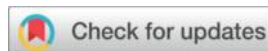




Mauri Resistance to Byzantine Occupation In North Africa : Antalas as a case study



Dr. Zaki Belkaaloul ¹, Dr. Amar Djebri ², Dr. Abdelatfi Djebri ³

¹ Department of History, University of Algiers 2, Algeria.

Email: Zaki.belkaaloul@univ-alger2.dz ; ORCID iD: 0000-0002-0432-1229

² Department of History, Mohamed El Bachir El Ibrahimi University - Bordj Bou Arreridj, Algeria.

Email: amar.djebri@univ-bba.dz ; ORCID iD: 0009-0001-9770-4551

³ Bou-Saada Higher Normal School, Algeria

Email: djebri.abdellatif@ens-bousaada.dz ; ORCID iD: 0009-0009-4804-1278

Received: 09/01/2026 ; Accepted : 22/05/2026 ; Published : 22/09/2026

Abstract

Antalas occupies a distinctive place in the history of North Africa in the mid-sixth century. He was the chief of the Frexes and, according to the best-supported hypothesis in the corpus assembled here, was based in southern or south-western Byzacena. He appears both as a military adversary of the Byzantine Empire and as a former partner of imperial power. This dual position prevents us from reducing him to the image of an irreconcilably hostile "barbarian." It also prevents us from turning his actions into an ancient equivalent of a national movement or a liberation struggle. This article offers a critical study of his trajectory. It compares the accounts of Corippus and Procopius as transmitted and analyzed in the works of Camps and Modéran. It also examines the context of the Byzantine reconquest and reconstructs the main stages of Antalas's career. Finally, it draws on David J. Mattingly's methodological approach to imperialism, discrepant experiences, and the dangers of binary oppositions. The argument advanced here is deliberately cautious. The sources support the use of resistance in a descriptive and analytical sense, namely collective actions intended to challenge or renegotiate military and political domination. They do not support the existence of an established Mauri nationalism. Antalas instead appears to have used warfare, alliance, and negotiation to defend his group's position, respond to specific acts of violence, attract support, and secure a recognized place within the imperial order.

Keywords: Antalas; Frexes; Byzacena; Byzantine occupation; Moors; Corippus; Procopius; Iohannis; resistance; imperialism; Mattingly.

Introduction

The Byzantine occupation of North Africa began with the defeat of the Vandal kingdom and the imperial intervention of 533. It did not produce immediate or uniform political integration. The studies assembled in the corpus instead reveal a region shaped by negotiation, unstable loyalties, rivalries among chiefs, revolts, and accommodations. The reconquest was therefore not simply a military operation against a defeated kingdom. It was also an attempt to reorganize power in provinces where Mauri groups already possessed a political history, territories of movement, alliance networks, and military capabilities of their own.¹ In this context, Antalas provides an exceptional case through which to examine these dynamics. His name is associated with fighting first against the Vandals and later against the Byzantines. Yet the surviving evidence also attributes to him a long period of loyalty to the Empire. This combination of submission, cooperation, revolt, and negotiation is precisely what makes his career historically significant.

The central question of this article is therefore the following: how should Antalas's resistance to Byzantine authority be understood, and can it be described as resistance in a historical and analytical sense without projecting the political categories of the modern world onto sixth-century Africa?

This question requires several precautions. First, the two principal narratives, Procopius's Vandalic War and Corippus's Iohannis, do not construct the same chronology or assign the same importance to the actors involved. Second, modern scholarship itself has moved between two opposing images: that of a Moor who was essentially predatory, undisciplined, and outside Romanity, and that of a national freedom fighter *avant la lettre*. Mattingly has shown that, despite their apparent opposition, both models can reproduce the same schematic division between "us" and "them."² Any study of Antalas must therefore distinguish between the establishment of facts, historians' interpretations, and the inferences that can reasonably be drawn from the evidence.

¹ Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine (IVe–VIIe siècle)*, Rome, Publications de l'École française de Rome, 2003, pp. 315–334; Gabriel Camps, *Antalas*, *Encyclopédie berbère*, 5, 1988, pp. 706–708.

² David J. Mattingly, *From one colonialism to another: imperialism and the Maghreb*, pp. 49–63.

The corpus used in this study consists exclusively of the materials provided. The ancient sources are represented mainly by editions and translations of Corippus, references to Procopius, and passages transmitted through modern studies. Shea's English translation is used to situate the transmission and editorial choices of the *Iohannis* within the available corpus.³ The studies by Camps, Courtois, and Modéran are used to reconstruct chronology, location, and political relations, while also allowing different interpretations to be compared. Mattingly's works are used in the role assigned to them in the dossier. They are not treated as the principal source for events specific to Antalas. Instead, they provide a theoretical and historiographical framework for examining imperialism, resistance, identity, discrepant experience, and power.⁴ The studies by Zarini and Gärtner complement this approach by emphasizing that the *Iohannis* is an epic work shaped by rhetorical and poetic choices, not a neutral chronicle.⁵

The argument develops along four lines. The first presents the context of the Byzantine reconquest and the problems raised by the category of "Mauri resistance." The second examines Antalas's origins, territorial base, and political profile. The third follows the stages of his career, from the earliest raids attributed to the Fraxes to the submission that followed the campaigns of John Troglita. The fourth offers a critical reading of resistance through Mattingly's approach. It assesses what the sources allow us to say about collective action and identities, as well as the limits of evidence produced mainly by authors connected to the imperial world.

I - The Historical Context of Byzantine Occupation and Mauri Resistance

1.1. Reconquest as an Incomplete Reorganization of Africa

The materials provided present the Byzantine conquest as an enterprise whose military dimension cannot be separated from the administrative and political reorganization of the African provinces. Victory over the Vandals did not mean that the Empire immediately gained uniform control over the countryside, roads, and armed groups. In the accounts compared by Modéran, the arrival of the Byzantines was

³ George W. Shea, *The Iohannis, or De bellis Libycis, of Flavius Cresconius Corippus: Introduction and Translation*, *Studies in Classics*, vol. 7, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1998, introduction and transmission details.

⁴ David J. Mattingly, ed., *Dialogues in Roman Imperialism: Power, discourse, and discrepant experience in the Roman Empire*, *Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series*, no. 23, Portsmouth, Rhode Island, 1997, introduction and general framework of the volume.

⁵ Thomas Gärtner, *Untersuchungen zur Gestaltung und zum historischen Stoff der Iohannis Coripps*, Berlin–New York, Walter de Gruyter, 2008, vol. 90; Vincent Zarini, *Rhétorique, poétique, spiritualité: la technique épique de Corippe dans la Johannide*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2003.

followed by revolts in several regions and by negotiations with Mauri chiefs who did not all stand in the same relationship to imperial authority. Procopius, who accompanied Belisarius to Africa and wrote within the circles of the imperial elite, provides an account close to the events. Corippus, an African poet whose *Iohannis* was composed shortly after John Troglita's victory, offers an epic construction centered on war and the restoration of Roman order.⁶

The organization of Byzacena shows that the conquest remained uncertain. Modéran notes Justinian's decision to station the duke of Byzacena temporarily at Capsa and Thelepte rather than at Hadrumetum. This choice indicates both the strategic importance of the southern margins and an awareness that the conquest was incomplete.⁷ This evidence alone does not prove that the administration was concerned exclusively with Antalas. It is, however, consistent with the wider body of evidence locating the Frexes in a southern or south-western sector of the province. Imperial power therefore had to operate in territories where the authority of cities, garrisons, and local chiefs overlapped without being identical.

The situation is further clarified by studies of Tripolitania and Saharan groups. Mattingly emphasizes the diversity of tribal forms of organization, the links between agricultural zones, pastoral territories, and fortified centers, and the need to avoid treating inland groups as a homogeneous nomadic mass.⁸ His study of the Laguatan confederation also shows that names transmitted by Roman and Arabic sources may refer to changing historical formations. Broad categories such as nomadic or sedentary can obscure variations in economy, mobility, and power.⁹ This point is essential in the case of Antalas. His alliance with the Laguatan in 544 does not mean that the Frexes and the Tripolitanian groups had previously formed a permanent unit.

1.2. The Moors as a Political Category

The term Moor is used by the sources for populations and chiefs who did not form a single political entity. Camps notes that Antalas was a Berber chief of the Byzantine period, the son of Guenfan, and the leader of the Frexes. The accounts of Procopius and Corippus also connect his actions with distinct

⁶ Yves Modéran, *Corippe et l'occupation byzantine de l'Afrique: pour une nouvelle lecture de la Johannide*, *Antiquités africaines*, 22, 1986, pp. 195–212.

⁷ Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, 2003, pp. 321–323.

⁸ David J. Mattingly, *Tripolitania*, London, B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1995, chapters 2–4 and 9–12, pp. 26–87, 270–346.

⁹ David J. Mattingly, *The Laguatan: A Libyan Tribal Confederation in the Late Roman Empire*, *Libyan Studies*, 14, 1983, p. 96 ff. in the copy provided.

groups such as the Levathae, or Laguatan, the Ifuraces, the Austures, the Numidians of Coutina, and the forces of Iaudas.¹⁰ The category therefore has narrative value, but it should not be mechanically converted into a unified collective identity.

Such caution is all the more necessary because the *Iohannis* constructs a moral opposition between the Byzantine camp and the enemies of Africa. Modéran shows that Corippus systematically omits Byzantine errors, justifies imperial policy toward indigenous populations, and tends to attribute Africa's misfortunes to the irreconcilable Moors led by Antalas.¹¹ The representation of Antalas is therefore more than a biographical portrait. It helps construct a genealogy of disorder and legitimize the restoration of imperial order. The violent language of epic poetry should not be treated as a transparent description of the chief's social identity.

Zarini's study of Book II of the *Iohannis* confirms that labels such as "Berbers" and "barbarians" belong to a representational technique combining ethnography, rhetoric, and politics.¹² Calling a chief a "Moor" does not prove that he stood outside every form of Romanity. Conversely, the use of Latin, participation in an army, or the conclusion of a treaty did not erase differences of status and culture. Several levels of analysis must therefore be retained: group affiliation, patronage relations, place of residence, military practices, and the position assigned to the chief by imperial discourse.

1.3. The Historiographical Framework: From Colonial Otherness to Discrepant Experience

The modern context in which knowledge about Roman Africa was produced is another part of the problem. Mattingly shows that colonial archaeologists and historians often portrayed Europeans as the natural heirs of Rome and North African populations as the heirs of indigenous inertia or violence. This construction encouraged oppositions between desert and cultivated land, nomads and sedentary populations, and Africans and Romans. Such binaries placed colonizers or European scholars on one side and "turbulent Africans" on the other.¹³

The postcolonial response performed an important corrective function. Mattingly recalls Laroui's role in deconstructing colonial historiography and Benabou's contribution in restoring agency to

¹⁰ Gabriel Camps, *Antalas*, 1988, pp. 706–708.

¹¹ Yves Modéran, *Corippe et l'occupation byzantine de l'Afrique*, 1986, pp. 195–212.

¹² Vincent Zarini, *Berbères ou barbares ? Recherches sur le livre second de la Johannide de Corippe*, Nancy–Paris, 1997.

¹³ David J. Mattingly, *From one colonialism to another*, study provided, pp. 52–54.

Africans, including in the cultural sphere.¹⁴ At the same time, he warns that turning insurgents into fighters for freedom and nationhood can create a new simplification. The claim that ancient revolts were analogous to twentieth-century liberation movements risks turning a rhetorical comparison into a historical explanation. This warning is decisive for Antalas. Armed opposition to the Empire is documented. Berber nationalism or a project of national liberation is not.

Mattingly's model is less a single theory of resistance than an invitation to reconstruct multiple experiences of imperialism. He stresses that responses to domination may include conformity, cooperation, resistance, and rebellion, sometimes successively among the same actors¹⁵ This proposition is particularly well suited to Antalas. His relations with the Empire moved from loyalty to rupture, and then from armed coalition to negotiation and submission. The model prevents resistance from being treated as a permanent cultural essence.

II - Antalas: Origins, Territorial Base, and Relations with Byzantine Power

2.1. A Chief of the Frexes and Son of Guenfan

The most stable element in the evidence is Antalas's lineage. He is presented as the son of Guenfan and the chief of the Frexes. Camps describes him as a Berber chief of the early Byzantine period who was active in the conflicts of the mid-sixth century¹⁶ Modéran takes up this evidence and shows that the catalogue in Book II of the *Iohannis* links Antalas to a group whose previous chief was his father¹⁷ This dynastic continuity does not, however, establish the existence of a centralized kingdom.

Historiographical tradition has sometimes portrayed Guenfan and then Antalas as rulers of a kingdom in the Tunisian Dorsal that emerged under the Vandals. Courtois advanced this hypothesis on the basis of the presumed location of the Frexes, the concentration of fortifications, and a reading of the *Vita Fulgentii*, or *Life of Saint Fulgentius*. Camps treats it as an important historiographical proposal but notes that the kingdom's existence remains difficult to establish¹⁸ Modéran criticizes the construction more directly. The *Vita Fulgentii* does not necessarily allow the unidentified regions it mentions to be

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 57–58.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 62–63.

¹⁶ Gabriel Camps, Antalas, 1988, pp. 706–708.

¹⁷ Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, 2003, pp. 315–316.

¹⁸ Gabriel Camps, Antalas, 1988, pp. 706–708; Christian Courtois, *Les Vandales et l'Afrique*, Paris, A.M.G., 1955.

equated with hostile Mauri territory, while the places associated with Antalas's activity instead point toward south-western Byzacena¹⁹

Three propositions must therefore be distinguished. The first is well attested: Antalas led the Frexes. The second is plausible but debated: his leadership formed part of a family succession associated with a regional territory. The third is more hypothetical: that there was an established and durable kingdom in the Dorsal. Gabriel Camps's research on the Mauri kingdoms of the sixth and seventh centuries provides a useful comparison, but it does not turn the idea of a kingdom under Antalas into an established fact²⁰ This article accepts the first two propositions with the necessary reservations and does not treat the third as established.

2.2. The Location of the Frexes in Byzacena

The location of Antalas is fundamental because it changes how his relations with the Empire are understood. Earlier proposals placed the Frexes between Thala and Thelepte, or around Thala, in a region of middle-altitude mountains. Camps favors a more southerly location in south-western Byzacena.²¹ Modéran reviews the evidence in detail and brings together several indicators: the places where Antalas is said to have acted, Corippus's expressions *fines Libyci* and *fines nostri*, the description of the mountains where he concealed his booty, the route followed by the Laguatan in 544, and the Byzantine military deployment.

Modéran's analysis places the Frexes approximately between Capsa and Theveste, west of the Capsa-Thelepte road, in the mountainous borderlands of Byzacena. The military logic of 544 is important to this reconstruction. The Laguatan came from Tripolitania, entered Byzacena, and moved toward Theveste. This choice makes more sense if their route allowed them to join Antalas, who was established in that area, before threatening the route toward Carthage²²

This proposal remains a scholarly reconstruction rather than direct evidence from an administrative document. It is nevertheless more cautious than the image of a "kingdom" with clearly known boundaries.

¹⁹ Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, 2003, pp. 316–318.

²⁰ Gabriel Camps, *Rex gentium maurorum et romanorum. Recherches sur les royaumes de Maurétanie des VI^e et VII^e siècles*, *Antiquités africaines*, 20, pp. 183–218.

²¹ Gabriel Camps, *Antalas*, 1988, p. 706; Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, 2003, pp. 316–323.

²² Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, 2003, pp. 318–322.

More importantly, it shows that Antalas was not based outside the provincial world. His group occupied a region already marked by agriculture, olive cultivation, Christianization, and Roman and Vandal structures. Modéran emphasizes that the area west of the Capsa-Thelepte axis was not untouched by Romanity. Agricultural installations and Christian remains are attested there, while the Albertini Tablets document the organization of the region in the Vandal period²³

2.3. An Integrated but Distinct Population

Antalas does not fit the profile of a chief who had recently arrived from a desert wholly outside the Empire. Nor does he resemble a fully assimilated municipal notable. Modéran instead suggests that the Frexes were a small group organized according to traditional forms. They lived in a Romanized area and maintained contact with urban populations without necessarily sharing their prosperity²⁴ This formulation is useful because it combines integration with distinction. It avoids treating Romanity as a single block that one either fully belonged to or entirely rejected.

Several indications support this view. Despite their differences, both Corippus and Procopius attest that Antalas remained loyal to the Byzantines during the revolts of 534-535 and was able to remain in Byzacena. In the confrontation with John Troglita, Corippus has Antalas recall that he had served under Byzantine commanders and fought on their behalf²⁵ Modéran even suggests that Antalas probably received insignia of imperial office, as other chiefs did. This point, however, should remain a probability based on Procopius's evidence rather than a certainty.

The questions of language and culture are more uncertain. Corippus associates the envoy Maccus with knowledge of Latin. Modéran infers from this that Antalas himself may also have spoken Latin, but he does not treat the inference as certain²⁶ Antalas's religion is equally difficult to determine. The oracle of Ammon described by Corippus may serve a literary function. The sources' silence about the religion

²³ Ibid., pp. 324–325.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 327–334.

²⁵ Procopius, *Vandalic War*, I, 25, 2–3 and II, 12, 30, cited and discussed in Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, 2003, pp. 328–329.

²⁶ Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, 2003, pp. 333–334.

of the Frexes proves neither an intact paganism nor complete Christianization²⁷ Cultural indications should therefore not be transformed into an identity program.

2.4. Multiple Authorities and the Imperial Order

Antalas's relationship with the Empire must finally be placed within a system of competing authorities. Mauri chiefs did not simply confront a central state imposing a uniform rule. Governors, generals, rebel officers, and allied chiefs all participated in shifting relations of power. The comparison between Antalas, Coutina, Iaudas, and the Laguatan makes this clear. The Empire could recognize certain chiefs, arm them, set them against one another, or seek their assistance against other groups.

Coutina in particular shows that loyalty was a political outcome rather than an ethnic essence. Corippus presents him as the "good Moor," always loyal to Byzantine arms. Procopius, as Modéran shows, preserves the trace of a more complex trajectory in which Coutina first took part in revolts before joining the Byzantines²⁸ This divergence indirectly clarifies the case of Antalas. His move into rebellion should not be read as the revelation of an age-old hostility. It belonged to a field of possibilities in which loyalty, alliance, and opposition were negotiated according to circumstances.

III - The Stages of Antalas's Resistance

3.1. From the First Raids to Confrontation with the Vandals

The account of Antalas's youth comes mainly from Corippus and is reinterpreted by Modéran. The poem presents a progression. Antalas begins with individual actions against livestock. He then gathers supporters. Theft develops into larger expeditions, groups confront the Vandals in valleys and mountains, and, after roughly a century of Vandal rule, the Frexes burn towns and attack the countryside²⁹ Modéran considers that, despite its literary construction, this sequence may preserve a plausible historical dynamic. A small and initially peaceful formation could gradually move from local raids to a more structured insurrection as its successes attracted individuals and neighboring groups³⁰

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 331–333.

²⁸ Yves Modéran, *Corippe et l'occupation byzantine de l'Afrique*, 1986, pp. 202–204.

²⁹ Corippus, *Iohannis*, II, 152–188, passages cited and discussed in Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, 2003, pp. 325–327.

³⁰ Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, 2003, pp. 327–328; Gabriel Camps, *Antalas*, 1988, p. 706.

The date of the major offensive is also debated. Corippus associates the action with the collapse of the Vandal kingdom after one hundred years. Procopius places the Vandal defeat during the reign of Hilderic, between 523 and 530. Modéran proposes dating the offensive to around 529 and links it to the defeat that contributed to Hilderic's fall in 530³¹ The apparent precision of this proposal should not obscure the uncertainties in the evidence. It depends on bringing together a poetic calculation, Procopius's chronology, and a reconstruction of Vandal politics.

This first phase cannot yet be called anti-Byzantine resistance because the Byzantines had not yet become masters of Africa. It is nevertheless important for understanding what followed. It shows that Antalas's activity developed before the reconquest and was connected to the crisis of Vandal power. The Frexes do not appear as an external force that suddenly entered the province. They gradually became a military actor within a space already structured by imperial and royal powers.

3.2. The Byzantine Conquest and the Loyalty of 534-535

The Byzantine conquest of Africa transformed the political framework. This is one of the most important points in the comparison between Corippus and Procopius. Corippus opens his poem by depicting an Africa overwhelmed by Mauri enemies and emphasizes the saving role of the imperial army. Procopius, by contrast, states that Antalas remained loyal to the Byzantines during the revolts of 534-535 and stayed in Byzacena with his men precisely because of that loyalty³²

This evidence contradicts a teleological reading that would turn Antalas's entire career into the unfolding of a constant opposition to Rome, Romanity, and Romanization. It also requires a distinction between the Byzantine Empire and the Roman Empire as categories experienced historically. Antalas could accept subjection to the emperor and later fight particular representatives of imperial authority without this development implying a change in ethnicity or the emergence of national consciousness. In the letter that Procopius attributes to him after Solomon's death, Antalas explains that his revolt was a response to injustices. He does not thereby deny his dependent relationship with the Empire³³

The term loyalty should not, however, be understood as unconditional adherence to Byzantine administration. It describes a specific political relationship. The chief retained his men, his territory, and

³¹ Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, 2003, pp. 315–316.

³² Procopius, *Vandalic War*, II, 12, 30, et Yves Modéran, *Corippe et l'occupation byzantine de l'Afrique*, 1986, pp. 198–202.

³³ Procopius, *Vandalic War*, II, 22, 7, cited in Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, 2003, pp. 328–329.

his capacity to make decisions, while the Empire recognized or tolerated his authority. The peace of 534-544 therefore appears as an arrangement rather than the disappearance of tension. The question is not whether Antalas was "Roman" or "anti-Roman." It is which forms of recognition, protection, and constraint made coexistence possible.

Imperial policy itself seems to have offered only limited alternatives. In Corippus's account as analyzed by Modéran, John Troglita presents a choice between submission to the Roman armies and withdrawal to the ends of the world. Peace is granted by Roman power rather than negotiated between equal partners³⁴ Even if this speech is a poetic construction, it reveals the political logic that the poem seeks to attribute to Byzantium: chiefs could be incorporated provided that they recognized the imperial hierarchy.

3.3. The Year 544: Injustice, Alliance, and a Change in Scale

Antalas's break with the Empire in 544 is explained by several factors that reinforce one another without being identical. Camps mentions Solomon's execution of Guarizila, Antalas's brother, as well as the entry into Byzacena of the camel-using tribes from Tripolitania known as the Levathae or Laguatan³⁵ In the reconstruction reported by Modéran, Procopius also links the revolt to the policies of the prefect Sergius and to tensions caused by the massacre of Laguatan delegates at Lepcis Magna. At the same time, Solomon withdrew Antalas's subsidies and had his brother killed³⁶

The question of causation requires us not to select a single explanation arbitrarily. Guarizila's death provided an immediate family and political motive. Administrative and military decisions may have transformed this conflict into a crisis of trust. The arrival of the Laguatan then supplied military strength and opened the possibility of a broader alliance. The event was therefore not merely an act of private vengeance. Nor does it prove the existence of a pre-existing collective program. The interaction of several interests and different temporalities changed the scale of the conflict.

The movement of the Laguatan toward Byzacena reveals the regional dimension of the crisis. They are described as coming from Tripolitania with their families and herds. Their mobility should not be

³⁴ Corippus, *Iohannis*, VI, 45–48 and II, 361–365, cited in Yves Modéran, *Corippe et l'occupation byzantine de l'Afrique*, 1986, pp. 203–204.

³⁵ Gabriel Camps, *Antalas*, 1988, pp. 706–707.

³⁶ Yves Modéran, *Corippe et l'occupation byzantine de l'Afrique*, 1986, pp. 200–202.

reduced to an abstract invasion of nomads against sedentary populations. Mattingly has shown that groups in Libyan Africa could combine agriculture, pastoralism, fortifications, mobility, and relations with provincial centers³⁷ In 544, the coalition did not erase the differences between the Laguatan and the Frexes. It brought them together against a common adversary and around converging objectives.

Modéran reconstructs the march toward Theveste and then Carthage as a strategy linked to Antalas's position in Byzacena. Antalas was not simply an auxiliary of the Laguatan. His territorial base gave the coalition access to roads, countryside, and inland towns. This interpretation remains a geographical inference, but it is explicitly grounded in the combination of places mentioned in the sources and the logic of the movements described³⁸

3.4. Solomon, Hadrumetum, and War as Negotiation

The conflict with Solomon reveals a war in which military operations, betrayals, messages, and expectations of urban support were closely intertwined. Corippus and Procopius differ on several episodes. The Iohannis presents Solomon's defeat and death in a scene dominated by Guntharith's betrayal. Procopius describes the army's defeat and the general's death without assigning betrayal the same narrative role³⁹ This difference does not make either text useless. It does, however, prevent their details from being simply added together as though they came from a single, homogeneous narrative.

The capture of Hadrumetum in 545 is especially revealing. Corippus explains the episode through a forged letter that lured the garrison into a trap. Procopius connects it to an error in the transmission of orders and the opening of the city gates. Modéran also notes that the inhabitants of Hadrumetum were reportedly spared by the Moors. This qualifies the image of indiscriminate destruction and may suggest that Antalas sought support, or at least a *modus vivendi*, with part of the population⁴⁰ This is an inference rather than an explicit statement by Antalas. Even so, it is more compatible with a chief attempting to govern or negotiate than with an actor motivated only by devastation.

³⁷ David J. Mattingly, *The Laguatan*, 1983, p. 96 ff.; David J. Mattingly, *Tripolitania*, 1995, pp. 26–87 and 270–346.

³⁸ Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, 2003, pp. 318–323.

³⁹ Yves Modéran, *Corippe et l'occupation byzantine de l'Afrique*, 1986, pp. 200–202.

⁴⁰ Procopius, *Vandalic War*, II, 23, 26, et Corippus, *Iohannis*, IV, 71–77, cited and compared in Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, 2003, pp. 329–330.

The presence of Stotzas in Antalas's camp reinforces this political interpretation. A former Byzantine soldier who had mutinied, Stotzas took refuge in Mauretania before returning to Byzacena at Antalas's invitation⁴¹ The coalition was therefore not based exclusively on ethnic or tribal solidarity. It brought together a Mauri chief, groups from Tripolitania, and a former imperial soldier. A common enemy and shared military interests created a cross-cutting alliance that crossed the categories of "Roman" and "Moor."

3.5. Guntharith: The Hypothesis of Shared Power

In 546, the crisis widened with Guntharith's coup. According to Modéran's comparative table, Procopius associates Antalas, Coutina, and Iaudas with the undertaking, whereas Corippus places greater emphasis on the general's betrayal and his seizure of power in Carthage⁴² The central issue is not simply that Mauri chiefs took part in a coalition. It is also the type of political project attributed to them.

Modéran reports that Antalas negotiated an arrangement with Guntharith under which Guntharith would become king over a large part of Roman Africa, while Antalas would receive Byzacena and a guard of Roman soldiers⁴³ If this information is accepted with the caution required by Procopius's mediation, it is particularly important for the question of resistance. Antalas does not appear to have demanded the destruction of the imperial order or the liberation of a nationally defined people. He instead sought to alter the hierarchy of power so that he would gain recognized control over a province and access to Roman military resources.

This demand may be read as an appropriation of imperial forms. It does not mean that the Empire was accepted without challenge. It shows that the categories, titles, and resources of the Roman order still formed the horizon of negotiation. A chief fighting imperial authority could nevertheless seek recognition as an actor within that order. Here Mattingly's approach to discrepant experiences is more useful than a binary opposition between resistance and assimilation. The same actor could challenge imperial oppression while still desiring the instruments and recognition of imperial power.

⁴¹ Procopius, *Vandalic War*, I, 11, 30; II, 15, 1; II, 17, 35; II, 22, 5; references compiled in Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, 2003, pp. 329–330.

⁴² Yves Modéran, *Corippe et l'occupation byzantine de l'Afrique*, 1986, pp. 201–202.

⁴³ Procopius, *Vandalic War*, II, 25, 10, cited in Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, 2003, p. 329.

Guntharith's fall did not immediately restore peace. The elimination of the usurping regime reshaped alliances and confronted the Mauri chiefs with a renewed imperial offensive. Antalas remained involved in the coalition, but his behavior was not that of a chief who had eliminated every possibility of return. Modéran notes that after Guntharith's death Antalas sought to submit to Justinian and tried to win over Markentios, a loyalist general, through promises and conciliatory language⁴⁴ This effort confirms that war also functioned as an instrument of negotiation.

3.6. John Troglita and the End of the Resistance

The arrival of John Troglita opened a new phase. According to Camps, the Byzantine general succeeded in bringing Coutisina back into the imperial alliance and secured the support of Ifisdaias. Antalas and Ierna nevertheless managed to join their forces. A first victory near Sufetula, at the beginning of 547 in Camps's summary, led to Antalas's submission after Ierna's death⁴⁵ Submission did not immediately end the violence. Raids by Tripolitanian tribes and groups associated with Antalas resumed, and John Troglita had to conduct a longer campaign.

The account of the final campaign highlights the Byzantine ability to reconstruct alliances. John Troglita brought together Coutisina, Ifisdaias, and Iaudas, while Antalas was aligned with Carcasan and groups from Tripolitania. Camps places the decisive battle at the Fields of Cato, where Carcasan and seventeen tribal chiefs were killed. Antalas submitted again and probably recovered a position similar to the one he had held before the conflict⁴⁶ The word probably is essential here. The source establishes the submission but does not allow the exact status restored to him to be reconstructed with certainty.

Corippus presents John Troglita as having achieved an almost providential restoration of Africa. Modéran shows, however, that the Iohannis tends to erase Byzantine errors and to portray the conflict as the consequence of Mauri wrongdoing. The final triumph must therefore be read on two levels. The poem provides valuable information about coalitions, movements, chiefs, and towns. At the same time, it turns victory into a justification of imperial power⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Procopius, *Vandalic War II*, 27, 4–6, cited in Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, 2003, pp. 329–330.

⁴⁵ Gabriel Camps, *Antalas*, 1988, pp. 707–708.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 707–708.

⁴⁷ Yves Modéran, *Corippe et l'occupation byzantine de l'Afrique*, 1986, pp. 195–212.

Antalas then disappears from the surviving sources. This silence does not allow us to conclude that he died, withdrew voluntarily, or was permanently integrated into the imperial system. It simply highlights a documentary limitation. The sources become abundant when a chief threatens imperial order and cease to follow him once his actions are no longer central to the military narrative.

IV - Antalas and the Question of Resistance

4.1. Defining Resistance without Anachronism

The term resistance is useful if it is defined as a descriptive tool rather than treated as a given historical identity. Here it can refer to individual and collective actions that limited, challenged, delayed, or renegotiated the exercise of imperial domination. This definition implies neither national consciousness nor a homogeneous ideological program. Nor does it require rejection of every form of Romanity. It allows several facts to be considered together: attacks on garrisons and towns, the formation of alliances, the use of local networks, the search for urban support, negotiations with imperial commanders, and periodic returns to submission.

Mattingly shows that the historiography of Roman Africa has often moved between two extremes. Colonial discourse portrayed Africans as rebellious and ungovernable populations. The anti-colonial response could transform them into freedom fighters who continuously opposed foreign domination⁴⁸ In both cases, the us/them relationship remains intact. Applied to Antalas, the first model reproduces Corippus's vocabulary without sufficient criticism. The second projects the categories of nationalism and national liberation onto the sixth century.

Laroui's work, as summarized by Mattingly, had the important merit of deconstructing colonial historiography and placing African agency at the center of analysis. It also warned against turning political analogies into historical explanations⁴⁹ Benabou, for his part, extended the concept of resistance to culture, languages, names, and religious preferences. Yet the discussion reported by Mattingly reminds us that some practices may have belonged to ordinary forms of Romanity rather than to conscious resistance⁵⁰ In the case of Antalas, it is therefore legitimate to examine documented political and military

⁴⁸ David J. Mattingly, *From one colonialism to another*, study provided, pp. 57–58.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 57–58.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 57–59.

choices. It would be excessive to infer a general form of cultural resistance simply from his Mauri affiliation.

4.2. Situated, Gradual, and Negotiated Resistance

The sources allow several of Antalas's actions to be described as armed opposition. They record raids, attacks on towns, ambushes, coalitions, and battles against Solomon and John Troglita. They also show that this opposition developed gradually. The small and peaceful tribe of the late fifth century became increasingly visible, attracted supporters, and transformed local raids into operations of regional scale⁵¹ This dynamic is more consistent with situated resistance produced by changing relations of power than with the expression of an immutable warlike essence.

The content of Antalas's claims, when it is transmitted, reinforces this conclusion. He invoked specific injustices, the death of his brother, the loss of subsidies, and his relationship with the Empire. During the Guntharith crisis, he sought control of Byzacena and a Roman military force. He spared inhabitants of Hadrumetum and attempted to win over Markentios. These elements do not erase the violence of his actions. They do show, however, that war was directed toward political objectives: protecting a position, obtaining resources, controlling territory, and negotiating status.

It is therefore appropriate to speak of pragmatic resistance or politico-military contestation, while recognizing that this is a modern analytical category. This formulation avoids two symmetrical errors. It does not reduce Antalas's actions to banditry because they acquired a collective dimension and targeted centers of power. At the same time, it does not transform them into a national movement. Antalas clearly defended the position of his group, but the sources do not show him mobilizing a Berber nation conceived as a unified political community.

4.3. Multiple Identities and the Crossing of Boundaries

Identity requires the same caution. Antalas was a Moor and the chief of the Frexes. He acted in a region of Byzacena marked by Romanity. He maintained relations with Roman generals, rebel soldiers, and urban populations. He allied himself with the Laguatan and with Ierna, and at times fought groups that the sources placed in the same broad ethnic category. This plurality makes it impossible to equate Mauri identity with an anti-Roman position.

⁵¹ Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, 2003, pp. 325–328.

Coutsina's trajectory provides a useful methodological parallel. Corippus constructs him as the model of the loyal Moor, Roman in spirit, whereas Procopius preserves evidence of his shifts in allegiance⁵² This difference shows that the identity assigned by the poet could serve a narrative function. In the case of Antalas, the poem presents him as an irreconcilable enemy. Yet the same narratives, or the studies that compare them, also reveal his earlier loyalty, his familiarity with imperial forms of power, and his use of negotiation.

The cultural dimension is more difficult to establish. Antalas or members of his entourage may have known Latin. There are also traces of Christianization in the region and a debate surrounding the oracle of Ammon. None of these elements allows a complete religious or cultural identity to be reconstructed. Modéran emphasizes their ambiguity. The sources do not clearly state whether the Frexes were pagan, Christianized, or attached to hybrid forms of practice⁵³ The only firm conclusion is negative: religion cannot be used to explain the revolt directly.

Identity categories should therefore be treated as relational. Moor, Roman, soldier, chief, subject, and ally did not necessarily designate mutually exclusive communities. They could correspond to different positions depending on context. Antalas could be a subject of the emperor, a Mauri chief, an ally of a Roman general, or an adversary of the imperial army. In this framework, resistance was not a transition from a Roman identity to a national one. It was a transformation in the relationship of power between actors whose affiliations were multiple.

4.4. The Iohannis as an Engaged Testimony

Source criticism is essential to any conclusion about Antalas. Procopius and Corippus were chronologically close to the events, but their positions, genres, and aims were not the same. Procopius was a Greek historian associated with the Empire's ruling circles and was present in Africa at the time of the conquest. Corippus was an African poet who composed an epic devoted to John Troglita and the Byzantine victory⁵⁴ Chronological proximity therefore does not guarantee a shared neutrality.

⁵² Yves Modéran, *Corippe et l'occupation byzantine de l'Afrique*, 1986, pp. 202–204.

⁵³ Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine*, 2003, pp. 331–334; Vincent Zarini, *Rhétorique, poétique, spiritualité*, 2003.

⁵⁴ Yves Modéran, *Corippe et l'occupation byzantine de l'Afrique*, 1986, pp. 197–198.

Modéran makes a particularly productive distinction. Procopius is often more reliable for the sequence of events when the two texts diverge. Corippus, by contrast, is indispensable for understanding the representation of Byzantine policy toward indigenous populations, the moral hierarchy imposed on the chiefs, and the ideological expectations of the poem⁵⁵ The purpose is not to replace one account with the other, but to ask different questions of each. When Corippus omits Byzantine errors and attributes Africa's misfortunes to the Moors, that omission is not merely a documentary weakness. It is evidence of the political function of the work.

Poetry should not, however, be dismissed wholesale. Accounts of the first raids, place names, relations among chiefs, and scenes of negotiation may preserve historical information if they are compared with Procopius and situated within the poem's epic construction. Gärtner and Zarini specifically call attention to the composition, literary models, and spirituality of the *Iohannis*⁵⁶ In the cases of Hadrumetum or Junci, differences between the texts may even reveal Corippus's intentions, the expectations of his audience, and the forms of legitimacy he sought to produce.

The most important limitation is the absence of an independent Mauri voice. Antalas appears through narratives written in the languages and genres of the imperial world. Even when Procopius reports a letter or speech, we do not necessarily possess the original words. Actions, alliances, and interests can therefore be reconstructed. It is much more difficult to recover the Frexes' own justifications, their political categories, and the way they themselves understood their relationship with the Empire.

4.5. What the Corpus Does and Does Not Allow Us to Conclude

The corpus allows us to establish with a reasonable degree of confidence that Antalas was the son of Guenfan, chief of the Frexes, active in Byzacena, and involved in the conflicts of the first half of the sixth century. It also allows us to trace a trajectory from the first raids attributed to his youth to his participation in coalitions against Vandal and then Byzantine authorities. His relationship with the Empire was not continuously hostile. It included loyalty after the conquest, possible alliance or service, revolt in 544, negotiations during the Guntharith crisis, and successive submissions under John Troglita.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 195–212.

⁵⁶ Thomas Gärtner, *Untersuchungen zur Gestaltung und zum historischen Stoff der Iohannis Coripps*, 2008; Vincent Zarini, *Rhétorique, poétique, spiritualité*, 2003.

The corpus also identifies several factors behind the rupture: injustices attributed to Solomon, the killing of Guarizila, tensions involving the Laguatan, rivalries among officers, and the opportunity created by Guntharith's usurpation. It does not allow the precise weight of each factor to be measured. Nor does it establish with certainty the institutional form of Antalas's power, the exact extent of his territory, the number of his men, his religion, or the degree of support his actions received from urban populations.

Finally, the corpus supports a nuanced answer to the question of resistance. The term is appropriate if it describes armed and political action intended to challenge domination and renegotiate a position within the imperial order. It is not appropriate if it implies a conscious national movement, a homogeneous cultural opposition, or a project to liberate the Berber people. The category can therefore be used only if it is historicized, carefully limited, and constantly related back to the sources.

Conclusion

The study of Antalas shows that Mauri resistance to Byzantine occupation cannot be understood through a simple opposition between Rome and Africa, sedentary and nomadic populations, or civilization and barbarism. The sources describe a world of interwoven relationships. Antalas was a Mauri chief, yet he was established in a region long integrated into the provincial world. He became an adversary of the Byzantine army, but he had previously recognized imperial authority. He allied himself with the Laguatan and with rebel soldiers, yet he also negotiated with representatives of Byzantine power. He sought control over territory and access to imperial resources rather than the abolition of every form of Roman order.

The most cautious historical reconstruction reveals a gradual trajectory. The Frexes initially seem to have been a relatively modest and peaceful group. The chief's activity expanded through Antalas's successes, the tensions that marked the final phase of Vandal rule, and the transformations produced by the reconquest. Guarizila's death and Solomon's measures provided a trigger, while the arrival of the Laguatan gave the crisis a regional dimension. The clashes with Solomon, the capture of Hadrumetum, the alliance with Stotzas, the Guntharith coalition, and the campaigns of John Troglita reveal a resistance that was military, diplomatic, and opportunistic at the same time.

Mattingly's contribution is decisive here, not because it supplies the facts specific to Antalas, but because it prevents those facts from being read automatically through inherited categories. His analysis of colonial and postcolonial historiography shows that moving from the image of the turbulent Moor to

that of the freedom fighter does not necessarily represent methodological progress. Both models can impose a totalizing identity on actors whose practices changed over time. Antalas's case instead invites analysis of degrees of cooperation, loyalty, resistance, and rebellion, together with the changes in position produced by conflict.

The evidence nevertheless has major limitations. The *Iohannis* is an engaged epic that justifies imperial victory and constructs Antalas as an enemy figure. Procopius is better placed for some events, but he too wrote within the political horizon of the Empire. Without independent Mauri testimony, the intentions, representations, and forms of identity of the *Frexes* cannot be fully recovered. What can be established is therefore a cautious political and military history. Antalas resisted not in the name of a modern nation, but as the chief of a group situated within a provincial space, using warfare and negotiation to defend and expand his capacity for action.

Bibliography

Ancient Sources and Text Editions

- Flavius Cresconius Corippus. *Iohannidos seu De bellis Libycis libri VII*. Edited by J. Partsch, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores antiquissimi*, vol. III, 2. Berlin, 1879.
- Procopius of Caesarea. *La guerre contre les vandales*. Edition by J. Haury, reproduced by H. B. Dewing in the Loeb Classical Library, 1953.

Historical and Philological Studies

- Camps, Gabriel. Antalas. *Encyclopédie berbère*, 5, 1988, document A231, pp. 706-708. Print edition: Peeters Publishers, 1 April 1988, ISBN 2-85744-319-6, ISSN 1015-7344. Electronic edition: ISSN 2262-7197, URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/encyclopedieberbere/2518>; DOI: 10.4000/encyclopedieberbere.2518.
- Courtois, Christian. *Les Vandales et l'Afrique*. Paris, A.M.G., 1955.
- Gärtner, Thomas. *Untersuchungen zur Gestaltung und zum historischen Stoff der Iohannis Coripps*. Berlin-New York, Walter de Gruyter, 2008, *Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte*, vol. 90, ISBN 978-3-11-020107-9, ISSN 1862-1112.
- Modéran, Yves. Corippe et l'occupation byzantine de l'Afrique: pour une nouvelle lecture de la *Iohannide*. *Antiquités africaines*, 22, 1986, pp. 195-212. DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.3406/antaf.1986.1131>; URL: https://www.persee.fr/doc/antaf_0066-4871_1986_num_22_1_1131.

- Modéran, Yves. Les premiers raids des tribus sahariennes en Afrique et la Johannide de Corippus. In IV^e colloque international sur l'histoire et l'archéologie de l'Afrique du Nord, Strasbourg, 1988, vol. 2, L'armée et les affaires militaires, Paris, 1991, pp. 479-490.
- Modéran, Yves. Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine (IV^e-VII^e siècle). Rome, Publications de l'École française de Rome, 2003.
- Mattingly, David J. From one colonialism to another: imperialism and the Maghreb. In *Imperialism, Power, and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire*, 75-93. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Mattingly, David J. *Tripolitania*. London, B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1995. First published: 1995; e-library edition: 2005. ISBN 0-203-48101-1, 0-203-78925-3, 0 7134 5742 2.
- Mattingly, David J. *The Laguatan: A Libyan Tribal Confederation in the Late Roman Empire*. *Libyan Studies*, 14, 1983.
- Mattingly, David J., ed. *Dialogues in Roman Imperialism: Power, discourse, and discrepant experience in the Roman Empire*. *Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series*, no. 23. Portsmouth, Rhode Island, 1997. ISBN 1-887829-23-7; ISSN 1063-4304.
- Camps, Gabriel. *Rex gentium maurorum et romanorum*. *Recherches sur les royaumes de Maurétanie des VI^e et VII^e siècles*. *Antiquités africaines*, 20, 1984, pp. 183-218.
- **Studies on Corippus and the Representation of the Moors**
- Shea, George W. *The Iohannis, or De bellis Libycis, of Flavius Cresconius Corippus: Introduction and Translation*. *Studies in Classics*, vol. 7. Lewiston-Queenston-Lampeter, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1998. ISBN 0-7734-8242-3; series ISBN: 0-88946-684-X.
- Zarini, Vincent. *Berbères ou barbares? Recherches sur le livre second de la Johannide de Corippe*. Nancy-Paris, A.D.R.A., distributed by De Boccard, 1997, xiv-262 pp., ISBN 2-9509726-5-9.
- Zarini, Vincent. *Rhétorique, poétique, spiritualité: la technique épique de Corippe dans la Johannide*. Turnhout, Brepols, 2003, *Recherches sur les rhétoriques religieuses*, 4, ISBN 2-503-52167-3.