

'The Egyptian Expedition' video transcription

A man dressed for travel, holding a folder under one arm, faces us. He is on a beach. In the background, we can see several three-masted ships with raised sails. The man begins to speak:

[Dominique-Vivant Denon]

Dominique Vivant. It's a funny name isn't it? My parents, who were winegrowers, chose it for me.

In the month of July 1798, I'd already had a full and interesting life: ambassador to Italy, art collector, writer, artist...

But the first time I stepped onto Egyptian soil, I had the feeling my real life was about to begin.

The view turns to reveal a large port town with a minaret and dozens of armed cavalymen heading towards the surrounding sand dunes.

[Dominique-Vivant Denon]

Just imagine: 55 ships, and 36,000 armed men!

And at the head of this expedition was a young general by the name of Bonaparte.

At the top of a dune, three generals on horseback look out towards the horizon, one through a spyglass. He wears a blue uniform with gold trims—tied at the waist with the French flag—and a feathered hat. He has long black hair and a hooked nose.

[Dominique-Vivant Denon]

He meant to conquer Egypt, to cut off England's trade route to India.

He wasn't yet 30 years old.

Dominique-Vivant Denon points to a group of men on foot, in simpler attire. Holding notebooks and measuring instruments, they look towards the pyramids of Giza.

[Dominique-Vivant Denon]

I was already 51, and I dreamed of the land of the pharaohs.

I was one of the 167 scholars who accompanied the expedition...

In front of the pyramids, a group of cavalymen wearing oriental clothing draw nearer. In the foreground, we can see their leader, with a turban on his head, a white beard and a sword in hand.

[Dominique-Vivant Denon]

The Mamelukes—fearsome Egyptian horsemen—were waiting to fight us at the foot of the pyramids.

The two armies, the Mamelukes and Bonaparte's men, come face to face. Their leaders prepare to give the order to attack.

[Mameluke leader]

Chaaaaarge!

[Napoleon Bonaparte]

Fire!

The Mamelukes charge but Bonaparte's army stays put, firing canons and rifle shots in return.

[Dominique-Vivant Denon]

One by one, their attacks were repelled by cannon fire.
Their chief, Murad Bey, ordered their retreat.

[Mourad Bey]

Retreat! Retreat!

[Dominique-Vivant Denon]

But he hadn't surrendered.

While the Mamelukes reluctantly retreat, a map of Egypt appears. First, we see Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast, where Dominique-Vivant Denon and Napoleon Bonaparte arrived by boat. It then takes us to the Nile delta, where we see Cairo and the pyramids of Giza and, further south, to the towns of Denderah, Thebes and Aswan.

[Dominique-Vivant Denon]

He disappeared into the desert with the rest of his army and headed for the fertile villages of Upper Egypt, determined to get his revenge.

Bonaparte and General Desaix are in a tent looking at a map. Dominique-Vivant Denon enters and shakes hands with Desaix.

[Dominique-Vivant Denon]

Bonaparte sent one of his finest officers, General Desaix, to track him down. And it was decided that I, Dominique Vivant Denon, should go too.

Dominique-Vivant Denon takes his sketchbook to the sites of Cairo, waiting for his departure with General Desaix.

[Dominique-Vivant Denon]

In the meantime, I visited the pyramids, drew the sphinx, wandered the streets of Cairo.

Desaix and Denon head towards boats moored on the banks of the Nile. They board with all their

equipment and head down the river. Denon continues to passionately draw everything he sees. They are attacked regularly by Mamelukes.

[Dominique-Vivant Denon]

The day of departure dawned at last!

We followed the Nile... back in time...
It was a strange journey: sailing, marching, fighting...

(a bullet zips through his hat)

Hard to draw in such conditions!

Desaix, Denon and their men visit the sites of Upper Egypt.

[Dominique-Vivant Denon]

But it was all worthwhile.
What wonders awaited us!
Denderah...Thebes ...
We were the first European travelers in hundreds of years to set eyes on this forgotten, sand-covered land!

We headed further south as far as Aswan, at the first Nile cataract, where crocodiles swim.
The majestic island of Philae marked the end of our journey. I went no further...

Denon sets up camp with other men while the General Desaix heads off on horseback with his cavalymen. They wave goodbye with their hats.

[Dominique-Vivant Denon]

General Desaix left me behind with a small troop.
He had to hunt for Murad Bey—with little hope of ever finding him!

On the way back to Cairo, Denon visits further marvels with other scholars.

[Dominique-Vivant Denon]

My trip back to Cairo was less eventful.
I had time to visit the ruins of Karnak and Luxor.
I met other scholars who'd arrived at those sites.
We went from one marvel to the next: tall obelisks, colossal statues, the Valley of the Kings with its fabulous tombs, whose walls were decorated with strange gods...

One day we found a mummy, holding a papyrus covered in hieroglyphs.
Perhaps the oldest book ever yet discovered!

When I got back to Cairo, almost a year had gone by since my arrival in Egypt.

Bonaparte and Denon stand on the deck of a boat, looking out over the rough sea.

[Dominique-Vivant Denon]

I returned to France with Bonaparte. His attempt at conquest had failed,

Back in his office, Denon writes a book based on all his notes and drawings.

[Dominique-Vivant Denon]

but we scholars had collected enough notes and drawings to draw a fairly complete picture of ancient Egypt. I wrote a book about my travels in Egypt, and dedicated it to him.

In the Louvre, near the *Diana of Versailles*, Bonaparte amicably places his hand on Denon's shoulder.

[Dominique-Vivant Denon]

Shortly afterwards, he made me director of the Louvre.

But part of me would always be in that far-away, sandy country—the land of the pharaohs.

We see a final image of a desert landscape in Egypt. A gust of wind blows Dominique-Vivant Denon's hat into the scene, where it falls to rest on the sand.

[Music]