

*The Continuity of Libyan and Punic Languages in the Ancient Maghreb
(In the Light of the Expansion of Latin 146 BC-40 AD)*

Bougoffa Nour Essadate^{1,*} , Pr. OULMI Rabie² 

¹University of Batna 1, Batna, (Algeria),
noursadate.bougoffa@univ-batna.dz

²University of Batna 1, Batna, (Algeria),
rabie.oulmi@univ-batna.dz

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Abstract :

During the Roman occupation era, the ancient Maghreb witnessed the spread and domination of Latin due to receiving political and legal support, which led to the decline of Libyan, the original language of the ancient Maghreb society, and Punic, the language of Carthage. Despite this, these two languages were able to persist in the Maghreb social environment until the fifth century to the sixth century AD, as mentioned in some literary and epigraphic sources.

Key words: language, Libyan, Punic, Latin, continuity indicators, ancient Maghreb, Roman occupation.

Résumé:

Durant l'occupation romaine, l'ancien Maghreb a été témoin de la propagation et de la domination du latin grâce au soutien politique et juridique reçu, ce qui a conduit au déclin du libyen, la langue d'origine de la société du Maghreb antique, et du punique, la langue de Carthage. Malgré cela, ces deux langues ont pu persister dans l'environnement social maghrébin jusqu'au Ve-VIe siècle après J.-C., comme le mentionnent certaines sources littéraires et épigraphiques.

Mots clés: langue, libyen, punique, latin, indicateurs de continuité, Maghreb ancien, occupation romaine.

*Corresponding Author:

Introduction:

Before the Roman occupation, the ancient Maghreb region knew bilingualism representing in Libyan, the original language of the ancient Maghreb society, and Punic, the language of Carthage, which represented language of science, trade and politics. However, the data had changed when the region submitted to the Romans, who imposed a policy through which Latin became the official language in various provinces of ancient Maghreb under the Roman control. Both languages retreated in the light of this change, so it thought to be extinct from the Maghreb linguistic field, but readers of historical and epigraphic sources find references of their continued circulation among the members of the ancient Maghreb society, who preserved their cultural and civilized values under the Roman occupation.

From this starting point, this study raises a crucial problem: What are the historical and epigraphic evidences and indicators of the continuity of the use of the Libyan and Punic languages during the Roman occupation era?

Study objectives:

I can identify the objectives required from studying this theme, and summarize them as follows:

- 1- Defining the three languages (Latin, Libyan and Punic) that were known to the linguistic reality of the ancient Maghreb during the Roman era.
- 2- Highlighting the factors that contributed in the spread of Latin, its expansion, and its dominance over the linguistic field of the ancient Maghreb.
- 3- Providing historical and epigraphic indicators that prove the continuity of the Libyan and Punic languages during the period of Roman occupation.

I studied this theme according to the following plan:

- Introduction

- 1- The spread of Latin in ancient Maghreb regions during the Roman era.

- 1/ The Latin language.

- 2/ Factors contribute in the spread of Latin.

- 3/ Testimony of the spread of Latin.

- 2- The Libyan language and indicators of its continuity during the period of the Roman occupation.

- 1/ The Libyan language

- 2/ Indicators of the continuity of the Libyan language

- 3- The Punic language and indicators of its continuity during the period of the Roman occupation.

- 1/ The Punic language:

- 2/ Indicators of the continuity of the Punic (Neoponian) language

- Conclusion

1- The spread of Latin in ancient Maghreb during the Roman epoch:

The ancient Maghreb region witnessed a wide spread of Latin after being subjected to Roman occupation. So what is Latin? What are the factors that contributed in its spread, and what is its impact on the Maghreb region?.

1\ Latin language:

Latin is the Roman community language, which was named after the region of Latium (Hebou, 1984, p. 106), where this community lived and where Rome originated. It belongs to the Indo-European languages family (Bashary, 2013, p. 18). After Rome expanded to the Italian Peninsula, Latin became dominant in the linguistic field of the Italian peoples (Hebou, 1984, p.106). In the first century BC, it reached the peak of its prosperity as a result of the expansion of the geographical area of the Roman Empire beyond the borders of Italy (Hebou, 1984, p. 106), which included areas from Europe, Western Asia, and North Africa, where it became the official language in most of its provinces, especially the western ones (Hebou, 1984, p. 106).

In its early beginnings, this language was merely a poor language in terms of terminology, and was limited to agricultural and military activities only. This provoked the Romans to adopt the idea of verbal borrowing from languages of the societies that were subjected to them, most notably the Greeks and Etruscans (Bashari, 2013, p. 18).

The cultural and civilizational influences of Greek society began to impose themselves on the culture of Roman society, especially at the end of the Third century BC (Steptshevich, 1993, p. 65). Accordingly, various hypotheses put forward about the origin of the Latin alphabet, some of which assume that it was derived from the Greek language and others from the Etruscan language. In this regard, Theodor Mommsen stated that the Romans borrowed their alphabet from the Greeks and then made modifications on it over time (Mommsen, 1863, p. 287-289). Other studies indicate that the Romans adopted the Etruscan alphabet, and borrowed letters which they lacked from the Greek writing that was widespread in southern Italy and Sicily in about 800 BC (Hebou, 1984, p. 106). Therefore, it can be indicated that the Latin alphabet was derived from the Greek letters and was influenced by the Etruscan, meaning that it is a form of Etruscan writing, and its alphabet consists of twenty-three (23) letters (Salhi & Mansouri, 2023, p. 45).

Accordingly, Latin witnessed an evolutionary movement, divided into three categories: Old Latin, which prevailed from the third century BC until the death of Marius; Classical Latin, which extended from the time of Sulla until the death of Augustus; and Post-Classical Latin, which spread during the end of the second century AD. After this century, Late Latin appeared (Collart, 1970, p. 6).

2/ Factors behind the spread of Latin in ancient Maghreb:

After the ancient Maghreb region had been subjected to Roman occupation, it worked to consolidate its direct presence in the region (Derect & Fantar, 1991, p. 124, 142), however; at the beginning of the first century AD, the influence of Roman culture was little on the ancient Maghreb culture (Saadan, 2020-2021, p. 75). Accordingly, the Roman Empire sought to focus on the issue of imposing its civilizational values on its provinces in ancient Maghreb (El-Nadouri, 1981, p. 341), adopting a policy known as the Romanization policy. This policy affected various fields, especially the linguistic field, by making Latin an official language in various civil, military, educational and public administrative establishments (El-Mashrafi, 1969, p. 98), and in all cities of ancient Maghreb, and it went beyond trying to impose it on rural and even tribal societies (Laraoui, 1928, p. 6).

A number of factors interacted with each other and contributed in the spread of Latin in ancient Maghreb, especially in areas of influence of the Roman occupation. I summarize some of them as follows:

- 1) Latin received political, legal and administrative support, and accordingly it became the language of courts, municipal deliberations, correspondence, official conversations, councils, decisions, decrees, memoranda and agreements (Albertini, 1927, p. 48) and the Roman administration contributed to this by applying Roman laws (Charen & al., 2007, p. 263).
- 2) Opening the way for advancement in the social hierarchical class ladder, by obtaining the right to Roman or Latin citizenship, which allows individuals in ancient Maghreb society to leave the circle of the defeated and find solutions to their social and economic problems. It targeted the aristocratic classes and notables (Chaniti, 1985, p. 84-95), and set a number of conditions for that (Rahmani, (2009), p. 306), including adopting the three-part name (Tria Nomana) stipulated in the Civil Status Law, and wearing the toga as a symbol of Roman citizenship (Agoun, 2008, p. 273).
- 3) The spread of the Roman educational system, as the Roman state approved a set of measures for this, such as granting privileges and tax exemptions to facilitate the opening of educational schools (Agoun, 1912, p. 270) to encourage individuals in ancient Maghreb society receive education to be more enlightened and more easily submissive and dependent (Agoun, 1912, p. 270). It also left its supervision to the municipalities and city notables

(Julien, 1983, p.248) and opened this up to individuals who interacted with the Romans and various administrative (Charen & al., 2007, p. 263) and military establishments from city residents and some rural people from educated people, workers and recruits to learn Latin in order to obtain jobs, material and scientific benefits (Dabouz, 2010, p.344).

4) Military service, which played an effective role in the spread of this language among the recruits of ancient Maghreb as it was imposed (Charen & al., 2007, p.269) in the Roman army, since the military service duration was between twenty (20) and twenty five (25) years (Bousaha, 2021, p. 897-898; Mowas, 2021, p.44).

5) Cultural and social amenities, as public places where there is interaction among different members of society, such as theatres, amphitheatres, Circus, baths, schools, libraries, temples, markets, forums, etc (Dabouz, 2010, p. 344; Charen & al., 2007, p. 269).

6) Christianity, which contributed in the spread of Latin, as it was the only language recognized by the African Church in its religious rituals (Gsell, 1903, p.80). The Holy Books were translated into Latin for the first time in the Proconsulate (El-Mahjoubi, 2001, p.154), and with it emerged Latin Christian literature in the ancient Maghreb, so that this language became the language of the Christian religion in the west of the Roman Empire (El-Mahjoubi, 2001, p. 154; Monceaux, 1894, p. 102).

7) The emergence of educated, Romanized elites in ancient Maghreb, who realized that their interests were linked to Roman authority, so they learned Latin and adopted Roman lifestyles. Since the second century AD, Latin was one of the means by which those elites expressed the extent of their commitment to the values of Roman civilization (Tlili, 2000, p. 167).

3/ Evidence of the spread of Latin language:

The size of the Latin inscriptions discovered in the Maghreb shows the extent of the widespread use of the Latin language. Epigraphic studies have counted most of them in the northeastern part of the Maghreb region, where 50,000 Latin inscriptions were discovered. In the proconsulate at the Chemtou site, about 200 inscriptions were found, most of which represent tombstones for the simple and poor classes of society (El-Omari, 2020, p. 10-27). As for the eastern part of Numidia, 600 inscriptions were found (Picard, 2020, p. 296), including 460 pagan inscriptions in Tebessa (El-Omari, 2020, p. 10-27).

2- The Libyan language and indicators of its continuity during the Roman occupation:

In this section, I will introduce the Libyan language, and I will provide testimonies indicating its continuity during the Roman period, as follows:

1/ Libyan language:

Libyan language is the language of the ancient Libyan community (Basset, 1910, p.1), which inhabited the geographical region known as Libya or Luba. It extended from the Nile River in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west and from the Mediterranean Sea in the north to the land of the Ethiopians (Issaoui, 2009-2010, p.155; Agoun, 2021, p. 97-100; Herodotus, 2009, p. 25-69, 106; Strabon, 2017, p. 389-390) (the edges of the desert) in the south, in addition to the Canary Islands (El-Darawi, 2015, p. 673-686).

The historical roots of this language go back to the fifth millennium BC or to centuries before it (Agoun, 2008, p. 273), as Herodotus referred to it when he spoke about the ancient Libyans, and that they used to speak a language that differed from one tribe to another, but they understood each other (Issaoui, 2017, p. 65), and it was known by various names such as the Libyan language, Numidian, Berber, Libo-Berber, and ancient Berber (Bates, 1914, p. 85). The alphabet in which it was written is the Libyan alphabet (Bates, 1914, p. 85), or the Numidian alphabet according to Faidherbe (Faidherbe, 1870, p. 9-12).

2/ Indicators of the continuity of the Libyan language:

Despite the reality that the Maghreb region experienced under Roman policy, and the state of isolation that the Libyan language and writing experienced, there are many indicators showing its continuity during the Roman period (Agoun, 2008, p. 273), and I refer here to the testimonies of Saint Augustine, Corippus (Flavius Cresconius Corippus), and Fulgentius (Fabius Claudius Gordianus Fulgentius).

Saint Augustine said: **"In Africa, we define most of the barbarian tribes (barbaras gentes) with one language (in africa barbaras gentes in una lingua plurimas novimus)"** (Ghaki, 2013, p. 18), and there is no doubt that Augustine does not mean by this the Punicophone society, and the name of the barbarian tribes *Barbaras Gentes* does not carry a sarcastic meaning, but rather he means by it the Lybophone society, which lives far from the Roman cultural influence, or adheres to its cultural values (Lakhlif, 2016, p. 28).

To this testimony was added the testimony of the late Latin writer Corippus during the sixth century (Chaker, 2020, p. 3), who called it the Libyan language (Corippus, 1998, p. 82). Saint Fulgentius, Bishop of Rusby (Bates, 1914, p. 84, 86), wrote about it during the fifth or sixth century AD (Gsell, 2007, p. 88; Gsell, 1927, p. 94), where he mentioned that it had a special alphabet consisting of twenty-three letters (Gsell, 2007, p. 88; Gsell, 1927, p. 94). These are the best indicators of its continued use in writing and its circulation in the Maghreb social milieu throughout the Roman period, and up until the Vandals and Byzantine invasion of the Maghreb region.

On the other hand, the Libyan language witnessed change and development, as it was divided into three alphabets: the Eastern Libyan (*Massylii*), the Western (*Massaesylii*), and the Saharan Libyan (Chaker, 2020, p. 3; Galand, 1989, p. 80). The Eastern was widespread in northern Tunisia and northern Constantine up to the Sebous River in Annaba (Ghanem, 2012, p. 163, 166; Camp, 2010, p. 322), while the Western Libyan was widespread in the entire center and west of Algeria and Morocco (Ghanem, 2012, p. 163, 166). However, we cannot be certain about the precedence of the two previous alphabets over the Saharan alphabet (Chaker, 2020, p. 3), and it seems that it is older than the Eastern, and is also widespread in southern Tunisia and the Moroccan Atlas. Many inscriptions have been discovered in this alphabet (Ghaki, 2013, p. 10; Galand, 2018, p. 80).

It happened that the eastern and western Libyan alphabets became extinct - not the language - and the Saharan language developed into the Tifinagh alphabet (Chaker, 2020, p. 3), and Gabriel Camps also called it the old Tifinagh, because the Neo-Tifinagh is a development of that alphabet (Camps, 2010, p. 322), and this Tifinagh replaced the old Libyan alphabet (Ghaki, 2013, p. 10; Galand, 2018, p. 80), and all of it continued as a language of exchange among the members of the Maghreb society.

There are other indicators of the continuity of the Libyan language related to epigraphy, represented in the double Latin-Libyan and single Libyan inscriptions, which are widely spread in various Maghreb regions (Agoun, 2006, p.173; Charen & al., 2007, p. 260-261), and even in places close to and adjacent to the areas of Roman influence, and the regions that Augustine indicated that they spoke Punic, and in which the largest number of Libyan inscriptions were found in the Maghreb (Issaoui, 2017, p. 87-88). For example, the region of Sedrata and Tebessa in Numidia contained ten (10) single Libyan inscriptions and a double inscription, and Chafia in El Kala contained 134 single Libyan inscriptions and nine (9) double inscriptions (Harich, s.d., p. 80). Among the most famous and richest inscriptions discovered in Chafia is the double Kaf Beni Faraj inscription documented by Chabot (J.B.) in RIL and numbered 146 (Chabot, 1941, p. 38), where the Latin text contained eight (8) lines, and the Libyan contains four (4) vertical lines (Issaoui, 2017, p. 88-92), and it represents an elegy for one of the Maghreb people who had a military rank in the Roman army, and it is as follows in the Libyan text:

K T H U M S U L T
M S U H M N K D H
M S K R H Ç R M M H
M Z B H

In the Latin text:

Caius Iulius G(a)e(tu)lus, Vet(eran)us, donis donatis torquibus et armillis, dimissus et in civit(ate) sua Thullioflam(en) perpet(uus), vix(it) an(nis) LXXX, H(ic) s(itus) e(st).

The owner of this inscription has two names, one is Latin and the other is Libyan. The Latin name is: Caius Julius Gaetulus, while the Libyan name is: KTH U MSWLT (Katoh u Mswalt) (Chaker, 2020, p. 3), which means Katoh son of Mswalt, because (U) in Libyan indicates separation or relation.

As for the second double inscription discovered in Chafia, its Latin and Libyan texts consist of three (3) lines, and as for the Latin text, it is as follows:

- NABDHSEN. CO. IVZA
- NIS. F. TR. B. MISICTRI. VIX
- ANNIS. XX. H. S .E.

The Libyan text is written from bottom to top and read from left to right, and is as follows in Latin letters:

- NBDDSN
- UGH. N
- ÇRMMH

This inscription bears the name of a Libyan person known as: “Nabadsen u Gah” from the Misiciri tribe.

There are many inscriptions documented by Chabot (J. B.) (Chabot, 1941, p. 38, 39, 46, 48, 61), which are full of the names of Libyan flags and tribes (Issaoui, 2017, p. 88-92), whether single or double, which have equivalent names in Latin. This confirms the preservation of Libyan and foreign names in the Roman civil status system, and is evidence of the continued use of the Libyan language and writing during the Roman period (Chaker, 2020, p. 3).

So these are some indicators that showed that Libyan was a language used among the Maghreb social milieu, and its members tried to preserve their original culture, primarily the language, by speaking it and writing in it.

3- The Punic language indicators of its continuity during the period of Roman occupation:

In this section, I will study the Punic language and the most important evidence that shows its continued use during the Roman occupation, which is as follows:

2/ The Punic language:

This name came from the Roman word Poenus and Poenulus (Mazel, 1998, p. 169), which is a language that emerged from Phoenician (Ghanem, 2006, p. 149), and was spoken by the Carthaginian society and the regions subject to it. It contained some differences from Phoenician, which resulted from the cultural friction between the Libyans and the Phoenician merchants; especially after the foundation of Carthage in about 814 BC (Agoun, 2008, p. 205). So the society was called the (Libo-Phoenician society) Libyan Phoenician society (El-Mahjoub, 2012, p. 9-22). This name indicates the occurrence of intermarriage and acculturation relations between the Libyans and the Phoenicians (El-Mahjoub, 2013, p. 215, 230), which introduced modifications and changes to Phoenician and Libyan words infiltrated it (Gsell, 2007, p. 112; Gsell, 1927, p. 100), distancing it from its eastern character (Ghanem, 2012, p. 33). Then it was called the Punic language to distinguish it from Phoenician (Agoun, 2008, p. 205), so Gabriel Camps said that Carthage: “**...Was established on two opposing entities: the eastern commercial city and what resembles Libyan sovereignty and from the meeting of these two eastern entities and the Libyan language originated from the Punic reality...**”(Camps, 2010, p. 188-189). It was the official language in Carthage and its areas of influence starting from the sixth century BC until its fall in 146 BC (Ghanem, 2012, p. 41).

Then this language developed into what is known as the Neo-Punic language and writing (Agoun, 2008, p. 205), by epigraphy researchers. This development occurred gradually, starting with its overlap with Punic until it reached the Neo-Punic stage (Berthier & Charlier, 1955, p. 10). It appeared after the fall of Carthage (Ghanem, 2006, p. 149). Some

researchers, such as Stephane Gsell, considered this development to be the last stage of the deterioration of the Punic language and writing (Ghanem, 2012, p. 41; Gsell, 1927, p. 113).

2/ Indicators of the continuity of the Punic (Neo-Punic) language:

Researcher David Mattingly points out that at the beginning of their occupation of Tripoli in the Tripolitania region, the Romans relied primarily on Punic-speaking elites to manage the affairs of this city. There is no doubt that this procedure was in effect in the cities of other regions, especially the cities that surrendered to the Roman occupation. Accordingly, this Roman policy allowed the continuation of Punic for a period of time before Latin advanced and those elites were romanized (Mattingly, 2018, p. 72-74). Examples of this include the Severian family of Leptis Magna, headed by Septimus Severus, who ascended the throne of the Roman Empire (Gautier, 1952, p. 120).

Some historical indicators also show that this language continued to be spoken in some of the Maghreb countrysides (Qamich, 2016, p. 67) until the fifth (5) (Gautier, 1952, p. 129; Gsell, 1927, p. 498) and sixth (6) centuries AD (Gautier, 1952, p. 129; Gsell, 1927, p. 498), specifically in the countryside adjacent to Hippo Regius, where Roman administrative officials and Christian bishops used Punic translators to deal with the community of this countryside (El-Mili, s.d, p. 113), and even the Carthaginian countryside (Gautier, 1952, p. 129; Gsell, 1927, p. 498), and in the Tripolitania region (Center for Papyrological and Epigraphic Studies, 2013, p. 275-283).

Among the evidences indicating this is what Saint Augustine mentioned in some of his letters when he was bishop of the Hippocratic Church (Church of Hippo Regius), where he indicated in one of them, which he sent to Pope Celestine 422-432 AD, to a shortage of bishops who were fluent in the Punic language, because some members of the rural community neighboring Hippone did not master the Latin language (Albertini, 1927, p. 48). He indicated in it that he appointed Bishop Antoninus in the village of Fussala near Hippo Regius because of his ability to speak the Punic language (Lakhlif, 2016, p. 25-26).

In another letter sent to Bishop Crisbin of Calama, Augustine asked him to deliver sermons and speeches together to the community of the village of Mappalia, located in the Hippo Regius, with the help of Punic translators (Gautier, 1952, p. 124-125), and this is an indication that the community of this village spoke Punic and was ignorant of Latin.

In Sermon number 167 of Augustine, in which he was giving sermons, he mentioned that he knew a Punic proverb, and translated it for his listeners into Latin, indicating that not all of them understood Punic, as he said: **"The plague asks you for a coin; give it two and let it go!"** (Lakhlif, 2016, p. 26).

He also pointed out the adherence of the rural Hippone community to the Punic-Canaanite ethnic affiliation, through the letter he sent to Romanus, in which he said: **"If you ask our peasants about their affiliation, they will reply that they are Canaanites"** (Gautier, 1952, p. 128). Among the later testimonies dating back to the sixth century AD is the indication by the Byzantine historian Procopius that the rural Carthaginian community spoke Punic (Gautier, 1952, p. 129; Gsell, 1927, p. 498).

As for the Punic inscriptions, they are spread in the areas close to the places of Carthaginian cultural influence and decrease with distance from them (Saadan, 2020-2021, p. 70), from single Punic inscriptions (Albertini, 1927, p. 48) and double Punic Latin inscriptions (Charen & al., 2007, p. 264), which are votive and funerary inscriptions and gifts dedicated to some gods, including a Punic Latin inscription written on limestone in Latin letters and its content is Punic, discovered in Leptis Magna, and its content is (Papyrological and Epigraphic Studies Center, 2013, p. 275-283):

- (M) INSISTH (M) VFEL BARIGBAL TYPAFI LOBY-
- M VIYSTILA VLILI STIM IHIM YTHEM BYR YSOTH
- (LY) BY (TH) YM YS TYTH FEL BAI AEM BITHEM

Translation:

- (This) monument that Barkabal Tibava erected for his father
- and Stella and his wife and his brother and for himself. This grave
- for his family where it is - below - he erected it during his lifetime and at his own expense.

In addition to the double Neo-Latin inscription, discovered in 1882 AD at the Masculula archaeological site located in north-western Tunisia, the content of which is as follows (Chabot, 1918, p. 46):



Which means in Latin:

- Publius... son of Egrelus.
- He lived eighty-five years.

These are two examples of the many inscriptions that demonstrate the continuity of Punic during the Roman period.

The bottom line is that Punic, according to the testimonies of Augustine and Procopius and the discovered epigraph, continued to be a spoken language in some rural areas of the ancient Maghreb, during the Roman and Vandal periods until the Byzantine period.

Conclusion:

Through this study, I reached a number of results, which I mention below:

- 1- The Latin language went through an evolutionary path in line with the movement of expansion of the Roman occupation in the European and Mediterranean world, due to the movement of influence and impact, especially in Italy and Greece, and it knew three Latin's (ancient, classical and late).
- 2- Latin spread in ancient Maghreb during the period of Roman occupation due to imposing the policy of Romanization, and a group of factors interacted in this, such as receiving legal and political support, military service, cultural and social facilities, the Christian religion, and the emergence of educated, Romanized Maghreb elites.
- 3- The Libyan language is considered the original language of the Maghreb community, and it continued to be used during the period of the Roman occupation, as proven by historical sources such as: the testimonies of Saint Augustine, Corypus, Saint Fulgentius, and the Libyan mono- and dual-Latin Libyan epigraphs discovered in the Maghreb region.
- 4- Despite the Romanization policy, the Libyan language and writing, with its three divisions (eastern, western, and Saharan), witnessed continuity before the eastern and western Libyan alphabets disappeared, and the desert Libyan evolved into the Tifinagh alphabet, which replaced the old Libyan alphabet.
- 5- The Punic language was the result of the cultural friction between the Phoenicians and the Libyans, and then it developed after the fall of Carthage, which resulted in the Neo-Punic language. Written and epigraphic sources indicate its continuity during the period of Roman occupation, in certain areas in the ancient Maghreb, especially some of the Hipponian, Carthaginian and Tripolitanian countrysides.

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