

Site: **M'Zab valley**

Country: **Algeria**



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SYNTHESIS

The M'Zab valley is formed by a wadi which crosses a rocky plateau crossed by dry riverbeds, called *chebka*, 600 km to the south of Algiers. It was settled by a population of Ibadites, followers of a specific form of Islam, in the 11th century. Cohesion and social organisation are very strong in this community. There are also original urban sites on rocky cliffs which stand out above the modern town which occupies the date-palm grove between the towns of Ghardaia and Beni Izguen. Five towns make up the Pentapolis of M'Zab: El Atteuf (The Bend), Bou-Noura (The Luminous), Melika (The Queen), Beni-Izguen (The Holy Town) and Ghardaïa (possibly from a Berber root meaning shoulder, in the sense of cliff, height).



"These are not human settlements whose value lies merely in the effort exerted and the relative degree of production and wellbeing obtained in spite of the natural conditions. They are settlements whose value lies in their absolute perfection. They represent what we could best imagine and produce as oasis culture." *Jean Brunhes, geographer.*

"The simplicity of forms we find in the M'Zab, at each step, with wonder, is not the natural conduction of an ameliorated primitive art. It is, rather, at a given time, at a very high level of culture, the collective choice to refuse ornament, that which is useless, ostentation." *Manuelle Roche, Le M'Zab.*

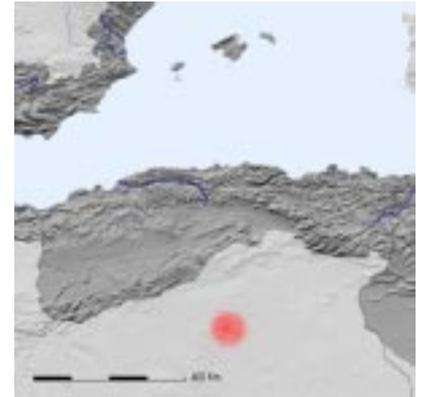
ARCHITECTURAL TYPOLOGIES PRESENT

House in the M'Zab valley

THE COUNTRY'S APPROVED SIGNIFICANT SITES

Medina of Algiers Medina of Bou Saada **M'Zab valley**

Country map



Regional scale



Local scale



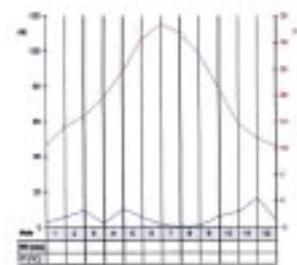
Detail of the urban tissue



HISTORY AND GENERAL INFORMATION

The Mozabite population is the only one remaining in Algeria of Ibadite confession, which defends the egalitarian, democratic principles of Islam, among others. The Rostemid dynasty, of Ibadite confession, founded the town of Tahart (a few kilometres from present-day Tiaret) in the year 144h/761-62. The kingdom exercised a far-reaching influence over much of Algeria. On its fall in 296h/909, the Ibadites took refuge in Ouargla and reinforced the nearby town of Sedrata. Finally, they sought an isolated retreat, an inviolable refuge to protect their religion. The towns of M'Zab, for their morphology, their organisation and their institutions, derived from a highly advanced urban order. The Ibadites who created them were, to a large extent, town-dwellers, and evolved in Basra and Kufa (south of Iraq), and in Tripoli, Tahart, Tlencen etc. The first town to be founded was El Atteuf, in around 1012.

— Surface area of the site	20 km along the valley, varying in width between 0.4 and 2 km, or 4,000 ha. The total surface area of the five historic ksours (El Atteuf, Bou Noura, Melika, Ghardaïa and Beni Izguen) is approximately 67 ha.
— Geographical co-ordinates	Lat.: 32°30' north – Long.: 3°40' east
— Height above sea level	468 m
— Lithology	The valley crosses a limestone plateau and the ksours are situated on rocky cliffs along the wadi, where the ground comprises clayey earth and sand.
— Population	Valley: 160,000 inhab. Sites of the ksours: approx. 50,000 inhab.
— Population density	Valley: 42 inhab./ha. Ksours: 746 inhab./ha.
— Average annual maximum temperatures	27.42°
— Average annual minimum temperatures	14.78°
— Average of maximum temperatures during the hottest month for 10 years	39.8° (absolute max. in Ghardaïa: 50°)
— Average of minimum temperatures during the coldest month for 10 years	5.1° (absolute min. in Ghardaïa: -1°)
— Average rainfall	69.11 mm
— Average number of days of rain per year	20 to 30
— Specific characteristics	The place was listed as a Historic Site in 1962 and as World Heritage by the UNESCO in 1982; a heritage workshop is responsible for its preservation.
— Traditional economic activities	Date-palm grove cultivation, artisan carpets, commerce.
— New economic activities	Commerce and small industry
— Site's communications with its territory	The M'Zab valley remained concealed until very recently (this was the reason for its implantation). It stands at a junction of roads leading in all directions: the N°1 national road to Algiers to the north via Laghouat, the national road to El Goléa, then to Tamanrasset to the south and Timimoun to the south-west, the roads to Touggourt to the east. It has a national airport which also hosted international flights when tourism was flourishing.



Graph of temperatures and rainfall



CURRENT STATE OF VITALITY AND PRESERVATION

Maintenance of social cohesion and rules of conduct which are very closely observed by the original population in the ksours, allowing preservation of heritage. However, substitute materials such as cement, which is supposedly more solid, are starting to be used in rubble formwork, principally in foundation walls, and represent a break with custom which must quickly be stopped.

In recent years, the site has lost the implantation logic of successive towns, and it is the space between the towns which is now tending to be developed. The problems are, then, of an urban nature in a very dynamic region, as well as the problems common to all of Algeria, concerning running water, the escalating abandonment of buildings and their lack of rehabilitation in a fragile environment.

TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

Under the effects of economic development, primarily industrial, and population growth, the valley has been undergoing very strong, accelerated urban development since the seventies. It was not long before the oasis began to be developed into a huge built-up area of row housing. By way of indication, housing requirements for the coming 20 years total 21,626, constituting 92% of housing built in 10 centuries.

Site protection is beginning to be affected by disproportionate construction on the listed site. The date-palm grove of Ghardaïa, which started to be occupied under French colonisation for the construction of the new town, is almost totally, with the exception of the grove of Beni Izguen, invaded by buildings with adjoining gardens. This is due to successive subdivision due to inheritance of plots of farmland which no longer produce revenue and to the need for housing. Only a return to old forms of occupation and the spatial organisation of new construction can prevent invasive development of the entire M'Zab valley, which does not have sufficient capacity in terms of road, water and drainage infrastructures to support urbanisation throughout its 25 km.

INTERVENTIONS AND REHABILITATION PROGRAMMES

Due to its listing, the site is preserved as a study and protection structure, under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture.

The heritage workshop of the M'Zab has procured a budget to provide assistance for insalubrious housing of 200,000 dinars, to be set aside for limited restoration work, after which the owner continues to finance the operation with the technical assistance of the organisation.

Restoration work has been carried out on public features such as squares and their facades, ramparts, gateways and watch towers, and old wells in the urban fabric.

Contacts

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LEXICON

1. Chebka: net

