

**The Marginalization of Central Maghreb Capitals in
Stéphane Gsell's "*Atlas Archéologique de L'Algérie*":
A Critical reassessment of French colonial Archaeological Selectivity**

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ABSTRACT:

Archaeological heritage constitutes an invaluable material record of past societies, providing empirical evidence of their historical and cultural development. During the colonial period, such evidence was frequently mobilized by colonial powers to legitimize territorial expansion and ideological claims. In the absence of early indigenous scholarly institutions, nineteenth-century Algeria became a major field for French archaeological investigations, where scientific practices were often shaped by the ideological framework of the mission civilisatrice.

This article critically interrogates the "archaeological selectivity", within the French colonial scholarly, focusing on the representation of the medieval capitals of the Central Maghreb in Stéphane Gsell's *Atlas archéologique de L'Algérie*. It explores the institutional structures established for the inventory and study of Algerian cultural heritage, highlights the marginalization of Amazigh and Islamic historical layers in favor of Classical Roman remains, and analyzes the epistemological biases and methodological limitations inherited from this colonial archaeological corpus.

Keywords: Stéphane Gsell; Central Maghreb capitals; Archaeological selectivity; Algerian cultural heritage.

Introduction

The issue of colonial ideology in the study of Algerian heritage first drew our attention through our engagement with the collective work: **Histoire et Historiens de l'Algérie (1830–1930)**, -History and Historians of Algeria (1830–1930)-, published as part of the commemorative publications marking the centenary of the French colonial presence in Algeria. This work revealed a fundamental reality: from the earliest stages of their presence in Algeria, scholars and researchers associated with the French colonial school sought to undertake a comprehensive exploration of the historical foundations and cultural resources of Algerian society, in order to acquire the knowledge necessary for consolidating colonial domination. Throughout history, conquest has generally relied on two interconnected instruments: military power scholarly inquiry, both serving strategic objectives by expanding influence and facilitating cultural penetration. In Algeria, this process required the mobilization of various academic disciplines, particularly anthropology and archaeology, which were

employed to investigate multiple dimensions of Algerian society, including population, customs and traditions, material heritage, oral traditions, and languages.

These studies were not produced within a neutral intellectual framework; rather, they were often shaped by colonial orientations and ideological objectives aimed at legitimizing French presence. While some researchers emphasized other historical layers, particularly those associated with Amazigh and Islamic civilizations. This selective approach contributed to a fragmented representation of Algerian history by privileging certain periods over others.

Despite these ideological constraints, several French and foreign scholars with Orientalist backgrounds attempted to acknowledge the contribution of the Central Maghreb to broader Islamic civilization and to preserve aspects of its historical legacy. Although their works contained methodological limitations, contradictions, and inaccuracies, they nonetheless provide an important starting point for examining the archaeological and historiographical processes through which the medieval capitals of the Central Maghreb were represented, overlooked, or marginalized.

This article therefore examines the archaeological selectivity adopted by the French colonial school, particularly through Stéphane Gsell's *Atlas archéologique de L'Algérie*, focusing on the marginalization of medieval Central Maghreb capitals and the prioritization of Roman and Byzantine remains within colonial archaeological discourse?

1: The French Colonial Approach to the Study of Algerian Cultural Heritage

The activities of informants and covert agents operating under various disguises within the borders of Islamic states and Christian kingdoms increased as a result of the prevailing climate of hostility and religious-political antagonism. Their aim was to obtain documents, sources, and information capable of revealing state policies, thereby enabling the formulation of plans for penetration and conquest.

This environment of tension and confrontation continued until the beginning of the sixteenth century. Following the fall of Granada, the last Muslim stronghold in al-Andalus, in 1492, and the conclusion of the Christian Reconquista, a systematic campaign of persecution was carried out under the authority of the Inquisition, targeting remaining Muslim and Jewish communities through policies of forced conversion, expulsion, and religious repression.

Meanwhile, the coasts of the Central Maghreb (Algeria) and the rest of the southern Mediterranean littoral began to fall under the cannon fire of Spanish ships and alliances formed under papal sponsorship for more than three centuries, within the framework of a vast expansionist project sanctioned by the Christian Church and pursued by every possible means.

As a result of all these persecutions, the local population was ultimately compelled to seek the assistance of the brothers Aruj and the Sultan of the Sublime Porte, who shaped a historical period that extended over more than three centuries. Yet Christian expansionist projects did not abandon their aspirations ; they eventually succeeded after political changes weakened the Ottoman state in the southern Mediterranean basin, with Algeria at its center, beginning in 1830.

They sought to benefit from Algeria's strategic position, not to mention their insistence on obtaining historical evidence that would confirm their supposed right to the legacy of their ancestors. Shortly after establishing a military presence in Algerian territory, Governor-General Marshal Bugeaud addressed Marshal Soult, then Minister of War, sending him a detailed report on the Tell region and the Algerian Sahara, in which he stated that control over these areas would open vast

prospects for the prosperity of French trade and its connection with Africa. The Minister of War, in turn, sent a report to King Louis-Philippe, the content of which emphasized the necessity of occupying these areas without delay.

Stéphane Gsell, in the preface to the collective volume that brought together leading representatives of the French colonial historical school—including Yver, Esquer, the Marçais brothers, Braussaud, Bel, Albertini, Braudel, and Leblanc—summarized the objectives assigned to historical research during the centenary commemorations of French rule in Algeria. According to Gsell, the military campaign against Algiers and the subsequent conquest of Algerian territory had imposed new responsibilities upon historians, whose work was expected to contribute to a better understanding and administration of the colony.

The publications produced within the centenary framework were organized into several thematic categories :

- I. Political, administrative, and financial institutions of Algeria – indigenous policy.
- II. Scientific inventory and valorization of the land.
- III. Geographical studies.
- IV. Archaeological and historical studies.
- V. Intellectual and artistic life – public education.
- VI. Archaeology and history.

This statement reflects the close relationship established by colonial scholars between historical research and colonial governance. The study and interpretation of Algerian history were therefore not conducted in an entirely detached academic environment but were integrated into a broader framework of political, administrative, and ideological objectives. (Alazard, Albertini et Autres, 1930, p. 01).

The actions of the French colonial administration, from the first landing of General de Bourmont's forces at Sidi Fredj in 1830 onward, contributed to the marginalization of major Algerian heritage sites representing different historical periods, from prehistory to the ancient and medieval eras. This process involved selective preservation, reinterpretation, and, in some cases, the transformation of monuments and historical spaces in accordance with colonial objectives.

The colonial authorities also sought to reshape cultural and historical perceptions by promoting interpretations that privileged certain elements of Algeria's past while reducing the significance of others, particularly those associated with local and Islamic history. Since these historical layers were closely connected to Algerian social identity, they represented a central dimension of the colonial struggle over memory and cultural legitimacy.

This is what led French interest in history, from the moment it set foot on Algerian soil, to focus on erasing historical periods that did not serve its colonial project in Algeria, including the Islamic eras, which Gautier—one of their most prominent historians—considered dark ages. Indeed, the author of that work claimed that the period of Muslim rule in North Africa represented centuries of civilizational backwardness and intellectual closure. In truth, his book clearly revealed an overt hostility toward Islam, which was not new within the French school. They had long worked on a project of “Christianizing” the peoples they occupied, in alliance with the “Pope,” as part of their project to spread what they considered the teachings of the Bible, which, as Muslims know, had been

altered and its texts reshaped according to their own ideological preferences (Alazard, Albertini et Autres, 1930, p. 02).



Centenary of Algeria (1930) Exhibition
President Doumergue accompanied by foreign delegations

French historical and archaeological studies may be considered an advanced defensive post protecting the colonial presence and an inseparable component of it. This conclusion becomes immediately apparent when reading French scholarly works, which give the impression that their authors were committed to serving their country in the present and ensuring the future continuity and permanence of the colonial presence in Algeria.

To achieve this objective, they presented a series of arguments that ultimately converged on a single premise : that the local population was incapable of producing or embracing what represented history and civilization. They relied on the supposedly nomadic character and limited civilization of the Berbers and Arabs, portraying them as distant from civilization and refinement, while attributing civilizational merit to their Latin ancestors—the Romans and Byzantines—as the true bearers of progress in North Africa.

foreign occupations: the French replaced the Turks, the Turks had replaced the Arabs, and the Arabs had replaced the Byzantines. He also insisted that conquerors, regardless of their identity, remained the masters of the Maghreb until new conquerors expelled them, and that the local population had never succeeded in removing the ruling invaders.

They were firmly convinced that the inhabitants had played no role in civilization and that this territory had remained outside history, serving merely as a witness to successive foreign dominations. In their view, the people had made no effort and had offered no resistance worthy of mention in the historical record, which, according to them, did not belong to them. This reveals a deep-seated hostility and an attempt to erase the country's identity by imposing an exclusionary worldview aimed at consolidating cultural domination. (GAUTIER, 1927, p. 16).

French archaeological studies targeted two main objectives :

A : They attempted to portray the Islamic period as an era of disorder, chaos, and the decline of the Roman-Byzantine civilizational legacy in North Africa and even in the Levant, describing it as a dark

age, as reflected in the title of Gautier's book. They claimed that Islam had severed the connection with civilization by being imposed through the force of the sword. They also sought to diminish Muslim achievements, intensifying their attacks during the arrival of the Hilalian migrations, which they compared to destructive locusts.

Thus, they regarded the Hilalians as the cause of the collapse of civilization and the spread of Bedouin life. It was, in their view, unfortunate that the region had fallen into the hands of these people, whom they also described as locust armies that consumed everything green and dry. This is how they represented the Islamic period in Algerian history.

B: extent of denying Algerian identity. This included their persistent campaign against the Arabic language and their attempt to replace it with French in order to facilitate the reading of their works and the internalization of their ideas within a systematic colonial project. As some officials declared on the eve of the centenary celebrations of the occupation, the era of the Hilal in Algeria had ended, the era of the Cross had begun, and it would last forever. They also stated that their celebration was not of the centenary of the occupation of Algeria, but rather of the funeral of Islam.

Archaeological research in Algeria was given the highest priority by the French colonizer. As a result, administrative and scientific efforts were accelerated. Among these measures was General Damrémont's request, made immediately after he succeeded in capturing the city of Constantine in 1837, to secure the long-term establishment of his corps. He ordered the formation of a military commission tasked with recording and collecting every monument, archaeological remain, and artistic object encountered by French troops during their movements.

Also included several civilians, such as a surgeon, a pharmacist, and an interpreter. It also included a highly significant figure who represented a turning point in the history of archaeological research in Algeria due to his status, intelligence, and strong capacity for field investigation : Louis Adrien Berbrugger, the founder of French archaeological research in Algeria.

He arrived in Algeria in 1834 at the special request and insistence of General Clausel, initially serving as his private secretary before later being assigned responsibility for managing the library and antiquities. His arrival represented a clear and explicit declaration of the desire to conduct a comprehensive survey of Algerian cultural heritage, particularly because he combined several disciplines, most notably archaeology, philology, and paleography.

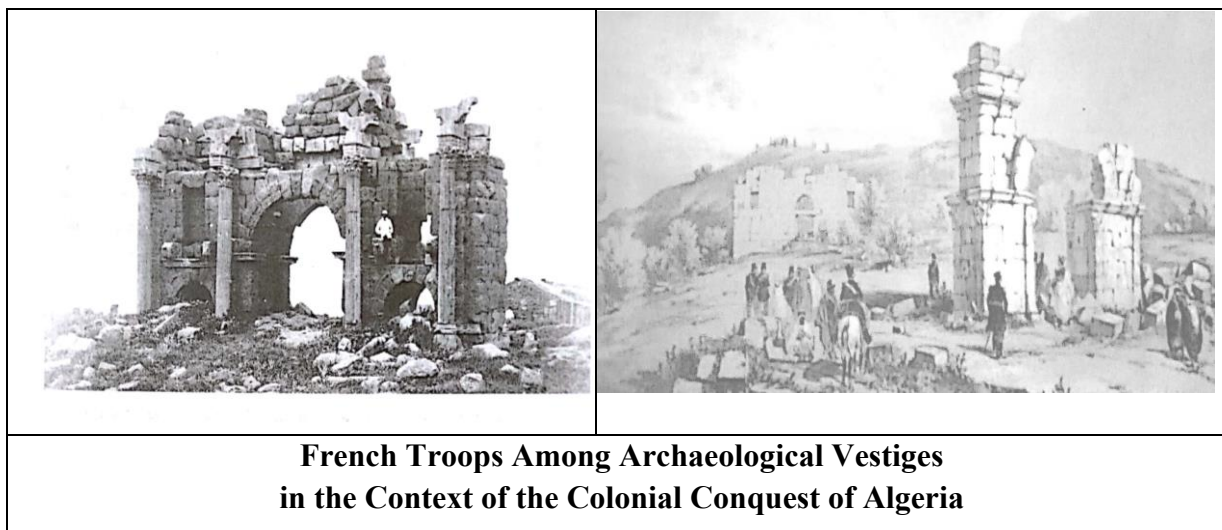
He also drew upon the experience he had gained while accompanying General Clausel during military campaigns in western Algeria, as well as his later accompaniment of General Vallée to Constantine, where he obtained highly valuable documents and manuscripts. Subsequently, the objectives and perspectives expanded, combining the search for antiquities with their appropriation and field investigations of archaeological sites that revealed the methods used by their ancestors to establish control over North Africa.

All of this was made possible through the recruitment of a large number of specialists from various fields who facilitated access to archaeological sites.

At the same time, priority was given to the publication of information on ancient antiquities scattered throughout Algeria, and various scientific committees were established and granted broad, and at times absolute, authority in dealing with Algerian heritage. This was clearly reflected in many cases through the granting of special permits with a cultural, scientific, and military character.

By this, we refer to those military-cultural missions supervised by high-ranking military officials under the authority of the French Ministry of War. This ministry ordered the establishment of a scientific commission in 1837 under the name “Commission for the Exploration of Algeria,” chaired by Bory de Saint-Vincent. This commission dealt with anthropology, history, geography, and archaeology, in addition to involving a large number of high-ranking military personnel, often holding the rank of general, who combined military duties with field scientific activities.

Among these figures were the Duc d’Aumale, Flatters, Rozet, De Xivery, Trumlett, Covagnac, Broussaud, Péliissier, Carette, Daumas, Rinn, and Lamoricière. Algeria thus became a vast field of exploration through the collection of historical materials and archaeological evidence. The motive behind the scientific commission was to understand the condition of the population, work toward their domestication, and gather information about them as an enemy population in order to facilitate control and occupation. (HEURGON , 1856, p. 04).



This is what Heurgon indicated when he stated that the pastoral and rural character of the population remained because they had rejected and remained distant from the civilization that, according to him, their Roman ancestors had brought. He further claimed that it was the merit of the French that had been the primary reason for reviving and presenting Algeria through Roman antiquities; otherwise, nothing would have demonstrated any civilizational aspect of that land.

The truth is that Heurgon was fully aware that Algeria’s civilizational heritage was not limited solely to the monuments of his ancestors. Otherwise, there would have been an equivalent urban continuity, which was not the case, despite the material evidence of civilization that still exists today. (HEURGON , 1856, p. 04).

After the period of reliance on military researchers, which paved the way for the arrival of numerous scholars specializing in archaeology and related disciplines beginning in 1880, these researchers considered it necessary to organize archaeological studies and make them specialized. This led to the establishment of projects aimed at creating associations devoted to field investigations, research, and archaeological preservation. Examples include :

The Constantine Archaeological Society (1852), *Société Archéologique de Constantine*, was founded on 5 October 1852 with the mission of exploring and identifying Algeria’s antiquities,

beginning with the eastern region. It was also responsible for establishing excavation workshops, recording all remains and discoveries, and preserving them. The success of its mission after its centenary was summarized by Troussel's statement : the work of unveiling Timgad, Tipasa, Announa, Djemila, Khemissa, Tiddis, and then Hippo, and bringing these monuments back to life from beneath the darkness of centuries so that they might shine once again under the golden sun of French Africa.

- ❖ The Algerian Historical Society (Société Historique Algérienne).
- ❖ La Revue africaine, founded in 1856 under the patronage of Marshal Randon.
- ❖ In addition, numerous periodicals dedicated to the study of Algerian heritage in general were published both within Algeria and abroad, including:
- ❖ Revue Archéologique
- ❖ Bulletin de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France (or Bulletin des Antiquaires)
- ❖ Académie d'Hippone, a regional learned society founded in Annaba (Bône) in 1890, initially under the name Société de Recherches Scientifiques et Régionales (Society for Scientific and Regional Research)
- ❖ The Society of Geography and Archaeology of the Province of Oran (Société de Géographie et d'Archéologie de la Province d'Oran)

2: Stéphane Gsell (1864–1932) author of the: Atlas Archaeological of Algeria

Stéphane Gsell was a French archaeologist and historian, born on 7 February 1864 in Paris and died on 1 January 1932 in the same city. He is widely regarded as one of the leading authorities



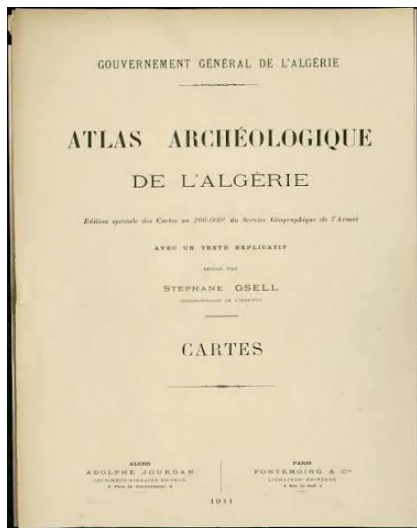
on ancient North Africa and Roman Algeria. He was an alumnus of the École Normale Supérieure (1883) and a member of the École Française de Rome (1886–1890), where he conducted his early archaeological excavations.

Gsell was subsequently appointed Professor at the École Supérieure des Lettres d'Alger. He later assumed the positions of Inspector of Antiquities in Algeria and Director of the Algiers Museum in 1900. In 1912, he was appointed to the Chair of North African History at the Collège de France, a position he held until his death. He was elected to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in 1923.

His major scholarly contributions include:

- ❖ Recherches archéologiques en Algérie (1893)
- ❖ Les Monuments antiques de l'Algérie (1901, 2 vols.)
- ❖ The monumental Atlas archéologique de l'Algérie (1902–1911)
- ❖ Histoire ancienne de l'Afrique du Nord (1913–1928, 8 vols.)
- ❖ Promenades archéologiques aux environs d'Alger (1926).

The *Atlas archéologique de l'Algérie* represents Gsell's most significant scholarly enterprise.



Published in its definitive compilation in 1911, it was produced under the auspices of the Historical Antiquities Service of Algeria during the colonial period. The work provides a comprehensive topographical and descriptive inventory of ancient remains throughout the territory. Co-published in Algiers and Paris by Adolphe Jourdan and Fontemoing & Cie, the *Atlas* comprises 51 double-page maps at a scale of 1:200,000, (Gsell, 1911, p. 01) accompanied by detailed explanatory fascicles edited by Gsell. By synthesizing cartographic base maps produced by the Army Geographic Service with detailed site registers, the work established itself as an essential reference in Algerian archaeology, despite continued historiographical critiques concerning its methodological selectivity and its predominant focus on Classical

Roman and Late Antique remains.

Despite its considerable empirical and archival value, Gsell's scholarship has become subject to critical decolonial reassessment. His corpus focused predominantly on Classical Greco-Roman and Byzantine monuments, while indigenous Amazigh and medieval Islamic historical layers were systematically marginalized or omitted. This selective documentation operated within the broader ideological framework of the French colonial apparatus, which sought to construct Algeria as a direct civilizational continuation of Latin Rome.

Nonetheless, Gsell's body of work remains a fundamental material reference for researchers of Algerian antiquity, provided that it is examined critically within its historical, administrative, and ideological context (Gsell, 1911, p. 03).

3: Stéphane Gsell and Exclusionary Selectivity in the Study of the Ruins of the Capitals of the Maghreb Central

The colonial administration's policy of civilizational legitimization required it to study and promote the remains attributed to its ancestors and to make them a priority in archaeological research. Accordingly, archaeological missions were directed toward these remains with the aim of establishing material evidence that could demonstrate the historical extension of French origins and claims beyond the boundaries of their cities and fortresses north of the Mediterranean.

The underlying rationale was clear: this undertaking formed part of an ongoing project of conquest whose names and methods had changed throughout history, while its objective remained constant. In pursuit of cultural penetration, no effort was spared. Consequently, the colonial authorities mobilized every instrument of intellectual conquest, from the printing press and newspapers to Orientalist scholarship.

The writings of these military leaders thus constituted not only historical and archaeological contributions but also a political and military program serving a colonial project. This becomes evident through their transition into forms of daily work and activities directly connected with colonial administration, a development that influenced studies of other sites documenting the presence of local Amazigh kingdoms and Islamic civilization.

These orientations were clearly reflected in their scholarly correspondence, writings, and archaeological activities, which were often characterized by exclusionary approaches and, in many cases, concealed explicit ideological objectives. In addition to the plundering of manuscripts, their confiscation, and the destruction of many others during the demolition of zawiyas and mosques—institutions that housed substantial collections of books and manuscripts dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and culture—Berbrugger, for example, acquired a vast number of documents during his stay in Constantine and transferred them to the collections of the Algiers Library.

In this way, the colonial authorities obtained some of the most important sources for documenting local history and expressing Algeria's rich cultural heritage, thereby ensuring that these sources could be used to write the history of Algeria according to their own ideological framework.

This approach became particularly apparent in their neglect of sites that represented the highest stages of civilizational development in the Central Maghreb, or present-day Algeria. They were content with brief references to these sites, without addressing the significance they had once held. The attempt to obscure the Islamic period was rooted in the fact that the substance of this historical era conflicted with their ideas, convictions, and political objectives.

Highlighting its achievements would have undermined many of their plans, most notably their campaign against Islam and their efforts to promote Christianity through practices that degraded the functions and meanings of Islamic monuments. These interventions ultimately contributed to the destruction of a large number of them.

We illustrate the nature of French ideology in the study of Algerian archaeology through the evident exclusion of major medieval Islamic urban centers by the French scholar Stéphane Gsell in his 1911 work, *Atlas archéologique de l'Algérie*. In addition to restricting his scope to sites that characterized the sphere of Roman-Byzantine expansion, Gsell completely overlooked other sites located beyond the boundaries defined by the Roman and Byzantine military authorities along the *limes*, the north-south defensive frontier established against the most powerful local Amazigh tribes of the period, such as the Gaetuli and Musulami.

This ideological bias becomes even more apparent in his reduction of the ruins of major medieval urban centers and dynastic capitals to brief introductory remarks, focusing specifically on ancient building materials that had been reused during the construction of these medieval capitals, as detailed below:

3-1: The First Ibadi Capital, Tahert:

In his discussion of the site of "Tahert," Gsell bypassed the location of the first capital of the Central Maghreb, despite the fact that its establishment represented a pivotal historical turning point during the medieval Islamic period. This event marked the first rupture and independence from the Abbasid Caliphate in the East, heralding the emergence of a local Islamic-Amazigh era characterized by Persian leadership and Arab participation, brought about by the arrival of Ibadi dissidents from the East to the Maghreb. (Gsell, 1911, pp. page 33, numbers 13-14).



Ruins of the first Ibadi capital (12/02/2024)

The French scholar sought, as far as possible, to highlight the ancient remains scattered across the “Tahert-Tagdempt” site in an attempt to assert the primacy of Roman settlement in the region. Nevertheless, he relied exclusively on the account of Baudens, who accompanied the French battalions during their confrontation with Emir Abdelkader, and whose account was itself derived from the narrative of Leo Africanus (al-Hasan al-Wazzan). Thereby acknowledging the weakness of the information and the absence of conclusive evidence, which prevented him from expressing a definitive position. Gsell nevertheless proceeded to elaborate extensively on the matter, presenting the history of Tiaret as a settlement established by the Romans as a military post.

He further referred to various scholars of its ancient history who associated the site with the toponym Tingartia. (present-day Tiaret) (Baudens, 1841, p. 21).

This excerpt clearly reflects his concern with defining the topography of ancient Tiaret by presenting it as the origin of civilized settlement in the region of Oued Mina. His analysis relied primarily on the testimony of a military eyewitness who accompanied the battalions besieging the capital of Emir Abdelkader: Commander Azéma de Montgravier, an epigraphy specialist who compiled a substantial corpus of Latin inscriptions. (azema de Montgravier, 1843).

3-2: The Second Ibadite Capital: Sedrata:

The ruins scattered across the Algerian Saharan regions reveal the extent to which the colonial archaeological school—foremost among its representatives Stéphane Gsell—focused almost exclusively on material remains and archaeological vestiges commemorating their Latin predecessors.

Gsell confined his research scope to the southern limits of the *Limes*, extending as far as Castellum Dimmidi (located in present-day Djelfa), while disregarding archaeological remains located further south in the Sahara. Among the most significant neglected sites are those that bear witness to the architectural and urban achievements of the Ibadis at Sedrata.

This omission occurred despite the fact that subsequent French scholars and explorers, such as Harold Tarry, Henri Duveyrier, Paul Blanchet, and Marguerite van Berchem, played a significant role in clearing the sands and uncovering its remains.



Ruines of the second Ibadi capital (19/02/2024)

3-3: The Capital of the Sanhaja Zirids, Achir:

Gsell's references to the three urban nuclei constituting the Zirid capital:

- ❖ **Manzah Bint al-Sultan**
- ❖ **Achir,**
- ❖ **Banya**

Were strictly limited to highlighting the strategic position of the site overlooking the ancient Roman road connecting Auzia (Sour El-Ghozlane) to Zucchabar (Khemis Miliana), some remains of which are still visible. In doing so, he overlooked three fully developed urban centers characterized by distinct defensive and civil architectural functions. (Gsell, 1911, pp. page 24, numbers 80,82,83).

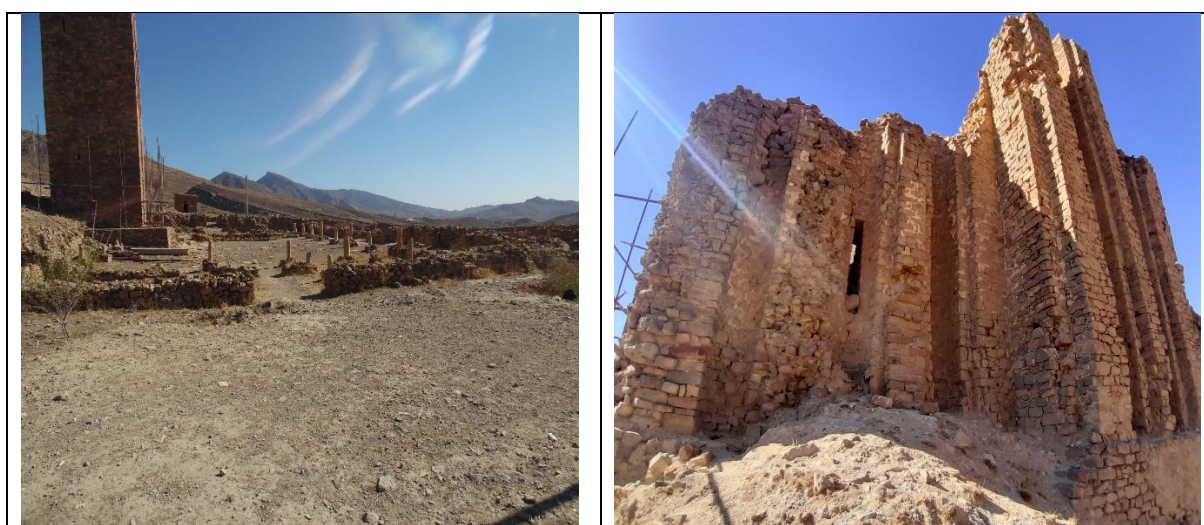
Furthermore, in his discussion of the site of "Banya," Gsell categorically asserted the existence of a Roman settlement based merely on an assemblage of dressed stones, fragments of columns, friezes, and stone sarcophagi scattered across the area. This position underscores his complete disregard for medieval Islamic remains, driven by a deliberate focus on elements attributed to the Roman period.



Ruines of The Capital of the Sanhaja Zirids, Achir (13/03/2024)

3-4: The First Hammadid Capital: Al-Qal'a

When addressing the site of the Hammadid Qal'a, Gsell merely noted its origins by describing it as a city founded by the local population, limiting his account strictly to the dates of its foundation and its fall. This reductionist approach does significant injustice to the foremost civilizational achievement of the Sanhaja, particularly given the numerous pivotal historical events that took place there, most notably the Sanhaja–Zenata conflicts. This significance is further confirmed by the subsequent interest shown by French scholars who excavated the site, such as General Léon de Beylié and Lucien Golvin, as well as by the extensive accounts of internal dynastic struggles provided by French historians such as Ch.-A. Julien, G. Marçais, and E. Mercier.



Ruins of the First Hammadid Capital: Al-Qal'a (15/03/2024)

Gsell overlooked these dimensions entirely, focusing instead on Lhote de Sélancy's reference to two small ancient redoubts (*qulay'a*) and mentioning scattered flint (*silex*) remains in the immediate vicinity. This focus clearly demonstrates his disregard for the archaeological and historical significance of the metropolis founded by Hammad ibn Buluggin. (Gsell, 1911, pp. page 25, number 92).

3-5: The Second Hammadid Capital: Bejaia-Al-Nassiriyah

The capital of al-Nasir ibn Alnas: Bejaia, was similarly not spared from the exclusionary framework of this work. Despite its profound civilizational legacy, the Hammadid maritime metropolis was relegated in favor of prioritizing and highlighting the history of Roman Saldae (Gsell, 1911, p. page 07). The excerpt dedicated to Bejaia underscores the extent of Gsell's focus on elucidating the ancient history of the site, delving into minute details and citing key studies on the remains of the ancient city across various archaeological domains: ceramics, architecture, and necropolises. Nevertheless, the modern study by Dominique Valérian: Bougie, port maghrébin, has contributed substantially to restoring the academic rigor of French historiography within the field of Mediterranean maritime studies, in which Bejaia served as a prominent port.



Ruins of The Second Hammadid Capital: Bejaia-Al-Nassiriyah (12/01/2024)

3-6: The Zayyanid Capital: Tlemcen

The archaeological remains of the capital of the Banu Abd al-Wad stand as one of the most prominent testaments clearly illustrating the methodology adopted of the author of the *Atlas archéologique de L'Algérie*. Beyond its ancient history, which extends across successive historical periods, the symbolic significance of its name marks the first geographical delimitation of the term "Central Maghreb" (al-Maghrib al-Awsat). It was explicitly mentioned by the Andalusian geographer Abu Ubayd Allah al-Bakri when defining the boundaries of the broader Maghreb, extending from Cyrenaica (Barqa) to Tangier—which he divided into three regions. He designating the second of these regions by stating: "And this city, Tlemcen, is the metropolis of the Central Maghreb."

However, Gsell chose to prioritize the Roman history of the site by highlighting the remains of the Roman military camp, Pomaria. He constructed his entire dataset based on accounts provided by MacCarthy, Bargès, and Canal, who focused on its ancient material culture of the site. The reality of their scholarship, however, was marked by an explicit effort to emphasize any evidence capable of reconstructing that of the ancient Roman camp (Pomaria) and presenting it as a major Classical Roman city. This occurred despite the discrepancies among these authors in their accounts of historical events, which were often marked by subjectivity and in which they did not fully overcome



Ruins of The Zayyanid Capital: Tlemcen (22/02/2024)

their own uncertainties, presenting arguments they considered merely plausible.

Their primary evidentiary foundation relied on Latin inscriptions, which they analyzed extensively while tracing every element associated with antiquity. Consequently, they neglected a major civilizational heritage, often with the implicit effect of marginalizing and concealing it.

This approach is reflected in Gsell's work, as he omitted the historical and architectural details of the Agadir Mosque and the entirety of the Zayyanid capital. Instead, he devoted almost all his attention to describing and analyzing the Latin inscription located at the base of the minaret of the Mosque of Idris I (Agadir), while detailing the stature of the Roman city of Pomaria (Gsell, 1911, pp. page 31, number 56).

Conclusion

Among the foremost consequences resulting from the imposition of the colonial ideology embodied in the paradigm represented by Stéphane Gsell was the selective prioritization of Classical Antiquity remains at the expense of indigenous and Islamic historical vestiges. This bias created a fragmented chronological gap that requires reintegration into the broader continuum of Algerian civilizational development, particularly in light of the colonial-era loss of numerous valuable documents, primary sources, and manuscripts that could have provided essential evidence for accurately documenting key sites and historical events.

Algerian authorities have sought, and continue to seek, to address this complex colonial legacy through the concerted efforts of institutional bodies engaged in archaeological research. Furthermore, the pioneers of the Algerian archaeological school after independence laid the foundations of national archaeological research, aiming to rewrite the history of Algeria on the basis of empirical material evidence.

This endeavor was supported by the surviving material remains that attest to an immense heritage requiring systematic documentation and preservation. Despite the initial lack of extensive field experience among local researchers, their strong determination encouraged efforts to investigate this past. The material remains of the Islamic period, in particular, represented an unbroken link to the identity and faith of Algerian society, as demonstrated in the foundational works of scholars such as Rachid Bourouiba and Mohamed Sahnouni.

Nevertheless, the continued delay in archaeological research remains an unavoidable reality, attributable to several factors:

- The cessation and scarcity of comprehensive archaeological field reports following independence.
- The restriction of cultural institutions and supervisory bodies primarily to administrative and regulatory functions.

Consequently, there is an urgent need to return to field research and reassess the archaeological interpretations of sites previously documented by French scholars. Such an endeavor would inaugurate a new phase of rigorous academic verification of colonial-era data, a pivotal and decisive step alongside the need to strengthen translation initiatives and critically revisit archaeological fieldwork through updated comparative and international approaches, as exemplified by Sahnouni's research.

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