



The credibility of historical information regarding the history of modern Algeria: between the French perspective and the local archives.

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Abstract:

This paper addresses the problem of sources for writing the history of modern Algeria between the Algerian perspective and the French perspective. As for the history of modern Algeria, we find its Algerian archival sources in Arabic and Ottoman languages to be rich, as archives are closely linked to history because they contain the various aspects of the political, economic, social and cultural life of a state, and they are its official record and the vessel of its memory that proves its existence. This allows the researcher to identify the characteristics of Algerian society and proves the existence of the Algerian state with its foreign relations. However, these sources were neglected by the French colonial historical school, which sought to deny the existence of the Algerian state by excluding the local archive and relying on the writings of spies, consuls and European travelers, which made writings aimed at casting doubt on the history of Algeria in order to justify the occupation.

Keywords: *Modern Algerian History, The Algerian State, The Colonial School of History, Local Archive, Correspondence, Records.*

Résumé :

Cet article aborde la question des sources utilisées pour écrire l'histoire de l'Algérie moderne, en comparant la perspective algérienne et la perspective française. En ce qui concerne l'histoire de l'Algérie moderne, les sources d'archives algériennes en langues arabe et ottomane s'avèrent riches, car les archives sont étroitement liées à l'histoire : elles renferment les divers aspects de la vie politique, économique, sociale et culturelle d'un État, et constituent à la fois son registre officiel et le dépositaire de sa mémoire, attestant ainsi de son existence. Cela permet au chercheur d'identifier les caractéristiques de la société algérienne et prouve l'existence de l'État algérien à travers ses relations extérieures. Cependant, ces sources ont été négligées par l'école historique coloniale française, qui a cherché à nier l'existence de l'État algérien en excluant les archives locales et en s'appuyant sur les écrits d'espions, de consuls et de voyageurs européens, ce qui a donné lieu à des écrits visant à jeter le doute sur l'histoire de l'Algérie afin de justifier l'occupation.

Mots-clés : *Histoire moderne de l'Algérie, État algérien, École coloniale d'histoire, Archives locales, Correspondance, Documents.*



Introduction:

Writing the history of Algeria during the Ottoman era can only be done through local Arab and Ottoman sources, because they are the witnesses to its events, and the vessel that preserves the existence of the state and its various organizations, its foreign relations, and the movement of society and its various activities. If we examine this period (1516-1830), we find it full of internal and external events, especially since Algeria's connection with the Ottoman state resulted in a rich archive of correspondence, instructions, and records related to endowments, which makes studying it reveal the characteristics of Algerian society in various fields, and allows us to make a general vision of the history of Algeria during that period that differs from what was written by the French colonial school, which worked to diminish the value of that period, by neglecting local sources and being satisfied with what was written by European travelers and consuls.

1- The Importance of Archives:

History is a series of events confirmed by documents embodied in the original sources to which we refer others to verify the accuracy of our statements and judgments (Mouanis, 2001, p. 53). This makes history more professional and ethical, bringing the historian closer to the natural scientists in their work method, which relies primarily on documents (Tahtah, 2012, p. 77) to extract the truth and present it to the reader. Based on this, sources were glorified and documents were revered, leading to an increased interest

in archives and their role in preserving the raw material for historical research, as well as preserving the memory of nations. Research that does not rely on documents is of diminished value (Hamza, 2011, p. 82).

Therefore, archives are of paramount importance in the lives of individuals and nations. They play a vital role across all scientific, economic, and cultural fields, thus constituting evidentiary value. Consequently, all administrative sectors have prioritized archives, relying on them for their administrative operations. They depend on the accumulated documents and records, comparing and evaluating them both qualitatively and quantitatively to make informed decisions and develop forward-looking studies.

Archives are therefore of immense importance in the lives of individuals and nations. Archival documents are all that originated during the performance of any task and were part of it, and were kept by the people responsible for those tasks for future reference. They are not limited to governmental work, but may be documents of associations, individuals, or non-governmental bodies. They accumulate naturally during the course of work, thus becoming evidence of the work itself. (Al-Alousi, & Malik, 1979, p. 68) Initially, archival documents have practical and administrative value, but after a period of time, that value changes to become historical value. Therefore, they are important because they carry news and details of past lives that cannot be equaled by hundreds of oral accounts. (Bouslam, 1999, p. 24)

The archive is a living witness to all the activities undertaken by administrative bodies across their various sectors. It is also a repository of information on diverse administrative activities, management styles, living standards, and the social status of all segments of society.



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Historians are therefore obligated to consult the archive in all its forms, as it accurately reflects reality and its authors had no vested interest in altering figures or changing data (Hamza, 2011, p. 81). This makes it the most inspiring source, as it was written without any consideration for future generations—a kind of eyewitness testimony, even against their will, as Marc Bloch put it (Touche, 1984, pp. 72-73). Through the archive, numerous researchers across various disciplines have been able to conduct research that has had a profound impact on history, providing a picture of lived reality at each historical juncture, each with its own unique characteristics.

The archive bears witness to all political, economic, social, and cultural activities, as well as to lived reality itself. As historian Jami' Bayda, director of the Moroccan archives, said, it is therefore the past, history, identity, heritage, a token of transparency, and it contributes to the economic development of the country, as it is a guarantee for the continuity of the state.

2- Archives and the History of Modern Algeria:

The primary and direct source for writing the history of modern Algeria is the archive, from which we derive accurate and precise information according to the requirements of an objective scientific perspective. Archival documents are the essential foundations for reconstructing historical events. (Miyassi, 1988, p. 213) These documents contain information pertaining to the history of humanity, or the history of prominent figures. Their preservation provides primary sources, evidence, and testimonies about the history of the country and the origins of its people. Based on them,

economic and political conditions are studied, and customs, traditions, mentalities, and various aspects of daily life, such as food, clothing, and housing, are identified. Thus, the archive constitutes the raw material from which most historians and others derive their primary sources to form an understanding of past reality. (Bouslam, 1999, p. 24)

2.1. The Modern History of Algeria from the French Perspective:

The French played a significant role in writing the history of Algeria during the Ottoman era. This was due to the backdrop of the conflict that had existed since the beginning of the modern era, during which Algeria emerged as a dominant military and commercial power in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, they controlled all Algerian state documents after the occupation, many of which were transferred to France (Al-Alousi & Malek, 1979, p. 38). These documents were then manipulated to serve the colonial interest by casting doubt on Algerian history and denying its sovereignty.

Most of what has been written about the Ottoman period is considered, from the perspective of Algerian historical studies, to be peripheral issues and marginal topics (Hilali, 2008, p. 104). Foreign studies focused on relations with Europe, such as piracy, prisoners, tributes, the exchange of consuls, gifts, and treaties, while important events and various aspects of life remained neglected and obscure (Saaïdouni, 2009, p. 77). Attention also remained primarily focused on the city of Algiers and its commercial activity. French historians, both military and civilian, disregarded the original sources of Algerian history, which were in either Arabic or Turkish. Instead, they relied on observations,



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anecdotes, and oral accounts that did not accurately reflect Algerian history. They recorded events and stories of various kinds and origins (Saadallah, 2007, p. 22), reflecting their nature as European colonizers and their worldview.

The French published the books of travelers and impressions of Europeans who visited Algeria during the Ottoman era, and published the memoirs and reports of French consuls and spies such as Dubois and Boutin, which had hostile backgrounds and were directed for specific purposes, far from any objectivity and credibility, in order to subject the methodology of history and the requirements of research to the reality of the occupation, which diminishes the scientific value of such studies, and puts them within the realm of biased propaganda (Saaidouni, 2009, p. 35). The aims of colonial policy, which viewed Ottoman rule as tyranny and aggression, while it saw the French presence as closer to a civilizing work than to colonial intervention, led to ignoring the historical existence of the Algerian people, and considering Algeria as a region of civilizational void, lacking the existence of a cohesive people and an integrated nation, and a geographical region over which rulers alternate. (Halali, 2008, p. 119)

French colonialism denied the prior existence of Algeria as a state to sow doubt among Algerians about their history and to instill this idea in Europeans, making them more secure in their presence in Algeria and more confident in their future there. Its aim was to create a dogmatic mindset among Europeans and undermine historical knowledge among Algerians. Therefore, they attempted to distort the past and ignore local Arab sources on Algerian history, leading to falsification. (Al-Mili, 1973, pp. 61-62) Colonial theorists

believed that the history of Algeria during the Ottoman era should be studied through European narratives and observations, not through local sources (Marcais, 1930, p. 161), arguing that the latter did not adequately address the relationship between the Turks and Europeans.

The writing of the modern history of Algeria by the French was subject to the colonial ideology aimed at discovering the secrets of the Ottoman era, and at destroying the morale that might bring about radical change after the success of the occupation (Saadallah, 2007, p. 19). The French objective in studying the history of Algeria was not scientific, but rather aimed at gaining an understanding of the population they were ruling in order to ensure their stability in Algeria. Therefore, history was employed in the service of colonialism by excluding original local sources that reflect the reality of Algerian society, under flimsy pretexts that they were few, poor, and unsuitable for constructing a history (Marcais, 1930, p. 167), or that they lacked reliability, according to De Grament, who categorically refused to rely on local sources in writing the history of Algeria during the Ottoman era. He questioned their integrity and credibility, accusing them of abstraction and exaggeration, and contented himself with European narratives and observations, arguing that the necessary documents were rare, very scattered, and sometimes highly contradictory (De Grament, 1887, p. 14). This renders most of his studies biased and serving colonialism in the field of history (Halali, 2008, p. 102), by neglecting modern Algerian history and what it represents in terms of the political, cultural, and economic existence of the Algerian people, and linking it to the beginning of the French colonial presence. Thus, the neglect of Arabic and Turkish sources and the complete reliance on European documents



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related to the period... Ottomanism was a refusal to recognize historical truth and an opposition to a sound view of history (Saaïdouni, 2009, p. 33) which inevitably leads to falsification.

2.2. The Modern History of Algeria through the Ottoman Archives:

The history of Algeria in the Ottoman era is rich in its archival material due to the nature of the relationship between Algeria and the Ottoman state and the resulting various correspondences, sultanic instructions, reports on the conditions of Algeria, and records of various aspects of economic and social life, in addition to Algeria's pioneering role in the Mediterranean and the abundance of trade relations and political treaties with Europe. It is necessary to refer to the primary Ottoman documents to write the history of modern Algeria, especially in its economic and social aspect, due to the accurate recording of everything related to Algerian society in its daily life.

Writing the history of modern Algeria requires examining local documents and analyzing their content to extract information that helps us understand historical phenomena in their temporal and geographical dimensions. This involves comparing their content with that of other contemporary sources, as these documents hold the true and detailed dynamism of Algerian society, addressing political life, administrative matters, legal issues, and economic activities. The Ottoman administration in Algeria was well-organized, and the administrative and military systems, in particular, stand out due to the abundance of documents. Like other provinces linked to the center of the Ottoman Empire, Algeria experienced significant commercial and military activity in

the Mediterranean basin. This resulted in a wealth of official documents stemming from correspondence between Algeria and the Sublime Porte, and between Algeria and European states (Al-Tamimi, 1973, p. 37). The process of registration and documentation became an administrative necessity, especially as the various departments of authority multiplied and became organized.

Understanding the modern history of Algeria correctly, in line with reality and truth, can only be achieved by studying this period based on primary sources, which are the raw material for any historical construction (Saaïdouni, 2009, p. 33). These sources reflect reality in all its characteristics, as history cannot be separated from the lives of people and the environmental conditions in which they live in their finest details (Boughofala, 2014, p. 108). Ottoman documents in Algeria are full of these details because they were formed as a result of the continuous recording of instructions, orders, and observations received from the Sublime Porte, or recorded by the Beylik officials in all economic, social, and political fields, in addition to the activity of the Algerian province's agents abroad, especially since Algeria during the Ottoman era witnessed vigorous commercial and military activity in the Mediterranean basin, which created a stock of official books and documents related to the treasury, endowments, internal and external trade, and taxes, in addition to the files of its political correspondence with all countries. (Hamouda, 1999, p. 31) The archive informs us about the components of the Diwan, the names of the employees, the fleet, the spoils, the gifts, the taxes, the collection and the ransom expenses, the military garrisons and the census of the prisoners (Halali, 2008, p. 109), that is, it



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gives us a clear picture of the various Algerian government agencies.

Therefore, Algerian documents from the Ottoman era are essential for rewriting Algerian history scientifically and objectively, as European sources operate from concepts influenced by colonial ideology (Saaïdouni, 2009, p. 70). These documents provide researchers with the primary material and simultaneously form the backbone of any historical work that attempts to revive Algeria's past from a national perspective, free from the biased view of the French colonial school. This school exploited political differences and religious animosities in its treatment of modern Algerian history, labeling it as a dark period, while neglecting Arabic and Turkish documents (Al-Tamimi, 1973, p. 36). These documents contain information related to internal life, administration, and finance, as well as external life and Algeria's international relations during that period. The Ottoman archives are the necessary entry point for reconceptualizing the past and defining our perspective on its events, especially concerning the active and influential environment: the city, the seat of government, administration, economic activity, and social interaction (Saaïdouni, 2009, p. 84).

3. The Economic and Social History of Algeria Through the Ottoman Archives:

3.1. Sharia Court Records:

Sharia court records are considered among the most important documents due to the valuable information they contain regarding economic and social matters (Bouزيد, 2015, p. 227). They are rich with details of life in these two aspects,

which the judge oversaw and meticulously recorded. During the Ottoman era, Algerian society witnessed the concentration of most of its needs within the jurisdiction of the judge, who controlled the reins of public life, in addition to his religious duties. The judge would record at the beginning of the records the legal cases brought before the court, and at the end, he would record the orders, rulings, and correspondence he received from government officials and administrators (Al-Sahli, 1974, p. 30). The Sharia court records were distinguished by the great care taken in their documentation by notaries, who ensured that contracts were drafted with precision, leaving no room for ambiguity or confusion. (Ghattas, 1997, p. 71)

The records of the Sharia courts included real estate contracts, endowment or trust deeds, sales and purchase contracts, loan agreements, gifts, wills, trusts, marriage and divorce contracts, manumission contracts, legal proceedings, proof of lineage, determination of dowry, inheritance, gifts, and preemption. In short, they documented various social activities, family relationships, customs and traditions, and the evolution of social phenomena reflecting the times, such as the rising value of dowries, prices, and sales and purchase amounts as time progressed.

From the records of the Sharia courts we obtain information about administration, taxes and their types, prices, the relationship of the population with the rulers, in addition to loans, sales, currency, dowries and types of family disputes (Al-Sahli, 1974, p. 30). It also reveals the prevailing mentality at the time, such as whether or not women benefit from the property of husbands and fathers, and about manifestations of righteousness, solidarity, mutual support and cooperation (Ghattas, 1997, p. 73), and the extent of



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individuals' contribution to social and cultural life through their endowments to religious and cultural institutions. It also suggests the tight organization of social life and strict adherence to the provisions of Islamic Sharia.

3.2. Endowment Contracts:

Endowments (waqf) are considered a manifestation of charitable giving and charity in Islamic societies. They also express the social and economic solidarity that endures over time. During the Ottoman era, Algerians paid great attention to endowments, dedicating their funds and properties to benefit society. This led to a system of strict administrative regulations overseeing endowments due to their numerous types and the large number of donors from all social classes. The endowments were meticulously recorded in special registers. Given the nature of endowed properties, we find they encompass all facilities such as real estate, agricultural land, shops, hotels, bakeries, springs, irrigation canals, orchards, and more. These endowments also provide insight into the management of endowments and those in charge, particularly judges, as contracts were drawn up under their supervision (Bouzid, 2015, p. 236). Their names, along with the contract wording and the names of witnesses, are recorded in these contracts, making them important records for researching members of the judiciary during that period.

Endowment documents allow us to identify economic activities, crafts, names of craftsmen, and estimate wealth and standard of living through what is included in contracts for the purchase of lands and shops for the purpose of endowment (Halali, 2014, p. 228). They are thus a window into the economic, social, cultural and spiritual history of the

nation, acquainting us with the endowers and their social status, and allowing us to distinguish between the categories of endowers and their positions, whether they were rulers, military personnel or employees. They also inform us of the nature of the endowed properties and their location, allowing us to recall that historical situation and reshape the image of urban and rural life as the essence of civilization and lifestyle. (Boughofala, 2014, p. 114) It provides us with an approximate census of endowment revenues and their sources, in addition to identifying the properties of individuals and social classes (Al-Tamimi, 1973, p. 40). It allows us to understand the demographic makeup, family structure, the status of women in society, and the financial and social capabilities of that time, as well as the prevailing economic structure.

Endowment documents contain extremely precise information in all transactions, enabling the researcher to prepare a map of houses, lanes, and alleys based on the precise identification of neighbors on all four sides. This clarifies the status of real estate ownership and how it is distributed among different social strata, whether inside or outside the city, especially for studying the density of residential and commercial neighborhoods. We also learned about the topography of the city and its landmarks, such as markets and public facilities, in the absence of maps and precise descriptions, thanks to the notaries' keenness to mention the details such as the name of the endowment or the endower, his profession, the location, the beneficiaries, and its purpose (Ghattas, 1997, p. 72). This is because the originals of documentation in Algeria during the Ottoman era were important and highly organized (Halali, 2014, p. 234). These documents also allow us to define the urban space of Algerian cities through the geographical concentration of the



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population, the organization of residential neighborhoods, and the groups inhabiting them, which are often homogeneous in their social composition, as each group is concentrated in a specific area, creating neighborhoods that are distinct from each other.

3.3. Revenue Documents and the Tax Collection System:

These are the documents related to various types of taxes, such as the tithe, zakat, tribal aid, the Jewish jizya, revenues, and the land tax levied on the lands of the Beylik, spoils of naval jihad, tributes and gifts from foreign countries, customs and market fees, in addition to the types of inheritances and revenues that revert to the treasury in the absence of legal heirs (Saaïdouni, 2009, p. 52). These documents are diverse and rich in sources, fluctuating according to natural and economic conditions, both internal and external. They constitute the general income of the Algerian treasury during the Ottoman period. The tax collection system was meticulously organized, especially in its tax-related aspect, where collection was carried out by differentiating between rich and poor tribes. These registers contain details of all the duties imposed on imports and exports, as well as police taxes on markets. (Al-Tamimi, 1973, p. 39) Ottoman archival documents in this area reflect the activity and well-organized nature of commercial life, both internally and externally. Internally, markets were organized under the responsibility of the muhtasib (market inspector), who oversaw the monitoring of goods, prices, and weights and measures, and supervised the resolution of disputes between those involved in various activities and financial transactions (Halali, 2008, pp. 180-181). These archival documents provide a clear

picture of the nature of crafts in Algeria during the Ottoman period, reflecting activity, diversity, and self-sufficiency in terms of the various products consumed by the population.

A study of these documents refutes the common belief among historians that piracy was Algeria's primary source of income during the Ottoman period. This does not reflect reality. Algeria enjoyed active trade with Izmir, Thessaloniki, Venice, Tripoli, Tunis, Morocco, and European ports such as Marseille, Malta, and Sicily (Al-Tamimi, 1973, p. 38). It imported rice, tea, and paper from Egypt and purchased iron, coal, gunpowder, sugar, textiles, and jewelry from Europe, while selling coral, leather, wool, and agricultural products (Hamouda, 1999, p. 35). Livorno had significant trade relations with Algeria, second only to Marseille, as Algeria exported considerable quantities of durum wheat, which was not produced in Italy for pasta making, in addition to precious metals like gold (Rahmouna, 2009, pp. 525-526). Algerian wheat was of excellent quality and held a prominent place in global markets, as noted by William Schaller, the US Consul. In Algeria (1816-1824), Algerian wheat was renowned in Italian markets, preferred by merchants over all other types of wheat due to its superior quality for making macaroni and other pasta. (Schaller, 1982, p. 30)

Algeria also served as an important trading hub in the western Mediterranean basin, attracting merchants from various parts of Europe, Africa, and the Arab East. It traded goods with sub-Saharan African countries (Western Sudan), exporting European products in exchange for ostrich feathers, wild cowhide, and ivory. Additionally, it supplied the markets of Tunisia and Morocco with woolen fabrics, dates, and other goods. (Shouitam, 2005, pp. 241-242) This contributed to the high income and diverse sources of



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revenue, which many French historians have limited to the proceeds of piracy and maritime jihad, relying on reports from European consuls and travelers. For example, (De Grammont) and (P. Boyer) depend on information from the reports of some European travelers or diplomats, claiming that piracy was the backbone of Algeria's economy during the Ottoman era. They also justify the economic decline Algeria experienced starting at the end of the 18th century by attributing it to the decline in Algerian piracy, thus ignoring the economic crises and natural disasters that Algeria experienced during that period, which significantly impacted treasury revenues and the social and military life of Algeria afterward.

William Schaller also claimed that the Turks relied on piracy as the primary source of revenue for their government (Schaller, 1982, p. 58). He added that the Algerian treasury during the Ottoman era was nothing but the product of three centuries of plunder and pillage. (Schaller, 1982, p. 192) The German physician Habenstreit also wrote about the same issue that the trade in Christian captives constituted one of the main sources of income (Habenstreit, 1732, p. 42). While Algeria, like other countries at that time, was rich in diverse economic activities that financed its treasury, the proceeds from naval jihad constituted only a part of it, not everything. When we look at the sources of the huge sums of money that accumulated in the Algerian treasury throughout the Ottoman era, we find them diverse, including the spoils of naval operations (naval jihad), the annual and quarterly contributions of the Beyliks, taxes on the agricultural sector and fines from rural residents, fees from city residents, and the proceeds of professional guilds (Saaïdouni and

Bouabdelli, 1984, p. 28). This is especially true since the various economic sectors were productive, whether in the agricultural or industrial field, where textile, silk, leather, wood, and pottery industries were widespread. Professions were numerous and widespread, especially in the major cities, including the caesar, the jeker, and the samarun. Saddlers, tailors, tanners, builders, butchers, brokers, and others. (Halaili, 2008, p. 192) The contributions of the Beyliks were also very large, as the Beylik of Constantine, Denouche, reached (120) thousand riyals in the Boujou region, the Beylik of Oran reached (100) thousand riyals in the Boujou region, and the Beylik of Titteri reached (50) thousand riyals in the early seventeenth century AD (Saaidouni and Bouabdelli, 1984, p. 31), which shows the diversity of the sources of income of the Algerian treasury.

Conclusion:

Archives play an important and vital role in the lives of nations and peoples. They are a source of information and a key means for historical, scientific, social and cultural research and studies. As for the modern history of Algeria, they are capable of correcting the fallacies established by the French colonial school through its purely colonial interpretation of events, and its use of them to serve its interests in sowing doubt about the historical and sovereign existence of Algeria during the Ottoman era.



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