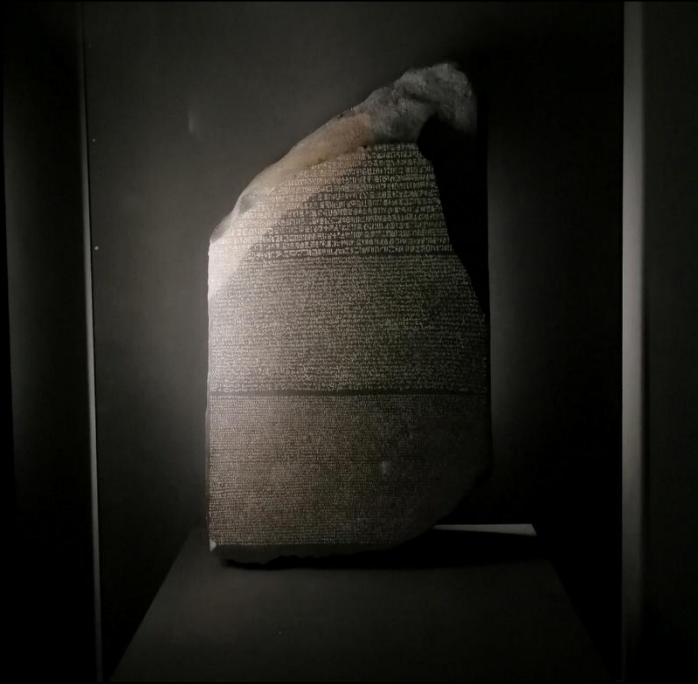


THE GREAT PLUNDER

VOLUME II – THE EGYPTIAN CAMPAIGN



ROBERT CASANOVAS

HISTORICAL NOVEL



Summary

The Great Plunder, Volume II — The Egyptian Campaign (1798-1801)

The second instalment of a four-volume historical saga devoted to Napoleonic spoliation, this novel recounts the most spectacular of all the razzias: the Egyptian Expedition. On 19 May 1798, three hundred ships set sail from Toulon. On board: an army of forty thousand soldiers and one hundred and sixty-seven scholars. Their destination is secret. Their mission, however, is secret only to the public. In his private notes, Berthollet calls the enterprise an acquisition operation. Bonaparte calls it a scientific expedition. These are two names for the same reality — one that the novel follows step by step, from the capture of Malta to the shores of the Nile, and all the way to the Parisian workshops where the Description of Egypt will be born. Through Denon's sketchbooks, Jomard's theodolites, Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire's specimen jars, and Berthollet's silences, the intimate machinery of enlightened plunder is laid bare: the beauty of the learned gesture and the violence of the razzia it conceals. And in the margins, Hassan ibn Youssef — interpreter, witness, memory — notes what the men of knowledge do not write down. At the end of the journey, one question remains unanswered: what is the difference between taking a thing and taking its image? The Rosetta Stone is in London. The engravings are in Paris. Egypt, for its part, remains on the bank of its river.

The Author

Robert Casanovas, who has previously published "The Stolen Room", "The Testament Was a Forgery" and "Pillage", is an honorary agrégé professor and a member of the French Society of Authors. A jurist with a lifelong passion for the history of art collections, he has devoted many years to the study of the appropriation of works of art by States. As President of the NGO International Restitutions, he has produced numerous academic works on the subject.



The Great Plunder**Historical novel in four volumes**

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Cover: Full-size reproduction of the Rosetta Stone set within an optical theatre, at the Musée Champollion in Vif (Isère, France)

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**English version****Volume II****1798-1801 – The Campaign in Egypt****3rd revised and corrected edition****By the same author:****The Stolen Room (historical novel)****The Testament Was a Forgery (historical novel)****Pillage (historical novel)****The Great Plunder – Volume I – The Birth of the System (historical novel)**

NOTICE

This novel is a work of historical fiction based on real research. All the works mentioned were indeed taken during the French conquests between 1794 and 1813.

Most of the characters existed.

The course of events retraces authentic and verified facts.

For the needs of the narrative, characters, scenes and dialogues may have been imagined.

The original version of the novel, written in French, has been translated into several foreign languages. The translated versions may contain linguistic errors, mistranslations or approximations.

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THE GREAT PLUNDER

Historical novel in 4 volumes

VOLUME II - THE EGYPTIAN CAMPAIGN (1798-1801)

CHAPTER I: THE ORIENT IN ARMS

I - From Toulon to Malta

On the morning of 19 May 1798, Claude-Louis Berthollet picked up a piece of tarred rope from the quay at Toulon and held it to his nose. All around him, more than three hundred ships were making ready to sail in a din of chains and shouted orders.

The rope smelled of Scandinavian pine tar, of Mediterranean salt and of something he could not immediately place. A vegetable resin, perhaps mastic from Chios. He put it back in his pocket to analyse on board. The quay trembled beneath him. That smell reminded him of the *Bel Paese*.

In 1796, Bonaparte had sent him to Italy with Gaspard Monge. Their mission: to identify in the collections of the Italian princes whatever deserved to go to the Louvre. They had gone through the palaces of Milan, Bologna and Rome, noting titles and dimensions. The paintings had then travelled in crates, each framed separately, wrapped in blankets. Some had arrived damaged. Others had not.

He had not found it difficult. It was applied science: identify an object's value, secure it, move it. The same logic as here, with different objects. He had known it from the very beginning. This expedition would produce the same thing as in Italy, on a larger scale. What Bonaparte called a scientific expedition, Berthollet called, in his private notes, an acquisition operation. The word was more exact.

The difference was Egypt. Italy had collectors, markets, prices. Egypt had tombs that had been sealed for three thousand years. On the deck of the *Orient*, a flagship of one hundred and twenty guns, Bonaparte watched the fleet get under way. Its destination, the men did not know.

Monge scribbled equations on the cover of his notebook while the ships manoeuvred. He did not look at the quay. Monge never looked at what could not be calculated.

Lower down, on C deck, Edme-François Jomard stretched a string between two pulleys to measure the length of a corridor. Barely out of the *École Polytechnique* eight months earlier, he was leaving France for the first time. The string read three metres sixty-two. Once he had the known value, he multiplied it in his head by the number of corridors he had counted and deduced an estimate of the ship's length to within two metres.

Jean-Baptiste Fourier, a mathematician of thirty and a professor at the *École Polytechnique*, had settled into a cabin on the upper deck with a pile of papers on algebraic equations that he would not open during the crossing. What had decided him to embark was not fieldwork – of which he had no experience – but the prospect of an entire civilisation to measure.

Dominique-Vivant Denon gazed for a long while at the empty horizon.

In his cramped cabin, he was arranging his equipment for the third time since embarkation. The sketchbooks first, sorted by size. The charcoals in their leather case. The pens, the black and bistre inks, the brushes of various thicknesses in a canvas roll. He knew this arrangement by heart – every tool in its place, every place with its function – as a grammarian knows his language. Not to speak it, but never to lose it. Doing it again gave him the impression of controlling something. Egypt still had no shape in his mind. His equipment did. He thought: if everything else goes wrong, I shall at least have my tools in order. That was probably

the definition of serious work. To begin with what one can control.

Bonaparte had recruited him with a ten-line letter: *you will draw the monuments*. That had been enough for him. He had accepted without asking where, or when, or in what conditions.

The fleet took several hours to leave the roads. From the shore, women wept and children waved handkerchiefs. Denon watched the shore recede.

“Are you afraid?” Jomard asked him.

“No. I am impatient. It is different.”

While the ships stood out to sea, he drew Bonaparte’s face in profile, lit by the morning light. That sketch would appear years later in the first edition of his *Voyage*.

More than a month of sailing separated Toulon from Egypt, with a stop at Malta. The fleet crossed the Mediterranean maintaining a relative silence at sea, avoiding Nelson as much by luck as by discipline. The first landfall was not Alexandria.

For the first few days the sea was calm. The savants swarmed over the decks, taking out their instruments, taking measurements, noting the direction of the winds. Jomard calculated the fleet’s speed by counting knots. The naturalists fished for specimens with nets. Denon’s notebooks filled with sketches. Swollen sails, dark hulls, the changing light on the water. He could not draw the sea as well as monuments, but he tried. Everyone tried.

Bonaparte, for his part, spent his days reading. He had brought aboard a meticulously chosen travelling library. The campaigns of Alexander, Caesar’s commentaries, the history of Polybius, the accounts of Arab travellers in Egypt. He read quickly, turning down page corners, annotating the margins in a cramped hand. Monge caught him one morning reading yet again Volney’s account of his journey through Syria and Egypt, published eleven years earlier.

“Volney is pessimistic,” said Bonaparte without looking up. “He saw only decadence. We shall see the sources.”

Bonaparte closed the book and laid it on his knees. Monge recognised something characteristic: Bonaparte did not read to be contradicted. He read to find precedents for what he already wanted to do.

The library of the Orient was an institution in itself. Bonaparte had prepared it like a small floating academy. Readings aloud in the evening, discussions of the books they had brought, debates on the ancient history of Egypt. These evenings gathered around the table of the great cabin the leading savants and the officers who took an interest in letters. They read Herodotus, discussed Thucydides, argued over the causes of the fall of Rome. Bonaparte presided and often intervened, displaying a genuine historical culture that impressed the professors of the Institut.

“The question that interests me is not why civilisations die. It is why they last. Egypt lasted three thousand years. What makes a state so stable for three millennia?”

Fourier put forward a hypothesis about the regularity of the Nile floods and the predictability of harvests. He liked historical examples because they gave abstract ideas the weight of duration. Millennia of regular floods: it was a demonstration that mathematics alone could not produce. What interested him in Egypt, even before arriving, was precisely this: a civilisation that had solved complex problems – irrigation, architecture, astronomy – without the algebra he taught his students. The solution had preceded the theory. It was both troubling and fascinating. Berthollet spoke of the concentration of power in a central administration. Denon replied that he did not know, but that he hoped to find elements of an answer in the monuments.

Bonaparte leaned towards Berthollet.

“In Italy, we negotiated with princes. Here, there are no princes. There are only tombs and monuments that no one lays claim to.

What we take has had no living owner for a long time. That is a considerable difference.”

Berthollet replied that the absence of a living owner did not mean the absence of an owner. But he said it in a low voice, and Bonaparte had already taken up his book again. Berthollet kept his eyes on the lamp flame a moment longer. He had known – since Venice, since Milan – that the right word and the effective word were not always the same. Bonaparte did not ask for his opinion. He asked him to validate a conclusion already drawn. That was the price of the expedition, and Berthollet had accepted it on boarding the Orient.

On the tenth day, the weather changed. A north-westerly wind forced the fleet to alter course. The ships scattered slightly before regrouping under the orders of Admiral Brueys. Soldiers fell ill. Several savants too, among them Monge, who spent two days lying in his bunk, pale and silent, a basin within reach, unable to open a book for the first time in years. Those who knew him knew that this silence amounted to a confession. Ill, Monge did not complain. He waited, with resignation, for his body to deign to resume work.

Denon carried on with his drawings from the deck, immune to seasickness. The sea was a blue he had never seen in painting. A violent, almost aggressive blue, which had nothing to do with the seascapes of Claude Lorrain. Another way of painting the sea was needed to render that blue. No one had yet done it.

The question of the destination remained unanswered for a long time.

Bonaparte had distributed sealed instructions to the officers, to be opened only at sea. The soldiers speculated. The most diverse names could be heard: England, Portugal, Ireland, the West Indies, Malta, India. Some, the best informed, murmured Egypt, but the name seemed so distant and so improbable that few dared believe it. That day, speculation ran wild.

The next day, Bonaparte let his senior officers understand what the destination was. Egypt. The African coast of the Mediterranean. The Nile, the pyramids, the deserts of the Sahara, the ruins of Thebes and Memphis. The rumour spread quickly among the savants. Reactions varied according to each man's temperament and what he feared most. Berthollet immediately turned over the chemical implications of the Nile's waters and the properties of Egyptian natron. Monge, still convalescing from his seasickness, simply replied that he hoped they would find drinking water. Jomard asked nothing. He shut himself in his cabin and spent two hours rereading his notes on ancient irrigation systems. He preferred to understand what he was going to see.

Denon took Herodotus out of his bag. The book opened of its own accord at the passage on the pyramids. The binding had its habits, like his own. He ran through the description of Lake Moeris, of the labyrinth at Hawara, of the pyramids of Giza as seen by the Greek traveller five centuries BC. Two thousand three hundred years separated Herodotus from this moment. The pyramids, for their part, were still there. Denon closed the book without marking the page. The place would remember on its own.

After skirting the coast of Sicily at a prudent distance, the squadron had set its course to the south-east. The sun rose earlier and set later. The heat was mounting, announcing the latitudes that awaited them. Soldiers who had never left the north of France gazed at the horizon with a curiosity mingled with apprehension. For many, this sea was already the edge of the known world.

The night of the eighteenth day was the finest of the whole crossing. Not the mildest – the air still held the day's heat and smelled of tar and salt – but the clearest. A cloudless sky, a moon in its last quarter, newly risen, lighting everything with a cold, precise light, as if someone had set a lantern on the horizon. The white sails of the frigates shone like damp paper. The black hulls of the ships of the line cut sharp shadows on the calm water. The waves

were barely audible – only the slow creaking of the masts, the muffled beating of sails searching for wind – and, from very far away, something that might have been a human voice or the cry of a night bird.

Bonaparte came to join Denon around midnight. It was a habit he had formed on boarding. Night rounds on deck, alone or almost, while his officers slept. He leaned on the rail without a word for a long moment.

“You draw better at night than by day.”

“Night removes the useless details. Only the essential forms remain. It is more honest. Nothing new. Everything has already been seen. But nothing has yet been drawn with precision. Herodotus describes the pyramids without measurements. Strabo mentions them without understanding them. What I want to do is bring back images of which no one can say that they are approximate.”

Bonaparte nodded. It was a way of thinking he understood. In the distance, to port, one could make out a dark line that might have been the Sicilian coast or a low bank of cloud. Neither man asked the officer of the watch what it was.

That same night, several days’ sail to the west, Nelson’s squadron was searching for the French fleet without knowing where it was. Two fleets, a single sea, and the darkness between them. Had the winds blown otherwise, everything Denon would carry in his notebooks would have gone down with the ships. What would depart or not depart would not depend on men alone. It would also depend on the winds.

On 9 June, after three weeks at sea, the French ships presented themselves before Valletta.

The island of Malta, held since 1530 by the Order of St John of Jerusalem, guarded the entrance to the eastern Mediterranean with fortifications reputed impregnable.

Bonaparte summoned his principal generals and the savants before the ramparts.

“These walls withstood forty thousand Turks in 1565. But the Knights who defend them today are old, divided and penniless. We have no need to take them by storm. We need only wait.”

General Louis Desaix, an officer with the profile of an ascetic who commanded one of the army’s divisions, intervened.

“General Bonaparte, is your information concerning the internal division of the Order reliable?”

“The knights of Malta are divided into rival factions. The Grand Master is weak. They will not fight. We shall be in shortly.”

Monge felt bound to ask a question.

“General, what justification will you give for attacking Malta, which is not at war with France? The Order of St John is a sovereign institution long recognised internationally. Does this aggression not risk provoking negative diplomatic reactions, notably from the Pope and the Catholic powers of Europe?”

“Monge, my dear friend, you are a mathematician. Calculate how long we can hold out in Egypt if the English blockade our routes. Malta is the bolt. As for the diplomatic justification, that is not your concern. My aide-de-camp is seeing to it.”

Monge fell silent. He had understood the limit.

The landing was carried out simultaneously at several points on the island, taking the defenders by surprise. Resistance lasted three days. Malta capitulated on 12 June.

The inventory revealed stupefying quantities of precious metals. Enough to finance several months of campaign. Denon walked through the great treasury hall, which the commissaries were inventorying chest by chest.

The Order's wealth was first of all monetary: silver ingots, gold coins, liturgical plate. Three to four million francs according to Berthollet's estimate.

But what held him lay elsewhere. In the sacristy of St John's Cathedral, soldiers were taking down paintings. The vault of the nave – a monumental cycle by Mattia Preti on the life of St John the Baptist, painted directly on the stone between 1661 and 1666 – could not be taken: too large, too fixed. It was left. But easel paintings could be taken.

He identified several canvases by Preti: a *Beheading of the Baptist*, dark and violent, torn from its chapel; portraits of grand masters of the Order; a large *Raising of Lazarus* of the Neapolitan school that was being rolled up without precaution.

Denon also noticed what was not being taken. In the novices' oratory, hung as an altarpiece since 1608: the *Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, Caravaggio's largest canvas, three metres sixty by five metres twenty of black and red tempera. The executioner bends over the decapitated body, whose blood forms a pool. In that blood the painter traced his signature: *f. Michelangelo*. The only canvas he ever signed, and he chose to sign it in the blood of his victim. He had himself killed a man. The painting knew it. A soldier came over to judge whether it could be taken down. Denon laid a hand on his arm.

"That one will not leave. It was painted for this wall. It would die on a ship."

The soldier looked at Denon for a moment, then at the canvas, then shrugged and went to look elsewhere. The painting stayed.

He wrote down the dimensions, the subject, the signature, then stood before the canvas without writing. This painting had a rare property. It examined the viewer in return. Not the beheaded saint. But the executioner, bending over the dead man, or the jailer turning his head, seemed to question whoever was watching the scene: and you, what are you carrying off?

The plate of the Order's Hospital – table basins, candlesticks, ciboria – was seized in its entirety. The hospital of Malta had marble floors, tapestries, silverware said to be unique in Europe. It would be melted into bars. The sick who came here would be tended with pewter bowls.

The same process, he thought. Each conquest financed the next.

The Tenture des Indes, a tapestry woven at the Gobelins from cartoons inspired by paintings brought back from Brazil by Prince Jean-Maurice de Nassau-Siegen, its colours still vivid, depicting elephants, parrots, tropical fortresses, exotic court scenes. Gifts from Louis XIV. The King of France had given the knightly Order what the army of France was now about to seize.--

He noted the dimensions. Two metres fifty high, roughly five metres wide for the largest. Wool and silk. They could have been rolled up. They had not been. The soldiers had not had time, or had not understood their value.

"Leave the tapestries," Denon said to the non-commissioned officer supervising the inventory. "They have belonged to France since Louis XIV."

Outside, crates were being loaded onto the longboats. Gold, silver, manuscripts, the paintings that had been designated. The Order's library, thousands of volumes in Latin, French, Arabic and Turkish, was left. No room. No time. The soldiers of the Revolution plundered fast. The scholars gathered what remained.

The library numbered about twenty thousand volumes. Incunabula, medieval manuscripts, treatises on navigation and cartography accumulated since the twelfth century. The soldiers did not know what to do with the books. A sergeant asked whether they were worth anything. Denon answered yes, some of them. The sergeant remarked that he had no crates. Denon found two and himself put the oldest manuscripts into them. A hundred or so volumes, chosen by instinct, without a catalogue, with no

criterion other than the apparent age of the parchment. The rest – nearly twenty thousand volumes – was left on the shelves.

The French garrison that would be kept in Malta would use them for two years as wrapping paper and fuel.

Berthollet noted in his observations, watching the loaded long-boats pull away towards the ships: “Flanders had been methodical, Italy had been scholarly, Malta was hasty. Each campaign had its own way of plundering, according to the time available and the men present. Egypt would be something else. Not a city to be emptied in three days, but a country to be crossed for months. The plunder there would be slow.”

The fleet weighed anchor on the evening of 19 June. On deck, Denon watched Valletta recede. A city of honey-coloured stone, ramparts running down to the sea, Baroque bell towers. In the warehouses, the crates were stacked with the gold and silverware. In his notebooks, the drawings of the fortifications, the cathedral, the harbour. What was being carried off and what was being left. Already he knew he would never see Malta again.

Gold could be melted down again. Works of art, once moved, never came back.

II - From Alexandria to the Nile

On 1 July, after a crossing during which the French had avoided Nelson several times, the lookouts signalled the low coast of Egypt. A smell of warm sand and salt. Monge was on deck from dawn.

“Alexandria. Euclid, Eratosthenes, Ptolemy. Seven hundred thousand volumes burned. Look at what is left of it!” exclaimed Bonaparte.

Monge scanned the coast.

“To tell the truth, General, this present city hardly seems to correspond to the glorious descriptions we read in the ancient texts.

It looks rather dilapidated and provincial. Where are the magnificent monuments, the temples, the palaces, the great library?"

Bonaparte smiled.

"All that has vanished. Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Ottomans. Ancient Egypt now exists only in its stones. That is why we are here."

The landing began in the afternoon in a heavy swell. The soldiers went down into longboats that carried them to the shore, where they leapt into the shallow water and splashed up the beach under a leaden sun. The smell arrived before everything else. Something hot and mineral, fishy and smoky, the smell of an ancient city that had not expected to be surprised.

The savants landed at the end of the day, once the city had been taken. Alexandria was not what they had read. Fifteen thousand inhabitants, narrow streets, houses of unbaked brick that crumbled away.

Denon set foot on Egyptian soil for the first time and looked around him with a disappointment he made no attempt to hide.

"Is this really it? Ruins and hovels?"

Pompey's Pillar stood five hundred metres away, alone in the sandy sky. Twenty-seven metres of red Aswan granite on a pedestal of dressed stone. It had no connection with Pompey. It had been erected around AD 297 in honour of the Emperor Diocletian, after he had crushed an Alexandrian revolt.

The shaft was monolithic, a single block of two hundred tonnes, polished fifteen centuries ago, still smooth to the touch beneath the dust. The Corinthian capital at the top had lost a few acanthus leaves but remained legible. Jomard took its measurements with his instruments: diameter at the base, two metres seventy-one; at the top, one metre ninety. The column tapered slightly. The craftsmen had calculated the optical illusion that would make the shaft look perfectly straight to the eye from the ground. Fifteen centuries later, the calculation still held.

At the pedestal, scattered blocks bore fragments of hieroglyphic inscriptions, reused in the Roman construction, probably torn from an earlier pharaonic temple. This practice of reuse ran through the whole of Egyptian history. The Romans plundered temples for their buildings, the Arabs plundered Roman buildings, the Ottomans plundered Arab buildings. Each layer served as a quarry for the next. Pompey's Pillar itself stood on stones that had already served elsewhere.

Denon drew the column from three different angles. Front, three-quarter, profile from the north. This monument of two hundred tonnes was condemned to serve as a landmark for ships entering the harbour. His drawing would join the plates of *the Description*. The column would stay there. Its image would go to Paris, to London, to Vienna.

Alexandria was disappointing. Too many centuries piled one upon another. But the Nile was opening before them. The true discoveries lay elsewhere.

The taking of the city had cost some three hundred French dead and wounded. Kléber, struck on the head, had survived. Bonaparte had set up his headquarters in the Ottoman governor's palace and summoned the notables to explain to them, in a proclamation translated into Arabic, that the French army had come to free Egypt from Mamluk tyranny and to restore the rights of the legitimate Ottoman sultan.

"People of Egypt," the text proclaimed, "you will be told that I come to destroy your religion. Do not believe it. I come to restore your rights and punish the usurpers. We are true Muslims. Did we not subdue the Pope and the Knights of Malta?"

While Bonaparte organised the administration of Alexandria, the savants began their first labours. Denon looked for traces of Ptolemaic grandeur. Little was found. Alexandria the Great had almost disappeared.

Denon spent his first night sleepless. Not from anxiety, but because the streets went on humming with a nocturnal life he had never heard before. Voices in Arabic, stray dogs, the sound of a fountain in an unseen courtyard, the calls to prayer resounding from the minarets before dawn. He settled at his window with his notebook and drew what he could not see, his ears guiding his hand. The lines were uncertain. He let them be. The night was long.

The next morning, he went out into the city with Jomard. The latter carried his theodolite and took measurements at every crossroads. Denon sketched façades, faces in the souks, a dromedary lying in the dust, a group of children who watched the French soldiers pass with a mixture of curiosity and mistrust. Neither of them spoke Arabic. They communicated with the inhabitants by gesture, by smiles, by money.

"The Egypt we are going to study is not only ancient Egypt," Denon said to Jomard as he drew a carved wooden door with geometric motifs. "There are several thousand years of superimposed layers here. Each layer has covered the previous one without wholly erasing it."

"Which complicates the measured drawings," added Jomard. "Your superimposed layers pose a problem of method. If everything belongs to everything, nothing can be dated. When an ancient block of granite is reused in an eighteenth-century house, which period does it belong to?"

"To both. That is the problem and that is the interest."

The fish market revealed to Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, a young naturalist and member of the Commission, a dozen Mediterranean species he had not yet seen anywhere as specimens. He bought several whose names he did not know, packed them carefully in salt and had them carried to his lodgings to dissect that evening. His room-mates protested at the smell. He replied that the smell of science was preferable to ignorance.

For his part, Berthollet took an interest in the dyes of the market. The fabrics displayed by the merchants showed colours he did not recognise. Very deep indigos, reds that did not have the shade of madder, yellows verging on saffron. Berthollet took samples of dyed fibres, rolled them in paper and labelled them carefully.

While the savants explored the markets of Alexandria, each according to his speciality, Bonaparte did not stroll.

There was the garrison to organise, relations with the local authorities to establish, questions of supply to settle, the march on Cairo to prepare. He received the notables seated in an armchair he had had brought from his ship, surrounded by his aides-de-camp. They presented themselves with the caution of those who still do not know whether the newcomers will stay.

The army, meanwhile, was making ready. The soldiers filled their canteens, loaded the mules, checked their ammunition. Egyptian guides had been hired. Men who knew the desert road and the watering places. They watched these preparations with fatalism. They had seen many troops pass through this corridor between the sea and the desert.

Bonaparte was not preoccupied with hydrological calculations. He was observing the desert. From the terrace of the palace where the savants were lodged, one could see to the south the sharp line where the city stopped and the sand began. A straight line. On one side, the houses, the gardens, the palm trees, a human presence organised over long ages. On the other, nothing. A uniform expanse to the horizon without a shadow, without a variation of colour, without a sign of life.

On 6 July, Bonaparte gave the order to march. Two hundred and twenty kilometres separated the coast from Cairo. In between: the desert. No one had told the savants plainly.

Forty degrees in the shade from the first hour. No water between the wells. Soldiers died as they marched, cut down not by the

enemy but by the sun. One did not die all at once. One stopped. One fell to one's knees. One did not get up again. The columns went on. No one broke step to stay with a man on the ground.

Bonaparte marched on foot like his soldiers, in parallel columns across the desert. The savants, ill-suited to it, followed as best they could. Several fainted. Denon drew the landscapes as he walked.

Monge staggered along, leaning on an improvised walking stick. Bonaparte, seeing him in this state, ordered that he be given water from his own reserve.

"Drink, Monge," said Bonaparte, holding out his canteen. "You must survive this march."

Monge drank a few mouthfuls of lukewarm water with a metallic taste. Monge nearly said thank you and held back. One did not thank a general for a mouthful of water as one thanked a friend. Monge handed back the canteen without a word. Bonaparte had already looked elsewhere.

"All great undertakings have their trials," Bonaparte went on, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Alexander marched as far as India for eight years. Marco Polo spent twenty-four years away from Venice. We shall hold out."

The columns advanced through a landscape where almost nothing grew. A few thorn bushes. From time to time a village of unbaked brick. Fellahs who watched the army pass from their doorways without a word. The heat was unlike anything the soldiers had known. It came not only from the sun but from the ground itself, as if the whole desert were an open oven. The canteens ran dry. They were refilled at wells when any were found. The water tasted of earth and salt, but no one complained.

On the fourth day, around noon, a murmur ran through the columns. The soldiers raised their heads. Ahead of them, beyond the trembling line of heat, a green band was taking shape on the

horizon. The Nile. Some began to run. The officers did not hold them back. They ran too.

When the first files reached the bank, the men fell to their knees in the water without even removing their packs. They drank, washed their faces, and stayed motionless in the current as if refusing to leave it. Behind them, the columns kept arriving, raising clouds of dust that settled on the water.

Denon settled on the bank with his charcoals. Before him, the wide sheet of water shimmering under the July sun, the fertile strip of a few kilometres of intense green, then the desert beginning exactly where irrigation stopped.

“Look, Jomard,” said Denon to the young engineer-geographer who had sat down beside him to rest, “here at last is the true Egypt.”

“What strikes me is the line. On one side the palm trees, the crops. On the other, the desert. Two kilometres from the bank.”

Jomard was right. Everything depended on the Nile. Two kilometres from the bank, it was desert. Absolute, immediate. Egypt was only a corridor of water in a continent of sand.

Drinking water was now available. The army was regaining strength. Jomard unfolded his graduated rule. Monge traced equations on his loose sheets. Denon opened his sketchbook. The engineers studied the irrigation systems: *sakiehs*, *shadufs*, distribution canals. Techniques thousands of years old, still in use. Nile water raised mechanically to reach fields lying a few metres higher. Simple, efficient, unchanged since the pharaohs. The botanists collected frantically: date palms, sycamores, lotus, papyrus, aromatic plants unknown in Europe. Geoffroy stuffed birds – ibises, herons – and filled crates. The fauna of the Nile offered itself to him: crocodiles on the banks, hippopotamuses that had become rare, migratory birds by the thousand.

“Look at these ibises,” Geoffroy called to Berthollet. “The Egyptians mummified them. They had turned the bird into the god

Thoth. Wisdom, writing. A bird one sees every morning at the water's edge."

"My dear Geoffroy, worshipping a bird as a god seems to me the height of superstition. The Enlightenment has corrected that."

The Enlightenment had indeed moved beyond many of these beliefs. But Geoffroy understood something that Berthollet refused to see. Venerating an ibis was probably not pure superstition, but the form that rigorous observation of nature took in a given civilisation. The Egyptians had noticed that the ibis appeared with the flooding of the Nile. They had made a god of it. The naturalists of the eighteenth century noticed the same thing and made equations of it. The difference lay in the language, not in the attention paid to the world.

Geoffroy had begun buying from the first month. He did not speak of it to his colleagues. Fourier, Monge and Berthollet had no clear position on the question. Scientific collecting or personal appropriation? The distinction was blurred.

A few weeks later, when the army had taken up its quarters in Cairo, the market at Saqqara had been operating ever since the French soldiers had shown that they bought. Fellahs from the neighbouring villages brought whatever they found in the fields and the tombs. *Shabtis* by the dozen, scarabs by the hundred, fragments of papyrus, amulets, Ptolemaic coins green with patina. Denon came in the morning, before the heat made walking exhausting. He walked slowly among the improvised stalls, rush mats laid on the earth, the objects arranged upon them. He crouched. Weighed in his hand. Looked. What stopped him was not always the oldest or the most spectacular. A painted wooden *shabti*, a funerary figure fifteen centimetres tall, arms crossed on the chest in the attitude of Osiris, the face hieratic, the blue wig striped with finely traced lines of gold. The face had the quiet precision of court portraits. Someone had looked at it, someone had wanted it to be recognised in the afterlife. This *shabti* had accompanied a dead man for thirty centuries in a sealed burial

chamber. Now it lay there, on a rush mat, at Saqqara, under the sun. The *shabti* was wrapped in a rag and Denon put it in his satchel.

The fellah said a sentence. Denon did not understand. He turned to Hassan, the interpreter the army had assigned him. Hassan listened, looked at his feet, then translated in a low voice.

“He says it is his ancestor’s tomb.”

Hassan returned alone to the bivouac that evening. He walked past the emptying market, the sellers gone into the evening dust with their piastres. He stopped at the place where the fellah had spread out his objects. The mat was still there. A hollow in the sand marked where the *shabti* had lain. An interpreter for four years, he had translated for merchants, notaries, Ottoman officers, and now French savants. He had learned that to translate is to choose between words that never overlap exactly. The fellah’s sentence – his ancestor’s tomb – he had translated exactly. What he had not translated was the tone.

In the following days, Denon made further acquisitions.

Scarabs. One in blue faience bearing the cartouche of Thutmose III, sixth pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty, engraved on the flat side with a precision he checked with a magnifying glass: the checkerboard, the scarab, the solar disc. Three thousand two hundred years and the line was intact. A second in black steatite depicting a beetle with finely detailed wing cases. The Egyptians had watched the scarab rolling its ball of dung towards the sun and had seen in it the god Khepri pushing the sun at dawn. They had placed it in tombs, on the hearts of the dead, to ensure re-birth.

Amulets. The wedjat eye in turquoise faience, the eye of Horus, torn out by Seth in combat and then restored. Three centimetres, a painted pupil, lines of cosmetic art imitating the falcon’s plumage. An ibis-headed Thoth in lapis lazuli, which scribes wore so that their reed pens would stay true. A Sekhmet in dark red

carneian. She was worn so that war and epidemics would not reach you.

Denon also bought two alabaster canopic jars – one stopper in the form of a jackal's head, another a baboon's – guardians of the dead man's entrails. Sixteen centimetres high, the translucent alabaster letting the light through in a honey tint as if the stone were still alive. Fragments of papyrus covered in hieratic writing, acquired without knowing what they said. What they said would not change what they were.

What they said, he still did not know. Years later, the orientalist would learn it: formulae from the *Book of the Dead*, protective invocations for the passage to the other world. A similar papyrus, bought at Thebes by the engineer Simonel and later known as the Cadet papyrus, contains spell 125, the judgement of the soul before Osiris.

The Cadet papyrus would join the Cabinet des manuscrits of the Bibliothèque nationale, under the shelfmark *Égyptien 1 to 19*.

But that morning at Saqqara, he knew nothing of all this yet. What stopped him, he bought. The market was emptying. The heat was rising. Tomorrow there would be other mats, other objects, other transactions of which he would not write down every sentence. Egypt was larger than his notebooks. He had known it from the first day. He would carry on nonetheless.

By dawn, Geoffroy had twelve pages of notes and a conviction. The Nile crocodile and the South American caiman shared a bone structure so close that it could not be accidental. This anatomical convergence across tens of thousands of kilometres and an ocean raised a question to which the biology of his day had no answer.

Geoffroy had not yet spoken of it to anyone. The idea was too different from what the science of his time taught.

Geoffroy had asked Denon to show him the animal representations in the bas-reliefs of Saqqara. They had spent half a day comparing the ibises of the paintings with living ibises. The paintings and the birds resembled each other perfectly. Three thousand years had changed nothing. Denon had drawn the two side by side – the living one and the painted dead one – without knowing which resembled the original more.

III - The Battle of the Pyramids

On 21 July, the army caught sight of the pyramids.

The triangular silhouettes stood out on the horizon from some ten kilometres away. The soldiers stopped of their own accord. No one had given an order. Bonaparte, on horseback, looked at them without a word.

Then he turned to his men:

“Soldiers, from the summit of these pyramids, forty centuries look down upon you.”

He signalled to his generals, without lowering his voice:

“Bon, left division. Desaix, right division. We do not move. We let them come.”

Then, for himself alone, one last time facing the pyramids:

“We might as well do it by winning.”

The savants were sent inside the infantry squares with the baggage and the wounded. They found themselves jammed among the mules and ammunition wagons, at the shoulder height of the soldiers in the rear ranks. Monge could see almost nothing.

From where he was, one could see only what happened at the height of a man: feet tightening together, muskets held in both hands, sweat on necks. The dust rising from the east. The Mamluk cavalry approaching, still unseen. A soldier on his left was murmuring in Alsatian. Monge did not understand. The tone was enough. He wondered, for the first time since Toulon, whether

it was worth it, for this expedition, to be wedged between mules and wagons while cavalry charged through the dust.

The rumble arrived before the sound of hooves. Something in the air, a vibration in the earth beneath his feet. Then the front ranks fired and the black smoke masked everything. The volleys followed one another at a steady rhythm. In the intervals, cries could be heard. Those of men falling from their horses.

What Monge could not see from inside the square, the mounted officers saw. Murad Bey had deployed his forces to the east, between the French and the Nile. Six thousand Mamluk horsemen, perhaps seven thousand, massed in undulating formations that changed shape without ever setting. No lines. No fixed ranks. A cavalry that spread like water over an uneven surface. The Arabian horses, smaller than the French mounts, galloped in groups of fifty, of a hundred, changing direction at the signal of a leader no one could see. Behind them, an ochre dust rose until it hid the sky.

Bonaparte had formed his divisions into five great squares. Twenty-five thousand men arranged six ranks deep, bayonets out, the officers inside with the baggage. It was the theoretical formation taught at the *École militaire*, the one that was never supposed to give way under a cavalry charge. In theory. No one in the army had ever seen six thousand horsemen charge at once.

The first charge came from the south-east. About a thousand horsemen, cut off from the bulk of the Mamluk army, who spurred straight at Desaix's square. The Mamluks carried scimitars, pistols at their belts, carbines slung across their backs. Some wore mail that glittered in the sun. Others robes of embroidered silk. It was not an army. It was a warrior aristocracy on horseback, each rider fighting for his own glory, without collective order.

They charged at full gallop over three hundred metres. Desaix's square waited. Two hundred and fifty metres. The officers shouted at them to hold the ranks. Two hundred metres. The muskets rose. One hundred and fifty metres. Bonaparte, from

his central position, watched without moving. One hundred metres. The distance at which an infantryman could make out the face of the rider charging him. Seventy-five metres. The order to fire.

The first volley struck the charge head on. The balls hit the horses first, broader than the men, then the riders who toppled forward or sideways. At fifty metres, the charge slowed. Not a sudden halt. A crumbling. The horses refused to advance towards the bayonets. A few isolated riders reached the square. They struck with their scimitars against the crossed muskets but could not penetrate the six ranks of depth. The second volley brought them down at point-blank range.

The survivors fell back. But other charges followed. Murad Bey launched his squadrons in successive waves, hoping to find a flaw in the French formations. Each wave broke on the muskets. After an hour, the squares still held. The ground in front of the French positions was strewn with dead horses and wounded riders. The powder smoke hung in the motionless air, forming a grey fog that hid the pyramids in the background.

Denon went on drawing blind. Backs, muskets, smoke, a corner of pyramid above the heads. From inside the square, he saw only fragments: the neck of the Alsatian soldier in front of him, the muskets that rose and fell, the acrid smoke that masked everything. What had just happened outside – the charges, the volleys that shattered the Mamluk squadrons, the counter-attack of the French cavalry – he would not see. He would keep only the smoke, the heat, the sweat, and the noise.

Towards the end of the afternoon, Bonaparte launched the divisions of Bon and Vial at the entrenched camp of Embabeh, on the bank of the Nile. The infantry columns advanced with the bayonet. It was not a pursuit. It was a calculated thrust to break the enemy's cohesion. The Mamluks, caught between the columns and the river, gave ground. Some drowned trying to cross

the river on horseback. Others were shot down on the banks by the French infantry pursuing them.

Murad Bey understood that the battle was lost. His horsemen, superb as individuals, could do nothing against a disciplined infantry holding its positions. He gave the order for a general retreat. Less than two hours after the fighting began, the surviving Mamluks were galloping south, abandoning the field to the French. They left several thousand dead behind them. The French counted fewer than three hundred killed and wounded.

Denon drew the pyramids with the dead in the foreground. It was that sketch, not the triumphal paintings commissioned later, that told the truth of that day.

The army set off again. And then the pyramids came back. Not as they had appeared in the morning, distant silhouettes in the dust, but as things of another nature. They grew as one approached in a way that had nothing to do with ordinary perspective. It was not that they became larger. It was that they ceased to be comparable to anything known. At two hundred metres, Denon understood that he had spent his whole life imagining monuments on the scale of a man. These pyramids had been built on the scale of an idea the builders had of what ought to endure. They were enormous, shameless in their size. No European edifice was comparable.

Jomard, the young polytechnician, took out his measuring instruments and began his surveys. The figures he noted that evening – length of the base, angle of slope of the faces, estimated height – would constitute the first precise scientific survey of the pyramids of Giza. This tedious, meticulous work, carried out on the very evening of the victory, summed up the ambivalence of the whole expedition.

Denon examined the pyramids, then the army camped at their foot. These monuments weighed millions of tonnes. They would go nowhere. But the objects they contained were another matter.

The statuettes of the burial chambers. The papyri. The faience scarabs. Everything a hand could lift and put in a campaign chest. Night fell quickly on the Giza plateau. The soldiers lit their bivouac fires. The orange light of the flames gave the stones a colour he had not yet seen in any painting. Denon remained standing long after Jomard had lain down on his blanket, eyes open to the sky.

Past midnight, he took his charcoals and approached the Great Pyramid. The sentries did not stop him. They had been told that this civilian with the notebook wandered everywhere and caused no trouble. He followed the base until he found an angle where the moon lit the west face directly. The blocks were taller than a man. Two, three blocks climbed, he sat down on the fourth.

The stone was still warm. Not the diffuse warmth of the air. A warmth of its own, inward, as if the mass of limestone had absorbed the day's sun and was slowly giving it back into the night. His palm laid flat. A hundred and forty-six metres of stone above him, invisible in the darkness. He saw only the first courses of blocks rising towards the black.

Denon tried to draw. The moon gave enough light to make out the joints between the courses, the slight irregularity of the hand-cut surfaces, the deep shadow of the interstices. The horizon line traced where the pyramid cut the sky, the successive ranks of blocks rising in steps. It was simpler than the daytime drawing.

Jomard found him there around one in the morning. He sat down beside him without a word, examined the sketch in the notebook, then the pyramid, then the notebook again.

"We have just won a battle that no one will remember having lost," said Denon. "In a thousand years, who will know that Murad Bey fled south a little while ago? In a thousand years, this pyramid will have seen a hundred battles like ours. It will not count them. Stone does not keep tally of the victories of men."

“Our notebooks will write it,” added Jomard. “There is a difference between knowing and writing. But our notebooks will bear witness, if someone reads them.”

“Our notebooks. That is what remains of victories. Notebooks and pyramids.”

Jomard reflected. The summit of the structure drew his gaze.

“I calculated this evening that the Great Pyramid contains about two million three hundred thousand blocks. If the workmen had worked ten hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year for twenty years, a block would have had to be laid roughly every two minutes, without interruption. No pause. No error. Two million times. What troubles me is that the calculation works. There is no margin that collapses. They did exactly what they had planned to do.”

In the distance, the soldiers’ bivouac fires twinkled on the plain. Somewhere to the north, Cairo slept. The pyramid did not sleep. Denon examined the sketch one last time. The line of the pyramid against the night sky, simple, absolute. Never had he drawn anything so difficult to get wrong. The form was so pure that one could not miss it.

Jomard stood up, slapped the dust from his trousers and climbed back towards the camp.

The next morning, Denon went down into the Great Pyramid with Monge and the architect Balzac. They entered by the passage forced in the ninth century by the Caliph al-Mamun. A tunnel in the masonry, so narrow that one had to advance bent double, smoking torches in hand. The heat of the day before had left the plateau. The stone was cold.

In the ascending passage they passed a soldier coming down. A young one, eighteen perhaps, torch in his left hand, right hand closed. He pressed himself against the wall to let them by. Denon glimpsed what the right hand held. A scarab of blue faience, the size of a walnut, found in a side niche. The soldier looked at him.

Denon looked back. Neither said anything. The soldier went on towards the exit. There was nothing to say. The soldier's scarab and the statuettes in his own baggage came under the same logic. The difference was one of degree, not of kind. Denon had known it since Saqqara.

The Grand Gallery stopped them short. Forty-seven metres long, eight and a half metres high, its polished limestone walls rising in corbelled courses towards the apex. The passage continued at twenty-six degrees towards the King's Chamber. Torch raised. The light did not reach the top. There was no visible top. Only the two walls drawing closer in the dark.

"The Romans built vaults," said Monge, looking at the walls. "The Egyptians built false ceilings. The result is the same. A covered space. The technical solution is different. They solved the same problem without knowing one another."

"Yes, with centuries between them," replied Balzac. "This passage is two thousand seven hundred years older than the Pantheon in Rome."

Monge advanced, counting his steps. He had brought a graduated cord which he unrolled behind him, noting the exact length at every change of direction. Balzac held the spirit level.

In the King's Chamber, they halted. The empty sarcophagus occupied the west corner. A monolithic trough without lid, without inscription, without ornament. Someone had broken the north edge at some undetermined time. The plunderers had left nothing else.

Denon measured the room in all three dimensions. Length: ten metres thirty. Width: five metres twenty. Height: five metres eighty. Having noted the figures, he checked them, noted them again. Then he calculated the ratio of length to width. Close to two to one. Close to the double square.

“Look. This ratio is not random. The Egyptians had a geometry of proportions that we are rediscovering. They had not written it down. They had built it.”

Seated on the edge of the empty sarcophagus, Monge drew the room by the light of his torch. This sarcophagus had held something. Or perhaps nothing. Perhaps it had always been empty. Probably the chamber itself was the tomb and not the stone chest. No one knew. No hieroglyph adorned the walls to say so. Had there been any, they would not have been able to read them.

They climbed back to the surface after two hours. The morning sun struck the Giza plateau. Monge sat down on a block of limestone and closed his eyes for a moment. He thought of the room below. Its absolute silence, its perfect darkness, the empty sarcophagus that had waited there for centuries for someone to come and lay hands on it.

Denon opened his notebook and wrote. “One enters a pyramid as one enters a sentence of which one understands neither the beginning nor the end. The meaning is there, organised, precise. But we lack the language.”

In the afternoon, while Jomard finished his surveys of the east face, Denon wandered off towards the south of the plateau. To see the Sphinx from afar, that was his wish, before approaching it. He stopped at three hundred metres and looked.

The head emerged from the sand on the horizon, cut out against the sky white with heat. The proportion was disturbing. Too large for a man, too small for a monument, something between the two that corresponded to no category he knew. He traced the silhouette precisely. Four lines. The break of the mutilated nose. The rim of the nemes. The striped headdress framing the face. The shadow cast on the sand.

As he drew nearer, details were added. The pale yellow limestone, worn by millennia of wind laden with sand. The geological strata were visible in the rock. The Sphinx had been carved from the

natural cliff. The workmen had followed the layers of the stone as a sculptor follows the grain of wood. The ears, half effaced, still kept their shape. The eyes were hollows now, but the raised brows showed that they had had to be deliberately hollowed out. Denon sat down in the sand, at the foot of the head, in the narrow shadow it cast in the late afternoon. It was the only cool spot on the plateau at that hour. The face drawn from below, the angle no painter had yet represented, the angle of someone seated at the foot of the monument and raising his eyes.

A soldier from the protection detachment came to tell him it was time to return to camp. He signalled that he had heard and did not move. The soldier went away. There was light left for about twenty minutes.

He thought of what the Sphinx guarded. Or was supposed to guard. The ancient Egyptians had called it Hor-em-akhet, Horus in the Horizon. The falcon god who was also the rising sun. That face looked to the east, exactly east, towards the sun at its rising. Not by chance. By astronomical calculation, carried out with a precision that Jomard's instruments would only confirm.

Everything here was intentional. Nothing was decorative for the mere pleasure of decorating. Every proportion, every orientation, every chosen material answered a logic that the builders had in their heads and had not thought it useful to explain because their successors knew it too. Then the successors had vanished, and the logic with them, and only the stone remained. Perfect, precise, and mute.

When the light became insufficient, he stood up and looked at the face once more. The missing nose did not diminish the expression. If it was an expression at all. It was probably not serenity. Perhaps simply the way a face carved in rock looks at the world.

The capture of Cairo on 24 July was astonishingly swift. The gates of the city opened without serious fighting, the local authorities preferring to negotiate rather than face an army whose firepower they had just witnessed. Bonaparte entered the capital of Egypt at the head of his troops, passing through alleys where the population prudently stayed indoors.

The soldiers' wonder at Cairo was universal. After weeks of desert, they discovered a city of three hundred thousand inhabitants. Its teeming bazaars, its countless mosques, its gardens of palms and orange trees, its fountains. For most of them, it was the largest and strangest city they had ever seen.

Denon walked through the Khan el-Khalili quarter on the very evening of the entry. Drawing as he walked, noting as he passed. The city seemed to him a complete and coherent world, organised according to a logic whose keys he still lacked. It would take months to begin to understand.

Khan el-Khalili had been the merchant heart of Cairo since the fourteenth century. A labyrinth of covered alleys where goldsmiths, weavers, spice merchants, booksellers, and makers of copper and brass crowded together. He had been wandering there for an hour, his notebook open, unable to fix his drawings because the movement never stopped. Faces, fabrics, wares. Everything came one after another, too fast.

An old dealer in Arabic calligraphy noticed him and beckoned him into his shop. Denon accepted. The man spread before him sheets covered in signs he could not read but whose aesthetic value he recognised at once. The curving lines, the diacritical points arranged with a precision that owed as much to drawing as to writing. He bought three for a modest sum. The merchant offered him a fourth by way of welcome.

The gesture struck him. After the gunfire of Alexandria, after the palpable mistrust of the streets, someone was offering him something. It was not sympathy for France. It was something older.

Hospitality as it had existed in this country for millennia, before the French, before the Ottomans, before even the Arabs.

Jomard, more pragmatic, at once took an interest in the dimensions of the city. Three hundred thousand inhabitants was nearly half the population of Paris. But spread over a far smaller area, in narrow alleys that allowed only two donkeys abreast. Density was another way of measuring a civilisation. He noted the widths of the streets, the approximate heights of the façades, the ratio between built surfaces and inner courtyards. These data would serve him later for his demographic estimates.

Bonaparte, for his part, saw Cairo as an administrative problem. Three hundred thousand inhabitants to be governed with an army of twenty-five thousand exhausted soldiers. The ratio was not favourable. He needed local allies, administration by proxy, a borrowed legitimacy. He began work on the very evening of the entry into the city, while his soldiers collapsed with fatigue.

Monge and Berthollet found themselves in the courtyard of an abandoned palace, drinking Egyptian coffee served by a servant whom the commissariat had hired that very morning.

"Here we are," said Monge, raising his cup. "We have crossed the Mediterranean, taken Malta, traversed the desert, won the Battle of the Pyramids, and here we are in Cairo. Six weeks at sea, one battle, and we sit here in a Mamluk palace drinking coffee."

"The essential remains," Berthollet pointed out.

"What, then?"

"Understanding what we have before us. This country. This civilisation. The military conquest was the easy part."

In the neighbouring streets, the army was settling in for the night. Shouted orders, horses, the dull sound of crates being set down. Cairo still did not sleep. Perhaps it never really slept. Monge set down his cup and surveyed the courtyard. A palm tree, the stone basin, the stars above the walls. He had spent fifty-two years

believing that science opened up the world. It did open it, indeed. That the opening could be so frightening, he had not foreseen.

IV - The Battle of Aboukir

On 1 August, Nelson attacked the French ships in Aboukir Bay. The battle lasted a night. By morning, eleven of the thirteen ships of the line had been sunk or captured. L'Orient, the flagship, had blown up.

The French fleet had lain at anchor in a line in the shallow cove of Aboukir since the first days of July, awaiting the orders of Admiral Brueys. Thirteen ships moored side by side, their starboard flanks turned to the sea, their larboard flanks to the land. It was the classic arrangement of a fleet at anchor, the one that protected one side by backing onto the shore. Brueys had chosen this position because the port of Alexandria was too shallow. He thought Nelson could only attack head-on.

But Nelson had grasped the weakness of this arrangement. If the bay was deep enough for thirteen ships, it was deep enough to sail between those ships and the coast. The French had protected themselves from the open sea. They had left their larboard flank exposed, believing that no one would dare venture into the shallows. Nelson dared.

The attack began at half past six in the evening, as the sun was sinking towards the horizon. Fourteen British ships entered the roadstead. Five of them, those of shallowest draught, passed between the French line and the coast. The others attacked from seaward. The French found themselves caught between two fires, their larboard guns useless because they had not foreseen fighting on that side.

The battle unfolded in the deepening darkness. The first French ships of the line, taken by surprise, were overwhelmed before they could recall their crews, scattered ashore. The Guerrier, the Conquérant, the Spartiate were pounded at point-blank range by

the British guns. By eight o'clock it was pitch dark. The fighting went on only by the light of cannon fire, of flames rising from damaged decks, and of the moon rising over the Mediterranean.

L'Orient, the flagship of a hundred and twenty guns, stood at the centre of the French line. She was the largest in the world, built at Toulon in 1791. Brueys commanded her, wounded but refusing to leave his post. At nine o'clock a fire broke out on the poop, where pots of paint and oil had been left lying about, and spread to the lower decks. The fire reached the magazines. The sailors tried to put it out, but the pumps had been destroyed by the earlier gunfire.

At ten o'clock, L'Orient exploded. The blast was visible from Alexandria, thirty kilometres away. A column of flame rose a hundred metres into the night sky. The noise of the explosion echoed along the whole coast. For ten minutes, the fighting stopped. British and French alike ceased firing, stunned by the violence of the destruction. Burning debris fell back onto the sea. The bodies of sailors were flung into the air and dropped into the water hundreds of metres from the ship. Of L'Orient, nothing remained. Of a thousand crewmen, only a handful of survivors were pulled from the water.

The fighting resumed after the silence. The surviving French ships tried to defend themselves, but they were surrounded, their crews decimated. By dawn on 2 August, eleven French ships had been destroyed or captured. Only two managed to escape to the open sea, the *Guillaume Tell* and the *Généreux*. They would flee towards Malta. The others were sunk, run aground on the coast, or in British hands.

The Battle of Aboukir was Nelson's greatest naval victory. French losses ran to several thousand men killed, wounded or taken prisoner. The British had lost not a single ship. The Mediterranean was theirs again.

That night changed everything. Without a fleet, the French army was a prisoner in Egypt. No reinforcements, no supplies, no

return. Thirty-eight thousand soldiers and a hundred and sixty-seven savants cut off from the world.

The news reached Bonaparte on 14 August, on the road to Cairo, on his return from Salhieh. As soon as he reached the capital, he summoned a council of war. His anger was plain to see.

“Brueys anchored the fleet in Aboukir Bay instead of taking it to safety at Alexandria. Nelson attacked by night. The fleet is destroyed. That is our situation.”

Kléber – down from Alexandria for the occasion, forty-five years old, an Alsatian, a giant of nearly two metres, frankness his occupational failing – asked the question that everyone had on the tips of their tongues.

“General Bonaparte, what is the long-term strategy? How long do we stay here?”

Bonaparte hesitated. The decision had not been made.

“We control the Nile, Kléber. Egypt can feed our army. Malta has given us enough to hold out. We do not depend on the Directory. Let us continue. The Army of the Orient is cut off from France. We are now obliged to do great things. If we cannot return by sea, we shall return by land, through Syria and Turkey, or else stay here until circumstances change.”

“We are prisoners here for an indefinite period,” said Monge.

Berthollet, more stoical and more resigned than Monge, tried to put the situation in proportion by setting it in a broader historical perspective.

“Alexander was away from Macedonia for eleven years, Monge. Our work here will outlast us. Hold on to that.”

After the council, Kléber found Denon in the palace corridor and stopped him with a hand on his arm. The Alsatian was the only general in the army who made no pretence in front of civilians. The only one, too, who did not ask permission to put an unpleasant question.

“You heard Bonaparte. He has given the order to continue. What do you make of it?”

“I think he has no choice. And that he knows it.”

“And we?”

“Neither do we.”

Kléber nodded. It was not pessimism. He let go of him and walked back towards his officers.

There was something instructive in this kind of catastrophe. Not a moral lesson, but a lesson in contingency. Great enterprises did not always fall for great reasons. Sometimes they fell because an admiral had anchored in the wrong place.

The announcement of the fleet’s destruction reached the savants in different ways, depending on their position in the hierarchy of the camp. Some learned it from a staff officer crossing the courtyard. Others from an Egyptian servant who had overheard soldiers talking.

That evening, before going back to his lodgings, Denon stopped by the northern outbuildings of Hassan-Kashif’s palace, where the collections were stored. Lantern and handwritten inventory in hand.

The crates were there: the twelve boxes labelled in his own hand, the official collections of Monge and Berthollet. In the north-west corner, against the back wall, twenty-three unlabelled crates. No serial number. No commissioner’s name. Plain wood, hastily closed with nails driven in at a slant. He tried to lift one of them. Too heavy for one man. His fingers slid into a gap between the planks. Canvas. Something hard beneath it. He did not force it open. He had seen them three times since the beginning of the expedition. The first time at Alexandria, without paying attention. They had been there among other crates. The second after the Battle of Aboukir, when he had come to check the collections by lantern. The third this morning. They had not moved, and no one had claimed them. They existed outside the system. Outside

the forms, the warrants, the inventory books. They were the part of the expedition that had no name.

He noted the existence of these twenty-three crates in his personal journal, at the foot of a page, with the date and the words: "Provenance unknown. Contents unchecked." He spoke of it to no one. These crates would belong to someone. Someone would claim them, or would not.

The following afternoon, Denon went to the spice market at Khan el-Khalili to see whether the news was known in the city. It had not filtered through. Or it had filtered through without any visible effect. The merchants sold. The buyers bought. The prices of pepper and cinnamon had not changed since the week before.

A cloth merchant he knew by sight beckoned him over. The man uttered a few words in Arabic, pointing at the sky, then at the sea to the north, then made a gesture with both hands clasped together and suddenly flung apart, the universal sign of an explosion.

"They know," Denon said to his interpreter.

"They have known since last night. News travels fast in the souks. They say the French fleet has been destroyed and that you are now prisoners here."

"And what do they think of that?"

The interpreter exchanged a few sentences with the merchant. Then he turned back to him.

"He says the French are not the first to be trapped in Egypt, that the Mamluks also thought they would stay, that the Nile will go on flowing when you have gone, and also that if you want to buy cloth, he's offering a good deal today."

Denon bought a piece of indigo cloth. Not for any useful reason but because the colour was beautiful and he wanted to have done something concrete that day.

What occupied him more, in the hours that followed, was a concrete thought: how would Jomard's notebooks, his own drawings, Geoffroy's collections get back to France? Science travelled on the same ships as war.

That evening, after the council of war, the savants gathered in the inner courtyard of the palace. No one had proposed meeting there. They were simply there, one after another, drawn by the same need not to be left alone with the news.

Berthollet arrived a few minutes later with a sheet of calculations in his hand. Seated, the sheet resting on his knees, he said to Monge without preamble:

"I have estimated the available provisions. Flour, oil, rice, dried meat. With proper rationing, the army can last sixteen months without outside supplies. We shall not starve."

"It is not hunger that concerns me," said Monge.

"I know. But it is what I can calculate."

Fourier sat apart, under the portico. He had not said a word. The others had learned not to read this silence as indifference. Fourier thought differently from them. He needed mathematics to deal with what words could not contain. Losing the fleet was a problem with multiple variables: the provisions, the reinforcements, the possible routes of retreat. Writing the equations that would link them eluded him. It was not coldness. It was his way of being afraid.

"Our collections. How do they get home?"

No one answered immediately. It was the question they had all asked themselves and that no one had wanted to be the first to put.

"The notebooks go home in our pockets," added Jomard. "The measurements, the notes, the sketches. What weighs a few kilos per man can cross anything."

“And the crates?” said Denon. “Geoffroy’s specimens. Berthollet’s mummies. The pottery, the papyri, the statuettes. What is heavy.”

Berthollet set down his sheet of calculations.

“What is heavy is vulnerable. We must admit it. If the English take control of the eastern Mediterranean, everything we might wish to embark could be captured.”

A cat crossed the paving and vanished under the portico. Somewhere in the city, the muezzin began the call of the night. A long, sinuous voice that rose and fell to a melody he had heard every night since 1 July and that never ceased to seem foreign to him.

“Bonaparte said we would go home through Syria if we could not go home by sea,” said Monge.

“Bonaparte says many things,” replied Berthollet. “Tonight, he is right to say them. The army needs to believe in them.”

They stayed an hour in the courtyard, with no plan, no decision, simply together.

They rose separately and each went back to his own room. They had nothing else to do.

Denon sat down at his worktable and wrote.

“We lost the fleet thirteen nights ago, without our knowing it. I say ‘we’ because it is the right word. This loss is collective even though I was not at Aboukir, even though I am not a sailor. What I lost with the fleet is the certainty that what I have seen here will not return to France, or at least not in a form of my choosing. My notebooks, my sketches, the two hundred and forty statuettes and amulets I bought in the markets of Saqqara and Memphis. All of it is now hostage to a military situation over which I have no purchase.”

He stopped. Reread. Struck out the last sentence. Too plaintive. Denon began again.

“What occupies me tonight is not fear. I do not think we shall die here. Bonaparte will find something; he always finds something. What occupies me is a more abstract question: what use is testimony if the witness cannot return? The drawings I have made of the pyramids, of the Sphinx, of the bas-reliefs of Saqqara, have value if someone sees them. Shut up in a crate in Cairo, they are worth no more than the stone they depict.”

He put down his pen.

His sketchbooks weighed, all together, about twelve kilograms. The statuettes and amulets in their wooden crates, about forty kilograms. A man could carry twelve kilograms on his back over a long march. Forty kilograms required a horse or a mule. The army’s horses and mules were not available for the personal collections of a civilian draughtsman.

He drew up a list of what he could carry himself if the situation demanded it. The notebooks, an absolute priority. His drawing instruments – pens, charcoal, inks – a few kilograms. Among the objects he had bought, the smallest and most precious: the scarabs of faience and steatite, the amulets of lapis lazuli and carnelian, the *shabti* of painted wood with its crossed arms. What would fit in a leather satchel.

The rest – the pottery, the fragments of bas-reliefs, the alabaster canopic jars – would stay. If they set off on foot through Syria, as Bonaparte spoke of doing, one could not load pottery on the back of a man marching through the desert.

This forced selection taught him something he had not anticipated. Since the outset, he had believed he was documenting Egypt in order to bring it back to France. Reality now imposed itself. What he would bring back would depend less on what he had chosen than on what could physically travel. The story told about a country is the story of what was able to come home. The rest does not count.

He wrote one last line:

“If these notebooks reach you and I do not, it is because they travelled alone. That is no doubt the best way to travel. Objects are lighter than men.”

He folded the sheet and slipped it into the first notebook, between the pages of Toulon. Then he blew out the lamp and waited for daylight.

V - The Institute of Egypt

Three weeks after Aboukir, while the army was digesting the naval disaster, Bonaparte founded the Institute of Egypt by decree on 22 August 1798, twenty-nine days after the taking of Cairo.

The Institute’s official mission was to study the country in all its dimensions – natural, historical, economic – and to answer the questions that the military administration could not resolve alone. The Institute sat in Hassan-Kashif’s palace. Bonaparte was its vice-president, Monge its president. Every five days, the savants settled into the great hall and resumed their work.

Monge presided over the first session.

He had taught descriptive geometry to the sons of artisans who were learning to read at the same time as they learned conic sections. The École Polytechnique had been founded so that merit would replace birth. For him, Egypt was not a conquest. It was proof that revolutionary France could produce something the monarchies never would: a scientific expedition at the heart of a military campaign.

He opened the proceedings with a few words:

“We are here to understand, not to conquer. I ask you never to forget it.”

Seated in the back row, Denon noted the sentence.

Bonaparte came often. The savants appreciated being listened to by someone who held power.

“Gentlemen, Egypt was the most civilised country in the world. Three millennia of history buried. You will exhumate them. Measure, draw, collect. And study the Egypt of today. Science must also serve the living.”

A few weeks later, Denon spent several days drawing the pyramids from every angle. Jomard climbed to the summit of the Great Pyramid. Three hours of climbing over blocks of stone. The view from up there: the desert to the west, the Nile valley to the east, Cairo to the north-east.

“What a view,” he murmured to the architect Balzac. “All of Egypt at a single glance.”

“Yes. And from up there I shall be able to calibrate my sightings on all four faces.”

They measured the remains of the temple of Ptah, creator god of Memphis. In the dust lay the fragments of a colossal statue of pink granite, which would later be attributed to Ramesses II.

The work was thankless. The statue was broken into several pieces scattered in the grass. Reconstructing the measurements meant building them up by addition, compensating for the gaps, estimating the missing parts.

Towards noon, Jomard sat down in the shade of the head. Nearly two metres high.

He examined the face. The mouth was faintly smiling. That smile peculiar to the colossi of the New Kingdom, neither benevolent nor menacing, simply present since thirteen centuries BC. The nose had been broken, probably by soldiers of the Middle Ages who believed they were destroying a power by destroying the face. The uraeus – the royal cobra on the brow, sign of divine sovereignty – had been torn off, leaving only its imprint. The nemes was intact, its parallel stripes legible beneath the dust.

On the belt – at hip level, where the broken legs had carried off the rest – Jomard spotted a cartouche. Two elongated ovals,

ringed by a continuous line: the royal names, which no one yet knew how to read.

The head could not be carried away. It weighed some eighty tonnes. It had been cut from a single block of pink granite, quarried at Aswan.

An old man crouching in the shadow of the colossal head had been watching Jomard for some time. A guardian, perhaps, or simply someone who had sat down there before him and had not moved. Jomard showed him his notebook, the diagram of his calculations. The old man spoke, but Jomard did not understand. Then he picked up a twig and drew in the dust, beside the statue's foot, two parallel lines and three oblique strokes across them. A diagram. Different from his own, but recognisable: a load moving up an inclined plane. They stayed like that for a while, two men and two diagrams in the dust. One had the instruments. The other had the memory. Mental arithmetic. A block of eighty tonnes. On a boat. The boats of the Nile were known. Flat, light craft, able to carry twenty tonnes at most. How did one transport eighty tonnes on water?

The obvious answer was: not on a single boat. On several, assembled into a floating raft, lashed together, the statue resting on timbers linking it to all the craft. The calculation showed that at least ten boats of standard size, fastened in close formation, would be needed.

Ten boats. Hundreds of metres of rope. Hundreds of men. To carry a statue to a temple.

What astonished him was not the technical feat, difficult but achievable. No, it was the decision to do it. To decide to transport eighty tonnes over nine hundred kilometres of water presupposed a certainty. The certainty that the result was worth the effort, that the statue would still be there in a thousand years, that the Empire the pharaoh sought to glorify would endure.

The pharaohs had been wrong. Empires do not last. But statues do. This one lay in the dust, broken but there, visible, measurable, real.

The greatness of ancient Egypt perhaps lay less in what it had accomplished than in what it had planned to leave behind. These monuments had not been built for their contemporaries. They had been built for us.

Denon was passing with his sketchbook and stopped on seeing Jomard seated in the shade of the colossus's head.

"Meditating?"

"Measuring. Which comes to the same thing."

In December, Berthollet counted what had been done since July. Hundreds of notebooks filled, thousands of specimens, memoirs on geology, irrigation, mummification, agriculture, languages. Five months of work. The ledger was closed. The country would yield its secrets only to those who stayed a very long time.

Desaix had been pursuing Murad Bey in Upper Egypt since the summer. Bonaparte decided to send a commission of savants in his wake, to leave in mid-December 1798 to study the Theban monuments. Denon volunteered.

The question of the collections already posed problems that no one wished to resolve clearly. The savants collected natural specimens – minerals, stuffed animals, dried plants – with the tacit agreement of Bonaparte, who saw in them the foundations of a future Egyptian museum in Paris. But archaeological objects fell into another category, morally more ambiguous.

Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire was coming back from the fish market at Embaba with eight species he had never seen before.

For him, dissecting an unknown fish was a conversation. Cuts, observations, notes, comparison with his anatomical memories of European species. The internal organisation of fishes was

remarkably constant from one species to another. The same organs in the same positions, with variations that reflected different ways of life. A bottom-dweller had its eyes set differently from a pelagic fish. But the underlying plan was alike.

This constancy of anatomical plan across the diversity of species was what he was beginning to glimpse without yet being able to formulate it. If species had been created separately, as the prevailing doctrine held, why did they share so precise a plan? The answer – that they descended from a common ancestor – was a dangerous idea. Cuvier, professor at the Natural History Museum, would reject it. The Academy would look on it askance.

The fourth fish was in the midst of dissection when Denon came in and stopped short at the smell.

“You are still working.”

“Yes. These are elephantfish. Endemic to the Nile and the Congo. These electric organs beneath the tail – the fishes of the Amazon have similar ones, developed ten thousand kilometres away without any contact. It is not a coincidence. It is an anatomical constraint.”

Among the eight species brought back that morning, one stopped him dead. He had bought it from a fisherman who could not understand why the Frenchman was interested in so ordinary a fish.

The fish was set in his observation basin, an earthenware bowl filled with Nile water. It was about sixty centimetres long, golden-brown, covered in scales as thick as articulated shields. It swam slowly, with the dignity of a reptile.

What stopped Geoffroy were the pectoral fins.

Not flat, radiating fins, like those of every fish he had dissected since the age of twenty. Fleshy, lobed appendages, borne on an internal structure that resembled a limb.

He spent the night analysing the living fish, then dissecting it. The internal structure of the fin contained something like a

humerus, a long central bone from which rays extended. This fish, which he would name *Polypterus bichir*, had nothing to do with the Americas. Yet its fins shared the same fundamental anatomical plan.

Geoffroy wrote to Cuvier that evening. Cuvier was in Paris. He had been refused embarkation for Egypt, too risky, too uncertain. Their letters crossed on the seas, months late.

“My dear friend,” wrote Geoffroy, “I have found here something that would alone justify our voyage. A fish that looks as if it has arms. Not arms, of course, fins. But an internal plan that resembles the plan of a limb, and which is the same, exactly the same, in species that could never have crossed. I still do not know what to make of it. But it cannot be chance.”

Cuvier did not reply on this point for several months. When he did, it was to say that resemblances did not imply a common origin. That God might very well have used the same plan in different circumstances.

VI - The Cairo Revolt

Jomard had begun keeping a journal of the city. Not a private diary – he had no disposition for that kind of thing – but a survey: estimated populations by district, building densities, widths of alleys, heights of façades, areas of markets. To this were added observations on the flow of traffic, the opening hours of the souks, the geography of water, the fountains and their basins.

That evening, on the eve of what he still did not know would be the revolt, he had gone out with his lantern to measure Ezbekiya Square. The square was the heart of the French presence in the city. It was there that Bonaparte had set up his headquarters, there that the markets, the official festivals, the military gatherings were held. The people of Cairo for the most part crossed it without lingering, eyes at mid-height, step quick.

He was measuring the angles of the square, noting distances with a calibrated cord, when he noticed that a group of men sitting near a fountain were watching him work.

One of them stood up and approached. He said a few words in Arabic that Jomard did not understand. Then he pointed to the measuring cord and said another sentence. Jomard took it for a question about what he was doing.

He showed him the partial plan of the square that he had drawn. The man examined it closely, turned the notebook over, held it at arm's length. Then he said something to his companions. They laughed. A laugh that was not mocking, rather surprised.

Jomard never knew what they had said. They had recognised, he thought, their square in the drawing. It was no doubt the first time anyone had shown them their own city seen from above. Or perhaps they laughed because the young Frenchman with his cord was trying to measure something that did not need measuring. Impossible to know.

On 21 October 1798, the latent hostility of the Cairene population exploded. The spark had been slight. A quarrel between a French soldier and a merchant.

At dawn on 21 October, thousands of rioters armed with sabres, spears and sticks flooded the streets of Cairo. Isolated soldiers were massacred, beheaded. The rebel districts barricaded themselves. The insurrection had taken three weeks to ripen. It broke out in a single morning.

Bonaparte was woken by the gunfire. He ordered all available troops to retake the city district by district.

"This rebellion must be crushed without delay," he shouted to his generals. "If we show the slightest weakness, we shall be wiped out before tonight. Fire on any hostile gathering, without warning."

The artillery bombarded the rebel districts. The mud-brick houses collapsed in clouds of dust. Infantrymen combed the

streets. The Al-Azhar mosque was overrun. A desecration that horrified the entire Muslim population of Egypt.

The repression lasted three days. Bonaparte ordered the execution of all the leaders of the revolt captured alive. For several nights, they were beheaded at the Citadel, and the bodies were thrown into the Nile.

Denon had not waited for the repression to end before going out. His Egyptian servant, frantic, advised him to go back in. He paid no heed.

What he saw along the thoroughfares of the district where he lodged would remain etched in his memory. Groups of armed men. Shops burning. The smell of smoke and something else beneath it, which he recognised and did not name. A French soldier lay in an alley. Dead. Women screamed at windows. A child ran. The French army, taken by surprise, was slow to organise its response.

“Go home, for heaven’s sake,” an officer called out on seeing him with his sketchbook. “This is no time to draw.”

“On the contrary, it is precisely the time. In fifty years no one will know what happened here if no one records it.”

He finally went in after an hour and watched what followed from his first-floor window. French soldiers were encircling a group of insurgents in an alley. A mosque opened its doors to take in the fugitives.

Denon closed the window. In the streets, the gunfire continued. At the Institute, a few hundred metres away, the other savants were living the same night differently.

The savants were shut in. Not by military decision. Bonaparte had not concerned himself with their movements in the haste of the fighting. They were shut in by necessity: French soldiers massacred two hundred metres away, armed rioters in every district, gunfire constant since dawn.

Fourier settled in the great hall of the Institute with his notebooks and worked at his equations. He was thinking, without having made a theory of it, about the way heat propagates through bodies. It propagates according to precise and immutable laws. Riots do not propagate according to those rules. It was one more reason to prefer physics.

Around midnight, Jomard joined him with a lantern.

Berthollet came in around three in the morning, without announcing himself. He sat down and watched the other two work for a while.

“What are you calculating?” he said to Fourier.

“The way heat propagates through a non-homogeneous medium. I do not have the equations yet.”

“Useful. The building on the left has been burning since this morning. With a little luck your reflections will predict whether ours will be hit before dawn.”

“Keep working,” he added on his way out. “It is the only thing that distinguishes our presence here from an ordinary occupation.”

They worked in silence until the small hours, each at his own calculations, while the city burned outside.

Monge wrote a letter to his wife. There had been no regular mail since Aboukir. He wrote it all the same. What he wrote in that letter, Denon would never know. What was known was that he sealed it carefully and then carried it in his jacket until the departure from Egypt, a year later.

On 25 October, the savants cautiously emerged from the Institute. Three days they had been barricaded in, listening to the gunfire. Whole districts were nothing but smouldering ruins.

Denon went out into the devastated streets and drew.

Or at least he tried. Before him, a collapsed house, its façade blown out by a cannonball, the charred timber beams lying across

the street, a child's shoe in the dust. He traced the roofline of what remained standing. At Giza, he had drawn the pyramids with the dead in the foreground. In Malta, he had drawn the works that were carried off and those that were left. Denon had always held that to draw was to bear witness, and that bearing witness was neutral. The pencil took no side. What had existed was fixed. Nothing more.

But that house had been destroyed by French soldiers. By the artillery of the army in which he travelled. On which he depended to eat, to move about, to work. The document he would produce by drawing these ruins would be the document of a repression that his presence here, in a way, endorsed. It was not the same as drawing pyramids.

Denon drew all the same. Not from conviction. From reflex. The page filled. When he closed it, he still did not know what he had done. Something necessary, or something unworthy. Perhaps both at once.

Further along the alley, a carved wooden door lay torn from its hinges. A souk shop gutted, the shelves overturned, a copper chest open and empty. There was, in the lanes of this ruined district, the same fundamental gesture as in Hassan-Kashif's palace when the commissioners filled in their lists. Simply, without criteria, without discernment. The army plundered as the Institute collected. The word differed. The gesture was kin.

That morning, as he walked the devastated streets, Hassan went ahead of Denon to clear the way. Near the Ibn Tulun mosque, they came upon two French soldiers busy emptying a weavers' shop. The fabrics were coming out of the door in bundles, piled on a wooden wheelbarrow. Silks, dyed cottons, white linen kept for great occasions. One of the soldiers was unhooking a loom from its wall mounting.

The owner stood in the frame of the back door, a woman dressed in black. She watched without speaking. No pleading, no cries. Only her eyes following each bundle. The soldier passed close to

her with the wheelbarrow and she stepped back exactly one pace, no more, no less.

Hassan stayed in the street. No translation. Nothing to translate. But Denon looked at him for a moment, Hassan watching the woman who was watching the soldiers, and understood that the intermediary saw too. And that seeing without being able to act had a particular colour on a face. No note. Some faces are not written in notebooks.

That evening, Hassan went home, to the Coptic quarter where the army rented him a room. Neither on the soldiers' side nor on the insurgents' side. On the side of language. A translator on either side of a line he could not cross. French orders translated. Arabic pleas translated. Some days he no longer knew in which language he was thinking. Tonight he thought in none.

Denon drew the emptied shop. The nails in the wall where the cloths had hung, the darker mark on the floor where the loom had stood for years, the doorframe with the woman in black looking on. Quick work, without caption, without date. When he had finished, the soldiers had gone with the wheelbarrow. The woman went back into the shop and closed the inner door.

After the repression had ended, Bonaparte summoned the surviving notables and the ulema who had not taken an active part in the insurrection, to explain to them plainly the terrible consequences of any future attempt at revolt.

"You have seen what happens. Your districts destroyed. Your leaders executed. Al-Azhar bombarded. If you rebel again, I shall raze the entire city."

"This revolt reveals the fundamental impossibility of our situation," Monge said to Bonaparte at the council that followed the repression. "We cannot govern this country by military force alone indefinitely. The population is hostile to us and will remain so as long as we are here as foreign occupiers."

That council ended late. Bonaparte summoned Monge the next morning. Not at the palace, but in the inner courtyard of a requisitioned house near Ezbekiya Square, away from the officers. There was coffee and two stools. Bonaparte was standing.

"You said we cannot govern by force alone. You are right. What do you propose?"

Monge had not expected to be consulted on this point. He said what he thought all the same.

"Institutions. Not proclamations. Real institutions. Courts that operate according to known rules. Schools. A system of land-holding that protects the fellahs against arbitrary power. What the Revolution did in France, but here."

"In how long?"

"A generation at the very least."

"We do not have a generation. We have perhaps two years."

"Then you cannot govern this country. Not truly. You can occupy it. That is different."

Bonaparte looked at him for a long time.

"Occupying will suffice. For what I want to do."

Monge did not ask what Bonaparte wanted to do.

That evening, Monge wrote in his journal: "Bonaparte knows that he does not govern. An occupation is administered. The distinction matters little to him. To me it matters a great deal. I still do not know whether it matters to the Egyptians."

In the weeks that followed the repression, a kind of precarious normality settled back in. The markets reopened. The mosques welcomed their faithful again, except Al-Azhar, which remained closed. French soldiers resumed their patrols. The savants began venturing out into the city again with their notebooks and instruments.

After the revolt, the savants experienced their presence in Cairo differently. The illusion of a peaceful coexistence with the

population had been shattered. They went on working, frequenting the markets, keeping up contacts with certain Cairene notables. But a latent violence could resurface at any moment.

Denon was, in the eyes of the Cairenes, what he had always been in the eyes of others. A Frenchman, therefore an occupier, therefore a potential enemy.

Most of the shops had reopened. The craftsmen were working. Life had resumed.

In an alley behind Al-Azhar, Denon came upon a Quranic school whose pupils were resuming their lessons. Children sat in a circle around an old master who read aloud and had them repeat. The master raised his eyes as he passed, looked at him, then went back to his reading without changing his expression.

The children's voices recited a text they probably still did not understand, in a language their parents perhaps no longer read. Venture de Paradis, an orientalist who had long worked in the trading ports of the Levant and Barbary, had told him that transmission precedes understanding. Words enter the body first; meaning comes after. The gesture was understood: to transmit, to continue, not to let interruption become rupture.

The city had been wounded. It would heal in its own way, at a rhythm the French did not control and would not entirely understand. This was not resilience in the heroic sense. It was only the capacity of a living organism to carry on its essential functions despite interruptions. The markets reopened because people were hungry. The mosques welcomed their faithful because prayer did not cease. The children recited their lessons because transmission did not wait for the occupiers to finish fighting.

VII - The Sphinx and the Necropolises

In November, Denon organised an expedition to the Sphinx. They set out before dawn so as to arrive with the raking light of

morning. The only light that would bring out the details of the stone.

The Sphinx appeared at first as a mass. Something darker than the sand and more compact than the night. Then the light came from the east and the head emerged, the nose missing, the hollow eyes gazing exactly where the sun was rising. The monument, seventy-three metres long and twenty high, remained buried up to the shoulders. The surface of the limestone revealed its nuances. Greyish-beige where the wind had polished the rock, darker in the hollows where sand had gathered in fine strata. Fissures ran across the forehead, descending from the top of the skull towards the temples, some several fingers wide, others barely visible. The stone was not uniform. Beds of softer limestone alternated with harder layers, creating horizontal lines that streaked the face according to the natural geology of the rock from which the monument had been cut. Traces of tools remained visible on the cheeks, repeated chisel blows that had shaped the curves, leaving regular facets that erosion had not yet effaced. The sand rose to the breast, forming a gentle slope that the wind continually reshaped, grain by grain.

The right eye held Denon's attention for a long time. The limestone had been hollowed, the globe scooped out to create a gaze that no longer existed, the upper eyelid legible beneath the erosion. Someone had wanted this thing to have a gaze. Not a decorative presence. A directed gaze, aimed at something specific.

Head turned to the east. The face looked exactly there, towards the rising sun.

"It is not a statue," said Denon in a low voice. "It is an instrument. They carved an instrument of astronomical measurement on the scale of a hill. A giant sundial whose face is the gnomon. That gaze fixed on the east at the equinox is not devotion. It is geometry. Volney would have said that this face has a broad nose and full lips. I do not decide the matter. But whoever cut this face knew how to measure."

Once the documentation of the site was finished, the expedition made its way to Saqqara. The necropolis stretched for several kilometres across the desert, a cemetery of the Old Kingdom where Djoser's step pyramid, the oldest ever built, raised its six tiers to a height of sixty-two metres. They spent several days there. Denon drew. Jomard measured. Geoffroy scrutinised the bas-reliefs to read in them what the texts did not say. The walls of the mastabas kept their polychromy in places. Egyptian blue – that pigment of copper and calcium which the artisans prepared by fusion – persisted in the hollows sheltered from the light. The red ochre of male bodies, the yellow of female bodies, pictorial conventions repeated over kilometres of funerary walls. The hieroglyphs were incised and then painted, each sign hollowed several millimetres into the stone before being coloured. The scribes had worked from right to left on these vertical columns, their errors sometimes visible where a sign had been erased and re-engraved slightly out of true. The scenes of daily life unfolded in superimposed registers: at the top, the noble activities, audiences, ceremonies, offerings; at the bottom, the labour of the fields, butchery, baking. A social hierarchy inscribed in the verticality of the wall. Geoffroy had crouched before a panel showing fishermen hauling a net. The fish were identifiable by species: Nile perch, tilapia, mullet.

Still fascinated by questions of natural history, Geoffroy concentrated on the representations of animals in these ancient bas-reliefs.

"Ibises, crocodiles, hippopotamuses, lions, ostriches. Some of these species no longer exist in Egypt. They still existed in pharaonic times. The climate has changed, or the hunting."

They descended into the shafts with torches. Twenty metres, thirty metres beneath the desert. The descent was made by steps cut into the rock, irregular, polished by millennia of passage. The walls of the shaft drew closer together as they went down, the circle of daylight shrinking above their heads until it was no more

than a white point in the darkness. The air thickened. The flame of the torches flickered in the faint draughts that still circulated between the surface and these deep chambers. The smell was peculiar: saltpetre, mineral dust, something animal too, impossible to define precisely. The walls of the shaft kept the marks of the digging, vertical blows descending in parallel bands. It had taken months to dig these shafts, perhaps years. Teams of workmen labouring in the dark, hauling up the spoil basket by basket. The burial chambers were not large, three metres by four at most, just enough for the sarcophagus and the offerings. The low ceiling forced one to bow the head. Fragments of pottery littered the floor, debris left by the plunderers. At the far end, burial chambers, hieroglyphs, wall paintings, the journey of the deceased traced upon the rock.

Between the explorations of Saqqara, Denon returned to Cairo. In the Coptic quarter he knew of weavers' workshops which he visited regularly.

The technique was simple and ancient. A hand loom, two alternating heddles, the shuttle passed between the threads. The noise of the loom filled the workshop, the regular clack of the beater packing down the weft threads, the creak of the heddles as the weaver worked the treadles. The wool smelled of grease even after washing, an animal odour mingled with the vegetable dyes drying in jars lined up against the wall. Skeins hung from the ceiling beams, sorted by shade: the deep blues of indigo, the carmine reds of madder, the greenish yellows of senna. In a corner, an apprentice was preparing a mordant bath, dissolving alum in hot water to fix the colours in the fibre. The process had not changed: soaking in the mordant, wringing, soaking in the dye, rinsing in the Nile. The same gestures as in pharaonic times, handed down from father to son through the centuries. Wool and linen woven in geometric patterns, lozenges, chevrons, crosses potent, stylised floral motifs.

Denon had compared a contemporary Coptic textile with the measured drawings of the frescoes of Beni Hasan that he had been shown, the tombs of the governors of Middle Egypt. The motif of the lozenge inscribed in a circle was identical, as were the combination of wool and linen and the width of the cloth, about sixty centimetres.

Four thousand years of continuity in a weaver's gesture.

He bought several pieces. Fragments of Coptic cloth, some still with their hunting or fishing designs along the border. Rigid silhouettes, clean profiles, the hieratic style of Egyptian popular art that had passed through Christianity and the Arab conquest without fundamentally changing.

Pottery too. Two-handled amphorae, narrow-necked jars, footed cups, made from the same Nile clay, fired in the same kilns. The artisans reproduced forms that their fathers had taught them, who themselves had them from their own fathers. The chain had not been broken.

Berthollet had obtained four human mummies from Saqqara.

What interested him was not the bodies; medicine would study those. What interested him was the chemistry of the embalming resins. These black, shining substances that impregnated the linen bandages were an assemblage of organic compounds whose components he wished to identify.

He melted scraped samples in alcohol, analysed the vapours, noted the melting temperatures. On his worktable the instruments stood in a row: a retort of Venetian glass, mercury thermometers, precision balances protected under bell jars. He worked by the light of four candles arranged in a square, a steady light that did not tremble when he took his measurements. The resin samples were sorted by mummy, labelled in Latin, kept in flasks stopped with wax. Some were a deep black, others reddish-brown, others almost translucent. He took a fragment with a spatula, placed it in a crucible, heated it slowly, noting the

temperature at which the material changed state. The resin softened first, then melted, then smoked, giving off an acrid smell of burnt wood mingled with something resinous. The vapours were collected in a cooled tube where they condensed into oily droplets. Terebinth resin, animal fat, beeswax, natron, Judaeen bitumen. The combination varied from one mummy to the next, but the logic was constant: to create an environment hostile to bacterial decomposition.

At three in the morning, he put down his pen and looked at the four bodies lying on his tables.

These people had died thousands of years ago. Their names were perhaps on the inscriptions of their coffins. What remained was their preserved bodies.

There was something in this permanence that troubled him. Not in a metaphysical way – Berthollet was a materialist – but in a scientific way. These embalmers had solved a problem of organic chemistry. By observation, by trial, by the transmission of techniques over generations. Practice had preceded theory by two thousand five hundred years.

He noted in his report: “Egyptian embalming techniques constitute a body of empirical chemical knowledge of remarkable sophistication, the systematic study of which might yield information on preservative properties still insufficiently known.”

At Saqqara, Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire had explored with Denon the surroundings of the necropolis of the sacred animals, where the Apis bulls of Ptah were said to lie. Fragments of granite were visible in the rubble. They stopped before a shard of black granite.

Denon wrote: “The ancient plunderers left these blocks. It is the only resemblance. They took what they believed to be treasure. We take what we believe to be knowledge. In two thousand years, if someone comes down here with a lantern, he will see the lids still fractured. And he will ask himself, as I ask myself now, what

is the difference between a plunderer and a savant in a dark gallery.”

At his feet, among the shards scattered in the dust, a fragment still bore two incised hieroglyphic signs, a bird, a broken line. Picked up. Slipped into the pocket. The gesture was automatic, without decision, before the question he had just written had time to reach his hand.

That night, before Denon returned to the bivouac, the market of Saqqara continued in the darkness. Only two lanterns, set on the sand between the stalls. Fellahs from the neighbouring villages waited squatting behind their mats. The soldiers came in groups of two or three, unarmed, hands in their pockets. They weighed things in their palms, walked about, left with something wrapped in their jackets. The night air was cool after the heat of the day. The sand still retained some warmth but the desert wind already carried the cold of the deep hours. Conversations were held in low voices, bargains struck in approximate Arabic or by gestures. A soldier was weighing a scarab, holding it close to the lantern to examine the hieroglyphs engraved on the underside. Another was haggling over the price of a faience amulet, a small turquoise figurine of Anubis with a jackal's head.

Berthollet was there too, seated on a folding chair that he had carried with him from Alexandria. Before him, a small campaign table covered with his forms from the Commission, and Hassan presented the pieces to him one by one with the lamp. Berthollet examined them, entered in his register the number, the description in Latin, the location in the monument, the state of conservation. Six pieces this evening: three royal scarabs, a scribe's palette of sycamore wood, a granite figurine, an alabaster canopic jar with its lid. He noted: "Traces of black resin on the neck." Then he paused, raised his head towards Hassan.

"What's in the other urn, the one with the jackal lid?"

"The stomach," said Hassan.

“Ah. I shall note that too.”

Berthollet had asked for animal mummies from Saqqara. The fel-lahs brought him six. Two sacred ibises, two cats, a young crocodile, a shrew. He installed them in the large room that the Institute had assigned him as a laboratory.

He analysed the bandages. Linen, impregnated with a brown substance that he identified as bitumen mixed with vegetable resins. Samples had been taken from the body-cavity filling, natron, rock salt, mineral powders. The natron above all occupied him. Hydrated sodium carbonate, occurring naturally in the desert lakes west of Cairo. He had made an excursion there some time earlier with other members of the Institute. The Natron Lakes. White expanses on whose shores this alkaline powder crystallised naturally, which the Egyptians gathered to embalm their dead.

In analysing the dissolution of the natron in the brackish waters of the lake, he had observed something unexpected: the reaction between sea salt and calcium carbonate could be reversed according to temperature and concentration. The chemists of his day believed that reactions always went in a single direction, the stronger acid driving out the weaker. Berthollet was beginning to perceive that this was false. That these were equilibria.

Paris would receive these notes. Four years of reflection would be needed to formulate the complete theory. The *Essai de Statique chimique* of 1803 would be its fruit. But the seed was there, in the white lakes of the Egyptian desert, in the contemplation of a natural chemical reaction that Egyptian nature had been repeating for millennia.

The animal mummies, for their part, posed Berthollet another question.

“These mummified ibises resemble the ibises of today,” Geoffroy remarked. “You remember what we said on the banks of the Nile. That the Egyptians venerated them because they observed nature? Here is the proof: unchanged in three thousand years.”

"Identical," Berthollet corrected.

"That is what Cuvier says. Species have been fixed since the Creation. The mummies prove it: no change."

"And Lamarck?"

"Lamarck says that three thousand years is too short to see a transformation. That an immense time would be needed."

Berthollet took one of the ibis mummies in his hands. The bird was rigid, perfectly preserved, the plumage still recognisable through the bandages.

"Neither of them will ever be able to prove it," Berthollet said. "We shall not live long enough." He set the ibis mummy down.

They spent two full nights at Saqqara, sleeping in the ruins of a mastaba so as to be on the spot at first light. The necropolis stretched for several kilometres across the desert, a vast cemetery of the Old Kingdom where kings and nobles had had their tombs built. Djoser's step pyramid stood at the centre of this funereal landscape.

"This pyramid precedes those of Giza by a century," added Jomard, who had calculated the approximate dates from the fragmentary information the savants possessed on Egyptian royal chronology. "It represents a moment in architectural history when the Egyptians were still experimenting with forms. The smooth pyramids of Giza are the culmination of a process that began here."

The superimposed tiers had something of a Mesopotamian ziggurat about them, as if the two civilisations had independently converged on the same architectural intuition: to pile up in order to climb towards the sky.

Berthollet spent the second night copying the inscriptions of a high official's mastaba. These bas-reliefs depicted the activities of daily life: fishing, hunting, agricultural labour, butchery, the making of beer, with a documentary precision that delighted the naturalists of the Commission as much as it fascinated the artists.

Returning from Saqqara to Cairo, Denon made a detour by the banks of the Nile at dusk. The light was different at that hour. Orange and dense, as if the sun were seeking to impregnate the stone before disappearing. He sat down on a block of limestone at the water's edge and tried to draw the river against the light. The exercise was difficult. The light moved too fast.

Jomard sat down beside him and waited until he had finished. Not to speak while the other was drawing.

"I calculated something this morning," Jomard added when he closed his notebook. "The tomb of Djoser dates from about two thousand six hundred years BC. The pyramid of Cheops, about two thousand five hundred. These two monuments are separated by a century only. But the one is an architectural experiment and the other a perfection. How can one progress so fast?"

"I am not sure the question is one of speed. I think the Egyptians had a different way of thinking about time. For us, a century is long. For them, perhaps it was only the time needed to learn."

They returned to Cairo in the darkness, guided by the lights of the minarets. The dogs of the desert barked in the distance. Somewhere in the lanes of the Coptic quarter, a church bell struck the hour.

VIII - The Scientific Debates

The session of 15 December pitted Monge and Fourier against each other. Measurement against meaning. Monge wanted volumes and angles. Fourier wanted contexts and significations. Bonaparte presided and decided: both, without choosing.

"True science is measurement," said Monge, opening the debate. "The dimensions of a pyramid. Its volume. Its proportions. Not the myths that surround it. Description and signification are two disciplines. We are here for the first."

"The pyramids are not simply volumes to be calculated, Monge," replied Fourier. "They are royal tombs, acts of faith in

immortality. If you keep only their dimensions, you describe the chest and not what it contains. What is more serious: you risk believing you have understood because you have counted.”

Bonaparte, who was attending the session and following the debate, intervened in an attempt to reconcile these two apparently contradictory approaches.

“You are both right on one point,” said Bonaparte, looking alternately at Monge and Fourier. “*The Description* will contain both: Monge’s measurements and the meaning that Fourier will find in them. The one without the other would remain incomplete.”

The same session was marked by Berthollet’s presentation of a memoir on the chemistry of the natron lakes of the Egyptian desert. Berthollet had chemically analysed samples taken from several lakes and had determined their exact composition.

“Natron is a mixture of salts: carbonate, bicarbonate, sodium chloride. Seventy days in this powdered mixture, and the moisture is absorbed. The body dries out without rotting. Very simple, very effective.”

Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire then presented his observations on the mummified ibises, discovered by the thousand in the necropolises of the sacred animals near Saqqara.

“Two species of ibis. The black-and-white sacred ibis that we know, and a smaller, brown one that seems to have disappeared. If it still existed in pharaonic times and no longer exists, something has changed. I do not know what.”

The session ended with a presentation by Jean-Joseph Marcel, orientalist and director of the National Press established in Cairo, concerning the progress of printing in Arabic characters. The *Courrier de l’Égypte* was now printed in French, the proclamations alone being printed in Arabic.

“We have the capacity to print in classical Arabic with a satisfactory typographical quality,” he announced. “Proclamations, decrees, notices. The population can read us in its own language.”

That evening Fourier presented a study on the distribution of temperatures in the Egyptian desert, a subject inspired by his observations during the military marches. His analysis of heat flows in a non-homogeneous medium prefigured the research on heat that he would carry out later in France. The savants present listened with the attention deserved by a clear exposé of a phenomenon they had all endured physically.

“The heat of the desert is not a question of ambient temperature,” Fourier explained. “It is a phenomenon of flows and exchanges between the ground, the air and the exposed bodies. I do not yet have the equations, but I believe that one day we shall be able to predict how this heat propagates in time and in space.”

What interested Bonaparte more in this Institute of Egypt was the way in which men of radically different training – mathematicians, chemists, naturalists, artists, engineers – managed to create a common scientific dialogue around a shared object: Egypt.

“What does this teach us about the ancient Egyptians?” he asked.

“Nothing directly,” Fourier admitted. “But it teaches us how their environment functioned. To understand why they built their houses in a certain way, oriented their temples along certain axes, dug their tombs to certain depths, one must understand the thermal constraints they lived under. The physics of their world is the key to their architecture.”

Bonaparte, at the end of the session, warmly congratulated all the presenters and encouraged them to intensify their research.

“Your work is excellent,” Bonaparte resumed, addressing the assembly. “Soon, Upper Egypt. The temples of Thebes. Denon will open the road.”

Fourier held Denon back in the corridor of Hassan-Kashif’s palace. Under his arm, a sheaf of measured drawings that the Commission had produced since arriving in Cairo. Measurement of the Great Pyramid, plans of the Sphinx, sections of the tombs of Saqqara. Eighty-three sheets.

"These measured drawings," Fourier observed. "You will take them away?"

"That is the object of the expedition," said Denon. "*The Description* will not be made here."

"I am speaking of objects. The statuettes you buy in the market at Saqqara. The amulets in your luggage. We are here to understand Egypt, not to empty it of its remains."

Denon observed the sheaf of measured drawings in Fourier's hands. Measurements. Plans. Angles. All of that would stay here, in the stones, available to anyone who came to measure after them. The painted wooden statuette he had bought back in the summer, the one with its arms crossed on its chest in the attitude of Osiris, no one would find it there in thirty years. It would be in Paris, or lost.

"The difference between the two of us, Fourier, is that you believe understanding is enough. I think that certain things must be seen in order to be understood. And in order to be seen, they must travel."

Fourier took back his sheaf and went off towards his room, two doors further along the corridor on the first floor. Denon remained in that empty corridor. He went to bed late. The next morning, he found on his worktable the *shabti* of painted wood that he thought was packed away in his luggage, standing upright, in plain view, its face turned towards him. Fourier must have come in during the night. He was in the habit of wandering the palace at improbable hours when his equations would not come. But on the floor, just in front of the table, there was a grain of sand. A single one, clearly visible on the polished tiles. As if Fourier had wanted to tell him: "This sand comes from somewhere."

Or as if it were simply a grain of sand. With Fourier, one never knew whether the intention preceded the gesture or whether it was the reverse. The *shabti* stayed on his table all day.

That same session of December 1798 had also welcomed, on the margins of the official programme, an informal presentation by Venture de Paradis, the expedition's principal interpreter, who spoke Arabic, Turkish, Persian and Hebrew with the fluency of a native, and who spent his days translating for Bonaparte and his nights writing an Arabic-French dictionary that he would never finish.

He took the floor at the end of the session.

"I should like to submit an observation to the Institute. In the five months we have been in Egypt, I have noted one thing that seems to me important for understanding this country. The Arabic spoken by Egyptians today and the classical Arabic of the Quran are two different languages. Not dialects. Two distinct systems, as far from one another as the Latin of Cicero and the French of Molière. A fellah of the Delta does not understand the Quranic text he recites. He recites it phonetically, without grasping its sense."

"Which means?" asked Monge.

"Which means that Islam in Egypt is in part a religion whose faithful do not understand the sacred texts in their original form. Faith is transmitted by the authority of the ulema, by oral tradition, by ritual. Not by direct reading of the text. It is not very different from Latin in the Catholic Church before Luther."

Bonaparte, who had listened without intervening, asked a question.

"And the ulema themselves, do they understand the classical text?"

"The most learned, yes. The others recite too. It is a chain of transmission in which each link passes on what it has received, not necessarily what it understands."

Denon noted this observation in his notebook. It echoed something he had seen in the lane of the Quranic school after the revolt. The children reciting sentences whose meaning they

doubtless still did not grasp, but whose sound and rhythm were already, within them, a form of knowledge. He thought of his own drawings. The pyramids copied before he had understood them. The Sphinx drawn at dusk before he knew its astronomical orientation. Perhaps that was how he worked: first the line, then the meaning.

“What you describe,” Fourier observed to Venture de Paradis, “is a system in which transmission precedes understanding. One learns the text by heart first; the meaning comes after. Or does not come. Does that not resemble what we are doing with the hieroglyphs? We copy signs that we do not understand. Our successors may perhaps understand their meaning.”

“The difference,” said Venture de Paradis, “is that the hieroglyphs no longer have living speakers. Classical Arabic does. Somewhere between the oral and the written, between the ulema and the fellahs, between the text and the rite, the language survives. It survives differently from the way in which it was created. But it survives.”

The session ended late. The lamps had burned low. The savants went out into the courtyard of the Institute, where the December air was at last cool. The first true cold since their arrival in Egypt. Denon stopped for a moment in the courtyard and raised his eyes. The stars above Cairo. The same as above Toulon seven months earlier, but higher on the horizon.

Bonaparte left the Institute after the session in the company of Berthollet. They walked for a time in the palace garden without speaking. Then Bonaparte said:

“Monge told me once that science seeks what is true independently of what is useful. Do you believe that?”

Berthollet reflected. It was a question he had asked himself throughout his professional life.

“I believe the distinction is less clear-cut than he claims. Our work here is true. Jomard’s measurements, the chemical analyses

of the mummies, Denon's drawings. But what we do here is also useful, to France, to European knowledge of Egypt, to you politically. Truth and utility do not exclude one another. They travel together, rarely in the same direction, but together." He hesitated, then added:

"The only thing I refuse to say is that what we are doing is harmless. It is not true. And Monge knows it as well as I do."

Bonaparte nodded.

"Fourier told me this evening that his research on heat has no immediate military application. He seems proud of it."

"Fourier is right to be proud of it. In twenty years his research will have applications that he still cannot imagine. That is science. It precedes its applications by a distance that cannot be measured in advance."

"Like a scout who still does not know for which army he is reconnoitring the ground."

"Exactly."

They stopped at the edge of the pool in the courtyard. The moon was reflected in the motionless water.

"Keep working," said Bonaparte. "Everything you produce here will outlast the expedition, whatever happens. It is the only certainty I have at present."

Berthollet went back into his laboratory and resumed his analyses. He had spoken one sentence to Bonaparte that evening, before going in. A sentence almost without intonation, like a chemist's observation on the colour of a precipitate.

"In Italy, in 1796, we chose what went to the Louvre. Monge chose, I approved. We had time, lists, commissioners. Here, we have none of that. When we leave, it will be in haste. What is in the crates at the moment of departure is what will go. The rest will stay. We must not tell ourselves otherwise."

Denon thought of Italy. In 1796, it was France that carried things off. Here, it might not be us.

At three in the morning, Denon relit his lamp and took up his notebook again.

The pages turned slowly, without his really rereading them. The drawings filed past. The sails of the fleet in the roads of Toulon, the harbour of Valletta seen from the deck of the Junon, Pompey's Pillar at Alexandria, the backs of soldiers in the desert, the smoke of the battle seen from inside an infantry square, the pyramids at dusk with the dead in the foreground.

He had another list too, which he had not written. Things he had done without noting them. He had drawn monuments that could not be carried off, seen a soldier slip a scarab into his pocket without saying anything, seen a fellah watch his *shabti* go, preferring not to note the phrase. That list was longer than the two hundred and forty-three drawings. It had no end.

He stopped at the first sketch of the voyage.

It was Bonaparte. Right profile, lit by the morning light on the quay at Toulon, a few minutes before embarkation. He had drawn it quickly, without the general noticing. A dozen strokes of charcoal. The thin profile, the high forehead, the chin thrust forward in the posture of someone looking at what does not yet exist.

He took a blank sheet and drew Bonaparte from memory. As he had seen him in August, at the council that had followed the news of Aboukir. The same profile, the same fundamental features. But something had changed that he could not name in words. He sought it with the charcoal.

Not the wrinkles. Seven months do not age a man of twenty-nine. Not the thinness. Bonaparte had always been thin. It was in the tension of the neck, perhaps. Or in the way the jaw was clenched. The man of Toulon was looking at something that did not yet

exist. The man after Aboukir was looking at something he had lost.

Denon laid the two sheets side by side on his worktable.

The drawings were alike. A hurried observer would not have seen the difference. Same profile, same posture, same draughtsman's hand. But looking at them one after the other, it was impossible not to see that the first was that of a man setting out, and the second that of a man who no longer knew where he was heading.

It was the first time since Toulon that he had drawn Bonaparte in his absence. Until then, his sketches of the general had been documents. The posture of command, the gesture of authority, the historic scene to be fixed before it passed. This nocturnal sketch was something else. A portrait without the sitter's consent, without a witness, drawn from memory rather than from reality.

He slipped the two sheets together into the same notebook, one after the other. Toulon, then Aboukir. What had begun and what it had become.

Was what these notebooks contained worth anything? The question seemed to him now less obvious than at the outset. At Toulon, as he boarded the *Junon*, he had known with certainty why he was there. To document a historic expedition, to see Egypt before the other Europeans did, to bring back to France images of a world still unknown. That programme was simple and clear.

Seven months later, he saw things differently. He had seen the wretchedness of the soldiers in the desert, the inhabitants of Alexandria watching the French army with the resignation of people who have endured too many armies to be moved by them, the revolt of Cairo and its repression. He had drawn all this with the same attention he gave to the pyramids and the bas-reliefs. And now he wondered whether his drawings were not, in spite of himself, the documents of a colonial occupation as much as the archives of a scientific discovery.

He did not resolve this question that night. His *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte* would not resolve it either.

He closed his notebook, blew out his lamp and lay down in the darkness. Through the window, the stars above Cairo were the same as those Herodotus had seen from the banks of the Nile, the same as those the pharaonic astronomers had used to orient their monuments, the same as those the French sailors had observed during the crossing from Toulon. There was something comforting in this permanence. Not that everything was of equal worth, but that everything endured, transformed, unrecognisable and yet there. The Egyptian sky made no distinctions. It lit the pyramids and the bivouacs with the same indifference. Denon closed his eyes. Tomorrow he would draw again.

CHAPTER II: THE ASCENT OF THE NILE

I - Dendera

On 25 December 1798, Desaix's expedition left Cairo and headed south. Three thousand soldiers to reconquer Upper Egypt. Denon was of the party, with his notebook.

Bonaparte, who had stayed behind in Cairo, had summoned Desaix on the eve of departure.

"Your mission is twofold. Military: destroy Murad Bey. Scientific: enable the savants to explore Upper Egypt. Treat them as collaborators. What they bring back is worth as much as your victories."

Desaix was thirty, a practical man with no particular taste for antiquities. But he had the intelligence to understand orders.

"I shall protect these men as I protect my soldiers. But warn them: Murad Bey will give no respite. Months, perhaps all the way to Aswan. The savants will have to endure it."

Once Desaix had gone out, Bonaparte kept Denon back a moment. He opened the drawer of his campaign table and took out a folded document. The four-page list he had shown Denon before Toulon, completed since.

"This is what must come back. What France deserves to bring home from this expedition."

Denon ran his eye over the first lines. Categories, descriptions: portable obelisks, fragments of bas-reliefs of exceptional quality, documented papyri, royal scarabs, bronzes of the Late Period, mummies of identifiable dignitaries. Each category came with an estimated value and a destination: the Louvre, the Bibliothèque nationale, the Institut de France.

"We did the same in Italy," Bonaparte went on. "Monge and Berthollet know the method. What they bring back with their forms goes to the Louvre. What the soldiers take in their packs, I cannot prevent. What you document with your notebooks stays

in France in another form. Three levels. Three different legitimacies.”

“And if the levels become mixed?”

“They always become mixed. That is why the first level must be beyond reproach. If the Commission does its work with rigour, the rest becomes tolerable by comparison. It is the logic of every state acquisition since the Renaissance. France does not plunder. She selects, documents and preserves. Soldiers plunder. The distinction is real, even if it is uncomfortable.”

“And if someone challenges it?”

“No one will challenge it so long as we win the war. If we lose it, the debate will not arise in the same way.”

Denon put the list away in his satchel. It was not an order to plunder. It was an order to select. The nuance was real. He would have liked it to be sufficient. He was not sure it was. But Bonaparte had already opened the door of his study. His time was limited. And Denon went out without having put into words what he would have liked to say.

On the morning of 25 December, the expedition took the road south along the western bank of the Nile. The air was still cold at that hour. A dry cold, without mist, the cold of Egypt that yields quickly to the sun. The dust raised by the columns could be seen from afar. The artillery advanced skirting the cultivated fields. The cavalry horses whinnied as they sensed the departure. Fellahs standing on the flat roofs of their houses watched the column pass without moving.

Denon rode beside Desaix.

“These temples we know only through Pococke and Norden. Approximate descriptions, inaccurate drawings. At last we are going to establish rigorous documentation.”

“Your enthusiasm pleases me. But tell me when you wish to move away from the column. Murad Bey has still not given up.”

Denon assented, without hiding a certain resignation.

“Understood, General. Hasty drawings are better than ignorance.”

The heat rose from the second hour, although it was January. The green strip along the river was a few hundred metres wide, and then the desert began, immediate and absolute. The soldiers marched in silence, canteen in hand. Denon drew as he walked – rapid sketches, the silhouettes of villages, a palm tree, the profile of a limestone cliff – without stopping, without losing step. The Mamluks harassed the column and vanished without ever offering a decisive battle. Near Beni Hasan, he explored tombs hollowed out of the limestone cliff overlooking the Nile, decorated with wall paintings depicting scenes of wrestling, hunting and daily life.

The colours had held. Ochre reds, Egyptian-frit blues, malachite greens, orpiment yellows. The desert had dried the air around them. He thought of the paintings of Paris, blackened by varnishes, dulled by centuries of damp.

He drew several of these scenes during the few hours Desaix granted him before the march resumed. His sketches came fast. He had learned to capture the essential in ten minutes, the formal hieratism, the narrative vivacity.

He went thus from one hypogeum to the next while the column set up its bivouac.

Denon never complained. He drew as he walked, he drew during halts, he drew by torchlight in the military tents in the evening. His physical endurance astonished the officers, who had at first regarded his presence as a burden.

“Your savant holds up better than my recruits,” Desaix said one day to one of his adjutants, pointing to Denon, who sat on a rock during a pause in the army’s march.

“That is because he has something to do,” replied the adjutant. “Men who have a reason to look around them survive better than the others.”

On 20 January, Jomard was the first to see Dendera. The temple of the goddess Hathor stood in the midst of cultivated fields, its mass visible from afar in the dry air of Upper Egypt.

“Look,” said Denon, who had stopped behind him.

Desaix ordered a halt. The army made camp in the neighbouring village, Qena. The fellahs watched from their thresholds without coming closer. They had seen other columns pass. This one carried men with measuring instruments and notebooks. That was no more reassuring.

Jomard went in first. At the threshold, he counted: twenty-four columns some fifteen metres high, their capitals with the face of Hathor looking in the four directions. He took his theodolite out of its case, then put it back. Where to begin? During his eight months at the École, he had always known where to begin. Here the hall had a logic that exceeded what his instruments could take in at a single glance. Too vast. Too coherent. He had to choose a point of entry and this choice suddenly seemed arbitrary to him in a way he had never felt before a pyramid or an isolated column. In the end he sighted on the nearest column. It was at least a beginning.

“It is extraordinary,” Denon murmured behind him. “The delicacy of those draperies.”

Jomard measured for five days. Fifteen metres per column, the joints so fine that one could barely slip a knife blade into them. The ceiling more than fifteen metres up. The walls covered in bas-reliefs. He noted the dimensions, the angles, the orientations. Denon drew at the other end of the hall, his hands covered in charcoal dust, scarcely ever pausing.

“How did they do this without our modern tools?” Jomard added in a low voice.

“With time, with labour, and with an organisation capable of sustaining a constant effort for decades. This temple took

generations to build. They passed the project down from father to son like a sacred inheritance.”

“The Egyptians knew the stars better than we know them still,” Jomard added, pointing to the constellations painted in intense blue on the ochre ground of the ceiling. “This vault is a map of the night sky of ancient Egypt.”

On the second day, Jomard noticed a detail that he did not note down. He set it down in his personal journal, in the evening, under the tent.

Three soldiers of the leading battalion had spent the afternoon in the side chambers of the temple. They were not on duty. When they came back, one of them was carrying a blue faience figurine in his hand. A seated cat, pointed ears, eyes inlaid with black glass. He was showing it to his comrades. They were laughing.

Jomard watched them pass. The faience cat was two or three thousand years old. It had been placed in the temple as a votive offering by a craftsman whose name had not survived, for a prayer whose very substance had been forgotten. In three years it would be in Marseille. The chain was short. It left no traces. Jomard thought of gravity: light objects always fall downwards. Here, down meant north.

The same day, in the great court of the temple, Costaz was at work.

That morning he had selected six pieces according to the categories on Bonaparte’s list. Two scarabs, a gold amulet, a figurine of Sekhmet, all conforming to the criteria of the list. But two pieces stood out from the rest. A scribe’s palette of sycamore wood with its reed pens still in their reed cases. Since wood had almost never survived, it was an exceedingly rare piece. And an alabaster canopic jar with its falcon-headed lid intact, representing Qebhsenuuf, guardian of the intestines. The six pieces were lined up on the stone, numbered, labelled.

Jomard approached from the entrance of the court. Costaz was filling in his form in broad daylight, unhurried, without hiding. That was the whole difference from what the soldiers were doing: the form.

"Citizen Costaz," Jomard said as he drew near. "These pieces are exceptional."

"Indeed. The scribe's palette is unique in the documentation known from recent expeditions. The reed pens are intact. Extremely rare. The sycamore wood survived because it was wrapped in a linen that I found in a side compartment of the niche. Two thousand five hundred years of preservation in ideal conditions."

He went on writing without raising his eyes. The handwriting was a scientist's: precise, abbreviated, unadorned.

"The canopic jar will interest the chemists for the analysis of mummification resins," he continued. "I have taken a fragment of the inner layer of resin. You will find the number of that sample under reference one hundred and fourteen-B in the Commission's register."

He entered the sixth number on his form, signed it, tore off the counterfoil and handed it to Jomard.

"Register of the Commission, section of official acquisitions. In case you want a copy for your own section's file."

Jomard took the paper. He looked at it. The form was impeccable. He put it away in his own satchel without replying.

A man from the village came to observe Jomard as he took his measurements. Hassan, the interpreter, kept apart. The man watched for a few moments and then went away. The encounter was brief.

The next day, the man returned, sat against a pillar for two hours without saying a word, watching Jomard work. Then he left again. The day after, he brought something: a small terracotta pot filled with fresh water. He set it down beside Jomard's instruments.

Jomard drank. The water was cold, slightly mineral. He said thank you in Arabic. One of the few words he had learned. Through Hassan, they exchanged a few sentences.

The man knew the names of the columns. Not the Greek names the savants used – Hathor, Nut, Isis – but Arabic names handed down from father to son for generations. The column at the north-east corner was called, in the village, “the column that bleeds at the flood”, because a crack in the limestone sometimes let a reddish, iron-laden water run during the flooding of the Nile. The central column was called “the column of the voice”, because if one struck it with an open palm at a certain height, it gave out a deep sound that spread through the whole hall.

Jomard recorded both names. He knew they would not appear in *the Description*. They had no measurable value. But they said something that his own measurements did not: that this temple had long had a continuous presence in the memory of the village. It was not a ruin. It was a neighbour.

Three days later, Denon returned alone to the temple, with a candle and his notebooks. He wanted to draw the zodiac in the upper chapel.

The chapel of Osiris stood on the roof of the temple. A small room reached by an exterior staircase. The ceiling was low. The candle threw a feeble orange light. He lay down on the cold stone. Above him, carved in the sandstone, the map of the sky. A circular disc two and a half metres in diameter. At its centre, the circumpolar constellations. The Great Bear in the form of a bull’s foreleg, a hippopotamus goddess brandishing a harpoon. Around the circumference, the twelve signs of the Greek zodiac mingled with Egyptian iconography: the Ram, the Bull, but also Aquarius, represented as Hapy, the flood god, holding two vases from which the Nile flowed.

This ceiling could not be carried off as it was. Several tonnes of sandstone set into the vault. But two days earlier Denon had put the problem to Captain Coutelle, head of the expedition’s

balloonists, the man who had flown the observation balloon at Fleurus. Coutelle was the most inventive engineer in the army. He had come to see the zodiac the day before with a technician's eye rather than an artist's.

"It can be done," he had said, examining the joints. "Not with what we have. It would take saws with tempered steel teeth, screw jacks, quicklime, a lifting frame twenty metres high. Six weeks of work at the very least, with twenty men. And a ship specially fitted out to carry the block. Several tonnes; ordinary holds are not enough."

"Would the result be worth the effort?"

Coutelle had looked at the zodiac again, his eyes travelling round the disc from constellation to constellation.

"It is the most complete representation of the ancient sky I have ever seen. Yes, it is worth the effort. But not now. Perhaps in thirty years, if someone comes back with equipment and time."

Denon had recorded the conversation in a memorandum addressed to the scientific staff. The first official document mentioning the possibility of extracting the Dendera zodiac. That memorandum would travel to Cairo, sleep in a crate, awaiting means that the army did not have.

He drew for two hours, lying on his back. His candle went out. He lit another. When he came back down, night was falling and the soldiers had been growing impatient for an hour.

"Have you got what you wanted?" a sub-lieutenant asked him.

"A first drawing. Imprecise. It would take several men to make a serious measured drawing."

Denon had asked the scientific staff to send engineers to complete his work. Two young polytechnicians, Jollois and Devilliers, would come three weeks after him to finish the survey with their precision instruments.

On the second evening, Jomard needed to settle a problem of ration requisitions. He looked for Sergeant-Major Aubert, the man who managed the supplies of Desaix's battalion. He found him in a tent apart from the main bivouac, seated at a small table with a lantern and a notebook.

Aubert was keeping a list divided into three columns: object, company, soldier. The lines were tightly packed. Jomard read from where he stood, without seeming to: "Blue stone figurine, 2nd Company, Racine. Fragment of bas-relief, 3rd Company, Duplessis. Faience scarab, 1st Company, Marin. Painted clay pot, 4th Company, Lefèvre." There were at least twenty lines.

Aubert looked up. He did not seem surprised to be observed.

"Citizen savant. Can I do something for you?"

"I was looking for the extra rations for the measuring fatigue parties. It is not urgent."

Jomard asked no questions about the list. He already knew what it was. An unofficial inventory. Neither ordered nor forbidden by anyone, kept by a non-commissioned officer who had understood that something was circulating in his battalion and had resolved to know about it. The list was not a disciplinary check. It was a precaution. If anyone asked questions later, Aubert would know how to answer. And if no one asked questions – which was more likely – the list would remain in his notebook, a document without an addressee.

He settled the matter of the rations in three sentences and left.

The night before the departure, Jomard did not work on his measurements. He turned to something else.

He began with what he knew for certain. Sergeant-Major Aubert's list contained, for the 2nd Company alone, twenty-three objects in two days. Four companies in Desaix's battalion. Two infantry battalions rotating through the site. Plus the officers, who took things in a different way. With more selection, less

quantity, but pieces of greater value. Plus Costaz's official acquisitions. Six pieces documented, others perhaps without formal documentation.

He built an estimate. Conservative: twenty objects per company per day of halt. Four companies. Five days. Two battalions. Result: eight hundred objects at the very least for this one temple. Adding purchases from dealers and what the officers quietly collected, it passed the thousand mark.

A thousand objects leaving Dendera. He examined the figure. Then he looked at the temple, visible in the dark two hundred metres from the bivouac. The temple was immense. A thousand objects were a fraction of what it still contained. But the right calculation was: how many halts at how many temples, multiplied by a thousand.

There were at least twelve major sites between Dendera and Aswan. He wrote at the bottom of the page: "Estimated total, full campaign: order of magnitude ten thousand objects. Low range. Not verifiable."

Then he stopped at what he had just written. Ten thousand. The figure looked abstract. It was not. It corresponded to ten thousand objects that had been in an Egyptian temple or tomb for centuries, and that would no longer be there in six months.

As he loaded the mules, he searched with his eyes for the soldier who had carried the faience cat in his hand. He could not find him among the hundreds of faces. The man existed. The cat existed. Somewhere in that figure of ten thousand.

Before leaving Dendera, Jomard went to find Costaz.

Costaz was supervising the nailing shut of his crates. He looked up.

"Citizen Costaz. I have made an estimate of the total volume of removals from this temple."

He held out the notebook open at the page of the calculation. Costaz read it. He took the time to check the assumptions, redid the arithmetic in his head.

"Your low range is reasonable," he said at last. "Slightly underestimated for the officers."

"You do not find this figure problematic?"

Costaz handed the notebook back.

"I find the figure accurate, or close to reality. Problematic for whom? For the Commission? No. Our acquisitions are documented. For the army? That is for Desaix to judge. For the history of this temple? Certainly. But the history of this temple has known removals since the Romans and the Greeks. We are not the first. And Egypt has survived all those before us."

"That is no reason."

"No. It is no reason. But it is a context. And in this context, what has to be established is whether what we do, we – the Commission – is defensible. I think it is. For the rest, I am neither policeman nor magistrate."

"You are a mathematician. A mathematician does not say that a calculation is defensible. He says whether it is exact."

"And our accounts are exact," Costaz replied without raising his eyes. "Archives, descriptions, objects for the Louvre."

"That is what Bonaparte asked for. It is not what I would have asked for."

On the fifth and last day, Desaix signalled the departure. Jomard packed away his theodolite. Denon tore his eyes from the ceiling with sincere regret.

"If we ever come back to this country in peacetime," Jomard added, "this temple deserves six months' study on its own."

They would not come back. Their drawings would remain.

The road to Thebes ran alongside the Nile for two days. In the evening, at the bivouac, the officers began to talk of the temples

they were about to see. Karnak. Luxor. The names circulated with the excitement of those approaching what they have never seen but have heard spoken of all their lives.

II - Thebes

On the evening of 27 January, the expedition made camp opposite the ruins of Thebes.

Jomard stopped on the bank and stood there doing nothing, looking at the black pylons in the light of the setting sun, on the other side of the Nile.

Karnak surpassed everything they had imagined. The hypostyle hall of the temple of Amun-Ra: a hundred and thirty-four columns, the twelve central ones twenty-one metres high. He crossed the threshold and stood motionless for several minutes. The hall covered an area of about five thousand two hundred square metres, one of the largest covered spaces of Antiquity.

"My God," murmured Denon. "No description can do justice to this. One must be here to understand."

The night after his first day at Karnak, Jomard settled in the court of the temple with his lantern and began to put the figures in order. The hall was not large because a pharaoh had wished to show his power. It was large because it had a function: to shelter a procession, a crowd, a ritual. Every dimension answered an acoustic, luminous, liturgical constraint. The Egyptians did not build wastefully. They built exactly.

He noted: "The regularity of proportions in this hall suggests a system of measurement handed down over several generations with absolute precision. The length of the hall is roughly twice the width. The spacing between the central columns corresponds to their diameter. These ratios are not accidental."

Outside, a jackal barked somewhere in the desert. Jomard looked up. The stars above the columns were very bright.

And suddenly, as he swivelled with his theodolite to note the azimuth of a reference star, he understood something he had not planned to understand. The understanding did not come like a demonstration reaching its end. It came all at once, in the body before the mind. A physical certainty, almost a vertigo, as when a long calculation ends in a round number and one knows, even before checking, that it is right.

The main axis of the temple – the axis linking the entrance to the innermost sanctuary – was oriented at twenty-six degrees south of east. He checked the calculation twice. Twenty-six degrees. He had had this figure in his surveys since the morning, noted mechanically as one datum among others. But now, in the darkness, with the stars visible above him, he knew what this figure meant.

It was the azimuth of the sunrise at the winter solstice at the latitude of Thebes.

He remained motionless for several seconds with this information. He held in his hands a result that no one had yet formulated in this way, and he wanted to make sure it was real before writing it down.

Karnak was not merely a temple. It was an astronomical instrument, oriented so that on the morning of the shortest day of the year, the light of the rising sun would enter the sanctuary and run along the axis as far as the great hypostyle hall. The construction had that precision. The Egyptians had calculated it. They had built accordingly.

He feverishly wrote a note of several pages in his journal, detailing the calculation, the measurements, the conclusion. He would send this note to Fourier the very next day by post. Fourier was the most rigorous mathematician of the Commission; he would know how to check it. Fourier's reply would arrive three weeks later in two lines: "Your calculation is correct. Note it down for *the Description*."

At two in the morning, Jomard returned to the camp. Five hours had passed since he had left his tent. His hands trembled slightly as he rolled up the leaves of the notebook. Not from cold, but from something he had no word for. He was used to discoveries that confirm a hypothesis. That night he had had something different: a hypothesis born of the discovery itself, without his having sought it. It had never happened to him before.

Denon devoted the following days to exploring the Karnak complex, ten hours a day, knowing that his time was limited. The pylons, forty metres high, bore bas-reliefs of pharaonic battles. The pink granite obelisks pointed straight up, monoliths transported from Aswan, two hundred kilometres to the south. One of them, erected by the queen-pharaoh Hatshepsut of the eighteenth dynasty, rose to a height of twenty-nine and a half metres. Its faces were covered with vertical columns of finely engraved hieroglyphs, indecipherable.

Everyone saw inscriptions everywhere – columns, walls, sarcophagi – and could read nothing of them. The whole history of Egypt was there, mute.

In the great court of Karnak, Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire had stationed himself before a register of bas-reliefs showing animals offered as tribute. Lion, giraffe, monkeys, antelopes. He copied the species with a naturalist's precision, noting those that no longer existed in Egypt. Each vanished animal was a datum on climate change since Antiquity. What others read as decoration, he read as a faunal inventory.

"This lion on this relief," he said to Jollois, who was passing, "has a different skull from the lion of sub-Saharan Africa. A flatter profile, a longer mane. Either the painter was mistaken, or the lions of ancient Egypt formed a distinct population. I incline towards the second hypothesis."

Jollois looked at the relief, looked at Geoffroy, nodded and went on his way. Geoffroy did not need an answer. He had his question.

Later in the night, Jomard was working on his Karnak measurements when he heard a noise.

Not the noise of combat. The noise of labour. Dull, regular blows, the scraping of something heavy on the flagstones. He took his lantern.

In the hall, three soldiers were working by the light of two torches. They had emptied a niche that contained fragments of statues – heads of divinities, hands, busts – and were sorting them on the flagstones: those worth the trouble of carrying on one side, those too heavy on the other. One of them held in both hands a falcon's head in black granite, Horus probably, its eyes inlaid with a dark material the torch did not allow him to identify. He turned it over, trying to judge the weight.

Jomard stayed at the entrance to the hall. He could have intervened. The authority of a member of the Commission allowed him to forbid unauthorised removals. He did not. There were only three of those soldiers. There were two thousand in Desaix's battalions. What could not be stopped by one man alone with a lantern was not worth attempting on principle.

The following day, in the court to the north of the complex, Jollois made a discovery. Fragments of bas-reliefs of the twelfth dynasty, scattered among the rubble, showed a radically different style: smaller, more intimate, the figure of the king less hieratic and more human. The face of one of these kings bore an expression of weariness that no pharaoh of the great dynasties would have tolerated on his monuments.

"This bas-relief is undoubtedly the most psychologically true representation of a pharaoh that I have seen," Jollois said to Denon, who had been drawing for an hour. "Look at the eyes. There is weariness here. The weariness of power, not its magnificence."

Denon stopped drawing. Jollois was right. That face was not looking towards eternity.

After three days at Karnak, the expedition moved on to Luxor, three kilometres to the south. Temple of Amenhotep III and Ramesses II. The avenue of sphinxes linking the two temples had been buried under sand and under the houses of the village built on top.

Denon sketched the great colonnade that led from the entrance court to the inner sanctuary. Fourteen papyrus-form columns nineteen metres high, of a formal elegance that bore witness to the aesthetic refinement of the eighteenth dynasty. The walls bore bas-reliefs of the Opet procession, the statue of Amun carried by barque from Karnak to Luxor each year. He copied the scene over several pages.

Other bas-reliefs represented the battle of Kadesh between Ramesses II and the Hittites on the entrance pylon. Sixty metres in length, covered from the ground to ten metres up with scenes carved with remarkable dynamism. This relief narrated a battle of contested outcome. Ramesses had nearly been encircled before extricating himself. But the pylon of Luxor showed only the triumph. Pharaonic propaganda worked this way: engrave the official version in stone, at a height where no one could correct the facts.

Before the pylon stood two obelisks. One of them Muhammad Ali would offer to France in 1830. It would sail to Paris in 1833, on a specially designed ship, and be raised in the Place de la Concorde in 1836. Denon was looking at it, in 1799, without knowing that it would end up there. He noted its dimensions, its inscriptions, the cartouches that repeated on all four faces.

Desaix came to see the obelisks one afternoon. He raised his eyes to the tip of the first, twenty-five metres above him, then to Denon, who was drawing beside it.

“These vertical columns – could we take them?”

"They are obelisks. Of granite. About two hundred and thirty tonnes each."

"With the river beneath and some levers, the Egyptians managed it well enough."

"Three thousand years ago. And they brought them down from south to north with the flood. To bring them up to France, we would have to load them on a specially built ship. Nothing we have in the Mediterranean can do it."

Desaix looked at the obelisk again.

"Someone will find a way. But not right away."

He went back to his staff.

In the side chambers of the temple of Luxor, where looters had already worked before them, Denon found what the hurried diggers had left: fragments of bronze statuettes, feet, hands, a complete face of Osiris in gilded bronze, fifteen centimetres high. The face had the serenity characteristic of the bronzes of the Late Period. Almond eyes slightly slanted, a thin mouth, a plaited false beard. The metal had been cast by the lost-wax method and then worked with a chisel. The eyebrows and the outlines of the eyes were inlaid with fine gold, the pupils in black glass.

Bronzes of this type had been produced in series from the seventh century BC. Thousands of votive figurines left by worshippers in the temples in exchange for divine protection. These objects had never belonged to an individual: they were gifts to the god, the property of the temple. When the looters had emptied the storerooms, they had taken the patrimony of Amun, not that of a man. This detail did not simplify the problem of ownership. It complicated it. A god could not make a claim.

Denon picked up the face of Osiris and turned it over. On the back, a line of hieroglyphs engraved with a chisel, the donor's name, probably. He copied the signs. Then he put the piece away in his satchel. As he did so, he thought of Bonaparte's list. The face of Osiris in gilded bronze was without any doubt a piece of

the very first category. He should have reported it to Berthollet or Monge for inclusion in the official collections. He did not. The boundary between what he took for the Commission and what he took for himself had been gradually blurring since Dendera. Some thirty entries in his personal inventory. As many objects that had not yet existed in the register of European possessions six months earlier.

It was not the same thing as stealing. He was almost convinced of it.

That evening, Jomard remained another hour before the façade of the temple. This temple had been built over two thousand years, each pharaoh adding a pylon, an avenue, a hall. Two thousand years of continuous construction, without a break in style, without any questioning of the project. Egypt had accomplished something that Europe had never solved: the transmission of an architectural project across generations without anyone deciding its end.

And now soldiers were carrying off pieces of that project in their packs. Not in order to destroy. They were not vandals by intention. But the result was the same. The fragments that left for Paris or for the officers' private collections were no longer in that coherent system. They became isolated objects, curiosities, souvenirs.

Jomard noted, before going back: "Karnak is a system. Each element has its place in the whole. Moving one element does not destroy Karnak, but it destroys that element as part of the system. Elsewhere it will be something else – an object, a collector's piece – and no longer something precise here."

Leaving Luxor that evening, Denon noticed an elderly man sitting at the entrance to the temple. He wore a white galabiya and was watching the soldiers carrying blocks off in the court. He did not look angry. It was the face of someone observing something he has already seen.

Denon stopped. Hassan called out to the man. They exchanged a few words.

"He says his father was guardian of this temple. And his grandfather. And his great-grandfather. He does not know how many generations. He says the Ottomans came. The Mamluks came. Now the French are here. Each time, they take stones."

Denon asked Hassan to translate an answer: that the French had come to study, not to destroy. Hassan translated. The man retorted that the Ottomans, too, had said they came for other reasons. They took all the same.

Denon had nothing to reply. He drew the man from behind. The white galabiya, the block of granite, the soldiers in the court behind him.

What Denon did not see, behind the scene, was what Hassan did after official working hours.

Hassan was the Commission's official interpreter. An Egyptian from Cairo who had understood that his position gave him privileged access to both worlds. He translated the savants' questions to the fellahs. What he did not systematically translate was what the fellahs said among themselves about what the savants really wanted.

Jomard had understood this after the first week. Hassan was a self-interested intermediary who facilitated the savants' purchases from local dealers and took a commission. Jomard estimated it at fifteen per cent. Neither the sellers nor the buyers knew that they stood at either end of a chain of which Hassan was the central link.

One night at Karnak, Jomard got up and followed Hassan at a distance. The latter crossed the main bivouac towards the sector where the senior officers were quartered, stopped in front of a tent, and exchanged a few words in a low voice with a servant. The servant went into the tent and came out with two officers, a colonel and a staff captain. Hassan opened a canvas bag. By the

light of an oil lamp, he laid out four objects on a folded rug. Finer than what he showed the non-commissioned officers by day. A royal scarab in lapis lazuli, rare and heavy. A cup of translucent alabaster. A statuette of Ptah in blue faience, ten centimetres high. An amulet of solid gold representing Bastet seated.

The officers examined the pieces. The colonel haggled. Hassan yielded on the price with an ease that showed he had built the margin in from the start. The four pieces changed hands. Hassan put the money away without counting it.

Jomard returned to the camp without having been seen. In the morning, he questioned Hassan directly, without beating about the bush.

"I saw," said Jomard. "The night market with the officers."

Hassan nodded without embarrassment.

"Where do these pieces come from?"

"From a man of Gurna who crossed the Nile in the night. He knows tombs the French have still not visited. He has been selling what he finds for years."

"And the commission you take?"

"Ten per cent of the sale price. Officers pay more than soldiers. Staff officers pay more than line officers. It is logical."

"And on what you sell to the savants by day?"

"Fifteen per cent. Volume makes up for the price. I facilitate transactions between people who want to sell and people who want to buy. The plundering began before me and will continue after me. I do not dig up the tombs. I do not break the walls. I translate prices."

Hassan walked away. He had said what he had to say. The truth was simple: he was from Cairo, the son of a scribe of the religious court, literate in Arabic and sufficiently so in French to work for these men. He had taken this work because it paid well and

because the French never lasted. Armies passed. The temples remained.

What Hassan had not told Jomard was that he had entered the great hall of the temple of Karnak two days earlier, alone, at dawn, before the savants were up.

He had never seen Karnak before this expedition. His ancestors had not built all this. He had no more key to these hieroglyphs than Denon. But no one asked him to decipher them. He was asked to translate prices.

III - The Valley of the Kings

On 30 January, Jomard was the first to cross the Nile to the west bank. He had asked to leave before dawn, so as to have the site to himself before the army was in motion.

The Theban necropolis stretched over several kilometres in the mountainous desert. Jomard knew it from the accounts of Pococke and Norden, but those narratives had not prepared his cartographer's eye for the reality of the terrain: a limestone valley cut into the cliff, five kilometres from the river, each opening in the rock marking a tomb entrance. Dozens of openings visible. Certainly others still beneath the sand.

He climbed onto a rocky ledge overlooking the entrance to the valley. From this position he saw everything: the tomb openings in the cliff, the quarrymen's paths, the traces of the ancient human exploitation of this rock. The pharaohs had given up pyramids for tombs cut here, supposedly more discreet. The looters had found them all the same. Almost all emptied in Antiquity. Jomard was measuring what no one had been able to steal.

He practised what he called "field triangulation".

From a central point, sight in succession every identifiable landmark with the theodolite, note the angles, calculate the distances from the baseline measured on the ground. That morning, he worked from dawn without interruption. A soldier joined him

around seven o'clock, bringing his ration. Jomard thanked him. Jollois worked differently. Where Jomard sought angles and distances, Jollois sought relationships. What one dimension said of another, what a proportion revealed of intention. His notebooks did not have Jomard's columns of figures. They had annotated sketches, proportions expressed as fractions, comparisons between sites. Two engineers trained at the same school, looking at the same stones with different eyes.

What Jomard could not see from his ledge was what the guides of Gurna did after they had led them into the tombs.

The fellahs of Gurna had known every entrance to the Valley of the Kings for generations. Their village was built on the tombs themselves. The houses rested on hypogea, the children grew up above the dead of the dynasties. They had quietly exploited the tombs for centuries, selling to Cairo merchants and to the rare European travellers who dared venture so far. The trade was modest, continuous, balanced by the risk of attracting the attention of the Ottoman authorities.

The arrival of the French changed that balance.

The savants wanted to see everything, at once. They demanded guides for tombs they would never have found alone. In guiding Denon and Jollois, the men of Gurna revealed entrances they had been careful not to show the authorities. After the French had passed, the tombs were "discovered", known, mapped. The discretion the looters had maintained for centuries vanished in a few days.

"We are creating our own market," said Jollois. "By coming here with an army and notebooks, we are considerably accelerating the plundering we find on arriving."

"It is not we who plunder," said Denon.

"No. It is not we. But it is we who create the conditions for it to be done ten times faster."

Denon and Jollois went down into the tombs with the guides. The corridor descended at a steep slope, so narrow that in places one had to crawl, elbows in the limestone dust. The torch cast moving shadows on the cut rock. The air grew colder, then heavier, then still. An air that had not stirred for centuries and seemed to resist entry. They emerged into an antechamber whose walls were covered with paintings of astonishing freshness.

Jollois could make out the scenes that would later be called the Book of the Amduat and the Book of Gates. He had read Kircher before leaving. Each hour of the night corresponded to a trial, each trial to a guardian god. He drew without understanding. He noted the correspondences in the margin of his measurements.

"These paintings are magnificent and I do not understand them," said Jollois, setting down his lamp. "Anubis with the jackal's head, that I recognise. Isis with outspread wings. But the rest – these ritual gestures, these symbols – an encyclopaedia to which we do not have the key."

They visited seven tombs in two days. The most impressive was that of Ramesses III, which Bruce had visited thirty years earlier: long corridors descending deep underground. Each chamber corresponded to an hour of the sun's nocturnal journey in the afterlife. The architect had conceived the space as a funerary calendar.

The paintings of this tomb stopped Denon short. He had seen the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel, the Raphaels of Italy. These paintings were not inferior. They were different. A linear elegance, an assurance of line, a palette of six colours that produced the impression of everything.

"These paintings equal or surpass the finest frescoes we have seen in Europe," said Jollois. "And the line is surer than much of what is hung in Paris."

The burial chamber still contained the red granite sarcophagus, carved with religious scenes. Too heavy for the ancient robbers.

"The precision of the hieroglyphs," said Denon, without taking his eyes from the sarcophagus. "Each sign cut as by a jeweller. They knew it would be the last object the dead man would see before eternity."

"These Egyptians had a conception of death of real complexity. Death was not an end but a journey, a succession of trials. It is a theology as elaborate as any European theology."

"What we do not understand now," replied Jollois, "others will understand later. Our copies will then be precious documents for checking the decipherments."

In the third tomb of the day – a modest chamber, presumably that of an official of intermediate rank – Denon found on the floor a partly unrolled papyrus scroll. The looters had left it: no gold, no immediate commercial value. He picked it up with care. The papyrus was dry, brittle at the edges, but the heart of the scroll had held. He unfolded it on his knee.

The document measured forty centimetres in height and more than two metres in length. It was covered with columns of hieroglyphs in black, with illustrated vignettes in red and ochre ink: a balance with a feather on one pan and a human heart on the other; a man kneeling before forty-two judges; Anubis, jackal-headed, holding a was-sceptre. It was what would later be called chapter one hundred and twenty-five of the Book of the Dead. The psychostasia, the judgement of the soul.

Neither of them could read this text. Denon nevertheless recognised the vignettes. He had seen similar scenes in other tombs. He rolled the papyrus up carefully, wrapped it in the linen of his handkerchief. In Paris, Marcel would study it. It was not what this papyrus had been made for. But it was what was happening to it.

In the fourth tomb of the day, Denon found a second papyrus. This one was larger than the first. He bent to pick it up.

The escort soldier was there before him. Not quite before him. They had seen the papyrus at the same moment. But the soldier had taken a step while Denon was still calculating. The soldier had his hand on it. They looked at each other for a second. Then Denon took the papyrus from the soldier's hands. Not brusquely. But without hesitation either. He said: "Commission of Sciences and Arts." The soldier let go. He had no real argument to offer.

The Commission of Sciences and Arts was a legitimate authority. He had the right to take scientific documents. It was different from what the soldier was going to do.

The soldier had left the chamber. Denon remained alone with his torch and the empty niche. What he had done was legal. What he had done was quick, decided, without consultation. What he had done matched the soldier's gesture. The hand stretched towards an object that did not belong to him, instant calculation of value, seizure. The only difference was the name given to the gesture according to who made it. Denon knew what he had just done – not the gesture, the gesture had been over for several seconds already – but what the gesture signified: claiming an authority that allowed him to take before the soldier. And the result was the same. He left the chamber without looking back. He noted in his personal journal, in one line: "Took the papyrus before the soldier."

The soldier, for his part, did not leave empty-handed. He went back into the chamber and picked up what Denon had left: three faience amulets broken on the floor, a fragment of gilded carton-nage, a splinter of painted limestone bearing a legible wedjat eye. Second-rank objects that Denon had not judged worthy of his satchel. The soldier judged them worthy for himself. Each had made a selection. Only the criteria differed.

At noon, Jomard came down from his ledge and joined Denon.

"Your tomb is a hundred and thirty-two metres east of the point I measured as the top of the cliff."

"And is that useful?" asked Denon, wiping his hands, covered with limestone dust.

"When someone wants to excavate this valley systematically, my map will tell him where to begin. For the moment, no one knows how many tombs are still hidden beneath the sand. My measurements will tell him where to dig."

He looked at the columns of figures in Jomard's notebook without understanding the calculations.

"You are already thinking of those who will come after us."

"I have thought of them from the start. We cannot do everything. But we can see to it that those who come after us can pick up where we stop."

Back at camp, Jomard reflected on what two days in the Valley of the Kings had taught him. Not about the tombs. About plunder.

He had seen four different logics at play at once since his arrival in the valley: the guides of Gurna, who exploited the tombs revealed by the savants, accelerating an ancient trade under the effect of new demand; the soldiers, who picked up what they could carry, without organisation, without criteria; the officers, who bought discreetly and with clean money; the commissioners, who took with authority, method, documentation. And himself, with his measurements. And Denon, with his notebooks and his satchels.

The four types produced the same result: objects that had been in Egypt were no longer there. What troubled him was not the quantity. It was the absence of a clear dividing line between what was legitimate and what was not. The Commission had official authority to collect scientific specimens. But this authority had no precise definition. It did not say: you may take this but not that. It said simply: you are here for science. Science decided.

He wrote in his journal: "The distinction between collecting and plundering is a distinction of destination, not of act. We collect for Paris. They plunder for themselves. The Valley of the Kings makes no difference." He put the journal down. It was not a conclusion he wished to share.

On the plain, at the foot of the cliff, Desaix stopped before the fallen colossus of Ramesses II. The serene face gazed at the sky. The chest bore inscriptions proclaiming his titles. Master of the universe, Lord of the Two Lands.

"This Ramesses commanded tens of thousands of men," said Desaix, looking at the toppled colossus. "He raised monuments for eternity. And now here he is in the sand, his nose broken."

Jollois set down his surveyor's chain and examined the statue with an engineer's eye.

"The granite comes from Aswan, two hundred kilometres to the south. They quarried the rough block, floated it to Thebes on the flood, then carved it here. The mountain came to the temple, not the other way round."

Before dawn the next day, Jomard and Denon waited in front of the Colossi of Memnon for the sun to rise. The first rays touched the stone. Nothing happened. The colossus had not sung for nearly sixteen centuries. They looked at each other.

"It no longer sings," Jomard added. "They say it fell silent when a Roman emperor had it repaired. No doubt the stone, expanding in the sudden warmth of the morning, made its fissures vibrate. A purely physical phenomenon."

"Of course. But imagine what the ancient pilgrims felt when they heard it without your thermal explanation. For them, the statue really spoke. That belief had a religious force that your explanation, however correct, cannot replace."

Desaix came to see the colossi early in the morning, raised his eyes to the impassive faces, and left again.

“Impressive. But the Mamluks concern us more for the moment. Move on when you have finished.”

Jomard had stayed before the Colossi of Memnon after Desaix's departure. He looked at the eighteen metres of quartzite seated on the plain, with no temple around them, no visible architectural context. What the soldiers and the dealers of Gurna could not carry off was this. A colossus eighteen metres high standing on the Theban plain, visible from five kilometres away, in the middle of nothing. It was a spatial fact that no one could move. The statue made sense only there, in that specific landscape.

Portable objects broke that link from the moment they were taken. A faience *shabti* in a tomb in the Valley of the Kings was in its place. It had been made to be there, to accompany that particular dead man on that particular journey.

Then he put away his notebook, took his instruments and went back down towards the camp. The colossi remained behind him, immutable, on their plain. That was their advantage over all the objects that were carried off. They could not leave. And, unable to leave, they remained what they had always been.

IV - Aswan

On 2 February, Desaix ordered the march to resume. Thebes lay behind them, its pylons still visible an hour after their departure.

The column made its way up towards Aswan, two hundred kilometres to the south. The landscape was narrowing: the green strip along the Nile, then the bare desert beyond it, the rocky hills drawing ever closer to the river. The fellah villages grew more widely spaced. The valley was shrinking.

The further south they went, the more the population changed. Darker-skinned Nubians gradually replaced the Arab fellahs. The crops changed too. Durra, the African sorghum, supplanted wheat. The houses grew lower, built of mud brick, their façades

without windows. The French army was crossing a region that no European had reached in a very long time.

The villagers watched the column pass from their flat roofs. They did not flee. They observed. Jollois noted the difference in his notebook. The fellahs of Upper Egypt had learned over the centuries to wait for armies to pass. They knew what resistance cost and what cooperation was worth. They offered neither. They waited.

The column had been carrying objects away from the very beginning. Jollois had come to understand it gradually, by watching the pack animals. On leaving Thebes, the mules had carried rations, camp equipment, chests of ammunition. A few days later, the same mules bore additional loads. Canvas sacks, makeshift wooden crates strapped on as extra burdens. The soldiers had made them themselves in the evening bivouacs.

One afternoon Jollois stopped beside a particularly heavily laden mule. The canvas sack had been badly closed. The corner of a piece of carved limestone stuck out of it, a fragment of bas-relief, some sixty centimetres by forty, showing the lower part of a figure in procession. The hem of a robe, the feet, the base of a sceptre. He recognised the style. Ptolemaic period, probably reused material from the site.

The soldier leading the mule noticed his gaze. He tightened the sack without a word. They marched on.

"Egypt is going north on muleback," Jollois said to Denon on their return from the temple.

"A part of Egypt. The lightest part."

"And the most portable. That is what decides what leaves and what stays. Not value. Not historical importance. Weight."

Jomard thought for a moment.

"Which means that the history of Egypt Paris will see will be the history of whatever weighed less than twenty kilos. Everything else will remain here."

That night, Jomard sat down beside the Nile and watched the river. He gauged the width of the channel by eye, almost without thinking: about three hundred metres. A moderate current.

The Nile flowed north. So did what they were carrying off. The army had its supply routes, its river convoys, its boats going down to Cairo with reports, correspondence, materiel. On those same boats went down the collected objects too: the Commission's official crates, the officers' unofficial parcels, the sacks tied to the pack animals that followed the bank.

The Nile had been the great artery of transport for four thousand years. The pharaohs had sent granite down from Aswan to Thebes on its waters. The Romans had sent obelisks down to Alexandria, with the current. Now the French were sending down to Cairo what the centuries had left in Upper Egypt. No longer on the water, but on the backs of beasts. The river made no distinction between cargoes. It carried whatever it was entrusted with.

Jomard thought about the numbers. The army had halted at a dozen sites since leaving Cairo. Each halt had yielded its quota of objects. Everything that could be carried slid towards the north, drawn by the Parisian market, the private collections, the Louvre. There was no single person responsible. There was a slope, and the objects followed the slope.

On 12 February, a halt at Kom Ombo.

Jollois made out the temple before dismounting. It was almost buried under the sand.

Jollois spent the two days of the halt with his surveyor's chain in the cleared parts of the temple. The bas-reliefs were remarkably sharp. Egyptian art had preserved its visual language longer than any European school.

"These instruments on the wall," said Jollois, stopping before a register in an inner chamber. "Scalpels, forceps, probes. Egyptian

physicians practised surgery. No ancient author ever mentioned it with such precision.”

Denon copied the instruments one by one into his notebook, noting their dimensions and probable function.

The battalion’s military surgeon – a man named Bruyant, a former pupil of the École de chirurgie in Paris – came to see Denon’s copies. He examined the drawings in silence for a long while.

“This curved scalpel,” he said at last, pointing to an instrument on the wall. “We use it for deep abdominal incisions. The curve lets you slide beneath the organs without piercing them. I thought it was a recent invention, from the last ten years or so.”

“These olive-tipped probes,” said Denon, pointing to another instrument. “Do you recognise them?”

“For urethral catheterisation. Same shape, same size. The metal is different – bronze instead of steel – but the instrument is identical. Someone here solved the same anatomical problem, independently, two thousand years earlier.”

He remained another hour before the drawings, identifying the instruments one by one, explaining their use. Denon noted the explanations in the margins of his sketches. This double reading – the artist’s drawing, the surgeon’s commentary – produced something that neither could have done alone: the understanding of an object through knowledge of its function.

“You should come tomorrow morning,” said Denon. “There are other medical registers in the rear chambers.”

The next morning, Bruyant and Denon went through the inner chambers of the temple together, the surgeon identifying the instruments and dictating their uses while Denon drew and copied. This two-day labour would produce one of the most frequently cited plates of *the Description*: the catalogue of the medical instruments of the temple of Kom Ombo, with functional annotations by a practitioner of the day.

Meanwhile Jollois measured the temple and reflected on what its survival meant. The answer was simple: the sand had protected it. What had buried it had also preserved it. He spoke of it to Desaix during a pause.

"If we truly wish to preserve this temple," said Jollois, "we ought to leave it as it is. Clear nothing. Touch nothing. The sand protects it better than we would."

"You advise me to do nothing?" said Desaix with a hint of amusement.

"I advise you to consider that our presence here is not necessarily beneficial to what we have come to study."

Desaix did not reply. He had an army to feed and a war to finish. Jollois's archaeological considerations carried no weight in his decisions.

Jollois watched what was leaving the temple: soldiers emerging from the inner chambers with weighted sacks, officers buying pieces from the dealer from Esna who had come specially, Denon himself buying two pieces after a negotiation conducted by Hassan.

What he saw here had happened at Dendera, at Thebes, and would happen again at Aswan. The structure was always the same: soldiers who took directly, local dealers who supplied, intermediaries who facilitated, savants who bought with legitimate authority.

The temple was dedicated to two gods – Sobek and Haroeris – with rigorous symmetry: two entrances, two hypostyle halls, two sanctuaries. Jollois noted that the two axes were slightly offset. The architecture had solved the problem of two equal gods without visible hierarchy.

"These scenes are not so different from those we see on Roman triumphal arches," Denon said to Jomard, indicating the registers of prisoners kneeling before the victorious pharaoh. "All civilizations depict their military victories in the same way."

“Perhaps because it is the most immediately legible way of communicating the balance of power. Royal art has always been at the service of political propaganda.”

On the last day at Kom Ombo, Denon saw two non-commissioned officers hacking a bas-relief from the inner wall of the sanctuary with a sledgehammer. The slab depicted surgical instruments similar to those Bruyant had identified. One man could carry it.

“Stop that,” said Denon.

“We have permission. Captain Lachèze said we could.”

Denon went to fetch Desaix. Desaix sent for Captain Lachèze. The captain did not deny it. He had seen other officers do the same at Thebes, at Dendera. He had not known it was forbidden.

“These monuments belong to the Commission. You touch nothing without my written order.”

Lachèze withdrew. The slab was fractured at the base. The blows of the sledgehammer had already done their work. It could not be put back in place. Denon took it in both hands and laid it flat on the ground. It was no better. But it was less serious than letting it fall.

He went to find Desaix that evening.

“Does this happen often?”

“More often than I know. A soldier who has been marching for two months, who sees stones covered in incomprehensible signs, takes what he can lift. It is human. I cannot watch over every temple.”

“And the difference between what you cannot watch over and what the Commission officially collects – how do you put it?”

“You have forms. Your commissioners have warrants. The soldiers have sacks. It is not the same thing.”

He looked at Denon.

"I know it is inadequate. You know it too. But it is what I have to offer you as a distinction."

He resumed his march, then stopped one last time.

"That temple over there. I went in one night, alone. I looked at those columns in the dark for twenty minutes. I do not know what I understood. But I shall not forget it. Good night."

The next morning, Denon went back to see the fractured slab. It had vanished during the night. Someone – not Lachèze, the punished officer was under watch – had taken it all the same. He made a written statement to Desaix. Desaix filed it without action. He had no witness, no name, no proof. The slab was in someone's baggage somewhere between Kom Ombo and Aswan.

The next day, an hour's march from Kom Ombo, Jollois turned his horse aside towards a small sandstone chapel visible fifty metres from the road. It had been partly cleared of sand as the leading battalions passed.

The walls were standing. The wooden roof had collapsed. Inside, wall paintings were visible on three sides. Processions, gods in barques, hieroglyphic inscriptions running in two registers. Niches had once held statuettes. They were empty. The floor was strewn with shards of faience, fragments of what had been figurines, broken as they were wrenched from their bases.

Soldiers from the rear battalion had passed at dawn. Jollois deduced it from the traces: fresh boot prints in the sand, mortar still white at the edges of the emptied niches. Quick work, without hesitation. These men had known what they were looking for.

He began describing the wall paintings in his notebook. They were the only ones left untouched, too high to be reached easily. Then something caught his attention. In the upper register, to the right of the third panel, an inscription in Demotic ran across four lines. He copied it, sign by sign, with maniacal precision, in three quarters of an hour of work in the morning heat.

It would be the only copy in existence. The chapel would collapse in the years that followed. His copy would remain in the archives, awaiting a reader.

Jollois rode off to rejoin the column.

The advance towards Aswan, after Kom Ombo, left little time for halts. Jollois drew on horseback what he could, sketching the outlines of temples glimpsed from the road. These rapid sketches had a vividness that the measured drawings did not always have. The light of one precise moment, the relation between a monument and its immediate surroundings.

“You draw like a soldier on the march,” said a young officer who was watching Jollois work. “Without stopping.”

“Egypt does not wait. One must seize her in motion.”

On 16 February, the expedition reached Aswan. The First Cataract made navigation southwards impossible. It had been the natural frontier of Egypt since Antiquity. Desaix set up his camp and left the savants free to explore.

“Grant me a few days for Philae. Norden visited it in 1737. His drawings were inaccurate. We can do better.”

At Aswan, before the departure for Philae, the antiquities market was the busiest Jollois had seen since the start of the campaign. The news that the army was turning back north had spread through the villages of the region. Sellers came from far away. They set up on the edge of the camp from dawn, with their sacks and their little chests. It was no longer the discreet market of a single intermediary: it was a lively trade, with prices that varied according to buyer and seller.

Jollois observed the transactions for an hour. He saw passing from hand to hand painted wooden *shabtis*, faience figurines of Horus, Isis, Anubis, scarabs of every size, stone amulets, a fragment of gilded cartonnage that probably came from a coffin, two bronze statuettes with an ancient patina, several alabaster vases, one of which still had its lid.

Prices were high. Higher than at Dendera or Thebes. The sellers knew this was the last opportunity. After the French had gone, they would have to wait for the next passage. They built that scarcity into their prices.

The antiquities market worked by the same rules as any market : supply and demand, and the awareness both parties had of facing their last chance. Sellers wanted to sell. Buyers wanted to buy. Three thousand years of history passed from one hand to the other in the sound of piastres counted out.

V - Philae

On 17 February, Denon and Jollois embarked on a felucca for Philae. Navigation through the cataract was perilous. Half-submerged rocks, whirlpools. The Nubian boatmen knew every channel. The island emerged from the turbulent waters. Four hundred metres by a hundred and fifty, occupied almost entirely by Ptolemaic temples.

“My God,” murmured Denon.

“These bas-reliefs are a visual encyclopaedia of Egyptian ritual,” said Jollois as he finished measuring a side chamber. “If we decipher the texts that accompany them, we shall know the meaning of every gesture, every offering.”

“This kiosk is feminine,” said Denon, pointing to the little colonnaded pavilion at the end of the island. “The great temples overwhelm. That one persuades.”

The Kiosk of Trajan – so called because its bas-reliefs showed that Roman emperor as a pharaoh – was the lightest structure on the island. Fourteen columns with floral capitals bearing an entablature of fine sandstone. The interior decoration showed the Roman emperors of the early centuries performing the traditional pharaonic rites, as if the forms had outlived all those who had taken them up. The blocks were modest in size, transportable by a few men. The bas-reliefs exceptional.

Denon stayed a long time before the kiosk, turning over a thing he had still not formulated clearly. He could have a few decorated blocks dismantled. The escort was there, the soldiers could carry, Hassan could negotiate with the boatmen for transport as far as Aswan. It would be legal. He had his Commission forms. It would be feasible. The blocks weighed no more than a few hundred kilos each.

He decided not to do it.

Not on moral principle. He no longer allowed himself that virtue after what he had taken since Dendera. But because he did not want Philae to look like the other sites on his next visit. Because something in that architectural lightness, in that elegance on a human scale, demanded to remain whole. Because if its blocks were taken, it would no longer be what it was – a pavilion, a conversation between the colonnade and the sky – but one ruin among the ruins.

It was the first time since leaving Cairo that he had made such a choice consciously, naming the reasons, weighing them. He wrote it in his journal that evening, precisely because the choice seemed unusual and deserved to be noted: “Philae. The kiosk. Decided not to take. Not from scruple. From a refusal to destroy what moves me.”

The rocks around Philae bore inscriptions left by ancient pilgrims. Names, dates, prayers. Jollois copied several, noting position and state of preservation. Denon copied the others. Even the least legible. Even those half erased by the flooding Nile.

“These graffiti move me more than the temples,” Jollois confided to Denon. “They are ordinary pilgrims. They came to pray to Isis and they carved their names. Not for posterity. Simply to leave a trace.”

“Our notebooks are our graffiti. We passed through here. We saw this. The difference is that we claim to be doing science.”

“And we are, are we not?”

He thought for a moment.

“Yes. And we also leave traces of another kind. In the empty niches, in the crates on muleback. Those traces we do not list in *the Description*.”

On 25 February, Denon left Aswan accompanied by sixty cavalymen as escort. Nearly nine hundred kilometres of return journey to Cairo, descending the Nile northwards. Hassan travelled with him as interpreter. Jollois and Devilliers left the same day with another detachment.

The return journey took seventeen days. The column went down the river at fifty kilometres a day, stopping in villages for water and provisions. The weather was hot, nearly thirty degrees in the shade. The march ran from dawn to noon, then resumed after four hours' rest under canvas.

Near a village whose name no one knew, a soldier collapsed during the march. Heatstroke. He was carried into the shade of a palm tree. The surgeon-major made him drink and wet his head with water from the Nile. The man regained consciousness after an hour but could not walk. He was loaded onto a mule. He died in the night. He was buried at daybreak in the sand a hundred metres from the bivouac. No cross, no slab. The sergeant noted the name and date in the company register.

Between Kom Ombo and Edfu, two soldiers fought over a faience figurine bought at the market. The first claimed to have seen it before the other; the second had paid for it. They came to blows in front of the sergeant-major's tent. He came out, separated them, confiscated the figurine and put it in his own sack. The two men protested. The sergeant said the object was henceforth the property of the company and that the first man to mention it again would get ten days' fatigue duty. That was the end of the matter.

A few days later, the column passed through an abandoned village. Thirty mud-brick houses, all empty. No sign of fighting. The inhabitants had left before the army arrived. A lieutenant had the houses searched. Buried jars were found in three different courtyards. Grain, dates, oil. The jars were emptied into the requisitions. In a fourth house, a cache was found beneath the floor: six faience scarabs, three copper bracelets, a bronze mirror. The lieutenant gave the scarabs to the captain, kept the bracelets, and left the mirror to the soldiers who had found the cache.

Late in the afternoon, as the column approached the defile of El-Kab, a horseman arrived at a gallop from the vanguard. He was looking for Desaix. He was taken to the head of the column. He spoke rapidly. Desaix signalled the officers to come closer.

"A roadblock. Armed fellahs. Twenty men or so. They are blocking the way at the defile."

"Are they asking for anything?"

"They do not speak French. The interpreter could not get near. They fired shots in the air."

Desaix thought for a few seconds.

"Do we go round by the east?"

"Impossible. The terrain is impassable. It would mean a three-day detour."

"Very well. We force the passage. Cavalry ahead, infantry behind. Denon, you stay in the middle of the column with the mules."

The column moved off again. An hour later, they reached the defile. The fellahs were there, armed with sticks, spears, a few old muskets. They stood across the road, motionless.

Desaix had the cavalry advance at a walk. The fellahs did not move. At fifty metres, Desaix raised his hand. The cavalry halted. He motioned to Hassan to come forward.

"Tell them we only want to pass. We touch nothing. We requisition nothing from their village."

Hassan went forward on foot, alone, his hands open before him. He spoke in Arabic. One of the fellahs replied. Hassan came back.

"They say the army took all their grain two weeks ago. They have nothing left. They want the grain given back, or payment."

"We took nothing two weeks ago. It was not us."

"They say it was French soldiers. They do not tell one detachment from another."

Desaix remained silent for a moment. Then he drew a purse from his saddle and tossed it to Hassan.

"Thirty-five piastres. Tell them it is all I have. If they want more, they will have to let us through all the same."

Hassan went back with the purse. He spoke to the same man. The man took the purse, weighed it in his hand, conferred with two others. Then they stepped aside from the road without a word. The column passed. The fellahs watched the soldiers file by in silence. When the last cart had gone through, the fellahs returned to their village.

At Thebes, the column halted for two days. Desaix wanted to let the men rest before the last stage to Cairo. The bivouac was set up a kilometre from Karnak. The soldiers slept in the shade of the temple. Some climbed onto the roofs to see the Nile. Others stayed under the tents, too tired to move.

On the evening of their arrival, an incident broke out in the bivouac. A soldier of the second company had stolen another soldier's bread ration during the distribution. The victim noticed, caught up with the thief and knocked out two of his teeth with a punch. The thief hit back and drew his knife. Four soldiers separated them. The sergeant arrived and had both men put in irons for the night. The next morning they were tried by the captain. The thief received twenty strokes of the cane. The victim was released without penalty.

The following evening, Desaix summoned the officers to his tent. He had received a despatch from Cairo. The news was not good.

The Turkish army was massing in Syria. Bonaparte had just left Cairo for Syria with the bulk of the army. Desaix was to bring his division back to Cairo as quickly as possible.

"No more halts after Thebes," said Desaix. "We march to Cairo. Ten days at most."

"And Dendera?" asked a lieutenant. "The savants wanted to go back."

"No time. We go past without stopping."

Denon, who was present, intervened.

"I need a halt at Abydos. Six hours. For the temple of Abydos."

"Impossible."

"Six hours. That is all I ask."

Desaix looked at him.

"Six hours at Abydos. Not one more. If you are not back by noon, we leave without you."

When the column reached Abydos, Denon dismounted and entered the temple with Hassan and two escort soldiers. He went straight to the back chamber, half buried in sand, at the end of the main corridor. Rows of engraved cartouches covered the west wall. Dozens of kings' names lined up in registers.

He stood before the wall for two hours, looking at inscriptions he could not read. Hassan had sat down on the ground near the entrance. The two soldiers waited outside.

A man came into the chamber. A fellah of about forty, white turban, leather sandals. He carried a bundle wrapped in coarse cloth. He approached Denon and unrolled the cloth before him. A fragment of limestone forty centimetres square bearing three complete cartouches.

The man pointed to the fragment. Five fingers raised.

"Five piastres."

He looked at the wall behind him. A fresh gap in the seventeenth row, where those three cartouches had been. The edges of the limestone were white, freshly cut. The man had cut out the piece during the night or early that morning.

Denon took five piastres from his purse and gave them over. The fragment went into his leather satchel. The man took the money and left without a word.

He stayed another two hours in the chamber, standing before the wall. At half past eleven, one of the soldiers ran in.

“Sir, the general is having the horses saddled.”

He left the temple. The column was already in marching order. He mounted and galloped to rejoin the head. Desaix watched him pass without comment. The column set off.

The road to Cairo still took eight days. The column crossed paths with three detachments heading south. News was circulating. Bonaparte had left for Syria, the Turkish army was advancing, the English were blockading every port. No one knew exactly what was happening.

When the column reached Cairo in mid-March, the soldiers were quartered in the barracks of the Citadel. Denon went directly to the northern outbuilding of Hassan-Kashif's palace, where the Commission's baggage was kept.

The storeroom was locked. He waited an hour for a quartermaster to arrive with the key. Denon went in. His twelve boxes were there, lined up against the south wall, labelled in his own hand. He opened the first, checked the contents quickly and closed it again. Everything was intact. He left the storeroom and went to the palace.

General Dugua, who commanded Cairo in Bonaparte's absence, received him at once. He was standing beside a table covered with maps of Syria. He motioned Denon to sit.

“You have finished your campaign in Upper Egypt?”

“Yes. From Dendera to Aswan. All the principal monuments.”

“Are the drawings usable for *the Description*?”

“Yes. Fifty-three sheets. Temples, tombs, colossi, bas-reliefs.”

“Good. Listen to me carefully. The commander-in-chief has gone to stop the Turkish army before it reaches us here. His orders do not change: you remain in Cairo. You coordinate the Institute with Monge and Berthollet. The explorations of the Delta continue. The excavations at Saqqara continue. *The Description* continues. Do you understand me?”

“I understand.”

“If the English land during his absence, you have the collections evacuated to the south. Desaix will know where to hide them. You lose everything except that. Is that clear?”

“It is clear.”

“Good. Now go. I have work to do.”

Dugua went back to his maps. Denon left the office.

Bonaparte had left Cairo a month earlier with thirteen thousand men, bound for Syria. Denon remained in Cairo with Monge, Berthollet, Fourier and the thirty or so savants who had not followed the army.

During Bonaparte’s absence, Denon organised the work of the Institute. Monge supervised the explorations of the Memphite region. Berthollet directed the excavations at Saqqara. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire continued his zoological studies in the Delta. Fourier managed the correspondence with the provincial sections.

In May, Denon called a meeting. All the members present in Cairo were there. Thirty savants and engineers crowded into the great hall. He opened the session at ten o’clock.

“Gentlemen, Bonaparte has been in Syria for a month. We have no precise news. The English still control the Mediterranean. I propose that we prepare a transport plan in case an opportunity arises.”

Monge raised his hand.

"We must wait for Bonaparte to return. He is the one who will decide."

"And if he does not return?" observed Fourier.

No one answered. Berthollet finally spoke.

"Denon is right. We prepare a plan. That way, the day we have a ship, we are ready."

The proposal was adopted. The session was adjourned at noon.

Bonaparte returned in June. He had set out with thirteen thousand men. He brought back fewer than ten thousand. The dead, the sick, the plague-stricken. The offensive had failed.

A few days after his return, Bonaparte summoned Denon to the palace. He had grown thin. His uniform hung loose on his shoulders. He showed Denon into his office without a word of greeting.

"Has the Institute gone on working?"

"Yes. All has gone well."

"Good. We carry on. The English are still blockading the coast. No transport until the situation changes."

"Understood."

Bonaparte made a gesture with his hand. The interview was over. Denon left.

The following weeks were quiet. The explorations continued. So did the excavations. *The Description* advanced slowly. Cairo waited, not knowing what was to come.

VI - The Rosetta Stone

On 15 July 1799, an engineer lieutenant named Bouchard was supervising earthworks near Rosetta. His pickaxe struck something.

Bouchard was twenty-eight, a graduate of the École Polytechnique. He understood at once what he had just found. A stele of black granodiorite, a hundred and twelve centimetres high, bearing three parallel inscriptions. He had the stone carried to his own house and immediately sent an urgent message to the Institute of Egypt in Cairo.

His house stood apart from the military works. The stone was safe there.

Jean-Joseph Marcel and Rémi Raige were sent to Rosetta. Marcel was an orientalist specialising in the Semitic languages. Raige was a Hellenist, able to read ancient Greek fluently. They examined the stone from every angle on 24 July.

The Greek text, located in the lower part of the stele, was relatively well preserved. Raige read it aloud while Marcel took notes. "This decree honours the young Ptolemy V. Tax exemptions for the temples, gifts to the priesthood. The kind of thing one engraves in three languages to be sure that everyone knows."

Marcel dampened a sheet of very thin paper and pressed it gently against the inscribed surface with a ball of cotton soaked in diluted ink. The result: an exact impression, in white on a black ground, of every sign. The operation took several hours for the whole surface.

Marcel and Raige's report reached the Institute on 29 July. The confirmation that it was indeed the same text in three languages, one of them legible, provoked an excitement Denon had not seen since their arrival at Alexandria a year earlier. If the stone allowed the hieroglyphs to be deciphered, three millennia of history would become legible again. The dynasties, the battles, the gods, the names. Everything that travellers had copied without understanding for two centuries.

"We may be at the dawn of a scientific revolution," Denon said to the Institute, convened in emergency session.

Monge proposed sending an expedition to Rosetta.

“Plaster casts, squeezes on paper. Before someone damages it or moves it.”

Jomard was present when Marcel and Raige made the first squeezes.

The Rosetta Stone measured a hundred and twelve centimetres in height, seventy-six in width and twenty-eight in thickness. Its weight, estimated from its volume and the known density of granodiorite, was about seven hundred and sixty kilograms. He took these measurements himself, not because they would be immediately useful, but because measuring was his way of entering into contact with the object.

The stele was incomplete. The top of the stele was missing, carried off at some indeterminate time. The hieroglyphs at the summit were therefore partial. About a third of the Egyptian text was lost. This gap would complicate the work of the future decipherer. But the Greek section was almost intact. That was enough to work with.

“The Greek, at the bottom, we can read at once,” said Marcel. “It is a decree of the Council of Priests of Memphis in the ninth year of the reign of Ptolemy V Epiphanes. The year 196 BC.”

“And the hieroglyphs?” asked Jomard.

“Probably the same text. That is what we hope.”

“If so,” said Jomard, “we can begin to establish correspondences. Every Greek word has its hieroglyphic equivalent. By comparing the lengths of the groups of signs, by identifying repetitions...”

“That is precisely what we shall do. But the work will take years.”

Jomard took a pencil and, in his notebook, began to record the frequency of certain groups of signs in the hieroglyphic band. Each sign, spotted, counted, entered in a table. The distribution was not random.

“Look. This group of signs, enclosed in a cartouche, appears six times in the preserved part of the hieroglyphs. The word Ptolemy

appears eleven times in the Greek, and part of the Egyptian text is missing.”

Marcel stopped working and looked.

“It is possible. Very probable, even. But the sign-for-sign correspondence is not necessarily direct. Hieroglyphic writing is probably not alphabetic.”

“Yes. But it is a starting point.”

He could not yet know where that road led.

Jomard helped Marcel stretch the last sheet of squeeze over the Demotic section. The night was far advanced. The lamp was smoking. Outside, the port of Rosetta slept.

Jomard came back to see the stone three times in the week that followed, at Rosetta.

The first time, he brought his leather tape and measured everything that could be measured. The second, he brought his notebook of frequencies and counted the groups of signs in the hieroglyphic band, building a table of distribution. The third time, he brought nothing. He sat down facing the stone on a stool. The granodiorite was cold and matt. No shine, no colour. A grey slab, ugly in the ordinary sense of the word. He laid his hands flat on his knees and forced himself not to calculate. Merely to look. The surface bore the marks of the chisel, visible in certain letters. Someone had engraved this letter by letter, for hours. That labour was there. It endured. Like looking at a map whose language one still does not understand, but on which one can see the roads have been drawn.

What he saw, sitting there, was that this stone was fundamentally different from all the other objects they had collected, or tried to collect, for more than a year. The *shabtis*, the scarabs, the papyri, the fragments of bas-relief. Those objects had a value that lay in their materiality and their origin. They were taken because they were beautiful, rare, old.

The Rosetta Stone had no aesthetic value. Its value lay entirely in what it signified: a correspondence between three systems of writing, one of which was legible and the other two still were not. It was not an object. It was a method. And as a method, it was reproducible. A squeeze of the Rosetta Stone was scientifically equivalent to the Rosetta Stone for anyone working on the decipherment.

It was the exact opposite of all the other objects of the expedition. A *shabti* taken from its tomb lost its relation to its context. The Rosetta Stone, taken from a fortification ditch, lost nothing. It had already been out of context for two thousand years. What it bore was independent of the place where it happened to lie.

"You are still here," said Marcel, coming in. "This is the third time this week."

"I am thinking. This stone is the exception to everything I have observed in a year. The objects we carry off lose something. This one can lose nothing. Because it has nothing to lose."

Marcel sat down beside him.

"Except by being taken by the English."

"Yes. Except that. But if the English take it, the squeezes remain. The information remains. It is the only thing in the entire expedition that cannot truly be stolen."

Marcel had taken a decision without informing anyone.

Beyond the official squeezes made at Rosetta, he made thirty more, not for the Institute, not for *the Description*, but to distribute. He sent five to European correspondents: one to London, two to Paris, one to Berlin, one to Copenhagen. Five scholars working on ancient languages who might, perhaps, recognise something.

He kept twenty-five in reserve. If the English took the stone, if the decipherment had to be done in London, these squeezes would allow the French to work in parallel. The race would be an even one.

"You have distributed the key before opening the lock," said Denon when he learned of it.

"I have distributed copies of the key. The lock stays here. And if the English take the lock, we shall still have our copies."

News of the discovery prompted an extraordinary meeting of the Institute on 2 August. All the members present in Cairo made the journey. Monge presided. Denon presented Marcel's squeezes and Raige's technical report on the Greek text.

The hall was full. Some thirty savants, engineers, naturalists. Some had not attended a session for months. The Rosetta Stone had drawn them out of their laboratories, their building sites, their missions in the Delta.

Berthollet spoke after the presentation.

"If this stone allows decipherment, we shall have access to three thousand years of archives. The royal lists, the accounts of battles, the religious treatises. Everything engraved on every monument we have drawn for more than a year will become legible."

Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, who never intervened in philological debates, raised his hand.

"How long will decipherment take?"

Marcel answered from the back of the hall.

"Years. Perhaps ten. Perhaps twenty. Hieroglyphic writing is not alphabetic. It is not a simple letter-for-letter substitution."

"But it is feasible," said Jomard. "We have the correspondence. The rest is work."

A military engineer, Chabrol, asked to speak.

"A practical question. If the British land, this stone will be their first target. They know what it is worth. Do we have a plan?"

The hall fell silent. No one had yet put the question so directly.

Monge looked at Denon.

"The squeezes travel," said Denon. "Marcel has already sent five to Europe. We have twenty-five in reserve here. If the British take the stone, the decipherment will be done in Paris from the copies."

"And if we lose the squeezes too?"

"Then we shall have lost."

It was not a satisfactory answer. But it was the only possible one. They did not control the military situation. They controlled only their own scientific decisions.

Monge drafted a formal resolution: the Rosetta Stone would be transported to Cairo as soon as possible, kept at the Institute under permanent guard, reproduced by squeeze as often as necessary, and studied as a priority by Marcel and Raige. The resolution was adopted unanimously.

Denon stayed on after the session. He was helping to put away the chairs when Fourier came in, carrying a sheaf of papers.

"Have you seen Bonaparte's latest despatch?"

"No."

"It does not look good. Bonaparte has come back from Syria with an exhausted army. Kléber, at Alexandria, has been asking for reinforcements for weeks. The answer is slow in coming."

He set down the chair he was holding.

"And here we are discovering the key to the hieroglyphs while the army returns from a disastrous Syrian campaign."

"Exactly that. We do science while the expedition collapses."

It was not said with bitterness. It was a statement of fact. The military expedition was failing. The scientific expedition had just achieved its most spectacular coup. Both things were happening at the same time, in the same country, under the same command.

Denon went back to the squeezes. He spread them out on the great table of the Institute. The three bands of writing: hieroglyphs at the top, Demotic in the middle, Greek at the bottom.

He followed the line of hieroglyphic signs with his finger. Birds, serpents, eyes, hands. Forms he had copied a hundred times at Dendera, at Thebes, at Philae. These signs had always been mute. They were going to speak.

He thought of Bonaparte. Back from Syria since June, victor at Aboukir on 25 July, secretly preparing his departure for France, unaware that his engineers had just found what no one had found in two thousand years.

On 5 August, Jomard spent the entire day with the squeezes. He had brought his survey notebooks from Dendera and Karnak. On every page, copies of cartouches he had drawn during the preceding months. Ovals containing groups of hieroglyphic signs. He had always supposed that these cartouches contained names. It was a common hypothesis among travellers since the eighteenth century.

Now, with the Rosetta Stone, he could test it.

The Greek text mentioned the name Ptolemy eleven times. Jomard counted the cartouches in the hieroglyphic band. He found only six, but the band was mutilated. He noted the correspondence in his notebook: "Hypothesis: cartouche equals proper name. If confirmed, all the cartouches on the monuments of Egypt contain names of pharaohs or of deities."

It was a small advance. But it was an advance. A year earlier, cartouches had been mysterious forms. Now they had an identified function.

The explorations went on.

The Rosetta Stone was a discovery. It did not halt everything else.

On 10 August, an officer came by the Institute to announce the official outcome of the battle of Aboukir on 25 July. Bonaparte had crushed the Ottoman landing on the beach at Aboukir. Ten thousand janissaries killed or drowned, the rest captured. A clear victory, after the failure of the Syrian campaign. The Army of the Orient held Egypt. But everyone knew that the Syrian campaign

had been a disaster, and that Aboukir, however brilliant, changed nothing about the army's fundamental isolation.

Denon learned the news from Kléber, who was passing through Cairo before rejoining his command at Alexandria.

"Is Bonaparte coming back?"

"Yes. In a few weeks. Perhaps less. He has sent no clear message. But the army is falling back. That much is certain."

"And afterwards?"

"Afterwards, we shall see. Either he consolidates Egypt. Or he goes back to France."

Kléber did not state the third option, but it was obvious: either he went on losing men in pointless campaigns until nothing remained of the Army of the Orient.

Kléber looked at the squeezes spread over the table of the Institute.

"So that is your stone?"

"That is it."

"What does it say?"

"A decree on temple taxes. Nothing military."

Kléber smiled.

"You have found the key to ancient Egypt with a text about taxes. I like that."

He left for Alexandria that same evening. Denon would never see him again.

On 12 August, a message arrived from Rosetta: the stone was ready for transport. Bouchard had supervised the construction of a reinforced crate. The military convoy was organised. Departure was set for the 14th.

Denon wrote a note to Bouchard: "Transport by river if possible. Avoid the jolts of the road. If overland transport is necessary, maximum suspension. The stone must not crack."

Bouchard replied the next day: "River transport impossible. All the boats are requisitioned for the wounded from Aboukir. Overland transport with extra straw beneath the crate. Three days' journey. Expected arrival 17 August."

On the evening of 17 August, the convoy entered the courtyard of the Institute. Fifteen escort soldiers, three carts. The stone was in the second cart, wrapped in canvas, strapped down on a bed of straw.

Denon, Marcel, Jomard and six soldiers unloaded it. Seven hundred and sixty kilograms. Levers, ropes and an improvised ramp were needed. The operation took an hour. In the end, the stone rested on a wooden plinth in the main hall of the Institute, against the east wall.

Marcel removed the canvas. The black granodiorite appeared, with its three engraved bands of writing.

"Not a crack," said Jomard, inspecting the surface.

They installed it beneath an oil lamp that burned continuously. Two guards on duty day and night. No written order. Everyone understood: this stone must not disappear.

The next morning, Denon came back to see the stone. He was alone. The Institute was still asleep. The lamp cast a yellow light on the granodiorite. The hieroglyphs threw tiny shadows into their hollows.

He laid his hand on the cold surface. The gesture was pointless. But he made it all the same. To touch the stone was to touch the moment when ancient Egypt became accessible again.

One day, someone would read this text as one reads Greek. The dynasties would emerge from silence. The pharaohs would find a voice again.

He withdrew his hand.

VII - Negotiations, Victory and the Death of Kléber

On the evening of 18 August, Denon happened to see Bonaparte crossing the courtyard of the Institute alone. No aide-de-camp, no escort. He was carrying something in his hand. A book, not maps. He walked quickly, like a man who does not wish to be seen.

Denon watched him from the doorway. There was something in that hurried figure he had never seen in him before: a haste that looked like flight. Not flight from a danger. Flight from a situation that had grown too small. Egypt had served him as a setting. The setting had become a cage.

He turned the corner of the courtyard and vanished.

Denon thought of the book he was carrying. Something about Rome, no doubt, or about Alexander. A man who is leaving always takes the same reading with him.

An hour later, an aide-de-camp came to fetch Denon. Bonaparte had examined his drawings that afternoon and wanted to take him along. Denon rolled his drawings into four copper tubes, entrusted the keys of his crates to Jomard and took his place in the berlin with Monge and Berthollet. That night, a few people saw them leave. Others heard the horses moving off towards the north.

The next morning, the news was confirmed. Bonaparte had left for France. He had sent Kléber a letter transferring to him the command of the army of Egypt. Monge, Berthollet and Denon had gone with him. They would embark at Alexandria on the night of 22 to 23 August aboard one of the two frigates, and Denon would land at Fréjus on 9 October with his drawings. Almost no one had been warned.

Jomard's first thought that morning was not for Bonaparte or for France. It was for the crates. Ninety-six crates stored in the out-buildings of Hassan-Kashif's palace. Seventy-three official ones and twenty-three unlabelled in the north-west corner, still there,

still nameless. Without Bonaparte to order a military transport, those crates were at the mercy of any military negotiation to come.

He went round the outbuildings before sunrise. The crates were there, stacked, nailed shut, labelled according to his system. A letter, a number, a brief description of the contents.

The objects came from everywhere: Saqqara, Karnak, Dendera, the Valley of the Kings, the market at Memphis, the excavations at Tanis. Some had been taken according to established procedures. Others had been bought in the markets that followed the army. Others still had arrived by less well-documented routes. Together they represented thirteen months of organised plunder, accidental plunder, tolerated plunder and scientific collecting, categories that no one had ever truly separated in any formal way.

With Bonaparte gone, the distinctions no longer held, even politically. With him had evaporated the justification of a state project that made such removals legitimate. What remained was simply objects, soldiers, savants. And the English, who would come sooner or later.

He put the inventory away and sat down on a crate. Around him, in the half-darkness, the ninety-six crates. All of it wanted to go back to France. And for the moment, nothing could go anywhere. Kléber now commanded the army of Egypt. Bonaparte had not thought it worthwhile to speak to him before leaving.

Marcel took it calmly. He had his squeezes; whether Bonaparte was there or not changed nothing. Jollois asked Fourier whether the work of the Commission would continue. Fourier said yes. Jollois went back to his notebooks. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire looked up from his dissection when the news was announced, nodded, and carried on. It was not indifference. It was the concentration of a man for whom the object on the table takes precedence over everything else.

“Bonaparte used us,” said Jollois. “Our drawings legitimised his conquest. Now that he has what he wanted, he leaves. We stay.”

Fourier found Jollois alone in his office at the Institute, three days after the announcement of the departure.

“Are you working?”

“No.”

“He could have warned us,” said Jollois. “I have a family in Paris. I promised them a few months. It has now been thirteen months. And he has gone home.”

He left the sentence unfinished. It was not jealousy. It was simpler and more painful: he had believed in something, science in the service of the Republic, the Republic in the service of science. Bonaparte had used that as scenery. Now the scenery was gone.

The Commission of Sciences and Arts met that very evening. No one had summoned it. The savants had found themselves at the Institute through a kind of collective instinct. Fourier was there, and Marcel, Jomard, Jollois, Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and a dozen others. Conté was the last to arrive.

The situation was simple to put: what happened now? Bonaparte was gone. Kléber was in command.

Kléber did not have the same relations with the Commission. Jomard had asked him for an audience two days earlier to discuss the status of the collections. Kléber had said he would look into the matter.

“Looking into it means he is not thinking about it,” said Jomard.

“Kléber has an army to keep together, Ottomans to watch and the English in the Mediterranean,” said Fourier. “The collections are not his priority.”

“Then they must be ours,” replied Jomard. “If we do not decide their fate, someone else will.”

On the table lay the general inventory of the ninety-six crates. Jomard had had it passed round. Each man read it in silence. The

names of temples, the categories of objects, the estimates of weight. It was the first time the Commission had looked at the whole of what it had collected in a single document.

No one said what everyone was thinking: that this inventory looked like a ledger of plunder as much as a scientific catalogue.

"We must establish a transport priority," said Jomard. "In the event of an evacuation, not everything can go. We need a hierarchy."

"The papyri and the copied inscriptions," said Marcel. "Irreplaceable."

Fourier hesitated before asking the question.

"And the twenty-three unlabelled crates in the north-west corner of the warehouse?"

Jomard and Marcel exchanged a glance.

"I have noted them," said Jomard. "I do not know whom they belong to."

"Nor do I," said Marcel.

The meeting ended without any formal decision on the point. The savants returned to their work. The inventory stayed on the table. The twenty-three nameless crates stayed in the north-west corner of the warehouse, in the darkness, waiting for someone to decide what they were.

Kléber described his predecessor as a "petty schemer" and a "cowardly deserter".

The military situation was untenable. The French army controlled Egypt but had no contact with France. The English fleet blockaded the Mediterranean. Kléber knew that he could neither hold out indefinitely nor receive reinforcements. He took the decision Bonaparte had not dared to take: to negotiate an evacuation. In December 1799, Kléber sent an emissary to the Ottoman grand vizier, who was encamped in Syria. Negotiations began

aboard the British flagship *Le Tigre*, off Damietta. The British negotiator was Commodore Sidney Smith, who presented himself as plenipotentiary of the Crown, a status Admiral Keith would soon dispute. The French plenipotentiaries were General Desaix and the administrator Poussielgue. The French terms were clear: an honourable evacuation of the army with arms and baggage. Smith agreed to deal with the urgent points: the evacuation of the wounded and of the savants from Egypt, and a truce until the Ottoman plenipotentiaries arrived. The discussions dragged on. Kléber pressed his negotiators to conclude. But on 24 January 1800, the Convention of El-Arish was signed. It provided for the complete evacuation of the French army from Egypt within three months, with arms, baggage and scientific collections. The French would gradually abandon their positions, starting with the east of the Delta and ending with Alexandria. Cairo was to be evacuated by the forty-fifth day at the latest. The news reached Cairo on 28 January. That day, the Convention was officially promulgated. The effect on the savants was immediate. "Gentlemen," said Kléber at an extraordinary meeting of the Commission, "I have negotiated our return with the Ottomans. In three months, we shall be in France. Embrace your collections; you are going to have to sort them."

Jollois spent whole days sorting and packing. Bronze statues, statuettes of painted wood and faience, amulets, papyri, coins, jewellery. Each object catalogued, described, wrapped in linen. He worked quickly, knowing that his time was limited. For the first time in twenty months, the return was becoming real. The crates came out of the storerooms. The labels were written. The Rosetta Stone was wrapped in several layers of canvas. Fourier, who had followed the negotiations closely, returned to Cairo with the text of the Convention and read it aloud at a session of the Institute. When he reached the clause guaranteeing the collections, a murmur of relief ran through the assembly.

“Does that mean that the Rosetta Stone, the papyri, the squeezes, everything we have gathered, will be able to return to France with us?” asked Marcel.

“The Convention guarantees it,” said Fourier. “Naturally, that assumes the English accept its terms.”

Fourier had drawn up a complete inventory: two hundred and seventeen catalogued objects, of which one hundred and thirty-eight had direct museum value and seventy-nine documentary scientific value. He ranked them in order of priority, knowing that if transport were limited, choices would have to be made. Priority one: Jomard’s measured drawings. Irreplaceable. Two hundred kilos at most, in watertight crates. Jollois’s notebooks, in copper tubes: fifty kilos more. Priority two: the small objects – *shabtis*, scarabs, amulets, papyri. Light, dense in value per kilo. Priority three: Marcel’s squeezes. Priority four: Geoffroy’s natural history collections, heavy, fragile, cumbersome. Priority five: the large pieces of the Institute, the granite statue, the medium-sized sarcophagi.

The hope lasted five weeks. In March 1800, the news arrived. The British had refused to ratify the Convention. Admiral George Keith Elphinstone, commander of the British fleet in the Mediterranean, had declared that Sidney Smith had exceeded his powers and that the convention was void. Keith demanded unconditional surrender. The French were to lay down their arms and give themselves up as prisoners. Kléber summoned his generals. He read Keith’s message aloud, then laid it on the table.

“Gentlemen, such insolence can only be answered with victories. Prepare to fight.”

The baggage was unpacked. The crates went back into the store-rooms of the Institute. Thirty-three were missing, lost or destroyed in the disorder of the preceding months; sixty-three remained. The labels stayed stuck on. These objects were no longer

leaving. For now. Until the next chance to leave, or until the capitulation that would hand them to the English. The British and the Ottomans believed the Army of the Orient too weak to resist. The grand vizier Youssouf Pasha set out for Cairo with an army of forty to eighty thousand men, depending on the estimates. In Cairo itself, the population rose at his call.

Nassif Pasha, at the head of the Ottoman vanguard, occupied the village of El-Matarieh with five or six thousand janissaries and several thousand horsemen, and fortified his position with sixteen pieces of artillery. Kléber had only ten thousand men. On the night of 19 to 20 March 1800, he had them cross the Nile and placed them on the right bank of the river, each of the four brigades of his little army forming its own square. At dawn on 20 March, the French army attacked near the ruins of Heliopolis, about fifteen kilometres from Cairo. The battle lasted all day. The French squares withstood every charge. The French artillery broke the Ottoman lines. By the end of the afternoon, the Ottoman army had disintegrated. The grand vizier fled towards Syria with what remained of his troops. The French counted eight hundred dead or wounded. The Ottomans left nine thousand on the field. Kléber returned to Cairo and crushed the rebellion. The bombardment lasted several days. Hundreds of civilians died in the fighting. On 21 April, the city capitulated. The victory of Heliopolis consolidated the French position in Egypt. Murad Bey, whose Mamluks had remained encamped in the desert without taking part in the battle, signed an agreement with Kléber in April that made him a sort of viceroy of Upper Egypt. Egypt seemed more firmly than ever in French hands. Kléber resumed his duties as commander-in-chief. The savants resumed their work. The collections stayed in the storerooms. No one knew how long this would last.

“Let us work while we can,” said Fourier at the weekly meetings that followed. “What we do here cannot be undone.”

Kléber had negotiated with the Ottomans, tried to bring the army home, failed, and resumed the fighting. The savants saw little of him. He sometimes came to the Institute, listened to the reports, and went back to his headquarters.

The military situation had stabilised without improving. The army held Egypt but could neither advance nor leave. The British blockaded the Mediterranean. France was far away. The expedition had become a garrison.

On the morning of 14 June 1800, Kléber reviewed the Greek legion, then came to Cairo to inspect work at the headquarters palace. Before visiting it, he attended a luncheon at the house of General Damas, his chief of staff and close friend. Members of the Institute and officers were gathered at the meal. Kléber showed himself more cheerful than usual. The success that crowned his efforts, the growth of the French establishments and the tokens of affection he received from the population had dispelled his customary coldness. He was lively, amiable, expansive. None of those around him foresaw that this merry luncheon was a farewell banquet.

At two o'clock in the afternoon, the general, accompanied only by Protain, the army's architect, made his way to his palace. To reach it, he followed a long gallery shaded by a thick vine, which linked the chief of staff's residence to that of the commander-in-chief. He was talking with Protain about the improvements he planned and giving orders for the repair of the headquarters and the garden, to remove the marks of the projectiles left by the last insurrection.

A young Syrian named Soleyman al-Halabi had been hiding in the palace garden since morning. He was twenty-four, studied theology at the Al-Azhar mosque, and had been watching Kléber's palace for a month. He had procured a dagger at Giza. That morning, disguised as a beggar, he had concealed himself near an abandoned cistern.

When Kléber entered the gallery with Protain, Soleyman came out of his hiding place, approached from behind, and plunged a dagger into the general's heart.

Kléber collapsed, crying: "Help me, I have been assassinated!"

Protain threw himself upon the assassin with the little cane he was holding. He tried to ward off the blows and received six dagger wounds himself. Soleyman left him unconscious, went back to Kléber, already on the ground, and struck him three more times. The first blow had been fatal. The general died within a few minutes without being able to speak.

The alarm spread. The guards, the officers, all those men with whom Kléber had raised a toast to the Republic a few hours earlier, gathered around him, trying to draw a few words from him. They questioned him in vain. The body was carried to the chief of staff's apartment.

Soldiers searched the palace and the gardens in every direction. Two guides brought in a young man they had surprised hiding under a thick prickly pear. Protain, who had come to despite his wounds, recognised the assassin. Soleyman was thrown into prison with three ulema of the great mosque who had known of his plan and had not denounced the attempt.

The army was seized by a profound consternation that quickly turned into a burning thirst for vengeance. The whole city was in turmoil. The shops closed. The French soldiers, furious, distraught, roamed the streets casting menacing glances about them. The night was a hard one.

The next morning, the news reached the Institute. Fourier called an immediate meeting. Sixteen savants gathered in the hall, silent. This silence was not mourning in the ordinary sense. It was the recognition that something had changed in their military situation and that the man who had tolerated their presence in Egypt was no longer there.

Fourier spoke without preamble.

“Kléber is dead. General Menou takes command. We do not know him. Kléber understood Bonaparte’s orders on the importance of scientific work. Menou has no such bond with us.”

Jomard added:

“Our collections are in storage, our drawings archived. If Menou decides they stay in Egypt or that they no longer have any military importance, we lose two years of work.”

Marcel then said, slowly:

“The work of documentation is almost finished. What matters now is to bring everything back to France. If the objects are scattered here, they will be resold in the markets, and everything we have done will have been for nothing.”

Fourier stood up.

“We carry on. We finish what can be finished.”

The savants returned to their tasks without knowing anything of what Menou would decide.

Soleyman al-Halabi was interrogated under torture. He confessed that he had been encouraged by the aga of the janissaries of the Ottoman army. He had confided his plan to four ulema of the Al-Azhar mosque, who had tried to dissuade him but had not denounced him. A council of war condemned them all. Soleyman had his right hand burned, then was impaled alive. He suffered for four hours before dying. The three ulema were beheaded. The fourth was sentenced in absentia.

The funeral took place quickly. Fourier, in the name of the Institute, delivered the eulogy of the hero they were mourning.

The soldiers vied in throwing wreaths of cypress and laurel. After the public funeral, a small group made up mostly of officers gathered discreetly around the deceased’s grave. They were members of the military Masonic lodge “*Les amis réunis*”. A savant of the Commission joined them. Though not an officer, he was himself

also a Freemason, a member of the Paris lodge "*La parfaite réunion*". He was the only civilian present. Monge might have been there, but he had fled with Bonaparte. They took out their aprons and turned them to the black side reserved for funeral ceremonies. They clapped three times and pronounced the ritual formula "Let us mourn! Let us mourn! Let us mourn!", immediately followed by the traditional battery of joy "But let us hope! Let us hope! Let us hope!" A sprig of acacia was laid on the tomb. Their brother had joined the *Eternal East*.

General Jacques-François Menou, second in command, had conducted the Masonic ceremony in his capacity as Worshipful Master. He officially took command of the army of Egypt.

Menou had converted to Islam, taken the name Abdallah, and married an Egyptian woman named Zobeida. The officers respected him less than they had Kléber. The savants did not know him well. They were about to learn.

CHAPTER III: THE TIME OF THE SAVANTS

I - The Last Campaigns

The change of command altered nothing in the work of the Institute.

Archaeological explorations continued throughout the Delta and Lower Egypt. The collections were enriched and better organised. Scientific publications in *La Décade égyptienne* continued regularly. General Menou had a radically different personality from his predecessor. He claimed to govern Egypt in the name of a Franco-Arab alliance that had no political reality. His officers followed him out of discipline, not conviction.

For the savants, Menou was at once more intrusive and less useful than Kléber. More intrusive because he claimed to steer their work towards subjects that seemed politically useful to him. Less useful because his priorities diverged completely from theirs.

Fourier devised a simple strategy for coexisting with Menou without compromising himself: to attach his name to a few minor discoveries and publications, to hand him regular reports technical enough to be incomprehensible, and to carry on the substantial work quietly without informing the commander-in-chief.

"That is diplomacy," said Jomard when Fourier explained his strategy to him.

"That is survival," replied Fourier.

The savants resumed their explorations.

The Institute of Egypt continued to hold its weekly sessions, even if the atmosphere was different from that of the early years. The presentations were less enthusiastic, the debates less lively. The savants bore the weight of a prolonged stay in a country whose everyday language and cultural subtleties they had never mastered.

Fourier tried to maintain the intellectual momentum. He proposed subjects for collective reflection and organised readings of ancient texts to remind his colleagues in what historical context they were working. These efforts were not in vain. Several of the papers presented to the Institute during those difficult years became important scientific articles.

The mid-June session of the Institute was one of the liveliest since Bonaparte's departure and Kléber's death.

Fourier had proposed a deliberately abstract subject – the notion of memory in civilisations – and the discussion had quickly overflowed academic limits.

Jomard had spoken first. He was twenty-two and had the irritating precision of young men who are right.

"A civilisation that forgets its own measures is condemned to begin again. Ancient Egypt did not forget hers for three thousand years. That is no doubt the definition of a great civilisation. Not the grandeur of its monuments, but the length of time for which it can transmit knowledge without distorting it."

Marcel had objected.

"Monuments are precisely what makes transmission possible. Without Karnak, without the pyramids, Jomard's measurements would transmit nothing. The material support is inseparable from the knowledge it carries."

"That is why we are here," retorted Jomard. "To substitute for the monument a document that will travel better. The *Description de l'Égypte* will be portable where temples are not."

Fourier had listened without intervening. He was thinking of what would become of their work if the army capitulated tomorrow.

"Are your drawings in a condition to be copied if we had to evacuate in haste?"

"I have had a double copy since Alexandria. If the ship sinks, at least one version survives."

Fourier looked at him in silence. This young man had understood that scientific work on a military campaign is by nature precarious, and that the only answer is redundancy.

"You should tell the others that."

"I already have. Most found it excessive."

"Most are wrong."

Fourier thought of Hamilton. He still did not know his name, but he knew he existed. Someone, on the other side, who was drawing up lists of his own. A country that arrives with notebooks is better than a country that arrives with nothing but cannon. Jomard's double copy was not an engineer's caution. It was common sense.

That evening, Jomard stayed alone to recopy his notebooks of measurements. The pen ran steadily over the paper. The city murmured through the shutters. A muezzin called to prayer. Jomard heard nothing. He copied. He sometimes thought that copying was the only sure thing he did here. That drawing and measuring could be mistaken, but that faithful copying could not. A correct copy outlived the original. That was true resistance. Since Aboukir he had understood that every measurement existed in two copies or did not exist. The first in the field notebook, made standing, in the wind. The second here, at the table, reread, checked, made legible. It was the second that would survive.

On 25 June 1800, Jollois set out again with Jomard, Geoffroy and two draughtsmen for Tanis, in the north-east of the Delta, to survey the remains of the ancient capital of the pharaohs of the twenty-first dynasty.

They found a vast field of ruins. Scattered mounds beneath which slept centuries of superimposed city. Blocks of granite. Fragments of statues. The Delta had devoured what the sands of

Upper Egypt had preserved. Nothing resembled Karnak. Nothing resembled Dendera. This was Egypt without its staging. Just matter, scattered, without apparent order, and yet arranged according to a logic that only excavation could reveal. No systematic survey had been attempted since the Greeks, Jollois reminded them: Herodotus mentioned the site, and so did Strabo. "That is because no one knew there was so much to see," added Jomard. Jollois drew for three days, stopping only at nightfall, and mapped the whole site, noting the position of every significant block.

At the entrance to the site, an antiquities dealer was waiting with his satchel. The man was called Suleiman al-Qabbani, who had come from Cairo after learning that the Commission was going to Tanis. He had made the journey the day before and was expecting no one in particular, but someone who would know what to buy.

Jollois stopped in front of the objects. Two of the *shabtis* were authentic; he could tell from the patina and the inscriptions. He bought one.

From Tanis, the expedition moved on to Bubastis, two days to the west. Holy city of Bastet, the cat goddess. The ruins of her temple were impressive in their dimensions. Herodotus had described it as one of the most magnificent in Egypt, and the annual festival drew immense crowds, which one could believe from the extent of the site.

Pink granite columns ten metres high lay overturned on the sand, their cylindrical shafts broken into several sections by the collapse. Fragments of bas-reliefs littered the ground: processions of priests, festival scenes, stylised divinities. The style of the Late Period.

Around the temple, a necropolis of sacred cats. Thousands of mummies in limestone galleries. The same care as for humans: natron, bandages, coffins of wood or bronze.

On opening one of the mummies, Geoffroy found the body remarkably well preserved, skin, fur, bones and tendons intact after two thousand years of burial. An ordinary-sized domestic cat.

The plunderers had already been at work. Gutted pits, scattered mummies, fragments of bandage strewn over the limestone floor like brown snow.

What the plunderers sought in the cat necropolises were the faience or gold amulets placed with the mummies, and the little bronze coffins in the shape of a seated cat with pricked ears and eyes inlaid with glass. Those coffins had immediate market value. The dealers of Alexandria had been reselling them to European travellers for a century. The plunderers left the mummies themselves, worthless once stripped of their amulets, and the ordinary limestone coffins, too heavy and too common to justify transport.

Geoffroy took six cat mummies in good condition. He wrapped them in clean linen and labelled them. To him they were zoological specimens, the fauna of ancient Egypt, comparable to the living individuals in the menagerie of the Natural History Museum. He thought of what Cuvier would say on seeing them: proof of the fixity of species, the cat unchanged in two thousand years. And of what Lamarck would say: that two thousand years count for nothing on the scale of change. The same mummies serving two opposing theses. Science had that property; facts did not choose their side. For the plunderers who had left them, they were waste once the amulets were extracted. For the priests of Bastet who had buried them, they were offerings to the goddess, meant to stay there for eternity. The same object had three histories that did not intersect.

In the necropolis, half buried in the earth, Jollois found a small bronze coffin in the shape of a seated cat. Height: twenty centimetres. The tail brought round over the paws in the characteristic posture of the cats of Egypt. In the raking evening light, the contours of the face emerged with a precision the patina did not hide,

the muscles of the cheeks, the ridge of the nose, the line of the closed lips.

The coffin was empty. Jollois turned the bronze over in his hands. On the base, engraved with a chisel, a line of hieroglyphs. The name of the dedicator, probably, the woman or man who had offered this cat to Bastet in exchange for a favour or out of ordinary piety. A name that someone else would read later, if this bronze ever reached Paris. A name that had waited there in the earth since the Twenty-sixth Dynasty.

He put it in his satchel. Weight: three hundred grams. Market value in Alexandria: perhaps twenty piastres, if one found an English buyer with a taste for Egyptian bronzes. Scientific value: inestimable, if the bronze bore the dedicator's name and that name could one day be read. The two values did not coincide. What was precious to the archaeologist was not precious to the dealer. And the fact that Jollois was both – an archaeologist who put in his satchel what he had found – did not resolve the contradiction. It embodied it.

Geoffroy joined Jollois that evening at the camp with his six mummies in their crate. Night was falling fast. They sat down before the fire and set their finds between them. The six mummies. The bronze. Geoffroy examined the mummies before closing the crate. He had spent the day deciding what he could take and what he must leave.

“What are you going to do with it?” asked Geoffroy, looking at the bronze.

“Take it. Draw it. Describe it. Hand it over to the Louvre when it has an Egyptian department.”

“And if the British take it from you at the capitulation?”

Jollois put the bronze in his satchel, under his notebooks. He did not answer. They both knew. If the capitulation came, the bronze would go to London. Into a display case at the British Museum.

The expedition returned to Cairo on 12 August after seven weeks in the Delta. It brought back drawings of Tanis and Bubastis, sites that were archaeologically disappointing but documented.

“Conté has made Egypt his laboratory,” Jollois said to Fourier. “Wherever we go, he observes, experiments, improves. He may be the one who draws the most lasting practical benefit from this expedition.”

Nicolas-Jacques Conté had established himself as the inventor of the expedition. Balloons, mills, manufacturing workshops. This former balloonist did not draw the temples; he solved the problems their exploration raised.

Other savants, less resistant to discouragement, reduced their activity to a minimum. Some fell ill. Chronic dysentery, fever, and ophthalmia caused by sand and sun had wrought havoc in the ranks of the Commission. Several died in Egypt before the return.

In the autumn of 1800, Jollois organised new explorations in the Eastern Desert. Sites distinct from those he had visited before. This time he wanted to explore the Coptic monasteries lost in the desert cliffs between the Nile and the Red Sea.

On 15 September 1800, Jollois set out eastward with Jomard and thirty cavalrymen as escort. Three days of Eastern Desert, arid and rocky.

On the morning of 18 September, the expedition reached the monastery of St Anthony, inhabited since the fourth century.

The Coptic monks received the visitors with wariness and curiosity. Some fifty anchorites in black robes, living in extreme ascetic poverty, looked at these Parisian savants as one looks at beings from another world.

“Father,” Jollois said to the superior through Hassan, “we have not come to take your manuscripts from you. We wish only to copy them. Everything will remain here.”

The father superior listened and withdrew for an hour. He returned with a condition. They could see the library, but nothing would leave the monastery without his authorisation.

The monastery's library occupied a small vaulted room. The Coptic manuscripts – some several centuries old – were kept in wooden chests. The father superior let them examine the manuscripts but not take them away.

“Look at this one,” murmured Jomard. “A bilingual psalter, Greek on the left, Coptic on the right. Line by line. If one can compare the two columns, one begins to read.”

He leafed through the manuscript. The Coptic letters – rounded, derived from the Greek, with seven additional signs borrowed from Demotic – said something about this civilisation. Neither Greek nor pharaonic, but both together. The language carried that history.

“Would you agree to sell it to us?” said Jollois. “Or to let us copy it?”

The father superior shook his head.

“This manuscript has belonged to our monastery for centuries. Our fathers preserved it down the centuries. It will not leave.”

The father superior had said this with the calm of a man who has no need to raise his voice.

Jollois accepted the conditions and spent three days copying the Coptic-Greek psalter. Meticulous work, letter by letter, on a text of which he understood only one of its two languages. He left with his copy and the certainty that someone, later, would know what to do with it.

While he copied the psalter, Jomard explored the surrounding cliffs. He found caves that had served as dwellings for the hermits of the early centuries, walls covered with graffiti scratched with a point: names, dates, prayers.

“These caves trouble me,” added Jomard. “Men lived here for years, alone, in prayer. Nothing else. What a conception of existence...”

He set down his pencil for a moment. He was thinking of the graffiti, those names carved in the rock by hermits who did not expect to be read. Jomard had spent three years noting measurements. The difference of motive was absolute. The difference of gesture, less so.

“These men had their own coherence. Their asceticism was not madness. It was a wager on eternity. We make the same wager on science. The means differ, not the intensity.”

On 21 September, the expedition set out for the monastery of St Paul, some thirty kilometres to the south. A larger library. Jollois copied. Jomard measured.

The expedition returned to Cairo on 29 September, bringing back copies of Coptic manuscripts and several Christian artworks that the monks had agreed to sell: icons on wood, bronze crosses, silver censers. Jollois catalogued them.

“These Coptic objects are the missing link. The Copts descend directly from the ancient Egyptians. Their language derives from pharaonic Egyptian. To study Coptic is to approach the hieroglyphs from below.”

II - The Desert Expeditions

Menou proved more benevolent towards the savants, in appearance at least. Kléber’s death had left in the corridors of the palace an absence that the savants’ activity filled, on the surface at least. Menou supplied escorts, allocated funds, and sometimes took part in the sessions of the Institute.

The news of Desaix’s death at Marengo reached Cairo in August. Jollois learned of it in his office. Desaix had been the best

companion of this expedition. The one who had let the savants work without pressing them, who had himself looked at the temples with an attention Jollois had seen in no other general.

The news had come by an Ottoman courier, two months after the event. Desaix had died at Marengo on 14 June 1800. The same day as Kléber, hundreds of kilometres away, charging at the head of his division to retrieve a battle Bonaparte believed lost. The bullet had struck him in the chest. He had died instantly, at thirty-one.

Jollois stayed at his desk for a long time without lighting a lamp. The light was fading. He let it fade. Outside, Cairo went on with its late-afternoon noise. The voices of the vendors, a muezzin in the distance, the steady sound of the sakiehs turning in the gardens. He searched his notebooks for the notes taken during the Upper Egypt campaign with Desaix. Two and a half notebooks, covered on both sides. Dendera, Thebes, the Valley of the Kings, Philae. In the margins, sometimes, Desaix had made notes. Not aesthetic comments, practical questions. How long to excavate this site, how many men to move this block, how well does this type of sandstone resist damp.

Those annotations had irritated Jollois at the time. A general asking questions of logistics before Dendera; he had found it reductive. He reread these pages by lamplight, the leaves rustling slightly in the draught from the open window. Desaix's handwriting was small, regular, sloping to the right. Now he read them differently. Desaix had looked at the same things as he had, with the same eyes, and had asked himself about their material future. What to do with these stones. How to protect them. How long they would last if nothing were done.

He also thought of Desaix's personal notebooks. The general had kept a campaign journal since the departure from Toulon. Jollois had seen it in his hand on several evenings, after the bivouac, by lantern light. He did not know what Desaix had written in it. He never would. A dead man's notebooks belonged to the dead man.

Those notebooks must have gone back to France with his personal effects. Or stayed on the battlefield. Or been taken by someone. In his own baggage Jollois had a pocketknife that Desaix had lent him in December 1798 and that he had never thought to return. An ordinary knife, wooden handle, short blade. It had been used to sharpen pencils for a year and a half. He did not know what to do with it now. Keeping it seemed right. Throwing it away seemed impossible.

No one knew what became of the notebooks of a man killed in action. Desaix had no collection. No satchel full of *shabtis* and scarabs. Desaix's notebooks followed the fate of other objects. Recovered, lost, sold, burned. Wars made no distinction between an officer's papers and the hieroglyphs of a temple.

Jollois went on organising new explorations. Sites of the western Delta this time, distinct from those he had visited at the start of the summer. Sais, Buto. Flat tells, few visible monuments.

On 15 August, he set out with Jomard and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire. Twelve days in the cultivated plains, looking for traces of the great pharaonic cities of the north, but also for the animal species that the bas-reliefs depicted. He had the naturalist's method: assume nothing from the study. See first. Everything else comes after.

After two days of travel they reached Sais. The air was different here, damper, heavier, with the smell of flooded fields and a white light that lacked the dryness of the desert. Nothing remained of the great capital of the pharaohs of the Twenty-sixth Dynasty. A few blocks of granite scattered in the fields, reused by local peasants as supports for their canals.

"This tell covers two square kilometres," said Jomard. "Two thousand years of stratified occupation. It is not an excavated site. It is a whole city compressed into a hill."

There was nothing to draw. No visible monument, no standing temple, no obelisk. Only the surface of the hill, its dimensions,

its altitudes taken by barometer. And in the fields around, in the canals, in the walls of the village houses, everywhere, reused blocks of granite. Fragments of columns, pieces of carved lintels, sections of architrave. The fellahs of the village had been using them for generations to build their houses and channel their fields.

Jomard stopped beside a canal bank. The blocks were of pink Aswan granite, polished on one face, rough on the others.

"We cannot take these blocks away," said Jollois, looking at his sketches. "They are part of people's houses. One cannot demolish a village to recover the stones."

"These fellahs are the true guardians of Sais. They do not know it. But without their houses, these blocks would have vanished long ago. They protected them by reusing them."

He looked at his own sketches. The blocks in the walls. The inscriptions copied line by line. He had done the same as the fellahs – taken what he could take of Sais, in the medium that suited him. They in granite. He in paper.

The expedition returned to Cairo on 27 August. Twelve days. Disappointing sites, but documented.

In October and November, Jollois catalogued the collections. Several thousand objects accumulated in two years. Statues, amulets, papyri, coins, jewellery, natural specimens. He drew up index cards, checked descriptions, corrected attributions. An archivist's work after months in the field.

Jollois had discovered by chance a Coptic workshop in the Old Cairo district where papyrus was said still to be made by ancient techniques. An old man and his two sons. They made sheets that were sold to dealers, who resold them to the savants of the Commission as authentic specimens. Jollois had bought several lots there.

One morning he asked to stay and watch the making.

The making of papyrus followed a well-worn process. Cut the stems into long thin strips, lay them in crossed layers, dampen, beat, press for several days. Jollois laid a finger on the surface of a fresh sheet – slightly rough, still warm, with a vegetal smell he had noticed nowhere else. The result – a supple sheet of creamy white – had nothing to envy in the best European paper. The technique, which Jollois thought he recognised on the bas-reliefs of Saqqara, claimed to go back four thousand years without changing a single gesture.

He drew the old craftsman's hands. His hands had known this work since childhood. His father had taught it to him, who had it from his father. He had no need to explain. His hands knew.

"This technique," said Jollois to the interpreter, "how long have they practised it?"

The interpreter put the question. The old craftsman answered without raising his eyes.

"He says his father taught it to him. And that his father had learned it from someone who said he had it from the ancients."

"The ancients, in this context, means the pharaohs?"

Another question. A brief answer.

"He says he does not know. He says it does not matter. What matters is that the hands know."

Jollois noted this down. What the hands know. Bodily transmission, gesture before words, technique before theory. The Coptic craftsman did not know the name of the inventor of papyrus. He had no need to. He knew how to make it. Jollois looked at his own hands, the ink stains in the creases of his knuckles, the callus on his right thumb formed by years of charcoal. His hands, too, knew things his notebooks did not say.

It was a form of memory that the *Description de l'Égypte* could not reproduce. The engraved plates would show the form of the papyrus. But the gesture of the hands – the exact pressure, the angle of the strips, the drying time judged by eye – that would go

nowhere. It would die with this man and his sons, unless his sons had sons of their own who wished to learn.

He examined the elder son's hands. They made exactly the same gestures as the father's. The transmission had taken place.

He left with three fresh sheets and the drawing of the hands, which he would later frame in his apartment in the rue Saint-Dominique. He thought of the old calligraphy dealer at Khan el-Khalili who had given him a fourth sheet as a welcome gift, on his first evening in Cairo. That gesture, too, was a transmission. To offer something to someone who had just arrived. The two men did not belong to the same world. They made the same gesture.

Menou showed a growing personal interest in the scientific work of the Commission. An interest his subordinates sometimes found burdensome, since it translated into interference in the organisation of the work and pretensions to decide what deserved study.

"General Menou would like us to devote more time to the monuments of the Islamic period at the expense of the pharaonic monuments," Jollois reported to Fourier. "He claims that Islamic Egypt is politically more relevant to our relations with the local population."

"He is not entirely wrong in substance," said Fourier. "But it is for us to decide our scientific priorities, not for him."

They found a compromise: a few savants, among them Chabrol and Lancret, devoted part of their time to the study of the Islamic period, documenting the medieval mosques of Cairo and the architectural techniques of the Arab masons. These studies, included in *the Description*, made it one of the first serious European works on the Islamic architecture of the Middle East.

Meanwhile, Jollois continued his documentation of the pharaonic monuments. Over the years he had developed a refined method of work: first an overall sketch to grasp the general

proportions, then detailed measured drawings of the significant elements, and finally copies of the hieroglyphic inscriptions with all visible imperfections, to allow a later comparison between different versions of the same text.

“A hieroglyph you copy with its cracks and gaps is more precious than a hieroglyph you idealise,” he explained to his young assistants. “What you see is reality. What you imagine it ought to be is merely your reconstruction. Do not mix the two.”

One March morning, walking through old Islamic Cairo to draw the façades of medieval houses, Jollois saw a detail he never forgot. A French soldier – in his twenties, worn uniform, musket slung over his shoulder – had stopped before the outside niche of a house in the Coptic quarter. In the niche, a bronze statuette, perhaps twenty centimetres high, a seated Isis. Old, clearly. The patina was thick and uneven.

The soldier looked at it. Then he took it. Without hesitation, without looking around. He slipped it into his cartridge pouch and walked off down the alley. Fifteen seconds in all. The niche was empty.

Jollois stayed where he was without saying anything. No authority over this soldier, no officer. And even if he had been one, what would he have said? That the object belonged to the house? That the owner would come back? He did not know who lived there or whether the house was still inhabited. He knew that the statuette had been in that niche long enough for its base to have left a circle of stone cleaner than the rest.

He took out his notebook and drew the empty niche. The outline of an absence. The lighter patch where the base of the statuette had rested for years. It was all he could do. Document what had just disappeared. The *Description de l'Égypte* would perhaps contain a drawing of a similar Isis, taken from the Commission's collections. But not that Isis. That one would be in the soldier's pouch as far as Alexandria, then in a bazaar, then in a Marseille drawing room if someone bought it at the port.

He stayed there a moment longer, the notebook open at the drawing of the empty niche. He went back to the palace through the alleys of the Coptic quarter. In the still-shuttered shops, children were playing on the doorsteps. He walked without taking out his notebook, without drawing. Sometimes one had to pass through without taking anything.

III - Agriculture and Irrigation

During the winter of 1800 to 1801, the engineers and agronomists of the Commission devoted themselves to Egyptian agriculture, a field that fascination with the monuments had until then eclipsed. What struck them was how well the system worked. Conté presented his work on hydraulics to the Institute at the first session of the winter.

“Egyptian agriculture can be put in one sentence: the Nile flood fertilises the fields every summer. Everything else – the canals, the basins, the mechanical devices – is only the organised management of that natural fact.”

He described the irrigation devices: the shaduf, a simple counter-weighted lever for drawing water; the sakieh, a wheel driven by an ox for larger volumes. Two machines that any fellah knew how to build and repair with local wood and rope.

“The shaduf and the sakieh look primitive. They are not. Local wood, plant rope, clay. It is engineering made for real conditions, not for our textbooks.”

What Conté understood from experience was that one well-designed simple machine is worth a hundred complex ones badly suited to their purpose. The Egyptians had learned it a thousand years before him.

He presented technical drawings of the network of canals that distributed the Nile’s water over the whole cultivable valley. A hydraulic tree branching over hundreds of kilometres, maintained collectively by dozens of villages.

“A canal that is not cleared dies in three years. The silt blocks it. Here, it is the winter’s work. Hundreds of men in water up to the waist. A single village cannot maintain a large canal. That is precisely why the Egyptians developed a centralised state. Hydraulics produced the pharaonic bureaucracy, not the other way round.”

Alongside irrigation, several savants studied the cultivated plants and agricultural practices. Jollois devoted his days to the fields, observing the seasonal cycles, ploughing techniques and local varieties.

“Egyptian agriculture today resembles that of the Old Kingdom,” concluded Jollois. “Same plants, same tools, same gestures. Four thousand years have changed nothing essential.”

“The Egyptians had no need of fertiliser,” said Conté. “The Nile brought it to them every year from the mountains of Ethiopia. They directed the water onto the fields, waited for the deposit, then let it drain away before sowing.”

Marcel, who was not an engineer, found in this explanation a key to understanding the architecture of pharaonic temples. The great sanctuaries were almost always oriented perpendicular to the Nile, their main axes directed towards the river or towards the cardinal points according to the agricultural calendar. Egyptian religious astronomy was inseparable from the agricultural calendar, itself keyed to the cycles of the Nile.

“You see, the temple is not a construction separate from the natural world. It is integrated into the agricultural and hydraulic landscape. Orientation towards the river names the source of life. The sun sets on the side of the desert, where the dead are buried. Egyptian religion is a hydraulic cosmology.”

“If this system were adapted to other silt-bearing rivers – the Niger, for example, or the Indus – the effects would be comparable. It is not a local technique. It is a universal technique that only the Egyptians had the time to perfect.”

Abdallah ibn Youssef had been *wakil* of the Giza canal for sixteen years. He supervised the annual clearing of seven kilometres of main canal and its branches, coordinated the labour of fourteen villages, and arbitrated disputes over the division of water among the fellahs.

That morning, two of the Commission's engineers had settled on the bank of his main canal. The tall thin one with his instruments. The other with ink-stained hands. They drew, measured, talked between themselves. The interpreter they had brought was not very good. He translated the words but not the sense. Abdallah knew it from the way he hesitated over technical terms. A good interpreter does not search for his words.

He had watched them at work for an hour from the other bank, hidden in the reeds along the bank. He wanted to understand what they were after. They were measuring the width of the canal, the height of the banks, the slope of the bed. He could tell from the gestures of the tall thin one with his sighting instrument. They were not soldiers. Soldiers would have looked at the surroundings, not at the canal. These men looked only at the canal. The tall thin one had come up to him. Through the interpreter, he had asked how many days of work the annual clearing represented, how many men, how the teams were organised among the villages. Questions of a *wakil*.

Abdallah had answered carefully. He knew that these French wrote everything down. The tall thin one noted his answers with a speed that showed he understood what was being said to him, even if the interpreter struggled. When Abdallah had explained the system of clearing turns – each village responsible for a section, rotating over three years – the tall thin one had nodded in the way engineers nod when something confirms what they already supposed.

What troubled Abdallah was not the curiosity of the French. It was that they treated the canal as an object. As something one could measure, describe, put in a book, and thereby understand.

Abdallah had spent sixteen years learning that the canal would not be reduced to its measurements. It had moods. In a year of high flood, it overflowed at certain points that had never overflowed. In a low year, it revealed difficult passages that no one had seen for thirty years. To master this, one needed memory – the memory his father had passed on to him and that he would pass on to his son – not sighting instruments.

He had let them work. They took nothing. They disturbed nothing. At the end of the morning, the tall thin one had shown him his drawing of the canal, a precise cross-section, with the dimensions in figures. Abdallah had looked at it without a word. It was exact. It was the canal. But it did not say why the left bank at the third kilometre was more fragile than the right, nor how one could tell from the colour of the water whether this year's silt would be good or too sandy. The drawing showed the canal. He knew the canal.

He had pointed out to them, through the interpreter, two places on the canal where the measurements would be more interesting. Places his father had shown him and whose importance he could not explain. He felt it, that was all. The tall thin one had gone there without hesitation. He must have found something of interest, because he had spent two hours at each.

Late in the afternoon, before leaving, the tall thin one had asked him – still through the interpreter – how long the apprenticeship of a *wakil* lasted. Abdallah had answered: a whole life. The interpreter had translated. Abdallah would have liked to add that the apprenticeship never ended because the canal never finished changing either, and that the wisdom of a *wakil* lay in knowing that what he still did not know was greater than what he knew.

Jollois returned to Cairo with seventy-two sachets of silt and pages of hydrological surveys. He was thinking of that canal *wakil*, his way of watching them work from the other bank, his precision in answering the questions, the pointing out of the two places on the canal. He was not a man who merely endured the

French. He was a man who calculated. Jollois thought of his own way of seeing this country: in measures, in dimensions, in cross-sections. Not so different, at bottom.

"And the man who has managed this canal for sixteen years, what did he tell you?" asked Conté a day later, during the presentation of the results.

"That the apprenticeship lasts a whole life. And that what he still does not know is greater than what he knows."

Conté put down his pencil. He looked at the sachets of silt lined up on the table. Seventy-two samples taken over forty kilometres, labelled, numbered, ready to go to Paris. Egyptian earth in French canvas sachets. He thought of how Jollois had taken each sample, kneeling at the edge of the canal, his fingers in the still-damp silt, feeling the texture before measuring it. That sensation would not be in the sachets. It would stay here, at the canal's edge, in the hands that had made the gesture.

"We are doing the same with their soil as with their statues," he said. "We take what interests us and call it science."

Jollois did not answer. The difference between taking silt and taking a *shabti* was not as clear as he would have liked. In both cases, something was leaving Egypt.

"The difference," he said at last, "is that one can take silt without impoverishing the field. The flood puts more back every year. The statues, the Nile does not put back."

"That is a practical line. Not a moral one."

They fell silent. Outside, in the courtyard, one could hear the Egyptian servants, the steady sound of the mortar, voices in Arabic, the smell of cumin. Those men, too, had learned their trade from their fathers. They would not be leaving for Paris in canvas sachets.

The clearing of the main canal began in the third week of December. Jollois asked Abdallah whether he might observe. Abdallah agreed with an expression that said nothing.

The teams worked by village, each on its assigned section. Men in water up to the waist, tearing the silt from the bed with broad wooden shovels and loading it into woven baskets that others carried up the banks. The silt deposited on the banks would be distributed over the fields. Nothing was wasted.

Jollois stayed five hours watching. He counted the men, measured the volume of silt extracted per hour, noted the depth of the sections before and after. Productivity was steady. No wasted movement, no disorganisation between teams. These men had done this since childhood. Their gestures had the fluidity of something learned so early that it can no longer be distinguished from the body that performs it.

At midday, Abdallah came and sat beside him on the bank. He watched Jollois note his figures without saying anything for a few minutes. Then he spoke, and the interpreter translated in short sentences.

“He says his grandfather showed him a place, further down, where the bed of the canal is living rock. When the bed is living rock, the canal holds better in years of high flood. His father knew it. He knows it. He wanted to know whether you knew it.”

Jollois looked at the interpreter, then at Abdallah. The question was not idle. Behind the words it carried another question: do you know what you are measuring?

“No,” he said. “I did not know. Show me this place.”

Abdallah rose without haste. They walked together along the canal for twenty minutes. Abdallah stopped before a stretch where the bed showed through. A dark rock, polished by centuries of current, streaked with lines of mineral deposit. Jollois knelt. He took out his knife and gently scraped the surface. Compact limestone. The canal had been dug here following the natural outcrop. Someone, three thousand years earlier, had chosen this spot for that reason.

Jollois noted the location and made a sketch of the rock with its striations. Abdallah watched him do it. When Jollois had finished, he said something that the interpreter took a moment to translate.

“He says the French write down what the Egyptians have always done. That perhaps it is useful. But that writing does not replace having done it for a thousand years.”

Jollois closed his notebook. It was fair. He could find nothing to answer.

In the evening, Abdallah walked Jollois back to the edge of the village where the French column had set up camp. They walked side by side without speaking, the interpreter following a few paces behind. The sun was low over the western desert, the light long and yellow on the fields already uncovered by the retreat of the waters.

Abdallah stopped. He looked at the fields for a moment, then said something that the interpreter rendered thus: that in the corner of the nearest field – he pointed with his finger – there was a pile of limestone blocks he had found while clearing the canal the previous winter. Inscribed blocks. He could not read the signs. He had put them there because he did not know what to do with them.

Jollois went to look. Four blocks of white limestone, the size of melons, heaped in a corner of the bank. Each bore hieroglyphs in relief, finely made. An administrative inscription, no doubt, or a votive formula, of the New Kingdom period. They came from a dismantled temple, reused in a wall, then fallen into the canal.

Jollois drew them. Then he entered them in his register, with the exact location and a description of the signs. He took the smallest of the four – three kilos, one inscribed face and three rough ones – and put it in his field bag.

Abdallah watched him do it. He said nothing. He had shown these blocks because they seemed important to him, not because he expected them to be carried off. But the Frenchman had

drawn first. That was already different from the soldier who simply took.

“The drawing will remain even if the block is lost,” said Jollois through the interpreter. “I am taking the block to study in Paris. If I do not take it, the canal will carry it off next year and nothing will remain of either the block or the drawing.”

Abdallah listened to the translation and shrugged – the universal gesture of one who is not convinced but lacks the energy to argue – then set off back towards the village.

IV - Time Closing In

On 8 March 1801, some sixteen thousand British soldiers landed at Aboukir and marched on Alexandria. The war that had been thought settled by the convention of El-Arish had begun again. The savants of the Commission, gathered in Cairo, understood that their departure from Egypt would now depend on a military capitulation.

Menou mobilised his troops. But his men were scattered between Alexandria, Cairo and Upper Egypt. Concentrating them in time was impossible. An indecisive battle was fought on 21 March near Alexandria. The French fought well. But the British had sixteen thousand men and ships. The war was not being lost in a single day. It had been slipping away since 1 August 1798.

Alarming news was reaching them from the north: a great Ottoman army was advancing under the command of the Grand Vizier Youssouf Pasha. Twenty thousand Ottoman soldiers, reinforced by the Mamluks. The vice was closing. The savants understood that capitulation was inevitable. The question was no longer whether, but when, and on what terms their collections would survive.

Fourier called an extraordinary meeting of the Commission on the evening of 14 March. All the savants then in Cairo were there. Some twenty men sat around the great table in the library of the

Institute. Outside, one could hear the cries of the merchants closing their stalls.

"Gentlemen," Fourier began, "we must prepare the defence of our collections. Treaties of capitulation generally stipulate that the victors may seize property belonging to the defeated state. If our collections are regarded as the property of the French state, the British will have the right to claim them."

A silence. Then Jomard spoke.

"We must have them recognised as international scientific property, not as French military property. Our work belongs to universal science, not to any particular government."

"The British have naturalists," said Geoffroy. "A commissioner named Hamilton knows antiquities. They will know exactly what we have."

Marcel intervened.

"The distinction between institutional and personal property will be crucial. What was paid for out of our own pockets can be defended as such. What was collected in the name of the Commission will be harder to protect."

The conversation went on for three hours. The savants laid down the broad lines of their strategy. They would not resist seizure by force. They had neither the means nor the authority for that. But they would assert their rights before the British commissioners. They would present their arguments. They would negotiate object by object if necessary.

They spent the night of 15 March drawing up a parallel inventory. An official inventory of everything the Commission possessed, and a personal inventory of what each savant held in his own name. Marcel worked until five in the morning. He opened his register at page eighty-seven. He reread the recent entries. A bronze statuette of Anubis, twenty-two centimetres high, bought at the Khan el-Khalili on 3 September 1799 for eight piastres from the merchant Youssef ibn Khalil. A fragmentary funerary

papyrus, fifteen centimetres by twenty, bought from a fellah of Saqqara on 17 November 1799 for three piastres. A scarab of green steatite, Ptolemaic period, bought at the Ezbekiya bazaar on 2 February 1800 for a piastre and a half. Each object had its history. Each transaction could be verified. That was his protection.

His register of purchases ran to a hundred and twelve pages, a hundred and sixty-two entries since the first market in Alexandria, nearly three years earlier. Every object acquired in his own name was recorded there with the date, the place, the price paid and, when he knew it, the name of the seller. The register had been kept from the beginning with a notary's rigour, because Marcel had understood as early as Alexandria that this distinction would in the end matter.

"Will this register hold?" asked Fourier, who was reading over his shoulder.

"It holds for what is certain. For the rest, it holds if Hamilton does not push too hard. A commissioner who wants to take everything will always find a pretext. A commissioner who wants to be reasonable will accept this register as sufficient proof."

"Then everything depends on Hamilton."

"Yes, everything depends on Hamilton."

The question of the Rosetta Stone weighed particularly on the savants. It was the most important object they had found. If it went to London, the decipherment of the hieroglyphs would become a British victory. But Marcel had taken his precautions. A year earlier, he had sent to Paris line copies of the squeezes he had made at Rosetta. Those copies had arrived. Silvestre de Sacy, the great French specialist in oriental texts, had them in his hands. Even if the Stone went to London, the squeezes would remain in Paris. The decipherment could be carried out from the copies.

"The information and the object are not the same thing," said Marcel. "Information travels. The object does not. We have already won that battle."

In the weeks that followed, the savants devoted themselves to the systematic duplication of their work. The library of the Institute was turned into a copying workshop. Tables were set along the walls, each assigned to one type of document. One table for tracings of drawings. One for the copying out of topographical measurements. One for transcriptions of Coptic texts. One for botanical and zoological descriptions.

The work was meticulous and exhausting. Jollois supervised the production of a hundred and eighty-three tracings of his most important drawings. The temples of Upper Egypt, the pyramids of Giza and Saqqara, the tombs of the Valley of the Kings. He had recruited three young draughtsmen from the army who knew how to hold a pencil and follow a line. He showed them an original drawing and asked them to make a quick tracing of it, just the outlines, no shading, no superfluous detail. The essence of the architectural information had to get through. The rest could be sacrificed to speed.

These tracings were rolled into bamboo tubes and entrusted to a Greek merchant who undertook to ship them to Paris by the first neutral vessel. Jollois paid him fifty piastres in advance and promised him fifty more if the tubes reached their destination.

"Do you trust him?" asked Jomard, watching the caravan leave.

"No. But I have no choice. The only protection is to multiply the consignments. If one is lost, perhaps another will arrive."

Jomard, for his part, copied the whole of his topographical measurements onto a second set of sheets. The work took him nine days. He worked in the evenings by the light of a lamp, copying figure by figure, angle by angle. Each measurement was checked twice. A single wrong figure could render a whole series of calculations useless. His notebooks filled with columns of numbers,

geometrical sketches, marginal annotations. These copies would be kept separately from the originals. If one crate was lost, the other would survive.

Geoffroy could not duplicate his jars of fish. A specimen in alcohol could not be copied. But he drew each specimen with sufficient precision for a naturalist to recognise the species from the drawing alone. Two hundred and forty species, one by one, with detailed annotations on provenance, size and distinctive anatomical characters. These drawings were not art. They were scientific documents, cold, precise, devoid of expression. But they contained all the information needed to identify the species. If the jars were destroyed, the drawings would at least preserve the knowledge they had held.

On 25 March, alarming news reached Cairo. The Ottoman army of the Grand Vizier Youssouf Pasha was advancing from Syria. Its junction with the British forces landed at Aboukir was imminent. Cairo would soon be encircled.

Fourier called the savants together that same evening.

"Gentlemen, we must speed up our programme of duplication. Everything that can be copied must be copied quickly. Afterwards, it will be too late."

The pace quickened. They worked from dawn to midnight. The oil lamps burned without pause. The smell of ink and paper filled the corridors. The savants worked in pairs, one dictating, the other writing.

On 8 April, an incident interrupted the work. Jomard was copying a series of angular measurements taken at Dendera when his elbow knocked the inkwell. The ink spread across the sheet. Three hours of work lost. He looked at the ruined page, the black devouring the figures. Then he took a fresh sheet and began again. Figure by figure. Angle by angle. Geoffroy, at the neighbouring table, looked up. They exchanged a glance. No words. Only the understanding that the work would go on, whatever

happened. Military scribes were requisitioned to help copy the administrative documents.

The library looked like a medieval scriptorium. The scratch of pens on paper, the crackle of turning pages, the whispers between copyists. Now and then a stifled curse when an ink blot spoiled a page almost finished. Then everything had to be begun again.

In April, Jollois sent a second batch of tracings with a merchant caravan leaving for Alexandria. He again paid fifty piastres in advance to the caravan leader. It was prudence, not paranoia. Ships sank. Crates fell from carts. Fires ravaged warehouses. Thieves prowled the roads. The only protection was duplication and the multiplication of routes.

Alongside the copying, the savants were working out their legal strategy for the confrontation with the British commissioners. They drew up a list of the objects they would defend first. The Rosetta Stone at the head, followed by the great sarcophagi, the monumental statues, Geoffroy's natural history collections, Jomard's cartographic surveys, Jollois's notebooks. For each category they prepared arguments based on the distinction between institutional and personal property, between objects collected and works created.

Marcel formulated the doctrine that would guide their defence: the drawing notebooks were not curiosities but working tools. The squeezes were not antiquities but paper and ink produced by the savants themselves. The scientific instruments were professional tools, not trophies of war. The natural history specimens belonged to the realm of nature, not to any particular state.

"They wrote in the treaties that the victors may seize natural and artificial curiosities," said Marcel. "It is for us to demonstrate that our work does not consist of curiosities. It is scientific output."

"The British will want to take everything," replied Jomard. "Our arguments will not be enough."

“Our arguments will create grey areas,” said Fourier. “In those grey areas, negotiation becomes possible. A reasonable commissioner will agree to leave certain things. That is where we must concentrate our efforts.”

“And if Hamilton is not reasonable?” asked Geoffroy.

“Then we shall lose everything. But at least we shall have tried. And the copies will survive.”

The moral question of spoliation was also debated. At a meeting in April, Jomard raised the problem that preoccupied them all without anyone daring to state it clearly.

“We have collected objects of three different kinds. First, scientific observations. Measurements, drawings, notes that we produced ourselves. These observations belong to us without question. Second, natural history specimens that we collected in nature. Fish, plants, minerals. These specimens belong to no one in particular, and our collecting deprives no one. Third, objects extracted from archaeological sites. Tombs, temples, necropolises. These objects belonged to Egypt. We took them.”

Geoffroy intervened.

“The distinction is clear in theory. In practice, it is more complicated. The fellahs who plunder the tombs to sell us objects would have plundered them anyway. Our presence has merely accelerated a process that already existed.”

“That is not a justification,” replied Jomard. “It is a mitigation. It is not the same thing.”

Jollois, who had remained silent throughout the debate, finally spoke.

“The question is not only moral. It is practical. If we admit that these objects belong to Egypt, then we have no argument to defend them against the British. If we claim them as ours, we must accept what that means. We took them. We shall keep them. And we shall publish our work to justify that taking. It is the only coherence open to us.”

Fourier nodded.

"The question," said Fourier, "is not whether we were right or wrong to take these objects. That discussion is academic. The question is: what do we do now? We have these objects. The British will claim them. Do any of you think we should hand them over voluntarily, in the name of moral principles?"

No one answered. The question had been put, but the answer was obvious. No savant in that room was prepared to give up three years of work voluntarily.

"Then we are agreed," said Fourier. "We shall defend our collections. But we shall do so knowing why we do it. Not only because they are our collections. But because we believe that French science will make better use of them than the British military."

Marcel added a crucial point.

"And what if the British make better use of them than we do? The British Museum is a serious institution. Their savants are competent. Our argument of scientific superiority holds only if we actually publish our work. If our collections end up in crates in Paris for twenty years, the British will have been right to take them from us."

"That is an important point," acknowledged Fourier. "*The Description* must be published. It will be the justification for everything we have done here."

On 12 May, a courier arrived from Alexandria. A French officer on leave brought news: the British had officially asked General Menou for the complete list of antiquities collected by the Institute of Egypt. Fourier read the letter twice. This was no longer a hypothesis. The British commissioners would come with their precise demands. Hamilton had probably already prepared his inventory.

In May, the military news grew clearer. The British, having consolidated their position at Alexandria, were advancing slowly inland. The Ottomans were making progress from the north-east.

Convergence upon Cairo was inevitable. It was now only a matter of weeks.

The savants redoubled their efforts. Time was indeed closing in. Each day brought new constraints, new urgencies, new decisions to be made. What to copy first? What to leave? How to share out their limited resources – paper, ink, time, attention – among projects that all seemed equally urgent?

It was in such moments that the difference between the savants became visible. Some panicked, wanted to save everything, began ten copying projects at once without finishing any. Others, like Jomard, kept to their method, set clear priorities, and held to them without scattering themselves.

Fourier observed all this with particular attention. He took notes. Not on the objects, but on the men. How each reacted to pressure. Who kept his lucidity. Who lost it. These notes would never be of use in the *Description de l'Égypte*. But they would help him, years later, to write the preface to the Description with precision: he had not only measured Egypt, but observed those who measured it.

At the end of May, Fourier went into the workshop after midnight. The lamps were still burning. Three copyists were working in silence, bent over their sheets. One was copying topographical measurements. Another was tracing a drawing of a temple. The third was transcribing botanical descriptions. Fourier stopped in the doorway. He thought of what was at stake in that room. If the British took everything, these copies would be what remained. The information would outlast the objects. Perhaps that, in the end, was the true victory.

At the beginning of June, one last meeting was called. The enemy armies were now only a few days' march from Cairo. Capitulation was imminent. The savants had to make their final arrangements. Jollois made the final inventory of his tubes on 20 June. Twenty-three copper tubes containing two thousand and eighty-seven

drawings. Two hundred and thirty-seven notebooks. A hundred and eighty-three tracings already despatched. He drew up the list on a sheet that he folded in four and slipped into his jacket.

"Gentlemen," said Fourier, "we have done what we could. Our work is duplicated. Our inventories are complete. Our arguments are ready. The British will arrive with their lists. We have ours. What happens next will depend on the negotiation. But we are as well prepared as it is possible to be."

Jollois spoke.

"We shall defend our collections to the end. Not out of pride, but because three years of work cannot vanish into the store-rooms of a British museum without having served science."

The tension was palpable. The savants knew that the coming days would decide the fate of their collections. But they also knew that they had done the utmost to protect them.

In the last days of June, Cairo was a city in suspense. The French troops waited. The savants waited. The population waited. Everyone knew that something was about to happen, but no one knew exactly what or when.

V - The Defeat at Cairo

By 27 June 1801, the military situation was untenable. Menou, blockaded in Alexandria, could not relieve Cairo. General Beliard, who commanded the garrison, opened capitulation negotiations with the Grand Vizier Youssouf Pasha.

A convention was negotiated. One clause, slipped in at first among the British drafts, potentially embraced the entirety of the Commission's collections. It would be signed in September, at Alexandria, as article sixteen.

The clause was brief. It fitted into a single sentence: the Arabic manuscripts, the statues and the other collections made for the French Republic would be considered public property, at the

disposal of the generals of the allied army. That sentence, read aloud for the first time by Fourier at the extraordinary session of 28 June 1801, in the draft transmitted by the British, was followed by a silence that Jollois afterwards compared, in his journal, to the silence that follows the announcement of a death. Then everyone spoke at once. Geoffroy. Marcel. Jomard. Voices over voices. Fourier raised his hand. Silence returned.

"The other collections," said Geoffroy. "That covers my jars. Three years of natural history collections. The complete fauna of the Nile. Two hundred and forty species that no one has yet described."

"The other collections include my notebooks," said Jollois. "Two hundred and thirty-seven notebooks. The only complete measured drawings of the temples of Upper Egypt that have ever been made."

"The statues include the Rosetta Stone," said Marcel. "The only key to the hieroglyphs that we have found in three thousand years."

Fourier had reread the clause. The Arabic manuscripts, the statues and the other collections. He was looking for a flaw in the wording. Statues covered the colossi, the sarcophagi. Collections covered the papyri, the coins, Geoffroy's jars, the herbaria, the bones. Were the drawing notebooks collections made for the Republic? Could an artist's working notebook be regarded as a collection in the sense of a treaty of capitulation? Fourier put the text down. He read it again.

The Rosetta Stone: beyond dispute. Marcel's squeezes – paper and ink made by Marcel himself – collection or intellectual work?

"The clause is deliberately vague," said Fourier. "They wrote 'other collections' so that they could take everything. It is for us to find what those words do not cover."

That was the beginning of the legal strategy that would occupy the savants for the following five days. Not military resistance.

They had no weapons and would not have known how to use them. Textual resistance. To find in the words of the convention the gaps through which their collections might slip. The notebooks were not curiosities. The squeezes were not antiquities. The scientific instruments were professional tools, not trophies. Each category of object had its line of defence.

In the days after the clause was read, something curious happened in the lanes around the Institute. The merchants of the Khan el-Khalili began to draw closer. Not the ordinary merchants of cloth and spices. The others, those who had sold antiquities for years, who could read in the gestures of European customers what they wanted to buy before the customers knew it themselves.

Suleiman al-Qabbani – the same man who had come to Tanis a year earlier with his canvas satchel – presented himself at the door of the Institute on the morning of 30 June with a wooden crate. Inside were twenty-two painted limestone *shabtis*, five scarabs in blue faience, three gold amulets of the Late Period. He had set the crate on the porter's table and said, through a boy who served as interpreter: "Normal price. Before the English take everything."

Marcel, who happened to be passing, had looked at the contents of the crate. The *shabtis* were genuine, Theban period, Eighteenth or Nineteenth Dynasty, painted limestone with the pigments still bright. The scarabs were of good-quality faience. The gold amulets were real.

"Where do these objects come from?" he had asked.

The boy had translated. Suleiman al-Qabbani had answered without hesitation: from Thebes, from an official's tomb found the previous winter by fellahs who were digging to enlarge their cellar. He had bought them. He was reselling them now because he knew the Commission was leaving Egypt and that the British, less knowledgeable, would pay less well.

Marcel had bought the whole crate. Price: forty piastres. He had drawn up a receipt dated 30 June in his personal register. The twenty-two *shabtis* had entered Marcel's personal inventory – not the collections of the Institute – and would therefore escape, in theory, the clause of article sixteen. The local market worked in this way: it anticipated the failings of treaties and adapted to them before they were even known.

Geoffroy's response was different. He was not seeking a legal interstice. He was seeking a balance of power.

Geoffroy wrote a one-page letter for the attention of General Belliard. Sober, without lyricism. In it he explained that his natural history collections represented three years of unparalleled fieldwork, that two hundred and forty species of the fauna of the Nile and the Delta had not yet been described by European science, and that if the British commissioners seized them he was prepared to destroy them rather than surrender them.

"This is not an emotional threat," he told Fourier when the latter read the draft. "It is information. I am telling them what will happen if the clause is applied strictly to my collections."

"Will they believe you?"

"I shall have burned them before they decide whether to believe me or not."

Fourier folded the draft. Geoffroy was not the kind to bluff. He had spent three years in this country crawling out of galleries on his knees, hands in the mud, carrying his jars of alcohol himself in the heat. He had thought about this threat before writing it. Not an impulse, a decision. If those jars went to London, they would sleep in a basement, opened by someone who would not know why a *Polypterus bichir* mattered. They might as well not exist. If his collections were taken from him, he would burn them. Because it was the only response consistent with what he thought of his work: that it belonged to him, not to the army that had financed it.

“Send the letter,” said Fourier.

Since the night the French fleet had burned and sunk at Aboukir, the savants had known they were cut off from Paris. No French ships in the ports. Couriers left by uncertain overland routes, via Constantinople and Vienna, taking six months to arrive.

From 1799, some had begun sending packages by neutral ships – Danish, Swedish, American vessels – that called at Alexandria for the grain trade. These ships were not inspected by the British, who controlled the sea but still had no right of seizure over neutrals.

Fourier had sent in this way, by a Danish brig in October 1799, a roll of paper containing thirty sheets of linguistic notes on the Coptic language. His first attempt at a grammar. When he returned to Paris in 1801, the thirty sheets were waiting for him at the Institut, slightly mouldy but legible.

Marcel had proceeded differently. In March 1800, he had had a Maltese acquaintance make two line copies of the squeezes of the Rosetta Stone. Not the original squeezes, which he refused to let leave, but line tracings made from the squeezes. These copies reached Paris in July 1800, where they were immediately consulted by Silvestre de Sacy. It was the first time a European orientalist saw a faithful reproduction of the inscription on the Rosetta Stone.

Jollois had tried to send a bundle of drawings by an American ship in January 1800. The ship had been intercepted by a British frigate off Crete and searched. Jollois’s papers had been seized, examined, then returned. The British had concluded that they were artistic drawings of no military interest. But the lesson had been clear: consignments by neutrals were not reliable.

Jollois had then adopted a different method. All the essential documents – his most important drawings, Marcel’s measured drawings, Jomard’s measurements – were copied in duplicate. One original stayed with the savant. One copy left by the first

available opportunity. If the copy arrived, well and good. If it was intercepted, the original survived.

Jomard had summed up the logic in a note to Fourier: that the Commission was in the position of soldiers who bury their ammunition in several places before a battle. If the first depot was taken, another remained. The documents were their ammunition. The price of a capture was the loss of a year's work rather than of everything.

Duplication had worked for most of the consignments. Not for all. Two of Jollois's notebooks, sent by a Swedish ship in 1800, never reached Paris. Their duplicates survived. What became of the originals was never known. Sunk at sea, seized, lost in the currents of Levantine trade.

These two missing notebooks represented some two hundred drawings of the Delta region. The sites of Sais, Bubastis, Tanis, which Jollois had visited during the summer of 1800 and would never see again. Their copies, less detailed, would appear in *the Description de l'Égypte* with the discreet note: from copies, the originals being lost.

It was the only public trace of these losses. Jollois never spoke of them in his memoirs.

There was here, Fourier could see, a fundamental asymmetry between what the French took from Egypt and what the British would take from the French. The French took objects – stones, bronzes, papyri – and copies of those objects. The British, when capitulation came, would take the objects. But not the copies. The copies were paper and ink. They had no value in the inventories of a peace treaty. They did not adorn the galleries of a museum. They were not laid out in display cases.

Fourier had put this asymmetry clearly at a session of the Institute:

“They will take the originals. We shall keep the copies. The copies are the true booty.”

He had said this standing, facing the crates, without hesitation. What he had not said – and what he would formulate years later, in his notes for *the Description* – was that this asymmetry was not accidental. The precaution of the vanquished, applied before the defeat. It was doubtless the only form of strategic intelligence the savants had truly exercised from the beginning. But as he sat down afterwards, he wondered whether it was true or merely what one tells oneself in order to bear what one could not prevent.

They had had five days.

Five days between the signing of the capitulation and the departure of the column. Not enough, and no one said so.

What these men did during those five days did not resemble what they had prepared. They had prepared arguments – lists, memoranda, legal distinctions between curiosity and work of art, between personal property and the Institute's collection. What they actually did was work without speaking. No sessions. No discussions. Each in his own storerooms, at his own crates. The conversations that took place were short and technical: what rope, what weight per wheel, how many thicknesses of cloth for the jars.

They were the quietest five days of the expedition.

One evening Fourier went to find Jollois and spoke to him of the long chain running through history. The Romans who had emptied Egypt of its obelisks, the crusaders who had sacked Byzantium, the kings who had filled their cabinets with curiosities. Each age with its justifications. The victim, by contrast, remained constant. Jollois listened. He made no substantial reply. Fourier went away. The conversation had taken place because it had to take place. It changed nothing.

What did change something was that on the morning of the fifth day, when the wagons were ready, no one gave an order. The men went out into the courtyard of their own accord, organised

themselves, took their places in the column without being asked. It was the first time in three years that the savants had behaved like soldiers.

A smell of wood, glue and alcohol hung in the corridors of the Institute as the column began to form in the courtyard. Jollois went through the rooms one last time. The walls kept the traces of the collections that had occupied the tables for three years. Circles of dust where the jars had stood, chalk lines where Jomard had pinned his sheets of measurements. Nail holes in the beams where the mummies had been hung for the anatomical drawings.

Jollois went out into the courtyard. The column was waiting. The wagons were loaded. The pack animals were blowing in the morning heat.

Jollois checked one last time that his saddlebags were fastened to the flank of the horse that had been assigned to him.

The Egypt that France would keep fitted into what one man could carry on a saddle. What she had taken from Egypt remained there, in the crates that the British would open in two months. He slipped the strap of his saddlebag over his shoulder. He would not wait for the column's signal. He was the first to leave the courtyard.

VI - The March to Alexandria

On 2 July, the evacuation of Cairo began. Thirteen thousand soldiers, two hundred civilians, all the savants of the Commission leaving the city in a column. A few looked back. Most looked ahead.

Late in the afternoon, an Ottoman patrol barred the column's road. Twenty Turkish horsemen in uniform, commanded by a bey who spoke French. They came from the grand vizier's camp. General Damas rode forward alone to speak. The bey dismounted. The exchange lasted ten minutes. The savants,

gathered in the middle of the column, could not hear but could see the gestures. The bey pointed north. Damas showed a document, probably the convention of capitulation signed with the British.

Fourier moved up within earshot. He heard the bey say in French:

“You are leaving Cairo. That is well. But your crates remain in Egypt.”

Damas replied with something Fourier did not catch. The bey insisted:

“These objects belong to Egypt. You took them from our temples, from our tombs. They will not leave.”

“Sir, we have signed a convention with the British authorities. It is with them that you must discuss these matters.”

He motioned to his horsemen. Twenty lances were raised. Damas did not move.

“If you try to stop this column, you declare war on France and Great Britain simultaneously. I do not think Constantinople ordered you to.”

The bey hesitated. He looked at the crates on the wagons, the thirteen thousand French soldiers deployed in battle order, then the empty horizon behind him. No Ottoman reinforcements in sight.

He remounted.

“We shall accompany you to Alexandria. To keep watch.”

“As you wish.”

The Turkish patrol followed the column at a hundred metres’ distance for two days. The horsemen spoke to no one. At dawn on 5 July, they had vanished. Damas supposed they had gone back to report to the grand vizier.

Jollois asked Fourier that evening:

“Do you think they will come back?”

“The Ottomans? No. They know they have lost Egypt. What they want to know is whether we had truly emptied it. Now they know.”

“And then?”

“Then they will wait for the British to take our crates. Afterwards, they will demand the same objects from the British. It is simpler than taking them from us.”

Jollois nodded. The logic was implacable.

The savants marched in the middle of the column with their baggage on wagons. They were relieved to escape danger, sad to leave Egypt, anxious for the collections.

They did not march fast. Thirteen thousand soldiers with wagons in the sand make for slow progress, punctuated by halts and redistributions of loads when an animal went lame or a wheel sank.

Jollois walked most of the time to spare his horse. Each time the animal stumbled on a stone or in a hollow of sand, he heard the tubes knock dully in the saddlebags and turned round.

Geoffroy’s chief worry was the heat on his jars of alcohol. Glass expands in heat, and so does alcohol, but not at the same rate. And if the expansion caused a microscopic crack, the alcohol would evaporate and the specimens would spoil within days. He had wrapped each jar in two thicknesses of damp cloth that his assistants renewed at every halt, drawing on their water reserves.

“You are wasting water,” said an officer who had noticed the manoeuvre.

“These specimens cannot be replaced. Water can.”

The officer moved off without insisting. In the July heat, with men suffering from thirst, the argument was not convincing. But Geoffroy carried on.

On the fourth day, one of Jomard’s crates slid off the wagon as it crossed a dune and split open in the sand. The men stopped.

Jomard leapt from his horse, waved away the soldiers who tried to help, and examined the rolls one by one. Three of them had faint traces of sand in the folds of the waxed cloth. Nothing had penetrated the paper.

Jomard nailed the crate shut again and had it loaded differently, flat, with an extra rope.

"You are lucky," said Fourier, who had watched the whole scene.

"It is not luck. It is rope."

At dusk on 6 July, two guardsmen brought a deserter back to camp. A young man of about twenty, from Lyon by his accent, who had fled Cairo three days before the evacuation. They had found him hiding in a palm grove, starving, his feet bleeding.

General Damas had him brought to his tent. Fourier, who was passing nearby, heard the interrogation.

"Why did you desert?"

"I wanted to stay in Egypt, General. Not go back to France."

"Stay to do what?"

"Work. Marry, perhaps. Here, I can live. In France, I go back to the mill."

Damas looked at him without a word for a long moment.

"Do you know what happens to deserters?"

"Yes, General."

"You know, and you deserted all the same?"

"I am twenty-three. I have spent three years here. I have learned Arabic. I know Cairo better than Lyon now. What am I going to do in France?"

Damas had the deserter taken out and called his aide-de-camp. Fourier heard the sentence: thirty lashes, then return to the ranks. No execution. The deserter was tied to a wagon wheel. The whip cracked thirty times. The man did not cry out.

The next morning, he was marching with his company, his back striped with red marks under his shirt. Geoffroy, who had some medical knowledge, gave him a balm.

"Put this on tonight. It will prevent infection."

"Thank you, sir."

"Why did you really desert?"

The soldier hesitated. Then:

"Because I do not want to see what is going to happen in Alexandria. We are going to give our discoveries to the English. I carried Mr Jomard's crates at Thebes. I saw what we measured, what we drew. And now we are giving it all away. I would rather have stayed here."

Geoffroy made no reply. The soldier went back to his company.

That evening, Geoffroy recounted the exchange to Marcel.

"That boy has understood something that many officers have not yet understood. We are not going home as victors. We are going home dispossessed."

"He understood. And he took thirty lashes for it."

"Yes. That too is a form of understanding."

The deserter marched with the column as far as Alexandria. Fourier learned later that he had enlisted in the British colonial infantry after the capitulation. He never returned to France.

On 7 July, a sandstorm broke over the column as it halted in a village of the Delta. The soldiers took shelter as best they could in abandoned houses or under overturned wagons. The sand did not come from one side only. It came from everywhere at once, whirling in from the four points of the horizon, seeking out the gaps, the open mouths, the half-open eyes. The men covered their faces with their coats and breathed through the cloth. The horses turned their rumps to the wind, closing their eyes, nostrils pinched. The camels knelt and waited, patient and indifferent, as

if they had been waiting for sandstorms since the beginning of time, which was more or less the case.

The savants covered their crates with blankets and improvised tents and spent two hours holding the coverings against the wind, fingers clenched on the straps that the gusts tore at. The sand crept in everywhere. Into clothes, into eyes, under the cork stoppers. Jollois held his horse with one hand and with the other kept a blanket over his saddlebags, his face turned against the animal's neck to breathe.

Geoffroy moved from crate to crate shouting instructions that the wind carried off before they reached their destination. He had understood from the start of the march that the jars of alcohol were the weak point of his collection. The one point where a physical failure could irretrievably destroy three years of work. A soaked tube of Jollois's meant blurred drawings. A roll of Jomard's full of sand meant measurements that could be recovered with a little work. But a jar broken in a crate, the alcohol spilling over the other jars, meeting a lantern, meant the whole collection of the fauna of the Nile going up in smoke. He had every lantern put out for fifty metres around. They worked in absolute darkness, by feel, recognising the crates by their shapes and by the way they answered to the blows of a fist.

His assistants – two young students of the École Polytechnique who had borne the desert heat badly the whole journey – worked that night without complaint. Each crate checked, each strap tightened, each stopper tested in the dark. When the storm subsided towards four in the morning, Geoffroy's hands were still clenched on the strap of the last crate.

In the morning, the tally: one stopper torn off a tube of Jollois's, three sheets with slightly smeared ink, one fish jar with a microcrack at the base. The specimens were transferred to the spare jar that Geoffroy had brought precisely for this eventuality.

It was not chance. It was foresight.

On 9 July, towards noon, the column passed a convoy of Coptic refugees fleeing towards Alexandria. Some thirty families with their donkeys loaded with bundles, children walking barefoot in the sand, old men carried on makeshift litters.

Their leader, a priest who spoke French, approached Damas.

“General, we are fleeing reprisals. Since the French left Cairo, the Ottoman militias have been burning our churches. We are going to Alexandria to place ourselves under British protection.”

Damas had water distributed. The priest refused it.

“Keep your water for your soldiers. We have wells two hours from here. But tell me, will the British protect the Christians when you are gone?”

“I do not know, Father. It is not my concern.”

“It was your concern when you promised us religious freedom in 1798. Now you leave and we remain.”

Damas did not answer. The priest went back to his convoy.

Marcel had listened to the exchange. He said to Fourier:

“We promised many things on arriving. The liberation of the Egyptians from the Ottoman yoke. The end of the oppression of the Copts. The modernisation of the country. We are leaving Egypt exactly as we found it. Worse, perhaps.”

“We are still leaving something. Jomard’s measurements. Jollois’s drawings. *The Description de l’Égypte* will be published.”

“Yes. We are leaving books. They stay behind with the reprisals.”

The Coptic refugees continued north. The French column went north-west. The two groups parted at a fork in the track.

Jomard, who had said nothing throughout the exchange, asked the priest before he moved off:

“Your church in Cairo, St Sergius – has it burned?”

“No, sir. Not yet. But it will burn.”

“How do you know?”

“Because it always burns. Every twenty years, every thirty years. That is the history of Egypt. You were only passing through.”

On the eighth day of the march, they crossed a village whose inhabitants had fled. Houses shut, streets empty, the smell of warm bread from a bakery abandoned only a few hours before. The column did not stop. The soldiers marched with their eyes straight ahead.

Some soldiers slipped away from the column. Two minutes later they came out of a courtyard. One carried a terracotta jar, a metre high. Inside, the clink of something metallic. An officer called them back. The jar was abandoned at the side of the track.

Jollois stopped. He lifted the jar. Inside were seven Ptolemaic bronze coins, three faience scarabs and an amulet of Wepwawet in painted limestone. The household treasure of a family that had fled, leaving what it could not carry.

“What do we do with it?” asked Jomard.

Jollois examined the coins one by one, turned them over, dated them in his head. Ptolemy IV or V, judging by the profile. The scarabs were well made. The Wepwawet amulet was of carefully painted limestone, the eyes traced in red ochre.

Jollois put them back in the jar. He set it at the foot of the wall of the nearest house, in the shade. Where the owner would find it on returning, if he returned. The position was deliberate. Not at the side of the track where someone else would pick it up, but sheltered by the wall, in a shallow hollow that Jollois scooped out with the heel of his boot, so that the jar would not roll.

“We go on.”

They rejoined the column. The jar stayed by the wall.

On the last day before Alexandria, they saw the Mediterranean for the first time in three years. A few soldiers shouted. The savants watched in silence. The light on the water was different from the light on the sand. Colder, more mobile, the

Mediterranean blue that Jollois had tried to paint on leaving Toulon three years earlier without finding the right colour.

"The sea," said Fourier.

The words said nothing in particular. Fourier meant: and now the British.

On the morning of 13 July, some twenty kilometres from Alexandria, two British officers on horseback joined the column. They came from General Hutchinson's camp with a signed order: to inspect the French baggage before entry into the city.

Damas received them with glacial politeness.

"Gentlemen, we shall enter Alexandria with our crates sealed. The inspection will take place after General Menou's official capitulation, not before."

The British lieutenant, a young man of about thirty named Thornton, insisted:

"We have orders to verify that you are not carrying munitions or war matériel. It is a formality."

"A formality that will wait for the signing of the convention. Until then, my wagons do not open."

Thornton looked at the crates lined up on the wagons. He could see the numbers painted on their sides: I, II, III... up to LXIII. Sixty-three crates under tarpaulins.

"General, if you refuse inspection, we can delay your entry into Alexandria by several days."

"Delay it. We shall camp here in the meantime."

The other British officer, older, intervened:

"Lieutenant, leave it. These are savants, not smugglers. Their crates contain stones and drawings. General Hutchinson knows it."

Thornton hesitated, then saluted and rode off with his colleague. Fourier asked Damas:

"Do you think they will really block us?"

"No. They wanted to see our reactions. To know whether we had anything to hide. Now they know that we will defend our crates."

"And is that a good thing?"

"That depends. If Hamilton is a negotiator, yes. If he is a plunderer, no."

The column resumed its march. At eleven o'clock, the ramparts of Alexandria appeared on the horizon. The British frigates lay at anchor in the harbour. The smoke of their galleys rose straight into the windless sky.

They camped that night two hours' march from Alexandria. The lights of the city could be seen on the horizon. Not yet shapes, only a low, diffuse glow. In the first weeks of the expedition, a light of that kind on the horizon would have meant a city to take, a map to draw, work to do. That night, it meant Hamilton.

By the light of a lantern held low, Fourier reread the first pages of Jomard's memorandum. The argument was sound. It was not the argument that kept him from sleep. It was the question whether Hamilton had latitude of interpretation in his instructions. A diplomat with strict instructions did not listen to arguments. He recorded them and forwarded them to London. A diplomat with room for manoeuvre could let himself be persuaded. Fourier had no way of knowing until he stood face to face with the man.

Geoffroy had checked his crates twice since making camp. The stoppers were holding. There was nothing left to do but sleep. Jomard wrote in his notebook the list of objects whose classification as scientific instruments he intended to defend. Not as seizable curiosities. Thirty-two entries. He closed the notebook and fell asleep.

Jollois stayed sitting outside after the camp fire had died. The sky was clear. In his saddlebags, the notebooks. Tomorrow, the

British, Hamilton, the memorandum, the discussions about what belonged to whom under which article.

The column entered Alexandria on 14 July 1801. Twelve days' march from Cairo. Menou still held the city, besieged by the British, who were awaiting his capitulation. The savants were lodged in warehouses at the port, their crates stacked around them. Outside, the frigates lay at anchor in the roads. The discussions about the collections would not take place now. They would take place after Menou's capitulation, when the British would be in a position to demand them. For seven weeks, they waited. Menou negotiated. The British were patient. The savants guarded their crates.

CHAPTER IV: THE COLLAPSE AND THE RETURN

I - The Great Antiquities

On 3 September 1801, the day after the signing of the capitulation convention of Alexandria, the British commissioner William Richard Hamilton presented himself at the headquarters where the French savants were lodged, accompanied by Edward Daniel Clarke, an antiquarian appointed by General Hutchinson to conduct the physical examination of the collections.

Hamilton, secretary to Lord Elgin, twenty-four years old and trained in classical antiquities at Cambridge, was coordinating the diplomatic negotiation. Clarke had been charged with identifying and listing the French collections piece by piece. They arrived with a secretary and two soldiers carrying blank registers.

Jollois and Fourier officially represented the Commission in these negotiations. Jomard's task was to defend the cartographic surveys and the measuring instruments. He had anticipated every opposing argument.

On the eve of the first meeting with Hamilton, he had recast in legal terms the memorandum drafted in April. He had worked all night. To anticipate is to prepare not to be overtaken. He had learned that at the École Polytechnique. He had verified it in Egypt each time a disputed measurement had to be defended. Legal arguments and mathematical arguments obeyed the same logic: one wins beforehand, not during the discussion. The new version distinguished three categories of objects.

First, antiquities in the strict sense: objects that pre-dated the expedition and whose presence in Egypt was independent of any French labour. A category open to seizure, without discussion.

Second, intellectual productions: measurements, calculations, observations, drawings made by members of the Commission.

These works had not existed before they were produced. They could not be assimilated to found objects.

Third, a grey zone: the scientific instruments brought from France. Neither antiquities nor intellectual productions, but working tools whose seizure would deprive the Commission of its future capacity to work.

"This memorandum is very clear," Fourier had said as he read it.

"The question is whether Hamilton will be receptive to its clarity."

"If he is not," Jomard added, "it is because his instructions require him to ignore legal distinctions. And in that case, no argument will be effective."

"You are pessimistic."

"No. I am precise."

Fourier had smiled.

Clarke entered the courtyard of the warehouse. He stopped in the middle of it, turned slowly on his heel, and counted the crates in one circular glance. Sixty-three. Plus the unpacked objects. Statues, sarcophagi, columns stacked against the north wall. His assistant, a young Cantabrigian named John Marten Cripps, took out a notebook and began to write. He noted everything. The number of crates, their approximate dimensions, the condition of the ropes that bound them.

Jollois watched Clarke, who was watching the collections. It was the first time a Briton had seen the whole of what the Commission had gathered in three years. Clarke showed nothing. Neither surprise nor satisfaction. He counted. Count first, appraise next, negotiate after.

"Gentlemen," said Clarke, turning to Jollois and Fourier, "in accordance with Article Sixteen of the capitulation convention signed on 2 September, I am charged with taking possession of the Arabic manuscripts, the statues and the other collections made for the French Republic, now public property at the disposal of the generals of the allied army."

The silence that followed lasted three seconds. Jollois slowly set down the register he was holding.

"All of it, Mr Clarke? You mean every object, every drawing, every specimen we have collected over three years?"

"That is what Article Sixteen says."

"Article Sixteen," Jollois answered in a cutting voice, "speaks of the collections made for the Republic. Not of our intellectual productions. Not of our scientific instruments. Not of the collections that some of us acquired with our own money."

Clarke opened his own register at the first page. Hamilton, who was standing slightly back, intervened before Clarke could reply.

"Gentlemen," said Hamilton, "no one disputes that you have worked. No one disputes the value of your labours. But the terms of the capitulation are clear. Mr Clarke will examine your collections piece by piece. You will have the opportunity to present your arguments for each category of objects. We shall listen. We shall rule fairly."

Fourier spoke. His voice was calmer than Jollois's, but no less firm.

"In that case, Mr Hamilton, let us establish a method of work. We shall propose a classification of the objects into several distinct categories. You will examine our arguments category by category. We shall refuse no inspection. But we require that every seizure be justified."

Hamilton nodded.

"That is reasonable. Mr Clarke?"

Clarke closed his notebook.

"I accept this procedure. But I warn you that my instructions are strict. I have no latitude to interpret Article Sixteen beyond what it says explicitly."

Jollois folded his arms.

“And we, Mr Clarke, have no intention of letting you confiscate three years of our lives without our disputing every piece.”

During the three weeks that the confrontation with Clarke and Hamilton lasted, whenever a contested object required scientific expertise – a map, a survey, an instrument – it was Jomard who was called. He spoke little, showed his documents, and answered questions with an economy that disconcerted Clarke, who was used to the more rhetorical arguments of the French. The role suited him better than he would have believed. Negotiation, he was discovering, was not so different from measurement. One had to stick to the facts, not concede what one could not verify, and know when silence was worth more than speech.

“Your colleague is formidable,” Clarke said to Jollois one evening. “He concedes nothing and overvalues nothing. That is rare in a negotiation.”

“He is a mathematician.”

“It shows.”

On the morning of 4 September, Clarke returned accompanied by several assistants and began the examination of the Institute’s collections. Hamilton was present as an observer.

The first category examined was that of the great monumental antiquities. The Rosetta Stone, the granite and basalt sarcophagi, the colossal statues, the bas-reliefs detached from the temples. For these objects, the French savants could present no credible argument of personal ownership, because these monuments had been discovered by the Commission.

“We do not contest your legal right to the great antiquities,” said Fourier. “We only insist that history record that it was the French Commission that discovered them. Not the British army.”

Hamilton nodded.

"I give you my word that the British Museum will acknowledge that these antiquities were discovered by your Commission."

Clarke drew up the inventory of the great antiquities, Hamilton validating each entry in the register. Jollois, beside them, watched each piece go.

The Rosetta Stone first.

Found in July 1799 by French soldiers digging fortifications at Rosetta, embedded in the foundations of a fort, reused as building material. A royal decree of 196 BC engraved in three scripts: hieroglyphs at the top, demotic in the middle, Greek at the bottom. That Greek which could be read. That which remained to be deciphered.

Clarke entered the Rosetta Stone in the register of seizures. It would be crated at the moment of the actual transfer.

Marcel watched Clarke write in his register. The pen scratched the paper with a dry, final sound. Every letter was a nail in a coffin. "Rosetta Stone. Black basalt. Trilingual inscription. Seized under Article 16, Convention of Alexandria, September 1801."

Marcel said nothing. In July 1799, at the discovery of the stone, he had spent two entire nights lying on his back, arms raised above his head, tapping damp paper to make squeezes. His shoulders had kept the pain for a week. His fingers had long smelled of printer's ink mixed with turpentine resin. That acrid, sticky odour that would not go, even after washing his hands three times.

He still had twenty-five complete squeezes in a flat crate, well protected between sheets of blotting paper. The others had been sent to the four corners of Europe. Every sign, every crack, every irregularity of the surface was reproduced with a fidelity that the finest draughtsman could never have achieved. Clarke could take the stone. Marcel was quite determined to keep the text.

Jomard, beside him, clenched his fists. His knuckles were white. He was not looking at the Stone. He was looking at Clarke.

Fourier, for his part, was taking notes. He was already calculating what might be negotiated in exchange for this first concession. A loss here, a gain elsewhere.

Jollois watched Clarke with the neutral expression of a chess player who has just lost a pawn but keeps his plan intact. He had already accepted in his mind that the Stone would go. The important thing was no longer to keep it. It was to save what could still be saved. The drawings. The notebooks. Marcel's squeezes. Geoffroy's collections. That was where the real battle would be fought.

Clarke raised his eyes from his register.

"The Stone will be crated at the time of the actual transfer to the port. Until then, it remains here under British guard. Mr Cripps, have two men posted."

Marcel turned away. He did not want to see British soldiers standing guard before the Rosetta Stone. It was petty of him. But he could not help it.

That stone, he had touched. He knew every roughness of it, every grain of its surface. He knew where it was slightly smoother, where ancient hands had rubbed it, perhaps priests who had read it two thousand years ago. He knew where it was rough, where it had been broken and then reused in the foundations of an Ottoman fort.

Jollois closed his eyes for a moment. It had been found by Bouchard's men, squeezed by Marcel, entered in the registers of the Commission. In a few days, four soldiers of His Majesty's army would appropriate it.

It was no different from what France had done in Italy. It was no different from what the Romans had done before them. The chain was long.

Clarke then wrote in his register: "Rosetta stele, black basalt, ceded to the British forces, September 1801. Discovered by the French expedition in 1799."

Jollois watched. Discovered. Not taken. Not pulled from a wall. Discovered.

Next, the sarcophagus of Nectanebo II, the last pharaoh of Egypt of native Egyptian stock, who had reigned from 360 to 342 BC. The green breccia was cold. Jollois had laid his hand inside it on his first visit, where the body would have lain. The bottom was polished, smooth, soft as metal. A tomb made to receive a dead man who had never come to it. His reign had been cut short by the second Persian invasion. No one knew where he had died, or whether his body had been brought back. This sarcophagus had probably been prepared before his flight and had never been used. Found in Alexandria in a mosque where it served as a basin. The decoration, on the lid and the sides, reproduced sections of the Amduat, the sun's nocturnal journey through the twelve hours of the underworld. Jollois had copied these same scenes in the Valley of the Kings. Recognising them here had a strange effect on him. The same gods, the same journey, engraved for a king who had never had the time to die in this sarcophagus.

Clarke examined it. He asked the weight.

"More than three metres long, several tonnes," added Jomard.

"And the historical interest?"

"It is the tomb prepared for the last pharaoh of Egypt. It was never used. It is doubtless the most moving piece in our whole collection. An empty tomb for a king in flight."

Clarke noted it in his register without comment.

There was also the statue of a high priest of Amun in grey granite, life-size, hands joined before him in the eternal attitude of the divine servant, the one Jollois had seen reproduced dozens of times in the temples of Upper Egypt. A colossal granite fist, a fragment of a royal statue whose remainder had never been found. Jomard had estimated that the complete statue must have

measured twelve to fifteen metres. The fist alone reached the shoulder of a standing man.

Then stelae, commemorative inscriptions in limestone and basalt bearing royal cartouches and hieroglyphic texts. The total weight was considerable.

"These objects," Hamilton declared, "will be preserved in the British Museum and made accessible to savants throughout the world. Your scientific contribution will be acknowledged. The labels will read: 'Discovered by the French expedition, ceded to the British forces at the capitulation of Alexandria.'"

The morning of 4 September had settled the question of the great antiquities. The Rosetta Stone was in the register. The sarcophagus of Nectanebo II, the statue of the high priest of Amun, the stelae – all were in Clarke's register. What remained to be defended was everything else. Jollois was exhausted by the weeks that had just passed, but animated by a determination that the years of the expedition had tempered.

"I am ready to discuss everything. But I warn you that I shall accept no seizure without prior discussion of each category of objects. We have time. The capitulation gives us weeks before the evacuation."

Hamilton, who had followed the exchange in silence, intervened. He preferred a negotiation to a brutal confrontation. Clarke would examine, and he would rule on the disputed points. The two camps laid out their initial positions, identified the points of agreement and disagreement, and settled a working timetable. Thus began the longest and most complex of debates over the sharing of a cultural heritage between two nations.

In the yard behind the warehouse, the Rosetta Stone waited under British guard. It had been decided in a single morning. Two millennia, one morning.

On the evening of 4 September, the French savants gathered in a room adjoining the warehouse. A low-ceilinged room, furnished with a table and a few mismatched chairs. Outside, they could hear the British soldiers on guard. The regular clink of weapons against belts.

Fourier asked the question that no one wished to put.

"The great antiquities are lost. The Rosetta Stone, the sarcophagi, the statues. We must now defend what can still be defended."

Jollois looked at him without answering. Marcel intervened at once.

"My squeezes. That is non-negotiable. I have twenty-five complete squeezes of the Rosetta Stone."

"Nor are the natural history collections," added Geoffroy. "I risked my life for every specimen. Every snake caught in the desert. Every insect collected in forty degrees of heat. I shall lie down in front of the crates if I must."

Fourier sighed. He had foreseen this reaction. He knew his colleagues. Each was convinced that his own contribution was the most important, the most irreplaceable.

"Gentlemen," he said, weighing his words, "let us be realistic. The large pieces are gone. Hamilton has the right and the force. We have patience and cunning. I propose that we concentrate our efforts on what is still defensible – what is intellectually irreplaceable. The drawings. The notes. The manuscripts."

Jollois rose abruptly. His chair scraped the floor.

"No."

Jollois stood with his hands laid flat on the table.

"No," he repeated. "We shall sacrifice nothing. We shall defend everything. Every object, every drawing, every specimen. Clarke will have to justify every seizure. He will have to argue every taking. We shall drown him in details, categories, legal exceptions.

He wants everything? He will have to negotiate everything. Piece by piece.”

Jomard nodded.

“Jollois is right. If we yield at the outset, we signal that we accept the principle of seizure. Then Clarke will come for the rest. We must hold on everything, and yield only when we can no longer resist.”

Geoffroy folded his arms.

“And in concrete terms, what does that mean? That we let Clarke take what remains without a fight?”

“Exactly,” said Jollois. “We fight for everything. We lose what we must lose. But we shall have made him pay for every concession. Hamilton will remember that we gave nothing for free.”

Fourier was looking at Jollois. He understood the logic. It was not a strategy for victory but a strategy of dignity. They were going to lose. But they would lose standing, having defended every yard of ground.

“Agreed,” said Fourier. “We defend everything. But we stay coordinated. No one negotiates alone in his corner. Every argument passes through this table before it goes to Hamilton.”

The others assented. Marcel spoke, more softly.

“And if we lose everything? If Hamilton seizes even the squeezes?”

Jollois sat down again. He had recovered his calm.

“We shall not lose everything. Hamilton is not a plunderer. He is a diplomat. He has instructions, but he also has a sense of fairness. He will yield on what is legally defensible. It is for us to make our arguments indisputable.”

The silence that followed was assent. They were agreed. They would defend everything. Together.

II - The Collections Saved

The savants' personal scientific instruments – astronomical telescopes, geodetic theodolites, barometers, thermometers, precision balances, microscopes – were recognised without difficulty as personal property not subject to seizure. Hamilton understood that these instruments had no connection with ancient Egypt and were the savants' professional tools. For the rest, everything was to be discussed by the British in the minutest detail.

On 9 September, Clarke examined the natural history collections of Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire.

"Mr Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire," said Clarke, "I have received orders to examine your specimens. I must ask you to give me access to your crates."

Geoffroy reacted differently from Jollois and Fourier.

"You will not touch these collections," he cried, placing himself between the soldiers and his crates. "I risked my life for every specimen. Every snake, every insect collected in forty degrees of heat. If you advance one step, I burn everything."

"You collected them as an official member of the Commission," said Clarke. "They are therefore French public property, and therefore British spoils of war. That is the logical chain. I did not invent it."

Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire rejected the argument.

"You want to steal my work to enrich your museums. Without having made a single effort of discovery yourselves. Call it what you like. I call it theft."

"I do not believe you," said Clarke. "You would not destroy three years of work."

Geoffroy understood that Clarke did not believe him. He crossed the room, opened one of the crates of dried specimens, took out a tinderbox lighter and lit it. The flame was ten centimetres from the dry straw.

"I am not bluffing. One step more and I set it alight. You will carry ashes back to London."

Clarke looked at the flame. The naturalist was twenty-nine years old and his hand was steady. He took a step back. Better to let Geoffroy leave with his jars than to return to London with ashes.

"Your passion commands my respect," said Clarke, backing away. "Even if your methods are theatrical. Universal science will gain if these collections survive in France."

"You defended your collections well," Jollois said to Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire that same evening. "Your initial resistance created a precedent that perhaps we should have followed for the great antiquities."

"The great antiquities were too visible, too spectacular. My jars of fish did not excite the British officers. It is sometimes an advantage to be misunderstood."

Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire's victory over the question of the natural history collections had a positive knock-on effect on the other negotiations. The savants understood that firm, well-argued resistance could achieve results, provided one chose one's battles and did not exhaust oneself on secondary points.

Jollois, encouraged by this example, pressed harder on the question of publishing the Commission's drawings. A letter from Bonaparte reached Alexandria on 10 September, eight days after the signing of the capitulation. Written in Paris in the spring, it had travelled for months by diplomatic courier, through Ottoman intermediaries. Fourier received it late in the morning while Clarke was examining the basalt sarcophagi.

It was short. Bonaparte wrote as First Consul, not as general. The title had changed, and the tone with it. He praised the work of the Commission, expressed his confidence in its ability to defend the collections against British claims, indicated that *the Description de l'Égypte* would be published with the full support of the

consular government, and added in the last line that Paris awaited their return.

Paris awaited their return. Fourier read the sentence three times. It was not cruelty; Bonaparte did not know what it cost to read “Paris awaits” while looking at the Rosetta Stone under British guard. Nor was it indifference. It was the future, seen from Paris. The present was here. Those two times did not speak to each other. Bonaparte did not write: I am sorry for the collections you are losing. He did not write: I would have done otherwise. He wrote: Paris awaits. As if everything that had happened here – the three years, the deaths, the Rosetta Stone that Clarke had just entered in his register – were merely the prelude to something that would begin over there.

Fourier folded the letter and slipped it into the portfolio of Marcel’s squeezes. It would travel with him. He was not sure what he would do with it once in Paris. Probably nothing. One does not reply to a letter from the First Consul to tell him that his wording seemed light.

He returned to the negotiations. Clarke had finished with the sarcophagi. Jollois demanded the freedom to publish the Commission’s drawings in France without restriction, which amounted to asking Hamilton to renounce all British control over the dissemination of images of Egyptian antiquities.

Hamilton hesitated. Such a concession was broad. But he also understood that to deny the Commission the right to publish its own drawings would be legally and morally indefensible. He accepted, setting as his only condition that a copy of each published plate be sent to the British Museum for its archives.

“A copy of each plate,” said Jollois. “That is no problem. We shall need multiple impressions for commercial distribution in any case.”

This agreement guaranteed the publication of the collective Description and also opened the way for the Voyage dans la Basse

et la Haute Égypte, which Denon, back in France since 1799, would publish in 1802, even before the Description was ready, and which would become the first great publishing success on ancient Egypt.

The question of the botanical herbaria raised a side debate less dramatic than that of the natural history collections but revealing of what was at stake in the negotiation. The Commission's botanists had built up herbaria of several thousand specimens of Egyptian flora. Desert plants, Nile vegetation, species cultivated in the gardens of Cairo.

Clarke wanted to seize half of them. The botanists argued that these herbaria formed coherent series and that dividing them would considerably reduce their scientific value. A fragmented herbarium did not allow the comparative studies that a complete one made possible.

Hamilton held to his demand. The savants could only accept.

Having settled the question of the natural history collections thanks to Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire's dramatic confrontation, Clarke moved on to the examination of the most delicate and ambiguous category: the small antiquities that the French savants claimed to have bought with their own money from fellahs or antiquities dealers, rather than having them officially discovered by the Commission.

These small antiquities comprised hundreds of miscellaneous objects. Funerary figurines in painted wood and glazed faience, amulets in semi-precious stone, engraved scarabs, papyrus fragments, small bronze statues, pottery, jewellery, ancient tools, textile fragments. The French savants argued that these objects constituted personal commercial acquisitions made on the local market and not official archaeological discoveries.

Clarke showed himself sceptical about this distinction.

“Proving that each object was bought and not found will be impossible,” he said. “You certainly did not keep the receipts for all your purchases at the bazaar.”

Fourier admitted the difficulty.

“We did not always keep rigorous records. But dividing these collections object by object would take weeks. I propose a compromise. We select half of the small antiquities that we wish to keep as a priority, and you take the other half for the British Museum.”

Hamilton, appreciating this honest proposal that avoided interminable contentious disputes over each individual object, accepted the compromise.

“Your proposal seems reasonable to me. We shall proceed thus. It will be quicker.”

The French savants spent the following days selecting the objects they would keep, favouring those of the greatest documentary scientific value or the greatest historical significance. Notably they kept several papyri bearing hieroglyphic and demotic texts, complete series of funerary figurines from a single tomb, and collections of scarabs bearing the cartouches of different pharaohs.

Hamilton, for his part, selected the most visually spectacular objects, those that would impress the public of the British Museum. Bronze statues of Egyptian deities, gold and silver jewellery, amulets finely carved in lapis lazuli and carnelian, high-quality painted pottery.

This division, although it deprived France of many precious objects, nonetheless made it possible to save a substantial part of the small antiquities that would enrich the future collections of the Egyptian Museum of the Louvre, inaugurated in 1827.

A particular problem arose concerning the mummies the savants had collected. Hamilton argued that the mummies manifestly constituted seizable Egyptian antiquities. The French savants

took the line that the mummies possessed chiefly an anatomical scientific value rather than an aesthetic museum value, and that they would serve science better if they remained with the French naturalists, who could study them.

Hamilton, after reflection, accepted an arrangement. The French savants would keep a few animal mummies and one human mummy of mediocre quality for their anatomical studies, while the British would take the best-preserved royal or noble mummies for public display.

"That satisfies me," said Hamilton, closing his notebook. "We have found an acceptable solution for each of the categories of objects."

Fourier answered with a courteous dryness that did not conceal his bitterness.

"We have been constructive because we had no choice, Mr Hamilton. Force was on your side. Allow me nonetheless to record formally, for the archives of the Commission, that we regard this seizure as an unjust spoliation of a French scientific work accomplished at the price of three years of labour and suffering."

Hamilton bowed his head without replying. He had heard this protest several times and knew that it would be transmitted to Paris, recorded in memoirs, perhaps published one day. He did not seek to efface the resentment of the French, only to carry out his instructions with the minimum of needless damage.

The following days were devoted to the practical inventory of the small antiquities. Each object was entered on two simultaneous lists, one kept by a British secretary, the other by Marcel. Comparing the two inventories at the end of the day made it possible to verify that no object had been omitted or moved without mutual agreement. This meticulous protocol, though tedious, guaranteed sufficient transparency to avoid later disputes.

The question of the squeezes of hieroglyphic inscriptions proved slightly more contentious. Hamilton argued that these squeezes

constituted reproductions of Egyptian inscriptions and could therefore be considered as falling under the category of “other collections” mentioned in Article Sixteen.

Marcel, who had meticulously prepared his defensive argument, vigorously countered this expansive interpretation.

“These squeezes are paper and ink,” he said. “Not antiquities to be exhibited. Working documents for philologists. The British Museum does not know what to do with them. Leave them to us.”

Hamilton reflected for a moment before replying.

“Your notes are your notes. That is not what I am after here.”

He shut his notebook with a sharp gesture.

“Keep them. We have the original.”

Hamilton recognised the logic of the argument. The squeezes would remain with the French. Marcel had known it since Rosetta. He had worked for this.

In three weeks, the Commission had saved what mattered most. What the savants would carry to France did not fit in the great crates. It fitted in copper tubes and leather portfolios. It would weigh little in the ship’s hold. It would weigh more in the decades to come.

The question of the manuscripts and scientific notes was settled still more favourably for the French. Hamilton readily recognised that these documents constituted personal intellectual works entirely distinct from material Egyptian antiquities, and therefore not seizable as spoils of war.

On 15 September, Hamilton asked to examine all the drawings made by Jollois and his fellow artists during the expedition. Jollois presented his notebooks.

“Mr Hamilton, these drawings did not exist before I traced them. A pharaonic statue existed without me. My drawings exist only

because I created them. To confiscate a personal work of art is not a requisition – it is theft.”

Hamilton examined the drawings for a long moment.

“Your drawings are your work, not antiquities. Keep them. I shall ask only for some fifty copies for the British Museum. The originals remain yours.”

Jollois himself selected the copies to be handed over. He laid his hands on his notebooks, eyes lowered. That was all.

The question of ancient coins nearly reopened a conflict thought to be resolved. The savants of the Commission collectively owned several hundred Greek, Ptolemaic and Roman coins collected at sites in the Delta and the Nile valley. Hamilton claimed them as seizable antiquities. The savants argued that they were personal acquisitions made for their own numismatic collections.

“Each coin was bought by a savant,” said Marcel, producing a notebook in which he had recorded, with admirable foresight, each individual acquisition with its price, its date and the name of the seller. “These records prove the private character of these acquisitions.”

Hamilton examined the notebook attentively. The keeping of this record manifestly predated the negotiations. It could not be a document fabricated for the purpose. He accepted the argument and left the coins to the savants, except for some fifteen remarkable pieces that Marcel agreed to cede to him in exchange for additional transport facilities for the bulkiest crates. This kind of small, piecemeal compromise characterised Hamilton’s method: firm on the broad lines of his instructions, flexible on secondary details.

Jollois, informed of this decision, was grateful without showing it. The incident reminded him that Hamilton, despite the rigour of his mission, retained a sense of fairness that set him apart from

the brutal confiscators he had dreaded at the start of the negotiations.

“I prefer to risk letting a few objects slip by rather than create a precedent of arbitrariness. Our credibility in these negotiations rests on our impartiality. If the French suspect us of confiscating property outside any rule, we lose their cooperation for what follows.”

III - The Ethics of Spoliation

On the morning of 17 September, Jollois went out alone into Alexandria. He had nothing in particular to draw. He wanted to walk. The negotiations had lasted fourteen days. The minutes would be signed in a few days. After that, there would be nothing left to defend.

He crossed the merchants' quarter without stopping. The city went on. That was what struck him most. That the city went on as if nothing had happened. The women at the wells. The mules in the narrow lanes. The smell of hot bread and jasmine.

He stopped before a bookbinder's shop. The man was working on his doorstep, sewing gatherings with the slow care of someone whose hand has known the movement since childhood. He raised his eyes to Jollois, then lowered them again to his work without any particular curiosity. Another Frenchman. He had seen them pass for three years. He would see others. Ottomans, English, Mamluks. The city had its own rhythms, independent of the armies that crossed it.

Jollois watched him work. The worn tools, the automatic movements, the workbench polished by years of friction. The smell of glue warming in its pot drifted in the street. Sweet, faintly acrid. This man had been doing this for a long time. Armies change; notebooks remain.

Jollois did not speak to him. Without an interpreter, he stayed watching him work before continuing to the harbour. The British

ships were there, in the roadstead, waiting. Crates were piling up on the quays. The great antiquities would leave in a week. He would leave soon after, on one of those ships. In his satchels, his notebooks. In the English crates, the Rosetta Stone and the sarcophagus of Nectanebo II.

He thought of the bookbinder. The bookbinder made notebooks. He filled them. The notebooks would go to Paris, the crates to London. In a hundred years – in two hundred – someone would open these notebooks and see Egypt as it was in 1801. Temple columns and royal hypogea, but not the bookbinder or the street. That was what Jollois had chosen to draw. What he had left aside – the everyday city, ordinary people, the work of hands – would be nowhere.

He drew the harbour, the quays, the ships in the roadstead. Then, in the corner of the page, from memory, the bookbinder's hands on his gathering. He did not know why. Only that those hands would go nowhere. They would remain here, in this street, making notebooks. They deserved a line, at least.

He examined the drawing. The hands, quick, sure, with the cal-luses in the right places. Hands that had never left this street. That had no need to leave it. Those hands knew what they were doing. A movement learned so early that it had become the body itself. He thought of his own ink-stained hands. Of Abdallah ibn Youssef, who knew the canal otherwise than by measurements. Of the Coptic craftsman whose hands knew papyrus. Those hands would go into no crate. They would remain here, doing what they had always done.

That evening, Hamilton sent them a note. He asked to come and dine with them the next day, without a secretary. Jollois showed the note to Fourier.

"He is coming alone," said Fourier. "Without a secretary."

"Which means he is coming as a man, not as a commissioner."

Fourier set down the note. He knew this kind of gesture. To come to the adversary's house, without a secretary, without protocol. It is what people do when they want to say something they cannot put in a report. He would accept in the name of all.

On the evening of 18 September, Hamilton presented himself at the Frenchmen's quarters, as agreed. He was alone.

The table was a door laid on trestles. Bread, goat's cheese, a bottle of local wine that no one judged. Fourier was there, Geoffroy, Marcel. Outside, the soldiers were loading crates onto carts. One could hear wood rubbing against wood.

They ate for a while without speaking. It was Hamilton who had asked to come. They waited to know why.

"The sarcophagus of Nectanebo II," he said at last. "The one you studied here, in Alexandria. It leaves tomorrow for the port. I wanted to tell you to your face."

Jollois slowly set down his glass. The sarcophagus of Nectanebo was of green breccia, more than three metres long, covered with inscriptions from the Amduat. He had spent an entire day drawing it. He remembered the light on the breccia. Not a reflection, an absorption, as if the stone kept the light for itself. The hieroglyphs had been cut with a precision that, after twenty centuries, still allowed one to make out the feathers of the birds and the joints of the serpents. He had given an entire day to that work.

"That sarcophagus," said Fourier, "was in Alexandria before us. The Arabs had reused it as a fountain basin. We took it out of there. We studied it."

"I know. We had also found it recorded as a fountain, in our archives of Pococke's journey. That is one of the reasons I wanted to tell you. You are not the first to have moved it."

Outside, one crate knocked against another. Someone swore in English.

"You know what troubles me," said Jollois. "It is not that you take it. It is that in a hundred years, an Egyptian will have to come to London to see the sarcophagus of one of his pharaohs."

Hamilton was looking at his glass. Fourier was watching Hamilton looking at his glass.

"If in a hundred years there is an Egyptian who wants to see this sarcophagus," said Hamilton, "it is because someone will have taught him what it is. And that person will probably have worked from your drawings and your surveys. Not from the stone."

"That is not an answer. It is a justification."

"Yes. As are all the answers we give ourselves about what we are doing here."

No one ate for a while. Marcel was filling his glass with the precision he brought to everything he did.

"That sarcophagus," said Marcel without raising his head, "had already changed hands before the Arabs. It never received the body of Nectanebo and ended up in Alexandria. It was made into a bathtub. The Arabs turned it into a fountain. We measured it and drew it. You are going to exhibit it. Every age has its way of appropriating Egypt."

"And Egypt has no say in the matter."

Geoffroy was looking at the ceiling.

"It was not Egypt that invited us."

The conversation had just touched on something Hamilton had not foreseen. He thought of his instructions: seize the antiquities, maintain fairness. His instructions said nothing of the Egyptians. No one had thought to include them. He did not answer Geoffroy. It was not insolence. It was honesty.

"If Egypt one day constituted itself as a nation," Fourier resumed, "and claimed its property, what would the British Museum answer?"

“It will not be I who answers. It will be someone else, in other circumstances. I cannot bind the next century.”

Fourier noted the reply. It was honest. It was also insufficient. But it was all that a man in Hamilton’s position could say that evening.

In a few years, in his notes for the preface to *the Description*, he would come upon this sentence. He would not put it in. It was too personal, too bound to an evening that had no official witness. But he would think of Hamilton while writing the preface to *the Description*.

Hamilton was the first to rise. He thanked them for the dinner. At the door, he paused.

“If a French savant wishes to examine the sarcophagus in London, I shall facilitate access.”

Jollois watched him go. Outside, the soldiers were still loading. The Alexandrian night came in through the window. Voices in Arabic, a dog, the smell of the harbour.

“He agreed with us on everything we told him,” said Marcel. “And he took the sarcophagus all the same.”

The next morning, when Jollois crossed the yard, the sarcophagus of Nectanebo was no longer there. In its place, a rectangular mark in the sand.

On 22 September, early in the morning, an Egyptian tradesman presented himself at the gates of the warehouse and asked to speak to Hamilton.

His name was Mahmoud al-Tawil. He kept an antiquities shop in the Coptic quarter of Alexandria, two streets from the port. His fifteen-year-old son accompanied him and would serve as interpreter. Jollois, who was passing through the yard as they arrived, stopped.

Hamilton received them in the room that served him as an office. A table, four chairs, the piles of minutes that the secretary had been filing for two weeks. Mahmoud al-Tawil laid a folded piece of paper on the table and waited until the son had translated.

He claimed that several statuettes included in the British lot of small antiquities had been stolen from him by French soldiers in 1798. He demanded their return.

"He says his father had acquired these pieces from his own father," translated the son. "They had been in the family for three generations. Soldiers took them from the shop in the first week of the occupation. He has witnesses."

Hamilton listened. He looked at the folded paper. A list of eight objects described in Arabic with annotations in piastres, the prices the father had paid when acquiring them. He asked to see the witnesses. The son went out and came back with two men from the same quarter, who confirmed that Mahmoud al-Tawil had indeed owned these objects before the French arrived.

Jollois had drawn closer to the door. He recognised the description of one of the statuettes: a bronze figurine representing Osiris standing, arms crossed, about twenty centimetres high. He had drawn it. Not in this man's shop – in an open crate at the bivouac, in 1798, in the first days. He had not asked where it came from.

"I cannot return these objects to you," said Hamilton. "They form part of an official seizure validated by the capitulation. The procedure of individual restitution in this context is legally inextricable."

The son translated. Mahmoud al-Tawil listened without changing expression. He asked a short question.

"He asks who owns these objects now? The English or the French?"

"The English. They are in the crates of the British seizure."

Another short question.

“He asks, then, why can the English not return them, if they have them?”

Hamilton took the time to formulate his answer. It was not bad faith. It was the truth of a system that had not been designed for this kind of question.

“Because these objects now form part of a state seizure, governed by an international treaty. Individual rights, however legitimate, cannot be dealt with within this framework. It would open a procedure that never ends.”

The son translated. Mahmoud al-Tawil listened, nodded once, and said something.

“He says he understands. And he says, note my name all the same.”

Hamilton took it down. He wrote down the name, the address, the description of the eight objects, the names of the two witnesses. He signed the page and handed a copy to Mahmoud al-Tawil.

The tradesman took the paper, folded it carefully and slipped it into his robe. He thanked them without warmth and left with his son. In the yard, he paused a moment and looked at the crates stacked against the wall. He said nothing. He set off again toward the city.

Jollois remained in the doorway. He was thinking of the bronze figurine of Osiris. Of the page of his notebook where he had drawn it. The figurine would go to London. The drawing would go to Paris. The name of Mahmoud al-Tawil would remain in a British register that probably no one would ever find. All of it was recorded. None of it would be returned.

There were concrete victims, dispossessed owners, legitimate claims that neither France nor England was in a position to address fairly.

On the evening of 22 September, the final minutes were signed in the yard of the warehouse.

A table had been set up in the yard, in the same place as in previous weeks, under the same canvas awning that the September sun was fading from below. Hamilton's secretary had laid the two copies of the document side by side, one drawn up in French, the other in English, each furnished with its numbered annexes. Twenty-two pages per copy. The secretary had lined up the pens, the inkwells, the wax seal. He did it with the meticulous care of people who know their work will be archived.

Hamilton arrived first, with two officers as witnesses. Fourier represented the French with Jollois. Jomard was there too, standing back, with no official role, but he had wanted to see.

Hamilton signed first. Protocol demanded it. The party that had imposed its conditions signed first. He did so without hesitation, the gesture of someone who has already signed many things in many countries.

Fourier took the pen. He held it a moment without writing. It was not hesitation in the true sense; the decision had been made long ago, there was no alternative. It was something else. The time the hand takes to accept what the mind has already accepted. He signed. The ink dried quickly in the evening heat.

Jollois signed next. The secretary stamped the two copies with the wax of the two parties, red for the British, blue for the French. Each seal left a clean imprint in the soft wax. The sound of the seal on the wax was dull, final.

Jomard mechanically counted the annexes. Twenty-two pages, forty-four in all. In those leaves, the list of the great antiquities seized by the British, the list of the scientific collections recognised as French, the clauses of mutual access, the guarantees of transport. Figures, descriptions, categories. Nothing in those pages said what the sarcophagus of Nectanebo weighed, nor how long the day had lasted in which Jollois had drawn it.

The two copies were handed to the parties. Hamilton slipped his into his satchel without looking at it further. Fourier held his a

moment in his hands, as if estimating its weight. The division was recorded. What was in London was in London. What was in Paris was in Paris. What was still there, in those lanes and markets and excavation sites, belonged to no one on this side of the table.

No one said anything for a few seconds. Then one of the British officers coughed, and everyone moved at once.

Hamilton made a last remark that Jollois found just in its wording. "What we have done here will be judged differently by future generations. I do not know whether that judgement will be favourable to us. But we have at least tried to do it with a certain fairness."

Jollois did not answer. He was too tired for philosophy. But he noted the sentence in his notebook that same evening, with the date and the context. It would appear in no published work.

IV - The Farewells

Once all the negotiations concerning the division of the collections were concluded, the French savants and the British commissioners spent the last days of September packing the objects to be carried to their respective destinations.

On the British side, the great antiquities had been entered in the register since 4 September. Clarke's men had only to crate them and check the straps and the seals. In the warehouse yard, the crates, the Rosetta Stone, the sarcophagi and the statues on their carts awaited loading, and no one opened them again. What had been settled in the negotiations was settled. There was nothing to reopen.

Jollois watched these preparations in silence, with mingled feelings of bitterness and resignation. He knew that these objects would leave for London for good and that he would never see them again as long as he lived. But at least he had saved his drawings, which would preserve the visual memory of these monuments even if the physical objects were lost to France.

On 24 September, Hamilton came to thank Jollois and Fourier for their relative cooperation during the negotiations.

The French savants, for their part, packed the collections they had managed to save.

Each savant drew up a detailed inventory of everything he was taking away, meticulously listing every object, every manuscript, every drawing.

On 25 September, a preliminary inspection took place under the joint supervision of a British officer and Fourier. Each crate was opened, its contents checked against the inventory, then closed again.

By the evening of 26 September, all the packing was complete. The French savants were ready to embark for the return to France as soon as the British ships became available.

In the last hours of that 26th of September, Jollois gathered his assistants for a final check. He had every metal tube containing drawings unpacked and re-examined, checked that the stoppers were airtight and that the tubes showed no crack. He did the same with the bundles of papers, the boxes of notes, the portfolios of squeezes. Everything the Commission would bring back to France fitted into a few crates and a few copper rolls. It was little for more than three years of work. It was everything.

“Have we forgotten nothing?”

“Nothing essential. The measuring instruments are in crate number three. The architectural survey notebooks in crate four. Your drawings in tubes one to twenty-three. Marcel’s squeezes in the portfolios. The Institute’s journals in crate five.”

Jollois looked at the metal tubes. Inside, rolled up and wedged in cotton paper, lay the plates that represented the whole of ancient Egypt that the army had crossed, reduced to lines and hatchings on thick paper. That paper was now more precious than the monuments themselves, for it could be reproduced endlessly by engraving, and handed on across time and space.

On the night of 26 to 27 September, Jollois sat in his room, the metal tubes lined up against the wall to his left, and worked on perfecting the index of his drawings, an alphabetical and thematic list of all the monuments documented, arranged by site, by period, by architectural type.

This index, which he finished around four in the morning, would be the first table of contents of what would become the *Description de l'Égypte*. It listed two thousand and eighty-seven drawings covering a hundred and eighty-six different sites, from the island of Philae in the south to Alexandria in the north. For each drawing, he noted whether it was a general view, an architectural detail, an inscription, a figurative representation.

At dawn, he closed the index and placed it in tube number one, with his most precious notebooks. He was ready. Egypt was in the tubes. He could leave. He blew out the lamp.

The final sealing of the crates took place on 27 September at ten in the morning. A British officer, two French witnesses, a military notary improvised for the occasion. The ceremony was simple but its implications were enormous. These forty-two crates were going to cross the Mediterranean and join the French national collections. It was, after all that had happened, a partial but real victory.

Jomard engraved the scene in his mind, telling himself he would describe it in his memoirs. What impressed him was not the spectacle itself but what it represented. The end of a period of his life that would be like no other. At twenty-three, he had already lived through something that most men never lived through.

Jollois, for his part, was not thinking of the future. He was thinking of the pyramids, the Colossi of Memnon, the temples of Philae. Of everything he had not had time to draw.

On 29 September, the French savants learned that the British ships intended to carry them to France would be ready to embark passengers in two days. This news hastened the final preparations.

On the morning of 30 September, the French savants received the official order to hold themselves ready to embark the next day on the British transport ships that would bring them back to France via Malta.

Before the embarkation, Hamilton paid the French savants a last visit. He brought the official passes that would authorise the transport of their crates through the British port inspections. This document, signed and stamped, was the formal guarantee that no one would attempt to seize their effects at the last minute.

"Here are your safe-conducts. I wish you a good voyage home."

He handed Jollois the bundle of papers. Jollois took it, then replied:

"And I hope you will make good use of what you are taking away."

Hamilton gave a brief smile. He had understood. In this context, making good use of the Rosetta Stone, the sarcophagi, the royal mummies meant studying them seriously, making them accessible to scholars, drawing from them a knowledge that would benefit all. It would be the only morally acceptable justification for what he had done here.

"We shall do our best."

That was all. They never saw each other again.

On the last evening, the savants gathered together without Hamilton or the British officers. They ate little and talked for a long time. Each had his regrets, the sites unvisited, the inscriptions uncopied, the monuments that one more year would have allowed them to study. But each also knew that they had accomplished something that had never been done before and would not be done again in the same way.

On the night of the thirtieth of September to the first of October, stretched out on his pallet in the warehouse, Jollois listened to the sound of the sea and the cries of the gulls. He let the three years just past unfold in his mind. The landing at Alexandria, the march through the desert, the first sight of the pyramids, the

temples of Upper Egypt, the revolt of Cairo, the Rosetta Stone, the death of Kléber, the exhausting negotiations with Hamilton. All of it seemed to belong to another life, lived by a man younger and more naive than the one he had become.

He rose at dawn, went to check one last time that the tubes were properly secured, and went out onto the quay. The sea was calm under a still-dark sky. A few stars lingered in the west. On the ships in the roads, lanterns shone. In a few hours, he would be on board. In a few weeks, in Paris.

On the morning of 1 October, the farewells took different forms according to temperament. Jollois, who had formed some lasting bonds with Egyptian scholars in Cairo, paid a last visit to a sheikh of Alexandria, trained at Al-Azhar, with whom he had exchanged views on the pharaonic monuments. The sheikh, an old man of letters who read Arabic, Persian and Turkish but not French, had shown a genuine curiosity about the drawings Jollois had shown him.

“He says the pharaohs were giants,” the interpreter translated. “Giants who built for eternity because they believed they would live in it.”

“Perhaps he is not wrong. These monuments have outlived all the empires that have occupied this land. They will outlive ours.”

The sheikh said something else. The interpreter hesitated before translating.

“He says: you looked at these stones as if they had a soul. That is good. The difference matters, even though you are leaving.”

Jollois noted the sentence. It echoed the remark of the wakil Abdallah. He was beginning to understand that the attentive gaze they had turned on ancient Egypt had had, quite apart from any political and military consideration, a value of its own that the Egyptians themselves recognised.

The embarkation took place at the end of the morning of 1 October. The British ships had anchored a few hundred metres

from the quay. Longboats plied between the quay and the vessels. The Frenchmen's crates were loaded first, by agreement with Hamilton, who had understood the savants' anxiety about their collections.

The ships were called HMS Peterel, HMS Alceste and HMS Unité. The last was a French frigate that had passed under the British flag, whose name the English had kept.

"Careful," said Geoffroy to a sailor who was lifting one of his crates of jars by one side only. "It is fragile."

The sailor turned it every which way to gauge its balance, then set it in the longboat with the others. Geoffroy clenched his teeth.

What concerned him was the stowage in the hold. The holds of a frigate were dark, damp, poorly ventilated, subject to the shocks of pitching and swell. The jars of spirit were the most serious problem. If a crate overturned in the hold during a storm, if the wood gave way under the shock, the jars would break, the spirit would spill, and if a lantern was nearby there was a risk of fire in the hold. He had pointed out this risk to the British captain, who had understood and authorised him to place the most fragile crates in an accessible space on the lower deck.

Jollois climbed into the longboat last. He looked one last time at Alexandria from the level of the water. The white houses with flat terraces, the slender minarets, the citadel raised on the ruins of the ancient Pharos, and behind it all the desert that began, the valley of the Nile vanishing towards the south, the countless monuments the army had not all reached.

"There is still so much to see," he murmured.

"There always will be," added Jomard, who had climbed into the same longboat. "That is the nature of Egypt. It is inexhaustible."

The longboat pulled away from the quay. Jollois did not turn round. He kept before his eyes the image of Alexandria as it was that morning, sharp and luminous in the dry October air.

Settled on board, he refused to leave his copper tubes in the hold. He carried them to his berth, the space allotted to him in the junior officers' quarters, a cubby two metres by one and a half with a canvas cot and a hook in the ceiling. He hung his satchels from the hook. Twenty-three tubes, some fifty kilos. The cot sagged slightly under the additional weight.

He hardly slept the first night. Every movement of the ship set the satchels swinging. He watched them in the darkness, counting the swings.

Jomard placed his crates of cartographic surveys in agreement with the first lieutenant, lashed to the bulkheads with ropes, like artillery equipment. A military method for protecting against pitching.

"Have you transported precious maps before?" the lieutenant asked him.

"No. But I have seen how you stow your cannon."

The lieutenant nodded. It was logical.

On board, the French passengers, savants and soldiers, found themselves mingled with the British crews in a space designed for two thirds of that number. The factions remained separate, the French forward and to port, the British amidships and to starboard. But in the narrow passages, the gangways, the ladders, they crossed paths twenty times a day without speaking.

What the savants felt was less shame than absurdity. They were sailing back to France on the ships of the men who had just taken from them the Rosetta Stone and the sarcophagus of Nectanebo II. The same fleet that had sunk their own at Aboukir. History had a way of closing back upon itself.

Jollois put it thus in his letter that evening. A letter he did not finish and never sent:

"We are returning to France on the vessels of our conquerors, with their passes in our pockets and the Rosetta Stone in their holds. We took Egypt from the Egyptians; they have taken it

back from us. The stones are now travelling to London. Our drawings are travelling to Paris in copper tubes that I keep in my berth. I think it is a distinction that will matter, in the long run.”

Jollois crumpled the letter and threw it away, lacking the words for what he felt. He would try to find others in the Description.

V - The Crossing

The October Mediterranean had its moods. From the second day, a north-easterly wind rose and the sea heaved. The ship began to roll badly. Several savants, unaccustomed to sailing, spent the first days lying in their cabins – except Jomard, who went down into the hold to check his crates, and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, who went back up to check them every two hours.

Jollois stayed on deck. He had made the outward voyage without difficulty and had developed a serene relationship with the sea over the Egyptian months. He observed the waves, the clouds, the changing light, with the same gaze he turned on the monuments. Attentive, open, without judgement. A British officer, one of the young British officers, came to speak to him.

“What exactly are you carrying in those tubes?”

“Ancient Egypt.”

The officer looked at him without understanding.

“Drawings,” Jollois explained. “Measured drawings of monuments. Copies of inscriptions. Everything I was able to document in over three years. There will be enough to fill whole volumes.”

“Like an encyclopaedia?”

“With pictures,” said Jollois.

The officer seemed satisfied and went away. Jollois remained on deck another hour, watching the sea. Somewhere beyond the horizon, the pyramids were still there. Impassive. They were waiting for nothing.

On the fifth day, the wind slackened. The sea recovered its regular motion. The savants reappeared on deck, still pale but on their feet. Each resumed his place, his notebooks, his calculations. Work had begun again before Malta was even in sight.

Jomard worked on his measurement notes, hunting down inconsistencies. Several could be resolved. Two resisted.

"Look at these measurements," he said, laying his notebooks on the rail. "The base of the pyramid of Khephren is slightly longer on the east-west axis than on the north-south axis. Not by much. Twenty centimetres over two hundred and fifteen metres. But it is repeated on all three great pyramids of Giza."

"An error in your measurements?"

"Possible. But unlikely. I measured each side three times."

"Then?"

"Then their measurements take account of the curvature of the earth. Practice can precede theory by several centuries."

Jollois looked at him for a long time.

"Publish that."

"Not now. It is only a hypothesis. I want to check it with Monge in Paris."

Monge had left with Bonaparte. But the measurements travelled with Jomard, in tube number four. That result, published in the volumes of *the Description*, would make him one of the founders of modern geodesy. That evening on deck, Jomard was merely a man of twenty-three who could not sleep.

What Jomard did not say – what he had told no one since leaving Alexandria – was that the hypothesis frightened him as much as it thrilled him. If the builders of the pyramids had known the curvature of the earth, it meant that something had been lost. Not forgotten – knowledge is forgotten – but lost in the strong sense: destroyed, scattered, made inaccessible. Twenty centuries of conquests, plunderings, fires. The library of Alexandria. The

papyri that Caesar's soldiers had burned without reading. The long indifference of successive occupiers towards what the walls contained.

He drew notebook number seventeen from his coat, the one he had set aside for unverified hypotheses. In it he had noted, over the months, the observations that resisted immediate explanation. The astronomical orientation of the temples. The absence of any error in the proportions of the great temple of Amun at Karnak over a length of five hundred metres. The arrangement of the inner chambers and galleries of the great pyramids, whose axes seemed to him to answer to a calculation he had not yet fully reconstructed.

The pyramids were not merely tombs. Perhaps not tombs at all, in the sense in which the word was understood in France. They were instruments. Machines for measuring the world, for fixing the sky in stone, for passing on to those who would come after a knowledge that papyrus could not guarantee. Because papyrus burns. Stone, less so.

He closed the notebook. It was too broad a hypothesis for a footnote. It called for ten years of work. He was twenty-three. He had time.

Night had fallen. The stars over the Mediterranean were less brilliant than above the desert. He looked for Orion and found it, low on the horizon, the three stars of the belt tilted slightly towards the south. He stayed watching them until the cold forced him in. In tube number four, between two rolls of oiled paper, he had slipped a small sheet folded in four on which he had copied, at Giza, the exact measurements of the bases. Those figures would not lie. They were his anchor.

On the quarterdeck, Fourier was writing. For several days he had been looking for the opening of the historical introduction to *the Description*. The sentence that would make the reader understand why Egypt mattered more than any other ancient civilisation. The problem was not the material. The problem was the tone. If

he adopted that of the savant, he would lose the cultivated reader who wished to be moved. If he adopted that of the orator, he would betray the rigour the Institute expected of him.

He had filled and torn up eleven first pages. There was the same mistake in all eleven attempts: he began with the expedition. "On 19 May 1798, the French army set sail from Toulon." Or: "The Commission of Sciences and Arts, made up of one hundred and sixty-seven members." Correct formulas that told a reader he was about to read a report. This was not a report.

What he was looking for – and could not find – was the word that would make the reader understand why Egypt was different from all other countries. Not more beautiful, not older in the ordinary sense. Old in another way. Antiquity as a physical property of the air, the stone, the river. He had three thousand years of history to fit into a preface. And no one had yet found how to write three thousand years.

"Where should I begin?" he said aloud, as much to himself as to Jomard, who was listening.

"With what does not change. The Nile. The annual flood. The seasons. Everything else – the pharaohs, the dynasties, the conquests – is ephemeral by comparison. Begin with geography. The rest will follow."

Fourier made a note. He felt something loosen in his chest. Not geography in the technical sense, not latitudes and meridians. Geography in the sense of the shape of the world as it constrains men. The Nile rising and falling. The valley between two deserts. Civilisation as a response to a physical constraint. That, he could write.

He began the twelfth page. This time he did not tear it up. He wrote three lines and reread them. They held. The third asserted that the Nile passed through the centuries without the centuries passing through it. It was not perfect. But it was alive. It was a beginning. He went on.

Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, during those same days, was writing the notes that would become his first articles on the fauna of the Nile. He worked in his cabin, surrounded by jars lashed against the roll. The smell of the spirit that preserved the animals hung in the narrow space.

“What do you think about when you write those descriptions?” Jomard asked him one evening.

“I think of those who will read them in fifty years. I want them to see what I saw. No more, no less. Just what is.”

It was his motto without his ever having formulated it: to render faithfully, to transmit without betraying, to leave posterity an observation, not an interpretation.

On the morning of 10 October, the ship entered the port of Valletta. The savants went ashore and strolled in small groups through the streets of the fortified city. A little more than a year had passed since the French garrison had evacuated the island under British pressure, and the Union Jack now flew over the bastions on which Jollois had seen the tricolour flying when he passed in June 1798.

“We took this island in three days,” said Fourier with a melancholy irony, contemplating the fortifications of Valletta. “We lost it after two years of siege. Such is our Egyptian story in brief: brilliant victories, silent abandonments.”

Jollois sat down before the co-cathedral of St John and quickly sketched its austere façade. Not for *the Description*, which concerned only Egypt, but for himself, as an instinctive gesture of his hand, which no longer knew how to remain idle before a remarkable building. The drawing took twenty minutes. When he looked up, Jomard was standing behind him.

“You are drawing still,” said Jomard, with an affection tinged with admiration.

“I shall always draw. It is my way of seeing the world.”

In the evening, the savants gathered at the inn for dinner. Conversation turned naturally to what each intended to do on returning to Paris. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire wanted to resume his post at the Natural History Museum (Muséum). Fourier was thinking of the prefecture of the Isère that Bonaparte had promised him. Marcel spoke wistfully of the Imprimerie nationale.

“And you, Jollois?” asked Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire.

“I? I shall work. That is all. These drawings will not engrave themselves.”

On 11 October at dawn, the ship weighed anchor and resumed its course to the north-west. The western Mediterranean, cooler and choppiest than the eastern sea, recalled to them by its grey-green colours the Provençal coasts of their youth.

During this last part of the crossing – five days from Malta – the savants met every day in the great cabin to discuss *the Description*. Who would write what. In what order. How many volumes.

“This Description will have to be an encyclopaedia,” said Fourier. “Not a few plates with notices but everything we have seen, measured, observed. The monuments, the geography, the natural history, contemporary society. Twenty volumes at the least.”

“These plates will be perfect or they will not be at all,” said Jollois. “The best engravers in Paris, as much time as it takes. One flaw, and we begin again.”

Jomard wanted a complete geographical atlas, the first exact maps of the whole valley of the Nile. Geoffroy demanded a place of honour for natural history. Marcel was thinking of the squeezes of the Rosetta Stone.

Each thought of what would remain of him. Jomard, at the bow of the ship, raised his eyes from his notebooks. The coast was still invisible. He thought of the measurements in his tubes: in a hundred years, someone would use them without knowing his name. That was enough for him.

On 16 October, on a clear autumn afternoon, France at last appeared on the horizon: first a dark, low line, then, as they drew nearer, the outline of capes and hills. France. They said nothing. There was nothing to say.

On 17 October, at six in the morning, the ship entered the coastal waters of Provence. The autumn light on the sea was different from that of the eastern Mediterranean. Paler, more diffuse, with a lightness that contrasted with the luminous density of Egypt.

"I recognise this light," said Jollois to Jomard. "It is the light of France. I did not know that light had a homeland."

The coast drew nearer. They could now make out the limestone cliffs, the calanques, the first fishermen's houses.

"We are going home."

That simple word contained everything: relief, regret, weariness, the prospect of the work that awaited. As if Egypt had been a parenthesis and real life were now resuming. But the two savants knew it was the other way round. Real life had been out there, in those intense years. What was opening before them was the ordinary world.

VI - The Return to France

The ship docked at Toulon on 18 October 1801, three years and five months after the French squadron had left that same port in May 1798. The circumstances of the return contrasted with those of the departure. Instead of a fleet of three hundred and fifty ships carrying thirty-eight thousand soldiers, a few British vessels brought back the remains of a defeated army.

The savants disembarked at Toulon with feelings that none of them could have named precisely. France had changed. They had changed more.

Jollois went down the gangway of the British ship and set foot on the quay at Toulon. The wet stone, cold. The smell of salt and tar. Gulls crying above the port.

Jollois stopped, letting the others pass him, without a word and without kissing the ground. He looked at the quay, the buildings, the hill above the town, the grey October sky. The air was cold and damp. A Mediterranean cold in October, different from the dry cold of Egypt. He drew it into his lungs and waited for his body to remember.

The crates – Jollois’s drawings, Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire’s collections, Marcel’s squeezes, instruments, manuscripts – were unloaded under their supervision.

They gathered at an inn in Toulon.

“To Egypt.”

Fourier raised his glass.

“To those who did not come back from it.”

They drank in silence. The evening ended early.

The next morning, the port authorities of Toulon sent an officer to carry out the official unloading of the crates. The officer was young, knowing nothing of the Egyptian expedition beyond what the Parisian gazettes had said of it. He examined the transport manifests with administrative meticulousness, counted the crates, and designated a secure warehouse near the quay.

“These objects constitute the scientific heritage of the Republic,” Fourier told him with an authority that brooked no contradiction. “They will be conveyed to Paris under escort as soon as possible. See that the warehouses are dry and properly locked.”

The officer bowed and complied. Fourier had instinctively recovered the tone of the Parisian official, the assurance of one who speaks in the name of an institution. Three years of Egypt had not erased that.

In the afternoon, several of the savants gathered in the offices of the maritime prefecture to draft their first official reports for the Ministry of the Interior. These reports were to establish that the Commission of Sciences and Arts had accomplished its mission, that its collections were intact in the part that had been saved, and that the work of publication could begin. Fourier wrote the principal report with a steady hand, mentioning the losses inflicted by the British only in a factual note in an annex.

"Let us leave politics to those who will make use of it. Our role is to set out what we have done and what we have brought back. The rest belongs to historians and diplomats."

Jomard, rereading the report over his shoulder, nodded. He was twenty-three. His whole life lay open before him, and that life was already marked by an experience that most men would never have. That would be enough for him. The thought comforted him.

The last hours in Toulon were given over to administrative formalities that contrasted with the extraordinary nature of what had just been lived. Forms, signatures, official stamps. The bureaucracy of the Consulate absorbed the Egyptian expedition into its ordinary circuits.

Jollois noticed with silent irony that the official who registered the Commission's crates treated them exactly as he would have treated a load of flour or wool. The exceptional nature of the contents appeared nowhere. Forty-two crates. That was all the bureaucracy saw.

"This is how civilisations preserve their memory," said Jollois. "In administrative forms that no one reads."

Fourier smiled. It was true, and it was also the principle on which rested his hope that the *Description de l'Égypte* would outlast regimes and wars. It would be catalogued, inventoried, consulted by generations of savants who would never have heard of Fourier or of Denon, but who would read their words.

The next morning, they took the road to Paris.

The journey lasted about a week along the main road that crossed the Rhône valley and then continued north through Burgundy. The savants travelled in public stagecoaches, their precious baggage following separately in secured transport wagons.

During this journey, they had the opportunity to observe France and to note the major political changes that had occurred during their Egyptian exile. France had changed regime.

At Avignon, a crowd was waiting in front of the stagecoach. People were asking for news of sons, brothers, husbands of whom they had heard nothing for three years. Fourier got down and answered patiently. He did not know about all of them.

This scene marked him more than the pyramids had. The great adventure had as its backdrop a simple reality: people who waited. There was a woman of about fifty holding a miniature portrait in her hand. She had asked nothing. She had simply watched the faces of the soldiers as they got down. Fourier had looked away. Some would go on waiting.

The passage through Lyon was the occasion for a two-day halt. Several savants had families or friends in the region and took the opportunity for improvised reunions. Fourier, whose family was at Auxerre, contented himself with sending a letter from Lyon announcing his imminent arrival in Paris.

Jollois, for his part, used these two Lyon days to visit a famous engraver whose work he had seen before the expedition. He wanted to assess whether this engraver could be associated with the production of the plates of *the Description*.

"Here are some examples," said Jollois, unfolding a few of his notebooks on the workshop table.

The engraver examined the drawings at length. His technician's eyes weighed the difficulties. The hieroglyphic lines demanded extreme precision, the bas-reliefs had nuances of depth that were hard to render in flat engraving, the general views of the temples

required a mastery of perspective that not every engraver possessed.

"This is serious work. I can do it. But I shall need time. A great deal of time."

Jollois looked at the engraver's hands. Broad, steady, with calluses in the precise places that only the burin produces. Hands different from his own. His drew. These would engrave. That passage from one gesture to the other was the thing he still understood poorly. They would have to learn together.

"We have time. What we do not have is the right to botch it."

They agreed on terms in principle. Jollois noted the name in his notebook. This Lyon engraver was exactly what he was looking for.

In the evening, returning to the inn, Jollois found Fourier in the common room.

"Bonaparte abandoned us," he said. "And now he is going to use our work for his glory."

Fourier tried to temper this harsh judgement.

"Without him, we would not have been out there. And he has the means to finance *the Description*. Let us keep those two facts in mind."

In Lyon, Jollois bought in a bookshop a copy of his own correspondence with the Institute, published during his absence. The bookseller had not recognised him. Reading his letters from Egypt while in France gave him a strange impression. As if another man had lived that experience and were reporting it to him from afar. He recognised the words but not quite the voice. His writing had changed. It had become more direct, less concerned with effect. That was perhaps good news.

"I am no longer the same man who left Toulon in May of ninety-eight," he said to Jomard on the road.

"No. No one is."

The entry into Paris by the faubourg Saint-Antoine took place at dusk. The city was larger in his memory than it was in reality. He had idealised Paris during the Egyptian months, to the point of making it a symbol of all he lacked. The reality of the city struck him by its prosaic coherence. The same streets, the same smells, the same noise of carts on the cobbles.

“Paris is still Paris.”

“You have come a long way, sir?” asked the coachman.

“From Egypt.”

“Ah,” said the coachman. “They say it’s beautiful.”

“It is more than beautiful. But you have to go home to know what it is worth.”

The arrival in Paris on 28 October was more discreet than some would have wished. No parade, no official reception, no speeches. The Army of the Orient had returned defeated, and the consular government had no reason to celebrate a capitulation. Bonaparte had already rebuilt his legend without Egypt. The campaign had become, in official speeches, a generous parenthesis, an act of scientific interest that had been forced to yield to circumstances, and not a plain and simple military defeat.

Jollois let his companions scatter and went home alone, to the rue Saint-Dominique. The apartment was shut up. His family, warned by letter from Toulon, had had the shutters reopened. He went in, laid down his coat, sat in the armchair where he was in the habit of reading. There was a fire in the hearth. The warmth on his face was soft, steady, the warmth of burning wood, which had nothing to do with that of Egypt.

Everything was in the same place. The bookcase, the paintings, the desk. Three years of Egypt and Paris had not moved.

He took a blank notebook from the shelf, the first he found, and wrote at the head of the first page: “October 1801 – The work begins.” Then he closed the notebook and went to bed.

The family reunions took place in the following days, as the news spread among his relations. Parents, friends, former colleagues. Each wanted accounts, descriptions, anecdotes. Were the pyramids really as large as travellers claimed? Was the heat bearable? Had they really been as frightened as the letters suggested?

Jollois answered patiently, calibrating his accounts to his listeners. With his parents he avoided the details of the fighting and the illnesses. With his savant friends he went into the detail of the monuments. With the general public he kept to the register of astonishment and wonder. This aptitude for modulating the story to the audience, he recognised in himself as an art he had not thought he possessed. It would be useful to him for *the Description*.

“More still. Rumours always fall short of reality when it comes to what one cannot imagine.”

This phrase earned him a few incredulous looks and a few invitations to dinner from Parisians curious to hear his adventures. He accepted them, told his tales, but always with the feeling that words betrayed the experience. Egypt could not be told. It had been lived. And now it lived in the copper tubes stacked in his apartment, waiting to be translated into engraved plates.

He fell asleep that night with that thought. The real work had still not begun. It began tomorrow, and would last twenty years. That was the exact measure of what they had undertaken. And twenty years seemed to him, at that moment, at once perfectly reasonable and perfectly dizzying.

In December, once the initial effervescence of the reunions had passed, the savants began to organise themselves in earnest.

On 10 December, Fourier was received in audience by Bonaparte at the Tuileries palace. The corridors were wide and cold, the warmth of the fireplaces not reaching down to the antechambers. Bonaparte awaited him in his study, standing, as always. Fourier presented the publication project. Bonaparte, who understood

the political interest of glorifying his Egyptian expedition despite its military failure, received the proposal favourably.

"Publish it," said Bonaparte. "I am making it a project of State."

Bonaparte officially decreed that the French State would fund in full the preparation and printing of the *Description de l'Égypte* and that this publication would be regarded as a priority national project. He appointed an editorial commission made up of Fourier as editor-in-chief, Denon as artistic director responsible for the plates, and several other savants as sectional editors responsible for the different thematic parts.

Offices were provided for the savants in a government building in Paris where they could work daily. Substantial budgets were allocated to employ professional engravers, auxiliary draughtsmen, and copyist secretaries.

Denon devoted the whole of December to organising his thousands of drawings so as to begin the work of transforming his rapid sketches into elaborate engraved plates. He sorted his drawings by monuments and by types. General views, architectural details, bas-reliefs, hieroglyphic inscriptions, ground plans, vertical sections.

"This preliminary work of organisation is indispensable," he explained to his assistants, "before we can begin the engraving proper. Without a rigorous systematic organisation, we would lose weeks vainly searching for the drawings we needed. With this methodical arrangement by sites and by types, we shall be able to work efficiently."

He began to select the best copperplate engravers in Paris to entrust them with the delicate work of reproducing his drawings. He met each prospective engraver, examined samples of their earlier work, and discussed at length the standards of quality he would demand.

The first contacts with the engravers revealed an unforeseen difficulty. These superbly trained technicians knew how to

reproduce an original in any conventional style. But Denon's drawings were in no conventional style. They had a freedom of line, an urgency, a productive imprecision that academic engraving did not know how to transcribe.

"You will have to train your eye. These conventions are not clumsiness. They obey a logic that you must understand before reproducing it. An engraver who does not understand why an Egyptian face is drawn like this will 'correct' it, and make grave errors in doing so."

This work would be longer than he had foreseen. But it was clear that Denon would not compromise, and that *the Description* would be the greatest undertaking in which he would ever take part.

Fourier, for his part, was advancing with the writing of the historical preface. He had adopted a tone of learned deliberation that suited the scale of the project. Every sentence was weighed. He did not want *the Description* to be a mere illustrated catalogue. He wanted it to be an act of thought, an intellectual monument comparable to the *Encyclopédie*, a text that would tell posterity what France had understood of Egypt, and perhaps what Egypt said of France.

December 1801 drew to a close in this concentrated work, in those offices and workshops where the great enterprise was taking shape. None of the savants could know then that it would take years still to bring it to completion, that the twenty-three *folio* volumes of *the Description de l'Égypte* would not be complete until 1829. Nearly thirty years of work to account for three years of expedition. That disproportion was perhaps the exact measure of what they had seen.

The meeting of 19 December at the Institut de France was the first official meeting of the Commission of Sciences and Arts since its return. Fourier had organised the summons with care, sending personal letters to every member still living – some thirty had perished in Egypt – to invite them to gather in the great hall of the Institut.

There were about sixty of them, come from all over France. Some had not seen one another since Alexandria, since the days of the capitulation and the embarkation. They met again with the quiet emotion of survivors who have shared an experience that no one else can entirely understand.

Fourier presided over the meeting with the solemnity it deserved, recalling the work accomplished, the difficulties overcome, the losses suffered, evoking the names of the dead colleagues, then presenting the plan for the publication of *the Description*, the funding obtained from the consular government, the provisional timetable.

"This work will take time. Ten years, perhaps. Perhaps more. Each of you will be called upon to contribute to the writing of his part. What we began in Egypt, we shall finish here, in Paris, in our offices and our libraries. The adventure was out there. The work will be here."

Denon, seated in the audience, listened, thinking of his notebooks in his apartment, of all those drawings waiting to be engraved. The work he had done in Egypt was only half the work. The other half was beginning.

The last week of December was devoted to drafting the first official report of the Commission of Sciences and Arts to the Minister of the Interior. This report, ninety-two pages long, presented an inventory of what the Commission had accomplished, of what it had brought back, and of what it proposed to publish.

Fourier wrote the bulk of it, Denon the artistic part, Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire the naturalist part. Marcel the part concerning languages and manuscripts. The document, sober and precise, impressed the minister, who passed it to Bonaparte with a favourable note.

Bonaparte, who had followed the progress of the collections since his return to France two years earlier, summoned Fourier for a working meeting. He wanted the *Description de l'Égypte* to be

not only a scientific monument but also a political monument glorifying his Eastern campaign. The two aims were not incompatible, but their coexistence obliged the savants to navigate with care.

“We shall serve science,” said Fourier to Denon after the meeting with Bonaparte. “And we shall let Bonaparte believe that we are serving his glory. That is how great scientific works have always been financed.”

Denon smiled. That formulation was perhaps the most accurate he had heard to describe their situation since the beginning of the expedition.

Bonaparte received the Commission’s report with an interest that was not feigned. He had a real intellectual curiosity about certain aspects of the expedition, the pyramids, the Rosetta Stone, the colossal temples of Thebes. A year later he would read Denon’s *Voyage* with passion and speak of it to his friends.

“Your Denon writes well,” said Monge. “That is rare among savants. His letters on the pyramids are the best descriptions I have read.”

“He sees what he describes,” said Bonaparte. “He is an artist as much as a savant.”

Bonaparte nodded. A few weeks later, he let Denon know that he had an idea for him, without going into detail.

For the savants who remained to work on *the Description*, the idea that Denon might obtain a post at the summit was good news. This prospect guaranteed them a highly placed interlocutor, understanding and well informed, within the government.

The funding Bonaparte granted was generous but not unlimited. The savants soon had to confront the economic reality of a monumental publication. Engravers cost dearly, printing large-format plates even more, and quality paper was expensive.

Fourier worked out a mixed funding plan combining government credits with subscriptions from libraries, academies and

wealthy private individuals. This formula, which made it possible to control costs while widening circulation, foreshadowed the funding models of the great scientific publications of the nineteenth century.

Denon, for his part, negotiated with a Parisian publisher the publication of his *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte* as a stand-alone volume, preceding the collective *Description*. This rapid publication, as early as 1802, would keep public interest in ancient Egypt alive and create a favourable context for the reception of *the Description* when it appeared.

“We publish in two stages. My *Voyage* first, for the general public and to maintain momentum. *The Description* afterwards, for savants and for eternity.”

Denon’s appointment as director-general of the national museums, pronounced by consular decree in November 1802, was a surprise to him as much as to his colleagues of the Commission. Bonaparte had decided on it after reading the *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte* and after several conversations with Denon on art and collections.

This post, which he had not solicited and which Bonaparte had reserved for him since their conversation of December 1801, would place Denon at the heart of a contradiction. As director of the museums, he would supervise the acquisition of works of art from the countries conquered by the Napoleonic Empire. He would become the central cog of a policy of systematic spoliation of which he had been, in Egypt, the critical and powerless witness. He accepted all the same. He thought that from that position he could influence the way the collections were assembled and presented, insist on the scientific dimension rather than the triumphal. It would be another battle, fought with other tools.

This fundamental tension between his future role and his past experience did not escape him. He noted it in his journal with the cold precision he reserved for observations that were hard to

bear. Then he moved on. There was too much to do to dwell on the paradoxes of his situation.

The twenty years that followed would be the most productive of his professional life, though different in nature from those he had just lived. More sedentary, more administrative, more institutional. But also, in their way, just as demanding. Bringing out *the Description de l'Égypte* would require an endurance and a discipline comparable to those of the expedition itself. Denon knew it. Twenty years of work ahead of him. He went out into the street and walked.

VII - The Work Begins

Jomard had lived in the rue de la Croix-Faubin since his return. A room that was cold in winter, facing north, but with a large table on which he had spread out his sheets of measurements.

It was a year since he had come home. For a year, he had transcribed, compared, corrected. His topographical surveys now extended over two hundred sheets of graph paper, from the Delta to the cataracts of Aswan. The most precise map of Egypt that had ever been drawn.

He was calculating the height of the Great Pyramid: a hundred and forty-six and a half metres, or about two hundred and eighty Egyptian royal cubits. The builders had used a precise unit of measurement, and that unit could now be recovered. He published the value in his notes: 0.5236 metre. Egyptologists would use it for a hundred and fifty years.

He also thought about the Suez Canal. Bonaparte had envisaged it.

Lepère, the chief engineer, had made a monumental error. He had concluded that the Red Sea was nearly ten metres higher than the Mediterranean, making the canal impossible without locks.

Jomard already doubted these figures, without being able to prove it. Lepère's report would appear in 1803.

This error would cost nearly half a century, until Bourdaloue, in 1847, took the measurements again and showed that the two seas were almost at the same level, and Ferdinand de Lesseps dug the canal in ten years.

Jomard, in his cold room, looked at his map of the Nile. Every meander surveyed by compass and theodolite. Every village. Every temple. The valley of the Nile stretched over ten sheets from north to south, with a precision that would allow an engineer to foresee where the water would go if a dam were built.

A century later, the British engineers who would build the first Aswan dam would still consult Jomard's surveys.

That evening he set down in his journal: "All this work so that the engineers of the next century may manage the water of a people we did not know how to govern."

He blew out the candle. He still had a hundred and ten sheets to transcribe before the Commission could begin printing the first volume of the *Description*.

October brought the first real resistances of the work.

The deepest was not technical. It was the problem of the hieroglyphs.

Denon realised it each evening on rereading his notes of the day. He had drawn hundreds of columns of inscription at Karnak, at Luxor, in the Valley of the Kings. He had copied them with an engraver's precision, sign by sign, without understanding a single one. *The Description* would publish these columns. Thousands of readers would look at them. No one would know what they said.

It was a fundamental gap, and there was no remedy available.

Marcel had put it clearly at a meeting in October.

"We must adopt a strictly descriptive style. What we see, not what it means."

The *Description de l'Égypte* was at the outset an idea of Fourier's. Not entirely. Bonaparte had ordered its publication, Jomard had

organised, Denon had supplied the images. But it was Fourier who had first understood what this book had to be. A monument. An encyclopaedia of an entire civilisation, as it had been found.

He would write the historical preface from his Paris apartment over two years. A hundred and sixty dense pages, a synthesis of everything that was known of Egypt since the Greeks.

The volume of images was dizzying. Denon had his notebooks, Jollois and Devilliers theirs, two hundred and thirty-seven in all. Jomard had two hundred sheets of surveys. Geoffroy had hundreds of plates of zoology and botany. The engineers had architectural plans for every monument visited. In all, eight hundred and ninety-four plates, of which some sixty were in colour. Some four hundred engravers, over twenty years. Dozens of draughtsmen, many of whom had taken part in the expedition.

Plates so large that no Parisian press could print them. Conté – the same Conté who had made pencils in Egypt – had designed before his death in 1805 a special device for the most demanding formats, which his successors put into operation. New presses were built. Some plates covered nearly a square metre. Specially manufactured sheets of paper were needed, watermarked *Égypte ancienne et moderne*. Some plates demanded two years of work apiece.

The first volume appeared in 1809. The last in 1829. Twenty-three volumes, printed in a thousand copies on watermarked laid paper. The commercial *Panckoucke* edition would appear from 1821 in thirty-seven volumes.

Fourier would see the first volumes appear, then the completed work. He would die in 1830.

The *Description de l'Égypte* created Egyptology as a discipline. It documented monuments since destroyed, colours since effaced, sites since plundered. It enabled a French savant to work out his method of decipherment. What France truly kept of Egypt was a hundred and sixty-seven minds and the eight hundred and

ninety-four plates they had produced. What it had stolen – and the word was exact, whatever the justification – was in London. The statues were in London. The knowledge was in Paris.

It was the only comfort available. It was real.

The other difficulties – consistency between plates by different artists, standardisation of the names of monuments – were settled by working procedures that Fourier devised with his customary method: clear, practical, immediately applicable. Every plate was checked against the dimensional surveys. Modern Arabic names were adopted as the official names, with the ancient Greek names in brackets.

Jomard proposed the rule on names. Fourier applied it.

In November, Denon began writing the notices. Each plate was to be accompanied by a text: location, dimensions, state of preservation, probable dynastic attribution.

Denon wrote the notices concerning the principal temples he had explored. His literary style, influenced by the nascent Romantic prose of the early nineteenth century, combined scientific descriptive precision with evocative passages conveying the aesthetic and spiritual emotion felt in contemplating these majestic monuments.

His notice on Karnak began with the dimensions. An enclosure of five hundred and forty metres by five hundred and fifty, thirty hectares, a hundred and thirty-four columns in the hypostyle hall, twelve central columns twenty-one metres high. Then a sentence: “The effect produced by this forest of columns is that of a space where human grandeur and divine grandeur merge.”

Fourier struck out the sentence. Denon reinstated it.

Fourier reread the notices and struck out the lyrical passages. Denon reinstated them. Fourier struck them out again.

“We are doing science, not literature,” said Fourier.

“The science of what?” replied Denon. “These monuments were built to produce an effect on the one who looks at them. If we do not convey that effect, we are cataloguing stones.”

Neither gave way. They let the two tones coexist. *The Description* would be both things at once. Perhaps that was why it would endure.

Fourier lived in the rue des Fossés-Saint-Victor, twenty minutes’ walk from the Hôtel de Beauvais.

He thought of Bonaparte. Not of his vanity or his ambition, which he had long since given up opposing, but of something simpler: that man had launched an expedition that had changed the way Europe looked at Egypt, changed the way Fourier himself looked at history, and he probably knew little of it. For Bonaparte, Egypt had been a military error redeemed by a successful coup. For Fourier, it would remain all his life the densest period he had known.

That was the difference between those who make history and those who understand it. Rarely the same people.

He stopped at the corner of the rue Saint-Jacques. A young man was selling newspapers in the cold. He bought one without reading it, and walked on.

Jomard, in his room in the rue de la Croix-Faubin, was still working. He had rented a room that was too small, where he had set up his notebooks and instruments on a table covered with tracing paper. That evening, he was perfecting the cartographic projection system he would use for the atlas of *the Description*. The valley of the Nile extended over eight degrees of latitude but never exceeded twenty kilometres in width. He needed a projection that preserved the proportions of this thin fertile strip without distorting distances too much.

He drew the first meridian. Then the parallels. Then the mouth of the Nile in the north, at Rosetta. Then the course of the river

towards the south, with its meanders that he knew by heart from having measured them for eighteen months.

The map took shape, one line at a time.

Midnight when Jomard put down his pen. He blew out the lamp rather than let it burn out – a habit from Egypt, where oil was dear – and stayed a while in the dark. Twenty-five years old. He had seen the pyramids, the temples of Thebes, the desert, a battle, a capitulation, had measured things that no one had measured before him.

And now he was making a map in a cold room.

It was no worse. Real science was done at night, with patience. He thought of Abdallah, the *wakil* of the canal, who had told him that apprenticeship never ended because the canal never finished changing either. He understood now what that meant. Egypt had been the harvest. This was the grain being threshed, brought into the granaries to last through the winter.

Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, in the rue de Seine, was writing to Cuvier. They were rivals and knew it. But the letter he was composing was not one of rivalry; it was a letter of truth.

He described to him the mummified ibises of Saqqara, the crocodiles of the Nile, the cats of Bubastis. And he described to him something he had told no one yet. The conviction that had come to him during the Egyptian months that species are not fixed, that they change with their environment.

Cuvier would oppose him. They would quarrel for thirty years before the Académie. That quarrel would be one of the most important in European natural history. It had begun here, in a room in Paris, in December 1802, with a letter to a man he loved and fought at the same time.

He closed the letter and sealed it. The evening came to an end. The next morning, he posted it.

Egypt went on acting, at a distance, in the minds of those who had passed through it. It was not nostalgia. It was something

more stubborn and more useful. A different way of seeing things, which would not be reabsorbed.

In December, the Ministry of Finance informed Fourier that expenses exceeded forecasts. The engravers were absorbing forty per cent of the budget. Quality paper, twenty. To cut without sacrificing quality was impossible. Fourier told the minister so. The minister said he would see.

He saw. The funds were maintained. *The Description* went on.

Jomard, in his room, had taken out that evening his notes from the Fayum. Irrigation surveys he had not yet transcribed for *the Description*. Canals, flow rates, rotations of the sakiehs. He had spent two weeks there measuring things that the fellahs knew without ever having written them down. A hydraulic system as old as the pharaohs, held entire in the heads of the men who had practised it since childhood. He had noted it, converted it into minutes and flow rates, set it out so that engineers of the following century could read it. It was perhaps the only way to save it.

He put down the notebook. Outside, Paris was silent. Somewhere, the same stars as those of the Fayum. The same oxen, probably, turning in their circles.

By the end of December, twenty volumes were in simultaneous preparation. The direction was set, the teams in place.

On the evening of 31 December 1802, Denon put down his pencil and looked at the copper tubes lined up against the wall of his study. Four copper tubes, numbered in black paint. In tube number one, his oldest notebooks, Alexandria, the march through the desert, the first views of the pyramids. In number three, the surveys of Thebes and the Valley of the Kings. In number four, the last drawings, made in Cairo on the eve of departure. He got up, took tube number one, unscrewed the stopper. Took out the first notebook. It fell open at a rapid sketch. The deck of the Junon, with the sails and the fleet in the background, drawn during the crossing of May 1798. Four years earlier. Almost another man.

He closed the notebook, screwed the stopper back on. Put the tube back against the wall.

Outside, Paris was ending its year in the ordinary noise of a great city. The chimes, the voices, the wheels of carriages on the wet cobbles. In a few hours, 1802 would become 1803. *The Description* would be a year old. Twenty-six more would be needed.

He let the flame die and went out into the street. He walked for a while without any particular direction, in the dry cold of the Parisian night. At the corner of the rue de Grenelle, he stopped and raised his eyes. The sky was clear. Orion was there, above the rooftops, exactly where he had seen it above the pyramids in the winter of 1798.

The same stars. The same night. Another country, another life.

He went home, sat at his table, opened a blank notebook. At the head of the first page, he wrote the date. Then, beneath it: "Temple of Karnak, hypostyle hall. Central columns: 21 metres. Diameter: 3 metres 50. Papyriform capitals."

He began to write the notice.

Bonaparte, for his part, had not waited. First Consul since Brumaire of Year VIII, Consul for life in 1802, Emperor of the French in 1804. The man who had told the savants of Cairo that their work would outlast him was building something more ambitious and more fragile: a regime. The *Description de l'Égypte* would appear under the Empire. Denon would run its museums. What the expedition had been in fact – precarious, incomplete, costly – was becoming in the official narrative a foundation of national glory. That was how things ended up holding together.

Denon had still not finished. The campaigns were about to resume. Germany, Austria, Prussia. And with the campaigns, the collections.

End of Volume II