

**Law Library of Congress Lecture
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Madison Building, LM-240, Multimedia Room**

Written in Stone: Roman law, Legal Epigraphy and the Geography of Roman Agriculture

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The middle of the Bagradas valley is located southwest of Carthage, between roughly sixty and eighty kilometers from the northern Mediterranean coast, in the region of northern Tunisia known as the *Tell interieur*. The term *Tell* designates those areas in Algeria and Tunisia subject to a Mediterranean climate, that is, to at least 400 mm of rainfall each year, sufficient to allow the cultivation of grain and olives without irrigation. The area has been an agricultural zone for thousands of years, and most intensively, with the escalation of Roman agriculture in period between 100 and 500 AD.

Within the region are found many of the most important legal inscriptions relating to the practice of agriculture and tenant farming, all of which provide a window into the how land and estates were managed and how tenant farmers made a living during this time of rapid growth in the Roman population. Inscriptions such as those found at *Henchir-Mettich* and *Souk-el-Khmis* provide us with



more information about the legal system under which this agriculture operated, and also, and perhaps more importantly, gives us hints into the geography and extent of Roman agriculture in North Africa when it was the 'bread basket' of the empire.

In this talk will Hessler will discuss his travels in Tunisia and Algeria in search of these and other legal inscriptions, and also talk about what these seemingly dry fragments of Roman law tell us about how the Romans managed their estates and environment, and how sharecroppers took advantage of the Roman system of petition and response to maintain their rights to the land.