

The Sahara, Ibadite Refuge

Houria Cherid, Lakhdar Drias, Farida Benouis (translated by Judy Harter)

First Day:

From Sidi Okba Mausoleum to the Tidjaniya Zawiya

I.1 BISKRA

I.1.a Sidi Okba

I.2 TOUGGOURT

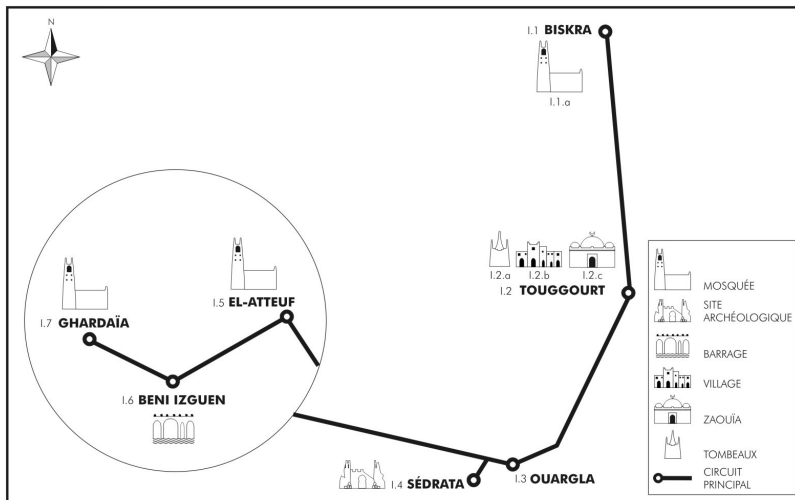
I.2.a Tombs of the Touggourt Kings

I.2.b Temacin

I.2.c The Tidjaniya Zawiya

La *tariqa* Tidjaniya

Farida Benouis



Beni Isguen, M'zab Valley

With the advent of Islam, the Maghreb gradually became a Muslim province with a governor in Kairouan (*Qayrawan*, Arabic for fortified camp). It was the first city in Ifriqiya, on the Tunisian plain, and was founded by Okba bin Nafi as early as 49/670. Bin Nafi became the Arab conqueror of the Maghreb, and Kairouan was the departure point for his conquest.

In the central and western regions, following resistance by Berber tribes from the Aures Massif, the population gradually adopted Islam and filled the region with monuments dedicated to the worship and veneration of prominent figures sainted by popular demand. The mausoleum of Sidi Okba, erected on the site of his struggles in 63/683, a few years after his death, is evidence of the local people's loyalty to their new religion, even if, according to ibn

Khaldoun, the Berbers were as ready for conversion as for apostasy: "twelve times in seventy years," he said.

During the period of transition between the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, the Maghreb was governed by the heirs of the first Arab conquerors under various denominations: Fihriissites (original tribe of Sidi Okba), *wullat* (plural of *wilaya*, province), as evidenced by a glass weight standard at the National Museum of Antiquities and Islamic Art (Algiers) that was discovered in the city of Mila. It has an inscription in Kufic script that reads, "In the name of God. From what Governor Abd al-Rahman bin Habib ordered/to Masal ben Hammad, prefect of Mila/twenty *ukiya*, in the year/one hundred and twenty-seven". The Maghreb still belonged to the political-religious bloc of the Muslim world.



*Master weight,
National Museum
of Antiquities and
Islamic Art, Algiers*

However, the new Arab conquerors applied a heavy tax and displayed contempt towards new converts. The reaction to this was fed by a fierce independence movement, resulting in dissent and in the adoption of the Kharijite doctrine. This rebellious schism was born in the East, after supporters of the Caliph Ali showed their disapproval by abandoning his ranks (*kharaja*, go out). In the Maghreb, it provided the Berber resistance with an ideological foundation in opposition to the despotism and arbitrariness of the Arabs. Different centres of dissent formed. In 140/758, these Kharijites managed to seize the capital, Kairouan, but in 143/761, its governor, Abd al-Rahman ibn Rostom, was driven out. He managed to flee, and soon he created the first Kharijite Ibadite state.

At the same time, Abu Qorra was founding a Kharijite kingdom near the city of Tlemcen. In 771, these two combined kingdoms became established in the central Maghreb and in Ifriqiya to the east. Tahert, near present-day Tiaret, would be the first Ibadite capital, and would remain a symbol of opposition to the central power in Kairouan throughout its 132 years as the capital of the Rustamid kingdom. Only a few fragments remain of this once flourishing city. In 298/911, it was destroyed by a new force that was gaining strength in the central Maghreb – the Fatimid dynasty, which would bring down all the

Kharijite cities from its base in Ikkjan in Little Kabylia.

After the fall of Tahert, the Kharijites were forced into defence and exile. They took refuge in the Sahara, in Sedrata (Isedraten), their second capital, near the city of Ouargla. Despite the terrible heat and aridity of the desert, the fugitives decided to build their city there because they discovered an immense artesian aquifer 60 metres below ground. The city continued to develop, and like its predecessor Tahert it would have a significant scholarly influence. It was destroyed by the Hammadids in 469/1077, and was abandoned, soon to be buried under the sands. After the destruction of their city, the Ibadites retreated further west, into the valley of M'zab. Earlier, from 433/1042, they had founded five cities there, in which their descendants still live today. Every year in the spring they go on pilgrimage to pray at length with their coreligionists on the sites of what used to be their capitals, Tahert and Sedrata.

Today, in the naturally hostile climate of the M'zab Valley, they have been able to control their precious water resources through creative ingenuity, to invent forms of original urban architecture and to combine economic prosperity with the religious fervour of Ibadism. Ghardaïa, the Mozabite capital, is a lesson in architecture for many prestigious architects: "A mode of construction that dictates form

Biskra

and determines aesthetics” (Hasan Fathy); “The M’zab is prestigious without intending to claim prestige” (André Ravereau). Since its creation the city has continued to maintain the essential axis of trans-Saharan trade, from Kairouan southwest to Gao, in present-day Mali, and from Algiers east to the banks of the Nile and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

1.1 BISKRA

Biskra has an international airport. If driving, on the route from Algiers via Bou Saada you can discover beautiful panoramas in the high plains. If leaving from Constantine via Batna, you can enter the beautiful gorges of el-Kantara leading to the plain of Biskra.

Our first city stop, Biskra (elevation 128 metres), is located southeast of Algiers. The climate is cold in winter, hot and dry in summer. At the foot of a pale mountain range, Biskra, “Queen of the Ziban” – with its plains and green oases, its cultural sites that were witness to succeeding civilisations – has long been one of the most popular tourist areas.

Biskra is famous for its dates, the Deglet Nour variety being considered the best in the world. The palm plantation extends along the valley and includes thousands of palm and fruit trees. Water is abundant, accessible by artesian wells. Each locality is known for its artisanal activities. The thermal baths known as Hammam Salihine have

enjoyed an excellent reputation dating back to Roman colonisation. Ibn Khaldoun, who stayed in Biskra in 784/1382, asserted that the city dated to 65/685, and that it was the capital of the Zab or Ziban, which means oasis. It was built on the site of ancient Vescera, a Roman post. Subjugated by the Aghlabides of Kairouan, Biskra supplanted Tobna, then capital of the eastern Hodna. Under the Hammadids, in the 5th/11th century, it was autonomous.

Al-Bakri describes Biskra’s beauty and prosperity, its ramparts, the lushness of its oasis and the Maghrawa and Sedrata Berber herders who roamed the area. According to the geographer al-Idrissi, the city was fortified in the Almohad era. Under the Hafids it became the capital of the entire southwestern part of their territory.

During the Ottoman period, in 948/1542, Hassan Agha and Salah Raïs settled there and built a fort. Under French colonisation, in 1844, Biskra was occupied by the French Duke of Aumale.

Today Biskra houses the Great Mosque of Sidi M’barek, which dates from the 5th/11th century; the Nassiriya *zawiya*, famous in the 6th/12th century; the mausoleum Sidi Abderrahman and the Khaled el-Abassi Mosque.

1.1.a Sidi Okba

At 20 km from the centre of Biskra. Take one of the shared taxis that go to Zeribet el-Oued via Route N. 83.



*Sidi Mbarek Mosque,
Biskra*



*Sidi Khaled Mosque,
Biskra*

Touggourt

the oldest Islamic mosques, such as the mosque in Medina built by the Prophet.

Outside on the top level two domes protrude: the larger one covers the tomb of the saint; the smaller one covers the tomb of his horse, in gratitude for his having brought his master that far. The short and square minaret behind them is decorated with only a few geometric motifs.

Inside, the bays and arcades are parallel to the *qibla* wall, perpendicular to the direction of prayer.

The space directly in front is reserved for ritual worship. The *koubba* (tomb structure) is modest. The pillars are made of palm trunks covered with a lime mortar.

The curved arches are devoid of decoration. The *mihrab* (niche) is very old; its capitals are decorated with grooves and stylised palm trees, while the niche has radiating ridges. Small interlocking columns support an arch decorated with very simple stucco and geometric motifs. A beautiful double-wing carved cedar door dates to the Zirid era (415/1025).

I.2 TOUGGOURT

From Biskra to Touggourt, travel 207 km by Route 3 along the Ghir Valley. According to legend, the river was similar to the Nile and the Niger, and flowed into the Triton Lake of the Romans, now known as the Melghir and Merouane Chotts, or salt lakes. Heading south from Biskra to Blidat Amor, a series of picturesque oases set in lush palm groves stretches along the valley, watered



by unpredictable rivers. Frequent floods are a familiar problem for the local population.

Interior view of the Sidi Okba Mosque



Zirid door of the Sidi Okba Mosque

Touggourt is the natural capital of the *wadi* Ghir. The circular city is surrounded by a ditch, originally a moat. Above it a surrounding wall 2.50 metres high is flanked by small towers spaced approximately

Touggourt

60 metres apart. This primitive fortification, made of rough gypsum masonry, is broken by three doors. “The two city gates called Bab el-Khadra and Bab es-Salam were braced with iron. They opened opposite a drawbridge over the defence moat”, wrote General Daumas in his 1845 narrative, *Le Sahara algérien* (The Algerian Sahara). Bab el-Gheder, the third gate, opens onto the Casbah.

The heart of the city is the *ksar* Mestawa, dominated by the Great Mosque with white marble doorways and columns. The facade is covered with glazed earthenware tiles. Near the mosque stands a terracotta brick minaret.

During the first centuries of Islam, Touggourt was dependent on the governors of Biskra. In the 9th/15th century, after the arrival of the first sovereign, Souleyman ben Djellab (of Moroccan origin and related to the Marinids), a new dynasty reigned for four centuries, with help from nomadic populations in the region. In the

10th/16th century, Ottoman influence caused hardship for the people subjected to heavy taxes. In 1854, the city fell under French control.

1.2.a Tombs of the Touggourt Kings

The tombs of the Touggourt kings, the Ben Djellab (9th/15th century), are found west of the city on a bare plateau.

The constructions are square, topped by domes and aligned in a rather picturesque way. One of these, larger than the others, contains a courtyard and several other structures. The tombs in the cemetery are rectangular, surmounted by plaster masonry blocks. The style is spare and austere with no ornamentation.

1.2.b Temacine

Temacine was a medieval village built in a beautiful oasis south of Touggourt.

The big *sebkha*, or swamp, called Chemora extends to the centre of the oasis of Temacin. A beautiful mosque was built on a base of palm logs. The minaret of the mosque is square and built of fine terracotta bricks that form geometric designs comparable to those found in Tozeur, Tunisia. According to local tradition, the mosque was contemporary with that of Touggourt. Similar designs can be found on the facades of wealthy homes, and evoke motifs in carpets from the region. The minaret is very high: it is necessary to climb 100 steps to reach

*Tombs of the
Touggourt kings*



*Temacine Mosque and Zawiya*

the top. The traveller el-Aiachi claimed that the minaret was built in 817/1414 by an architect from Fez called Ahmed ben Mohammed who came to Ghir *wadi* on a pilgrimage. Indeed, on the door of the mosque you can read: “architect Ahmed bin Mohammed el-Fassi, built in the year 817 [of the Hegira]”.

continues to have substantial influence in both the Maghreb and the Sahel region to the south,

Temacine Mosque, minaret

I.2.c **The Tidjaniya Zawiya**

Temacine was a religious capital of the *wadi* Ghir, as Touggourt was the political and military capital. The building of Tidjaniya Zawiya is composed of a large vaulted room with carved and latticed stucco arcades. The saint Sidi el-Hadj Ali is buried there. The Tidjaniya Sufi *tariqa* (school) was founded in the 12th/18th century by Si Ahmed Tidjani in Ain el-Madhi, near Laghouat. The community

THE TIDJANIYA TARIQA

Farida Benouis

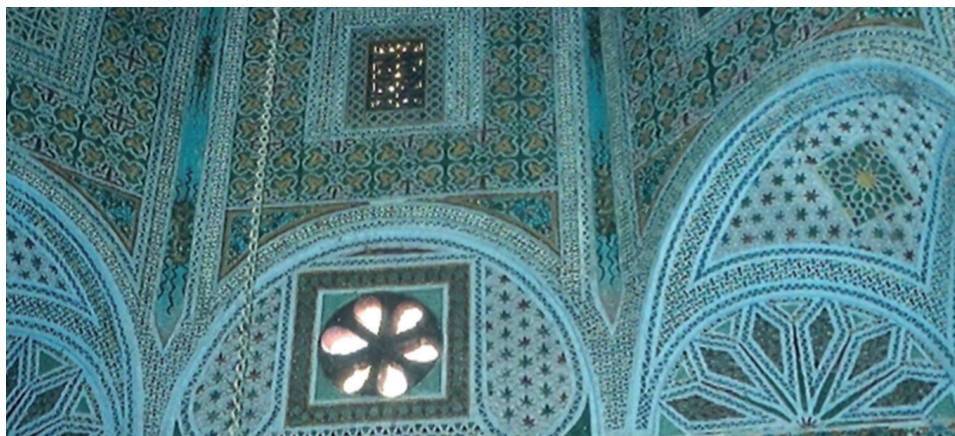
The Tidjaniya *tariqa* (brotherhood, Sufi Way) was founded by Abu al-Abbas Ahmed Tidjani in the oasis of Abi Samghoun in Algeria. Born in Ain el-Madhi, a small town in the Algerian desert, in 1149/1737, he subsequently settled in Fez. He died there in 1230/1815. He was the son of the very pious and learned Sidi Mohammed ibn el-Mokhtar Tidjani and of Aicha, who themselves counted many scholars and accomplished saints among their ancestors. El-Tidjani had a dream in which he would have been designated by the Prophet Muhammad as *Khatam al-awliya*, or Seal of the Prophets. Thus, the Prophet would have taught him his *ouird*, or personal invocation, and dictated the precepts that his *tariqa* should follow. He enjoined him: "Maintain this *tariqa* without withdrawing from the world or breaking with the business of men, until you reach the spiritual station promised to you, while maintaining your

activity, with neither discomfort nor excessive devotions; do without all the saints."

Tidjani thus received from year to year the direct initiation of the Prophet, as well as the order and authorisation to call people to this path. This doctrine spread throughout the region, with people flocking from many lands to take advantage of his *baraka* (protection) and the teachings that the Prophet had entrusted to him. He thus became the guardian of the ritual path of the Prophet himself, a path that contains all other paths.

The Tidjaniya *tariqa* is based entirely on the two fundamental sources: the Qur'an and the Prophetic Tradition. The Sufi way is based on mindfulness and constancy in spiritual practices, whether they are obligatory or optional prayers, or simply good deeds. The purification of the soul (*al-nafs*) and the journey to God can be done only by resisting the passions of the ego. This struggle must

Tidjaniya Zawiya,
interior view





Tidjania Zawiya,
exterior view

start with a good knowledge of science and its everyday practice. The principles of Tidjanism are the traditional religious teachings of Islam. Added is the recitation of litanies from the Qur'an called *ouird* and *dikr*. Connection to Tidjanism is through the intermediary of the religious guide (*muqaddam*) who gives to the disciple (*taleb*) several collections of prayer texts (*wasifa*) and apologetic texts (*dikr*), after which the supplicant is a full member of the brotherhood. This movement established itself as the largest African brotherhood of the 19th and 20th centuries. It

was introduced to Senegal around 1265/1835 by el-Hadj Sheikh Omar Tall (1213–1280/1799–1864) who would be followed by el-Hadj Malick Sy (1271–1340/1855–1922). The latter succeeded in spreading the ideas of the brotherhood and his influence throughout the country. The Tidjaniya Brotherhood now represents more than 51% of Senegalese Muslims. Members of the community meet each year in Senegal's holy city Tivaouane for the commemoration of the Mouloud, the birthday of the Prophet. The Tidjaniya order has spread to Sudan, Ethiopia, the Near East, Albania and Indonesia.