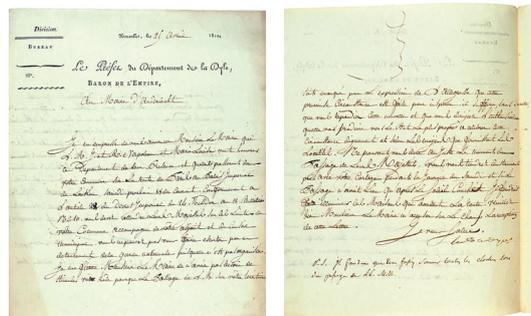

UNUSUAL OBJET N°1

**Letter from the prefect of the department of Dyle,
the Marquis de La Tour du Pin Gouvernet, to the mayor of
Anderlecht, Michel Van Soust, announcing Emperor Napoleon's
passage through Anderlecht to Brussels, 25 April 1810.**

The year 2021 is marked by the commemoration of the bicentennial of Emperor Napoleon I's death on the island of Saint Helena on 5 May 1821 at the age of 51. You thought you knew everything about this historic figure, but did you know that Napoleon came through Anderlecht? He came through – but did not stop – on his way to Brussels. That was in 1810. The municipal archives have an unprecedented, original document that proves this trivial, unknown, but historical fact. It is this summer's “unusual object”. Let's take a closer look...



An administrative document

This letter, which was written in French – the empire's official language – comes from the prefecture of Dyle, of which Brussels was the departmental seat. The style was rather emphatic, polite but peremptory. It is a good example of administrative correspondence during the First Empire. The translation of the text is as follows:

(recto)

Brussels, 25 April 1810.

The Prefect of Dyle,
BARON OF THE EMPIRE,
To the Mayor of Anderlecht

I hasten to inform you, Mayor, that Their Imperial and Royal Majesties Napoleon and Marie-Louise will be honouring this department with their presence and shall pass through your municipality on the road from Paris to the imperial palace of Laeken this coming Saturday, the 28th of the month. Pursuant to Article 22 of the Imperial Decree of 24 Messidor of the Year XII, Bulletin No 10, you must await Their Majesties at your city limits, flanked by your deputy and the Municipal Council. You cannot have a detachment of the national guard escort you as it is not organised. I flatter myself, Mister Mayor, in not needing to stimulate your zeal to have Their Majesties' passage through your territory

(verso)

marked by the expression of rejoicing that this precious circumstance cannot but inspire. It will doubtless suffice for you to spread this news and direct the enthusiasm that it will generate toward the most appropriate goal to celebrate this circumstance worthily and according to the means that the localities will provide. As I am unable to give you the exact time of Their Majesties' passage, you shall remain constantly at the ready, with your retinue, throughout the day on Saturday, and if the passage takes place only after the sun has set, the houses along the road will have to be illuminated.

I ask you, sir, to confirm receipt of this letter immediately as you get it.

Respectful greetings

(signature)

P(ost)S(criptum). You must have all the bells ring as Their Masjeties pass through.

Notice that the letter itself was written in one hand, doubtless that of a secretary, whereas the signature, which is illegible, and PS were written by the prefect himself.

The figures mentioned in the text

Four figures appear in the letter. Only Napoleon and Marie-Louise are mentioned by name. The two other figures, the author and the recipient, are indicated by their respective titles (prefect and mayor), without giving their names.

Napoleon (1769-1821) became emperor of France in 1804. In 1805 he also became king of Italy, which explains the double form of address "Imperial and Royal Majesty" used in the letter. After repudiating Josephine, who failed to give him an heir, Napoleon married the Archduchess Marie-Louise (1791-1847), daughter of the emperor of Austria, in April 1810. He decided to take his new wife to visit the departments of the North – the former Austrian Low Countries and future Belgium – scarcely four weeks after their wedding. It was Napoleon's fourth trip to "Belgium". He would take six in all – the last, fatal journey, ended at Waterloo – and this 1810 trip would be the longest, lasting from 29 April to 21 May. The emperor wanted first and foremost to show the new empress, Marie-Louise, to the people and take advantage of her aura to win over the "Belgians", many of whom were still nostalgic about the Austrian regime.

The prefect was the high civil servant representing the emperor at department level. The department of Dyle was created in 1795, along with the municipality of Anderlecht, when France annexed the Austrian Low Countries. The department would subsequently become Brabant Province. The position of prefect of Dyle was occupied from 1808 to 1813 by Frédéric-Séraphin, Marquis de La Tour du Pin Gouvernet (1759-1837). He is thus the one who signed the letter. Today he is known above all as the spouse of Lucie Dillon (1770-1853), the author of memoirs entitled *Journal d'une femme de cinquante ans (Diary of a Fifty-year-old Woman)*, in which the marchioness relates, amongst other things, this sojourn by Napoleon and Marie-Louise in Brussels. Their daughter, Marie, married Auguste de Liedekerke-Beaufort in Brussels in 1813. Many descendants of this couple live in Belgium today.

The mayor of Anderlecht at the time was Michel François Van Soust (1762-1825). This manufacturer of printed calico (cotton fabrics) was one of the first industrialists to set up shop in Anderlecht. He was mayor of the municipality from 1801 to 1812.

An imperial decree

The letter is interesting because of the details that it gives about the established protocol during the emperor's official travels. It refers to a decree that settles the matter. Its date of 24 Messidor of the Year XII in the Republican calendar corresponds to 13 July 1804 in the Gregorian calendar. The text of this decree (pp. 22-23) specifies the local authorities' obligations during imperial visits: "Section II – Civil Honours. 21. During the journeys that His Majesty takes, and which will be announced by his ministers, he shall be received in the following manner. 22. The Prefect shall come, accompanied by a detachment of the *gendarmerie* and the national guard of the canton, and receive him at the limits of the department. Each sub-prefect shall likewise come to receive him at the limits of his district. The mayors of the municipalities shall await him at their respective city limits. They will be accompanied by their deputies, the municipal council, and a detachment of the National Guard. 23. As the Emperor enters each municipality, all the bells shall ring. If there is a church along his route, the parish priest or priest in charge shall stand, in sacerdotal attire, at its door, along with his clergy."

Arriving in Brussels one day late...

In his message, the prefect expected the emperor and empress to pass through Anderlecht on Saturday, 28 April. Nevertheless, he took the precaution of writing that he did not know exactly when they would arrive. A wise precaution, for the imperial retinue finally reached Brussels late in the day on Sunday, 29 April, or one day late.

Leaving Cambrai that morning, Napoleon and Marie-Louise set off on the road to Brussels via Valenciennes and Mons. That means that the inhabitants of Anderlecht of the time were able to see the imperial carriage, drawn by eight horses, and the impressive escort of no fewer than 250 people who accompanied it, hurtling down Chaussée de Mons at full tilt. And we can suppose that the mayor was indeed at his post at the city line between Anderlecht and Sint-Pieters-Leeuw

The emperor, the empress, and their escort finally reached Brussels that Sunday, 29 April 1810, slightly after 7 in the evening. Their point of entry was Anderlecht Gate, which had been flanked by two pyramids. A tent had also been pitched at the gate. Under it stood Joseph d'Ursel (1777-1860), Mayor of Brussels, surrounded by his deputies and municipal council. After a harangue by the mayor and the emperor's response, neither of which could be heard above the crowd's noisy cheering, the Count d'Ursel handed Napoleon the keys to the city.

The imperial couple's carriage then set off again and crossed the city, which was decked with flags, toward Laeken Castle, where Napoleon and Marie-Louise would stay. The castle, which was built in the early 1780s for the governors of the Austrian Low Countries, Archduchess Maria-Christina of Austria and her husband, Albert of Saxony-Teschen, served as an official residence for Napoleon in Brussels, including during this visit.

Recommended reading (in French)

Gustave MAISON, Anne and Paul van YPERSELE de STRIHOU, *Napoléon en Belgique*, Brussels, 2002, éd. Racine, 296 pp., coll. *Les Racines de l'Histoire*

Marquise de LA TOUR du PIN, *Mémoires. Journal d'une femme de cinquante ans (1778-1815)*, Paris, 1979, éd. Mercure de France, 486 pp., coll. *Le Temps retrouvé*

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