

DARIO GUCCIO feat. ANDREA CLEOPATRIA

REFERENDUM SULL'AEROPLANO

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If the French failed to win the Egyptians over to the ideas of the Enlightenment, they were nevertheless confident that French technology would impress the natives. Napoleon's savants brought quite a bag of tricks to Egypt. In November 1798, the French organized the launch of a Montgolfier hot air balloon. They posted notices around Cairo inviting the townspeople to witness the marvel of flight. Al-Jabarti had heard the French make incredible claims about their airship, 'that people would sit in it traveling to distant countries to gather information and to send messages,' and went to see the demonstration for himself.

Looking at the limp balloon on its platform, decorated in the red, white, and blue of the French tricolor, al-Jabarti had his doubts. The Frenchmen lit the Montgolfier's wick, filling the balloon with warm air until it took flight. The crowd gasped in amazement, and the French took evident pleasure in their reaction. All seemed to be going well until the balloon lost its wick. Without a source of hot air, the Montgolfier collapsed and fell to the ground. The crash of the balloon restored the Cairo audience's contempt for French technology. Al-Jabarti wrote dismissively, 'it became apparent that it was like the kites which servants construct for holidays and weddings,' The natives were not impressed.

Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History*, 2009