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THE BORDER CITY OF TÉBESSA: HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS AND CRITICAL REFLECTION

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ABSTRACT

This research engages in a thorough reflection on the city of Tébessa, a city located at the edges of its national territory and marked by a peripheral position, both geographically and symbolically. This reflection is centered around two fundamental and interdependent spatial concepts: "the city" and "the border." The main objective of this study is to examine the historical and contemporary interactions between these two dimensions, focusing on two key aspects: Tébessa's geographical position as a border city and the organization of its road network.

The analysis highlights the impact of the historical transformation of the border on the structure and function of the city. In the past, the border had a "zonal" and shifting form, allowing the ancient Theveste to play a central role in cross-border exchanges and interactions. In this context, the city served as a strategic hub, driven by economic, cultural, and social flows. However, with the evolution of borders into a "linear" and fixed form, Tébessa gradually lost its dynamic position, becoming a marginalized city, isolated and self-contained.

This transition not only affected Tébessa's identity and development but also reshaped its role in the regional space. Nevertheless, the border should not be seen solely as a constraint; it also represents a strategic opportunity. Indeed, Tébessa's border position could be reinvested to make it a hub for development and cross-border exchanges. With proper planning, the city could reinvent itself as a "transborder metropolis," capable of leveraging its geographical location to enhance its attractiveness, competitiveness, and integration into regional dynamics.

Thus, this study emphasizes that the border is not only a line of separation but also a space of potentialities. It can be viewed as a lever to reposition Tébessa with a forward-looking perspective, fostering a synergy between its historical heritage, economic dynamism, and strategic role in cross-border exchanges.

KEYWORDS

Border City, Road Networks, City-Border Interaction, Territorial Attractiveness, Transborder Metropolis, Tébessa

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1. Introduction

Border cities in Algeria, often marginalized in public policies and academic studies, are perceived as transitional spaces limited to passage functions. The city of Tébessa, located in the far east of the country and in close proximity to the Algerian-Tunisian border, exemplifies this issue. It stands out with a dual status: a product of a complex historical heritage (ancient, pre-colonial, and colonial) and a strategic space connecting the North to the South and the East to the West.

Historically, the ancient city of Theveste occupied a peripheral and shifting position, functioning as a strategic frontier contested by various civilizations. After decolonization, this dynamic diminished, reducing the city to a mere transit corridor. Geographically, its distance from the national center reinforces its eccentric character, while its proximity to Tunisia, on a 297 km-long border, makes it both an entry and exit point for the country, but also a place exposed to the asymmetries and imbalances typical of border spaces.

Thus, Tébessa illustrates the contradictions inherent in its border position, being both a strategic asset and a factor of imbalance. This text explores this duality by analyzing the relationship between the city and the border through two axes: Tébessa's border position and its road networks. A systematic and historical approach reveals that the border, far from being just an obstacle, can also serve as an opportunity to stimulate development and redefine Tébessa's role as a dynamic transborder space.

2. Methodology

Border cities, although undergoing profound contemporary transformations, remain complex and underexplored subjects of study. They are defined as cities located near a state border, characterized by functional and institutional relationships with their counterparts in neighboring countries, yet often hindered in their development by the border itself, which serves as a major spatial and socio-economic obstacle.

According to the group "Frontière" in their work *Cities and Borders*, analyzing the interactions between the city and the border requires an understanding of the nature of the border and the role attributed to it by societies and politics. This group highlights the complexity of the relationship between these two concepts, marked by dialectical relations: obstacle and passage, control and exchange, inclusion and exclusion. These ambiguities influence the spatial forms and dynamics generated by both the city and the border.

In this context, the study of the city of Tébessa and its relationship to the Algerian-Tunisian border fits within this issue. Two key themes emerge as analytical axes to explore this relationship and its specific dynamics.

Origins and Evolutions of the Border

The concept of a border, embedded in the history of border cities, is a complex and evolving one. According to La Pradelle (1927), its current meaning is deeply rooted in its historical origins, requiring a return to its sources to fully understand its richness and diversity. Michel Foucher, in *Front et frontière*, highlights the importance of the processes of border production, or "horogenesis," by tracing their genesis back to Antiquity. He illustrates this evolution through the Roman limes, which, although seemingly linear, often functioned as an interface of contact between Roman civilization and the outside world. Thus, borders were more dynamic zones of interaction than rigid lines of separation.

This ambivalence between "border line" and "border zone" is a key element in understanding borders. The linear border, defined as a fixed vertical plane, contrasts with the zonal border, perceived as a horizontal space that is mobile and fluctuates over time and space. Jean Gottmann specifies that, although a border is legally defined as a line, it is, in reality, a zone of complex interactions, marked by specific legal regimes, no man's lands, and local issues tied to its dual function of separation and contact.

This fundamental duality reveals that the border space is never univocal. It reflects a constant tension between separation and exchange, making the border both an obstacle and an opportunity in socio-economic and geopolitical relations.

Functions and Impacts of the Border on the City

The border goes beyond its simple function as a line of separation and becomes an instrument influenced by socio-political and economic conditions, creating or destroying living environments without any predefined intention. According to the theories of C. Raffestin (1974-1992) and the Border Group (2004), it performs four main functions: it creates territorial distances (Arbaret-Schultz, 2002), controls flows through filtering, affirms political power by structuring territories, and defines material and symbolic belonging to a space. Moreover, the border has lasting effects on the organization of space, creating a border fringe where the influences of the border are particularly marked, as explained by O. Dollfus (1972).

How can the presence of the border, through its roles and effects, either promote or hinder the development of a border city, considering that this city largely depends on the border for its activities and existence?

The goal of this research is to examine the impact of the border on border cities, highlighting both the positive and negative dynamics it can generate. Building on the analyses of Guichonnet and Raffestin, the study seeks to evaluate how some cities, like Tébessa, have managed to turn the border into a development lever, while others struggle to overcome the constraints it imposes. The interpretation of Tébessa's road network is used as an indicator to analyze the effects of the border on the configuration of circulation axes and, more broadly, on urban development, oscillating between constraint and opportunity.

3. Results

This research explores the antiquity and specificities of the Algerian-Tunisian borders, particularly in the Tébessa region. Unlike other geographical borders, these boundaries do not follow natural landscapes or cultural differences but result from historical agreements between tribes, influenced by political and temporal considerations. Camille Lefebvre emphasizes the importance of long-term historical analysis to understand their evolution. Three major periods are identified as key to explaining the current layout of these borders.

3.1. Evolution of the Border Throughout History

3.1.1. The Ancient Period: Indistinct Boundaries (Mainly Transition Zones)

The current border between Algeria and Tunisia has a multi-century historical origin, predating the arrival of the Turks in the 16th century. Yves Lacoste shows that it successively coincided with the eastern limits of Carthaginian, Roman, Byzantine influences, followed by Muslim states such as the Aghlabids, Fatimids, Zirids, and Hammadids, before being incorporated into the Hafsid state. Historically, this border functioned more as a vast transition zone rather than a fixed linear boundary, fluctuating according to political, tribal, and socio-economic dynamics. This imprecision reflects a boundary between civilizations and an evolving socio-spatial organization (Monchicourt, 1938).

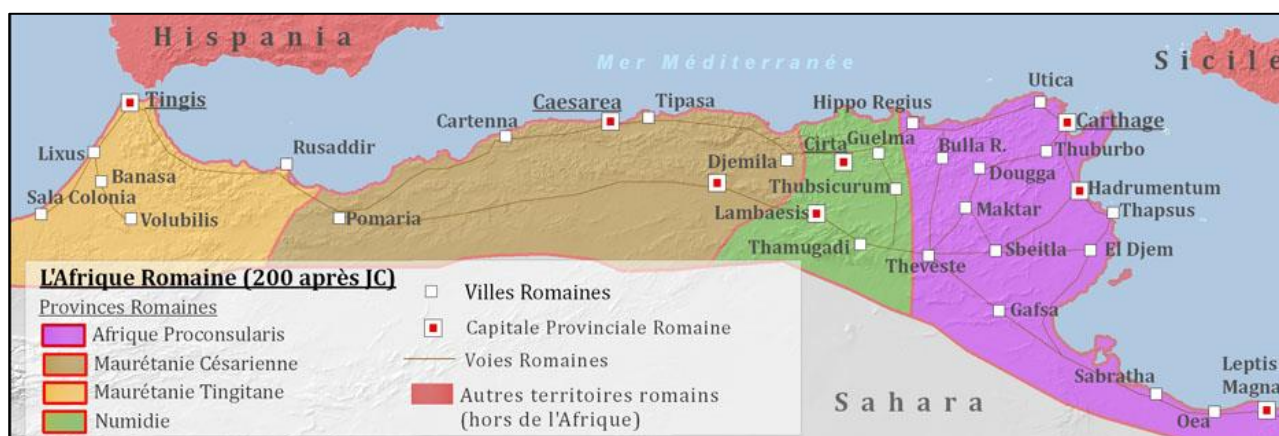


Fig. 1. Theveste in relation to the Roman frontiers
Source: <http://explorethemed.com/RomeAfricaFr.asp#2>

3.1.2. The Pre-Colonial Era (1574-1830): Emergence of the Linear Border under the Ottoman Empire

Under the Ottoman Empire, the separation between the Algerian and Tunisian regencies marks the introduction of the concept of a linear border, in contrast to the previous concept of a zonal boundary. This shift from a vague boundary to a precise delineation was driven by the Turkish authorities' desire to establish a clear demarcation. The Treaty of Es Settara in 1628 formalized this boundary, initially accepted in 1614, but it remained limited in its extent.

The lack of an expanded demarcation led to local conflicts, particularly revolts by the affected tribes, such as the Frachich and the Nemaemcha, who sought to preserve their traditional territories. These tensions culminated in a revision of the border in 1807 under Bey Hamouda, shifting the boundary further west, approximately along the current line. Thus, this period illustrates the difficult and conflict-ridden transition from a traditional conception of borders to a modern political delimitation.

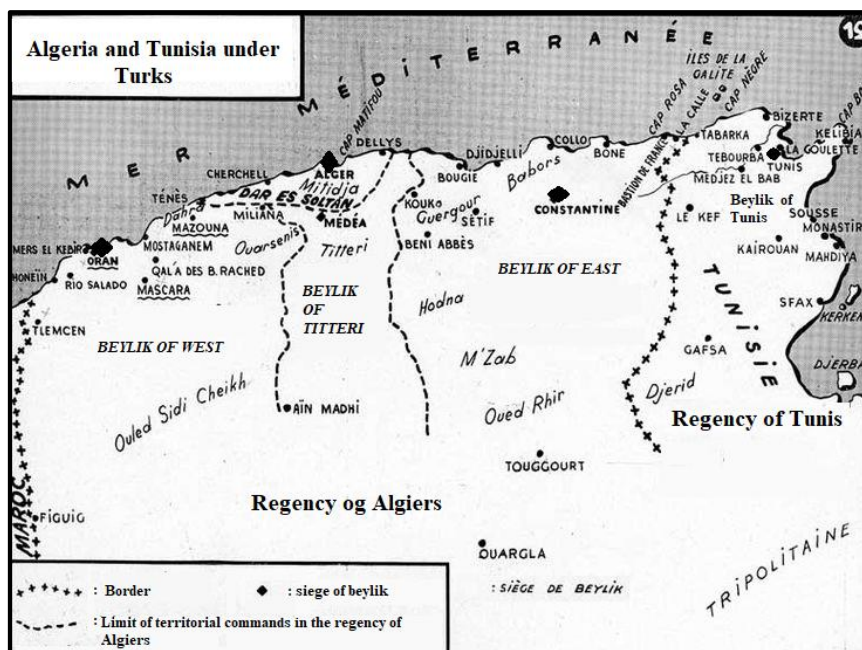


Fig. 2. Division under Turkish rule

Source: https://jeanyvesthorrignac.fr/wa_files/info_588_beni_slimane.pdf

3.1.3. The Colonial Era: Stabilization of the Demarcated Borders

The French conquest of Algeria in 1830 marked the need to precisely delineate the border between the regencies of Algiers and Tunis, which had previously been defined vaguely under the Ottoman Empire. The French authorities introduced the concept of a "line border," in line with their territorial conception, relying on dialogue, force, and advancements in cartography. As early as 1835, negotiations began with the Bey of Tunis, leading to the establishment of an initial boundary between Kef and Hammam in 1852, which was consolidated through topographic and cartographic work until 1857. After the establishment of the French protectorate in Tunisia in 1881, the border was officially fixed in 1901, transforming this demarcation into an administrative and later international border. This process marked the transition from a vague boundary to a clearly defined and materialized legal and political separation.

3.2. Theveste: A Historic Border March

The evolution of the city of Tébessa can be studied through a chronological approach, highlighting the key periods that have shaped it from antiquity to the 20th century. This analysis reveals two major aspects: on the one hand, Tébessa's status as a border city is the result of its history, and on the other hand, historical conditions have contributed to its peripheral positioning within its region.

3.2.1. Roman Theveste: A Crossroads City

From the 3rd century BC, Theveste, under Carthaginian control, became a strategic commercial and military hub in Numidia, thanks to its location at the crossroads of routes linking Madaure and Cirta (Numidia) to central Tunisia and the small Syrte (Carthage). During Roman occupation (25 BC to 430 AD), the shift of the frontier further west incorporated Theveste into Proconsular Africa, which included modern Tunisia and parts of eastern Algeria. In the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, Theveste became the most prosperous city in Roman Africa after Carthage, due to its strategic position at the foot of the Aurès Mountains, at the crossroads of eight major roads, and its role as a trading hub for regional commerce.

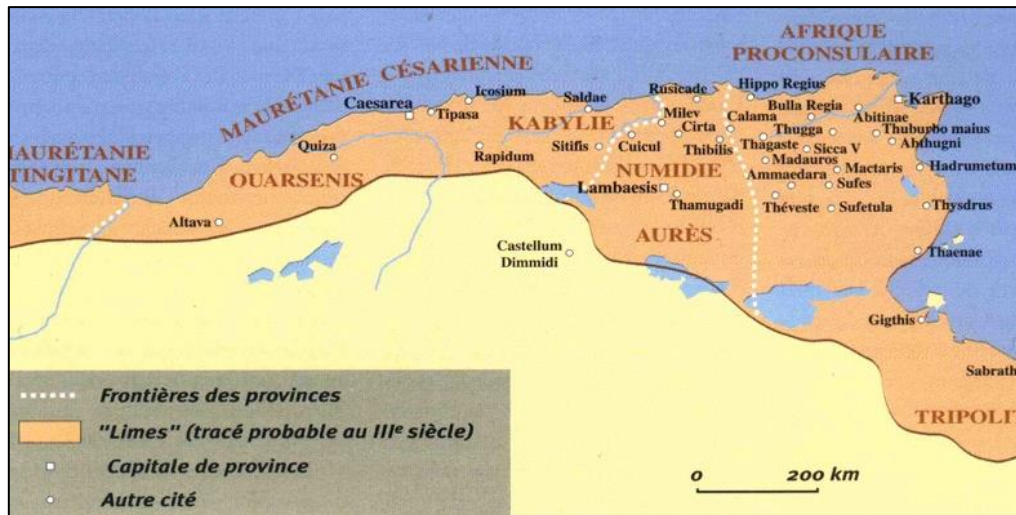


Fig. 3. Theveste in relation to the Roman frontiers
 Source: <https://jahiliyyah.wordpress.com/tag/africa-proconsularis>

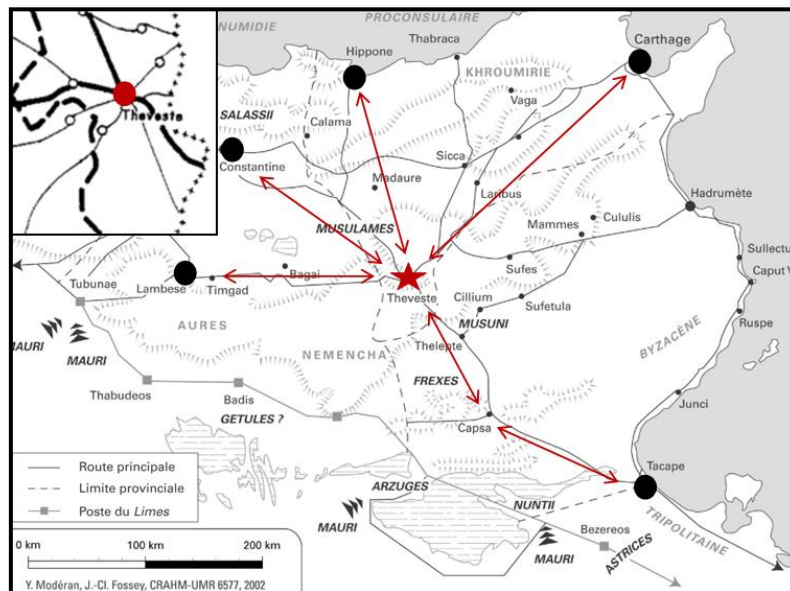


Fig. 4. Situation of Theveste in relation to its road network
 Source: <http://books.openedition.org/efr/docannexe/image/1423/img-1.jpg>

Theveste was a strategic city and a true crossroads during the Roman Empire, where the main Roman roads from southern Numidia and southwest Byzacena converged, with the "Carthage-Theveste-Lambèse" axis being the most frequented. This axis connected the administrative capital, Carthage, to the military headquarters at Lambèse, facilitating the transport of goods, harvests, and products to Carthage and beyond. The dense road network of Theveste connected it to major cities such as Cirta, Thysdrum, and Gabès, while also acting as a transit point between the Roman world and tribal regions. The Roman frontier was thus a zone of transition and trade, rather than a fixed and clear line, fostering regular relations between border cities, as evidenced by the star-shaped organization of roads emanating from Theveste. This configuration allowed for continuous exchanges between neighboring regions, making the frontier more of a contact zone than a mere separation.

3.2.2. Byzantine Theveste: A Fortified City

In the 6th century, during the Byzantine reconquest of Africa, Theveste, which had been devastated by the Moors, was fortified to ensure its defense. Under the reign of Solomon (535-538 AD), a first wall was erected around the Roman core of the city, with secondary defense posts. After Solomon's death, a lasting

peace allowed the construction of a second Byzantine wall. This wall was part of a border defense system and had three main gates: the Caracalla Gate, the Ain Challa Gate, and the Solomon Gate. The absence of a gate to the west was due to the city's orientation towards the Tunisian shore, which was the primary supply point.

Despite the construction of this wall, the Byzantine city remained integrated into the Roman structure, with a similar road system and an urban organization based on the *Cardo* and *Decumanus* axes. The wall, far from being a mere physical separation, was a protective tool against external threats, notably the Vandals and the Berbers. However, it did not constitute a clear linear border but rather a zone of transition, a "fuzzy and zonal boundary," marking both a spatial and temporal separation, reflecting the city's evolution and its military and defensive roles over time.

3.2.3. From the Arab Conquest to the Ottoman Occupation

Tébessa, the ancient Roman *Theveste*, became a city influenced by successive Muslim dynasties (Aghlabids, Fatimids, Zirids, Hammadids, Almohads, Hafsids), which had a lasting impact on its development. Throughout these periods, the city occupied a peripheral position, with shifting and imprecise borders, more characterized by a "border zone" than a "border line." These boundaries reflected more the local tribal practices than decisions made by a centralized power.

Under the Muslims, the orientation of roads and routes was altered to follow an East-West direction, connecting the Middle East to central Maghreb, in contrast to the South-North direction favored by the Romans. Tébessa thus played a key role as a "transit city" between these two worlds, due to its strategic location on trade routes connecting the Middle East to sub-Saharan Africa, notably for gold trade.

The arrival of the Turks in the 15th century, and more specifically in 1573, marked a turning point with the establishment of the Turkish Regency of Algiers, making Tébessa a peripheral city to this new linear border. The Turks contributed to the transition from zonal to linear borders, though they left no lasting impact on the region's road network. As a result, while the city continued to use old routes, Tébessa asserted itself as a "land of passage" during the Muslim and Ottoman periods, far from the importance it had held under the Romans and Byzantines.

4. Discussion

4.1. Tébessa during the Colonial Period: A Prominent Border City

Under French colonization, Tébessa acquired the status of a border city, marked by a transformation of the border from a "zone boundary" to a "line boundary." This new geographical, political, social, and military demarcation created a clear separation between Algeria and Tunisia, leading to the loss of half of Tébessa's regional influence and a decrease in its strategic role.

The organization of the regional road network then centered on two axes: a South-North axis (Tébessa-Annaba) to transport agricultural and mining products to the port of Annaba, and an East-West axis (Tébessa-Constantine), which connected Tébessa to Constantine but stopped at the border, limiting contact with Tunisia. The French established border posts to control and defend the region but avoided creating new roadways crossing the border, maintaining the old routes.

In 1956, France reinforced the border with an electrified and mined line, modernizing the fortifications. This layout caused disruptions and slowdowns in traffic at the intersection of roads and the border, in line with Raffestin's idea that borders often imposed a doubling of communication routes.

The border between Algeria and Tunisia, under French colonization, had a negative effect by acting as a barrier, creating a physical and political separation between the two territories. However, despite this barrier effect, Tébessa continued to develop. The city expanded beyond the Byzantine walls while preserving the Roman organization around the *Cardo* and *Decumanus* axes. To support this growth, the French opened a fourth modern gate, the Constantine Gate, oriented toward Algeria, facilitating circulation and urban expansion. They also developed commercial facilities near Solomon's Gate. Despite the border, this growth was not hindered, and the city of Tébessa managed to adapt to its environment while continuing to thrive.

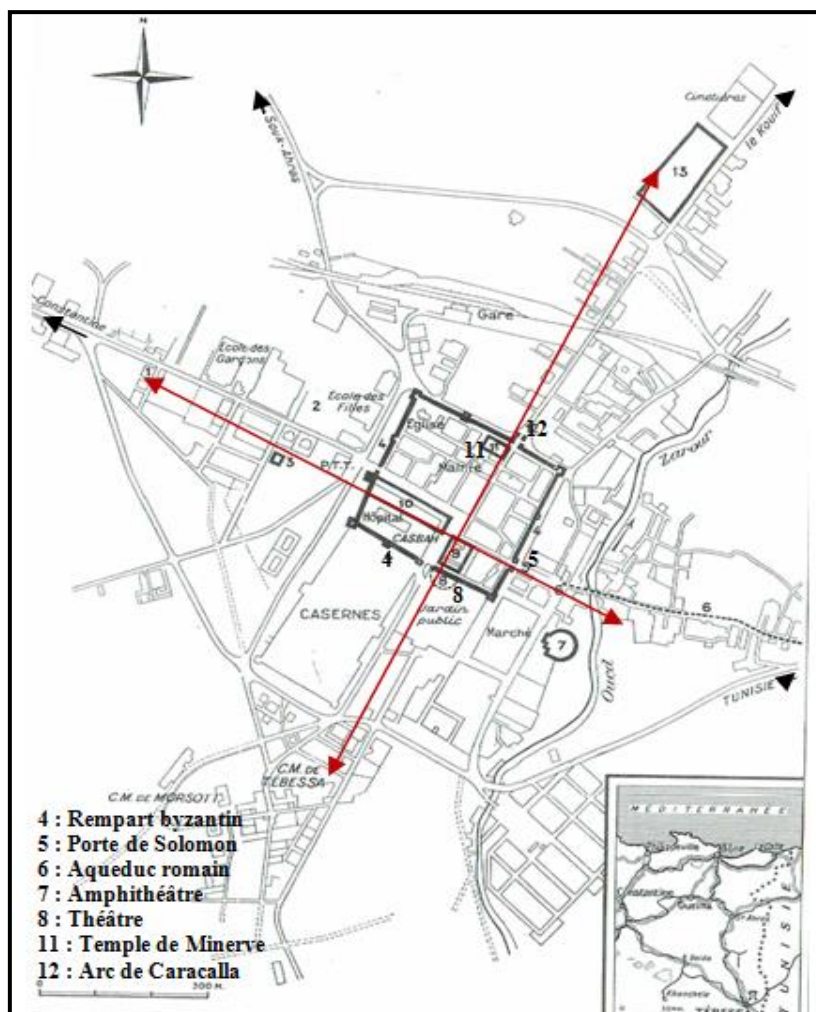


Fig. 5. City plan of Tébessa in 1952
 Source: Roger Leonard, 1952

4.2. Tébessa Today: A City Facing Its Border

Today, Tébessa is one of the largest border wilayas in Algeria, with a population of 648,703 inhabitants. The city is structured around two main road axes inherited from the colonial period: the road parallel to the border (R.N 16) and the transversal axis (R.N 10) which connects the city to other regions of the country and Tunisia. Unlike the colonial era, urban growth has primarily moved towards the North, South, and West, while the Eastern area remains static. This evolution shows that Tébessa has distanced itself from the border and is increasingly connecting with major cities such as Annaba and Constantine.

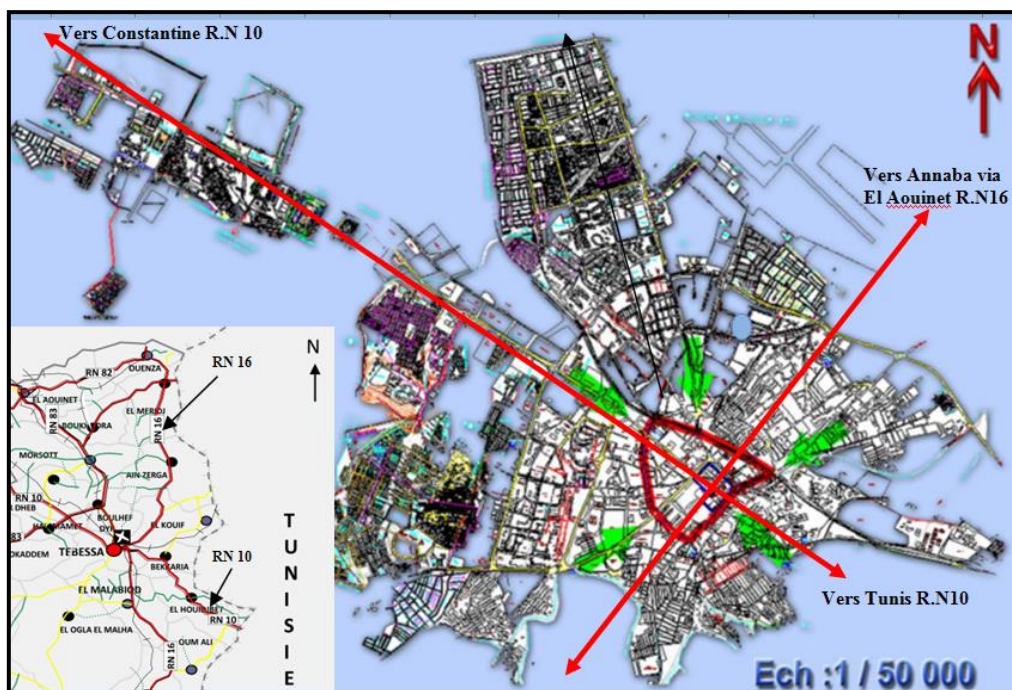


Fig. 6. The city of Tébessa and its road network
Source: L. Gharzouli, 2015

Despite its distance from the national center, Tébessa remains a key location for the transportation of goods, primarily through illicit cross-border trade and smuggling between Algeria and Tunisia. This activity relies on transborder familial and tribal networks. Although the border is reinforced with customs controls, it remains a crucial passage for these traders. The border thus has a dual effect on the city: positive in facilitating the flow of goods, and negative in fostering illegal trafficking, particularly along former Roman roads.

5. Conclusion

The city of Tébessa embodies a fascinating dynamic through its history, where the border, while sometimes constraining it, has also shaped its trajectory and identity. Initially a strategic crossroads under the Romans and Byzantines, the city later experienced phases of retreat and marginalization, particularly during the French colonization, when its geographic location relegated it to a peripheral position, far from decision-making centers. This marginalization, while weakening its regional role, did not erase the traces of its past as a meeting point of various cultures and influences.

Over the centuries, the border, initially a fluid and shifting "zone," has solidified and materialized into a clear line, marking a sharp division not only between states but also in the function of the city. The evolution of this border, from a buffer zone to a dividing line, transformed Tébessa from a transit point to a space of defense and control. This redefined its role but paradoxically also opened the door to new opportunities.

Today, although Tébessa maintains an excentric position, its geographical location at the border could prove to be a real asset. As a junction point between Algeria and Tunisia, Tébessa could reinvent itself as a strategic hub for trade, cross-border cooperation, and economic development. The border, although more clearly marked, is no longer necessarily an obstacle but can become a gateway to new opportunities, particularly in the areas of international trade, cultural exchanges, and regional cooperation.

As illustrated by the concept of the "transborder metropolis" proposed by Christiane Arbaret-Schulz, the city could position itself as a modern crossroads between Algeria, the Maghreb, and the rest of the world. This could lead to an economic revival based on the integration of border areas and strengthening connectivity between different regions of the area. By reorienting its dynamics around its role in globalization and leveraging its border position, Tébessa could become a center for sustainable development, both economically and culturally, and play a key role in redefining borders as zones of opportunity rather than division. This territorial reorganization would offer Tébessa a chance to rewrite its history as a city carrying new ambitions, regional cohesion, and international integration.

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