In June 1798, Napoleon landed from a fleet of French ships on the coast of Alexandria, accompanied by a host, not only of soldiers, but also French scientists, intellectuals, and interpreters who were prepared to make an archaeological, anthropological, and scientific study of Egypt. The occupation of Egypt lasted three influential years, ending with the evacuation of French forces in 1801 and the return of Ottoman overrule to a country that had been, before the arrival of Napoleon, under the control of local Mamluk military households.

Edward Said argues that the French occupation betrayed a “textual” and “schematic”¹ attitude toward Egypt from its inception. As part of his colonising mission, Napoleon’s scholars established the Institute of Egypt in Cairo, where they set up a number of printing presses, under the directorship of Jean-Joseph Marcel. These instruments were new to the majority of Egyptians. What Said sees as the dawn of Orientalist discourse on the Middle East, as initiated by Napoleon’s project to textualise Egypt and epitomised in the publication of the Institute’s research in the twenty-three volume Description de l’Egypte, found resistance in at least one native Egyptian writer. A witness to the French invasion, ʿAbd al-Rahmān al-Ǧabartī (1756–1826), was a historian, biographer, and al-Azhar scholar. As a member of the educated religious elite, the ʿulamāʾ, al-Ǧabartī chose to counter Napoleon’s claims to authority through the traditional arts of grammatical and literary criticism. He wrote three different versions of his account of the French occupation, based on public documents, informants, and eyewitness accounts. His first chronicle, entitled Ta’rīḫ mud-dat al-Faransīs bi-Miṣr [The history of the period of the French in Egypt], was written in 1798 from al-Ǧabartī’s initial impression of the French, and covers the first seven months of the occupation. The second chronicle, Maẓhar al-taqdīs bi-zawāl dawlat al-Faransīs [The sacred aspect of the fall of the French], covers June to December 1801 of the occupation, and was

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presented to the Ottoman general Yusuf Paşa upon the Ottoman reoccupation of Egypt.

Comparing al-Ǧabartī’s earlier editions of his history with his final work, ‘Aǧāʾīb al-āṯār fi l-tarāġim wa-l-akhbār [The wondrous vestiges in the biographies and history], a multi-volume chronicle of Egypt from 1688 to 1821, some scholars characterise his initial depiction of the French as that of a traditional Muslim scholar’s reaction against “infidel” occupiers. After his experience of suffering under the Ottoman reoccupation of Egypt, however, these scholars argue that al-Ǧabartī came to prefer French over Ottoman or Mamluk rule. Yet al-Ǧabartī’s reaction to the French and Ottoman occupations is complex. His livid cursing against the French and his bitterness toward the Ottomans are instigated by their official proclamations, as translated into Arabic from French and Turkish. A comparison of his depiction of the French and Ottoman forces reveals al-Ǧabartī’s insight into the production and dissemination of governmental texts as tools of oppression.

Al-Ǧabartī’s understanding of the Islamic cosmos includes the concept of a divinely revealed relationship between human speech, justice, and salvation. In his worldview, written texts have an implicit governing nature. Al-Ǧabartī uses the word siyāsa to express this relationship. In modern Arabic this term refers to politics, but al-Ǧabartī uses it in the sense of a model drawn from sacred texts for the governing of people’s affairs. In his introduction to ‘Aǧāʾīb, he describes how God created humans weak and dependent on each other for their livelihoods. He writes, “men realised that they were in need of a just ruler and a wise king who would establish for them a standard of justice and a law of government [siyāsa]… God therefore sent down His Book to bring the truth, and His balance to bring justice.”2 Al-Ǧabartī organises the strata of society according to this relationship between Islamic textual and political authority, stating that the ‘ulamā’ are second only to the prophets and are followed by the kings, whose role is to establish justice, but only through the guidance of the religious scholars.

A significant portion of al-Ǧabartī’s first chronicle, Muddat, is devoted to taking apart each phrase of Napoleon’s first proclamation to the Egyptian populace, translated into and printed in Arabic, with the aid of interpreter

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