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The Provincialization of Africa

It is generally claimed that after the destruction of Carthage in 146, Rome created a province in North Africa. In this paper I argue that this is too legalistic a conception of events: that although Rome exercised hegemony in the region from c.200 BCE, the area over which Rome acquired territorial rights in 146 was likely much smaller than usually supposed, and that there is little evidence for Roman administrative intervention or territorial exploitation before the passage of the *lex agraria* in 111. Although a late republican understanding of the Roman empire as composed of a system of territorial provinces directly administered and exploited by Romans is well attested, this is not the case for the second century. The events of 146 did not amount to the creation of a 'province' in Africa and such a description obscures the slow and halting development of Roman authority in the region.

The 146 settlement included the imposition of tribute and, probably, a garrison. Neither of these arrangements amount to a sufficient condition for the identification of a 'province', since both phenomena can be found in places not identified as provinces. Although territorial acquisition or annexation is not attested in 146, in 125 a colony was planned on the site of Carthage, and by 111 Rome was assigning and leasing land in Africa according to the *lex agraria*. The most economical interpretation is that in 146 Rome claimed the hinterland of the city of Carthage, a much smaller acquisition than usually envisaged. The discrepancy is due to the universal assumption that the *fossa regia* formed the original boundary between Roman and Numidian Africa. I suggest instead that this frontier was rather a Numidian initiative, marking the generous boundary to their territory agreed with the Romans. There is no reason to assume that the entire area on the other side of this boundary was either in theory or practice considered Roman.

For over thirty years after this there is no evidence for large-scale or systematic administrative intervention or territorial exploitation in Africa on the initiative of the Roman government. The extensive centuriation pattern visible in north west Tunisia is usually presumed to date either to the settlement of 146 or the foundation of a colony in 125, but there is no material evidence for its dating and the bulk of it could as easily be Augustan. The colony itself was swiftly revoked, and although colonists were sent out. The provisions of the *lex agraria* of 111 suggest that prior to this law there was little systematic organization or taxation of Roman land in Africa. But the law must itself have marked an important turning point: even if the intention was not to effect the 'provincialization' of Africa, the consequences of the law in terms of regulation, centuriation, administration and record-keeping would have solidified the Roman hold on this region of Africa. The subsequent campaigns of the Jugurthian War would also have had a disciplinary effect on Roman Africa, and acted for the Romans as a confirmation of their need and right to be there.

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