

The French in Egypt

When the French forces commanded by Napoleon Bonaparte landed at Alexandria in June 1798, they found themselves in the position of needing to justify their presence in Egypt. There were only a few thousand Frenchmen, uninvited guests in a country where no one knew who they were or why they were there.

Ever the diplomat, Napoleon wrote out a message to the Egyptian people, reproduced here:

To the People of Egypt, H.Q. Alexandria, 2 July 1798

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. There is no god but God. He has no son, nor has He an associate in His domain.

On behalf of the French Republic which is based upon the foundation of liberty and equality, General Bonaparte makes it known that the beys who govern Egypt have for long insulted the French nation and injured its merchants: the hour of their punishment has arrived.

For too long this rabble of slaves bought in Georgia and Caucasia have tyrannized over the most beautiful part of the world; but God, from whom all depends, has ordered that their empire shall cease.

Peoples of Egypt, you will be told that I have come to destroy your religion; do not believe it! Answer that I have come to restore your rights and punish the usurpers, and that, more than the Mamluks, I respect God, his prophet and the Koran.

Say that all men are equal before God; wisdom, talent and virtue alone differentiate between them. But what wisdoms, what talents, what virtue have the Mamluks, that they exclusively have all that makes life desirable and sweet? Is there a fine estate? It belongs to the Mamluks. Is there a beautiful slave, a good horse, a pleasant house? They belong to the Mamluks.

If Egypt is their farm, let them show the lease that God has given them. But God is just and merciful to the people.

The Egyptians will be called upon to hold all offices; the wisest and most learned and most virtuous will govern, and the people will be happy.

Once there were among you great cities, great canals, a great commerce. What has destroyed all this if not greed, the injustice and the tyranny of the Mamluks?

Qadis, sheiks, imams, [In the French version] tell the people that we are friends of the true Muslims. [In the Arabic version] tell the people that the French are also faithful Muslims, and in confirmation of this, we have destroyed the Pope, who called for war against the Muslims. We have destroyed the knights of Malta because those madmen believed God wished them to fight to Muslims. We have been through the centuries the friends of the

Sultan (may God grant his desires) and the enemies of his enemies. But, as for the Mamluks, have they ever not been in revolt against the Sultan's authority, which even now they disown?

Thrice happy those who shall be for us! They will prosper both in fortune and in rank. Happy those who shall be neutral! They will have time to learn to know us, and they will range themselves beside us.

But woe, threefold woe to those who take up arms for the Mamluks and fight against us! For them there will be no hope: they will perish.

The Egyptian scholar and jurist al-Jabarti responded with a lengthy letter to the Egyptian people, which explained Napoleon's letter according to his own interpretations:

Here is an explanation of the incoherent words and vulgar constructions put into this miserable letter.

His statement 'In the name of God, the merciful, the Compassionate ... etc.' In mentioning these three phrases there is an indication that the French agree with the three religions, but at the same time they do not agree with them, nor with any religion. They are consistent with the Muslims in stating the formula 'In the name of God,' in denying that He has a son or an associate. They disagree with the Muslims in rejecting the mission of Muhammad. They agree with the Christians in most of their words and deeds but disagree with them by not mentioning the Trinity and furthermore by killing their priests and destroying their churches...

... Their statement 'On behalf of the French republic, etc.' means that their proclamation is sent from their Republic, because they have no chief or sultan with whom they all agree, whose function is to speak on their behalf. For when they rebelled against their sultan six years ago and killed him, the people agreed unanimously that there was not to be a single ruler, but that their state, territories, laws and administrations of their affairs should be in the hands of the intelligent and wise among them. They made this the foundation and basis of their system. Their term 'liberty' means that they are not slaves like the Mamluks...

... They follow this rule: great and small, high and low, male and female are all equal. Sometimes they break this rule according to their whims and inclinations or reasoning. Their women do not veil themselves and have no modesty. Whenever a Frenchman has to perform an act of nature, he does so wherever he happens to be, even in full view of people...

... As for his statement 'destroyed the Pope,' by this deed they have gone against the Christians as has already been pointed out. So those people are opposed to both Christians and Muslims, and do not hold to any religion...

Notes:

Napoleon's letter

Bey (2nd paragraph) was a title held by the Mamluk rulers.

Georgia and Caucasia (3rd paragraph) are places in Central Asia where many of the new Mamluk recruits came from.

Paragraph 9: A **Qadi** is an Islamic judge, a **Sheikh** is a clan or tribal leader, and an **imam** is a prayer-leader or the title for the head of a mosque.

The Pope (10th paragraph) refers to Pope Pius VI, who had governed a vast section of the Italian peninsula, but lost a large amount of territory to the French armies commanded by Napoleon in 1796.

The knights of Malta (10th paragraph) were remnants of the Knights Templar, who followed the Crusaders to the Middle East, and tried to identify holy relics.

Al-Jabarti's Response

The three religions (2nd paragraph) refer to Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

Al-Jabarti's reference to the **French rebellion against their sultan** (2nd paragraph) is a reference to the French revolution, which actually took place in 1789, or 9 years before the invasion. Al-Jabarti is referring to the execution of Louis XVI in 1792, which he has associated with the rebellion.

Questions

Now, try to answer the following questions based on your reading of these two excerpts.

- 1) What is the purpose of Napoleon's message? Why did Napoleon have it written and distributed throughout Egypt?
- 2) How does Napoleon present the French army? How does he justify their presence in Egypt?
- 3) What do you think Napoleon's intentions were in having a difference between the French and Arabic versions of his letter? (See 9th paragraph)
- 4) What is the tone of al-Jabarti's response? Does he accept Napoleon's message or not? Why?
- 5) Does al-Jabarti appear to trust the French? Why or why not? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
- 6) What do you think the French reaction to al-Jabarti's response would have been?

Teacher's notes:

Napoleon's message to the Egyptians was supposed to inspire the Egyptians to rise up against the Mamluks. Napoleon had it written in a style that he thought would approximate traditional Islamic writing, however, there are many Christian-inspired phrases throughout the text -- particularly the reference to supporters being "thrice happy," which comes from the concept of blessings from each component of the holy trinity.

Even in this text, it is apparent that Napoleon is fixated on the distant past of ancient Egypt. "Once there were among you great cities, great canals, a great commerce. What has destroyed this if not ... the Mamluks?" What Napoleon is ignoring is that the Mamluks brought Egypt its period of great literary and culture output, and it was the invasion by the Ottoman Sultan, whom he exalts in paragraph 9, that led to Egypt's cultural stagnation. Egyptians would know this; Napoleon, presumably, did not. His bragging about his exploits in Italy against the pope and in Malta would have fallen on deaf ears: it is unlikely that the Egyptians would have known or cared about these achievements.

Napoleon's wording in the Arabic version of his text was constructed with the hope that the Egyptians would see him as a savior to Islam, and rally around him. However, the Muslim Egyptians did not believe that a Christian could be the savior of Islam, nor did they believe that Napoleon was sincere when he described himself as a Muslim. Although Napoleon was sincere in his desire, his soldiers were not, and their actions during the Egyptian campaign alienated the Egyptian population completely, removing whatever small chance there might have been for Napoleon to win allies.

1) Napoleon is trying to rally the Egyptians to his side, and to convince them not to support the Mamluks who rule Egypt. Because word of mouth would be so strong, the message is an attempt to communicate directly to the Egyptian people what the French are trying to accomplish.

2) Napoleon presents himself and the French army as the liberators of Egypt from tyranny and oppression. He uses a flimsy excuse about the mistreatment of French merchants as a justification for the intervention in Egypt.

3) Napoleon was trying to present himself as sympathetic and friendly to the Egyptians. To the Egyptians, being a "friend of the Muslims" is not as strong as being "a true Muslim," whereas Napoleon's troops might have been alarmed if they thought their leader had converted to Islam. Therefore, two different versions: one in Arabic for the Egyptians, one in French for the troops. The likelihood that any of the French soldiers could have read the Arabic is miniscule.

4) Al-Jabarti's tone is one of mocking disbelief. He believes that Napoleon is a wicked individual, that his message may be honest, but that his mission is of a false nature. In parts of the text not reprinted here, he does not pass judgement on the honesty of Napoleon's intentions, but rather on Napoleon's intentions as a whole, which he views as fraudulent and dishonest.

5) Al-Jabarti clearly does not trust the French. From the text, he makes repeated references to the French destroying churches and killing priests, and their campaign against the Pope. If the French treat other Europeans, other Christians this way, then what hope is there for the non-Christian, non-European Egyptians?

6) Throughout the French occupation, al-Jabarti is one of their loudest opponents. The French view him as a nuisance more than anything else. At one point, he is arrested, and continues his anti-French campaign even from inside prison.