Setting the Scene: Algeria in Context

The Marshal [Thomas Robert Bugeaud] fully understands the secret object of the French Government. It is found desirable to retain this colony, however burthensome, because it is a ready outlet for troublesome and dangerous men in France, who find in it a field for their energies, and most frequently a premature grave. It is, moreover, an object for the frequent occupation of public attention, and a constant topic for the journalists.[1] [1846]

This book studies the impact made by the French army and colonists (colons, or pieds noirs) on the ancient landscape of Algeria (earlier called la Régence d'Alger, and annexed to France in 1848) and its monuments.1 Enthusiasts such as Chateaubriand saw this land as a ripe plum waiting to be picked, whereby the perennial scourge of piracy would be obliterated.[2] The French would dominate it in stages.[3] Algeria was known in previous centuries largely through literary accounts2 and the occasional diplomacy, bombardment,3 and invasion.4 Its towns and road network, developed by the Romans, were surely

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3 Charles-Roux 1932: Algiers bombarded 1681 by Duquesne, 1688 by D’Estrées; Sousse and Bizerta in 1770, Tripoli 1728. Various invasions also contemplated.

4 Bachelot 2011 for Louis XIV’s invasion of Djidjelli in 1664: several thousand men were lost before the French retreat left wounded, artillery, arms and food behind.
radically changed by the Arab invasions.\(^5\) This introductory scene-setting lays out information essential for the reader to know in order fully to appreciate the impact made by the French upon a landscape little altered for well over a thousand years.

What follows is only tangentially about battles, military careers and equipment, and the often murky politics of colonisation. Its main focus is on the destruction of a two-thousand-year-old environment by army and colonists trying to survive in a hostile land, and importing those modernising European concepts of housing, town development, and roads and railways without which security and the hoped-for prosperity through commerce were impossible. The essential complement to such developments is the resistance of the natives, who ensured that troops remained in Algeria.\(^6\) Much of the country never knew long-term peace, for through shortsightedness there was to be no equity for the natives, because "c'est le droit de la guerre."\(^{[4]}\)

Apart from the controlling importance of the Romans and their achievement, several elements make up the mix of themes that set the scene for the French in North Africa, namely Christians, Arabs, earlier invasions, and expected trade. The Christian impact on late antique North Africa was large, and was eventually studied.\(^7\) They built many splendid monuments, generally re-using earlier structures or building-blocks, including temples.\(^8\) Solomon’s great attempt in the 530s to re-secure the region for the Byzantine Empire included the construction of a large number of fortresses, many of which survived into the 19th century, and some of which were to be re-used by the French (and also by the allies in World War II). At Tebessa, for example, all the French had to do was restore his walls.\(^{[5]}\) There were so many Christian remains in, for example, the Département de Constantine, that Berthier believed the time

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\(^5\) Mahjoubi 1986, 392, 394: un remodellage progressif, puis une mutation profonde qui avaient déjà assuré, avant le VIIe siècle, le passage de la cité antique à la ville ou à la bourgade rurale médiévale... la carte routière, sous-tendu par des considérations militaires et économiques, notamment commerciales, permet déjà de noter soit l'affirmation de réseaux urbains antiques, soit l'émergence de nouveaux réseaux.

\(^6\) For an overview, see Bouchène 2012, 19–44, Peyroulou, Jean-Pierre et al., 1830–1880: la conquête coloniale et la résistance des Algériens.

\(^7\) Zeiller 1931.

\(^8\) Sears 2011, 229: “it is only with the Byzantine conquest in the 6th c. that widespread destruction of temples took place, for the incorporation of their masonry into fortifications, or for the conversion of their remains into Christian churches."