

## ROMAN IN QUESTION: NAVIGATING BETWEEN THE TWO SHORES OF A MEDITERRANEAN HERITAGE

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### **Abstract:**

This article delves into Tunisia's complex interplay between its Roman heritage and Mediterranean identity, examining how these elements influence contemporary cultural and geopolitical narratives. The study aims to uncover the nuances of 'heritage intimacy,' exploring how Tunisia navigates its historical ties with the Roman Empire while engaging with its broader Mediterranean connections. Employing a qualitative analysis of tourist maps, promotional materials, and historical texts, the research traces the evolution of Tunisia's heritage portrayal from the post-independence era through the post-revolutionary period. Key findings reveal a strategic emphasis on Roman elements during the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes to foster tourism and Western relations, juxtaposed with a recent shift towards highlighting Punic and African identities in response to changing socio-political dynamics. The article concludes that Tunisia's heritage narrative is marked by a persistent ambivalence, reflecting ongoing tensions between embracing a Roman past and asserting a distinct Mediterranean identity amidst evolving internal and external pressures.

**Keywords:** Tunisia, Tourism, Heritage, Roman, Mediterranean, promotional narrative.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Tunisians and Greeks, everything invites us to cooperate brotherly from one side to the other of this Mediterranean, resembling a mirror where each of us discovers their own identity as well as the image of all our neighbors, dwellers along its shores, participants in a very ancient history which is, nevertheless, just beginning. [...] Is it not, indeed, a duty for the inhabitants of this common history, to progress together, to join in the effort, and to support each other in adversity? (Bourguiba 1978: 206)

The above quote is excerpted from a solemn speech made by former Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba to his Greek hosts during his visit to Athens in the 1960s. It is of great importance because it crystallizes the political and geopolitical ethos of an era when Tunisia was just freeing itself from the colonial yoke and seeking to assert itself on the world stage, particularly within the Mediterranean sphere. The call for Mediterranean

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fraternity was so pivotal that it heralded a major change in the country's relationship with the West, particularly Europe. Formerly seen as a national adversary, the “Other”, in the wake of independence, was to be re-envisioned as a friend, or even as a 'brother,' within the same familial fold. This rebranding of the 'intimate enemy' (Nandy 1983) was primarily manifested in the country's embrace of international tourism.

In this vein, this article examines the critical role of tourism in redefining the country's geopolitical stance since its independence in 1956. This is more significant given that the policy of opening to the West adopted by the post-colonial state was largely based on the promotional narrative developed and disseminated by various government bodies, led by the Office National du Tourisme Tunisien (ONTT). Aimed primarily at a European clientele, this narrative emphasized Tunisia's central location within the Mediterranean, presenting it as a territory bathed by Mediterranean waters and closely linked to Europe. It also highlights the country's roots in the historic Mediterranean thanks to its rich Latin-Roman heritage.

However, this projection of an easily identifiable tourist image for international visitors is not without its share of reservations among Tunisians. The current perception of the Mediterranean, marked by recent migratory disaster and the tragedy of young Tunisians, North Africans, and Africans drowning in its waters, contrasts sharply with the vision of openness and access to Europe that prevailed in the past. The situation is even more complex when it comes to the Roman heritage. Although it forms a substantial part of Tunisia's heritage, it is tainted by the shadow of European colonization, whether Roman, French, or other. As a result, the promotional narrative is imbued with an ambivalence between the desire to reflect the country's policy of openness by highlighting elements shared with Europe and the concern not to be in tune with the feelings of the local population.

To better understand this ambivalence (Breglia 2006), this article undertakes an analysis of the Tunisian promotional narrative through the prism of the political issues and historical experiences that have shaped relations between Tunisia and Europe. The aim is to focus on the narrative of heritage elements, both natural, such as Mediterranean landscapes, and cultural, such as Latin-Roman monuments and remains, to highlight the country's ambivalent affiliation with an imagined Mediterranean community, as will be explained later. To do so, I introduce the notion of 'heritage intimacy,' inspired by the work of Herzfeld (2016, 2020). In forging his concept of cultural intimacy, Herzfeld evokes the two facets of the same national identity, the first of which is shaped by the state to be disseminated, or even exported, on an international scale, while the other is cooked up internally to be shared on a national scale (Byrne 2011, Subotic and Zarakol 2012, Anderson 1983). Heritage intimacy, as developed here, is based on this theoretical model but with more emphasis on heritage as a narrative of shared belonging to a geopolitical and geocultural area. In other words, it is based more on the idea of an imagined kinship that the state seeks to cultivate and project to the outside world while seeking to temper and nuance it within the country. That is to say, heritage intimacy focuses on the way in which the state juggles these two dimensions, national and international, navigating deftly through the challenges of an ever-changing geopolitical context while taking account of the subtleties of the country's internal complexity.

The exploration of this imagined affinity with the Mediterranean and its shared heritage will be supported by concrete examples from the Tunisian promotional landscape. This will demonstrate that tourism promotion is not limited to simple marketing seduction aimed at attracting international visitors but evolves in a more complex sphere, intertwining with political discourse and acting as a geopolitical mirror. It adapts to the changes affecting the destination in question while at the same time influencing the perceptions associated with it. In this respect, the case of Tunisia is particularly instructive as it highlights the promotional strategies that have been finely deployed over the years to reconcile sometimes divergent, even contradictory perspectives, particularly as regards the promotion of Roman heritage. Despite the colonial connotations that may be attributed to it, this heritage is used as a lever of soft power and as a vector of diplomatic intimacy with Europe (Matelly 2013). In so doing, it offers the country a valuable resource, albeit a complex and tricky one to handle in a constantly changing world.

The article is structured into four parts. The first part focuses on the literature review, examining the geopolitical issues surrounding tourism, with a specific focus on the Mediterranean region. The second part provides a short overview of the colonial era to contextualize the genesis and evolution of the problematic relationship with Roman heritage. The third part covers the Bourguiba and Ben Ali eras and explores Tunisia's significant opening to international tourism, especially towards Europe. It analyzes the country's strategic decision to position itself as a major tourist destination by capitalizing on its Mediterranean coastline and Roman heritage. Within this context, this section of the article will concentrate on analyzing the promotional strategies that played a crucial role in shaping a promotional narrative characterized by an ambivalent heritage intimacy towards Europe. The fourth part covers the post-Revolution period and examines the subtle yet revealing changes introduced in the promotional landscape following updates to the Tunisian tourism portal.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Since its global expansion, tourism has become closely intertwined with geopolitics. This interconnection is evident in the diversity of its practices, institutions, involved actors, encompassed spaces, and the movement of people and objects worldwide (Palmer 2018, Franklin 2004). These dynamics play a significant role in shaping international relations. This connection becomes even more pertinent when we consider tourism's role as a catalyst for economic and social change, while also being susceptible to various crises with geopolitical consequences, such as wars, political instability, natural disasters, or pandemics. Among the crises that have profoundly impacted the international tourism landscape are the oil crisis, conflicts in the Middle East and the Balkans (Giblin, 2007), the Arab Spring, the COVID-19 pandemic, and more recently, the wars in Ukraine and the Middle-East. Therefore, even though the geopolitics of tourism has not yet been fully recognized as a distinct field of research, it remains an essential underlying theme in tourism studies, especially in regions where most countries actively participate in the tourism industry, either as sources or destinations for tourists (Chevalier and Lefort 2021, Gillen and Mostafanezhad 2019, Bhandari 2019, Mostafanezhad 2016, Hall 2017).

The Mediterranean region is particularly suited for exploring the geopolitical issues surrounding tourism for at least two major reasons. Firstly, it remains one of the world's leading tourist destinations, attracting a significant number of visitors. Secondly, it has been the cradle and stage for the development of mass tourism, whether seaside, cultural, urban, or otherwise, at a time when new dynamics were taking shape between the countries on the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean (Ferreira da Silva 2022). It is worth noting that tourism in the Mediterranean experienced rapid growth in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, coinciding with the independence movements and the period often referred to as the "thirty glorious years" in Europe. In this context, tourism played a major role in shaping the political, economic, and cultural relations between the major colonial powers and their former colonies. Hoerner (2007) provides an insightful analysis on how tourism has influenced the evolution of relationships from a colonialist framework to what he terms 'colonism'. He characterizes 'colonism' as a form of tourist influx, particularly evident in the establishment of numerous holiday camps in nations that have recently emerged from colonization. This influx is not merely a continuation of traditional colonization or a manifestation of neo-colonialism for economic purposes. Instead, Hoerner views it as indicative of a new order, especially in the Mediterranean context, where tourism emerges as a pivotal component of contemporary development strategies. This interpretation is further elaborated by Chambers (2008), who underscores the role of tourism as a flagbearer of the prevailing development doctrines of that era. This nuanced perspective sheds light on the complex dynamics between tourism, historical colonialism, and emerging socio-economic trends in newly independent nations.

Promoted by international organizations such as UNESCO and the World Bank (Hawkins and Shann 2007; Saidi 2019), this “new” Mediterranean order consisted of a model of trade between the affluent countries of the northern shore and the less fortunate countries of the southern shore. As emitters of tourists and owners of tourist infrastructures freshly established on the other side of the Mediterranean, the former positioned themselves as creators of wealth for the benefit of the latter. Faced with the challenges of decolonization and various crises, particularly for countries lacking other natural resources, tourism was seen as a solution to their economic problems. It was also viewed as a means of strengthening political and socio-cultural ties with Europe and the West, both during the Cold War and in the era of globalization (Hilali 2007).

Similarly, tourism holds a prominent position in the reshaping of the Mediterranean's image, contributing to the renewal of the utopias and representations that underpin it. These representations exert significant influence on the propagation of this imagery, disseminated through various channels such as formal and informal promotional campaigns, the media, social networks, political discourse, academic discourse, and school curricula (Bramwell 2003; Michalco and Ratz 2006). Most of these representations portray the Mediterranean as a central zone situated between Europe, Africa, and Asia, weaving a network of convergence between north and south, east and west. In doing so, they have predestined the Mediterranean to embody the image of a melting pot of civilizations, a cultural crossroads, the cradle of the great monotheistic religions, and an inexhaustible source of diverse, multi-millennia-old heritage (Lowenthal 2008; Pons et al. 2009).

However, it's crucial to emphasize that this idealized image of the Mediterranean conceals the most painful historical realities that have marred the region. In other words, the romantic representation of a plural Mediterranean, popularized by Braudel's work (1949, 1978) among others, masks another reality - that of a controversial, even perverted, sea. Hurdon and Purcell speak of a corrupted sea (2019, 2000), referring to the various tragedies that have marked the history of the Mediterranean, such as armed conflicts, various forms of colonial domination, economic and social disparities between the northern and southern shores, and the policies of exclusion and displacement faced by minorities, immigrants, and refugees, among others (Concannon and Mazurek 2016, Clancy-Smith 2011, Peressini and Hadj-Moussa 2005).

Despite these dark pages in Mediterranean history, the widely shared image of an idealized Mediterranean persists, particularly among tourist destinations on the southern shores. Being largely dependent on European customers, these regions have heavily relied on this image. This is the case of Tunisia, which, in addition to its central position at the heart of the Mediterranean basin, has used its Roman heritage to reinforce its Mediterranean image, giving rise to a subtle form of Romaness that is appreciated by visitors but met with a more nuanced acceptance among Tunisians.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This study utilized a multifaceted approach, drawing upon an array of sources including written documents, iconographic materials, digital content, and oral narratives. It spans various historical periods, from the colonial era (1881-1956) to the post-revolution period in Tunisia. The investigation into written documents involved scrutinizing colonial-era tourism guides and records from early archaeological expeditions to contextualize the historical backdrop. Additionally, an array of tourist maps and promotional materials from the Bourguiba (1956-1987) and Ben Ali (1987-2011) administrations were analyzed to trace the evolution in the depiction of Tunisia's Mediterranean and Roman heritage. In the digital domain, the study examined alterations to the Tunisian tourism portal post the 2011 Revolution, providing insights into the evolving promotional narratives. The research also incorporated data from a decade-long ethnographic study conducted in Tunisia during the post-revolution era, which included field observations and semi-structured interviews with pivotal figures in Tunisian tourism and heritage, such as former directors of the National Tourist Office (ONTT) and the ex-head curator of the National Museum of Bardo.

Given the diverse nature of the collected materials and data, a qualitative analysis approach was adopted. This approach was instrumental in elucidating the 'blurred genres' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) identified in this study, underscoring the diversity of subjects and the breadth of data sources utilized. To enrich this methodology, the 'following' technique as proposed by George Marcus (1995, 2009) was employed. This technique facilitated the chronological and thematic tracking of the nuanced relationship between Tunisian perspectives on Mediterranean and Roman heritage as manifested across various mediums within the tourism promotional context.

The analytical framework was structured as follows: It commenced with an exploration of the roots of the ambivalent stance towards Mediterranean and Roman

heritage in colonial-era sources, investigating how colonial policies and narratives influenced Tunisian perceptions of this heritage. The examination then progressed to the postcolonial era, tracing the development and evolution of what is termed "temperate heritage intimacy" and its visual representation in tourist maps and promotional imagery. This phase involved delving into the confluence of historical accuracy and modern marketing strategies, and unraveling the complexities embedded in the visual portrayal of heritage. A substantial portion of the study focused on analyzing the post-2011 Revolution changes, particularly how the Tunisian tourism portal's reconfigurations underscored a shift from Roman themes to a greater emphasis on Punic and African elements. Ethnographic interactions, including interviews and field observations with key figures in Tunisian tourism and heritage, contributed in-depth perspectives on the geopolitical ramifications of this promotional narrative in the contemporary Tunisian milieu.

Employing this integrated methodology, the study endeavored to dissect the complex dynamics by which Tunisia's relationship with its Mediterranean and Roman heritage is constructed, deconstructed, and recontructed within the tourism promotional landscape. The fusion of 'blurred genres' and the 'following' technique provided a holistic view, capturing the intricate interplay between tourism promotion, historical legacies, and political narratives.

#### **4. THE COMPLEX HERITAGE PARADOX: TUNISIA'S ROMAN LEGACY**

To gain a more profound insight into Tunisia's intricate relationship with its Roman heritage, it is valuable to briefly examine the issues that surrounded the utilization of this heritage during the protectorate period (1881-1956). Colonial literature abounds with publications attesting to colonial France's inclination to assert itself as the heir to the Roman Empire, using this claim to justify its expansion into North Africa (Cagnat 1892, Toutain 1896, Boissier 1902, Pallu de Lesseert 1905, Proser 1924). Numerous scholarly studies have explored this colonial ideology (Labadi 2023, Lorcin and Shepard 2016, Bacha 2013, Rodes 2012, Gutron 2010, Barrette 2005, Oulebsir 2004, Février 1990). In both cases, the focus lies on France's colonial endeavor to "take up the torch of ancient Rome" (Weiss 1937) by "reconquering" territories once under Roman rule. Tunisia, as a former colony of Scipio and his Roman successors, was particularly targeted in this context, not only by France but also, and perhaps even more so, by Italy, which likewise adopted this colonial interpretation of antiquity (Mattingly 2011). To thwart Italian ambitions, the French colonial authorities rapidly began to assimilate the Roman legacy, emphasizing the Romaness of Tunisia from the outset of their conquest. This approach effectively transformed the Roman heritage into a geopolitical instrument in the occupation of the country and in shaping the French colonial narrative in Tunisia and North Africa.

In summary, the Roman heritage held such geopolitical importance for France that it was entrusted to the military. "Topographical brigades" composed of "scientists," including archaeologists, were integrated into the army, particularly in regions of the country under exclusive military control (Jebahi, Pouillon 2022; Insart et al. 2018). In fact, one of the first actions carried out by these brigades at the very beginning of the protectorate was the establishment of an archaeological map of the entire country. The strategic complicity

between military conquest and "scientific" investigation also benefited from the support of political authorities, who facilitated researchers' access to all levels of power. A renowned archaeologist, René Cagnat, who fervently promoted the thesis of a historical lineage between the French and Roman empires, recounts how he was invited to dine with the Resident General of France in Tunisia, just an hour after his request for an audience: "[...] I dined the other time with the Resident Minister, it's between two glasses that we agreed on great scientific projects of France in Tunisia [...] the museum affair is underway." (Cagnat 1938). This museum, whose creation was decided "between two glasses," was in fact the future Bardo Museum, which, at its conception in 1882, was named "French National Museum" before being renamed "Alaoui Museum" at its inauguration in 1888, and then "National Bardo Museum" after independence (Zaiane 2008).

The term "French national" speaks volumes about the colonial heritage policy being established at the time. The initial legislative texts focused on the protection of ancient heritage, primarily from the Roman era, as exemplified by the Beylical decree of 7 November 1882 (Jaïdi 2017). This decree explicitly stipulated the preservation of ancient heritage predating the Arab conquest, citing that Islamic heritage was governed by distinct laws rooted in Muslim law, such as the *Hobous* law (Jaïdi 2017). The distinction between these two protection regimes gradually positioned Roman heritage hierarchically superior to other remnants of the past (Bacha 2006). This hierarchy was further reinforced with the establishment of the aforementioned museum<sup>2</sup>, which predominantly featured Roman collections, hence earning it the local nickname "Dar Laajayeb" (House of oddities), as a way to dissociate from this heritage (Coslett 2020). The association of peculiarity with Roman heritage partly stems from the Arab-Muslim cultural and religious background, which linked the Latin-Roman legacy to the era of ignorance (*Jahylia*) that preceded the rise of Islam in Arabia and other regions. To some extent, colonial heritage policy exploited this underlying hostility toward Latin-Roman heritage to further alienate it from the local population.

The convergence of these elements significantly influenced the trajectory of Latin-Roman heritage in the post-colonial era. A considerable segment of the population, along with the political and intellectual spheres, was infused with the belief that Roman and French dominion had impeded national emancipation in Tunisia and the Maghreb (Laroui 1982, Talbi 2005). From this standpoint, integrating Roman heritage into the Tunisian national narrative appeared inconceivable, particularly in the early years of independence, characterized by decolonization discourse and identity redefinition. Caught between national and colonial visions, Roman heritage remained on the periphery of efforts to claim and fully acknowledge it. Mohamed Arkoun suggests that this dilemma reflects a clash between two 'dogmatisms' embodied by 'colonial science' and 'nationalist science,' both of which fostered mistrust of this legacy in the post-colonial Maghreb (Arkoun 1991, 1984).

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to the Musée Alaoui, known today as the Musée du Bardo, Tunisia during the protectorate period had other archaeological museums dedicated mainly to conserving collections of Roman mosaics. These include the museums of Sfax and Sousse, not forgetting the Lavignerie Museum, founded in 1875 by the White Fathers and renamed the National Museum of Carthage after independence.

Since gaining independence, Tunisia has approached its Roman heritage through the lens of "nationalist science." Habib Bourguiba, the former Tunisian president, and leader of the national movement, consistently emphasized that the Romans, Arabs, Ottomans, and French had all exerted their colonial influence over Tunisia. Nonetheless, he did not hesitate to center his modernization policy around what he termed *Al-infitah*, or openness to the West. In this regard, he employed tourism, and by extension, Roman heritage, to reinforce this orientation. Therefore, Tunisia embarked on a third path that could be described, in Arkoun's words, as a "science of tourism," accentuating the tourist aspect of Roman heritage. Consequently, this heritage became primarily a "tourist heritage" targeting foreign visitors, especially Europeans, rather than being a culturally and politically appropriated asset. In other words, Tunisia's Roman heritage, while not fully acknowledged in the national imagination, has melded with its Mediterranean heritage to shape a two-sided tourist image, merging the country's coastal and heritage facets.

## **5. MAPPING AND IMAGING TUNISIA'S MEDITERRANEAN CENTRALITY**

The corpus of 20 tourist maps under examination, produced post-independence, offers a unique vantage point for delving into the concept of 'heritage intimacy'. These maps underscore Tunisia's pivotal position in the Mediterranean, elucidating its geocultural affiliations with Europe. The cartographic representations predominantly accentuate the nation's territorial outreach into the Mediterranean, with a particular focus on Cap Bon, the Sahel, and the Djerba-Zarzis region—locales distinguished by their substantial hotel infrastructure. Such depictions conceptualize Tunisia as extending towards Europe, seamlessly integrating with the maritime expanse in a manner akin to a swimmer, with its coastal resorts portrayed as serenely buoyant upon the waters.

This imagery has not escaped scholarly attention; Paul Balta's analogy of Tunisia as "an open hand that both receives and gives, proffering itself while selectively engaging with those who reciprocate its gesture" (Balta, 1987), draws inspiration from these representations. The metaphorical extensions into the Mediterranean—envisioned as a hand emanating from Cap Bon and a torso submerged in the waters off the Sahel—acquire augmented significance in light of their proximity to the Italian peninsula, a mere few hundred kilometers distant. These regions, located in Tunisia's northern and central zones, not only underscore the country's geographical outreach but also epitomize its welcoming ethos and its profound, historical entanglements with the European continent.

Illustrated in this way, the country's geographical proximity to Europe is reinforced by a geocultural proximity. As well as visually showing the Tunisian coastline within easy reach of Europe, these maps, or the travel guides in which they are inserted, incorporate images of Roman monuments to visually associate them with the seaside resorts that line the coastline. The Colosseum at Eljem, for example, is presented as if it were in the vicinity of the Sahel seaside resort, while the site of Carthage and the Bardo Museum appear to be close to the tourist areas of Nabeul and Hammamet. Other Roman sites further from the coast, such as Sufeitula, Makthar and Dougga, are shown at some distance from the coastal areas, giving the country's opening onto the Mediterranean a dual historical and territorial dimension. It is important to note that most of these maps are dominated by bright colors,

mainly navy blue, evoking the Mediterranean Sea, and sometimes white or golden yellow, reflecting the similarity between the color of the sand on the beaches and in the desert and that of the ancient monuments (Abassi 2010, 2017).

Beyond their promotional purpose, such cartographic representations reflect a political mindset that seeks to make Tunisia's Mediterranean nature a point of convergence with Europe, or even a place of identification with it. Remember Bourguiba's speech on Mediterranean fraternity. In other words, the tourism discourse is intertwined with the political discourse to express a similar message: Tunisia is intimately linked to Europe, far beyond mere geographical proximity. To this end, tourism is of vital importance in re-establishing a twofold intimacy, both in terms of heritage and geography, with the aim of reintegrating Tunisia into its original and 'fraternal' environment, embodied by its Latin-Roman heritage and its central position in the Mediterranean. This assertion is further supported by many of the people in charge of this sector whom I met during my research in this country.

I would like to mention A. Smaoui, a senior civil servant during the Bourguiba and Ben Ali eras, who witnessed the growth of this sector by joining the ONTT when it was created in 1970, and then becoming Minister of Tourism on several subsequent occasions. Smaoui considers tourism to be one of the pillars of the national state, on a par with the army, parliament, the constitution, the police, and customs. Not only because it was born at the same time as all these institutions, but also because it made a real contribution to the building of the state by providing the country with much-needed economic development at a time when it was just freeing itself from the colonial yoke. Furthermore, Smaoui attributes to tourism the role of a modernizing agent, or even a "school of apprenticeship and training," for openness and reconciliation with the West. According to Smaoui, this stems from Bourguiba's vision, who, in launching the country into the tourism era, aimed to convey to Europeans, "I have trained a Tunisian who is just like you: educated, multilingual, service-oriented, and, in short, thoroughly modern<sup>3</sup>." W. Ibrahim, a former senior official at the ONTT, shares the same perspective, describing what he refers to as the "saga of Tunisian tourism<sup>4</sup>." This saga has transformed Tunisia into a veritable "promised land" for both tourists and European investors in the tourism sector. In his view, this is how Bourguiba succeeded in strengthening relations with Europe and firmly positioning the country in the Euro-Mediterranean market.

In a similar vein, M. Sayah, a prominent minister during Bourguiba's tenure and one of the most ardent proponents of his modernization and openness policy, also underscores Bourguiba's strong inclination towards the West. Bourguiba harbored a deep desire to merge the country with Europe, a desire he sought to instill in young Tunisians. Sayah recalls his first meeting with Bourguiba when he was still a young student, returning with other Tunisian comrades from a student event in Uganda, Africa. He recounts how the Head of State immediately interrupted them as they were about to discuss poverty and submission in Africa. "Furthermore, he warned us against comparing Tunisia with these

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<sup>3</sup> Extract from an interview with Ahmed Smaoui in Tunis in 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Extract from an interview with Wahid Ibrahim in Tunis in 2015.

countries, asserting that Europe was our horizon, "our balcony opposite," across the Mediterranean. He encouraged us to think in terms of Italy, Greece, or France. I still hold that memory." (Camau and Geisser 2004).

Although this metaphor of the 'balcony opposite' has been used in a different context, it is particularly relevant to the notion of heritage intimacy. Indeed, it takes on added significance as it illustrates the spatial organization and, by extension, the geopolitical orientation conferred on the country by the construction of hotels along the coast. These hotels were not only oriented towards the sea, on the other side of which lay the 'balcony' mentioned by Bourguiba, but they also acted as another 'balcony.' They stood as facades of the country, exposing Tunisia to Europe and its people.

In summary, this metaphor of the "balcony opposite" reflects the profound aspiration of Bourguiba and the Tunisian post-colonial elite to integrate with the European sphere and establish a close relationship with the West. It reinforces the idea that the construction of hotels by the sea symbolized much more than simple tourist expansion (Hazbun 2008, 2010). Combined with the promotional narrative, it embodied the projection of an image of Tunisia turned towards the West, an invitation to Europe to share this Mediterranean balcony embodied by the coastal zone.

The policy of openness towards the West under the Ben Ali regime did not undergo any major changes, mainly due to the persistence of Europe as Tunisia's primary source of tourists (Hazbun 2007). However, during this period of so-called 'Change,' some adjustments were made, particularly in terms of the relationship with the past, whether Roman or other historical eras. To distinguish itself from Bourguiba, whose modernization policy had been perceived as excessive westernization and a break with the past, Ben Ali's era was characterized by what was then presented as a reconciliation with the turath (heritage in Arabic).

This reconciliation involved invoking earlier eras, particularly Antiquity, and integrating them into the present in the form of representations that juxtaposed figures from the past and the present. These representations, in various media and artistic forms, left their mark on the promotional landscape of the time. Whether in television commercials or photo slideshows, they all served to showcase ancient monuments in harmony with contemporary objects. One notable example is a promotional CD-Rom distributed on a large scale, including through the ONTT's web portal and branches abroad, during the 1990s and early 2000s. Of the 106 images of cultural attractions it contained, 30 featured historic sites and monuments, most of them linked to Roman times. The images were bright and sunny, highlighting the splendor of the monuments, the grandeur of the sites, and the diversity of the imposing remains, such as the Colosseum, ancient theaters, places of worship, triumphal arches, etc. The slideshow accentuated these objects even more strikingly by juxtaposing them with other contemporary elements, such as luxury hotels, sparkling jewelry, lush landscapes, golden beaches, and delectable dishes from Tunisian cuisine. This arrangement of vestiges of the past alongside contemporary objects gave the Tunisian tourist landscape a temporal density punctuated mainly by Roman monuments.

This tendency to portray the past as coexisting with the present during the Ben Ali era was driven by the post-Bourguibian regime's aspiration to symbolically elevate itself to the

level of the glories and heroes of the past in the eyes of both tourists and Tunisians. This was exemplified by the dissemination of promotional videos through the national television channel, wherein the presidential palace at Carthage, situated near the ancient site bearing the same name, was promoted alongside other historical monuments across the country. The implicit objective was to exalt both the palace and the then-president, Ben Ali, by positioning them in a comparable light to historical figures such as Hannibal and Alissa, also known as Queen Dido. This was an especially noteworthy move, given that these videos were broadcast before and after the official news programs, where images of the President and his activities dominated almost the entire broadcast.

Consequently, this method of displaying power through conspicuous advertising invited viewers, whether they were foreigners or Tunisians, to witness firsthand the interconnectedness of the past and the present. The perpetuation of Carthage as a "place of memory" thus solidified its status as a "place of power." Antiquity was consequently acknowledged and esteemed due to the Carthaginian "blood" connection, thereby establishing a symbolic reference to Carthage's illustrious era. It can, therefore, be asserted that Romaness was subsumed, if not obscured, within Carthageness, or even Punicess, as we will explore in the subsequent section.

## **6. REVOLUTIONIZING HERITAGE: DE-ROMANIZING THE ROMAN?**

Following the January 2011 Revolution, the ONTT initiated a comprehensive overhaul of its primary web portal dedicated to Tunisian tourism. The portal, now named "Discover Tunisia" (<https://www.discovertunisia.com/>), presents a revamped image of the country, capitalizing on the opportunities provided by new technologies and social networks for producing and disseminating promotional content. This renewed representation of the country primarily concerns its form while remaining faithful to the ONTT's editorial and promotional line. Key elements of this image, such as the sea, beaches, sites, and monuments, continue to occupy the central position in the presentation.

However, a thorough analysis of the organization of the portal's sections reveals subtle yet significant transformations. These changes predominantly revolve around the section titled "Must-See Sites," which showcases the seven Tunisian sites and monuments included on UNESCO's World Heritage List. Carthage, with its dual Punic and Roman dimensions, leads this list of seven monuments. In second place is Kerkouane, often referred to as the "Punic Pompeii" due to its status as the sole intact Punic site despite centuries of Roman dominance. The two Roman sites, Dougga and El Jem, which typically occupied second and third positions after Carthage, have each descended one rank.

This tendency to accentuate Punicess at the expense of Romaness is also evident in another section labeled "Universal Heritage," where a promotional video titled "True Tunisia" is featured on the portal. Commissioned by the ONTT, the video portrays a group of European YouTubers embarking on a tour of the country's beaches. They commence their journey in Carthage, highlighting its status as a city that "rivaled" Rome and resisted destruction, even in the face of the famous adage "Delenda est Carthago" (Carthage must be destroyed), attributed to Cato the Elder following the Third Punic War. Instead of heading to Hammamet, renowned for its sandy beaches and luxury hotels, the YouTubers

opt for Kélibia, specifically the Mansoura and Haouaria beaches. Their visit to these beaches, which lack hotel facilities and are more popular with Tunisian holidaymakers, leads them to a stopover at Kerkouane, once again depicted as a site that resisted Roman invasion and retained numerous elements and artifacts of Punic civilization that have been largely obliterated elsewhere in the country. The portal also showcases a series of mosaics described as "Roman-African."

This expression encompasses two interconnected discourses, each reevaluating the Roman heritage in Tunisia from distinct perspectives. The overarching theme is a movement towards acknowledging and valorizing the native contributions to what has traditionally been perceived as Roman legacy. The first discourse emerges from a group of Tunisian in the middle class. Their advocacy centers around a form of de-Romanization of the Roman heritage in Tunisia, challenging the conventional view that attributes these historical treasures solely to Roman ingenuity. While this group is diverse in its composition, it notably includes individuals associated with a nascent, yet informal, political movement known as the Movement of the Republic of Carthage. This movement extends its agenda beyond mere de-Romanization, proposing a change in the nation's name as a significant act of reevaluating national identity. This proposal is not only symbolic but also serves as a means to reclaim what they regard as the “first republic in history”, namely, the Republic of Carthage<sup>5</sup>.

These advocates, both affiliated and unaffiliated with the movement, engage actively on social media, in political forums, and television debates. They argue that the so-called Roman heritage was not exclusively Roman in origin but was significantly crafted by local populations. According to them, post-conquest, the Romans rebranded these monuments and relics with Roman names, obscuring their original Punic or Carthaginian roots. The second discourse arises from the academic realm, particularly among Tunisian archaeologists and historians. Their focus is on dismantling the colonialist narrative that has dominated interpretations of Roman heritage. They endeavor to shine a light on the substantial African, specifically Tunisian, contributions to what is known as Roman civilization, thereby reshaping the historical narrative to include a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the past.

From this standpoint, H. Ben Younes, an archaeologist, and former General Curator of the Bardo National Museum, alludes to an "African school of mosaics." He underscores the influence of African Christianity on the northern shores of the Mediterranean, courtesy of theologians and religious martyrs like Saint Augustine and Saint Cyprian. He contends that "the concept of Africanity in Roman times evolved progressively, giving rise to the term 'Roman-African,' akin to the long-established 'Gallo-Roman,' although African civilization in Roman times shone more brilliantly than that of Gaul<sup>6</sup>." Nonetheless, the

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<sup>5</sup> The movement has established an online presence with a website accessible at <https://republicofcarthage.org/>, and is also active on social media with a Facebook page and a YouTube channel. According to the information disseminated on these platforms, the movement has submitted an official request to transition into a political party and is currently awaiting a response from the Tunisian authorities.

<sup>6</sup> Extract from an interview with Habib Ben Younes in 2022.

emphasis on Africanness and Punicness manifests an ambivalent and intricate stance in the post-revolutionary promotional narrative, mirroring the complexity observed during the Bourguiba and Ben Ali eras. It could be argued that since the Revolution, the dual relationship with the Mediterranean and Roman heritage has become even more intricate, owing to a substantial decline in the number of European tourists visiting the country. This is further exacerbated by the repercussions of the Mediterranean migration crisis and the influence of certain Islamist and Arabist political discourses that have dominated the public sphere over the past twelve years, challenging the policy of Western openness championed by Bourguiba and Ben Ali (Rey 2018). All of this, not to mention the two terrorist attacks that took place in 2015, initially targeting the Bardo Museum and subsequently a hotel in Sousse, resulting in a total of 59 fatalities among foreign tourists.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

Tunisia's intricate relationship with its Mediterranean and Roman heritage unveils an evolving and complex dialogue within its promotional imagery, characterized by dual facets. On one side, there's a tempering of Mediterranean and Roman elements due to historical and political considerations, giving rise to a nuanced and inward-looking heritage intimacy. On the other side, the narrative emphasizes shared Mediterranean and Roman traits with Europe, promoting an outward-facing heritage intimacy aimed primarily at European tourists.

This dualistic approach has been shaped by a series of political and geopolitical shifts that have influenced Tunisia's relations with Europe, both pre- and post-independence. During the colonial era, Roman heritage was often leveraged to portray Tunisia as an extension of ancient Rome, thereby distancing this heritage from the Tunisian identity. Post-independence, particularly in the Bourguiba era, Tunisia sought to engage with the West, using tourism as a conduit for modernization and rapprochement with Europe. This period saw the rise of political and promotional rhetoric advocating values of proximity, fraternity, and intimacy among Mediterranean nations.

Tunisia, in this era, was depicted as a 'Mediterranean balcony,' mirroring its European counterpart—a notion further explored during Ben Ali's regime. Ben Ali, seeking to distinguish his leadership, emphasized a reconciliation between past and present. Under his rule, Roman sites and monuments gained prominence in promotional materials but were contextualized within a broader narrative of antiquity, dominated by themes like a Carthaginian renaissance and a symbolic return of Hannibal, associated with Ben Ali and his administration. Roman elements, while somewhat relegated, maintained their relevance for tourism and political symbolism. Notably, Ben Ali, like Bourguiba, continued policies of modernization and Western engagement, aiming to bolster the tourism industry, secure economic support, and acquire Western backing in combating Islamist factions of that period.

The post-revolutionary phase has brought subtle yet notable shifts in the promotional narrative, with an increased focus on Punic heritage, particularly through the promotion of Kerkouane. This site is celebrated as the last intact remnant of Punic civilization, having withstood Roman rule, symbolizing a resurgence of pre-Roman Tunisian culture. This

reinvigorated emphasis on Punic elements in the promotional discourse also facilitated a revival of Punic figures and aspects previously less prominent.

In summary, the fluctuating portrayal of Tunisia's heritage reflects a broader narrative of identity and geopolitics, balancing internal cultural perspectives with external diplomatic and touristic strategies. This dynamic interplay continues to shape Tunisia's image and its interactions with the wider Mediterranean and global community..

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