



Respect for Islamic Religion towards Abrahamic Religions:

Abu Muhajir Dinar Mosque and Saint Optatus of Mileve Church as a Model - An Analytical Archaeological Study

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Abstract:

Since the advent of Islam, one of its fundamental principles has been the respect of other religions, particularly the Abrahamic faiths. This principle is rooted in the Islamic belief that the religion is meant to be easy and not burdensome. This respect is evident in various mosques from the period of Islamic conquests, including the Mosque of Abu al-Muhajir Dinar in Mila, the first mosque in Algeria and the second in North Africa after the Mosque of Kairouan.

Some historical texts claim that the mosque was built on the ruins of a Christian church, specifically the Church of Saint Optatus of Milevum. However, our field studies of these two landmarks suggest that the mosque was built adjacent to the church, not on its ruins. This indicates that Abu al-Muhajir Dinar, the mosque's founder, respected other religions, particularly the Abrahamic faiths, as encouraged by Islam, which calls for the respect and non-violation of other religious practices and sites.

Abu al-Muhajir Dinar took care to honor this principle with the Church of Saint Optatus of Milevum, which was one of the most important churches at the time. Saint Optatus mentioned in his letters four churches in the city of Milevum, but he did not describe or specify their locations. Written sources and historical research highlight the city's role during the Christian period and its saint, Optatus Milevus. They also refer to two councils held in Milevum in 402 AD and 416 AD.

In this presentation, we aim to introduce and explore these two significant landmarks from two different but historically and archaeologically interconnected periods, emphasizing their religious value

Keywords: *Islamic religion, Heavenly religions, The mosque, the church, Abu Al-Muhajir dinar, Mila.*

I Introduction:

Since the emergence of Islam, its fundamental principle has been the respect for other religions, particularly the monotheistic faiths. This is attributed to Islam being a religion of ease rather than hardship, a characteristic evident in various mosques from the Islamic conquest period. Abu al-Muhajir Dinar Mosque in Mila, the first mosque in Algeria and the second in North Africa following the Great Mosque of Kairouan, is said in some historical texts to have been built over the ruins of a Christian church, specifically the Church of Saint Optatus of Mileve.

However, our field study reveals otherwise; the mosque was constructed adjacent to, not on the ruins of the church, reflecting the founding culture of Abu al-Muhajir Dinar towards respecting other religions, especially the monotheistic ones which Islam teaches to honor without desecrating or insulting their rituals. Abu al-Muhajir Dinar took special care to respect the Church of Saint Optatus of Mileve, which was one of the most significant churches at that time. Saint Optatus mentioned four churches in the city of Mila in his letters, but did not specify their exact locations or descriptions.

The historical and textual sources discuss the city's role during the Christian era and its saint, Optatus of Mileve, noting two councils held in Mila in 402 AD and 416 AD. However, the physical archaeological sources did not align with this significance, leading us to a field study of these landmarks. During this study, we faced several questions, notably:

- **What is the validity of the claim that Abu al-Muhajir Dinar Mosque was not built on the ruins of a Christian church?**
- **What are the architectural and engineering elements that constitute these landmarks?**

The lack of alignment is due to two main reasons: the accumulated civilization in the limited geographical space, which led to the loss of many of the city's Christian landmarks, and the absence of archaeological digs and research in the city; the last scholarly work in the city was conducted in 1970.

Through this paper, we aim to identify and describe these important landmarks from two different historical periods that are interconnected in terms of their historical and archaeological value, as well as their religious significance.

I.1 Introduction to the Christian Church (Basilica):

Saint Optatus mentioned four churches in the city of Mila in his letters but provided no descriptions or locations (Gsell, 1996.). The textual sources and historical research discuss the city's role during the Christian period and its saint, Optatus of Mileve, noting two councils held in Mila in 402 AD and 416 AD.

However, the material archaeological sources did not align with this importance, attributed to two main reasons: the accumulated civilization in the limited geographical space, which caused the loss of many of the city's Christian landmarks, and the absence of archaeological digs and research in the city since 1970. This confirms that Mila harbors its material sources beneath its soil, waiting for those who will uncover the dust of time and validate what the textual sources narrate about its history.

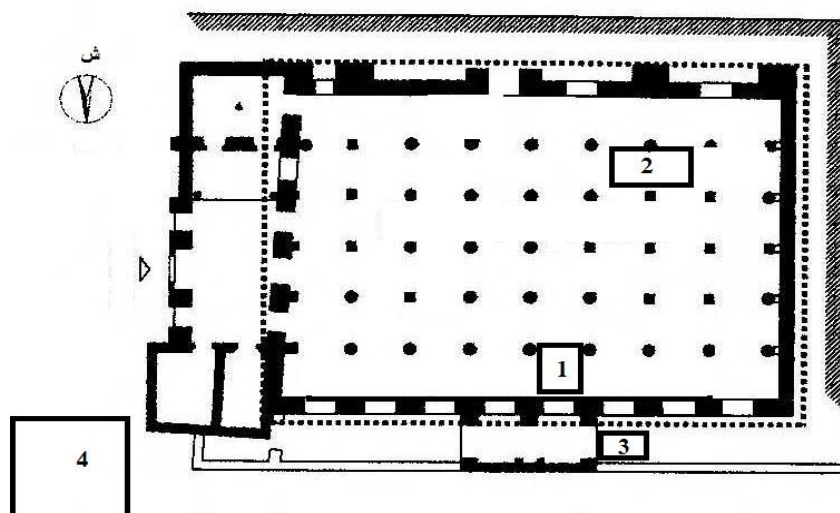
I.2 History of Research at the Church:

We found a letter dated 18/03/1955 (copied from Marcel Leglay's letter), representing a request to conduct explorations at the mosque sent by the Museum of Constantine (Cirta) administration to researcher Marcel Leglay. The museum's administration discussed the possibility of ancient ruins beneath the mosque's foundations and the hypothesis of Saint Optatus of Mileve's grave being at the site.

No traces of these explorations, which might not have been conducted, were found. Returning to the excavation results carried out by French researchers and later by Algerian researcher Rachid Doukali, we gathered some indications about some Christian landmarks, particularly the church adjacent to the foundations of Sidi Ghanem Mosque (the archaeological Abu al-Muhajir Dinar Mosque), discovered by a Ministry of Culture mission in 1968, which lasted three years through three phases:

- **1968:** Researcher Rachid Doukali conducted probes within the mosque, revealing brick arches and the four walls of the prayer hall, and discovered a door in the north wall that had been sealed during the colonial period. (Dokali, 1969)
- **1969:** Further probes inside the mosque uncovered similar structures and the sealed door (Dokali, Excavation Report 1968, preserved in the archives of bastion 23, 1968)
- **1970:** The probes were deepened and expanded, revealing 11 tombstones dating back to the Roman period, confirming the mosque was built over a Christian basilica, which in turn was located on a Roman forum. (Dokali, Excavation Report 1968, preserved in the archives of bastion 23, 1968)

In 1996, the archaeological district of Setif sent a group of researchers for a rescue excavation inside the mosque, revealing two graves. The first, located in the aisle opposite the mihrab in a west-east direction, with the head oriented west, was simply constructed and contained six iron nails. The second, opposite the first, had no funerary artifacts, and it was noted that their dating goes back to the late Roman period. (Archaeological District of Setif , Rescue Excavation in Sidi Ghanem Mosque, from the Archive Service of Fort 23, Algeria,)



Plan (01): Plan of the Church's Probes

I.3 Church Location Relative to the Mosque:

The church lies beneath the foundations of the old mosque known as Sidi Ghanem, located within the Byzantine walls on the western side of the Islamic city. The church's foundations are approximately 3.70 meters below the level of the mosque (as determined by excavations) and about 6 meters below the current city level.

The probes (number 2 in Plan 03) revealed a wall extending from east to west, constructed of large polished stones using the Opus quadratum technique, and adorned with prominent protrusions called "le bossage" on its northern side (Image 01). (Dokali, Excavation Report 1969, preserved in the archives of bastion 23, 1969)



Image (01): Remains of the church wall

This wall extends eastward to reach a height of 5 meters outside the mosque's prayer hall at the eastern facade (Image 01), where it clearly shows another wall extending southward to intersect with the previously mentioned wall.

Excavations by Doukali (number 04 in Plan) uncovered stone slabs at a depth of 1.90 meters, consistent with the stone slabs found within the mosque (number 03 in Plan). Doukali's last probes conducted in 1970 revealed a circular brick structure above the extensions of the walls of Roman buildings (Dokali, Excavation Report 1968, preserved in the archives of bastion 23, 1968).

It is also worth noting that we found a plan of the mosque dating back to 1852, indicating that the wall extends to the borders of the Byzantine wall to the north and west. All these data lead us to believe that the site covered a large area.

Additionally, the 1968 excavations inside the mosque's prayer hall at a depth of 3.40 meters below the north wall uncovered traces of large stone slabs (number 02 in Plan), which Professor Doukali suggested might belong to a paved road (Image 02). (Dokali, Excavation Report 1968, preserved in the archives of bastion 23, 1968)



Image (02): The stone slabs in the church

These excavations confirmed that they extend east to west and uncovered traces of a drainage channel at a depth of 0.30 meters and width of 0.45 meters, constructed of gypsum concrete mixed with stones at a depth of 3 meters (Image 03). It is noteworthy that the excavations revealed two different levels of the tiled floor, where the tiles located north of the wall in squares 03 and 04 are 1.20 meters higher than those on the southern side in squares 01 and 02.

Additionally, the tiles differ not only in level but also in shape and even in the method of carving, with the lower tiles carefully carved with deep grooves to allow rainwater to flow into two drainage channels on their north and south edges, measuring between 1 and 1.50 meters in length and between 1 and 1.10 meters in width, while the upper tiles were flat and devoid of any decoration.

This leaves room for speculation that we are looking at a building extending from east to west, located south of the old mosque, which it shares with its southern wall where we find an entrance 1.80 meters wide opening onto a paved road 13 meters wide. At the entrance, a second wall extends from north to south for 20 meters and is perpendicular to the church wall, featuring a series of arches.



Image (03): Traces of drainage channels inside the mosque.



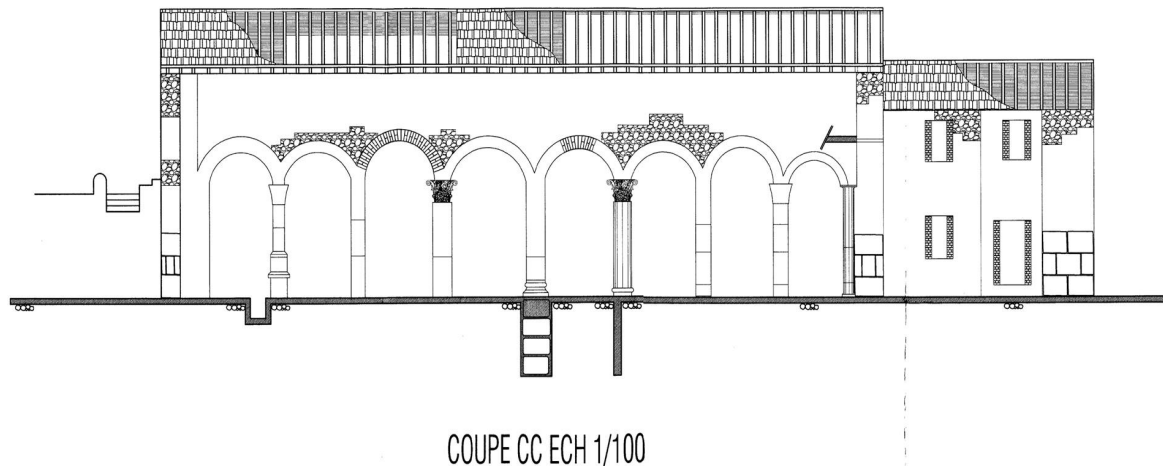
Image (04): Traces of the channels outside the mosque.

Given the absence of data allowing for precise dating of this site, the construction technique, especially in the walls which utilized the prominent protrusions on the polished stones "la bossage" (Image 05), was a fast-building style adopted by the Romans, inspired by Greek architecture, particularly for public structures.

This technique allowed for the manual lifting of polished stones using wood only when absolutely necessary, aiming for time efficiency and adding a simple artistic touch in form, suggesting magnitude and strength, which was the general aim of Roman architecture, "strength with simplicity." (Adams) This technique began to be used in North Africa in temples during the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius and later spread to the architecture of Christian churches in the fourth century. (Rebuffat, 1956-1966.)



Image (05): Protrusions on the wall.



Plan (02): Elevation of the church facade from the study office of Laraba and Bouhouhou

II.1 Sidi Ghanem Mosque (Abu al-Muhajir Dinar):

Abu al-Muhajir Dinar Mosque is located at coordinates 36°27'1.54" North and 6°16'18.07" East in the old city of Mila. Its foundation dates back to the year 60 AH/680 AD by the conqueror Abu al-Muhajir Dinar. Abu al-Mahasen ibn Taghri Bardy mentioned that Abu al-Muhajir Dinar (62 AH-56 AH/675 AD - 682 AD) was the one who conquered the city in the year 60 AH and was assigned the leadership of North Africa and the Islamic army to continue the conquest after Uqba ibn Nafi was dismissed by Muawiyah ibn Abi Sufyan.

It is likely that the mosque, along with the Emirate's house, was built during this period. Despite the lack of sufficient material data to determine the exact date of the mosque's construction, it is attributed to the beginning of the Islamic conquest of the city. This mosque is the second oldest in North Africa after the Great Mosque of Kairouan and the first mosque in Algeria.

It is noted that this mosque was built on the ruins of a Roman Christian church, although there is insufficient material evidence to precisely date the construction of the mosque to the start of the Islamic conquest of this city.

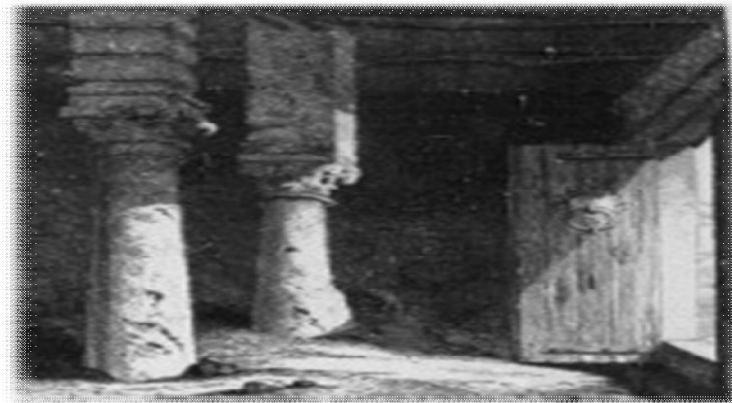


Image (06): An old photograph of Sidi Ghanem Mosque

II.2 Description of the Mosque:

- **Exterior Description:**

The mosque has four facades, including a main eastern facade that is 24.60 meters long, featuring three doors. The main door, centered on the facade, is 2.95 meters wide and is topped by a semi-circular arch. On its sides, there are two other doors that have been sealed, each 1.37 meters wide, and topped by an Arabic inscription in Kufic square script, written using brick squares.

Much of it has been destroyed, leaving only two clearly visible words on the right side of the door, reading "Blessing of Muhammad." This door leads to a small courtyard flanked by three doors; the door on the right leads to two rooms that were added during the colonial period, while the two doors on the left, measuring 1.22 meters and 1.44 meters wide respectively, lead to the Emirate's house (Image 07).



Image (07): The Emirate's House

Opposite this door, the courtyard ends with three doors leading into the prayer hall. The middle door is the largest, measuring 1.50 meters wide, while the two side doors are narrower, each 1.27 meters wide. The western facade contains a newly added door 0.80 meters wide, likely originally a window that was expanded both downwards and upwards, located among four windows that vary in height from the ground and in width between 0.79 meters and 1.81 meters. The door is closer to the left side than to the right and leads to the upper floor of the mosque, which was used during the colonial period (Image 08).



Image (08): The Upper Floor

The north facade of the mosque features twelve steps (12), each 1.99 meters long and 0.34 meters wide, leading to a door 1.15 meters wide centered on the facade between eight scattered windows, four on the right and four on the left, with every two windows on the left side adjacent to each other.

The south facade contains a door 1.15 meters wide leading into the mosque via three steps. This facade features four windows varying in width between 1.35 meters and 0.95 meters. This facade is notable for being covered, separated from the road by a colonial-era extension leading to a courtyard on one side and towards the door leading outside the site on the other.

A modern wall around the mosque, nearly as high as the mosque's roof, separates the mosque from the current ground level; it was built to prevent soil from slipping and eroding towards the mosque, especially during the winter season. A significant observation is that the mosque is located on the subterranean level, leading some to speculate that the mosque was built secretly and that prayers were conducted covertly because Abu al-Muhajir Dinar was rejected by the locals.

- **Interior Description:**

The mosque is rectangular in shape, typical of most mosques, measuring 26 meters by 18.3 meters, oriented from east to west, following the layout of the building it was constructed over. Its prayer hall covers an area of 475.8 square meters and follows the column and pillar system typical of mosques.

It consists of seven evenly spaced longitudinal slabs along the qibla wall and four parallel arcades, before the prayer hall was expanded by adding a slab to the right of the mihrab on the west side and two arcades, one on the north side, making the prayer hall consist of eight slabs and six arcades with pointed arches (Image 09).



Image (09): The arcades forming the prayer hall

II.3 Components of the Mosque:

- **Prayer Hall:**

The prayer hall adopts a rectangular shape, measuring 26.56 meters by 19.64 meters in width, similar to the layout of most prayer halls across various mosques worldwide, following the design of the building it was constructed over, which was the church. This hall contains forty-

three columns of various sizes and shapes, both cylindrical and square, most of which are of Roman origin, crafted mostly from limestone and others from red and brown brick.

Some columns serve a functional role, while their shape does not conform to typical column specifications; they are set in a composite manner using other architectural pieces such as funerary stelae and more. These columns are positioned on bases that are either square or circular stone pieces, also placed on Roman foundations and bases, varying in height from 0.25 meters to 0.30 meters and width of 0.5 meters, raising the level of the wall to the current mosque floor.

Some of these bases have shifted slightly off-axis due to the weight and numerous digs throughout the mosque, resulting from probes conducted during post-independence studies. Above these columns are various styles of Roman capitals, including Corinthian, composite, and one Tuscan. There are also capitals featuring plant leaves, perhaps an adaptation introduced by Islamic civilization, as these capitals closely resemble those in the mosque of Constantine. These capitals support pointed, surpassing arches made of brick, linked by wooden fixtures, the traces of which are still evident on the arches.

- **Mihrab (Niche):**

The mosque's mihrab, or the imam's station, is considered by religious scholars to derive from the term 'mihrab' meaning 'war', as the worshipper 'fights' against Satan and his own self by focusing his heart and senses on prayer. (Mohammed) Some believe that its origin is Christian, taken from the eastern orientation of churches, and that its decorations should not distract worshippers as such adornment is traditionally discouraged. (Mohammed)

Uniquely, the mihrab is located on the southern wall instead of the eastern wall facing the qibla (direction of prayer), making it a notable feature. This placement is reminiscent of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, though such a slight deviation is acceptable because if it shifts south, it does not imply a reversal of the qibla.

This orientation of the mihrab is also common in Algiers, as observed in the Ottoman era with the new mosque in Algiers, where the mihrab forms a right angle with the qibla wall, which is permissible and not subject to criticism.

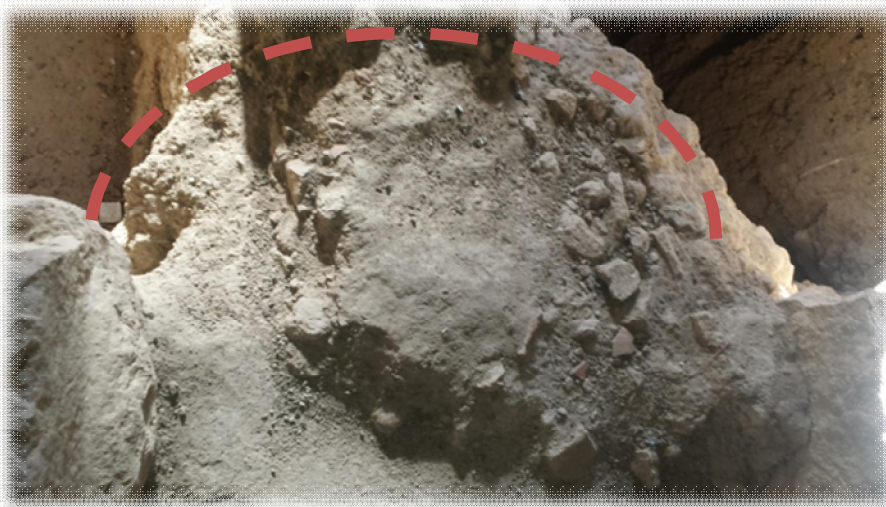


Image (10): The Mosque's Mihrab

- **Minaret:**

The minaret is known by several names; in the Islamic East, 'minarets' and 'lighthouses' are used interchangeably, where the term 'lighthouse' is applied to minarets because they were lit with lights at sunset during Ramadan and remained lit until dawn to mark the start of a new day of fasting (Al-Fayroozabadi). Another definition relates the term to 'lighthouse' or 'beacon' in the Maghreb, likely because most minarets in Islamic Morocco are square, resembling watchtowers. (Mohammed)

The mosque of Abu al-Muhajir Dinar had a minaret, but its shape or descriptions are unknown as it was removed during the colonial period and used in constructing the modern town's church tower, now known to the locals as Mosque Al-Marabou. Only images drawn by the French artist Delamard remain.

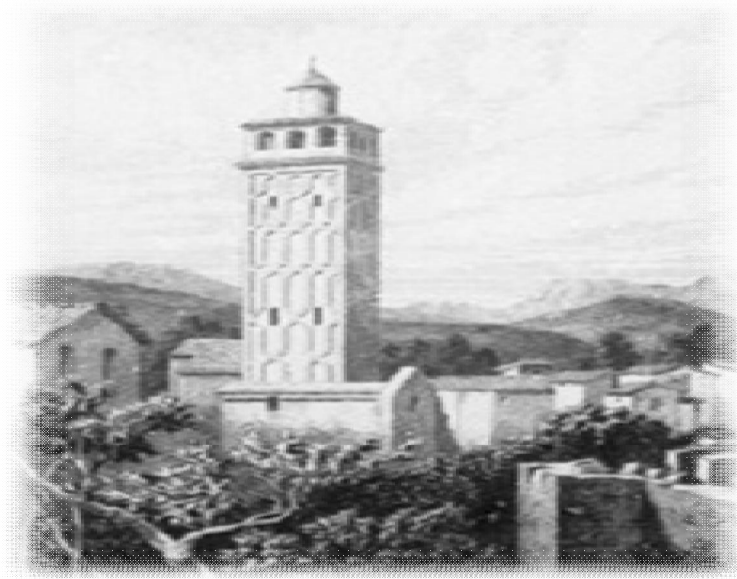


Image (11): The Minaret drawn by de Lamard

Conclusion:

From our study of these landmarks, we conclude that the mosque was not built on the ruins of the Byzantine church but adjacent to it. It only overlapped with the church after a period due to the growing number of Muslims, making the mosque too small to accommodate them, leading to its expansion southward, where the minaret was originally on the northern side. Our findings from the tiles and the extension of the walls at the mosque's peripheries suggest that the church occupied a large area, reflecting its significance and value to the Christian community at the time. Considering the two different tiling techniques found at different levels, we deduce that the church was either built on the ruins of an older pagan temple or a public road, as this tiling technique was used either in temples for the flow of sacrificial blood or in public streets for rainwater drainage, as previously mentioned, the city suffers from accumulated civilization within a confined space.

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