

Libya and the Libyans: A Geographical and Ethnographic Approach in Light of the Evolution of Nomenclature

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ABSTRACT

The terms ‘Libya’ and ‘the Libyans’ are important for understanding the historical, geographical and ethnographic transformations experienced by the Maghreb region in different periods. The geographical meanings of these terms evolved depending on differences in literary and ancient Egyptian sources that used them to refer to the peoples and tribes inhabiting its western boundaries. The relationship between these tribes and the ancient Egyptians varied between peace and conflict. Thus, from the outset, the term did not designate a specific political entity in the modern sense, but rather a label applied to the geographic region located to the west of the Nile. This is reflected in Egyptian references to numerous tribes, such as the Tjḥnw, Tmḥw, Libu and Mšwšw, whereas Greek and Roman historians used the term to denote parts of the northern African continent. Over time, the term gradually came to refer to specific regions and populations.

The term ‘Libyan peoples’ had multiple connotations. It was used to describe different tribal groups and peoples who shared certain cultural characteristics amid internal diversity. In this context, Greek writings stand out for their contributions, such as the detailed ethnographic accounts provided by Herodotus, which were often accompanied by a degree of subjectivity.

Therefore, tracing the trajectory of these appellations contributes to research on the history of the geographical area, as well as to changes in demographic structure and cultural identity that have shaped the image of Libya and the Libyans across the ages.

This topic is important because it examines an essential component of the region’s ethnic and geographical identity, in light of the differing perspectives found in various sources regarding the region’s geography. Egyptian sources document a variety of tribes, emphasising the characteristics of their peoples and their geographical location. Meanwhile, literary sources — especially Greek and Roman — contributed to linking tribes with their environment by providing descriptions and characterisations of their lifestyles according to the authors’ own perspectives. From this standpoint, we pose the following research question:

To what extent did the evolution of the names used for ‘Libya’ and ‘the Libyans’ contribute to shaping the region’s geographical and ethnographic image?

This problem is broken down into the following subsidiary questions:

What designations did Egyptian and literary sources use for ‘Libya’ and ‘the Libyans’?

How did the meaning of the term ‘Libya’ evolve in accordance with the development of the geographical and ethnographic concept of ancient Libya?

How did ancient sources portray the geography of Libya and its inhabitants? What foundations did they rely on when ethnographically dividing Libya and ‘the Libyans’?

It was therefore necessary to adopt a descriptive historical method, tracing what various literary and Egyptian sources reported about the region's geography and population. Additionally, an analytical method was employed to interpret the connotations of these designations. Furthermore, a critical method was essential for this study, as it enabled the assessment of the information provided by different literary sources and its comparison with the evidence offered by material sources.

Keywords: Libya, Libyan tribes, geographical and ethnographic concepts, literary sources, Egyptian sources.

1. Many literary sources address the geography of the region, including the following:

1.1 According to Herodotus

In his discussion of Egypt in Book II, Herodotus states that the coast of Libya, stretching from Egypt to Cape Solis, is populated by various Libyan tribes, except for Greek and Phoenician settlements. He also describes the interior of Libya as a habitat for wild beasts, as well as barren desert lands characterised by extreme aridity¹.

1.2 Strabo notes that Libya resembles the speckled hide of a leopard, containing populated areas surrounded by desert regions. He presents it as being divided into three regions: Cyrenaica, the areas surrounding Carthage, the outskirts of Morisia (Mauritania) and the Pillars of Hercules. He also mentions the interior regions known for producing silphium, which has low yields, and says that the remaining areas consist of rocky lands and sandy deserts².

1.3 According to Pliny the Elder

Pliny states that Libya extends from Egypt's western borders to the Atlantic Ocean. He adds that the Greeks were the ones who named Africa 'Libya', and remarks that the names of its peoples and cities are difficult to pronounce³.

1.4 According to Sallustius (Sallust)

In his account of the war against Jugurtha, Sallust describes the western boundary of Africa as the strait that connects 'our sea' (the Mediterranean) to the Atlantic Ocean. To the east, he mentions a broad, sloping plateau called Catabathmos by the local inhabitants. He describes the sea as turbulent and without harbours, while the land is described as being productive for grain cultivation and suitable for livestock breeding⁴.

2. Designations given to the region

The region was referred to by numerous names, as follows:

2.1 Libya

Egyptian sources used the term 'Libu' (also rendered 'Rebu') to designate the human groups that inhabited the region extending from western Egypt to the Atlantic Ocean. The term "Libyans" is derived from "Luba", an ancient name for North Africa. Its origin can be traced back to hieroglyphic texts.

¹- Herodotus, *Egypt*, translated by Muhammad Saqqar Khafaja, with an introduction and explanation by Ahmad Abdou. Published by Dar al-Qalam in 1966. Paragraph 32 of Book Two.

²- Strabo, *Geography in Seventeen Books*, translated by Hassan Mikha'il Ishaq, Part One, 1–10, 1st edition, Dar Ala' al-Din for Publishing, Printing and Distribution, Syria, 2017, Book Two, Chapter Five, paragraph 33.

³- Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, text established and commented on by Jean Desanges, Société d'édition Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1980, Book V (North Africa, 1).

⁴- Gaius Sallustius Crispus, *The Jugurthine War (War against Jugurtha)*, translated by Muhammad al-Mabrouk Dhuwayb, Benghazi University Press, Libya, 2007, paragraph 17.

Religious sources, namely the Bible (the Book of Genesis), mention these peoples under the names “Lhabim” and “Lobim”. It is clear, therefore, that there is a relationship between this designation and the Egyptian terms “Rebu” and “Libu/Libo”⁵ found in Egyptian texts. It is also believed that the name ‘Lhabim’ is older than ‘Libom/Libu’. The term then appears to have entered the Arabic language either via the Phoenicians or ancient Egyptians⁶.

Furthermore, the concept of the ‘Libyan community’ later evolved to encompass the kingdoms of the Numidians⁷ and the Moors⁸.

2.2 Africa

The term ‘Africa’ was first used by the Romans, based on historical evidence dating back to no earlier than the third century BCE. In his account of the war against Jugurtha, Sallust states that:

“The earliest inhabitants were the Gaetuli and the Libyans — a primitive, barbarous people who feed on the flesh of wild animals and the grasses of the meadows, living like beasts. They are subject to neither customs nor laws, nor to any leader...”

He then recounts the aftermath of Hercules’s death in Spain, during which his army — including Medians, Persians and Armenians — was dispersed. It may be suggested that the purpose of this is to explain the origin of the names Numidia and Mauretania⁹.

The term ‘Africa’ also appears in the writings of Arab historians such as Ibn Khaldun, who mentions ‘Ifriqish’ (Ifriqiya), the son of Qays ibn Šafiy, one of the Tubbā’ kings¹⁰. As for the origin of the name, some scholars propose that it is derived from the word ‘Ifri’, meaning ‘caves’, or ‘Afro’, meaning ‘the local deity’¹¹. The name is also attested on an inscription discovered to the east of Constantine¹².

⁵- The Bible (Old and New Testaments), Book 13, 'Chronicles II', paragraph 12, Dar al-Kitab al-Muqaddas, 6th edition, Cairo, 2004, p. 521.

⁶- Al-Rachidi (Farj Mahmoud), 'Libyan Presence in Ancient Egyptian Society', al-Majallah al-Libiyya al-'Alamiyya, Issue 4, University of Benghazi, Faculty of Education–Marj, Libya, 2015, p. 4.

⁷- The Kingdom of Numidia was divided into the Kingdom of the Massyli, whose territories were in the eastern part of Algeria and northern Tunisia, excluding the lands of Carthage. Its capital was Cirta. The Massylian kingdom also extended over vast areas from the Moulouya Valley in the west to the Cape of Triton in the east, with Siga as its capital. For more details on the local kingdoms, see:

-Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, text established and commented on by Jean Desanges, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1980, V, 22 .

Strabo, *Geography*, translated by Amédée Tardieu, volume 3, Librairie Hachette, Paris, 1880, 17.9.

⁸- The Kingdom of the Moors (Mauritania): It lies between the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the Moulouya Valley to the east, which separates the Moorish kingdom from the Massyli kingdom, together with the Columns of Heracles to the north. As for the south, it was variable. The Romans used the name to refer to the kingdom of Boghus I and his sons. Sallustius states that the Moors were the result of the mixing of the Persians with the Getuli. For more, see :

-Gaius Sallustius Crispus, *The Jugurthine War (War against Jugurtha)**, translated by Muhammad al-Mabrouk Dhuwayb, Benghazi University Press, Libya, 2007, paragraph 18 ;

- Harassh (M. al-Hadi), *Studies and Research in the History of Algeria and the Maghreb Lands in Ancient Times*, Dar Huma Publishing and Distribution, Algeria, 2013, p. 36.

⁹- Gaius Sallustius Crispus, previous source, paragraph 18.

¹⁰- Ibn Khaldun (Abd al-Rahman), *al-'Ibar wa Diwan al-Mubtada' wa al-Khabar*, Volume 3, Dar al-Kitab al-Lubnani, Beirut, 1968, p. 87.

¹¹- Khalfa Abd al-Rahman, *'Ancient Maghrebi Paganism: From Its Origin to the Fall of Carthage (146 BC)**, Master's Thesis in Ancient History, supervised by Muhammad al-Saghir Ghanim, University of Mentouri, Faculty of Human Sciences, Department of History, 2007–2008, p. 14.

¹²- Same

2.3 Berbers

There are different hypotheses about the term 'Berbers'. Some link it to the name of the patriarch Bar. Meanwhile, Ibn Khaldun mentions:

"When you hear them speaking ('How many of your Berber words are there!'), they are therefore called Berbers, meaning a mixture of unfamiliar sounds."¹³

2.4 Amazigh

The term 'Amazigh' means 'free' or 'noble'. It became widely known and remains in circulation to this day.

3. Libyan tribes from the perspective of Egyptian sources

The pharaonic sources, namely hieroglyphic texts, sculptures and drawings, constitute the earliest materials that mention the tribes inhabiting the region.

The oldest Egyptian archaeological document related to the Libyans is the Narmer Palette¹⁴, which dates to the First Dynasty and is named after the king Menes/Mena¹⁵, who unified the two halves of ancient Egypt (Upper¹⁶ and Lower Egypt)¹⁷ around 3200 BCE.

Egyptian sources mention numerous Libyan tribes; the following are among the most notable:

3.1 Tjḥnw (Tjhenw / 'Techenu')

The earliest evidence bearing the name of this people is the 'Stela of the Lion and the Eagles', dating to the pre-dynastic period in the fourth millennium BCE. This name is also recorded on the well-known 'Stela of Fortresses and Spoils', and appears on the cylindrical seal of King Narmer from the First Dynasty, alongside other attestations¹⁸.

The Tjḥnw entered the Nile Valley at a very early stage and were initially described as hunters and herdsman. Over time, they became settled farmers. Their areas of settlement covered all regions to the west of the Nile Valley, including the southern regions. From the Fifth Dynasty of the Old Kingdom

¹³- Ibn Khaldun, Abd al-Rahman, previous reference, p. 87.

¹⁴- The First Dynasty: 3200–2980 BC. Its most important kings: Mina, Jer, Hub and Semerkhet. In addition to the Second Dynasty, this period is known as the Early Ancient Age or the Thinite Age, named after the city of Thinis near Abydos. It is also known as the Age of Founding or the Early Dynasties. See: Ramadan 'Abda 'Ali, History of Ancient Egypt, vol. 1, Dar Nahdat Misr, Cairo, 2001, p. 325.

¹⁵- King Mina: He founded the first ruling dynasty in Egypt. After unifying Upper and Lower Egypt, he wore the double crown. He founded a new city called "Nefert" (the Beautiful Port), which the Greeks later renamed Memphis. See: Anwar Mahmoud Zanati, Encyclopedia of World History: History of Egypt from the Unification of the Two Lands until the Events of 11 September and Their Consequences (an annual study based on sources and documents), vol. 1, Ain Shams University, Egypt, no date, p. 15.

¹⁶- Upper Egypt: This includes the Egyptian lands located south of the Fayum and extending as far south as Aswan. Its most famous cities include Thebes, Coptos, Nekhen and Edfu. See: Ikasha Ali, Shahada an-Nazur and Jamil Baydoun, Greece and Rome, 1st edition, Dar al-Amal for Publishing and Distribution, 1991, p. 11.

¹⁷- Lower Egypt (the Delta): This part of Egypt is bounded by the Mediterranean Sea and the two branches of the Nile near the cities of Rashid and Damietta. In ancient times, the term 'Delta' referred to the lands between the Canopic and Pelusiac branches. It is the triangular shape of these lands that led the Greeks to call it 'the Delta'. For more, see: Malou et al., 'Scholars of the French Expedition, Description de l'Egypte: Studies on Egyptian Cities and Regions, translated by Zuhayr al-Shayeb, Dar al-Shayeb for Publishing, Cairo, 1999, p. 63.

¹⁸- Our History Book, Book One: Libya from Prehistoric Times until the Seventh Century BC, Algerian National Library, no date, pp. 150–151.

up to the Eighteenth Dynasty, the term ‘Tjḥnw’ came to refer more broadly to Libya and the ancient Libyans in general¹⁹.

See Figure 01.



Figure No. 1: Depicts the fort's fortitude and the spoils .

Source: Our History Book, previous reference, p. 150.

Features/representation: The Tjḥnw appear on the Lion and Eagles Stela with curly hair and short beards. They are shown wearing tight garments fastened at the waist. They are portrayed as tall, with dark/tanned skin and black hair falling in braids over their shoulders. Their faces are depicted as slim and prominent, with a hooked (aquiline) nose and thick lips²⁰. The figures on the cylindrical seal do not clearly show their facial features. They also appear in scenes painted on the walls of funerary temples, accompanied by their wives and children.

There are significant similarities between their names, clothing and ceramic vessels, suggesting that they maintained strong relations with the Egyptians since the time of the First Dynasty.



Figure No. 02 depicts a man from the Tihnū tribe, according to Egyptian sources.

Source: Our History Book, previous reference, p. 97.

¹⁹- Bokhus (Zuhayr): The Human Composition of the Rural Society of the Eurasian Steppe during Roman Occupation: an analytical study and comparison with the names of individuals in Roman urban societies in 'Eurasia'. PhD thesis in Ancient Archaeological Sciences, supervised by Muhammad al-Mustafa Filach, University of Algiers, Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, Department of Archaeology, 2016–17, p. 26.

²⁰- François Chamou: 'The Greeks in Cyrenaica' in The History of Ancient Libya: Myth and History'. Commentary and Explanation by Muhammad Abd al-Karim al-Wafi. 1st edition. Publications of the University of Cyrene, Benghazi, 1990. p. 30.

3.2 The ‘Tamho’ (or ‘Temehu’):

They are first mentioned in the text of King Unis from the Sixth²¹ Dynasty and in the tomb of King Ramesses III²² in the Valley of the Kings.

Characteristics: They are described as a Libyan tribe with fair/white skin, blue eyes and blonde hair²³. In all depictions, they are shown with light skin, blonde hair and blue eyes, and distinctive attire²⁴. They are particularly distinguished by their loose leather garments, which cover one shoulder while leaving the other exposed²⁵.

Their territory extended to the western borderlands of Egypt as far as Tripoli, and to Nubia to the south. Some scholars also consider that they spread farther south, reaching Darfur²⁶.

See Figure No. 03

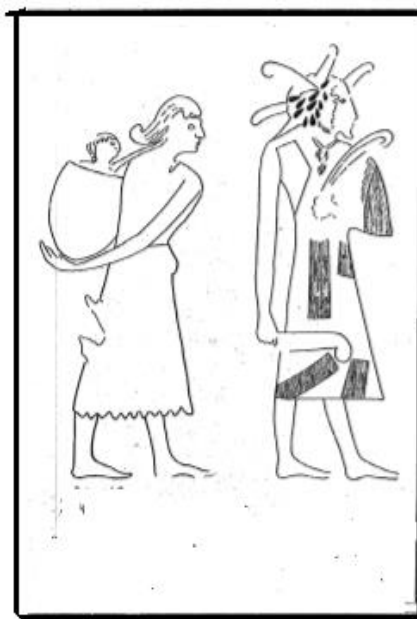


Figure No. 03: Depicts a family from the Tamhū tribe (modified) .

Source: Bates (O), op. cit., p. 130.

3.3 Libu (or Ribu):

The name ‘Libu’ first appears in the lists of names in the temple of King Ramesses II of the Nineteenth Dynasty in Abydos²⁷. The name is also associated with significant historical events, such as the Libu’s

²¹- Our History Book, previous reference, p. 151. The Sixth Dynasty: Some consider the first kings of the Sixth Dynasty to be so-and-so, while others mention that the first king of this dynasty was Neti. The kings of the Sixth Dynasty ruled for close to one and a half centuries. The most important of these were Teti, Osorkon, Pepi I, Merneptah I, Pepi II, Merneptah II and Queen Nitokris. For more, see: Samir Adib, *History and Civilisation of Ancient Egypt*, Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Egypt, 1997, p. 94.

²²- Ramesses III: Among the rulers of Pharaonic Egypt in the Twentieth Dynasty during the New Kingdom period, read about his personality in Ikasha (a), *Kings and Heads Who Made the History of Egypt*, Random Papers, 1st ed., Arab Press Agency for Publishing and Distribution, Egypt, 2007, p. 77.

²³- Chamou (François), previous reference, p. 35.

²⁴- Muhammad Bayoumi Mihran, previous reference, p. 76.

²⁵- al-Rashidi (Farj Mahmoud), previous reference, p. 7.

²⁶- Bokhus Zuhayr, previous reference, p. 26.

²⁷- The Abydos List: There are two lists in the Temple of Seti I and Ramesses II at Abydos. The first is engraved on a stele discovered by John Shaeper Banks inside the temple, and it is currently housed in the British Museum. The second is a

attempted invasion of the Delta in the fifth year of Menpehtah/Minpehtah's reign, in 1227 BCE, led by M'rbai²⁸.

Characteristics: Members of this tribe are described as having a white complexion, red hair and blue eyes, as are the Temehu. They wear long garments decorated with various designs that leave one shoulder uncovered, and their hands and arms are marked with tattoos²⁹.

See Figure No. 04.



Figure No. 04: Depicts an image of a man from the Libu tribe, according to Egyptian sources .

Source: Our History Book, previous reference, p. 102.

3.4 Meshwesh:

They have been recorded since the time of the Eighteenth Dynasty (during the reign of King Thutmose III). The Meshwesh are mentioned as a people who presented tribute to the pharaoh. Their name is also recorded on ceramic vessels containing fresh fat from Meshwesh cattle, which suggests that they engaged in trade. They served in the army of King Ramesses II. From the Twentieth Dynasty onwards, the Egyptian army generally consisted of Libyans alone. Egyptian kings also granted them land in payment, leading to the formation of military communities in which Libyan commanders held exclusive power. They did not show hostility towards Egypt until the reign of King Merneptah³⁰.

They are depicted with an ever/pointed beard, crossed bands on the chest and a long coat, and their heads appear to be decorated with feathers. They also maintained close ties with the Sea Peoples³¹.

See Figure No. 05.

royal list engraved on the inner walls. See: Ramadan 'Abda 'Ali, *History of Ancient Egypt*, vol. 1, Dar Nahdat al-Sharq, Haram of Cairo University, Egypt, 2001.

²⁸- 'Aqoun (M. al-Arabi), *Berbers Through History: A Brief View of Origins and Identity**, 1st edition, Fikr and Hibr series, al-Tanukhi Printing, Publishing and Distribution, Rabat, 2010, p. 7.

²⁹- Our History Book, previous reference, p. 102.

³⁰- Bokhus (Z), previous reference, p. 27.

³¹- The term 'Sea Peoples' refers to tribes from the Balkan Peninsula and the islands of the Aegean. See: Kahla (M), *The Invasions of the Sea Peoples*, 1st ed., Syrian General Authority for Books, Damascus, 2017, p. 45.

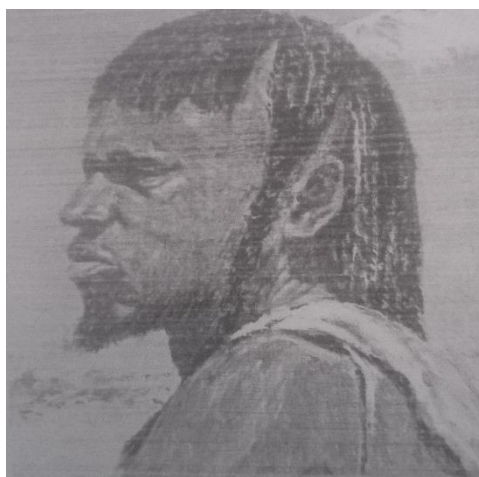


Figure No. 05: Depicts one man of the Mushwāsh tribe, according to Egyptian sources.

Source: Our History Book, previous reference, p. 104.

After that, they adopted the use of swords measuring 3–4 cubits. The pharaohs included these swords on the list of spoils/granted goods³². One Meshwesh prince seized the throne in 950 BCE (Sheshonq), following the death of the last kings of the Twenty-First Dynasty³³. They likely settled in the northern areas of the Libyan Desert and their lands probably extended westward as far as present-day Tunisia. See Figure No. 06.

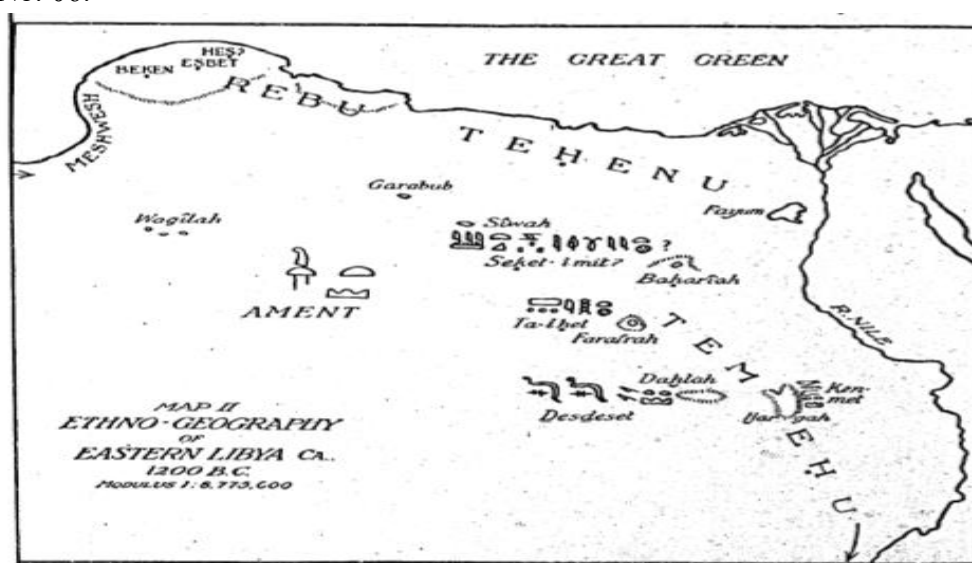


Figure No. 06: Map showing the distribution of Libyan tribes, according to Egyptian sources .

Source: Bates (O), op. cit., p. 50.

Egyptian sources indicate that the two parties have been in contact throughout history due to Libyan migration, driven by climatic factors — especially drought — in search of fertile land along the banks of the Nile³⁴.

See Figure No. 07.

³²- Mehran (M. Bayumi), *ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

³³- Bakhoush (Zuhair), *ibid.*

³⁴- References (Hussein Abdel-Aali), *Libyan-Pharaonic relations from the pre-dynastic era until the beginning of the Libyan rule over Egypt*, Master's thesis in ancient history, supervised by Rajab Abdel-Hamid Al-Athram, Garyounis University, Faculty of Arts and Education, Department of Historical and Archaeological Studies, Libya, p. 16.

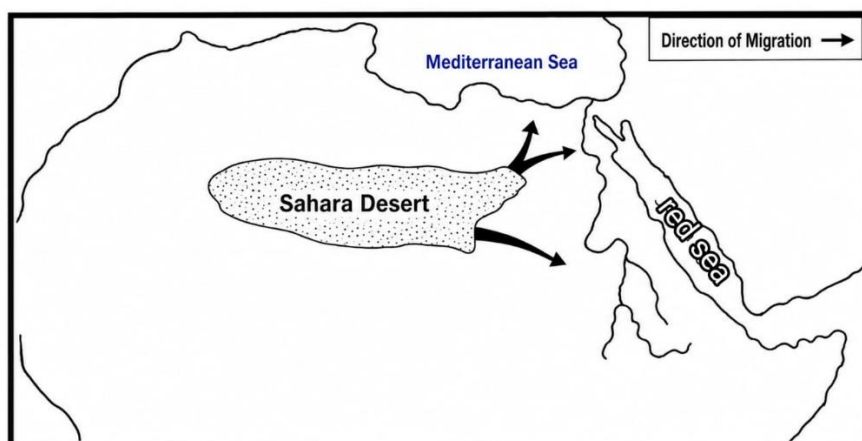


Figure No. 07: A map illustrating the prehistoric migrations of the inhabitants of the Libyan Desert .
Source: References (Husayn ‘Abd al-‘Alī), previous reference, p. 15.

4. Libyan Tribes from the Perspective of Literary Sources:

Herodotus states that the Libyans are the indigenous population of the northern region, alongside the Ethiopians in the south³⁵. Salustius also mentions this in the course of the Jugurthine War: ‘The earliest inhabitants were the Libyans and the Gaetuli. Strabo provides valuable information in his account of the southern boundaries occupied by the Libyans³⁶, which extend to Lake Beseyo³⁷, above Meroe, on the western bank of the Nile, whereas the Ethiopians occupied the other bank.

Strabo adds in Book Two that: ‘Most of the people of Libya are unknown to us because many of them have not been reached by armies nor visited by foreigners. Moreover, only a small number of those living in its interior have visited us, so what they tell us is not fully trustworthy.³⁸

Nevertheless, numerous historians have described the Libyan tribes distributed along the coastline and extending into the interior, covering all parts of the region. Herodotus addressed these in particular detail, dividing them between the coastal and inland areas³⁹.

- Adyrmakhidai (or Adromakhidae): Herodotus states: ‘The inhabitants of those Libyans, starting from Egypt, the Adyrmakhidai, practise customs similar to Egyptian customs; however, their clothing is like that of the rest of the Libyans.’ We can therefore infer that the Adyrmakhidai are the earliest human group mentioned by Herodotus, beginning from Egypt in a region that lies at the border between Cyrenaica (Barka) and Egypt⁴⁰.

³⁵- Herodotus, previous source, paragraph 197 of Book Four.

³⁶- Gaius Sallustius Crispus, previous source, paragraph 18.

³⁷- The Getuli: This name first appeared in the second century BC to refer to a large tribal group whose way of life was characterised by movement and migration. They inhabited the area between the Garamant region in eastern Libya and the Atlantic Ocean in the west. The geographer Ptolemy states that their dwellings extended along the banks of the Sebou River, behind Red Lake, between the Atlas Mountains and the Tensift River. According to Livy, the Getuli were also included in Hannibal’s armies during the Punic Wars, and are described as ‘strong peoples’. See: Ptolemy, *Geography*, edition Muller, 1901, IV, 1–5;

Titus Livy, *Roman History*, published by C.L.F. Panckoucke, new translation by M.M.A.G. Liez, Paris, 1833, XXIII, 18; Strabo, *Geography*, XVII, 3.

³⁸- Strabo, *Geography*, XVII, II, 3.

³⁹- Libyan texts from Strabo, previous source, paragraph 33 of Book Two.

⁴⁰- Herodotus, Book Four of History (The Scythian and Libyan Books), 1st ed., translated from the Greek by Muhammad al-Mabrouk al-Dhuwayb, Publications of the University of Cyrene, Benghazi, 2003, paragraph 168.

- Geliligamāi (or Geliligamayi): Herodotus mentions the following: ‘Adjacent to the Adyrmakhidai on the west.’ He adds that the name was partially eroded and unclear in the original text, but was later restored to become the name Marmaridai. Their way of life is similar to that of the other Libyans⁴¹. Diodorus Siculus states that the Marmaridai tribe inhabits the narrow strip of land between Egypt and Cyrene⁴² and that their name is associated with the plant silphium⁴³, which dominates the island of Plateia⁴⁴ and extends as far as the entrance to the Gulf of Sidra⁴⁵.

In addition, many tribes that lived in the interior regions are mentioned by a number of historians, foremost among them Herodotus.

Aspostnai (or Aspostnai): Herodotus states: ‘They come after the Geliligamayi from the west’⁴⁶. They dwell in the interior of Cyrene and are distinguished by riding chariots drawn by horses — because the Cyrenaeans inhabit the coast.

- Ouskhiay (or Ouskhiay): Herodotus states: ‘The next tribe after the Aspoustai from the west. They live south of Barka in a region extending to the sea. Their way of life is similar to that of the people who live in the south of Barka, but it cannot be ruled out that they were pushed farther inland after the Greeks seized the coastal areas in the seventh century BCE’⁴⁷.

- Nasamones: Herodotus states: ‘West of the Ouskhiay there are many Nasamones. In summer, it has been their custom to leave their herds to graze along the seashore and go inland towards a place called Augla to gather dates. The Nasamones catch locusts, dry them in the sun, grind them finely, pour them into milk, and feed on this mixture. Among the customs of their men is that each one takes a number of wives...’⁴⁸

- Byselli (or ‘Physēl/Physelli’): Herodotus states: ‘Those who became extinct and whose traces were lost because of southern winds that once blew upon their country. The waters of their reservoirs dried up and they had nothing to drink in their homeland, which was located in the Syrtis.’ After consulting amongst themselves, they decided to declare war on these winds — I am reporting as the Libyans relate it — so they set out into the desert and reached the sands. Then a sandstorm blew upon them and blinded them all, and the Byselli became extinct. Their lands are now inhabited by the Nasamones.’⁴⁹ However, the story is difficult to believe since Pliny the Elder provides information indicating that the Nasamonians were the ones who destroyed the city and seized its land. It is also possible that some of

⁴¹- The same, previous source, paragraph 169 of Book Four.

⁴²- Diodorus Siculus, *Universal History*, translated by Monsieur Labbé Terrassons, new edition, de Bure Frères, Paris, III, 49.

⁴³- For information on the plant silphium, see:

Chamoux, *Cyrene under the Monarchy of the Battiads*, Library of the French Schools of Athens and Rome, Boccard edition, Paris, 1953, pp. 246–263.

⁴⁴- The island of Platea: Herodotus mentions that it lies opposite the Libyan coast. The Therians (the inhabitants of the island of Thera) settled there after being instructed by a Delphic oracle to do so. See:

Gulf of Bomah, located in the Bay of Bomah (Seal Island), where they established a colony in Libya which is currently known as “Seal Island”.

Bates (O), *The Eastern Libyans: An Essay**, Macmillan and Co., Ltd., London, Bombay, Calcutta, 1914, p. 248.

⁴⁵- Herodotus, previous source, paragraph 169 of Book Four.

⁴⁶- Herodotus, previous source, paragraph 170 of Book Four.

⁴⁷- The same, paragraph 171 of Book Four.

⁴⁸- The same, paragraph 172 of Book Four.

⁴⁹- The same, paragraph 174 of Book Four.

the group escaped the Nasamonians and took refuge in the desert interior⁵⁰. Pliny also states that the Byselli, who lived near the coast of the greater Syrtis, knew how to treat snakebite⁵¹.

Diodorus Siculus states that the Makae (Makai), who inhabit the regions surrounding the Syrtis, constitute a people more numerous than the Nasamonians, the Ouskhiay and the Marmaridai⁵². He also describes their geographical area and their most important characteristics as follows, citing Herodotus: ‘The Nasamonians border on the inland side, along the coast to the west, on the Makaioi. They arrange their hair in the form of a horse’s mane, shaving off the ends and leaving a mane in the centre. In times of war, they protect themselves with arms made of ostrich hide....’⁵³

- Gindanes (or “Gindanes”): Herodotus states: “The Makaioi border the Gindanes, whose women adorn themselves with garlands/bracelets of leather rings; and the greater the number of rings, the greater the proof of the number of admirers among the men of the tribe.” He also highlights that their homeland includes a headland extending from the land to the sea, where the Lotophagi (Lotus-eaters) reside. These people live and feed only on the fruit of the lotus⁵⁴. It is a fruit the size of a wild berry, whose sweetness is compared to the sweetness of dates. They do not merely eat it; rather, they prepare wine from it, according to Pliny the Elder⁵⁵.

Macleies (or ‘Makalieis/Makles’): Herodotus states: ‘The Lotophagi border the Makaioi on the sea, who likewise use the lotus flower, but on a limited scale compared with the Lotophagi. Their territory extends up to a great river called Triton, which empties into Lake Tritonitis.’⁵⁶

- Numerous other tribes farther south: Herodotus also provides detailed descriptions of many other tribes, including:

- Amonians: Herodotus states that the Amonians are the first people encountered by someone arriving from Thebes, alongside the Garamantes, whom he mentions in paragraph 183. He says, ‘At a distance of another ten days, there is a salt mound surrounded by running water and a large number of date palms. The Garamantes live there. They spread a layer of soil over the salt and then plant crops. They have well-managed enclosures for their grazing animals, whose horns are set in such a way that they are planted or embedded as the animals walk. They pursue the Ethiopians in four-horse chariots...’⁵⁷

Atrantes (or ‘Atrantās’): Herodotus mentions them as being located ten days away from the land of the Garamantes. He adds that they do not have personal names, and everyone is called ‘Atrantes’. He considers the inhabitants, ‘the Atlas’, as the support/hinge of the sky. They do not eat anything living, and they dream while they sleep⁵⁸.

See Figure No. 08.

⁵⁰- Pliny the Elder, VII, 14.

⁵¹- Ibid., XIII, 89.

⁵²- Diodorus Siculus, III, 49.

⁵³- Herodotus, previous source, paragraph 175 of Book Four.

⁵⁴- Herodotus, previous source, paragraph 176 of Book Four.

⁵⁵- Pliny the Elder, V, 28.

⁵⁶- Herodotus, previous source, paragraph 178 of Book Four.

⁵⁷- Herodotus, previous source, paragraph 181 of Book Four.

⁵⁸- The same, paragraph 184 of Book Four.

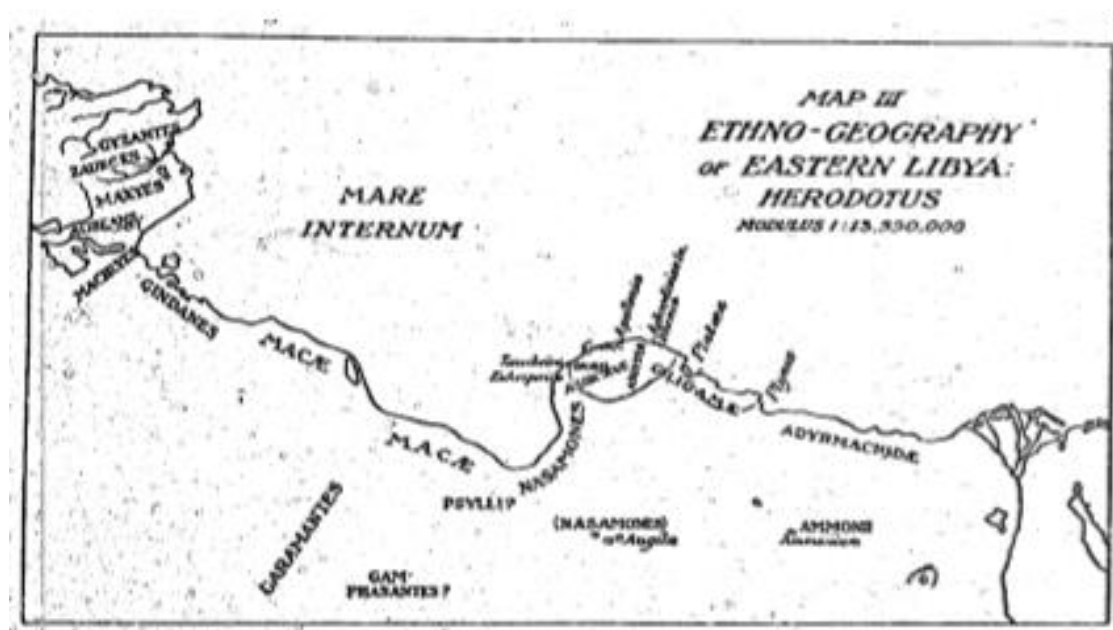


Figure No. 08: Depicts the distribution of Libyan tribes according to Herodotus

Source: Bates (O), op. cit., p. 53.

Clearly, Herodotus obtained his knowledge of the Libyan tribes through intermediaries from Cyrene, since, despite his apparent understanding of its geography⁵⁹, he did not visit the city personally. This is reflected in his mention of the fact that the eastern part of Libya, inhabited by nomadic herdsmen⁶⁰, was low-lying and sandy up to the river Triton, whereas the land of the farmers to the west was extremely mountainous.

Furthermore, Herodotus employed various hints embedded within his text. It seems he intended to use these to demonstrate the credibility of his information, as can be seen from phrases such as: 'As the Libyans say', 'and I say what the Libyans themselves say', 'I cannot go further than that', and 'I cannot say that accurately...', all of which are repeated in many sections.

Herodotus divided Libyan tribes into two groups (nomadic herdsmen and settled people) and made Lake Tritonitis the boundary between the two groups, reflecting differences in their way of life⁶¹. This view is supported by B(i)ets, who further argues that the basis for this division is economic and social, rather than ethnic. B(i)ets defines the geographical framework of the so-called 'Eastern Libyans' as follows: the Mediterranean Sea to the north; the Sahara Desert up to northern Sudan to the south; the Nile Valley to the east; and a line extending to the edge of the Chott al-Jarid to the west⁶².

It seems that the geographic framework drawn by B(i)ets does not only form political boundaries, but also constitutes a continuous cultural and ethnic area. The term 'Eastern Libyans' may have been used to distinguish between two groups of the same people: nomads living east of Lake Tritonitis and a more settled group that practises agriculture.

⁵⁹- Asheri (D) and others, *A Commentary on Herodotus, Books I-IV*, edited by O. Murray and A. Moreno, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 568-569.

⁶⁰- Herodotus, previous source, paragraph 191 of Book Four.

⁶¹- Bates (O), op. cit., p. VII.

⁶²- Ibid., pp. 1-10.

Herodotus also states that the eastern Libyans, who extend from Egypt to Lake Tritonis, are herders. They eat meat and drink milk, but they do not consume the flesh of female cattle. He attributes this to their influence by their eastern neighbours, the Egyptians. He also describes their method of offering sacrifices, which involves cutting off part of the victim's ear and throwing it over the house. They only approach the gods of the sun and moon.

In addition, Herodotus's division of Libyan tribes into nomadic herdsmen and settled people, and his designation of Lake Tritonitis as the boundary between these two groups, is due to their differing lifestyles. This view is supported by B(i)ets, who argues that the basis for this division is economic and social, rather than ethnic. B(i)ets defines the geographical area of the so-called 'Eastern Libyans' as follows: the Mediterranean Sea to the north; the Sahara Desert up to northern Sudan to the south; the Nile Valley to the east; and a line extending to the edge of the Chott al-Jarid to the west⁶³.

It seems that the geographic framework drawn by B(i)ets does not only form political boundaries, but also constitutes a continuous cultural and ethnic area. The term 'Eastern Libyans', in particular, may have been used to distinguish between two groups of the same people: nomads living to the east of Lake Tritonitis and a more settled group that practised agriculture⁶⁴.

Herodotus also states that the eastern Libyans, who extend from Egypt to Lake Tritonis, are herders. They eat meat and drink milk, but they do not consume the flesh of female cattle. He attributes this to their influence by their eastern neighbours, the Egyptians. He also describes their method of offering sacrifices, which involves cutting off part of the victim's ear and throwing it over the house. They only approach the gods of the sun and moon⁶⁵.

Clearly, Herodotus used Egypt as a benchmark to explain the Libyans' way of life, likening their customs — including those of the first tribes he mentions, the Adromachidai — to Egyptian customs. At the same time, their clothing is similar to that of the other Libyans, which, according to him, suggests that they were strongly influenced by their eastern neighbours. However, in some passages, Herodotus also acknowledges the local character of certain customs, such as clothing (Baladi) and the shields of the Athena statues (Aegis), which the Greeks took from Libyan women. He also mentions the cries of joy during religious celebrations that are part of Libyan women's customs⁶⁶.

Meanwhile, the territory of the settled Libyans, who cultivate the land and live in houses, begins on the western side of Lake Tritonis. The first of these are the Maxyes, who wear their hair on the right side and shave the left⁶⁷, covering their bodies with crimson dye. Herodotus then mentions the Zauces, whose women drive chariots in war, the Gyzants, who raise bees, and the people who eat monkeys⁶⁸.

The binary division that Herodotus singled out — herders and nomads versus farmers — contradicts a fact that he himself confirms. He mentions the Maxyces tribe⁶⁹, whose settlements were established

⁶³- Bates (O), op. cit., pp. XX, XXI.

⁶⁴- Herodotus, previous source, paragraphs 186–188 of Book Four.

⁶⁵- Herodotus, previous source, paragraphs 186–188 of Book Four.

⁶⁶- The same, paragraph 189 of Book Four

⁶⁷- The same, paragraph 191 of Book Four.

⁶⁸- The same, paragraphs 193–194 of Book Four.

⁶⁹- The Macaïcs (the 'Maxacis'): Herodotus mentions the following: 'The Lotophagoi, on the seaward side, are the Macaïcs, who use the lotus flower to a lesser extent than the Lotophagoi. Their territory extends as far as a large river called the Triton, which flows into the Tritonis Lake.' See: Herodotus, previous source, paragraph 178 of Book Four.

after those of the Ausises⁷⁰. They were Libyan farmers⁷¹. This explains why farmers existed in the western part of Carthaginian territory, as in the rest of the coastal regions⁷². This is also supported by archaeological evidence of the antiquity of agriculture, which Combes dates back to the Neolithic period. Rock art from this period depicts scenes of hunting, domestication, herding and fishing. Notably, depictions include human figures to represent the Neolithic era. However, although rock art helps us to understand hunting activities, it rarely depicts land cultivation⁷³.

Additionally, some archaeological sites have revealed the earliest evidence of agriculture in the form of perforated grindstones (or querns), which were likely used to crush grain⁷⁴. Such finds have been documented at many Capsian and Neolithic sites. These tools could perform several functions, are lightweight, and are made of soft, chalky limestone⁷⁵. They include backed and unbacked blades and notched handles for cutting, as well as a set of perforated stones that function as digging sticks and grinding tools, especially millstones such as rotary querns. These are interpreted as tools used in agricultural activity⁷⁶.

Herodotus also provides us with more information about tribes far from the coastal strip. Perhaps his description of a sandy belt stretching from Thebes⁷⁷ in Egypt to the Pillars of Heracles is significant. He mentions huge salt masses in the form of small hills that burst upward from the middle of the salt. From this salt springs cold, fresh water. Around it live the Ammonians⁷⁸, together with a spring whose waters alternate between boiling and cooling⁷⁹. After a journey of ten days, there are the Nasamonians,

⁷⁰- The Oesae (Oasis/Ousesis): The Oesae inhabit the lands next to the Macaïcs and live with them on the shores of Tritonis Lake. The Macaïcs lengthen the hair behind the head, whereas the Oesae lengthen the hair in front of the head. See: Herodotus, previous source, paragraph 180 of Book Four.

⁷¹- Herodotus, previous source, paragraph 191 of Book Four.

⁷²- Koms Gabriel, previous reference, pp. 113–114.

⁷³- Ghanim (M. al-Saghir), 'Early Features of the Emergence of Agriculture in the Land of the Ancient Maghreb', *Journal of Human Sciences*, Issue 17, University of Constantine, 2002, p. 166.

⁷⁴- The Capsian (or Qafsi) civilisation: named after the Qafsa region in Tunisia, where many of its sites are located. This civilisation was named by de Merville in 1905. It consists of two phases: the 'Typical Capsian' and the 'Upper Capsian'. The former was characterised by coarse industry and extensive retouching and chipping. The upper phase is characterised by more points and blades (or finer tools) and shows differences in stone engineering geometry over time. See: Sahnouni, Mohammad. *Prehistory*. Dean/Office of University Publications (Diwan al-Matbu'at al-Jami'iyya), 1999, pp. 119–120.

⁷⁵- Koms (Gabriel), *On the Origins of the Berbers: Massinissa or the Beginnings of History*, translated and verified/researched by Muhammad al-'Arabi 'Aqoun, Publications of the Supreme Council for the Arabic Language, 2nd ed., Algeria, 2012, pp. 115–117.

⁷⁶- Mihni (Majid), 'The Numidian Economy: A Historical Vision', *Al-Risala Journal for Studies and Human Research*, Vol. 9, Issue 3, 2024, p. 613.

⁷⁷- Medical/healing: the most famous Egyptian capitals in ancient history, alongside Babylon and Nineveh, represented the greatness of the ancient Eastern world. Thebes remained the political and religious capital of Egypt during the Middle and New Kingdom periods. Thebes is a later name for the city of Luxor. Previously, it existed under the name Waset or Wisa, meaning 'the sceptre', which was a symbol of rule and sovereignty among the pharaohs' dynasty. See: Bayoumi, *Great Cities in Egypt and the Ancient Near East*, vol. 1, Dar al-Ma'rifa al-Jami'iyya, Egypt, 1999, pp. 21–27.

⁷⁸- Herodotus, previous source, paragraph 181 of Book Four.

⁷⁹- Pliny the Elder provides a description of the places and peoples defeated during the campaign of Lucius Cornelius Balbus, one of Augustus's leaders, in the lands of the Garamantes. This campaign indicates that it was not merely a simple attack. See:

Pliny the Elder, V, 36–37.

who gather palms⁸⁰. After another ten days, there is another salt mound inhabited by the Garamantes. After ten more days, there are the Atrantii. What is striking is that they have no names, and likewise the Atlantes. As for the Atlantes, Herodotus finds it strange that they do not eat any living creature and that they do not dream in their sleep⁸¹.

Examining Herodotus's accounts of the inland and desert tribes — from the 'sandy belt' starting at Thebes in Egypt and ending at the Pillars of Heracles — leads to the conclusion that he did not visit the region. It is unreasonable to assume that the distance between each Libyan tribe is ten days' travel, especially given how limited his information becomes the farther west we go. This suggests that most of his information came from the people of Cyrene (Quraynah). This is also supported by the way he mentions only the Atlas Mountains, treating them as the pillar of the sky, and by his description of the Atlantes as living among lifeless things and not dreaming. This helps to explain the mythical tone of the historian's account. We also sense this mythmaking in his depiction of certain Libyan customs that seem immoral. Furthermore, he attributes Greek characteristics to certain Libyan customs, for instance by claiming that the Maxyes are descended from Troy and describing a burial practice similar to that of the Greeks (except for the Nasamonians)⁸². He also describes animals such as asses that do not drink⁸³, animals with horns, animals with dog heads and animals without heads whose eyes are in their chests⁸⁴.

Conclusion:

As we conclude our study, we can present some of our findings. Firstly, examining the labels associated with Libya and the Libyans from geographical and ethnographical perspectives reveals a significant degree of overlap. Names were not merely labels used to change a name; rather, they reflected the historical transformations experienced by the region across different eras. Their meanings diversified according to shifts in geographic perspectives.

The civilisational relationships linking the Libyans with neighbouring peoples, such as the Egyptians, formed a fertile field that allowed us to access a wealth of information about Libyan tribes. These tribes had direct contact with their neighbours, whether in times of peace or war. Egyptian sources were among the earliest to address Libyan tribes. At the same time, the value of literary sources should not be overlooked, whether Greek or Roman. These sources often added a subjective element to their ethnographic descriptions of these groups. This opens the door to new, careful readings supported by archaeological and anthropological studies, which will undoubtedly help change our understanding of Libya and the Libyans.

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⁸¹- The same, paragraphs 183–184.

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⁸³- The same, paragraph 192 of Book Four.

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