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DEPARTMENT OF THE ANTIQUITIES OF LIBYA

ARID LANDS IN ROMAN TIMES

PAPERS FROM THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
(ROME, JULY, 9TH-10TH 2001)

Edited by
MARIO LIVERANI

Assembled by
FRANCESCA MERIGHI

ARID ZONE ARCHAEOLOGY

MONOGRAPHS 4



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with the contributions of

A. AVANZINI, U. BRUNNER, V. CASTELLANI, M. CREMASCHI,
A. DE MAIGRET, F. DE ROMANIS, R. FATTOVICH, M. LIVERANI,
S. MANTELLINI, G. MANZI, D. MATTINGLY, F. RICCI, A. ROCCATI,
S. SIDEBOTHAM, I. VINCENTELLI, D. WELSBY, A. WILSON

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Contributors

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| <i>Alessandra Avanzini</i> | Dipartimento di Scienze Storiche del mondo Antico, Università degli Studi di Pisa, via Galvani 1, 56100 Pisa, Italy |
| <i>Ueli Brunner</i> | Geography Department, University of Zurich, Winterthurerst. 190 Ch-8057 Zurich, Switzerland |
| <i>Vittorio Castellani</i> | Università degli Studi di Pisa, via Galvani 1, 56100 Pisa, Italy |
| <i>Mauro Cremaschi</i> | CNR, Centro Geodinamica Alpina e Quaternaria, Via Mangiagalli 34, 23100 Milano, Italy |
| <i>Alessandro De Maigret</i> | Dipartimento di Studi Asiatici, Istituto Universitario Orientale, P.zza S. Domenico Maggiore, 80134 Napoli, Italy |
| <i>Federico De Romanis</i> | Dipartimento di Scienze del Mondo Antico, Università della Tuscia, largo dell'Università, 01100 Viterbo, Italy |
| <i>Rodolfo Fattovich</i> | Dipartimento di Studi e Ricerche su Africa e Paesi Arabi, Istituto Universitario Orientale, P.zza S. Domenico Maggiore, 80134 Napoli, Italy |
| <i>Mario Liverani</i> | Dipartimento di Scienze Storiche, Archeologiche e Antropologiche dell'Antichità, Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza", Via Palestro 63, 00185 Rome, Italy |
| <i>Simone Mantellini</i> | Università degli Studi di Bologna, Bologna, Italy |
| <i>Giorgio Manzi</i> | Dipartimento di Biologia Animale e dell'Uomo, Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza", Piazzale Aldo Moro 5, 00185 Rome, Italy |
| <i>David Mattingly</i> | School of Archaeology and Ancient History, University of Leicester, Leicester LE1 7RH, UK |
| <i>Francesca Ricci</i> | Dipartimento di Biologia Animale e dell'Uomo, Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza", Piazzale Aldo Moro 5, 00185 Rome, Italy |
| <i>Alessandro Roccati</i> | Dipartimento di Scienze Storiche, Archeologiche e Antropologiche dell'Antichità, Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza", Piazzale Aldo Moro 5, 00185 Rome, Italy |
| <i>Steve Sidebotham</i> | Department of History, University of Delaware, 230 John Munroe Hall, 49 W Delaware Ave, Newark DE 19716-2547, USA |
| <i>Irene Vincentelli</i> | Dipartimento di Filologia e Storia, Università di Cassino, via Zamosch 43, 03043 Cassino (FR), Italy |
| <i>Derek Welsby</i> | The British Museum, Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3DG, UK |
| <i>Andrew Wilson</i> | Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 2PG, UK |

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Introduction

1. The conference on 'Arid Lands in Roman Times' is the first one to have been organised by the CIRSA, and a few words are needed in order to explain what the CIRSA is. The "Centro Interuniversitario di Ricerca sulle civiltà e l'ambiente del Sahara antico" [Inter-University Research Centre on cultures and environment of the Ancient Sahara] has been founded since 1992. It is located in the University of Rome "La Sapienza" (as administrative seat), and includes also the Universities of Milan, Modena, Cassino, Pisa, and Naples "Orientale". In 1998 the area pertaining to the CIRSA has been enlarged to include all the "arid lands". In this way, the CIRSA has become an instrument for co-ordinating the activities that various Italian institutions are carrying out, according to their independent projects and responsibilities, in the fields of archaeology, ancient history, palaeo-environment, and palaeo-anthropology, in the entire arid belt encompassing northern Africa, the Arabian peninsula, and Central Asia. Besides carrying out its own research projects (mainly in the Libyan Sahara), the CIRSA is willing to put its organisation at the disposal of more general enterprises. The editorial series "Arid Zone Archaeology" has been recently started (a first volume appeared in 1999, a second in 2001 and a third in 2002) and has opened to all interested scholars. The present conference is a major occasion for a fruitful exchange of ideas, experiences and projects.

2. The choice of the topic "*Arid Lands in Roman Times*" is the outcome of various considerations: (a) many Italian archaeological missions are presently working (or have recently worked) in countries of the arid belt: Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Iran, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, etc. (b) The chronological phase roughly contemporary with the classical world (*ca.* 300 BC to 500 AD) includes interesting features of its own and in connection with the topic of the 'Roman frontier'. (c) The time seems now ripe to apply to this relatively 'late' period the research procedures and methods that have mostly been applied to earlier periods. (d) The more recently acquired data should be related to the written (historical) evidence, in order to sketch up a comprehensive reconstruction for such a period.

3. The study of countries 'beyond the Roman *limes*' has admittedly a long story, and underwent successive phases that were different in methods, in availability of data, in cultural and political approach. However, a 'Romano-centric' approach has always prevailed, viewing the local cultures and polities in function of the Roman empire, as peripheral and marginal phenomena, as belonging to an area that becomes more and more obscure in progressing away from the Mediterranean coast. The very same con-

cept of 'desert' has been mostly used – consciously or implicitly – in order to point out a negative void in the demographic or cultural or political fields, or at the very best in order to define a transition (and in the meantime an obstacle) towards other areas and cultures, so distant that their connection with the Mediterranean world remains quite irrelevant.

Our conference, on the contrary, aims at turning such a perspective upside down, by putting the arid zone in the very centre of the analysis, by underscoring its peculiar features, by showing that from their point of view the arid lands are located in the centre of networks that have the Mediterranean basin, and other African and Asiatic regions as well, as their own periphery — a term that at this point is brought back to a properly relative and subjective concept.

4. The chronological belt (*ca.* 300 BC to 500 AD) has been selected for our conference both because of its interest in the subject matter of the frontiers of the Roman empire, and because of phenomena of *longue durée* in the palaeo-climatic and palaeo-environmental fields. This approach, by now largely accepted in studies about the prehistoric and proto-historic periods, is still unusual when applied to properly historical times – as if the presence of written records made it irrelevant to have recourse to environmental data. We do not intend to support a strictly deterministic approach; yet it seems quite correct to evaluate the impact of desertification on the deliberate or implicit strategies in land use, in settlement pattern, in the adoption of agro-pastoral technologies (including irrigation) and means of communication (including the camel), in the very shaping of the social and political systems. The different reactions to similar stress and conditioning, taking place in the various regional cultures – from central Sahara to central Asia – can help understanding the various cultures as compared to each other, and the specific features of the period as compared to previous and subsequent periods.

5. Among the historical problems most obviously characterising the arid and semi-arid lands during Roman times, we can single out at least the following. (a) The transformation in land use, from an extensive (mostly pastoral) exploitation to one concentrated in the oases. (b) The related introduction and/or improvement of irrigation and agricultural techniques most fitting to the specific environment of oases and wadi beds. (c) The formation of a network of caravan routes, and the enlargement of the trade relationships. (d) The related introduction of new tools in transportation techniques (like the camel and dromedary). (e) The emergence of local states characterised by a complex structure and able to dominate large extents of territory. (f) The relationships between economies and polities of the arid lands and