

Cultural Heritage in the Sidi El Houari District from the Islamic Conquest to the Ottoman Period – A Historical and Urban Study

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Abstract:

This study examines the history of the Sidi El Houari district and its historical architectural heritage from the Islamic conquest up to the Ottoman period. The district served as a stage for numerous significant historical events, and the urban remains that still exist today stand as clear evidence of this past. During the colonial era, one of its main streets was also named “Louis-Philippe.” This neighborhood contains a large proportion of the city’s cultural heritage, including landmarks such as the Mausoleum of Sidi El Houari, the Fort of Casa Rosa, and the Bey’s Palace, among others. This richness is largely due to its important strategic location. Through this paper, I will attempt to explore the historical and urban development of this ancient popular district, drawing on both historical sources and personal field observation, as I visited the site and documented its monuments through photographs.

Keywords: Sidi El Houari, heritage, architecture, history, Ottoman.

Introduction :

The Sidi El Houari district is considered one of the most renowned historic neighborhoods in the city of Oran. I had the honor of living there for more than three years, during which I shared the daily life of its inhabitants in various circumstances and events, both joyful and difficult. From this perspective, this paper aims to shed light on the history of this ancient popular district from multiple angles, particularly its prominent architectural and archaeological landmarks, which will be studied and analyzed based on historical sources and field observation.

This study is based on a central research problem: to what extent does the Sidi El Houari district reflect the historical and urban transformations that the city of Oran has experienced throughout different historical periods, and how do its archaeological monuments contribute to preserving the city’s historical memory? This main question gives rise to a subsidiary inquiry concerning the nature of these monuments, their historical significance, and their role in highlighting the cultural identity of the district.

The objective of this study is to highlight the historical and architectural value of the Sidi El Houari district as a cultural space rich in heritage that reflects the succession of civilizations in Oran. It also seeks to document its most important archaeological sites and define their role in shaping the historical and urban identity of the city, in addition to analyzing the transformations the district has undergone throughout different historical periods, relying on historical sources and field observation.

Based on the above, the study of the Sidi El Houari district is not limited to its historical and architectural aspects alone, but extends to a deeper understanding of the cultural, social, and civilizational dimensions that characterize this district, making it a living representation of Oran's historical memory across the ages.

1-Geographical Location:

Old Oran is located on the eastern slope of Mount Murdjadjo (Maïda), also known as Marjajou (Sidi Heddour), within the basin of Oued El Rhi, which is famous for the numerous watermills built along it. It is also known as Oued Ras El Ain due to the presence of flowing springs, especially in its upper course. The valley extends from south to north, eventually flowing into the sea. The old districts of Oran are situated on its western bank, while several castles, forts, and ramparts are located on its eastern bank (Bouaziz, 2009, p. 8).

The ancient city forms an irregular triangle: its broad, curved base faces the sea to the north, while its sharp southern apex is located near Bordj Ras El Ain, and its eastern angle corresponds to Bordj Ain El Mahal, also known as the Red Tower. On the eastern bank of the valley lie Bordj El Amhal and the Jewish quarter (Derb El Yahoud). Numerous underground tunnels connected the neighborhoods, forts, and towers on both the eastern and western banks, facilitating supply and reinforcement. One of these tunnels links the Red Palace with Bordj Sbaïhia (Al-Rashidi, 2003, p. 195). It is noted that the foundation of Bordj El Amhal dates back to the Marinid and Zayyanid period in 1331.

2- Historical Overview of the District:

The Sidi El Houari district is considered one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city of Oran. Over the centuries, the Kasbah has been subjected to repeated acts of destruction and demolition, which makes it difficult to determine its exact historical origins. In 1509, the Spanish cardinal Cisneros occupied part of the old Kasbah of Oran. Later, when Bouchlaghem recaptured the city in 1708, he took the old Kasbah as his residence and ruled from it for nearly a quarter of a century.

Due to its strategic importance, the old Kasbah long served as a central hub for population movement and institutional activity. Many buildings were constructed within it over time. Recent extensive restoration and cleaning campaigns carried out by local authorities and various sectors in Oran over the past decade have revealed important remains inside the old Kasbah, including walls dating back to the Marinid period. A Phoenician tomb was also discovered in the Sidi El Houari district a few years ago ¹(Zar', 1972, pp. 14–18) .

Since its foundation in 903 (290 AH) until 1831 (1247 AH), Oran witnessed the construction of numerous mosques across different historical periods. However, the exact number of these mosques remains unknown, as is the case in many major Algerian cities. This is mainly due to the widespread destruction and transformation they suffered during the first and second Spanish

¹ The Marinids: named after their ancestor Marin bin Wartajan. They originate from the Zenata Berber tribe, which settled in the eastern regions near the desert borders. They succeeded in overthrowing the last Almohad rulers in Marrakesh.

occupations, and later under French colonial rule, which together lasted for nearly four centuries.

The mosques that survived destruction and alteration largely date back to the Ottoman period, even though some were built on the ruins of earlier mosques. Among the most notable are the Great Mosque of Mohamed Othman, the Pasha Mosque, and the Mosque of Imam Sidi El Houari. At least two of these date back to the Ottoman period, which lasted approximately 39 years (Boutechicha, 2017–2018, p. 181).

3- Monuments in the Sidi El Houari District:

a- The Mausoleum of Sidi El Houari: Sidi Mohamed Ben Omar El Houari (751–843 AH / 1350–1439 AD) is one of the most important and prominent figures in the history of Oran. His full name is Mohamed Ben Omar Ben Othman Sebaâ Ben Aïcha Ben Sayed El Nas Ben Khair El Ghiari El Maghraoui, known as El Houari.

After memorizing the Holy Qur'an at a very young age, before the age of ten, he embarked on a long scholarly journey across different regions of the Islamic world. He first traveled to Fez, then moved to the Hijaz to perform the pilgrimage, where he met many prominent scholars. He also visited Egypt and spent several years as a resident in Mecca and Medina, where he lived in Ribat Al-Fath. Later, he traveled to Jerusalem before returning to Oran, where he settled and dedicated his life to teaching and spreading knowledge (Boubaya, 2010, pp. 136–137).

Among his notable works are:

- *Al-Tashil*
- *Al-Sahw wa Al-Tanbih*
- *Al-Tibyan (Fgharour & Bouk'aber, 2015, p. 209)*

His name has been closely associated with Oran, and over time his mausoleum has become one of the city's most important pilgrimage sites. It has remained widely renowned due to his reputation for knowledge, spiritual struggle, and piety. He is of Hawari lineage, according to most of his biographers.

Sheikh Sidi El Houari is considered one of the most important Sufi figures produced by Algeria during the medieval period, specifically between the second half of the 8th century AH and the first half of the 9th century AH (Belhouari, 2012, p. 87).

b- Bordj El Amhal or the Red Tower, currently known as the Bey's Palace:

The foundation of this tower dates back to the medieval period, when Venetian merchants laid its initial structure and used it as a center for their commercial activities with the coastal ports of the Islamic Maghreb. It is also said that it was designed and built by a Maltese engineer under the order of the Knights of Saint John, during the Crusades, to serve as a base for Crusader commercial activity.

Later, when Abu Al-Hassan Al-Marini took control of Tlemcen between 1331 and 1339 AD, his governors took care of the tower and the nearby major fort. They renovated, expanded, and fortified them by raising their walls, transforming them into two key strongholds of Islamic presence used for the defense of the city and the wider Maghreb region (Belhouari, 2012, p. 87).

The governors of the Ottoman state paid great attention to immortalizing their names through the monuments they built, which they used as places of residence and leisure, as well as symbols of their power and authority. A clear example of this is the Bey's Palace.

This palace was built by Bey Mohamed Ben Othman El Kebir during his rule between 1792 and 1799, following his conquest of Oran and its final liberation from Spanish control in 1792. The palace is located within the architectural complex known as the "New Palace," (Tewati, 2024, p. 168), which also includes the Red Tower, the Spanish fortifications, the military sector, Ibn Badis Park, and a hotel (Tewati, 2024, p. 168).

After the departure of the Spanish, Bey Mohamed El Kebir chose the most strategic area of the fortified citadel known as the New Palace, specifically its southern section, to build his residence. From this location, he overlooks both the old and new city, as well as the southern and eastern areas and the sea front. This palace is mentioned in numerous historical sources, both Arabic and foreign, all of which agree that its founder was Bey Mohamed El Kebir, the conqueror of Oran (Boutechicha, p. 178).

The palace became the seat of government and residence of the Bey El Kebir and his successors for thirty-eight years. Due to its historical and strategic importance, it was later taken over by the French colonial authorities and transformed into a military headquarters and barracks housing dozens of soldiers as well as officials from various military departments. It was then referred to as the "Military Division Hotel."

After independence, the "New Palace complex," including the Bey's Palace, remained under the control of the military institution until 1970. It was then left without supervision, becoming vulnerable to looting and various forms of deterioration. In 1990, the palace was classified as a historical monument and later became the headquarters of the archaeological department in Oran (Boutechicha, p. 179).

c- The Liberation of Oran (February 1792): The Intervention of Saints and the "New Spirituality"

Scholars regarded Bey Mohamed El Kebir as a model of the just ruler desired by the Islamic community. He was distinguished by firmness in confronting the widespread unrest in the country and succeeded in subduing rebellious tribes. He also worked to secure the routes and inspect the southern regions, which led to the establishment of unity between authority and society. As a result, security prevailed and banditry disappeared, to the extent that "in his time, the sheep could graze alongside the wolf" (Abou Ras), and people returned to their work while agriculture, trade, and crafts flourished.

Since assuming power, the liberation of Oran and Mers El-Kébir became his main concern. He revived the duty of jihad as a symbol of the unity of the الأمة (Islamic community). He prepared for battle, spent his own wealth to equip the army with large cannons, financed the students stationed at Jebel El Maïda, and provided them with weapons and supplies. He also mobilized volunteers from all regions and incorporated them into his army for combat (Ghalem, 2018, p. 23).

d- Rosalcazar Fortress:

This fortress is located next to Bordj El Amhal, which the Spanish used as a seat of government when they occupied the city in 1509. They named it Rosalcazar (also written Rosas Cajas or

Rozas El Kébir) and introduced several modifications during the reign of King Philip V. These changes continued between 1563 and 1701, after which it was renamed the “New Palace.”

The Spanish installed thirty cannons in the fortress, later increasing their number to around 300, due to its strategic importance in the defense of the city and its port. The Spanish recorded these modifications on a commemorative plaque placed on the eastern wall overlooking Oued Rhiouina (Bouaziz, 2009, p. 87).

When Bouchlaghem took control of Oran in 1708, the tower witnessed the capture of 500 Spanish individuals who were resisting inside it. Later, when the Spanish reoccupied Oran in 1732, they introduced further modifications to the structure, adding arches, sections, and underground shelters during the reign of King Charles III. These changes were documented on a marble plaque placed on the wall beneath the first inscription (Bouaziz, 2009). When Mohamed El Kebir liberated Oran for the final time in 1791, he commemorated this victory with a special marble inscription placed under the previous one, bearing the date 1206 (1791). He and the subsequent Beys used the site as a seat of governance. The complex consisted of two main sections: one for the residence of the Dey and his household, and another for administration and government affairs. Beautiful gardens of roses and jasmine surrounded the palace.

After the French occupation, the building was also used as a governmental headquarters for many years, both during the colonial period and in more recent times (Bouaziz, 2009, p. 88).

4- Hassan Pasha Mosque:

The Hassan Pasha Mosque is located on the right bank of Oued El Rhi, opposite the Bey’s Palace, at Ben Omar Boutkhil Street (formerly Philippe Street). It is bordered on three sides—east, west, and north—while its southern side is bounded by the “Mosque Street.”

It was built by Bey Mohamed El Kebir on the orders of Hassan Pasha shortly after the liberation of Oran, in commemoration of this important historical event. This was mentioned by Al-Zayani, one of the writers contemporary to the Bey. A commemorative inscription recording its foundation date, along with a list of endowments dedicated to the mosque’s maintenance, was engraved on a marble slab that is currently preserved in the Ahmed Zabana Museum in Oran.

Historical sources indicate that the mosque was constructed by Bey Mohamed El Kebir under the directive of Hassan Pasha to commemorate the liberation of Oran. It is also reported that Hassan Pasha sent a large sum of money to fund its construction, and that a golden treasure was discovered during the excavation of its foundations, which was also used to support the building works.

Conclusion

This research finds that the Sidi El Houari region is one of many distinct reminders of the many different civilizations and historical turning points that occurred in the city of Oran through time; from the Muslim conquests until the period of the Ottoman Empire and thereafter. Examples of architectural and archaeological sites in this area include the Mausoleum of Sidi El Houari; Bey's Palace; Rosalcazar Fortress and the Hassan Pasha Mosque. These sites create integral parts of the historical and urban identity of Oran and exhibit how the three elements of religion, politics and the military have interacted to help define the history of Oran.

In addition, the findings reveal that this area served not only as a place of residence but also as a physical site in which crucial cultural and historic events occurred that helped to shape the city of Oran into what it is today. Therefore, preserving and documenting this area is necessary for the protection of the collective memory of the city. Thus, this study of the Sidi El Houari district provides insight into the broader application of knowledge regarding the urban, social and cultural evolution of the city through the years.



Figure 02: Image of the Bey's Palace



Figure 01: Mausoleum of Sidi El Houari



Figure 04: Recent image of Rosalcazar Fortress dated June 7, 2021



Figure 03: Recent image from the Bey's Palace garden site



Figure 06: Stables inside the fortress



Figure 05: Image of a solitary cell inside the fortress



Figure 07: Hassan Pasha Mosque



Figure 09: Stables inside the fortress

Figure 08: Recent image of the Sidi El Houari district dated June 7, 2021

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