

A photograph of a desert landscape at sunset. In the background, a large, ancient stone fortress with a prominent tower stands on a hill. The sky is a warm, golden-orange color. In the foreground, there are several palm trees and some low-lying desert vegetation. The overall scene is quiet and evocative of a bygone era.

EMPIRES OF EMPTINESS

Fortresses of the Sahara and the Steppe

EMPIRES OF EMPTINESS: THE INTELLECTUAL PROJECT

How do empires expand into deserts? These spaces of apparently limited value have presented conquering powers with significant logistical and tactical challenges due to their sheer size, their geography, their aridity and the valiant warriors whom they often sheltered. Despite these difficulties, desert conquests have often mobilised sizeable resources from some of the world's most powerful empires, such as the British, the French and the Russian.

A new international research project sheds light upon this little-known, yet decisive, aspect of European imperialisms in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It explores strategies of colonial conquest and administration in arid environments through one of the most symbolically charged expressions of imperial control: the Russian fortifications in the Central Asian steppe and the vast network of French forts built in an attempt to control the Sahara desert.

Looking at both the 'high politics' reflected by the development of fortress lines across empty spaces (which often implied decisions by Czars or ministers) and the more practical aspects of desert fortifications (construction, everyday life, relationship with local populations), *Empires of Emptiness* reveals the fascinating untold story of desert conquests.

It is both a visual and a historical journey through time and space. High-impact photography, in particular from the world-renowned archive of multiple award-winning photographer Alain Sèbe, shows vividly the 'nature' of the Sahara and the steppe, which is essential to understanding the strategic and logistical challenges which desert fortresses were supposed to help overcome. New forays into archival material in France and Russia, by the project's investigators Prof. Alexander Morrison and Dr Berny Sèbe, provide a unique insights into decision-making processes, as well as the practicalities of building fortresses in deserts.

At a time when the Sahara is becoming a theatre of war again, and as fortresses are being built by international forces in their attempt to repel jihadist fighters, this project is a timely reminder of the challenges posed by any attempt to guard these spaces of winds, sand and stars.

Empires of Emptiness stems from the 'Outpost of Conquest' project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of England.

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Co-investigator: Prof. Alexander Morrison, Professor of History, Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan

Photographs: Dr Berny Sèbe and Alain Sèbe (unless otherwise stated).

More information: www.birmingham.ac.uk/empires

FORTRESSES IN THE STEPPE

















The site of Fort Raim, where the first Russian fortress in present-day Kazakhstan was built in 1847, as seen on a watercolour by Ukrainian poet and artist Taras Shevshenko in 1848 (left) and in 2012 (right).



The mausoleum of Khoja Akhmet Yassawi in Turkestan, as it was seen in Russian times (left, from A. L. Kun (ed.), *Turkestanskii al'bom* (1871), part 2, vol. 2, pl. 53, No. 135) and in 2012.

FORTRESSES IN THE SAHARA











Photo Yacine Ketfi



Photo Yacine Ketfi



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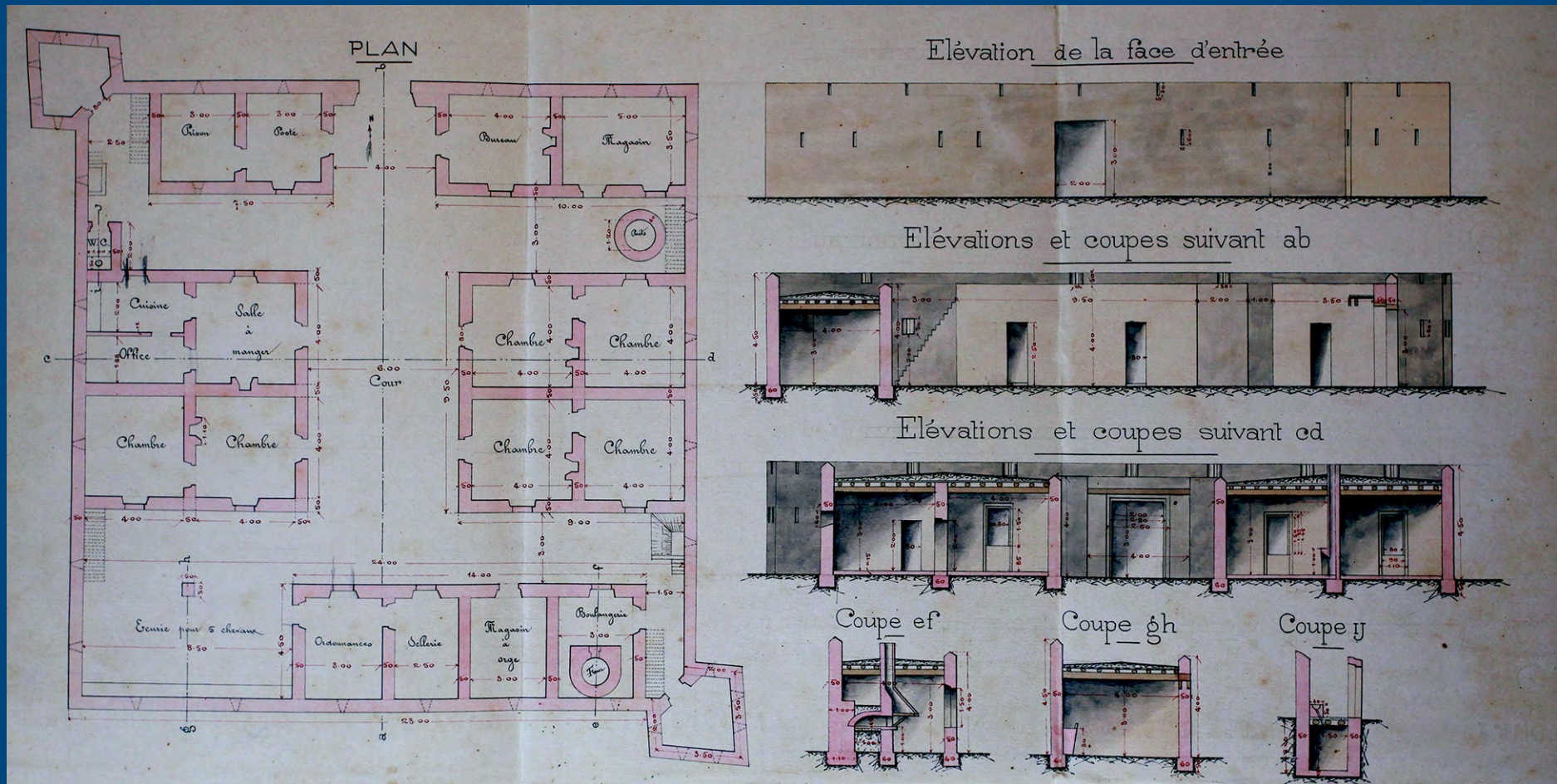




The Desert of the Tartars:
the view from Bordj Erfoud Sud, towards the rest of the fortress (left)
and towards the desert (right).



The fortress of El Meniaa seen from the air in 1972 (left), and as it appeared on a French administrative document in the late 1920s (French Overseas Archives, Augieras-Draper papers).



Plans for the major fortress of Béni-Abbès (Archives nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, 22H55).

EMPIRES OF EMPTINESS

Fortresses of the Sahara & the Steppe

CIRCULATING EXHIBITION

EMPIRES OF EMPTINESS: THE EXHIBITION

Empires of Emptiness: Fortresses of the Sahara and the Steppe uses extraordinary photography to show how, despite the seemingly limited 'value' of arid spaces and the significant logistical difficulties they posed, the conquest of deserts has often mobilised sizeable resources from some of the world's most notable empires. This circulating show combines the attractiveness of an outdoor street gallery and the depth of an indoor exhibition based on high-impact photography conveying research results.

The outdoor gallery *The Sahara & the Steppe* is a visual and a historical journey which uses high-impact photography, in particular from the world-renowned archive of multiple award-winning photographer Alain Sèbe, to show vividly the 'nature' of the Sahara and the Steppe, which is essential to understanding the strategic and logistical challenges which desert fortresses were supposed to help overcome. (Please note that the outdoor gallery can also be presented indoors).

The indoor exhibition *Fortresses of the Sahara and the Steppe* presents both large format images of the sites of colonial fortresses in post-colonial Algeria and Kazakhstan and a historical presentation of the conditions which presided over the development of these fortress lines in one of the most inhospitable places on Earth. Whilst large-format images describe evocatively the situation of desert fortresses in the twenty-first century, a series of historical panels looks at both the 'high politics' of these conquests such as the development of fortress lines across empty spaces as well as the more practical aspects of desert fortifications - construction, everyday life and relationships with local populations. *Empires of Emptiness* (which encapsulates both sections of the exhibition) reveals the fascinating untold story of desert conquests.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS 'EMPIRES OF EMPTINESS: FORTRESSES OF THE SAHARA & THE STEPPE'

The Sahara & the Steppe

27 weather resistant panels size 140 x 180 cm.

Made-to-measure aluminium structures (width 180 cm; height 220 cm) designed to be assembled in triangular shape.

Lighting system (27 LED floodlights; 20 w).

Nine topics: Presentation of project and geographical location; A challenging environment; People; Livelihood; Trade; Transport; Water; Religion; Drier deserts?

Designed to be self-standing triangular 'photographic islands' (ground rods available to tie structures to grasslands).

Fully weather proof (but can be displayed indoor too).

Fortresses of the Sahara and the Steppe

30 panels

Qty	Size (cm)	Description
7	120 x 180	Desert fortress photographs
14	60 x 80	Desert fortress photographs
9	50 x 100	Historical presentation of fortresses, based on research results of 'Outposts of Conquest': Exhibition presentation; Conquest & Strategy; Construction; Typology; Fortress networks; Supply; Fortress life; Interaction with local populations; From conquest to administration.

Designed to be wall hung and to be displayed indoor only. Separate foam panels for captions.

Series of cultural artefacts about French popular representations of desert fortresses available (vintage books and post-cards, sand samples, etc.).

Tailored-made lectures series can be arranged in conjunction with this exhibition.



University of Birmingham, University Square, 15 February - 15 May 2016



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Official opening by Professor Sir David Eastwood, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Birmingham, 7 March 2016



University of Birmingham, opening speech by Professor Charles Forsdick, AHRC Theme leader, 'Translating Cultures', 7 March 2016



University of Birmingham, Chancellor's Court, 15 February - 15 May 2016



University of Birmingham, Aston Webb Rotunda, 15 February - 15 May 2016



University of Birmingham, Chancellor's Court, 15 February - 15 May 2016



Fusion Gallery, Jackfield Tile Museum, Ironbridge Gorge, Shropshire, 23 May - 21 September 2016



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Fusion Gallery, Jackfield Tile Museum, Ironbridge Gorge, official opening by Professor Michael Whitby, Head of the College of Arts & Law and Pro Vice-Chancellor, and Professor Mike Robinson, Director of the Ironbridge International Institute for Cultural Heritage, 31 May 2016



Thank you for taking the time to read this presentation.

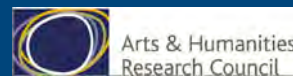
For more information about the 'Outposts of conquest' project:
www.birmingham.ac.uk/empires

And the 'Empires of Emptiness' exhibition:
www.birmingham.ac.uk/forts

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