Urbanisation and State Formation in the Ancient Sahara and Beyond

The themes of sedentarisation, urbanisation and state formation are fundamental ones in the archaeology of many diverse parts of the world. Hitherto these concepts have been little explored in relation to early societies of the Saharan zone. Discussion of these issues in relation to the precocious civilisations that bordered the vast North African desert has rarely considered the possibility that they were interconnected by long-range contacts and knowledge networks. The orthodox opinion of many of the key oasis zones within the Sahara is that they were not created before the early Medieval period and the Islamic conquest of Mediterranean North Africa. Major claims of this volume are that the ultimate origins of oasis settlements in many parts of the Sahara were considerably earlier, that by the first millennium AD some of these oasis settlements were of a size and complexity to merit the categorisation 'towns' and that a few exceptional examples were focal centres within proto-states or early state-level societies.

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Preface

When I was working on my PhD thesis on the Roman province of Tripolitania (north-west Libya) in the early 1980s, I became intrigued by a desert people who inhabited Fazzan, the area of the Central Sahara to the south of Tripolitania. This was my first introduction to the Garamantes. They were regularly mentioned in the ancient Greek and Roman sources, though seldom in complimentary terms – for the most part being depicted as nomadic and uncouth barbarians.[1] However, some pioneering archaeological work in the 1930s and then again in the 1960s–1970s had revealed their physical traces to be considerably more sophisticated than would be assumed on the basis of the literary stereotypes.[2]

This volume arises out of my subsequent direct engagement across more than 20 years now with the archaeology of Fazzan. In 1996, I was given the chance to renew field research in what were effectively the Garamantian heartlands. Following an initial scoping visit that year, I directed the Fazzan Project across six years, carrying out excavations and survey around the capital of the Garamantes at Garama (Old Jarma), with an emphasis on tracing evidence for their settlements, but also mapping other archaeological features including cemeteries and irrigation systems.[3] A notable result of this work was the clear demonstration of the sophisticated and substantial network of oasis farming settlements that lay at the heart of the Garamantian territory. Rather than being 'nomadic barbarians', the Garamantes now appear to have been predominantly sedentary oasis farmers, living in substantial permanent and complex settlements of mudbrick buildings. That is not to say that the Garamantes did not also incorporate pastoral elements, as will be further discussed at various points below, but simply to highlight the unexpected density and sophistication of sedentary oasis settlements. There

[1] See in particular, Mattingly 2003, 79–81; 2011, 34–37 on the concept of 'progressive barbarisation' imposed by ancient authors as a factor of distance from the Mediterranean.
[2] Ayoub 1967; Daniels 1968; 1970; 1971; 1989; Pace *et al.* 1951.
[3] There were five seasons of fieldwork (1997–2001) and a finds study season (2002). The results are now fully published as Mattingly 2003; 2007; 2010; 2013 (now free to download from the Society for Libyan Studies website). Funding for the Fazzan Project came primarily from the Society for Libyan Studies, the Leverhulme Trust, the British Academy and the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

is strong evidence to identify the top level of their settlement hierarchy as 'urban' in character and their overall society as an early Saharan state.[4] The prime aim of this volume is to evaluate those claims in a broader geographical and chronological framework.

My work on the Garamantes has subsequently evolved through a series of further projects. Between 2007 and 2011, I directed the Desert Migrations Project, with a particular focus on Garamantian burials and funerary traditions.[5] The increasing availability of high resolution satellite imagery opened a new avenue of research in 2011, the Peopling the Desert project, which extended research on the Garamantes to another of the major oasis bands in Fazzan, the Murzuq depression.[6] Another survey on the oasis of Ghadamis in Western Libya was cut short by the Libyan civil war in 2011 and it has so far been impossible to complete that work. The Trans-SAHARA Project (2011–2017) marked a further evolution of this body of work, seeking to place the Garamantes in their Saharan context and to address the wider implications of the results obtained in the earlier work.[7] As part of the Trans-SAHARA project, although unable to return to Libya for fieldwork, we continued to work closely with Libyan colleagues – who followed up with ground visits to sites we identified through satellite image analysis. This has contributed to a number of specific studies of historic oasis clusters that are reported on below. We also commenced a new phase of work on early oases in the Wadi Draa area of southern Morocco (see below, Chapter 6). The widening of our field of investigation has been hugely beneficial to our thinking about the Garamantes.

One of the major obstacles hindering understanding of the Sahara through history is that the study of the desert and the neighbouring zones of North Africa, the Nile Valley, Sudan and West Africa has tended to be compartmentalised into chronologically or regionally specific investigations. Broader synthesis across the vast Trans-Saharan zone has been lacking. The term 'Trans-Saharan' should be understood in the context of this book as referring to the connected spaces of the Sahara and its eastern, northern and southern peripheries. The Sahara has often been likened to a great sea and no sea can be understood without reference to its adjacent

[4] Mattingly 2013, 530–34; Mattingly and Sterry 2013.

[5] Five planned seasons of fieldwork were completed by 2011, but the scheduled study season could not take place in 2012 because of the Libyan civil war. Interim reports have been published in *Libyan Studies* from 2007 to 2011, Mattingly *et al.* 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010a; 2010b; 2011a. Funding for the Desert Migrations Project came primarily from the Society for Libyan Studies.

[6] Sterry and Mattingly 2011; 2013; Sterry *et al.* 2012. The Peopling the Desert Project was funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

[7] The Trans-SAHARA project was funded by the European Research Council (grant no. 269418).

shore-lands. The idea of Trans-Saharan perspectives on historical developments thus shares much in common with recent studies of the Mediterranean, which have stressed the importance of connectivity and supra-regional influences.[8]

The work of the Trans-SAHARA project was organised around a series of four workgroups, each one supported by early career post-doctoral research associates and each dealing with a discrete group of themes: trade; migration, burial practice and identity; mobile technologies; urbanisation and state formation. As a key element of the work programme, a workshop was held at Leicester for each of the workgroups, to which international scholars working on neighbouring areas of the Trans-Saharan zone were invited. From the outset, these workshops were conceived as offering a chance to engage a group of leading experts in the field in a high-level debate about the implications of the new information on the Garamantes for studies of the wider Trans-Saharan world. Papers were commissioned for an intended series of agenda-setting volumes on Trans-Saharan Archaeology and pre-circulated so that the workshop sessions focused entirely on discussion of their content. The volumes in this series are thus unusual edited books in that each one has at its core an extended and detailed presentation of the key results of the Trans-SAHARA research team's work, combined with the comparative perspectives of invited external experts. As the Cambridge University Press reviewers of the volumes have noted, in the interests of promoting debate we also invited critique and contradiction from these external specialists. We think that adds to the special character of the resulting books, integrating new evidence with a broad overview of the state of the field and combining agenda-setting ideas with different perspectives.

This third volume in the resulting series of four, thus presents some of the key work of the Trans-SAHARA team and an international pool of collaborators on the themes of urbanisation and state formation. The territorial expanse of the Trans-Saharan zone is vast and, given the hostile climate and environment of the Sahara across the last 5,000 years, it is perhaps unsurprising that scholarly research has become regionally segmented. Archaeologists have most commonly self-identified with one of the great civilisations bordering the Sahara: the Classical or Medieval Maghrib, the Nilotic civilisations or the precocious polities of West Africa. Saharan historical archaeologists have been fewer in number, vastly outnumbered by prehistorians (and especially the

[8] Abulafia 2011; Broodbank 2013; Horden and Purcell 2000. See Lichtenberger 2016 for the explicit comparison of Mediterranean and Sahara.

devotees of rock art). The Trans-Saharan archaeology series seeks to explore the interconnections across this zone in new ways, bringing together archaeologists, anthropologists and historians from different regions, varied academic traditions and multiple time periods and cultural phases.[9] The volumes are designed to reassess traditional assumptions about the history and archaeology of the zone, to present and assess alternative hypotheses and to set a fresh agenda for future studies. The Sahara has for too long been seen as a vast empty space, separating and keeping apart areas of precocious state formation and urbanisation along the Nile valley, in the Mediterranean zone of Libya and the Maghrib, in Sub-Saharan territories around Lake Chad and the West African Niger Bend area. Recent archaeological studies have started to cast doubt on this for certain parts of the Sahara and it seems an appropriate time to review the larger picture of pre-Islamic and early Islamic developments across this entire zone.

As we are asking our readers to often step outside their core areas of knowledge and expertise to engage with material from other parts of the Trans-Saharan zone, place names and their mapping have exercised us all. Systems of transliteration and spelling of place names across the Trans-Saharan region vary enormously and the same site can be presented in several distinct ways. We have tried to impose a measure of consistency in the transliteration of names, following the practice I adopted for the *Archaeology of Fazzan* series. However, for ease of recognition some exceptions have been allowed for sites whose canonical spelling is so well established in the literature. We trust that the maps provided will prove helpful with the identification of places named in the text, but hope that readers will share our sense of being on a journey of discovery as they read the following contributions. Most of the site mapping on satellite imagery is the work of Martin Sterry. Thanks are also due to Mike Hawkes for the production or revision of many other line drawings in the volume.

David Mattingly

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