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Military Sites from the First Defensive Line in the Province of Lambdia in the Southeastern Region of the Province of Caesarean Mauretania

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- **Abstract:**

Since the early stages of their presence in North Africa, the Romans pursued dominance over the region, as seen through literary sources, archaeological sites, and material remains, like Latin inscriptions. Caesarean Mauretania, a vast African province with numerous tribes opposed to foreign presence, became a central focus of Roman authority. To counter this resistance, the Romans implemented defensive lines known as *limes*, a series of structures aiding control over the province. Sites like Rapidum (now Sour Djawab) and Ozia (now Sour El-Ghozlane) initially served as military outposts within the southeastern defensive line, playing a significant military role. Over time, they transformed into social centers, with their strategic importance fostering a road network linking them to key urban and military hubs.

Keywords:
Sites; Archaeology; Defense; Military; Lambdia; Caesarean Mauretania.

Introduction

The successive civilizations that passed through the area of Médéa and its surroundings left behind a rich and diverse heritage of archaeological evidence. This includes tangible sites that shaped the historical image of the region, reflecting numerous historical periods. Among these sites are a series of ancient cities located in the Limbidia region, which formed part of the first line of defense in the southeastern part of the province of Mauretania Caesariensis. Notable among these are Rapidum at Sour El Ghozlane and Auzia at Sour Djebab, both of which were military fortifications from ancient times. These fixed camps were constructed by the Roman army to reinforce the Limes in Mauretania Caesariensis, later developing into surrounding residential cities whose ruins are still visible today.

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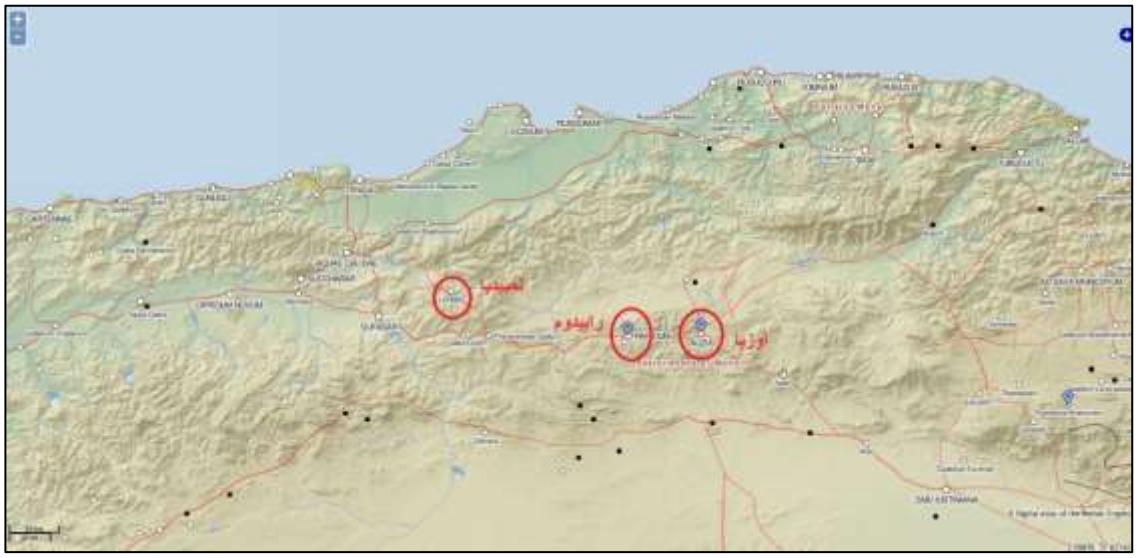
1. Military Sites from the First Line of Defense in the Limbidia Region

Limbidia and its geographical region are rich in archaeological remains, particularly Roman military monuments. These sites played a significant role in the ancient history of the region and are an essential part of the first line of defense in the area. Among these, we highlight Rapidum and Auzia (Fig.1).

Fig.1. Location of Military Camps in the First Line of Defense



Source: https://imperium.ahlfeldt.se/places/27051.html

1.1 Rapidum:

Rapidum is located 27 kilometers west of Auzia and 100 kilometers south of Icosium (present-day Algiers). Situated in the western plain of Beni Slimane, it is flanked by two rivers to the north and south and lies along an important military route connecting Auzia to the Chelif River. In the first and second centuries AD, it was one of the ancient camps at the borders of the province of Mauretania Caesariensis.[1]

This camp was built by the Romans in the Mauritanian Limes under Emperor Hadrian. The name "Rapidum" first appears in 122 AD with its establishment.[2] It housed important military garrisons,[3] including the Second Cohort of Sardinians (*Cohors Secunda Sardorum*),[4] which is believed to have

1- S. Gsell, *Ancient Monuments of Algeria*, Albert Fontemoing, Paris, 1901, p. 91.
2- Jean Pierre Laporte, Rapidum: The Camp of the Cohort of Sardinians in Mauretania Caesariensis, 1989, p. 13.
3- *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (CIL), Vol. VIII, nos. 9200, 9198 = 20829, 9202 = 20830, 9207, 9203.
4- Jean Pierre Laporte, op. cit., p. 13.

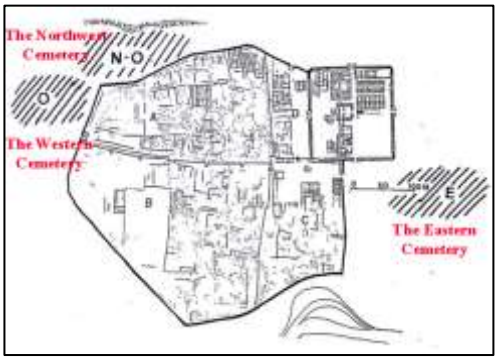
been stationed there specifically. This cohort remained until its transfer to Altava (present-day Ouled Mimoun) during the reign of Septimius Severus.[5]

Around the camp, Roman army veterans and a tribe of Mauri settled, eventually forming a town around it. In 167 AD,[6] protective walls were constructed around this settlement. Latin inscriptions discovered on the site, including those found on the western and eastern gates, indicate that the town was inhabited by former soldiers alongside local residents who established it with their own funds. This occurred during the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, leading to Rapidum becoming a Roman *municipium* in the first half of the 3rd century AD.[7]

The first references to the site came from De Caussade, who mentioned it in November 1843 along with a collection of Latin inscriptions that he later published. In July 1850, Berbrugger visited the site, conducting two days of excavations in the western cemetery with around 50 workers and uncovering approximately 30 Latin inscriptions. In April 1865, Chabassiére provided a plan and some drawings of the site before further excavations, followed by the archaeological excavations conducted by M. Choiset from October 1882 until 1883. Excavations continued in 1885 under M. Robert.[8]

From 1908 to 1917, Louis Charrier carried out further excavations, which were then halted for 10 years. Excavations resumed in 1927 by M. Séguy-Villevaleix, who continued until his death in 1933. Marcel Leglay resumed excavations in the camp from 1948 to 1953. Afterward, archaeological activities ceased at the site, with no excavations conducted beyond 1954.[9]

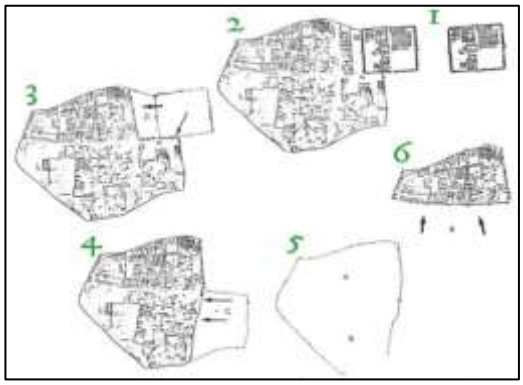
Fig.2. Cemetery Locations in the City of Rapidum (modified)



Source: Jean Pierre Laporte.[10]

5- Stéphane Gsell, Archaeological Atlas of Algeria, vol. 2: Text, Algiers-Paris, 1911, sheet 14, no. 90.
6- Jean Pierre Laporte, op. cit., p. 17.
7- S. Gsell, Ancient Monuments of Algeria, p. 92.
8- Jean Pierre Laporte, op. cit., pp. 57-59.
9- Ibid., pp. 60-64.
10- Ibid., p. 150.

Fig.3. The City of Rapidum from Establishment to Abandonment



Source: Jean Pierre Laporte.[11]

The archaeological site of Rapidum spans approximately 15 hectares and contains numerous historical landmarks, including the camp, which serves as the site's core and primary purpose. The camp covers an area of 17,000 square meters, approximately 1.7 hectares, with a generally rectangular shape. It includes watchtowers and four gates:[12] the first gate, Porta principalis sinistra, faces north; Porta praetoria faces east; Porta principalis dextra faces south; and finally, Porta decumana faces west.[13]

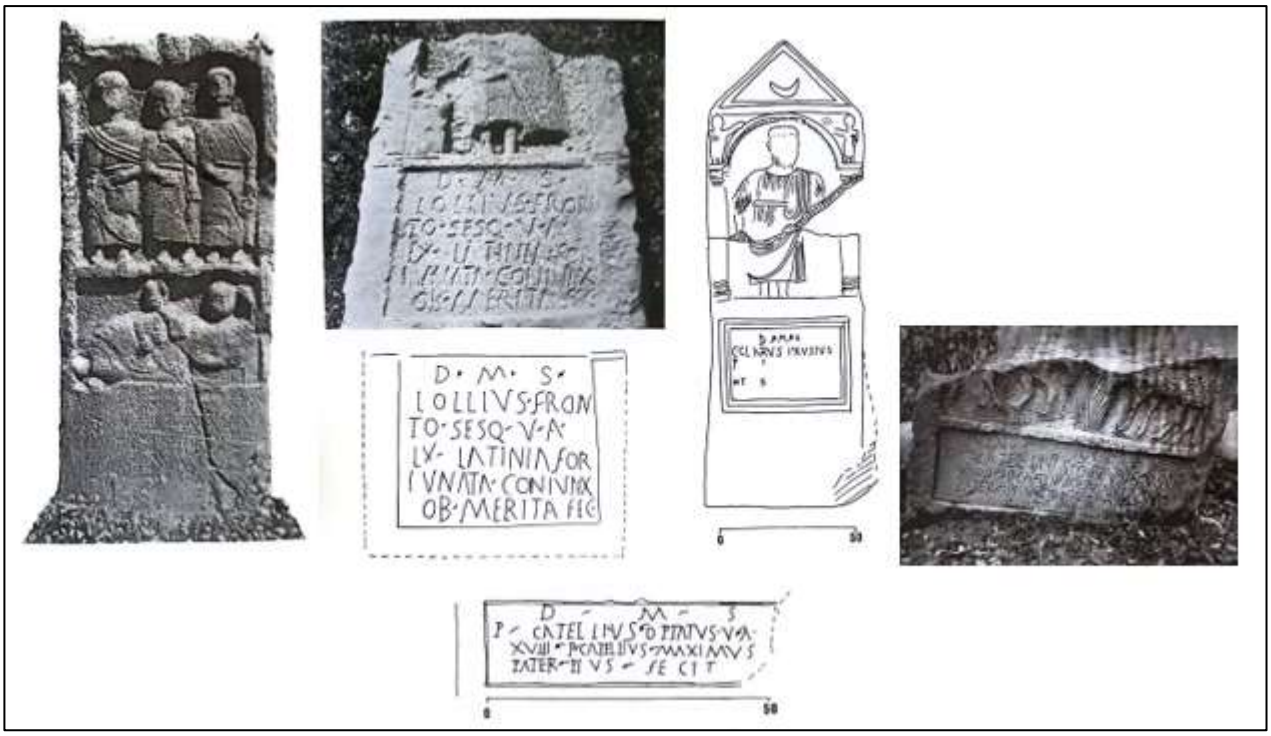
The Rapidum camp also houses several other structures, including streets, a soldiers' walkway, the principia, the praetorium, camp baths, northern baths, southern baths, storage facilities (possibly grain?), a fountain, and others. In addition to the camp, several other landmarks were found within the city, such as the unidentified temple, the Temple of Jupiter or Aesculapius, the northeastern press, the eastern press, the western press, the well building, a courthouse or temple, among other landmarks.

Around the city of Rapidum, there are remnants of three cemeteries: the first to the west, the second to the northwest, and the third to the east (see figure 02). Archaeological excavations have shed light on the city's prevailing funerary practices, with most graves exhibiting standard burial methods, similar to those found in several other cemeteries in the province during the 2nd century AD. There were simple earth graves as well as graves built with brick and stone, and the city's inhabitants also used sarcophagi. These graves were often accompanied by tombstones and

11- Ibid., p. 27.
12- Ibid., p. 71.
13- Ibid., p. 74.

funerary inscriptions.[14] In one instance, cremation was used; a clay jar containing bone remnants and ashes was discovered.[15]

Fig.4. Various images and diagrams of funerary inscriptions found in the site's cemeteries

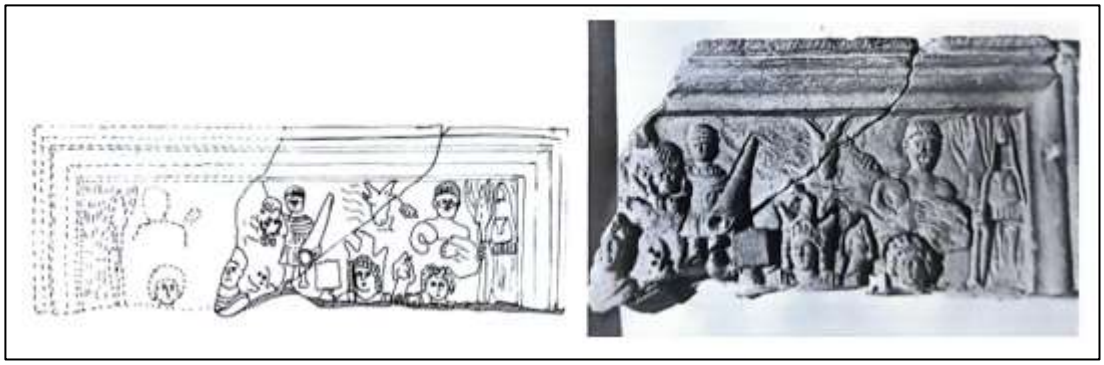


Source: Jean Pierre Laporte.[16]

Through the movable archaeological remains discovered during site excavations, we gain insight into the deities worshipped by the city's inhabitants. A bronze statue was found in one of the temples, along with a stone statue of the god Jupiter or the god Aesculapius. There is also an inscription dedicated to the African deities Dii Muri (see figure 5), a dedication to M. Furninus Donatus, another to Catellius Marirus, and commemorative monuments for two worshippers, Ceres and Caelestis.[17]

14- Ibid., p. 149.
15- Excavation by Choisset in 1884 in the western necropolis: "a funerary urn filled with bones," E. Masqueray, Bulletin de Correspondance Africaine, Vol. II, 1884, p. 173.
16- Jean Pierre Laporte, op. cit., pp. 251, 258, 260.
17- Ibid., p. 169.

Fig. 5 Inscription dedicated to the African deities Dii Muri



Source: Jean Pierre Laporte.[18]

Fig. 6 Statue of the god Aesculapius



Source: Jean Pierre Laporte.[19]

1.2 Auzia

The ancient city of Auzia is situated approximately 120 km east of Algiers in the high plateaus, at an elevation of about 860 meters above sea level. Its geographical coordinates are 3.28409 E and 36.29320 N, located on the northern slope of Mount Djurdjura, south of the Kabylie region.

Auzia served as both a military and civilian center in the eastern part of the province of Mauretania Caesariensis. It was a significant crossroads for ancient routes, including roads leading to the cities of Cirta (Constantine), Lambaesis (Lambèse), Saldae (Bejaia), and Caesarea (Cherchell),[20] where

18- Jean Pierre Laporte, op. cit., p. 279.
19- Ibid., p. 272.
20- René Cagnat, The Roman Army of Africa and the Military Occupation of Africa under the Emperors, Paris, 1913, p. 618.

military activity was concentrated from the early 2nd century CE.[21] Additionally, the city was situated in a fertile area rich in agriculture, especially olive cultivation, and abundant water resources.[22]

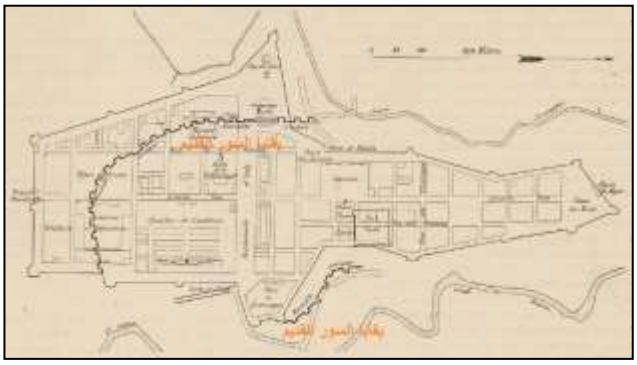
Auzia was a Roman municipality in the last quarter of the 2nd century CE during the rule of the Flavian emperors, known as *Res publica municipi auziensium*. Later, it became a colony under Emperor Septimius Severus, designated *Res publica colonia Aurelia Septimiana Auziensium*, as evidenced by numerous Latin inscriptions.[23] Historian Tacitus previously speculated that the rebel Tacfarinas may have died in 24 CE near the castellum "cui nomen auuzea," which could have been Auzia.[24]

In 1843, during the French occupation of Algeria, the first excavations were undertaken, revealing remnants of the wall on the eastern, western, and southern sides. The wall, made of smooth stone and constructed without mortar, ranged between 300 and 400 meters in width and approximately 800 meters in length.[25] The nearly rectangular wall included watchtowers spaced about 4 meters apart, with gates on all four sides. The area was also protected on all sides by observation posts along the various routes originating from or passing through Auzia.[26]

However, the remains of the ancient wall disappeared when the French built the colonial settlement known as Aumale, covering the old archaeological landmarks.[27]

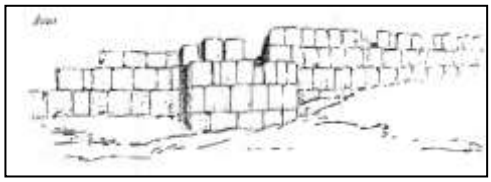
21- Mohamed El Bachir Cheniti, Algeria under Roman Occupation: A Study of the Military Control System (Mauretanian Limes) and the Resistance of the Moors, vol. 1, Algiers, 1999, p. 201.
22- Jean Pierre Laporte, “Note on Auzia, Modern Sour El Ghozlane, formerly Aumale in Mauretania Caesariensis,” Bulletin de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France (BSNAF), 1996 (published in 1998), pp. 300-317, p. 300.
23- Stéphane Gsell, Archaeological Atlas of Algeria, sheet 14, no. 105.
24- René Cagnat, op. cit., p. 23, and Yann Le Bohec, The Third Augustan Legion, Paris, 1989, p. 345.
25- Stéphane Gsell, op. cit.
26- René Cagnat, op. cit., p. 618.
27- Mohamed El Bachir Cheniti, op. cit., p. 198.

Fig. 7 illustrates the city of Sour El-Ghozlane during the colonial period, including some landmarks of ancient Auzia



Source: Stéphane Gsell.[28]

Fig. 8 cross-section of the wall of the city of Auzia, illustrating the technique used in its construction



Source: Jean Pierre Laporte.[29]

The archaeological excavations at the site of the ancient city have uncovered numerous artifacts, including columns and capitals of various styles, remains of statues made of stone and marble, and many mosaic panels, among them mosaics depicting the four seasons and nymphs. Additionally, several funerary tables were found, as well as a total of 249 Latin inscriptions, covering various topics. Among these inscriptions are mentions of different landmarks of the ancient city, including a religious temple built around 235 AD, the Temple of Saturn, public baths, a market built in 230 AD, the southern and southeastern cemeteries, water reservoirs, wells, and others. It is noteworthy that the city of Uzya was supplied with water via a canal from the western side.[30]

28- Stéphane Gsell, op. cit., p. 09.
29- Jean Pierre Laporte, op. cit., p. 308.
30- Stéphane Gsell, Op.cit., p 09.

Fig. 9 Some of the Latin inscriptions found in Uzya



CIL 08, 09057



CIL 08, 09047



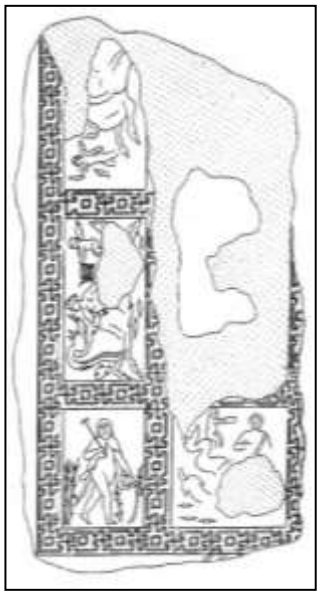
BCTH–1910–CCXVII



CIL 08, 09174

Source: https://db.edcs.eu/epigr/imp-rom.html

Fig. 10 Schematic drawing of the mosaic found in Uzya depicting the four seasons and nymphs



Source: Jean Pierre Laporte.[31]

2. Ancient Road Network for Military Sites in the First Defensive Line of the Lambaesis Region and Its Surroundings:

Since their occupation of North Africa, the Romans sought to control the region by all means. Among the methods aiding them was the construction of roads and the establishment of several landmarks, particularly of a military nature, to monitor and control the local population. From the city of Lambaesis and the various military sites in its region, a network of roads emerged, connecting it to several neighboring cities. Among these roads are the following:

- Roads originating from Lambaesis: The road linking Lambaesis to Tipasa, which starts in Lambaesis and heads northwest towards the city of Elephantaria (currently known as Mouzaia), continuing northwest to Tipasa. There is also likely a road from Lambaesis to Sufasar (known as Dolfusville during the colonial period, and presently Aumale), as well as another route from Lambaesis heading south to the city of Boghar (currently in the province of Médéa), passing through Caput Cilani.

- Roads originating from Tanaramusa Castra: The road connecting Lambaesis to the second defensive line, which starts from Tanaramusa Castra and heads northwest towards Lambaesis. Another road from this city leads to Rapidum, with two additional presumed roads: one southward to Vzinaza (currently Saneg) and another southwest to Boghar.

31- Jean Pierre Laporte, op. cit., pp. 300-317, p. 311.

- Roads originating from Rapidum: Three roads depart from Rapidum: the first to the west, leading to Tanaramusa Castra; the second southward to Maginot (currently known as Charef El Adhaoura) and possibly extending to the Djir Dam further south; and the third eastward to the city of Uzya. Additional routes are also suggested from Rapidum, including a southwest road to Vzinaza (Saneg) and a southeast road to Kelali.

- Roads originating from Uzya: From Uzya, a series of roads extends, including a westward route passing through Rapidum to reach Tanaramusa Castra, as well as a northeast route towards the city of Béjaïa, passing through Tablast, Petra, Tubusuptu (Tigzirt), and finally Saldae (currently Béjaïa), connecting to the main coastal road. Another road heads southeast to Souk El Khemis, Tatili (currently Tizi), and finally Aras (Tarmount), linking with the southern Limes. Additional roads are believed to connect Uzya to the aforementioned Limes, including a road from Uzya heading south towards the Grimidi camp, a road leading to the Djir Dam via Maginot, and a series of roads connecting the city to the main coastal road, including a likely route heading north to Rusucurru (currently Dellys) and another to Rusgonia.

Fig. 11 Map of the ancient road network illustrating the road network for a series of military sites in the Lambaesis region



Source: Pierre Salama.[32]

It should be noted that all roads originating from the aforementioned camps are main roads connecting the first defensive line to the coastal road, specifically those routes heading north. Meanwhile, the set of roads heading south connects the first defensive line to the second defensive line (i.e., the first Limes to the second).

32- Pierre Salama, The Roman Roads of North Africa, Algiers, 1951.

3. The Defensive Line in the Province of Mauretania Caesariensis:

Since its founding in 42 AD, Mauretania Caesariensis covered a vast area in North Africa, stretching from the Mulucha River in the west to the Ampsaga River in the east, and from the Mediterranean coast in the north to the territory of Gaetulia in the south. Its eastern borders start from the Ampsaga River, heading south, then veering west along the Wadi N'ja before turning south, passing west of Zarai, then through the lowlands between the mountains of Hodna and Bilizma. From there, it traverses the southern slopes of the Hodna mountains to reach the northeastern bank of Chott el Hodna. Its western boundary is marked by the Mulucha River, while its southern borders are challenging to define.[33]

The province of Mauretania Caesariensis was one of the largest and most enduring in the Roman Empire, maintaining stable borders for nearly 250 years since its establishment in 42 AD. In 288 AD, part of its eastern section separated to form the province of Mauretania Sitifensis.[34]

Roman forces constructed the Limes in this province to consolidate military occupation and support economic colonization, with the coastal road forming an essential component. Established around 40 AD, it was expanded during the reign of the Flavian emperors to include the cities of Igilgili (modern Jijel), Saldae (modern Béjaïa), Rusazu (modern Azzeffoun), Rusucurru (modern Tigzirt), Icosium (modern Algiers), Tipasa, Caesarea (modern Cherchell), Gunugu (modern Gouraya), Cartennae (modern Ténès), Portus Magnus (modern Bethioua), Siga (modern Takkembrit), and other cities with unresolved historical records.[35]

In the second century, particularly during the reigns of emperors Trajan and Hadrian, the Romans established the first defensive line (see map 03), which passed through a series of stations from east to west, including Silas (modern Kherbet Zerga), Macri (modern Bordj Maghra), Zabi (modern Bouchlekha), Aras (modern Tarmount), Tatili (modern Tazi), Uzya (modern Sour El Ghozlane), Aïn Bessem, Sidi Hamza, Rapidum (modern Sour Djouab), Tanaramusa Castra (modern Berrouaghia), El-Kouaiya, Lambaesis (modern Médéa), Zucabar (modern Miliana), Manliana (modern Khemis Miliana), Oppidum Novum (modern Aïn Defla), Tigava Castra (modern Ouled Abbas), Castellum Tingitanum (modern Chlef), Mina (modern Relizane), and others.[36]

As for the Limes of the 3rd century AD, known as the second defensive line (see map 03), it was established around 201 AD during the reign of Emperor Septimius Severus. This line begins at Silas (modern Kherbet Zerga) and passes through Macri (modern Bordj Maghra), Zabi (modern Bouchlekha), Aras (modern Tarmount), Tirzas, Aïn Amras, Kouda El-Qemmah, Kouda El-Bayt, Grimidi (modern Aïn Grimed), Kelal, Aïn Fakhar, Boghar, Kherbet Ouled Hilal, Tissemsilt,

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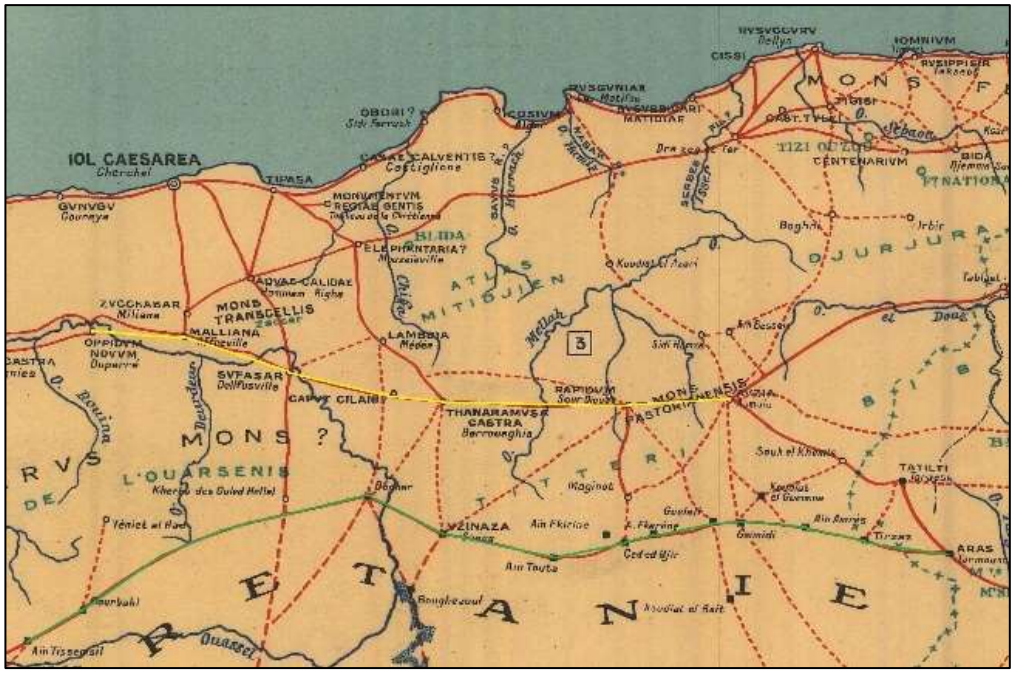
33- Abdelkader Sahraoui, Military Fortifications in Numidia and Mauretania Caesariensis during the Roman Occupation, 46 B.C. – 284 A.D., Dar Al-Huda, Ain M'lila – Algeria, 2011, p. 24.
34- Ibid., p. 25.
35- Ibid., p. 25.
36- Ibid., pp. 25–26

Tamantit, Altafa (modern Ouled Mimoun), Pomaria (modern Tlemcen), and other towns, ending at Numerus Syrorum (modern Maghnia). In this way, the Roman military authorities effectively encircled the Tell Mountains and the adjoining plains, connecting the Limes with various types of fortifications, including camps, castles, forts, and towers.[37]

Fig. 12 Defensive lines in the eastern region of the military province of Mauretania (the first defensive line in yellow and the second defensive line in green)


IOL CAESAREA
Cherchel
TIMSA
GVNVGV
Gounaya
MONS TRANSCELLIS
MALLIANA
Milliana
OPPIDVM NOVVM
Duperré
SVFASAR
Dellys ville
CASAE CALVENTIS?
Castiglione
MONVMENTVM REGIAE GENTIS
Tombeau de la Chrétienne
ELEPHANTARIA?
Marengo ville
BLIDA
ATLAS MITIDJIEN
LAMBAESA
Médéa
CASTRA
Berrouaghia
RAPIDVM
Sour Rouzou
MONTANENSIS
PASTORIS
THANARAMVSA
CASTRA
CASTRA CILANI?
MONS ?
L'OUARSENIS
Kherbet des Ouled Hellal
Béni Slimane
Médéa
Ain Oussera
Djelfa
Aflou
Laghouat
Ksar el Boukhari
Tiaret
Frenda
Tagdempt
Tissemsilt
Ain Tarek
Boughezoul
Ain Tesra
Ain Tissemsil
Tarmount
Tirsas
Ain Bessem
Sour el Khamis
Tatilti
Sidi Aïssa
Ain Fekirina
Ain Boucif
Ain Touta
Ain Berriss
Gueltat
Gommidi
Kasbah
Ksar el Boukhari
Ain Tesra
Boughezoul

- **Conclusion:**

These sites serve as a mirror reflecting civilization, a part of national identity, and a hallmark of the cultural and civilizational heritage inherited across generations, linking the past, present, and future.

In conclusion, the Lambaesis region stands as one of the significant and sensitive areas that played an important role in the history of the region during the Roman occupation. The province of Mauretania Caesariensis, in particular, was known for local uprisings and unrest led by local tribes, such as the Jarjara tribes, who attacked the Uzya area between 290 and 293 AD. One of the consequences of these uprisings was the destruction of a bridge, compelling Rome to mobilize its military forces to suppress this attack, underscoring the threat posed by these tribes. Additionally, notable leaders like Tacfarinas and Firmus led other revolts, further challenging Roman control.

In response, the Roman military exerted all efforts to maintain control and quell these uprisings, establishing a series of military posts, including Uzya, of which few archaeological remains exist. This scarcity is due to the continuous habitation of Uzya and its region across successive civilizations up to the present day.

Although limited surface archaeological evidence remains, the artifacts we do have underscore the significance of the area, offering valuable insights that have been elusive in other regions. This highlights the need for future archaeological surveys and excavations to further enrich the history of the area. Furthermore, it is essential to raise public awareness about the importance of preserving any material evidence and to encourage its submission to authorities, as each artifact undoubtedly holds significant information about a region that is a source of pride and honor for us.

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