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Néhémie Strupler

GREEN OPEN ACCESS / SELF ARCHIVE

# Fishing in Troubled Water?

## *The Lesser Syrtis under East Roman Rule (6th–7th Century CE)*

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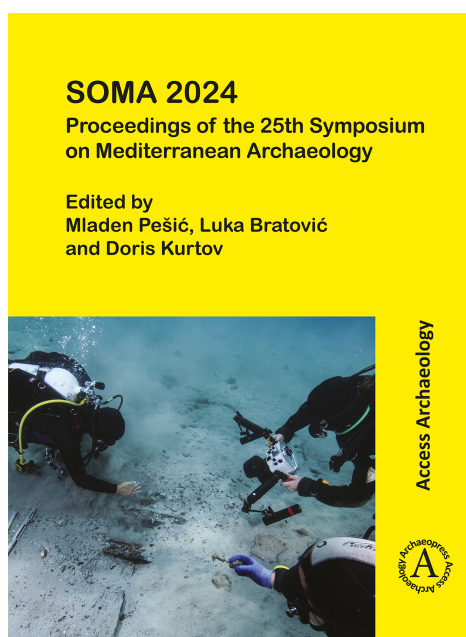
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# Fishing in Troubled Water?

## *The Lesser Syrtis under East Roman Rule (6th–7th Century CE)*

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### Abstract

The Byzantine period of North Africa (6th–7th century CE) has long been dismissed as merely the final phase of Roman presence in the area. Along with the reorganisation of the Mediterranean economic space following the establishment of the Vandal Kingdom, it has been assumed that the economy of North Africa was significantly diminished and lacked dynamism. While economic activities decreased in the northern part of North Africa (e.g., Carthage), there was growth in other regions. In this paper, we demonstrate the rising importance of the coast of Byzacena, particularly the Gulf of Gabès. We show that, despite its poor reputation, the natural setting and location of the Gulf offered many advantages that were subtly turned into strengths. We review the archaeological and textual evidence to present a new portrait of the Lesser Syrtis and its unique dynamics.

*Keywords:* Economy; Byzantine North Africa; Commerce; Port cities; Trade Routes

### Introduction<sup>3</sup>

The Gulf of Gabès, a stretch of coastline located on the south-eastern border of Tunisia (Figure 1), was a vital hub for regional and trans-regional trade since the Punic period. It was known throughout Antiquity as the Lesser Syrtis (*Syrtis Minor*) to distinguish it from the Greater Syrtis (*Syrtis Major*), which corresponds to the Libyan Gulf<sup>4</sup>. The Lesser Syrtis was a strategic location between the pre-desert Libyan valleys and the maritime trade routes crossing the Mediterranean basin. This role persisted after Roman Empire's gradual conquest of North Africa (2nd century BCE–1st century CE), a process through which the Gulf's cities were progressively integrated into the commercial and fiscal network operating in the *mare nostrum*.<sup>5</sup> Following the pivotal Diocletian administrative reforms in the Roman Empire (late 3rd–early 4th century CE), North Africa was divided into smaller provinces. The northern sector of the

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<sup>3</sup>This paper is part of the current project on the Byzantine Military Strategy of North Africa (Anna Leone – PI) which involves Dan Lawrence, Tommaso Giuliodoro, Néhémie Strupler (all Durham University) and Vivien Prigent (École française de Rome) funded by Leverhulme Trust. The idea for this paper developed through discussion with project PI Anna Leone, who also provided some information on the pottery. Strupler has worked on the ecosystems and completed the figures for the paper, while Giuliodoro has worked on the historical interpretation and analysis; they both contributed to the editing of the text.

<sup>4</sup>The Latin term “*Syrtis*” (sing.), meaning “quicksand” or “bog”, likely has a Semitic etymology, possibly traced back to the Punic settlers who inhabited the area as far back as the 6th century BC (see Mastino 1990: 16–17). The plural “*Syrtes*” is used to designate both gulfs.

<sup>5</sup>The scholarship on the subject is collected in Mastino 1990; Rebuffat 1990; Troussset 1992; Slim et al. 2004: 15–21; Cordovana 2016.

Lesser Syrtis was included in the province of Byzacena, while the southern sector was attached to Tripolitania.<sup>6</sup>

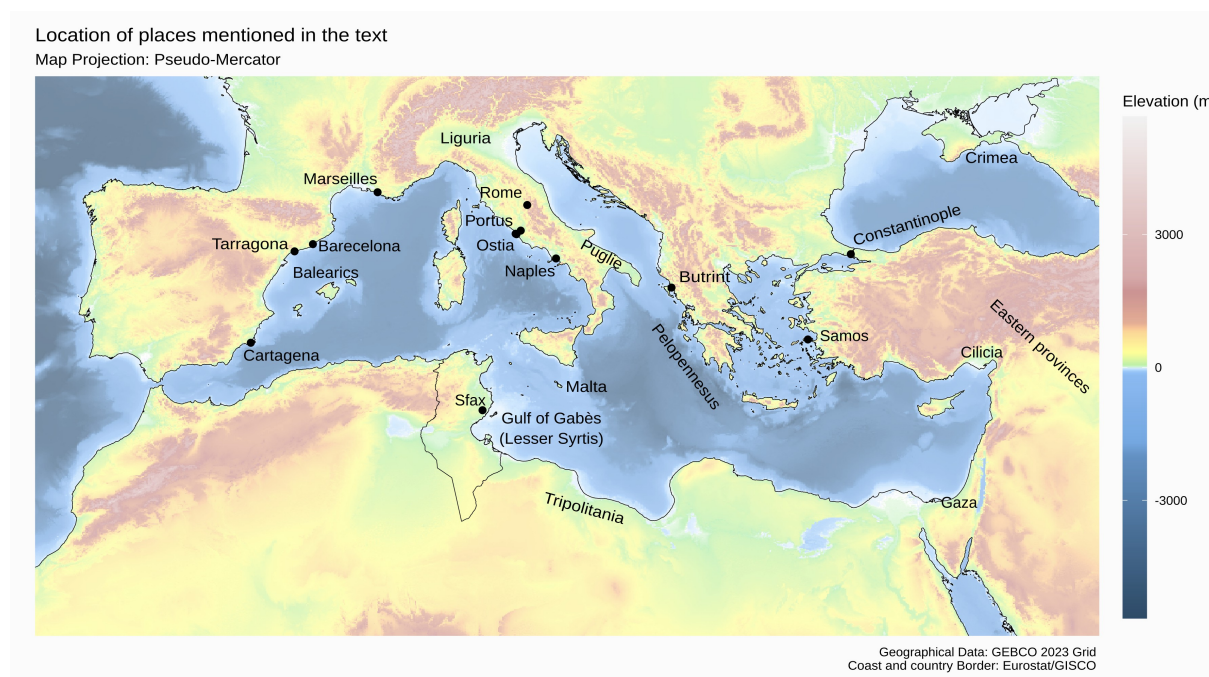


Figure 1: Geographical map of the Mediterranean showing the main sites and geographical designations outside the Gulf of Gabès mentioned in the text. Map created by N. Strupler with R (R Core Team 2024).

Despite the Vandal conquest of North Africa and their settlement in the region, substantial evidence indicates that the economy and the settlement system of 5th-century North Africa were not entirely disrupted. Instead, a high level of vitality was maintained.<sup>7</sup> Surprisingly, however, the development of the maritime cities of the Lesser Syrtis during Late Antiquity has never been investigated in detail. In particular, the role of this region during the East Roman rule of North Africa (534–698 CE), a period of great upheavals for both North Africa and the Empire as a whole, remains to be further explored. One reason for this lack of thorough reconsideration lies in the general approach to the study of Ancient and Late Antique North Africa. This field of research, established during the French colonial rule over the Maghreb, traditionally favoured the study of the Punic and Roman periods. As a result, the Byzantine period of North Africa has long been dismissed as merely the final phase of Roman presence [end page 274]

<sup>6</sup>The North African province of *Valeria Byzacena*, established after Diocletian's reforms initially comprised the modern-day territories of central and southern Tunisia. It stretched from Gabès (initially attached to Tripolitania) to Hammamet on the coast, and from Gafsa to Maktar in the hinterland (Desanges 1992). Although its borders evolved over the period considered (Modéran 1999), the province's structure survived both the Vandal and the Byzantine conquest of North Africa. It continued to function as a military and administrative district as late as the mid-7th century. See Morrisson, Prigent 2018: 1821-1833; Price et al. 2014: 169.

<sup>7</sup>See Modéran 1996; Leone 2007, with further relevant bibliography.

in the area, receiving only occasional examination.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, most historical and archaeological investigations conducted on the Lesser Syrtis have focussed on the Punic and Roman imperial periods. Aside from research conducted on key paleo-Christian buildings, the late antique phases of occupation and exploitation preceding the Islamic conquests have yet to be fully investigated in all their complexities.<sup>9</sup>

We aim in this contribution to shed new light on a previously overlooked coastal area of the Mediterranean from the 6th–7th century, which corresponds to the phase of Byzantine presence in North Africa. First, we present the natural features of the Gulf and its evolution over this historical period. We then reconsider the available textual evidence, incorporating the renewed theoretical framework of the history and archaeology of harbours, maritime environments and their networks between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, we base our investigation on Iunci, a major city that flourished during that time on the coast of the Gulf of Gabès.<sup>11</sup> Based on this comprehensive analysis of the available evidence, we critically reconsider the organisation of the littoral settlements in the region and their cultural, political and commercial role in the development and management of the network systems linking southern Byzacena to other North African districts and the broader Mediterranean region. By offering a fresh perspective on the role of the cities of the Lesser Syrtis under Byzantine rule and highlighting their changing fortunes and strategic importance in an evolving maritime landscape, we demonstrate that understanding the place of Byzacena's southern shores in late antique exchange networks also illuminates North Africa's contribution to the broader Mediterranean economy at the dawn of Antiquity.

### A Unique but Challenging Setting: High Tide, Shallow Depth, Rich Ecosystem

The Roman denominated Lesser Syrtis region corresponds to a stretch of coastline of the Gulf of Gabès, at the south-eastern border of Tunisia. This region is flanked by the large Kerkennah Islands to the north and the island of Jerba to the south (Figure 2). Its coastline stretches for almost 700 km, and hosts several major modern towns, such as Gabès and Sfax. This latter is the second-most populous city in the country, following the capital city of Tunis, and is the fastest-growing economic centre of the country (Bousnina 2015). [end page 275]

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<sup>8</sup>The most comprehensive analysis of the history and archaeology of Byzantine North Africa is still represented by Charles Diehl's *L'Afrique Byzantine* (1896). Note, however, that from the 1980s scholarly attention to this topic has increased, and several studies and research projects have been devoted to the examination of North African society, economy and politics during the 6th and 7th centuries. See as an example Durlat 1981; Pringle 1981; Leone 2007; Stevens, Conant 2016; Bockman, Leone, Von Rummel 2019; Merrills 2023.

<sup>9</sup>Concerning the archaeology of the Late Roman Christian buildings, see the catalogue composed by Baratte et al. 2014: 239–263, with further relevant bibliography. An exception to this situation is represented by the work carried out since 2017 by a Tunisian-French research team at the site of Thenae, see Othman et al. 2023.

<sup>10</sup>See as an example the papers collected in Preiser-Kapeller, Dam 2015; Preiser-Kapeller, Kolias, Dam 2021; Ginalis 2024.

<sup>11</sup>The project in collaboration between Durham University (PI Prof. Anna Leone), and the Institut National du Patrimoine de Tunisie (INP), Ammar Othman, started in 2017 and it is ongoing. The excavation has been co-ordinated by Dr. Maurizio Marinato, the survey by Dr. Marco Nebbia. The pottery was studied between 2017 and 2019 by Michel Bonifay, and is currently being studied by Sami Ben Tahar (INP – Roman and Byzantine pottery) and Chokri Tohiri (INP – Medieval pottery).

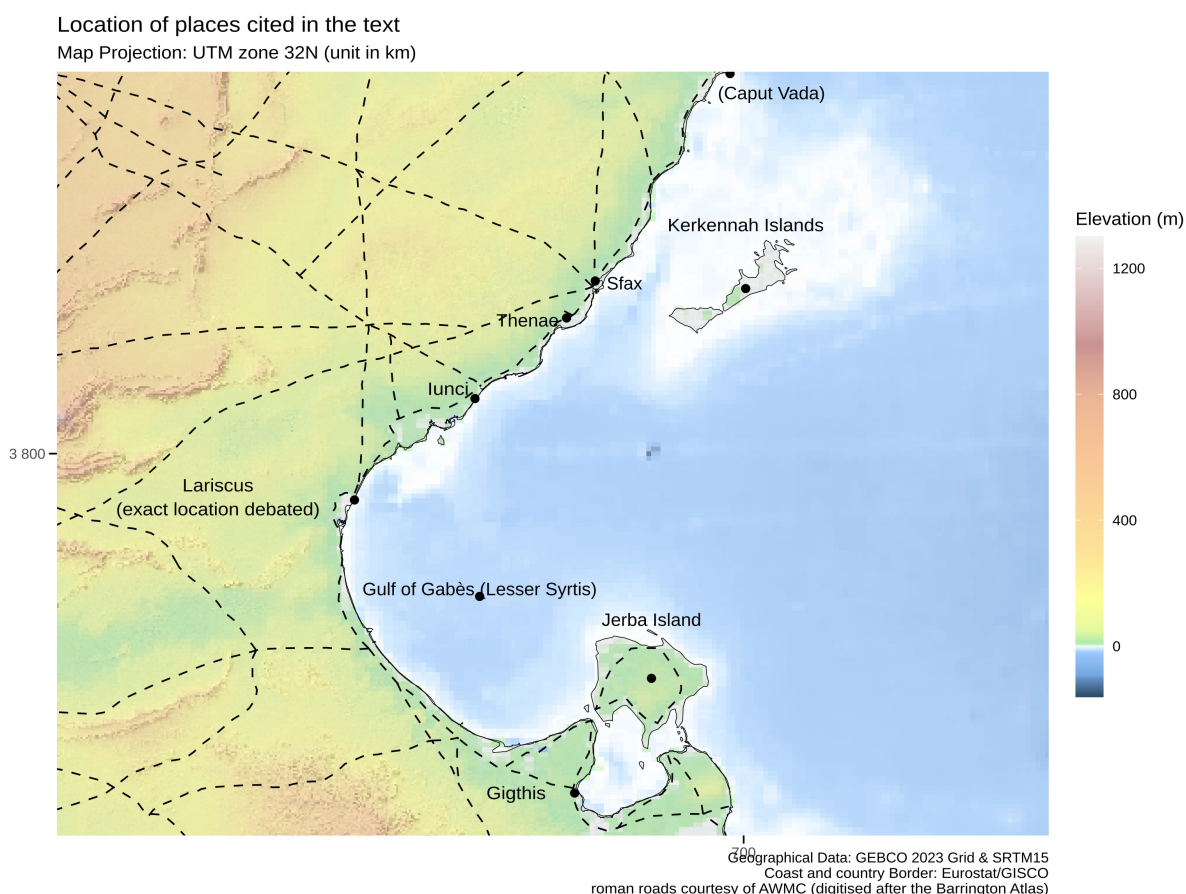


Figure 2: Geographical map of the Gulf of Gabès with the main sites and geographical designations mentioned in the text. The dashed lines indicate the reconstructed Roman road system (based on the Barrington Atlas). Map created by N. Strupler with R (R Core Team 2024)

The coastal morphology of the Gulf is varied and includes both beaches and cliffs, which can exceed 8 metres in height (Oueslati 2004). Work conducted by scholars in the 1990s has shown that coastal areas have experienced significant changes over time, related to rising sea levels and deteriorating coastlines (Slim et al. 2004: 22). Since Antiquity, the sea level has risen, affecting archaeological sites that were located just above the former sea level (Oueslati 1995: 2022).

Contrary to the typical characteristics of the Mediterranean Basin, which is known to be oligotrophic, the Gulf of Gabès is very rich in fish and marine resources (Béjaoui et al. 2019). Until recently, and before the impact of large-scale industrial pollution (El Kateb et al. 2018), the Gulf of Gabès was an excellent place for fishing and the exploitation of maritime resources. In the Gulf of Gabès, the tides are unusually high, among the highest in the Mediterranean Sea, reaching up to 2 m (Othmani et al. 2017). The central part of the Gulf (i.e., at the latitude of Gabès) has the greatest difference between high and low tides, reaching up to 2.3 m during the spring tide. This impressive tidal range results from the flat underwater terrain and shallow sea depth. The water depth is less than 50 m up to 110 km from the coast. The shallow nature of the Gulf makes navigation hazardous for ships, as many sand ridges loom close to the

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coast, and the flat underwater terrain increases sensitivity to winds. This combination of high tidal ranges, shallow marine waters with numerous sand ridges, and challenging winds contributed to the Gulf's negative reputation among foreign sailors, despite its rich natural resources (Slim et al. 2004: 15–25).

As an example, Pomponius Mela, known as the earliest Roman geographer (active in mid-1st century CE) emphasises the absence of ports, or at least the difficult accessibility of this coast (Slim et al. 2004: 17). The bad reputation is not only attested in antiquity, though. The difficulty of navigating the Gulf for foreigners is well documented in modern times, as many maps from the 17th and 18th centuries CE indicate that the Gulf was unknown because it could not be explored (Figure 3).

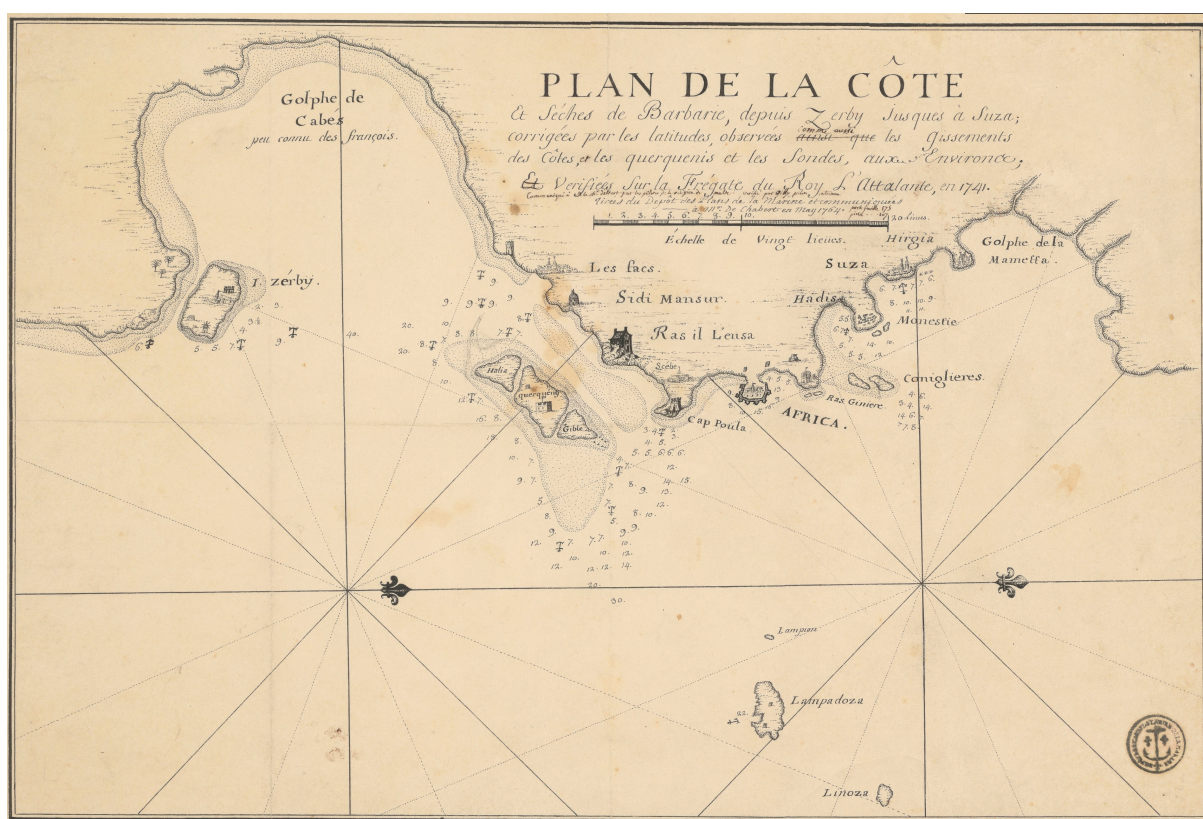


Figure 3: Figure 3. Map dated 1741 of the Gulf of Gabès (north is on the right, with the island of Jerba in the top left corner and the Kerkennah islands approximately in the centre). In the Gulf of Gabès (top left of the image) there is an indication: “Golphe de Cabès peu connu des François” (which can be roughly translated as “Gulf of Gabès, almost unknown to the French”). Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Cartes et plans, GE SH 18 PF 105.

## A Window of Opportunity

Despite these negative connotations, the coastal archaeological survey conducted in the 1990s brought to light the economic importance of the industry related to the sea's resources in the Gulf during Late Antiquity (Slim et al. 2004). These remains attest that the Gulf offers many advantages from the perspective of those living on the coast, with local knowledge of navigating and fishing in its waters. If some areas of the coast are hardly accessible, this has been turned into an advantage for certain cities,

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which could monopolise maritime and terrestrial trade routes to become major nodal points during particular time periods. Recent archaeological data show the extensive exploitation of fish at various sites. The Lesser Syrtis was a strategic location where fishing and fish-related products, such as the extraction of purple dye and the production of fish sauces, constituted significant economic activities. Complementary to this, the inland steppe-like environment was exploited for the cultivation of olive trees and pasturage.<sup>12</sup> According to archaeological and epigraphical investigations conducted in the area, up to the early 5th century, the city of Thenae was the major centre in the Lesser Syrtis for the export of goods, such as olive oil, grain, purple dye, *garum* or *salsamenta*. Located on the northern tip of the Syrtis Gulf (Figure 2, approximately 12 km south of Sfax), Thenae was closely connected with other inland and coastal cities via imperial commercial routes. As a harbour, it was also linked to the major ports of the Western Roman Mediterranean.<sup>13</sup> Other commercial hubs operated in the Gulf before the Byzantine conquest. Centres such as Gigthis (Figure 2), located in the south-eastern section of the Gulf and equipped with significant port facilities, were also integrated into the maritime and terrestrial networks of exchange of the central Mediterranean basin.<sup>14</sup>

### The Multimodal Connections of the Lesser Syrtis in the 6th and 7th Century: An Analysis Based on Textual Evidence

After the Vandal conquest cut North Africa out of the Roman fiscal system (5th century CE), the provincial commercial and exchange networks progressively adapted to the evolving situation. This impacted the organisation of the coastal settlements of the Lesser Syrtis.<sup>15</sup> The first signs of this adaptation appear in the written record in the early 6th century, when new centres had already consolidated their positions. In a passage of his *Vandalic War*, Procopius recounts the episode when in 533 Justinian's fleet of over 500 ships sailed towards North Africa to capture it from the Vandals.<sup>16</sup> He reports a speech purportedly given by Archelaus, prefect for military expenses, to the army officers aboard Belisarius' ship. Archelaus claimed that only Carthage, on the Northern coast, and Iunci, in the Lesser Syrtis, were safe ports for the Eastern Roman navy along the Tunisian coast.<sup>17</sup> Even if Belisarius eventually chose to disembark the Roman army in Caput Vada (modern La Chebba), around 100 km

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<sup>12</sup>Overviews in Courtois et al. 1952; Hitchner et al. 1990: 244-245; Lassère 1984; Slim et al. 2004: 19-21; Wilson 2006: 525-528; Strupler, Giuliodoro, Leone, in press.

<sup>13</sup>On the vitality of Thenae's maritime connections see Desanges et al. 2010: 232-233; Othman et al. 2023; Belmabrouk et al. 2023: 184-187.

<sup>14</sup>Ennabli 1976a; Slim et al. 2004: 19-20. The port facilities of Gigthis, dating to the late 1st–early 2nd century CE, are discussed in Slim et al. 2004: 25-26.

<sup>15</sup>On the end of the fiscal connection between Rome and North Africa following the Vandal conquest of Carthage (439) and the death of the emperor Valentinianus III (455) see Wickham 2005: 87-93; Caliri 2007; Merrills, Miles 2010: 141-176; Tedesco 2011: 115-125; Von Rummel 2011.

<sup>16</sup>The fleet is described in Proc. *Bell. Vand.*, I, 11. According to Procopius, Belisarius had 592 ships at his disposal, of which only 92 were equipped for maritime warfare. Procopius defines this latter group of smaller and faster vessels with the term “*δρόμων*”, meaning “runner”, see Pryor, Jeffreys 2006: 125-128.

<sup>17</sup>Proc. *Bell. Vand.*, I, 15: 8-9: “Have you not then heard that this promontory – I mean from Carthage to Iunci (*δε εἰς Ἰούχηνην ἐκ Καρχηδόνοσ*) – extends, they say, for a journey of nine days, altogether without harbours and lying open to the wind from whatever quarter it may blow?” Being employed by the general as his advisor, Procopius was present at the meeting held on Belisarius' ship.

north of Iunci, clearly, the port of Iunci had a good reputation with the administration in Constantinople and high officials like Archelaus. Given that merchants from the East were part of the imperial intelligence network, Archelaus' knowledge about Iunci probably indicates not only that Iunci was already a famous major port, but also that it had strong trade links with the East.<sup>18</sup>

Iunci, previously known as Macomades Minores, was a medium-sized town in the northern Lesser Syrtis, about 35 km south of Thenae (Figure 2).<sup>19</sup> According to Procopius' account, Iunci was the major port city in the Lesser Syrtis at the dawn of the East Roman rule over North Africa. However, other cities from the Gulf appear to have participated in the region's maritime network. Lariscus, located along the shores south of Iunci, represents one of such cases, being mentioned, along with Iunci, in Corippus' *Iohannis* (Figure 2).<sup>20</sup>

Corippus, a North African poet active in the mid-6th century, was not particularly interested in describing the coastal settlements of the Gulf, but he mentions that Lariscus and Iunci received military supplies through their harbours in 548 CE. These were sent from Carthage to Eastern Roman troops campaigning against local indigenous groups (labelled *Mauri* in the textual evidence). Corippus also mentions that Lariscus provided shelter for the provincial fleet supporting the field army.<sup>21</sup> These indications illustrate the value the port cities of the Lesser Syrtis retained for the Byzantine administration of North Africa. Thanks to their harbours, Lariscus and Iunci represented suitable points of entry for the army to control the southern borderlands of the recently conquered province. Additionally, Corippus' account provides evidence of the interconnectedness of the maritime cities of the northern sector of the Lesser Syrtis, both within the Lesser Syrtis and with more distant North African port cities like Carthage.

The textual evidence even allows us to observe differences in the development of the cities of the Gulf. Lariscus vanishes from the corpus of written sources after serving as a shelter for the provincial fleet in 548 CE. In contrast, Iunci starts to be prominent. Following the conflicts against Byzacenic and Tripolitanian indigenous groups in the mid-6th century, which severely affected the city and its hinterland<sup>22</sup>, Iunci received significant imperial investments. In the 570s, the Byzantines fortified the

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<sup>18</sup>The role of Eastern Mediterranean merchants operating in North Africa and Sicily as intelligence providers for Belisarius' campaign is explicitly mentioned in Zach. Rhet. *Hist. Eccl.* 9, 17; Proc. *Bell. Vand.* I, 20. See also Modéran 2003: 581-583; Cristini 2023.

<sup>19</sup>On the identification of Iunci with Macomades Minores, see Poinssot 1944; Troussel 2003; Desanges et al., 2010: 160-161. Unfortunately, there is no information on the process which resulted in the change of the toponym, but by 411 the city name had already changed (*Gesta Conlotionis Carthaginiensis anno 411*, I, 187: 78-79). On the form "Iunci", currently adopted in the scholarship to refer to our city, see Desanges et al. 2010: 160.

<sup>20</sup>The settlement of Lariscus remains unidentified. A location around 35 km south of Iunci has been suggested, in an area now known as La Skhira, where two late antique Christian basilicas and several necropolises have been uncovered and excavated since the 1960s (Fendri 1961; Ennabli 1976b; Pringle 1981: 207-208). However, as noted by Duval 1973, Oueslati et al. 1992 and Slim et al. 2004: 115-116, it appears more appropriate to identify these ruins with the site of Benfas/Bennefa, whose location in relation to Iunci is expressly described in the *Vita Fulgentii* (XII, 29: 186) and whose bishops are known up to 484 CE. On the other hand, no bishop of Lariscus is known; see Maier 1973: 114. The location of Lariscus, between Iunci and Tacapes (modern Gabès), is suggested by Corippus: *Cor. Ioh.* VIII, 30-31.

<sup>21</sup>*Cor. Ioh.*, VIII, 30-31; 45-48. See also Durliat 1998: 64; Merrills 2023: 184-185.

<sup>22</sup>On the 535-550 CE conflicts against Byzacenic and Tripolitanian indigenous groups, see Modéran 2003: 565-643; Merrills 2023.

city by building or renovating the city walls, and stationed a provincial army garrison there.<sup>23</sup> Clearly, the empire needed to ensure the control of Iunci and the Lesser Syrtis in the face of recurrent indigenous unrest. By strengthening its presence in Iunci, however, the East Roman Empire could also better exploit both the Mediterranean trade routes and the highly productive agricultural land of southern Byzacena. Thanks to its strategic location, a rare suitable interface between land and sea in the Gulf, Iunci became the most important economic and administrative centre of the Lesser Syrtis.

The importance of Iunci's interface should also be taken into account when interpreting the textual evidence. Procopius reports in his *Secret History* that around 540 CE, during the reign of Emperor Justinian (527–565 CE), ship-owners (*ναύκληροι/navicularii*) from North Africa arrived in the capital city Constantinople with provincial tax revenues from North Africa. They then returned with goods purchased in Constantinople.<sup>24</sup> Procopius does not specify the city from which the *navicularii* and their fleet sailed to the capital, or the city to which they returned. However, with the prominence of Iunci in the Byzantine administration of Southern Byzacena, it is reasonable to speculate that this city was somehow involved. This would mean that Iunci was used to ship directly to and from Constantinople. This would include the provincial fiscal revenue (including the *annona*, a tax dedicated to supplying the empire) going one way, but also the eastern goods purchased in Constantinople for North Africa on the return.

Even if this remains hypothetical at the moment because no written record allows us to directly connect Iunci to Procopius's account on the North African *ναύκληροι/navicularii*, this would fit in with the general picture of the evolution of the Western territories of the Empire between the 6th–7th centuries. Other port cities benefitting from imperial interest were integrated into extra-regional communication and trade routes,<sup>25</sup> and we think this was the case also for Iunci. Indeed, Procopius' *Vandalic War* describes a sailing route connecting the northern sector of the Lesser Syrtis to the East and the imperial capital, Constantinople. This route operated at least from the early 6th century, and possibly even earlier. It began in central Byzacena, passed by Malta, south-eastern Sicily, Puglia, the southern coasts of the Peloponnesus, and the northern Aegean (Figure 1). Belisarius used this route in 533 to move the imperial fleet of 500 ships from Constantinople to the Gulf. Mid to late 7th-century texts, such as the *Doctrina Jacoby* and the *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, show that this seaway remained in use, or at least well-known, until the late 7th century.<sup>26</sup> This indicates its importance over more than 200 years. It was along

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<sup>23</sup>Concerning Iunci's city walls, see *C.I.L.*, VIII, n. 10498; Leone, Giuliodoro 2022, with further bibliography. For the possibility that the city hosted a garrison, see Georg. *Cypr. Descr.*, 644; Cosentino 2022.

<sup>24</sup>*Proc. Secr. Hist.*, III, 25, 8–9. The dating of this passage is discussed in Stein 1949: 442, n. 1. During the period under consideration, *ναύκληροι/navicularii* were private ship-owners who, in specific moments of the year, were required by the imperial administration to manage the shipment of imperial taxes (in particular the *annona*). See also Reynolds 2016: 139. A different analysis has been proposed by Vera 2010: 10, according to whom the *navicularii* described by Procopius were private merchants operating outside the imperial fiscal system. Although this might be the case, it is clear from the same passage of the *Secret History* that the North Africa ship-owners played a role in the management of the imperial fiscal system, although probably not so willingly: "... he (the officer charged with the supervision of Constantinople's port taxation) ... forced them (the *navicularii*) to report for service in North Africa...". The service North African ship-owners were required to perform is undoubtedly to be identified in transporting provincial tax revenues (including the *annona*) to the capital.

<sup>25</sup>The case of Naples appears paradigmatic, see Arthur 2002. Other known examples are represented both by major urban centres such as Syracuse, Ravenna, and Butrint, and by smaller settlements, like S. Antonino di Pertini and Torcello.

<sup>26</sup>Belisarius' fleet travel from Constantinople to central Byzacena (Caput Vada): *Proc. Bell. Vand.*, I, 13. The same route, ending however in Thenae, c. 75 km south of Caput Vada, was used by the Jewish merchant Jacob, who travelled back and forth from Constantinople in 632 and 634 (*Doctr. Jac. Nup. Bapt.*, V, 20; Dagron 1991: 238–240) and by the bishop Kyprianos of Thenae, whose travel to Constantinople is to be placed in the second half of the 7th century, probably *ante* 665 CE (*Mir. Sanct. Dem.*, VI, 307–317; Lemerle 1981: 168–169). As underlined by Clay 1992: 350, this was the safest and fastest route for a traveller coming from the East, but as proved by the available sources it was equally favourable for travelling from North Africa to the East. See also McCormick 2001: 502–508, who discusses a section of this same route still connecting south-eastern Sicily to Constantinople in the 8th and 9th centuries.

this route that most of the Lesser Syrtis communicated with the wider Mediterranean basin. If correct, this should be visible in the archaeological record.

### Corroborating the Dynamics of Exchanges: Late Antique Ceramic Assemblages from the Lesser Syrtis

Although the Lesser Syrtis remains poorly explored archaeologically and the picture is incomplete, there is enough evidence to trace its evolution. Since the 1990s, surveys have been conducted along the gulf shores, while fieldwork at the sites of Iunci and Thenae, first started as early as the early 20th century, has been ongoing since 2017.<sup>27</sup>

In the 4th and much of the 5th century, the Gulf trade was concentrated on the Western Mediterranean. However, by the 6th and 7th century, trade networks expanded towards the East (Pieri 2005: 167-168; Reynolds 2016: 140-145). The ceramic assemblages from Iunci reflect well this expansion and Eastern Mediterranean materials dominate the finds at Iunci. Naturally, pottery analyses attest to the presence of substantial quantities of local productions from the late 5th to the mid-7th century such as North African red slip wares (ARS), amphorae from Proconsularis (mainly Nabeul and Carthage area) and amphorae from southern Byzacena. However, material studies reveal large numbers of amphorae from Cilicia (LR1), Argolid (LR2), Samos (LR8), Gaza (LR4), along with cooking wares from Constantinople and the Aegean area. The best represented types are LR1 and LR2 dating to the 6th–7th century.<sup>28</sup> The presence of these types of amphorae along the Danube frontier was linked to the supply of the imperial army.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, this could also be the case at Iunci, and the presence of a garrison of the provincial troops stationed in the city since 570's CE would be a matching outlet for these typologies of amphorae. However, the impressive quantity of material suggests that private consumption was also a driving force in the transport of these amphorae from Cilicia and the Argolid to Iunci. Overall, it is clear is that Iunci must have been a central hub for imperial and private distribution systems between North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean in the late 6th and early 7th centuries.<sup>30</sup>

To better understand the rise of Iunci as seen in the textual evidence in the North African context, it is instructive to compare it with the ceramic record of Carthage as outlined by Fulford and Peacock. As the capital and main port of Late Roman, Vandal and Byzantine Africa, Carthage consistently received large quantities of Eastern Mediterranean goods throughout Late Antiquity. In the early 5th century (400-425) Eastern Mediterranean amphorae accounted for 10% of imports. This figure doubled to 20% by 475–500 and reached almost 30% by Belisarius' conquest in 533. During the second part of the 6th

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<sup>27</sup>See *infra*, notes 3-6.

<sup>28</sup>Bonifay et al. 2002; Mabrouk et al. in press. No quantitative data on the assemblages from Iunci is available yet.

<sup>29</sup>Karagiorgou 2001: 149-156; See however Reynolds 2010: 265-271 for the necessary caveats concerning the interpretation of these findings as a clear marker of the imperial supply system (*annona*); Mabrouk et al. in press.

<sup>30</sup>Slim et al. 2004: 105-125. For an assessment of the coexistence and mutual relationships of private trade with the Early Byzantine imperial exchange network, still a hotly debated topic, see the works of Wickham 2005: 70-73; Vera 2010 and Cosentino 2021; 2024.

century, however, this figure steadily decreases, dropping to less than 10% by the late 6th– mid 7th century.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, the data from Iunci record exactly the opposite trend. Although absolute and relative percentages regarding the ceramic findings from the site have not been established yet, the pottery assemblages suggest that imports of Eastern Mediterranean amphorae increased from the second half of the 6th century, indicating Iunci's growing importance in trade networks under East Roman rule.<sup>32</sup> Beyond Iunci, Eastern Mediterranean amphorae (mostly LR1 and LR2) have been found in moderate quantities at several coastal sites in the Lesser Syrtis, from Meninx (Djerba Island) to Sidi Mansour (Sfax district)<sup>33</sup>. As Iunci was the largest port in the Gulf of Gabès, it is likely that it represented the main hub for the redistribution of goods across the Lesser Syrtis (Mabrouk et al.). Beside substantial quantities of Eastern Mediterranean amphorae, Iunci holds the second-largest amount of Eastern Mediterranean cooking wares in North Africa, surpassed only by Carthage (Fulford 1984; Mabrouk et al.). The quantity of such materials certainly attests to the regularity of the exchanges with the Eastern Mediterranean and to the attractiveness of Iunci's market. Overall, imports suggest that Iunci's exchanges with the East were highly relevant in the general trade networks of the Mediterranean, probably matching the role of Carthage itself.

If Iunci was a major importer of goods from the Eastern Mediterranean region, what does the distribution of North African ceramics reveal? From the late 6th to early 7th century Tunisian exports declined.<sup>34</sup> This has been interpreted as a sign of a general economic downturn in North Africa. Fulford suggested that Byzantine governance partly caused this (Fulford 1980: 75-76). Indeed, Justinian ordered that the provincial army and administration should be supplied with locally produced goods, which likely reduced North African exports after 534 CE.<sup>35</sup> Despite this decline, however, significant amounts of North African exports have been uncovered both in Eastern and Western Mediterranean coastal sites.

Amphorae from Nabeul (Keay 35A, 35B, 55-57) and southern Byzacena (Keay 8B) have been found together at several Eastern Mediterranean sites, including Constantinople, Alexandria, and even the major ports of the Black Sea, such as Tomis and Chersonesos (Figure 1).<sup>36</sup> As Iunci is the only North African site where these vessels have been found together in significant quantities alongside 6th and

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<sup>31</sup>Data and percentages of Eastern amphorae imports to Carthage are given in Fulford 1980: 71; Peacock, Fulford 1984: 258-262. See also Clay 1992: 350-352; Bonifay 2013: 532-533.

<sup>32</sup>See Bonifay 2004: 457, in particular his remarks concerning the relationship between the Byzacenan and Carthaginian networks of exchange over the period considered: "On a donc l'impression, en examinant la céramique africaine de Marseille, d'assister très schématiquement à un jeu de balancier entre la région de Carthage et la Byzacène, l'une ou l'autre de ces deux régions devenant tour à tour dominante au sein des échanges".

<sup>33</sup>LR1 and LR2 amphorae have been identified in Meninx, the island of Jerba (Slim et al. 2004: 99-100; Fontana 2000); at Nadour (north of Gabès; Slim et al. 2004: 11-114); Zabouza, probably corresponding to ancient Ad Oleastrum (Slim et al. 2004: 117); on the three islands composing the Kneiss archipelago, 15 km south of Iunci (Slim et al. 2004: 118-120); Sidi Mansour, in the northern Sfax district (Slim et al. 2004: 130-133). The same typologies of eastern amphorae have also been retrieved from the sites of Jebeniana, Chebba (ancient Caput Vada), and Salakta/Syllechtum, but their location on the Byzacenan north-central coast makes it uncertain if these settlements received Eastern materials from Iunci. See also Bonifay et al. 2002: 128-12.

<sup>34</sup>Fulford 1980: 75-76; Clay 1992; Reynolds 2016: 140-141. See however Reynolds' comments on the need to recalibrate this interpretation by including the new available evidence in the analysis (in particular at p. 141, n. 50). See also Bonifay 2019: 305, according to whom it is not before the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century that "la diffusion des céramiques africaines semble limitée à quelques grandes villes: Constantinople, Rome, Marseille ...".

<sup>35</sup>*Cod. Iust.*, I, 27, 2, 18.

<sup>36</sup>Hayes 1992 (Constantinople); Bonifay, Leffly, Capelli, Pieri 2002 (Alexandria); Mabrouk et al. in press, with further relevant bibliography on the findings from the Black Sea port cities.

7th century pottery, these goods were most likely loaded there for transport to the Eastern Mediterranean region. This marks a shift from the 4th and 5th centuries, when Carthage and major Byzacenean ports such as Hadrumentum, Syllechtum and Thenae exported the majority of North African goods (Bonifay 2004: 452-455; Mabrouk et al.).

Exchanges with the Western Mediterranean region are also attested during the 6th and the 7th centuries (Fulford 1980; Reynolds 2016). We find significant quantities of North African goods (Keay 1984; Bonifay 2004; Reynolds 2016), including Byzacenean amphorae (Keay 8B and Keay 61) in many parts of the Empire such as the Balearic Islands, Sardinia, Sicily and the Byzantine possessions in Italy, but also far beyond the Empire and reaching places such as Frankish Marseilles, Visigothic Tarragona and Barcelona.<sup>37</sup> The considerable presence of these types in Iunci and the Lesser Syrtis testifies of the contribution of this region to the Mediterranean commercial space, exporting its surpluses not only to eastern, but also to Western Mediterranean markets.<sup>38</sup>

Overall, the ceramic material from the Gulf shows that the Lesser Syrtis, far from being on the periphery of the economic space of Byzantine Africa, appears to have been integrated into and contributed to the overseas trade networks with the east and the west. Iunci's importance, especially in the late 6th and the 7th centuries, potentially rivalled that of Carthage.

## Conclusion

The Byzantine rule over North Africa began with a reorganisation of the territory, its administration, and Mediterranean trade networks. While researchers once believed this restored a Roman-like system centred on Carthage, we instead show a gradual yet significant restructuring of North African production and trade. By the late 5th century, the Lesser Syrtis formed strong commercial ties with both North Africa and the East. This indicates a shift in economic activities from Northern Tunisia toward the Eastern Tunisian coast, exactly near the location of today's largest and booming economic Tunisian centre, Sfax. Evidence, both textual and archaeological, reveals that Iunci rose to prominence on the Gulf of Gabès, becoming a key hub that redistributed imports and managed inland goods like oil and grains, and probably taxes sent to Constantinople. For this reason, the empire also invested in the defence and control of the area, a productive yet contested region near the imperial border threatened by different confederations of indigenous groups. Besides imperial investments, Iunci's growth likely benefited also from its geographic position and climatic events such as coastal erosion and tsunamis, which disadvantaged previously dominant cities like Thenae, Syllechtum, or Hadrumentum.<sup>39</sup> The

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<sup>37</sup>Keay 8B distribution in the Western Mediterranean: Keay 1984 (Tarragona); Bonifay 1998 (Marseille); Pallarès 1987 (Albenga); Cirelli 2021 (Ravenna, Classe). Once thought to originate from the hinterland of Iunci, its production is more plausibly attributed to Majoura, located 100 km west of the city, see Bonifay 2004: 132; Mabrouk et al. in press. For the Keay 61 centres of production, identified in the southern Tunisian Sahel, see Bonifay 2019: 302. For the findings in Iunci see Mabrouk et al. in press; for its distribution in sites of the Tunisian eastern and northern coast and in the harbours of the Western Mediterranean, see Bonifay 2004: 140-141; Bonifay 2013: 535-536; Mabrouk et al. in press.

<sup>38</sup>For Keay 8B content see Bonifay 2004: 132. On the other hand, the content of the Keay 61 is not known. As noted by Bonifay 2013: 535, the patterns of distribution of these vessels in North African coastal sites (Keay 8B: Carthage; Rusguniae. Keay 61: Jebeniana; Cherchell; Rusguniae; Djerba; Sabratha; Leptis Magna) attest to the vitality of intra-regional commerce.

<sup>39</sup>The natural factors at play in the modification of the shores of the Eastern Tunisian coast, including the Lesser Syrtis, over the late antique period, to be probably connected with a series of high-energy events (earthquakes, tsunamis), have been examined in Kamoun et alii 2020; Bahrouni et alii 2024; Kamoun et al. 2024. In particular, Kamoun et al. 2020 investigated the decline, occurred over the 5th century, of Acholla's harbour, to be ascribed to natural factors and, as argued by Cosentino 2021, to the impossibility for the city municipal authorities to invest in the refurbishment of the harbour, leading to its dismissal. According to Kamoun et al. 2024, the same situation is emerging also for Thenae, where a high energy event occurred in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century accelerated the process of degradation of city's sea shores, probably contributing to the dismissal of the harbour. Although no such data are available for other port cities of the Byzacenean coast, as argued by Bahrouni et al. 2024, a similar fate could have also impaired the capabilities of the harbours of Syllechtum and Hadrumentum, to name a few. As argued by Cosentino 2021: 5, this situation and the general decline of the municipal authorities responsible for the maintenance of the harbours prompted a "diminution in the number of towns being able to offer port facilities for market activities".

distribution of southern Byzacenan amphorae across the Mediterranean further proves Iunci's economic role, demonstrating that substantial North African exports were not solely handled by Carthage. Future research should explore land management and the influence of private and imperial enterprises in the region's rise under Byzantine rule and its transformation after the Islamic conquest.

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