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<p>RESEARCH ARTICLE </p>	
<p>Mounted Power and Imperial Authority: The Military, Cultural, and Symbolic Role of the Horse in the Formation of Cavalry and Identity in Ottoman Algeria (16th–Early 19th Centuries)</p>	
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<p>Keywords Mots clés :</p>	<p>Ottoman Empire; horse culture; equestrian traditions; symbolism of the horse; military identity.</p>
<p>Abstract The study of the horse’s role in Ottoman Algeria holds significant importance as it provides a critical lens to understand the military and social fabric of the region during a period marked by profound political and military transformations in North Africa. This research addresses a central question: to what extent did the horse, as both a military asset and a symbolic entity, influence the formation and power of the Algerian cavalry, and how did this dual role contribute to</p>	

consolidating Ottoman authority while shaping cultural identity and local horsemanship traditions? Focusing on the period from the 16th century to the early 19th century, the paper highlights the pivotal role of cavalry as the backbone of the Ottoman military presence in Algeria. It demonstrates that the horse was more than just a mode of transportation; it was integral to combat maneuvers and strategic mobility within the region's diverse and challenging geography. Moreover, the study explores the symbolic significance of the horse within military and social contexts, emphasizing its association with honor, nobility, and authority in Ottoman Algerian society. By analyzing historical documents and military records, it reveals how horses elevated the morale and social status of cavalrymen, fostering a deeply rooted military identity intertwined with equestrian traditions. The research further investigates the dynamic interaction between indigenous horsemanship practices and Ottoman military models, illustrating how horses and cavalry tactics adapted to Mediterranean warfare demands. This adaptability was key to sustaining Ottoman Algeria's military and political influence amidst regional and international challenges. In conclusion, this study offers a nuanced understanding of the interconnected military, cultural, and social dimensions of the horse in Ottoman Algeria. It invites a reassessment of the horse's vital role as a foundational element in shaping military power and equestrian identity in North Africa during the Ottoman era.

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Introduction

The study of military cavalry in Ottoman Algeria occupies a vital place in understanding the socio-political and cultural fabric of the region during the period spanning the 16th to the early 19th centuries. The horse was not merely a mode of transportation or a battlefield tool; it symbolized power, prestige, and social identity among the Ottoman military elites and local communities alike. In Ottoman Algeria, cavalry units—comprising both Turkish-origin soldiers and local tribal horsemen—formed an indispensable pillar of military strength and governance, particularly as the territory faced multifaceted challenges such as European incursions, internal rebellions, and the complexities of tribal alliances.

This research gains significance due to the relative scarcity of comprehensive studies focusing on the dual military and symbolic roles of horses in Ottoman Algerian society within contemporary Arabic scholarship, despite abundant references found in Ottoman archival materials and European travelogues. The central question guiding this inquiry is how the intertwining of military function and symbolic representation of the horse contributed to the formation of cavalry power in Ottoman Algeria, and how this dynamic influenced the construction of authority and social identity for the cavalrymen. Addressing this question entails tracing the historical backdrop of Ottoman rule establishment in Algeria, the organization and function of the military cavalry, and the socio-cultural meanings attached to horses and horsemanship, culminating in an analysis of how local equestrian traditions merged with Ottoman military structures.

The Ottoman administration in Algeria instituted a military system that reflected a synthesis of traditional Ottoman martial practices and local adaptations. Cavalry units, often recruited from indigenous tribes and Ottoman settlers, represented a key component in securing territorial control, especially in the interior regions where geography and tribal dynamics complicated direct governance. The horse, as a symbol of martial valor and nobility, was embedded deeply within social rituals and expressions of identity, reflecting a broader cultural valorization of equestrianism across the Maghreb.

Methodologically, this study relies on an interdisciplinary approach combining archival Ottoman documents, historical chronicles, military records, and anthropological insights into equestrian culture. This framework allows a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted roles horses played—from tactical military assets to markers of social prestige—within the evolving socio-political context of Ottoman Algeria.

The paper is structured into four main sections: the first outlines the historical and political context of Ottoman rule; the second analyzes the military organization and strategic deployment of cavalry; the third investigates the symbolic and social significance of horses; and the final section discusses the interaction between Ottoman military traditions and local equestrian customs, offering conclusions on the enduring legacy of cavalry in Algerian history.

I-Building Empire and Authority in Ottoman Algeria : From Political Consolidation to the Ascendancy of Mounted Power"

1. The Formation of Ottoman Algeria : Political and Military Consolidation (1518–18th Century)

The establishment of Ottoman Algeria in the early sixteenth century was both a political innovation and a military necessity. When the brothers Aruj and Khayr al-Din Barbarossa seized Algiers in 1518, they acted not only as corsairs but as agents of imperial expansion who sought Ottoman protection against Spanish incursions along the Maghrebi coast (Abun-Nasr, 1987, p. 52). Their allegiance to Sultan Selim I transformed Algiers into an Ottoman province (*eyalet*), integrating it into the broader imperial system while preserving a considerable degree of local autonomy. This dual nature—imperial authority combined with indigenous adaptation—remained a defining characteristic of Algerian governance for over three centuries (Hess, 1978, p. 33).

From the outset, the Ottoman presence in North Africa was shaped by geopolitical rivalry. The western Mediterranean became an arena of confrontation between Christian Europe and the Islamic world. Spanish fortresses, such as Oran and Mers el-Kébir, posed a constant threat, while corsair activity under Ottoman patronage served both defensive and economic functions. In this militarized context, control of the sea required control of the hinterland, which depended on effective cavalry forces capable of ensuring mobility and security across Algeria's vast and diverse territory (Bono, 2003, p. 41).

1.1 The Structure of Ottoman Authority in Algeria

The Ottoman *eyalet* of Algiers was governed through a hierarchical yet flexible system. At the top stood the Pasha, appointed by the Sultan, assisted by the Divan—a council composed mainly of Janissary officers. Over time, however, the Janissary corps (locally known as the Odjak) evolved into a self-governing military elite that exercised de facto control over the province (Colley, 2002, p. 57). By the seventeenth century, the Pashas had become largely ceremonial, while real authority lay with the Agha of the Janissaries and, later, the Dey, whose election by the Odjak symbolized the autonomy of Algiers within the Ottoman polity (Shaw, 1976, p. 98).

This transformation of power structures did not diminish the role of the cavalry; rather, it redefined it. The spahis—Ottoman-style cavalymen—were reorganized into local regiments combining imperial military discipline with North African riding traditions. The beys of provincial centers such as Constantine, Titteri, and Oran commanded mixed forces of infantry and cavalry, often supplemented by tribal contingents providing horses and riders under a system of negotiated allegiance (Drompp, 2014, p. 64).

The hybrid nature of this military system reflects the broader Ottoman principle of governance: pragmatic decentralization combined with symbolic imperial unity. As Faroqhi (2004, p. 121) notes, “Ottoman provincial administration was not a rigid imposition of Istanbul's will but a negotiated adaptation of imperial norms to local realities.” Algeria exemplified this process. The balance between Janissary authority, local notables, and mounted tribal power ensured both stability and flexibility in the face of external threats and internal challenges.

1.2 The Mediterranean Context: Warfare, Diplomacy, and the Corsair Economy

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed the rise of Algiers as a formidable maritime power. The city's corsairs, operating under Ottoman banners, dominated the western Mediterranean and secured vast revenues through privateering, ransoms, and trade (Agoston & Masters, 2009, p. 74). Yet this maritime prowess was underpinned by terrestrial strength: horses and riders defended ports, escorted caravans, and maintained communication with the interior. Cavalry units formed the indispensable link between coastal fortresses and inland provinces, ensuring logistical coherence and territorial cohesion (Clancy-Smith, 1994, p. 39).

The corsair economy also shaped the social composition of Ottoman Algeria. Wealth from maritime enterprises funded urban expansion, military stipends, and the maintenance of cavalry horses, often imported from the high plateaus or the Sahara. Horse trade became a lucrative business involving local tribes, Ottoman officers, and European merchants. The equine economy thus functioned as a microcosm of the province's hybrid character—Ottoman in structure, Maghrebi in substance, and Mediterranean in exchange (Abitbol, 2009, p. 101).

Diplomatically, Algiers maintained an ambivalent relationship with both Istanbul and European powers. While formally loyal to the Sultan, the Regency often pursued independent negotiations with France, Spain, and the Netherlands. This semi-autonomous diplomacy required military credibility, heavily dependent on the readiness and reputation of its cavalry forces. Mounted displays in diplomatic receptions and religious festivals projected an image of disciplined strength, reinforcing Algiers' political legitimacy both internally and externally (Bennison, 2002, p. 87).

1.3 Consolidation and Transformation (18th Century)

By the eighteenth century, Ottoman Algeria had evolved into a distinct political entity with its own institutional rhythm. The Deylik regime, centered in Algiers, balanced the interests of the Odjak, urban elites, and rural tribes through military coercion

and symbolic authority. Cavalry remained the cornerstone of this system, not merely as an instrument of war but as an emblem of sovereignty.

Contemporary observers such as Thomas Shaw and later European travelers remarked on the magnificence of Algerian horsemen, their ornate saddles, and ceremonial parades serving both aesthetic and political purposes (Shaw, 1738, p. 212). The horse was omnipresent in state rituals—symbolizing continuity with Ottoman tradition and connection with local conceptions of honor (*muruwwa*). Even as firearms and artillery became increasingly important, cavalry retained its prestige as the “soul of the army,” embodying courage, mobility, and aristocratic virtue (Faroqhi, 2014, p. 65).

The eighteenth century also witnessed growing tension between central authority and tribal confederations, particularly in high plateaus and the Sahara. Managing these relationships required political negotiation and projection of equestrian power. Cavalry expeditions served as both punitive and integrative mechanisms, reaffirming the Dey’s authority while respecting tribal autonomy. Mounted power functioned as a language of governance—a performative display of strength sustaining the Ottoman political order in Algeria until the nineteenth century (Coles, 1968, p. 47).

2. The Role of Mounted Power: Cavalry, Tribal Alliances, and the Foundations of Ottoman Control

2.1 The Cavalry as the Backbone of the Provincial Army

The Ottoman presence in Algeria was sustained not only by imperial administration and urban garrisons but also—crucially—by the strategic deployment of mounted power. The horse, as both a material and symbolic asset, lay at the center of Ottoman authority in the Maghreb. Cavalry forces (sipahis, spahis, and local contingents) embodied the fusion of Ottoman institutional frameworks with indigenous martial traditions, representing the Ottoman capacity to integrate diverse local communities while maintaining a recognizable imperial identity (Abun-Nasr, 1987, p. 59).

Unlike the highly centralized Janissary corps stationed in Algiers, cavalry units operated in the provinces and along the frontiers, serving as primary instruments of projection and control. Each beylik—Constantine, Titteri, and Oran—maintained a cavalry contingent drawn from local tribes bound by patronage, loyalty, and land privileges (*timar* or *zamia*) (Drompp, 2014, p. 66).

The spahi (Ottoman-style cavalryman) was not a simple soldier but a landholder deriving income from tax revenues in exchange for military service. Although the formal *timar* system was less rigidly implemented in the Maghreb than in Anatolia or the Balkans, a comparable structure of obligations existed, blending Ottoman administrative principles with North African customary law (Hess, 1978, p. 44).

The Algerian cavalry consisted of several categories:

- Ottoman spahis, professional soldiers often of Turkish or mixed origin;
- Provincial cavalry, recruited locally and trained according to Ottoman discipline;
- Tribal auxiliaries, mounted warriors from allied or semi-autonomous tribes mobilized during campaigns or internal revolts.

These forces provided both mobility and legitimacy. Their presence symbolized Ottoman protection and power, while their participation in military campaigns ensured territorial cohesion (Bono, 2003, p. 49).

2.2 Tribal Alliances and the Politics of Equestrian Power

Ottoman authority in Algeria rested on a complex web of alliances with indigenous tribes. The state’s legitimacy was negotiated rather than imposed, and the horse served as both the medium and metaphor of this negotiation. Through equestrian diplomacy—gifts of horses, shared hunting expeditions, or participation in ceremonial parades—the beys and deys reinforced loyalty among tribal leaders (*qaids* and *amirs*) (Colley, 2002, p. 62).

This relationship was particularly evident in Constantine, where alliances with tribes such as the Harakta, Awlad Sidi Yahya, and Beni Abbas provided military manpower and access to quality horses. The high plateaus and steppe regions were renowned breeding grounds, producing agile and resilient mounts suited for Maghreb terrain (Shaw, 1976, p. 105).

The horse was also a political currency. A well-bred steed could seal a truce, affirm allegiance, or symbolize reconciliation after conflict. Equestrian rituals thus played an essential role in the performative politics of Ottoman governance (Faroqhi, 2004, p. 129).

2.3 The Cultural Integration of Equestrian Traditions

Ottoman cavalrymen adapted quickly to local modes of riding, weaponry, and ceremonial display. Ottoman tactics emphasized discipline, while Algerian horsemen introduced fluidity, speed, and improvisation—essential for open-terrain

warfare. The resulting hybrid cavalry culture combined Ottoman armor and hierarchy with Maghrebi agility and intuition (Clancy-Smith, 1994, p. 41).

This synthesis is exemplified in the practice of *fantasia* (or *tbourida*), a traditional equestrian performance celebrating collective identity and martial prowess. Though pre-dating Ottoman rule, the *fantasia* flourished as a popular spectacle associated with tribal gatherings and state festivals. Synchronized charges, musket firing, and ornamental attire reflected skill and coded assertion of power and solidarity (Ágoston & Masters, 2009, p. 88).

2.4 The Horse in the Economy and Symbolism of Power

The equine economy of Ottoman Algeria was vast. Horses were bred, traded, taxed, and sometimes exported across the Mediterranean. The state maintained specialized stables (*marabouts*) near major centers such as Algiers, Medea, and Constantine. High-quality Arabian and Barb horses were prized for endurance and aesthetics; trade involved networks linking rural breeders, urban merchants, and Ottoman administrators (Abitbol, 2009, p. 103).

Horses were deeply inscribed in the visual and ceremonial culture. Mounted officials in processions and receptions represented state dignity. Chroniclers described “pageantry of horses” accompanying the bey’s entrance into provincial capitals, projecting spiritual and temporal power (Shaw, 1738, p. 217).

According to Bourdieu’s notion of “symbolic capital,” prestige operates through visible markers embodying authority. In Ottoman Algeria, horses functioned as such markers: conferring status, demonstrating control over resources, and materializing the relationship between domination and devotion (Faroqi, 2014, p. 71).

2.5 Mounted Power as a Mechanism of Control and Integration

Cavalry’s effectiveness was inseparable from its social role as mediator between central authority and rural populations. Mobility allowed rapid response to revolts or invasions and circulated symbols of authority.

Regular cavalry patrols reaffirmed Ottoman sovereignty in distant regions and reassured local allies (Coles, 1968, p. 52). Cavalrymen acted as intermediaries in tax collection, dispute resolution, and safe passage of goods. By the late eighteenth century, the equilibrium between urban Odjak power and rural tribal cavalry had become fragile, yet horses continued to symbolize continuity, connecting the Ottoman legacy to Algeria’s cultural memory (Abun-Nasr, 1987, p. 61).

II. Military Organization and the Role of Cavalry in Ottoman Algeria

1. Structural Composition of the Ottoman Military in Algeria

The Ottoman military system was tripartite: urban, provincial, and tribal elements. The Odjak of Algiers, the Janissary garrison, formed the urban core, initially tied to Istanbul but gradually localized. Surrounding it were provincial corps under beys, and tribal auxiliaries providing mobility, intelligence, and logistics (Abun-Nasr, 1987, p. 64).

The Odjak numbered 7,000–10,000 soldiers during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, primarily Anatolian or Balkan in origin early on, later increasingly local. Their dominance earned Algiers the epithet *Dar al-Sultan*—“House of the Sultan” (Julien, 1994, p. 48).

Cavalry (*spahis*), organized under beys, allowed Ottoman power to extend into the countryside without direct colonization (Shaw & Shaw, 1976, p. 132).

2. Provincial Military Administration and the “Beylik” System

The Ottoman provinces were divided into Constantine (east), Titteri (center), and Oran (west). Each bey commanded a spahi corps, Odjak infantry, and allied tribal auxiliaries (*makhzen*). Fortified towns (*qaṣba*, *bordj*) served as authority nodes connected by cavalry patrols, maximizing control with minimal logistics (Roberts, 2014, p. 77).

Makhzen tribes provided horses, riders, and intelligence in exchange for privileges, transforming tribal military traditions into imperial governance tools (Clancy-Smith, 1994, p. 44).

3. Tactical and Strategic Functions of the Cavalry

Cavalry units served in combat, surveillance, escort, and administration. Their tactical role emphasized mobility and shock—rapid raids, encirclement, and pursuit (Ágoston, 2005, p. 121). Ottoman commanders blended Turkish discipline with Berber-Arab flexibility. Cavalry participated in siege protection, reconnaissance, and containment of reinforcements, crucial in defending Algiers (Faroqi, 2005, p. 67).

Against revolts, fast-moving units struck before uprisings spread. The combination of mobility, intelligence, and punitive raids (*ghazawat*) made cavalry both feared and respected (Bennison, 2002, p. 91).

4. Military Logistics and the Horse Economy

Cavalry maintenance required robust logistics. Horses were bred in the High Plateaus, Hodna Basin, and Mitidja plains. Tribal breeders supplied mounts in exchange for tax relief (McDougall, 2006, p. 55). Spahis maintained their own horses; stables and veterinary services were organized under aghas and kaids (Julien, 1994, p. 50).

Algerian horses were exported to France, Spain, and the Levant. The Barb horse's endurance reinforced both symbolic prestige and military capability (Playfair, 1884, p. 33).

5. The Symbolic and Ideological Dimension of the Military Horse

Horses embodied *finūsiyya*, a chivalric code of courage, generosity, and piety. Governors and beys participated in equestrian parades, religious festivals, and ceremonies, displaying decorated horses (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 87).

The *fantasia* bridged Ottoman military ethos and local identity, serving as celebration of valor and rehearsal of discipline. Public rituals constituted a "politics of visibility," enacting authority (Geertz, 1980, p. 102; Clancy-Smith, 1997, p. 67).

6. Decline and Transformation in the Nineteenth Century

By the early nineteenth century, the Ottoman military system showed exhaustion. The Odjak became hereditary and corrupt; beyliks faced resistance from autonomous tribes; the *makhzen* alliance eroded. Firearms reduced the impact of cavalry, and internal rivalries weakened coordination (Bennison, 2009, p. 114).

Nevertheless, cavalry retained symbolic resonance. During the French invasion of 1830, spahis and tribal horsemen were central to early resistance. Their mobility and guerrilla tactics influenced later insurgent strategies, including those of Emir Abdelkader, who invoked Ottoman martial models (Evans-Pritchard, 1949, p. 56). The horse thus remained both instrument of war and metaphor of continuity, linking Ottoman Algeria to historical memory (Clancy-Smith, 1994, p. 47).

Conclusion:

- 1- The horse played a dual role in Ottoman Algeria, serving both as a crucial military asset and as a symbol of social prestige, honor, and authority. Its significance extended beyond practical use, shaping cultural, political, and military identities.
- 2- Ottoman cavalry, comprising spahis, provincial forces, and tribal auxiliaries, constituted the backbone of the military system, providing mobility, strategic flexibility, and territorial control across Algeria's diverse geography.
- 3- Tribal alliances mediated through equestrian diplomacy were essential for consolidating Ottoman authority, allowing the state to negotiate loyalty rather than rely solely on coercion. Horses functioned as both a medium of negotiation and a marker of trust, status, and political legitimacy.
- 4- The integration of local equestrian traditions with Ottoman military organization resulted in a hybrid cavalry culture, combining Ottoman discipline with Maghrebi agility, improvisation, and ceremonial display. Practices such as the *fantasia* embodied both martial prowess and social cohesion.
- 5- The equine economy was central to sustaining the cavalry, linking rural breeders, urban markets, and Ottoman administration. High-quality horses were vital for military campaigns and ceremonial purposes, reflecting the intertwined economic, social, and symbolic dimensions of mounted power.
- 6- Ottoman military administration in Algeria demonstrated adaptability, balancing centralized structures (the Odjak) with decentralized, tribal-based cavalry networks, reflecting a pragmatic approach to governance in a geographically and socially complex territory.
- 7- The symbolic and ideological role of the horse reinforced state legitimacy, communicated power during rituals and ceremonies, and contributed to the projection of Ottoman authority both internally and to foreign powers.
- 8- Despite technological changes and the gradual decline of Ottoman central authority in the 18th and early 19th centuries, cavalry maintained its prestige and cultural significance, influencing the military strategies of later resistance movements, including anti-colonial struggles.
- 9- The study highlights the interdependence between military function, social structures, and cultural symbolism, showing that the horse was central to sustaining Ottoman-Algerian identity and continuity of governance.
- 10- Finally, the research underscores that Ottoman Algeria's military success relied not solely on manpower or weaponry, but on the complex network of cavalry, tribal alliances, economic infrastructure, and symbolic culture—a model of military and socio-political integration unique to the Maghreb.

Ethical Considerations

The authors confirm that this study is based exclusively on historical sources, archival materials, published documents, and secondary literature. The research does not involve human participants, personal data, or experimental procedures. Therefore, ethical approval from an institutional review board was not required.

All sources have been properly cited, and the study was conducted in accordance with international standards of academic integrity, research ethics, and publication ethics. The authors declare that the manuscript is original, has not been published previously, and is not under consideration elsewhere.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed significantly to the preparation of this manuscript.

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- Writing – review and editing: All authors
- Final approval of the manuscript: All authors

All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. There are no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this manuscript.

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