1 Geographical and Historical Background

ROME'S CONQUEST OF CARTHAGE IN NORTH AFRICA

In the spring of 146 BCE, after victory in its third war against Carthage, Rome established its rule in Africa. Under the orders of Scipio, who faithfully carried out the mission of the warring clan of Marcus Porcius Cato (*Delenda est Carthago,* "Carthage is destroyed"), prestigious Carthage—heir to the legacy of Tyre and Sidon and dominant in the previous centuries in the western Mediterranean world—was destroyed, its walls razed and population exterminated or reduced to slavery. Following a ceremonial salting or cursing of the land, Carthage was deemed eternally cut off from men and doomed to the infernal gods. Yet, this eternity would be brief as twenty-three years after the solemn ceremony, Caius Grachus, tribune of the plebs, boldly founded a large colony on the cursed soil.

Like a well-informed landowner, Rome had been attracted for some time to nearby overseas territories that could become its bread basket. Hence, the Romans first annexed the region of conquered Carthage, an area comprising at least 25,000 square kilometers—which roughly corresponds to the northeast tier of modern Tunisia. Always pragmatic in its approach, Rome had previously been content to take possession of fertile lands and establish colonies for its citizens, including non-land owning military veterans and Italian farmers desiring to migrate in order to acquire and exploit plots of land. However, this first province, *Africa,* would not be developed until the first century CE, as it took Rome nearly one hundred years after taking hold of the remains of Carthage to assimilate the colony politically. This occurred when Caesar made his mark by decisively taking control of the new province, *Africa nova.* From 27 CE, the beginning of Augustus' reign, the two provinces—new and old—were melded together to constitute the large province of *Africa*, later renamed

Africa Proconsularis in honor of its governor, a former Roman consul. In order to be fully efficient, military and political power were placed in the same ruling hands, and the province, invincible for five centuries until the Vandal invasion, was classified as a senatorial province. As a result, this Roman entry into Africa ultimately led to the demise of some of the indigenous Berber kingdoms.

ORGANIZATION OF THE PROVINCES

Though it is not the goal of the present work to deal with all of the developments of Roman colonization, it should be noted that colonization continued through periods of advancement, recoil, and adjustments, leading up to the decisive third-century occupation by the Severans. Indeed, it took Rome more than three and a half centuries to gain control of a region that included mountainous areas and totaled around 350,000 square kilometers.

Not including the new administrative zones organized by the Tetrarchy at various points to manage the growth of the Empire, there were initially four large African provinces that were later increased to eight under Diocletian's reforms:

- Pronconsularis stretched from the west of modern Libya and included all of modern Tunisia. This territory was later divided into the provinces of Byzacena—whose capital was located at Hadrumetum (Sousse, Tunisia)—and Tripolitania with its capital at Lepcis Magna (Al Khums, Libya).
- Numidia, with its capital at Cirta (Constantine, Algeria) stretched from the port cities of modern western Algeria to the southern oasis, to Lambaesis (Tazoult), which was located a dozen kilometers to the east of Batna. Situated at the northern side of the Aures Mountains, Lambaesis was known for its frequent uprisings and, from the time of Trajan, was the base of operations for the Roman African army (*Legio III Augusta).* By the end of the second century, it had become Numidia's leading city.
- Mauretania Caesarea, with its capital at Caesarea (Cherchell, Algeria) covered what is now central and western Algeria. Following reforms in 288, the western part of the province became a new province—Mauretania Sitifien whose capital was Sitifis (Setif, Algeria).

- Further west, Mauretania Tingitane grouped together the districts along the Atlantic coast of present day Morocco from the key city of Tingi (Tangier, Morooco) southward to Sala (Rabat).

Each province was led by an imperially appointed governor who possessed civil authority. The only exception, as noted, was the governor of Proconsularis who was appointed by the Senate and had both civil and military power. The provinces were divided internally into districts or communes that differed according to their administrative status—Roman colonies, *municipia,* or settlements. It should be noted that following an edict by Caracalla in 212, nearly all of the Empire's free inhabitants were granted Roman citizenship.

Africa, despite a full scale Romanization and the development of hundreds of towns, was in reality limited to an area of about 110,000 square kilometers. The region was primarily comprised of Pronconsularis—its two provinces of Byzacena and Tripolitania—and Numidia, which stretched from the coastal regions (including cities like Hippo Regius) to the foothills of the Aures.

If Rome had simply been interested in integrating a "useful" Africa into the Empire, then the venture could be considered successful, at least in regards to what is now the central and eastern Maghreb. It is important, however, to realize that North Africa, whose Arabic name (*Djeziret el-Maghreb*) literally means "island of the setting sun," was spread out over 200,000 kilometers, contained three rivers, and was "anchored" by the Sahara. In all, the vast region totaled some 900,000 square kilometers. Such considerations serve as a reminder that Roman control reached only a portion of Africa. Despite Roman control in the mountainous and southern regions—Numidia and the Mauretanias in particular—there were regular violent uprisings by indigenous tribes against the Roman occupants.

Yet these numbers and figures fail to account accurately for a complex situation. On one hand, almost the entire region of modern Tunisia and the Constantine region of Algeria—stretching from the Mediterranean upper plains to the edge of the Sahara (the Chott al-Gharsa and Chott el-Djerid in Kebili)—were controlled by Rome. It was in this area that soldiers set up military outposts and where church dioceses were eventually created. On the other hand, on the western side of Mauretania Caesarea, the boundaries of Roman civilization stretched from the

heights of Pomaria near Tlemcen (Oran) southward to the foot of the high plateaus of the Atlas Mountains—only sixty kilometers or so from the coastline. Hence, despite the difficulties presented by some provinces and regions, Rome capably exerted its authority on the provinces that it was able to occupy.

Certainly the Berber "kingdoms," established progressively in the fifth century as imperial authority had become too weak to carry out its administration, took the mantle of power and established a new type of rule over a diverse population of Romans, Romanized Africans, and Berbers. It was this Roman-African symbiosis that actually provided Roman civilization with a long life in Africa. In spite of the enduring presence of Roman occupation in Africa, in May of 429, Genseric and his armies crossed the Straits of Gibraltar and established a new Vandal rule. The Roman Empire, forced to adapt in light of these circumstances, was still able to conserve the essential *dominium* that stretched back to the glorious reign of Septimius Severus—an African who safeguarded the *pax Romana* with the help of his soldiers.

THE AFRICAN CITY: A KEY TO ROMANIZATION AND SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

The indigenous Africans did not expect the Romans to establish cities. Yet this phenomenon of urbanization, which strongly characterized Africa in antiquity, did not originate with Rome's organizing its African provinces. Archaeology has revealed traces of very ancient urban habitations, particularly Punic trading posts. Some of these developed into important cities such as Hadrumetum, Tacape (Gabes, Tunisia), and Mogador (Essouara, Morocco)—cities that were scattered along the modern Tunisian Mediterranean coast and stretched to the Moroccan Atlantic side. The fact remains that African urbanization was a key factor in Romanization as well as in the establishment of Christianity. Thus, urbanization was a phenomenon that would profoundly integrate Africa into the process of transformation occurring in a Roman controlled Mediterranean region. Urbanization developed over several centuries from the second century until the reign of the Severans, a period also marked by particular efforts in urbanization. While African cities were indeed diverse in terms of their physical design, that discussion will not be addressed in this study.

How many cities were there and what was the proportion of urban dwellers to the total population of the African provinces? From ca. 150 to the middle of the third century—the period of the Antonins and Severans and arguably the height of Roman Africa—historians estimate that there were between four and six or seven million inhabitants, with the latter figures being the most accepted. Nearly 500 cities could be counted, an enormous number indeed, with at least 200 situated in what is now Tunisia. The inhabitants of the cities comprised one-fourth to one-third of the entire population.

Regard for the importance of the African cities varies as much as the population estimates. It is likely, however, that Carthage—which according to the third-century historian Herodian competed with Alexandria as the second most prominent city in the empire after Rome—could have by conservative estimates numbered 150,000 people, including its urban center and suburbs. Moreover, upon considering the surface area of the urban areas at their broadest limits as determined by archaeology, as well as conjectures about the average urban population—conjectures based on how the territory was actually used—other arguments have been put forth. Thus, Lepcis Magna in Tripolotania, the favored homeland of Septimius Severus, may have numbered as many as 80,000 inhabitants. A number of key towns probably contained some 20,000 residents: Hadrumetum, Utica, Hippo, Cirta, Mauretania Caesarea, and Volubilis. Finally, the small towns, some of which surely numbered more than 10,000, contained modest urban centers and were at times stretched out over vast rural areas—often the property of city-dwelling bourgeoisie—that were linked administratively to the provincial districts.

Whatever we conclude about these statistics—always a hypothetical enterprise when dealing with the ancient world—at least one thing is certain: the urban network was dense and rich enough to spread out over the African territory, though it did not occur in uniform fashion in the various provinces. It was in these privileged localities that an African–Roman amalgamation took place. Certainly, the accelerated process of urbanization in Africa contributed to the success of the Empire and was an essential factor in the expansion of what has been rightly termed "Romanization."

For its part, the Christian movement also benefited from this urban expansion. The limits of imperial power also determined the limits on Christian expansion. In fact, none of the known dioceses had its episco-

pal seat located beyond the provincial boundaries and the regions controlled by military detachments, at least at the time of the great Roman expansion in Africa. It was in this period that the *fossatum Africae,* a line of defense formed by a deep ditch measuring four to ten meters wide and consolidated by fortified works, solidified the frontier at the southern Aures against the incursions of nomadic tribes. With that, the farthest military outposts stretched into the Saharan region to places like Castellum Dimmidi (Messad, Algeria), which is to the west of the modern route linking Djelfa and Laghouat. Moreover, it should be noted that with the exception of the diocese of Numidia, which spilled over into that of Proconsularis, the administrative boundaries and organization of the North African church essentially coincided with that of the empire in Roman Africa. This organizational structure became evident at the council of Carthage in 258, where "several bishops gathered together from the provinces of Africa, Numidia, and Mauretania . . ."

Within the context of this urban and rural matrix, a number of religions were being propagated in Africa. Passionately committed to the "gods made in their image," the pagans were just as "religious" as the Christians in their belief and just as fervent in their practices. Indigenous African cults were joined by other pagan religious expressions that came from the East, Egypt, Greece, and Rome.

In the interior of the country, the ancient local deities were honored through sacred practices that were often performed in caves. As the cave walls were covered with magical and religious designs, they were probably centers of worship. Also, certain wells, rivers, trees, rocks, venerated animals, and even the sun and moon had regular followings of worshippers who offered sacrifices and sought their protection. In Mauretania, one finds structures honoring the Maure deities such as *dea Maura*, who possessed its own temple, as well as *Diana Maurorum* and the *dii Mauri* who were grouped together under one name within the venerated Libyan pantheon. Throughout the centuries, the ancient kings, including Hiempsal and Juba, also erected pagan altars.

In addition to the Berber religions, the two most popular deities in the African religious mosaic were imported by the Carthaginians, yet they continued to gain a popular following after the Roman conquest. The first deity, Ba'al Tanit (Juno Caelestius in Latin), was the goddess of fertility and "assistant" to the second, the great Carthaginian god Ba'al Hammon who originated from Phoenicia. Taking the name Saturn of Africa, this

god of land and sky was held in much higher regard than all of the previously honored local deities and thus, the cult of Ba'al extended to all of Roman Africa. Later, Tertullian, attempting to argue for monotheism in the context of the pantheon, would draw parallels between the Christian God and Saturn. Here we have a particularly characteristic example of Romanization: a Punic deity, undoubtedly Africanized before the arrival of Rome, which sustains the religious fallout of a foreign presence on African soil.

Against this backdrop of traditional deities, other pagan cults, originating from all around the Mediterranean world, were added. They included: Mithras, a symbol of eternity; Serapis, who came from Egypt and would have adherents as far as the villages of the interior; and the goddess Ma (Bellona), the grandmother of the gods, who originated from Phrygia in Asia Minor and had followers from Proconsularis to Mauretania Caesarea and even to Lambaesis in southern Numidia. Each cult had its own temples, altars, priests, and circles of devotion, some of which gathered in specific locations that honored Mars, Venus, Ceres, and Ma. These cults arrived in Carthage with their adherents—merchants, soldiers, civil servants, and settlers. Within the African pantheon, the greatest prominence was given to the Capitoline Triad: Jupiter, the master of the Roman pantheon, Juno, and Minerva. The three could be typically found alongside one another in one temple or were assigned their own temples in the same vicinity. That the gods were grouped in a pair or trio actually reflected the multiple aspects of a single deity—just as the goddess Tanit functioned as the "face of Ba'al." In the majority of the most important African cities, the Capitol stood as the most opulent and prestigious building in the city. Finally, the official cult of the divine emperors should be mentioned within this religious mosaic. The emperors (*Divi*) had their own temples in the cities and worship practices overseen by a *flamen*, a priest who was a member of the local aristocracy.

Hence, long before the arrival of Christianity, the Africans were already deeply religious. Though some foreign deities, particularly those of Egypt and Phoenicia, were initially more prominent, all of the pagan cults would become mutually accommodating. Though we are unable to discuss the sedimentary levels that resulted as new religions replaced older ones, the past and present were able to co-exist despite different dates of arrival in Africa and juxtaposition in belief and practice. This reality, con-

sistent throughout the history of religious people in antiquity, constitutes one of the strongest aspects of the African religious tradition.

Inasmuch as they were able to appeal to the richness of their traditions and their own genius, the Africans contributed to the changes in civilization that characterized the centuries of Roman domination in the western Mediterranean. Further, in the context of bitterly defending its uniqueness against Roman attempts to organize and standardize African society, African Christianity (*catholica*) would also lay hold of a major place in the history of the early church.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Birot and Dresch, *La Méditerranée et le Moyen-Orient.*
Decret and Fantar, *L'Afrique du Nord dans l'Antiquité: Histoire et civilization—des origins au V siècle.*
Despois and Raynal, *Géographie de l'Afrique du Nord-Ouest.*
Février, *Approches du Maghreb romain: Pouvoirs, differences et conflicts* (2 vols).
Julien, Courtois, and LeTourneau, *Histoire de l'Afrique du Nord.*
Picard, *La Civilisation de l'Afrique romaine.*
Romanelli, *Storia delle province romane dell'Africa.*
Salama, *Les Voies romaines de l'Afrique du Nord.*
Warmington, *The North African Provinces from Diocletian to the Vandal Conquest.*