

An Evaluative Study of Restoration Works on a Historical Landmark: Okba Bin Nafi' Mosque in Biskra Province

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Abstract:

Sidi Okba Mosque in Biskra stands as a remarkable landmark, embodying both religious and historical significance. It is a testament to the Islamic conquests of the region and is considered one of the oldest mosques in the Maghreb.

This remarkable structure underwent restoration work in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. However, these efforts were not without their flaws. The use of materials that lacked the same characteristics as the original ones led to alterations in the mosque's appearance and obscured its historical authenticity, both in terms of architectural style and construction materials.

Keywords: Mosque, Okba Ibn Nafi, Biskra, Restoration, Architectural Style, Construction Materials

Introduction:

Historical buildings in our contemporary history are not merely relics of bygone eras or extinct civilizations; they carry artistic, aesthetic, historical, and civilizational values. Therefore, it is our duty to preserve and restore them. The goal of archaeological restoration is to reveal the aesthetic, artistic, and historical values of these monuments, as well as to serve as a testament to the efforts of our ancestors in a time when values such as mastery, craftsmanship, and beauty are lacking.

The rapid development and progress witnessed by the world has been accompanied by a development in the preservation of human and civilizational heritage, and the development of materials used in dealing with this heritage necessitates the development of the global concept of restoration, maintenance, and preservation of this heritage.

The field of antiquities maintenance and restoration relies not only on manual skills and artistic expertise but also on scientific technologies that reveal

what lies beneath the surface of an artifact in order to enable its proper maintenance and restoration.

This field also draws upon engineering, architectural, applied, and artistic studies. The development of the field of antiquities maintenance and restoration requires us to keep abreast of new methods and apply the best practices to preserve this enduring heritage. It also demands a diverse range of abilities, including the capacity for continuous scientific research, as the field of maintenance and restoration is constantly evolving. Additionally, the ability to implement the findings of ongoing research and studies is crucial.

Restoration work requires teamwork, as it is carried out by a collaborative team of restorers, artisans, archaeologists, photographers, and painters. No single group can work in isolation from the others.

Humans have long recognized the importance of preserving ancient artifacts. This interest in the relics of our ancestors, the desire to own and preserve them, to immortalize the memory of their creators, and to enjoy their beauty, is deeply rooted in human nature. The care taken by later generations of these relics has not been limited to movable artifacts, but has also extended to ancient buildings of all types, including religious, civil, and military structures. Religious buildings have received the greatest share of maintenance and restoration efforts, and as a result, most of the surviving ancient architectural remains are religious in nature, including mosques, churches, schools, and shrines, in contrast to castles, forts, gates, and baths.

the most important of these landmarks is Sidi Okba Mosque, which is considered as one of the oldest mosques in the Islamic Maghreb. This mosque has undergone maintenance and restoration work for many years. However, one must ask: were these restorations carried out thoughtfully and in accordance with the principles of conservation and restoration, or were they haphazard and unplanned?

The Founding of the Mosque of Uqba ibn Nafi

At a distance of 18 km southeast of the city of Biskra, and 8 km south of Tehouda, where the battle took place near its village, a mosque and a city were built on the side of the tomb of Uqba ibn Nafi'. These are still known today as the city and mosque of Sidi Uqba, (المراكشي، 1980 ، صفحة 19)

As for its foundation, archaeological sources do not give us a clear idea of the date of its establishment, as no date was engraved on the tombstone, except for a writing on a stone in Kufic script, which reads: "This is the tomb of Uqba ibn Nafi', may God have mercy on him."

It is believed that this inscription dates back to the 5th century AH (11th century AD), in comparison to a Kufic inscription dating back to this period in Kairouan, Tunisia. It is also mentioned that it was found with the remains of the

body inside the tomb when it was discovered. It is believed that this mosque was founded in the period between the suppression of the Ridda and the Kingdom of the Kahina in 82 AH (701 AD) and the return of the Islamic conquest to Africa, and between the end of the rule of the Aghlabid dynasty in Africa in 140 AH (758 AD). (شهيبي، 1984، صفحة 20)

In general, Sidi Uqba Mosque is considered the oldest mosque in Morocco after the Kairouan Mosque. It was first established as a shrine on the site where the conqueror and companion Uqba ibn Nafi' was martyred. (شهيبي، 1984، صفحة 18)

Who was Uqba ibn Nafi' ?

Uqba ibn Nafi al-Fihri al-Qurashi (621-683 CE) was a companion of the Prophet Muhammad and a prominent military commander who played a pivotal role in the Islamic conquest of North Africa. Born in Mecca, he embraced Islam at a young age and participated in the conquest of Egypt under the leadership of Amr ibn al-As. His exceptional leadership skills and strategic acumen soon earned him recognition, and he was appointed governor of Ifriqiya (present-day Tunisia) by Caliph Muawiyah I in 647 CE (البلاذري، صفحة 226)

Uqba ibn Nafi's tenure as governor of Ifriqiya marked a turning point in the Islamic conquest of the region. He established the city of Kairouan as his base of operations and launched a series of expeditions that extended Muslim rule westward across North Africa. His most ambitious undertaking was the construction of a fortified camp on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, known as "Qasr al-Kabir" (the Great Fortress). This strategic outpost served as a springboard for further expeditions into the unknown territories of West Africa.

Uqba ibn Nafi's legacy extends beyond his military achievements. He was a devout Muslim and a revered leader who instilled values of piety, discipline, and justice among his troops. His contributions to the spread of Islam in North Africa were immense, and he is remembered as one of the most influential figures in the region's Islamic history.

Uqba ibn Nafi's life came to an end in 683 CE during the Battle of Tahuda against the Berber forces of Kusaila. Despite his untimely demise, his legacy lived on, and his successors continued to push westward, eventually reaching the Iberian Peninsula and laying the foundations for the flourishing of Islamic civilization in Spain.

Maintenance and Restoration: General Concepts

-Maintenance: Maintenance refers to all actions aimed at extending the lifespan of a monument by preventing or mitigating damage.

-Restoration: Restoration involves all interventions undertaken to improve the appearance of a monument by removing any additions and returning it to its original state, (معاذ وآخرون، 1991)

Mosque Renovations: A Historical Overview

The mosque has undergone numerous renovations and restorations throughout its history, initially undertaken by the local community and continued over time as documented by the mosque's imam, Al-Zubairi.

Early Renovations

The earliest recorded renovation dates back to the 4th century AH/10th century CE, during the reign of Fatimid Caliph Ismail al-Mansur (r. 334-341 AH/945-952 CE). According to historical accounts, Caliph al-Mansur embarked on a military expedition to fight Abu Yazid al-Khariji who was rebelling against the Ubaid State. He got him out of Africa and followed his trail which brought him to the region of Biskra, where the mosque is located but he fled from him. It is believed that the mosque may have undergone repairs during this period.

Aghlabid and Zirid Era Renovations

During the rule of the Aghlabids, who controlled the Zab region, the mosque likely received further additions. Subsequently, under the Zirid emir al-Mu'izz ibn Badis (r. 406-454 AH/1062-1106 CE), the mosque underwent significant renovations and restorations. An inscription was added to the mosque, stating "This is the tomb of Uqba ibn Nafi al-Fihri," and a commemorative door, crafted and adorned in the city of Tabna and now known as Bab Tabna, was installed, (ابن خلدون، 2003، صفحة 217)

11th Century Renovations

Historians and archaeologists, including Golvin (Golvin, pp. 86-90), Bourouiba (Bourouiba, 1981, p. 57), and Marçais (Marçais, 1955, pp. 70,71), have documented further renovations that took place during the first half of the 11th century. Marçais notes, "In the first half of the 11th century, Sidi Okba Mosque received the ornamentation whose remains we admire today" (Marçais, *mélange d'archéologie et d'histoire*, 1970, p. 156).

George Marci emphasizes the restoration work that the mosque has undergone by saying, "There is another document that also allows us to determine the date (i.e., the date of restoration), which is the Kufic inscription carved on the stone, which is now inlaid in one of the corners of the shrine... It does not have a date, but the shape of the letters gives us useful information and almost all the letters that make it up. It has what resembles it in the Tunisian calligraphy found in the cemeteries of Kairouan, which dates back to the 11th century AD. (Marçais, *mélange d'archéologie et d'histoire*, 1970)"

Bourouiba mentions that the mosque was restored by Al-Mu'izz bin Badis al-Zirid when he attacked the Ziban region between 429 AH/1037 AD, who stayed in the area for two years under these circumstances, the mosque would have been repaired and equipped (بورويبة، 1979، p. 229).

The mosque also witnessed restoration and repair work during the Ottoman era, and there is much evidence of this, as evidenced by the inscriptions in the mosque dating back to 1800 AD according to his reading of Dr. Sher's word on the inscription carved on the mihrab.

Restoration work was carried out in the Ottoman era due to the existence of an inscription engraved on the mihrab of the mosque indicating that it was built by a man named Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Tunisi in 1214 AH, and restorations were carried out in the mosque at the level of the minaret in 1160 AH and the prayer room was expanded from the Qibla side where two tiles were added to it, and the mihrab was built in 1214 AH and the shrine was renewed in 1215 AH.

Restoration work did not stop during the French occupation, but rather continued, especially in 1332 AH 1913 AD, two tiles were added to the prayer room from the back, to continue after independence by rebuilding the ablution house and the entrance to the mosque and restoring the prayer room. Restoration work is still going on, (شهبوي، 1984، صفحة 24، 25).

According to Imam Zubairi, Abdelmajid Haba, and Zohair Al Zahri, all prominent figures in the region, the local residents carried out restoration work on the mosque in accordance with the area's characteristics and traditional construction methods. These methods relied on readily available materials such as mudbrick, straw, palm trunks, and gypsum.

Due to the mosque's location in a low-lying area at the confluence of several wadis (dry riverbeds), including Wadi Al Arab, Wadi Al Abyad, and Wadi Muzeire'ah, which all converge into Chott Melghig, the area is prone to flooding and natural disasters. Consequently, the local inhabitants have always been quick to repair and renovate the mosque whenever the opportunity arose, such as after the region-wide floods of 1969 that followed Algeria's independence.

These numerous restorations and repairs have made it difficult to pinpoint the mosque's exact date of construction, despite attempts by some to do so.

However, the recent restoration work carried out on the mosque in 1997, as part of efforts to preserve it as a historical and archaeological landmark, revealed the original materials used in its construction, including the columns and capitals. These turned out to be Byzantine stone columns, believed to be remnants of the ancient city of Tehuda, which was destroyed after the shrine became a major attraction for settlers. (كريم، 2009، صفحة 42).

Restoration Errors: A Threat to Historical Buildings

One of the dangers that threaten historical buildings is the occurrence of errors by inexperienced restorers during the restoration process. These poorly studied restoration works can lead to either the obscuration of some of the building's features or the alteration of its elements. This can be done by

removing originally existing parts, introducing new parts and elements, or disfiguring its distinctive styles and characteristics (قادوس، 2003، صفحة 248). This is what we noticed in Sidi Okba Mosque, where essential elements of the mosque were hidden. For example, the researcher will not be able to identify the roofing methods except by referring to the original files of the mosque, as the restoration work led to the concealment of the roofing elements and techniques, or rather "construction techniques and materials" because the entire mosque was subjected to covering all its parts and elements with the use of gypsum, cement, and ceramics.

What is the purpose of using gypsum? Is it for decoration and to add an aesthetic touch, or for maintenance?

If the purpose of using it is to give the mosque an aesthetic appearance, the authenticity of the roofing materials and their method of installation express the aesthetic and artistic value of the building. In addition to this, this process will lead, as we have already mentioned, to the obscuration of the roofing elements, as it will not allow us to have a complete view of the causes of the resulting damage, especially from the spread of insects such as termites, which are considered one of the main factors in causing damage to the building, as they are considered one of the most dangerous insects that attack archaeological sites, as they feed on crushed straw and dig tunnels. Termites can also destroy wood, as they have the ability to secrete an enzyme that helps decompose cellulose, which is the main component of wood, and damage the binding material between the fibers "lignin", which leads to the destruction of wood. (توراكا، 2003، صفحة 97)

If the maintenance and restoration process has obscured structural elements and materials, we will not be able to diagnose the causes of the damage and therefore we will find it very difficult to determine the appropriate treatment method.

We have also noticed the use of cement mortar and ceramics in the restoration operations, although the binding material in the stones is clay. This leads to the penetration of salts from the cement material into the wall surfaces, which then crystallize in different places. The crystallization of salts and the associated local stresses cause the disintegration of the wall surfaces. In addition, the use of cement isolates the ventilation of the inner mortar of the wall, which leads to the retention of moisture inside it, causing an internal pressure problem between the mortar particles and consequently their explosion through cracks in the walls. (قادوس، 2003، p. 248)

In addition to these drawbacks, the use of cement in the construction of some parts of the building has caused it to lose some of its distinctive architectural and historical features. This is because it is observed that the restoration process was carried out by a builder and not by a specialized restorer.

In addition to the complete covering of the internal and external walls with gypsum, one of the damages is the complete concealment of the building's original materials and evidence, making it difficult to retrieve them. One of the principles of restoration is the ease of removing the restoration material without damaging the elements of the historic building, when it is desired to modify the method and method of maintenance and restoration.

However, it is noted that the process of retrieving the restored materials of cement and gypsum will lead to the damage of some of the original building materials.

This restoration method will have other negative consequences, namely the risk of increasing the loads and weights on the building, which is known as the mechanical bearing capacity. The increase in cement, gypsum and ceramics will reduce the load-bearing capacity of the foundations and even the walls. This is because in the construction method, we always start with the largest and heaviest stones, followed by the lighter ones in order to reduce the load and pressure on the foundation, wall and columns. This will lead to an increase in the loads on the soil under the foundations, increasing the pressure on them, which is represented by the vertical thrust force, which leads to subsidence and compression of the soil, accompanied by the emergence of groundwater, which in turn flows to places with less load and compression. (عطية، 2003 ، الصفحات (255-238

Regardless of the differing viewpoints on how to maintain and restore historical and heritage buildings, restoration processes are not merely operations to repair damaged architectural elements. Rather, they are operations of a special nature with their own origins and traditions, and must be carried out on the basis of extensive experience and complete knowledge of the nature and characteristics of the different types of historical buildings. Otherwise, restoration operations will lose their purpose, and how many rare artifacts and important historical elements have been lost due to improper restoration.

Based on this, restoration operations must be adapted and diversified according to the type and characteristics of the case to be restored in terms of its material, shape, appearance and artistic features. This is because the historical or heritage building is not a mere physical entity devoid of intellectual, artistic and civilizational content. Thus, the results of scientific research in this field must be linked to implementation aspects and be a means of developing new materials and methods for maintenance and restoration.

Therefore, restoration and maintenance works must be carried out within the framework of the following rules:

1. Identify the materials used in the construction of the historical building to be maintained and restored.

2. Identify the prevailing damage factors as a starting point for studying their effects and how to avoid their dangers.
3. Identify the type of damage and study the conditions in which the historical building was found or affected by it.
4. Study the methods used in maintenance and restoration to exclude the damaged ones and stop working on them.
5. Develop and recommend the use of more resistant materials to damage factors in maintenance and restoration operations.
6. Specify the specifications of the materials to be used in maintenance and restoration operations and develop appropriate methods.
7. Study and examine the commercial products used in maintenance and restoration to determine their suitability for the materials used in the construction of the building.

In any case, there are general principles that govern the maintenance and restoration of historical buildings that must be kept in mind by those working in this field and are summarized as follows:

1. Do not carry out maintenance and restoration work that results in erasing, changing, distorting or obscuring the physical and moral characteristics of the historical building in terms of shape, appearance, features and architectural and artistic characteristics.
2. Do not carry out maintenance and restoration work that may weaken or damage the materials used in the construction of the historical building.
3. Do not overdo the restoration work and only do what is necessary to ensure the survival of the historical building.
4. Carry out restoration work in a manner and method that facilitates the differentiation between the restored and non-restored parts of the historical building.
5. Maintenance and restoration materials must be used that can be easily removed without damaging the elements of the historical building, when it is desired to modify the method and method of maintenance and restoration.
6. Do not start maintenance and restoration operations until after a thorough study and sufficient knowledge of the properties and effects of the materials that will be used in the maintenance and restoration on the materials used in the construction of the historical building.
7. Maintenance and restoration work on important historical buildings must be carried out with the participation of the person responsible for them and the specialist in their scientific material.
8. It is necessary to constantly monitor and inspect historical buildings so that maintenance and restoration work can be carried out in a timely manner.

9. Since the objectives of all maintenance and restoration operations are to preserve historical buildings, it will be necessary to choose maintenance and restoration materials that ensure this continuity and do not interact chemically with the materials used in the construction of the historical building in a way that leads to damage to it.
10. Misuse is one of the most destructive causes of historical buildings, so it is necessary to prevent walking on them, touching them with hands, or defacing them by writing on the walls, and taking into account the damage that may result from electricity, water and sanitation connections. (بوٲو باخة ديل، 2002، الصفحات 58-67).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is worth noting that respecting the privacy of buildings requires the restoration team to deal intelligently with its data and be able to make decisive and sound decisions. This is because the restoration of historical buildings represents the guarantee of the continuity of a historical message from the past to the present and future. The success of the restoration process is the success of delivering this message, and the mistakes of the restorers will place future restorers in front of a double responsibility to correct the mistakes of their predecessors and restore the content of the archaeological landmarks.

Annexes



Photo01: the original roofing method.the work of the researche

Photo 02:Under the ceiling with plaster.The work of the researcher



Photo 03 :Restoration with ciment and ceramic mosaics.The work of the researcher.

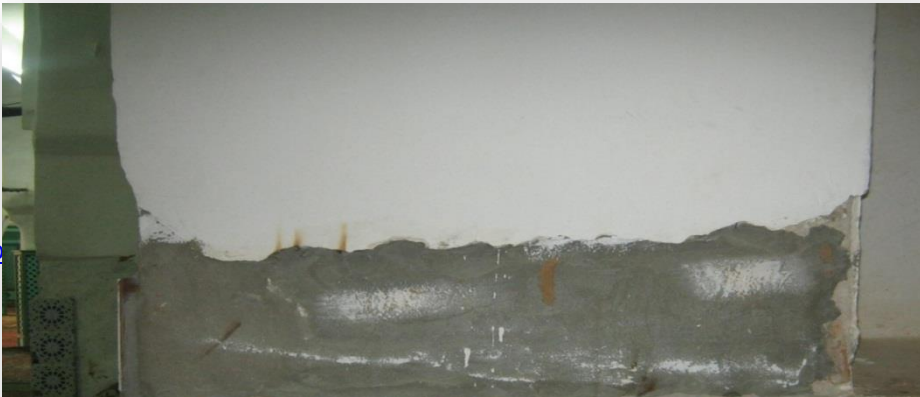


Photo 04 :The original roofing and additions under the ceiling with gypsum.The work of the researcher.



Photo 05 : Decorating with plaster on the walls.The work of the researcher.

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