

The Gsur of Tripolitania: A New Interpretation

In the region of Tripolitania in Northern Africa, a unique building type has been the subject of debate among scholars (Mattingly, 1989). The first modern references to these structures came from the accounts of nineteenth century traveller's accounts of heavily built, rectilinear buildings along the seasonal rivers called *wadis* (Mattingly, 1994). These were what the locals called *gsur* (sg. *gasr*), the Arabic word for "castle," and have fascinated scholars, travellers, and even the local population. The main point of contention has always been their role within the larger frontier system and if they played a significant role in the defense of the region.

R.G. Goodchild and J.B. Ward-Perkins conducted the first in-depth study of the phenomena of fortified farmhouses in the Tripolitanian hinterland (Goodchild and Ward-Perkins, 1949). This study included archaeological work at Ain Wif, Gasr Duib, and Ghirza as well as air and ground reconnaissance of the region (Goodchild, 1950). They concluded that although farming occurred at the *gsur*, they were military in function and served as the main defensive line for the region (Goodchild, 1950). More specifically, they claimed that the occupants of the *gsur* were *limitanei* under the control of the *dux Tripolitaniae* as described in the *Notitia Dignitatum* (Goodchild, 1950). They date the organization of the frontier into this system to the Severan Period, using literary and epigraphic references (Goodchild and Ward-Perkins, 1949). Although this was later undermined by discoveries of Pre-Severan *gsur* and even earlier open plan farms, nevertheless some of the literary and epigraphic evidence is still strong (Mattingly, 1989).

David Mattingly argues that only a few of the *gsur* were military, and that the majority of the fortified farms were only agricultural in function (Mattingly, 1994). Mattingly also dismisses the epigraphic and literary evidence as unreliable, since the literary sources are dubious and the

military terms found in inscriptions could be applied to civilian settlements (Mattingly, 1989). Mattingly concedes that the defensive nature of the *gsur* may be because they were meant for self-defense but not part of a larger system (Mattingly, 1994). However, Mattingly does not sufficiently explain the epigraphic evidence, which uses military language at a number of sites. He as well as A.F. Elmayer argue that the civilian *gsur* could have arisen either through a means for self defense especially as the Roman military presence decreased in later centuries, or they could be viewed as prestige buildings constructed by the local elite farmers (Elmayer, 1985). Perhaps the weakest part of this argument is the difficulty in distinguishing military and civilian structures, which Mattingly himself admits one must do with some caution (Mattingly, 1994). This makes it too easy for *gsur*, which appear to be military in function, to be dismissed as outliers instead of a part of the larger trend. However Mattingly's contribution to this subject cannot be underestimated, and many of the elements of his theory are sound.

Instead of describing the *gsur* as fortlets manned by Roman *limitanei* as proposed by R.G. Goodchild or native farmsteads as argued by David Mattingly, there is a third alternative. This is that the *gsur* of Tripolitania were not solely agricultural settlements, but were also part of a defensive frontier system, which was meant to control and observe the movement of people in and out of the region. In Tripolitania settlement patterns show that the *gsur* worked in concert with other defensive structures. For instance at the Hadd Hajar *clausurae* (a low wall with watchtowers and gates placed at intervals) *gsur* do not appear for about 10 kilometers behind the wall despite there being a major *wadi* which could have supported farming there (Mattingly, 1994). The timing of *gsur* construction also supports this theory, with the earliest *gsur* dating to the third century CE, the same time as official Roman military presence is decreasing in the region (Mattingly, 1994). All of this evidence points to the *gsur* being part of a deep defensive

zone established by the Romans with the cooperation of the native Libyans to defend the province.

Bibliography

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