

# Chapter 1

## 7,000 Years Ago: The First Berber

*Rachida Addou*

*If considering Africa is to seek the origins of mankind, then considering the Sahara is to seek out the origins of civilization.*

—Malika Hachid (translated)

We have been typically taught that the Fertile Crescent<sup>1</sup> is “The cradle of civilization” or at least the earliest. However, many scholars now believe that there is not a single cradle but several, the first cradle still being debated.

The earliest signs of civilization appeared in the Neolithic Age<sup>2</sup> with the transition from Nomadic hunter-gatherer communities to sedentary living. This period was marked mainly by the onset of agriculture and the domestication of animals.

Weather conditions and abundant water supply in certain geographic regions led man to live in settlements between 10,200 BP<sup>3</sup> and ended around 4,500 to 2,500 BP in different areas of the world.

For the majority of prehistorians, most of the African continent is not associated with the term Neolithic. However the Sahara, more specifically Central Sahara, is the indisputable exception. (Hugot, 1980)

The Sahara as we know it today was not always an arid desert. During the Holocene epoch<sup>4</sup> approximately 11,700 BP, which followed the last major glacial epoch<sup>5</sup>, climate fluctuations transformed the Sahara into a humid, fertile, and populated region.

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<sup>1</sup> Fertile Crescent: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus, Jordan, Israel, Egypt, Turkey and Iran.

<sup>2</sup> Neolithic: also known as the “New Stone Age,” began around 10,000 BP.

<sup>3</sup> BP: Before Present, time scale mainly in geology and other scientific disciplines to specify when events occurred in the past.

<sup>4</sup> The Holocene epoch is the current warm period of geological times covering approximately the last 11,700 years.

<sup>5</sup> The Glacial epoch represents the Ice Age before the Holocene, during which much of the northern hemisphere was covered by great ice sheets.

Research data from human paleontology, historical linguistics, archaeology and more recently genetics have shown that the ancestors of the first settlers of Central Sahara appeared in the Maghreb 11,000 to 10,000 years BP coinciding with the humid climate of the Holocene epoch and the beginning of the Neolithic Age.

This chapter will attempt to briefly retrace the origins of the first settlers of Central Sahara, describe their emerging economy, and finally report how their sophistication influenced neighboring civilization as well as the lasting impact it had on North Africa as we know it today.

## The First Berbers

The most distant ancestors of the Berbers are of pure African descent, but they are already mixed. Some, the Mechtoids, are strictly indigenous to the Maghreb; others, the Proto-mediterranean Capsians, arrived on the shores of the Mediterranean at a time so far back in Prehistory that the question of whether they are foreign or not becomes meaningless. (Malika Hachid)

Recently, the remains of the oldest *Homo sapiens* were discovered in Jebel Irhoud, Morocco. Previously, the oldest *Homo sapiens* fossils dated back to approximately 195,000 years ago, but the recent discovery of *Homo sapiens* fossils, alongside stone tools and animal bones push back the origins of our species to approximately 300,000 years ago.

The data following the recent discovery may suggest otherwise in the future, however, according to previous research findings, anthropologists specializing in North Africa such as D. Ferembach and M.C. Chamla, admitted the direct affiliation of the Mechtoids to the primitive *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* found in Jebel Irhoud 195,000 BP with whom they share many similarities. (Gabriel Camps)

The Mechtoid, an early modern version of *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*<sup>6</sup> equivalent to *Homme de Cro-Magnon* in Europe, was identified in North Africa at the end of the Palaeolithic<sup>7</sup> and later Neolithic (approximately 22,000 BP to 10,000 BP). Named after Mechta El-Arbi site in Algeria, the Mech-

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<sup>6</sup> *Homo sapiens sapiens*: subspecies of *Homo sapiens*, includes all modern men.

<sup>7</sup> Paleolithic: also known as the "Old Stone Age," started 2.5 million BP until Mesolithic, which marked a period between the Upper Palaeolithic and Neolithic.

toids initiated the Ibero-Maurusian industry, using lithic<sup>8</sup> technology to produce tools from various types of stone. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

Later, around 10,000 BP, another type of modern *Homo sapiens* appeared, the Proto-mediterranean Capsians, named after the city of Gafsa in Tunisia, (*Capsa* in Latin).

The Capsian industry progressively replaced the Ibero-Maurusian, bringing more advanced and refined techniques. “The Capsian was a microlithic (tiny-flaked-blade) tool complex. It differed from the Ibero-Maurusian, however, in displaying a far more varied tool kit distinguished by large backed blades and burins in its earlier phase and a gradual development of geometric microliths later.” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

To date, the origins of the Proto-Mediterranean Capsians are still debated. Some evidence suggests that they migrated from the Levant<sup>9</sup> where Natufians, men with similar features, were identified. Nonetheless, Malika Hachid, acclaimed researcher specializing in the Prehistory and Protohistory of the Sahara, demonstrates in her book *The First Berbers* that the “proto-Mediterranean Capsians arrived on the shores of the Mediterranean at a time so far back in Prehistory that the question of whether they are foreign or not becomes meaningless.”

Furthermore, linguistic as well as archeological data suggest that the Berbers of the Maghreb and their language could be related to the migration of Proto-Boreafrasians originally from Eastern Africa. The explanation could be that Capsians and Natufians were distant cousins of Proto-Boreafrasians who got separated geographically and linguistically. (Malika Hachid)

With this in mind, an undeniable argument is that Mechtoids and Proto-mediterraneans were two very different types of man with very distinct features, implying that the latter did not evolve from the Mechtoids.

Over time, Mechtoids features softened, not owing it to the Proto-Mediterranean Capsians- no evidence of miscegenation between the two groups- (Gabriel Camps) but probably as a result of the interaction of genes and environment. Eventually, the Proto-Mediterranean Capsian type became prevalent.

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<sup>8</sup> Lithic: consisting of stone.

<sup>9</sup> The Levant: Easter Mediterranean Region.

However, one should not ignore that Mechtoids and Proto-Mediterranean Capsians lived side by side and shared habitats, influencing each other on many levels for a few millennia before becoming the Bovidian Proto-Berbers, the very first Berber settlers of Central Sahara, 7000 BP.

### **Emergence of a Productive Economy**

“[...] Maghreb, is only marginally considered in the debates on the Mediterranean as a possible route for the transmission and innovation of Neolithic features. North Africa, as an interactive area where the Saharan and Mediterranean influences operate and produce a mosaic of cultural behaviors, is still underestimated.” (Mulazzani S., et al) Researchers were able to describe and retrace “the most brilliant pre-historical civilization of the Sahara” (M.Hachid) by bringing evidence together from archeological sites, funerary monuments but mostly from the well preserved prehistoric cave paintings and engravings of the Tassili N’Ajjjer<sup>10</sup> (“the plateau of rivers” in Berber ).

For a long time, pottery was associated with the beginning of Neolithic period in a given site. Approximately 12,000 to 11,000 BP, pottery was discovered in the Sahara between the Hoggar<sup>11</sup> and the Nile (Close, 1995; Garcea, 2006; Huysecom et al., 2009) long before the Levant (approximately 8,000 to 7,000 BP) where agriculture preceded the art of ceramics.

At the beginning of the Holocene period, climatic fluctuations across the Sahara affected the availability of resources leading semi-sedentary communities of hunter-gathers to exhibit Neolithic behaviours. Their economy was mainly based on hunting, fishing, and gathering of plants and mollusks. In order to survive, these communities developed adaptive strategies to manage resources involving delayed consumption practices (underground storage pits) and the use of pottery. (Mulazzani S., et al)<sup>12</sup>

As the climatic conditions became more pleasant in the Central Saharan massifs over the next millennia, immigrants from different parts of the Sahara gathered in the highlands taking advantage of the local

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<sup>10</sup> Tassili n’Ajjjer: National park in South East Algerian Sahara with the most important grouping of prehistoric cave art in the world.

<sup>11</sup> Hoggar: Highland region in Central Sahara.

<sup>12</sup> Gabriel Camps (1927–2002): French Historian, founder of the “Encyclopédie Berbère.”

resources and sharing each other's know how. With the abundance of wild plants, cereals, fish, and the flowing rivers of the Tassili, the Igharghar, and the Tafessasset (of which only fossils remain today), the first sedentary communities of Central Sahara were born.

Between the 8,000 and 7,000 BP, domestication of cattle, goats, and sheep transformed their economy and their way of life. The first settlers of Central Sahara have been named The Bovidian Proto-Berbers<sup>13</sup> referring to the beginning of the "Bovidian" or "Pastoral" times.

The beautiful Bovidian paintings of the Tassili n'Ajjer alone show evidence of bovine husbandry in the Saharan mountain taking place earlier than the Nile Valley (Hays, McHugh, Van Noten). Other evidence comes from bovine bone remains found mainly in southern Sahara and the Nile Valley.

To date, researchers are still debating the onset of agriculture in Central Sahara. Gabriel Camps shows evidence of early agriculture in his excavations of Amekni.<sup>14</sup> "The abundance of grinding bowls on the surface of the granitic croup and the large number of wheels and grinders collected in the archaeological layer" (Gabriel Camps) as well as pollen grains relating to millet found deep in the ground, were dated back to 8,000 BP. (Marianne Cornevin)

Others claim that wild plants, such as sorghum and millet, were readily available due to the humidity of the Sahara, and were abundant enough to feed small populations; therefore, the need to cultivate crops at that time did not make sense. (J.D. Clark, 1976) Nonetheless, based on strong evidence suggesting millet cultivation in the Tichitt (Mauritania), scholars confirm that agriculture developed in Western Sahara around 3,600 BP. (Munson).

## **An Elegant Civilization with Elaborated Values**

"The Algerian Tassili n'Ajjer and its Libyan extension of the Tadrart-Acacus<sup>15</sup> represent not only the largest and most beautiful prehistoric

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<sup>13</sup> Proto-Berber: indicating the first or earliest Berbers.

<sup>14</sup> Amekni: region of Central Sahara near Tamanrasset.

<sup>15</sup> Tadrart-Acacus: Mountain range in the desert of the Ghart district in Western Libya, part of the Sahara.

museum in the world but also following the happy expression of J. Ki Zerbo” (Marianne Cornevin)

In addition to being skilled entrepreneurs, the Bovidian Proto-Berbers were above all talented artists. Without the extensive display of their fascinating artwork, the oldest in Africa, scholars would have been unable to retrace the details of this brilliant civilization. The diversity of these people who migrated from different parts of North Africa to gather in the prosperous Central Sahara, is illustrated especially in scenes of funerary traditions and worship monuments unique to each group.

This mosaic of ethnic groups living harmoniously and sharing each others experiences and traditions, surely contributed to the flourishing of the Proto-Berber’s creative civilization. Their paintings and engravings show that they were more than just pastoralist, hunter, gatherer communities but a true society build around elaborated values and conventions. Their elegant postures, sophisticated hairstyles and outfits, as well as their convivial scenes not to mention the privileged status of women, all imply that these Proto-Berbers paid attention to details worthy of highly civilized people. (Malika Hachid)

Their fashion, beliefs, and ceremonies will have lasting influence on the Egypt of Pharaohs, Greek Mythology but also on today’s North African Berber tribes such as the Kabyles<sup>16</sup> of Algeria and the Tuaregs<sup>17</sup> of the Sahara.

## **Ancient Libya: from Proto-Berbers to Paleo-Berbers**

*Ancient Libya: Region West to the Nile, Corresponding to Modern Maghreb*

The Paleo-Berbers, also known as Libyans and Garamantes,<sup>18</sup> succeeded the Bovidian Proto-Berbers. The dating of this transition is still not clear but it occurred in the early days of Antiquity, a period marked by the onset of writing. The Ancient Greek referred to North Africa as Libya and to its inhabitants as the “Libyans” or “Berbers” from the Greek word *barabaroï*, (latinized *barbari*) which referred to people who neither spoke Latin or Greek.

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<sup>16</sup> Kabyles: Largest Berber speaking ethnic group of Algeria.

<sup>17</sup> Tuaregs: descendants of Berber natives, nomads of the Sahara.

<sup>18</sup> Garamantes: Berber tribe of Garama, capital of southwest Ancient Libya.



Figure 1-1. Tassili N'Ajjer.

Sallust<sup>19</sup> described the first inhabitants of North Africa as: "...Gaulians<sup>20</sup> and Libyans, rude and uncivilized tribes, who subsisted on the flesh of wild animals, or on the herbage of the soil like cattle (...) They were controlled by neither customs, laws, nor the authority of any ruler; they roamed about . . . and slept in those shelters to which night drove them." These uncivilized tribes that Sallust referred to were no other than the proto-Berbers, who were far from being "barbaric" as we know it now.

The Tassili fresques show Libyans as great warriors mounted on their chariots. They rode majestic horses, owned sophisticated weapons and invented writing. (M.Hachid) Herodotus<sup>21</sup> describes the Libyans later in the fifth century B.C "on four-horse harnessed chariots chasing Ethiopian troglodytes." They were noble warriors but certainly not barbaric, uncivilized tribes. Their ancestors, the Bovidian proto-Berbers had already "an inclination towards the value of war and nobility, closely

<sup>19</sup> Sallust (86–c.35 BC): Roman historian and politician.

<sup>20</sup> Gaetulians: Romanized name of ancient berber tribe inhabiting Getulia in the Atlas mountain, bordering the Sahara.

<sup>21</sup> Herodotus (c. 484 BC–c. 425BC): ancient Greek historian.



**Figure 2. Libyco-berber inscriptions —Tassili Tifinagh, Berber alphabet.**

linked to social prestige” and “one can imagine that a fundamental principle of their philosophy was the code of honor” (Malika Hachid).

The innovations of the Paleo-Berbers continue as their communication medium evolves into writing. The first traces of a writing system are depicted in engravings of the Tassili. These “Lybico-berber” inscriptions dated back from the Neolithic period, will evolve to become the current Tifinagh, alphabet of today’s Berbers. (Ahmed Boukous) This system of symbols together with Egyptian hieroglyphs, is considered to be among the earliest forms of writing in Africa.

Berbers and Egyptians shared a common cultural background in their worship of gods represented by solar and lunar deities. Herodotus reports: “Their sacrifice to the Sun and the Moon, but not to any other God. This worship is common to all the Libyans.” (Berbers-Ancient History Encyclopedia) Their influence can also be seen in Greek mythology with the Aegis, shield of Athena, which was inspired by the goat skin tied around the waist of Libyan women as seen on the cave paintings of the Tassili. (Malika Hachid).

One of the most symbolic garment worn by the Libyan warriors was the double harness, which consisted of two straps crossed on the chest and tied around the waist. Scenes of Pharaohs defeating Libyans wearing the double harness are illustrated on Egyptian monuments. Inspired by the Libyans, this garment will eventually become an essential feature of the Pharaohs’ war attire. It was also worn during coronation ceremonies



and festive celebrations. (Jennifer Romion) To date, the Tuaregs wear the *elmejdûden*, the double harness in *tamâhaq*,<sup>22</sup> a symbol of the value of war as well as nobility emphasizing their ethnic identity.

Paleo-Berbers cultural heritage can also be appreciated across North Africa such as the *burnous*<sup>23</sup> worn by today's Berbers, as well as the geometric patterns painted on clothes and tattoos that form the basis of contemporary Berber Art. (Malika Hachid) As this brilliant civilization continued to flourish, paleo-Berbers of Ancient times, known as the Libyans and Garamantes, became accomplished architects and skillful engineers, as well as successful farmers and traders. They created a Trans-Saharan network of commerce between the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan zones. "This changes the whole basis of our understanding of human occupation across the Sahara. The desert was a much more intensely settled and inter-connected region than we have previously realized." (David Mattingly)

Berber people survived many challenges from extreme weather conditions with the desertification of the Sahara to cycles of violence and conquests. Today the Berbers form dispersed communities across North Africa. They call themselves *Imazighen* (singular *Amazigh*) meaning free men or women, a noble way to differentiate themselves from outsiders and invaders during conquests, but also as a symbol of their indigenous identity through their ethnicity, language and culture. (Hsain Ilahine) Since 2004 in Morocco and more recently in Algeria, Tifinagh, the Berber language, is taught in schools celebrating the fascinating heritage of a millennial civilization.

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<sup>22</sup> Tamâhaq: Tuareg Berber dialect.

<sup>23</sup> Burnous: long cloak with a hood, usually white in color.

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