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Proclamations, Speeches and Letters of Napoleon Buonaparte During His Campaign of Egypt 1-8

Trent Dailey-Chwalibog

Brittany Gignac

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PROCLAMATIONS,

SPEECHES AND LETTERS

OF

NAPOLEON BUONAPARTE

DURING HIS CAMPAIGN OF EGYPT

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A WORD OF ENIGMA.

*Pars mala, non bona pars! dicent te tempora; quare*

*Prælia concludet sors mala, non bona sors.*

*Albionum ad littus frangetur denique victrix*

*Gallia, nec cunctos gens tua dejiciet*

*Destituet mare spes magnas, nec tempora cinget*

*Laurea navalis : quod tibi vaticinor!¹*

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<sup>1</sup> "Part bad, part not good," the times tell you; for the bad lot concluded the battles, not the good lot. In the end, the conquering Gaule will be defeated on the British shores, and your army will not have defeated all of its enemies. The sea will not meet your expectations, and the fleet does not gird the times victorious. This is what I prophesy to you. – T.R. (all subsequent notes are translators' notes unless otherwise indicated)

*Nap. I - Correspondence  
and decrees*

*Nap. I - Egyptian Campaign,  
1798-1799*

Translated by:

TRENT DAILEY-CHWALIBOG  
and  
BRITTANY GIGNAC

*DePaul University, 2009*

## INTRODUCTION

The following texts form a series of letters, speeches, and official proclamations of Napoleon Bonaparte during his campaign in Egypt at the turn of the 19th century. Bonaparte, with the title of commander-in chief, joined together both the French army and navy in 1798 to carry out this complex conquest. His intention was to seize Egypt, which was part of the Ottoman Empire, in order to create a French presence in the Middle East, and to protect French trade which was at the time being hurt by British relations with trade authorities in Egypt, the Mamluk Beys. One of the prime reasons for France agreeing to this near-impossible expedition was certainly to gain cultural enrichment from learning more about Middle Eastern life, but more so it was out of the fear that Napoleon's growing power was invoking in the French government. It was their hope that with the commander gone for several years, he would not only end in defeat, but would lose some of his credibility as an authority figure in France. After 3 years of countless defeats and exposure to the Bubonic Plague, the campaign did indeed prove to be unsuccessful. France gained no control over Egypt, nor of the British, yet Napoleon's reputation as a great military leader remained strong, due to the fact that during his campaign he formed his own newspaper that praised his efforts and was periodically sent back to France to inform the people of his so-called brilliant progress. Therefore, despite his failure in Egypt, he was still seen as admirable and was crowned Emperor only a few short years after.

These 8 separate documents are all from the beginning of this legendary campaign, from an inspirational speech to his soldiers before leaving France, to the official statement issued to the Egyptian people after his first attacks against the Mamluk forces, the Battle of the Pyramids. The tone in each text never fails to be optimistic, compassionate, or encouraging, even in his proclamations warning Egyptian officials of his impending actions. This series of statements allows us to see the type of commanding officer that Napoleon Bonaparte truly was, where despite the fact that his personal greed for power was his driving force, he was capable of encouraging his troops and even the people he conquered to all be passionate for a common cause and to trust wholeheartedly in their leader.

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PROCLAMATIONS,

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I.

## SPEECH

*Addressed to the French Army before departing  
from Toulon<sup>2</sup>, May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1798.*

Officers and soldiers, two years ago, I came to be your commanding officer<sup>3</sup>. At that time, you were in the Genoa River<sup>4</sup>, in the greatest of miseries, stripped of

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<sup>2</sup> A city in southern France and large military harbor on the Mediterranean coast; today the site of a large French naval base.

everything, having sacrificed even your most prized possessions, all for the sake of your mutual livelihood. I promised to have your miseries put to an end, I guided you to Italy, from there, everything worked in your favor. Have I not kept my word?—Well, hear this: you have not yet done enough for our nation, and our nation has not yet done enough for you.

I am now going to lead you to a country where, through your future exploits, you will surpass even those that today astound your admirers, and give back to our nation the services that she rightly expects from an army of invincible men. *I promise to each soldier that, upon the return from this expedition, he will have the means to buy six arpents<sup>5</sup> of land.* You will run from new dangers, and will share them with our brothers, the sailors. This navy, thus far, has not made itself redoubtable to our enemies; their exploits hardly rival yours; they have not had the same opportunities, but the courage of the sailors is equal to yours. They strive for triumph, and they will achieve it with you. Show them this invincible spirit that has everywhere left you victorious; assist in their efforts; get on board with this

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<sup>3</sup> Bonaparte had been nominated commander-in-chief of the *armée d'Orient* on March 5<sup>th</sup> 1798.

<sup>4</sup> A river in Genoa, Italy; Reference to Bonaparte's Italian Campaign in 1796.

<sup>5</sup> A pre-metric French unit of measurement; 1 arpent is equal to 180 French feet (of approximately 32 centimeters each).

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intelligence that is characteristic of those who are entirely animated and devoted to the sake of the same cause. They have, like you, acquired the right to national recognition, in the difficult art of the sea. Learn the maneuvers of the deck, become the terror of our enemies on land and at sea; imitate, in that regard, the Roman soldiers who knew how to combat both Carthage on land and the Carthaginian fleets.



II.

PROCLAMATION

May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1798.

Soldiers, you are one of the wings of the English army; you have fought this war on mountains, plains and by siege; all that is left for you is maritime war. The Roman legions, that you have at times emulated but not yet equaled, combated Carthage time and time again on this very sea and in the Zama plains. Victory never eluded them, because they were unremittingly brave, patient in tolerating fatigue, disciplined and united.

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Soldiers, Europe has her eyes set on you. You have great destinies to fulfill, battles to pursue, danger and fatigue to conquer; you will do more than you have ever done for the prosperity of our nation, for the happiness of mankind, and for your own glory. Soldiers, sailors, infantrymen, gunmen and cavalrymen, may we unite! Remember that on the day of battle, you need one another! Soldier-sailors, you have been thus far neglected; today the Republic's<sup>6</sup> greatest concern is for you; you will be worthy of the army to which you belong. Since its birth, the spirit of liberty that made the Republic the arbitrator of Europe, has also wanted to be the arbitrator of the waters and of more distant lands!



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<sup>6</sup> Shortened from the French First Republic, *La République Française*; the government in place in France from 1792 to 1804.

## III.

## PROCLAMATION

June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1798.

Soldiers, you are about to take on a conquest whose effects on civilization and world commerce are incalculable. You will bring England a most successful yet delicate attack—before delivering the final blow. We will endure some taxing marches, we will engage in many battles, we will succeed in all of our ventures; fate is on our side. The Mamluk Beys<sup>7</sup>, who exclusively favor English commerce, who vexed our merchants and tyrannize the unfortunate people of the Nile valley, will cease to exist shortly after our arrival. The people with whom we are going to live are Mohammedans<sup>8</sup>; their first article of faith is this: there is no other God than

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<sup>7</sup> Mamluk: applies to soldiers who converted to Islam and served its religious officials between the 9th and 16th centuries, eventually seized power for themselves and became referred to as an ethnic group; Bey: a Turkish title for "chieftain" or "lord", equivalent to a Duke in Europe.

<sup>8</sup> A term used to show relation to either the religion of Islam or to the Prophet Muhammad; is now largely rejected by the Muslim world and is superseded by "Muslim" or "Islamic".

God, and Muhammad is His Prophet. Do not contradict them; behave with them as we did with the Jews, and with the Italians; show respect for their Muftis<sup>9</sup> and their Imams<sup>10</sup>, as you have for Rabbis and Bishops. For the ceremonies that read from the Qur'an, and for the Mosques, show the same *tolerance* that you have shown for the convents and the synagogues, for the religions of Moses and of *Jesus Christ*. The Roman legions protected all religions. Here you will find different practices from those in Europe; you must grow accustomed to them. Where we are going, the people treat their women differently than we do, but in all countries, he who rapes is a savage. Pillage brings wealth to only a small number of men; it dishonors us; it destroys our resources; it makes enemies of those it is in our interest to have as friends. The first city we will encounter was built by Alexander. With each step we will forge great memories, worthy of inspiring the competitive nature of the French.—From the headquarters, *aboard the Orient*, June 21<sup>st</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> An Islamic scholar who is an interpreter or expounder of Islamic law.

<sup>10</sup> An Islamic leadership position, often the leader of a mosque and of the community; the one who leads the prayer during Islamic gatherings.

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IV.

LETTER

*Addressed to the Pasha of Egypt,*  
June 20<sup>th</sup> 1798.

The Executive Directory<sup>11</sup> of the French Republic has addressed the Sublime Port<sup>12</sup> several times, to request punishment of the Beys of Egypt, who devastated French merchants with trials and tribulations. But the Sublime Port declared that the Beys, capricious and avaricious men, ignored the principles of Justice. Not only did she not condone the insults they made on her kind, old friends, the French, but she even withdrew her protection. The French Republic decided to send a strong army to put an end to the Egyptian Beys' larceny, as it was obligated to do several times this century, against the Beys of Tunisia

<sup>11</sup> A body of five Directors (Jean-François Rewbell, Paul François Jean Nicolas, Louis Marie de la Révellière-Lépaux, Lazare Nicolas Marguerite Carnot, and Etienne-François Le Tourneur) that held executive power in France between 1795 and 1799.

<sup>12</sup> The open court of the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, led by the Grand Vizier; refers to the gates (*portes*) of the Palace.

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and of Algeria. You, who should be commanding the Beys, while they occupy Cairo without any authority or

power over them, surely you await my arrival with pleasure. You, without doubt, have been informed that I do not come to oppose the Qur'an or the Sultan. You know that the French nation is the one and only ally the Sultan has in Europe. Therefore come join me, and with me curse the impious race that is the Beys.—*Aboard the Orient*, June 20<sup>th</sup>.



V.

LETTER

*To the commander of the Harbor of Alexandria,*  
July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1798.

The Beys have smothered our merchants with vexation; I come to ask for retribution. Tomorrow, I will be in Alexandria; you need not worry in the slightest, for you belong to our good friend the Sultan; act accordingly. But if you display even the slightest hostility toward the French army, I will treat you as an enemy, and you will

be to blame—for this is far from my heart's intention.—  
*Aboard the Orient*, July 3<sup>rd</sup>.

## VI.

## PROCLAMATION

*Published in Arabic after arriving in Egypt.*

For some time now, the Beys who govern Egypt, have insulted the French nation and have excluded our merchants; the time for retribution has come. For too long now, this bevy of slaves, bought in the Caucasus and in Georgia, has tyrannized the most beautiful part of the world; but God, on whom all depends, has ordered that their empire be brought to an end. People of Egypt, they will tell you that I come to destroy your religion—do not believe it. Tell them I come to restore your rights, to punish the usurpers, and that I respect God, His Prophet Muhammad, and the Qur'an, far more than do the Mamluks. Tell them that all men are equal in the eyes of God. Only wisdom, talent and virtue set a difference between us. And yet, what wisdom, what talents, and what virtues set the Mamluks apart, so that they might claim for themselves all that makes life sweet and

enjoyable? Is there a fine land? It belongs to the Mamluks. Is there a fine slave, a fine horse, or a fine home? All of it belongs to the Mamluks. If they claim Egypt as their farm, may they provide the lease that God has written for them.

But God is just and merciful to the people. All Egyptians will be called forward to manage all places. The wisest, most educated and most virtuous of them will govern, and the people will be happy. In the past, there were among you great cities, large canals and strong commerce. What destroyed it all, if it was not the avarice, the injustice and the tyranny of the Mamluks? Caliphs<sup>13</sup>, Sheikhs<sup>14</sup>, Imams, Chorbajis<sup>15</sup>, tell the people *that we are friends of true Muslims. Was it not us who destroyed the Pope, who demanded that war be waged against the Muslims? Was it not us who destroyed the chevaliers of Malta<sup>16</sup>, because those fools believed that God wanted them to wage war against the Muslims? Was it not us who have for centuries been friends of His*

<sup>13</sup> An Islamic leader in a community of Islam; means "successor", that is, successor to the Prophet Muhammed

<sup>14</sup> A word or honorific term in Arabic that literally means "elder"; used to designate an elder of a tribe, a revered wise man, or an Islamic scholar.

<sup>15</sup> A person who is very rich and elite; literally means "soup server" in Turkish and refers to "chorba", a kind of thick soup or stew that supposedly only the rich can afford to eat.

<sup>16</sup> Also called the Knights of Malta; part of the Christian organization The Knights Hospitaller that became a religious/military order in defense of Christianity after the First Crusade; sent to Malta in 1565 to expel Muslims and gain a new base from which to possibly launch another religious assault on Europe.



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Highness, the Sultan, (may God fulfill his desires!) and the enemies of his enemies? However, were the Mamluks not the ones who always revolted against the authority of

His Highness, of which they are still incognizant? They indulge only in their own whims. Three times happier will those who join us be; they will prosper both in fortune and in rank. Happy will be those who remain neutral, they will have the time to become acquainted with us, and they will line up with us! But cursed, three times more cursed, will be those that who take up arms for the Mamluks, and fight against us. No, there will be no hope for them, they will perish.

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VII.

LETTER

Addressed to the Sheikhs and Officials of Cairo,
July 24th 1798.

You will see, by the enclosed proclamation, the feelings that move me. Yesterday, the Mamluks were, for the most part, either killed or imprisoned, and I am in pursuit of the few who still remain. Have your boats cross the river from your bank to ours; send me delegation to prove to me your obedience. Have bread, meat, straw, and barley prepared for my army, and be without worry; for nobody desires to contribute to your happiness more than myself.—*Giza*¹⁷, July 24th.

¹⁷ Written as *Gira* in the original text; most probably a mistake.

VIII.

PROCLAMATION

To the people of Cairo.

People of Cairo, your conduct pleases me. You were right in remaining loyal to me. I came here to destroy the Mamluk race, to protect the commerce and nature of this country. May all who are frightened be subdued; may all who have fled return to their homes; may prayer be held today, like always, for I want it to always continue. Fear nothing for your families, your homes, your properties, and above all your religion from your Prophet whom I love. It is urgent to have men in command of the police, so that peace be not disturbed. Thus, there will be a Divan¹⁸ composed of seven people who will meet at the Ver Mosque; there will always be two men near the Major, and four will be busy maintaining public peace, and one overseeing the police.—From the headquarters, in *Giza*.

¹⁸ A high governmental body of an Islamic state.