

1. Musa Mali, Lord of the Negroes of Guinea, from a panel of the Catalan Map of Charles V (1375)

The Golden Trade of the Moors



E. W. BOVILL

SECOND EDITION

Revised and with additional material by Robin Hallett

'The golden trade of the Moores in Barbary . . . was the first incourager and beginning of this business.'

RICHARD JOBSON



LONDON
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW YORK TORONTO

1968

where before it had not been. But, as we know, its persecution continued for long after that.

What is surprising is not that many of the animals pictured in the mosaics no longer survive or are so rare that their survival is in doubt, but that they did not become extinct long before the end of the Roman occupation. Like the dead cities and dry river-beds, the lost fauna is in no way attributable to climatic change.

It would be wrong to assume that there have been no variations in climate. The destruction of the forests probably led to minor local modifications in rainfall. There have also been slight changes for reasons we do not know. Archaeologists think it probable that in Roman times Tripolitania was more humid than it is now. To take another example from just outside our field, the rainfall records kept by Ptolemy the geographer in the second century A.D. show that in Egypt although the rainy days were about as numerous as they are today, they were better distributed.⁶ But had the changes been more than slight, had the rainfall been materially heavier, some of the Roman bridges would not have spanned the rivers, and many fords would have been unfordable.

When reading descriptions of the country by Roman authors it is impossible not to be impressed by how applicable they are to present-day conditions of climate and water supply. To the Romans, for all their dependence on North Africa for corn (though they depended much more on Egypt), it was a country to be dreaded for its waterless wastes and wild beasts. It is a theme which constantly recurs in their literature, but it remained for Horace to sum it up in three words, 'leonum arida nutrix'.⁷ Salust's comment was equally apt, 'caelo terraque penuria aquarum.'⁸ In historical records the problem of water supply frequently recurs. When Caesar was campaigning near Hadrumentum (Sousse) lack of water was a constant anxiety to him, as it was to Belisarius six centuries later. Droughts, too, were seemingly no less common than they are today. Hadrian was beloved of Africans because rain fell for the first time in five years on the day of his arrival in the country. The conclusion that climatically the Maghrib has changed but little in the last 2,000 years is impossible to resist.

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The climatic history of the Sahara is even more striking than that of Barbary. There can be little doubt that two thousand years

ago the Sahara must have been almost as arid and formidable a desert as it is today. Classical authors all paint a sombre picture of what the Sahara was like. 'Libya is full of wild beasts', wrote Herodotus, 'while beyond the wild beast region there is a tract which is wholly sand, very scant of water, and utterly and entirely a desert.'⁹ To Pliny, five hundred years later, the Sahara was just 'a desert abandoned to the sand and swarming with serpents'.¹⁰

At no time was a journey into the Sahara regarded as other than a hazardous enterprise. Even before Herodotus's time it was possible for a whole army to be overwhelmed. Such was the fate of the expedition which Cambyses sent to destroy the oracle at Jupiter Ammon, the modern Siwa. 'A wind arose from the south, strong and deadly, bringing with it vast columns of whirling sand, which entirely covered up the troops, and caused them wholly to disappear.' Thus, according to the Ammonians, did it fare with this army!¹¹

Cambyses's expedition took place about 525 B.C. But if one presses further back in time, the face of the Sahara changes. 'Long, long ago', Lloyd Cabot Briggs, one of the leading students of Saharan prehistory has written, 'during the prehistoric ages before the dawn of written history, the Sahara was very different from what it is today, for much of it was fertile and relatively thickly populated. Stone implements of all shapes and sizes are scattered nearly all over the desert, in a profusion which proves beyond doubt that the land once supported a very substantial human population, thanks to a climate far more salubrious than that it now enjoys. Fishhooks and barbed harpoon points made of bone have been found as far north as the centre of the western Sahara, and so there must have been good fishing once upon a time. Indeed recent excavations have shown that, up until perhaps as recently as three or four thousand years ago, much of what is now desert was relatively fertile and well watered country, dotted with shallow lakes and swamps, and even clumps of trees, shrubs, and ferns belonging to species which are no longer found south of the Atlas Mountains.'¹²

The fishing implements of neolithic man are not the only evidence left by him to suggest a remarkable change in climate. On certain rock sites in the central and northern Sahara there have been discovered life-size engravings done by an early race of hunters. Among the animals depicted are elephant, rhinoceros, hippopotamus, and the extinct *bubalus antiquus*. (We shall have

light on the Sahara. Five wild young men, sons of Nasamonian chiefs from the Greater Syrtis, had set out to explore the desert parts of Libya, with the object of penetrating farther than any had done before. Providing themselves with a plentiful supply of water and provisions they traversed the desert in a westerly direction. After travelling for many days over the sand they came to a plain where there were trees laden with fruit. While they were gathering the fruit they were surprised and seized by some dwarfish negroes whose language they could not understand. They were carried away over extensive marshes till they reached a town, the inhabitants of which spoke the same language as their captors. A great river containing crocodiles flowed past the town, running from west to east. In due course the adventurous young men returned safely to their own country.²

These two curious pieces of information noted down by Herodotus—the Garamantes in their chariots chasing the Ethiopian troglodytes and the strange adventure of the young Nasamones—represented almost all that was known about the inhabitants of the Central Sahara in the first millenium B.C. But in recent years Herodotus's information has been both confirmed and supplemented by the evidence provided by the rock-engravings and paintings of the desert. The existence of ancient pictures on the rocks was first reported by Heinrich Barth, the great German explorer, as early as 1851.³ But it has been only in the last forty years that the astonishing richness of Saharan rock art has been revealed, mainly through the work of French archaeologists.

For technical reasons, the paintings and engravings are very difficult to date, but it has been possible to classify them into various styles, which can then be arranged in chronological order.⁴ The earliest style is distinguished by its life-size or nearly life-size engravings, executed in a vigorous naturalistic manner, of wild animals, including elephant, rhinoceros, and the now extinct *bubalus antiquus*. Some of the engravings have scenes depicting hunters, and it seems likely that the engravings are in fact the work of a people who lived mainly by hunting. Engravings in this style have been found only in the northern half of the Sahara. Some scholars believe that the engravings must have been executed before 5,000 B.C.; others prefer a more recent date.

The second style shows many of the same animals as the first style, but is clearly of later date, as the *bubalus antiquus* is no longer shown. Instead, domestic cattle make their appearance, being

shown both in engravings and in polychromatic paintings. Pictures of cattle have been found in many parts of the Sahara; they are particularly common in the Jebel Uweinat lying to the east of Tibesti, in Tibesti itself, and in the Tassili-n-Ajjer to the west of the Fezzan. Clearly these cattle-pictures provide evidence of the arrival of pastoral people coming from further east. Some scholars are inclined to see in these ancient pastoralists the ancestors of the nomadic Fulani of West Africa.

The third distinct style is marked by the presence of men riding in horse-drawn chariots. Over three hundred representations of chariots have been found in the Sahara, from the Fezzan to southern Morocco, in Ahaggar, and in Adrar of the Iforas. The chariots confirm Herodotus's statement about the Garamantes; they also help to provide an explanation for the strange exploit of the Nasamones, for a French archaeologist, Henri Lhote, has found chariot-drawings at various stations along an ancient caravan route leading from Ahaggar to Adrar of the Iforas. Their presence suggests that this was the route that was taken by the Nasamones and that the river which they saw flowing from west to east was in fact the Niger in the vicinity of Gao.⁵

In the fourth style, the chariots have disappeared. Instead, men armed with javelins are shown riding on horses. The fifth style—artistically the least distinguished—shows men on camels.

It will be many years before archaeologists have succeeded in extracting all the information contained in this remarkably rich material. For the paintings and engravings contain far more than men and animals. Some pictures represent strange deities; others provide detailed impressions of dress and weapons. Some paintings give clear evidence of Egyptian influence; others—notably some of the chariot pictures—recall the art-styles of the Aegean. But though much remains obscure, one fact stands out beyond the reach of controversy: for centuries before the introduction of the camel into the Sahara (an event that took place about the beginning of the Christian era) men were accustomed to move about the desert with oxen, in horse-drawn chariots, or on horse-back.

The use of horses and of oxen in the desert is not quite such a surprising fact as it might appear to those who have been brought up to think that the camel is the only beast of burden man can employ in the Sahara. Until quite recent times, many Saharan tribes maintained a small number of horses. Among some tribes, the Tuareg of Ahaggar for example, the horse was rare enough to

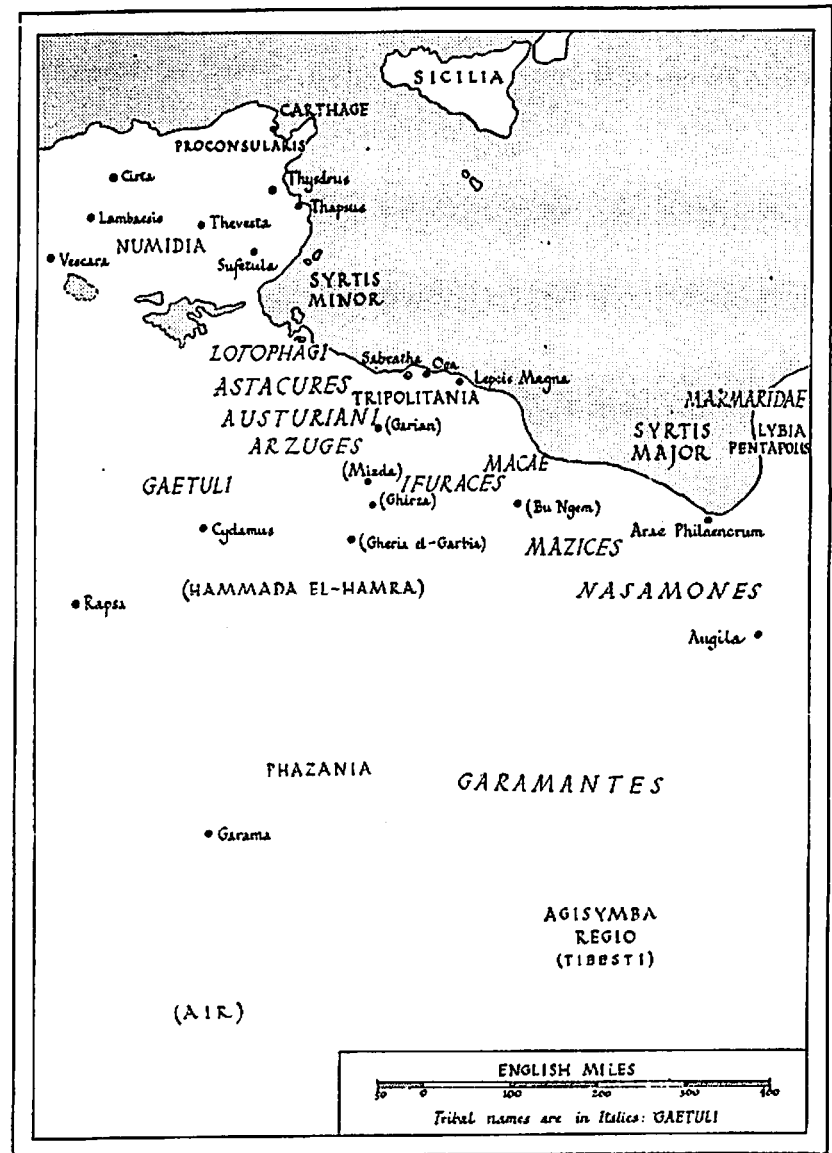
continued only on sufferance and depended on meek acquiescence to the will of the occupying power. The harshness of Roman rule was doubtless a constant source of complaints and solicitations for protection from the subjugated peoples of the coast to their powerful desert neighbours. The Carthaginians, immersed in trade, had never presented themselves to the Garamantes as a rival power. The Romans, on the other hand, had quickly made it clear that they were not merely a rival power but the only power. To a great people like the Garamantes, whose predominant position in the eastern Sahara none had ever dared to challenge, the change of rulers on the coast was intolerable.

How soon a rupture between Romans and Garamantes occurred is uncertain, but towards the close of the first century B.C. the Romans felt compelled to embark on what must have appeared to them a very hazardous expedition against the Fezzan. They had recently had to crush a revolt by the Gaetuli, who had probably invoked the willing aid of the Garamantes. Whether this was the *casus belli* or not, so daring an operation as the invasion of the Fezzan would hardly have been undertaken except under prolonged provocation culminating in an outright challenge to Roman authority.

The expedition was led by the proconsul Lucius Cornelius Balbus, a native of Spain. It took the Garamantes by surprise and the Fezzan was successfully subjugated. The many towns which were captured included Garama (Germa), the capital, and the important outlying oasis of Cydamus (Ghadames) which also lay in Garamantian country. Among the places mentioned by Pliny as having been captured is Mount Gyri 'where precious stones were produced', which unhappily remains unidentified.⁶

It is probable that the object of the expedition was to break the Garamantes and make impossible any further challenge to Roman supremacy. On the other hand, its intention may have been merely punitive. It certainly failed on the former score, as it was bound to, for war against desert nomads can never be pressed home: their answer to overwhelming force is wide dispersal and guerilla tactics. An army cannot break them any more than a fist can a pillow.

Nevertheless, the expedition was acclaimed as a notable achievement, which indeed it was. Never before had Rome carried war into the heart of the Sahara. To the grave difficulties inherent in desert warfare had been added the problem of an initial thirty days' march through almost waterless country before the enemy



ii. Roman Africa

battle, and Roman troops were disengaged, the Garamantes took alarm and sought to forestall the retribution they feared awaited them. At the close of the campaign Dolabella took home with him, Tacitus relates, 'envoys from the Garamantes, a rare spectacle in Rome. . . . The nation in its terror at the destruction of Tacfarinas . . . had sent them to crave pardon of the Roman people.'⁹

The visit of the envoys was probably welcome, for it rather surprisingly convinced the Romans that they had nothing more to fear from the Garamantes and it provided an excuse not to launch a second costly expedition against the Fezzan. Balbus, they knew, had succeeded only because he had taken the Garamantes by surprise. Since then the latter had become too vigilant for that to recur, and, as a further protection, they had resorted to the commonest and most effective method of defence against attack in the desert. 'It has been impossible', wrote Pliny, 'to open up the road to the Garamantes country, because brigands of that race fill up the wells with sand.'¹⁰

The Garamantes were not slow to realise that they owed their escape from punishment for helping Tacfarinas less to the good offices of their envoys than to the defensive measures they themselves had adopted. The confidence this gave them was further strengthened by the Romans' ill-advised withdrawal of the rest of their troops from Tripolitania because peace seemed to them assured. However, initially the trouble which followed was different from what they might have expected. In A.D. 69 war broke out between the neighbouring cities of Oca (Tripoli) and Lepcis. This would have mattered less if it had not brought the Garamantes into the field once more. Convinced that if worsted in battle they had only to scuttle back into the desert and fill in the wells behind them to stop pursuit, and confident in their immunity from attack in the Fezzan, they responded to an appeal for aid from the people of Oca and, together with these new allies, they laid siege to Lepcis. This brought the legate of Numidia, Valerius Festus, hurrying down the coast to restore order, which he did with surprising speed. He freed Lepcis, defeated the Garamantes, recovering much of their loot, and pursued them into the desert. In doing so he achieved something remarkable. He found, Pliny tells us, a new and shorter road across the desert, known as the *Praeter Caput Saxi*, which is not very different from its modern native name of Bab Ras al-Hammada.¹¹ It was probably the road running due south from Oca through Garian, Mizda, and El-Gherria el-Garbia which

later on, in the reign of Caracalla, was marked with milestones. The inference is that Valerius Festus discovered a road unknown to the Garamantes. This is incredible, for he was operating in the Garamantes' own country which they must have known far better than the Romans, and at least as well as any tribe from whom the latter could have obtained guides.

But the mystery surrounding the discovery of the *Iter Praeter Caput Saxi* extends over a much wider field. Before the end of the century other odd things happened which have never been explained.

The first was a very surprising *rapprochement* between the Romans and the Garamantes, from which flowed two remarkable Roman expeditions through the Fezzan and far into the country beyond. They took place in the reign of Trajan, somewhere about A.D. 100. The first, led by Septimius Flaccus, legate of Numidia, marched for three months southward from the Fezzan, which almost certainly must have taken him into the Sudan. Perhaps that country will one day yield evidence of its having done so. Ptolemy, however, thought the story, which he had got from Marinus of Tyre, an exaggeration. The second expedition, led by Julius Maternus, is also recorded by Ptolemy and from the same source.

Julius Maternus, setting out from Leptis Magna and Garama with the King of the Garamantes, who was beginning an expedition against the Ethiopians, by bearing continuously southward came within four months to Agisymba, the country of the Ethiopians where the rhinoceros is to be found.¹²

Ptolemy was reluctant to credit this story also, but it is more circumstantial than the other and rings true to the extent that a strong case has been made for identifying Agisymba with Tibesti. Some have sought to identify it with Air, but, as F. R. Rodd (Lord Rennell) has pointed out, Air is not easily accessible from the Fezzan and would therefore not have been visited by the Romans except for some pressing need of which there is no evidence.¹³ Tibesti, on the other hand, lies close to the natural road leading southward from the Fezzan to Negroland which, we believe, was then in use as a trade route and therefore would scarcely have been ignored by the Romans. When the Arabs and, after them, the Turks found themselves, like the Romans, in occupation of the Fezzan and desirous of extending their authority southward, both penetrated to Tibesti, but neither reached Air. The same writer

has also pointed out that whereas in Air there are no names similar to Bardetus and Mesche, which are mentioned by Ptolemy as the names of mountains in Agisymba, there are in Tibesti a Bardai and a Miski.

The association of the Garamantes with the Romans leaves little room for doubt about the object of the joint enterprise. The Romans might of course have endeavoured to cement their new friendship by agreeing to help in an attack on formidable neighbours. There is, however, no evidence that the Garamantes had any enemies in the south whom they would not have been able to subdue long before the coming of the Romans. It is far more likely that they asked the Romans to go with them on a slave-raiding expedition and that Julius Maternus readily seized this opportunity for seeing new country. That he was himself interested in catching slaves is improbable, for the Romans do not appear to have concerned themselves with the slave-trade of central Africa. If slave-raiding was the object of the joint enterprise there can be no doubt that Agisymba was Tibesti, which is generally accepted as the home of the Troglodyte Ethiopians whom Herodotus tells us the Garamantes used to raid. In the absence of any proof of how far south Septimius Flaccus penetrated, Tibesti may be regarded as the farthest point in the interior of Africa west of the Nile valley reached by the Romans.*

Far more important than these speculations is to consider what circumstances led to the surprising *rapprochement* and made possible two military expeditions, apparently in quick succession, into remote lands which not long before must have appeared to the Romans hopelessly inaccessible. The strange discovery of the *Iter Praeter Caput Saxi* is probably part of the same problem which, by some odd inadvertence, has wholly escaped the attention of the many crude scholars who have closely studied the history of the Roman occupation. But, despite its complexity, it is susceptible of a simple though not immediately obvious explanation.

In North Africa the art of war, and much else besides, was at about this time being revolutionized by the camel. In the history of the northern half of the continent no event had greater consequences than the introduction of this now indispensable animal. When it happened and in what circumstances are matters of great

* But not, of course, of things Roman. For example, in 1931 a Roman coin of the age of Constantine was dug up at Buca in British Cameroons. (Letter from the late E. J. Arnett to the author.)

uncertainty. The wide distribution throughout the region of remains of a quaternary camel for long seemed clearly to indicate that it had been there continuously since before the dawn of history. It is now known that the quaternary beast did not survive into historical times. The later camel is believed to have been introduced into Egypt by the Persians in the sixth century B.C. Alexander the Great used camel transport on his expedition to the Oracle of Jupiter Ammon, but Siwa appears to have been the most westerly point reached by the camel at this period. When one considers the great need there was for it in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, let alone the Sahara, this is astonishing. One of the reasons was probably the failure of this animal to thrive in Lower Egypt, which instead of being, as one might expect, a breeder and exporter of camels was an importer. It still has to satisfy its requirements by buying from Upper Egypt and Palestine. The camel reached the present Republic of the Sudan some time before the Christian era, but its failure to spread from there westwards seems quite unaccountable. Its absence from the numerous early rock-drawings which, as we have seen, so richly record the desert fauna, both wild and domestic, clearly shows that it did not.¹⁴

Caesar captured twenty-two camels at Thapsus in 46 B.C. This is the earliest record of them west of Siwa. Although the Romans were familiar enough with the use of camels in Asia and must have realized how valuable they could be in Africa, they seem to have taken to their use there very slowly. Long after Thapsus they were still using horses in military operations in which the camel would have been of far more use. Moreover, in the history of the Roman occupation camels are not again mentioned until 400 years later. In A.D. 363, when the people of Lepcis appealed to the governor of Africa for help against the Austuriani, who were ravaging their territory, he replied that he could not come to their aid until they sent him 4,000 camels for transport for his troops.¹⁵

The Romans may themselves have been responsible for the introduction of camels, but it is significant that we first hear of their being used in North Africa not by the Romans but by those in rebellion against them. Moreover, as their military operations did not normally take them farther than the fringes of the Sahara and as nowhere west of Tripolitania did they ever attempt to penetrate the desert their need for them can never have been at all general or pressing.

The introduction of domestic animals is so often associated with