

Rethinking ancient Rome and its colonies in Africa

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Stones from the building structure of a Roman period olive press from the Kasserine region of Tunisia. "We can't forget that material culture is mute," said Bruce Hitchner. "It is archaeologists and historians who interpret what they find, and therein biases and constrained perspectives will always exist." Credit: Bruce Hitchner

When French archaeologists first began digging into the baked earth of their new colonial empire in Algeria in the mid-19th century, they fancied that they'd found kindred spirits in the Roman Empire that had come some 2,000 years before them.

The French thought they were engaged in a "civilizing mission" through their colonial subjugation of the region, just as Rome had "Romanized" the indigenous Berber and Punic people by supposedly imposing its imperial culture upon them.

"Africans were not envisioned as the agents of change or civilization, merely the recipients of it," said Bruce Hitchner, professor and chair of classical studies at Tufts, in a recent Center for the Humanities at Tufts lecture. "Never mind that there were Punic and Berber inscriptions and an archaeology rich in remnants testifying to local identities and cultures that had long preceded Roman rule."

Far from being a neutral exploration of the ancient world, French archaeology in North Africa was deeply shaped by the colonial preoccupations of those holding the shovels, Hitchner explained in his talk "Decolonizing the History of North Africa in Antiquity."

In many ways, he said, contemporary archaeology is still struggling to recover from that misleading perspective. "The French army and administration saw the Roman legacy in Africa as a fundamental source of information for shaping colonial policy, and therefore supported the work of archaeologists and historians which they saw as a justification for conquest," Hitchner said.

Thus, the archaeologists of the period told a story of Roman urbanization and agricultural technology that made north Africa the granary of Rome, contrasting it to the so-called barbaric, uncivilized peoples south of the area of Roman control.

It wasn't until the independence of the countries of north Africa in the 1960s that a different story began to be told. Excavations at Althiburos in north-western Tunisia, for example, showed that a sophisticated infrastructure for agriculture and urbanism existed "as early as the first half of the last millennium BCE," long before the Romans arrived—and that, in fact, the Romans followed pre-existing street plans in many of the cities that pre-dated the Roman conquest.



At the archaeological site near Kasserine in Tunisia, the remnants of tables on which olives were crushed at a Roman period olive press. Credit: Bruce Hitchner

Building on existing civilizations

In Hitchner's own work in the countryside around Kasserine, a center of Roman olive oil production south of Althiburos, not too far from the current Tunisian border with Algeria, he and others showed that the Romans often situated olive oil presses on the sites of longstanding local farms that had elaborate systems of terraces and irrigation.

"The Roman period was built largely upon indigenous agricultural technology," Hitchner said.

Another dramatic example of the interactions between Roman and the native peoples is a tomb inscription found in eastern Algeria. The Latin inscription of a local aristocrat Caius Julius Gaetulus describes him as a veteran of the Roman army, given citizenship under Julius Caesar or Augustus, who served as a priest of the imperial cult.

On the other side of the tomb, however, an early Berber text tells a different story, calling him Keti, son of Maswalet, and emphasizing his long affiliation with a local people. "If you just read the Latin inscription, you would think this person had become thoroughly 'Romanized' and brought into the system. But the Romans always emphasized the idea of having dual identities," Hitchner said. "It wasn't a problem."

These and other examples illustrate the difficulties in uncovering the truth using archaeology, Hitchner said, in which biases and preconceived notions can change the way we read the past.

While the movement toward recovering indigenous perspectives of north African ancient history has been a step forward, it carries its own pitfalls, he added. Some post-colonial archaeologists, for example, overstate the brutality of the empire or focus too heavily on the resistance of local tribes against the Romans rather than the interplay between cultures.

"We can't forget that material culture is mute. It is archaeologists and historians who interpret what they find, and therein biases and constrained perspectives will always exist," he said. "Interested stakeholders, whatever their perspective, are subject to the same misreading, overreading, or underreading of the past and how it shapes the future of research."

At the same time, he said, overcoming the colonial narrative of "Romanization" in North Africa has helped lead to a much better understanding of the true power, influence, and legacy of the Roman Empire, and how it interacted with local inhabitants to create a unique culture worthy of study.

"Rome's power and influence in Africa changed repeatedly over time and was throughout very strongly influenced by Africa and Africans," Hitchner concluded in his talk. "Africans not only retained many aspects of their own identity and culture, but in the process, changed what it meant to be Roman and exercise rule in Africa and the empire."

Provided by Tufts University

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