

Burtal Haider Palace: The Expression of Italian Art in Mid-19th-Century Tunisian Wall Coverings

Sabrina Ghattas¹; Wided Melliti²

¹Research Laboratory for Sustainable Cities and Environment (VDEC),
National School of Architecture and Urban Planning of Tunis (ENAU), University of Carthage, Tunis,
Tunisia

²Laboratory of Maghreb Archaeology and Architecture (LAAM),
Higher School of Design Sciences and Technologies (ESSTD), University of Manouba, Tunis, Tunisia

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Abstract: The Burtal Haider Summer Palace in Tunisia stands as a remarkable testament to the beylical court's pronounced interest in Italian artistic traditions. Constructed in the mid-19th century, the building is distinguished by its use of ceramic tiles drawn from a corpus of approximately twenty exclusively Neapolitan designs. These decorative elements are arranged according to structured compositional principles—distributed in registers, framed panels, or as baseboards—reflecting the ornamental conventions of the period. The tiles adorning the upper-level large room and the singular T-shaped chamber remain in a commendable state of preservation and feature exclusively floral motifs. The palace is further enhanced by coffered ceilings painted with Italian Rococo patterns, which have been meticulously restored. Together, these elements form a coherent stylistic ensemble with the polychrome ceramic cladding. This article aims to examine the edifice from both architectural and decorative perspectives, with the objective of identifying the interplay between Italian influences and local traditions.

Keywords: Burtal Haider Palace; 19th Century; Tunisia; Architecture; Decorative Cladding; Cermaic Tiles; Italian Influences.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Many richly decorated Beylical palaces and residences in and around Tunis remain overlooked, despite their architectural significance. These structures were built during the rule of the Beys, who ruled Tunisia from the early 17th century until the republic was founded in 1957.

Burtal Haider, also known as the « Petit Palais » (little palace in French), was built near Bardo, Tunisia, in 1856 by Hussyn Bacha Bey (who reigned from 1824 to 1835). It stands as a notable example of these often overlooked architectural works. The estate's orchard was estimated to cover an area of 139 hectares. The property was later transferred to the husband of his daughter, Haider Sâhib al-Tâbi, from whom it derived the name Henchir el-Bey. In 1890, it was sold to Shalum Ven Mushi Kuhin el-Sanuhi. Subsequently, it was acquired by Alî Bacha Bey (reigned 1882–1902) for 75,000 Riel. In 1906, Mohamed El-Hedi Bacha Bey (reigned 1902–1906) transferred the estate to his daughter Beya Zubeida, wife of Rachid, son of Haider Sâhib al-Tâbi. The property then regained its name « Burtal Haider ». Over time, the orchards were subdivided and sold repeatedly to French and Italian buyers. Beya Zubeida retained only the Burj (fortified dwelling in Arabic) and the «

petite Saniya » (little garden in Arabic), which she passed on to her descendants in the form of Habous or wakf (endowment in Arabic where property is permanently immobilized for religious, charitable, or public good purposes) until 1951 [1]. Administratively, the palace falls under the jurisdiction of the Governorate of Tunis, specifically within the municipality of Le Bardo. Today, the Burj and its surrounding orchards cover a reduced area of only 3 hectares and 18 ares. The palace currently houses the High Academy of War, operating under the authority of the Ministry of National Defense. It occupies the northeastern section of the petite Saniya.

In the present article, we aim to highlight the distinctive use of exclusively Italian ceramic cladding that enhances the paneling of this monument. Particular attention will be given to the stylistic features of these decorative elements and to the beylical court's fascination with Western architectural traditions.

II. THE GROUND FLOOR OF THE PALACE

The palace is constructed in an Italian architectural style that gained prominence from the second half of the 19th century onward. It spans two floors and incorporates both local

architectural and architectonic elements, as well as Western influences, in line with other beylical palaces and residences built in the Medina and the suburbs of the Regency. Notable examples include the palaces of *Kheireddine*, *Khaznadar*, and *Burj Zarrouk* in Carthage, as well as the palaces of *Kheireddine* and *Ali Zarrouk* in *La Manouba* [2].

Access to the palace is provided through an eastern entrance. The building opens onto a large courtyard adorned with a chalice-shaped fountain, aligned with the axis of the main entrance. The fountain is carved from a block of white marble and flows into an octagonal basin. The principal façade, Italianate in style, features rectangular barred windows arranged in perfect axial symmetry and rhythmic composition.



Fig 1 Burtal Haider Palace Facade (Photo by Authors)

The monumental main door is framed within a *kadhel* marble rectangle and topped by a full-centered arch. Above it rests a wooden *moucharabieh* (openwork wooden architectural structure) with openwork carving, supported by wrought iron brackets. On either side are windows with molded frames.

The facade is bordered by a wide frieze of glazed green tiles. Flanking the entrance are two massive platforms, each accessible via a twenty-step stone staircase. At each end, two wells are embedded in trapdoors and equipped with electric pumps to supply water to the two ovoid pools.



Fig 2 Ovoid Pool (Photo by Authors)

The main entrance leads to the first vestibule, known as the *Driba* (antechamber in Arabic). Rectangular in shape, it is topped by a barrel vault and paved with white Carrara marble. The walls are enhanced with large Italian tiles [4] of type *CE*

228, arranged in the central register and separated by 3 cm-wide black borders. The upper and lower registers are flanked by two rows of Neapolitan tiles of type *CE* 765.

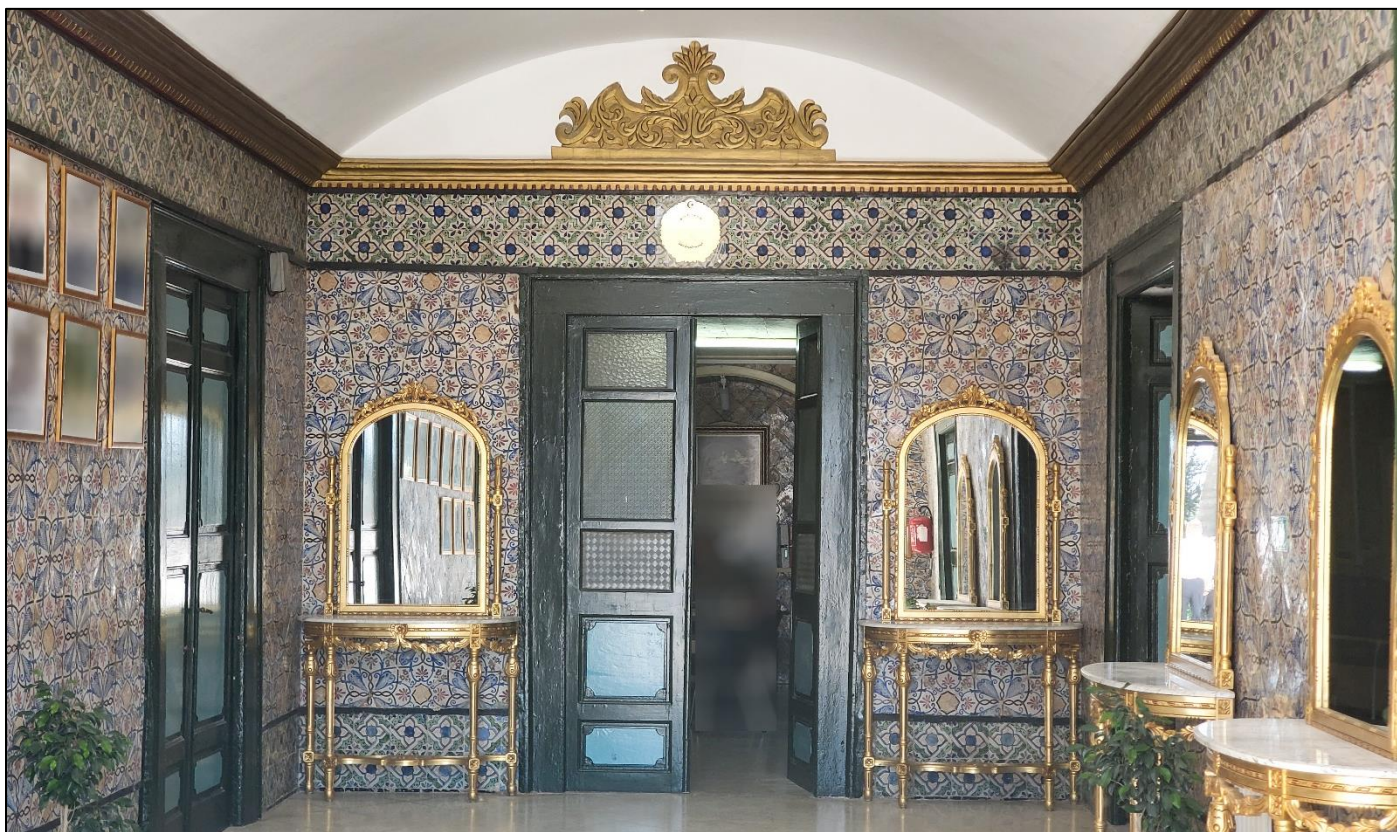


Fig 3 Main Entrance of the Palace (Photo by Authors)



Fig 4 CE 228 Tiles (Photo by Authors)

These tiles were produced using two distinct pictorial techniques: initially hand-painted, then outlined using stencil methods to facilitate swift execution [5]. Dominated by geometric motifs, the tiles feature interlaced bands forming a network of rosettes with stylized eight-petal daisies at their

centers, alternating with a pattern of quadrilobed medallions. The polychrome register is bordered by a wide gilded wooden frieze. A crown of gilded acanthus leaves was added to the western side, rising along the axis of the door and reaching the curvature of the vault.



Fig 5 Vestibule Ceramic Tiles (Photo by Authors)

The vestibule is adorned with fifteen photographs of successive directors who have overseen the military school. Four rooms, each topped with groin vaults, open onto the *Driba*, symmetrically arranged in pairs on the north and south

sides of the main entrance. The vestibule leads into a rectangular *Skifa* (vestibule in Arabic), adjacent to the staircase that ascends to the upper floor.

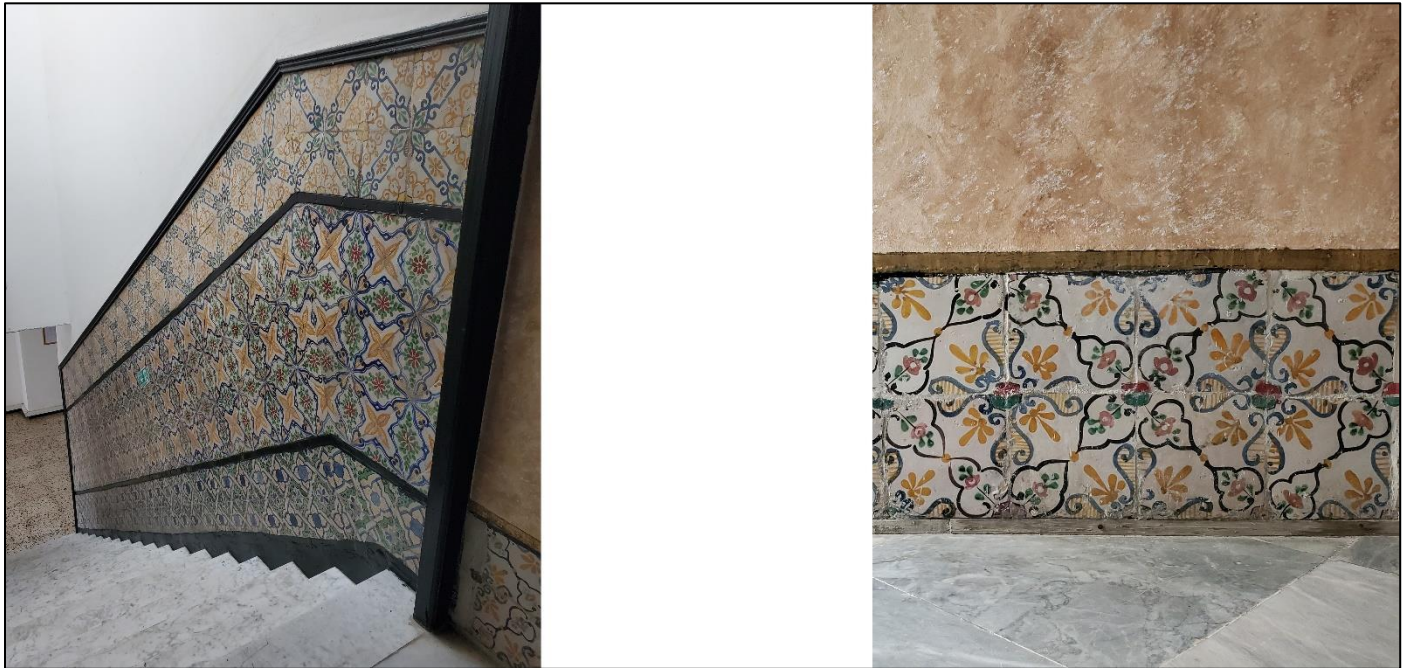


Fig 6 Ceramic Tiles of the Staircase (Left) and vestibule (Right) (Photos by Authors)

On the southern side, the palace opens onto a subsidiary space that formerly served as the servants' quarters. This wing is characterized by its austerity and the absence of decorative elements. The walls were coated in a brown, granulated-texture finish, and the flooring consists of diagonally laid white marble tiles measuring 50×50 cm. This marble imported from Italy was widely used in the official and religious buildings of Tunis between the 17th and 20th centuries, particularly marble imported from *Carrara* [6].

The straight staircase leading to the upper floor is paved with large slabs of Carrara marble. The walls of the stairwell are adorned with Neapolitan tiles arranged in registers that follow the incline of the stairs. The lower tiles are of type *CE 765*, topped by a broad band of *CE 668* tiles. These feature a network of quadrilobed rosettes with foliate ornamentation alternating with cruciform motifs. The upper register is composed of *CE 171* tiles, showcasing large rosettes with floral patterns and slender palmettes, all inscribed within elongated hexagons.



Fig 7 CE 171 Tiles (Left) and CE 668 Tiles (Right) (Photos by Authors)

The eastern side of the ground floor contains the service areas: kitchens, storage rooms, and annexes. These spaces are topped with groin vaults that support the upper level and are organized around an open-air rectangular large room. A single

portico extends along the northern side, while the southern side is punctuated by a double-leaf door that formerly led to the *Saniya*. Today, these subsidiary spaces are integrated into the military base.

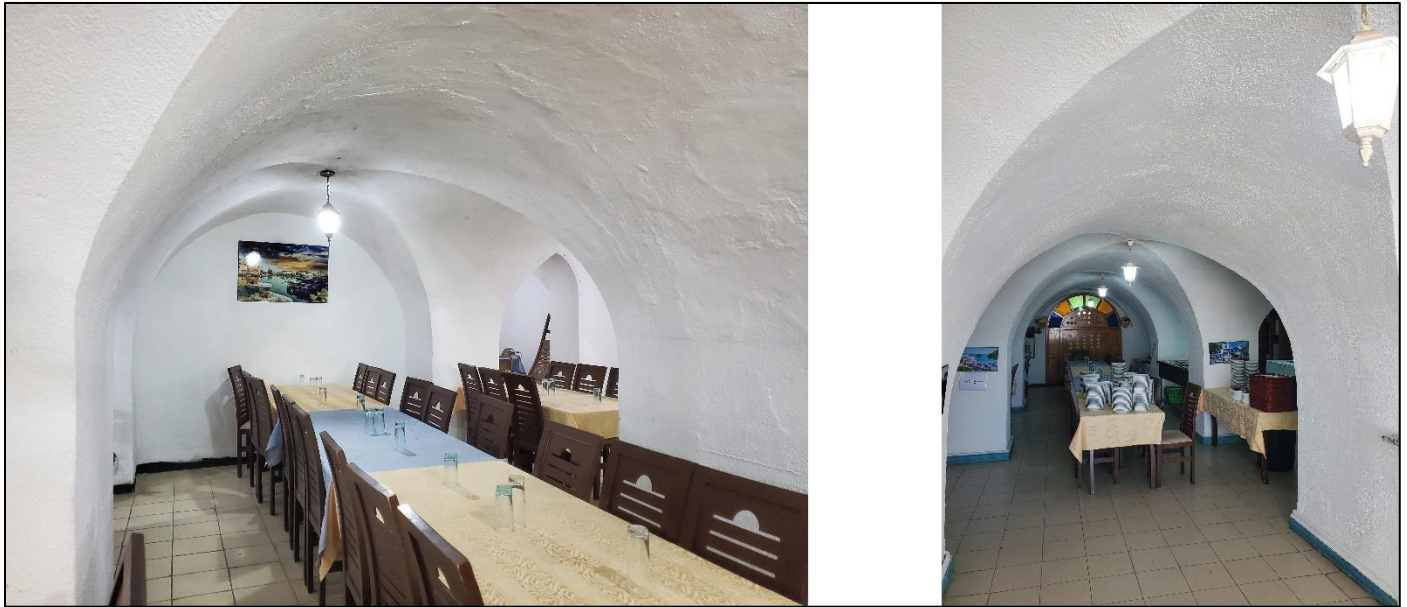


Fig 8 The Dining Room Surmounted by Cross Vaults which Support the Upper Floor (Photos by Authors)

III. FIRST FLOOR DESCRIPTION

The room adjacent to the staircase is rectangular in shape. The Italian tiles [7], arranged in a double row, form a simple baseboard. These *CE 83* specimens are adorned with exclusively floral motifs, set within polylobed and scalloped rosettes.

➤ *The Large Room*

The upper floor is distinguished by its exceptional Italianate architectonic features, setting it apart from other summer residences. The upper courtyard serves as a quintessential example of beylical palatial architecture [8] and stands as the most splendid and richly adorned space within the monument. Its coffered ceiling, crafted from painted wood,

enhances the overall elegance of the interior. Friezes featuring multicolored floral motifs, volutes, and stylized palmettes reflect a refined aesthetic and a mastery of Italianate craftsmanship [9]. The ceiling is divided into three distinct and superimposed registers.

The lower frieze consists of two staggered frames inclined inward. The first is composed of broad festooned, molded, and gilded wooden bands. The second is rendered in nuanced browns and mahogany tones set against a saturated crimson background, adorned with palmettes, volutes, and cornucopias. The central sections of the eastern and western sides feature frescoes depicting a bridge spanning a valley, while the northern and southern sides are flanked by Roman aqueducts set within landscapes containing adjacent buildings.

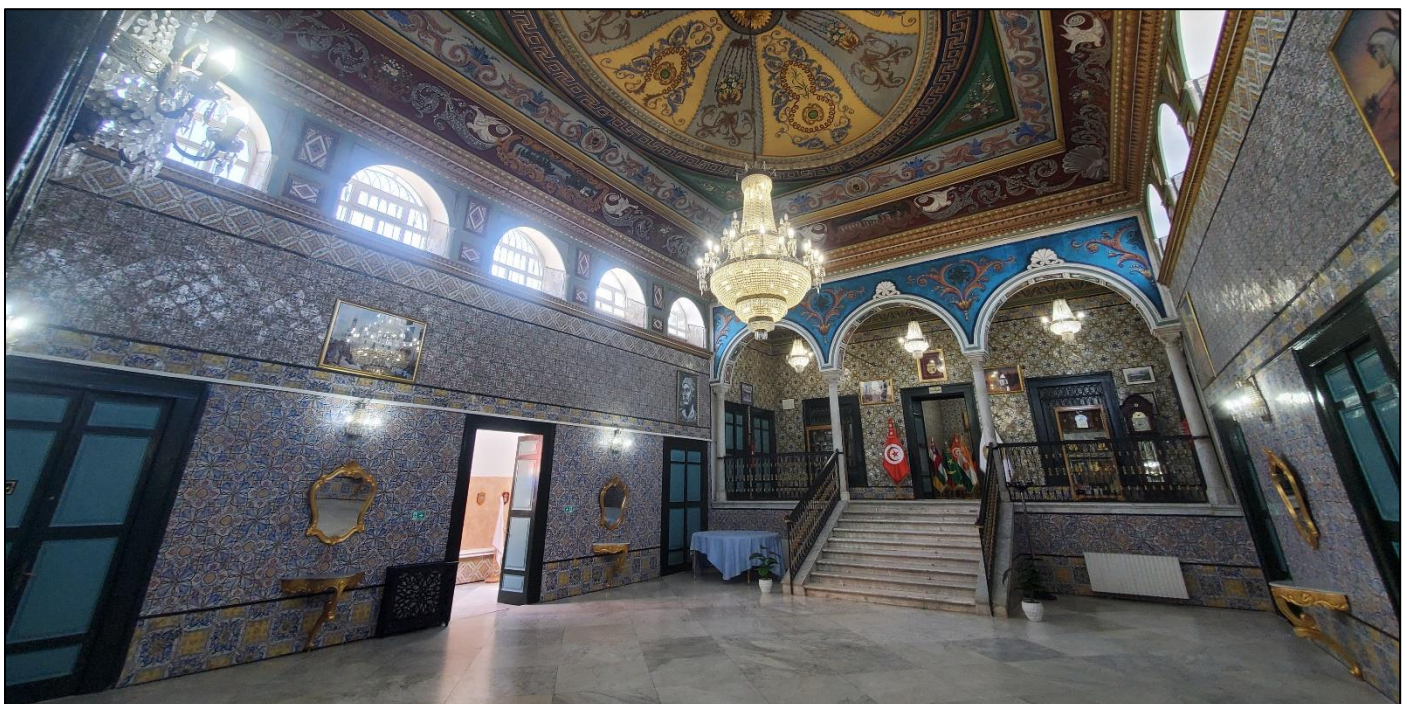


Fig 9 The Large Room on the First Floor (Photo by Authors)

The corners are embellished with large Italian oyster shells from which interlaced vegetal trellises emerge, highlighted with shaded whites to create depth and a play of light and shadow. These trellises connect to a Renaissance-

style vase with serpentine handles, decorated with blue and white floral scrollwork. The same motifs are mirrored on the opposite frieze, with the addition of a mythical phoenix bearing a long, shaded white tail accented with shimmering silver.

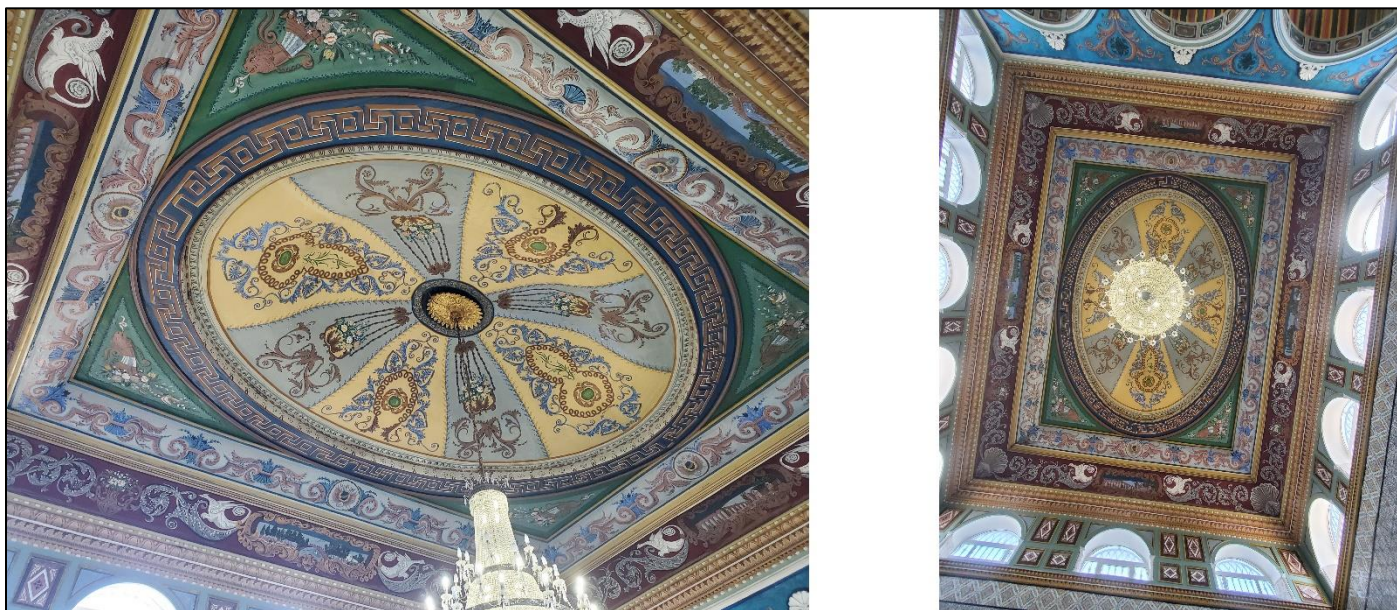


Fig 10 Ovoid Dome (Photos by Authors)

A second frieze is adorned with rosettes, flags, and landscape flourishes. The background features hues of pale sky blue and grayish blue. The third register is decorated with so-called “Greek” motifs, finely embossed in relief against a cobalt blue background. At its center lies a massive rosette with Italianate floral designs [10].

The ovoid base is divided into eight irregular, alternating bicolored compartments, treated in ochre yellow and light blue, and embellished with copper and chestnut-toned vegetal branches. The walls are entirely clad in Neapolitan tiles of shimmering polychrome. These are arranged in five superimposed registers.

The lower register consists of Neapolitan tiles of type *CE 840*. These tiles form a network of rosettes enclosed within broad bands, alternating with a second type of rosette featuring hatched brackets and stylized fleur-de-lis motifs. The second register, the most expansive, is composed of *CE 288* tiles, sketched freehand. These are adorned with foliate designs, stylized lotus flowers, vine tendrils, and hatched patterns. This register aligns with the height of the doorways and is bordered by a narrow black frieze, 3 cm wide, known as *Kthib*.

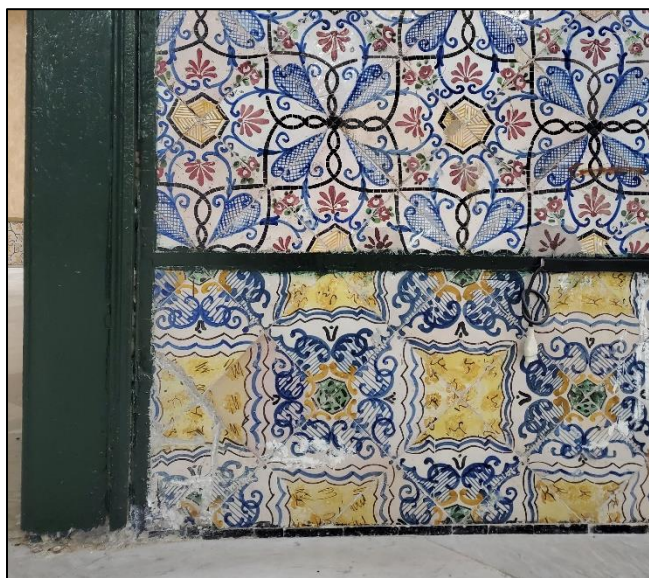


Fig 11 Lower Registers 1 and 2 in Neapolitan Tiles (Photo by the Authors)



Fig 12 Registers 3, 4 et 5 (Photo by the Authors)

A third band of *CE 840* tiles is positioned above the doorways. The fourth register consists of five aligned rows of *CE 449* tiles, forming a network of quadrilobed medallions. These are adorned with slender roses, stylized palmettes, and

hatched brackets. Above this lies a final, narrow register composed of Neapolitan *CE 836* tiles. These feature a pattern of concentric square rosettes, enclosed within broad bands decorated with brackets and floral scrollwork.

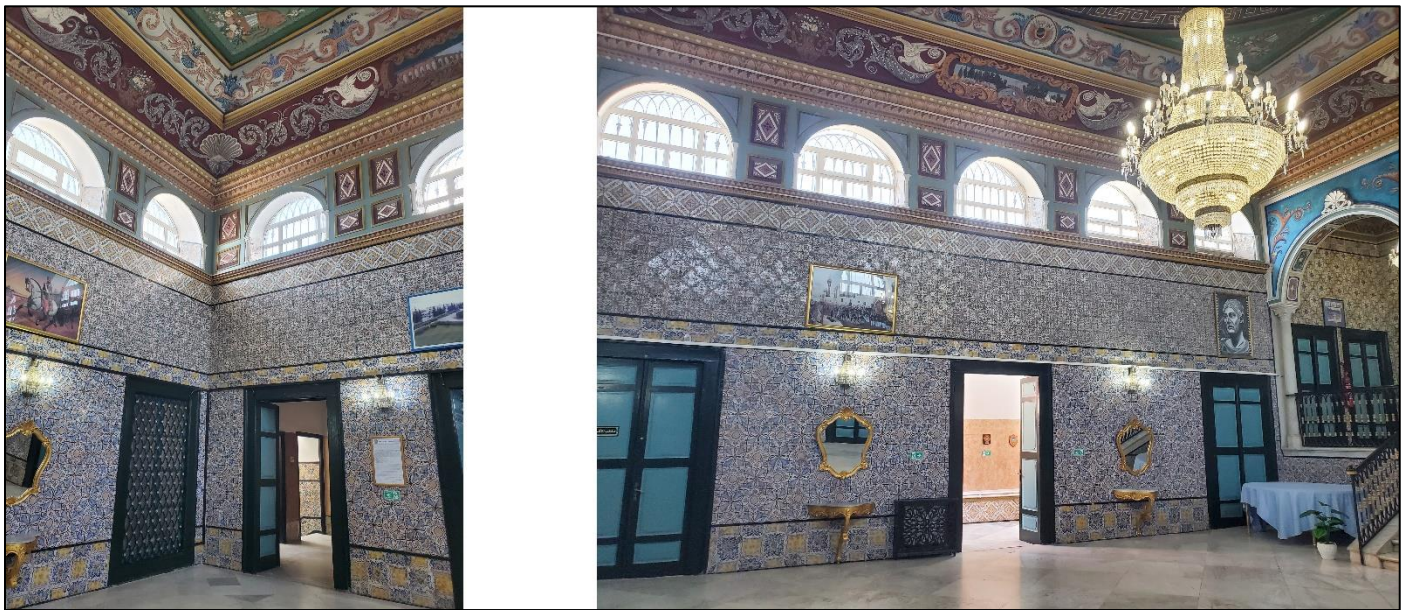


Fig 13 The Five Superimposed Registers (Photos by the Authors)

This expansive Neapolitan tile cladding is surmounted by twelve windows set within arched alcoves. These are further embellished with *CE 171* tiles. The reserved spaces are enhanced with wooden panels painted with rosette motifs. The

tilework of the covered upper-floor large room features exclusively floral designs, inscribed within quadrilobed or polylobed rosettes, harmonizing with the large room's lush, vegetal ambiance.



Fig 14 The Gallery with Three Arches (Photo by the Authors)

The upper floor contains several rooms distributed along the eastern and western wings of the palace. In the southern wing lies an elongated room that opens onto a long corridor and currently houses the administration of the military school. The most richly appointed room is located on the eastern side. It is

preceded by a gallery with three arches, supported by Carrara marble columns topped with composite capitals adorned with crescent motifs. A broad staircase of ten steps is secured by an Italianate wrought iron balustrade.



Fig 15 Iron Balustrade (Photo by the Authors)

The rectangular gallery is adorned with painted wooden beams, alternating in green and red—colors emblematic of the Husaynid beys [11]. It is also clad in Neapolitan tiles of type

CE 52b, which constitute the dominant central register. These are framed by two friezes composed of Neapolitan *CE 840* tiles.

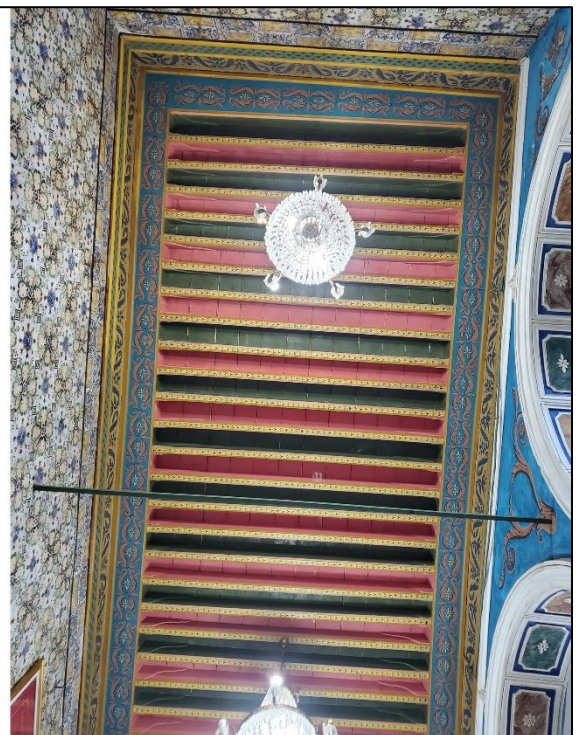


Fig 16 CE 52b (Left) and Painted Wooden Beams (Right) (Photos by the Authors)

➤ The T-Shaped Master Bedroom

Positioned along the axis of the gallery, this room is reserved for the director of the military school. It is T-shaped and features a dazzling decorative scheme. The two wings are identical and covered with painted coffered wooden ceilings in the Italianate style [12]. The background is flanked by floral

motifs, acanthus leaves, stylized foliage, and sinuous grape clusters. The walls are entirely clad in exclusively Italian tiles, arranged in three registers that extend uniformly across the main room *Kbû* (Middle alcove in Arabic) and its two adjoining wings.

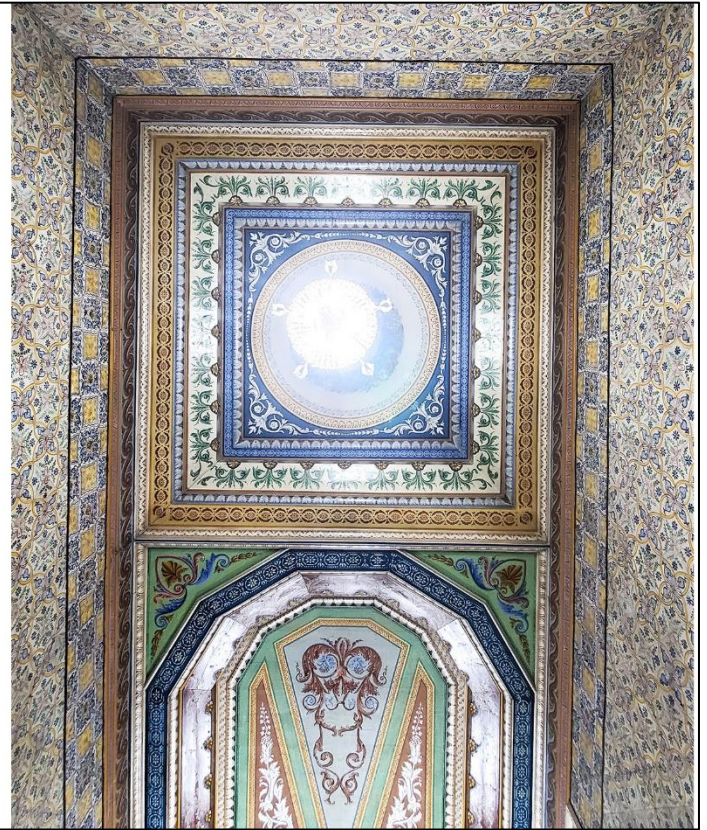
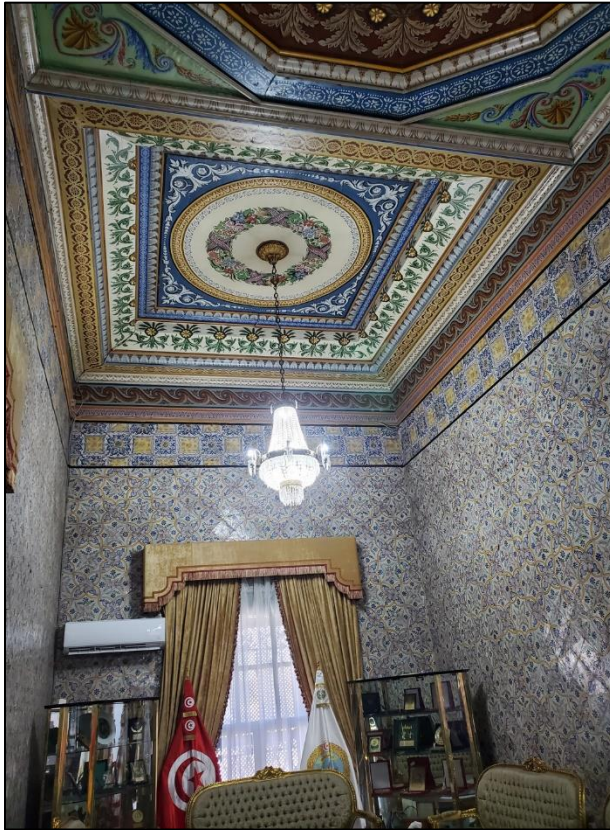


Fig 17 The T-Shaped Room, Left Wing Relative to the Entrance (Photos by the Authors)

The lower register is the most prominent, showcasing Neapolitan tiles of type *CE 841*. This variant features quadrilobed rosettes and octagons with contoured borders. Its foliate ornamentation is exceptional, with lotus flowers radiating from the centers. Stylized daisies are intertwined with sinuous stems, creating a dynamic background pattern.

The upper register consists of a succession of *CE 840* tiles, previously used in the upper-floor large room. The *Kbû* is preceded by a scalloped arch with tympanums.



Fig 18 CE 841 Neapolitan Tiles (Photo by the Authors)



Fig 19 Painted Ceiling of the T-Shaped Room (Photo by the Authors)

The coffered wooden ceiling is embellished with Rococo floral motifs, including bouquets, foliate rosettes, and floral scrolls extending across a stretched polygonal background. The lower register is the most prominent, composed of juxtaposed Neapolitan tiles of type CE 287. These tiles feature a network of polylobed medallions adorned with floral elements.



Fig 20 Ceiling Detail of the T-Shaped Room
(Photo by the Authors)

➤ The Officers' Quarters

These rooms are concentrated in the south and west wings. They are narrow and feature exclusively Italian wall coverings. These are distributed differently in compositions of registers, plinths, or within large frames, among others. *CE 81a* tiles flank the thick jambs of the windows, which are set into 80-cm-wide load-bearing walls.

The same specimens surmount a register of *CE 839* tiles. They feature a network of rosettes adorned with eight-pointed star elements, alternating with medallions with lobed (or scrolled) borders. These are created using ogee arches and feature foliate ornamentation with stylized floral scrollwork

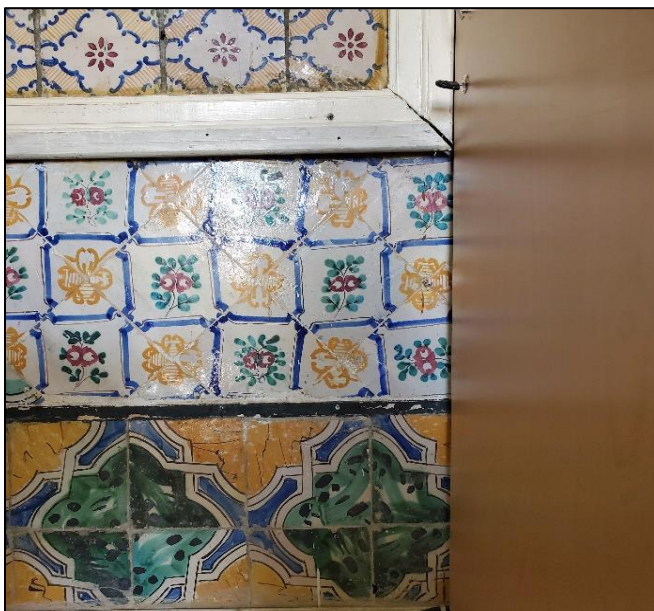


Fig 21 One of the wall Decorations in the Officers' Quarters
Made of Ceramic Tiles. CE 198 Tiles (Bottom). CE 75 Tile
(Middle) CE 786 Tiles (Top). Photo by the Authors

The tiles are stenciled following the *CE 756* type. Featuring cobalt blue, ochre yellow, and burgundy red on a milky white background, these tiles have a modular and symmetrical composition along four axes: vertical, horizontal, and two median obliques. They form a network of polygonal medallions framed by ogee arches. These alternate with squares set on point (diamond-shaped) and adorned with stylized daisies. The reserved areas are treated with parallel, freehand-sketched hatching. They form a thick plinth. Other specimens of the *CE 75* type surmount a lower register of *CE 198* tiles.

CE 837 and *CE 838* tiles are arranged in a register composition and decorate an officer's room. Another spacious room is clad exclusively in Italian tiles featuring *CE 51* geometric patterns. They were treated freehand and then using the stencil technique, allowing for convenient and rapid execution. The lower register of the room is enhanced with *CE 454* tiles, featuring ogee arches sketched onto a regular grid.



Fig 22 One of the wall Decorations in the Officers' Quarters
Made of CE 837 Tiles (Photo by the Authors)



Fig 23 CE 51 Tiles (Bottom). CE 838 Tiles (Top)
(Photo by the Authors)

IV. CONCLUSION

This study allowed for the documentation of the interior décor of Burtal Haider, which remains a building with difficult access as it houses military institutions.

The main hypothesis, according to which the monument is distinguished by the exclusive use of Italian ceramic cladding, was supported by the inventory of the identified tile types (CE 228, CE 765, CE 840, etc.). These decorative elements are not isolated but form complex compositions in superimposed registers, particularly in state rooms such as the large room on the first floor and the T-shaped master bedroom.

The examination of the tile production techniques (Tab.1), combining hand-painting and stenciling, underscores a pursuit of rapid execution and maximum visual effect. Stylistically, the predominance of floral and geometric motifs, inscribed within polylobed rosettes or quadrilobed medallions, grants the palace an aesthetic unity while reflecting adherence to contemporary Italian decorative standards.

Table 1 Identification and Attribution of the Parietal Ceramics of Burtal Haider (1856)

<i>Freehand drawn tiles</i>	<i>CE 21, CE 52b, CE 75, CE 81a, CE 83, CE 171, CE 168, CE 287, CE 288, CE 449, CE 668, CE 836, CE 840 et CE 841.</i>
<i>Stenciled tiles</i>	<i>CE 51, CE 454, CE 756, CE 838, CE 837, CE 839 et CE 840.</i>

The analysis of the cladding revealed a distinct predilection for exclusively Italian tiles. This preference is particularly notable in the context of a negation of the local Qallaline ceramics, whose absence is total, including in the common areas. This observation aligns with the decline of the Qallaline workshops and the adoption of purely Western stylistic forms in the mid-nineteenth century.

The density and exclusivity of the Italian décor within the palace confirm that the building is a major testimony to the adoption of the Italianate style in the Regency of Tunis in the mid-nineteenth century.

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