

1869, Lepsius led the new Prussian crown prince (later Emperor Friedrich III) on a Nile cruise, and from 1874 until his death he was director of the Royal Library.

Few others in the history of Egyptology – not even Champollion – can claim so many achievements. In 1850, the Berlin Academy, where Lepsius's career had begun, elected him a full member (he had been made a corresponding member in 1844, during the expedition to Egypt), thus publicly recognizing that the study of ancient Egypt stood alongside theology, philology and all the branches of learning, on its own merits. Champollion cracked the code, Wilkinson gave the ancient Egyptians a human face, but it was Lepsius, through his meticulous and systematic approach, who separated Egyptology from classical antiquity and founded it as an independent, scientific discipline.

FIVE

French foundations



A seated statue of King Khafra, found in situ in his valley temple at Giza by Auguste Mariette.



This was like taking possession of Egypt for the cause of science.¹

AUGUSTE MARIETTE, 1858

Eighteen forty-eight was the year of revolutionaries and revolutions across Europe and beyond. In London Marx and Engels published their *Communist Manifesto*. In Bohemia and Hungary there were nationalist risings, forcing the Hapsburg emperor Ferdinand to abdicate. In France, King Louis Philippe was overthrown, ushering in the Second Republic. Egypt, too, experienced its own dramatic political change with the deposition of Muhammad Ali on grounds of senility. The Albanian soldier who had murdered the Mamluks, thumbed his nose at the Ottoman empire, and played the European powers off against each other, had not only won recognition for himself as the de facto independent ruler of Egypt and for his heirs and successors as hereditary viceroys: he had also, during the course of his forty-three-year reign, transformed Egypt from a pre-industrial, feudal society into a thrusting country with a vibrant economy in a headlong rush into the modern age. Through force of will and of arms, he had imposed a planned economy, revolutionized agricultural production, introduced cash crops to boost exports, built factories and mills to reduce Egypt's dependence on imports, and improved transport and communications through the construction of roads and bridges, canals and dams. As regular visitors

could not fail to notice, Egypt in 1848 was almost unrecognizable compared to the country Muhammad Ali had inherited.

But, as commentators were also quick to point out, all this modernization had been achieved at a heavy cost. The long-suffering fellahin, backbone of Egypt's rural economy, were especially hard pressed. A combination of demanding production targets, heavy taxes, military conscription and the dreaded *corvée* (conscripted labour, levied as a form of taxation) made life for an average Egyptian peasant tough and unrelenting. Not just the general population but also Egypt's patrimony bore the brunt of Muhammad Ali's development. From Champollion's in the 1820s to Gliddon's in the 1830s, there had been no shortage of appeals to the Egyptian ruler to protect the country's ancient monuments before any more damage was done. But these appeals had fallen on deaf ears. As far as the pasha was concerned, portable antiquities were a handy currency, while larger monuments like obelisks were powerful bargaining chips that could be used to buy support and influence. If Westerners were passionate about the relics of Egypt's past, that merely gave Egypt's present ruler greater leverage. The fate of the first national collection of antiquities was a case in point: it had been neglected, given away as trinkets, and the remaining pieces presented to an Austrian archduke as a diplomatic gift. While Muhammad Ali had introduced a few pieces of antiquities legislation, they had been more honoured in the breach than in the observance, and were customarily waived at the ruler's whim. Antiquarians and archaeologists with a genuine concern for pharaonic civilization were either despondent, angry or resigned: there seemed little prospect of change, little likelihood of a comprehensive package of measures to protect Egypt's heritage, at least while Muhammad Ali remained in charge.

So his removal from office in July 1848, and the succession, in short order, of his eldest son Ibrahim (who reigned for only

four months) and then his nephew, Abbas Hilmi I (r.1848–54), offered the prospect of change. At the same time, thanks to the stunning achievements of Lepsius's expedition and the popularity of his public lectures, the recent publication of Champollion's *Monuments de l'Égypte et de la Nubie*, and the runaway success of Wilkinson's *Manners and Customs*, the study of ancient Egypt had regained the popularity it had previously enjoyed in the time of Belzoni. Indeed, the subject now had its own name: the word *égyptologie* first appeared in a French dictionary in 1850. (It would take another nine years before its English equivalent, 'Egyptology', made it into the *Oxford English Dictionary*; when it came to matters Egyptological, the French always got there first.) As for the French authorities, newly energized by the overthrow of a repressive and moribund monarchy and the return to Napoleonic values (the man who emerged, rather swiftly, as president of the new Constituent Assembly was none other than Bonaparte's nephew, Prince Louis-Napoleon), and no doubt inspired by memories of Bonaparte's achievements during the First Republic, they looked again to Egypt to secure their national pride. Since the death of Champollion, the baton of Egyptology had been surrendered to France's fierce rivals, Britain and Prussia. It was time to take it back.

The man appointed for the task was not an obvious choice. Auguste Mariette (1821–81) had nurtured an interest in ancient Egypt since childhood, prompted by visits to the local museum in his home town of Boulogne-sur-Mer. The museum's Egyptian collection was small, but choice. It had been formed in 1824, and supplemented with further acquisitions during the 1830s. The object that particularly gripped the young Mariette's imagination was a sarcophagus that had once belonged to Vivant Denon, leading member of the Napoleonic expedition and doyen of early nineteenth-century Egyptology.

When Mariette was nine years old, his mother died and he was largely thrown back on his own devices, spending hours at the museum, learning all he could about ancient Egypt. However, for someone of limited means and provincial background, the study of ancient Egypt hardly provided good prospects. So, at the age of eighteen, Mariette crossed the Channel to take up a job as a teacher of French and drawing at the Shakespeare House Academy in Stratford-upon-Avon. It didn't suit him. After a year, he moved to Coventry to be apprenticed to a ribbon maker, but struggled to make ends meet. England had let him down, so he returned to Boulogne to finish his studies and seek a career.

It was shortly after Mariette's graduation, with a master of studies from the Collège de Boulogne, that another death in the family changed the whole direction of his life. In 1842, a distant relation, Nestor LHôte, who had been a member of the Franco-Tuscan expedition to Egypt under Champollion, died, bequeathing to his relatives in Boulogne all his papers. They included a huge number of notes and drawings made during a total of three visits to Egypt. Mariette devoured them, learning the hieroglyphic alphabet and the principles of decipherment. He had found his calling. As he would later explain: 'The Egyptian bug is a formidable creature. Once you've been bitten by it, it won't let you go.'² For seven long years he immersed himself in private study while holding down a series of more or less dull, provincial jobs. He studied the plates in the *Description de l'Égypte* (unaware of the many errors), learned Coptic (as a prerequisite for the serious philological study of ancient Egyptian), and published an analytical catalogue of the Egyptian antiquities in the Boulogne museum. In 1849, he managed to secure a minor post at the Louvre, allowing him to devote himself full-time to Egyptology; but he found it difficult to survive in the French

capital on a lowly salary. Nonetheless, the museum authorities were impressed by his diligence and dedication, especially after he succeeded, in little more than twelve months, in transcribing all the inscriptions then in the Louvre's collection – an enormous feat.

The opening in 1850 of Lepsius's new Egyptian galleries at the Berlin Museum, to great public acclaim, reignited the competition between European capitals to acquire and display the best Egyptian artefacts. The Louvre, which since the time of Champollion's directorship had enjoyed a position (real or perceived) of pre-eminence, suddenly felt threatened. The museum authorities therefore decided it was time to boost their collection in areas not hitherto well represented. Above all they wanted to acquire manuscripts of the early Christian period, in Coptic, Ethiopic and Syriac, to compete with the remarkable Papyrussammlung (Papyrus Collection) in Berlin. As for the best person to accomplish such a task, their thoughts turned naturally to the young employee who had single-handedly transcribed all the existing inscriptions, and who knew Coptic as well as hieroglyphics. So it was that, in the late summer of 1850, they agreed to send Mariette to Egypt, with a modest budget of 6,000 francs, on a mission of acquisition.

Mariette embarked at Marseille on 4 September 1850, on the aptly named *Osiris*, a post steamer in service across the Mediterranean, and landed in Egypt six weeks later. Like many a European traveller before him, he was immediately struck by the quality of the light, and by the heat and smells of Egypt. Like other antiquarians of his time, he was also struck by the wholesale destruction of monuments taking place all around him. He wrote to his brother: 'Every day, I witness a new loss to science; every day, I learn of a further catastrophe.'³ But as a twenty-nine-year-old employee of a foreign government, he was powerless to intervene. The best he could hope for was a

chance to excavate and record those monuments still surviving, before it was too late.

First, however, before he could have any chance of securing a dig, he had to satisfy his employers back in Paris. So he installed himself at the Hôtel d'Orient in Cairo, a favourite haunt of French expatriates and tourists, where Gustave Flaubert and his friend and fellow writer Maxime du Camp had stayed the previous year, and made his introductions to the Coptic patriarch, in the hope of securing a good haul of ancient manuscripts. But, as he was soon to discover, in the competitive antiquities market there were losers as well as winners. Back in the 1830s, two English collectors, Robert, Lord Curzon, and the Reverend Henry Tattam, had gone to Egypt in search of early Christian manuscripts, and had stripped the monasteries of their prize collections. Not surprisingly, when another 'collector' arrived eleven years later, seeking further manuscripts, the Coptic patriarch was unwilling to cooperate.⁴ Mariette was rebuffed, and it looked as though his mission was doomed from the outset.

It turned out to be a blessing in disguise. With no prospect of achieving what he had come for, Mariette decided to follow his own instincts, and to gamble the Louvre's funds and his own career on an excavation. And not just any excavation. For Mariette had decided he was going to try to find the long-lost Serapeum. The monument sacred to the god Serapis had been famous in classical times as one of the wonders of Egypt. In the first century BC, Strabo had written: 'There is also a Sarapium at Memphis, in a place so very sandy that dunes of sand are heaped up by the winds; and by these some of the sphinxes which I saw were buried even to the head and others were only half-visible; from which one might guess the danger if a sand-storm should fall upon a man travelling on foot towards the temple.'⁵

Mariette would have been familiar with the description,⁶ but it was not enough, on its own, to pinpoint the location. After all, the Memphite necropolis stretched over a distance of some thirty miles of desert, and was dotted with pyramids, tombs, and sand dunes. However, Mariette was blessed with a photographic memory, and a rare ability to make connections in his mind. With his eagle eyes he had spotted clues that had apparently escaped others' notice. On first landing in Alexandria, he had seen a number of small stone sphinxes, and had thought little of it. But when he noticed two similar statues in the garden of the Ecole Polytechnique in Cairo, he began to wonder. He traced them to the antiquities dealer Salomon Fernandez, whose valuable collection had attracted the attention of both Wilkinson and Lepsius. It turned out that Fernandez still had three identical sphinxes in his storeroom. Moreover, they all came from the same part of the Memphite necropolis, close to the Step Pyramid. Mariette had his lead, and he set off at once for Saqqara, with his trusty assistant Marius François Joseph Bonnefoy, a friend from Boulogne.

Mariette's first task was to produce a detailed map of the site. (He was unaware of the results of Lepsius's expedition, as the *Denkmäler* had not yet been published.) It seemed like an almost impossible task. The jumble of tombs and shrines, of damaged and reused monuments, of subterranean galleries and hidden shafts, combined with the ever-shifting dunes, presented a daunting picture. To make matters worse, carrying out any sort of antiquarian or archaeological work at Saqqara meant first negotiating access with local Bedouin tribes who regarded the site as their property. Fortunately for Mariette, his imposing figure (1.8 metres tall, with ginger hair), gave him a forbidding presence – local villagers nicknamed him 'the red giant' – and he was able to secure their agreement. Setting straight to work, his systematic approach soon bore fruit. As he later recalled:

'One day, walking across the necropolis, metre-rule in hand, seeking to disentangle the plans of the tombs, my eye fell on another of these sphinxes. It was a revelation. Although three-quarters buried, it was clear that this sphinx was in its original location. The avenue which had furnished the collectors of Cairo and Alexandria with so many monuments was therefore found.'⁷

Hurried excavations around the buried sphinx revealed an offering table inscribed with a prayer to Osiris-Apis. The pieces of the puzzle were coming together: Mariette knew that the fabled Serapeum must lie nearby. Without permission from his employers at the Louvre, and without an Egyptian government permit, on 1 November 1850 he traced out on the sand the line of what would be his first excavation. He soon discovered a second sphinx – just twenty feet from the first, but buried sixteen feet deep in sand – then another, and another. By late December, after two months' work, he had revealed no less than 134 sphinxes. Then the avenue disappeared.

A less dedicated scholar might have given up, there and then. Not Mariette. On Christmas Eve he found the 135th sphinx on an axis perpendicular to the first part of the avenue. The race to locate the Serapeum was back on. Along the new axis, the discovery of a chapel dedicated to the sacred Apis bull by the pharaoh Nectanebo II, a statue of the household deity Bes, and a perfectly preserved sculpture of a seated scribe⁸ reassured Mariette that he was on track. But the conditions made large-scale excavation almost impossible. The sand simply poured back in as quickly as it could be removed. Working in such unpleasant conditions brought on an acute eye infection, and Mariette had to return to Cairo for medical treatment. By the time he got back to Saqqara, a sandstorm had blown away his tent. Mariette was undeterred. In any case, he travelled light – all his belongings fitted into two cases and an iron trunk –

and he had only a single book with him, being blessed with a prodigious memory. (If he needed a precise reference he could consult a friend's library in Cairo.)

Mariette continued digging, uncovering dozens of bronze statuettes that pilgrims to the Serapeum in pharaonic and Classical times had left behind as votive offerings. Most were in poor condition, but any discovery of a metal object from beneath the sands of Egypt soon had tongues wagging. Rumours of buried treasure started circulating, and a government inspector was sent from Cairo to investigate. But still Mariette persevered, digging without a permit, working by night to avoid detection, and resting by day in a rough shelter he had erected nearby that was marginally more robust and comfortable than his erstwhile tent.

At last, after a year's toiling in the longest and deepest trench ever dug through the sands of Egypt,⁹ his labours bore fruit. At three o'clock in the morning, the coldest time of night, on 12 November 1851, he came upon a lintel of polished white limestone. He knew it must be part of a doorway, a doorway to the Serapeum, but what might lie beyond? Before he could satisfy his curiosity, dawn began to break. At this of all moments, he could not afford to be discovered excavating illegally. So he ordered his workmen to cover up all traces of the lintel, fill in the trench, and erase their footprints as they retreated. The following night, as soon as darkness had fallen and the antiquities inspectors had clocked off, Mariette began again where he had left off, exposing the lintel and clearing away the fallen stones that blocked the doorway. A rush of stale air emanating from the gap indicated a void beyond, and a lighted candle put through the hole went out immediately. He enlarged the opening to allow in some fresh air, and to give him room to wriggle through. Then, with a rope tied around his waist, he climbed into the hole and descended into the darkness. After

a drop of about six feet, his feet touched the floor. Before his candle was extinguished by the asphyxiating atmosphere, he had just enough time to look around and take in his surroundings. In the gloom, he could make out the lines of a vaulted gallery, cut into the rock, some ten feet high and around twice as wide. It looked endless. The floor was covered with the debris of centuries: broken stelae, statues, votive objects, *shabtis* (servant figurines), and *ostraca* (flakes of limestone used for jottings). In a side chamber, he glimpsed an enormous stone sarcophagus. Other than a few robbers, it seemed probable that he was the first person to enter the catacomb for twenty centuries. But he had precious little time to savour the moment: almost on the point of suffocation, he reluctantly called to his workers above to haul him back up. Having regained the fresh air, he whispered to his co-conspirator Bonnefoy, 'I was right.'¹⁰ Mariette's months of toil, '*à la recherche du temple perdu*,'¹¹ had paid off. He had discovered the Serapeum.

It was not only the find of the century, but indeed the first great archaeological discovery in the history of Egyptology. Yet, for the moment at least, it had to be kept quiet. The only people Mariette entrusted with the news were the French consul-general in Egypt, Arnaut Lemoyne, and the engineer and explorer, Louis Linant de Bellefonds who had worked with Bankes, Belzoni and Champollion, and had been the first European to explore the Upper Nile. It fell to Lemoyne to reach a diplomatic agreement with the pasha's court, and to clear matters with the authorities back in Paris. The French were first off the mark, recognizing the importance of the discovery and the glory it would bring, not to mention the 230 cases of antiquities excavated by Mariette that were destined for the Louvre. The French parliament voted funds to transport the finds to Paris, but they had jumped the gun: the pasha had not yet agreed to an export licence and he promptly sent guards

to stop further excavations. Mariette simply did what he had done before, digging secretly at night; he also had one of his assistants produce fake antiquities to fob off the inspectors.¹²

European rivalries in the scramble for ancient Egypt, for so long at work behind the scenes, now came out into the open. Under Abbas's rule, the British could have been forgiven for believing they were winning the race for influence in Egypt. For example, in July 1851, the pasha had signed an agreement with Robert Stephenson (son of the *Rocket's* inventor) to build a railway between Alexandria and Cairo – not merely the first line in Egypt, but the first anywhere to the east of continental Europe. Stephenson went on to be confirmed as chief engineer of the Egyptian railways, and another Briton, an army officer from India, was appointed director. While British engineering was busy transforming modern Egypt, reconstructions of the country's ancient monuments, made for the Crystal Palace, were having a profound influence on British art and scholarship.¹³ The authorities in London must have felt they had Egypt in their pocket. So Mariette's arrival on the scene, and the resurgence of French archaeological prowess, came as an unwelcome wake-up call.

Both the British and the Austrian consuls lobbied Abbas to take a hard line against Mariette, but Lemoyne managed to broker a compromise: over a hundred objects found to date could be sent to the Louvre, and Mariette would be allowed to continue with his excavations, but all future finds would remain the property of the Egyptian state.¹⁴ On 19 November 1852, the pasha formally relinquished his government's claim to the antiquities already discovered, but refused to sanction further excavations until his ownership of future finds was legally recognized. But possession was nine-tenths of the law, and Egyptian inspectors were no match for the wily Mariette. He continued to excavate clandestinely and hid his finds in a

deep underground shaft before smuggling them out in grain sacks. With Lemoynes's complicity, they were loaded onto French ships and escorted by French navy frigates out of Egyptian territorial waters, and onwards to France. Mariette later defended his actions by pointing out that the objects that had been surrendered to the Egyptian government and sent to the Cairo Citadel were subsequently given away as presents. But Mariette's behaviour was, nonetheless, extraordinarily brazen for someone who, later in his career, would be in charge of preserving Egypt's antiquities.

Whatever his methods, the scale of his achievements cannot be overstated. The Greater Vaults of the Serapeum, Mariette's first discovery, contained twenty-four massive stone sarcophagi in which the sacred Apis bulls had been buried from the fourth to the first centuries BC. The continuity of burials enabled scholars to refine the chronology of the twenty-sixth to Ptolemaic dynasties, bringing a new measure of precision to the understanding of Egyptian history. The Lesser Vaults, discovered in spring 1852, contained yet more bull burials. De Bellefonds calculated that a single sarcophagus weighed up to 17,000 kilogrammes; none has ever been successfully removed, provoking awe and wonder at the ancient Egyptian workers who manoeuvred them into place without the aid of modern machinery. De Bellefonds also played a key role in clearing the galleries, taking a leaf out of Howard Vyse's book by using explosives (more than a hundred charges in total).

The later Apis burials had all been robbed in antiquity, but Mariette subsequently discovered an earlier, intact burial made in the reign of Ramesses II and overseen by his son, the High Priest of Ptah, Khaemwaset. In the thin layer of sand which covered the floor around the sarcophagus, the footprints of the ancient Egyptian workmen were still visible; and around the doorway were

the fingerprints of the priest who had sealed the chamber more than three thousand years before. Mariette was deeply moved by this human thread stretching across so many centuries.¹⁵

What had started out as a short-term mission to acquire Coptic manuscripts had now, more than two years later, acquired the makings of a more or less permanent archaeological expedition. Back in Paris, Mariette's wife gave up waiting for him to return, and set sail for Egypt with their three daughters. They joined him at Saqqara where they settled down in a ramshackle construction dubbed 'the little house among the sands'. Mariette's employers at the Louvre forgave him his failure to procure any papyri, and were only too happy for him to continue his excavations. The Serapeum became the most celebrated discovery since the Rosetta Stone, and a favourite day trip for scholars and tourists from Cairo. By the time the thousands of finds from the Serapeum reached the Louvre, the President of the Second Republic's Constituent Assembly, Louis-Napoleon, had declared himself Emperor Napoleon III (r.1852-70). Mariette's discovery, and the cultural riches it brought his homeland, were thus celebrated as an auspicious harbinger of a new imperial age. With a confidence not seen since the days of the first Napoleon, France looked forward to regaining its rightful place as the leading Egyptological nation of the world.

The impact of Mariette's discoveries – bolstered by Maxime du Camp's photographic study, *Egypte, Nubie, Palestine et Syrie*, published the same year – spread across Europe, propelling the civilization of ancient Egypt back into the forefront of fashion. Two of the strangest manifestations of this new 'Egyptomania' were aristocratic follies: in Scotland, the newly deceased tenth Duke of Hamilton was mummified and buried in a Ptolemaic sarcophagus in the family vault, following his own carefully expressed wishes;¹⁶ while, in Germany, the newly widowed

Prince of Pückler-Muskau began creating massive earthwork pyramids in his landscape garden, one of which was to serve as his final resting place, following funeral rites modelled on those of ancient Egypt.¹⁷

Having rediscovered the famed Serapeum beneath the sands of Saqqara, Mariette next turned his attention to the most iconic area of the Memphite necropolis, the Giza plateau. Vyse and Perring had been there a decade and a half earlier, and had blasted open the burial chambers of the three main pyramids; but, Mariette believed, they had only scratched the surface (or, more accurately, drilled the back) of the Great Sphinx. In 1817, Caviglia had made some discoveries – the flight of steps ascending the monument and the pavement between its paws – but the dunes had returned, covering both Caviglia's trench and the bulk of the great statue. As at Saqqara, the work required just to hold back the sand, let alone remove it, would be daunting . . . and expensive. The French government might have been delighted by the recent haul of antiquities from the Serapeum, but it balked at financing a further flight of fancy. So, like Champollion and Lepsius before him, Mariette turned to an influential patron to advance his cause. Emmanuel, Vicomte de Rougé was ten years' Mariette's senior. A talented philologist and the first person to translate a running ancient Egyptian text, he had been appointed conservator of the Egyptian collection at the Louvre in 1849, the same year that Mariette had started work at the museum; the two had become firm friends. Through his aristocratic contacts, de Rougé secured for Mariette the interest and patronage of a noted collector, Honoré d'Albert, Duc de Luynes, who was keen to solve the riddles of the Sphinx. The duke sent the princely sum of 60,000 francs for Mariette's new mission, and on 15 September 1853 the work began.

It took fifty workmen to clear the sand, which covered the Sphinx up to its shoulders, and remove the dwellings on top

of the statue. Clearing the northern face alone took nearly a month. In the process, Mariette was the first to reveal the full extent of the Sphinx enclosure. He relocated the chambers that Caviglia had found, and the well described by an earlier traveller, Father Vansleb, in the seventeenth century. Mariette hoped the shaft might lead to a hidden chamber, but after fifteen days of clearance, it turned out to be a natural fissure in the rock. As Giza's twenty-first century archaeologists have noted, not without sympathy: 'Mariette plunged into the sea of sand that had once again filled Caviglia's trench of 30 years earlier. The more he dug, the more sand would pour down into his trench, and there was no immediate flow of discoveries as in his excavation at the Serapeum. He soon lost patience.'¹⁸

The absence of discoveries, though dispiriting, was nonetheless important for what it disproved: there was no entrance to the Sphinx, no hidden chambers, no secret corridors; it was simply a natural knoll with masonry additions. While the Sphinx might hold no further secrets, Mariette had a hunch that an area to the south-east, where Wilkinson had noted a series of pits, might prove more promising. Once again, Mariette's intuition was rewarded. In June 1854, he discovered the valley temple of King Khafra's pyramid complex. It was filled with sand, up to twenty-six feet deep in places. Another mammoth clearance effort ensued but, with just three feet of sand to go, Mariette's funds ran out. He appealed to Paris, but to no avail. With great reluctance he had to abandon the work, leaving any hidden treasures (of which there turned out to be one very significant example) for another day.

Frustrated and elated in equal measure, Mariette prepared to leave Egypt and return home. With his wife and three children, he embarked at Alexandria at the end of July. Just two weeks earlier, Abbas had been assassinated by his bodyguard, leaving the throne to his son, the Francophile Said

(r.1854–63). It was, as it turned out, a good omen for the future. Mariette's first visit to Egypt had been full of unexpected twists and turns, disappointments but also great discoveries. As he later summed it up: 'I left for Egypt in search of Coptic manuscripts. I didn't find any. But I brought back a temple.'¹⁹



On his return to Paris, Mariette found that he had become something of a celebrity. His lectures at the Académie des Inscriptions were reported in *Le Figaro*. The discovery of the Serapeum was lauded by figures as eminent as Jomard (geographer to the Napoleonic expedition and arch-rival of Champollion), Louis de Saulcy (keeper of the Artillery Museum and senator), and Mariette's own friend and mentor, de Rougé. People queued to see the seated scribe on display at the Louvre. Indeed, Mariette's employers at the museum could count themselves well pleased with his achievements, and they promoted him to 'adjunct curator', his first substantive post in Egyptology. He wrote to his half-brother, Edouard: 'My destiny is set.'²⁰ He immediately began writing up his discoveries, but other duties soon supervened, and he only ever finished the first volume. He longed to return to Egypt, but instead the Louvre sent him on a study tour of other Egyptian collections across Europe (mindful, no doubt, of his skills as a copyist and cataloguer). A second trip to the land of the pharaohs seemed to be receding ever further into the distance when fate intervened a second time.

On 14 August 1857, Napoleon III visited the Louvre to open its new wings, and Mariette was present at the celebrations. A few weeks later he was unexpectedly ordered back to Cairo. The circumstances could not have been stranger. The emperor's cousin, Prince Napoleon, had expressed a desire to visit Egypt for himself, and not just as a tourist. The prince

wished to discover some antiquities. For the sake of Franco-Egyptian relations the visit had to be a success. As the leading (indeed the only) Egyptian archaeologist in France, Mariette's job would be to unearth, and then rebury, a series of objects for the prince to 'discover'. This was just the opportunity Mariette was looking for. There was little prospect of further promotion at the Louvre, and he dearly wished to return to excavation.

Once back in Egypt, he presented his credentials to the new ruler. Said (now more often styled 'viceroy' rather than 'pasha') was suspicious of Mariette's motives, wondering if the real purpose of his visit was to advance French interests in the Suez Canal project. But he graciously made a steamer available for Mariette's personal use, and the Frenchman lost no time in initiating new digs throughout the Nile Valley: at his old stamping grounds of Saqqara and Giza, as well as the rich archaeological sites of Abydos, Thebes and Elephantine.²¹ The results were immediate and impressive. At Saqqara, Mariette discovered the sarcophagus of the fourth dynasty king Shepseskaf, still in situ in the burial chamber of his coffin-shaped pyramid. Mariette celebrated with a winter cruise up the Nile with his close friend and fellow Egyptologist, Heinrich Brugsch. Ever the diplomat, Mariette dedicated his handsome folio publication of the Serapeum which appeared that year (*Le Sérapéum de Memphis*, 1857) to Prince Napoleon, with a foreword that consciously harked back to the Napoleonic expedition led by the prince's forebear half a century earlier: 'It is not only through the bravery of our soldiers and the genius of their commander that the Egyptian expedition has attracted the attention of posterity. Perhaps the prestige of this glorious campaign would be the less if science had not profited from our victories, and if Egypt, subject to our armies, had not at the same time been opened up to research by our scholars.'²²

But then, quite unexpectedly, it was announced that the prince had postponed his visit indefinitely, and Mariette's mission was changed from one of archaeology to one of acquisition: instead of finding objects for the prince to unearth, he was now required to gather a representative sample of antiquities for the prince's personal collection, which Said would present as a diplomatic gift. Mariette did not demur. The objects were sent to Paris, and the prince was delighted. Mariette's good standing with Said was restored. In a fulsome letter of thanks to the viceroy, Prince Napoleon felt emboldened to make a suggestion: 'If Your Royal Highness were to ask of France the offices of a scholar to protect [Egypt's] heritage and create a museum, the government would designate no other man but [Mariette].'²³

As with the original suggestion of sending Mariette back to Egypt, the influence of Ferdinand de Lesseps – who had known Said since their shared childhood days in Cairo, and was now an influential member of the viceroy's circle – can be detected. Said got the message. On 1 June 1858, by royal decree, the Egyptian Antiquities Service was founded; Mariette was appointed director of Egypt's historic monuments, at a generous salary of 18,000 francs per annum. The letter of appointment, signed by Said, stated: 'You will ensure the safety of the monuments; you will tell the governors of all the provinces that I forbid them to touch one single antique stone; you will imprison any peasant who sets foot inside a temple.'²⁴ Mariette summed up his feelings succinctly: 'This was like taking possession of Egypt for the cause of science.'²⁵

To accompany his exclusive excavation rights throughout Egypt, the new director had extraordinary resources at his command. In addition to use of the royal steamer *Samannoud* (on which he had travelled up the Nile with Brugsch the previous winter) for his tours of inspection, Mariette was given

the right to call upon the army and to levy *corvée* labour. In total, he had access to 7,000 workmen. He wasted no time in putting them to good use. His old friend Bonnefoy was named director of excavations in Upper Egypt, and digs were launched at many sites simultaneously. Mariette mobilized a hundred workers at Abydos, over three hundred at Giza, and up to five hundred at Thebes, where four new tombs were opened in the Valley of the Kings.²⁶ A young Egyptologist, Théodule Devéria, arriving in Cairo in early 1859 to be Mariette's assistant, wrote: 'They are removing the sand the entire length of the valley and around Cairo – a veritable army of diggers is at work.'²⁷

With unprecedented effort directed at uncovering Egypt's ancient past, the discoveries came thick and fast:²⁸ the relief of the Queen of Punt in 1858;²⁹ the coffin and jewellery of Queen Ahhotep the following February; the leonine sphinxes of Amenemhat III from Tanis later that same year; the 'Sheikh el-Beled' wooden statue and the wooden panels of Hesira from Saqqara in 1860. One of the greatest finds, and for Mariette one of the most rewarding, was the magnificent seated statue of Khafra from his valley temple at Giza. Because lack of funds had forced Mariette to give up the excavation of the temple six years earlier, it was one of the first sites to be reopened when he took up the reins of the new Antiquities Service. Just as he had suspected, the temple had been abandoned in antiquity and there, in its inner hall, was a life-sized statue of its royal owner, carved from a single block of diorite, undamaged over the succeeding forty-three centuries. It was, and remains, one of the greatest masterpieces of ancient Egyptian art.

Mariette's results may have been impressive, but his methods were decidedly slipshod, even by the standards of the time. With work progressing on many fronts simultaneously, he left his workmen unsupervised, kept few records, paid no attention to stratigraphy, and happily split up groups of objects. It did

not have to be so. In 1855, a Scotsman named Alexander Rhind, a lawyer rather than an archaeologist, had come to Thebes for his health and, while he was there, excavated several Theban tombs. He argued that ancient monuments and antiquities should be left intact and in situ, and that museums should display only casts and facsimiles. But his ideas were ahead of his time, and his death before his thirtieth birthday robbed archaeology of a visionary practitioner. Mariette, while not quite in the Vyse camp, definitely belonged to the old school. His excavations have, perhaps unfairly, been described as 'miseries inflicted by Europeans . . . without tangible benefit to the workers'.³⁰ Certainly, his foremen showed no mercy in the application of the *corvée*.

Early in his tenure at the Antiquities Service, Mariette realized that his future career now lay in Egypt. He returned to France to fetch his family, but his employers at the Louvre were not exactly thrilled to see him. They did not welcome one of their staff working for the Egyptian government – especially as one of Mariette's first actions had been to send inspectors to unauthorized digs, to seize any antiquities illegally excavated (highly ironic, given his own activities at the Serapeum, less than ten years earlier). A compromise was reached whereby Mariette resigned from his substantive position at the Louvre, accepting an honorary deputy keepership instead.³¹ He and his wife, and their children – now numbering four daughters and a son – set up home in the port of Bulaq, in a house infested with rats, snakes and scorpions. It was even less comfortable than the 'little house among the sands'.

One of the most pressing issues resulting from the frenzy of archaeological activity was where to store all the resulting finds. Mariette had identified the former hangars of the Alexandria-Cairo Steamer Company at Bulaq (defunct since the arrival of the railway) as a suitable repository; but after just

a few months, the storerooms were full. A permanent solution was clearly needed, and one was not long in coming. In 1859, Said agreed to establish a national museum with Mariette as director. The only question was where it should be located. Mariette's proposal was the valley temple of Khafra (also known as Armachis) at Giza, the site of his most spectacular discovery since the Serapeum. He wrote to Brugsch: 'As for the Museum, I firmly believe that it should be at the pyramids themselves, utilizing the temple of Armachis which I discovered previously. It is a good enough location, which has the huge advantage of being out of sight of the Turks, who are a little offended by Viceroy's European notion of founding a Museum.'³²

Building modern Egypt's national museum at the site of ancient Egypt's greatest cultural achievement was a bold plan, but utterly impractical. Giza was still covered in sand dunes, difficult to reach, and distant from the Nile. (Mariette's vision of a Grand Egyptian Museum at Giza has only now been realized, over a century and a half later.) By contrast, Bulaq, the main port of Cairo, presented a more sensible option, given its location on the east bank of the Nile and its proximity to the centre of Cairo. So, while not giving up on his dream of a purpose-built museum, Mariette came up with a design for the Bulaq site.

Meanwhile, there was no let-up in the pace of excavations. Bonnefoy was struck down by exhaustion and malaria, but Mariette continued to dig even in the intense summer heat. Bonnefoy's death at Thebes, in August 1859, shook Mariette – the two had worked together since Mariette's first visit to Egypt – and he returned to France to recuperate. His reception was decidedly less warm than at his previous homecoming, five years earlier. He was accused by his former colleagues at the Louvre of betrayal by establishing a museum in Cairo, and by ending the practice of dividing finds between the excavator

and the Egyptian state. Nonetheless, he was still a valuable asset for the French government in Egypt: on a subsequent visit to Paris, at a private audience with Napoleon III, the emperor asked him to act as a secret agent, to protect French interests against the schemes of the British.

The entente between Second Empire France and Said's Egypt was cemented in 1862 when the viceroy paid a state visit to France, with Mariette as his personal guide. Travelling from London, Said landed at Boulogne to a rapturous reception. In Mariette's home town, the viceroy announced to a delighted crowd that he had conferred on Mariette the status of bey, and placed him in charge of educating the royal children. In recognition of his achievements, the Académie des Inscriptions in Paris finally elected Mariette a member. But his moment of triumph was short-lived: just a few months later, Said's death, on 17 January 1863, dealt Mariette's plans a fatal blow and robbed him of a staunch ally (and France of a valued friend). He would have to build a new relationship, from scratch, with the new viceroy, Said's nephew Ismail (r.1863–79).

Fortunately for both Mariette and Egypt's antiquities, Ismail had grand ideas of his own status and equally grand plans for his reign. He lost no time in announcing his wish to establish a national museum for Egypt, comparable to the great museums of Europe, and in confirming Mariette as director, both of the Museum and of the Antiquities Service. Ismail's vision was of a monumental museum on Ezbekiya Square, in the heart of the capital; but he agreed that, in the short-term, work should continue at Bulaq. Construction work resumed without delay, and the Bulaq Museum opened its doors on 16 October 1863, in a ceremony presided over by Ismail himself. The British authorities were represented by their consul, and the French government by Ferdinand de Lesseps. The main museum building comprised four magnificent halls; the objects in each

were arranged around a star attraction. These centrepieces included the wooden 'Sheikh el-Beled' statue from Saqqara, Queen Ahhotep's jewellery from Thebes, and the seated diorite statue of Khafra from Giza. Each of the artefacts on display had an accompanying description written by Mariette. Indeed, he was proud of the fact that, in stark contrast to the situation in European museums, the provenance of every object housed at Bulaq was properly recorded.

With its masterpieces of pharaonic art and its convenient location, close to the quay where *dahabiyas* departed for the journey up the Nile, the museum soon became a major tourist attraction. Ismail wrote to its founder-director: 'I am told, M. Mariette, that your museum is, after the pyramids, the most visited place in the capital. I am very glad of it.'³³ Mariette, however, in sentiments somewhat ahead of his time, expressed his wish that Egypt's second *Antiqakhana* should serve the Egyptian people as well as well-heeled Western visitors. In his guide to the collection, published five years after the official opening, he wrote: 'The Museum of Cairo is not only intended for European travellers. It is the Viceroy's intention that it should be above all accessible to the natives, to whom the Museum is entrusted in order to teach them the history of their country . . . Not long ago, Egypt destroyed its monuments; today, it respects them; tomorrow it shall love them.'³⁴

Egyptian scholars responded positively to the sentiment, although some were sceptical of Ismail's motives in promoting a museum of antiquities, especially one that had reputedly cost the public purse hundreds of thousands of francs. (Mariette's biographer would later claim, loyally if not entirely plausibly, that the cost had been much lower, around sixty thousand francs, and that Mariette had contributed some of the funds out of his own pocket.) Abdullah Abu al-Su'ud, who produced the Arabic translation of Mariette's guidebook and championed

a connection between the ancient and modern Egyptians as the same 'people of Egypt',³⁵ was more generous, asserting that Ismail wanted 'to waken us from this torpor by the study of the history of our ancestors so that we can revive the glorious virtues and follow their example in working together as true Egyptians and true patriots, for the renaissance of Egypt'.³⁶

Despite Mariette's laudable aspirations, the Bulaq Museum was always more of an attraction for European tourists than for Egyptian natives. And because it housed the very latest antiquities dug from the sands of Egypt, with the benefit of accompanying documentation, the collection also became a valuable tool for Egyptologists. Mariette had intended as much, declaring that the museum was 'a museum arranged for the practical service of Egyptology'.³⁷ If casual observers queried the inclusion of damaged fragments, he would respond that 'there is not a single archaeologist who, with me, would not wish to see them to advantage'.³⁸ Indeed, his underlying philosophy, both of museum display and of the excavations that fed the museum, was avowedly scientific rather than antiquarian:

In effect, one does not have a proper idea of the value of excavations carried out in Egypt if one thinks these excavations have, as their only purpose, the discovery of monuments preserved in the museums of Europe. For every stela, for every statue, for every monument which the aforementioned collectors have included in their collections, there are twenty others that they have left on the ground . . . Now, it is impossible that among these fragments there are none with some scientific value.³⁹

Following the lead of Lepsius a decade earlier, Mariette was transforming the excavation and display of Egyptian antiquities from a pastime for dilettantes into a proper academic discipline.

After 'taking possession of Egypt for the cause of science', Mariette looked forward to consolidating his achievements and safeguarding the country's patrimony. However, to his disappointment, it soon became clear that Ismail had supported the establishment of a national museum for reasons of personal pride, not out of any great interest in, or love for, Egypt's heritage. The viceroy temporarily took away Mariette's steamer, essential for his tours of inspection up and down the Nile, and sharply reduced his budget. By 1867, his excavation workforce of thousands had shrunk to only a few hundred.⁴⁰ But still he persisted. He may have been an absentee archaeologist, often leaving his workmen to their own, worst devices, but he was an assiduous and fiercely protective museum director. When Napoleon III's consort, Empress Eugénie, asked Ismail for Egypt's entire collection of antiquities, it was Mariette, not the viceroy, who refused the royal request. To safeguard the museum from thieves of a pettier kind, Mariette lived on site, in a wing of the building that served as his official residence. He even kept a pet gazelle in the garden. As he later commented: 'I don't say we will be lodged there like kings, but at least we will have an ensemble of galleries while we await the definitive museum.'⁴¹



Mariette never gave up on his dream of a purpose-built museum, but it would always elude him. The best he managed to achieve was an extension to the Bulaq building, two extra halls, in 1869. All too predictably, Ismail had been persuaded, not by the necessity of further space to house Egypt's burgeoning collection of antiquities, but by the argument that an expanded museum would impress European dignitaries visiting Egypt that year.⁴² The occasion was the inauguration of a third great monument to French influence which, alongside the Antiquities

Service and the Egyptian Museum, would shape Western engagement with the Nile Valley for generations to come.

At the very end of the eighteenth century, geographers and cartographers participating in the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt had discovered the remains of an ancient canal linking the Nile with the Red Sea. From the ceremonial stela erected near its southern terminus, it could be dated to the period of Persian domination in Egypt in the sixth century BC, and more specifically to the reign of Darius I. Darius's vision had been to link Egypt's great artery with 'the sea that begins in Persia' (i.e. the Arabian Sea and its extension, the Red Sea), thus uniting his extensive realm through waterborn trade. The discovery had given Bonaparte an even grander idea: a canal linking the Mediterranean and the Red Sea via the Gulf of Suez, in order to give France effective control of sea routes to India and thus deprive Britain of easy access to its empire in the east. But Napoleon's defeat at the Battle of the Nile shifted the balance of power in Egypt, and the dream of a Suez Canal remained just that, a dream. What it needed to turn it into reality was an Egyptian ruler as ambitious as Darius, a presiding genius with Napoleonic drive and determination, and a great deal of money.

Through a mixture of serendipity and planning, all the ingredients came together in the early 1830s, but it would take a further thirty-seven years – and several changes of ruler in the Nile Valley – before the project could be brought to fruition.

The presiding genius, and the name forever associated with the Suez Canal, was the Frenchman Ferdinand de Lesseps. Born in the year of Napoleon's self-elevation from consul to emperor, de Lesseps grew up with French patriotism and the French national interest as his guiding principles. After completing his education in Paris, he followed his father into the French diplomatic service, accompanying him in 1828 on a posting to Tunis:

de Lesseps *père* was consul-general, while de Lesseps *fils* served as an assistant vice-consul. The son quickly proved his worth, and was given a prestigious solo posting just four years later, as French vice-consul in Alexandria. De Lesseps set out on his voyage across the Mediterranean, eager to take up his duties in Egypt's great port city. While his ship was quarantined off the port of Alexandria, waiting for permission to disembark its passengers, de Lesseps used the time to prepare himself for his new post, avidly devouring books on various aspects of Egyptian history and culture sent out to his boat by the French consul-general in Alexandria. Among the volumes de Lesseps received, as he lay at anchor, was a memoir on the abandoned canal of Darius I by the French engineer Le Père. As chief civil engineer of the Napoleonic expedition, Le Père had undertaken a survey of the isthmus of Suez and had mused on the possibility of digging a canal from sea to sea. The notion fired de Lesseps's imagination, but any thoughts of realizing such a great feat of engineering were soon overwhelmed by other, more pressing priorities.

After landing in Alexandria, a second stroke of luck came de Lesseps's way. It just so happened that the ruler of Egypt at the time, Muhammad Ali, had reason to recognize the name de Lesseps: Ferdinand's father had been consul-general in Egypt at the time of Muhammad Ali's rise to power, and indeed had advised the French government to support the Albanian army commander's elevation to viceroy. Muhammad Ali may have been a ruthless autocrat, but he never forgot a favour, especially from a foreign power. De Lesseps junior duly received a warm welcome as the new French vice-consul, and was introduced to Muhammad Ali's own son, Said, then a boy of ten years old. The two became firm friends. De Lesseps's good standing with the Egyptian royal family did not go unnoticed back at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris,

and promotions followed rapidly: to consul in Cairo in 1833, and a few months later to consul-general in Alexandria, at the head of the French diplomatic mission in Egypt. After four years of service to France's interests, de Lesseps left Egypt for other postings, before retiring from the diplomatic service in 1851. But he never forgot his friendship with Said, nor his interest in the idea of a canal linking the Mediterranean and Red Seas.

The elements came together with Said's accession to the viceregalty in July 1854. The new ruler of Egypt lost no time in inviting his old childhood friend to visit. De Lesseps arrived in Alexandria on 7 November that very year, and within a month had received a royal concession granting him the right to build a Suez Canal. A few months later, back in Paris, de Lesseps convened engineers from across Europe – he diplomatically included a representative from Britain, as well as French, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Austrian and German members – to assess the different options. In 1856, the grandly titled 'Commission internationale pour le percement de l'isthme de Suez' (international commission for the piercing of the isthmus of Suez) agreed on plans drawn up by two French engineers (little surprise there), Louis Adolphe and Linant de Bellefonds, the latter fresh from his exploits with Mariette at Saqqara.

The reaction from Britain was predictably furious. The prime minister, Lord Palmerston, was fiercely resistant to any plan that might strengthen French influence in Egypt, and especially to a project that might threaten British access to India. He wrote to Lord Cowley, Britain's ambassador in Paris: 'We do not want Egypt or wish it for ourselves, any more than any rational man with an estate in the north of England and a residence in the south would have wished to possess the inns on the north road. All he could want would have been that

the inns should be well-kept, always accessible, and furnishing him, when he came, with mutton-chops and post-horses.'⁴³

Disraeli, who, of course, knew something of Egypt from his visit of 1831, was likewise against the plan. Sir Gardner Wilkinson, by now the grand old man of British Egyptology, declared his opposition to the Suez Canal on the grounds that 'it could obviously destroy our Indian trade & throw it into the hands of the Austrians, Greeks, French, Russians and all petty traders who can carry cheaper than the English'.⁴⁴ Only Gladstone offered a more measured and realistic assessment, asking: 'What would be more unwise than to present ourselves to the world as the opponents of a scheme on the face of it beneficial to mankind, on no better ground than remote and contingent danger to interests of our own?'⁴⁵ (In any case, British opposition to the canal rang a little hollow, given their continuing dominance of the Egyptian railway network: following the success of the Alexandria to Cairo route, a second line, from Cairo to Suez, was completed in 1858.)

Despite the voices of opposition from London, de Lesseps pressed ahead, raising the necessary funds by issuing shares in the newly formed *Compagnie universelle du canal maritime de Suez* (Suez Canal Company). On 25 April 1859, the first spadeful of earth was cut at the Mediterranean end of the canal's route – named Port Said in the viceroy's honour – by de Lesseps himself.

Work on the colossal project proceeded apace, thanks to the thousands of Egyptian peasants who were called up for the *corvée* and sent to labour in appalling conditions. Britain continued to oppose the whole scheme – and not out of any concern for the workers. But de Lesseps was having none of it. Nor was Said's successor as viceroy, Ismail, who, if anything, harboured even grander visions for Egypt than his uncle. Under mounting British pressure, the Ottoman sultan

in Constantinople eventually agreed to issue an ultimatum to the Suez Canal Company, asserting that Said's concession had never been ratified by the Sublime Porte.⁴⁶ Britain and France, at loggerheads, agreed to the establishment of a Commission of Arbitration; but, headed as it was by Napoleon III, it was never going to be objective – especially as the emperor's wife, Eugénie, was a cousin of de Lesseps. Family ties and national loyalty won the day. The commission found in favour of the project continuing, but in a nod to British sensitivities, required the company to give up its land holdings and navigation rights in return for massive financial compensation of 130 million francs, payable by the Egyptian government. Not for the first time, nor for the last, the European powers were the ultimate winners, and Egypt the loser. The debt Egypt incurred to rescue the canal project would, within twenty years, doom it to colonial occupation. (In one of Egyptology's bitterest ironies, the first major history of Egypt up to the Arab conquest to be published in the country's own language, Tahtawi's *Anwar tawfiq al-jalil fi akhbār Misr wa-tawthiq Banu Ismail*, appeared in 1868, just a year before the completion of the canal.)

Altogether, the realization of de Lesseps's vision cost 453.6 million francs and involved the removal of 97 million cubic yards of spoil. During the course of construction, the population of Suez grew sevenfold. Finally, just ten years after the first sod of earth was cut, the canal was finished. From Port Said on the Mediterranean to Suez on the Red Sea via the Great Bitter Lake, it stretched for 193.3 kilometres. The travel entrepreneur Thomas Cook called it 'the greatest engineering feat of the present century',⁴⁷ and so it was. To celebrate such a stupendous achievement, Ismail (who had recently won both Ottoman and international recognition as hereditary 'khedive' of Egypt) arranged the most sumptuous of opening ceremonies. The guests of honour, headed by Empress Eugénie, included

the Emperor of Austria and the Crown Prince of Prussia. Wilkinson, despite his opposition to the whole scheme, was flattered to receive an official invitation.

On 17 November 1869, five days of celebrations began with a great religious ceremony at Port Said. The Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria and the chaplain to the French imperial court (the *évêque aumônier des Tuileries*), celebrated a Mass and a Te Deum. Then the Grand Mufti of Cairo and the clerics of al-Azhar read verses from the Qur'an and recited prayers to Allah. The religious rites accomplished, guests were invited to a grand banquet in the government buildings: fifty courses, prepared by over five hundred European chefs and served by a thousand European waiters, brought over to Egypt specially for the occasion. After the feast, a great flotilla of ships set out down the canal towards the Red Sea. At the head was Empress Eugénie on board the imperial yacht *L'Aigle* ('The Eagle'), with de Lesseps at her side, and Mariette and de Bellefonds at a respectful distance behind; they were followed closely by Ismail in his royal yacht *Maroussia* ('Fiancée') and the boats of other guests, while a huge crowd watched from the banks. At Lake Timsah, Egyptian naval vessels that had come from the Red Sea joined the flotilla and fired a gun salute. The next day, in the newly founded city of Ismailia, Ismail threw a ball in the royal palace he had built for the occasion; Eugénie arrived in a carriage pulled by six white dromedaries. On the third day, the flotilla reached the Red Sea and anchored off Suez. Two days later, on 21 November, guests made the return journey to Port Said in just fifteen hours.

To set the seal on this great triumph of French diplomacy and engineering, France's leading Egyptologist, Mariette, escorted Eugénie on a trip up the Nile. She visited Abydos – riding a mule the four hours from the Nile to the temple of Seti I – and Dendera, Luxor and western Thebes,

Elephantine and Philae. She showed no signs of tiredness. Ismail was so delighted with the success of the trip that he showered Mariette with honours and promised funds for the education of the archaeologist's sons and dowries for his two eldest daughters.

Thanks to Mariette, de Lesseps and – in her own way – Empress Eugénie, the 1850s and 1860s were France's decades in the Egyptian sun. French scientific and cultural superiority were asserted over Britain and Prussia, and French foundations laid that would shape the future, not only of Egyptology, but of Western engagement with Egypt. But, just as the statue of the once-mighty Khafra had been swallowed up by the sands of Giza for over forty centuries, so events after 1869 were not kind to the French. Less than a year after Eugénie's triumphal progress along the Suez Canal and up the Nile, her husband was overthrown, bringing an end to the Second Empire and consigning the house of Napoleon to history. De Lesseps's great achievement, which should have secured French economic interests in Egypt, instead led to a rapid expansion of British trade through the Suez Canal.⁴⁸

And as for Mariette, while he was lauded in Egypt, he found much less favour in his home country. It has been said that he 'sought no friends except the ruler, and he alienated both those who wanted to exploit the monuments of Egypt by denying them that privilege and those who wanted to support his work of conservation by his solitary gruffness'.⁴⁹ For all that he had founded and stewarded the Antiquities Service, established Egypt's first national museum, and discovered a host of major monuments and priceless artefacts, he was never taken entirely seriously by the scholarly community. He was sanguine about his academic reputation, writing: 'I know the truth, that during my scientific career, I have done only two things, the Serapeum and the Cairo Museum, that most people would regard as

services to science. But I have published nothing further, except a few insignificant and incomplete articles.'⁵⁰

The Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres finally appointed Mariette a permanent member in 1878, just three years before his death. A more fitting, and lasting, tribute may be found inscribed on his sarcophagus which lies, not in a Paris cemetery, but in the garden of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. It reads, simply, '*L'Égypte reconnaissante*' – a grateful Egypt.