

THE GUNS OF TANTURA

Napoleonic weaponry from beneath the sea

SHELLEY WACHSMAN AND KURT RAVEH

Spurred by a growing interest in diving, underwater archeology has become an established field of research in Israel. The Department of Antiquities set up its sea base at the Tantura lagoon near Kibbutz Nahsholim [G-8], in a disused old glass-bottle factory built by Baron Edmond de Rothschild in 1893.

Since extensive work elsewhere met with a variety of technical difficulties, we did much diving in nearby Tantura lagoon and the large bay to the south of Tel Dor, learning basic work techniques by carrying out an underwater survey of this area.

In the course of these dives we began finding ordnance scattered on the seabed, paralleling finds brought to the surface during a survey by the Israel Undersea Exploration Society in 1961-1964.*

At that time a number of heavily concreted muskets, two swivel guns, a mortar and mortar balls were found. The ordnance was assumed to have been part of a ship's cargo which sank nearby, but no remains of the ship itself were found during the survey.

During our dives we removed four flintlock muskets, several lead musket balls and an iron cannon ball for purposes of identification. We also began researching the history of Dor-Tantura in an attempt to find an historical event which would explain the preponderance of weaponry on the seafloor.

Retreat from Akko

Among the sources studied were various old maps. Of particular interest to us was one prepared by Napoleon Bonaparte's

* The survey was directed by J. Galili, aided by H. Stav, S. Shapira, G. Raz, E. Linder and other divers from the Society's Kibbutz Ma'agan Mikhael branch.



Raising Spanish mortar from sea bottom with air-filled "parachutes" (Photo: Shelley Wachsman)

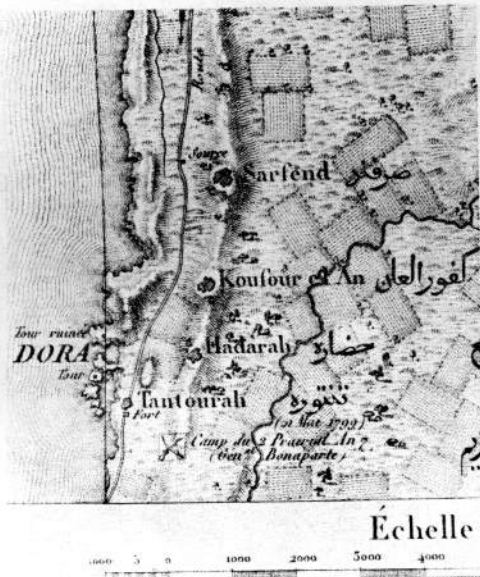
cartographer, Jacotin, during his Egyptian campaign. The map shows the Carmel Coast and among other details indicates the route of the French army's retreat from Akko. A crossed saber and musket indicate Bonaparte's camp on the evening of May 21, 1799, not far from where we kept finding military hardware in the sea...

Excitedly, we began delving into the happenings at Tantura on that day, until, finally, we were able to reconstruct the events of that fateful day.

Napoleon at Tantura

As darkness fell on the eve of May 20th, 1799, a disillusioned Napoleon Bonaparte

SHELLEY WACHSMAN of Kibbutz En Carmel is a nautical archeologist and inspector of Underwater Antiquities for the Israel Dept. of Antiquities.
KURT RAVEH of Kibbutz Nahsholim works with the above in underwater inspection.



Detail of Jacotin's map showing environs of Dor/Tantura and site of Bonaparte's camp on 21 May 1799

raised his unsuccessful siege of Akko. Stealthily evacuating its positions around the walled city, the battered French army struck out south along the coast in a forced march. Many of the soldiers were incapacitated from wounds received during the fierce fighting or by having fallen victim to the plague which ravaged the French camp. At midnight the army arrived at Haifa.

In a letter to his mother a French officer described the march.

... 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. The 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 march south took place under horrifying circumstances. The historian of this campaign, Bourienne, wrote:

... 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 in the morning of the 21st, the van of Napoleon's army straggled into the small harbor town of Tantura.

Bonaparte had earlier sent specific orders to Admiral Perrée, the officer in charge of his fleet, to meet the troops at Tantura with the ships at his disposal in order to evacuate the army, together with its ordnance, to the rear bases at Jaffa and Damietta in Egypt.

But instead of ships, the exhausted army found an additional 700-800 wounded and sick soldiers lying on the beach at Tantura.

MAP REFERENCES

The geographical localities mentioned in the articles of *Israel — Land and Nature* are followed by letter and number combinations in brackets. These refer to the marginal indicators of the standard English-language maps published by the Survey of Israel to a scale of 1:250,000 in two sheets. *ISRAEL-NORTH* and *ISRAEL-SOUTH*. These maps are readily available in most bookshops in Israel or can be purchased at the sales rooms of the Survey Department in the larger towns; they may also be ordered from our offices for \$6 and will be airmailed to any foreign address.

Bonaparte realized that in order to extricate the army and to bring it safely to Jaffa he had to find a way to make it more mobile. Sufficient water and food were lacking for an extended march and many of the soldiers were disabled. Accordingly, he ordered all the beasts of burden to be allocated for carrying the sick and wounded, marching himself on foot to set a personal example.

However, using the animals for transporting the wounded meant that the army's ordnance had to be abandoned. Throughout the night of the 21st and morning of the 22nd, Bonaparte's men toiled to dispose of the weaponry in various manners to prevent it from falling into enemy hands.

Cannon carriages along with the caissons of gunpowder were burnt on the beach. One caisson exploded, badly burning several of the soldiers standing nearby. Some twenty cannons were jettisoned into the sea. The remaining two (of a total of five) "24s" were hastily buried on the beach. These were the largest siege cannons that Napoleon had with him on his Egyptian campaign.

The remains of our heavy artillery were left in the moving sands of Tentoura... 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.

Grenadiers' saber

At 10 AM on 22 May 1799, Bonaparte left Tantura with his army on the way to Jaffa, Sinai and to his final defeat in Egypt.

Of particular interest to us were the two "24s" which had been cached on the beach. Since they had such high sentimental and military value to the French we reasoned that they might have recorded the burial site of the guns with the intention of retrieving them one day. A simple metal detector found only rusted sewage pipes, iron nails, aluminum foil yoghurt tops and other assorted debris.

Colonel Willing, of the Hôtel des Invalides, identified the four flintlocks as



Turkish cannon as found by lying upside down on seabed
(Photo: Shelley Wachsmen)



Turkish crescent and star, and "tughra" monogram of Ottoman sultan

French service muskets of the 1777 model; this same model, with several modifications, continued in use until 1840. The concreted remains of a saber scabbard proved to be of a model used by French infantry grenadiers from 1789 to 1800. Unfortunately, however, no known map remained of the burial spot of the "24s"; if such indeed existed it must have been lost, along with other records of the French army, at the French capitulation prior to its evacuation from Egypt.

Our search for the cannon jettisoned into the sea bore fruit in March of 1981. A 1.60 meter long bronze cannon was found lying upside down 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.

Turkish guns

At last we had found one of Bonaparte's cannons; or so we thought. Our jubilant mood rapidly dissipated, for, as the cannon's markings were cleaned, the crescent and star symbol on the barrel marked it as Turkish. The cannon also had a Turkish sultan's monogram, or *tughra*, near the priming hole.

Reviewing once again the available eyewitness reports, we found that we had overlooked a basic fact: some of the pieces jettisoned into the sea at Tantura were Turkish cannon which had been captured at Jaffa and brought before Akko prior to being 'deep-sixed' at Tantura. Thus wrote Louis-Alexander Berthier:

...it (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 the 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.

Lieutenant-General (Ret.) Bahaddin Alpkan of the Turkish Prime Minister's Office, informed us that a cannon with similar markings was to be found in the Turkish Military Museum. It dates to the reign of Sultan Selim III (1789-1807) or to one of his predecessors, Mustapha III (1757-1774). There can be little doubt, therefore, that our cannon found its way into the sea at Tantura through the hands of Bonaparte's soldiers on 21 or 22 May 1799.

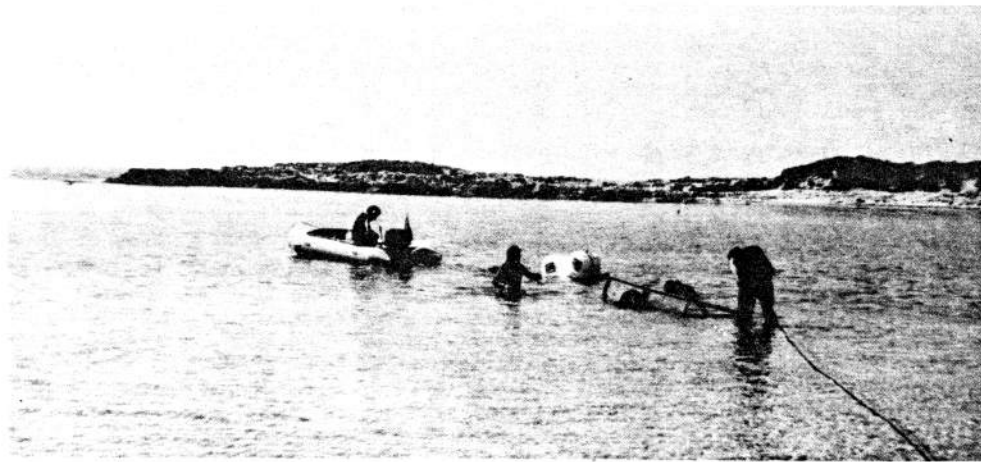
Since little research has been done on Turkish artillery, the Tantura cannon is interesting in itself. The cannon's dimensions were very similar to an English ship's 4-pounder. The bore is slightly less and, consequently, the shot would be somewhat lighter than four pounds. This may be due to differences between Turkish and English measures.

Although the cannon is of late 18th century date its appearance is somewhat old-fashioned by contemporary European standards. Loop handles, known as dolphins, had disappeared from English and French cannons by the mid-18th century. The position of the trunnions low down on the barrel is another archaic feature, reminiscent of English practice in the 17th century rather than a century later.

Placing the trunnions low on the cannon caused an undesirable downward

Removal of cannon from sea by means of small wagon. The cannon was floated onto the wagon which was pulled out by tractor with long cable.

(Photo: Shelley Wachsmen)





Spanish mortar on beach
(Photo: Shelley Wachsmann)

stress on the carriage when the gun was fired. Because of this, trunnions were later placed one-third of the gun's diameter up from the underside... 'hung by the third', as the saying went. The gun's old fashioned appearance is not unexpected, for Turkish arms generally lagged behind those of Western Europe in the 18th century.

The cannon was probably a field piece rather than a ship's gun originally, it being common practice to mount naval guns on land carriages and contrariwise. However, the Turks were not particularly active at sea in the Eastern Mediterranean during the time of Bonaparte's Egyptian campaign.

Spanish mortar

The story does not end with the Turkish

gun. In January 1983 we recovered a second artillery piece at Tantura. This time it was a Spanish bronze mortar bearing five separate inscriptions. The most interesting of these states that the mortar was made in Seville on 12 December 1793 — only 5½ years before Bonaparte disposed of it in the sea.

One of the trunnions bears the inscription "COBRE DE LIMA" — that is, the copper of which the piece is made came from Lima, Peru; the other trunnion bears a number which apparently refers to the gun's caliber. We do not know how this mortar came into use by Bonaparte's troops.

Another inscription referring to Spanish royalty is located near the priming hole. It contains an R and a Q inscribed one withing the other and capped by a crown.

* * *

Bonaparte's visit to Tantura is admittedly little more than a historical footnote. However, the story behind the elegant weapons found in our surveys recalls the horrors of this long-forgotten war and bears witness to the ruthless dynamism of a man who later shaped the annals of modern Europe. □

Note: All the Napoleonic finds, including the cannon and mortar are on exhibit in the Center for Nautical and Regional Archeology at the Old Glass Factory at Kibbutz Nahsholim. Guided tours for groups may be arranged with Kurt Raveh at the kibbutz office: Tel. 063-99666.

Bibliography

- BERTHIER, L.A., 1827, *Mémoires du Maréchal Berthier — Campagne d'Egypte* I, Paris
 RABAN, A. (1981) "Some Archaeological Evidence for Ancient Maritime Activities at Dor", *Sefunim*, VI, pp. 15-26
 SANDERSON, E. (ed.) *Bourienne's Memoirs of Napoleon Bonaparte*, London (n.d.)

- WACHSMANN, S. & K. RAVEH, (1978) "Underwater Investigations by the Department of Antiquities and Museums", *Israel Exploration Journal*, XXVIII, pp. 281-283
 Idem, (1980) "Underwater Work Carried out by the Israel Department of Antiquities", *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, IX, pp. 256-264

"NAHAL" and "WADI"; "HAR"; "EN" and "EIN"

Throughout Israel — Land and Nature and Discover Israel with Israelis, the Hebrew term "nahal" is used interchangeably with its Arab equivalent "wadi", usually according to the form in which it is indicated in the reference map. Both terms refer to the kind of dry river bed or small river common to Israel and the surrounding regions. The American equivalent would be "arroyo". A wadi or nahal may take the form of a deep canyon, with or without a stream along all or part of the dry watercourse; it may become a raging torrent for a few hours, or even days, or it can be a fairly respectable little river like Nahal ha-Taninim [G-9] for example. The Hebrew word "har", and "jebel" in Arabic, means mountain or mount. "En" or "Ein" is the word for spring or for a small perennial water source.