

TRAVEL REPORT: Roman Sites in Mauretania Tingitana, Morocco

Traveler: Marie Theres Wittmann

Duration: 1 week

Objective: Research on the urban development of Roman cities during the Severan Dynasty

Destinations: Sala (Chellah), Thamusida, Banasa, Lixus (near Larache), Tingis (Tangier), Tamuda (near Tétouan)

I recently embarked on a research trip (24.08.–04.09.2024) generously funded by the Ernst-Kirsten-Gesellschaft to the most important archaeological sites of the Roman province *Mauretania Tingitana* in modern-day Morocco. My primary aim was to familiarise myself with these ancient sites, their urban layout and state of preservation to further analyse the evolution of these cities during the Severan Dynasty (late 2nd/early 3rd century AD). This trip was a crucial part of my PhD-research in Classical Archaeology at the University of Oxford, supervised by Prof. Andrew Wilson as I examine the urban development of North African cities in Severan times during the so-called African Boom in my thesis. The sites I visited had not been extensively studied in this context, so I had a unique opportunity to gather fresh insights and data.

I arrived in Rabat and picked up a rental car that I would use for the week. My first stop was the Museum of History and Civilizations in Rabat, where I explored significant finds from the sites I planned to visit. Among them was the important literary document of the *Tabula Banasitana*, a bronze tablet, which dates to the late 2nd c. AD and records the assignment of Roman citizenship to several members of the local Berber tribe of the *Zegrenses* (fig. 1). This tablet gives valuable insights into the administrative procedure and advantages of receiving Roman citizenship which I can use in my analysis of the *Constitutio Antoniniana* when the Severan emperor Caracalla extended Roman citizenship to all inhabitants of the Roman Empire in AD 212. Moreover, these deals and negotiations seem to have played a decisive role in ensuring peaceful and advantageous relations with local Berber tribes as is attested in other inscriptions from Volubilis between the Romans and the *Baquates* and *Bavares*. Therefore, the visit of the museum helped me establish a foundational understanding of the artifacts and the historical context of the cities I would be studying.

Moreover, I visited Sala, known today as Chellah, in Rabat (fig. 2). Sala was one of the main harbours on the Atlantic coast of *Mauretania Tingitana* and played a crucial role in regional trade and urban development. I focused on examining the public buildings from the 2nd century AD, which were funded by local elites rather than through imperial initiatives—a pattern I found echoed in other North African cities like Thamugadi in Algeria. Moreover, I found several parts of grain mills and olive presses all over the site which testify to Sala's agricultural production.

After Sala, I drove to Thamusida, a site that had grown significantly under the Severan emperors. Thamusida was of particular interest due to its military significance and the presence of installations for purple dye production from murex shells despite being located inland (fig. 3). When visiting the site, I noticed the remains of crushed murex shells. Moreover, several animal bones scattered all over the site, raised my interest and after some research, I found zooarchaeological reports which record and analyse the abundance of “exotic” animal bones found in Thamusida such as lions,

leopards, cheetahs, hyenas, different antelopes and ostriches.¹ The current interpretation is that Thamusida was probably an important trading centre for loading these animals onto ships and exporting them to the amphitheatres of the closest other Roman provinces such as *Hispania*, *Lusitania* and *Gallia Narbonensis* for *venationes* and gladiator games.² As the city of Thamusida did not have an own amphitheatre, the possibility that they used the animals for games themselves can be excluded.³

On the next day, enough time was left to visit the newly excavated site of Rirha near Sidi Slimane (fig. 4). The site is located on a terrain which is surrounded by the loop-shaped course of the Oued Beht and excavations recently revealed the first archaeologically known winery in Roman North Africa.⁴ As the winery burnt down due to a fire in the mid-3rd c. AD, the winery is exceptionally well preserved including *dolia* still *in situ* and large quantities of charred grape pips.⁵ The winery therefore must have been active during Severan times which proves the importance of wine production in North Africa at that time. Usually, wine production is difficult to distinguish from olive oil production in the archaeological record as both use the same type of presses and distinctive residues of what product was produced in a workshop are rarely preserved. Hence, Rirha is an important example where we have clear evidence for this production, and probably trade. In addition, I saw that several modern vineyards are cultivating grapes in the region, sometimes producing Moroccan wine for export today. I will explore this path of economic importance during the Severan times in my thesis when I am back in the library at Oxford.

After that, I visited Banasa, a veteran colony founded during the Roman period (fig. 5). Banasa provided a counterpoint to my other case study, Thamugadi in modern Algeria, in terms of urban development and abandonment. The site had been deserted shortly after the Severan period, offering a rare opportunity to study a city that remained untouched by later occupations or destruction, allowing for a clearer analysis of its Severan-era urban planning. The site showed a unique combination of pre-Roman Mauretanian architecture and Roman elements as well as basins for the production of *garum* and purple dye.

I spent the next day at Lixus, one of the largest Roman cities in Morocco and second in importance only to Volubilis. Lixus was known for its thriving economy based on fish-salting and *garum* production. Basins for producing *garum* with a total capacity of one million litres have been excavated in the industrial district and are still astonishing to visit today (fig. 6). Lixus exported salted fish and *garum* to several cities all over the Roman Empire (fig. 7). Moreover, it was interesting to note that modern salt production is still carried out next to the site of Lixus which supports the argument of a continuing economic branch in this region (fig. 8). I compared the site to Sabratha in modern Libya, another significant centre for maritime product processing, to understand the broader patterns of economic and urban development in Roman North Africa.

On the way to Tangier, I stopped at Zilil. The site is not touristically developed at all but I managed to get in contact with the local guard of the site who gave me a tour around the ancient ruins, consisting of remains of the Great Baths, the water tanks, an

¹ De Grossi Mazzorin/Abatino 2023.

² De Grossi Mazzorin/Abatino 2023.

³ De Grossi Mazzorin/Abatino 2023, 9.

⁴ Carrato *et al.* 2020.

⁵ Carrato *et al.* 2020, 168, 170.

industrial quarter, a potential house and the four city gates (fig. 9). Only five percent of ancient Zilil are excavated today and the guide told me that in 2018, an Italian team surveyed the site with geophysical methods and recorded a large amount of metal and wall structures which still wait to be revealed. As I did not know about such a geophysical project in Zilil before, this was very helpful and I will search for the research results of this project later on.

In Tangier, I visited Tingis, the provincial capital of *Mauretania Tingitana*. Tingis was a vital urban centre during the Severan period with strong industrial activities, particularly in fish processing. The city was also a critical junction, connecting the province with other parts of the Roman Empire through well-constructed roads. However, the ancient remains of Tingis are the poorest I have seen on my tour and consisted only of some remains of the city wall without any further traces of the settlement (fig. 10).

On my final day of site visits, I travelled to Tamuda near Tétouan (fig. 11). Tamuda was another urban centre that flourished under the Severans, notable for its textile dyeing industry. The site provided a comparison to similar industries in Meninx, modern Tunisia, and contributed to my broader analysis of the economic drivers behind the 'African Boom' and the urban development in Roman North Africa. However, the preservation of the site is not as good as I would have expected, the remains were largely overgrown and walls have been poorly restored.

The trip concluded with my return to Tangier Airport, where I returned the rental car and boarded my flight back to London. Throughout my journey, I took meticulous notes and photographs, which will be invaluable for my PhD research and will be included into my thesis. Moreover, the photos I took from all sites will now be integrated into the Manar Al-Athar database for use for future research.⁶

This research trip allowed me to gather essential data on the urban development, state of preservation and touristic accessibility of Roman cities in *Mauretania Tingitana*. By visiting these sites firsthand, I gained new insights into the economic and social dynamics that influenced urban growth in this region. I observed that all large cities in *Mauretania Tingitana* flourished at the time of the Severans, not because of an imperial favour but of specific investments and technological improvements into specialised branches of economy. The maritime located sites were producing fish-products, *garum* and purple dye made of murex shells in large quantities for export. The inland cities secured the southern border of the Roman Empire, maintained trading relationships and specialised in the cultivation of grain, olives and wine. Most of this happened at a large economic scale with specialised production units as seen in Lixus with the massive capacity for *garum*-production. All the findings from this journey will significantly contribute to my PhD thesis and will be included in my chapters on the economy and urban development of *Mauretania Tingitana*, and Roman North Africa in general.

Finally, I would like to thank all the site guards and locals living near the sites for their sincere hospitality and their helpful explanations. They all contributed to making this trip unforgettable and ensuring every day that these sites are protected from illegal excavations and other hazards. Last but not least, I am very grateful to the Ernst-Kirsten-Gesellschaft for enabling me to undertake this research travel and enlarge my understanding of the sites I have previously only studied in libraries and not on site.

⁶ <<https://www.manar-al-athar.ox.ac.uk/welcome.html>>.

Figures

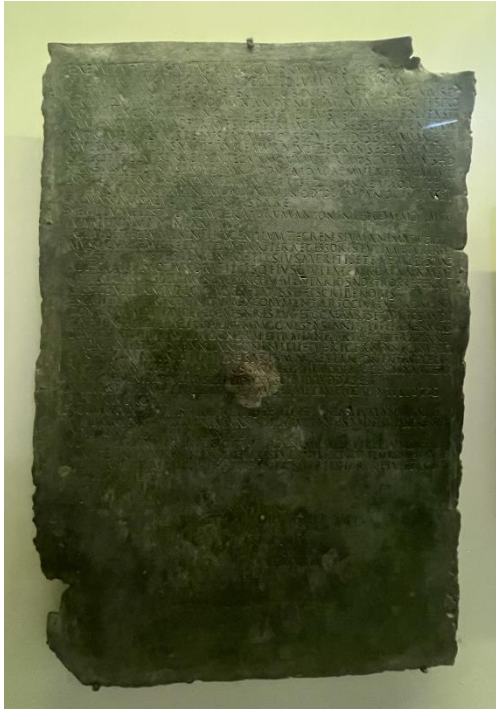


FIG. 1

Tabula Banasitana recording the assignment of Roman citizenship to members of the local berber tribe *Zegrenses*, end of 2nd c. AD, Museum of History and Civilizations in Rabat, Photo by M.T. Wittmann



FIG. 2 Sala, view over the artisanal quarter, view from west, Photo by M.T. Wittmann



FIG. 3 Thamusida, Building V.6.1 (*Domus du dallage*), view from south, Photo by M.T. Wittmann



FIG. 4 Rirha, view over the excavation site from south, Photo by M.T. Wittmann



FIG. 5 Banasa, view over the forum from south, Photo by M.T. Wittmann



FIG. 6

Lixus, basins with waterproof mortar for fish-salting and *garum* production, view from west, Photo by M.T. Wittmann

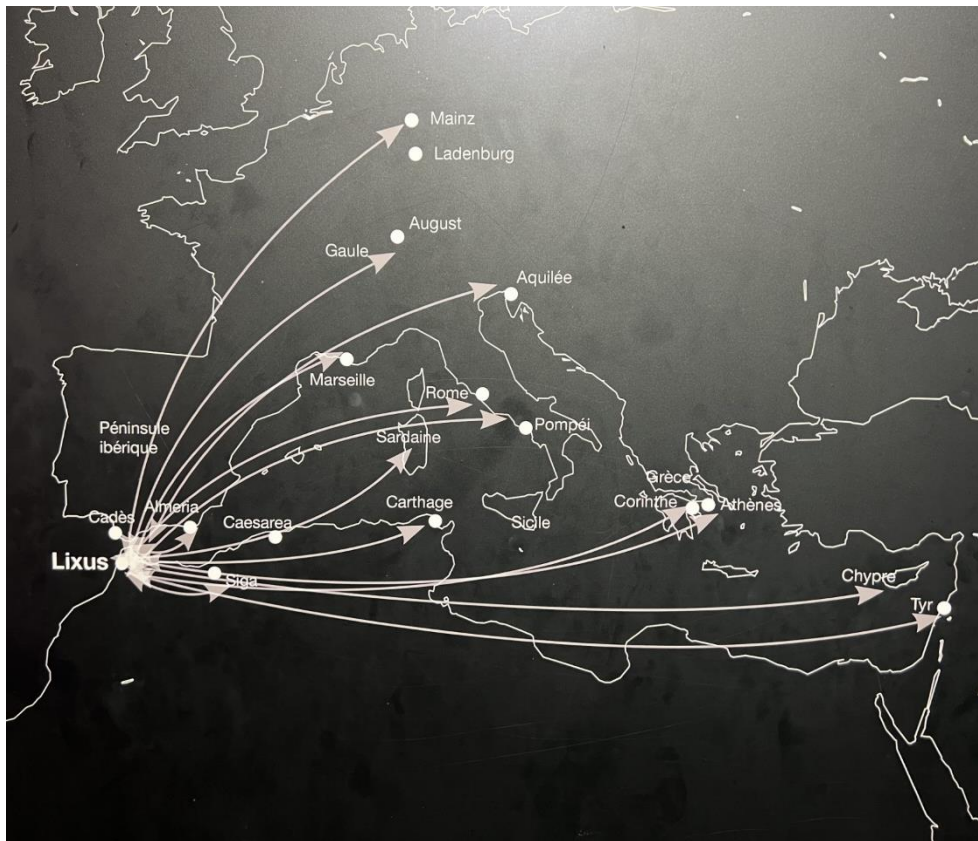


FIG. 7 Map showing the export of fish-products from Lixus all over the Roman Empire, Museum of the Archaeological Site of Lixus, Photo by M.T. Wittmann



FIG. 8

View from the ancient site of Lixus to the neighbouring modern production of salt, view from east, Photo by M.T. Wittmann



FIG. 9

Zilil, water tanks supplied by the Roman aqueduct, serving the Great Baths located outside the city walls of Zilil, view from northwest, Photo by M.T. Wittmann



FIG. 10 Tingis, remains of the Roman wall, view from west, Photo by M.T. Wittmann



FIG. 11 Tamuda, one of the re-erected entrance gates to the Roman military camp, in front remains of the pre-Roman settlement from Mauretanian times, Photo by M.T. Wittmann

List of References

- Carrato, C. et al. 2020, Recent Discovery of an Urban Winery in Rirha (Sidi Slimane, Morocco), 2nd–3rd Century CE, in J.-P. Brun, N. Garnier, and G. Olcese (eds.), *Making Wine in Western-Mediterranean/Production the Trade of Amphorae: Some New Data from Italy, Panel 3.5*, Archaeology and Economy in the Ancient World, 9, 167-175.
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