

On the Eve of Colonialism: North Africa Before the French Conquest 1790-1830

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al-Madinah or la ville? An architectural & urban "clash of civilizations" – the example of the city of Algiers

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Abstract: The main aim of author was to present the specific features of the architecture and urbanisation of Algiers – the capital of Algeria. The history of the city was marked by two great periods: Muslim domination (especially from the 15th century) and French colonialism (in the years 1830 – 1962). Both of these have left behind numerous traces of architectural and urbanistic thought. The material effect of French domination is the architecture of modern Algiers, which took the form of a French ville, similar to Paris, Lyon or Marseille. On the other hand, the architecture of Algiers also includes the old Arab district – Casbah, that resembles the cities of the Middle East (Madinah in Arabic), like Istanbul, Cairo or Damascus. Both architectural traditions give the city of Algiers a cosmopolitan and universal character. The threat to the peculiar coexistence of these traditions is the progressive migration from the countryside to the city, which results in the expansion of areas of slums, called bidonvilles.

Keywords: Algiers, colonial city, Muslim medina, architecture, urban development, colonialism

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Introduction

For an average European who comes to Algiers for the first time, the capital of Algeria can seem both ordinary and unique. On the one hand it is a city like many others in Africa and in the Arab World: neglected, chaotic, without a clear character and a little dirty. On the other hand, Algiers seems to be an amazing city where it is possible to travel between cultures and civilisations. In this metropolis of almost 3.5 million inhabitants there are places where man can feel like in "a slightly warmer Paris" and after a few moments spent in a taxi, one can move places reminiscent of Istanbul, Cairo or Damascus. The architecture and the urban planning of Algiers clearly illustrate the specificity of Algeria as a country located at the crossroads of three civilisations: Western, Islamic and African. On the example of Algiers, we can clearly see the "clash" of the first two. Due to its history, the western part of the Islamic world is considered as "the least Arab". This point of view is due to the still living legacy of French colonialism in this region of the World, both material and non-material. The material effect of French domination is the architecture of modern Algiers, which in 132 years of French domination took the form of a French city (*la ville* in French), like Paris, Lyon or Marseille. On the other hand, the architecture

of Algiers also includes the old Arab district – Casbah, resembling the cities of the Middle East – Medinas (*madinat* in Arabic), like Istanbul, Cairo or Damascus. Both architectural traditions give the city of Algiers a cosmopolitan and universal character. The aim of the author is to present the architectural specifics of Algiers both as a European and Eastern city.

This article is of the nature of a review. It is a synthesis of two types of scientific work. First of all, the study deals with theoretical and architectural concepts in the colonial era, especially those concerning the architecture of French Algerian towns. Therefore, numerous references to works by authors in the field of traditional Arab-Muslim architecture appear in the text. Both French and English publications were used in the article. The main idea of the article is a methodical assumption that the city as an urban and architectural unit reflects the culture of its inhabitants. This methodological approach was first presented by F. Znaniecki. One of the most well-known Polish sociologists believed that an urban space under study should be understood in the same way as are its inhabitants (Znaniecki 1938). The city of Algiers as a place of mixture of two cultures is not only a reflection of its turbulent history, but also a manifestation of the nature of the diversities within the Algerian nations.

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