

## Roman Military Defense Installations in Ancient Maghreb

**Mohammed Toumi**

[Toumi-mohammed@univ-eloued.dz](mailto:Toumi-mohammed@univ-eloued.dz)

University of El Oued

**Khaoula Bouchama**

[bouchama.khaoula@gmail.com](mailto:bouchama.khaoula@gmail.com)

University of Constantine 2 - Abdelhamid Mehri

---

### Abstract

Ancient Maghreb experienced the arrival and succession of several civilizations and waves of occupation, including the Roman occupation of the region. The Romans extended their influence, facing numerous local revolts opposing the occupation. To counter these attacks and maintain their control, the Romans established many military defense installations in the area. In this presentation, we will highlight the key Roman military defense structures in the Maghreb and the reasons for their establishment.

**Keywords:** Romans, Numidia, defense installations, Third Augustan Legion.

---

### Introduction:

In ancient times, the region of the Maghreb experienced the arrival and succession of several civilizations and waves of occupation, due to its strategic location and natural resources that distinguished it from other regions. These factors made it a target for the major powers of the ancient world. The first significant encounter was with the Phoenicians, who initially engaged in trade and later established the Phoenician settlement of Carthage, which grew into an empire with influence in the region. Eventually, this would lead to the Roman invasion and domination of the Maghreb, which lasted until the first half of the 5th century AD (429 AD), marking the end of Roman presence in the region. During this

long military history, the Romans left behind a legacy of military and defensive structures.

In this study, we aim to highlight the key Roman military defense installations in the Maghreb and understand the reasons behind their construction. Our central research question is: What were the strategic motivations for Roman control of the Maghreb, and were they able to maintain dominance over the region as a whole? From this question, other sub-questions arise:

- What were the motivations that drew Rome's attention to ancient Maghreb?
- What was the strategic military nature of the Maghreb, and what was the key

military unit stationed there that became its pillar?

- What were the defensive structures in the Maghreb that helped maintain control over the region?

To answer these questions, we employed the historical method to recount events but focused primarily on the analytical and descriptive approach to thoroughly understand the subject. We began by addressing the reasons and motivations for the Roman occupation of the Maghreb, focusing on the Third Augustan Legion as a case study, due to its presence and its military center in Theveste (modern-day Tebessa). Finally, we explored other important defensive structures in the region, which were a key factor driving us to study this subject, as outlined in the following points. We begin by examining the motivations that led the Romans to focus on North Africa in general and the Maghreb in particular.

### **1. Reasons and Motivations for the Roman Occupation of Ancient Maghreb:**

Since its founding in the mid-8th century BC (753 BC), Rome was primarily a military state rather than a peaceful one, unlike Carthage in the southwestern Mediterranean, which was driven by economic motives. The strength of the Roman Republic government, established in the late 6th century BC and early 5th century BC, was characterized by an aggressive military policy aimed at subjugating all neighboring nations. The Romans were driven by an insatiable ambition to become the rulers of the world, following a plan to achieve this goal with unwavering determination (1).

From the beginning of the Roman Republic, Rome's aim was not just to defeat Carthage;

it also set its sights on the wealth of Numidia from the outset, with a desire to build a powerful empire. Thus, the motivations for the Roman occupation of the Maghreb were multifaceted, including geographical, political, economic, and social reasons, which are outlined below:

#### **1.1. Political Reasons and Motivations:**

North Africa in general, and the Maghreb in particular, were geographically significant. The region is located in northern Africa, forming an irregular quadrilateral, bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the north, the Sahara Desert to the south, the Atlantic Ocean to the west, and Egypt to the east. Geographically, it lies between latitudes 18° and 38° north of the equator, and longitudes 25° east and 17° west of Greenwich (2). This strategic location made it a vital link between the western Mediterranean and the civilizations that developed in the Sahara to the south (3). The region's location made it susceptible to European and Eastern influences and subject to major Mediterranean events (4).

This distinctive location attracted the attention of the Romans from the very beginning, who viewed it with arrogance (5). As part of their larger plan, they sought to conquer North Africa more than other regions of the world. Once they had conquered Italy, they aimed to extend their dominion to Africa, Greece, and Asia, fulfilling Rome's unchangeable destiny (6). By conquering North Africa, Rome transformed Carthage from a client state into a Roman province (7).

Politically, Rome also exploited the conflict between Carthage and the Numidian king, Masinissa, using it to their advantage to

subdue the ruled populations. This set the stage for the final blow to their rival, Carthage, which had violated one of the harsh terms of the Treaty of Zama by declaring war on Masinissa, giving Rome a legitimate excuse to intervene (8). Carthage thus became an easy and inevitable victim (9).

After the Third Punic War brought the Roman state to a position of power in North Africa by completely destroying Carthage (10) and controlling the Numidian succession and regional borders, Rome had already subdued Carthage through military dominance and treaties. However, Masinissa's complaints about new Carthaginian hostilities drove Rome toward the total annihilation of Carthage, which was an ambitious commercial power. Rome aimed to put an end to Carthage in order to expand further. With the fall of Carthage, Rome opened the doors wide to control the Mediterranean and most of the surrounding countries (11). These were the main geographical and political reasons that led Rome to occupy the ancient Maghreb (12).

### **2.1 - Economic Reasons and Motivations:**

The economic motive, considered one of the most important drivers of the Roman invasion of the Maghreb, was a key factor in Rome's determination to hold on to Numidian lands and insist on remaining there (13). Given the alliance between Numidia and Rome, which was part of Rome's flexible foreign policy, this enabled Rome to obtain major privileges in trade without facing any local laws or customs in Numidia. This granted Rome complete freedom to move through trade centers and benefit from Numidia's thriving economy (14).

The Maghreb was home to various types of animals, and its inhabitants relied heavily on hunting to meet their nutritional needs and to protect themselves from dangerous animals (15). Hunting was not limited to local consumption but also involved the export of African wildlife products, such as elephant tusks (ivory), ostrich eggs and feathers, and the fur of lions and leopards. Even monkeys were exported to aristocratic families who kept them as pets (16).

Thus, we can say that trans-Saharan trade, which had existed since the time of the Phoenicians, was one of the factors that encouraged Rome to set its sights on North Africa. Roman decision-makers were motivated to occupy the Maghreb and exploit its lands to provide food for the Roman people and extract as many taxes as possible (17). The land of Numidia was of great importance to Rome, as stated by the contemporary historian Charles-André Julien: "For Rome, Berber lands were a colony for exploitation, not for settlement." (18) The measures taken by the Roman state regarding Maghreb lands reveal their economic motives and their eagerness to expand control over fertile agricultural lands. They did this by evacuating and displacing the local population, forcing them to work for the occupiers, and organizing the land through surveying and partitioning.

**3.1 - Social Reasons and Motivations:** The growing population in the Roman state drove it to seek new territories for expansion. Many researchers believe that Roman colonization (19) was necessitated by the social conditions in Italy during the civil wars of the first century BCE and the first century CE. Military leaders would often promise their soldiers agricultural lands as rewards for victories in war, as did Marius, whose goal

was to expand into North Africa, bringing many veterans along with him (20). Julius Caesar also encouraged many of his soldiers to migrate to Africa and settle there. These soldiers would exploit the land and its resources, with the benefits ultimately returning to Rome and its elites (21).

These were the main social reasons that motivated the Romans to occupy the Maghreb, leading to local revolts. The first of these was Jugurtha's War, which lasted around seven years and aimed to resist Roman presence in the region (22). Later, King Juba I of Numidia attempted to reclaim his nation's land from the Romans, but ultimately, the Kingdom of Numidia became a Roman province (23). The Numidian people did not cease their efforts to expel the Romans, with notable revolts such as Tacfarinas' rebellion, which lasted over seven years from 17-24 CE, aiming to counter Rome's expansionist policy in the Maghreb and return the usurped lands to their rightful owners (24)(25).

**2 - Historical Background of Rome's Gradual Annexation of Numidian Territories:** Rome's gradual annexation of the Maghreb began with the capture of Carthage in 146 BCE, transforming it into the Roman province of Africa (26). Following this, the political map of the Kingdom of Numidia changed due to the conflict between King Jugurtha and the Roman Republic. After Jugurtha was betrayed and captured, with the assistance of his son-in-law Bocchus I, King of Mauretania, the western part of Numidia was awarded to Bocchus, expanding his kingdom to the Saldae region (modern-day Béjaïa) (27).

Rome continued its expansion by annexing Numidia into Roman possessions after the

conflict between Caesar and Juba I, the Numidian prince who sought to reclaim his ancestral lands. Following the Battle of Thapsus, one of the largest battles that resulted in Caesar's great victory, Numidia was transformed into a Roman province under the name "Africa Nova." (28)

Next came the annexation of the Kingdom of Mauretania. After the incorporation of Numidia, Rome was poised to expand its influence across the entire region by annexing Mauretania. Despite the efforts of Arabion, the son of Massinissa II, who regained control of Numidia after Caesar's death and killed Sextius in 44 BCE (29), his ambitions were short-lived. Rome restored control through military force, and Mauretania was annexed in 40 BCE (30).

In 27 BCE, Emperor Octavian (Augustus) merged the provinces of Africa Nova and Africa Vetus, forming the larger "Africa Proconsularis." The goal was to expand Roman control, ensure security and stability, and suppress local revolts (31). This reorganization of the two African provinces was part of Octavian's broader efforts to politically and militarily restructure the region from 27-25 BCE, during which time Numidia was directly governed under military control (32).

To achieve their goals of expansion, exploitation, and securing the resources of the Maghreb, the Romans needed a strong army capable of fulfilling both offensive and defensive roles. They built various military fortifications, including camps (*castra*), towers (*turres*), and forts (*castella*). One of the key military forces responsible for these tasks was the Third Augustan Legion, which we will examine in more detail below (33).

**3 - The Roman Army: The Third Augustan Legion (La Troisième Légion Auguste) as a Model:** As Roman control over Numidian territories grew, Rome encountered difficulties in managing the local population, which was in constant rebellion against Roman presence. Roman emperors found themselves facing complex military challenges. After securing political dominance, insecurity remained a persistent problem that burdened the emperors. They were forced to adopt a policy of comprehensive occupation, attempting to crush African resistance.

To implement these goals, it was essential for the Romans to establish a powerful military force in the Maghreb and organize it for greater readiness. Thus, they formed the Third Augustan Legion (34). Although the exact date of its founding and arrival in Africa is unknown, it is certain that the legion had been present in the Maghreb since 6 CE (35).

The Third Augustan Legion was considered the only regular and permanent backbone of the Roman army stationed in Africa (36). Historical sources referred to it with various names, including the Third Augustan Legion, the African Army (*Exercitus Africae*), and the Army of the African Province (*Exercitus Provincia Africae*). However, its exact date of establishment remains unclear and disputed among scholars. According to Cagnat, its creation dates back to Julius Caesar during the time of the civil wars (37).

The Third Augustan Legion was one of the most important regular legions in Africa, leading expansion and defense operations for Roman army settlements (38). It was likely founded during the reign of Emperor Octavian (Augustus) with the aim of exerting

full control over Africa and protecting the western borders of the proconsular province (39).

The legion had three major stations in the Maghreb. Initially, the legion had to set up its camp in Haidra (*Ammaedara*) northeast of Tebessa, in the heart of the Musulamii territory. This location was chosen because it served as a major crossing point from Carthage to Tébessa (Theveste), making it an advanced center in the proconsular province of Africa. It also marked the border between proconsular Africa and Numidia (40), effectively acting as the guardian of both provinces (41). Strategically important, the camp was a hub for monitoring the local population and protecting Cirta (42) and the proconsular province. The legion also controlled the difficult terrain around the Aurès Mountains (43).

The legion later moved to Tebessa due to its strategic location, positioned on the edge of a water-rich plain and open to both the northeast and southeast (44). This allowed the legion to monitor the connections between the coast and the south, and its proximity to Carthage (45) further reinforced the defense of Rome's agricultural and commercial interests, particularly in the area between Gabès and major trading stations (46).

Finally, the legion relocated to the camp at Lambaesis (47), which was established by the legion after the defeat of Tacfarinas in his rebellion against the Romans (48). The location was chosen for its strategic position, situated to the northwest of the Aurès Mountains, offering an excellent geographical vantage point. It was near numerous water sources and plains to the west and northeast and occupied a critical

location as one of the most frequently used routes between the coast and the desert. This allowed the legion to monitor movements between the north and south. Positioned between the Boukhbouzan and Takserin valleys, which flow in parallel from the southeast to the northwest, these rivers formed the natural boundaries of the city (49). Although the exact date of the legion's relocation to Lambaesis remains unknown, the primary reason for the move was to monitor the mountain inhabitants and pastoral tribes (50).

Historian Cagnat indicated that the Third Augustan Legion expanded beyond the African region, confronting the Musulamii tribes, and was supported by auxiliary forces and King Juba II to suppress all revolts, including the Tacfarinas rebellion (51).

The Third Augustan Legion achieved significant accomplishments in North Africa, being the backbone of the Roman army, which made Rome the ruler of the world and the seas at that time. It is worth noting that the legion's first major achievement was the African War led by Caesar against Juba I and his Pompeian allies. The legion's victory in this war resulted in Caesar's occupation of Africa, turning it into a Roman province (52).

The Roman province in Africa experienced multiple campaigns against the Musulamii rebellion led by Tacfarinas against the Roman presence in the region. The Third Augustan Legion played a crucial role in suppressing this rebellion, despite facing difficulties in controlling the Musulamii tribes and the challenging terrain (53). The legion relocated its headquarters to the heart of the revolts, specifically to the Lambaesis camp, to subdue and monitor the mountain populations and prevent further revolts (54).

The legion also focused on strengthening the southern borders of the proconsular province by launching campaigns against the Garamantes tribes, who posed a constant threat to Roman authority (55).

In addition to its military campaigns and defense efforts, the Third Augustan Legion was involved in building various military installations, such as forts and camps, including Hammam Fort, Madghacen Fort (56), and the Lambaesis camp, where the legion established its most significant base. This camp served to support military operations, enforce Roman control, and separate Roman settlements from the rebellious southern tribes (57).

Apart from its role in warfare and military construction, the Roman state utilized the Third Augustan Legion for land surveying projects known as *centuriation*. After seizing land and removing its original inhabitants, the land was divided into large plots called *centuriae*, aimed at increasing Roman control over agricultural lands and forests (58).

The Third Augustan Legion was disbanded by Emperor Gordian III in 238 AD but was soon re-established due to fears of local revolts or external threats. This reinstatement underscores the importance of the legion in North Africa, especially in maintaining security over Roman holdings in the region, defending against external threats, and upholding Roman sovereignty (59).

In addition to the Third Augustan Legion and its Lambaesis camp, other Roman military defense installations existed in North Africa, which we will explore in the following section.

**4- Other Roman Military Defensive Installations:** After occupying North Africa,

the Romans worked to protect their settlements and fend off various local resistances and external attacks by relying on a defensive system known as the *Limes* (60). This was a fortified defense line that spanned the regions under Roman control (61). Rome extended the *Limes* as its influence and expansions grew in the region. The key components of the *Limes* included ditches as the final construction phase (62), interspersed with towers and forts. Following the ditches were walls that stretched over varying distances, incorporating watchtowers, fortified guard posts, and storage facilities for provisions (63). Thirdly, a network of strategically planned roads was designed for smooth transportation and surveillance (64).

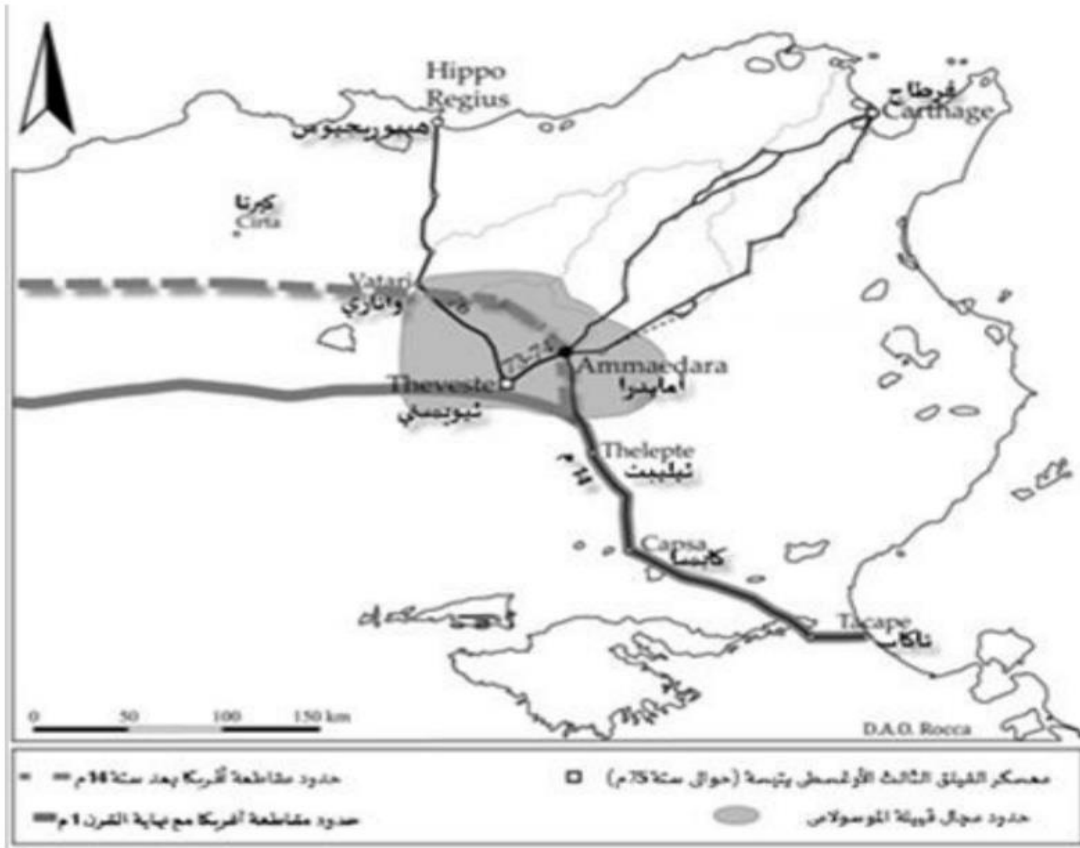
Rome constructed this defensive barrier to create a clear boundary between the Romans and the southern tribes outside their control (65), protecting Roman institutions and installations from external threats (66). Additionally, it aimed to limit the movement of pastoral tribes, protect Roman lands, expand settlements by seizing more territory, and establish secure trade and military routes. The *Limes* did not have fixed boundaries but expanded with the Roman army's military advances.

In the first century, the *Limes* stretched between Tripoli and Gabes along a narrow coastal strip. From Gabes westward, it reached the northern edge of Shatt al-Fajjaj, then extended north to Gafsa and Tebessa (67). The *Limes* also crossed the plains of

Setif and Medjana to Sour el-Ghozlane, then passed through Berrouaghia, the Chelif coast, and the Mina River, reaching Relizane. In the west, it passed through Oran, ending at the mouth of the Moulouya River in Morocco (68). As Roman influence expanded southward, new guard posts were established, surrounding the Aurès Mountains with forts by the late second century AD (69). This phase coincided with Rome's growing power and its settlements, while the indigenous Mauri tribes were in decline (70).

The *Limes* underwent changes during the late second and early third centuries (71), marking a second phase of construction. During this period, the *Limes* extended from the Philæna temples in the east, paralleling the coasts and passing through Leptis Magna to the rugged hills south of the coastal plains (72). It continued through southern Aurès and Shatt al-Jedi, then shrank northward through the Zab Mountains from Biskra to Maghnia in the west. Here, traces of the *Limes* were lost.

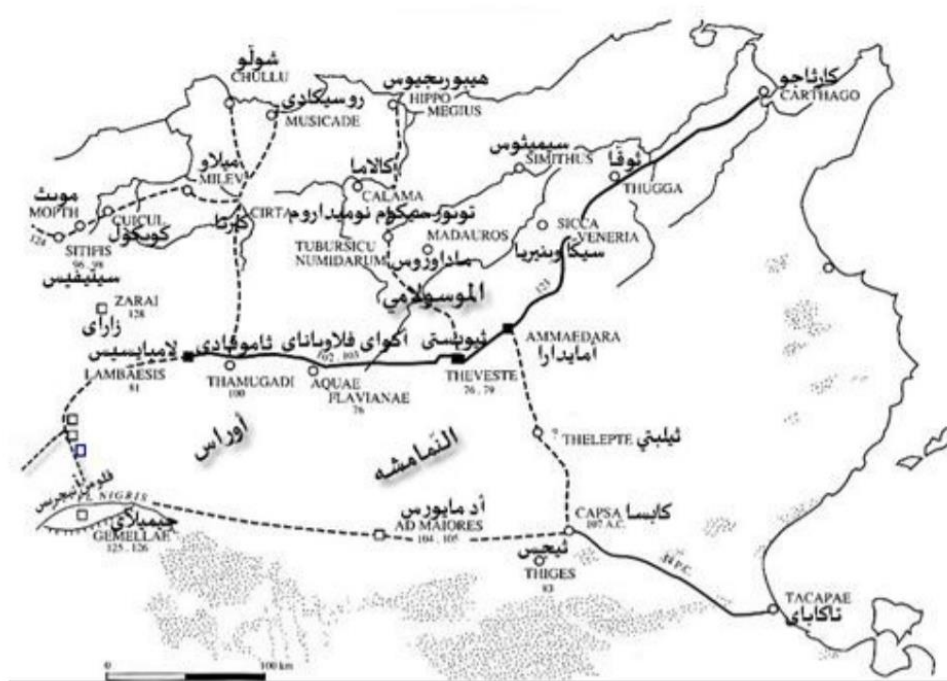
In Rabat, there are traces indicating that the *Limes* did not disappear completely, as it is believed to have extended to the Atlantic Ocean. It is also worth noting that the high plains of Algeria and Morocco had slipped out of Roman control, but Bedouin movements were still monitored by Roman military centers such as the Madghacen center, built in 149 AD west of Bou Saada and Djelfa (73).



Map No. 01: A map showing an image of the Limes Line in the 1st century AD.

See: Bekhouch Zouhir, "The Military Organization in Southern Numidia (The Aures

Region): The Role of the Roman Army in Roman Territorial Control," *Algerian Journal of Security and Development*, Issue 13, Algeria, 2018, p. 264.



**Map No. 02:** A map showing an image of the Limes Line in the 2nd century AD.

See: Bekhouch Zouhir, *The Military Organization in Southern Numidia (The Aures Region): The Role of the Roman Army in Roman Territorial Control*, Algerian Journal of Security and Development, Issue 13, Algeria, 2018, p. 256.

## 5. Trenches and Walls:

Rome constructed various fortifications to counter local attacks, including:

### 5.1 Trenches (Fossatum):

These were the final phase of building the Limes Line (74), featuring watchtowers, defensive forts, and walls made of stone or brick (75), depending on the local materials. Trenches were dug along with a network of

roads adjacent to them, with the aim of providing security and stability to the Romans by reinforcing defensive constructions with difficult-to-overcome barriers, thus limiting the movements of local tribes. The first trench dug after the fall of Carthage was known as the *Scipio's Trench* (*fossa scipianis*), separating Numidia from the Roman province of Africa. It was constructed in 146 BC around Roman lands (77), running from the mouth of the Wadi Kabir to the southeast, passing through Faga, Duga, and the city of Sfax (78).

Another notable trench was *Gemellensis*, known as "Saqiya Bent Al-Akhras Trench," which supported Fort Gemellae in southern Numidia (Biskra) and stretched 240 km (79). In Tunisia, a similar trench, about 17 km long, was found with the task of closing a significant natural passage in southern Tunisia. There were also trenches extending

from Numidia to Mauretania Tingitana, ranging in width from two to three meters and reaching a depth of 15 meters in valleys, with the trench lined with roads and guard posts with watchtowers (80).

## 5.2 Walls:

These walls were built to protect cities from infiltration by gangs and to serve as a refuge against external attacks. They also protected forts and camps, reinforcing them as a defensive shield. Most walls were built from large carved stones or bricks (81).

Two types of walls can be distinguished: those surrounding cities to protect colonies, built with stone and supported internally with curved walls, and a second type erected to prevent the infiltration of tribes and gangs, thinner than the first (82). Examples include the wall around the city of Tahouda in Numidia (83) and the walls in Mauretania Caesariensis, which emperors were keen to build, such as the walls of Rapidum (Sour Djouab) (84).

Other examples include the wall of Ziyama, located between Bougie (modern Bejaia) and Jijel along Algeria's coastal borders (85), as well as walls found in Mauretania Tingitana, particularly in the city of Lixus, located on a hill near Larache. Ruins of walls were also found protecting Fort Thamusida, situated between the cities of Banasa and Sila (modern Rabat) (86).

Approximately 60 meters from the fort's northeastern corner lies the city wall, which spans between 1,500 and 1,600 meters (87). These walls were constructed from both small and large stones, with some sections built using evenly-sized stones (88)(89)(90).

## 6. Camps and Forts:

Rome built camps to protect its territories in North Africa, combining military expansion and logistical movement. Camps served as resting places for soldiers, housing supplies and equipment. Most camps were constructed from large stones, baked clay, and small pebbles, and the construction was typically carried out by soldiers themselves (91).

### 6.1 Numidian Camps:

Several camps existed in Numidia, such as:

- **Camp Thevest (Theveste):** Headquarters of the Third Augustan Legion under Domitius Tullus, built to monitor the Aures people and nomads spread across southern Africa and Proconsular territory (92).
- **Henchir Besriani Camp:** Located between the Nememcha Mountains and the plains of Melgig, established by the Third Augustan Legion to monitor routes leading to Theveste and central Tunisian plains (93).
- **Loutaya Camp:** Situated southwest of the Aures Mountains (94).
- **Cucuna Camp:** Part of the Limes Auresien defensive line.
- **Tazoult Camp (Lambaesis):** The nucleus of Roman fortifications, built strategically below the Aures Mountains to oversee the surrounding plains (95). The camp had access to water for filling tanks, and the Third Augustan Legion settled here by order of Emperor Hadrian, as recorded in inscriptions from his visit in 127 AD (96). The camp remained in use until the late 3rd century AD due to its strategic importance.

- **Gemellae Camp:** Built by the commander of the Third Augustan Legion, located on a plateau in the Wadi Djedi region. It contained military and civilian quarters and is considered one of the main Limes Numidiaie camps (98).
- **Sidi Hajj Camp:** Established in the Aures Mountains near the Kantara Pass (99).
- **Tarmont Camp (Aras):** Built to monitor the western side of the Hodna region and protect the road between Chelia and Sour El Ghozlane (100).
- **Rapidum Camp:** Located on the military route connecting Ouled Nail and the Chlef Valley, this camp dates back to the first and second centuries and is among the oldest defensive outposts in Mauretania (101).

## 6.2 Mauretanian Camps:

Though documentation on Mauretanian camps is limited due to scarce sources, there are indications of Roman military presence in strategically significant regions, such as:

- **Bouhlou Camp:** Located 80 km east of Volubilis, overseeing the middle Moulouya River Basin and monitoring the ancient road connecting Numrous Sirovorum Camp (modern Maghnia) to Volubilis (102).

## 7. Forts:

Forts served as a precautionary measure against nomadic tribes and desert incursions. Notable examples include:

- **Fort Fom Tamesmida:** Located on the military road between Theveste

and the port of Gabes, dating back to Emperor Nerva's reign (103).

**Besseriani Fort:** Located 115 km southwest of Tebessa, in one of the corners of the massive mountain range that separates the desert from the elevated regions of Tebessa, Khenchela, Timgad, and Lambaesis. The fort controlled the surrounding plain within a 50-meter distance (104). Its primary function was to protect the roads leading to the Melghir salt flats in the Tebessa area and to extend control over the surrounding land (105).

**El Kasbat Fort:** This fort dates back to the third century, specifically to the year 252 AD, according to an inscription found at the fort's entrance (106). It is located on the western bank of the Ourlal River, facing the desert (107).

As for the forts in Mauretania Caesariensis, they were limited in the first century AD, but the Roman armies focused on fortifying the mountainous regions in the second century. Fortifications were found near the Boutaleb Mountains, close to Sétif, located south of the Djurdjura Mountains. The fort measured 100 meters in length, and its purpose was to monitor caravans coming from the south. There is also mention of **Sour Direoua Fort**, located 14 km west of Oumal, built to guard the road connecting it to **Sour Djouab (Rapidum)** (108).

To protect transportation routes between Bougie, Tiklat, Sidi Khalifa, and the coast, the Roman army built **Ain Kabbouch Fort (109)**.

**Ain Chkour Fort:** Located 4 km north of Volubilis (110).

**Tabrenea Fort:** Situated 16 km north of Lixus (111).

## 8. Towers and Castles:

Roman defensive architecture in Africa included towers and castles to fortify Roman rule.

### 8.1 Towers:

Towers were used to support city walls and the Limes (112), taking various shapes (rectangular, square, circular) (113). Built on solid foundations, they provided a means of surveillance and communication between defensive positions. In Numidia, nine towers were built around the walls of the Tazoult

camp, with some facing inward for easier access to the upper walls.

### 8.2 Castles:

Castles were smaller fortified buildings used to monitor roads and provide housing for troops. They also stored munitions in times of crisis. Examples include:

- **Civitas Pophtensis Castle:** Located in eastern Numidia on the border of the Proconsular province.
- **Timrag Castle:** Positioned to monitor and guard open passes in the Aures Mountains.

In summary, the Romans established numerous defensive structures across North Africa, driven by their need to expand and maintain control. These fortifications played a crucial role in ensuring the stability of Roman settlements in the region.