

## Bonafos on Effros (2018)

Effros, Bonnie. *Incidental Archaeologists: French Officers and the Rediscovery of Roman North Africa*. Cornell UP, 2018, pp. xv + 371, ISBN 978-1-5017-0210-5

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As its title suggests, Bonnie Effros's latest monograph examines the amateur efforts or "potential archaeolog[y]" (259) brought about by the French conquest of Algeria. The study highlights the connections between strategic, practical, ideological, and symbolic uses of Roman monuments in North Africa (that is, the Algerian territories and the Beylik of Tunis) prior to the institutionalization of a more centralized conservation service under the Third Republic. It offers a chronological, parallel reading of the extremely brutal and destructive war, and the role that archaeological endeavors played in the process, serving and justifying military and colonial goals.

Starting with the 1830 invasion of Algiers and covering one decade at a time, the book's five chapters each open with a survey of the increasing war waged against local populations, the colonial rule progressively implemented, and the highly selective French perception of North Africa as the land of past Roman imperial grandeur. It contextualizes the mostly idiosyncratic and opportunistic archaeological endeavors of military officers and civilians claiming to be the direct heirs of ancient Rome. Chapter one takes readers through the early exploration of Algeria, as troops moved inland using Roman sites as strategic signposts charting out routes for the conquest. Following in the Romans' footsteps, the French sought to rewrite the Algerian landscape by discounting local history and cultures with an essentializing gaze. Chapter two examines how ancient history acted as an ideological vindication for individual officers, such as the infamous General Bugeaud. With the fascinating case study of the ancient colony of Lambaesis, chapter three then provides a particularly salient example of the military's interaction with Roman structures. Finally, the last two chapters analyze the development of French Algerian archaeological institutions under the Second Empire, with connections between Napoleon III's interest in archaeology in the metropole and similar efforts in Algeria. An epilogue offers thoughts on the legacy of military-led archaeological efforts and some insights on the further development of French Algerian monumental conservation in the 1870s and 1880s.

In Ernest Carette's words, found in one of the book's opening epigraphs, "si vous cherchez un aliment à l'admiration que vous professez pour la France [...] gardez-vous bien de la venir voir dans ses colonies." Bleak indeed is the picture that this compelling study paints of the demise of the monumental past of Algeria as a by-product of the human, cultural, and economic disaster engendered by the war, during which the French essentially wreaked havoc on ancient monuments. Effros reveals in unequivocal terms the *de facto* association of archaeological prospection with military efforts, which in turn provided a basis for the ideological justification of French colonial rule over vast swaths of confiscated lands, stripped bare of indigenous presence, cultures, and history—when all the while the French refused to acknowledge any engagement with ancient monuments on the part of the local populations being massacred and displaced. This process, as Effros's introduction argues, lies at the root of Western civilization's claims to stand as the legitimate successor of the empires and civilizations of Antiquity. In that sense, *Incidental Archaeologists* explores a dark nineteenth-century iteration of Europe's *translatio studii et imperii*, by which "exploration" led to "expropriation" (5), with little regard for its human cost and the actual long-term fate of Roman vestiges. This study, then, comes at an opportune time when European cultural institutions must reckon with the entangled legacy of their collections with colonial warfare and exploitation.

The case of Algeria is all the more compelling because the territories conquered by the French remained for the most part under military rule until 1870, which, in practice, left very little recourse for authorities to intervene against the destructions and looting exacted by the army and early settlers. Indeed, the damaging potential of military presence and warfare in North Africa was not lost on learned metropolitan authorities; as Effros shows, the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres sensed the urgency of surveying North African remains as early as 1833, but it took another six years before a Commission d'exploration scientifique d'Algérie was allowed to set foot in Algeria. Its members were eventually forced out in 1842 due to safety concerns related to the ongoing violence. In addition, Algerian antiquities lay outside of the prerogatives of the Commission des Monuments historiques, which was part of the Ministry of the Interior, and lacked any agency to intervene in favor of monuments in territories managed by the Ministry of War. This in effect left surveys and excavations in the hands of a few civilian antiquarians such as Adrien Berbrugger, founder of the Bibliothèque et Musée d'Alger in 1835 and appointed Inspector General of historical monuments and archaeological museums in Algeria in 1854 (chapters one, four, and five), or military officers such as Jean-Luc Carbuccia, who appointed himself chief archeologist at Lambaesis when he became positioned there in 1848, and whose role in the fate of the site is detailed in chapter three.

The tragic irony of this archaeological “discovery” of Roman North Africa, as Effros points out, is that more archaeological artifacts and ruins were “destroyed or altered beyond recognition” (25) within the first four decades of the French presence than in the previous 1,500 years; yet, the official discourse pointed at the presupposed ignorance of local populations—which were being violently subjugated and removed from the archaeological sites—as the cause of the degradation or destruction of such vestiges over time. The book thus uncovers the (often cynical) contradictions within the overall colonial logic, and reveals how the French archaeological enterprise became enmeshed with warfare and oppression. In the end, this archaeological exploration appears as a product of the strategic imperatives of the war waged against the peoples of Algeria, serving as a self-asserting enterprise seeking to justify the rightfulness of the French invasion, but barely masking the actual destruction of lives, lands, and monuments throughout the conquered territories. As Effros notes, “[w]ith the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to document the all-encompassing nature of a vicious and unforgiving system that turned ancient monuments into fuel that justified the colonialist experiment” (259)—and which literally helped to build it.

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