

From Latin Frurenta to Amazigh Frenda: Toponymic and Ecological Approaches to Redrawing the Caesarian Ecclesiastical Map

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ABSTRACT

This study fundamentally re-evaluates the historical and toponymic geography of the dioceses of Mauretania Caesariensis (ancient Algeria) during Late Antiquity, focusing specifically on the elusive diocese of Fronta, documented in the acts of the Council of Carthage in 484 CE. It seeks to deconstruct the classical archaeological hypothesis inherited from colonial scholarship, which conventionally aligned Fronta with the site of Wadi al-Abtal (Fratasa) based on superficial phonetic conjectures that notably lack decisive epigraphic validation. Alternatively, this paper advances a robust counter-hypothesis identifying Fronta with modern-day Frenda (Tiaret Province). This new attribution is grounded in a dual-faceted approach: first, a meticulous phonetic and semantic analysis of how Latin hydronyms and toponyms morphed within the local Amazigh vernacular, alongside its correlation with the striking morphological features of the Frenda-Takhmert cliff-front; second, an examination of the region's prominent geopolitical landscape during the fifth century CE—the golden age of emergent independent indigenous principalities characterized by the monumental Jedars (Les Djedars). Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that the exceptional archaeological and political weight of the Frenda region during this era strongly substantiates its claim as the true seat of this lost bishopric, thereby offering fresh perspectives for redrawing the ecclesiastical and administrative map of interior Mauretania Caesariensis.

Keywords: Fronta; Frenda; Toponymy; Mauretania Caesariensis; Vandal Era; The Jedars.

Introduction

Ancient ecclesiastical documents, particularly those pertaining to the religious councils and synods of Roman North Africa, constitute an invaluable corpus of primary source material for reconstructing the historical geography and urban topography of the ancient Maghreb. Foremost among these documents is the *Notitia Provinciarum et Civitatum Africae* (The List of Provinces and Cities of Africa), appended to the historical writings of Victor of Vita (Victor de Vita). This document meticulously records the names of the bishops and their respective episcopal sees summoned by the Vandal King Huneric to the Council of Carthage in 484 CE. However, a critical scrutiny of these lists reveals a major methodological dilemma: many interior dioceses—situated along the hinterlands of the limes defensive lines—have long remained subject to geographical speculation and classicist projections. A case in point is the diocese of Fronta (Dioecesis Frontensis) and its Catholic representative, Bishop Donatus (Donatus Frontensis).

Research Problem (Problem Statement)

Against this backdrop, the core problem of this study crystallizes into a fundamental question regarding the validity and accuracy of the traditional, classical hypothesis that locates the diocese of Fronta at Wadi al-Abtal (Fratasa). Conversely, the alternative approach asks: To what extent can the

identification of the historical diocese of Fronta with modern-day Frenda (Tiaret Province) be substantiated by solid linguistic-toponymic justifications, as well as robust geopolitical and archaeological data dating back to Late Antiquity? From this central inquiry emerge several sub-questions: Does the Frenda-Takhmert region possess the material evidence—both Roman and indigenous—qualifying it to host an episcopal see during the fifth century CE? Furthermore, how does this counter-hypothesis resolve the conundrum of the "ecclesiastical vacuum" that characterizes the vast territory of the Jedar principalities in ancient documentation?

Previous Studies (Bibliographical Background)

The geography of Mauretanian dioceses has occupied a central place in the scholarship of the French colonial archaeological school since the late nineteenth century. Stéphane Gsell, in his encyclopedic masterpiece *Atlas archéologique de l'Algérie*, attempted to lay the initial groundwork for locating ancient cities and forts within the province of Mauretania Caesariensis. In the second half of the twentieth century, André Mandouze's monumental biographical and bibliographical work, *Prosopographie de l'Afrique chrétienne*, further consolidated the prevailing classical hypothesis. This paradigm explicitly identifies the ancient diocese of Fronta with the site of Wadi al-Abtal—known during the colonial period as Uzès-le-Duc, and locally as Fratasa—which is geographically situated within the broader perimeter of Mascara and Relizane.

Despite the undeniable scholarly value of these pioneering endeavors, a critical examination of their texts reveals that this correlation relied almost exclusively on a superficial phonetic resemblance tied to the toponym "Fratasa", occurring in the absolute absence of any epigraphic evidence (such as a decisive inscription) confirming the name at the site. It is precisely from this juncture that the research gap emerges which this paper intends to bridge, shifting the discourse away from abstract phonetic conjecture and anchoring the diocese within the concrete geographical and archaeological depth of the southwestern High Plateaus.

Methodology

To address this problem and validate the proposed alternative hypothesis, this study employs the historical-critical method (*Méthode Historique Critique*), which centers on tracing and deconstructing primary textual sources and cross-referencing them with field archaeological data. Additionally, the research utilizes the analytical tools of phonetic and semantic toponymy to examine the mechanisms through which Latin nomenclature mutated as it transitioned into the late local Amazigh vernacular and subsequent Arabization. This is coupled with a geopolitical approach that links religious architecture to the broader urban and military frameworks of the region during the fifth century CE—specifically within the context of the resurgence of independent indigenous political entities known as the Jedar Principalities (*Les Djedars*) in the Frenda and Takhmert territory. This multi-dimensional approach ultimately facilitates a fresh reading of the administrative and ecclesiastical map of interior Mauretania Caesariensis.

Section I: The Geography of the Diocese of Fronta in Classical Archaeological Literature: A Critical Review

Subsection I: Bibliographical and Documentary Data of 484 CE

The *Notitia Provinciarum et Civitatum Africae*, preserved within Victor of Vita's (*Victor de Vita*) fundamental work *Historia persecutionis Africanae provinciae*, serves as the primary and essential source for mapping the ecclesiastical geography of Mauretania Caesariensis under Vandal rule. In the prelude to the Council of Carthage in 484 CE—convened by King Huneric to compel Catholic bishops to assent to Arian theology—the name of Bishop Donatus (*Donatus*) is explicitly recorded as

the representative of the diocese of Fronta (Dioecesis Frontensis). This documentation is of paramount historical significance; it not only provides definitive legal proof of the episcopal see's existence, but it also helps delineate the geographical sphere of influence commanded by this diocese during an era marked by a drastic retrenchment of centralized Roman authority in favor of increasingly autonomous tribal territories¹.

Recent scholarship in the prosopography of Christian Africa confirms that Bishop Donatus was far from being a merely spiritual figure; rather, he functioned as the administrative figurehead of a geographical domain positioned in direct contact with the Mauretanian limes (frontier lines). Contemporary researchers argue that these historical lists, despite their undeniable value, suffer from a profound "toponymic ambiguity" caused by the extensive changes that swept through site nomenclature following the withdrawal of Roman administration. In this regard, comparative historical analyses indicate that the inclusion of Fronta within the lists of Mauretania Caesariensis reflects a structural continuity of ecclesiastical institutions throughout the interior regions—a compelling factor that effectively undermines the hypothesis of marginalization or isolation that once dominated colonial historiography².

Subsection II: The "Wadi al-Abtal/Fratasa" Hypothesis and Its Archaeological Foundations

The classical hypothesis that identifies the diocese of Fronta with the site of Fratasa (present-day Wadi al-Abtal) was forged on early convictions formulated by the colonial archaeological school, which sought to establish a geographical anchor for every episcopal see documented in the Notitia. In his seminal work, *Atlas archéologique de l'Algérie*, Stéphane Gsell argues that the phonetic proximity between Fronta and Fartassa, coupled with the presence of scattered architectural remnants within the Mascara and Relizane perimeter, heavily favors this localization. This premise was subsequently reinforced by linking the site to the modest Roman infrastructure observed by researchers in Wadi al-Abtal, who categorized these ruins as the vestiges of a vicus or a small castellum that functioned as a regional administrative hub intertwined with the primary communication routes connecting Sitifis (Sétif) to Caesarea (Cherchell)³.

Despite the long-standing entrenchment of this paradigm, its reliance on superficial phonetic resemblance suffers from a critical lack of decisive epigraphic validation. While Latin inscriptions have been uncovered at adjacent sites, Fratasa has yielded absolutely no epigraphic record (inscription) that mentions the name Fronta or bears any religious character pointing toward an episcopal seat. The inscriptions brought to light during colonial excavations—such as commonplace tombstones or fragmented columns—remain entirely generic and fall short of providing definitive historical-geographical proof of a diocese. Furthermore, recent archaeological data reveals that the true nature of the structures at Fratasa aligns far more closely with fortified farms or minor military outposts than with urban ecclesiastical centers. The latter would inherently require the construction

¹ -Victor of Vita, *History of the Vandal Persecution*, translated with introduction and notes by John Moorhead, Liverpool University Press, 1992, p. 115.

² -André Mandouze, *Prosopographie de l'Afrique chrétienne (303-533)*, Éditions du CNRS, Paris, 1982, pp. 312-314; cf. Merrills, A. H., *Vandals, Romans and Berbers: New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa*, Ashgate Publishing, 2004, pp. 142-145.

³ - Stéphane Gsell, *Atlas archéologique de l'Algérie*, Éditions de l'Algérie, Alger, 1911, feuille 28, n° 14; André Mandouze, *Prosopographie de l'Afrique chrétienne (303-533)*, Éditions du CNRS, Paris, 1982, p. 312; Jean Lassus, *La ville antique d'Algérie*, Paris, 1969, pp. 45-48.

of a monumental basilica, which stands as the definitive architectural hallmark of documented African bishoprics during the Vandal era ⁴.

Furthermore, contemporary English and French scholarship has begun to re-evaluate the spatial distribution of dioceses within the interior regions. These studies indicate that the mapping devised by Mandouze occasionally relied on geopolitical projections designed to align with the administrative organization of the colonial era. In the absolute absence of epigraphic records confirming the nomenclature, the dilemma of a "material vacuum" at Frata becomes strikingly apparent; the site completely lacks the sophisticated hydraulic systems or public squares (forum) expected of an episcopal see whose representative was present at the Council of Carthage in 484 CE. Consequently, this renders the Frata hypothesis a mere theoretical assumption that fundamentally lacks comprehensive fieldwork support ⁵.

Subsection III: Methodological and Archaeological Critiques of the Classical Hypothesis

The ultimate conundrum of the classical hypothesis manifests in the absolute absence of "decisive epigraphic validation." In archaeological praxis, verifying the identity of a diocese (dioecesis) is fundamentally impossible without uncovering votive, funerary, or administrative inscriptions that explicitly bear the site's nomenclature—a requirement that Frata utterly fails to meet. While adjacent sites within Mauretania Caesariensis have yielded inscriptions confirming their administrative status—such as the famous inscription discovered at Castellum Tingitanum (Chlef), which precisely delineates religious jurisdictions—Frata remains entirely obscure epigraphically. Consequently, its inclusion in the roster of episcopal sees relies solely on "toponymic conjecture" rather than tangible "archaeological documentation" ⁶.

From a morphological and material standpoint, the limited excavations conducted at Frata over the past two decades confirm that the site falls squarely within the typology of an agricultural vicus or a minor military fort (castellum) tasked with safeguarding transit routes, rather than an episcopal city (civitas). Field data indicates a total absence of the foundational urban infrastructure typical of a Roman city, such as a fully realized public square (forum) or the sophisticated hydraulic networks (thermae or aqueduct) necessitated by an ecclesiastical population density. Most notably, no traces of a basilica have been detected that would befit the seat of a bishop who attended the Council of Carthage in 484 CE ⁷.

Furthermore, researchers fall into a "generalization trap" by projecting the functions of a civitas onto strictly military installations, thereby ignoring the sharp functional divergence between a fort

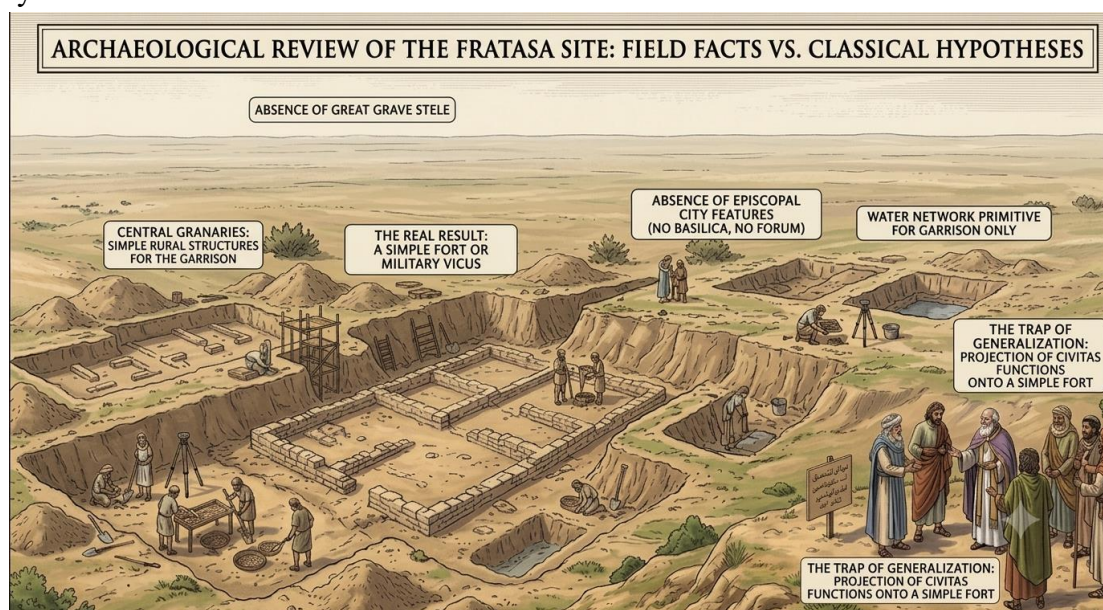
⁴ -Pierre Salama, *Bornes milliaires d'Algérie*, Paris, 1951, pp. 110-112; cf. Philippe Leveau, *Caesarea de Maurétanie: une ville romaine et ses campagnes*, École française de Rome, 1984, pp. 245-247; Brent D. Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 210-215.

⁵ -Yvette Duval, *Chrétiens d'Afrique à l'aube de la paix constantinienne*, Institut d'études augustiniennes, Paris, 2000, pp. 88-90; Jonathan Conant, *Staying Roman: Conquest and Identity in Africa and the Mediterranean, 439-700*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 175-180; cf. W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa*, Oxford University Press, 1952, pp. 302-305.

⁶ -J.J.L. Bertholet, *Les inscriptions latines de Maurétanie Césarienne*, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2005, pp. 201-205; cf. S. Lancel, *L'Algérie antique*, Éditions Mengès, Paris, 2003, pp. 188-190; R. Cagnat, *L'armée romaine d'Afrique et l'occupation militaire de l'Afrique sous les empereurs*, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1913, pp. 560-562.

⁷ -P. Leveau, *Caesarea de Maurétanie: une ville romaine et ses campagnes*, École française de Rome, 1984, pp. 312-315; C. Lepelley, *Les cités de l'Afrique romaine au Bas-Empire*, Études augustiniennes, Paris, 1979, vol. 2, pp. 240-244; cf. B.H. Warmington, *The North African Provinces from Diocletian to the Vandal Conquest*, Cambridge University Press, 1954, pp. 78-82.

(designed for military enforcement) and a diocese (established for social and religious cohesion). This heavy reliance on the phonetic similarity to Fronta has resulted in the oversight of the region's topographical attributes, which offer no strategic significance comparable to the monumental architectural renaissance witnessed in the Jedar region (Frenda today) during the fifth century CE. The archaeological sites in Frenda—evidenced by royal funerary monuments and advanced defensive structures—provide concrete material proof that political centralization was anchored in the High Plateaus, rendering the Fratasia hypothesis a mere methodological anticipation unsupported by physical evidence⁸.



Section II: The Toponymic and Linguistic Approach to the "Fronta-Frenda" Site Subsection I (Expanded):

The Phonetic Transition from Latin to Amazigh and subsequent Arabization The process of phonetic transition from the Latin pronunciation Fronta to the contemporary form Frenda (فرندة) constitutes a pivotal key to unlocking the historical geography of the region. This transformation does not represent a random phonetic shift; rather, it falls squarely within the "laws of phonological evolution" (Phonological Evolution Laws) that governed Latin nomenclature in Mauretania Caesariensis. An examination of the vocalic structure of the word Fronta reveals an intersection between the low-central vowel (\$a\$) and the mid-front vowel (\$e\$) during its transition into the local vernacular, which perfectly accounts for the stabilization of the term into the form Frenda. Modern linguistic theories suggest that the "nasalization" (Nasalization) of the silent noon (\$\text{n}\$) followed by the dental plosive, and its subsequent mutation into (\$\text{nd}\$) in Frenda, serves as a defining hallmark of "linguistic accommodation" (Linguistic Accommodation) in the High Plateaus. Here, the Amazigh tongue inherently tends to assimilate consonant sounds with close phonetic articulation points to facilitate fluidity of speech⁹. This analysis is not confined to the consonantal

⁸ - Y. Duval, *Loca Sanctorum Africae: Le culte des martyrs en Afrique*, École française de Rome, 1982, pp. 620-625; cf. A.H. Merrills, *Vandals, Romans and Berbers: New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa*, Ashgate, 2004, pp. 195-198; S. Raven, *Rome in Africa*, Routledge, London, 2012, pp. 210-213.

⁹ - Lionel Galand, *Études de linguistique berbère*, Peeters, Louvain, 2002, pp. 145-155; cf. Salem Chaker, *Linguistique berbère: Études de syntaxe et de diachronie*, Peeters, Paris, 1995, pp. 210-220; K. Jongeling, *North African Names from Latin Sources*, Brill, Leiden, 1994, pp. 58-65.

cluster but extends inherently to "vowel shifts" (Vowel Shift). The terminal suffix in Fronta (which functions as a Latin feminine marker) underwent a process of phonetic erosion (Phonetic Erosion) within the Amazigh linguistic context, which is characterized by stress on the final syllable. This drove its mutation into (\$a\$) or (\$e\$) at the end of the word, mirroring identical and well-documented transformations in the ancient nomenclature of the Jebel Ouf and Beni Rached regions. Extrapolating these linguistic principles demonstrates that identifying Fronta with Frenda rests upon a systematic "phonetic law," whereby the consonantal root F-R-N-D—which forms the structural skeleton of the name—is strictly preserved, while the vowels shift in accordance with the prosodic laws of late Amazigh stress¹⁰. Furthermore, researchers in historical linguistics observe that the convergence of the Latin phonetic system with Amazigh structural frameworks gave rise to standardized "derivational rules" that favored configurations integrating liquid and nasal consonants. Cross-referencing this specific mutation with the toponymic maps of the Ouarsenis and Tiaret regions demonstrates that place-names which maintained their core radical structure while undergoing minor vocalic shifts exhibited the highest resilience across centuries. Consequently, asserting that Frenda is the modern evolution of Fronta ceases to be a mere hypothesis; it is a demonstrable "linguistic outcome" dictated by the phonological rules that governed the transition of nomenclature from Roman administrative custody to the local linguistic landscape. This effectively refutes the classical hypothesis that coupled the name with Fratasia based on superficial phonetic similarities that utterly disregard the historical laws of linguistic evolution¹¹.

Subsection II: The Topographic and Morphological Signification of the Site

In historical geography, a name is rarely divorced from its function within the natural landscape. Within the Roman military apparatus, the term Frons (from which Fronta derives) constitutes a technical expression that transcends its literal linguistic meaning (forehead or front); rather, it extends to denote a "forward-looking frontier" or an "advanced outpost" within the regional defensive framework (limes). A close examination of the topographic data of contemporary Frenda reveals a striking semantic alignment. The city sits majestically upon a rocky promontory (promontory) that commands a panoramic view over the northern plains and the mountainous passes leading into the depths of the High Plateaus. This location effectively serves as a natural "strategic terrace," rendering the designation Fronta by Roman military engineers a calculated functional choice designed to define the site as a natural barrier (frontline) safeguarding the administrative entities situated in its hinterland¹².

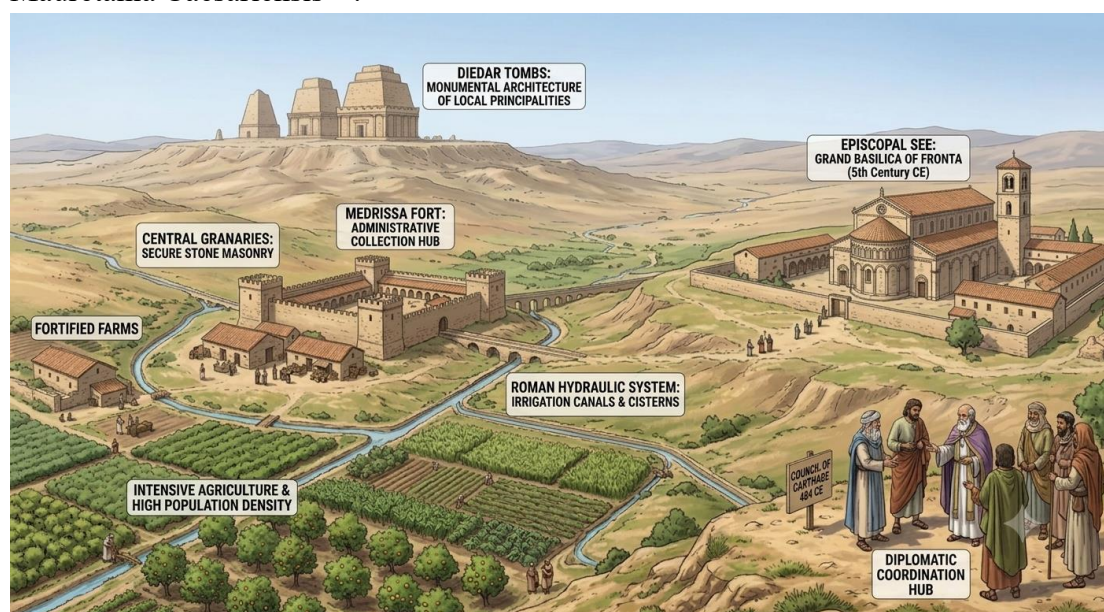
The geomorphological profile of Frenda and Takhmert surpasses mere elevation above sea level; it functions as a critical "pivot point" within an interconnected network of fortifications. Comparative

¹⁰ -(2) M. G. Kossmann, *The Arabic Influence on Northern Berber*, Brill, Leiden, 2013, pp. 88-98; cf. H. Basset, *Essai sur la littérature des Berbères*, Leroux, Paris, 1920, pp. 34-45; R. Kasser, *L'influence du latin sur le berbère*, in *Revue des études latines*, vol. 55, 1977, pp. 215-225; N. Bel, *Les noms des lieux en Afrique du Nord*, Geuthner, Paris, 1930, pp. 112-115.

¹¹ - J. Peyras, *Le Tell nord-africain avant la conquête romaine*, in *Antiquités africaines*, vol. 20, 1984, pp. 150-160; cf. D.J. Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire*, Princeton University Press, 2011, pp. 245-255; G. Camps, *L'Afrique du Nord au féminin : héros et ancêtres*, Picard, Paris, 1992, pp. 110-120; M.H. Fantar, *L'Afrique du Nord dans l'Antiquité*, Maison Tunisienne de l'Édition, 1986, pp. 200-205.

¹² -Philippe Leveau, *Caesarea de Maurétanie: une ville romaine et ses campagnes*, École française de Rome, 1984, pp. 412-420; cf. A.H. Merrills, *Vandals, Romans and Berbers: New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa*, Ashgate, 2004, pp. 195-200; Y. Thébert, *Les villes et les campagnes de l'Afrique romaine*, in *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, vol. 37, 1982, pp. 555-560.

topographic studies of Mauretania Caesariensis sites indicate that locales designated as Fronta or Frons were consistently linked to defensive rear-lines that monitored trade routes and military troop movements. The absolute absence of these "forward-looking" qualities at the site of Fratas (Wadi al-Abtal) strongly reinforces our counter-hypothesis; Fratas is situated in a flat, low-lying plains environment that fundamentally contradicts the military-topographic concept of Fronta as an "elevated front." This alignment between Latin nomenclature and geomorphological reality offers compelling circumstantial evidence substantiating Frenda as the authentic site of the lost diocese¹³. This cohesion between topographic signification (Topographic Signification) and strategic function provides a lucid explanation for the diocese's inclusion in the council rosters of 484 CE. Its centrality on the "plateau front" transformed it into a vital nexus of communication between the Vandal administration and the adjacent indigenous tribes. Given that bishops during this era wielded administrative authority just as heavily as they exercised spiritual leadership, selecting a site that overlooked critical geographical axes—such as Frenda—became a logistical imperative to ensure effective ecclesiastical governance. Consequently, the historical toponymy of Frenda emerges as a silent yet eloquent archaeological witness to the prominence of a site that was never a marginal agricultural village, but rather a pivotal junction on the religious and administrative map of Mauretania Caesariensis¹⁴.



Section III: The Archaeological and Geopolitical Weight of the Frenda-Takhmert Region in Late Antiquity

Subsection I: Non-Funerary Roman Evidence in the Region (The Defensive and Agricultural Systems)

The historical role orchestrated by Fronta (Frenda) during the fifth century CE cannot be comprehensively grasped in isolation from the solid infrastructure established by the Romans during

¹³ - D.J. Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire*, Princeton University Press, 2011, pp. 240-250; cf. C. Lepelley, *Les cités de l'Afrique romaine au Bas-Empire*, vol. 1, Études augustiniennes, Paris, 1979, pp. 125-130; J.J.L. Bertholet, *Les inscriptions latines de Maurétanie Césarienne*, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2005, pp. 210-215.

¹⁴ -S. Lancel, *L'Algérie antique*, Éditions Mengès, Paris, 2003, pp. 185-192; cf. Y. Duval, *Loca Sanctorum Africae: Le culte des martyrs en Afrique*, École française de Rome, 1982, pp. 630-635; S. Raven, *Rome in Africa*, Routledge, London, 2012, pp. 215-220

the classical period of stability—an infrastructure that exhibited a striking functional continuity throughout the Vandal era. Archaeological surveys of sites in Takhmert, Ain El Hadid, and the Medrissa region reveal an integrated engineering network of forts (*castella*) and fortified agrarian layouts (*centuriation*) that formed the backbone of the regional economy. Rather than serving as mere military watchposts, these complexes functioned as vital economic hubs utilizing sophisticated hydraulic technologies. The remnants of cisterns and irrigation channels (*aqueducts*) discovered along the foothills of the Frenda mountains substantiate a dense population and intensive agricultural productivity. Such attributes constitute a structural prerequisite for hosting an episcopal see, which inherently required an infrastructure capable of sustaining a church institution of urban proportions¹⁵. Field observations of the defensive network within this region display an organic nexus between fortifications and agricultural facilities. Forts—such as the Medrissa fort—were intentionally designed to act as centralized collection hubs for crops and in-kind taxation, positioning them far closer to the concept of an administrative city (*civitas*) than to a purely militaristic barracks. This functional architectural paradigm, which coalesced defense with production, endowed the Frenda territory with a strategic significance completely absent from sites like Fratasia (Wadi al-Abtal), which conspicuously lack such integrated structures. The presence of monumental ashlar-masonry "central granaries" within the perimeter of Frenda and Takhmert provides concrete material proof that this space served as a center of gravity capable of delivering the logistical support necessary to manage a diocese of considerable administrative stature during the Vandal era¹⁶.

Furthermore, recent archaeological scholarship regarding agrarian tenure systems (*estates*) in North Africa confirms that interior dioceses were geographically anchored to the most productive lands managed by the Church to secure its material autonomy. The landscape surrounding Frenda, with its Mediterranean microclimate and abundant water resources, offered an ideal economic baseline that would have enabled Bishop Donatus to finance a basilica and effectively administer his diocese. Consequently, linking Fronta to Frenda emerges as an imperative dictated by a rigorous "archaeological-economic logic." The episcopal see was not merely a spiritual entity, but an economic institution deeply embedded within the territory. This renders the Frenda hypothesis the most internally consistent model when cross-referenced with field data, far surpassing all prior colonial propositions¹⁷.

Subsection II: The Frenda Region and the Era of the "Resurgence of Indigenous Principalities" (5th Century CE)

The historical juncture that witnessed the documented participation of Bishop Donatus at the Council of Carthage (484 CE) coincided with a radical geopolitical shift across Mauretania Caesariensis. During this epoch, Vandal centralized authority retreated from the interior hinterlands, thereby

¹⁵ -P. Leveau, *Caesarea de Maurétanie: une ville romaine et ses campagnes*, École française de Rome, 1984, pp. 280-285; cf. S. Gsell, *Atlas archéologique de l'Algérie*, Éditions de l'Algérie, Alger, 1911, feuille 29; P. Salama, *Les voies romaines de l'Afrique du Nord*, Gouvernement Général de l'Algérie, Alger, 1951, pp. 155-160.

¹⁶ -C. Lepelley, *Les cités de l'Afrique romaine au Bas-Empire*, vol. 2, Études augustiniennes, Paris, 1979, pp. 248-255; cf. D.J. Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire*, Princeton University Press, 2011, pp. 260-268; J. Lassus, *La ville antique d'Algérie*, Paris, 1969, pp. 88-92.

¹⁷ -A.H. Merrills, *Vandals, Romans and Berbers: New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa*, Ashgate, 2004, pp. 182-190; cf. Y. Duval, *Chrétiens d'Afrique à l'aube de la paix constantinienne*, Institut d'études augustiniennes, Paris, 2000, pp. 110-120; B.H. Warmington, *The North African Provinces from Diocletian to the Vandal Conquest*, Cambridge University Press, 1954, pp. 95-102.

clearing the path for the prominent emergence of the "Jedar Principalities"—manifested by the monumental funerary architecture (Les Djedars) dominating the Frenda and Takhmert landscape. These monumental tombs, which stand as an architectural icon of ancient Amazigh civilization, transcend mere funerary structures; they represent profound "political manifestos" declaring the existence of a local ruling elite endowed with the economic power and historical legitimacy independent of Carthage's sphere of influence. This reality prompts a vital inquiry regarding the relationship between the ecclesiastical institution and these nascent political entities. It is highly probable that the diocese, within this specific framework, did not function as an instrument of foreign hegemony, but rather operated as an administrative institution fully integrated with the pre-existing political order¹⁸.

Recent scholarship in the political anthropology of Late Antiquity confirms that the Church in North Africa routinely acted as a crucial "mediator" between indigenous tribes and centralized powers. Within the Frenda region—the vibrant heart of the Jedar Kingdom—the existence of an episcopal see signified possessing a strategic "coordination nexus" for the diplomatic and commercial endeavors of these principalities. The anchoring of Bishop Donatus's name to the site of Fronta in ecclesiastical records strongly suggests that the bishop was a figure of vast regional clout, uniquely positioned to facilitate dialogue with the Jedar rulers. This constitutes a complex administrative role that a marginal village or a modest agrarian fort like Fratasia could never have assumed. The demographic and political gravity that the Jedar monuments confer upon the territory renders Frenda the sole candidate possessing the "inherent weight" necessary to host such a high-level ecclesiastical representation¹⁹.

Furthermore, this alternative paradigm brilliantly resolves the "ecclesiastical vacuum" that has long confounded researchers analyzing ancient documentation. This phenomenon was not a factual administrative void, but rather a form of "toponymic obfuscation" stemming from the colonial school's failure to comprehend the geopolitical weight that Frenda commanded during that era. The chronological alignment between the tenure of Bishop Donatus and the golden age of the Jedar Principalities serves as the missing link in our historical understanding of the region. During this period, the Church in Frenda was experiencing its own "golden age" as a functional partner in local governance, largely insulated from the centralized conflicts of Carthage. Consequently, the diocese ceases to be viewed as a merely religious entity; instead, it emerges as a core component of the "political identity" that distinguished the High Plateaus as a fortress of autonomous resistance and cultural resurgence during Late Antiquity²⁰.

¹⁸ -G. Camps, *Les monuments protohistoriques de l'Afrique du Nord*, Arts et Métiers Graphiques, Paris, 1961, pp. 255-260; cf. M.H. Fantar, *L'Afrique du Nord dans l'Antiquité*, Maison Tunisienne de l'Édition, 1986, pp. 210-215; A.H. Merrills, *Vandals, Romans and Berbers: New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa*, Ashgate, 2004, pp. 210-215.

¹⁹ -C. Lepelley, *Les cités de l'Afrique romaine au Bas-Empire*, vol. 2, *Études augustinienes*, Paris, 1979, pp. 260-265; cf. D.J. Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire*, Princeton University Press, 2011, pp. 270-275; J. Peyras, *Le Tell nord-africain avant la conquête romaine*, in *Antiquités africaines*, vol. 20, 1984, pp. 160-165.

²⁰ - S. Lancel, *L'Algérie antique*, Éditions Mengès, Paris, 2003, pp. 200-205; cf. Y. Duval, *Chrétiens d'Afrique à l'aube de la paix constantinienne*, Institut d'études augustinienes, Paris, 2000, pp. 125-130; J.J.L. Bertholet, *Les inscriptions latines de Maurétanie Césarienne*, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2005, pp. 220-225.

Subsection III: The Convergence of Field Data to Substantiate the Alternative Hypothesis

The relocation of the diocese of Fronta to the city of Frenda constitutes a fundamental solution to the long-standing "ecclesiastical vacuum conundrum" that has plagued historical literature regarding the religious mapping of the Jedar Principalities' territory. The apparent absence of a documented episcopal center within this expansive region—which historical records demonstrate enjoyed a substantial population density and a cohesive political structure—does not reflect an actual historical void; rather, it is the direct consequence of a "flawed geographical projection" built upon superficial phonetic resemblances. Establishing Frenda as the seat of this diocese effectively fills this administrative lacuna. Furthermore, it provides a logical explanation for the participation of a high-ranking ecclesiastical representative like Bishop Donatus at the Council of Carthage in 484 CE. The site possessed in antiquity, just as it does today, all the logistical and developmental prerequisites to function as a regional center of gravity bridging the High Plateaus with northern Mauretania Caesariensis²¹.

Field data—ranging from the royal Jedar monuments that embody the stabilization of the local ruling elite, to the sophisticated hydraulic systems uncovered in Takhmert—converge to confirm that the region was experiencing a civilizational boom running parallel to the resurgence of independent political entities during the fifth century CE. Linking the political prowess of the Jedar kings to the presence of an episcopal see in Frenda aligns seamlessly with the known mechanics of governance during the Vandal era, where ecclesiastical authority was exercised within a local administrative framework acutely aware of the necessity to forge alliances with the active powers on the ground. Consequently, the alternative hypothesis transitions from a mere "toponymic conjecture" into an integrated "analytical model" that redraws the religious map of Mauretania Caesariensis through a rigorous scientific approach marrying political anthropology with historical geography²².

In conclusion, the exceptional archaeological and geopolitical weight of the Frenda and Takhmert region endows the "Frenda Hypothesis" with a level of scholarly credibility that far surpasses the inherited classical paradigm. Adopting this new localization does not merely resolve an isolated historical dilemma; it opens broad horizons for future fieldwork by providing a strategic "roadmap" for targeted archaeological excavations in Frenda and Takhmert. It is highly anticipated that future excavations will bring to light the physical remnants of a basilica or decisive epigraphic records that definitively confirm this correlation. The success of this counter-hypothesis in reconciling the contradictions between primary textual sources and fieldwork realities positions it as the essential cornerstone for any future scientific re-reading of North African Church history, ultimately contributing to restoring the leading role that the urban centers of the High Plateaus played in shaping the cultural trajectory of ancient Algeria²³.

²¹ - J.J.L. Bertholet, *Les inscriptions latines de Maurétanie Césarienne*, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2005, pp. 225-230; cf. G. Camps, *Les monuments protohistoriques de l'Afrique du Nord*, Arts et Métiers Graphiques, Paris, 1961, pp. 260-265; C. Lepelley, *Les cités de l'Afrique romaine au Bas-Empire*, vol. 2, *Études augustiniennes*, Paris, 1979, pp. 265-270.

²² - A.H. Merrills, *Vandals, Romans and Berbers: New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa*, Ashgate, 2004, pp. 215-220; cf. S. Lancel, *L'Algérie antique*, Éditions Mengès, Paris, 2003, pp. 205-210; D.J. Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire*, Princeton University Press, 2011, pp. 275-280.

²³ - Y. Duval, *Chrétiens d'Afrique à l'aube de la paix constantinienne*, Institut d'études augustiniennes, Paris, 2000, pp. 130-135; P. Leveau, *Caesarea de Maurétanie: une ville romaine et ses campagnes*, École française de Rome, 1984, pp. 435-440; B.H. Warmington, *The North African Provinces from Diocletian to the Vandal Conquest*, Cambridge University Press, 1954, pp. 105-110.

Conclusion: Toward Redrawing the Ecclesiastical Map of Mauretania Caesariensis

This study culminates in a fundamental reformulation of the hypothesis concerning the localization of the diocese of Fronta in Mauretania Caesariensis. By deconstructing the inherited "classical model" of the colonial school—which bound the diocese to the settlement of Fratasia (Wadi al-Abtal) in the absolute absence of decisive epigraphic or material validation—this paper offers a robust paradigm shift. The toponymic and linguistic approach deployed herein demonstrates that the phonetic mutation from the Latin Fronta to the modern Frenda aligns perfectly with the established laws of phonological evolution governing Roman nomenclature within the local Amazigh vernacular. Furthermore, this linguistic transition seamlessly mirrors the strategic geomorphology of contemporary Frenda, which functions as a natural "front" (Fronta) commanding an elevated view over the High Plateaus.

Archaeological and geopolitical analyses have unveiled a substantial urban and developmental gravity within the Frenda-Takhmert region during Late Antiquity. Tangible field data—ranging from sophisticated hydraulic complexes to integrated defensive frameworks—intersect dynamically with the historical context of the resurgence of the "Jedar Principalities." This convergence confirms that the site functioned as an administrative and religious center of gravity, possessing systemic prerequisites entirely missing from locales proposed by prior colonial scholarship. Anchoring the episcopal see to this geographical space effectively resolves the long-standing conundrum of the "ecclesiastical vacuum" within the Jedar territory. Moreover, it institutes a novel paradigm for reading the church history of Roman Africa—one that transcends superficial phonetic guesswork in favor of interrogating the "functional logic" of ancient cities and dioceses.

Ultimately, this study advocates for a definitive transition from "deskbound scholarship" to "field-based methodology." There remains an urgent imperative to program systematic, organized archaeological excavations across the ancient sites encompassing Frenda and Takhmert, specifically targeting spatial nexuses where the alternative hypothesis predicates the structural remains of an episcopal basilica. Furthermore, this paper urges epigraphists to intensify regional field surveys in search of inscription data that could definitively settle this historical debate. Such endeavors will undoubtedly correct the administrative and ecclesiastical cartography of the Mauretanian interior, while concurrently opening fresh horizons for understanding the intricate interplay between ecclesiastical authority and indigenous political entities in Mauretania Caesariensis during the Vandal era.

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