

## Aspects From The History Of The City Of El-Meniaa: Origins To The End Of The Modern Period

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### **Abstract:**

The city of El-Meniaa has witnessed various historical stages, making it one of the ancient cities and a city that experienced significant prosperity. This can be attributed to its strategic location, as it lies in the heart of the African desert, making it a transit point for many trade caravans coming from kingdoms and countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The abundance of underground water due to the presence of a massive underground water reservoir led to the emergence of springs. The presence of terrain such as hills provided a strategic location for the construction of fortresses, and the presence of plains enriched by the waters of seasonal rivers from time to time. All of this made it a geographical center that attracted human groups seeking stability, security, and guaranteed livelihoods. The city has witnessed several developments and historical events, which turned it into a competitive hub among different ethnicities, especially during the period of conflict between the cities of Ben Zazu and Al-Qal'a. After the destruction of Ben Zazu, only the fortress built by the Zanata tribe remained, utilizing this geographical area until the arrival of the Arabs in modern times, who took control of the ancient palace. Through this research, we will present the most important historical stages that the city has gone through from its inception until the end of the modern period.

**Keywords:** El-Meniaa, desert, Zanata tribe, underground water, ancient palace.

## Introduction

The city of El-Meniaa traces its roots back to the depths of history, specifically to the prehistoric period. By this, we refer to the early stages of human activity, as evidenced by various scattered artifacts across the geographical expanse. The reason behind the early human presence in this area can be attributed to the abundance of water from various sources, including seasonal rainfall in valleys and explosive springs caused by the existence of a massive underground water reservoir, sometimes referred to as the subterranean sea. Naturally, this led to the growth of grass and trees, providing a vegetative cover and fertile hunting grounds. Humans utilized these natural pastures to graze their livestock, which served as a source of food and livelihood.

Subsequently, the construction of houses and fortresses took place in ancient, medieval, and modern periods. Among the regions where these traces were found is the "Mola Walan" area, located a day's journey southwest of the ancient fortress, and the "Hasi Al-Abid" area. The construction of the El-Meniaa fortress took place during the medieval period and it remains standing to this day. Here, we will attempt to trace the development of this city up to the beginning of the modern period, which coincided with the arrival of the Arabs, who became among its inhabitants.

### 1- The Strategic Location of El-Meniaa

El-Meniaa city enjoys a strategic location as it lies at the heart of the Algerian territory. It is often referred to as the "Pearl of the Desert" due to its abundant natural and economic resources. One of its remarkable features is its favorable climate, which supports the production of agricultural products, especially fruits such as pomegranates. Moreover, the city has access to fresh underground water<sup>1</sup> along the course of the "Wadi Saghar" that originates from the Atlas Saharan Mountains and reaches El-Meniaa, serving as its outlet. This has resulted in the availability of fertile soil along a stretch of over 20 kilometers.

The city is surrounded by the eastern mountainous region and the western sand dunes, creating a location that served as a refuge and settlement for numerous tribes compelled by

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<sup>1</sup> Geneviève Capot-Rey: "Water and Soil in El-Goléa: Review of Works of the Saharan Research Institute, University of Algiers, Volume XVII, 1st and 2nd Semester, 1958, pp. 83-126.

circumstances to inhabit these desert areas. Palaces were established in these areas, and springs were brought forth, enabling El-Meniaa to endure and overcome the challenges it faced throughout its historical stages.

## **2- Difficulties Encountered in the Archaeological and Historical Studies of El-Meniaa**

One of the most challenging aspects facing historical researchers studying the origins of El-Meniaa city is the issue of determining its historical roots. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the city dates back to prehistoric times, as evidenced by physical artifacts such as primitive stone hunting tools. Unfortunately, these tools have been intentionally or unintentionally disturbed. They have been moved from their original locations by individuals who engaged in unofficial tourism to acquire some souvenirs or by tourists themselves who had preconceived objectives before arriving in these areas.

This also applies to individuals who have established private museums in their homes as a hobby or for decorative purposes. However, this contradicts the legal framework since they established these museums without considering the scientific aspect of relocating these archaeological pieces. As a result, it becomes difficult to determine their original geographical location and, consequently, accurately identify the geographical area where prehistoric human activity was prevalent. Moreover, many of these pieces that were preserved in homes have been lost due to inheritance or unknowingly sold by individuals who believed they had the freedom to dispose of them as private property.

Even the artifacts that are still present within families pose problems, such as the legal status of their presence and how they can be legally retrieved. Furthermore, there is a need to address them scientifically so that they can be included as material historical sources.

What is noteworthy is that some of the physical artifacts collected by Father Le Clerc<sup>2</sup>, which formed the foundation of the El-Meniaa City Museum, have provided us with valuable insights into the various geological, natural, and human stages of the city. These artifacts have been instrumental in

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<sup>2</sup> Among the French settlers who settled in the city of El Meniaa before and after independence.

identifying the locations of these materials related to different historical periods, including the geological and paleontological eras, the Stone Age, and the ancient period. Therefore, these periods are in urgent need of thorough review and in-depth research to uncover the true historical essence of the city during these stages.

### **3. Historical Indicators of the Origins of El-Meniaa City**

#### **3-1. Prehistoric Period:**

One of the historical indicators of the city's origins lies in the archaeological artifacts dating back to the prehistoric period. These artifacts provide evidence of the earliest humans who inhabited these areas and shed light on their lifestyle through various tools collected from the surrounding regions of El-Meniaa. These include stone knives, stone arrowheads, and ornaments made from ostrich eggshells used for decoration<sup>3</sup>. It should be noted that the contents of the scientific museum "The museum of Augiéras"<sup>4</sup> in the Belabchir area, which is considered the first museum in the city, remain unknown. Many people mistakenly believe that what was established by Augiéras was merely a park displaying various animals. However, this misconception differs significantly from the

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<sup>3</sup> The National Public Museum of El Menia possesses various archaeological artifacts from different historical stages. The credit for the establishment of this museum goes to Father "Ronie Leclerc", who came to the city of El Meniaa in 1958. He began collecting these materials, laying the groundwork for the city's museum, which was officially established in 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Augiras, one of the French officers who settled in El Menia after World War II, constructed the retired Colonel "Augiras" Museum. This retired military man poured all his knowledge of African affairs into this museum and recognized the potential for tourism. The French government allocated him a large land area extending from near the church lands in the Belbachir area to Hafirt El Belabbasse, which he utilized as follows: constructing a large museum divided into four large rooms, each dedicated to a specific purpose. The first was allocated for a library for reading, the second for all the animals found in Africa, preserved, the third for all the hunting tools used in Africa, ancient and modern, and the fourth for all the insects and reptiles found in Africa, either dried or preserved scientifically. This museum became a destination for tourists, scientists, and university students from all over the world who were interested in conducting studies on the African desert and Africa, known as scientific tourism. This attracted them, providing comfort and recreation facilities. Augiras built tents in African style, called "Zraib Koko," each surrounded by water connected to the others by a trench, forming a space covered with aquatic plants that give the visitor the impression of being in an African forest. Augiras achieved significant revenues from this investment.

See, Nouacer Abderrahmane: French Colonial Policy in Southern Algeria between 1873-1962 - The Case of El Meniaa - Rawafid Journal of Research and Studies, University of Ghardaia, Issue 1, December 2016, pp. 111-129.

actual purpose of the museum, which we will explore in due time and detail.

### 3-2. Ancient Period

The ancient period of El-Meniaa lacks sufficient information and requires in-depth research, as previously mentioned. However, when we refer to historical sources, we must acknowledge the early accounts that mentioned the presence of ancient ruins in El-Meniaa with remarkable accuracy, even before the arrival of the French mission by more than seven centuries. One such account is attributed to Al-Bakri (d. 487 AH/1094 CE)<sup>5</sup>, although he never traveled to the region himself. He relied heavily on earlier sources, such as "Kitab al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik" by Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Warraqu, which covers historical and geographical matters related to the history and geography of Morocco and the term "Maghrib" in its geographical sense during that period<sup>6</sup>.

Al-Bakri mentioned the existence of an inhabited fortress in Al-Minia with traces of ancient civilization, suggesting that there was a pre-existing period known as "Taourirt"<sup>7</sup> or "El-Golea." In his book "Al-Maghrib fi Dhikr Ifriqiya wa al-Maghrib," he stated, "...to the city of Warjilan (ouregla

) and to the fortress, which is an inhabited city with traces of ancient civilization and a mosque."<sup>8</sup> This will be further clarified in an extensive study focusing on this particular point, including references to foreign sources. Among these sources, the mission led by "Schwartz" responsible for studying the railway route is significant. The railway passed through El-Meniaa, then Tamanrasset, and ultimately reached Sudan. Tracking the path of this railway, which reached El-Meniaa on February 7, 1880 CE, provides insights into the region.

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<sup>5</sup> Abdullah ibn Abd al-Aziz ibn Muhammad al-Bakri al-Andalusi (died 487 AH/1094 CE), a historian and geographer, was esteemed by the kings of Al-Andalus who cherished his books. One of his most famous works is "Al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik" (The Routes and Realms), with one of its sections being "Al-Maghrib fi Dhikr Ifriqiya wa al-Maghrib" (The West in the Mention of Africa and the West). See, Al-Zarkali, Khayr al-Din, "Al-A'lam", Vol. 4, Dar al-Ilm lil-Malayin, Beirut, 2002, p. 98.

<sup>6</sup> Al-Bakri, Abu Ubaydullah, "Al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik", Vol. 1, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1992, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> Ang. Chevalier, Journey of Studies through the Sahara, its Sudanese confines, and in the Niger Valley, In: Review of Applied Botany and Colonial Agriculture, 12th year, bulletin n°129, May 1932, pp. 423-432.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Bakri, Abu Ubayd, "Al-Maghrib fi Dhikr Ifriqiya wa al-Maghrib", Al-Muthanna Library, Baghdad, 1964, p. 77.

In conclusion, the ancient period of El-Meniaa requires thorough investigation and analysis of historical sources, including local and foreign accounts, to uncover more information about the city's historical roots during that era.

#### **A- Issue of the Garamantes and their Relationship to El-Meniaa**

The mission discovered a grave to the east of the palace, and based on its characteristics, it was identified as belonging to the Garamantes<sup>9</sup>, an ancient Berber people who inhabited the Libyan desert, specifically the Garama oases. Consequently, there are hypotheses suggesting that the Garamantes were the ones who built the ancient palace. However, this hypothesis has been refuted by experts in archaeological studies. In this regard, they stated, "The nature of these scattered and isolated communities, in addition to their agricultural lifestyle, raises questions about the purpose of elevated and fortified citadels for them. Moreover, these fortifications, referring to the palace, regardless of their antiquity, cannot be 20 centuries old. Some inhabitants believe that the palace is simply the remains of a Roman city. However, upon examining these artifacts, it becomes clear that they are all of Berber origin, possibly contemporary with the Roman occupation, and perhaps even older."<sup>10</sup>

The location of the Garamantian grave<sup>11</sup> was determined by specialized researchers in architectural engineering, who conducted an examination of the ancient palace. They provided us with the shape and depth of the well located within the palace, which we will discuss later.

Based on our own analysis following the archaeological and topographic survey, if the Garamantes were the ones who built this palace, how do we find only one solitary grave in the area? This suggests that these individuals may have attempted to trespass on the palace and became victims themselves. Alternatively, there could have been relationships between the ancient palace inhabitants and the Garamantes that led to a death whose cause is unknown. All of this requires an

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<sup>9</sup> At-Tayeb Mohammed Ahmad, *Libyan Civilization in Southern Libya (Fezzan Region)*, Nasr International University Magazine, Issue 3, 2009, p. 334.

<sup>10</sup> This text is literally excerpted from a lecture by the archaeologist "Mohammed Kentawi" as part of an architectural study and inspection of the old palace, which he personally presented to us, and we requested him to publish it so that it could be utilized in studies and research.

<sup>11</sup> It is located in the eastern part of the palace.

examination of the grave, similar to what was done with the two skeletal structures taken from the city of "Ben Zazu" for study in France.

### **B- the Issue of Temaseen**

The mission discovered the remains of a fortified center in the area of "Temaseen," which served to protect the inhabitants from their enemies. It was surrounded by a solid wall made of stones and wood. Nearby, there was also a workshop made of flint, indicating the presence of a civilization predating the arrival of Islam to these regions. The area contains numerous ancient artifacts, although the precise period to which they belong has not been determined. However, it has been firmly established that they date back to a period before the arrival of Islam to the region<sup>12</sup>.

### **C. The Case of the Nearby City of "Ben Zazou" and its Competition with the City of Taourirt:**

Among the discovered artifacts in the plain of El-Meniaa that indicate the presence of an ancient civilization, there are remnants of a vanished city. Its traces were found on the continent of Tin-Bouزيد, named after the saint or the "Marabout" called "Sidi Bou Zid." His tomb and a mosque are located there. This city was situated approximately 1 kilometer south of the palace.

This city was known as the city of "Ben Zazou," and the reason behind its name remains unknown. Was it named after its leader or its sheikh? Or is there another explanation for this name? Perhaps time will reveal the truth. The site of this city is to the south of the ancient palace, and it formed a prosperous and competing cultural center with the city of "Taourirt,"<sup>13</sup> which was the old name for the ancient palace. Later on, it became known as "El-golea" in reference to the fortress of the ancient palace.

According to accounts, the city of Ben Zazou was in constant conflict with Taourirt, without interruption. Many unpleasant matters and facts were attributed to them. Their physical strength, as we will explain later, their cunning, and their expertise in dealing with enemies, as well as their isolation

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<sup>12</sup> Choisy, Auguste: Trans-Saharan Railway, National Printing Office, Vol. 1, Paris, 1895, pp. 31-32.

<sup>13</sup> The word "Zanatiya" means plateau or a slightly elevated mountain.

from outsiders, all contributed to the obscurity of this city to travelers and merchants. Consequently, the inhabitants of Taourirt kept a close watch on the people of Ben Zazou, and it is said that this surveillance lasted for a long time, indicating the lack of trust between the inhabitants of Ben Zazou and anyone else, as mentioned earlier.

On one occasion, something unexpected occurred. A man from the palace of Taourirt married a woman from the city of "Ben Zazou," who revealed to them a secret. It turned out that the men of Ben Zazou would descend every lunar year to visit the graves of their deceased without carrying any weapons. Seizing the opportunity, the men of Taourirt attacked them mercilessly, annihilating them without mercy. Moreover, they completely destroyed the city, from the top of the hill to its base. Since then, it has not been rebuilt, and a mosque was constructed on its ruins<sup>14</sup>. This raises the question: were the shrine of the righteous saint and the mosque built after the destruction of the city of Ben Zazou? And why, among all the architectural structures, were these chosen? This mosque and the ruins were mentioned by Al-Bakri, along with remnants of other artifacts, as the text states: "It contains remnants of the past and a mosque."<sup>15</sup>

Through the excavations conducted by the expedition around the city, they arrived at several significant findings. The destruction of the city was found to be contemporaneous with the arrival of Islam to the region. This led them to conclude that the city was ancient, based on excavations carried out in the adjacent cemetery. The expedition examined the cemetery located next to the city and studied the burial practices by opening a tomb. They discovered that the burial method did not conform to Islamic practices. The body was buried on its right side but facing south, with the knees folded beneath the chin and the hands crossed, their position disrupted by the stones. This burial method, resembling a squatting position, is very ancient and similar to burial practices observed in the

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<sup>14</sup> This incident reflects the extreme caution of the inhabitants of Ben Zazou towards the people of Taourirt, as well as their military experience, indicating that the city was heavily fortified, hence they were only able to overcome them through trickery.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Bakri, *Al-Maghrib*..., previous reference, p. 77.

country of Peru, caves, Krapina, and other similar tombs known globally<sup>16</sup>.

By studying the cemeteries of both "Ben Zazou" and "Taourirt," the expedition determined that they were extensive. This can be attributed to two factors: firstly, both cities were inhabited by a large population during their prosperous periods, and secondly, the profound respect shown by both cities towards their deceased, a well-known tradition with religious significance. Consequently, their size can be traced back to the period when they existed, up until the time when the expedition examined the two cemeteries. It appears that the "Ben Zazou" cemetery was the oldest, as evidenced by the skeletal structure of the woman and the skull of the man, both obtained during nocturnal excavation activities in the large cemetery on the slopes of the mountains.

The deterioration in both cities can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, it was a result of the wars that took place between them. Secondly, the weak maintenance and neglect of the country's infrastructure and irrigation systems, known as "Hassiyen," led to the deterioration of the agricultural sector. Additionally, there is another factor to consider: the city experienced a campaign of palm tree cutting, the cause of which remains unknown to this day. One hypothesis suggests that it may have been a result of repeated sieges by enemies in the region, causing extensive damage, including to the agricultural aspects. Furthermore, there are indications that caravans coming from Sudan, which used to bring slaves as the workforce for these orchards, decreased in number due to declining demand caused by the deteriorating situation.

Currently, there are no traces remaining of the city, indicating that what remains of it has been encroached upon by the local population. They utilized the stones from the vanished city to build their own houses, considering them easily accessible nearby instead of sourcing them from distant areas. As a result, there are no visible remnants of the city except for the reports mentioned by the French expedition, which stated that the city's ruins were still visible<sup>17</sup> and described the dramatic archaeological scene. The same was mentioned by Al-Bakri, as we mentioned earlier, referring to "the castle, a populated city

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<sup>16</sup> Choisy, op.cit, p 433." - Choisy, in the work cited, page 433.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p432.

with remnants of the past and a mosque." Therefore, it is preferable to conduct further excavations in the area to uncover the unknown aspects of this destroyed city. Even the oral narratives that were once recounted about the city of "Ben Zazou" have vanished with the passing of their storytellers, if not for their documentation by the expedition that engaged in dialogue with the settled population and gathered valuable information from them. This information represents an indispensable part, as it constitutes a page in the local memory of the city of El-Meniaa.

Consequently, we can deduce that the city of El-Meniaa is ancient, with its roots deeply embedded in history. Currently, many people believed that the inhabitants of El-Meniaa were solely confined to the palace. However, in reality, they were distributed across several geographic regions and different time periods, making it difficult to determine their exact chronology, including places like Temassin, Mola Walen, Ben Zazou, and Taouririt. The reason for this human presence can be attributed to the abundance of freshwater sources close to the surface of the earth, which provided the essential conditions for stability. It led to the establishment of a flourishing civilization, evident from the hydraulic engineering systems such as springs and aqueducts, extensively described by European explorers and documented in the reports of military personnel and the French expedition upon their arrival in the city.

We greatly benefited from the reports of this expedition, as they aimed to provide accurate information for future projects of the French colonial government. Moreover, these reports offered us researchers a perspective from the other side, shedding light on the living reality in the region. They provided us with a wealth of information that local sources and references had overlooked, filling gaps and illuminating previously obscured angles in the development of historical events. Furthermore, these oral narratives were at risk of being lost with the passing of their storytellers. However, their documentation by foreigners compelled us to revisit the issue, dust off these narratives, and reach out to the elderly. Through this process, we discovered the case of the "Ben Zazou" city, one of the vanished remnants within El-Meniaa due to destruction and encroachment by the local population.

### **3-3- The Medieval Period**

The historical events witnessed by the city of El-Meniaa are closely connected to the developments of the city of "Taourirt," also known as El-golea due to its ancient palace. After conducting archaeological studies, it was confirmed that the fortress was built by the Zenata tribes of the Berber Al-Batr lineage, as elucidated in Ibn Khaldun's book *Al-'Ibar*. These tribes constructed numerous palaces throughout the desert, which were mentioned in historical sources, particularly in Arabic-Islamic literature. Among these sources:

#### **A. Mention of El-golea by Al-Bakri**

Abu Ubayd Al-Bakri referred to the city of El-Meniaa as "El-Qal'aa" Al-Bakri lived during the 11th century CE (1030-1094 CE) and mentioned it as an important route traversed by caravans traveling from the city of Tlemcen to Warjilan, then to the fortress (El-Qal'aa), and finally reaching the city of Sijilmasa. This indicates the strategic positioning of the city of El-Meniaa during the Medieval Period. The following excerpt is from his book: "<... the city of Tizil, which is the first in the desert. From there, one travels to the city of Sijilmasa, then to the city of Warjilan, and to the fortified city, which is a populated city with ancient ruins and a mosque.<sup>18</sup>" At the same time, these passages highlight the strong connections between the city of Warjilan, El-Qal'aa, and El-Meniaa.

We would like to draw attention to an important note here: Al-Bakri mentioned El-Meniaa (Al-Qal'aa) during the 11th century CE. He passed away in 487 AH/1094 CE. After that, until the 12th century CE, specifically until the birth of the prominent scholar Abdul-Rahman Ibn Khaldun in 732 AH/1332 CE, and until he reached a stage of intellectual maturity and wrote the essence of his ideas in the introduction to his book *"Al-'Ibar"* in the fortress of Bani Salama in the vicinity of Medea, Fernanda. In this work, the name of the fortress (Al-Qal'a or El-Meniaa currently) reappears, equivalent to nearly three centuries where we have not found any text or manuscript that mentions El-Qal'aa to the best of our knowledge. Here, we note that Ibn Khaldun referred to information related to El-Qal'aa (El-golea) in the 7th century AH/13th century CE, which we will clarify in the upcoming paragraphs. It is highly likely, or rather certain, that there are books, especially manuscripts, abundant in the repositories, both within Algeria and beyond, that discuss the city. As the saying goes, "There is no final word in history."

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<sup>18</sup> Al-Bakri, *Al-Maghrib*..., previous reference, p. 77.

Therefore, there may come a day when we can complete this missing part of the historical developments that the city witnessed during this period.

**B) El-golea in Ibn Khaldun's book "Al-'Ibar" (808 AH/1406 CE)<sup>19</sup>:**

Abdul-Rahman Ibn Khaldun indicates that the palaces found across the desert are built by the Zanata tribe<sup>20</sup>. These palaces extend from the palaces of Sus westward to Tawat, Jawdah, Tementit, Wardjlan, then Tissabit, and finally Tikurarin. Each of these territories encompasses numerous palaces with palm trees and rivers. The majority of their inhabitants belong to the Zanata tribe, and conflicts and wars have arisen among them for leadership<sup>21</sup>.

Ibn Khaldun provides valuable information about the fortress of El-Meniaa in the sixth part of his book "Al-'Ibar." In this explicit text, he mentions matters related to the city of El-Meniaa during the medieval period. He refers to the origin of the Berbers inhabiting these regions, the specific tribes they belong to, and the geographic scope they cover. Moreover, he emphasizes the most significant developments that the fortress has witnessed, particularly when Telemcen came under the control of Abu Al-Hasan Al-Marrakechi. We will clarify this through the following points:

**The "Mudgharah" tribes from the Berber branches and their relationship to El-golea (El-Meniaa):**

To understand this matter accurately, we need to carefully study the texts mentioned by Abdul-Rahman Ibn Khaldun. Let's

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<sup>19</sup> To understand the stages of the life of Ibn Khaldun and his intellectual activity, refer to Ali Abdul Wahid Wafi, "Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun: His Life, Works, and Aspects of his Genius," Dar al-Masr, 2013, pp. 24-50. Also see Nasser al-Din Saidouni, "From the Historical and Geographical Heritage of the Islamic West," Dar al-Basa'ir for Publishing and Distribution.

<sup>20</sup> There is a difference regarding the origin of this word. Some attribute it to the ancient city of "Zana," whose ruins are still located 80 km southeast of Constantine. It was known to the Romans as "Diana Veteranorum." Most historians follow the opinion of the genealogists who derive the name Zana from "Jana" or "Shana," who is considered the first ancestor. However, Dr. Ben Amira corrected this and stated that it is better to say Jana was the first leader, not the first ancestor. Historians agree that Zanata is of Berber origin, attributed to "Mudghassen al-Abtar." It is difficult to determine the locations of Zanata, but it is said: "Zanata is the land of the central Maghreb." See, Mohammed Ben Amira, "The Role of Zanata in the Religious Movement in the Islamic Maghreb," National Book Institution, Algeria, 1984, p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> Ibn Khaldun, Abd al-Rahman, "Al-'Ibar wa Diwan al-Mubtada' wa al-Khabar fi Ayyam al-Arab wa al-'Ajam wa al-Barbar wa Man 'Asharahum min Dhawī al-Sultan al-Akbar," Dar al-Fikr, Beirut, 2000, pp. 77-78.

start with the first point, which is an explanation of the Berber branches of El-Batr<sup>22</sup>. Ibn Khaldun states: "Mudgharah, Lumayyah, Sidiyyah, Kumiyah, Madiunah, Mughayl, Matmatah, Malzuzah, Meknasah, Dunah, and all of them are descendants of Fatin bin Mimsib bin Haris bin Zuhayk bin Mudghis al-Abthar. Among these branches, Mudgharah had the largest population.<sup>23</sup>" This indicates that Mudgharah had the highest number of people in terms of human population weight.

The Mudgharah tribes were distributed throughout the vast territories of Greater Morocco, reaching into the expanses of the desert. They built their palaces and engaged in agriculture, particularly the cultivation of palm trees, which they learned from the Arabs. Among the desert regions were Tawat and Temntit. In this regard, Ibn Khaldun states: "And among the Mudgharah tribes in the Moroccan desert, many settled in their palaces and adopted the cultivation of palm trees in the Arab manner. Some of them, from Tawat to the last of Tamanrasset, are engaged in this.<sup>24</sup>"

Ibn Khaldun continues to specify the presence of Mudgharah tribes until reaching the vicinity of Telemcen, identifying their presence in several stages<sup>25</sup>, including neighboring palaces. He states: "To the east of Telemcen, in several stages, starting from the vicinity of Mount Rashid, until reaching the eastern side of these palaces in five stages, we reach El-Qal'aa. It is now inhabited by a group of Mudgharah people, and caravans from the people of the desert visit it every few years when they are affected by the drought, seeking refuge in its hills to survive in their vicinity.<sup>26</sup>"

This text provides us with a mention of Al-Qal'a and its inhabitants, who are a group of Mudgharah Berber people from the Berber Al-Batr tribe. They had a relationship with the masked people of the desert who used to come to El-golea,

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<sup>22</sup> Next to the Berber Al-Batr, there are also the Berber Al-Buransi. See Ibn Khaldun, *Al-Ibar*, Vol. 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Op.cit.*, p. 155.

<sup>24</sup> *Op.cit.*, p. 158.

<sup>25</sup> The "stage" is the distance traveled by a traveler in about a day on a usual camel journey, and its plural form is "marahil" (stages). According to the Hanafi and Maliki schools of thought, it is equivalent to 44.25 kilometers, while according to the Shafi'i school of thought, it is 89.04 kilometers. See, Ali Jum'a Muhammad, "Al-Mikayil wa al-Mawazin al-Shar'iyya," *Al-Quds for Distribution*, Cairo, 2001, p. 56.

<sup>26</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *Al-Ibar*, Vol. 6, p. 158.

especially during the summer, seeking refuge from the heat. It is not specified who these masked people are, perhaps referring to the Tuaregs, which indicates that the Tuaregs did not have any issues with the inhabitants of the Berber palace of Mudgharah-Zanata and they seemed to have had friendly relations. However, this relationship would later turn into hostility when the Arabs took over the palace in the modern period. By that, we mean the past tribe of "chanba," who forcefully seized control of the palace.

### **3-4. In the modern period**

According to the oral account of the student Hamah Belhaj<sup>27</sup>, which describes how the Arabs took over the El-Meniaa palace, the good relationship between the two parties lasted until the end of the 10th century AH. In accordance with their customs, a caravan arrived with two men from the Bani Hilal tribe to the palace for trade. A dispute arose between the two groups, leading to the treacherous killing of the two men. Their remains were lost for several years, and the Arab travelers anxiously inquired about them, presuming they had died of thirst. After a period of time, a fight broke out among the palace residents, and one of them struck his companion on the head, killing him. The murderer then fled into the darkness of

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<sup>27</sup> He is known as the poet of the city of El Menia, where he wrote poems in folk poetry, which serve as a source for writing the history of the city of El Menia and its role in the national movement and the liberation revolution. He was born in 1900 in the city of El Menia, where he memorized the Quran, then moved to the city of "Ouargla" in the garara region, near Timimoun, under Sheikh Moulay Ahmed. There, he learned jurisprudence and biography and studied under "Sheikh Bey Belalem" and other scholars from the Tawat region and scholars from Mauritania. He was known for his extensive culture due to his travels between the countries of the Maghreb and the Mashriq. He had connections with the Muslim Scholars Association and had a special relationship with Massali El-Hadj, prominent figures in the city of El Menia and the founders of the Algerian national movement. He used to conduct seminars in the form of lessons and poetry evenings, elucidating the ideas of the Victory Movement for Democratic Freedoms Party. This took place weekly at his home, and he was actively involved in revolutionary activities within the National Liberation Front in El Meniaa. He was a member of the secret organization affiliated with the Victory Movement for Democratic Freedoms Party in El Meniaa and was arrested in 1950, imprisoned in Batna for eight months, and fined seventy-five thousand francs after the discovery of the secret organization. He was succeeded by the martyr Bouamama Boukhchba at the head of the national movement in El Meniaa. He authored works including a book titled "Despotism," a sociology book that is still missing to this day, and an oral narrative entitled "The History of the City of El Meniaa from its Foundation until 1954." He passed away in 1982 at the age of 82. See, Ibrahim Ben Sassi: *Figures of Southern Algeria*, Mawfum Publishing, Algeria, 2011, pp. 110-114. Also see: Taleb Hama Belhadj: *History of the City of El Meniaa from its Foundation until the Entry of the French Invasion*, El Meniaa Mujahideen Organization, not yet published, p. 1.

the night, seeking refuge in the Arab tents, where he recounted the story of the two killings<sup>28</sup>.

Upon hearing the news, the Arabs prepared for revenge and waited for the opportune moment. It happened during a period of drought that affected the region. They sent a group of their people to the palace residents, informing them that it was a year of drought and offering to sell them livestock at low prices to prevent their loss. The palace residents joyfully and eagerly welcomed the Arabs to purchase the livestock. The two parties met, one prepared for trade, and the other prepared for vengeance and combat. It resulted in a battle in which the palace residents were defeated, and the Arabs, led by their leader "Ibn Qasmi Bi'Aaj," emerged victorious, fleeing out of fear for their lives. "Al-Abadi," the leader of the palace, also fled, and a group of Arab knights pursued and captured him. Before they killed him, they asked him about his destination, to which he replied, "To Ouargla." Hence, the place was named "Gourara Ouargla," which is located 25 kilometers east of El Meniaa.

The Arab Hilalian chanba tribes subsequently seized the palace, making it their own, and they were organized into five tribes in order of priority: Al-Madi, Ouled Faraj, Ouled Zaid, Ouled Sayyid al-Hajj Yahya, and Awlad Aisha. They were collectively known as Chanba because they were originally different tribes that united under the name Chanba. During the winter and spring seasons, they would reside in the desert (badia) to graze their livestock, while in the summer and autumn seasons, they would stay in the palace to cultivate their lands. The governance was based on collective consultation (shura), and they adjudicated matters according to Islamic Sharia law based on the Maliki school of thought.

There was a Quranic and jurisprudential school where Sayyid al-Hajj Yahya ibn Abdullah taught. The region frequently faced attacks from all directions except the north, where their allies, the "Ouled Sid al-chikh" in the El-Bayadah area, were located. This situation persisted until the entry of France into El-Meniaa in 1873<sup>29</sup>.

Based on our analysis of this narrative, we deduce that these events occurred after El-'Ayachi passed through the city of El Meniaa. This is because the ruler mentioned by the student

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<sup>28</sup> Taleb Hama Belhadj, previous reference, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Same reference as above, pp. 2-3.

Hamah al-Hajj "Al-'Abadi" was present during al-'Ayashi's journey through the region. It is noted that this ruler was subordinate to the Sultan of Ouargla, who was "Mulay 'Alahem ibn Muhammad" and ruled for a long period from 1649 to 1669<sup>30</sup>. El-'Ayachi passed through the region on December 23, 1662, and he provided a description that constitutes vital historical information based on a source that chronicles the modern period of the city. He states, "We stayed in El-Qlaa (El-golea), which means a small fortress. It is a fortified village built on solid rock at the foot of a detached mountain. It has numerous good water wells, but not many palm trees. It is under the authority of Sultan Ouargla, with its own governor, and its inhabitants are devoted to his commands. Those who have seen him describe him as a barefooted, black man with a bare head... Nevertheless, the people of the village resort to him for arbitration and submit to his orders. It is in this village that the esteemed chikh, Sidi Abu Hafs ibn al-Wali El-Salh, Sayyid 'Abd al-Qadir ibn Muhammad ibn Seleman ibn Busmahah, known among his people as Sidi al-Sheikh, used to stay... He had great sanctity and was entrusted with resolving matters in these regions and their deserts."<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, the account of El-'AyaChi's journey provided us with valuable and concise information. It mentioned the name by which the city was known, which is El-golea, derived from the word "Qal'aa," meaning fortress. It also highlighted the strong relationship between the people of El Meniaa and the Al-Bayadah, Béchar, and El-Biod regions, specifically with Sidi el-Chikh.

### Conclusion

Among the ancient cities, El stands out, with its roots deeply embedded in history. It has witnessed different historical

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<sup>30</sup> Ibrahim ibn Saleh Baba Hamou Azzam: "Ghassan al-Ban in History and Genealogy," study and investigation by Ibrahim ibn Bakir Bahaz and Suleiman ibn Muhammad Boumaqal, 1st ed., Al-Alamiya, Ghardaia, 2013, pp. 148-149.

<sup>31</sup> El-Ayachi (1628-1679 CE), from the Ait Ayash tribe near Tafilalet, was educated by his father who was a Sufi leader. He completed his education in Fez under many scholars of that period, then traveled to the Arab East seeking knowledge. He traveled there three times: in 1649, 1653, and 1661 CE. He authored several works on jurisprudence, Sufism, and biographies, and his journeys, particularly his description of the Sahara route and its inhabitants' living conditions, including aspects related to southern Algeria, are noteworthy. Al-Ayashi died in the farthest part of Morocco in 1679 due to the plague. See, Abu Salim Abdullah ibn Muhammad El-Ayachi: "Al-Rihla Al-Ayachiyya 1661-1663 CE," edited by Saeed Al-Fadhli, Vol. 1, Dar Al-Sweidy for Publishing and Distribution, Abu Dhabi, 2006, p. 80.

periods, starting from prehistoric times, through ancient and medieval periods, during which the Zanata tribe ruled, and finally the modern era when it came under the control of the Arab Hilalian Chanba tribes until it was occupied by French forces.

The city of El Meniaa has witnessed various human civilization manifestations, evident in the material remains such as ancient tombs, remnants of aqueducts and water wheels that used to transport water throughout the city. Perhaps the most prominent material evidence is the "Old Palace," which has been mentioned since the medieval period and is still standing to this day, as documented by al-Bakri and Ibn Khaldun.

The city has been home to different tribes, as recorded in historical sources, especially the Zanata tribe, which built the Old Palace, and the Arab Chanba tribes that took control of the city in the modern period.

The availability of water resources, particularly an immense underground reservoir, played a significant role in the city's development. This geographical feature attracted human groups, especially those seeking stability, security, and assured livelihood resources.

Material sources, such as archaeological remains and written records like travelogues and oral narratives, have played a crucial role in solving many mysteries, clarifying, and interpreting historical events after subjecting them to historical criticism.

However, it is important to acknowledge the historical responsibility and emphasize that many issues and events require urgent studies to enable us to write a comprehensive history of El-Meniaa following the methodologies of academic scientific research.

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