Conclusion: “Là où nofus passons, tout tombe”[1]

Car, il faut le reconnaître, ce sont ceux-là même qui se disent les héritiers des Romains en Afrique qui ont fait disparaître les plus beaux témoignages de leurs droits à ce patrimoine, les édifices laissés par leurs prédécesseurs et que, par une ironie du sort, les ravisseurs eux-mêmes avaient respecté… Fort heureusement, pour l’honneur de la science française, la faute commise en Algérie a profité à la Tunisie et amené la création d’un Service qui recueille et protège les vestiges du passé d’une façon sinon complète, en raison des faibles ressources dont il dispose, du moins dans une mesure suffisante pour éviter d’irréparables pertes.[2] [1899]

Carton’s acknowledgment that the French destroyed the best Roman monuments comes nearly seventy years after the Conquest. Carton worked late in the century, and we cannot know what Roman, let alone Islamic monuments, were destroyed without trace, description or drawing from 1830 onwards.

Such obscurity extends to the reasons for continuing occupation following the invasion. Was North Africa conquered to provide a commercial outlet for the products of French factories? As a source of produce with which to enrich the hexagon? As a land for colonists who would ensure prosperity by keeping the natives under, or at bay? Or were the colonies to become dumping-grounds for the poor and inadequate sweepings of French streets? There is no clear answer, because policies were for ever changing – although the colonists always had the upper hand over the natives, who were frequently displaced so that Europeans could farm their land. Founding towns was easy, because that was what the 19th century knew plenty about, with models provided in the illustrated periodicals. But how to deal with colonies and colonists, not to mention the natives, was an ongoing and insoluble problem. Indeed, as several commentators continued to ask throughout the century, was France capable of ruling an empire? Many answered in the negative, and Tacitus’ bleak assessment of Galba (omnia consensu capax imperii nisi imperasset) springs to mind.

This confusion stemmed from the lack of an overall plan for the founding of colonies, although a barrage of publications suggested how colonies should be formed and managed. Indeed, there was generally no true central management of colonies, let alone any equitable distribution or donation of land or government funding. Many would-be colonists migrated to Algeria because of the high 1840s unemployment levels in Paris, but it was shortsighted of the
Government to try and sweep such a huge problem across the sea. There were over 37,000 of them in Algeria by 1841, and 200,000 by 1870. However, many new arrivals had no agricultural skills, and so opened shops and cafés in the towns and villages; and many of those trying to run a farm nearly starved. Medical details are difficult to come by, but it seems likely that many were at least badly nourished and even sickly, and therefore the more susceptible to the diseases in Algeria (such as malaria and cholera) waiting to kill them. The colons’ safety and prosperity varied from area to area, depending on the local army priorities. Military colonies, on the Roman model, were suggested and even tried – but failed. Government ineptitude created chaos, which increased when, from 1848, Algeria was administered as part of France. Just as the army could not be supplied from France, neither a fortiori could the colonists, who were also forced to re-use Roman facilities as well.

Distance has not lent enchantment to modern views regarding France in Algeria. Her contribution to the First World War was great,1 but growing unrest soured the metropolitan view of the colony. There was an undeclared war from 1954, ably serviced by native Algerians trained in fighting with the French army in World War II and Indo-China. By 1956 unrest required 512,000 French troops in Algeria. Then came the 1958 military coup, which brought De Gaulle to power, and then the failed Generals’ putsch of 1961, which attempted to remove him in order to ensure that France retained her colony. These events had a great and continuing impact on France in both culture and politics, reflected in factual accounts as well as in fiction and film.2 Once out of Algeria, a “controverse mémoriable autour de la colonisation,”3 developed as right-wing official France attempted to paint a more positive picture of their involvement in Algeria in the face of mounting revisionist criticism in research by left-wing French and Algerians. On Armistice Day in 1996 President Chirac, deducing a memorial to military and civilian dead in North Africa 1952–1962, spoke of

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\text{toutes celles qui ont contribué à la grandeur de notre pays en incarnant l’oeuvre civilisatrice de la France. Nous ne saurions oublier que ces soldats}
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2 Dine 1994.
3 Bertrand 2006, 12: On se propose ici de décrire l’émergence d’une controverse mémoriable autour de la colonisation – c’est-à-dire d’un espace de débats idéologiques et partisans structuré par des revendications visant principalement à susciter la reconnaissance, par les autorités publiques, d’interprétations spécifiques, car sélectives, du processus de domination coloniale.