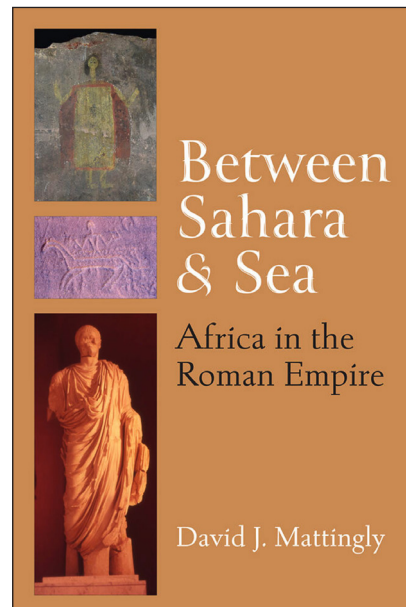


Book Review

Mattingly, David J. 2023. *Between Sahara and Sea: Africa in the Roman Empire*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; 978-0-47213-345-1 hardback \$44.95.

This extremely substantial study adds to this author's seminal publications on Roman imperialism and the Roman Empire. Mattingly's volume is a very significant contribution to studies of Roman imperialism and also a key publication for anyone researching North Africa in the immediately pre-Roman and Roman periods.

Mattingly has been at the forefront of the development of theory in Roman archaeology for decades, as indicated by his 1997 edited volume *Dialogues in Roman Imperialism*. Since the 1990s, he has made significant contributions to the critical approaches to Roman imperialism that have arisen, as reflected in an impressive publication list that includes his 2011 volume *Imperialism, Power and Identity*. The many other significant contributions that Mattingly has made include directing major field survey projects across North Africa. The innovative recent work on the *Garamantes* and their complex interrelations with Rome is just one example. Mattingly has published two ground-breaking volumes on North Africa: the volume under review and his 1995 monograph *Tripolitania*. His contribution to the archaeology of Roman Britain is also seminal, and includes *An Atlas of Roman Britain* (1990), which he wrote with Barri Jones; this volume remains a standard work of reference. We also have his monumental volume *An Imperial Possession: Britain in the Roman Empire* (2006).



Imperial Possession reinterpreted the archaeological and ancient historical information for Britain in the Roman Empire. It is a key reference work with an extensive bibliography. If I want to know more about an aspect of the Roman occupation of Britain that eludes me, it is to *An Imperial Possession* that I first turn. *Between Sahara & Sea* clearly will serve a comparable purpose for scholars who work on North Africa. The 13 substantial individual chapters are arranged into six 'Parts' and include 570 pages of text and illustrations. The volume also has a massive bibliography of 119 pages, containing roughly 2,300 published references. The volume is well supported by illustrations, many prepared by Martin Sterry and Mike Hawkes. These include colour maps which are the product of numerous survey projects, line drawings of sites and artefacts, and numerous photographs.

So, how does this new volume complement the author's earlier output? One constant, of course, is a deep desire to tell a story that addresses a wide spectrum of the Roman population, eroding earlier colonial traditions that focussed on the provincial elite. The volume's dedication to 'all the peoples of North Africa, past and present' expresses this intent. Another continuity in much of Mattingly's published work (from the late 1990s to the present volume) concerns 'discrepant identities'. Chapter 2 in *Between Sahara & Sea* provides a full update on this influential theory, which forms the central analytical approach to the information deriving from the Roman occupation of North Africa.

Many earlier studies of these lands have looked most directly at the 'Roman' peoples who invaded and came to live in this region. The urban centres, which are often well-preserved, continue to form a particular focus of interest. Studies of the Roman military and the provincial infrastructure of roads and resource exploitation have also been popular themes. *Between Sahara & Sea* follows a different agenda that builds directly upon the results of the impressive series of landscape surveys conducted across North Africa. It attempts a 'bottom-up' synthesis of the region, exploiting the vital contribution of archaeological landscape surveys and the interpretation of the rural populations of Africa in Roman times. One strength, however, is that (like *Imperial Possession*) Mattingly also explores the wealth of information for the military and urban populations. He does this to illustrate the variability in the information for military, urban and rural populations. This is a key issue since these topics have often been studied in isolation.

The volume includes Mattingly's thorough updating of his earlier critique of the colonial context of the creation of modern conceptions of the Roman past in this region (p. 51–57). This updates his earlier innovative study published in the *Roman Imperialism: Post-Colonial Perspectives* volume (Mattingly 1996). The up-to-date

surveys of ‘The Military Community’ (Part 3), ‘The Urban Community’ (Part 4) and ‘The Rural Communities’ (Part 5) adopt an identical structure to that used to address the peoples of Britain in *Imperial Possession*. In addition, *Between Sahara & Sea* includes a substantial Part 2, which explores ‘Early Cultural Encounters’ (addressing the period from 1000 BCE to 40 CE). The length of this section of the book reflects the far longer span of recorded history for North Africa in contrast to the Atlantic coast of Western Europe. Although *Imperial Possession* addressed the pre-existing (Iron Age) peoples of Britain, Mattingly’s new book required a fuller account of the run-up to the Roman assimilation of North Africa. In Britain, as in France and Germany, there is a long history of studying pre-Roman populations. Many past approaches to North Africa, by contrast, prioritized the role of outsiders who came into these lands (p. 73). Mattingly assesses in detail the ways that local communities played a fundamental role in the formation of Africa in the Roman Empire, telling a different story to the old accounts.

Although *Imperial Possession* and *Between Sahara & Sea* include the same approach to three defining ‘communities’ (military, urban and rural), the deep contrasts in the character of the archaeological and ancient historical materials available for the two regions, the geographical and climatic differences, and very different research traditions, emphasize fascinating contrasts between Britain and Africa. Discussions of similarities and differences between these two regions of the empire in *Between Sahara & Sea* are fairly limited. This volume serves well, however, to place North Africa in a broader imperial context.

The military and urban sections of the book are substantial and thoroughly informed. They paint a complex picture of the ways that military and urban communities adapted to local climate and to topographical and cultural factors. The Military Community section includes a full assessment of whether it is possible to interpret Roman strategy in North Africa as focusing in any way on the concept of the frontier. These ideas develop in far greater detail the observations included in *The African Frontiers* volume (which formed part of *The Frontiers of the Roman Empire* series; Breeze et al. 2013). The section on Urban Communities exploits the rich information from more than a century of archaeological work on the towns, seeking to complicate the over-simplistic picture of urban developments included in some earlier publications. It explores this topic by addressing the idea that towns differed in character and that various urban trajectories can be reconstructed.

The contribution of landscape surveys to Mattingly’s interpretation of rural communities clearly demonstrates the significance of the information stemming from this research, from the initial work of Richard Goodchild during the 1950s to the many substantial recent projects. Mattingly explores the potential and limitations of

the available information in great detail, noting the relative scarcity of excavation. The excellent preservation of many rural sites makes it possible to interpret rural populations in some detail. There is an interesting contrast with Germany, Gaul and Britain, where there is a lengthier history of more intensive excavations but generally fewer landscape survey projects.

Mattingly writes about the North African past as a geographical outsider. Despite the many projects he has directed in this region, and the author's unrivalled knowledge of the wider archaeology of North Africa, Mattingly is writing about an area from which he neither comes nor lives. The colonial legacy of study, as Mattingly explicitly acknowledges, has seen the Roman past of Africa written by scholars from countries that formerly exercised colonial control over these territories. Despite the focus on unmasking colonial agendas, therefore, *Between Sahara & Sea* continues this tradition. Yet, Mattingly has worked hard—through his research on the ground and his networking—to encourage new approaches that should encourage additional interest from African scholars. This point arose during a TRAC seminar last May at which Mattingly presented the volume just before its publication (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txQsOSeoYZs>). There, he noted several PhD students from North Africa who are engaged in the study of the Roman past, and, in *Between Sahara & Sea* (p. 437), we read that three Libyan PhD students are exploring aspects of 'Roman' rural Cyrenaica.

The debate at this TRAC seminar caused me to reflect on the postcolonial archaeological tradition of study in the UK—a topic to which Mattingly has also made a significant contribution. When I first encountered Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) as a PhD student during the early 1980s, it seemed to me that it would be simpler to apply colonial discourse theory to the Roman past in the UK, than to focus on the national tradition of a country that was not one in which I had grown up. Later, a critical focus on decolonizing Roman archaeology developed in Britain during the 1990s. After four decades of works that have attempted to decolonize Roman Britain, an urgent issue remains to encourage greater diversity in the range of people that contribute to our knowledge. Scholars from overseas have only rarely excavated in Britain, and most research has been undertaken by people based in the UK. I can imagine, perhaps in a decade, an account of Britain in the Roman Empire produced by one of a new generation of non-UK-based scholars. How different would the archaeology and ancient history of Roman Britain look in the research and writings of an African or Italian archaeologist? And will the next substantial synthesis of the archaeology of Africa in the Roman world be written by an African? Such an intellectual conceit on my part is not intended as a critique of Mattingly's vital contribution to changing perspectives on the Roman past, as indicated by his vast collection of published works, including the seminal volume under review. Indeed, Mattingly clearly communicates such a perspective in his book.

It is impossible to do full justice to the richness of this latest volume in a short review. *Between Sahara & Sea* is an immense and frankly stunning assembly of information, integrated into a logical and extremely well-informed intellectual framework. Anyone involved in researching and teaching the Roman archaeology and history of the ancient Mediterranean will find this a key source of information, insight and inspiration.

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