

Manifestations of the Exploitation of Material Heritage in Algeria during the French Colonial Era

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Abstract:

This study meticulously examines the multifaceted strategies employed by France during its colonial rule to exploit Algeria's material heritage. The primary objective was to reinforce its colonial regime and strategically attempt to efface the Arab-Islamic national identity of Algeria. By methodically excavating Roman ruins and strategically utilizing these findings, France endeavoured to substantiate its dominion over Algerian lands as a mere continuance of Roman civilization. This imperial tactic involved the systematic demolition of Islamic architectural heritage and institutions, supplanting them with European constructs, alongside the desecration of Islamic sanctuaries through archaeological excavations within mosques or their conversion into churches.

Moreover, the study delineates the integral roles played by both the military and the clergy in these archaeological exploits and missionary endeavours. Despite these concerted efforts, the study illustrates how these strategies ultimately faltered in completely erasing the Arab-Islamic identity of Algeria, showcasing the resilience with which Algeria preserved its cultural and national identity against all French attempts to obliterate it.

Keywords: Material Heritage, French Colonialism, Arab-Islamic Identity.

Introduction:

In a relentless pursuit to efface the distinct features of Algeria's national identity, French colonial authorities sought out various mechanisms that would enable them to assert their sovereignty over Algerian territory convincingly. Recognizing material evidence as a potent tool for this endeavour, the French construed it as irrefutable evidence supporting the notion that their presence in Algeria was a mere extension of an ancient Roman past.

However, this strategy prompts critical questions regarding its efficacy. Did this material evidence truly reinforce France's claims, or did it paradoxically become a testament to its

colonial failures, particularly given that Algerian cities have tenaciously preserved their Arab-Islamic character through the ages?

In crafting its colonial policy, France manipulated the Algerian material heritage, employing a dual strategy of destruction and construction. This approach entailed the demolition of Arab-Islamic elements and the erection of European-style urban developments. Yet, prior to executing this expansive scheme, it was deemed essential to foster a conducive atmosphere by deliberately overlooking the Islamic historical period of Algeria, thereby necessitating the excavation of Roman relics.

1. Excavation of the Roman Past:

Initiated in the early 1830s, the colonial administration embarked on an extensive exploration of Algeria's history, focusing on the excavation of its Roman ruins to find artifacts that aligned with its colonial agenda and could legitimize its military endeavors.

This strategic exploration was underscored in a pivotal 1833 letter from Marshal Soult to the Secretary-General of the Academy of Inscriptions and Letters, emphasizing the practical and administrative significance of these archaeological undertakings. Importantly, the colonial focus selectively excluded Islamic periods which did not align with the objectives of the occupation, thus posing challenges in accessing Roman sites. ⁽¹⁾

France did not conceal its political objectives behind the pursuit of Roman ruins, explicitly demonstrating its intent through the excavation and publicization of their religious and secular accomplishments. From 1830 to 1880, French military officers and leaders particularly oversaw these archaeological endeavors, incorporating discoveries from archaeological sites into military reports.

Notably, Governor-General Cavaignac, during his tenure from February to April 1848, fervently pursued archaeological excavations aimed at uncovering Roman ruins to substantiate France's dominion over Algeria. His well-documented stance in front of an ancient Roman cross symbolized France's resolve to perpetuate Roman governance. ⁽²⁾

Additionally, beyond mere excavations, France actively engaged in the restoration of several ancient Roman structures, exemplified by the renovation of a church constructed atop a Roman temple. This act was emblematic of France's ambition to reinvigorate the Roman past. Cavaignac's specific focus on a religious edifice further underscores the colonial intent to rejuvenate Christian heritage within the region, facilitating missionary campaigns designed to alter the Arab-Islamic fabric of Algerian society. ⁽³⁾

From the initial stages of occupation, France accorded high priority to proselytization, leveraging both military and ecclesiastical resources in archaeological projects that aimed to unearth ancient Christian churches and bishops' relics. ⁽⁴⁾ Cardinal Lavignerie was a prominent advocate for this archaeological research, asserting the necessity of France's continued presence as a continuation of the paths tread by Saint Augustine and other saints. ⁽⁵⁾

The colonial administration's policies extended beyond the search for Christian relics and the restoration of old churches to include violations of Islamic sanctuaries, either through archaeological excavations within mosques or their conversion into churches, often justified by manufactured myths. A notable instance of this policy was enacted at the Grand Mosque and the Hanafi Mosque. ⁽⁶⁾

In these cases, France posited that the Grand Mosque was constructed over a Christian temple, necessitating excavations to expose its supposed foundations. Meanwhile, the Hanafi Mosque was purportedly founded by a Christian slave's prophecy, which foretold that Christians would repurpose the mosque as a church upon conquering the city, thereby justifying frequent French visits to this site in anticipation of fulfilling this legend.

Despite persistent efforts to uncover Roman relics, French archaeologists frequently encountered Islamic artifacts that obstructed their access to the intended Roman sites. In response, they proffered interpretations that relegated the Islamic period to merely a colonial phase, asserting that Christianity was the original faith of Algeria, which Muslims endeavored to obliterate over centuries.

General Dumas notably claimed that delving beneath the 'Islamic crust' would unveil a 'Christian nectar,' thereby confirming the Christian legacy of the Berbers—a narrative strategically aligned with colonial goals, even at the expense of scientific accuracy. ⁽⁷⁾

Regardless, France managed to highlight Roman landmarks in Algeria through its military efforts and mythical interpretations, thus establishing the first pillar in its colonial plan. Once this phase was completed, it moved on to the next phase, which was the renewal of the construction of historical cities to eliminate what remained of the Arab-Islamic identity.

2. Renewal of Historical Urban Centers:

Upon the initiation of the French occupation, the urban landscapes of Algerian cities prominently displayed their Islamic heritage, a characteristic starkly at odds with the colonial agenda. Driven by a vision to reclaim and substantiate their ties to the land of their Roman predecessors, the colonizers embarked on deep terrestrial excavations to unearth evidence of a Roman past. This led to a confrontational stance with the existing Islamic urban planning and architecture, necessitating the obliteration of Islamic landmarks to pave the way for the development of modern European cities.

A. Erasing Islamic Landmarks:

The colonial regime aggressively targeted the architectural heritage of Islamic cities within Algeria, seeking to strip them of their cultural and civilizational identities. This approach garnered criticism even among some orientalist in Paris, which eventually compelled Emperor Napoleon III to issue a protective decree in 1865 during his visit to Algeria and Constantine.

Despite this decree aimed at preserving local architectural heritage, it barely impeded the French colonial policies that continued to ravage Algerian heritage, with the majority of Islamic landmarks already irreversibly damaged ⁽⁸⁾.

The major Algerian cities that had managed to retain their Islamic urban planning and architectural integrity became prime targets for the colonizers. Predominantly, mosques stood as symbols of the Arab-Islamic identity and were therefore earmarked for destruction to erode the Algerian cultural identity by supplanting Islam with Christianity.

The rationale for these demolitions often included claims of structural dilapidation or conflicts with new urban planning projects, which served as pretexts for converting these mosques into churches or museums, thus aligning them with the new colonial vision of the city. ⁽⁹⁾

However, not all demolitions were cloaked in ostensibly legitimate reasons. A poignant example is the Mosque of the Lady, one of Algiers' most exquisite mosques at the time, which was demolished in 1830 — a decision taken well in advance of any plans to construct the government square. This act was devoid of any urban planning justification, starkly revealing the true intentions of the colonizers to eradicate the Islamic identity from the urban fabric ⁽¹⁰⁾.

Even the method of demolishing the minaret of a mosque in 1832, after it withstood the occupier for two years, serves as a stark testament to France's resolute drive to obliterate every emblematic representation of the Islamic and Arab identity in Algeria. A detailed account from a witness vividly captures the relentless destruction: "The minaret collapsed as one piece, then it was shattered with hammers and axes.

As the process lengthened and the noise intensified, huge ropes were used to pull the minaret down, but the ropes snapped. Eventually, the base of the minaret was obliterated, and fire was set to bring it down as one piece." ⁽¹¹⁾

The onslaught extended beyond mosques to include zawiyas (Islamic religious schools), domes, and traditional schools, amounting to what can be depicted as a systematic vendetta against Islamic and Arab symbols in Algeria. ⁽¹²⁾ Abu al-Qasim Saadallah characterizes these acts vividly as "the revenge of the cross against the crescent."

Investigations into the religious institutions in the city of Algiers disclose the pre-occupation existence of a substantial number of these establishments ⁽¹³⁾, which faced demolition and confiscation post-occupation. Annaba, another poignant example, witnessed the loss of the vast majority of its mosques and schools. ⁽¹⁴⁾ In Tlemcen, the Agadir Mosque's minaret was spared complete destruction but lost its revenues, and several mosques were repurposed into museums. ⁽¹⁵⁾

These deliberate actions epitomize the French policy designed to strip away all Islamic and Arab elements from Algeria, ⁽¹⁶⁾ thereby endeavoring to replace the country's foundational identity with a European Christian culture and identity. ⁽¹⁷⁾

As for educational institutions, the city experienced a systematic demolition of its religious schools, such as the Tashfiniya School, razed in 1873 to make room for a central square, and the Ya'qubiya School, replaced by modern French edifices. This comprehensive obliteration of schools across Algeria underscores France's intent to reshape the cityscape in alignment with colonial standards and objectives, effectively erasing traces of Islamic education and culture. (18)

Conversely, the hesitation to demolish religious institutions in Tlemcen invites scrutiny, as the city, along with Constantine, was renowned for its rich array of religious establishments.

Some historical accounts suggest that the French might have adopted this more cautious approach to curry favor and support from the local populace against Emir Abdelkader, particularly after the city endured substantial destruction by French forces in 1837, complicating the accurate assessment of the number of religious institutions, despite estimates of eighteen mosques. (19)

The historical urban centers in Algeria were subjected to complete annihilation, as confirmed by the testimonies of the French themselves. In the nascent years of the occupation, a French parliament deputy lamented that Algeria, once brimming with beautiful gardens and vibrant marketplaces, had been reduced to mere ruins; even the aqueducts that irrigated the city were demolished.

These observations underscore the profound impact of the French occupation on the infrastructure and cultural and religious landmarks of Algeria, precipitating a radical transformation in the identity and fabric of the city. (20)

B. Reconfiguration of the City:

France reached the final stage of implementing its military strategy, and, building upon the outcomes of earlier phases, advanced its colonial agenda. The transformation of historical urban centers, stripped of their Islamic essence, paved the way for the inception of modern European urban projects.

This shift was starkly highlighted by Abu al-Qasim Saadallah, who, describing the city of Algiers between 1832 and 1833, cited an eyewitness account: "...the face of the city of Algiers had begun to transform from an Eastern character to a Western character." (21)

In this context, France viewed the metamorphosis of Algiers' general image as a reaffirmation of Western dominance over this Islamic stronghold, which spurred further urban planning initiatives that introduced architectural elements alien to the pre-colonial landscape.

Campbell, present in Algeria in 1832, documented the French celebrations of the "recovery of property," which saw the replacement of Eastern bazaars with European shops, French commercial warehouses, and the emergence of major hotels, restaurants, libraries, and even a circus—all mirroring a concerted effort to Westernize the city and overhaul its urban and cultural identity. (22)

The archaeological endeavors led by the French military also significantly hastened the urban reconfiguration. The insights garnered from these archaeological sites were leveraged to spearhead construction and urbanization projects, particularly in areas already equipped with the necessary infrastructure to support new population centers. This included the utilization of raw materials derived from the archaeological findings themselves. ⁽²³⁾

Moreover, this urban planning was imbued with a distinctly military character, reflecting the underlying military motives of the French colonial agenda. Reports often highlighted ancient military roads and strategic locations, emphasizing the military-driven nature of the occupation. The reconfiguration of urban spaces also bore a military imprint, with the colonial authorities erecting new architectural structures designed to accommodate military forces or enhance their mobility within cities, repurposing historical landmarks to align with their new utilitarian roles. ⁽²⁴⁾

These policies and practices underscore France's relentless pursuit to erase the Islamic and Arab identity of Algeria, aiming to supplant it with a Western cultural imprint and affirm its colonial dominion over the city and its inhabitants.

In Tlemcen, similar to other Islamic cities in Algeria, historical landmarks were co-opted by French authorities and transformed into essential military infrastructures. The Casbah, spanning five hectares, was no exception; it was extensively modified by French military engineering services into a vast barracks to accommodate army units and their equipment. ⁽²⁵⁾

One of the most significant alterations involved removing the wall that segregated the Casbah from the rest of the city's districts. This facilitated the introduction of broad streets within the Casbah, enhancing the mobility of military equipment and easing troop movements, which inevitably led to the demolition of many commercial shops and historical edifices. ⁽²⁶⁾

In 1842, the French authorities undertook significant expansions at Bab El-Meshwar, enhancing the outer fortifications by constructing a robust stone wall, particularly along the northern and western fronts. ⁽²⁷⁾ The city also experienced the demolition of numerous internal structures to accommodate the construction of a central command barracks, alongside the conversion of a local mosque into a church connected to the military hospital. ⁽²⁸⁾

The urban reconfiguration extended beyond merely augmenting military infrastructure; it also encompassed the broadening of streets, paths, walls, and gates to streamline military operations within the traditionally narrow alleyways of Islamic cities. This extensive overhaul was imperative to facilitate the transportation of military equipment and integrate military installations with major urban thoroughfares, resulting in a comprehensive, rather than merely partial, reconfiguration of the historic urban landscape.

In a relatively brief period, the city of Algiers underwent the demolition of hundreds of its residential buildings to clear space for the establishment of Government Square. The intricate architecture and confined streets necessitated extensive demolitions, affecting houses even those distanced from the planned square.

Duke Rovigo, the commanding officer of the occupying forces, unhesitatingly razed an Islamic cemetery to forge a roadway between Bouleh and Bab Azoun, showcasing a blatant disregard for Islamic cultural and religious values. ⁽²⁹⁾ This wave of demolition was not confined to cemeteries and residences alone; it also included the Mosque of the Lady and adjacent houses to clear a path to the Jardin Palace, previously the seat of Ottoman rule, which was repurposed as a military depot.

The overarching goal was to establish an expansive square in the city's core to facilitate troop assemblies in the event of civil unrest, underscoring the authoritarian nature of the colonial occupation. ⁽³⁰⁾

In Tlemcen, the colonial administration actively modified the city's defenses by creating breaches in the surrounding walls, introducing new gates, and expanding existing ones, thereby facilitating both military and administrative movements. This led to the partial or complete demolition of neighborhoods as deemed necessary for the urban reconfiguration. ⁽³¹⁾

Moreover, the Baradeen Market was converted into Camp Street, exemplifying the numerous thoroughfares opened by the occupiers within the Casbah to enhance both military and civilian circulation. These streets, including those linking the Grand Mosque to various city sectors, were instrumental in reinforcing the French strategy to reshape Algerian cities to suit military and administrative needs of the occupation. ⁽³²⁾

These urban transformations explicitly illustrate the colonial authorities' intent to alter the urban and cultural fabric of Algerian cities, systematically erasing their Islamic and Arab features to replace them with designs that serve colonial objectives and assert Western dominance. ⁽³³⁾

In Tlemcen, the transformation of Sidi Hamed Street exemplifies how colonial planners employed traditional Roman urban design principles to restructure the city's landscape. The street's orthogonal layout and its intersection with Camp Street emulate the *cardo* and *decumanus* system, a hallmark of Western urban planning dating back to the Roman era.

This grid system traversed the Casbah, intersected Suika Square at the city's northern edge near the entrance to Mansour Hotel, and extended southward to Bab El-Jiyad Street. This street linked Mechouar Castle with Bab El-Jiyad, both creations of French colonial engineering.

This strategic urban planning underscores France's readiness to co-opt local architectural heritage to further its military and political aims, reshaping the urban environment to align with its colonial interests. Despite these extensive efforts to transform urban characteristics and obliterate Islamic architectural elements, France failed to fully eradicate the Arab-Islamic identity of Algeria. This shortfall underscores the enduring cultural and identity resistance within Algeria, which persisted despite vigorous colonial endeavors to obliterate it.

Conclusion:

In summary, this study, which delves into the exploitation of material heritage during the French colonial period in Algeria, reveals that colonial strategies extended beyond mere military and administrative dominance. They also included concerted efforts to redefine the cultural and urban identity of Algeria.

Through the excavation of Roman ruins and the systematic reengineering of cities and Islamic landmarks, France aimed to impose its colonial vision and assert its cultural and civilizational supremacy.

Despite these intensive French initiatives, historical evidence attests that the Algerian spirit and its Arab-Islamic identity have endured these colonial policies, maintaining its civilizational depth and cultural richness. This resilience not only exemplifies the failure of colonial efforts to obliterate the Algerian identity but also highlights the Algerian people's strength and resolve in safeguarding their heritage and culture.

This affirms that identity transcends mere physical alterations and reconfigurations of urban spaces; it is deeply ingrained in the consciousness and collective memory of the people.

Footnotes:

1. Khadija Mansouri, "Archaeological Research in Algeria During the Occupation," *Athar Journal*, Issue 05, 1999, Institute of Archaeology, University of Algiers, p. 30.
2. Ibid, pp. 27, 28.
3. Mustafa Al-Achraf, *Algeria: Nation and Society*, translated by Hanafi Ben Issa, Dar Al-Qasbah for Publishing, Algiers, 2007, pp. 283, 284.
4. Ibid, p. 284.
5. Khadija Mansouri, op.cit, p. 31.
6. Abou El kassim Saad Allah, *The Algerian National Movement*, Vol. 1, 1st ed., Dar Al-Gharb Al-Islami, Beirut, Lebanon, 1992, p. 80.
7. Ghali Gharbi et al., *The French Aggression on Algeria – Backgrounds and Dimensions*, Publications of the National Center for Research on the National Movement and the November 1st Revolution, Dar Houma, Algiers, pp. 275-276.
8. Rezki Cherki, *Historical Landmarks and Archaeological Sites in the City of Tlemcen in the Lenses of 19th Century Photographers*, Ibn Khaldoun Publishing, Tlemcen, pp. 34, 35.
9. Hussein Moenes, *Mosques*, World of Knowledge for Publishing and Distribution, Kuwait, 1981, p. 206.

10. Abou El kassim Saad Allah, op.cit, p. 83.
11. Ibid, p. 86.
12. Ibid, p. 90.
13. Abou El kassim Saad Allah, op.cit, p. 67.
14. Mohammad ben Ismaili, *Immortal Sheikhs and Scholars*, 1st ed., 2014, p. 23.
15. Ibid, pp. 23, 24.
16. Rezki Cherki, op.cit, p. 22.
17. Mohammad ben Ismaili, op.cit, p. 24.
18. Rezki Cherki, op.cit, pp. 31, 32, 33.
19. Abou El kassim Saad Allah, op.cit, pp. 87, 88.
20. Ibid, pp. 78, 79.
21. Ibid, p. 71.
22. Ibid, p. 71.
23. Khadija Mansouri, op.cit, p. 31.
24. Ibid, p. 31.
25. *The Casbah*: A type of commercial building in Islamic architecture, predominantly a commercial market consisting of several architectural elements centered around a rectangular courtyard where goods are unloaded, featuring a small mosque, with storage units around the sides. See: Asim Muhammad Rizq, *Dictionary of Islamic Architecture and Arts Terms*, 1st ed., Madbouli Library, 2000, pp. 245-246.
26. Rezki Cherki, op.cit, pp. 35, 37, 79.
27. *The Tabiya*: A construction technique used in building walls, similar to brick in its composition of raw materials, using a mold placed on the wall, producing concrete in the form of solid artificial stone. See: Al-Amin Omar, *Building Materials and Techniques in the Middle Maghreb during the 4th-6th Centuries AH/10th-12th Centuries AD during the Zirid and Hammadid periods (Achir, Bani Hammad Castle, Bejaia)*, Master's in Islamic Archaeology, Department of Archaeology, University of Algiers Capital, pp. 42, 43.
28. Rezki Cherki, op.cit, p. 75.
29. Abou El kassim Saad Allah, op.cit, pp. 70, 86.
30. Ibid, p. 83.

31. Rezki Cherki, op.cit, p. 37.
32. *Tagrart*: An Amazigh word meaning the location of the camp, named so after Yusuf bin Tashfin camped there during his siege of the city, later making it the nucleus of his military and political city. See: Razki Sharqi, op.cit, pp. 24, 25.
33. Ibid, pp. 80, 81.
34. Ibid, p. 81.