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The Inhabitants of Ancient North Africa (the Maghreb) in Light of Archaeological Evidence and Ancient Historical Sources: A Study of Egyptian Sources from the Old Kingdom and the Writings of Herodotus

Los habitantes del norte de África antiguo (el Magreb) a la luz de las evidencias arqueológicas y las fuentes históricas antiguas: un estudio de las fuentes egipcias del Reino Antiguo y los escritos de Heródoto

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Abstract:

Ancient Egyptian archaeological evidence and the writings of Herodotus serve as significant sources for studying the populations of the ancient Maghreb, as they provide data regarding the Libyan presence in the region and their interactions with neighboring societies. The importance of examining these sources lies in their contribution to uncovering early references to the ancient Libyans, offering insight into aspects of their lives and the diversity of their groups. Egyptian artifacts dating back to the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods—along with texts and depictions from the Old Kingdom—contain references to Libyans, including the Temehu and Tehenu. Furthermore, the writings of Herodotus, particularly Book IV of his *Histories*, provide information on various Libyan tribes, their geographical distribution, customs, traditions, and their economic and social activities. This data highlights the diversity of the ancient Maghreb's population and the variety of their lifestyles—ranging from nomadism and pastoralism to agriculture and sedentary living—thereby enabling an analysis of their presence and distribution through a comparison of archaeological evidence and historical accounts.

Keywords: Ancient Maghreb, ancient Libyans, ancient Egyptian sources, Herodotus, Libyan tribes.

Resumen

Garantizar el bienestar de la ciudadanía exige una administración local moderna, capaz de satisfacer sus crecientes necesidades en todos los ámbitos de la vida: económico, social, cultural y político. Este objetivo solo puede alcanzarse mediante recursos financieros suficientes y recursos humanos competentes, cualificados y sujetos a rendición de cuentas, tanto electos como designados, capaces de gestionar las instituciones locales de manera moderna, junto con un marco normativo avanzado y adaptado a las circunstancias cambiantes. ¿En qué medida están presentes estos elementos en la administración local argelina actual? Y, cuando existen, ¿hasta qué punto se articulan de manera coherente entre sí?

Palabras clave: desarrollo local deseado; recursos financieros; inversión local; recursos humanos cualificados; gobernanza de la gestión; marco normativo actualizado.

Introduction:

The study of the populations of the ancient Maghreb is a significant subject in the field of ancient history. It offers valuable insights into the origins of the human groups that inhabited the region, their geographical distribution, their cultural characteristics, and the nature of their relationships with neighboring peoples. However, reconstructing the history of these groups presents several challenges—foremost among them being the scarcity of indigenous written sources. Consequently, researchers must rely heavily on archaeological evidence and historical accounts left by other civilizations, primarily ancient Egypt, followed by the Greek and Roman worlds.

In this context, the sources available for studying the ancient Libyans—who constituted one of the most prominent population groups to inhabit vast areas of the ancient Maghreb—can be categorized into two main groups. The first consists of ancient Egyptian sources, which date back to the Predynastic period and span the Pharaonic era. These are significant due to the references found in Egyptian inscriptions, illustrations, and documents concerning Libyan groups, their interactions with Egypt, and the various instances of contact and conflict between them and the Egyptian state. The second group comprises Greek, Roman, and Byzantine sources, which emerged following the arrival of the Greeks in the Cyrenaica region—notably from the 7th century BCE—and continued through subsequent periods up until the Islamic conquest of the Maghreb in the 7th century CE. These sources have provided information regarding Libyan tribes, their areas of settlement, their customs and traditions, their ways of life, and their relationships with their regional surroundings. However, most of the available information regarding the inhabitants of the ancient Maghreb comes from the writings of historians and representatives of neighboring civilizations, rather than from the local populations themselves. This necessitates a cautious approach, as such accounts may contain biases or perceptions rooted in the cultural contexts of their authors. Furthermore, archaeological evidence from early periods—particularly the era marked by contact between the Libyans and the ancient Egyptians—does not always provide sufficient data to reconstruct a comprehensive historical chronology of the various aspects of these groups' lives. Consequently, it is essential to examine and compare the available sources to gain an understanding of the region's history.

In light of this, it becomes important to study the inhabitants of the ancient Maghreb through Egyptian archaeological evidence and historical texts—focusing specifically on Egyptian sources from the Old Kingdom, which contain references to the ancient Libyans—as well as the writings of Herodotus, which serve as one of the earliest Greek accounts concerning the region's population. The significance of this approach lies in uncovering the nature of the information these sources provide and assessing the extent to which they contribute to our understanding of the inhabitants of the ancient Maghreb and their historical and cultural characteristics.

Accordingly, the research problem can be formulated as follows:

To what extent do Egyptian archaeological evidence—particularly from the Old Kingdom—and the writings of Herodotus contribute to our understanding of the inhabitants of the ancient Maghreb, and to shedding light on the features of their history and civilization? Furthermore, what is the nature of the information these sources provide regarding ancient Libyan groups and their relationships with neighboring peoples?

1- The Inhabitants of the Ancient Maghreb in Light of Ancient Egyptian Archaeological Evidence:

Ancient Egyptian sources are considered significant evidence for studying the inhabitants of the ancient Maghreb, as they contain references to the ancient Libyans and their interactions with Egypt. Before addressing the sources from the Old Kingdom, we shall first briefly touch upon archaeological evidence dating back to the Predynastic period.

a- Predynastic and Early Dynastic Documents:

The Gebel el-Arak Knife Handle:

The Gebel el-Arak knife handle is among the oldest archaeological artifacts that point to the ancient Libyans and their relationship with Egypt. Discovered in the Gebel el-Arak region and dating to the fourth millennium BCE (the Predynastic period)—with a specimen currently housed in the Louvre Museum in France—it offers historical insights into Egypt's relationship with its western neighbors. On one side, it depicts scenes of a land and naval battle between

two factions: one Egyptian, and the other—as some researchers suggest—composed of inhabitants of the ancient Maghreb. This identification is based on the men's hairstyle, which features a single braided lock, and their attire, consisting of a sheath (penis cover). These are characteristic markers of the ancient Libyans—features frequently observed in prehistoric rock art found in the Sahara Desert (such as in the Tassili region). (See Figure 01)



Image No. 01: Handle of the Gebel el-Arak knife

http://mandomando334.blogspot.com/2014/12/blog-post.html

The "Hunting Palette"—also known as the "Lion Palette"—is fragmented, with some pieces held at the Louvre in Paris and others preserved at the British Museum in London. The palette depicts a number of men carrying bows, spears, and throwing sticks, surrounded by various animals being hunted. They are shown wearing feathers in their hair, loin coverings, and tails hanging from their garments—all of which researchers have identified as characteristic features of the ancient Libyans (see Image No. 02).



Image No. 02: The "Hunting" Palette

The Tehenu Palette (The Palette of Fortresses and Spoils):

This palette is considered one of the most significant archaeological pieces providing evidence of the ancient Libyans. It was discovered in Abydos, in Upper Egypt. On one side, the palette features seven squares representing fortresses or strongholds, each enclosed by a crenellated wall. Within these enclosures are smaller squares—likely representing dwellings within or around the cities—accompanied by hieroglyphic signs denoting the names of the fortresses. The scene depicts these strongholds being demolished by picks and hoes, aided by a lion, a scorpion, and two falcons. These animals may symbolize specific deities, cities, or allies of the victorious king, or perhaps his triumphs over the fortresses of his enemies. Alternatively, the scene might portray a single king in various guises or under different names: the lion and the falcon represent the "warrior king," while the scorpion signifies the "Scorpion King," whose victory culminates in the destruction of the fortresses of the hostile lands he conquered (see Image No. 03).

On the reverse side, there are three registers depicting bulls, donkeys, and sheep, with olive trees shown below them. Nearby, a hieroglyphic sign—"Tehenu"—appears, serving as a reference to the land of the Libyans.

This palette stands as the oldest document attesting to the existence of Libya as a known and inhabited land, dating back approximately six thousand years—coinciding with the dawn of ancient Egyptian civilization. Its importance lies in the fact that it features some of the earliest examples of ancient Egyptian script, marking the first instance where a specific land or people—in this case, the Libyans—is explicitly identified. If the identification of the aforementioned cities is correct, they were likely situated on the west bank of the Nile. Furthermore, it is probable that Libya was inhabited during the Predynastic period; accounts suggest that King Scorpion invaded the land of the Tjehenu and subjugated its population.



Image No. 03: The Tjehenu Palette

https://www.cairo24.com/1696803

The Unification Palette (The Narmer Palette):

Dating back to the Early Dynastic Period of ancient Egypt—specifically the reign of King Narmer, who is credited with the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt—this artifact is also known as the "Victory Palette of King Narmer" or the "Great Hierakonpolis Palette." It is a ceremonial, inscribed Egyptian artifact, roughly 64 centimeters in height and carved from schist. The palette features some of the earliest hieroglyphic symbols discovered in Egypt, dating to approximately 3200–3000 BCE. On its front face, King Narmer is depicted raising a mace, while his other hand grasps the hair of a kneeling enemy. Also visible are images of bound captives, upon whom the term "Tjehenu" is inscribed (see Image No. 04).

Alan Gardiner interpreted the scenes on the Narmer Palette within the context of a struggle for control over the Nile Delta—a region potentially held by forces associated with the Libyans at the time—viewing the imagery as a representation of the King's victory over his adversaries. However, this interpretation remains one possible historical reading rather than a consensus among scholars.

Image No. 04: The Unification Stela

B- Documents from the Old Kingdom:

It is notable that documents from this period were recorded using hieroglyphic script. The texts range from concise to highly detailed—a marked contrast to the documents of the preceding era (the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods), which consisted primarily of general, engraved scenes unaccompanied by written text, as the hieroglyphic writing system had not yet fully developed.

The Inscription of King Sneferu (Founder of the Fourth Dynasty) on the Palermo Stone:

The inscription of King Sneferu on the Palermo Stone is one of the most significant historical records documenting Egyptian military campaigns during the Old Kingdom, specifically under the Fourth Dynasty. The circumstances surrounding the discovery of the Palermo Stone remain unclear; its original provenance is unknown, and there is no definitive archaeological information regarding the exact site where it was found. It is currently housed in the Antonino Salinas Regional Archaeological Museum in Palermo.

The text indicates that King Sneferu led a campaign against the Tjehenu tribes. It provides figures for the number of captives taken and the spoils seized during this campaign: 11,000 captives and 13,100 head of cattle (though other sources suggest the number of cattle reached 23,000). These figures point to the likely existence of border conflicts along Egypt's western frontier at the time, which may explain why King Sneferu launched such military campaigns. These data also allow for an assessment of the economic wealth of the targeted Libyan groups, while also helping to clarify the role that Egyptian military campaigns played in weakening their economic and human structures.

Texts from the Fifth Dynasty, found on the walls of King Sahure's temple:

These inscriptions provide comprehensive information about the Tjehenu—specifically regarding their physical characteristics, attire, and other features—reminiscent of depictions of ancient Libyans found in Predynastic and Early Dynastic records.

The reliefs in the upper section of the scene depict the goddess Seshat—deity of writing and record-keeping—seated and holding a stylus and a tablet. This scene represents the tallying of captives and spoils seized by King Sahure during his military campaign in the land of the Tjehenu (Libya). Before the goddess, there are three rows of captives, accompanied by their wives and children; according to the inscriptions, each row represents a specific group or city, such as Mehesham and Bashubakt. The lower section of the relief features four rows of animals taken as spoils by the Egyptians. The text specifies the quantities: 123,400 head of cattle, 223,000 donkeys, 232,413 goats, and 22,368 sheep.

These scenes hold significant historical importance; Its significance is not limited to documenting the outcomes of the military campaign; it also allows for a discussion of the nature of the economic resources possessed by the Libyan groups in the Tjehenu region, and the extent to which they relied on livestock herding as part of their economic activity. The depiction of captives—men, women, and children—alongside large numbers of livestock, highlights the human and economic dimensions of Egyptian military campaigns. It points to the resulting loss of individuals and animal wealth, factors that could significantly impact the social structure and productive capacity of the targeted groups.

The Inscription of King Pepi I – The Texts of Weni

At the beginning of the Sixth Dynasty, during the reign of King Pepi I, Egyptian texts began to refer to a Libyan people known as the "Tjehenu." The King recruited individuals from this group to serve within the forces participating in his military campaigns in Asia. A key piece of evidence for this is the inscription left by Weni on the walls of his tomb at Abydos, in which he recounts being tasked by the King with levying fighters from Nubia and Libya to take part in a military campaign against Asian groups.

The inscription of Weni states: "His Majesty organized an army of tens of thousands, with troops gathered from the entire south—stretching from Elephantine in the south to Aphroditopolis in the north—as well as from the northern regions and their fortresses. Forces were also drawn from the groups of Irjet, Medjay, Yam, Wawat, and Kau, as well as from the land of the Tjehenu."

Weni's inscription indicates that the Tjehenu were known to the Egyptians as early as the Old Kingdom, and that they were among the groups from which military personnel were recruited during the reign of King Pepi I. Furthermore, this text serves as significant evidence of the ties that existed between Egypt and certain Libyan groups during the Sixth Dynasty—ties that manifested in the form of military cooperation or recruitment. However, the inclusion of the Tjehenu among the forces assembled for the campaign is not, in itself, sufficient to prove that they were subject to Egyptian authority; nor does it definitively establish their place of origin or whether they belonged to the northern or southern Tjehenu groups.

Consequently, these issues remain a subject of debate among scholars and require further examination in light of later Egyptian texts that discuss the Tjehenu and the locations where they settled.

The text of King Pepi II:

The text was discovered in the mortuary temple of King Pepi II, a ruler of the Sixth Dynasty. It is an exact replica of a scene that previously appeared on the walls of the temple of Sahure. It appears that this motif, once transferred to temple walls, became a conventional, symbolic representation of the king's power and his ability to subjugate foreign lands neighboring Egypt. The scene depicts the king striking his enemies and bringing them under his authority; it also includes the spoils of war he seized—such as bulls, donkeys, and goats—alongside bound captives. Among these prisoners are individuals identified as Libyans, including "Bat" and "Tekhen," who likely belonged to specific Libyan tribes. The scene also features other captives, such as the "Tjehenu"—a name used to designate a particular Libyan group—as well as women and children.

It is noteworthy that the scenes depicted on the walls of the temples of Sahure and Pepi II were reproduced in later historical periods. There is a striking resemblance in the visual elements—in some instances, even the specific details and the names of the individuals are replicated—despite the significant temporal and geographical gaps between these monuments. A case in point is the imagery found in the temple of Taharqa in Nubia, dating to the Third Intermediate Period (Twenty-Fifth Dynasty).

This suggests that certain scenes of war and victory in ancient Egyptian art were not necessarily records of specific historical events; rather, they served a traditional, symbolic function, expressing the pharaoh's might and his capacity to subdue enemies and foreign peoples—thereby highlighting the significance of such subjugation. These scenes are subject to critical study and archaeological comparison to distinguish between their symbolic connotations and the actual historical evidence they may provide.

Nevertheless, the potentially conventional nature of these depictions does not diminish their value as historical sources; the inscriptions and imagery remain highly significant for the study of fashion, attire, weaponry, the appearance of captives, and spoils of war. Furthermore, they contribute to our understanding of the political and military concepts that Egyptian kings sought to project throughout the ages.

The Inscriptions of Harkhuf (Sixth Dynasty):

In the texts he left on the walls of his tomb at Elephantine, Harkhuf described his expeditions to the region of Yam in Nubia, noting that he traveled as far as the land of the Tjehenu, located to the southwest of the Nile. His account also mentions that the tribe of Yam advanced against the Tjehenu tribes, who lived to the west of Egypt. The text of the traveler Harkhuf is significant for shedding light on the conflict between Yam and the Temehu. This border conflict

arose from the Temehu's attempt to advance southward toward Nubia. It is also noteworthy that, although Egypt was keen to protect its western borders from Libyan incursions—often launching campaigns against the Temehu tribes—on this particular occasion, the royal envoy (the governor of Elephantine) intervened on behalf of the Temehu. He sought to de-escalate tensions between the tribes of Yam and the Temehu, and even recruited the latter to serve as mercenaries in the Egyptian army. This may be explained by pre-existing marital and kinship ties between the Egyptian monarchy (dating back to the time of King Khufu) and the Temehu tribes—a relationship that may have persisted throughout the subsequent dynasties of the Old Kingdom. This remains a plausible hypothesis, open to further debate, pending any contradictory evidence that might emerge from future archaeological excavations.

1- The Inhabitants of the Ancient Maghreb as Described in the Writings of Herodotus:

Herodotus was a Greek historian who lived between 485 and 424 BCE. Born in the city of Halicarnassus in Asia Minor, he is often called the "Father of History," as he was among the first to systematically record historical events. His writings cover the histories and civilizations of various peoples. While his work is of great importance, some of his accounts have been criticized for containing errors and contradictions, which has made his historical methodology a subject of both study and critical analysis. Herodotus discusses the region of ancient North Africa (the Maghreb) and its inhabitants in the fourth book of his *Histories*—a section often referred to as the "Libyan Book." In it, he describes the Libyan tribes residing across the territory stretching from west of the Nile River to the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. Herodotus notes that the world, as known in his time, was divided into three continents, identifying Libya as the third: "In truth, the three continents—Libya, Asia, and Europe—differ vastly from one another in terms of size."

Herodotus further states that ancient Libya was home to four distinct human groups. He identifies two indigenous populations—the Libyans, who inhabited the northern regions, and the Ethiopians, who lived in the south—while noting that the two groups who arrived from elsewhere were the Phoenicians and the Greeks. He writes: "...the indigenous inhabitants are the Libyans and the Ethiopians—the Libyans occupying the northern territories and the Ethiopians the southern—while the newcomers are the Phoenicians and the Greeks."

An apparent contradiction arises in Herodotus's accounts; after classifying the Libyans among the indigenous human groups that inhabited the region, he elsewhere mentions the Maxyes—an ancient Libyan tribe—noting that they traced their origins to men who had arrived from Troy. He writes: "They claim to be descendants of men who came from Troy."[1] While this discrepancy raises questions regarding the tribe's origins, it does not necessarily constitute an explicit contradiction, as Herodotus was merely relaying the Maxyes' own account of their ancestry without personally confirming its veracity.

Herodotus categorized the inhabitants of the ancient Maghreb into two groups based on their lifestyles and economic resources. The first group consisted of nomads and pastoralists inhabiting the region extending from Egypt to the Triton River, while the second group comprised sedentary farmers living to the west of the Triton River. It appears that the differing terrain on either side of the river contributed to these divergent ways of life: the regions east of the river were characterized by sandy, flat landscapes—conditions conducive to a nomadic, pastoral existence—whereas the regions to the west featured highlands, forests, and diverse vegetation, providing a suitable environment for agriculture and settled life. This contrast illustrates the extent to which the economic activities of the inhabitants were shaped by the natural and environmental characteristics of the regions they inhabited. In addition to classifying the inhabitants of the ancient Maghreb according to their lifestyles, Herodotus—in his writings—identifies several tribes that settled in the region, detailing some of their characteristics, geographical distribution, and means of subsistence. These accounts reveal the tribal diversity that defined the ancient Maghreb, as well as the variations in the inhabitants' ways of life, shaped by the natural and economic conditions surrounding them. Below, we examine some of these tribes, highlighting key information provided in his historical narratives:

The Adyrmachidae:

Herodotus mentions the Adyrmachidae tribe, whose territory extended from the Nile Delta in Egypt to the port of Plinthine on the Libyan coast. As a Libyan tribe, they inhabited the eastern part of the ancient Maghreb, along the Egyptian border. In his description of this tribe, Herodotus notes several customs and traditions associated with its women; he mentions that they wore copper ornaments around their lower legs and kept their hair long. He also describes a specific habit of theirs: picking lice from their hair, biting them, and then discarding them. He added that young women about to be married were presented to the king, who would then choose whichever one caught his fancy.

The Giligamae:

Herodotus mentions the Giligamae tribe among the ancient Libyan tribes, situating them in the coastal region west of the Adyrmachidae tribe. He refers to the island of Platea, located off their coast—where the settlers of Cyrene established a colony—as well as the port of Menelaus and the region of Aziris, where the Cyrenaeans resided before settling in their own city. Herodotus further notes that the territory of the Giligamae was a region where the *silphium* plant grew; this plant's range extended from the island of Platea to the entrance of the Gulf of Sirte.

The Asbystae:

Herodotus identifies the Asbystae as one of the ancient Libyan tribes that inhabited the interior regions west of the territory of the Giligamae. He notes that they lived in the highlands behind the city of Cyrene, and that their territory did not reach the coast because the Cyrenaeans controlled the coastal areas. He also mentions that the members of this tribe were particularly known—more so than other Libyans—for using four-horse chariots. Furthermore, he states that they adopted many of the customs and traditions of the Cyrenaeans, which reflects the nature of the interaction and cultural influence that existed between the ancient Libyan tribes and the Greek settlements in the Cyrenaica region.

The Nasamones:

Herodotus mentions the Nasamones as one of the ancient Libyan tribes that inhabited the regions west of the Auschisae tribe. He describes them as a numerous tribe that would leave their herds near the coast during the season... ...in the summer, they would head toward the Awjila region to harvest the fruit of the palm trees that grow there in abundance. He also noted that they used to catch locusts, dry them in the sun, grind them into a powder, and mix them with milk to drink. He further touched upon their social and marital customs, explaining that a man could take multiple wives, and that they followed specific traditions on the wedding night: the groom's guests would take turns visiting the bride to present her with gifts before the groom himself consummated the marriage.

The Maxyes:

Herodotus mentions the Maxyes as one of the ancient Libyan tribes that inhabited the region west of the Triton River, alongside the Auses. He describes them as a sedentary people who practiced agriculture and lived in permanent dwellings—unlike the nomadic tribes—and notes their custom of wearing their hair long on the right side of the head while shaving it on the left. Furthermore, he mentions that they painted their bodies with a red substance and claimed descent from men who had arrived from Troy. He adds that the territory they occupied, and the lands further west, were more heavily forested and richer in wild game than the eastern regions inhabited by the nomadic tribes.

The Zauekes:

Herodotus lists the Zauekes among the ancient Libyan tribes, placing them after the Maxyes in his enumeration. He notes that, among the Zauekes, women would drive the war chariots whenever the tribe went into battle. This reference serves as one of the accounts highlighting the role Herodotus attributed to women in the military life of certain ancient Libyan tribes—though he provides no further details regarding the nature of their participation in battles or their military organization.

The Gyzantes:

Herodotus mentions the Gyzantes tribe among the ancient Libyan peoples—listing them after the Zaueces in his description of the inhabitants of Libya. He notes that their land was rich in honey, produced in large quantities by bees.

He further records that members of the tribe would coat their bodies with a red substance—known as red ochre—and that they consumed monkeys, which were abundant in the mountains of their region. This account offers insight into aspects of the economic life and customs of the Gyzantes, specifically regarding honey production and the use of pigments for body painting.

Conclusion:

An examination of the inhabitants of the ancient Maghreb—based on both ancient Egyptian archaeological evidence and the writings of Herodotus—reveals that the region was not devoid of human populations in antiquity. Rather, it was home to Libyan peoples who formed an integral part of its ancient history and maintained connections with neighboring societies, most notably ancient Egypt. Egyptian evidence—including artifacts, depictions, and inscriptions—demonstrates that the Egyptians were aware of these groups and referenced them from very early periods, particularly during the Old Kingdom. This underscores the significance of such evidence in tracing the Libyan presence within early historical sources, while noting that the interpretation of certain images, symbols, and labels remains contingent upon their specific historical and archaeological context. The writings of Herodotus have made it possible to identify a number of Libyan tribes that inhabited various regions of the ancient Maghreb—such as the Adyrmachidae, Giligamae, Asbystae, Nasamones, Maxyes, Zaueces, and Gyzantes. They also provide information regarding the areas these groups occupied, as well as some of their customs, economic activities, and social practices. This information is significant because it offers a more detailed description of certain Libyan groups; however, it must be approached with critical scrutiny and cross-referenced, given the nature of historical narratives and the sources upon which the author relied.

Consequently, a comparison between ancient Egyptian evidence and the writings of Herodotus confirms the presence of Libyan populations in the ancient Maghreb, while also demonstrating that neighboring societies were aware of them and took an interest in documenting aspects of their lives. Furthermore, it illustrates that our understanding of these populations does not rely on a single source, but rather on the integration of archaeological evidence and historical accounts—despite their differing contexts and objectives. Thus, synthesizing these various forms of evidence allows for the development of an initial conceptual framework regarding the Libyan presence in the region and the diversity of the groups that inhabited it, serving as a gateway to understanding the history of the peoples of the ancient Maghreb.

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