Roman Africa on screen: An exotic otherness.

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Abstract
This article analyses the reception of the African territory in a limited number of films and series set in ancient Rome and produced at different historical moments. In the first section, it deals with the image of Carthaginian Africa in two Italian films from the early 20th century: *Cabiria* (1914) and *Scipione l'Africano* (1937). The second section analyses the image of Roman Africa in three more recent US productions: *Gladiator* (2000), *Ben-Hur* (2016) and *Those About to Die* (2024). This study delves into certain war-political conditioning factors and some contemporary socio-cultural trends, specific to each period of production, which may have influenced the audiovisual representation of North African territories in pre-Roman and Roman times. In this vein, I will identify some of the most recurrent stereotypes about the "African" or the "Oriental" in these productions, in relation to relevant historical issues such as colonialism, nationalism, orientalist visions, slavery –ancient and modern– and racism.[1]

Keywords: Roman Africa, Carthage, Numidia, Film, Television, Classical Receptions, Orientalism, Nationalism.

Introduction

For obvious reasons, the favourite setting for audiovisual productions about ancient Rome has been undoubtedly the Urbs itself. Along with the city of Rome, other recurring cities on screen have been Pompeii, in the many different versions of its destruction, and Jerusalem, as the epicentre of the Roman province of Judaea, so often recreated in the numerous versions of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Other places of the ancient Roman

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Empire such as Gallia, the *Limes Germanicus* or Britannia have also been standard settings for these productions. In twenty-first century cinema and television, we can observe a particular interest in setting plots in Roman provinces, a trend that has been defined as "provincial peplum" (Cano 2014: 101-106). The most notable example is probably the British setting, with the different adaptations of the Boudica revolt, those of the supposed disappearance of the Ninth Legion or the recent series *Britannia* (2018-2021), among others.

As far as Roman Africa is concerned –understood as the area of Punic influence–, cinema and television have mainly recreated the specific period of the Punic Wars. On few occasions, scenes from the African territory have been recreated as a Roman province. In this paper, I aim to outline some general ideas of the reception of the African territory and some characters from Africa in a limited set of productions, allowing for a comparison between two different historical, geographical and cinematographic contexts. In the first section, I will deal with the image of Carthaginian Africa in two Italian films from 1914 and 1937, respectively: *Cabiria* and *Scipione l'Africano*. In the second section, I will analyse the image of Roman Africa in three more recent US productions: *Gladiator* (2000, R. Scott), *Ben-Hur* (2016, T. Bekmambetov) and *Those About to Die* (2024, Peacock). Although the impact of these productions and their reception by critics and audiences is uneven, they are all blockbusters with colossal budgets, and therefore their dissemination has been massive.[2] Likewise, all of them show sequences that I consider to be of notable interest for the analysis of the reception of Punic-Roman Africa as a mirror of various contemporary concerns. In this vein, I intend to address some war-political conditioning factors and some contemporary socio-cultural trends, specific to each period of production, which may have influenced the audiovisual representation of the North African territories in Roman times. With this aim, I will identify some of the most recurrent stereotypes about the "African" or the "Oriental" in these productions, in relation to relevant historical issues such as colonialism, nationalism, orientalist visions (Said 1978), slavery –ancient and modern– and racism.

As we shall see, many of these themes have served to consolidate or popularise a number of essentialist receptions of the past, in this case of Punic and Roman Africa. Thus, linear bridges were built between antiquity and the present through clichés, simplifications and ahistorical readings that are rooted in political discourses sometimes linked to modern national identities. In order to understand how and why such essentialist narratives were constructed, I will also analyse some elements of archaeological reconstruction, the portrayal of specific peoples and/or characters, the cinematic language of certain sequences, as well as the metacinematographic narratives.

Indeed, the subject is too wide-ranging for an exhaustive analysis in the following pages. For this reason, my study aims only at presenting a few examples and outlining some general reflections on the proposed subject.[3] It should be noted that I follow an interpretative approach to the cinematic reception of antiquity based on the theoretical

[2] The limited circulation of *Scipione l'Africano* (1937) outside Italy has been compensated by the attention the film received as an important source for the study of the *culto della romanità* in the fascist era.

[3] I refer to the final bibliography for further details on each of the audiovisual productions discussed here, apart from the series *Those About to Die* (2024), which due to its recent release has not yet been academically analysed.

and methodological framework developed by leading researchers such as Maria Wyke, Martin M. Winkler and Monica S. Cyrino, among others.[4] In contrast to interesting but somewhat reductionist approaches such as "historical films are always about the time in which they are made and never about the time in which they are set" (Richards 2008: 1), I prefer to underline the fact that "(...) while these cinematic depictions may tell us more about the present than they do about antiquity, their engagement with the past is not unimportant; indeed, these productions tell us much about how and why modern audiences connect with the ancient world" (Day 2008: 4).

Cabiria and *Scipione l'Africano*: colonial aspirations on the big screen

The Italo-Turkish war of 1911-1912, in which the Italians conquered the African territories of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica from the Ottoman Empire, was a decisive geopolitical event and had also an impact on the Italian cinematography of that period (Brunetta 2024: 24-31). Some films produced during and after that war combined colonial aspirations with the historiographical and archaeological narrative of the time through a new mass medium, which led to an unprecedented social impact. Italian cinema, as an incipient format, exploited aesthetic and plot references from nineteenth-century opera, paintings or historical novels, as well as from the political discourses coming from the *Risorgimento*. Back then, the discourses on *romanità* –which, according to Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), would be an "invented tradition"–, served the purposes of nation-building and sought to justify Italy historically by means of a supposed continuity with ancient Rome. Based on this, the essentialist discourses on *romanità* were adapted to a new context of colonial expansion and a new medium of transmission (Wyke 1997: 17-20). Thus, the projection of the Roman past in Italian cinema in the 1910s "gradually developed as a discursive practice for the construction, dissemination and legitimation of an Italian national identity, an identity that was grounded in pretensions to a new Roman empire on the shores of Africa" (Wyke 1999: 189). If Roman expansionism in Africa was a model that the Italian nation sought to emulate, it was necessary to find also in the past a civilisation that embodied the otherness of that model. As Marta García-Morcillo states, "cinematic Carthage is a topic strongly influenced by 19th-century Western imaginations. The romantic and exotic visions moulded by Orientalism contributed to an image of Carthage that stood for a sort of East in the West, one that often projected stereotypical ideas of eroticism, barbarism and otherness as opposed to the civilised —Western— Romans" (2015: 136).

Directed by Giovanni Pastroni and released in 1914, *Cabiria* was the most significant film in this respect, also because of its international projection beyond Italy's borders. Set during the Second Punic War (218-201 BCE), it presents a relatively Manichean story in which the Carthaginians represent the barbaric and the cruel –the children sacrifices in the temple of Moloch being a paradigm of that cruelty– and Rome is presented as a glorious civilisation opposed to all the negative features attributed to the Punics (Wyke 1999: 200-

[4] See Paul (2008) for a theoretical and methodological revision of this field and Paul (2010) for a state of the art. For a historiographical review of the research development in Spanish academia on this topic see Aguado-Cantabrana (2024).

204; Dávila 2021: 256-259; Pomeroy 2023: 300-308). Although this film has been studied from numerous perspectives in the last decades,[5] the artistic and archaeological references used by Pastrone to recreate the Carthaginian material culture had not been investigated in depth until very recently. Ivo Blom (2023: 8) discovered some of the main sources of visual inspiration for the film. On the one hand, the works of two "archaeologist painters" as Frenchmen Georges-Antoine Rochegrosse (1859-1938) and Henri-Paul Motte (1846-1922), and on the other hand, Georges-Antoine Rochegrosse's illustrations for the 1900 reprint of the novel *Salammbô* (1862). Likewise, regarding the material reality of the period, Blom deepened Pastrone's knowledge of Punic-Phoenician archaeology, mainly led by the French. He succeeded in identifying a number of objects that film's director had access to during his visits to the Louvre Museum and the Egyptian Museum in Turin. According to Blom, the need to fill in with imagination the lack of knowledge about Punic material culture led Pastrone to take Greek, Assyrian and Egyptian artefacts as references. Most probably one of the main sources used by Pastrone was the first volume on Carthage in the series *Musées et Collections Archéologiques de l'Algérie et de la Tunisie. Musée Lavigerie de Saint-Louis de Carthage* (1900), edited by Philippe Berger (Blom 2023: 213-283).

As mentioned above, *Cabiria* sets a paradigmatic example of how cinema served to massively propagate and disseminate Italian imperial aspirations towards African territory. This reality is not limited to the liberal period prior to the First World War, rather it was intensified during the Fascist period. In fact, both in liberal Italy at the beginning of the century and during Mussolini's dictatorship, a whole series of cultural creations can be traced back. One example is the cinema itself, but also monuments, informative publications and public ceremonies were pivotal in the creation of these imperial anxieties about African territory, mediated through the reception of Roman imperialism (Agbamu, 2024). An in-depth analysis of this topic would also lead us to examine the representation of Africa in Italian cinema beyond the recourse to Antiquity. It should be noted that several big screen depictions of the African continent at different historical moments helped propagate the European colonial and racial views (Zinni 2023).

In this paper we are only going to comment on the most emblematic example of fascist period cinema, *Scipione l'Africano* (1937) by Carmine Gallone. This was a blatantly propagandistic film, financed by the regime and which –like *Cabiria*– uses the setting of the Second Punic War to depict the geopolitical concerns of contemporary Italy (Giuman & Parodo 2011). The victory of the Romans over the Carthaginians is depicted as an allegory of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia –1935-1936–. The character of Scipio is presented as an "ancient Mussolini", who even imitates his gestures and delivers long speeches on the inviolability of the state, the need for discipline and the inevitable destiny of Italy over Africa (Cano 2014: 65). Such a political approach indicates that the film Manichaeism was disproportionate even by the standards of the time and that the negative representation of the Carthaginians was even more evident than in *Cabiria* (Dávila, 2021: 259-260). While the Roman army is composed of disciplined and even cheerful and motivated volunteers, the soldiers of Hannibal's army are shown as savage, undisciplined and prone to desertion, since –according to the fascist interpretation– they do not fight for the defence and glory of the homeland as the enthusiastic legionaries would.

[5] Miguel Davila's doctoral thesis (2017) constitutes a key reference.

The film was a failure at the Italian box office and had almost no international circulation. Nevertheless, the regime publicised it as good as possible and it also enjoyed the support of national film critics. It could be said that the regime's propagandistic aspirations with this film were to some extent more fruitful in the field of education of new generations. [6] The August 1939 issue of the film magazine *Bianco e Nero* (n. 8) was a monograph entitled "*Il cinema e i bambini*", devoted to collecting answers from young schoolchildren on questions related to the film. This issue of the magazine includes a preface signed by Giuseppe Bottai, Mussolini's Minister of Education, and an introduction by film critic and theorist Luigi Chiarini. The latter acknowledged that *Scipione l'Africano*, despite its technical and artistic shortcomings, achieved its goals, as the children's responses would demonstrate (Chiarini 1939: 11). Although one could think of an intentional manipulation of the published content also for propaganda purposes, it is certain that the schoolchildren's responses fit perfectly in the educational and ideological framework of the time, which encouraged warmongering, patriotism and imperialism (Wyke 1997: 22; Dávila 2017: 652-656; Agbamu 2024: 187-193). To the question "What feeling did watching the film give you?" some kids' answers denote a substantial level of indoctrination, with a vision of African land –both ancient and contemporary– as a territory of conquest, at least according to the testimonies collected in the volume:

"Mentre l'esercito romano combatteva contro i cartaginesi, io pensavo ai soldati di oggi che hanno combattuto nelle stesse terre Africane e col loro sangue hanno conquistato l'Impero" (p. 38).

"Queste gloriose imprese mi fanno pensare alla guerra vittoriosa che solo da poco è stata combattuta in Africa dove l'Italia è stata ancora una volta apportatrice di civiltà [...]. Noi benché ragazzi siamo pronti a tutto ciò che il Duce comanda, ma mi sembra che, dopo aver veduto questo film sarei ancora più pronto a dar tutta la mia vita perché l'Italia sia grande e potente" (p. 41).

Roman Africa in the post-*Gladiator* (2000) era

Produced and released at the end of the 20th century, *Gladiator* (2000) would mark the aesthetics and development of the ancient epic genre in the 21st century. Ridley Scott's film relaunched the epic genre on the big screen in a new cinematic context in which the digital image was beginning to take hold. To do so, it employed as a starting point some historical paintings from the 19th century and various aesthetic and plot motifs from 20th-century epic films set in ancient Rome (Winkler 2005). Just under half an hour of footage places the spectator in North Africa, showing an idealised reconstruction of what would have been a provincial city in the Roman Empire at the end of the second century. The only accurate information conveyed in the film is that the provincial city in which this part of the plot is set is Zucchabar (fig.1). Historically attested as Colonia Iulia Augusta Zucchabar, it was a colony founded by Emperor Augustus (Mackie 1983), although in the period in which the film is set, that city would have been in the province of Mauretania Caesariensis, which is not mentioned at all. Ancient Zucchabar has been identified as the

[6] In this vein, and beyond this film, cinema was widely employed in Fascist Italy to the purpose of educating the so-called *new Italian*. See Campagna (2023).

present-day town of Miliana, in northern Algeria. Nonetheless, the scenes were shot in Morocco, in the former fortified town of Ait Ben Haddou (Ouarzazate Province), which contains Islamic buildings from no earlier than the 17th century. It is a UNESCO World Heritage site, where films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *Sodom and Gomorrah* (1963), *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), *The Jewel of the Nile* (1985), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and *The Mummy* (1999), among others, were filmed before *Gladiator*.

The production designer Arthur Max claimed that this enclave "really was magic. I mean, exotic, romantic" (cit. in Landau 2000: 63). In a way, these words sum up the Orientalist vision guiding historical reconstructions of North Africa and the Middle East in Hollywood cinema. Indeed, one critic described the scenes of Zucchabar as "the Hollywood version of the Middle East: a place of mud-brick architecture and ululation, where stoop-shouldered, burnoose-clad merchants pass the days in sibilant larceny" (Klawans 2000).

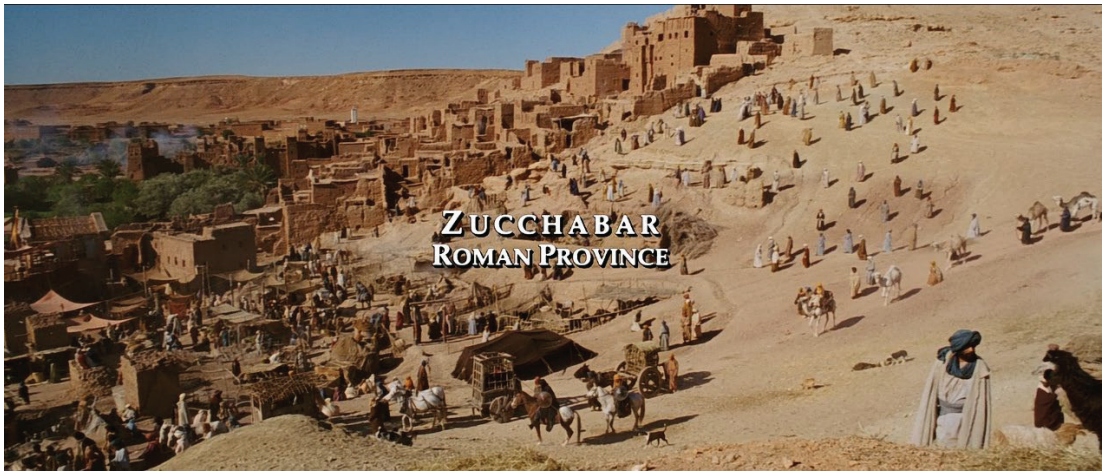


Figure 1: Screen capture from *Gladiator* (2000, dir. Ridley Scott)

Although Scott's public statements on the supposed historicity of his film were many and somewhat contradictory, it could be argued that for Zucchabar he sought "verisimilitude not accuracy" –as he did in the recreation of the Empire's capital–, stating that "I felt the priority was to stay true to the spirit of the period, but not necessarily to adhere to facts. We were, after all, creating fictions, not practicing archaeology" (cit. in Landau 2000: 64). Undoubtedly, the proposed recreation of North Africa is plausible from the point of view of the average Western viewer, even if it has little to do with the region's Roman past. The chronological question is diluted in an architecture that refers to an undefined but potential 'ancient remote past'. Another statement by the production designer about the town of Ait Ben Haddou/Zucchabar is an equally illustrative example, as it seems to refer to a timeless past: "You come up over the hill, and you're in another time" (cit. in Landau 2000: 73).

Of course, the orientalist stereotypes present in the North African scenes go far beyond the architectural setting. Some critics have gone so far as to claim that *Gladiator* "manage to perpetuate negative stereotypes about Arabs", pointing to the costumes of the extras, the musical notes, the slave caravans and the bazaar where the price of human merchandise is negotiated as elements of this negative representation (Shaheen 2000; Flint

2024). *Gladiator*'s historical advisor and Harvard professor Kathleen Coleman commented on the scene where Maximus is kidnapped while unconscious in his villa in Emerita Augusta (present-day Mérida, Spain), just before being taken as a slave to African territory: "I'm quite sure Arab slave-traders would not have penetrated Spain [where the scene was set] to kidnap Maximus. [...] I was under the impression that although the plot was fictitious, DreamWorks wanted the atmosphere to be authentic. But that is evidently not the case" (cit. in Shaheen 2000). The professor, who finally decided that her name should not appear in the credits, has personally narrated her experience as consultant for the film and her disagreement on many issues (Coleman 2005). Nevertheless, she raises some key reflections that can help us better frame the meaning of the sequences discussed here:

"Cinematic versions of history, however, generate their own momentum. The self-referential aspect of historical cinema may be conditioned not so much by narcissism as by the perception that the past has to be presented in a recognizable package.
[...] most of the historical distortions in cinema are probably not the result of such ignorance or arrogance. They are much more likely to be conscious decisions based upon aesthetics, pragmatism, or an estimation of the public appetite". (Coleman, 2005: 50-51).

Figure 2: Screen capture from *Gladiator* (2000, dir. Ridley Scott)

Back again to the scenography of Zucchabar and leaving aside the orientalist stereotypes, it is worth noticing that some elements somewhat related to Roman architecture were specifically added in the town. The main architectural element is the town's small amphitheatre, built by the production team using local materials and techniques to fit in with the local architecture (Landau, 2000: 73). To give it a "more Roman" look, they added columns and a classical-style pediment, as well as a triumphal arch next to the amphitheatre. Another example is a second triumphal arch that was built as a gateway to the *ludus* of the *lanista* Proximus (fig.2). The reconstruction is based on the preserved remains of the Arch of Caracalla at Volubilis, an ancient Roman city located near present-day Meknes, also in Morocco. The aforementioned production designer Arthur Max acknowledges having travelled through some of the territories of the Roman Empire to museums and sites, and in particular he visited and photographed the site of Volubilis (Landau, 2000: 60-62). The idea of placing a triumphal arch as the entrance to a private

provincial *ludus* is incoherent from the point of view of the planning of a Roman city. It is also yet another anachronistic element of the film, being this a monument built some decades after the reign of Commodus. Once again, the only aim is to include elements that the viewer can easily relate to the Roman past.

However, given that *Gladiator* presents ancient Rome as an allegory for the United States and its superpower status in the late twentieth century (Wilson 2002; Cyrino 2005; Taylor 2019), it is evident that the film's representation of Roman Africa is conditioned by a contemporary, simplified Western perspective. Thus, the depiction of ancient slavery, as in *Spartacus* (1960), is mediated by the experience of modern and contemporary slavery and its impact on American culture. The character of Juba has an important role in this regard. Played by Beninese actor Djimon Hounsou, he is presented as a Numidian slave and faithful companion of the protagonist Maximus. A few years earlier, the actor had starred in Steven Spielberg's film *Amistad* (1997), in which he played the African slave Joseph Cinqué, leader of a slave ship revolt in the 19th century. One of the screenwriters of that film, David Franzoni, also wrote the screenplay for *Gladiator*. Reportedly, references to the character of Juba as "the slave" were so constant in early versions of the script that Hounsou himself, in collaboration with the screenwriters, sought to broaden the conception of the character beyond that label (Landau, 2000: 58). Unlike *Spartacus* (1960), and although the character of Juba also has a precursor in Draba in Kubrick's film, the struggle for civil rights or against racism does not seem to be relevant in *Gladiator*.[7] Rather, Juba seems to reflect the multiculturalism of American society, not to mention that "even now the black among the gladiators unhesitatingly accepts and appreciates the white hero's leadership qualities without question" (Pomeroy 2005: 200). In fact, Juba's submissive and helpful character, though disguised in an innocent and well-meaning friendship with the protagonist, has some possible political readings: "Here again we have a specifically Republican image of nostalgia for a lost golden age of race relations, in which blacks do not question whites and obey their white superiors" (Rose 2005: 163). And, above all these issues, the scenes of Zucchabar as a slave market reflect the collective imaginary of Africa as a land of slaves, with all the negative conditioning that this can entail.[8]

Moving closer to the present, in the latest adaptation of the classic *Ben-Hur*, released in 2016, we find a brief but interesting reference to African territory. In a sequence from the first part of the film, the main characters Judah Ben-Hur (Jack Huston) and Messala (Toby Kebbell) meet again and the latter recounts his experience as a soldier fighting for the Roman Empire. As a flashback, following Messala's narration, a series of scenes where the Roman army confronts different adversaries follow one another in a rapid montage: first in a night battle identified as Persia, then on a snowy mountain, and finally in a desert area. In this last scenario the Romans' enemies are black men who fight half-naked and are somewhat reminiscent of Zulu warriors. The red capes of the Roman army seem to reinforce this idea, if we compare it with a scene from the iconic film *Zulu* (1964), in which

[7] On this topic see Greenhalgh (2023).

[8] In ancient Rome, race was not an operative principle of slavery and black Africans were probably a minority of the slave labour force, most of whom came from the northernmost and easternmost regions of the Roman world (George 2003).

African warriors face the British in red uniforms (figs. 3a, 3b and 4). The three-set sequence may be a cinematically effective formula for conveying to the average viewer the idea of an empire stretching across three continents: the first identified as "Persia" would mark the eastern frontier; the second probably represents the northern frontiers of the Empire in Europe; and undoubtedly the scene under discussion represents Africa in a prototypical form.

Again, this is a simple but effective way of associating Roman imperialism with contemporary colonialism. Messala's narrative, which is superimposed on the scenes, undoubtedly refers to a contemporary reflection on imperialism and its violent consequences:

"He reminded me of what we were fighting for. Things you and I believe in, Judah. A civilized world, progress, prosperity, stability. I battled and marched through countries and across continents I'd once dreamed of. I led men from battle to battle to the heights of glory. But crushed the freedom of innocent civilisations simply because they were different. I saw much blood spilled. More than I can describe."

Figures 3a and 3b: Screen capture from *Ben-Hur* (2016)

Figure 4: Screen capture from Zulu (1964)

The rest of the film, set in Roman Judea, includes a whole series of allegories that refer to post-9/11 war contexts and the so-called "War on Terror" (Aguado-Cantabrana 2023). No further references to the African continent are present in the film, and in the rest of the scenarios –mainly Jerusalem– there is a clear aim to allude to the invasion of Middle Eastern countries by Western powers, especially the US.

Finally, I would like to comment on the recent TV series *Those About to Die* (2024), set in the last days of the reign of Flavius Vespasianus and the following reign of her son Titus (79-81 CE). The series includes in its first two episodes scenes in Numidia, described as "Roman province of Northern Africa" (fig.6a).[9] That African setting is used to introduce some of the main characters of the series: a Numidian family consisting of mother Cala (Sara Martins), eldest son Kwame (Moe Hashim) and sisters Aura (Kyshan Wilson) and Jula (Alicia Ann Edogamhe). In this plot, one can sense the show's effort to include a diverse and inclusive cast of actors and actresses from racialised minorities in Western audiovisual productions. This has become an increasingly normalised trend in contemporary productions in the Anglo-Saxon sphere that has generated intense public and media debates, as a relevant element within the so-called "culture wars" (Raczkowski 2023). On the one hand, broad progressive sectors see the fact that audiovisual fiction is becoming increasingly diverse and inclusive as a positive development. On the other hand, the conservative and far-right extremist reactions, which sometimes lead to racist discourses and even defence of white supremacism, criticise an alleged "forced inclusion". However, the debate is even more complex when it comes to depicting historical figures. In this context, a recent public controversy linked to the ancient world has been that of Netflix's docudrama on Cleopatra (*Queen Cleopatra*, 2023), based on an African-American cultural reception of the ancient Egyptian queen that is not new. The controversy mirrors

[9] *Africa proconsularis* would be the name of the Roman province in which those scenes of the series are set, although that name is not mentioned.

contemporary concerns and prejudices around the construction of racial identities and how these are projected onto our view of the past (Rosillo 2019). I find particularly interesting to point out a specific strand of these debates, which would connect to the *Those About to Die* series. The Black Cleopatra controversy has reached national dimension in two North African countries. From a historical point of view, the skin colour of the Egyptian queen is irrelevant and given the available sources impossible to know. Nonetheless, important personalities in Egypt, including the famous Egyptologist Zahi Hawass, opposed Netflix docudrama and stated categorically that Cleopatra was not black and that such a representation was an attack to Egyptian identity (Washington 2024). It is important to notice that such nationalist appropriations are as much evidence of an essentialist revision of the past as any appropriation of Cleopatra by African-American culture. The frame of reference has little to do with the past that is being narrated.

Similarly, when Netflix announced in late 2023 that it would release a series on Hannibal Barca with starring actor Denzel Washington, a member of Tunisia's parliament urged its Ministry of Culture to take a stand on the matter and stated that: "this is about defending Tunisian identity and listening to the reactions of civil society". The Minister of Culture's response identified other more tangible interests, beyond the essentialist discourse that would connect the Carthaginian past with contemporary Tunisian identity:

"It's fiction; it's their right. Hannibal is a historical figure, even if we're all proud that he's Tunisian... What could we do? (...) What matters to me is that they shoot even one sequence in Tunisia and mention it. We want Tunisia to become a platform for foreign films again" (cit. in Tondo 2023).

The inclusion of black characters in leading roles in Western films, series or docudramas about the past is a legitimate decision that also makes up for an obvious traditional shortcoming in this regard. Furthermore, it agrees with the ethnic and racial diversity that may have existed in various territories around the Mediterranean in antiquity, and especially in North Africa. Ultimately, the available sources do not allow us to know with certainty the physical appearance and skin tone of certain emblematic figures of antiquity. However, the characterisation of these figures and the decision to portray them with dark-skinned actors and actresses is not intended to present a more accurate representation. On the contrary, the aim is to offer a more inclusive commercial product that can connect with progressive ideas, that defend the need to project, also onto the past, the cultural debates of the present regarding the representation of racialised minorities. Hollywood proposes a re-reading of the history of the African continent that can appeal to African-American identity. But this perspective, in turn, may conflict with other contemporary ethnic and national North African identities, that have their own essentialist version of their region's past, such as the Tunisian on Hannibal, the Egyptian on Cleopatra, or the Berber on the Numidian past.

The depiction of the Numidian family in *Those About to Die* is full of stereotypes linked to sub-Saharan Africa, which are mediated through the Western vision. The only reason why this series did not generate a similar controversy to the other two Netflix productions is the absence of a key historical figure that shaped the national identity of North African countries, or that had a relevant reception in the Western imaginary. On the contrary, the show is about an anonymous family whose children end up being enslaved. The mother

Cala, as well as Kwame, Aura and Jula are characters with whom the spectator empathises as victims of Roman imperialism. In fact, these characters were conceived with a clear link to current times, as they are related to the collective identities of the present. Sara Martins, who plays the role of the Numidian mother who crosses the Mediterranean to get to Rome and free her children from slavery, has stated in an interview that "Cala's story reflects those migrant women who immigrate for the best for their family" (cit. in Stenzel, 2024). In her character, we clearly see the recent archetype of the empowered racialised woman, whose odyssey is embedded in current migration processes from Africa to Europe. The actress acknowledges that she has examples of strong women who have experienced immigration in her own family, being herself a woman born in Portugal, raised in France and of Cape Verdean descent. She also acknowledges that in the absence of information on the language spoken in Numidia, they had to invent a language for the series (Vallavan 2024). The sounds and intonations are reminiscent of the languages of sub-Saharan Africa. This lack of historical sources for the Numidian past has also been pointed out by the British actor of Yemeni descent, Moe Hashim. Some statements about the construction of his character, Kwame, are revealing and denote his own prejudices and references:

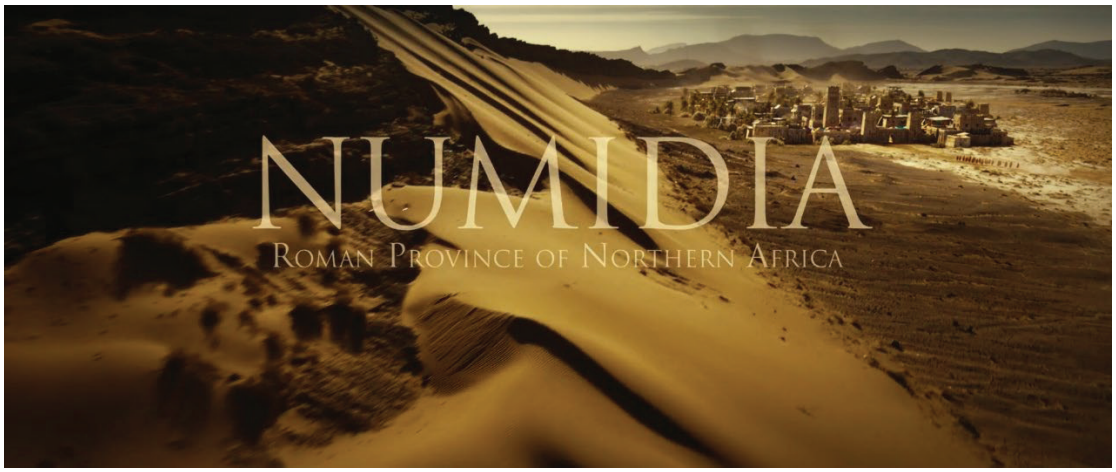
"*I couldn't actually pinpoint a North African gladiator. So in regard to that point, I kind of had to bring a bit of my own imagination involved in it. But just knowing what North Africans did and how they were seen in the research helped me build this character. (...) My dad being from Yemen kind of infused certain aspects of the role together (...). So when playing a character from that side of the world it didn't feel too foreign to me. It could be someone like Kwame in a previous life" (cit. in Saeed 2024).*

Figure 5: Screen capture from *Those About to Die* (2024, Peacock)

The search for inspiration, as we see, has little to do with any approach to Berber culture past or present. Even his Yemeni ancestry seems to serve in this amalgam of inspirations, although it is not clear what he is referring to when he speaks of "that side of the world". The idea, as the actor recognizes in the same interview, is to introduce younger generations to models of powerful African characters, also from antiquity. The sense of belonging to the African continent is emphasised in the characters' dialogue and interactions in the series. Kwame is presented as an expert hunter and the scenes of the first episode in which he appears hunting in a group are full of visual stereotypes referring of the tribes of sub-

Saharan Africa (fig.5). In the second episode, when Domitian, son of Emperor Vespasian, provokes him by describing North Africa as "filled with filthy vermin and dogs, pacified by my august father", Kwame feels his pride hurt by this insult to his homeland and responds with an attempted assault on the emperor, risking his life. Likewise, in the third episode Kwame tells another gladiator that his father was from Nubia "the land of the Black Pharaohs", underlining the importance of his skin colour. Cala, in the same vein, reaffirms his African identity through the food she prepares, pointing out that it is a "typical African dish".

Following the same logic of depiction of the past, the recreation of North African territory in the series also includes some of the orientalist clichés already discussed with *Gladiator*. Without going into further detail, this approach is evident in the large general shot that introduces the first scenes in the province of Numidia. Accompanied by a musical composition that is very common in this type of cinematic introduction when presenting African or Middle Eastern territories, the CGI created shot presents a city that does not include any Roman elements and that is located in the middle of a large desert (fig.6a). The scenery, costumes and props of the close-up of a street within the city reinforce this relatively prototypical image of Africa from an orientalist point of view (fig.6b).



Figures 6a and 6b: Screen capture from *Those About to Die* (2024, Peacock)

Conclusion

The image of Africa and Africans in the films and series set on Ancient Rome analysed here responds to conventions inherent to the representation of Antiquity on screen: Manichaeism, exoticism, orientalism and presentism. This image is also the product of a whole series of codes of presentation of the African continent in Western audiovisual productions, which are repeated regardless of the historical moment they are intended to recreate. To further explore the issues raised here, more examples could be analysed and should be linked to recent research on the representation of Africa on screen through the lens of Hollywood (Dokotum 2020; Garrigós 2024).

Historical-archaeological research and knowledge of the Punic-Roman heritage in the region play an almost anecdotal role in these representations. What is usual is the mixture of architectural elements and material culture from very different temporal contexts, which are often not from the ancient period, or are directly the product of creators' inventions. The aim is not to provide an accurate reconstruction of this past –which would in any case require a considerable amount of invention, given our partial, fragmentary and limited knowledge. On the contrary, the aim is to connect with the spectator so that they can quickly identify a series of audiovisual codes that refer to that past and to that specific geographical context, according to the imaginaries of the time.

To conclude, it can be argued that these receptions of Punic-Roman Africa have served, in diverse contexts, to create linear connections between Antiquity and the present through essentialist and ahistorical readings, rooted in political discourses linked to contemporary national or collective identities. In contrast to the colonialist visions of the first half of the twentieth century, in the twenty-first century we find attempts to recreate Roman Africa and its inhabitants in more positive terms, seeking the empathy of the Western spectator. However, many orientalist and romantic clichés as well as the idea of Africa as a wild and exotic place still remain intact. While each of these visions is a product of its time, they all tell us a lot about how the popular Western imaginary about the Roman presence in North Africa is constructed and evolves.

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