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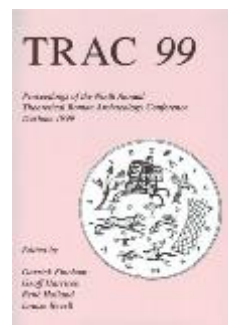
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From Periphery to Core in Late Antique Mauretania

by Alan Rushworth

Introduction

It has long been recognised that the centuries following the Arab conquest in the 7th century AD witnessed a shift in the political centre of gravity in North Africa from the coastal regions to the inland plains and high steppe, a process signalled by the foundation of cities such as Sijilmassa, Tlemcen, Tihert, Achir, Qal'a of the Beni Hammad and most notably Kairouan (cf. Lawless 1972c: 131; 1973: 231). The importance and distinctiveness of this inland, pre-Saharan steppe and mountain zone, separate from the *Tell* - the mountainous, Mediterranean coastal region - on the one hand and the desert on the other, has been well-highlighted by Lawless (1972c; 1973), building on the work of Despois (1942; 1964) and De Planhol (1962; 1968).

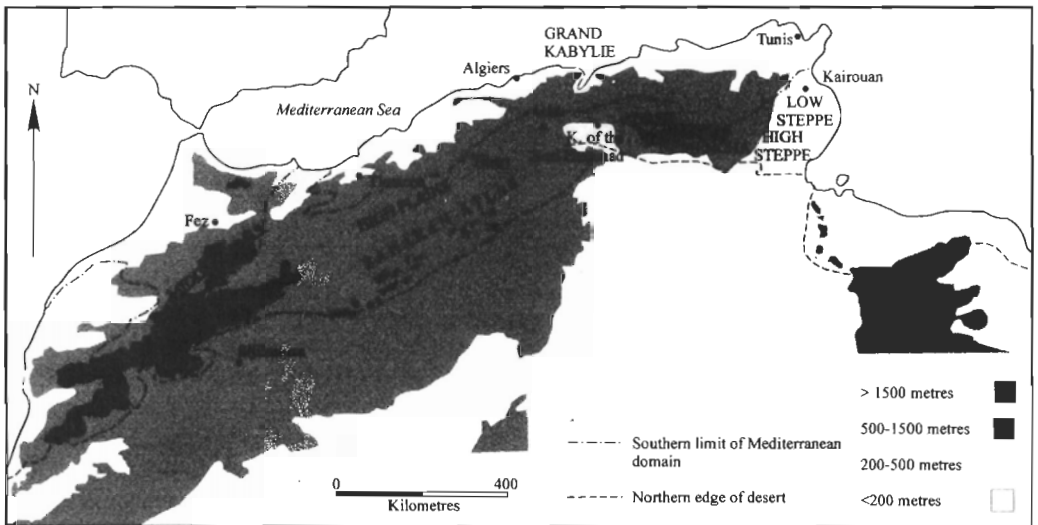
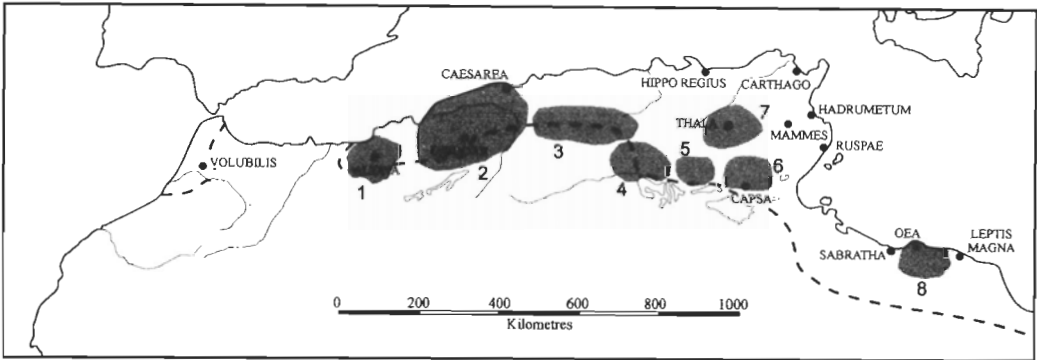


Figure 1 North Africa: Relief and major regional divisions (with the principal inland centres of the early Islamic era marked).

However, I will argue that the origins of that shift can be traced further back, into Late Antiquity, with the formation of sub-Roman successor states in the African provinces during the 5th and 6th centuries AD, particularly in the western province of Mauretania Caesariensis.

The dynamic processes unleashed in the former imperial frontier zone following the collapse of Roman authority resulted in a region which had been on the periphery of the

Mediterranean-centred empire becoming the core of new regional polities. The paper will also emphasise the value of comparative historical analysis in illuminating such processes.



- | | | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Kingdom of Altava | 2. Kingdom of the Ouarsenis | 3. Kingdom of the Hodna | 4. Kingdom of the Aures |
| 5. Kingdom of the Nemencha (?) | 6. Kingdom of Capsus (?) | 7. Kingdom of the Dorsale | 8. Kingdom of Cabaon |

Figure 2 Moorish successor states (after Courtois 1955).

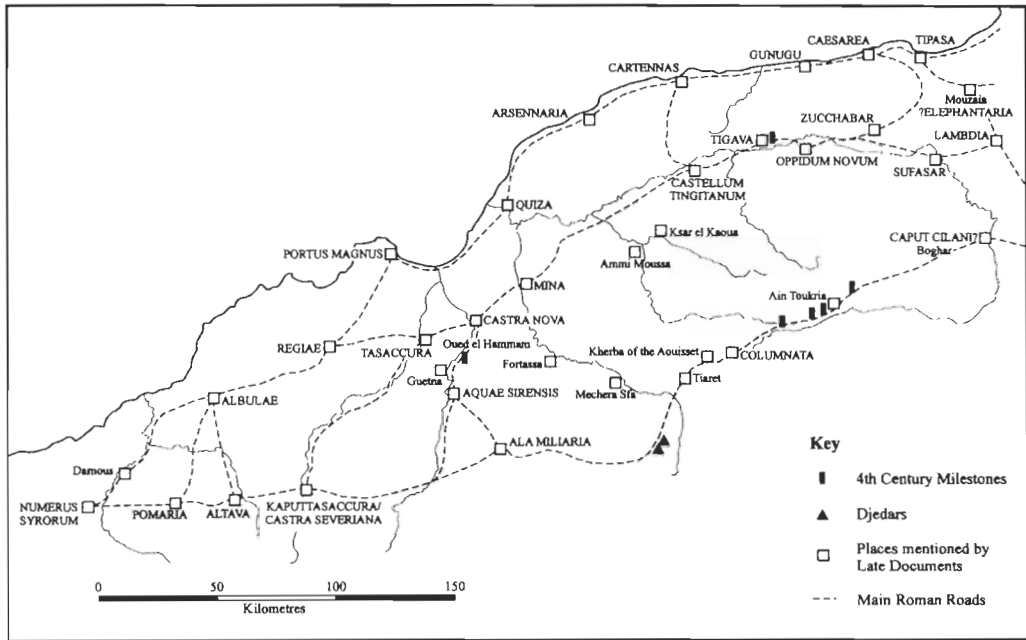


Figure 3 Western Mauretania Caesariensis in Late Antiquity.

In his monumental work *Les Vandales et l'Afrique*, Courtois outlined the evidence for a series of small Moorish states or chiefdoms, the majority of which were centred on the former imperial Roman frontier zone (*limes*) (1955: 333-9; cf. also Pringle 1981: 13-6). The evidence for the two kingdoms he identified in western Caesariensis (modern western Algeria), in

particular, is worth examining. These were centred on or near Tiaret and Altava, both settlements on the frontier highway, the *nova praetentura*, which was established under Septimius Severus (Albertini 1928; Salama 1953 & 1955a; 1977; Daniels 1987: 254).

Evidence of successor states 1: the Djedars

The evidence for the first of these statelets takes the form of a remarkable series of massive funerary monuments, known locally as the 'Djedars' or 'structures'. A total of 13 of these square mausolea, of fine ashlar construction surmounted by stepped pyramids, occur at two sites in this region (ten at Ternaten on the Djebel Araoui - AAA 33: 66 - and three at Djebel Lakhdar - AAA 33: 67) 20-26km south south west of Tiaret and 13-16km east of the modern town of Frenda. The monuments have provoked admiration ever since the expedition of the Fatimid caliph, al-Mansur, in the mid-10th century (recorded by the Arab chronicler, Ibn Rakik, in an excerpt preserved in the *Kitab al-Ibar* or 'Universal History' of Ibn Khaldun) and attracted the attention of numerous scholars of the French colonial era, most notably La Blanchere (1883: 77-99, 127-9) and Gsell (1901: 418-27) and later Camps (1961: 590-1). More recently they have been the subject of intensive study by Kadra (1974; 1979; 1983), including a programme of extensive excavation at Djedar A on the Djebel Lakhdar which has revealed an enclosure wall and an associated building on the east side, presumably designed for mortuary or other ceremonial practices such as incubation.

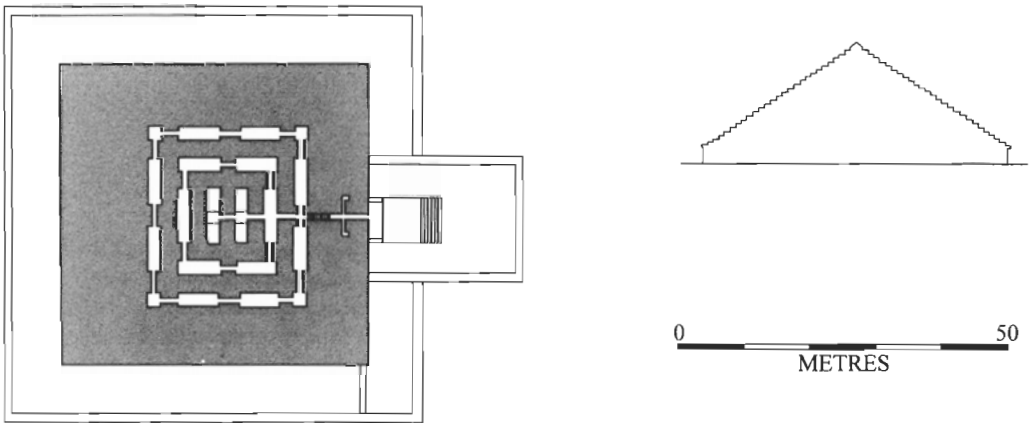


Figure 4 Plan and profile of one of the Djedars.

A C¹⁴ date of 410 +/- 50, calibrated to AD 490 +/- 50, was obtained by Kadra from Djedar B on the Djebel Lakhdar. This date would accord with that applied on stylistic criteria to the decorative carvings and Christian motifs on Djedars A and B, which suggests that the Lakhdar trio probably represent the earlier of the two groups of monuments. Unfortunately the dedicatory inscriptions *in situ* on Djedars A and B (the latter a bilingual Latin-Greek example), which would doubtless have supplied the names and careers of the individuals buried within, are virtually illegible. The largest of the Ternaten group, Djedar F (or 'the Great Djedar of Ternaten'), incorporates much reused stonework, including a Severan dedication of 202-203 marking the foundation of an *oppidum* (Salama 1955a: 329-42) and epitaphs dated to 433, 466, 480 and 490 (Kadra 1974: 260-81), all presumably derived from ruined or redundant structures in neighbouring settlements. A late 6th century date has been assigned to this structure, which

must have placed great demands on the available supply of building stone, new or reused, on account of its massive size.

Whilst their architectural form echoes a long tradition of massive, North African royal mausolea, stretching back to Numidian and Mauretanian kingdoms of 3rd-1st centuries BC (cf. Rakob 1979: 132-45; Fentress 1979: 55-56), the closest parallels are with the tumuli or *bazinas*, with flanking 'chapels', which are distributed in an arc through the pre-Saharan zone and beyond from Negrine on the southern margins of the Nemenchas Mts in the east to the present-day Western Sahara and Mauritania in the south west (Camps 1984: 207-8, figure 9; 1985: 316-7). The Djedars could thus be considered the ultimate development of an indigenous, pre-Saharan funerary architectural tradition, adapted to fit a Christian, Romanised environment. They probably represent the tombs of a local dynasty perhaps beginning in the 5th century with the erection of the Djebel Lakhdar monuments and continuing up to the Arab conquest at the end of the 7th century.

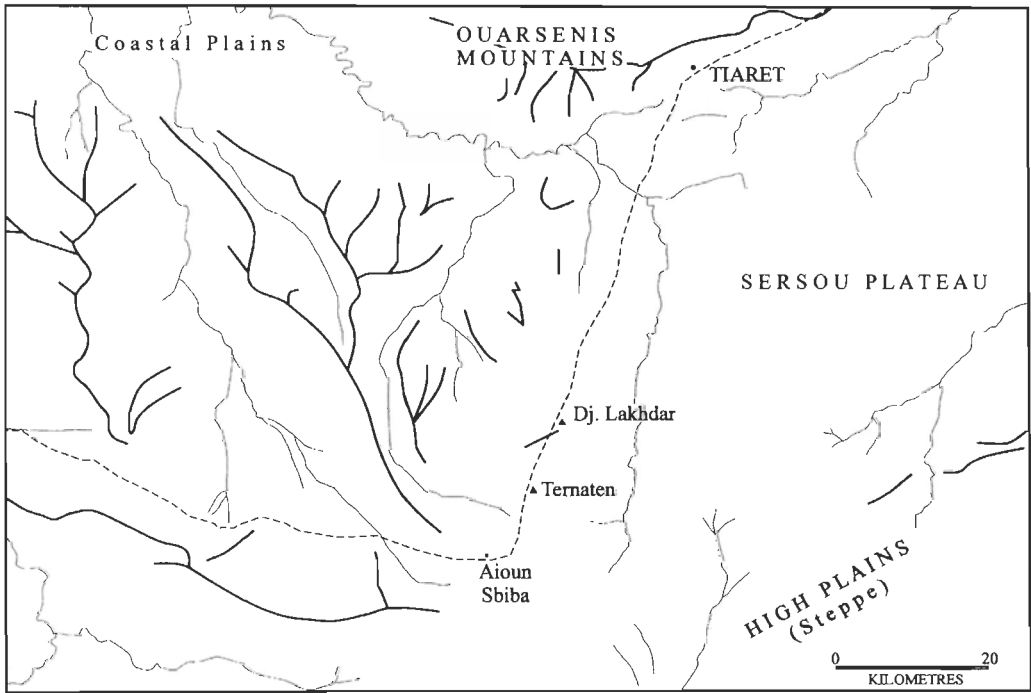


Figure 5 The location of the Djedars.

A most significant aspect is the location of these dynastic monuments. Both in political-strategic and broad geographical-topographical terms the mausolea occupied a liminal position on the divide between two worlds. Firstly, the Djedars probably actually overlooked the old frontier highway - the *praetentura* - linking the military bases and urban centres along southern limit of the province. Although no milestones have yet been found between Aioun Sbiba and Columnata, the most likely route would take the road right past the Djedars. The road probably continued on from Columnata, following its previous, west-south-westerly course, 20km to Tiaret, where the ruins of a sizeable, walled city with an inner citadel or reduced circuit and a

rectangular fort were recorded by French military surveyors (cf. Azema de Montgravier 1843: 665-7, 675 & plan; Cagnat 1913: 660-1; Fabre 1900: plan; Lawless 1970 II: 143-7). Inscriptions, including one mentioning the dedication of a *pondarium* by an aedile (*AE* 1912: 156; cf. Cadenat 1988), suggest this was the site of a Romanised *municipium* from the early 3rd century AD. At Tiaret, the military highway must have changed course to reach the next known milestone (Salama 1955b), 45km to the south south west, near Aioun Sbiba. If it is assumed that the road followed the shortest practicable line projected between these two points, the highway will actually have passed right beneath the low bluffs of the Djebel Lakhdar and Djebel Araoui on which the Djedars were situated. A trackway marked on the early 20th century, French colonial 1:200,000 series map follows this very route.

Secondly, the monuments were situated on the boundary between the mountainous watered zone - the Tell - and the high steppes. Moreover this part of the steppe, known as the Sersou Plateau, is unusually well-watered, being traversed by several watercourses, notably the Oued Mina and the Nahr Ouassel, which flow off the southern slopes of the adjacent Tell ranges, the Frenda and Ouarsenis Mountains. The Sersou thus acts as a fertile antechamber to the vast semi-arid expanse of the High Plateaux stretching away to the south west, south and east to the distant Saharan Atlas range. The area has witnessed much agricultural development based on extensive cereal cultivation in the present century and during antiquity it is clear that the headwaters of the Mina and Nahr-Ouassel and the adjacent slopes of the Ouarsenis and Frenda mountains were densely settled (Fort 1908a; 1908b; Gsell *AAA* sheet 33; Joly 1909; 1910; Lawless 1970). If the royal cemeteries lay close to the political centre of the successor state, alongside its principal artery, so their liminal location must have important implications for the nature of that state.

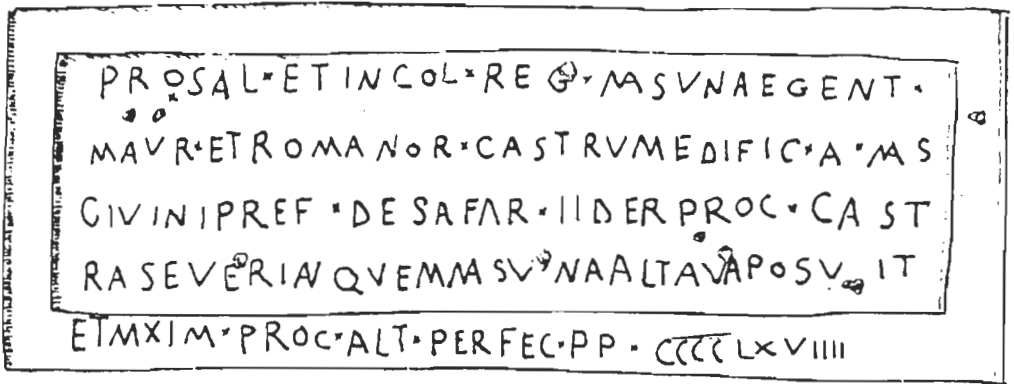


Figure 6 The dedication of king Masuna at Altava.

Pro sal(ute) et incol(umnitate) reg(is) Masunae gent(is) or gent(ium) /Maur(orum) et Romanor(um). Castrum (a)edific(atum) a Mas/givini, pr(a)ef(ecto) de Safar, lider, proc(uratore) Cast/ra Severian(a) quem Masuna Altava posuit / et Maxim(us) proc(urator) Alt(avae) perfec(it) (anno) pp(rovinciarum) cccclxviii.

Evidence of successor states 2: the kingdom of Masuna at Altava

The second of the successor states identified by Courtois was centred further to the west. The principal evidence for its existence is represented by a dedicatory inscription (*CIL* VIII 9835; cf. Camps 1984: 192-7; 1985: 314; Février 1988) recording the building of a fort (*castrum*) for Masuna, *rex gent(ium) Maur(orum) et Romanor(um)*, by local officials in AD 508. The location of the *castrum*, at Altava, is, again, right on the *praetentura*. As Lawless noted (1970, II: 60-1), the enclosure of c. 70m x 48m, visible on the aerial photograph of Altava (reproduced by Marcillet-Jaubert 1968: 9), in the south-west corner of the walled urban circuit, may represent the remains of Masuna's *castrum*.

The focus of Masuna's kingdom is less certain than that associated with the Djedar tombs. Of itself this inscription need not imply that Altava was the political centre. The officials listed in the inscription governed neighbouring settlements. *Castra Severiana*, which also figures in a late-5th century episcopal *notitia* (*Not. prov. Maur. Caes. 73*), must have originated as one of the bases on the Severan military highway and should probably be identified with the early-3rd century fort at Kaputtasaccura (Sidi Ali ben Youb), a name which occurs on 3rd-century milestones, but is not mentioned later (Camps 1984: 196; Rushworth 1996:313). Safar is unidentified as yet, but clearly also lay in the vicinity. There is no indication that the procurator of Altava, Maximus, had any higher status than Masgivinius the prefect at Safar or Iider the procurator of *Castra Severiana*. Indeed Camps suggests that Masuna may have been a member of the royal dynasty responsible for construction of the Djedars, ruling a kingdom embracing most of Mauretania Caesariensis (1984: 215-6; 1985: 321-2).

Yet two factors suggest that Masuna's kingdom was indeed centred in this sector of the former frontier zone. Firstly, the prominence of Tlemcen (formerly Roman Pomaria), only 25km to the west, as the principal inland city on the plains of the western Algerian Tell throughout the subsequent medieval era is noteworthy (Abun Nasr 1987: 43; Julien 1970: 162-3; Canal 1889; Dahmani 1985). Koceila, the leader of Berber resistance to the Arab conquest is even said to have originated from Tlemcen (cf. Camps 1984: 217-8; 1985: 322-4). Although this last may simply be a retrospective anachronism in the later medieval Arab sources, it is conceivable that Tlemcen was already an important regional centre in Late Antiquity.

Secondly, a clutch of late-6th-7th century inscriptions at Volubilis, far to the west in Mauretania Tingitana, seem to hint at a political takeover mounted from the region of Altava. Volubilis was the major inland city in southern Tingitana during the Roman period. Settlement continued here after the official Roman withdrawal from the southern half of the province at the end of the 3rd century AD, as attested by a trickle of coins and pottery finds (Lenoir 1986: 240-1). Although small in number these finds are nonetheless significant given the precipitate decline in the quantities of such material reaching any part of southern Tingitana, except Sala (where a military garrison remained in place). The focus of the town seems to have shifted downhill to the banks of the Wadi Khroumane and a new fortification wall closing off this reduced area was built at some stage during this period (Akerrez 1985; Lenoir 1985). It was still an important centre at the end of the 8th century, figuring in the Arab sources as *Walila*, the focus of the Awreba tribe and initially of the Idrisid state.



Figure 7 The late defensive wall at Volubilis.

The four tombstones (*IAM* II: 506, 603, 608, 619) range in date from AD 599-655, far later than any others from the site. They employ formulae such as *domus aeternalis* and were dated using the Mauretanian era all of which were widely used in western Caesariensis, but otherwise unknown in Tingitana (Fevrier 1986: 768-9, 778; Marcillet-Jaubert 1968). One inscription commemorates Iulia Rogatiana from Altava (*IAM* II: 608). All four deceased may belong to the same lineage, bearing the *nomen* Iulius. Some also bear the titles *princeps* and *vice pr(a)epositus* (*IAM* II: 506, 603). Given the evident cultural and personal links with western Caesariensis, the epitaphs may signify the insertion of a governing cadre into Volubilis following a political takeover from the east by Masuna's successors at the very end of the 6th century or beginning of the 7th century.

Discussion

Why should the former frontier zone have become the centre of at least some North African polities in Late Antiquity? In seeking to understand this phenomenon a useful concept is that of the 'dual state', developed by Thomas Barfield (1989) in his detailed study of the dynamics of frontier interaction and post-imperial collapse in China and Inner Asia.

Barfield argues that the history of the Chinese-Inner Asian frontier zone tended to follow a cyclical pattern. The unification of China under a powerful, militaristic dynasty (the Han, the Ming, etc.) was usually followed fairly rapidly by the emergence of a corresponding imperial confederacy ruling over the tribes of the Mongolian steppe (the Hsiung-Nu, etc.). The relationship of the tribal confederacy to the Chinese state was not simply parasitic, though in large measure the steppe empire functioned to extort resources required by the nomadic tribes

from settled, agrarian China (Barfield 1989: 32-84). There were also symbiotic elements in the relationship, particularly as the Chinese dynasty began to decline or became unstable. Faced with internal revolt and disintegration, the state's most reliable source of military assistance was often the nomad confederacies, for, in practice, the steppe empires' structural reliance upon the Chinese state was even greater, as they could not long function without the large subsidies which only a unified Chinese empire could provide.

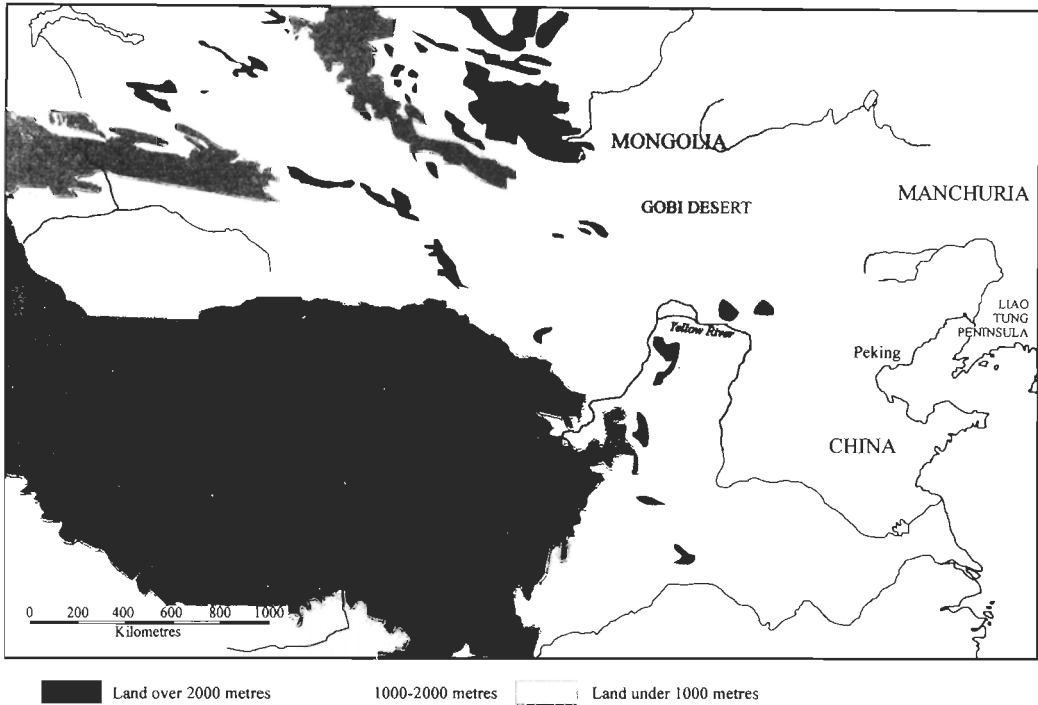


Figure 8 Inner Asia and northern China.

Thus when a Chinese imperial dynasty collapsed the beneficiaries were not the steppe empires, which on the contrary tended to collapse at the same time as the Chinese dynastic states. Instead it was tribes of Manchuria, to the north east, which were able to establish successor states in the frontier zone. In an often repeated pattern a series of such states, each more expansionary than its predecessor, culminated in a single dynastic empire controlling both northern China and the Mongolian steppe (Barfield 1989: 100-1).

The key factor in the success of the Manchurian tribes was the essential experience their chieftains already possessed of ruling two different communities - their own nomadic tribes and groups of Chinese agricultural settlers along the coast and in the Liao-Tung peninsula, between northern China proper and Korea. This enabled them to administer and tax Chinese districts they seized, rather than just raiding them, and eventually to establish parallel administrative hierarchies for the two populations - the tax-paying, agricultural Chinese and the northern tribes, which provided the military arm of the state. Moreover the Manchurian leadership was also conceptually equipped to take on the Inner Asian nomadic tribes and ultimately to dominate the Mongolian steppe in a way that the Chinese dynasties with their Confucian bureaucracies and rigid world view were not (Barfield 1989: 104-24).

Even after the new state had expanded to control northern China its capital remained in the former frontier zone where dynastic leadership could exercise effective control over both worlds. If the regime moved its capital southward and became more Sinicised, it lost touch with its tribal roots and generally collapsed very rapidly (cf. Barfield 1989: 124-7 discussing the sinification of the T'o-pa Wei state in the late 5th-early 6th century AD for example).

Something similar may be going on in the North African frontier zone during Late Antiquity. Moorish tribes and their chieftains had long been integrated into the processes of frontier control by the imperial authorities as allies, *foederati*, or military commanders (Rushworth 1992: 27-59, 197-229). A law of 409, preserved in the Theodosian Code, refers to the responsibilities of tribesmen (*gentiles*) in the defence and maintenance of the *limes* and *fossatum* (*CTh* VII xv 1; cf. Rushworth 1992: 27-40). Several chieftains buried in the Tripolitanian pre-desert cemetery of Bir ed-Dreder held the title of *tribunus* - either signifying tenure of a frontier command or simply an honorific title (Goodchild 1954; 1976: 59-71; cf. Buck *et al.* 1983). Moreover in 420/421 St Augustine refers to recently pacified tribes (*gentes pacatae*) now in the service of Rome (*Epistulae* 199; cf. Decret 1985).

The presence of a few Romanized communities amongst the Berber population of transhumant pastoralists-cum-terrace farmers in the high steppe and mountains to the south of the Mauretanian province will have provided the federate chieftains with some experience of maintaining authority over mixed populations (Lawless 1972a; 1972b; Rushworth 1992: 189-91). Examples of such possible Romanised settlements include the fortified site at Ferme Romanette, beside the Oued Ouerk (Benseddik 1980; Joly 1898) - a chieftain's residence or a military outpost protecting a remote settlement? - El Gahra, where the remains of a walled town with projecting towers were noted in the last century and pottery suggests occupation continued into the 5th century (AAA 47: 1; Daniels 1983: 12, 15-6; 1987; Lasalle 1889); and Djelfa, where the lettering of one Latin epitaph suggests Romanised settlement again persisted beyond the 3rd-century military outpost (*CIL* VIII 8804; AAA 46: 102; Rushworth 1992: 190; Salama 1977: 584-5).

With the collapse of central authority in the western Maghreb during the 5th century these local Berber chieftains established polities centred on the former *limes*. Their location on the territorial interface between two populations facilitated the control and exploitation of these twin human resources. The citizenry of the former Roman provinces provided the fiscal resources of the new state and were subject to some kind of formal administration, as indicated by the existence of named officials on the Altava and Volubilis inscriptions, whilst the tribes beyond the frontier provided the military manpower. Control over the latter was probably exercised through the manipulation of kinship networks and the distribution of lucrative offices, honours and titles to key individuals. To adopt the vivid analogy used by Gellner to describe the early-modern Moroccan state (1969: 3-4), the provincial *Romani* were the sheep to be shorn whilst the tribesmen were the sheepdogs who guarded the sheep and did the shearing.

The ethnic, functional duality of many of the late-antique successor states has often been stressed, most notably with regard to Theodoric's Gotho-Roman kingdom in Italy (cf. Moorhead 1992: 66-113, for example). Indeed it seems implicit in the titulature of such rulers (Fevrier 1988: 138). In most cases, however, the new ethnic, military arm of the state - the 'Goths', or 'Burgundians' for instance - settled within the former boundaries of the Roman Empire, whereas the tribal sheepdogs in the Mauro-Roman kingdoms of North Africa continued to occupy a territorial zone beyond the former imperial frontiers which remained, to some extent at least, distinct from that of the *Romani* (whatever we understand by terms such as 'Goth', 'Moor' or 'Roman').

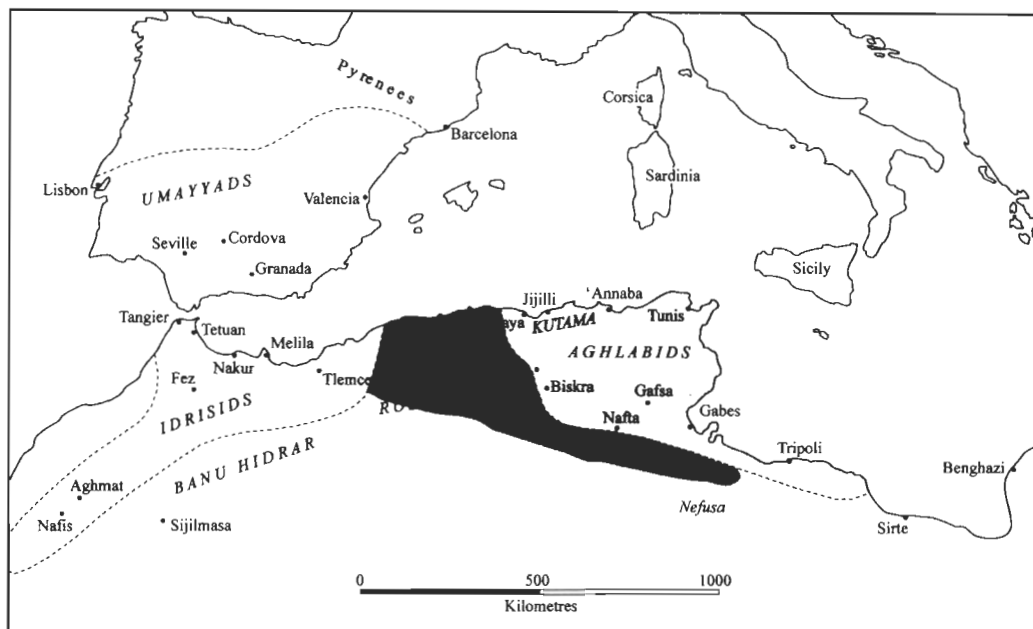


Figure 9 The Maghreb in the 8th-9th centuries AD.

Tribal states in the medieval Maghreb

Finally, some of the implications of the above for our understanding of the later history of state structures in the medieval Maghreb can be explored. The areas discussed above as possibly forming the cores of sub-Roman successor states were each subsequently the focus of early-Islamic state-building activity during the 8th-9th centuries. Tahart, near Tiaret, was founded in the later 8th century as the capital of the Ibadite Rostemid state, its authority recognised throughout the pre-Saharan zone as far east as the Djebel Nefusa in Tripolitania (Abun-Nasr 1987: 42-9; Julien 1970: 26-33). The early-medieval prominence of Tlemcen has already been noted above. From 765-90 Tlemcen was the centre of a state established by the Beni Ifran under the leadership of their imam Abu Kurra. In 790 it fell under the authority of the Idrisid state, which was centred initially on Volubilis (*Walila*) and after 809 on Fez, which then replaced Volubilis as the principal political focus in the interior of Morocco. This continuity in the importance of certain sites or particular areas suggests that some of the basic arrangements underpinning the Moorish successor states remained in place during the 8th-9th centuries providing some form of infrastructure of governance, despite the lack of evidence for direct political and institutional continuity.

Secondly, numerous studies have focussed on the role of long-distance trade in the growth of urbanism in the pre-Saharan zone (e.g. Brett 1969; Lawless 1972c; 1973) - both north-south trans-Saharan exchange and east-west Maghreb-Mashriq commerce. Certainly its importance cannot be denied. But by shifting the political centre of gravity further southward, bringing it a little closer to the Saharan world and its Berber communities, the formation of dual states in the former frontier zone conceivably fostered the growth of trans-Saharan trade, which was certainly established by the 8th century (Lewicki 1962).

An even longer lasting theme in the historiography of the medieval Maghreb has been the role of tribes in state formation, the cyclical pattern - or 'circulation of elites' - first analysed by the great 14th-century historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldun, whereby particular tribal groups, the Kotama, Sanhaja, Zenata, etc., inspired and legitimised by a charismatic religious leader overthrew the old state order and established a new one (cf. Gellner 1981: 16-35; Lindholm 1996: 49-54). Although modern scholars would not now accept Khaldun's model without serious qualification, it would be absurd to deny the importance of the tribal society and the military power it contributed to medieval Maghrebi states. Khaldun indeed, particularly in his introductory *Muqaddimah*, emphasises the dual nature of North African states, analysing the tense and dynamic relationship between urban civilisation and the warlike tribes with their internal solidarity - *asabiyya* - both necessary for the continuance of the state yet inherently unstable in the longer term (cf. Gellner 1981: 27-9). This paper should show that these themes are worth exploring in the period prior to the Islamic conquest.

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Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

AAA Gsell, S. 1911. *Atlas Archéologique de l'Algérie*. References to sites entries in the Atlas are given in the traditional manner as AAA (sheet no.):(site no.).

AE *L'Année épigraphique*.

BCTH *Bulletin Archéologique du Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques*.

BSGAO *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie et d'Archéologie d'Oran*.

CIL *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*.

MEFR *Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de l'École Française de Rome* (until 1970)

MEFRA *Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de l'École Française de Rome, Antiquité* (after 1970).

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