably amassed by the ancient philosophers who studied in Egypt: “Homer, Lycurgus, Solon, Pythagoras, and Plato all went to Egypt to study the sciences, religion, and the laws. Alexander founded an opulent city there, which for a long time enjoyed commercial supremacy and which witnessed Pompey, Caesar, Mark Antony, and August deciding between them the fate of Rome and that of the entire world.”<sup>49</sup> Napoleon and the French are naturally intended to be a part of this impressive historical lineage. The *Description* is their testament to the glorious Oriental adventure that was too large, too grand, too endowed with historical significance to conceivably be a failure. Instead it was rendered as a victory, a victory over science and mankind’s ignorance – a true victory in those philosophic words of Napoleon.

Indeed, it represented the ultimate philosophical ambition of the Enlightenment: the organization of knowledge. In this case the subject was Egypt – the whole of Egypt – from the composition of its water to the height of its pyramids. Fundamentally, the

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<sup>49</sup> Cited in Said, *Orientalism*, 84.

*Description* was perhaps the first example of scientific colonialism. In it the French had succeeded in monopolizing, and subsequently appropriating, a history entirely separate from their own. More sinisterly, it also succeeded in transforming a fundamentally military operation into the noble pursuit of knowledge. Edward Said explains that the work's principal objective was "to formulate the Orient, to give it shape, identity, definition with full recognition of its place in memory, its importance to imperial strategy, and its 'natural' role as an appendage to Europe."<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, such knowledge had been "collected during colonial occupation with the title 'contribution to modern learning' when the natives had neither been consulted nor treated as anything except pretexts for a text whose usefulness was not to the natives."<sup>51</sup> To survey, copy, schematize, tabulate, index, measure, and record everything in view, and sometimes out of view – hidden beneath the sand or lost in the stygian darkness of an ancient tomb. These are the characteristics of the Orientalist projection realized in the *Description de l'Égypte*. Ultimately, it served as a means to establish the West's superiority over the East, because it illustrated that the Occident controlled perhaps the most potent weapon of all: knowledge.

The dissemination of such knowledge sent shock waves through Europe's intellectual circles. The *Description* and Denon's *Voyage* unveiled, for the first time, a world little known in stunning detail. Their spectacularly illustrated folios captivated an entire continent with detailed color images of pyramids, crocodiles, mummies, and harems. Moreover, the *savants* had revealed the magnificence of a once flourishing civilization not only to fellow scholars but to the general public as well. In this regard,

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<sup>50</sup> Said, 86.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

Denon's travelogue was much more accessible than the expensive and rather scholarly *Description*, this is testified by its relatively low cost, multiple reprints and translations, and general popularity among various booksellers and publishers (only 1,000 copies of the *Description* were ever produced).<sup>52</sup> However, combined these works were immensely popular and testified to the inherent interest in the subject they presented. The *Description* and *Voyage* stirred the West's curiosity vis-à-vis one of the world's oldest civilizations and confirmed, with hard science and beautiful line drawings, what the collective European imagination had held to be true: the Orient was a land fallen from grace, once great and now left to ruin. This perception ensured the continued glorification of an imagined ancient past while compounding the Western *mépris* felt towards the contemporary Ottoman/Arab presence.

Such a reaction precipitated what the French later labeled *égyptomanie* – Egyptomania. This phenomena manifested itself in diverse ways: from a dinner service decorated with scenes from the *Description de l'Égypte* fabricated for the Empress Josephine, to the monumental set designs for an 1815 production of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* that incorporated backdrops of a sphinx-lined Nile and ancient Egyptian temples.<sup>53</sup> European sensibilities had been exposed to an exotic and romantic civilization the likes of which had never before been made so accessible. Egyptian and, on a broader scale, Oriental themes and patterns were constantly reflected in art, architecture, furniture, and *objets d'art*. Napoleon's expedition to the Near East had irrevocably introduced modern Europe to an ancient world that predated both the Romans and the Greeks. It would leave the public with an almost insatiable thirst for Egyptian antiquity. In the wake of the

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<sup>52</sup> Russell, 256-257.

<sup>53</sup> Fagan, 56.

French army's departure, private collectors and national museums began a fierce scramble to acquire the most incredible artifacts. After all, Egypt had already proved to be a land for the taking.



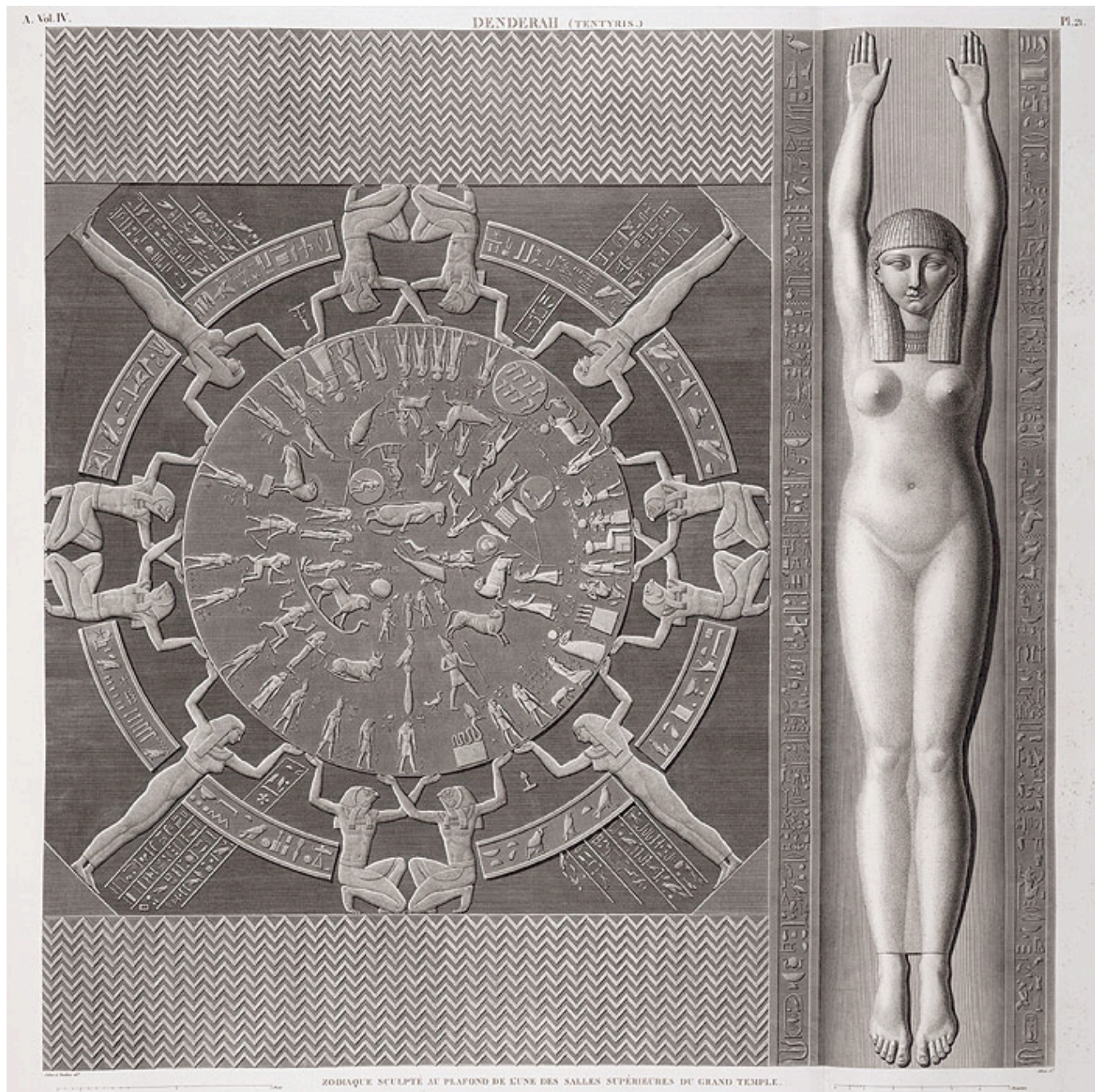


Figure 4: The zodiac of Dendera



## Chapter 2 Spoiling the Egyptians

AND IT SHALL COME TO PASS, THAT, WHEN YE GO, YE SHALL NOT GO EMPTY.  
[...] YE SHALL SPOIL THE EGYPTIANS.

~ Exodus 3:21 – 22

May 1821. Dendera. Jean-Baptiste Lelorrrian, a young French engineer, stood on the roof of the Temple of Hathor and squinted upwards through the glare of the Egyptian sun towards the East Osiris Chapel. Perched on top of the small shrine, his men – a group of well-paid *fellahin* – worked furiously, their hacksaws and chisels vainly trying to eat into two hard sandstone slabs, each one three feet thick. Progress had been painfully slow. To Lelorrrian's chagrin the saws could only cut about one foot a day and the Frenchman had resorted to igniting gunpowder in small, controlled explosions to blow openings in the ceiling. Now, after twenty arduous days, his task was almost complete. So far, Lelorrrian's presence in this small temple bordering the Nile had gone undetected. So far, no one had witnessed him trying to steal the zodiac of Dendera.

The summer before, Sébastien Louis Saulnier, a wealthy antiquarian, had commissioned the young engineer to travel to Egypt, remove the zodiac from the temple ceiling, and ship it back to France. The zodiac of Dendera was considered by French scholars to be a beautiful and striking piece – one of the most remarkable antiquities depicted by Napoleon's *savants* in the *Description de l'Égypte*. Saulnier had decided that, since it had been discovered by Dominique-Vivant Denon and General Desaix

during Napoleon's campaign, it had "in a way become a national monument."<sup>1</sup> Here, the zodiac was regarded as the rightful property of the Nation and once again we observe the translational property of history through which a direct link could be forged between the ancient past and a national one, conferring status and illustrating continuity to the progress of civilization. French scholars like Saulnier had not forgotten that, if interpreted properly, the zodiac could provide a means of dating the Egyptian civilization – perhaps even the age of the world. More importantly, the mysterious celestial planisphere might yet unlock the secrets of hieroglyphic script. This was particularly relevant since another young Frenchman, Jean-François Champollion, had cloistered himself in a cramped Parisian attic with multiple impressions of the Rosetta stone. A linguistic prodigy, he had been working industriously since 1807 to decipher hieroglyphs before his British rival, Thomas Young, did. Thus, obtaining the zodiac, placing it the Louvre, and presenting it to the Institut de France for study, would further buttress the prestigious intellectual reputation the French had achieved from their misadventures in Egypt. "The great institutes of learning in Paris," Said claims, had "a dominating influence over the rise of archeology, linguistics, [and] Orientalism."<sup>2</sup> These "new and glamorous sciences" would provide a "vehicle for culturally appropriating French imperial concerns."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the stakes were high when Lelorrion disembarked at Alexandria in October 1820.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Brian Fagan, *The Rape of the Nile: Tomb Robbers, Tourists, and Archaeologists in Egypt* (New York: Westview Press, 2004), 155-156.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 98-99.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Acquiring the zodiac, however, would prove challenging. Egypt had changed significantly in the years following Napoleon's departure. The withdrawal of French forces had created a power vacuum in the Nile Valley and although the Mamelukes had been considerably weakened, they still remained influential, especially in the countryside. The British army attempted an occupation, but after a year of desultory governance they decided to hand over Egypt to the emissaries of Selim III, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. However, the Porte was concerned with Egypt insofar as Constantinople punctually received taxes from the far-off province. Centralized leadership was desperately needed, but it would come at the price of Egypt's treasures.

Muhammad Ali was an Ottoman military commander of Albanian origin tasked with the Turkish reoccupation of Egypt. He quickly rose to prominence in the ensuing anarchy, consolidating power and building influential support. He became particularly popular with the general public who rallied around him when he installed himself as pasha in 1805. Civil war with the Mamelukes followed sporadically until he had their leadership murdered in Cairo. They had come under the pretense of a celebratory dinner.<sup>4</sup> Such ruthlessness bestowed a firm and stable government upon the Nile Valley, and gradually Egypt became increasingly autonomous vis-à-vis its Ottoman masters. Muhammad Ali was a strong, intelligent, and ambitious leader whose dream it was to bring the benefits of modernity to his country and enhance Egypt's international prestige along with his own. In particular he strove to introduce Western technology: water mills to harness the power of the Nile and irrigate crops, factories to facilitate industrial

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<sup>4</sup> William L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), 124.

manufacturing.<sup>5</sup> To this end an attitude of openness and appeasement was shown towards Europeans.

Consequently, scores of merchants, diplomats, engineers, tourists, collectors, and as Brian Fagan puts it, “just plain shady characters” descended on the Nile Valley.<sup>6</sup> Many of them hoped to take advantage of the opportunities in Muhammad Ali’s Egypt, but even more had come to plunder the countryside of statues, papyri, sarcophagi and the mummies inside them. The antiquities trade was a novel, yet rapidly expanding market in which expedient profits could be speedily realized. The frenzied popular enthusiasm and scholarly curiosity for Egyptian artifacts in Europe assured a steady demand. The Egyptian government assigned no restriction to the removal of antiquities; in fact the cunning *Wāli*<sup>7</sup> saw this bizarre Occidental fetish for the exotic as a political tool – a means to maintain European interest in Egypt and attract foreign capital and investment. Thus, *firman*s – official permits authorizing the excavation and removal of artifacts – were freely granted as long as the applicant curried favor with local officials. Such policies, however, fostered an atmosphere along the Nile comparable only to the lawlessness of the American West:

No qualifications were needed to become a dealer or excavator, simply a tough constitution to cope with the harsh...environment, an ability to use bribery and gunpowder, and the political finesse that enabled successful applications for permits. Those were the rough-and-ready days of excavating. An excavator simply appropriated anything to which he took a fancy, from a

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<sup>5</sup> Fagan, 57.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> The panoply of official titles in the Ottoman Empire is confusing. *Pasha* was a title bestowed upon provincial governors, *Wāli* was a term that designated a territorial ruler, and *Khedive* signified a viceroy. As governor of Egypt and the Sudan, the ambitious Muhammad Ali appropriated all three titles for himself.

scarab to an obelisk. They settled their differences with the help of thugs or with guns.<sup>8</sup>

If Jean-Baptiste Lelorrion were to succeed, he would have to contend with a cast of rather unscrupulous and competitive characters. Among them: Henry Salt and Bernardino Drovetti.<sup>9</sup>

Henry Salt was the British consul general in Egypt and one of the Nile Valley's largest antiquities dealers. Salt was a passionate antiquarian and devoted Egyptologist with a strong interest in hieroglyphs. With British influence growing in Egypt, the Foreign Office was looking for men with knowledge of the Red Sea region. Salt, who had previously spent time in Egypt in 1807, secured his post in 1816 after having proved himself a capable agent during a diplomatic mission to Abyssinia. Once installed he quickly established close relations with the Pashalik as well as an extensive network of local administrators, headmen, diggers, and traders who supplied him with information and artifacts. Despite Egypt's growing international importance, as consul in a distant Ottoman province Salt's diplomatic duties were rather sparse, providing him with ample time to indulge his archaeological pursuits (this, as we will see, shall be a recurring theme wherever diplomacy, boredom, and antiquities intersect). His British sponsors encouraged his activities. Sir Joseph Banks, the famous naturalist who had accompanied Captain James Cook to the Pacific in 1768-1771, was a trustee of the British Museum and sought out Salt as a potential source of Egyptian artifacts for Britain's national collection.

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<sup>8</sup> Fagan, 62.

<sup>9</sup> For a brisk and well-crafted overview of the personalities involved in the plundering of Egypt throughout the nineteenth century see Brian Fagan's *The Rape of the Nile*.

The diplomat Sir William Hamilton, whose infamous involvement in the Elgin Marbles<sup>10</sup> affair had earned him notoriety, was more direct. He enjoined the consul to “collect as many antiquities for ‘an enlightened nation’ as possible.”<sup>11</sup> To do so, however, would mean confronting another impassioned collector: the French consul general.

Bernardino Michele Maria Drovetti was a determined and competent man with dark, brooding eyes and an appropriately villainous handlebar mustache. He was of Piedmontese origin but acquired French citizenship after having served, with distinction, in Bonaparte’s continental armies. After rising to the rank of major he was appointed to the French consulate in Alexandria in 1802, a position he held until Napoleon’s exile in 1815.<sup>12</sup> In this capacity he was known as an incomparable diplomat and played an influential role in stabilizing Muhammad Ali’s regime. Drovetti was thus held high in the pasha’s favor and counseled Ali in matters of government. He also forged extremely close relationships with a vast number of headmen, village leaders, and peasants. It was a position that would greatly facilitate his acquisition of precious antiquities. Unlike Salt’s motives, Drovetti’s interest in ancient Egyptian treasure was mostly commercial and his energetic pursuit of the past provided him with a rather substantial source of supplementary income.

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<sup>10</sup> In 1799 Hamilton was appointed chief private secretary to Sir Thomas Bruce, Earl of Elgin. Elgin was Britain’s ambassador to the Ottoman Empire and an enthusiast for antiquities. He secured a controversial *firman* of to carry out excavations near the Parthenon in Athens and subsequently removed a series of marble sculptures from the temple between 1801 and 1812. His actions provoked an outcry at home and abroad. Nonetheless, the British Museum purchased the marbles for £35,000. The Greek government regularly petitions the British Museum for the marbles’ repatriation. Interestingly enough, Hamilton was present in Alexandria in 1801 to oversee negotiations concerning the Rosetta stone.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Fagan, 60.

<sup>12</sup> Fagan, 58.

Upon the restoration of Louis XVIII to the French throne, Drovetti's previous political affiliations made him a liability and he was temporarily relieved from his post.<sup>13</sup> Free to devote himself entirely to tomb robbing and travel, Drovetti supported himself as a fulltime antiquities dealer, bringing him into inevitable conflict with Salt's newly established operation. In particular, Drovetti would compete against one of Salt's leading field agents: a circus strongman turned treasure hunter named Giovanni Belzoni. On several occasions Drovetti and Belzoni came into direct confrontation, each one claiming it had been he who had arrived first at a site or had previously laid claim to a monumental head or fist as his rightful property. Subsequently, *fellahin* were bribed to mutiny and antiquities were surreptitiously lifted from rival encampments, or worse, vindictively destroyed. Intimidation, fisticuffs, and gunfights ensued. Appeals to the Pashalik were met with indifference. Muhammad Ali was an astute enough politician to play both sides against the middle. The cunning Khedive realized that the petty archaeological antics of the French and the British were but a microcosm of larger, imperial rivalries. Thus, Drovetti and Salt came to a gentleman's agreement. In a solution characteristic of two European diplomats, they carved the Nile Valley into "spheres of influence." Lelorrrian's paymaster, Saulnier, was aware of the situation, writing: "They concluded a peace treaty. Like kings who, in accommodating their differences, want to preclude all causes that could renew them, they took a river for the border of the respective possessions that they granted themselves in Egypt."<sup>14</sup> Under the terms of this settlement, the French would be permitted to excavate the ruins on the east bank of the Nile, while the British claimed

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<sup>13</sup> Fagan., 59.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 166.

everything on the west bank.<sup>15</sup> Such an act is particularly paradigmatic of the territorial “claims” that were made on behalf of archaeology. The behavior of Salt and Drovetti perfectly illustrates the overlying historical problematic at stake – that is to say that the division of antiquities represents the category of informal imperialism being undertaking in the Near East.

Unfortunately for our young French engineer, the Temple of Dendera was located on the Nile’s western bank. Before leaving Cairo in February 1821, Jean-Baptiste Lelorrrian made sure to conceal his true intentions by publicly announcing that he was going to attempt an excavation around Thebes.<sup>16</sup> He had successfully obtained a general *firman* from the Pashalik, which authorized him to conduct archaeological research in ancient ruins as far upstream as Wadi Halfa near the Sudanese frontier. Despite these precautions, Lelorrrian uncovered one of Henry Salt’s spies among his traveling companions and had him carefully removed from his boat.<sup>17</sup> En route to Thebes, the Frenchman stopped at Dendera to case the temple and familiarize himself with the exact location of the zodiac. The presence of British tourists, however, prevented him from taking any immediate action. Not particularly eager to transmit his interest in the zodiac (and possibly have his presence reported to Salt) Lelorrrian decided not to linger and continued directly on to Thebes. Here he set up camp and purchased a number of portable antiquities as a feint. Then in mid-April, upon learning that the Temple of

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<sup>15</sup> William H. Stiebing, Jr. *Uncovering the Past: A History of Archaeology* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993), 67.

<sup>16</sup> Fagan, 156.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



Hathor had been vacated, the crafty engineer perpetuated the story that he was planning a trek across the Eastern Desert to the Red Sea.<sup>18</sup> Once Salt's agents in Luxor were convinced that the Frenchman had departed, Lelorrrian secretly sailed back downstream to Dendera.

Lelorrrian and his men worked for twenty-two continuous days sawing, chiseling, and, finally, blasting the zodiac out of the temple ceiling. The entire time Lelorrrian maintained a vigilant watch along the Nile for any approaching boats that might be carrying one of Henry Salt's henchmen. After successfully excising the zodiac and lowering it to the floor it took an additional sixteen days, and a total of fifty Egyptian workers, to lever the two massive stones along wooden rollers to the bank of the Nile four miles away.<sup>19</sup> The captain of Lelorrrian's hired vessel, however, refused to cast off. Brian Fagan recounts that a passing American traveler had reported the presence of excavators at Dendera to the British consul in Cairo. Salt, through his contacts, had managed to arrange an effective bribe. Nonetheless, some persuasion – and 1,000 piastres – convinced the captain to change his mind and take Lelorrrian and his prize to Alexandria.<sup>20</sup> Unwilling to let the Frenchman purloin an artifact from his "territory," Salt ordered one of his agents in Luxor to give chase and towards the end of Lelorrrian's journey down the Nile another craft pulled alongside. At the rail an Englishman sternly ordered the young engineer to hand over the zodiac. Lelorrrian refused, defiantly raising

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<sup>18</sup> Stiebing, 68.

<sup>19</sup> Fagan, 156.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

the French colors and challenging the British to board.<sup>21</sup> For the first time in two decades France and Britain were at peace, and an uneasy peace at that. Yet, what would be the diplomatic repercussions if a British agent were to board a French vessel in neutral waters? Lelorrrian's brazen gambit worked and Salt's hireling disengaged. Upon hearing the news Salt was furious. He had been planning to remove the zodiac on behalf of his compatriot William Banks, a wealthy Egyptologist.<sup>22</sup>

Henry Salt made one last attempt to intercept the Dendera zodiac before it left for Paris. The British consul appealed personally to Muhammad Ali at the royal palace in Alexandria, but to his dismay the pasha declined to intercede. Tired of such squabbling and conniving, annoyed at the arrogant division of his country's antiquities, and suitably impressed by the young Frenchman's audacity, the pasha claimed that, according to the regulations of Lelorrrian's *firman*, Lelorrrian had done nothing illegal.<sup>23</sup> This decision would later become a point of contention in modern patrimony arguments.

The zodiac of Dendera arrived in Paris amid great displays of public enthusiasm. Its acquisition would be Lelorrrian's only contribution to French archaeology, but it paid handsomely. Saulnier and Lelorrrian sold the zodiac to Louis XVIII for 150,000 francs.<sup>24</sup> It was immediately installed in the Louvre and became one of its most prized possessions. It can still be seen today, tucked away in an alcove of Room 19 of the Sully pavilion, where a plaque provides ample information about the zodiac's astrological

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<sup>21</sup> Fagan, 156.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>23</sup> Stiebing, 69.

<sup>24</sup> Fagan, 157.

symbolism, but none concerning the incredible journey it made to France. Those who travel to Dendera, however, must be satisfied with a plaster replica.<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, the Dendera zodiac proved worthless in the pursuit to decipher hieroglyphs. It also proved to be far less ancient than Napoleon's *savants* had originally estimated. Once French scholars were able to read the ancient Egyptian language, they learned that the zodiac had been carved in 50 BCE during the fateful reign of Cleopatra. Nonetheless, its acquisition was considered an immense victory not only for French science but for the French nation as well. As historian-archaeologist Margarite Díaz-Andreu states: "The exploration of the past was legitimized as a search that would support the advancement of science."<sup>26</sup> "But," she adds, "this aspiration was only understood in national terms."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Saulnier and Lelorrion had not only reclaimed an artifact of apparently immense historic importance, they had successfully compounded earlier Napoleonic claims. By physically sequestering one of the expedition's most famous discoveries and displaying it for the world to see, France was able to further reinforce the political and cultural narratives it was synthesizing in the Orient. The affair of the Dendera zodiac set an important precedent which "symbolized...how acceptable it had become to appropriate ancient works of art of the Great Civilizations geographically located in other countries."<sup>28</sup> The problem would only worsen once European

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<sup>25</sup> Fagan, 157.

<sup>26</sup> Margarita Díaz-Andreu, *A World History of Nineteenth-Century Archaeology: Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 128.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 76.

Egyptologists had the ability to read the inscriptions adorning the magnificent pieces hitherto collected abroad.

One year after Lelorrion returned, Jean-François Champollion succeeded in deciphering the millennia-old language. On 14 September 1822, Champollion received copies of hieroglyphs from the massive rock-cut temple of Rameses II at Abu Simbel enabling him to finalize his comprehension of the Egyptian alphabet. He had been using a system that focused on studying royal cartouches<sup>29</sup> and transliterating them through Coptic.<sup>30</sup> Now he found himself effortlessly reading the names of various pharaohs. Suddenly able to grasp the fundamental principal of hieroglyphs, Champollion dashed across Paris to the Institut de France where he burst into his brother's office, shouted "*Je tiens l'affaire!*" ("I've got it!"), and promptly fell to the floor in exhaustion.<sup>31</sup> The following month he formalized his results in his famous *Lettre à M. Dacier*<sup>32</sup> in which he explained that hieroglyphic script was not pictographic (as some had previously believed), nor was it purely alphabetic either (as his rival Thomas Young had once speculated), but rather a complex phonetic language. The discovery was considered so important that the king was immediately informed. Once again France claimed a monumental scientific victory.

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<sup>29</sup> Cartouches are oblong enclosures used in hieroglyphs indicating that the text within is a royal name. So named because Napoleon's soldiers identified the shape with the paper powder cartridges they used in their muzzle loading rifles (*cartouche* in French).

<sup>30</sup> Coptic was the final evolution of the ancient Egyptian language preserved through the Coptic Orthodox Church (although written with Greek characters). Champollion had mastered Coptic as a young boy, even writing his personal diary in it.

<sup>31</sup> Fagan, 162.

<sup>32</sup> Bon-Joseph Dacier was the principal secretary of the Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres.

Champollion's efforts throughout the next decade would ensure that France maintained its intellectual monopoly over ancient Egypt. Named curator of the Louvre's modest Egyptian collection in 1826 it was his duty to oversee its continued expansion. The following year he petitioned the French government to sponsor a research trip to the Nile Valley. In a proposal submitted directly to the Minister of the Interior, the Comte de Corbière, on 1 May 1827, Champollion outlined the objectives of his mission which included copying dedicatory, religious, and bilingual inscriptions as well as making detailed drawings of scenes depicting religious ceremonies, civic life, astronomical tables, and historical events.<sup>33</sup> He also proposed "to undertake excavations," adding that "Found objects which merit attention will be taken away to be placed in the Musée Royal du Louvre...and the Cabinet des Antiques de la Bibliothèque."<sup>34</sup> The following month the Ministry agreed to allocate a total of 20,000 francs for the expedition.<sup>35</sup> For the next year and a half Champollion and his team studied the ancient monuments of the Nile, collecting a significant amount of contextual information concerning the chronology of the Egyptian civilization, managing to simultaneously confirm and refute various historical hypotheses put forth in the years after 1798. For the most part the intrepid linguist gleaned this knowledge by simply reading hieroglyphic text directly from the walls of temples and tombs – a breakthrough for Egyptology.

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<sup>33</sup> Archives Nationales de France (ANF): F/21/543 J.-F. Champollion, "Plan d'un Voyage Littéraire et Scientifique en Egypte," 1 May 1827.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. "faire exécuter des fouilles" [...] "des objets trouvés et qui mériteraient quelque attention seraient emportés pour être places au Musée Royal du Louvre...et au Cabinet Antiques de la Bibliothèque."

<sup>35</sup> ANF: F/21/543 "Lettre à Son Excellence Monseigneur le Ministre de l'Intérieur," 4 February 1830.

Ultimately, Champollion did not have the sufficient resources to collect the artifacts he had promised to gather. Perhaps it was for the best. Throughout his voyage he observed firsthand what nearly two decades of indiscriminate looting and administrative indifference had destroyed. This prompted an appeal to the pasha to restrain such activity so that the ruins of Egypt might be “well guaranteed from the attacks of ignorance or blind greed.”<sup>36</sup> Although his intentions were sincere, he was not above convincing Muhammad Ali to offer one of the massive obelisks at Luxor as a gift to King Charles X. It would be transported to Paris in 1830 where a regime change precipitated by the July Revolution would prevent its installation until 25 October 1836 when it was erected in the center of the Place de la Concorde before the presence of Louis-Philippe I and 200,000 spectators – a towering testament to France’s engagement with ancient Egyptian history and an unofficial monument to Napoleon’s expedition.<sup>37</sup> Even the regimes succeeding the exiled emperor could not deny France’s triumph in Egypt.

Finally, upon his return to Paris, Champollion petitioned the Ministry of the Interior to allocate an additional 5,000 francs towards the establishment of a chair of Egyptian literature and language at the Collège de France.<sup>38</sup> He was concerned that contemporary intellectual advancements would threaten France’s dominant position in the field of Egyptology. He reasons that an Egyptian chair “would assure the continued

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<sup>36</sup> Cited in Fagan, 151.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>38</sup> ANF: F/17/543 J.-F. Champollion, Proposal to subsidize the work of J.-F. Champollion and two students and to create a chair of Egyptian language and literature at the Royal College of France, 12 May 1830.

instruction of doctrine founded by a French scholar.”<sup>39</sup> He continues, arguing that the great universities of Germany, Italy, and England will inevitably follow suit, training students in the language and literature of ancient Egypt. Thus “from this point of view, France would remain the instructor of intellectual Europe.”<sup>40</sup> Once again we see knowledge as the basis of both power and national pride.

France’s collection of Egyptian artifacts in 1830 was meager compared to the one in the British Museum. Moreover, the majority of the Louvre’s Egyptian antiquities had been obtained through third parties rather than through direct appropriation by French archaeologists. Before departing for Egypt, Champollion had, quite ironically, advised Charles X to purchase a large portion of Henry Salt’s collection. Drovetti’s collections also enhanced the Louvre’s Egyptian galleries, purchased by the French government for a quarter-million francs. As Edward Said writes in *Culture and Imperialism*, Champollion’s decipherment of hieroglyphs gave the reproductions of temples and palaces in the *Description de l’Égypte* a voice, enabling a more thorough appropriation of the past in which the “staged actuality of ancient Egypt as reflected through the imperial eye [could be] made to speak.”<sup>41</sup> Only then could antiquities be “dislodged from their context and transported to Europe for use there.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> ANF: F/17/543 J.-F. Champollion. “Proposal to subsidize the work of J.-F. Champollion and two students and to create a chair of Egyptian language and literature at the Royal College of France.” 12 May 1830. “Le Ministère ferait une fondation perpétuelle qui serait un immense service rendu aux Etudes historiques et à la littérature ancienne;...un cours public assurerait la perpétuité de l’enseignement des doctrines fondées par un savant français.”

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. “Le France serait encore sous ce point de vue, l’institutrice de l’Europe savante.”

<sup>41</sup> Said, 118.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Before Champollion's revelation even the most enlightened Western scholars had little idea what they were looking at. Denon and the other *savants* of Napoleon's expedition, as sensitive to history as they were, could only admire in wonderment. And men like Drovetti and Belzoni, as fascinated as they were by ancient Egypt, were more concerned with amassing antiquities than they were with understanding them. The ability to finally comprehend the ancient Egyptian language transformed the fundamental principles of early archaeology and created a more profound appreciation for the objects that graced the exhibition halls of Europe's museums. Serious intellectual interest in the Orient was supported by the dramatic expansion of specialized academic disciplines: archaeology, philology, and Semitic languages received remarkable attention. But not every scholar could travel across the Mediterranean to conduct research. Consequently, France's intellectual institutions set out to obtain as many artifacts as possible, their actions once more executed in the name of broadening mankind's knowledge about the origins of human civilization. Satiating this appetite for knowledge effectively sanctioned the continued looting of the Nile Valley. Again it was reasoned that it was necessary to preserve such priceless antiquities from a people that showed little appreciation for their own cultural heritage. But as archaeologist William Stiebing contends, "This argument displayed the same paternalistic attitude that characterized nineteenth-century Western defenses of colonialism."<sup>43</sup>

Additionally, the technological advancements of the Industrial Revolution, namely the steamship and the railroad, precipitated an unprecedented boom in tourism, rendering the Eastern Mediterranean accessible to a broad spectrum of European society.

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<sup>43</sup> Stiebing, 75.



As early as the 1830s and 1840s, detailed guidebooks to Egypt's monuments were available in New York, London, Paris, and Berlin.<sup>44</sup> Adventure-seeking tourists journeyed to the mythical land of the pharaohs where they casually wandered through ruins, pocketing artifacts to impress relations back home and scratching their names into temple walls, caring not that their graffiti sprawled across hieroglyphic inscriptions and bas-reliefs. Upon visiting the Nile Valley in the 1860s, French polymath Ernest Renan (who we will encounter in the Chapter 4) smugly lamented the destruction that had been perpetrated by intellectuals and tourists alike:

Purveyors to museums have gone through the country like vandals; to secure a fragment of a head, a piece of inscription, precious antiquities were reduced to fragments. Nearly always provided with a consular instrument, these avid destroyers treated Egypt as their own property. The worst enemy, however, of Egyptian antiquities is still the English or American traveler. The names of these idiots will go down to posterity, since they were careful to inscribe themselves on famous monuments across the most delicate drawings.<sup>45</sup>

The problem was desultorily addressed in 1835 when the Pashalik promulgated an edict prohibiting the destruction of ancient monuments and the exportation of antiquities.<sup>46</sup> This ordinance also created an Egyptian Antiquities Service as well as a national museum, both to be situated in the Ezbekieh Gardens of Cairo. The museum housed artifacts belonging to the Egyptian government, obtained through officially sanctioned excavations. However, the law was, at best, a symbolic gesture. Muhammad Ali was not interested in establishing any mechanisms to enforce his mandate. In reality,

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<sup>44</sup> Fagan, 190-191.

<sup>45</sup> Cited in Díaz-Andreu, 120.

<sup>46</sup> Díaz-Andreu, 120.

the museum served as a clearinghouse – its collections used by the Khedive as a source of gifts for important foreign visitors. The situation would remain unchanged during the reign of Ali's successor, his grandson, Abbas. Paradoxically, it would be one of France's greatest archaeological plunderers who would begin to remedy the situation: Auguste Mariette.

In 1850, Charles Lenormant, chair of archaeology at the Collège de France, sent Mariette to Egypt on a mission to acquire Coptic manuscripts. In the words of Brian Fagan, these texts were considered “hot property” in Parisian intellectual and cultural circles.<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately, previous agents had taken advantage of Egypt's remote monastic communities and the Patriarch of Cairo barred Mariette access to the ecclesiastical library.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, a supplementary clause in his instructions had authorized him to obtain antiquities in order to enrich France's national collections. Although a self-taught Egyptologist, Mariette had no prior archaeological training. An energetic, adventurous, and prodigiously indefatigable soul, Mariette gathered his own supplies, and with only the most limited authority from the Louvre and no official *firman*, set off into the desert determined to make an amazing discovery. Against all odds, he did exactly that.

Unlike Vivant Denon or Jean-François Champollion, Auguste Mariette was not particularly gifted as a young man, nor did he float in any influential circles. Born in 1821 in the sleepy seaside town of Boulogne-sur-Mer, Mariette had become an instructor

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<sup>47</sup> Fagan, 181.

<sup>48</sup> Apparently, some years before Mariette's arrival, two Englishmen had purposefully gotten some monks drunk and absconded with the entirety of the monastery's library. Ibid., 182.



Figure 5: Bernardino Drovetti  
(1776-1852)



Figure 6: Auguste Mariette  
(1821-1881)



Figure 7: Photograph of the Egyptian gallery at the Louvre circa 1880

at the local college after an unsuccessful attempt at teaching French in England, and an even more unsuccessful one as a ribbon designer.<sup>49</sup> But he quickly discovered a talent for writing and editing that enabled him to earn a modest income preparing articles on a myriad of subjects for newspapers and magazines. His life might have continued on as such had not another man died. In 1842, at the age of twenty-two, Mariette was called upon to edit the work of Nestor L'Hôte, an artist who had accompanied Champollion to Egypt two decades earlier.<sup>50</sup> L'Hôte's father, a family friend, requested that the young Frenchman prepare his late son's papers for publication. Mariette amiably agreed. A love affair with Egypt was born.

Throughout the course of his work, Mariette became infatuated with the ancient Egyptian civilization, studying everything he could in his spare time. His fascination grew until he impulsively quit his teaching post and moved to Paris so that he could pursue his newfound interest in earnest. Well acquainted with Egypt through L'Hôte's personal papers, Mariette expanded his knowledge considerably, taking advantage of the resources available at France's major intellectual institutions. He even mastered hieroglyphs to a profession standard.<sup>51</sup> Eventually, he submitted an extremely well reasoned, seventy-page dissertation on the Karnak Table of Kings to the Collège de

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<sup>49</sup> Fagan, 181.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 182.

France where he caught the attention of Lenormant.<sup>52</sup> Subsequently, he was granted a small cataloging position at the Louvre before being sent to Egypt.

Mariette had now arrived at the Necropolis of Saqqara, fifteen miles south of Cairo. He had been inspired by the first-century Greek historian Strabo who had recounted the existence of a Serapeum at Memphis.<sup>53</sup> According to legend its location was indicated by a long avenue of sphinxes that terminated at the sacred tomb of the bull-god Apis.<sup>54</sup> Mariette only saw one sphinx protruding from the desolate, sand-swept plain, but it was enough for him to gamble the little money he had and hire thirty workers. In a few hours, his team uncovered sphinx after sphinx. A few weeks later Mariette was well on his way to excavating a previously lost temple complex. His discovery earned him instant recognition throughout Egypt (to the annoyance of other, more well-established antiquities dealers) and the French consul in Alexandria secured generous funding in the amount of 30,000 francs from the Louvre.<sup>55</sup> Mariette also incited the jealous ire of Abbas Pasha, who upon hearing that the young Frenchman had no *firman* tried to confiscate the find. The French government interceded politically and managed to secure a permit, but only on the condition that the French renounce any

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<sup>52</sup> The Karnak Table of Kings lists sixty-one pharaohs from the Old Kingdom. It was stolen from Egypt in 1843 by French Orientalist Émile Prisse d'Avennes before a rival Prussian expedition could obtain it. Fagan, 180, 182.

<sup>53</sup> Stiebing, 75-76.

<sup>54</sup> “The ancient Egyptians had believed that there was one bull, the Apis Bull, sacred to Ptah, patron god of Memphis. They kept this bull in a sacred enclosure near the temple of Ptah and when it died they mummified and buried it in a special tomb with the remains of its predecessors. [...] In later periods of ancient Egyptian civilization the Apis was identified with the god of the dead, Osiris. This identification produced the compound name Osiris-Apis, which the Greeks corrupted into Serapis.” Ibid., 76.

<sup>55</sup> Fagan, 183.

future archaeological claims at the site.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, Mariette continued to dig. By November 1851 he had reached the tomb of Apis where an incredible cache of antiquities awaited discovery beneath the temple floor, including a collection of monumental granite sarcophagi containing the mummified remains of the holy bulls of Apis. Aware of his permit's restrictions and unwilling to yield the artifacts to a government liable to utilize them as political gifts, Mariette devised a fiendish plan.

Having carefully concealed his recent find from Egyptian officials, the French archaeologist began stowing his previously collected antiquities – a rather substantial haul – into large wooden packing cases for transportation to Paris as permitted by the criteria of his *firman*. But he had placed his crates at the bottom of a deep well where a trapdoor provided access to the burial chamber below. Under the cover of darkness, Mariette cunningly stashed the contents of the theoretically unopened tomb into cases with false bottoms.<sup>57</sup> After his treasure had safely arrived at the Louvre, Mariette dutifully made a show of opening the now empty Apis chamber to a group of officials. They were rather disappointed to find that the crypt seemed to be a dead end. In Paris the amazing find at Saqqara greatly enhanced Mariette's reputation, and he was quickly promoted to assistant keeper of the Louvre's Egyptian collection.

The energetic Frenchman was subsequently given significant latitude by the French state to excavate even though Egyptian authorities remained wary. Digging became easier, however, after the confrontational Abbas was assassinated in 1854. The Khedive's uncle, Muhammad Saïd, quickly assumed the viceroyship. It was during this

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<sup>56</sup> Stiebing, 76.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 77.

time that Mariette came to the attention of the famous engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps. Lesseps had been sent to Egypt to construct a canal across the Suez isthmus and his position enabled him to exercise a great deal of influence at court. In 1858 he persuaded the viceroy to appoint Mariette as *maamour* (director) of Egypt's struggling Antiquities Service as well as the curator of the new national museum slated for construction in the Boulaq neighborhood of Cairo.<sup>58</sup> In a move to cultivate political goodwill with Lesseps and the recently installed regime of Napoleon III, Saïd agreed.

Mariette would see the beginning of a ninety-four year period during which French archaeology would maintain a dominant position in Egyptology, lasting through much of Britain's "temporary" military occupation (lasting from 1882 until 1922).<sup>59</sup> In his new capacity, Mariette was given funds and the authority "to clear and restore temple ruins, to collect stelae, statues, amulets, and any easily transportable objects wherever these were to be found, in order to secure them against the greed of local peasants or the covetousness of Europeans."<sup>60</sup> To this end, Mariette launched an ambitious archaeological campaign across Upper and Lower Egypt overseeing the majority of his dig sites personally because of the distrust he harbored for local officials and scheming antiquities dealers. At one point he operated thirty-seven simultaneous excavations along the Nile, virtually monopolizing Egyptian archaeology. His methodology left much to be desired, however. Because funding could be terminate on a whim, he was forced to focus on spectacular finds that would both validate his work to the Pasha and build the Bulaq

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<sup>58</sup> Díaz-Andreu, 121.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Cited in Ibid.

Museum's international reputation, which had officially opened in 1863. Thus, he excavated with "complete abandon" using dynamite and largely ignoring to record any scientific observations.<sup>61</sup> Nonetheless, he took his newly assumed position to heart, adamantly assuring that the antiquities he collected remained in Egypt despite the government's occasional desire to do the exact opposite. In 1867 Mariette was recalled to France to organize the Egyptian pavilion for the Universal Exposition in Paris where the jewelry of Queen Ahhotep served as the exhibition's centerpiece.<sup>62</sup> The sight of the ancient royal jewels stimulated the cupidity of Napoleon III's empress, Eugénie, who subtly requested that they be made a gift. At the risk of angering both the Pasha (for alienating a powerful ally) and the French imperial family (for outright impertinence), Mariette refused. Neither the promise of prestigious posts nor the allure of money could sway his opinion. At the end of the exposition the jewels returned to Cairo with Mariette.

Paradoxically, Mariette was, at once, both a protector of Egyptian archaeology and an agent of French imperialism. During his tenure as the director-general of the Egyptian Antiquities Service he successfully reclaimed Egypt's cultural heritage for Egypt, establishing impressive collections of antiquities that rivaled those found in the British Museum and the Louvre. But it was assumed that such an accomplishment could only be achieved through foreign agency. Egyptians were marginalized from the study of their own history. Those who worked on Mariette's staff were French, trained at the great Orientalist institutions in Paris. Even for well-read and experienced Egyptian scholars there was little chance of promotion. As we have continued to witness, a

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<sup>61</sup> Fagan, 185.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 188.



patronizing attitude prevailed, perpetuating the perception that “People beyond the core of imperial Europe were...static, needing guidance from the dynamic, entrepreneurial European classes to stimulate their development or to regain – in the case of the countries where ancient civilizations had occurred – their lost impetus.”<sup>63</sup>

In the case of Egypt, the Arabs were identified as having degenerated from their earlier ancestors, or worse, were presumed to be the descendants of the barbaric invaders responsible for the collapse of the Nile Valley’s golden age of civilization. The role of French archaeologists was therefore to uncover this lost grandeur and explain the barbaric past in an effort to rationalize the contemporary state of affairs. Consequently, the scientific information obtained through decipherment and excavation was filtered through an entirely Occidental lens, interpreted to support preconceived notions of Western ascendancy. Concerning such cultural representations, and to paraphrase Edward Said, Egyptology was Egyptology and not Egypt.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Islamic art was never given the same degree of precedence as classical and ancient Egyptian archaeology was because it did not fit within European aesthetic models, except as a confirmation of the Orient’s charming and exotic backwardness.

Ultimately, Auguste Mariette served as a dual protector: defending Egypt’s monuments from the wanton looting that defined the first half of nineteenth-century archaeology while simultaneously guarding them from indigenous Egyptians. While acknowledging the necessity to retain Egyptian artifacts in Egypt, such splendid objects still had to be sheltered from primitive ignorance. Thus, at its core, the Bulaq Museum

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<sup>63</sup> Díaz-Andreu, 127.

<sup>64</sup> Said, 117.

was an imperialist illusion. It catered to the affluent Western tourists who made the journey to Cairo, putting the whole of Egypt on display without needing to dirty frock coats and silk dresses. The average Egyptian certainly had no place in the marbled exhibition halls of their own country's Antiquities Service. Nonetheless, Mariette had ushered in a new era, one that tamed the disastrous swashbuckling enterprises of Drovetti and Lelorrion by expanding the institutional paradigm directly to the source. Here the appropriation of the ancient past could be achieved within a seemingly controlled framework. This would be continued in earnest following Mariette's death. August Mariette would die of complications resulting from diabetes on the evening 18 January 1881 in the presence of the man who would soon replace him: Gaston Maspero.<sup>65</sup>

Maspero had been sent to oversee the last evolution of France's archaeological dominance in Egypt, the creation of the *École Française du Caire*, which would later transform itself into the *Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire*. Despite the spectacular impact Egyptian artifacts had made on French society, it had taken Egyptian archaeology quite a while to merit the establishment of a formal school abroad, as had been previously done in Rome and Athens. But, Mariette's deteriorating health towards the end of the 1870s threatened France's scientific monopoly in Egypt and in 1880 the French state approved an estimated budget of over 380,000 francs for the creation an institution that would enable the continued acquisition of antiquities on behalf of France's national museums.<sup>66</sup> It was to be the first European institution of its kind in Egypt.

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<sup>65</sup> ANF: F/17/2930 Gaston Maspero, "Letter from Maspero in Cairo," 24 January 1881.

<sup>66</sup> ANF: F/17/2930 "Mission permanente du Caire – Projets du budget," 1880.

Intellectually, it would be the completion of a dream first envisioned by the *savants* who had formed the Institut d'Égypte nearly a century earlier: a permanent installation of French scientists dedicated to studying the Nile Valley. Maspero, however, would not be its director. Instead, the Egyptian government had singled him out to replace Mariette as director-general of the national Antiquities Service, assuring that France would remain in control of Egypt's historic treasure for yet another generation.<sup>67</sup>

Nonetheless, the French Institute in Cairo would continue the institutionalization of archaeology as an instrument of imperialism and serve as an outlet of nationalism. In the words of Ernest Renan:

Useful to the progress of science, useful to the country, the Cairo School will also be, I am convinced, useful to the civilization and the moral progress of the Orient. That which is lacking in the Orient...among the indigenous population...is the idea of a selfless society. The sight of an establishment where men of great merit lead a modest life, devoted to the most impersonal work yet nonetheless surrounded by high consideration, will be an excellent lesson and a novel spectacle for the Orient. It will be honorable for France to have given this lesson first.<sup>68</sup>

Naturally working in close concert with Maspero's Antiquities Service, the Institut du Caire would further concretize France's scientific interest in the Orient. But the Orient, of course, was not Egypt. There still remained other regions in the Near East with civilizations as equally unknown and as equally compelling as Egypt had once been, in

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<sup>67</sup> ANF: F/17/2930 Gaston Maspero. "Letter from Maspero in Cairo," 24 January 1881.

<sup>68</sup> ANF: F/17/2930 Ernest Renan. "Rapport de M. Renan sur l'Institut du Caire," 6 December 1881 "Utile au progrès de la science, utile au pays, l'Ecole du Caire sera aussi, j'en suis persuadé, utile à la civilisation et au progrès de la moralité en Orient. Ce qui manque le plus en Orient...aux indigènes ...c'est l'idée de la culture désintéressée. Chaque chose y est estimée d'après ce qu'elle rapporte, et chaque homme d'après l'argent qu'il gagne. La vue d'un établissement où des hommes de grand mérite mènent une vie modeste, vouée aux travaux les plus impersonnels, et néanmoins entourés de la plus haute considération sera une leçon excellente et un spectacle nouveau pour l'Orient. Cette leçon, il sera honorable pour la France d'avoir été la première à la donner."

particular the Mesopotamian provinces of the Ottoman Empire and the mysterious and religiously charged Holy Land. To this end, French archaeologist Charles Clermont-Ganneau, a pioneer of France's expanding archaeological horizons in the Orient, addressed a note to the Ministry of Public Instruction advocating the establishment of an additional school to be founded in Beirut. Its purpose would be to facilitate French archaeology throughout the rest of the Near East. His intentions are quite clear, as among a list of the principal objectives of his proposal one finds:

The onsite acquisition of antiquities for our national collections. [...]

This...objective merits special attention and is worth insisting upon. The acquisition of antiquities *sur place* will be a precious resource for the enrichment of our national collections. Even today it is, in a general way, the only manner for them to favorably contend against the competition of foreign museums. It is not enough to welcome antiquities when they come to us. We must go to them.<sup>69</sup>

Spoiling the Egyptians was to be merely the beginning.

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<sup>69</sup> ANF: F/17/2930 Charles Clermont-Ganneau. "Note sur la création, en Syrie, d'une Station Archéologie orientale dépendant sur l'École du Caire," Undated. "Acquisition des antiquités, sur place, pour nos collections nationales. [...] Ce dernier objectif mérite une attention spéciale et vaut qu'on y insiste. L'acquisition des antiquités sur place serait une ressource précieuse pour l'enrichissement de nos collections nationales. C'est même aujourd'hui, d'une façon générale, le seul moyen pour elles, de lutter avantageusement contre la concurrence que leur font les Musées étrangers. Ce n'est pas assez d'accueillir les antiquités quand elles viennent à nous. Il faut aller à elles."



Mesopotamia  
(Librairie Hachette, 1931)

Source: David Rumsey Historical Map Collection

### Chapter 3 Raiding the Cradle of Civilization

NEBUCHADNEZZAR, SARDANAPALUS, OR NINUS HIMSELF, FOR WE DO NOT KNOW HIS ACTUAL IDENTITY, BUT THE ASSYRIAN MONARCH, IN ANY CASE, SETS FOOT ON THE BANKS OF THE SEINE. A NEW, MORE WORTHY HOME HAS BEEN DESTINED FOR HIM, THE PALACE OF OUR KINGS. THE LOUVRE OPENS WIDE ITS DOORS TO HIM.

~ *L'Illustration* on the arrival of Assyrian antiquities in Paris (1847)<sup>1</sup>

One late February evening in 1853 the inhabitants of Khorsabad, a small village in northern Iraq, became witnesses to an unusual spectacle. News that Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte had proclaimed himself the new emperor of France had just reached Victor Place, the thirty-four year old French consul at Mosul who, for nearly two years, had been undertaking excavations of an immense Assyrian palace complex outside of Khorsabad. An enthusiastic supporter of the newly proclaimed Napoleon III, Place gathered his workers and their families at the dig site for a celebration. Torches were lit and he laid out a Homeric meal composed of platters of beef, lamb, and rice. At the center of Place's *fête* was the evening's most extraordinary guest: an enormous marble bull, ten feet in height, with giant arching wings. It had recently been excavated from the ruins of the adjacent palace and in the flickering torchlight the human-headed *shedu* was a monstrous and breathtaking sight. Sharpened horns curled around an elaborate, cylindrical headdress underneath which piles of braided hair framed a silent, regal face that, in turn, was framed by a massive rectangular beard, ceremoniously knotted and curled. At its hooves the naked feet of Place's laborers trampled the dusty earth in dance

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Frederick N. Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 66.

and the still night air carried the sound of their singing across the empty desert. Surveying the entire scene, Victor Place listened contentedly as his workers lauded France's new emperor with lyrical couplets, occasionally crying: "May Allah bestow a thousand years to the Padishah of the Franks!"<sup>2</sup> But Place was still more contented with the historic symbolism he was orchestrating. How fitting, he thought, that France's newest emperor should be honored amid the grand ruins of the once mighty Assyrian empire. He reported this scene in a private letter written on 25 February 1853. It was destined for the Minister of the Interior, the duc de Persigny, a devoted confidant of the newly proclaimed emperor. In it Place underscores the emotion he felt: "It was a very gripping spectacle for me to see these...savage masses rejoice with such spirit while the stone colossus...impassibly contemplated this strange scene; a silent witness, after three thousand years, to the proclamation of a new Empire – he who has beheld the oldest Empire in the world."<sup>3</sup>

Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte became Emperor of the French on 2 December 1852, exactly forty-eight years to the day that his uncle assumed the imperial throne in 1804. Such regime changes, however, were a common occurrence in France during the first half of the nineteenth century. In the years between 1798 and 1852, France's turbulent political landscape witnessed seven distinct transitions of power during which the

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<sup>2</sup> ANF: F/21/546 Victor Place to the Minister of the Interior, "Fête à l'occasion de l'installation de l'Empire," 25 February 1853. "Qu'Allah donne mille années au Padichab des Francs."

<sup>3</sup> ANF: F/21/546 Victor Place to the Minister of the Interior, "Fête à l'occasion de l'installation de l'Empire," 25 February 1853. "C'était pour moi un spectacle bien saisissant que de voir ces masses...sauvages se réjouissants avec tant de verve, pendant que le colosse de pierre, dont la figure...contemplant impassible cette scène étrange, muet témoin, après trois mille ans de la proclamation d'une nouvel Empire lui qui a vu le plus ancien Empire du monde."

prevailing system of government fluctuated precariously between republic, empire, constitutional monarchy, reformed constitutional monarchy, republic, and empire. Following Napoleon's exile in 1815, the Bourbon monarchy was restored. However, it was overturned by popular discontent in the July Revolution of 1830, which installed Louis-Philippe, the duke of Orleans, as a more progressive monarch. He fared no better and in February 1848, Louis-Philippe was ousted and replaced by Louis-Napoleon as President of the Second Republic and then (following in the ambitious footsteps of his uncle) ruler of the Second Empire.

These changes had a direct effect on the development of French archaeology, but despite such shifts in power one variable remained constant: archaeology was continuously, and consciously, placed into the service of *la Patrie*. By mid-century the "nationalization" of archaeology would be nearly complete, an evolution effectuated within the cradle of civilization. This chapter, while focusing on the history of French imperial archaeology in Mesopotamia, will trace the nationalistic and imperialistic dimensions that archaeology assumed and propagated. To do so requires a brief survey of the cultural and political situation in France following Napoleon's Egyptian expedition. Ultimately, we will be able to better understand Victor Place's motives.

We last left Napoleon Bonaparte sailing across the Mediterranean en route to Toulon in August 1799. Rumors of the Directory's political instability provided the ambitious general with an expedient excuse to abandon the deteriorating military situation in Egypt. News of the expedition's troubles, however, were suppressed and his triumphant arrival on French soil provoked outpourings of support. Crowds gathered in



the streets to announce that Bonaparte had returned to save the Republic. Three months later, on 9 November, Napoleon overthrew the Directory and founded the Consulate – a system inspired by the ancient Roman Republic – in which he served as First Consul. In 1802 he upgraded himself to Consul for Life and two years later, by virtue of a plebiscite, proclaimed himself emperor, thus transforming the French Republic into the French Empire. The Napoleonic regime was marked by a period of near continuous warfare across the European continent that thoroughly disturbed the previous Oriental focus. Nonetheless, the emperor harbored dreams of an Oriental extension to his empire throughout his reign and, in exile, ruefully dreamt how close he had come. Following Napoleon's abdication and subsequent removal to the desolate South Atlantic in 1815, the French monarchy was restored, albeit significantly tempered by two and a half decades of war, revolution, and liberal reform. With the ascension of Louis XVIII to the French throne memories of Napoleon were quickly suppressed. Yet, the monumental legacy of Bonaparte's adventure in the Orient survived the transition intact, if not strengthened by the patina which memory inevitably bestows upon distant events. In the turbulent years that followed it would become the foundation upon which France's eventual shift towards Mesopotamia and the Levant was built.

Culturally, the Romantic Movement succeeded in crystallizing France's fascination with the Orient between 1815 and 1830 and inspired the maintenance of French imperial interest in the Near East. Victor Hugo's eulogistic descriptions of Bonaparte along the Nile, François-René de Chateaubriand's Oriental wanderings, Eugène Delacroix's paintings of sultry Algerian women and twisting *kasbahs*, Honoré de Balzac's mystical *La Peau de chagrin* – each drew inspiration from the exoticism of the Orient so recently

revealed by Napoleon, an individual himself considered emblematic of the Romantic archetype. Even the monumental Napoleonic tableaux of Louis-François Lejeune and Antoine-Jean Gros were occasionally re-exhibited during the Restoration.<sup>4</sup> These paintings, commissioned during the Empire, overtly depict such mythic events as the Battle of the Pyramids and Bonaparte comforting his plague-ridden soldiers at Jaffa. Such imagery was no less preponderant during the reign of Louis XVIII and Charles X as it had been under the Empire. As politically splintered as French society was in the post-Napoleonic period (precariously peppered with Republicans, Socialists, Bonapartists, Orléanists, Royalists, and Ultra-royalists), the ancient past and the allure of the Orient became fields on which France's problematic national identity could be reconciled. Jean-François Champollion himself was a fervent Republican and an outspoken critic of the Bourbon Restoration. But despite his political allegiances, Champollion's representative role as the muse of French national genius prompted tolerance and support.<sup>5</sup> Thus, France's previous Republican-Napoleonic engagement in the Near East assumed a more universal character, induced by the undeniable prestige it had bestowed upon the nation. As historian Todd Porterfield notes, such translational utility "demonstrates the flexibility of the Oriental currency that had been inherited from the Empire and reveals how it was transformed in the Restoration to forge a continual, national, imperial culture."<sup>6</sup>

It also underscores the continued importance of the Orient in French international affairs. Following the Congress of Vienna, France found itself in an insecure geopolitical

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<sup>4</sup> Todd Porterfield, *The Allure of Empire: Art in the Service of French Imperialism, 1798-1836* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998) 78.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 82, 101-102.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 85.

position. While France had remained isolated on the Continent during the Napoleonic Wars, Britain had managed to solidify its position in India and the Russian Empire had begun cultivating interest both in Persia and the Ottoman territories bordering the Black Sea. To compensate, the French monarchy began repairing diplomatic relations with Constantinople as way of repositioning itself strategically in the Eastern Mediterranean. As we have seen, French prestige in the Near East had for centuries been considered a barometer of French prestige across the globe. In the early summer of 1830, Charles X instigated the conquest of Algeria to secure an Arab colony for France and expiate the nation's earlier military failure in Egypt. However, growing domestic instability once more threatened the Oriental designs of the French state. On 27 July 1830, only three weeks after French soldiers had entered Algiers, the citizens of Paris revolted. Provoked by the increased conservatism of the French monarchy, the July Revolution ousted Charles X in three days. The constitution that had been created in the wake of the Empire was reformed and a new monarch was selected: the "Citizen King" Louis-Philippe, Duke of Orleans. The installation of the aptly named July Monarchy established a decade and a half of stability in France. It would witness the revitalization of French archaeology in the Orient.

In the three decades following Napoleon's campaign to Egypt and Syria archaeology in the Near East had stagnated. By the July Revolution the majority of the Louvre's impressive Egyptian collection had been obtained through third party antiquities dealers or, in the case of the zodiac of Dendera, private sponsors. Yet, growing public and scholarly interest in the Orient demanded that the mysteries of human civilization

continue to be unraveled, producing an increased desire to explore the Near East even further, specifically the Fertile Crescent (Mesopotamia and the Levant). Unfortunately, France's intellectual institutions could do very little in light of the political situation to expand their horizons, despite the excellent scholarship they were producing. Indeed, Champollion's wish had been fulfilled and by 1830 France had incontestably become "the instructor of intellectual Europe" in matters Oriental. Scholars from across Europe traveled to Paris to study at the École spéciale des Langues Orientales, the Collège de France, the Université de Paris or to gain membership to the prestigious Société Asiatique, founded in 1822 by France's foremost orientalist, Silvestre de Sacy. The French capital had become the veritable Mecca of Oriental studies.<sup>7</sup> However, Great Britain, unburdened by domestic instability, had already begun the penetration of the Near East's unknown interior.

The fertile valley that lies between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers had long been considered the world's cradle of civilization. The ancient Greeks called the region Mesopotamia – the land between the rivers – and in the West it was known principally as the setting for the Bible's earliest stories: the books of Genesis, Kings, and Chronicles, the tales of the Garden of Eden, the Tower of Babel, and Jonah. But unlike Egypt, few monumental remains had survived above Mesopotamia's sandy plains and the grandeur of the Near East's pre-Hellenistic past was invisible to the few adventurous Europeans who trekked the caravan routes of Iraq prior to the nineteenth century. The memory of Mesopotamia's ancient civilizations had mostly faded into myth.

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<sup>7</sup> Margarita Díaz-Andreu, *A World History of Nineteenth-Century Archaeology: Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 140-141.

But Napoleon's conquest of Egypt had prompted the British East India Company to install a resident agent at Baghdad to defend British trading investments.<sup>8</sup> Claudius Rich, only twenty-one years old at the time of his appointment, was chosen in 1808. Despite his age he was well read in classical history, had traveled widely in the Near East, and had a mastery of Turkish, Persian, Arabic, Hebrew and Syriac.<sup>9</sup> His assignment in Iraq awakened a curiosity in the ancient cities of Mesopotamia and beginning in 1811 he undertook a survey of what little remained of ancient Babylon, and began forming a small collection of inscribed bricks, cuneiform tablets, clay cylinder seals, and other portable antiquities that would eventually be purchased by British Museum after his untimely death.<sup>10</sup> Towards the end of his residency in 1820 he also traveled north to Mosul where he examined a series of *tells* (mounds) at Kuyunjik and Nebi Yunus and subsequently compiled his new observations into a series of memoirs. Unfortunately for Rich he contracted cholera shortly before returning to England and died. The results of his archaeological exploits were posthumously published more than a decade later, in 1836.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, Rich's modest exploration of ancient Mesopotamia attracted the enthusiastic attention of various European scholars hungry for new information about the Orient's lost civilizations. One inspired French orientalist in particular saw the relatively untouched region as an opportunity to advance French archaeology. An opportunity for

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<sup>8</sup> William H. Stiebing, Jr. *Uncovering the Past: A History of Archaeology* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993), 89.

<sup>9</sup> Stiebing, 90.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

French scholarship to dominate the history of Mesopotamia the way it had done so in Egypt.

Although born in Stuttgart, Jules Mohl immigrated to Paris in 1823 to pursue his studies in Oriental languages under Silvestre de Sacy. By the 1830s he had become not only a prominent member of the French Asiatic Society, but also one of its secretaries. He was also an eager proponent of expanding French archaeology in the Orient, which, outside of Egypt, had been languishing. According to Margarita Díaz-Andreu he immediately realized the potential of Rich's work and "dreamt of making the Louvre the major museum holding antiquities from Mesopotamia."<sup>12</sup> He also saw it as a chance to curb British archaeological supremacy in the region. The French state was of a similar opinion. As archaeologist William Stiebing remarks, "The French government was not blind to this British 'first' nor slow to realize the possibilities of active archaeological work in Mesopotamia."<sup>13</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs had already contemplated the installation of a French consulate in Mosul as a way to counterbalance British diplomatic influence in the far-flung Ottoman province. Now Mohl petitioned French authorities to appoint a consular official with experience in archaeology and insisted that their agent be instructed to undertake excavations and collect antiquities on behalf of the Louvre. The ministry agreed and Paul-Émile Botta was appointed to the unique position of consul-excavator in 1840, touching off what would become an international rivalry between France and Britain over the antiquities of ancient Mesopotamia. Thus marked the first archaeological operation completely underwritten by the French state.

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<sup>12</sup> Díaz-Andreu, 140-141.

<sup>13</sup> Stiebing, 92.

The nationalistic narrative as encountered in the imperial dialectic hitherto presented has emerged by degrees. Napoleon's invasion of Egypt was undoubtedly motivated by a sense of national utility (if not also by a touch a personal glory), especially when contextualized with the war that was being waged against Great Britain in 1798. The scholars that accompanied the campaign also attached themselves to the patriotic ideal and succeeded in converting the ancient Egyptian past into potent political currency. The British desire to obtain the Rosetta stone was of a similar design. Yet, the archaeological results produced by the Egyptian expedition were serendipitous. Neither the Directory nor Napoleon himself had placed archaeology at the fore while preparing the conquest of the Nile Valley. Indeed, the collection of antiquities and the mapping of ancient sites were carried out mostly by curious individuals from the Institut d'Égypte. Nonetheless, archaeology's utility was recognized and adopted. Following the Empire's collapse, however, there was little interest in proactively pursuing archaeology as a political tool except by individual actors with private agendas: Jean-François Champollion and his desire to maintain French intellectual superiority in Europe, Sébastien Saulnier and his concept that the zodiac of Dendera was a national monument. Their actions were inherently nationalistic in design, but the large-scale institutional investment was missing. However, as mid-century approached such personal archaeological ambitions were co-opted by the machinery of the nation-state. The excavations undertaken by Paul-Émile Botta in Mesopotamia are representative this new development – one in which the political institutions of the French state became wholly invested in the “nationalization” of Antiquity.

Paul-Émile Botta, a native of Turin, was born in December 1802 - fortuitously three months after Piedmont's annexation into Napoleon's rapidly growing continental empire. Though the son of a historian, he had gone to medical school and in 1830 found himself as a physician in the service of Muhammad Ali.<sup>14</sup> Three years later France appointed Botta as the consul in Alexandria where he contracted the same passion for antiquities by which all European diplomats in Egypt seem to have been afflicted. While stationed in Egypt, he undertook an expedition across the Arabian Desert to Yemen where he made observations of the region's ancient remains and acquired ample antiquarian experience.<sup>15</sup> By the time of his appointment to Mosul in 1840, Botta was not only proficient in Arabic and Turkish, but also in the diplomatic skill necessary to successfully manipulate local Ottoman administrators. His profile was therefore ideal for the diplomatic-archaeological post he was assuming.

Upon reaching Mosul in 1842 he decided to excavate the mounds previously surveyed by Claudius Rich at Kuyunjik and Nebi Yunus in an effort to uncover what he believed to be the location of Nineveh, ancient capital of the Assyrian empire and the Biblical city to which the prophet Jonah had been dispatched. His initial efforts, however, proved discouraging and Botta might have suspended his archaeological activities had he not received promising news from a passing Arab. The man was an inhabitant of the nearby village of Khorsabad, some five hours northeast of Mosul, and he claimed that his town had been built overtop an ancient city. Additionally, he explained that almost every house in the village had been constructed out of inscribed bricks found

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<sup>14</sup> Stiebing, 96.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



around the *tell*. Intrigued, though a bit wary of local lore, Botta decided to follow the lead and in March 1843 began a tentative excavation of the site. Attacking the summit with a group of laborers he immediately uncovered two massive parallel walls adorned with bas-reliefs.<sup>16</sup> Botta sent a detailed letter from the consulate in Mosul to Jules Mohl on 5 April stating emphatically: “I believe myself the first who has discovered sculptures that may, with some probability, be traced back to the epoch when Nineveh flourished.”<sup>17</sup> This letter, among with others, were later published by Mohl in the Asiatic Society’s *Journal Asiatique*.

Ultimately, Botta was mistaken about his site being the foundation of ancient Nineveh but he was indeed the first to have stumbled upon archaeological evidence of the ancient Assyrian civilization. The site he had been excavating was, in reality, Dur-Sharrukin, the royal palace complex of Sargon II who ruled Assyria in the eighth century BCE.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, his announcement kindled the excitement of his anticipant benefactors in the government and at the Asiatic Society, who quickly heralded his discovery as yet another triumph for French science; for whereas Claudius Rich had only uncovered the clues to a larger mystery, Botta had unveiled, in all its monumental glory, the mystery itself. Immediately, the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres lobbied the Minister of Public Instruction and the Minister of the Interior to allocate fresh funding to assure the continuation of the dig and eventually permit that “everything admitting of removal...be sent to France” where the antiquities would be installed in “an Assyrian

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<sup>16</sup> Paul-Émile Botta, *M. Botta’s Letters on the Discoveries at Nineveh*, trans. Catherine Ellis Tobin (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1850), Letter I (5 April 1843), 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Stiebing, 98.

museum, unique throughout the world.”<sup>19</sup> They also arranged that artist and orientalist Eugène Flandin be transferred to Khorsabad to make accurate drawings of the monuments and inscriptions being excavated. Botta’s work promised to reveal definite ideas concerning the architecture, customs, language, religion, and extent of the Assyrian civilization. And in the emerging age of positivist certainty, pure faith in the Holy Writ could finally be supplemented by physical, archaeological proof. Thus, the “noble example of France” had once more succeeded in arousing a new spirit of archaeological enquiry across Europe.<sup>20</sup> It also succeeded in arousing the suspicion of Mohammad Keritli Oglu, the Pasha of Mosul.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1843, Botta continued his excavations in Khorsabad, but not without considerable difficulty. The megalithic palace complex he had uncovered had been destroyed by fire in antiquity and thus a majority of the calcined limestone reliefs that were discovered were extremely delicate and prone to either crumble upon exposure to air or, more dramatically, melt in the rain. Adding to his problems, the Pasha of Mosul believed Botta was searching for buried treasure and did all in his power to hinder what he perceived to be the rapacious designs of the Franks.<sup>21</sup> Botta’s local diggers were occasionally imprisoned to force confessions about the Frenchman’s assumed plan to steal a hidden horde of gold.<sup>22</sup> Yet other workers were incited to boycott, while the villagers were instructed to make off with the wooden

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<sup>19</sup> Botta, Letter II (2 May 1843), 29-30.

<sup>20</sup> Catherine Ellis Tobin, cited in Botta, Preface - iv.

<sup>21</sup> The term “Frank” was often used by Arabs to describe the French. Occasionally it could be employed to refer to any European. This unusual designation was a linguistic artifact of the Crusades.

<sup>22</sup> Botta, Letter IV, 58.

supports Botta used to stabilize the fragile bas-reliefs and sculptures he had uncovered (wood being a rare and desirable commodity in the desert).<sup>23</sup> The result was a bitter mix of ruined property and frustration. Moreover, the villagers themselves were distrustful of Botta's enterprise. They were worried that the Frenchman's excavations would force them completely out of their homes and at length (and to Botta's annoyance) they refused to share any knowledge about the ancient remains of Nineveh. "The people know, but will not tell me," Botta complains to Mohl in one letter, "I hope they will become accustomed to my researches, and be more communicative."<sup>24</sup> They did only when he purchased every dwelling on the mound.<sup>25</sup> But by October the Pasha had used his authority to stop the excavation on the pretense that the trenches Botta had been digging were, in fact, fortifications for use in some secret French plot to seize the country.<sup>26</sup> Botta appealed directly to the French ambassador in Constantinople. "As you will easily believe, I am most desirous that the absurd difficulties raised by the Pasha of Mosul may speedily be removed, in order to profit by the generosity of the French government. [...] Grant that such liberal intentions be not frustrated by ignorance and barbarism!"<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., Letter IV, 58.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., Letter II, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., Letter IV, 57.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., Letter V, 71.



Left. Figure 8: Paul-Émile Botta (1802-1870)

Below. Figure 9: An Assyrian *shedu* discovered by Victor Place at Khorsabad, now in the Musée du Louvre



Here, as in Egypt, the Arabs encountered by the French are perceived to be both ignorant of their history and barbaric in their treatment of it. As such, the scientific instruments of French imperialism (i.e. Botta as archaeologist and diplomat) portray the locals as mischievous and barbarous impediments to the noble pursuit of knowledge. Botta's portrayal of the Pasha of Mosul in particular seems to correspond with previous European tales of Oriental duplicity. Thus, the French archaeological engagement in Mesopotamia continued to compound preconceived notions of Oriental behavior and consequently reinforce the "salvation narrative" begun by Napoleon's *savants* three and a half decades earlier – that the European appropriation of antiquities was an act of cultural preservation. The nationalist influence, however, attached these once discrete intellectual perceptions to the attitudes of the state.

Archaeology was most apt to buttress such views since it provided one of the most immediate experiences through which Europeans could interact with the Orient. Unlike the violent impersonality of a military campaign, or the distant theatricality of a picturesque grand tour through the Orient, archaeology was an intimate, involved affair – one that, at its foundation, strove to understand the origins of a region and from them, generate some contemporary meaning. Men like Botta were installed in distant and unfamiliar countries for extended periods of time and were in a position where they dealt personally with the local population. Their observations, therefore, were considered very reliable back in Europe. In this respect archaeologists were portrayed, in the Western consciousness, as the missionaries of science, the vanguard of Europe's imperial momentum and the awe-inspiring representatives of Europe's self-proclaimed intellectual superiority. As Jules Mohl states in his justification for increased archaeological activity

in the Near East: “The most favorable moment for the exploration of a country is when it first becomes accessible, and it is thus in most of the Orient, which is struck by an almost superstitious terror after its contact with Europe.”<sup>28</sup> In the Arab imagination Europeans could descend upon any patch of desert and divine, as if by some dubious magic, the location of ruins previously unaccounted for centuries. And as this act was repeated across the Orient, Europeans began believing it themselves.

By 1844 the artist Flandin had arrived from Constantinople with a *firman* obtained by the French ambassador. The inimical Pasha of Mosul could no longer interfere and Botta was authorized to reopen his trenches and prepare his finds for transport back to France. The first consignment of Botta’s Assyrian artifacts reached Paris in December 1846 amid an enthusiastic welcome.<sup>29</sup> Among the incredible antiquities he had sent back to France were several massive stone sculptures in the form of human-headed winged bulls and lions. These statues had been found in pairs flanking the palace’s principal entryways. Called *shedu* in Akkadian, they were used by the ancient Assyrians to repel evil spirits. Their fantastic forms captured the European imagination and became the most enduring image of Mesopotamian archaeology. In period that followed, Parisian newspapers and illustrated journals dedicated an unprecedented amount of print to stories about the newly arrived Mesopotamian antiquities.<sup>30</sup> Curious crowds flocked to the Louvre. As Stiebing asserts, the unearthing of ancient Assyria garnered more attention

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<sup>28</sup> Cited in Bohrer, 70.

<sup>29</sup> Stiebing, 99.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

than any other archaeological subject until the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb by British archaeologist Howard Carter in 1922.<sup>31</sup> As Mohl had envisioned, the French had succeeded in acquiring the first comprehensive collection of Mesopotamian antiquities in Europe. At a time when France was still recovering from instability at home and seeking to regain its influence abroad, Botta's efforts tremendously amplified French national prestige. This is particularly evident in the emerging rivalry between England and France over Mesopotamia's antiquities.

The love-hate relationship harbored by these historic competitors was nigh eternal and, as the previous scramble for Egyptian antiquities has evidenced, archaeology had become a very real point of contention. Initially the British were indifferent to the excavations being undertaken by Botta, but one intrepid Englishman named Austen Henry Layard was determined to reclaim Britain's archaeological prestige. A lawyer by profession, he had traveled to the Near East in 1839 on a whim and eventually found himself in the employ of Sir Stratford Canning, the British ambassador in Constantinople.<sup>32</sup> Throughout his travels along the Tigris and Euphrates, Layard had become interested in excavating several *tells*. Impulsively, he borrowed sixty pounds sterling from the ambassador and traveled into northern Iraq to begin digging at Nimrud, a small village located nineteen miles southeast of Mosul.<sup>33</sup> In less than twelve hours

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<sup>31</sup> Stiebing, 99.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 99-101.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 101.

Layard succeeded in locating two separate palace complexes.<sup>34</sup> It was to be the first major British discovery in the region and promised to be as exciting and, more importantly, as rich in monumental antiquities as the one being excavated by the French in Khorsabad. Layard, an acquaintance of Botta, knew that the Frenchman was close to sending his first shipment of artifacts to Paris. The race had begun.

As Díaz-Andreu recounts: “His [Layard’s] notes make it clear that he saw archaeology as something that would bring glory to his own nation, and the deciphering of the cuneiform inscriptions as a matter of national honour. The involvement of Britain and France in the archaeology of Mesopotamia was felt by him to be like a competition.”<sup>35</sup> “I think,” wrote Layard in a letter to Canning in 1845, “we might be able to transmit some sculpture to Europe as soon if not sooner than the French. This would be very important for our reputation.”<sup>36</sup> In another letter written several months later he boasted, “if the excavation keeps its promise to the end there is much hope that Montagu House [the British Museum] will beat the Louvre hallow.”<sup>37</sup> Here the synthesis of archaeology and national rivalry is palpable, and suggests that the actions of a few men halfway across the globe can ostensibly both increase national reputations and, conversely, embarrass entire foreign institutions – a microcosm of the larger imperial game. As Layard’s excavations continued elsewhere, the Englishman even challenged Botta’s assertion that Khorsabad was indeed the true location of Nineveh. After fully

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<sup>34</sup> Stiebing, 101.

<sup>35</sup> Díaz-Andreu, 142.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Cited in Ibid.



excavating Kuyunjik and Nebi Yunus (the mounds previously abandoned by Botta), Layard himself would also claim the title “discover of Nineveh.”<sup>38</sup> What is interesting about this action – this ostentatious self-declaration of being the “discover” of the same place – is that both the French and the British ignored the complexity of their finds and instead focused on a single term, “Nineveh,” which had become entrenched in the European imagination. Thus, they ignored physical reality and instead defined their discoveries within the interests and expectations of Occidental power, a reaction akin to the colonizer’s treatment of the colonized.

Botta had returned to Paris in 1846 with his antiquities and his excavations in Khorsabad were temporarily closed. Back in France, Botta and Flandin collated their research on the ancient Assyrian civilization they had discovered and began work on the *Monument de Ninive* – a literary descendent of the *Description de l’Égypte*. The French government, eager to continue the intellectual tradition previously established by the *savants* of the Egyptian campaign, generously funded their effort.<sup>39</sup> The work would also assure that, intellectually, French archaeology would remain one step ahead of concurrent British enterprises. Like its Napoleonic predecessor, the *Monument de Ninive* was a multi-volume presentation of architecture and sculpture to the accompaniment of intricately detailed plans, maps, topographies, and drawings. But in 1848, one year before the *Monument* was to be published, political unrest in Paris precipitated a series of dramatic events that occasioned the sudden end of Botta’s career as an archaeologist.

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<sup>38</sup> Bohrer, 68.

<sup>39</sup> Stiebing, 99.

King Louis-Philippe's popularity had slowly deteriorated since his coronation as France's more liberal, bourgeois monarch. Though his reign had initially succeeded at marginally unifying French society, the July Monarchy quickly faced growing opposition by both Legitimists on the right (those who did not accept Louis-Philippe as the legitimate heir to the Bourbon line), and Republican and Socialist factions on the left. A lack of social reform combined with the increased disenfranchisement of voters disillusioned many of Louis-Philippe's original middle-class supporters. Moreover, a financial crisis followed by poor agricultural performance in 1846 only exacerbated the already mounting tensions in France. On the morning of 22 February 1848 the citizens of Paris manifested to protest a newly enacted law prohibiting political gatherings. Fighting broke out, barricades were erected, and three days later Louis-Philippe fled to England. Botta, unfortunately, was a supporter of the monarchy, and thus found himself a sudden victim of the ties that existed between archaeological and national interests. For the conditions that had enabled his previous sponsorship dissolved along with the July Monarchy. As Frederick Bohrer states, "Botta's historical misfortune is to have successfully excavated the remains of an ancient king under the sponsorship of a modern one, at the very moment that kingship itself was under attack."<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, following the popular deposition of Louis-Philippe and the proclamation of the Second Republic, Botta was dismissed from his diplomatic post in Mosul and France's archaeological program Mesopotamia was suspended until 1851. This hiatus permitted a British archaeological monopoly in the region for almost half a decade and although Botta's diplomatic successors in Mosul did try to resume work in the trenches

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<sup>40</sup> Bohrer, 73.

between 1848 and 1851, their efforts received no official support and consequently little progress was made.<sup>41</sup> Serious French efforts to revive the excavations at Khorsabad would only be resumed during the Second Empire.

As a member of the Bonaparte family, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte had either lived in exile or prison following his uncle's abdication in 1815. However, in the wake of the July Monarchy's collapse he was free to return to France where he immediately integrated himself into French politics and ran for president. As a moderate with a progressive social policy (and a rather potent family name) Louis-Napoleon became a popular candidate and won the December 1848 election in a landslide. As president he managed to facilitate a steady progression towards internal stability, but ultimately Louis-Napoleon was unwilling to serve only one term in office (as stipulated by the constitution) and on 2 December 1851 he staged a coup d'état, seizing dictatorial powers. Exactly one year later he proclaimed himself emperor Napoleon III. It was in this intervening year that the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres and the Direction générale des Musées Nationaux began petitioning the French government to provide funding for the recommencement of excavations in Mesopotamia.

Both institutions were concerned at the immense progress being made by the British. The massive projects undertaken by Layard and his successor Henry Creswicke Rawlinson painfully underscored how quickly France had lost the archaeological

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<sup>41</sup> Nicole Chevalier, "L'activité archéologique des consuls de France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle en Assyrie" in *Khorsabad, le palais de Sargon II, roi d'Assyrie, actes du colloque organisé au musée du Louvre par le Service culturel les 21 et 22 janvier 1994*, by Annie Caubet (Paris: La Documentation Française, 1994), 82.

advantage she had so recently gained. As one report written by the Academy in July 1851 laments:

The glory of having discovered this rich archaeological mine belongs to France. England has followed in our tracks never ceasing to exploit our discovery. [...] France must not let herself be preempted in this fashion, in a domain that she opened up, and it is necessary that she end the inactivity that has gripped her since her first conquests on Mesopotamian soil.<sup>42</sup>

A month earlier Henri-Adrien Prévost de Longperrier, the Louvre's curator of antiquities, had urgently wrote to the Ministry of the Interior imploring the French government to appoint an "intelligent, experienced, and courageous man" to the consulate at Mosul so that he may resume work at Khorsabad and continue to enrich France's national collections.<sup>43</sup> To emphasize his argument, Longperrier informed the ministry that while the British Museum possessed over one hundred Assyrian bas-reliefs, France's collection contained a paltry thirty.<sup>44</sup>

The man selected was Victor Place. After having his appointment officially approved on 22 August 1851, Place arrived in Mosul five months later on 16 January

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<sup>42</sup> ANF: F/21/546 Institut de France – Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, "Rapport sur la demande d'instructions pour M. Place" 4 July 1851. "C'est à la France que revient la gloire d'avoir découvert cette mine de richesses archéologiques, mais elle a eu le tort d'abandonner ce terrain depuis 1844 pendant que l'Angleterre marche sur nos traces n'a jamais cessé d'exploiter notre découvert. [...] La France ne doit pas se laisser devancer de cette façon dans une voie qu'elle a ouverte, et il faut qu'elle sorte de l'inactivité dans laquelle elle s'est tenue depuis ses premières conquêtes sur le sol de la Mésopotamie."

<sup>43</sup> ANF: F/21/546 Adrien de Longperrier, Report to the Minister of the Interior made by the Direction générale des Musée Nationaux, 23 June 1851. "le choix d'un homme savant expérimenté et courageux...que le Ministre se propose d'envoyer à Mossoul pour garantir le succès de l'entreprise."

<sup>44</sup> ANF: F/21/546 Adrien de Longperrier, Report to the Minister of the Interior made by the Direction générale des Musée Nationaux, 23 June 1851.

1852.<sup>45</sup> He began work almost immediately, organizing laborers and continuing where his predecessor left off. Funding, however, was slow in coming and briefly threatened Place's operations. Once more France's intellectual institutions, eager that France should recover its archaeological reputation, spurred the Ministry of the Interior into action with nationalistic rhetoric, insisting that there was more at stake than mere antiquities. In a proposal for a 60,000-franc subsidy, the Director of Fine Arts presented the following line of reasoning to the Minister of the Interior:

Lastly, and this is the most powerful reason...must we abandon these newly opened trenches? Substantiating the opinion so perniciously widespread in the Orient that France knows only how to begin, but that she cannot finish anything? France has just been restored with a legitimate and strong government the actions of which must be marked by the seal of a great and glorious era, [and] it does not wish that one can accuse it of lacking the continuation and the perseverance with which England knows well how to take the field of Science as well as the one of politics.<sup>46</sup>

The subvention was promptly approved, along with others. During the three years that Place actively excavated at Khorsabad (1852-1855), he received an extraordinary 135,000 francs from the French government.<sup>47</sup> Thus, during the Second Empire, archaeology can be described as having merited enough political consequence to be

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<sup>45</sup> Nicole Chevalier, "L'activité archéologique des consuls de France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle en Assyrie" in *Khorsabad, le palais de Sargon II, roi d'Assyrie, actes du colloque organisé au musée du Louvre par le Service culturel les 21 et 22 janvier 1994*, by Annie Caubet (Paris: La Documentation Française, 1994), 81.

<sup>46</sup> ANF: F/21/546 "Rapport au Ministre de l'Intérieur" 1852. "Enfin, et c'est le motif le plus puissant, fallait-il...abandonner ces tranchées nouvellement ouvertes? De façon à accréditer cette opinion déjà si fatalement répandue dans l'Orient, que la France ne sait que commencer, mais qu'elle ne peut rien finir? [...] la France venait redonner un gouvernement régulier et fort, et dont les actes doivent être marqués au sceau d'un grande et glorieuses époque, il n'a pas voulu qu'on put l'accuser de manquer cette suite et de cette persévérance que l'Angleterre sait monter sur la terrain de la Science comme celui de la politique."

<sup>47</sup> ANF: F/21/546 Ministry of the Interior, Summary of the excavation and money allocated by the government, 1855.

considered a matter of national importance. Moreover, for Napoleon III, there was a very symbolic element in France's continued pursuit of archaeological glory. As historian, and curator of Near Eastern Antiquities at the Louvre, Nicole Chevalier explains: "By his familial links with the head of the Egyptian expedition, Napoleon III [was] hereditarily the protector of archaeology in far-off countries."<sup>48</sup> Cognizant of such a compelling argument, French scholars did not hesitate to eloquently lobby the emperor into supporting their projects. Thus, in 1852 the Academy, wishing to secure another grant for Victor Place's excavation in Assyria, insisted on "the munificence of the Emperor, always favorable to that which is great and useful," followed by the inevitable evocation of his great ancestor:

The resurrection of ancient Egypt...inaugurated the beginning of this century, the middle will be marked by a scientific conquest of the utmost interest: that of the art and civilization of the Assyrians, and the name of Napoleon must attach itself to the second as it has to the first of these great events.<sup>49</sup>

Once more we observe the meta-political properties of archaeology. The French investigation of the Assyrian past had originally been sponsored by the July Monarchy, but here its nationalistic objectives have been successfully transferred across regimes, and its function in the service of French patrimony is reassigned from monarchical to imperial. Thus we return to our opening vignette: Place's celebratory feast at Dur-Sharrukin.

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<sup>48</sup> Nicole Chevalier, "Les missions archéologiques en Orient sous le Second Empire," in *Bulletin de la Société Historique de Compiègne* 33 (2001): 175.

<sup>49</sup> ANF: F/21/546 Institut de France – Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres to the Secretary General of the Ministry of State "Note sur les fouilles assyriennes," 1852. "La résurrection de l'antique Égypte...a inauguré le commencement de ce siècle, le milieu sera signalé par une conquête scientifique d'un aussi haut intérêt: celle de l'art et de la civilisation des Assyriens, et le nom de Napoléon doit s'attacher au second comme au premier de ces deux grands événements."

Such a spectacle is the paradigmatic amalgam between nationalism and archaeology. Place directly appropriates Sargon II's ancient palace as the backdrop for his banquet, suffusing the moment with a sense of historical legitimacy and fabricating the illusion that France's recently regenerated imperial authority is somehow established from an older, rawer, and therefore more authentic source of imperial power. At the center of the scene is the most iconic representation of Mesopotamian imagery: the human-headed winged bull. It is an imposing figure that naturally commands respect, inspires awe, and serves as an exemplar of Mesopotamia's lost greatness. Furthermore, because it has been rediscovered by the efforts of French *génie*, the French are thus entitled to commune directly with it – meritorious claimants to Mesopotamia's past by virtue of having been the first ones to unearth it since the collapse of the Assyrian empire caused such monuments to be buried and forgotten. And through archaeology both the French and the Assyrians are united. Here, the imperial designs of French archaeology have succeeded in showing that both civilizations, though separated by thousands of years, are far more developed than contemporary Arab society. In a report sent to the Ministry of the Interior a year later Place comments how his workers once remarked, "Truly the Assyrians knew almost as much as the Franks."<sup>50</sup> Indeed, as if to highlight their subaltern role in France's dialogue with the Assyrian past, Place's workers are positioned around the statue, dancing and singing praises of Napoleon III in a disturbingly totemistic ritual; thus completing the stage on which France's own national

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<sup>50</sup> ANF: F/21/546 Victor Place, "Rapport générale au Ministre de l'Intérieur, N° 27," 9 May 1853. "Véritablement, les Assyriens en savaient presque autant que les Franks."

prestige can be presented and justified. Archaeology appropriately provides both the set dressing and the props.

Unfortunately, Place's mission was to end in disappointment and disaster. In April 1855 Place was authorized to begin transporting his finds to Paris. The French consul made arrangements to ship a large number of bulls, bas-reliefs, and cases of antiquities down the Tigris from Mosul on a convoy of four barges to Basra by way of Baghdad.<sup>51</sup> But after having entered the Shatt al-Arab<sup>52</sup> on 21 May Place's rafts were attacked by raiders from the rebellious Al-Muntafiq tribe.<sup>53</sup> Hostile to the Ottoman government and its Western allies in Baghdad the Al-Muntafiq regarded the French archaeologists as convenient targets. Moreover, they suspected the rafts to be laden with treasure. Place's men, although armed with rifles, were unable to repulse the attack and amid the confusion two of the rafts broke apart in the current, carrying more than half of the antiquities destined for France to the river's silty bottom. The incident signaled the end of French archaeology in Mesopotamia for another two decades.<sup>54</sup> The Second Empire's increased involvement in the Crimean War (1853-1856) had placed a mounting financial burden on the state and after having, quite literally, sunk a large investment into the resumption of Botta's excavations, the French government now grew frustrated. Place was recalled from Mosul and the archaeological mission in Khorsabad was terminated.

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<sup>51</sup> ANF: F/21/546 Victor Place to Archille Fould, Minister of the State, concerning the transportation and sinking of the antiquities from Nineveh, 17 June 1855.

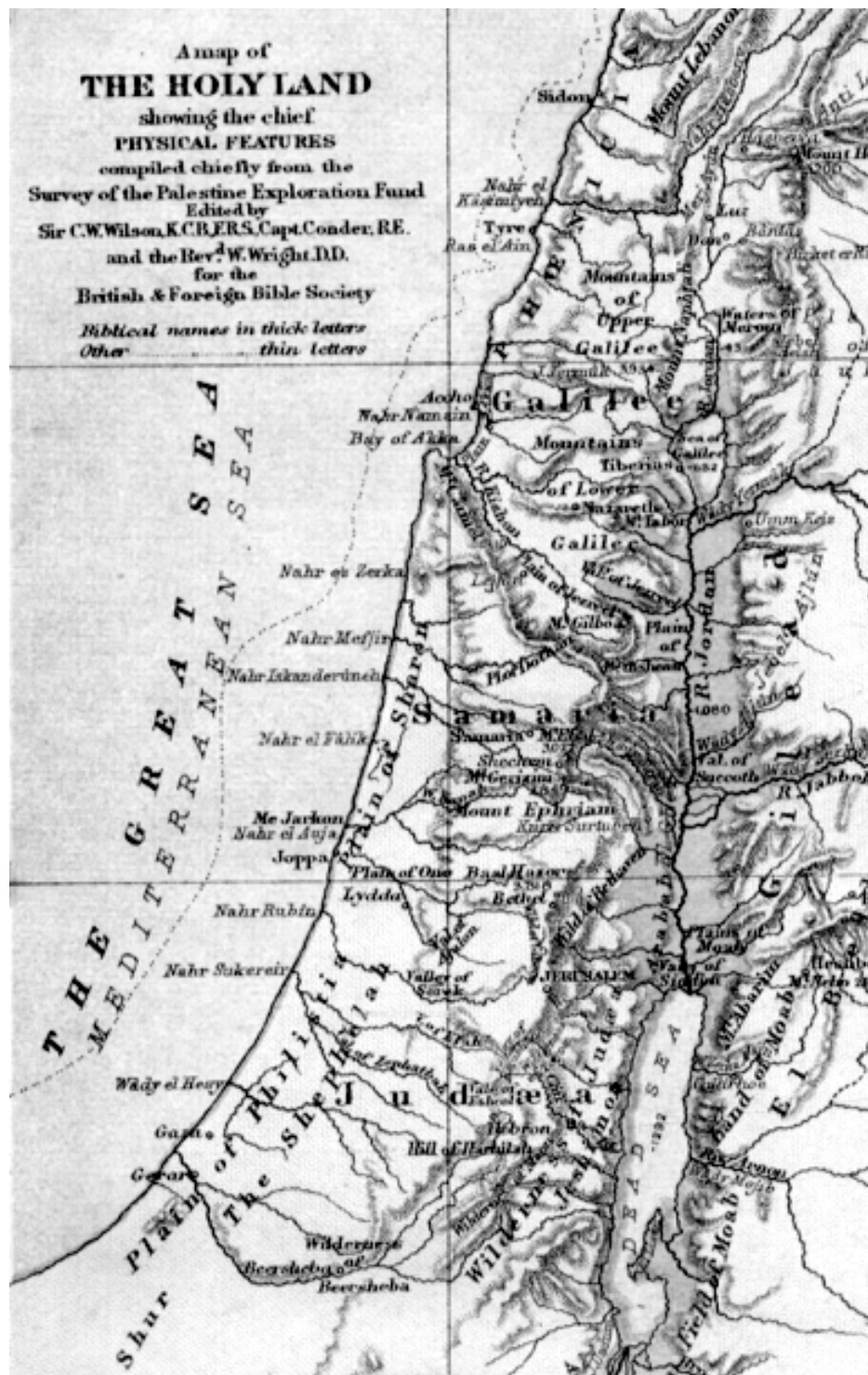
<sup>52</sup> The confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers north of Basra.

<sup>53</sup> ANF: F/21/546 Victor Place to Archille Fould, Minister of the State, concerning the transportation and sinking of the antiquities from Nineveh, 17 June 1855.

<sup>54</sup> The French would later resume archaeological activity in Mesopotamia in 1877 when the vice-consul at Basra, Ernest de Sarzec, became the first to discover evidence of ancient Sumer.



Dur-Sharrukin would remain undisturbed until 1925 when a team from the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute would pick up where Victor Place had left off. To this day the lost antiquities have never been recovered.



The Holy Land  
(Palestine Exploration Fund, 1899)

Source: David Rumsey Historical Map Collection

## Chapter 4

### Digging for God and Country: French Archaeology in the Holy Land

WHY EXPEND SO MUCH ENERGY IN THIS FAR AWAY, INHOSPITABLE, DANGEROUS LAND? WHY THIS COSTLY RANSACKING OF THIS MILLENNIA-OLD RUBBISH HEAP...WHEN THERE IS NO GOLD OR SILVER TO BE FOUND? WHY THIS INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION TO SECURE AS MANY AS POSSIBLE OF THESE DESOLATE MOUNDS FOR EXCAVATION? TO THESE QUESTIONS, THERE IS BUT ONE ANSWER...THE BIBLE.

~ Friedrich Delitzsch, from “Babel and Bible” (1902)<sup>1</sup>

France’s archaeological setback in Mesopotamia did not stifle French interest in rediscovering the ancient past. Still determined to remain the “instructor of intellectual Europe,” France looked to the Levant to regain an archaeological foothold and solve some of Western civilization’s most profound spiritual questions. For there was another emergent dimension of archaeology apart from its evolving nationalization: religion. As we move into the Holy Land the theme of archaeology’s religious utility will be especially prevalent. The sense that excavating had an even more profound purpose than expanding knowledge or assuring national supremacy was clear even to Victor Place. He wrote in the spring of 1853:

[It is the Assyrian empire] whose view is most intimately linked with the Jewish nation, that is, with the origins of our religion. It was the arm with which God used repeatedly to punish his unfaithful people and when he speaks of this race through the mouth of his prophets it is to represent it as the strongest, richest, and most terrible on the earth. On every page of Scripture we see the history of these Assyrians furnished the Holy Book with the most

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Margarita Díaz-Andreu, *A World History of Nineteenth-Century Archaeology: Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 160.

assorted episodes. Certainly there is an interest...in this people whose historical resurrection belongs to the right of Catholic France.<sup>2</sup>

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Biblical archaeology in the Holy Land would become the primary focus of many Western nations. Archaeology had already proven itself to be a powerful tool, capable of probing into the past and validating scientific and historiographical arguments. Thus it was quickly realized that the burgeoning discipline could also be used to authenticate, or challenge, the Bible's authority. Archaeological provocation of religious controversies, however, had existed since the end of the Egyptian campaign. Hearing that Napoleon's *savants* had returned to Paris with relics from one of the world's oldest civilizations, Church officials were worried that the information gleaned from hieroglyphs, papyri, and zodiacs would contradict theological canon, proving, for example, that the Earth was far older than the traditionally accepted age of the universe.<sup>3</sup> Such evidence threatened to shift traditional perceptions of history, but it could also embolden them as well. Excavating in the Holy Land provided a means to reaffirm the Occident's historic engagement in the Near East and reestablish Christianity's claim to a region previously dominated by the Romans, the Byzantines, and the crusading knights of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. By discovering, and subsequently appropriating, antiquities relating to the cultures and civilizations of the

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<sup>2</sup> ANF: F/21/546 Victor Place, "Rapport général au Ministre de l'Intérieur de 13 mai 1853, N° 31: Observations générales sur les Fouilles de Ninive – Continuation des travaux – Transport des objets découverte," 13 May 1853. "Et puis c'est l'empire [l'Assyrie] dont la vue se trouve le plus intimement mêlée à celle de la nation Juive, c'est à dire, aux origines de notre religion. Il a été le bras dont Dieu s'est servi maintes fois pour châtier son peuple infidèle et quand il parle de cette race par la bouche de ses prophètes c'est pour la représenter comme le plus puissant, le plus riche, le plus terrible qui fut alors sur la terre. À chaque page de l'Écriture, nous voyons apparaître ces Assyriens dont l'histoire fournit au Saint Livre les épisodes les plus divers... Certes il y a un intérêt...à ce peuple dont la résurrection historique appartenait de droit à la France Catholique..."

<sup>3</sup> Brian Fagan, *The Rape of the Nile: Tomb Robbers, Tourists, and Archaeologists in Egypt* (New York: Westview Press, 2004) 161.

Bible, Europe could, from an intellectual perspective, provide scientific justification for the idea of an *Orient Chrétien*. Consequently, locating places and objects of religious importance became an obsession and competing teams of British, American, German, and French archaeologists scrambled across Palestine and Syria to find the tomb of King David, the foundations of the Temple of Solomon, and even the Ark of the Covenant.

In this respect, the opportunism of politics was often veiled beneath the shroud of religion. The case for Biblical archaeology is no different. As we shall see, there was very little piety in religious archaeology and beyond the desire to probe the mysteries of the Bible archaeology really furthered nationalist ambitions. It should not be forgotten that the Holy Land was central to European imperial strategy. The three principal international players vying for power in Palestine were each representative of a different Christian sect: Britain (and the United States) representing Protestant doctrine, Russia defending Eastern Orthodoxy, and France as the emissary of the Catholic Church in the Orient. The Ottoman Empire's slow decline became a source of much geopolitical tension among these three and the fate of the Near East prompted much debate over the "Eastern Question." Diplomatic intrigues devolved into war when the Russian Empire took advantage of a decaying Ottoman Empire to seize the sultan's European provinces. Between 1853 and 1856, France and Britain successfully curbed the territorial aspirations of the Russian Empire by invading the Black Sea region of Crimea. It is in this historical context that Biblical archaeology developed. As we shall see, mastery of the Holy Land's antiquity became a way to affront national prestige by challenging the traditional religious positions in the Orient. Where gunboats failed, pickaxes might succeed.

France had long been considered the protector of Christianity in the Levant and in 1852, after considerable political maneuvering by Napoleon III, Sultan Abdülmecid I proclaimed France as the supreme Christian authority in the Holy Land. As such France could counteract the equally ambitious territorial claims being made in the region by reasserting its religious claims and therefore establish “islands of influence in Palestine.”<sup>4</sup> But as interest in Biblical archaeology grew, a series of Protestant theologians-turned-archaeologists from England and America began directly questioning the validity of the shrines and pilgrimage sites administrated by French monastic communities.<sup>5</sup> They declared various sacred places, such as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, to be frauds - accusations that debased France’s previous claims.<sup>6</sup> Russian ecclesiastics also contested France’s role as minder of the Holy Land. They asserted that the Russian Empire was the rightful descendent of Byzantium and therefore the protection of Oriental Christianity was its concern. Thus, the validity of religious history was important to France’s reputation as it sought to reposition itself politically and economically in the Near East. If France hoped to maintain its influence in the Holy Land it would need to produce its own share of scholarship and once more dominate the expanding horizons of archaeology. And so in 1850, the French government authorized Louis-Félicien Caignart de Saulcy to lead the first French archaeological expedition to Palestine.

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<sup>4</sup> Neil Asher Silberman, *Digging for God and Country: Exploration, Archeology, and the Secret Struggle for the Holy Land, 1799-1917* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982) 64.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

De Saulcy was a forty-three year-old artillery officer who found himself suddenly widowed in 1850. A scholarly man interested in archaeology, geology, botany, and entomology, he was eventually appointed curator of the Musée d'Artillerie at the Hôtel des Invalides in Paris. His wife's death, however, made him anxious to remove himself from Paris and its bittersweet memories and de Saulcy decided that a good dose of "mystery and danger" would alleviate his grief.<sup>7</sup> In the interest of furthering his own antiquarian researches he decided on a journey eastward, but having previously visited the classical sites in Italy, Greece, and Asia Minor he thought that "it would be no advantage to science were we to tread again the beaten paths already traced by hundreds of tourists."<sup>8</sup> Palestine still remained only partially explored by Westerners and therefore presented an appropriately adventurous destination with ample scientific merit. Thus, towards the end of August 1850 he requested a *mission gratuite*<sup>9</sup> from the Ministry of Public Instruction to travel to Ottoman Syria (an administrative region encompassing present-day Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan).<sup>10</sup> In his proposal he claims that his expedition would "indisputably enrich the Musée du Louvre" with a "number of objects worthy of entering the rich collections of the Museum and with which we will be happy

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<sup>7</sup> Silberman, 66.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> A "free mission" – meaning a mission financed entirely by de Saulcy's personal resources. Conversely, a *mission payé* (paid mission) was one that was supported entirely, or in part, by the French government. Regardless of the classification, all missions had to be reviewed and approved by the Ministry of Public Instruction. Only with official sanction could scholars and adventurers obtain passports and *firman*s.

<sup>10</sup> ANF: F/17/3006/A Louis Félicien de Saulcy to the Minister of Public Instruction proposing an archaeological mission to Syria, 26 August 1850. "...sans contredit enrichir le Musée du Louvre..."

to honor our Nation.”<sup>11</sup> His proposition was enthusiastically received and two days before Christmas, de Saulcy entered Jerusalem.

The Frenchman arrived with his son and a cadre of young men, whom he had agreed to chaperone in order to raise capital for his trip. They would be the principal composition of his archaeological workforce. Following the holiday celebrations, de Saulcy and his entourage set off for the Dead Sea region to undertake the scientific portion of their field trip. For the next twenty-one days they trekked relentlessly around the southern edge of the Dead Sea on a quest to gather antiquities and identify the area’s scattered ruins. Throughout, de Saulcy confidently provided a Biblical identification for every site they encountered, convinced he was accurately locating the remains of the Bible’s most famous (and sometime infamous) cities. His methods, however, relied on no particularly defined set of criteria and many of de Saulcy’s claims were later proved incorrect by modern archaeologists.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, after having “authenticated” the foundations of Sodom and Gomorrah, de Saulcy and his young adventurers returned to Jerusalem to investigate the Holy City’s ancient remains. There, de Saulcy was attracted to a rock-hewn ruin located beyond the city walls – a site traditionally believed to be the royal tomb of the Kings of Israel. Previously unexplored, it offered French archaeology an opportunity “to verify the scientific reliability of the traditional religious identifications.”<sup>13</sup> Consequently, de Saulcy ordered his companions to clear debris away

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<sup>11</sup> ANF: F/17/3006/A Louis Félicien de Saulcy to the Minister of Public Instruction proposing an archaeological mission to Syria, 26 August 1850. “un nombre d’objets digne d’entrer dans les riches collections du Muséum et dont nous serons heureux de faire hommage à notre Pays.”

<sup>12</sup> Silberman, 67.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



from the crypt's entrance and proceeded to disappear into the darkness. He returned dragging the broken lid of a limestone sarcophagus behind him, which he promptly identified as belonging to the coffin of King David.<sup>14</sup>

The promising results of de Saulcy's mission reached Paris before de Saulcy and his group had even departed from Beirut. They had succeeded in proving that traditional Biblical sites could be scientifically validated and to substantiate his claims, de Saulcy had amassed a considerable collection of portable antiquities to present. These were displayed in the Louvre in April 1851, forming the centerpiece of the museum's newly opened "Jewish Court."<sup>15</sup> The installation of a gallery devoted to religiously significant antiquities served to emphasize the rising importance of Biblical archaeology. No longer did the scenery of the Bible have to be imagined, the curious could now inspect the pottery, the statues, the architecture, and the inscriptions of the ancient Israelites at their leisure. Indeed, as Díaz-Andreu states, "Excavations helped forge a historical imagination of the topography of the Holy Land. Archaeology thus assisted in the creation of a visual image for the religious accounts related in the Bible."<sup>16</sup> That which was once veiled and sacrosanct was demystified and hurled into the realm of the secular and scientific. Consequently, many scholars began treating the Bible as a historical source rather than an exclusively religious book. The result was that European archaeologists like de Saulcy excavated with expectations, seeking to locate that which they believed ought to be in a certain place rather than objectively analyzing their

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<sup>14</sup> Silberman, 67.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>16</sup> Díaz-Andreu, 164.

discoveries. Regardless, the French had succeeded in both demonstrating that Biblical archaeology was not the exclusive domain of Protestant scholars and bolstering their position in the Holy Land vis-à-vis other European rivals. As for de Saulcy, he had succeeded in securing his celebrity.

By 1863 de Saulcy was remarried and his social status had increased considerably. His exploits in Palestine had earned him the recognition of Napoleon III and in 1859 he was appointed to the Senate. Now, at the age of fifty-six, he was eager to return. This time, however, the Ministry of Public Instruction supported de Saulcy with a generous subsidy of 20,000 francs. A note explains that it was offered with “the appreciation of the Emperor.”<sup>17</sup> The amount is significant since it comprised over a quarter of the ministry’s annual budget of 75,000 francs.<sup>18</sup> The average scientific mission to the Orient received only 1,000 to 1,200 francs per month; de Saulcy had 5,000 a month at his disposal.<sup>19</sup> He was also assigned an experienced topographical officer from the Ministry of War and two assistant archaeologists.

The French team arrived in Palestine on 27 October after a brief visit to see August Mariette in Egypt. A month later de Saulcy returned to the so-called Tombs of the Kings outside of Jerusalem, encouraged by Mariette’s extensive archaeological endeavors to begin a full-scale excavation of the site. It would be the first time anyone had attempted to dig in the Holy City itself. As archaeologist Neil Asher Silberman comments, de Saulcy was determined to silence English detractors and confirm, for the glory of France,

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<sup>17</sup> ANF: F/17/3006/A “Arrêté de 4 octobre 1863 du Ministre Secrétaire d’État au Département de l’Instruction publique” 4 October 1863. “Il s’en remit à l’appréciation de l’Empereur.”

<sup>18</sup> ANF: F/17/3006/A “Note de la Ministère de l’Instruction publique,” 20 October 1864.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

the sacred identity of the tomb through scientific means. Moreover, he sought to establish along the Jordan the same level of archaeological prestige France had attained along the Nile and the Tigris. The excavations went well, enlarging the site and uncovering previously hidden extensions. Once more de Saulcy slipped into the darkened crypt and once more he emerged with a surprising find. This time it was an intact stone sarcophagus, which he declared to be that of King Zedekiah's wife based on the ancient Hebrew script he found carved into the coffin's side bearing the word "Queen."<sup>20</sup>

Yet again the French claimed a major success at the hands of archaeology. However, this time France's self-glorification provoked the ire of Jerusalem's Jewish population. De Saulcy's confidence had succeeded in convincing the public that he had actually discovered sacred Biblical sites. Rabbis were outraged at the supposed desecration of the tombs of their ancient kings. "The lust for the study of antiquities has become so intense here in recent days that its practitioners have not even shrunk from disturbing the ancient remains of our forefathers," accused one Hebrew newspaper.<sup>21</sup> The Jewish community portrayed de Saulcy as a tomb raider and angry religious leaders sent protests to the Ottoman authorities demanding that the French excavations be suspended immediately. But before the grand vizier could send orders to halt the work, de Saulcy and his team managed to pack up their finds and quit Jerusalem. It was not long before British newspapers, smelling blood in the water, condemned the French of

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<sup>20</sup> Silberman, 71.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 72.

“shameless profanation.”<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, de Saulcy returned to Paris to much acclaim. However, even in France he had his share of critics. Among them: the famous philologist and theologian Ernest Renan.

Like de Saulcy, Renan believed archaeology was invaluable to unraveling the mysteries of Western religion and establishing accurate chronologies for Biblical events. However, as a product of Paris’s finest intellectual institutions, Renan was too freethinking to accept some of the archaeological theories de Saulcy had presented. The results of de Saulcy’s first expedition prompted Renan to criticize his colleague’s ideas as naïve and obtained by, what he considered to be, an unreliable scientific methodology.<sup>23</sup> But unlike de Saulcy, Renan had never actually undertaken any significant archaeological fieldwork. That would change, however, following France’s triumphant victory in the Crimean War.

The resulting Treaty of Paris in 1856 established France as the legitimate defender of the Ottoman Empire’s integrity. It was with this newfound authority that Napoleon III ordered the occupation of Lebanon in 1860. A raging civil war between the region’s Muslim Druze and Catholic Maronites had ended with the massacre of local Christians by the Druze. The Second Empire, in its role as the protector of Oriental Christianity dispatched an expeditionary force of 7,000 troops to restore order. As previously underlined, Napoleon III considered himself to be the inheritor of his uncle’s Oriental legacy and understanding the historic significance of another French military campaign in the Near East, the emperor arranged for a scientific corps to accompany the expedition

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<sup>22</sup> Silberman, 72.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 69.

and undertake archaeological investigations. The Louvre, spurred by its recent acquisition of Biblical antiquities was extremely eager to secure artifacts from the land once inhabited by the ancient Phoenicians. Ernest Renan was selected to oversee the massive operation.

A member of the Institut de France, Renan was a Biblical scholar and an expert in Semitic languages. In 1855 he presented his first celebrated work, the *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques* (General History and Comparative System of Semitic Languages). Now with imperial patronage, 46,000 francs from the Ministry of Public Instruction, and a division of soldiers armed with pickaxes and spades at his disposal Renan undertook an energetic survey of ancient Phoenicia.<sup>24</sup> For an entire year he directed digs at Arwad (Aradus, mentioned in the books of Genesis, Ezekiel, 1 Chronicles, and 1 Maccabees), Byblos (the town from which the Bible owes its names), Tyre (described by the prophet Ezeekial), and Sidon (Gen. 10:15, 1 Ch. 1:13). Unfortunately, the sudden death of his sister, who had accompanied him to Lebanon, forced Renan to return back to France.<sup>25</sup> He left fellow archaeologists Melchior de Vogüé and Charles Gaillardot to complete his research.<sup>26</sup> Under orders from Napoleon III they even extended the scope of their mission to the island of Cyprus. Subsequently, a flood of antiquities entered the Louvre, filling exhibition halls with cases of intriguing Phoenician artifacts.

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<sup>24</sup> ANF: F/17/3002/A “Situation relative à la Mission de M. Renan,” January 1861.

<sup>25</sup> ANF: F/17/3002/A Note from the Ministry of State, 16 August 1861.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



Figure 10: Ernest Renan (1823-1892)



Figure 11: The Moabite stone

In the European historical imagination the Phoenicians were known as intrepid, seafaring people, the race from which Rome's most formidable enemy, the Carthaginians, were descended. Their culture was considered a mosaic, blending Greek artistic styles with ancient Egyptian motifs and Mesopotamian religious beliefs – a missing link in Europe's evolutionary trajectory from the cradle of civilization. Paradoxically, they were at once admired (the Western alphabet was developed from Phoenician script) and disparaged. European scholars like Renan considered them paradigmatic of Oriental decadency: “a people who were hard and sad, sensual and greedy, and adventurous without heroism” and whose “religion was atrocious and full of frightful practices.”<sup>27</sup> Among evidence for the last accusation was the belief that the ancient Phoenicians practiced child sacrifice to the god Moloch. Such perceptions were popularized immediately following France's mission to the Orient in Gustav Flaubert's 1862 novel *Salammbô*. Coupled with the scientific evidence Renan collected, archaeology gave credence to the rising idea of European ethnic superiority over the “inferior” Semitic people of the Near East. Thus, as Biblical archaeology gained prominence throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, scholars could empirically justify anti-Semitism.

Settling back in Paris, Renan continued the recent French tradition of producing a monumental written work on the ancient past. His *Description générale de la Phénicie* was published in 1864 and collated the information he had collected while in Lebanon.<sup>28</sup> He was also appointed to the prestigious position of Chair of Hebrew at the Collège de France. In this capacity he undertook work on his next major contribution to

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<sup>27</sup> Jules Michelet, *Histoire romaine* (Paris: 1831) cited in Díaz-Andreu, 158.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 156-157.

archaeology: the *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, an ambitious project to compile and reproduce all the monuments and inscriptions from ancient Semitic civilizations and translate them.<sup>29</sup> Like Champollion before him, Renan emphasized the collection of texts in order to corroborate mankind's knowledge of the world's oldest cultures. Rival scholars from Britain and Germany were of a similar mind, and in 1868 the dusty plains of Palestine became the battleground for one of the bitterest episodes in archaeological history.

The Moabite stone sits at the entrance to the Louvre's Near Eastern antiquities gallery, a massive stele of polished black basalt covered in ancient characters. But upon closer inspection, one sees that it is not entirely original and that fissures dissect the stone's face into a broken pattern of reconstructed fragments. The remaining spaces have been carefully reproduced from a mold. The curious visitor might believe that the stone was found as such, broken by the violence of time, and then restored at the museum. But upon its discovery in August 1868, the stone was intact – a remarkable artifact bearing (at that time) the oldest text yet discovered in the Holy Land. It was European rivalry that destroyed the stone.

One late summer evening in 1868, Reverend Frederick Augustus Klein was shown the mysterious stone by the Bedouin tribe of Bani-Hamideh in the remote region of Moab near the ancient ruins of Dhiban.<sup>30</sup> Although born in Strasbourg and educated in England, Klein considered himself a German and as such he reported the find to Dr.

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<sup>29</sup> Díaz-Andreu, 157-158.

<sup>30</sup> Silberman, 100.



Heinrich Peterman, the consular agent of the Northern German Confederation in Jerusalem. As a diplomat in the Near East, it is not surprising that Peterman was both an Oriental scholar and an antiquarian. Using the sketches Klein had made, he identified the writing as Phoenician – the oldest sample he had yet to see. The importance was immediately realized since no extensive inscription from Biblical times had ever been discovered. Peterman contacted the Prussian Foreign Ministry and the Imperial Library in Berlin and received authorization to purchase the stone. But, the Bedouin of the region were wary to accept money from Europeans, lest it be misinterpreted, as they were in a conflict with rival tribes. Subsequent deals in the spring of 1869 fell through and a frustrated Prussian government, anxious that news of the find would be leaked to the British or the French, decided to approach Ottoman authorities directly.

Klein's discovery, however, did not remain a secret for long. News eventually reached Charles Clermont-Ganneau, the dragoman<sup>31</sup> at the French consulate in Jerusalem. At only twenty-three years old he was an accomplished linguist and an amateur archaeologist in his own right.<sup>32</sup> He was also entirely unscrupulous. A friend of the Adwan tribe, enemies of the Bani-Hamideh, Clermont-Ganneau sent a party of his local allies to obtain an impression of the Moabite stone. Armed with plaster and squeeze paper, they stole into the ruins of Dhiban, located the stone, and began making the impression. Almost immediately, however, a group of enraged Bani-Hamideh surrounded Clermont-Ganneau's men. A heated argument quickly devolved into a gunfight, but despite the commotion one of the Adwan tribesmen managed to grab the

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<sup>31</sup> A consular agent proficient in Turkish, Arabic, or Persian and who regularly shared both diplomatic and linguistic duties.

<sup>32</sup> Silberman, 106.

still wet plaster impression and escape, galloping back to Jerusalem with the crumpled shreds of the squeeze paper in his saddlebag.<sup>33</sup> The French consul was extremely pleased, but the Beni-Hamideh were outraged. No sooner did they fight off the Adwan then an order arrived from the Pasha demanding that they relinquish the stone to the Prussians. The Bedouin tribe had little love for their Ottoman masters and refused outright. Moreover, they were thoroughly determined to uncover the valuable secret their stone must be hiding, so the tribesmen heated the massive basalt slab over a fire and then submerged it in water until at last it cracked into a small mound of black rubble.<sup>34</sup>

At the French consulate the young Frenchman worked tirelessly to decipher the mutilated remains of the stolen impression. He could eventually make out enough to realize the immense importance of the stone's text. Firstly, the writing was not Phoenician, but a Paleo-Hebraic script belonging to the much older and long-extinct language of ancient Moab – the Biblical kingdom whose rebellious leaders threatened the borders of ancient Israel and Judah.<sup>35</sup> The text itself was an official statement from the Moabite king Mesha in the year 896 BCE which described his army's recent victory over those of his Hebrew enemies.<sup>36</sup> The event was known only as a story in the Old Testament's Second Book of Kings; thus, the French were the first to physically possess external evidence of the Bible's historic accuracy. It was a breakthrough. A year later, Clermont-Ganneau's results were enthusiastically published in the Second Empire's

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<sup>33</sup> Silberman, 106.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

*Journal Officiel* in January 1870 and a combination of amazement and outrage spread across Europe.

The Moabite stone stimulated anew the European public imagination and as Silberman recounts, “The dramatic proof of the historical accuracy of the Bible soon became a popular subject of conversation in drawing rooms, dinner parties, and garden receptions.”<sup>37</sup> Throughout, Clermont-Ganneau was hailed as the stone’s discoverer. Prussia’s reaction was, understandably, choleric. The discovery of the Moabite stone was considered the rightful property of the German nation and Clermont-Ganneau’s brazen meddling had led to its destruction. “The ordinary rules of discretion,” wrote a spiteful Dr. Peterman from Berlin, “would seem to have demanded that nobody should have interfered in the transaction until it had regularly been brought to a conclusion or broken off.”<sup>38</sup> Set against a backdrop of rising military and diplomatic animosity between France and Prussia in 1870, the affair of the Moabite stone can be seen as merely an extension of Europe’s broader national tensions.

The crafty French consul was oblivious to the mounting crisis, more determined to hunt down the broken fragments of the stone. The Bani-Hamideh had initially hidden the pieces amongst themselves and after learning of the stone’s destruction the Germans had given up their bid in frustration. But as excitement about the inscription grew the Bedouin became more willing to sell their artifacts for adequate remuneration. Clermont-Ganneau used his contacts to ferret out sellers, but he faced opposition from Charles Warren, an archaeologist and acquaintance from the British-supported Palestine

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<sup>37</sup> Silberman, 109.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 110.

Exploration Fund who had been ordered by the British Museum to obtain the remains of the stone for England. Warren, however, was more concerned with the stone's salvation rather than its final destination and, following the path of least resistance, handed the pieces he had managed to acquire over to the competitive Frenchman. Thus, against initial odds, the French gained possession of the Moabite stone. Unfortunately, the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in the summer of 1870 would forestall the stone's installation in the Louvre.

Otto von Bismarck's skillful manipulation of Continental diplomacy forced a proud Napoleon III to declare war against Prussia on 19 July 1870. The French army, however, met a swift and humiliating defeat on 2 September at the Battle of Sedan where the emperor himself was taken prisoner. The Second Empire subsequently collapsed and two days later, on 4 September, the Third Republic was proclaimed. Nonetheless, the fighting continued and Paris suffered a devastating four-month siege until the newly founded Republic signed a peace accord at Versailles in January 1871. Consequently, the triumphant German Empire (proclaimed following France's surrender) took possession of Alsace-Lorraine and established itself as a force to be reckoned with in Europe. A bitter France sought symbolic retribution.

Conveniently, Charles Clermont-Ganneau proposed to sell the Moabite stone – that prize so cunningly robbed from the Germans – to the Louvre. Under pressure from Ernest Renan to acquire the stele, the Ministry of Public Instruction and the Louvre raised 5,000 francs and 12,000 francs respectively, and provided an annual 1,000-franc stipend for Clermont-Ganneau's elderly mother in Paris.<sup>39</sup> The price, in Renan's opinion, was

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<sup>39</sup> ANF: F/17/2949 Note from the Ministry of Public Instruction concerning the acquisition of the Stele of Dhiban, 26 March 1873.

worth it: “I can attest that there is not a single monument whose acquisition was more desirable, more useful to science, or more capable of throwing luster onto our great collection of antiquities.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, it was with a certain measure of defiant national pride that the reconstructed Moabite stone went on display in 1873.

Archaeology in Mesopotamia and the Holy Land enabled European scholars to explore the furthest reaches of mankind’s past, to unveil the civilizations, monuments, and languages known only to the Western world through the written word of Judeo-Christian religious texts. Thus, Biblical archaeology adds a unique dimension in the narrative of imperial archaeology, in that the search to legitimize Western religion – to explore the spiritual roots of Europe’s evolution – provided an alternative motivation for excavating and the religious nature of the artifacts being retrieved managed to elevate the contemporary dialectic beyond mere power politics. But it was merely a façade; the scramble to obtain antiquities in the Holy Land was fueled by imperial zeal and a sense of national glory. Moreover, it permitted the French to establish zones of influence across Palestine and Lebanon. Ultimately, nationalistic ambition was the driving force. The international tension between empires was distinctly echoed by archaeology, as evidenced by the competition between Botta and Layard in Mesopotamia and Charles Clermont-Ganneau and the Germans in Palestine.

Archaeology also provided a means for European powers to re-appropriate the Orient itself. As previously seen, Victor Place used the ruins of Khorsabad to stage his

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<sup>40</sup> ANF: F/17/ 2949 Ernest Renan to the Ministry of Public Instruction, February 1873. “Ce que je peux attester, c’est qu’il n’est pas un seul monument dont l’acquisition fût plus désirable, plus utile à la science, plus capable de jeter du lustre sur notre grande collection d’antiquités.”

celebration of Napoleon III and symbolically forge a link between the ascendant imperial power of France's Second Empire and the ancient glory of the Assyrians. In this respect, archaeology marginalized the Orient's Arab past, disregarding its inclusion in the historical discourses being created by the West's intellectual institutions and extending influence beyond the core of imperial Europe. Archaeologists literally dug beyond the Islamic Near East to find evidence of an ancient past with which to bypass the contemporary Orient and reinforce narratives in which the Occident could justify its right to the region. Be it the Assyrians, the Phoenicians, or the ancient Israelites, each culture was seen as a contributor to Europe's development. Furthermore, they left behind striking evidence of their existence which stood in stark contrast to what the West perceived as the stagnant culture of the Orient. When needed, archaeological remains could be singled out as proof to bolster European hegemonic claims of superiority and perpetuate the anti-Semitic dialogue. To this end, the importance of continuously utilizing the ancient past to further nationalist ideology resulted in archaeology's increased institutionalization and early individual initiatives were soon substituted by more ambitious expeditions directed and financed by the intellectual and political machinery of the state: the Louvre, the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, the Ministry of Public Instruction, and even the direct patronage of leaders such as Louis-Philippe and Napoleon III. Such investments linked archaeology directly to the fate of the state, and as a result archaeology was used to endorse France's successive regimes, be they royal, republican, or imperial. Archaeology, however, had another role to play. The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of French colonial expansion and it was reasoned

that if archaeological domination had helped transform France into a formidable international power, it could also help transform it into a mighty colonial power.



French Algeria and Tunisia  
(L.E. Desbuissons and J. Migeon, 1891)

Source: David Rumsey Historical Map Collection



## Chapter 5 Colonizing Archaeology

IN SHORT, ALGERIA AND TUNISIA ARE ONE LARGE MUSEUM.

~ Salomon Reinach, *Revue Archéologique* (1891)<sup>1</sup>

The men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of the French Foreign Legion stood at attention, their sunburned brows glistening with sweat under their bright red *képis*. With rifles aimed skyward they stared at a towering memorial capped with a marble pyramid. Earlier that day they had marched from their garrison in Batna to assemble in parade formation at the ancient city of Lambaesus – once the military capital of Roman Numidia. Their commanding officer, Colonel Jean-Luc Carbuccia had ordered them to this dusty, ruin-strewn plain to honor a fallen comrade and despite the oppressive North African heat, the scene was solemn. Upon his orders, shots rung out and the trumpet sounded and the men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment began a slow procession past the final resting place of a soldier, who like many of Carbuccia's men, had died in an effort to colonize Algeria. But it was not a French brother-in-arms they saluted. Across the marble façade of the mausoleum Carbuccia had carved: *The Colonel of the Foreign Legion to his colleague of the Legion of Augustus*.<sup>2</sup> It was the tomb of Centurion Quintus Flavius Maximus, leader of the Third Roman Legion.

In the fall of 1848 the occupying government in Algiers ordered Colonel Carbuccia and his regiment to undertake an archaeological survey of Lambaesus and reconstruct the

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<sup>1</sup> Salomon Reinach, "Compte-rendu sur les Instructions du Comité des Travaux historiques et scientifiques. Recherche des antiquités dans le Nord de l'Afrique. Conseils aux archéologues et aux voyageurs. *Revue archéologique* (1891): 269-270. "Bref, l'Algérie et la Tunisie...sont un grand musée."

<sup>2</sup> Michael Greenhalgh, "French Military Reconnaissance in the Ottoman Empire during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries as a Source for Our Knowledge of Ancient Monuments," *The Journal of Military History* 66/2 (April 2002): 387

geography of the ancient Roman city.<sup>3</sup> Upon the discovery of Maximus's crypt, Carbuccia, a passionate student of history and an amateur archaeologist, instructed his men to restore the ruined funerary monument to its former grandeur. It seemed only right to honor their ancient confederate who, like the soldiers of the Foreign Legion, had also endured the hardships of campaigning in Algeria. From the outset of the colonial adventure in North Africa, the French considered themselves to be the inheritors of the country's Roman legacy. As French historian Louis Bertrand remarks: "[Carbuccia], by proclaiming himself in front of the mausoleum of Flavius Maximus, as the inheritor and successor of the Roman, has truly woven history into an unbroken stream. Like...his compatriot Napoleon, he has reclaimed for the Gauls an abandoned Latin heritage."<sup>4</sup> This desire to seamlessly integrate Roman patrimony into the French historical narrative would be the driving force behind French colonial archaeology in Algeria and Tunisia. But unlike Napoleon in Egypt, the French were here to stay.

Colonial archaeology was markedly different than the previous examples of imperial archaeology that have been seen. Here a clear distinction should be made between "imperialism" and "colonialism," far too often these two terms are used interchangeably when referring to the overseas exploits of European nation-states in the nineteenth century. According to Edward Said, "'imperialism' means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory; 'colonialism' which is almost always the consequence of imperialism, is the implanting

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Bertrand *Les villes d'or: Algérie et Tunisie romaines* (Paris: Fayard, 1921), 43 cited in Greenhalgh, 387.

of settlements on distant territory.”<sup>5</sup> This definition provides an important distinction; for the inclusion of settlers, the transformation of North Africa into “French” territory, is the essential element that marks the atypical approach taken by French archaeology in this region of the Orient. We have hitherto investigated cases in which archaeology was used as a tool of informal imperialism – a means of politically and culturally maintaining French influence in those regions not directly controlled by France: the Levant, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. However, the story of French colonial expansion in North Africa will subtly change previously established paradigms.

In prior cases, archaeology was used to justify imperial ideologies, create dialogues between contemporary Western civilization and those of the past, legitimate France’s political regime changes when expedient, and, when fueled by nationalism, it provided a stage upon which Europe’s geopolitical rivalries could be played out. However, in French Algeria and Tunisia archaeology was used to fasten the ancient past of an unrelated culture to the historical identity of the metropole and legitimize the act of colonization itself. Moreover, antiquities were not removed from France’s North African possessions, but generally remained on native soil where French officials were more sensitive to the integrity and preservation of ancient ruins than elsewhere. And most interestingly, archaeology provided not just a historic case for the colonization of North Africa, but an actual blueprint for conquest.

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 9.

The decision to invade Algeria was not an arbitrary act of conquest, but the culmination of several complex historical and political factors. It would mark the beginning of France's new colonial empire. The history of French engagement in North Africa is tightly bound to France's long relationship with Algeria. Since 1517 Algeria had been a province of the Ottoman Empire, but its geographic position and the independent nature of its administration meant that, like Egypt, Algeria maintained a comfortable margin of autonomy. The first French consul was stationed in Algiers in 1564 and the positive nature of diplomatic relations between the French court and the *deys* of Algeria ensured the marginal protection of French shipping in the Mediterranean from Algerian pirates and privateers along the Barbary Coast.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, a combination of French naval supremacy and tributary payments meant that Algerian corsairs raided the ships of lesser European nations; an arrangement that suited French trading interests just fine given France's well developed commercial ties to North Africa.

Even following the turbulent events of 1789 the French managed to remain on good terms with Algeria and the *dey* decided to support his country's historic economic partner against the First Coalition despite pressure from England. Indeed, he befriended the fledgling Republic by selling her desperately needed wheat and in 1796 the government of Algeria lent the Directory one million livres without interest.<sup>7</sup> However, in the wake of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, Algeria declared war against France and ships flying the *tricolore* suddenly found themselves the target of dreaded Algerian piracy. The act was partly driven by France's unwillingness to pay her mounting wheat bill. Napoleon,

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<sup>6</sup> Herbert Priestly, *France Overseas: A Study of Modern Imperialism*, (New York: American Historical Association, 1938), 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

ever ready for another chance at Oriental conquest, briefly considered an invasion of the city of Algiers in 1808 to rid the French Empire of the problem, but the demands of the Peninsular Campaign required more attention. Nonetheless, the military maps of Algiers prepared for Napoleon's descent were to be used by the French in their assault in 1830.

Following the Congress of Vienna, the newly restored French monarchy, weary of the "medieval conditions still surrounding their trade in the Mediterranean,"<sup>8</sup> pressed the *dey* of Algeria to abolish piracy. His refusal, coupled with the lingering problem of France's unpaid debt (a sum of seven million francs)<sup>9</sup>, engendered diplomatic tension between the once close nations. Events came to a head in 1827 during an audience between Pierre Déval, the French consul, and Hussein Dey, ruler of Algeria. Enraged at Déval's patronizing and circumlocutious replies concerning the state of France's financial obligation to the coffers of Algiers, the *dey* violently struck the French consul with the handle of his ornate flywhisk.<sup>10</sup> This slight to Déval's honor manifested the entry of six French men-of-war into the Bay of Algiers demanding apologies. Initially, Charles X hesitated to use further force, wary of political retribution from Britain or Russia, and instead maintained a naval blockade despite recommendations from his ministers advocating for a combined land and sea assault on the city. Diplomatic avenues between France and the *dey* quickly deteriorated and by late 1829 the possibility of invading the littoral of Algeria was renewed.

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<sup>8</sup> Priestly, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 26.

The recovery of French colonial prestige was a leading concern of the French state following the restoration of peace in 1815, especially considering that in the seventeenth century France had once possessed a wider reach of extra-European power than England. Like the justifications for Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, it was reasoned that such an expedition to Algeria would redress the balance of power in the Mediterranean against the British and restore France's status as a first-rate colonial power. Moreover, the French monarchy's officials argued that a colonial military engagement would help alleviate France's growing domestic problems by building political support among the veterans of the Napoleonic campaigns and, due to the popular fascination with the Orient, provide the general public with an expedient distraction. Thus, at the end of May 1830, an increasingly unpopular Charles X ordered 37,000 soldiers, 27,000 marines, and 103 warships towards the Algerian coast.<sup>11</sup> Algiers fell quickly, and on 5 July French troops successfully evacuated the Kasbah, establishing a small foothold on what would soon become France's most important colony.

However, the decision to settle Algeria was not immediate. Initially, the French government had justified its recent military operation as a convenient way of not having to pay seven million francs in overdue wheat expenses. There was also considerable backlash from both the international community, outraged at another French invasion of North Africa, and the French people, indignant of the financial burden of such an endeavor. But Charles X and his ministers were determined to maintain a French presence and "pacify" the country. After all, "to evacuate the country unconditionally

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<sup>11</sup> Priestly, 28.

would be for France to humiliate herself, and turn Algiers back to anarchy and pirates.”<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, for the French monarchy, the invasion of Algeria did little to sway the unpopular public opinion mounting against it and between 27 and 29 July 1830 Paris revolted. The restored Bourbon monarchy collapsed and Charles X fled to England.

The installation of Louis-Philippe, however, did not change the course of France’s involvement in Algeria. The military agreeably adopted the tricolor and the occupation of Algeria received renewed support from a regime eager to reestablish France’s international reputation in the wake of such disconcerting domestic turmoil. Nonetheless, the question of complete colonization, however, remained ambivalent as this region of North Africa was still a relatively unknown corner of the world. As historian Herbert Priestley explains, “the French, in spite of long commercial relations, knew little about the country. On the geography, ethnography, history, and political organization of Algeria, the conquerors had everything to learn, as they had also to decide what to do with a possession not yet securely held.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, there was much debate concerning the fate of France’s newest territorial acquisition. The immense task of colonization daunted many, and there were those that staunchly opposed a serious French commitment in Algeria. They claimed that such an enormous financial obligation would burden the state and that an already growing native insurgency would undermine France’s designs in Algeria as it had two decades earlier in Egypt. Partisans of occupation, however, maintained that in rebuilding France’s colonial domain, she could challenge the economic domination of Britain. Besides, the dignity of France was at stake. Nonetheless, the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 30.

specter of Bonaparte's colonial failure in a similar endeavor still lingered. In order to solve the fundamental problems of colonization in the Orient and avoid past mistakes, the French decided to study the actions of a civilization that had successfully settled the region: the ancient Romans.

The first foreign conquerors of what was to become French North Africa were the Phoenicians, who established an extensive network of trading posts along the coast of modern Tunisia and Algeria, their most prominent colony being at Carthage. There the Carthaginians developed an impressive and extremely prosperous civilization that, at its apex, threatened the banks of the Tiber. Their boldness, however, provoked an equally bold response from the nascent Roman Republic, which sent its army to the deserts of North Africa to meet the Carthaginian threat directly. There the Roman general Scipio defeated the feared Carthaginian strategist Hannibal in 201 BCE and North Africa fell under the dominion of Rome. For the next 160 years, legions of soldiers spent entire careers methodically establishing Roman control across a region known in the Latin world as *Africa*. Algeria became the province *Mauretania Caesariensis*, which gained a reputation as being not only one of the most successfully "Romanized" provinces along the Mediterranean rim, but also one of the Empire's most agriculturally rich territories. The lucrative Mediterranean trade routes bestowed Roman North Africa with much wealth and prosperity, a fact evidenced by the immense architectural projects financed during Roman occupation. Thus, structural reminders of Rome's colonization were conspicuously strewn across Algeria's harsh scrubland for the invading French military to uncover: triumphal arches, temples, and tombs lay besides the ruined vestiges of



amphitheaters and public baths. Such plentiful archaeological remains inevitably aroused the curiosity of the well-educated army officers stationed in Algeria.

In the effort to establish control along the littoral, army officers led their men into the interior on patrol and reconnaissance missions, mapping the terrain and securing supply routes, thus they were the first to interact with the monumental remains of Roman Mauritania. Well versed in classical history, they took a keen interest in Roman architecture and reported their findings directly to the Ministry of War, for here was evidence of a once flourishing Mediterranean colony; proof that the rugged, inhospitable landscape of France's newest possession could be successfully transformed into a prosperous outpost of Western civilization. Subsequently, it was rationalized that the colonization and assimilation of Algeria might be entirely possible. In this respect archaeology would provide the means through which France could learn the colonizing methods of their classical forbearers. As one military official stated, "every vestige of [Roman] domination in this country is a lesson for us."<sup>14</sup>

The French Minister of War, Nicolas Soult was particularly intrigued by the history of Roman Algeria. As a former Marshal of the Empire under Napoleon, he was also sensitive to the intellectual legacy established by the *savants* of the Egyptian campaign. Thus, he decided to enlist the services of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres to engage in "a work that will interest both science and the state."<sup>15</sup> In a letter written to the Academy's secretary on 18 November 1833, Soult proposed that a historical commission be formed in order to produce "a good geography of ancient Mauritania

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<sup>14</sup> Cited in Greenhalgh, 385.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Margarita Díaz-Andreu, *A World History of Nineteenth-Century Archaeology: Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 265.

under ancient civilization and a history of Roman colonization in this area, of the institutions they created and the relationships they established with the natives.”<sup>16</sup> However, in the first years of France’s occupation, the country was considered too dangerous for a group of *savants* to wander around measuring columns and sketching felled porticos, therefore the preliminary work was conducted by a group of specialists in Paris that included the historian and classicist Joseph Naudet, the archaeologist Désiré Raoul Rochette, the secretary of the Academy, Charles Athanase Walckenaer, and Edme François Jomard, veteran of Bonaparte’s Egyptian expedition and editor of the *Description de l’Égypte*.<sup>17</sup> Their objective was to investigate what the Romans did right in securing and settling Algeria by studying classical texts.

But the conclusion of the commission’s preliminary report put a specific emphasis on the need to study Algeria’s Roman antiquities. They argued that archaeology would provide the principal means to determine the historic causes of growth and decline in the region. By collecting artifacts and undertaking excavations, France’s *savants* could forensically explain why certain towns prospered while others did not; valuable knowledge that the French could use to their advantage. Soult agreed, writing:

[It is] a real utility to study the circumstances under the influence of which the populations of certain cities developed, to rediscover the routes of ancient roads, to observe, by the past viability of rivers, today blocked off, the salubrity of a land which we find inhabitable, [and] the possibility that would exist to place it [Algeria] back into equally favorable conditions.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> “Lettre du ministre de la Guerre, duc de Dalmatie, du 18 novembre 1833” cited in Nabila Oulebsir, *Les Usages du patrimoine: monuments, musées, et politique coloniale en Algérie (1830-1930)*, (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 2004), 49.

<sup>17</sup> Oulebsir, 50.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 51. “Il me semble d’une utilité réelle d’étudier les circonstances sous l’influence desquelles se développa la population de certaines villes, de retrouver le tracé des routes antiques, de

To effectively achieve such an ambition, the commission recommended that a team of archaeologists, artists, geographers, and engineers be sent in-country to record the monuments of Rome's occupation and produce a detailed map of ancient Mauritania. This latter point is particularly important, for by mapping the ancient vestiges of Algeria, the French were able to acquire a mastery of the territory itself; a mastery that consciously excluded contemporary Islamic history by being based exclusively on Roman geography. Thus, the impetus behind French archaeology shifted away from the mere acquisition of intellectual knowledge or the collection of fine museum pieces for the Louvre. The task of the archaeologist was now to appropriate the Roman palimpsest in an effort to reinforce a teleological narrative of civilization and settlement in the region, one in which foreign conquest was not only rationalized by historical precedents but also normalized. To this end, the extensive archaeological survey of Algeria would provide a blueprint to colonization.

In 1834, the same year in which the commission's initial reports were published, the July Monarchy finally decided that France was to remain permanently in Algeria.<sup>19</sup> With France's long-term colonial commitment assured, the members of the Academy lobbied the state for approval of their scientific expedition. However, their safety once more became a concern. Abd al-Kadir, a prominent Algerian chieftain and Islamic theologian, threatened the French presence with an army of well-organized resistance

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constater par la viabilité passée de rivières, aujourd'hui obstruées, et la salubrité des contrées que nous trouvons inhabitables, la possibilité qu'il y aurait de se replacer dans des conditions également favorables."

<sup>19</sup> Priestly, 35.

fighters that effectively controlled the interior of the country. Until the insurgency could be extinguished and the interior secured, the role of surveying Algeria's archaeological treasures was unofficially delegated to France's military officers.

Apart from an urbane antiquarian fascination, many officers were also interested in the tactical significance of Roman antiquity, for as military historian Michael Greenhalgh explains, "[Roman ruins] offered a lifeline to an army short of money, supplies, men, and backup."<sup>20</sup> Therefore, archaeological reconnaissances became vital to the success of the Armée d'Afrique's campaign and it was common practice for French units to establish strongholds within Roman forts or use Roman grain silos as stores for provisions. Additionally, Roman aqueducts and cisterns provided a thirsty army with water and the extensive network of Roman roads provided the infantry and their artillery with relatively uninterrupted access across uneven terrain. At El-Zarour near Orléansville Colonel Mercier, an engineering officer, noted in the spring of 1838 "the remains of a rectangular fortress," and concluded that: "This is an excellent military position."<sup>21</sup> Just as the Academy's scholars realized the value of studying the remains of Roman occupation so did the military. The Roman model thus provided a strategic guide for the French army. As another engineering officer writing from the town of Mascara on 11 April 1844 states:

We will...set ourselves at last on the practical, rational and methodical path which would have assured the Romans indefinite possession of these lands of Africa and Barbary...We shall tie one by one the various knots of this colonizing network which the political science of the Romans thought necessary to tie up her conquest and fortify her domination of the country.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Greenhalgh, 376.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Ibid., 383.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Ibid., 379.

Such a symbiotic relationship with the architecture of ancient Rome drastically increased France's ability to control Algeria, but more importantly, it helped to crystallize the apparent homology between the French army and that of its classical predecessor. The fact that the colonial armies of France were romantically following in the footsteps of Rome's glorious legions was well imbedded in the historical sensitivities of French commanders. Particularly emblematic of this rationalization was Ferdinand-Philippe, the duc d'Orléans and the eldest son of King Louis-Philippe. In the fall of 1839 he led a military expedition south from Constantine on a publicity stunt to the Portes de Fer – the Iron Gates – an impressive geological formation that formed a rugged pass through the Biban Mountains, a feat that the duke boasted, “the Romans themselves did not even dare to attempt.”<sup>23</sup> Throughout his voyage he busied himself with the study and acquisition of portable antiquities. He was especially impressed with the ruins at Djemila (the ancient city of Curculum). Among its many remarkable ruins was the triumphal arch of Emperor Caracalla which the duke immediately singled out for shipment to France where it would serve as a monument to France's colonization of Algeria.<sup>24</sup> Nabila Oulebsir remarks the duke of Orleans had found “a trophy to transport to Paris [to be] a historic witness to the conquest of Algeria,” one that was intended to emphasize the parallel between the French campaign with that of the Roman.<sup>25</sup> As the principal instrument of French imperialism the military directly interacted with the ancient past, physically appropriated it, politicized it, and created narratives in which the Armée d'Afrique became the direct

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<sup>23</sup> Cited in Oulebsir, 41. “...les Romains eux-mêmes n'avaient osé tenter.”

<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, the arch never made it to Paris. Following the duke's sudden death in 1842 the project was abandoned. Ibid., 77-79.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 38.

descendent of Rome's mighty African garrisons.<sup>26</sup> Like the Romans, the French had marched across the foothills of the Atlas Mountains to bring the torch of civilization to the barbarous masses of the Maghreb. As in Egypt, its bearers would be a select group of the nation's most learned men.

On 13 October 1837 the battle for septentrional Algeria came to an end when the French army marched into the city of Constantine, effectively placing the entire littoral under French control. As the colonization process began in earnest along the coast, the military began to push even further inland to extend French domination to the relatively unknown interior. Recognizing the military and scientific importance of penetrating upcountry the Ministry of War finally authorized the Academy's proposal to launch an archaeological expedition so that the French might benefit from whatever information could be gleaned from the passage of the Romans. As Oulebsir notes, such an alliance between the Ministry of War and the Institut de France formalized "the connection between Algeria's monumental architecture and the politics of conquest."<sup>27</sup> Thus, it was the duty of the newly formed Commission d'Exploration Scientifique d'Algérie (Scientific Commission for the Exploration of Algeria) to "identify the ruins of ancient monuments of every order and every age,"<sup>28</sup> and in the Napoleonic tradition a team of French scholars was assembled and sent across the Mediterranean. The Commission's members, which included the architect Amable Ravoisié (who had previously

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>27</sup> Oulebsir, 53. "L'intérêt manifesté pour les monuments antiques de l'Algérie est ainsi justifié pour les deux instances, l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres et le ministère de la Guerre, dont l'alliance autorise des rapprochements entre l'architecture monumentale de l'Algérie et la politique de conquête."

<sup>28</sup> Cited in Ibid. "Reconnaître les ruines de monuments antiques de tout ordre et de tout âge."

accompanied a French scientific expedition to the Morea in Greece between 1828 and 1833), the historian and Latin epigraphist Léon Ranier, and a captain in the artillery, Adolphe Delamare, arrived in Algiers in December 1839. Using the works of ancient writers such as Pliny, Strabo, and Titus Livius they began locating ancient sites and documenting the buildings, statues, and inscriptions they found. Like their Egyptian predecessors, the members of the Scientific Commission produced stunning reproductions of the Roman ruins they encountered and collected an impressive body of knowledge on Roman archaeology. Since the end of the eighteenth century the Italian peninsula had become overrun with amateur antiquarians from across Europe searching for classical antiquities, but Algeria was virgin territory, an untapped mine of beautiful Roman artifacts that the French could claim entirely for themselves.

Artistic considerations, however, were ultimately marginalized. The priority for France's *savants* was, as Amable Ravoisié writes, "[to investigate] the means of colonization employed with such success by the Romans, to know the forms of colonial architecture, the choice of material, and finally, the importance of the institutions...founded so far from the metropole by the ancient masters of the world."<sup>29</sup> Between 1840 and 1845, the Commission scoured the cities of Cirta, Curculum (Djemila), Rusicade (Skikda), Milevum (Mila), and Sitifis (Sétif) collecting an impressive amount of artifacts and publishing their results in several volumes. These antiquities were then transported back to Paris for study at the Academy and then installed in the newly created Algerian Museum at the Louvre where they generated immense interest. The *Revue Archéologique* (founded in 1844 as France's first periodical

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<sup>29</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 69.

completely dedicated to archaeology) was particularly ecstatic about the opening of the Musée Algérien.<sup>30</sup> Inaugurated by Louis-Philippe in 1845, it was located at the end of a colonnaded corridor that extended from the Louvre's Egyptian Museum. This positioning of the Algerian gallery was deliberate, for it was intended to reinforce the continuity between France's current *mission civilisatrice* in Algeria and her previous attempt in Egypt.<sup>31</sup> However, the Louvre's newest addition would close within the decade, for changes in colonial policy would directly affect France's treatment of Algerian antiquities.

In 1852, French archaeologist and founder of the Société Historique Algérienne (Algerian Historical Society), Adrien Berbrugger, published the following remarks in one of the society's reports:

Algeria, as French territory...must not be so stripped of its archaeological riches, as if she were still a pashalik of the Ottoman Empire. Would there not be, moreover, a real inconsistency to want, on one hand, to regenerate civilization in Africa, and on the other to deprive this country of its principal elements of local study?<sup>32</sup>

Berbrugger, as a former member of the Scientific Commission and soon-to-be appointed inspector general of the Commission of Historical Monuments and Archaeological Museums in Algeria, was particularly sensitive to the country's historical heritage. Nonetheless, his statement echoed a larger sentiment that had been brewing among the

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<sup>30</sup> Oulebsir, 76.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>32</sup> Adrien Berbrugger, 1856 cited in Ibid., 106. "L'Algérie, devenue une terre française ne devait cependant pas être ainsi dépouillée de ses richesses archéologiques, comme si elle était encore un pachalik de la Porte ottoman. N'y aurait-il pas, d'ailleurs, une véritable inconséquence à vouloir d'un côté faire reflourir la civilisation en Afrique et de l'autre à priver ce pays de ses principaux éléments d'études locales?"



*colon* population of French Algeria. Suddenly, the attitude towards antiquities had dramatically changed. No longer was there a desire to plunder the Algerian countryside and remove artifacts for exhibition in the Louvre. Instead, there was a movement, led by Algerian colonists and administrators like Berbrugger, to keep artifacts on Algerian soil. This begs the question: what precipitated this unique change in the treatment of Algerian antiquities? Moreover, why did such an evolution occur so early when compared to concurrent archaeological undertakings? After all, the French continued to excavate and loot finds with abandon elsewhere. In Mesopotamia, Victor Place was locked in a heated archaeological race against the British near Khorsabad. In the Nile Valley, where another decade would pass before Auguste Mariette began promoting preservation, the French were still robbing the Egyptian government blind.

Firstly, the rise of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte in 1848 and the proclamation of the Second Empire in 1852 dramatically changed France's relationship with Algeria. Previously, French settlement along the littoral had steadily increased throughout the 1840s, but Prince Napoleon was determined to transform Algeria from a distant colony into an administrative continuum of the metropole. He prominently placed this idea besides his other ambitions (such as renewing the French Empire) at a speech made in Bordeaux on 9 October 1852, stating: "We have, across from Marseille, a vast kingdom to assimilate into France."<sup>33</sup> Thus, beginning under the Second Empire no major distinction was to be made between France and Algeria. Simply put, Algeria was France. This trend had already begun following the election of Bonaparte as President of the

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<sup>33</sup> Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, "Discours de Bordeaux," *Le Moniteur Universel*, 12 October 1852.

Second Republic when in December 1848 the three administrative provinces of Algeria (Oran, Algiers, and Constantine) were officially *départementalisé*, that is to say they essentially became *départements* of metropolitan France – their soil having no administrative difference from the department of Paris. Thus, if Algeria was truly considered to be French soil, should antiquities be removed from it? Such a concept is crucial in understanding the evolution in the treatment of Algerian antiquities that occurred between 1840 and 1860.

There was also a growing sense of proximity between French colonists and the Roman past to which they were being exposed. As the *Revue Archéologique* commented in 1849, “the areas chosen by the French government for the establishment of new colonists offer all the guaranties of salubrity and desirable fertility, which have been already appreciated in another time by Roman colonists.”<sup>34</sup> Incoming *colons* settled on the best land, which was easily identifiable by the presence of Roman ruins. Following the capture of Abd al-Kadir in 1842, there was a dramatic increase of French colonists to Algeria and by mid-century there were approximately 160,000 Europeans in the French Maghreb.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the passage of the Scientific Commission between 1840 and 1845 also increased awareness about the country’s ancient treasures and fundamentally changed the status of Algeria’s Roman antiquities as objects having important historic value. It also contextualized French colonization with Roman colonization and newly arrived *colons*, eager to commune with their Roman ancestors, developed a frenzied

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<sup>34</sup> “Découvertes et nouvelles,” *Revue archéologique* (Oct. 1848 – Mar. 1849): 501 cited in Oulebsir, 79. “...les endroits choisis par le gouvernement français pour l’établissement des nouveaux colons offrent toutes les garanties de salubrité, de fertilité désirables, qui avaient été déjà appréciées dans un autre temps par les colons romains...”

<sup>35</sup> Priestly, 76.

interest for the ancient vestiges that littered their newly acquired territory. As Oulebsir explains, the Commission had also “generalized the practice of wild excavation, as any person wishing to acquire antiquities had only to travel to the [ancient] sites and help themselves.”<sup>36</sup> Consequently, the archaeological situation in Algeria in the 1840s was comparable to the wanton looting of Egypt in the first half of the nineteenth century. Mosaics were frequently uncovered and hauled off by officers and administrators on a whim to fashionably decorate their houses *à la mode antique* while marble busts and capitals were dug up and placed on the front steps or in the gardens of European homes.<sup>37</sup>

Such rampant, uncontrolled archaeological activity and vandalism was eventually met with concerned reactions from administrators and scholars both in France and Algeria. They were primarily worried about the destruction of the colony’s cultural patrimony. As early as 1843, Nicolas Soult, in his capacity as Minister of War, addressed a letter to General Thomas Bugeaud, the Governor-General of Algeria, expressing his desire to protect Algeria’s ancient monuments in a letter written on 23 November. Such sensitivity with regard to the conservation of antiquities is much more complex than previous cases we have encountered in which preservation was synonymous with shipment. Soult does not encourage the removal of Algeria’s antiquities from their native soil to Paris. Instead he advocates that since the colony’s “ancient monuments are

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 95. “Cette entreprise généralise la pratique de la fouille sauvage, puisque toute personne voulant acquérir des antiquités n’a qu’à se déplacer vers les sites et se servir.”

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

considered the property of the state,” they should be treated in the same manner as the historic monuments of France, that is to say, conserved *in situ*.<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunately, his intentions were largely disregarded by the government’s desire to deposit Algeria’s archaeological wealth in the Louvre. However, in Algeria, local societies and institutions for the maintenance and conservation of ancient monuments were created, such as the Société Archéologique de Constantine, and in 1848 an archaeological museum in Algiers was founded under the direction of the Ministry of Public Instruction.<sup>39</sup> This latter institution, the Musée d’Alger, soon came into direct competition with the Algerian Museum in Paris, for as Algeria began its slow assimilation into the French metropole many began to reevaluate the status of the country’s Roman antiquities, metamorphosing their status from the spoils of conquest to an extension of French patrimony.

This consideration stemmed from the increasing belief that if Algeria was indeed France, then there was no need to relocate the country’s antiquities. Consequently, it was more appropriate that the antiquities remained in Algeria where French *colons* could commune with their adopted cultural heritage. Why should French Algerians be dispossessed of their patrimony? The French could not lay such an authoritative claim to Egypt, Syria, or Mesopotamia (still under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire), and thus the removal of artifacts from the rest of the Orient could be effectively justified. And as Berbrugger contemptuously noted, Algeria was no longer some backwater Ottoman pashalik. As such its archaeological treasures had to be treated with due

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<sup>38</sup> Cited in Oulebsir, 95. “...la conservation des monuments anciens qui sont considérés comme propriété de l’État.”

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 108.

respect. Thus, while the despoliation of Algeria was condemned, the archaeological crimes perpetrated by France elsewhere went unrecognized since no comparable sense of responsibility, or for that matter, accountability was present.

Thus the physical appropriation of the past became a patrimonial appropriation and slowly the flow of antiquities away from Algeria was reversed. This concept was institutionalized by the creation of the Inspection générale des Monuments historiques et des Musées archéologiques de l'Algérie (the Commission of Historic Monuments and Archaeological Museums) in 1853 by the Governor-General, Jacques Louis Randon and was based on the Commission des Monuments historiques created in France in 1837. The institution was overseen by Adrien Berbrugger whose role it was to undertake regular inspections of Algerian antiquities in an effort to achieve a better understanding of previously excavated antiquities, identify the location of ruins, prevent their destruction, prohibit the use of monuments for building material (a prolific problem in French Algeria), and to single out sites in need of protection from acts of “public and private vandalism.”<sup>40</sup> He also acted as a liaison between Algeria’s museums and local authorities, and determined whether antiquities excavated from ancient sites be sent to the central museum in Algiers or to local museums across the littoral. The success of the program was best illustrated by the dramatic closure of the Algerian Museum in Paris in the mid 1850s.

This fact is significant, for the mid-nineteenth century marked a period of impressive growth for the Louvre’s Near Eastern galleries: Mariette’s remarkable

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<sup>40</sup> Oulebsir, 108.

discoveries from Egypt, Place's stunning Assyrian antiquities from Khorsabad, and de Saucy's misidentified, yet mystifying religious relics from the Holy Land. That the Algerian Museum should shut its doors is a testament to the unique nature of colonial archaeology. The impetus behind French archaeological endeavors in Algeria extended beyond the mere physical acquisition for the sake of national pride or intellectual prestige, instead it was rooted in the ideological belief that colonized land had been integrated into the French historical narrative by virtue of conquest and settlement, and therefore antiquities must receive different treatment than those countries outside the borders of the French colonial empire. Thus explains the early calls for conservation and the public desire to leave Algerian antiquities more or less undisturbed (or at the very least, in-country). Moreover, by assimilating Roman history into French patrimony, France was able to obtain, as if by osmosis, the classical history for which it had always longed: a history that involved exotic conquest in the Orient, imperial might, and unchallengeable cultural superiority. The type of history represented by Quintus Flavius Maximus.

In the wake of Napoleon III's fall from power, France's preoccupation with colonial archaeology would dwindle temporarily. But the colonial desire, and the French government's fascination with the ancient past, would be successfully revitalized following the occupation of Tunisia.



Above. Figure 12: The triumphal arch at Djemila  
Below. Figure 13: Interior of the Musée d'Alger



20 May 1881. A harsh wind churned the coastal waters off northwestern Tunisia and pushed driving rain inland towards the small town of Tabarka. It was here, amid shelled remains, where twenty-eight year old French archaeologist René Cagnat found refuge for the night. He was lodged in a tarpaulin-covered hut through which the rain steadily seeped. He could not sleep. Outside, the distant rapport of cannons cut through the drumbeat of rain. For the past three months he had been leading a special archeological mission sponsored by the Ministry of Public Instruction, but since April the political situation in Tunisia had changed dramatically and now he had to flee. He could no longer travel the region in safety and his study of Tunisia's archaeological treasures had become impossible, for his compatriots had invaded and the countryside was in revolt. Cagnat knew that the hut he was staying in was destined to be a café for the French officers already stationed in the town. He also knew that aside from copying and collecting Roman inscriptions, his survey of Tunisia was also an advanced reconnaissance for France's annexation of the country. The colonial occupation of Tunisia was well underway and with his job completed Cagnat will soon leave for the safety of France.<sup>41</sup> His work, however, will be continued, for with the arrival of the French it was only a matter of time before the splendors of Tunisia's ancient past were unveiled.

The decision to seize Tunisia in 1881 was precipitated by the international and domestic embarrassments France suffered as a result of its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. The collapse of the Second Empire and the turmoil experienced in

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<sup>41</sup> Information for this vignette was obtained from a letter written by René Cagnat to his mother from Tabarka on 20 May 1881. René Cagnat, "Lettres de René Cagnat," *Bulletin trimestriel de la Société de géographie et d'archéologie d'Oran* 59 (Oran: 1938).



establishing the Third Republic forced the French government's focus away from archaeological undertakings. However, following the colonization of Tunisia, the French, as the new custodians of ancient Carthage, would gain a renewed passion for antiquities and under the administrative prowess of the Third Republic, archaeology became significantly more professional, reinforced the colonial institutional base, and found itself supported by extensive legislative framework.<sup>42</sup>

By the mid 1870s, many politicians within the Third Republic felt that France was not doing enough to establish her geopolitical dominance in the Near East. Diplomatically, the British had overshadowed the French in Egypt, and the growing imperial aspirations of a unified Germany and Italy added ambitious new competitors to the colonial scramble. For a France desirous to reassert its international authority, extend its colonial dominion, and revive the "Roman tradition" in North Africa, Tunisia was an expedient target. Abutting French Algeria, the Regency of Tunis had been the recipient of French influence since 1830, despite Ottoman attempts to maintain control and British aspirations to tether Tunisia to Egyptian dependency.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, during the Second Empire, Tunisian *beys* found themselves increasingly tied to the commercial interests of Paris and Marseilles. In 1878, during the infamous Congress of Berlin, that France received secret support from Britain and Germany to annex Tunisia. Using the Regency's apparent disregard for French Algeria's territorial integrity as a pretense, the French sent 30,000 soldiers garrisoned in Algeria across the Tunisian frontier on 24 April

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<sup>42</sup> Díaz-Andreu, 269.

<sup>43</sup> Priestly, 163.

1881.<sup>44</sup> A month later, on 21 May, the regent of Tunis, Muhammad-es-Saddock was forced to sign the Treaty of Bardo and Tunisia officially became a protectorate of France. It was considered a masterstroke for French imperial strategy. As the politician Léon Gambetta wrote to the Prime Minister, Jules Ferry: “France has resumed her rank as a great power.”<sup>45</sup>

The development of patrimonial institutions was immediate following the establishment of the Protectorate of Tunisia. As we have seen, even before the French occupied Tunisia, plans were underway to appropriate the country’s archaeological possessions. After receiving confirmation of international neutrality vis-à-vis the French conquest of Tunisia in 1878, the Third Republic began formulating plans to seal the Regency’s fate. But, as was the case in Egypt and Algeria, the French government possessed very little knowledge of the countryside. Therefore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Public Instruction allocated 10,000 francs and organized a scientific expedition to Tunisia to study the abundant remains of Carthaginian and Roman civilization found amid the low rolling hills of the Tell and plains of the Sahel. Comprised of Cagnat (a student of Léon Renier of the Scientific Commission of Algeria) and Édouard Gasselin, the mission explored the ruins of Carthage, the remarkably preserved coliseum at El Jem, and the ancient city of Dougga collecting inscriptions and other antiquities to supply fresh material for Ernest Renan’s expanding *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*. Once more archaeology was put into the service of the state so as to lay the groundwork for eventual colonization. Jules Ferry, in his capacity as

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<sup>44</sup> Priestly, 169.

<sup>45</sup> Cited in Ibid., 170.

Minister of Public Instruction, openly admitted that the Mission de Tunisie had “a more political than scientific character.”<sup>46</sup> And French historian Myriam Bacha underscores the fact that “the objective enunciated by the Academy and the ministry was to clearly attach a sense of French paternity to the first archaeological and epigraphical studies in Tunisia.”<sup>47</sup> The team reached Tunisia in January 1881, just three months before the invasion, and its reconnaissances consequently inspired the creation of patrimonial institutions by the newly installed colonial administration.

The first of these was a direct descendant of the Cagnat’s mission: the Commission des Fouilles Archéologiques (Commission of Archaeological Excavations) which was founded in 1881 and eventually evolved into the broader Commission d’Afrique du Nord. This organization devoted itself exclusively to studying the antiquities of Tunisia (and later of Algeria and Morocco). Its members, not amateurs, but scholars from France’s Oriental institutions published the *Bulletin archéologique* which disseminated information concerning the status of archaeology in French North Africa. Additionally, following the successful “pacification” of Tunisia in 1882, official legislation “enacting conservation measures for artistic monuments and historic documents, establishing a museum in Tunis and regulating the right of excavation” was passed by decree on 7 November 1882.<sup>48</sup> Further legalistic protection was promulgated in decrees made on 26

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<sup>46</sup> ANF: F/17/2943/D. Jules Ferry, “Letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs,” 19 November 1880. “...un caractère plus particulièrement politique que scientifique.”

<sup>47</sup> Myriam Bacha, “Les institutions patrimoniales de la Tunisie au début du protectorat: un projet scientifique au service de la colonisation?” *Outre-Mers, Revue Historique* 95 (2007): 142. “L’objectif clairement énoncé par l’Académie et le ministère est d’attacher à la France la paternité des premières études épigraphiques et archéologiques tunisiennes.”

<sup>48</sup> *Journal Officiel Tunisien*, 25 January 1883, cited in *Ibid.*, 144. “édicte des mesures conservatoires des monuments d’art et des documents historiques, établissant un musée à Tunis et réglementant le droit de fouilles.”

September 1890 and again on 2 August 1896.<sup>49</sup> This legislation was administrated by the Service des Antiquités Tunisiennes. Modeled on the Antiquities Service directed by Auguste Mariette in Cairo, it was founded in 1885 by René du Coudray de La Blanchère and was responsible for excavating, preserving, and protecting France's newly incorporated archaeological heritage. Subsequently, upon none other than René Cagnat's recommendation, the Protectorate's first museum, the Musée Bardo, was inaugurated in 1888. It housed the majority of country's pre-Islamic antiquities collected by the Tunisian Antiquities Service.

This archaeological selectivity was intentional. As in other parts of the Near East, French archaeologists were blinded by their classical fetishes and purposefully overlooked Arab history as a way to disregard the contemporary state of affairs and reconnect with a more glorious past. Such exclusion, however, was not only limited to Arab artifacts. Byzantine history was surprisingly ignored as well. But whereas Islamic art was disregarded for its apparent lack of serious cultural significance, Byzantine antiquities were ignored for a subtle political reason. In 533 the Byzantine Empire, under the Emperor Justinian, had successfully reconquered the North African provinces previously lost by the Western Roman Empire to the Vandals. But the Byzantines were unable maintain their newly won territory for long and only a hundred and sixty-five years later all of it was finally overrun by the advancing armies of the Umayyads. Admittedly, Byzantine rule was still considered one of great prosperity, but nonetheless the French condemned the Eastern Empire as being responsible for the loss of Christian North Africa to the Arabs. Wary of exposing any historic evidence that might raise

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<sup>49</sup> Díaz-Andreu, 269.

doubts about the durability of France's own colonial activity in the Maghreb, French archaeologists expediently marginalized the importance of Byzantine antiquity.<sup>50</sup> This fact is best illustrated by the treatment Byzantium receives in one of the seminal texts on North African archaeology: *Instructions du Comité des Travaux historiques et scientifiques – Recherches des antiquités dans le Nord de l'Afrique. Conseils aux archéologues et voyageurs*. (Instructions by the Committee of Historical and Scientific Works – Archaeological Research in the North of Africa. Advice to Archaeologists and Travelers).

A long and largely technical manual, *Instructions* was France's first attempt to systematically organize, and make accessible, technical information about archaeology to the general public and was published in 1890 by Leroux in Paris on behalf of the Committee of Historical and Scientific Works. René Cagnat, now Chair of Epigraphy and Roman Antiquities at the Collège de France, contributed to the book's largest chapter: the one concerning ancient Roman inscriptions and architecture (a total of fifty-five pages). Comparatively, only ten pages are dedicated to Byzantine North Africa and its history is portrayed as a mere appendix to its mightier predecessor. Libyan, Numidian, and Arab antiquities receive similar treatment. Nonetheless, the work was a breakthrough in an era when detailed information about the ancient past was still reserved for the Parisian intelligentsia. The average Frenchman could enjoy visiting museums, but a mastery of inscriptions, architectural distinctions, and numismatics was unobtainable. This changed with the appearance of *Instructions*.

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<sup>50</sup> Díaz-Andreu, 274.

The field guide was specifically aimed at French colonists and at French tourists who, thanks to the colonial presence in North Africa, could now venture across the Mediterranean and vacation among the ancient vestiges of Roman Africa in style. Its goal was to professionalize amateur archaeology; for it was not conceivable that France's patrimonial institutions in North Africa could monopolize archaeological activity. They had neither the resources nor the manpower to excavate and study every ruin that littered the vast Maghreb. The adventurous tourist or interested *colon*, however, would naturally travel from site to site and, if properly instructed, could take impressions or, with the advent of reliable cameras, photographs of "France's African antiquities" and report new finds the Ministry of Public Instruction. As the forward proclaims:

We therefore entrust to this book...the care not only to guide all those who are in, or will go to, Algeria [and Tunisia], but...above all, to win them over to the cause of archaeology. The more numerous those are who will help us in this undertaking, the more fruitful the work will be, and the quicker we shall accomplish it.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, in a controlled environment, the once misguided passion for archaeology could be seemingly tempered and transformed into a civic duty. Unlike elsewhere in the Orient, colonial archaeology in Algeria and Tunisia became the work of every Frenchman and it was his right, his cultural privilege, to uncover France's adopted heritage and to increase mankind's knowledge of the ancient past on behalf of a grateful Republic. Moreover, it is not surprising that, in a similar vein, copies of *Instructions* and

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<sup>51</sup> *Instructions du Comité des Travaux historiques et scientifiques – Recherches des antiquités dans le Nord de l'Afrique. Conseils aux archéologues et voyageurs* (Paris : E. Leroux, 1890), 4. "Nous confions donc à ce livre...le soin non seulement de guider tous ceux qui sont ou iront en Algérie, mais...surtout de les gagner à la cause de l'archéologie. Plus nombreux seront ceux qui nous aideront dans l'œuvre entreprise, plus féconde sera l'œuvre, plus vite elle pourra s'accomplir."

ample supplies of squeeze paper were regularly issued to French colonial troops stationed in Algeria and Tunisia up through the outbreak of the First World War.<sup>52</sup>

*Instructions* testifies to the rapidity with which the archaeological machinery of French colonialism was established in Tunisia. In the decade following Cagnat's arrival on Tunisian soil, the French government had succeeded in constructing both the physical and the legal infrastructure necessary to efficiently manage the country's ancient treasure. This "top-down" approach evidences an interesting transition in the French state's mentality concerning the excavations undertaken within its overseas possessions, for the decision to keep antiquities on Algerian soil was generated mostly by the colonist community. But as France had first learned of archaeology's important colonial role during the pacification of Algeria, she was better prepared to construct the necessary patrimonial and institutional framework needed to effect a swift transition in the Regency.

The dramatically increased professionalization of archaeology was another development of French archaeology in Tunisia. Here, at the dawn of the twentieth century, the discipline was approached as a true science, conducted methodically under the supervision of specialized institutions. Regulations restricted access to sites and placed ancient monuments under special provisions. Furthermore, professional archaeologists, historians, and epigraphists from Paris regularly took up residency in Tunis and attached themselves to organizations such as the Commission of North Africa. Even nonprofessionals were being solicited, trained, and mobilized to efficiently carry out archaeology on the state's behalf. Detailed reports were widely dispersed and

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<sup>52</sup> ANF: F/17/17155-17156. "Letter from the Ministry of Public Instruction to the Ministry of War," 7 January 1910.

debated in the gas-lit lecture halls of an expanding number of learned societies, while artifacts were subjected to more rigorous cataloging and placed within increasingly better organized sets of identifications – a far cry from the unrestrained plundering of Egypt.

Truly, colonial archaeology provided the basis for a type of *translatio studii et imperii* wherein France, by studying ancient Roman antiquities, furthered its reputation as the center archaeological learning and subsequently, using the knowledge it acquired, constructed a powerful colonial empire in the fashion of her classical ancestors. As Paul Glaucker, La Blanchère's successor as the Director of Antiquities, affirmed in 1897:

Archaeology in Tunisia is a science of practical utility. In this country both very new and very old, which had alternatively sustained unprecedented prosperity and extreme misery, the knowledge of the past is a teaching for the present, a guarantee for the future. [...] Our predecessors, the Carthaginians, and especially the Romans, knew how to make, out of the miserable land before them, one of the richest countries in the world; the remains of their civilization are our patrimony. The brilliant results they obtained, as well as the disasters that followed their collapse, prove the excellent method of their colonization. That which they did, we would like to redo; enrolling ourselves into their school and profiting from their experience.<sup>53</sup>

By perceiving themselves as following in the footsteps of the ancient Romans, men like Colonel Carbuccia and René Cagnat successfully actualized a desire originally manifested by Napoleon in Egypt: to assimilate themselves into classical narratives and justify France's claim to a cultural dominance in succession. This fundamental concept is

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<sup>53</sup> Cited in Bacha, 147. "L'archéologie en Tunisie est une science d'utilité pratique. Dans ce pays, à la fois très neuf et très vieux, qui a subi des alternatives de prospérité inouïe et d'extrême misère, la connaissance du passé est un enseignement pour le présent, une garantie pour l'avenir. [...] Nos devanciers, les Carthaginois et surtout les Romains, ont su faire, d'un pays avant aux misérable, l'une des contrées les plus riches au monde. Nous sommes leur héritiers ; les restes de leur civilisation, sont notre patrimoine. Les brillants résultats qu'ils ont obtenus, comme aussi les désastres, qui ont suivi leur chute, prouvent l'excellence de leur méthode de colonisation. Ce qu'ils ont fait, nous voulons le refaire ; mettons-nous donc à leur école et profitons de leur expérience."



what separates colonial archaeology from the cases of imperial archaeology previously encountered. As the patrimonial relics of France, antiquities were to remain within the borders of French Algeria and Tunisia as they were seen as legitimately belonging to *la Patrie* despite their unconnected historical and geographical identity. Indeed, as Salomon Reinach proclaimed at the beginning of this chapter, Algeria and Tunisia were indeed fashioned into large, open-air museums where French *colons*, tourists, and military officers could wander amid the physical testaments of Rome's glorious imperial history as easily as one did the galleries of the Louvre and experience the profound weight of history that surrounded the French in North Africa. This notion was augmented by the fact that antiquities could be viewed in their natural environment. In this respect archaeology in French North Africa proved to be just as exhibitionary and exploitable as any other facet of nineteenth-century colonialism.

## AFTERWORD

*Who Owns the Past?*

Archaeology has been a rather unstudied dimension of the nineteenth-century imperial dialectic, overshadowed by the more prominent and more easily categorized facets of empire building: the great colonial contests, the rubber tree plantations, the scramble for Africa. But, as we have seen, it was perhaps one of the most emblematic aspects of the imperial narrative – a microcosm of the larger trends that represented Europe’s experience in the Orient. The formalized study of Antiquity was a distinctly nineteenth-century development, one that became consciously attached to, and delineated by, the political and intellectual momentums of European modernity. As Michel Foucault describes, history was the nineteenth century’s “great obsession.” For, “[history’s] themes of development and of suspension, of crisis and cycle, [and its] themes of the ever-accumulating past” made nineteenth-century scholars increasingly aware of the profound weight of the world’s past and imbued them of with a sense of being “in” history.<sup>1</sup>

This sensitivity, born from the universalist philosophies of the Enlightenment, inspired scholars to unravel the mysteries of mankind by brushing away the sands of time, extending the historical horizon beyond Europe’s medieval heritage to encompass progressively deeper pasts: Egypt, Assyria, Greece, and Rome. In this pursuit, Napoleon’s *savants* traveled the length of the Nile, the Armée d’Afrique marched to the Ports de Fer, and Félicien de Saulcy and his band of young archaeologists trekked around

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, “Texts/Contexts: Of Other Places” in *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 371.

the Dead Sea. But archaeology was not a neutral discipline; it was conceived during a colonial operation, appended to a military campaign. It was a science that evolved within the framework of European national and imperial ambitions and was employed not only to rediscover the glory of the “Great Civilizations” but also to rationalize the state of modern affairs in a land whose glory had faded and was in need of apparent rescue. It sought at once to understand and explain, exhibit and educate, dominate and control.

Ultimately, images, not artifacts, were excavated. In the Near East representations of the Orient were pieced together like potsherds. Archaeologists defined the essence of Orientalist reality by comparing what they saw around them to what they unearthed beneath them. Archaeology provided a lens through which imperial powers, like France, could peer into the past and generate perceptions of the present. The recent past was historicized as newly emerging nation-states strove to assimilate themselves into ancient chronologies, marginalizing the Orient’s own claim to have developed from similar roots. Such perceptions justified the removal of antiquities by giving Europe an imperative to seize artifacts in the name of saving them from destruction, advancing knowledge for humanity, and furthering national prestige. The subsequent monopolization and appropriation of other cultures’ history allowed Europe to dominate territories not only from the colonial office, but from the lecture hall and the museum gallery.

In Paris, intellectual institutions distilled what they wished from the evidence their agents had excavated and persuasive narratives were constructed in which Napoleon was the successor of Alexander the Great, Christianity claimed religious authority in an Islamic Near East, and the designs of French colonialism in Algeria became synthesized with the legacy of Rome. These narratives, in turn, produced sets of romantic imagery

that disguised the forceful agency of imperialism and colonialism behind the noble process of discovery. Thus, archaeology was a science that both propelled imperial ideologies and was propelled by them. In France, the political and intellectual establishments of the state formulated its objectives and supported its execution: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Public Instruction, the Ministry of War, the academies, the museums, and the *écoles*. By the end of the nineteenth century, archaeology had become integrated with the trajectory of the nation-state.

For the past two centuries, the powers of imperialism have “owned” the past, physically and intellectually. During this time the fruits of Europe’s archaeological labors were lodged in the colonnaded halls of national museums. No other institution better exemplified the act of possession encountered herein: a desire to grasp the past and in doing so, the world. This desire was also paradigmatic of a distinct nineteenth-century mentality, for as Foucault states: “the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages...this whole idea belongs to...modernity.”<sup>2</sup>

Museums were the terminal point in the imperial-archaeological discourse, a repository in which the ancient wealth of the empire, formal and informal, could be proudly exhibited. By amassing the icons of civilization those who held them could demonstrate their right to emulate the greatness of past empires. But all boundaries shift,

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<sup>2</sup> Foucault, 377.

and all empires collapse. The influence of Western imperialism was eventually diminished by the rising nationalist ambitions of countries like Egypt. Now they seek to reclaim what they perceive to be their cultural heritage, emotionally calling into question the acquisition of antiquities such as the zodiac of Dendera and the Rosetta stone. The Western museum has become the target of contemporary debates over patrimony, and institutions such as the Louvre are seen as the inheritors of the European imperial legacy, bearers of the responsibility and the guilt. Ancient artifacts have been transformed by the political developments of the postcolonial era into modern flashpoints.

By looking back at the history of French archaeology we have seen that the past belonged to those who could take it. Museums defend themselves by underscoring the role they played in preserving the past, protecting antiquities in a time when leaders like Muhammad Ali of Egypt were willing to trade papyrus for power. For this reason authority had been granted to European antiquities dealers and archaeologists to haul away the artifacts that are now the subject of so many bitter repatriation appeals. Indeed, the treasure seized by archaeologists like Auguste Mariette, Paul-Émile Botta, and Victor Place had been negotiated with the Pashalik of Egypt and the Ottoman Porte in Constantinople; and in French Algeria and Tunisia, colonial policy simply deemed the antiquities of those countries to be the cultural property of the French state. The validity of these claims is still debated, with each side either defending or challenging their relevance. Yet, with the passing of time and the changing of regimes, legal arguments such as these tend to be as murky as the Nile during the wet season.

The story of archaeology encountered herein is an ambivalent one, filled with a colorful cast of men described as both heroes and villains, men who engaged in

remarkable feats of discovery and perpetrated brazen acts of skullduggery. Their stories, however, reveal that the problematics of nineteenth-century imperial history are still very pertinent to the dialectics that surround the struggles over heritage and patrimony. The charges made by Dr. Zahi Hawass and his compatriots across the modern Near East have been engendered by this history and the antiquities that sit silently under glass are its artifacts – impassive witnesses to a history that is often overlooked and rarely told.

Thus remains the question, “Who owns the past?” Do antiquities belong to their discoverer? Do they belong to the people who inhabit the land in which they were found? Or do they belong only to those who produced them? Perhaps a better question to ask is: “Can the past be owned?” Undeniably, the past is evocative, capable of producing potent imagery, and artifacts have a way of bestowing physical reality to these images. The mechanisms of French imperialism relied heavily on the historical imagery culled from the burial crypts of Egypt, the *tells* of Mesopotamia, and the Roman mausoleums of the Algerian countryside. Today, little has changed in the way antiquities are used – they remain powerful totems to those forces that seek to stake a claim in history. Yet, as long as the world’s cultural heritage continues to be appropriated for broader political agendas, as long as artifacts remain the ammunition with which the cultural struggles of postmodernism are fought, the question “Who owns the past?” may never truly be answered.

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