Chapter 6

The Army Rebuilds Tebessa (First visited 1842)\textsuperscript{[1]}

Tebessa, a garrison town that was the first headquarters of the Roman Third Legion, has its own chapter for several reasons. It sits in a key location near to the Tunisian border, and its site has probably been continuously occupied since Roman times, not least because its Byzantine fort remained in excellent condition, and other now useless buildings such as the theatre provided convenient building materials. A comprehensive collection of documents from the Army’s occupation, especially the extensive work done there by the Military Engineers, allows us to chart what happened to some of her monuments, almost year by year. They sometimes explain why the Army behaved as they did, reflecting the various army attitudes toward the ancient monuments and the antiquities, including inscriptions, discovered here.

The Site and its Monuments

Tebessa, the ancient Theveste, was enclosed in AD535 by Byzantine walls, built by Solomon, who also restored the earlier basilica complex.\textsuperscript{[2]} The Roman enceinte had been completely destroyed by the Vandals, who had razed it to the ground.\textsuperscript{[3]} Solomon built strong walls,\textsuperscript{[4]} which were rich in antiquities, and which the French could see were similar to the walls of Guelma and Sétif.\textsuperscript{[5]} Roman buildings were of course used for these walls which, forming an enceinte of 320m × 280m, were smaller than their predecessors.\textsuperscript{[6]} Some monumental architecture went into his walls, and yet more was made part of the defences. The most notable inclusion was the earlier Triumphal Arch of Caracalla of AD214,\textsuperscript{[7]} part of which became a watchtower, and had its passageways blocked.\textsuperscript{[8]} It formed part of the fortifications,\textsuperscript{[9]} but it was of stone, not marble\textsuperscript{[10]} – perhaps another reason for its survival to this day.

The Byzantine reworking of the town was an attempt to keep a smaller population safe from predators, and it was still in use when the French arrived, for it contained the Arab town.\textsuperscript{[11]} As an indication of the quantities of ruins still available for reuse, there might have been 40,000 inhabitants in the much larger Roman town.\textsuperscript{[12]} The basilica complex, well outside the Byzantine walls but within the Roman ones, was a sturdy structure, and Solomon surrounded it with its own strong wall, with fourteen towers.\textsuperscript{[13]} It evidently served as a kind of mini-fortress with gates, and was subsequently occupied by Arab
families. Moll, a captain in the Génie, surveying the ruins in 1860, uses stone-types (rather than style) to distinguish between Roman monuments, and those erected or reworked by Solomon.

As drawn by Lieut-Général de Négrier in 1842, it is clear that the Byzantine enceinte was in a remarkably good condition. But an auxiliary fort, projecting from its late Roman predecessor, was soon planned and, by 1852, the Byzantine work was described by Général d'Artois in his summary of Engineers’ work throughout Algeria as in a poor state, yet nevertheless “peut être conservée longtemps avec quelque entretien, grace aux fortes dimensions des matériaux superposés les uns sur les autres, presque partout sans mortier;” although some of the 5–6 cubic-metre blocks “recourant ces vides ne se soutiennent que par un miracle d’équilibre.” It seems, therefore, as if the French abstracted some of the blocks from the Byzantine enceinte for their new structures.

The monuments of Tebessa were noted well before the city was garrisoned – which it of course owed to its strategic location on a defensive line between the Hodna and the sea. This included the 32km of traceable ancient road leading to Bir-Oum-Ali in Tunisia, and prestigious ancient sites in the area, some with the remains of Byzantine fortresses and churches. Out on patrol during 1842 in what was as yet unconquered territory, and far from safety, time was taken to record the city’s antiquities. Still occupied by Arabs, Tebessa was first sketched by de Négrier’s column, whilst encamped under the city’s walls, probably in order to show what needed doing in order to repair the fortifications for occupation. Time was also taken to explore the environs of Tebessa; and eventually the Commandant du Génie at Constantine wrote a 3-page letter to Charon, Colonel de Génie at Algiers, detailing the finds and reproducing the two inscriptions. Obviously from friend to friend (signed “mille amitiés”), and therefore demonstrating the antiquarian interests of the two officers, it is three-quarters on the Tebessa remains, including the “arc de triomphe, debout et bien conservé. La pûreté de cette architecture de l’ordre Corinthien et la richesse des dessins rappellent les beaux temps de Rome.” Perhaps with a view to publication, Général de Négrier himself wrote five pages of description of the Roman city, with measurements of wall-heights and tower dimensions. De Négrier’s description appeared in the Moniteur (29 June 1842), noting inside the town near the El-Kedim Gate a “petit temple conservé tout entier dont la forme et les détails d’architecture rappellent la maison Carrée de Nîmes,” with monolithic columns in red marble. This was to be called the “Temple of Minerva, the “best-preserved Roman temple in Algeria” (Baedeker, 1911), and it was a soap-factory, a canteen and a prison, amongst other uses, before it became the museum.