

# Inheriting Tindjellet: nine hidden fortresses in the ancient Timimoun Sebkhaharbour, Gourara (Algerian Sahara)

Illili Mahrouf

Université De Lyon, LADEC - Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Des Enjeux Contemporains, Université Lumière Lyon 2, Lyon, France, [illiling@yahoo.fr](mailto:illiling@yahoo.fr).

## Abstract

Tindjellet is one of the fortified settlement oases forming the network of the Gourara defensive structures in the north of Timimoun sebkha or salty soils, on the edge of the Meguiden, an erosion glacis of a sandstone cuesta area of the Continental Intercalaire. Tindjellet nine fortresses are situated in the southwest of Algeria on the ancient caravan trails linking sub-Saharan Africa to the Atlantic shores and the Mediterranean world a site made famous until the 19th century for its eight mosques. By using a space anthropological approach prevailing oral tradition we have tried to understand why Tindjellet is still known as the “Marsa”, an old harbor on the edge of the Hellala plateau. We have also questioned how the inhabited spatial organization grew on a cornice above the Ouled Ilyas bour, a non-irrigated palm tree area owned by a former Andalusian tribe, in this early Saharan lake human settlement today composed of hundreds distinct tumbled-down defensive structures. Despite their advanced state of ruins, whether occupied or abandoned, the nine hidden fortresses and their landscape are identified as the establishment of ancient red sandstone defensive constructive know-how with vertical wells dug one hundred meters into the rocky peak. The building technic is based on curved and right-angled stone masonry of the defensive walls as well as circular and squared angles towers like in Agham Tawriht and Taourayaht, two Tindjellet nine ruined defensive structures. The fortresses toponymy, the water system and cemetery position together with the saints' tomb structures highlight the territory defensive system and stone architecture construction technics and allow to follow throughout time the development of this Saharan stone building culture from the Almoravid period to the 18th century.

**Keywords:** fortified habitat, bour, lake settlement, stone Saharan architecture.

## 1. Introduction

Tindjellet is one of the fortified settlement oases forming the network of the Gourara defensive structures in the north of Timimoun sebkha or salty soils, on the edge of the Meguiden, an erosion glacis of a sandstone cuesta area of the Continental Intercalaire. Tindjellet nine fortresses are situated in the southwest of Algeria on the ancient caravan trails linking sub-Saharan Africa to the Atlantic shores and the Mediterranean world a site made famous until the 19th century for its eight mosques. By using a space anthropological approach prevailing oral tradition we have tried to understand why

Tindjellet is still known as the “Marsa”, an old harbor on the edge of the Hellala plateau. We have also questioned how the inhabited spatial organization grew on a cornice above the Ouled Ilyas bour, a non-irrigated palm tree area owned by a former Andalusian tribe, in this early Saharan lake human settlement today composed of hundreds distinct tumbled-down defensive structures. The presence of man in this region dates back several millennia and human settlements traces can be read in an inhabited landscape where morphogenesis translates this palimpsest of inhabiting in a desert environment

(Aumassip, 2001). Today people's words are the memory of the ancients who have shaped over time the territory of this inhabited space to maintain life in the oases around the fossil seas. The fortresses toponymy, water system and cemetery position together with saints' tomb structures highlight the territory defensive system and stone architecture construction technics.

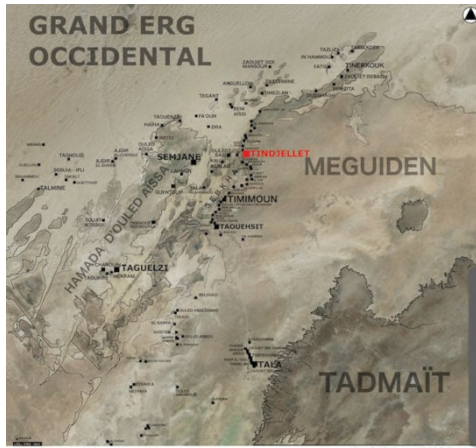


Fig. 1- Tindjellel situation in the Gourara Region (Graphic elaboration by the author, 2019; ©Bing - Michelin data © Michelin 2019)

**1.1. To inherit Tindjellel spatiality of the Hellala plateau: the cucurbit of the forgotten sea and Oulad Ilyas bour**

Tindjellel qsār spatiality vocabulary is distinguished by its large fortresses nine ruins mostly abandoned by its inhabitants living today in the below old qsār urban fabric which developed towards the gardens. Tindjellel is located on the sandstone edge eastern bank of Timimoun sebkha forming a cuesta at the foot of which spreads a rocky glaciais which is differentiated by the superposition of sandstone

on clay and dissected by erosion cuts or channels (Bisson, 1957). This geological distinctive feature allowed water to appear in various ways: iflan or foggaras, wells in the gardens and fortresses. The wells dug in the rock inside the fortresses are still found today as in Agham Tawriht. The inhabited landscape of the defensive human settlement Agham Tawriht strategic position suggests the site ancient occupation facing Gour Toubchirine, one of the oldest Gourara human settlements (Bellil, 2003). Inhabitants refer to the place by its toponym “Tindjellel” or the term “El-Marsa”, “the Port” probably referring to the site geographical position north of the Timimoun sebkha and at the bottom of El-Djereifat channel.

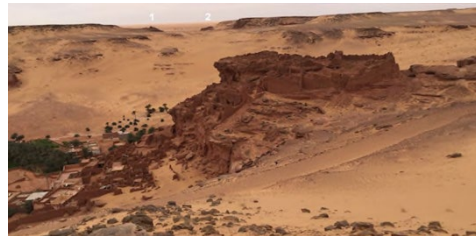


Fig. 2- Tindjellel old fortress: Agham Tawriht defensive elements of the territory and the fortresses (Photos by the author, 2015-2018)

Tindjellel nine fortified inhabited structures reported by “spatiality inhabitant words” reveal the complexity of the inhabited space organization on a territorial scale and can explain the morphogenesis of these defensive structures giving birth to troglodyte habitat, defensive stone towers and double-walled fortifications with gardens, wells, underground water system for gardens irrigation, mosques, and cemeteries. The presence of water is also found in hagiographic stories reporting an inland sea and Timimoun sebkha as its vestige.



Fig. 3- View of the Hellala plateau from the Sebka with the position of the Tindjellel nine fortresses among the other qsūr (Photo by the author, 2016)

*From sea...*

The inhabitant’s memory establishes a link between the inland sea disappearance and the advent of foggaras tracing the Jewish time in

Tamentit in Touat, well before their percussion by El-Maghili in the 15th century (Bellil, 2003). In Tindjellel the sea is associated with the place toponym facing Timimoun Sebka and stories related to its presence are found in different qsūr

including Taguelzi, At Âïssa where its disappearance is associated with saints' time and in Tukki region where inhabitants report Gourara internal sea joining Touat by boat (Bellil, 2003). In 2018, an old Tindjellel dweller confirms the legend of a sea and port where boats were moored. This reference to a body of water designated by the zenete berber term "Guelta" is reported by the anonymous Portuguese's description in 1596 of the "Kingdom of Gourara" dimensions (De Castries, 1909). The lake surface presence is even more vivid in memories thanks to today dried up Timimoun salty lake situated in the heart of the inhabited territory but whose graphic representation at early Algerian Saharan French colonization in 19<sup>th</sup> century is depicted covered in water (De Colomb, 1860). The following extracts from the colored map drawn up by De Colomb (Fig. 4- 1/1bis) specify the sebkha contours as a salt lake covering a large part of Gourara oases territory (De Colomb, 1860). At the beginning of the 20th century, French officers reported water in the Timimoun sebkha (Anis, 1900) and witnessed its flooding (Fig.4-2) and making it impassable by men (Athénour, 1907).



Fig. 4- The Gourara Sebkha in "Oasis du Gourara, de l'Ouoguerout" of De Colomb 1859-1860, SDH - T.20.6.B.711.bis.8. (2) and « Carte du Gourara of Lt. Anis 1900, SAHARA GR 1H1032. (Photomontage elaboration by the author, 2021; De Colomb, 1860; Anis, 1900).

#### *To cucurbit...*

Today, the sea toponymy is rarely used in favor of a term related to plant field and Tindjellel is commonly used today to identify the qsâr coming from an old berber term dating back to antiquity (Tilmatine, 2017) meaning "colocynth" present in several North African and Saharan Berber dialects, where Tadjellel means Cucurbitaceae Cucumis Colocynthis and corresponds to the

Arabic term Handhal or Hadedj (Foureau, 1896). This plant, well identified in Saharan landscapes, known for its medicinal properties, is seen as a toxic plant and inedible by humans except its numerous seeds once roasted.

Moreover, Tindjellel cornice is on one of the Meguiden escarpments to the north of Timimoun sebkha distinguished by its sandstone bench composed of red clays, pink and white sandstones, red sandstones with cross-stratification with lenses of gravel and quartz dragees distributed in the mass of sandstone called "Kerboub" (Bisson, 1957). These small beads or pills are found in the red sandstone at the foot of the ruins making up part of the stones Tindjellel fortresses walls. Thus, the colocynth is a landscape marker of suitability Saharan settlement. In Tindjellel, the cucurbit is even found in homes as a decorative item and thoughtfully placed by women to protect against evil eye, keeping misfortune away. (Fig.5)



Fig. 5- The cucurbit Indjel toponym root word of Tindjellel (Photos by the author, 2016).

A phonetic connection can also be made between Berber and Arabic terms, both used by Zenete populations because Tedjellel synonym is Halkat, a singular term designating a circle or a round shaped evocation of the fruit (Foureau,1896) symbolically referring to the tight community organization and the tribe group spirit which, in desert regions, is the basis of transhumance and pastoral economy. The term may refer to the 11<sup>th</sup> century times, at the end of the Ibadî Imamate, when the ulemas became imams traveling across the Sahara at their disciples' head forming a circle around them, the "ḥalqa" moving together, with their herds of sheep and camels (Aillet, 2021).

#### *To Hellala plateau and Oulad Elyas bour*

Indeed, the residents' words collected on site mention the presence of eight mosques of which physical trace have disappeared but could be a

reference to those Ibadī imams fleeing the Fatimid persecutions in the 10th century retreated, further south, probably to the Hellala

plateau protected site where a well 100m deep dug into the rock is probably a reminiscent of that of Sedrata Gara Krīma in Ouargla region.



Fig. 6- Position of 14 of the 15 Ighamawen (fortresses) of Taouehsit (Photo by the author, 2018)

Furthermore, we note the presence in the 17th century of a scholar named El-Hellali, whose writings are found in the region manuscripts dated 1688 (Martin, 1908). Lt. Palat notes refer to the "three ksour of Oulad Lias" identified on Anis' maps showing the "Oulad el-Yas" bour at Tindjellet channel entrance.

The term Hellala does not appear in the toponyms indicated in Lt. Anis' map, but Lt. Palat notes qsūr Hallala ruins position linked to Semouta (Lacroix and La Martinière, 1897) (Fig.7). Qsār Hellala toponym could also refer to the character "Helal ben Messâoud", identified in a 1714 manuscript, as coming from the "land of Mosul" in Irak 748-749 going to Takhfift in Touat via Temmassekht accompanied by Jewish traders (Martin,1908). Thus, at Qsār Hellala his descendants or supporters are found few centuries later, around 1200, enjoying prosperity established thanks to trade with Bilad el-Soudan, already developed under the Tāhert Rustumide dynasty, which included the qsūr of Touat and Gourara in a network of relay fortresses on the major caravan routes linking Tahat and Sidjilmassa with Tahetayt in Timimoun as important markets on the routes leading to sub-Saharan Africa (Bellil, 2003). So, the military officers reports of "Oulad Lias" defensive structures seem to refer to the tribe "Awlad Ilyas" establishment identified in 1957 as being the first inhabitants of Taghiyart already occupying Tiliwin qsār at the end of the 16th century (Bellil, 2003). They could be members of the Banu Ilyas tribe, the Maghila of Cordoba (Guichard, 1977), due to the migration and installation in Taghiyart, in the 15th century, of the religious lineage of the scholar Taleb Muhammed who came with El-Maghili.

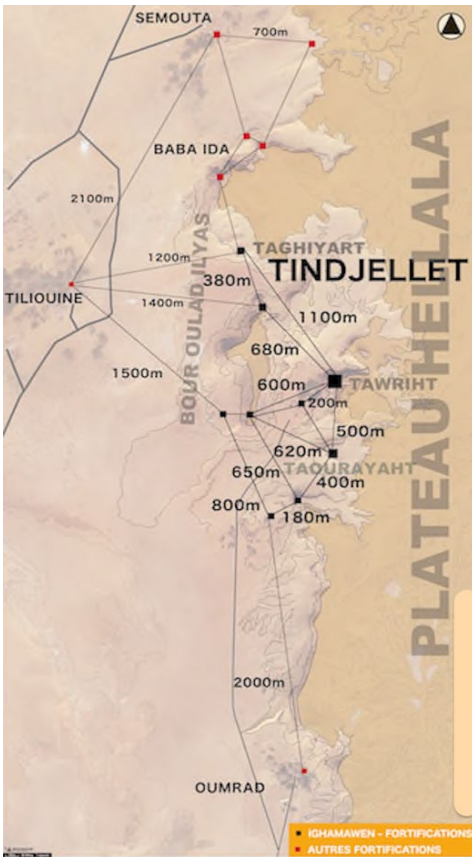


Fig. 7- Distances between Tindjellet nine fortresses (Graphic elaboration by the author, 2019; ©Bing - Michelin data © Michelin 2019).

## 2. Tindjellet toponymy and defensive legends

Today, the toponymy is still used by inhabitants and particularly the largest fortress name, Agham Tawriht, located in a strategic position on the cornice edge and at the bottom of the channel formed by the rock walls of the advancing Meguiden plateau. In Gourara Zenete Berber, where the sound "r" is pronounced "h" (Boudot-Lamotte, 1964; Mammeri, 1984-2003), the name Tawriht corresponds to Tawrirt or Taourirt more

commonly used in other Berber-speaking regions and identifies a fortified human settlement in defensive position. Through legends the fortresses toponyms survive and allow fortified ruins to remain alive for the young generations maintaining Tindjelle inhabited territory memory revealing inhabited space through the constructive techniques of Adgha master builders. Despite an advanced state of ruins, these ancient fortresses are still used according to different cultural and religious practices as “ziyaratés”, the cemeteries saints’ pilgrimages which maintain connection with place, time, and space.

### 2.1. Leghzi: enemy assault, Gourara territory defensive structures

Oral tradition reports the collective alert system structured in Gourara inhabited territory where smoke serves as information means to sentries positioned on high watchtowers. It represents a collective network of lookouts allowing long-distance communication and announcing the enemy arrival. The inhabitants’ memory associated with this principle of collective alert is the absence of collective defense. However, when facing the enemy, the memorized defensive practice requires each qsār to prepare and hold a siege by itself without its neighbor’s help. Inhabitants’ point to the paradoxical alliance of the qsūr to raise the alarm opposed to the isolated defense of each fortress. It seems that each fortress inhabited by a single lineage with its allies, supporters, and slaves, is assimilated to the action of a single warrior action defending himself in a territorial logic linked to Berber warfare mode based on attack and completion as identified by Ibn-Khaldun (Cheddadi, 2012).

The above map shows at Gourara scale the fortresses responsible for raising the collective alert at ghezzi arrival from Oued el-Namous. The alert is transmitted through the following qsūr lookouts of Ferâoun, Dra, Ouled Aïssa, and Gour Toubchirine which by their altimetry at more than 370 m allows them to communicate with the other qsūr by the itinerary: Dra (375m); Tindjelle ( $\pm 300$ m); Ighzer - Tlalet (290m); Timimoun (280m); Beni Mehlal – Ghnet (275m) – Messahel (270m); Temana (302m); Beni Yeslem ( $\pm 270$ m); Charouine ( $\pm 300$ m). The last being also alerted by Ouled Aïssa and Haiha qsūr ( $\pm 300$ m). The geographical relief data confirm the alert route diagram as memorized by the inhabitants associating the circular and para-circular shape of

the lookout-gara fortresses on the scale of Gourara inhabited territory. This collective alert system is associated with the legend of a “Great Copper” serving as a gong a means of “inter-qsār communication”. Here, the gong is not positioned on a high place but at the top of a defensive structure like a watchtower and used as an announcer of caravans heading to Mecca.

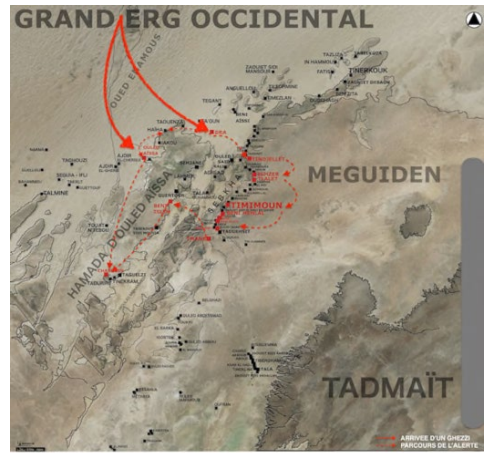


Fig. 8- Alert fortresses position in case of Ghezzi attacks (Graphic elaboration by the author, 2019; ©Bing - Michelin data © Michelin 2019)

The legend positions the different lineages originating from three warrior leaders who belonged to the Spanish Omayyad army and retreated around the 12th century to this strategic territory on the major caravan routes leading to Bilad El-Soudan when the chief Ba M'luk arrived with his allies, supporters, and slaves. His coming is linked to a small "state" creation or "dawla", transforming the qsūr thanks to his supporters mainly carpenters, blacksmiths, masons, jewelers, potters, tailors, and irrigation work specialists such as the foggara system.

### 2.2. Tindjelle nine fortresses

Tindjelle is described by aged dwellers as composed of many fortresses with their own stone defensive structures, over more than 5km<sup>2</sup> territory (Fig.9). Despite their advanced state of ruins, whether occupied or abandoned, the nine hidden fortresses and their landscape are identified as the establishment of ancient red sandstone defensive constructive know-how with vertical wells dug one hundred meters into the rocky peak. The building technic is based on

curved and right-angled stone masonry of the defensive walls as well as circular and squared angles towers like in Agham Tawriht and Taourayaht. In Tindjelle, wells and carried water have made easier the establishment of nine ancient fortified human settlements on various positions: three have an implementation on the Meguiden escarpments sandstone edge, two are sentinel fortresses associated with Taghiyart, one is below in the gardens, two are on the Tindjelle bour, a wide crossing area with sandy soil and natural palm trees, whereas the last one is established on a spur escarpment of the other Méguiden cornice edge. Like most Gourara qsur, the Tindjelle ifli water supply and distribution system is characterized tunnels dug in the sandstone cuesta area of the Continental Intercalaire. The galleries dug into the rocks are visible thanks to the alignment of series of “wells-chimneys” which favor condensation to optimize water flow (Laureano, 1991).

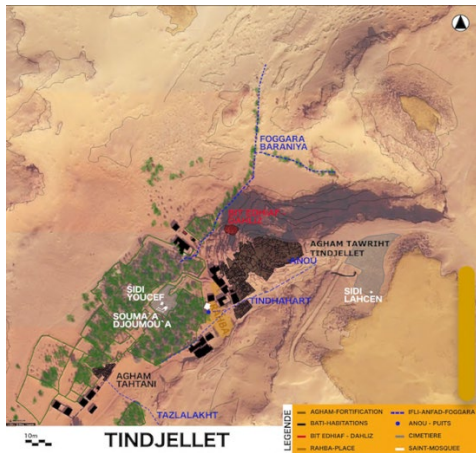


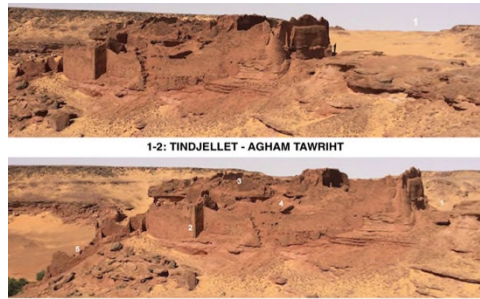
Fig. 9- The Qsar of Tindjelle: fortresses, houses, troglodyte guest house, square, water system, wells, cemeteries, and mosque (Graphic elaboration by the author, 2019; ©Bing - Michelin data © Michelin 2019)

The sandstone rocks use in the construction reveals the master mason’s technical know-how in the defensive structures as in the catching water system based on the “Adgha eṣṣini” sandstone stone buried pipes elements forming the water supply channels. Water in the palm grove gardens is shared through “Taḥelaf” (Fig. 10), a stone distributing comb, on a pro rata of the work achieved to build the still used iflan carrying it on

elevated stone pipes: Ifli Tindhahart, Tazlalakht and Foggara Baraniya (Fig.9).



Fig.10- Adgha eṣṣini constructive know-how of Tindjelle Adgha mâallems, sandstone master-builders (Photos by the author, 2015-2018).



1-2-3-4-5: DEFENSIVE ELEMENTS OF THE TERRITORY AND THE FORTRESSES

Fig. 11- Tindjelle: Agham Tawriht defensive territory elements (Photos by the author, 2015-2018).

The eldest fortress is probably Agham Tawriht the most interesting defensive structure because it rises about 100m above the Timimoun sebkha on the edge of the Meguiden cornice. It covers an area of more than 5000m<sup>2</sup> with dwellings dug on daheliz, basement inhabited levels, and common residential floors. It is singled out by its defensive system of towers, ditch, the interweaving of the inhabited fortress interior fabric and high defensive walls. The large size, the intermediate towers flanking the various surrounding walls followed by the spatial development on the plateau and along the cliff provide information on the prosperity and wealth of this city and its inhabitants. Agham Tawriht lookout settlement position with visual breakthroughs over the inhabited landscape offers strategic views towards the Grand Western Erg and Timimoun sebkha. The fortress defensive elements are identified on the Hellala plateau where the ditch marking the location of the old removable bridge can be seen, the entrance door of which seems to

have been permanently blocked by walls. The bridge has an intermediate support point marked by a stone foundation still visible on site in 2018.

Agham Tawriht is overlooked by the old cemetery singled out by the Sidi Lahsen mausoleum. Here, “the city of the dead” is facing “the city of the living” forming the inhabited space duality and permit to identify Tindjellet sandstone walls fixtures and sandstone master-builders know-how (Fig. 9-12).



Fig. 12- Tindjellet sandstone walls fixtures (Photos by the author, 2015-2018)

Qsar Tahtani or the lowest fortress 550m<sup>2</sup> in area, is located below in the palm trees gardens with few meters high stone defensive walls near the old mosque ruins transformed in cemetery and identified by the saint Sidi Yusef mausoleum located at the foot of the destroyed minaret after a Beraber attack. Tindjellet stone urban fabric is developed between these two fortresses and the limestone ground was shaped by the master builders to create a wide public square still used by children and adults called “Rahbet Tindhahart”, “The eastern square” with 1600m<sup>2</sup> in area (Fig.9). The second cornice fortress is Agham Tindhahart, a 1000m<sup>2</sup> para-rectangular shaped defensive structure with angled towers mostly ruined situated 500m from Tawriht.

At 400m is the third one, Agham Taourayaht with an area of 500m<sup>2</sup>. It has the most conserved defensive system characterized by both its circular and squared angled towers, ditch, daheliz and dismantled bridge. This fortress is impressive by its position facing the entrance of the Tindjellet qsar (Fig.13). Further, at Tindjellet channel entrance are the two Ighamawen n’Lbour built on the Tindjellet and Oulad Elyas bour edge with a wide central courtyard called Rāhbā formerly used by the caravanners. They are square shaped located west to east with respectively the following surfaces: Agham bour Taourayaht with its 1000m<sup>2</sup> in area and Agham

bour Oulad Elyas totally abandoned and ruined on 800m<sup>2</sup> in area with stone defensive walls. On the cornice above this bour and facing Tawriht fortress we find the two Tindjellet sentinel fortresses identified as Ighamawen Taghiyart two defensive structures with their 1500m<sup>2</sup> and 1300m<sup>2</sup> in area triangle shaped defensive double walls above a ravine and guard the access to the main fortress. Agham Ledjbal, 9<sup>th</sup> and most ruined raised as spur fortress at more than 80m from the road level above Tindjellet entrance with its 560m<sup>2</sup> in area.



Fig. 13- Agham Taourayaht - old cornice fortress (Photo by the author, 2018)

### 2.3. Defensive stone constructive technique

The nine fortresses are distinguished by the technical quality of their stone fortified walls. The Meguiden edge rocky slope led the master builders dig the fortresses moat by trenching the superimposed layers of sandstone on clay which allowed them to erect defensive towers either circular, as in Agham Taourayaht, or square as in Agham Tawriht. The building technic is based on curved and right-angled stone masonry of defensive walls as well as circular and squared angles towers. The walls architectonic is based on constructive know-how of building with sandstone, “Adgha eṣṣīnī” and limestone, “El Tafza”. The set of stone layers is regular and deploys on heights exceeding 12m high and distinguished by a variety of technics ranging from mixed and regular masonry to tight and regular layers, which need buttresses made of perpendicular stoned walls of inner dwellings to counterweight the pushing high defensive walls. The wall cemetery stone architecture is linked to the fortresses constructive technique with cyclopean stone placed on their sides and reveals Tindjellet maaallems sandstone constructive know-how (Fig.12).

### 3. Conclusion

In this research on built heritage, our anthropological approach focused on interaction

with inhabitants led us to highlight that Tindjellet is composed of nine fortresses contributing to the territory alert system. Observing this Saharan inhabited space practices enables us to read the building act mutations that replace the original stone architecture know-how by an empirical use of concrete. Today, architecture and space anthropology complete each other to reveal Tindjellet through the constructive technics of the Adgha eṣṣīnī master builders.

## Notes

Our maps are drawn by using our surveys together with Google Earth Pro information, but plans background are based on satellite pictures photomontage of screenshots provided by Google Earth Pro and [www.viamichelin.fr](http://www.viamichelin.fr) websites.

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