The patrician Vice Admiral François-Paul Brueys D’Aigalliers sent a frigate to pick up the French consul in Alexandria, Charles Magallon, who filled in the details of Nelson’s ominous visit. He said he thought the British had headed for Alexandretta on the Syrian coast, thinking that if the French were not in Alexandria by that time, they must have gone on to that other debarkation point. If the British thought that the French intended to threaten India, then Syria and Iraq were potential gateways. The Tigris and Euphrates river valleys, despite their fast-running waters and tendency toward violent flooding, could be used for transport, and the British themselves sometimes resorted to this route to India through the Persian Gulf.

Back in Alexandria, the fierce, keening winds and turbulent seas that had prevailed for a day or two convinced Brueys that a landing should be postponed, especially since night was falling and the navy had no idea how to navigate the reefs or find the most suitable landing points in the dark. (Brueys, born an aristocrat, served the Republican navy even though he had lost family and friends to the Great Terror in the early 1790s, when radical revolutionaries executed the king and attempted to wipe out remnants of the old regime.) Bonaparte, who had command of both navy and army operations, overruled the admiral, insisting that the troops must disembark immediately. He wrote the captain of an Ottoman ship then anchored off Alexandria, “The Beys have covered our merchants with humiliation, and I have come to demand reparations. I will be in Alexandria tomorrow. You must not be anxious. You belong to our great friend, the Sultan. Comport yourself in that light. But if you commit the least hostility against the French army, I will treat you as an enemy, and you will have been the cause of it, since that is far from my intention and what is in my heart.” The Ottoman captain appears to have fled.
During the night the French positioned several launches equipped with cannon all along the shore, flanking Alexandria. Consul Magallon had brought along with him a local Egyptian pilot, who helped steer the French landing party through the reefs. Beginning around one o’clock in the early morning of 2 July, Bonaparte and his French troops were able to land about three miles from the city.

At 3:00 A.M., generals Bon, Kléber, and Jacques Menou each led a unit of 430 men as a combined advance guard that marched on Alexandria. It had not proved possible to land artillery or cavalry as yet. Bonaparte marched on foot with the sharpshooters of the vanguard. A mile and a half from the city, the three hundred Bedouin Arab horsemen who guarded the heights around it caught sight of the French and fired on them.

When they fully realized the size of the French force, the Bedouins hastily retired. Menou and his unit traversed the small sand dunes along the sea, to the west of the wall of the Arab quarter of Alexandria, seeking to overwhelm the Triangular Fort. Kléber took his contingent toward the great gate of that wall, which led to Pompey’s Column. Bon and his troops turned to the east of the city, toward the Rosetta gate. Having taken the fort and the gates by 8:00 A.M., they halted. Bonaparte headed toward Pompey’s Column and detached several officers to reconnoiter the wall of the Arab quarter, which protected Alexandria. They discovered that the wall had been well maintained, and offered them no breaches.

When Bonaparte arrived under the walls of the old city that morning, he seemed ready to begin negotiations, confident that the small city of 8,000 would capitulate in the face of an overwhelming military force. But armed townspeople, excited to combat by the cries of their leaders, women, and children, swarmed the battlements atop the wall and took up positions in its towers. The five hundred slave-soldier cavalrymen under the command of Sayyid Muhammad Kurrayim, the governor of Buhayra Province, and the armed Alexandrian townsmen, kept up a steady gunfire against the French, which proved relatively ineffectual. Suddenly the emirs or commanders within the city unveiled their cannon and fired on their enemy.

The three or four old pieces of cannon, which were mounted on the walls and could not be swiveled, did not deter the French attackers. As for the defenders’ rain of musket balls, the European infantry raised their own muskets and replied with a thunderous fusillade, cutting down some Egyptians. Then the French light artillery, which had finally arrived, weighed in with cannonballs, forcing the Ottoman-Egyptian cavalry to withdraw to a distance.
Bernoyer reported that Bonaparte sent an imperious message demanding that Kurayyim capitulate:

I am surprised to see you take hostile measures against me. You are either extraordinarily ignorant or extraordinarily presumptuous, to believe you could resist me with two or three poor pieces of cannon. Moreover, my army has just vanquished one of the foremost Powers in Europe. If in ten minutes I do not see a white flag waving, you will have to be held accountable before God for the blood that you will spill needlessly, and soon, you will weep at the departure of the victims that you will have sacrificed by your blindness.²

A little while later the French commander in chief, having had no reply, mounted his attack. The French had still not surrounded the city, and the emirs were reassured to find that cavalry reinforcements could still reach it from the hinterland. The Ottoman-Egyptian cavalrmen prepared to engage in a second round, believing that the speed of their horses rendered them invincible against an enemy that was largely on foot. Moiret admits of the small French cavalry, “Our own, however good, could not be compared to it, because of the difference in the horses.”³

Mounted warriors, whether pastoral nomads or professional cavalry, had generally, in medieval Middle Eastern warfare, easily triumphed over villagers, urbanites, and even a trained infantry. The great empires of the Arab Muslims, and later the Mongols, the Seljuk Turks, the Safavids, and the Ottomans, had all been founded primarily by men on horse or camel back. Advances in infantry tactics in Europe had weakened the power of cavalry, especially when combined with skilled use of artillery. In addition, the power and range of artillery during the eighteenth century in France had significantly increased through better casting of cannon and better-made powder. Bonaparte, a mathematician turned artillery specialist, had made his career by taking advantage of these breakthroughs in the organization of foot soldiers and the delivery of cannon shot. The proud mounted warriors of what we would now call the Middle East were about to meet their match, at long last, in an unlikely combination of drilled French peasants backed by cannon of unparalleled potency, all massed and thrown at a single pressure point.

French sources claimed that there were in Egypt when they arrived about 60,000 members of the ruling caste of emirs and their slave soldiers, with about 6,000 armed and outfitted. This estimate has been found plausible by subsequent historians, though it may not have included in the count all the sorts of Ottoman troops in the country. From the 1770s, the number of emirs
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had declined, in part because of the toll taken by their wars with one another. The French believed that all the emirs were slave soldiers, called in Arabic Mamluk, having been imported to serve in the Egyptian military. Since others had never been slaves, however, this ruling group is better referred to as emirs (Arabic for “commanders”) or, at the higher ranks, beys (from a Turkish word meaning “lord”). A government of beys is a beylicate, and this group ruled Egypt as vassals of the Ottoman sultan. The Ottoman-Egyptian grandees and their wives owned vast estates and maintained magnificent mansions. Moiret described them, saying that the beys possess everything: houses, lands, and other properties, and have a considerable annual income. The clothing of the rich differs from that of the poor only in the fineness of the material. Beneath a silk shirt, they wear a habit like that of former monks in France, but of an exorbitant price; trousers of such amplitude that they must take ten or twelve ells of cloth to make; and for footwear they sport slippers of Moroccan leather of enormous dimensions. Their turbans must, given their fineness, cost them a great deal. They shave their heads, except for a small tuft in the middle of their pate. It is by this, they say, that at their final moment Muhammad will grab hold of them and pull them into paradise.

The emirs and Mamluks defending Alexandria now charged for a second time, but failed to break through the French lines, which typically had formed into impenetrable squares of men with firearms and bayonets raised. The Ottoman Egyptians retired, then tried again, and again, never with success. Horses, for all their spirit and maneuverability, will not charge into a disciplined infantry square bristling with bayonets and gunfire. Fixed socket bayonets that allowed infantrymen to fire their weapon and to use the bayonet as a pike against cavalry had given eighteenth-century foot soldiers a powerful new advantage, as the emirs suddenly became aware. French battalions were being reinforced at every moment. Since Bonaparte still lacked heavy artillery, which the navy had not yet been able to offload, he had no means to punch a hole in Alexandria’s walls.

Around noon, the Europeans mounted a decisive offensive. They chased away the defenders’ cavalry and then took Alexandria by scaling the walls. They camped partly inside and partly outside the walls of Alexandria that night, while the general staff lodged with families of wealth and position. They all suffered from mosquitoes, the heat, and brackish water. Initially, some of the townspeople peppered the French with gunfire or pelted them with stones, even after the
defeat, but this defiance subsided in the face of French military superiority. Casualty estimates in battles such as the taking of Alexandria varied wildly from author to author. The French dead came to between 20 and 100 and wounded between 100 and 300. The wounded included generals such as Kléber and Menou. An Egyptian defender shot Kléber in the face and sent him plummeting to the ground. He nevertheless survived and recovered.

On the afternoon of the assault Bonaparte had established his headquarters in the palace of the governor. At a meeting with the city notables, he assured them that he would respect their religion and their property, and they in turn pledged to avoid any conspiracies against French rule. He kept Sayyid Muhammad Kurayyim as governor of the district and draped him in a tricolor sash.

Although Bonaparte grandiosely passed in review of his troops, Bernoyer reported that the Egyptians seemed unimpressed and defiant. Those who had not fled the city stayed inside their homes. The generality of the people still expected their lives to be forfeit and their city to be torched, given that they had actively resisted conquest. The Alexandrians seemed to Pierre Amédée Jaubert, Bonaparte’s Arabic interpreter, “most astonished that we had not cut off their heads.” They were taking no chances, declining to come out into the streets for fear of the foreigners. Henceforth, the locals offered resistance only by pulling hapless individual French soldiers into back alleys and slitting their throats when they could do so unobserved. The French, lacking good lodging elsewhere, had initially hoped to billet some soldiers in the old city, but these attacks forced them to abandon it.

Europeans had enjoyed an economic supremacy in Alexandria, and the French had now turned it into political dominance. Although Alexandria was an Ottoman port, part of the main route for seaborne trade inside the empire that connected it to Istanbul and Smyrna (now Izmir), European captains played an increasingly important role in conducting the city’s commerce with the outside world. About half the merchants who chartered vessels from the city to other ports were Ottoman Turks resident in the port, but the ships themselves tended to be owned by Europeans. In the previous decade, all trade between that port and Europe went on European ships, and ninety-five percent of the trade with Tripoli, Tunis, and Algiers also was in the hands of European merchants and captains. The French predominated among the owners of European merchant vessels, and their ships accounted for half of Alexandria’s trade with Europe. Earlier, in the 1790s, the ruling beys had challenged French commercial dominance of the port by favoring instead the small British mercantile community; this move provoked loud complaints among outraged French merchants back in
Marseilles, and their complaints helped impel the Directory to intervene. The spacious European mansions of the foreign merchants in Alexandria marked off the nicest part of the city, reflecting the dominance of French and Venetian capital, and that part of the city, in a way already colonized, warmly welcomed Bonaparte.

The French heavy guns were now off-loaded at Abuqir, and companies of grenadiers manned the fortifications at the lighthouse. Bernoyer, a civilian with no military experience, went to the beach to attend to his personal effects and was surprised to see the sands covered with ammunition wagons, bombs, cannonballs, and artillery pieces. More than a thousand men were scurrying about on the beach and in boats, off-loading this deadly cargo, which was intended to subdue the entire Nile Valley. He was shocked to see the Alexandrians coming to the beach and nonchalantly bathing and praying, appearing to pay no attention to the fleet’s disgorgement of the weapons of large-scale terror. He took their insouciance for a strange lack of curiosity, and did not stop to think that carrying on with business as usual has often been among the secret weapons of resistance employed by vanquished populations to bolster their morale.

The Bedouins who had resisted the French advance that morning sent a delegation of thirty men to offer an alliance by breaking bread, saying they had now heard that Bonaparte was only interested in overthrowing the beylicates of Ibrahim Bey and Murad Bey, Egypt’s two rulers. The commander in chief assured them that this was the case, and ate with them as a proof of the sincerity of his intentions. He reaffirmed his commitment to interfere neither with their religion nor their women, and went beyond seeking a truce, asking them to ally with him against the beys. For their part, they pledged not to harass his columns and to provide some men to fight Egypt’s former masters. For his part, Bonaparte said that upon becoming master of Egypt he would return to them some lands they had formerly possessed, but which the emirs had confiscated.

For a while the Bedouins withdrew, temporarily making the roads secure. The few chieftains who made this pledge to Bonaparte were not representative, and other Bedouin, who did not feel bound by the agreement, harassed the French army relentlessly. Moiret, showing the usual disdain of urban observers, described the Bedouins as inveterate highwaymen (ignoring their valuable role as pastoralists, producers of meat and milk products from marginal land, and managers of long-distance communications and transportation). He depicted the men as well armed, typically owning a horse, a carbine, two pistols, and a saber of Damascene steel. He said that, when in camp, each was accompanied by a young female slave who took a stirrup in her hand and followed alongside the
horse. Moiret, and the French generally, referred to the Bedouin as “Arabs,” by
which they meant pastoral nomads. The Bedouin considered themselves Arabs
inasmuch as they claimed descent from tribes that had emigrated from the Ara-
bian Peninsula. Before the rise of modern nationalism a century later, an Ara-
bic-speaking gentleman in Cairo would generally have referred to himself as an
Ottoman subject, not as an “Arab.”

The French in Egypt were universally disappointed by Alexandria, having
been raised on tales in the classical sources of the port’s magnificence in antiq-
uity. The merchant Grandjean lamented that the city’s ancient monuments had
“fallen back into nothingness” under “the domination of the Turks.” He sniffed,
“It offered no more than misery and half-ruined shacks on the debris of palaces
and magnificent temples.” He was only impressed with the foreign merchant
colonies and the mansions of the consuls. Each nation had its own settlement,
together forming the European quarter, “which is situated on the New Port and
the great square.” The rest of the city, he said, was inhabited by Muslims, Jews,
and some great merchants, “who try to become as close as they can to the Euro-
peans.”7 Alexandria’s condition was in fact unreasonably bad, though only par-
tially as a result of misrule. Lack of quarantine and frequent plague and other
disease outbreaks limited its population, which had been devastated in the me-
dieval period by the Black Death. A lack of water also afflicted it. The Nile out-
let on which the city had originally been built had changed course, leaving the
city high and dry. A narrow canal brought some water to the city, and even al-
lowed shipping of goods in and out, when it was not diverted by peasant farmers
for their own irrigation needs.

Bernoyer accompanied scientists such as Charles Norry, one of the 151
members of the Commission on Arts and Sciences whom Bonaparte had
brought along, on their explorations of the few remaining ancient monuments
in Alexandria. He lamented that some commission members strayed so far in
their excitement and thirst for discovery that they fell into the hands of the
Bedouin, who returned them to Bonaparte for a reward in fulfillment of their al-
liance with him. Norry wrote of his profound disappointment in contemporary
Alexandria: “Shocked at this sight, we went to visit the remains of antiquity. We
every where found columns of granite, some still standing, others promiscu-
ously lying prostrate in the streets and squares, and even on the sea-shore,
where they formed considerable piles; Egyptian monuments covered with hi-
eroglyphics, serving for thresholds of doors, or benches used for seats.” He says
they found only a few ruins of the ancient port of the Ptolemies, including some
fallen columns inscribed with Pharaonic characters, then still undeciphered.
The locals had incorporated some stonework with the hieroglyphs still engraved into them into the gates of the bazaars.  

The French officers concurred in the disappointment expressed by the scientists. Captain Moiret lamented that nothing remained in Alexandria of its ancient monuments save Pompey’s Column and two obelisks of Cleopatra, one of which had already fallen to the ground. “I sat on it and walked along it,” he reported. We now know that most of ancient Alexandria had fallen into the sea because of earthquakes and that the disappearance of the classical city had nothing to do with civilizational decadence. Among other beginnings visible in the French assault, we can see the birth of modern Egyptian tourism. Moiret was seeking an ancient Alexandria, and thus was dissatisfied with the bustling, Arabic-speaking, Muslim port that exported so much Egyptian grain and other goods to Anatolia and even to Europe. Talleyrand’s interest in the sugar plantations of Bengal and the Antilles suggests that the French elite was primarily interested in such commodities, and that they also believed it was dangerous to allow the British to enjoy surplus profits from tropical cash crops while France was deprived of these extra sources of wealth. Cleopatra and past greatness had little to do with the reasons for which French troops now crawled all over Alexandria.

Moiret gave his impressions of the Alexandrians. He thought their “constitution” robust, and so did not find them sickly, and he remarked their “bronze color,” though noting that “many are black or mulatto.” He was a severe critic, however, of their fashion sense. The peasants, he maintained, often went naked. As for urban folk, “Their clothing is a few rags thrown bizarrely over their bodies, and on their heads is chiffon rolled up like a swallow’s nest, which they call a turban. They wear neither hat nor shoes.” Moiret was most scathing about the common women and complained of the way their poverty created immodesty even as they attempted to veil their faces.

Not all French officers were as dismissive of Egyptian women as Moiret, the former seminarian, was. His allegation, that women were zealous about veiling but careless about letting slip a glimpse of their charms, concerned lower-middle-class urban women, who were presumably attempting to emulate the veiling practices of the upper-class Ottoman-Egyptians but did not have enough money to afford blouses that would guarantee their modesty. Not all social classes veiled in the premodern Middle East. Peasant and Bedouin women seldom had the luxury of worrying about full veiling and seclusion, since they performed key work outside for their social groups.

The images of Egyptian women that Moiret derived from his early experiences in Egypt take on a gritty, realistic texture very distant from woolgathering
about Cleopatras. To explain the discrepancy between his reveries and the reality, Moiret resorted to a theory of degeneration. Alexandria, he lamented, was so squalid and miserable that the troops wanted immediately to turn around and repair to Europe. “We remarked,” he said, “as to how the subjects and compatriots of Cleopatra had degenerated.” Egypt’s chief port “offered only the debris of a formerly great city, and the vices of a brutalized and enslaved people.”

The theme of the degeneration of what had once been the classical world was well established by the eighteenth century, having been elaborated early in the century by French travelers to and writers about Greece. Degeneration allowed the French to appropriate classical civilization for their own, displacing its splendor into the distant past and positioning its present heirs as unworthy, such that the mantle of those glories fell on the French instead. Still, it should be underlined that despite the racist overtones of the phrase, degeneration did not refer, for these Directory-era Frenchmen, to a hereditary condition of the blood. Rather, they believed that the climatic and social conditions of Egypt had produced tyranny and excess, which were amenable to being reversed. This attempt at restoring the Egyptians to greatness and curing their degeneracy through liberty and modernity was central to the rhetoric of the invasion.

On 3 July, Bonaparte issued several grand pronouncements. “The Commander in chief wants the Turks [Muslims] to fulfill their acts of worship in their mosques just as in the past. He expressly forbids all the French, military or otherwise, to enter mosques or to assemble outside their doors.” He demanded that within twenty-four hours all Alexandrians turn in their firearms to the site designated by the local French commander. Only Muslim clerics, jurisconsults, and prayer leaders were exempted, insofar as he envisaged them as the backbone of the new regime. He went on: “All the inhabitants of Alexandria, from whatever nation they derive, must wear the tricolor cockade. Only muftis have the right to wear a tricolor sash. The commander in chief reserves to himself the right to accord the same favor to the ordinary clerics and prayer leaders who are distinguished by their enlightenment, wisdom, and virtue.”

In contrast to the Jacobin republican ideal of equality, the Directory had re-instituted certain kinds of hierarchy (e.g., between those with enough property to engage in politics and those without). Bonaparte created such hierarchies in French Egypt, between the armed and the unarmed, and the wearer of the cockade and the bearer of the sash. The sash was an honor enjoyed by city mayors under the Directory. Ironically, the first thing the heirs of Voltaire in Egypt
could think to do with the Egyptian power structure was to depend on the Muslim clergy and to bestow on it the right to bear arms. Bonaparte attempted to coopt the Muslim clerical class as allies from the indigenous middle stratum against the beys. On the other hand, according to the contemporary Ottoman historian Izzet Hasan Darendeli, Bonaparte employed the Muslim slaves he had manumitted in Malta and brought to Alexandria as ambassadors of good will for the French when they reached Cairo, giving some Egyptians the impression that the French really had come as liberators. The French festooned the city in tricolor banners and forced the townspeople to surrender all their weapons, as they would everywhere they went in Egypt. They honored prominent citizens with cockades (knots of tricolor ribbons). Finally, they demanded a substantial tribute from the inhabitants, making rather hollow Bonaparte’s boasts that he would provide a less rapacious government than that of the slave soldiers. (Some of these details are from the Egyptian chronicler ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti and the Ottoman historian Izzet Hasan Darendeli; the French memoirists tend, unlike the local sources, to be silent on these coercive measures.)

Bonaparte, having secured Alexandria, issued a proclamation setting forth to the Egyptians the reasons for the invasion and what the French government expected from them. The French Orientalist Jean Michel de Venture de Paradis, perhaps with the help of Maltese aides, translated the document into very strange and very bad Arabic. The Maltese, Catholic Christians, speak a dialect of Arabic distantly related to that of North Africa, but they were seldom schooled in writing classical Arabic, which differs with regard to grammar, vocabulary, and idiom from the various spoken forms. Venture de Paradis, who had lived in Tunis, knew Arabic grammar and vocabulary but not how to use them idiomatically. The French thus first appeared to the small elite of literate Egyptians through the filter of a barbarous accent and writing style, making them seem rather ridiculous, despite Bonaparte’s imperial pretensions. It would be rather as though they had conquered England and sent forth their first proclamation in Cockney. But ungrammaticality and awkward wording were not the worst of the statement’s difficulties. Much of it simply could not be understood by most Egyptians, since it sought to express concepts for which there were no Arabic equivalents.

Eighteenth-century France had witnessed many revolutions in thought and institutions, more than any other country in the world (with the possible exception of the United States of America). New discourses had grown up, with a new
vocabulary. The proclamation alleged that Bonaparte had been sent to punish the rebellious beys by the Ottoman sultan, Selim III. It denounced the beys as foreigners from the Caucasus who pitilessly overtaxed and exploited Egypt. Bonaparte insisted that the religious authorities should keep the prayers going in mosques, and that towns and villages raise the French tricolor. He warned the Arabic-speaking Egyptians not to side with their Ottoman-Egyptian overlords and said that rebellious villages would be burned.

The proclamation announces a political use of French deism and anticlericalism as proof that the French are actually “muslims” with a small “m” (which is to say, they have submitted to the one God). That is, unlike Christians, the French believe in only one God rather than in a Trinity, and have become sworn enemies of the Christian pontiff. (This mention of the pope recalled the conquest of Rome at Bonaparte’s order by Gen. Louis Alexandre Berthier in 1797, and his taking Pius VI prisoner.) Bonaparte, with his cynical view of religion, was perfectly content to issue an Arabic proclamation that the French were “muslims” (as deist unitarians). This assertion is absurd, but not as absurd as the English rendering makes it appear, since in Arabic the word “muslim” could simply mean anyone who had submitted to the one God, and non-Muslims are represented in the Qur’an as calling themselves “muslim” in this sense.

Bonaparte, having no way of knowing how bad the document’s Arabic style was, viewed it as a key tool of propaganda. On 7 July he issued an order for its publication. He commanded that the French, Arabic, and Greek printing presses be brought ashore: “From the instant that the Arabic press is set up, 4,000 Arabic proclamations must be printed.” Bonaparte was a master of what we would now call spin, and his genius for it is demonstrated by the reports in Arabic sources that several of his more outlandish allegations were actually taken seriously in the Egyptian countryside.

The Orientalist Jaubert wrote back to his brother a little while later that the few Alexandrians who had not fled the city “read with transports of joy, the proclamation which the Commander in Chief had previously printed in Arabic, and which you must long before this have seen in the public papers.” He related how, “the evening before, we had seized a few Turks and Arabs, and carried them on board the fleet.” Desiring to “calm their apprehensions, and make them our apostles,” the French determined to convey to them the proclamation, though these men appear to have been illiterate. He wrote that they pressed a Maronite priest from Damascus into service for this purpose, making fun of him for calling himself “a Christian like ourselves.” Many French in the age of the Revolution had become deists, that is, they believed that God, if he existed at
all, was a cosmic clockmaker who had set the universe in motion but did not any
longer intervene in its affairs. Most deists did not consider themselves Chris-
tians any longer and looked down on Middle Eastern Christians as priest-ridden
and backward. Jaubert recalled that the priest “was ordered to read it to them,
and to comment on it as he proceeded. When you consider the proclamation,
you will judge how well the part he played became him!” Jaubert thought it fur-
ther amusing that the poor priest had had to tell the captured Alexandrians that
the French, whom he had initially greeted as fellow Catholics loyal to the pope,
were actually a kind of “muslim” who had attacked the pontiff! In a later letter
to another correspondent, Jaubert observed, “You will laugh outright, perhaps,
you witlings of Paris, at the Mahometan proclamation of the Commander in
Chief. He is proof, however, against all your raillery; and the thing itself will
certainly produce a most surprising effect.”

When the great Sunni Muslim clerics of the al-Azhar Seminary in Cairo re-
ceived these pamphlets and they spread up the Nile, how did they react? The
Cairene cleric and historian ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti, among the persons
Bonaparte’s proclamation was supposed to impress, reacted with a combination
of amusement, bewilderment, and outrage. He penned a quick commentary
on it, the form of which suggests an element of satire, since learned men such as
al-Jabarti normally penned glosses of the Qur’an, not of French pamphlets.

Al-Jabarti began by eviscerating the broken Arabic grammar and the infe-
licitous style of the proclamation. He then observed that the opening phrase
demonstrated that the revolutionary French in some ways agreed with the three
religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), but in other ways disagreed with all
of them. “They agree with the Muslims in employing the phrase ‘in the name of
God, the Merciful, the Compassionate,’ and in denying that God has any son or
partner.” But, he said, they also differed from the Muslims. They did not pro-
nounce the Muslim witness to faith, which affirmed the prophethood of
Muhammad, nor did they accept the very idea that messengers, whose sayings
and deeds have normative and legal force in Islam, are sent by God. The
French, he argued, agreed with the Christians in most of their words and deeds,
but differed from them on the issue of the Trinity and, again, on the idea that
God sends revelations to humankind. They rejected the church hierarchy, killed
priests, and razed churches.

As for the term “republic,” he explained, the pamphlet represented itself
as coming from the French collective, since they did not have a grandee or
sultan to whom they granted legitimacy and who spoke for them, unlike all
other societies. He said that they had risen up against their king six years be-
fore and killed him, and that their collectivity had reached a consensus that there should be no single ruler, but rather that the affairs of their state, their country, their laws, and their administration should be in the hands of the wise and the leaders of opinion among them. (If al-Jabarti’s description of revolutionary France sometimes makes it sound less like a democracy and more like a rule of philosophers similar to that proposed by Socrates in Plato’s Republic, that is no accident. He was a Muslim Neoplatonist.) He described how they chose individuals to lead the army, and installed beneath them officers, men and administrators and ombudsmen to consult with them, on the condition that all would be equal and none would be exalted over the other, on the grounds that human beings are by nature equal. They made that principle, he said, the foundation of their way of life. That, he explained, is the meaning of their phrase, “which is based upon the foundation of being free and socially leveled.” He did not understand the assertion that the French enjoyed “liberty,” suggesting that perhaps Bonaparte meant to boast that he was not a slave like so many of Egypt’s emirs.

Al-Jabarti appears to have been under the impression that the French were mostly citizen soldiers and that they ran their military in a democratic fashion. While the revolutionaries did invent the mass conscription of peasants, and while democratic consultation within military units had been attempted early in the revolution before being quickly abandoned, neither impression was correct. His description, indeed, would have been more apropos of the early 1790s, and it makes one suspect that he had been in contact with European informants, years before the invasion, who had described to him the French innovations of that time.

French men, he said, went clean-shaven. After describing their uniforms (he thought their hats especially ridiculous) and how they differed according to military rank, he concluded, “They followed that law, such that big and small, glorious and abject, men and women, are equal.” He observed that they sometimes in fact disregarded this principle, out of greed or ambition. Then he turned to the subject of French women. “Their women do not veil, nor feel any shame, nor even care if they display their privates.” Men and women fornicated at will, he alleged, and he went on to say that French women went to male barbers to have their pubic hair removed and paid them with favors. He remarked that the French answered the call of nature wherever they were, even in public. Coming from a culture where washing with water is de rigueur after a bowel movement, he was disturbed that the French just wiped themselves with any paper at hand, or, he said, even neglected to clean themselves at all.
Having described the French in this hostile way, he turned to the values asserted in the pamphlet, which he rejected. He brought into sharp question Bonaparte’s declaration that he respected the Prophet Muhammad and honored the Qur’an, since, he insisted, true respect and honor could only be demonstrated by accepting their truth and converting to Islam. He pointed out that the writer of the pamphlet, when alleging that the French were a kind of muslim, put the word “muslims,” in the wrong noun case in Arabic, and he punned that the allegation itself made a faulty case. He also denied the pamphlet’s claim that “all the people are equal before God.” He thundered, “This is a lie, and ignorance, and stupidity. How could it be, when God has chosen some above others, and all the people of the heaven and earth have borne witness to it?”

The republican French posed a puzzle to the Muslim scholar. Theologically, they were Unitarians, like Muslims; but in their social customs they resembled other Christians, and they rejected any theory of divinely inspired prophecy or the revelation of religious law, which for al-Jabarti was the core of religion. Bonaparte made the typically Western error of thinking about Islam primarily as a doctrine, whereas for a Middle Easterner such as al-Jabarti it was a way of life. For Muslims such as the Egyptian cleric, Islam lay in the five pillars of recognizing the uniqueness of God and the prophethood of Muhammad, praying five times a day, fasting the month of Ramadan, giving alms to the poor, and going on pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime. Bonaparte had nothing to say about any of these pillars except for half of the first one (monotheism). From al-Jabarti’s perspective, the concordance of mere doctrine said little about how alike two religious systems might be (otherwise Judaism and Islam could easily be conflated). All this is not to say that the proclamation had no effect. Literate peasants read it differently than the Cairene patrician, apparently, for he reported that in the countryside Bonaparte’s claim to be acting on behalf of the Ottoman sultan was believed by some.

Al-Jabarti also drew back the curtain on the stir produced by the French occupation of Alexandria in Cairo, some 140 miles to the south. Fear spread through the populace, and many thought about taking flight. One leader, Ibrahim Bey, rode to Qasr al-‘Ayni, and was joined there by Murad Bey from Giza and then the rest of the commanders, as well as by the chief Muslim judge and the leading clergy. They launched into a discussion of what had to be done about this setback to the Muslims. They decided to send a courier to the Ottoman sultan to ask for assistance, and it fell to the figurehead Ottoman viceroy of Egypt, Ebu Bekir Pasha, to write the letter. The Ottomans occasionally sent
out a governor or viceroy, along with a chief Islamic court judge. The viceroy, who sometimes served a short term, seldom wielded much real power. In some years the insolent slave soldiers even declined to send any tribute to their liege lord in Istanbul, though this level of impudence could be dangerous, since it invited Ottoman military intervention. There were only a few thousand Ottoman troops from Turkish-speaking Anatolia in Egypt. The slave-soldier houses had increasingly marginalized them. To supplement their meager salaries, the Anatolians often worked as artisans and shopkeepers in the bazaar, especially the famed Khan al-Khalili market. Now, all of a sudden, the proud emirs needed their sultan and his Ottoman troops.

The Ottoman Egyptians decided that they would raise an army, the biggest division of which would be that of Murad Bey. The meeting of commanders having come to an end, the troops began making preparations to set out. The amassing of food, gunpowder, tents, cannon, and other necessities took five days. The rulers demanded severe exactions from the people on short notice and simply expropriated much wealth from them. In the meantime, the markets and streets of the capital were thrown into disarray as fear drove the populace to stay inside their homes. The streets were so deserted at night that thieves and burglars took control of them, to the extent that the road west was impassable. Al-Jabarti lamented that one hardly saw a pedestrian walking in the street.

The police chief, or aga, and the viceroy then intervened, insisting that the markets and coffeehouses remain open at night and ordering that candles be lit outside houses and shops. Al-Jabarti remarks that these measures were taken for two reasons, to quiet the fears entertained by the inhabitants of the city and to make it harder for enemies to sneak into it. Murad set out after Friday prayers, but made a further stop at the Black Bridge, where he waited two days, assembling his troops and cavalry. He also was joined by 'Ali Pasha of Tripoli and Nasuh Pasha. Although Murad Bey probably made this elaborate show of amassing such a force, with all its provisions and artillery, in order to reassure the populace and bolster his authority, he without any doubt committed a severe error by delaying his departure for an entire week. He then set out overland with the cavalry. A polyglot infantry consisting of provincially assigned Caucasians and Greek and North African troops followed on the Nile aboard small galleons.

The Ottoman-Egyptian elite believed themselves invincible on land and therefore mainly feared that the small French ships would come up the Nile to attack the capital. On departing the Black Bridge, Murad Bey sent orders that an enormous iron chain should be fashioned “such that it would fit across the
strait at Burj Mughayzil [a tower] from one bank of the river to the other to prevent French ships from passing into the Nile.” Al-Jabarti reported that during Murad’s absence the Muslim clergy, or ulema, held daily prayer sessions at the ancient seminary of al-Azhar and that others took up this practice, including the Sufis or mystics of the Ahmadiya and other orders. Children in the Qur’an schools (the elementary schools of the time) prayed and chanted God’s name, the Kind (al-Latif). The chronicler conceded that all this prayer and chanting had no effect on the course of events. It did, he said, produce an atmosphere of greater kindness in the jittery capital.

As a precaution, the ruler Ibrahim Bey had all the Europeans in Cairo rounded up and imprisoned. He at one point ordered those kept in his palace on the island of Roda killed. Sometimes the spouses of powerful politicians have more prudence than their partners, whose authority tends to make them arrogant over time. Ibrahim Bey’s chief wife, Züleyha Hanim, appears to have thought it unwise to dispatch European men of great property at a time when a force of 32,000 Europeans had landed in the country and was preparing to march on the capital. She intervened with the executioners to save their lives, arguing that a saying of the Prophet predicted that the French would seize Egypt. She then hid them in her side of the palace.19

Back in Alexandria, Bonaparte had two reasons to make haste. He wished to deny the beys in the capital the time to make defensive preparations or to empty the storehouses of the city. But he also felt Nelson’s breath on his neck. He had boots and biscuits distributed to the troops and immediately ordered the army to form three columns and to set out in pursuit of the cavalrymen, heading toward the capital, Cairo. He left 2,000 men in Alexandria with the Alsatian general Kléber, who had a head wound. During July in Egypt, a time of torrid sun and dry, hot air, the temperature often rises to 115 degrees Fahrenheit and more. Bonaparte had neglected to research the exigencies of fighting a war in such a place as the Nile Valley at such a time of the year, and appears not to have realized that water canteens were an absolute necessity. His troops had none. Perhaps he thought water would be found in village wells along the way. If so, he was mistaken. It was the season of the low Nile, and the water tables had fallen, and the Bedouin resistance to the French invasion delighted in hiding or spoiling what wells there were. Some historians have accused the general of being willing simply to use up his men, and of asking of them the impossible. No doubt he frequently did so. But the mistake with regard to water resources is
most elegantly explained by simple ignorance in the beginning, combined with appalling callousness even after the problem became apparent. Bonaparte, an islander whose major military successes to date had been in Italy, did not realize the severe limitations lack of water imposed on desert warfare. In addition, he felt himself in an almost hopeless race against time, given the proximity and firepower of the British fleet.

Having landed in the northeast corner of the African continent, the French now stood at a port city in the Nile Delta, a broad alluvial plain created over the millennia by the Nile, which overflowed its banks every year, as it emptied into the Mediterranean. Most of Egypt's population huddled along the Nile and its tributaries. Although at one time the Nile put many fingers into the sea, the Delta is now mainly traversed by the Rosetta branch in the west and the Damietta branch in the east. The French would have to march to the western branch and make their way upriver toward the capital of Ottoman Egypt, Cairo, nicknamed “Misr” or “the fortified city,” where the branches diverged.

On 5 July two columns prepared to set out, marching to the west along the path of the dry canal that used to bring water to the port. The next day the third column trekked east along the sea toward the wealthy port city of Rosetta and thence south, following that tributary of the Nile. Moiret was in the eastern division, commanded by Gen. Charles François Dugua, which, despite its travails, had the easier time of it. Two hours out of Alexandria they found themselves in desert sand and soon were beset by fatigue and a powerful thirst. They marched from sun to sun without encountering any habitation or source of fresh water, “roasted by a sky aflame.”

They tried digging beneath the sand near the ocean, but only found a bit of dirty water that was wholly insufficient to their needs. Many soldiers died of thirst or dehydration because they could not keep down the dirty groundwater. Diarrhea and dysentery, which had spread among the troops, dehydrated them further. They only began to find fresh water when they approached Abuqir, where they spent the night. The next day the march was easier, since it was interrupted by the wait to be ferried across a small strait of the sea that separated Alexandria’s territory from that of the nearby city of Rosetta.

The following morning, 8 July, they set out again at three. During that day they experienced the most horrible thirst and fatigue. The sources differ about what happened when General Dugua and his troops approached Rosetta. Al-Jabarti wrote that many of the city’s inhabitants had fled before the advance of the foreign troops. A French source said the inhabitants opened the city gates and sent out a deputation draped in tricolor sashes. News of the republican
French taste in fashion accessories, it seems, had preceded them. Since Rosetta was a cosmopolitan port, it is not impossible that Christians and expatriates welcomed the conquerors, whereas many Muslims with strong ties to the beys fled. Each national historiography remembers what it pleases about the ambiguous events. No one disagrees that most of the soldiers threw themselves down in exhaustion once they arrived in the city. They ravenously devoured the refreshments that wealthy city had to offer—water, raisins, dates, and even, as Moiret observed, “some bad wine” peddled “by local Jews.” The cavalryman Pierre Millet described Rosetta, then a city of 15,000 or so that had profited from the decline and neglect of Alexandria under Ibrahim and Murad: “This city is one league from the sea, on the western outlet of the Nile. It was in this city that we saw for the first time that famous river, which is so much spoken of in history. Rosetta is surrounded by gardens full of all sorts of fruit trees, such as date palms and lemon, orange, fig, and apricot trees, as well as other species.”

The city was embellished by big square caravanserais that served as warehouses and around which shops proliferated. Its prominent guilds included fishermen, ironsmiths and bronzesmiths, water carriers, butchers, dyers, tailors, sellers of sorbets, and great import-export merchants. Its workshops produced olive oil, salted fish, textiles, and hookahs. It also had a shipyard. Moiret’s division departed from the city at midnight, provisioned with hardtack, and since they were following the Nile, they had access from then on to fresh water. By 11 July the division rendezvoused at Rahmaniya with the other two columns of the army.

The quartermaster, Bernoyer, accompanied one of the western columns south and suffered much more horribly than Moiret’s division, as did all the soldiers in those two columns. “We were annihilated,” he wrote, “but we had to march over this immense plain of arid sand, in a climate far hotter than our own, without the benefit of a single shadow so that we might recover a bit and might be sheltered from the heat of the burning sun. In that overwhelming situation, we could not quench the thirst that was devouring us. Very quickly, our canteens were emptied, without any hope of refilling them very often.” Bernoyer was lucky to have a canteen at all. The troops, lacking them, suffered appallingly. They were “crushed” by thirst and fatigue, throats parched, and sweating hot vapor. The halts at night were short, since Bonaparte, accompanying his men on horseback, wished to profit from the better marching conditions by starlight, to get out of the arid region as soon as possible, and to reach Cairo before Nelson returned. A Sergeant François recounted how on 4 July his unit discovered wells at a village on the way to
Damanhur. “In five minutes, these wells were emptied; soldiers pressed in to descend on them in such great numbers that many were smothered. Others were crushed by the mob. More than thirty soldiers died around those wells. Many, not able to get water, committed suicide.” He revealed that on the march south, many of the troops felt burdened by their heavy European clothing and the provisions they had to carry. They discarded their coats and shirts and tossed away the biscuits they were given in Alexandria, confident that both clothing and food could easily be replaced later, “forgetting that we had seen the inhabitants of Alexandria clothed in an altogether different manner than Europeans.”

A young officer, Charles Antoine Morand, described how soldiers in search of brush to make a fire discovered in the wilderness a woman with a child in her arms. Receiving their report, Morand, curious, went out to see her. “I found a young woman of sixteen to eighteen years, covered in tatters, who was nothing more than a horrible skeleton. They had put out her eyes and the wounds were still bloody. She was laid out on the burning sand, and some inarticulate words issued with effort from her dried-out throat. Her lips were a livid black.” Her newborn was at her breast. He tried to revive her with water and a biscuit. She refused the biscuit but took the water, and they took her to a cistern. She nevertheless later died there, and a mounted Bedouin used a rope to cart the carcass a hundred feet off into the wastelands. The interpreter for Gen. Louis Desaix made inquiries in the local village and discovered that she was expiating a crime of love. “Proven guilty of adultery, she had been condemned with the resulting infant to that appalling torment. They had put out her eyes nine days before, and thus abandoned, she had only lived on roots, grains and wild grasses that she found in prowling through the desert.”

The French soldiers were getting a quick introduction to a key value in the Middle East, where the honor of males depended on their ability to protect their women from the unwanted attentions of outsiders and keep them chaste. Women kin who dishonored the band of brothers sometimes faced such clan retribution. Such gender-based honor societies were widespread in the eastern Mediterranean, among Christian populations as well as Muslim. The Qur’an made adultery and fornication difficult to prove (requiring four witnesses!) and prescribed a punishment of whipping, though the influence on early Islamic jurisprudence of Jewish converts and halacha, or Jewish religious law, caused some authorities to favor stoning as a punishment. Putting out the woman’s eyes and exposing her in the desert, much less the killing of the newborn, are not in the law books. Muslim clerics would have been as appalled as the French at the illit-
erate male villagers’ way of avenging their honor on a wayward female relative. Morand found the punishment horrible but clearly did not view the fact of the death sentence as surprising in the circumstances. After all, French law recognized an affront to the husband’s honor in the form of a wife’s affair as a defense under the law for crimes of passion.

As the French troops marched to the southeast, the Bedouin began shadowing the columns, capturing anyone who fell behind. When they began following too closely, the French unveiled cannons and fired on them. Sometimes this tactic caused the Bedouin to disappear only for a short time, sometimes for an entire afternoon. But as the invaders continued to be dogged, both officers and soldiers formed a profound dislike of the pastoralists who made their lives so miserable and killed their friends and comrades. Sometimes the settled population was equally hostile. Sergeant François recounted how, entering a village on the way, the French faced concerted gunfire. “Since we never put down our arms, we riposted; the fusillade became serious. Many inhabitants were taken and executed. This severity prevented the villagers from revolting.”23 Having put down this challenge, the French were then able to buy some provisions from the peasants.

On 9 July Bernoyer marched along with the soldiers again during the day, the sun beating down on their heads, their knees trembling, thick phlegm on their lips and in their throats, their lungs barely able to draw a breath. Captain Vertray recalled, “When the sun was hot, a lake of dirty water would dry up. The deposited salt shone as though it were water. A good number of soldiers ran ahead with pitchers to draw from it, but how deceived they were when they saw that, the farther they advanced, the more the lake dried up.”24 Despite mentions of this phenomenon in classical texts the mirage had not been widely known or understood until the French invasion of Egypt. Gaspar Monge, a physicist attached to the Egyptian Institute, was to write a paper on it, long after the troops had figured out that it was an optical illusion. Once they came to this realization, however, despair gripped them even more violently. Bernoyer had to steel himself against the pitiful whimpers of those men who collapsed from dehydration and pleaded for water as they lay dying. He was surprised, not being a professional soldier, at how he could see a man fall at his feet and step over him, unmoved. But he was himself barely able to go forward and had no energy to spend on caring for anyone else. Soon thereafter they sighted the trees that signaled habitation and rejoiced “like sailors coming to shore” as they trudged into the town of Damanhur in the gloaming. Desvernois thought that 1,500 French soldiers died in the course of the four-day march from Alexandria.
Adj. Gen. Augustin-Daniel Belliard, the son of a public prosecutor, had formed a militia of patriots at the time of the Revolution, which became part of the National Guard and started him on a military career. Belliard recalled, “The gloom was thick, we were marching defiantly, when we saw by the light of torches a big group approaching us.”

It was a deputation headed by the local mufti, or Muslim jurist. “They brought us a torch, bread, honey, and cheese.” Encouraged by this attempt at propitiating them, the French asked for lodging, but the cleric flatly refused (Belliard thought it was because they were infidels and would have polluted the servants of Muhammad, but one wonders if a French town would have been eager to have German troops billeted on them.) “We were happy to be admitted to the baths, where the general staff passed the night on mats.”

General Desaix, who was from an aristocratic background but had thrown in with the revolutionary army, had less patience with local customs. He had the doors of a local mosque forced and established himself there. Needless to say, turning a mosque into a barracks for French soldiers made a bad impression on the Muslims of Damanhur.

Many of the 4,000 townspeople of the city, upon discovering the French advance, had fled, taking with them their provisions, their animals, even in some instances their doors (carved wood is precious in an arid land). Bernoyer exulted that the locals had been unable to carry away their water, which was what the troops mainly sought. Jean-Pierre Doguereau, a young artillery lieutenant from a modest family in Orleans, central France (his father was a wig maker), had fought in the Army of the Rhine, then been assigned to the Egyptian campaign. He described Damanhur as a “mound of huts that look a lot like dovecotes.”

He continued, “Some mosques, the minarets of which are visible among tall palm trees, offer from afar an agreeable glimpse. The illusion ends when one approaches.” Only by dint of much effort and money could the soldiers find anything to eat, and the townspeople disdained their coins. He viewed them as mischievous assassins in league with the Bedouin that surrounded them, having many relations with the latter “and much of their character.” The officer memoirists often expected peasants to be subservient, but were repeatedly disappointed. Doguereau was already constructing a rationale to explain the rebelliousness of Damanhur, blaming it on the bad influence of the Bedouin.

Desvernois maintained that the other officers confronted Bonaparte at Damanhur about the unfolding disaster they were witnessing, as the desert and Bedouin harassment used up their men. General François Mireur of Montpellier, he said, condemned the Directory for sending the army to Egypt and spoke
forcibly for leaving immediately for Italy, where there was unfinished business in Sardinia and Naples. He wanted to adopt a longer-term plan to dominate the eastern Mediterranean, with a return to Egypt when the time was right. Mireur’s patriotism was not in question and, indeed, he had played a role in making the Marseillaise popular as the anthem of the Revolution. His impassioned speech, however, gained no support. Bonaparte, Desvernois alleged, greeted this impassioned plea for a retreat coldly. He wanted to conquer Egypt immediately. He rose and ended the session. Mireur, recognizing that his career was over, rode out to the desert and blew his brains out. Desvernois was in the party that found him. A military funeral was held for him and he was interred in the Muslim cemetery.27

The death of Mireur deeply affected the officers and soldiers who knew him, and many preferred to believe the rumor that he had fallen victim to the Bedouin than that he had lost his nerve. Morand wrote home in despair of how his friend Mireur had passed behind a sandy hillock and been ambushed by Bedouin hiding there. “Egypt, its campaigns, its ruins, its monuments—all of that is hideous to me. A veil of horror has enveloped me. My imagination, for so long abandoned to romantic dreams and agreeable illusions, is now filled only with ghastly images. It wanders among specters and searches for the gory shadow of Mireur. He is no more. Barbarous assassins have ripped away his life. Valiant, in the flower of his youth, good, sensible of glory and friendship, surrounded by esteem, covered with laurels, he fell to the weapons of cruel Bedouins.”28

At Damanhur, an Arab horse kicked Bonaparte in the right leg, which an army physician said “produced so severe a contusion that one had to fear subsequent accidents. I was happy enough to prevent them, and to guide him in a very short time to healing, despite the pain when he walked and his natural activity, which kept him from resting.”29 The commander in chief set up his headquarters in the whitewashed residence of Damanhur’s mayor, which, despite his wealth, was poorly furnished. Bonaparte’s private secretary, Louis de Bourrienne, told the story of how the Corsican inquired of his involuntary host as to why he chose to live in such penury. The mayor replied that once he had refurbished his home, and “when this became known at Cairo, a demand was made upon me for the money, because it was said my expenses proved me rich. I refused to pay the money, and in consequence I was ill-treated, and at length, forced to pay it.” Bourrienne professed himself shocked that any ruler would force people to pay crushing taxes. In fact, Bonaparte was already working on appropriation schemes of his own. The engineer Villiers du Terrage recorded in
his journal for 11 July, “A commission has been charged with researching and taking possession of the goods of the Mamluks.”

The prudence of the mayor in hiding and locking up his possessions was further illustrated by an anecdote told by Jacques Miot, commissary of the army, in his memoir of the invasion. He said that troops fanned out in Damanhur searching for grain, and they came upon a hidden, windowless harem containing three black slave women belonging to the elderly mayor. They were not good-looking, but “in the desert one is not choosy,” he remarked, and the troops considered attempting their first Egyptian romance. They were disappointed to learn, however, that the sheikh had clapped strong iron chastity belts on all three women, which they found it impossible to remove.30

After they arrived in Damanhur, Bernoyer found a shady area to rest in the city and sent his servant to find food. In the meantime he slept fitfully on an empty stomach. When he awoke, he found the wife of a soldier offering him some soup, but “with a delicacy out of place in such circumstances, I declined.” A few French soldiers’ wives accompanied their husbands. It is unlikely many survived. Bernoyer admitted he would have gladly paid a pretty penny for the soup, but could not in good conscience accept the poor woman’s hospitality. Then his servant brought him some disgusting white cheese that he could not think of eating. He sought out an officer’s table, and was reprimanded and threatened with arrest for not being with the equipment detachment, as ordered. He explained that he had waited for them in Alexandria until the army was almost out of sight, and had thought it expedient to go on without them. It was then revealed to him that the Bedouin had massacred the sixty-two stragglers.

That evening the French set out again. While in town they had been able to sing some war ditties, and the Marseillaise. Now they had to fall silent again, Sergeant François remembered, for fear of the emirs. The surgeon D. J. Larrey recalled the increasingly dangerous terrain into which the French troops were venturing. “On departing Damanhur, the phalanx of the headquarters, where I was with the wounded, was assailed on all sides by a cavalry of numerous Bedouin and Mamluks. We would have no doubt succumbed without the prompt aid that we received from the division of Desaix, and without the vigilance and agile tactics of Colonel Dupas, who then commanded the army scouts. As it was, several individuals of our square were killed or wounded.”31

Bernoyer said that, next morning, he found out that nomads had captured a fine young officer and demanded a ransom. Bonaparte refused, saying that if he had to ransom everyone who fell into Bedouin hands between there and Cairo, his
treasury would be bankrupted. Upon receiving this answer, the Bedouin, not wishing to feed and take care of their captive, blew out his brains in full view of the French. Bonaparte had ransomed others, so it is unclear why he declined in this instance. The price was small and the choice was fully the general’s. Bernoyer, the civilian, was disgusted, and was not alone in his sentiments.

Moiret’s division had barely arrived at Rahmaniya on 10 July when a few emirs appeared. Desaix’s 15th Regiment of Dragoons set out after them.
Although he was being wildly optimistic, Bonaparte believed that presiding over the Festival of the Nile, with all its connotations of blessedness and prosperity in Egyptian folk Islam, had been a public relations success. He looked forward to the next such occasion, determined to turn it to advantage as well. The Great Sultan wrote to General Vial in Damietta, “I imagine that you have in mind to celebrate with yet more pomp the festival of the Prophet. . . . The festival of the Nile was very beautiful here; that of the Prophet will be even better.”

Al-Jabarti wrote that the Cairo Muslim elite had not intended to celebrate the birthday of the Prophet that year, and that when Bonaparte discovered their intentions, he pressed them on the matter. Sayyid Khalil al-Bakri apologized, saying that the situation was too unstable and the elite lacked the funds to act as patrons of the festival. Bonaparte therefore funded it himself, providing al-Bakri with three hundred French francs. The same initial reticence was apparent in provincial cities. The artist Dominique Vivant Denon, who had once painted a portrait of Voltaire, described with some outrage how the mufti of Rosetta had intended to let the birthday of the Prophet go uncelebrated, as a means of conveying to the people that “we oppose one of the most sacred acts of their religion.” Menou had discovered the importance of holding the festival at the last minute and ordered the mufti to organize it.

The festival of Muhammad’s birth began on 20 August, three days before the exact anniversary. Detroye recalled that Cairenes put colored lanterns atop poles at two places in Azbakiya Square, producing a beautiful effect that evening. At ten in the evening, devotees began forming processions that set out from city quarters and walked toward various mosques, led by men carrying torches or large mobile chandeliers with forty lanterns attached. Others,
Detroye complained, “charted baroque airs accompanied by music that was even more baroque. Such is the procession that traversed the city at night, shouting, crying out, and making an infernal racket.” Moiret wrote that “the principal residents circulated in the streets with the marks of their rank or function, accompanied by slaves, some of them armed and the others carrying torches.” At Azbakiya they suspended in the air an illumined representation of the Prophet’s tomb in Medina.

The next day, Detroye said, the festival started up again, more tumultuous than the day before. The following day saw more processions, more singing, more shouting. One can only speculate that the Egyptians took advantage of the French permission to celebrate their religious holiday to reaffirm their faith and steadfastness, at a time when both had surely been shaken by the French infidel conquest of Egypt, which had been continuously in Muslim hands since the seventh century.

The actual day of the anniversary of the Prophet Muhammad’s birth, Detroye remembered, was celebrated with even more fervor than the preceding days. “The public places were crowded with small sideshows: bear or monkey trainers, singers, songstresses who performed scenes with dialogue, women who chanted poetry, magicians working with goblets who made live snakes disappear, children who performed the most indecent dances, gladiators who engaged in single combat, etc.”

Despite the sacredness of the event, the street people commonly engaged in lewd dancing to celebrate it. Denon at Rosetta witnessed a similar scene, but of men, not children: “The dance that followed was of the same genre as the chant. It was not a painting of joy or of gaiety, but of a voluptuousness that turned quite rapidly toward a lasciviousness more and more disgusting, in which the actors, always masculine, expressed in the most indecent manner the scenes that even love does not permit to the two sexes save in the shadow of mystery.”

Denon, author of the 1777 libertine short story “No Tomorrow” (“Point de Lendemain”), was no prude. He was complaining not about eroticism but about an explicit style of public performance that was common in Egypt. He may also have been especially shocked, since he mentioned the dancers’ masculinity, at the homosocial character of the pornographic performance. The scout Millet observed, “They know nothing of prudishness in Egypt. A true Muslim will show the most lewd and licentious dances and recreations to his family.” The worldly libertines from secular Paris were continually blushing at scenes, usually involving hip action, put on by the supposedly hidebound Egyptian Muslims. At the same time, the Egyptian historian al-Jabarti took a dim view of the sexual morality of French men and women.
When evening fell, Bernoyer’s least favorite people, the dervishes, or Sufi mystics, appeared, their hair long and their clothing “negligible.” Malus, more frank, observed of the dervish leaders, “These are the saints of the country; their life is a continual ecstasy and everything is permitted to them; many circulate through the streets at various times of the year naked as apes. They only live on alms from the public.” Villiers du Terrage said of the nude holy men that they “are a kind of madman, extremely venerated, to whom everything is permitted, whose insults are an honor, even to the women who surrender themselves to them.” Devotees gathered, Detroye said, forming themselves in circles, very crowded in on one another, and taking each other by the arms. They then began “a very violent movement, of each man by himself and of the entire circle, to the left and the right. This movement was accompanied by painful efforts.” They went on moving in unison until they were exhausted. “It was said that sometimes devotees died where they stood.” Moving in unison and chanting religious poetry in this manner caused Sufi adepts to hyperventilate, which they believed helped them attain alternate states (hal) of consciousness and aided them in their quest to feel union with the divine.

That morning, Bonaparte had ordered up an imposing parade of the troops of the garrison in honor of the great day, and a French marching band intermixed its martial strains with the chants of the Muslims. Then, Detroye recalled dryly, “The French artillery saluted Muhammad.” All the high French officers were presented to a leading cleric, Sayyid Khalil al-Bakri. In the presence of the divan, Bonaparte dressed al-Bakri in an ermine coat and declared him the naqib al-asbraf, the leader of the caste of Muhammad’s honored descendants, insofar as the previous incumbent, Umar al-Makram, had fled to Syria. The festival of the Prophet’s birth was especially presided over by his putative descendants, who formed an honored social stratum. Bonaparte directed that any Egyptian who had a dispute with a member of the sharif caste should bring the complaint to Sayyid al-Bakri.

In all these steps, Bonaparte was playing the role of a Muslim sultan, honoring the progeny of the Prophet, and they in turn pledged to support the status quo and employ their religious aura to mediate disputes between ruler and ruled. This attempt at gaining legitimacy through the Prophet’s progeny was not entirely successful. The Christian Syrian chronicler of the occupation, Niqula Turk, remarked, “Sheikh Khalil al-Bakri loved the French Republic, and for that reason the Egyptian Muslims hated him.” The ambitious and wealthy
al-Bakri, cloaked in the aura of the Prophet’s family and of his prominence among the clerics, weathered the disdain of the masses.

Captain Say, who disapproved of Bonaparte’s dalliance with Islam, recalled that the commander in chief on the occasion of the festival of the Prophet’s birth “dressed in oriental costume and declared himself protector of all the religions. The enthusiasm was universal, and he was unanimously given the name of the son-in-law of the Prophet. Everyone called him Ali Bonaparte.”6 Egyptian Sunnis considered ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, to be the fourth rightly-guided caliph or vicar of the Prophet. If the Egyptians bestowed this sobriquet on the Corsican, it was in sidesplitting jest. Bonaparte’s secretary, Bourrienne, sensitive to the way in which the general’s pandering on the subject of religion made him seem ridiculous, said that he never dressed in Egyptian robes again, finding them “uncomfortable.”

That evening, the sheikh threw a great feast for Bonaparte at his mansion. A hundred prominent clerics of al-Azhar sat cross-legged on carpets around twenty low tables, while one of them recited a narrative of the Prophet’s life in a voice that the French found monotonous. The French were seated at tables and offered silver cutlery and plates, with a rare bottle of wine. Afterward, roast, entrées, rice, and pastry were served, all of it spicy. Desvernois observed, “The Arabs eat with their fingers; but I must add in all justice that three times during the meal they washed their hands.”

The subject of their conversations is easy to imagine. Desvernois said of Bonaparte and the al-Azhar clerics that he “conversed frequently with them, seeking to be instructed as to the needs of the country and the means of making it prosper. Sometimes, even, to flatter their religious prejudices, he let them envisage that the Republican army was not far from embracing the faith of Muhammad.” Another officer observed: “Nothing was forgotten in persuading the Egyptians that the army had the greatest veneration for the Prophet. The soldiers were politic in their expressions; when they returned to their quarters, they laughed at that comedy.”7

In a moment of unusual candor, Bonaparte at Saint Helena later recalled his straits of that August.8 “The position of the French was uncertain. They were only tolerated by the believers, who, crushed by the rapidity with which events unfolded, had bowed before force, but were already openly deploiring the triumph of the idolaters, whose presence profaned the blessed waters. They groaned at the opprobrium that had befallen the first key to the holy Kaaba. The imams made a show of reciting the verses of the Qur’an that were most op-
posed to the infidels.” The “blessed waters” of the Nile were being coded as Muslim, he was reporting, and the non-Muslim French conquest of them rendered them ritually polluted. Likewise, the cube-shaped edifice known as the Kaaba in Mecca, around which Muslims on pilgrimage circumambulate, had been safeguarded by the Egyptian stronghold. Now, Bonaparte recalled his adversaries charging, non-Muslims held the very key to Mecca itself.

The commander in chief was fully aware that any literate Egyptian Muslim would look, in explaining the French conquest, to the medieval wars of the Crusades for a precedent. If the Egyptians decided that the French were just crusaders, and represented a specifically Christian quest for Near East dominance, they would never reconcile themselves to French rule. He recalled the words of the Count of Volney, who came to Egypt and wrote in 1788 that any conqueror of Egypt would have to fight three wars. The first would be against the British, the second against the Ottoman Empire, and the third, most difficult of all, would be against the local Muslims. Volney had urged these three as reasons not to attempt an attack on Egypt. Bonaparte took them as a challenge.

On 30 July, Bonaparte had written to General Kléber in Alexandria, asking him to establish a local divan consisting of pro-French loyalists. He had warned of the dangers if the Egyptian public panicked in terror, observing, “All these people could have thought that we came in the same spirit of Saint Louis, that they should comport themselves as though they had entered a Christian state.” Saint Louis’s invasion had even failed on its own terms! Certainly, were Egyptians to decide that Bonaparte’s was a new Crusader state, it would toll the death knell for Bonaparte’s entire enterprise. He was running away from Christianity as fast as possible.

Bonaparte hoped to persuade the imams to say the Friday sermon in his name. Ordinarily in the Egypt of the time, the sermon would have been said in the name of the Ottoman Sultan, Selim III, but the commander in chief wanted the Islamically granted legitimacy that came with this privilege. It was, of course, folly to hope that the Friday prayer sermonizers would say the prayers in the name of a European Christian ruler. The commander in chief remonstrated with the clerics of the al-Azhar, whenever he met with them that summer: they were not doing enough to stop the febrile agitation stirred up by the preachers, and he wanted a fatwa or formal legal ruling from them demanding that imams advise obedience to the new state. He said that they paled and seemed seized with consternation. Sheikh Abdullah al-Sharqawi at length replied, “You want to have the protection of the Prophet. He loves you. You want the Arab Muslims to march beneath your banners. You want to restore the glory of Arabia,
you are not an idolater. Become a Muslim! 100,000 Egyptians and 100,000 Arabs come from Arabia, from Mecca and Medina, will range themselves with you. Drilled and disciplined in your way, they will conquer the Orient for you, and you will reestablish in all its glory the fatherland of the Prophet.” Bona-
parte said that at that moment, their old faces lit up and all prostrated them-
selves, imploring the protection of heaven.

That al-Sharqawi argued to Bonaparte that he should convert is plausible enough. That he thought in terms such as “Arab,” “nation,” or “fatherland” a century before such ethnic nationalism began appearing among Arabic speakers is impossible, and the Corsican was just imposing European categories on what he heard. At most, al-Sharqawi would have seen the general’s conversion as a way of reinvigorating the fortunes of the Muslim world. He might have hoped that Bonaparte would convert, and then send tribute to Istanbul, asking that the sultan formally recognize him as the viceroy of Egypt. From an Egyptian point of view, such a development would not have been unusual. After all, many of the beys that ruled Egypt had been born to Christian families in the Caucasus, and the sultan routinely granted them some sort of ex post facto recognition once they became powerful.

The commander in chief, despite his later protestations to the contrary, clearly considered this option seriously, at least on a pro forma, outward basis. He wrote that he replied to the sheikh, “There are two great difficulties pre-
venting my army and me from becoming Muslims. The first is circumcision, the second is wine. My soldiers have the habit from their infancy, and I will never be able to persuade them to renounce it.” He told the story that Sheikh Muham-
mad al-Mahdi (who had been born a Coptic Christian and converted in order to attend al-Azhar) proposed that sixty clerics of the al-Azhar Seminary be permit-
ted to pose the question publicly and to deliberate on the matter. He maintained that the rumor spread throughout the country that the clerics were instructing the Great Sultan in Islam. Bonaparte had an unappealing tendency to believe his own propaganda, or at least to keep repeating it long after it was completely im-
plausible. His depiction of happy Egyptian Muslims joyous at the news that the infidel general was learning the Qur’an by heart is at odds with everything we know about the profound hostility Egyptian Muslims entertained for their new masters. Bonaparte appears to have believed that even a public debate about whether the French might become Muslims benefited his cause.

Warming to his tale, Bonaparte remembered that four Muslim jurisconsults came with a fatwa over a month later, setting aside the issue of circumcision since, they said, that was not a central Islamic duty. They also said that non-
Muslims who drank wine would be permitted to convert, but that if they continued to drink after the conversion, they would go to hell. The commander in chief pronounced himself delighted that the first difficulty had been removed but expressed some consternation about the second point, which would hardly be an incentive to conversion. Sheikh al-Mahdi suggested that the first part of the fatwa be released, in any case, which he thought would have a good effect on the country. He maintained that the al-Azhar clerics went back to their discussions on the second matter, also corresponding with their peers in Mecca. In the end, they agreed that the new converts might drink, but would have to pay a penance for it. Bonaparte’s story is suspect. Although the second fatwa is intended to be its denouement, he drops the subject at that point. Clearly, he never found a way of convincing the al-Azhar clerics to allow a pro forma declaration of French “conversion” to Islam.

Although Bonaparte and his defender, Bourrienne, prefaced this account by saying that Bonaparte never converted, never went to mosque, and never prayed in the Muslim way, all of that is immaterial. It is quite clear that he was attempting to find a way for French deists to be declared Muslims for purposes of statecraft. This strategy is of a piece with the one used in his initial Arabic proclamation, in which he maintained that the French army, being without any particular religion and rejecting Trinitarianism, was already “muslim” with a small “m.” Islam was less important to him, of course, than legitimacy. Without legitimacy, the French could not hope to hold Egypt in the long run, and being declared some sort of strange Muslim was the shortcut that appealed to Bonaparte. It foundered on the orthodoxy of the al-Azhar clergy, however.

Bonaparte’s admiration for the Prophet Muhammad, in contrast, was genuine. He wrote in his memoirs that “Arabia was idolatrous when Muhammad, seven centuries after Jesus Christ, introduced to it the religion of the God of Abraham, Ishmael, Moses, and Jesus Christ.” The Corsican decried the sanguinary doctrinal wars of early Christianity, with squabbles over the nature of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and said admiringly, “Muhammad declared that there was only one God, who had neither father nor son and that the Trinity imported an idea from paganism.” He explained the sensual depictions of paradise in the Qur’an by the poverty and ignorance of the Arabians of that time, who did not have the luxury of a life of contemplation such as the Athenians could pursue. Muhammad had to promise his acolytes, with their hardscrabble lives, Bonaparte explained, “sweet-smelling groves where they would repose in perpetual shade, in the arms of divine houris with white skin and black eyes.” Bonaparte coded the early Muslims as Bedouin who, impassioned at such a
Bonaparte did not give up his attempts to use Islamic rhetoric as part of his ruling strategy. Just a few days after the festival, on 28 August, he wrote a letter to the leading Muslim cleric of Alexandria, Sheikh al-Masiri, whom he had met on taking the city, and who later proved cooperative with Kléber as the head of the divan there. “You know the particular esteem,” he wrote, “that I conceived for you at the first instant I met you.” He expressed a hope of meeting soon with “all the wise and learned men of the country” to establish “a uniform regime, founded on the principles of the Qur’an, which are the only true ones, and which can alone ensure the well-being of men.”¹¹ That is, he was offering al-Masiri a chance at national office and influence and promising to institute rule by *sharia* or Islamic canon law. At least, that is how an Egyptian man of the cloth would have taken the offer to govern in accordance with the Qur’an. Even the Ottoman Empire did not always implement *sharia* as it was interpreted by the clerics.

Bonaparte, isolated from France by the British blockade and faced with a hostile population and endemic Bedouin and town revolts, adopted the Qur’an as his shield and the promotion of the Muslim clerics as his program. The French Jacobins, who had taken over Notre Dame for the celebration of a cult of Reason and had invaded and subdued the Vatican, were now creating Egypt as the world’s first modern Islamic Republic.

In mid-August, Bonaparte wrote to the sharif of Mecca, Ghalib ibn Musa’id al-Hashimi, announcing his arrival in Cairo “as well as the measures that I have taken to preserve for the holy mosques of Mecca and Medina the revenues that pertained to them.”¹² Bonaparte had been told by the clerics of al-Azhar about the enormous endowment of farm lands in Egypt and their grain harvest that supported the holy cities. He was seeking Islamic legitimacy by supplanting the Ottoman sultan, Selim III, as guarantor of foodstuffs to the Muslim holy land. He pointed out to the sharif that he had “protected the imams, the *sharifs*, and all the men of the law.” He told the Meccan potentate that he had appointed Mustafa Bey, the deputy of the (departed) Ottoman viceroy, as the leader of the pilgrimage caravan, and promised that the bey would escort the caravan with

prospect, became heroes. “Muhammad was a prince; he rallied his compatriots around him. In a few years, his Muslims conquered half the world. He rescued more souls from false gods, overturned more idols, and pulled down more pagan temples in fifteen years than the adherents of Moses and Jesus Christ had in fifteen centuries.”
forces sufficient to prevent Bedouin predation. Bonaparte offered to send either French troops as an escort, or local Egyptian ones. Ghalib then faced a challenge from the puritan, militant Wahhabi sect based in Najd, and felt that the Ottomans had not given him much support in the struggle. He therefore was willing to consider establishing good relations with the French, especially since the economy of the Hejaz in western Arabia, where the holy cities of Mecca and Medina were located, depended profoundly on Egypt, both because of the grain endowment and because of the commerce of the pilgrimage caravan and the coffee trade. Bonaparte was drawing around himself the mantle of guarantor of the fiscal health of this region, and therefore that of key support for the Islamic pilgrimage.

On his return to Cairo from Salahiya, Bonaparte appears to have privately named as the leader (amir al-hajj) of the annual pilgrimage caravan one Mustafa Bey, who had been an aide to the Ottoman-appointed viceroy of Egypt. (The previous incumbent had fled to Syria with Ibrahim Bey.) On 2 September, the commander in chief held a formal investment ceremony. Bonaparte presented Mustafa Bey a superb green cloak in the presence of the divan and the clerics, along with a diamond-studded crest and a richly caparisoned horse. The newly installed official set out from the Citadel with many aides, to a six-gun salute. The annual pilgrimage caravan was a major source of commercial wealth for Egypt, and Bonaparte wished to encourage this trade, which transported cloves, coffee, shawls, oils, balms, and cochineal dye between the Red Sea and North Africa. Naming the leader of the pilgrimage caravan had been a prerogative of the Ottoman viceroy, and in assuming it Bonaparte was attempting to claim the mantle of legitimate Islamic statecraft.

The Great Sultan had the al-Azhar clerics write a letter to the sharif of Mecca on that occasion. They said, “He has assured us that he recognizes the unity of God, that the French honor our Prophet, as well as the Qur’an, and that they regard the Muslim religion as the best religion. The French have proved their love for Islam in freeing the Muslim prisoners detained in Malta, in destroying churches and breaking crosses in the city of Venice, and in pursuing the pope, who commanded the Christians to kill the Muslims and who had represented that act as a religious duty.” Bonaparte had a copy of the letter sent to Kléber to be printed in six hundred copies, with four hundred to be sent to the Arabian Peninsula.

It is not entirely clear that the Muslim notables of Mecca would have been reassured to hear that the French had destroyed churches or broken crosses. Islamic law recognized Christians as “people of the Book,” fellow monotheists
with a legitimate religion. This attitude of Muslims, that it was allowed for other religions to be practiced in their midst, was somewhat unusual. Christian Europe under the Inquisition had had virtually no resident Muslims, and the hundreds of thousands who elected to remain in Spain after the Reconquista of the late 1400s were forced to convert to Catholicism. For some centuries some Christian countries forbade Jews to live there as well. In contrast, as long as they paid a poll tax and showed themselves loyal, Jews and Christians were allowed by Muslim states to dwell under their shadow and practice their faiths, though with some restrictions. There were, of course, episodes in which particularly fanatical or vicious rulers or clerics attacked these minorities, but they were not the rule, and the contrast with medieval and early modern Europe remains stark. Bonaparte’s rhetoric, here put into the mouths of the clerics of al-Azhar, actually exhibited less toleration than was typical in Islamic law.

Bonaparte’s Islam policy provoked a lively debate among his officers and troops. Some officers were unfazed by the hypocrisy of it all. General Dupuis in Cairo wrote a merchant of Toulouse, “We celebrate here with enthusiasm the festivals of Muhammad. We fool the Egyptians with our affected attachment to their religion, in which Bonaparte and we no more believe than we do in that of Pius the Defunct.” The dismissive reference to the pope and Roman Catholicism betrays a lively anticlericalism and militant secularism. Incredibly, they produced in Egypt not open disdain for an alien religion but a calculated and cynical willingness to pretend respect for it as a means of deceiving the Egyptian public. “You won’t believe it,” he continued, “but I assure you that we are as fervent as the most fanatical pilgrims. In the end, it is the third pantomime that we will have played, since the solemn entry of the Meccan caravan that we presided over here is no small thing. You would have smiled to see me with our musicians at the head of the pilgrims.” Dupuis here revealed that Bonaparte had ordered a positively pious French welcome be given the pilgrims, still covered in the dust of the holy city of Mecca.

Two months after the festival of the Prophet’s birth, Captain Moiret reported that soothsayers began being paid to proclaim that Bonaparte was on a divine mission to destroy the enemies of Islam, which had been predicted “in more than twenty passages” of the Qur’an. They predicted that the French sultan would soon have himself circumcised, take the turban, follow the religion of Muhammad, and bring along by his example his entire army. Moiret recalled
that “the politicians” among the French forces argued that positive rhetoric about Islam and stoking the fires of such expectations among the Egyptian populace were necessary for the security of the army. They pointed to Roman practice, which they said was to avoid imposing any changes on the mores, usages, laws, or religions of the peoples they conquered. “Rather than forcing them to adopt the gods of the capital, they placed there the gods of Athens and Carthage.” Moiret alleged that this view won out among the army, and was certainly that of Bonaparte himself.

Captain Moiret remarked dryly that the French troops actually would not have much minded gaining admission to the Muslim paradise. This is a joking reference to the Qur’an’s promise of perpetual virgin companions, or houris, said to inhabit it. But, he said, they would only have wanted such a heaven if they could have obtained a dispensation to do without circumcision and to continue to drink wine. When he had first arrived in Cairo, Moiret had complained bitterly that the Egyptians had no wine, because their Legislator, the Prophet Muhammad, forbade it. He admitted that the French troops thought it unlikely that they would receive special permission to drink, were they to convert. The rationalist partisans of the Enlightenment, he reported, either satirized these predictions about Bonaparte converting or became indignant. They protested that they “had not shaken up the superstitions of Europe so as to adopt those of the Orient, and that one should never speak anything but the truth to the people.”17 He saw these militant secularists as a minority, with little support among the troops, who favored Bonaparte’s pragmatic paganism on the Roman model instead.

The civilian quartermaster Bernoyer also wrote angry letters back home about Islam. At one point, he launched a diatribe against the Muslim clerics, whom he called “veritable impostors,” and charged with forcing the faithful to believe absurdities such as that they were the agents or confidants of the Creator: “Nothing surprises with regard to them, but it is inconceivable that there are enough imbeciles to believe them!” Once when he saw pilgrims come back to Cairo from Mecca, a multitude in diverse dress, from different races and nations, he wrote of his desire to shout the Enlightenment truth at them that there was no deity that actively intervened in history. But, he concluded, “what would that have served?”18

Bonaparte’s Islam policy provoked lively intellectual debates, but encounters with Islam had an intimate meaning for those of the French who established
close personal relations with the Egyptians around them. The most dramatic instance of wholehearted approval of the commander in chief’s warming to Islam was that of Gen. Jacques Menou. Thereby hangs a tale.

The presence of French troops in the towns of the Delta profoundly upset ordinary social arrangements in Egyptian society. In Rosetta, the middle-class women had been used to being allowed to go out of their homes during the day and to gather at the communal bathhouse. Secluding females was a custom usually practiced only by the wealthiest Ottoman-Egyptian families and was rare among middle-class or lower-middle-class Egyptians. Seclusion was designed to show that the man of the house was so wealthy that he could afford servants to shop for everything the household needed and could maintain almost an entire second residence in the female quarters of his mansion. The wealthy had baths in their homes, allowing their women to dispense with the city bathhouses. Niello Sargy said that, with French soldiers patrolling the streets, Egyptian husbands in Rosetta began forbidding their wives to go out. The women organized and sent a deputation to Menou, the commander of Rosetta, asking that he take measures that would allow them to recover their liberty of movement—presumably by rein ing in the troop patrols around the bathhouse. They charged the two prettiest women as their spokespersons, including Zubayda, the daughter of the proprietor of the city’s communal hot bath (who had an economic interest in the lifting of the informal ban on the circulation of housewives). Menou acquiesced in their request and issued a decree stating that women were an object of respect for the French and that the clan chieftains and clerics were to allow them to circulate in the town as they had ordinarily done before. Menou must have glimpsed enough of Zubayda to be smitten with her. He sought her hand, and would have been told by her father, Muhammad Ali al-Bawwab, that only by converting to Islam could he hope to marry her. Islamic law allows Muslim men to marry non-Muslim women, but Muslim women may only marry Muslim men, and the al-Bawwab family claimed descent on both sides from the Prophet Muhammad, making them members of the sharif caste and even more fastidious about such matters. Menou therefore converted to Islam, adopting the name ‘Abdullah, or the “servant of God,” and in the spring of 1799 he married Zubayda, the daughter of the bathhouse owner and divorced wife of Selim Aga Nimatullah.

Bonaparte tended to describe his army as unchurched, but in fact many believers served under him. For a handful, disoriented by the Revolution’s anticlericalism and then by culture shock in the Middle East, adopting Islam was a way of authorizing a pious sensibility and of connecting with their new home.
Menou wrote in October to General Marmont concerning a valuable administrative suggestion he had made: “You are a man of gold, my dear general... I ask God, Muhammad, all the saints of paradise and of the Qur’an, that the measure you proposed will be adopted.” Menou had been the officer in charge of Paris security for the Republic in September 1795, at a time of royalist intrigue. Nervous politicians saw him as insufficiently forceful. They had removed him and replaced him with Barras and Bonaparte. Three years later he was governor of Rosetta and a Muslim convert. The adoption of an almost Catholic discourse of piety in an Islamic guise by a French officer in Egypt could scarcely have been foreseen by the Jacobins on the Directory and in the legislature who urged the invasion.

Menou was initially rare in being willing to convert in order to make a formal marriage alliance in Egypt. Most officers simply took Egyptian women as mistresses. Still, even some of those wrestled with the same issues as had Menou. Captain Moiret wrote, some months later, that he conducted a clandestine affair with Zulayma, the widow of a lesser grandee, who had fled to refuge with a patron in Damietta. He lived on the route to and from the mosque, and a wealthy woman often hesitated before his door as she went to or came back from her devotions. (Mosques sometimes had side passages where women were allowed to pray, out of sight of the men, though this arrangement was rare.) The tantalized Moiret could not see her face through the double veil. Once, however, he greeted her, and she put her hand to her heart. That evening, her maid-servant came and arranged for him to tutor her. He was able to communicate with her because this slave woman had originally hailed from Marseilles but had been captured off the Barbary Coast by pirates and sold in the North Africa slave markets. Zulayma had enough freedom and wealth left so that she could hire him to tutor her in mathematics and French, with her slave woman as a chaperone. He recorded her description of her life. She explained that she had been sold from Georgia, but was sent to Cairo rather than to Istanbul because she was not plump enough for the markets in the imperial capital. She said that even the bey who purchased her neglected her for some time in hopes of fattening her up. He recalled that she complained of being oppressed by the more powerful women in the harem, of being “humiliated and enslaved” and confined to an interior apartment with no company but elderly slaves. She explained that the wives and concubines had no society with men except their masters, who visited their apartments occasionally, and for whom they would prepare with perfumes and treats. They passed their days embroidering, and occasionally had an ‘alima, or Egyptian geisha girl, in to dance for them and tell them passionate
stories. In the afternoon they took tea and fruits. Sometimes they went for boat rides. The luxuries they enjoyed, however, were outweighed by the cruelties they often endured. Moiret relates from her the story of a Circassian co-wife of hers who went out to the mosque with an elderly slave. While out, she heard a strange accent and turned her head to see a European man conversing with someone nearby. The slave is said to have reported the infraction to the bey. “The furious tyrant grabbed the guilty one by the hair in the midst of us all and beheaded her with a saber.”

She finally broached her feelings, presumably through her French maid-servant. “Out of your grace, young lover, charming warrior, pull me out of this detestable country and lead me to France, if ever destiny calls you there.” He wrote that her tears added to her beauty, and that he promised her that he would. He then pressed her, however, asking if he could hope to see his love requited in accordance with this oath he had given her. He clearly wanted, not only her gratitude for delivering her, but also an indication that she had real feelings for him. She played hard to get. How could she be sure of the sincerity of his oath, she asked, “before it had been consecrated by religion and law?” For, she said, Frenchmen were renowned for their inconstancy, being inflamed with a passion that is soon extinguished. (If Frenchmen already had that reputation, it speaks volumes about their relations with local women.)

Moiret represented himself as an exception. But he went on to press her about which ceremonies of religion, exactly, she had in mind. She should not, he said firmly, expect him to take the turban, “or to submit to the humiliating operation that is the distinctive sign of the Jew and the Muslim,” or to renounce wine, “which was invented by Noah.” He would not follow the example of Menou, who had converted to Islam and taken the name of ‘Abdullah, setting the tongues of the entire army wagging. He refused to be an object of ridicule for his comrades. Finally, he said, “How can you believe me incapable of breaking my oaths to you if I would break my ties to the religion in which I was raised?”

She in turn protested that she could hardly leave Islam, since the man she was staying with, the merchant “Aboulferu,” was deeply attached to it and would never countenance her conversion out of it.

Moiret coldly replied, “We must then bid one another an eternal farewell,” though he wrote that he knew full well she would not.

Zulayma offered a compromise. He should alert her when he was to return to France, and she would accompany him, with her riches and jewelry, and once in France his God would be hers. He wrote that thereafter he continued to see
her as often as possible, continuing the tutoring, until he was posted elsewhere on 19 July 1799. In the event, when the French did withdraw in 1801, Zulayma was not able to meet him in Alexandria, falling into the hands of the bey who returned with the Ottoman army.\textsuperscript{21}

Despite the romantic touches, the veiled approach, the tears that enhanced her beauty, the pledges of eternal love, this exchange reveals a bargaining process. Moiret was offering Zulayma refuge from the Ottoman-Egyptian rulers should the French leave, and she was pledging him the riches she had obtained from her dead husband. (She specifically mentioned bringing her jewelry and wealth with her to France.) In essence, she was offering to bring her own trousseau to the marriage. Initially, he must have been attracted by the prospect of having a mate in Egypt. Finding a mate in France on his return would not have been so difficult. But the possibility of simply marrying her in Damietta was foreclosed by his unwillingness to convert to Islam and by her inability to convert to Christianity without losing her local patronage. He expressed himself unwilling to be a laughingstock or to accept alien ways, but it surely had something to do with his own religious convictions.

Unlike many of the Republican officers, he was a believing Catholic and had once gone to seminary in Lyons with the intention of becoming a Dominican priest. Moiret depicted both of them as too concerned about social conventions and personal image to accept the compromises necessary for marriage in Egypt. He was gallant enough not to even hint at what went on during her visits to him for the ostensible purpose of tutoring her.

The same barriers that stood in the way of a formal marriage alliance between the Catholic Moiret and his Zulayma also bedeviled the Jacobin unbeliever François Bernoyer.\textsuperscript{22} Bonaparte knew that his men had arrived in torrid Egypt wearing heavy European clothing, and he ordered Bernoyer to design new uniforms better suited to local conditions and to arrange for them to be mass-produced. The quartermaster, however, faced a shortage of the necessary thick linen. He asked his Egyptian agent, Achem (presumably Ahmad), who knew a little French, to help him, and through him he contacted the local owner of a small textile manufactory that employed about three hundred workers, both male and female. The owner agreed to provide Bernoyer with four hundred yards of cloth each day.\textsuperscript{23}

The next day he and his Egyptian agent went out to the workshop to see if production had begun on the required cloth. They found the outer gate closed, so Bernoyer dismounted and entered the premises on foot, leaving his agent to see to the horses. On crossing the threshold, he saw a beautiful young woman
drawing water. She looked up at his footsteps and gasped, covering her face with her hands, and then she hurried away, leaving her jug behind. Bernoyer, “ever gallant, as you know,” picked up the jug and went after her. He called out in his broken Arabic, “Look, my pretty friend, you forgot your jug!” She stopped, and he wasted not a moment in catching up to her and presenting her with the vessel. Of course, in order to accept it she had to withdraw one hand from her face, uncovering part of it. “That one portion that I saw was sufficient as a basis for concluding that this Egyptian was extremely beautiful. I fell in love at that moment, to the extent that a great confusion seized my reason and paralyzed me for a few instants.”

The owner of the manufactory was proud to give him a detailed tour, but Bernoyer was so distracted that he hardly heard a word the man said. He cut the tour short on a pretext. As they rode out, the agent inquired of his intentions. Bernoyer replied, “I absolutely have to come into possession of that beautiful person.”

Ahmad agreed to do what he could, but raised several difficulties. First, how would he know which girl it was that Bernoyer had seen? They would all be veiled in the presence of strange men. Moreover, all the women who worked in the factory would be Egyptian Muslims, and they were forbidden to have anything to do with non-Muslim men. Muslims were so sensitive on this issue, he concluded, that they might well refuse to have anything to do with intriguing for Bernoyer. The quartermaster replied that none of these obstacles deterred him. “On the contrary, they only serve to excite my desires and increase my need to satisfy them.” The forbidden status of Muslim women eroticized them for the Frenchmen. Bernoyer then threatened to cut off his agent if he would not cooperate in trying to acquire the girl, all the while ashamed that he was hurting the man’s feelings and that his will was unable to rein the “violent passion of carnal love that had so strongly subjugated” him. He wondered if it was the heat of the climate that had provoked these intense desires and swore he had never experienced anything like it. The Orient itself became the pretext for the need to subjugate the Orient.

Ahmad at length managed to locate the girl in the manufactory whom Bernoyer had described and to ascertain that her name was Fatima (“Fatmair”). She was the daughter of a destitute carpenter. Bernoyer had formulated a plan of setting up a false marriage between her and his servant ‘Ali. Ahmad pointed out to him that the qadi who married the two would need to be assured that ‘Ali had a sufficient source of income, his own domicile, a cooking pot, a coffee pan, and a pipe. ‘Ali, in contrast, did not have shoes on his feet. Bernoyer stuffed a wad of money in Ahmad’s hands and asked him to buy ‘Ali the necessary accoutrements. Bernoyer then sent Ahmad to the carpenter father of the prospective
bride, with “Ali’s” proposal, saying that he had caught a glimpse of her at the textile manufactory and that he was employed in a workshop belonging to the French. The carpenter was pleased at the idea of establishing an indirect link of clientelage to the masters of the country. They went to the qadi and got everything approved, though Bernoyer wrote that it was done without the girl’s consent, since in Egypt “fathers exercise absolute power over their children.”

The wedding was to take place 11 November. Bernoyer represents himself as now realizing that he had to find a way to avoid an “idiot like ‘Ali” actually getting to spend the nuptial night with the girl. The difficulty was, he said, that the bride was typically delivered to the bedroom of the groom by her mother before he arrived, as he waited outside with his friends. She then used her finger to press her daughter’s hymen enough to produce blood. She would issue from the chamber, lock the girl in, and show her sanguinary digit around proudly to the groom and his guests. They would congratulate her on having been so good a mother as to preserve the chastity of her daughter. She would relinquish the key to the bedroom to the groom and depart. His friends would accompany him to the door, give him the same wish, and then leave. Bernoyer needed a means of substituting himself for the groom at the last minute.

Desperate, he consulted with his neighbor, Madame Gontrand, the wife of one of the tailors in his employ, a man he had sent with uniforms to the soldiers at the front in Upper Egypt. He explained his straits, and she offered to solve his problem. She suggested that he switch keys, making sure that ‘Ali got the key to her bedroom, which was apparently not so far from Bernoyer’s on the second floor of the cavernous mansion. Thus, she could entertain ‘Ali, while Bernoyer would get the key to the nuptial chamber. He hugged her for joy, but she pushed him away, saying he was about to strangle her. He remarked to himself that it was a bit odd that she was willing to take a young Egyptian like ‘Ali, who was not very good-looking, to bed. “But,” he concluded to himself, “he was a man, and a woman of a certain age does not look too closely.” In addition, he revealed later in the letter, he had given the Gontrands large rooms at the heart of the mansion he had taken over, from which she had organized a food service for the French tailors and artillerymen on Roda Island. She thus had good reason to be grateful to him.

He locked Madame Gontrand in her room on the second floor and gave the key to Ahmad. Meanwhile the wedding was going on in the garden below, with five women around the bride on one side, all veiled, and five men with ‘Ali on the other. When the ceremony was complete, save for the signatures of the witnesses, Ahmad directed the mother and the bride up the stairway that led to Bernoyer’s room. Apparently, when the bride’s mother came back down with
bloody finger and key and proffered the latter to ‘Ali, Ahmad managed to make himself a go-between, receiving the key, palming it, and giving the key to Madame Gontrand’s room to ‘Ali. The two men then presumably went back upstairs, and Ahmad steered ‘Ali to the French woman’s chambers. He then delivered Bernoyer’s own key to him and gave him some Egyptian clothes to wear so as not to startle the girl.

Bernoyer represented himself as now brimming with passion and impatience. Ahmad returned below to the garden to finish scrutinizing the marriage contract before signing as a witness for the groom. Bernoyer attempted to restrain himself from bursting into his bedroom so violently as to startle the demur bride within. “Imagine my confusion when, on opening the door, I saw that Venus stretched out on a straw mat on the ground, her seductive charms directly in my view.” Unable to control his passion, he united with her, expecting to find her surprised or unhappy, but instead saw that she was radiant with joy, whispering in his ear, “My friend, my sultan, my brother, my souk.” They slept in late, and the next morning he showed her the clothes he intended for her and the extent of their quarters, and she was delighted. She happily tried on her new clothes, he wrote, and settled down to domestic bliss.

Bernoyer gave Madame Gontrand a small bag of diamonds and bestowed two hundred francs on Ahmad as a reward for their roles. “Moreover, I would have paid a hundred times more to find such a girl: in this country where beautiful women are very rare, I could congratulate myself on having a treasure.” Bernoyer had had several prior disastrous adventures in attempting to find sexual gratification in Cairo, and he depicted only his arrangement with Fatima as a success. Paying lip service to social and religious convention had the advantage, on both sides, of keeping up appearances, and in this regard it mirrored Bonaparte’s own diplomatic Islam policy perfectly. As time went on, the chronicler al-Jabarti alleged, marriage became increasingly common between the French men and Muslim women. Attracted by the vast wealth the French concentrated in their hands, even good Egyptian families proved willing to make such alliances. For their part, French troops gradually lost their initial disdain for Muslim conventions and proved willing to undergo a pro forma conversion as a prerequisite to the wedding. It was not, al-Jabarti sniffed, as though they had any faith to begin with that they feared losing.

The French Jacobins could not help but view Islam as a crucible of superstition. They often saw firsthand evidences of popular religious enthusiasm that in-
volved what to them seemed like bizarre and barbarous rites. Of course, the formally trained Muslim clergy, or ulema, would have denied that such practices had anything to do with Islam. Bilingual Egyptians of the middle strata were probably the chief interpreters to the French of the meaning of popular religious practices, and they probably transmitted some of their own disgust with them to the Europeans. Far from being a sole creation of European Orientalism, this image of popular Islam was a joint production.

Arab Muslim civilization as a cultural symbol had many meanings for the French of the Enlightenment and revolutionary eras. They sometimes used Muslims and Islamic practices to stress how different the French were from Middle Easterners. The political philosopher of the mid-eighteenth century, Charles de Montesquieu had, when discussing the virtues of the separation of executive, legislative, and judicial powers, explicitly said, “Among the Ottomans, where these three powers are united in the person of the sultan, a frightful despotism reigns.”25 (Montesquieu overestimated the sultan’s ability to dictate the rulings of the qadis, or Islamic court judges, and did not reckon with how powerful the grand viziers and their ministers had become vis-à-vis the sultan, so that his picture of Oriental despotism is a caricature of the Ottoman system.) Some French thinkers tried to show how close Europeans could be to Islamic practice, without knowing it, as a way of critiquing religion. Voltaire’s play *Mahomet* depicted the Prophet of Islam in an unflattering light, but it was intended as a critique of institutionalized religion, not of Islam per se, and Voltaire openly admitted that he had done Muhammad an injustice. Bonaparte himself dismissed the play, saying that Voltaire had “prostituted the great character of Muhammad by the basest intrigues. He treated a great man who changed the face of the earth as though he were an abject villain, worthy of being hanged.”26 Elsewhere, Voltaire wrote that Muhammad was a great man and had formed great men, and that if he had been defeated by his pagan, Meccan enemies at the Battle of Badr in 624, world history would have been different.

The writers of the vast eighteenth-century *Encyclopédie*, the first modern attempt to encompass all knowledge in a single work, also sometimes employed Islam as a code for criticisms of the popular superstition and the dogmatism they saw in Catholicism.27 Other writers of the articles in this encyclopedia, in contrast, saw the virtues of Arab Muslim science, and contrasted its achievements with European religious obscurantism. Bonaparte himself admired the history of Arab science.28 He contrasted urban Middle Eastern traditions of civilization with the traditions of the pastoral nomads of the Asian steppe and
deserts, who, he said, constantly overthrew settled empires. The former were “enemies of the sciences and the arts,” he said, “but this reproach cannot be launched at the Arabs, or at Muhammad.” He praised the Umayyad caliphs of the seventh and eighth centuries as poets and connoisseurs of fine verses, which, he said, they valued as much as they did valor on the battlefield. He lauded the Abbasid caliphs of the eighth and ninth centuries even more: “Al-Mansur, Harun al-Rashid, al-Ma’mun, cultivated arts and sciences. They loved literature, chemistry, and mathematics; they lived with scientists, and had translations made of Greek and Latin authors in Arabic. . . . Chemistry, distillation, sundials, clocks, our contemporary numerals, are all inventions of the Arabs. Nothing is more elegant than their moral tales; their poetry is full of warmth. Muhammad commended above all the erudite and men who gave themselves to a life of meditation and who cultivated belles lettres.” Bonaparte had profoundly altered the arena in which these discussions were taking place. The arrival of some 32,000 French soldiers in Egypt in the summer of 1798 made the question of how to think about Islam more than a parlor game. The French were involved in the largest-scale encounter of a Western European culture with a Middle Eastern Muslim one since the Crusades.