

# The forming process of the Algerian territory

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The lecture will present the formation and transformation process of the built environment, at territorial scale, in the Ouled Nail and Djebel Amour mounts, following the principle of organicity such as developed in the Muratorian thought. This reading makes it possible to distinguish periods of relative stability, during which the territorial organism was endowed with all the values of the type, from periods of imbalance induced by the various waves of colonization.

## **Territorial formation process between spontaneity and intentionality:**

Wanting to bring out the discrepancies between two zones of the same territory, or of a territory in relation to another (concrete or abstract), requires the preliminary knowledge of the mode of formation and of the successive transformations characterizing the territory as a historic product resulting from consensual (spontaneous) actions.

Secondly, this type of territory should be compared with that expressly introduced by colonization in order to identify the anomalies generated by the contact of the two modes of occupation and consolidation of the territory. Although of Mediterranean origin, these two modes of occupation of the territory are sometimes manifested in a repulsive and constraining way, as a consequence of the spontaneous nature of the first and the intentional nature of the second.

Because the intention emanates from a voluntarist conscience and results in the development and implementation of a project.

## **Territory: product of spontaneity**

In essence, it can be said that the cultural areas located around the Mediterranean Basin share, in view of the common climatic and historical conditions, the same mode of occupation of the territory, which is based on phases that can be easily identified as follows:

**1st** phase: Appearance of paths, in correspondence with the ridge lines, as the first humanized structure allowing only movement.

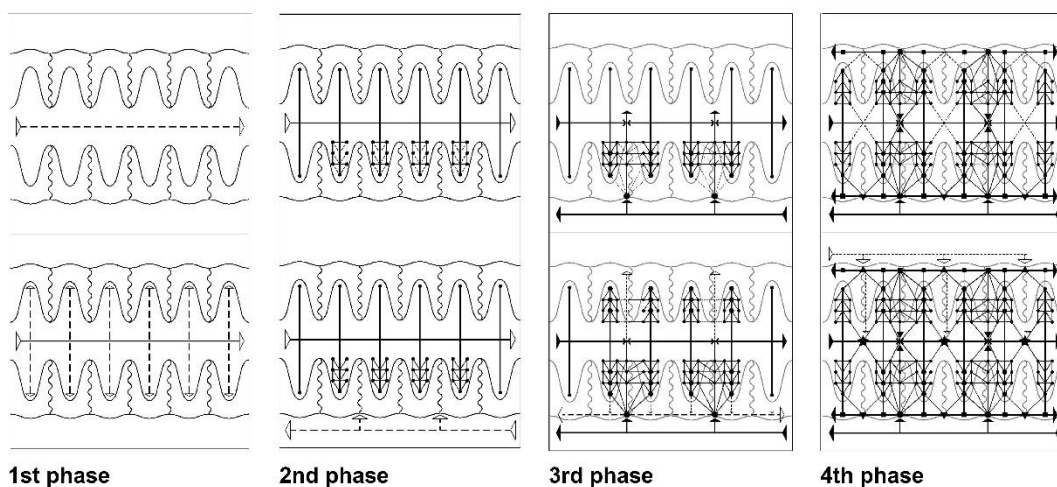
**2nd phase:** Appearance of the first settlements on the high promontories due to the mastery of agriculture and breeding. The location of the settlements on the high promontories is away from the main ridge routes and upstream from the water sources in order to direct the water flow exclusively towards the cultivated land.

**3rd phase:** Appearance of exchange points located downstream, near a group of villages solely for agriculture and breeding.

These places of exchange, judiciously located equidistant from settlements forming an elementary neighborhood system, and at the location of a water point (source or stream), in order to provide water for the animals of exchange or transport, will constitute the first proto-urban centers which come to life according to the seasons and the days of the week.

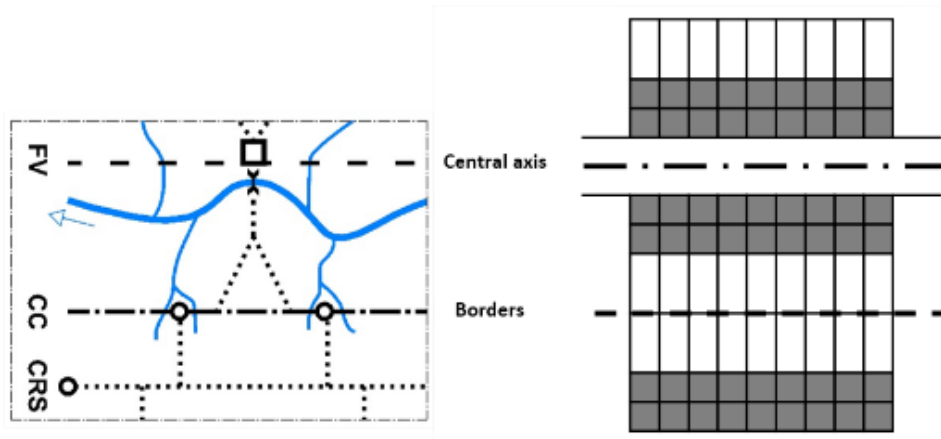
The holding of the weekly market is a consequence of the need to broaden the scope of trade in the face of the specialization of agricultural, breeding and craft activities. Thus, there is a shift from the exchange between settlements (villages and hamlets) of the same elementary neighborhood system to an exchange of this same system with other similar systems belonging to the same cultural area.

**4th phase:** Appearance of large urban centers, as the main market place for several elementary markets, and of large routes along valley bottoms and those connecting urban centers belonging to two opposite sides of the same mountain system.



**Theoretical model of the territorial process. (source: Cataldi, 1977, pp. 39-45)**

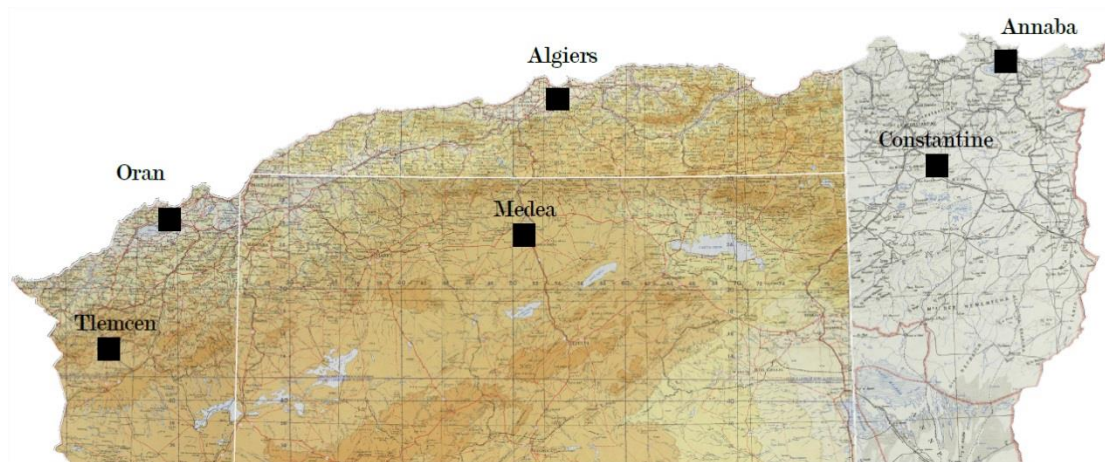
Thus, at the end of the process, two confronted mountainsides (previously isolated from each other by the presence of a relatively impassable barrier imposed by a major river) end up developing a common point of exchange downstream which will tend to reduce the intensity of relations between two mountainsides of the same mountain. This fact is similar to that recorded in an urban fabric in process of consolidation, where the inhabitants of houses occupying two parallel streets of the same block end up distancing themselves in their relationship to the advantage of those opposite.



### Similarity of behavior between urban fabric and territory

At this stage, the main valley bottoms, especially in larger places with cultivable areas, and in the plains, become the seat of major agglomerations whose radius of influence sometimes encompasses several cultural areas. The cases of extreme spatial expansion of large coastal cities are verifiable in the north of the country with the equidistance of Oran, Algiers and Annaba. Then, each of these cities rubs shoulders with another large city, placed in the interior of the country, which attests to the rivalry of two systems: one oriented towards the sea, and the other, towards the interior of the country.

These two territorial structures correspond to different historical situations in Algeria. They bear witness to the structural variation - location of poles and routes - depending on the supremacy of one of the two types of trade: maritime (Western) or land (Eastern and African). In both cases, the mountains of Ouled Nail, Amour and Ksour were areas of attraction for the nomads of the great Sahara. However, this balance between farmer and herders, maintained for millennia, was gradually broken in less than a century of colonization by the introduction of a system of farming that turned its back on the interior of the country - or rather, the heart of the country - and turned exclusively towards Europe.



**Major Algerian cities**

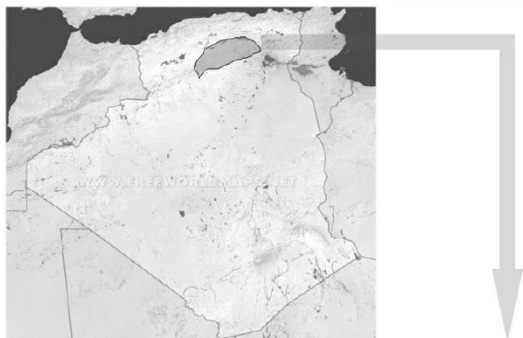
### **The territory: product of intentionality**

Intentional occupation is based on planning; planning that progresses by adjusting its approach without losing sight of its objectives.

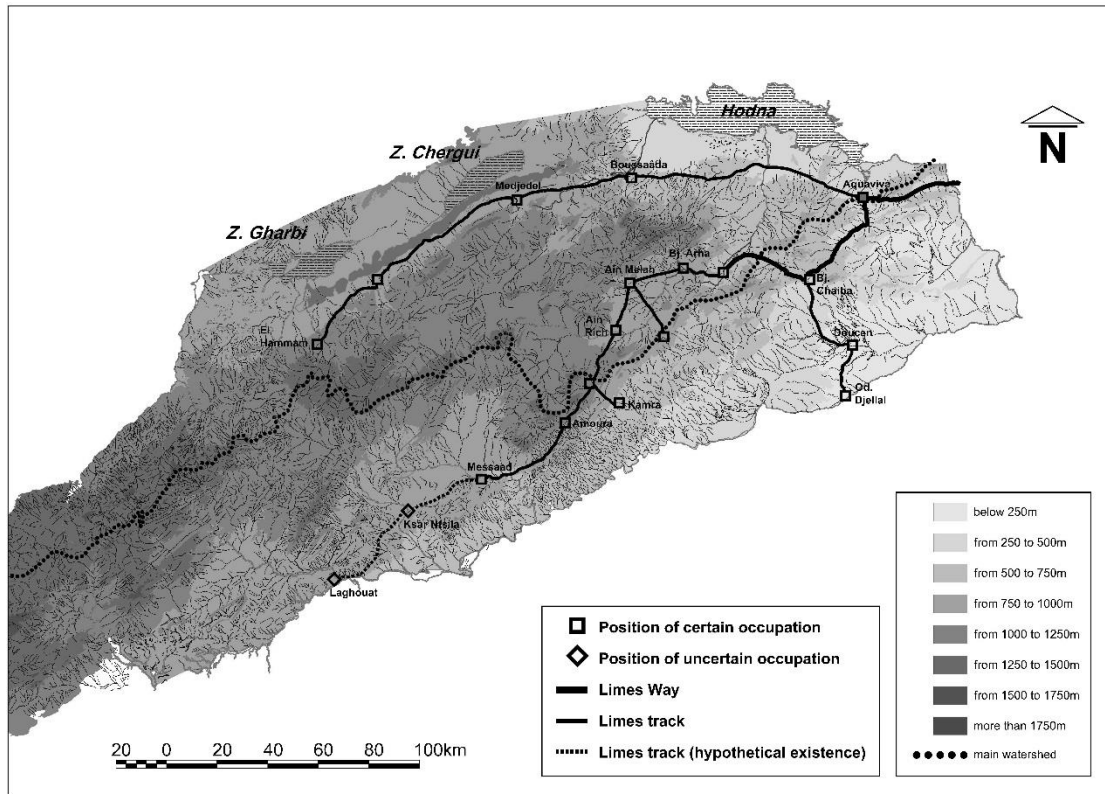
The colonization of Algeria, whether Roman or French, was oriented towards the great plains already occupied by the natives. These lands, which constituted the main stake on which rested the well-being of a society, represented - by the fact of being the last phase of the occupation of the territory, in other words the most accomplished level of progress - the place of confrontation where the supremacy of the dominant will be exercised.

The penetration borrows the valley bottoms; and effective domination proceeds through occupation and consolidation, not without violence, of the "heights" before settling in the plains.

For example, the Roman colonization of the Ouled Nail mountains began by taking the ridge route and founding a saddle settlement (Aquaviva) before progressing, subsequently, along the main valley.

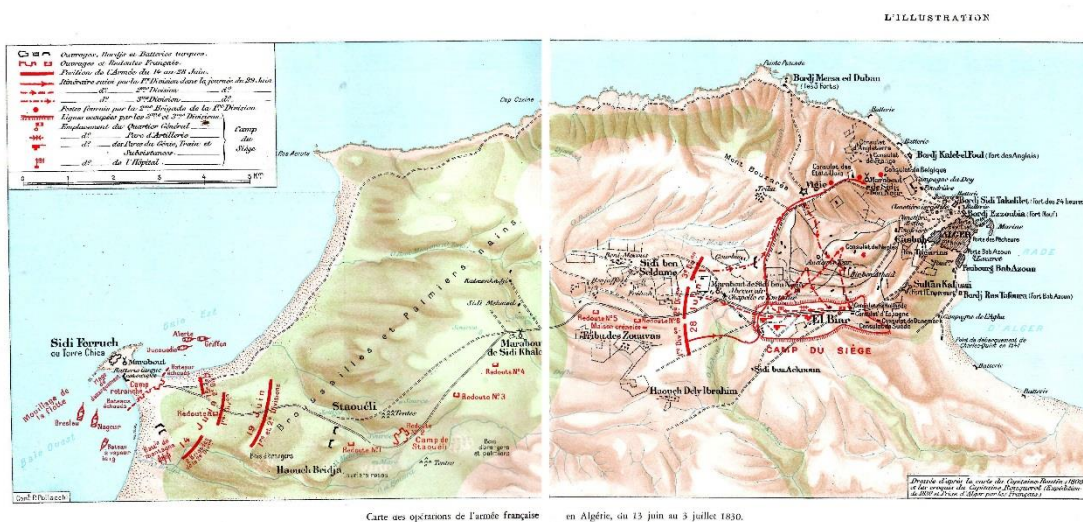






Map of Roman occupation

The military occupation of Algiers and its massif in 1830 shows the inevitable recourse to the process proper to the spontaneous occupation of the territory. The French did not, and could not, take Algiers from the front, that is to say by sea, which is why they first landed at Sidi Fredj, to the west of Algiers, in order to be able to take the ridge road and attack the Kasbah.



Map of the French army's operations in Algeria, from 13 June to 3 July 1830

Therefore, it was only after consolidating the ridge positions, in order to take the positional advantages offered by the natural morphology of the territory, that total domination could be envisaged. Thus, the small plains near El Djazaïr - El Hamma, Zeralda and Rassauta - will be invested before seeing the great plain of Mitidja occupied, not without great difficulties.



**Plain of El Hamma east of Algiers**



**Zeralda plain**



**Mitidja plain**

In comparison to the ease of access and establishment of structures built on the promontories, corresponding to the second phase of the spontaneous occupation, the man-made structures implanted across the plains require, due to their high artificiality level, permanent maintenance actions (Ouagueni, Y., 2007, pp. 174-175). Nonetheless, the entirety of these operations does not represent an absolutely technical act, but falls within the scope of a cultural sensitivity that provides a specific meaning to the relationship maintained with the nature through technical solutions developed over time by more than few generations to the point where they can be identified as “types” (Caniggia, G., Maffei, G. L., 1979, p. 235); in other words, as sets of facts that are consistent and agreed upon in such a manner to meet a shared requirement in a given geographical area at a particular time.

At the end of the colonial occupation of the north of the country, the distribution of Algerians and settlers is as follows:

- The colonists occupy the structures belonging to the 3rd and 4th phases of the spontaneously produced territorial type: the bottom centres of main valleys and plains; the military will add the pre-existing centres of the high plains and high valleys.

- The natives are confined in the structures of the first and second phases as well as certain centres in the valley bottoms. The latter, born spontaneously as market places, will be used during the liberation war to accommodate the populations of the high promontories in makeshift constructions in order to empty the mountains which have become the place of resistance.

### **The impact of the colonial occupation on the territorial balance**

First of all, it should be noted that the spontaneous occupation of a territory, which always tends to encompass the existing phases in the following ones according to a dynamic based on the search for unity and coherence, can sometimes see discrepancies appear. between the primary structures (1st and 2nd phases) and the valley bottom structures (3rd and 4th phases) by the sliding of the populations downwards and the abandonment of the promontories. Indeed, this is rarely the case in the north of the country, but is a common rule in the Sahara due to the aridity of the climate.

But this process of abandonment in favour of the plain can also be caused suddenly by the consequences of a strategy that ignores human behaviour. To better understand the traumatic force of the flood of peasant populations towards urban centres in the aftermath of independence, it is enough to imagine the effect of the 'natural dyke' phenomenon.

The analogy with the 'natural dyke effect' is permissible here insofar as the gap between the urban centres in the valley bottoms and plains and the settlements on the high and low promontories, which had been ensured by the maintenance of indigenous populations in the mountain reserves, was suddenly broken on the liberation of the country, pouring considerable masses of rural populations into the major urban centres in a relatively short period of time.

The appropriation of agricultural areas and urban centres did not take place gradually, in order to allow the necessary integration of the



structures to be conquered into the existing structures and to guarantee, moment by moment, the outcome of the formation of a territorial body endowed with all the values of the "type". This is a rush for the plain that will help empty the structures of the high and low promontories (villages and hamlets) and accentuate marginalization.



**Ruines de Ain Madhi**



**Ruines de Taouiala**

On another side of the problem, that is to say the coherence of the territorial organism, it is necessary to mention, beyond the physical impact generated by the colonial occupation, the cultural one that some benevolent researchers have seriously pointed out to the young nations that have regained their independence. It is the appearance of 'prejudices' that tend to deprive the indigenous heritage of the credibility to assume modernity. It is the renewal of a new form of marginalisation of the entire vernacular architectural heritage.

### **As a conclusion:**

The reference to the theoretical model on the spontaneous occupation of the territory made it possible to identify the structural anomalies introduced by colonization. Rehabilitating the territory does not mean returning to the structural configuration before 1830; but rather to repair the breaking points (potentializing of minor urban centres in the high valley) and to consolidate marginalized areas with the aim of regaining the continuity and unity proper to the territorial organism.

This approach, based on a global vision interested as much in the conservation and enhancement of the vernacular built heritage (human settlements and routes) as in the integration of elements of modernity, will protect today's territory from an unfortunate conception of planning which often operates by adding up juxtaposed actions considered within the limits of the large urban centres and whose problematic is sometimes reduced to questions of an urbanistic nature.



In sum, the future of mountain structures can only depend on a planning strategy, reformulated from the point of view of rehabilitation, which is able to regulate the degree of influence of lowland structures.

For this, it is necessary to recognize that the urban crisis in Algeria, which is characterized by a state of various dysfunctions and a consequent rather important deficit in housing, can find a lasting answer only through the transposition of the problem, of the city-scale to the territory, focusing efforts on the rehabilitation of settlements on high and low promontories and minor centres in the high valley.