

AGDAL.
«Per Africae gentes,
deserta atque loca»

New perspectives on ancient Amazigh onomastics
(toponymy, ethnonymy, anthroponymy)
and Amazigh historical linguistics

Carles Múrcia (ed.)



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UNIVERSITAT DE
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Foreword

This volume presents the most relevant results of the project *AGDAL*. « *Per Africae gentes, deserta atque loca* ». *New perspectives on ancient Amazigh (Berber) onomastics (toponymy, ethnonymy, anthroponymy) and Amazigh historical linguistics*, bringing together nine contributions from the scholars who take part in it. The *AGDAL* project is an interdisciplinary study of the Amazigh language in Antiquity based on the analysis of toponymy, ethnonymy, anthroponymy and other linguistic corpuses. Two areas of study converge in this project: on the one hand, Amazigh historical and comparative linguistics (the reconstruction of Proto-Amazigh and linguistic analysis of Latin, Greek, Libyan, Punic, Amazigh-Ibadite and Arabic philological and epigraphic sources) and, on the other, the sciences of Antiquity applied to North Africa (geohistory, archaeology and anthropology). The maturity that the phonological and morphosyntactic reconstruction of Proto-Amazigh has reached in recent years has allowed us to make major progress in our understanding of the history of the Amazigh language not only from the point of view of the evolution of the code (phonology, morphology, syntax) but also from the point of view of the deep transformations undergone by the society, economy, and culture of the Amazigh-speaking communities in Antiquity and in transition from late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages. This collective volume reflects the progress that has been made in this line of research. As we will see, new hitherto unexplored horizons are opening up for the linguistic history of Northern African populations.

This is not a handbook, but a collection of self-contained texts in which the editor has respected the methods and notation criteria of each author and has maintained individual bibliographies. That said, it is a multifaceted volume in which each chapter focuses on a major piece of the Paleo-Amazigh jigsaw puzzle. Completing this jigsaw requires an approach akin to the methodology of the *Trümmersprache*, although, of course, in a somewhat more advantageous position

due to the variety and richness of the available corpus (despite its fragmentation, incompleteness and heterogeneity). Roughly half of the volume explores core aspects of Amazigh historical and comparative linguistics (phonology, morphophonology, nominal morphology, syntax) based mainly on toponymic, ethnonymic, anthroponymic, and phytonymic data and also on other diachronic and comparative sources. But this is not just a volume of hardcore diachrony and comparatism, since the linguistic analyses are placed in their philological, epigraphic, historical, geographical, social and cultural contexts. And, of course, the fundamentally interdisciplinary nature of the AGDAL project is reflected in the heterogeneity of sources, media, and methods that allow us to access knowledge of Paleo-Amazigh: Latin and Greek philology, epigraphy and ostraca, Neo-Punic epigraphy and numismatics, Libyan epigraphy, the philology of Ibadite manuscripts written in medieval Amazigh and the geohistory of ethnonymic occurrences in the transition between Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Consistency has been sought in the distribution of the texts in chapters, cross-references are provided between the different chapters, and a unified index of words at the end of the book compiles and references all the toponyms, ethnonyms, anthroponyms, phytonyms and common lexicon cited by the various authors. Therefore, although it is not a handbook of the discipline, this volume acquaints the reader with the current state of research in Paleo-Amazigh and encourages further inquiries.

In chapter 1, L. Souag asks why, west of Sitifis (in Mauretania Sitifensis), there was a massive substitution of the toponyms used during the Roman period in North Africa from the Middle Ages onwards. Based on an analysis of the survival of Roman-era toponyms, which were much more prevalent in the territories of the former eastern provinces of Byzacena, Zeugitana, and Numidia than in the Mauretaniae (particularly in the Caesariensis and the Tingitana), the author investigates the causes of this toponymic substitution and raises the possibility of establishing parallels with what occurred in other parts of the Empire.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 then develop aspects of Amazigh phonology, morphology and syntax, respectively, from a diachronic point of view.

The labialization of velar and uvular consonants in Northern Amazigh has been the subject of numerous synchronic phonetic studies. Its phonological status has generally been considered marginal (leaving aside $gg^w < **w$), and, for some time, it was considered possible that it was the remnant of an ancient short vowel. In chapter 2, M. Kossmann convincingly argues that labialization is, in many relevant contexts, the remnant of Proto-Amazigh short high vowel $*ə$, based on an analysis of documentation from some Tašlḥiyt dialects of the Anti-Atlas, where a

contrast between aorist and perfective aspectual stems based on labialization can still be discerned. The importance of this achievement goes beyond the Tašlhiyt-speaking area, as it proves that the phonemic contrast between two short vowels *ə and *ā, long established for other Amazigh groups (particularly in Tuareg and Ghadames), existed in the whole of Northern Amazigh and in Zenatic and can be attributed to the proto-language.

In chapter 3, C. Múrcia introduces seven case studies (four toponyms, two ethnonyms and one phytonym) in their philological and epigraphic contexts and analyses morphophonological features that concern vowels, namely syllabic structure, apophony, stem patterns and mid-vowel metaphony with the aim of exploring the extent to which current Proto-Amazigh reconstruction match with the analysis of Paleo-Amazigh evidence across Latin, Greek, Neo-Punic and Libyan sources.

While syntax is often left in the background in historical and comparative linguistics studies, in chapter 4 K. Naït Zerar offers a comprehensive historical and comparative study of conditional subordinate clauses in four Amazigh groups: Northern (Kabyle, Tašlhiyt), Zenatic (Shawi, Wargli, Mozabite), Eastern (Ghadames) and Southern (Tuareg). The author clarifies the uses of conditional subordinating conjunctions from two points of view: semantic (potential, unreal or counterfactual) and aspectual/temporal (aspectual compatibilities between apodosis and protasis).

Chapters 5-8 are regional studies that cover specific parts of North Africa in four different kinds of source and according to different methodological approaches.

In chapter 5, S. Struffolino analyses the Libyan anthroponyms that appear in the Greek literary and epigraphic sources of Cyrenaica with the aim of clarifying the complex problem of the relations between the indigenous culture of Cyrenaica and Greek colonial culture, which settled in the region in the last decades of the 7th century BCE. The Libyan anthroponymy is analysed from different points of view: by the number of occurrences of the names, by the geographical distribution between the different cities of the Pentapolis and the Cyrenian *chora*, by the social status of the individuals bearing such names, by the typology of the patronymic onomastic construction and by the chronological distribution from the classical era to the Roman period.

In Chapter 6, S. Ait Ali Yahia discusses the lexicon of stelae that contain Libyan inscriptions in ancient Numidia. The author discusses the problems of dating the stelae and the difficulties that persist in determining the relationship between the language of the Libyan inscriptions of Numidia and the Amazigh languages as we know them, taking into account the abjad (consonantal) nature of

this writing system. Finally, the author establishes a typology of the linguistic material provided by these stela inscriptions, which includes anthroponyms, titles of functions, toponyms and other names of controversial interpretation.

The methodology for studying the onomastic continuity of ethnonyms attested in Latin and Greek sources into the Middle Ages was successfully established by J. Desanges and has been developed very productively for many years by A. M'Charek, who, in Chapter 7, presents a monographical analysis of the survival of the Zabenses of ancient Mauretania Sitifensis through the ages, starting from a detailed regional examination of the onomastics referring to Zabenses individuals in Latin epigraphy and references to the country of Zabe (Ζάβη ἢ χώρα) in Greek historiographical sources from the Byzantine period, and ending with an examination of Arabic sources of the early Middle Ages mentioning the Zab.

The literature of the Ibadi groups from different regions of North Africa, which continues to this day in Nafusa, Mzab and Djerba, is one of the few that has consistently used the Amazigh language as a vehicle of expression since approximately the 8th century. In Chapter 8, V. Brugnattelli presents one of the most notable works of Ibadite literature, the work of a medieval scholar from Nafusa entitled the *Kitāb al-Barbariyya*, a long treatise on jurisprudence of almost 900 pages in its best preserved manuscripts; it is thus one of the most extensive works of medieval Amazigh literature that have been preserved. The indigenous elements that emerge from the work are for the most part anthropological data, such as the preservation of the measurement of time according to the Julian calendar and several units of measurement (length, weight, capacity) that are specific to the regions of North Africa. In this study, the author analyses the scarce Amazigh onomastics (toponyms, demonyms and some anthroponyms) contained in the *Kitāb al-Barbariyya*.

In recent years, G. Lazarev has published two geohistorical monographs and numerous articles that have shed light on the population movements that took place during the “dark centuries of North Africa”, thus called because of the scarcity of written sources between the last historians of the Byzantine period (7th century) and the first Arabic sources (basically from the 10th century onwards). In the ninth and final chapter in this volume, Lazarev presents a historiographical study of the sources and a geohistorical analysis of toponymic and ethnonymic recurrences, and reveals that the migratory movements of Ṣanhāḏa groups in Maġrib al-Aqṣā began already during Antiquity. The author examines the ways in which the Ṣanhāḏa populations moved along a vast corridor running, via the Dra valley, Saḡru, Central and Eastern High Atlas and Middle Atlas, from the Atlantic Sahara to the Rif mountains. At the same time, the author analyses the nature of the interplay

between the pre-existing Amazigh groups of Mašmūda stock, the newly arrived Ṣanhāža tribes and Zenatic-speaking populations and other eastern Amazigh groups which converged in large regions of Mağrib al-Aqṣā following the Islamization of North Africa and al-Andalus.

This book is being published thanks to funding received from the Ministry of Science and Innovation of Spain and the State Research Agency within the framework of the R&D&I project « *Per Africae gentes, deserta atque loca: Amazigh (Berber) Toponymy in Latin and Greek Sources (AGDAL)* » (PID2020-114348GA-I00). The volume is published in the prestigious collection *Barcino. Monographica Orientalia* (BMO) of the Institut universitari del Pròxim Orient Antic (IPOA) of the Universitat de Barcelona under the auspices of the collection's directors Ignasi-Xavier Adiego and Adelina Millet Albà. The BMO collection has once again obtained the Seal of Quality in Academic Publishing, which recognizes best practices in the university publishing sector. Under the guidance of its directors Gregorio del Olmo, Joaquín Sanmartín, Adelina Millet Albà and Ignasi-Xavier Adiego, over the last 25 years the IPOA has supported this line of research and teaching in Amazigh linguistics and has acquired a growing library of Amazigh studies. Adelina Millet Albà conducted a thorough review of the manuscript, organized the layout and provided valuable comments. Jean-Pierre Laporte and David Forniès provided the images on which the cover illustration is based. Núria Aineto is responsible for all the arrangements that made a meeting possible, bringing together the members of the AGDAL project. Edicions de la UB has welcomed the publication of this first volume of the Libyca Series of the BMO collection. The toponymic database on which the philological, epigraphic and linguistic analyses are based is openly accessible on the project website www.agdal.ub.edu.

To conclude, I thank the scholars who have contributed to this volume and made the editor's work easy, and extend my gratitude to those who were invited to participate but unfortunately were not able to do so.

Carles Múrcia
Barcelona, July 2025

Continuity and rupture in North African toponymy since the Classical era

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In Tunisia and eastern Algeria, place names already attested in the Roman era are everywhere. West of Sitifis/Setif, however, towns occupied in the Roman era overwhelmingly bear entirely different names, except for some limited pockets, notably around the provincial capitals of Caesarea/Cherchell and Tingis/Tangier. This difference does not reflect the expansion of Arabic: in many cases, the new names come from Berber, and Kabyle-speaking regions stand out as conspicuously lacking in toponyms surviving from Roman times. Nor does it reflect the disappearance of Latin or Punic; names of presumed Berber origin, like Tigisi or Tubusuctu, appear no better preserved than others. As in post-Roman Britain, demographic explanations for this toponymic rupture appear possible a priori; however, a closer look suggests that ideological factors played a key role, with new place names becoming emblems of a relocalised political order.

§ 1. *Introduction*

Many modern North African toponyms are cognate to equivalents already attested in Roman usage or earlier; thus, for instance, Gafsa (Tunisian Arabic *gaḥṣa*) is transparently related to Latin *Capsa*, Ngaous (Algerian Arabic *ngāwās*) to Latin *Nicivibus*, Tangier (Moroccan Arabic *ṭanṣa*) to Latin *Tingis*. Many others, however, are entirely unrelated. In some cases, this can be linked to the rise of an Arabic place name: Algiers (*ad-dzāyər*) derives from Arabic *al-jazāʾir* ‘the islands’, and has no direct connection to *Icosium*, except perhaps semantically insofar as the *i-* of the latter may reflect Phoenician *i* ‘island’. In many cases, however, the later

attested name is from Berber; thus Tlemcen (Algerian Arabic *Tl̥amsān* / Beni Snous Berber *Tl̥amsin*) has no formal relationship with *Pomaria*, Bejaia (Kabyle Berber *bgayət* / Algerian Arabic *bžāya*) clearly does not reflect *Saldae*, Taourga (Kabyle *tawərga*) is independent of *Tigisi*...

This raises a few questions. Where in North Africa are Roman-era toponyms more likely to be retained or lost, and why should they be better retained in some areas than in others? Does this reflect population replacement, changes in settlement patterns, ideological shifts, or something else? Such questions have attracted little attention in the North African context, though the parallel question of retention of pre-Roman toponyms in Roman North Africa has been addressed by Laporte (2011, p. 126), who observes that « the more ancient the urbanisation of a region is, the higher the percentage of pre-Roman toponyms, and, conversely, the more recent the Roman occupation, the higher the percentage of Latin toponyms » (author's translation). In other regions, however, these questions have been the subject of an extensive literature – notably in Britain. There, a relatively sharp discontinuity is observable between Roman and Anglo-Saxon toponymy, with most later toponyms straightforwardly etymologisable as of English origin. For Hogg (1964, p. 298), the « almost complete loss of all Romano-British names » must be taken as the result of « widespread dislocation of social life », supported by archeological evidence for « a complete change in settlement patterns ». However, as Hall (2012, p. 116) points out, there is « little more hard evidence for continuity of names from the Roman period in Wales than in England », undermining explanations in terms of demographic shifts and perhaps merely indicating « a society in which place-names were simply unstable ».

A priori, one would expect to be able to predict the answers to such questions from linguistic and demographic history. Depopulation should disrupt toponymy; newcomers arriving in a desolate landscape are likely to be unfamiliar with previous place names. The impact of rapid population replacement is similar – not many towns in California bear Native American names. Language shift, on the other hand, need not have a major impact on toponymy, as illustrated by the significant levels of retention in places like Ireland or Egypt. Where there is linguistic continuity, toponymy typically remains relatively stable, affected by gradual piecemeal turnover as new names emerge and old ones fall out of use, but not in general by catastrophic large-scale replacements.

In the case of North Africa, we know that the expansion of Arabic started no earlier than the 7th century CE, and that, while its catalysts undoubtedly involved Arab migration, its scale largely reflects language shift by Berber speakers to Arabic. This was, however, not the only discontinuity in the region's linguistic

history. Most Berber varieties across a vast region extending from the Rif in eastern Morocco to the Nefusa Mountains of northwestern Libya belong to a single subgroup – Zenati – whose conspicuous homogeneity implies a comparatively recent expansion (Kossmann 2020, Souag 2017, Blažek 2010). The westward and northward expansion of the Zenati subgroup has plausibly been dated to Late Antiquity (Fentress & Wilson, 2016), although the high mobility of Berber groups during the medieval period, including the Zenata proper (Graïne 2023), may also have contributed to its spread later on. Among the surviving Berber varieties of northern Algeria, only one large region stands out as relatively unaffected by the Zenati expansion: Kabyle. This suggests a greater degree of population continuity in Kabylie, as stated for instance by Múrcia (2010, p. 779). Put together, this data would lead one to expect great toponymic continuity in Kabylie and in the southern and eastern regions out of which Zenati is likely to have expanded; a lower degree of continuity in westerly Zenati-speaking regions and in Arabic-speaking regions; and complete rupture only in regions of especially low population density, such as perhaps the edges of the Sahara. As will be seen below, these predictions are, in general, not borne out, forcing a reexamination of these assumptions.

§ 2. *Measuring toponymic continuity*

In general, if the current name of a given town is cognate to its name in the Roman era, it can safely be assumed that the name has been retained continuously since that time. The sporadic cases where French colonial authorities reimposed a Latin name can easily be excluded. If a comprehensive gazetteer of North African toponyms in the early Islamic era were available, it would presumably show more examples of continuity; in practice, however, early Islamic geographical sources list relatively few toponyms for northwest Africa (see Forstner 1979), and using more recent data permits a far larger dataset.

Åhlfeldt (2020) provides an extensive database of geolocated Roman-era toponyms, accompanied by modern equivalents where available. This database was initially queried for all toponyms of cities and legionary fortresses within a rectangle bounded by latitudes 29.4° – 37.3° N and longitudes 11.7° E – 15.6° W. Ones located in Europe were then excluded, along with all those whose current or ancient names were not recorded. A Boolean column was added to the resulting data indicating whether or not the modern name was cognate with the Latin name provided. In a few cases, corrections to the modern name were necessary: *Pisida* is modern Bu Kammash, *Agbia* is Ain-Hedia, and *Cissi* is Djinet. In two cases, the Latin name was revived by the French colonial government; thus Tazoult-Lambèse

was not counted as a cognate of Lambaesis. Tipaza/*Tipasa*, however, was counted as cognate despite the current name dating to the colonial period, since the precolonial name Tefessad (Shaw 1758, p. 44) was plausibly inspired by the Latin name (hybridised with the Arabic root *fsd* ‘spoil’). This made it possible to create a map of toponymic continuity in North Africa using R (R Core Team, 2022) and the R libraries *sf* (Pebesma, 2018) and *ggplot2* (Wickham, 2016), as seen in Figure 1.

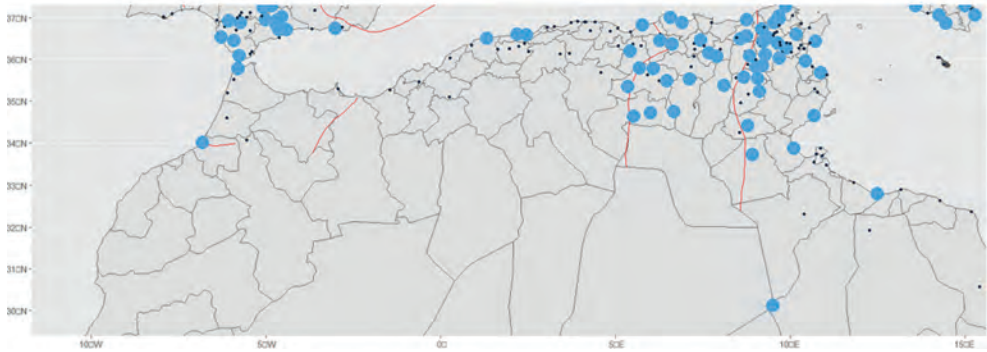


Figure 1. Cities or legionary fortresses whose Latin names are (blue) or are not (black) cognate to their modern names. Towns and other smaller sites are *excluded* in this figure; for those, see the larger scale maps further on

It is obvious by inspection that cities west of 5.1° E much less frequently use cognates to their former Latin names than ones east of 5.1° E. This observation can be quantified: within this sample, as seen in Table 1, 43% of the names east of 5.1° E (5/33) are cognate with their Latin counterparts, whereas only 15% of those west of that latitude are. If we were to suppose that the probability of retaining a cognate name is equal in both areas, then the chances of observing such a distribution would be less than 1 in 250, as calculated using Fisher’s exact *t*-test. (For comparison, the usual threshold of statistical significance is only 1 in 20.) We may thus safely conclude that location – and in particular, latitude – does indeed make a major difference to the chances of a Roman-era place name being retained into the modern period.

	cognate with Latin name	not cognate
west of 5.1° E	5	28
east of 5.1° E	49	66

Table 1

However, the nature of this difference simply does not correspond to the prior expectations outlined in the introduction – as the massive concentration of cognate town names in the largely Arabic-speaking northeast might already suggest. To see this more clearly, let us examine two areas formerly ruled by Rome which still maintain large Berber-speaking populations today: the Kabyle and Chaoui regions of Algeria.¹

§ 2.1. *Across Berber-speaking regions*

§ 2.1.1. *In Kabyle*

The most populous Berber-speaking region in Algeria is Kabylie east of Algiers, centered today on Tizi-Ouzou and Bejaia. As seen above, Kabyle seems to have largely resisted the homogenising influence of the Zenati expansion, as well as the shift to Arabic in later centuries; one might therefore expect Kabyle-speaking regions to display a particularly high frequency of toponyms retained from the Classical era. The reality is far otherwise, as seen in Figure 2.

Åhlfeldt records at least 14 Roman-era town names within the area where Kabyle in a broad sense is currently spoken, including smaller Roman-era settlements. Out of these, only one bears a name cognate with its Roman-era name: Kefrida, from Latin *Aqua Frigida*, in the extreme east. It is, of course, likely that Kabyle was also spoken further west before the Arabization of Algiers; the nearly extinct dialect of the Beni Salah near Blida forms a language island clearly grouping with Kabyle (El Arifi 2016, Souag 2017). If the sample is extended west just beyond Algiers to allow for this, the number of attested Roman-era town names nearly doubles to 25, but no more Roman toponymic retentions appear.

1. In these regions, smaller settlements excluded from the map above will also be examined, as long as their current and ancient names are recorded.