

A new edition of the imperial regulation from the Lella Drebbia 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, Aïn el Djemala, Aïn Wassel, Souk el Khmis) were found in the Medjerda (*Bagradas*) valley, where the present site is located. The other two (Gasr Mezouar, Aïn Zaga) were discovered a little farther north close to *Vaga* (fig. 1). The inscriptions from Souk el Khmis, Gasr Mezouar and Aïn 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), Aïn el Djemala (Hadrian's reign) and Aïn Wassel (A.D. 198-209) contain items of regulations about the exploitation of imperial estates. Those of most interest

1 M. de Vos (ed.), *Rus Africum, Terra acqua olio nell'Africa settentrionale. Scavo e ricognizione nei dintorni di Dougga (Alto Tell tunisino)* (Trento 2000); AE 2001, 2083; an opinion shared by J. Edmondson in C. Bruun and J. Edmondson, *The Oxford handbook of Roman epigraphy* (New York 2015) 680: “readings need to be improved”.

2 On this subject, see in general M. Rostovtzeff, *Studien zur Geschichte des römischen Kolonates* (Leipzig 1910); for N Africa, see D. Flach, “Inschriftenuntersuchungen zum römischen Kolonat in Nordafrika,” *Chiron* 8 (1978) 441-92; D. P. Kehoe, *The economics of agriculture on Roman imperial estates in North Africa* (Göttingen 1988), and J. Kolendo, *Le colonat en Afrique sous le Haut-Empire* (Besançon 1991).