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*Adhuc Tacfarinas. The causes of the Tiberian war in North Africa  
(AD ca. 15 – 24) and the impact of the conflict on Roman imperial policy*

**Abstract**

During the reign of Tiberius successive governors of the province of Africa Proconsularis struggled to suppress a serious revolt by a number of semi-nomadic tribes lead by Tacfarinas. As expected, the size of the rebellion has elicited much scholarly attention. After a critical overview of various hypothetical explanations of its causes and their particular strengths and shortcomings, I argue that the conflict can only be explained convincingly as an indigenous act of negative negotiation of the Roman administrative encroachment on tribal territory. My argument is based on an in-depth analysis of the literary, epigraphic and archaeological evidence, combined with anthropological observations regarding pastoral migrations in modern Tunisia. The Revolt of Tacfarinas should not be perceived as a reaction against a Roman blockage of pastoral nomadic migrations, as banditry or as protest of disillusioned auxiliaries gone wrong. Instead, I propose that the rebels revolted against the outcome of cadastral activities launched straight after the Gaetulian War, which entailed taxation and confiscations. Thus, the rebellion does not support the traditional view of antagonism and lack of symbiosis between agriculturalist and nomadic communities in North Africa. Although Rome apparently achieved victory, the insurgents succeeded in renegotiating Roman administrative policy to their advantage.

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Many years ago, one scholar made the audacious statement that “tout ou presque a été dit sur la révolte de Tacfarinas”<sup>1</sup>. Scholars now seem to accept that the major questions regarding this revolt have been answered and that only the petty details have been left untouched. For them, the general course of events is clear: war broke out in AD 17 and after several governors had tried to defeat Rome’s enemies only the efficient military measures of P. Cornelius Dolabella (cos. ord. 10 AD) brought an end to seven eventful years of endemic guerrilla warfare in the North-African hinterland and Mauretania<sup>2</sup>. Tacitus relates how before the final victory was attained statues honoured, in vain, the military virtue of his predecessors<sup>3</sup>. Only in AD 24, when Tacfarinas was killed in the Battle at Auzia, did the Romans attain a decisive victory. Peace was restored, and soon the glorious proconsul made dedications to the goddess Victoria<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Gonzalès 1998, 939.

<sup>2</sup> *PIR*<sup>2</sup> C 1348.

<sup>3</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 4, 23: “*Iamque tres laureatae in urbe statuae, et adhuc raptabat Africam Tacfarinas...*”.

<sup>4</sup> *AE* 1961, 107 = *AE* 1964, 226 and *AE* 1961, 108.

Although a consensus about the causes of the conflict has never really been reached in modern scholarship, most scholars seem to take the view that the Romans intended to block pastoral nomadic migrations. However, the overconfidence with which this story is currently told should not remain unquestioned. Many reconstructions are based solely upon a rather one-sided reading of Tacitus' account, which is actually the most important literary source for this conflict<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, it is not surprising that the use of other source types and the quest for alternative interpretations of the literary evidence can often allow for reconstructions that are both innovative and persuasive. For instance, numismatic evidence comprising coins struck by the client kings of Mauretania in times of warfare not only question the traditional date and context of the onset of the hostilities, but also indicate that these kings were involved from the start, and not, as Tacitus relates, merely during the final stage of the war<sup>6</sup>. In the same way it will be argued here that interesting conclusions regarding the nature and causes of the conflict can be drawn from comparing Tacitus' account with formerly neglected results of epigraphic and archaeological research regarding the penetration of the Romans in the interior of the province before and after their struggle against Tacfarinas.

Other ancient authors devote only a few words to the conflict, and Tacitus also hardly offers a clue for its causes<sup>7</sup>. In fact, only on two occasions does he seem to allude specifically to the motives of Tacfarinas and his followers. At a certain point, Tacfarinas sent an emissary to Rome to announce an ultimatum. According to Tacitus, the terms and conditions for peace were respectively a *sedes* and a *concessio agrorum*, a place to dwell and an assignation of lands<sup>8</sup>. Indignation more than empathy may have marked the reaction of Tiberius: the ultimatum seems to have been perceived as a shameless request by most unrespectable villains. Of minor value is the second mention of the indigenous motives in Tacitus' narration. In a (plausibly fictitious) appeal to the indigenous tribes of North Africa Tacfarinas presents the preservation or restoration of freedom or *libertas* as their collective aim and the purpose for which they were raising arms<sup>9</sup>. With no attention paid to matters of context and deeper causality, the second mention should be categorized as a general and stereotypical explanation of indigenous war motives.

Yet in their search for more satisfactory explanations modern scholars have interpreted both statements by considering them against what they perceived as underlying conditions and contextual clues. Previously, the revolt was explained as a clash of different civilizations, an outbreak of violence due to the incompatibility of the nomadic and settled way of life<sup>10</sup>. Quite a similar view that enjoyed much popularity was that the indigenous tribes faced an imminent threat of colonization. The indigenous tribes would have revolted because the African interior was (about to be) overrun by Italian immigrants who were to settle in new colonies. By this large scale colonization Rome would thus have encouraged the spread of agriculture to the

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<sup>5</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 2, 52; 3, 9 + 20-21 + 32 + 72-74; 4, 13 + 23-26.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Vanacker 2013.

<sup>7</sup> The other literary sources for this conflict are Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 2, 3 + *Epit.* 2, 8; Vell. Pat. 2, 125 + 129, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 3, 73.

<sup>9</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 4, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Charlesworth 1934, 643-644; Romanelli 1959, 228; Charles-Picard 1959, 104; Decret et al. 1981, 321-322.

detriment of nomadism<sup>11</sup>. However, against this view it can be argued that no new colonies were established in the area either before or after the conclusion of the conflict. Therefore, the hypothesis that colonization formed the main reason for indigenous insubordination seems unpersuasive<sup>12</sup>.

Nevertheless, a similar theory has been expounded, holding that Roman policy at least aimed at the control and canalization of nomadic migrations. In an article taking this position, Lassère suggested that a key role should be given to the construction of the road between Ammaedara and Tacape, which was finished under the auspices of proconsul L. Nonius Asprenas (cos. suff. AD 6) in AD 14<sup>13</sup>. The road would have been an effective means to control pastoral migrations and to defend agricultural domains and settlements from raiding nomads and their destructive flocks<sup>14</sup>. Especially at the isthmus between Tacape and the Chott el-Djerid, as well as in the region of Capsa the road would have formed an effective barrier. In fact, by its construction the Romans would have intended to consolidate the outcome of the Gaetolian War, in which the repression of pastoral migrations could have been a Roman objective as well<sup>15</sup>. Lassère's theory actually goes back to Broughton, and has found considerable support ever since<sup>16</sup>.

Despite its longstanding value as a persuasive explanation for the background and outbreak of the conflict, there are a number of serious objections to this hypothesis regarding the impact of the road construction. Firstly, and most obviously: how could this road form an effective barrier against pastoral migrations<sup>17</sup>? After all, Isaac correctly argued that roads should not be perceived as impediments to migration and movement. Instead, they catalyse them<sup>18</sup>. Of course, one could reduce the hypothesis a little and argue that the Romans did not intend to radically block these pastoral migrations, but instead merely aimed to control and observe them. However, even in this case there is little reason to assume that such less oppressive intentions entailed minor clashes and disputes that were likely to escalate to a widespread rebellion<sup>19</sup>. Nevertheless, apart from being an effect and catalyst of Roman military and administrative encroachment, the road could have formed some kind of (symbolic) marker of the territorial limits of Roman control<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Cagnat 1912, 18; Syme 1951, 123; Garzetti 1960, 65; Harmand and Grenier 1960, 56; Rachet 1970, 75 + 88-91; Petit 1974, 77 + 393; Bénabou 1976, 75; Fushöller 1979, 39-40; Berthier 1981, 100-101; Sirago 1988, 204; Raven 1993, 44; Cherry 1998, 36-37; Coltelloni-Trannoy 2002, 50.

<sup>12</sup> Shaw 1982, 42; Lassère 1982, 12. Cf. Gutsfeld: "In der Zeit vor dem Ausbruch der Stammesrevolte um das Jahr 17 bestand jedenfalls kein Bedarf an siedlungsfähigem Land und damit auch kein Grund dafür, Stämme von diesem Land zu vertreiben". Gutsfeld 1989, 56.

<sup>13</sup> *PIR*<sup>2</sup> N 118. Several inscriptions attest this construction, for ex. *CIL* 8, 10023; *CIL* 8, 10018; *CIL* 8, 5205; *AE* 1905, 177.

<sup>14</sup> Lassère 1982, 13ff.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Orosius in *Adv. Pag.* 6, 21, 18. Gutsfeld however questions whether this late Roman author is really a valuable source for this event. Gutsfeld 1989, 55-56.

<sup>16</sup> Broughton 1929, 89-90. These views have regularly returned in the works of other scholars: Bénabou 1977, 299; Whittaker 1978, 345; Manganaro 1987, 580; Sirago 1988, 199; Gonzalès 1998, 948.

<sup>17</sup> Gutsfeld 1989, 56.

<sup>18</sup> Isaac 1992, 103.

<sup>19</sup> As imagined by Lassère 1982, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Cherry 1998, 37.

Moreover, studies on nomadic pastoralism in modern Tunisia provide further criticism of the idea that by constructing the road from Tacape to Ammaedara the Romans intended to cut off pastoral migrations because these would have formed a threat to agriculturalists. The phenomenon of pastoral migration has been in (sharp) decline in the region since the mid-twentieth century, but at least in the first half of the previous century, two forms of pastoral nomadism still prevailed<sup>21</sup>. One form consisted of rather short-range migrations. Pastoral nomadic groups pasture their flocks towards and in the south-eastern low steppes in winter. But in spring they gradually move upwards to the Tell in the northwest, where the altitude allows for a cooler climate. The second form is more regional in nature, as the herds come from the pre-desert further south. These migrations especially occur at the occasion of environmental disaster, like drought<sup>22</sup>. Obviously, they induce political instability as they increase pressure on pasture rights in the Tell. Therefore, during the nineteenth century the Ottoman administration took care to ensure the provision of regulated access to the northern pastures for the Bedouin from the south<sup>23</sup>.

Now let us consider this migration pattern in relation to the chronology of the Roman campaigns. Tacitus mentions that the proconsul of AD 21-22, Q. Iunius Blaesus (cos. suff. AD 10), started to extend the war through the winter instead of leading the army to winter quarters<sup>24</sup>. Apparently, these winter quarters were located in Africa Vetus, in the coastal zone that formed the old province of Africa, and were thus at some distance from the critical zone of conflict in the interior<sup>25</sup>. The author also suggests that in the period *before* Blaesus' strategic changes the proconsuls did not fight in winter, and he clearly relates that the new strategy was particularly favourable to the Romans. Importantly, even if one prefers to draw other migration trajectories, such as the course suggested by Leschi locating the winter pastures in the south-western region of Negrine, it is clear that this need for continuous military deployment is inconsistent with the seasonality of the pastoralist occupation of cultivable lands and hence of the conflicts with agriculturalists they presumably entailed<sup>26</sup>.

Another way to verify the strength of the conflict hypothesis centred upon pastoral migrations is to take a closer look at the location and chronological setting of battles and sieges mentioned in Tacitus' narrative. One would expect that most conflicts would take place along traditional nomadic migration routes or in areas where the presence of the flocks could endanger agriculturalist settlements. Admittedly, precise geographical indications of warfare are few, and if mentioned, their timing within the year is even more difficult to assess. Nevertheless the exercise is interesting enough to carry out. The first chronological indication might be derived from the position of the first section on the rebellion within the yearly structure of the *Annales*. However, its location at the very end the account of the events of AD 17 probably stems from Tacitus' intention to include this section as an additional note or anecdote. By doing so, Tacitus may either have aimed to reduce the gap between the account

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Despois and Dresch 1958, 18; Seklani 1960, 504-505; Sarel-Sternberg 1963, 123-133; Demeerseman 1965, 27; Louis 1969.

<sup>22</sup> Despois 1945, 367; Clarke 1955, 160; Despois and Dresch 1958, 227-228, 242-243; Picouet 1971, 125-126.

<sup>23</sup> von Sivers 1975, 261.

<sup>24</sup> *PIR*<sup>2</sup> I 738.

<sup>25</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 3, 74.

<sup>26</sup> Leschi 1942, 48.

of these early events and the reports that follow in the following year. Or perhaps he may have considered that the events were not important enough and therefore favoured a short résumé at the end instead of different sections throughout the account of AD 17<sup>27</sup>. In the first section on the events of AD 20 a reference is also made to the first campaign. The latter is said to have taken place “*priore aestate*”<sup>28</sup>. Although this chronological indication is particularly interesting, as it alludes to an initial seasonal setting which is consistent with the later protraction of Roman active engagement through winter, one should not attribute too much value to it since it suggests that the first campaign should be dated to AD 19, which is obviously incorrect. Therefore it seems that the phrase as a whole is an interpolation. Yet, interestingly, the entire section on the events of AD 20 is located in the middle of the structural arrangement of the year. Moreover, it also contains a few geographical indications. The first indication is clearly too vague and refers imprecisely to “*vicos*” destroyed by the rebels. Where should these “*vicos*” be located? Who inhabited them? These questions simply cannot be answered. The Roman camp besieged near the river Pagyda cannot be identified either. It could have been located near any of the dozens of streams which descend from the Tell or the High Steppes towards the Tunisian coast, or any of the rivers which end up in the salty depression of the Chott-el-Djerid in the south. However, another location mentioned by Tacitus as a setting of combat is called Thala, and is well known<sup>29</sup>. It is situated about 20 km to the east of the Roman camp of Ammaedara, right in the territory of the Musulamii. The town is situated on the high plateaus, where modern nomads herd their flocks in summer. The next location is again marked by imprecision, as Tacfarinas is said to have moved “*ad maritimos locos*”<sup>30</sup>. The northern coast of Africa should probably be excluded, since the maritime regions in the (south)west are not only closer to Thala, but also much more easily reached.

In the section that narrates Blaesus’ campaign of AD 22, another indirect geographical indication is given:

*“Ex quis Cornelius Scipio legatus praefuit qua praedatio in Leptitanos et suffugia Garamantum ; alio latere, ne Cirtensium pagi impune traherentur, propriam manum Blaesus filius duxit ; medio cum delectis, castella et munitiones idoneis locis imponens, dux ipse arta et infensa hostibus cuncta fecerat...”* (Tac. Ann. 3, 74)

By then the field of action seems to have spanned most of Africa Proconsularis<sup>31</sup>. The “*Leptitanos*” means either the inhabitants of Lepti Minor, situated near Thapsus, or those of Lepcis Magna. Lepti Minor could have been threatened by the Cinithii, who were allied with the Musulamii<sup>32</sup>. On the other hand, Lepcis Magna is more convincing since the author mentions that the same units were also used against the Garamantes, who lived to the south of this town. And there is also the aforementioned epigraphic attestation of the dedication the

<sup>27</sup> Tac. Ann. 2, 52. The vague introductory phrase “*eodem anno*” is the only non-structural chronological indication we have for the first section, and it is repeated in the next passage (Tac. Ann. 3, 20).

<sup>28</sup> Tac. Ann. 3, 20.

<sup>29</sup> Tac. Ann. 3, 22.

<sup>30</sup> Tac. Ann. 3, 21.

<sup>31</sup> For this episode, cf. Tac. Ann. 3, 73-74.

<sup>32</sup> Tac. Ann. 2, 52.

ultimate Roman victor, P. Cornelius Dolabella, made in this town to the goddess Victoria. At the same time, the rebellion seems to have threatened the region of Cirta, although at first sight this could seem an exaggeration on the part of Tacitus, in view of its distance from the territory of the Musulamii. Blaesus' main force was located between both geographical extremes, in the region where the greatest danger was posed. Probably, this was actually the Musulamian heartland. The same episode refers to Blaesus' pursuit of Tacfarinas into desert lands. For those persuaded by the blockage thesis, it could be tempting to accept this statement as firm evidence supporting the view that at that point the rebels were actually moving towards their winter pastures in the southern steppes, or swarmed the desert itself in flight. However, if this part of the narrative implies that rebellious nomadic groups led by Tacfarinas were migrating to the south, then it is particularly hard to understand why the Romans would now make the effort to try to harass the enemy when he is there where they actually want him to be, far from cultivated lands of (future) colonists. In fact, the "*solitudo*" and "*mapalia*" mentioned by Tacitus could also refer to the desolated interior and settlements of the High Steppes or the western Tell<sup>33</sup>.

Thubuscum is mentioned by Tacitus in the final section of his account, but this could refer to either an unknown place, to Thubursicum Numidarum near Tipasa, Thubursicu Bure near Thugga or to Tubusuctu near Saldae<sup>34</sup>. With Thubursicu Bure ruled out, due to its proximity to Carthage, considerable doubts have been raised about its identification with Tubusuctu, since this town is located at a considerable distance from the lands of the Musulamii<sup>35</sup>. But there is also the distant location called Auzea, which was once devastated by the rebels and was the place where Tacfarinas' life (and the rebellion) came to an end. If we agree to identify this location with Auzia (Sour El-Ghozlane?) in Mauretania, then it makes the identification of Tubuscum with Tubusuctu much more convincing. In addition, its distance from the territory of the Musulamii also reinforces the view that during Blaesus' proconsulate the region of Cirta could have been threatened after all. Furthermore, it also provides further proof of the region-wide character of the insurrection and of the strong connection between the rebellion of Tacfarinas and the tribal discontentment with the administration of the client king(s) of the protectorate of Mauretania<sup>36</sup>. However, as a result of their absence or imprecise nature, the geographical and chronological indications in Tacitus' account do not provide any clues that confirm the hypothesis that the conflict was an indigenous rebellion against a harmful Roman policy that was intended to block or control pastoral migrations between the Tell and the steppes. The wide range of military operations as much as Blaesus' protraction of the war through winter (which should be connected with the pursuit of the rebels and their subsequent failure to regain strength in this period), are perfectly explained by the mobility of Rome's opponents, but not the revolt's causes.

More recently, Kath again directed attention towards the possible impact of the road construction between Ammaedara and Tacape. The merits of her work lie not so much in the

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<sup>33</sup> The same can be said about the "*deserta*" mentioned in Tac. *Ann.* 3, 21: "... *prosperam adversum Numidias pugnam facit pellitque in deserta*".

<sup>34</sup> The final section spans Tac. *Ann.* 4, 23-26.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Syme 1951, 117.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *infra* and Vanacker 2013.

acknowledgement of a Roman road as “Herrschaftsinstrument” which like border stones and camps connected and symbolically denoted islands of conquered space, or in the recognition of possible limits the road could have posed to nomadic mobility. Far more innovative is her emphasis on the costs of the road construction. She suggested that the indigenous communities in the vicinity of the road had to pay substantial costs in terms of human and non-human labour and of (temporary) confiscation of material resources. If the scarce wells and sources were used for soldiers and road workers then the construction could have been too much of a burden to the local population<sup>37</sup>. However, if such a burden was indeed a primary cause of the conflict, then we would expect that violence would have broken out during the construction of the road, or at least before it was completed. Yet this was not the case: the first indications of Roman involvement in the conflict are provided by Tacitus and refer to AD 17, thus three years after the construction was finished. Moreover, it should be repeated that there is no evidence in favour of the view that A. Vibius Habitus (cos. suff. AD 8), proconsul of AD 16/17, was involved in warfare<sup>38</sup>. And for the previous governor, L. Aelius Lama (cos. ord. AD 3), we have the statement of Velleius Paterculus which mentions that he was a decent commander who could not receive triumphal decorations due to the lack of military opportunities to prove himself<sup>39</sup>. In addition, it is difficult to agree with Gutsfeld and to interpret the aforementioned coin issues of Juba II as evidence of a Roman military engagement prior to AD 17<sup>40</sup>.

A wholly different hypothesis was expounded by Troussel, who argued that the uprising of Tacfarinas should be linked with the fall of a local nomadic trade monopoly. Indigenous traders are supposed to have followed a commercial route from the Garamantes and the Syrte along the southern slopes of the Aurès to the larger urban nuclei in north(east)ern Mauretania. Italic traders would have redirected this route by using the newly created Roman road. Troussel believes that indigenous traders would easily have become strong supporters of Tacfarinas’ cause<sup>41</sup>. As we have no evidence at all concerning the existence of indigenous trade monopolies and their take-over by Italian merchants, this hypothesis is essentially based on assumptions and speculation. Furthermore, it should be noted that one passage in Tacitus’ account may allow us to repudiate the idea that the rebels’ fury was directed against Italic traders<sup>42</sup>. Our source mentions that two non-native traders, Carsidius Sacerdos and C. Gracchus, had been accused of trading wheat with Rome’s opponents in Africa<sup>43</sup>. Unexpected events of war could have led to a situation of low resources amongst the rebellious tribes or their armies, who consequently would have urged them to carry out such commercial exchanges. Indeed, the very fact that both individuals were spared by Tiberius possibly indicates that these accusations were false. Moreover, the “*sordidas merces*” mentioned in the same fragment is difficult to interpret, as it may just represent the stereotypical denunciation

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<sup>37</sup> Kath 2009, 155-157. It is argued elsewhere that Roman law determined that the use of profluent water was a universal right enjoyed by both Romans and *peregrini*. At least in such cases, conflicts over water were possibly less frequent. Cf. Ørsted 2000, 93 and Gaius *Inst.* 2, 1.

<sup>38</sup> Contra: Kath 2009, 150. *PIR* V 384.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Vell. Pat. 2, 116. *PIR*<sup>2</sup> A 200.

<sup>40</sup> Gutsfeld 1989, 38-39 (n. 83) + 43. *PIR*<sup>2</sup> I 65.

<sup>41</sup> Troussel 2002-2003, 368.

<sup>42</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 4, 13.

<sup>43</sup> *PIR*<sup>2</sup> C 451.

of commercial activities<sup>44</sup>. However, the relationship between rebels and Italic traders drawn by Tacitus is the only one we know of, and it is undeniably positive. Furthermore, Whittaker's suggestion that this passage actually confirms his view that migrant groups protested against their loss of status and wealth due to Roman intervention in the marketplace, is based on assumptions, and seems to be just the opposite of "almost certainly" persuading<sup>45</sup>. Moreover, no clear-cut evidence can help us to measure the impact of what Fentress called the "progressive disembedding of the economy and, eventually, the individual" at this early stage of Roman occupation<sup>46</sup>. It is therefore difficult to explain the revolt as the outcome of increasing pressure on the traditional socio-economic system in the context of an expanding market economy.

To many scholars it may be tempting to reduce the conflict to acts of banditry. After all, does Tacitus not denote Rome's enemies as *latrones* whose sole purpose was booty, murder and terror<sup>47</sup>? This description can surely gain additional value if we acknowledge that the picture of nomads in search of booty aligns with certain aspects of the so-called trade-or-raid model from anthropology. This model of nomadic-sedentary relations is centred upon the lack of economic autarchy of the pastoral nomadic economy<sup>48</sup>. In order to acquire certain commodities (grain, artisanal products) nomadic groups have to fall back on sedentary economies. This need is obviously particularly high in the case of a natural disaster, such as a drought, which can severely affect flock numbers. If the nomadic population group is not able to acquire the goods it needs through commercial exchange (or labour), they can decide to take it *manu militari* (or by the extortion of tribute). Apart from the doubts that should surround the hypothesis that Tacitus actually had such an insight into this particular trait of nomadic economies, there are other arguments which make us question the applicability of this model. Firstly, there are no direct indications of an environmental disaster. Perhaps the aforementioned commercial transaction between Tacfarinas' army and Roman merchants represents an indirect and extremely controversial event that might point to the occurrence of a natural calamity. In Tunisia, Clarke observed, perilous periods of famine and water shortage also made nomads migrate more to the north<sup>49</sup>. Yet, the only clear attestation of nomads "*latius vagantes*" in North Africa during the early imperial period relates to the Gaetulian War (AD ca. 3 – 6) and is irrelevant for the revolt under discussion<sup>50</sup>. Therefore, in case they really took place, the contacts with the Italic traders can be most convincingly explained in the context of a shortage of food among the indigenous population or its army due to the exceptional context of war. Secondly, when considering the applicability of the trade-or-raid paradigm one should first take into account that there are no indications of a disruption of existing exchange possibilities before the outbreak of the rebellion. And finally, it should be

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<sup>44</sup> For other notable examples, cf. Cic. *De Off.* 1, 151 ("*mercatura autem, si tenuis est, sordida putanda est*"); Tac. *Ann.* 4, 62, 2 ("*sordidam mercedem*"); Quint. *Inst. Or.* 1, 12, 17 ("*sordidae mercis*"). Also see D'Arms 1981, 4, 153.

<sup>45</sup> Whittaker 1978, 348.

<sup>46</sup> Fentress 2006, 31-33.

<sup>47</sup> The author portrays Tacfarinas as a "*latro*" (Tac. *Ann.* 3, 73) who "*raptabat Africam*" (Tac. *Ann.* 4, 23) to spread "*incendia et caedes et terrorem*" (Tac. *Ann.* 2, 52) and accumulate "*praedas*" (Tac. *Ann.* 3, 20).

<sup>48</sup> Khazanov 1994, xxxi-xxxii + 70 + 202-227.

<sup>49</sup> Clarke 1959, 106.

<sup>50</sup> Oros. *Adv. Pag.* 6, 21, 18.



remembered that the Musulamii formed a semi-nomadic tribe, which made them more autarchic than fully nomadic tribes. One can provide a fourth counterargument by connecting Tacitus' discourse to the overall negative Roman perception of nomadism, or by linking it with an effort to evocate the hit-and-run strategies of the tribes<sup>51</sup>. Tacitus mentions this type of guerrilla warfare explicitly, as “*dum ea ratio barbaro fuit inritum fessumque Romanum impune ludificabatur*”<sup>52</sup>. Furthermore, Tacitus was possibly referring to *latrocinium* in a legal sense. After all, Roman sources used this term to denote the unlawful exercise of (political and military) power, for instance by starting a war that was unjust – from the Roman point of view, of course<sup>53</sup>. Finally, the minimalist description of Rome's enemies as bandits could have been motivated by the author's intention to ridicule the position of Tiberius and his incompetent governors. After all, Tacitus actually seems to describe the image of escalated banditry in his very first passage on the conflict:

“*Is natione Numida, in castris Romanis auxiliaria stipendia meritis, mox desertor vagos primum et latrociniiis suetos ad praedam et raptus congregare, dein more militiae per vexilla et turmas componere, postremo non inconditae turbae sed Musulamiorum dux haberi.*” (Tac. Ann. 2, 52)

Interestingly, Shaw proposed a different hypothesis based on this particular fragment<sup>54</sup>, which may be seen as an elaboration of Sherwin-White's view. He believes that Rome dealt with a revolt of former *auxilarii* who had fought for the Roman cause during the Gaetulian War. The *auxilarii* would have waited in vain for their reward: Roman citizenship or a land grant (expressed by the *sedes* and *concessio agrorum* mentioned by Tacitus). This discontentment, Shaw argues, eventually led to the outbreak of the revolt lead by Tacfarinas<sup>55</sup>. In fact, this theory recalls in part Syme's view that the rebellion was fuelled by indigenous deception over the speed of their integration (and promotion) within the Roman Empire<sup>56</sup>. Shaw's theory is tempting, but there are three counterarguments. First, there is no mention of such auxiliaries in the Roman army during the Gaetulian War<sup>57</sup>. Moreover, it is rather difficult to link the formation of a great nomadic coalition (Cinithii, Musulamii, Garamantes, undefined Mauri and no doubt others) with the benefits of a small group of disillusioned auxiliaries who would have fought against the cause of most (semi-nomadic) indigenous actors in the region. Finally, Shaw's theory falls in tatters if we recognize that the Romans fought several of these tribes during the Gaetulian War as well. The Musulamii, for instance, are named in both conflicts as enemies of Rome. If one adheres to Shaw's thesis, then one supports the odd view that during the Gaetulian War pro-Roman and contra-Roman indigenous factions of the same tribe fought

<sup>51</sup> On the general Greek and Roman perception of nomadic cultures, which is essentially negative, cf. Shaw 1982-1983; Troussset 1982; Devallet 2001. On Tacitus' perception in particular, cf. Gutsfeld 1989, 46 (n. 126).

<sup>52</sup> Tac. Ann. 3, 20 (“*vagis ... ob pernicitatem inultis*”), Tac. Ann. 3, 21 (“*Tacfarinas ... spargit bellum*”); Tac. Ann. 3, 74 (“*furandi melior, pluris per globos incursaret eluderetque et insidias simul temptaret*”).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Dig. 49, 15, 24 and 50, 16, 118. Cf. also Aug. De Civ. Dei 4, 6.

<sup>54</sup> This appears to be an elaboration of Sherwin-White's observation, cf. Sherwin-White 1973, 249 (note 242).

<sup>55</sup> Shaw 1982, 41-42. Cherry shares his view: Cherry 1998, 39.

<sup>56</sup> Syme 1951, 129-133. Followed by Alföldy 1965, 637.

<sup>57</sup> On this conflict cf. Cass. Dio 55, 28, 3-4; Vell. Pat. 2, 116, 2; Flor. Epit. 2, 31; Oros. Adv. Pag. 6, 21, 18. Related epigraphic attestations: CIL 8, 26580; CIL 8, 16456; AE 1940, 68 = AE 1941, 105 = AE 1948, 6 = AE 1954, 201a. The execution of L. Cornelius Lentulus (cos. ord. 3 BC) by the Nasamones possibly took place in the context of the same war. Cf. Eustath. Commentarii Dion. Per., v. 209-210 and Gaius, Inst. 2, 25.

against each other, yet made up the internal quarrel after the conclusion of the war and then started another conflict because of the maltreatment of those groups who formerly fought on the Roman side. Even though fluidity of political relations between and within the tribes forms a typical feature of nomadic societies, no one should feel too comfortable with these implications of Shaw's theory. Shaw erroneously assumes that Tacitus created an exaggerated image of the war, yet the epigraphically attested dedications as much as the senatorial discussions and the temporary reinforcement of the Legio III Augusta by the Legio IX Hispana indicate that the struggle was more than just an occasional skirmish. Importantly, it has been argued that Tacitus' descriptions of wars and external conflicts generally tend to be deliberately minimalistic in the *Annales*, because "by narrating his wars in a manner that was unattractive by conventional historiographical criteria, he reinforces the sense of the corrupt state of Rome under the Julio-Claudians, partly by focusing the reader's attention on domestic affairs, and partly by suggesting that the emperors, among other crimes and flaws, were no longer running the Empire according to the canon of traditional military glory"<sup>58</sup>. If these observations are correct, there is little reason to assume that Tacitus actually intended to exaggerate the size of the present conflict.

The long list of hypotheses, explanations and propositions found in modern literature that we have surveyed so far is beset by doubts and criticisms. In the remaining part of my paper I show that new and hitherto neglected archaeological and epigraphic sources from the Tunisian interior provide clear indications that the Roman administrators at least intended to pursue a policy of (nominal) expropriation and taxation at the time of the outbreak of the rebellion. Importantly, it should be emphasized that this land was not used by pastoralists (only), but (rather) by indigenous agriculturalists.

After all, the North African interior certainly contained fertile land suitable for cultivation. Moreover, the indigenous population did not need Roman instructions in order to recognize and reap the benefits of agriculture<sup>59</sup>. In spite of literary descriptions of the interior that tend to emphasize the desolation of the desert and the ubiquitous wanderings of the nomad, it is clear that agriculture was an important component of the economy wherever the environmental conditions were suitable. Accordingly, there is evidence of indigenous agriculture dating to the pre-Roman period. Herodotus not only mentions Libyan farmers called Maxyes who dwelled near the Chott-el-Djerid, he also refers to farmers in the mountainous interior of North Africa<sup>60</sup>. In fact, Camps has argued that pre-Roman cultivation was not limited to the plains<sup>61</sup>. Indeed, with sufficient precipitation per annum, the Low and Middle Tell could provide wheat yields that were not at all poor<sup>62</sup>. Moreover, where rainfall was inadequate, the population often resorted to irrigation techniques. In contrast to their former characterizations as Roman imports, Shaw and Mattingly have pointed to the indigenous nature of the organization and material structure of these installations in Africa

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<sup>58</sup> Levene 2009, , 228f.

<sup>59</sup> Whittaker 1978, 345.

<sup>60</sup> Her. *Hist.* 4, 181; 191.

<sup>61</sup> Camps 1960, 17-19 and 69-91 (esp. 72-75 on irrigation techniques).

<sup>62</sup> Cf. the observations of Despois 1942, 116-117.

and Tripolitania<sup>63</sup>. Similarly, Janon has related that such irrigation techniques rendered agricultural activities profitable in the Aurès mountains<sup>64</sup>. The observations made by these ancient historians and archaeologists are perfectly analogous with relatively recent ethnographical and geographical accounts of semi-nomadic communities of the steppes, the mountains and the pre-desert. These studies show how throughout the eastern Maghreb semi-nomadic groups live(d) through a succession of periods of pastoral nomadic migration followed by times of settlement combined with dry farming and arboriculture<sup>65</sup>.

These insights provide an important contrast to the description of Tacitus, who confers the stereotypical view of vagrant tribes “*nullum etiam tum urbium cultu*” on the revolting Musulamii<sup>66</sup>. Notably, further contrast is provided by Sallustius, who attests that the river banks of the Muthul (which in all probability was situated in Musulamian territory) were covered with shrubs and used by both herdsmen and farmers<sup>67</sup>. This statement gains weight as we consider the historian’s past assignment as proconsul of Africa. Clearly, while advancing step by step in the interior of Africa the Romans did not encounter just desolate deserts and empty wastelands. Instead, in many places they found villages that contained potential taxpayers, farmers and pastoralists. Therefore, we should not neglect this complex dual economic orientation of the indigenous semi-nomadic society. In fact, it suggests that not only impediments to pastoralism – such as the supposed blockade of nomadic migration routes – could have damaged relations between the Romans and the indigenous tribes: disruptions could equally have been triggered by the intentions and effects of Roman administration on the agricultural basis of the indigenous economy. When Lassère interpreted Tacfarinas’ request for a “*sedes*” as an indigenous recognition of defeat and of future settlement, he failed to recognize that at least some part of the Musulamii permanently lived in agricultural settlements already<sup>68</sup>.

Shaw vigorously countered the traditional confinement hypothesis<sup>69</sup>. Considering the land measurements and allocations dating (for the most part) to the reign of Trajan, he argued that the indigenous tribes were not confined to reservations consisting of poorly cultivable lands. This is a valuable observation, with an important implication for our perception of Roman provincial policy in the region. However, it does not compel us to concur with Shaw’s conclusion that the land rights of the Musulamii were never threatened. After all, there is a large chronological gap between the Revolt of Tacfarinas and these Trajanic delimitations. In his careful attempt to align a troubled page in the history of Roman Africa with the recently established paradigm of symbiosis between the (semi-)nomadic tribes and the Roman administration, Shaw dismisses the possibility that at some point between the reign of

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<sup>63</sup> Shaw 1982, 93; Mattingly 1986, 53.

<sup>64</sup> Janon 1977, 476-477 and 1982, 56-58.

<sup>65</sup> Clarke 1955 and 1959; Despois 1942, 120-122; 1945; Norris 1953; Hallet 1975. It should be noted that also during the Ottoman occupation semi-nomadic groups cultivated parts of the Tell. von Sivers 1975, 261.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 2, 52. On pre-Roman (Punic, Numidian and Mauretanian) development of town and village in North Africa, cf. Fentress 2006, 6-10, 13-22. Contra: Leveau 1988.

<sup>67</sup> Sall. *BJ.* 46, 5 and 48, 4. Cf. also Diod. 3, 49, 2.

<sup>68</sup> Lassère 1982, 25.

<sup>69</sup> Shaw 1982, 42-43.

Augustus and Hadrian Roman policy in the region could have been subject to significant change.

In fact, Troussel has pointed out that this chronological gap does not eliminate the possibility that there was a certain connection between the Tiberian and Trajanic cadastral activities. His relatively recent discovery of a reused border marker as well as other evidence of convergence allowed this French scholar to show that the delimitations of the late first and early second century AD were fundamentally based on the earlier cadastral project of C. Vibius Marsus (cos. suff. AD 17) in the Tiberian era<sup>70</sup>. Troussel's findings thus seem to confirm Shaw's static and presumably benevolent appreciation of Rome's treatment of the indigenous land rights from the late Tiberian period onwards<sup>71</sup>. But how does the rebellion of Tacfarinas relate to this, and where does the apparent benevolence stem from?

Interestingly, Troussel's observations would not be so valuable if we failed to grasp the true scope and development of the cadastral undertakings that unfolded in the early first century AD. A long time ago, Caillemer and Chevallier related that the cadastral activities which C. Vibius Marsus terminated in AD 29 in the south of the province, in the region of Turris Tamalleni, may have started much earlier in the north<sup>72</sup>. Twenty years later, Fentress suggested that the survey which preceded the road between Ammaedara and Tacape "was linked to the survey necessary for the centuriation"<sup>73</sup>. Hence, she also believed that in and along the territory of the Musulamii, the first land measurements probably took place well before AD 14, the year when the road was finished. Most recently, an expedition by a team of archaeologists and geographers provided an in-depth study of the *limitatio* of the interior of Africa Proconsularis. Their research, which was conducted throughout the entire region, brought about particularly striking results. They not only confirmed that the aforementioned cadastral work in the south of the province definitely started in the north, as the *gromae locus* was to be found near Ammaedara; they also observed that there must have been a survey that formed the basis for both the late Augustan construction of the road between Ammaedara and Tacape and the later Tiberian *limitatio* in the south, evidenced by the strong geodesic correlation between both undertakings<sup>74</sup>. It follows that there must have been at least three

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<sup>70</sup> Troussel 1997, 9. Sources: *CIL* 8, 22786a-1; *CIL* 8, 22789; *AE* 1997, 1588a-b. On C. Vibius Marsus: *PIR* V 388.

<sup>71</sup> In contrast to Kali-Coulibaly 2007.

<sup>72</sup> Caillemer and Chevallier 1957, 52; Chevallier 1957, 97-104. Similar observations came forth from the 2002 expedition of the ASC/CNES Archéologie in the region, since "... de telles opérations d'arpentage sont longues et difficiles, d'une part à cause des montagnes à franchir et d'autre part du contexte d'hostilité rencontrée par les géomètres dans les territoires à traverser. Il a fallu probablement plusieurs années avant d'arriver dans le Chareb." Cf. (ASC/CNES[Archéologie] 2005.

<sup>73</sup> Fentress 1979, 67.

<sup>74</sup> "On s'interroge souvent, faute de textes explicites, sur la chronologie relative entre les voies et les cadastres associés. On affirme trop souvent que le cadastre est bâti sur une voie principale. Il n'en est rien. Cette faute, critiquée par Hygin, conduit nécessairement à un anachronisme. C'est à partir de l'épine dorsale d'une centuriation originelle que les géomètres romains procédaient au fur et à mesure de la colonisation, aux travaux de construction des routes, au bornage des frontières et à l'assignation des terres aux colons. Les centuriations comme les grands axes routiers forment souvent des structures géométriques qui sont parfaitement orientées dans l'espace géographique, donc aisément reportables sur une *forma*." Moreover, "... les deux structures sont parfaitement orientées l'une par rapport à l'autre, le report sur la *forma* est ainsi facilité. La voie est construite à partir de la grille cadatrale, et non l'inverse. Le géomètre passe toujours avant le terrassier." ASC/CNES[Archéologie] 2005; cf. also Decramer et al. 2001, 19 and Decramer 2002, 303-308. This counters

cadastral campaigns: (1) an Augustan campaign following the Gaetulian War, which provided the *forma* that influenced the trajectory of the road, (2) the Tiberian campaign in the south during the proconsulate of C. Vibius Marsus, after the Tacfarinan uprising, and finally (3) the Trajanic delimitations.

The implications from these observations are particularly far-reaching. If we accept that the first survey was conducted during the reign of Augustus, then we cannot easily recognize that “l’ouverture de cette route est le seul événement connu qui ait pu entraîner une sédition”<sup>75</sup>. Instead, the reconstruction of the various cadastral campaigns revitalizes the old but poorly defended theory that the indigenous tribes effectively faced an imminent (nominal) loss of land or the imposition of taxation shortly before the outbreak of the war against Tacfarinas and his Gaetulian and Numidian tribes<sup>76</sup>.

We can now discern the various stages of Roman policy in the region after the conclusion of the Gaetulian War. At first, Roman administrative aims were aggressive, as the governors intended to expropriate or tax the local indigenous tribes. For this reason, the camp of the Legio III Augusta was moved to Ammaedara in the interior of the province of Africa. Among the soldiers were land measurers, who had been ordered to make an extensive land survey. Based on this survey, a road was built from Ammaedara to Tacape. The next logical step was the delimitation of tribal territories and/or the imposition of taxes. This was the point at which the local population reacted. First, wholly in line with comparable cadastral disputes attested elsewhere, an envoy was sent to Rome to reach a more beneficial land settlement<sup>77</sup>. The emissary was not successful, and the province became the scene of bloody turmoil for more than seven years. The conflict took the form of an indigenous act of negative negotiation of Roman encroachment on tribal territory, and found support among the various tribes of the region who shared this concern.

Importantly, this reconstruction of the context and causes of the Revolt of Tacfarinas does not counter the idea that *effectuated* land delimitations did not play a role in the outbreak of the rebellion in the north. After all, epigraphic attestations of delimitations in this region only appear in the epigraphic record during the reign of Trajan. However, in the northern area, right in the heartland of the revolting Musulamii, the presence of the *gromae locus* provides firm evidence that land measurements had been conducted in the period preceding the Revolt of Tacfarinas. Yet the absence, contrary to their omnipresence in the south, of direct traces of cadastral activities (such as border stones and cadastral markers) of the Augustan or Tiberian period also indicates that at that time the heartland of the Musulamii was not the scene of an effective expropriation or taxation policy.

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Trousset’s suggestion that Dolabella, the victorious proconsul in the Tacfarinan revolt, was the initiator of the cadastral activities. Trousset 1997, 7.

<sup>75</sup> Lassère 1982, 13.

<sup>76</sup> Or as Bénabou has stated: “Ils visent apparemment au grignotage systématique des territoires indigènes.” Bénabou 1976, 75 and 1977, 298.

<sup>77</sup> The connection between land disputes, diplomatic action and the final outcome expressed by boundary stones in North Africa and elsewhere has been elaborated by Eck 1990.

I suggest that this discrepancy between the north and the south was a direct result of the Revolt of Tacfarinas. The many hardships Rome suffered during the war probably convinced the Roman authorities to take indigenous demands into account (the “*concessio agrorum*” and “*sedes*” mentioned by Tacitus) and adapt their policy regarding the confiscation or taxation of indigenous (arable) land – or at least to slow down its execution<sup>78</sup>. Therefore, if one acknowledges Shaw’s view that “the boundary stones do concede an immense formal territorium to the Musulamii” and do not prove “any delineation of less favourable lands or a lesser extent of land”, and if one recognizes his view that “this would seem to betoken a special treatment of a favourable kind rather than a harsh containment policy”, then one should surely take into account the bloody context which created the formation of this more deliberate strategy<sup>79</sup>. Moreover, it should be noted that as an act of negative negotiation of Roman administrative measures that had been imposed too early on the superficially subjected peoples, the Tacfarinan rebellion is reminiscent of the Germanic revolt that crushed the legions of P. Quinctilius Varus (cos. ord. 13 BC) a few years earlier, in AD 9<sup>80</sup>.

Obviously, the resemblance between the revolt of Arminius and Tacfarinas’ rebellion may end here. In Africa, a Roman victory initiated eight additional decades of Roman government that softened the seditious spirit in ways famously described elsewhere by Tacitus<sup>81</sup>. This process may have induced the creation of trustworthy mediators among the indigenous elites and a gradual change of local socio-economic, cultural and political structures, in such a way that these communities became less negatively responsive to Roman administrative measures. In fact, members of the Musulamian tribe later left a number of epigraphic traces attesting to their adoption of Latin and the identification with Roman social structures, as well as their presence among the ranks of the *auxilia*<sup>82</sup>.

Moreover, the reconstruction defended above does not question the view, expressed recently, about the impact of the political instability in Mauretania on the outbreak of the revolt. Not merely does Cassius Dio clearly state that this factor played a role in the Gaetulian War<sup>83</sup>. Numismatic evidence reveals that the subsequent client kings of Mauretania, Juba II and Ptolemaeus, supported the Romans during the entire conflict and not only, as might be derived from Tacitus, near the end of the conflict<sup>84</sup>. The evidence also tends to indicate that they were actually involved in military activities *before* the Roman campaigns started. The early military engagement could be explained in two ways. Least convincing is the explanation that, at the first signs of rebellion and insurgence in Africa Proconsularis, the Romans commanded Juba II to crush the enemy, yet intervened at the moment when the client king proved to be unable to withstand the insurrection. After all, the Roman proconsuls do not seem to have been involved in any kind of warfare whatsoever between AD 15 and 17 (cf. *supra*), and giving a military assignment within a Roman province to a client king seems

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<sup>78</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 3, 73. This reconstruction aligns with Gutsfeld’s appreciation of “*sedes*” as a place to dwell (instead of pastures). Gutsfeld 1989, 58 (note 200).

<sup>79</sup> Shaw 1982, 42.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Vell. Pat. 2, 117, 3; Flor. *Epit.* 2,30; Cass. Dio 56,18,3-4. *PIR*<sup>2</sup> Q 30.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. the measures of Agricola in Britain. Tac. *Agr.* 21.

<sup>82</sup> For instance *AE* 1904, 76; *AE* 1917/18, 39; *AE* 1980, 971; *CIL.* 8, 28035.

<sup>83</sup> Cass. Dio 55, 28, 3-4.

<sup>84</sup> *PIR*<sup>2</sup> P 1025.

fairly implausible. Instead, Juba II was probably involved in a strictly *internal* conflict with (semi-)nomadic tribes, as was the case in the Gaetolian War. In the latter case it is not difficult to grasp the catalysing force of such a conflictual situation just across the border of Africa Proconsularis, where the Romans planned to encroach on the North African interior<sup>85</sup>.

In conclusion, this reconstruction highlights the dynamic nature of the relations between the indigenous peoples and the Roman administrators in North Africa. Previously, these relations have far too often been described as static and one-sided, either in terms of overt political and economic antagonism, or (though much less frequently) unquestioned symbiosis<sup>86</sup>. Hence, the Tacfarinan uprising was first primarily understood as a clash between two incompatible modes of living, pastoral nomadism and sedentary agriculture. In the end, the revolt became an annoying event to the adherents of the symbiosis paradigm and was consequently downscaled to a form of escalated banditry. However, in our view, the rebellion should be understood as an act of negative negotiation that illustrates how an act of insurgence could have an effective impact on Rome's administration. The uprising, its causes and its consequences underline the importance not only of appreciating the complex and discrepant character of the integration trajectories of specific indigenous tribes, but also of recognising the fluid and potentially negotiable nature of Roman provincial policy in a particular region.

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<sup>85</sup> Vanacker 2013.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. \*\*\*\*\*

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