Trans-Saharan Long-distance Trade and the Helleno-Punic Mediterranean

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A very great nation

> But when the Libyans had moved away, the multitude of the Negroes appeared like a cloud on a level with the ground, in the place which the others had occupied. They were there from the White Harousch, the Black Harousch, the desert of Augila, and even from the great country of Agazymba, which is four months' journey south of the Garamantians, and from regions further still! In spite of their red wooden jewels, the filth of their black skin made them look like mulberries that had been long rolling in the dust. They had bark-thread drawers, dried-grass tunics, fallow-deer muzzles on their heads; they shook rods furnished with rings, and brandished cows' tails at the end of sticks, after the fashion of standards, howling the while like wolves.

These are not Herodotus', but Flaubert's Garamantes, featuring in his historical novel *Salammbô*. However, Herodotus' Garamantes seem to spring from an even more fabulous universe: in his famous list of the 'peoples of Libya' (Hdt. 4. 168–187), he claims that the Garamantes 'fly from every man and avoid the company of all; and they neither possess any weapon of war, nor know how to defend themselves against enemies.' (Hdt. 4. 174).[1] On the other hand, he mentions men,

> who are called the Garmantes, a very great nation, who carry earth to lay over the salt and then sow crops. From this point is the shortest way to the Lotophagoi, for from these it is a journey of thirty days to the country of the Garmantes. Among them also are produced the cattle which feed backwards; and they feed backwards for this reason, because they have their horns bent down forwards, and therefore they walk backwards as they feed; for forwards they cannot go, because the horns run into the ground in front of them; but in nothing else do they differ from other cattle except in this and in the thickness and firmness to the touch of their hide. These Garamantes of whom I speak hunt the 'Cave-dwelling' Ethiopians with their four-horse chariots (Hdt. 4. 183, 1–3).[2]

Flaubert, in his amazing novel, takes something for granted which in modern scholarship is rather contested: the very existence of pre-Islamic trans-Saharan trade, with routes crossing the vast desert and converging in Carthage, the sumptuous setting of *Salammbô*. Conventional scholarly wisdom, however, has it that trans-Saharan long-distance trade did not start until the age of the dromedary and indeed not until the coming of Islam: 'The regular commercial and cultural exchange between western Africa and the Mediterranean world did not start properly until the 8th century AD' (Masonen, 1997: 117). The quest for traces of a Mediterranean presence – of whatever kind – in Sub-Saharan Africa has even been referred to as a colonialist attempt to reduce Africans to 'passive objects in their encounter with other civilisations' (ibid.: 116).

Be this as it may, at the basis of this paper is the hypothetical assumption that there is more to ancient accounts about trans- or *circum*-Saharan contacts – including narratives like the famous *periplous* of Hanno, king of the Carthaginians – than just the classical authors' notorious fancifulness. To be sure, since its domestication in Late Antiquity, the dromedary provides a – not merely symbolic – thread linking the histories of Africa, Europe and the Near East (Cummings, 1986: 3–4). To assume that crossing the desert was within reach for its neighbours, is plausible however, even though the process of desertification, stretching (according to paleaoenvironmental data) from about 2300 to about 700 BC, was certainly completed by the time Herodotus was writing (Liverani, 2003a; Kröpelin, 2008).

Ethnographic narratives

In close relation to the general problem of its plausibility, Herodotus' account raises a number of further questions: first, how can the apparent contradictions in his narrative be explained? Herodotus introduces the Garamantes as solitary, chicken-hearted underdogs whose inability to defend themselves he deems noteworthy – only to get back to them later as 'a very great nation' (ἔθνος μέγα ἰσχυρῶς) experienced in charioteering and slave-hunting. This is a remarkable discrepancy. Second, what information does Herodotus possess on the ethnic backgrounds – their 'identities', if you like – of the desert people he lists and how reliable is his account in this respect? And third, how does a 'powerful nation' in the midst of the Sahara fit in with what we know about the situation in the Mediterranean in Herodotus' time? To address these questions, my paper will attempt a brief textual analysis of the Herodotus-narrative, followed by an attempt to map the Garamantes in the world of the 5th century BC.

Herodotus' excursus on the nomadic peoples of Libya seems straightforward. He begins with the campaign of the Persian satrap Aryandes in North Africa, some of whose tribes were under Persian overlordship, 'while the greater number paid no regard to Dareios.' (Hdt. 4. 167, 3). This leads Herodotus to his list of peoples inhabiting the Libyan Desert. He mentions the following groups: Adyrmachidai, Giligamai, Asbystai, Auschisai, Bakales, Nasamones, Psylles (whom Herodotus reports as extinct), Garamantes, Makai, Gindanes, Lotophagoi, Machlyes and Ausees. Some of them he locates in the hinterland of coastal cities: the Asybstai in the vicinity of Cyrene, the Auschisai in the area of Barke, a city in western Cyrenaica. The Lotophagoi lived on a 'peninsula', easily to be identified with the island of Djerba. Further west, the Machlyes and Ausees 'dwell round the lake Tritonis' (ibid., 180, 1), probably the Gulf of Gabès. For Herodotus, each of these peoples is of a particular ethnographic interest: the Gindanes' women, for instance, wear leather anklets, one for each man they had sexual intercourse with (ibid., 177). The list follows an evident geographical rationale, roughly from east to west, along the Mediterranean coastline. The group located furthest inland appear to be the Garamantes, the group located furthest

to the west are the Ausees in present-day Tunisia.

What follows is a brief description of the area's geography: next to the littoral comes an area where the wild animals live and 'and above the wild-beast region there stretches a raised belt of sand, extending from Thebes of the Egyptians to the Pillars of Heracles' (ibid., 181, 1) – the Sahara. In this desert, oases can be found, or, in Herodotus' words,

> in intervals of about ten days' journey there are fragments of salt in great lumps forming hills, and at the top of each hill there shoots up from the middle of the salt a spring of water cold and sweet; and about the spring dwell men, at the furthest limit towards the desert, and above the wild-beast region (ibid., 181, 2).

The ethnographic description of the Saharan peoples – Ammonioi, Garamantes, Atarantes, Atlantes and an unknown people inhabiting the last water place – is arranged along this chain of seven oases. The account features a number of striking elements, of which the reference to the 'great nation' of the Garamantes is certainly the most puzzling one. Second, the regular gaps of 10 days' journeys between the individual oases stand out. The perspective is linear, based on Egypt. Third, like in the preceding list of peoples living close to the sea, Herodotus connects each group with specific ethnographic memorabilia. But while these may be exotic in the first list, the properties of the second group of peoples are truly outlandish, especially as we get further afield: the Garamantes have oxen 'that go backward as they graze' (ibid., 183, 2), the Atarantes have no names (ibid., 184, 1) the last, unnamed people lives in houses built of salt (ibid., 185, 3). Finally, it is conspicuous that for one oasis, Augila, Herodotus, does not provide us with the name of an ethnic group living there; he just mentions, as in the first list, that Augila is regularly visited by the Nasamones who collect palm-fruits there.

Barbarian *topoi*

What are we supposed to make of such a narrative? It has been suggested we should discard the information provided here altogether (Swanson 1975: 598) or partly (Gsell, 1915: 155; Lloyd, 1975: 136) or to approach it only from a, as it were, metahistorical point of view, focusing on the discourses of otherness underlying ancient ethnography.[3] Undeniably, Herodotus, like any ancient ethnographer, applies stereotypical patterns of interpretation to his subject. A recurring one is that of the inverted world ('verkehrte Welt', Nippel, 1990: 18–19), manifest in his description of Egyptian customs which are opposed to those of all other peoples (Hdt. 2. 35, 2). One of his favourites is the inversion of gender roles, also applied to the peoples of Libya.[4] But the presence of 'barbarian' *topoi* in the text does not mean that all the details are imaginary. Wilfried Nippel reminds us, to my mind correctly, that 'Herodotus shows a scholarly ethos committed to objectivity' ('Herodot zeigt ein der Objektivität verpflichtetes wisschenschftliches Ethos', Nippel, 1990: 15).

This 'ethos' is particularly visible in Herodotus' critical treatment of his own sources. In the case of the peoples of Libya, Herodotus must have had a wealth of different sources. The tribes living close to the Mediterranean were known to the Greeks (and Phoenicians) for several centuries. They lived in the vicinity of Greek or Phoenician cities, maintained manifold ties with the Aegean and Levantine colonists and were, from a Greek point of view, just outside the *oikoumene*. The tribes of the Sahara were a different matter. Herodotus must have come across them in Egypt: this is suggested by his geographical perspective. The account's linear structure, the regular alignment of the water places and the mention of one particular place (Augila) without a people related to it suggests that his main source was indeed an itinerary, garnished – by Herodotus himself or secondary sources – with ethnographic details to make it fit in an ethnographic excursus on Libya. The apparent discrepancy in his description of the Garamantes – if it is not the result of textual corruption[5] – could be explained in the same way. In his effort to associate as many stages of the route as possible with a particular tribe or group, Herodotus may have confounded pieces of information of various origins. This could suggest that 'Garamantes' at his time was a rather vague, generic term, which referred to a variety of rather disparate groups, living in the area of the Zella-Fuqaha' oasis. If we attempt[6] – with Carpenter, 1956; Law, 1967; Liverani, 2000b, who all read the narrative as an itinerary – to pinpoint Herodotus' geographical indications on a map of the Sahara, a route running diagonally across the Sahara, from Egypt towards what is now northern Nigeria, emerges.

The Garamentes in a globalizing Ancient world

Provided this interpretation of the text is correct, how does a trans-Saharan trade route in Herodotus' time fit in the wider Mediterranean framework of the period? Travelling through the desert was troublesome and dangerous; it required a logistic backbone of some sophistication and huge investment; it required people in the first place who were willing to do the job. What could have caused men to take the risk and trouble? The question inevitably leads to the kinds of goods involved in the trade. Herodotus makes recurrent mention of salt, of which the Sahara is rich indeed: salt was the main commodity the Sahara supplied to the medieval trade networks, whereas gold and slaves travelled from Sub-Saharan Africa northwards.[7] Herodotus' reference to Garamantes hunting cave-dwelling Aithiopians (Hdt. 4. 183, 4) may well be read as an allusion to slave trade. If Herodotus describes a trade route here, a route that directly pointed towards West Africa's gold-mining areas, slaves and gold were in all likelihood the commodities transported along this route.

Why were slaves and gold required in the Mediterranean, to an extent that justified the effort, cost and risk implied by the trans-Saharan route? The Mediterranean used to have its sources for such goods, sources of long standing at that. The most comprehensive description of an Archaic Mediterranean commercial network is the famous 'Lament over Tyre', in the book of Ezekiel (27). The book obviously dates to the period of Exile, but the passage has almost certainly older sources, which go back into the 8th and early 7th centuries BC, when Tyre was at the climax of its commercial power. In this text, the Phoenician coastal city is portrayed as the centre of an extensive network of trade routes, the rationale of which is straightforward: agricultural products, raw materials and slaves are brought to Tyre, whereas the Phoenician city supplies luxury commodities and services. Like a spider in its web, Tyre was the centre of a full-fledged, integrated, hierarchic commercial system with a strictly vertical division of labour between core and periphery (Liverani, 1991; Sommer, 2000: 127–8; Sommer, 2007). Generally speaking, the further

afield a region was from a Levantine's point of view, the less developed it was economically and the less sophisticated were the goods it had to offer. Those who had to offer nothing but their manpower supplied slaves.

For our purposes, it suffices to have a closer look at the areas that were involved in the exportation of gold and slaves. 'The traders of Sheba and Raamah traded with you; they exchanged for your wares the best of all kinds of spices and all precious stones and gold' (Ezek. 27: 22). Sheba and Raamah can be identified with the southern tip of the Arabian peninsula, present-day Yemen, the ancient Arabia Felix. The other passage of interest is the one concerning the suppliers of slaves: 'Javan, Tubal, and Meshech traded with you; they exchanged human beings and vessels of bronze for your merchandise' (ibid. 27: 13). Javan, first mentioned in the 'table of nations' in the book of Genesis, is the Hebrew word for Greece, Tubal refers almost certainly to northern Anatolia, Meshech is the central Anatolian landscape of Phrygia.

In Ezekiel, all these areas appear as parts of the outer periphery of Tyre's commercial system; they are literally on the fringes of the world of that period. The world of Herodotus' time is clearly a very different one: Greece has witnessed the rise of the *polis*, the victory in the Persian Wars and a steady economic boom making cities like Athens, Miletus and Corinth hubs of the Mediterranean long-distance trade rivalling with Tyre and the other Phoenician cities. The Black Sea littoral in northern Asia Minor had been subject to Greek colonization resulting in substantial changes and, in the *longue durée*, a radical process of transculturation between Greek and indigenous populations. Central Asia Minor became the centre of the Lydian kingdom and later a part of the Achaemenid Empire, linked to the Persian 'royal route', with subsequent rapid development. South Arabia, from the 7th century onwards, turned from a tribal area, populated by largely segmented societies, into the urbanized, literate centre of a fully-fledged empire. The construction of the dam of Marib in the 6th century BC marks a true watershed, allowing for intensive agricultural production and, in the long run, substantial demographic growth.

All this suggests that, towards the middle of the 1st millennium BC, the Mediterranean–Near Eastern economic system was rapidly changing. New centres were emerging in old peripheries, achieving self-sustained growth. Societies that had been merely able to supply slaves and raw materials were developing industrial capacities themselves, and they were evolving into active participants in the intercontinental long-distance trade. Old peripheries turning into new centres and 'global' economic growth call for the development of new peripheries. As a consequence, the emergence of a trans-Saharan trade-route and the rise of urban or proto-urban societies in the oasis belt in the 5th century BC can not only be explained, as recently done by Mario Liverani,[8] as a result of the final stage of desertification around 700 BC; it also fits in with the general pattern of demographic, economic and commercial expansion we encounter in the Mediterranean and Near East. Unless I am very much mistaken, Herodotus' Libyan tribes were the tiger states of his time, benefiting from a globalizing ancient world and its insatiable appetite for raw materials and manpower.

Notes

1 τούτων δὲ κατύπερθε πρὸς νότον ἄνεμον ἐν τῇ, θηριώδεϊ οἰκέουσι Γαράμαντες, οἳ πάντα ἄνθρωπον φεύγουσι καὶ παντὸς ὁμιλίην, καὶ οὔτε ὅπλον ἐκτέαται ἀρήιον οὐδὲν οὔτε ἀμύνεσθαι ἐπιστέαται.

2 καὶ ἄνθρωποι οἰκέουσι ἐν αὐτῷ τοῖσι οὔνομα Γαράμαντες ἐστί, ἔθνος μέγα ἰσχυρῶς, οἳ ἐπὶ τὸν ἅλα γῆν ἐπιφορέοντες οὕτω σπείρουσι. συντομώτατον δ' ἐστὶ ἐς τοὺς Λωτοφάγους, ἐκ τῶν τριήκοντα ἡμερέων ἐς αὐτοὺς ὁδός ἐστι· ἐν τοῖσι καὶ οἱ ὀπισθονόμοι βόες γίνονται· ὀπισθονόμοι δὲ διὰ τόδε εἰσι. τὰ κέρεα ἔχουσι κεκυφότα ἐς τὸ ἔμπροσθε· [3] διὰ τοῦτο ὀπίσω ἀναχωρέοντες νέμονται· ἐς γὰρ τὸ ἔμπροσθε οὐκ οἷοι τε εἰσὶ προεμβαλλόντων ἐς τὴν γῆν τῶν κερέων. ἄλλο δὲ οὐδὲν διαφέρουσι τῶν ἄλλων βοῶν ὅτι μὴ τοῦτο καὶ τὸ δέρμα ἐς παχύτητά τε καὶ τρῖψιν. [4] οἱ Γαράμαντες δὴ οὗτοι τοὺς τρωγλοδύτας Αἰθίοπας θηρεύουσι τοῖσι τεθρίπποισι· . It is at least a curious footnote that chariots are indeed a common motif in the Saharan rock paintings: 'In the western Sahara they occur along a route running from the region of Figuig (Southern Oran) and the Djebel Bani in the north, via Zemmour, Mauritanian Adrar, and the Dhar Qualata to Tondia, near Goundam on the Niger. In the central Sahara, the route runs from the Fezzan and Fort Polignac in the north, via Tassili des Ajjers, Hoggar and Ti-m-Missao to Es-Souq in Adrar des Iforas.' (Law 1967: 181–2; cf. also Gautier 1935a: 553–6; Gautier 1935b: 14–17.)

3 Generally along the lines of Hall, 1989. But see Nippel, 1990: 11–29, on 'ethnographische Topoi' and 'Deutungsmuster'.

4 Hdt. 4.180, 2: ὁρτῇ δὲ ἐνιαυσίῃ Ἀθηναίης αἱ παρθένοι αὐτῶν δίχα διαστᾶσαι μάχονται πρὸς ἀλλήλας λίθοισί τε καὶ ξύλοισι, τῷ αὐθιγενέι θεῷ λέγουσαι τὰ πάτρια ἀποτελέειν, τὴν Ἀθηναίην καλέομεν. τὰς δὲ ἀποθνησκούσας τῶν παρθένων ἐκ τῶν τρωμάτων ψευδοπαρθένους καλέουσι. ('They celebrate a yearly festival of Athena, where their maidens are separated into two bands and fight each other with stones and sticks, thus (they say) honoring in the way of their ancestors that native goddess whom we call Athena. Maidens who die of their wounds are called false virgins.').

5 As suggested by some editors of the text (Burn; Legrand). McCall, 1999: 199–200.

6 With Carpenter, 1956; Law, 1967; Liverani, 2000b; Liverani, 2000a; Liverani, 2001; Liverani, 2003b, who all read the narrative as an itinerary.

7 The trans-Saharan trade reached its climax between *c.* AD 700 and 1100, when gold from Ghana and the upper Niger region as well as slaves from Sub-Saharan Africa was transported through the desert to the Mediterranean, where demand was constantly high. The Berber tribes of the desert exported salt to Ghana and – in return for Sub-Saharan gold – received finished products from the Mediterranean centres (Mauny, 1961: 293–396; Curtin, 1984; Thiry, 1995: 502–42; Liverani, 2000b: 507–8). For the early modern period, Austen, 1993.

8 Liverani, 2001; Liverani, 2003b.

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