

Reading the process of formation of military fortifications on the Algerian coast in the nineteenth century.

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Abstract

From 1830 onwards, France timidly colonized the Algerian territories, starting with its coastline. This expansion was accompanied by a multitude of fortification projects, reflecting the divergent conceptions of French occupation.

The Algerian towns of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries then, were formed in various hectic contexts, starting first with their control by the Military Engineering Department, which relied on a strategy of war of movement to transform the territory into a network of fortified towns, whose tracing is often faced with constraints concerning the topography of the terrain. To understand the process of their formation, it is important to consider the logic behind the establishment of these military fortifications during the French colonial period, particularly those located in the north on the coastal strip, the first interface that military engineers faced in colonizing the country.

This article proposes a reading of the possible development of these artefacts on the Algerian coastline, and their capacity to be thought of at once as means of defense, instruments of development and symbols of domination at the time, but which is also a question today of recognizing them, reappropriating them in a new meaning and then valorizing them as potentialities and added value in the territorial and urban development of cities.

Keywords: Military fortifications, Algerian coast, nineteenth century, military engineering.

1. Introduction

The chapter of the French empire in Algeria which began in 1830, was accompanied by multiple fortification projects carried out by the Military Engineering, from its coastline to the interior of the country. From this year the Algerian territory was gradually transformed into a network of fortified cities guided by several factors and issues and above all decisions which gave result to the current layout of these cities. The primary focus of this article revolves around the intricate logic behind the establishment of military fortifications during the French colonial period, starting with those along the country's

coastal strip. Understanding the historical context and political decisions is essential for comprehending the evolution of this colonial occupation.

2. Geopolitical situation of France

Before 1830, despite the strength of its army, the French Empire faced economic difficulties, including overpopulation and industrial overproduction, leading to the suffering of the people (Gonnet, 1955). The economic problems of France in 1829, resulting from numerous

business failures, combined with the lack of labor caused by successive wars, were among the motivations that led to the colonization of Algeria and its population (Vidalenc, 1966) and to redirect the gaze of French citizens towards other issues, that is to say, to divert attention from their domestic political problems.

From that year onwards, France experienced significant political changes, leading to controversies and polemics between the French military, politicians, as well as revisions of legal and administrative instruments established during the colonization. These modifications had far-reaching impact on both territorial scale and regional scale since the logic of the occupation of the Algerian territories and the choice of location of the colonial centers were strongly influenced by these movements.

On the other hand, Algeria, which was a regency belonging to the Ottoman Empire during this period, offered many opportunities; its strategic location in the Mediterranean basin made it one of the important areas of commercial exchanges, moreover it was underpopulated. However, the decline of Ottoman influence on the Mediterranean Sea further facilitated the takeover of Algeria. In 1830, France began a process of involvement and presence in Algeria by landing in Sidi-Freuch (Algiers) on June 14, 1830.

3. Historical context of colonization

From 1830, direct control of the entire Algerian territory by the French became increasingly challenging, requiring the collaboration of local chiefs to exert their authority. During a period of ten years, the French government limited itself to acquiring a few ports and coastal areas, without considering the total conquest of the country. The July Monarchy, meanwhile, restricted the occupation of Algeria to a coastal fringe at first, reaching agreements with Muslim leaders inland. The strategy of conquering Algeria depended closely on the political regime put in place in France. For these ten years, Algeria witnessed nine changes of command, passing successively into the hands of various leaders. It began with Clausel on August 12, 1830, who immediately proposed a definitive occupation and strongly supported the idea of keeping Algiers. Berthezène took over on January 31, 1831, but soon made way for Rovigo on December 6, 1831. Voirol succeeded him in April 29, 1833, but only held

the position for a year before being replaced by Drouet d'Erlon on July 27, 1834. Clausel returned on July 8, 1835, followed by Damrémont on February 12, 1837, and finally Bugeaud on December 29, 1840 (Bernard and al., 1930).

Meanwhile, the colonization of Algeria was characterized by two diametrically opposed visions.

3.1 Uncertainty and intentions: from 1830 to 1840

Clausel, appointed general in chief of the army of Africa, owing to his extensive experience gained in all the Empire campaigns long before the colonization of Algeria, accelerated occupation projects in the country. Initially, he took up positions at strategic points on the roads from Algiers leading to the Mitidja plain, establishing a post at Bordj-el-Harrach as well as at Haouch-Hassan-Pacha. His objective was to install a new bey in Médéa, which was quickly achieved. Subsequently, he left part of his troops in Blidah and undertook to cross the Atlas via the Mouzaia pass (Bernard and al., 1930). However, all these occupation projects remained limited to Algiers and a few cities in Mitidja.

In addition, the Commission of Inquiry of 1833, due to economic considerations, demanded a restricted occupation of Algerian territory, limiting it to Algiers, Oran, Bone, and Bougie to reduce costs and troop numbers. Later, with the ordinance of July 22, 1834, certain modifications were made, the question of the conservation of Algiers was resolved and Mostaganem was integrated (Bernard and al., 1930). This led to the existence of two systems of restricted occupation. The first system, the maritime occupation, consists of retaining only the main points of the coast, focusing only on fortified cities, without any kind of surroundings. However, in this scenario, fortifying the entire coastline was not straightforward, as there were still some coastal cities yet to be conquered. The second system involved retaining the Algerian Massif and the Mitidja plain by fortifying the perimeter of this plain (Savary, 1840).

Free occupation: from 1830 to 1834

Until 1834 then, it was a matter of free colonization, without a colonial program, nor indigenous policy¹, nor system of colonization, the work was primarily centered in Algiers, the

Sahel and Mitidja, and a few cities located on the rating (Bernard and al., 1930).

The initial actions were limited to the occupation of Ottoman buildings, the old bordjs and forts, even the construction of temporary barracks buildings to reinforce the defense around vulnerable points; we cite in Algiers, casbah houses were converted into barracks, as well as the occupation of Bordj Mulay Hassan which took the name of Fort l'Empereur, the Mustapha barracks were reoccupied too. The casbah of Bougie knew the same actions and the Bordj-Moussa became Fort Barral.

The military body was also responsible for establishing a report, evaluating the potential, risks, and characteristics of the occupied places, as well as the start of proposing restoration plans for the existing ramparts. For instance, in the case of Bone, the restoration of its fortifications was frequently discussed from the outset of its occupation in 1832 due to their structural fragility and coastal location, which made the town vulnerable to attacks. This question of restoration often constituted a major debate due to the considerable expenses required for the operation.

Additionally, batteries were established at vulnerable points within the fortifications, and military camps were set up before evolving into regular towns in the following years, following a regular tracing.

Inability to restrict the territory: from 1834 to 1840

Colonization began to take on a more developed pattern; it is a polar occupation relying on strategic coastal points as a pad for expansion into the interior of the country. The coastal towns were gradually occupied, as the those already taken became a base of operations to penetrate and reach the inland towns (Fig.1).

In 1836, General Bugeaud will be charged of unblocking the Tafna camp and establishing communications between this camp and Tlemcen with the aim of getting closer to Constantine, the most important capital and seat of Beylik, to expand the perimeter of colonization. However, he was blocked by Emir Abdelkader. Their negotiations resulted in the Treaty of Tafna (May 30, 1837). Nevertheless, the two parties did not respect the treaty and France captured Constantine in 1837, then Biskra and Ziban.

After the definitive occupation of Algiers, the ambitions of army chief Clausel grew and his desire to satisfy military needs above all was a priority. In 1838, the French army officially took possession of Blidah which will be the subject of an important place with a defense line of fifteen fortification fronts (Savary, 1840). A camp was established between Blidah and Chiffa, dominating the entire Mitidja plain as well. Coastal cities continued to be conquered; Koléah in 1838, where a camp was established on a small hill 2 to 300 meters west of the city, as indicated in the "*Tableau de la situation des établissements français dans l'Algérie en 1838*"². Philippeville (1836-1837) too, which was considered from the beginning as a strategic measure aiming to reinforce the military presence in Constantine. Always with the need to occupy all the ports at the moment when the troops are engaged in the country's interior to leave no coastal town unsubdued, in 1839 the port of Jijel was attacked by land and sea to accelerate its appropriation, then the following year Cherchell was occupied.

The Engineering Corps began to undertake modifications to the layout of the fortifications of already colonized cities. The Casbah of Constantine will undergo several demolitions from 1838 to be able to install military establishments inside the medina and will be the subject of a project to enlarge its enclosure. Also in 1838, multiple fortification and enclosure expansion projects were planned for the town of Bone (Bensaad, Labii, 2017).

The year 1838 was marked by the planning of numerous barracking projects as noted in the "*Tableau de la situation des établissements français dans l'Algérie en 1838*"²; in Kerguentah and Ile de Rachgoun in Oran, Mostaganem, Bougie, Douera, Bone.

From 1840, the debate concerning the limits of the territory to be colonized experienced a revival. While there was still talk of a restricted occupation, the projects proposed by the engineers to fortify Mitidja testified otherwise. Two projects were proposed on this occasion; the first project of General de Berthois which encompasses two important parts of the Algerian colony: the whole of the Sahel plus a triangle linking Maison Carrée, Blidah, Koleah. Meanwhile the second project by Count Guyot proposed an exclusion of the plain and establish a line of fortifications to connect the Sahel to

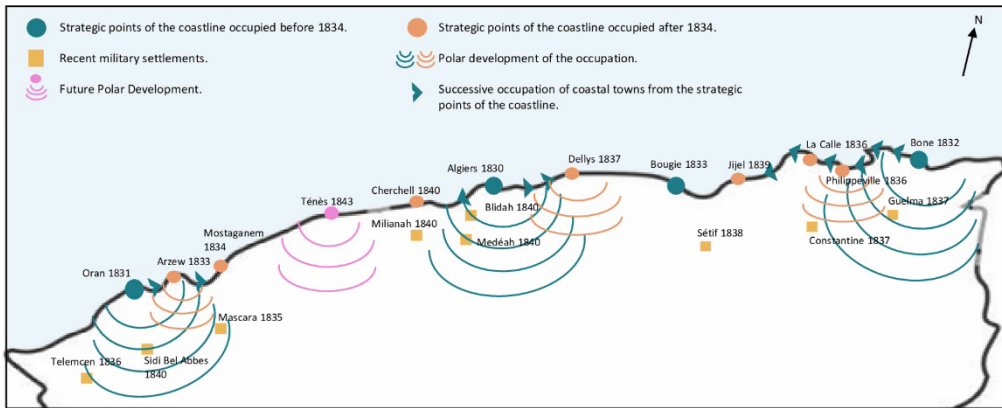


Fig. 1- Polar colonial occupation from the strategic points of the coastal strip between 1830-1840 (Authors, 2023).

Bouffarik and Blidah (Blais, 2008). The first project was strongly supported by General Bugeaud on one hand since it favors the idea of expanding the perimeter to be fortified in a continuous manner, and thus extending as much as possible, on the other hand it favors the occupation of the fertile plains to improve the economy of France.

3.2 Will and power: from 1840 to 1847

In 1841, Governor General Bugeaud established the rules for land colonization in Algeria and was personally responsible for choosing locations for the creation of occupation centers, launching the total conquest (from 1841 to 1847). This was accompanied by a notable change on the urban plan, we could finally talk about a regularization and alignment plan, and restructuring actions, since in the previous years, the Engineers were mainly concerned with defense and barracks. The Engineering Corps was responsible of conceiving plans for new towns in such a way as to respect the rule of regularity, inspired by “castrametation”, an art used to trace military camps, in order to save expenses (Ratheau, 1858).

Despite the topographical constraints inherent in certain cities, the Engineers try to get as close as possible to regularity to ensure better defense. The plan of Sidi Bel Abbès perfectly illustrates the regular figure sought, with an almost rectangular enclosure which modifies at one of the corners to integrate a source into the city, and a layout of the streets which intersect perpendicularly. Two large main streets organize the plan of the city; one 25 meters wide which

intersects another 10 to 12 meters wide. The remaining secondary streets run parallel to the two main streets, constituting blocks measuring 40 m by 90 m. The 25m street made it possible to divide the interior of the city into two; part dedicated to military establishments therefore the military town, and the other the civilian town. Later the increase in the European population, thus requiring an extension of the city plan without affecting its regularity, to accommodate a large part of the population while the rest will be settled in villages under more suitable conditions (Malverti, Picard, 1989).

These years were marked by the birth of important colonial centers which were the basis of military camps; the defeat of Emir Abdelkader in 1847 also helped to catalyze the advancement of colonization projects, notably the creation of roads and railways and the building of towns and villages. However, in the first occupied cities, considerable expenses began to be noted; in the military report “*Tableau de la situation des établissements français dans l’Algérie 1846-1847-1848-1849*”² we find expenses which exceed 200,000 francs to maintain the buildings of the barracks which are originally temporary installations built at the beginning of the occupation thinking they would not last long, but they reached or even exceeded their expected lifespan and were far from satisfactory in recent years.

At the same time, Governor General Bugeaud decided to strengthen his strategy; starting with the territorial cities, which were then thought of as ports welcoming material resources in order to

supply and control the interior cities which were seen to have great economic potential.

Motivated by his determination to demonstrate the supremacy of the French empire, he pledged to occupy not only the vast majority of Algerian territory, but also to conquer The Great Kabylie, a region that even the Turks had failed to subdue. In addition, the transformation of Borj Hamza into barracks in 1847 reinforced the presence of French soldiers and served as a defense for them to be able to get closer to the Kabyles of Djurdjura.

4. The Grand Challenge: The Fort Napoléon project

There still remains a part of the rebellious territory, The Great Kabylie of Djurdjura, which has fiercely resisted colonization. It presents itself as a unified mountainous massif which does not include any road or railway network, considerably reinforced by the natural elements and the sustained presence of the Berbers, unlike the cities already conquered, seen by Marshal Randon as “one of the great chains of the Algerian Atlas and the main seat of the Kabyle resistance” (Bernard and al., 1930).

In 1857, Marshal Randon, who was then governor of Algeria, led a new campaign to pacify Kabylie, requiring fourteen expeditions and the largest army in French Africa, to successfully isolate it and exercise domination over the region. The fort of Tizi-Ouzou, built by the Turks and occupied by the French in 1855, represented the point of concentration of the army corps, as well as the fort of Dra-el-Mizan assumed the role of observation center. We proceeded village by village, setting fire in the majority of these villages, such was the occupation plan, to finally arrive at Souk-el-Arba, situated among the highest and widest plateaus of the French Africa, and the center of the Beni-Raten mountains (Carry, 1858) which was the base of the great Fort Napoléon project.

Once these tribes were subdued, on May 28 the process of occupation began and the military troops settled in Souk-el-Arba, the colonization center. On June 2, four days after the layout of the fort was completed (Carry, 1858), the day after June 3, the opening of the first major military road from the ridges began to connect it to the Borj of Tizi-Ouzou which was completed in less than twenty days (Fig.2).

General de Chabaud-Latour, one of the architects of the fortifications in Paris, will be at the head of this project since he has experience in quickly executing fortifications and at low cost. Engineering also benefited, for the first time since the start of the colonization, from an army team made up of twenty-five thousand workers (Carry, 1858).



Fig. 2- Kabylie Algeria, Opening of the road Sik-el-Meddour Fort Napoléon Gravure,1857 (Anonymous source).

On June 14, the first stone of the fort was laid, a date which recalls the landing of French troops near Algiers (Fig.3). We began by flattening the ridges and carrying out major earthworks to prepare the base of the fort.

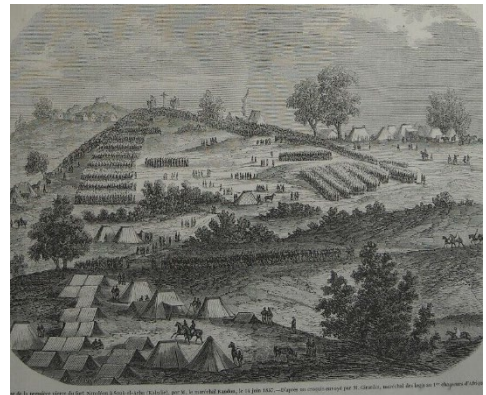


Fig. 3- Laying of the first stone of the Fort Napoléon in Souk-el-Arba, by the Marechal Randon on June 14, 1857, Extract of «L'Illustration, Journal Universel» (Girardin, 1857).

The Engineering Corps, as in his previous work, tried to get as close as possible to regularity in highly rugged terrain. Starting with its irregular

enclosure which encompasses the entire Souk-el-Arba plateau, covering an area of twelve hectares. The military buildings were aligned parallel and perpendicular to the ridges following the topography of the land. Many streets and ramps were created within the fort which flow into the large main street which connects between the doorway of Algiers and the doorway Djurdjura. This main street, too, was not straight but follows the shape of the crest (Fig.4).

The fort included within its interior the only village spared from the fire, the village of Ichéraouia, which would serve as officers' accommodations. For the construction of the fort, felled trees were used for the fort's framing, as well as local earth and stones were used. The Algiers Arsenal also donated the structural timber. Certain materials such as iron and zinc (supplied by France) as well as wood, tools, etc., are transported from the port of Algiers to the port Dellys then from Dellys to Fort Napoléon by road (Carry, 1858).

The construction of Fort Napoléon in the heart of Great Kabylie, was among the most profitable projects, it made it possible to increase France's economy. Resources such as clay for bricks and tiles, stones for building, wood for construction and heating, and lime were readily available. *This resulted in significant cost savings for France, amounting to hundreds of thousands of francs* (Carry,1858).

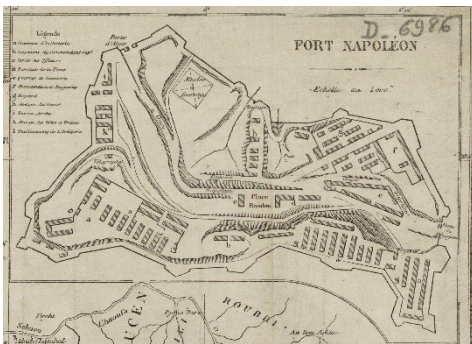


Fig. 4- Plan of Fort Napoléon, Extract from the Map of Kabylie of Djurdjura to be used for the 1857 expedition (Gillot, BN France, 1857).

5. Conclusion

French colonization in Algeria in the 19th century witnessed a series of strategic and political developments that had a significant impact on the urban and territorial development of the region. Starting with uncertain colonization with debates on the extent of the territory to be colonized and limited projects on the coastal strip, up to more structured urban planning with the creation of colonization centers, and efforts to regularize and align cities. This progressive development gave birth to a network of fortified cities and reflecting the desire to prove the grandeur and power of the French empire alongside the Roman and Ottoman empires which had previously laid their hands on Algeria.

The military engineers also demonstrated mastery and knowledge in the field, through their ability to adapt to all the conditions encountered on the site, particularly in territories not occupied by the Ottomans.

The history of the evolution of this complex and tumultuous colonial enterprise has shaped the urban and territorial landscape of the region and has left behind a controversial and lasting legacy.

Notes

(1) The word indigenous means, which was established in a country before colonization (as opposed to populations of European origin) according to (Larousse, 2020). However, in Algeria the word “indigenous” was used by the French during the colonial period with a pejorative undertone, it designates any non-European person without rights in their own territory. Treating the Algerian people as indigenous by French politicians and soldiers testifies to “colonial unconsciousness” and a kind of “racism” (Said, 1980).

(2) “Le Tableau de la situation des établissements français dans l’Algérie en 1838” or The Table of the situation of the French establishments in Algeria in 1838, is a memorandum written by French military, containing the details about the occupation and military operations during the year 1838 in order to present it to the Minister of War in Paris who does not necessarily know the terrain.

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