

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL CASE STUDIES FROM ROMAN LIBYA

MUGNAI (N.) (ed.) *Tripolitania in the Roman Empire and Beyond*. Pp. xiv + 221, b/w & colour ills, b/w & colour maps. London: The British Institute for Libyan and Northern African Studies, 2024. Paper, £40. ISBN: 978-1-915808-10-3. [Open access](#).

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Thirty years after the publication of D. Mattingly's synthetic *Tripolitania* (1995), the present volume seeks to provide an update on the archaeology of Roman and late antique Tripolitania – a region of diverse bioclimatic zones stretching from modern south-eastern Tunisia to central Libya. With its monumental coastal cities prospering from their ports, large-scale olive-oil production in their hinterlands and trans-Saharan trade routes, Tripolitania played a prominent role in the wider empire long before (and after) launching Septimius Severus into the role of emperor. In a series of contributions covering everything from urbanism to the rural and military worlds of the pre-desert, the authors provide a number of discrete case studies.

The time may be ripe to update *Tripolitania* in light of new archaeological research. In Libya, the University of Palermo conducted projects at Sabratha (1977–2013); multiple surveys have looked at the hinterlands of Lepcis Magna; and a German team excavated the fort at Gheriat el-Garbia (2009–2010). One might also point to work in western Tripolitania, largely absent from the present volume, which does little to look across the modern border drawn between Tunisia and Libya. In Tunisia the Jerba Survey, the Meninx Project and the Zita Project have all stressed the importance of the third to first centuries BCE in shaping the distinctive settlement patterns, economies and social practices of coastal Tripolitania: a period with which the present volume engages only in passing. But far and away the most significant new archaeological research in the Maghreb has taken place beyond Tripolitania itself: south of this zone, in the Fezzan heartland of the Garamantes; in central and northern Tunisia; and in Morocco. Such material might help situate and frame the more tessellated studies here, although it is largely left to the side. Nor do any of the papers engage explicitly with wider theoretical models, whether *Tripolitania*'s notion of Roman 'frontier zones' – a product of its time, and largely abandoned by Mattingly in favour of identity-based approaches in his new account of the entire Roman Maghreb (*Between Sahara and Sea* [2023]) – or those that think about connectivity and globalisation. Instead, the papers here focus more modestly on coming to terms with aspects of the expanding, but still fragmentary, archaeological data from the region.

In so doing, the present volume becomes a book about isolated microregionalisms and localisms, rather than interconnections or even the mesoscalar, regional perspective aspirationally espoused in Mugnai's introduction. This is not to downplay the contributions made by each chapter individually, each of which offers new data or interpretations; they will be welcome reads and obligatory citations for scholars working on the Roman Maghreb.

Two opening chapters deal with coastal urbanism. Building on his earlier work and the Palermo project, S. Aiosa offers a dense survey of material from Sabratha, positing a novel (and very hypothetical) picture of the city's urban history that sees an earlier boom in building than previously recognised. He collects the fragmentary evidence for the Hellenistic city; sees significant eastward expansion in the first (rather than second) century CE; pushes the first iteration of the theatre and amphitheatre to the Flavian period,

making the amphitheatre one of the first seven in Africa; identifies a possible second-century CE forum north of the Temple of Hercules; and suggests locating more port infrastructure at the eastern end of the city's Decumanus Maximus. A first-century boom in wealth and its investment in urban monumentalisation is made more plausible by the first-century dating proposed for a wide range of farm sites recently surveyed on the Tarhuna Plateau (M. Ahmed, *Rural Settlement and Economic Activity* [2018]), if one assumes similar intensification in Sabratha's hinterland. Unfortunately, the sites in Sabratha's (more distant) Djebel Nafusa hinterland, catalogued in I. Welsby Sjöström's chapter, carry little dating evidence, even if they speak to significant signs of Roman-period occupation and the relatively untapped archaeological potential of the region. Mugnai's chapter, on Severan Lepcis Magna, draws attention to the range of Severan-period projects within the city beyond the Severan Forum complex, focusing on the range of infrastructural (harbour) and locally driven, smaller renovation projects: evidence of far more collaboration from local elites in remaking the city's urban facies.

Taking a microregional view of the pre-desert zone, J. Nikolaus and N. Sheldrick start from UNESCO Libyan Valley Survey data to focus on questions of agency in the settlement- and tomb-building boom of the first century CE. They argue that local Libyan families (rather than colonists or the urban elite of the coastal cities) drove development of this microregion, noting that most new buildings of the first to second centuries (before the onset of fortified *ksur* from the third century) are medium-sized farmyard structures that largely support modified forms of pre-Roman lifeways. The builders and inhabitants of these structures seem to be a rising middle class of the pre-desert, using their local environmental knowledge to farm wadis and their gains from such endeavours to invest in distinctive funerary monuments advertising their prestige.

Three chapters on the Roman army also offer microregional syntheses. M. Mackensen surveys the military presence in the province. He notes the continuing lack of visible archaeological evidence for a substantial army presence in Tripolitania before the second century, despite all the textual evidence for large-scale campaigns: a mark of how fragmentary our archaeological perspectives remain. He also argues, based on measurements of barracks, that the third-century forces posted to this zone were significantly smaller than previously suggested, totalling perhaps 1,400 legionaries seconded from Lambaesis and complemented by a small number of auxiliaries. And – the most novel results of his excavations – he demonstrates late fourth-century reoccupation of Gheriat el-Garbia after an initial withdrawal in the late 270s, with renovations to suit a smaller number of troops.

Localness emerges again in the chapters on military consumption and worship, though with significant caveats. F. Schimmer looks at the different supply patterns of the major forts (Bu Njem and Gheriat el-Garbia), drawing on ostraca, artefactual and ecofactual evidence. Both forts seem to have received primarily Tripolitanian oil/fish amphorae and foodstuffs from their hinterlands or further south (barley, durum wheat, dates and even pearl millet from the Sahara), reflecting their places in the landscape and along caravan routes. But Gheriat el-Garbia received far more wine amphorae from further west in Africa and Sicily than Bu Njem: amphorae that seem not to have made it further into the pre-desert or Fezzan. This points to distinctive supply chains for the different forts, rather than a common and standardised system of logistics or major reliance on caravan trade. There are some potential hesitations in fully accepting Schimmer's conclusions: amphora reuse is not considered, and botanical materials from the fourth-/fifth-century reoccupation of Gheriat el-Garbia are assumed to be indicative of earlier consumption patterns and thus worthy of comparison with third-century Bu Njem. Even with high-quality, recent fieldwork, integrating material across sites remains a challenge. In a chapter on cult S. Schmid argues that there is a distinctive military religion in North Africa, tied to worshippers' identities as soldiers: the

Tripolitanian military sites largely reproduce the pantheon of legionary headquarters at Lambaesis, rather than embracing ‘civilian’ pantheons or being ‘African’, given the absence of ‘African’ gods such as Saturn and Caelestis from the forts. But such arguments are predicated upon on a problematic colonial paradigm that associates specific deities and particular forms of temple design with particular cultural identities. Instead, what emerges most strongly is the way in which soldiers worked to woo hyper-local deities of place; such *genii* are better attested in Tripolitanian forts than Jupiter or Mars.

Finally, two chapters cover other aspects of the region’s archaeology. W. Wootton offers a useful and well-illustrated overview of mosaics from Tripolitania and recent conservation work, but notes the lack of workshop-level and material analysis that would allow better understanding of issues besides styles, chronologies and iconographies. V. Prevost looks at the historical and architectural connections between Ibadi Islamic communities in the Djebel Nafusa region and on Djerba: this is one of the few contributions that explicitly focuses on linkages across microregions.

Ultimately, three overarching points emerge. First, despite 30 years of hindsight and higher-resolution data driving minor revisions of individual claims, little of *Tripolitania’s* synthetic, historical picture of the region in the imperial period needs to change. Second, our archaeological understanding of Roman Tripolitania remains lacunose, despite the recent work flagged here: a situation that may change as international partnerships return to Libya to support preserving and understanding the region’s endangered archaeological heritage. Mattingly offers some suggestions for how to fill these data gaps in his concluding response to the volume, proposing priorities for investigation and methods for new research in the region.

And this leads to the third conclusion: that perhaps it is not primarily new data that we need, but rather new paradigms to interrogate, integrate and meaningfully juxtapose the material we have. As a discipline, archaeology is grounded in the making of assemblages: creating different linkages among discrete objects, sites and moments that configure particular imaginations of the past. Instead of fragmenting Tripolitania into discrete cases, developing relational models that can situate (rather than isolate) material practices in a multitude of linked chains, and recognise where historical disjunctures occur, may offer more productive paths forward. For example, Aiosa’s rhythms and forms of monumentalisation at Sabratha closely parallel those of imperial-period Meninx in western Tripolitania (S. Ritter and S. Ben Tahar, *Studies on the Urban History of Meninx [Djerba]* [2024]), fostering a sense of Tripolitanian benefactors acting in a regional dialogue quite distinct from the dialogue happening among the elites in Carthage’s hinterland (P. Scheduling, *Urbaner Ballungsraum im römischen Nordafrika* [2014]). The articulation of practices, environment, forms of colonialism and military institutions were likewise configured in markedly different ways on the margins of the Aurès mountains of Numidia and in the Tripolitanian pre-desert. Seeing the particular worship patterns of Tripolitanian forts at the intersections of landscapes and livelihoods may offer a better explanation of this material than dividing ‘African gods’ or ‘urban gods’ from ‘army gods’ (M. McCarty, *Religion and the Making of Roman Africa* [2024]).

This volume will be a useful and widely consulted reference work in the study of Libya in the Roman imperial period. But it is primarily an invitation to build on the material collected here and to think about how these tessellated cases might be drawn into a more coherent model of the interlinked material, social and cultural worlds of a wider Roman world.

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