



# DEFENSIVE ARCHITECTURE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

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DEFENSIVE ARCHITECTURE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN  
Vol. VIII

PROCEEDINGS of the International Conference on Modern Age Fortification of the Mediterranean Coast  
FORTMED 2018

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Politecnico di Torino. Italy

POLITECNICO DI TORINO

Series *Defensive Architectures of the Mediterranean*

General editor  
Pablo Rodríguez-Navarro

The papers published in this volume have been peer-reviewed by the Scientific Committee of FORTMED2018\_Torino

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ISBN: 978-88-85745-12-4



FORTMED - Modern Age Fortification of the Mediterranean Coast, Torino, 18th, 19th, 20th October 2018

# The Béni-Rached Fortress in Relizane: An archaeological city and cultural landscape of the pre-colonial defensive architecture in Algeria

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## Abstract

Located in mountainous area, between Relizane and Mascara cities, *the Beni-Rached Qalaa* is made up of four distinct conurbations, amidst multiple rocky peaks, following the banks of river, nearby the fertile plains, staggered between two separate zones. The citadel presents a structure and characters common to Berber and Eurasian villages, intended to facilitate their defensive system. Indeed, like pre-colonial fortified cities of Algeria, the Beni-Rached Citadel was the political and military capital during the three periods of the history that made its foundation: The Arab conquest, the Ottoman and Spanish occupation, and the French colonization. Today the fortress is witness of a living culture with its industrious population, conserving important social functions. This paper aims to present an architectural, landscape and patrimonial study of *the Beni-Rached Qalaa* that tackles the question of its assessment as a “*lived and perceived*” landscape. First and foremost, the primary objective of this research is the identification of the cultural (tangible and intangible) and natural attributes of the fortress, this current method is enrolled in dual approach of knowledge and recognition of *the Beni Rached Qalaa*, its knowledge consists of making an analysis grid at three different scales: the global perception scale that allows the interpretation of physicals and symbolic characteristics of the citadel, scale of the fortress landscape evaluation and its evolution based on the historical approach, and scale of the cultural and natural values quantification. Regarding the recognition, it evokes the determination of the integrity and authenticity of *the Béni-Rached Qalaa*, allowing its inscription as a cultural landscape in accordance with the UNESCO regulation and Algerian legislation governing the cultural heritage protection.

**Keywords:** The Béni-Rached Qalaa, cultural landscape, defensive architecture, Algeria

## 1. Introduction

Algeria's pre-colonial cities constitute the urban organizations of civilizations that succeeded each other prior to the French colonization.

The urban form of these cities is presented as a juxtaposition of various tissues, which are grafted to each other, whose character of their spatial organization represents man's interaction with his natural environment, forming over a long period of time a unique landscape. Today,

this landscape is characterized by a predominance of cultural heritage that reflects historical, archaeological and landscape values.

Algeria's pre-colonial towns of the medieval period were built around defensive concerns. Indeed, the constituent element of these cities was their defense system, characterized by its large dimensions, constituted essentially by the enclosure walls that enclose them and

encompasses the citadel. The Qalaa of Béni-Rached in Relizane, like the other Algeria's medieval fortified villages, is situated in a rugged area on a peak not easily accessible, dominating fertile plains; and controlling a strategically and economically-important routes. Moreover, the Kalaa continues to play an active social role in contemporary society.

This research aims to analyze in a quantitative way, the cultural landscape features of the Qalaa of Béni-Rached, identifying its tangible and intangible constituent elements. This approach involves describing and understanding the landscape, the natural and cultural resources as well as the archaeological remains contained therein.

In Algeria, 98.04 Law on the protection of cultural heritage incorporates into its legislation texts the concept of cultural landscape, under the designation "cultural park", in order to identify and delimit the areas to be protected according to their vocations and values they represent. Nevertheless, the regulations in force do not involve normative studies or evaluation of these cultural landscapes, or even their classification criteria as such. Our objective is, therefore, to establish an approach of appreciation of the cultural landscape applicable on "the citadel of Béni-Rached in Relizane" case study, by setting up a grid of analysis for its cultural landscape, as a work which refers to a "perceived and lived" landscape system in which physical and symbolic elements interact.

## 2. Methodological approach

### 2.1. Landscape study and assessment process

In this study, we focused our research on three directions, which consists of defining and understanding the cultural landscape features (tangible, intangible) as well as the natural features. The diagrams below summarize the methodological elements of our approach applied to the Béni-Rached fortress in Relizane:

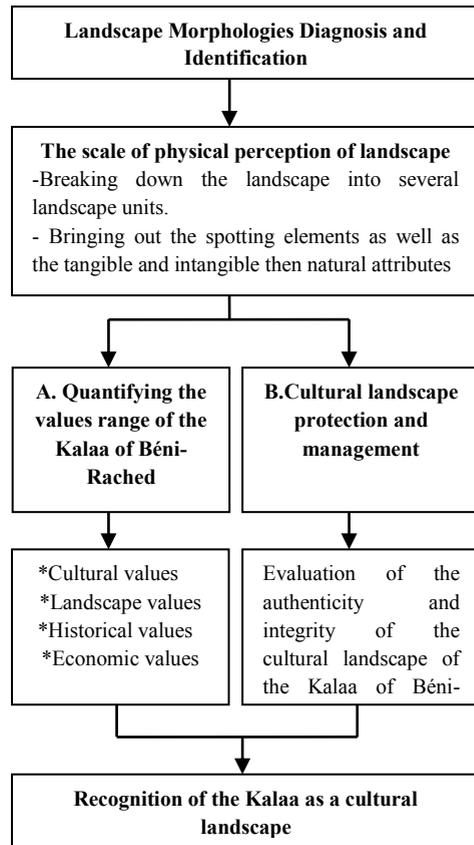


Fig. 1- Diagrams of the landscape study and assessment process (Oulmas, Abdessemed-Foufa & González Avilés, 2018)

### 2.2. Landscape morphologies diagnosis and identification

#### 2.2.1. Landscape unit description Spatio-temporal organization of the Béni-Rached Fortress (Qalaa)

The Qalaa of Béni -Rached, a medieval defensive city of the Houaras tribe, is located in the relatively humid mountain ranges of the Oran tell, on a peak not easily accessible, the southern side of béni-Chougrane, near the Orano-Algiers borders, between the main route into Morocco, linking a strategically and economically-important routes (Sari, 1970: pp. 12-84).



Fig. 2- The aerial view of The Béni-Rached Fortress (Google earth)

The Qalaa of Béni-Rached is staggered between two distinct areas, having a layout and a character common to Berber villages intended to facilitate its defense. Therefore, throughout its long history, it holds an important place in the political, intellectual and economic life of the region.

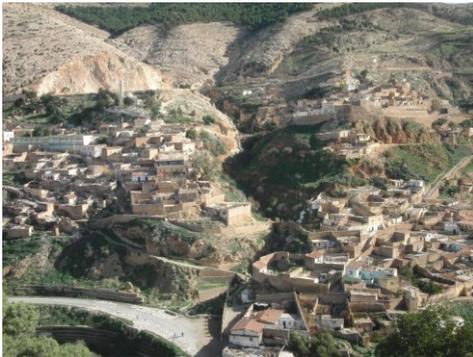


Fig. 3- Landscape character of the Béni-Rached Fortress (implantation).

The description of the Qalaa's landscape unit and its character is closely linked to that of the great historical facts which have led to its evolution. Its history may be divided into 3 main periods: Arab era, Turkish and Spanish occupation and finally the French conquest Age (Lucienne, 1929)

**1-Arab invasion Era:** A fortress and a refuge at the same time, the Qalaa of Béni-Rached was occupied by the Beni Rached of the Zenatian Berber tribe in the 12th century, after having

been occupied by the Houaras, the indigenous inhabitants of the Qalaa. In the 15th century it fell during expeditions of Merinids against Tlemcen, under Abdel-Ouaidid domination.

**2-Turkish and Spanish Era:** Considered to be the most important period in the Qalaa's history, it was at that time that the Ottomans grew up and built a huge mosque, schools; and the Qalaa was honored by scholars and highly revered characters throughout the North Africa, and becomes a place of traditional asylum. At that time, the trade was prosperous with the firearms and leather industry, and especially the carpet-making which makes the Kalaa a famous weaving center. Subsequently, the Kalaa was occupied by the Spanish as early as 1515, accompanied by a Spanish expeditionary force commanded by Dan Martin d'Argote. Indeed, the Spanish conquered the Qalaa for its role of communication between Oran, Algiers and Tlemcen.

**3-French colonization Era:** The Qalaa of Béni-Rached has undergone significant upheavals under the French colonization especially in agricultural life and this in 1880 following implementation of the Sénatus-consulte Land Law. The French occupied the Kalaa as an important place of refuge because of its strategic position, but they had not introduced any transformation on the urban or architectural aspects of the Qalaa of Béni-Rached.

## 2.2.2. Description of physical conditions

**Relief:** The analysis of the Qalaa relief leads us to distinguish 3 fundamental areas, 1. mountain area, 2. slope area, 3. plain area (Fig. 3)

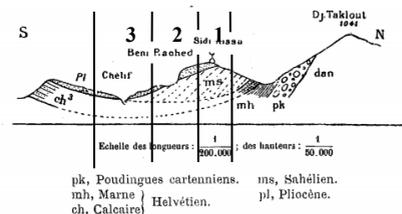


Fig. 4- The relief cross-section of the Béni-Rached area (Sari, 1970)

**Mountain area:** A rocky massif and the most culminating point of the region, encompasses many forest species especially the Carob tree.



Fig. 5- The highest point of the Béni-Rached Qalaa

**Slope area:** It is the area on which the city is built, considered as the most important part of the site for its politico-military function at the time and its fertility quality (loam-clay soil), thanks to the presence of an irrigation system.

**Plain area:** an area well-delimited by the surrounding massif, the lowest part of the region, opening on to a Oued, and characterized by very fertile soil, irrigated by many water sources that are fed by the river, it is an area with high agricultural potential.

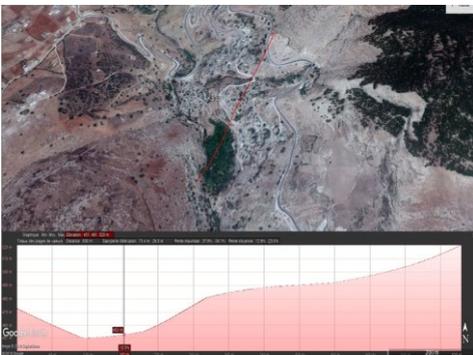


Fig. 6- The land difference of altitude relief of the Beni-Rached Fortress (Google earth)

### 2.2.3. Character of organization and spatial planning of the fortress

**Organisation pattern:** The implantation of the Qalaa of Beni-Rached is linked to the nature of the site, which itself responds to

strategic conditions and has an irregular parameter with mixed layout, its plan is still quite well preserved, and reflects the functional differentiation of its distinct districts that constitute it: (Ras Qalaa, Es Souk, Karkouri, Dar Echikh), served by a road system ending in small dead ends. Each district consists of compact and intramural residential areas with few free areas between them. In addition, the formation of the residential fabric was based on the combination of this road system and the aggregation of residential cells (Sari, 1970).



Fig. 7- The organization plan of the Béni-Rached Qalaa (Office URBA.Blida)

**Type of habitat:** the dominant typology is the residential housing of the Ottoman era (Fig. 7), houses qualified as introvert, often without floors, blind on the outside, composed of rooms arranged around a central space, usually a courtyard, with porticoes opening on several sides, and sometimes the courtyard is punctuated by a well (Fig. 8).

The houses are constructed with solid and sustainable materials partially in unbaked earth and local stones of the region, with walls up to 80cms thick (Lucienne, 1929).



Fig. 8-The residential unit of the ottoman era (Dar Cheikh entity)

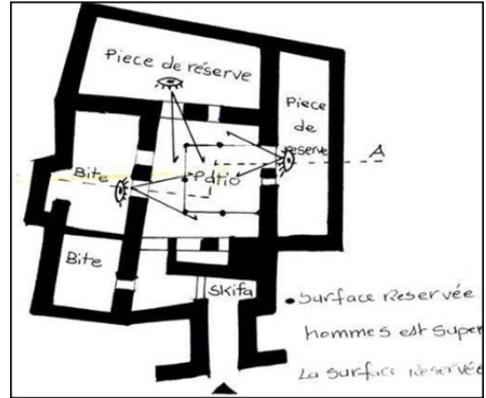


Fig. 9- Typical house plan of the Beni-Rached fortress (Qalaa Association)

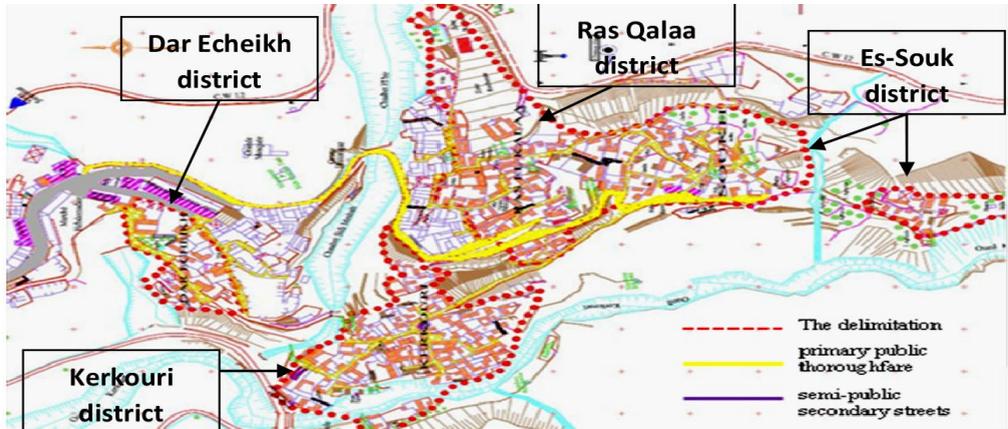


Fig. 10- Character of organization and spatial planning of the fortress (design Office: URBAB)

### Defense component

#### Implantation site

The Qalaa is adapted to the field lines and to the form of the area to be protected; the site itself responds to strategic and defensive considerations (Fig. 10).

#### Surrounding wall/Enclosure (rampart)

The constituent component part of the Qalaa of Béni-Rached was its defense system characterized by an enclosure of large dimensions that encloses the entire Qalaa and set with a big well-protected gates as a defense.

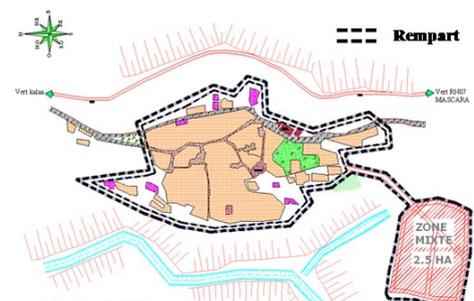


Fig. 11- The Beni-Rached Fortress implantation and the rampart delimitation (U.R.B.A. Blida)

Also, the specific nature of the Qalaa of Béni-Rached enclosure as compared to the other

medieval fortified cities; it spreads out to the cultivated and extra-urban spaces as a fortification system protecting large agricultural lands of the Qalaa previously threatened by nomadic incursion.

### 2.3. Tangible heritage of the Qalaa

#### The minor heritage of the Qalaa of Béni-Rached

The historical landscape of the fortress and its heritage quality are linked to the value of their constituents, seen as an expression of a natural organization, characterized by a predominance of traditional living areas (minor heritage) which dates back to the Ottoman period, containing features of historical, architectural and archaeological importance (Marçais, 1958: pp. 67-116).

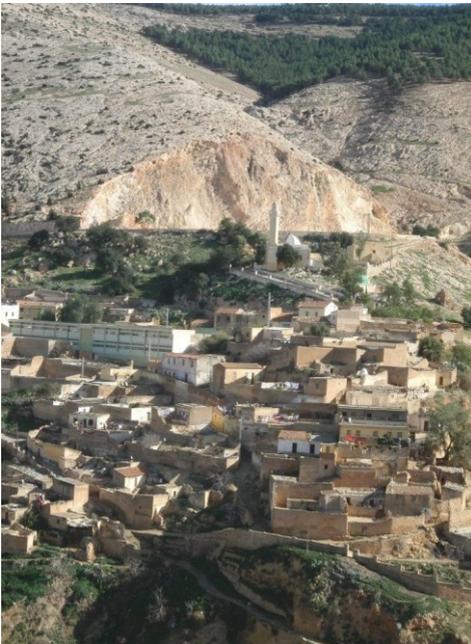


Fig. 12- The Ottoman residential unit of the fortress (Minor heritage)

#### Major heritage

**The Great Mosque:** Dating back to the 18th century, it was built by the Ottomans, its architecture represents the Turkish-Moorish style, and compared to the other Algerian pre-colonial cities of the medieval period, the Qalaa

did not respect the classical structure of its organization, the mosque is located alone in a remote and isolated place on the escarpments, thus dominating the whole region.

The great mosque and the ramparts of the city emphasize the unity and the sacredness of the urban complex (Fig. 12)



Fig. 13- The ottoman great mosque implantation

**Mausoleums:** The Qalaa of Béni Rached was the homeland of great men of cult. It has 366 mausoleums, their dome are symbols of Ottoman architecture



Fig. 14- Some Medieval Mausoleums of The Beni-Rached Fortress



Fig. 15- The historic cave of the Fortress

**The historic cave:** Place of refuge at the conquest of the Qalaa of Beni-Rached by the Spanish

**The Ottoman Cemetery:** A historical, where were buried the great Turkish men who had conquered the Qalaa and the local Saints; its impact stands apart today both in material and identity terms; its architectural value is an element of attraction and enhancement of the region space (Fig. 13)



Fig. 16- The Ottoman cemetery, element of material and immaterial heritage

### 3. Socio-economic component

#### 3.1 Qalaa's landscape historical activities

**Agricultural function:** the privileged natural conditions have a fundamental effect on the early manifestations of man on the Qalaa of Beni-Rached; this amounts to the presence of the three vital conditions in its territory namely: the abandonment of natural and forest resources, existence of caves, and ridge for safety reasons. However, the Qalaa of Beni Rached is known as a locality with agricultural potential, notably in agro-pastoral products (Sari, 1970).

**Craft function:** The Qalaa of Béni-Rached is known for its tapestry industry, from the medieval period to date. Indeed, of the whole pre-colonial tapestry, that of the Kalaa is undoubtedly the most well-known in the national territory, inspired by the foreign models of Central Asia, Ottoman and Islamic arts and crafts (Fig. 14)

**Trade:** Economically, the role of Qalaa of Béni-Rached is twofold, an agricultural products collection center and a handicraft products distribution center at the same time. Its market provides a base for the industrial and craft activities (tapestry, blacksmith workshop, carpentry, pottery workshops)



Fig. 17- The medieval rugs modals of the Qalaa's tapestry industry (Sari, 1970)

**Cultural and religious activities:** The Qalaa Berber village is built as an amphitheater on rocks, on which cultural (ceremonies, traditional celebrations) and religious collective manifestations are present and which is distinguishable by the number of places of worship.

#### 3.2. Identification and appreciation of Kalaa values

Recognizing the medieval archaeological and historical space of the Qalaa of Béni-Rached leads to identify and quantify the cultural and landscape values that it represents:

##### Landscape value

The landscape unit of the Qalaa of Béni-Rached is characterized by its unique relief. The fortress is perched on a mountain, above terraced orchards, which stretches along the river shoreline. This ecological value is recognized by its varied fruit gardens, irrigated by many water sources (Mitchell et al, 2011: pp. 13-99).

##### Historical and socio-cultural value

The historical importance of the Qalaa of Béni-Rached represents a landscape quality that reflects its long historical evolution, having gained an appreciable diversity from a landscape point of view. Indeed, the political, military and industrial role known by the Qalaa of Béni-Rached marked an architectural and urban production of the medieval period, characterized by an Ottoman residential built environment, accompanied by another component which constitutes the whole spaces and buildings of religious, cultural and industrial service.

## 4. Cultural Landscape Protection and Management

### 4.1 The evaluation of authenticity and integrity of the cultural landscape of the Qalaa of Béni-Rached

The patrimonialization of landscape was achieved in 1992, with the integration of the concept of cultural landscape into UNESCO World Heritage, and according to this law, the landscape of the Qalaa of Beni-Rached can be identified as an evolving and living landscape, which continues to play an active social role in contemporary society, which, through its architecture and archaeological reserves, represents an exceptional value from cultural, socio-economic and natural perspective.

The authenticity and integrity conditions of the Qalaa of Béni-Rached are reflected in its clearly defined architectural design that perfectly integrates into its context of belonging, as well as its previously described distinctive components. Its traditional built environment or structure is a testimony to an ancient civilization dating back to the Ottoman period, revealing the interaction between man and his environment.

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Therefore, the historical character of the landscape of the Qalaa of Beni Rached and its natural resources, to which local traditions and social practices are added, form the elements that represent its identity and authenticity

## 5. Conclusion

Although the Law 98.04, governing the protection of the cultural and natural heritage in Algeria, addresses the cultural landscape issue, we note, however, the absence of applicable texts of the new legislation and thus leading to a legal vacuum in the protection and enhancement of cultural landscapes in Algeria. On the other hand, the cultural landscape of the Qalaa of Béni-Rached is today deteriorating, and no strategy for its historic listing or preservation has been initiated to date. This work comes within a perspective of awareness and recognition of this both historical and fortified landscape, which incorporates the living dimension, the inhabited character, and the traditional know-hows. Moreover, the Qalaa of Béni-Rached is worthy of historic listing and preservation for future generations.