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FROM PAS-DE-CALAIS TO ENGLAND: THE CARTOGRAPHICAL ARSENAL OF THE IMPERIAL STATE SECRETARIAT

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Abstract

In 1803, as Napoleon prepared to invade England, what cartographical resources were used to set up the Boulogne camp and its surroundings and lay the groundwork for the attack? Cécile Robin, of the French National Archives, has examined the collection of State Secretariat-commissioned documents, finding eighty illustrated documents produced in support of the invasion. In this article she analyses a selection of illustrated pieces.

FROM PAS-DE-CALAIS TO ENGLAND: THE CARTOGRAPHICAL ARSENAL OF THE IMPERIAL STATE SECRETARIAT

The Imperial State Secretariat was created by consular decree on 4 Nivôse Year VIII (25 December 1799), and it became a ministry in 1804. Hugues Maret, Duc de Bassano, was the first to lead it, with the title “Secretary of State”. The Secretariat was one of the most important cogs in the machine of the state, accomplishing missions similar to those of a government administration and thus continuing the work previously done by the service formed and run by Joseph-Jean Lagarde during the Directory. As an intermediary between ministries and the emperor, the Secretary of State was responsible for organising work upstream and then transmitting the final version of laws to the ministers responsible for their execution. The Secretariat was also the government’s legal administration service, filing the minutes of executive orders. The business of ministerial departments went through the Secretariat. As a result, these archives are a record of government since 1793. Indeed, these State Secretariat archives (known as “Archives Impariales”) record, in succeeding layers, the work of the upper echelons of the executive, beginning with that of the Comité de Salut Public, and continuing through the Directory, the Consulate, and finally to the emperor himself. Unlike the “Archives de l’Empire” (today the National Archives), the documents held in the “Archives Impariales” were not intended for publication beyond the realms of government.

The Imperial State Secretariat thus held a large and highly organized store of work papers, and this made it possible quickly to compile working documents as required. In particular, the Secretariat contained a large quantity of iconographic documents, included as part of the documents providing supporting information, namely, technical projects, battle plans, designs for uniforms, architectural

and urban-development plans, maps of foreign countries, maps of communes, etc. That being said, the presence of these documents in the State Secretariat archives is only indicative of the importance the emperor ascribed to the Secretariat itself. It does not reveal much about how the projects were implemented. Only the reports, or the decrees to which they are attached, allow us to reconstruct the context of the production of these documents and the outcomes of the proposals that they reflect. Close to half of the 1,820 maps, plans, and drawings identified in the State Secretariat archives are appended to the minutes of the corresponding decrees; the other half are distributed among the files of reports sent by the different ministers. Naturally, the greatest number of iconographic documents are to be found in the files of the war and naval ministries, although those of the ministries of the interior and of foreign affairs are also notable in this respect.

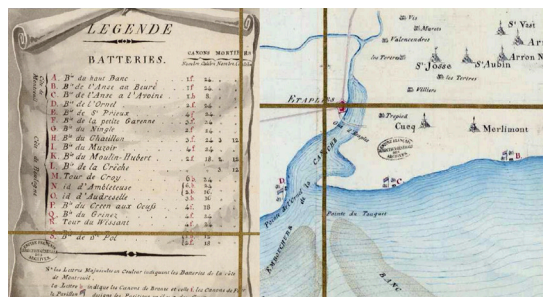
The plan to invade England resulted in the production of some eighty iconographic documents, many of which naturally related to the Pas-de-Calais region. The illustrated documents here include: general maps or plans (coastlines and routes between ports, waterways, and paths); general layout plans of towns; technical drawings (levelling, factories, etc.); and detailing of fortifications (positioning of batteries, battle array, military camps). Although the vast majority of these documents concern Boulogne, the towns of Calais, Wissant, Ambleteuse, Wimereux, and Étaples are also depicted. However, military strategy was not the only concern of this documentary effort. The illustrated documents include also attempts to acquire knowledge of the terrain of operations so as to be able to estimate the costs of constructing or restoring infrastructure as a result of bad weather or attacks. The maps, plans, and drawings portray the territories at various scales, they present graphically development projects, and they describe the functioning of military apparatus. The considerable documentation held by the State Secretariat on the subject reveals that there were in fact two fundamental, key questions: first, which town should be chosen as the

site from which to launch expeditions against England; and second, what work should be prioritized to ensure that men, ships, and materials were ready as needed?

The first question, which sparked renewed interest in identifying the legendary Portus Itius, was eventually narrowed down to two options: Boulogne or Calais? Interested parties, civilian and military, argued in favour of one town or the other, supporting their points of views with highly technical arguments: some pointed to the distances, measured in *étapes* or stages at that time, while others raised the issue of triangulation; all, though, insisted on the importance of winds and tides. Thus, in an insert containing “observations” on the plan for the “Bombing of Boulogne by Nelson in the Year X,” we read: “Force of habit and Calais’ reknown have led to this city almost always being favoured as the route of ambassadors and packet boats. However, it is acknowledged that the favourable winds to reach Dover are more frequent in Boulogne than in Calais. The route from Paris to Boulogne is shorter by 4 and $\frac{1}{4}$ *étapes*/stages, meaning that by leaving from Paris and going via Boulogne, one reaches Dover in the same time it would take to go from Paris to Calais. Furthermore, it is desirable that the winds and the time of the tides be the only criteria determining in future the choice between the two embarkation points; since passengers should never be the victim of the narrow self-interest of others, which would expose them to the hardship of eight or ten hours of rough weather at sea to reach Calais, when in three or four hours they can reach Boulogne.”

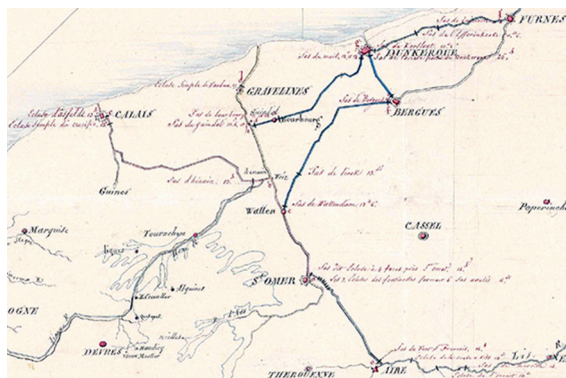
Except for the general maps of England and the French departments facing it, the majority of the coastal maps concentrate largely on the location of the batteries, sometimes indicating the number of canons and mortars of each.

Figure 1: Coastal map of the departments of Pas-de-Calais and the Somme (AF/IV/1205, d. 2, item 61)



Other documents focus on the sand banks, the high tides, and the positioning of the anchorage for the different types of ships. Although impossible to represent visually, movement (in distance and time), i.e., movement within a given space, be it on land or by sea or river lies at the heart of these depictions. The “Chart of routes by water between Saint-Omer and various coastal ports from Calais to Antwerp” is an exceptional example of this: it maps all the existing locks and sluice gates between the two cities, and the maximum water level for each.

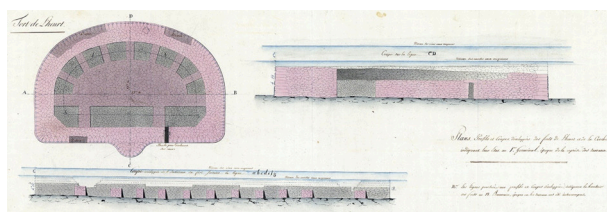
Figure 2: Chart of routes by water between Saint-Omer and various coastal ports from Calais to Antwerp (AF/IV/1055, d. 1, item 16)



Also of note are the “View of the Liane showing the positioning of the moorings of various ships of the Imperial fleet,” and the “Course of the stream flowing from Wimille to Wimereux, and out to the sea.” These two documents highlight the importance of waterways that were, a priori, a secondary means of transporting people and equipment—from which we can infer the need to balance strategic interests and financial costs.

Although for military hardware reasons the images focus on transport routes, strategic locations are also important, as shown by the number of maps of towns and forts. Inland towns were of interest mainly for their fortifications, existing or planned; this is the case, for example, of the “Plan of the ramparts of the town of Arras.” However, the majority of the documents show port cities, with their existing or proposed quays, breakwaters, port basins, roadsteads (or ‘roads’), sluice gates, and forts. The plans of forts, in particular those of the Fort de l’Heurt and the Fort de la Crèche, are examples of unusual drawing techniques.

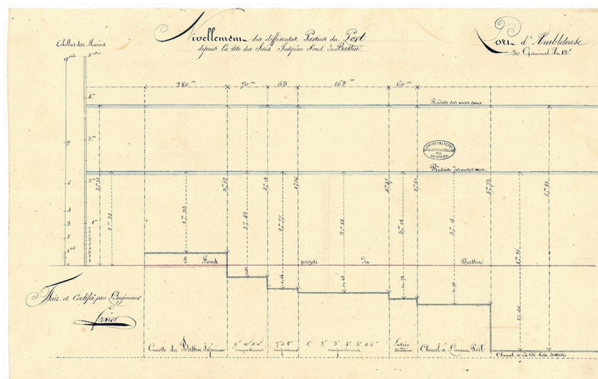
Figure 3: Fort de l’Heurt and Fort de la Crèche (AF/IV/1205, d. 2, item 23)



These documents use mostly profile, cross-section, levelling, and elevation drawings and aim to highlight the construction techniques used and structural characteristics that will ensure resistance: the location of drainage holes allowing water through, the levels of flowing and still bodies of water, the position of artillery, the structure of the frame, and so on. We find a similar technique used in the levelling diagrams of port basins (Ambleteuse, Boulogne,

Wimereux), where the levels of tides, from the basin entrance to the quay, are indicated.

Figure 4 : Levelling drawing of the different parts of the port of Ambleteuse, 30 Germinal Year XII (20 April, 1804) (AF/IV/1205, d. 2, item 6)

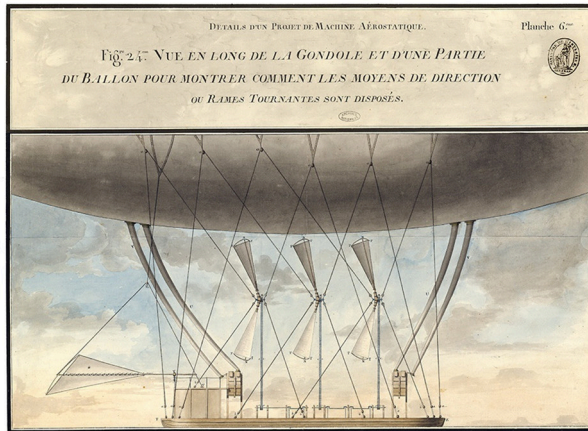


Despite the symbolic importance of the campaign against England, there are in fact very few battle plans. A diagram of the “Battle supported by seven prams and two gunboats of the Boulogne Imperial fleet” against an English station on 21 September 1811 indicates the location of the ships and their names. The other documents are mostly plans, showing orders of march, troop arrangements, and encampments.

On the other hand, illustrations of the arms and means of transport to be used for the conquest of England are rare in this corpus. Alongside the “Plan of the bronzed iron-cased rockets launched by the English barges at the port of Boulogne during the night of 8 or 9 October 1806” and the “New drawing for a bridge that could serve to disembark the line infantry,” stands the most extraordinary (but also highly improbable) innovation of the period, namely, the “plan for an Aerostatic machine” intended to transport men as well as equipment. While the balloons may have been of some use to the

General Bonaparte in his campaigns, the weight and design of this airship boded ill for its capacity to reach England.

Figure 5: Drawing of an Aerostatic machine: Longitudinal view of the gondola and of part of the balloon (AF/IV/1955, item 33, plate 6)



If we turn our attention to the authors of these documents, we observe that the corpus studied here is unrepresentative of the group of all the documents provided for the State Secretariat, with Engineer officers significantly overrepresented. The letter from General Ney, commander-in-chief, to the First Consul, dated 24 Ventôse Year XII (15 March, 1804), sent with information on a plan to construct a port in the bay of Étapes, is eloquent in this regard: “Commander Cazals of the Engineers has begun the profile of the bay of Étapes, from the point opposite Hilbert farm to the end of the Banc aux Chiens; the line dividing flowing water from still water will be marked every hundred toises: as soon as the work is finished, I shall have the honour of sending it to you. All the information that I have gathered on the bay of Étapes suggests that it could easily contain fifteen to eighteen hundred ships of all types, fully sheltered from any bombardment and all launchable at once on the same tide; the voyage to reach the English coast takes only one or

two hours more than from Boulogne; returning towards La Canche in the event of rough weather and even running aground would be less perilous than in the area around this latter port, but it seems that the position of Étapes cannot be reconciled with the system for amassing vessels. So I propose, General, the construction of a small fort on the Banc de terre aux Chiens; the aim of this structure would be to defend the entrance of La Canche, to protect the roadstead and, in particular, the anchorage for casting off, which is only very imperfectly defended by the batteries of Camiers, l'Ornet and le Touquet: the material needed can be found in abundance in a quarry close to Étapes. I attach here two sketches that the engineer officer Cazals gave me for this purpose; they may be of use to you as a basis for the establishment of a port in the bay of Étapes, if the intention is for La Canche to receive a larger number of ships. The route from Étapes to Boulogne via Neufchâtel is completely finished, with the exception of two bad sections that we are now repairing, and from the 28th of this month it will be possible to travel it with artillery.”¹ We can see how the technical aspects mix with strategic considerations, in a concentrated form of military engineering, which brings together all the important elements relating to a given territory, and synthesized thus in the “Observations” insert of the plan:

“The project that we propose for the construction of a port in the bay of Étapes consists of:

- 1) Two jetties “en fossinage” forming a new channel, of which one part is positioned so as to prolong the river and the other is positioned in such a manner as to take greatest advantage, in terms of the entrance and exit of ships, of the prevailing winds on the coast;
- 2) A large grounding basin formed of two dikes, which form the entrance of the current bay, and that shelters the interior from the winds travelling from north to west and from

1 French National Archives, AF/IV/1599, pl. 2/III, p. 171.

the violent swell; once complete, these works will aid the anchorage of the fleet; they will be able to enter and exit in all tides;

- 3) The space occupied by the large basin is currently deep enough to receive ships in still water, but as the surrounding ground is of quicksand, it would be necessary to dig towards the interior until reaching land that is sufficiently firm to be able to drop anchor there or affix mooring lines;
- 4) The channel would be protected from silting by a dock gate, which would also serve to hold back the water to fill a circular basin in which the ships would remain permanently afloat;
- 5) The river would be maintained by dikes positioned in the most advantageous manner;
- 6) To increase the volume of water in La Canche, it would be necessary to add to it the water from the Authie, a project which has already been proposed;
- 7) Since the dunes at the tip of Le Touquet have already been carried off by the winds into the cove of Camiers, we would install a plantation there [...];
- 8) Whilst we could have implemented the project proposed for the cove of Camiers, namely, a large basin, a port and a dock gate, in front of Étaples, we have preferred to implement it in the cove of Camiers since this cove is closer to the sea;
- 9) In terms of defence, the head of the jetties would be protected by two batteries, and we would build on the foreshore two forts to keep the enemy at bay, prevent bombardment, and favour the anchorage of the fleet in the mooring bay in good weather.”

Figure 6: Plan of the port to be built in the bay of Étapes (AF/IV/1599, d. 2/III, item 172)

