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In the Footsteps of Napoleon at Tantura, Israel

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As night fell on the evening of May 20, 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte raised his unsuccessful siege of Acco. The battered French army, which by then had a high percentage of wounded and plague-stricken soldiers, stealthily evacuated its positions around the walled city and marched south along the coast. About midnight they arrived at Haifa.

André Peyrusse, who took part in the retreat, described the march in a letter to his mother: "We hoped that we should no longer have before our eyes the hideous sight of dead and dying men... when, as we entered Haifa in the dark of night, we saw about a hundred sick and wounded who had been left in the middle of a large square. Those poor, desperate people filled the air with their screams and their curses;... some were tearing off bandages and rolling in the dust. This spectacle petrified the army. We stopped for a moment, and men were designated in each company to carry these men in their arms to Tantura."

The army continued south under horrible circumstances. Louis-Antoine Fauvelet de Bourrienne, Napoleon's aide-de-camp, described the scene: "I saw with my own eyes officers who had limbs amputated being thrown out of their litters.... I have seen amputated men, wounded men, plague-stricken men, or people merely suspected of having the plague, being abandoned in the fields. Our march was lit up by torches with which we set fire to the towns, the villages, the hamlets, and the rich harvests that covered the land. The entire countryside was on fire.... We were surrounded by nothing but dying men, looters and arsonists. The dying, by the roadside, were saying in a barely audible voice, 'I am only wounded, I haven't got the plague,' and in order to convince those who were marching by they opened their wounds or inflicted fresh ones on themselves. Nobody believed them. People said, 'He's a dead man,' and passed by.... To our right was the sea; to our left and behind us, the desert we were creating; ahead of us, the sufferings and privations that awaited us."

Early on the morning of the twenty-first the first elements of the army arrived at the small harbor town of Tantura, located directly south of the ancient maritime site of Dor. Napoleon had previously ordered the man in charge of

his fleet, Admiral Perrée, to meet him at Tantura with ships in order to evacuate the army and its ordnance to the rear bases at Jaffa and Damiette in Egypt. But instead of ships, the exhausted army found an additional 700 to 800 wounded and sick soldiers lying on the beach.

Lacking sufficient water and food for an extended march, and with much of his army incapacitated, Napoleon realized that in order to bring his men safely to Jaffa he must make the army more mobile. Accordingly, he gave orders to allocate all horses, mules and camels to carry the sick and wounded. Bonaparte himself set a personal example. From then on, de Bourrienne notes, it was a contest as to who would give up his horse first to carry the sick—provided they did not have the plague.

Using the beasts of burden for transporting the wounded meant that the army's ordnance had to be left behind, but the French took great care to prevent it from falling into enemy hands. Throughout the night of the twenty-first and the morning of the twenty-second the soldiers disposed of the army's weaponry. Gunpowder and cannon carriages were burnt on the beach. One caisson exploded, badly burning several of the soldiers standing nearby.

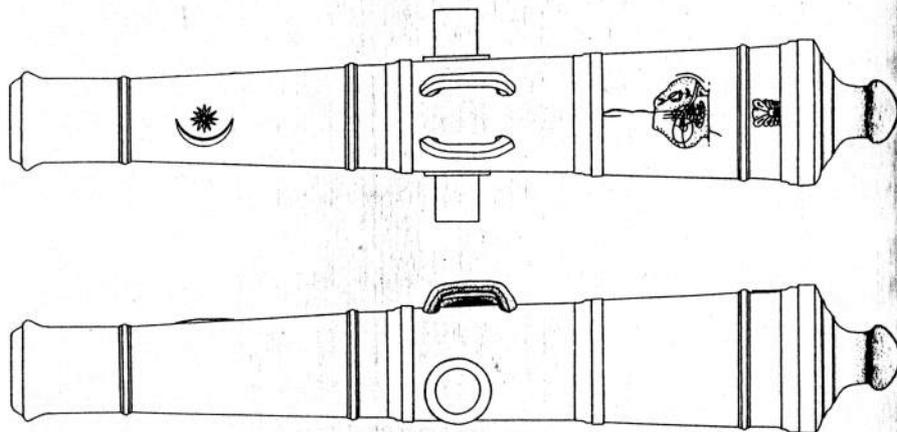
Some 20 cannon were jettisoned into the sea. The remaining two (of a total of five) "24s" were hastily buried on the beach. These were the largest cannon that Bonaparte had in this campaign, and it seems that they were simply too



heavy to be taken out to sea in the local boats. It is apparently to these two pieces that de Bourrienne referred when he wrote: "The remains of our heavy artillery were left in the moving sands of Tantoura.... The soldiers seemed to forget their own sufferings, at the loss of these bronze guns, which had enabled them so often to triumph, and which had made Europe tremble." At 10 a.m. on May 22, 1799, Napoleon and his army left Tantura, on their way to Jaffa and into the pages of history.

The search

During the years 1961-64, members of the Israel Undersea Exploration Society carried out a pioneering underwater sur-



Divers discovered a 1.60-meter bronze cannon during their survey of the Tantura Lagoon seabed. Closer examination revealed a Turkish crescent-and-star on the cannon's barrel and a sultan's monogram near the priming hole.



(Above) The Turkish cannon was raised from the lagoon bed by lift bags filled with air. It was then tied to a rubber boat and pulled to shore. (Below) The pennant located on the forward part of the Spanish mortar's barrel has been erased with time. All that remains is the Latin number "IV," which apparently refers to King Charles IV of Spain.

vey in the vicinity of Tantura Lagoon. Divers found a number of muskets that were covered with heavy marine concretions, two swivel guns, a mortar, and mortar balls. This ordnance was assumed to have been part of the cargo of a ship carrying a load of weapons which had sunk nearby, although no remains of a ship were actually found. After this initial survey, research on the site lay dormant for over a decade.

In 1976, as a result of growing interest in sport and commercial diving in Israel, the Department of Antiquities and Museums entered the realm of underwater archaeology. Our sea base was established at Kibbutz Nahsholim which, as luck would have it, is situated next to

Tantura Lagoon. We began diving in the lagoon and in the large bay on the southern side of Tel Dor, intending to learn sound underwater techniques by carrying out a survey of this area.

As time went on, we began to find ordnance scattered about on the seabed. Four flintlock muskets with heavy marine concretions, lead musket balls and an iron cannon ball were removed for identification. Along with the underwater survey we began research into the history of Tel Dor/Tantura.

Among the sources we studied were old maps. One particularly interesting map was made by Jacotin, Napoleon's cartographer during his Egyptian campaign. The map charts the Carmel coast and includes the route the French army took in their flight from Acco. A crossed saber and musket indicate Napoleon's camp on May 21, 1799, near where we were finding the ordnance in the sea.

This discovery raised several pertinent questions: Could the sunken ordnance at Tantura be definitely linked with Napoleon's visit there? Since the large "24s" buried on the beach had such a high sentimental and military value, would it not seem likely that the French had made a map of the burial site with the intention of perhaps one day retrieving them?

Jeremy Schoenfield had tentatively identified the muskets as being of French manufacture. With the assistance of British archaeologist Claudine Dauphin, we got in touch with Colonel Paul Willing, head curator of the Hôtel National des Invalides in Paris. Colonel Willing identified the four flintlock muskets removed during our survey as French service muskets of the 1777 model; this same model, with several modifications, continued in service until 1840.

Another artifact provided an even more exact date. An elongated concretion proved to have originally contained the lower part of a sword and scabbard, the only remains of which were some wood fragments, a black bad-smelling liquid and the scabbard's impression on the concretion. Using the concretion as a mold, we made a plastic cast of the scabbard, which appears to have been of wood covered with leather terminating in a small circular projection. Colonel Willing identified this as part of a French infantry grenadier's saber scabbard of the model in use from 1789 to 1800.

Unfortunately, no known map remains of the burial spot of the "24s"; if such a map ever existed, it must have been lost along with the other records of the French army before their evacuation from Egypt. Our attempts to find the cannon with a simple metal detector resulted in the discovery only of rusted sewage pipes, iron nails, aluminum foil yogurt tops, and other assorted debris.

Despite this setback, the search continued for the cannon that the French

had jettisoned into the sea. The floor of Tantura Lagoon is covered with a blanket of sand which is constantly shifted by the sea. This shifting occasionally reveals parts of the seabed, and each time a new opening appeared we surveyed it. In March 1981 our search finally bore fruit—we found a 1.60-meter bronze cannon lying on its back with all its markings buried. With the enthusiastic assistance of members of Kibbutz Nahsholim and the University of Haifa's Sea Workshop, the cannon was raised and removed from the sea.

The Turkish cannon

Our jubilation rapidly dissipated, however, as we cleaned the cannon's markings. The cannon, far from being French, was Turkish! If the Turkish crescent-and-star symbol on the cannon's barrel was insufficient to make this point, to add insult to injury it also bore a *tugra*, or Turkish sultan's monogram, near the priming hole. We were crestfallen. Was the cannon not related to Napoleon's visit to Tantura after all?

Later the same day, the solution became evident. In reviewing the eyewitness reports, we found that we had overlooked a very basic fact—at least some, if not all, of the pieces jettisoned into the sea at Tantura were Turkish cannon which the French army had captured at Jaffa and brought before Acco. As Louis-Alexander Berthier wrote: "...[the French army] arrived at Tentoura, the port where the objects to be forwarded to Damiette and to Jaffa had been landed and where the siege artillery had been evacuated along with forty Turkish campaign pieces, captured at Jaffa, some of which had been brought before Acre.

"There were not enough horses to draw this quantity of Turkish artillery. Bonaparte decided that all the means of transport would be preferably employed for evacuating the sick and wounded. Consequently he kept only two howitzers and a few small Turkish pieces, and he had twenty-two thrown into the sea; the caissons and the carriages were burnt at the port of Tentoura."

In order to verify the cannon's date further, we wrote to the Director of the Archives of the Turkish Prime Minister's Office. Lieutenant-General (Ret.) Bahaddin Alpkan informed us that a cannon with similar markings in the Turkish Military Museum dates to the reign of Sultan Selim III (1789-1807). Independently, the *tugra* on the Tantura cannon was tentatively identified by Myrian Rosen-Ayalon and Amnon Cohen as that of Selim III or one of his immediate predecessors, Mustapha III (1757-1774). There can be little doubt, therefore, that the Tantura cannon found its way into the sea at the hands of Bonaparte's sol-

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