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When not in Rome, still do as the Romans do? Africa from 146 BCE to the 7th century

Studying North Africa poses a variety of problems. Historical as well as archaeological research bears the burden of a colonial view on Africa’s past, which tends to overemphasize its Roman aspects. Berber (Numidian and Moorish) political entities together with Punic (Carthaginian) cities had a long history when Rome entered the African scene. The history of Roman North Africa in its narrow sense started with the forming of Africa vetus in 146 BCE, after the third Punic War and the destruction of Carthage. For the centuries to come, Rome relied on client kings in Numidia and Mauretania to secure the new province. Initially Africa consisted of the Carthaginian hinterland and had the fossa regia as a demarcation line drawn by Scipio the Younger between the territory of the Numidian kings and the Roman province. Caesar added Africa nova (parts of the Numidian territory between the Tusca and Ampsaga rivers as well as Tripolitania) after the defeat of the Pompeians and their African allies, most prominently Juba I, at Thapsus in 46 BCE. The vast domains that were acquired helped the new political concept of Augustus’ principate to satisfy the claims of its followers. The process of full annexation of North Africa finished during the early principate under Emperor Claudius (41–54 CE) when Mauretania became part of the Empire.¹

Scholarship defined the spread of Roman civilization – ‘Romanization’ – as an acceptance of something like a Roman identity by local populations, or as a phenomenon of migration. Thousands of Roman colonists and members of the aristocracy started to penetrate North Africa with Roman norms, lifestyle, architecture and language from the first century BCE onwards. Scholars have regarded that as a thorough demographic and cultural change. But was North Africa in fact rather a Roman colony comparable to French Algeria in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? A variety of processes of change were successively labelled with the term ‘Romanization’, and the parameters vary considerably from one study to another. ‘Romanization’ was no organic cultural, political, economic or social development nor ever fully completed. Thus the Roman World was not a homogeneous zone of Romanness, although it tended to present itself that way, in opposition to the surrounding ‘Barbarians’. It in-

¹ Fishwick 1993/1994; Woolf 2012, 97–100; for an overview on Roman North Africa see Lassère 2015; Raven 1993; Fenwick 2012; Fenwick 2008 (archaeological research); Hobson 2015 (economy).

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corporated pre-existing regional, ethnic and civic identities and transformed them.² David Mattingly concluded that the impact of the Roman takeover was more complicated than the Romanization model made us believe. Research has to focus more intensely on local communities and regional developments.³ What did it mean to be Roman and live in Africa?

The extent to which Africa was ‘Romanized’ from the second century BCE onwards is still subject to a debate overshadowed by the colonial past of Libya, Tunisia and Algeria. In these countries as well as in France, nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars often projected political issues back into antiquity. Anticolonial circles asserted a low level of ‘Romanization’ and advocated a strong local Berber identity. French as well as Italian intellectuals, however, tended to create a master narrative using the Roman past of North Africa to claim it as a part of ancient Europe. Both French and Italians in North Africa presented themselves as the direct and natural successors of the Romans.⁴ As Mattingly has noted: ‘The “otherness” of North Africa (in terms of the Arabs and Berbers, with their Islamic culture and tribal and nomadic societies) was countered by the conscious association of the colonizer with the Roman presence. It was comforting for the French and Italian armies on campaign in the remote desert and mountain margins to find traces of the earlier penetration of the Roman legion into the same spaces.’⁵ Roughly speaking, the Arab history of the regions was pictured as a decline, while the Roman past appeared as a period of prosperous and rightful rule that had now been re-established by the French colonial masters.

Meanwhile, the master narrative of total ‘Romanization’ of the provinces has become questionable. Local affiliations always played a role, in Africa as well. Nevertheless, Roman concepts as well as the language of rule and organization long remained a point of orientation for political entities within and beyond the imperial frontiers. We know a couple of Latin inscriptions engraved by independent rulers at the borders and on the soil of Roman provinces in transformation throughout

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³ Mattingly 2011, XXII; Mattingly 1987, 80–83: Existing power structures in Tripolitania remained as long as Roman authority was accepted.
⁵ Mattingly 2011, 55; Fenwick 2012, 512–513: After 1830 (French) archaeological research was part of an imperialist discourse justifying colonization by stressing the ‘otherness’ of Africans. ‘The Roman Empire provided a model as well as a justification for colonial rule.’ Cf. Fenwick 2008; Lorcin 2007.
the fifth and sixth centuries. Latin served as the language of power, quite independent-ly of how tightly a certain territory was linked to Carthage.⁶

Africa was one of the most densely urbanized areas of the Empire. Towns in Af-rica were, however, not a Roman innovation. Thimida, Bulla, Hippo and Zama bore the epithet regia, which recalled their status during the reign of the Numidian kings. Cirta was King Micipsa’s (148 – 117 BCE) capital. Simitthu, Capsa and most likely The-veste (Tebessa) have long pre-Roman urban traditions as well as the ‘Libyphonecian’ towns of Tripolitania. Elizabeth Fentress stressed the importance of such towns as centres with an urban status and as independent city-territories. Members of the local elites owned private estates.⁷ ‘Africa at the beginning of the second century BCE was thus occupied by a series of towns and their territories, with internal struc-tures not apparently very different from those of the rest of the Mediterranean world. Most of these were Punic in origin, but some were certainly Numidian or Mauretani-an.’⁸

Later, a Latin culture connected to other centres of the Mediterranean flourished in these cities as well as in the newly founded Roman coloniae. Caesar and Augustus established colonies, and some 50,000 veterans of their armies settled there. These men enjoyed citizenship of the new urban centres. Especially officers, who obtained extra land, quickly became part of the local elite.⁹ Till the end of the first century CE many soldiers chose Africa as their new homeland after having served in the army. The possibilities for a better life in the new colonies attracted them. Finally, many veterans of the legio III Augusta remained in the African provinces.¹⁰

This legion was stationed since 30 BCE at Ammaedara (Haidra) changing around 75 CE to Theveste (Tébessa). Around 115 – 120 the legion moved to its former outpost, Lambaesis (Tazoult-Lambese). At this military headquarters around 3000 inscrip-tions connected to the Augusta are known. The soldiers served at different locations

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⁶ Mattingly 1996, 50 – 54; Mattingly 1997; Bénabou 1978; Leveau 1978; Thébert 1978, 64 – 82; Averil Cam-eron 1989, 171 – 172; Christianization: Beltrán Torreira 1990; Mattingly 2011, 51 compares the around 2,500 inscriptions of Roman Britain with the over 60,000 from the former French territories of the Maghreb.


⁸ Fentress 2006, 8 – 9.


¹⁰ Mann 1983, 12 – 16.
to secure the provinces. A cohort was present at Carthage at the proconsul’s orders. Because they supported the Numidian governor Capellianus against the Gordians, the legion was disbanded in 238 by Gordian III. Emperor Valerianus (253 – 260) remobilized the unit in 253.¹¹ This may be connected to an insurrection at the southern frontier in the same year. After 290 other revolts are reported. Maximinian arrived in Africa in 298 to reorganize the defence lines and the military system of the provinces.¹² In the end none of these events endangered the provinces or caused major problems. There may have been riots, fighting with local confederacies and uprisings, but nothing really challenged Roman rule in the provinces.¹³

In the frontier zones, representatives of the Empire ensured Roman dominance.¹⁴ In 1955 Christian Courtois thought of a basic dichotomy of Roman rule and described this world as a permanent opposition between the mountains and the coastal plains: ‘Roman civilization spread along the availability of water. It had invaded the plains without taking the mountains.’¹⁵ The concept of a ‘Romanized’ belt of cities at the sea and tough resistance by local Berber tribes (labeled Mauri by the Romans) had become generally accepted since René Cagnat’s (1852 – 1937) study on the Roman occupation, first published in 1892.¹⁶ In 1976, the French scholar Marcel Bénabou published his ‘La Résistance africaine à la romanisation’ and thus provided a concept of indigenous cultural endurance. His book became ‘the most sophisticated exponent of the resistance thesis’.¹⁷ In Bénabou’s view, Africans had their own religious beliefs and maintained their Punic or Libyan/African languages and personal names. Romano-Africans thus demonstrated their ‘Africanness’. The controversies surrounding Bénabou’s early post-colonial ideas have been intense.¹⁸ Perhaps a compromise could be found with on-going debates differentiating the nature of ‘Romanization’.

¹¹ Le Bohec 1989; Speidel 1992; Janon 1973; Pollard/Berry 2012, 120 – 130. Speidel 2006: ILS 2487 contains the only extant speech by a Roman emperor (Hadrian, 117–138) to soldiers stationed in a province, recorded when Hadrian went to Numidia in 128 to review the legion’s training manoeuvres.
¹⁵ Courtois 1955, 121: ‘La civilisation romaine s’était répandue à la manière des eaux. Elle avait envahi les plaines sans recouvrir les montagnes [...]’
¹⁶ Cagnat 1892.
¹⁸ Bénabou 1976. Critical comments on Bénabou’s thesis: Leveau 1978; Fentress 1979 and Whittaker 1978 (variation of resistance comparable to other provinces of the Empire); responses: Bénabou, 1978 and 1981. Thébert 1978 criticized Bénabou’s focus on ethnic groups and pleaded for an analysis of social formation in North Africa. Fentress 2006, 4: ‘This strictly Marxist approach left culture out of the picture, thereby oversimplifying it.’ Elizabeth Fentress follows Thébert’s recommendation for some steps and offers a brief outline of the social preconditions for ‘Romanization’ avoiding a simple opposition between the Numidian/Berber peoples and the Punic/later Roman settlers to provide a basis for an analysis including cultural patterns.
Recent research increasingly attempts to stress the regional differences and the multitude of local identities underlying a seemingly Roman culture.

How did antiquity perceive North Africa and why was it possible to ground the disputes delineated above in our sources? The poet who authored the Odyssey knew a region named Λιβύη (Libye). There, at the southern edge of the known world, the Aithiopes lived.¹ As early as the fifth century BCE, Herodotus distinguished native Libyans in the North of ‘Libye’ from immigrants, the Greeks in the Cyrenaica and Phoenicians (Carthaginians). Apart from the basic meaning for the terra firma at the southern rim of the Mediterranean Sea as a whole, ‘Libye’ could also denote specific regions. At certain periods of time or under specific circumstances, the term was restricted, for example, to the Cyrenaica and its Greek cities, to the western border regions of Egypt, or to western North Africa. Thus, ‘Libye’ signified the area between the Atlantic Ocean and the Nile River as well as certain parts of it.²

This is fundamental for understanding the Roman geographical concept of Africa. During the Punic Wars (264–146 BCE) ‘Libyans’ also became a term for the inhabitants of the African territory controlled by Carthage. After the second half of the third century BCE, the Latin term Africa appeared in Roman politics and literature, as the cognomen Africanus of the victorious elder Scipio illustrates. To some extent, Africa served as an equivalent for the Greek Λιβύη (Libye) to define northern or Punic Africa.²¹ Initially, Afrī referred to indigenous peoples living inside the African hinterland of Carthage to distinguish them from Numidae and Mauri further west and south. How and why these Afrī turned out to be eponyms for a territory much larger than the area they originally inhabited is not completely clear. Be that as it may, a century later Sallust used Africa to refer to the northwestern parts of the continent with the exception of Egypt.²² From the second Punic war onwards, Roman and Greek authors referred to indigenous societies not only as curiosities or to mark geographical borders but as historical entities. In the first century CE, Pliny counted 516 gentes and nationes, that is, ethnic groups in alliance with, in opposition to, or au-

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²² Sallust, De bello Iugurthino 17, 3–4; 19, 3, ed. and trans. Rolfe, 170, 176; cf. Huß 1996, 218; Kotula/Peyras 1985. The very name Afrī appears on inscriptions dating from the principate. Fentress 2006, 16 refers to CIL 8, 14364 (At Uccula a statue bears the inscription decreto Afrorum) and CIL 8, 25850 (Afrī and the cives Romani Suenses act together at Sua).
tonomous from Rome, including the conquered kingdoms of Mauretaniae. Besides them he named Roman settlements and colonies.²³

North of the deserts, three areas apart from Egypt with the Nile had a regular supply of water and therefore can support settled populations as well as produce enough crop, barley, oil and other products for export: Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and North-West Africa north of the Atlas Mountains. The Cyrenaica is located roughly 1,100 kilometres from the Nile Delta. The ancient Pentapolis with its urban centres Kyrene, Ptolemais, Apollonia, Taucheira and Euesperides became part of the Greek world as early as the beginning of the seventh century BCE. Thus, at the southern edge of the Greater Syrtis (Gulf of Sidra), the Carthaginian sphere of influence bordered the territory of the mentioned Greek cities.²⁴ Centuries later, the frontier between the Roman provinces of Africa and Cyrenaica (since 20 BCE Creta et Cyrenaica) together with the language border between Greek and Latin speaking areas ran there.²⁵ Ptolemy Apion died without heirs and bequeathed his royal land in Pentapolis to Rome in 96 BCE. In 74 BCE, Rome granted provincial status to Cyrenaica.²⁶

Sallust and other authors provided the legend of the Philaeni brothers from Carthage, creating a border by literary means. Carthage and the Greek cities in the Pentapolis tried to agree on a border in Libya. Two pairs of athletes set out from Carthage and Cyrene on the same day, each pair running towards the other city. When the runners met, the Carthaginian pair had covered more ground. Accused of cheating by the Greeks, the Carthaginians swore solemnly that they had followed all rules and eventually consented to be buried alive at the meeting point. This sacrifice was meant to underline their rightful claim. Since then the territory between that spot and Carthage would become part of the Carthaginian domain. The border was marked by two pillars labelled the ‘Altars of the Philaeni’, Φιλαίνων Βωμοί.²⁷

The spot described by Sallust was approximately halfway between modern Ra’s Lanuf and El Agheila. In 1937, the Italian colonial government erected a modern Arae Philaenorum some 30 kilometres from this place at the Libyan Coastal Highway (Via Balbia) to commemorate the Roman past of the new Libyan colony. In 1973, the revolutionary leader Muammar al Gaddafi, who considered the landmark a sign of the Italian domination of Libya, ordered the arch to be destroyed in order to stress

²⁵ Rochette /Clackson 2011; van Hoof 2007, 193; Michel 1981.
²⁶ Sallust, Historiarum fragmenta 2, 41; cf. Laronde 1987, 445–446.
the unity of modern Libya, which today again is separated in Western Tripolitania and Eastern Cyrenaica.28

The tiny coastal belt of Tripolitania is separated from the Cyrenaica by about another 1,000 kilometres of desert, but from its ancient centres Oea (Tripolis), Sabratha and Leptis Magna to the Gulf of Gabès a traveller had to manage only 300 kilometres of waterless areas. A wide coastal plain, the Gefara, stretches from just west of Leptis to the mainland opposite Meninx (Djerba). Concerning ‘Romanness’, the frontier at the Arae Philaenorum described above marks off the areas we have to deal with: the large region of northwestern Africa that includes Tripolitania, the Roman provinces of Africa Proconsularis, the two Mauretaniae and Numidia. The Arab concept of the Maghreb (al-Maghrib al-Kabîr) embraces the Atlas Mountains and the coastal plains of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. The Atlas mountain range comprises four general regions: the Middle Atlas, High Atlas and Anti-Atlas in modern-day Morocco; the Saharan Atlas in Algeria, marking the northern edge of the great desert; the Tell Atlas in Algeria and Tunisia; and finally the Aurès Mountains. From the Med-

Fig. 1: Caption: The Arae Philaenorum, 1937

iterranean Sea to the Sahara, the cultivated land in Roman times stretched on average 300 kilometres deep. The 2,600 kilometres of watered plains that ran from the Atlantic Ocean to the *Arae Philaenorum* became one of the most important agricultural landscapes of the Roman Empire. Modern Morocco (Mauretania Tingitana with its capital Tingis/Tanger), northern Algeria (Mauretania Caesariensis with its capital Caesarea; later under Septimius Severus Numidia became a province of its own) and Tunisia (Africa Proconsularis) share a Roman past with parts of Europe and the Middle East.²

Pliny furthermore stressed the foreignness of the Africans when he wrote that ‘The Greeks have given the name of Libya to Africa, and have called the sea that lies in front of it the Libyan Sea. It has Egypt for its boundary, [...]. For him, a Latin speaking Roman, it was nearly impossible to pronounce the names of peoples and cities.³ The poet Publius Papinius Statius (died around 96 CE) was a friend of the Emperor Septimius Severus’ grandfather of the same name. Statius was eager to stress the ‘Romanness’ of his fellow Romans of African birth: ‘Who would not think that my sweet Septimius had crawled an infant on all the hills of Rome? (...) Neither your speech nor your dress is Punic, yours is no stranger’s mind: Italian are you, Italian! Yet in our city and among the knights of Rome Libya has sons who would adorn her.’³¹ Statius repeats twice the Roman manners, language and appearance of an aristocratic provincial from Tripolitania. Benjamin Isaac concluded that members of the higher classes had to be separated by defining them as Roman from the poorer locals, who perhaps adhered more closely to local culture and language. Isaac states that there was an ambivalent attitude to provincial origins: ‘The implication is that it was normal for equestrians from a place like Leptis with the status of a *municipium* to be regarded as foreign in appearance, speech and spirit.’³²

A hundred years later, Herodian labelled the Emperor Septimus Severus (ruled 193–211) a Libyan without assessing this as a possible blemish.³³ The Augustan History, a collection of imperial biographies of the period 117 to 284 most likely written in the first decades of the fourth century CE, on the one hand refers to the classical education and Roman background of Septimius Severus. Septimius had been ‘drilled

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³³ Herodian, *Ab excessu divi Marcii* 3, 10, 6, ed. and trans. Whittaker, vol. 1, 328: The Emperor Septimius Severus chooses a wife for his son Antoninus (Caracalla), the daughter of the praetorian prefect Plautianus. He is a fellow countryman of the emperor, Severus was also a Libyan: ὃντα δὲ πολίτην ἑαυτοῦ, Λίβυς γὰρ κάκενας ἦν [...].
in the Latin and Greek literatures, *Latinis Graecisque litteris*, with which he was very well acquainted, *quibus eruditissimus fuit*. On the other hand, the Augustan History alludes to the African background of his family in an ironic way. When Septimius’ sister from Leptis came to visit the emperor at his court in Rome, she disgraced herself: ‘Since she could scarcely speak Latin, *vix Latine loquens*, the sister made the emperor blush for her hotly.’ Septimius bestowed his sister with many presents and tried to get rid of her as quickly as possible.³⁴

Elizabeth Fentress stressed a certain competition for status and power among the provincial elites as a motor of ‘Romanization’. Fentress decided to use the term ‘Romanization’ as a useful means to describe the shift of Numidian and Mauretanian tribal elites into their new roles as decurions, members of the city senate in their towns.³⁵ Important and old urban centres, always with the exception of the newly founded colonies of Caesar and Augustus, had ‘Punic’ governments and were left free to run themselves as long as they paid their taxes. The civic assembly, senate and *sufetes*, magistrates in the Punic tradition, had Hellenistic elements and resembled urban organization elsewhere in the Mediterranean. Especially in Tripolitania the *sufetes* of Oeae, Sabratha and Leptis are long attested. The Emperor Trajan (ruled 98–117) made Leptis Magna a *colonia* administered by *sufetes* and a Punic style of civic assembly. The elites of the coastal towns such as Lixus, Kerkouane or Leptis were probably largely Punic, whereas away from the sea Berbers (Libyans, Numidians or Mauri) formed the leading class of urban societies. The terms *nobilis*, *illustriores* and *primores* are attested for these circles. The Berber elites of North Africa always had been polyglot. Libyan, Punic, Greek and later, Latin were in daily use as well as engraved in stone.³⁶ Punic was a vernacular in the African provinces. The amount of inscriptions known today renders it unlikely that it was as such limited to members of the lower classes. Recently published lists of all attested Punic and Libyan names and work on Punic and Libyan inscriptions are available.³⁷ Other sorts of evidence exist. In 390 Augustine wrote to the pagan philosopher Maximus of Madaura and criticized him heavily. One of his arguments starts with the accusa-

³⁵ Fentress 2006, 22: An example are M. Valerius Severus and his wife Flavia Bira appearing on inscriptions from Volubilis (Walili): Euzennat/Marion/Gascou 1982, 439, 448, 449.
³⁶ MacMullen 2000, 35–36; Fentress 2006, 9 and ns. 32–34; Gsell 1972, 5, 72 lists the sources for the Berber elites labelled as *nobilis*, *illustriores* and *primores*. Aounallah/Maurin 2008 with the example of the *pagus et civitas Siviritani*, a ‘commune double’ in the hinterland of Carthage.
tion that a man born in Africa should not joke about Punic names. As late as the fourth century multilingualism was a reality in the African provinces.\textsuperscript{38}

Fritz Mitthof concluded that since the reigns of Hadrian (117–138) and Antoninus Pius (138–161) the perception of provincial identity had changed. Iconographical as well as written sources and inscriptions show that in the later principate the connotation of a province switched from an administrative district to a ‘pseudo-ethnical’ entity. Hadrian issued coins in bronze, silver and gold showing the personifications of twenty-six provinces. The acceptance of vernacular languages both in juridical texts and inscriptions is another part of this new role of local identities in imperial rule. Different social and cultural habits existed side by side. It was possible to be a proud citizen of Leptis Magna and to use an African vernacular, like Severus, the emperor’s grandfather. This man was thus perceived as a Roman aristocrat with a specific (African) background.\textsuperscript{39}

Latinists stress another point enriching the picture. The notion of a spoken form of Latin with African characteristics and of African schools with distinctive language curricula may have influenced literary Latin. It is generally known that North Africa had become a cultural centre of the Latin West. Furthermore regional variants of spoken Latin existed. Whether or not an Africitas can be postulated remains an interesting point.\textsuperscript{40}

Different identities could be in use at the same time and by the same person. An aristocrat or merchant lived, behaved and spoke, especially after 212 when Roman citizenship was granted to all free inhabitants of the Empire, like a Roman of the African provinces. Romano-Africans could be linked more or less strongly to Italy or other core imperial regions. Differences between cities – as mentioned above – played a role as well as the distinction between the urbanized areas and the mountains. The African provinces were rich. The coastal plains at the edges of the Atlas ridge were extraordinarily productive agricultural lands. Textual evidence as well as archaeological results refer to the objects of dominant Roman interest from the late Punic and Republican periods on: Grain, oil, wine and garden produce from vast estates owned by important families and later also by the Roman emperors. The African provinces quickly had become crucial for the Roman economy and the state’s income. Elizabeth Fentress concluded: ‘Now, this essential division between the private estates of the elite, which sustained the great families, and the pub-

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\textsuperscript{38} Augustine, Epistulae 17, 2, ed. Goldbacher, vol. 1/1, 41, ll. 11–14: Neque enim usque adeo ipsum oblivisci potuisses, ut homo Afer scribens Afris, cum simus utrique in Africa consituti, Punica nomina exagitanda existimares.

\textsuperscript{39} Mitthof 2012, 70: ‘pseudo-ethnische Identitäten’; cf. the examples listed 69–72; Ando 2000, 80–130 (‘The communicative actions of the Roman government’); 303–312 (reception of imperial artwork in the provinces); 317–320 (Hadrian’s imperial celebration of the consensus of populations and regions of the Empire).

\textsuperscript{40} Mattiacci 2014, 92–93; Vössing 1997 on schools in Late Antique North Africa.
lic revenues from the African territories represents one of the most fundamental aspects of almost any period in North African history.⁴¹

During the centuries imperial domains had greatly increased. In the northern part of the fertile valley of the Bagradas around Bulla Regia (Hammam Daradji, Tunisia) vast latifundia owned by the emperors were located. Nero had confiscated the estates of six rich senators. Pliny states that the emperor now controlled half of the African provinces. This may be an exaggeration, but at the beginning of the fifth century CE imperial possessions in the Proconsular province and the Byzacena encompassed 150,000 square kilometres, which equates in one sixth of the total land area.⁴² The emperors endeavored for centuries to optimize the production of the fertile African soils to secure the food supply for other parts of the Empire. Thus constant efforts to increase the efficiency and productivity of the estates were undertaken. At the same time large estates of leading Roman families existed. Galba and Gordian I for example succeeded in expanding their estates significantly while holding the office of proconsul in Africa. In the second century a group of senators with African backgrounds engaged in the development of rural infrastructure such as the expansion of the villas structure, the oil presses, the construction of small roads and irrigation systems. Private estates of vast dimensions had been extended at the expense of older municipal or private management.⁴³

Much worse for the imperial government than any petty war with Moorish groups at the edges of the desert or any threat from outside was the possibility that the African provinces could be ruled independently. Given the vast imperial as well as private estates and the economic importance of the provinces this was the real danger for the Empire. The African production taken over by anybody not loyal to the Italian centre provided the facilities to organize an independent political entity within the Roman West. Grain, olive oil, wine, and textiles as well as the taxes paid by the owners of the estates and the rich cities were needed in the Roman West. No imperial government could afford to lose Africa. At the same time the rich provinces had a certain potential for independent rule. African usurpers or military masters had exploited this option since the third century. The Vandal century from 429/439 to 533 is only one example of this phenomenon.

⁴¹ Fentress 2006, 6; Whittaker 1996, 615 – 616.
⁴³ Gizewski 1997, 738 citing Codex Justinianus 11, 62; 63; 75: ‘Real estate was the backbone of state and imperial property in all its forms. The proceeds from it, which for the most part went to swell the state coffers, the rights to tax-exemption for it and the forms of colonate and emphyteutic law in late antiquity are at the root of the later character of domains, which until modern times depended on special laws for the monarchy and nobility in the areas of property, taxation, fiefdoms and inheritance.’ Cf. Whittaker 1978; Mattingly 1997, 123; African elites and senators: Birley 1988, 23 – 30; 212–229; Alföldy 1986; Jarrett 1972.
The Year of the Six Emperors (238) had an African episode. Gordian had, before being made emperor by the local elite in Thysdrus (El Djem), drawn lots for the proconsular governorship of Africa Proconsularis. The African landowners protested against new taxes raised by the government of Maximinus Thrax (235–238) and relied on their local governor. Herodian reports: ‘Gordian, after protesting that he was too old for the position, eventually yielded to the popular clamour and assumed both the purple and the cognomen Africanus on 22 March.’⁴⁴ His rule as emperor lasted only a few weeks, but the economic and political potential of the African provinces had become obvious.

Seven decades later Lucius Domitius Alexander (died c. 311) held the office of vicarius in Africa. Emperor Maxentius (306–312) tried to gain recognition of his rule in Africa and put Domitius Alexander under pressure, ordering him to send his own son to Rome as a hostage. As part of an ongoing civil war in the empire between Galerius, Constantine and Maxentius, the African troops rose to resistance, first staying loyal to Galerius, later rising their own African emperor. For maybe two years Alexander ruled independently over the North African provinces and Sardinia. Similarly to later events Italy and Rome came under immense pressure immediately, as the population concentrated there depended on African produce. In 310 Maxentius sent an army to quell the rebellion. Alexander was taken prisoner and executed.⁴⁵

Two generations later new usurpers sought to rule Africa without reference to Rome. ‘Nubel, who had been the most powerful petty king, regulus potentissimus, among the Mauritanian nations, per nationas Mauricas, died, and left several sons, some legitimate, others born of concubines, of whom Sammac, a great favourite of the Count Romanus, was slain by his brother Firmus; and this deed gave rise to civil discords, and wars.’⁴⁶ This is how Ammianus Marcellinus introduces the history of the power struggles in Africa of the 370s. Nubel – the father of the African usurpers Gildo and Firmus – is given a very limited political and social identity. Being the father of two rebels later opposing the Western imperial government, Ammianus pictured Nubel as an African barbarian. But Nubel’s full name

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⁴⁶ Ammianus Marcellinus, Res Gestae 29, 5, 2, ed. Rolfe, vol. 3, 246; translation following Duke Yonge, 525. Jones/Martindale/Morris 1971, 237 (Cyria); 262 (Dius); 395 – 396 (Gildo); 340 (Firmus 3); 566 (Mascezel); 591 (Mazuca); 633 – 634 (Nubel); 801 (Sammac); cf. Modéran 2003, 482, 511; Shaw 2011, 37 – 38 and n. 80; Shaw 1997, however, doubts that what Ammianus Marcellinus reports concerning Nubel’s offspring was the case. According to Shaw, Firmus and Gildo could have been biological siblings, but he regards it as more probable that the term ‘brother’ in this case indicated ‘a fictive kinship relationship between them.’ If Shaw is right, Ammianus had taken the history of King Micipsa (died in 118 BC) as a literary motive to depict African affairs.
was Flavius Nubel. Like many other men serving the emperor in Late Antiquity, he proudly used the name of the first-century Flavian imperial dynasty. Since Constantius, the father of Constantine the Great, this had become quite common in military circles and so Nubel was a Flavius, just as, for example, Flavius Odovacar or Flavius Theodericus were. Furthermore, Nubel was a Roman citizen, a military commander (praepositus) of a regional cavalry unit in the northern regions of the Mauritanian province, and a fervent Christian. Together with his wife Nonnica (Monnica), he had a church erected and, as a wealthy man, was able to equip this basilica with a piece of the true cross. The inscription from Nubel’s basilica reveals another detail Ammianus kept quiet about. Nubel’s father, Saturninus, was a comes and thus a high ranking Roman officer. So Nubel’s family formed part of the Romano-African elite for several generations. Nubel served his emperor and caused no problems for the Roman administration of the African provinces.

In contrast, his son Firmus became – according to the Historia Augusta – a petty brigand, a latrunculus. Between 372 and 375, Firmus became the leader of an uprising against Romanus, the comes Africae. The reasons for the revolt are not entirely clear. Around 372, the rebel might have been acclaimed emperor by his men. Emperor Valentinian sent the magister militum Theodosius, the father of the later Emperor Theodosius I, to Africa to solve the problem. Around 386, the son of the victor of 375, Theodosius I, appointed Gildo comes Africae and magister utriusque militiae per Africam, count and master of the regional field army and the border troops (limitanei), in Africa. Gildo was awarded with an immense patrimony confiscated from Firmus and he was able to blackmail the Western Empire. His foreign policy (as the Vandals were later to do, tended to pit the Western against the Eastern Empire. Finally Gildo’s property was confiscated. His immense wealth fascinated contemporary writers. It was so extensive that a special comes Gildoniaci patrimonii was appointed. The rank of comes means an officer directly responsible to the emperor. When the Vandals arrived in Africa in 429, Geiseric took over. He confiscated in a short time the emperor’s property and quickly became the richest and most powerful man in the

48 Shaw 2011, 39 and n. 84; Drijvers 2007, 134–135; Blackhurst 2004, 64–65; Mandouze/Marrou/La Bonnardière 1982, 790; Duval 1982, 1, 352, no. 167.
52 Codex Justinianus 9, 7, 9; 7, 8, 7 (400); 9 (399); 9, 42, 16 (399); 19 (405), ed. Mommsen/Krüger; cf. Redies 1998, 1072.
African provinces. If Gildo would have been luckier, Justinian might have been forced to wage war against one of his successors and not the Vandal king Gelimer.

In the early stages of Firmus’ uprising against the comes Africae he murdered his brother Sammac who, presumably, had stayed loyal to the Italian government. At some time before 371 the wealthy landowning Moorish prince Sammac had a metric inscription erected at his estate, Petra, in which the first and last letters of each line, read vertically, give the acrostic Praedium Sammacis, Sammac’s estate. Ammianus Marcelinus describes the estate as built like a city. The cultural references of the inscription are very Roman: ‘With prudence he establishes a stronghold of eternal peace, and with faith he regards everywhere the Roman state, making strong the mountain by the river with fortifications, and this stronghold he calls by the name of Petra. At least the tribes, gentes, of the region, eager to put down war, have joined as your allies, Sammac, so that strength, virtus, united with faith, fides, in all duties shall always be joined to Romulus’ triumphs.’

Whether personalities like Sammac can be categorised as Moorish chieftains who had followers bound to them by personal loyalties or as local Romano-African elites remains a matter of debate. The Roman military played its role as well as the organisation of border regions. But was Africa really a special case and was it so different from other regions of the Roman West? As a matter of fact some Romano-Africans managed to take part in supraregional power struggles within the Empire. Roman writers like Ammianus Marcellinus tended to picture Firmus and Gildo as rude barbarians, whereas other sources highlight their Roman identity. It will be necessary to understand Roman identity as a complex mélange of local and supraregional elements. Of course being Roman was different whether one lived in a coastal city (maybe with an old Punic tradition) or in the mountainous hinterland. But even there the language of power and the administrative terminology were Roman, even after the Empire had lost control over these regions.

The political and military events of the fifth and sixth centuries and their backgrounds demonstrate the dissolution of the Roman West into smaller entities based on Roman provinces or dioceses. Very much like Gothic or Vandal military formations several African leaders tried to establish themselves as independent rulers. Africa was important enough to allow the powerful men there to become relatives of the imperial house. Very much like Octavian-Augustus cared for his friend Juba, Theodosius wanted to make sure that Gildo remained on good terms. Some decades later
this would happen again. The main difference was that the Vandals were even more successful in becoming a part of the imperial elite: the Vandal king’s son Huneric married an imperial princess and his offspring had to be accepted as a part of the Theodosian dynasty.⁵⁵

Between 429 and 533 the Vandals monopolized access to supraregional economic exchange networks and controlled the cities along the African coastline. In a way they became the new Romans from an African perspective. Wolf Liebeschuetz put it like this: ‘It looks as if the Moors were building up gentes and turning gentes into regna just as the Germanic peoples had been doing before, and during, their march through the Empire. Once the Vandals had settled, and become accommodated to Roman society, they soon became helpless in the face of the gentes evolving along their borders, as the Romans had been in the face of the Vandals themselves.’⁵⁶ During the second half of the fifth century Berber kingdoms in Mauretania and Tripolitania evolved as an alternative to Vandal rule. The local potentates were eager to use a Roman and Latin language of power to stress their legitimacy. As late as the seventh century Latin inscriptions using the Mauretanian provincial era continued to be produced. Moorish kingdoms were not petty chiefdoms. For all we know, they may have had effective control over large numbers of people. This, indeed, is the theory of the French scholar Gabriel Camps, who concluded that Mauretania was ruled by a stable dynasty.⁵⁷

In Numidia local monarchs ruled small political units. A Latin inscription found in the middle of the Aurès Massif near Arris in southern Numidia is dedicated to the Moorish lord Masties and dates most likely to the late fifth century: ‘I, Masties, duke (dux) for 67 years and [ruled?] (IMPR) for 10 years, never perjured myself nor broke faith with either the Romans or the Moors, and was prepared in both war and in peace, and my deeds were such that God supported me well.’ The inscription takes into account various social and religious ideas. The invocation to the diis manibus, the pagan gods of the dead, stands next to a Christian cross. This kind of syncretism was an offer for everybody opposing Vandal rule in Carthage. Pagan and Christian Romans from different social classes were welcome to follow Masties. The letters IMPR could mean imperavit or imperator. But there is another possible reading of the inscription. The I could be a damaged L and be interpreted as Li(mitis) P(rae)p(ositus). Masties thus would have been a local military commander keeping his Roman title.⁵⁸

Some twenty years later a certain Masuna left an inscription near Altava (Oran) in Mauretania. Masuna styled himself as king of the Romans and Moors, rex Masuna

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⁵⁶ Liebeschuetz 2003, 83.
gentium Maurorum et Romanorum.\textsuperscript{59} Maybe this alludes the Vandal title of a rex Vandalorum et Alanorum and again stressed an opposition to Carthage. Masuna’s Romans may have preferred to support a local political power than to paying taxes to Carthage and risk being persecuted as Catholics.\textsuperscript{60} These and other examples illustrate possible political solutions apart from Vandal rule. Other inscriptions used the Mauretanian era allude to official Roman terminology. The rulers of Mauretania believed themselves to be simply continuing the administration of the provinces, now independent from Carthage. Very much like Nubel, Masties and others had a Roman and Latin understanding of political organization.

The fifth century saw the development of two Africas. The smaller locally organized territories described above and the Vandal territory along with the larger part of the Proconsular province, Byzacena and most likely Tripolitania. The war of 533 changed the situation. Justinian’s troops conquered Africa, bringing an end to the Vandal century. Berbers in the Aurès and Tripolitana were strongly opposed to the newly established Byzantine rule, and shortly before Justinian’s death in 565 another war broke out in Numidia. Moorish groups were not alone in being unsatisfied with the new political order. The urban Romano-African elite may have profited in many ways from the economic possibilities of smaller polities not part of a superregional empire. Paying taxes to Carthage and equipping the Vandal army was simply cheaper than financing imperial operations. Furthermore Justinian’s aggressive policy against pagans, Donatists, Jews and Arians may have made a move into the Berber kingdoms an alternative.\textsuperscript{61}

Procopius categorized the Moors (Μαυρούσιοι) as the real African barbarians, whereas the Vandals who had entered the African provinces in 429 CE were merely decadent and behaved like rich Romans. Procopius was convinced that Vandal aristocrats had lost their ability to fight because of taking baths, reading and enjoying their town houses, the results of having become well off.\textsuperscript{62} Be that as it may the sixth-century historian Procopius used ‘Libyans’ as a collective term for the Latin-speaking African population: ‘All the Libyans being Romans in earlier times had come under the Vandals by no will of their own and had suffered many outrages at the hand of these barbarians.’\textsuperscript{63} Why did Procopius stress this point? First, he tried to depict Vandal rule in as deleterious and hostile terms as possible. It may not have been too easy to convince all the ‘Libyans’ to be allegiant subjects of Constantinople again. Many Latin and Punic speaking Romano-Africans in the coastal cities as well as inhabitants of the Berber kingdoms did not welcome the Greeks and the federate soldiers entering their country. Justinian needed money, therefore

\textsuperscript{59} CIL 8, 9835 = Marcillet-Jaubert 1968, 126 – 127, no. and tableau 194: Pro sa(lute) et incol(umitate) reg(is) Masunae gent(ium) Maur(oru)m et Romanor(um).
\textsuperscript{60} Camps 1984; Modérane 2002, 95; Brett/Fentress 1996, 78 – 79.
\textsuperscript{62} Procopius, De bello vandalico IV, 6, 6 – 13, ed. and trans. Dewing, 256 – 259.
\textsuperscript{63} Procopius, De bello vandalico III, 20, 19, ed. and trans. Dewing, 175.
taxes had to be paid to a capital overseas again. Furthermore, as war did not end for decades, many may have missed their Vandal kings.\textsuperscript{64}

Did the Libyans who had been Romans in earlier times become Romans once again? According to Procopius, “the fundamental definition of a Roman in the empire of Justinian was that of loyalty to the Emperor.”\textsuperscript{65} Procopius was not only interested in emphasizing a person’s origin outside the Empire, he also took note of a Cilician, Calabrian, Illyrian or, in our case, African-Libyan descent. There was no dichotomy between a Roman and a local identity. One could understand Procopius at this point, however, determining a legal affiliation that had changed for the Libyans when the Vandals took over the African provinces in the years before 439.\textsuperscript{66} In Procopius’ view groups following the emperor were ‘Roman’, whereas he labelled resisting circles ‘barbarians’. Following this definition the Libyans/Romano-Africans living in the cities controlled by the Byzantine army became Roman again.

Modern research tends to distinguish between Romans and Moors, while Procopius mainly focused on armed resistance or political allegiance. Geoffrey Greatrex stressed another point. All Romans were Christians who adhered to Chalcedonian orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{67} Thus Justinian’s military victory was depicted as a crusade to unite the orthodox Romano-Africans with the imperial church again. In Carthage as well as many other sites a building programme resulted in basilicas and pilgrim sites offering new religious centres. The intended message was that Romano-Africans lived in peace, security and doctrinal orthodoxy again.\textsuperscript{68}

Under the Emperor Justin II (565–578) little changed in Africa. While a statue of him was erected in Carthage, outside the central areas Moorish groups still organized themselves and attacked whenever they liked. Massive fortifications were built against them to secure the coastal cities and agricultural core areas. Some Moorish groups wanted alliances, others remained hostile. The Garamantes and Maccuritians wanted peace. An embassy of Maccuritians even travelled to Constantinople and presented the emperor with African ivory and a giraffe.\textsuperscript{69} Throughout the 580s the military and civil administration of Africa finally merged and an exarchate was established, which existed until the end of Byzantine rule. In the following decades Carthage and Constantinople lost control over the Byzacena and Tripolitania. Many inhabitants of Africa chose other affiliations, whereas others remained loyal subjects of

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{64} Rodolfi 2008; Steinacher 2016, 310 – 313.
\bibitem{65} Greatrex 2000, 268 (citation) and 279 n. 8 with a reference to Amory 1997, 136, 146.
\bibitem{66} Greatrex 2000, 269.
\bibitem{67} Greatrex 2000, 276 – 278.
\bibitem{68} Merrills/Miles 2010, 234 – 238, 241 – 248.
\bibitem{69} Iohannis Abbatis Biclarensis Chronica 569, 3; 573, 6, ed. Mommsen, 212, 213; cf. Modérán 2003, 670 – 671; Pringle 1981, 1, 40; Desanges 1962, 60.
\end{thebibliography}
the emperor in Constantinople. To sum up: the Moorish alternative remained attractive for many Romano-Africans.⁷⁰

In 641 Egypt had been conquered by Arab armies, and only some years later Cyrenaica was taken. In 647 the Byzantine Exarch Gregorius made himself emperor and moved his capital to Sufetula (Sbeitla). He is the last African usurper in Roman history. In the same year Gregorius lost a battle and his life against the Arabs.⁷¹ Another two decades passed till the Arabs finally took over. Their commander, the Umayyad Uqba ibn Nafi, had Kairouan founded as an Islamic military camp in the Tunisian Sahel. The coastal cities were defended by Byzantine troops, the mountainous regions by Berber groups. Unified action against the Arabs is even attested. The charismatic Berber Princess Kahena organized fierce resistance, uniting Moors and Romano-Africans for a common cause. Ultimately it was unsuccessful and in 695 Carthage fell to the Arabs.⁷²

The Arabs named the newly conquered provinces *Ifriqiya*. Tunisia, eastern Algeria and Tripolitania became a part of the Umayyad Caliphate. The core region of the Arab territory was – similarly to Roman, Vandal or Byzantine Africa – northern Tunisia, with the Kairouan and Tunis becoming the new centres in place of Carthage. The Arab governor, *wali*, replaced the Byzantine exarch. *Ifriqiya* is of course the Arabized form of the Latin *Africa*, and not without reason. A considerable part of the population remained Christian and spoke Latin.⁷³ African saints like Cyprian, Felicitas or Perpetua were worshiped in different places around Europe.⁷⁴ As late as the tenth century, forty-seven bishoprics existed in *Ifriqiya*. The papal chancellery in Rome corresponded with African bishops up until the eleventh century.⁷⁵ A new military elite had taken over: this was nothing new in North African history.⁷⁶

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⁷³ Leisten 1996, 225–226; Lancel 2001, 188–195 (Latin inscriptions after the 7th century); Lewicki 1953; Seston 1936; Talbi 1971 (*Ifriqiya*).
⁷⁴ Conant 2010; Wickham 2005a, 726–728.