

The importance of archaeological evidence in writing the history of the Numidia region

اهمية الشواهد الأثرية فى كتابة تاريخ إقليم نوميديا

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Received 15/11/2024

Accepted 21/12/2024

• Abstract:

Archaeological sources such as inscriptions, coins, monuments, and pottery, along with other materials discovered in the Numidia region, offer invaluable raw material and original, verifiable sources. Historians have used these sources to reconstruct the history of the region. The study of these materials by archaeologists has enabled historians to correct many false historical narratives previously based on travelers' accounts or oral traditions, which are often subject to forgetfulness. These material sources have revealed historical facts that would otherwise have remained unknown. The process of scientifically interrogating physical evidence and recording its content has led to the writing of a more accurate history, free of fallacies. This approach has unveiled the civilizations that succeeded one another in the region and has provided insights into its political and economic status through the study of its coins, for instance, or the nature of its trade exchanges through pottery and inscriptions detailing exported and imported goods. Additionally, the study of monuments and funerary tablets has revealed information about the region's prevailing religion, including its deities and rituals. The technical advancements achieved by the region are also evident through the work of specialists in the field.

Keywords: Physical Witness, Numidia, Coins, Inscriptions, Mosaics

المخلص:

تعتبر المصادر الأثرية المتمثلة في النقائش والمسكوكات والأنصاب والفخاريات..... وغيرها والتي وجدت في إقليم نوميديا المادة الأولية والمصدر الأصلي غير قابل للتزيف والتي استعان بها المؤرخين من أجل كتابة تاريخ هذه المنطقة فدراستها من قبل الأثريين منحت للمؤرخ تصحيح العديد من الحقائق التاريخية المغلوطة والمعتمدة على الرحالة أو الذاكرة الشفهية التي تتعرض للنسيان كما تكشف عن حقائق تاريخية كانت بعيدة المنال لولا تواجدها المصدر المادي المتمثل في الآثار، لهذا وللاهمية التي تكتسبها عملية إستنتاج الشواهد المادية و تدوين محتواها بشكل علمي أدى الى كتابة تاريخ صحيح خالي من المغالطات كما انه كشف لنا عن الحضارات التي تعاقبت على هذه المنطقة وقدم لنا معلومات عن مكانتها السياسية والاقتصادية من خلال دراسة مسكوكاتها مثلا او نوع تبادلاتها التجارية من خلال فخارياتها و نقائشها التي دونت عليها البضائع الصادرة والمستورة كما قدمت لنا معلومات عن الديانة السائدة في المنطقة من آلهة معبودة و طقوس ممارسة وذلك من خلال دراسة الأنصاب و الطاولات الجنائزية المتواجدة بالمنطقة دون ان ننسى المستوى الفني الذي وصلت اليه المنطقة من خلال دراسة معالمها و قطعها الزخرفية ولذلك سوف نسلط الضوء على بعض الشواهد المادية الهامة التي اعتمد عليها المؤرخون في كتابة تاريخ إقليم نوميديا في العهد القديم لنطرح الإشكالية التالية، هل كانت هذه الشواهد المادية الأثرية كافية لتدوين تاريخ إقليم نوميديا ؟ سنجيب على السؤال من خلال استنتاج عدد من الآثار التي توفرت في الإقليم والتي خضعت لدراسة معمقة من خلال أصحاب الاختصاص.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

الشاهد المادي، نوميديا، المسكوكات، النقائش، الفسيفساء.

• Introduction

Archaeological sources such as inscriptions, coins, stelae, pottery, and others found in the Numidian region represent the primary, genuine, and undistorted materials that historians have relied upon to write the history of this area. Their study by archaeologists has allowed historians to correct many historical inaccuracies, which were based on travelers' accounts or oral memory that is subject to forgetfulness. These sources also reveal historical facts that would have been unattainable without the material evidence represented by archaeological remains. Therefore, the importance of examining material evidence and documenting its content scientifically has led to the accurate writing of history, free from falsifications. Moreover, it unveiled the civilizations that succeeded in this region, offering us insights into its political and economic status through the study of coins, for example, or its trade exchanges through pottery and inscriptions that recorded imported and exported goods. It also provided information about the dominant religion in the region, including deities worshiped and rituals practiced, through the study of stelae and funerary monuments found in the area. We should not forget the artistic level reached in the region, as evidenced by the study of its monuments and decorative pieces adorning its landmarks. Thus, we will shed light on some of the important material evidence that historians relied upon to write the history of the Numidian region in antiquity, raising the following question: Were these material archaeological testimonies sufficient to document the history of the Numidian region? We will answer this question by examining several archaeological artifacts found in the region, which have been subject to thorough study by specialists.

1. The Role of Inscriptions in Writing the History of Numidia

The number of Latin inscriptions in ancient North Africa depends on the significance of the region. Their numbers increase or decrease according to the region's historical importance and the events it witnessed. For example, the most important sites for Roman inscriptions written on stones in Proconsularis include the site of Chemtou, where about 200 inscriptions have been found¹, and other sites like Khemissa, Madaurus, Timgad, Zraï, Djemila, and others. These cities have provided us with Latin inscriptions covering all aspects of life in Roman colonies, from which we will take examples in two vital areas: political and economic, as follows:

2.1 In the Political Sphere:

These inscriptions contain a wealth of important information about the political situation in the Roman Empire's colonies in North Africa in general, and ancient Morocco in particular. As material evidence, a large inscription was found, referred to as the Timgad Album, during excavations of the Byzantine fortress in the city of Timgad, discovered by the researcher Charles Goudy in 1940. This inscription, which researcher Louis Leschi discussed (see Figure 01), contains valuable

¹ Abdelnour Al-Omari, "A General Study of Latin Inscriptions : Their Types, Fields, and Source Value in Writing the History of Ancient Morocco," *Ages Journal*, vol. 19, no. 02, 2020, p. 17.

information about official documents related to the members of the Senate (Senatus Consultes), legal texts, royal decrees, and governors' regulations, allowing the establishment of a chronology for Roman history.

Fig.1. Timgad Album Inscription from the Municipal Album of Timgad 1947

CAELIVS SECTIANVS	DVBIDIVS	SEPTIMIVS VICTORINIANVS	CLAVDIVS FELIX
EMILIVS CHORDIVS	ACILIVS SPERATIANVS	VARIVS AVGVSTALIS	SALLVSTIVS GERMANVS
CAELIVS NATIVTINVS	PLATIVS MACRINVS	MILITES QVINODRACONIVLARIVS	IVLIVS ZVCCARIVS
BRVTIVS VIVENTIVS	VIRIVS ICVRTIO-VS	VIRIVS ATENIVS	AVIANIVS PAVSTINIANVS
DVBIDIVS VICTORINVS	ANTONIVS SOTELLIVS	CASCLIVS CALCEBONIVS	ANNIVS CRESCONIVS
SESSIVS CRESCONIVS	DVBIDIVS CELERIVS	DONATVS FILIVS INNOCENTIVS	FL CRESCENTIANVS
VLRIVS VICTOR	QVI ET QVINTIANVS	VIRIVS ARTEMIDIVS	POMPEVS ADELPHVS
	CORFELIVS CREMENTIVS	LEONTIVS FILIVS CEREALIS	POSSIDIVS POMPEVS
	ANTONIVS FLORVS	CEREALIS FILIVS CEREALIS	SIMPLICIVS GREGORIVS
	CECILIVS RESTVTVS	SESSIVS INNOCENTIVS	NASIDIVS NASIDIVS
	DVBIDIVS CRESCENTIANVS	LETORIVS POTENTIVS	SEMPRONIVS MELLIOR
	GRANIVS AMANTIVS	FLAVIDIVS SVBIANVS	SEMPRONIVS OPTATIANVS
		POMPONIVS CRESCONIVS	CLAVDIVS RESTITVTVS
		POMPONIVS MAVRENTIVS	PAPIRIVS AVRELIANVS
		POMPEVS SIMPLICIVS	FL REPERENTIVS
		POMPONIVS VRANIVS	
		FLAVIDIVS IVLIANVS	
		ACILIVS ACILIANVS	
		BERTORIVS CROMATIVS	
		DVBIDIVS IVLIANVS	
		IVL PROTASIVS IVNIOR	QVIN OFFICIORATIONVM
		GRANIVS CESONIANVS	REGATIANVS FILIVS
		CLAVDIVS DISCOLVS	PAVLINIVS ARISSANI
		DONITIVS LAVRENTIVS	PALMINVS FILIVS PALMINI
		POMPEVS EVCARPIVS	ARISSANI
		ANINIVS BASSVS	ANNIVS GALLVS FILIVS
		POMPEVS CRESCONIVS	BINCENTI
		POMPEVS ADELIVS EVIARPI	IVLIVS PLACVNTIVS
		IVL SESEVS IVCCET	FELIX FILIVS PALMINI
			ARISSANI

Source: Leschi, Lois, op. cit., p. 561

2.2 In the Economic Sphere:

Among the Latin inscriptions that provided us with important information about the economy and tax payment methods in the Roman world and its colonies is the "Zraï Tariff." This tariff was first mentioned in 244 AD when the Senate abolished these oppressive taxes on the Roman people, fearing the outbreak of civil wars and the fragmentation of unity, especially since Rome was threatened by the risk of war against Porsenna, who was king of Rome in the 6th century BC.

The Zraï Tariff was discovered in the last century in the Zraï region during the construction of a mill. It was published by Léon Renier in 1858, and later recorded by the researcher Mommsen in the compilation of Latin inscriptions (CIL) ². The inscription was dated to 202 AD, during the reign of emperors Septimius Severus and Caracalla. The tariff inscription contains 22 lines, detailing the various taxes that each merchant passing through the port with goods was required to pay (see Figure 02).

² CIL VIII, 5408.

Figure (02): Zraï Tariff Inscription from (C.I.L.VIII, No. 4508



Source: Seghir Krim, Mohammed; El Mutafta Filah, Mohammed, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

It also addressed the subject of grants provided by the wealthy and nobles, as well as the payments imposed on trade activities, including export and import³. This tariff also contained inscriptions related to all aspects of commerce, crafts, and agriculture, and how taxes were paid, which were considered official writings. Additionally, there were other documents we might call semi-official, such as inscriptions related to financial donations (evergesies) made by nobles and prominent figures of the cities. These donations often took the form of constructions like temples, water channels, and other architectural achievements that contributed to the cities' development and prosperity⁴.

Moreover, this type of text shed light on the cultivation of important crops in Roman colonies, such as the planting of olive trees and their development. Professor Bourghile mentioned that legislative texts greatly contributed to evaluating this type of agriculture, as is the case in other provinces. For example, some inscriptions refer to the Lex Manciana, a law from the Flavian period that bears the name of Emperor Mancian's commissioner, who was initially tasked with its implementation in the Proconsular province. This law was found on an archaeological inscription at Henchir Methich in the Majardah plains, dating to the early second century AD.

³ Seghir Krim, Mohammed ; El Mutafta Filah, Mohammed, "A propos du Tarif de Zarai: Tarif local ou institution provinciale," *Journal Almuqadimah des Études Humaines et Sociales*, vol. 06, no. 01, 2021, p. 283.

⁴ Jehida Mehntel, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

The law, dated to 1456, generally outlines the leasing conditions for lands not included in the centuriatio system and referred to as external lands (*subcesiva*) or, at times, unsuitable lands (*loca inculta*), usually located on slopes, marshes, and other areas unfit for agriculture. It also mentions new types of trees and beekeeping practices that should be exploited on these lands, while defining the relationship between the beneficiaries and the landowners. Among the most notable advantages observed from this law is the expansion of agricultural lands and the improvement of the coloni (farmers) conditions, allowing them to retain two-thirds of the production while giving the remaining third to the legitimate lessees (*conductores*) of these lands ⁵.

3. The Role of Coins in Writing the History of the Numidian Region

Numidian coins hold great importance in studying various aspects of Numidian civilization, whether political, economic, or cultural, as they have provided us with the following insights:

3.1 Political Perspective

Numidian coins have offered us abundant information about the political landscape of the Numidian kingdom, both before and after its unification. Through their study, we have been able to identify the names of the kings who succeeded each other in the two kingdoms, Massyli and Masaesyl, as well as the periods during which their princes ruled. This allows us to conclude that many inland and coastal cities had rulers who enjoyed considerable autonomy in managing their internal affairs. Moreover, they exercised their authority by minting their own coins, on which they engraved their images, such as King Syphax, who ruled the Masaesyl region from 218 to 203 BC (see Figure 03), and King Vermina, son of King Syphax, who ruled from 203 to 200 BC (see Figure 04).

**Figure (03): A coin with the image of King Syphax on the obverse
and a depiction of a horseman on horseback on the reverse.**



Source: Numista Website; Open Edition Books

Figure (04) : A silver coin from the reign of King Vermina, ruler of the Masaesyl kingdom. The obverse features the portrait of King Vermina, while the reverse depicts a horse in a running position.

⁵ Bourahli, A., "Madaurus Colony and Its Territorial Region," PhD dissertation in Ancient Archaeology, 2010, p. 250.



Source : Numista Website; OpenEdition Books

The kings of the Massyli also minted a significant number of coins using various metals. These coins have allowed us to identify the kings of the eastern part of the Numidian kingdom, the Massyli, and to track their succession. This is confirmed by images of coins from the reign of King Masinissa, who ruled from 203 BC to 148 BC (see Figure 05), as well as the coins minted by his son Micipsa, who ruled between 148 BC and 118 BC (see Figure 06).

Figure (05): A coin from the reign of King Masinissa, featuring his portrait on the obverse, with a galloping horse engraved on the reverse.



Source : Massyles; Open Edition Journals ; Le Citoyen Online.

Figure (06): A coin from the reign of King Micipsa, featuring the king's portrait on the obverse and a galloping horse on the reverse.



Source : Massyles; Open Edition Journals ; Le Citoyen Online.

The study of these coins also provided us with the names of the capitals of the Numidian kingdom, which were inscribed in the Punic language, the official language of the kingdom. This conclusion was drawn as Punic was the only script found on these material artifacts. A total of 53 coins minted from various metals were discovered, belonging to cities of both the Massyli and Masaesyl kingdoms. For instance, some coins bore the name of the city Kirta (KRTN), which was the capital of the Massyli kingdom.

3.2 From an Economic Perspective

The study of Numidian coins allowed us to gain insights into the agricultural and pastoral activities practiced by the Numidian society under the reign of the Numidian kings. These coins also provided evidence of the animal and plant wealth present in the kingdom's cities. For example, ears of wheat were engraved on the coins of the city Iol and on a single coin from Kirta and Timisi. Grape clusters appear on the coins of Camarata and Timisi and the city of Cunoquae, next to the image of the Phoenician god of wine, Shadrappa. Furthermore, horses are depicted on the coins of cities like Hippo Regius, Kirta, Rusicade, Saldae, Siga, and Macomades. Additionally, images of falcons appear on the coins of Bulla Regia, and wild boars are depicted on the coins of Macomades ⁶.

Archaeological excavations have revealed that coins from certain inland cities were found throughout the Numidian interior and even beyond its borders. This indicates active internal and external trade in the region ⁷. Moreover, the type of metal used in coinage is a clear indicator of

⁶ Moudoui, Khaldia, "Numidian Coins: Their Types and Importance in Recording the History of Ancient Algeria (Numidian Period 218 B.C. – 46 B.C.)," *Al-Nasiriya Journal for Social and Historical Studies*, vol. 13, no. 02, December 2002, p. 471.

⁷ Mazard, J., 1955, pp. 25-26; Gsell, St., 1972, *Histoire Ancienne de l'Afrique du Nord*, vol. 06, reprint of the 1921-1928 edition, Germany, Otto Vonzeller Verlag Osnabruck, p. 80.

the economic prosperity or decline in Numidia. Specialists in Numidian coin studies observed that the use of gold in coin minting signified the affluence of the society. On the other hand, economic decline due to wars and the exploitation of the region's resources is reflected in the type of coins produced, such as the use of bronze, tin, and copper in coin minting for trade exchanges.

4. The Role of Funerary and Votive Stelae in Writing the History of the Numidian Region

Stelae are among the most important archaeological elements and material evidence that clearly reflect the prevailing religion, beliefs, customs, and traditions through the rituals practiced in Numidian society. They are architectural elements that adorned the façades of temples, the tombs of kings and nobles, and certain classes of Numidian society. These stelae serve as crucial archaeological evidence that provide insight into the religious life, beliefs, and rituals practiced in that society. Additionally, they reveal the architectural and artistic development in their form over time, as well as the successive peoples who inhabited the region and the extent of artistic evolution during that period. Here, we pause to highlight the information that can be gleaned from these stelae, as follows:

4.1 Religion and Deities

Through the study of these stelae, we can determine the type of religion that prevailed during the period. For instance, the depiction of a deity with offerings placed before them indicates a pagan era in which the Numidian society worshiped multiple gods. Among the most prominent were Baal Hammon and the goddess Tanit, who was often represented in various forms—sometimes holding a scepter and a crescent, and in other stelae, carrying a military banner as if declaring victory in war. She is also depicted beneath a ram, which frequently symbolized the god Baal Hammon. This is reflected in some of the stelae found at the Pit Temple, which are currently housed in the Cirta Museum (see Figure 07). Conversely, the appearance of symbols such as the letters P and X or the fish symbol clearly indicates the Christian period.

Figure (07): The goddess Tanit, the protective deity of Numidian society (Cirta Museum)



Source : Cirta Museum

4.2 Religious Rituals

Many stelae depict the manner in which offerings were presented, often by women carrying a basket filled with fruit or the finest of early agricultural products on their heads. This has been interpreted from several votive stelae discovered at the archaeological site of Madauros (see Figure 08).

Figure (08): Votive stela of an offering bearer (Archaeological site of Madauros)



Source : Zeroual Zakia, 1997-1998, p104, Plate XI, Figure 47

The architectural records represented by the stelae exhibit specific features, particularly in the façades of temples and chapels. Some façades are simple, while others are more advanced and intricate. More precisely, these stelae consist of two main sections of crowning: the celestial region, which gathers symbols and divine attributes like the crescent moon, solar disc, and rose, and the middle and lower regions, representing the earthly realm. The latter often takes the form of a temple or chapel entrance, where ceremonies, sacrifices, and funerary representations, such as altars and offerings, are depicted. The individuals featured typically occupy the central and most prominent space.

5.1 The Pediment

The pediment appears in various forms, such as triangular, arched, or flat. Sometimes, it is adorned with acroteria, decorative projections that enhance the pediment, a Punic tradition symbolizing the ears of the deity, who listens to the prayers of worshippers. These acroteria are found on both the left and right sides or may be absent, leaving the pediment simple. Often, celestial symbols like the crescent, rose, and solar disc embellish the pediment, though occasionally, it remains unadorned.

5.2 The Frieze

The frieze is the section that separates the entrance from the pediment. It usually features an inscription, whether on funerary or votive stelae, though it may also be blank. In many cases, the frieze provides information about the buried individual, including their social and military status, especially if they were a military commander.

5.3 Columns

Columns are artistic architectural elements that adorned the entrances of structures in general, and temples and chapels in particular. These columns are depicted on several stelae from the archaeological site of Madauros, where we found them in the Corinthian style, with fluted shafts supported by bases and crowned with Corinthian capitals (see Figure 09).

Figure (09): Funerary stele decorated with fluted Corinthian columns



Source : Zeroual Zakia, 1997-1998, pp. 79-80, Plate X Figure 44,

Gsell.S, I.L.A, Inscription (2465), p233.

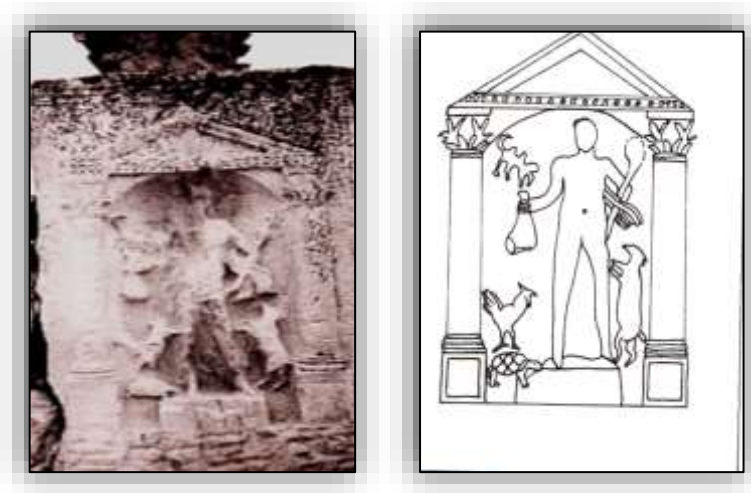
5.4 Capitals

Capitals are decorative architectural elements placed atop columns to support other architectural features. These capitals, which adorned the façades of chapels or temples and were represented on the stelae, belong to the Corinthian order, characterized by smooth, carved acanthus leaves (see Figure 10).

5.5 Bases

The Attic-Corinthian base was also present in the decorations of the stelae from the archaeological site of Madauros. It appears with a raised slab, featuring two moldings separated by gaps and an astragal (see Figure 10).

Figure (10): Votive stele from the archaeological site of Madauros



Source : Zeroual Zakia, 1997-1998, p135, Plate XXXV, Figure 83

6. Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned analysis, we conclude that the material evidence utilized to determine whether these findings contribute to the writing of Algerian history in general, and the history of the Numidian region in particular, proves to be credible and answers the research question affirmatively. This is due to the nature of the material evidence, which includes inscriptions, coins, and steles. These elements represent original, primary sources that cannot be falsified, and their existence serves as a genuine support for ancient literary and historical texts. In some cases, they have even corrected certain inaccurate information that was circulated prior to their discovery.

The information gathered from the Timgad Album was sufficient to provide insights into the political and administrative history that Rome applied across its empire and provinces. Furthermore, the inscription of Zray provided significant details about the economic aspects of the Roman Empire and its provinces, particularly regarding the tax system, internal and external trade, agricultural yields, production control, and the organization of imports and exports. All this information has been extremely valuable in understanding the economy of the ancient world, especially within the Numidian region.

Additionally, the religious aspect should not be overlooked, as the steles were essential sources that revealed much about religious life both before and after Roman presence. They provided details on the deities worshiped and the rituals practiced in offering sacrifices to these gods, as well as an understanding of the temple façades before which these steles were placed. All of this information could not have been easily discovered or verified through historical and literary texts alone; however, this material evidence stands as a trustworthy source across all levels

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