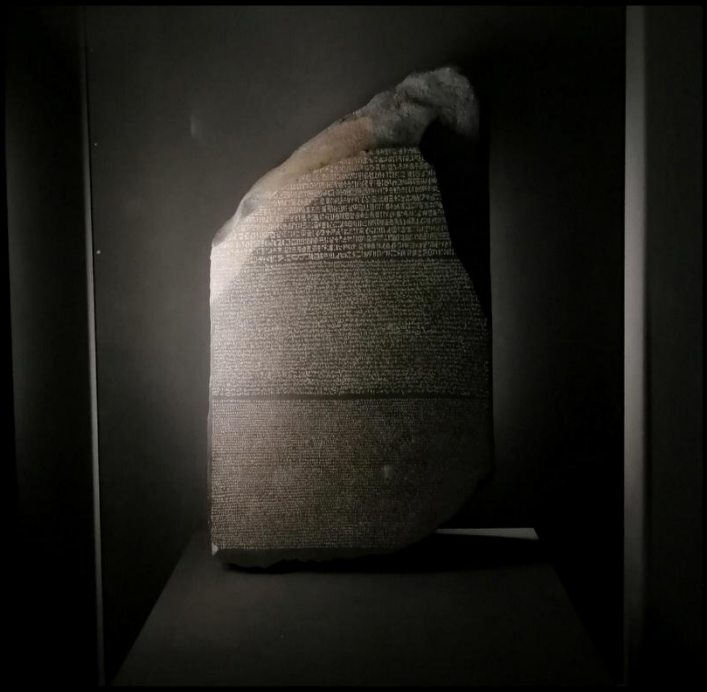
THE GREAT PLUNDER

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

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ISBN 9782488999236

The Great Plunder
Historical novel in four volumes
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Legal deposit April 2026 – digital ebook and print edition
© 2026 Casanovas. All rights reserved
ISBN : 978-2-488999-23-6
www.international-restitutions.org

Cover : Full-size reproduction of the Rosetta Stone set within an optical theatre, at the Musée Champollion in Vif (Isère, France)
17 July 2022 – Julien Peytard



English version
Volume II
1798-1801 – The Egyptian campaign
Definitive edition, revised and corrected

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. The works mentioned did indeed exist and, for the most part, were taken during theFrench 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 four 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, more sweetly, of a vegetable resin that it took him a moment to recognise – mastic from Chios, no doubt. He slipped it into his pocket to analyse on board. The quay vibrated beneath his feet. That smell reminded him of the *Bel Paese*.

In 1796, Bonaparte had sent him to Italy with Gaspard Monge 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.

The expedition would do the same thing as in Italy, on a larger scale. What Bonaparte called a scientific expedition, Berthollet, in his private notes, more exactly called an acquisition operation.

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. The men still did not know where it was going.

Monge scribbled equations on the cover of his notebook while the ships manoeuvred. He did not look at the quay, nor at anything that could not be calculated. The pencil lead scratched on the card.

Lower down, on C deck, Edme-François Jomard stretched a string between two pulleys to measure the length of a corridor. A former student of the École Polytechnique's first intake, aged twenty, he was leaving France for the first time. The string read three metres sixty-two. He counted the ribs along which the corridor ran, related his measurement to the spacing of the frames and drew from it an estimate of the ship's length, to within a few metres. No one had asked him for it.

Joseph Fourier, a mathematician of thirty, 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. The prospect of an entire civilisation to measure had decided him to embark. Of fieldwork he had no experience.

Dominique-Vivant Denon, writer and diplomat, had taken his place on the frigate *Junon*, which led the squadron with two other frigates. He 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 rolled in a piece of canvas. He knew this order by heart, every tool in its place, as a grammarian knows his language, and doing it again gave him the impression of holding on to something. Egypt still had no shape in his mind. His equipment did. If everything else went wrong, he would at least have his charcoals in order.

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. On the shore, handkerchiefs were still waving when the first sails rounded the point. Denon watched the coast recede.

"Are you afraid?" an officer of the *Junon* asked him.

"Afraid? No, sir. Impatient. That is not at all the same thing."

While the ships stood out to sea, he drew the coasts and islands in the morning light. That sketch would appear years later among the plates of the first edition of his *Voyage*.

Six weeks 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.

For the first few days the sea was calm. The savants swarmed over the decks with their instruments, 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 swollen sails, dark hulls, reflections on the water. He drew the sea less well than he drew monuments, but he 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 knew this trait. Bonaparte did not read to be contradicted. He read to

find precedents for what he already wanted to do. Monge did not press the point.

The library of the *Orient* served as an institution. Bonaparte had turned it into a small floating academy, with readings aloud in the evening and discussions of the ancient history of Egypt. Around the table of the great cabin gathered the leading savants and the officers who had a taste for letters. They read Herodotus, they discussed Thucydides, and they often ended, very late, on the causes of the fall of Rome. Bonaparte presided and often intervened, with a historical culture that astonished the professors of the Institut.

"Why civilisations die matters nothing to me. Why they endure, that is what I want to understand. Egypt held for three thousand years. What holds a state together 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 were as good as a demonstration that mathematics alone could not produce. He saw there a civilisation that had solved irrigation, architecture and astronomy long before the algebra he taught his students. He spoke of it in figures rather than in words. Berthollet spoke of the concentration of power in a central administration. Denon, a guest that evening aboard the *Orient*, admitted that he knew nothing about it and that he was counting on the monuments to tell him.

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."

"The absence of a living owner, General, has never meant the absence of an owner."

Berthollet had said it in a low voice, and Bonaparte had already taken up his book again. Since Venice, since Milan, he had known that the right word and the effective word were not always the same. That was the price of the expedition, accepted on boarding the *Orient*. He kept his eyes a moment longer on the flame of the lamp, which was smoking.

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

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 blue, which had nothing to do with the seascapes of Claude Lorrain. To render it, the sea would have had to be painted differently. He knew no one who had done so.

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. The best informed murmured Egypt, but the name seemed so distant that few dared believe it.

A few days later, Bonaparte let his senior officers understand what the destination was, which the proclamation to the whole army would officially reveal only on 22 June, after Malta. Egypt. The African coast of the Mediterranean. The Nile, the pyramids, the deserts, the ruins of Thebes and Memphis. The rumour quickly reached the savants. Berthollet at once thought of the waters of the Nile and of Egyptian natron. Monge, still pale, said that above all he hoped drinking water would be found. Jomard

asked nothing. He preferred to know in advance what he was going to see, and spent two hours shut in his cabin rereading his notes on ancient irrigation systems.

Denon took Herodotus out of his bag. The book opened of its own accord at the passage on the pyramids. 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.

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, and the heat was mounting. For many soldiers who had never left the north of France, this sea was already the edge of the known world. They gazed at the horizon with an anxious curiosity, leaning on the burning rails.

The night of the eighteenth day was the clearest of the crossing. The air still held the day's heat and smelled of tar and salt. Not a cloud. A moon in its last quarter, newly risen, laid a cold, precise light on the water. 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 – the slow creaking of the masts, the muffled beating of sails searching for wind – and, from very far away, a human voice, or the cry of a night bird.

Around midnight, a boat from the *Orient* came alongside the *Junon*. Bonaparte had formed the habit of these night rounds, alone or almost, while his officers slept, and sometimes visited the vanguard frigates. He joined Denon and 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 forms remain. It is more honest. Over there…" – he searched for the word – "over

there, nothing is new, everything has already been seen. Drawn with precision? Nothing. Herodotus describes the pyramids without surveying them. Strabo mentions them without understanding them. As for me, I would like to bring back images of which no one will be able to say that they are approximate."

Bonaparte did not reply. 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. Had the winds blown otherwise, everything Denon would carry in his notebooks would have gone down with the ships.

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 shall not need a siege. It will be enough to land."

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

"General, these divisions within the Order, is your information reliable?"

"Divided into rival factions. The Grand Master is weak. They will not fight. We shall enter before long."

Monge felt bound to ask a question.

"General… Malta is not at war with France. The Order is sovereign, recognised for centuries. The Pope, the Catholic powers… What justification will you give?"

"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 just learned where the limit lay.

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

The inventory revealed stupefying quantities of precious metals. Enough to finance several months of campaign. Denon, who had been able to land on 14 June, walked through the great treasury hall, which the commissaries were inventorying chest by chest.

The Order's wealth was first of all monetary, made up of silver ingots, gold coins, liturgical plate. Several 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, portraits of grand masters of the Order, and a large *Resurrection of Lazarus* of the Neapolitan school that was being rolled up without precaution.

Denon also noticed what was not being taken. In the oratory of the cathedral was the *Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, Caravaggio's largest canvas, three metres sixty by five metres twenty of black and red tempest. 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.

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. 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 eat from pewter bowls.

Each conquest paid for the next – always the same mechanism, he thought, watching a candlestick pass from hand to hand.

There was also *La Tenture des Indes*, a series of tapestries woven at the Gobelins from cartoons inspired by paintings brought back from Brazil by Prince Jean-Maurice de Nassau-Siegen – elephants, parrots, tropical fortresses, court scenes, their colours still vivid. The King of France had given the Order what the army of France would, this time, leave in place.

He noted the dimensions. Two metres fifty high, roughly five metres wide for the largest. Wool and silk. They could be rolled up. No one was rolling them. 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 come from France; Louis XIV gave them to the Order."

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

There were 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, on the sole faith of a parchment more yellowed than the others. The rest was left on the shelves.

They would stay there. After the French departure, the Order's library would become the public library of Malta.

"Flanders had been methodical, Italy had been scholarly, Malta was hasty. Each campaign plundered 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." Berthollet wrote it in his observations, watching the loaded longboats pull away towards the ships.

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. He already knew that he would not see Malta again. In the holds, the crates were stacked with the gold and the silverware. In his notebooks, the fortifications, the cathedral, the harbour.

The gold would be recast. The paintings rolled up in the holds, no one would bring them 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.

"I was expecting… well, something else, General. A dilapidated little town. Where are the temples, the palaces? The great library?"

Bonaparte smiled.

"Vanished. Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Ottomans. Only the stones remain. That is why we are here."

The landing began in the evening, in a heavy swell. The longboats set the soldiers down on the shoals. They jumped into the water and splashed up to the beach in the warm darkness. The smell reached them before the houses did. Salt, heated stone, fish, the smoke of an ancient city that did not expect to be surprised.

The savants landed the next day, at the end of the day, once the city had been taken. Alexandria was not what they had read. Ten 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 twenty and a half metres high, nearly three 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; over the upper two thirds, about two metres fifty. 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. The calculation still held.

At the pedestal, scattered blocks bore fragments of hieroglyphic inscriptions, probably torn from an earlier pharaonic temple. The Romans had plundered temples to build, the Arabs Roman buildings, the Ottomans Arab buildings. Pompey's Pillar itself rested on stones that had already served elsewhere.

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

Alexandria was disappointing – so many centuries lay piled one upon another there. The savants were already looking towards the Nile.

The taking of the city had cost some one hundred and fifty 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 punish those who insulted the Ottoman sultan, a friend of France.

"People of Egypt," the text proclaimed, "you will be told that I come to destroy your religion. Do not believe it. Answer that I come to restore your rights and punish the usurpers, and that I respect, more than the Mamluks, God, His Prophet and the Koran. We too are true Muslims. Was it not we who destroyed the Pope, who said that war must be waged on Muslims? Was it not we who destroyed the Knights of Malta?"

While Bonaparte organised the administration of Alexandria, the savants began their first labours. Denon looked for traces of Ptolemaic grandeur. He found few, a handful of blocks reused in brick walls.

Denon spent his first night sleepless. 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 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, and by money.

"Look at this door," said Denon, without lifting his pencil from the geometric motifs of the carved wood. "Nothing here belongs to a single period. Layers, thousands of years of layers, and none has quite erased the one before."

"Which complicates the measured drawings," said Jomard. "An ancient block of granite in the wall of an eighteenth-century house… how do I date it? By the block, or by the wall?"

"Both, my dear fellow. That is the trouble, and that is the charm."

The fish market revealed to Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, a young naturalist and member of the Commission of Sciences, some ten 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, scalpel in hand, that ignorance smelled worse.

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.

Bonaparte himself had no leisure to 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 observed 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.

On 6 July, Bonaparte gave the order to march. Two hundred and twenty kilometres separated the coast from Cairo. Between the two lay the desert, and 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, without having seen the enemy. 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 often 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. He nearly said thank you and held back. One did not thank a general for a mouthful of water as one thanked a friend. He handed back the canteen. Bonaparte had already looked elsewhere.

"All great undertakings have their trials," Bonaparte went on. "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. The heat was unlike anything the soldiers had known. It rose from the ground as much as from the sky. The canteens emptied. 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.

"Ah, Jomard," said Denon to the young engineer-geographer who had dropped down beside him. "Here at last is the true Egypt."

"The line, above all," said Jomard, shading his eyes with his hand. "The palm trees, the crops, then the desert. A few kilometres from the bank. One could trace it with a taut cord."

Everything depended on the Nile. Egypt was only a corridor of water in a continent of sand.

Drinking water was now available. The army was regaining its strength, the savants their instruments. 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. Nile water raised by the strength of oxen or of arms to fields lying a few metres higher, by techniques unchanged since the pharaohs and still in use. The botanists collected date palms, sycamores, lotus, papyrus and aromatic plants unknown in Europe. Geoffroy stuffed birds – ibises, herons – and filled crates. The fauna of the Nile offered itself to him, with its crocodiles on the banks, its

hippopotamuses that had become rare, its migratory birds by the thousand.

"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 edge of the Nile."

"Worshipping a bird, my dear Geoffroy… The height of superstition. The Enlightenment has corrected that, it seems to me."

Geoffroy did not answer. He thought that 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, another language for the same attention. He kept the comparison to himself and went back to his birds.

Denon had begun buying from the first month. He did not speak of it to his colleagues. Fourier, Monge and Berthollet had not settled the matter – scientific collecting or personal appropriation – and none of them put the question aloud.

Later, in the months following the army's entry into Cairo on 24 July, a market had been set up at Saqqara as soon as 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 who had put it there said a sentence. Denon did not understand. He turned to Hassan, the interpreter the Commission 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 rebirth.

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 carnelian. 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 through a honeyed light. Fragments of papyrus covered in hieratic writing, acquired without knowing what they said.

What they said, the orientalists would learn years later. 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 passages from thirty-eight chapters or spells of the *Book of the Dead*.

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, Denon 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.

One morning, at 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 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 clashed too sharply with what was taught in Paris.

In November, at Saqqara, Geoffroy would ask Denon to show him the animal representations in the bas-reliefs. They would spend half a day comparing the ibises of the paintings with living ibises. The paintings and the birds would resemble each other perfectly, as if three thousand years had changed nothing. Denon would draw 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 for a long time.

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.

"General Bon, left division. General Desaix, right division. We do not move. We let them come."

Then, more quietly, for himself alone, 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 south. 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, what

a geometer was doing there, between two mules, while cavalry charged.

The rumble arrived before the sound of hooves. A vibration of the earth beneath the soles of their 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 south, on the plain stretching between the village of Embabeh, entrenched on the bank of the Nile, and the pyramids. Six thousand Mamluk horsemen, perhaps seven thousand, massed in undulating formations. 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, out of the thirty-eight thousand embarked at Toulon, 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. 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, spurred straight at Desaix's square. A warrior aristocracy on horseback rather than an army, each rider fighting for his own glory, without collective order. Scimitars, pistols at their belts, carbines slung across their backs. Some wore mail that glittered in the sun. Others, robes of embroidered silk.

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. It did not stop, it crumbled. 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. 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 drew blind. Backs, muskets, smoke, a corner of pyramid above the heads. The neck of the Alsatian soldier in front of him, the muskets that rose and fell, the acrid smoke. 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.

The fighting had lasted more than an hour when 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, less to pursue the enemy than to deliver a hammer blow intended to break its 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. The triumphal paintings would be commissioned later.

The army set off again, and 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, and 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 be only a rough draft, which he would take up again methodically in 1799 during the survey of the pyramids of Giza.

Denon looked at the pyramids, then at 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 found in the tombs, the papyri, the faience scarabs, all of it fitted into a campaign chest.

Night fell quickly on the Giza plateau. The soldiers lit their bivouac fires. The orange light of the flames reddened the base of the stones. 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. More than a hundred and thirty 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. Simpler than the daytime drawing, with no smoke in front of the notebook.

Jomard found him there around one in the morning. He hauled himself up onto the next block, examined the sketch in the notebook, then the pyramid, then the notebook again. Denon spoke at last.

"A battle won, and in a thousand years… Murad Bey fleeing south, who will know? Look at it. It has seen a hundred like ours. It does not count them."

"Our notebooks will write it," said Jomard. "Which, strictly speaking, is not the same as remembering it."

"Notebooks. And pyramids. That is what remains of victories, my dear fellow."

Jomard did not answer at once. His eyes sought the summit, which could not be seen.

"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. They did exactly what they had planned to do."

In the distance, the soldiers' bivouac fires twinkled on the plain. Somewhere to the north-east, Cairo slept.

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.

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

The next morning, Jomard went into the Great Pyramid with Monge and Denon. 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. Jomard 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. Jomard looked back. Neither said anything. Statuettes, Denon would later bring back in his own baggage. Between the soldier's pocket and the savants' crates, Jomard already sensed that there would be only a difference of degree. The soldier went on towards the exit, his right hand still closed.

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. With the torch raised, the light did not reach the top, and one saw only the two walls drawing closer in the dark.

"Look at that," said Monge, his nose raised towards the walls. "The Romans make vaults, the Egyptians corbels – the same problem, my friends, the very same! And they did not know one another."

"Give or take a few millennia," replied Denon. "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. Denon held the spirit level.

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

Jomard measured the room in all three dimensions. Length, ten metres fifty. 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. Two to one, more or less. I hardly believe in chance. A geometry of proportions, which we are rediscovering… They did not write it down. They 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. When he opened his eyes again, the light made him wince.

Jomard opened his notebook. Beneath the figures for the King's Chamber, in a looser hand, he added three sentences. "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 Denon finished his surveys of the east face, Jomard wandered off towards the south of the plateau. He wanted to see the Sphinx from afar 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.

Jomard 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. He drew the face from below, at the angle no painter had yet represented, that of someone seated at the foot of the monument and raising his eyes.

"Time to get back to camp, citizen," a soldier from the protection detachment came to tell him. Jomard raised a hand without turning round and did not move. The soldier went away, shrugging. There was light left for about twenty minutes.

He thought of what the Sphinx guarded. Or was supposed to guard. The ancient Egyptians, it would later be learned, 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 – an astronomical calculation, carried out with a precision that his own 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, precise and mute, under the pencil of a twenty-year-old engineer.

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 one. Serenity, he would not have sworn to. He shook the sand from his coat-tails and set off back to camp.

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 could hardly believe it. After days of desert and then of marching along the Nile, 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.

Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire 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 would not hold for months.

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. Geoffroy 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 and the palpable mistrust of the streets. There was nothing in it of sympathy for France. Hospitality, rather, as it had existed in this country before the French, before the Ottomans, before even the Arabs. The old man had already gone back to his reed pens.

Jomard, more pragmatic, at once took an interest in the dimensions of the city. Three hundred thousand inhabitants was more than half the population of Paris. But spread over a far smaller area, in narrow alleys that allowed only two donkeys abreast. 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.

"Well, here we are!" said Monge, raising his cup. "Six weeks at sea, Malta, the desert, a battle… and this coffee – taste this coffee, thick as a sauce. In a Mamluk palace!"

"The essential remains," said Berthollet, without touching his own.

"What, then?"

"Understanding what we have before us. This country… The rest – the conquest – was the easy part, Monge."

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, and he had not foreseen that this could be frightening. Cairo still did not sleep. In the neighbouring streets, the army was settling in for the night. Shouted orders, horses, the dull sound of crates being set down.

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. Thirteen seventy-four-gun ships and the fifty-gun *Leander* entered the roadstead, but the *Culloden* ran aground on the shoal and took no part in the battle. Five of them, on the initiative of Captain Foley, 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, later, of the moon that rose 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 had commanded her, wounded but refusing to leave his post, until a cannonball killed him. 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 blaze reached the magazines. The sailors tried to put it out, but the pumps had been destroyed by the earlier gunfire.

At ten o'clock, the *Orient* exploded. The blast was visible from Alexandria, more than twenty 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, neither the British nor the French fired again. 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 the *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, and the Mediterranean was becoming British again. French losses ran to several thousand men killed, wounded or taken prisoner. The British had not lost a single ship.

Without a fleet, the French army was a prisoner in Egypt, without reinforcements or supplies, without any means of returning. 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, by a staff officer whom Kléber had dispatched to him from Alexandria. As soon as he reached the capital, he summoned a council of war.

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

Caffarelli – forty-two years old, a general of engineers, with a wooden leg since the siege of Mannheim, frankness his occupational failing – asked the question that everyone was holding back from asking.

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

Bonaparte hesitated.

"We hold the Nile, Caffarelli. Egypt will feed the army. Malta has given us enough to hold out. The Directory, we do not depend on it. We carry on. The Army of the Orient is cut off from France – well, we are obliged to do great things. By sea, no? Then by land. Syria, Turkey. Or else we stay here until circumstances change."

"Prisoners, then," said Monge, with a small laugh that fell flat. "For how long?"

Berthollet, more stoical, went looking for a precedent.

"Alexander stayed away from Macedonia for eleven years, Monge. No one pities him much. Our work here will outlast us… Hold on to that."

After the council, Caffarelli found Fourier in the palace corridor and stopped him with a hand on his arm. Caffarelli 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."

Caffarelli said nothing. He let go of Fourier and walked back towards his officers, his wooden leg ringing on the paving.

The whole enterprise now came down to the fact that 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, Jomard 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 crates labelled in his own hand and 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 before this evening, since the beginning of the expedition. The first at Alexandria, without paying attention, among other crates. The second a few days earlier, when he had come to check the collections by lantern. The third the day before. They had not moved, and no one had claimed them. They existed outside the system, 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 this note : "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, Jomard went to the spice market at Khan el-Khalili to see whether the news was known in the city. Nothing, at first sight, showed it. 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 parted. He held them open for a moment, palms empty, above the rolls of cotton.

"They know," Jomard said to his interpreter.

"Since last night. In the souks, news travels faster than couriers. They say the French fleet has been destroyed. And that you are prisoners here now."

"And what do they think of that?"

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

"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."

Jomard bought a piece of indigo cloth. He had no use for it. The colour was beautiful, and he wanted to have done something concrete that day.

Another question occupied him more in the hours that followed. How would his own notebooks, Denon's drawings, Geoffroy's collections get back to France?

As evening came, the news having finished spreading through the city, 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. That is something, at least."

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

"I know. But hunger I can calculate."

Fourier sat apart, under the portico, and had not said a word. What words could not contain, he entrusted to mathematics. Losing the fleet was a problem with multiple variables – the provisions, the reinforcements, the possible routes of retreat – whose equations eluded him. He sought them all the same. It was his way of being afraid.

"Our collections," said Geoffroy. "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," said Jomard. "Measurements, notes, sketches. A few kilos per man, no more. That can cross anything."

"And the crates?" said Geoffroy. "My specimens. Berthollet's samples. The pottery, the papyri, the statuettes. What is heavy."

Berthollet folded up his sheet of calculations.

"What is heavy is vulnerable. We may as well admit it at once. 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 that if the sea… well, that we would go home through Syria if we could not go home by sea," said Monge.

"Bonaparte says many things," replied Berthollet. "At the moment, he is right to say them. The army needs to believe in them."

They stayed an hour in the courtyard, without deciding anything.

They rose one after another and each went back to his own room, for want of anything else to do.

Geoffroy sat down at his worktable and wrote.

"We lost the fleet fourteen 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 seventy species of fishes, birds and reptiles that I have gathered since Alexandria, in the markets and from the fishermen. All of it is now hostage to a military situation over which I have no purchase."

He stopped and reread. The last sentence was too plaintive. He struck it out with a single stroke and 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, that of knowing what use testimony is if the witness cannot return. The drawings I have made of the crocodile, of the ibis, of the fishes of the Nile, have value if someone sees them. Shut up in a crate in Cairo, they are worth no more than the beasts they depict."

He let the ink dry.

His notebooks of notes and drawings weighed, all together, about ten kilograms. The specimens in their jars and 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 naturalist.

He drew up a list of what he could carry himself if the situation demanded it. The notebooks, an absolute priority. His dissecting instruments – scalpels, scissors, forceps – a few kilograms. Among the specimens, the smallest and most precious were the bird skins, the reptile skulls, the dried fish, a mummified ibis. What would fit in a leather satchel.

The rest – the large fish in jars, the crocodiles, the mammal skulls – would stay. If they set off on foot through Syria, as Bonaparte spoke of doing, one could not load jars 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. 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.

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 snuffed the wick and waited for daylight.

V - The Institute of Egypt

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

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 less a conquest than proof of the capacity of revolutionary France to produce what 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, my friends. Not to conquer – others are very good at that. I ask you never to forget it."

Seated in the back row, Geoffroy noted the sentence.

Bonaparte came often, and the savants were not indifferent to the attention of a man who held power.

"Gentlemen, Egypt was the most civilised country in the world. Three millennia of history buried. Exhume them. Measure, draw, collect. And the Egypt of today too – science serves the living, or it serves nothing."

In early October, Denon, who had followed the army from Alexandria and seen the pyramids on the evening of the battle, came back to spend several days drawing them from every angle.

Jomard climbed with him to the summit of the Great Pyramid. Half an hour of climbing over blocks that came up to their chests, palms raw. From up there, the desert to the west, the Nile valley to the east, Cairo to the north-east.

"All of Egypt at a single glance," murmured Jomard.

"Yes… Look at the light on the east face. From here I shall be able to fix my perspectives 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, a wrist as broad as a tree trunk, pieces of legs, a head, which would later be attributed to the reign of 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 took refuge in the shade of the head, nearly two metres high, the warm granite against his back.

He examined the face. The mouth was faintly smiling, with the smile carved on the colossi of the New Kingdom thirteen centuries BC, neither benevolent nor menacing. 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, for its part, would not be carried off. Several tonnes, a single block of pink granite drawn from the quarries of 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, that of a load moving on 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. He calculated in his head. The whole statue, before its fall, had weighed eighty tonnes. On a boat. The boats of the Nile were known. Flat, light craft, able to carry eight tonnes at most. How did one transport eighty tonnes on water?

Obviously 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.

The technical feat, difficult but achievable, astonished him less than the decision to attempt 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 empire had not endured. The statue lay in the dust, broken, but there, measurable.

Jomard wondered whether the greatness of ancient Egypt lay less in what it had accomplished than in what it had planned to leave to those who would come long after. He sharpened his pencil against the granite knee.

Denon passed by, his sketchbook under his arm, and stopped in front of him.

"Meditating?"

"Measuring. Which comes to the same thing."

At the beginning of November, Berthollet counted what had been done since July. Hundreds of notebooks filled, thousands of specimens, memoirs on geology, irrigation, mummification, agriculture, languages. More than three months of work, which fitted into a single ledger.

Desaix had been pursuing Murad Bey in Upper Egypt since the end of August. Bonaparte decided to send a draughtsman to study the Theban monuments; a larger commission would follow only in the autumn of 1799. Denon volunteered and was due to leave at the beginning of December.

The question of the collections already embarrassed everyone, and no one was keen to settle it. 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. Antiquities were another matter. The agreement, there, became harder to avow.

Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire was coming back from the fish market at Embabeh 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. Underneath, the plan remained similar.

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 lay open on the board when Denon came in, a handkerchief already under his nose.

"Still at your fish? Your room smells like the fish market."

"Elephantfish. The Nile, the great rivers of Africa. There, beneath the tail – electric organs. The fishes of the Amazon have similar ones, developed eight thousand kilometres away, without contact. A coincidence? No. An anatomical constraint, I believe."

Among the eight species brought back that morning, one caught his attention. 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 observing the living fish, then dissecting it. The fin hid a long, central bone from which rays extended, and which looked in every respect like a humerus. This fish, which he would name *Polypterus bichir*, had no connection with the fishes of the Amazon. Its fins nevertheless shared with them the same fundamental anatomical plan. By dawn, the water in the basin had turned pink.

Geoffroy wrote to Cuvier the following evening. Cuvier had stayed in Paris, the expedition having seemed to him 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

From the first days of October 1798, Jomard had begun keeping a journal of the city. Nothing private in it, he had no disposition for that kind of thing. The survey recorded the estimated populations by district, the building densities, the widths of alleys, the heights of façades, the 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.

On the evening of 20 October, the eve of 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 place 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.

On 21 October 1798, the latent hostility of the Cairene population exploded. The spark had been a new tax on property. General Dupuy, commandant of the city, was killed by the crowd.

From dawn, thousands of rioters armed with sabres, spears and sticks had flooded the streets of Cairo. Isolated soldiers were massacred, beheaded. The rebel districts, where anger had been ripening for three weeks, barricaded themselves.

Bonaparte, who was then at Old Cairo, learned of the uprising in the morning. With crowds blocking the gates of the city, he had to make a detour and re-entered only by the Boulaq gate. 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, and the desecration horrified the whole of Muslim 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.

In the thoroughfares of the district where he lodged, he saw 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 dead in an alley. 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 day differently.

No one had ordered the savants to stay at the Institute. In the haste of the fighting, Bonaparte had not concerned himself with their movements. There was no need. French soldiers massacred two hundred metres away, armed rioters in every district, gunfire without interruption since dawn were enough to keep them shut in.

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. Heat obeyed precise and immutable laws. Riots did not. 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."

"Do not stop," he added on his way out. "It is still the only thing that distinguishes our presence here from an… well. From an ordinary occupation."

They worked in silence until the small hours, each at his own calculations. Outside, the city burned. Twice Jomard had to snuff the wick of his lantern.

Monge, for his part, wrote a letter to his wife. There had been no regular mail since Aboukir. He wrote it all the same. What it contained, no one would ever know. He sealed it carefully and carried it in his jacket until the departure from Egypt, ten months later.

On 24 October, the savants cautiously emerged from the Institute. Three days that most of them had been barricaded in, listening to the gunfire. Several 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 from every angle. 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 he travelled with, on which he depended to eat, to move about, to work. Once drawn, these ruins would become the document of a repression that his presence here, in a way, endorsed.

Denon drew all the same, from reflex rather than conviction. The page filled. When he closed the notebook, he could not have said whether the gesture had been necessary or unworthy, or both. He had ash up to his wrists.

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. Denon thought of Hassan-Kashif's palace, of the commissioners filling in their lists. The same gesture, minus the criteria and the discernment. Here it was called plundering, there collecting. He closed the lid of the chest with his foot.

Hassan walked 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. Nothing to translate. 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 gave the face a particular colour. He took no note.

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.

In the street, Denon had drawn 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 make them understand what any new attempt at revolt would cost them.

"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, you see, General, this revolt shows it plainly, our situation is untenable," Monge said to Bonaparte at the council that followed the repression. "One does not govern this country by military force alone. Not indefinitely, in any case. The population is hostile to us. It will remain so as long as we are here as foreign occupiers."

That council ended late. Bonaparte summoned Monge the next morning, away from the officers, in the inner courtyard of a requisitioned house near Ezbekiya Square. 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, institutions! Courts that judge according to known rules, schools, and then – this is the most important – a system of landholding 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. Two years. Perhaps."

"Then you will not govern this country. Not truly. You will occupy it, which is… something else."

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.

The savants, for their part, no longer experienced their presence in Cairo in the same way. The illusion of a peaceful coexistence with the population had not survived those three days. They went on working, frequenting the markets, keeping up contacts with certain Cairene notables, but under the threat of a violence that could resurface at any moment.

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

In the souks, most of the shops had reopened and the craftsmen were working.

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 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, for its part, was understood. The lesson resumed at the verse where it had stopped.

The city would heal in its own way, at a rhythm the French did not control and would only half understand. The children, for their part, recited their lessons without waiting 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. 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. 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 along the flanks, 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 head to look, and to look somewhere.

Head turned to the east, towards the precise point where the sun rose.

"It is not a statue," said Denon in a low voice. "It is… how shall I put it, an instrument. A sundial as large as a hill, whose face would be the gnomon. See where it looks, at the equinox. Geometry, upon my word, more than devotion. Volney would have held forth on the broad nose, the 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 the step pyramid, the oldest ever built, raised its six tiers to a height of sixty-two metres. They spent two 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 firing – 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. Geoffroy had crouched before a panel showing fishermen hauling a net. The fish were identifiable by species. Nile perch, tilapia, mullet.

Geoffroy, for his part, saw only the animals.

"Ibis. Crocodile. Hippopotamus… and there, lions. Ostriches. Several that are no longer found in Egypt – in the time of the pharaohs they still lived there. 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 mingled saltpetre, mineral dust and an animal reek. 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, and the smoke of the torches gathered beneath it. Fragments of pottery littered the floor, debris left by the plunderers. On the walls ran

hieroglyphs and wall paintings, the journey of the deceased traced upon the rock.

Between two stays at Saqqara, Denon returned to Cairo for a few days. 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 retained its grease despite washing, and its smell mingled with that of 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. 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 Saqqara, the tombs of the dignitaries of the Old Kingdom. 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 separated the fresco from the cloth, and the width had not varied by a finger's breadth.

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 almost intact through Christianity and the Arab conquest. The weaver folded them in a piece of linen.

Pottery too. Two-handled amphorae, narrow-necked jars, footed cups, made from the same Nile clay, fired in the same kilns. The potter, questioned, shrugged. His father had turned them that way, and his father's father.

Berthollet had obtained four human mummies from Saqqara.

The bodies did not concern him; medicine would study them. 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.

On his return to Cairo, he melted scraped samples, dissolved others in alcohol, analysed the vapours, noted the melting temperatures. On his worktable the instruments stood in a row. An alembic of Venetian glass, mercury thermometers, precision balances protected under bell jars. He worked by the light of four candles arranged in a square, whose flames 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 and pitch. The vapours were collected in a cooled tube where they condensed into oily droplets. Terebinth resin, animal fat, beeswax, natron, Judaean bitumen. The combination varied from one mummy to the next. The logic never did. Nothing that causes rot survived in it.

At three in the morning, he raised his eyes from his register to 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.

This permanence unsettled him. Nothing metaphysical, Berthollet was a materialist, a scientist's unease. These embalmers had solved a problem of organic chemistry by observation, by trial, by the transmission of techniques from generation to generation, more than four thousand years before any theory. He trimmed his quill.

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 appeared in the rubble. They stopped before a shard of black granite.

Denon wrote these lines. "The ancient plunderers left these blocks. That is where we resemble them. 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. He picked up the fragment and slipped it into his pocket.

That night, while Denon was returning to the mastaba where they were sleeping, 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. They weighed things in their palms, haggled, 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 held a scarab up 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. 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, including three royal scarabs, a scribe's palette of sycamore wood, a granite figurine, an alabaster canopic jar with its jackal-headed lid. He wrote "Traces of black resin on the neck." Then he paused, raised his head towards Hassan.

"What's in this 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. In Cairo, in early February 1799, the fellahs 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 linen bandages, 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 a five-day excursion there in January with General Andréossy. The Natron Lakes. White expanses on whose shores this alkaline powder crystallised, 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. It would take four more years, and the *Essai de statique chimique* of 1803, to draw the complete theory from them.

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

"These mummified ibises are our ibises," Geoffroy called out. "Do you remember what we said on the banks of the Nile – that they venerated them because they observed nature? There you are. 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 it would take a time… immense."

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 prove it," said Berthollet, setting the mummy down. "One would have to live too long."

During the November stay, they had spent two full nights at Saqqara, sleeping in the ruins of a mastaba so as to be on the spot at first light. The step pyramid stood at the centre of this funereal landscape.

"A century older than those of Giza," said Jomard, who had cross-checked as best he could the scraps of royal chronology

available to the savants. "Roughly. Here, they were still searching for the form. At Giza, they found it."

The superimposed tiers had something of a Mesopotamian ziggurat about them, as if two peoples, without knowing one another, had had the same idea, to pile up in order to climb towards the sky.

Denon spent the second night copying the scenes 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 an exactitude that served the naturalists of the Commission as much as 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, almost thick upon the stone. 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 joined him and waited until he had finished. One did not speak to Denon when he was drawing.

"I keep thinking about that century," said Jomard when Denon had put away his pencil. "An experiment on one side, a perfection on the other. A hundred years. How does one progress so fast?"

"Speed… I am not sure that is the question. The Egyptians thought about time differently, I believe. For us, a century is long. For them, perhaps it was the time it takes 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, the semantron of a church struck the hour.

VIII - The Scientific Debates

The session of 16 November pitted Monge and Fourier against each other. Monge wanted volumes and angles. Fourier wanted contexts and significations. Bonaparte, vice-president of the Institute, attended the session and settled the matter by siding with both, which amounted to not deciding at all.

"True science, my friends, is measurement," said Monge, opening the debate, both hands flat on the table. "The dimensions of a pyramid, its volume, its proportions, that is what is beautiful! The myths that surround it… let us leave them to the poets. Description and signification are two disciplines. We are here for the first."

"The pyramids are not simply volumes to be calculated, Monge," replied Fourier without raising his eyes from his papers. "They are royal tombs, acts of faith in immortality. If you keep only their dimensions, you describe the chest and not what it contains. And you risk… believing you have understood because you have counted."

Bonaparte raised his hand.

"You are both right," he said, looking at one, then the other. "The work will contain both. Monge's measurements. The meaning, Fourier will find."

The same session saw Berthollet present a first memoir on the chemistry of the natron of the Egyptian desert. He had analysed samples bought from the merchants of Cairo and determined their exact composition.

"Natron? A mixture of salts, nothing more. Carbonate, bicarbonate, sodium chloride. Seventy days in this powder and the moisture is absorbed, the body dries out without rotting. Very simple, very effective. Nothing miraculous, I fear."

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

"One species of ibis only. I have compared the mummies with the living birds. It is the same sacred ibis, white and black, that we still see on the banks of the Nile. Three thousand years, and not one feature has changed. If species transform, it is not on that scale that we shall see it."

Next came 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 can print in classical Arabic, and cleanly," he announced. "Proclamations, decrees, notices… The population can read us in its own language."

Fourier then took the floor for 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. He was listened to all the more closely because everyone in the room had suffered the phenomenon in the flesh.

"The heat of the desert… it is not only the temperature of the air," explained Fourier. "It is flows. Exchanges between the ground, the air and the exposed bodies. I believe – indeed, I hope – that one day we shall be able to predict how it propagates, in time and in space."

Bonaparte, for his part, was less interested in the heat than in the spectacle of these men of radically different training – mathematicians, chemists, naturalists, artists, engineers – who managed to talk to one another around a single object, Egypt.

"And the ancient Egyptians, in all this?" he asked.

"Nothing, directly," admitted Fourier. He searched a moment for what to say next. "But their environment, yes. How it 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."

Bonaparte congratulated the speakers and urged them to go further.

"Excellent," he called out to the assembly. "Soon, Upper Egypt. Thebes, the temples. 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 at the market at Saqqara, 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, in the room

he had occupied in the palace since the revolt. 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 that this sand came 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 November 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 would die of dysentery in Syria, at Saint-Jean-d'Acre, in May 1799.

He had taken the floor at the very end.

"I should like to submit an observation to the Institute. A remark, rather. In the nearly five months we have been in Egypt, one thing has gradually become apparent to me. The Arabic spoken by Egyptians today and the classical Arabic of the Quran are two different languages. I am not speaking of dialects. They are two 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.

"That Islam, in Egypt, is in part… how shall I put it… a religion whose faithful do not understand the sacred texts in their original

form. Faith passes through the authority of the ulema, oral tradition, ritual. Not through direct reading of the text. A little like Latin in the Catholic Church before Luther."

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

"And the ulema? Do they understand it, the classical text?"

"The most learned, yes. The others recite too. A chain. 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 dawn before he had measured its meaning. He too began with the line. He underlined Venture's sentence twice.

"In other words," observed Fourier, as if to himself, "one transmits first, by heart. The meaning comes after. Or does not come. That is not so far from what we are doing with the hieroglyphs, is it? We copy signs that we do not understand… Others, after us, will perhaps read them."

"With one difference," said Venture de Paradis. "The hieroglyphs no longer have living speakers. Classical Arabic does. Between the ulema and the fellahs, between the text and the rite, the language survives, differently from the way it was created." He gathered up his papers.

That evening, the session had ended late. The lamps had burned low. The savants went out into the courtyard of the Institute, where the November 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 six months earlier, but the Pole Star had sunk lower on the horizon.

Bonaparte left the Institute after the session in the company of Berthollet. They walked for a time in the palace garden, the gravel crunching under their boots. Bonaparte spoke first.

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

Berthollet took his time. He had asked himself the question all his life, without ever deciding.

"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 did not answer at once.

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

"He is right. In twenty years his research will have applications that he does not yet imagine. Science goes ahead. By how much… one never knows in advance."

"A scout, then. Who does not know for which army he is reconnoitring the ground."

"Exactly."

They stopped at the edge of the pool in the courtyard. The water did not move.

"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.

Berthollet 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."

In 1796, in Italy, it was France that carried things off. Here, nothing guaranteed that it would still be her. Berthollet rinsed a test tube, then another.

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

He turned the pages slowly, without 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 pyramids at dusk seen from afar.

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 soldiers slip scarabs into their pockets without saying anything, seen a fellah watch his *shabti* go, and preferred not to note what he had said. That list was longer than the two hundred and forty-three drawings. It had no end.

He stopped at the first portrait 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. About ten 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 Cairo in mid-August, the day after the news of Aboukir. The same profile, the same fundamental features. But he was no longer the same man. He looked for the difference with the charcoal, rubbed it out with his thumb, began again.

Not the wrinkles. Three 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 one after the other, they no longer said the same thing.

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.

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. The programme fitted on a single line.

Six months later, he was no longer sure of it. 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. Were his drawings not, in spite of himself, the exhibits of an occupation as much as the archives of a discovery?

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

He put out the 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. That comforted him a little. The Egyptian sky 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 the evening of 16 December 1798, Desaix's division left Beni Suef heading south. Three thousand infantry, two hundred cavalry, and all of Upper Egypt to conquer. Denon, who had left Cairo at the beginning of December to join it, was of the party, with his notebook.

In early December, Desaix had passed through the capital before returning to Beni Suef, and Bonaparte had received him.

"Two missions. Destroy Murad Bey. Open Upper Egypt to the savants. Treat them as collaborators. What they bring back is worth your victories."

Desaix was thirty, practical-minded, with no particular taste for antiquities. He understood orders, which was enough.

"I shall protect them as I protect my soldiers. But Murad Bey will give us no respite, warn them. Months. As far as Aswan, perhaps. Your savants will have to endure it."

Before Denon left Cairo to join the division, a few days after the session of the Institute, Bonaparte had kept him back a moment. He had opened the drawer of his campaign table and taken 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."

Denon ran his eye over the first lines. Categories and 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 or 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. Each with its own legitimacy."

"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. An order to select, not to plunder. He would have liked the distinction to be enough. Bonaparte, whose time was limited, was already holding open the door of his study, and Denon went out without having put into words what he had to say.

That evening, the column, a league long, took the road south along the left bank of the Nile. The air was already cold at that hour, a dry cold, without mist. The dust raised by the troops 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.

"Pococke, Norden… Have you read them, General? Approximate descriptions, inaccurate drawings. This time, we shall measure."

"Your enthusiasm pleases me. But you will tell me before you move away from the column. Murad Bey has still not given up."

Denon sighed.

"Understood, General. I shall draw quickly. It is always better than nothing."

In the days that followed, the heat rose from the second hour of marching, despite the winter. 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. Further south, at Asyut, the ancient Lycopolis, he explored tombs hollowed out of the cliff overlooking the town, their walls covered with hieroglyphs and ornaments of a delicacy he had seen nowhere else.

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 stiffness of the bodies, the liveliness of what they were doing.

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

He drew during halts, and in the evening in the tents, by torchlight, his notebook on his knee. The officers had at first regarded him 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.

On 25 January 1799, Denon was one of the first savants to see Dendera, which he wrote as Tintyra. The temple, which he would take to be that of Isis, stood at the edge of the desert, at the foot of the Libyan range, its mass visible from afar in the dry air of Upper Egypt.

"Look," said Denon to Belliard, who had halted his horse beside his. Beyond a monumental gateway half buried under rubble, the temple appeared.

Desaix, who an hour earlier had answered irritably a request for a halt, said nothing. No one had ordered a stop. Officers and soldiers had left the road of their own accord, and the army stayed there until evening. The camp was set up in the neighbouring village, Dendera, three-quarters of a league from the temple. 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.

Denon went in first. At the threshold, he counted twenty-four columns some fifteen metres high, their capitals with heads of Isis – the name he would give them – looking in the four directions. He took out his notebook, then closed it again. Where to begin? In the cities of Europe, he had always known. Before a pyramid, before an isolated column, the question did not even arise. Here the hall was governed entirely by a single logic, and any point of entry would be arbitrary. In the end he attacked the nearest column.

"Extraordinary," Belliard murmured behind him. "Those draperies…"

Denon drew until the last ray of daylight. Jomard, geographer-engineer of the general staff, measured what the hours allowed. He noted the dimensions, the angles, the orientations. Fifteen metres per column, the joints so fine that one could barely slip a

knife blade into them. The ceiling resting on them. The walls covered in bas-reliefs. At the other end of the hall, Denon's hands were black with charcoal.

"How did they do this without our tools?" Jomard asked in a low voice.

"Time. Labour. And an organisation capable of sustaining the effort for decades," replied Belliard. "This temple took generations to build. The project was passed from father to son, like a sacred inheritance."

"The Egyptians knew the stars better than we know them still," Jomard went on, pointing to the ceiling blackened by smoke, where celestial figures could be made out. "This vault is a map of the night sky of ancient Egypt."

Earlier in the afternoon, Jomard had noticed a detail that he had not entered in his surveys. 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 less than three years it would be in Marseille. The chain was short. It left no traces. Jomard thought of gravity, which always makes light objects fall downwards. Here, down meant north.

The same day, in the court of the temple, Citizen Vasseur, a mathematician of the Commission of Sciences and Arts attached to the division, was at work.

That afternoon 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 Qebehsenuef, guardian of the intestines. The six pieces were lined up on the stone, numbered, labelled.

Jomard approached from the entrance of the court. Vasseur was filling in his form in broad daylight, unhurried, without hiding. The whole difference from what the soldiers were doing lay in that form.

"Citizen Vasseur," said Jomard. "These pieces are exceptional."

"Indeed. The scribe's palette has no known equivalent. The reed pens are intact. 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. The form was impeccable. He folded it in half and slipped it into his own satchel.

A man from the village came to observe Jomard as he took his measurements. Hassan, the interpreter, kept apart. A few moments later, the man went away.

He returned before sunset, sat against a pillar and watched Jomard work for an hour. Then he left again, and reappeared almost at once with 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 knew. Through Hassan, they exchanged a few sentences.

The man knew the names of the columns. Not the names the savants gave to the deities of the place – Isis, Osiris, Horus – 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 what his own measurements did not, namely that this temple had long inhabited the memory of the village. It was not a ruin. It was a neighbour.

Four months later, in May, Denon was to return to Dendera. He would then leave Qena, where the division had established its quarters, with an escort of thirty men, a candle and his notebooks. He wanted at last to draw the zodiac of the upper chapel, which he had only glimpsed in the twilight of January.

The chapel of Osiris, a small room reached by a staircase built into the thickness of the walls, occupied the roof of the temple. The ceiling was low and the candle gave only an insufficient orange light. He lay down on the cold stone. Above him, carved in the sandstone, the map of the sky stretched out, a disc set within a block two and a half metres square. 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, with 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. Before leaving, at Qena, Denon had put the problem to Jomard, the most inventive mind on the general staff. Jomard had seen the zodiac in January with a technician's eye rather than an artist's.

"It can be done," he had said, unfolding Denon's sketch. "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?"

Jomard had looked at the sketch 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. It was the first official document to envisage the extraction of the zodiac. It 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. Wrong in places, I fear. For a proper survey, other hands will be needed."

Denon pointed out to the scientific staff the need to send engineers to complete his work. Two young polytechnicians, Jollois and Devilliers, of the mission of chief engineer Girard, the first of whom was already in Upper Egypt, would finish the survey with their precision instruments.

But it was still only the first evening. On that 25 January, Jomard needed to settle a problem of ration requisitions. He looked for Sergeant-Major Aubert, the man who managed the supplies of the lead 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, headed object, company, soldier. The lines were tightly packed. Jomard read from where he stood, without seeming to, and retained these lines. "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 more than eighty lines.

Aubert did not seem surprised to be observed.

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

"The extra rations… for the measuring fatigue parties. Nothing urgent."

Jomard asked no questions about the list. He 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, as a precaution. If anyone asked questions later, Aubert would know how to answer. And if no one asked – which was more likely – the list would remain in his notebook.

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

That night, Jomard did not write up his measurements. He set to work on 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 one day. Four companies per battalion, and more than eighty lines on the list for the lead battalion alone. 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 Vasseur's official acquisitions. Six pieces documented, others perhaps without formal documentation.

He built an estimate. Conservative hypothesis of twenty objects per company for the afternoon of the halt. Four companies. Two battalions. That gave a hundred and sixty objects at the very least for this one temple. Adding purchases from the inhabitants and what the officers quietly collected, it approached two hundred.

Two hundred objects leaving Dendera. He examined the figure. Then he looked at the temple, visible in the clear night three-quarters of an hour's walk from the bivouac. The temple was immense. Two hundred objects were a fraction of what it still contained. But the right calculation was that of the number of halts in the number of temples, multiplied by two hundred.

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

Then he stopped at what he had just written. Two thousand five hundred. On the page, the figure weighed nothing. Yet it stood for two thousand five hundred 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 thousands of faces. The man existed. The cat existed. Somewhere in that figure of two thousand five hundred.

Before leaving Dendera, Jomard went to find Vasseur.

Vasseur was supervising the nailing shut of his crates. He broke off, a nail between his fingers.

"Citizen Vasseur. I have made an estimate. The volume of removals, for this temple and for the campaign that follows."

He held out the notebook open at the page of the calculation. Vasseur 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?"

Vasseur 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 this temple? Doubtless. But the Greeks took from it, and the Romans too. We are not the first, and Egypt is still here."

"That is no reason."

"No. It is a context. And in this context, the only question is whether what we do, we – the Commission – is defensible. I believe 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."

"Our accounts are exact," Vasseur replied, already back at his crates. "Archives, descriptions, objects for the Louvre."

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

The next day, at dawn, Desaix signalled the departure. Jomard packed away his instruments. Denon looked back at the temple for a long time.

"If we ever come back in peacetime…" said Jomard. "Six months. This temple deserves six months on its own."

Jomard would not come back. Denon, for his part, would return in May, for scarcely a few days. 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 passed from one fire to another, names heard all their lives.

II - Thebes

In the late afternoon of 27 January, Desaix's division emerged before the ruins of Thebes. The army stopped of its own accord. That evening Denon had only time to draw on horseback. The rest would wait for daylight.

Jomard went down to the bank and did not move again, his eyes on the black pylons in the light of the setting sun, on the other side of the Nile.

The next day, having crossed the river on requisitioned boats, they discovered Karnak, which surpassed everything they had imagined. The hypostyle hall of the temple of Amun-Ra had 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.

"I shall never draw this," murmured Denon. "No one will be able to."

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 had not been made large for the sole glory of a pharaoh. It had to house a procession, a crowd, a ritual. Every dimension answered an acoustic, luminous, liturgical constraint.

His note ran to a few sentences. "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. The stars above the columns were very bright.

Then, as he swivelled with his theodolite to note the azimuth of a reference star, he understood something he had not planned to understand. It did not come at the end of a demonstration. It came all at once, 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 did not move for several seconds. No one, to his knowledge, had yet formulated this result, and he wanted to make sure he was not mistaken before writing it down.

The temple was also 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.

He feverishly wrote a note of several pages in his journal, detailing the calculation and the measurements through to the conclusion. He would send it to Fourier in Cairo by the first post. The most rigorous mathematician of the Commission would know how to check it. The reply would arrive a month later, two lines only. "Your calculation is correct. Note it down for the publication."

At two in the morning, Jomard returned to the camp, five hours after leaving his tent. His hands trembled slightly as he rolled up the leaves of the notebook, and it was not the cold. Ordinarily, his discoveries confirmed a hypothesis. That night, for the first time, the hypothesis had come out of the measurement itself, without his having sought it. He kept his boots on to sleep.

Denon devoted the day to exploring the Karnak complex, ten hours at a stretch, 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.

There were inscriptions everywhere, on the shafts, on the walls, on the sarcophagi. Denon copied whole rows of them, his pencil slow, without reading a single one – no one could.

In the great court of Karnak, Denon had stationed himself before a register of bas-reliefs showing animals offered as tribute. Lion, giraffe, monkeys, antelopes. He copied the species with a draughtsman's precision, noting those that no longer existed in Egypt.

"Look at this lion," he said to Jollois, who was passing. "That is not the skull of the sub-Saharan lion – a flatter profile, a longer mane, it looks like a portrait. Either the sculptor was mistaken, or the lions of ancient Egypt formed a distinct population. I would wager on the second."

Jollois looked at the relief, then at Denon, and went on his way. Denon did not expect an answer. He was already adding, in the margin, a second mane.

Another night, Jomard was working on his Karnak measurements when he heard a noise.

Dull, regular blows, the scraping of something heavy on the flagstones – the noise of a building site, not of combat. 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 in two piles, 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 did not go beyond the entrance to the hall. The authority of a member of the Commission allowed him to forbid unauthorised removals. He could have intervened. He did not. There were three of them, there were three thousand in Desaix's battalions, one man alone with a lantern would stop nothing, and he had no taste for gestures of principle. He lowered the wick and withdrew into the dark.

In the afternoon, 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.

"Look at the eyes," Jollois said to Denon, who had been drawing for an hour. "I have never seen a pharaoh so… Tired." He fell silent for a moment. "The weariness of power."

Denon stopped drawing. Jollois was right. He began the face again from the start, the eyelids heavier.

On 29 January, the division took the road south again and halted at Luxor, three kilometres further on, for two nights. Denon and Jomard obtained permission to stay behind when it left, with an escort, so as to rejoin it afterwards by forced march. 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 an elegance that bore witness to the 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.

On the entrance pylon, other bas-reliefs represented the battle of Kadesh between Ramesses II and the Hittites. Sixty-five metres in width, covered from the ground to ten metres up with scenes of remarkable dynamism. The outcome of the battle remained contested. Ramesses had nearly been encircled before extricating himself. The pylon showed only the triumph, carved at a height where no one would come to correct it.

Before the pylon stood two obelisks. The very ones of which Muhammad Ali would offer one to France in 1830. That obelisk 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, who was passing with the head of the column, stopped before the obelisks. He tipped his head back towards the tip of the first, twenty-five metres above him, then looked at Denon, who was drawing beside it.

"These vertical columns – could we take them?"

"They are obelisks, General. 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 with the current, from south to north, with the flood. To bring them up to France, we would need a ship built for the purpose. Nothing we have in the Mediterranean would suffice."

Desaix looked at the obelisk again.

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

He mounted his horse again and rejoined 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, and 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, it was from Amun that they had taken, and Amun had lodged no claim with anyone.

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 belonged without question to the very first category. He should have declared it, so that it would

go to Cairo to join the official collections of which Fourier kept the register. He did not. Since Dendera, the boundary between what he took for the Commission and what he kept for himself had faded away without his noticing. Some thirty entries in his personal inventory. As many objects that, six months earlier, had yet to appear in any European catalogue.

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. Karnak had been built over two thousand years, each pharaoh adding a pylon, an avenue, a hall, without a break in style or any questioning of the project. Egypt had achieved what Europe had never known how to do, the transmission of an architectural project from generation to generation without anyone deciding its end.

And now soldiers were carrying off pieces of that project in their packs, between the mess tin and the spare shirt, with no vandal's intent, no doubt. The fragments that left for Paris or for the officers' private collections left that whole to become curiosities, souvenirs.

Jomard noted this 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 his answer. 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 quickly understood that his position opened both worlds to him. He translated the savants' questions to the fellahs. He was less willing to translate what the fellahs said among themselves about what the savants really wanted.

Jomard had understood this after the first week. Hassan facilitated the savants' purchases from local dealers and took his share along the way. Jomard estimated it at fifteen per cent. Neither the sellers nor the buyers knew that the other end of the market also passed through his hand.

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. "Last night. The officers, the rug, the four pieces."

Hassan did not seem embarrassed. He waited for what came next.

"Where do these pieces come from?"

"From Gurna. A man 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 your commission. How much?"

"Ten per cent. Officers pay more than soldiers, the staff more than the line."

"And on what you sell to the savants by day? I reckon fifteen."

"Fifteen, yes. Volume makes up for it. They want to sell, you want to buy… The tombs, I am not the one who digs them. I translate prices."

Hassan walked away. 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, like the others before them, would not stay.

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 29 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. It was 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 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, and had emptied almost all of them as early as Antiquity. What remained was the rock and the angles, which no one had been able to steal. Jomard wedged the tripod of his theodolite between two stones.

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 brought up his ration around seven o'clock. Jomard thanked him without leaving the eyepiece, and the bread remained on the stone. Jollois worked differently. Where Jomard sought angles and distances,

Jollois sought relationships, what one dimension said of another, what a proportion betrayed of intention. His notebooks did not have Jomard's columns of figures, but annotated sketches, fractions, cross-references from one site to another. Yet they had come out of the same school.

Lower down, out of Jomard's sight, the guides of Gurna led Denon and Jollois from tomb to tomb.

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 asked for 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. "An army, notebooks… and the plundering we find on arriving goes faster."

"Come now, it is hardly we who plunder," said Denon.

"I did not say that. But at the rate we are going… What took them a century will take them ten years."

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 air grew colder, 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.

"Magnificent. And I understand none of it," said Jollois, setting down his lamp. "Anubis, the jackal's head, fine. Isis, the wings. The rest… these gestures… It is like leafing through an encyclopaedia without the key."

They visited seven tombs in a single day. The most impressive was that of Ramesses III, which Bruce had visited thirty years earlier. Long corridors descended deep underground, and each chamber corresponded to an hour of the sun's nocturnal journey in the afterlife – a funerary calendar cut into the rock.

The paintings of this tomb stopped Denon short. He had seen the Sistine, the Raphaels of Italy. This was not inferior to them, and resembled them in no way. A linear elegance, an assurance of line, a palette of six colours that gave the impression of containing them all.

"They hang things in Paris whose line is less sure," said Jollois.

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

"Look at the hieroglyphs," said Denon, without taking his eyes from the sarcophagus. "Each sign cut as by a jeweller. It is the last thing the dead man was to see."

"They thought of death as a journey. Trials, doors, guardians… Our theologians never made it so complicated, and God knows they tried."

"Others will understand," replied Jollois. "They will need our copies to check."

In the third tomb of the day, outside the valley, on the flank of the hill of Gurna, where private individuals were buried – 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, with no gold or 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, among which 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.

Denon could not read this text, no one at the time could, but he recognised the vignettes from having seen them on other walls. He rolled the papyrus up carefully and wrapped it in the linen of his handkerchief. In Paris, Marcel would study it, which was not what the papyrus had been made for. Denon slipped the packet to the bottom of his satchel.

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, or nearly. They had seen the papyrus at the same moment, but the soldier had taken a step while Denon was still calculating, and his hand was already 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 only : "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. Denon had the right to take scientific documents.

The soldier had left the chamber. Denon remained alone with his torch and the empty niche. His gesture was legal, quick, resolute, without consultation, and it repeated the soldier's. The hand stretched towards an object that did not belong to him, the value estimated in an instant, the seizure. The only difference was the name given to the gesture according to who made it. He left the chamber without looking back. His personal journal kept a single 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, a fragment of gilded cartonnage, a splinter of painted limestone bearing a legible wedjat eye. Second-rank objects that Denon had not judged worthy of his satchel. The soldier stuffed them into his own and went back down, whistling.

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

"Your tomb at Gurna 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, my map will tell him where to begin. For the moment, no one knows how many tombs are still hidden beneath the sand."

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

"Are you already thinking of those who will come after us?"

"Since the first day. We shall not do everything. Let them at least be able to take up where we have stopped."

Back at camp, it was not the tombs of the Valley of the Kings that occupied Jomard, but plunder.

He had seen four different logics at play at the same time. The guides of Gurna exploited the tombs revealed by the savants, accelerating an ancient trade under the effect of new demand. The

soldiers picked up what they could carry, without organisation, without criteria. The officers bought discreetly and with clean money. The commissioners took with authority, method, documentation. And himself, with his measurements. And Denon, with his notebooks and his satchels.

All four led to the same result. Objects that had been in Egypt were no longer there. What troubled him, more than the quantity, was the absence of a clear dividing line between what was legitimate and what was not. The Commission had a mandate to collect scientific specimens, but no one had defined that mandate. It did not say what one could take. It said that one was there for science, and science decided.

In his journal he wrote : "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 slipped the journal under his pack and spoke of it to no one.

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. "He built 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.

"Aswan granite. Two hundred kilometres to the south. Rough block extracted there, floated to Thebes on the flood, carved here. It was the mountain that came to the temple."

On 30 January, before dawn, 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," said Jomard. "They say it fell silent when a Roman emperor had it repaired. Perhaps the stone, expanding in the sudden warmth of the morning, made its fissures vibrate. A physical phenomenon, nothing more."

"Doubtless. But the pilgrims who heard it did not have your thermal explanation. For them, the statue spoke. Go and take that away from them with a thermometer."

Desaix came by to see the colossi early in the morning and considered the impassive faces for a moment.

"Impressive," he said. "The Mamluks concern me more. The column breaks camp this evening. Catch us up when you have finished." And he left.

Jomard stayed before the Colossi of Memnon after Desaix's departure. Eighteen metres of quartzite seated on the plain, with no temple around them, no visible architectural context, in the middle of nothing, and yet visible from five kilometres away. This was what neither the soldiers nor the dealers of Gurna could carry off, and it made sense only there, in that 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. Behind him, the colossi went on looking east.

IV - Aswan

Desaix, for his part, had not waited. From the evening of 30 January he had had the camp struck, and Denon, left behind with Jomard and Jollois, had had to close his portfolios of Thebes to

catch up with the column by forced march, which they did on the 31st. Devilliers would only travel this road later.

The column made its way up towards Aswan, two hundred kilometres to the south. The landscape narrowed.

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 army had reached since the Romans.

The villagers watched the column pass from their flat roofs. They did not flee. They observed. 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, and offered neither. Jollois noted the difference in his notebook, without dismounting.

The column had been carrying objects away from the very beginning. Jollois had understood it by watching the pack animals. On leaving Thebes, the mules had carried rations, camp equipment, chests of ammunition. Two 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 haste, and resumed the march.

"Egypt is going north on muleback," Jollois said to Denon at the bivouac.

"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, who was riding beside them, 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, sitting on the bank of the Nile, Jomard absent-mindedly gauged the width of the channel. Three hundred metres, by eye. 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 and mail. On those same boats travelled the Commission's official crates and the officers' unofficial parcels, while the sacks tied to the pack animals followed the bank.

The Nile had been the transport route 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, by boat when there was one, on muleback the rest of the time.

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 Muséum central des arts. There was no single person responsible. There was a slope, and the objects followed the slope.

On 1 February, a halt for the night at Kom Ombo.

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

Jollois spent the evening of the halt, then the following dawn, stretching his surveyor's chain across the cleared parts of the temple. The bas-reliefs were remarkably sharp – Egyptian art had preserved its visual language longer than any European school – and the sand rose to his ankles.

"These instruments," said Jollois, stopping before a register in an inner chamber. "Scalpels. Forceps. Probes. Their physicians operated. No ancient author speaks of 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.

"That curved scalpel, there." He pointed at the wall. "It is used for deep abdominal incisions. The curve lets you slide beneath the organs without piercing them. I thought… I was taught that it was an invention of the last ten years."

"And these olive-tipped probes," said Denon, his pencil held out towards the wall. "Do you recognise them?"

"Urethral catheterisation. Same shape, same size. Bronze instead of steel, but it is the instrument. Someone here stumbled on the same anatomical problem, all alone, two thousand years before us."

Bruyant lingered another hour over the drawings, identifying the instruments one by one and explaining their use, and Denon noted the explanations in the margins of his sketches, in an ever tighter hand.

"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 work of an evening and a morning would remain in Denon's portfolios. The plates of Ombos in the *Description* would be drawn later, by Jollois and Devilliers.

Meanwhile Jollois went on measuring. The sand that had buried the temple had also saved it. Every survey confirmed 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. 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…" Jollois searched for his words. "To consider that our presence here is not necessarily a boon for what we have come to study."

Desaix did not reply. He had an army to feed and a war to finish, and he was already looking towards the horses.

Jollois watched what was leaving the temple. Soldiers emerged from the inner chambers with weighted sacks, officers bought pieces from the dealer from Edfu who had come specially, Denon himself bought two after a negotiation conducted by Hassan.

It had been so at Dendera and at Thebes. It would be so at Aswan. Soldiers took, local dealers supplied, intermediaries facilitated, and savants bought, with no one contesting their right to do so.

Two entrances, two hypostyle halls, two sanctuaries. The temple was dedicated to two gods – Sobek and Haroeris – with rigorous symmetry, and Jollois, chain in hand, found the two axes slightly offset, enough to house two equal gods without either taking precedence over the other.

"One could be standing beneath a triumphal arch in Rome," Denon said to Jomard, indicating the registers of prisoners kneeling before the victorious pharaoh.

"There may not be a hundred ways of showing who has won."

On the morning of the departure from 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," said Desaix. "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.

With Lachèze gone, Denon went to Desaix, who had remained a little apart, before the column set off.

"Does this happen often?"

"More often than I know. A soldier who has been marching for two months, who sees stones covered with signs… he takes what he can lift. I cannot watch 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.

"It is inadequate. I know it, you know it. But it is the only distinction I have to offer you."

He took a few steps towards his horse, then stopped and turned back to the temple.

"This one. I went in last night, alone. Twenty minutes in the dark, before those columns. I do not know what I understood. I shall not forget it." He took the reins. "We shall meet again at Aswan."

When the column set off, Denon went back to see the fractured slab. It had vanished. Someone – not Lachèze, the reprimanded 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.

That 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 a leading battalion had passed at dawn, quickly and without hesitation. Jollois deduced it from fresh boot prints in the sand and from mortar still white at the edges of the emptied niches.

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, a cursive inscription ran across four lines. He copied it, sign by sign, with maniacal precision, in three quarters of an hour of work in the heat of the day.

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

Jollois slipped the notebook into his satchel and rode off at a trot 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.

"The temples will not wait for me," replied Jollois without lifting his pencil.

On 2 February, the expedition reached Aswan. The First Cataract made navigation southwards difficult. 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," said Denon. "Norden drew it more than sixty years ago – and badly, between ourselves. We can do better."

At Aswan, in the days leading up to the departure for Philae, the antiquities market was the busiest Jollois had seen since the start of the campaign. The news that the army would soon be taking the road north again 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. People haggled aloud, and the price changed 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 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.

The antiquities changed hands to the sound of piastres being counted out.

V - Philae

In February, Denon embarked on a felucca for Philae, accompanied by Hassan. The cataract was crossed by pole, between the half-submerged rocks and the whirlpools, and the Nubian boatmen called out each passage before reaching it. Then the island emerged. Four hundred metres by a hundred and fifty, occupied almost entirely by Ptolemaic temples.

"My God," murmured Denon.

"The whole ritual is here," said Denon, finishing the sketch of a side chamber. "Every gesture, every offering. If one deciphers the texts alongside… one will know what each of them means."

"And that one," he added, pointing his pencil at the little colonnaded pavilion at the far 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. Inside, the Roman emperors of the early centuries performed the traditional pharaonic rites, in the same poses as their predecessors. Blocks of modest size, transportable by a few men, and bas-reliefs of rare delicacy.

Denon stayed a long time before the kiosk. A few decorated blocks, dismantled – it was feasible. 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 in his satchel. No block weighed more than a few hundred kilos.

He decided not to do it.

Not on moral principle. He no longer allowed himself that virtue after what he had taken since Dendera. He did not want Philae to look like the other sites when others came there. Something in that architectural lightness, in that elegance on a human scale, demanded to remain whole. Without its blocks, the kiosk 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, so unusual did the gesture seem to him. "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. Denon copied several, noting position and state of preservation, then copied the others. Even the least legible. Even those half erased by the flooding Nile. The sun heated the stone so much that he had to rest his notebook on his knee.

"Those, I prefer to the temples," said Hassan. "Ordinary pilgrims. They came to pray to Isis, they carved their names. Not for posterity. To… have been here."

"Like our notebooks," said Denon. "We passed this way, we saw this. Except that we call it science."

"And we do make some, do we not?"

Denon took the time to blow on the page to clear it of sand.

"Yes. But we leave other traces. The empty niches. The crates on the backs of mules. Those… will be found in no report."

On 25 February, Denon left Aswan on horseback with the column, the baggage and crates going down on the boats that sixty escort cavalrymen followed along the bank. Desaix, launched in pursuit of Murad Bey, had entrusted the column to Belliard. Nearly nine hundred kilometres separated him from Cairo, which he would not see again before summer. Hassan travelled with him as interpreter. The troops were retracing the road they had taken on the way up.

The journey to Hermontis took nine days. The column went down the river at about twenty kilometres a day, stopping in villages for water and provisions. Nearly thirty degrees in the shade. The march ran from dawn to noon, then resumed after four hours under canvas, where the flies would not let anyone sleep.

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 beneath the floor held six faience scarabs, three copper bracelets and 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 General Belliard. He was taken to the head of the column. He spoke rapidly. Belliard 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."

Belliard 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.

Belliard had the cavalry advance at a walk. The fellahs did not move. At fifty metres, Belliard 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."

Belliard 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 Hermontis, the column halted for two days. Belliard wanted to wait for news of the Mamluks, the Meccans and the rest of the army, scattered over many points. The bivouac was set up at the foot of the temple. The soldiers slept in the shade of its walls. Some climbed onto the roofs to see the Nile. Others stayed under the tents, too tired to move, their boots still on their feet.

On the evening of their arrival, a soldier of the second company stole 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. It took four soldiers to separate them. The sergeant had both men put in irons for the night. The next morning, judgement by the captain. Twenty strokes of the cane for the thief. The victim was released without penalty.

The following evening, Belliard summoned the officers to his tent. His spies had just informed him. Osman Bey and the Meccans, it was said, were about to cross the Nile at Qena; they had cannon, they had destroyed the Nile flotilla, and Desaix, gone in

pursuit of Murad Bey, could not be reached. Bonaparte had left for Syria with the bulk of the army. They had to march to meet the enemy as quickly as possible. Belliard put his finger on the map, level with Qena.

"No more halts after Hermontis. Qus, then Qena. Three days at most."

"And Thebes?" asked a lieutenant. "The savants wanted…"

"We go past."

Denon, who was present, did not wait to be given the floor.

"Then a halt here, tomorrow morning. The temple of Hermontis. Six hours."

"Impossible."

"Six hours, General. I ask for nothing else."

Belliard looked at him for a long moment, then folded up the map.

"Six hours at the temple, tomorrow, from dawn. Not one more. If you are not back by noon, we leave without you."

The next day, from dawn, Denon went to 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. The sand grated under his soles. On the west wall, rows of engraved cartouches, 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. Outside, the two soldiers were playing dice.

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 raised his eyes to the upper part of the wall, which the half-light had hidden from him until then. 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.

Denon did not leave the chamber again. At half past eleven, one of the soldiers ran in, out of breath.

"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, the satchel banging against his thigh. Belliard watched him pass without comment. The column set off.

The column passed through Thebes that same afternoon, without stopping. Denon watched the pylons of Karnak and Luxor slide by in the distance, unable to measure a single one, and he left more regrets there than anywhere else along the road. Contradictory news was circulating. The Turkish army was advancing, the English were blockading every port, said one. Another swore the opposite.

There was still the fight at Benouth, the retaking of Qena, a second trip to Dendera, the march on Quseir with Belliard at the end of May. Denon left Upper Egypt on 5 July and saw Cairo again only on the 20th. 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. A smell of straw and warm dust. His twelve boxes were there, counted among the ninety-six in the inventory, lined up against the south wall, labelled in his own

hand. He opened the first, checked the contents quickly and closed it again. Nothing was missing. He went to the palace.

General Dugua, who commanded Cairo, received him at once. He was standing beside a table covered with maps of the Delta and the coast of Aboukir. He motioned Denon to sit.

"You have finished your campaign in Upper Egypt?"

"Yes. From Dendera to Aswan. All the principal monuments."

"Are your drawings usable for the *Description*?"

"Fifty-three sheets. Temples, tombs, colossi, bas-reliefs."

"Good. Listen to me. The commander-in-chief has gone to stop the Turkish army that has just landed at Aboukir, 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, to Upper Egypt, which the army still holds. You lose everything except that. Is that clear?"

"It is clear."

"Then leave. I have work to do."

Dugua was already bent over his maps when Denon closed the door.

Bonaparte, back from Syria in mid-June, had left Cairo a few days earlier for the coast. Denon remained in Cairo with Monge, Berthollet, Fourier and the thirty or so savants who had stayed behind.

During Bonaparte's absence, Denon organised the work of the Institute. Monge supervised the explorations of the Memphite region. Berthollet wrote up his observations on natron. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire continued his zoological studies in the Delta. Fourier managed the correspondence with the provincial sections.

A few days after his return, Denon called a meeting. All the members present in Cairo were there. Thirty savants and engineers crowded into the great hall, the windows open to the heat. He opened the session at ten o'clock.

"Gentlemen, Bonaparte is on the coast, where the Turks have landed. 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 and spoke before being given the floor.

"Let us wait for Bonaparte, come now! He is the one who will decide, he always decides, and besides, he likes to be waited for…"

"And if he does not return?" said Fourier, without lifting his eyes from his columns of figures.

No one answered. Berthollet took off his spectacles.

"Denon is right. Preparing a plan never sank a ship. The day we have one, we shall be ready. Assuming that day comes."

The proposal was adopted. The session was adjourned at noon.

From Syria, Bonaparte had brought back fewer than ten thousand of the thirteen thousand men who had set out with him, the others dead, sick or plague-stricken. The offensive had failed, and everyone at the Institute knew it without saying so.

A few days later, Dugua summoned Denon back to the palace. Drawn features, cravat undone, maps heaped even on the chairs. No greeting.

"Your transport plan?"

"Ready, on paper. Only the ships are missing."

"It will stay on paper. The English are still blockading the coast. No transport until that changes."

"Understood."

Dugua had already gone back to his maps.

Those weeks were calm. Explorations and excavations went on; the *Description* advanced slowly. In the evenings, on the terraces, people watched for the couriers from the coast.

VI - The Rosetta Stone

On 15 July 1799, an engineer lieutenant named Bouchard was supervising the demolition of an old wall of Fort Julien, near Rosetta. A pickaxe struck something.

Bouchard was twenty-eight, a graduate of the École Polytechnique. He understood at once that it was no ordinary building stone. A stele of black stone, a hundred and twelve centimetres high, bearing three parallel inscriptions. He had the stone placed under cover in the fort and informed General Menou, who commanded the post, and Lancret, a fellow graduate of the École Polytechnique, then at Rosetta, wrote to the Institute of Egypt in Cairo.

The fort stood apart from the ordinary building sites. Under a canvas sheet, against a wall, the stone was safe.

Jean-Joseph Marcel and Rémi Raige were sent to Rosetta as soon as Lancret's letter had been read at the Institute. 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 from 1 August.

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 was an exact impression, in white on a black ground, of every sign. The operation took several hours for the whole surface.

Lancret's letter, read at the Institute on 29 July, had suggested that the three inscriptions were three versions of one and the same text, one of them legible. Marcel and Raige's report confirmed it. Denon had not seen such a fever since the arrival at Alexandria a year earlier. If the stone allowed the hieroglyphs to be deciphered, three millennia of history would become legible again, and with them everything that travellers had copied without understanding for two centuries.

"Gentlemen," Denon had said to the Institute, the evening Lancret's letter was read, "we are perhaps… well, I believe we are at the dawn of a scientific revolution."

Monge had at once proposed sending an expedition to Rosetta.

"Plaster casts! Squeezes on paper, as many as we can… And quickly, my friends, before someone damages it or moves it."

Jomard, who had made the journey from Cairo with them, was present at 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. Jomard took these measurements himself, though they were not needed at once, stretching the leather tape from one edge to the other, twice for each.

The stele was incomplete. The top was missing, carried off at some indeterminate time. Only the last fourteen hieroglyphic lines survived, and even these were mutilated. About half of the hieroglyphic text was lost, whereas the Demotic was almost complete. The future decipherer would pay for it. But the Greek, despite a break at the lower right, remained essentially legible, and 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. 196 BC."

"And the hieroglyphs?" asked Jomard.

"Probably the same text. Well… 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…"

"Precisely. But reckon on 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, enclosed in a cartouche, recurs six times in what remains of the hieroglyphs. Ptolemy recurs eleven times in the Greek… but 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."

Jomard underlined the cartouche twice in his notebook.

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 days 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 dark 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

marks of the chisel remained 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.

Sitting there, he saw what set this stone apart from everything the Commission had collected, or tried to collect, for more than a year. The *shabtis*, the scarabs, the papyri, the fragments of bas-relief, all these were taken because they were beautiful, rare, old.

The stone had no beauty. It was worth only what it said, a correspondence between three scripts, one of which was legible and the other two not yet. For anyone working on the decipherment, a squeeze, still buckled, was worth the stone.

A *shabti* taken out of its tomb lost its context. This one, drawn from a fortification wall, lost nothing. It had had none for two thousand years.

"You are still here," said Marcel, coming in. "This is the third time this week."

"I am thinking. The objects we carry off lose something. This one… I do not see what it could lose."

Marcel sat down beside him.

"Except for being taken by the English."

"Yes. Except that. But even then, the squeezes remain. What it says remains. It is perhaps the only thing in the whole 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 prepared five for European correspondents, at the rate of one to London, two to Paris, one to Berlin and one to Copenhagen, which an officer returning to France, an aide-de-camp of Bonaparte perhaps, would carry through the blockade. 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 distribute the key before opening the lock," said Denon when he learned of it.

"I distribute copies of the key. The lock stays here. And if the English take the lock, we shall still have our copies."

The announcement of the discovery, then the return of Marcel and Raige, prompted an extraordinary meeting of the Institute on 8 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… I say if… 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 it take to decipher? Approximately."

Marcel answered from the back of the hall.

"Years. Perhaps ten. Perhaps twenty. Hieroglyphic writing is not alphabetic; one does not move from a sign to a letter."

"But it is feasible," said Jomard. "We have the correspondence. The rest is work."

An engineer of the Ponts et Chaussées, 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. Someone coughed at the back. No one had yet put the question so directly.

Monge looked at Denon.

"The squeezes travel," said Denon. "Marcel has prepared five for 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."

The answer satisfied no one, but there was no other. The military situation was beyond their control, and Monge was already drawing the inkwell towards him.

Monge drafted a formal resolution whereby 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. It 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 read the latest despatch?"

"No."

"Kléber, at Alexandria, is still asking for reinforcements. No one answers him. Since Syria, everyone behaves as if… as if the army had got over it."

Denon set down the chair he was holding.

"And we, we are finding the key to the hieroglyphs."

"Yes. Two curves. Science rises while the expedition collapses."

Fourier had said it without bitterness, as one reads out figures.

Denon went back to the squeezes and spread them out on the great table of the Institute. 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 without ever knowing what they said.

He thought of Bonaparte. Back from Syria since June, perhaps already turned towards France, unaware that his savants had just found what no one had found in two thousand years.

On 9 August, Jomard spent the entire day with the squeezes. He had brought his survey notebooks from Giza and Saqqara, covered with cartouches drawn during the preceding months. In them he took up again the hypothesis already noted at Rosetta, that of cartouches bearing names, common among travellers since the eighteenth century.

This time, he could check it against the actual pieces.

The Rosetta count still held, eleven Ptolemys in Greek, six cartouches in the mutilated band. He set the correspondence down cleanly 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."

A year earlier, the idea had drifted about in travel narratives; it now rested on a count, on a notebook page stained with soot.

The explorations went on. The stone did not stop the rest.

Nor did the war.

On 10 August, an officer came by the Institute to announce the official toll of the battle of Aboukir of 25 July. Bonaparte had crushed the Ottoman landing on the beach. Ten thousand janissaries killed or drowned, the rest captured. A clear victory, after

the failure in Syria, and the Army of the Orient held Egypt. But Aboukir, however brilliant, changed nothing about its isolation.

Denon learned the news from Kléber, who had come from Alexandria for the day.

"Is Bonaparte coming back?"

"Yes. In a few days, perhaps less. He has written nothing clear. But the army is at the end of its tether. That much is certain."

"And afterwards?"

"Afterwards, we shall see. Either he consolidates Egypt. Or he goes back to France."

Kléber did not name the third possibility. Bonaparte could also go 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 announcing that 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, an improvised ramp and a few oaths 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, but everyone understood that 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.

One day, someone would read this text as one reads Greek, and the names of the pharaohs would come out of their cartouches.

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, less from a danger than from a situation that had grown too small for him.

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.

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 outbuildings 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 negotiation to come.

He went round the outbuildings before sunrise. The seventy-three official 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, from Saqqara, Karnak, Dendera, the Valley of the Kings, the market at Memphis, Giza. 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 formally separated.

With Bonaparte gone, the distinctions no longer held, even politically. With him had evaporated the state project that made such removals legitimate. What remained were 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. He stayed there until daylight slipped under the door.

Kléber now commanded the army of Egypt. Bonaparte had been careful not to tell him of his departure in person.

Marcel took it calmly. He had his squeezes; whether Bonaparte was there or not changed nothing. Costaz asked Fourier whether the work of the Commission would continue. Fourier said yes. Costaz made no comment. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire heard the news bent over his dissection and did not let go of his scalpel. "Gone? So be it," he said without raising his head. For him, the object on the table took precedence over everything else.

"He used us," Costaz was saying that morning to anyone who would listen. "Our work… a front, that is what it was. He has what he wanted, he is leaving. And we stay."

Fourier found Costaz alone in his office at the Institute, the very afternoon of the announcement of the departure.

"Are you working?"

"No."

"He could have warned us," said Costaz. "I have a family in Paris. I promised them a few months. It has now been fifteen months. And he has gone home, he has, while…"

He left the sentence unfinished. Jealousy had no part in it. He had believed in science in the service of the Republic, and in the Republic in the service of science, and he was discovering that he had been used as one uses an extra.

The Commission of Sciences and Arts met that very evening. No one had summoned it. The savants had found themselves at the Institute without having agreed beforehand. Fourier was there, and Marcel, Jomard, Costaz, Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and a dozen others. Conté was the last to arrive.

The situation came down to one question. What happened now that Bonaparte was gone and Kléber was in command?

Kléber did not have the same relations with the Commission. Jomard had sounded him out, before the Syrian campaign, on the status of the collections. Kléber had said he would look into the matter.

"When Kléber says he will look into something, it means he is not thinking about it," said Jomard.

"Kléber has three worries," said Fourier, counting them on his fingers. "An army to keep together, Ottomans to watch, the English in the Mediterranean. The collections come… after."

"Then they must be ours," replied Jomard. "Otherwise someone else will decide, and not on the basis of an inventory."

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 made any remark. Costaz turned the sheets more slowly than the others, his finger on the column of weights, as one reads a ledger of plunder.

"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, and the twenty-three nameless crates in the north-west corner of the warehouse, in the darkness.

Kléber judged that his predecessor had fled so as not to take responsibility for a surrender; in his report to the Directory of 26 September 1799, he reproached him for not having left a penny in the treasury.

Seen from the Institute, the military situation seemed hopeless. 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 and negotiated the evacuation. In December 1799, Kléber sent an emissary to the Ottoman grand vizier, who was encamped in Syria. Negotiations began aboard the British ship the *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 demanded 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 as well as a truce until the Ottoman plenipotentiaries arrived. The discussions dragged on. Kléber pressed his negotiators to conclude, and 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, the day the Convention was officially promulgated there. 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. Pack your collections. 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, as if that time were about to be taken back from him. 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. "The clause is… explicit. Provided, naturally, that the English accept its terms."

Fourier had drawn up a complete inventory, with two hundred and seventeen catalogued objects, of which one hundred and thirty-eight had direct museum value and seventy-nine documentary scientific value. Those two hundred and seventeen pieces formed the core of the ninety-six crates. 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, which would not be done again. Two hundred kilos at most, in watertight crates. Jollois's notebooks, in copper tubes, added fifty kilos. 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 nearly seven 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 storerooms of the Institute, and Jomard counted them again. Thirty-three were missing, lost, destroyed or mislaid in the course of the army's movements; sixty-three remained. The labels stayed stuck on. These objects were no longer leaving 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 led them out in front of Cairo 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 about six 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, who had broken with the Ottomans by heading into the desert without taking part in the fight, 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. At the Institute, work picked up where it had been left, and the crates stayed where they were.

"Let us work while we can," Fourier kept repeating at the weekly meetings that followed, without raising his eyes from his sheets. "What is written is not 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 without interrupting, then 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 palace of Elfi Bey, his headquarters on the Ezbekiya. 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 amiable, expansive. None of those around him could know that it was his last meal.

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. Disguised as a beggar, he waited 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, surrounded him, trying in vain to obtain a few words from him. 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 consternation that quickly turned into anger. The whole city was in turmoil. The shops closed. The French soldiers, 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. They spoke little, and in low voices. Someone had left the door open onto the courtyard, and no one got up to close it.

Fourier spoke without preamble.

"Kléber is dead. General Menou, the most senior of the divisional generals, takes command. We know him little… as a commander, I mean. Kléber, in his way, respected Bonaparte's orders concerning our work. Menou has no such bond with us."

Jomard did not wait.

"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…"

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 Masonic lodge "*Isis*", of which Kléber had been the Worshipful Master. 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, divisional general and the most senior after Kléber, officially took command of the army of Egypt.

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 very 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, who respected him less than they had Kléber, followed him out of discipline rather than conviction. Menou had converted to Islam, taken the name Abdallah, and married an Egyptian woman named Zobeida. The savants had known him since the 1798 campaign, but had never yet seen him command in chief.

At first, for the savants, Menou was at once more intrusive and less useful than Kléber. He wanted to steer their work towards subjects that served his policy, and his priorities had almost nothing in common with theirs.

Fourier devised a simple strategy for coexisting with Menou without compromising himself, namely 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.

In the field, the explorations resumed.

The Institute of Egypt continued to hold its regular sessions, even if the atmosphere was different from that of the early years.

The stay was growing longer, in a country whose everyday language and cultural subtleties the savants had never mastered. The presentations were less enthusiastic, the debates less lively.

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 kept hers for three thousand years. Three thousand. That is what a great civilisation is, I believe – less the grandeur of its monuments than the length of time for which it transmits knowledge without distorting it."

Marcel had objected.

"But surely monuments are precisely what does the transmitting! Without Karnak, without the pyramids, Jomard's measurements would transmit nothing. The support and the knowledge cannot be separated."

"That is why we are here," retorted Jomard. "To substitute for the monument a document that will travel better."

Fourier had listened without intervening, his pen motionless above a column of figures. He was thinking of what would become of their work if the army capitulated tomorrow.

"Your surveys, Jomard… Are they in a condition to be copied, if we had to evacuate – in haste?"

"Double copy, since Alexandria. If the ship sinks, one version survives."

Fourier looked at him for a moment. This young man had understood that on a military campaign a piece of work that exists in only one copy is already half lost.

"You should tell the others that."

"I already have. Most found it excessive."

"Most are wrong."

Fourier thought of the British. He did not know whom they would send, but he knew they would send someone. Someone, on the other side, who would also be preparing his lists.

That evening, Jomard stayed alone to recopy his notebooks of measurements. The pen scratched the paper, the lamp smoked. The city murmured through the shutters, a muezzin called to prayer, and Jomard heard nothing. Copying was the only sure thing he did here, he sometimes thought. One could measure wrongly, draw wrongly. A faithful copy did not deceive, and it outlived the original. Since Alexandria, every measurement had existed in two copies or not at all. The first in the field notebook, made standing, in the wind. The second here, at the table, reread, checked, made legible.

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 damp of the Delta had eaten away what the sands of Upper Egypt had preserved. Nothing like

Karnak or 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. Strabo mentioned the site, Jollois reminded them, but since the Greeks no one had attempted a systematic survey. "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. He 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 the man had spread out. 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 south-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, finding in them proof of the fixity of species, the cat unchanged in two thousand years. And of what another naturalist would say, one who dared to think that two thousand years count for nothing on the scale of change. 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.

In the necropolis, half buried in the earth, Jollois found a small bronze coffin in the shape of a seated cat. It stood twenty centimetres high. 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. Someone else would read it later, if this bronze ever reached Paris. That name had been waiting in the earth since the Twenty-sixth Dynasty.

He put it in his satchel. It weighed three hundred grams. In Alexandria it would be worth perhaps twenty piastres, if one found an English buyer with a taste for Egyptian bronzes. For science it would be beyond price, if that name could one day be read. Jollois knew that the two reckonings would never meet, and that his own hand, which had just picked up the bronze, did nothing to mend matters.

Geoffroy joined Jollois that evening at the camp with his six mummies in their crate. Night was falling fast. Before the fire they set their finds between them. Geoffroy, who had spent the day deciding what he could take and what he must leave, examined the mummies one last time, then lowered the lid.

"What are you going to do with it?" asked Geoffroy, looking at the bronze.

"Take it. Draw it, describe it. To the Louvre, when there is a room for Egypt."

"And at the capitulation? If the British…"

Jollois did not answer. He slipped the bronze into his satchel, under his notebooks. They both knew it. 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. If anyone is going to draw a lasting benefit from all this, it is he."

Nicolas-Jacques Conté had established himself as the inventor of the expedition. Mills, forges, 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 late summer of 1800, Jollois organised new explorations in the Eastern Desert, at sites distinct from those he had visited before. This time he wanted to reach the Coptic monasteries lost in the 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 destitution, stared at these Parisian savants without saying a word.

"Father," Jollois said to the superior through Hassan, the Commission's interpreter, "we have not come to take your manuscripts from you. We should like to see them, and to copy them if you permit."

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.

"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 were rounded, derived from the Greek, with seven additional signs borrowed from Demotic. Jomard counted them twice, with the tip of his fingernail.

"Would you agree to part with it?" asked Jollois, almost in spite of himself. "Or at least to let us copy it?"

The father superior shook his head.

"This manuscript has belonged to our monastery for centuries. Our fathers preserved it from generation to generation. It will not leave."

He had not raised his voice. His hands remained flat on the lid of the chest.

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 the two languages. He left with his copy, the ink of the last leaves barely dry, counting on someone, later, to 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," said Jomard. "Men lived here for years, alone, in prayer. Nothing else. What a conception of existence…"

He broke off. He was thinking of the graffiti, those names carved in the rock by hermits who did not expect to be read. He himself had spent two years noting measurements.

"Their asceticism had its own coherence," he went on. "A wager on eternity. Ours… well, on science. By other means."

On 21 September, the expedition set out for the monastery of St Paul, some thirty kilometres to the east. The library there was larger. 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 link we lack. 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 Delta and the City

Menou proved, with time, more benevolent towards the savants. 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 early October. Jollois learned of it in his office. Desaix, who had left for France in March, had been the expedition's best companion, 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, nearly four months after the event. Desaix had died at Marengo on 14 June 1800. The same day as Kléber, thousands 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 creaking 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, annotations by Desaix, all of them practical. 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 in the fading light, 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 wondered what would become of them – how to protect them, how long they would last if nothing were done.

He thought of Desaix's personal notebooks. The general had kept a campaign journal since the embarkation. 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. 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 nearly two years. He did not know what to do with it now. Return it, to whom? He left it in his baggage.

What became of the notebooks of a man killed in action? No one knew. Desaix had no collection, no satchel full of *shabtis* and scarabs. Only campaign papers, of the kind that are recovered, lost, sold or burned.

Jollois went on organising new explorations, this time in the western Delta, far from the sites of early summer. Sais first, then Buto. Flat tells, few visible monuments.

On 15 October, 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. Geoffroy had the naturalist's method – assume nothing from the study, see first – and from the first day wrote down the birds of the canals under their Latin names.

After two days of travel they reached Sais. The air there was damper, heavier, laden with the smell of flooded fields. The light was white, without 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 the peasants as supports for their canals.

"Two square kilometres," said Jomard. "Roughly. We shall have to take up the chain again tomorrow. Millennia of stratified occupation, no excavation. A whole city compressed into a hill."

There was nothing to draw. No visible monument, no obelisk. Only the surface of the hill, its dimensions, its altitudes taken by barometer. But in the canals and in the walls of the houses, reused blocks of granite. Fragments of columns, pieces of carved lintels, sections of architrave.

Jomard stopped at the edge of a canal and ran his palm over one of the blocks. Pink Aswan granite, polished on one face, rough on the others.

"We shall not take them away," said Jollois. "They are the walls of their houses. One does not demolish a village for stones."

"They are the true guardians of Sais," said Jomard. "Without knowing it, of course. Without their houses, these blocks…" – he tapped the granite – "would have vanished long ago."

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 October, after a stop at the tells of Buto, barer still than those of Sais. Few stones in place, but complete surveys.

In November and December, Jollois catalogued the collections. Several hundred objects accumulated in two years. Statues, amulets, papyri, coins, jewellery, natural specimens. He drew up index cards, corrected attributions. After months in the field, ink had replaced dust on his cuffs.

Jollois had discovered by chance a workshop of Coptic copyists in the Old Cairo district, where liturgical books were still copied by hand and paper was dressed according to the techniques of the Arab scribes. An old man and his two sons. They prepared quires that were sold to dealers, who resold them to the savants of the Commission. Jollois had bought several lots there.

One morning he asked to stay and watch the work.

The dressing of the paper followed a well-worn process. Size the sheet with starch, let it dry, then burnish it at length with a stone or a shell so that the reed pen glides over it without drinking the ink. Jollois laid a finger on the surface of a finished sheet – smooth as skin, still fresh, with a smell of starch and reed he had noticed nowhere else. The result – a supple sheet of creamy white – had nothing to envy in the best European paper. The technique, inherited from the Arab and Coptic copyists of the Middle Ages, was said not to have changed by a single gesture for centuries.

He drew the old craftsman's hands, which had done this work since childhood and had it from a father, who had it from his own. The stone went back and forth over the sheet without the eyes following it.

"Since when have they done this?" Jollois asked the interpreter.

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. Does he mean the pharaohs?"

Another question. A brief answer.

"He says he does not know. That it does not matter." The interpreter searched for the word. "What counts is that the hands know."

Jollois noted down the phrase. The name of the inventor of paper, the craftsman did not know and did very well without. 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.

That kind of memory, the Commission's work could not reproduce. The engraved plates would show the form of the sheets and tools. But the gesture – the exact pressure, the angle of the reed pen, the length of the burnishing 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.

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, on the evening of the entry into Cairo, had sold three sheets to Geoffroy and given him a fourth as a welcome. These two men did not belong to the same world. They made the same gesture.

Menou's benevolence had its reverse side. Menou took a growing interest in the work of the Commission, to the point of meddling

in its organisation and claiming to decide what deserved to be studied.

"General Menou would like more mosques and fewer pharaohs," Jollois reported to Fourier. "Islamic Egypt would be politically more relevant. For our relations with the population, he says."

"He is not entirely wrong," said Fourier without raising his eyes from his sheet of calculations. "On the substance. But our scientific priorities…" – he put down his pen – "are for us to decide. 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, which began with an overall sketch to grasp the general proportions, continued with detailed measured drawings of the significant elements and ended with copies of the hieroglyphic inscriptions with all visible imperfections, to allow a later comparison between different versions of the same text.

"Copy what you see," he would repeat to his young assistants. "The cracks, the gaps, everything. An idealised hieroglyph is worth less than a cracked one. What it ought to be is your business, not the stone's."

One November 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 the coast, 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.

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 very first session of the winter, a sheaf of drawings under his arm.

"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 shaduf, a simple counterweighted lever for drawing water, and 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.

"They look primitive. Try, then, to build better ones with the wood, the plant rope and the clay of the country."

Conté knew it from experience – one well-designed simple machine is worth a hundred complex ones badly suited to their purpose. The Egyptians had learned it millennia before him.

He circulated technical drawings of the network of canals that distributed the Nile's water over the whole cultivable valley. The sheets passed from hand to hand. 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. It takes an authority commanding all the villages, pharaoh, caliph or bey. I do not say that water made the king; I say that it cannot do without him."

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, and came back in the evening with his boots grey with mud.

"Same plants, same tools, same gestures," said Jollois. "It is the agriculture of the Old Kingdom. Four thousand years have changed nothing essential in it."

"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 often 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 does not turn its back on the fields. It faces the river, from which life comes. And the sun sets on the side of the desert, where the dead are buried. So their religion, at bottom, is – how shall I put it – a hydraulic cosmology. The word is dreadful. Forgive me."

"The Niger, the Indus… any silt-bearing river, if this system were adapted to it, would give comparable effects," said Conté. "There is nothing local in it. The Egyptians simply had the time to perfect it."

Abdallah ibn Youssef, who shared nothing with General Menou but his first name, 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 was Jollois, with his instruments. The other remained bent over his sheets. They drew, measured, talked between themselves. The interpreter they had brought was not very good. He translated the words but not the sense. Abdallah could hear it in the way he stumbled over the technical terms.

He had watched them at work for an hour from the other bank, hidden in the fringing reeds. 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. Soldiers would have watched the surroundings. 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 given the brief lift of the chin of men who are told what they already supposed.

The curiosity of the French did not trouble Abdallah. What troubled him was that they treated the canal as an object, as something one could measure, describe, put in a book, and then 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 demanded 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. A whole life, Abdallah had answered. 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 thought again of the *wakil*, of the way he had watched them work from the other bank, of the precision of his answers, of the two places on the canal he had pointed out to them. That man did not endure the French. He calculated. Jollois thought of his own way of seeing this country, in measures, in dimensions, in cross-sections, and did not find it so different.

"And your *wakil*… sixteen years on that canal, what did he tell you?" asked Conté the next day, during the presentation of the results.

"That the apprenticeship lasts a whole life. The rest, he did not say. I think he believed that what he still does not know exceeds what he knows."

Conté left his pencil lying across the sheet and looked at the sachets of silt lined up on the table. Seventy-two samples taken

along the canal and its branches, labelled, numbered, ready to go to Paris. Egyptian earth in French canvas sachets. He pictured Jollois kneeling at the edge of the canal, his fingers in the still-damp silt, feeling the texture of each sample before measuring it.

"Their soil, their statues…" he said. "It is the same. We take what interests us and call it science."

Jollois took a moment to answer. Silt, a *shabti*… in both cases something was leaving Egypt, and the difference was not as clear as he would have wished.

"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, and one could smell the 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, down to the last basket.

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. None of them looked at his shovel.

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. Behind the question, he heard another. Did they even know what they were 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 put away his pencil. 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 escort 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. 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 the corner of the field, level with 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. He had not taken at once.

"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 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, and concentrating them in time was impossible. An unfortunate battle was fought on 21 March near Alexandria, at Canopus. The French fought well. The British had the numbers, and the ships – those the French had lacked since 1 August 1798.

Alarming news was reaching them from the north-east. A great Ottoman army was advancing under the command of the Grand Vizier Youssouf Pasha, twenty thousand Ottoman soldiers reinforced by the Mamluks. Capitulation was becoming inevitable. In the corridors of the Institute, no one asked any longer whether they would capitulate, but when, and on what terms the collections would survive.

Fourier had 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. The right, I say advisedly."

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. "They will also have commissioners who know antiquities. They will know exactly what we have."

Marcel intervened.

"Everything will turn on one distinction. Institutional property, personal property. 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 14 to 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 one hundred. 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 transaction could be verified, and he had no other protection.

The register 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. Marcel had kept it with a notary's rigour, having understood from the outset 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 the British commissioner 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." Marcel tapped the binding, where the ink of the previous day had not quite dried.

"Then everything depends on the commissioner."

"Yes, everything depends on the commissioner."

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. More than a year earlier, he had made squeezes of the inscription in Cairo, which General Dugua had carried to Paris. They 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.

"Information travels," said Marcel. "The object… the object does not. We may already have won that battle."

In the weeks that followed, the savants set about systematising the duplication of their work, hitherto done piecemeal. 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.

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." Jollois watched the dust settle behind the animals. "I have no choice. If one consignment is lost, perhaps another will arrive."

Jomard, for his part, copied his most recent topographical measurements onto his 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. The copies would go in a different crate from the originals, and Jomard noted on each the number of its twin crate.

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, cold, precise, devoid of expression, were working documents rather than art. If the jars were destroyed, the sheets would remain.

On 25 March, more precise news reached Cairo. The Ottoman army of the Grand Vizier Youssouf Pasha was advancing from Syria and approaching the frontier of Egypt. Its junction, sooner or later, with the British forces landed at Aboukir seemed inevitable. Cairo would soon be threatened on two sides.

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… afterwards, it will be too late."

The pace quickened. They worked from dawn to midnight. The oil lamps burned without pause, and the smell of fresh ink reached into the corridors. The savants worked in pairs, one dictating, the other writing. Military scribes were requisitioned to help copy the administrative documents.

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, line after line. Geoffroy, at the neighbouring table, looked up, then bent over his fish again.

In the library, nothing could be heard any longer but 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 the coast. He again paid fifty piastres in advance to the caravan leader, who counted the coins twice, like a man who knew that ships sank, that crates fell from carts and that thieves prowled the roads.

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.

"Treaties of this kind speak of natural and artificial curiosities," said Marcel. "Very well. Our work does not consist of curiosities. It is scientific output. It is for us to demonstrate as much."

"The British will want to take everything," replied Jomard. "I do not believe that arguments…"

"Grey areas," Fourier cut in. "Our arguments will create them. In a grey area, one negotiates. A reasonable commissioner will agree to leave certain things. That is where we must concentrate our efforts."

"And if the commissioner is not reasonable?" asked Geoffroy.

"Then we shall lose everything." Fourier made a vague gesture with his hand. "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, what we have produced ourselves. Measurements, drawings, notes. These belong to us, I think, without question. Next, natural history specimens. Fish, plants, minerals. They belong to no one; our collecting deprives no one. Finally… objects taken from tombs, temples, necropolises. Those belonged to Egypt. We took them."

Geoffroy intervened.

"In theory, yes. In practice… The fellahs who plunder the tombs to sell us objects, they would have plundered them anyway. We have merely accelerated what already existed."

"That mitigates," replied Jomard. "It justifies nothing."

Jollois, who had remained silent throughout the debate, finally spoke.

"There is also the practical question. If we admit that these objects belong to Egypt, we have no argument left against the British. If we call them ours, we must go all the way. We took them. We shall keep them. We shall publish."

Fourier nodded.

"Whether we were right or wrong to take them," he said, "is a discussion for the academy. We have these objects. The British will claim them. Does anyone here think we should hand them over willingly, in the name of moral principles?"

No one answered. No savant in that room was prepared to give up years of work voluntarily. Geoffroy looked at the table, Marcel at his hands.

"Then we are agreed," said Fourier. "We shall defend our collections. But knowing why. Because they are ours, of course – and because French science, I believe, will make better use of them than the British military."

Marcel added a reservation.

"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."

"Fair," acknowledged Fourier after a moment. "We shall have to publish. Without that, nothing we have done here is justified."

On 12 May, an officer who had escaped from a post in the Delta arrived in Cairo with news. The British, masters of Rosetta since the end of April, were inquiring of prisoners and merchants about what the Institute of Egypt had gathered. Fourier made him repeat his account twice. The British commissioners would therefore come with precise demands, and their inventory was probably already prepared.

In May, the military news grew clearer. The British were slowly advancing up the Nile. The Ottomans were making progress from the north-east. Convergence upon Cairo was inevitable, to within a few weeks.

The savants redoubled their efforts. Each day brought its share of constraints and decisions to be made. What to copy first? What to leave? How to share out the paper, the ink, the time, 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.

Fourier observed all this closely. He took notes, on the men rather than on the objects. How each reacted to pressure. Who kept his lucidity. Who lost it. These notes would never be of use in the plates of the *Description de l'Égypte*. They would help him, years later, to write the historical preface to the work.

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. If the British took everything, these copies would be what remained. He stayed there for a moment, none of them raising his head, then left.

In mid-June, one last meeting was called. The enemy armies were now only a few days' march from Cairo. 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 in the first batch, more in the second, all 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. We could hardly have been better prepared."

Jollois then spoke.

"To the end. They will not end up in the storerooms of a British museum without having served science."

No one added anything. The sheets were folded, a lamp was snuffed. The meeting broke up before midnight.

In the last days of June, the shops of Cairo opened late and closed early. The French patrols passed one another without speaking. At the Institute, they packed, then unpacked to check.

V - The Defeat at Cairo

By 27 June 1801, the military situation was untenable. Menou, blockaded in Alexandria, could not relieve Cairo. General Belliard, who commanded the garrison, had opened, a few days earlier, capitulation negotiations with General Hutchinson and the Grand Vizier Youssouf Pasha.

A convention was signed that very day. It settled the evacuation of the army with its arms and baggage, saying nothing precise about the Commission's collections. That silence was only a

reprieve. The clause that would truly threaten them would be signed in September, at Alexandria, as article sixteen.

The word that mattered fitted into a single sentence. The army would leave Cairo with its arms and baggage. That sentence, read aloud by Fourier at the extraordinary session of 28 June 1801, was followed by a silence that Jollois afterwards compared, in his journal, to that of a sickroom when the doctor has just fallen silent. Then everyone spoke at once, Geoffroy, Marcel, Jomard, voices over voices, until Fourier raised his hand.

"The baggage… Does that cover my jars?" said Geoffroy. "Three years of collections. The whole fauna of the Nile. Two hundred and forty species that no one has yet described."

"And my notebooks," said Jollois. "Two hundred and thirty-seven. The only complete measured drawings of the temples of Upper Egypt that have ever been made."

"And the Rosetta Stone?" said Marcel. "It is at Alexandria, with Menou. The only key to the hieroglyphs that has been found in three thousand years, and it…"

Fourier had reread the article. The army would carry off its arms and baggage. He was looking for a flaw in the wording. Baggage obviously did not cover the colossi or the sarcophagi. But the papyri, the coins, Geoffroy's jars, the herbaria, the bones? Were the drawing notebooks baggage, or collections made for the Republic? Could an artist's working notebook be regarded as anything other than a personal effect in the sense of a treaty of capitulation? Fourier put the text down. He read it again.

The Rosetta Stone, at Alexandria, did not depend on this convention. Did Marcel's squeezes – paper and ink made by Marcel himself – come under baggage, collection or intellectual work?

"The word is vague," said Fourier. "'Baggage'. They have not defined the term. An undefined term is… a variable. It is for us to fix its domain, what it covers and what it does not cover."

The legal strategy of March at last had a text to work on. Military resistance was out of the question, since they had no weapons and would not have known how to use them. There remained textual resistance, which consisted in finding in the words of the convention the gaps through which their collections might slip. The notebooks became working tools, the squeezes documents, the scientific instruments professional effects. Each category of object had its line of defence.

In the days after the convention was read, the lanes around the Institute acquired a different kind of visitor. Merchants of the Khan el-Khalili began to prowl near the door, not the sellers of cloth and spices but those who had sold antiquities for years and could read in a European's gestures what he wanted to buy before he knew it himself.

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, of good-quality faience, and the gold amulets were genuine too.

"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 for forty piastres and 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, any requisition aimed at the Institute's collections. The local market had read the treaty faster than the diplomats.

Geoffroy responded differently. Legal interstices bored him. He wanted 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 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.

"I am not threatening them," he told Fourier, who was reading the draft over his shoulder. "I am warning them. This is what will happen if 'baggage' is applied literally 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 his stay crawling out of galleries on his knees, hands in the mud, carrying his jars of alcohol himself in the heat. He had weighed this threat long before writing it. It was the only response consistent with what he thought of his work, which belonged to him, and not to the army that had financed it. Better that these jars should not exist than that they should sleep in a basement in London, opened by someone who would not know why a *Polypterus bichir* mattered.

"Send the letter," said Fourier.

The copies, moreover, had been travelling for a long time. 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, from caravan to caravan and port to port, 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 only rarely inspected by the British, who controlled the sea but treated neutrals with consideration.

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 Institute, slightly mouldy but legible.

Marcel had proceeded differently. From the winter of 1799-1800, he had himself pulled, in the printing house he directed in Cairo, proofs of the Rosetta Stone, true squeezes obtained by inking the stone before applying the paper. General Dugua took these sheets to Paris in the spring of 1800, and the Institute entrusted them to the orientalists, among them Silvestre de Sacy. Europe could already begin to read the inscription that the army was not sure of keeping.

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. He had been lucky, and he knew it.

Since neutrals could not be relied upon, Jollois 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. 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 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 never reached Paris. Their copies being unfinished, he had sent the originals, for lack of time, by a Swedish ship at the end of 1800. Only those copies, which had stayed in Cairo, 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 and autumn 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 the loss. In his memoirs, Jollois did not say a word of it.

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, and leave the copies. Paper and ink had no value either in the inventories of a peace treaty or in the galleries of a museum.

Fourier had summed it up at a session of the Institute, in three sentences.

"They will take the originals. We, the copies. And the copies… they 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 seventeen days.

Between the signing of the convention and the departure of the column, not one more. No one said it was too few.

What these men did during that time did not resemble what they had prepared. They had prepared arguments – lists, memoranda, legal distinctions between curiosity and creative work, between personal property and the Institute's collection. They worked without speaking. Soon there were no more sessions. Each stayed in his own storerooms, at his own crates. The conversations that took place were short and technical, on the rope to be used, the weight per wheel, the number of thicknesses of cloth for the jars.

Nothing could be heard any longer in the Institute but the hammers and the rustle of straw.

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 the same. Jollois listened to the end. "No doubt," he said, and went back to his crate. Fourier left.

Then, on the morning of the seventeenth day, when the wagons were ready, no one gave an order. The men went out into the courtyard, organised themselves and took their places in the column without being asked, like soldiers, for the first time since Toulon.

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 rolled along behind him, in the crates that the British would open in two months. He tightened the strap. No one would give a signal, and he did not wait for one. He was the first out of the courtyard.

VI - The Descent to Rosetta

In mid-July, the evacuation of Cairo began. Thirteen thousand men, including five thousand sick or convalescent, two hundred civilians, the savants of the Commission who had remained in Cairo, all leaving the city in a column under the command of General Damas. A few looked back. Most kept their eyes on the back of the man walking in front.

On the first day, 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 evacuation convention signed with the allied generals.

Fourier moved up within earshot and heard the bey.

"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 allied generals, your grand vizier included. It is with them that you must discuss these matters."

The bey motioned to his horsemen. Twenty lances were raised. Damas did not move.

"If you try to stop this column, you violate a convention that your own chiefs signed. I do not think Constantinople ordered you to."

The bey hesitated. He looked at the crates on the wagons, the French soldiers deployed in battle order, then the empty horizon behind him. No Ottoman reinforcements in sight.

He remounted.

"We shall accompany you for a while. 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 the third day, they had vanished. Damas supposed they had gone back to report to the grand vizier.

On the evening of the third day, Jollois questioned Fourier, without much conviction.

"Do you think they will come back?"

"The Ottomans? No. They have the city. What they wanted to know was 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 claim them from the British. It is simpler than taking them from us."

Jollois looked for an objection, found none, and poked the fire with the end of a stick.

The savants marched in the middle of the column with their baggage on wagons. The relief of having escaped danger and the sadness of leaving Egypt were already giving way, in most of them, to anxiety for the collections.

They did not march fast. Thirteen thousand men 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 against the saddle 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.

"Water can be replaced. These specimens cannot."

The officer moved off without insisting. In the July heat, with men suffering from thirst, the argument was not convincing. Geoffroy carried on.

On the fourth day, one of Jomard's crates slid off the wagon as it crossed a dyke 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 the fifth day, 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. No court martial, no execution, a week from Rosetta. The deserter would march in irons as far as

Rosetta, then be returned to the ranks. A sergeant riveted the irons to his ankles. The hammer rang twice. The man did not cry out.

The next morning, he was marching with his company, his ankles chafed raw by the irons. 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.

"Because… I do not want to see what is going to happen with the English. We are going to give them our discoveries. 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 and stoppered the jar of balm again. The soldier went back to his company, dragging his irons.

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… how shall I put it. Dispossessed."

"He understood. And he took the irons for it."

"Yes," said Geoffroy, and he added nothing.

The deserter marched with the column as far as Rosetta. Fourier learned later that he had taken advantage of the confusion of the arrival to disappear into a village on the river bank. He never returned to France.

On the sixth day, 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 came from everywhere at once, whirling, 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 hours holding the coverings against the wind, catching the straps that the gusts tore away. 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. The danger, this time, was no longer the heat. 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 came to one stopper torn off a tube of Jollois's, three sheets with slightly smeared ink and one fish jar with a microcrack at the base. The specimens were transferred to a spare jar.

Geoffroy had brought it from Cairo for that, and for nothing else.

On the seventh day, towards noon, the column passed a convoy of Coptic refugees fleeing towards the coast. 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 the coast 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 turned to Fourier.

"We promised many things on arriving. The liberation of the Egyptians, the end of the Mamluks… The end of the oppression of the Copts. The modernisation of the country. And we are leaving Egypt as we found it. Worse, perhaps."

"We are still leaving something. Jomard's measurements, Jollois's drawings… Our work will be published."

"Yes. We are leaving books. They stay behind with the reprisals."

The Coptic refugees were about to resume their route north, the French column north-west, each at its own 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. On the Wepwawet amulet, the eyes were traced in red ochre.

Jollois put them back in the jar. It could not stay on the track, where the first passer-by would pick it up. He set it in the shade at the foot of the wall of the nearest house, in a hollow that he scooped out slightly with the heel of his boot so that the jar would not roll, where the owner would find it on returning, if he returned.

"We go on."

They rejoined the column. The jar stayed by the wall.

On the tenth day, they saw the Mediterranean for the first time in months. 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.

He said no more. He meant "and now the British".

On the morning of the eleventh day, some twenty kilometres from Rosetta, two British officers on horseback joined the column. They came from General Hutchinson's camp with a signed order of mission instructing them to inspect the French baggage before entry into the city.

Damas received them with glacial politeness.

"Gentlemen, we shall enter Rosetta with our crates sealed. The inspection will take place at embarkation, as the convention provides, 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 embarkation. 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, from I to LXIII. Sixty-three crates under tarpaulins.

"General, if you refuse inspection, we can delay your embarkation 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 turned to 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 on the commissioner. A negotiator, yes. A plunderer…"

The column resumed its march. At eleven o'clock, the palm trees of Rosetta appeared on the horizon, then the mouth of the river. The British frigates lay at anchor offshore. The smoke of their galleys rose straight into the windless sky.

They camped that night two hours' march from Rosetta. 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 the British.

By the light of a lantern held low, Fourier reread the first pages of Jomard's memorandum. The argument was sound. What kept him from sleep was knowing whether the British commissioner would have 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 would know nothing of it until he stood face to face with the man. He folded the pages and lowered the wick.

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. Then he fell asleep fully dressed.

Jollois stayed sitting outside after the camp fire had died. The sky was clear. He kept his saddlebags against him, the most precious notebooks inside. Tomorrow, the British, their commissioner, the memorandum, the discussions about what belonged to whom under which article.

The column reached Rosetta at the end of July 1801. Twelve days' march from Cairo. Belliard's troops embarked at Aboukir in the following weeks, on British ships. The savants, for their part, obtained permission to be taken by sea to Alexandria with their crates, under a flag of truce, to follow there the fate of the Institute's collections. Menou still held the city, blockaded by the British since the spring and besieged since 17 August. The savants were lodged in warehouses at the port, their crates stacked around them. The discussions about the collections would wait for Menou's capitulation, when the British would be in a position to demand them. For more than a month, while Menou negotiated and the British waited, the savants kept 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 warehouse at the port 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. All night long. At the École Polytechnique, he had been taught to foresee the objection before it was made. He had verified it in Egypt, one disputed measurement after another, and did not see why the law should obey a different logic. The new version distinguished, as far as Jomard was concerned, 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.

"It is very clear," Fourier had said, without raising his eyes from the last sheet. "It remains to be seen whether Hamilton is sensitive to clarity. It is not a quantity that measures well."

"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."

"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 secretary, 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.

"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 register.

"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 did not move.

"And we, Mr Clarke, have no intention of letting you confiscate three years of our lives without our disputing every piece."

During the nineteen days 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, unfolded his documents on the table, and answered questions with an economy that disconcerted Clarke, who was used to the more rhetorical arguments of the French. The role suited him. Negotiation resembled measurement more than he would have believed – one stuck to the facts, conceded nothing unverifiable, and knew when to fall silent.

"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 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. These monuments had existed long before the Commission, which had done no more than discover them.

"We do not contest your legal right to the great antiquities," said Fourier, his eyes on a point above Hamilton's shoulder. "We only insist that history record that it was the French Commission that discovered them. Not the British army."

Hamilton consented.

"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 leave the courtyard for the register.

The Rosetta Stone was missing from the roll.

Found in July 1799 by French soldiers reinforcing the defences of Fort Julien, near Rosetta, embedded in a wall of the old Mamluk fort, reused as building material. A royal decree of 196 BC engraved in three scripts, with hieroglyphs at the top, demotic in the middle and Greek at the bottom. The Greek could be read. The rest awaited decipherment. But General Menou claimed it as his personal property, and no one in the warehouse knew where it was.

Clarke entered it in the register all the same, provisionally, reserving the right to complete the entry when the piece was found. General Hutchinson would rule, and Hutchinson, it was known, would not rule in Menou's favour.

Marcel watched Clarke write in his register. The pen scratched the paper with a dry, final sound. "Rosetta Stone. Black granite. Trilingual inscription. Claimed by General Menou as personal property. To be seized under Article 16, Convention of Alexandria, September 1801."

Marcel said nothing. In Cairo, in the months following the stone's discovery in July 1799, 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 portfolio, 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, did not move. He was not looking at the Stone. He was looking at Clarke.

Fourier, for his part, was taking notes in the margin, in a small, cramped hand. He was already calculating what might be negotiated in exchange for this first concession.

Jollois watched Clarke without letting anything show. He had already accepted that the Stone would go. What remained was to save the rest. The drawings. The notebooks. Marcel's squeezes. Geoffroy's collections.

Clarke raised his eyes from his register.

"The Stone remains entered in the register. General Hutchinson will rule on it."

Marcel turned away and tucked the flat portfolio under his arm. He did not want to imagine British soldiers standing guard before the Rosetta Stone. It was petty. He imagined it all the same.

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 a wall of a Mamluk 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, gunners of His Majesty's army would hoist it onto a gun carriage.

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 added in the margin of his register the note "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. 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 the courtyard of the Attarine mosque, where it served as a basin for ablutions. The decoration, on the walls, 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. He recognised them at first glance. 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.

"Several tonnes. More than three metres long," said Jomard.

"And the historical interest?"

"The tomb of the last native pharaoh of Egypt," said Jollois. "It was never used."

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. Clarke contented himself that day with counting them. The examination of the inscriptions would come later. 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 bear the inscription '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 sarcophagus of Nectanebo II, the statue of the high priest of Amun, the stelae were in the register, and the Rosetta Stone would soon join them. What remained was everything else. Jollois was exhausted by the weeks that had just passed. He had no intention of letting go.

"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 agreed on a working timetable, which Cripps copied out neatly.

That same evening, it was learned where the Stone was. An officer, a member of the Institute, had led Clarke, Cripps and Hamilton into the lanes behind Menou's residence. It lay sleeping there, under carpets, among the general's baggage. General Hutchinson had been informed at once. Everything had been decided in a single day.

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 defend what can still be defended."

Jollois looked at him without answering. Marcel did not wait.

"My squeezes. That is non-negotiable. I have twenty-five complete squeezes of the Rosetta Stone."

"Nor are the natural history collections," said Geoffroy. "The snakes caught in the desert, the insects collected in forty degrees of heat – I risked my life for every specimen. I shall lie down in front of the crates if I must."

Fourier sighed. He had foreseen that each would plead for his own crates.

"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 a little 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.

"No."

Jollois stood with his hands laid flat on the table.

"No," he repeated. "We shall defend everything. Every object, every drawing, every specimen. Clarke will have to justify every seizure, argue every taking. We shall drown him in details, categories, legal exceptions. He wants 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 stared at him.

"And in concrete terms, what does that mean? That we let Clarke take what remains without a fight?"

"On the contrary," 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, his pencil poised above his sheet. They would lose. But at least every metre of ground would have been defended.

"Agreed," said Fourier. "We defend everything. But we stay co-ordinated. 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."

No one added anything. Outside, the changing of the guard passed beneath the window.

II - The Collections Saved

The savants' personal scientific instruments – astronomical telescopes, theodolites, barometers, thermometers, precision balances, microscopes – were recognised without difficulty as personal property not subject to seizure. Hamilton admitted that

these tools of the trade had no connection with ancient Egypt. For the rest, the British intended to discuss everything, down to the smallest 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. "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 refused to hear it.

"You want to steal my work to enrich your museums. Without having made a single effort of discovery yourselves, not one. 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 crossed the room, opened one of the crates of dried specimens, took out a tinder lighter, struck it twice and lit it. The flame was ten centimetres from the dry straw.

"I am not bluffing. One step more and I set it alight. History will record that you, too, burned a library in Alexandria."

Clarke looked at the flame. The naturalist was twenty-nine years old and his hand was steady. Better to let Geoffroy leave with his jars than to return to London with ashes. He took a step back.

"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. I shall plead their cause with General Hutchinson."

"Well defended," Jollois said to Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire that same evening. "For the great antiquities, we should have done as you did. Perhaps."

"The great antiquities could be seen from too far away. My fish in jars never made a British officer dream. It is sometimes an advantage to be misunderstood."

The affair had a knock-on effect on the other negotiations. The savants had seen that firm resistance could pay, provided one chose one's battles.

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 stelae.

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, promised that its work 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. Bonaparte did not know what it cost to read "Paris awaits" while looking at the Rosetta Stone under British guard. Neither cruelty nor indifference, only Paris, which already saw what came next. Bonaparte did not write "I am sorry for the collections you are losing", nor "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 the squeezes. 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 stelae. 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. The concession was broad, but to deny the Commission the right to publish its own drawings would be indefensible, legally and morally. 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 *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 backed Clarke. The savants could only accept.

Clarke then moved on to the most ambiguous category, that of the small antiquities that the French savants claimed to have bought with their own money from fellahs or antiquities dealers, rather than discovered officially by the Commission.

There were hundreds of them. 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 were personal purchases made on the local market, not official discoveries.

Clarke remained sceptical.

"Proving that each object was bought and not found will be impossible," he said. "I doubt you kept the receipts from the bazaar."

Fourier admitted the difficulty.

"Our records… were not always rigorous, no. Sorting object by object would take weeks. I propose a compromise. One half, chosen by us, which we keep. The other for the British Museum."

Hamilton accepted.

"Reasonable. And quicker. We shall proceed in that way."

The French savants spent the following days selecting the objects they would keep, favouring documentary value and historical significance over splendour. 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 deprived France of many precious objects, but it saved a substantial part of them, which would later enrich 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 an anatomical value rather than a 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 studies, while the British would take the best-preserved royal or noble mummies for exhibition.

"That satisfies me," said Hamilton. "We have a solution for each category."

Fourier answered with dry courtesy.

"A solution… We have been constructive, Mr Hamilton, because force was on your side. I ask only that it be recorded, for the archives of the Commission, that we regard this seizure as an unjust spoliation. Three years of work. And of suffering."

Hamilton did not reply. He did not claim to efface the resentment of the French, only to carry out his instructions without needless damage. This protest he had already heard, and he knew that it would be transmitted to Paris, recorded in memoirs, perhaps published one day.

The practical inventory of the small antiquities occupied the following days. Each object was entered on two lists at once, one kept by a British secretary, the other by Marcel, and the two were

compared in the evening, by lamplight, line by line, to verify that nothing had been omitted or moved without mutual agreement. Tedious. There was no dispute afterwards.

The squeezes of hieroglyphic inscriptions proved more contentious. Hamilton maintained that they reproduced Egyptian inscriptions and therefore fell under the "other collections" mentioned in Article Sixteen.

Marcel, who had prepared his defence, challenged this extensive 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 put down his pen with a sharp gesture.

"Keep them. We have the original."

The squeezes would remain with the French. Marcel had foreseen it from the first day.

The Commission had saved what mattered most, and what mattered most 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 manuscripts and scientific notes were settled more favourably still. Hamilton recognised without difficulty that these documents were personal intellectual work, distinct from material 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. A pharaonic statue existed without me. These drawings did not. They did not exist before I traced them. To confiscate a personal work 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 chose the copies to be handed over. Then he remained for a moment with his hand resting on his notebooks.

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 a foresight that no one had asked of him, each purchase with its price, its date and the name of the seller. "Here are the records."

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.

Hamilton proceeded thus, firm on the broad lines of his instructions and flexible on the details.

Jollois, when he learned of it, was grateful without showing it. At the start of the negotiations he had dreaded a confiscator.

"I prefer to let a few objects pass rather than create a precedent of arbitrariness," said Hamilton. "If the French suspect us of

confiscating 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, and that was what struck him most, 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 needle went back into the gathering.

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.

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 few days. 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 quite know why. Those hands would go nowhere. They would remain here, in this street, making notebooks.

He examined the drawing. The hands, quick, sure, with the calluses in the right places. Hands that had never left this street. That had no need to leave it. 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 paper.

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 raising his eyes from the note. "Without a secretary."

"As a man, then," said Jollois. "Not as a commissioner."

Fourier set down the note, turned it over, looked on it for a date that was not there. To come to the adversary's house without secretary or protocol was to want to say what no report would contain. 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.

"That sarcophagus," said Fourier, "was in Alexandria before us. The Arabs had reused it as a basin for ablutions. We took it out of there. We studied it."

"I know. We had also found it mentioned, in the account 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.

"What troubles me…" said Jollois. "It is not that you take it. 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 a justification."

"Yes. Like all the justifications we give ourselves, 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 basin. The Arabs, later, set it up for ablutions in the courtyard of the Attarine mosque. We measured 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.

"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 sentence. It was honest, and 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 it.

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 the English cannot return them, if they have them."

Hamilton took the time to formulate his answer. There was no bad faith in it. The system 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. Then he set off again toward the city, his son a step behind him.

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.

Dispossessed owners, legitimate claims, and neither France nor England was in a position to answer them 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. The decision had been made long ago, with no alternative. All that remained was 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, with a dull sound.

Jomard mechanically counted the annexes, forty-four pages 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. 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. London on one side, Paris on the other. 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, future generations will judge. Not necessarily in our favour. We shall at least have tried… 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 the division of the collections had been settled, the French savants and the British commissioners spent the last days of September packing what each would take away.

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 remaining sarcophagi and the statues on their carts awaited loading. No one opened them any more.

Jollois watched these preparations without a word, bitter and resigned. These objects would leave for London. He would never see them again. He still had his drawings, which would keep the memory of monuments 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.

The inventories were drawn up object by object, manuscript by manuscript, drawing by drawing, each man for what he was taking away.

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.

On the evening of 26 September, the packing was finished. The French savants were ready to embark for France. They were now waiting only for the British ships.

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.

"Nothing forgotten?"

"Nothing essential, I think. 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 tubes. Inside, rolled up and wedged in cotton paper, lay the plates of the whole of ancient Egypt that the army had crossed, reduced to lines and hatchings on thick paper. That paper was now worth more than the monuments, since engraving could reproduce it as many times as one wished and it would cross time and distance better than any stone. The copper was cold under his palm.

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 rolled up the index and slipped it into tube number one, with his most precious notebooks, and pressed the stopper home with the flat of his hand.

The final seal was placed on the crates on 27 September at ten in the morning, before a British officer, two French witnesses and a military notary improvised for the occasion. These crates were going to cross the Mediterranean and join the national collections.

A partial victory, after all that had happened. The notary blew on the wax.

Jomard promised himself he would describe the scene in his memoirs, for what it closed. At twenty-three, he was leaving behind a period of his life that would resemble no other.

Jollois, for his part, was not thinking of the future. He was thinking of the southern sites he had barely glimpsed. Of everything he had not had time to draw.

On 29 September, the savants learned that the British ships intended to carry them home would not be able to take passengers for more than a month. They had to wait.

On the morning of 31 October, 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 passes that would allow their crates to clear the British port inspections, signed and stamped. No one would be able to seize their effects at the last minute.

"Here are your safe-conducts. I wish you a good voyage home."

He held out the bundle to Jollois, who took it.

"And I hope you will make good use of what you are taking away."

Hamilton gave a brief smile. He had understood. To make good use of what they were taking away meant publishing the plates, opening them to scholars of every country, drawing from them a knowledge that would not remain locked up in Paris. It would be the only justification he could ever give 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 among themselves, without Hamilton or the British officers. They ate little and

talked for a long time. Each had his regrets, a site missed, an inscription uncopied, a temple that one more year would have allowed them to survey. No one said aloud that it would not be done again, but all of them thought it.

On the night of the thirty-first of October to the first of November, stretched out on his pallet in the warehouse, Jollois listened to the sea and the cries of the gulls. The three years came back to him in disorder, already distant, as if lived by a younger man. The landing at Alexandria, the march through the desert, the first sight of the pyramids, the revolt of Cairo, the temples of Upper Egypt, the Rosetta Stone, the death of Kléber, the negotiations with Hamilton.

He rose at dawn, went to check the tubes one last time 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 November, everyone said farewell in his own way. Jollois paid a last visit to a sheikh of Alexandria, trained at Al-Azhar, with whom he had spoken several times of the pharaonic monuments. The old scholar, who read Arabic, Persian and Turkish but not French, had examined at length the drawings that 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."

"Not wrong, perhaps. These monuments have outlived all the empires that have occupied this land. Ours too, no doubt."

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 wrote the sentence in his notebook, after that of the *wakil* Abdallah. Two men who did not know each other, a year apart, and neither had dismissed this gaze cast upon their country as nothing.

The embarkation took place late in the morning. The British ships had anchored a few hundred metres from the quay, and longboats plied to and fro. The Frenchmen's crates were loaded first. Hamilton had granted this, knowing the savants' anxiety.

These were British transports and warships. Also in the roads lay the *Égyptienne*, a former French frigate taken in the port of Alexandria and passed under the British flag, whose name the English had kept; it was to her that the Rosetta Stone was assigned.

"Careful," said Geoffroy to a sailor who was lifting one of his crates of jars by one side only. "Jars. Fragile."

The sailor took it up again in both hands to judge its balance, then set it in the longboat with the others. Geoffroy said nothing more.

What worried him was the hold. Dark, damp, poorly ventilated, given over to the shocks of pitching. The jars of spirit posed the most serious problem. A crate overturned in heavy weather, a plank giving way, and the spirit would spill. A lantern too near, and there would be a fire. He had told the British captain, who had 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 minarets, the citadel built on the ruins of the ancient Pharos, and behind, the desert, the valley of the Nile sinking away to the south, all those monuments that the army had merely passed through.

"There is still so much to see," he murmured.

"There always will be," said Jomard, who had climbed into the same longboat.

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 November air.

Settled on board, he refused to leave his copper tubes in the hold. He carried them to his cabin, a cubbyhole two metres by one and a half in the junior officers' quarters, with a canvas cot and a hook in the ceiling. Twenty-three tubes, some fifty kilos. He wedged them on the shelf above the cot and tied them to the hook with a rope.

He hardly slept the first night. At every movement of the ship the rope pulled taut and the tubes knocked softly against the bulkhead. He listened to them in the darkness.

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, French passengers, savants and soldiers, and British crews were crammed into a space meant for two thirds of that number. Each kept to his own territory, the French forward and to port, the British amidships and to starboard. But in the passageways and on the ladders they crossed paths twenty times a day without speaking.

The savants found in it, above all, 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.

Jollois wrote it thus, that evening, in a letter he did not finish.

"We are returning to France on the vessels of our conquerors, with their passes in our pockets, and the Rosetta Stone awaits the holds of the *Égyptienne*. We took Egypt from the Egyptians; they have taken it back from us. The stones will leave for London. Our drawings are travelling to Paris in copper tubes that I keep above my berth. I think it is a distinction that will matter, in the long run."

He reread it, crumpled the sheet and threw it away. The words were not there. He would try to find them in the *Description*.

V - The Crossing

The November 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 down to check his jars 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, attentive and without judgement, that he turned on the monuments. 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, his hand on the rail wet with spray. Somewhere beyond the horizon, the pyramids were still there.

On the fifth day, the wind slackened. The sea recovered its regular motion. The savants reappeared on deck, still pale but on their feet. Before Malta was even in sight, each had resumed his place and his notebooks, wedged against the roll under an elbow or a cup.

Jomard worked on his measurement notes, hunting down inconsistencies. Several could be resolved. Two resisted.

"Look," he said, laying his notebooks on the rail, one thumb on the page against the wind. "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. I thought of that. But I measured each side three times, with the chain, and all three times…"

"Then?"

"Then the discrepancy is deliberate. The builders would have taken account of the measure of the earth. Centuries before it was… before the theory, in short."

Jollois looked at him for a long time.

"Publish that."

"Not now. It is only a hypothesis, nothing more. Monge must redo the calculations. In Paris."

Monge had returned to France with Bonaparte as early as August 1799. The measurements, for their part, travelled with Jomard, in one of his tubes. That work, published in the volumes of the *Description*, would be debated and taken up for decades. That

evening on deck, Jomard was merely a young man 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 measure of the earth, it meant that something had been lost – not forgotten, but 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 put the notebook back in his coat and buttoned the collar again. Too broad for a footnote, this hypothesis. Ten years of work, at least. He was twenty-three.

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 one of his tubes, 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.

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 material posed no difficulty; the tone alone did. 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. The eleven attempts all stumbled on the same mistake. 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, which promised the reader a report, when he wanted to give the reader something else entirely.

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 finally had his way in. 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 a few 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. The scale, the fin, the colour from before the alcohol. Just what is."

Without realising it, he had just given his motto.

On the morning of 10 November, 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.

"Three days to take it," said Fourier, his eyes on the fortifications of Valletta. "Two years of siege to lose it. Like the rest, in roughly the same proportion."

Jollois sat down before the conventual church 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.

"Always. I do not know how to look otherwise."

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 Muséum d'histoire naturelle. Fourier was thinking of his chair at the École polytechnique. Marcel spoke wistfully of the Imprimerie nationale.

"And you, Jollois?" asked Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire.

"I? I shall work. These drawings will not engrave themselves."

On 11 November at dawn, the ship weighed anchor and resumed its course to the north-west. The western Mediterranean, cooler and choppier than the eastern sea, recalled to them by its grey-green colours the coasts of France they had left.

During this last part of the crossing – eight 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, which someone, in a hundred years, would use without knowing his name. He wetted his pencil and resumed his column of figures.

On 17 November, 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.

On 18 November, at dawn, the ship entered the coastal waters of Provence. The autumn light on the sea differed from that of the eastern Mediterranean, paler, more diffuse, without the density it had in Egypt.

"This light," said Jollois to Jomard. "It is France."

The coast drew nearer. They could now make out the limestone cliffs, the calanques, the first fishermen's houses.

"We are going home," said Jollois.

The word carried relief, regret, and all the work that awaited. Jomard did not answer. Neither of them believed that Egypt was a parenthesis now closing.

VI - The Return to France

The ship anchored in the roads of Toulon on 19 November 1801, three years and six 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 four hundred ships carrying thirty-eight thousand soldiers, a few British vessels brought back the remains of a defeated army.

The quarantine imposed on ships from the Levant first had to be served, and this time it was shortened. The savants then disembarked at Toulon. France had changed. They had changed more.

Jollois left the lazaret 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. He did not kiss the ground. He looked at the quay, the buildings, the hill above the town, the grey November sky. The air was cold and damp. A Mediterranean cold in November, nothing like the dry cold of the Egyptian nights. 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 from the holds under their supervision.

That evening, they gathered at an inn by the harbour.

"To Egypt," said Jollois.

Fourier raised his glass in turn.

"To those who did not come back from it."

They drank. No one added anything, and they went to bed early.

The next morning, the port authorities sent an officer for the official registration of the crates. He was young and knew of the Egyptian expedition only what the Parisian gazettes said of it. He examined the transport manifests line by line, counted the crates twice, and designated a 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, intact under three years of dust.

In the afternoon, several of the savants settled into an office of the maritime prefecture, beneath a portrait of the First Consul, its varnish still fresh, 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," he said without raising his pen. "We set out what we have done and what we are bringing back. The rest is a matter for historians. And diplomats."

Jomard, who was reading over his shoulder, nodded. He was twenty-three and saw nothing to object to in a note in an annex.

The last hours in Toulon were spent on forms, signatures and stamps, the Egyptian expedition swallowed by the ordinary circuits of the Consulate's bureaucracy.

The clerk who registered the Commission's crates treated them like a load of flour or wool. Wooden crates, that was what he saw. Jollois watched him for a moment, then turned to Fourier.

"That is how civilisations preserve their memory," he said. "In registers 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 savants who would never have heard of Fourier or of Jomard, but who would read their words.

The next morning, they took the road to Paris.

The journey lasted nearly two weeks, halts included, by the main road, which ran up the Rhône valley before reaching Burgundy. The savants travelled in public stagecoaches, their precious baggage following in wagons under escort.

They had known since Alexandria that France had changed regime. On the road, they saw the signs of it. At the post houses,

the notices now bore the letterhead of the Consulate, and no one spoke of the Directory any more.

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. Among those who were waiting 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.

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 former teacher Bonard lived at Auxerre, a little off the road, contented himself with writing to him from Lyon that he could not stop to see him and that he would soon be 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 know whether this man could be associated with 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, magnifying glass in hand, following certain lines with his fingernail. 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, he who drew where these would engrave. That passage from one gesture to the other, they would have to learn together. He still understood it poorly.

"We have time," said Jollois. "What we do not have is the right to botch it."

They agreed on terms in principle. Jollois noted the name in his notebook and underlined it. This Lyon engraver was exactly the man 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… now he is going to use our work for his glory."

Fourier waited until the wine had been served before replying.

"Without him, we would never have gone out there. And he is the one who can pay for the *Description*. We must hold the two terms together."

In a Lyon bookshop, Jollois bought 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 become more direct, less concerned with effect.

"I am no longer the same man who left Toulon in May of ninety-eight," he said to Jomard on the road.

"No," said Jomard after a pause. "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 it during the Egyptian months, to the point of making it a symbol of all he lacked. It now struck him by its prosaic coherence, the same streets, the same smells, the same carts on the cobbles.

"Paris is still Paris," murmured Jollois as he stepped down from the coach.

"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 that… you have to have come home to know what it is worth."

The arrival in Paris on 8 December 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 military defeat.

Jollois let his companions scatter and went home alone, to the rue Saint-Dominique. His family, warned by letter from Toulon, had had the shutters of the apartment 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 nothing here had moved.

He took a blank notebook from the shelf, the first he found, and wrote at the head of the first page "December 1801 – The work begins." Then he went to bed.

The reunions took place in the following days, as the news spread. Relatives, friends, former colleagues. Each wanted accounts. Were the pyramids really as large as travellers claimed? Was the heat bearable? Had they really been as frightened as the letters suggested?

Jollois adjusted 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 others he kept to 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*.

"Larger still," he replied to those who asked him about the pyramids. "Rumours always diminish 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, for its part, waited in the copper tubes stacked against the wall of his study, their stoppers sealed with wax, to be translated into engraved plates.

He fell asleep one of those evenings with that thought. The real work had not begun. It would last nearly thirty years.

Once the reunions had passed, the savants organised themselves.

On 15 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, listened to him without interrupting and received the project favourably.

"Good. Publish it," said Bonaparte. "I am making it a project of State."

Things would move fast, faster than Fourier hoped that day. A consular decree of 6 February 1802 would decide that the State would fund in full the preparation and printing of the *Description de l'Égypte*, a priority national project. On 18 February, the minister Chaptal would appoint an editorial commission made up of

Berthollet, Monge, Conté, Fourier, Costaz, Desgenettes, Girard and Lancret, each responsible for a part, Fourier reserving the historical preface for himself. Conté would be its commissioner general for the government; Jomard, Jollois and Devilliers would soon join it. Fourier, appointed prefect of the Isère that same year, would leave for Grenoble in the spring.

In the meantime, the savants were given offices in a government building in Paris, and funds to employ professional engravers, auxiliary draughtsmen and copyist secretaries.

Jollois devoted the end of December to sorting his thousands of drawings, the first step before engraving. He spread them out on the floor, for lack of tables large enough, and sorted them by monuments and by types. General views, architectural details, bas-reliefs, hieroglyphic inscriptions, ground plans, vertical sections.

"Without this classification," he explained to his assistants, "we would lose weeks searching for the drawing we shall need."

With Conté, whom everyone already named as the future commissioner-general, 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 the drawings of Jollois and his comrades 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," said Jollois to one of them, who had just straightened the profile of a pharaoh. "These conventions are not clumsiness. An engraver who does not know

why an Egyptian face is drawn like this will correct it. And he will make grave errors."

This would take longer than foreseen. Jollois handed the plate back to the engraver, refusing to compromise.

Fourier, for his part, was advancing with the historical preface. He had adopted a tone of learned deliberation, weighed every sentence, struck out many. He wanted the *Description* to be more than an illustrated catalogue, an act of thought comparable to the *Encyclopédie*, which would tell posterity what France had understood of Egypt, and what Egypt said of France.

December 1801 passed in those offices and workshops. None of the savants could know then that the twenty-three *in-folio* volumes of the *Description de l'Égypte* would not be complete until 1829.

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. They shook hands a little too long, and looked about for those who were missing.

Fourier presided over the meeting, recalled the work accomplished, the difficulties, the losses, read out the names of the dead colleagues, then presented the plan for the publication of the *Description*, the funding promised by the First Consul, the provisional timetable.

"This work will take time. Ten years, perhaps. More – the calculation is uncertain, I have redone it several times. Each of you will be called upon for his part. What we began in Egypt, we shall finish here, in our offices and our libraries."

Jollois, seated in the audience, thought of his copper tubes, of all those drawings waiting to be engraved. In Egypt, he had done only half the work, at most.

The last week of December was devoted to drafting the first general 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, Costaz the part on antiquities, 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 they would have to navigate with care.

"We shall serve science," said Fourier to Conté as they left. "And we shall let the First Consul believe that we are serving his glory. That is the usual price of great works, give or take."

Conté smiled. He had heard no more accurate formulation to describe their situation since the beginning of the expedition.

Bonaparte received the Commission's report with an interest that was not feigned. Certain aspects of the expedition genuinely moved him, the pyramids, the Rosetta Stone, the temples of Thebes. A few months later he would read Denon's *Voyage* with passion and speak of it to his friends.

"Your Denon writes well," Monge would tell him. "That is rare among savants – myself first of all, I readily confess. His pages on the pyramids are the best I have read, and God knows I have read many!"

"He sees what he describes," Bonaparte would cut in. "An artist. As much as a savant."

In the year that followed, Bonaparte let Denon know that he had an idea for him, without going into detail.

For the savants of the *Description*, the idea that Denon might obtain a high post was good news. They would have a highly placed interlocutor, well informed and well disposed.

The funding 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 too.

Conté, who had become commissioner general of the government, looked for savings on the very ground of engraving. He devised an engraving machine that executed the backgrounds, skies and masses of the monuments, and reserved the delicate work for the engravers. It made it possible to contain costs and to save considerable time.

Denon, for his part, negotiated with a Parisian publisher the publication of his *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte* as a standalone volume, preceding the collective *Description*. Published as early as 1802, it would keep public interest alive and prepare the reception of the *Description*.

"We publish in two stages," Denon explained. "My *Voyage* first, for the general public. The *Description* afterwards, for the savants. And for eternity, if it is willing."

Denon's appointment as director-general of the Musée central des arts, 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, 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.

The contradiction did not escape him. He noted it in his journal, in three dry lines. Then he moved on to other things.

The thirteen years that followed would be the most productive of his life, more sedentary and more administrative than those he had just lived, but just as demanding. Directing the museums of France would require an endurance comparable to that of the expedition. He took his hat and went out to walk along the quays.

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.

In the year since his return 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. The builders had used a precise unit of measurement, and that unit, he believed, could now be recovered. He would publish the value in 1817, 0.462 metre for the cubit. Egyptologists would have to correct it. The royal cubit measures 0.5236 metre, and the Great Pyramid comprises about two hundred and eighty of them.

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 be published in the *Description* itself.

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.

That evening, Jomard 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 a single sentence. "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."

Of the two hundred sheets, a hundred and ten remained to be fair-copied before the Commission could begin printing the first volume of the *Description*.

October brought the first real resistances of the work.

The deepest concerned the hieroglyphs.

Jollois realised it each evening on rereading his notes of the day. With Devilliers, he had drawn hundreds of columns of inscription at Karnak, at Luxor, in the Valley of the Kings. They had copied them with an engraver's precision, sign by sign, without understanding a single one. The *Description* would publish these columns, which thousands of readers would look at without anyone knowing what they said.

Nothing could be done about it. Not yet.

Marcel said it bluntly at a meeting in October.

"We cannot read them. That is all. So we copy them – exactly – and for the rest, a strictly descriptive style. What we see. What it means… others will find out."

The *Description de l'Égypte* was at the outset an idea of Fourier's, or almost. Kléber had encouraged the project, Bonaparte had ordered its publication, Conté directed the execution, the draughtsmen supplied the images. But it was Fourier who had first understood what this book had to be, an encyclopaedia of an entire civilisation, as it had been found.

He would write the historical preface from the prefecture at Grenoble for years. A dense synthesis of everything that was known of Egypt since the Greeks.

The volume of images was dizzying. Jollois and Devilliers had their notebooks, Dutertre, Denon and Cécile theirs. Jomard held 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. The undertaking mobilised some four hundred engravers over twenty years, and 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 an engraving machine for the backgrounds and skies, which his successors put into operation. New presses were built. Some plates covered nearly a square metre. Specially manufactured sheets of paper were needed. Some plates demanded two years of work apiece.

The first volume appeared in 1809. The last in 1829. Twenty-three volumes, printed on wove paper. The commercial

Panckoucke edition would appear from 1820 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.

The comfort was not slight.

The other difficulties – consistency between plates by different artists, standardisation of the names of monuments – were settled by working procedures that the Commission worked out following Fourier's usual 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. The Commission adopted it.

In November, Jollois and Devilliers began writing the notices. Each plate was to be accompanied by a text giving the location, dimensions, state of preservation and probable dynastic attribution.

Jollois wrote the notices concerning the principal temples of Thebes that he had surveyed with Devilliers. His prose, which owed something to nascent Romanticism, mingled, among the measurements, passages in which something of what he had felt before these monuments still lingered.

His notice on Karnak began with the dimensions. An enclosure of Amun of about twenty-five 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. Jollois reinstated it.

Fourier, in Grenoble, reread the notices that the post brought him and struck out the lyrical passages. Jollois reinstated them. Fourier struck them out again.

"We are doing science," Fourier wrote in the margin, his eye already on the next page. "Not literature."

"The science of what?" Jollois replied by return of post. "These monuments were built to produce an effect. On the one who looks at them. Without the effect, we are cataloguing stones."

Neither gave way, and the two tones remained in the *Description*, side by side, sometimes on the same page.

Fourier lived at the prefecture of the Isère, in Grenoble, several days by stagecoach from the Commission.

He thought of Bonaparte, leaving aside his vanity and ambition, which he had long since given up opposing. 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.

Those who make history, he thought, and those who understand it… He looked for a proportion and found none.

He stopped on the quay, beside the Isère. A young man was selling newspapers in the cold. He bought one without reading it, and walked on.

In the rue de la Croix-Faubin, Jomard was still working. The tracing paper had ended up covering the whole of the large table, and

the notebooks were piling up on the floor. That evening, he was preparing his sheets for the map that Jacotin, chief of the geographical engineers, would draw up for the atlas of the *Description*. The valley of the Nile extended over eight degrees of latitude but never exceeded twenty kilometres in width. The Bonne projection, adopted for this map, preserves areas and scarcely distorts distances near the central meridian. It suited this thin fertile strip.

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 three years.

The map was taking shape. In the cold, the ink dried badly.

It was 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-four 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.

He felt no regret. He thought of Abdallah, the *wakil* of the canal, for whom apprenticeship never ended because the canal never finished changing either. The harvest was in. What remained was to thresh the grain, at night, slowly.

Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, in his study at the Muséum, was writing to Cuvier. They were friends, and would be rivals only later. The letter simply said what he held to be true.

He described to him the mummified ibises of Saqqara, the crocodiles of the Nile, the cats of Bubastis. And he confided to him what he had observed during the Egyptian months. These animals, three thousand years old, differed in no way from their living descendants. On this point, Cuvier and he were still in agreement.

Geoffroy would change his mind, and Cuvier would oppose him. Their quarrel would break out in the open in 1830 before the Académie des sciences. It would be one of the most important in European natural history. It had not come to that yet, in December 1802, in his study at the Muséum, with a letter to a man he loved and whose adversary he would become.

He sealed the letter and posted it the next morning.

Egypt went on acting, at a distance, on those who had passed through it.

In December, the Ministry of the Interior informed Conté that expenses exceeded forecasts. The engravers were absorbing forty per cent of the budget. Quality paper, twenty. To cut without sacrificing quality was impossible. Conté told the minister so. The minister said he would see.

He saw. The funds were maintained. The *Description* went on.

Jomard, another evening, had taken out 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. He saw no other way to save it.

He remained a long while with the notebook open on his knees. In the Fayum, the same oxen, probably, were turning in their circles.

By the end of December, the memoirs of the four parts of the work, Antiquities, Modern State, Natural History and Geography, were in simultaneous preparation. The direction was set, the teams in place.

On the evening of 31 December 1802, Jollois put down his pencil and looked at the copper tubes lined up against the wall of his

study. Twenty-three 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. Number two held the rest of the journey, number three the surveys of Thebes and the Valley of the Kings. In the last, the last drawings, made in Alexandria in September. He got up, took tube number one, unscrewed the stopper. Took out the first notebook. The notebook opened on a rapid sketch. The deck of a ship, with the sails and the fleet in the background, drawn during the crossing of May 1798. Four years earlier. 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 frozen 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.

He stood with his face raised until the cold numbed his fingers.

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 resumed 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. What the expedition had been

in fact – precarious, incomplete, costly – was becoming in the official narrative a foundation of national glory.

For Denon, at the Louvre, the work was only beginning. The campaigns were about to resume. Austria in 1805, Prussia in 1806. And with the campaigns, the collections.

End of Volume II