

Probable first Japanese visitor to Algeria

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“In spite of its enormous archeological interest, the ruins of Thamugadi, often referred to as ‘African Pompeii ‘ is little-known even in Europe, much less in my country. In fact, it is located in a remote place in North Africa and there will be no opportunity of visiting them except for few travelers of fancy taste who make a special detour on the way. During my journey to North Africa several years ago, I visited the ruins. Since the ruins drew my profound interest, now I introduce them to the world....”

“Every inch of their streets is a result of pavement work. There exists an orderly separation between the sidewalk and the carriage way. The street blocks are ordered in square configuration, similar to the town of Kyoto.... The perfection of the construction of water supply and sewage system strikes us with admiration...”

Thus I translate into English, some passages of the manuscript, written in superb classical Japanese, of the lectures given by Dr. Kengo Murakawa in November 1910 . Dr. Murakawa, professor emeritus of Tokyo Imperial University is known as a founder of modern methodology of history in my country who focuses on archiving, researching and analyzing historical primary sources. Ordered by the Meiji Government he stayed as a young visiting scholar from 1902 to 1904 in Germany, Italy and France for his research in ancient European history. During his stay in Europe, he visited Thamugadi (ancient name of Timgad) and gave above lectures which were published in a history journal in 1912.

His description of the streets, water system, triumphal arches and six public baths with scrupulous attention to detail demonstrates his enthusiasm as a great scholar. The manuscript not only has important academic value but also the narration conveys vividly between the lines, emotions of a Japanese historian who stood, in the beginning of the last century, after long difficult travel, in front of the Roman ruins of Timgad. Separated by huge time and distance from his home country, when he reflected upon the image of Roman-Berber town which was prosperous over two thousand years ago, innumerable emotions no doubt would have welled up inside his mind.

Before anything else I was overwhelmed by his energy, passion and spirit to pursue his profession. Remaining whole life as a specialist of ancient European history, he was also active in publicizing his observations on the relations between the World Powers after the first World War and his analysis of the domestic situations of the countries and regions he had visited.

I could not have discovered the story of this probably first Japanese visitor to Algeria, had I not attended the conference titled “Algeria in Ancient Times” by Professor Yutaka Oshimizu and held by the Japan-Algeria Association, in December 2013. Until the recent prevalence of the COVID19, the Association was continuing to hold evening gatherings with lectures on diverse subjects related to Algeria followed by friendly discussions over a glass of refreshment. The lectures allowed me to learn numerous aspects of Algeria which I hadn’t known during my service in Algiers. At this moment the coronavirus doesn’t allow the Association to hold gatherings and meetings like before. Amidst of the difficult situations caused by the pandemic , former Ambassador of Japan to Algeria Kazuya OGAWA accepted to preside over the Association in June last year and he already took the initiative in organizing lectures on line . The new Ambassador of Algeria to Japan H.E. Larbi KATTI assumed the post last December. I sincerely hope things return to normal quickly and the Association further develops its activities with the energy of a new team. As a token of my support for the Association, I contribute this small article.

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