

**Inventory and Documentation of Archaeological Sites
in the Columnata Region, Tissemsilt Province**

Lourtane Bakhti♦; University of Tiaret
lourtan@gmail.com

Received: 26/04/2026 Accepted: 23/06/2026 Published: 30/06/2026

Abstract: The purpose of writing this research is to introduce the new discoveries in the Tissemsilt region through field work of all kinds that carries with it an important addition that will be the basis for later studies that enrich the archaeological field, especially if these survey and descriptive works aim to document the various archaeological holdings vulnerable to theft or sabotage by nature and human tampering. Because of the historical importance of the area of 'Aïn Tekria and Kherbet 'Aïn el-Kahla in Tissemsilt in ancient times and its proximity to the points of reconstruction during the Roman period known as Columnatae, which did not receive sufficient documentation, we made a field visit in an attempt to collect information about some of the archaeological remains left by ancient man in the region. Important discoveries were found, especially in the 'Aïn el-Kahla area, and we recorded several new archaeological points dating back to the Roman period (40 AD – 429 AD) according to some preliminary historical data.

Keywords: Recording, documentation, Columnata, Khemisti, Tissemsilt, inventory.

1. Introduction

Tissemsilt contains many archaeological features dating back to different periods, from prehistory to the ancient and Islamic periods. However, these features have suffered loss and destruction without any attention being paid to them, without making them tourist attractions that could be used for tourism and culture, or considering them as sources that could be exploited for the region's history. What draws our attention is the lack of priority given to maintaining, protecting, and restoring these sites, leaving them exposed to various natural and human dangers, especially since Tissemsilt attracts many treasure hunters, which has caused us to lose much of our heritage. In addition to the damage they cause to the sites – something we observe in most sites in Tissemsilt, especially isolated sites far from

♦ Corresponding Author

Inventory and Documentation of Archaeological Sites in the Columnata Region, Tissemsilt Province

urban clusters – those near towns suffer from urban expansion at their expense or the reuse of their stones in modern structures. These problems are not limited to Tissemsilt alone but affect most sites in Algeria. In this article, I want to shed light on one of the important archaeological areas in the province, namely the ‘Aïn el-Kahla area, which is considered an extension of the ‘Aïn Tekria area, and to focus on it through a field study, as it is one of the most important cultural centers in the region, being the primary factor linking most of the other Roman sites in Tissemsilt and the connecting bridge between them. Researchers estimate there are more than 100 archaeological sites, most of which date back to the Roman period, as indicated by researcher Stéphane Gsell in the *Atlas Archéologique*⁽¹⁾.

Accordingly, we pose the following problem: What are the main architectural structures in the ‘Aïn el-Kahla area, and is the area indeed an extension of the ‘Aïn Tekria area?

2. Historical data of the ‘Aïn Tekria area

‘Aïn Tekria is considered one of the important archaeological sites in Algeria because it contains a set of valuable and significant remains for the region’s history, dating back to the Roman period. It is one of the points that formed the second line of defense, the Roman Limes⁽¹⁾. In 1884, researcher Mac-Carthy addressed the origin of the name ‘Aïn Tekria, which used to be called *Paepositus Columnatensis* after the discovery of an inscription containing archaeological writings bearing the name “Columnata”⁽²⁾. Several researchers visited the site, including P. Cavault in 1883, who recorded that there were remains of Roman ruins, as well as a tower belonging to one of the Ottoman leaders – the Pasha Agha – and some archaeological finds (pottery and coins)⁽³⁾, and tombs taking a rectangular shape consisting of sarcophagi carved in stone, and the remains of small walls ranging from 0-40 cm and 0-50 cm with a characteristic of blue plaster. He also found water channels for bringing water from sources after finding paved stones, floor tiles,

(1) Gsell.S. (Sheet No. 23). *Archaeological Atlas of Algeria*.

(1) Cavault, P. Note on the Ancient Ruins of Ain Toukria. *Revue Africaine*. 1883, pp. 231-240.

(2) Carthy.O, M. Columnata Historically Written Stone. *African Review*. 1884, Pp.392-399.

(3) Weisssette. De Bogahar A Tlemcen. Algiers: *Revue Africaine*.1862, Pp.22-31.

and several different types of coins. Researcher P. Cadenat also visited the site in 1956⁽⁴⁾ as part of scientific research and an archaeological survey with a French research team, and he carried out excavations that revealed some architectural elements dating back to the Roman period. The 'Aïn Tekria site is located northwest of the town of Khemisti, 1 km north of the national road linking Khemisti and Tissemsilt, on a plateau 910 m above sea level. Its geographical coordinates are estimated as: X: 3947.5, Y: 404.8, E: 981— these appear to be local grid references; I have retained them as approximations).

From an archaeological perspective, the site is a camp or fort that housed a Roman military unit, as well as military, civil, and funerary structures. A significant part of these structures has disappeared, and their stones were used to build the town of Bourbaki (currently Khemisti)⁽¹⁾.

The site contains the remains of a “necropolis,” a funerary monument where offerings were made to the gods⁽²⁾ according to the religious beliefs of the time. What remains of the necropolis is a column still standing today. The site also contains a cemetery with forty graves, carved into the rock, facing different directions: some towards the southeast, some towards the northeast. Their dimensions range between 1.8 m and 1.9 m in length, 0.6 m in width, and 0.5 m in depth, and they are arranged in groups.

On the northwestern side, along the rocky belt, there is another archaeological site called Kherba (the ruin), which researchers have not addressed. It is also an extension of 'Aïn Tekria and overlooks the Roman site of Oum El-Alou. The site contains remains of stone columns and overlooks the plains of Djebel Ighoud. It is likely that it was a monitoring center due to its strategic location⁽³⁾.

To the southeast, we come across the site of:

(4) Chain.). Excavations in Columnata (1956 – 1957). *Libyca Archéologue / Epigraphique* n° 4. 1958.PP 89 -99.

(1) Dahdouh Abdelkader, *The Companion Guide to the History and Monuments of the Capital of the Ouarsenis*. Algeria: Abjadiyat Publishing House, p. 42.

(2) Leshil.)L(. *A Votive Altar From Borbaki*. Libya. 1953;Pp.87-94.

(3) Bakhti Lortan, *Methods of Preserving and Preparing Archaeological Sites: Tissemsilt as a Model through Ain Safa, Ain Takria and Taza*, Master's Thesis, (2009/2010, p. 32).

Inventory and Documentation of Archaeological Sites in the Columnata Region, Tissemsilt Province

‘Aïn el-Kahla Archaeological Site: This area is considered an extension of the ‘Aïn Tekria area and has not received any survey work or study of the archaeological landscape and cultural development, except for the study carried out by Dr. Labib El-Hadj in his doctoral thesis⁽¹⁾. This prompted us to carry out an archaeological survey to document, record, and map the archaeological sites scientifically in order to study the cultural and civilisational development of the region.

To investigate the historical facts, we made a field visit to the site and recorded the following observations:

2.1. Location

‘Aïn el-Kahla is located between the district of Khemisti and Tissemsilt Province on National Road No. 14, about 8 km west of Khemisti district, at longitude: E 1°54'21.1", latitude: N 35°41'03.2", and an altitude of 999 m above sea level. These sites lie at the highest point of “Erriacha Plateau” at about 1,044 m, thus enjoying a very wide view of the surrounding archaeological and geographical landscape. Following field inspection, we recorded several archaeological points, as follows:

2.1.1. Section One

a. Kherbet ‘Aïn el-Kahla No. 01: Khirbet Ain Al-Kahla No. 1 is located in the “Bani Ayad” roundabout in the northeastern part overlooking the Roman Limes of Ain Takria, known to the people of the region as “Deir Al-Ruman” (see picture No. 03). Its coordinates are estimated as: S: 353944.64 and E: 155.20.74 above a mountain height estimated at 999 m.

We found a ruin containing architectural remains with stone columns and rectangular masonry courses occupying a considerable area of about 200 m (see Image No. 04). We also found some pottery sherds (see Image No. 05) indicating that the site dates back to the Roman period. Due to the destruction that has affected it and the removal of its architectural parts, it is difficult for us to determine the type of monument. There is another site to the north, 300 m away, containing a group of silos that were used for grain storage, along with a grave (a tumulus) consisting of a heap of small stones forming a mound, which is termed tumulis.

(1) Labib Al-Hajj, Roman Military Fortifications in the South of the Ouarsenis, 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, Algeria: University of Algiers. (2017/2018, pp. 65-66).

Lourtane bakhti

The remains of three funerary shrines were also discovered on a mountain height in the northern direction, in the “Al-Rayasha Plateau,” as it is called by the inhabitants of the region. Their coordinates are estimated at: S: 353954.69 and E: 15539.66 at an altitude of: 1044 m.

b. The vaults (caves) and the corridor:

Directly north, 300 m away, we find silos dating back to the Roman period, more than 30 silos, each 1 m in diameter and between 1.5 m and 2 m deep, next to a large tunnel that extends for a considerable distance (see Image No. 06). According to local residents, it collapsed due to an earthquake that struck the region. In the same area, we find a circular tumulus believed to be a grave, next to which we find an inscription bearing an Ottoman pistol symbol indicating the enclosure and the tunnel (see Image No. 07).

c. Shrines:

To the northwest, we find architectural remains belonging to three funerary shrines located on the plateau of Kef E-Chajara, also known as Erriacha Plateau.

First shrine: Square in shape, 8 m long and 8 m wide, in poor condition, built of polished stones measuring between 60 cm and 90 cm. Its foundations are in good condition, but it has been vandalized (see Image No. 08).

Second shrine: Rectangular, slightly larger than the first, 10 m long and 8 m wide, also in poor condition, built in the same way as the first. It appears circular because it has been vandalized in the middle. Built of polished stones of the same dimensions as those of the first mausoleum (see Image No. 09).

Third shrine: The smallest of the mausoleums, 6 m long and 6 m wide, built of polished stones ranging from 60 to 90 cm in length. It has been vandalized and destroyed, with only the foundations remaining (see Image No. 10).

d. Signs and symbols:

The ‘Aïn el-Kahla site contains some Roman signs and symbols, which are varied and diverse (see Image Album No. 11).

2.1.2. Section Two

a. ‘Aïn el-Kahla No. 02:

One kilometer from the hamlet of Beni Ayad, we find the hamlet of Bouchama to the northeast. We encounter Ruin No. 02, known to the local people as “El-Qsayer” (the small castles). It occupies a vast

Inventory and Documentation of Archaeological Sites in the Columnata Region, Tissemsilt Province

area of about 1 km. We find several archaeological remains suggesting that the site once contained architectural structures, as evidenced by the stone columns, approximately 80 cm wide, indicating that the buildings were massive (see Image No. 12).

We also find some scattered foundations whose nature we do not know because they have been vandalized and subjected to illegal excavation, which has altered their features. Given the size of the site, it contained many architectural facilities, confirmed by the wine press we found on the site, in addition to the Roman solar tombs carved into the rock, numbering more than forty graves, also known as el-hawanit (shops/stalls), as well as the pottery sherds confirming that the site dates back to the Roman period (Abdelkader Dahdouh, 2011, p. 40) (see Image No. 13).

b. The wine press:

During the field survey, we found a wine press consisting of two basins carved into a large rock. The length of the first basin (the trading floor) is 4.30 m and its width is 3.32 m. It contains a 20 cm opening allowing the juice to flow into the second basin, which is 1.40 m wide and 1 m long. The total length of the rock is 8 m. The press is covered with soil, so we do not know its depth, which probably ranges between 30 cm and 40 cm (see Image No. 14).

The press we are discussing is carved into soft limestone, and this limestone is the upper covering of softer rocks dating back to very ancient geological periods. The land where the press is located is a mountain slope called “Kherbet el-Qsayer” by the inhabitants of the ‘Aïn el-Kahla area. The presence of the press in this location indicates that the land there was once planted with vines, at least during the period when the press was operational. This is despite the fact that the land there is currently not planted with trees but is open for cereal cultivation, partly covered with wild plants. We do not know when vine cultivation stopped there, nor when the press was abandoned.

c. Tombs (el-hawanit):

Numbering more than forty graves distributed on a rocky slope in groups, carved into the rock, with lengths ranging between 1.80 m and widths ranging between 30–40 cm (see Image No. 15).

d. Signs and symbols:

“Kherbet el-Qsayer” contains some Roman signs and symbols, many of them carved into the rock. They are difficult to analyze, especially in the absence of field survey tools and detection devices. Therefore, our study is limited to descriptive work pending future archaeological excavations because the site has not been previously addressed by researchers, especially field studies, given that the site is located in mountain highlands and studies have been limited only to the ‘Aïn Tekria site in the Khemisti area.

2.2. Historical background

From the archaeological investigations mentioned above, it is evident that the ‘Aïn el-Kahla area was one of the most important areas that witnessed settlement activity and remarkable prosperity during the Roman period, possibly from the 2nd century AD. The sites varied between burial sites, agricultural production sites, defensive and religious sites, and it was an important part of the interior region of ‘Aïn Tekria, which was known during the Roman era as Columnata.

What is noteworthy is that the archaeological research conducted on the ‘Aïn Tekria site did not refer to the ‘Aïn el-Kahla sites we have previously mentioned. However, there were the first attempts by the researcher Bourguinat, who visited the region in 1868 and tried to demonstrate that the ruins in the ‘Aïn Tekria area extend westward on its slopes.

Perhaps this researcher’s reference is to the ‘Aïn el-Kahla sites. As for researcher Pierre Cadenat, he carried out excavations in 1956 and his efforts culminated in identifying the archaeological dependencies of the ‘Aïn Tekria area. He noted in his publication in the journal *Libyca* that the city of Columnata is not actually the ‘Aïn Tekria area but exists in a place near it. The question raised here is: could the ‘Aïn el-Kahla sites located near the rocky slope actually be the Roman city of Columnata?

This is possible, as this region is rich in archaeological features and was one of the economic and civil centers in the Ouarsenis region in ancient times. The presence of numerous pottery sherds and funerary tombs in high density is evidence that the sites of Kherbet ‘Aïn el-Kahla witnessed human settlement.

3. Conclusion

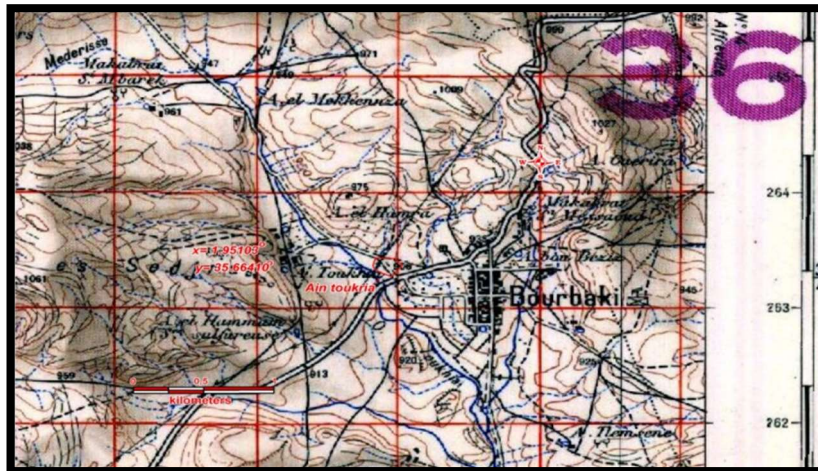
Inventory and Documentation of Archaeological Sites in the Columnata Region, Tissemsilt Province

‘Aïn el-Kahla is considered one of the most important archaeological sites in Tissemsilt, shrouded in mystery despite the richness of its archaeological remains. However, it has not received the necessary study, causing us to lose many of its parts due to vandalism, the removal of its stones for the construction of modern facilities by the inhabitants, as well as the lack of awareness and recognition of the value of this cultural heritage, and the illegal excavations carried out by treasure hunters. From this standpoint, through our field work, we wanted to draw the attention of researchers to this site, which is an important asset for the province, especially regarding the historical aspect, and to the local authorities on the need to intervene to protect the site through a set of short-term recommendations, which are as follows:

- Register the site on the supplementary inventory list according to Law 98/04.
- Protect the site by appointing guards, especially since the site is close to ‘Aïn Tekria (National Office for the Management and Exploitation of Protected Cultural Property).
- Work towards national classification of the site.
- Work to carry out systematic scientific excavations according to modern scientific methods, especially at some of the important sites that have been documented.
- Take legal action against acts of assault, vandalism, destruction, and bulldozing that affect many archaeological sites, especially under current circumstances.
- Study the importance of the ‘Aïn el-Kahla site for human settlement and extract the historical indications and information that help interpret this important civilisational period in the ancient history of Algeria.

4. Appendices

Figure 01: Topographic map of the ‘Aïn el-Kahla site.



Source: Prepared by researcher Lourtan Bakhti.

Figure 02: Satellite image showing the archaeological sites of Kherbet 'Ain el-Kahla No. 01 and No. 02.



Source: Prepared by researcher Lourtan Bakhti.

Figure 03: General view of the ruin at Beni Ayad.

**Inventory and Documentation of Archaeological Sites
in the Columnata Region, Tissemsilt Province**



Source: Prepared by researcher Lourtan Bakhti.

Figure 04: Stone columns at Beni Ayad.



Source: Prepared by researcher Lourtan Bakhti.

Figure 05: Pottery collected from the ruin of Deir er-Rouman
(Monastery of the Romans).



Source: Prepared by researcher Lourtan Bakhti.

Figure 06: Remains of silos and tunnels.



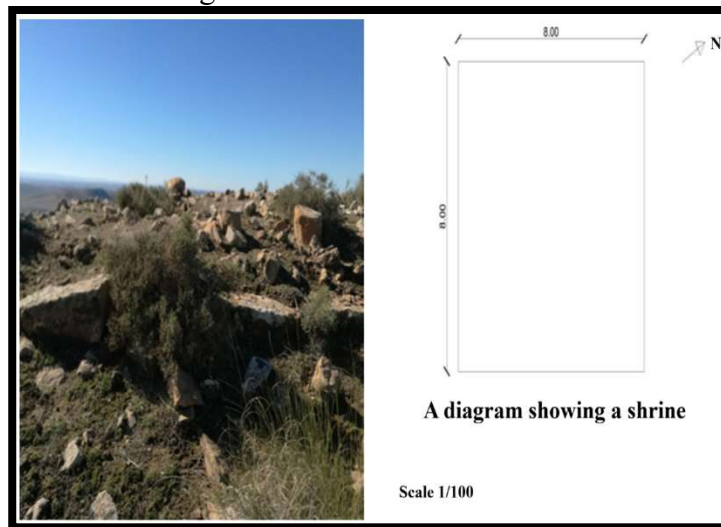
Source: Prepared by researcher Lourtan Bakhti.

Figure 07: Inscription.

**Inventory and Documentation of Archaeological Sites
in the Columnata Region, Tissemsilt Province**



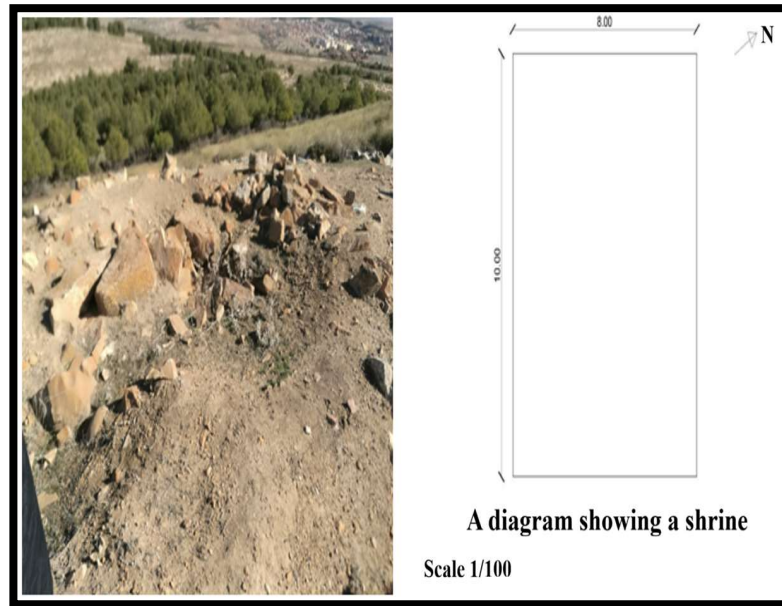
Source: Prepared by researcher Lourtan Bakhti
Figure 08: Mausoleum No. 01.



Source: Prepared by researcher Lourtan Bakhti.

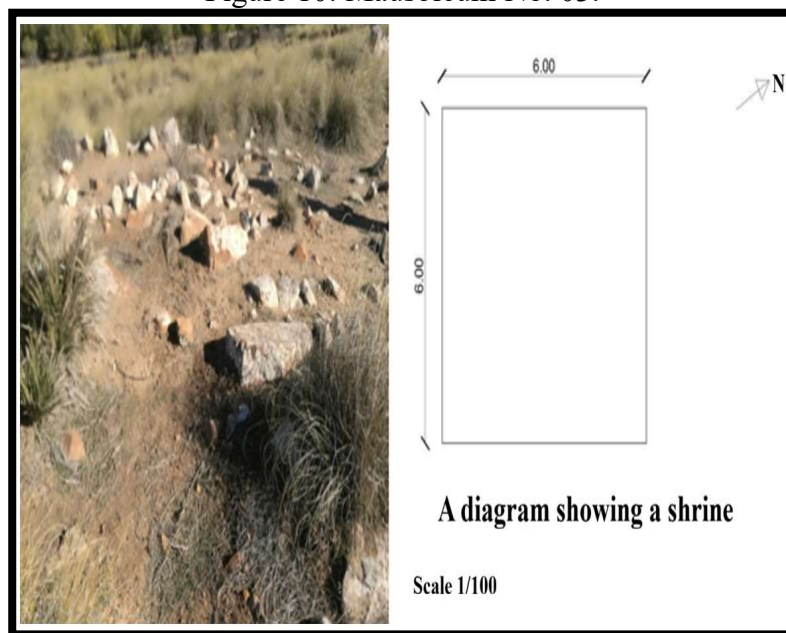
Figure 09: Mausoleum No. 02.

Lourtane bakhti



Source: Prepared by researcher Lourtan Bakhti.

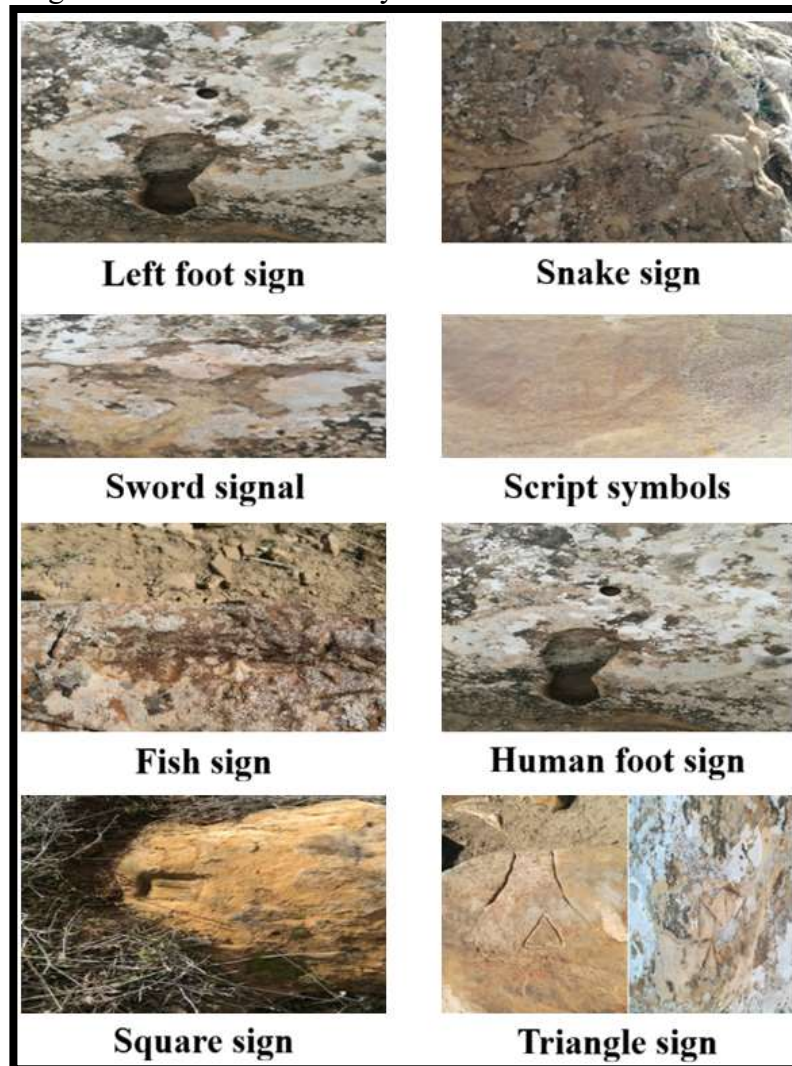
Figure 10: Mausoleum No. 03.



Source: Prepared by researcher Lourtan Bakhti.

**Inventory and Documentation of Archaeological Sites
in the Columnata Region, Tissemsilt Province**

Figure 11: Indications and symbols next to the mausoleums.



Source: Prepared by researcher Lourtan Bakhti.

Figure 12: Remains of stone columns.



Source: Prepared by researcher Lourtan Bakhti.

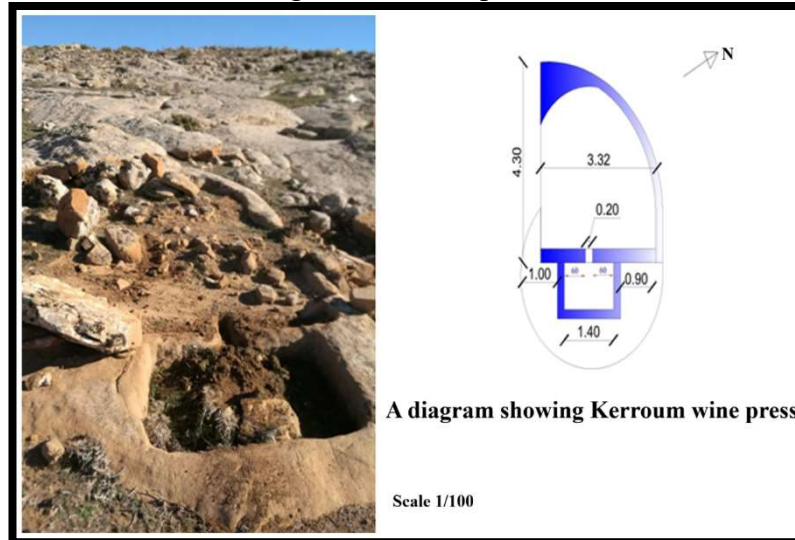
Figure 13: Pottery and ceramics collected from mausoleums 1, 2, and 3.



Source: Prepared by researcher Lourtan Bakhti.

Inventory and Documentation of Archaeological Sites in the Columnata Region, Tissemsilt Province

Figure 14: Wine press.



Source: Prepared by researcher Lourtan Bakhti.

Figure 15: Roman tombs carved into the rock.



Source: Prepared by researcher Lourtan Bakhti.

Figure 16: Map showing the Roman *Limes* by Pierre Salama.



References:

- Cadenat, P. (1958). Fouilles à Columnata 1956–1957. *Libyca Archéologie / Épigraphique*, No. 4, pp. 89–99.
- Mac-Carthy, O. (1884). Columnata Historiquement Pierre Écrite. *Revue Africaine*, pp. 392–399.
- Cavault, P. (1883). Note sur les Ruines Antiques d'Aïn Toukria. *Revue Africaine*, pp. 231–240.
- Gsell, S. (n.d.). *Atlas Archéologique de l'Algérie* (Sheet No. 23).
- Leschi, L. (1953). Un Autel Votif de Borbaki. *Libyca*, pp. 87–94.
- Vayssette. (1862). De Boghar à Tlemcen. *Revue Africaine*, Alger, pp. 22–31.
- Bakhti, Lourtan. (2009/2010). *Methods of Preservation and Development of Archaeological Sites: Tissemsilt as a Model through 'Ain es-Safa, 'Ain Tekria, and Taza*. Master's thesis, p. 32. [Original Arabic]
- Dahdouh, Abdelkader. (2012). *The Enlightening Guide to the History and Antiquities of the Capital of Ouarsenis*. Algiers: Dar Abjadiyat for Publishing, p. 42. [Original Arabic]
- Labib El-Hadj. (2017/2018). *Roman Military Fortifications South of the Ouarsenis (2nd–3rd centuries AD)*. Algiers: University of Algiers, pp. 65–66. [Original Arabic]