

Remains of the Day: Negotiations of French and Roman Imperial Legacies within the
Monument Aux Morts of Constantine, Algeria.

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Colonial Cities in the French Empire

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Figure 1. *Monument aux morts*, Constantine, Algeria (1918-1930). Architects: Marcel Dumoulin and Maurice de La Chapelle. Credit: Consulat Général d’Algérie à Paris.

On the towering cliffside edge of Constantine stands a triumphant imperial arch that gazes out over the landscape beneath it, towering over both the city and the surrounding valley. The twenty-one-meter arch presents itself in traditional Roman triumphant form, bearing a central passageway flanked by two columned piers and an inscribed attic [Figure 2]. Atop the arch is a statue of a winged victory perched atop a globe, suggestively stepping its foot out towards the valley in promise of glorious flight. Etched into the attic’s stone is an inscription that reads: “PRO PATRIA MDCCCXIV – XVIII [1914 - 1918],” betraying the arch’s provenance to the twentieth century. The arch’s altogether state of preservation, too, juxtaposes against its

near-strict citation of classical ancient form; the perfectly cut stones bound tightly together give the arch a rigid, intact structure too clean-cut and polished to have survived centuries under the Algerian sun. Built nearly seventeen centuries later than the architectural vernacular it employs, the arch stands to bridge two chronologically disparate colonial projects across time. Both reviving — and altering — the blueprints of ancient Roman colonization, the *Monument aux morts* serves to negotiate a modern understanding of the twentieth-century French imperial project. It is through this deliberate form, filtered through the visuals of ancient conquest, that the arch preserves (and *remembers*) France's colonial legacy in Algeria; we can best understand this monument as an embodiment of that legacy, subjected to the same conditions of defacement and erosive decay as its physical material. The arch's continued perch atop the city seems to be as potentially impermanent as French colonial rule over Algeria; since 1968, repeated efforts have been made to expatriate, vandalize, and/or destroy the monument to remove its colonial reminder.¹ However, like France's indelible colonial influence on Algeria, the arch remains with its looming presence on Constantine's outcropping. To best understand how the forms of the monument function in the present day, we must parse apart the nuances and contradictions of the French imperial relationship with ancient Rome. It is only through dissecting the unstable and flexible Franco-Roman identity that we can begin to articulate the meanings carved into this monument's individual forms.

Construction on the *Monument aux morts* commenced on November 18, 1918, making Constantine the first Algerian municipality to begin work on a monument for World War I. Designed by architects Marcel Dumoulin and Maurice de La Chapelle, the monument was envisioned to commemorate the local Algerian soldiers who fought on behalf of France in World

¹ Susan Slyomovics, "Creating Provenance: Ahmed Benyahia and Public Sculptures in the Constantine Region," essay, in *Monuments Decolonized: Algeria's French Colonial Past* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024), 139–90, 171.



Figure 2. *Monument aux morts*, Constantine, Algeria (April 10, 1959). Credit: Images Défense, Établissement de Communication Production Audiovisuelle de la Défense.

War 1.² The names of eight hundred and forty-four Constantine residents who perished in the war are engraved into copper plates within the arch's passageway. Many of the names commemorate the Algerian Muslim soldiers who were sent to the frontlines of battles like Verdun or Ypres, where they died in service of France.³ Also inside the passageway were four chiseled busts of French marshals who proved victorious in the Great War. The monument took nearly twelve years to complete and was finally inaugurated with a celebration in May of 1930, led by then President of the Republic Gaston Doumergue, as part of French Algeria's centenary celebrations.⁴ Images of the ceremony [Figure 3] show the monument staged amongst a sea of colonial soldiers flanking either side. A dramatically oversized French flag drapes over the central archway while birds flock above. The staging of this architectural debut — along with the commemorative physical form of the monument — emphasizes the arch's originally imagined function of incorporating fallen Indigenous soldiers as active *protagonists* of French global conquest.

In order to articulate this message of provincial, colonized *participation* in imperial victory, it is easy to understand why the French turned to the Roman ruins they newly possessed upon Algeria's shores. Upon occupation, the French army documented and chronicled the extensive oeuvre of Roman remains scattered across Algeria; though many were in ruin, their sustained existence against the eroding desert testified to a vitality and persistent grasp of the foreign colonial force that built it millennia before.⁵ According to historian of Colonial Algeria Patricia Lorcin, the French understood this architectural heritage as undeniable proof that the

² Ibid., 167.

³ Ibid., 170.

⁴ Gérard Seguy, "The Constantine War Memorial," Centre de Documentation Historique sur l'Algérie, n.d., <https://www.cdha.fr/le-monument-aux-morts-de-constantine>.

⁵ Patricia M. E. Lorcin, "Pax Romana Transposed: Rome as an Exemplar for Western Imperialism," essay, in *The Routledge History of Western Empires*, ed. Kristen McKenzie and Robert Aldrich (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 409–22, 414.



Figure 3. Inauguration of the *Monument Aux Morts* (1930). Credit: Centre de Documentation Historique sur l'Algérie.

frontiers of Western civilization belonged (or were even *predestined*) to reach into the deserts of North Africa: “The Roman ruins demonstrated that the seal of Rome was indelible. Thus the ‘Latins’ who came to Algeria in the wake of the conquest could well imagine they were returning to their abandoned domain to repossess their property (*leur bien*).”⁶ Thus, these Roman sites became repositories for French colonial identification and projection, helping to mentally reframe the French colonial project in Algeria as a reclamation of rightful heritage as the (exclusive) heirs to this great Western civilization. This function was explicitly recognized by the archeological explorer Alfred-Louis Delattre of the *Société des missionnaires d’Afrique*, who wrote to challenge any static understanding of these ruins that relegated their potency to the past, exhaling them as *living* and *active lieux de mémoire*.⁷ The memories activated by Roman architecture helped to recast the chronology of the Algerian frontier, not only defining the Arab population as unoriginal newcomers but also justifying “a particularly brutal modern campaign by finding parallels in the ancient past.”⁸ By imagining these ruins as active agents in an ongoing colonial project, the French sought to legitimize and justify their imperial endeavors within the footprints of Rome’s conquest of North Africa. The decay of these ruins only further punctuates France’s self-imposed role as an invaluable *protector* of this cultural heritage, justifying their wrenching of control from the local Arab population that had purportedly neglected and even destroyed these remains.⁹

Yet it was not enough to merely preserve and protect these fragile structures. Rather, Roman classical form had to be replicated, amplified, and spread in order to fully cement this

⁶ Patricia M. E. Lorcin, “Rome and France in Africa: Recovering Colonial Algeria’s Latin Past,” *French Historical Studies* 25, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 295–329, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00161071-25-2-295>, 319.

⁷ Bonnie Effros, “Reviving Carthage’s Martyrs: Archaeology, Memory, and Catholic Devotion in the French Protectorate of Tunisia,” *Archeologia Medievale: Cultura Materiale, Insediamenti, Territorio* 46 (January 2019): 66–73, 70.

⁸ Bonnie Effros, *Incidental Archaeologists: French Officers and the Rediscovery of Roman North Africa* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 9.

⁹ Lorcin, “Rome and France in Africa,” 319.

Latin reclamation of Algerian space. In fact, the *Monument aux morts* was modeled after one of the ruins excavated by the French in their survey of Algeria: the Arch of Trajan at Timgad, built during the reign of Septimus Severus and located a hundred and nineteen miles south of Constantine [Figure 4]. The *Monument aux morts* replicates the same tripartite structure, notably replacing the lower minor passageways with a raised plinth. The historical significance of the arch — and the Roman colony of Timgad at large — further informs this choice of architectural citation. The town served as a military camp built into the foothills of the Aurès mountains as a means of both displaying Roman grandeur and subduing the local “savage” tribes who resisted Roman incorporation.¹⁰ The sedentary arch served as a means for the Romans to make literal their cementation of their influence over the land in permanent stone, creating a static monument of ownership left unchallenged by nomadic tribes and their impermanent, mobile architecture. By replicating the architectural form of the Arch of Trajan, the French redefine their project in the terms (and legacy) of this *civilizing* mission, now replicated amid an urban environment where more and more subjects will feel its permanence and message.

This desire to identify and affiliate with the Roman imperial project manifests itself in the architecture of the *Monument aux morts* by replicating the forms and associations of its predecessors. In the form of the triumphal arch, the unornamented, flat attic draws attention to the central inscription that defines the monument’s message and purpose. “PRO PATRIA MDCCCXIV – XVIII” connects the arch back to the Roman project through its usage of Roman Numerals, further casting the French project as a continuation of this *Latin* imperial reclamation. Upon occupation, the French paid close attention to the Latin inscriptions they found across ruins; after visiting the ruins of the Roman military camp in Lambaesis in 1851, epigraphical specialist Léon Renier wrote,

¹⁰ Slyomovics, *Monuments Decolonized*, 167.



Figure 4. Arch of Trajan at Timgad, Algeria (c. 193-211 CE). Credit: World History Encyclopedia.

“Not only do I understand, but I can write it; look: these are our letters, this is our language... It is true; the *Roumis* are the sons of the *Roumâns*; when they took this land, they were simply taking back the property of their fathers.”¹¹

In the eyes of the French, the use of Latin script (and language) signified a rightful, continued domination of all the land below these monuments. Emphasizing French’s mutual usage of this *original* Latin Alphabet serves to recast Arabic script (and Arab presence) as a recent, *foreign* phenomenon.

Lorcin notes that this French appropriation of the Roman imperial legacy was “not a predetermined justification of colonization,” instead emerging as a “multidirectional process

¹¹ Bonnie Effros, “Colliding Empires: French Display of Roman Antiquities Expropriated from Postconquest Algeria, 1830–1870,” essay, in *Objects of War: The Material Culture of Conflict and Displacement*, ed. Leora Auslander and Tara Zahra (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 50–77, 54.

whose disparate components came together gradually.”¹² France did not unequivocally claim Rome as their republican governmental predecessor; since the sixteenth century, historians and scholars intensely debated the origins of French institutions (whether Germanic, Celtic, or Roman) in combination with similar debates on the racial origin of the French people.¹³ Widespread French identification with Roman origins became further emphasized and cemented into stone with the mass acquisition of French colonial territories in North Africa starting in the nineteenth century. The *Pax Romana* and *Mission Civilisatrice* of the French empire were not analogous, direct cognates, instead, having to be reimagined and reframed to find a sustained continuity between the two imperial projects.

If the ideological forms of the two imperial projects could be interchanged, chiseled, and spliced together, so too were their material forms. The “Roman past [becomes] an integral part of the colonial present,” at the same time as its ruins are used to form the *integral* foundations of French colonial buildings and infrastructure.¹⁴ Many French towns and settlements were built around Roman roads, aqueducts, forts, and cisterns, putting these ancient forms of colonial infrastructure in service of their modern colonial project. This reutilization, reclamation, and *reviving* was encouraged by administrators and military leaders throughout French Algeria. General Thomas-Robert Bugeaud encouraged the use of Roman bricks as *spolia* as cornerstones and archways in the construction of French buildings.¹⁵ While archeological historian Bonnie Effros notes that there are records of “trepidation” and “distress” at this destruction and ransacking of historic sites by some French Officers, usage of Roman *spolia* continued widespread throughout the colony.¹⁶ However, this practice was not without precedent in the

¹² Lorcin, “Rome and France in Africa,” 327.

¹³ Ibid., 317.

¹⁴ Ibid., 326.

¹⁵ Ibid., 304.

¹⁶ Bonnie Effros, “Colliding Empires,” 60.

urban fabric of Algeria. The Djama'a al-Kabir mosque in Algiers reutilized Roman cippi and cornice sections in its minaret, and even the Arab urban infrastructure of Constantine utilized Roman columns, bridges, and foundations before French occupation.¹⁷ Across Algeria, under both French and Arab control, these Roman remains were haphazardly reconfigured as “symbolic building blocks” into the material “stone and mortar” form of French settlements and their “sites of ancestral memory” [Figure 5].¹⁸

This prevalent usage of *spolia*, and the material flexibility/vulnerability of these Roman ruins, begins to further complicate the French's perceived role and legacy as *preserver* of Latin imperialism. While the French claimed to be continuing and honoring the Roman imperial project, they desecrated and destroyed remains when they proved inconvenient to modern “progress.” In his analysis of the French military's impact on the Algerian landscape, Michael Greenhalgh notes that by 1863, nearly all visible, well-preserved Roman ruins were destroyed or obscured under French urban development.¹⁹ In fact, Constantine had already had an authentic triumphant arch before the French built theirs atop the city's cliff face, but it was demolished to clear the land for the construction of the railway station.²⁰ Historian Jean Joseph François Poujoulat lamented that “the engineering corps is more terrible than the weather and [Philippeville, modern-day Skikda] sees only some stones in the monuments imprinted with the majesty of centuries.”²¹ This razing of historic sites extended also to Arab monuments, mosques, and medieval palaces that were nearly all destroyed, leaving behind only remnants.²² Much of this destruction was done under the guise of historic preservation, as French authorities evicted

¹⁷ Michael Greenhalgh, “1830–40: The Destruction of Algiers, Constantine and Other Early Settlements,” chapter, in *The Military and Colonial Destruction of the Roman Landscape of North Africa, 1830–1900* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2014), 119–65, 126.

¹⁸ Lorcin, “Rome and France in Africa,” 319.

¹⁹ Greenhalgh, “1830–40: The Destruction of Algiers, Constantine and Other Early Settlements,” 130.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

²¹ Effros, *Incidental Archaeologists*, 121.

²² Greenhalgh, “1830–40: The Destruction of Algiers, Constantine and Other Early Settlements,” 120.



Figure 5. *Lambèse: Fragments romains sur une maison*, Médéric Meusement, (1830).
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des estampes et de la photographie. Credit:
Lorcin, *Incidental Archeologists*.²³

Indigenous residents and businesses from ancient sites under the guise of preservationist efforts, only to subsequently demolish these sites to clear up the confiscated land.²⁴

The *Monument aux morts* embodies this intertwined process of reutilization/destruction that was integral to France's construction of its empire. The winged victory atop the arch [Figure 6], sculpted after Algerian Jewish artist Joseph Ebstein, is a direct, enlarged copy of a Roman statuette unearthed by French engineering officer Colonel M. Ribot in his demolition of

²³ Effros, *Incidental Archaeologists*, 163.

²⁴ Lorcin, "Rome and France in Africa," 24.

Constantine's historic Ottoman fortress walls.²⁵ The replication of this exact artifact fully articulates the messaging behind the French development of Algeria: A modern, French project can resuscitate the glories of Roman imperial splendor through the deliberate, systematic destruction of Arab history and presence. Instead of directly incorporating Roman *spolia* in the monument's material design, the *Monument aux morts* appropriates and magnifies its form in hopes of similarly magnifying its potency and meaning. The winged victory, now potentially recast as a winged angel in service of France's mission as Christian imperial regime, matches the arch's triumphant, domineering scale to cement this glorification of the French colonial project. While the Roman remains act as a foundational inspiration for the French to cite (and to justify unjust land appropriation with), they do not necessarily need to be used in their original form to convey a message of imperial continuity.

This is why the *Monument aux morts* ultimately does not incorporate Roman *spolia* in its design, using only new materials to construct this modern representation of the French imperial project. Unlike Médéric Meusement's photograph of the house in Lambèse, the *Monument aux morts* does not inextricably enmesh Roman and French colonial materiality, instead rejecting *spolia* and its accompanying ideological adherences to Roman colonialism in practice. While the French purposefully fostered implicit associations between Rome and France as colonizing forces, French colonial ideology notably diverged from and contradicted that of Rome. Under Roman rule, symbolized by Timgad's Arch of Trajan, the imperial subjects and soldiers of the land that is now Algeria were offered citizenship and participation in the empire; under French rule, symbolized by the *Monument aux morts*, Muslim subjects were conscripted to die in service of the empire without any recognition of citizenship. In her interviews with the families of the soldiers whose names are inscribed within the monument, anthropologist Susan Slyomovics

²⁵ Slyomovics, *Monuments Decolonized*, 168.



Figure 6. *Victoire ailée*, Joseph Epstein (October 26, 1929). *L'Afrique du Nord Illustrée*.
Credit: Slyomovics, *Monuments Decolonized*.²⁶

²⁶ Slyomovics, *Monuments Decolonized*, 169.

notes how many families argued *for* the arch to remain intact after Independence, as it *materially proved* “that Algerians who had died in two wars had been used as cannon fodder.”²⁷ The *Monument aux morts* thus refuses to incorporate actual fragments of Roman material at the same time as it rejects — and *obscures* — any incongruent Roman imperial ideology.

This is why the *Monument aux morts* still looks notably different from its original model in Timgad. The architectural forms of ancient Roman (and their accompanying imperial dogma) are transformed through the filter of the French imperial project and its aesthetic preferences. Every choice makes a deliberate revision in the message of the monument; The inscription only celebrates the glory of service *pro patria* in the name of motherland France, offering no promise of expansion or incorporation into the *Senatus Populusque Française*. The location of the arch is also divorced from its traditional placement within the urban fabric of the colonial city. While the arch at Timgad is placed within the very center of the city’s grid, the *Monument aux morts* is constructed at the very limits of Constantine, balanced right at the edge of the sheer cliff face beneath the city. The arch is no longer meant to be understood and *inhabited* as a triumphal thoroughfare, reminding each passer-through of the glory of participation in the Roman project. Instead, it is placed on the cliff edge as a solemn monument to the protection — and continued vitality in occupation — of the French empire.

Today, the *Monument aux morts* still stands atop the cliffs of Constantine in an independent, post-colonial Algeria [Figure 7]. However, its continued presence has not been without conditions. The decorative busts, plinth bowls, and bas-reliefs have been stripped away, and one of the four bronze plaques bearing the names of fallen soldiers was vandalized with a chainsaw and stolen.²⁸ While the Latin inscription still remains emblazoned in the arch’s attic,

²⁷ Slyomovics, *Monuments Decolonized*, 170.

²⁸ Slyomovics, *Monuments Decolonized*, 168.



Figure 7. *Monument aux morts* in present-day, Mahieddine Boumendjel (November 21, 2012).
Credit: Wikimedia.

Arabic graffiti continues to counter this linguistic weight. Even post-independence Algerians were conscious of the rhetorical force of the monument's Latin letters, with proposals emerging that called for the erasure of the original inscription to be replaced by Islamic calligraphy in Arabic.²⁹ Like the Roman Ruins upon which it bases its genealogical design, the *Monument aux morts* has found itself subjected to the same destructive scavenging and vandalism, articulating an unsecured, ambiguous position for the monument's continued function in the present day. As the arch has moved from French to Algerian administration, it accumulates the weight of the colonial projects it makes architecturally manifest, and the imperial messages articulated by its forms are by no means straightforward and monolithic. Because of this destruction, alteration, and looting, the modern image of the Monument emerges in parallel with Meusement's house in Lambèse: a bricolage mix of incongruent sovereign projects stacked together to make one ambiguous whole.

²⁹ Ibid., 171.

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