

# Garamantian Development

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## Who Were the Garamantians? Challenges interpreting evidence. Garamantian Trade. The Garamantians and the Romans

There are no Garamantian literary sources, so our perception of them is coloured by the Greeks, Romans, and Arabs who encountered them and had their own biases against the Garamantians and their culture. The main problem with the literary sources is their affirmation of an overblown dichotomy between nomadic and sedentary people. The Garamantians are were both nomadic traders and settled agriculturalists, not as they are painted by hostile sources or by, racist ideology from the colonial era to the present, as violent raiders who feast solely on half-cooked flesh and mare's milk. Some people of nomadic background would rise up in the Roman intelligentsia. Cornelius Fronto, a man who described himself as a Libyan nomad who became a celebrated orator, author, and educator and confidante of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius and the imperial family,



the writer Tertullian and the iconic Christian writer St. Augustine come from rural North African backgrounds. Archaeological evidence for this project mainly relies on excavations in the Fezzan and

Fewet Oasis. Excavations have shown the presence of ashlar style masonry, pottery, and amphorae among others, indicating a connection with the Mediterranean world. Archaeological study of the Central Sahara and Sahel comes with challenges due to overcoming the colonial-focused research of the past, and the political instability and violent conflicts of the modern era. There are two of the many sources of ethnographic accounts on the Garamantians worth considering; one is the 19<sup>th</sup> century German ethnographer Heinrich Barth, who was able to witness African cultures before the expansion of the imperial European presence in the 1840s, the other is Ibn-Khaldun, a 14<sup>th</sup> century Islamic writer from North Africa, who is most valuable for his perceptions of the differences between nomadic and sedentary peoples in North Africa and the Middle East and their respective lifestyles. For these ethnographers the successors to the Garamantians throughout the Islamic and Colonial Period were the Tuareg peoples.

The Garamantians were a civilization which existed from roughly 1000 BCE to 700 CE and was centered in the Libyan Saharan desert. The heartlands of the Garamantians were the

Fezzan Oasis. Contrary to popular belief, the Sahara is not endless desert, but rather possesses a network of connected oases. The arable land is highly productive when combined with sophisticated irrigation techniques. The Garamantians



especially utilized the foqqara, an aqueduct dug through a mountain to transport water, to engage in intensive agriculture, allowing them to produce dates, figs, and grapevines among other staple goods such as cereal crops. Garamantians were able to cultivate new farmland with the foqqara alongside other hydrological structures such as wells, check dams, and runoff terracing. There are West African, Arab, and Roman influences behind the development of the Garamantians. This project is about is seeing how the Garamantians used these influences to improve their state capacity and build towns that could grow beyond their natural capacity, rivaling the average cities of Roman North Africa in size and population.

The Garamantians controlled their trade routes through management of camel herds, small forts, and irrigation. This allowed traders and camels to rest safely, ensuring a steady flow of goods. They fiercely defended their trade routes, however, permanent warfare was not what led to the flourishing of the Garamantians. An example would be that despite the occasional hostility, the most profitable customers were the Romans and the urbanized and settled North Africans integrated into the Roman state. Romans had an immense appetite for goods and a fascination with exoticia. Trying to decipher what flowed into and out of Garamantian lands requires some parsing. Written sources only give us a partial list of trade goods, which archaeological and ethnographic evidence can complement. Some of the most important goods imported by the Garamantians from Central and West Africa included Precious stone and Gems such as Carnelian and Amazonite. Agricultural crops, including Sorghum, Pearl Millet, Cowpea, Hyacinth bean, Taro, Baobab tree fruit, cultivated and natural Salt, Animal skins, Animals



for the circus, Slaves, wild game animals such as Ostriches and their shells, Guinea Fowl, Ebony and exotic wood from Central Africa, Ivory tusk, Camels, Gold, Rhus tripartitis-dye, Natron, and Cotton. The invention of modern shipping technology has rendered the camel caravans that would have delivered these goods obsolete. Many of these goods were important to the Roman people such as natron which can be used for glassmaking and textile manufacturing.

Leptis Magna was the greatest city of the Roman province of Tripolitania. Its well-preserved buildings and mosaics attest to its wealth and importance to Rome.



The wealth of Leptis was in large part due to olive plantations and as a locus for trade. It is estimated that the territory of Leptis possessed over a million olive trees, and many types of press technology to convert into oil. A trader coming northward would have passed through the Severan Arch, erected by the city's most famous progeny, Septimius Severus, the first African Emperor of Rome. Monumental architecture including colonnades and carved reliefs would have wowed the caravans as they entered the city, further reinforcing the idea that the people of Leptis and by extension Romans were highly wealthy and powerful, and who could provide a comfortable and awe-inspiring experience for nomadic traders. Garamantians relations with the Romans were not all positive though. The Garamantians joined Hannibal in Europe and the Numidian Jugurtha in their wars against Rome, and they were not above opportunistically sacking a Roman outpost. Their own cities, including the capital, Garama, were sacked by the Romans in punitive campaigns. However they were never conquered due to their well-renowned military capabilities and knowledge of the desert, which allowed them to engage in scorched earth tactics such as the filling in of enemies wells with sand. When faced with implacable foes, the Romans elected to trade with the Garamantians, and the latter incorporated Roman technology such as ashlar and mudbrick masonry, buildings, arches, mausoleums, baths, and local forms of pottery and industrial goods such as jewellery into their society.

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