

Ksours and Oases of the Montain of Ksours in General Cavaignac's Campaign in April and May 1847 AD by Felix Jacquot

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• Abstract:

European explorers paid great attention to the Algerian Sahara. In the 19th century AD, talk about it was linked to the campaigns carried out by the French, especially the military. One of these Frenchmen was Commander Cavaignac, who led a military expedition to southwestern Algeria in the months of April and May of the year 1847 AD, in which he accompanied scholars and specialists in Several fields, including Felix Jaco, who wrote down all the aspects of the campaign and the itinerary it took, and highlighted the historical and geographical importance of southwestern Algeria through the geology of the region and its historical and natural human qualifications.

Keywords:

campaign; oases; ksours; south west of Algeria.

• Introduction

The allure, fertility, and wealth of the Djebel Amour region were among the key factors that motivated France to advance into southwestern Algeria. This region held significant importance in the history of French colonization in Algeria, Africa, and the Sahel since the 19th century. During its occupation of Algeria, France managed to penetrate southwestern Algeria by dispatching missions, intensifying military campaigns, and organizing exploratory expeditions. These endeavors were supported by thorough and specialized field studies conducted by various scholars, researchers, clergy, writers, and military officers. Their reports and studies enabled the French authorities to gain comprehensive knowledge about the secrets of the desert,

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meticulously documenting every detail, whether natural, economic, or demographic, to control and exploit its resources.

In this research paper, which outlines the path of General Cavaignac in the Djebel Amour region and highlights the main stations he explored while describing every aspect, including the prevailing climate, constructed architecture, various routes, diverse flora, existing and extinct fauna, and the daily life and living conditions of the region's inhabitants, we aim to answer the following questions: What contributions did the author of *The Campaign of General Cavaignac in the Algerian Desert* make regarding the Djebel Amour region, which stemmed from a military campaign presented as a scientific mission? What were the scientific and historical benefits of this campaign, and how did it impact the historical legacy and scientific studies of the region?

The author perceived his journey as an exploration of a new, intriguing, and unfamiliar desert region, marked by its people and features. He also presented pathways previously inaccessible to Europeans and provided significant benefits to settler farmers who needed to establish connections with the desert and its inhabitants to stimulate trade in the southern region and neighboring countries. General Cavaignac's mission included scholars and specialists who, according to Félix Jacquot, gained great insights from this expedition, despite the fear and fatigue experienced. With his expertise in writing and history, Félix Jacquot effectively compiled a mix of emotions such as joy, sorrow, astonishment, and observations about weather, climate, botanical geography, natural descriptions, geology, ethnography, as well as reflections of thinkers, representations of nature, poetic imagery, stages of caravan movement, and other themes consistently linked to the Algerian desert ¹.

1. Author and Work Overview:

1.1 Overview of the Work:

«The Campaign of General Cavaignac in the Algerian Desert, April and May 1847 »

¹ أنساعد-الجنوب الجزائري وأهم حواضر إفريقيا- مجلة العربي، 2022، ص22

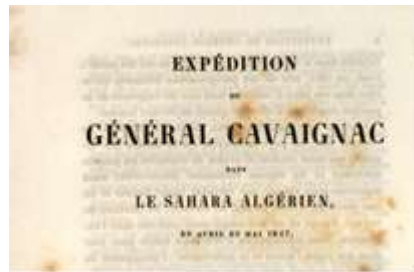


Figure 1: Cover of the Book

The book was published in Paris in 1849. It was authored by Félix Jacquot, who utilized the memoirs of General Cavaignac. The book, written in French, spans 360 pages and details the daily accounts of the expedition that departed from Tlemcen towards El Dayet at El Aricha, administratively part of Tlemcen, then Gourara in the El Bayadh Province, reaching on April 16 the eastern Chott region, a boundary zone between the Tell and the desert. The journey then moved into the Djebel Amour region, starting from Assela, followed by Lower and Upper Magrane, Tiout, Ain Sefra, and Sfisifa, between April 21 and May 5, 1847.

Jacquot sought to present a comprehensive overview of the geological nature of Algeria, aiming to convey a crucial understanding—that the Algerian desert is not merely an arid, sandy expanse nor as flat as a tranquil lake. It features varied terrains, including rugged, low-lying rocky lands formed by hills and plateaus, fine sand layers, and sparsely green, cultivated areas. His book systematically classifies the Algerian landscape geologically and naturally, from the coast to the Sahara².

1.2 Overview of Félix Jacquot:

Félix Jacquot was born in 1819 and was a physician, military officer, and surgeon, later becoming a certified professor specializing in infectious diseases. He also contributed as an editor for *Gazette Médicale* in Paris. Jacquot passed away at a young age, succumbing to typhus at 38.

In 1847, during his participation in General Cavaignac's campaign in the Algerian desert, Jacquot authored a documentary narrative supplemented with illustrations he created himself. He was one of the first, after Colonel Dumas, to provide a detailed description of the central Algerian desert³

1.3 Overview of General Cavaignac:

General Louis Eugène Cavaignac was born in Paris in 1802 and was both a military officer and French politician. He participated in the war against Algeria and, in 1844, conducted a campaign that led to the massacre of the Beni S'Bih tribe, who were burned alive in a cave. Cavaignac served as Governor of Algeria following the 1848 Revolution, and his harsh and oppressive policies ultimately ended his political career following a labor uprising in Paris (Kadi 2004:233)⁴. During his tenure in 1844, a law was enacted to intensify military campaigns and establish military posts as a precursor for advancing into the desert. Cavaignac became the interim President of France

³ Huard F et Jacquot F –op cit, p403-408

² أنساعد 2012 -المرجع السابق، ص22

⁴ قوراري عيسى-قصر تيوت دراسة أثرية ومعمارية، رسالة ماجستير في الثقافة الشعبية جامعة تلمسان، 2001، ص233

until the presidential elections of 1848, where he lost by a significant margin to Louis Napoleon Bonaparte⁵. He passed away in 1857.

2. The Expedition Route:

2.1 Asla:

On April 21, the expedition reached Asla. It is noted that the village of Asla appears 8 miles away, with the first sight being the fortress. The area is slightly elevated, covered in large expanses of esparto grass. The author mentions the Asla Valley, situated between hills, describing it as a dry valley surrounded by small bushes. He adds that the site becomes increasingly arid, with steep, rugged, rocky mountains stripped of vegetation ⁶.

The history of the region testifies that the Asla Fortress is the most significant landmark and symbol of heritage for the local inhabitants. It played a vital role in their lives, which have undergone various developments from ancient times to the present, embodying a symbol of stability. Recently, it has become a destination for some foreign tourists, known for its unique and somewhat appealing architecture. The fortress reflects the concept of a traditional town with an urban fabric characterized by the cohesion of original families who have continuously utilized the structure. The settlement is divided into neighborhoods specific to each tribe or clan, consisting of compact houses, narrow, winding streets barely exposed to sunlight, allowing only the passage of a person or some livestock. These streets branch into passages ending in homes and alleys. The fortress is surrounded by a thick wall fortified with steps and balconies and enclosed by a wide moat crossed by movable gates made of palm wood, similar to those found at the Sfisifa Fortress⁷.

The structures of the fortresses remain functional for both public and semi-public purposes. Typically, the entrance to a fortress house is simple, meeting the residents' needs while providing privacy from passersby. It includes a closed entrance surrounded by walls, leading to an interior courtyard⁸.

As summarized by researcher Bisson, a fortress is a small town consisting of several interconnected houses. The streets within are narrow, and if the fortress is built on flat ground, the streets are straight and intersect at right angles, often ending in dead ends⁹.

- Definition of the Fortres (Qasr):

⁵ تروملي-الفرنسيون في الصحراء- يوميات حملة في حدود الصحراء الجزائرية- منشورات المركز الوطني للدراسات والبحث في الحركة الوطنية وثورة أول نوفمبر، الجزائر، 2013

⁶ Jacquot F Expédition du général Cavaignac dans Le Sahara Algérien en Avril et Mai 1847,1849,p122

⁷ بامون أمينة- آليات المحافظة على القصور والقصبات الصحراوية وإعادة إدماجها في الواقع المادي-دكتوراه علوم في علم الآثار، جامعة الجزائر أبو القاسم سعد الله، 2015، ص448

⁸ نفسه، ص448

⁹ Bisson-Mythes et réalités d'un désert convoite le Sahara, Edition L'harmattan, Paris 2003,p480

Linguistically, "qasr" refers to a residence or a stone-built house. It is also called a "qasr" because it restricts and confines, as reflected in the Quranic verse: "...Fair ones, reserved in pavilions..." (Surah Ar-Rahman, 55:72)¹⁰. The plural form is "qusour," as seen in "...You build palaces in the plains..." (Surah Al-A'raf, 7:73)¹¹. A "qasr" refers to a constructed residence, an imposing and spacious building (Ibn Manzur 1992:411)¹². The term "palace" (balat) has also been associated with it¹³.

During the early Islamic era, "qasr" referred to the residence of the caliph or ruler and his household, including servants and courtiers¹⁴. In some historical sources, the term "qasr" indicated inhabited or abandoned settlements¹⁵.

In desert regions, cities and oases often bear the name "qasr," pronounced locally as "al-qasr." It refers to a large fortified structure with a distinctive architectural style. Typically built near valleys where oases are found, it is a common term among the fortress-dwelling desert inhabitants¹⁶. The "qasr" serves as a fortified city surrounded by walls, featuring storage areas and markets for tribes and nomads to store grains when they travel in search of pasture for their herds and livestock¹⁷.

In the context of the Qasr Mountains, the "qasr" represents an architectural structure housing a community that meets their social, cultural, and economic needs. This community, united by blood ties, faith, and shared culture, settled around essential resources, facilitating a reciprocal civilization between groups not necessarily of the same origin but seeking mutual benefit¹⁸.

- **Asla Oasis:** The Asla Oasis is listed as a wetland of international significance, boasting a unique and enchanting natural environment. It hosts significant biodiversity, including various plants, wildlife, aquatic life, and numerous species of birds, some of which are rare and endangered. The oasis resembles an open-air museum and serves as a strategic location amid a picturesque natural setting that lends it particular charm and appeal¹⁹.

- **Route Through Asla:** On April 22, the author notes that between 4 and 5 a.m., the sky was overcast, revealing intervals of clear skies. The temperature recorded was 25°C in the morning and 8°C in the evening. The weather included storms, heavy rain, and thunder. Asla is described as being located 45 leagues from El-Daya in a straight line. It is an oasis along a strip of land less than 1,000 meters long and much narrower in width, covering no more than 16 hectares. It is traversed by a narrow valley bed surrounded by an earthen wall 2 to 3 meters high (Jacquot 1849:122)²⁰.

¹⁰ القرآن الكريم-سورة الرحمن-الآية

¹¹ القرآن الكريم-سورة الأعراف-الآية

¹² ابن منظور جمال الدين-لسان العرب-ج6، دار صادر للطباعة والنشر، 1992، ص411.

¹³ المعجم العربي الأساسي-المنطقة العربية لتربية والثقافة ولعلوم، 1989، ص990.

¹⁴ عبد المنعم ماجد-تاريخ الحضارة الإسلامية في العصور الوسطى-مكتبة لانجلو المصرية، القاهرة، 1963، ص121-125.

¹⁵ الإدريسي محمد بن عبد الله-المغرب العربي من كتاب نزهة المشتاق-ديوان المطبوعات الجامعية، الجزائر، 1983، ص175.

¹⁶ Le Grand Dictionnaire Encyclopédique-1984,7905

¹⁷ Colomieu-Voyage dans le Sahara Algérien de Gery ville à Ouargla, Le tour du monde 1863,p

¹⁸ محمد الطيب عقاب-مساكن قصر القنادسة الأثرية-دراسة أثرية ومعمارية، ديوان المطبوعات الجامعية، الجزائر، 2007، ص21.

¹⁹ Colomieu-op cit,p449

²⁰ Jacquot F-op cit,p122

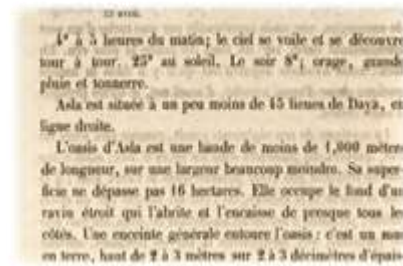


Figure 2: p. 122

As for the Qasr of 'Asla, he notes some construction techniques, stating that it is a solid structure with a few, small windows. Due to the slope on which the Qasr is situated, the stairs are irregular, and all the houses are interconnected. The doors lead to passageways or streets. He mentions that there is no unified outer wall; instead, the external walls of the houses, clustered together, serve as a barrier against potential attackers. These walls are equipped with holes and topped with some barriers. He notes that he was keen to mention these details because, based on his reading of Colonel Dumas' book—which he describes as excellent—'Asla, Tiout, and Sfissifa do not have a closed wall ²¹.

2.2 From 'Asla to Tiout:

On April 24, he mentions that the distance between 'Asla and Tiout is approximately 42 km and that the route consists of a long plain. Wadi 'Asla remains on the eastern side. He describes clusters of (retem) broom plants (see note) as sparse, along with wild jujube, which adds a natural scene. He describes the ground as being covered in certain places with flat stones embedded in the earth like the slabs of a giant grave ²².



²¹ Ibid,p128

²² Ibid,p141

Figure 3: p. 141

On April 25, he notes that at five in the morning, the temperature was 4°C, and at eight in the morning, it was 10°C. He mentions that the ground was still filled with prominent or level rocks, making it steep and difficult. He points out that it is easy to follow the paths in this region, a feature not shared by the Tell ²³.



Figure 4: p. 142

2.3 Tiout:

- Tiout Fortress:

Tiout means "spring of water" or "springs" or "the water-rich area" ²⁴. The Tiout fortress is located on the right bank of the Tiout Valley on a slope in the northwest direction. The Tiout oasis is the largest, richest, most fertile, and most distinguished, and it is the most beautiful among all the western oases, containing fruit trees of various kinds.

In the path of the general, it is mentioned that the plain extending to the foothills leads to Tiout (see note), and it is added that it is the oasis approached after three hours of walking. Unlike Asla, Tiout opens its orchards first, and the fortress can only be seen when approaching from the western side. It is said that the surrounding areas are dry and rocky with scarce desert grasses. The Tiout oasis is described as the most expansive, richest, and most fertile among all those visited during their journey. The fields are divided into squares with earth walls about one meter high, and the entire oasis is surrounded by a wall with earthen towers, most of which are rectangular in shape ²⁵.

The fruit trees in Tiout include grapevines, apricots, plums, peaches, almonds, pomegranates, figs, and apples, in addition to palm trees. It is noted that, unlike Asla, the land is not barren, and he reiterates the richness of nature, describing it as having an irresistible special allure, far from the needs often generated by civilization ²⁶.

²³ Jacuot F-op cit,p142

²⁵ Jacquot-op cit,p143

²⁶ Ibid-p144

²⁴ قوراري عيسى- المرجع السابق، ص86

- Water Resources in Tiout:

Regarding the Tiout Valley, it is mentioned that it is bordered by two dams, with the lower part being no less than 15 meters. It is noted that its builders were knowledgeable in the construction laws of such structures, with a comparison made to the remains of Ottoman dams in Oran. Water is channeled at an obtuse angle to halt the flow and force the water level to rise, forming a pool filled with tall aquatic plants and reeds, where plovers, pigeons, and a beautiful white bird with large wings are found. It is noted that they were unable to capture one²⁷. The Tiout region is classified under the Ramsar Convention (see note) as a wetland area.

Underground canals distribute water to the fields and orchards, making irrigation very easy. The author wonders if, as in most oases, there is an organized distribution of water in Tiout through a sign posted in a public place, allowing each person a specific amount of water for a certain period according to their needs. He suggests that it is very likely this is the case during irrigation times²⁸.

On page 170, he discusses the importance of trees and palm trees in the desert, emphasizing that trees producing fruit, providing shade, and protecting streams must be safeguarded.



Figure 5: p. 170

2.3 Magrar el-Tahtani:

Magrar was formerly called "Umm Qarar," meaning "stability" or "Mother of Villages" (Ben Amara 2009:122)²⁹. The Magrar el-Tahtani oasis is described as located in a low basin with piles of red sandstone and covering an area of 30 hectares, with large sandy areas and densely planted palm trees forming a true forest. The fields are divided as in Asla and Tiout and contain a somewhat varied selection of fruit trees, although grapevines are few³⁰.

2.4 Magrar el-fouqani:

The Magrar el-Fouqani fortress is smaller compared to other fortresses. Upon arrival at Magrar el-Fouqani, the author mentions the presence of the horned viper, locally known as "Um

²⁷ Ibid-p145

²⁸ Ibid-p145

²⁹ خليفة بن عمار-كتاب النسل الشريف متبوع بشرفة الجنوب الغربي الجزائري، تر عمر بن داود، مكتبة جودي مسعود وهران، 2009، ص122

³⁰ Jacquot F-op cit,p

Qarainat" with an emphasized "qaf," which has a highly dangerous bite, along with many owls. He adds that various types of scorpions are also found in the Ouled Sheikh Mountains.

2.5 Ain Sefra:

Among the still-standing fortresses in the Ain Sefra area, these are considered a natural, historical, and cultural extension of the fortresses that have existed in the Maghreb region since ancient times. The term "fortress" denotes urban life and stability and is still commonly used today. The fortresses were built on rocky heights due to the harsh continental climate³¹.



Figure 6: p. 238

Cavenac's observations suggest that the Ain Sefra fortress was built at the foot of sand dunes in a chain separated by the valley, which stretches for no less than three miles and forms an arched path. Félix Jacquot emphasized the stark contrast between life and death, and the fertility of the soil found in Ain Sefra's fortress.

Jacquot explained that the storm's rotation in the sand dunes charges the air with sand particles, darkening it. When calm returns, the people of Ain Sefra observe the sand advancing toward their dwellings, causing concern. The sand accumulates in thick layers in the fortress streets and penetrates deep into their homes, but this initial fleeting impression soon gives way to tranquility, and people resume living in peace despite the ever-present threat of death³². The inhabitants sweep the sand, leaving the accumulated part behind the wall in the garden without questioning where on earth they might plant their palms and sustain their families.



³¹ محمد بيدي-التحصينات الدفاعية لقصور منطقة العين الصفراء، دراسة معمارية أثرية، أطروحة دكتوراه في الآثار الإسلامية، جامعة الجزائر، 2016، ص82

³² Jacquot F-op cit,p238

Figure 7: p. 246

He notes the significance of the oasis as seen from the summit of Mount El-Hirsh. Appearing as a patch cast upon the sands, with a fortress occupying its far end, the cultivated land covers 45 hectares. Round or square towers give the oasis its distinctive appearance, with abundant fruit trees swaying above only fifteen or twenty palm trees.

The Ain Sefra Valley flows with good water and forms the horizontal branch of the river, almost vanishing after a short journey. Springs arise under the fortress walls, where the general set up camp to recover after the previous day's journey. They could not visit Ain Sefra until very late. On their way, some rock carvings caught their attention, and upon entering the fortress, they soon retreated. At night, they were drawn to a light from a house where four soldiers of the Foreign Legion worked in two carved minarets, one below the other, connected to a third, large and deep cavity. It was indeed a true underground labyrinth³³.

2.6 Sfisifa:

Sfisifa is named after the willow tree that is abundant in the area. It has been a beacon of villages in southwestern Algeria since ancient times. The fortress is located on the right side of the Sfisifa Valley, about 30 km west of Ain Sefra, and was built using solid stones and clay³⁴.



Figure 8: p. 249

On May 7, during the general's march at four in the morning, the temperature reached 35°C during the day and 18°C at seven in the evening. They were five miles away from Sfisifa, which was separated by a line of sand dunes connecting to Mount Mekhter. The valley extends from Mount Mekhter to Mount Mer and can be used as a route from Magrar el-Fouqani to Sfisifa, a journey that took a whole day or two stages of the journey. As they approached the fortress, the ground changed from soft, loose sand to a stony surface resembling the desert of Tiout, with an abundance of sheep and esparto grass. They passed through a narrow path in a series of hills that intersect the valley and approach the mountains slightly (Jacquot 1849:249).

³³ Ibid, p246

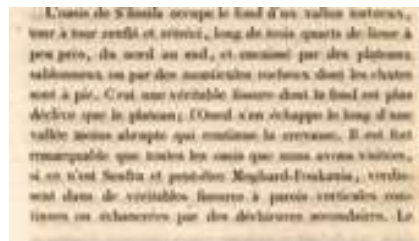


Figure 9: p. 250

Upon reaching the southern part of the Sfisifa region, they saw protected squares of barley and wheat surrounded by small earthen walls barely two or three feet high. When moving toward the center of the oasis, they found enclosed gardens and many fruit trees, with only five palm trees across the entire cultivated area. In the northern part of the Sfisifa oasis, the trees gave way to grain fields that were greener than in the south.

The Sfisifa oasis is described as an undulating, elevated, and narrow valley bed, three-quarters of a league long from north to south, surrounded by sandy plateaus or rocky hills with clear waterfalls. Félix Jacquot noted that all the oases they visited, except for Ain Sefra and Magrar el-Fouqani, were green.

• Conclusion

Such writings were aimed at serving colonial expansion projects, yet they sparked interest in writing about southwestern Algeria in general and the Ksour Mountains region in particular. The scientific and exploratory missions undertaken by Europeans, regardless of ethnicity, paved the way for colonization under the guise of exploration within the colonial policy for advancing into southwestern Algeria. After nearly total control of the northern areas, France shifted its attention to the south, targeting steppe and desert regions for domination, sending exploratory missions to the Algerian south.

Despite the challenges and dangers faced by General Cavaignac and Félix Jacquot during their journey, they meticulously studied the region, gaining knowledge of its soil, climate, and waterways, traversing its mountains and establishing camps.

The wealth of the region invited exploration, which inspired French travelers to write and describe every aspect of their campaign journey. The road map outlined by French missions, described with high accuracy, increased the French government's desire to occupy the desert regions rich in natural resources, whether visible or hidden.

What we know about the Ksour Mountains region is that life is harsh and the heat is intense. However, researchers in these desert studies, especially the French, confirmed that the region is fertile ground for study.

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