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## Editing Mariette's Letters: Sharing the Archives of Egyptology

Thomas Lebée

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# Current Research in Egyptology 2022

Proceedings of the Twenty-Second Annual Symposium,  
Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, 26-30 September 2022

Edited by

A. Bouhafs, L. Chapon, M. Claude, M. Danilova,  
L. Dautais, N. Fathy, A.I. Fernández Pichel,  
M. Guigner, M. Pinon, M. Valerio

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2° Des Oiseaux : tels que la Chouette ou Nyctycorax

l'ibis :



3° Des Poissons : tels que le Satus, l'Oxyrynchus &



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Montpellier 2023

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# Current Research in Egyptology 2022



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*Cahiers « Égypte Nilotique et Méditerranéenne »*  
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## Introduction

The Egyptology team of the Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 - CNRS was honoured by the decision of the participants of the CRE 2021 Rhodes to assign the hosting of the 2022 congress to Montpellier. The twenty-second Current Research in Egyptology conference was held on 26th–30th September 2022 and featured around 250 attendees in presence and online. Among them, young scholars in Egyptology from different institutions worldwide presented ninety-three papers and twenty-four posters. CRE 2022 Montpellier marked the first time that the event was held in France – a fitting opportunity to celebrate the bicentenary of Champollion’s eventful discovery.

September 1822 indeed witnessed a milestone event that marked the birth of scientific Egyptology: the young Jean-François Champollion from Figeac outlined the principles of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing in his famous *Lettre à M. Dacier*. 2022 also marked the centenary of another important milestone in Egyptology: the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun in November 1922. For these reasons, we have decided to celebrate the history of Egyptology and associated research by dedicating specific sessions to these topics and making them a focal point of the congress.

The Egyptology team “Égypte Nilotique et Méditerranéenne” (ENiM), part of the UMR 5140 Archéologie des Sociétés Méditerranéennes of the Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 and the CNRS, also celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2022. ENiM has contributed to developing and promoting Egyptology at the European level. Consisting of many specialists in different fields of Egyptology, including history, epigraphy, lexicography, and archaeology, the team is involved in several excavations in Egypt, such as Saqqara, Karnak, the west bank of Thebes, and the site of Armant, but also develops various digital projects, such as the Karnak Project and the VEGA dictionary, which is available in French, Arabic, English, and German. Teaching and research programmes provide training for students from all over the world at different educational levels. It also has an extensive library of more than 35,000 volumes and various scientific archives with documentary material compiled by some of the members of this institution over decades.

For the last 15 years, the ENiM team has been publishing an online journal named ENiM - Égypte Nilotique et Méditerranéenne and two collections, CENiM - Les Cahiers Égypte Nilotique et Méditerranéenne, to which this volume also belongs, and TDENiM - Textes et documents de l’ENiM. For all the students and staff of the ENiM team, welcoming the CRE in Montpellier has been an excellent opportunity to meet young researchers in Egyptology from all over the world, creating links between different generations of scholars.

Since its first edition in Oxford in 2000, the core goal of CREs has been to bring together young researchers in Egyptology from all over the world. Each session of the CRE 2022 Montpellier saw the presence of a majority of post-graduate students and young post-doctoral researchers. The Organising Committee of CRE 2022 Montpellier would like to express its gratitude to all participants and attendees of the conference for their inspiring contributions and the positive and friendly atmosphere created during the days of the conference. We hope attendees found in the CRE the ideal framework for presenting their research in progress, whether doctoral theses or broader research projects, and that this experience will remain a pleasant memory for everyone.

CRE 2022 Montpellier would not have been possible without the support of many scientific and institutional partners. Special thanks go to Sébastien Biston-Moulin for his support and invaluable help during all stages of the conference organisation, as well as to Jérôme Gonzalez, Marie-Laure Chênebeau,

and Sandra Reboullet for their guidance with all the administrative subtleties and their unwavering support for this event. We would also like to thank the researchers representing various French institutions who kindly agreed to participate in our conference by giving a keynote lecture: Sylvie Donnat, Marc Gabolde, Jérôme Gonzalez, Sandra Lippert, Frédéric Mougenot, Bérangère Redon, Isabelle Régen, Pascal Vernus as well as the thirty-one members of the symposium's scientific committee, who are recognised researchers from various French and foreign institutions.

The authorities of the Université Paul Valéry-Montpellier 3 supported each and every step of our project, providing us with the conference locations, funding, and technical facilities for the CRE. We would like to thank first and foremost its president, Anne Fraïsse, and the two vice presidents of the university's Scientific Advisory Board, Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, as well as all the staff and departments who helped to organise this event.

We are honoured to thank the region Occitanie through its president, Carole Delga, represented at this event by Fadilha Benammar Koly, president of the international relations commission of the Occitanie region, the Montpellier City Council and Montpellier Métropole, through Michaël Delafosse, Mayor and President of Montpellier Méditerranée Métropole, and his representative at the event, Clare Hart, Vice-President in charge of International Affairs and European Cooperation.

We shall also mention the LabEx ARCHIMEDE and the Hierolexique foundation through their director, Frédéric Servajean, and their project director, Sandra Reboullet, as well as the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) for having contributed to the realisation of the conference. The events that took place alongside the congress were made possible by the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations (MUCEM) in Marseille and the Montpellier Tourist Office.

Last but not least, we would like to thank all our colleagues and students who helped us during the whole process.

The present volume includes thirty-two articles on various topics from the history of Egyptology to archaeology and material culture, from the Predynastic to the Roman period, through history and epigraphy, as well as new technologies. All of them were reviewed by the members of the scientific committee, recognised scholars who contributed significantly to the quality of these proceedings through their constructive comments and advice. A special thanks goes to them for helping us in the peer review process of both the abstracts and the subsequent papers.

We are grateful to all the contributors for sending their papers and keeping with the tight schedule that led to the swift publication of these proceedings, as well as to Mike Schurer and Gerald Brisch from Archaeopress for their efficiency.

As we present the volume a year after CRE 2022 Montpellier took place, we would like to extend our warmest congratulations and best wishes to the Basel Egyptology team and all the participants in the CRE 2023 edition: may you have a successful and enriching congress!

The Editors



*Group photo taken on September 27th 2022 in the Cour des Marronniers, Saint Charles, Université Paul Valéry-Montpellier 3.  
(© S. Cayez).*

# Editing Mariette's Letters: Sharing the Archives of Egyptology

Thomas Lebéé

## Abstract

Auguste Mariette is an outstanding figure among the pioneers of Egyptology. Discoverer of the Serapeum of Memphis, founder of the Antiquities Service, and the Boulaq Museum, he also wrote the intrigue of *Aïda*. Designing the Egyptian pavilions of the World Fairs of his time, he worked in exciting times for Egyptology, one generation after Champollion, when the discipline was gradually becoming institutionalised and developing its methods.

The best material to study his legacy is the contemporary documents in which the peculiar world of 19th-century Egyptian archaeology still appears vividly to us. Among them, the letters are of the utmost importance: they give us a discourse often immediately contemporary to the facts, with little distance or reinterpretation. The writer also uses his own voice in them, obviously adapted to the issue at stake, which is not without interest. Nevertheless, scholarly discussions often compile the same sources since Mariette's death, while many other documents lie in the archives or have been discovered since that time.

However, we are now benefiting from the willingness of most institutions to open their archives, and from the new publishing and sharing possibilities offered by digital technology. In the wake of Auguste Mariette's bicentenary, we have set up an ongoing free digital edition of his letters. The paper will present this project; we also hope to attract the interest of all those who wish to share historical documents and to present our methodology and the tools we have used for this purpose.

## Keywords

Archives, Antiquities Service, Digital Humanities, History of Egyptology, Latex, Mariette, XML-TEI

## Introduction

This contribution intends to introduce an ongoing project of a free digital edition of Auguste Mariette's letters. It will offer a practical account of the considerations and choices made at the beginning of this endeavour in 2020. It uses few illustrations, but we encourage readers to visit our project website with its associated data.<sup>1</sup> We hope that anyone wanting to share unpublished sources and facing the same questions may find these considerations useful, at least as an overview of methodological and technical issues that may arise at some point.

---

<sup>1</sup> <<https://thlebee.github.io/CoEg/>>; <<https://github.com/ThLebee/CoEg>>

## Mariette's letters

### *Our main protagonist*

Auguste Mariette Pasha (1821-1881) is one of the forefathers of our discipline (for reference accounts of his life, see Wallon 1883; Maspero 1904; David 1994). Originating from Boulogne-sur-Mer, in the north of France, he left high-school to work briefly in England, and then came back to Boulogne, where he ran a local newspaper and took on the responsibility of teaching a class at the town's middle school. Meanwhile, inspired by papers inherited from his distant relation, Nestor L'Hôte, he was also learning Egyptology by himself, studying Champollion and any books he could access from Boulogne; he even petitioned the Public Education ministry to be sent to Egypt. After a few years, he left his modest but secure position and went to Paris, where he was hired in the Egyptian section of the Louvre in 1848.

He finally succeeded in obtaining an official mission to Egypt from the government in 1850, being primarily tasked with collecting Coptic manuscripts, and, if he had enough time and money, to organise some excavations (a secondary objective that he was actually reluctant to take on, fearing it might prevent him from fulfilling his main mission). In Egypt, he realised the Coptic libraries were now wary of foreign collectors, and so, deciding to allocate all his remaining resources to excavating, he began to explore around Giza and Saqqara, with no previous field experience.

It is well known that he was notably lucky in his venture: recognising the head of a sphinx emerging from the sands as an element in a series he had seen elsewhere in the Alexandria and Cairo collections. Remembering Strabo's account of such a buried sphinx on the way to the fabled Serapeum of Memphis, Mariette started to dig up the *dromos* and follow it westwards, until finally he reached the remains of the temple and its subterranean necropolis. For four years, and through many difficulties, he kept digging and studying his findings there, until all was settled with the Egyptian government and he could go back to France. From there, it seemed that his natural path would be to study further the history of Apis and the Serapeum, and to make an uneventful career in the Louvre.

Mariette was not, however, inclined to armchair scholarship. In 1857, he went back to Egypt, this time with the exciting prospect of designing an administration responsible for the management of archaeology in the country. Entering the service of the Egyptian Viceroy, he thus founded the Antiquities Service and the Cairo Museum, originally located in Boulaq. Devoting the rest of his life to his career as an Egyptian civil servant, he lobbied to guarantee as best he could the exclusive ownership of the country's archaeological resource for the state (against the interest of many dealers and European governments). Navigating through the schemes and deceptions of the Egyptian Court, under several reigns and crises, he was successively nominated Bey then Pasha. His official position also led him to design Egyptian pavilions in several World Exhibitions, to write history handbooks for Egyptian schools, and a few works to be translated into Arabic for the Egyptian visitors of the museum; he even found time to work on the story of the opera *Aïda*. Having managed to publish major sites – Dendera, Karnak, Deir el-Bahari, Abydos – Mariette is credited for coining the terms 'mastaba' and 'serdab' into the archaeological vocabulary, and for guiding Gaston Maspero's first steps. He is undoubtedly a colourful figure who worked in interesting times. As we will see, his travels and responsibilities led him to produce a vast number of letters throughout his active years.

### *Writing letters as an expatriate 19th-century Egyptologist*

Written correspondence was then, ever more than nowadays, the best way to formally convey important information between administrations, colleagues, peers, scholars, friends, and family. Writing letters was obviously not only a leisure activity, despite its appeal, but a necessity, imposing

many contingencies, such as the time needed to write (composing or copying it properly), the material conditions to produce a clean and well-written document, and ultimately the efficiency of the postal system that carried letters with varying speed and frequency, depending on where they were sent from and to whom. Mariette makes reference to all of these factors in his letters, complaining that he is often deprived of enough comfort, peace of mind, and above all time to write to his correspondents as he would have liked (which was certainly not always a mere epistolary commonplace).

Mariette was, most inconveniently for him but luckily for us, often far away from the people he wanted to inform of his works. Some of the most intense periods of his career were indeed spent as a lone forerunner or an envoy abroad. It is in such a position that he carried out the first Serapeum excavations (1850-1854), isolated in the desert and threatened on all sides, but nevertheless in communication with the French diplomatic agency and his colleagues from the Louvre. Later, back in Egypt in 1857-1858, while he was touring the country to set up an administration to supervise future excavations, he sent frequent reports to his contacts in Cairo. During the following years, as director of the Egyptian Antiquities Service, he kept regular epistolary contacts with his colleagues and Cairo relations, as well as with peers, friends, and family in Europe, all the while he was working in the field, or following the Egyptian Court, when sent to various World Exhibitions to represent Egypt, or when he was taking leave overseas to care for his family and his relatively poor health.

This unstable situation, which also reflects the uncertainty of his career, caused him to write extensively throughout his life. Letters are usually quite ephemeral, and most end up being casually discarded soon after being read, or a few years later during some careless tidying up.

However, a significant number of his letters were kept by several administrations and far-sighted colleagues. By searching the archives of many institutions, it is possible to locate several hundreds of his letters, retained by their recipients as official documents or private correspondence. Moreover, Mariette's own archives contain many drafts or copies he kept for himself as reminders of resolved and current matters. We estimate that more than 450 letters have been identified so far, stretching over thirty-five busy years. They encompass both private messages and official communications, while Mariette was in France and in Egypt, working successively for both governments, and addressed to relatives, friends, colleagues, fellow scholars, and officials on many subjects. Almost all aspects of his eventful life are alluded to or described in detail in those letters. We are thus in the fortunate position of being able to gather a rich corpus of material that may serve as a source for Mariette's life, and more generally as a wide gateway to the history of Egyptology.

### *Correspondence as a source for the history of Egyptology*

Letters offer many features that make them a source of choice for historians. It is not surprising that they have long been a favoured means of engaging with historical figures, especially in the field of humanities. Published volumes of letters structure our knowledge of countless writers, scientists, statesmen, etc. The list is endless of course: Charles Baudelaire, Napoléon Bonaparte, Charles Darwin, Ernest Hemingway, Gustave Flaubert, Victor Hugo, J.R.R. Tolkien, Vincent Van Gogh, Voltaire, Marguerite Yourcenar... A few Egyptological examples can also be cited, starting with the letters of Champollion le Jeune himself (see Champollion 1833 and 1909), that were published very early to present study material related to his works. It was already recognised that letters were a perfect way to explore 19th-century Egyptology (Maspero 1915: 224 – ‘une époque où l'égyptologie élaborait sa doctrine par lettres privées plus encore peut-être que par ouvrages imprimés’). More recent publications of this kind include Maspero (2003) and Petrie (2004).

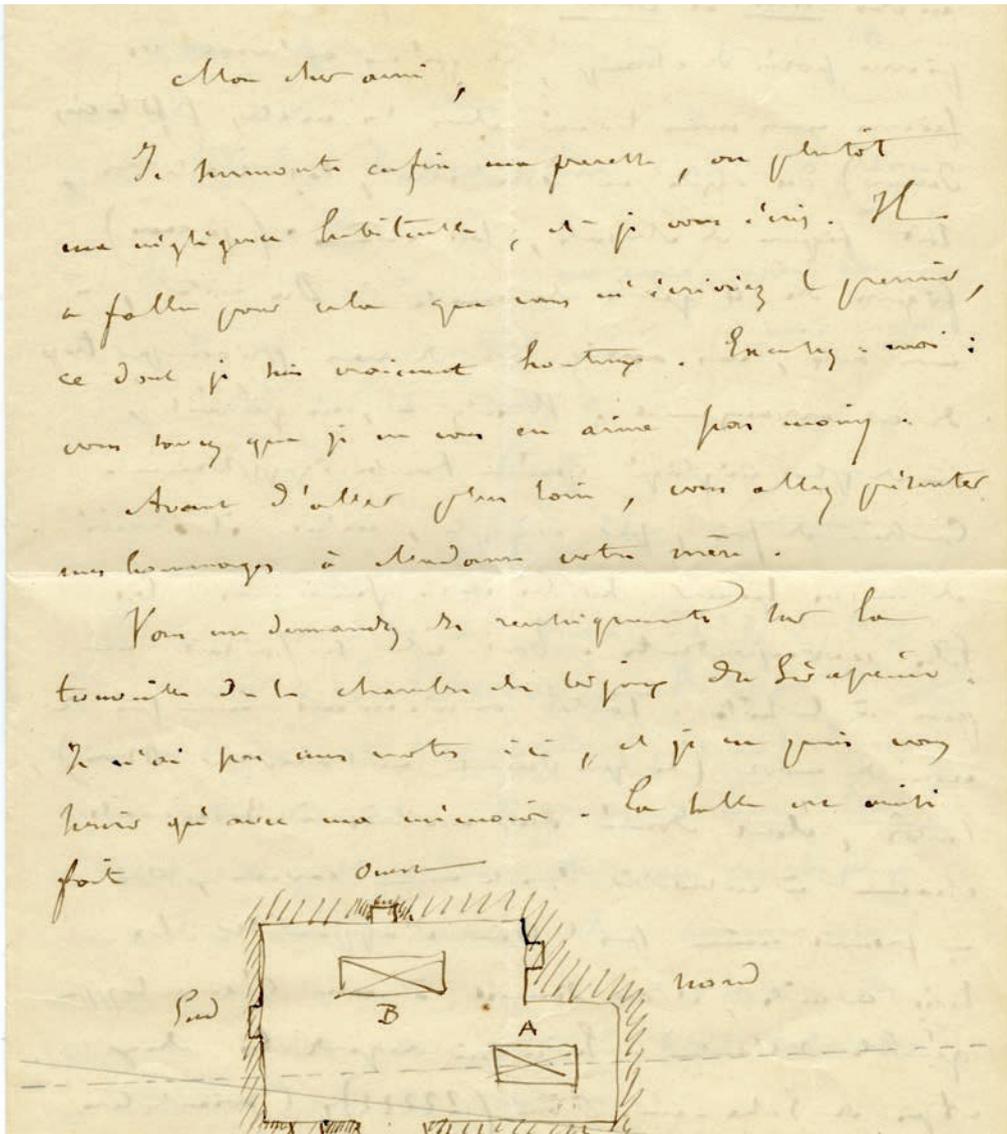


Figure 1. Letter dated 31 March 1867, from Auteuil, from Mariette to Devéria (musée du Louvre, département des antiquités égyptiennes, BCMN ms. 245.2)

Letters are indeed very convenient documents to work with. Most, of course, are precisely located in time, with a clear addressee, private or official. Their contents, naturally, are not always trustworthy *per se*, but they often provide a specific context for evaluating their sincerity.

These insightful documents remain, however, difficult to use for various reasons. Mariette's notoriously idiosyncratic handwriting (Figure 1) is the first obstacle, being compared by his colleagues to Demotic script (Horrack 1907: XXXVI). This can be further complicated by the current physical state of the documents, especially with drafts or copies kept for private usage and sometimes unexpectedly exposed to severe conditions (Mariette's own papers were rescued from a dramatic flood in 1878). Being scattered around many institutions, where they are not always publicly identified, is another considerable difficulty to be overcome. Moreover, the meaning can often be allusive, depending on current events well known by the parties and detailed in previous (possibly lost) exchanges. It is thus quite helpful to analyse these letters as part of an extensive corpus to recreate a context that would be difficult to grasp otherwise.

As for our project, when preparing a paper on the Boulaq Museum, in the context of the celebration of Mariette's bicentennial in 2021 (see Devauchelle and Podvin, in press), we intended to collate as many of Mariette's letters as we could find. While we were progressing with this considerable task, we thought that all this documentation might be useful to many others, and that we ourselves would understand it much better if we processed it more systematically.

Such an attempt to make available Mariette's correspondence is not the first (see Bruwier 1985), nor certainly the last; but we hope this present one will make the best use of currently available methods, technologies and infrastructures. We are quite aware that the field of digital humanities is constantly evolving, and our intent is not to reach a definitive edition, but to provide, at least, a convenient tool for the time being and a potential reusable basis for further works. We aim to share in this contribution how we are trying to do this.

## Chosen examples

### *Entering the Serapeum*

Before delving into technical considerations, we wanted to share a few select examples of the correspondence, e.g. the first account of the opening of the Serapeum, written down by Mariette just two days after the event and immediately sent to Paris. Apart from its emotional value, it is very interesting to compare the text with the account published by Mariette much later, which is also striking but inevitably less vivid and accurate.

‘Vous dire l’émotion dont je fus saisi à cet instant suprême est impossible. Après une année et douze jours de travail ; j’arrivais enfin à mon but. Ce but, je l’avais poursuivi à travers des empêchements de toute sorte [*sic*], à travers les maladies, les luttes que m’ont suscitées la jalousie des uns et la cupidité des autres. Privé d’argent depuis six mois, manquant de tout, vivant seul au milieu des morts dans un horrible désert, je n’avais jamais reculé, certain que la grandeur des résultats, serait, tôt ou tard, la récompense de mes fatigues. Maintenant qu’allais-je trouver derrière cette porte à peine entrouverte ? Champollion qui m’avait enseigné à lire sur chaque pierre de temple le nom du bœuf divin de Memphis ne m’avait-il pas trompé, et devrais-je avoir assez foi dans sa méthode si souvent attaquée pour risquer, sur la lecture seule de quelques hiéroglyphes, une année entière de recherches pénibles et l’avenir de toute la mission qu’au mois d’août 1850 le gouvernement français m’avait confiée ? En outre ce que j’allais découvrir ne pouvait-il pas, (si un seul de mes arabes venait, pour quelques piastres, à en dévoiler le secret) ne pouvait-il pas [*sic*] d’autant plus encourager Abbas-Pacha dans sa résolution que les objets précieux à prendre devenaient plus nombreux.

Mais comment résister ? Je me laissai donc aller à ma curiosité, et, la tête la première, je m’enfonçai dans l’ouverture.

Pendant cinq minutes environ, j’eus à ramper, le ventre sur le sable et le dos appuyé littéralement sur la voûte. J’avais une bougie d’une main et une boîte d’allumettes de l’autre et je n’avançais qu’en m’aidant des genoux et des coudes. Enfin le conduit devint graduellement plus large et j’arrivai à un endroit où je pouvais me tenir debout. Là je m’orientai un instant. A droite et à gauche je reconnus des chambres taillées dans le roc au milieu desquelles s’élèvent de gigantesques sarcophages, et je vis devant moi des galeries qui paraissaient s’enfoncer dans la montagne à des profondeurs inconnues.

Je m’avançai résolument. Jamais, Monsieur le Ministre, je n’oublierai le trouble dont j’étais saisi en parcourant ces couloirs, ces chambres, ces souterrains de mille sortes qui font de la tombe d’Apis toute une ville taillée dans le roc.

Je reconnus ainsi 28 sarcophages, tous en granit, tous monolithes, tous de dimensions colossales. Je n'en mesurai qu'un, et je lui trouvai de onze à douze pieds de hauteur sur dix-sept ou dix-huit de largeur. Malheureusement je ne pus rester dans ces galeries aussi longtemps [*sic*] que je l'eusse voulu. L'air que je respirais n'avait pas été renouvelé depuis des siècles et je voyais à la difficulté qu'avait ma lumière à brûler qu'il était prudent de sortir.'

(*Mariette 2020, 14 November 1851, to the Minister of the Interior: Archives nationales, 20144775/8; translated in annex 1.*)

This striking episode was only known through a very succinct narrative (Maspero 1882: 44-45); this account was written only two days after the events and sent to the Minister of the Interior who was subsidising Mariette's mission.

### ***Nominating the first reis***

Another example of valuable information is the nomination of the first *reis* of the Antiquities Service, whose name would be almost unknown otherwise. There are few details known of the Service's earliest activities in the field in the published material (see for example Dewachter 1985) and any detail on this matter is extremely valuable. A few lists of sites where Mariette led the first official government excavations are known, but the letters written in the first years of the Service (created in 1858) are even more evocative of his plans for his new administration, and of his many ambitions that, unfortunately, could not be supported by the Egyptian budget during difficult years.

The first *reis* nominated were:

- 18 December 1858 (Mariette 2020: École pratique des hautes études, Centre Wladimir Golénischeff, box 44, document 39):
  - Mit Rahineh: Ibrahim Abu Hagazeh
  - Saqqarah:
    - Khamsawi Abu Rubi
    - Aly Abu Safar
    - Rubi Abu Khamsawi
  - Pyramids of Gizah: Atush Abu Faid
- 24 January 1859 (Mariette 2020: École pratique des hautes études, Centre Wladimir Golénischeff, box 44, document 43)
  - Karnak:
    - Muhammad Demarany
    - Diab ben Timsah
  - Qurnah:
    - Awad
    - Aly

The approximate transcriptions of Arabic names adopted by Mariette have been slightly altered here to follow the English usage. These few nominations are centred around major sites, with an idea of the expected future activity to be undertaken at each, according to the allocated manpower. It is not surprising that Saqqarah features so prominently, given that it was here that Mariette had dug for four

years less than a decade earlier. These nominations were circumscribed to one *mudiriyah* each, and we lack the corresponding designations for other provinces, even if the Memphite and Theban areas were undoubtedly the first priority for the newly founded administration. We can also recognise in the local first *reis* Mariette's previous associates, such as the multi-generational Rubi and Khamsawi family, who were to work within the Antiquities Service for many years more.

### ***Hiring Ahmad Kamal***

Of note is also the hiring of Ahmad Kamal (Bierbrier 2019: 246), one of the first Egyptian Egyptologists (the Coptic Marc Kabis had acted as assistant curator in the Antiquities Service earlier, c. 1863).

It is not without interest to see that Mariette specifically requested him and formally acknowledged his expertise, whereas it is commonly said that Mariette actively opposed the progress of Egyptian students (this opinion originating from late comments by Brugsch (1894: 282); to our knowledge, it is not supported by contemporary documents).

'Excellence,

Malgré toute la bonne volonté que j'y mets, il m'est impossible de ne pas reconnaître que Mohammed effendi Sadeh, le secrétaire interprète arabe du Musée, est devenu complètement insuffisant pour les fonctions qu'il doit remplir dans l'Administration que j'ai l'honneur de diriger. Nous avons beaucoup de comptes à tenir, toute une série de correspondances à mettre au courant. Or les devoirs que tout cela impose à Mohammed effendi sont pour lui comme s'ils n'existaient pas, au point que depuis quatre jours Mohammed effendi n'a pas paru au Musée.

Dans ces circonstances, je demande à Votre Excellence de vouloir bien procéder au remplacement de Mohammed effendi, et de désigner pour ces fonctions Ahmed Kemal effendi, qui se présente pour les remplir. Ahmed Kemal effendi réunit toutes les qualités requises pour cet emploi. Il est ancien élève de l'Ecole d'Égyptologie dirigée au Caire par S. E. Brugsch-Bey. Il parle et écrit le turc, l'arabe, et le français. Sans parler de son aptitude à nous venir en aide dans les affaires administratives du Musée, il peut aussi nous rendre des services, par sa connaissance de l'archéologie égyptienne, au point de vue scientifique.'

(*Mariette 2020: 25 ; February 1880, to the Minister of Public Works; EPHE, Centre Wladimir Golénischeff, box 44, document 122; translated in annex 2.*)

This letter, lost in the middle of many seemingly mundane little administrative errands, is nonetheless an important document that testifies to the recognition by Mariette of the merits of his putative colleague, and of their previous relations, that have never been investigated to our knowledge.

## **Method, principles, and tools**

### ***Defining the project's parameters***

We had many options to define the framework of our work. The first priority was to set the scope of the project and define criteria to circumscribe our corpus. Considering Mariette's epistolary activity, should we include received letters or only sent ones? What to do with drafts of letters that may not have been sent? Should we also include letters already published, in Mariette's time or later?

We chose to keep only the letters written by Mariette and not their replies, which would have represented too large a documentation, would have continually shifted the focus of the text, and in most cases were missing anyway. We decided nevertheless to remain quite liberal in defining Mariette's letters,

i.e. including drafts, already published letters and articles, or texts written following the epistolary style (such as a large report of forty pages addressed to the Minister of Public Education; see Mariette 2020: letter from the 1st April 1857, Archives nationales, F/17/2988/1).

Once we settled to a linear sequence of letters that could be read from a single file, rather than a dynamic database, for practical reasons covered below, another issue was how to structure and order the letters. At least two ways could be considered: ordering the letters by addressee, allowing a more coherent reading of Mariette's communications, like as many virtually uninterrupted dialogues; or following a strict chronological order, keeping the historical sequence of writing in Mariette's life. In both cases, however, we would have to deal with letters lacking the essential information, either addressee or date. The chronological approach was favoured, with undated letters gathered at the end of the sequence.

Desiring to share these documents, we tried to take inspiration from the FAIR principles (findability, accessibility, interoperability, and reuse of digital assets: Wilkinson *et al.* 2016) from the very conception of the project. This implied, naturally, choosing an open license for all the project's data to facilitate their reuse as much as possible.

Before putting ourselves to work, however, we also had to ponder some technicalities. Within French law, under which most of the owner institutions of our corpus so far are bound, these texts are 'works of the mind' ('œuvres de l'esprit'); they belong in the public domain because Mariette died more than seventy years ago (French intellectual property law code, art. L123-1), but as they are yet unpublished, they generate 25 years of exploitation exclusivity to their owners from the date of their first publishing (art. L123-4).

It is therefore no mere courtesy but mandatory to obtain formal authorisation from the various owners, mostly archival centres, libraries, and museums, explicitly stating our intention to publish a transcription of their letters under open license. This proved fortunately easier than we anticipated, and so far, each institution providing access to its documents to the public has allowed us to work on them and to put transcriptions online. If in the future an owner would deny us such an authorisation, we still have the possibility to include in our corpus only the basic descriptive data of the letters (date, place, addressee, and index entries) that are not covered by intellectual property and would provide the essential elements of the content of the text.

### ***Encoding the text: XML-TEI and Latex***

Our underlying aim is to reproduce faithfully the documents in form and content, allowing anyone to easily check the original letters, for example to correct our reading if need be. On a more practical level, as we were looking for a way to make these letters easily available, we had to choose a format that could be read and reused without restriction of software licence or version. In this matter, simple character chains that form a code containing the relevant information is the most reliable medium to date. We found a toolbox already designed for this end: XML-TEI.

XML is a language used to encode and structure digital data with markups (the acronym stands for 'extended markup language'). According to the XML principles (see World Wide Web Consortium 2008; a practical example is shown below), the elements are the categories into which text and its description may be segmented: title, note, paragraph, table, author, dateline, deleted text, gap, etc. The character chains are segmented by 'tags' formed by the standard designation for a type of element (such as 'title') written between chevrons and sometimes a slash: they can be used as opening tag ('<title>'), closing tag ('</title>') and empty-element tag ('<space/>'). More information can be added to elements by attributes that follow their name in opening, or autonomous tags (e.g. '<persName type="familyName">Mariette</

persName>’ signifies that the character chain ‘Mariette’ belongs, among personal names, to the type ‘familyName’).

TEI (‘text encoding initiative’) is a sublanguage of XML developed by scholars to encode texts and their descriptions. It offers both a lexicon of elements and a syntax to organise them (see The TEI Consortium 2022). Rules of TEI are quite flexible and allow each project to use them according to its particularities; for example, many elements are defined, but their use depends on the aims of each project; it is possible to segment each words and characters or glyphs, or only to focus on the text macrostructure. The system still offers new developments as it is implemented on every inscribed document possible, including paper sheets and stage plays. A working group is currently proposing to include the particularities of correspondence metadata in the core schema options of TEI (Stadler *et al.* 2017).

The following lines (Mariette 2020: letter dated 10 September 1863 to Kabis, Archives nationales, AB/XIX/4195, folder 1, doc. 5) are encoded below using the XML-TEI elements <p> (paragraph), <lb/> (line beginning), <rs> (reference string) and <placeName> (geographical name):

Mon cher Kabis,  
Votre station à Saqqarah a été assez  
longue, et je vous prie de revenir au Caire.

```
<p rend="indent"><lb/><rs sameAs="https://thlebee.github.io/CoEg/doc/CoEg_Index.xml#CoEg_pers_00000428">Mon cher Kabis</rs>,</p>
```

```
<p><lb/>Votre station à <placeName sameAs="https://thlebee.github.io/CoEg/doc/CoEg_Index.xml#CoEg_place_00000001">Saqqarah</placeName> a été assez
```

```
<lb/>longue, et je vous prie de revenir au <placeName sameAs="https://thlebee.github.io/CoEg/doc/CoEg_Mariette.xml#CoEg_place_00000010">Caire</placeName>.</p>
```

In this case, we have added to the transcription of the manuscript a few indications of the display of the text, by delimitating paragraphs and line, or we mark special features, i.e. the use of underlined or crossed out text. We also characterised here the names and expressions that are referring to places and people, with a URL address pointing to our index, which we will describe below.

Such code is intellectually satisfying, but obviously not very convenient for the human eye, so we needed a way to process the text to obtain a file that can be read comfortably; experience of digital formats also made us hope to use hyperlinks and automated indices if possible.

The free software Latex proved useful to this end. It has been designed to produce complex text files, such as papers, dissertations, etc. We are mainly using it for its capacity to include advanced functions, i.e. hyperlinks, multiples indices, and precise inclusion of figures. Latex uses a different language than XML, but the information is similarly segmented, so it is not too bothersome to shift from one to another. The Latex code of the example given above could be:

```
\hspace{1cm}Mon cher Kabis\gls{CoEg_pers_00000428},\
```

```
\indent Votre station à Saqqarah\gls{CoEg_place_00000001} a été assez\
```

```
longue, et je vous prie de revenir au Caire\gls{CoEg_place_00000010}.\
```

This code appears simpler, and it is, providing only the information needed to display the text, with indentations of various magnitude (`\hspace{1cm}`, `\indent`), lines ends (`\`) and index references (the `\gls` followed by an identifier). This passage is, however, less informative: indices entries are not categorised as person or place names. If Latex gives convenient and easily readable PDF files, its data are not as precise as XML-TEI, and the gap is even more significant with the critical apparatus.

### ***Display, metadata and indices: modelling information***

While choosing our tools, our main preparatory work was to define which features we wanted to include in our edition and how to translate them into XML and Latex codes, and ultimately how to display them visually on a page.

Our dilemma was to process all those unique documents and submit them in some sort of standardisation process; the most obvious way is to convert handwriting into typographical characters, but similar transformations may occur to the disposition of paragraphs and page layouts. The challenge is to identify which nuances are significant enough to be reproduced, and which are just accidental. Our intention is not to produce a facsimile, and we used printing conventions (e.g. italics for underlined text).

For the text itself, we selected a concise set of metadata to describe unequivocally each letter and ease the navigation within the corpus. Those metadata were based on XML-TEI elements and transcribed into the final PDF generated with Latex. Each letter is thus accompanied by a title which states, whenever possible, its date, place of writing and addressee; the other metadata include the institution where the document is kept, its reference, a short description of its material support, the associated keywords, and any necessary notes (i.e. subsequent marking, clarifications on the situation described in the text and the mention of draft and copies, if known).

All the letters are gathered into a single file, at the beginning of which a short introduction describes our project and our editorial conventions. It is followed by a succinct description of our corpus, ordered by institution, with the details of their archival history, before the main part of the work, formed by the chronological sequence of letters and completed by several indices. Ultimately, even if this edition makes use of digital technologies and semantic web tools, it is quite similar in structure, appearance and transcription practice to traditional published text editions (it is the reason why we chose to imitate the visual style of Maspero's *Bibliothèque égyptologique*, as an auspicious patronage).

All of this leads to a pretty simple workflow of sorts, with the letters first transcribed in a regular text editor, then completed with XML elements, later replaced by their Latex counterpart to obtain a readable PDF file, with both XML and PDF files being available at the end. Letters are processed by groups corresponding to their current gatherings in archives and our progressive collation of them in various institutions.

Indexing is another way to ease the comprehension and exploration of the documents. In this area, we had to choose what to index and how to describe it in the appendices, trying to guess what types of entities may be searched for in our documents by others. TEI elements were again a good basis and provided data models for almost anything, allowing us to define simply each entry and to link them with web authorities such as Geonames, Wikidata, Trismegistos, etc. All are listed in a separate index file, with appropriate descriptive data for any person, ship, place, organisation, published work, and object that Mariette may mention. (Curiously, there is no data model to describe ships in TEI and we had to determine whether, from the perspective of our project, a ship was more akin to a person, a place, an organisation, or a museum artefact; we settled for the first option, not for poetic reasons but because ships may be described similarly to individuals, with names and dates of existence, whereas geolocation

data and artefact properties were not relevant.) We also made complementary indices for the letters' keywords, rare terms, abbreviations, and Middle Egyptian glossary entries.

Our letters occasionally include hieroglyphic citations. Our reflection on how to process them can be shortly expanded here, and may be of interest to anyone wanting to similarly share archaeological material. XML encoding is based on character chains, but it can be adapted to carry most relevant information about an inscription. There already exists a specific declination of XML applied to epigraphic material, i.e. Epidoc (see Elliott *et al.* 2006), and a TEI metadata model for Egyptian texts (see Coulon *et al.* 2015), however most of the ongoing projects in this domain are working on word level, often dealing only with transliteration. In our case, we wanted to transcribe the signs written by Mariette, not only the words they form (partly at least because his reading may be outdated, and because our own reading of his hieroglyphic quotes is sometimes conjectural). We adapted accordingly the code to include a picture of standardised signs (made with free hieroglyphics editor Jshesh), a code following the *Manuel de codage* principles (Buurman *et al.* 1988), a transliteration indexed on a suitable glossary, and a French translation. We believe that this expedient is, for now, a satisfactory way to preserve all relevant information around these fragments of text. As a warning, we should add that although it is working for our purposes, and we believe it may similarly be implemented in other projects, it remains a time-consuming and tedious process.

### ***Online: sharing the project***

To make this work in progress available, the project currently uses three platforms. All the data are uploaded on a Github repository (<<https://github.com/ThLebee/CoEg>>), which provides also the website of the project (<<https://thlebee.github.io/CoEg/>>), whereas more in-depth commentaries on each new letters collections are posted on our research blog (<<https://hef.hypotheses.org/>>).

Quite early on in the project, we identified GitHub as a convenient tool to make our raw data and files easily accessible. This free platform has been designed for sharing codes between programmers, and besides many functionalities that go well beyond our skills and needs, it allows users to share files, providing a stable URL to read them, while keeping track of any modification made by the project members. (As a side note, we are currently working alone on the *Correspondances égyptologiques* project, but it could be extended in scope and personnel, and this structure would remain relevant for a team working together.)

We also used Jeekyll, a functionality deployed by the platform to add to our data repository a whole website that is more welcoming to browse. A few tries were necessary to fully understand the architecture of this tool, but once mastered it allows for a good-looking 'front-office' interface, deliberately kept as simple as possible but leaving room for future developments if need arises. At every update of the project, we only update the project core files on the GitHub repository; the file names and address remain the same and any link keeps working. At the same time, we upload each new set of data files as an archive version of the project in another branch of the repository. This procedure is currently very satisfactory for light maintenance of the data without needing too much time or care.

Another objective was to use the potential of the semantic web by attempting a synergy with other online tools and improved navigation and indexing: by having our files online and directly readable, it is possible to use the hyperlinks set within our code to jump between the various files (between the text and index of the XML files, or inside the Latex PDF file), and, more interestingly, from our index entries to external authorities such as Trismegistos, Geonames, Wikidata, etc.

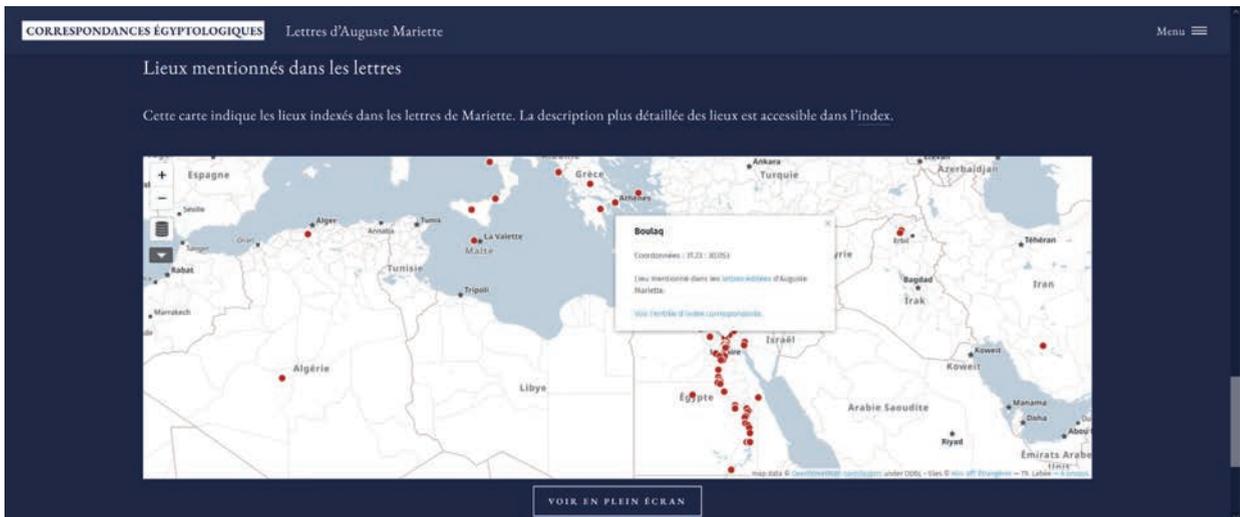


Figure 2. A map of the place names referenced in the letters. Th. Lebée (CC-BY).

We have also been able to experiment with data visualisation and include dynamic maps and timelines to offer other ways to explore our data and ease any research focusing on specific locations or times in Mariette's life. While being a nice way to see the places quoted in the letters, it is also a good incentive for us to keep our geolocation data clean and regularly checked (Figure 2).

Another facet of the semantic web is to enable our data to be part of other projects. We tried our best to make our data usable; we do not know yet of any use of the encoded letters of Mariette, but any such initiative would be most welcome, and feedback would allow us to improve our project. To give the project a better visibility among similar editions, we produced metadata files targeted by the `correspSearch` platform (<<https://correspsearch.net/en/home.html>>), which operates as a search engine for XML-encoded correspondence.

Finally, an obvious factor of accessibility is the language used; while we try to translate in English most of the posts published on our research blog, since this project revolves around a documentation in French, we are not convinced of the interest of translating the critical apparatus, deeming it necessary to engage directly with the source material in any event. A translation of the whole corpus, on the other hand, would be quite another project, and on a scale beyond our reach.

### ***A low-tech digital project?***

This project began as an experiment; we were neither sure about the technical possibility to deliver something usable at the end, nor even of the willingness of institutions to let us use their collections. Had any major institution holding Mariette's letters refused, the project would have met a severe drawback and its very purpose would have needed to be re-evaluated.

This probably explains why the editorial chain was, from the beginning, designed to be very light: since we are working on this project in our free time and without institutional support, our practical concern was to avoid costs and reduce the time of maintenance of the project. We also wanted to be able to publish the letters gradually, as soon as a new collection is processed. This has allowed us to share quickly some letters, in the hope that we could gather advice and improve the project thank to feedback. It was also useful, when asking institutions their authorisation to publish our transcription of their letters, to show a convincing if incomplete glance at the expected result, in which more and more institutions were appearing.

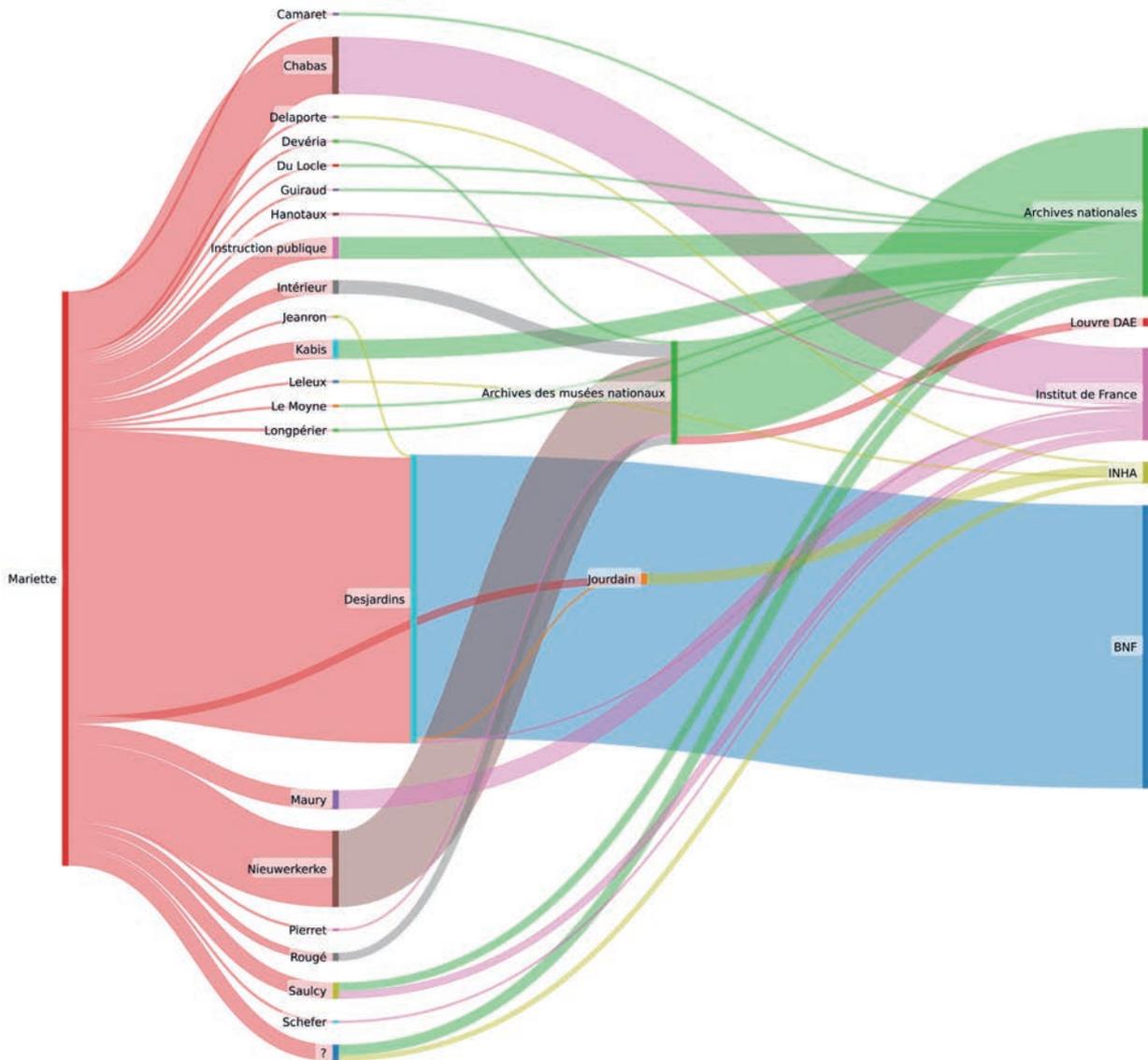


Figure 3. Letter trajectories, from Mariette to their current repositories (219 letters published, July 2022). Th. Lebée (CC-BY).

Given these circumstances, we sought to decrease the time of the update process as much as possible, without reducing quality controls and proofreading. It is the reason why, for example, we have chosen not to display photographs of the letters next to their transcriptions (apart from copyright complications), nor to design a fully dynamic database online, preferring instead a single file. The result may be a little ‘bland’ compared to more complex projects, but remains easier to maintain.

The modest technical resources, a necessity caused partly by our independent status for this project and partly by the limitation of our skills in these matters, was embraced as a feature of the experiment. All our needs were covered by free and often open software and tools: LibreOffice as text editor and spreadsheet program; Notepad++ and Atom as code editors; Jshesh as hieroglyphics editor; some free fonts; Latex as document preparation system; and GitHub as data repository and publishing platform.

It made us realise the extent of the possibilities offered by many tools freely available, and we are eager to encourage anyone wanting to share unknown materials to try, and not feel restricted by a lack of

financial, material, or technical support. We hope that our project is proof of concept that 'handmade' digital ventures can be successful and offer useful resources available to anyone, provided they are reasonably scaled.

### The project now and in the near future

Our investigation is still ongoing. At the beginning of 2023, the project covers 260 letters and we hope to include a few hundreds more from France and abroad, as well as beginning a more in-depth exploitation of their contents by dedicated papers.

The slow process of editing Mariette's letters also drives us to investigate around the many entities mentioned in the text, in order to get clean and proper indices. It is a salutary incentive to broaden our understanding of the documents' context. Another domain of research that has become more and more apparent in our investigation was the later institutional gathering of the documents, as we were simultaneously looking for known letters, and hunting for other potential repositories (Figure 3).

On a wider scale, this also helps us to apprehend his communication network, by investigating around his correspondents and the dynamics of their exchanges through Mariette's life. We started to ponder more closely the context of each document: what information did Mariette choose to disclose, or not reveal, how did he comment on things, what did he need from his correspondent, etc. Our extensive investigation allowed us to develop a general understanding of Mariette's letter-writing activities, which reflected most aspects of his life, in his simultaneous personal, professional, administrative, and scholarly development.

Overall, the seemingly slow endeavour to carefully process many documents is a rewarding opportunity to engage with their subjects, and greatly improve our understanding of them. The time needed to set up such a project and organise the documentation is not to be underestimated, but it does not require much more: with time to try and to learn, free digital tools can help with almost anything, even with very basic resources, as we hope to have demonstrated.

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## Annex 1

Translation of Mariette's letter of 4 November 1851 to the Minister of the Interior (Archives nationales, 20144775/8)

'It is impossible to tell you the emotion with which I was seized at that supreme moment. After a year and twelve days of work; I had finally reached my goal. I had pursued this goal through all sorts of obstacles, through illnesses, through the struggles that the jealousy of some and the greed of others had caused me. Deprived of money for six months, lacking everything, living alone among the dead in a horrible desert, I had never backed down, certain that the greatness of the results would, sooner or later, be the reward for my efforts. Now what was I going to find behind this door that was barely ajar? Had not Champollion, who had taught me to read on each temple stone the name of the divine ox of Memphis, deceived me, and should I have enough faith in his method, so often attacked, to risk, on the reading of a few hieroglyphs alone, a whole year of painful research and the future of the whole mission that in August 1850 the French government had entrusted to me? Moreover (if only one of my Arabs were to reveal the secret for a few piasters), could not what I was about to discover encourage Abbas-Pasha in his decision [to close the French excavation] as the precious objects to loot became more numerous?

But how could I resist? So I gave in to my curiosity, and, head first, I plunged into the opening.

For about five minutes I had to crawl, my stomach on the sand and my back literally against the arch. I had a candle in one hand and a box of matches in the other, and I only moved forward with the help of my knees and elbows.

At last the shaft gradually became wider and I reached a place where I could stand. There I orientated myself for a moment. To the right and left I recognised chambers cut into the rock, in the middle of which rose gigantic sarcophagi, and I saw before me galleries that seemed to go down into the mountain to unknown depths.

I went forward resolutely. Never, Mr Minister, will I forget the turmoil I felt as I walked through these corridors, these chambers, and these subterranean passages of a thousand kinds that make the tomb of Apis a whole city carved out of the rock.

I thus recognised twenty-eight sarcophagi, all of them of granite, all of them monolithic, all of them of colossal dimensions. I measured only one of them, and I found it to be eleven to twelve feet high and seventeen or eighteen feet wide. Unfortunately, I could not stay in these galleries as long as I would have liked. The air I breathed had not been renewed for centuries and I could see from the difficulty my light had in burning that it was prudent to leave.'

## Annex 2

Translation of Mariette's letter of 25 February 1880 to the Minister of Public Works (EPHE, Centre Wladimir Golénischeff, box 44, document 122)

'Excellency,

In spite of all the goodwill I put into it, I cannot fail to recognise that Mohammed effendi Sadeh, the Museum's Arabic interpreter-secretary, has become completely inadequate for the functions he has to fulfil in the Administration I have the honour of directing. We have many accounts to keep, a whole series of correspondences to bring up to date. Now the duties that all this imposes on Mohammed effendi are for him as if they did not exist, to the point that for four days Mohammed effendi has not appeared at the Museum.

I ask Your Excellency to proceed to the replacement of Mohammed effendi, and to designate for these functions Ahmed Kemal effendi, who presents himself to fulfil them. Ahmed Kemal effendi has all the required qualities for this position. He is a former student of the Egyptology school run in Cairo by H. E. Brugsch-Bey. He speaks and writes Turkish, Arabic and French. In addition to his ability to assist us in the administrative affairs of the Museum, he can also be of service to us with his knowledge of Egyptian archaeology from a scientific point of view.'