

Reflections on an Environmental History of Resistance: State Space and Shatter Zones in Late Antique North Africa

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Ecologically and politically peripheral areas, such as mountains, deserts and marshes have often been seen as zones of resistance against the encroaching state. At first sight, the mountainous uplands and the desert fringe of North Africa seem to be such an area of resistance: in the Late Roman and Byzantine period, the Atlas Mountains and the Tripolitanian Sahara were epicentres of indigenous revolt against the Roman state, particularly during the Moorish Wars c. 533-548 AD. The question is whether the physical geography truly determined a cultural antagonism between inland zones and the Mediterranean coast. Using evidence from survey archaeology, epigraphy and literary sources, this paper tests models on connectivity and resistance, disputing the simple opposition between an inland, indigenous world on the one hand, and a cosmopolitan, Mediterranean and Roman world on the other. Instead, evidence shows that the relationship between “Roman” and “native” was much more complex, entangled and ambivalent, despite the peripheral nature of the inland landscapes. The cultural landscape was determined as much by historical factors as environmental.

Keywords: Late Antiquity, Roman frontier, Northern Africa, connectivity

1. INTRODUCTION

In the late fourth century of our era, if St. Augustine peered over the city walls of Hippo Regius (Annaba) in modern-day Algeria, he would have first seen the surrounding countryside, ruled over by ruthless landowners.¹ Further away, towards the horizon, he would perceive another world from his own altogether, one of hilltop villages where people spoke ‘Punic’, not Latin, of heretical Donatists and wild animals. At least, that is how Peter Brown describes the situation in his landmark study on St. Augustine (Brown 1967: 186-187). Elsewhere, speaking in more general terms, Brown (1971: 13) remarks that ‘[T]he Roman empire always consisted of two overlapping worlds’, referring to the world of the urban elite and the provincial rural inhabitant. Brown’s words recall the scholarly drive to understand the cultural wedges of the Roman Empire under the now much-maligned term Romanisation (Freeman 1997; Hingley 2005). For North Africa, this supposed

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cultural divide between Roman and ‘native’ has often been framed in environmental terms of an opposition between the harsh inland landscapes of mountains and deserts (Sahara) and the cultured world of the Mediterranean coast (Tell).

This inland world was inhabited by peoples usually called ‘Moors’ by Late Antique sources and often identified with the modern Berber.² Berbers had long inhabited the North African inlands, already in the first few centuries BC, when Numidian states coexisted with the Mediterranean-facing empire of Carthage. The Romans managed to subjugate most Berber tribes in the region, but from the fourth century AD, various Berber strongmen appear in the literary sources, first with the revolt of Firmus in 372. With the collapse of Roman authority in North Africa following the Vandal conquest of Carthage in 439, various Moorish principalities controlled much of Mauritania, Byzacena and part of Tripolitania. When general Belisarius was sent by the Byzantine emperor Justinian in 533 to reconquer North Africa from the Vandals, he defeated the Vandal forces in only a few months, but for the next fifteen years, his successors faced various Berber revolts. Only in 538 was the general John Troglita able to finally quench resistance (Brett and Fentress 1996).

To what extent is the unrest reported in the ancient sources symptomatic of a more fundamental antithesis between Sahara and Tell? As will be discussed below, the environmentalist framing of this opposition between Roman and barbarians goes a long way back. A more theoretically sophisticated analysis is made possible through the work of anthropologist James C. Scott. In his *The Art of not Being Governed* (2009), Scott departs from an environmental perspective to research the dialectic between what he calls ‘state space’ and stateless ‘shatter zones’. The question here is whether the rebellious Berber populations in the marginal hinterlands of Late Antique North Africa can

be seen as stateless peoples in opposition to Rome state space, following the thesis put forward by Scott.

In many ways, the ‘Moors’ of Roman North Africa are a “people without history”, having produced no texts of their own (except some inscriptions, discussed below). The Romans, when writing about them, usually did so in very pejorative terms. However, a set of Late Antique texts, when read against the grain, can throw some light on the African inlands during the Late Antique period (here, roughly fourth to sixth centuries AD). This paper discusses models of Mediterranean connectivity and resistance and compares it with survey archaeology conducted in modern Algeria, Tunisia and Tripolitania, as well as the narrative texts by Ammianus Marcellinus, Procopius and Corippus and epigraphic texts left behind by ‘Moorish’ chiefs. Putting the evidence together and relying on a critical discursive reading of the texts, a more nuanced picture emerges of the interaction between ‘Roman’ and ‘local’ in North Africa.

2. MODELS OF CONNECTIVITY AND RESISTANCE: STATE SPACE AND SHATTER ZONES

In *The Art of Not Being Governed*, Scott studies an area called Zomia, the mountainous uplands of Southeast Asia. As a leading question, he asks: ‘how might we best understand the fraught dialectical relations between [...] projects of rule and their agents, on the one hand, and zones of relative autonomy and their inhabitants, on the other?’ (Scott 2009: 2). According to Scott, environmentally marginal zones such as mountainous Zomia were places of refuge for people seeking to escape the tyranny of the premodern state. Here, men and women could escape the imposition of taxes, corvée, servitude, war and disease which would inevitably follow the establishment of sedentary and hierarchical states. These places of refuge, or ‘shatter zones’, were made possible by environmental circumstances. Scott characterises the state as a lowland phenomenon. The reach of the state was obstructed by the problem of distance: armies needed to be moved and fed, land to be surveyed by agents of the state, taxes in kind to be collected. Difficult terrain like mountains, marshes or deserts made overland transport more difficult so that many premodern states concentrated into fertile river valleys, and the state’s hegemonial culture spread across flat plains. To escape state space and the burdens of the state, people fled to difficult terrain, called shatter zones, and became ‘barbarians by design’, living in opposition to the state in acephalous, illiterate, fluid communities with mobile

2 The word ‘Berber’ is derived from Latin *barbarus* and usually refers to the indigenous people of North Africa (as opposed to Arabs, Phoenicians, Romans, etc.). Ancient ethnonyms are for example Moors (Mauri), Numidians, Garamantes, etc. Berber can also refer to the related indigenous language. While not a perfect term, I will use the term here, following Brett and Fentress (1996: 3-5), to use it to refer to those people who are, or were, perceived to be indigenous North Africans both in the past and the current day.

residences and dispersed agriculture. Variations of this pattern occur all over world history according to Scott, and everywhere the discourse of civilised states is to portray stateless people as ‘barbarians’ (Scott 2009).³

One such people fleeing the state and living in shatter zones mentioned by Scott (2009: 328) are the Berbers in North Africa. Indeed, the history of North Africa has long been interpreted in terms of an opposition between the state and the stateless, *siba* and *makhzen* (Gellner 1969: 1-29). According to the Medieval African scholar Ibn Khaldun, history could be explained through the opposition between sedentary peoples (Arabs, in his case), and barbarian nomads (Berbers) (Ibn Khaldun I.221; Wickham 2005: 18). This opposition has often been framed in geographic or environmental terms, a simple opposition between coast and desert, an opposition that has been especially prominent since the French colonization of North Africa (Lawless 1972; Brent 1986). Thus, one could speak of a struggle between the desert and the Mediterranean world (Birod and Dresch 1953: 452), or between ‘desert’ and ‘sown’ (Despois 1964: 108). Most forcefully, the argument has been put forward in Christian Courtois’ *Vandales et l’Afrique*, who, like Scott, uses the metaphor of Roman civilisation flowing around the landscape like water, covering the plains but leaving the mountains dry, home to ‘l’Afrique oubliée’ (Courtois 1955: 65-128). Subsequently, criticism on the dichotomy urban/rural, plain/mountains and Roman/African has mounted, seeing it as a simplification of reality and a relic of colonial thought (Lawless 1972; Leveau 1977).

It is important to realise that Scott’s thinking is more sophisticated. *The Art of Not Being Governed* explicitly characterises the stateless as the product of state formation; paradoxically, the stateless are fundamentally entangled with the state, according to Scott. It is only in the discourse of the state, through the written texts passed down and studied by historians, that the stateless become othered into a categorical opposite, barbarians that remain to be civilised by the state (Scott 2009: 98-126). I will return to this point later.

At first sight, Scott’s thesis seems appealing for the Roman Empire and Roman North Africa specifically. It is a well-known fact that most Roman towns are

distributed along the Mediterranean coastline or major river ways (Noreña 2015) a basic fact which had not changed by Late Antiquity if we can judge from the location of early medieval bishoprics (Brown 2012: 7). The Mediterranean coastal zone thus also produced specific cultural landscapes where traditional ‘Roman’ life was replicated. Here lived the aristocrats who wrote the texts that we read to the current day, from bishops like St. Augustine who guided their flock, to governors who administered the province. The hinterlands, on the other hand, were home to estates, villages, military fortifications and tribal areas, but much more sparsely populated by towns.

This sharp contrast in urbanisation and cultural landscapes was an effect of the ‘problem of distance’. Distance plays a central role in Scott’s argument, which goes back to Fernand Braudel’s landmark study on the Mediterranean (1949: 355-358). Braudel (1949: 25-51) too, already argued that the mountains had always been a world apart from the Mediterranean coastal plains, refuges of liberty for peasant republics. Recently, distance as *ennemi numéro uno* has received renewed attention among ancient and medieval historians studying the Mediterranean. Horden and Purcell (2000) in their environmental, neo-Braudelian monograph, *The Corrupting Sea*, see the Mediterranean Sea as enabling connectivity. Because the Mediterranean connects and land divides, Mediterranean geography is essentially ‘inside out’. ‘Distance is, in effect, inverted: places linked by the sea are always “close”, while neighbours on land may, in terms of interaction, be quite distant’ (Horden and Purcell 2000: 133).

While the importance of the Roman roads should not be forgotten (e.g. Laurence 1991), they can best be seen as complementary to the greater importance of waterways. The centrality of the Mediterranean has been powerfully corroborated by Walter Scheidel’s ORBIS project. In a GIS-model based on Diocletian’s Price Edict and papyri the time and costs of travel-routes are simulated (Scheidel 2014). The resulting maps perfectly plot the problem of distance and the ‘inverted Mediterranean’ of Horden and Purcell (figure 1). The Mediterranean becomes a pond of connectivity, while the far-flung inland regions such as Numidia and Mauretania were further away from the city of Rome than, for example, the Levantine coast in terms of relative distance. Such a map of connectivity perfectly fits the distribution of Roman cities. Since cities were the cornerstone of Roman governance,

3 For critique on Scott from the discipline of Southeast Asia studies, see Lieberman 2010. For application within ancient history and classical archaeology, see Woolf 2016.

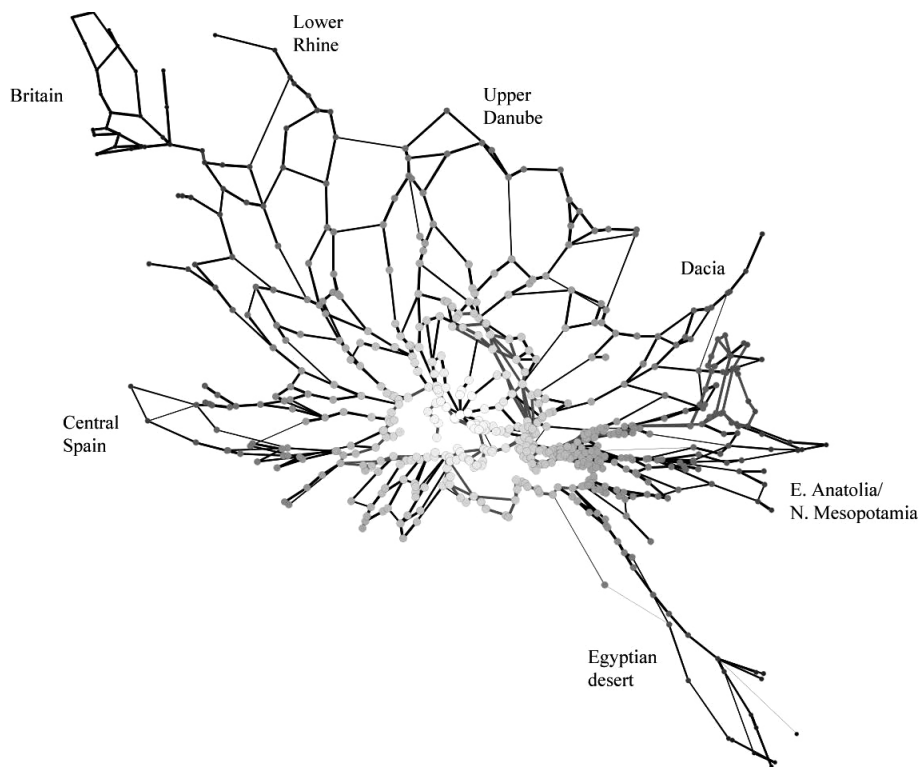


Figure 1: Visualisation of Mediterranean connectivity based on Walter Scheidel's GIS model, computing the time cost from Rome at high military speed. Note the relative distance of inland Africa compared to the coast (Scheidel 2014: 15).

even in the Late Empire,⁴ this brings us back to Scott's theory: the Mediterranean Sea itself becomes the Roman state-space, similar to the river valleys of Scott's Southeast Asia, while the peripheral inland territories become potential shatter zones. From the point of view of the Roman state, inland zones would be harder to reach and control, forming possible landscapes of resistance. The question is whether this model can be corroborated by the ancient evidence.

3. THE AFRICAN LANDSCAPE

Since the 1970s, a series of archaeological surveys have been conducted across North Africa, revealing hundreds of sites across modern Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. Generally, these surveys, some intensive and others extensive, have relied on fieldwalking, collecting pottery sherds and mapping remains of archaeological structures, still visible above ground. The main problem with the African surveys, familiar to anyone

who has attempted to synthesise the results from a plethora of surveys performed by different archaeological teams, is the lack of comparability between the surveys, since each survey has had its own parameters, research decisions, methodologies, chronological demarcations, thoroughness and quality of execution (Alcock 1996: 36; Leone and Mattingly 2004: 136-142). This paper will therefore rely to a large extent on the authors' own interpretations.

Here, three surveys will be discussed in detail: The Africa Proconsularis Survey near Thugga, the Kasserine survey near Cilium and Thelepte in Byzacena, and the UNESCO Libyan Valleys Archaeology Survey in Tripolitania ((cf. figure 2). The Africa Proconsularis survey,⁵ which found up to 634 sites in the hinterland of Thugga over an area of sixty-nine square kilometres, is located in the north of modern Tunisia and represents here the more 'archetypical' state space of the Mediterranean littoral or Tell. Towards the south in the province of Byzacena,

4 There is no room here to discuss the continuing centrality of towns in Late Antiquity. A recent and powerful argument for towns as foci of late antique administration and governance, see e.g. Dey 2014.

5 The data of the Africa Proconsularis survey is freely available online: *Rus Africum. Thugga Survey*, <http://www.rusafriicum.org>.

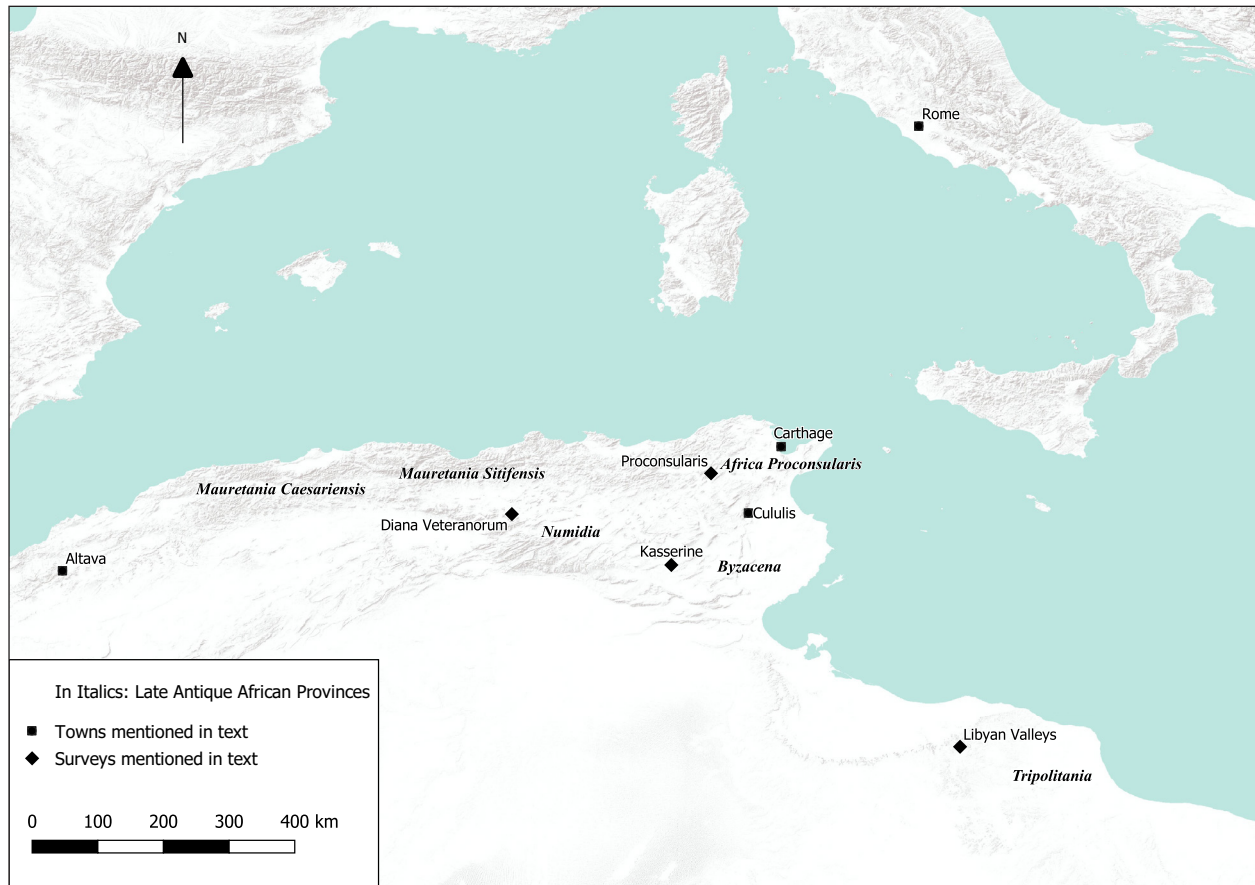


Figure 2: A map of North Africa, showing towns and the surveys discussed in this article, alongside the Late Roman provinces. Basemap: Esri Terrain, made in QGIS.

the Kasserine survey was conducted in the harsh landscape of the pre-desert, recording over 200 sites in 75 square kilometres. Finally, the harshest and most peripheral landscape is represented by the Libyan Valleys Survey, which covered over 50,000 square kilometres and recorded roughly 2,500 sites.⁶ These three surveys have been selected for their differing environmental and geographic conditions. This way, we can find out whether different environments caused differences in terms of settlement patterns, material culture and thus, tentatively, the imposition of a Roman state space. This question can also be turned around: what evidence for shatter zones can be found in these surveys?

6 Summaries of the North African surveys can be found in Dyson (2003, 42-45) and Mattingly (2011, 155-159) among others.

3.1. Micro-ecologies and settlements

North Africa is characterised by the Atlas Mountains, a parallel range of mountains extending from Mauretania Tingitana (Morocco) in the west to Africa Proconsularis (Tunisia) in the east. These create a variety of ecological niches, from highland plateaus to forested mountain slopes and an arid pre-steppe preceding the Saharan desert. Only in the East, in Tripolitania (modern Libya) is there a sharp break between coastal and desert zone (Sherwin-White 1944; Amin 1970: 11-21). This variability accords well with the model put forward in Horden's and Purcell's Corrupting Sea of the Mediterranean consisting of micro-ecologies, a variety of small-scale local ecological zones each with their own distinct environmental conditions. We can try to cross-reference this environmental variability with human settlement patterns through the survey archaeology. Here, the landscape of fertile and densely populated Thugga survey will be

contrasted with the peripheral landscapes of Kasserine and the Libyan Valleys surveys.

Thugga here represents the archetypical 'state space', located in the hinterland of Carthage in the Medjarda valley in the prosperous Roman province of Africa Proconsularis. Located close to the crucial Medjerda river which connected the area to the Mediterranean sea, the survey area was well connected to the outside area. The valley is hilly but received enough rain (400-500 mm annually) to produce cereal crops in the valley bottom, while the hill slopes were used for olive production. Notably, the survey area was densely populated by minor towns, in addition to numerous smaller settlements. The most predominant type of settlement found were those of circa 2000 square metres in size, although smaller 'settlements' around 1000 square metres (interpreted as farmsteads), were also found. Hill settlements consisted of mud-brick buildings. Generally, the area is known from written sources to have consisted of sizable imperial holdings leased to coloni under the conditions of the Lex Manciani, and later also the church became a major beneficiary of land (De Vos 2013).

Moving to southern Tunisia in the ancient province of Byzacena, Kasserine is part of the high steppe and is rather arid with only 400 mm of precipitation, making the area best suited for pastoralism. Yet, the survey area was home to two Roman coloniae, Cillium and Thelepte. Away from the main urban centres, survey archaeology has located secondary settlements, called 'agrovilles' by the surveyors. Agrovilles could sometimes be rather large and even resemble Roman towns in terms of monumentality, such as Ksar el Guellal. Simple courtyard buildings were often located on ridge tops with surrounding field systems and irrigation, orbiting larger or more prestigious sites in the lowland. Judging by the irrigation infrastructure and the large numbers of olive presses found, much of the arid land had been converted into agricultural land for olives. This could generate quite some wealth for some: villas such as Henchir el Guellali were equipped a peristyle court with outbuildings, such as bathhouses, and presumably formed as estate centres for the surrounding ridgetop villages (Hitchner et al. 1988; Hitchner 1990). Interestingly enough, the archaeological picture is closely corroborated by a written source in the form of the Albertini Tablets. These inscriptions from the Vandal period were found nearby, only 60 km to the southwest. The tablets deal with the sale of land, revealing the cultivation of olives in the region and the

existence of irrigation works (aquaria) that were used to sustain this agricultural regime (Mattingly 1989).

Perhaps the most stunning agricultural accomplishments took place in Tripolitania. Here, the UNESCO Libyan Valleys survey found a landscape rich in wadi agriculture and settlements interspersed through the desert, despite the extreme climatic and environmental conditions. With only 25mm-70mm of rain per year and thin soil, much of the land can truly be called inhospitable. Yet water is naturally collected in the wadis (riverbeds), which allowed the local population to flourish, building walls, cisterns and irrigation networks. Surveys recorded more than 2500 sites, which have been grouped into military sites, huts, courtyard farms (sometimes built in *opus africanum* or *opus quadratum*). The most controversial structures are the so-called *gsur*, fortified structures named after their castle-like appearance (*gasr*, plural *gsur*, cf. Arabic *qasr*) but, which appeared rapidly around the third and fourth centuries AD. Rather than seeing them as the abodes of soldier-farmers, Mattingly has interpreted the *gsur* as the estate centres of local elites. These or similar elites may have been responsible for building the site of Ghirza, a remarkable fourth-century site where mausolea are constructed in a Romano-Libyan style celebrating local Libyan chiefs (Barker et al. 1996; Mattingly 1995; Mattingly 2011: 146-166).

However, there are some crucial differences between the different regions in terms of chronology. The surveys in the 'core areas' of Africa Proconsularis and Byzacena (possibly Numidia too) generally show a general rise of sites in Late Antiquity (dated by means of ARS) with a peak between 350-500/550 AD, while the more peripheral provinces of the Mauretaniae and Tripolitania peaked earlier in the third century, with a decline in the fifth century (Dossey 2010: 62-69). In Tripolitania, the decline of ARS matches the rise of the fortified *gsur*, which on their turn decline in the sixth and seventh centuries (Mattingly and Dore 1996; Mattingly and Flower 1996). It may well be that the Vandal invasion disrupted state power in the peripheral provinces of Tripolitania and the Mauretaniae, coinciding with the rise of the autonomous Berber kingdoms discussed below. Then, in the sixth century, the period following the Byzantine invasion seems to have been characterised by economic decline in Byzacena and Proconsularis.

To sum up, generally, survey evidence points towards an intensification of the rural landscapes in later antiquity (from the third century onwards), with the appearance of structures in the landscape, such

as winepresses, bathhouses and villas that are linked to a Romanising koine (cf. Fentress 2006: 27). In terms of site density, land use and intensity of agriculture there are significant similarities between each of the survey areas, despite the ecological differences. All of these landscapes were transformed under the Roman Empire into landscapes of production, showing interconnectivity with the Mediterranean world even for the more marginal landscapes. It needs to be stressed once again that this does not suppose a model of Romanisation, since the capacity of irrigation and dryland farming which allowed the transformation of these landscapes may have well have been based on indigenous knowledge of the landscape. On the other hand, differing chronological trends may suggest that Vandal invasion allowed local polities to flourish in the the peripheral areas of Mauretania and Tripolitania.

3.2. *Indications of Shatter Zones in Roman North Africa*

Is there no evidence for shatter zones in the survey archaeology of North Africa at all? In order to recognize a shatter zone, we need to have archaeological evidence for societies that evaded or resisted the state, or had cultural expressions very different from the Romans. David Mattingly has done preliminary research of what he calls ‘landscapes of resistance’ (Mattingly 2011: 159-162). Let us briefly consider his examples.

In Tripolitania, the main question revolves around the fortified *gsur*. Were these castle-like structures fortified centres for soldier-farmers guarding the limes, or rather prestigious estate centres for a land-owning elite? We know that from the third century onwards, there was increasing pressure on this region from beyond the limes by the Laguatan confederation, a group of Berber people who challenged Roman authority in the region between the third and sixth centuries, coinciding with the appearance of the *gsur*. It could be that these structures belonged to local strongmen integrated into the Laguatan confederation. (Mattingly 1996: 319-342). Unfortunately, the evidence remains ambiguous and will require further archaeological investigation. Another indication for the Tripolitanian pre-desert as a shatter zone could be the *clausurae*, walls in the frontier region that may have been used to channel the movement of pastoralists. If so, they indirectly attest people of ‘another world’, although if pastoralists traded with Roman citizens on a regular basis, this would rather be proof of symbiosis instead of opposition (Mattingly 1995: 113-114).

Throughout North Africa, there are the remains of hillforts (called *oppida* by the Romans). Perched on hilltops, they often have sloping and winding paths and walls making access difficult. Excavation has revealed that some of these hilltops may even have had residences inside, although in far too small numbers for permanent habitation. Perhaps they should be understood as centres of refuge or as strategic centres protecting water access (Mattingly 1995: 42-44). Several of such hilltops have been found in the Thugga, Libyan Valleys and the Diana Veteranorum surveys. The question is when these forts were used, although the hilltops in Tripolitania have ceramics dating to the third and fourth centuries (Mattingly 2011: 160; Fentress 2013: 322-325).

There may be another type of evidence which Mattingly does not consider: settlements. Already in 1911 under the colonial French regime, a rudimentary survey was conducted in Algeria, mapping ‘Roman’ and ‘indigenous’ sites, published as the *Atlas Archéologique de l’Algérie* (Gsell 1911). This has been studied in detail by R. Lawless for the area of Mauretania Caesariensis. Here, ‘native’ Berber sites could be identified by their simple architecture, consisting of dry-stone houses, located as isolated hamlets or in small villages. Although these sites are hard to date, the presence of some Roman fine ware suggests that at least some such sites were inhabited during the Roman period (while at the same attesting interconnectedness with the Mediterranean world). In terms of spatial distribution, these sites are rare in the coastal mountains, and more common further inland (Lawless 1969). However, the study is based on the essentialist premise that dry-stone villages are Berber or ‘native’ and antithetical to the Mediterranean, Roman way of life. Furthermore, ‘ruines romaines’ can still be found in the lowlands and valley bottoms of the province, often in proximity to the ‘sites indigènes’ (e.g. Gsell 1911: f. 31). Furthermore, dry-stone villages have been found in core areas such as the *Africa Proconsularis* survey, described above.

More research on these ‘landscapes of resistance’ could be done and much more can be said about the *gsur*, *clausurae*, hilltop forts and settlements. For now, a fundamental opposition between coastal state space and inland shatter zones seems to be weakly supported by the archaeology. And even if some of these ‘landscapes of resistance’ truly document societies opposing the Roman state, then the presence of the fortified *gsur* and hilltop forts at least seem to indicate some kind of

hierarchy, instead of an anarchistic, acephalous society of Scott's model.

4. READING AGAINST THE GRAIN: ROMANS AND BERBERS

Postcolonial theory in archaeology shows us that we need to be wary of making a rigid distinction between coloniser/colonised (Van Dommelen 1998: 212-216). Indeed, rather than a binary opposition between Romans and natives, we have seen that the survey evidence hints towards a more entangled relationship of both cooperation and resistance. A unique corpus of texts which discusses the revolt of Firmus (372-375 A.D.) and the Moorish Wars (534-548 AD) further reveals the relationship between Romans and Berbers. Archaeologists often point out that texts provide little (neutral) information about non-state agents (cf. Moreland 2001), and certainly most texts for Roman North Africa were written by agents of the Late Roman state with a hostile, elitist perspective. Nevertheless, a deep reading of the discursive strategies employed in these texts allows a reading against the grain, enabling us to deconstruct the dichotomies put forward by the Roman authors and bring the texts more line with the archaeology. A second body of texts can corroborate the first: fifth and sixth-century epigraphic texts, many of them written from the perspective of Berber chiefs from Numidia and Mauretania.

The Roman perspective is told by three different authors. The first is Ammianus Marcellinus, living in the fourth century and reporting on the rebellion by Firmus and his brother Gildo. In brief, the narrative of Firmus' revolt against Romanus, the count of Africa, can be read from the perspective of a nativist rebellion

against the Roman state. However, recent work has emphasised how Firmus himself operated in a Roman framework (as did another brother of his, Sammac, whom we will meet below) (Drijvers 2007: 139-142). Rather than an outright bid for Berber independence, Firmus may have instead played games of high politics, aligning himself with the eastern court in Constantinople rather than the western court in Italy (Blackhurst 2004: 59-75).

The other two authors are Procopius and Corippus, who report on the Moorish wars in the sixth century. Procopius travelled in Belisarius' army and reports, with some important caveats, the viewpoint from Constantinople. It is well known Procopius was critical towards Justinian's rule, especially in his notorious *Secret History* (Cameron 1985; Greatrex 2014: 83-91). The Wars, too, could be seen as being implicitly critical of Justinian's rule in reporting its inability to maintain an adequate occupation force after the initial (re) conquest. The overall narrative seems to have little interest in Africa or its inhabitants, who are barely mentioned, and the focus is almost solely on the Byzantine army (Cameron 1985: 171-187). Instead, Corippus himself was born in Africa. Instead of a historical text, his *Iohannes* or the *Libyan War* was written as an epic in Virgilian style, commemorating the heroic deeds of general John Troglyta. Corippus may have been an apologist for the Byzantine regime, justifying the presence of the Byzantine army towards his elite urban compatriots by stressing their role in keeping the barbarian Moors at bay (Shea 1998: 1-62).

It is well known that Procopius and Corippus speak in very negative terms of the Berbers. In the age-old tradition of classical rhetoric, they presented

Traits	Examples	Citation
Craven	Fleeing, unfair fighting	Corippus, <i>Iohannis</i> 5.154-155, Procopius, <i>BV</i> 2.11.47-56
Faithlessness	Breaking promises	Corippus, <i>Iohannis</i> 1.522-578, <i>BV</i> 2.8.9-11, Procopius, <i>BV</i> 2.25.16
Cruel	Burning, slaughtering, pillaging	Procopius, <i>BV</i> 2.23.26-27, Corippus, <i>Iohannis</i> 3.380-400.
Innumerable	Innumerable armies	Corippus, <i>Iohannis</i> 2.196-196, Ammianus, 29.25.29
Irrational	Howling at each other	Corippus, <i>Iohannis</i> 4.350-355
Uncivilised	Not wearing proper clothes, not eating proper food	Corippus, <i>Iohannis</i> 4.350-355, Procopius, <i>BV</i> 2.11.26, 2.6.5-13.
Black-skinned	Roman mothers scare their children with the black skin of the Moors	Corippus, <i>Iohannis</i> 6.29-98.
Pagan	Worship Gurzil and Jupiter-Ammon	Corippus, <i>Iohannis</i> 6.145-188, 3.82-155, 1.282-1.322

Table 1: A discursive analysis of traits ascribed to the 'Moors' in Procopius and Corippus. Citations are illustrative, not exhaustive.

the Berbers as the polar opposite of their own, Graeco-Roman civilisation (Conant 2012: 252-273). In both Corippus' *Iohannes* and Procopius' *Wars*, a very similar discourse of negative traits is ascribed to the Berbers, as is summarised in table 1. A notable departure from classical discourse is the addition of the Berber paganism (*e.g.* *Iohannis* 6.145-188), which is contrasted by Corippus with the noble piety of *Iohannis* (*e.g.* *Iohannis* 4.269-278).

More relevant for our current purposes is the specific environmental associations that were made by the texts. Ammianus, Corippus and Procopius all have a tendency to associate Berbers with marginal, wild and uncultivated terrain which forms an analogy to their supposed wild and animal nature. The most common association is between Berbers and mountains. Common tropes include: fleeing to the mountains when defeated; using the mountains to ambush the Roman army; or 'pouring forth' from the mountains (*e.g.* Procopius, *BV* 2.19.16-20; Corippus, *Iohannis* 1.5.529-536). For example in the following passage by Corippus: 'Their fear threw them into confusion and so they took refuge on the mountain heights. They set up and fortified their grim huts in the forests, and the hollow valleys, and the sloping hills were filled with their innumerable tribes' (Corippus, *Iohannis* 2.4-7, translation from Shea 1998). Another type marginal terrain often mentioned by Corippus is the desert. Specifically, the case where the Tripolitanian tribes under Carcasas lure general John into the desert, a fatal strategic mistake made by the Roman general, since the desert is too hot and dry for his armies to survive (Corippus, *Iohannis* 6.220-6.773).

The point here is not that Berbers lived in mountains and deserts. As we have seen, it is a perfectly reasonable supposition to believe this to be true. The point is, rather, that this is, as an imagined geography, the perspective of the Roman elite of this landscape. In other words, the specific environment is framed in a negative way as the opposition of civilisation. This, too, relies on an older literary topos of *loca horrida*, or terrible 'non-places' such as marshes or mountains, that were considered opposite to the idealised Roman life (Fabrizi 2015). The literary device of the *locus horridus*, then, marginalised Berbers into the uncivilised 'other'. Here we return to Scott's point that written texts usually represent the perspective of the lowlands elite and their perceptions of marginal peripheries and their inhabitants (Scott 2009: 99-105). Through the act of discursively marginalising difficult terrains such as mountains or deserts, state agents

such as Corippus and Procopius also claimed their own cultural superiority and justified the state's attempt at domination.

That such a dichotomy between Roman and Berber is more ideological than real, can, in fact, be gleaned from these very same texts. Several Berber chiefs feature as allies to the Romans in Corippus. The case in point is 'the most loyal Cusina', who despite the flowery terms in Corippus, was still an enemy to the Roman army before general John's arrival in Africa, as stated by Procopius (Shea 1998: 9). Berber chieftains could, therefore, position themselves as friends or allies to the Romans. When Belisarius arrived, many Berber chiefs asked him the diplomatic honour of the 'symbols of office' (possibly the items of a silver cap, a silver staff and a white cloak) (Procopius, *BV* 1.25.1-9). According to Brett and Fentress (1996: 65), such giving of honours was part of a long tradition of Roman-African diplomacy: 'Rome had become a source of legitimation on its periphery, outside the areas which it directly controlled'.

Epigraphy confirms the close ties between the Berber elites and the wider Roman world. In an intriguing inscription from the fourth century, we meet another one of Firmus' brothers, Sammac, known for his estates from Ammianus Marcellinus (29.5.13). The inscription is written in beautiful and classicising Latin, with Sammic playing the role of a Roman aristocrat. At the same time, his power play of controlling the local tribes as a Berber chief can be read as a veiled threat towards the Roman provincial government. Another literary motive in the inscription itself is again the association with marginal terrains, such as mountains and rivers:

'With prudence he [Sammac] establishes a stronghold of eternal peace, and with faith he guards everywhere the Roman state, making strong the mountain by the river with fortifications, and this stronghold he calls by the name of Petra. At last the tribes of the region, eager to put down war, have joined as your allies, Sammac, so that strength united with faith in all duties shall always be joined to Romulus' triumphs', ILS 9351; transl. Brett and Fentress 1996, 72 (the emphasis is mine)

While this is the most elaborate inscription, we find a similar ambivalence in the fifth and sixth-century inscriptions. One inscription from the Aurès mountains in Tunisia names Masties as dux and imperator, who 'never broke faith with either the

Romans or the Moors' (Carcopino 1944). To the West, in Mauretania Caesariensis, near the royal centre of Altava, an inscription records Masuna, *regis Masunae gentium Maurorum et Romanorum*, king of the Romans and the Moors (CIL 8: 9835). Sammac, Masties and Masuna can perhaps best be described, following Blackhurst, as examples of 'the frontier man who lived simultaneously in both worlds' (2004: 60). Much rather than seeing these Late Antique Berber principalities in the Atlas mountains and the Saharan pre-desert as the antithesis of Roman life, we should see the inherent cultural ambiguity that their rulers expressed. As such, these principalities were 'dual-states', composed both of Romans and Berbers, with a political core in the intermediate zone between Sahara and Tell (Rushworth 2004: 77-98).

Conant (2012: 252) writes that 'one gets the sense from Corippus that there were in fact two Africas'. Clearly, then, the dichotomy between Sahara and Tell goes back to ancient discourse itself. Corippus and Procopius relied on this ideological superstructure to justify Emperor Justinian's wars of 'reconquest'. Scholars have often remarked how Justinianic ideology delegitimised the western successor-kingdoms, such as the Vandal kingdom in Africa, transforming them into lost provinces to be reconquered (Amory 1997: 10). The Berber kingdoms, often forgotten in discussions on Justinian's bellicose ideology, underwent the same treatment after Belisarius' victory over the Vandals. Thus, in his law code, Justinian declares both Vandals and Moors to have been invaders (*invasionem vvan-dalorum et maurorum*) (Codex Justinianus 1.27.2.4). This rhetoric is also found in a fascinating sixth-century inscription from the town of Cululis at the foot of the Aurès mountains, close to territories of Berber principalities, which praises the Byzantine armies for saving the town: 'Finally you [Cululis] have been delivered from the fear of the Moors' (AE 1996: 1704).

What may have led to the break between Justinian and the African Berbers following centuries of cooperation and co-option? Justinian's regime was firmly based in the Eastern Mediterranean, and thus lacked knowledge about local power networks and relations. The dichotomy between Tell and Sahara, then, was not only an ideological construct but also an epiphenomenon of the specific historical conditions of the sixth century. Here we can join text and archaeology: the decline in surveyed sites roughly coincides with Justinian's wars. Following the classic thesis put forward by Y. Modéran, we may conclude that the destructive wars of reconquest that Justinian waged not

only destroyed the economy but also drove a wedge between Roman and Berber, where formerly this divide had not been so pronounced (Modéran 2003).

5. CONCLUSION

This paper began with the question whether Scott's theory on the dialectic between state space and anarchist shatter zones could hold true for Late Antique North Africa. On the basis of theoretical models of connectivity, it has here been argued that the Roman Empire, in some sense, formed a Mediterranean state space, with the *mare nostrae* having the same function as that of the lowland plains in Southeast Asia. Yet, when zooming in on North Africa and turning to empirical evidence, a much more complicated and nuanced picture emerges of interlocking micro-ecologies and ways of life. Survey archaeology has shown the entanglement of these various micro-ecological zones in the form of a productive and fundamentally transformed landscape in Late Antiquity, even in environmentally marginal areas. Finally, written texts show that while this idea of a dichotomy between sown and desert is as old as antiquity itself, interaction coexisted with exclusion. Berber chiefs like Firmus, Sammac and Masties could straddle both Roman and 'native' worlds. Only with Justinian's wars of reconquest did a more narrow, exclusive definition of what it meant to be Roman emerge to enforce a strict dichotomy between Roman and Berber. Where the situation had first been ambiguous, for various peoples throughout the former imperial West including the Berbers, they were now firmly categorised as barbarian.

While the reach of the Roman state was indeed impeded by mountain and desert, the question is whether the latter can truly be seen as a shatter zone. Between the fourth and the sixth centuries, it instead looks like Berber chiefs started implementing their own ministates, often framed specifically in Roman framework of state power, using terms like *rex* and *dux*. The Romans, in their turn, needed middlemen like Firmus or Sammac to govern the difficult terrain of the North African interior. In that sense, the physical geography did check the power of the lowland states of the Romans and Vandals. But this does not make an anarchist zone. While pastoralism could be used as an economic subsistence model to distance oneself from the state, in fact, we have seen the spread of irrigated agriculture in even the more remote areas in this period, not the dispersed agriculture of Scott's model. Similarly, while illiteracy remained the norm, it may be

questioned who the audience was for the inscriptions put up by men like Masuna and Masties. The epigraphy is corroborated by the archaeology of peripheral areas such as Tripolitania and Byzacena. Surely, hilltop castles and the fortified *gsur* hardly fit into the picture of an acephalous society.

Thus, if Scott's thesis can explain why the Romans had difficulty controlling the tribes of the Atlas Mountains and the Saharan (pre-)desert, this does not make it automatically a zone without a state. On the other hand, Scott's model is correct on another point: the worlds of mountains and the Sahara were not some primordial left-over waiting to be civilised by the Romans. To truly advance our understanding of non-state spaces, there is much room for the development of an anarchist archaeology, although progress is being made (Borck and Sanger 2017: 10-11). For Roman North Africa, more archaeological attention for the hinterlands and the limes, instead of the Mediterranean Tell, could help advance our knowledge of the unique sub-Roman, Berber states from the fourth to seventh centuries.

To conclude, I have tried to show the value of approaching the relationship between humans and environment from multiple perspectives. On the one hand, this paper has described the influence of physical geography in the settlement choices of ordinary peoples, and its influence on a much larger level in the formation of state space. At the same time, the mental modes of conceiving space, found in the written texts, were just as important as the physical manifestations of space. Explicitly through linking barbarism and marginal terrain, Roman ideology created the dichotomy between desert and sown which marginalised the Berber populations more than landscapes ever had.

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