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The Importance of the City of Thibilis (currently Selawa Announa) and Its Civilizational Role During Ancient Times

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Abstract:	Article info
<p>In addressing the topic of the importance of the city of Thibilis (currently Slawa Announa) and its civilizational role during ancient times, I first examined how this city came into being. I then discussed the various developments it underwent throughout the different ancient periods, starting with the Numidian–Punic phase, followed by the Roman and Byzantine periods. Most important is the civilizational role played by this city in various social, religious, and economic fields—especially the economic one—considering that it was an important hub through which various major and secondary roads passed, connecting to and from Cirta, the capital of the Numidian kingdom, and Carthage, the capital of the Carthaginian Empire in the early period. Its importance grew even more with the arrival of the Roman invaders, and it became a Roman town and colony with a significant position within the Cirtaian confederation.</p>	<p>Received: 28/04/2025</p> <p>Accepted: 23/05/2025</p> <p>Key words:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Thibilis ✓ Numidian period ✓ Cirta ✓ civilization

Introduction

Most areas of ancient North Africa have since the earliest times, witnessed the first forms of human settlements in the form of villages. These villages underwent many developments throughout the various historical periods that the region experienced. These changes affected both their external appearance and most aspects of life within them, ultimately transforming them into increasingly urbanized centers during the historical stages (Punic, Numidian, Roman, Vandal, and Byzantine). Among these areas is Thibilis, or what is now Selawa Announa, which itself saw the emergence of a small village since prehistoric times and underwent significant development throughout all the aforementioned historical stages. This is confirmed by most historical and archaeological evidence, which we will examine in detail in order to answer the central question of this study: what were the human and material factors that accompanied and caused this civilizational transformation? From there, we can identify the importance of the city and the civilizational role it played within its surroundings.

1. A Historical Overview of the City of Thibilis

1.1. Etymology and Geographical Location

The name of this settlement begins with the same two letters that are found in many place names throughout North Africa in general—such as Thamugadi, Thagaste, Thabarca (Gsell (St.) and Joly 1918, p.7) and in the province of Numidia in particular—such as Aquis Thibilitanis, Thabarbusis (Judas s.d., p.154). According to most modern and contemporary researchers, these letters represent the feminine marker in the local Libyan language, which also appears frequently in the names of Libyans who have left behind a significant number of inscriptions discovered in most of the sites within the studied region—such as Msth, Mrth, Gzth (Gsell (St.) and Joly 1918, p.7). (See Figure 1)

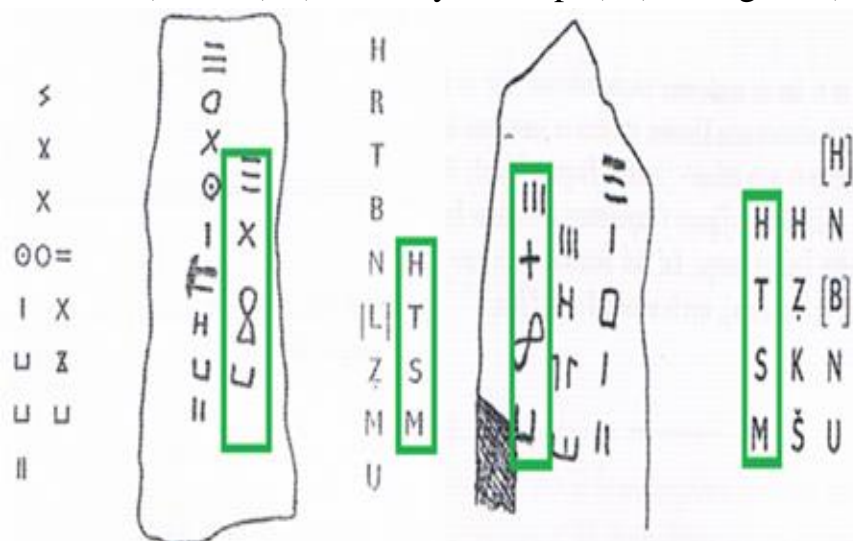


Figure 1: Inscriptions No. 671 and 676 bear the same Libyan name (Math) (Chabot (J.B) s.d., pp. 147–148).

This settlement extends over a plateau surrounded by mountains on almost all sides. It is protected by the Taïa Mountains to the northwest, the Maouna Mountains to the northeast, the slopes of Mount Announa to the south, and Mount Khmajah to the southeast. Nearby flows the region's largest ancient river, Oued Echarf. This strategic location allowed it to overlook several important routes throughout the province of Numidia and the province of Africa Proconsularis, especially during the Roman period (Gsell (St.) and Joly 1918, p12).

2.2. Historical Periods and Major Archaeological Evidence and Landmarks

The historical importance of this settlement lies in its antiquity, as evidenced by the discovery of a megalithic tomb at the site of Aïn El-Hamra(1), as well as a large rock bearing engravings depicting scenes of herding and plowing, which researchers date to prehistoric times. Additionally, two tombs carved into a large rock in the Punic style have been found. Numerous Libyan and Punic relics have also been discovered (see Figure 1), as well as Punic votive stelae in several nearby sites (see Figure 2).

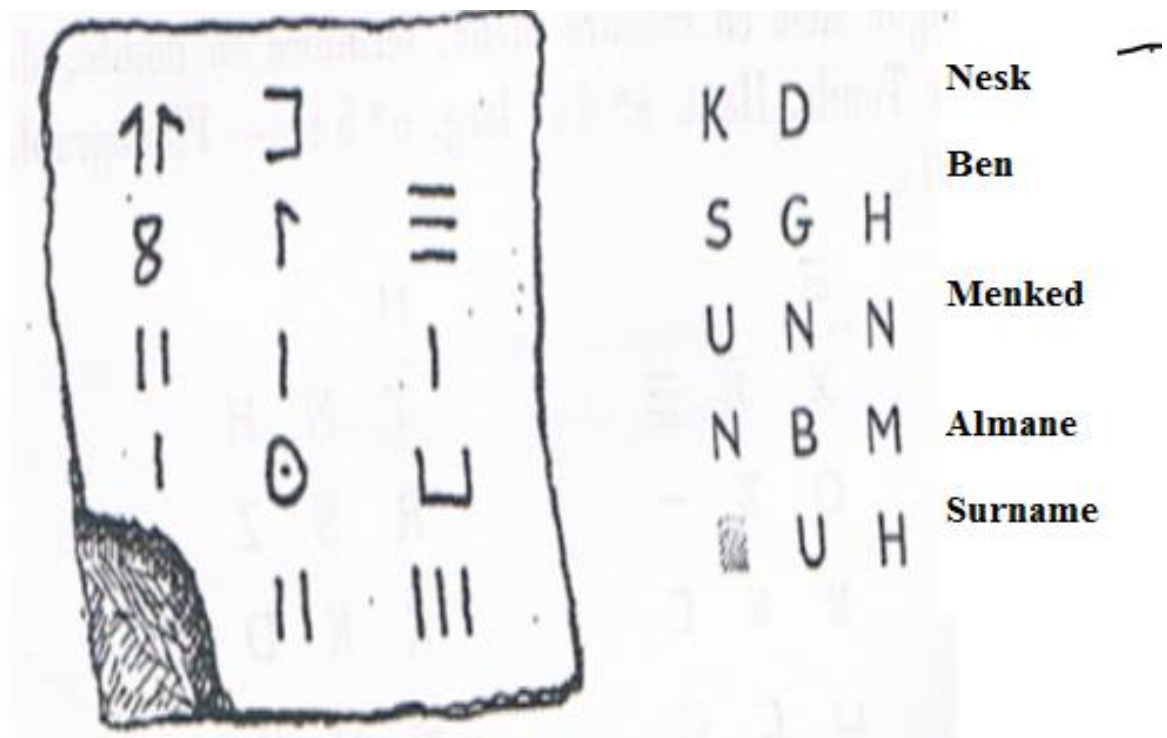


Figure 2: A Libyan inscription discovered in Thibilis bearing two Libyan names and a surname (Chabot (J.B) s.d., 148).

It is also worth mentioning the coins found at the site of the Roman city of Thibilis. Two of them bear, on one side, the image of a galloping horse, while the other sides depict the head of a crowned king. These coins date back to the Numidian period (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Two sides of a Numidian coin found in Thibilis.

Thibilis experienced significant prosperity during the Roman period, when it became a Roman city affiliated with the Cirtaean Confederation, before its final dissolution between 251 and 269AD (Aqqoun 2003–2004, p.70). Its citizens were registered in the **Quirina** tribe, a name associated with several cities and sites within the Cirtaean Confederation, as evidenced by inscriptions discovered there (Gsell (St.) 1922, p4681, 4634, 4681, 4682, 4687, 4643, 4703, 4689, 4690, 4691, 4624, 4647, 4683, 4684, 4686, 4688, 4692, 4693, 4698, 4699.). This affiliation also appeared in other cities such as Hippo Regius, Sicca Veneria, and Bulla Regia, while in cities like Calama, Khamissa (Tubursicu Numidarum), Thugga, Cuicul (Djemila), and Sitifis, Thibilis was mentioned only through individuals who had migrated from the cities mentioned above (Lassère (J.M.) s.d., pp. 606–607.).

However, during the Late Roman Empire, Thibilis separated from the confederation and became an independent town, adopting the system of free cities. The community of Thibilis left behind many archaeological remains during the Roman and Byzantine periods, including:

The House of the Antistii family, located in the eastern quarter of Thibilis along the road coming from the public square (the forum), which bordered it to the north. The boundaries from the other directions are unclear (see Figure 4). This information comes from archaeological work conducted by researchers Stéphane Gsell and Joly (Gsell (St.) and Joly 1918, p81).

As for its condition today, it is almost completely in ruins. The area is filled with piles of large, polished stones made using various techniques, and overgrown with weeds and shrubs that have covered most of the details of the foundations and floors of the rooms, as the walls no longer exist (see Figure 4).

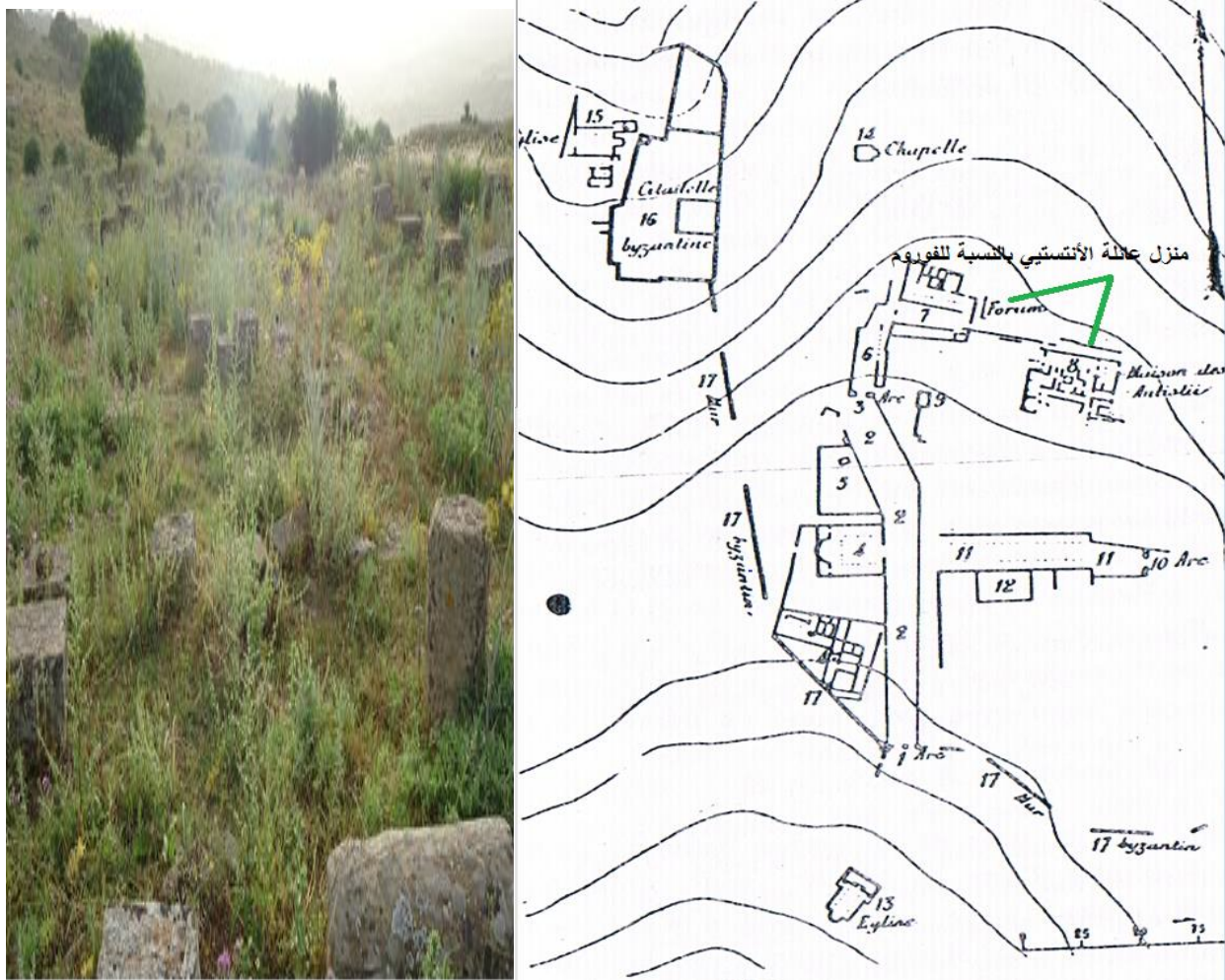


Figure 4: General plan of the city of Thibilis showing the location of the House of the Antistii in relation to the forum (Gsell (St.) s.d., p. 8.). and Remains of the House of the Antistii in Thibilis (photographed by the researcher).

The house was named as such because an altar was found there bearing an inscription with the name of a member of this family—Quintus Antistius Adventus Postumus Aquilinus—offered by one of his freed slaves, Agathopus, in honor of the household's protective deities. Additionally, another altar was found at location (G) on the site plan (see Figure) dedicated to the goddess of victory (Victoria) and the goddess of fortune and happiness (Fortuna Redux) (Pouille 1876, p415) Due to the presence of these altars, the researcher Gsell believed that this area served as a sacred space, possibly functioning as a temple (Gsell (St.) and Joly 1918, p86).

Like other Roman houses in North Africa, this residence consisted mainly of a courtyard, which served to provide light and allow sunlight into the house (Drici (S.) 2006, p 675.). According to Gsell, the House of the Antistii featured two large courtyards and many rooms distributed across its entire surface area, giving it a rectangular layout (see Figure 4) (Gsell (St.) and Joly 1918, plate XVIII.).

According to ancient plans of the city, the site of Thibilis also contains three basilicas. The first basilica is located outside the Byzantine fortifications of the city, extending along the *Cardo Maximus* street to the south. Its length ranges from 19 to 60 meters, while its width is between 13 and 15 meters. It has three aisles. Although it is situated outside the Byzantine fortifications, the cross-shaped carving on the lintel of its main entrance has led both researchers Gsell and Joly to date it to the Byzantine period. However, other scholars believe it may have been built earlier than this period and continued to be used during the Byzantine era (Gsell (St.) and Joly 1918, p91-95), (Gsell (St.) s.d., No. 11, pp. 165–166), citing some archaeological evidence to support this claim (Poulle 1876, p 299) (see Figure 5).

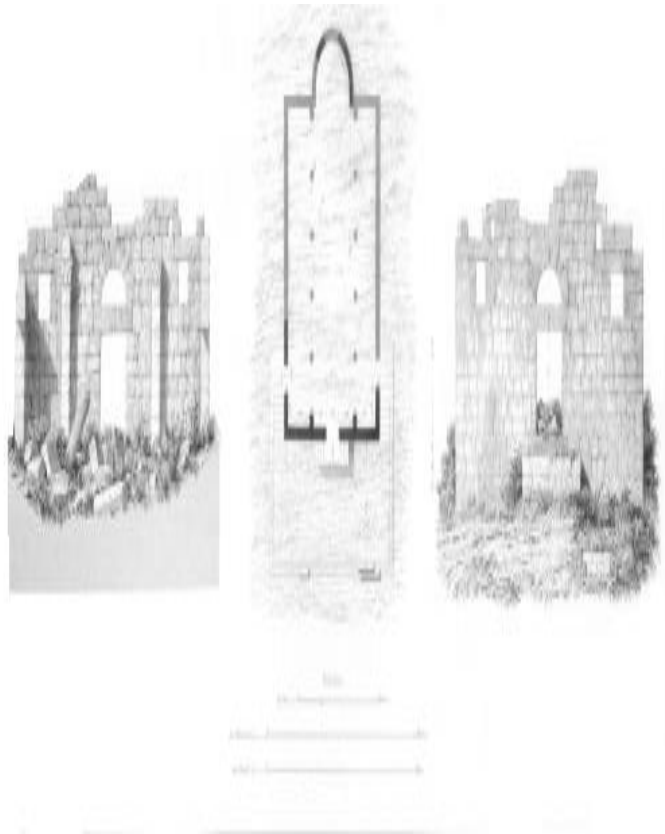


Figure 5: The interior facade of the Basilica of Thibilis (photographed by the researcher).and Plan of the Basilica of Thibilis.

As for the second basilica, it is located in the northwestern part of the city, west of the Byzantine citadel. It is also characterized by having three aisles. A **multifaceted baptismal basin** was found there, and this, along with some other remains, has led researchers to date it to the Byzantine period. (Gsell (St.) and Joly 1918, p95-97), (Gsell (St.) s.d., No. 12, pp. 169–170.)

A third basilica exists in the northern quarter, to the west of the main road, amidst the houses that are more Romanized. It differs from the two previously mentioned basilicas due to its smaller dimensions, ranging between 12.30 meters (Gsell (St.) and Joly 1918, p99)in width and 6 meters in length. Researcher Haji Rabah Yassine believes that this basilica was modified to align with Christian practices and was dedicated to the city's church, as

happened with the first basilica in Timgad. Therefore, it is possible that it had been used even before this period, i.e., before the Byzantine occupation, and continued to be in use until the end of Christianity in the region, just like the other basilicas of the site. (Christian Basilicas 2008–2009, p59)

2. The Importance of the City and Its Civilizational Role

Through the study of various archaeological evidence, including the monuments and Latin inscriptions, we can ascertain the significant role played by the citizens of Thibilis in various aspects of life (social, economic, religious, and cultural). From this, we can infer the importance of this city not only within Ancient Maghreb but also beyond

2.1. Its Role in Social and Economic Spheres

The scarcity of sources documenting Thibilis' society during the Punic–Numidian period does not imply that this society was underdeveloped. The evidence of this is found in the rock carvings, which demonstrate the creativity, imagination, and precision of their creators. These carvings, from the choice of subject matter to the technique of engraving on stone, evolved over time, culminating in carving techniques during the Roman period.

My study of most of the Latin inscriptions discovered in Thibilis has provided us with the names of many significant figures who were members of the Cirtaean Decurions Council (2). It is worth noting that during this period, Thibilis was a mere pagus within the Cirtaean Confederation (Cataudella (M.R.) Oristano, 1992., p 328.). The confederation was responsible for appointing a Praefectus Quirina, who assisted the magistrates (judges) in managing the affairs of Thibilis(3) before it was promoted to a town in the mid-3rd century AD, as evidenced by two miliaria (mile markers) discovered by researcher Pierre Salama near Ain Ammara and dated to 270 AD (Salama (P.) 1951, PL V). The presence of this political elite in the city granted it significance and high status due to the various roles they played in serving their communities.

As for the city's contribution to the economy, the inhabitants of Thibilis have been consistently active from ancient times, as shown in the rock carvings and inscriptions that have preserved many vibrant scenes indicating their engagement in various agricultural activities, such as animal husbandry and agriculture. One such scene can clearly be seen at the site of Khenqa el-Hajar on the right bank of the Oued Bou Fraïis, amidst fertile lands suitable for agriculture in the studied city. This scene depicts a person standing, holding a plowing tool that is likely being pulled by an ox (Vigneral (M.CH) 1867, plate IX.) (see **Figure 6**)



Figure 6: Scene of plowing on a rock at the Khenqa el-Hajar site.

The importance of Numidian wheat is not only evident in its depiction on various coins of that era, such as those of Massinissa II, Juba II, Ptolemy, and also on the coin of the city of Cirta (Chafia Charen 2000–2001, p80), but also in the monuments where people are depicted holding sheaves of wheat. These have been found throughout the Numidian kingdom, including in the city of Thibilis. This is evidence that Thibilis held a prominent place within the Numidian kingdom during the Numidian period, due to its agricultural nature. This importance persisted even after the Roman conquest, as confirmed by several ancient Latin sources, including old maps like the Ptolemaic map and the Antonine Itinerary, which listed Thibilis as one of the key cities and villages along major trade routes, such as the Cirta–Carthage Road. This was one of the most important roads originating from Carthage, passing through several towns and villages in Tunisia before reaching Cirta (Louis Lacroix s.d., p181).

Due to its strategic importance, it intersects with several other key routes, such as the road from Carthage to Hippo via Bulla Regia (Tissot s.d., p112). Generally, it cuts through the Proconsular province from east to west. For this reason, the Roman authorities made significant efforts to secure it by constructing various buildings and defensive structures, which were strategically distributed along the road. This is evidenced by the different physical remains of these structures, such as fortresses, castles, and towers, especially those located within the studied city. (Gsell (St.) s.d., N.p.107-195)

THACORA	V	THAGURA.....		Taoura. تاورا
VASIDICE.....	V		24 XXIV	Tamatmat. تاماتمت
AD MOLAS.....	VI			?
*	XII	TIPASA.....		Tifech. تيفش
CAPRARIA.....	7			Ain-Sajra.
THIBILI	VII			Sidi-Mabrouk, ech-Che-
CASTELLUM FABATIANUM	XXV			rif? سيدة مبروك و ليس سيد
CIRTA.....	?			? سيرة
				Constantine.

* Ab Hippone Regio Carthagine. — ^b Ab Hippone Regio Carthagine. — ^c A Musti Cirta. — ^d A Musti Cirta.

Figure 7: An excerpt from a table showing the name of the city of Thibilis in the Antonine Itinerary and Ptolemy's map, which indicates the routes passing through Hippo-Carthage and Cirta, according to Tissot (adapted by the researcher) (Tissot s.d., p 113).

The various Latin inscriptions discovered in the mile markers of the city also confirm that most of the major and secondary roads passed through the city. For instance, two-mile markers were found. The first was discovered at the crossroads leading from Thibilis to Hammam Dabbagh or vice versa. It mentions the Emperor Caesar Marcus Aurelius Carus, the undefeated and pious, and to Marcus Aurelius Carinus and Marcus Aurelius Numerianus, the noble emperors, as decided by the municipal council (Pouille 1876, pp. 538–539). The inscription is dated between 282 and 283 AD. The second mile marker was found in the house of Baue, who placed it in the courtyard of his house. It mentions the noble emperors Flavius Valerius Constantine, Galerius Valerius Maximian, and the sacred (Auggg), from the treasury of the municipality of Thibilis (R.P.M.T) (Pouille 1876, p537.).

2.2. Its Role in the Religious and Cultural Fields

The inhabitants of **Thibilis**, like other people in the ancient Maghreb, were creative in imagining their gods and deities since the earliest times. The material evidence discovered in the city reflects their powerful imagination. Most of the preserved **Punic monuments** in the **Roman Theatre Museum** of **Guelma** display symbols and images of the most famous gods throughout the ancient Maghreb, such as **Baal Hammon** and the goddess **Tanit** (Selwa Bouchareb: 2015, p17).

During the Roman period, the city saw significant development, which included the appearance of new religious practices resulting from the arrival of different human groups who settled alongside the local population. Latin inscriptions mention the presence of an important **religious elite** that contributed clearly to the city's growth and development. Some

of the individuals who held prominent positions in the religious hierarchy and simultaneously played key roles in other aspects of life include **Quintus Antistius Adventus Postumius Aquilinus** (Q. ANTISTIVS ADVENTVS Q. F. QVIR. POSTOMIVS AQVILINVS), who held various civil and military positions, such as priest, consul, and leader of a military unit (Gsell (St.) 1922, p,4681,4634 , 4681, 4682.), **Quintus Geminius Marcianus** (Q. GEMINIVS Q. FIL. QVIR. MARCIANVS), son of the **Quirina tribe**, who served as **Quaestor** and **judge** (Gsell (St.) 1922, p , 4687 ,634.), and **Caecina Decius Albinus** (CAECINA DECIVS ALBINVS [IVNIOR]), who worked as an eternal priest, consul, and priest of the provinces, among others (Gustavvs, Willmannns, s.d., p7034-7035) (Gsell (St.) 1922, p 619, 620,621;4685).

CONCLUSION

After studying the importance of the city of **Thibilis** and its civilizational role during ancient times, I have come to the following conclusions: **Thibilis** is one of the most ancient and distinguished cities in **North Africa**, with its origins dating back to the dawn of history. The presence of **ancient tombs** and **rock carvings** with various scenes not only proves the creativity of its residents and artists but also serves as evidence of the artistic and technical progress they achieved.

Furthermore, the continued development of the city during subsequent historical periods, such as the **Punic** and **Numidian periods**, underscores its historical significance to the Numidian kings. The discovery of coins bearing their images is a clear testament to this. The city reached its peak prosperity during the **Roman period**, when it underwent significant development in all fields. This is reflected in the important roles played by its citizens, who held many **administrative, political, and military positions** both within the **Numidian province** and beyond **Ancient North Africa**.

Explanation and Comments:

1- The cemetery is located in Kef Umm al-Shtoub, specifically in the hamlet of Aïn El Hamra, which lies to the south of the municipality of Selawa Announa, approximately 10 km away, along National Road No. 123, which connects it to the municipality of Aïn Makhoulf. It is worth mentioning that the region derives its name from the two large rocks located there, which overlook Oued Boulefraï, a stream that flows into Oued El Charf. The area also contains several water sources: Aïn El Hamra, Aïn Talhi, and Aïn Qatar.

Astronomically, the cemetery lies between 36°19'18.25" North latitude and 7°16'35.40" East longitude. According to Lambert coordinates, it is situated between 910–912 North-South and 344–346 East-West. Its elevation above sea level is estimated at 698 meters

2- In inscriptions No. 4692 and 4693, it is stated that a man named Sittius Lucius Rufinus (L. SITTIVS M. F. QVIR. RVFINVS) was a member of the municipal council (decuriones) of Cirta (Gustavvs, Willmannns, s.d., p, 5534), (Gsell (St.) 1922, p,4692 , 4693)..

3- One of the inscriptions discovered in Ghar El Jamaa in Taya was offered by a citizen of Thibilis who had held a number of positions, including that of Prefectissimus (High Prefect). Other inscriptions mention municipal magistrates (Magistrii Thib...). Sometimes the term Thibilis is used, while in other instances the term Thibilitanorum (of the Thibilitans) appears. A third designation also appears: Dothen or Dotensis. (Lepley 1981, p,477), (Gsell (St.) 1922, p,4631, 4534, 4535, 4641, 4653, 4654, 4660).

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