N March 21, 1799, 29-year-old Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) felt it incumbent to visit his troops who had contracted bubonic plague when they took the fortress at Jaffa, Palestine (modern-day Tel-Aviv, Israel), by storm. His goal was to dispel fear about a disease that had caused panic among his troops. René-Nicolas Desgenettes, the chief physician, and his general staff accompanied him. Dr Desgenettes recorded the visit as follows:

The General walked through the hospital and its annex, spoke to almost all the soldiers who were conscious enough to hear him, and, for one hour and a half, with the greatest calm, busied himself with the details of the administration. While in a very small and crowded ward, he helped to lift, or rather to carry, the hideous corpse of a soldier whose torn uniform was soiled by the spontaneous bursting of an enormous abscessed bubo.2(p279)

Other members of his staff also document the visit. One wrote, “This action, which shows a deep political instinct, has produced an excellent effect. Already there is less fear.”2(p279) Still, there were mixed feelings about Bonaparte's attack at Jaffa, where the men had taken ill. When attacking the walled fortress by storm on March 7 and 8, his troops ran amok and, in their fury, slaughtered soldiers, women, and children, both Christians and Muslims. Moreover, 2500 to 3000 Turkish troops who had surrendered were taken to a beach over the next several days and killed.

Our spies, deserters, and our prisoners all reported that plague was ravaging the city. . . . If the soldiers had entered the city . . . they would have brought back into camp the germs of that horrible evil, which is more to be feared than all the armies in the world.2(p307)

Thus, Bonaparte used the plague as an excuse for his failure at Acre. Before the retreat, Bonaparte remarked to Dr Desgenettes (witnessed by General Berthier) that, to maintain his army, if he were in the doctor's position, he would put an end to the suffering of the soldiers who did have plague, and their risk to others, by administering each of them an overdose of opium.2(p302)

He said that this would be his choice if he were severely ill with plague, but the doctor responded that his task was to preserve life; he knew that plague was not uniformly fatal. Bonaparte did not seek to overcome Dr Desgenettes's scruples but replied that he believed he could find others who would appreciate his intentions.

On May 24, the army in retreat reached Jaffa and rested there for 4 days before moving on toward Egypt. On May 23 and 27, arrangements were made to transport 1300 wounded soldiers and plague patients ahead on foot, by horse, by litter, or by sea. On May 27, Bonaparte again visited the plague hospital in Jaffa, telling the 50 or so soldiers who remained: “The Turks will be here in a few hours. Let all those strong enough to get up come with us; we will be carried on litters and horses.”2(p302) He then ordered that any remaining soldiers be poisoned with opium. The laudanum (opium) was obtained from Hadj Mustafa, a Turkish physician from Constantinople who was in Jaffa, and administered to them by Royer, the chief pharmacist.2(p302) Herold suggests that there is reason to believe that the men were deliberately given an insufficient dose. Others, according to Dr Desgenettes, threw up the laudanum, recovered from plague, and told what had happened to them. Indeed, there is no evidence that any of these men died from an overdose of opium.

Bonaparte took the Fortress of Acre on May 17, but conditions were favorable to capture Acre but that...
lated. In his own account, Bonaparte wrote that laudanum was placed beside the patients before the French evacuated Jaffa so that they could take it voluntarily to avoid falling into the hands of the Turks, who might torture them. Supporters of Bonaparte minimize his involvement in mercy killing; his detractors made a field day of it.

Bonaparte, having failed to stop the Turks from advancing beyond Acre, recognized the hopelessness of his venture in Egypt. He was aware of the recent defeat of the French army in Europe, especially in Italy, and he determined to return to France; there was no longer glory for him in Egypt. After one final victory against the Turks at Abukir, Bonaparte slipped away to France, leaving his army behind in Egypt. There he joined forces with dissident members of the Directory; Talleyrand (1754-1838); and his brother Lucien, the head of the national Assembly; and in a coup became First Consul of France in 1799.

Like Alexander the Great, Bonaparte appreciated science. He brought leading scientists, historians, and artists with him and, with them, planned an ethnographic study of Egypt. With them, he established the Institute of Egypt, bringing with him the first printing press to reach Egyptian soil. Ultimately, the major accomplishment of Bonaparte’s Egyptian campaign came from the civilians: the artists, historians, and other savants who accompanied him. When his army in Egypt eventually surrendered to the British in 1801, the French scientists refused to surrender their natural history specimens, stating they would prefer to go to England with them and not return to France. Eventually, most were allowed to keep their specimens. It was the savants who were to return to France triumphant, with enough information to eventually complete the 22-volume Descriptions de L’Egypte. Among those treasures was the Rosetta stone, which was discovered in the port city of Rosetta, Egypt. It was inscribed in Greek, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and a cursive hieroglyphics script. In victory, the British insisted on taking the Rosetta stone as spoils of war and did so at gunpoint from the defeated French general, Jacques-Abdullah Menou, who claimed it as a personal possession to keep it from falling into British hands. However, the French already had made inked rubbings of the stone before it was taken from them. It was the Frenchman Jean-Francois Champollion (1790-1832) who finally deciphered the hieroglyphic script from these inked impressions.

In the year of Bonaparte’s coronation as the emperor Napoleon I (December 1804), rumors continued to circulate about the opium poisoning at Jaffa and the brutality of the Egyptian campaign (the killing of prisoners who had surrendered). Bonaparte, an excellent propagandist, invited Antoine-Jean Gros (1771-1835) to document his heroism and dispel the impact of these rumors.1 They first met in 1796 in Milan, Italy, where the young French painter was working as a portraitist while attempting to recover from the upheavals of the French Revolution. Bonaparte appointed him painter of war campaigns. In 1797, after Bonaparte’s victory in Italy, Gros was commissioned to select Italian masterpieces as the spoils of war to enrich the Louvre. He was given the post of inspecteur aux reves, which enabled him to follow the army.

During the revolution, artists had been free to paint as they liked, but Bonaparte established an attractive government patronage. Gros’s Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken at Jaffa was the first major painting to emerge from the new patronage.2 It was the sensation at the Paris Salon in the spring of 1804. More than 5 by 7 meters in size, it depicts an exotic Middle Eastern scene. The French tricolor flag flies in the background over the Jaffa city walls near the citadel. Inside the pest house, Bonaparte and his entourage are brightly lit by the sun as he visits the soldiers. His right glove removed, Bonaparte touches an axillary bubo on a soldier who lifts his arm over his head. Dr Desgenettes looks on, standing between Bonaparte and the patient. An officer behind Bonaparte holds a handkerchief to his face. A Turkish doctor kneels, apparently to lance a bubo. A French doctor, ill with plague, slumps down in front of him. To the left, Arab men accompanied by slaves distribute bread to the ill. The sick are nude under blankets or partially clothed. They are in shadow, heads down or looking back toward Bonaparte. Gros’s theme is not the healing touch of the king but rather the enlightenment theme of rationality overcoming ignorance. Bonaparte insisted that the plague was not infectious. Thus, Bonaparte ensured that the most enduring image of the Egyptian campaign was the suffering of the French troops and his sympathetic tendency to their needs. Seeing this painting led a British observer, John Pinkerton, to doubt the rumors about Bonaparte’s ordering poison at Jaffa.3 Who would have the audacity to call attention to the plague episode if the rumors circulating about Bonaparte were true? Gros was successful in depicting Bonaparte as compassionate rather than ruthless and as risking his life for his troops rather than abandoning them. Gros continued painting portraits that Bonaparte commissioned to emphasize not so much the warrior, but the peacemaker, diplomat, and moral leader.4 Toward the end of his life, Gros regretted the effect that his mixing art and propaganda had on the art of his period.5 As he grew older, his creativity waned; at age 64 years, he committed suicide by drowning in the Seine.

In 1849 during the Second French Republic, Charles-Louis Muller (1815-1892), a student of Gros, apparently used Gros’s painting Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken at Jaffa as a model for his heroic painting Pinel Orders the Chains Removed From the Insane at Bicêtre (Figure). Unlike those of Napoleon Bonaparte, the motives of Philippe Pinel and Jean-Baptiste Pussin6 seem unassailable.

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REFERENCES

5. Harris JC. Pinel Orders the Chains Removed from the Insane at Bicêtre. Arch Gen Psychiatry. 2003;60:442.


Correction

Error in Text. In the Arts & Images in Psychiatry cover story, Napoleon Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken at Jaffa, in the May issue of the ARCHIVES (2006;63:482-483), the text contained an error in a description of the painting. On page 483 in the last paragraph of the first column, the sentence should have read, “His left glove removed, Bonaparte touches an axillary bubo on a soldier who lifts his arm over his head.”