

Empire at the Margins: Interaction and the Frontier Society of Roman North Africa

It is easy to fall into the tendency to view the borders and frontiers of the Roman Empire as hard lines, clearly delineating the interior as separate from the exterior, or as the Romans would think of it, the civilized world and the *barbaricum* outside. This perspective has allowed for the analysis of Roman borders as a strategic creation, most famously by Edward Luttwak (1979), and allows for an analysis of Roman imperial strategy outside of wartime. However, comparative studies have argued that the image of a border as a hard line is an artifact of rhetoric from the imperial center, and one that is rejected in the lives of those who live along it (Baud and Van Schendel, 1997, Whittaker 2004). Rather a more useful perspective is of a “frontier zone” defined more by interaction rather than separation.

In this paper, I apply this model to the frontier of Roman North Africa, a province most famous for its relation to the imperial center in the form of its grain production, but in many ways defined by its long Saharan frontier. From the Romano-Numidian rebel Tacfarinas to the alternating friendly and hostile relationship with the Saharan Geramantes, the possessors of a highly complex society themselves, the North African frontier defied simple incorporation into a metropole-centered imperial system. Historical sources, such as the writings of St. Augustine, reveal an unease among the Romanized elites who were highly conscious of the disruptive influence of the nearby *barbaricum*. However, this unease was merely the pretense put over a relationship of mutual dependency, as economic ties spanned across the frontier (Schörle 2012). Within this relationship arose new forms of political and social expression among the elite of the frontier region, borrowing freely from both Roman and non-Roman sources alike (Brogan and Smith, 1957). This new society was not a simple relic of a pre-Roman time nor an imperfect importation of Roman culture, but a thing created by the presence of the frontier, a land of

merchant nomads, runaway slaves, cattle herders and soldiers alike. It was conditioned by the distant imperial system, but never controlled by it.

Recent decades have revealed the extent to which the seeming uniformity of the Roman Empire disguised a vast diverse reality. This is nowhere more true than in the small strip of land between the waters of the Mediterranean and the sands of the Sahara. By examining the economic interaction at the frontier, I hope to reveal the way in the processes of Roman imperialism played out on the margin and was experienced by those within the empire, but not fully of it (Woolf 1998, Cherry 1998, Mattingly 2011).

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