The Peoples of Africa

General Editor: Parker Shipton

This series is about the African peoples from their origins to the present day. Drawing on archaeological, historical and anthropological evidence, each volume looks at a particular group's culture, society and history.

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The Empire and the Other: Romans and Berbers

It is not the purpose of this book to give even an outline political history of the seven centuries during which North Africa was Roman: the theme of the Romans in North Africa has been well covered elsewhere.[1] But we cannot fall into the other trap, that of simply telling the story of the victims of Roman imperialism, as if there were no other role for the Berbers to play. What is interesting about North Africa is that it gives a very vivid and full range of the types of relationship possible between Rome and its subject peoples in the early empire. On the one hand, Africa produced emperors, on the other, an ever-renewable crop of rebellious tribes, whose religion and culture remained only partially influenced by the hegemony of Rome. The possible relationships between Africans and Romans were numerous: we shall examine a few of them here.

Co-option: Becoming a Roman

As with most of its empire, the policy of Rome appears to have been to co-opt the tribal leaders, and through them to control the tribes, thus maintaining, for a while at least, traditional forms of domination. There appears to have been no lack of minor chiefs willing to co-operate. The advantages were obvious: a *princeps* could obtain Roman citizenship and have his *de facto* power transformed into a high-status, legitimate position.

We have some epigraphic traces of Numidian aristocrats turned Roman citizens: in an inscription from a tombstone found near

Sicca we find a woman called 'Plancina, first lady of the Numidians, of kingly stock'.[2] She was the wife of Quintus [A]rruntius Mas[cel], whose cognomen betrays similar origins, but whose Roman name shows that he was granted citizenship. From Gigthis, in southern Tunisia, comes a second-century dedication to Lucius Memmius Pacatus, who 'stood out among his people'. The fact that this was erected by the tribe of the Cinithians, and that Pacatus is himself called 'Cinithius', demonstrates that he was one of them, although the family went on to achieve senatorial rank.[3] At the veteran colony of Sitifis founded at the end of the first century AD in eastern Mauretania, just south of the Kabylia mountains, we find the inscription of a *prin[ceps] gentis*, probably of the Musunian tribe.[4] His name, Flavius, indicates that he received citizenship under the Flavians, and thus before the foundation of the colony. Here, the tribal chief appears to have acted as an intermediary in the romanization and urbanization of his followers.

The most striking example of Roman policy towards tribal leaders comes from the town of Banasa, in Mauretania Tingitana. Here a bronze tablet records two letters granting citizenship to the family of Julianus, of the Zegrensian tribe. The first, addressed by the emperor Marcus Aurelius to the Roman governor of the province in the middle of the second century, reads:

We have read the petition of Julian the Zegrensian which was attached to your letter, and although Roman citizenship, except when it has been called forth by a member of the chief's family with very great services in the tribe is not wont to be granted to those tribesmen, nevertheless since you assert that he is one of the leading men of his people and is very loyal in his readiness to be of help to our affairs, and since we think that there are not many families among the Zegrensians who can make equal boasts concerning their services, whereas we wish that very many be impelled to emulate Julian because of the honour conferred by us upon his house, we do not hesitate to grant the citizenship, without impairment of the law of the tribe, to him himself, to his wife Ziddina, likewise to his children Julian, Maximus, Maximinus, Diogenianus.[5]

This splendid mixture of resigned distrust and practical politics shows how the process of co-option was viewed by the Romans themselves. Certainly it was advantageous for the family of Julian:
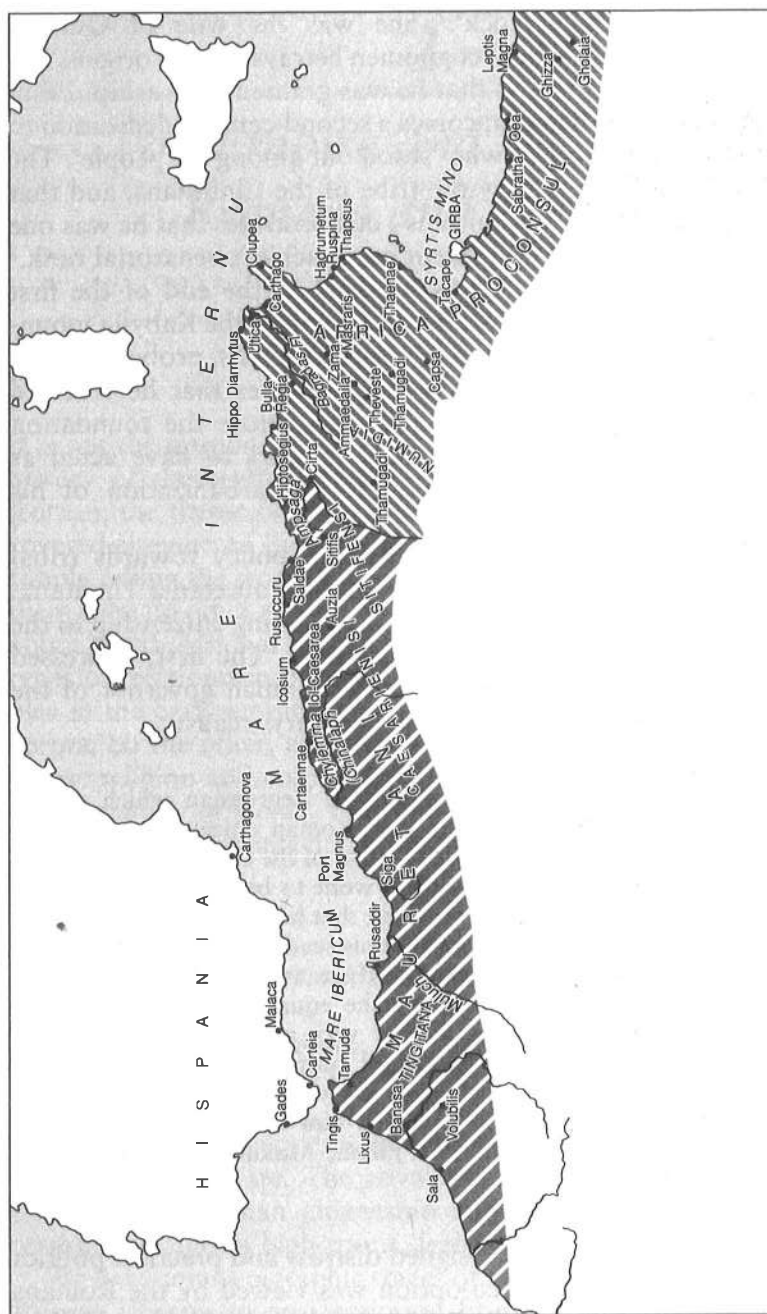
Map 2.1 Roman North Africa

although the first citizen was simply head of 'one of the leading families', his son became *princeps* of the tribe, and we may guess that this appointment was more likely to have been effected by the Romans than by his fellow countrymen.

Another advantage which came from accepting a role in the Roman province was probably the privatization of tribal land. This was hardly a new phenomenon: we have seen that Masinissa held vast estates in *Africa Nova*, and it has recently been suggested the monumental tombs found in much of the Medjerda Valley were erected by indigenous landlords on what may formerly have been tribal land.[6] The relations of production probably continued much as before: surplus produced by the tribe was now acquired by the landlord not as tribute but as rent. The result, as far as the peasant was concerned, was much the same, but the landlord probably possessed more coercive power over the peasants than that which accrued to him by customary law. Further, in so far as he was able to sell their crops, he could now participate fully in the monetary economy of the cities.

The culture of Roman Africa was overwhelmingly urban, and if indigenous aristocrats became major landholders, it was in the town that they spent their wealth.[7] Culturally, or at least epigraphically and archaeologically, they became indistinguishable from any other Roman citizen. It is here that a major contradiction arises. It is very hard to tell in the case of a given individual whether he had Punic, African or immigrant origins. In some cases the name helps, but in the vast majority we simply do not know. The successful African is perfectly camouflaged and only chance remarks, such as that of Apuleius mentioned above or of the schoolteacher from Cirta who declared his origins to be *de sanguine Mauro*, from Moorish blood, help us to see that some of the urban upper classes had Berber origins, but we are unable to quantify them.[8]

The case of the Septimii of Leptis Magna illustrates a particularly successful family *cursus*.[9] In the first century AD the family formed part of the municipal upper classes, and may have been made citizens by the legate of the III Augustan legion, Septimius Flaccus, whose *nomen* they took. One branch then emigrated to Italy, where it held land in Veii, near Rome, and achieved senatorial rank by the second century. This Italian connection was maintained and exploited by the branch of the family which remained in Tripolitania. A Lucius Septimius Severus played a

major role in the elevation of Leptis to the rank of colony, serving first as sufete and then, under the new romanized constitution, as *duumvir*. His son, Septimius Geta, was a local notable who facilitated his grandson Severus' promotion to the senate and, in AD193, to the purple. Romans sneered at his halting Latin and his reliance on dreams[10] (shades of the Augilae at their ancestors' tombs) but his African origins showed best in the extraordinary energy he devoted to the promotion of Africa's cities and the expansion of its borders. Severus' reign is one of the high points of Roman rule in Africa. By any measure – new buildings, new men in the senate, pottery production, the expansion of the market in African oil – it can be considered the African age of the empire. This cannot in any way be construed as a form of *revanche*; rather, it is the end result of a process of co-option which had made the governed equate their self-interests entirely with that of the governors.

Berbers in the Army

Just as the aristocracy were willing to co-operate with Rome if they were given the right sort of position in their cities and eventually in the empire as a whole, the creation of auxiliary units of Numidian cavalry gave a new role to an important component in African society, one which brought with it both status and a road to Roman citizenship, for veterans of auxiliary units had an automatic right to citizenship. Further, service in the army could lead to land grants on retirement or reasonably substantial retirement bonuses. The auxiliaries thus in some respects served as schools of Roman life and were probably an important resource for the Berber communities. They maintained, however, an important aspect of the indigenous culture: its involvement in fighting. The status of a knight in an auxiliary *ala* was not far distant from that of the mounted, bridleless warriors of the past, as a series of decorated tombstones shows. A similar grafting of an indigenous military culture on to an imperial army was found in this century in India, when the Gurkha regiments were recruited from independent states outside the frontier, and formed a source of income and prestige for their recruits – and, indirectly, for the independent states themselves.

At the top of the military structure could be found some notable individuals, such as Lusius Quietus, a 'Maurus' who came to

prominence as head of a cavalry contingent, sacking cities in Trajan's Parthian War. He rose to the rank of consul, and was put in charge of crushing the revolt of the Mesopotamian Jews, a task which he carried out with notable ferocity. Governor of Judaea in AD117, he was executed in the next year for plotting against Hadrian. On Trajan's column he appears at the head of his troops, who are distinguished by their flowing corkscrew curls. His career demonstrates the growing importance of African cavalry units and their leaders within the army, and the route it formed to success on Roman terms.

The Roman army was not composed solely of auxiliaries. Until the third century the principal instrument of Roman control in Africa was the third Augustan legion, which manned the frontiers between Tripolitania and Numidia. It was, like all Roman legions, recruited entirely from Roman citizens, and in the first century was in every sense a foreign body in Africa. However, in the course of the second century, and particularly in the third, Africans were recruited into the legion in large numbers: as their origins became more local the soldiers, based in southern Numidia, identified more directly with the civilian population. Officers would have siblings in the local aristocracy, while soldiers came from successful peasant families in the neighbourhood. The purchase of army supplies would have had important economic effects on the areas in which army camps were found, not least the immission of a substantial quantity of silver into the local economy.[11] This gradual union between the police and the policed is a curious but undeniable phenomenon of Roman rule in North Africa. The very fact that the whole vast Numidian frontier was controlled by a single legion of (ideally) 5,000 men with perhaps as many auxiliaries gives us ample proof that the natives were not continually restless. That the army was an instrument of social control is obvious – and we shall see it in action further west – but it is also clear that it contributed to the more general co-option of the local population. Like city life, it gave another frame of reference to the individual, outside his tribal or family loyalties.

Peasants and Property Relations

The Roman tendency to leave native customary property relations relatively intact while using the cities as the principal means of extracting taxes is particularly evident in North Africa. As we have

seen, the Numidian kings received tribute from their subjects, and within the old Carthaginian territory Masinissa founded large private estates. Other nobles probably had rights over the tribute from individual villages: it has recently been shown that there is a clear topographical relationship between large, 'noble' tombs and indigenous villages in the ancient territory of Carthage, and the tombs may express ownership of some kind.[12] Vitruvius had a friend, described as a 'son of Masinissa' (which would have been difficult chronologically, but the sense that he was of the royal family is clear), who owned an oppidum called Ismuc, along with all its fields.[13] He may have had even more extensive rights over the village, as he discussed the possibility of breeding imported slaves there so as to profit from the fact that the local water made children wondrously sweet-voiced. Now, we have little evidence for the private ownership of land away from Punic territory, although Pliny tells us that land in the oasis of Tacape, miraculously fertile and productive, was extremely expensive.[14] There is, however, a relationship between the conditions of land use and their relation to land ownership. Irrigated farming is regularly associated with individual private property, while pasture land with its vaguer boundaries may be more generally associated with a clan or a tribe. We might thus expect a mixed structure, with a complicated system of rights which could range from the private ownership of a single tree to the tribal rights over winter pasture in the desert.

Our knowledge of estates in Roman North Africa reflects both aspects of these property relations, although the most detailed evidence comes from estates owned by the emperor rather than by local aristocrats. The landowners were structurally similar to the emperor, and the addition of the imperial administration simply added another tier to the process of extracting the peasant's surplus. A series of inscriptions from the Medjerda valley in Tunisia has done much to elucidate the nature of the imperial estates.[15] In a sense, they depict a pre-Roman, tributary situation to which a new, Roman level of administration has been added. Individual estates were let to a *conductor*, or head lessee, at a fixed rent for a five-year period. He would be entitled to the rents from the tenants, or *coloni*, who farmed the land on a share-cropping basis. The *coloni* would also be required to provide several days of labour service a year for the 'home farm' run directly by the *conductor*. This system was modified by a ruling referred to on the

inscriptions as the *lex Manciana*. Uncultivated land could be claimed by any tenant willing to improve it by bringing it under cultivation. Figs, olives and vines newly planted on this land would be rent free for a number of years while immature, after which normal rents would prevail. The *lex Hadriana* modified the tenure of these cultivations by making them alienable by sale or inheritance, and by extending the rent-free period. Imperial procurators oversaw the functioning of these estates, mediating in disputes between the *coloni* and the *conductores* and generally looking after the interests of the owner.

The system is thus one in which tenants were encouraged to invest in the development of the estate by the grant of property rights over the trees which they planted. After the rent-free period they still had to pay a proportion of the crop to the *conductor*. The marketing of the crop was up to the *conductor*, whose cash rent was fixed and not dependent on the harvest. The peasants themselves would have sold any remaining surplus on the local periodic market, where they would have bought anything they could not produce themselves. As long as peasants were in short supply their conditions were thus not particularly arduous: they were free to sell up and leave the estate, and could increase their capital with time. The system, which seems to have been unique to Africa, created an increasing surplus of olive oil, reflected in the wide distribution of African oil amphorae, and a category of small *possessores*, whose own holdings linked them to the estates but drew them away from any property which might have been held in common by a kinship group.

The history of settlement in various parts of North Africa seems to demonstrate this gradual loosening of the strength of tribal groups. This is a history which a number of recent archaeological surveys is beginning to fill out. They show the gradual development of peasant farming both in the areas settled from Punic times and in the more marginal lands of the pre-desert, where intensive labour on irrigation was required to make farming possible.

In Tripolitania, two major projects have given us a particularly clear image of settlement in the Roman period.[16] Tripolitania divides fairly neatly into three zones: the coastal plain, the Gebel or high plateau to the south whose scarce rainfall still allows some cultivation, and the pre-desert to the south-east where agriculture must be irrigated to be viable. Close to the coast, finds of numerous olive farms show the basis of the wealth of the aristocracies of

towns such as Leptis Magna. Here, although a system of tenants paying rent in kind might have prevailed, the importance of olive oil as a cash crop gave their owners an interest in the direct management of their estates, and many of the farms closest to the town may have been cultivated by slaves.[17] This development of great estates producing olives was precocious, probably starting as early as the first century BC. Further south a large number of farms are found in the river valleys of the Wadis Sofeggin and Zemzem and in the smaller valley systems running into the Syrtis.[18] These areas, like Southern Tunisia, probably underwent a changeover from pastoral nomadism in the late first century AD. Immense labour was put into the land to catch as much as possible of the run-off with dams and terracing. The farms were isolated or grouped in hamlets of five or six houses. Some of the larger farms had dependencies, but in general they appear to be the sort of exploitations which would be run by an extended family. We know from various sources, not least the archives of the soldiers on the frontiers, that some of these farms were inhabited by a people called the Maces, who were regarded as peaceable by the Romans.[19] The large amounts of imported pottery found on these sites show that they participated in the Roman market economy, and they may have served as intermediaries in communications with the Garamantes beyond the frontiers.[20]

One important group of farms is found at Ghirza, in the valley of the Wadi Zemzem some 180 km due south of Leptis Magna. Here a number of castle-like buildings with numerous rooms and large courtyards are flanked by smaller buildings, huts, and enclosures for stock.[21] The major families erected elaborate mausoleums for themselves, decorated with vivid scenes of ploughing (with camels and oxen), threshing and winnowing, lion, hare and cheetah hunts, ostriches, camels and caravans, horsemen, executions and battles. An inscription which mentions the sacrifice of fifty-one bulls and thirty-eight goats (all male) indicates the importance of pastoralism in their economy. They probably enjoyed a large degree of autonomy, and their inscriptions proclaim a command of Latin rather different from the rest of the area, where neo-Punic is the dominant epigraphic language.[22] In all the rural areas, however, the people recorded bear Libyan names.

A survey near Thelepte, in southern Tunisia, shows a more gradual development of settlement patterns in the area.[23] An economy with a major component of pastoral nomadism in the
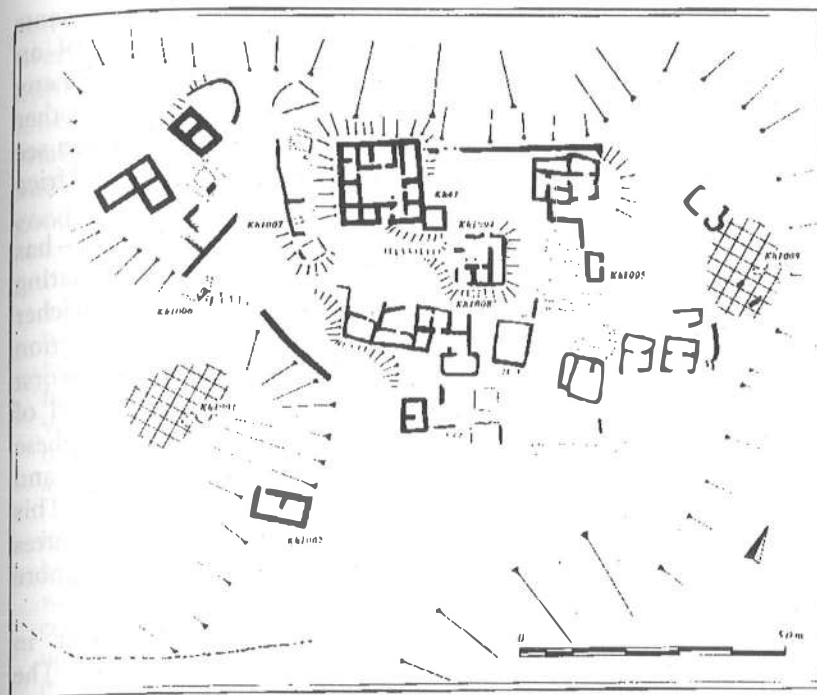
Figure 2.1   Third-century farming settlement with 'big house' from the Libyan desert
(From D. Welsby, 'ULVS XX: the Gsur and associated settlements', Libyan Studies, **23**, 1992)

period before Roman rule seems to have given way to settled agriculture in the course of the first century AD. The first settlements, near the Roman colonies of Cillium and Thelepte, were fairly large agglomerations, and it was not until the third and fourth centuries that scattered villas, farms and hamlets started to emerge – perhaps signs that the peasants were moving towards a more individual cultivation of the land. The farms had olive presses, enclosures for animals and field systems, suggesting a relative balance between the cultivation of grain and olives and stock raising.[24]

To the west, in Mauretania Sitifensis, settlement patterns were radically different. We have no trace of the sort of hierarchies visible in Tripolitania and Africa Proconsularis. The amount of land occupied by imperial estates increased, but the form of its

exploitation appears to have been different. Here, the peasants were grouped in large *castella* under the direct control of an imperial procurator who managed the estates: we do not have any evidence as to whether they were sharecroppers or some other form of labourers. The principal crop was wheat, and we can see no signs of the development of arboriculture so obvious in Africa and Numidia.[25]

The territory of Cherchel – Juba II's capital of Iol Caesarea – has also been intensively surveyed.[26] What emerges is a fascinating mosaic of settlement types. Both on the coast and in the richer mountain valleys are found farms and villas whose construction and oil presses relate them to the urban economy. On the worst lands, villages which may or may not have been composed of tenants huddle over poor fields and upland pastures. These evidently played little role in the urban, market economy, and produced almost exclusively for their own subsistence.[27] This was probably the pattern further west, where urban centres became fewer and the areas under direct Roman control more limited.

Finally, we know something of the rural settlement in Mauretania Tingitana, thanks to the work of R. Rebuffat.[28] The province as a whole was thinly settled, with few cities and large zones of mountain and forest. In the valley of the Oued Sebou, east of the inland town of Banasa, rural settlement was already developing in the first century BC, during the time of Juba II. Occupation of small farms, with little settlement hierarchy, grew through the second century AD, but appears to have stagnated in the third century. In the late empire, although direct Roman control was withdrawn as early as AD 280, the cities were evidently still occupied. However, identifiable pottery is no longer found on rural sites, which points to a growing isolation from the market if not to an actual desertion of the countryside.

There is thus a fair amount of variation both in settlement and in modes of production, although most of the farmers probably participated in the market to some extent, as finds of pottery and metalwork show. The free peasant is perhaps the rarest category, found outside the areas occupied by cities and imperial estates, near the frontiers and in the mountain valleys. Most other farmers were tenants, either individual or collective, and their surplus production was probably extracted in kind, although local periodic markets would have provided some entry into the mon-

etary economy. There was probably a certain amount of crossing-over between the categories – a peasant might own a few fields outright and cultivate others as a tenant on an estate or as an itinerant harvester. Others might save up sufficient capital to establish themselves as large landowners in their own right. Best known of these (but how typical was he?) is the poor-boy-made-good whose story is told on an inscription from Mactar:

I was born into a poor family; my father had neither income nor house. From my birth I have always cultivated my field: neither I nor my land ever rested. As the season ripened the crop I was the first to cut my sheaves. When groups of harvesters gathered in the fields of Cirta in Numidia, or near the mountain of Jupiter, then I was the first in the field; then, leaving my country I harvested for others for twelve years, under the burning sun; for eleven years I led a gang of harvesters, cutting with our sickles the wheat in the fields of Numidia. By working, and by knowing how to be content with little, I became the owner of a villa and master of an estate; the house lacks for nothing in riches. I have even achieved honours: I was called to the senate of my city, and from peasant I became censor. I have seen my children and grandchildren born and grow up. My life has passed in honour, unblemished by any crime. Learn, mortals, to live a blameless life, for even thus a man deserves to die who has lived without treachery.[29]

Tribes and the Unregenerate

The first three categories of Roman African – aristocrats, cavalry and soldiers, and peasants – all had some sort of positive inducement to co-operate with the new order. They did this, it seems, almost individually: by becoming a knight in a Roman auxiliary force the new military loyalty took the place of the old tribal affiliation. Peasants appear to have identified with their village or estate, but the more successful they were the farther they moved from the tribal context. This is evident in the names they gave their children: in the second and third centuries AD, Berber names are recorded almost exclusively in the lowest (recording) classes, and then are more common for women than for men. But all our evidence suggests that many tribes persisted through the empire, and indeed that tribal structures emerged in the fourth century just as strong as before. The Roman treatment of the tribes thus deserves close examination.[30]

In Africa, as in other frontier provinces, the conquest of territory was succeeded by a period in which its tribal occupants were cantonned into limited tribal lands, and occasionally split into small sub-sections so as to prevent future collusion and revolt. Our evidence for this process is derived from the boundary stones set up by the legionary legate at the moment a particular tribe was assigned a territory. In the pre-desert of southern Tunisia the tribe of the Nybgenii, mentioned by Ptolemy, was established on a vast, arid patch of land south of the oasis of Tacape. Under Trajan, the Musulamians were officially granted a portion of what had been their territory in the pre-Roman period. How far was the delimitation of a tribal territory in a particular area a recognition of the *status quo* – that is, an attempt to order an existing situation rather than a radical displacement of a tribal group?

The case of the Nybgenii is fairly clear. The creation of their reserve took place in the context of the survey by the army of the whole of southern Tunisia.[31] The object of this process could be described as the definition of separate parcels of territory for the purposes of determining ownership and consequently taxation. Not only were the Nybgenii included in this, but also the towns of Tacape and Capsa. Land not assigned to these might become the property of private individuals or of the emperor. Now, the participation of the Nybgenii on the same footing as the two *municipia* indicates that they had a similar status: they were recognized as a *civitas stipendaria* and constituted a legal entity. Their capital was situated in the oasis of Telmin, the *Civitas Nybgenorum* or, as it was known in the third century, Turris Tamalleni. By AD100 the *Civitas Nybgenorum* was constructing a road to Capsa and it was made a *municipium* by Hadrian. This rapid development seems to suggest another instance of co-option, not of an individual but of a whole tribal group. The removal of the tribal name from the settlement – mirrored at Thubursicu Numidarum, which became plain Thubursicu by the third century – suggests that the tribal association was not felt appropriate to a new Roman *municipium*.

The case of the Musulamians is somewhat different.[32] The *limitatio* of their territory occurred at a time when large estates under private ownership were already established in the area. It is possible that formal boundary divisions were established after a series of disputes over the encroachment of these estates, legitimizing the expropriations which had already taken place but limiting

future ones. In the centre of their territory lies their old capital of Theveste, now a newly refounded veteran colony. What was the relationship between the new colony and the tribe? And who administered their territory? The answers to these questions remain entirely obscure, although since auxiliary troops were already being raised from the tribe during this period a certain number of Musulamians must have become eligible for citizenship. Again, as members of the tribe were brought into the market economy we can probably see the slow substitution of economic relations for those based, even ideally, on kinship.

Evidence for administrative structures of the Berber tribes and villages comes from a number of inscriptions from the area of the old kingdom of Masinissa. This is the institution of the *undecemprimi*, or council of notables, which we find in the *Gens Saboidum*, the *Gens Bacchuiana*, at Mactar and a number of smaller towns. Sometimes they were simply referred to as *primores*, as at Sicca, while at the *castellum* of Tituli a dedication to Neptune was put up by the elders, or *seniores*, together with the *plebs* and *magister*, suggesting a community with a council of elders headed by an (elected?) chief: as we shall see, this is a pattern frequently found in modern Berber villages.[33] The major difference between this and the modern form, however, is that beside the *seniores* we continue to find traces of hereditary kings, for example the '*rex gentis Ucutamani*' who is known from the little Kabylia – the first trace of a tribe, the Kutāma, which would one day sweep the Fatimid dynasty to power.[34]

Elsewhere, particularly in Numidia and the Kabylia mountains, the situation appears to have been quite different. There, far from being given autonomous status, the tribes were governed by a Roman prefect, probably a young soldier establishing himself as an administrator. Such was Lucius Calpurnius Fabatus, prefect of the 'six nations of Gaetuli found in Numidia' at the time of Trajan,[35] or the man who was both prefect of a cavalry *ala* and of the *gens Mazices* in the valley of the Chelif.[36] These prefects certainly had some hand in recruiting auxiliaries, but whether they had direct administrative responsibilities over the tribes is open to doubt. When a tribe was deemed civilized, which we can see expressed by the transformation of its status to *civitas*, its administration was certainly left to its own members – the *principes*, which have been discussed above, or *magistri*. By the late empire many of the tribes were still run by prefects, although these were

no longer foreign but came from the tribes themselves. In a letter of St Augustine we read that some of the tribes 'are attached to the Roman territories without their own kings but, at their heads, prefects chosen by the Roman empire'. Inscriptions from the third and fourth century give the names of various of these – M. Aurelius Masaisilen; Aurelius Urbanus Mastlius, or Gerrasu – and there is no doubt of their cultural affiliation.[37] They had themselves represented on their tombstones, mounted, carrying spears and shields, and sometimes followed by other horsemen. The most famous such stele is that of Abizar. His name is written in the Libyan alphabet next to his upraised right hand, which holds a spherical object. In his left hand he holds a round shield and three javelins, while in front of the horse runs a large bird – probably an ostrich which he is hunting. The carving is primitive, but the iconography combines that of the late Roman noble, represented on horseback while hunting, with one of the symbols of African

Figure 2.2   Stele of Abizar, from Kabylia
(From P.-A. Février, 'L'art funéraire et les images des chefs indigènes dans la Kabylie antique', Actes du premier congrès d'études des cultures Méditerranéennes d'influence arabo-berbère, Malta, 1972, pp. 152–74)*

nobility, the ostrich, whose plumes decorated the heads of the Garamantes and who retained a powerful symbolic reference for the Tuaregs in this century.[38]

With these prefects, half tribal chiefs, half Roman administrators, we come to the most interesting type of relationship between Roman and Berber, a relationship in which there is apparently no hope of progress towards identity or co-option or even any particular hope of tribute. Rather, there is an overwhelming desire to keep on good terms with tribes whose ill will would be at best annoying, at worst disastrous. There were ritual and symbolic means of codifying these relationships. A series of eleven altars and inscriptions dating between c.AD170 and AD280 record the 'colloquia' and peace treaties between the Roman governors of Mauretania Tingitana and the tribe of the Baquates.[39] It is clear from these that the Baquates were autonomous, although they may have been used as intermediaries to control their neighbours.

The leaders of these 'client tribes' might be granted the insignia which we first saw given to Syphax and Masinissa: sceptres, coronets and robes.[40] The tribal leaders were referred to as *principes*, and Rome was prepared to treat them as 'equals' by entering into treaty relationships with them – the Baquates are referred to as a 'confederate tribe' (*gens foederata*) – and recognizing their noble status. This symbolic codification of the 'client king' relationship became increasingly important to tribal society. In AD533, after the Byzantine reconquest, we find a local chief requesting the 'client king' set of honours so that he would be accepted *by his own subjects*. Procopius says 'according to Moorish custom, no one can rule even if he is the enemy of the Romans before the Romans give him the symbols of government. Now, they had already received these from the Vandals, but did not consider their power sure.' The honours consisted of 'a silver-gilt staff, a silver headdress like a sort of crown made of silver bands, a white mantle attached to the right shoulder by a gold pin, like a thessalian chlamys, and gold shoes'.[41] Rome had become a source of legitimation on its periphery, outside the areas which it effectively controlled.

When power over the internal tribes was effectively transferred to their own leaders this same symbolic relationship was called into play. From one of the Ghirza tombs comes a sculpture representing just such a chief, seated in a curule chair and holding a cup and a sceptre or scroll, while smaller figures offer him wine

and, possibly, tribute (plate 2.1). The tomb from which it comes dates to the fourth century, and the names recorded – M[archius] Chullam, Varnychsin, Marchius Nimmire and Marchius [M?]accurasa – are a mixture of Roman, Punic and Libyan.[42] These ambiguous princes, often referred to in Tripolitania as *tribuni*,[43] are heirs of the Numidian chief in other important ways. At Ghirza was sited a major temple of a Semitic type, the only known cult centre in the pre-desert.[44] Indeed, the god worshipped at the site may have given the settlement his name, as we know that the nomadic tribes of fourth and fifth century Tripolitania adored the god Gurzil.[45] The use of the temple well into the sixth century, and a corresponding lack of evidence for Christianity,[46] argues that the dominant family at Ghirza had not only temporal power over the area but also some wider ranging claim to spiritual power.

Tribes outside the frontier were carefully watched, and much of the activity of the soldiers on the frontiers seems to have consisted of this kind of surveillance. We have evidence of it from a series of ostraka, or sherds on which notes were taken, from the fort of Gholaia in the Libyan desert.[47] One sherd reports the entry (into Roman territory) of 'Garamantes bearing barley, four mules and
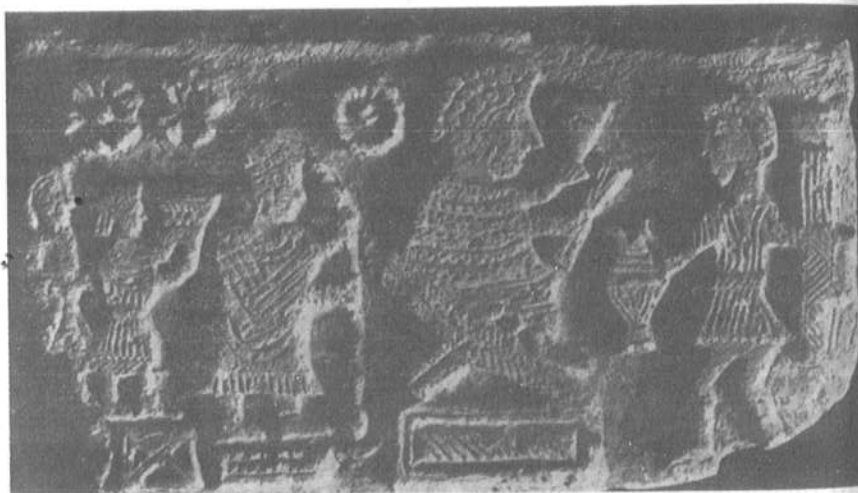
Plate 2.1   Chieftain from Tomb N at Ghirza
(From O. Brogan and D. Smith, Ghirza: A Libyan Settlement in the
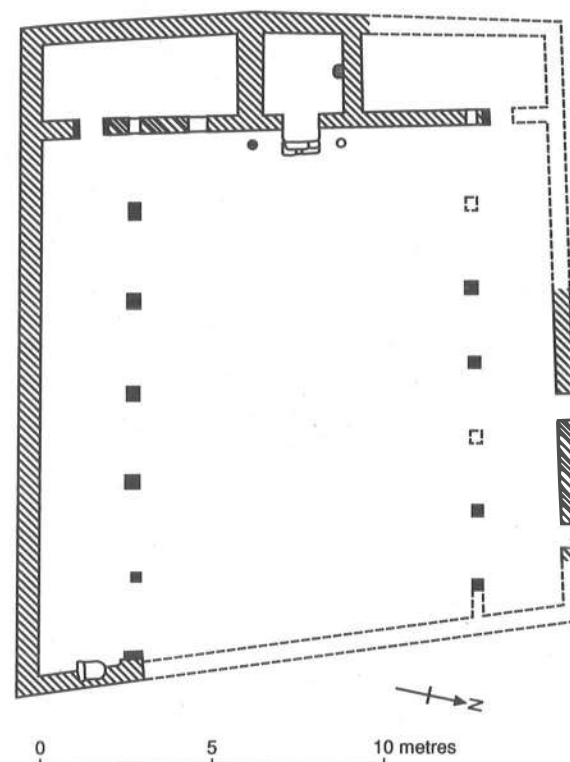Roman Period, *Tripoli, 1984)*

Figure 2.3   The sanctuary of Gurzil at Ghirza
(From O. Brogan and D. Smith, Ghirza: A Libyan Settlement in the
Roman Period, *Tripoli, 1984)*

four asses'; another of 'Garamantes leading four asses'. One of the functions of the frontier zone, or *limes*, with its long walls, ditches, and small signal stations in front of it, was apparently to act as a semi-permeable membrane for the tribes who nomadized in and out of Roman territory.[48]

Cycles of Aggression

Of course, not all relationships with the peripheral tribes were so well ordered. From the second century onwards, Mauretania, Southern Numidia and then Tripolitania were shaken by revolts and external raiding parties which required a military response.

These are, at last, relations of pure antagonism. How did they arise? The answers are complex but closely tied to responses to the overt behaviour of the Romans. To the expansion and consolidation of the frontiers under Hadrian can be added a tendency to expansion on the part of the cities themselves. From the Algerian coast comes an inscription defining the territory of the town of Igilgili, and warning the tribe of the Zimizes that 'they no longer have the right to use these lands'.[49] In AD112, before they were brought into a more stable relationship with Rome, the Baquates raided the coastal town of Cartenna – possibly, as Benabou suggests, in reaction to a move towards their own territory.[50] Another cause of tribal resentment in those areas outside the effective control of the empire was almost certainly slaving. A customs tariff from the south-eastern borders of Mauretania mentions a tax on slaves, which suggests they were being brought up from the south.[51] A geography called the *Expositio Totius Mundus et Gentium* names slaves as the principal export of Mauretania, while among the newly discovered letters of St Augustine we find one in which he complains bitterly that 'Those commonly called slave-merchants are so numerous in Africa that they empty a large part of the countryside of its population, and export to provinces

Figure 2.4   Late Roman estates: the castellum of Kaoua
(From S. Gsell, Monuments antiques de l'Algérie, *Paris, 1901, vol. 1)*

overseas those they buy, and who are almost all free men'. For these, especially the Christians among them, he feels the utmost pity, for who can resist these 'merchants who do not deal in animals but in men, not in barbarians but in Romans'? By the time of St Augustine, then, the slave trade was expanding to the Roman heartlands – but it is clear that the trade in *barbarians* (read tribesmen) was looked on as normal and raids outside the frontier condoned.[52] One of the effects of these raids, as it emerges from the same letter, was the reverse: small-scale barbarian raids on isolated hamlets, whose prisoners were either sold to the same merchants or held for ransom outside the province. This might result in a punitive expedition against the tribesmen, thus creating a spiral of predatory conduct and violence which would have been a continuous irritant along the frontier. Finally, the Roman cities were rich; sometimes, as in the case of Leptis Magna, offensively so. In periods of unrest, or of temporary military weakness on the part of Rome, the prizes were evidently tempting.

Mauretania Tingitana was probably the most unstable of all the African provinces, but we know little about the actual events which led the Romans to give it up as early as the reign of Diocletian. At the end of the second century we can see a general strengthening of the frontiers. In Numidia the frontiers were strengthened under Septimius Severus, and a line of forts thrust down into the Saharan Atlas, an area which was probably fairly densely populated. At the same time we have references to Severus' victory over 'warlike and ferocious tribes' near Leptis Magna, in Tripolitania,[53] and the great oasis forts, Gholaia (Bu Ngem), Gheriat el Garbia and possibly Ghadames constructed at the beginning of the third century were probably a reaction to this menace.[54]

By the middle of the third century Mauretania Caesariensis was the centre of a full-scale war against a confederation led by the tribe of the Bavares, who apparently lived both in the mountains within the Roman province and to the south-west of the Hodna basin.[55] Significantly, our first sign of unrest is a letter of AD253 from St Cyprian deploring the kidnapping of Christians by barbarians. A series of skirmishes and Roman victories occupied the next few years, until in 259 the four 'kings' of the Bavares were joined by the five tribes of the Quinquegentanei and the tribe of Faraxen, the '*gentiles Fraxinenses*'. Although the revolt was put down by 263, it had flared up again by the end of the century.

These cycles of violence with the tribes on the frontiers were a problem never effectively resolved: as we shall see, they continued with ever-increasing ferocity into the late empire. They created conditions of increasing insecurity in the countryside, while maintaining the glamour of the warrior ethos even within the areas of provinces which were most heavily Romanized.

The Late Empire and the Rebirth of Berber Kingdoms

Anyone familiar with the archaeology of North Africa associates the fourth century with a period of astonishing material brilliance, rivalled only by the Severan period.[56] But there is a difference; while at the beginning of the third century an extraordinary amount of money was put into public building, in the fourth the most striking monuments are private houses, whose huge reception rooms were decorated with splendid mosaics. As elsewhere in
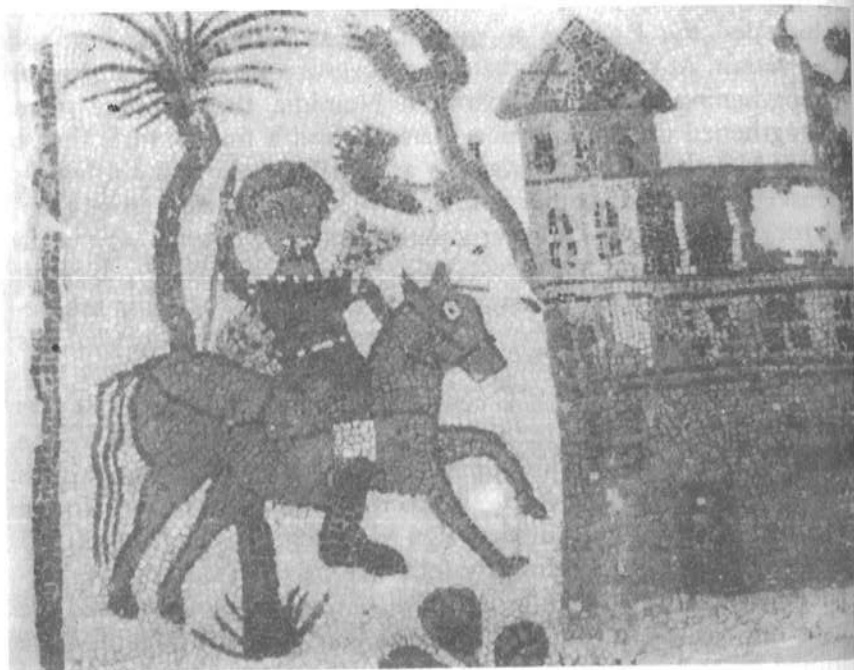

Plate 2.2 The noble estate: mosaic from an estate near Carthage (Photo: D. Kennet; Museum of Carthage)

the empire, wealth was becoming ever more concentrated in the hands of a few, but those few were very wealthy indeed. In a town such as Djemila, Roman Cuicul, south of little Kabylia, just four or five great houses seem to have been the homes of the major families of the period.[57] All were of course landlords, with estates to which the peasants were ever more closely tied. The class of small decurions had not disappeared altogether, however, and some social mobility was still possible. The most obvious example of this is St Augustine, himself the son of a minor decurion in a small provincial town: his mother's name, Monica, is Berber, and suggests that she came of African stock.[58]

The conditions of the rural population were probably significantly worse than in the preceding centuries. Although the tenants on the great estates were still legally free to leave, de facto they were almost entirely tied to the landowner. Thus in one letter Augustine asks whether a landlord can sell his tenants into slavery.[59] On the other hand, although undoubtedly abused, the rural population was not diminishing. A recent survey of Southern Numidia has demonstrated that almost all farms were still occupied in the fifth and sixth centuries, while in central Tunisia a survey has shown continuous renewal of rural property into the fifth century.[60] But these surveys can tell us nothing about the relationships of power, and it is doubtful that all the farmers were independent. It is probable that with the increase in population pressure the landlords or lessees could effectively call the tune, and while the customary laws about the planting of new trees on uncultivated land still existed, peasants had in fact fewer opportunities to improve their lot.[61]

The growth in the personal power of the landlords was not restricted to the urbanized part of the population. In mountains such as those of Kabylia the sort of dominance we can see on 'urban' senatorial estates took on a more traditional face. One of the most significant tribal disturbances in the fourth century centred around the family of a Mauretanian *princeps*, Flavius Nubel. We know of him both from the history of Ammianus Marcellinus, as a 'little king most powerful among the Moorish tribes' and, from an inscription, as the builder of a church near Rusguniae in which was placed a supposed fragment of the true cross.[62] The inscription describes him as son of a man with equestrian rank and as the prefect of a cavalry unit – again, the cavalry provides a link between the native aristocracy and the Roman

state. He had both a wife, Nonnica, and concubines, an arrange-
ment that can be seen as a Christianized version of polygamy. By
these he had a number of children whose names indicate the
cultural ambivalence – if not the conscious strategy – of a family
with one foot in the Roman camp and the other planted firmly in
tribal society. One was called Gildo, clearly derived from the
Libyan root GLD which, we have seen, means ruler. The names of
the other sons included the Latin Firmus and Dius, the Berber
Mascazel and Sammac, while the only daughter we know of bears
the Greek name Cyria.

The material wealth of Nubel's children was matched by a great
fluency in Roman culture. At some time before AD371 Sammac
erected a metric inscription at his estate, Petra, in which the first
and last letters of each line, read vertically, give the acrostic
'*Praedium Sammacis*' (Sammac's estate): Ammianus describes
the estate as 'built like a city', and the cultural reference of the
inscription is urban as well:

> With prudence he establishes a stronghold of eternal peace, and
> with faith he guards everywhere the Roman state, making strong
> the mountain by the river with fortifications, and this stronghold he
> calls by the name of Petra. At last the tribes of the region, eager to
> put down war, have joined as your allies, Sammac, so that strength
> united with faith in all duties shall always be joined to Romulus'
> triumphs.[63]

Sammac thus claims to have made the neighbouring tribes lay
down their arms and make peace with Rome. He is a mediator
between the two elements in the society, and boasts of it. There is
also a more menacing subtext: the tribes are Sammac's allies, not
Rome's, and will do his bidding.

The beginning of Firmus' revolt was not unlike that of
Jugurtha's: accused of murdering his brother Sammac, who was
supported by the Roman authorities, he found himself forced to
take up arms against them. With him fought all his other brothers
with the exception of Gildo, who took the Roman side.

Now, a recent analysis of this war has made it very clear that
this was no more a class struggle than was the war against
Jugurtha.[64] Nor is it a case of Berber versus Roman. Rather, the
war against Firmus was a dynastic struggle pitching one lot of
African nobles, with their tribes, against another. But the existence
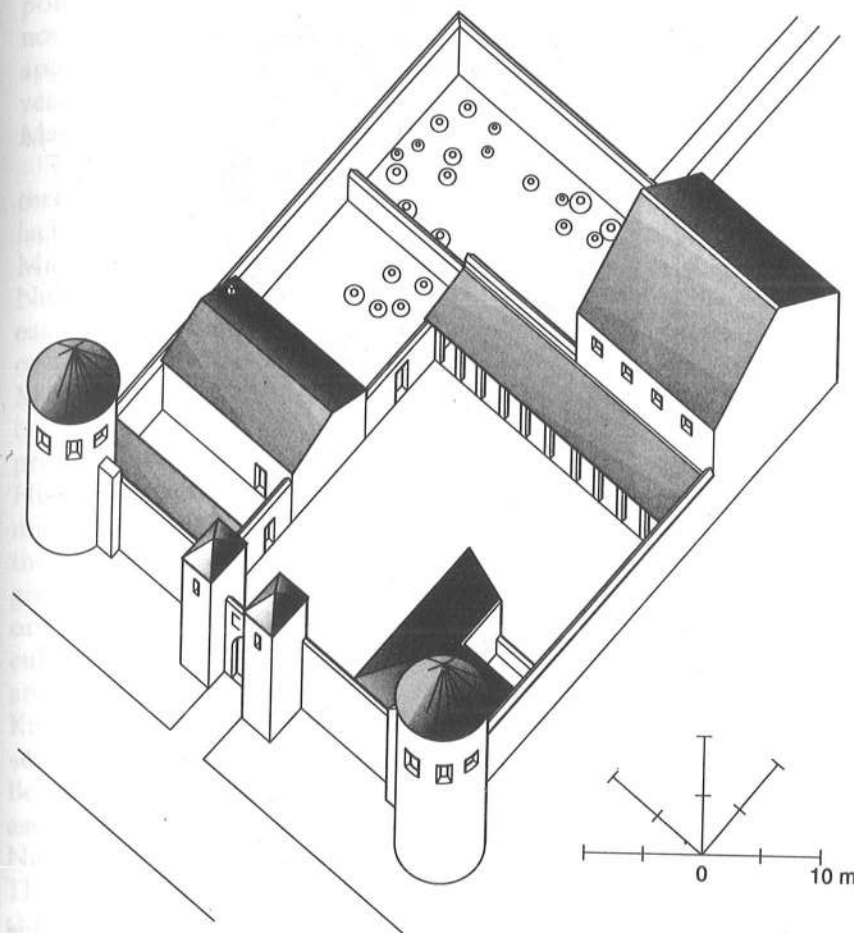of unquestioningly loyal tribesmen on the great estates of these

*Figure 2.5   Late Roman estates: the villa at Nador
(From Anselmino et al.,* Il Castellum di Nador, *Rome, 1989)*

nobles shows that little of the personal and tributary relationships
within the African tribes had changed. Just as in the past, the
nobles offered protection in exchange for tribute and military
service. Their castles sheltered their tribesmen against raids, not
only by other tribes but also, perhaps, by the Romans, for whom
the *barbari* could be legally enslaved. This relationship between
nobles and tribes was, of course, beneficial to both. Members of
Nubel's family by now occupied key roles in Roman provincial

*Plate 2.3 A Roman perfume flask showing a Garamantian captive: the
lines on his cheeks probably represent ritual scars
(Photo: S. Fontana)*

administration, but much of this was due to their unquestionable
personal power, and this was based as much on the armed might
which they could command on occasion as on their fluency in
Roman cultural forms and their ability to communicate as equals
with the rest of the Roman elite. They had, if they survived, the
best of both worlds.

Firmus' brother Gildo, who revolted in 396, was even more
tightly interlocked with the empire. His daughter Salvina was
married to a nephew of the emperor, and at the time of his revolt
he had been appointed *comes*, or count, of Africa. During his short
secession he behaved in all ways as a 'Roman' ruler, holding court
and striking coins with his image.[65] His immense wealth put him
on a par with the great families of the empire: more than a regional

potentate, he was a member of its inner circle. However, he did
not long survive his defection, and the manner of his defeat was
appropriate: just as Gildo had been used against Firmus thirty
years before, so he was himself defeated by one of his brothers,
Mascazel.

The two parallel stories of Nubel's heirs bring us back to a
theme discussed in the first chapter: the undoubted effect of the
lack of a tradition of primogeniture. Just as the succession to
Micipsa was disputed because of the lack of a clear successor, so
Nubel's succession split his power and estates among his progeny,
each one of which seems to have become chief of a separate tribal
or territorial grouping: Mascazel of the Tyndenses, Dius of the
Masinissenses and so on.[66] This continual fracturing of power
between generations seems to have been one of the factors that
prevented the formation of major blocs under dynastic control.
Historians and anthropologists have spent much time on the deter-
minants of the balanced anarchy of the mountain tribes, but
the constraints on the transmission of personal power have been
given very little consideration. It was not so much the 'democratic'
or segmentary institutions of the underlying structure as the diffi-
culty of passing on accumulated power to his heirs that thwarted
any possibility of the consolidation of Nubel's kingdom in
Kabylia.

Archaeologically, we know little of this society. Survey in the
Belezma has revealed fortified structures in the mountains, with
associated hamlets, which appear to date to the fifth century.[67]
Numerous inscriptions refer to the construction of '*centenaria*'.
The term originally referred to small forts, but it was taken over by
the builders of fortified farmhouses, such as that of Marcus
Caecilius Bumupal in Tripolitania or of Marcus Aurelius
Masaisilen in Kabylia, with an associated village and church. In
the Wadi Sofeggin, in Tripolitania, Flavius Nasama and his son,
Macrinus, built a *centenarium* to guard and protect all the re-
gion.[68] The grandest of them all was Kaoua[69] in Mauretania, with
a Greek cross plan surrounded by two circular walls (figure 2.4).
Over the door were found a series of low reliefs: a man with a
dagger, a gazelle and a chi-rho, as well as an inscription reading
SPES IN DEO FERINI AMEN.

Contemporary with these emerging castles, however, were
splendid villas, which we find depicted on mosaics such as the
well-known series showing the estate of Lord Julius. One of these

found in the last century at Oued Athmenia, west of Cirta, had a huge peristyle court for its stables of thoroughbreds, and extremely elaborate baths. Now, these societies were certainly interlinked, and it is probable that the senatorial proprietor of an 'urban' villa would have had clients in the more tribal areas whose strongholds would have presented an altogether more uncouth aspect, but whose own peasants could be transformed into an effective fighting unit. The Numidian cavalry was still a weapon to be reckoned with, but it was increasingly found in private hands.

The Threat from the Desert

Another sort of tribal conflict occurred in Tripolitania at this time; it can be seen as a worsening of the sort of external tribal wars we saw earlier. This was the destruction of Leptis Magna at the hands of a tribe called the Austuriani, recorded by the historian Ammianus Marcellinus.[70] An important recent study of this tribe suggests that, along with the Leuathae, the Austuriani derived from the tribe of the Nasamones, recorded as early as Herodotus as nomadizing between the Syrtis and the oasis of Augila.[71] One of their number, who had attempted to raise the settled peoples inside the Roman province against the cities, was burnt at the stake by the authorities. The first raid occurred in AD363. On the refusal of the Count of Africa, Romanus, to counterattack unless supplied with 4,000 camels, the raids were repeated until the defeat of the Austuriani in AD367 – although since their raids continued during the next forty years the defeat cannot have been definitive.[72] This, then, is an example of an attack on the province by a Berber tribe living outside it, but with close contact with other Berber tribes such as the Maces who lived within Roman territory and may have participated in the raids.

The effect of the Vandal conquest of AD429–440 on tribal society seems initially to have been little more than a change of patrons, giving the nobles new and not necessarily more reliable possibilities for alliance and discord. However, the legitimation which the Roman state made possible disappeared along with their power to enforce it, and there is evidence that both the pre-desert and the mountain areas escaped altogether from any effective control. Indeed, Corippus speaks of the happiness known by Africa under Vandal rule.[73] It is not until the Byzantine

reconquest over one hundred years later that we get a detailed picture of the situation in North Africa, and it is clear from Procopius that by then much of the periphery – the Aures, the Hodna, most of Tripolitania and all of Mauretania west of Caesarea – was in the hands of tribal chiefs.[74]

What these tribal kingdoms consisted of is very unclear. In Tripolitania, the Leuathae had probably moved from their original base – perhaps the oasis of Augila – to take control over most of the Gebel, with their capital at the religious centre of Ghirza.[75] They appear at the head of a vast coalition of tribes arrayed against the Byzantines in revenge for the murder of seventy-nine of their leaders.[76] They were certainly pastoralists, but although some of the tribes possessed camels the presence of numerous cows in their herds suggests that they were not fully nomadic. It is in fact far more likely that they comprised both transhumants and the remains of the sedentary communities of the pre-desert.[77] The successful war carried out by the Byzantine general John Troglyta against this coalition is vividly depicted by the contemporary poet Corippus in the *Johannidos*: defeated, the Leuathae were probably pushed back to the Syrtis, and the temple at Ghirza was destroyed in the middle of the century.

Desert Kingdoms

In Mauretania the situation was more complex. Traditionally, it has been assumed that the area outside Vandal control was divided up into a number of small states, each with its own leader.[78] However, an inscription found at Altava, in western Mauretania, far outside Vandal or Roman control, referred to a 'king of the Moors and the Romans' in AD508, while in the Aures another king 'never broke faith with the Romans'.[79] The theme is familiar: powerful, independent nobles who assume the recognition of the Roman state and may, according to circumstances, ally with it, or take on the role of mediator between it and the tribes. These monarchies are often said to be 'shadowy' or 'ephemeral', but this must be because we have no historical accounts of them, nothing to throw light on them. For all we know, they may have had effective control over large numbers of people. This, indeed, is the theory of Camps, who believes that Mauretania was ruled by a stable dynasty.[80] The inscription of Altava does indeed mention
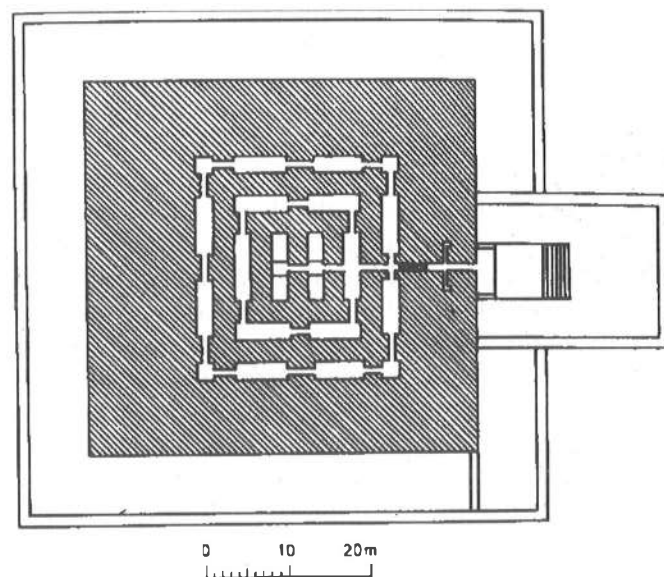
Figure 2.6   Djedar A, plan (after Khadra)
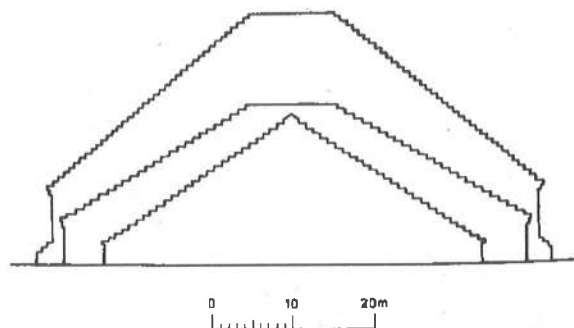(From R. Horn and C. Rüger, Die Numider: Reiter und Könige nördlich der Sahara, Bonn, 1979)

Figure 2.7   A comparison of the profiles of the Mausoleum at Tipasa, the Medracen and Djedar A
(From R. Horn and C. Rüger, Die Numider: Reiter und Könige nördlich der Sahara, Bonn, 1979)

prefects and a procurator of the 'king', and seems to suggest an administration based on Roman tradition. Another indication that these 'kingdoms' were not, in fact, petty chiefdoms is, again, the presence of huge monumental tombs. These are the Djedar, built in two cemeteries near Tiaret, in an area only briefly under Roman control.[81] They consist of large stepped pyramids, with elaborate funeral chambers as well as external altars, chapels and other annexes. They are decorated with the 'noble' iconography we have already seen on the stele of Abizar – ostrich hunts, with horses, as well as lion hunts. The earliest was constructed at some time in the fifth century, as we know from a fragment of an inscription, which also seems to say that it was made for one 'Egregius', a 'dux'.[82] Like the inscription of Altava, this inscription seems to have carried the provincial year – or the number of years since the foundation of the Roman province: there is thus no doubt that the rulers of Mauretania believed themselves to be simply continuing the administration of the province, now independent of Roman rule. The cemetery – and the dynasty? – continued in use for at least a century, as radiocarbon dates taken from another Djedar show.

We have no evidence for the origins of this group, but the type of tomb seems to derive from those known from Saharan prehistory, and it is not impossible that there was at this time a northward movement of the Saharan tribes and their establishment in the Aures and the Hodna.

Byzantine Rule and the End of the African City

Although after the Byzantine reconquest in AD530 order was progressively restored, one fundamental aspect of the relationship between the African nobles and the empire had changed, and this was the possibility of absorbing them or, indeed, of treating them on any other terms but as enemies or equals. For one thing, the language of government was now the alien Greek of the Byzantine empire: they were now no longer bilingual in the hegemonic language. Moreover, the symbolic value of the city had faded – or, indeed, had taken on a different sense. Thus Timgad was destroyed (or at least partially so) by tribes from the Aures 'so that the Romans would have no excuse for coming near us again'.[83] There has been much discussion of the continuity of African cities

in the sixth and seventh centuries, discussion which tends to lay a somewhat excessive weight on the presence or absence of a sherd, or of a bishop at a church council.[84] There is little doubt that occupation continued in some form on most urban sites. Even in the far west, at Volubilis, where Roman officials hadn't been seen since the end of the third century, we can find Latin inscriptions and new city walls in the sixth century.[85] But what form did the occupation of these cities take? The African city, which by the fourth century had become the residence of a few major land-owners and a remnant of the decurion class, no longer showed any evidence whatsoever for an urban aristocracy. The major monu-ments in any townscape were the Byzantine fort, built in general out of the ruins of the forum, and one or more fourth- or fifth-century basilicas. Only at Carthage do we have evidence for new building and a resident aristocracy, but even there quarters which were fully urban as late as the fifth century were occupied by rubbish and huts in the seventh.[86] Elsewhere, inertia and a wealth of building material maintained some population in the old towns, but by any definition they had become villages, with parish churches, a small garrison, the occasional tax or rent collector, but without a local hierarchy, a network of services or an administrat-ive structure. At this point the kinship and tribal structures which had ceased to be a primary source of reference during the Roman empire, and had re-emerged as the power bases of the elite in the late empire, became the dominant form of identification wherever one lived. As general insecurity drove the scattered farms from the landscape, the rural population found shelter under the wing of the local chiefs or their 'urban' counterpart, the Byzantine forts. With the replacement of the state by the personal power of chiefs – including, of course, chiefs who were symbolically invested by the state – and the concentration of all settlement inside walls, the encastellation of North Africa was complete.

3

The Unification of North Africa by Islam

The Berbers in Arabic literature, to quote the title of Harry Norris's book,[1] is almost the only way in which we see the great majority of North Africans, apart from their material remains, from the time of the Arab conquests in the seventh and eighth centuries down to the beginning of modern times. Arabic effort-lessly replaced Latin and Greek as the language of civilization from Tripoli to Tangiers, imposing upon the native inhabitants yet another frame of mind and expression. Arabic literature on the subject of the Berbers was nevertheless far more substantial than that of either Latin or Greek, and culminated in the late fourteenth century in a work which has already been quoted on the subject of Berber origins, the *Kitāb al-'Ibar* or 'Universal History' of Ibn Khaldūn.[2] This vast compendium of information on the races of mankind began as a treatise on the Berbers, who continue to fill most of the last two volumes, in second place only to the Arabs.[3] They do so through the great dynasties to which they gave rise in the Middle Ages – the Almoravids, the Almohads, the Ḥafṣids, the Ziyanids and the Marinids, at whose court Ibn Khaldūn began his career. He himself came from an old Arab family of Seville, but his patronage by the Berber rulers of Fes induced him to take up the traditional theme of the *mafākhir al-Barbar*, 'the boasts of the Berbers', and turn it over the years into the inspiration of one of the great books of all time. The despised natives of the Muslim West thus found their supreme literary monument in the language of their conquerors seven hundred years earlier.