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Neptunus Augustus and the fons Thignicensis: The works commissioned by the knight P. Valerius Victor Numisianus Sallustianus, of the Papiria tribe, by his father and his mother for the Temple of the Waters of Aïn Tounga in Tunisia

***24° Annual Meeting of the EAA in Barcelona 2018 (8 settembre 2018)
Session: Lived Ancient Religion in North Africa***



In this prestigious setting we aim to summarise the complex phenomenon of the cult of Neptune

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in North Africa, by way of about hundred inscriptions and dozens of mosaics, with reference to the latest developments (that have recently been published in “Epigraphica”) in relation to the *fo ns Thignicensis*

and the work undertaken for the gathering of the spring waters of *Thignica*

carried out by the knight

P

ublius Valerius Victor Numisianus Sallustianus

, of the Papiria tribe, by his father

Valerius Tertullianus

and mother

Caecilia Faustina

for the “Temple of the Waters” in Aïn Tounga in Tunisia, in the period of Gallienus and Salonina.

In reality, this is a monument dominated by the *aedem [dei Nept]uni*, which has been conceptually compared to the far more famous “Temple of the Waters of Zaghouan”, which was the origin of the Hadrian-era Carthage aqueduct; the dedication

Neptuno Augusto sacrum

links it closely to the Imperial cult, also by way of the use of the

summae honorariae

of the three

flamines perpetui

. This is an area that has been affected by the decrees of

lex Hadriana de rudibus agris

studied by Hernán Gonzáles Bordas of the Università of Alcalá de Henares in the text found at Henchir Hnich (Krib region, Tunisia).

It is precisely to Hadrian that the plan of the great Carthaginian aqueduct is to be attributed. This impressive work channelled water from Zaghouan to the cisterns of Malga and to the baths inaugurated in the first year of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus: El-Bekri in c. 1068 knew of the origin of the aqueduct in the mountains of Zaghouan (56 km as the crow flies) and was able to state that the work took forty years, hence starting from the era of Hadrian. Arriving in a moment of great drought in Africa, it was Hadrian, in 128 AD, who planned the great aqueduct that was to give Carthage its new name: *Hadrianopolis*. The aqueduct was built above all to supply the great seaside baths, commonly known as “Thermes d’Antonin”, of which the commemorative plaque remains.

The Temple of Neptune in *Thignica* is on the eastern foot of the hill of Aïn Tounga, a few hundred metres from the Sanctuary of Saturn, on the south-western border of the municipium: the topographic appearance is fundamental for our theme, that will lead us to that part of the

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territory of Carthage that lies beyond the
aedes dei Neptuni
was located at the natural springs of the
aqua Thignicensis

Fossa Regia. The

(from which, according to Beschaouch, derives the modern Aïn Tounga) and was composed of a square cell with a barrel-vault roof, which was partially cut from the rock. It also featured a columned gallery on three sides, with a niche in the centre to house a statue and pools to collect the spring water. In the background there is ever the theme of the relationship of inland Africa with the cult of Neptune called
undarum dominus Nereidumque pater

at Dougga, with springs, spas, aqueducts and the contemporary veneration of the Nymphs, in association with, or even with the assimilation of other
Numina

. In our case, particular attention must be paid to the connections between Neptune and the imperial cult, the euergetic nature of some of the dedications, the adoption of the cult for the God of Waters by the supreme magistrates of the colonies and municipia, as well as by priests connected with the municipium's aristocracy and by members of the army.

Partially excavated fifteen years ago by Habib Ben Hassen of the Agence de Mise en Valeur et de Promotion Culturelle de la Tunisie, the complex has been summarily published in the volume *Thignica (Ain Tounga), son histoire et ses monuments*, with numerous inaccuracies in terms of the epigraphic text. The research carried out in 2017 and over these last few weeks, coordinated by Samir Aounallah and myself (along with Maria Bastiana Cocco, Claudio Farre, Antonio Ibba, Salvatore Ganga, Alberto Gavini, Piergiorgio Floris, Paola Ruggeri, Alessandro Teatini, and Tarek Hammami), has led to the revision of the large dedication inscription and the importance of the monument, that presents only slight similarities with the Temple of the Waters of Zaghouan at the origins of the Aqueduct of Carthage in the era of Antoninus Pius, but with a plan that is wholly conditioned by the profile of the nearby hill. The total measurements are about 40 x 20m, with a large square temple that was not envisaged in the original project (*[ampli]ata pecunia aedem [dei Nept]uni*

): the cell was barrel-vaulted, and not perfectly in line with the plan of the large monument. It was cut out of the rock of the hill and was 5.2m (18 Roman feet) wide, with a semi-circular niche at the bottom. Just downhill from this was the wide triple columned gallery, that was 3.4 m (12 Roman feet) wide, and closed by an
opus incertum

wall, with remains of canalisation. The pavement was partially restored in the late period, and there was another niche in the substructure of the portico that was to house a female statue, which according to H. Ben Hassen, was a mermaid. The intercolumniation is 2.2m, with a total of 12 columns at the front, and five in the side arms. The approximate height was 5m including capitals. The frieze and remains of the capitals are currently being studied (A. Teatini) and the Eastern facade of the monument has not been excavated. Several rectangular basins have survived for the gathering and filtering of the waters. The central basin was 28.5 m (10 feet) x 10m (3.5 feet). The activity of the dedicator was that of gathering the water from the springs on the side of the hill, like

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Lambaesis

:
collectis fontibus et / [scatu]riginibus aedem Neptuni / [a] solo fecit

Sadok Ben Baaziz in volume XIV (1996) of "Africa" has studied other Temples of Neptune in Africa, and almost all are from the 2nd century: the closest analogies are with *Pheradi Maius*, with its cell, basins and porticos;

Thubursicu Numidarum

, and Aïn Drin at

Lambaesis

. However, epigraphy testifies to the presence of at least 13 temples, in:

Leptis Magna, Thugga, Mactaris

,
Aquae Thibilitanae,

Sidi el Bahloul,

Calama

, Cartagine,

Zama Minor, Chullu, Thamugadi,

Khemissas, and Aïn el Aouad on the Aurès. Furthermore, there are more than 15 statues of Neptune, generally in upright position. This is a god that in reality acted as a synthesis of "plusieurs divinités ou génies préromains locaux des sources".

The large inscription that was recently studied in "Epigraphica" was inscribed on three large blocks of damaged limestone, with a width of 2.45 (8 feet), and a height of 49 cm (1.5 feet).

Thignica p. 85 = AE 2006, 1762 = AE 2007, 1680 = AE 2010, 1807. Vd. ora Ruggeri, *La dedica dell'aedes Neptuni*, cit.,

pp. 338 ss.:

Neptuno Augusto sacrum / pro salute [[Imp(eratoris) Caes(aris) P(ubli) Licini Gallieni Pii Fel(icis) Aug(usti) p(ontificis) m(aximi), Dacici max(im)i Germ[a]nici max(im)i, Persici max(im)i trib(unicia) pot(estate) XIII]] / [[imp(eratoris) XII co(n)s(ulis) VI p(atris) p(atriciae) proco(n)s(ulis) et Corneliae Saloninae Aug(usti) coniugis Aug(usti) n(ostri) totiusque domus divinae eorum]] (vacat) / P(ublius) Valerius L(uci) fil(ius) Pap(iria) Victor Numisianus Sallustianus eq(ues) R(omanus) aedilic(ius) Ilviral(icius) Xlpr(imus) fl(amen) perp(etuus) opus fontis [Thignicensis] quod Valerius Tertullianus pater eius / 5 ob summam flam(onii) perpetui sui itemq(ue) Caeciliae Faustinae matris suae f(laminicae) p(erpetuae) ex HS LIII mil(ibus) n(ummum) facturum se promi[serat supra legitima]m taxationem podium tantummodo ei[s] / exstruxerat quodq(ue) idem Numisianus ob honorem flam(onii) sui perp(etui) ex HS XXX mil(ibus) n(ummum) experitu[r]um se pollicitus [erat, ampli]ata pecunia aedem [dei Nept]uni VM

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The dedication to *Neptuno Augusto* was carried out in 265 AD on the occasion of the works at *fons Thignicensis pro salute* of Gallienus in his 13th

potestas tribunicia

and Cornelia Salonina (the Arabic placename Aïn Tounga that in the first part reminds us of *fons Thignicensis*

(Aïn) and in the second part (Tounga) echoes the name of the Severian municipium of *Thignica*

). A very important testimony to the municipium's euergetism, the document directly links the cult of Neptune the protector of springs to the Imperial cult in the ancient territory of the colony of Carthage. The person making the dedication, an important figure of the aristocracy of the municipium founded by Septimius Severus, was the knight

P. Valerius Victor Numisianus Sallustianus fl(amen) perp(etuus), who used the

summae honorariae flamonii sui

(more than 54,000 sesterii) saved by his father

flamen Valerius Tertullianus

and mother Cecilia Faustina

f(laminica) p(erpetua),

for a change to the original project and a further

ampliatio pecuniae

with respect to the 30,000 sesterii that he had originally promised, with the construction of the temple to the god Neptune behind the gallery, slightly higher than the pools. The interpretation provided by H. Ben Hassen is erroneous from many points of view, as he imagined a

podium aeneum

and did not read

aedes [dei Nept]uni

, which is clear in the 3D reproduction and in the facsimile we now avail of.

In the reuse an epigraphic fragment was found that testified to successive euergetic interventions by the corporation of the *fullones*.

Large lists of epigraphic references to the cult of Neptune in Africa have been published in recent years: we know of *sacerdotes*, *flamines*, *cultores*, *templa*, *aedes*, *aediculae*, *arae*, *curiae*, for Neptune Augustus

, *redux Augustus*, *dominus et deus*

, in a Greek dedication by Thapsus (Ras Dimas, in Tunisia)

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karpodòtes
, in the sense of
carpofòros
and
Frugifer
, merged with the
genius
of the nearby
Colonia Concordia Ulpia Traiana Frugifera Hadrumetina
. It is the same god

Frugifer
on the coins of the Emperor from Hadrumetum, Clodius Albinus, dedicated
Saeculo Frugifero
, that connect Neptune to the agricultural cult and to the fertility of the land. Neptune is represented in the bas-reliefs with a trident and a stick, around which is wrapped a snake, as for Aesculapius, with reference to the therapeutic value of the spa waters: so at Aïn el Hamedna, close to Hr. Bou Saadoun, south of

Althiburos
: “le serpent est enroulé autour d’un baton que tient le dieu Neptune represente nu debout de face”; the text of the votive altar is:

Neptuno Aug(usto) s(acrum) L(ucius) Apronius Processus mag(ister) suo(!) i(ussu) d(ei) p(ecunia) p(osuit)

[\[1\]](#)

. In reality one could also think of the myth of the serpent Python, protecting the escape of Leto the mother of Apollo and Artemis. Of great interest is the attribute of

Neptunus cremens,
from the Imperial
Latifundia

of the region of Thala, at Ain Hedia (Henchir El Roumia), which refers to the patronage of the god over vegetation:

deus
Crem[e]nti deo / Ne[ptun]o. Aedem / su[is su]m(p)tibus / fe[ceru]nt instan[te], [---Te]rtio (?), mag(istro),

in a dedication recently presented by Ridha Kaabia. This underlines the abilities of the god with reference to the patronage of the products of the land. At Thapsus, instead, the god was associated with grasslands without trees, and at Thala with vegetation in general, with an extension of the attribute

Frugifer
, without the chthonic characteristics of the cult of Ceres or Saturn, but with a direct link to water: “Neptune est donc le patron de la croissance et de la poussée de la végétation”. This is an unique case in the epicleses of the god, who “s’introduit dans la logique du rapport entre l’eau douce, en l’occurrence l’eau de source, comme l’indique le lieu de la découverte, et l’activité agricole. C’est donc par l’irrigation que Neptune dispose d’un pouvoir fécondant toute espèce végétale et participant à la floraison des produits de la terre. Il rejoint dans ce contexte Jupiter et Caelestis qui procurent de la pluie”.

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Neptune, confused with Poseidon, was associated with, or even assimilated with, Baal Hammon, Saturn, Triton, Poseidon, *Frugifer*, agricultural Mars, Serapis (for example at Carthage), Silvanus, Apollo (for example at Calama), Liber Pater, Mercury (in common with the Caduceus), Vulcan, Concordia as at Dougga, Ceres with a torch, and other

Numina.

He is often flanked by the Sphinxes, the Nymphs, the Sirens, the Tritons and the

Genius loci

as at Timgad

:

in colonies,

municipia,

pagi

,

civitates

, with more than 50 localities:

Leptis Magna, Sabratha, Thysdrus, Thapsus, Capsa, Thala, Althiburos,

Tleta-Djouanna,

Sufetula, Saltus Massipianus, Mactaris, Pheradi Maius, Zama

, *Ksar Mdoudja,*

Tituli, Theveste

, *Henchir Bou Chekifa,*

Masculula, Thamugadi, Calceus Herculis, Lambaesis, Zarai, Madauros, Hippo Regius, Calama,

Aquae Thibilitanae, Sigus, Cirta, Chullu, Cuicul

; as well as

Thelepte, Verrona, Ammaedara, Rusicade, Mopthi, Sitifis, Saldae

. This was mainly in the inland areas of the African provinces, that were almost desert, far from the coast, but in the vicinity of springs, oases or rivers. The geographical extension highlights the particular importance that the cult of Neptune had in the peripheral (inland) territory of the colony of Carthage, in particular beyond the

Fossa Regia

. The most important piece of evidence is precisely this temple close to the spring of the municipium of

Thignica

in the era of Gallienus, the emperor who promoted the nearby towns of

Thubursicum Bure

and

Thugga

to the status of colony. More specifically, at Dougga the

ex forma

promotion, hence with a new cadastral delimitation (the arrival of new settlers was improbable)

is dated to between 261 and 265, as has recently been demonstrated by Louis Maurin and

Samir Aounallah

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, who have reconstructed dedication carried out

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[*pro salute*]

of Gallienus in the 13th

potestas tribunicia

and of Salonina (names we believe were erased following the *damnatio memoriae*

), by a

cur(ator) reipubl(icae)

, to exalt the imperial

indulgentia

,
[*ob*] *benivolentiam dignationis ac liberalita[tem] Imp(eratoris) Aug(usti) col(oniam) deducen[ti]s* ex forma.

The theme and the reasons for the African deductions (institutional promotions) following Caracalla's

de

civitate

edict have already been discussed by Antonio Ibba and Michel Christol, starting from the dedication of the Arch of

Uchi Maius

under Severus Alexander:

sub eius nomine auspicioqu[e] deducta

[\[iii\]](#)

. The association of the emperors with Neptune August is to be found in at Dougga in at least two of the four dedications on record, some of which certainly came from the fourth chapel of Sanctuary B, which was attributed to Neptune, perhaps in the era of Hadrian

[\[iv\]](#)

, where reference is made to the

[*temp*]la *Concordiae Frugiferi Liberi Patris Neptuni ... cum marmoribus et statu[s] et ornamentis*,

all of which are divinities of fertility particularly appreciated in Byzacena, but less so in Zeugitana. These divinities are invoked by

[*M(arcus) Gabiniu[s] Quir(ina) Bassus flam(en) Aug(usti) perp(etuus) patron[us] pagi et civitatis*]

and by

[*A(ulus) Gabinius Arn(ensi) Datus patronus pagi et civitatis flamen(?) divi Titi aedilis augur c(oloniae) I(uliae) K(arthaginis)*].

Of similar interest is another inscription from Dougga, more specifically from Caracalla's Temple of Victory, which is still connected with the organisation of the imperial cult of *Neptuno* / *Aug(usto)*.

This association with the imperial cult in the era of Severus is also present at Thibursicu Bure, the modern-day Theboursouk, later one of Gallienus' colonies, close to a rich spring:

Neptuno Aug(usto) sac(rum) / pro salute Imp(eratorum) Caesarum L(uci) S[ep]timi S[everi]---

. Three epigraphic dedications to Neptune come from Carthage, the capital of Africa

Proconsularis, the first of which appears to be of a particularly early date, as it dates to the reign

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of Augustus, who ordered its placement in his last years:

[N]eptun[o] / [Imp(erator) C]aesar divi [f(ilius) Aug(ustus)] / [po]nt(ife)x maxim[us] / trib(unicia) pot(estate) / [de st]ipe quam p[opulo p(ostulante)] / f(ieri) i(ussit) K(alendis) la[n(uariis)]

. Neptune is associated with Serapis once:

Sarapidi / Neptuno / Aug(usto) sacr(um) / P(ubli) Aurelii / Pasinici / cum suis / s(ua) p(ecunia) f(ecit) d(ecreto) d(ecurionum).

The later document was Christian, a

carmen

[\[V\]](#)

.
A dedication to

Vulcanus

,
Ne[ptunus]

comes from Tunisi.

Also of great significance is the dedication to *Neptuno Aug(usto)* of *Pagus Suttuensis* at Uchi Maius, placed close to the source of the supply for the local aqueduct (“Dans la source dite Aïn-Zroug, au dessus de l’Henchir ech-Chelt, qui est alimentée par ses eaux”) :

Neptuno / Aug(usto) / sacr(um)

It is hence precisely in the territory of Carthage that emerge the characteristics of that which Alain Cadotte in 2002 (in Phoenix) and in 2007 in the volume on *La romanisation des dieux* called the

Neptune Africain

: product of the Roman

interpretatio

of a god that had deep Libyan roots documented by contact with the Libyan water genius. But these roots were also Punic, as is documented by numerous geographical, literary and epigraphic sources (we may note those that were bilingual, Latin-Punic in Leptis Magna), that refer to the Phoenician god

‘*El qōnē ‘areṣ*

, in the sense of “owner of the land”, perhaps a Poseidon that was originally Libyan. However, we cannot imagine a close local relationship with the great sanctuary of Saturn-Baal Hammon, which has yielded almost 300 steles (that will be described in an upcoming publication of ours), with constant confusion with the Libyan Poseidon, who was already associated by Herotodus (IV 180 and 188) with Lake Triton (Chott el Djerid), behind the mythical Sirti mountains. From Byzacena and in particular from the territory of

Ammaedara

(Tleta-Djouama) comes the dedication

Neptuno Saturno

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sacrum

following the fulfilment of a vow. This dedication rightly would lead us to think of outright assimilation. Along similar lines is the dedication of

Thala

(Aïn Maja), that carries out

dom(ino) et deo Neptuno et dis deabus

etc., referring to the

African

dominus

par excellence, Saturn, the heir of the Phoenician/Punic Baal Hammon. Besides Byzacena, J. Toutain already underlined the importance of Neptune, the god of running water and of springs in the areas far from the coast: we may think of the springs of the Temple of

Lambaesis,

of the nymphs of

Pheradi Maius

and of Ksar Mduja ,

civitas A[---]

, of the pool of

Tituli

, at the baths of Aïn el Hmadna and

Sitifis

; at the springs at

Pagus Suttuensis

, Hr Bou Chelifa,

Zarai, Madauros, Thubursicu Bure,

and

Cirta.

Hence, according to Cadotte “ces différents indices montrent bien la nature différente de ce Neptune, dont la popularité dépassait de beaucoup celle du Neptune marin”; and this was the case, even if the Neptune of Dougga, father of the Nereids, was also

undarum dominus

, the lord of the waves and of the rough sea. According to Cadotte, this is an aspect which is not well known in the Italic religion, and almost completely absent in the rest of the Empire, one that was enriched in Africa by way of its blending with more ancient local traditions linked to the cult of the genius that protected the springs.

Yet in numerous African mosaics, many of which are well known, one notes the prevalence of a form of classicism more closely linked to Greek mythology, that of Neptune as God of the Sea, associated in triumph with Amphitrite and *Cirta*, with the Nymphs, the Tritons, but also with the Seasons, as has been observed by such a great scholar as the sorely missed J.M. Blázquez Martínez. The most famous cases are that of the House of Neptune's Triumph in

Acholla

in the third quarter of the 2

nd

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c. and that of La Chebba (to the south of
Hadrumetum

), which portrays Neptune with a head surrounded by rays, flanked by Triton and Nereid, in the mid-2nd c. AD, ever with Herodotus' remembrance of Lake Triton. Hence, along the coasts, but also in the inland areas of the African provinces, the iconography is more inclined towards the classic model of a marine Neptune, as for example in the Villa of the

Laberii

and in the villa of the composite capitals at

Uthina

(end of the 2

nd

c. AD), with nereids, sea monsters or dolphins. In the Oued Blibane villa at

Hadrumetum

at the end of the 2

nd

c. and at the

Sorothus

villa,

Neptune appears with three sirens, tritons and nereids. Other examples come from the Villa of Neptune at

Thuburbo Maius

(end of the 3

rd

c.), from

Thamugadi

(second half of the 3

rd

c.) and from Hippo Regius. Neptune is often presented as triumphant on a chariot drawn by horses, as in Sousse. The documentation that provides the greatest depth and is of most interest is hence that of the inscriptions and the bas-reliefs that express different subtleties and represent the multi-faced nature of a god that the Africans venerated above all for his connection with the capacity to protect the springs, to irrigate the fields and make them fertile, and to supply the spa baths. Precisely at Dougga, the inscription that commemorates the

[a]quam con[ductam e fonte M]occol[i]tano

in the era of Commodus, according to Azedine Beschaouch, had an extraordinary response that continues to the present day, with the folk traditions of the mysterious festival of Lella Moccolla.