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Numidian Royal Portrait

Carthaginians or Romans are usually the first thoughts that come to our minds when we are asked to think about North Africa in Antiquity.

But North Africa is the home of the Berbers, who are considered to be an autochthonous people, although pre-historic finds that can be related to them show that the first individuals came from the Orient some 10.000 years ago (Camps, 2002).

Until around the Vth century B.C., when Herodotus writes his *History*, the Berbers were practically unknown to the Greek world. That picture started then to change, and from that moment on, as the Berber people of North Africa became more and more involved in the struggles for power in the West Mediterranean basin –between Punics, Greeks, and Romans–, more was written about their society and their alignments with the different powers mentioned above.

But for the modern researcher this is also the moment when we perceive a fragmentation of the Berber people. Herodotus (IV, 181; 186; 197) used the word “Libyans” and divided the Berbers between sedentary and nomadic (“nomades”) peoples. Among these two categories. Herodotus pointed out many different “tribes” or groups. Latin and Greek writers that came after him continued to use those same categories, only with distinct meanings. And so, “nomades” became “Numidiæ” in Latin, that is, Numidian, a term which, at first, embodied all the Berber people, several, different tribes, not living under direct Carthaginian control. In that sense, the Libyans became the ones living in Carthaginian territory.

Those divisions go on, but here is not the place to address them all. Behind the various general labels lie a multitude of different tribes and through textual and ethnological data we assume nowadays that those tribes were divided in extended families and in clans among these.

The aim of this paper is to address some questions about a specific Berber tribe, the Massyli, a group that

formed, under their leadership, a strong confederation of Berber tribes in the end of the IIIrd century B.C. They were also known to the Roman writers, following Herodotus, as Numidians, and so their leaders, called kings by those same sources, were held to be kings of the Numidians.

Some of the most famous Berber leaders of Antiquity were Numidian: Massinissa, Jugurtha, Hiempsal and others. Theirs was a long lived dynasty, stretching for about 150 years, and holding, at least, 16 rulers.

The heart of the Massylian confederation was the region of ancient Cirta (modern Constantine), in northeast Algeria, but their dominion of North Africa, between the IIIrd and the Ist centuries B.C., stretched, in different periods, both to the west (to the modern Moroccan borderline) and to the east (to the ancient emporia area).

The genealogical line of the Massylian ruling family, Massinissa’s family, is known to us both by epigraphical information (Kontorini 1975, 90) and by Latin texts. On the texts they are called kings both in Greek and in Latin. But its their coinage, a novelty in North Africa –since before the end of the IIIrd century B.C. only Carthage had the prerogative to strike money in the region–, which actually strongly shows us that the political and social order of things in the Berber world had changed.

Numidian coinage strikes the observer with its Hellenistic iconography. We have, on the obverse, the rulers head, either wearing a laurel or a diadem and, on the reverse, as its the common rule in Hellenistic times, besides the images, we have a legend depicting the name and title of that same ruler.

Those legends are particularly interesting, for they are not written in Libic language, that is, in Berber language, but in Punic and, eventually in Latin –in the specific case of Juba I, the last Numidian king of Cirta.

Regarding the rulers head on the obverse of the coins, we perceive them as actual portraits. The representation is typically Numidian, as is stated by ancient writers, like Strabo and Silius Italicus: thick, wavy hair and pointed beard (Figure 1). After detailed analysis of treasure finds from Cirta and its environs, for instance IGCH 2304, over 25 different portraits were identified, showing that there was a concern with some kind of a realistic representation of the ruler (Thomas, 1949 and Troussel, 1948).

On the other hand, the reverse is specially interesting to the understanding of Berber society. First, there is the Punic legend with the ruler's name and the title HMMLK or its contraction HT. This title is usually translated as "Royal Person" (Mazard, 1960).

In fact, MLK meant "the king" in the Phoenician city states. But, there, the king was only a *primus inter pares*, that is, the first in rank among others with political power (Sznycer, 1978, 565).

In Carthage itself, although this specific question has been debated over many years now and although the route MLK appears in some Punic personal names (only sometimes obviously concerning the deity Melqart), there is no clear evidence, at all, that there ever existed a royalty in the North African capital, even on Phoenician terms. The *suphete* and not the king is supposedly the major magistracy in Carthage.

So, the Berbers also, apparently, chose a term that meant they were the most important among many important people.

In the past, to call Massinissa and his successors "king", after what was written on Latin and Greek texts and on their coinage, was common. Apart some scholars, among them Gabriel Camps, there seemed to be no major concern in establishing the true character of the confederacies and of their leadership.

I believe that their monetary iconography can both help us understand the real character of the confederation, and also throw light upon the dynamics of the Berber groups themselves, showing us that their organization was not so vertical as one would assume.

Stéphane Gsell was one of the first scholars to point out how much resemblance there was between Numidian monetary iconography and Punic monetary

iconography. The main image depicted on their reverse, specially in the coinage struck between the IIIrd and the IInd century B.C., the horse, could be held as practically equal. The obvious answer to this similitude was given by the same Gsell: the necessity of having their money accepted after the beginning of Carthage's downfall at the end of the IInd Punic War made it natural for the Massylian kings to use the same iconography as the Carthaginians.

The obverse, in this sense, was the distinct emblem of the new era: the royal portrait, with all its strength and clear message, specially if we were to add the legends.

On the other hand, in Berber language, that is, Libic, the "kings" are called *agellid* (GLD or GLDT), name taken from epigraphic evidence. In northeast Algeria (Kabília region), this title was still used until recently (Montagne, 1930).

From ethnographical studies we understand that *agellid* has a meaning that relates the title with the ideas of extraordinary strength and land fertility. A man able to wear this title was someone with magical and religious power, but also with warrior power.

Stéphane Gsell (1927, vol. V, 122) remarked that, above all, the Berber leadership was a warrior command, transmitted to the eldest member of the family, which was formed by agnate relations. We know from textual sources (Apian, *Lib.* 106) that, after Massinissa, this order of things changed, and his successors were actual heirs and not the eldest members of the family.

G. Camps (1960, 215) also believed the Numidian leaders were considered sacred, that they held this magical and religious power (held what is called among modern Berbers, after the Islamic domination, *baraka* = mysterious benign force given by God). In modern Berber society this kind of beneficial power is seen in the *marabouts*.

Nevertheless this immense magical and warrior power, ethnologists who have studied Berber society in modern times showed that the *agellids* could not centralize in their hands all the Berbers (Montagne, 1930). Those continued to live within their social organization of smaller familial groups, under less powerful leaders/chiefs, the princes of ancient Latin writers.

In Antiquity things were probably very similar. We lack data from the pre-roman period, but the *Tabula Banasitana*, for instance, points out a social scale for the Berber community: domus, familia, gens, and the confederation of gentes (Dondin-Payre, 1981).

On the contemporary inscriptions of Massinissa and of Micipsa, his son and successor, they are not, usually, addressed by the same title. Nor are the expressions used, bilingually, in Punic and Libic, totally equivalent.

On the Punic inscriptions found at the site of ancient Cirta, dated to the reign of Massinissa (first half of the IInd century B.C.), the name of the “king” is always followed by the already mentioned Punic word HMMLKT, that is, “Royal Person” (Berthier and Charlier, 1955). Another inscription, found at the site of ancient Thugga, in Tunisia, dated to 139 B.C. by St. Gsell (1927, vol. V, 127), has the contracted form of the word, HT, used to address both Massinissa and his father, Gaia. But, the supreme magistrates of this Berber-Punic town, the suphetes, are also called HMMLKT on that same inscription. On the other hand, the Thugga inscription is bilingual. The correspondent Libic term for HMMLKT is the term for agellid, GLD. And here it comes also following the names of the suphetes (Camps, 1960, 216).

Micipsa, has two other inscriptions addressing directly to him. And those are quite interesting for on those he is not called HMMLKT anymore. One was found in ancient Thigibba (modern Tunisia-Maktar area), and the other in Iol, in central Algeria.

On the Thigibba inscription he is called MNKDH, in Libic (Fèvrier 1949, 652-655), and on the Iol one he is specifically called, in Punic, king (MLK) of the Massylians (MSLYYM) (Fèvrier, 1951, 139-150).

How to translate MNKDH, a novelty way of addressing a Berber king, and more interesting of all, a Libic way? A more recent bilingual inscription (Libic and Latin), found at the ancient site of Leptis magna, in modern Libya, and dedicated to the emperor Augustus, has the same word MNKDH in Libic. Its Latin equivalent, here, though, is not Rex, but Imperator. Other inscriptions, also from the Tripolitania area, have the term MNKDH associated either with the word veteranus or with the expression “emperor soldier”, when it appears associated with the Libic word for soldier: MSUH. G.

Levi della Vida, publisher of those Tripolitanian inscriptions, believed that the modern touareg word amenokal was the correspondent for our Libic word (Levi della Vida and Amadasi Guzzo, 1987). Among the modern touaregs, amenokal means supreme chief. The amenokal is the supreme chief of a touareg confederation, and is chosen by the leaders of the tribes forming this confederation. So he is a chief among other chiefs, very similar to the Phoenician king, MLK.

Because the inscriptions referring to the soldiers have not yet been dated precisely, there is a possibility that some of these soldiers were not under roman command, but under Numidian command. And so, the word MNKDH, supreme chief, is meant to describe a Numidian king.

On the Iol inscription, as seen, Micipsa is celebrated, in Punic, as both king of the massilians (MLK MSLYYM) and chief, RB. But whose chief? There is another word attached to the Punic word for chief (RB) and it is a number, T, meaning, probably, 100. So, G. Camps translated this formula as “Micipsa supreme chief of 100 princes” (Fèvrier, 1949 and Camps, 1960: 216).

On the other hand, this same inscription could depict Micipsa as chief of the 100 suphetes, if we were to interpret these words in an urban context, where, as stated above, we know that the suphetes were the supreme magistracy.

So, from the epigraphical data and monetary legends, we have the Numidian kings as supreme chiefs both of the magistrates in the towns and of the other tribes’ chiefs of the countryside.

This brings us to another question. What was the base of this chieftain?

We believe that the answer to this question can be looked for on the reverse of the first Numidian rulers coinages, where the Punic horse is so constantly depicted.

Carthage was a maritime power. But its strength also lied upon land forces, who, after, the loss of 3000 young Carthaginian aristocrats at the Crimiso Battle in Sicily, in 339 B.C. (Acquaro, 1987, 53), were mainly formed both by the Berbers submitted and by mercenaries. Among those land forces, the Numidian cavalry is remarked by ancient writers as a force to be reckoned with (Titus-Livius XXIII, 13, 7 e Gsell 1927, vol. V).

Eventually, Carthage came to rely heavily upon the Numidian cavalry. This cavalry was recruited, as textual sources tell us (Justin XXI, 4, 7 e Polibius I, 77-78), by local chiefs and not by the Carthaginians themselves. When Massinissa, during the IInd Punic War, transferred his support, and of his cavalry, from the Carthaginians to the Romans, it was an extremely hard blow for Carthage to absorb.

As mentioned above, the use of the horse as main iconographic type of reverse on Numidian coinage could be easily explained as a mere copy of a well established Carthaginian motif. But if we take a closer look on the meaning of the horse to Carthage maybe we can throw light upon this same use by the Numidians.

J. Bayet in an article of 1941, "L'Omen du cheval", has showed how we should look at the Orient for an answer to explain why Carthage chose a horse –represented in the most diversified ways: standing, pouncing, turning its head to bite, etc.–to be its reverse emblem on its coinage (Figure 2).

We could either look for a religious answer (the horse being interpreted as an attribute of the God Sêd) or we could think about the image of force, ferocity and quickness that the horse has among oriental peoples (Assirians, Philistines and Semites –among who we have the Phoenicians), as is shown on Biblical texts (Bayet 1941, 183). For instance, the Book of Job XXXIX, 18, 26 mentions the ferocity of the horse, snarling its teeth, the nostrils wide open (Figure 3).

Bayet showed that the use of the horse image came from the oriental cultural stock of the Carthaginians. Their choice was so successful that the Greeks (Timée) and, later, the Latins (Justin) incorporated this image on the foundation recital of the North African capital.

It's now generally understood that Carthage started to coin money for political, and not commercial, purposes. Its money was used, firstly, as army payment and as political propaganda against the Greeks of Sicily, during the wars for the control of the island in the IVth and IIIrd centuries B.C.

This Semitic context, on the other hand, fed and was fed by the warrior force implicit in the Berber chieftains. Carthage depended upon the lesser chiefs of the Berber tribes and of the great agellids, among them Massinissa, to recruit and form the Numidian cavalry.

In this sense, the reproduction of the horse on Numidian monetary iconography becomes understandable. It was not only a question of re-using an already accepted image, but also of stating one of the sources of the Numidian agellid's power.

During the Ist century B.C., along with the political changes that swept North Africa –mainly the Roman decision to definitely enter the region–, the last Numidian rulers coined money with both different reverse and obverse types. As the balance of forces changed so did the Numidians, but that is a whole different story.

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Figure 1 - Juba I (60-46 B.C.), Numidian mint x 7. Roma, Museo Nazionale Romano.
(from Acquaro, E., Manfredi, L.-I. & Rahmouni, L. Monete Puniche nelle Collezioni Italiane, *Bollettino di Numismatica*, Monografia 6.1, 1989: 48, cat. n. 63)



Figure 2 - Sicilian Punic Mint (350-340 B. C.) x 7. Siracusa, Museo Archeologico Nazionale (from Acquaro, E., Manfredi, L.-I. & Rahmouni, L. *Monete Puniche nelle Collezioni Italiane*, *Bollettino di Numismatica*, Monografia 6.1, 1989: 82, cat. n. 104)



Figure 3 - Sicilian Punic Mint (320-306 B.C.) x 7. Siracusa,
Museo Archeologico Nazionale
(from Acquaro, E., Manfredi, L.-I. & Rahmouni, L. Monete
Puniche nelle Collezioni Italiane, *Bollettino di Numismatica*,
Monografia 6.1, 1989: 87, cat. n. 128)