

## The first African diamonds discovered by the ancient Arab-Berbers in Algeria

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In 1833, Paolo Peloso, consul of Piedmont-Sardinia at Algiers, sold to the French three diamonds reportedly found by a “native” in the Oued Ghoumel, near Constantine. The diamonds were purchased for three Parisian collections, among which the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle [MNHN]. Several American and European periodicals of the time presented the find 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* that diamond existed in Ethiopia.

The geologists who worked in Algeria during the XIXth century considered this find as a hoax. The lack of new finds, as well as the geology of the Constantine province consisting of Mesozoic marine sediments hardly favourable to the presence of diamonds, discredited the find. In 1849, Henri Fournel imagined that these diamonds 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. In the 1970s, Miocene lamproites were discovered in the Constantine province, reviving the interest for the Constantine diamonds. The diamond preserved at MNHN is a 3-mm-sized octahedron with smoothed edges. The abundance of radiohalos at its surface suggests that it is an old diamond, probably originating from the Sahara. The occurrence is doubtful but the diamond is real; it is suspected that it was subtracted to the Kasbah treasury in 1830.

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, that is “Country of the diamond”. In 1849, the French adventurer Louis Du Couret, alias Hadji Abd-El-Hamid Bey (he claimed to have been converted to Islam), initiated a mission across Africa, which ended in 1851 at Toggourt. Soon afterwards, Alexandre Dumas 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, and so the French Académie des Sciences refused to publish the results of his mission to Toggourt. Nevertheless, Du Couret had brought back from Toggourt (reportedly) two diamonds (now lost) and an unpublished manuscript (still preserved), written in Arabic by Cid-el-Hadj Abd-El-Kader Ben-Abou-Beir-et-Touaty. The author describes precious stones from the Sahara, among which diamonds found between Akabli and Ouallen, near Balid al-mās, in “a dark stone harder than iron” that resembles “the grains of pomegranate”. Et-Touaty's manuscript insinuates that the ancient Arabs or Berbers knew the source rock (a dark micro-conglomerate?), which is looked for in vain since decades by modern geologists!

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