Along and within the imperial boundaries in North Africa Rome encountered numerous (semi-)nomadic tribes and confederations. The aim of this paper is to give a short overview and evaluation of the different perspectives of modern research on the relations between (semi-)nomads and sedentary communities in North Africa during the Roman period. It is argued that the rise of the symbiosis perspective has offered a valuable counterweight against the traditionalistic view of opposition and antagonism. However, scholars should be aware of the fact that the various sources point to differentiated integration trajectories, both negative and positive. More attention should be paid to the various motives of Roman and indigenous actors which moulded and shaped these integration trajectories, and to the specific contexts in which they appear.

1. The Nomad Kept Out: The Traditional Perspective of Antagonism and Exclusion

It has long been a truism in studies on relations between sedentary communities and (semi-)nomads in North Africa that Rome had to deal with endemic nomadic insubordination and disinclination to integration. Scholars perceived “ces terribles Maures” as a permanent threat to stability and order.¹ Such viewpoints were subsequently reinforced by studies

emphasizing the complete lack of social, economic and cultural transformation of indigenous societies. These opinions were inspired both by contemporary colonialist experiences and by new questions and insights put forward in early post-colonial historiography. Certainly, they resulted in part from the extensive focus on literary sources, which tended to mention nomadic groups almost exclusively in the context of conquest, insurgence and resistance. Ancient authors did not hide their negative perception on nomadism in general and displayed poor insights in the social reality of nomadism in the North African interior.

Modern scholars have subsequently constructed extensive overviews of revolts, wars, military expeditions and punitive campaigns, attested by literary, epigraphic and archaeological sources. These overviews incorporated a lot of attestations – albeit indirect – like temporary increases of the number of auxilia in the Mauretaniae or the construction of city walls. Furthermore, it has been understood that the diplomatic negotiations between Roman governors and indigenous tribal leaders of the Baquates at Volubilis suggest periods of chaos and disorder. Similarly, the view has been held that further conflict indicators can be seen when considering the establishment of special offices. In Mauretania, the procuratores pro