

Cultural Real Estate Properties of the Province of Tebessa

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Abstract:

Tebessa, an eastern Algerian border province, is distinguished by its climatic diversity, mining resources, and agro-pastoral character. It is regarded as a cradle of civilization, which has resulted in a rich and diverse Cultural Real Estate heritage. The management of the province's assets, as public cultural property, necessitates their safeguarding, maintenance, and restoration by competent authorities to reflect its history and national significance. Tebessa has been inhabited since prehistoric times, witnessing a succession of civilizations including the Atareen and Qafsa cultures, followed by the Amazigh (Libyan), Roman, and Byzantine eras.

The province is renowned for its prominent archaeological remains, primarily from the Roman and Byzantine periods, and is considered one of North Africa's most important urban archaeological sites. Consequently, the central research question emerges: **What types of Cultural Real Estate properties are most abundant in Tebessa?**

Keywords: Tebessa, Real Estate, Civilization, Cultural Property, History.

I. Introduction

Tebessa is an eastern Algerian border province, characterized by climatic diversity, mining resources, and agro-pastoral activities. Recognized as a cradle of civilization, its long history has yielded a wealth of cultural real estate heritage, marked by a significant diversity of holdings, particularly at the regional level. This rich endowment paves the way for administrative approaches that emphasize diversification and pluralism in management.

The management of Tebessa's public cultural properties necessitates their safeguarding, preservation, and restoration. This commitment ensures these assets serve as expressive landmarks of the province's history and reflect both local and national organizational heritage.

Tebessa's history stretches back to prehistoric times, with successive civilizations leaving their mark. These include the Atareen culture (dating back approximately 50,000 years BC) and the Qafsa civilization. Native Amazigh (Libyan) tribes inhabited the region by around 247 BC. Subsequent Roman and Byzantine eras profoundly shaped the area, contributing to a rich and layered cultural real estate landscape.

The province is widely noted for its archaeological remains, predominantly from

the Roman and Byzantine periods, many of which remain in a remarkable state of preservation. Tebessa is rightfully considered one of North Africa's most important repositories of urban heritage, encompassing both classified (officially protected) and unclassified sites.

This context leads to the central research question: **What specific types of cultural real estate properties are most abundant in Tebessa?**

This question will be addressed through the following points:

II- Nationally-Classified Cultural Real Estate Properties in Tebessa: A Study of the Most Significant Assets

Tebessa Province safeguards a distinguished collection of nationally classified cultural real estate holdings. These assets, recognized for their outstanding historical and architectural value, form a cornerstone of the region's identity and Algeria's broader heritage landscape.

First : Nationally Recognized Cultural Real Estate Properties

1. The Amphitheater: A Classified Cultural Real Estate Property

The amphitheater is a public monument initially constructed during the reign of Emperor Vespasian, around 77 AD. It was later significantly expanded under Emperor Septimius Severus in the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries AD. This period marked the city's zenith, characterized by prosperity, stability, and a thriving agricultural economy that produced substantial surpluses of olives, wheat, and grapes.

The expanded structure could accommodate approximately 7,000 spectators. It featured an oval shape, was built from precisely cut stone blocks, and included 15 radial access corridors (vomitoria). The amphitheater had several distinct gateways: one specifically designed for the entrance of gladiators and wild animals into the arena, and separate entrances for the public. This architectural layout reflects the vibrant social life of Tebessa's affluent citizenry, as the venue hosted gladiatorial combats, wild animal hunts (venationes), and various other public spectacles¹.

2. The Triumphal Arch of Caracalla in Tebessa:

It is considered one of the most famous and magnificent Roman monuments in the city of Tebessa. Built during the reign of Emperor Caracalla of the Severan dynasty between 211 and 214 AD, the arch was intended to commemorate the emperor and his ruling family.

The arch is distinguished by its unique quadrifrons (four-sided) design, resting on four massive Corinthian columns. Each of its four symmetrical facades features an arched opening. Constructed from large stone blocks, it was originally decorated with sculpted medallions bearing various motifs and reliefs.

The arch is located approximately 450 meters from the Roman amphitheatre in the city. It stands as a remarkable example of Roman architectural prowess in North Africa².

3. The Temple of Minerva (in Tebessa/Antinoöpolis)

This temple is a Roman-era religious structure built in the early 3rd century AD, during the reign of the Severan dynasty. It was dedicated to Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom, strategic warfare, arts, and crafts, who was syncretized with and adopted many attributes from the Greek goddess Athena³.

The temple follows a classic Roman architectural design. Its columns feature Corinthian capitals adorned with acanthus leaves, and the friezes bear religious inscriptions. Among the symbolic motifs found is that of a ram, which is associated with the Punic deity Baal Hammon. This likely indicates a local syncretic practice or the site's significance across different cultural periods, predating or coexisting with the Roman temple. At a much later date, the structure was repurposed to house a museum of antiquities. It now displays artifacts from various historical periods, with mosaic panels mounted on its walls⁴.

The temple was officially classified as a national historic monument by its publication in the Official Journal of the Algerian Republic on January 28, 1968. It currently falls under the authority of the Ministry of Culture and Arts⁵.

4. The Old Palace (also known as the Zaouia Palace or Byzantine Palace):

According to historical records, it was constructed during the Byzantine period (5th–6th centuries AD). Excavations at the site have revealed artifacts from various periods, including a coin from the Punic era, Islamic remains such as inscribed tombstones, human skulls, and jewelry from that period. Burials containing pottery, oil lamps, and cups were also discovered. The palace was built using stone and lime mortar, not glass, and

includes about 12 rooms adorned with finely crafted Roman mosaic floors⁶.

The palace was accidentally discovered in 1972 in central Tébessa, south of the Byzantine Wall in the Zaouia area, during the construction of forty modern housing units. Part of the construction work was halted in compliance with Algerian antiquities law to allow archaeological excavations.

The site is currently closed to visitors, and access is restricted. It is surrounded by an iron fence and under guard. The palace's history has not been precisely determined due to delays in comprehensive archaeological studies⁷.

5. The Roman Cemetery:

Located about 300 meters from the Byzantine Wall, it was discovered by chance during modern infrastructure development in Tébessa in 1976.

Archaeological investigation yielded significant findings, including 49 stone sarcophagi (slabs) covered with stone lids and 8 burials, in addition to a funerary mosaic⁸.

6. The Brizegan Olive Press:

The Brizegan Press is a rare archaeological landmark in the Tébessa region. It was built in the 3rd century AD as part of the agricultural development of the area, which was transformed into an important olive-producing zone during a period of prosperity marked by extensive olive cultivation. Historical sources indicate that there were around two hundred presses along the road linking Tébessa and Negrine.

The ruins of the press are located near El Malabiod, about 30 kilometers south of Tébessa. The preserved part of the structure measures roughly 20 × 18 meters, but its original footprint was much larger, with its

stones scattered over an area exceeding 800 square meters. The press and its surrounding facilities likely covered about 2,000 square meters (not square kilometers) during the Roman era⁹.

Though not located within the main archaeological zone of ancient Theveste, its significance remains considerable due to its proximity to the city. The Brizegan Press was classified as a national historic monument in 1980¹⁰.

7. *The Great Church (Basilica):*

Known as the Basilica of Saint Crispinus, it is considered one of the most important ecclesiastical architectural monuments in Tebessa. Its construction dates to the 4th century AD. It was commissioned by Saint Augustine in honor of the Christian martyrs Saints Crispinus and Crispinianus. The basilica represents the peak of the spread of Christianity in the city and is located about a 10-minute walk from the Temple of Minerva¹¹.

Covering approximately 20,000 square meters, it is one of the largest churches in North Africa, blending Roman and Byzantine architectural styles, and is notable for its vaults and wide aisles¹².

8. *The old Tebessa (Theveste):*

Theveste served as the headquarters of the Legio III Augusta, making it a key military and administrative center for the Romans in the region. The main archaeological site is also referred to as "Empty Tebessa" and the "Tamimiyya Palace". It was built on the northern slope of Jebel Dukkan and contained numerous structures reflecting its importance as a prosperous city. It was surrounded by a fortification wall with towers - not 16 separate walls - and includes remains of marble

columns, baths, fortifications, and artistically carved statues.

Excavations at the site have uncovered many mosaic fragments that once decorated houses and baths, as well as inscriptions featuring Christian symbols and texts, including references to "Christ, Jesus son of Mary, peace be upon them", along with remains of Christian temples and priests' quarters¹³.

9. *The Byzantine Wall:*

Often called the Byzantine Fortress or Kasbah, it was constructed between 535 and 539 AD under Emperor Justinian I, as part of defensive enhancements overseen by the Byzantine general **Solomon** to suppress local revolts and maintain regional control. It is one of the largest archaeological sites in Tebessa and a major attraction for visitors.

Despite the passage of centuries, much of the wall's architectural features remain intact. It is distinguished by its fourteen towers and rectangular layout, enclosing the ancient heart of Tebessa and the Forum. It has three main gates: Caracalla Gate in the north (incorporated into the wall), Solomon Gate (named after the general) in the east, and Chahla Gate in the south. A fourth gate, Constantine Gate, was added during the French colonial period¹⁴.

10. *The Modern church (now the Museum):*

Located inside the Byzantine Wall, west of the Minerva Museum, construction began in 1881 under engineer De Lapard and later Professor Baronneau. It opened for worship in 1903. Following urban expansion and demographic changes, the Heritage Preservation Service converted the church into a museum in 1970, now known as the Tébessa Museum.

Second: Supplementary Inventory List (for registration purposes)

According to Article 10 of Law 04-98, registration on the supplementary inventory list falls under the authority of the Minister of Culture, following consultation with the National Committee for Cultural Properties, for properties and monuments of national significance.

The initiative for registration can come from the Minister or from any other party interested in listing a property on the supplementary inventory. For properties of local importance, registration on the Governor's List is subject to consultation with the Provincial Commission for Cultural Properties¹⁵.

III- The Supplementary Inventory List for Tebessa Province

For Tebessa Province, the supplementary inventory list includes one cultural site:

1. The Negrine Palaces (Ksour of Negrine):

The Negrine Palace dates to the Islamic period (approximately the 7th century AH / 13th century AD or later). It was built on a small hill overlooking a barren valley and is almost entirely surrounded by palm groves. It features a compact urban fabric with harmonious density to reduce exposure to sunlight, along with a graded road network extending from the spacious public square to main streets - Four Loti Alley, Ouled Sidi Alley, Ouled Sidi Chikh Alley, and Ouled Sioul Alley - and onward to smaller alleys and dead ends that align with social and privacy considerations. Al Rahba (the courtyard) is considered the center of the palace, where the mosque is located¹⁶.

IV- The unclassified real estate cultural properties

The geographical location and historical status of Tebessa Province have made it one of Algeria's most important urban areas, rich in a vast reserve of cultural real estate. This has made the process of inventory and classification challenging for tracing civilizations and clarifying the history of properties. Among these unclassified properties are:

1. Archaeological Sites Nominated for Inventory Classification:

Among the unclassified sites is a group proposed by heritage valorization and protection bodies or the Ministry of Culture for inclusion in the inventory list, aiming to classify them as national cultural real estate properties to ensure their protection and national recognition. Examples include:

1.1. Turris Ubaza:

Located in the municipality of Thlidjen, Cheria District. Its history spans the Roman and Byzantine periods. It is a defensive fortress of an ancient camp, mentioned by Gsell in Sheet 39, Cheria, under No. 258.

1.2. Rachi Farmstead (Country Estate):

Located in the municipality of Thlidjen, Cheria District. Its history spans the Roman and Byzantine periods. It is a population center extending over a vast area, mentioned by Gsell in Sheet 39, Cheria, under No. 250.

1.3. Elfayja (Belfrouth) Farmstead:

Located in the municipality of Thlidjen, Cheria District. It dates to the Byzantine period. It consists of a small rectangular fortification along with some terraces, mentioned by Gsell in Sheet 39, Cheria, under No. 248.

1.4. The Aqueduct at Jebel El Djazia:

Located in the Jebel El Djazia gorge, municipality of Safsaf El Ouasra, El Malabiod Department. It dates to the Roman period and is a water-transport bridge (aqueduct) with 10 arches. It was mentioned by Gsell in Sheet 40, Feriana, under No. 154 ¹⁷.

1.5. Bosman Archaeological Site:

Located in Kastal, Ain Zerga Municipality, Ouenza District. Its history spans from the prehistoric period to the dawn of history. It contains rock paintings (wall art) in addition to a group of chambers and stables¹⁸.

V- *Recently Discovered Archaeological Sites*

Several newly discovered cultural sites and real estate properties in Tebessa Province were inspected by the Cultural Heritage Service in collaboration with the National Gendarmerie between 2019 and 2020, through surveys carried out by local agencies under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture. These include:

1. Period 2019–2020

- Archaeological sites at Gouriguer (Tbagat Al-Menasria) and Boulhef-Dir (Kchhada) were preliminarily inspected on February 26 and March 26, 2019, respectively.
- Preliminary inspection of the archaeological site (Ben Falia) in the municipality of Lehoudjbet on March 11, 2019.
- Preliminary inspection of an ancient site (Gmata farmstead, Geltet Laghbar Scattered) in the municipality of Lehoudjbet on March 17, 2019.
- Preliminary inspection of an archaeological site in Ain Zarroug on the national road.
- Preliminary inspection of the archaeological site Ghadir Al-Safia in the municipality of Safsaf El Ouasra on April 30, 2019.
- A site preview was conducted in the Tin area of Morsott Municipality on May 5, 2019.
- Preliminary inspection of an archaeological site at Mechtet Tarchan, Bir Dhahab, on July 17, 2019.
- Preliminary inspection of an archaeological site in the Kastal area, Ain Zerga Municipality, on August 6, 2019.
- Preliminary inspection of the archaeological site Mechtet Ouled Mloul, Lehoudjbet Municipality, on October 8, 2019.
- Preliminary inspection of an archaeological site in the Darmoun area, Thlidjen Municipality, on April 9, 2019.
- Preliminary inspection of the archaeological sites Henchir Fidh Lmehri and Henchir Laroui in Tbagat, El Mezraa Municipality, on September 4, 2019.
- Preliminary inspection of an archaeological site in El Ogla Municipality on September 4, 2019.
- Preliminary inspection of human remains and stones in El Aouinet on November 5, 2019, and a stone basin in

the Chwafiiya area, Lehouidjbet Municipality, on December 1, 2019.

- Report on a field assignment to the Basilica (the ancient church) site on December 16, 2019.
- Preliminary inspection of an archaeological site at the Bir Mokaddem municipal allotment on December 23, 2019, and on the same date, an inspection of an archaeological site in El Malabiod.
- Preliminary inspection of the BouBadis mosaic in Negrine Municipality on January 8, 2020.
- Preliminary inspection of the Tifech site in Negrine Municipality on January 22, 2020.
- Inspections were scheduled for the Ain Sokhna site in Frekkan Municipality on January 27, 2020, and the Lekhmaissia site in Boulhef-Dir Municipality on February 5, 2020¹⁹.

VI- Conclusion :

This study aims to highlight the significance of focusing on cultural real estate properties within Tebessa Governorate and the prerequisites for their rehabilitation and valorization. The objective is to enhance their contribution to revitalizing the tourism sector at large and to foster the development of cultural tourism in particular.

The research identified a distinctive feature of the dual classification processes established by Law 98-04, which governs the protection and preservation of cultural heritage and its integration into **public**

domain. This law creates a formal procedural sequence, beginning with registration on the supplementary inventory list and advancing towards either official classification as a historic monument or designation as a protected sector. The latter mechanism serves as a crucial tool, operating within the frameworks of both public and private law.

Despite this structured legal framework, several obstacles hinder the optimal utilization of these sites, particularly within Tebessa Governorate. The most prominent challenges include the inadequacy of allocated budgets for proper management and rehabilitation, coupled with a significant shortage of suitable tourist facilities and visitor infrastructure commensurate with the demands of cultural tourism.

Results:

- Despite Tebessa's wealth of archaeological and historical monuments, local authorities have not leveraged them effectively to secure national or international heritage status, nor have they integrated these sites into a strategic plan for provincial tourism development.

- Tourism to ancient sites in the province is primarily classified as domestic tourism, given the significantly higher proportion of local visitors compared to international tourists.

- There is a notable lack of effective collaboration among local authorities, organizations, civil society, and stakeholders in the tourism and cultural sectors to promote Tebessa's essential historical tourism.

- Archaeological excavation and research efforts in Tebessa Province are progressing at a slow pace.

- The province, particularly several ancient sites of significant tourism potential, suffers from a severe shortage of adequate visitor amenities and designated facilities. Furthermore, most sites remain underdeveloped and are located outside established tourist circuits.

- There is a critical lack of awareness and initiative regarding the importance of tourism development linked to cultural real estate, an issue largely confined to the provincial administration and not addressed at the municipal level.

Recommendations:

- Develop a strategic tourism plan for the province's archaeological sites. This could include creating a "Golden Triangle" of key tourist areas and utilizing Tebessa's local radio for promotional campaigns (advertisements and informational segments) about these sites.

- Prepare and regularly update the archaeological map of the province and ensure the protection of buried heritage during all land-use planning processes.

- Establish and maintain a dynamic, ongoing inventory of cultural real estate properties.

- Legally certify and professionally train the human resources specialized in the preservation of cultural property.

- Implement a rigorous conservation methodology for cultural real estate. This involves conducting comprehensive studies to revitalize properties without compromising

their heritage value, engaging multidisciplinary experts (in architecture, history, archaeology, sociology, and economics). Consequently, the managing institution must employ scientifically recognized professionals with a broad, holistic understanding of cultural assets to ensure comprehensive heritage preservation.

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