

Algiers fortified city vs. Algiers occupied in 1830

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Abstract

From the 16th century and under the Ottoman reign, the city of Algiers was called the protected city or "*el Mahroussa*", a name that comes to it, from the system of fortifications, which ensured its protection and its defense from the danger that came to it by seeing the sea. Despite its surrounding walls, the forts and the batteries that were attached to them, its fortified port, and the forts detached from its near and distant surroundings, Algiers was taken by French military troops on July 5, 1830. This contribution raises the question of the effectiveness of the modern fortifications erected during the Ottoman reign and their impact on the protection and defense of the city against the European attacks that it had known from the 16th century. It also presents the strategy adopted by the French military engineering for the capture of the city in 1830, a strategy based on the plan of attack drawn up by Captain Vincent-Yves Boutin in 1808, during his secret mission in Algeria. The contribution returns to the importance of the hinterland as a line of protection of territories against attacks by sea. Methodologically, it is essentially based on the exploitation of texts and historical accounts, as well as on archival documents (military reports, etc.), plans, and maps drawn up by French military engineers at the time of the first operations to occupy the city and its territory.

Keywords: Algiers, military engineering, modern fortifications, French colonization.

1. Introduction

Under Ottoman rule and for more than three centuries, Algiers, the current capital of Algeria, was a heavily protected city. A characteristic that gave it its designation of "*El-Djezaïr El-mahroussa*". The expression means Algiers the protected, or the well-guarded. Indeed, it went from a small town founded around the 10th century, on the ashes of a modest Roman colony called *Icosium*, to the capital of the central Maghreb and the center of the corsair companies in the Mediterranean.

The military strength that the city had acquired dates back to the historic event of the capture of the *pegnon* of Algiers (1) by Kheireddine Barberousse, on May 27, 1529, and the construction of the port as a central point of its operations on the southern shore of the western Mediterranean. Thereby, the protection of the city

against European fleets became a major concern for its sovereigns, to the detriment of that of its hinterland, apparently not considering attacks that could come by land (Lèspes, 1930).

However, despite its surrounding walls, the forts and batteries attached to them, its fortified port, and the forts detached to its near and distant surroundings, Algiers was occupied by French military troops on July 5, 1830. Hence the question of the effectiveness of modern fortifications of Algiers in the Ottoman period and their impacts on its protection and defense (Benselama-Messikh, 2020).

The presentation of the strategy adopted by the French military engineers for the capture of the city, in 1830, based on the attack plan drawn up by Captain Boutin in 1808 (2), during his secret mission in Algeria, made it possible to understand

the importance of protecting the hinterland of maritime cities to ensure their security and defense.

Through the exploitation of texts and historical stories, archival documents (military reports, etc.), plans, and maps drawn up by French military engineers at the time of the first operations of the occupation of Algiers and its territory, both near and far, it was possible to recognize the logic of the defensive system of its maritime facade and the weaknesses which allowed the capture of the city by French troops in 1830.

This contribution is historical research for the reconstruction of the trajectory followed by the French army for the capture of the city of Algiers. This trajectory was programmed and drawn up according to the establishment of the Ottoman fortifications which had made it possible to attack the city by land and then to occupy the entire Algerian territory from its coastal strip to the depths of the Sahara.

2. The maritime front of Algiers and its system of fortifications

Naturally, Algiers is a city that has been consolidated on an exceptional coastal site. According to *Ibn H'Awqal* who wrote between 943 and 969, the island opposite constituted a place of refuge for the inhabitants of the city during possible attacks to which they were often subjected (*Ibn H'Awqal*, 1992, p.78). The Arab traveler and chronicler underline the interest in the port position of the city and the role of the island opposite in the birth of its port from the Phoenician trading post to the port of Algiers today (Carayon, 2008).

2.1. The site of Algiers, a natural acropolis

By its position in the Mediterranean basin, halfway between Cape Bon and the Strait of Gibraltar, Algiers occupies a central position between its eastern and western entrances. It's a cape situation, a rocky point that penetrates the sea at the position 36° 47' 16" north latitude and 0° 44' 01" east longitude (3). It is the culmination of one of the many hills forming the foothills of the eastern slope of Mount Bouzaréah (4): the "Algiers massif" (Lèspes, 1930, pp.29-36) (Fig.1).

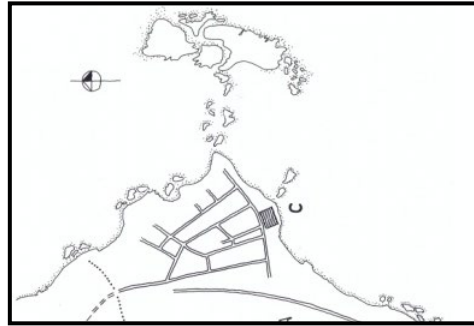


Fig. 1- The islets opposite the Algiers site (Fédérico Cresti, n.ed)

Characterized by a fairly steep slope, the hill on which Algiers was established looks like a natural acropolis: a high plateau isolated and defended by two ditches, the northern ditch of *Bab El-Oued* and the southern ditch of *Bab Azzoun* (Devoulx, 1875, p.294). It also forms the left end of the bay said the "Bay of Algiers" (5) (Bernard, 1939, pp.178-224) (Fig.2).

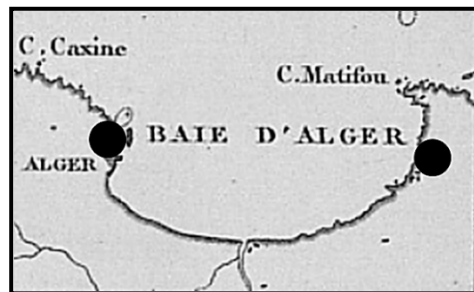


Fig. 2- The Bay of Algiers: vast bay with the establishment of two port towns (Aristide Lieussou, 1850)

The geomorphological configuration of the site is in the form of a low promontory, relatively high, approximately "ten meters above sea level, and ending, at its greatest extent, in a steep embankment" (Devoulx, 1875, p.294). From ccoastline17, it begins to slope in a piedmont shape to the highest point of the hill, the location of the current citadel, the Ottoman citadel (6). It is also separated from its surroundings by two relatively large depressions forming ravines that served as ditches reinforcing the security of the city walls in different historical periods: Roman, Arab-Berber, and Ottoman. Their route extended "... one from the kasbah on the site of the old Bab-Azoun fort [...] the other from the kasbah on the

site of the old Bab El-Oued gate” (Pasquali, 1955, p.1).

Such a geomorphological situation made a fortune for the security and defense of the city of Algiers when it was confronted with European expeditions until 1830. Indeed, in 1516, the Spaniard Diego de Vera, commanding a fleet of more than thirty-five, withdrew from the beaches of *Bab el Oued* beach because it was a harbor open to the winds (Mercier, 1891, pp.17-18). In 1518, Hugo Moncade also approached the Gulf of Algiers near the mouth of river *Oued El-Harrach* and the Spanish troops established themselves on the *Koudiat-es-Sboun*. Moreover, the place where the Emperor's fort was later erected (Mercier, 1891, p.26). In 1541, the place also served as the headquarters of Charles V during his historic expedition. Algiers has experienced other attacks such as that of Admiral Edw in 1661, those of the Dutch allied with the Italians in 1662, etc (Mercier, 1891, p.253).

2.2. The port, a natural line of defense

The promontory and the rocky point that extended into the water constituted, according to Lespès, “a point naturally indicated by history and geography to dominate” (1930, p.32). The island situation formed by a series of rocks aligned in the water, over a length of two hundred meters, and four islets constituted a “natural basin, forming the letter T” (Devoulx, 1875, 294). Protected from west and east winds (7), the island site formed by the islets and the line of rocks (the reefs) had, very early on, allowed anchorage; the island opposite the cape constituted a natural breakwater on the east side. The natural port thus formed must have been one of the Phoenician relays that generated island establishments (8) where places of exchange were established: Punic then Phoenician counters (Crayon, 2008, p.494). In 1914, Stéphane Gsell, a specialist in the antiquity of Africa and Algeria, described it as a “truly Phoenician site” (9) (Gsell, 1914, p.159).

2.3. The Spanish fortress: the Pégnon

In 1510, a Spanish fortress was built on the largest of the islets facing the city: the *Pégnon* of Algiers (10), “the augmentative of *Pena*, meaning big rock, in Spanish” (Berbrugger, 1860, p.16). It was so called because of the rocky base which served as its foundation. According to Sander Rang, the

Pégnon was built in place of a tower established by the first Andalusians who arrived in the city. It was, according to the author, to serve as a lighthouse for ships (1837, p.363). The Spanish fortress, the *Pégnon*, was composed of two works, as indicated by an extract from an Arab chronicle entitled “*Zohrat en-Nayerat*” (11). From the 16th century, the Barbarossa brothers turned such a situation into a real port, the best landmark able to monitor and intercept the most important maritime roads, which linked the North and South shores of the Mediterranean. It thus became a real maritime district equipped with various structures such as mosques, arsenal, etc. As well as a defensive system distinct from that of the city.

2.4. The Kheireddine Pier (passageway)

The pier (12), which connected Cape Island to the mainland, was the work of Kheireddine Barberousse (Bernard, 1931, p.202. He began his work with the demolition of the Spanish *Pégnon* on Friday, May 21, 1529. The rubble of the fortress was used to fill “the gaps between the different heads of rocks” (Berbrugger, 1860, p.6. *Keireddine* also recovered many blocks of stone from the ruins of Tamentfoust to complete his work (Devoulx, 1876, pp.350-351). The preserved part of the Spanish fortress later served as the basis for the construction of *bordj El-Fanar* (the Lighthouse) (Berbrugger, 1860, p.6). According to Albert Devoulx, the construction of the pier lasted two years while the Arabic chronicle “*Zohrat en-Nayerat*” gives three years. The work consisted of establishing a roadway twelve (12) meters above sea level on a development of two hundred and ten (210) meters long on a fairly gentle slope and embankments: the mole, made by filling the gaps between the islets (Devoulx, 1876, pp.350-374). In 1532, a low wall was added to the pier to protect the passage. In 1573, during the time of *Arab Ahmed Pasha* (13), the protective wall was extended to surround the entire mole except the southern part providing access to the port. The open end of the port was closed by a heavy chain floating on buoys (Imbert, 1907, p.422).

Later, in 1560, under the reign of *Salah Rais* (14), the pier was raised by the construction of a “masonry pavement which defended the north against the sea by a pile of rock” (Imbert, 1907, p.421) (Fig.3).

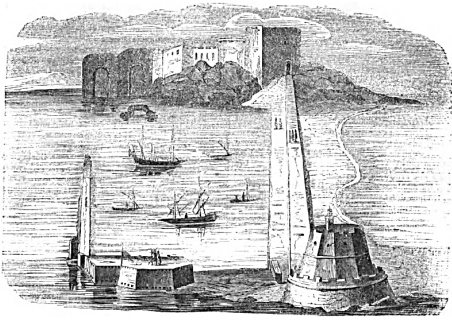


Fig. 3- The Kheireddine pier (passageway)
(Pierre Clausolles, 1843, p.139)

2.5. The fortifications of the port of Algiers

Under the reign of *Hassan Agha*, successor to Kheireddine Barberousse, several batteries were raised on the main islet of the port. They were in the form of “simple walls pierced with narrow embraces and sheltering a few small-caliber cannons” (Devoulx, 1876, p.351). In 1573, under the reign of *Arab Ahmed Pasha*, two small towers were built on the mole. The first to serve as *Fanar* (lighthouse), at the port. By its importance, *Bordj El-Fanar*, or the lighthouse fort had constituted “the headquarters of the gunners and the place of their meetings” (Tassy, 1725, p.162). The second tower, raised on the mole, had served for *El-Ouardia (15)* of the port, in other words, its guard. Beyond the Mole, the port of Algiers contained other fortification works. It was the strongest part of the city. Indeed, since the attacks to which it has been subject, its security has been reinforced by the construction of several batteries and forts like the *e El-Goumereg battery (El-Andalous battery)*; *Ras Ammar El-Kedim battery*; *Ras Ammar El-Djedid battery*; *Bordj El-Djedid, bordj Mohamed Pasha* or the new fort, the *mabbin battery, bordj Es-Serdine* the battery housing the *Baba-Merzoug* cannon, called by the French the consular and *bordj Ras El-moul* or *bordj El Hadji Ali* (Devoulx, 1876, pp.473-489).

2.6. The line of defense on the coast

Since the signing of the truce between the Ottoman Empire and the West (the Habsburg Empire), in 1580, the Mediterranean went from a scene of war into a territory of attacks and reprisals (Hess, 1968). The major concern of the Turks focused on the constitution of a line of defense for the protection and security of its

maritime facade. Several isolated fortifications were erected in its surroundings:

- *Bordj Ras Tafoura (16)* also called *Fort Bab Azoun*, was built in 1804-1805, outside the city in the south direction (Colin, 1833, p.183),
- *Bordj El-Euldj Ali*, *Fort of Twenty-Four Hours* or *Fort Bab El-Oued (17)*, built between 1567 and 1568 (Colin, 1833, p. 17). It was located on a rock by the sea, to protect the small beach accessible to small boats located to the northwest of the city,
- *Dar El-Baroud* (the powder magazine): Beyond the river *Wadi ElWadihacel* is about one hundred (100) meters, north of the city. It was a large building dependent on *Djenane El-Dey*. (Vidal-Bué, 2012, p. 77). After 1830, the powder magazine was called the “salpêtrière barracks” and was annexed to the Maillot hospital.

3. The hinterland and the main road, the path of the Romans

For the Turks, the city's interest had to come from outside, in other words from the sea. Its hinterland had only a secondary role. It just constituted the attic which provided him with tribute and supplies (Lèspes, 1930, p.33). These resources were transported by natural routes like the *Blida Road*, the junction of the *Médéa-Laghouat* and *Oran roads*, and the *Constantine Road*. Along these communications ways with the interior of the country, certain fortifications were built for their security.

However, these were fairly mediocre forts and batteries. The most important, are those which marked the event of the capture of the city in 1830 and which were located along the “Roman path”. It was a natural road that was very well consolidated. It linked Algiers to its distant territory passing through the *Tagarins plateau*, the place where *Bordj MBordjd Pasha* (fort of the star) was raised in 1569, and, *Koudiat Es-Saboun*, the place where *Bordj Moulay Hassan* (Emperor's fort) was raised, in 1545. At the level of the *El-Biar plateau*, at an altitude of two hundred and eighty (280) meters above sea level, the ridge line on which the ancient “road of the Romans” was consolidated branches into three ramifications:

- The branch towards the *Bir Semman* path starting from the *El-Biar plateau*, and joining the highest point of *Mount Bouzaréah*,
- The branch towards the *Staouali plateau*, in the direction of the *Sidi-Feredj peninsula* and the *Sahel hills*. Along its road, the ramification of the

path passes through the mounds of Sidi-Khalef, Cheragas at two hundred and thirty (230) meters above sea level and Sidi-Ykhelef then reaches the plateau of Staouali at one hundred and twenty-five (125) meters above sea level. Along the way, historical documents have not mentioned any fortification works except the Torri-chica on the Sidi-Feredj peninsula (Menouer, 2023).

4. Boutin's strategy for the capture of Algiers, in 1830

The French had seriously decided to take Algiers well before 1830, through attempted espionage operations. In 1662, during his mission to recognize the most favorable place for a landing and an occupation, the Chevallier de Clerville, had designated the bay of Stora (currently the town of Skikda) as a place meeting the best conditions (Mercier, 1891, p. 252). In 1808, Captain Yves-Vincent Boutin proposed an attack strategy by examining the topographical situation of the city, its fortifications, and the provisions in the possession of the Dey. (Boutin, 1808). In his report, he gives several recommendations that were adopted for the capture of the city.

4.1. The disembarkation point

According to Boutin, the suitable place for a disembarkation must be located as close as possible to the point of attack and the place of

camp, because the road from Algiers were some difficult paths. Looking along the coastline of the town and its surroundings, Boutin advises against the coastline from Cape Matifou to Cape Caxines. He privileges the space from this point (Cape Caxines) to the peninsula of Sidi-Feredj: "level ground except for a few fairly low undulations. They are sometimes separated by narrow and shallow ravines. Passable for a man on foot and often even for a rider on which it would be easy to make ramps. The shore in this space is accessible everywhere" (Boutin 1808). Throughout this fairly distant part of Algiers, there is only one square tower, the *Torre-Chica*, and a few batteries nearby (Menouer, 2023). Boutin suggests landing on the left bay of the peninsula which is close to the road he suggests as the path to take to occupy the city.

4.2. The road to pass through

To attack the city of Algiers, Boutin had proposed, in his mission report, the path known as the Roman path following its branch which heads towards Sidi-Feredj passing through Staouali. He described it as the best road from Algiers to the interior of the country. Boutin specifies that from the Emperor's fort to Sidi-Feredj passing through Sidi-Khalef, it was quite clear, being partly cultivated or grassy and partly invaded by brush (Boutin, 1808) (Fig.4).



Fig.4- Algiers Expedition: Theater of army operations, (Archives of Vincennes, 1830 1VH61_01)

4.3. The time of the disembarkation

According to Boutin, the favorable season for navigation in the surroundings of Algiers is from May to October. Beyond that, it becomes dangerous for a large fleet. He specifies that the rain stops in March. He proposes the period for disembarkation, on the coast of Algiers, from May 10 to June 10 at the latest, a period during

which the paths are clear and the founts in their greatest abundance (Boutin, 1808, p.6).

5. The road to Algiers in 1830

Arriving opposite the city on June 13, 1830, the French fleet had orders to reach Cape Caxine and continue to the peninsula of Sidi-Feredj, the point from which it was necessary to advance to beat the fort of the Emperor.

5.1. The disembarkation, on the Sidi Feredj peninsula

At three o'clock on the night of June 13 to 14, the signal to approach the Algerian coast in the place called Sidi-Feredj was given. The French military troops were put on the ground in brigades preceded by that which was under the command of General Poret de Morvan. The taking of the position of the peninsula and the shore was started by the isolation of the peninsula from its hinterland by the creation of a camp line and several installations necessary for their needs, like hangars, hospitals, living stores, new roads, and redoubts (18) (Menouer, 2023).

5.2. The occupation of the Staouali plateau

In the first third of the way between Sidi-Feredj and Algiers (the destination of the French army), is the Staouali plateau. Before 1830, the place was a grazing area during the summer. With a slightly uneven topography, the place was invaded by evergreen shrubs and tall brush. It was chosen as a place to regroup Algerian forces to face the danger approaching the city and Dey Hussein. After a long battle that lasted all day on June 19 (19), the camp was taken by the French, and several works were undertaken (Juchereau, 1831):

- The construction of a new redoubt on a dominant point on the Algiers side,
- the improvement of the defensive works found on the site
- the completion of the fortifications of Sidi-Feredj

5.3. Advancement towards the hamlet of Sidi Khalef

The way extending from the Staouali plateau towards Algiers was difficult to access and interspersed with ravines and covered with bushes and its defense was ensured by improvised batteries for the occasion. But arrived in Sidi-Khalef (20), the landscape changes. In this place, a small hamlet of a few houses surrounded by gardens and vineyards existed. The troops of the French army confronted the Algerian forces here on June 24 and seized the position the same day.

5.4. The Emperor's Fort, or "Bordj "Sultan-Calassi": the seat of the French headquarters

The headquarters of the army, on the march towards Algiers, was moved from Sidi-Feredj to

Sidi-Khalef and then to an olive grove where the marabout of *Sidi Abderrahmane Bou-Néga* was erected (Clausolles, 1843, p. 49). The new post was called fountain-chapel about an abundant spring not far from the marabout (21). On the 29th, French troops had advanced in the direction of the Emperor's fort in the heights of el-Biar, a fort which was erected to defend the city in the vicinity of its southern gate known as "*Bab Djedid* ou porte neuve". The siege of the fort was preceded by the occupation of five rural houses located in its surroundings, approximately 500 meters. After a battle and a fairly heated exchange of fire, which lasted several days, on July 4 at half past nine in the morning, the Algerians withdrew and the fort evacuated then exploded, setting fire to the powder magazine located nearby (Considerations, 1831). The event was the start of long negotiations before the effective capture of the city the next day, July 5, 1830.

5.5. The capitulation convention of Algiers, July 5, 1830

Finally, the convention for the capture of Algiers, its kasbah, its port, and its exterior forts as well as all the public properties in its surroundings, was signed between the Dey Hussein and the Count of Bourmont, on the evening of 04 July. And the time for the surrender of the city was set at 10 a.m. on July 5. The agreement between the general in chief of the French army and his majesty the Dey of Algiers consisted of (Clausolles, 1843, p. 60):

- The Dey is free to retire with his family and his particular wealth to the place he chooses as long as he remains in Algiers, they will be under the protection of the general in chief of the French army,
- Turkish soldiers have the same advantages and protection as the Dey,
- The inhabitants of the city are free to exercise their religion, free to maintain their properties, commerce, and industry.

6. Conclusions

Looking back at the history of the capture of the city by the French army on July 5, 1830, highlighted that modern fortifications of Algiers were erected, mainly, for the security and protection of the race in the sea. Its hinterland, which only provided a few tributes and supplies, was of no interest to the Turks. Thus, its defense was neglected because it had never considered an

attack by land. The rare checkpoints in the form of mediocre batteries were to ensure the security of the territorial roads that linked Algiers to the interior of the country in the directions of Oran, Blida, Constantine, and *Titteri*.

Thus, and unlike all the expeditions that Algiers has known, the French were able to realize the dream of making the Mediterranean a “French lake” by taking Algiers and all of Algeria and organizing their protectorate in Morocco and Tunisia. The success of the strategy of taking the city was based mainly on the recommendations of Captain Vincent-Yves Boutin who was established following his mission of reconnaissance of the coasts of Algiers on April 18, 1808, a spy mission that cost 132 years of colonization to Algeria.

Notes

(1) The *pegnon* of Algiers is the fortress that Pedro de Navarro, at the head of the expedition sent by Ferdinand the Catholic, had erected on the mole in front of the city.

(2) Yves-Vincent Boutin was Battalion Commander in the Imperial Corps of French Military Engineers.

(3) The situation, thus given, is the exact position of the lighthouse of the port of Algiers

(4) Bouezaréah or Bou-Zareah meaning the “Father of Cereals”, a name that comes back to the fertility of its high valleys.

(5) The expanse of the Bay of Algiers develops between *Ras Mers Ed-Dabbane* (Cape of Port of Flies, to the West, and *Ras Tamenfoust*, to the East. Between the two capes, the coastline develops, alternating, between cliffs and vast coastal plains forming alluvial valleys at the mouths of the watercourses that line it.

(6) Reading established from the graphic document entitled « Plan d’El-Djezaïr en 1830 », in Pasquali Eugène (1955), « L’évolution de la rue musulmane d’El-Djezaïr », *Documents Algériens*, série culturelle, n°75, fig 01.

(7) The port of Algiers is protected from western winds by the Bouzaréah massif with its foothills and from eastern winds by Cape Temenfoust.

(8) No port development has been identified on the Algiers site. The port of Algiers remained a natural port until the arrival of the Turks, unlike the ports of Tipaza and Cherchell which were

equipped with certain facilities during the Punic period.see Carayon Nicolas, *Les Ports Phéniciens et Puniques ...* pl.45, p.1367.

(9) The development of the port prevented any excavations even during the colonial period.

(10) The *Pegnon* of Algiers was the work of Pedro NAVARRO. Voir Berbrugger A. *Le Pégnon d’Alger ou Les origines du gouvernement turc en Algérie*.

(11) *Zohrat en-Nayerat* is an Arabic chronicle written in 1780 and translated by Alphonse Rousseau consul of Djerba, under the title *Chronique de la Régence d’Alger* in 1841.

(12) The term “pier” was the translation given by Alphonse Rousseau to the term “*kantra* or bridge”, from the Arabic text “*Zohrat en-Nayerat*”. See, Rousseau Alphonse, *Chronique de régence d’Alger*, p.16

(13) *Pasha Ahmed* reigned between 1572 and 1578 was called “*Arab*” because he was of Andalusian origin and therefore to distinguish him from pashas of Turkish origin. See Haëdo, *Histoire des rois d’Alger*, p.154.

(14) *Salah Raïs* was *Pasha* of the regency of Algiers between 1552 and 1555. Under his reign, the territories of Touggourt and Wargla, to the south, had been subjugated. See Haëdo, *Histoire des rois d’Alger*, p.85.

(15) The Frankish term *Ouardia* means lookout or guard.

(16) Fort *Bordj Ras Tafoura* had two fountains.

(17) For more details on the naming of *Fort Bab El-Oued*, in Haëdo Fray Diego (de), *Topographie et histoire générale d’Alger*.

(18) See the plan for the disembarkation of military troops on the Sidi-Feredj peninsula in Clausolles, M. (1843), *l’Algérie pittoresque ou histoire de la régence d’Alger, depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu’à nos jours*, Imprimerie de J.B. Paya, Toulouse. P. 38.

(19) The occupation of the Staouali plateau did not prevent the continuation of the battle during tune 20 to tunes

(20) Sidi-Khalef was a place whose name came from the presence, in this place, of a marabout of the same name erected in the middle of a small wood of palm trees, cactus, and agaves

(21) Today, it is the town of Cheraga located about ten kilometers from Algiers.

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