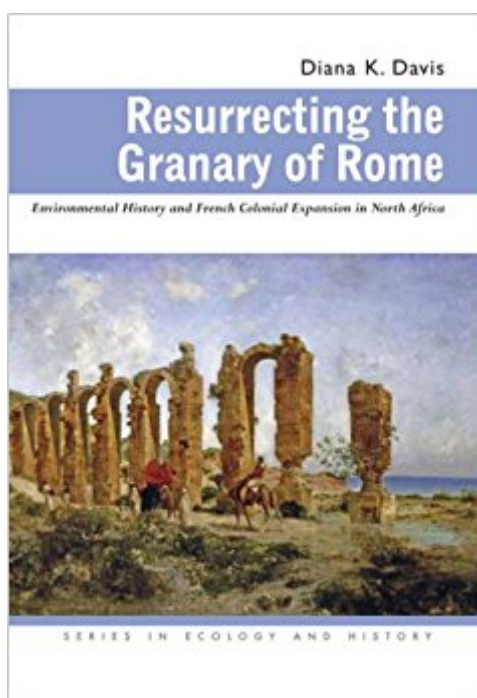


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# Resurrecting The Granary Of Rome: Environmental History And French Colonial Expansion In North Africa (Ecology & History)



## Synopsis

Winner of the George Perkins Marsh Prize for Best Book in Environmental History  
Winner of the Meridian Book Award for Outstanding Work in Geography  
James Blaut Award in recognition of innovative scholarship in Cultural and Political Ecology

Tales of deforestation and desertification in North Africa have been told from the Roman period to the present. Such stories of environmental decline in the Maghreb are still recounted by experts and are widely accepted without question today. International organizations such as the United Nations frequently invoke these inaccurate stories to justify environmental conservation and development projects in the arid and semiarid lands in North Africa and around the Mediterranean basin. Recent research in arid lands ecology and new paleoecological evidence, however, do not support many claims of deforestation, overgrazing, and desertification in this region. Diana K. Davis's pioneering analysis reveals the critical influence of French scientists and administrators who established much of the purported scientific basis of these stories during the colonial period in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, illustrating the key role of environmental narratives in imperial expansion. The processes set in place by the use of this narrative not only systematically disadvantaged the majority of North Africans but also led to profound changes in the landscape, some of which produced the land degradation that continues to plague the Maghreb today. Resurrecting the Granary of Rome exposes many of the political, economic, and ideological goals of the French colonial project in these arid lands and the resulting definition of desertification that continues to inform global environmental and development projects. The first book on the environmental history of the Maghreb, this volume reframes much conventional thinking about the North African environment. Davis's book is essential reading for those interested in global environmental history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Resurrecting the Granary of Rome is an excellent piece of scholarship, well written, well researched, and well argued.”  
• Journal of Historical Geography  
“Diana Davis has provided an outstanding contribution to the field of comparative environmental history. Informed by history, political philosophy, anthropology, forestry, and strikingly, art history—as well as Davis’s own field of geography—Resurrecting the Granary of Rome will provide a crucial touchstone for comparison to works on sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.”  
• African Studies Review  
“Davis’s study has done more than any other previous work to place the Middle East on the agenda of environmental history | this pathbreaking book should be required reading for all those interested in the history of the Maghrib, environmental history, and the history of colonialism.”  
• International Journal of Middle East Studies  
“(I) f one had to pick a single great book early this summer, it would have to be that of American historian Diana K. Davis, *Les Mythes environnementaux de la colonisation française au Maghreb*.  
• Le Monde  
“Relying on available paleoecological and other scientific evidence, Davis has punched holes into the declensionist narrative. Davis forcefully argues that the existing data proffers a totally different and oppositional view of the environmental history of the Mediterranean basin and immediate regions to ones constructed by the French in the eighteenth century.”  
• Environment and History

Diana K. Davis is an associate professor of history at the University of California at Davis. She has published in *Environmental History*, *Geoforum*, *Cultural Geographies*, the *Journal of Arid Environments*, and *Secheresse*.

Having just completed *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl*, a book about farmers in the Dust Bowl, I found this to be a refreshing counterpoint. Dr. Davis’ thesis in *RtGoR* is that the French colonists created a narrative in which Algeria was once a vast green sea of forests and grain, but that the nomads (read: barbaric Arabs)

ruined it with their primitive farming and especially herding methods. This "declensionist narrative" was used to justify the result: the French were morally obligated to re-civilise Algeria and restore the region to its former glory. The trouble was that it wasn't true. There were several topics in the book that intrigued me. Dr. Davis discusses various types of property recognized by the indigenous Algerians, including communal property used to rotate grazing animals to allow some land to remain fallow. She also briefly explores the interrelationship between deforestation and desiccationist theories that instructed 19th century environmentalism and their foundation in Christian mythology. An important theme in the book is the idea of environmentalism as a means of social control (colonists over natives). Finally, she describes how the declensionist narrative worked its way into early 20th century botanical science, resulting in continuing negative consequences for the region. The discussion of property interests me as an example of alternative social organization. Among other varieties of property, Davis describes briefly the concepts of melk, achaba, habous, and arsh: private property, "pasture contract" exchanging grazing rights for labor, land reserved for religious institutions, and communal property, respectively. Arsh (mostly pasture but some cultivation) is curious: if the system was stable, it challenges the Tragedy of the Commons meme. Under some circumstances -- perhaps only those of small, nomadic, strictly religious tribes -- communal property may be sustainable and productive. At university, I had an environmentalist friend who preached that North America had once been entirely covered in forest. It's awfully hard to believe Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico, Iowa, Kansas, etc. were "covered" in forest. On another occasion, I ran into a co-worker who believed the mirror image, that England had recently been completely barren of trees. It would have been awfully difficult to build half-timbered houses, hide in the Sherwood forest, build the world's most fearsome navy in the 19th century, or any number of other things if there were no trees on the island. Indeed, both ideas are born of the same myth, the idea that the world was once covered in forests (Eden), but since man's fall from grace, the forest has gradually given way to deserts. In part, this narrative was used to demonize and justify the French treatment of the Algerian natives who used fire as an agricultural tool (North Americans did the same with our natives). Call them reservations, cantonments, or concentration camps, colonists claim that nomadic peoples must be controlled, "attached" to the land, and turned into farmers if possible and imprisoned if not. In Algeria, they also forced them to use money by forcing them to pay taxes in cash rather than in kind. Having deprived them of their traditional, nomadic, pastoral ways, and having also forced them out of barter and into the cash system, many had no choice but to enter the workforce as a laborer for the new French masters. Algeria went from a land of traditional herding and farming to a colony of small farmers to a corporation-dominated

extension of France. Likewise, the American Plains transitioned from the land of the buffalo to a land of small land-grant farmers to ADM's central production facility. Both changes happened under cover of conservationist narratives - as it happens, those providing moral cover with a Christian-fall-from-Eden myth were almost literally Baptists to the corporate-colonial Bootleggers. The temptation to force such narratives onto history is strong; Jared Diamond made similar claims about Rapa Nui (Easter Island) that have since been debunked, and for similar reasons (European colonial policies). Other areas of interest included a review of art and literature of the 19th century. Dr. Davis shows how the narrative was created and propagated through various social, academic, political, and popular avenues. The book concludes much stronger than it begins. The description of the route by which the declensionist narrative entered botanical science and thereby continues to influence policy is frightening. We think of science as being rational and above politics, but Dr. Davis shows persuasively -- in this case at least -- that the accepted science is built on an artificial, racist, state-capitalist scam. She notes that the UN and several North African countries have spent millions on misguided attempts to restore a forest that never existed. Can we think of other "science-based" environmental programs on which politicians are proposing to force social change and expend scarce resources on a massive scale? Just how sure of the science are we?

This is a polemical work, it alleges, with considerable fairness that North African Environmental History is based upon a self serving colonial narrative. However, it never escapes its polemical tone. It is a history of environmental historical theory almost devoid of science. It's scientific sources are both scarce and poorly chosen, and it places this in one of the crudest of all postcolonial narratives of French history. In this work, the nomads and pastoralists are all good, Algerian indigenous agriculturalists, both Arab and Berber are only here as victims (especially the Arab as the Kabyle are pronounced to be favored) and the pied noirs are all les grand colons, with huge estates, when in fact the vast portion of European settlers lived in considerable poverty at what could be charitably described as a petit bourgeois level.. The very long and tortured history of the various North African forestry services is rendered into a manichean fight between pro and anti native, and even this is reduced to acceptance of a narrative of desertification. Those who believe that Algeria can be made more agriculturally productive are the villains while those who believe that marginal semi nomadic stock raising is the best use of the land are the angels. This combine with a dramatic conflation of the Mahgreb's many ecological regions into one in polemic, no matter how carefully they are separated in the authors geographical essay, and one gets a grossly distorted view. An excellent example of this is that the Algerian Forest Service and those involved in the reforestation

campaign were often in long drawn out conflicts with the Grand Colons, both private and corporate throughout the entire period. A situation only barely hinted at in the text. Similar things can be seen with the treatment of eucalyptus, whose widespread planting across the Mediterranean and role in malaria control is completely elided. The author spends a considerable amount of time condemning "Capitalist Production" and the monetary economy, and obliquely attacking the modern post colonial states for their continuation of these policies, but in the more fertile areas this just means an opposition to modernity itself. But of all my objections, the one that I feel most strongly is her very confused discussion of the effects of forestation on water. Admittedly my background is in hydrogeology, but to claim that forest do not reduce runoff and flooding in one passage and then claim that they reduce the water table and dry out wells in another is both incoherent and crude. Cork Oak are not Eucalyptus, and these are controversial matters that can not be understood from one or two heavily politicized sources, as Davis does. Devotion to tree planting and forestry are hardly unique to European culture, and the subject is quite complicated, a fact that has been recognized since the 19th century, particularly in France. But if I feel so strongly about these defects, why give the book four stars? Well it is because in spite of all of the above the author makes a very compelling argument about how environmental rhetoric is used in an Imperialist context to dispossess the poorest and most disadvantaged, how many of our environmental theories, especially those related to land use, are based on the most naked prejudice, not just the prejudice of racism but also of class. And she gives a compelling suggestion that in light of what we now know about concepts such as climax forests, that the entire basis for our Mediterranean climate may be fundamentally flawed. Of course others have addressed these issues before, but not in English. As a final aside, I would point out that much of Southern Europe has a climate and environment quite similar to that of the more fertile regions of the Maghreb, and this includes parts of the south of France. The French foresters and botanists who tried to reconstruct paleolandscapes were not so ignorant as she suggests, and the classical sources, if read carefully have often been confirmed by modern work, in Northern Algeria in particular.

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