

## The problem of the Libyan alphabets in ancient North Africa\*

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"Libyan" inscriptions from Thugga (to-day Dougga, Tunisia) were the first ones to draw the attention of scholars. When more texts were found in different parts of North Africa, it soon became clear that they had not been written in one and the same alphabet, although they all belong to the Libyco-Berber script, and one gradually came to oppose a "western" to an "eastern" alphabet, the limit being supposed to cross Algeria somewhere near Algiers. When scattered on a vast territory, a system of writing, like a language, will indeed easily split into more or less different varieties, a tendency still exemplified by the modern Twareg alphabets. But the notion of two Libyan alphabets can only give a rough, provisional sketch of the situation.

The fact that a number of letters are unknown in Thugga does not prove that they pertain to one single set: there were surely more than two Libyan alphabets. Several "western" inscriptions make a frequent use of the letter V, the phonetic value of which has not been established, and of a word  $\vee \text{m} +$  (or  $\vee \text{c} +$ ) (see page 62-64), and they have a few other features in common. Now such inscriptions spread eastwards from Morocco, as far as (at least) the vicinity of Calama (Guelma, Algeria; see map), that is near Tunisia! In many places they seem to coexist with "eastern" inscriptions. A stela in Algiers (S. Chaker, *Libyca* 25, 1977, 193-202) bears two inscriptions, one with the script and vocabulary of Thugga, the other one with the word  $\vee \text{m} +$ .

On the whole, we must reject the idea of two areas divided by a clear out line between a "western" and an "eastern" alphabet. The Libyan inscriptions reveal a noticeable expansion of the script and culture found at Thugga, whereas the  $\vee$ -inscriptions, though covering a large area, are much less numerous: only 25 have the word  $\vee \text{m} +$ , half of them in the district of Algiers. Starting from those facts, one might venture the following hypothesis:

- 1) the Thugga script may have conveyed the culture of the Massyles, after Massinissa and Rome had defeated Syphax, king of the Masaesyles (202 B.C.);
- 2) the area of the  $\vee$ -script largely corresponds to the territory occupied by the Masaesyles at the time of their political climax (about 220-202 B.C.). But there are reasons to think that the  $\vee$ -script, on the stela at Algiers, was used after the Thugga-script. Then the  $\vee$ -inscriptions might be viewed as a testimony of the survival of Masaesyle cultural features even after the Masaesyles had disappeared from the political scene.

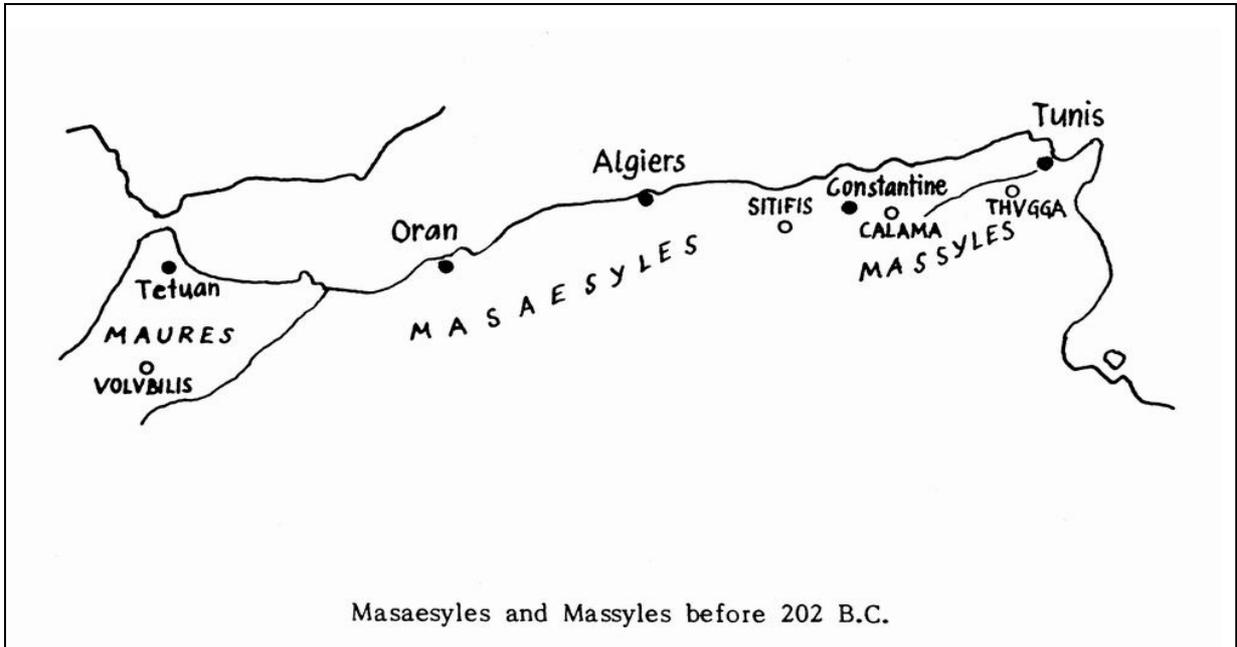
It is only fair to add that O. Rössler had already associated the two alphabets with the Massyles and the Masaesyles, but as a mere representation of western and eastern North Africa and without any historical comment (see for instance "Die Sprache Numidiens" in *Sybaris: Festschrift Hans Krahe*, Wiesbaden, 1958, p. 95). At any rate Massyles and Masaesyles exemplify nothing more than two different facies of Libyan civilisation.

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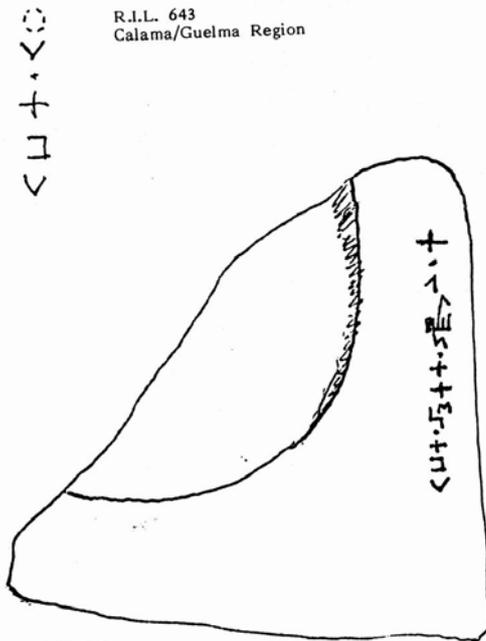
Abbreviations:

R.I.L.: J.-B. Chabot, Recueil des inscriptions libyques, Paris, 1940, XXIV-248 p. + planches.

I.A.M./IL: L. Galand, Inscriptions libyques, in Inscriptions antiques du Maroc, Paris, C.N.R.S., 1966, p. 1-79, carte, planches.



R.I.L. 646  
Calama/Guelma Region



R.I.L. 643  
Calama/Guelma Region

I.A.M./IL 15  
= R.I.L. 842 bis  
Museum, Volubilis



