

Tebessa, a Heritage in Search of Valorisation: Analysis of the Untapped Tourism Potential in Tebessa, Algeria

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ABSTRACT

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The city of Tebessa, located in eastern Algeria, possesses an exceptionally rich historical and archaeological heritage inherited from successive civilizations ranging from the Numidian period to the Islamic era. Despite this remarkable patrimonial capital, the city remains marginal within national tourism dynamics. This article examines the paradox between the abundance of heritage resources and their weak tourism valorisation. The study adopts a qualitative approach combining documentary analysis with exploratory fieldwork conducted among institutional actors, economic stakeholders, and local residents. The findings highlight several major constraints hindering the tourism development of Tebessa's heritage, including insufficient hospitality infrastructure, the absence of integrated territorial governance, weak heritage mediation, and poor coordination among local actors. Based on this territorial diagnosis, the article proposes strategic orientations for sustainable tourism development adapted to the realities of Algerian secondary cities and grounded in the mobilisation of local resources.

Keywords: cultural heritage; territorial tourism; tourism valorisation; secondary cities; Algeria

INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalisation and the diversification of tourism practices, tourism has become a major lever for territorial development. Beyond its economic dimension, tourism contributes to territorial structuring, the enhancement of local identities, and the preservation of cultural heritage. Numerous heritage cities have successfully capitalised on their historical and cultural assets to strengthen their attractiveness and integrate sustainably into national and international tourism flows. Algeria, endowed with a millennia-old heritage, holds considerable potential for the development of cultural tourism. However, this potential remains largely underexploited, particularly in inland and border regions. The city of Tebessa illustrates this gap in an emblematic manner. Formerly the Roman city of Theveste, Tebessa preserves an exceptional ensemble of archaeological remains—including monumental arches, Byzantine ramparts, Paleochristian basilicas, temples, and Islamic buildings—attesting to its major historical role in North Africa.

Despite this high heritage density, Tebessa remains absent from the main Algerian tourism circuits. The valorisation of its sites is fragmented and insufficiently integrated into a coherent territorial strategy. This situation raises a central research question: why does such a rich heritage struggle to become a driver of tourism and territorial development? What structural, institutional, and social obstacles hinder the tourism development of the city? And to what extent could a territorial and sustainable approach activate this untapped potential?

Objectives

The objective of this article is to address these questions through an analysis of Tebessa's tourism potential, highlighting the gap between available resources and their current level of valorisation. The study also aims to propose tourism planning orientations adapted to the specificities of an Algerian secondary city, within a framework of sustainable development and shared governance.

1. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Territorial tourism development is grounded in a set of concepts derived from geography, spatial planning, and social sciences. This research mobilises in particular the notions of tourism potential, heritage valorisation, tourism planning, and sustainable tourism.

1.1 Tourism as a Lever for Territorial Development

Tourism is no longer limited to a leisure or consumption activity. It is now recognised as an instrument of territorial development capable of stimulating local economies, strengthening social cohesion, and enhancing cultural identities (Peyrache-Gadeau, 2003). The territorial approach to tourism is based on the coordinated mobilisation of stakeholders around a collective project rooted in local specificities and endogenous resources (Mandić & Kennell, 2021).

1.2 Tourism Potential as a Latent Resource

Tourism potential refers to the set of natural, cultural, historical, and intangible elements that can be mobilised for tourism purposes. However, as noted by Violier (2008), a tourism place does not exist in itself; it is the product of a social and territorial construction. The transformation of potential into an actual tourism resource requires identification, planning, mediation, and promotion.

In the case of Tebessa, archaeological heritage constitutes an objective asset, yet its integration into a tourism strategy remains limited. The distinction between existing heritage and valorised heritage is therefore central to understanding current constraints.

1.3 Tourism Valorisation of Heritage

Tourism valorisation combines several dimensions, including physical site development, cultural mediation, and promotion. It involves transforming heritage into a tourism product through the creation of routes, networking of sites, signage, and cultural animation (Gravari-Barbas, 2003; Boussaa & Madandola, 2024). This process also requires the support of local populations, as territory is fundamentally an identity-based construct (Nogué & Di Méo, 1998; El Faouri & Sibley, 2022).

1.4 Tourism Planning and Sustainability

Tourism planning relies on planning and spatial organisation logics. It can only be effective if embedded in an integrated approach that considers local dynamics, environmental constraints, and residents' expectations. Sustainable tourism, defined by the World Tourism Organization as tourism that accounts for its economic, social, and environmental impacts, is particularly relevant for territories located outside major tourism flows (Garanti et al., 2024).

2. METHODS

2.1 General Approach

This research adopts a qualitative approach based on the complementarity of documentary analysis and exploratory fieldwork. The aim is to understand the mechanisms limiting the tourism valorisation of Tebessa's heritage and to identify planning strategies adapted to the local context.

2.2 Documentary Analysis

Documentary analysis focused on institutional documents (urban planning schemes, tourism and culture department reports), scientific literature on heritage tourism in Algeria, and digital and media sources. This phase enabled the identification of tourism resources, institutional discourses, and representations of the city in communication media.

2.3. Exploratory Field Survey

The field survey was based on exploratory interviews conducted with three categories of actors: institutional stakeholders, local economic and social actors, and residents. These exchanges made it possible to collect differentiated perceptions regarding the state of heritage, the obstacles to its valorisation, and expectations

concerning tourism development. Although limited in scale, this qualitative approach provides relevant insights into local dynamics and governance-related issues. Three categories of actors were considered:

a. Institutional actors:

An official from the Tourism Directorate of the Wilaya of Tébessa highlighted the lack of coordination among local institutions, as well as the limited budgets allocated to tourism development.

In addition, a senior representative of the Municipal People’s Assembly (APC) of Tébessa emphasized the issue of poorly maintained and unsupervised heritage sites.

b. Economic and social actors:

Interviews conducted with shopkeepers in the city centre, particularly those located near the Roman ruins, drew attention to the low number of visitors. Local artisans (specialising in leatherwork and Amazigh motifs) reported that no institutional framework currently supports craftsmanship as a lever for tourism development.

c. Residents:

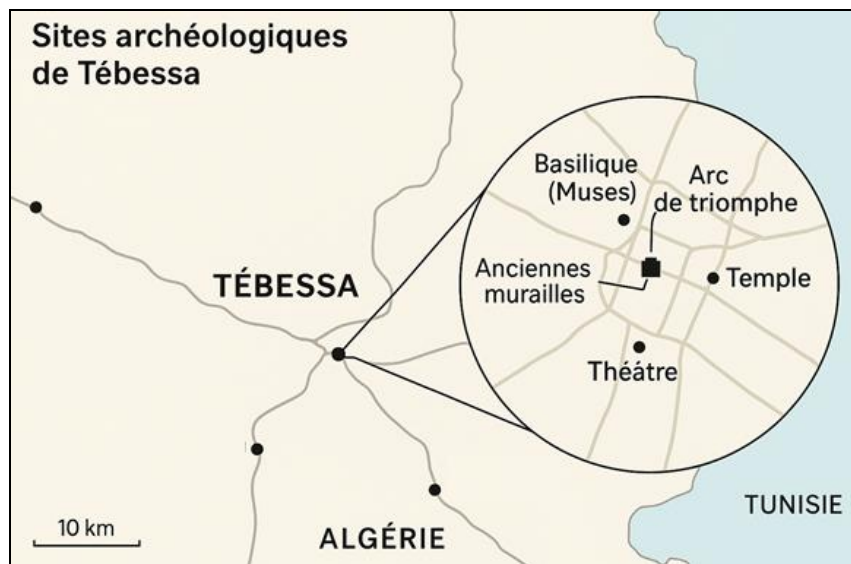
Finally, local residents expressed both a strong sense of pride in their city’s heritage and a deep frustration regarding its current state of neglect and deterioration. They strongly emphasized that heritage sites are perceived as abandoned by public authorities, while younger generations show limited awareness of their cultural value

3. PRESENTATION OF THE CITY OF TEBESSA

3.1. Historical and Socio-Economic Context

As the capital of its wilaya, Tébessa occupies a strategic position close to the Tunisian border. As the heir to the ancient Roman city of Theveste, it played a major role in regional history. Today, the city fulfils important administrative and commercial functions. However, it faces several socio-economic challenges, particularly youth unemployment and limited investment in the cultural and tourism sectors.

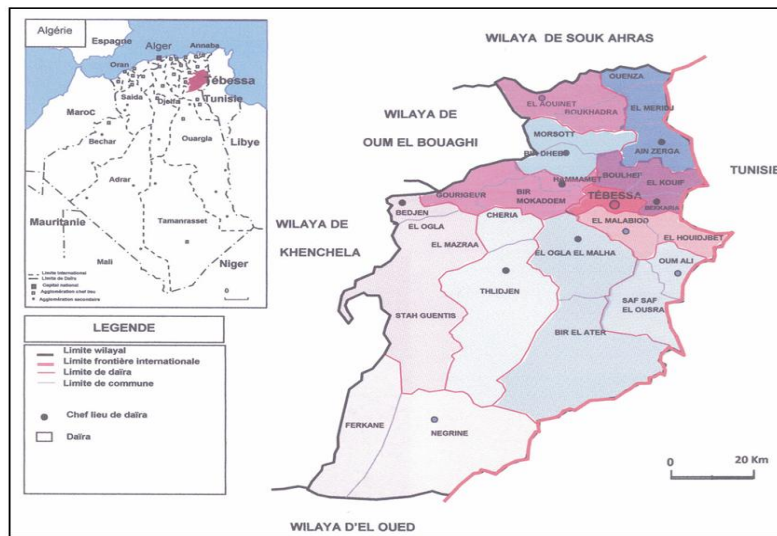
Figure 1. Main archaeological sites of Tébessa



Source: *Monograph of the Wilaya of Tébessa, 2023.*

Its geographical location (Figure 1) enables the city to open up to external areas, particularly toward neighbouring Arab countries and the wider MENA region. The border area of the Wilaya of Tébessa is currently inhabited by a population exceeding 288,000 inhabitants, representing more than 33% of the total population of the wilaya.

Figure 2. Geographical location of the Wilaya of Tebessa



Source: National Institute of Cartography and Remote Sensing (2022).

The spatial configuration of settlements and localities located in direct contact with the border line reflects the intensity of interactions and relations generated by cross-border dynamics with Tunisia (Figure 2). The highly strategic nature of this area can be summarised as follows:

- Its location within the Eastern High Plateaus, serving as a transit zone between the northern and southern parts of eastern Algeria;
- Its border character with Tunisia, and consequently its openness to neighbouring countries;
- Its predominantly steppe environment, covering more than 90% of the wilaya’s territory.



Photo1 ; made by authors , 2024

3.2. A Cultural Heritage of Exceptional Richness

The tangible heritage of Tebessa is characterised by the diversity and density of its archaeological remains (Photo 1), including the Arch of Caracalla, the Byzantine ramparts, the Gate of Solomon, the Temple of Minerva, the Roman amphitheatre, the Basilica of Saint Crispina, and the Old Mosque. These monuments bear witness to the succession of civilisations that shaped the city and together form an exceptional heritage ensemble at the national scale.

3.2.1. The Gate of Caracalla (Triumphal Arch)

This monumental arch marks the entrance to the ancient Roman city of Theveste (Photos 2 and 3). It is believed to have been built around AD 216 in honour of Emperor Caracalla. Its architecture is typical of Roman triumphal arches, featuring three openings—a large central arch flanked by two smaller lateral arches—surmounted by Corinthian columns. Although the dedicatory inscription has disappeared, its dating is based on stylistic comparisons with other imperial arches. This monument reflects the advanced Romanisation of the city and its status as a Roman colony from the first century AD (Khelifa, 2017).

3.2.2. The Byzantine Ramparts

Constructed around AD 535 during the reign of Emperor Justinian, these ramparts once enclosed the Byzantine city of Theveste. They represent one of the few well-preserved examples of Byzantine military architecture in North Africa (Photo 4). Their quadrangular layout extended over a perimeter of approximately 1,200 metres and included circular corner towers, fortified gates, and masonry built with carefully cut stone blocks (Lazzari, 2019).

3.2.3. The Gate of Solomon

Also built around AD 535 under Emperor Justinian, the Gate of Solomon is one of the main entrances to the Byzantine citadel of Tebessa (Photo 5). It is named after the Byzantine general Solomon, who was responsible for fortifying the city against Berber threats. Architecturally, the gate is distinguished by large dressed stone blocks (*opus quadratum*), square flanking towers, and its integration into the defensive ramparts. It illustrates a major shift in urban strategy, marking the transition from an open Roman city to a fortified and defensive urban structure (Khelifa, 2017).

3.2.4. The Temple of Minerva and Its Museum The Temple of Minerva is one of the oldest surviving pagan religious buildings in Tebessa (Photo 8). Dating back to the second century AD, it was dedicated to Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom, strategy, and the arts, equivalent to the Greek goddess Athena. The temple reflects the religious syncretism of the Roman period, during which pagan cults coexisted with local African influences (Photo 7). The building stands on a rectangular podium preceded by a monumental staircase (Photo 6) and preserves fluted Corinthian columns as well as part of the entablature. Its classical architecture and symmetry illustrate the aesthetic canons of the Roman High Empire. The interior has been converted into an archaeological museum housing statues and fragments of pagan deities, the Sarcophagus of the Muses, mosaics depicting the Triumph of Bacchus and the Metamorphosis of Daphne, as well as artefacts related to daily life and funerary practices (OGEBEC, 2021).

3.2.5. The Archaeological Museum of Tebessa

The Archaeological Museum of Tebessa is housed in the former Saint Martin Church, a building constructed in 1885 during the French colonial period. Originally a Romano-Byzantine-style church, it was repurposed after independence (Photo 9). In 1971, the building was refurbished to accommodate the region's archaeological collections, and its single-nave structure with a barrel vault remains visible today (Photo 10). The museum displays Roman and Paleochristian mosaics (originating from the Basilica of Saint Crispina), Roman stelae and statues, funerary objects, lamps, pottery, and domestic artefacts, as well as a small section dedicated to the Numidian and Libyco-Berber periods (Ministry of Culture, 2019).

3.2.6. The Roman Amphitheatre

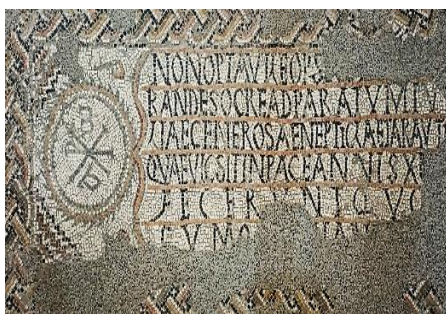
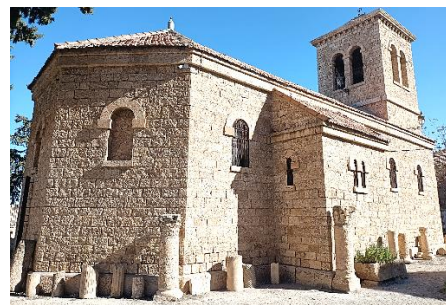
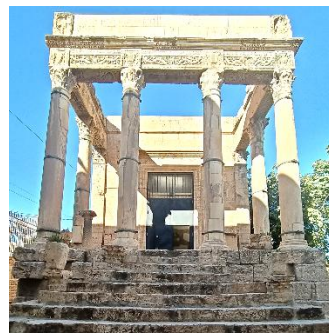
Built between the second and third centuries AD, the Roman amphitheatre could accommodate approximately 4,500 spectators. Elliptical in shape, it measures 76 metres by 58 metres and includes seating partially carved into the bedrock. While comparable in size to the amphitheatre of Timgad, it is less well preserved (Photo 11). Underground galleries are still visible, where wild animals and gladiators were held before performances. During the imperial period, the amphitheatre functioned as a central space of urban sociability and was likely used until the fourth century AD (Bacha, 2015).

3.2.7. The Basilica of Saint Crispina

This fourth-century Paleochristian basilica is dedicated to Saint Crispina, a noble Christian woman from Theveste who was martyred under the reign of Diocletian. It is one of the largest ancient basilicas in North Africa. The building consists of three naves separated by colonnades (Photo 12), a semi-circular apse, and several annexes, including a baptistery (Photo 13). Remains of floor mosaics and liturgical features such as the altar and chancel are still visible. The basilica stands as a major testimony to the early Christianisation of Numidia (Cherif & Mebarki, 2018).

3.2.8. The Old Mosque of Tebessa (Jamaâ El Atik)

Located in the historic core of the city, the Old Mosque of Tebessa—sometimes referred to as *El Atik*—is a religious building dating back to the medieval period, probably the eleventh or twelfth century. Its origins are linked to the early phases of Islamisation in the region, although the structure has been rebuilt and modified several times, notably during the Ottoman period. The mosque follows a traditional hypostyle plan, with a prayer hall divided by columns and a decorated stucco *mihrab*. It also features a square minaret in the Maghrebi style (Photo 14). The reuse of ancient materials, such as Roman columns and capitals, reflects a continuity of occupation and the adaptive reuse of earlier heritage elements (Meknassi, 2020).





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Photos 2 to 14 (from top left to bottom right):

2 and 3. The Roman Arch of Caracalla and a detail of the entablature.

4. The Byzantine ramparts and several towers.

5. The Gate of Solomon.

6, 7 and 8. The Temple of Minerva, a mosaic, and a sarcophagus.

9 and 10. The Archaeological Museum (former Saint Martin Church) and a Paleochristian mosaic.

11. The Roman Amphitheatre.

12 and 13. The Basilica of Saint Crispina and a sculpted capital.

14. The Old Mosque of Tebessa.

Source: photographs taken by the authors, 2024.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1. A Remarkable Historical Heritage That Remains Underexploited

The city of Tebessa, with more than two millennia of history, preserves an exceptional archaeological heritage. From the Numidian period through the Roman and Paleochristian eras, the city played a major role, as evidenced by the monumental remains that are still visible today. The Roman amphitheatre, although less imposing than that of Timgad, nonetheless possesses undeniable archaeological value. The Basilica of Saint Crispina, considered one of the largest in North Africa, bears witness to the early Christianisation of the region. The Byzantine ramparts, built by Justinian's troops in the sixth century, still form an identifiable perimeter within the urban fabric.

However, this rich heritage remains largely underexploited. No marked or organised heritage routes are offered to connect the sites. Opening hours are irregular and poorly communicated to the general public. Access to certain monuments remains difficult or even impossible, particularly due to their location within poorly planned urban areas. By comparison, cities such as Djemila or Timgad, with an equivalent or even smaller heritage surface area, benefit from UNESCO World Heritage status, well-established valorisation policies, and attract several thousand visitors each year thanks to visitor services, guides, brochures, and appropriate infrastructure.

In short, while the heritage density of Tebessa is remarkable, its level of valorisation remains weak, which limits its influence at both national and international levels.

4.2. Insufficient Tourism Infrastructure

One of the main constraints on the tourism valorisation of Tebessa lies in the weakness of its hospitality infrastructure. The hotel sector is limited in both quantity and quality: only a small number of classified establishments exist, most of which do not exceed two-star standards. Alternative accommodation, such as guesthouses or homestay tourism, is almost non-existent or poorly regulated. The lack of appropriate restaurants, cultural cafés, and craft shops further reinforces the sense of isolation experienced by visitors.

Field data indicate that in 2023 fewer than 1,500 registered tourists visited the archaeological sites of the wilaya, whereas Timgad attracts between 20,000 and 30,000 visitors annually. The absence of urban signage, tourist

information offices, and trained personnel contributes significantly to this low level of visitation. Testimonies collected from Algerian and Tunisian tourists clearly illustrate this situation (Algerian and Tunisian tourists, July 2023).

These findings confirm the existence of a significant gap between potential and reality, largely attributable to the absence of a structured tourism offer and insufficient investment in basic tourism infrastructure.

4.3. Perceptions of Local Actors

Interviews conducted with various institutional and social actors in Tebessa reveal a growing awareness of heritage value, but also a clear lack of coordination among stakeholders. The Directorate of Culture acknowledges the exceptional nature of local heritage but highlights shortages in human and financial resources needed to ensure site preservation and promotion. At the level of the Municipal People's Assembly (APC), discourse focuses primarily on pressing urban issues (road infrastructure, lighting, cleanliness), relegating cultural concerns to a secondary position.

The private sector, particularly travel agencies and restaurant owners, reports a lack of incentives to invest in local tourism, which is perceived as offering limited short-term returns. Residents, for their part, express mixed attitudes: some view tourism as an economic opportunity for the city, while others fear the potential negative effects of a large influx of visitors on daily life. Overall, they oscillate between pride in their heritage and frustration over the deterioration of sites.

These perceptions highlight the absence of an integrated approach to tourism development. Institutions operate in a fragmented manner, without a shared strategy, and local initiatives remain sporadic or anecdotal.

4.4. Strategic Synthesis of Tebessa's Tourism Potential

In order to synthesise the results of the territorial diagnosis, a strategic analysis inspired by the SWOT method makes it possible to identify the main internal and external factors influencing the tourism valorisation of the city of Tebessa (Table 1).

Strengths

The main strength of Tebessa lies in the richness and diversity of its archaeological and historical heritage, covering several major periods of North African history. The concentration of ancient and medieval monuments within a relatively compact urban area represents a major asset for the development of integrated heritage routes. In addition, the city's border location offers significant potential for regional and cross-border tourism, which remains largely underexploited.

Weaknesses

Structural weaknesses remain substantial and constitute the primary obstacle to tourism development. These include insufficient hospitality infrastructure, the near absence of signage and tourist services, and a lack of coordination among institutional actors. Weak heritage mediation and limited promotion further reduce the city's visibility within national tourism circuits.

Opportunities

The national context, marked by growing interest in cultural tourism and proximity tourism, provides favourable conditions for the gradual revalorisation of Tebessa's heritage. Public programmes aimed at heritage protection and enhancement, as well as prospects for cross-border cooperation with Tunisia, represent institutional and financial levers capable of supporting a territorial tourism strategy in the medium term.

Threats

The main threats relate to the ongoing deterioration of unrestored sites, insufficient budgets allocated to culture and tourism, and the lack of continuity in public policies. These constraints are compounded by certain negative perceptions linked to the region's geographical marginality, which may hinder tourism attractiveness and private investment. To summarise these elements, a SWOT analysis of Tebessa's tourism potential can be proposed as follows:

Table 1. Strategic Analysis of the Tourism Potential of the City of Tebessa

Strengths	Weaknesses
Exceptional heritage richness	Weak tourism infrastructure
Proximity to the Tunisian border	Lack of tourism promotion
Moderate altitude and pleasant climate	Deficient institutional coordination
Opportunities	Threats
Development of cross-border tourism	Political or administrative instability
New heritage valorisation programmes (ANDPM, UNESCO)	Progressive deterioration of unrestored sites

Source: Authors' elaboration, based on field surveys (2023).

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A SUSTAINABLE TOURISM VALORISATION STRATEGY

Based on the territorial diagnosis, several strategic orientations can be proposed. It clearly emerges that the city of Tebessa possesses significant tourism potential that remains largely underexploited. In order to overcome the identified constraints and initiate a process of sustainable tourism valorisation, several strategic axes are suggested.

5.1. Development of a Comprehensive Heritage Protection and Valorisation Plan

It is essential to design a Protection and Valorisation Plan for Archaeological Sites (PPMVSA) covering all the ancient and Paleochristian monuments of Tebessa. This plan should:

- Delimit archaeological protection zones;
- Define conservation and intervention regulations;
- Plan restoration and site security works;
- Integrate heritage sites into the urban fabric while improving accessibility.

Such an approach would meet the necessary criteria for a potential application for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List, which would represent both major international recognition and an important lever for funding (El Faouri & Sibley, 2022; UNESCO, 2021).

5.2. Development of a Coherent and Multisectoral Tourism Offer

Tourism development in Tebessa can only be achieved through a structured and diversified offer. It is therefore recommended to:

- Establish thematic tourism routes (Roman route, Christian heritage route, craft route);
- Improve hospitality infrastructure (quality accommodation, restaurants, signage, transport);
- Encourage local initiatives such as guesthouses, guided tours, and craft workshops;
- Create a heritage interpretation centre featuring permanent exhibitions, 3D reconstructions, and digital mediation tools.

This strategy should be accompanied by capacity-building programmes for local stakeholders (guides, hotel managers, restaurateurs, artisans) and by the implementation of a regional and national marketing plan (World Tourism Organization, 2018; Garanti, Ilkhanizadeh, & Liasidou, 2024).

5.3. Shared Governance and Citizen Participation

Improved institutional coordination is required among the sectors of tourism, culture, urban planning, and the environment. The creation of a local intersectoral body responsible for implementing tourism development policies would be highly desirable. In parallel, citizen participation should be encouraged through public consultations, neighbourhood committees, and community-based tourism projects. This would strengthen the territorial anchoring of the strategy, prevent conflicts of use, and foster collective ownership of heritage resources (Mandić & Kennell, 2021).

5.4. Cross-Border Cooperation and Regional Integration

Given its strategic location, Tebessa could be integrated into a cross-border tourism cooperation dynamic with neighbouring Tunisian regions. This could involve:

- The creation of Algerian–Tunisian heritage itineraries (e.g. Tebessa–Gafsa–Sbeitla);
- The joint organisation of cultural events;
- The facilitation of tourist mobility through a shared tourist visa or customs partnerships.

Such regional openness would enable Tebessa to position itself within an integrated tourism framework at the scale of the eastern Maghreb and attract new tourism flows (Boussaa & Madandola, 2024).

6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This research is based on an exploratory qualitative survey, and its findings do not claim statistical generalisation. Further studies incorporating quantitative data on tourism flows and economic impacts would allow for a more in-depth analysis.

7. CONCLUSION

The analysis of Tebessa's tourism potential reveals a striking paradox: undeniable heritage richness combined with an almost complete absence of structured valorisation. Despite its prestigious historical legacy, the city remains marginalised within national tourism policies. Nevertheless, the necessary conditions exist to transform Tebessa into a major heritage hub, provided that political will, targeted investment, and the mobilisation of local stakeholders are effectively combined. Tourism development in Tebessa should not be conceived merely as an economic valorisation project, but rather as a lever for territorial development capable of fostering employment, cultural outreach, and the preservation of local identities. To achieve this, an integrated, participatory, and sustainable approach is essential. This article constitutes an initial contribution to a better understanding of the constraints and drivers of tourism development in this historic city. It calls for further research, particularly on residents' social perceptions of tourism, expected economic impacts, and comparative analyses with other Algerian cities that have successfully undergone tourism transitions. Ultimately, valorising Tebessa means breathing new life into a forgotten heritage in the service of a shared future

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