Al-Jabarti's Napoleon in Egypt

Napoleon in Egypt

AL-JABARTĪ'S CHRONICLE OF THE FRENCH OCCUPATION, 1798

Translation by
Shmuel Moreh

Introduction by
Robert L. Tignor

Markus Wiener Publishing
Princeton & New York

FOR INFORMATION WRITE TO: MARKUS WIENER PUBLISHING, INC.
114 JEFFERSON ROAD, PRINCETON, NJ 08540

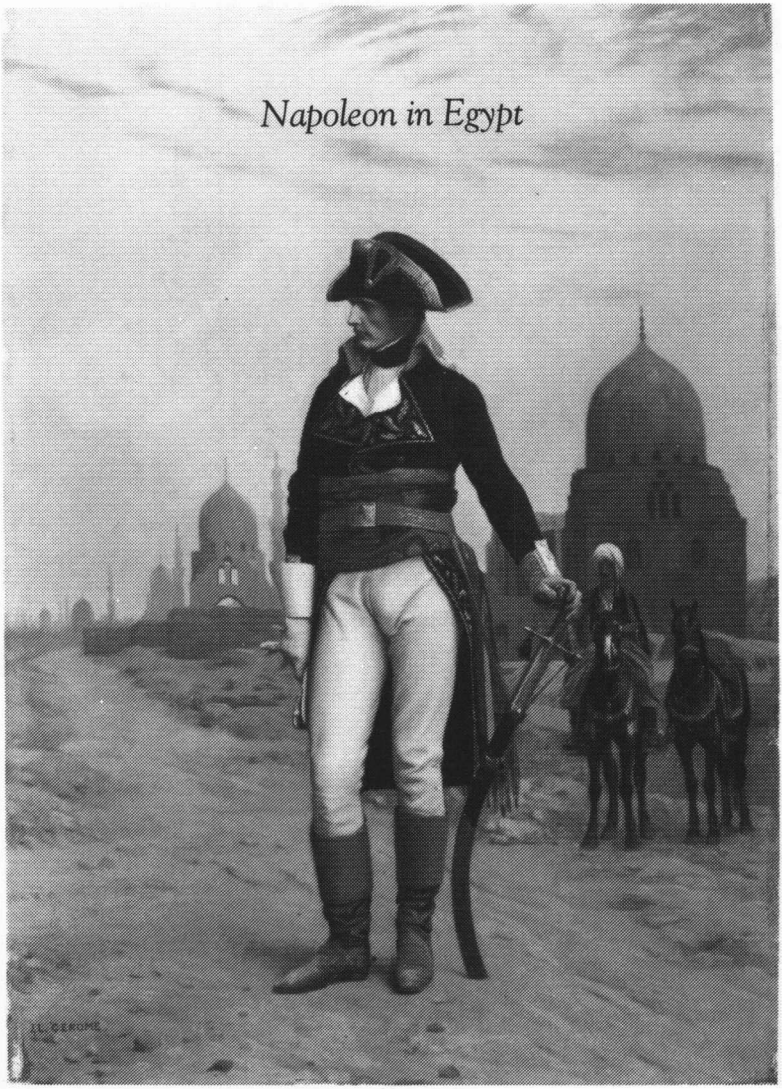
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

JABARTĪ, 'ABD AL-RAHMAN, 1754-1822.
[TARIKH MUDDAT AL-FARANSIS BI-MISR. ENGLISH]
NAPOLEON IN EGYPT: AL-JABARTĪ'S CHRONICLE OF THE FIRST SEVEN MONTHS OF THE FRENCH OCCUPATION OF EGYPT, 1798/TRANSLATION BY SHMUEL MOREH; INTRODUCTION BY ROBERT L. TIGNOR
ISBN 1-55876-069-5 ISBN 1-55876-070-9 (PBK.)
1. NAPOLEONIC WARS, 1800-1815—CAMPIGNS—EGYPT.
2. EGYPT—HISTORY—FRENCH OCCUPATION, 1798-1801. 3. NAPOLEON I, EMPEROR OF THE FRENCH, 1769-1821—MILITARY LEADERSHIP. 4. FRENCH—EGYPT—HISTORY—19TH CENTURY. I. BOURRIENE, LOUIS ANTOINE FAUVELET DE, 1769-1834. MEMOIRS OF NAPOLEON BONAPARTE. 1993.
II. SAID, EDWARD W., SCOPE OF ORIENTALISM. 1993. III. TITLE.
DC225.J3413 1993 92-45614
940.2'7—DC20 CIP

THE PHOTOGRAPHS IN THE TEXT ARE REPRODUCED COURTESY OF THE FOLLOWING SOURCES: PAGE I, THE ART MUSEUM, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY. MUSEUM PURCHASE, JOHN MACLEAN MAGIE AND GERTRUDE MAGIE FUND; ALL OTHER PICTURES, FIRESTONE LIBRARY, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY.

BOOK DESIGN BY CHERYL MIRKIN
THIS BOOK HAS BEEN COMPOSED IN GOUDY OLD STYLE
BY COGHILL BOOK TYPESETTING COMPANY, RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

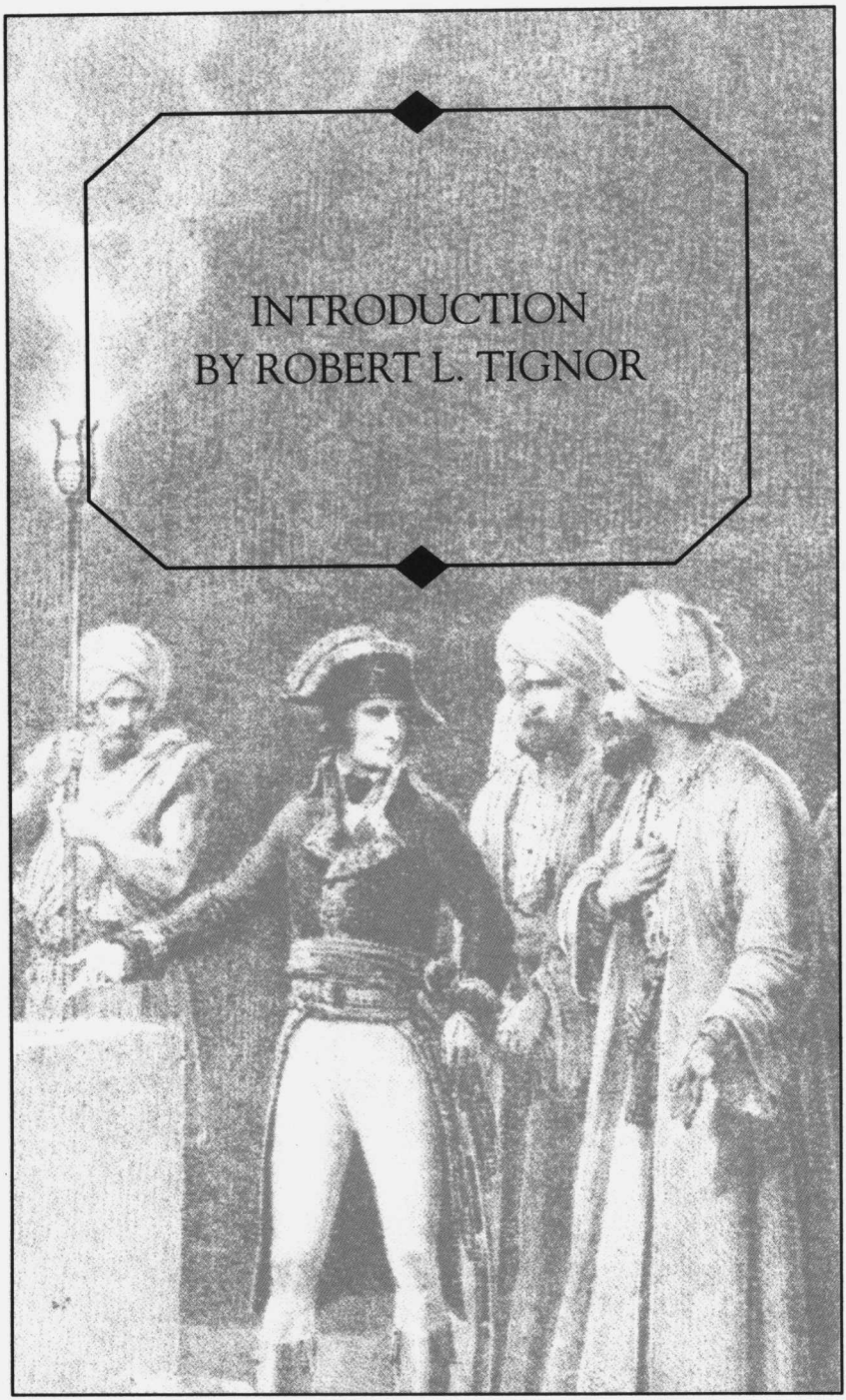
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA ON ACID-FREE PAPER
BY PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

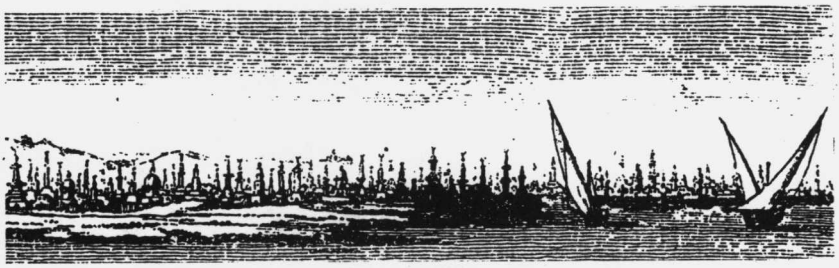


(Painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme, Art Museum, Princeton University)

Double profile of Bonaparte with French bicorne army hat and turban
(Bibliothèque Nationale—Cabinet des Estampes)

CONTENTS

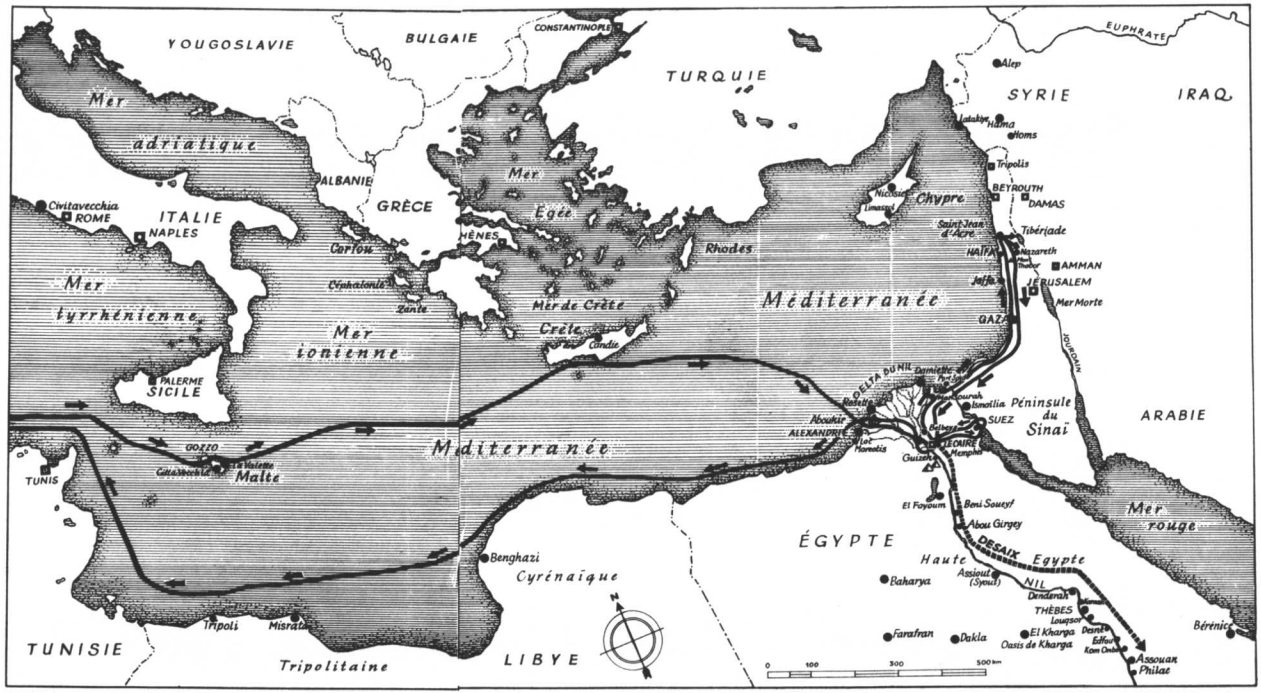

INTRODUCTION
BY ROBERT L. TIGNOR



On May 19, 1798, a massive French fleet set sail from Toulon harbor, bound for Egypt. Joined by smaller contingents from three other ports along the way, the fleet numbered 400 ships and transported 36,000 men. Under the command of France's rising new military officer, Napoleon Bonaparte, only 28 years old but already the most important military leader of the French revolution, the armada appeared off the coast of Alexandria on June 28th. An eyewitness, Nicholas the Turk, claimed that when the people looked at the water they could see only sky and ships and "were seized by unimaginable terror."

The French invasion of Egypt lasted for a brief three years (1798–1801) but constituted a watershed encounter between two civilizations. Though not as dramatic as Columbus's arrival in the New World or Cortés's conquest of Mexico, where a completely isolated segment of the world was brought into contact with Europe, the collision of cultural and political forces was nonetheless impressive. To be sure, Europe and the Muslim East had been in contact since the emergence of Islam in the seventh century. Even at the time of the invasion fifty or sixty French merchants resided in Egypt, and France had posted consular representatives to that country for the purpose of fostering trade. Yet the Egyptian population, in contrast to their Ottoman Turkish suzerains, had only the most rudimentary knowledge of European affairs. The intelligentsia and the ruling elite were largely unaware of the revolutionary events which had determined the French to invade Egypt. For them, then, the encounter with Bonaparte produced startling revelations, not the least of which was that Europe possessed superior military power, sufficient to defeat the vaunted Mamluk military machine, and that an expansionist, imperial, and cultural zeal drove France to possess the valley of the Nile.

The French invaders left the world the most copious records of their conquest of Ottoman Egypt—records which scholars have mined for the histories of the two countries in this period. The most impressive historical



Bonaparte's route to and from Egypt

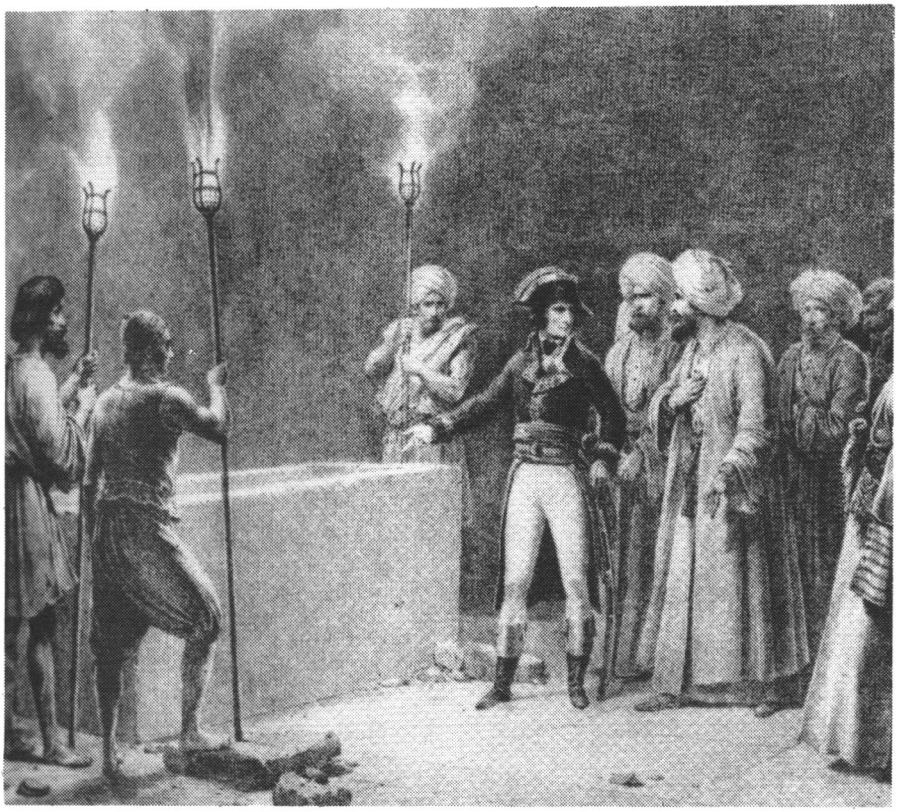
document to come out of the French occupation was the multi-volume *Description de l'Egypte*, which was the handiwork of the large contingent of scholars whom Napoleon had recruited for his conquest and colonization of Egypt.

Often the voices of the invaded are silent. We look in vain for their reactions to the trauma of invasion and occupation. African perceptions of the conquest of the African continent at the end of the nineteenth century would have gone unnoted save for the diligence of later researchers in recording African oral testimony. The Spanish conquest of the Americas in the sixteenth century left only sparse Indian records, in large measure because of the catastrophic loss of Indian life and the systematic destruction of Amerindian culture by Spanish overlords. Fortunately, the French occupation of Egypt produced no such effacement of indigenous accounts. The most important of the Egyptian observations were those set down by Egypt's unrivalled chronicler of the eighteenth century, Abd al-Rahman al-Jabartī.

In all, Jabartī wrote three versions of these cataclysmic years. His first work, entitled *Tārīkh muddat al-Faransīs bi Miṣr* and available in translation here, covers only a little more than six months of the French invasion. It offers Jabartī's immediate, often highly emotional responses, to the early days of French rule. It expresses the author's cynicism toward Napoleon's efforts to curry favor with the local population by claiming to be sympathetic to Islam while at the same time it reveals much admiration for French learning. Jabartī's second account, *Maẓhar al-taqdīs bi-zawāl dawlat al-Faransis*, would appear to have been written to put the author in the good graces of the Muslim rulers contending for power in the wake of the French withdrawal. It rejected the French occupation in all of its manifestations. The final study, the famous *Ajā'ib al-āthar fil-tarājim wal-Akhbar*, chronicled the history of Egypt from 1688 until 1821. A portion of this work presented, in a dispassionate tone, the events of the French occupation.

We know little of the life of Ottoman Egypt's most illustrious historian, save that he was born into a family of *ulama* (religious scholars) in 1753 and died in 1825 or 1826. His most important work, *Ajā ib*, was long forbidden publication because of its many criticisms of Muhammad Ali, Viceroy of Egypt from 1805 until 1849 and founder of Egypt's ruling dynasty. Only at the end of 1870 was the ban on its publication lifted, and only in 1879–80 was the entire work published.

The *Muddat* commences in the middle of June, 1798, with news of the arrival of a British fleet under the command of Horatio Nelson off the coast of Alexandria. Nelson had come in search of the French fleet under Napo-



Visit to the Pyramids of Gizeh

leon, and the two fleets had passed in the night without encountering each other. The account leaves off in December, 1798, with Napoleon still trying to secure his hold over a recalcitrant Egyptian population. Although it deals with only a brief period in the French occupation, it treats all of the most important themes of French rule, including the military clash with the Mamluks, the French efforts to organize a settled and collaborative government in Egypt, and the first and most aggressive uprising of the Cairene population against the French. It also presents, admittedly from the perspective of the author, the attitude of local inhabitants toward the French colonizers.

The decision to occupy Egypt did not spring full-blown from the fertile brain of Napoleon Bonaparte. France's economic interests in Egypt were rising in the eighteenth century, by the end of which Egypt was France's leading trading partner, outside of the sugar islands of the Caribbean. French

diplomats had proposed several schemes for conquering and colonizing Egypt well before the French revolution. It fell to Napoleon, however, to put these ideas into practice. This he did with the flair and comprehensiveness for which he was already well known. Following his expulsion of the British from Toulon, his suppression of a Parisian royalist uprising against the Convention, and his military triumphs in North Italy in 1796, the French Directory named him to command the Army of England. Although this army was ostensibly intended to conquer England, Napoleon realized the folly of such an effort, given the British command of the seas. He proposed, instead, to strike at British interests in India and throughout Asia by invading Egypt. Having secured the assent of the Directory, he assembled an armada and a powerful army of occupation. Nor did he neglect the cultural aspects of the undertaking. The French revolution had propelled an arsenal of new political, cultural, and social ideals into world history. In selecting a group of scientists to aid the colonization effort, Napoleon chose leading men of science who in addition to their technical skills were suffused with the ideals of the French revolution.

In 1798 Egypt was still formally part of the Ottoman empire. In reality, Mamluk military households ruled the country. Ottoman forces had conquered Egypt in 1517 and incorporated it as a prized possession. The Ottomans continued to exercise suzerainty over the country in the eighteenth century. They appointed a political representative to the country and received annual tribute payments. But Ottoman political and military influence was waning. The seven Ottoman military corps, including the feared Janissaries, or military slaves recruited from Christian families in the Balkans, had yielded military supremacy to the Mamluks.

Exactly when the Mamluks established political supremacy in Ottoman Egypt is not clear. These military households increased their numbers by taking young boys away from their parents, introducing them into Mamluk households as slave recruits, and preparing them for political and military service. These slave levies were drawn at first overwhelmingly from the Caucasus but later from the Sudan and other parts of Africa as well. As Jabartī's account indicates, the Mamluks were not the only influential group. Through ties of wealth they had aligned themselves with merchant and *ulama* groups. Egypt's ruling elite constituted a tiny fraction of the total population. The vast majority were peasants and artisans who had little say in governance and were viewed by their rulers mainly as taxpayers.

Napoleon's military defeat of the Mamluk forces, just outside Cairo, at the so-called battle of the pyramids, sent shock waves throughout the Muslim

East. The French force had the advantage of numbers—25,000 against a probable 15,000. But the Mamluk profession was warfare. As they marched out to meet the French, one of their princes boasted: "Let the Franks come; we shall crush them beneath our horses' hooves." The Mamluk warriors were, if nothing else, a spectacle to behold. Their elaborate and resplendent military regalia was intended to evoke fear in their adversaries. Literally armed to the teeth, they carried javelins, sabers, battle axes, bows, and muskets and were surrounded by a retinue of followers whose function was to assist rather than to fight. Nonetheless, they proved no match for the superior weaponry, advanced military tactics, and determination of the French forces. By the time the battle ended, the Mamluk forces were in disarray. Egypt's two rulers, Ibrahim Bey and Murad Bey, had fled. Ibrahim had retreated to Syria and Murad to Upper Egypt. Shortly after the conflict, the French entered Cairo, and Napoleon installed himself in the house of a local notable, Muhammad Bey al-Alfi.

From the outset Napoleon intended to colonize Egypt. To do so he sought the support of the local population. As a first step he issued a proclamation, contained in Jabartī's account. Asserting that the French had entered the country not to destroy Islam but to liberate its inhabitants from Mamluk tyranny, Napoleon hoped to align himself with Egypt's merchants, *ulama*, and lesser notables. The proclamation also made clear, as did subsequent French actions, that resistance to French authority would be met with stern reprisals. Napoleon followed his proclamation by creating local governing councils, *diwans*, which, while advisory and subordinate to French military commanders, had local Egyptian representation. The first *diwan* was established in Cairo. Additional councils were set up in each of the sixteen administrative districts into which the French divided Egypt. Later, Napoleon created a grand *diwan*, which drew representatives from all of Egypt's districts as well as Cairo and which selected Shaykh al-Sharqawi as its President.

The invasion and the efforts of the French to create a settled administration in Egypt provoked determined opposition among the local population. The French task was rendered even more difficult when the Ottoman Sultan proclaimed a holy war and called upon the local inhabitants to rise against the occupiers. Jabartī's account suggests that a number of oppressive French policies alienated the Egyptian population and deepened the antagonism against the occupying force. French military and administrative plans were costly. The new rulers were compelled to place heavy tax demands on the people. They also forced merchants to advance them funds, and they confis-

cated the property of the Mamluks as well as properties for which Egyptian claimants failed to produce adequate records.

Jabartī's account of the October 21–22 Cairo uprising offers a valuable Egyptian perspective on these events. The *Muddat* leaves no doubt that *ulama*, like Jabartī himself, distrusted Napoleon's proclamations and rallied the people against the French. Using mosques as meeting places, the rebel leaders attacked the French for their fiscal policies but also pointed out the widespread French infringements of traditional rights and Islamic customs. Yet the rebellion failed. It was unable to win the support of all of Cairo but was confined to a few severely disaffected quarters where hot-headed recalcitrants filled the population with rumor and inaccurate information. The French response was quick and severe. Stationing their cannons on high ground and raining down fire on the most rebellious locations, including even the venerated al-Azhar mosque, the French brought the resistance to an end within 36 hours. Even after suppressing overt opposition, the French carried out further acts of punishment, including executions, against those individuals deemed responsible for inciting the rebellion or joining it.

The short-lived October 21–22 uprising proved a harbinger for future Franco-Egyptian relations. Although Jabartī recounts no further acts of opposition in the *Muddat*, in fact French forces were harassed during the remainder of their stay in Egypt.

At this point the narrative breaks off. The French were still attempting to complete their control of the country and had even embarked upon a campaign to conquer the holy places and Syria. There, in Syria, Napoleon suffered his first military reversal. At the city of Acre the French forces ground to a halt. Ottoman troops, the British fleet, and the ravages of disease wreaked havoc among the French forces and persuaded Napoleon to lead his army back to Egypt. By the time he reached the valley of the Nile he had lost 2,000 of the 13,000 who had embarked upon the campaign. Another 3,000 had suffered casualties.

No doubt Napoleon intended to fulfill his mission in Egypt and establish a full-fledged French presence there. But he kept an eye on events in France. By the middle of 1799 he realized that his army was by now trapped in Egypt. The British had destroyed the French fleet off Abukir on August 1, 1798, and the Ottomans had landed troops in Egypt to oppose the French. At home France had lost much territory to its adversaries. Determined to play a large role on France's political and military stage he left Egypt. Keeping his plans secret from all but a few trusted individuals, Napoleon stole away from Cairo on August 18, 1799, embarked from Alexandria on August 22,

Portrait of Kléber (Drawing by E. Charpentier)

and after 47 days at sea arrived back in France. Within three months of his departure from Egypt he had seized power in France. He established himself as the First Consul of the newly established Consulate government which had replaced the Directory. While thousands of his soldiers remained trapped in Egypt amid an increasingly hostile population and suffered greatly from disease, the young French general had set his course toward the mastery of Europe.

At his departure Napoleon placed Jean-Baptiste Kléber in command. He did not inform Kléber of this decision, no doubt because he knew of Kléber's growing hostility to the Egyptian venture and to his own handling of affairs there. Once in command Kléber sought but one goal—an agreement with his Ottoman and British adversaries by which he would be permitted to evacuate the Egyptian army to France. An agreement, struck on January 24, 1800, and initialed by the English naval commander, Sidney Smith, as well as the Ottomans, was repudiated in London. Unable to leave the country, Kléber turned his attention to securing dominion over Egypt. Even here he was frustrated, and on June 6 he was assassinated by a religious enthusiast from Aleppo. His successor was Jacques-Abdallah Menou, a man who had converted to Islam while in Egypt so that he could marry an Egyptian woman. Unable to maintain the French military position in Egypt, Menou had to accede to British surrender terms. On July 31, 1801, the French forces began to leave Egypt; the last soldier had departed by the end of September. The brief but important French occupation was brought to a close.

Modern scholarship regards the French invasion and occupation of Egypt as opening the modern era in the Arab world. The French forces, the argument runs, exposed the military weaknesses of the region and awakened the educated classes to the learning of the West. To be sure, an occupation lasting a mere three years could not produce far-reaching and fundamental institutional and intellectual changes. Yet by defeating the Mamluk cavalry and sowing confusion among the ruling elements in Egypt the French occupation set in motion a train of events which changed the face of Egypt and the rest of the Middle East. In Egypt itself, an Albanian military adventurer, Muhammad Ali, took advantage of the power vacuum created by the defeat of the Mamluks and the withdrawal of the French. Triumphing over the Ottomans and the remnants of Mamluk military power, Muhammad Ali consolidated his authority in the Nile valley in 1805 and thereafter effected far-reaching, albeit autocratic changes in virtually every arena of Egyptian life. Not surprisingly, he drew freely upon France for technical advice. He