

RETHINKING COLONIAL *TOPOI* IN A SOCIAL HISTORY OF AFRICA IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

MATTINGLY (D.J.) *Between Sahara and Sea. Africa in the Roman Empire*. Pp. xxvi + 717, b/w & colour ills, b/w & colour maps. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023. Cased, US\$44.95. ISBN: 978-0-472-13345-1.

doi:10.1017/S0009840X24000398

Ancient studies were constructed differently in Europe and Africa, depending on modern colonial projects. Beginning with the French conquest of Algeria in 1830 and permanent presence in North Africa, the study of the African provinces under the aegis of Rome began in a strong colonial context. Despite major advances in theoretical approaches, the study of Africa in the Roman empire still is influenced by the colonial past. M.'s volume rises to the challenge of providing a synthesis of Africa in the Roman period, including controversial issues. Such a synthesis can only be achieved by a scholar like M., with long experience in the field. The title of the monograph might lead readers to expect a history of Africa in the classical period. However, rather than a linear historical discourse, the book is conceived as a social history. It focuses on different communities in space and time and the way in which they expressed themselves (identity).

The book is divided into six different parts and contains thirteen chapters. In the introduction (Chapters 1–2) M. explains that Roman Africa has often been studied from an outside point of view and that the main aim is to remedy this by analysing the study of Roman Africa as a history of Africa during Roman rule. The introduction goes on to outline why Africa is Africa, what its geographical and climatic conditions were and still are, what the peculiarities of the name of its discipline (Roman Africa Studies) are, along with its colonial implications in the nineteenth century. It also presents its literary, epigraphic and archaeological resources as well as the gaps. An important section (Chapter 2) is devoted to the ever-present concept of Romanisation, which has been a difficult issue for Anglo-Saxon scholarship (but is still present in other languages with different views, implications and interpretations). This is another contribution to a revival of the dilemma of explaining 'Romanisation processes' without using 'Romanisation' (terminology with colonial implications).

Part 2 (Chapters 3–5) consists of an overview of the indigenous and immigrant populations up to the 40s CE. This is the only chronological section, and it focuses on colonial encounters up to the arrival of Rome. M.'s upside-down vision consists in considering as foreign all populations that came from outside, even though, from a Roman point of view, Phoenicians and Greeks had already lived there thousands of years before the Romans. This allows him to promote the idea of a permanent colonisation of North Africa by a succession of different peoples. The next two chapters are devoted to the 'rehabilitation' of the North African Iron Age population. M. summarises the general ideas about the populations of *Numidae*, *Mauri*, *Gaetuli* and *Garamantes* as well as other 'archaeologically invisible' communities. He focuses on the reasons for these archaeological challenges and the possibility of 'intermediate positions' (avoiding Romanisation, creolisation, hybridisation etc.). Such a microregional approach is essential to understanding Africa in pre-Roman times.

The rest of the book is divided into thematic sections focusing on the diversity of populations and providing a diachronic overview. This kind of structure is highly

innovative in a general survey, as it does not focus on the typical historical and archaeological aspects, but rather on groups of peoples as communities.

Part 3 (Chapters 6–7) explains the arrival of Roman troops in Africa and the establishment of a military community. Patterns of military action were diverse in space and time. The archaeological and epigraphic evidence also varies across North Africa. The analysis of military identity is interesting, as M. compares the initial phases of garrison deployment with cultural practices reinforcing their identity and indicating a bias towards local communities. Later he proves that there was a transition to new forms of interaction and a different cultural response to colonial encounters. M. introduces the idea that borders and frontiers were a fluid issue in Roman military geography.

Part 4 (Chapters 8–9) focuses on the urban environment and its communities. M. organises these two chapters around the differentiation of cities according to their origin and urban identity. As origin largely determines the identity of many communities, multiple answers are analysed through language, toponyms, onomastics, religion and mythic cosmology (including funerary practices). Representative case studies (Carthage, Lepcis Magna) are useful in explaining these cultural processes, although the main lines are supported by several minor examples that provide an extraordinary overview. This analysis in a densely populated area such as North Africa is an almost impossible task due to the infinite number of examples (400–600 towns and *c.* 50,000 inscriptions). M. provides a valuable summary of the most important cultural processes and the general perspective of urban identity of North African communities under the aegis of Rome.

Part 5 (Chapters 10–11) develops the counterpart of communities in the rural environment. M. goes beyond the mythical colonial notions of high production in the rural landscapes of Africa. Roman rural colonisation motivated by *coloni* extended land ownership opportunities to some sections of society and broadened crops and water sources to new areas. M. argues that this intensification of production was prompted by the empire's global market, which encouraged the export of certain surpluses to other regions. The identity of these peoples was different to that of military and urban settlers, and M. demonstrates this with some comparisons (i.e. epigraphy). He wisely defines these areas as 'the most ambiguous cultural engagement with the Roman Empire' because, already integrated in the political administration and Latin epigraphic habit, the Punic and the Libyan cultures persisted and are more visible in the archaeological remains. Readers may possibly notice the lack of a distributional analysis explaining the concentration of urban communities in some parts of Africa, dealing with orogeny, pathways or other issues.

Part 6 (Chapters 12–13) includes a section on the diversity of economic production and how it affected communities. The last chapter is an update on the study of Africa under Rome. It strongly defends an archaeology of identity in the face of African archaeology. M. points out the need to be aware of the colonial implications (ancient, modern and contemporary) in the discipline and the gaps that should be investigated (stratigraphy, aDNA-analysis, palaeoecology etc.). From my point of view, the challenges should also include closer collaboration with African colleagues, the study of colonial archives, a genuine decolonial historiography and the creation of an open, collaborative and more integrative network of researchers working in Africa.

The book does not end there: Appendix 1 is one of the greatest achievements of the book. In just 15 pages M. manages to recapitulate the main points of North African history (3000 BCE–711 CE), in terms of both events and cultural-technological landmarks, and to link them to the main events of the Roman world.

One of the highlights of this coherent synthesis of Africa is the bridge between the 'two Africas'. The complexity of African territories lies in the frequent division between the

Latin and the Greek parts of the continent. This colonial division of the past is also present in modern academia, with a French-speaking part (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia) and an English-speaking part (Libya, Egypt). The complexity of the continent and the specialisation of scholars in a particular territory often make it difficult to fill this gap, but M.'s 40-year experience in Africa allows him to go beyond these differences and reunite Africa in a continuous, entangled and interconnected territory. This vast territory has been studied by both African and European teams and has produced a huge bibliography. It is reassuring that M.'s broad vision includes this multilingual bibliography. Placing the emphasis on the colonial aspects of Africa allows the author to rethink and reconsider cultural aspects of African history without resorting to the clichés of brutalism and imposition.

Another strong point of the book are its illustrations. The book contains an excellent graphic apparatus with comprehensible maps and quality photographs reproduced in colour. Some groundbreaking maps, such as Fig. 6.1, suggest a different view of the Roman conquest, with some gaps in the territory.

One of the minor negative aspects is the mistreatment of some of the classical sources. There are few classical texts and inscriptions in the book, and in some cases the original text is not provided. If the main principle of the book is to overcome some of the contemporary colonial views, the original sources should be included.

This book covers all the topics one would expect to find in a social history of Africa in Roman times, through its history, archaeology, ethnography, colonial past and troubled present. We can navigate through the very different views of Africans and Romans living in Africa in military, urban and rural contexts. The monograph is a welcome and enriching contribution to the scholarly community, thanks to its theoretical approach in such a broad synthesis.

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