

Received : 26/12/2023 ; Accepted : 22/03/2024 ; Published : 27/04/2024
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53555/ks.v12i4.2963>

Numidian Clothing Through Archaeological Sources and Evidence

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Abstract

The archaeological remnants, both immovable and movable, scattered across North Africa, represent a venerable civilizational heritage spanning millennia. While extensive studies have delved into various historical dimensions through time, certain facets of North Africa's past, particularly its civilization, remain insufficiently explored. Most scholarly attention has been directed towards political and architectural developments, whereas everyday life, cultural customs, traditional practices, and attire have been comparatively neglected.

This study seeks to identify the principal sources that illuminate the nature of Numidian clothing and to determine the materials predominantly used in their creation. The most critical sources identified include rock art, funerary and dedicatory monuments, and the historical accounts penned by ancient scholars.

Keywords: Numidian Clothing; Archaeological Sources; Archaeological Evidence.

Introduction

To comprehend the historical trajectory of a population's attire, one must aggregate all available historical and archaeological evidence. Discoveries in archaeology have affirmed the ancient human occupation of this region, evidenced by tools from various prehistoric epochs- microlithic implements, polished stones, and early ceramics- now preserved at the National Public Museum of Cirta in Constantine.

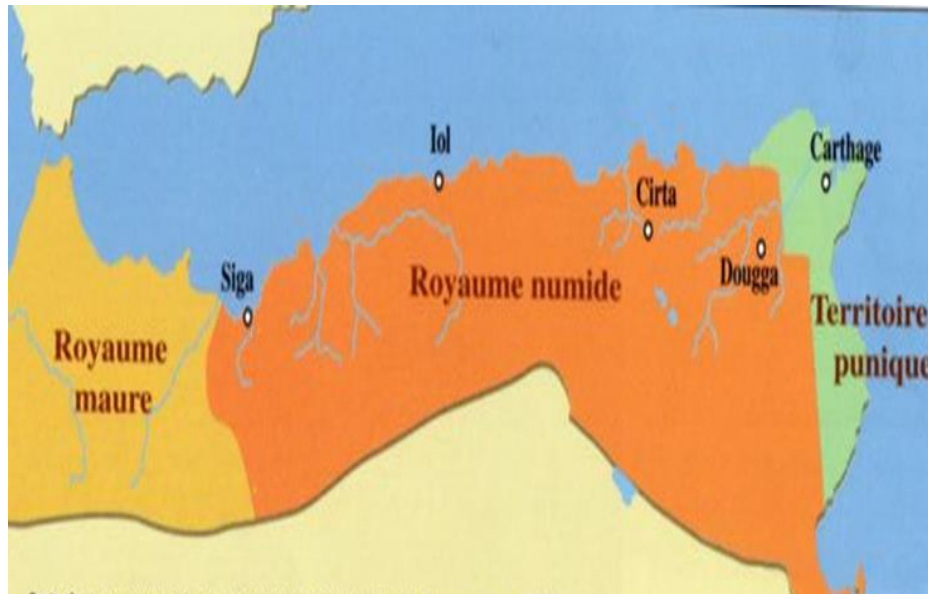
The etymology of the term "*Numid* (1)" has spurred considerable debate, with various theories proposed regarding its origins. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus, intimately familiar with the Libyan peoples of the 5th century BC, did not reference any tribe, clan, or ethnic group named "*Numid*" in the manner that became prevalent from the third century BC among the Romans.

The terms used by Herodotus related to the concept of nomadism, highlighting that a significant segment of the Libyan populace he encountered were nomadic, their livelihood dependent on pastoralism and seasonal migration. Successive Greek scholars such as Hecataeus, Timaeus, and Doris in the 4th century BC, and later Eratosthenes in the 3rd century BC, echoed this interpretation.

Diodorus Siculus in the 1st century BC extensively employed the term in his *Historical Library* while discussing the Libyans. Strabo, a geographer of the same era, conflated the nomadic and the emerging political connotations of "*Numid*," attributing the nomadic tendencies of these people to the prevalence of wild beasts which impeded agricultural activities, thereby perpetuating their migratory habits (3).

Polybius, contemporaneous with King Masinissa and maintaining connections with him, overlooked the linguistic and ethnic implications of the term, focusing instead on the political and economic circumstances of the Numidians and their role in the protracted conflicts between Rome and Carthage. The Romans ultimately crystallized "*Numid*" with a specific political significance starting from the third century BC (4).

With the evolution of agriculture, human settlements progressively shifted towards riverbanks, corroborated by archaeological evidence on the presence along the banks of the Sand River, particularly on its left bank. Gsell articulates, Numidian cities, akin to those of the Phoenicians, Greeks, and Romans, necessitated extensive and expansive territories, and the expanse occupied by the city of Cirta was undeniably vast.



The Kingdom of the Numidians

The Numidian kingdom, through the maintenance of stable political conditions and a meticulously managed economic policy, fostered a robust and cohesive social system. Though superficial observations might suggest a highly civilized structure, no existing written or archaeological evidence points to any form of social stratification within this society.

Governed predominantly by enduring tribal customs and traditions, Numidian society exhibited a patriarchal hierarchy that traced from ancestors down to their descendants, yet remarkably, it maintained an egalitarian ethos with minimal disparities among its members.

Even as sovereignty and governance were centralized under the patriarch of the family, this tribal system eschewed any notions of superiority or aloofness typical of larger, more stratified societies. Archaeological findings further substantiate that there was negligible difference in the attire worn by rulers compared to that of the common members of Numidian society, suggesting a uniformity in cultural expression and social identity.

Sources for Understanding the Clothing of the Libyans and Numidians

Our investigations into the apparel historically crafted and worn by the ancient populations of North Africa prior to the Roman influence have drawn on an array of sources. These sources include monuments, rock engravings, numismatic evidence denoted by coins (5), the detailed accounts from ancient historians, and not least, the physical remains uncovered in graves that date back to the studied period.

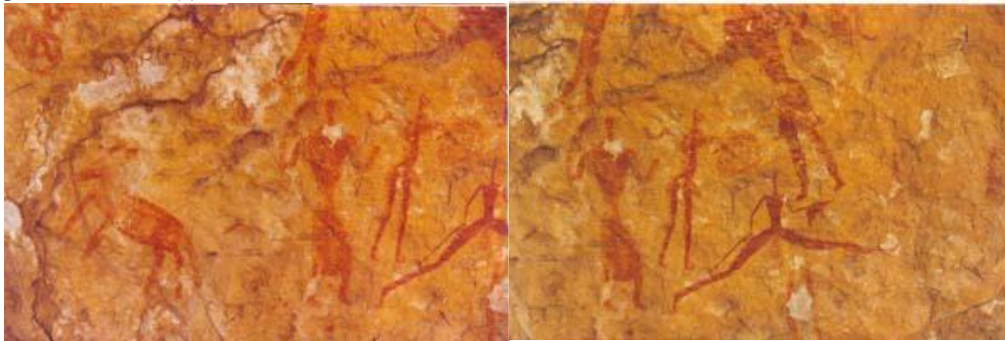
This research endeavors to delineate the diverse types and styles of garments that characterized each civilization that once thrived in this region. It seeks to elaborate on the specific attributes of each garment category, analyzing the materials employed in their construction and the hues used for their coloration. Numidian attire, with its varied manifestations, significantly aids in elucidating the prevailing nature of that era, encapsulating the lifestyle of its people and the perpetuation of their traditions, customs, and rituals.

The archaeological evidence available offers visual depictions of prominent societal figures, furnishing insights into the garments these individuals adorned within these monuments. While the primary purpose of these monuments was rooted in religious and ideological expressions, the findings have yielded a wealth of ethnographic insights. Numerous depictions illustrate the personal traditions, fashion sensibilities, and customs of the individuals, thereby enriching our understanding of the array of clothing models that were prevalent during that time (6).



Rock Drawings in North Africa

The earliest representations that spotlight the clothing worn by North African inhabitants trace back to a time dominated by rock art, specifically during a phase known as the "Round Heads" era. These petroglyphs capture vivid tableaux of the clothing styles prevalent during that epoch, laying the groundwork for the evolution of clothing styles in subsequent periods. The rock art consistently features leather garments, predominantly donned by horse breeders, offering a visual chronicle of the apparel typical of that era (7).

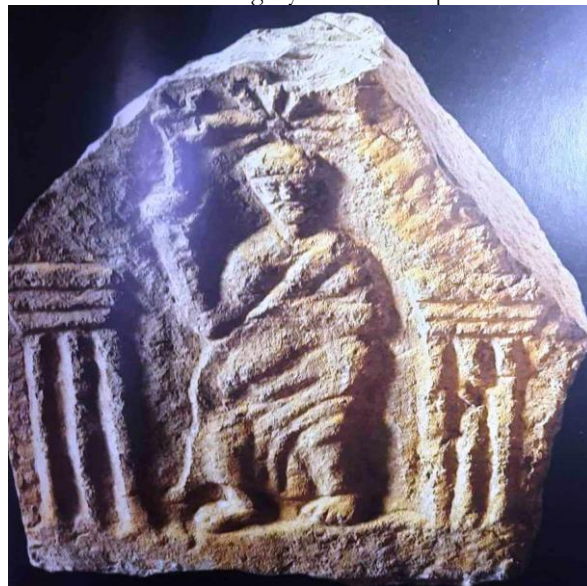


Human and Animal Figures in Various Postures and Attires at Timgad

Rock drawings in the Great South reveal human figures, predominantly static, depicted in relative perspective. These figures are adorned in garments ranging from dresses of varying lengths to cloaks with finely crafted edges, highlighting the region's rich textile traditions as captured in stone. These depictions underscore the continuity of clothing styles throughout the ages as known from rock art (8).

In the High Atlas rock drawings, we observe figures clad in short skirts and occasionally in long coats crafted from a single rectangular piece of fabric. These garments cover the individual from the shoulders down to below the knees and are embellished with decorative lines and lattice-like intersections.

Additionally, near Sigus, the rock art depicts figures in long, sleeveless coats worn from the front, complemented by head coverings, providing a broader view of the diverse clothing styles that once prevailed in North Africa (8).



Dedicatory Monument without Inscription

The Monuments in Ancient North Africa

At the archaeological site of Tiddis, numerous dedicatory monuments have been uncovered, showcasing figures adorned in distinctively styled garments. These depictions feature individuals in upright stances, garbed in short tunics cinched at the waist with belts. The Hafra Temple in Constantine houses additional significant findings, where different types of attire are portrayed, worn by figures identified as priests and warriors.

Notably, one monument captures a seated figure draped in a voluminous garment fashioned from a single piece of fabric elegantly wrapped around the body starting from the left shoulder, leaving the right shoulder exposed, which imparts a priestly demeanor. Another monument presents a warrior attired in a short skirt composed of densely aligned leather strips (9).

A prominent Libyan monument, preserved within the National Public Museum of Cirta and known as the Libyan "Menhir," crafted from shell limestone and unearthed in Tarkabine in the village of Bou Chaan, Ain Mellila, exemplifies the artistry of ancient Libyan sculptors. The weathered Libyan inscriptions on the left side of the monument have faded over time, yet it remains an iconic piece, cataloged under inventory number 3.J-P.P.45.

This menhir depicts a Libyan leader in a commanding pose at the entrance of a temple, clutching a long staff in his right hand, with his left hand positioned thoughtfully on his chest, possibly clasping a sword. This sculpture, explicitly erected in honor

of a Berber tribal leader known as "Retaten," features two lines of Libyan script flanking the figure, read vertically from top to bottom.

The depicted leader is clothed in a single-layered garment, commonly referred to as a "*Kandoura*," which is frequently seen in numerous monuments across the region. This garment is celebrated for its simplicity and generous fit, marked by a lack of detailed folds, offering a sleek silhouette that molds to the body's contours.

This attire is typically seen throughout various locales, notably in Tighennif, west of Oran, an area historically known as Portus Magnus. However, this particular garment terminates at the knees (10, 11).



Libyan Monument (*Menhir*)

Another significant Libyan "Menhir," also hewn from shell limestone and found in Ain Mellila, now stands in the Public Museum's garden in Cirta, cataloged under inventory number 3.J-P.P.51. This monument, measuring 1.26 meters in height and 0.26 meters in thickness, belongs to the Libyan period. It portrays a warrior in a frontal pose, gripping a staff in his right hand and resting his left hand against his chest.

He is clad in a garment that features two stripes running from the shoulders down to the knees, and although the head and parts of the sides and bottom are truncated, the essential elements of the warrior's attire remain discernible.

Libyan letters are intricately carved on the right side between the staff and the figure. This artifact offers valuable insights into the clothing style of the depicted warrior, with the shoulder stripes prompting discussions on whether they signify a formal military uniform or serve to distinguish the wearer from others.

Despite the worn condition of the monument, it still effectively conveys the characteristic appearance of the Libyan warrior, notably the knee-length style of the garment (12, 13).



Monument of a Libyan Warrior

Within the curated collection of the Public Museum's Garden in Cirta, there stands a notable sculpture crafted from yellow limestone, cataloged under inventory number 3.J-P.P.129. The sculpture has dimensions of 0.64 meters in height, 0.35 meters in thickness, and 0.95 meters in length.

Unearthed in 1945 within the historical confines of the Kasbah of Constantine, the statue's current condition is deemed average, bearing some damage, including to the horse's head. The artistry of the sculpture is somewhat rustic, depicting a Numidian rider captured in a dynamic rightward motion, as if galloping.

The rider's hands are elevated, clutching items that are now difficult to distinctly identify due to the eroded state of the stone and the rudimentary nature of the sculpting technique. This depiction showcases the Numidian rider actively engaged on his horse, clad in garments that have blurred over time due to stone erosion and the initial lack of detailed carving finesse (14).



Prominent Sculpture of a Numidian Rider

Another striking piece, a Libyan "*Menhir*" sculpted from sandstone, is also preserved within the Public Museum's garden in Cirta, bearing the inventory number 3.J-P.P.147. This artifact was discovered at Burj al-Qasr (Sila) and features pronounced sculptures and inscriptions in Libyan script across its facade.

Central to the sculpture is the figure of a Libyan leader, standing 1.20 meters tall, his posture commanding with his head inclined to the right and his forehead raised, characterized by a prominently elongated nose and a short, rounded beard. His left arm is slightly bent and extends forward, while his right arm is folded, with fingers directed upwards towards his knees, and both legs are posed leaning to the right.

Adjacent to his head, the sculpture includes carvings of two concentric circles with diameters of 0.14 meters and 0.28 meters, respectively. Below his left arm, there are carvings of two bulls with elongated heads and outwardly curved horns, measuring 0.31 meters in length and 0.16 meters in height.

The right side along the figure's body displays Libyan inscriptions. Despite the erosion of the stone, subtle details of the figure's clothing can be discerned within the folds, highlighting that the sculptor placed considerable emphasis on depicting facial features over the intricacies of the apparel (15).



Monument of a Libyan Leader

Further contributing to the collection is another Libyan "*Menhir*" under inventory number 3.J-P.P.155, crafted from limestone and standing 1.92 meters tall, 0.66 meters wide, and 0.30 meters thick. Found in Tircabine in the village of Bou Chaan - Ain Mellila, this sculpture is housed in the National Museum's Garden in Cirta.

The monument's condition is average, with damage noted on all sides, and the Libyan inscriptions remain unclear (17). This menhir features a prominent relief of a standing warrior, attired in long garments that drape down to his legs, wielding a long staff in his right hand and his left hand folded across his chest, clutching his spear or sword which extends 0.80 meters.

Between the staff and the warrior's body, the Libyan letters, though eroded, hint at historical narratives waiting to be deciphered (18).



Libyan Monument (*Menhir*)

Egyptian Monuments

Displayed on the tomb of "Seti I" are four Libyans wearing cloaks with short sleeves, fastened on one shoulder, sometimes decorated with colored shapes or with stitching of pieces from different fabrics.



Decorative Panel from the Tomb of King *Seti I* - The first from the left is a Libyan leader adorned with ostrich feathers.

Ancient Historians

Many ancient historians from the Greeks and Romans mentioned the leather garments worn by the Libyans; Diodorus Siculus noted that the bodies of the Libyans were covered only with goat skins. Herodotus mentioned that Libyan women used these skins for making garments, decorating the edges with strips instead of the snake motifs that adorned the edges of Greek garments, with Strabo also noting this practice.

Coins

The Numidian region saw various coinages, represented by the Numidian rulers from the era of Syphax to the period of Ptolemy. Numidian coins emerged in the third century BC, with King Syphax being the first to mint coins in his name, followed by a series of kings. What interests us in these coins is the ethnographic aspect that reveals some of the clothing and the royal headbands, as seen in the silver currency of King Juba I.

Materials Used in Clothing Manufacturing

Leather garments appear in the rock drawings, such as those found in the outskirts of Biskra, where people are depicted wearing leather clothing, according to researcher Stéphane Gsell.

The animals providing these leathers were either wild, such as lions and tigers, or mountain goats, while domesticated animals like rams and especially goats were used with the skins fastened by a clasp as described by Strabo, fastened over one of the shoulders, and these skins had to be preserved with their wool or fur. Herodotus mentioned that women made garments from goat skin dyed red.

Numidian Clothing

Numidian clothing varied like that of other peoples, depending on the season, social status, and economic activity.

Ordinary Clothing

The common attire among ancient Libyans was a rectangular piece of cloth wrapped around the body or tied towards one of the shoulders (19), often tightened at the waist. Animal skins constituted the ordinary attire, whether from wild or domestic animals, and textile garments also appeared alongside woolen coats, which were commonly used.

Royal Clothing

Libyan leaders depicted on Egyptian walls wore tunics that covered only one shoulder, worn over a skirt and a belt. These garments were decorated and colored, and they adorned their heads with ostrich feathers.

Numidian coins do not depict Numidian kings in their clothing but rather show only their heads in profile. We have two pieces featuring King Juba I (20), depicted wearing a garment covering his upper chest and neck, wrapped from the front, in the same style as depicted on a medal-like pendant also attributed to King Juba I with a beard styled like Numidian kings.



Juba I (60-46 BC)

Footwear

Footwear in ancient North Africa was very simple, usually consisting of a semi-rectangular sole with raised corners, tied with leather straps that intertwined and wrapped around the ankle, under which a piece of cow or goat leather covered the top of the foot.

The Burnous

Stéphane Gsell speculates about the burnous, made from wool due to the abundance of this material; sometimes the wool was dyed, and one of its broad edges was thrown over one shoulder, equipped with a hood covering the head. André Parrot noted that the drawings discovered at the site of Sigus are clear examples of the ancient Numidians wearing the burnous. (21).

Men often wore a type of wide coat over their clothes, but the usage varied from region to region. There are many examples, such as in the Kabyle region, like the area of Tighzirt where funerary monuments depict a person wearing a robe with a coat wrapped around his body from his right waist to his left shoulder (22).



Man Wearing a Burnous at the Sigus Archaeological Site

Conclusion

The attire of the Numidians was steeped in the traditions of their ancient Libyan progenitors, a fact underscored by the writings of the Greek historian Herodotus. Their wardrobe included leather garments, which were a direct inheritance from their ancestors. Beyond leather, the Numidians were adept at weaving, a skill enriched through their interactions with the Phoenician civilization, which was noted for its sophisticated weaving and dyeing techniques. Additionally, the Numidians donned woolen coats known as burnouses, revered as emblematic attire that denoted a man's status within his community.

This study asserts that the Numidians were far from being sequestered from the contemporary global arena of their epoch; indeed, archaeological excavations have unearthed evidence of robust trade interactions spanning the Mediterranean, involving the Greeks, Phoenicians, and Romans, particularly in commodities such as pottery and grains. This begs the question: If such exchanges were prevalent in these domains, why would they not extend to the realm of clothing, especially considering the region's historical tapestry woven with figures of royalty and affluence?

The enduring nature of certain clothing types from ancient times, still donned by locals today albeit with slight modifications, is a testament to the enduring legacy of Numidian customs and traditions. These practices have withstood the test of time, surviving the tumult of various foreign dominations and the infusion of diverse cultural customs. Despite the incessant waves of change and the overlay of external cultural influences, the core of Numidian cultural heritage and traditions has remained unyielding, continuing to resonate through the millennia.

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