Transcript:

These are business cards which were used by dragomans, tourist conductors and interpreters in Egypt and the Middle East in the late 19th and early 20th century, and a bit like business cards today these acted as a way of giving information about someone's contact details and their position, and they were used by dragomans to advertise for clients, and so very often had mentions of previous illustrious clients they had or specialities that they offered.

This one here, Elias Talhamy, was the dragoman for a number of quite famous figures within the history of Egyptology.  He worked for Amelia Edwards, and he is mentioned several times in her 1877 book A Thousand Miles Up the Nile, and he also worked for Henry Villiers Stuart, who was an Egyptologist and member of the Egypt Exploration Society, as well as a couple of quite prominent US politicians - one H.P. Baldwin, who was the ex-governor of Michigan, and another Whitelaw Reid, who subsequently went on to be a Vice-Presidential candidate and then was the US ambassador to the United Kingdom.

A lot of dragomans like Elias Talhamy were active in different areas in different seasons.  From May until November he worked in Beirut in Syria, and then December until April he was based at Shepheard's Hotel in Cairo, one of the most famous hotels in Cairo where European and American visitors would spend the winter season.

Most of these cards came into my possession though buying them online on auction sites or through finding them in secondhand bookshops, they're the kind of things that people who had travelled in the Middle East tended to bring back with them incidentally, as little souvenirs, or as things inside their guidebooks or phrasebooks.  Sometimes we get pictures of the dragoman concerned, this one of Esau Modbeck, the chief dragoman of the paddle-steamer Rameses worked for Thomas Cook in the 1880s, and as you can see in the photograph he's wearing medals, because he had served in the Royal Navy.  In the 1881 census we find him serving as interpreter on a Royal Navy vessel in the Red Sea, which was doing a survey of the East African Coast.  Modbeck was based in Cairo but he was born in Jerusalem and seems to have worked, like Talhamy, in Syria and Palestine.

Sometime we get more curious examples, like this one of Ibrahim Hassan Mohammed, who also goes by the name "Spud Murphy".  Although I don't have a date for this I think it's probably of the First or Second World War era, and it seems like the rather irreverent nick-name he's got was given to him by clients, perhaps soldiers that he'd worked with or people who had made him well enough known by this name that he wanted to advertise it on his cards along with his portrait. He was based in Alexandria, in Egypt, but as we can see he also worked as far as Upper Egypt and the Sudan, and he also did Holy Land tours and Camping in the Desert. So these three men all seem to have worked across quite large geographical distances, and cover a time period from the 1870s, right up into the early 20th century.