CHAPTER 4

Ruins, Roads and Railways

The Largest Quantity of Roman Ruins Outside Asia Minor

On conçoit dès lors qu’on puisse trouver là des villes entières, telles que Lambessa ou Tébessa, mieux conservées qu’en Europe, parce qu’elles n’ont subi que les ravages du temps. Il ne faudrait pourtant pas se faire illusion: ce sont bien des ruines, et quoique dorées par le soleil d’Afrique, elles ne peuvent plus servir qu’à attirer des archéologues ou des touristes. [1] [1861]

It was the imposition of new building for soldiers and colons that destroyed many ancient monuments. Thus by only 25 years after the initial conquest, it was estimated that the French had put into Algeria 5350km of roads “faites ou projetées”; aqueducts totalling 132,941 metres, offering 24,108,310 litres of water daily; and by 1850, “869 bâtiments d’utilité publique tels que fontaines, lavis, abreuvoirs, halles marchés, abattoirs, pépinières, hospitaux, églises, mosquées, écoles, lycées, salles d’asile etc;” in addition were built 20 lighthouses; barracks for 40,000 men, and military hospitals for 5,000. [2] A considerable amount of this building would have been on top of the Roman infrastructure of public works [3] – digging out fountains, repairing cisterns and aqueduct, roads and forts, so these figures should be taken with a considerable pinch of salt, as we shall see. It is such large-scale building, provoked in large part by an expanded military presence for further conquest, and in support of colonisation, which put intolerable pressure on the ancient monuments. Much of the material destroyed was stone building blocks, a great loss because they represented the “skeleton” of ancient settlement, and their destruction or re-cutting meant that reconstructing ancient monuments, even only on paper, was made impossible. Also destroyed in large quantities were the plentiful inscriptions funerary and civic, by which the Romans had proclaimed the permanence of their civilisation, and which the Byzantines had frequently reused in decorative display by incorporating them in the walls of the fortresses they built. Monuments already in ruins, their blocks and columns collapsed like dominoes (the dangerous task of dismantling accomplished by earthquake or old age), were especially vulnerable to reuse.

This chapter first sketches the great extent of ancient ruins in North Africa, and then examines sites occupied by locals when the French arrived, as well as
others deserted except for occasional nomads. After setting these in context by a brief overview of ruins studied by the Army, it then passes to two juggernauts which probably destroyed as many antiquities as did the rebuilding of sites by the French – namely roads and railways. Both of these often devoured ruins, because both tended to run over the ground covered by ancient roads. And both, in their turn, made access to ancient sites quicker and more convenient, hence were engines in the destruction of yet more antiquities. Similar devastation occurred in metropolitan France, and on a larger scale, because there were more kilometres of both roads and railways built. Both the Ponts et Chaussées and the Génie militaire were responsible.1

Untouched by Europeans since Late Antiquity and the Byzantine era, and inhabited by peoples largely uninterested in ancient remains, North Africa was rich in impressive ruins, even if some ignorant commentators opined that “vainement l’écrivain recherche des yeux un monument quelconque modelé sur le grandiose des constructions de la vieille Rome; ses yeux ne rencontrent rien, rien que le désert dans sa nudité, le désert sans bornes et sans fin.”[5] For in fact even small areas, such as that around Dougga, could reveal large quantities of antiquities.2 At Djemila and Timgad, there were statues in profusion in the Forum, but all have now gone, their pedestals marking where they stood.3 The remains were frequently drawn, and eventually semi-protected by the Commission des Monuments Historiques.4 So where did such quantities of statues and other antiquities go? Mostly into the lime-kilns: “on a fait de la chaux avec des statues de Caesarea; Naraggara, Thagora et Auzia ont été engloutis dans les casernes. [Masqueray] a vu scier les marbres du temple d’Eusculape à Lambèse, et dans cette dernière localité les monuments enfermés dans le prætorium ont tellement souffert que l’Etat s’est décidé à faire transporter les plus précieux et à protéger efficacement celles qui sont restées à Lambèse.”[6]

1 Réau 1994, 669–675.
2 Vos 2000, 20 for list of what they found: 186 fattorie, 7 fortezze, 5 torri, 5 recinti, 5 marabout, 3 templi, 2 ville, 8 strade, 4 miliari, 161 opere idrauliche, 128 pozzi e 7 ponti dell’acquedotto pubblico di Dougga.
3 Zimmer 1989; statues documented by the inscriptions, by Wesch-Klein, Gabriele, 54–86. Not even one fragment of a statue can he illustrate, although some must have been splendid, such as east side of Timgad Forum (Abb.22), with five quadrigas and an equestrian statue; or Cuicul, with one quadriga, two equestrian statues, etc (Abb.14).
4 Koumas and Nafa 2003, 15–57 for overview of Les explorations scientifiques; 63–85 for the Monuments Historiques, and then the departments of Oran (91–119), Algiers (121–165) and Constantine (167–195), with illustrations which help underline French interest in Islamic as well as in ancient monuments.