A new edition of the imperial regulation from the Lella Drebblia site near Dougga (AE 2001, 2083)

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While prospecting in the vicinity of Dougga in the autumn of 1999, the research group directed by M. de Vos (Università degli Studi di Trento) unearthed a large inscription dating from the reign of Hadrian. Its contents were immediately associated with the 6 major inscriptions found between the late 19th and early 20th c. concerning the conditions of exploitation of imperial property in this part of the province of Africa (NW Tunisia). The very next year de Vos presented photographs and an initial transcription of the inscription; her reading was subsequently corrected on certain points by Année Épigraphique but it remains incomplete for several lines, or one-third of the text on the preserved surface.¹

It was therefore necessary to make a full scientific edition on the basis of a new reading. This mission was entrusted to us by the Tunis National Institute of Heritage through M. Samir Aounallah and after a few preliminary studies a research project was presented in 2015 to LabEx “Sciences archéologiques de Bordeaux”, which agreed to finance it for one year. The work involved a full range of techniques specific to epigraphy. Three are well known: direct reading (with or without raking light) done on the spot as part of a field mission (autumn 2015); photographic analysis and processing; and the analysis and viewing of squeezes (whether directly or from photographs). A fourth technique consisted in analysing and visualizing a set of 3D models of the inscription that were created for this study. This essential aspect was supported by the Pôle “Humanités numériques” of UMR Ausonius, within the framework of a more comprehensive programme of the application of photogrammetric and 3D processing to epigraphy.

The dossier of the major agrarian inscriptions

Six other inscriptions of major importance that are directly related have been found at distances ranging from 5 to 50 km from the present discovery. Four (Henchir Mettich, Ain el Djemala, Ain Wassel, Souk el Khmis) were found in the Medjerda (Bagradas) valley, where the present site is located. The other two (Gasr Mezouar, Ain Zaga) were discovered a little farther north close to Vaga (fig. 1). The inscriptions from Souk el Khmis, Gasr Mezouar and Ain Zaga, from the time of Commodus, are about complaints and petitions to the emperor from coloni (small-scale farmers; smallholders²) on the imperial estates suffering wrongs from the conductores (middlemen) and procurators. Those petitions elicited favourable responses from the emperor, which were also engraved. The inscriptions of Henchir Mettich (A.D. 116-17), Ain el Djemala (Hadrian’s reign) and Ain Wassel (A.D. 198-209) contain items of regulations about the exploitation of imperial estates. Those of most interest
