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Tripolitania in the Roman Empire and beyond

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Review by

Antonio Ibba, Università degli Studi di Sassari.

ibbanto@uniss.it

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[Authors and titles are listed at the end of the review]

The extensive coastal region stretching between Gabès (*Tacape*) in Tunisia and Ras el-Aàli (*Arae Philenorum*) in Libya, bounded to the south by the 150 mm annual rainfall isohyet (beyond which the cultivation of the olive tree was impossible), was officially incorporated into the Roman Empire only with the establishment of the province of *Africa Proconsularis* and was probably placed under the jurisdiction of the *legatus dioecesis Karthaginis*. The toponym *Tripolitania* appears only at the beginning of the third century CE, whereas earlier the term *Emporia* was preferred, though in fact it referred solely to the coastal strip. Finally, Diocletian, at some point between 294 and 303 CE, transformed the region into an autonomous province, a status it retained at least until the arrival of the Vandals^[1].

The volume edited by Niccolò Mugnai does not aim to reconstruct the *histoire événementielle* nor to provide a comprehensive overview of the economy, society, or monuments of this vast

territory. Rather, through eleven essays authored by both emerging specialists and established scholars, it seeks—on methodologically innovative and markedly interdisciplinary grounds—to revisit certain aspects of the region’s socio-economic life, distancing itself from the stereotypes of colonial scholarship. This perspective is outlined from the outset in Mugnai’s own introduction, which offers a useful overview of the most recent scholarship, including popularizing works, that have contributed to reshaping the traditional historiographical image of *Tripolitania*. The introduction concludes with a concise and well-conceived chronological table spanning 700 BCE to 1051 CE, intended to assist the non-specialist reader in situating the contributions to the volume within their appropriate chronological framework.

Despite differences in style (inevitable in a multi-authored work), the contributors collectively seek to demonstrate how contact between Berbers and Romans fostered the emergence of an original culture, in which Hellenistic-Italic models introduced by merchants, officials, soldiers, and immigrants were reworked in the light of the experiences and values of indigenous populations. These processes generated specificities, continuities, and innovations that nonetheless do not preclude viewing *Tripolitania* as an integral part of the wider Roman world.

The contributions may be grouped into four major thematic strands. The first is devoted to the urban development of the principal cities and to their decorative programs, which allow us to assess the tastes and economic capacities of patrons, as well as the artistic skills and sensibilities of the craftsmen involved. Particular attention is paid to the building activity at *Sabratha* in the Flavian period and at *Lepcis Magna* under the Severans. In the case of *Sabratha*, future research will need to confirm whether a duplication of the forum occurred here as well, analogous to that attested in other communities of *Africa Proconsularis* in the same period, possibly foreshadowing the grant of municipal status, traditionally assumed to have been conferred by Trajan or Marcus Aurelius^[2]. For *Lepcis Magna*, by contrast, the rich epigraphic documentation makes it possible to observe the

sustained commitment of the *nobilitas Lepcitana* to the renewal of the city's monumental fabric through private initiative, without awaiting imperial financial intervention. This practice, already attested between the age of Caesar and Nero, developed further during the second century as local élites sought to demonstrate their full adherence to the imperial program and to Roman customs, while nonetheless maintaining a strong link with their community of origin^[3]. An indication of the economic resources available to these notables can be inferred from the magnificent mosaic pavements studied by Will Wootton, which adorned public and private buildings in both urban and rural contexts throughout *Tripolitania*. As already noted in the scholarly literature, these mosaics combine local features with unmistakable influences from Carthage, *Byzacena*, *Cyrenaica*, and Egypt, and depict aspects of daily life as well as the costly *munera* offered by these figures to the populace in order to secure consensus and consolidate their politico-economic primacy^[4].

Wootton's valuable survey also introduces the second strand of research, devoted to settlement dynamics in the pre-desert zone, the persistence of indigenous traditions, and changes in the economy and organization of labor, as well as the emergence of *gsur* (fortified farms) and the evolution of funerary mausolea. Set alongside simple farmsteads and collective necropoleis, these monuments testify to the continued political and military dominance of certain wealthy Berber families over the region, in accordance with tradition but through mechanisms recognized and regulated by imperial authorities. These mechanisms are well known and widely attested across the Maghreb, from Morocco to Libya; however, the contribution by Julia Nikolaus and Nichole Sheldrick stands out for its close integration of the mechanisms of self-representation among the living with those of the dead, restoring a sense of unity to a phenomenon that had at times been fragmented in earlier studies.

A third section is devoted to the military sphere and to the organization of the *limes* that regulated the movement of goods and labour between the coast and the desert, without constituting an insurmountable barrier. Michael Mackensen's lucid synthesis

focuses on the emergence and development of the *limes Tripolitanus* between the third century and Late Antiquity, seeking to clarify the size of the forces involved and the nature of certain installations within the frontier system, up to its radical reorganization under Diocletian (or perhaps more precisely under Maximian)^[5]. Florian Schimmer's shorter contribution addresses the functioning of the *annona militaris* during the third century and the relationship between farms and fortlets prior to the appearance of *praepositi*, *tribuni*, and *decuriones* attested in later sources. Finally, Sebastian Schmid provides an archaeological-epigraphic catalogue of the cults practised by soldiers stationed in this sector, noting that while they remained closely tied to official religion, they did not disdain local deities, which were nevertheless worshipped only in small sanctuaries located outside the encampments.

The final section is devoted to regional studies, with an explicit opening towards the Early Middle Ages already signaled in the title, in order to demonstrate that the end of the Roman Empire and the Arab conquest did not bring about an abrupt termination of classical culture or of urban and rural civilization in this area. On the contrary, these traditions continued to survive at least until the invasion of the Banū Hilāl^[6]. Isabella Welsby Sjöström distills the scant evidence for Roman and post-Roman occupation of the Djebel Nafusa region, often only indirectly demonstrated by the frequent reuse of architectural elements of classical date in later structures, which in turn attest to continuity of occupation. Virginie Prévost focuses on the community that moved from the Djebel Nafusa to Djerba during the Middle Ages, bringing about a transformation of the island's religious architecture.

More generally, in order to reach these results the authors have had to engage with an enormous body of archaeological, architectural, and epigraphic evidence, distributed both chronologically and geographically in so uneven a manner as to require constant contextualization. There is extensive and well-considered use of new technologies, remote sensing, and satellite imagery; at the same time, more traditional approaches are also employed, such as fieldwork (unfortunately not systematic owing

to Libya's current political instability), as well as the critical study of archives and of older or more recent excavation reports. The hypotheses advanced are numerous and stimulating, yet—by the authors' own admission—will need to be tested through direct autopsy and further future investigations. The bibliography consulted is extensive and, it should be emphasized, not confined to the Anglophone scholarly world.

The result is a collection of essays of considerable interest, attentive to ongoing international debates and, through targeted case studies, committed to offering new interpretative tools and rereading the history of Tripolitania in a modern key more closely aligned with archaeological and epigraphic data. In so doing, the volume successfully tempers simplified and ideologically driven narratives, highlights the plurality of local experiences, and brings to the fore those specific features that distinguish the region and its sub-regions from the other African provinces. In this respect, a more systematic comparison with other Maghrebian contexts might have further enhanced the distinctive characteristics of this territory or, conversely, helped to normalize phenomena that, when analyzed in isolation, may appear unique or exceptional^[7].

The volume therefore does not present itself as a point of arrival, but rather—as David Mattingly reiterates in his Conclusions—as a starting point that underscores both the progress achieved and the challenges that remain, and as a stimulus for further reflections and debates which, it is to be hoped, will continue to animate the study of Roman Africa with renewed vigor.

Authors and titles

1. Approaching Ancient Tripolitania: an Introduction — Niccolò Mugnai
2. The Urban Development of Sabratha: Old Theories and New Perspectives — Sergio Aiosa
3. Transforming the City: Large- and Small-Scale Building Activities at Lepcis Magna in the Severan Period — Niccolò Mugnai

4. The Mosaics of Tripolitania: Historic Value and Future Challenges — Will Wootton
5. Life and Death at the Margins of the Roman Empire: Rural Settlement and Funerary Landscapes in the Tripolitanian Pre-Desert — Julia Nikolaus & Nichole Sheldrick
6. Military Fortifications in the Frontier Zone of Tripolitania (Limes Tripolitanus) from the Mid-Imperial Period to Late Antiquity — Michael Mackensen
7. Food Supply of the Limes Tripolitanus in the Third Century CE — Florian Schimmer
8. The Religious Identity of Roman Soldiers in Tripolitania: Archaeological and Epigraphic Evidence — Sebastian Schmid
9. In Search of the Romans in Jabal Nafusa and Surrounding Areas — Isabella Welsby Sjöström
10. Some Observations on the Cultural Proximity between Tripolitania and the Island of Jerba — Virginie Prevost
11. Tripolitania: Conclusions and Prospects for Future Research — David J. Mattingly.

Notes

[1] D.J. Mattingly, *Tripolitania*, London 1995, pp. 4-17, 88-91, 95-98, 270-272; see also R. Rebuffat, “Où étaient les Emporia?,” *Semitica*, 39.2, 1990, pp. 111-126.

[2] J. Gascou, *La politique municipale de l'Empire Romain en Afrique Proconsulaire de Trajan à Septime-Sévère*, Rome 1972, p. 82.

[3] On these aspects, A. Ibba, “Per parole e per immagini: la propaganda fra Cesare e Augusto in Africa e Sardinia (iscrizioni, monete, monumenti),” in S. España-Chamorro, G. L. Gregori (eds), *Tra la Tarda repubblica e l'Età augustea: economia, politica e religione nei loro riflessi epigrafici*, Roma 2025, pp. 135-137; see also D. Kreikenbom, *Lepcis Magna unter den ersten Kaisern*, Wiesbaden 2011; A. Wilson, “Neo-Punic and Latin Inscriptions in

Roman North Africa. Function and Display,” in A. Mullen, P. James (eds), *Multilingualism in the Graeco-Roman Worlds*, Cambridge 2012, pp. 272-299.

[4] A. Ibba, “I Romani e l’Africa,” in: G. Traina (ed.), *Storia d’Europa e del Mediterraneo*, I, *Il mondo Antico*, III, *L’ecumene romana*, VI, *Da Augusto a Diocleziano*, Roma 2009, pp. 285-286, 304-305; A. Ibba, *Ex oppidis et mapalibus. Studi sulle città e le campagne dell’Africa romana*, Ortacesus 2012, pp. 143-145.

[5] Ibba, ‘*Ex oppidis et mapalibus*’ cit., p. 40.

[6] In general, a summary of the debate currently underway in A. Marcone, *Tarda Antichità. Profilo storico e prospettive storiografiche*, Roma 2020.

[7] I am thinking for example of the fortified farms that are also known in *Mauritania*, with different shapes but very similar functions (Ibba, ‘*Ex oppidis et mapalibus*’ cit., pp. 42-43).