

Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji, Reading Through the Writings of European Visitors (End of XIX & Beginning of XX Century), the Characteristics of a Lost City

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Abstract

Understanding the evolution of cities, with the purpose of optimal care of their architectural and urban heritage, seems to be an important step before any safeguarding intervention. In the absence of historical studies and a scientific database, referring to the writings and testimonies of authors who have visited and described these towns can reveal the most characteristic elements of their heritage, whether tangible or intangible. Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji is a small town located in the extreme east of the wilaya of Biskra, assigned as a national heritage site, it represents an important architectural and urban heritage set in a site of captivating natural beauty. Despite its rich heritage, research on this city remains very limited. Aiming at deepening the knowledge of the urban history of Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji from its foundation (XVII century) to the present time (XXI century), This paper attempts through reading in the writings between the end of the XIX and the beginning of the XX century, of the European visitors, to identify the most recurrent characteristics of this city. Through an analysis of the content of the writings (novels, exploration reports, newspaper articles, etc.) trying to highlight the elements that made up the city's brand image, before the various interventions that transformed its built environment and that subsequently led to its degradation and gradual abandonment. The results allowed us to trace the main natural, urban, architectural and social characteristics of the city in the above-mentioned period.

Key words: Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji; travelers' accounts; content analysis; urban characteristics; architectural characteristics.

INTRODUCTION

Some cities are founded, grow, expand, decline, and die, leaving dilapidated structures without any life behind. Urban history allows us to understand the evolution of these cities and their urban, architectural and social characteristics. Unfortunately, the absence of real archaeological research and the weakness of regular written sources, other than those provided by travelers, prevents a correct reconstruction of these cities for possible better management.

Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji in the region of *Biskra* is a tourist site by excellency, it represents an urban and architectural heritage of great wealth. It is located in the extreme east of the wilaya of *Biskra* (Fig. 01). This ancient human settlement, for more than four hundred years old, is a transitional site between the Saharan Atlas massif and the great Sahara and represents the southern gateway to the *Auressian* valley of *Oued-El-Arab* leading to the high plains in the northern direction and to the Saharan regions on the southern side. It was also a resort for pilgrims coming from various regions of the Maghreb and going to *Mecca*.

Being part of the pilgrims' route coming from the western side of the African continent, *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* is an important station. Despite its historical and touristic importance, the research on its historical evolution and its morphological and social characteristics remains rather limited, moreover, the sources of information are rare or poorly exploited.

The cultural and commercial blossoming of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*, since its foundation in the 17th century, is basically due to its geographical situation and the relationship that its nobles had with the Beys of Tunis. This can be noticed in the writings of visitors such as *El-Ouartilani* and several important military, scientific and literary personalities during the French colonization (XIX and XX century). The fact that *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* appears in numerous writings attests that

it is far from being marginalized, it encountered great vitality and occupied an important position in the inter-regional framework in the eastern *Zab* and the *Aures*. Of course, these sources are incomplete and contain many gaps and even errors. Indeed, these authors look at our cities from their reading grids and their centers of interest and above all from their cultures.

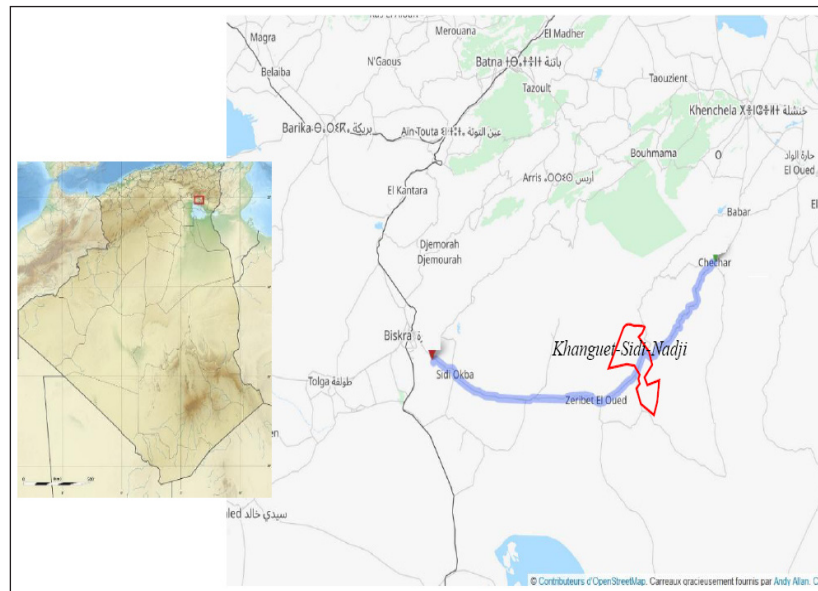


Figure 1. Situation of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*, Source: Authors 2022

Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji underwent several restructuring and urban renovation operations during the National Liberation War (1954-1962) and the post-colonial period. These operations affected the city's original urban and architectural landscape, causing its degradation and progressive abandonment. The absence of archaeological studies and technical documents on the city in earlier periods makes access to the information problematic, which complicates any safeguarding or restoration operation, this implies the use of other tools to understand its history and recover all possible information concerning its technical and social characteristics.

This research aims through the content analysis of documents and writings on *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* in the mentioned period, to identify and understand the elements that founded the city's brand image in the past, then to identify the main characteristics that constantly recur in visitors' writings, and finally to restore the original image of this oasis settlement based on the data perceived and narrated by its visitors.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the objective of deepening the knowledge of the urban history of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* from its foundation (XVII century) to the present time (XXI century), This paper proceeds with the analysis of the thematic content of more than thirty-four historic documents dealing with the subject including books, scientific papers, and reports published between the end of the XIX and the beginning of the XX century. The content analysis is divided into three steps, the first one consists of the classification of the documents to be analyzed according to the profile of their authors (historian and archaeologist, administrator and military, novelist and journalist, or others) respecting the chronological order of their publication (from the oldest to the most recent) (Tab 01). In the second step, the documents underwent a deep selection and were classed into two categories, the first included documents closely related to the study theme and whose authors have visited and/or explored the site globally or partially, and the second one included other documents whose authors have directly described the site and its components.

Table 1. Classification of authors by profile and year (Source: Authors2022)

Historian and Archaeologist	Administrator and Military	Novelist and Journalist	Others
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feraud. (1868) • (Piesse, 1891) • (Vaissière, 1892) • (Jacqueton, Gsell, & Bernard, 1905) • (Mercier, 1916) • (GOUVION & GOUVION, 1920) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Fernand, 1880) • (Niox, 1884) • (Postel, 1885) • (Quesnoy, 1885) • (Depont & Coppolani, 1897) • (Touchard, 1902) • (De-Lartigue, 1904) • (Jonart, 1907, 1919) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Réveillaud, 1887) • (Alain Dupouy, 1902) • (Auguste Dupouy, 1909) • (Boisnard, 1916) • (Rudel, 1922) • (Gillon, 1924) • (Lesyndicat_d'initiativ es_d'Alger, 1927) • (Keun, 1930) • (Ceard, 1932) • (Rozet, 1932) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Ville, 1868) -Geologist • (Violle, 1880)- Physicist • (Latruffe, 1880)- Geographer • (Duveyrier, 1881)- Geographer • (Reclus, 1886)- Geographer • (Hurabielle, 1899)- Religious • (Doutté, 1909)- Sociologist • (Hilton-Simpson, 1921)- Ethnologist • (Bernard, 1921)- Geographer

The second selection allowed the identification of about twenty documents which were then subjected to a very thorough analysis of the descriptions and findings given by their authors. The information extracted from the selected sources was divided into broad categories, each of which groups the elements characterizing the overall landscape of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* before its profound transformation in the 1950s, mainly natural, urban, architectural, and social characteristics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The content analysis of the selected sources revealed four main categories of landscape, the authors mentioned the characteristics of natural, urban, architectural, and social landscape. Each of these categories covers very decisive elements, which attracted the attention of the authors.

Table 2. Main categories and their elements characterizing *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* (Source: Authors2022)

Natural characteristics	Urban characteristics	Architectural characteristics	Social characteristics
The access road	Homogeneity and compactness of the urban fabric	Tunisian influence	Hospitality and wealth
Palm groves and gardens	The protective wall	Mosque (Sanctuary - prayer room - <i>Madarsa</i>)	Physical appearance and dress
Mountains	streets and alleys and dead ends	<i>Sraya</i> (<i>Gaid's</i> house + annex)	The racial or ethnic composition
<i>Oued-El-Arab</i> (River)	Covered passages	Dwellings	Diseases
	Vaults	Towers (<i>Gualaà</i> or Castle)	Social events
		Building materials	

The Natural Characteristics of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*, a Striking Variety and Richness

The natural landscape that characterizes *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* is one of the most extraordinary in the whole region (the village and the gorge were classified as a natural heritage site in 1923). The majority of visitors expressed amazement and wonder at the natural beauty of the site, describing it as *picturesque, mosey, charming, a magnificent sight, an Eldorado, Eden, and a land of dreams*. They consider the *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* oasis to be a *voluptuous, curious, beautiful, and superb land*, which is situated in an *extraordinarily colorful scene in the kingdom of the rocks*. The fact that *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* is built on the *Oued-El-Arab*, at the point where this river escapes through a deep rocky indentation into the Sahara, makes it the only site of interest in the whole region. (Quesnoy, 1885). Eugène Réveillaud (1887), describes his visit to *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* as deportation by the djinns to the land of the *Thousand and One Nights* and adds:

"...mon étonnement eût été à peine accru si le khalife Haroun-al-Raschid ou la sultane Scheherazade m'étaient apparus, couverts d'escarboucles, entourés d'eunuques noirs portant des milliers de torches, et m'avaient demandé ce que je faisais moi, intrus, étranger, profane, au milieu de ce jardin féérique réservé aux seules bayadères" (Réveillaud, 1887, p159)(...

My astonishment would hardly have been increased if the *Khalifa Haroun-al-Raschid* or the *Sultana Scheherazade* had appeared to me, covered with carbuncles, surrounded by black eunuchs carrying thousands of torches, and had asked me what I, an intruder, a stranger, a profane person, was doing in the middle of this fairy garden reserved for the *bayadere* alone).[free translation]

According to Louis Piesse (1891), *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* is a real “*Eldorado*” where there are even tamed gazelles. Auguste Dupouy (1909) qualifies *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* as riotous and luxuriant, and as the first oasis of the *Zyban*, privileged among all, especially after the rocky hell of *Cherchar*, it seems to be an “*Eden*”, whose charm is very penetrating “... *This voluptuous land must be enervating* ” (Auguste-Dupouy, 1909).

In general, the literature follows the same route taken by the visitor, first the road to the city, its overall composition, the access road, the streets and alleys, the prominent buildings, and finally the population.

Table 3. Natural characteristics of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* (Source: Authors 2022)

N°	Author	year	Natural characteristics							
			The access road	Mountains		Palm groves and gardens			Oued El Arab	
			Hidden narrow tree-lined	Color degradation	high	Superior quality of dates	Plant variety	The beauty of the gardens	density	Very deep with palm trees
01	Jules Violle	1880								
02	Philippe Fernand	1880	•		•	•			•	•
03	C. Latruffe	1880	•		•			•	•	•
04	Quesnoy_Ferdinand	1885				•			•	•
05	Reclus, Élisée	1886								
06	Réveillaud, Eugène	1887	•		•		•	•		•
07	Louis Piesse	1891	•	•		•	•		•	•
08	Jean Hurabielle	1899								
09	Auguste Dupouy	1902		•			•	•		•
10	De Lartigue, Raoul Julien François	1904								•
11	Edmond Doutté	1909								
12	Gustave Mercier	1915	•	•	,		•	•	•	•
13	Magali Boissard	1916	•	•	•		•		•	•
14	Melville William Hilton-Simpson	1921	•					•	•	
15	Augustin Bernard	1921								
16	Geoffroy Rudel	1922		•						•
17	Robert Gillon	1924		•				•	•	•
18	Algiers tourist office	1927		•						
19	Odette Keun	1930	•	•			•	•	•	•
20	Ceard	1932	•		•			•	•	•

According to the literature review, what characterizes the natural landscape, and makes it so captivating, is the symbiosis of three picturesque elements, the mountain, the palm grove, and the *wadi*, these three components so much quoted and described by the majority of the visitors of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*, we find them grouped in the first scene which the visitors are confronted with, that is the access road and the entrance of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*. (Tab 02).

The Access Road to Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji, a Picturesque Natural Route!

The current way to reach *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* was only established late in 1957 for military reasons. Before, and to access the village, visitors had to take a track that passed through the palm grove and sometimes crossed the riverbed

of *Oued-El-Arab*. Despite its difficulty, this path offers visitors a panorama of picturesque natural variety. This path is also the only way to reach *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*, it passes between the palm trees of the village which are on both sides of the bank, dominated, on the right and the left, by the high mountains (Fernand, 1880). Latruffe describes the access way and the natural components by saying “...on entre dans le lit de L’Oued El Arab, profondément encaissé, d’un côté par le Djebel Sefa, et de l’autre par les pentes du Koudiat Tamazous. On traverse de magnifiques jardins pour entrer, par un sentier étroit, dans le village de Khanga-Sidi-Nâdji” (Latruffe, 1880, p. 275). (...we enter the riverbed of *Oued El Arab*, deeply embanked, on one side by the Djebel Sefa, and the other by the slopes of Koudiat Tamazous. One crosses magnificent gardens to enter, by a narrow path, the village of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*...)[free translation]

In addition to the beauty and originality of the access road to *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*, some authors add the difficult character of the access to *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*. Engulfed between the mountains and the *Oued*, Mercier (1916) states that the lack of communication would explain the fact that this curious oasis is so ignored by the public and neglected by tourists. Getting there is not an easy matter when you only have the ordinary means at your disposal: horse, mule, or camel.

The Mountain, the Palm Grove and the Oued, a Captivating Natural Trilogy

The association of the mountain, the palm grove, and the Oued is not unusual in the *Aurès* region, and many *Dachras* are privileged to have it. But this alliance remains somewhat strange in the eastern Zab. *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* is the only site where the visitor can enjoy this natural alliance which forms one of the most wonderful natural pictures of the region. The major part of the visitors evoked and sometimes described with wonder this natural picture, sometimes emphasizing one component more than another. Beginning with Gustave Mercier, who speaks about the mountains as being a belt of tawny tones, these mountains lay out the various planes of their mineral splendor; a rich case where all the nuances of burnt ochre, the softest pink and cobalt blue exhaust infinite combinations. The mountains have shades that vary with the passing hours of the day. (Mercier, 1916).

With a more romantic tone, Magali Boissard evokes the mountains that surround *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*:

“...L’oasis de Khanga,.... jeta ses maisons de galets pâles et de boue vermeille à l’assaut d’un sommet de pierre empourprée et d’argile flambante. Si verticales, les pentes de ce sommet, qu’elles défiaient les lois de l’équilibre ! Ce roc formidable allait choir sur l’inconsciente et hardie petite cité des hommes, ruche de montagne, oasis téméraire, oasis d’une nuit ou d’un jour, éclore par miracle au royaume des rochers....» (Boissard, 1916, p. 84). (...The oasis of Khanga,.... threw its houses of pale pebbles and ruddy mud up to a peak of purple stone and flaming clay. The slopes of this summit were so vertical that they defied the laws of balance! This incredible rock was going to fall on the unconscious and bold little city of men, a mountain hive, a reckless oasis, an oasis of a night or a day, hatched by miracle in the kingdom of rocks...)[free translation]

The palm grove and gardens form an inherent part of the natural site, they were evoked by the heights according to several aspects; their beauty, the superior quality of their dates, the variety of the plant species which compose them, and their density. The palm grove counted from 16,000 to 20,000 palm trees, which produced one of the best qualities of dates in the region. The abundance of water in the region, provided by *Oued-El-Arab*, is what gives the palm grove its offspring, which spreads out its high palm trees bathed on all sides by the living water of the *seghias* (Alain Dupouy, 1902). The Oasis of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* by its palm grove provoked the astonishment of visitors, most of them reported their great surprise to discover such a landscape, described as a splendid green tuft and a real sea of palms that stands out on the red background of the mountains (Gillon, 1924).

This palm grove is much more than a simple tide of palms, it hides between its palm trees incredible gardens described as luxuriant (Réveillaud, 1887). The richness of this vegetation is multiple, varying between fruit trees (orange trees, lemon trees, mandarin trees, apricot trees, pomegranate trees, and fig trees...), various vegetables (cabbages, broad beans, peas...) and multitudes of flowers and roses (the high stems of hollyhocks, jasmines, wallflowers, oleanders, and tamarixes...). (Réveillaud, 1887); (Piesse, 1891); (Keun, 1930).

The third element of the natural landscape of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* is *Oued-El-Arab*. Known as one of the most important water sources in the region, it borders the western side of the village. *Oued-El-Arab* has its sources in the heights of the *Aurès* mountains. The Romans used to get water from a canal that linked *Badès* (Ed Badias) to *Khanguet-Sidi-*

Nadji (De Torcy, 1911). This wadi contributed to the development of agriculture, the main activity of the inhabitants. The importance of water in the life of the inhabitants made *Oued-El-Arab* one of the first sources of conflict with the villages along its course. Jonnart (1907) reports that water is taken from the *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* by diversion using a dam and that the villages of *Lioua*, *El-Kseur*, and *Bades* use the floods. But they do not have wells. From the 15th of October to the 15th of May, they are allowed only ten days of water from the *Oued-el-Arab* per month.



Figure 2. View of the palm grove and the village (before 1954) Source: unknown

The Urban Characteristics of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*, an Oasis Ksar or A Saharan City

Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji, means the “gorge of *Sidi Nadji*”, it is called by the abbreviation *Khanga* (the gorge), which means a hollow between two mountains, and *Sidi Nadji* is its founder “*Lembarek Ben Quassem Ben Nadji*”. This agglomeration has known many names, based on its morphology and its location in a site naturally protected by the mountains, recent research has given it the name of *Ksar*¹ (Nasri, 2007), which was first given by Hurabielle during his trip to the region in 1898. Thirty-four years later, the name of *Ksar* was given again to *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*, this time by Dr. Ceard (1932), who said that *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* represented for him an important stage of a car race.

The name that is frequently used in the writings is without any doubt; Oasis. During the colonial period, many people who visited *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* gave it this title. This may be due to its location in an intermediate zone between the mountains and the Sahara, among the bare hills that flank the foothills of *Djebel Chechar* to the south (Mercier, 1916). This appellation is also based on the natural attributes of the site, *Oued-El-Arab* is a major natural element that contributed to the appellation of oasis, for Piesse (1891), *Khanga* is a fresh oasis watered by *Oued-el-Arab*. Its vast palm grove with more than 16,000 palm trees may also be at the origin of this name.

Other authors have noted that the morphology and urban components of this agglomeration have earned it the title of “village”, small town, or even a city: Quesnoy (1885) and Rozet (1932) have qualified *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* as a small town, for Quesnoy the only locality in the region that offers some interest is the small town of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*. For Rozet, *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* is a small town of stone and marble, with a feudal silhouette. In addition to a small town, Mercier (1916) adds, the great resemblance that unites *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* with the Tunisian cities “*Such are the inscriptions of Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*” (p.163) The association of urban and natural characteristics has earned *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* two nominations, it is both a village and an oasis (Feraud, 1868).

Currently, *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* is a *Dachra*. This more administrative name means; a secondary agglomeration attached to a more recent urban center (*El Bordj*).

***Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*, A Homogeneous and Compact Amphitheater Town**

The analysis of the writings on *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* reveals several elements that characterize its urban fabric. What often comes up is the adaptation of the town to the natural environment characterized by the mountains. The homogeneity and compactness of the fabric, another element noted by the visitors, and finally some data concerning the configuration of the streets, alleys, and squares. (Tab 04).

1 According to Vincent Battesti, (Architectures of earth, example of Siwa), the word “ksar” is borrowed from the Arabic “qasr” (“castle”, “fortified village”), which itself comes from the Latin *castrum* (“fort” or “strong place”). It resulted in the word “alcázar” in Spanish. The original word for this type of architecture, which is used in Berber, is “ighrem”.

The natural components which characterize the site of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*, have directly influenced its morphology and its urban landscape. Being limited by the mountain on the eastern side, the *Oued* and the palm grove on the western side, has limited the urban extension of the city and imposed a very particular and ingenious mode of integration to the natural site. This adaptation to the site was mentioned by visitors as being an amphitheater layout (Violle, 1880). Ceard takes up the description of the village with more fascination, and gives more detail on the dwellings that make up the urban fabric: *“Adossés aux escarpements dénudés qui nous étaient apparus hier comme un décor de légende, nous dominons tout ce ksar curieusement suspendu et étagé, merveilleux amphithéâtre ouvert sur un panorama d’une incomparable beauté”*(Ceard, 1932, p. 01)(Leaning against the bare escarpments that appeared to us yesterday as a legendary setting, we dominate the whole of this curiously suspended and tiered ksar, a marvelous amphitheater opening onto a panorama of incomparable beauty)[free translation]. The general impression that *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* gives us is the homogeneity that characterizes its urban fabric, composed essentially of largely similar houses. The houses are not scattered, nor in isolated clusters of trees, they are rigidly assembled, and all parts of the city touch each other. The houses *“révèlent le même aspect grave, distant, donnent la même impression, indéfinissable et saisissante, de religion, de clôture, de sévérité”*(Keun, 1930, p. 128)(reveal the same grave, distant aspect, give the same indefinable and striking impression of religion, of the enclosure, of severity [free translation]).

Table 4. The characteristics of the urban landscape (Source: Authors 2022)

N°	Author	year	Appellations given to <i>KHANGUET-SIDI-NADJI</i>				Amphitheatre city	Homogeneity and compactness of the urban fabric	Elements of the urban landscape			
			Ksar	City/town	Village/Bourg	Oasis			The protective wall	winding streets and alleys	Covered passages	Small square
01	Jules Violle	1880	•				•	•	•			
02	Philippe Fernand	1880			•					•	•	
03	C. Latruffe	1880			•		•					
04	Quesnoy Ferdinand	1885	•	•	•							
05	Reclus, Élisée	1886			•							
06	Réveillaud, Eugène	1887			•		•	•				
07	Louis Piesse	1891		•	•				•	•		
08	Jean Hurabielle	1899	•		•							
09	Auguste Dupouy	1902			•	•			•	•	•	•
10	De Lartigue, Raoul Julien François	1904			•	•						
11	Edmond Doutté	1909			•							
12	Gustave Mercier	1915	•		•		•		•		•	•
13	Magali Boissard	1916	•		•		•	•		•	•	•
14	Melville William Hilton-Simpson	1921			•	•		•	•	•		•
15	Augustin Bernard	1921			•					•	•	•
16	Geoffroy Rudel	1922			•							
17	Robert Gillon	1924			•							
18	Algiers tourist office	1927						•				
19	Odet Keun	1930		•	•		•	•	•	•	•	
20	Ceard	1932	•				•	•	•	•		

Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji, for many visitors, is perceived as a *Ksar*, probably because of its wall, this wall confirms once again the insecurity which dominated the region as a result of the disagreements of the leaders of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* with the neighboring tribes (Nemamcha, the people of Liana). This wall confirms the character of the *ksour* found in our Sahara and in other African countries: *“Ce qui fait l’originalité du paysage, et lui en confère un cachet d’africanisme intense, ce sont les murailles massives qui l’entourent d’un cadre extraordinairement coloré.”* (Mercier, 1916, p. 141)(What

makes the landscape original, and gives it a character of intense Africanism, are the massive walls that surround it in an extraordinarily colorful context.[free translation]]. But Odette Keun sees in it a sign of stiffness and dignity”...*L'impression de clôture que donne ce bourg blafard, de raideur et de dignité, est saisissante: rien qu'à le voir, on sent qu'il est régi par des formules.*»(Keun, 1930, p. 123)[...The impression of enclosure given by this pallid burg, of stiffness and dignity, is striking: just looking at it, one feels that it is governed by formulas] [free translation]. The wall of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* is composed of part of the houses and the fences of the gardens. According to Hilton-Simpson (1921), the village can be accessed through four gates, one at each point of the compass, whose large wooden doors are closed at night.

Once again, the morphology of the natural site has imposed a layout for the streets and alleys, which allows the evacuation of rainwater towards the *Oued* without damaging the foundations of the houses. The streets and alleys at *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* are narrow and tortuous, but cleaner than those in any other village (Hilton-Simpson, 1921). Odette Keun (1930) states that in *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* one is in the heart of an Arab people, and one can recognize this just by the streets, which are different from those in other *Auresian* villages. For her, the streets are all the same, narrow, dull, sad ribbons of earth that run between the high walls. There is not the slightest hint of houses or courtyards above their tops or between their stones. Keun adds that the streets are pale and irregular, they criss-cross the village like twisted whips. The streets and alleys in *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* run between the closed facades; sometimes it enters, like a short tunnel, under beams topped by a floor. These are the *Sguifas*, these covered passages have attracted the attention of visitors, the most remarkable *Sguifa* is that of the mosque, certainly because of its location (between the mosque and the *Sraya*), but also because it is the only one built with red brick.

As in many ancient Arab cities, the most important square is the mosque square. In *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*, the only square that visitors have mentioned is the one in front of the mosque of *SidiLembarek*, which is limited in the area.

The Architectural Characteristics of Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji, the Tunisian Influence

Through the various descriptions, it appears that the architectural landscape in *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* presents the same characteristics. The authors mentioned a homogeneous and compact urban fabric structured from several dwellings whose form, color, and materials were remarkably described. The city is also distinguished by a few major facilities and recurrent elements. The mosque of *Sidi Lembarek*, with its high minaret visible from afar, is the central element of the urban fabric; the house of the *Caïd* (*Sraya*), with its silhouette and position, comes in second place; the tower (*Gualaa*) which surmounts the town has also been very present in the writings. The presence of other facilities such as the market, the Moorish cafés, and the school is a strong witness to the importance of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* as a settlement.

The originality of the constructions in *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* and their different character compared to those of the region is the contribution of Tunisian workers in the construction of the monuments, this difference was confirmed by all the visitors. (Tab 04).

Table 5. Characteristics of the architectural landscape (Source: Authors 2022)

N	Author	Year	Elements of the architectural landscape						
			Tunisian influence	Mosque (Sanctuary - prayer room - Madarsa)	Sraya (Gaid's house + annex)	Dwellings	Towers (Gualaa or Fort)	Building materials	Other buildings
01	Jules Violle	1880		•	•	•	•		
02	Philippe Fernand	1880		•	•				
03	C. Latruffe	1880		•	•	•			-The market
04	Quesnoy_Ferdinand	1885		•	•	•		•	
05	Reclus, Élisée	1886	•	•					-The market
06	Réveillaud, Eugène	1887		•	•	•			
07	Louis Piesse	1891	•	•	•		•	•	-Wadi al-Arab Gate
08	Jean Hurabielle	1899	•	•	•		•	•	

09	Auguste Dupouy	1902	•		•	•		•	
10	De Lartigue, Raoul Julien François	1904	•	•	•			•	
11	Edmond Doutté	1909							
12	Gustave Mercier	1915	•	•		•	•	•	-The inscriptions in the mosque -Shops
13	Magali Boissard	1916		•			•		-School
14	Melville William Hilton-Simpson	1921	•	•	•	•	•	•	-Wall inscriptions -the gates
15	Augustin Bernard	1921		•	•	•		•	
16	Geoffroy Rudel	1922	•	•		•			
17	Robert Gillon	1924		•					
18	Algiers tourist office	1927							
19	Odette Keun	1930	•	•	•	•	•		-Moorish cafes, -The market, -the large cistern, -School
20	Ceard	1932	•	•					-The gate

The Mosque Sidi Lembarek, a religious complex on a regional scale

Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji is characterized by its five mosques. The one of *Sidi Lembarek* (representing the *Zaouia Naciria*), and the mosque of *Sidi Abdelhafidh* (representing the *Zaouia Rahmania*) are the most remarkable. Through the writings, it appears that the mosque of *Sidi Lembarek* is the only one to be mentioned and described by the visitors², it represents the first monument built in *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*. Its first bricks were laid by the founder of the city, *Lembarek Ben Kassem Ben Nadji* (from whom the mosque takes its name) in 1037 of the hegriras (1628), this first construction was rather simple and small, built with local materials, the development of the city and the increase in the number of the population made it unable to accommodate all the prayers (Benhassine, 2002). The mosque of *Sidi Lembarek*, as we see it today, was built by his descendant *Mohamed Ben Mohamed Tayeb* in 1145 of the hegriras (1733). Mercier (1916) indicates that the mosque was designed and built by an architect from *Sfax* (Tunisia), *El Hadj M'hammed Saad Ben Amor*, who died before the completion of the building, by referring to an inscription above the main door.

The various inscriptions on the door frames and inside the mosque were the subject of a study by Gustave Mercier (1916). These inscriptions give us very important information on the history of the mosque and the city.



Figure 3. The mosque across the palm grove 1929 (old C.P.) Source: treated and colored by Rezgui Cherif 2021

² This is mainly due to the fact that it is built and maintained by the leaders of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* on the one hand. But also, for the fact that it is dominant and stands out from the natural landscape, its minaret is visible from afar. The mosque of *Sidi Abdelhafidh* on the other hand is rather new construction. It was restored and enlarged in the 1980s.

The mosque of *Sidi Lembarek* is the most described construction and has aroused the curiosity of many travelers. Considered beautiful by Hurabielle (1899), the most beautiful of the *Zyban* by Violle (1880), De-Lartigue (1904), and superb by Rudel (1922). A mosque of beauty and solidity superior to all the others in the Algerian Southeast (Hilton-Simpson, 1921). A mosque touching in its naive piety, very soft and numb, an opulent construction. (Keun, 1930) The dominance of the mosque by its color and height of its minaret over the urban and natural landscape, in general, has also been pointed out by visitors: “...au fond des montagnes. La blanche mosquée et la maison du kaïd, sur lesquelles le soleil jette à flots sa lumière d’or, se détachent sur les verts palmiers qui, à leur tour, ont pour repoussoir les rochers rougeâtres et calcinés du Djebel-Cherchar» (Piesse, 1891, p. 301). (...at the bottom of the mountains. The white mosque and the house of the *kaïd*, on which the sun pours its golden light, stand out against the green palm trees which, in turn, have as a backdrop the reddish and charred rocks of *Jebel-Cherchar*...) [free translation]

The mosque of *Sidi Lembarek* is not a simple place of prayer but a building that forms a rather complex whole, it consists of several entities: the sanctuary where the remains of the saint rest; the great hall of prayers, which includes five naves of six columns each; the *Madersa* adjacent to the mosque. The whole is dominated by the minaret from which one enjoys a splendid view of the city, the oasis, and the surrounding mountains. Numerous inscriptions, most of them on plaster, inform us about the construction of the building and its date. (Mercier, 1916).

3.3.2 The “*Sraya*”, a mysterious fortress

The “*Sraya*” or *KsarLehssainia*³ is the second construction after the mosque of *SidiLembarek* that has attracted the attention and curiosity of authors. It is a residence that dates from the 17th century (1679) (Benhassine, 2002). The *Sraya* is located near the mosque of *Sidi Lembarek* (it shares with him the same *Sguifa*). This location is undoubtedly proof of the importance of this residence and also of the notoriety and social level of the people who lived there. The building was once used as a residence for the manager (referred to in the writings as *GaïdOuCaïd*) and his family. The *Sraya* is doubled by an annex described several times by the authors, it is reserved for the visitors of high level, administrators, scientists, or travelers.

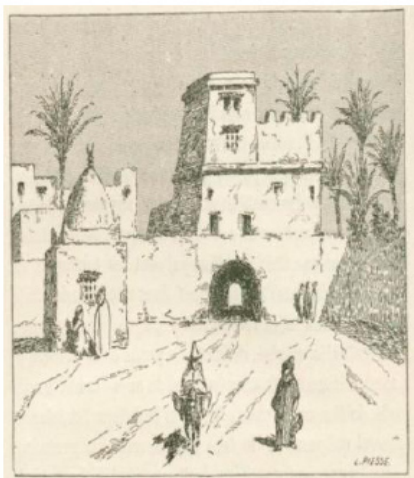


Figure 4. The house of the Caid according to Piesse.
Source : (Piesse, 1891, p.302)

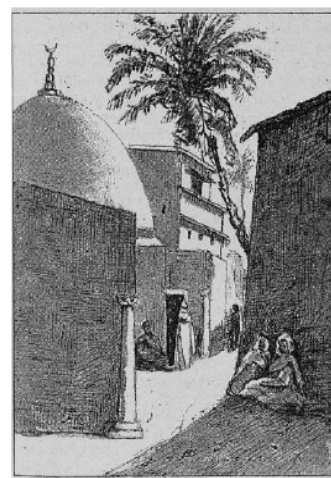


Figure 5. The mosque of theCaidaccording toQuesnoy.
Source : (Quesnoy, 1885, p. 105)

The *Sraya* of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* was presented by Violle (1880) as a high fortress that stands in the middle of a tight cluster of houses. Philippe Fernand (1880) considered it to be the only building worthy of attention in *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*. While Jean Hurabielle (1899), in evoking its architectural style, confirms that it is similar to the Moorish buildings of the large cities of the coast with its interior courtyard, its porticoes, and its fountains. The exterior, on the contrary, has the appearance of a citadel. The same observation was made by De-Lartigue (1904) concerning the interior layout, which is reminiscent of the Arab houses of Algiers. The most significant description is that given by Augustin Bernard

³ It is the name given by the inhabitants to the residence of the leader of *El Khangua*. *Saray* or *Sraya* is a Turkish name of Persian origin that means ‘palace’. This confirms once again the attachment of the region to the Ottoman power represented by the Beys of Tunis. And *KsarLehssainia* where the palace of *Benhassine* the other name of *Bennaceur*, descendants of the founder of *Khanguet-Sidi-NadjiLembarek Ben Kacem Ben Nadji*.

(1921), who brings us that the residence of the *Caïd* is placed in front of the mosque and probably dating from the same period, he adds that it is a house of Moorish style, connected to the wall of the mosque by an ogival vault in bricks.

In a separate annex of the family residence, the *Caïd* received and offered to the prestigious visitors, all the wonders of a reception worthy of the noble and great leaders of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*. As explained above, the fact that the majority of the visitors resided during their visit in the annex of the *Sraya*, explains why the latter is mentioned in their writings, with more details. The most recurrent elements that are often mentioned are the decoration and the furnishing, the interior atmosphere, and the garden on which the annex opens.

Concerning the decoration and furnishings, Alain Dupouy (1902) and Hilton-Simpson (1921) described an annex furnished in the European style, at great expense, for the officers who could go there. On the other hand, Keun (1930) specifies that the concessions made to European needs are limited to simple and very clean furniture where there is no trace of these efforts to imitate Western fashions which result, in the homes of rich Arabs, in a jumble of such bad taste. It is a very curious annex, with walls one-meter thick, square windows curiously grilled, and heavy Roman arches.

The Houses in Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji, A Particular Domestic Architecture

If, the few prestigious monuments that *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* counts, aroused the attention and the curiosity of the visitors. The domestic heritage, as for him, was less quoted. The information divulged concerns essentially the external aspect of the houses (justified by the sacred character of the private space).

Violle (1880), reports that *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* is presented as a tight cluster of houses, without gardens, and resembles the cities of the war. Alain Dupouy (1902) and Mercier (1916), cite other aspects; regular houses, are well-built and sufficiently aligned with an architecture that reveals a concern for elegance and cleanliness. Once again, they confirm this connection with small Tunisian villages. According to Rudel (1922), this change in the architecture of the houses, where the Tunisian influence is felt, has modified the rough aspect of the Zyban lines. The houses in *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* seem to deserve more attention, for it is a fine example of a prosperous city, founded, enlarged, and almost entirely maintained by the great family that dominated it for centuries. This statement by Hilton-Simpson (1921), comes to certify the general impression produced by these carefully maintained houses, by the rulers of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*.

The domestic heritage in *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* was the subject of a prospective survey carried out by the French geographer and historian Augustin Joseph Bernard in 1921. This investigation affirms the adaptation of the houses with a climate considered very hot. He classified the dwellings in *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* into three distinct typologies; the first one gathers in general constructions which consist of a first floor of which some have one floor, the style of these dwellings approaches the Moorish house, they consist of a spacious interior court with a gallery on which the rooms open; obscure vestibule giving access in the court and flat terrace in beaten earth. The second typology encountered represents some houses of the same style as the *Sraya* (the residence of the *Caïd*), and which probably date from the same period. These houses offer a spacious courtyard, surrounded by a gallery with large pillars. Finally, a third category is considered more modern, some of which are very recent, built by the *Bennaceur* family. These are vast constructions, in the Moorish style, with the addition, on the second floor, of large French windows with glass and shutters; Augustin Bernard confirms that these constructions were built by Europeans.

Odette Keun (1930), describes the *Bennaceur* houses, where she announces having been invited to five or six of them, that they are separate residences. These houses are high and vast, they seem to be similar to the beautiful Arab houses that we sometimes see in Algiers and that still abound in Tunisia, but simpler.

Other Notable Buildings

Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji was an important station for pilgrims coming from the West. Also, a center of knowledge and instruction by its *Zaouia Naciria*. This made it a meeting place for people of different origins (the *Chaouia* of the *Aurès*, people of the *Souf*, and even students coming from *Tebessa*, *Khanchela*, and *Constantine*). That had a great influence on the trade by its important market where the inhabitants of the plain, as well as those of the mountain, meet. (Latruffe, 1880); (Niox, 1884). Mercier (1916), also confirms the existence of numerous stores, a place where the populations that surround *El Khangua* get supplies. “....l'entrée des boutiques nombreuses où viennent s'approvisionner les nomades du Sahara, comme les *Chaouia* de la montagne...». (Mercier, 1916, p. 141). (...the entrance to the numerous stores where the nomads of the Sahara, like the *Chaouia* of the mountain, come to stock up) [free translation]

The fort or *Gualaâ* which dominates the city on the eastern side (*Satha*), is another monument that certifies the importance of this city. This fort was mentioned in the writings of Piesse, Hurabielle, Mercier, Hilton-Simpson, and Boisnard. Although it has been demolished, it attests once again to the ancient power of the *Benaceurs* and the jealousy of a Tunisian rival (Keun, 1930, p143).

Odette Keun during her stay in *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* (1930), was impressed by numerous urban, architectural, and even hydraulic structures. The presence of numerous Moorish cafes; the school built in 1903 where the children of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* learned the principles of the language from a French teacher; and the water cistern (*Feskia*)⁴ from which the population obtained drinking water.

Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji, A City of Earth, Stone, and Marble

The European visitors, while traveling through the eastern *Zab* with its different settlements and getting used to an architecture based on earth (the first material available in the region), are stunned by the variety of materials used to build the *Ksar* of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*. "*Khanga diffère des autres ksours des Zibans par sa construction : au lieu de briques séchées au soleil, on y a employé des matériaux plus résistants : de la pierre, du marbre*» (Quesnoy, 1885, p. 100). (*Khanga* differs from the other *ksours* of the *Zibans* by its construction: instead of bricks dried in the sun, more resistant materials were used: stone, and marble.) [free translation]

Clay remains undoubtedly the most used material for the construction of houses. The technique by which this material is used remains different from that used in the neighboring oases. The houses of clay (of *Toub*) inform us Dupouy is like all those of the desert, but regular those, well-built and sufficiently aligned (Alain Dupouy, 1902).

Stone as a material is less used in the *Zyban* region, but it is often used in the monuments of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*, or even for the first floors of some houses (Hurabielle, 1899). The marble, noble material, whose use is reserved for prodigious constructions, impressed the visitors. One meets this material, especially in the mosque and the residence of the *Caïd* "Aussi les quelques monuments qu'elle renferme ont-ils un caractère tout différent de celui des autres ksour du *Zab*. La mosquée, la maison du kaïd, la porte de l'Oued- el-Arab et la citadelle qui domine la ville, sont en marbre." (Piesse, 1891, p. 303). (Also, the few monuments it contains have a character quite different from that of the other *ksour* of *Zab*. The mosque, the house of the *kaïd*, the door of *Oued-el-Arab*, and the citadel that dominates the city, are made of marble.) [free translation]

The Tunisian influence in *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* does not only reside in the architectural style of its monuments but also in the materials used. The terracotta brick, a material whose use is remarkable in the house of the *Caïd* and its *Skifa*, the technique of production as well as the implementation of this material were brought back to *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* by the Tunisian workers who came for the construction of the *Sraya*. "...à la maison paternelle de *Khanga*, que des maçons venus de Tunis avaient édifié en belles briques d'argile, cuites au soleil du désert." (Auguste Dupouy, 1909, p. 01). (... the paternal house of *Khanga*, that masons from Tunis had built in beautiful clay bricks, baked in the desert sun). [free translation]. Some houses and the mosque have doorframes made of ashlar roughly sculpted by workers from Tunis; these stones are made of soft, grayish-white limestone from the Nummulitic mountains of the South (Ville, 1868).

THE SOCIAL LANDSCAPE, THE HIDDEN FACET OF KHANGUET-SIDI-NADJI

In general, the authors had little or no interest in the social components and lifestyles. They were not close enough or in direct contact with the inhabitants. What often comes up in the writings are some aspects of hospitality and opulence, physical appearance and dress, racial or ethnic composition, diseases, and some social events.

The dimension of hospitality is regularly addressed and the hospitable character especially of the leaders (the *Benhassines*) remarkably emphasized by Violle, Piesse, Dupouy, Hilton Simpson, and Keun. Despite this significant hospitality, the gaps between the two societies remain. Dupouy pointed out this difference during his trip in 1902:

« *L'Arabe ici semble très loin de nous, de nos gouverneurs et de nos soldats. Pour eux nous restons les rommis*[français]. *Et sous les manières affables, derrière les sourires polis que leur inspire la crainte et une bonne grâce native, ils nous demeurent étrangers [...]* Nous sommes chez eux comme chez le *caïd* de *Khanga*, dans une annexe de notre goût, tandis que la maison

⁴ A name of Tunisian origin, a large marble basin generally circular in shape, used for irrigation (*Feskia* of Kairouan). The one of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* is rectangular; it is supplied by the floods of *Oued El Arab*, and used for the supply of the population in drinking water.

véritable est à côté, toute proche et pourtant si loin, avec ses murs épais et ses portes closes.»(Dupouy. A, 1902, p.179). (The Arabs here seem very far from us, from our governors and our soldiers. For them, we remain the French (Rommis), and behind the affable manners, the polite smiles inspired by fear and a native good grace, they remain strangers to us [...]) We are in their house as in the house of the Caïd of Khanga, in an annex of our taste, while the real house is next door, very close and yet so far away, with its thick walls and its closed doors.) [free translation]

Other details have attracted attention, some authors have not failed to describe with precision the fine physiognomy of the *Benhassines*, worthy of a pure race, their courtesy and distinction, their dress, their behavior, and also the notoriety they are witnessing among the population. This population differs completely from the Berber type and is closer to the Romans, and the Vandals especially because they have blond hair and beard, blue eyes, and white skin wherever it is not exposed to the sun (Quesnoy, 1885).

The social and ethnic composition of the inhabitants of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* has also been mentioned by the authors. Réveillaud mentions a small city of three thousand inhabitants, composed mainly of Arabs, Jews, Negroes, and Berbers (Réveillaud, 1887). Latruffe points out the presence of a few Jewish families, who settled in the village, engaged in the jewelry trade, and never lacked work because of strong demand (Latruffe, 1880).

The social variety that characterizes *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*, has generated a variety in the way of celebrating religious and social events. This dimension is rarely treated by authors, except for Edmond Doutté, who describes the celebration of the Aachoura festival. And Odette Keun who was closer to the woman draws the details of a traditional wedding party.

The poverty of the population, the various diseases such as malaria caused by the contaminated water that the inhabitants consume, and the ophthalmia so frequent in the region, another facet of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* that we meet in the writings of Violle (1880) and Keun (1930). A reality that unfortunately affected the majority of rural districts in *Biskra*.

CONCLUSION

Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji, although it is a relatively recent urban structure, has managed to attract attention and arouse a lot of curiosity from visitors who have considered it an important station in a journey between the South and the North, through the Sahara and the Eastern *Zab*, or passing through the *Aures* and crossing the localities of *Djebel Chechar*.

Today, the city is lifeless, its buildings are in poor condition, and its houses are abandoned and dilapidated. Its population, despite its attachment to this small city and its values, remains powerless and immobile to improve the image of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*. The efforts of the Algerian state represented by its cultural and patrimonial structures remain in vain facing the effects of time. The lack of a global strategy for the management of tangible or intangible heritage has led to a few hazardous interventions, causing more degradation and distorting the image that characterized the city in the past.

Through the analysis of the writings of the travelers who visited *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* during the XVIII and XIX centuries, who transmitted the image of a resplendent city, we tried to highlight the remarkable elements which often occurred in their accounts and which characterized the city during this period. It is therefore essentially from these writings that have been preserved and transmitted, from the travel notes made by these travelers, essentially geographers, historians, administrators, and military or scientific men, that we have tried to reconstitute elements of this history.

The different descriptions have led to the same path taken by the visitors. First, the road to the city where the authors have emphasized the originality of the natural landscape. This landscape is where three elements cohabit in perfect harmony; the mountains of *Mount Tamazous*, *Oued-El-Arab*, and the palm grove. In second place comes the urban structure of the city, the character of the fortified city with the surrounding wall often comes out, the streets and tortuous alleys, but especially the compact and homogeneous fabric leaned perfectly to the mountain. The architectural landscape had an important place in the writings. Concerning the architectural characteristics of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji*. The first element that stands out is the distinction of typical architecture, where the influence of the Tunisian workers who participated in the construction of the great monuments of the city, is very present. The city is structured from its magnificent mosque, the latter has attracted the attention of all visitors. The *Sraya* or residence of the *Caïd* is also part of the constructions described by the authors. Finally, the social landscape was less described by the visitors, who were very distant from a society qualified as discreet. The hospitality, the opulence, and the physiognomy of the leaders of *Khanguet-Sidi-Nadji* were the elements that most marked the visitors.

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