



International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science

e-ISSN: 2544-9435

Scholarly Publisher
RS Global Sp. z O.O.
ISNI: 0000 0004 8495 2390

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ARTICLE TITLE ROMAN RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS IN NORTH AFRICA

ARTICLE INFO

Ahmed Demmana, Ali Ben Thabet. (2025) Roman Religious Buildings in North Africa. *International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science*. 2(46). doi: 10.31435/ijitss.2(46).2025.4725

DOI

[https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.2\(46\).2025.4725](https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.2(46).2025.4725)

RECEIVED

12 January 2025

ACCEPTED

13 March 2025

PUBLISHED

15 May 2025

LICENSE



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ROMAN RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS IN NORTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Roman architecture has long been a subject of interest for researchers in the fields of history and archaeology, as the Romans were able to leave a lasting cultural imprint wherever they established settlements. One of the most remarkable features of this architecture lies in the diversity of its elements and the precision of its details, particularly in the artistic expression of places of worship within the Roman city.

During the Roman occupation, North Africa became a prominent stage for such architecture, with some of its ancient cities serving as true repositories of Roman architectural traditions. Cities such as Timgad, Thubursicum, and Lambaesis clearly reflect the characteristics of these structures. The types of buildings varied according to their function, including temples, altars, shrines, tombs, and funerary monuments. The Romans devoted significant effort to the construction of these buildings, carefully highlighting the role of their gods in daily life.

KEYWORDS

Capitol, Vitruvius, Nymphaeum Temple, Lambaesis, Corinthian Style, Funerary Building

CITATION

Ahmed Demmana, Ali Ben Thabet. (2025) Roman Religious Buildings in North Africa. *International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science*. 2(46). doi: 10.31435/ijits.2(46).2025.4725

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Introduction

Religious buildings among the Romans are considered among the earliest types of architecture, predating the construction of cities, theaters, basilicas, and baths. Consequently, religious architecture in Italy occupied a prominent position among other architectural forms, featuring richer and more intricate decorations than other structures (Gros, *L'architecture romane de début de III siècle av. J.C. à la fin de haut empire*, Paris, 1966, p. 122). Temples, therefore, are among the most important landmarks in a Roman city due to their religious and urban significance, making them the principal and central buildings of the city (Ezzat Zaki Khamid Kadous, *Introduction to Greek and Roman Archaeology*, Faculty of Arts, Alexandria University, 2007, pp. 167–168).

In this context, one may ask about the overall forms of Roman architecture in terms of their functions and structures, and the main details distributed across these classifications. This research paper aims to explore the main forms of religious buildings both within urban centers and in their surroundings, highlighting the main architectural features employed by Roman architects and their relationship to Roman religious beliefs influenced by local architectural elements. Using historical and archaeological approaches and the descriptive method, this study focuses on the most expressive examples of religious buildings in the region under investigation due to the abundance of models in the area.

1. Plans of Roman Temples Roman temples were influenced by various architectural traditions, which together shaped the final form of the Roman temple during the imperial period. One such influence was the Etruscan temple. The Etruscans, a non-Italian people who migrated from western Asia Minor, controlled the western Italian coast from Naples in the south to Genoa in the north from the early 8th century BCE, establishing fortified cities there (Ibrahim Ayoub, *Roman History*, Al-Alamiya Publishing, Lebanon, 1996, p. 20).

The Etruscan temple typically had a rectangular or nearly square plan, standing on a podium that leads to the entrance via a staircase. The temple was divided into two parts: the front section, a colonnaded vestibule, and the inner sanctum, divided into three rooms. The Romans adopted this plan for their Capitoline temples (Manal Abu al-Qasim, *Characteristics of Architecture in Numidia during the Roman Period*, PhD Dissertation, Alexandria University, 2005, p. 185).

An example is the Capitoline Temple in Timgad, located on the western outskirts of the city, overlooking the entire urban area due to its elevated position. Its dimensions are approximately 105 m × 66 m, with a high podium and frontal staircase, surrounded by Corinthian columns. The temple consists of a vestibule followed by a three-room cella housing statues of the three Capitoline deities (Manal Abu al-Qasim Hussein, *The Influence of the Roman Capitoline Temple on Local Temples in North Africa during the Imperial Period*, *Journal of Arab World Archaeological Studies*, Issue 14, n.d., p. 769).

The second influence was the Greek temple, typically a rectangular building on a low stone platform with steps around the entire structure, consisting of a front portico and the main cella. Often, the rear hall was open, called the *Opisthodomos*, or closed, called the *Adyton* (Fatiha Jaber Isa, *Architectural Features in the Region of the Three Cities (Tripolitania), Libya, during the Roman Period*, Master's Thesis, Alexandria University, 2009, p. 191).

An example of this type can be found in Volubilis (present-day Morocco), where the temple stands on a six-step podium, with the cella enclosed by walls and containing statues of the deities for religious rituals. The front porch has a façade with four columns and two additional columns on the sides (Ezzat Hamid Kadous, *Monuments of the Arab World in the Greek and Roman Periods (African Section)*, Alexandria, 2003, p. 397).

The third influence was circular temples, unknown to the Greeks. Vitruvius explains: "There are circular temples, some built in a monopteral form, surrounded by columns; without a cella, with a raised platform equal to the diameter measured between the outer edges of the base walls, including cornices and capitals, and the beam resting on the columns is half the thickness of the column, with the frieze and other parts placed above" (*Vitruvius, De Architectura*, IV, 8).

An example of this type is the Nymphaeum Temple in Lambaesis, dedicated to the worship of nymph goddesses, originally of Greek origin, guarding forests and mountains. The Nymphaeum consists of a central semi-circular structure with a diameter of 7 m, preceded by a trapezoidal courtyard. Straight walls connect the semi-circular part to the street. The temple façade is made of regular limestone blocks, with columns in front, and niches in the semi-circular wall for statues (Mohamed Naji Ben Arous, *Study of Architectural Decorations in Severian Buildings in Lambaesis (193–235 CE)*, Master's Thesis, University of Garyounis, Libya, 2003, pp. 34–35).

Finally, rock-cut temples also existed, particularly in cities with Punic or local origins. Some were carved in mountain peaks and later Romanized, or dedicated to Roman deities such as Vesta. An excellent example is the Ras el-Dar temple in Tidis, located on a hilltop, featuring a rectangular hall with elaborate decorations, mosaics, Corinthian capitals, clay statues (*Terra Cotta*), and a staircase leading to a grand building floor with column bases (Mohamed Al-Arabi Aqoun, *The Sertian Confederation*, Constantine, 2019, p. 284).

2. Types of Temples

a. Temples of Roman Deities The most famous temples of Roman deities in North Africa include the Capitoline Temple (Leonardo Benevolo, *Histoire de la ville*, Marseille, 2000, p. 89), which was central to every Roman city. This temple was dedicated to the triad of Jupiter (king of gods), Juno, and Minerva. The cella was divided into three chambers, the central one being the largest for Jupiter, the right for Juno, and the left for Minerva, often with a statue of the deity in the depth of each room (Manal Abu al-Qasim, p. 177–178).

The layouts varied across North Africa: some temples had only two chambers (e.g., the Lambaesis temple) or one chamber (Volubilis), with minor differences such as the presence of a rear *Opisthodomos* in Timgad, Dougga, and Sbeitla (Fatiha Jaber Isa, p. 199–200).

b. Temples of Eastern and Roman Deities Although Roman deity temples spread during the imperial period, Eastern deity temples also appeared, such as the temple of Saturn, an ancient agricultural deity of possible Etruscan origin, worshipped in North Africa, particularly in Gemellae, 700 m south of the Roman camp (Baradez, *Gemellae: un camp d'Hadrien et une ville des contins sahariens*, RavAfr, XCIII, 1949, pp. 21–23).

The Roman Saturn corresponds to the Phoenician god Baal, the storm and lightning god, and the deity of agriculture reliant on water. In Punic regions, human sacrifices were sometimes offered, evidenced by human remains found in temple courtyards, with the temple layout following purely Carthaginian patterns (Manal Abu al-Qasim, p. 187).

In Lambaesis, a temple of the god Serapis, of Egyptian origin, was located near the theater at the intersection of minor streets. The temple housed many statues of Serapis, with Greek inscriptions indicating Egyptian settlers in the 2nd century CE, renovated during Marcus Aurelius' reign (161–180 CE). Unfortunately, it was destroyed by Christian inhabitants in 398 CE under Theodosius I (Rashid Abu Bakr Mohamed, *Architectural Contributions of Emperor Marcus Aurelius in North Africa*, Master's Thesis, Tanta University, 2018, pp. 64–65).

a. Temples Dedicated to the Emperor During the Julio-Claudian period, the successors of Emperor Augustus (14–69 CE) promoted the deification of emperors after their deaths, creating cults in their honor and establishing religious institutions supervised by freedmen (*M. Ibrahim Al-Saadani, History and Civilization of the Romans from the Origins to the End of the First Century CE*, Cairo, 2007, p. 161; Sayyid Al-Nasiri, *History of the Roman Empire (Political and Cultural)*, 2nd edition, Cairo, 1991, p. 175). These temples spread across the Roman provinces, including the North African territories, and although they became widespread during the Severan dynasty, their origins date back earlier. They were closely linked to the political and economic life of the provinces, serving both as propaganda tools for the emperor and as symbols of social prestige for local elites who constructed these temples to demonstrate loyalty to the imperial government in Rome (Manal Abu al-Qasim, p. 190).

A prominent example is the Severan family temple in Lambaesis, located in the southwestern part of the forum. This large temple dominates the forum square, faces the basilica, and forms a central point in the forum's layout, dedicated to the worship of the Severan family. The temple has a rectangular plan measuring 22 × 32 m, standing on a high podium 5.20 m tall, accessible via a staircase of 28 steps. The temple features a columned portico supported by 20 columns arranged in three rows, with colonnades along each longitudinal side. The main cella is square, with each side measuring 12.8 m, and architectural remnants indicate a Corinthian style, as evidenced by the surviving capitals (Suleiman Milad Miftah Ben Qarad, *Civic and Religious Architecture in North Africa under Emperor Septimius Severus*, Master's Thesis, Tanta University, 2018, pp. 99–100).

3. Roman Altars Religious altars are among the oldest types of religious architecture, whether wooden or stone. Simple altars were typically rectangular or cylindrical blocks carved from natural rock without decoration. More elaborate altars consisted of a base supporting a rectangular or octagonal altar, adorned with relief decorations. Circular altars became popular during the Hellenistic period and peaked in the Augustan era. Altars can be classified by their location (Manal Abu al-Qasim, p. 167):

- **Independent altars:** Dedicated to multiple deities, sometimes associated with non-religious buildings such as theaters, or installed in private homes.

- **Altars attached to temples:** Located either inside the entrance hall or outside in the courtyard or in front of the main staircases, dedicated to the temple's primary deity (Fatiha Jaber Isa, p. 236).

a. Temple-Associated Altars: An example is the altar of Saturn in the sacred square in front of the temple in Gemellae, a stone altar with a carved long channel and a hook for suspending offerings. Over a hundred amphorae containing cremated human remains were found in the temple's rear courtyard (Baradez, *Gemellae: un camp d'Hadrien et une ville des contins sahariens*, *RavAfr*, XCIII, 1949, p. 19). Another example is the large sacrificial altar of the Capitoline Temple in Gemellae, featuring a winged motif on one side, a central vessel surrounded by vegetal motifs, and a depiction of a bull striking a fire altar on another side, with all ritual implements placed in front (Manal Abu al-Qasim, p. 170).

b. Altars within Non-Religious Buildings: At the theater in Lambaesis, a stone altar was found on the main axis of the theater, on the front steps. The base measured 0.76 m per side, with a circular offering pit 0.45 m in diameter. The altar itself was octagonal, 1.38 m high, and appears from inscriptions to have been dedicated to the deified Augustus or protective city deities (V.B. Redde, *Temples et Cultes de Tripolitane*, Paris, 1922, p. 166). Another altar was found in the courtyard of the command headquarters at Gemellae, dedicated to Emperor Valerius Julian, standing 1.90 m tall with a two-step base and a dedicatory inscription on top (Baradez, *Inscriptions de la région du Limes de Numidi de Baskra à Tobna*, Libyca, Tome I, 1953, p. 153).

4. Shrines (Sacella) Shrines were small spaces for worship but cannot be considered temples in the strict sense, as they lack the architectural significance or sanctity of temples and are often located within non-religious buildings. Many have been found in North Africa (Suleiman Milad Ben Qarad, p. 108).

For example, a shrine was discovered in the palaestra of Hadrian's Baths, constructed during 136–137 CE. It is located at the end of the southern colonnade of the eastern side, facing west. The shrine is small, vaulted, elevated about 1 m above the floor, with a diameter of 2.5 m. A statue base and a white marble altar were found inside, likely dedicated to Heracles (Fatiha Jaber Isa, p. 233).

5. Funerary Monuments Romans placed great importance on death and the afterlife, with beliefs showing notable similarities to ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian traditions regarding life after death (Rima Mahmoud Al-Aqleh, *Planning Roman Tombs in Al-Badiya: A Comparative Archaeological Study*, Master's Thesis, Yarmouk University, 2005, p. 26).

Consequently, Romans carefully selected burial locations to commemorate the deceased. However, funerary buildings were not highly valued in official Roman architecture and were not classified by Vitruvius in his architectural typology (Farida Amrous, *Roman Funerary World, Arab Archaeologists' Union Journal*, Issue 15, p. 267). Most tombs were located outside cities, near rural areas or roads.

a. Tombs: Subterranean chambers with vaulted walls and niches for urns containing cremated remains (Tawfiq Ahmed Abdul Jawad, *History of Architecture and Arts in Antiquity*, Vol. 1, 2014, p. 469).

- **Rectangular tombs:** Common in coastal cities, with three subtypes: single, double, and communal tombs. These feature underground burial chambers with rectangular plans and vaulted ceilings, influenced by Mediterranean and Asia Minor models, and could be reused (Hanan Faraj Al-Haboudi, *Study of Greek and Roman Tombstones in Cyrenaica*, Master's Thesis, Alexandria University, 2012, p. 34; Ramadan Abdul Razzaq Makhtaz, *The Development of Roman Religion until the Late Republican Period*, 2008, p. 91).

- **Memorial tombs:** Circular structures with a raised base and conical roofs, often decorated with drinking scenes, banquet tables, or portraits of the deceased or relatives. Some contained no bodies (Farida Amrous, p. 20; Azzaal Al-Majdi, *Roman Beliefs*, 2005, p. 152).

- **Rock-cut tombs:** Found in North Africa, carved into hillsides or quarries, these public cemeteries contained multiple burial chambers. Roman rock-cut tombs often featured scallop-shell motifs on ceilings, marble sarcophagi decorated with floral wreaths, daily life scenes, and mythological subjects. Notable examples include the Swing Tomb in Cyrenaica, discovered by L. Bacchieli, named for the swing depicted on its façade (Hanan Faraj Al-Haboudi, p. 32).

6. Funerary Monuments (Stelae and Mausolea)

Stelae (Gravestones): Stelae are grave markers used to commemorate the deceased, typically placed in front of the tomb. They could include only the name of the deceased, or the name along with their status, date, and the deity they worshipped. They often appear within an architectural framework resembling a temple façade and were among the most common religious monuments, reflecting human beliefs and desires in both this life and the afterlife. They were widespread in all North African cemeteries during the Roman period (Meryem Qattal & Donia Saleha, *Roman Stelae in Algeria: Heritage and Cultural Legacy*, *Al-Hikma Journal for Historical Studies*, Vol. 6, Issue 15, 2018, pp. 150–151).

An example was discovered in 1996 in the city of Cirta (modern Constantine) on the tomb of an individual erected by a friend:

L(ucius) Clodius. L(ucii) F(ilius)
 Quirina.Bassus.Vix(it) Annis
 Lxx H(ic) S(itus) E(st)
 O(ssa) T(ua) B(ene) Q(viescan) Cur
 A(mici) M(emoriae) C(lodius) Ian(us)
 Inp

Translation:

“Lucius Clodius Bassus, son of Lucius of the Quirina tribe, lived seventy years – rests here – may his bones rest in peace. This monument was erected by his friend Clodius Ianus in his memory” (Jehida Mahantal, *The Civilizational Development of Cirta*, PhD Thesis, Institute of Archaeology, University of Algiers, 2009, pp. 229–230).

Mausolea:

Mausolea are large funerary structures containing the remains of leaders, emperors, or notable individuals (Khazal Al-Majdi, p. 143). These monuments were either square or rectangular and constructed on strong foundations, whose depth and design depended on the type of ground (soft, sandy, natural, or rocky) and the overall weight and height of the structure.

They are divided into two types:

1. Simple Mausolea:

2. These include a subterranean burial chamber often topped with a pyramid-shaped roof (Farida Amrous, *Roman Funerary Mausolea*, p. 365). Examples include the Aqbou Mausoleum in Bejaia and several mausolea in Cherchell, with roofs made of stone or carved blocks. These resemble the Amrit monuments of Phoenicia dating back to the 4th century BCE. This type was most common in Tunisia and Libya, with only traces remaining in Algeria, sufficient to reconstruct their general form and roof structures (Farida Amrous, *Roman Funerary Architecture in Algeria*, *Al-Āthār Journal*, University of Algiers 2, Vol. 9, Issue 1, pp. 28–29).

3. **Two-Level Mausolea:** The lower level served as a burial chamber, while the upper level was dedicated to statues. According to Picard, these mausolea symbolized the piety of ordinary citizens toward the gods and expressed their loyalty to Roman civilization and their desire to approach the gods in the afterlife (Mohamed Ben Abdelmoumen, *Beliefs in the Afterlife among the Inhabitants of Ancient Maghreb*, PhD Thesis, University of Oran, 2012, p. 212).

Examples:

• **Qasr Al-Duwayrat Mausoleum in Lambaesis:** A two-story funerary building. The first story rests on a rectangular podium 12 m high, containing a square burial chamber with a narrow short passage, decorated on all four sides. The upper story rises 4 m, cylindrical in shape, supported by six fluted Corinthian marble columns, with an architrave featuring a dedicatory inscription:

C(aio) Mario louino et C(aio) Mario et
 Mariae Victorinae et Marsos(ilio) eius
 C(aius) Marius Pudens Boccius Zurgin et Velia
 Longina Bibai parentes f(il) iis et nepotifecerunt

Translation:

“To Gaius Marius Iuvinius, Gaius Marius, Maria Victorina, and her son Marsos, Gaius Marius Pudens Boccius Zurgin and his wife Velia Longina Bibai, the parents, built this mausoleum for their children and grandchildren.”

The Latin names indicate the family was of Libyan origin but had adopted Roman naming practices, demonstrating the family’s wealth and the likelihood that some members held high offices in Lambaesis during the reign of Emperor Septimius Severus. The mausoleum dates to circa 200 CE or early 3rd century (Khaled Al-Heddar, *The Qasr Al-Duwayrat Mausoleum in Lambaesis*, *Al-Āthār Journal*, Libya, pp. 8–9).

Conclusions

The influences on Roman architectural elements varied in terms of their originality before and during the Imperial period, as reflected in the plans that embodied Roman engineering thought.

Roman architecture in North Africa demonstrated a space for cultural exchange, going beyond mere imitation of pure Roman architectural models. It showcased a unique integration of imperial techniques—such as the use of arches, domes, and concrete—with local heritage. This cultural interaction was particularly evident in religious buildings and decorative arts, such as mosaics, producing a distinctive architectural character that flourished especially during the “Second Golden Age” of the region under the rule of the Severan dynasty.

Mausolea were widespread in Tunisia and Libya, while in Algeria only minor remains survive, allowing researchers to reconstruct their general form and roof structures.

Moreover, Greek and Roman architectural elements were employed to achieve both aesthetic purposes and symbolic functions. The Romans used high-quality local materials, which contributed to the uniqueness of Roman architecture in North Africa.

The presence of deities was the most prominent feature in the details of Roman religious architecture in North Africa. The roles of the gods, according to their status and symbolism in space and time, facilitated the identification and categorization of religious structures throughout the Roman-controlled territories, particularly those established after the first century CE.

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