

---

H-France Review Vol. 6 (June 2006), No. 67

**Nabila Oulebsir**, *Les usages du patrimoine: Monuments, musées et politique coloniale en Algérie (1830-1930)*. Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2004. 411 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. 45 € (pb.). ISBN: 2-7351-1006-0.

Review by Benjamin Claude Brower, Texas A&M University.

---

It is an exciting moment for historians of Algeria. After some fifteen years of war--a civil war that was so often a cruel war on civilians--Algerian citizens today enjoy an important measure of physical safety in their daily lives. They no longer wake, as novelist Assia Djebar did in 1995, to face the "white of a sullied dawn," *Algerian White*, the color of a funeral shroud. Certainly, injustice remains chronic and conflict endemic. Security in rural areas in particular is tenuous, as the 7 April 2006 killings of 13 customs officers near Ouargla demonstrates. And throughout the country, the political and economic problems that erupted in the violence of the 1990s continue to be sources of social suffering. But as I write these lines, they are not the cause of war, wholesale attacks, or indiscriminate slaughter.

For scholars, the changed political climate has several important implications. Most obviously, it means new opportunities for travel and research. Algerian archives and libraries are now able to welcome students from abroad. [1] Facilitating research are new international academic centers, such as the recently established offices of the American Institute for Maghrib Studies in Oran. And for the first time in a generation, there is funding for travel to Algeria such as the Fulbright Scholar Program. The improved security situation also allows researchers to collaborate in ways not possible before. Algeria can host international conferences, such as the ongoing series of meetings on Sufism organized by CNRPAH (Algiers). And academic journals such as *Insaniyat* (CRASC, Oran) unite international researchers in important social, anthropological, and historical studies. Working together, scholars from across the world can critically re-evaluate old canons and ask new questions, all the stuff of new intellectual opportunities and reason to hope that the long, terrifying isolation of the 1990s is over.

Another reason for enthusiasm includes the publication of exciting new works on Algerian history, and I would count Nabila Oulebsir's recent book, *Les usages du patrimoine*, high among them. Oulebsir's fine work examines the French state's policies towards Algeria's cultural patrimony during the period of colonial rule. Ever since Edward Said drew attention to the importance of what he called the "imperial perspective," understanding the cultural politics of colonialism has taken on life as a robust topic of study, and Oulebsir's book makes an important contribution to this field. In her richly researched and thoughtfully argued work, Oulebsir charts the long history of the cultural politics behind the failed attempt to make Algeria French. This topic leads her to examine how a distinct European identity was fabricated for this North African country by the artists and architects who followed the military conquest, a question that requires understanding how "le crayon de l'architecte va de pari avec le fusil du soldat" (p. 56).

Divided into two parts that together span the first century of French rule, Oulebsir's study begins with the first fifty years of the French occupation. Ambivalence and confusion characterize the tenor of much policy of this period. It was not until the 1840s when General Bugeaud transformed a "restricted occupation" into a total war, and Louis-Philippe came to appreciate that he too could play the Bonapartist card with military glory in the Mediterranean, that France committed itself to staying in Algeria. But the problem of how to rule this territory remained. The physical subjugation of its people was one way, but many questioned that order, prosperity, and peace could be sustained by military

---

means alone. The politics of culture figured centrally in these debates, and Oulebsir's work examines the fascinating relations that developed between artists, savants, and soldiers as they worked together to try to understand this complex country and devise strategies to control it.

The Scientific Exploration Commission, which operated in Algeria in the early 1840s under the auspices of the Ministry of War, was at the center of this project, and Oulebsir devotes much of the first part of her work to the Commission's understanding of Algerian history. The vague future planners had for a French Algeria drove them to look back at Algeria's past for clues about what to do with this territory and how to control its people. The Roman ruins punctuating the landscape, mementos of their long rule in North Africa, encouraged planners to seek in the Roman example a sort of "mode d'emploi" for French colonialism. As expressed by the Duc d'Orléans, "L'étude du système d'occupation des Romains serait d'une grande utilité: ce n'est qu'en marchant sur leur traces que nous donnerons une haute importance à notre magnifique conquête" (p. 46).

The practical uses of this part of the Commission's work were of negligible value: France would not construct its empire from stone and cement like the Romans, but iron and steel. However, as Oulebsir shows, the Commission's artists, archeologists, and historians gave France something it needed urgently, an ideological orientation and along with it the conviction necessary to see the North African project through. For example, Amable Ravoisié's sketches of Roman antiquities subtly suggested, as Oulebsir notes, a "parallèle entre la gloire de la conquête [française] et celle des Romains" (p. 68). The Roman past also allowed planners to conceive of Algeria not as a foreign land, part of the Arabo-Muslim world, opaque and confusing, but as a familiar "Latin" country with a Roman past and, therefore, a European future. As Oulebsir writes, "la présence de ces restes antiques qui couvrent si abondamment le sol permet matériellement de rattacher l'Algérie au monde latin" (p. 39). This use of Algeria's history gave the colonial project what it desperately lacked, both great prestige—France was marching to empire in Rome's footsteps—and also a claim to legitimacy—France was righting Algeria's historical trajectory, bringing it back within the fold of European civilization. In short, reconstituting Algeria's Roman history allowed French policy makers to bring into focus the vision of France's African future and served as a powerful model for their modern imperial identity.

Algeria had other pasts, of course. Privileging the Roman period meant the amputation of the rest of Algerian history, its Berber, Arab, and Ottoman past. Here Oulebsir's work corroborates other studies of the construction of European identity in the Mediterranean such as Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*. Like Bernal, Oulebsir demonstrates how French efforts to seek a singular and prestigious genealogy in the multitudes of Mediterranean histories were built upon effacing the historical diversity of the region. This drive to attach Algeria to a European orbit had catastrophic effects. In the first decade of the occupation, "le paysage urbain des villes de l'Algérie a changé de manière radicale: palais occupés, fontaines détruites, rues éventrées, mosquées transformées en cathédrales, alignements, réaménagements, etc." (p. 82). At the same time, the aspiration of some colonial planners to create an Algeria without Algerians also took form in the colonial production of the country's heritage. Local populations became, as Oulebsir writes, "simple figurants qui ne sont pas associés au projet culturel et historique, voire patrimonial, défini par la société coloniale française" (p. 7).

The rule of Napoleon III tempered some of the worst effects of the policy of cultural effacement. Already, the indignation of Algerians, like the Algerois elites who fought the destructive 1832 transformation of the Ketchaoua mosque to a cathedral, led some to question the practices of indiscriminate cultural effacement. And in the 1850s individuals such as Adrien Berbrugger successfully led attempts to include Arabic art and architecture as part of a common Algerian patrimony to be protected. Even General Bugeaud thought things had gone too far, when in 1842 he forbade the billeting of troops in mosques and other forms of wanton vandalism.

---

Napoleon III followed a more self-assured sort of Bonapartist Ceasarism in Algeria than his predecessor. Louis-Philippe had looted Algeria's Roman antiquities for the Musée algérien du Louvre (est. 1845) in an effort, as Oulebsir points out, to emulate Bonaparte's Musée égyptien. Napoleon III ended such expropriation, agreeing with those who could see no point in looting a territory that was now French. He also supported conservation and restoration projects, including those that recognized the value of Algeria's Arabo-Berber past. The Emperor was motivated by his vision of the Mediterranean as a French lake, along with the influence of Saint-Simonian ideas that saw Algeria as a link between the Occident and Orient, a place to realize the "fusion des races." Accordingly, he stressed the "bienfaits positifs" of French colonialism for *all* Algeria's people in what was called after 1863 his "Arab Kingdom."

Napoleon III's ecumenicalism combined with the new architectural theories making headway in France. Viollet-le-Duc's insistence that France's architectural ruins be restored, especially those of the long shunned medieval period, gave energy to those in Algeria who wished to acknowledge the cultural importance of buildings from the Islamic "Middle Ages" in Algeria. Oulebsir cautions, however, that this embrace of a more diversified understanding of Algerian history, like so many reforms of the "Arab Kingdom," remained at the level of rhetoric. The el-Maâl mosque at Mostaganem was returned to the faithful in 1865 after long service as a French military base, but there was no serious effort to restore Muslim edifices elsewhere.

While he did little to create a more pluralistic society, Napoleon III embarked upon major urbanization projects in Algiers as he had in Paris. Long before Le Corbusier dreamed of transforming Algiers into the French capital of modern Africa, the architects of Napoleon III, led by Charles Frédéric Chassériau, worked to make it a beacon of the Emperor's version of liberal modernity in the Mediterranean. The centerpiece of this project was the famous Boulevard de l'Impératrice Eugénie, which boldly announced Algiers's confidence, openness, and prosperity in its airy, white arcade that faced the sea. The Boulevard aimed to transform Algiers from a "ville de guerre," a military camp, to a "ville du libre-échange," a "ville de plaisance." At the same time it stressed to all those arriving in Algiers that this was a distinctively French port, mirroring Marseille and linking both French "banks" of the Mediterranean. Thus in the act of proclaiming its modernity and universalism, Chassériau's projects decisively destroyed the integrity of Algiers's Arabo-Ottoman appearance, and it became "plus française que mauresque" (p. 136).

Oulebsir explains that unlike in the 1830s, this was not done to deliberately efface Algeria's Berber, Arab, and Ottoman heritage with a singular Roman-French history. But Chassériau, like Haussmann, would not let the past, any past, get in the way of the future. And like in Paris, Napoleon III's urbanization produced a socially segregated city. "La partie haute, considérée comme plus appropriée aux moeurs et aux habitudes des indigènes, doit leur être réservée," one author wrote at the time, "tandis que la ville basse doit être occupée par la population européenne" (p. 138). Fatefully, Algiers was divided into a city of two people, Arabs and Europeans, one living in the lower modern city and the other concentrated in the overcrowded multi-story villas of the Casbah, which became as Oulebsir puts it, a "ghetto musulman" (165). In the decades that followed, the city of Algiers became visibly even more European as Notre-Dame d'Afrique took form between 1858-78, its neo-Byzantine hulk towering over Bab el-Oued.

Although society remained divided, at the turn of the century there was another movement to create an inclusive cultural identity in Algeria, and, at the same time, one that asserted Algeria's maturity and development. This was enshrined in the neo-Moresque styles adopted at the turn of the century by Governor-General Jonnart, studied by Oulebsir in the second part of her book. This style produced some of the colonial era's most distinctive buildings such as Algiers' Central Post Office, its Prefecture building (now seat of the Wilaya of Alger), and the Médersa of Constantine. The goal was to articulate a

---

style "en harmonie avec les monuments laissés dans la colonies par la civilisation arabe," as one 1906 document put it (p. 252), and it included an expression of the democratic ideals of Republican France. The neo-Moresque also served as a signal of the colonial administration's ability to generate a unique architectural style for Algeria's public buildings, independent of those in the metropole. "Être moderne signifie alors investir la tradition mauresque et la retranscrire matériellement au présent," Oulebsir writes (p. 296). The neo-Moresque was popular among the artistic and intellectual elite of Algeria's European community, but the conservatives who dominated settler opinion recoiled at this style and attacked neo-Moresque buildings as "pastiche honteux." In their eyes, the search for a hybrid Franco-Algerian cultural identity was tantamount to treachery, "un frein à la diffusion de la civilisation française en Algérie" (p. 258).

Such hostility can be read in many ways. One is as an indication of the deeply felt cultural insecurities of Algeria's European population. Indeed, Oulebsir's penultimate chapter, focusing on the Centenary celebrations of 1930, shows that in a country that was by all important measures firmly "French," there was nagging anxiety about colonial society's cultural identity. Ever since Napoleon III's projects, there had been the possibility to establish a pluralistic cultural identity, "*Méditerranéénité*," out of the multiple threads of Algeria's historical heritage. But the celebrations and artistic production that accompanied the Centenary announced that this possibility would be trumped by the exaltation of *Latinité*, Algeria's Roman past. In most French eyes, this was an imperial past, and as Oulebsir concludes, the fact that the victory arch emerged as the most dominant sign of the Centenary revealed the aggressively triumphalist vision of French colonialism in 1930. Little had changed in a century of rule. The message was not lost on Algerians, who as Oulebsir points out, saw that French Algeria had little future for them.

*Les usages du patrimoine* is an important book and will be of interest to students of modern France and the Middle East, European colonialism, as well as to those in the fields of history and memory and architecture. Oulebsir is a meticulous researcher. She has assembled a vast array of sources and is attentive to the complexity and nuance of her subject. Her attention to detail alone will ensure that the reader will spend a great deal of time in her footnotes. The book includes over 100 images and illustrations, including some of the author's own photographs of Algiers taken in the 1980s; and the biographical sketches included in the appendix will be valuable tools for future researchers. *Les usages du patrimoine* complements well the classic studies of colonial urbanism written by Zeynep Çelik, Paul Rabinow, and Gwendolyn Wright. And her last chapter detailing the continued ambivalences of the independent Algerian state towards its varied cultural heritages brings this book fully up to date. This book represents some of the best of the very fine work today being done in France on colonial studies. Time will tell if her thesis director, Daniel Nordman, is correct when he writes in the preface that "C'est un livre appelé à devenir un ouvrage classique," but high praise for this book is certainly well deserved.

---

## NOTES

[1] See the helpful description of research opportunities in Algeria by Akihito Kudo, Raéd Bader, and Didier Guignard: [http://www.ihtp.cnrs.fr/dossier\\_monde\\_colonial/bader\\_guignard\\_kudo.html](http://www.ihtp.cnrs.fr/dossier_monde_colonial/bader_guignard_kudo.html). Consulted 10 April 2006.

Benjamin Claude Brower  
Texas A&M University  
bcb6@tamu.edu

Copyright © 2006 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172