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Military topographies: the British army on the Egyptian coast, 1801

An understanding of topography, an ability to identify and describe the salient features of a particular landscape or locale, has always been central to the waging of war. By the end of the eighteenth century it was becoming an increasingly formalized element of British army officers training. In his 'Instructions on Reconnoitring' Major-General William Roy (1726-1790) gave the following advice to British army officers:

“As the encampments, marches, and every possible movement proper for an army to make in the field intirely depend on a just and thorough *knowledge of the country*, the greatest care and exactness should be observed in examining minutely the face of that country” ('General Roy's Instructions on Reconnoitring' in Sir Richard Phillips, *The British Military Library: Comprehending a Complete Body of Military Knowledge...* (London, 1804), vol. 1, p. 320).

Roy was a pioneering figure in the field of British military survey and military cartography. His instructions reflected the growing importance of drawing, mapping and mathematical measurement to the eighteenth-century army and in the training of British officers: the curriculum at Woolwich Academy first founded in 1741 included geography, drawing, map making and surveying. By the time of the Napoleonic Wars there five drawing masters at Woolwich and at least one at each of the Royal Military Colleges at Marlow, Sandhurst and High Wycombe. Military knowledge and knowledge of the countries in which they fought, thus depended in large part on a topographical understanding. This short essay will explore some of the ways in which the British army expedition to Egypt in 1801 understood, responded to and represented the topography of the Egyptian coast near Alexandria where they landed under heavy French fire on 8 March 1801 and remained until the French capitulation on 1 September 1801.

The contest in Egypt came at the culmination of what has been described as a 'cartographic revolution' in the history of European warfare. For Napoleon Bonaparte mapping was a key strategic tool. He maintained an extensive topographical bureau

dedicated to surveying the lands in which he campaigned. The French invasion of Egypt in 1798 resulted in the most extensive and accurate map of the country yet produced, with the French army conducting a trigonometric survey of the Nile Valley, and the Mediterranean coasts of Sinai and Palestine. One of the most significant challenges facing the British military expedition led by General Ralph Abercromby and dispatched to Egypt late in 1800 was their lack of any reliable or accurate maps of the country. Abercromby was forced to rely on naval veterans of Nelson's Battle of the Nile (1798) who had some familiarity with the Egyptian coast to determine where the British force should land. He ultimately settled on Aboukir bay, situated roughly 18 miles from the City of Alexandria, which the British hoped to capture from the French.

In preparing to land on 'the barren shores' of Egypt, the British had to keep several considerations in view, considerations that would be critically shaped by the nature of a terrain of which they had little knowledge. 'It is vain to refer to you maps', wrote Col. Robert Anstruther to his brother before the landing, 'There are none but what the French may now have that are not the greatest botchpennies possible, and perfectly erroneous' (Col. Robert Anstruther quoted in Mackesy, *British Victory in Egypt*, p. 86). Were the waters of Aboukir bay sufficiently deep to allow British ships to approach close enough to speedily disembark under enemy fire? Once they had landed and established a bridgehead at Aboukir, how were they to supply troops with water and provisions? With Egypt under French control, the army's access to local informants with knowledge of the country was severely restricted. It was uncertain whether any drinking water was available on the isthmus, although it was hoped, and later proved to be the case, that water could be found by digging at the foot of date palm groves.

British attempts to ascertain the 'lay of the land' upon which they were to disembark, were further hampered when two officers of the Royal Engineers sent to reconnoiter the coast were captured by the French. Thus deprived of the valuable information their reconnaissance reports would have provided, the British army were landing in Egypt effectively blind. This metaphorical blindness was compounded by the very real problems with vision which the British army in Egypt suffered. As soon as British troops landed in Egypt large numbers were afflicted by ophthalmia a painful eye condition that left many temporarily, and some permanently, blind. Doubts too were raised regarding Abercromby's visual acuity. He was extremely short-sighted

and could see little without the assistance of a telescope. According to General 'Jack' Doyle: 'his blindness which was nearly total, obliged him to depend upon the eyes of others' (Mackesy, *Victory in Egypt*, p. 141). Given the importance attributed to the *coup d'oeil militaire*, or a general's ability to evaluate a terrain at a glance and visually track how a battle unfolded, this was a cause for concern.

In the absence of reliable, up-to-date geographical knowledge of Egypt, British soldiers drew on a broad repertoire of military, historical and religious knowledge in an attempt to make this unfamiliar and 'exotic' land intelligible. The sandy plains of the Egyptian coast presented distinctive tactical challenges. However, as a coastal assault on an isthmus framed by a line of heavily defended sand-hills, the landing at Aboukir bay engaged terrain that bore a strong resemblance to that which the British army had faced in Northern Holland two years previously; parallels which the army drew upon in their preparations.

Despite concerns about their partial and limited knowledge of the country, the British army won a significant, though not decisive, victory over the French at the Battle of Alexandria on 21 March 1801. The map of the action shows the isthmus upon which the battle was fought, situated between the Mediterranean sea on the right hand side and Lake Aboukir on the bottom left hand side. The value of such maps lay in their operational utility, but these wars also saw the proliferation of commercial maps aimed at civilian audiences eager to follow the contests being waged in distant lands. The map of the Battle of Alexandria was a fusion of two types of map: the topographical and the battle plan. The illustrative lines and text offered a dynamic, narrative of the action, while a general view of the terrain was also provided.

Many of the troops' who landed in Egypt in 1801 prior knowledge of the country was derived from their reading of the Bible and their initial encounters with the country were often filtered through this religious framework. As they sailed towards the coast under a heavy rainfall several soldiers noted that this seemed to contradict the biblical prophecy that no rain would fall on Egypt as punishment for its infidelity. A pious Scottish soldier, however, found his religious faith reaffirmed by the encounter with Egypt and the remnants of its ancient civilization. 'We were now upon Scripture ground', he recalled in his memoir, 'we had come from a distant Island of the sea, to the land of the Proud Pharoahs, to carry on our military operations'. Marching past the ruins that marked the former 'glory of ancient Egypt' he saw this as a 'fulfilment

of Jehovah's threatenings' and 'evidence to the truth of the Scriptures.' (Anon., Narrative of a private Soldier, pp. 83, 114).

An even greater influence on British soldiers and particularly officers' understanding of Egypt was their schooling in classical history and literature. Abercromby, it was claimed, determined that drinkable water could be found by digging after recalling a passage in Julius Caesar's Commentaries recounting how the Roman army in Egypt had found water by this method (cf. The 28th and 61st regiments of foot in the Egyptian Campaign 1801-2). The coast upon which the British forces were encamped as they laid siege to the French garrison at Alexandria was rich in monuments to Egypt's Greco-Roman history. The most obvious of these was the Greek city of Alexandria founded by the formidable military conqueror Alexander the Great in 332 BC. Just outside Alexandria, and clearly visible from the British encampments, stood Pompey's Pillar, a Roman triumphal column flanked by a pair of sphinxes. The British camp was located on the site known as Cleopatra's Caesarum, a Roman temple built in memory of Cleopatra's lover Julius Caesar. Close by stood the obelisk Cleopatra's Needle, engraved in hieroglyphics.

Campaigning in such an iconic, 'antique' landscape, abounding with relics of formidable military conquerors, endowed the British expedition with a sense of its historic grandeur and significance. Indeed, an inscription engraved at the base of Cleopatra's Needle in 1802 commemorated British military successes in Egypt and Syria since 1798 and symbolically yoked these victories to the military triumphs of the classical age (cf. Wilson, History of the British Expedition, vol. 4, p. 306). Once the French garrison at Alexandria had capitulated, the British troops were able to examine close up what they had only hitherto been able to view from a distance. They took measurements of Pompey's pillar and transcribed and translated its Greek inscriptions. Officers broke off so many chips of these ancient monuments as souvenirs that a General Order was issued forbidding them from continuing to do so a sentinel was at the foot of Pompey's Pillar (cf. Wilson, History of the British Expedition, vol. 4, p. 60). The 61st regiment even made a failed attempt to transport Cleopatra's Needle back to Britain, going so far as to build a specially-constructed wharf for this purpose.

These antiquarian investigations affirmed officers' identity as gentlemanly connoisseurs as well as soldiers. Yet interest in the classical topography of the region was not entirely removed from more military concerns. In a largely flat and

featureless landscape, the antiquities and ruins dotted across the terrain served as important tactical reference points and defensive bulwarks. They were also symbolic landmarks marking territory won and lost: the French flew the tricolour of the republic from the top of Pompey's Pillar, the flag being quickly lowered when the British took possession of Alexandria. There were also close affinities in this period between the military survey and the antiquarian survey. Several leading exponents of military surveying and cartography, including Major-General William Roy, were also actively engaged in the scholarly study and excavation of historical monuments in Britain.

The relationship between military and classical topographies can be considered with reference to a sample of different views of Alexandria sketched by British soldiers. The first of these is by a private soldier, William Porter, of the 61st regiment. This commercial print was based on an original drawing in an album of watercolours by Porter. The album recorded the experiences of the 61st regiment in Egypt and had been commissioned by one of its officers, Captain Charles Hicks. The print shows a view of Alexandria from the South with Pompey's Pillar in the distance on the left and in the centre foreground two Indian sepoy, part of General Baird's East India Company force which had crossed the Red Sea to join the British army expedition. It records a number of cross-cultural encounters: between the Indian and British troops and between the British and the local Egyptians, one of whom is shown conversing with an officer with both figures gesturing towards the ancient city.

Porter's drawing conforms to a topographical mode of landscape drawing, one which asserts a claim to be a factual representation of a locale in contrast to the more idealized landscapes associated with the then fashionable picturesque school of painting. Unlike maps which provide a view of the landscape as imagined from above and which rely on an abstract system of notation and symbols to communicate information about the terrain – trees, rivers, roads and so on – topographical landscapes adopt a perspectival view, depicting the landscape as it would be seen by the eye when viewed from a particular location. This form of topographical representation was just as useful to the army as maps because it showed how a terrain would appear when encountered on foot: it could be an aid to orientation during planning and on the ground. It is unlikely, however, that such utilitarian considerations were foremost in Porter's rendering of Alexandria. Rather his drawing commemorated an historic encounter between Eastern and Western troops on the

historic sands of Egypt and a British victory on a site resonant with memories of past military triumphs.

Colonel Tomkyns Hilgrove Turner's 'View of Alexandria while possessed by the French in 1801' provides a much sparer pen and ink drawing of the area around Alexandria. Also produced as a commercial print, it is laid out in three horizontal sections designed to be cut out and reassembled to provide a panoramic view showing Pompey's Pillar and Cleopatra's Needle and the old and new cities of Alexandria. As a panoramic survey of the landscape that depicts prominent landmarks - the marshy ground near Lake Mareotis, and the location of the French cavalry - the drawing has clear military utility. Yet, though it likely originated as a reconnaissance sketch, the intersection of military and antiquarian concerns is also evident. Included in the third horizontal section, is a sketch of a statue of a Roman soldier, which, the key explains, was discovered by Turner while digging entrenchments. Indeed, it was Col. Turner, who, in 1802, was charged with escorting the haul of Egyptian antiquities captured from the French back to Britain, a cargo that included the Rosetta stone, the key to deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphics. Amongst the ships faintly visible in the final horizontal section is *l'Égyptienne* the captured French frigate which, Turner claimed, had carried the stone back to Britain (a claim that has since been disputed). Though it lacked the official scholarly ambitions of Napoleon's scientific exploration and description of Egypt, the British army through the production of maps, topographical prints and the transportation of antiquities also viewed itself as contributing to an enhanced knowledge of Egypt, both ancient and modern.

While the ability to sketch rapidly salient topographical features may be thought of as characteristic of military ways of seeing, in the final image considered here, we can see again, how sketches of the Egyptian coastline could encompass broader concerns. It is a hand-coloured aquatint based upon a sketch by Captain Samuel Turner of the 3rd Foot Guards and is a section of a much larger panoramic view of the British encampment outside Alexandria. The 3rd Foot Guards were part of the detachment of troops who remained near Alexandria until the French capitulation in September 1801 and the sketch captures some of the leisureed tedium of a largely uneventful guard duty: British soldiers are shown in small groups working, conversing and lounging. To the mid right of the image a group of three soldiers are assembled around the statue of the Roman soldier, also shown in Hilgrove Turner's sketch, making a clear visual connection between these soldiers and their classical forebears. In the distance

immediately behind the soldiers is the Citadel of Qaitbay, built on the site of the ancient Lighthouse of Alexandria, or Pharos, by which title it was still known by British soldiers. On the far left Pompey's Pillar is distantly visible. The view is richly detailed, but it is as much interested in the human figures that populate the fore and middle ground as it is in Egyptian topography and antiquities. Much of the visual interest comes from the British soldiers themselves. On the left of the image an officer looks through a telescope out across Lake Mareotis. On the right, a blue-coated soldier stands beside a cannon, gazing, perhaps with a hint of homesickness, out towards the sea. It is not clear what they are looking at, or for, but in capturing these poses, Walker's sketch suggests the importance of viewing, surveying and recording this unfamiliar and ancient landscape to the British experience of the Egyptian campaign.

Sources

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