

Orientalist Writings on the History of Algeria: The Writings of the French Orientalist François de Villaret on the History of Djelfa as a Model.

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Abstract:

François de Villaret was born in Angers, western France, in 1913. He joined the White Fathers Institute and was appointed bishop of Carthage, Tunisia. In 1945, he moved to Algeria and settled in Djelfa until 1948, later moving between El Bayadh and Touggourt until the end of the Algerian War of Independence.

De Villaret mastered Arabic, and his primary mission was spreading Christian teachings. After his missionary project failed, he focused on the region's history, relying on French archival documents and writings of French military leaders and translators, especially from the 19th century like Marey-Monge and Arnaud.

His notable work on Djelfa's history, "Siècles de Steppe" (The Steppes Through the Ages), consists of two volumes covering prehistory to French colonization and resistance movements in the 19th century.

Keywords: Djelfa, De Villaret, Steppes, Oulad Nail, Resistance.

1. Introduction

The term “Orientalism” is considered a modern designation, even though its concept has been in circulation for centuries. It refers to the interest and focus on the affairs of the Arab-Islamic East, its cultures, and languages. The word “Orientalism” corresponds to the French term (Orientalisme), which means concern with Eastern issues. An “Orientalist” (ORIENTALIST) has been defined as a European who studies and takes an interest in Eastern studies. (Mokhtari, 2008, p. 1192)

Orientalism has been closely linked to modern colonial movements throughout most of its phases. In this regard, Edward Said defines it as “(a style of discourse supported by institutions, individuals, scholarly research, images, ideologies, and even colonial bureaucracy and colonial methods...)”. (Said, 2006, p. 44) However, what distinguished French Orientalism from others was its strong association with cultural invasion and missionary work. France relied on it to establish its socio-cultural dominance and used it as a key ally throughout all stages of its military expansion¹.

A notable example of a French Orientalist with clear missionary intentions was (François de Villaret), who came to the Djelfa region after mastering Arabic and the local dialect. However, encountering the strong adherence of the local people to their Islamic faith led him to shift his focus toward historical and scientific research. This resulted in his book (Siècles de steppe. Jalons pour l’histoire de Djelfa), which contributed to documenting the history of Djelfa from prehistoric times to the 19th century. He is also credited with discovering numerous archaeological sites and fossils in the region, confirming human presence as far back as 7000 BC. His research immortalized the natural environment of the area through rock engravings depicting extinct trees and animals in the southern slopes of the Saharan Atlas.

¹ For more on French Orientalism in Algeria, refer to: Ben Ibrahim, T. (2004). *French Orientalism and its multiple missions, especially in Algeria*. Dar Al-Manabi’ Publishing and Distribution.

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic, the following problem must be addressed: How did François de Villaret's writings contribute to documenting the ancient and modern history of Djelfa?

2. Milestones in the Life of (François de Villaret)

François de Villaret was born on November 23, 1913 (Voix d'Afrique, n.d.) in (Angers), western France. He grew up in a large family in the mountainous town of (Poissonnière), about 20 km from the city, where he completed his primary education. He later moved to (Sanchir), overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, where he finished his studies and obtained his baccalaureate in mathematics in 1931. He then enrolled at the Sorbonne University in Paris to study literature but dropped out after two years in response to his religious inclinations. In 1933, he joined the Pères Blancs Institute in (Saint-Nazaire), located in the Loire-Atlantique region of western France.

After three years at the Pères Blancs Institute, where he was deeply influenced by Christian missionary thought, he enlisted for mandatory military service in 1926 in (Tours). Upon completing his service, he decided to enroll in the French military academy—fulfilling the wishes of his grandfather, who had been a general during World War I—and graduated as an officer.

At the beginning of the 1940s, François de Villaret embarked on his religious mission after being selected for a missionary delegation supervised by the Pères Blancs Institute, which was heading to Africa. His first stop was Carthage, Tunisia, in 1941. In 1942, he moved to the town of (Thibar) in the Beja region, where he spent four years specializing in priestly education, culminating in taking the vow required to become a monk within the Pères Blancs order.

Due to his military background, he participated in combat alongside the French army during World War II and sustained injuries. After the war, he returned to Tunisia as an instructor for a unit of French soldiers. Later, he abandoned his military career to pursue his missionary and scientific exploration in Algeria, beginning in Djelfa in September 1945. Over the next 17 years, he traveled through Ouargla, El Bayadh, and Touggourt before returning to Djelfa in 1962 as a missionary, biologist, archaeologist, traveler, and historian. He

based much of his research on French archival documents. His journey lasted 43 years until illness and old age forced him to leave the region in 2005, under the orders of the Pères Blancs organization. (de Villaret, 2015, p. 197) He passed away at their residence in (Billère), France, on July 25, 2006.

3. His Social Activities and Archaeological and Historical Contributions in Djelfa

3.2. Social Activities

The primary mission of Father François in the Djelfa region was religious and missionary. He made great efforts to achieve this goal, utilizing various methods he had studied at the Pères Blancs Institute in France and the priestly training center in (Thibar), Tunisia. Among his contributions was assisting in the construction of a vocational training center in the town of Messaad in 1962. (Boukhalal, n.d.) This approach was widely used by missionaries in Algeria. Since society was deprived of formal education, learning a craft became an advantage that allowed individuals to integrate into society and secure a livelihood. Consequently, people rushed to enroll their children in these training centers to acquire manual skills and agricultural techniques. However, missionaries turned these centers into traps to confuse young minds, alienate them from their Arab-Islamic values, and lure them toward Christianity, even fostering moral corruption and deviation. (Hawwasa, 2015, p. 362)

He familiarized himself with the customs and traditions of the region's inhabitants after living among the nomads for years and mastering the local dialect to connect with the minds and hearts of the common people. This was a strategic plan developed by Orientalists since the 19th century, materialized in the 14th Orientalist Congress held in Algeria in 1905, presided over by (R. Basset), one of the leading French Orientalists. It was the only congress held outside Europe in an Arab country in Africa, aiming to reinforce the notion that Algeria was part of France. The congress resulted in several decisions regarding the Algerian dialect, a point emphasized by the Orientalist (E. Doutté), who stated: "We are on the verge of finalizing the legal framework and curricula for the dialect, benefiting from modern

linguistic sciences”. (Doutté, 1905, p. 443) Orientalist efforts primarily sought to undermine Classical Arabic by attempting to fragment it into various dialects, encouraging old Berber languages in the north, and studying the Tuareg dialect in the south, in addition to promoting illiteracy among the indigenous population. (Abdelkader, 1983, p. 80)

François de Villaret also played a role in promoting tourism in Djelfa through the local tourism office, collaborating with educated and interested locals, including (Said Boukhalal, Daloula Belabbas, Hilouf Abdelkader, Hassan Al-Bashir, Massoudi Yahia, etc.). The office significantly contributed to introducing tourists, both domestic and international, to Djelfa’s historical and archaeological sites. He also oversaw the establishment of the municipal museum in the city center, which continues to attract researchers and heritage enthusiasts interested in Djelfa’s history.

Drawing from his Orientalist and religious background, François de Villaret traveled across Djelfa and interacted with various social groups. Many who knew him recounted stories and social incidents that affirmed his missionary project and his patience and perseverance in achieving his goal. Some of these stories include:

He engaged in charitable work to get closer to poor families, traveling across rural areas to provide material assistance. He even contributed to construction projects and well-digging. He adopted the name (Abdelrahman) and dressed in traditional Arab Bedouin attire—particularly the white djellaba, which he was rarely seen without. Many Bedouins admired him for his humility and selfless service, calling him (Abdelrahman Al-Babbasi). However, educated individuals, particularly members of religious zawiyas, recognized his use of charity as a cover for spreading Christianity and dubbed him (The Enemy of Rahman). (Makhlet, n.d.)

Those who lived with him recount that he was devout in his faith but refrained from attacking or criticizing Islam, understanding that it was a red line even for Bedouins. Instead, he sought to present himself as a social alternative for rural populations who had not seen Islamic teachings reflected in their harsh realities. However, he frequently

encountered the unwavering faith of the Bedouins, who were willing to forgo any material assistance if it threatened their religion. One notable incident occurred in the impoverished Ain Ibel area, south of Djelfa. For two months, he provided financial aid to a needy family, only to be surprised when the mother, realizing his intentions, told him: “(You are a generous man who loves the poor, engages in charity, and dedicates much of your time to helping those in need. But one essential thing is missing—you should embrace Islam)”. (Makhlet, n.d.) Despite his disappointment and withdrawal of support from the family, he remained steadfast in his missionary project.

3.3. His Contributions to the Discovery and Documentation of Archaeological Sites

De Villaret did not abandon his missionary project, but he encountered a historical reality: once Islam takes root in people’s hearts and minds, it cannot be eradicated. Consequently, he shifted his focus toward a scientific archaeological project, relying on the studies and efforts of French research teams during the colonial era, as well as archival documents sent to him from France. However, it must be reaffirmed that this man, trained in the institutions of the White Fathers and clerical schools, could not completely abandon his original mission. Instead, he merely changed his approach by entering a field where he could question the human presence in the region and claim that the Arab-Islamic presence in Algeria and Djelfa was just one of many successive human waves, while asserting that the true origins and civilization of the area belonged to ancient humans and the Roman civilization.

Despite the archaeological and historical significance of the work carried out by French archaeologists and researchers in Algeria in general and in Djelfa in particular before (De Villaret) during the 19th and 20th centuries—including figures such as Arnaud, Berbroujer, Suzzon, Reboud, and Charles Picard—these scholars served the French historical school, which aimed to reinforce French colonial rule in Algeria and link the country to Roman civilization as France’s rightful motherland. This is why their focus was on archaeological findings that supported the French colonial project, particularly

Roman ruins, to assert that the Romans were the first discoverers and settlers of these areas and that France had a historical right to inherit these lands as a legitimate successor to the Romans. In this context, one of their historians stated: “The similarities between Roman and French colonialism were very clear, as they learned from the behavior of their ancient ancestors in dealing with recurring challenges.” (Pflaum, 1949, p. 55) Furthermore, some extremists denied the existence of an Islamic civilization in Algeria, such as the French historians (Gauthier) and (Gasell), who agreed that Algeria’s history had periods of enlightenment represented by Roman-Christian history and other forgotten, dark periods—specifically, the era of Arab-Islamic civilization. (Gautier, 1952, p. 19)

Despite the aforementioned points, and in the interest of scientific truth, Father De Villaret made tremendous efforts in researching and excavating archaeological sites throughout the Djelfa region. He traveled long distances for several years to uncover and classify these historical treasures, summarizing his discoveries in the first volume of his book: (*Siècles de steppe. Jalons pour l’histoire de Djelfa*), (*Avant les Ouled Nail*)¹. The first chapter, titled (*Préhistoire*), covered numerous topics related to Djelfa’s archaeological history, including:

- Les pierres taillées (Carved stones)
- Les Débris organiques (Organic remains)
- Les fouilles (Excavations)
- Les gravures rupestres (Rock engravings)
- Les peintures rupestres (Cave paintings)
- Stations préhistoriques des environs de Djelfa (Prehistoric stations around Djelfa). (de Villaret, 1959, pp. 1-15)

In the second chapter, titled (*Le Protohistoire*), he discussed various topics related to ancient history in the region, including:

- Les textes anciennes (Ancient texts)
- Les documents archéologiques (Archaeological documents)

¹ See Appendix No : ...

- La couche archéologique (Archaeological layers)
- Les figurations rupestres (Rock figurations)
- Les monuments funéraires (Funerary monuments). (pp. 19-24)

Among the most notable archaeological sites discovered and documented by De Villaret are:

The Ain Naga Ruins: Located 17 km north of Messaad, these ruins consist of rock engravings that De Villaret referred to as (sculpted nature-themed engravings). Among them is a depiction of a man and a woman known as (The Shy Lovers) at the northern entrance of Ain Naga village, as well as two large ancient buffalo (deux Buffles antiques), a depiction of a goat with a circular ornament on its head, and a wall engraving of a large elephant... ¹.

The Hasbaya Ruins: Initially discovered by the French during their military campaign in the 1850s, these ruins were rediscovered and classified by De Villaret in 1964. He categorized them as medium-sized Mediterranean-style engravings, featuring depictions of elephants, lions, ostriches, various hare species, and human figures.

The Hajarat Sidi Boubakr Ruins: Discovered by De Villaret in 1965 near Messaad, these simple rock engravings include a ram with a spherical shape above its head and, to its right, a ewe.

The Khanq al-Hilal Ruins: Found by De Villaret in 1965 near Ain Ibel, these ruins contain numerous rock engravings, including depictions of a bull, a ram, and a lion.

The Amoura Ruins: Located in the southeastern highlands of Mount Boukhel, these engravings, discovered by De Villaret in 1965, appear in a single site as rock carvings depicting two elephants.

De Villaret noted that during the prehistoric period, there were approximately 50 rock engraving stations around Djelfa. The areas he identified include: Z'kar, Khanq al-Hilal, Thniyat Boumidouna, Thniyat al-Mzab, Dhayat Jaqlil, Al-Marhama, Safiyat al-Baroud, Jebel al-Doum, Al-Maghara, Hajarat Sidi Boubakr, Al-Haywi, Al-Qila al-Bayda, Dhayat al-Satl, Oued Boudeib, Safiyat Bouran, Qarqar, Al-

¹ For more on Ain Naga ruins, see : Grebenhart, D. (1969). Ain Naga: Capsien et Néolithique des environs de Messad. *Revue Libyca*.

Idrissiya, Fayjat al-Laban, Atf al-Gherbal, Bouskin, Ras al-Ahmar, Ain Naga, Oued Messaad, Amoura, Ma'dhir Amara, Hasbaya, Al-Rawakib, and Oued al-Rumailiya... (de Villaret, 1959, pp. 56-59)

3.4. His Contribution to the Writing of the Region's History

In the field of historical writing, De Villaret chronicled numerous historical events of Djelfa in the third chapter of his book ("Siècles de steppe, Jalons pour l'histoire de Djelfa"), ("Avant les Ouled Nail"), relying on sources, references, and archival documents from France. Some of the key sources he cited in his work include Ibn Khaldun, Al-Masoudi, Mohamed Abu Ras Al-Nasiri, Al-Ayachi, Imam Masoudi Atiya, Arnaud, Thomas Shaw, Marey-Monge, Mangin, Federmann, Du Barraill, General Yusuf, and the "Archives d'Aix-en-Provence". (de Villaret, pp. 133-136)

He began his historical account with the Roman presence in the region, which dates back to the 2nd century AD, mentioning the fortifications built by the Romans, including the "Limes"¹.

De Villaret concluded his discussion of the Roman presence by referencing the Roman fortress "Castellum Dimmidi", founded in 198 AD by the Roman commander Flavius Superus, confirming the existence of other Roman ruins throughout Djelfa. (de Villaret, pp. 34-39)

In the fourth chapter of his historical study, titled "The Berber Presence," he explored the meaning of the term "Berber," the Berber populations of the region, and their way of life, focusing on two major Berber tribes: "Zenata" and "Maghrawa."

In the fifth chapter, he discussed the Banu Hilal tribes that arrived in the region in the 11th century, along with some popular legends passed down about them. (de Villaret, pp. 50-54) He concluded the

¹ The "Limes" was a Roman military defense system consisting of trenches, walls, towers, forts, and a network of roads interspersed with military outposts to facilitate surveillance and reinforcements. Its primary objective was to limit the movement of nomadic tribes, ensure Roman military mobility to suppress rebellions, and facilitate trade exchanges between the south and north. The Roman ruler Severus carried out extensive restoration of roads and fortresses to maintain Roman dominance. For more details, see : Lampridius, A. (1925). *Vie d'Alexandre Severe, Études critiques sur La vie et le règne de Sévère Alexandre* (Vol. 16, pp. 1-2). De Boccard. pp. 24-25.

first volume of his book with a chapter titled “Arsh Al-Sahari,” in which he examined their origins, branches, and the three stages they underwent: emergence, prosperity, and decline.

The Second Volume of “Siècles de steppe (Les Ouled Nail)”

This volume is one of the most significant references on the history of Djelfa, covering the period from the arrival of Sidi Nail in the region to the 19th century and the resistance movements against French occupation. De Villaret divided this volume into five chapters:

- Chapter One : Sidi Nail¹

De Villaret traced Sidi Nail’s ancestry to Fatima Al-Zahra and covered the genealogical tree and narratives surrounding his lineage. (Ben El-Haddar, n.d., p. 38)

- Chapter Two: Ouled Nail

He discussed the origins of the Ouled Nail tribe and the differing accounts of their lineage, favoring the argument that they have noble ancestry. He also detailed their settlement across Djelfa, M’Sila, and Biskra, where they divided into five branches: Malik, Issa, Zakaria, Yahia, and Faraj.

- Chapter Three: The Ottoman Era

He referenced the “Beylik of Titteri”, noting that until 1725, the authority of the Algerian Regency did not extend beyond “Bougzoul”. However, this did not prevent the Ouled Nail from traveling north to obtain grain or the Ottoman military (“Mahalla”) from penetrating southward to impose control and collect taxes. Turkish influence only fully reached Djelfa at the end of the 18th century after prolonged struggles with the Ouled Nail. (de Villaret, pp. 102-107)

- Chapter Four: With Emir Abdelkader

This chapter began with Sheikh Moussa Al-Darqawi’s resistance (1833-1849), who rallied supporters from Messaad, Idrissia, and El-

¹ Mohamed bin Abdullah bin Ahmed bin Abdullah bin Abdul Wahid bin Abdul Karim bin Omar bin Mohamed bin Ali bin Abdul Salam bin Mashish, whose lineage traces back to Al-Hasan Al-Sibt, son of Ali ibn Abi Talib and Fatima Al-Zahra, daughter of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). His origins are from Morocco, and his 18th grandfather was Idris I, founder of the Idrisid dynasty, who fled from Abbasid Caliph Abu Ja'far Al-Mansur. For more on Sidi Nail's life and lineage, see: Hashlaf, A. A. (1929). *Silsilat Al-Usul fi Shajarat Abna' Al-Rasul*. Tunisian Press.

Sharif. It detailed how the Ouled Nail pledged allegiance to Emir Abdelkader at Karmounia in 1836, led by Abdel Salam bin Lakandouz, who later ceded command to his brother Sharif Belharsh to serve as Emir Abdelkader's deputy among the Ouled Nail. The chapter also examined the challenging years of 1846-1847, when the people of Djelfa (whom De Villaret refers to as Ouled Nail) stood with Emir Abdelkader, led by Sharif Belharsh and Tali Belkhel¹.

De Villaret also documented the French military campaigns against the Ouled Nail, known as "military columns," including General Marey-Monge's first campaign on 24/11/1845 and his second on 20/01/1847, as well as General Yusuf's campaign on 16/03/1846².

- Chapter Five: Under French Domination

Covering the period from 1848-1874, De Villaret analyzed how France imposed its control over the Ouled Nail through military force and the local resistances that arose, such as the 1852 rebellion of Ouled Taaiba and the 1854 uprising of Ouled Amlekhoua³. He also examined the oppressive policies of General Yusuf and the establishment of Djelfa's military fortress on 02/04/1861, which later became the foundation of the modern city of Djelfa.

4. Conclusion

François De Villaret pursued two objectives: a religious mission to spread Christianity in Djelfa and a scholarly mission to study its archaeology and history. While his missionary efforts ultimately failed, his scientific contributions left a valuable legacy, particularly in archaeology, where he discovered 137 sites, three of which are now

¹ See the map of Emir Abdelkader's military movements in Djelfa in 1846, drawn by De Villaret in "Siècles de steppe", Vol. 2 (Appendix No. 3).

² General Yusuf (1808-1866) was raised in the "Bey's Palace" in Tunisia. His origins remain unknown, hence the nickname "Yusuf the Foundling." He mastered Arabic and later moved to Algeria, adopting local customs and gaining insight into Algerian society. He committed atrocities against Algerians in Djurdjura, Djelfa, and Laghouat. For further details, see: Ibn Attou Belirouat: "The French Occupation of Laghouat and its Surroundings in 1852 and its Crimes", Belirouat, I. A. (2012). The French occupation of Laghouat and its surroundings in 1852 and its crimes. *Asrour Jadida Journal*, 6, 52.

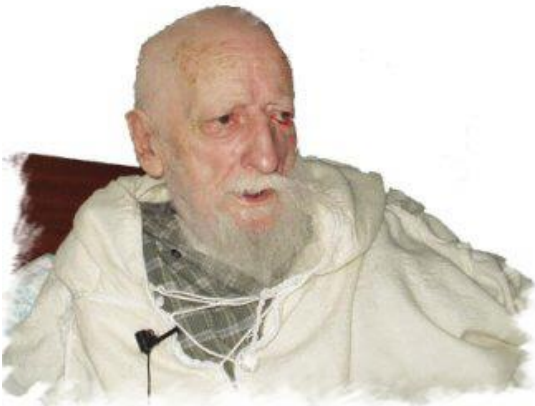
³ See the map of these tribes' movements in Appendix No. 4.

globally recognized. Despite his ideological background, his book remains a significant scholarly contribution to Djelfa's history.

Appendices

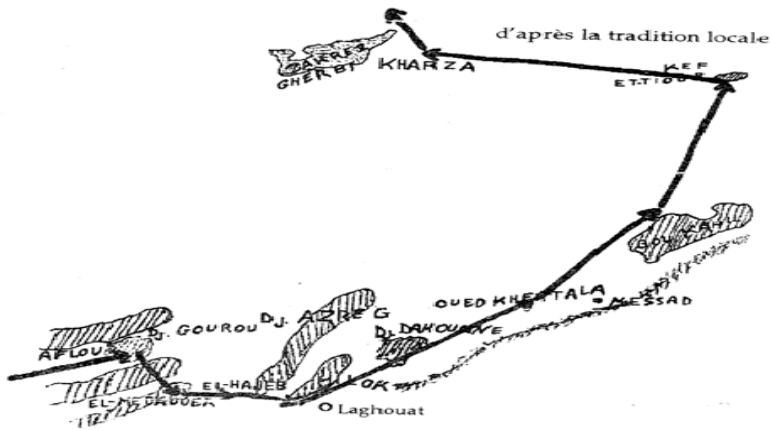


Appendix n 01: A picture of Francois De Villaret in 1962.



Appendix n 02: A picture of François De Villaret in his last days in Djelfa.

Planche XXVIII: PREMIÈRE VENUE DE L'ÉMIR ABDELKADER (1837)

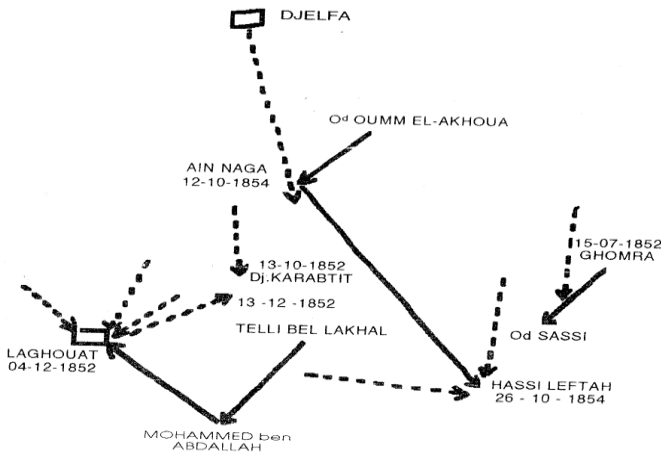


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Appendix n 04: A map of the movement of Ouled Nail horsemen with the Emir (1845/1846).

Pl. XXXI: COMBATS POUR MOHAMMED ben ABDALLAH (cherif de Ouargla)

Mouvements des Français -----
 Mouvements des Algériens ————



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Appendix n 05: A map by De Villaret showing the battles of the people of the Djelfa region against the enemy and their movement to resist the Sharif of Ouargla, Mohammed Ben Abdallah (1852/1854).

TEXTES DE DOCUMENTATION SAHARIENNE

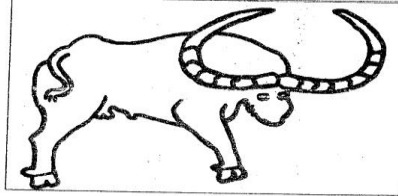
N° 3/A

François de VILLARET

SIÈCLES DE STEPPE

Jalons pour l'histoire
de
DJELFA

Première Partie: Avant les Oulad Naïl
Deuxième Partie :Les Ouledes Nail



édition hors commerce pro manuscrito.

CENTRE DE DOCUMENTATION SAHARIENNE
GHARDAÏA (Algérie)

- 1995 -

Appendix n 06: Book Cover: The Steppes Through the Ages.

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