

*France's Pharaonic Fascination*

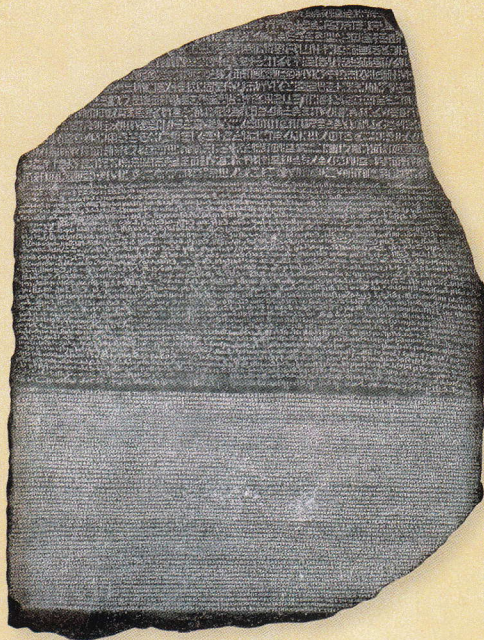
# NAPOLEON IN EGYPT

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Napoleon's Egyptian campaign might have been a military failure, but it was a victory for history. French scholars sent to study Egypt were captivated by its rich culture and kicked off a period of "Egyptomania" in Europe.

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MIGUEL ÁNGEL MOLINERO

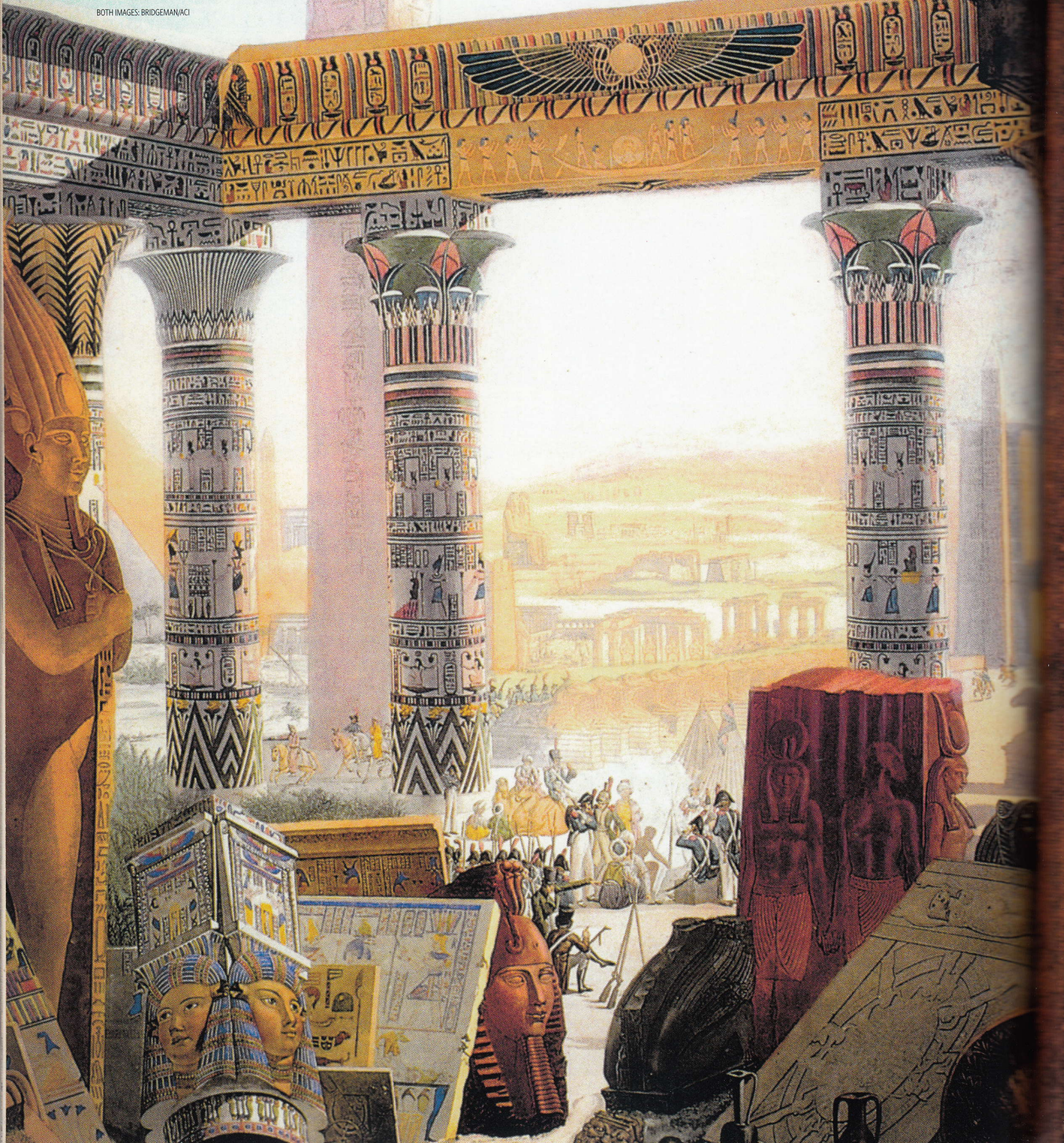


## GLORY OF EGYPT

The fantastic frontispiece from the second edition of the *Description of Egypt* is just one of the many breathtaking illustrations produced by the Egyptian expedition.

Opposite: During the expedition, the Rosetta Stone was discovered by the French but later seized by the British. It is now in the British Museum, London.

BOTH IMAGES: BRIDGEMAN/ACI





MONUMENTAL VIEW, *DESCRIPTION OF EGYPT*, VOLUME 1, 1809

DEA/ALBUM

By the end of the 18th century, France wanted to conquer Egypt. At war with Britain, France sought to disrupt its enemy's dominance of the seas and its trade routes with India; taking control of Egypt would give France a foothold from which to expand in the Mediterranean. An ambitious Corsican general, Napoleon Bonaparte was given command of the mission. Already renowned for his campaigns in Italy, Napoleon led French forces to Egypt in 1798 to fight against the local rulers. Known as the Mamluks, they controlled the North African territory, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire.

While the expedition's chief aim was martial, it had a secondary purpose: to collect scientific and historical information about Egypt, which many in France believed was an ancient civilization equivalent to classical Greece and Rome. Along with 35,000 soldiers, more than 160 scholars and artists traveled to Egypt in 1798. Officially known as the Commission of the Sciences and Arts of Egypt, this group would end up making a greater contribution to history than the French fighting forces. Their careful work, carried out over many years, would give birth to the field of Egyptology in Europe and reveal to the world the history of the grand civilization that had ruled along the Nile for millennia.



### BATTLE OF THE PYRAMIDS

The battle between the French army and local Mamluk troops, on July 21, 1798, took place in Imbabah, farther from the pyramids than this 19th-century painting by François-Louis-Joseph Watteau suggests. Museum of Fine Arts, Valenciennes, France

BRIDGEMAN/ACI



## Soldiers and Scholars

In early July 1798, the French fleet landed near Alexandria and easily captured it. French troops advanced on Cairo and took the city on July 21, after winning the Battle of the Pyramids, also called the Battle of Embabeh. Despite these initial victories, the military mission began to flag. France did not have enough men to establish sufficient garrisons, which limited its military presence to the capital city and certain areas of the Nile Delta. British naval forces were lurking offshore in the Mediterranean and succeeded in sinking the French fleet stationed off the coast of Egypt in August. Napoleon and his forces were effectively stranded. The land campaigns continued with some success, but Napoleon also had to suppress local revolts and losses of men not only to battle but also disease.

In 1799 Bonaparte decided that Egypt held nothing more for him and returned to France, leaving his men under the command of General Jean-Baptiste Kléber. Kléber scored a few victories before his death in June 1800. His successor, General Jacques-François de Menou, faced insurrections in Cairo and attacks from the British that ultimately forced him to sign a capitulation in Alexandria in September 1801. All French troops were allowed to evacuate to Europe.

## Scientific Successes

In stark contrast to the failure of the military mission, the scientific expedition was enjoying tremendous success. Led by two veteran scholars—mathematician Gaspard Monge and chemist Claude-Louis Berthollet (who both served with Napoleon in Italy)—its many participants were at the beginning of their careers. In August 1798 the Institute of Egypt was formally organized in Cairo; Monge was elected its president, and Napoleon, vice president. The institute was organized into four sections: mathematics, literature and fine arts, natural history and physics, and political economics. The institute's founding act stated it was not only to research the nature, economics, and history of Egypt, but also to contribute to advancing the principles of the Enlightenment in Egypt and to assist its government.

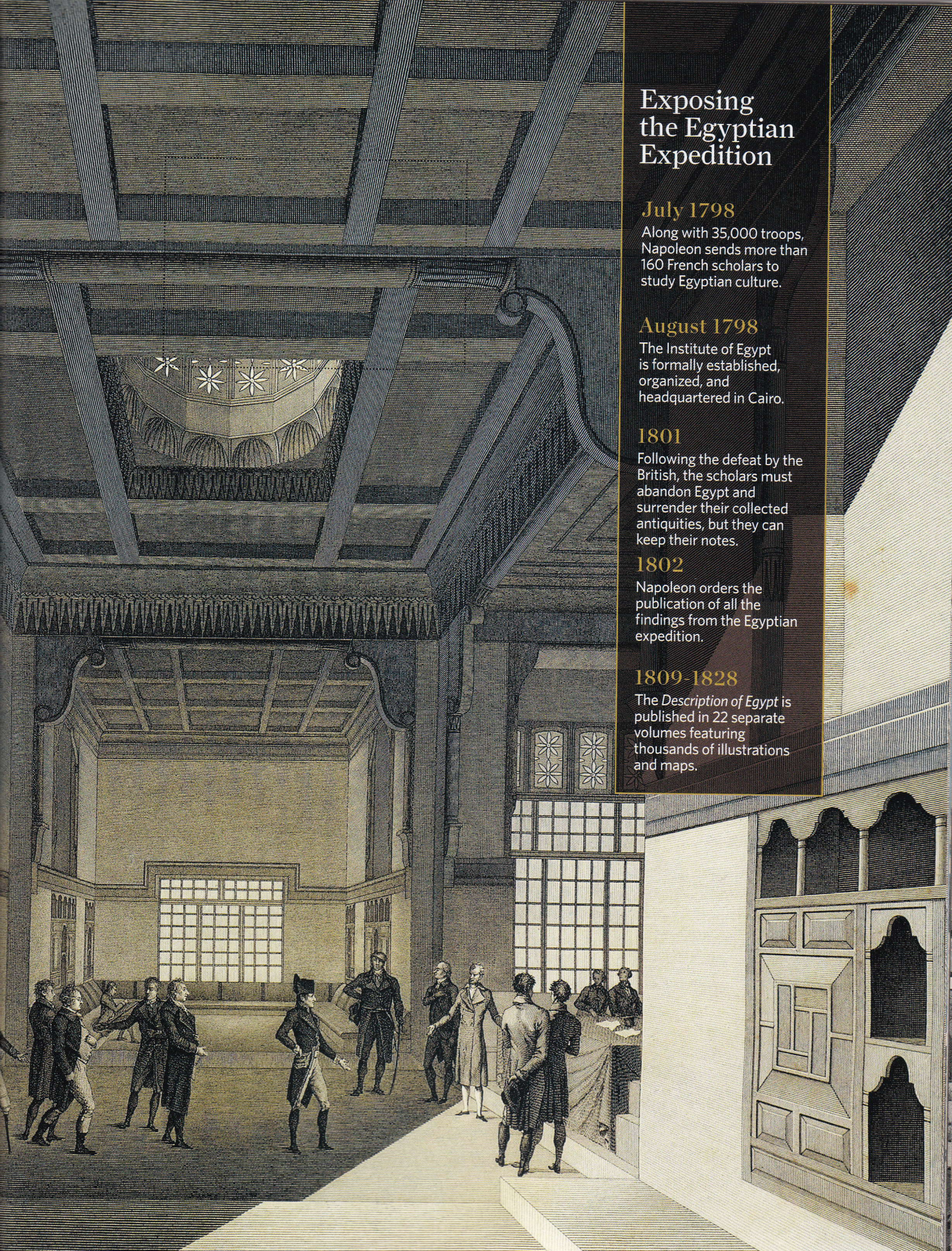
At first, French scholars were posted to the institute's Cairo headquarters, but others began to travel around the country to fulfill their duties. One member, Dominique-Vivant



### *The Institute of Egypt*

The institute's headquarters were established in Cairo at the former residence of Hasan Kashif, a Mamluk chief who had fled after the Battle of the Pyramids. Several rooms in the palace were transformed into a bookstore, a laboratory, an observatory, and a museum of minerals and antiquities. In addition, a botanical garden and small zoo were created on adjoining land. This engraving from the *Description of Egypt* shows Napoleon (center) attending a reception at the institute.

DEA/ALBUM



## Exposing the Egyptian Expedition

### July 1798

Along with 35,000 troops, Napoleon sends more than 160 French scholars to study Egyptian culture.

### August 1798

The Institute of Egypt is formally established, organized, and headquartered in Cairo.

### 1801

Following the defeat by the British, the scholars must abandon Egypt and surrender their collected antiquities, but they can keep their notes.

### 1802

Napoleon orders the publication of all the findings from the Egyptian expedition.

### 1809-1828

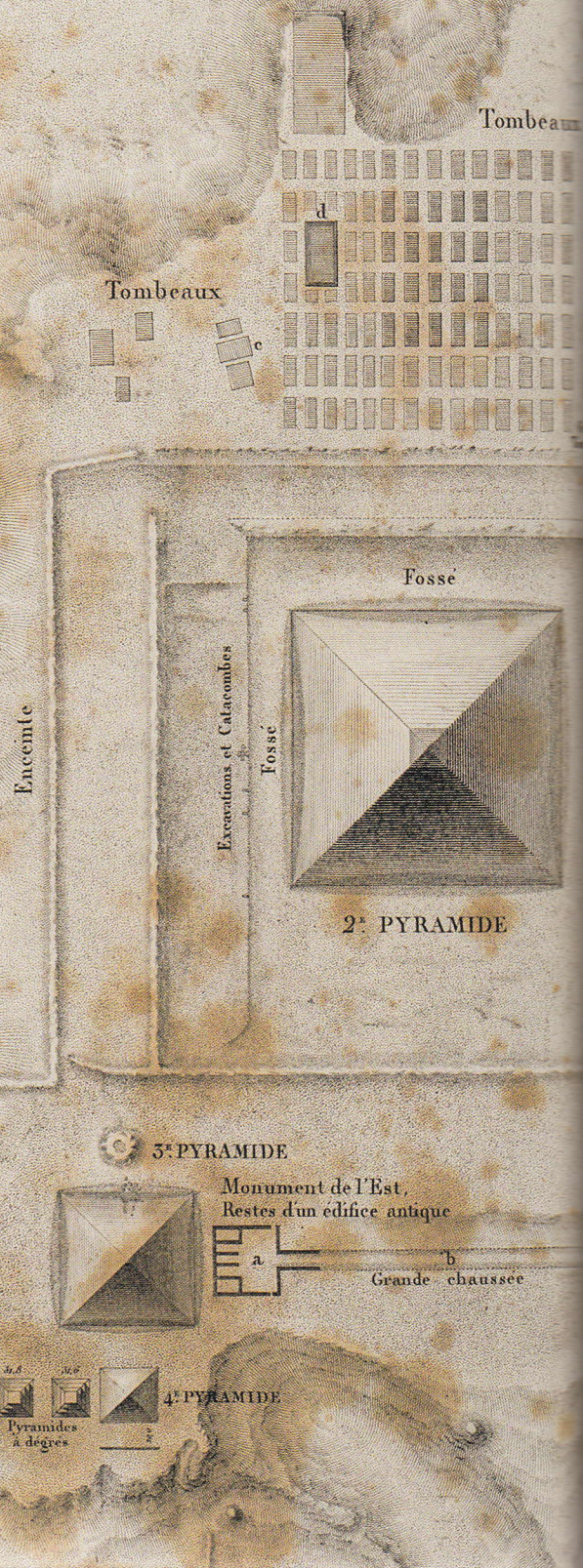
The *Description of Egypt* is published in 22 separate volumes featuring thousands of illustrations and maps.

## Mapping the Pyramids

In the chapter on the Great Pyramids at Giza in the *Description of Egypt*, the engineer-geographer Edme-François Jomard wrote: "Each of the Great Pyramids covers or hides a space so vast that it is impossible at first sight to figure out precisely its respective location. A topographical plan [pictured on this page], raised geometrically, was therefore indispensable for an exact and faithful description of the site. Colonel Jacotin took charge of this task, and I supported him by measuring the sides and heights of the pyramids, as well as the monument to the east and the immense road leading to the third pyramid (the one covered with granite)." *Sable*

BRIDGEMAN/ACI

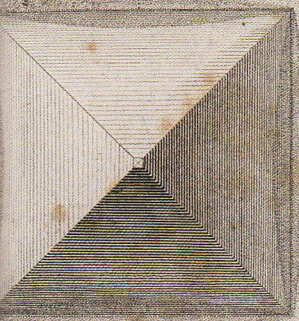
Partie de la chaîne Libyque



Sables

PYRAMIDE

Traces d'un Fosse



GRANDE PYRAMIDE



Pyramides ruinees

Petits Tombeaux

Puits

Pyramides ruinees

Puits

Sables

GRANDE

Sphinx

Catacombe Sculptee

Rochers taillés

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Constructions ruinees

DE

MÉRIDIENNE



Terres cultivées

Terres

des

Limite

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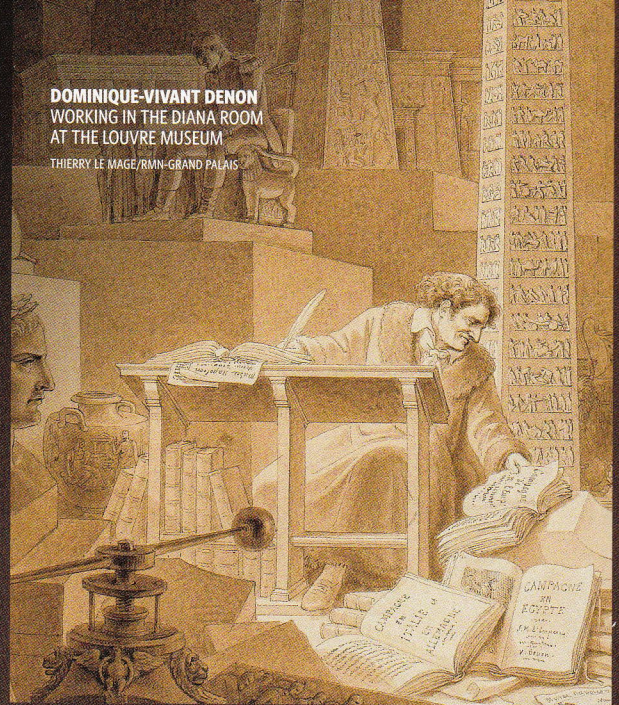
Denon, was an aristocrat and diplomat as well as a writer of libertine novels and an accomplished visual artist. While in France, he had been a regular at the parlors of Joséphine de Beauharnais, the woman who would become Napoleon's first wife. After Napoleon convinced him to join the Egyptian expedition, Denon accompanied General Desaix to Upper Egypt where he sketched and collected data on numerous pharaonic monuments in the region. When Napoleon slipped back to Paris in 1799, Denon went back with him and began to work on a book of his Egyptian adventures.

In 1802 Denon published *Travels in Lower and Upper Egypt*, which became a runaway success. His lively prose mixed the narrative of a military campaign with descriptions of mysterious ancient sites in a faraway land. Denon's illustrations were remarkable for their time. *Travels in Lower and Upper Egypt* contained more illustrations than any other book before it. While there was no precedent for the number, size, and quality of his works, there was also no precedent in terms of the subject matter. The Egyptian monuments he drew—the Colossi of Memnon, the Temple of Hathor, and the Sphinx of Giza—had never been seen in such detail. Their beauty and distinction captivated France, and audiences were hungry for more.

Denon dedicated his work to Napoleon, and the book transformed local opinion. Napoleon went from being associated with the failure of a military campaign to the leader who exposed the might and grandeur of ancient Egypt, a civilization as influential as classical Greece and Rome. Denon became director of the Central Museum of the Arts (the future Louvre Museum) and had all manner of luxury objects designed from the drawings he had brought from Egypt. Tableware, furniture, wallpaper, and other items were decorated with sphinxes, obelisks or palms, exotic images that served as propaganda for Napoleon.

### British Wins, French Losses

After Denon's return from Upper Egypt in 1799, Napoleon sent more scholars to the region for more investigation of Egyptian antiquities. Despite the military turmoil, the French scholars were able to work in relative safety because they were escorted to each monument and guarded



DOMINIQUE-VIVANT DENON  
WORKING IN THE DIANA ROOM  
AT THE LOUVRE MUSEUM  
THIERRY LE MAGE/RMN-GRAND PALAIS

### Changing Views

Dominique-Vivant Denon's *Travels in Lower and Upper Egypt* reflects the transformation that French intellectuals experienced after being exposed to Egyptian art and architecture. A student of neoclassicism, Denon did not have high expectations for the Egyptian temples, but his opinion radically shifted when he saw Egypt's massive monuments: "I finally saw the portico of Hermopolis; and the great masses of its ruins gave me the first image of the splendor of the colossal architecture of the Egyptians: On each rock which composes this building I seemed to see engraved, *Posterity, eternity.*"



VASE MADE IN 1811,  
DECORATED WITH  
A SCENE FROM  
DENON'S *TRAVELS IN  
LOWER AND UPPER  
EGYPT*. PALAZZO  
PITTI, FLORENCE

BRIDGEMAN/ACI

CLEOPATRA'S NEEDLE,  
IN ALEXANDRIA. COLOR  
ENGRAVING FROM  
DENON'S *TRAVELS*. TEXTS  
SHOW THAT DESPITE THE  
NAME, IT WAS ERECTED  
BY THUTMOSE III AT THE  
TEMPLE OF HELIOPOLIS.

BRIDGEMAN/ACI



during their examinations. The researchers took numerous notes, collected various artifacts, and made careful observations and detailed measurements.

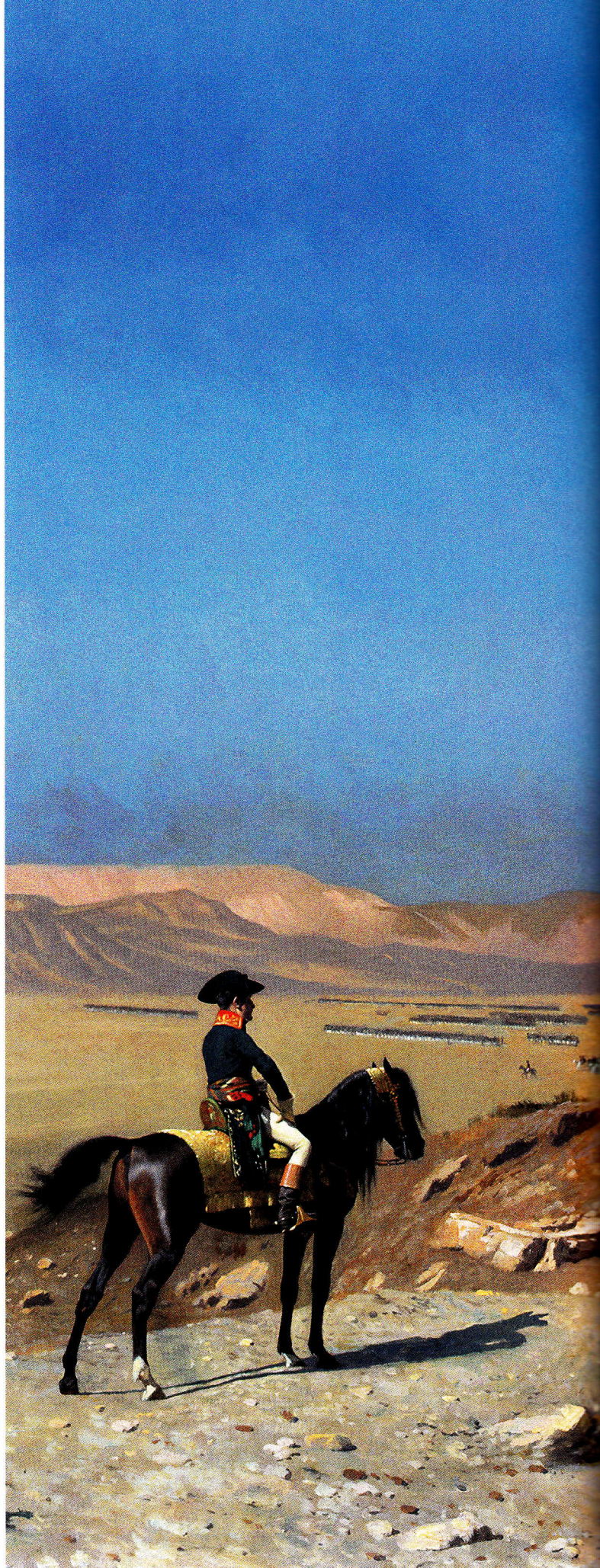
After returning to Cairo, they had hoped to embark immediately for France with their collection, as Napoleon had ordered before leaving the country. But the French surrender to the British changed circumstances: British commanders demanded that the French hand over all the antiquities the commission had collected, including an inscribed black stone stela found by French soldiers in Rashid in June 1799. Although it looked rather unassuming, the appearance of hieroglyphic, demotic, and Greek inscriptions on it were intriguing. The French were forced to give it up (along with everything else), and that is how the famous Rosetta Stone and other Egyptian treasures ended up in British hands.

The commission successfully fought to keep their documentation. French naturalist Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire threatened to burn everything before giving it to the British. As part of his threat, he compared the potential conflagration to be the equal of the loss of the great Library of Alexandria. His gambit worked: The British relented and allowed the French to keep their notes.

### **A Colossal Publication**

A few months after the return of the expeditionaries to France, Napoleon ordered that the investigations of the commission of scholars in Egypt be published in a large printed work. It was a massive undertaking, one that would take years to complete. The resulting multivolume work would feed the French appetite for ancient Egypt, begun by Denon's book.

By 1809 there were 36 people involved in writing the work and as many as one hundred engravers involved in creating illustrations. The plan called for nearly 900 copper plates containing more than 3,000 figures. Geographer Edme-François Jomard was one of the project managers of the massive work and led the committee in charge of assigning topics, receiving drafts, and editing them. The committee also made sure that the text coordinated with the images being created specially for the volume. The system did not differ all that much from today's academic journals.

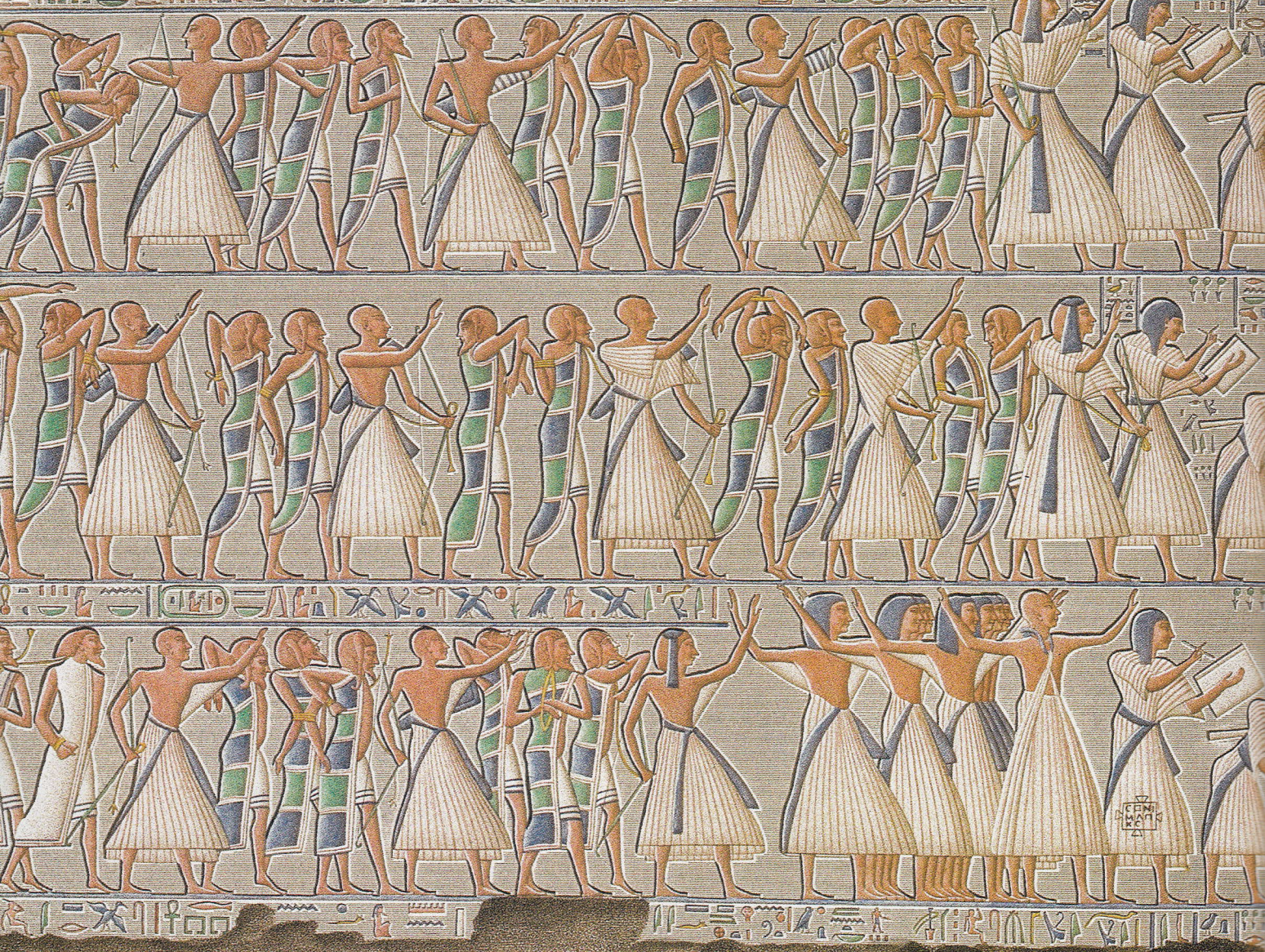


**FACE TO FACE  
WITH GREATNESS**

Jean-Léon Gérôme's painting "Bonaparte Before the Sphinx" captures Napoleon's instinct that the glory of ancient Egypt could be harnessed to exalt French power. Hearst Castle, San Simeon, California

AKG/ALBUM





▲ **RAMSES III OBSERVING FROM HIS WAR CHARIOT AS SCRIBES COUNT PRISONERS.** ILLUSTRATION OF PAINTED RELIEF FROM MEDINET HABU IN THE *DESCRIPTION OF EGYPT*

DANIEL ARNAUDET/RMN-GRAND PALAIS



▲ **MUSICIAN.** A SECTION FROM A RELIEF IN THE TOMB OF RAMSES III IS RENDERED IN GREAT DETAIL IN THE *DESCRIPTION OF EGYPT*.

FINE ART/ALBUM

▶ **WINGED DEITIES** FROM A COFFIN FRAGMENT, FEATURED IN THE *DESCRIPTION OF EGYPT*

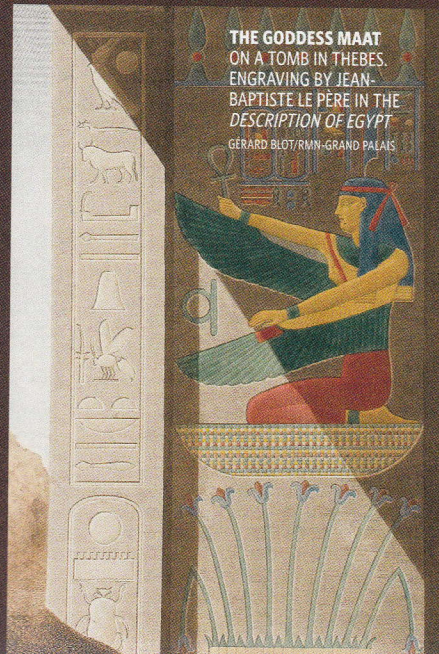
RMN-GRAND PALAIS





### *The Art and Science of Illustrated Works*

Publishing the detailed engraved images in the *Description of Egypt* was a big challenge in the early 19th century. Their creation was only made possible by an ingenious machine invented by Nicolas-Jacques Conté, a chemist and engineer who participated in the expedition to Egypt. On his return in 1803, he was appointed head of the editorial committee for creating the published work. One of his colleagues, Edme-François Jomard, said Conté's engraving machine could perform tasks in two or three days that would have taken a traditional artist as long as six months to finish. Two of his engraving machines were used to create the magnificent illustrations, and between 80 and 100 engravers worked on them.



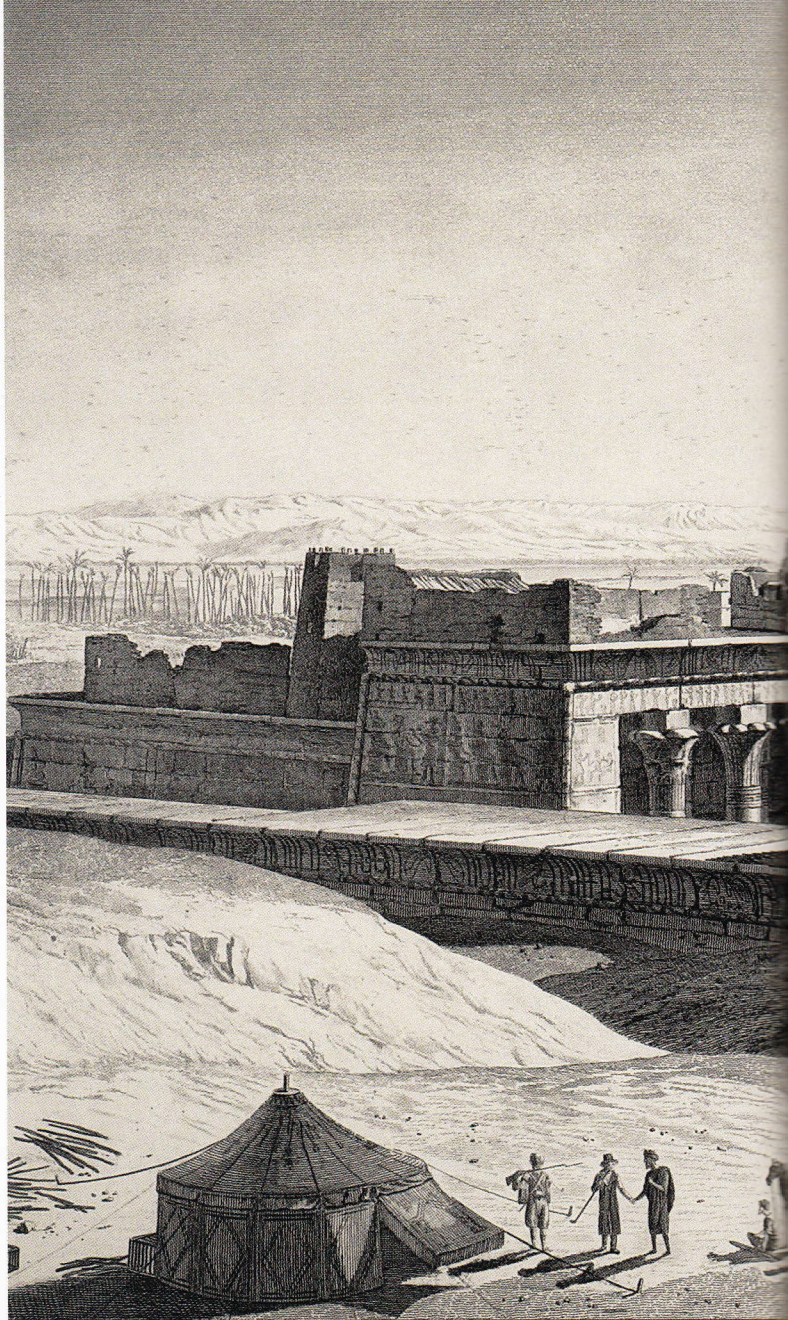
**THE GODDESS MAAT**  
ON A TOMB IN THEBES.  
ENGRAVING BY JEAN-BAPTISTE LE PÈRE IN THE  
*DESCRIPTION OF EGYPT*  
GÉRARD BLOT/RMN-GRAND PALAIS

The publishers had hoped the work would be published all at the same time, but Napoleon, already crowned emperor, was growing impatient. To appease him, they decided to start serially publishing in separate volumes in 1809. *The Description of Egypt, or a Collection of Observations and Research That Was Made in Egypt During the Expedition of the French Army, Published by Orders of His Majesty the Emperor Napoleon the Great* comprises 22 volumes: nine books of text and 13 of plates, illustrations, and maps. Volumes began publishing and continued even after Napoleon was out of power. After the reinstatement of the monarchy in 1814, King Louis XVIII decided to continue work on the publication because it was an obvious badge of French national pride. The team would finish the entire set of works in 1828, after the publication of the maps, which were last to be published because they had once been considered top secret by the government.

Joseph Fourier's preface framed ancient Egypt as a cradle of civilization (a fairly new concept, conceived at the end of the 18th century) where the pyramids rose, the great Greek thinkers had studied, and the great Alexander had ruled. But he also wrote: "This country, which has transmitted its knowledge to so many nations, is currently mired in barbarism," hence the supposed need for the French conquest that was intended—so it was affirmed—to return to Egypt the benefits of a civilization that it had itself created.

### Strengths and Weaknesses

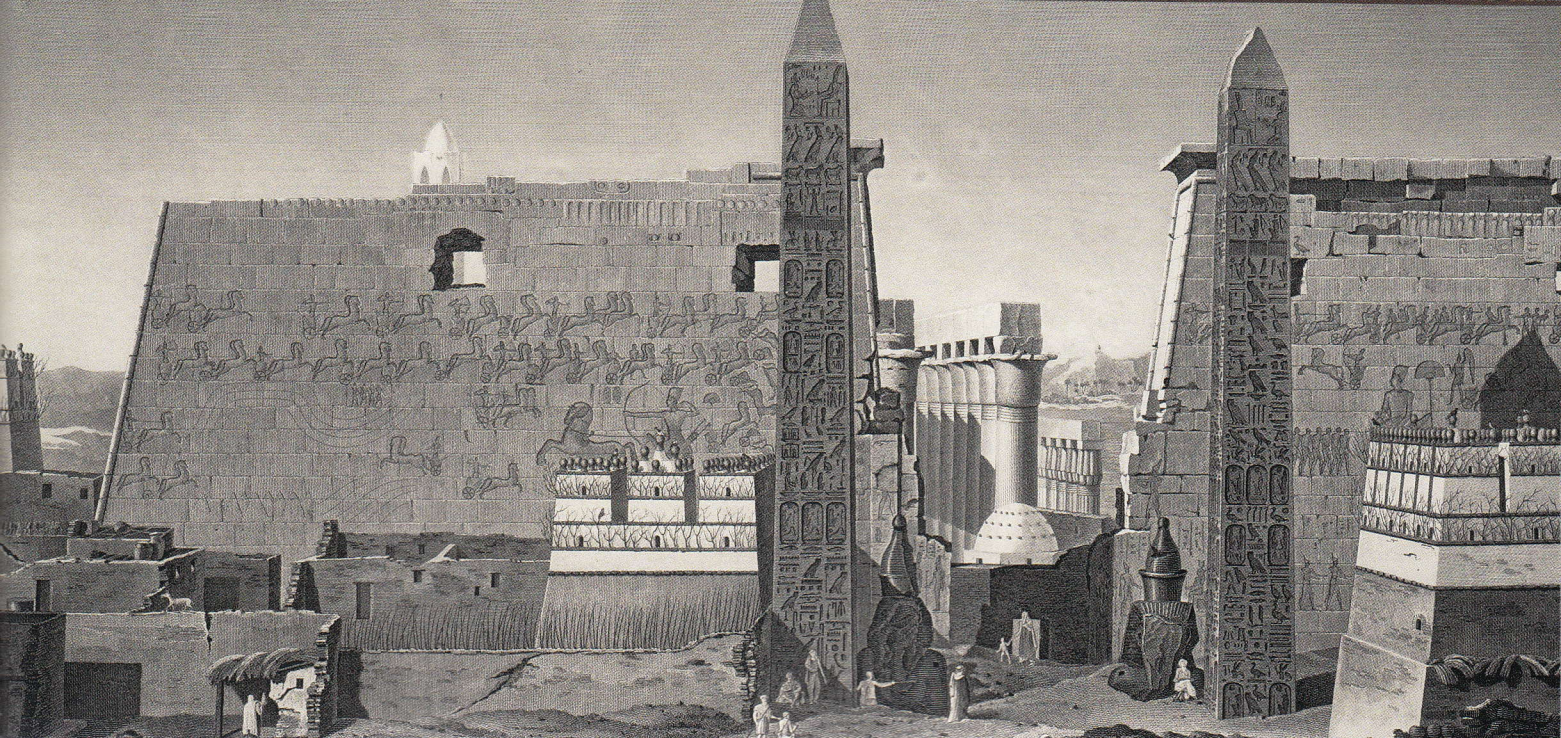
The contents of the *Description of Egypt* are divided into three major sections: antiquities, natural history, and the modern state, with volumes of text and images for each. More than half the work is devoted to the past and shows how the untold history of the pharaohs had captured the imagination of the scholars. Their fledgling historical interpretations were hindered by the inability to understand hieroglyphs, which prevented the creation of a chronological presentation. The first two volumes were organized geographically, from south to north, from the island of Philae in Upper Egypt to the Nile Delta. In the third and fourth volumes, articles were organized by theme. Scholars attempted to compare the



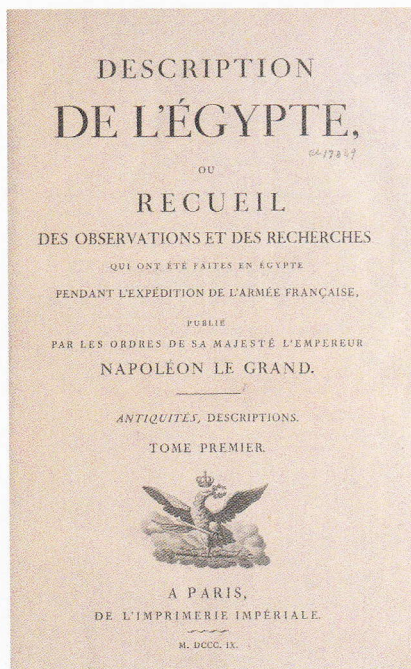
### Moments in Time

The drawings made by the French scientific expedition capture how the treasures of ancient Egypt appeared during the late 18th century before any had been excavated. André Dutertre's rendering of the Ptolemaic Temple of Horus at Edfu (above) shows the exposed, yet well preserved, upper portions of the structure while the lower are still buried by mounds of desert sand. An engraving by Jean-Baptiste Réville shows how the Temple of Luxor (commissioned by Amenhotep III in the 14th century B.C.) looked when the French first observed it (right) in the 1790s. Two obelisks still flanked the entrance (the one on the right would later be moved to France in 1831), and sand has consumed more than half of two colossi seated next to each one.

BOTH ENGRAVINGS: RMN-GRAND PALAIS







**TITLE PAGE** FROM THE FIRST VOLUME OF THE *DESCRIPTION OF EGYPT*, 1809

LLP COLLECTION/ALAMY

narratives of classical authors with the remains of Egypt's still visible monuments.

For many modern scholars, the most enduring value of this work lies in the illustrations, for their fidelity and aesthetic dimension, accentuated by their enormous size. They mark the start of academic archaeology in the Nile Valley. The topographical plans are exceptional. There are plans, elevations, sections, and precise measurements of monuments. The aim was to facilitate their study without the need to travel to Egypt. About 20 of the buildings depicted have since disappeared and all that remains of their appearance are the figures and explanations in the *Description*.

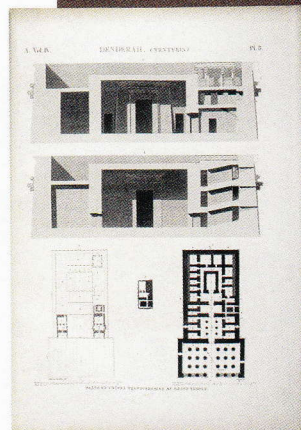
Napoleon's French expedition marked the turning point when the European public and academic imaginations became obsessed with exploration of ancient Egypt. The 1799 discovery of the Rosetta Stone led to Jean-François Champollion's deciphering of hieroglyphics in the 1820s. His work was the key to a new understanding of ancient Egyptian civilization, as scholars could better interpret monuments and antiquities, leading to a more detailed rendering of this colossal ancient power and its people. ■

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**THE DANDARA ZODIAC**, AS REPRODUCED BY JOLLOIS AND DEVILLIERS, IS ONE OF THE TEMPLE'S MOST ICONIC FEATURES.

BRIDGEMAN/ACI

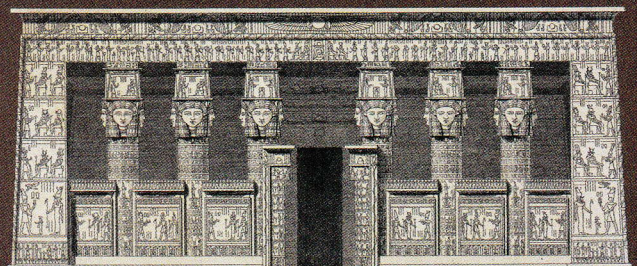


BRIDGEMAN/ACI

### Temple of Dandara

On his pioneering journey through Upper Egypt, Denon was fascinated by the Temple of Dandara, which he considered superior to any monument in ancient Greece. He showed his sketches of the temple to two young assistants, Jean-Baptiste Prosper Jollois and Édouard Devilliers du Terrage. In a second expedition, organized for academic purposes, both men visited what was then believed to be a temple of Isis (later study revealed it was actually dedicated to Hathor).

Using engineering principles, they were able to produce topographic surveys of the site, detailed architectural plans (above), and remarkably precise drawings of the structures and their art. When working inside the temples, they had to use torches for light, which made the work "long and arduous," according to Devilliers.



**TEMPLE PORTICO.** THE COMPLEX ARTWORK ADORNING THE TEMPLE OF HATHOR IS CAPTURED IN AN ENGRAVING BY DEVILLIERS FEATURED IN THE *DESCRIPTION OF EGYPT*.

DEA/GETTY IMAGES



**THE TEMPLE OF HATHOR**  
IN DEIR EL MEDINA  
IS DEPICTED IN RICH  
DETAIL IN A COLORIZED  
ENGRAVING FROM THE  
*DESCRIPTION OF EGYPT*  
DE/AGE FOTOSTOCK

# SEE, SKETCH, EXPLORE

In many engravings in the *Description of Egypt*, the French scholars literally inserted themselves in their work. They depict how they sketched monuments, took notes, excavated ancient sculptures, and explored temples. Their presence helps show the scale of these objects as well as saves personal memories of a great archaeological adventure.



## *The Island of Philae*

Expedition members stand between Trajan's Kiosk (right) and the Temple of Isis.

▼ DEA/GETTY IMAGES

## *Tomb of Paheri in El Kab*

A French scholar draws the statues in the tomb of a high official of the 18th dynasty.

DEA/ALBUM





▲ *A Giant Hand*

French workers prepare to relocate a colossal hand that was once part of a massive granite statue.

DEA / ALBUM

*The Great Pyramid* ►

Architect Jacques-Marie Le Père observes a worker from the foot of a ladder in the Great Pyramid of Khufu.

RMN-GRAND PALAIS

