

## Book Review

### A COMPANION TO NORTH AFRICA IN ANTIQUITY

Edited by R. Bruce Hitchner. *Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ, 2022. ISBN 9781444350012, pp. 496. Price: \$199.95 (hardback) and \$160.00 (eBook)

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This companion appeared in March 2022 in the series *Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World*, edited by R. Bruce Hitchner and featuring contributions by an international team of 24 scholars. The volume provides a useful, outstandingly up-to-date outline of the current state of research on ancient North Africa. According to the editor's preface (xiii), it intends to give an overview of the history, geography, archaeology and literature of this region from the first millennium BC to the early Islamic period. While this is a valuable and long-awaited addition to the Wiley-Blackwell series, its high retail price does not make it an easily accessible reference work for those who do not have access to it via an institutional affiliation and may reduce its impact beyond western scholarship, as remarked by Scheduling (2023). To partly overcome this, it is to be hoped that the publisher will release a cheaper paperback edition before long.

The book is divided into four parts: an introductory part aims to 'set the stage' by looking at the region's historiography, archaeology and environment (Chapters 1 to 3); the second part is concerned with North Africa in the first millennium BC (Chapters 4 to 7); the third part covers the Roman era, 146 BC–AD 349 (Chapters 8 to 20); the fourth section looks at the period from the Vandal Kingdom to the Arab Conquest, AD 349–711 (Chapters 21 to 24). Each chapter ends with a note on further reading, which, together with the bibliography, provides a useful starting point for researchers and readers, covering the most important publications on the respective topics. Several maps, showing the region's geography and topography, but also the distribution of cities and ancient peoples and the transformation of borders over time, are presented at the front of the book. Unfortunately, they contain some errors and *lacunae*, as Ardeleanu (2022, 562–63) has pointed out recently, and are not referred to in the chapters and, therefore, seem a bit excluded from the narrative. The rest of the figures are placed directly in the text and enable the reader to follow the arguments closely. They are all of good quality and size; maps and plans all include a north arrow and scale.

Chapter 1 by Hitchner (3–8) gives a brief overview of North Africa's historiography, rightly pointing out the difficulties, losses and gaps in our knowledge due to the almost exclusive focus on Roman remains in early excavations. As to the post-colonial period, the statement that 'French and Italian researchers continued work on Roman North Africa [...] now in tandem with their Libyan, Tunisian, Algerian and Moroccan counterparts' (5) may sound a bit optimistic since even today there is still much to do to establish equal research co-operations. Chapter 2 by Stone (9–23), likewise, provides an introduction to and a brief history of archaeological research, highlighting again the issues of colonial-era excavations. The sections of this chapter that are

concerned with the different types of current archaeological research, such as field survey, geophysical analyses and remote sensing, give an important and concise overview and provide useful information of what remains to be done in the field of North African archaeology.

Chapter 3 (24–38) introduces the reader to the geography of the region, which Leveau defines as a transitional zone due to the 'climatic, relief, and societal factors that have effected its environment over time' (24). Analyses of the current climate, as well as of the debate on the reconstruction of ancient climate, its anthropic causalities and human responses to it, attest to North Africa's geographical complexity. A dedicated section on threats to archaeological sites caused by climate change would have been useful to show that these problems are still ongoing or even worsening. However, Leveau does mention some of these briefly, such as uneven precipitation, erosion, land clearing and grazing accelerating desertification.

Chapter 4 (41–63) focuses on the populations that inhabited North Africa before and during the Roman occupation, such as Libyans, Numidians, Carthaginians and several different 'Berber tribes'. Sanmartí is right in acknowledging that a chapter on this topic gives the wrong impression of a well-founded knowledge of this subject. Yet, he summarises effectively what we know about these peoples' society, administration, language and religion, and at the same time underlines how urgently we need research projects that specifically target these issues. Chapter 5 (64–80) is connected to the previous one insofar as Mattingly presents the results of one of the first in-depth studies of one of these peoples – the Garamantes from Fazzan. It discusses the evidence for their advanced organisation, which comes to us in the form of *foggara* irrigation systems, several village settlements with an abundance of imported Roman pottery, but also extensive production and involvement in Trans-Saharan trade networks. The chapter ends with the hope that future research will shed more light on such societies that were much more than just rioting nomadic people.

Chapter 6 (81–100) is dedicated to the most famous North African city – Carthage – which in Latin sources is usually described with a negative connotation as Rome's rival. Ortega gives a more nuanced view by showing how the city was admired for its administrative and military system by Greek authors such as Aristotle, Thucydides and Plato. Moreover, he describes its excavation history and the better-understood sectors of the Punic city (e.g., the harbour, the Quartier Magon and Quartier Didon), also discussing Carthage's contacts with its hinterland and with other Phoenician and Etruscan cities as well as its final opponent, Rome.

In Chapter 7 (101–16), Hobson presents what is known about Republican-period Africa, its administrative organisation and

geographical extension within the *fossa regia*, using literary, epigraphic and numismatic sources. Rome's military success over Carthage was long associated with the start of a 'Romanisation' process which was thought to have brought a superior level of administration, lifestyle and economy. This view, which dominated colonial historiography of the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, is now largely replaced by more nuanced analyses. Hobson points out that, in fact, evidence from the early period of Roman governance from 146 BC to the Battle of Thapsus is very scant. Future research through stratigraphic excavations and detailed analyses of archaeological finds should thus engage with a less Rome-biased picture of Republican North Africa.

Chapter 8 by Bockmann (119–41) is concerned with Carthage's development from the Roman conquest to the end of the Byzantine period. The sections examining the city's excavation history and urban features in the early times of Roman colonisation mostly repeat what is mentioned in Ortega's and Hobson's chapters, while the rest of the chapter gives a good overview of the administrative, urban, economic and religious development of the city up until its abandonment by the mid-seventh century AD. The strong focus on Carthage throughout Chapters 6–8 seems a bit excessive and perhaps glimpses into other important North African cities could have offered a more diversified picture.

Chapter 9 (142–51) tries to unravel the confusing administration of the Roman provinces of North Africa, which became part of the Empire at different times and due to different circumstances, thus developing different administrative systems. On the basis of epigraphic, archaeological and literary sources, Carlsen presents an overview of the most important offices, the required status of the office-holders, who (s)lected them, the length of their post in office and what their duties were. A chart disentangling the several officials involved in tax collection or the administration of imperial estates would have been useful here.

Faure outlines in Chapter 10 (152–72) a thoughtful chronological summary of the Roman military presence in North Africa, from the first hostilities with Carthage during the Punic Wars and the war against Jugurtha until the army's disappearance with the Arab Conquest at the end of the seventh century AD. Through epigraphic, literary and archaeological evidence, he shows that these contacts were much more than 'Africans' against 'Romans', involving diverse and complex interactions among different local communities, soldiers, civilians and veterans. In addition, he emphasises that the southern border of the Roman Empire was not a clear-cut line of defensive walls and military forts but was subject to constant shifts from the Republican period through to late antiquity.

Chapter 11 (173–201) is the first in the book which actually examines other important North African cities beyond Carthage. After introducing the reader to general themes of urbanisation and urban growth, Dufton and Fentress take a more regional approach and give useful introductions about the urban development and characteristics of sites like Timgad, Cuicul, Thugga and Tiddis. Although this regional perspective allows the reader to get a more detailed picture of the urbanism of a specific part of North Africa, it has the disadvantage that other regions with different historical and urban trajectories, such as the Greek foundations of Cyrenaica or cities of the two *Mauretaniae*, are not discussed. It is true that the authors recommend reading Wilson's essay (2020) on North African urbanism, but this endnote may be missed by readers.

Turning from urban centres to the countryside, de Vos Raaijmakers gives a useful overview of rural settlements and land use in Chapter 12 (202–19). Offices and administrative mechanisms of land organisation and agricultural labour and

production are explained on the basis of inscriptions, ancient legal regulations, literary evidence and archaeological survey results. Considering the importance and large quantities of African pottery, it is not surprising that the North African economy is approached in this companion by looking at ceramic evidence, and in Chapter 13 (220–32) Bonifay gives a concise introduction of the production, distribution and trade of amphorae and tableware. He points out that future research should focus on residue analyses of amphora contents and on the archaeological identification of production sites to better understand the production and chronology of African pottery.

Chapter 14 (233–46) is devoted to the prose literature of ancient North Africa. Guédon discusses the most important North African authors in three sections: writers of African origin in the imperial period, such as Florus and Apuleius; famous Christian authors from the region, such as Tertullian, Perpetua, Minucius Felix and Cyprian; and writers from the third century until the Vandal Conquest, among them Arnobius of Sicca, Lactantius and Augustine. The chapter offers a useful list of the main authors and their works, but unfortunately it does not go beyond presenting a merely historical view on them, without a proper discussion of their works' linguistic and philological characteristics.

In Chapter 15 (247–84), Mugnai presents a useful analysis of 'the architectural and decorative features of public, private, military and funerary buildings' (247). By discussing a wealth of evidence, from column capitals to mausolea at many different sites, he brings together a picture of the variety and diversity of North African architecture from Cyrenaica to Tingitana. However, the topic of ancient North African art is mostly discussed in its connection with architecture: e.g., architectural ornament and sculpture, and some decorative reliefs on buildings. A more detailed discussion of North Africa's rich corpus of mosaics and statuary would have been beneficial, but certainly this could not have been addressed in a single chapter given the region's outstanding architectural preservation (see also Scheding 2023, 264). A division of 'Art and Architecture' into two chapters would probably have been more sensible to do justice to these two broad topics.

Making use of the same variety of evidence, McCarty focuses on what we know in terms of religion in Chapter 16 (285–98): evidence from pre-Roman cults – a complex pantheon which later combined traditional Roman deities with pre-existing gods such as *Melqart* and *Shadrapa* – and the ongoing discussion about child sacrifices in Carthage show that religious life in ancient North Africa was as manifold as its society.

Chapter 17 (299–316) is dedicated to North Africa's society and culture in the fourth and fifth centuries. Magalhães de Oliveira thoughtfully summarises the change in scholarly perception of Late Roman North Africa: from the past understanding of it as a 'foyer of armed resistance to Roman rule' to more recent views of an 'expansion of opportunities of popular intervention' (312) in cities and the countryside among the elites, religious groups such as the Donatists, peasants and local populations. Focusing on these local peoples, Merrills presents an interesting, in-depth account of the *Mauri* in Late Antiquity in Chapter 18 (317–31). Drawing on a variety of sources, he brings together what we know about the heterogeneous *gentes* known under a myriad of ambivalent names, such as *Bavari*, *Gaetulians*, *Garamantes*, *Quinquegentanei* and *Ucutumanni*. Often ruled by a king – although this should not be equated with the concept of territorial 'kingdoms' – these cultures interacted with Rome in a number of ways that are only sparsely documented in the textual evidence.

Chapter 19 (332–53) is the second in the volume that deals with North Africa's literature, this time focusing on the region's most important poets. Kaufmann's analysis of the characteristics

of their works in terms of language, style and metre provides the reader with a more philologically focused approach than Guédon's chapter on North African prose.

That the Christianisation of North Africa encompassed more than church architecture is pointed out by Leone in Chapter 20 (354–71), where she pleads for a regional approach, which should look at the complex religious developments in the North African provinces in Late Antiquity, and emphasises that future research needs to focus also on monasticism and inland areas to obtain a more comprehensive picture.

Chapter 21 (375–90) is dedicated to the period that followed the Roman occupation of North Africa, starting with the conquest of Carthage under the Vandal king Geiseric in AD 439 to the reconquest by Justinian's general Belisarius in AD 534. By examining its society, economy and culture, Conant demonstrates that Vandal rule gave more continuity to Roman modes of administration than was previously assumed, the two major changes being the 'embrace of the homoian confession' (386) and the fact that the Vandal Conquest destabilised Roman power considerably, not only in North Africa, but also in the rest of the Empire. While scholarship has often regarded Justinianic North Africa as a stepping stone to what came afterwards, in Chapter 22 (391–409) Merrills presents a useful and thought-provoking overview of the region's administrative and military organisation after its reconquest in AD 534 as well as the social, economic, climatic and religious changes that shaped this period.

Chapter 23 (410–23) is the first in the book to be dedicated to North African coinage, focusing on late Roman, Vandal and Byzantine monetary issues. Morrisson gives an interesting introduction to how coin values, weight standards, coin distribution and the monetary system changed, especially in the aftermath of the Vandal Conquest, and how Byzantine coinage adapted to the Vandal system after the reconquest of North Africa.

Finally, Chapter 24 (424–38) describes North Africa's developments from the Arab Conquest and the destruction of Carthage in AD 697/698 through to the tenth century. Fenwick emphasises that previous assumptions of a rapid and neat 'end of antiquity' do not reflect historic reality and are a result of the lack of textual and archaeological evidence from the seventh and eighth centuries. Early excavations during colonial times disregarded these later phases and did not document them in order to reach the supposedly more interesting Roman-era layers. More recent research, on the other hand, has just started to unravel the continuity and change in terms of social and religious life, urbanism and economy in this period.

To conclude, one can say that this volume offers a valuable new resource for readers interested in ancient North Africa,

thoughtfully and concisely summarising the main achievements, problems and tasks for future research on the region. The deficiencies of past scholarship on and in North Africa are pointed out in nearly every chapter and the book therefore tries to encourage a wider and more objective perspective by including chapters on the *Garamantes*, the *Mauri* and the late antique and early Islamic periods. However, as a result of the volume's broad approach (offering a companion to ancient North Africa as a whole, not only to its history, archaeology or literature), some important topics are not addressed: that ancient North African statuary and mosaics should have received their own chapter has already been mentioned. Given the importance of North Africa's literary and epigraphic evidence, it is surprising that no chapter deals with the abundance of inscriptions found in this region. Furthermore, North Africa's multilingualism, which is often preserved in bilingual inscriptions, finds only a marginal note. In general, philological studies are underrepresented in the volume with only two, rather brief chapters on prose and poetry. The omnipresence of Carthage, in turn, seems a bit one-sided and the volume would have profited from an inclusion of more urban case studies from each African province to illustrate their different development.

The fact that not a single author from a modern North African country contributed to this companion is probably the main disappointment of the book. Their participation in projects on North Africa's Roman past is often difficult to achieve, as Ardeleanu (2022, 569) has already pointed out, but that the present contributions are written exclusively by western scholars shows that we still have not fully overcome certain issues. Nevertheless, despite these criticisms, the *Companion to North Africa in Antiquity* offers an important starting point for students and researchers as well as anyone interested in the region's complex evolution from the third century BC to the ninth century AD. The multiple references in these chapters to what needs to be achieved through future research show the reader the opportunities for proposing new strands of scholarship on North Africa and encourage thinking about new projects and approaches.

## References

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