

El Romana Hotel in Tlemcen – An Archaeological Study

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Summary:

This article examines one of the archaeological and historical symbols of Tlemcen city, namely El Romana Hotel, from an archaeological perspective. It explores the general importance of Tlemcen's location for commerce, focusing on the city's economic sphere, the history of the hotel's construction, the significant events it witnessed, and the background of its naming.

The study delves into the archaeological aspects, highlighting the hotel's architectural elements, such as the entrance, ground floor, upper floor stairs, fireplace, residential units, and courtyard, related to the architectural side. It also discusses the pricing methods in the hotel as a commercial service establishment, the water supply system essential for commercial buildings, and concludes with some findings on the hotel's role, especially in political, economic, social, and religious aspects.

The research problem centers on El Romana Hotel, focusing on its architectural design and its role in the commercial life of the city of Tlemcen during the Zayyanid period.

Keywords: Hotel; El Romana Hotel; Tlemcen City; Archaeological Study; Architecture.

ملخص:

فندق الرمانة نتن اول في هذا المقال أحد أهم المباني الأثرية في مدينة تلمسان ، وهو فندق الرمانة من منظور أثري، كما نحاول استكشاف الأهمية العامة لموقع تلمسان، مع التركيز على المجال الإقتصادي وتاريخ بناء الفندق والأحداث

التي شهدتها وخلفية التسمية. وتتمحور إشكالية البحث الرئيسية حول الجانِب الأثري للفندق، مع التركيز على التصميم المعماري ودوره في الحياة التجارية والإقتصادية لمدينة تلمسان خلال العصر الزياني. كما نتطرق إلى الجوانب الأثرية ومحاولة إبراز العناصر المعمارية للفندق كالمدخل، والطابق الأرضي، وسلالم الطابق العلو، والمدفأة والوحدات السكنية، والفناء، وكل العناصر المرتبطة بالجانب المعماري، كما نناقش أساليب وطرق التسعير كمنشأة تجارية خدمتية، ونظام إمداد وتزويد الفندق بالماء. ونختم مقالنا ببعض النتائج حول دور الفندق، خاصة في الجوانب الإقتصادية والسياسية والإجتماعية والدينية الكلمات المفتاحية: فندق، فندق الرمان، مدينة تلمسان، دراسة أثرية، عمران

1. INTRODUCTION:

Tlemcen was designed according to a meticulous urban plan and the recognized standards for city construction. All who described the city, ancient and modern, praised its strategic location, moderate climate, and abundant water (El Megri, 1983, p. 340). The city was divided into distinct parts, with transitional areas between these sections, such as the caravan square, hotel square, and others.

Among the significant sections of the city is the economic sector, designed to distinguish between two main parts: one adjacent to the central section, specializing in commercial activities with markets, shopping arcades, and hotels, and the other adjacent to the residential section, which served as the hub for craftsmen and their production centers.

This sector is characterized by its dual function: a center for commercial exchanges and a hub for craft production, where various commercial transactions occur, whether in hotels or shopping arcades. Of particular interest in the economic district's services is the hotel, which serves both as lodging and a café.

The hotel's function and layout resemble those of a caravanserai, a term used in the Islamic Maghreb to denote an inn prepared for the accommodation of people and animals. Typically, it consisted of a central courtyard surrounded by four-sided, two-story buildings, with the ground floor for accommodating travelers' animals and goods, and the upper floor for the travelers themselves.

The word "hotel" first appeared in an inscription above the door of the Arus Hotel built by Al-Nasir Salah ad-Din in 577 AH/1171 AD near Qatina on the caravan route between Homs and Damascus. Among these hotels, some were

designated for foreigners near city gates, like the French Hotel in Tunis and the Venetians' Hotel in Cairo. Others were earmarked for charitable endowments to support schools and mosques maintenance, host pilgrims or the needy, or fund public water dispensers without charge. Each hotel had a manager overseeing its operations, known as the merchants' agent.

2. Descriptive Architectural Study:

2.1 El Romana Hotel:

Located adjacent to the Qaysariyya, El Romana Hotel covers an area of 20 square meters. Its name, derived from a pomegranate tree situated in the central square, has various interpretations regarding its origin.

Some experts in architecture suggest that the name might come from storing pomegranate peels at the hotel, used for dyeing leather. Another interpretation is that the hotel specialized in selling and repairing scales, with a scale called "Al-Romana" used there. However, the first interpretation seems less plausible as a primary reason for the hotel's name, considering several factors.

If true, the place would be named after the pomegranate itself, not "El Romana," given the significant amount of pomegranate that could be stored there. Additionally, no other hotels from the same era (Zayyanid period) were named after goods or dyes stored within them, which were more commonly used than pomegranate, such as indigo, yellow (Planets), and red (Kurmuz). Most dyeing houses in Zayyanid Tlemcen were within the city walls, away from goldsmiths and tanners, and these houses often contained stores for materials used in leather preparation, like pomegranate peels (Jema, 1971, p.1145).

As for the second interpretation, it does not align with the hotel's construction history. Naming it "El Romana Hotel" after the scale is a recent designation, as this type of

scale was introduced during the colonial period, predating the name by far. It is also said that the peach tree preceded the pomegranate tree, and the hotel was initially named "Peach Hotel" (Nacadi, 2002), supporting the notion that the hotel's name derives from the pomegranate tree in its central platform.

El Romana Hotel served as a hub for various crafts and a storage place for many goods. Its central platform was used to display tannery products brought from outside the city walls. Its ground floor shops were dedicated to the shoemaking craft (balaghjiya), leading some to later refer to the building as "Balaghjiya Hotel." This craft continued there until the colonial period when it was transformed into a café, subsequently named "El Romana Coffee" instead of El Romana Hotel, reflecting the shift from accommodating traders and pilgrims to becoming a café.

During the major liberation revolution, it served as a meeting place for several leaders preparing for the revolution starting in 1950. The colonial authorities closed it on June 17, 1950, as it was a starting point for several patriotic operations. It reopened immediately after independence as El Romana Café and is now privately owned by the Khayal family heirs since 1942. The hotel has been associated with various literary figures, including Mohamed Dib, Alain Bellet, José Lanzini, Louis Abadie, and others, as noted in their works (Louis Abadie., 1997, p. 20).

3. General Description:

3.1 Entrance:

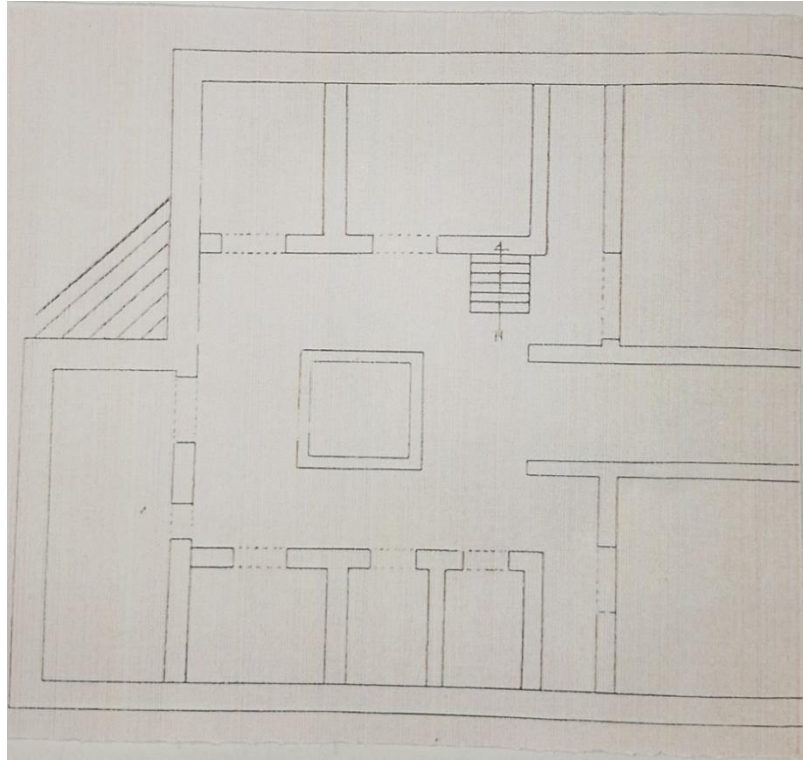
Less imposing than other hotels in the city, it is centrally located on the wall with a relatively small threshold elevated from the ground, indicating that animals were not allowed inside. Directly inside the entrance is a canopy flanked by two shops, simple stone platforms devoid

of any decoration or arches, situated on the right and left sides.

These were intended for the hotel visitors and beverage consumers to sit, a practice that continues today. Unlike other hotels, this entrance does not have a room for the supervisor in charge of collecting customs duties. Notably, the absence of a stable further suggests that commercial caravans did not enter this hotel.

Its central courtyard features a square platform, about half an arm's height above the ground level, centered around a pomegranate tree, after which the hotel is named. Until the early last century, this platform was used to display tannery products, but it is now covered with mats for visitors to sit on, transitioning the space into a traditional café.

The central courtyard's small size means the platform occupies most of its area, leaving only a modest passageway to the surrounding rooms.



Architectural Plan of Romana Hotel / Prepared by the Researcher

3.2 Ground Floor:

There is only one corridor, immediately after the entrance canopy. This corridor does not contain shops but has a shop at its left end, extending from the entrance shops, designed for leaning against one of its sides. The right side of this corridor houses the furnace.

The shops on this floor directly face the central courtyard without a covered corridor, unlike other hotels, totaling eight rooms, all dedicated to the shoemaking craft (balaghjiya). This indicates the hotel's productive function, contrasting with other contemporary hotels in the city, which were mainly commercial hubs. This distinction led Roger Le Tourneau to generalize the principle of artisans in

hotels to protect their trade secrets (le Tourneau, 1957, p. 131).

3.3 Furnace or Hearth:

Used for heating pots for brewing hot beverages like coffee and tea. While most hotels had one or two furnaces, like in the Abu Ali Hotel, El Romana's furnace remains active to this day. With the disappearance of its display and production functions, and its shift from accommodating people, it was renamed El Romana Café (Pomegranate Coffee).

3.4 Stone Staircase:

Similar in design and function to residential staircases, it is relatively elevated from the shop floor level and features a steeply inclined broken arch. This architectural arrangement ensures that anyone using the staircase remains out of sight, comprising ten steps.

3.5 Upper Floor:

Not encompassing the entire building, it consists of two large rooms, unlike other hotels, which have a covered corridor. The stone staircase leads up to the threshold of these two rooms, differing in size but distinct from other houses and hotel rooms in several aspects.

These rooms are communal: the first room, to the left of the staircase, is regular in its interior design, while the second room spans the building's width and equals the width of the entrance canopy and corridor combined, roofed with tiles and designed with a typical saddleback roof seen in houses, mosques, and palaces. The entrance to this room is at the left corner, allowing a comprehensive view of the central courtyard from the top of the staircase.

This room has three windows, two overlooking the central courtyard and the third facing the street, directly above the hotel entrance, suggesting the hotel's facade is similar to other hotels. Inside, on the room's inner wall to

the right of the windows, is a deep niche called "al-taaq" with a stone platform along the wall's length, called "al-sirir," used as a bed.

Given the room's size and features, the hotel likely accommodated traveling families or homogeneous groups like pilgrims. With only two rooms on the upper floor, it's believed the larger room was for men and the other for women, supporting the idea that the hotel accommodated non-traders. This is corroborated by the poet Ibn Khumayyis's mention of living in such a hotel: *"His residence was the hotel, where he slept on sheepskins."*

The hotel's function was twofold: providing accommodation for travelers, families, and homogeneous groups, and serving beverages. Additionally, it had a productive role in the shoemaking craft (balaghjiya).

3.6 Rooms (Residential Units)

The Arab house has several names, varying in construction and form, including the khayma (tent) made from wool, hair, and fur; the fustat from hair; and the qash'a and leather. The khateera is made of branches, the aqna from stone, and the shadda from clay.

In terms of form, there are terms like the flat roof (al-tam), the high part (al-sarh), the square (al-kaaba), and the elongated and elevated (al-ablaq). Muslim architecture focused on protecting the house from the heat of summer and the cold of winter, thus preferring square or rectangular shapes with rooms arranged around a central uncovered courtyard (Rizq, 2000, p. 38).

Among the parts of the house is the room, known in archaeological terms as a small living space within the house. This term is associated with three other names: first, hujra (plural: hujarat), meaning a place where people stay or reside; second, 'uluw, meaning elevation, denoting the raised part of a building; and third, qa'a, derived from qā' and qa'a,

meaning a flat and spacious area of land (Amin & Ibrahim, 1990, p. 35, 82, 87).

These halls were found in various residential buildings like houses and palaces, as well as in commercial or industrial buildings like agencies, caravanserais, and qaysariyas, used for placing different craft tools or accommodating traders from various regions (Rizq, 2000, p. 211). Rooms are among the key architectural components of Zayyanid hotels, serving as spaces where traders spent their time after business transactions. Consequently, most hotels had many rooms, varying in size and shape from one hotel to another.

In the lower floors, particularly in the Romana and Abu Ali hotels, the rooms indicate a unique style and function specific to each hotel. In El Romana, the ground floor rooms suggest a specific commercial activity, excluding space for animals, unlike the Abu Ali hotel, which, despite having several rooms on the ground floor, includes stables at the end of the entrance canopy on the left side. This implies that these rooms were used more for storage than accommodating traders, due to their proximity to the stables.

3.7 Courtyard:

A vital architectural element in any hotel, the courtyard serves multiple functions and services across different residential units and architectural annexes (in language, sahn refers to the open space of a house, known as sahn in mosques, madrasas, and mausoleums, and as a patio or atrium in houses and palaces). In any building—not just hotels—the courtyard is an integral part, enhancing the structure and providing essential elements.

In the Islamic world, the courtyard is known as the vital or central area, offering light, ventilation, and sunlight to all parts of the building. It helps in air purification,

reducing light intensity, wind severity, and moderating cold air currents in winter or hot air in summer (Shafei, 1970, pp. 28-29; Al-Rihawi, 1982, p. 18; Akasha, 1994, p. 92).

The courtyard also contributes to the natural and climatic balance of a building, reducing noise from streets, alleys, and lanes, especially in mosques built in public areas lacking tranquility.

Besides these general functions, the courtyard in hotels has increased importance and necessity, serving as a space for displaying merchandise and conducting business activities, fundamentally a functional role. The size of these courtyards is determined by the overall size of the hotel. For instance, a large hotel like Abu Ali has a correspondingly large courtyard. An exception is El Romana Hotel, where the central platform occupies a significant portion of its courtyard, leaving only a modest passage around the four sides for hotel patrons.

4. Determining Prices in Hotels:

As mentioned before, hotels in Tlemcen fall into two categories: those resulting from agreements between the Kingdom of Tlemcen and European countries, and those specific to domestic trade and artisan classes. The central courtyard of these hotels was designated for display purposes, like El Romana Hotel, which was used for daily leather display by the relevant guild.

Price determination was conducted by the tanners' guild leader, who would hand over the leather pieces to the broker (dalal), a mediator between seller and buyer who also set market prices and guided them. The broker, in constant contact with artisans, had a broad perspective on the displayed item's price.

The process started with phrases like "on God's doorstep" and "the Opener is generous," implying the price was not yet fixed, inviting buyers to propose an initial price

considering the ethical norms of trade. After receiving various offers from traders, the broker would consult the guild leader, who, after discussing with the producers, set the daily price for the goods.

This method was not limited to leather but applied to all industries, products, and traded items in the hotel. The role of the market supervisor (*muhtasib*) was to enforce the agreed principles between traders and the guild leader, preventing unjust price increases. Thus, pricing in hotels or *qaysariyas* was a consensus among stakeholders, influenced by the broader economic conditions of supply and demand.

5. Water Supply in Hotels:

Among the essential necessities for any hotel, which are part of its overall design, are the cistern and water trough, used to provide water for washing or drinking to hotel guests. However, the source of this water and how the hotel was supplied remain questions.

In the absence of archaeological and excavation studies on Tlemcen's Zayyanid hotels, no tangible archaeological evidence was found during field inspections on how water was brought to these establishments. Still, the presence of faucets and cisterns in most hotels (some still standing, like Hotel El Mami) indicates they were water-supplied.

Historical sources discussing Tlemcen mention the city's water supply. Since hotels are an architectural component of the city, they were undoubtedly part of this system. Ibn Khaldun described water being drawn from outside the city walls to its interior, serving mosques, schools, water troughs, palaces, houses, and baths, filling cisterns and irrigating gardens and crop fields (Ibn Khaldun, *n.d.*, p. 10).

Similarly, Ibn Khaldun noted Tlemcen's growing urban development and expansion, with the Zayyanids constructing adorned palaces, bustling homes, gardens, and

running rivers throughout the city (Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun, *Kitab al-'Ibar*, Vol. 7, Beirut, 1968, pp. 156–162).

Most hotels in Tlemcen were constructed in the economic sector adjacent to the city's central area. It is likely that these hotels, like other buildings, were supplied with water in the same manner as residences and palaces, meaning the water supply system for the hotels was integrated with the city's overall supply system.

This system was complex and intertwined, closely related to the city's topography and implemented through precise engineering methods and techniques (Laaraj, 1997, pp. 424–427).

As in the case of houses and palaces, hotels in Tlemcen were integrated into the city's water supply network, which included various types of water channels. These channels comprised fresh water conduits, wastewater conduits, and stormwater drainage systems. Typically, these channels were terracotta pipes, formed by interlocking rectangular pieces to create the waterway that supplied water to residences, palaces, institutions, and others.

These pieces were similar in appearance and manufacturing process, being grayish-yellow, strong, and very durable, likely fired in kilns at temperatures ranging from 1000 to 2000 degrees Celsius. These channels were discovered by Dr. Laaraj during an excavation in Mansoura, and it is believed that the channels used to supply water to Tlemcen were similar to these, dating back to the Zayyanid period. (Laaraj, 1997, pp. 155–159)

Generally, these channels were laid at a calculated incline, taking into account the water source and outlet, the topographic slope of the location, and the various city areas where water needed to be delivered. This design ensured that water flowed towards these areas with sufficient speed and force, yet controlled as necessary. Archaeological

studies have shown that the gradient or slope of these channels typically maintained a ratio of 1mm per meter, considering the elevation difference between the water source and the outlet (Otman, 1988, p. 173).

If the water supply sources for Tlemcen were on the Lalla Setti plateau, about 1050 meters high, and Tlemcen itself is at an elevation of around 800 meters, the significant height difference between the water source and its destination is approximately 250 meters.

This height differential caused the water to flow through the channels with great speed and force, especially given that this height extends over a distance of 5 to 6 kilometers between Tlemcen and the Lalla Setti mountains.

Conclusion:

From the information previously discussed, we can conclude that hotels, similar to other structures situated in economic, central, or residential zones, were connected to the city's public water supply network, which was maintained by the authorities. This system was comparable to the infrastructure supporting other facilities such as baths and mosques.

A significant outcome of this commercial expansion was the construction of numerous hotels designed to cater to the needs of both foreign and local traders. These establishments played crucial roles in the economic and commercial history of Tlemcen and the Zayyanid state at large. They were instrumental in fostering the economic, political, and social relationships of the Zayyanid state with a variety of neighboring and distant nations.

Among these roles, the economic function was most prominent, manifested in trade exchanges. The existence of hotels was a direct result of both domestic and foreign trade practices, becoming destinations for traders of different nationalities and regions to conduct their buying and selling

activities, and providing temporary accommodation for non-local traders, students, and pilgrims.

In other words, these architectural structures contributed in one way or another to the development of the Zayyanid state's national income through the revenues generated from the services they provided.

Politically, some of these hotels were often regarded as residences for traders of specific nationalities, effectively serving as embassies for certain communities. Each community had its own designated center or embassy, reflecting the political relationships between the Zayyanid state and other countries.

Trade was the main reason for these relationships, and naturally, hotels served as appropriate venues for these embassies or consulates, especially when it involved countries or kingdoms that had significant trade (economic) relations with the Zayyanid state. This was the case with traders from the Kingdom of Aragon in Spain, who had an embassy in one of the hotels in Tlemcen, serving both as their diplomatic mission and as a place for their accommodation and various trade activities.

Culturally, these hotels could be seen as centers of scientific, cultural, and even religious illumination. They often served as meeting points for students, pilgrims, scholars, and travelers, facilitating discussions and dialogues in various fields. Therefore, these hotels could be considered spaces for networking and intellectual exchange, where scientific and religious debates or discussions could take place.

From an architectural planning perspective, the general layout of most hotels in the city did not fundamentally differ from the architectural forms and plans of hotels built in other Islamic regions, whether in the Maghreb, like the

hotels of Fez and Tunis, or the khans of the Islamic East, such as Cairo, Aleppo, and Baghdad.

These hotels and khans typically featured a central courtyard on the ground floor, with stables for animals, water fountains, and rooms or shops for displaying goods. The upper floors contained rooms for accommodating traders. The slight difference between the Zayyanid-period hotels in Tlemcen and the khans in the Islamic East lay in their size; Zayyanid hotels were smaller, typically consisting of a single story, unlike the larger, multi-storied Islamic khans.

It could be argued that hotels, located in the economic districts or along trade routes outside the city walls of Islamic cities in general, and not just Tlemcen, represent a distinct architectural style. They are fundamentally different from religious buildings, incorporating architectural elements not found in religious structures, like stables, and lacking elements like minarets, domes, mihrabs, and pulpits found in religious architecture.

They are also not purely civic, as their overall design differs in many aspects from the general layout of civic architecture like palaces and houses, especially in terms of entrances, facades, doors, ground floors, and even decorations and themes. Nor are they related to military architecture, as they do not resemble castles, forts, guardhouses, or towers. Thus, these buildings can be classified under a unique category of Islamic commercial architecture.

This means that the function associated with hotels extends beyond just trade, selling, buying, and various commercial activities, or merely serving as temporary accommodation for foreign traders. As previously mentioned, their role is much broader and more significant.

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