

‘Garamantian Chariots’? Economic Relations between the North African Local Populations in the Context of the Numidian Confederation¹

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The Numidian kingdom or state was one of the most important autochthonous entities (confederation) of northern Africa which established relations with Mediterranean forces such as the Carthaginians and Greeks and, particularly, later, with Romans. At the climax of its power, hegemonial bonds would have allowed it to control a large number of minor tribal groups and organisations along its southern prolongation.² These features make this context one of the most interesting fields of study, since it presents great possibilities concerning all types of contacts and exchanges between different ‘worlds’ at the southern limits of the known reality, dominated by the largest desert on Earth.

In terms of economic and commercial relations, we firstly consider some literary references from the Roman period, which inform us about the process of obtaining,



Fig. 1: Detail of painted rock art on a rock shelter wall showing a charioteer driving a biga, bent forward in the process of whipping the horses. A short inscription in Libyan or Tifinagh script can be seen at the top-right of the image, in black, presumably not of the same date as the chariot. Emi ‘n’ Eher, Wadi Aramat, Tassili n’Ajjer, Libya.



Fig. 2: Terracotta statuette of a horseman riding a dromedary, with two amphorae tied to his saddle. From Hadrumetum (Sousse), II–III centuries AD. Bardo Museum, Tunis, Tunisia. I 64.

manufacturing, and the commercialisation of the so-called 'Gaetolian purple'. This was made from a characteristic type of murex from the Atlantic coast (Plin. nat. 5.12, 6.201). The epithet hints at the supposed participation in this activity by the Gaetulians, which were a diffused group, perhaps even a kind of supra-tribal organisation. This term may also be a generically flexible name applied to multiple groups south of ancient *Mauretania* and Numidia. Moreover, in these same passages, it is possible to find references to the forest zones south of modern Morocco and Algeria, at the feet of the Atlas Mountains, where some special types of wood (citrus-wood) might have been extracted, along with elephant ivory. The region of Fezzan, in modern Libya and directly in the Sahara Desert, is usually seen as the main centre of the Garamantes. Their economic activities appear in Roman literature especially in connection with the commerce of 'stones', maybe garnets, carbuncles or carnelians, famous in Antiquity. According to these texts, the Garamantes played some role in this commerce, perhaps as centralisers and redistributors. However, the texts also relate these stones with the intervention of other neighbouring, more oriental or meridional groups, such as the Nasamons or the Ethiopians (Plin. nat. 5.34; Sil. Ital. 15.676).

However, the most striking reference, which has stimulated a great amount of debate in research about the Garamantes, is found some centuries before, in Herodotus. He mentioned this population, recording their habit of chasing Ethiopian *Troglodytae* on chariots of four horses (Hdt. 2.34). From this passage, some scholars saw proof of the Garamantes as the initiators of the traffic of black slaves in the Sahara. This phenomenon is well attested in the Middle Ages, but, just as with the trade of gold (with a sole reference, for Punic times: Hdt. 4.196), is not supportable with any conclusive evidence for Antiquity.³ The mention of these 'Garamantian chariots' in the sources also encouraged the enthusiasm of some researchers after the first discovery of the great Saharan rock art ensembles, some of which belonged roughly to the area controlled by the Garamantians. In fact, chariots are common in all North African rock art, and helped to formulate the idea of a trans-Saharan caravan 'route' that extended far back in time; these artistic manifestations would be found at stopping posts along this route.⁴ Nonetheless, these representations are diverse and manifest multiple variations and techniques, generally depicting bigae and more rarely quadrigae. These correspond more precisely to a typology of prestige⁵ and parade, and of aristocratic context, far from commercial aspects. Although some cases may be especially suggestive, we must also consider the large and complex (and strongly regionalised), chronology of these ensembles, which can be ascribed only to more recent times when camelids and Libyan-Berber script appear in the engravings and paintings.

Furthermore, the material culture of the Garamantes has also yielded valuable data for the knowledge of the commercial aspects of this world of contacts between the Sahara and the Mediterranean Sea. This is particularly thanks to research conducted at the city considered to be the historical capital of the group, Garama (modern Germa, Lybia), and especially on its necropoleis. These scientific works, which began in the 1930s and

have continued ever since, have identified many Roman objects.⁶ These finds testified to a circulation of products, accompanied, as always, by people, animals and ideas, which, although not fluid, nor intense or comparable with other zones of the Roman orbit, doubtlessly took place.⁷

Notes

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² *Vid.* Mattingly 1995, 19.

³ Desanges 2003, 53 f.

⁴ *Vid.* Mattingly 2017, 22–24 with footnotes; fig. 1, 6.

⁵ Camps 1982, 16–18.

⁶ *Vid.* for example, Ruprechtberger 1989, 56 and abb. 92 for the parallel between some fragments of a fish-vase found in Garama and the magnificent fish-vase of Trier.

⁷ *Vid.* synthesis of the main trade commodities of the pre-Islamic era between Rome, the Garamantes and the sub-Saharan zone in Mattingly 2017, 26 f. tab. 1, 1.

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