

The romance of the first African diamonds discovered in Algeria

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In 1833, Paolo Francesco Peloso, consul of Piedmont-Sardinia at Algiers, sold to the French three diamonds reportedly found by a “native” in the auriferous gravels of Oued Ghoumel, near Constantine. The find was presented at the *Académie des Sciences* and *Société géologique de France*, and the diamonds were purchased for three Parisian collections (*École des Mines*, *Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle* [MNHN], and *De Drée*). Several American and European periodicals of the time echoed the find, which they presented as the first discovery of diamond ever made in Africa – the south-African diamonds were discovered later, in 1867. It was recalled, however, that Pliny says in his *Naturalis Historia* (lib. xxvii) that the diamond existed in Ethiopia. The geologists who worked in Algeria during the XIXth century were embarrassed about this find, which they considered as a hoax and thus soon forgave. The lack of new finds as well as the geology of the Constantine province, consisting mostly of Mesozoic marine sediments hardly favourable to the presence of diamonds, discredited the find. In 1849, Henri Fournel proposed a strange origin for these diamonds: in his *Richesse minérale de l'Algérie*, he imagines that they could have belonged to one of the adulterous women that, according to an ancient tale, were thrown into the Ghoumel gorge at Constantine during the Roman times. Although the romanised Numidians were certainly not that stupid to throw these unfortunate persons with their jewels, some attention has been paid to this hypothesis until today.

In the 1970s, Miocene lamproites were discovered in the Constantine province, reviving the interest for the Constantine diamonds, meanwhile forgotten. Only the diamond at MNHN is preserved. It is an octahedron of ~3 mm in size, with smoothed edges, whose weight does not exactly match the first descriptions. Some inclusions trapped in superficial micro-cavities consist of micas (muscovite and biotite/phlogopite), which are not typical of lamproites. Therefore, the enigma of the Constantine diamonds still remains.

In 1953, diamond was discovered in the Algerian Sahara. Since then, some 1500 diamonds have been collected from the saharian sands and regolith, at the suture zone between the West African craton and Panafrican domain, in the Reggane region (central Algerian Sahara). Unfortunately, the source rock and primary occurrences are still not identified.

Actually, these diamonds were known of the ancient Arabs, as testified by the Arabic name of the region, *Balid al-mās* (بلد الماس), that is “Country of the diamond”. They probably were the first diamonds found in Africa in historical times. In 1849, the French adventurer Louis Du Couret, alias Hadji Abd-El-Hamid Bey (he claimed to have been converted to Islam), initiated an expedition across Africa, from Tunis to Cap town. Evidently, the mission failed and ended in 1851 at Toggourt, to the north of the Algerian Sahara. Soon afterwards, Alexandre Dumas *père* published the chronicles of Du Couret's journeys across equatorial Africa, at the search of the so-called tailed men of the Niam-Niam tribe. This hoax discredited Du Couret, so that the French *Académie des Sciences* refused to publish the results of his last mission to Toggourt. Nevertheless, Du Couret had brought back from Toggourt valuable information and collections, in particular a manuscript in Arabic, written by Cid-el-Hadj Abd-El-Kader Ben-Abou-Beir-et-Touaty, that describes the precious stones from the Sahara, among which the diamonds from the Reggane region, found in “a dark stone harder than iron”. The collections and documents from Du Couret's mission are still under scrutiny, and there remains some chance to get more information on the source rock, identified by the ancient Arabs, but looked for in vain since decades by modern geologists.