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A Town Grows in Numidia:
The Testimony of the Inscriptions at Guela'a Bu Atfane

The only traces of the Roman town that once flourished on the site of Guela'a Bu Atfane in modern Algeria are two cemeteries, a few scattered ruins and a rich epigraphic testimony to the ethnic, social and cultural character of the community in the first three centuries of the Common Era. While it has thus far been impossible to discover the name of the town in the Roman imperial period, the extent of the Roman franchise in the town, as evidenced by the onomastic evidence of the inscriptions, strongly suggests that it achieved *municipium* status, most likely before 212 CE.

The town that occupied the site of modern Guela'a Bu Atfane was situated in the highlands of central Numidia on the south bank of the Wadi Chenoir, a natural and advantageous site for an urban development in that region. Archaeological research on the site began in the late nineteenth century, with the site reports of Vigneral and Bernelle, which was followed up in the early twentieth century by Gsell's detailed epigraphic study of the ruins and cemeteries at the site (Gsell 1965, 58). Subsequent scholars have theorized about the ancient town's legal status and demographic composition.

In this paper, I re-examine Gascou's assertion that the town acquired *municipium* status in the early second century CE, as well as Lassere's hypothesis that the region was heavily populated by immigrants from the Punic-Roman centers of Africa Proconsularis, in light of my reading of the epigraphic evidence of Guela'a Bu Atfane (Gascou 1972, 203; Lassere 1977, 341). What the epigraphic evidence shows is that it had, by the end of the second century if not before, become an autonomous town. That is to say, it rapidly evolved into a highly Romanized provincial center, locally governed by decurions rather than by a prefect, with a primarily African, but reasonably diverse, population – a microcosm of urban provincial life in Roman Africa under the High Roman Empire.