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FUNERARY MONUMENTS OF THE PROTOHISTORIC PERIOD IN THE GUELMA REGION AND THEIR ROLE IN PRESERVING NATIONAL MEMORY

المعالم الجنائزية لفترة فجر التاريخ بمنطقة قالمة ودورها في حفظ الذاكرة الوطنية

مقابر الركنية ووادي شنيور انموذجا

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Abstract

This research paper examines the funerary monuments of the Protohistoric period in the Guelma region, highlighting the different types of funerary monuments and archaeological evidence found in the area, including tumuli, Bazinas, dolmens, which are widespread at numerous archaeological sites, and Haouanets. It also examines the principal archaeological sites dating to the Protohistoric period, particularly Roknia, regarded as one of the most important Protohistoric cemeteries in North Africa, and Oued Cheniour in the Ain Arbi area, among other sites. These remains provide clear evidence of human settlement in the region during the Protohistoric period and of the practice of diverse burial rituals. Archaeological excavations at these sites have revealed burial methods, religious rituals, and funerary furnishings. The paper also seeks to highlight the role of these archaeological sites in strengthening collective memory and the importance of discovering, protecting, and classifying them as part of national memory.

Keywords: Guelma region; Protohistory; funerary monuments; Roknia; national memory.

الملخص:

في هذه الورقة البحثية سنحاول التطرق إلى المعالم الجنائزية لفترة فجر التاريخ بمنطقة قالمة، وإبراز أنواع هذه المعالم الجنائزية و الشواهد الأثرية بالمنطقة، كالجثى، وقبور البازيناس، والدولمن المنتشرة بكثرة بعديد المواقع الأثرية، وقبور الحوانيت، إضافة إلى أهم المواقع الأثرية التي تعود إلى فترة فجر التاريخ مثل موقع الركنية الذي يعتبر أهم مقبرة تعود لفترة فجر التاريخ بشمال افريقيا، وموقع وادي شنيور بمنطقة عين العربي، وغيرها من المواقع الأخرى، وهي تمثل دليلا واضحا على الاستقرار البشري بالمنطقة في فترات فجر التاريخ وممارستهم طقوس دفن مختلفة، ابرزتها مختلف التنقيبات الأثرية بهذه المواقع التي بينت طرق الدفن والطقوس الدينية و الأثاث الجنائزي، وسنحاول ابراز دور هذه المواقع الأثرية في ترسيخ الذاكرة الجماعية ودور الدور في استكشافها وحمايتها وتصنيفها باعتبارها جزء من الذاكرة الوطنية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: منطقة قالمة، فجر التاريخ، المعالم الجنائزية، الركنية، الذاكرة الوطنية.

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Introduction

North Africa passed through numerous historical periods, from prehistory to the historical eras, leaving behind a considerable body of material remains. The Protohistoric period constitutes a boundary between prehistoric and historical periods. Like the other periods, it was characterized by various material remains, most notably megalithic and semi-megalithic tombs dating to Protohistory, particularly in eastern Algeria, such as the Aurès, Constantine, Tebessa, and Guelma. The latter contains numerous cemeteries reflecting the intellectual and cultural development of human communities, as demonstrated by the types of tombs, burial methods and positions, and funerary rituals.

The Guelma region contains numerous archaeological sites dating to the Protohistoric period, including the cemeteries of Roknia and Oued Cheniour, as well as other sites such as the tombs of Kasr El-Azeb and Ain Kharouba west of Guelma. These sites have not received sufficient scholarly attention compared with Roknia and Oued Cheniour, and the degree of interest and research devoted to them has varied among researchers and archaeologists.

The Roknia cemetery is considered one of the most important Protohistoric cemeteries in North Africa. It contains more than three thousand dolmens, Haouanets, and other funerary structures. These remains constitute material evidence concerning people's views of death, their religious beliefs, burial practices and positions, and even the archaeological finds discovered in the cemetery. The Oued Cheniour cemetery is likewise important in terms of the number, types, and distribution of its discovered tombs. Accordingly, the study asks: What are the most important Protohistoric funerary monuments in the Guelma region? What are the principal archaeological and historical sites and studies? And to what extent do these sites contribute to preserving national memory?

Defining the Protohistoric Period in the Ancient Maghreb

The Protohistoric period has been defined differently by historians because it is regarded as a transitional phase between the historical periods that followed it and the preceding prehistoric period. It was characterized by the transition from a simple, rudimentary way of life to another form of life that can be described as involving a degree of progress in various aspects of human existence.

Historians and researchers have differed in defining this period and in determining its chronology precisely. Among the earliest scholars to study the period and attempt to establish its chronology was Stéphane Gsell at the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly during the period 1901–1929. He was followed by M. Reygasse in 1950 and G. Camps in 1961, alongside many other researchers whose work focused on understanding this historically ambiguous period.

In an attempt to reach a comprehensive definition of Protohistory in North Africa, G. Leroi-Gourhan defines it as a transitional stage between prehistoric and historical periods, without elaborating further (Leroi-Gourhan, 1998, p. 868). J. Déchelette defines European Protohistory as the transitional period between prehistory and history, characterized by the emergence of the Bronze and Iron Ages; he dates it to the last two millennia of prehistory (Déchelette, n.d., p. 529).

Balout regarded the Neolithic as a cultural phenomenon and Protohistory as a condition or state, meaning that Protohistory constitutes an entry into the subsequent historical periods (Balout, 1955, p. 450). Reygasse used the term "pre-Islamic" for this period (Reygasse, 1950a, p. 134). G. Camps considered Protohistory in the Ancient Maghreb to be the study of the origins of the Berbers, since it possesses distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from the historical periods, drawing particularly on his studies of Maghrebi pottery (Camps, 1960, p. 160).

Arab and Algerian researchers generally did not depart from these definitions and chronological limits. They agree that Maghrebi Protohistory was the transitional period between prehistory and the subsequent historical periods, more precisely between the Neolithic and the later historical periods. Muhammad al-Saghir Ghanem, however, linked it to the Libyco-Phoenician phase (Abbas, 2008, p. 16; Sahid, 2008–2009; Ghanem, 2006, p. 6).

Compared with Europe, the Protohistoric period there has been extensively investigated through archaeological excavations and research. Bourdier Frank placed its beginning at the emergence of representational art in the Upper Paleolithic, which preceded symbols and writing. Accordingly, European Protohistory begins in the third millennium BCE, corresponding to the Bronze Age in northern and central Europe (Bourdier, 1950, p. 551).

Funerary Monuments

Since prehistoric times, the people of North Africa buried their dead and used tombs for this purpose. Nevertheless, funerary rituals remained largely unknown until the beginning of the Neolithic, when clear evidence began to emerge from human skeletal remains found preserved and covered with stones in different positions. This provides evidence that people buried their dead away from caves—their places of residence—possibly to protect the bodies from predatory animals. The phenomenon of burial and its associated practices demonstrates the intellectual development of human communities during Protohistory (Ghanem, 2006, pp. 25–26).

These tombs, cemeteries, or funerary monuments are among the most prominent characteristics of Protohistory in North Africa. They spread in various forms across large areas of the Ancient Maghreb, and researchers and archaeologists classified them under different names according to their architectural forms and geographical distribution. Tariq Aziz Sahid defines them as stone architectural structures mixed with soil, placed over the body of the deceased together with funerary furnishings (Sahid, 2011, pp. 28–29).

These funerary monuments developed progressively over long prehistoric periods. Some cemeteries indicate the development of knowledge concerning funerary rituals as early as the Upper Paleolithic, with such practices developing further during the Neolithic, when people in North Africa began burying their dead in trenches and pits surrounded by stones in the form of tombs. Burial practices and funerary monuments then gradually became larger and more elaborate. Gabriel Camps emphasized that, regardless of the importance of megalithic tombs and funerary monuments to ancient Maghrebi populations, their significance should also be considered in terms of their interaction with Mediterranean societies (Toynbee, 1981, p. 58; Mahouz, 2022, pp. 105–106; Camps, 1960, p. 220).

Types of Funerary Monuments

1. Tumuli (Tumulus)

Tumuli are stone mounds or heaps of stones placed over a grave. The term refers to a form of funerary monument with various constructions. It has several local designations, including rajm and jidar; in western Algeria, it is also called “tombs of the ignorant.” It is a simple structure made of earth and stones of different sizes, generally conical and low, with a diameter ranging from six to fifteen meters and, in some cases, reaching twenty meters (Amokrane, 2009, pp. 143, 150; Decker, 1999, p. 315; Ghanem, 2003, p. 10; Camps, 1960, p. 65; Reygasse, 1950b, p. 6).

Tumulus tombs are common funerary monuments throughout the Ancient Maghreb and are widely distributed as far south as the desert regions. They are considered among the oldest funerary monuments, with some dating estimates reaching approximately 4000 BCE.

Tumuli occur in several forms (Gsell, 1927, p. 189; Mahouz, 2022, p. 106; Salatnia, 2013, p. 21):

Tumulus without a funerary chamber.

Tumulus containing a funerary cist.

Flat tumulus with an opening.

Tumulus containing a clearly defined funerary chamber.

Gabriel Camps argued that during prehistory human beings developed their thinking and began burying their dead in the earth, placing stones over the bodies to protect them from animals. This form of burial subsequently developed through later periods (Camps, 1960, p. 65).

2. Bazinas

Bazinas are circular or rectangular stone structures carefully built from rows of stones. They may be constructed of stone alone or of stone and earth and contain an opening leading to a funerary chamber. They resemble tumuli, but Bazinas are higher and contain a funerary chamber or stone coffin. They are also surrounded by concentric stone circles arranged in stepped form (Gsell, 1927, p. 186).

Bazinas are distinctive tombs of the ancient inhabitants of the Maghreb and represent a burial method whose remains are still visible in many regions, especially desert areas. A. Letourneaux was among the first researchers to study this type of funerary monument, beginning in 1867 (Letourneaux, 1867, pp. 309–312).

Bazinas occur in several forms (Sahid, 2011, p. 182):

Domed Bazinas.

Multi-burial Bazinas.

Stepped Bazinas.

Bazinas with a cylindrical base.

3. Dolmens (Dolmens)

The word “dolmen” is of Breton origin and consists of two elements: DOL, meaning “table,” and MEN, meaning “stone,” hence “stone table.” Dolmens are stone funerary monuments in the form of a funerary chamber consisting of two or more stones supporting a large horizontal slab that forms the roof. This type of monument is widespread in Europe, particularly France, Britain, and Ireland, as well as in Asia and North Africa. For further discussion, see Adel Wafia’s descriptive and typological study of dolmen-type megalithic tombs in the Oued Cheniour area (Ain Arbi, Guelma) (Wafia, 2018, p. 41).

V. Reboud was the first to use the term “dolmen” in 1856. Dolmens are stone tombs consisting of vertical slabs supporting a horizontal stone table and are often surrounded by

a stone ring. The vertical slabs are embedded in the ground to varying depths. Their forms vary according to the number of slabs used, including three-, four-, and five-slab structures. They contain a funerary chamber intended for burial. North African dolmens are distinguished by their relatively small size compared with their European counterparts (Camps, 1995, p. 2498; Reygasse, 1950b, p. 16; Letourneaux, 1867, p. 315; Camps, 1960, p. 118).

Dolmens are widely distributed in North Africa, especially in eastern Algeria and some coastal areas, while they are absent from the desert. The Roknia cemetery in the Guelma region is one of the most important cemeteries containing dolmens. More than three thousand tombs are recorded, most oriented from north to south and others from northeast to southwest. Bourguinat considered this orientation to be related to religious beliefs, whereas Faidherbe regarded it simply as a repeated alignment in the same direction (Gsell, 1911; Bourguinat, 1868, p. 59; Faidherbe, 1868, p. 24).

4. Haouanets

Haouanets are caves or recesses excavated into limestone rock faces along mountain slopes. They have different shapes, including squares and parallelograms. A. Berbrugger was the first to use the term in 1864 during his research on the Haouanets of Roknia in the Guelma region; subsequent sites generated different designations, such as room, house, and stone (Camps, 1960, pp. 91–92; Berbrugger, 1864, p. 391).

A Haouanet consists of one or two elements: a chamber with a narrow opening that is closed after the body is placed inside. Haouanets may occur in vertical or horizontal sequences and are widespread in North Africa, particularly eastern Algeria. Their function has been debated: some researchers considered them dwellings, while others regarded them as funerary tombs intended to protect the body, with an opening closed by a specially prepared slab. Faidherbe confirmed the latter interpretation through excavations at Roknia and Bounouara (Salatnia, 2013, pp. 57–58; Faidherbe, 1868, p. 35).

The Natural Setting of the Guelma Region

A study of the natural and geographical setting provides an important perspective for explaining human settlement in the region since antiquity. It constitutes a basic factor alongside other causes of settlement, including relief, climate, and watercourses, all of which could attract ancient populations.

Astronomically, the Guelma region lies between longitudes 6°56.622′ and 7°57.063′ E and latitudes 36°40.39′ and 36°1.45′ N. Geographically, it is situated among several provinces of eastern Algeria: Souk Ahras to the east, Oum El Bouaghi to the south, Constantine to the west, and El Tarf, Annaba, and Skikda to the north. Its area is approximately 4,101 km².

Guelma has a semi-humid Mediterranean climate, with cold winters and variable rainfall and hot, dry summers, with increasing dryness during June and August. The region has varied relief and includes four mountain ranges differing in elevation and extent. In the north they extend from east to west, while in the south they are broader and higher. Among the most important are Mount Maouna, south of Guelma, at 1,411 m above sea level; Mount Debbagh to the west at 1,060 m; Mount Taya at Bouhamdane at approximately 1,208 m; and Mount Houara at 1,292 m (Despois & René, 1968, p. 29).

Plains and plateaus account for approximately 27% of Guelma's area. These relatively flat and moderately elevated areas include the central Guelma Basin, at about 290 m above sea level. They are fertile agricultural zones, particularly for cereals. The Tamlouka Plain is one of the largest plains in the region, together with the Great Seybouse Plain and the plains of Oued Zenati.

The Guelma region also possesses important water resources, mainly streams and rivers. The most important is the Seybouse River, which extends for about 50 km within Guelma, crosses the provinces of El Tarf and Annaba, and flows into the Mediterranean Sea, reaching a total length of more than 255 km. It is considered the longest river in Algeria and has historical significance through its tributaries, such as Oued Cherf, which represented a natural boundary between the Numidian and Proconsular provinces. Other important watercourses include Oued Bouhamdane, Oued Cheniour, Oued Zenati, Oued Boulfraïs, and Oued Roknia, most of which flow into the Seybouse (Despois & René, 1968, p. 20).

Major Protohistoric Sites in the Guelma Region

1. The Megalithic Cemetery of Roknia

The megalithic cemetery of Roknia lies northwest of Guelma. It consists of a limestone rocky slope containing a large group of megalithic tombs, particularly dolmens and Haouanets. The area has little soil and is therefore unsuitable for agriculture. The cemetery extends for approximately three kilometers in length, while its width ranges from 700 to 800 meters; it is narrow in the south and becomes wider toward the north, extending alongside the lands of al-Sat'ha (Jaquot, 1916–1917, pp. 207–208; Ghanem, 2006, p. 67).

The site on which the ancient Maghrebi inhabitants constructed the funerary monuments at Roknia is Hammam Tef. Bourguinat suggested that the ancient inhabitants selected the location because they believed it would provide infernal protection for their dead. The site is therefore important for understanding human settlement in the Ancient Maghreb. Bourguinat also suggested that the location was selected because its geological characteristics provided easily accessible raw materials for constructing tombs and because the cemetery was close to arable land, which facilitated settlement (Bourguinat, 1870, pp. 58, 60–61).

The Roknia megalithic cemetery contains more than three thousand dolmen tombs differing in type and size. The tombs are distributed along the valley slope in an irregular pattern and

are relatively small, leading Gabriel Camps to suggest that they were individual graves because of their size (Bourguinat, 1870, p. 18; Camps, 1960, p. 139).

Researchers have disagreed on the precise date of construction of the cemetery. Bourguinat, following extensive study of the site, dated it to 2200 BCE, whereas Broca dated it to approximately the fourteenth century BCE. Reygasse stated that using shells found at the Roknia cemetery to determine its chronology was ineffective and imprecise. It is therefore difficult to establish a precise date for the Roknia tombs solely on the basis of archaeological finds and funerary furnishings, particularly because the cemetery may have been used by ancient Maghrebi populations over long periods, possibly extending into the Punic period (Bourguinat, 1868, p. 92; Salatnia, 2013, p. 94).

2. The Oued Cheniour Cemetery

The Oued Cheniour site is located approximately four kilometers from the municipality of Ain Arbi, formerly Gounod, administratively attached to the Ain Makhlouf district, and 34 km southeast of Guelma. The Oued Cheniour cemetery is one of the large cemeteries of the region and North Africa generally. It contains more than four thousand diverse funerary monuments, including dolmens, tumuli, Bazinas, and rock-cut galleries, as well as several upright stone monuments. These funerary structures are distributed across an area exceeding ten square kilometers (Wafia, 2021, p. 5).

What distinguishes this site is that it remains relatively unknown. Archaeological studies conducted there are very few, if not virtually nonexistent, apart from brief references. Stéphane Gsell visited the site and mentioned it only briefly, mainly identifying its location. Despite containing a large number of funerary monuments comparable to those at Roknia and Bounouara, the site includes numerous dolmens closely resembling those of Roknia in form and stone type (Gsell, 1901, pp. 33–34).

Naturally, the site is divided into two sections separated by Oued Cheniour. The southern section, on the left bank, includes the elevations of Bassbas Basin, Dher Bih, al-Sat'ha, al-Sawaqi, and al-Qalaa. It is characterized by limestone, plateaus, and moderately elevated hills, which facilitated the formation of the cemetery because suitable stone was available. The abundance of springs and the continuous flow of the valley also contributed to settlement around or near it (Wafia, 2018, pp. 38–39; Salatnia, 2013, pp. 109–110).

The northern section, on the right bank, includes the elevations of Oued Cheniour: Jebel al-Naqib, Lahkimin, and the site of Mechta Ramdani, which contains numerous dolmens of different sizes. Mechta Ramdani extends across rocky plateaus intersected by watercourses fed by springs and contains numerous dolmens accompanied by stone pillars, a feature that distinguishes it from other sites. It also includes massive stone tables exceeding five meters in length.

The Bassbas Basin site is characterized by a large type of dolmen, in addition to caves along the northern edge of the valley resembling those at Roknia. It also contains a group of developed dolmens with sliding closures, a rare type among Protohistoric sites in North Africa. Another site is al-Naqib, located on the northern elevations of Oued Cheniour (Salatnia, 2013, p. 108).

Oued Cheniour is an important site for dating Protohistory in North Africa, yet it has remained relatively unknown because most research has focused on the Roman and Byzantine remains at Qalaa Bou Atfane, marginalizing the numerous and varied stone tombs. De Vigneral referred to funerary monuments in the area in an article on Roman remains around Oued Cheniour and Qalaa Bou Atfane. Some non-scientific excavations were also mentioned by V. Reboud in 1878. In addition, Stéphane Gsell visited the site, probably the Oued al-Naqib locality, and briefly confirmed the presence of a large number of funerary tombs of different types (De Vigneral, 1867, p. 223; Reboud, 1881, pp. 27–28; Salatnia, 2013, p. 110; Gsell, 1901, p. 34).

The Role of Protohistoric Archaeological Sites in Preserving National Memory

1.1. Definition of Memory

Memory is an intrinsic aspect of the human personality. It is not merely recollections of the past; rather, it encompasses the experiences that shape human awareness and the way people engage with the present. These experiences constitute the basis of knowledge. In a society's collective memory, memory is not simply the sum of individual memories but rather a largely conscious and intentional construction. Wajih Kawtharani defines it as the retention of events, experiences, and relationships that a person passes through during the stages of life and later recalls as images. Collective memory therefore represents the mental consolidation of socially defined lived experiences and has a major influence on society and on the cohesion of individuals and groups (Abu Zayd, 1982, p. 200; Kawtharani, n.d., p. 20).

Because collective memory can be affected by time, it must be placed within a social and historical context. Collective memory is closely connected to history, particularly individual history, because it is not an independent entity: collective consciousness exists and is realized through individual consciousnesses. Maurice Halbwachs explained this relationship by arguing that each individual memory is a perspective onto collective memory (Halbwachs, 2016, p. 6).

1.2. National Memory

National memory consists of different collective memories that often conflict. Despite these conflicts, they share symbolic dimensions and bring together political and social differences to form a desired, shared cultural character. National memory is not limited to the memory of the individual; it extends to the various segments of society belonging to the same nation.

National memory is formed through three overlapping circles: the past, the present, and the future. The past represents the historical roots of society and expresses its history and social belonging. The present represents society's interactions as it confronts challenges and seeks a better future. Through the interaction between the present and the aspiration for the future, a collective sentiment emerges based on a shared past, present challenges, and aspirations for the future (Ditto, 2007, p. 12).

2. Protection of Archaeological Sites

Many scholars argue that the concept of archaeological heritage emerged with the French Revolution, while others trace it to the emergence of nation-states in Europe. Islamic history, however, contains explicit calls to protect the architectural and artistic remains of ancestors. Al-Baghdadi, writing in the twelfth century, highlighted the concern of Arab-Islamic authorities with preserving cultural remains, stating that rulers continued to safeguard such monuments and prevent their destruction so that they would remain as historical lessons. Whatever the underlying reasons, this demonstrates that sultans, rulers, and kings of earlier periods paid attention to ancient remains and attempted to protect them from damage or destruction (Sheikh, 1998, p. 106; Muhammad, n.d., pp. 9–10).

2.1. During the French Occupation

During the French occupation of Algeria, the French authorities mobilized numerous historians and archaeologists, particularly from the late eighteenth century onward, to produce works supporting France's claim to be the heir of Rome in North Africa. Military leaders were instructed to explore Roman Africa, and this policy was reflected in military writings and publications, including De Xiverey's 1838 work on the historical monuments of Algeria. This did not, however, prevent the looting, theft, smuggling, or destruction of archaeological monuments (Chenniti, 2003, p. 50).

Management of the national heritage was initially subject to French military authorities before being transferred to the French civil administration represented by the Directorate of Interior and Fine Arts under the authority of the Governor-General of Algeria. As with other sectors in occupied Algeria, heritage management was subject to French legislation, beginning with the Law of 30 March 1887 concerning the preservation of monuments and objects of particular historical and artistic value. This was followed by the decree of 14 September 1925 concerning the protection of historical monuments in Algeria, which determined the applicability of the French Law of 31 December 1913. The protection, however, primarily concerned French historical monuments such as churches and palaces. On 27 September 1941, the law regulating archaeological excavations and the exploitation of sites, and protecting movable objects and discovered monuments, known as the Carcopino Law, was enacted. It was followed by several decrees and decisions, notably the decree of 9 February 1942 on the protection of archaeological sites and movable objects and

the decision of April 1947 regulating advertising and the erection of signs (Batrouni, 2008, p. 35; Khoudadjia, 2016, p. 75; Loi du 31 décembre 1913, 1914).

2.2. After Independence

These regulations continued to be applied after independence, given the circumstances of the newly independent state and its focus on reorganizing various sectors. The situation remained largely unchanged until 1967, when the task of drafting a specific law on national cultural heritage was assigned to the French archaeologist Paul Albert Février. He reformulated the previous 1913 and 1941 laws into a new legal text consisting of 138 articles. This resulted in Ordinance No. 67-281 of 20 December 1967 concerning excavations and the protection of archaeological, historical, and natural sites and monuments. Later, Decree No. 69-82 of 13 June 1969 prohibited the export of objects of national historical and archaeological interest (Ordinance No. 67-281, 1968).

Subsequently, the decision of 17 May 1980 concerning archaeological research permits was issued, specifying the procedures and the authorities entitled to issue such permits. These decrees and laws governing archaeological research and the protection of archaeological sites remained in force in different forms until 1998, when Law No. 98-04 of 13 June 1998 on the protection of cultural heritage was enacted. This law remains in force and established a detailed system for the classification of monuments and cultural heritage, while also providing specific provisions for the protection of cultural and archaeological heritage (Decision of 17 May 1980, 1980; Law No. 98-04, 1998).

3. Classification

These archaeological sites, like other sites throughout Algeria, constitute a record of collective national memory and a living archive of the ancient Maghrebi population, documenting their way of life, religious beliefs, and burial practices. They provide archaeologists with tangible indications for reconstructing and studying ways of life during important periods of North African human history. An archaeological site is a place where remains or traces indicating human activities in ancient periods are found. To preserve such sites, the Algerian state enacted several decisions and laws regulating the preservation of archaeological sites, archaeological research and excavation, and severe penalties for violations against archaeological sites and antiquities, including Law No. 98-04.

The classification of these archaeological sites gave them a national dimension and placed them within the category of public archaeological property protected by the relevant laws. For example, the Roknia megalithic cemetery was classified as early as 1900 and reclassified in 1968 after Algerian independence, according to the Official Gazette of 1968. Other sites were classified later, such as the Oued Cheniour dolmen structures at Ain Arbi, classified in 1999 under the decision of 3 November 1999 concerning the classification of monuments and historical sites; the same decision classified Qalaa Bou Atfane (Kafafi, 2004, p. 55; Decree No. 68-07, 1968).

Algerian legislation defines archaeological sites as built or unbuilt spaces demonstrating interaction between humans and nature and containing tangible and intangible remains that express human activity in the past. This includes remains preserved in museums and movable archaeological property resulting from planned, accidental, or unauthorized excavations. Such property is considered part of the public domain and part of national memory, as provided by Law No. 90-30 on national property (Law No. 90-30, 1990).

Conclusion

Algeria possesses a large body of archaeological sites documenting different historical periods, from prehistory and the Stone Age through Protohistory and subsequent historical eras. These sites translate the region’s diverse history, constitute an important cultural heritage resource, and contribute to the formation of a collective memory expressing national memory. The Guelma region contains numerous archaeological monuments dating to Protohistory. The Roknia cemetery, with its dolmens and Haouanets, represents an important period in national history dating to the Neolithic and provides evidence of the development of burial practices and associated funerary rituals. Many tombs contained human remains in different positions, accompanied by funerary furnishings indicating a belief in an afterlife. The differences in tomb construction reflect the periods in which they were built, particularly when compared with similar tombs in different parts of Algeria, such as tumuli, dolmens, and tumulus-type graves.

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