CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE FRENCH INVASION OF ALGERIA AND THE ROMAN PAST

The mediaeval landscape of Algeria was largely obliterated because of military necessity and a considerably enlarged population. The French occupation was disastrous for the monuments precisely because they could not survive without re-using the Roman infrastructure of the country. These were the two pressures which also destroyed the ancient land- and monument-scape in Europe between the Millennium and the Black Death. In other words, read below about the fate of Algeria, fully documented – but consider the likelihood that very similar processes devastated and remodelled mediaeval Europe. For that period, we have very little documentation, and none day-by-day, as survive for 19th-century Algeria.

Nineteenth-Century Algeria and the Middle Ages in Europe

Unlike the rest of the book, this chapter relies largely on archival documents, residing in large quantities in the Service Historique de la Défense (Département de l’Armée de Terre) (SHD(T)) at Vincennes, as well as at the Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer (CAOM) and DOM-TOM in Aix-en-Provence. The military archives are abundant, frequently logical in their layout, and contain sometimes contradictory annotations – apostilles – written by engineers, artillerymen and commandants in their official capacity, many of them interested in and knowledgeable about antiquities. As a result, they allow us to deduce not just the life-history and death-throes of antiquities almost year by year under the French, but also to expound the wide range of French attitudes to those monuments, the more prevalent of which led to their destruction. Algeria away from the trading-cities along the coast was largely terra incognita to the French, and information on the state of most of the monuments was not available before the invasion, hence both the lack of any plans for dealing with them, and their sending missions in the late 1830s to scour Italian archives for useful material. The invasion was scarcely planned, had changing aims, was indifferently or badly supported by Paris, and cost 150,000 soldiers’ lives in thirty years (with settlers’ deaths also very high).
The invasion of Algeria allows us to study in microcosm and with ample documentation what happens to a sparsely-inhabited landscape rich in Roman and Byzantine monuments when the apparatus of modern war and then colonisation attack it. The ancient infrastructure enabled the struggling French army, very dependent on supplies from France, to survive. Such re-used materials survived at first because the army was small. As numbers grew, and as the army penetrated ever further south, and needed bigger fortifications, plus bakeries, barracks, hospitals, and churches, so immense quantities of ancient materials were re-used in modern constructions. The proposition that the study of the past is as much about the present as the past\(^1\) is well illustrated by Algeria, where the interest in the monuments is practical and political as well as archaeological, and where a near-complete layout of Roman military defences was clear to see.\(^2\) The emphasis here is on “was,” since “L’implantation d’une multitude de villes nouvelles a jeté une voile opaque sur le passé antique de Tébessa, Guelma, Sétif, Sour el Ghozlame ou Cherchel.”\(^3\)

In medieval Europe, antiquities were also subjected to similar pressures, but for that period documentary evidence is very rare, and most cases of re-use have been obliterated by the population pressures of later centuries. The obliteration in Algeria was by the French, who invaded a landscape the Romans or the Byzantines would have recognized, and proceeded to refortify and then settle it – and they wrote about it at great length, so that their attitudes to the monuments, re-use, refurbishment and destruction can be thoroughly documented.

**The Romans Over Their Shoulders**

Following the Moslem invasions of the 7th century, and then the Crusader states, the occupation of Algeria was the first 19th-century attempt by Europeans to colonise part of our Crescent. The ubiquity of medieval landscapes in North Africa was a potent element in promoting such colo-

\(^{1}\) Kohl & Fawcett 1995; Shanks 1996.

\(^{2}\) As it still is in the south: cf. the extent of Roman way stations, in Baradez 1949.

\(^{3}\) Benseddik 2000, 760. Short sections on individual towns sketch the scale of the disaster: Tiaret, Castellum, Tlemcen, Manliana, Miliana, Cherchell, Tipasa, Medea, Auzia, Iomnium (Tigzint), Russicada, Sétif, Cuicul, Constantine, Guelma, Tébessa, Timgad, Lambaesis – with plentiful reproductions of typed letters indicating that destruction continued after the Second World War.