

MONIKA STRŽÍTESKÁ

## Mint and Coinage Propaganda of the Rulers and Usurpers of North Africa

*This paper examines numismatic material from Roman North Africa – present-day Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya – from the late Republic to the Principate and Dominate periods. A sub-objective of this work is a survey of important personalities, especially emperors and usurpers from North Africa, who had coins minted with their likenesses. The overview and interpretation can therefore contribute to the study of Roman numismatics, Roman economic history and the history of North Africa in general. From the surviving finds of coins in North Africa, it is assumed that the vast majority of them was struck in Rome. However, local mints, such as those in Carthage, were also typical of the North African region.*

**Keywords:** Coinage propaganda, mints, North Africa, Late Antiquity, usurpers

### Introduction

Roman Africa was a very diverse region. Its centre was the province of Africa Proconsularis, which was located in Tunisia and included parts of present-day Algeria and Libya. This region enjoyed a relatively high level of productivity and stability, even in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, when the crisis of the whole Roman Empire was a little later.<sup>1</sup> The prosperity of the whole region was due above all to its exceptionally fertile agricultural land.<sup>2</sup> The wealth derived from the grain and other products

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<sup>1</sup> HOYER (2016).

<sup>2</sup> D.S. 20,8,3–6. As an example it is possible to use Diodorus Siculus' comments on

helped the wealthy Romans to accumulate vast tracts of land and also to contribute to the regional economy. The local economy thrived mainly through the production and distribution of wheat and olive oil.<sup>3</sup>

It is assumed that there is a strong correlation between coinage and the presence of larger military garrisons. In North Africa, however, we can observe economic activities that are not entirely related to the military. There was usually only one legion in Africa, the Legio III Augusta, whose main camp was moved from Numidia during Hadrian's reign to the vicinity of Lambaesis in Mauretania Caesariensis. This place was located near the Aures Mountains, a major area of unrest throughout the imperial period, including the revolt of 250 AD. In 238 AD, the Legio III Augusta suppressed the Gordians' revolt at the Battle of Carthage. However, following the ascension of Gordian III to the imperial throne, the le-

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the Syracusan expedition to Africa during the Seventh Greco-Punic War (311–306): *„The intervening country through which it was necessary for them to march was divided into gardens and plantations of every kind, since many streams of water were led in small channels and irrigated every part. There were also country houses one after another, constructed in luxurious fashion and covered with stucco, which gave evidence of the wealth of the people who possessed them. The farm buildings were filled with everything that was needful for enjoyment, seeing that the inhabitants in a long period of peace had stored up an abundant variety of products. Part of the land was planted with vines, and part yielded olives and was also planted thickly with other varieties of fruit-bearing trees. On each side herds of cattle and flocks of sheep pastured on the plain, and the neighbouring meadows were filled with grazing horses. In general there was a manifold prosperity in the region, since the leading Carthaginians had laid out there their private estates and with their wealth had beautified them for their enjoyment.“* See also Plin. (HN. 5,3,24): *„Here commences the second division of Africa properly so called. Those who inhabit Byzacium have the name of Libyphœnices. Byzacium is the name of a district which is 250 miles in circumference, and is remarkable for its extreme fertility, as the ground returns the seed sown by the husbandman with interest a hundred-fold.“*

<sup>3</sup> KRAJŇÁKOVÁ (2022: 27–29). Africa's great prosperity was also due to the great wealth derived from the export of grain, as a result of which people moved to the province from all over the Empire. Large numbers of veterans of the Roman army settled in northwest Africa on farmland promised to them in return for military service. Even so, the Roman military presence in northwest Africa was relatively small, consisting of about 28,000 soldiers and auxiliary units in Numidia. Beginning in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, these garrisons were composed mostly of local residents. See also ABU-NASR (2012: 45–46).

gion was subsequently disbanded.<sup>4</sup> There were also smaller strongholds of individual auxiliary units. Before the crisis of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the whole area was relatively under-militarised compared to other parts of the empire (e.g. the Danube and Rhine borders). Later, the situation changed.<sup>5</sup>

Most of the coins found in the region tend to come from Numidia and Africa Proconsularis. In both Moorish provinces, where much of the region's military power was concentrated, finds are less numerous. This may be related to the fact that the Mauretanian provinces may have been more commercially involved in exchange (traders deliberately chose soldiers for their trade and then took their money away).<sup>6</sup>

### **Mints in Late Antiquity**

This chapter deals with mints in Late Antiquity in general. The most popular mint in North Africa during Late Antiquity was the Carthaginian mint. However, before that, during the Late Republic and the beginning of the Principate, smaller mints appeared at Hadrumetum, Tingis, Sicca, Cirta, Utica and at present-day Cherchellum. The coins of Gaius Iulius Caesar, Augustus and the emperors of the Iulian-Claudian dynasty were minted in these mints in large numbers, e.g. in Utica it was especially successful under the emperor Tiberius. I have found no further information about these mints, other than the Carthaginian one, in the Late Antiquity period. It is therefore assumed that they probably disap-

<sup>4</sup> KRAJŇÁKOVÁ (2022: 27–29). Archaeological finds in areas such as modern Tunisia (e.g. around the town of Dougga) indicate the existence of settlements that were founded by veterans. These settlements often contained houses, temples and public buildings, suggesting that veterans played a key role in the development of local infrastructure. The relocation of veterans to Africa was also intended to stabilize the region. Veterans were experienced soldiers who could help maintain order and security in areas that might be prone to insurgency or attack, which was typical in Africa. See also ABU-NASR (2012: 45–46).

<sup>5</sup> MORRISON (2022: 410–423).

<sup>6</sup> HOYER (2012).

peared and their role was taken over centrally by the Carthaginian mint. This mint has been on the rise since approximately the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.<sup>7</sup>

To illustrate the development of coinage from the Principate period to Late Antiquity, a map of important mints in Late Antiquity is provided. The mint in Rome played a key role.



Figure 1: Major mint cities of the Roman Empire 300–476 AD. ERIC. Database available online: <https://www.forumancientcoins.com/numiswiki/view.asp?key=ERIC%20-%20Mint%20Map>

Each coinage consisted of 4 elements. The letter that appeared after the coin's abbreviation used to come first. These are for example the letters P (Pecunia – money), M (Moneta) or SM (Sacra Moneta). Another important element was the abbreviation of the mint, so for North Africa the abbreviation of the Carthaginian mint (K, KAR, KART) was important. The mintmark also appeared. The following picture shows their use on different types of coins (Carthage).

<sup>7</sup> BUTREY (1976: 157–193).

Period	Gold	Silver	Bronze
296-307	PK	no mark	FK, PK
308-311	PK		PK
423-425			no mark

Figure 2: Different types of coins in Carthaginian mint with their marks. ERIC. Database available online: <https://www.forumancientcoins.com/numiswiki/view.asp?key=Roman%20Mints>

The last elements were the identification of the mint. These were usually Latin letters, Greek letters, or Roman numerals indicating the officina. Sometimes the officina is omitted and sometimes it precedes the abbreviation of the mint name. Many mintmarks also include symbols such as dots, crescents or branches. These symbols probably indicate when the coin was struck and who was running the workshop at the time.<sup>8</sup>

### **Famous rulers related to North Africa and their coinage propaganda**

The next section of this paper will examine the important personalities at the end of the Roman Republic. A specific coin depiction from North Africa is the goddess Dea Africa. However, there are no material remains of this goddess from this region in the pre-Roman period, and apart from coins, there are no other examples of this iconography in the region before the arrival of the Romans. There is also a little evidence that local personifications were part of nomadic culture; the elephants on the coins may be symbols, but they are not personifications. Nor is

<sup>8</sup> ERIC. Database available online: <https://www.forumancientcoins.com/numiswiki/view.asp?key=Roman%20Mints>

there any other evidence of local use of animal heads as symbols in Numidian art; the only exception may be the lion-headed goddess. Some Numidian kings, such as Iugurtha, minted coins similar to Hellenistic coins or were depicted on coins from the Roman mint (e.g. King Bocchus). Therefore, Pre-Caesarian coins were also found in North Africa.

During the dictatorship of C. Julius Caesar, coins with his likeness were widely minted in North Africa. On the picture below, there is a Republican silver denarius minted during Caesar's dictatorship, dated to 47–46 BC. The obverse depicts the head of Venus, facing right. The reverse shows Aeneas carrying a palladium in his right hand and Anchises, his father, on his shoulders. This proves a clear promotion of Caesar's lineage. The name is at the bottom, but it is already much worn.

Figure 3: Republican silver denarius minted during Caesar's dictatorship. PAS. Database available online:



<https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/775393>

Other notable figures whose coins have been found include Quintus Caecilius Metellus Pius Scipio (proconsul of North Africa, fought against Caesar), Marcus Licinius Crassus (member of the First Triumvirate) and Cato the Younger. Here it is suggested that they could be considered early usurpers. This suggestion can be supported by the finds of their coins.

On the coins of Metellus Scipio, two motifs are most often preserved. The first depicts him as an emperor with a laurel wreath and a typical African emblem – an elephant. The second coin was again struck by Metellus Scipio and Publius Licinius Crassus. On the obverse there is METEL. PIVS|SCIP.IMP (Metellus Pius Scipio Imperator) and a bust of Jupiter, the head of an eagle and a sceptre. On the side of Crassus there is CRASS.IVN|LEG.PRO.PR (Crassus Iunianus, legatus pro praetore) with a curule chair, scales, cornucopia, corn stalk and dragon's head referring to his offices.



Figure 4: The coin of Metellus Scipio. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quintus\\_Caecilius\\_Metellus\\_Pius\\_Scipio#/media/File:Metellus\\_Scipio\\_denarius.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quintus_Caecilius_Metellus_Pius_Scipio#/media/File:Metellus_Scipio_denarius.jpg); MANTIS. Database available online: <https://numismatics.org/collection/1944.100.3307?lang=cs>

One of the emperors originating from North Africa, specifically from the city of Leptis Magna, was Septimius Severus (145–211 AD). Most of the silver denarii from his reign have survived, but none of the coins bears the mark of a mint located in North Africa. Severus had his coins struck most often in Rome and is usually depicted with a laurel wreath and his head pointing to the right. The obverse side most often bears the inscription SEVERVS AVG PART MAX, illustrating the victory over the Parthians and the gain of other eastern provinces. On the reverse, the inscription FVNDATOR PACIS or RESTITVTOR VRBIS often appears, celebrating S. Severus as the saviour of the old order. A typical

motif is then Septimius standing in front, veiled, holding a branch in his right hand and a scroll in his left.



Figure 5: The coin of Crassus Iunianus and Metellus Scipio



Figure 6: Septimius Severus's silver denarius. MANTIS. Database available online: <https://numismatics.org/collection/1978.64.501?lang=cs>

From Africa also came the rulers Gordian I, II and III, whose family became famous in 238 AD, known as the Year of the Six Emperors. The first of these came to power as a relatively old man, but before that he had had a glittering career in various offices. Together with his son Gordian II, he ruled for several weeks. His nephew lasted the longest and ruled until 244 AD before he was killed in the province of Mesopotamia. Coins of various values and metals survive from his

time.<sup>9</sup> On the obverse, the inscriptions IMP GORDIANVS PIVS FEL AVG referring to his piety (especially the cult of Iuppiter), as well as the rayed crown, the cuirass, appears most frequently. On the reverse there is P M TR P III COS P P referring to the powers and offices he held during his lifetime (Pontifex Maximus, Tribunicia Potestate tertia, Consul, Pater Patriae – high priest, three times tribunicia potestas, consulship, pater patriae). The coin shows Gordian veiled, standing on the left, offering from the patera in his right hand over the altar, holding a staff in his left hand.



Figure 7: The coin of Gordian I. MANTIS. Database available online: <https://numismatics.org/collection/1978.64.473?lang=cs>



Figure 8: The coin of one of the tetrarchs – Constantine the Great. MANTIS. Database available online: <http://numismatics.org/collection/1944.100.4033>

<sup>9</sup> BLAND (2012: 514–537).

The mint at Carthage was most active during the Tetrarchy. It issued coins with almost all the Augusti and Caesars (most often with Maximian, his son Maxentius, Constantius I Chlorus, etc.). On the obverse the titular IMP CONSTANTIVS P F AVG appeared most often (in the case of the other tetrarchs only the name changed), on the reverse the tetrarchs were praised (inscription SALVIS AVGG ET CAESS FEL KART). There was also the personification of Carthage as a goddess.

### Usurpers from North Africa and their coinage propaganda

The last part of this work will focus on some usurpers originating from North Africa. There have been several of these throughout history, as North Africa had always been a rather unstable area due to the large number of nomadic tribes and the vast resources. The most famous usurpers of Late Antiquity are Domitius Alexander, Firmus and Gildo. However, usurpations were not only limited to the African provinces, but took place throughout the Roman Empire. In Late Antiquity, these included for example the Gallic Empire or the usurpers Heraclianus, Attalus and Joannes, *primicerius notariorum* in 423 AD.<sup>10</sup>

One of the above-mentioned usurpers, from whom bronze coins have survived, was Domitius Alexander. His revolt in 308–311 AD foreshadowed the events at the Milvian Bridge between Constantine I and Maxentius. Africa, Sicily, Sardinia and Hispania were under Domitius' administration at the time. Domitius had the title *vices agens praefecti praetorio per Africam*, deputy praetorian prefect for Africa. His ambition to turn local usurpation into a bid for power at the highest levels of the tetrarchy could be evidenced by the legend he had struck on his coins (obverse – IMP ALEXANDER P [F] AVG). This shows his tendency to allow himself to be portrayed as the legitimately elected emperor and

<sup>10</sup> PELLIZARRI (2023: 179–200).

to use a similar titulary. The reverse then shows the supreme Roman god Jupiter and the inscription IOVI CONSERVA[TOR]I. It shows Jupiter standing on the right side, holding a thunderbolt and leaning on a scepter.



Figure 9: The bronze coin of Domitius Alexander. MANTIS. Database available online: <https://numismatics.org/collection/1979.153.1?lang=cs>

At the beginning of the chapter, in addition to Domitius Alexander, Firmus and Gildo, who led several revolts in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, were also mentioned. However, I have been unable to find any coinage evidence of the usurper Firmus. This may be due to the fact that, unlike his brother Gildo, he was quickly defeated by Flavius Theodosius. Gildo, on the other hand, held on to power much longer and there is one coin that could be attributed to him. These are four small bronze coins with the anonymous inscriptions DOMINO NOSTRO, DOMINIS NOSTRIS P(ER)P(ETUIS) AVG(USTIS) and the coinage mark CARTAGINE. This find is known as the Treasure of the City of Tapaz.<sup>11</sup>

The last part of the article deals with Vandal coins. The kingdom of the Vandals and Alans existed between 435 and 534 AD and its first rulers could be seen as usurpers. However, the larger coin finds are dated more to the late 5<sup>th</sup> century rulers Gunthamund (484–496 AD), Thrasamund (496–523 AD), Hilderic (523–530 AD) and Gelimer (530–534 AD).

<sup>11</sup> WARE (2004: 96–103).

Gunthamund minted this unusual coin (see below) during his rule, approximately between 484 and 496 AD. The front side features a diademmed, draped and armored bust, which can be clearly recognized by the inscription DN RX GVNTHA (Dominus Noster, rex, Gunthamund). The various elements of this coin, which was worth 25 Roman denarii as indicated on the reverse, show the influence of the Empire, including the use of the term Dominus Noster. Other rulers usually have palms and the term Dominus Noster, not rex (king).



Figure 10: Bronze coin attributed to Gildo, which was struck during the time he was in power.



Figure 11: Coin of Gunthamund from the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, containing an atypical titulature of a king among Vandal rulers. NGC. Database available online:

<https://coins.www.collectors-society.com/wcm/coinview.aspx?sc=579258>

## Conclusion

Roman North Africa was a very prosperous province of the Roman Empire, but sometimes somewhat unstable. The high yields from grain and olive oil production attracted local officials and the Roman-Berber aristocracy. As a result, the area was often the centre of various uprisings and usurpations. Some of them even crossed the borders of the African provinces.

A number of important emperors in Late Antiquity came from North Africa and used coins as a propaganda tool. The mint at Carthage, which has played a key role in the region since the Principate, was used for these purposes. However, the usurpers, from whom very few coins have survived, had the same intention of legitimising their rule. Some usurpers even used titles similar to those of legitimate emperors, which may refer to their tendency to extend their power beyond their jurisdiction in North Africa.

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