

Colonial Viticulture and Demographic Change in Eastern Algeria (c. 1900–1950)

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This paper examines the relationship between colonial viticulture and demographic change in Constantine, an eastern Algerian department under French rule between 1901 and 1954. Colonial viticulture was an exclusive, export-oriented crop dominated by European settlers, and historians have often described it as an extractive activity. Yet there is limited systematic evidence on how specialization in viticulture related to indigenous demographic patterns.

To address this question, we construct a new municipal-level dataset combining colonial censuses, agricultural statistics, viticulture directories, and historical maps, covering nearly one hundred communes across nine census waves. We also use vineyard ownership records to capture land concentration. In parallel, we complement the quantitative evidence with a systematic text analysis of contemporary colonial reports and local accounts, in order to trace how issues such as labor scarcity, vineyard expansion, and rural transformation were discussed and perceived at the time. This combined strategy makes it possible to situate demographic outcomes within the wider institutional and economic context of colonial Algeria.

Our preliminary results suggest that communes with higher viticulture intensity experienced faster indigenous population growth. While differences across communes were modest in the early 1900s, they widened substantially after the 1920s. By 1954, the indigenous population index in the most wine-intensive communes was nearly three times higher than in those with little or no viticulture. These patterns are robust to alternative specifications and appear to be associated with both the expansion of vineyards and the degree of land concentration.

Taken together, these findings indicate that viticulture shaped demographic patterns in Constantine by concentrating indigenous population growth in areas of cash-crop expansion. Rather than excluding indigenous groups from settler agriculture, viticulture coincided with a substantial increase in their population density. The combination of new quantitative evidence and systematic analysis of contemporary sources sheds fresh light on the demographic dimensions of colonial extractive institutions. More broadly, it highlights the importance of integrating demographic history, agricultural specialization, and textual evidence when assessing the long-term legacies of colonial economies.