

The Protection of Archaeological Heritage in Algeria and the Issue of Lack of Social Awareness

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Abstract

Protecting and preserving our archaeological heritage from the threats of disappearance and extinction is part of our duty to preserve our collective historical memory and the foundations of our national identity, particularly in the face of its exposure to vandalism, theft, and organized looting, which have increased in recent years.

This article offers a sociological interpretation of the issue of cultural heritage, and more specifically archaeological heritage, in Algeria and its importance. We also address the need to protect, preserve, and promote it. Finally, we seek to address the problems that hinder its management and propose solutions.

Keyword: Cultural heritage; Archaeological sites; archaeological awareness; historical memory.

1. Introduction

Preserving, protecting, and valuing cultural heritage is an imperative for all peoples, especially when this heritage is threatened with extinction due to natural or human factors.

Despite the efforts made by regional and international organizations concerned with this issue to reform the cultural sector in the development programs of Third World countries, the importance of culture in these countries has not yet received sufficient attention from political decision-makers and economic actors.

Technological progress and economic growth, which have long been the focus of attention in these countries, cannot alone guarantee the well-being of these societies if they do not take into account the promotion of the fundamental cultural and social values on which the social life of peoples is based and which form the foundation of any strong and integrated development.

Any development program must therefore take into account the importance of the cultural dimension, because the culture of any people is reflected in the individual or collective actions of both current generations and their ancestors, and the boundaries of this culture exist within the collective memory of these peoples. where the chronological sequence is subject to the richness of its archaeological heritage, especially the work to protect and preserve it. This requires every country that is interested in and proud of its cultural history to take responsibility for ensuring a good knowledge of archaeological sites and remains and to take care to protect and preserve them.

Through this paper, we aim to highlight the importance of cultural heritage, specifically the archaeological heritage of Algeria, and the need to protect, preserve, and value it. We also seek to

identify the problems that hinder its management and propose some solutions. This will be done through the following questions:

- ✓ What is the importance of archaeological heritage and what is its reality in Algeria?
- ✓ What are the measures and regulatory mechanisms adopted by the Algerian state to protect its archaeological heritage?
- ✓ How can we protect our archaeological heritage more effectively?

2. Archaeological heritage: definition of the concept

Heritage is generally defined as "the accumulation of traditions, customs, experiences, expertise, arts, and sciences of a people, forming an essential part of its social, human, political, historical, and moral fabric, and documenting its relationship with past generations who worked to create and enrich this heritage" (Jabour Abdelnour, 1984, p. 63).

Al-Jabri highlights the importance of heritage as a repository of rich and diverse human experiences, saying: "Heritage is a reservoir of ideas, visions, and perceptions from which the nation draws what is useful to it in the present or what can contribute to movement and progress. Therefore, selection is necessary, and the criterion for selection is always the concerns of the present and the aspirations of the future" (Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, 1991, p.38).

Heritage is a cultural and civilizational wealth that has accumulated over the ages. It is a true expression of intellectual, cultural, and civilizational achievements, representing the identity of peoples and nations and embodying the culture of the individual, society, and the nation. It also plays a major role in connecting the past and the present. Therefore, the process of reviving and protecting heritage is important in order to serve reality on the one hand and to prove belonging and existence on the other.

Archaeological heritage is defined as "any trace left by civilizations or previous generations, whether on the surface of the earth or submerged under water, whether fixed or movable, documents or manuscripts related to the arts, sciences, beliefs, traditions, daily life, public events, or other matters dating back to prehistoric or historical periods, which prove their national or global value. It also includes archaeological finds displayed in museums and those in private collections, as well as archaeological materials that have not yet been discovered. Archaeological heritage is considered public property of the state, except for items whose ownership has been proven by individuals (Mohammed bin Ali Al-Haj and Yasser Hashim Al-Hayaji, 2023, p. 236).

While specialists in the field of archaeology have focused on the care, preservation, and restoration of archaeological heritage from a technical and artistic perspective, jurists and legal experts have focused on defining it, clarifying its characteristics, and distinguishing it from other similar terms and concepts due to its legal importance. We find that the Algerian legislator defined cultural heritage in Law 04-98 in its second article: "Cultural heritage of the nation within the meaning of this law includes all cultural property, real estate, and movable property located on and within national property, owned by natural or legal persons subject to private law, as well as those found in the subsoil of inland and regional waters inherited from successive civilizations from prehistoric times to the present day" (Law No. 04-98 of June 15, 1998).

The Charter for the Management of Archaeological Heritage issued by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) in 1990 defines archaeological heritage in Article 401 as "a part of the tangible heritage to which the historical approach is applied in order to arrive at fundamental knowledge, including all traces of human existence and the various places where human activities

have taken place, represented by structures and artifacts of all kinds, whether on land or submerged under water, and the various equipment associated with them"(Charter for the Management of Archaeological Heritage, Article 401, 1990).

Archaeological heritage is therefore part of the tangible cultural heritage, which includes a variety of elements ranging from architectural monuments, such as ancient buildings and historical structures, to movable monuments, such as artifacts and treasures found in various locations, in addition to other cultural monuments such as documents and manuscripts covering various sciences, beliefs, traditions, and skills that are passed down through generations.

3. The importance of Algeria's archaeological heritage

Algeria's archaeological heritage is one of the most prominent features reflecting its rich and diverse cultural history, spanning different periods of time and embracing the heritage of multiple civilizations that have shaped the cultural identity of Algerian society. This makes Algeria a living witness to the successive stages of civilizations that have passed through it, such as the Phoenician, Roman, and Ottoman civilizations, etc.

Algeria's archaeological heritage, which is one of the main sources of its history, is rich in archaeological sites from various successive civilizations and relics from the past buried in its soil or preserved in caves and grottos, in addition to artifacts preserved in museums or by collectors.

Algeria is rich in such archaeological sites, divided between archaeological parks such as Tassili, Hoggar, Saharan Atlas, Touat-Gourara, and archaeological sites located in urban or rural areas such as Tipaza, Dj'mila, Beni Hammad Castle, and Timgad. These archaeological sites reflect the remains of the activities of their original inhabitants and are indicators of their relationship with their physical and social environment. In other words, they serve as evidence of the daily life of these social groups, reflecting their past in a more profound way than that reconstructed in written documents chronicling events and the life of a social class or group, where a large part of the history of these groups is often neglected.

The importance of archaeological sites stems mainly from their historical depth, which often goes back to the earliest traces of human beings and successive human civilizations. If we take the Tassili enclosure, for example, it contains traces that allow us to trace the basic stages of human development from thousands of years ago to the present day, which is why it is of national and international interest. Archaeological heritage is therefore a witness to an important aspect of our society's civilization over thousands of years and an expression of our national identity, reminding us of the values that guided our ancestors and helping us to revive the spirit of the past and promote awareness of the authenticity of this heritage as a fundamental basis for social cohesion and solidarity in the present and the future.

4. The reality of archaeological heritage in Algeria

The concept of preserving cultural and archaeological heritage has two meanings:

The first means preserving and protecting historical monuments and sites without making any modifications or changes to them. We must protect our heritage by preventing any vandalism or looting, especially in light of the organized looting of archaeological sites and historical monuments, as well as the destruction and vandalism caused by uncontrolled urban expansion and certain development projects.

The second meaning refers to reviving heritage as part of our identity through display, maintenance, and restoration using scientific methods and tools. We need to collect, study, and highlight this heritage, and above all, we must take responsibility for documenting and reproducing it.

The issue of protecting our archaeological heritage and preserving it from danger is raised within the framework of preserving the foundations of our national identity. However, this heritage faces several challenges that threaten its sustainability and protection from damage and destruction. Many factors contribute to this, most notably the deterioration of many monuments and archaeological sites resulting from neglect and insufficient attention to the cultural and historical value of these sites. Human encroachment includes unlicensed construction and accidental or intentional vandalism by some local residents. are among the most significant problems facing archaeological sites, leading to the destruction or irreparable damage of large parts of them, especially in light of the vandalism, theft, and looting that has been accelerating in recent years due to uncontrolled urban expansion and development works in various areas.

Since the use of urban spaces is often unregulated and disrespectful of the sites, we can easily imagine the number of archaeological sites that are vandalized each year. The situation is exacerbated in areas undergoing rapid urban expansion or road construction.

Such practices of looting, theft, and destruction of this cultural heritage often make headlines in the press, especially in print media, in a clear indication of the seriousness of the situation. This is what we read, for example, in Al-Nasr newspaper, which reported that local associations in El Taref had appealed to the relevant authorities to intervene to address the destruction and vandalism of archaeological sites in Laayoune and Boukos by local residents. The associations pointed out that "these archaeological sites and the rare artifacts they contain, which bear witness to successive civilizations dating back to ancient times, are now being used by residents for construction, through the destruction of these artifacts, which consist of stones of various shapes, such as tombs, stone mills, bowls, etc. and others, while other people are building their individual homes on some archaeological sites, threatening their disappearance and destruction" (Farouk Badis, Al-Nasr newspaper, 2010).

The associations also called on the authorities to take the necessary measures to protect them from smuggling, given the emergence of specialized networks at the borders that smuggle artifacts to Tunisia and from there to Europe, especially since the region has more than 200 archaeological sites that bear witness to the succession of different civilizations. Documents indicate that the province remains an open space for archaeological sites that are vulnerable to looting and vandalism in the absence of protection. Every time construction and excavation work is carried out to complete projects, important archaeological sites and monuments are damaged, the latest being the discovery of a mass grave dating back to ancient times in the Sebaà R'qoud area during excavation work carried out by a Japanese company to complete the East-West Highway project (Farouk Badis, Al-Nasr newspaper, 2010).

Among the other archaeological sites that have been damaged and neglected is the old Kasbah district in the upper part of the capital, a site in dire need of restoration. It is considered one of the oldest Turkish neighborhoods in the country, but it suffers from severe neglect. Despite the plans, programs, and funds allocated since the 1980s to restore and save the Kasbah and preserve its cultural and civilizational uniqueness, which reflects the memory of the Algerian nation through the restoration of its palaces, mosques, and historic buildings, the process has been limited to shoring up some of the buildings in danger of collapse with wooden supports.

The lack of awareness among the local community and visitors of the importance of archaeological heritage is one of the main factors leading to its mistreatment, accompanied by a failure to comply with rules of protection and respect. The Algerian newspaper Al-Shorouk reported that in recent years,

more than one site in the Tassili n'Ajjer region (the world's largest open-air museum) has been vandalized by visitors and passersby. Some sites located near the city of Djanet, such as the Tissaras area, have not been spared from vandalism because they are located in visitor rest areas. The newspaper explained that vandals write their names, the names of their cities, and their emotional thoughts, which causes obvious damage to historical heritage. In addition, careless visitors set fires and throw trash, metal cans, and plastic bags (Al-Shorouk Online newspaper, 12/31/2017).

The above is just a small sample of the damage, abuse, and vandalism suffered by Algerian archaeological sites, which are clear indicators that these monuments are victims of a lack of awareness among Algerian citizens of their historical and tourist importance, as well as a lack of care, attention, and protection from the relevant authorities, in addition to the absence of a civil society initiative to highlight the issues and challenges facing these monuments and raise awareness of their importance and protection.

5. Regulatory mechanisms for the protection of archaeological heritage in Algeria

Faced with this situation, the Algerian state is seeking to make greater efforts to protect archaeological sites and monuments, both at the institutional and legal level and at the level of the authorities responsible for protecting, managing, and exploiting cultural heritage. Specialized departments have been created and efforts have been made to provide sufficient financial and human resources to combat the destruction of cultural property and archaeological heritage on the one hand, and to ensure the necessary international cooperation in this field on the other.

5.1 At the national level

Algeria is one of the few Arab countries to have a specialized agency responsible for preventing and combating the smuggling of antiquities, namely the "Sub-Directorate for the Security of Cultural Property," which is part of the "Directorate for the Legal Protection of Cultural Property." In addition, there is also the Central Unit for Combating Attacks on National Cultural Heritage, which is part of the General Directorate of National Security. This unit is responsible for "operational investigations related to various acts and attacks that damage the national cultural heritage, such as theft and smuggling of archaeological objects, artifacts, and works of art, deterioration of the condition of archaeological sites and their looting, and art forgery," in order to guide the investigations carried out by other judicial police services and to develop strategies to combat the smuggling of cultural property (Ridha Fraoua, 2009, pp. 6-7).

This unit carries out its tasks in close cooperation with the Directorate for the Legal Protection of Cultural Property, the Office for the Management and Exploitation of Cultural Property, the National Center for Archaeology, and museum curators.

The Directorate General of National Security took the lead in establishing a specialized structure to combat damage to cultural heritage at the end of 1996, when it created a central unit specializing in combating damage to national cultural heritage. and subsequently reinforced it (between 2008 and 2012) by creating forty-seven (47) other specialized units spread across the country's provinces (Laaribi Mejahid, April 2022, p. 477).

In parallel, the National Gendarmerie Command formed seven special regional units tasked with combating damage to cultural property in 2005, at the level of the six regional commands of the National Gendarmerie in Blida, Oran, Bechar, Ouargla, Constantine (two cells) and Tamanrasset, in addition to plans to set up 20 surveillance centers in the Tassili and Hoggar regions announced in 2010 (La Nouvelle République Online newspaper, 20/04/2021).

5.2 At the international level

Global interest in heritage and its protection, and related issues, led to the establishment of national and international institutions to take care of it and protect it, especially after World War I and then after World War II. The United Nations and its specialized agencies, such as UNESCO, have helped to establish bodies that assist in the protection of historic buildings and archaeological sites, such as the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the International Council of Museums (ICOM), and the International Center for the Protection and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) in Rome.

For example, Article 9 of the 1970 UNESCO Convention calls on member states to participate in international measures to preserve the cultural heritage of other member states that are victims of looting and smuggling of their archaeological and ethnological heritage. It also calls on them to conclude bilateral agreements aimed at ensuring the protection of cultural property particularly vulnerable to looting and trafficking, such as sites, artifacts, and antiquities" (Ridha Fraoua, 2009, p. 8).

Algeria is also one of the few Arab countries that has already resorted to concluding a bilateral agreement to protect its cultural heritage from smuggling. It has signed a special agreement with Argentina on the mutual protection of cultural property in the event of smuggling or illicit trafficking. In addition, it has initiated the conclusion of two similar bilateral agreements with China and Peru (Ridha Fraoua, 2009, p. 8).

In this context, the cooperation mechanism established by Article 9 of the 1970 UNESCO Convention appears to be an important mechanism that needs to be further activated and utilized, as it allows for targeted protection and is therefore effective against theft and smuggling of cultural property to specific countries.

3.5 Achieved results

Thanks to these security measures, both at the national and international levels, Algeria has been able to recover many artifacts and antiquities stolen from museums or archaeological sites, including the following:

- ✓ The National Gendarmerie reported that during the first six months of this year (2025), it recorded 116 cases, resulting in the arrest of 104 people, eight of whom were imprisoned, in addition to the recovery of 108 artifacts (Latifa Darib, Al-Masaa Online newspaper, 02/09/2025).
- ✓ Between 2005 and the end of 2019, the National Gendarmerie units achieved tangible results in this field, which translated into 750 cases filed, based on preliminary investigation reports by the judicial police. leading to the arrest of more than 550 people, including dozens of foreign nationals, and contributing to the recovery of more than 27,000 cultural objects from various periods, from prehistory to the modern era. as well as contributing to the discovery of more than 350 archaeological sites, which were reported to the relevant authorities represented by the Ministry of Culture and Arts so that the necessary measures could be taken to protect them (L'Arabi Mjahid, April 2022, p. 482).
- ✓ Police officers also seized 48 gold and silver coins in the province of Tiaret and arrested three people on charges of illegal trafficking in antiquities. The gendarmerie in the province of Tipaza arrested individuals involved in the trafficking of ancient artifacts and antiquities. They seized 92 coins dating back to the Vandal era in North Africa in the 6th century AD, three pottery vessels

dating back to the 1st century AD, two bronze statues, and a clay oil lamp dating back to the Roman period.

- ✓ According to a report by the Directorate for the Protection of Cultural Property of the Ministry of Culture, between 2000 and 2012, the various units responsible for combating the smuggling of cultural heritage recovered 10,455 items classified as national heritage that had been stolen from museums or archaeological sites in eastern or southern Algeria and dealt with 109 cases in which 132 people were convicted, 14 of whom were foreign nationals (La Nouvelle République Online newspaper, 20/04/2021).

Despite the various results achieved in attempts to stop the outflow of cultural property abroad by various security and military agencies, or through administrative measures taken by the relevant ministry in the context of enacting legislation or establishing agencies responsible for management, valuation, and protection, the reality on the ground confirms that neglect continues to affect many archaeological sites. Many of them remain vulnerable to looting and theft by individuals who, over the years, have managed to steal valuable artifacts and smuggle some of them out of Algeria.

6. Protecting our archaeological heritage: obstacles and solutions

Despite all these security measures, illegal excavations and the theft and smuggling of artifacts that are part of the cultural heritage protected by the state continue to defy these deterrent measures. This raises the need to adopt a more effective and rigorous security system and constant vigilance on the part of those concerned, as well as the need to mobilize various other sectors (other than the security and legal sectors) and segments of society and involve them in the fight against this organized crime that directly affects the collective memory, through the following mechanisms:

6.1 At the institutional and security level

- ✓ The fact that most archaeological sites are not subject to any kind of security, whether night or day, is one of the priorities that must be taken into account, by providing a range of material and human resources (specialized security guards, fences, lighting) and, above all, the use of advanced technological means used in various developed countries to protect their archaeological sites, such as remote sensing devices and surveillance cameras. This is especially important given the large number and wide geographical spread of archaeological sites (some of which are registered and documented, while others have not yet been registered), which makes it difficult to control them using human resources, as this would require large numbers of security personnel to be present at or near archaeological sites to guard them. Realistically, this cannot be implemented at all sites, which necessitates the use of modern technologies and the installation of surveillance devices and cameras connected to central operations rooms to control and monitor archaeological sites accurately, with guard posts placed at strategic locations to enable security personnel to intervene at sites threatened by looting or vandalism. In addition, they should be equipped with satellite communication devices, GPS devices, and other modern devices that help them perform their duties. This equipment must be part of a clear security plan aimed at protecting archaeological sites.
- ✓ It is also important to exercise caution and provide the necessary monitoring of certain websites, as a virtual market is emerging on the internet where rare stolen artifacts are offered for sale.
- ✓ Any project or discussion on archaeological heritage involving policies, laws, plans, and programs must be defined with the involvement of the relevant authorities of scientific and cultural institutions concerned with cultural heritage. It is also important to emphasize the

importance of investing in informal initiatives and activating regional and international cooperation in the context of developing scientific practices that contribute to the protection and preservation of cultural heritage, which requires collective responsibility.

6.2 At the socio-cultural level

The lack of awareness, or more accurately, the ignorance of citizens about the importance of archaeological heritage is one of the main reasons for the loss of a large part of their cultural property. This requires efforts to raise awareness of the importance of this cultural heritage in order to create a link between citizens and their heritage, so that they contribute out of conviction to the protection of this valuable wealth. Heritage can only be protected if individuals are educated and made aware of its importance and that its preservation contributes to the preservation of national identity. No matter how strict the laws and deterrent measures are, they can never replace the moral commitment and awareness needed to deter citizens from destroying archaeological heritage. The protection of heritage is not limited to public authorities; it is a collective responsibility that requires the combined efforts of all members of society. While the state is officially responsible for preserving the national historical heritage and protecting it from all forms of vandalism, looting, and destruction, the moral responsibility for protecting and preserving this heritage also lies with citizens. Once this awareness is achieved, it will be a positive factor that will encourage citizens not to contribute to any damage to archaeological sites, but rather to work to protect them.

This archaeological awareness can be developed and strengthened among different segments of society by activating the roles of other sectors, as follows:

- ✓ Teaching concepts of cultural heritage and raising awareness of its importance among students is extremely important, as they are the builders of society and the torchbearers of this heritage in the future. Introducing such concepts into school curricula and textbooks and organizing scientific competitions related to this heritage can have a significant impact on the preservation and protection of national heritage, especially in light of the decline in historical and archaeological culture. Many of our young people may not know the historical sequence of successive civilizations in our country or even the most important archaeological sites scattered throughout it, and this deficiency must be remedied through educational programs.
- ✓ Providing adequate financial support to civil society organizations active in the field of cultural heritage and encouraging them to conduct studies and organize forums and exhibitions on the protection of archaeological heritage at the local, national, and even international levels. These organizations can also play an important role in protecting archaeological heritage by creating specialized magazines or websites on the diversity of our archaeological heritage and its components to highlight its importance, document it, and help researchers and those interested in this field find relevant information. More broadly, they can organize awareness-raising initiatives for citizens and educational institutions outside the context of special events, especially in areas where archaeological sites are located, such as organizing study days, open days at museums and archaeological sites in partnership with the police and customs authorities, information days, poster campaigns, leaflet distribution, and traveling exhibitions in schools, tourist sites, and places frequented by the public, as well as organizing forums on cultural heritage for university and high school students and local communities. These groups must be involved in the protection of archaeological sites by raising their awareness of archaeology and sensitizing them to the importance of these monuments so that they contribute to their protection.

- ✓ The role of the media should be activated, especially since Algeria lacks a specific media policy or, in other words, a media strategy on the looting and illegal trafficking of cultural property. Regular and objective media coverage of the smuggling of archaeological artifacts and its negative impact on the national cultural heritage can contribute effectively to preventing this phenomenon and mobilizing all components of society. Various media and communication outlets can play an active role in broadening interest in the national cultural heritage to create cultural awareness of the importance of antiquities among a large segment of society. Appropriate media publicity should also be used to promote archaeological sites and attract citizens to visit them, as such visits would deepen their awareness of archaeology.

7. CONCLUSION

Algeria is rich in archaeological heritage that bears witness to the historical roots of successive human civilizations that have shaped its national identity. This heritage also reflects the depth of the relationship between society and culture, between the past and the present, and contributes to building society for its renaissance, especially when the latter witnesses attempts to obliterate its identity, as happened in Algeria during a long period of French colonialism, which created a rupture that prevented Algerian society from benefiting from the continuity necessary to invest in and care for its cultural heritage. This rupture between society and its archaeological heritage has made the latter a matter for a particular elite, whose interests vary according to their components.

In other words, the culture of archaeological heritage in our society is in fact more a matter for the elite than for society as a whole. This is reinforced by the official mechanisms used to protect this heritage, which generally focus on the deterrent aspect, while the social and cultural aspects come last, if not ignored altogether. This calls for the activation of these aspects and efforts to invest in them to ensure a better level of protection for our archaeological heritage and historical memory.

Ultimately, the preservation of archaeological heritage remains a collective responsibility that requires integrated efforts to achieve the sustainability of this legacy, which is an essential part of our history and national identity and reflects a rich civilization that spans the ages and continues to inspire new generations.

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