CHAPTER 1

The French Conquest

Dès les premiers pas que nous avons faits en Algérie, les généraux et chefs militaires isolés se sont sentis mal à l'aise dans une contrée dont ils ne connaissaient rien; c'est là une situation dont on ne tient pas assez compte. Dans quelque coin de l'Europe qu'on soit appelé à combattre, il y a espoir pour notre état-major de trouver à l'avance des cartes, des livres, des renseignements expliquant le pays, tout au moins des voyageurs dont les récits peuvent éclairer. Lors de notre débarquement à Sidi-Ferruch, nous n'avions pas ces ressources; on fut fort embarrassé pour tout.[1] [1858]

Introduction

This chapter covers the early years of the conquest, and fleshes out some of the themes already introduced. “Planning & logistics” and “Occupying the ground” approach Algeria largely from the Army’s point of view, but inevitably influenced by the politics and intentions of mainland France. We shall discover that these were so confused that commanders did much as they pleased, and the implementation of policies was rarely straightforward. The final section deals with “Reactions to the occupation.” Those from Paris offer a broad range of opinions, while Britain is generally sceptical and sometimes scornful. In Algeria, the local press is naturally favourable, presenting feel-good opinions for established colons, and also giving a window into the destruction and sometimes preservation of antiquities.

The military and governance aspects of the conquest went in phases, and these are easy to discern. The first task (during the 1830s) was to capture important cities such as Algiers and Constantine, and intermediate fortified camps. Bugeaud’s arrival in 1840 as Governor General begins the second phase, with a two-pronged approach. He changed the existing sit-in-a-fortress ethos by organising light formations which could fight a very mobile counterinsurgency against Abd-el-Kader, accompanied by enormous destruction. He also launched colonisation schemes, and resigned in 1846 because he could not agree with the government on strategy for the future of Algeria, now seen by some as a state of permanent war.[2] Instability followed, with seven generals in fourteen months (May 1847–September 1848), so the conquest slowed down,
if not colonisation. Then in 1852–8 there was further expansion under Marshal Randon, who continued Bugeaud’s strategy and tactics. Approaches differed thereafter, as we shall see in subsequent chapters.

However, there is no temporal linkage between the phases just outlined and the impact the invasion had on the monuments, for three reasons. The first is that the Arab responses to French cruelties meant increasing numbers of troops, but only according to political and financial decisions from Paris. The second is that destruction of the monuments depended not on unenlightened soldiers (many were very interested in antiquities), but on material shortages which varied from place to place and from one year to another, again dependent on finance from Paris. The Military Engineers had to build with available stone (usually from ruins) because they were cash-strapped and, in any case, usually unable to transport materials because of the poor state of the roads. The third is that varied rates of colonisation and the vagaries of administrators meant that, rather than diminishing, destruction probably accelerated as time passed. A narrative telling of conversion from vandalism to archaeology and museums would be soothing, but impossibly dishonest. Certainly, archaeology developed, its practitioners dug; some soldiers rescued antiquities; and museums were founded; but Roman monuments remained far down the pecking order, and monuments disappeared, even from museums.

Planning & Logistics

The French invasion, seen as “a delayed attempt to re-establish imperial standing,” began with a hesitant and uncertain occupation of the coastal cities of Algiers (1830), Bône and Oran (1831), and Bougie (with two ancient forts and ruined walls) added in 1833. The invasion was badly led, badly organised, dilatory, and slow to make any real progress in a land where they were hated. It broke basic rules of strategy, as a commentator reminds us for

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1 Yver 1931 for a dispassionate account. Dufour 2011, 20–27 for the conquest, and 30–51 for the Premiers titres de gloire, such as Mascara, Constantine and the battle of Isly. Decker_1844_II for an excellent account of the French army in Algeria up to 1844, from a member of the German General Staff.

2 Bessel 2010, 5: “The French colonial empire . . . had almost disappeared by 1815, with only two West Indian islands, Guadeloupe and Martinique; Senegal in West Africa; Bourbon in the Indian Ocean; and a few trading posts in India remaining under French control. France also suffered the loss of its naval power and the heavy burden of a war indemnity. The French invasion of Algeria in 1830 represented a delayed attempt to re-establish imperial standing.”