

The worship of the goddess Tanit in the Makhlyes and Auses tribes, and its reflexion on the practice of the gladiatorial games in the Antic Maghreb

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ملخص

انتشرت في القرن الخامس قبل الميلاد مظاهر اجتماعية بين قبيلتين ليبيتين مستقرتين حول بحيرة تريتونيس، امتزجت فيها التسلية بطقوس دينية ورد ذكرها عند المؤرخ اليوناني هيرودوت. وكان أبطال هذه الطقوس الدينية الدموية التي كُرمت فيها الربة الليبية تانيت هنّ نسوة قبيلتي المخلّيس والأوسيس. ففي الوقت الذي كان سكان مدن وأرياف مقاطعات المغرب القديم يتهافتون على حضور فعاليات سباق العربات والمسرح وألعاب الصيد في ميادين المصارعة الرومانية، عمل سكان مقاطعة إفريقيا البروقنصلية على إحياء ألعاب المصارعة الرومانية. وصرفوا أموالاً طائلة على بناء ميادين المصارعة وإنجاز لوحات الفسيفساء المكلفة التي تدور مواضيعها حول هذه الألعاب العنيفة. ويعني هذا أن سكان هذه المقاطعة كانوا على استعداد لتقبل هذه الألعاب الدموية لوجود سابقة لهذا العنف.

الكلمات المفتاحية

تانيت؛ المخلّيس؛ الأوسيس؛ إفريقيا البروقنصلية؛ بحيرة تريتونيس.

Abstract

The practice of some Libyan tribes of bloody religious diets led to the liability of practicing the gladiatorial games by people of South Tunisia and North West Libya, which the ancient Maghrebians used to watch in the Empire age. Here, I will try to oppose/approve the relation, which marked such religious acts in the 5th century BC.

Keywords

Makhlyes; Auses; Tritonis Lake; Goddess Tanit; Proconsular Africa.

The cult of Tanit in Tripolitania region

During the 5th century BC. there began to occur social habits among parts of Libyan tribes where the amusing mixed with the religious, such was mentioned Herodotus as practiced by the women of the tribes Makhlyes and Auses which were two tribes living around the Tritonis Lake and separated by the Triton River. Herodotus says on the two tribes « The Makhlyes have their hair long in the head back while the Auses have their long in the front. They held an annual festival for Athena during which their virgins fight in two teams with stones for

the sake of the goddess according to a local tradition. The victims of such fight were regarded as non-virgins, and they used to choose the most beautiful girls to join such a game. The girls wore a Corinthian helmet and several African war gears and then rode a vehicle that roams the entire coast of the lake¹.

It seemed that the goddess whom they worshipped was not Athena, but the Libyan Tanit (*fig. 1*) who was a warrior and was also worshipped in Egypt where the inhabitants of Saïs city called her Neith (*fig. 2*), and she was known as the Libyan goddess in Egyptian inscriptions or written sources².

Some scholars originated this goddess to Carthage³ while others considered her a Phoenician related to the god Baal and the goddess Ishtar⁴.

However, according to Herodotus's text, it is the local origins of Tanit whom the Libyans worshipped during the pre-historical age, while the Phoenicians worshipped her as similar to their Ishtar and Anat⁵.

The Cult of Tanit covered the west of the Mediterranean Sea thanks to the Phoenician commerce. The Phoenicians simplified her body and features in a triangular form with a circular head⁶. The goddess was the symbol of fertility and corn in Sicily⁷, and after the Roman conquest of the Antic Maghreb, she was resembled by the Caelestis the goddess of nature and rain⁸.

The Roman politicians seemed to have known the importance of this goddess for the Antic Maghreb. Therefore, the Emperor Septimius Severus enlarged her cult in Rome⁹ and the Emperor Elagabal made her wife to god Baal¹⁰. Due to the importance of gladiatorial shows (*munera gladiatoria*) for the Romans and its relation with the formal religion in Rome, the gladiatorial games held in Libya and Tunisia, and the inhabitants of this geographic are welcomed such games heavily as they were influenced by the religious rites mentioned in the 4th book of Herodotus. The Roman gladiatorial games were held on religious occasions

¹ Hérodote, IV, 180.

² Hérodote, II, 28.

³ Lancel (serge), *Carthage*, Tunis: Cérès Edition, 2000, p 277.

⁴ Briand-Ponsart (C.) et Hugoniot (Ch.), *L'Afrique romaine de l'Atlantique à la Tripolitaine 146 av. J.-C. – 533 ap. J.-C.*, Paris : Armand Colin, 2005, p 161.

⁵ Lancel (S.), *Op.cit.*, pp 276-278.

⁶ Blas de Roblès (J.-M.), *Libye : grecque, romaine et byzantine*, Aix en Provence : Edisud, 1999, p 27; p 59.

⁷ See Philibert (M.), « Déméter », *Dictionnaire des Mythologies*, Sarthe: Brodard et Taupin, 2002, pp 66-67.

⁸ Briand-Ponsart (C.) et Hugoniot (Ch.), *Op.cit.*, p 161.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p 162.

¹⁰ Hérodien, *Histoire des empereurs romains de Marc Aurèle à Gordien III*, V, 6, 4-5.

that were linked to the glorification of the Roman gods, including the goddess Tanit¹¹.

The heavy expenses of these games which were held according to programmes related to religious festivals and Emperor Worship were not available to many cities of the Antic Maghreb. Gladiatorial games was limited to fishing because the environment of Antic Maghreb was available on different types of animals and in large numbers made Herodotus in the fifth century BC¹². His shows was confined to the region of the Tripolitania under the influence of Makhlyes and Auses (*fig. 3*).



Fig. 1: The symbole of Tanit
Blas de Roblès (J.-M.), *Libye : Grecque, romaine et byzantine*, p59.

¹¹ Boissier (G.), « Les jeux séculaires d'Auguste », *Revue des deux mondes*, 1^{er} mars 1892, pp 75-95 ; Ville (G.), « Les jeux de gladiateurs dans l'empire chrétien », *MEFRA*, 72, 1960, pp 273-274; Wiseman (T.-P.), « The games of Flora », in *The Art of Ancient Spectacle*, Edited by Bettina Bergmann and Christine Kondoleon, National Gallery of Art : Washington, D.C, 1999, p 195; Veyne (P.), *Le pain et le cirque. Sociologie historique d'un pluralisme politique*, Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1976, pp 560-572.

¹² Hérodote, IV, 174 ; 181.

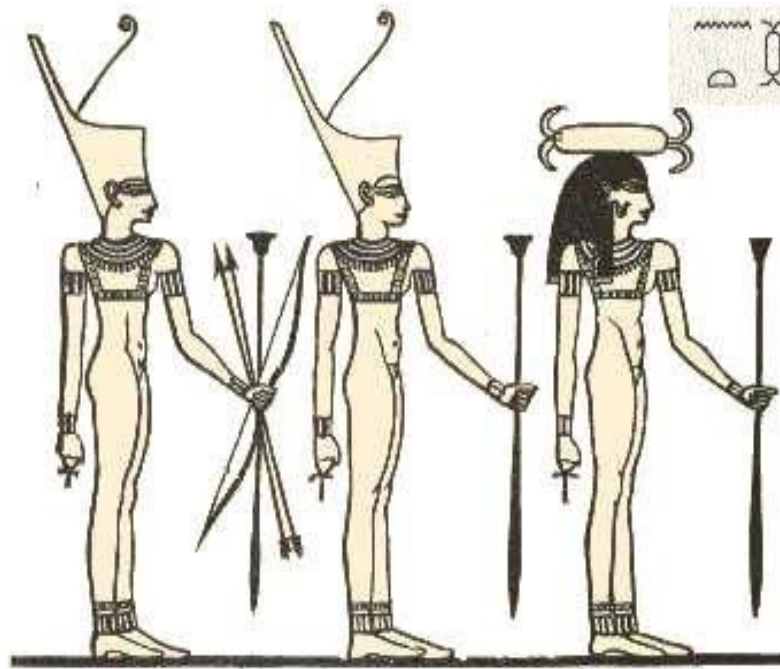


Fig. 2: The Libyan goddess of Sais: Neith
<https://mythologica.fr/egypte/neith.htm>

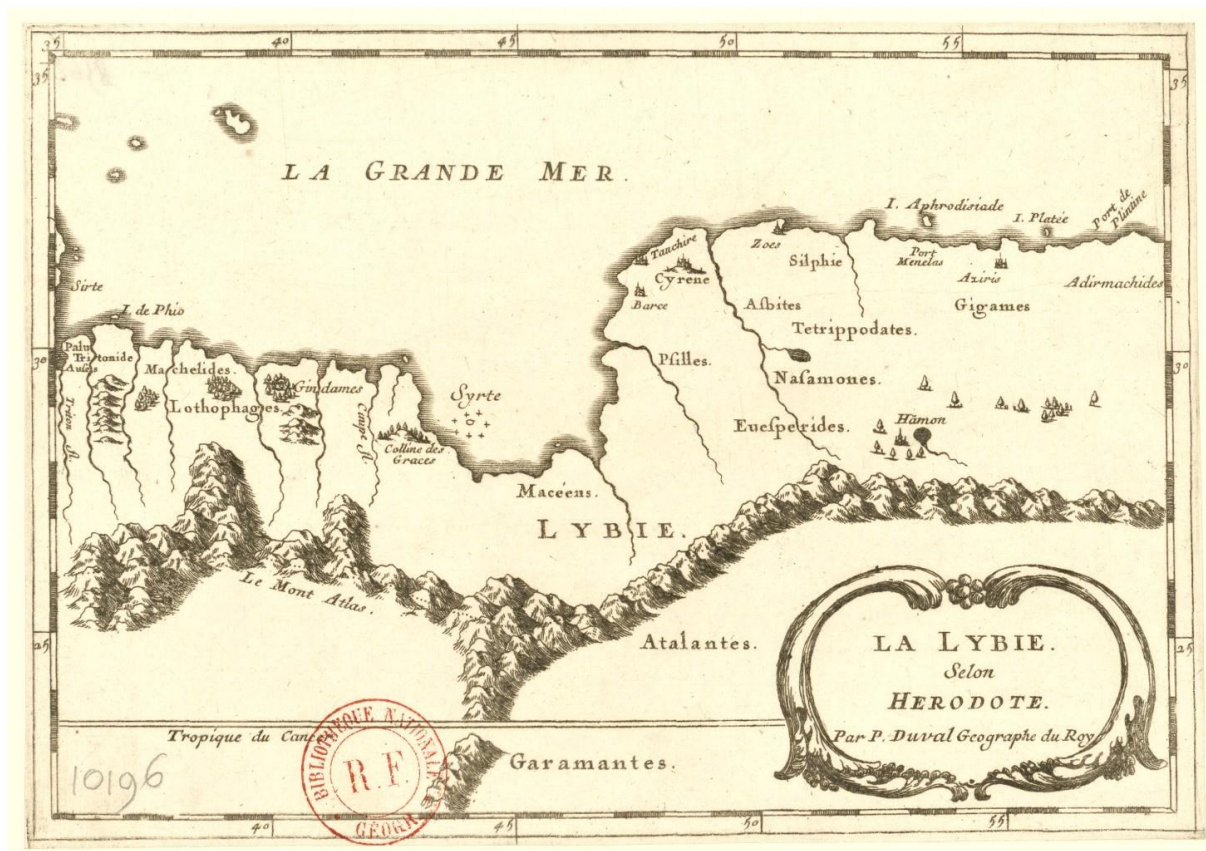


Fig. 3: Libya according to the writings of Herodotus by P. Duval
Gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Gladiatorial mosaics in Proconsular Africa

This study is based on a group of mosaics, which show information about these games which are much more in the east of the Antic Maghreb than westward. Such artistic elements are regarded as a true representation of Roman games in the Antic Maghreb¹³.

There are two plates of mosaic discovered near Leptis in Libya which represented the games of gladiatorial heroes (fig. 4). It was discovered in a Roman house 30 km from Leptis. It dated back to the 1st or 2nd century, and is now in Tripoli museum in Libya and represents the scenes of the runway¹⁴. The plate was discovered in 1914 by an Italian archaeologist « Salvatore Aurigemma ». it supplies important information about gladiatorial shows as showing a smart lady using a pipe organ, a hydraulic one, and two men with a third using a Trumpet (a sort of pipe)¹⁵. The bearer of the killed near the group was employed by the follower of Mercurius¹⁶ as these masked men were going with the killed and wounded to a spoliarium through the doors of the barrier known by the name of ceremonial goddess Libitina¹⁷.

The trainer used often to order the god's followers to get rid of the wounded who became unable to practice gladiatorial games¹⁸. The last word about the destiny of the conquered gladiator was that of the audience that used their fingers up if they wished to keep him alive, and down if they invited the victorious to kill miserable loser¹⁹.

The plate shows on one side the keeping of the trainer to Samnite waiting for the judgment, while appears a wound of the secutor to his opponent Retiarius, and the other side of the plate there is Traex facing Hoplomachus and another with his spear, and a fight of two swords of the fighters, while Murmillio conquered waiting for mercy, and some gladiators getting ready to fight²⁰.

¹³ بن علال رضا، الألعاب في المغرب القديم أثناء الاحتلال الروماني، أطروحة دكتوراه في التاريخ القديم، قسم التاريخ، كلية العلوم الإنسانية والاجتماعية، جامعة الجزائر 2، 2012، ص 57.

¹⁴ Picard (G.-Ch.), *La civilisation de l'Afrique Romaine*, Paris: Plon, 1959, p 264; Cagiano de Azevedo (M.), « La data dei mosaici di Zliten », *Latomus*, LVIII, Hommages à Albert Grenier, 1962, pp 374-380 ; Foucher (L.), « Sur les mosaïques de Zliten », *Libya Antiqua*, 1, 1964, pp 9-24; Polidori (R.) et autres, *La Libye antique, cités perdues de l'empire romain*, Paris : Editions Mengès, 1998, pp 83 et 86.

¹⁵ Aurigemma (S.), *I mosaici di Zliten*, Roma-Milano: Società Editrice d'Arte Illustrata, 1926, pp 152-154.

¹⁶ Philibert (M.), *Op.cit.*, p 183.

¹⁷ Bernet (A.), *Les Gladiateurs*, Paris: Perrin, 2002, p 143; pp 212-214.

¹⁸ Ville (G.), *La Gladiature en occident des origines à la mort de Domitien*, Rome, 1981, p 378.

¹⁹ Bernet (A.), *Op.cit.*, p 59 ; p 207.

²⁰ Polidori (R.) et autres, *Op.cit.*, p 86.

The mosaic of games represents successive views beginning by a fight among two couples of Gladiators and ending by a fight among a group of them. The two games were separated by throwing the perfumed water on the audience²¹.

The other plate (*fig. 5*) dated back to the 3rd century and was discovered in the house of an elite from Leptis, and is now in the local museum. It represents a sword holder looking at his killed rival²².

Gladiatorial games in the Proconsular Africa

According to their Latin sources, gladiatorial games dated back to the end of the 6th century B.C. it began on the tombs of the elite in the South of Italy and Campania and then to Rome and other Italian cities²³. It was thought that the dead was fed on the blood of gladiators when scattered on the tomb²⁴.

The year 264 BC is regarded as the official date of the practice of gladiatorial games in Rome, when Brutus Pera's sons honoured the memory of their dead father by a gladiatorial show among a group of captives of the first Punic war who fought each other in the city forum²⁵. And such a habit went on according to Titus Livius throughout the last three centuries BC²⁶.

The Romans promoted bloody wrestling by providing new locations instead of tombs. This work indicates the ascendancy of wrestling from a religious custom to organized performances, which prompted the political class to think about building buildings that could host the events of these competitions²⁷.

The province of Africa supplied more than half of the gladiatorial shows places discovered in the Antic Maghreb; they were more than thirty of which twenty-six in Tunisia and the others in Theveste and the Tripolitania²⁸. The Romans inhabiting there after the fall of Carthage in 146 B.C. widened the gladiatorial games among the inhabitants of the province of Africa.

The African architects were able to control the building of games which has no equal but only the Colosseum in Rome. The Carthagians were able to build

²¹ Bernet (A.), *Op.cit.*, p 225.

²² *GEO*, 312, février 2005, p 69.

²³ Futrell (A.), *Blood in the Arena: the spectacle of Roman Power*, Second paperback printing, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001, pp11-24.

²⁴ Bernet (A.), *Op.cit.*, pp 17-18.

²⁵ Valère Maxime, *Faits et dits mémorables*, II, 4, 7.

²⁶ Tite Live, *Histoire Romaine*, XXIII, 30, 15 ; XIII, 50, 4 ; XXXIX, 46, 2-3 ; XLI, 28, 11.

²⁷ Golvin (J.-C.), « l'Amphithéâtre romain », *Dossiers d'Archéologie*, 45, Juillet-Aout 1980, p 7.

²⁸ Kolendo (J.), « La description des amphithéâtres de la Tunisie dans les récits des voyageurs », *KTEMA*, 17, 1992, p 78.

the amphitheatre in 29 BC. under Octavius, while it was repeated in Leptis and El Djem during the first century AD²⁹.

Architects built the amphitheatre of Carthage west Byrsa through three stages, from Octavius reign to the 3rd century AD³⁰.

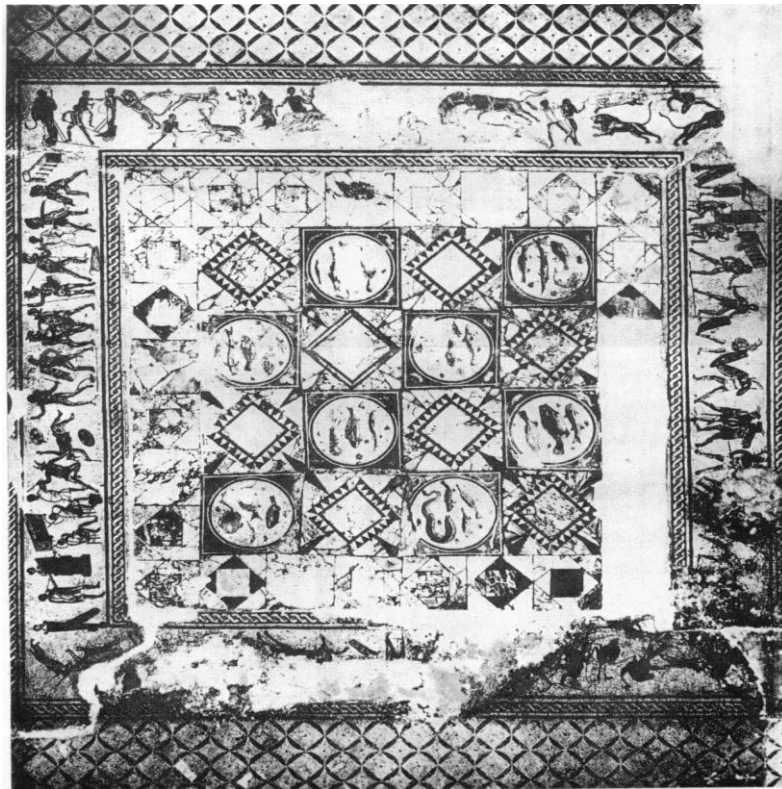


Fig. 4: The gladiatorial shows
Museum of Tripoli (Libya)
Aurigemma (S.), I mosaici di Zliten, pp 135-136.

²⁹ Lachaux (J.-C.), *Théâtres et amphithéâtres d'Afrique proconsulaire*, Aix-en-Provence: Edisud, 1981, p 57.

³⁰ Hugoniot (Ch.), *Les spectacles de l'Afrique Romaine. Une culture officielle municipale sous l'empire romain*, Lille: Atelier national de reproduction des thèses, 1996, 3 volumes, T.1, Op.cit., p 71.



Fig. 5: Mosaic from Leptis (3rd century)
Museum of Lebda (Libya)
Photograph: Fatma Salem El Aguili,
Benghazi (Libya)

In the 11th century, El Bekry admired the amphitheatre describing it as then most marvellous in Carthage, the walls of the building were decorated by paintings and views of daily life³¹.

El Idrissi described the building in the 12th century saying that it consisted of 50 arches above a group of columns and five stages of arches, built in solid stones³².

It seemed that the architects prepared the architecture to receive 36000 spectators. It was the first of the Antic Maghreb of 150 x 178 m³³. The seats were not discovered but there were certain set aside for the elite and the rulers. The effects of drilled in the lower wall of the ring show the use of the latter as a cavity to receive columns were aimed at carrying nets to ensure viewers of animals³⁴.

³¹ أبي عبيد البكري، المغرب في ذكر بلاد إفريقية والمغرب (جزء من كتاب المسالك والممالك)، القاهرة: دار الكتاب الإسلامي، ب ت، ص 43.

³² صفر أحمد، مدينة المغرب القديم في التاريخ، تونس: دار النشر بوسلامة، 1959، الجزء الأول، ص 346.

³³ Hugoniot (Ch.), « Les noms d'aristocrates et de notables gravés sur les gradins de l'amphithéâtre de Carthage au bas-empire », *Antiquités Africaines*, 40-41, 2004-2005, pp 205-258.

³⁴ Lachaux (J.-C.), *Op.cit.*, p 56.

The architecture of Carthage was employed to execute those who refused the official Roman religion, and among them a great number of Christians especially in 203 B.C. who were killed by being thrown to wild animals³⁵.

The city of El Djem seemed to have been equipped with one of the greatest ten amphitheatres in the Roman world (fig. 6). It was built in a plain and was able to receive more than 30000 spectators. It was 122 x 143 m³⁶.

This amphitheatre had three stages of arches built on half-columns. Sticking to semi-columns was inspired by multiple architectural styles. There is no presence in the present day of the upper wall of the building, and it seems that the builders did not complete the completion of the building of this great edifice for unknown reasons. After the end of the construction of the foundations of the construction, the architects build the facade of the building that was carrying the viewers platforms. The craftsmen cut the stones into the domes before lifting them up to their positions along the layers that were wrapped around the runway³⁷. The building seemed to have places under the stage set aside for the wild animals, and there were two passages which led from the amphitheatre to other limits and were used to bring the animals into under the building. There was only a system for getting rid of rain water into certain places where stored and used in water games. Gladiators used the gate of victories which faced another one used in removing the dead bodies of conquered and killed gladiators³⁸.

The inhabitants of El Djem built another amphitheatre smaller than the first at 700 m distance only from the amphitheatre one. It was 84 x 116 m³⁹ and was regarded among the greatest amphitheatres of the Antic Maghreb as well. As for Leptis, it flourished thanks to Severus Dynasty who made its economic and cultural progress. It had an amphitheatre build in 56 AD. on an area of 80 x 100 m and with the capacity of 15000 spectators⁴⁰.

³⁵ Ibid., pp 56-57.

³⁶ Bomgardner (D.-L.), « The Carthage Amphitheater: A Reappraisal », *American Journal of Archaeology*, 93, 1, January 1989, pp 85-103; Fevrier (P.-A), « Les Chrétiens dans l'arène », *Spectacula I. Gladiateurs et amphithéâtres*, Actes du colloque tenue à Toulouse et Lattes les 26-29 Mai 1987, Lattes, 1990, p266; Salisbury (Joyce E.), *Perpetua's Passion. The death and memory of a young Roman women*, New York: Routledge, 1997, pp135-148.

³⁷ Slim (H.), « Les facteurs de l'épanouissement économique de Thysdrus », *Cahiers de Tunisie*, 31, 3^e trimestre 1960, pp 51-56; Laronde (A.) et Golvin (J.-C.), *l'Afrique antique : histoire et monuments. Libye, Tunisie, Algérie, Maroc*, Paris: Thallandier, 2001, p 109; Golvin (J.-C.) et Autres, *Pérégrinations dans l'empire Romain de Bliesbruck-Reinheim à Rome avec Jean-Claude Golvin, peintre de l'antiquité*, Arles: Actes Sud, 2010, p 41.

³⁸ Lachaux (J.C.), *Op.cit.*, pp 137-141.

³⁹ Thuillier (J.-P.), *Le sport dans la Rome antique*, Paris : Errance, 1996, pp 141-142.

⁴⁰ Blas de Roblès (J.-M.), *Op.cit.*, p85.



Fig. 6: The amphitheatre of Thydrus (El Djem)
<http://www.mestir.net/t616-el-jem>

Gladiatorial games, a food of the dead

The 23rd part of Homer's *Iliad* glorifies the games of Achilles on the honour of Patrocles whom the Trojans killed. This is the best proof of the relation between the games and the ancient Greek religion. Achilles had slain 12 children from the sons of Trojan notables above the dead body of Patrocles before burning it⁴¹.

The most ancient mention of Etruscan practice of games is Herodotus on Alalia battle (535 BC.) in which the navy of the Etruscan city Caere allied with Carthage faced the Ionic navy which tried to imperialise Corsica Island. The Ionic navy was defeated and the Caereans were executed, and to repent of killing the Greek captives, the fortune teller of Apollo Temple in Delph ordered the Caereans to sacrifice for the souls of the Greeks and organise sporting games⁴² – among those games there was paints dating back to the 6th century B.C. a gladiatorial games between a wild dog and a gladiators bare and catching a stick with a head covered by a mask to prevent him from seeing⁴³.

The people of South Italy thought that the dead were nourished by the blood of gladiators which fall upon the tombs before building special places for games after and they believed that blood provided the dead with force⁴⁴.

⁴¹ Homère, *Iliade*, XXIII, vers 249-897.

⁴² Hérodote, I, 166-167.

⁴³ Thuillier (J.-P.), *Op.cit.*, pp 23-24.

⁴⁴ Bernet (A.), *Op.cit.*, pp 17-18.

The story of Valerius Maximus that the sons of Brutus Pera honored the memory of their parents by organizing gladiatorial shows, and their involvement with a group of Punic fighters from the first Punic War prisoners in the city forum, is proof of the close relationship between this bloody sport And the official religion of the Roman state⁴⁵. Titus Livius states that these rituals associated with the honoring of the Roman aristocracy were continued during the second century BC⁴⁶.

Tertullian said that the gladiatorial games were associated with the pagan Roman thought and the Romans began to sacrifice the war captives and some slaves by slaughtering them on the tombs of relatives to feed them, and afterwards they began to replace these habits by the gladiatorial games⁴⁷.

Others, as Maurus Servius Honoratus, say that the dead were desirous of milk and human blood, and so the Romans encouraged their own wives to wound their faces in order to supply blood to soften the gods of hell, and encourage the human sacrifice as well before they compensated by gladiatorial on the graves of the dead⁴⁸.

Conclusion

While the inhabitants of the urban and rural districts of the Antic Maghreb were much careful to attend the hunting games in amphitheatres, the inhabitants of proconsular Africa were careful to watch the Roman gladiatorial games and spent much money to build the amphitheatres and mosaic plates for such bloody games. Such a violent behaviour came down from the religious practice of the Makhlyes and Auses tribes to honour the Libyan goddess Tanit.

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⁴⁵ Valère maxime, *Faits et dits mémorables*, livre II, IV, 7.

⁴⁶ Tite Live, *Histoire romaine*, XXIII, 30, 15; XIII, 50, 4; XXXIX, 46, 2-3; XLI, 28, 11.

⁴⁷ Tertullien, *Contre les spectacles*, XII.

⁴⁸ See بن علال رضا، المرجع السابق، ص ص 75-77.

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