Municipal Vitality in Late Antique North Africa:

Epigraphic Evidence for Public Munificence and Urban Growth

When he published his *Decline and Fall* *of the Roman Empire* in 1776, Sir Edward Gibbon doomed the period of late antiquity to obscurity for nearly two centuries. According to Gibbon, the long peace of the “Good Emperors” unmanned the Roman world and sapped its intellectual vigor. [[1]](#footnote-1) Widely considered a dark and dreary interlude between the classical and medieval periods, late antiquity was largely neglected by ancient historians, philologists, and archaeologists alike. But in the mid-20th century, scholars like A. H. M. Jones and Peter Brown demonstrated the richness of late Roman culture and the value of studying it closely.[[2]](#footnote-2) Currently, the historical significance of the late antique period is generally accepted and its study has become more popular.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It is no longer appropriate to view the late antique period as one of widespread decay or universal moral, economic, and military decline. There is no doubt, however, that the Roman Empire of the fourth century was radically different from that of the Julio-Claudians or of the Antonines. The anarchy of the third century had shaken the empire to its core. Yet in recent years, studies have shown that the provinces of North Africa emerged from the third century crises on stronger footing than other regions of the Roman Empire.[[4]](#footnote-4) Its municipal governments remained intact and active, and large cities continued to thrive and even expand. Epigraphic evidence for increased public building activity during the final decades of the fourth century indicates that the Valentinianic period (364-392) was one of particular urban renewal in North Africa. Several factors contributed to the increased activity: most importantly, the return of previously-confiscated revenues to provincial cities, and legislation easing the burdens of the curial class. We must not underestimate, however, the influence of the emperors themselves. The emperor Julian (r. 361-363) took great care to preserve and bolster the city councils of the empire, the organizations primarily responsible for the funding and management of public building projects. The Pannonian-born brothers, Valentinian and Valens (r. 364-378), were especially attuned to the needs of provincials, and their edicts express a real concern for the quality of life in the provinces. Rescripts in the *Codex Theodosianus* demonstrate the continued interest of Valentinian’s dynasty in preserving the infrastructure of provincial cities.

It has been the traditional view that cities of the later Roman Empire were stifled by an overbearing imperial government, and having lost their previous autonomy, suffered a steady decline into the Middle Ages. On the contrary, the imperial government of the fourth century supported the activities of local municipal councils and encouraged urban growth and renewal. The thriving cities of fourth-century North Africa are themselves evidence of this fact.

Works Cited

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1. “The minds of men were gradually reduced to the same level, the fire of genius was extinguished, and even the military spirit evaporated.” (Gibbon 2000, 62) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Jones 1986; Brown 1971. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The *Journal of Late Antiquity* was launched by Johns Hopkins University Press in 2008. It is the first international interdisciplinary publication to deal exclusively with the late antique period (250-800 A.D.). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Mahjoubi 1978, 1984; Lepelley 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)