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What Happened to the Ancient Libyans? Chasing Sources across the Sahara from Herodotus to Ibn Khaldun

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PIECING together the ethnic history of the ancient world in a systematic way is an impossible mission. One particularly perplexing problem is the fate of groups that lived beyond the bounds of city and empire: hundreds of them come and go in the historical record. We think we know what happened to a few, such as the Franks and the Angles and Saxons. Many others, however, simply disappear from the historical record, presumably the victims of larger or more martial groups, although the disappearance of an entity was more likely to have meant absorption or fragmentation than complete annihilation.¹ Even prominent or notorious peoples came to mysterious ends: the Scythians fade away while the Huns lose their storied warlord and make a precipitous exit. What about the people the Greeks called “Libyans,” and, in particular, those who lived in the Sahara?² Were

¹ In his discussion of North Africa Herodotus tells the story of the Psylli, “a tribe that met with extinction.” After the desert wind dried up their water holes, they marched out to do battle with it and were buried alive (IV.173). Pliny the Elder maintains more reasonably that they were “almost exterminated” in a war with their neighbors, the Nasamones, but the descendants of those who escaped “survive today in a few places” (VII.2.14). Strabo does not mention an unsuccessful war against either the desert wind or the Nasamones but only that the Psylli were still in existence, occupying “a barren and arid region” (XVII.3.23) below the Nasamones. Later writers, especially poets, bestowed on the Psylli a reputation as great snake charmers.

² Most ancient geographers divided the world into three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa, although the word “Africa” was not used until Roman times, and then it was applied

the Libyans, described by Herodotus in the fifth century B.C.E., the same people Ibn Khaldun wrote about under the name "Sanhaja" almost two thousand years later? Ethnic history rarely provides straight yes and no answers.

The indigenous peoples of North Africa appear to go for long intervals with little discernable change. Periodically a metamorphosis occurs, usually accompanying some larger cataclysmic event: the Sahara becomes drier and drier still; the Egyptian Empire to the east, or a millennium later the Roman Empire to the north, or another millennium later the Songhay Empire to the south collapses, reverberating deep into the interior; Islam enters North Africa and makes its way through war and trade to beyond the southern fringe of the desert; the Hilalian Arabs, a new ethnic strain, appear, affecting politics, language, and culture. But is this metamorphosis model illusionary, less the result of some drastic change than of the perspective from which we must observe our subject? We are, after all, viewing this history through portals in time rather than along a continuous pane of glass.

Four portals appear over the past four thousand years, each a look at the peoples of North Africa from the outside. The first comes from the Egyptians of the third and second millennium B.C.E., who made artistic representations and occasionally commented on their neighbors, the Tjehenu and the Tjemehu, and later the Libu and the Meshwesh. A second portal opened at the time of the Greeks and Romans, beginning with Herodotus and closing a thousand years later with Procopius. Several centuries pass, and a new portal becomes available, courtesy of geographers and historians who wrote in Arabic beginning with al-Ya'qubi in the late ninth century and reaching its acme with Ibn Khaldun in the fourteenth. Herodotus's Libyans have been replaced by the Sanhaja and Zanata. A final portal opens in the second half of the millennium with the work of Leo Africanus and culminates on the brink of the colonial period with Heinrich Barth. The Sanhaja and their kin have become Tuaregs and Moors.

Societies are never static; cultural traits and social patterns evolve through time. History lumbers on propelled by myriads of subtle and unassuming changes we interpret as a process of continuity that occurs both within and between portals. An organic model underlies the metamorphosis model. A look through one portal should show neither exactly the same nor an entirely different people than in the previous

only to the area around modern Tunisia. The continent of Africa was usually referred to as "Libya," which was subdivided into three parts, one of which was also called Libya. The other two were Egypt and Ethiopia. Strabo devotes a lengthy section to unraveling the geographical problems associated with Ethiopia; see his *Geography*, 1.2.24–28.

or subsequent portals. The gaps between portals necessitate transitions that must come from the historian's mind. A little evidence from either side combined with a healthy dose of inference and a steadied measure of conjecture should fill in the gaps between portals. And it does—but not uniformly.

Not surprisingly, more work has been done on the fourth portal than on the other three, and the transition between three and four seems fairly clear. Portal one can use supporting evidence from rock art but remains the purview of a few specialists.³ Despite the limited information available, the organic model seems to hold in the transition between one and two. Clearly we can see seven or so centuries of change between the Libu of Egypt's New Kingdom and the Libyans of Herodotus, but we do not suspect that these are completely different people. The problem comes between portals two and three, where little continuity is evident; we appear to be looking in on an entirely new world.

The peoples of North Africa seem to change much less between Herodotus and Procopius, a period of one millennium, and between al-Ya'qubi and Ibn Khaldun, a half millennium, than between Procopius and al-Ya'qubi, a mere three centuries. This paper examines the problems of identifying and classifying people who lived at a time and in a place for which relatively little information is available. In this kind of history point of view is all important, so sources become an integral part of the topic. The first third of this paper takes a look at the information needed to fill in the last two thirds. The second focuses on the general matter of social and ethnic classification and, in particular, on the criteria that were used in identifying and labeling people. The final section returns to the specific problem of the Libyans and the Sanhaja. Historians work to create models of continuity, so what can be done with an obvious case of discontinuity?

A big part of the problem is that historians have had to rely too much on the perception of ethnicity in written accounts. No doubt we need a more holistic system of research methodology; unfortunately we are not likely to develop one in the near future. Archaeology can provide some answers about the past, particularly in such matters as technology, material culture, health, and economy. Occasionally archaeologists are able to examine a skeleton found in some part of the Sahara and proclaim it to be of the "Mediterranean" or "Sudanic" type. And the use of diagnostic pottery can indicate commercial and cultural ties between distant peoples. In the transition from portals two to three,

³ For a sampling see *Libya and Egypt c. 1300–750 B.C.*, ed. Anthony Leahy (London: SOAS Center of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, 1990).

for example, architectural styles from the UNESCO Libyan Valleys Project have shown a surprising degree of continuity between the classical and Islamic periods.⁴

Any historian whose diet is old history must use every smidgen and dollop the archaeologist can put on the table. In sorting out peoples, this can be useful in a broad way, but it is not likely to tell us why Herodotus made a distinction between the Atarantes and the Atlantes or why Ibn Khaldun differentiated the Lamta from the Lamtuna. Grave goods have a corporeal quality to them that no description in an account can match, although material culture and ethnicity tend to become blurred, raising the question of just what constituted ethnicity in the ancient milieu.

Linguistic evidence can also be helpful, especially the survival of toponyms. The Hawwara, according to Ibn Khaldun, was a tribe originally from Tripoli that apparently moved since it gave its name to the great highland region in the Central Sahara known today as the Ahaggar (Hoggar) and hence to the celebrated Kel Ahaggar Tuaregs.⁵ The Fezzan region of southwest Libya was known as “targa” (the garden), and during Ibn Khaldun’s time, the Targa (Tarja) was one of the subdivisions of the Sanhaja who occupied part of the desert that included the Fezzan. Most likely this was the origin of the word “Tuareg.”⁶ The oasis cities known to the Romans as Cydamus and Viscera are today Ghadames and Biskra, respectively. This kind of history is almost too easy when it works, but it doesn’t always. Modern Libya may be included in what Herodotus considered to be Libya, but modern Mauritania does not even border on the Roman-era kingdom or subsequent provinces of Mauretania. Herodotus’s version of the inhabitants of the Ahaggar turned out very differently from Ibn Khaldun’s. He called them the “Atlantes,” and they represented the end of the world at least in one direction. To writers beginning with Plato, they became the inhabitants of Atlantis, and their country went from a real mountain

⁴ G.D.B. Jones and G.W.W. Barker, *Libyan Studies* 11 (1980): 11–36; G.W.W. Barker and G.D.B. Jones, *Libyan Studies* 12 (1981): 9–48 and 13 (1982): 1–34.

⁵ Ibn Khaldun, *Histoire des Berbères et des Dynasties Musulmanes de l’Afrique Septentrionale*, 4 vols., trans. Baron de Slane (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste, 1925–1956), I, p. 275.

⁶ The traditional assumption, which may have originated with the Arabs but was first documented by the nineteenth century explorer and linguist Heinrich Barth, has been that the term “Tuareg” is an opprobrium meaning “abandoner of one’s religion” either because these people were originally Christian (very unlikely) or they were such backsliding Muslims they had to be converted fourteen different times to Islam before it stuck (probably apocryphal). The so-called “Tuaregs” never referred to themselves by that designation but preferred Kel Tamashek, “the people who speak Tamashek,” or Kel Tagelmoust, “the people of the veil.”

range in the middle of the desert to a mythical continent in the middle of the ocean. In most cases, it is dangerous to use toponymy and, on a broader level, etymology without strong support from other sources. Linguistic evidence is not likely to provide historical conclusions: at best language can give direction and indicate possibilities. Usually history can more easily explain linguistic phenomena than vice versa.⁷

Oral tradition has proved to be useful in West Africa and parts of the Sahara in the fourth portal and occasionally even in the third. And much of what is now literary evidence is nothing more than verbally transmitted information that someone like Herodotus or Ibn Khaldun wrote down. Oral tradition can save much history, but rarely can it stand on its own as history. In the telling of stories from mouth to mouth, history is too easily twisted. Sometimes the worst of written history originates in oral tradition.

With all of its pitfalls and limitations, most of the available evidence on ancient North Africa comes from written accounts, and this means the observations of outsiders.⁸ Classical authors can be divided into three schools. The earliest major source is Herodotus, the so-called "Father of History" (to his detractors, the "Father of Lies"). He was born in the city of Halicarnassus in the 480s B.C.E. and died in the 420s, spending much of his early life traveling around the eastern Mediterranean with excursions as far as Mesopotamia, the Black Sea, and southern Egypt. The early section of his work includes sometimes lengthy discussions of non-Greek peoples including the Libyans. Herodotus examines aspects of culture and descriptive geography and includes tidbits of history often mixed with chunks of legend and mythology. His modern detractors see him as something of a sensationalist pandering to the Hellenic masses with anecdotes rather than substance and always preferring the exotic over the commonplace, leaving behind a skewed image of his world. No doubt Herodotus's strengths tend more toward the narrative than the analytical, and he was an unabashed devotee of digressions. His defenders remind their

⁷ J. Bynon, "The Contribution of Linguistics to History in the Field of Berber Studies," in *Language and History in Africa*, ed. David Dalby (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1970), p. 64.

⁸ The ancient Berbers had their own system of writing complete with a script referred to as Old Libyan or Numidian. A version survives as Tifnagh, which the Tuaregs of the deep desert still use mostly for rock graffiti. It is inconvenient to write and laborious to read, and not surprisingly no known corpus of literature developed from it. See J. B. Chabot, *Recueil des Inscriptions Libyques* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1940), and J. Fevrier, "Que savons-nous du libyque?" *Revue Africaine*, C (1956): 263–273.

colleagues that Herodotus collected an enormous body of material, some of which is extremely useful, some of which is not. Herodotus does not hand history to you; if you want to use him, you have to do some work.⁹

Joining Herodotus are Strabo, Pliny the Elder, and Diodorus Siculus. A native of the Hellenistic kingdom of Pontus on the Black Sea, Strabo was known among his contemporaries for his great work of history, which has been lost, rather than for his work of geography, which has survived. His life straddled the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E., so he saw the Roman Mediterranean at the onset of its Golden Age. Although he is more exacting in his research methodology than Herodotus, Strabo did not pretend to have much expertise on Libya: "Most of the peoples of Libya are unknown to us," he admits, "for not much of it is visited by armies, nor yet by men of outside tribes; and not only do very few of the natives from far inland ever visit us, but what they tell is not trustworthy or complete either."¹⁰

Pliny the Elder lived in the first century C.E. shortly after Strabo. He was from true Roman stock and spent most of his life as a soldier and imperial official. A prolific writer, he is best known for the *Naturalis Historia*; unfortunately, the section devoted to North Africa contains little original material even though Pliny may have served there in an official capacity. Parts of it are lifted directly from Herodotus.¹¹ Diodorus Siculus, a Sicilian Greek who lived a generation or so before Strabo, devoted his life to writing a general history of mankind from the beginning of time to 59 B.C.E. He saw history as a body of knowl-

⁹ A good recent translation of *The Histories* is available by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Numerous books and articles have been written extolling or debunking Herodotus although his section on North Africa is not among the most heavily scrutinized. Scholars venturing into the field of Herodotean studies may wish to consult L. Bergson, "Herodot 1937-1960," *Lustrum* 11 (1966): 71-138; H. Verdin, "Hérodote historien? Quelques Interprétations récentes," *L'Antiquité Classique* (1975): 668-685; and Arnaldo Momigliano, "The Place of Herodotus in the History of Historiography," *Studies in Historiography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), pp. 127-142.

¹⁰ *Geography* II, 5.33. For text and modern translation, see Strabo, *Geography*, trans. Horace Leonard Jones (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1917). For recent work on Strabo, see Katherine Clarke, *Between Geography and History: Hellenistic Constructions of the Roman World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

¹¹ For text and modern translation, see Pliny, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1942). A helpful analysis of Pliny the Elder can be found in K. G. Sallman, "Die Geographie des ä Heren Plinius in ihrem Verhältniss zu Varro: Versuch einer Quellenanalyse" in *Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte*, eds. H. Dörrie and P. Moraux 11 (Berlin, 1971), pp. 27-34. On Pliny and North Africa, see B. D. Shaw, "The Elder Pliny's African Geography," *Historia* 30 (1981): 424-471.

edge from which man could extract valuable lessons, yet he was too easily swayed by tall tales. He maintained, for example, that during its early history Libya was dominated by a race of Amazons. His work has been characterized as “both a mine and a mess.” Diodorus Siculus accuses Herodotus of interlacing lies with truth; Pliny, in turn, charges Diodorus with being “the first amongst the Greeks to degenerate into trickery in historical writing.”¹²

A second school consists of Roman-era authors such as Sallust, Tacitus, Livy, Polybius, Pseudo-Caesar (the author of the *Bellum Africanum*), and Procopius of Caesarea. They were mostly men of affairs who chronicled Roman history within an African setting, and their interest was war; Procopius and Pseudo-Caesar were directly involved in the conflicts they wrote about. Normally these writers show little interest in matters cultural, social, or geographic unless they had some bearing on military campaigns. Nevertheless, helpful information can often be gleaned from these sources.

The third school is occupied by a single author, Ptolemy, who provides an enormous mass of mostly indigestible data in the form of names and locations of peoples and places, severalfold more than all other ancient authors combined. Ptolemy lived in Alexandria, the commercial and intellectual center of the Hellenistic world, location of the greatest library in the world, and crossroads of Asia, Africa, and the Mediterranean, a place with a plethora of people who had travel information. And Ptolemy was a man of genius who had a firm grasp of the collected knowledge passed down by earlier geographers. But Ptolemy was essentially a mathematician, and his interest was in map-making rather than history, ethnography, or culture. His goal was to complete his map, which he seems to have done much better for East than West Africa. On the eastern coast his accuracy extends to below the equator; in the west, however, it begins wearing thin in southern Morocco. He has been accused of repeating and inverting names some-

¹² Donald R. Kelley, *Versions of History from Antiquity to the Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 48, 259. Diodorus's work is presented under the title *Bibliotheca Historica* (hereafter *B.H.*). The early section is largely mythology rather than history, and when the historical parts become evident, they are often more anecdotal than analytical. For text and modern translation, see *Diodorus of Sicily*, trans. C. H. Oldfather (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1935). Diodorus's somewhat ironic attack on Herodotus comes in 1.69.7. A short summary of the works of Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, Pliny the Elder, and Ptolemy as they relate to Africa can be found in Joseph E. Harris, *Africa and Africans as Seen by Classical Writers: The William Leo Hansberry African History Notebook* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1981), pp. 101–147.

times alternating between their Greek and Latin forms when he ran out of data to fill in the blank spaces.¹³

The Arab authors—some of whom were ethnic Arabs or Persians although the majority were Maghribians and Andalusians who wrote in Arabic—are more similar to the Herodotean school, since they had nothing like the rise and fall of the Roman Empire to chronicle. Muslim scholars were interested in the scientific and philosophical works of the ancients but not in their history and descriptive geography. In the transition between portals two and three, little transference of information took place; Strabo, for example, wasn't even known to the Arabs.¹⁴ But if the Arabs had to create their own corpus, they did have one great advantage: the world of Islam bound by religious, cultural, and commercial ties from the Atlantic to the Pacific provided access to geographical information undreamed of by the Greeks and Romans. And the Arabs knew of Ptolemy although they did not use him for ethnography and history. Nor did any Arab writer produce a work like that of Ptolemy, the closest being that of al-Biruni, who lived in the eleventh century and is generally considered to be the greatest geographer of his time. Unfortunately, al-Biruni and his counterpart in history and descriptive geography, al-Mas'udi, were not very interested in the interior of North and West Africa. The twelfth-century geographer al-Idrisi was, and he was heavily influenced by concepts borrowed from Ptolemy. But if much of Ptolemy's work remains a mystery because of the lack of corroborating evidence, too much evidence has survived from al-Idrisi's time, casting suspicion over substantial parts of his work. Nevertheless, his contemporaries were impressed by what they considered as al-Idrisi's "scientific approach" and preferred him over al-Bakri, an Andalusian who wrote a century earlier. Modern scholars

¹³ Little biographical data is available for Klaudios Ptolemaios, who lived c. 100–178 C.E. His great work, which is commonly referred to as the *Geographia*, is divided into eight books with book IV devoted to Africa. The Greek text for the *Geographia* in its complete form can be found in *Claudii Ptolemaei Geographia*, ed. C.F.A. Nobbe, 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1843–1845; reprinted, Hildesheim, 1966). For book IV the best critical text is C. Müller with C. T. Fischer, *Claudii Ptolemaei Geographia*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1883–1901). The only complete English edition is *The Geography of Claudius Ptolemy*, ed. and trans. Edward Luther Stevenson (New York: The New York Public Library, 1932; reprinted 1991), which has been subject to considerable criticism. Helpful comments on Ptolemy's work can be found in Raymond Mauny "Le Sahara chez Ptolémée," *Bulletin de Liaison Saharien* 6 (Oct. 1951): 18–23, and "L'Ouest African chez Ptolémée (vers +141 A.D.)," *Actas da 2ª Conferencia Internacional dos Africanistas Ocidentais reunida em Bissau em 1947 I* (Lisboa, 1950): 241–293.

¹⁴ Akhtar Husain Siddiqi, "Muslim Geographic Thought and the Influence of Greek Philosophy," *GeoJournal* 37.1 (1995): 13.

do not agree and almost unanimously hail al-Bakri as the best of the lot when it comes to accuracy.¹⁵

Other Arab scholars, notably Ibn Hawqal, Yaqut, Ibn Sa'id, and Ibn Ali Zar, add to our knowledge of the Sahara. The tradition they represent culminated in Ibn Khaldun, considered by some as the most important figure in historiography between Thucydides and Giambattista Vico. Born in 1332 in Tunis, Ibn Khaldun was a peripatetic scholar and statesman for hire. Like Confucius and Machiavelli, he wanted nothing more than to be a successful government official, albeit a high one, and like them he proved to be much better at theorizing about power than practicing it. His ambition took him from Andalusia to Egypt, working along the way for various masters but always seeming to end up on the wrong side of dynastic politics. His love of court intrigue landed him in jail, forced him into exile a number of times, and occasionally threatened him with the loss of his head.

With little carryover from portals two to three, the first step in reconstructing an ethnic history is to seek corroboration between sources within each portal. In dealing with groups beyond the walls, this is easier said than done. Among classical authors many people are mentioned only once, and those who enjoy multiple references are often put in different places.¹⁶ While nomadic peoples did wander around, we are left in some instances wondering if these are the same people or different people whose names have become interchanged. This problem occurs to a much less extent among Arab authors, and when it does, it is often an indication that a particular people actually did change their location.

Conformity among sources often indicates borrowing or plagiarizing. We read the same accounts over and over again, sometimes practically verbatim. Among the ancients Herodotus serves as the font of all knowledge in his description of the peoples of the eastern Sahara.¹⁷ The use of Herodotus became abuse in some hands like that

¹⁵ Selections from al-Bakri, al-Idrisi, Ibn Khaldun, and many others can be found in *Corpus of Early Arab Sources for West African History* [hereafter *Corpus*], eds. N. Levtzion and J.F.P. Hopkins, trans. J.F.P. Hopkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), and in *Recueil des Sources Arabes Concernant l'Afrique Occidentale du VIII^e au XVI^e Siècle*, ed. and trans. Joseph M. Cuoq (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1975).

¹⁶ For examples see Jehan Desanges, *Catalogue des tribus africaines de l'antiquité classique à l'ouest du Nil* (Dakar: University of Dakar, Faculté des lettres et des sciences humaines, Publications de la Section d'histoire, No. 4, 1962), pp. 34, 62, 140, 225–227.

¹⁷ For an example of borrowing from Herodotus, see Pliny, V.8.45.

of the anonymous author of a periplus (nautical guide) known as Pseudo-Scylax from the mid-fourth century B.C.E. Pseudo-Scylax left a description of the black peoples the Greeks called Ethiopians who lived in the Atlantic region south of the Pillars of Hercules, a great blank spot through much of the ancient period. Alas, Pseudo-Scylax produced pseudo-geography by taking some limited nautical information he got from the Carthaginians, which may have been misinformation to start, and combining it with stereotypes common in Greek literature and Herodotus's description of the Ethiopians, who lived south of Egypt. Pseudo-Scylax apparently thought that Ethiopians were Ethiopians, and information about those who lived in the Nile Valley could be used heuristically to describe others who lived on the Moroccan coast or anywhere in between.¹⁸

Writers not only borrowed from each other, they sometimes altered information, and once tampering has been detected, the whole text comes under suspicion. The oldest extant copies of Ptolemy's *Geographia*, for example, come from the thirteenth century and the printed edition from 1475, allowing more than a millennium for corruptions to seep into the text, as indeed they did. Copyists made unintentional mistakes, but scholars also made deliberate changes, including additions in the belief they were improving Ptolemy's work. Today there exist over fifty surviving manuscripts, some of which are at such variance modern scholars have found it nearly impossible to produce a single acceptable version in translation.¹⁹ But the problems with Ptolemy pale next to those associated with another author from the beginning of the fourth portal, although some may see Leo Africanus as representing the transition between third and fourth.

The work of Leo Africanus, a man who was said to have eyewitnessed what he wrote about, contains a bounty of bloopers large and small. In one of his most memorable gaffes, he reports that the Niger River, which he supposedly followed across Sudanic Africa, flows east to west when it actually flows west to east. What went wrong with Leo? To begin with, he wrote his book in Arabic, then translated it

¹⁸ Raoul Lonis, "Les Éthiopiens du Pseudo-Scylax: Mythe ou Réalité Géographique?" in *Le Sol, la parole et l'écrit; 2000 ans d'histoire africaine; mélanges en hommage à Raymond Mauny* (Paris: Société Française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer, Librairie L'Harmattan, 1981), pp. 385–394.

¹⁹ J. Lennart Berggren and Alexander Jones, *Ptolemy's Geography: An Annotated Translation of the Theoretical Chapters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 42–50.

into Italian, a language in which he was not fluent and probably had trouble writing. He worked in the Vatican under the patronage of the pope, where he was doubtless provided with “help” by parties who had ample opportunity to mistranslate, misinterpret, and misstate his data. His book was written in 1526 but not published until 1550. During the interval it came into the hands of one Jean-Baptiste Ramusio, who may have completely rewritten it. The original did not survive. The Italian edition was subsequently translated into English in 1600 by a fellow named John Pory, offering still another opportunity for alteration. Exactly what Leo saw, what he surmised, what he was told, and what he never said but is attributed to him is so jumbled it is impossible to untangle. Only the degree of contamination is in question.²⁰

Authors sometimes drew from a common source no longer identifiable. Groups became a part of the literature, living on in the words of geographers, historians, and poets long after they ceased to exist—if, in fact, they ever really had existed.²¹ The practice of copying from earlier works allowed many original sources that are now lost to survive in fragmented form. Thus much of al-Bakri comes from Muhammad b. Yusuf al-Warraaq, who lived a century earlier in the North African commercial center of Qayrawan, an excellent place to pick up information on the Sahara. Al-Bakri even borrowed his title, *The Book of Routes and Realms*, from al-Warraaq.

Among the Arabs, al-Idrisi and, to a lesser extent, al-Bakri were favorite sources. Both supplied Ibn Khaldun with much of his information on the Sanhaja, although for al-Bakri this appears to have come indirectly through an early-fourteenth-century text attributed to Ibn Abi Zar in which the original al-Bakri material was “perhaps . . . manipulated.”²² Ibn Khaldun was unusual among Arab writers in that he used a few non-Muslim sources, including a world history survey from

²⁰ Leo Africanus's work is available in English in a three-volume edition under the title *The History and Description of Africa and of the Notable Things Therein Contained*. For his statement on the Niger, see vol. I, p. 124. The best modern translation is by A. Epaulard, *Description de l'Afrique*, 2 vols. (Paris: Librairie d'Amerique et d'Orient, 1980). For a good examination of the problems in Leo's account, see Humphrey J. Fisher, “Leo Africanus and the Songhay Conquest of Hausaland,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* XI, 1 (1978): 86–112.

²¹ A good example of a people who may never have existed but who lived on in the literature is the Lotophagi, or “Lotus Eaters,” who first appear in Homer's *Odyssey* (IX.95; XXIII.311). Herodotus includes the Lotophagi in his tour of the peoples of North Africa, as do Ptolemy (IV.3; 6; 12) and later writers.

²² Hopkins and Levzion in *Corpus*, pp. 234, 318.

the Roman period by the Christian writer Paulus Orosius, which in turn drew on Sallust, Tacitus, Livy, and others.²³

Ptolemy clearly believed in building on secondary sources rather than starting with oral tradition and primary source material, and he admits that much of his information comes from Marinus of Tyre, who lived about a half century earlier. Both Marinus and Ptolemy used still older sources now unknown except for a scholar named Eratosthenes, who had been chief librarian in Alexandria several centuries earlier. The work of Marinus and Eratosthenes survives only through Ptolemy.

Strabo is selective in his borrowing, using only those he considered to be "honorable," such as the second century B.C.E. Syrian Poseidonius of Apameia, who wrote a fifty-two book history that is now lost.²⁴ Diodorus Siculus wrote an equally enormous work, most of which did survive and in which he seems to have borrowed from everyone, honorable or not. Diodorus did not bother to blend information from different sources but rather used it sequentially, allowing passages from otherwise lost texts to survive. He was, as one modern observer put it, "an expert with scissors and paste [who] paraphrased the work of better men."²⁵

Whether authors credited their sources or not (and the Arabs more often did so than the ancients), much of the time it is easy to tell what was original and what was borrowed. This still begs the question of where the information originated. Little information seems to have come from firsthand observation. Herodotus traveled to Cyrenaica on the Libyan coast, Strabo went up the Nile, and Pliny and Diodorus Siculus did some snooping around although not in the Sahara. Al-Ya'qubi visited North Africa, and Ibn Hawqal ventured even farther; his account seems to indicate that he crossed the Sahara although he probably went no farther than the northern oasis of Sijilmasa in Morocco.²⁶ Ibn Battuta crossed and recrossed the desert. Al-Bakri stayed in Spain, where he got his information from talking to travelers and reading books, and Ibn Khaldun made his way across the more pleasant parts of North Africa. Ptolemy may have visited undeter-

²³ Charles Issawi, "Ibn Khaldun on Ancient History: A Study in Sources," in Charles Issawi, *Cross-Cultural Encounters and Conflicts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 51–77.

²⁴ Strabo mentions some of his main sources in his introduction; see *Geography* 1.2.1.

²⁵ Pardon E. Tillinshast, *Approaches to History: Selections in the Philosophy of History from the Greeks to Hegel* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1963), p. 8.

²⁶ N. Levtzion, "Ibn Hawqal, the Cheque and Awdaghust," *Journal of African History* 9 (1968): 223–233.

mined areas in the eastern part of the continent, but he is not likely to have ventured into the desert.

Authors were at the mercy of their sources. Al-Bakri is superior to al-Idrisi because he was more critical in using them. The stories Leo picked up were probably more gossip than information, and if his text really originated with him, he seems to have had an extraordinary penchant for obtaining inaccurate information an inordinate amount of time, a sort of reverse al-Bakri syndrome. Herodotus stands in contrast to Diodorus Siculus because Herodotus had little from which to cut and paste since the writing of history began with himself. Consequently, his account was based more on oral sources than were those of subsequent writers. The sometimes maligned Herodotus anticipates his modern critics by providing warnings like "I am only repeating what the Libyans themselves say."²⁷ He assumes his readers will sort out the substance from the fluff for themselves.

No doubt Arab accounts are superior to classical accounts in accurately describing the peoples of the Sahara largely because of one profound event that occurred in the interval: the opening of the trans-Saharan trade system. In the ancient period some trade existed into and out of the Sahara with the secretive Carthaginians playing some undetermined role on the north side. But this was a haphazard relay system in which goods were passed from oasis to oasis, people to people, until they were consumed or, in rare cases, emerged on the other side. The coming of Islam with its system of commercial law and larger world contacts and the use of the camel as a cross-desert beast of burden opened highways to trade. None of the ancients had informants who had actually crossed the desert; all of the Arab writers could find such people if they so wished.²⁸

If the desert beckoned, few from the third portal were actually compelled to examine firsthand what they wrote about. Only one stands in

²⁷ *Histories* IV.173, 187, 191.

²⁸ In ancient sources references to trans-Saharan crossings are few and problematic. Athenaeus's *The Deipnosophists* offhandedly mentions that "Mago of Carthage crossed the desert three times, eating dry meal and having nothing to drink" (II.44). Herodotus relates the story of a crossing that is almost as bizarre (II.32). It involved five young Nasamones, who set out in search of adventure, deciding to explore the desert. Eventually they were captured and carried off by little black men to a town beside a crocodile-infested river flowing from west to east. The town was said to be inhabited by wizards. The Nasamones escaped and returned home. Ptolemy (I.8.4; I.10-11) reports that a certain Julius Maternus from Leptis Magna, accompanied the King of the Garamantes on a four-month expedition southward to Agisymba, "the place where the rhinoceri gather." Wherever this was, Julius Maternus's trip produced no long range consequences.

the forefront of available sources. Ibn Battuta was obsessed with wanderlust; had he been a European, Marco Polo would be a footnote today. Altogether Ibn Battuta was on the road about thirty years, during which he crossed the boundaries of perhaps as many as fifty modern countries. The total distance he traversed has been estimated at between seventy thousand and eighty thousand miles. Most of this was in Asia, but his last trip took him from Morocco, his homeland, to the Empire of Mali and back over a circuitous route that gave him plenty of time in the Sahara. Ibn Battuta was no scholar of the Ibn Khaldun or al-Bakri mold; he was a traveler extraordinaire and is best at describing what he saw. He shows little interest in history, but he was curious about customs if they were sufficiently strange or offensive, and frowning on them seems to have been one of his guilty pleasures.²⁹

In his trip across the desert, Ibn Battuta traveled with merchant caravans. Although trans-Saharan trade involved many products, gold was the magnet. Once on the desert's south side, North African merchants were likely to stay in Sahelian towns such as Walata and Timbuktu, where they were fed a steady diet of misinformation by Sudanese merchants, the Wangara, who brought the gold from the mining areas. The miners were said to be everything from deformed troglodytes to gigantic ants; only through a mysterious process called the silent trade would they part with their treasure. And woe unto interlopers, at least according to the twelfth century geographer al-Zuhri, who warned that anyone who laid eyes on them would become blind on the spot.³⁰

The Wangara must be credited with one of the most successful campaigns of deception in history, and Wangaran lies were still appearing in history books well into the twentieth century. We have to wonder if this happened earlier with the Carthaginians playing the role of the Wangara and the lustrous gems they were famous for that came from some unknown spot in the Sahara, the mysterious carbuncles, assuming the role of gold. The Carthaginians maintained such effective silence about their commercial contacts they remain largely unknown to us today. Part of their strategy seems to have been to ply curious outsiders, particularly Greeks, with a healthy dose of fable. Some of this

²⁹ The complete Ibn Battuta can be found in *Ibn Battuta: Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354*, 3 vols., ed. and trans. H.A.R. Gibb (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1929; reprint 1983). Portions relating to his African trip can also be found in *Corpus*, pp. 279-304, and *Ibn Battuta in Black Africa*, eds. and trans. Said Hamdun and Noel King (London: Rex Collins, 1975).

³⁰ *Corpus*, p. 96. On the Wangara and the silent trade, see P. F. de Moraes Farias, "Silent Trade: Myth and Historical Evidence," *History in Africa* 1 (1974): 9-24.

ended up as so-called “false secrets” in the works of Pseudo-Scylax,³¹ and smaller amounts probably seeped into more authoritative accounts, including perhaps Herodotus.

All of this information, the valid and the bogus, gathered by all the sources available today from Herodotus to Ibn Khaldun, has been used to classify the peoples of North Africa into groups. Lumping people together under rubrics that differentiate them from other people is a normal strategy in trying to make sense of the past, and one convenient system is the use of ethnicity since it seems to work well in the modern world. Sometimes it also works in the ancient world.³² No one denies there were clearly identifiable people we can label as the “Egyptians” or the “Greeks.” Unfortunately, it does not always work as well when we have to look through the eyes of the Egyptians or the Greeks at other peoples.

In classifying the peoples of North Africa, Procopius offered the fewest categories, Libyans and Maures, friend and foe. He served as court historian for Emperor Justinian in the sixth century and wrote political and military history, not ethnography. While his division has some basis in location, it is essentially a political one.³³ On the other extreme are Ptolemy and Ibn Khaldun, both of whom refer to scores of people. One of the most curious systems of categorization comes from Ibn Hawqal, who wrote in the late tenth century. A native of Bagh-

³¹ An examination of Punic false secrets can be found in Jerome Carcopino, *Le Maroc Antique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), p. 112.

³² An interesting case of imposing ethnicity involves the Saharan protohistoric period and developed from the study of rock art. Archaeologists and art historians noted a style that they dubbed the “Bovidian” because of frequent domestic cattle scenes in wall paintings from the last wet period of the Sahara. Soon scholars extended the use of the term “Bovidian” to the pastoral society they thought it depicted and eventually to the people themselves. The Bovidians became a full-fledged ethnic group; for a description of Bovidian society, see G. Camps, “Beginnings of Pastoralism and Cultivation in North-West Africa and the Sahara: Origins of the Berbers,” in *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 1, ed. J. Desmond Clark (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 570–580. Unfortunately, history is never this tidy. The more we have learned about the peoples who produced the rock art of the Sahara, the more complicated the picture has become. The Bovidians, as it turned out, were not a single group but several different, apparently unrelated groups. Nor did the artistic unity hold up with different styles varying from place to place. Scholars had to conclude that the prehistory of the Sahara could not be reconstructed from just rock art. For the basic works in this controversy, see Fabrizio Mori, *Tadrart Acacus: Arte supestre e culture del Sahara preistorico* (Turin: G. Einaudi, 1965); Alfred Muzolini, “Le ‘Bovidien’ dans l’art rupestre saharien: un réexamen critique,” *L’Anthropologie* 96 (1992): 737–758.

³³ *Bellum Vandalicum* (hereafter B.V.) III.16.3,9; 17.6; 20.19 IV.10.5–24. For text and modern translation, see Procopius, *History of the Wars*, trans. H. B. Dewing (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1916).

dad, he traveled extensively in the western regions of Islam, where his curiosity led him to gather much information about the Sahara. At one point in his work, he suddenly announces that his readers may become confused by the many Berber clans and tribes he mentions, so to help matters he divides them into the “pure Sanhaja” and the “Banu Tanamak,” the difference being that the latter “were originally Sudan [black] whose skin and complexion became white because they live close to the North.”³⁴ He lists nineteen names under the pure Sanhaja and twenty-two under the Banu Tanamak without indicating whether these are political, cultural, geographic, social, or linguistic in nature. Nor does he specify the difference between the Sanhaja and other Berbers.

Ibn Hawqal is trying to impose some order on a segmented society. Other authors were interested in larger entities that we are tempted to see as ethnicities; much of the time, however, we find ourselves dealing with generic labeling. In certain instances, labels imposed from the outside stuck to a people. Numidia, for example, became a major player in the North African state system fighting in the Punic Wars. Later the Numidians took the wrong side in the civil war between Pompey and Caesar and ended up as a province in the Roman Empire. “Numidian,” according to both Pliny and Strabo, came from the word “nomad.”³⁵ In a similar way, names sometimes appear that relate more to social class than ethnicity. From their earliest appearance in the Sahara, the Berbers had a pronounced class structure. Tuaregs often identified themselves by class rather than tribe, especially if they were of noble or warrior status. This practice may be as old as Herodotus, who mentions among his Libyan tribes the Maxyes, a name that appears to be related to a common Berber root word meaning noble.³⁶

Obviously, classical and Arab authors named people for different reasons at different times. They didn’t mean for such designations to work for us according to our modern sense of ethnicity, and often they don’t. For the ancients the ethnic picture of the Sahara was less a mosaic than a spilled jigsaw puzzle, and those who were trying to piece it together had no idea what it was supposed to look like. One simple

³⁴ *Corpus*, p. 50. On Ibn Hawqal’s lists see Tadeusz Lewicki, “A propos d’une liste de tribus berbères d’Ibn Hawqal,” *Folia Orientalia* 1 (1959): 128–135, and an update in “Du nouveau sur la liste des tribus berbères d’Ibn Hawkal,” *Folia Orientalia* 13 (1971): 171–200.

³⁵ *N.H.* V.2.22; *Geography* II.5.33.

³⁶ *Histories* IV.191. On relating Maxyes to Amazigh and Imazighen, see Oric Bates, *The Eastern Libyans: An Essay* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1970; reprint of 1914 edition), p. 77, and Desanges, *Catalogue*, p. 111.

solution was to divide Saharans into three general groups: the Gaetulians, who were mostly nomadic and lived toward the west; the Garamantes, who were mostly sedentary and lived toward the east; and the Ethiopians, who were distinguished less by lifestyle, economy, or even location than by their darker skin since the word “Ethiopian” is derived from the Greek meaning something to the effect of “person with a burnt face.”³⁷

To the Romans the Gaetulians were a numerous people who lived south of the Atlas Mountains on the fringe of the Sahara. Occasionally they appear in classical accounts as mercenaries fighting against the Romans in North African wars or as angry tribesmen senselessly raiding decent settled folk who lived under Roman protection. They thunder out of their haunts, commit some mischief, and are caught and wiped out or escape back into their netherworld. At various times they are referred to in the context of a tribe, a confederation of tribes, a nation, and a collection of independent groups sharing a similar lifestyle, which is probably the most accurate, assuming there was some reality to the Gaetulians. And if the Gaetulians were not an invention of the Romans, they were certainly a convenience. Their name may have originally referred to direction and meant nothing more than “dweller of the southlands” or simply “southerner.”

If most modern scholars are not going to be satisfied with an ancient author’s generic label, how much farther can we go? Are we chasing white rabbits in search of a definition of ethnicity that can be applied universally to the premodern world so we can classify into categories all its peoples, not just the ones who lived in states and left records? And what should these categories be based on? Even the largest categories like “race” can be confusing, as in the case of two of Ptolemy’s most enigmatic peoples, the Leukaethiopes and the Melanogaetulians. The Leukaethiopes, literally “white Ethiopians,” or, since the term “Ethiopian” referred to skin color, the “white black men,” were located by Ptolemy in the interior of southern Morocco. Ptolemy did not invent them since earlier Pliny had also mentioned them. Pliny put them south of the desert between the Gaetulians, who by almost all accounts were white, and the Nigritae, who were thought to be black. The closest neighbors to the Leukaethiopes, according to Ptolemy, were the Libyaegyptians, literally the “Egyptian Libyans,” another oxymoron. Ptolemy characterizes the Melanogaetulians, the “black Gaetulians,” as one of the “great races” of Libya, but Pliny does not mention them,

³⁷ Harris, *Africa*, pp. 5–6, 24.

nor does any other author who is not borrowing from Ptolemy. Historians often assume both people were of mixed race although some suggestion has been made combining race and culture: the Leukaethiopes were whites who lived in an Ethiopian-style culture while the Melanogaetulians were blacks who lived in a Gaetulian-style culture.³⁸ Such an idea assumes a far stronger tie between race and culture than may be comfortable, especially since the interior of North Africa had too much mixing and matching of cultures and peoples to draw such distinctions. About all we can conclude from the Leukaethiopes and Melanogaetulians is that the ethnic map was very complex and thus very confusing even to an observer with the resources of Ptolemy.

A broader question concerns the fate of the Ethiopians who lived on the northern side of the Sahara. Herodotus first mentions Ethiopians as troglodytes who lived in proximity to the Garamantes; and Strabo, Pliny, Ptolemy, Sallust, and others also mention various groups of Ethiopians. They are not referring to the Sudanese since Strabo expressed a commonly held belief that on the other side of Ethiopia there lay "desert, without water, and habitable only in spots, both on the east and on the west."³⁹ Ptolemy mentions the Xulihkeis, the Oukhalikkeis, and the Aganginae as the southernmost of the Ethiopians in the west, and from his description it appears evident they are still on the northern side of the desert.⁴⁰ Strabo tells of an ancient tradition "that Ethiopians overran Libya as far as Dyris [the Atlas Mountains] and that some of them stayed in Dyris, while others occupied a great part of the sea-board."⁴¹ Ethiopian tribes were reported to be among the neighbors of Numidia, Mauretania, and even Carthage.

By the time Arab writers began jotting down their observations, the only organized black group left in the Sahara was the Tebu (Teda), who lived in the fortress-like Tibesti Mountains. In the interval did all the other Ethiopians migrate south? People under pressure often move, sometimes across large stretches, but a vast movement of peoples from one side of the Sahara to the other in a relatively short period of time would have been a death march rather than a migration. Some suggestion has been made that the Berbers adopted the camel as an unstoppable fighting machine and used it to dislodge the Ethiopians from

³⁸ Ptolemy, *Geographia* IV.6.6; Pliny, N.H. V.8.43. Also see Desanges, *Catalogue*, pp. 219–220, 223, and Stéphane Gsell, *Histoire ancienne de l'Afrique du Nord*, 8 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1914–1928), 1, p. 299.

³⁹ *Geography* I.2.25.

⁴⁰ *Geographia* IV.6.6.

⁴¹ *Geography* I.2.26.

their North African homeland. If so, why didn't the Ethiopians adopt the camel as well? Probably because the camel was not an unstoppable fighting machine, not nearly as effective as the horse, which continued to be the mount of choice in battle.⁴² And underlying this thesis is the assumption of some kind of awful ancient race war in which the white tribes ganged up against the black tribes and expelled or exterminated them. No evidence exists to support any such assumption. The most likely scenario is the simplest. The Ethiopian tribes were absorbed by the Berber tribes, or they became oasis dwellers known today as the Haratin, or both. Perhaps Ibn Hawqal's strange report of the Banu Tanamak, who originally were black but became white, was the distorted echo of a real event, the absorption of tribes formerly considered as Ethiopian into the Sanhaja.

Moving beyond race, language—one of the defining characteristics in the modern concept of ethnicity—is rarely mentioned by classical or Arab authors except to note that their subjects spoke some form of gibberish. This began with Herodotus's offhand remark about the Ethiopian troglodytes: "The language they speak is completely different from any other language, and sounds like bats squeaking,"⁴³ and continues through the sixth-century poet Corippus, who, in referring to Berber tribes, notes that their "barbaric languages bark in savage terms."⁴⁴ Authors don't usually distinguish gibberishes from each other, nor do they state categorically that language was a major criterion for dividing the peoples of North Africa. Perhaps, however, we should assume this. Tacitus, who falls into the Sallust school in his discussion of North Africa but whose study of the German tribes is unsurpassed in classical ethnography, does refer to the importance of language in his review of peoples to the north of the Roman Empire.⁴⁵ In other regions of Africa, including nearby West Africa, language has often served as an insignia of ethnicity. Ibn Khaldun does distinguish the Berbers from the Arabs and other peoples by their language. According to him, the Arabs gave the Berbers their name, the origin of which

⁴² Brent D. Shaw, "The Camel in Roman North Africa and the Sahara: History, Biology, and Human Economy," *Bulletin de l'Institut Fondamental d'Afrique noire*, sér. B 41.4 (1979): 663–721.

⁴³ *Histories* IV.183.

⁴⁴ The most useful modern edition of Corippus is J. Diggle and F.R.D. Goodyear, *Flavii Cresconii Corippi Iohannides seu de Bellis Libycis* Lib.viii (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). Corippus's second book, in which he provides a catalogue of tribes in geographical order, can be found in Vincent Zarini, *Berbères ou barbares? Recherches sur le livre second de la Johannide de Corippe* (Nancy: ADRA, 1997), pp. 121–131.

⁴⁵ *Germania* XLIII.

meant something like gibberish: “The word *berbera* signifies, in Arabic, a jumble of unintelligible cries; from which one says in speaking of the lion that it *berbère* when it utters confused roars.”⁴⁶

The unintelligible cries were the many local dialects Berber was divided into, by one modern count an astounding twelve hundred, although the situation at the time of Ibn Khaldun can only be guessed. And while Berber languages show relatively little internal differentiation in comparison to other branches of the Afro-Asiatic family, a detailed language map of Berber speakers would have the pattern of spilled vegetable soup.⁴⁷ In the past scholars have tried to get a handle on this so-called “language of dialects” by recognizing two or three dialect clusters—Zanatiya, Sanhaja, and sometimes Masmuda (which, when not recognized as separate, is joined with Sanhaja)—based on phonetic and morphological variations and location. Zanata, Sanhaja, and Masmuda are not terms used in the writings of the ancients but do appear, full-blown, with Arab authors who draw a clear distinction between them. The Masmuda were concentrated in the High Atlas and surrounding areas while in the rest of North Africa the Zanata (those who speak Zanatiya) were more common in the north and east and the Sanhaja in the south and west. The word “Sanhaja” means those who speak Zenaga (Znaga), the major dialect of the western desert.

The Zanata-Sanhaja classification system has never worked very well—the people of the Kabyle Mountains that border on the Mediterranean in eastern Algeria, for example, were Sanhaja speakers—and for at least the last millennium Zanatiya and Sanhaja speakers have been scattered somewhat helter-skelter across North Africa. Recently it has come under criticism by linguists, which has hardly helped historians to sort out ethnic groups from a thousand years ago.⁴⁸ At this point it does seem clear that language was more important in defining group identity than observers stated or were likely to credit. Islamic scholars already had a favorite classification system based on the Old

⁴⁶ *Histoire* I:168. In another place, Ibn Khaldun offers an alternate if similar explanation. According to this, a Yemenite king named Afriq b. Qays b. Sayfi, who lived at the time of Moses, often raided North Africa and killed many Berbers: “He gave them the name of Berbers when he heard their jargon and asked what that barbarah was.” Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, ed. N. J. Dawood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 14.

⁴⁷ For a background on the origin of Berber and its derivatives, see P. Behrens, “Wanderungsbewegungen und Sprache der frühen saharanischen Viehzüchter,” *Sprache und Geschichte in Afrika* 6 (1984–85): 135–216.

⁴⁸ Lionel Galand, *Langue et Littérature Berbères: Vingt cinq ans d'études* (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1979), p. 19.

Testament tradition of establishing everyone's place on the tree of mankind back to Adam.

Once past the basic Sanhaja-Zanata split, a combination of language, geography, and genealogy seems to have played varying roles in determining group identity. The Sanhaja were themselves divided into three "races," according to Ibn Khaldun. The first comprised groups from the eastern Maghrib, and the third lived to the west and were mountain dwellers. The second, the desert Sanhaja or "Mulaththamun," a term popular among Arab writers from the time of al-Idrisi, seemed to have shared with their northern namesakes little more than their name and, presumably, similarity of dialect.⁴⁹ The Mulaththamun were, in turn, differentiated into groups, always including the Lamtuna, Masufa, Gudala (Juddala), and Lamta, and occasionally the Targa, Wurika, and others.⁵⁰ On first appearance they seem to have enjoyed more unity than later. In a list of countries al-Ya'qubi mentions the "Kingdom of Sanhaja." Both Ibn Hawqal and al-Bakri discuss a powerful tenth century king, Tinbarutan b. Usfayshar (a.k.a. Tin Yaratan b. Wisana b. Nizar), and Ibn Abi Zar adds that he was "their [the Sanhaja] first king in the desert." Two reigns later the Sanhaja decided they were tired of monarchy, so they killed the king. One hundred twenty years passed until in 1038 they agreed to accept a new one, who was from the Lamtuna. He was killed in battle not long thereafter, and his replacement was a Gudala. Ibn Hawqal called Tinbarutan the "king of all the Sanhaja," but this new arrangement seems to have included only those two groups in what appears to be more than an alliance but less than a state. Perhaps confederation best describes it, if indeed it happened. All the information from the post-Tinbarutan period originates from a single source, Ibn Abi Zar, who lived four centuries later.⁵¹

Any sense of Sanhajan unity was swept away with the rise and fall of the Almoravid Empire in the mid-eleventh to mid-twelfth centuries. Rivalry within the Almoravid movement between the Gudala and the Lamtuna led to a civil war culminating in a ghastly battle in which the Lamtuna force was annihilated and the Gudala nearly so. The Sanhaja

⁴⁹ Much of volume II of Ibn Khaldun's *Histoire des Berbères* is devoted to the three races of the Sanhaja. See in particular pp. 4–5, 64–65, 104–105, and 121–122.

⁵⁰ Many variations exist. Al-Idrisi, for example, splits the Lamta from the Sanhaja and includes the Masufa with the Lamta but puts the Lamtuna, Gudala, and "many others" with the Sanhaja. Al-Dimashqi in the early fourteenth century included the Lamtuna, Masufa, and Gudala but also the Tazakkaght, who are not mentioned by any other author, and the Kakkam, which other authors treated as a place, the semi-mythical land of the veil-wearers. See *Corpus*, pp. 127, 209.

⁵¹ In *Corpus* see pp. 48–49 for Ibn Hawqal and pp. 236–237 for Ibn Abi Zar.

never came back together again, not even in the form of a military alliance. Cataclysmic struggles between confederations of Sanhaja and Zanata, who are portrayed as inveterate enemies, were limited to a series of complicated proxy wars in the tenth century. The “then” superpowers of the western Mediterranean, the Fatimid Empire of Ifriqiya (Tunisia) and the Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba (Spain) were locked in a struggle for hegemony with Morocco as the principal theatre of war. The Fatimids used a major Sanhaja group (not of the desert), and the Umayyads used mostly Zanata groups. These conflicts were dynastic, religious, political, and economic in origin but hardly ethnic, and they had no lasting impact on groups in the Sahara. However, raids and even wars between Sanhaja groups, particularly the Lamtuna and Gudala, are a frequent theme, and seem to have been essentially struggles between competing groups over economic resources such as salt mines, highland pastures, and oases.⁵²

Determining identity from the top down—an individual would be considered as Berber, Sanhaja, and Lamtuna or Masufa—may resolve our need to categorize better than it reflects the historical reality of the ninth or fourteenth centuries. In segmented societies, the farther down the network of sociopolitical relationships, the greater the sense of belonging, which is why there was no concept of a Berber nation. Extended families were incorporated into descent groups or lineages, which combined to form clans based on a shared common ancestor, although this was often more the result of wishful thinking than biology.⁵³ Genealogies were easy to alter or, if necessary, to create outright. In the simplest model, clans should be grouped into tribes, but crossing the line between clan and tribe takes us from relatively straightforward social constructs into something else indeed. It would be nice if we could perform a quiet euthanasia on the much overused and abused word “tribe.” As a word, “tribe” is too charged and, what is worse, too vague. It has been misemployed to describe so many different real and imagined social, political, and ethnic configurations that it has come to mean nothing. Ancient authors had no real sense of segmented societies. Herodotus ticks off a list of so-called tribes beginning at the border of Egypt and moving westward to beyond the Gulf

⁵² For the Sanhaja-Zanata conflict, see Henri Terrasse, *Histoire du Maroc*, vol. I (Casablanca: Editions Atlantides, 1949). For intra-Sanhaja conflicts, see H. T. Norris, *Saharan Myth and Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 78, and E. Ann McDougall, “The Sahara Reconsidered: Pastoralism Politics and Salt from the Ninth through the Twelfth Centuries,” *African Economic History* 12 (1983): 276–277.

⁵³ On segmented societies and traditional African culture, see *Die Völker Afrikas und ihre traditionellen kulturen: Studien zur kulturkunde*, ed. H. Baumann, 2 vols. (Wiesbaden: H. Baumann, 1975 and 1979).

of Syrtis and southwestward to the Ahaggar Mountains, noting the peculiarities of each, and his successors dutifully followed his example, lumping everyone who lived beyond the boundaries of states into tribes without ever questioning what a tribe was.

Arab authors perpetuated the notion of tribe. Ibn Abi Zar divided the Sanhaja into seventy tribes but never tells his readers why these are tribes or even what criteria are used to differentiate one from another. At least Herodotus has his tribes eating different foods and practicing different customs, including varying forms of sexual misconduct. We can sidestep tribes by lumping the indigenous peoples of North Africa together under the rubric of “Berbers” and declaring that this constitutes an ethnicity,⁵⁴ but this is a cop-out since obviously there was some reality to the sociopolitical units that we know of as tribes. We may not have any more of an idea as to what constituted a tribe than did Ibn Abi Zar or Herodotus, but since they used this word as the basis for their categorization of peoples, we are stuck with it. Terms such as tribe and even ethnicity survive because they are conveniently ambiguous; they grease our passage through the confusion of social identity.

Unlike Herodotus, Ibn Abi Zar did recognize that his subjects lived in segmented societies,⁵⁵ but the framework that he and other Arab writers imposed was genealogical rather than anthropological. Groups were defined as descendants of specific people, so exactly who the Berbers issued from was a much debated topic. The most popular starting place was the Holy Land, and first among the candidates was Goliath. After David killed Goliath, the Philistines, frequently confused with the Canaanites, were said to have left their homeland and migrated to North Africa, where they became the Berbers. Not everyone who wanted to keep the Berbers in the Old Testament was convinced of the Goliath connection. One of the most popular accounts goes back to Noah’s children, Ham and Sem, among whom Satan was said to have sowed discord: “Ham, having become black because of a curse pronounced against him by his father, fled to the Maghrib to

⁵⁴ For general discussions of the Berbers as an ethnicity, see Michael Brett and Elizabeth Fentress, *The Berbers* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), pp. 4–6, and the introduction by Gabriel Camps in *Encyclopédie Berbère* (Aix-en-Provence: Edisud, 1984), I, pp. 8–13. G. H. Bousquet, *Les Berbères: Que Sais-je?* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967), pp. 7–12, chooses to see them as a language group rather than a “homogeneous ethnicity.”

⁵⁵ *Corpus*, p. 236.

hide in shame. . . . Berber, son of Kesludjim [Casluhim], one of his descendants, left numerous posterity in the Maghrib.”⁵⁶

Understandably, many of the Berbers did not want their family trees rooted in Goliath, Ham, or other Biblical ne'er-do-wells. Muslims all over the Islamic world often tried to establish ancestral connections with the Prophet's homeland, the Arabian peninsula, and the Berbers were no exception. A popular theory among them was that they were long-lost Yemenites. Ibn Khaldun chronicled all the stories he could find concerning Berber origins and demolished each in turn. He characterized one story that featured an invasion by an ancient Yemenite king as an “example of silly statements by historians.”⁵⁷ Nor did he mince words concerning another popular theory: “The opinion which represents them as the children of Goliath or Amalecites, and which has them emigrate from Syria, willy-nilly, is so untenable that it merits classification as a fable.” But Ibn Khaldun proved more effective as a critic than in offering a viable alternative. In the end he, too, traced the Berbers back to Genesis: “Now the real fact, the fact which dispenses with all hypothesis, is this: the Berbers are the children of Canaan, the son of Ham, son of Noah.” Down this line came Berr who had two sons, Baranis and Madghis al-Abtar. All Berber tribes descended from one or the other of these brothers and were classified as either Baranes or Botr.⁵⁸

The Sanhaja were Baranes, and the Zanata were Botr. Further up the tree on the Baranes side were the Mulaththamun, who, according to al-Idrisi, descended from two eponyms, Sanhaj and Lamt. They lived in the Maghrib and were the sons of a mother named Tazakkat (Tizki), “the lame.” But Sanhaj and Lamt produced troublesome broods who tried to conquer the other Berbers and were finally driven into the desert, where they became nomads living in tents and surviving on the milk and meat of camels.⁵⁹

Arab-imposed, male-centered genealogy tells us more about contemporary Arab historiography than it does about Berber ethnography. This is not to dismiss the importance of perceived descent, which was matrilineal among most Berbers, particularly those of the desert. Etymological analysis seems to indicate that this tradition had its roots

⁵⁶ Ibn Khaldun, *Histoire* I, 177–178. The Ham connection appears in al-Ya'qubi, *Corpus*, p. 21. The Goliath connection comes a little later in Ibn Hawqal, *Corpus*, p. 48. Much earlier, in the first century C.E., the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus claimed that the Gaetulians descended from Havilah, the son of Cush, grandson of Ham.

⁵⁷ Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, p. 14.

⁵⁸ *Histoire* I, 173–185. Also see R. W. Bulliet, “Botr et Baranes: Hypotheses sur l'histoire des Berbes,” *Annales Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 36 (1981): 104–116.

⁵⁹ *Corpus*, p. 127.

deep in the past: the words for brother and sister in proto-Berber, for example, are “son of my mother” and “daughter of my mother” respectively.⁶⁰ The progenitor of Sanhaja and Tuareg alike was more often than not thought to be a woman, Tin Hinan of the Kel Ahaggar being the most well known. Whatever the real story behind the formation of a group like the Lamtuna, a large measure of their self-identity came from the commonly held belief that their eponymous ancestor was a woman named Lamtuna, and thus they were related “by blood” to each other.

One final aspect of Biblical-based genealogical history is worth noting: it did not start with the Arabs. About halfway through his work, Procopius suddenly announces that it is necessary to tell how the Maures came to Libya. He begins with Joshua and the Hebrews invading Palestine and thrashing everyone in sight. Several of the Canaanite tribes escaped by moving into Egypt, but finding it already crowded, continued on to Libya. Autochthonous people Procopius calls the “Children of the Soil” already lived there; Procopius does not say whether the Canaanites and the Children of the Soil fought or intermarried, only that the Canaanites became Maures.⁶¹ Procopius did not invent the tie between the peoples of North Africa and the Old Testament: for the Christians it goes back to St. Hippolyte in the early third century, but its origins can be seen even earlier in Flavius Josephus and Jewish tradition.⁶² However, Procopius’s story does establish a link between portals two and three. It is one of the few strands of continuity, even though it concerns a perceived rather than a real relationship, which brings us back to our original problem: Why does there appear to be such a level of discontinuity?

The almost complete break in nomenclature between the classical and Arab periods has to raise a few eyebrows. The names we use today come from the sources available to us. Some names originated with the people themselves, as in the case of the Mauri, at least according to Strabo.⁶³ Others came from neighbors, and some that ended up in Greek and Roman references were simply botched transliterations.⁶⁴ Authors confused names probably more often than we suspect. In his

⁶⁰ G. Marcy, “Les survivances juridiques de la parenté maternelle dans la coutume du Maroc Central,” *Actes du Congrès de l’institut des Hautes Études Marocaines* (Rabat, 1937), p. 33.

⁶¹ B.V. IV.10.12–24.

⁶² Yves Modéran, “Mythe et histoire aux derniers temps de l’Afrique antique: À propos d’un texte d’Ibn Khaldun,” *Revue Historique* CCCIII 2 (Avril–Juin 2001): 327–337.

⁶³ *Geography* XVII.3.2. Later the transliteration became “Moors.”

⁶⁴ In the opening paragraph of his discussion on Libya, Pliny complains, “The names of its peoples and towns are absolutely unpronounceable except by the natives,” *N.H.* V.1.

tour of the middle of the desert, Pliny notes that “the Blemmyae are reported to have no heads, their mouth and eyes being attached to their chests.”⁶⁵ Strabo and others describe a real people they referred to as the Blemmyae, who were nomads living below Egypt. Pliny’s Blemmyae, minus the name, were borrowed from Herodotus’s discussion of western Libya beyond the cultivated area: “There are enormous snakes there . . . donkeys with horns, dog-headed creatures, headless creatures with eyes in their chests (at least, that is what the Libyans say), wild men and wild women. . . .”⁶⁶ Still others were made up by the Greeks and Romans. Diodorus Siculus provides some egregious examples in his tour of peoples living south of Egypt, which includes the Ichthyophagi (fish eaters), Chelonophagi (turtle eaters), Rhizophagi (root eaters), Hylophagi (wood eaters), Spermatophagi (seed eaters), Stnithophagi (bird eaters), and Acnclophagi (locust eaters). Just to show his scheme was not entirely based on diet, he threw in the Simi (flat nosed). It is unlikely that people actually thought of themselves as being Hylophagi or Simi.⁶⁷

Diodorus is easy to pick on, so it is important to note that other scholars indulged in the same practice, if not quite so systematically. Ptolemy had his own Ichthyophagi, whom he put on the West African coast, and he also had the Skenitae, the “men of the tents.”⁶⁸ Pliny mentions the Logonpori, the “spear carriers” and the Nisicathae and the Nisitae, “names that mean ‘men with three’ or ‘with four eyes’—not because they really are like that but because they have a particularly keen sight in using arrows.”⁶⁹ In the third and fourth centuries a major threat to the Empire’s southern flank came from a “people” known as the Quinquegentanei, hardly a word from the Berber. It means simply the “five peoples,” obviously an alliance or confederation.⁷⁰

Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, and Europeans saw Saharan peoples not only through different portals but also with different lenses. It should not be surprising that they assigned different names to what

See Gustave Mercier, “La langue libyenne et la toponymie antique de l’Afrique du Nord,” *Journal Asiatique* 105 (1924): 189–320.

⁶⁵ N.H. V.8.46.

⁶⁶ *Geography* VIII.7; 135; *Histories* IV.191.

⁶⁷ B.H. III.15.1; 21.1; 23.1; 24.1–2; 28.1–2; 29.1. On names the Greeks gave to the Libyans, see Olivier Masson, “Grecs et Libyens en Cyrenaïque,” *Antiquités africaines* 10 (1976): 49–62.

⁶⁸ *Geographia* IV.8.2; IV.7.10.

⁶⁹ N.H. VI.35.194–195.

⁷⁰ Lionel Galand, “Les Quinquegentanei,” *Bulletin d’archéologie algérienne* IV (1970): 297–299.

they saw. And this is not to assume that the people being viewed kept the same names for themselves given the fluid nature of their social and political institutions. The change in portals signaled a general sweeping away of almost all old names.⁷¹ Scores of names from ancient authors are virtually meaningless today, and relating them to other peoples who came before or after is not only daunting but in many cases fruitless. As a point of comparison modern scholars often have a frustrating time with what should be a much easier task, that of identifying natural features. Ptolemy or Herodotus was told of a mountain range, or a river, or lakes, islands, bays, peaks, or valleys. The origin of most such reports was probably based on fact, but travelers had no good reason to be exact about what they saw nor had they the skills or tools to describe where. Thus finding Lake Tritonis, supposedly a big body of water separating eastern from western Libya, or the Nigris, Geir, Giris, and Nigeir rivers, all of which flowed across land that vaguely separated North Africa from West Africa and from which the Niger took its name, has proved to be more challenging than it should.⁷² To further complicate matters, towns, tribes, "lands," and occasionally natural features like mountains, lakes, and rivers were given interchangeable names. Ethnicities became cognomens and vice versa.

Associating a particular group with a geographical region can cause problems because some groups were nomadic, and occasionally settled groups or parts of groups relocated. Not only did different authors place the same people in different places; at times the same author did as well. Pliny mentions the Autoteles or Autolatae four different times, giving them what appears to be four separate locations, all of which were in modern Morocco. Ptolemy provides a fifth location, again in Morocco.⁷³ Ptolemy had groups of Pharousii in different places that were also different from where Strabo and Pliny had them, and Pliny

⁷¹ Major names originating in the classical world that survived into modern times include Africa, Libya, Ethiopia, and Berber (from the same root as barbarian, originally from the Greek, referring to people whose native language was not Greek). Neither the ancient Libyans nor the Ethiopians referred to themselves by these names nor did the Berbers for many centuries. They did not have a single name to designate themselves as a particular people because they did not consider themselves as such.

⁷² Lake Tritonis must have referred to the Chott Djerid or perhaps that body together with the Chott Melhir and several smaller chotts lying between. These are saline depressions that filled up with rainwater in the winter and spring, hardly the grand geographical features ancient authors made them out to be. On the search for the ancient Niger, see C. K. Meek, "The Niger and the Classics: The History of a Name," *Journal of African History* 1 (1960): 1–17.

⁷³ N.H. V.1.5; V.1.9; V.1.17; VI.36.201. In *Geographia* IV.6.6, Ptolemy has them as a "minor people" living below the Gaetulians, meaning presumably that they were separate from the Gaetulians. Pliny, however, calls them the most powerful of the Gaetulians.

complicates the situation further by confusing the Pharousii with the Perorsi.⁷⁴

During the Arab period nomadic groups gained increased prominence in the Sahara as a result of their adaptation to camel pastoralism, and camel nomads required enormous territories over which to roam. Other people relocated to take advantage of business opportunities. Al-Bakri notes that most of the inhabitants of the city of Awdaghust (in southern Mauritania) were Zanata and other people from Ifriqiya, which required a trip clear across the Sahara both north to south and east to west. Nor was this exceptional. According to Ibn Khaldun, the Hawwara lived around Barca, a port city in Cyrenaica at the time of the Islamic invasion, but some of them subsequently crossed the Sahara and took up residence as neighbors of the Kawkaw, that is, the Songhay people of Gao on the eastern bend of the Niger River. Al-Idrisi has the Hawwara living in the city of Aghmat in western Morocco and at the same time in Zala in eastern Libya.⁷⁵ The distances involved in these examples were all around two thousand miles.

One of the great units of the Sanhaja, the Lamta, also seems to have been one of the most unstable if reports by observers are accurate. Al-Ya'qubi (late ninth century) reports the Lamta as living on the eastern side of the desert between the Ahaggar and Tibesti Mountains. Ibn Hawqal (late tenth century) mentions the territory of Lamta as being on the western side of the desert, and al-Bakri (mid-eleventh century) has them ambushing trans-Saharan caravans at a watering spot in the northwest. Both al-Bakri and al-Idrisi (mid-twelfth century) discuss Nul Lamta, a town under the control of the Lamta that al-Idrisi locates on the Sus River in southern Morocco. Yaqut (early thirteenth century) agrees that they belong in the "Farthest West." However, Ibn Khaldun (late fourteenth century) places them as fifth out of six Sanhaja tribes stretching in a line from west to east across the southern Sahara, putting them just north of the eastern bend of the Niger River. He confirms this in a second reference, but in a third he has them back in the northwest wandering between the Sus and the Atlas Mountains.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Ptolemy *Geographia* IV.6.6; Strabo *Geography* II.5.33; Pliny *N.H.* V.8.43, VI.35.195.

⁷⁵ *Corpus*, pp. 68, 128–129, 326–327.

⁷⁶ *Corpus*, pp. 22, 46, 67, 127, 174, 327, 331, 337. Louis Vivien de Saint-Martin, *Le Nord de l'Afrique dans l'antiquité grecque et romaine, étude historique et géographique* (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1863), p. 415, believes he has found the Lamta or at least their ancestors in a people Ptolemy calls the Klimatides (IV.6.6) near where Ibn Hawqal and al-Bakri place them.

If trying to untangle information within a portal is difficult, establishing relationships among groups across portals pushes to the very border between history and speculation, yet attempts have been made, some more credible than others. Scholars who studied many of the same people using the same sources more often than not came up with different conclusions. A recent attempt to follow Ptolemy's map around Africa, relating the many peoples he mentions not only to the Arab period but to modern peoples based largely on a system of this-name-sounds-like-that-name, is audacious, and the unfortunate author pays a price.⁷⁷

On the extremes scholars are divided into those who see a number of direct relationships starting sometimes in the prehistoric and carrying through the classical, Arab-era, and modern periods, and those who refuse to draw any lines, particularly between classical and Arab-period peoples. A middle ground ignores tribes and similar groupings but does see continuity in ethnicities. Thus the prehistoric Bovidian cattle herders became Saharan Ethiopians, who became Haratin and Tebu. The prehistoric Equidians became Gaetulians in the west and Garamantes in the east and later Moors and Tuaregs respectively.⁷⁸ A daring extension of this thesis has some of the Bovidians migrating south as the Sahara dried up to become the modern day Peuls (Fulbe or Fulani), a major ethnic group that is scattered across West Africa today.⁷⁹

The ethnic sequence in the eastern Sahara does seem to be clearer than in the west. Two groups in particular are worth noting: the Garamantes, who stretch across the classical period, and the Laguatan, who

⁷⁷ The most complete and credible attempts to sort out who became whom can be found in Desanges, *Catalogue*, and Vivien de Saint-Martin, *Le Nord*. The recent attempt by W.F.G. Lacroix, *Africa in Antiquity: A Linguistic and Toponymic Analysis of Ptolemy's Map of Africa, Together with a Discussion of Ophir, Punt and Hanno's Voyage* (Saarbrücken: Verlag für Entwicklungspolitik, 1998), has suffered castigation as in a review in the *Journal of African History*. On the part of the work with which the reviewer is most familiar, that dealing with Egypt and Eastern Africa, she states that the book "is incredibly frustrating to read, offering the occasional flash of considerable insight coupled with an overwhelming lack of even tentative research leading to a most basic understanding of ancient Egyptian iconography, language and culture, or of scholarly methodology in these fields." See Jacke Phillips, "Rereading Ptolemy's Map," *Journal of African History* 40, no. 3 (1999): 478. Her comments are appropriate for the Sahara and West Africa as well.

⁷⁸ Gabriel Camps, *Les Civilisations Préhistoriques de l'Afrique du Nord et du Sahara* (Paris: Doin, 1974), pp. 346–347. Also *Encyclopédie Berbère* II, 176–78; III, 407–408.

⁷⁹ Amadou Hampaté Ba and G. Dieterlen, "Les fresques d'époque bovidienne du Tassili n'Ajjer et les traditions des Peul: Hypothèse d'interprétation," *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 36 (1966): 151–157. Ba and Dieterlen see a close similarity between the rituals and ceremonies shown on some rock paintings and those practiced among the non-Islamic Peul of modern times. Their thesis has been hailed as both brilliant and ridiculous.

provide continuity between the classical and Arab periods. First noticed by Herodotus, the Garamantes were subsequently discussed by Strabo, Pliny, Ptolemy, and other writers through the Roman and Byzantine eras. They lived in the Fezzan, where they practiced agriculture along well-watered wadis. Modern excavations indicate that their civilization began half a millennium before Herodotus.⁸⁰ From their capital at Garama, the Garamantes were in the middle of what there was of Saharan commerce and were probably the source of the Carthaginians' carbuncles. Later they fought, then made peace with the Romans. Archaeological evidence indicates that the Garamantes reached their height in the first century C.E. and began to decline in the fourth or fifth century. At about that time they may have become associated with the Laguatan Confederation as allies.

The Laguatan Confederation (a.k.a. Leuathae, Louta, and Lawata) may be the same basic collection of tribes the Romans called the Ausuriani, who began attacking the empire in 363. It included groups from the Cyrenaican, Tripolitanian, and Tunisian regions, some of which, like the Nasamones, stretched back to Herodotus. The core tribes may have been in the process of a slow migration westward set off by ecological decline, but scholars have not reached a consensus on this matter.⁸¹ Did the Garamantes blend into the Laguatan Confederation to their north, or did they shift southward into the central Sahara to become the Kel Ahaggar, or both? Garama, or Jarma to the Arabs, was still considered to be the capital of the Fezzan when the first Islamic armies arrived in 643, but the days of the Garamantes were numbered. Although Arab writers refer to Jarma until the fourteenth century, they barely mention the Garamantes.⁸² The Lawata (as the Laguatan were known to the Arabs) fought the Arabs and then joined with them to spread Islam. They were Zanata, and their subtribes, especially the Hawwara, became scattered across North Africa.⁸³ Their descendants dominated North Africa from the borders of Egypt to the Atlas Moun-

⁸⁰ C. M. Daniels, "Excavation and Fieldwork amongst the Garamantes," *Libyan Studies* 20 (1989): 45–61.

⁸¹ D. J. Mattingly, "The Laguatan: A Libyan Tribal Confederation in the Late Roman Empire," *Libyan Studies* 14 (1983): 96–108. For the argument against migration, see Modéran, "Mythe," *Revue Historique*, 321–325.

⁸² The Garamantes are mentioned briefly in the tenth century by al-Mas'udi and al-Muqaddasi; see *Corpus*, pp. 31, 54, and 379.

⁸³ Al-Bakri, al-Idrisi, and Ibn Abi Zar all mention the Lawata or Hawwara as living in towns in Morocco or the western part of the desert (*Corpus*, pp. 68, 128, 246). Ibn Khaldun considered the Lawata to be one of the great tribes but called the Hawwara "nomadic and timid" (*Histoire* I, p. 231). According to him, a branch of the Hawwara, the Misrata,

tains until the Hilalian invasion of the eleventh century really did change the ethnic makeup of the region.

If the Laguatan Confederation did migrate to the west, its advance guard did not get beyond modern Tunisia. No great tribal confederation emerged in the west, at least none the Romans reported on that carried through the Byzantine and into the Arab period. Part of the problem is a lacuna of sources between Ptolemy in the second and Procopius and Corippus in the sixth centuries. The only major one is Ammianus Marcellinus, characterized by one modern historian as “an astonishing apparition, an original mind in history after centuries of dry rot.”⁸⁴ Unfortunately, of the thirty-one books in his opus (the first thirteen have been lost), only two small sections concern North African affairs. The province the Romans called Mauretania Tingitania (modern Morocco) in the far southwestern corner of the empire was one of the first places Rome gave up when the process of contraction began. The desert beyond it went from terra incognita to just incognita: the Gaetulians don’t fade or transform themselves into someone else, they just disappear. Neither Ammianus Marcellinus nor Procopius, who does not bother to break up the Maures into smaller units, nor Corippus, who does produce a useful list of tribes, none of which came from beyond the area of modern Tunisia, provides the necessary transition from portals two to three in the west.

If scholars have enjoyed some success in tracing the peoples of the east, if not the west, this does not explain why the Libyans of the ancients appear so different from the Sanhaja of the Arabs. The most manifest characteristic of a people is their appearance, and one trait relating to dress has had a disproportionate impact on the discontinuity between portals two and three. In portal one the Egyptians often portrayed male tribesmen in loincloths or even strutting about nude; the penis sheath was common. Clothing indicated rank, and men of high stature are often rendered in open, ungirded robes made of wild animal skins. Practically all men sported Vandyke or goatee-style beards.⁸⁵

was engaged in trade between Egypt, Ifriqiya, and the western Sudan on the other side of North Africa from Morocco.

⁸⁴ Harold Mattingly quoted in Michael Grant, *The Ancient Historians* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), p. 362. The relevant sections in Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gesiae* (hereafter R.G.), are XXVIII.6.4–13 and XXIX.5.2–56.

⁸⁵ Bates, *The Eastern Libyans*, remains an extremely useful source. For his description of Libyan dress, see pp. 118–129. For an interesting comparison also see F. Lecorre, “Le vêtement dans l’art rupestre nord-africain et saharien,” *Travaux Laboratoire d’Anthropologie et de Préhistoire de Méditerranée Occidentale* 8 (1984): 1–56.

By the time the classical authors came along, all of the Libyans seemed to wear some form of clothing. Indeed one of the few traits Herodotus found that the Libyans shared was their dress. The Adyrmachidae, the Libyan tribe on the border of Egypt, lived like Egyptians in every way “except that they wear the same kinds of clothes as are worn everywhere else in Libya.” In a later passage he specified that “Libyan women wear tasseled goatskins, de-fleeced and dyed with madder, as their outer clothes.”⁸⁶ He does not describe men’s clothing. Strabo mentions clothing made from skins that was used by both Mauretanian foot soldiers and Numidian peasants for protection against scorpions and snakes. He agrees with Herodotus that “the Libyans in general dress alike.”⁸⁷

Herodotus and others also commented on the stylish and sometimes bizarre coiffures done in feathers and ostrich shell with parts of the hair shaven and other parts hanging loose. The Macae shaved their hair on the sides but left the middle long, the Maxyes shaved the left side of their heads but allowed the right to grow, the Machlyes grew their hair long in the back, and the Ausees grew it long in the front.⁸⁸ In his comments on the men of Mauretania, Strabo notes, “only rarely can you see them touch one another in walking, for fear that the adornment of their hair may not remain intact.”⁸⁹ No wrap covered the head and face. At the close of the classical period, Corippus does leave a vivid description of warriors in full battle dress: “The Maures do not adorn their arms with tunic sleeves, they do not encircle themselves with belts encrusted with buttons, and it is a free-flowing tunic that their savage squadrons wear into combat. . . . A rough covering, suspended from their thin frame, falls from the shoulders; a piece of linen, held by a solid knot, encircles their hideous head, and the soles of their bronze feet are supported by a gross Moorish sandal.”⁹⁰ If the free-flowing tunic has replaced animal skins and penis sheaths, it is the headgear that is of particular note. The piece of linen was wrapped around the head, framing but not covering the face or the mouth. Sometime between Corippus and al-Ya‘qubi, the piece was moved from vertical to horizontal and adopted not just for battle but for everyday wear.

The use of the veil or litham by men but not women became the

⁸⁶ *Histories* IV.168; 189.

⁸⁷ *Geography* XVII.3.7; 3.11. According to Strabo, “some of the barbarians in this part of the world use also the skins of snakes and fish both as wraps and as bed-covers.”

⁸⁸ *Histories* IV.175; 180; 191.

⁸⁹ *Geography* XVII.3.7.

⁹⁰ Zarini, *Berbères*, p. 124.

signature of the Sanhaja and remains so today among the Tuareg. Greek and Roman authors do not mention Saharan men as wearing veils. However, al-Ya'qubi, the first Arab author to take a look at the Berbers of the Sahara, does in his discussion of "a people called Anbiya of the Sanhaja, who have no permanent dwellings. It is their custom to veil their faces with their turbans."⁹¹ Ibn Hawqal offers an explanation: "They consider that the mouth is something shameful, like the privy parts, because of what issues forth from it, since in their opinions what emanates from the mouth smells worse than what emanates from the privy parts."⁹² Virtually every subsequent Arab author who discusses the Sanhaja mentions the litham. According to al-Bakri, "they do not remove these veils under any circumstances. A man does not distinguish his relative or friend unless he is wearing the veil. Thus if one of them is killed in a battle and his veil is removed, nobody can recognize him until the covering is put back."⁹³

Several interesting suggestions have been offered to explain the appearance of the litham. One is that invading Arabs frequently veiled themselves in battle and this caught on among the Berbers. The problem with this explanation is that those Berbers who had the most direct contact with Islamic armies, the peoples of the Maghrib, did not adopt the veil, but the western and central deep-desert Sanhaja, who had less contact, did. Another suggestion is based on a few instances in ancient Egyptian art that appear to show Libyan chiefs dressed in women's clothing. Religious ceremonies honoring ancestresses may have contained an element of transvestitism, and if the veil was considered to be feminine, its use by men could be seen as a survival of this practice. It is hardly likely that classical observers, whose own society was very patriarchal and who were not averse to painting their subjects in as exotic, outlandish, or deviant a manner as possible, would have let such a custom go by without comment. Or are we to assume that the veil went underground during the long period of the second portal only to reappear with the Sanhaja?

⁹¹ *Corpus*, p. 22.

⁹² *Corpus*, p. 49. This explanation proved to be very persistent, reappearing half a millennium later in the report of an Italian sea captain named Ca da Mosto, who explored the coastal areas of the Sahara for the Portuguese. After describing the "flap," he notes: "For they say that the mouth is a brutish thing, that is always uttering wind and bad odors so that it should be kept covered, and not displayed, likening it almost to the posterior." *The Voyages of Cadamosto and Other Documents on Western Africa in the Second Half of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. and trans. G.R. Crone (Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint Ltd., 1967), p. 19.

⁹³ *Corpus*, pp. 75–76.

Modern observers believe that veil-wearing served very practical purposes as protection from desert wind and sun and as a convenient defense mechanism in a society characterized by a rigid code of ethics. These are reasonable interpretations, but we are still left wondering why the practice appeared between the sixth and ninth centuries. Traditional explanations range from the apocryphal to the silly. Some Arab and Moorish groups who have been inveterate enemies of the Tuaregs have used veil-wearing as an object of ridicule. According to one account, the ancestor of the veil-wearers was a devil who married a woman from whom such hideous children sprang they took to covering their faces. A story popular among Tuareg women claimed that originally the women rather than the men wore veils. When the men lost a great battle, the women threw their veils at them and told them to hide their faces in shame. A more positive spin has the men fighting for Islam in Yemen during its early days. After being defeated by nonbelievers, some escaped to North Africa by veiling their faces and passing as women. Whatever the origin of the litham, its wearers rarely reflected on why they wore it. Antoine Malfante, an Italian merchant who reached the oasis region of Tuat in the middle of the Sahara in 1447, was given the simplest and most direct explanation: "We have inherited this custom from our ancestors."⁹⁴ Period. Why and how the veil came into such widespread use over so short a time is still one of history's mysteries even if it is not likely to make the television series.⁹⁵

The image of the desert Sanhaja in his veil was considerably enhanced if he was riding atop a camel; in Arab sources camels and veils went together. According to Herodotus, the peoples of eastern Libya were mostly nomads who consumed meat and milk. To the south deep in the desert, the Atlantes "never eat any living thing," which is likely a reference to pastoralists whose diet was based on dairy products.⁹⁶ He doesn't mention camels. Polybius, who lived in the first century B.C.E. makes a point of stating that in Africa "the total of horses, oxen, sheep, and goats which inhabit the country is so immense that I doubt whether an equal number can be found in all the rest of the

⁹⁴ "The Letter of Antoine Malfante" in Crone, *Voyages of Cadamosto*, p. 87.

⁹⁵ For a sampling of explanations of the veil, see Boubou Hama, *Recherche sur l'histoire des Touregs Sahariens et Soudanais* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1967), p. 125; J. Nicolaisen, *The Ecology and Culture of the Pastoral Tuareg* (Copenhagen: The National Museum, 1963), pp. 14, 34; Lloyd Cabot Briggs, *Tribes of the Sahara* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 151–155; Jeremy Keenan, *The Tuareg: People of Ahaggar* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), pp. 129–130; Norris, *Saharan Myth*, pp. 39, 41, 68–69.

⁹⁶ *Histories*, IV.191.

world,” certainly an *argumentum ex silentio* against the widespread use of camels.⁹⁷ The first mention of camels comes from the author of the *Bellum Africum*, who states that in 46 B.C.E. Julius Caesar captured twenty-two of the beasts in operations leading up to the Battle of Thapsus.⁹⁸ At one time modern scholars assumed that one-humped camels were domesticated in Arabia and subsequently introduced into North Africa during the Roman period. Recently, however, it has been shown that wild dromedaries were native to North Africa and were likely domesticated there, albeit later than in Arabia, perhaps in the second millennium B.C.E.⁹⁹

If classical observers did not notice the camel until the time of Caesar, they seem never to have caught on to it as a food-producing entity. Both Polybius and Strabo discuss nomads without mentioning camels.¹⁰⁰ In his description of life in the desert, Sallust observes that “this scarcity of water, both here and in all the comparatively uncivilized interior of North Africa, was rendered more endurable by the Numidian habit of living chiefly on milk and the flesh of wild animals,”¹⁰¹ but again camels go unmentioned. Ammianus Marcellinus does discuss camels in an interesting context. In 370 C.E. a wicked Roman official, Count Romanus, attempted (unsuccessfully) to extort what was considered to be the preposterously high number of four thousand camels from the city of Lepcis Magna.¹⁰² Later Procopius and Corippus describe defensive cordons made by the Maures, who turned their camels sideways and placed them in circles twelve deep to impede cavalry and infantry charges. Again there is no mention of camels as food animals.¹⁰³

In Arab authors the importance of the camel grows exponentially. The Sanhaja king Tin Yarutan b. Wisanu b. Nizar, according to al-Bakri, could put one hundred thousand camels in the field and on one occasion did put fifty thousand in support of an ally.¹⁰⁴ More importantly, the camel became the source of sustenance for Saharan nomads beginning with al-Ya‘qubi’s observation that the Sanhaja “subsist on

⁹⁷ *Histories* XII.3.

⁹⁸ CXVIII.

⁹⁹ Shaw, “Camel,” 685–688.

¹⁰⁰ For Strabo, see *Geography* XVII.3.7; for Polybius, see *Histories* XII.3.

¹⁰¹ *Bellum Jugurthinum* (hereafter B.J.) X.90.2. For a convenient translation, see Sallust, *The Jugurthine War*, trans. S. A. Handford (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963).

¹⁰² R.G. XXVIII.6.6.

¹⁰³ Zarini, p. 123. Using camels in this fashion worked well for the Maures in fighting the Vandals but not against the Byzantines. See B.V. III.8.25–28; IV.11.17–19, 50–54.

¹⁰⁴ *Corpus*, p. 69.

camels, for they have no crops, wheat or otherwise.”¹⁰⁵ Ibn Hawqal, al-Bakri, and al-Idrisi continue the chorus, all noting the dependency of the Sanhaja on camels, in language similar to that of Ibn Abi Zar: “They are a people who do not know of ploughing, sowing, or produce; their property consists only of camels and they live on flesh and milk. One may pass his life without eating bread.”¹⁰⁶

In the controversy over the camel in North Africa, scholars have traditionally recognized two eras: before camel and since camel. Exactly when the camel was introduced from Asia has been the major point of debate, a fact of history that now does not seem to have happened. Since the camel shows up in the sources at about the time the Romans were assuming control over North Africa, camels did not appear to be a classical versus Arab period problem. A closer look, however, shows three eras. In the first camels are not mentioned at all despite the probability that the domestication process was well underway. In the second camels are occasionally mentioned but in the context of war as baggage animals or live ramparts. From other evidence (panels with relief sculpture), it also appears that they were used to pull plows. The third era materializes between classical and Arab sources when the Sanhaja emerge as full blown camel nomads, drinking camel milk and eating camel meat in every major account. Much borrowing took place; for example, Ibn Ali Zar’s passage paraphrases al-Bakri. But even if the Sanhaja and their camels became stereotyped, it is noteworthy that sources considered it necessary to include this information.

The most obvious explanation for the late date in which camels were reported to be part of the human food chain in North Africa is also the least likely. Were camels domesticated first for work and only later for food? This would make them unique in this part of the world. All animals that ended up being used to pull or carry something were originally tamed for food with the exception of the donkey, which was not used under normal circumstances for food. Another possibility turns the equation around. Perhaps few people lived in the desert until the use of the camel as a food animal. But again, why did this happen between Procopius and al-Ya’qubi? The Berbers came in waves into the Sahara, the last of which may have swept through in the first millennium c.e. Could these newcomers have brought the camel with them? Yes, except this would put the domestic camel in the better

¹⁰⁵ *Corpus*, p. 22.

¹⁰⁶ *Corpus*, p. 236.

watered part of North Africa before it was introduced into those parts for which it was more properly suited.

Could it be simply that Herodotus and his classical successors had to rely on such spotty information that they did not know that in the desert people were herding, milking, and occasionally eating camels? The camel is clearly a desert animal and is efficient as a food producer only in the most marginal areas that cannot adequately support goats, sheep, and cattle. Arab geographers had much better information about what went on deep in the Sahara than did the ancients because they had access to people who had been there. Once again the matter becomes one of sources rather than of substance.

If veils and camels muddy the transition between portals two and three, another trait does show continuity. Sexual behavior and gender issues are among the features that outside observers found most curious. Herodotus certainly did, especially if something kinky was involved. In his discussion of the Nasamones, he tells us that, "any woman is available to any man for sex," and when a couple got married, "it is the custom for the bride to have sex with all the guests one after another on her wedding night." Among the Gindanes, women "tie on an anklet for each man they have had sex with," and the woman with the most anklets "is considered to be the most outstanding because she has been loved by the largest number of men." Warrior women were almost as interesting. Zauce women drove their husbands' chariots in battle, and the Ausees celebrated a festival each year during which unmarried young women were divided into two groups that used sticks and stones in an all-out rumble in which participants were sometimes killed. Being tough did not mean that Ausee women were uninterested in sex. In fact, the Ausees were so promiscuous they didn't bother living as couples. When a child was three months old, all the men were assembled, "and the child is taken to be the son or daughter of whichever of the men it resembles."¹⁰⁷

Herodotus was not picking on the Libyans. He just could not resist telling a scurrilous story if he knew one, and his descriptions of the peoples of northern Europe, India, and elsewhere often contain equally lewd and outrageous material. At least some of his information probably originated from the same type of source that in the contemporary world provides letters to *Penthouse Forum*. Subsequent classical writers didn't elaborate on the juicy details, but they agreed with Herodotus's

¹⁰⁷ *Histories* IV.172; 176; 180; 193.

point. Pliny observes that “the Garamantes do not practice marriage but live with their women promiscuously.”¹⁰⁸ Strabo is more circumspect, noting only that among Libyans, “the men have many wives and many children.”¹⁰⁹ In his work on astrology, Ptolemy lumps the Libyans together with the Egyptians, other Africans, and the Arabians and concludes, “their marriages are brought about by violent abduction,” and “among some of them the women are common to all the men.”¹¹⁰ Procopius maintains that the Maures practiced polygamy, and it was not unusual for powerful men to have fifty wives. But he also mentions that when important decisions had to be made, leaders consulted priestesses: “For it is not lawful in this nation for a man to utter oracles, but the women among them as a result of some sacred rites become possessed and foretell the future.” He also tells the story of a governor named Sergius, who was disliked by the Libyans “because he had shown himself strangely fond of the wives and the possessions of others.”¹¹¹

Had Christianity caused Procopius’s Libyans to forsake their swinging ways? With the adoption of Islam, Arab authors expected the Saharans to get their gender matters in proper order. Ibn Hawqal was impressed by the power of Tinbarutan b. Usfayshar, “King of all the Sanhaja,” but he must have thought it odd that the king’s sister was the richest individual in the tribe. When this king needed help in overcoming his enemies, he had to turn to his sister’s herdsmen.¹¹² Ibn Sa’id reports on veil-wearing Berbers who were Muslims, “yet they make the sister’s son inherit according to a custom which they have followed since before Islam.”¹¹³

In such a topsy-turvy society, sexual misconduct had to be lurking just under the surface. Al-Idrisi reports that in the Sanhajan center of Kakadam when an unmarried woman reached the age of forty, “she offers herself to any man who desires her. She does not ward off nor hinder anyone.”¹¹⁴ Ibn Battuta was disgusted by the freedom and high status enjoyed by Masufa women, who, he concludes, “have no modesty.” He provides accounts of two separate incidents in the Sahelian city of Walata, where he rested after crossing the desert. There he

¹⁰⁸ *N.H.* V.8.45.

¹⁰⁹ *Geography* XVII.3.19.

¹¹⁰ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, II.3.70.

¹¹¹ *B.V.* IV.11.13; 8.13; 22.2.

¹¹² *Corpus*, p. 48.

¹¹³ *Corpus*, p. 193.

¹¹⁴ *Corpus*, p. 128.

found men and women who were not married to each other engaged in private conversation. In the second incident he reproached the woman's husband, who told him that "the association of women with men is agreeable to us and a part of good conduct to which no suspicion attaches. They are not like the women in your country." The exasperated Ibn Battuta could only note, "I was astonished at his laxity," and he snubbed the man thereafter. He also noticed that in Walata and among the Berbers who lived around Takedda more than a thousand miles to the east, the people were matrilineal. Of the latter he remarks dryly (and perhaps sarcastically), "the women are more important than the men."¹¹⁵

From Herodotus to Ibn Battuta, women were viewed through the eyes not only of outsiders but always of men, thus twice removing observer from subject. And these men represented societies that were decidedly male-centered and tended to undervalue women. Obviously, the accounts reflect some element of female empowerment. What prompted Herodotus's snidery, al-Idrisi's disgust, and Ibn Battuta's outrage was a society in which women enjoyed higher status and more authority and influence than in their own. It was a threatening image. A society that features promiscuity does not imply a society characterized by female empowerment, but the charge of promiscuity is the easiest avenue for discrediting feminine power. In this sense how much of the reported goings-on actually went on is largely irrelevant. And reports continue through the fourth portal with the focus on licentiousness gradually giving way to a more balanced and accurate rendering of gender relations. Almost every account on the Tuaregs from the last two centuries marvels at the high position women enjoyed.¹¹⁶ One striking difference, however, was manifest. Later Berbers were staunchly monogamous in the face of Arab polygamy whereas evidence from Egyptian as well as classical sources indicates that early Berbers preferred polygamy in the face of Greek and Roman monogamy. Although the Berbers became very fragmented—northern from southern, mountain from desert, open-faced from veiled—to the point of not being able to understand each other's dialects, they all came to prefer having one wife.

¹¹⁵ *Corpus*, pp. 285–286; 301.

¹¹⁶ For a sampling see Barth, *Travels* IV, p. 486; Briggs, *Tribes*, pp. 133–134; Lord Rennell of Rodd, *People of the Veil* (Oosterhout, Netherlands: Anthropological Publications, 1966, reprint of 1926 edition), pp. 167–168; James G. Jackson, *An Account of Timbuctoo and Housa* (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1967; reprint of 1820 edition), pp. 34–35; and Edward Ward, *Sahara Story* (London: Robert Hale Ltd., 1962), pp. 98–100.

The transition from polygamy to monogamy highlights again the many unexplained changes that appear to pop up randomly in the historical record. One possibility is that a feminine-friendly society will naturally evolve in the direction of monogamy (certainly the correlation was not true: monogamous Athens was not an especially good place to be a woman). The Arab period is inexplicably quiet on the matter of Saharan family structure. Did the Arabs make no comment because they saw nothing to comment about, meaning that the Saharans adhered to the same pattern, a modified polygamous system, as themselves? This is too much of an assumption. On the other hand, no evidence exists to indicate that the shift took place during that strange period of change between Procopius and al-Ya'qubi. And, in any case, this matter should not cloud the more general issue of gender relations, which stands as one of the more prominent threads of sociocultural continuity in the literary sources.

Gender relations, however convincing, are not enough to prove that Herodotus's Libyans became Ibn Khaldun's Sanhaja. In examining aspects of cultural continuity, there is no smoking gun. There is, however, common sense. In his final passage Procopius notes that the Byzantine army killed "a great part" of the Maures in battle but only after the Maures had killed many Libyans: "Thus it came to pass that those of the Libyans who survived, few as they were in number and exceedingly poor, at last and after great toil found some peace."¹¹⁷ Could this be evidence for a displacement theory, and if the indigenes were largely wiped out, who came in, veils aflutter, to resettle the land? Corippus does not leave the impression that North Africa was suffering from depopulation. In his description of the gathering of the tribes for battle, he notes: "The bottom of the valleys and the steep hills fill with innumerable tribes, who cover the plains and the rivers at large bends. The neighboring lands disappear under the density of the battalions . . . and on no mountain is there a peak unoccupied. . . . The air itself is thin as a result of the masses who live there." He asks, "What inspired poet would know how to describe for me so many people?"¹¹⁸

Neither author should be taken too literally. Corippus was a poet whose work was intended to memorialize the Byzantine commander John Troglita. Procopius was a good historian, but he saw no contradiction in also serving the role of propagandist and apologist. Neither author hesitated to hyperbolize the magnitude of the struggle. And

¹¹⁷ B.V. IV.28.51–52.

¹¹⁸ Zarini, *Berbères*, p. 121.

while Procopius emphasizes its bloody nature, he also maintains that polygamy allowed each Maure warrior to produce numerous offspring. Following one particularly brutal campaign, a boy slave could be bought for the price of a single sheep.¹¹⁹

In fact, North Africa suffered depopulation before and after this particular series of conflicts.¹²⁰ Yet demographic growth always appears to have rebounded.¹²¹ Neither Procopius's Libyans nor his Maures were annihilated at this time or at any other up to al-Ya'qubi. Nor did the peoples of North Africa migrate to somewhere else, nor did the major invasions of this period involve enough people to change the ethnic composition of the region. The only invasion of a "people," that of the Vandals in the mid-fifth century, may have initially involved about fifty thousand fighting men that eventually grew to eighty thousand. According to Procopius, "they came to be an exceedingly numerous people."¹²² However, the Vandals did not intermarry with the local population, and in the sixth century they fell on hard times, losing battles to the Maures and the Byzantines until their numbers became depleted. Finally in 539–540 the Byzantine commander Solomon "removed those of the Vandals who were left and especially all their women from the whole of Libya."¹²³ The only other invading force, the Arab Islamic army that conquered North Africa in the late seventh century, was just that: an occupying army, not a migration of peoples who settled down. And it soon moved on into Spain. In short, there is no evidence to support a displacement model. The only reasonable conclusion that can be drawn is that despite their many differences, the people the ancients referred to as Libyans became Sanhaja and Zanata. Sometimes negative evidence can be overwhelming.

Having chased down the literary sources that deal with the Sahara and much of the rest of North Africa and having squeezed from them precious drops of information to use as the resin in constructing tran-

¹¹⁹ B.V. IV.11.13; 12.27.

¹²⁰ For example, see the remark by Sallust six centuries earlier in *B.J.* X.92.4.

¹²¹ Contrary to assumptions among both ancients and moderns, several recent studies have shown that North Africa was not a region of heavy population density. See Robert Sallares, *The Ecology of the Ancient Greek World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 377–380, and Brent Shaw, "Climate, Environment and History: The Case of Roman North Africa" in T.M.L. Wigley, M. J. Ingram, and G. Farmer, eds., *Climate and History: Studies in Past Climates and their Effect on Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 391. This paper, however, is interested in who these people were rather than specific demographic matters short of complete depopulation, for which no evidence exists.

¹²² B.V. III.5.20.

¹²³ B.V. IV.19.3.

sitions between portals, we have come to a better appreciation of what we don't know, much of which we probably can't know. It is convenient to attribute any shortfalls to our sources. The scrutiny we use today in examining data and the exactitude we demand were not so much as conceived of by them. And classical and Arab writers can't be blamed for one major source of confusion: groups—clans, tribes, confederations, whole ethnic entities—really did come and go. They were fluid, not static, blending, splitting, changing, and occasionally assuming or being assigned new names, which on further blending, splitting, and changing would disappear or be reassigned.

Our modern concept of ethnicity is pretty well defined, but we are deluding ourselves if we assume the ancients shared a similar definition. They were describing "others," whom they perceived as being different from themselves. When they applied a name to these others, we assign it a meaning according to our best guess, ranging from a clan all the way up to an ethnicity or a few generations ago even a so-called "race." And we will continue to do this but always keeping in mind that the key to understanding groups that appear and disappear in Saharan history is flexibility. The quest for artificially imposed specificity or scientificlike exactitude will be a lesson in frustration.

Concluding this essay with a caveat should not be unsettling. No historian chooses to see history as meaningless chaos signifying nothing. On the other hand, most history and virtually all old history is not the neat and tidy bundle of reasoned cause and effect found in most freshmen survey textbooks. When attempting to explore the comings and goings of ancient peoples, seamless history seems to be a contradiction in terms.