

The Algerian Burnous Through Time: From a Primitive Desert Cloak to the Attire of Numidian Kings

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Abstract:

The Algerian burnous is widely recognized as a key marker of Algerian national identity, embodying both traditional refinement and historical depth. It is not confined to its basic function as a traditional garment (cloak) designed to provide protection against severe cold; rather, over time, the burnous has undergone a gradual transformation into a symbol of dignity, honor, and social distinction, reflecting a long-standing historical trajectory and a deeply rooted civilizational heritage. Throughout different historical periods and successive eras, this garment accompanied Algeria's prominent leaders, and it continues to stand today as one of the most visible cultural expressions of the dignity and social stature of the Algerian individual. This study approaches the Algerian burnous as a central component of Algeria's tangible cultural heritage; it is not merely a conventional cloak, but rather a woven historical document that bears witness to the depth of Algerian civilization and its continuity through its capacity to integrate authenticity with functional utility across time.

The problematique of this study is centered on the origins and historical foundations, as well as the civilizational extension of the Algerian burnous, raising the question of how this garment has managed to preserve both its material form and its symbolic significance across changing historical contexts. The study seeks to demonstrate the deep-rooted historical origins of the burnous by establishing links with material evidence in rock art, as well as with ancient Libyan tribes. Within this framework, the research aims to trace its origins and historical evolution within the region, drawing on both textual written sources and archaeological material evidence.

To achieve the objectives of this study, the historical descriptive-analytical method was adopted. The descriptive dimension is grounded in an inductive reading of rock art evidence in the Algerian Sahara (including Tassili and Ahaggar), in addition to written historical sources, in order to document early representations of primitive cloaks and systematically compare them with the contemporary burnous. The analytical dimension focuses on tracing the diachronic evolution of the burnous through written sources and scholarly references across different historical periods, while examining its transformation from a purely utilitarian object designed for protection against cold into a symbol carrying sovereign, social, and cultural meanings. Among the preliminary findings of this study is that the Algerian burnous cannot be reduced to a functional garment, but should be understood as a woven historical document whose origins extend back to ancient rock art. It constitutes a civilizational bridge connecting the

authenticity of the past with the identity of the present, and it persists as a symbol of sovereignty reflecting the dignity of the Algerian individual and the antiquity of his material heritage across time.

Keywords: Algerian burnous, identity, heritage, rock art, sources.

Introduction:

Material cultural heritage constitutes a foundational pillar in the construction of the civilizational identity of peoples. It should not be reduced to material remnants or archaeological artifacts alone, but rather understood as a structured symbolic system that reflects long-term historical, social, and cultural transformations. Within this conceptual framework, the Algerian burnous emerges as one of the most significant heritage elements that has preserved both its functional relevance and symbolic continuity across extensive historical periods, spanning from antiquity to the modern era.

The importance of this study lies in repositioning the burnous beyond its material status as clothing, to consider it as a complex civilizational phenomenon that has undergone layered historical transformations. It initially fulfilled a basic utilitarian function related to protection from cold and environmental conditions, before progressively acquiring a layered symbolic dimension that came to express status, authority, and belonging within social and political hierarchies. Examining this element through archaeological evidence and ancient written sources provides a rigorous scientific perspective on the earliest configurations of clothing identity in the ancient Maghreb, particularly within the ancient Algerian region (Numidia), and reinforces the argument regarding its deep historical roots among Libyan tribes and Numidian political formations.

The problematique of this study revolves around the historical tracing and civilizational rooting of the Algerian burnous as an ancient material and symbolic heritage. The study seeks to answer a central question: how did the burnous manage to preserve its material integrity and its symbolic (semiotic) function across different eras despite social and cultural transformations? And how did archaeological evidence and historical texts converge to confirm its deep roots in the geography of the ancient Maghreb?

This study aims to establish the temporal extension of the burnous by returning to its earliest origins and roots, relying on an approach that combines iconographic analysis (material evidence) of rock art, including engravings and pictorial representations, with anthropological data related to ancient Libyan tribes. The study also adopts the historical descriptive method to trace the evolution of this garment through classical Greek and Latin written sources.

First: The linguistic and material structure of the burnous

1. Origin of the term:

The burnous is considered an emblematic male, and in certain contexts female, garment that occupies a central position within Maghrebi heritage, particularly in Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Libya. Its colors and materials vary between the distinctive white wool of the Kabylie and Aurès regions, the brown and black camel hair characteristic of Messad in Djelfa, and brown goat hair; it may also be produced in black variants. From a structural perspective, the burnous takes the form of a long cloak extending from the shoulders to the feet, equipped with a hood (qallamūna) for the head. It is closed at the chest by a seam known as the “sader” (Sader), approximately the length of a hand. This partial closure allows the

garment to be worn without the need for wrapping like the haik (l'ajar), and without the use of pins or buttons (El Briga, 1992, p. 1668). Multiple interpretations have been proposed regarding the origin of the term “burnous,” oscillating between local linguistic roots and Arabic etymology, with possible intersections with ancient languages:

The term “burnous” appears in classical Arabic lexicographical sources (such as *Lisan al-Arab* by Ibn Manzur), where al-burnus (with variations in vocalization) is defined as any garment with an attached hood, typically made of wool or similar materials. Some interpretations attribute its derivation to the root “brns,” referring to a long hooded garment. It is also considered by some as a loanword of non-Arabic origin, while prophetic traditions mention the burnous among garments worn during the early Islamic period (Ibn Manzur, p. 75).

The local linguistic hypothesis: several anthropological studies argue that the term derives from the Amazigh root “Abernus.” In ancient Amazigh dialects, it is known as “slehām” (asdelham) in western Algeria, and as “aheddun,” “azennar,” and “aserqi” in Morocco (El Briga, 1992, p. 1668). The term may be connected to the verb “yabrn” or “brn,” associated with the root (Brn) or (Brns), which conveys the idea of twisting or winding, referring to the manual spinning and twisting of wool used in the production of this garment. It may also denote a cloak wrapped around the body (Khamis, 2023, p. 39). This etymological reading aligns with the hypothesis that the garment emerged within North African environments and has been associated with its populations since antiquity.

The intersection with ancient languages (Greek and Latin): Gsell. S (Gsell, S.) suggests that the term “burnous” may derive from the Latin Birrus or Burrus, a cloak used during the Roman imperial period, particularly in the African provinces. It has also been proposed that Birrus itself may originate from the Greek Puroos, meaning “reddish” or “light-haired,” possibly referring to its original coloration. Historically, ancient Libyans are described as having worn it for millennia as a loose wool garment, predominantly white, fastened at the shoulder with a pin, and considered their primary form of dress (Gsell, 2007, p. 26). Marcais. G (Marcais, G.) characterizes the burnous as bearing the features of primitive clothing (vêtement primitif), highlighting its resemblance to the sagum, the cloak worn by Roman soldiers, consisting of a simple piece of fabric fastened on the right shoulder by a fibula (Marcais, 1930, p. 17).

Some historians argue that the designation circulated through processes of cultural exchange across the Mediterranean basin, while the Algerian burnous retained a distinct morphological identity, particularly in its length and material composition, notably camel hair and wool, which differentiate it from the Roman cloak. Despite attempts by certain Orientalist scholars to situate its origin within the Roman period on the basis of lexical proximity in Latin terminology, historians and anthropologists emphasize its Amazigh authenticity and deep local rootedness, drawing on Ibn Khaldun’s writings, where it is presented as a cultural marker of the region’s inhabitants (Brahimi, 2021, p. 188).

Ibn Khaldun associates the designation with the expression “people of the burnous” among Berber (Amazigh) tribes, transforming the garment into a distinguishing ethnographic sign that separates them from other groups (the “people of turbans”), thereby elevating the term from a mere clothing reference to an identity marker within Algerian and Maghrebi cultural history (IBN KHALDUN, p. 168).

In conclusion, the term may be understood either as an Arabized form of an ancient local designation or as a shared lexical element across ancient Mediterranean languages; however, it ultimately became stabilized in Algeria as a specific designation for this distinctive garment.

2. Materials used in the making of the burnous and its types:

The clothing of the ancient populations of the Maghreb was, in antiquity, fundamentally based on the exploitation of locally available natural resources, primarily animal skins and woven textiles. Animal hides represented a principal raw material, a choice directly linked to the richness of Libyan pastoral environments and the prevalence of livestock breeding alongside hunting practices. Historical accounts, notably those of Diodorus Siculus and Herodotus, attest to a marked preference for goat skins, as well as the use of aesthetic treatments such as dyeing skins in red, particularly in women's garments (Hérodote, IV. 189). The use of wool and camel hair is also documented as an integral and complementary component of the Libyan clothing system during these early periods (Al-Fakhouri, 2024, p. 77).

Types of burnous:

The burnous has been classified in anthropological and heritage studies as a central garment, and its typology may be structured along three main axes: raw material, geographical distribution, and sociocultural significance.

1. Classification according to raw material (Morphology of Material):

- A. **The camel-hair burnous (Camelus Dromedarius Fiber):** This type is produced from camel hair, specifically the fine undercoat collected from young camels during their first year. It is regarded as the most refined and expensive variant due to its thermal insulation properties and its lightweight structure.
- B. **The wool burnous (Ovis Aries Fiber):** This represents the most widespread form, characterized by its density and strong resistance to climatic variations, making it suitable for harsh environmental conditions.
- C. **The silk burnous (Sericulture):** This variant is relatively rare and is generally associated with ceremonial contexts. It is most often reserved for festive occasions and women, particularly brides, and is woven either entirely from silk or as a silk-blended textile.

2. Regional and aesthetic classification (Regional & Aesthetic Taxonomy):

- A. **The Messadi burnous (central steppe regions):** Named after the town of Messad (Djelfa), this variant is regarded as the primary reference for the traditional camel-hair burnous in its natural brown coloration, often considered its most authentic form.
- B. **The Kabyle and Aurès burnous (highlands):** This type is predominantly white, produced from pure wool, and is often distinguished by a pointed hood design, reflecting regional stylistic particularities.
- C. **The Mascara burnous (Zaghdani):** Associated with the city of Mascara, this variant is characterized by its dark black coloration (khidous). Historically, it was exported toward political and administrative centers during the Ottoman period, indicating its symbolic and economic value.
- D. **The slehām (Western Morocco):** This designation is used in Morocco to refer to the burnous, a form that developed notably during the Saadian period. It is typically produced from wool or blended fibers, reflecting regional adaptations of the garment.

3. The burnous in archaeological and literary sources:

The burnous is widely regarded as one of the most ancient garments in North Africa, having undergone a long historical evolution in the ancient Maghreb, progressing from red-dyed animal skins (notably the Filali style) toward woven wool textiles. Archaeological and literary evidence consistently document its presence as a marker of identity and social prestige across successive historical periods.

From an archaeological perspective, rock engravings discovered in regions such as Tassili and Ahaggar, as well as in Sigus (eastern Algeria), indicate that prehistoric populations wore garments structurally similar to the burnous, particularly in their hooded configuration. Roman statues and mosaics from sites such as Timgad and Djemila also depict local figures wearing the Lacerna, an open cloak that closely resembles the burnous in functional design, thereby reinforcing its deep historical continuity within ancient Amazigh cultural contexts. Additional archaeological corroboration is provided by coinage attributed to King Syphax (Syphax), which portrays him wearing the Chlamyda, a cloak designed to move freely with the wind.

Greek, Latin, historical, and geographical authors consistently referenced garments identifiable with the burnous when describing the inhabitants of the ancient Maghreb (Libyans, Numidians, and Moors), often employing Latin terminology that emphasized its functional structure rather than its local designation.

Among the most significant references, Herodotus (5th century BCE), in Book IV (Libya), provides detailed observations regarding Libyan dress. He notes, particularly in his account of the Adyrmachidae tribe, that they shared certain Egyptian customs while maintaining distinct Libyan attire (Hérodote, IV.168). In section 189 of the same book, he further reports that Greek populations learned from Libyan women the craft of producing leather garments decorated with fringes, which conceptually resemble traditional Maghrebi forms of dress. He also refers to de-haired leather garments (égées) and woollen clothing worn in desert regions, specifically designed to provide protection against climatic fluctuations (Hérodote, IV. 189).

Strabo similarly describes Moorish and Numidian populations as wearing heavy cloaks wrapped around the body, emphasizing their dual functionality as both garments and bedding during rest periods (Strabo, XVII.III.7). This multifunctional use closely parallels the persistent practical role of the burnous in rural contexts, where it continues to serve simultaneously as protective outerwear and as a covering during sleep.

In Latin sources, Pomponius Mela (Pomponius Méla) notes a social differentiation in clothing practices, distinguishing between common populations who wore animal skins and tribal leaders who adopted cloaks (Sagum) as a marker of status (Gsell, 2007, p. 27). Saint Augustine (St. Augustine), a major late antique source, refers in his sermons to a garment known as the Birrus or Birrum, which was commonly worn in Africa during his period (Serm., 356, 13). Procopius of Caesarea (Procopius), in the 6th century AD and his work *The Vandalic Wars*, documents the widespread use of thick cloaks in North Africa during the 4th century AD. He notes that Moorish leaders, during investiture rituals conducted under Roman authority, were granted a small white cloak resembling the Chlamys (Bell. Vand., I.25.7), albeit adapted to local Maghrebi aesthetic and cultural sensibilities (El Briga, 1992, p. 1669).

Later, Corippus, in his historical epic *Iohannis*—which narrates the wars in Africa—depicts Moorish warriors wrapped in rough coverings (Horrida stragula) or heavy wool cloaks (Johan., II, 134). This

description corresponds closely to the tactile and material characteristics of camel-hair burnous fabric, thereby reinforcing through textual evidence both the antiquity of these garments and their enduring association with African identity (Gsell, 2007, p. 27).

Second: the burnous in rock art:

Rock paintings in Algeria, particularly in the regions of Tassili n'Ajjer and Jarf al-Tarfa (Bechar), as well as in northern Algerian sites, constitute a significant visual corpus documenting the early origins of traditional clothing forms that would later evolve into the burnous.

1. Tassili n'Ajjer and the Ahaggar:

These regions represent one of the most extensive rock art complexes in the world, with pictorial sequences dating back over 10,000 years. Certain engravings depict human figures wearing wide, enveloping garments that bear strong formal resemblance to the contemporary burnous, suggesting that the concept of a full-body protective cloak was already embedded in the cultural repertoire of ancient Maghrebi populations from very early periods.

• The Tin Aneuin style:

The rock iconography of Tassili n'Ajjer, particularly within the pastoral (Bovidian) phase and the Tin Aneuin stylistic tradition (associated with Saharan Libyans), as identified by Fabrizio Mori, constitutes one of the earliest archaeological attestations to the deep historical roots of the burnous as an extended clothing form in the ancient Maghreb. This anthropological sequence begins with the settlement of Libyan-Berber groups (early Berbers) migrating from the Saharan Atlas, the Libyan coast, and Fezzan toward the central Sahara, where rock art evidence records a profound transformation in bodily representation and material culture. This shift moves from early hunting scenes characterized by nudity to pastoral societies depicted wearing burnous-like garments, represented as conical cloaks draped from the shoulders and extending to cover the torso.

This material development reflects a high level of artisanal specialization in textile production and clothing design. Within its early Saharan context, the burnous functioned as an adaptive technological response, combining climatic protection with full mobility, without restricting the agility required by pastoral lifeways. Beyond its functional dimension, it rapidly acquired a symbolic role as an indicator of social stratification and cultural differentiation (Ben Bouzid, 2023, pp. 77–78).

Within Tin Aneuin visual representations, the garment appears associated with individuals of elevated social standing, serving as a visual marker of maturity, prestige, and organized status. In several mural compositions, these figures are depicted as structured groups, sometimes armed yet visually distinguished from direct combat representation, and differentiated through ornamental details such as embroidery and ostrich feathers. On the basis of this visual continuity, Ben Bouzid. L argues that the general physiognomic and sartorial features of the Tin Aneuin groups correspond to populations of the Aurès region, highlighting the continuity of the burnous as a historically attested garment among Berber communities since antiquity (Ben Bouzid, 2023, p. 77).

In this perspective, the contemporary burnous is not reducible to a transient traditional garment, but rather represents a direct material and symbolic continuation of conical cloaks documented in Saharan rock art over millennia. This continuity provides contemporary Amazigh identity with an archaeological grounding that reinforces both its authenticity and its long-term civilizational persistence.

The appearance of the burnous in the Tin Aneuin style is characterized by figures rendered in clear, light tonalities, with representations predominantly executed in bright white. These individuals are shown wearing a cloak (the burnous) in an ochre hue, wrapped in a uniform and carefully structured manner around the neck, while the garment extends freely over the body without the use of a belt or any fastening system to secure it (Ben Bouzid, 2023, p. 78) (see Figure 1).



Image No. 1: Rock painting depicting men wearing the burnous in the archaeological Tin Aneuin style

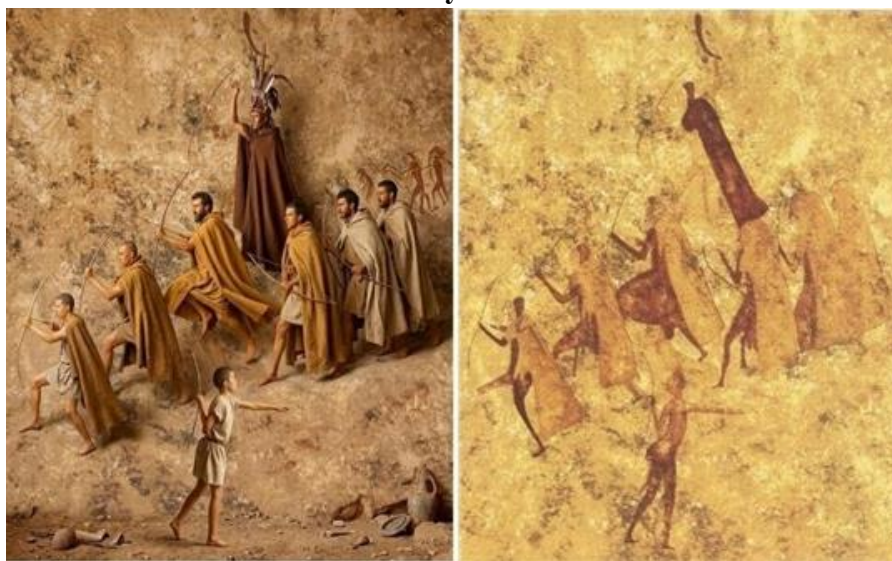


Image No. 2: An AI-based reconstruction of the garment; it clearly appears to be a burnous from the rock art sites of Tassili n'Ajjer.

2. The Iheren site:

The Iheren site, located in the Tassili n'Ajjer plateau in southeastern Algeria, is considered one of the most significant and most accurately documented rock art stations worldwide. It is distinguished by a specific artistic tradition known as the Iheren–Tahilahi style, which represents a peak of realism and precision in the depiction of ancient pastoral societies. This site has been extensively studied by

researchers such as Henri Lhote and Ulrich Hallier (Camps, G., 2001, p. 3677). The stylistic corpus is generally dated to the Late Neolithic period (pastoral phase), approximately between 3350 and 2700 BCE.

The Iheren–Tahilahi style is marked by an exceptional degree of realism in the rendering of visual detail. In the representation of clothing, the ancient artist does not limit the depiction to general silhouettes; rather, there is a deliberate attention to folds, textile textures, and the modes of fastening and draping garments on the human body. Scenes frequently portray herders wearing short leather aprons or close-fitting tunics, whereas warriors or socially distinguished figures are represented in longer and more structurally complex cloaks (Camps G., 2001, pp. 3677–3668).

Within this visual system, certain figures appear wearing long garments falling from the shoulders, some of which include forms suggestive of a connected hood attached to the cloak, a defining structural element of the traditional burnous. On this basis, the Iheren corpus is considered material evidence supporting the antiquity of the hooded cloak within Algerian and Saharan cultural heritage over millennia. These depictions constitute among the earliest visual attestations indicating that North African populations employed cloaks and robes as fundamental components of dress.

3. Rock art from the Djorf Torba region (Djorf Torba):

The Djorf Torba site, located in the province of Béchar (Kenadsa district), includes several engraved scenes, notably those of the Villalonga series (named after the discoverer of the panels). In particular, the third and fourth scenes merit specific attention, as they depict individuals wearing broad dark cloaks that extend from the shoulders and envelop the body. It is generally assumed that these garments were produced from leather, and this description corresponds closely to the structural appearance of the burnous as an outer cloak designed for full-body coverage (Cheniti, 2024, p. 45).

The third scene presents a structured composition of six individuals arranged in a frontal confrontation format (Frontality), with a central heroic warrior occupying the visual axis of the representation. One figure raises his right hand while holding two objects in his left. The ethnographic relevance of this scene lies in the precision of sartorial detail: the warrior wears a long tunic (Tunica) decorated with broad vertical stripes (Clavi), covered by a loose outer garment (Cape) with lateral openings allowing freedom of arm movement. The composition is completed by four female figures wearing composite garments. The presence of a burnous-like cloak within this funerary or commemorative context suggests not only established clothing practices but also symbolic associations with prestige and sovereignty of the deceased, further reinforced by martial posture and the presence of spears (Camps G., 1995, p. 2483).

The fourth scene depicts a sequence of individuals arranged in what appears to be a circular or enclosed formation, resembling a bracelet, with six figures represented in frontal orientation. The male figure, carrying three spears, is shown with his shoulders covered by a cloak decorated with white V-shaped motifs, while the tunic (tunica) appears shorter, reaching mid-thigh. Four female figures are depicted holding hands, while the composition concludes with a child figure holding a small spear proportionate to his size. The first and last female figures each hold in their free hand an object resembling a Latin cross (Camps G., 1995, p. 2483).

The rock engravings of Djorf Torba provide a significant visual corpus documenting early forms of cloaks that gradually evolved into what is later identified as the burnous. These scenes are generally dated to

the 5th and 6th centuries AD (Byzantine period or late Christian phase in North Africa) (Camps G., 1995, p. 86).

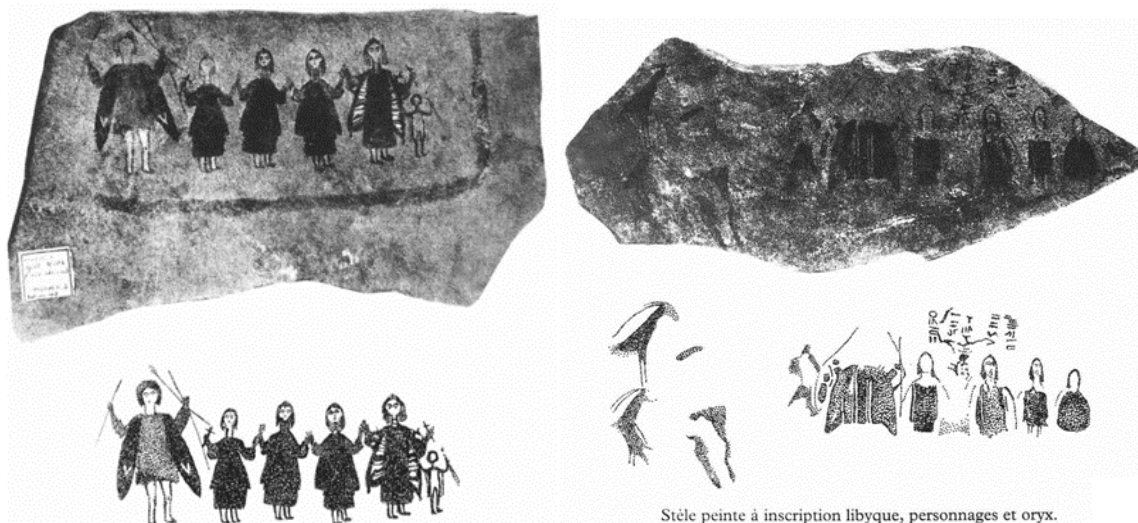


Image number 3: two stone panels illustrating clothing styles in the Djorf Torba engravings (Camps G., 1995, pp. 2485–2486).

4. Rock engravings of the Sigus region:

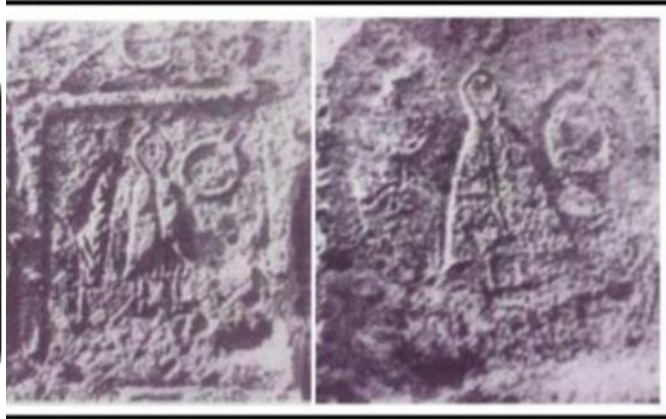
The burnous was not confined exclusively to Saharan contexts such as Tassili, but is also attested in northern Algeria through rock evidence and Numidian stelae. In the Sigus region (Sigus)¹, located in present-day Oum El Bouaghi province in eastern Algeria, rare rock engravings provide significant archaeological testimony to the antiquity of the burnous in North Africa. These representations, dated to the pre-Roman period, were documented by Berthier and Logeart in their 1937 study.

The engravings are distinguished by a notable degree of precision, depicting individuals wearing a large cloak (burnous) that is long, reaching approximately mid-calf, open at the front, and without sleeves. The garment is shown with a hood (qallamūna) that closely corresponds to the structural form of the modern burnous. One figure is represented lifting one edge of the cloak with the right hand while holding the opposite edge with the other hand—a gesture that remains commonly observed among Algerian wearers of the burnous today, particularly when walking, reflecting a continuity of embodied practice (El Briga, 1992, p. 1669).

These engravings are generally interpreted as evidence that the burnous constitutes an indigenous garment originating within the region itself, rather than an imported cultural form. Their chronological placement prior to Roman influence and later Islamic-era transformations further strengthens the argument for its deep pre-classical rootedness in North African material culture.

¹ The engraved scenes replicate the well-known pattern of Punic and Numidian monumental stelae; however, rather than being portable objects, they are carved into limestone layers (as in Chemtou and the Qal'a). The accompanying symbols surrounding the figures correspond to the customary iconography of Punic votive monuments: palm fronds, crescent moons, crown-like buns, and the staff of Hermes (caduceus).

**Image No. 4: Rock engraving
from the site of Sigus.**



Third: The burnous among Libyan peoples and Numidian kingdoms

1. The burnous among ancient Libyan tribes: a study of cloaks mentioned in Greek and Latin sources, such as the mantle of the Meshwesh and Libu tribes, and the extent of their correspondence to the form of the burnous:

The long cloak appears to have emerged as early as the New Kingdom period (1550–1070 BCE), particularly during the 18th–20th Dynasties, and was widely associated with Libyan populations. Archaeological evidence, combined with historical accounts, suggests that this garment functioned as a marker of dignity and elevated social status. Its detailed representation in Egyptian iconography appears to derive from leather mantles characteristic of earlier classical and proto-historical periods. Structurally, the garment consisted of a rectangular textile or hide, wider at the upper section than at the lower, and wrapped over the shoulders in a draped configuration. Bates (Oric Bates) notes that Libyan populations produced these long garments using both leather and wool as primary materials (Bates, 1914, p. 119).

Egyptian inscriptions from the tomb of Seti I (1294–1279 BCE), belonging to the 19th Dynasty and depicting Libyan groups (Meshwesh and Libu)², show their leaders wearing long open cloaks. These representations present the Libyan cloak (Libu) as a key sartorial element associated with social authority. The garment appears as a broad leather cloak, artistically arranged to cover the right shoulder and part of the arm, while leaving the left side exposed. It is often decorated with painted motifs and vegetal or geometric ornamentation, with its lower edge finished by a wide striped band that enhances its visual distinction (Mustafa Kamal, 1966, p. 32).

Additional Egyptian inscriptions document forms of clothing worn by Libyan elites who appear alongside Asian delegations presented to the Egyptian king. Herodotus also notes that Libyan warriors serving in the army of King Xerxes of Persia wore leather garments (Cheniti, 2024, p. 45). Egyptian sources further describe the Meshwesh as sharing certain physical traits with the Tehenu and Rebu, often depicted with light skin and wearing crossed leather straps over the chest, a loin covering, and a tail-like extension; however, their most distinctive sartorial feature remains the long cloak (Al-Aqoun, 2016, p. 97).

² The cemetery scene depicts the four races of the world according to Egyptian belief: the Egyptians (Rmt), the Asiatics ('Aamu), the Nubians (Nehesy), and the Libyans (Tjemehu).

A clear structural correspondence can be observed between the modern coarse burnous (khidous) and the garments depicted in Egyptian temple reliefs, reinforcing the hypothesis that the burnous functioned historically as a garment associated with elites and tribal leaders among ancient Libyan populations.

Image No. 5: Panel from the tomb of Seti I (1290–1279 BCE), 19th Dynasty, depicting the Libu people. It shows the cloak, tattooing, and braided hairstyle for which they were known (Bates O., Op. cit., p. 46).



2. The earliest historical testimony in Greek and Latin writings:

The burnous appears in the accounts of Greek and Roman historians, particularly Herodotus and Strabo, in their descriptions of the populations of the ancient Maghreb (Libyans). Herodotus' account of Libyan dress in the 5th century BCE provides a detailed ethnographic description of these tribes. In Book IV, paragraph 189, he highlights the cultural influence of Libyan populations on the Greek world, noting that Greek iconography, particularly the representation of Athena's shield and garment, was inspired by Libyan women's clothing made of goat skins and decorated with straps.

This influence extends beyond visual form to linguistic and conceptual dimensions, as it has been suggested that the terms Palladia and Aegis (Hegis) may themselves have Libyan linguistic origins (Hérodote, IV. 189). This description corresponds closely to the earliest material phase of what would later develop into the burnous, prior to the widespread use of camel wool, when goat and sheep pastoralism constituted the dominant economic system. This continuity supports the interpretation that the burnous emerged within an authentic pastoral and indigenous North African context.

These testimonies collectively indicate that the burnous retained its essential structural and functional characteristics across time. Ancient historians consistently describe its core features—hooded protection, fluid draping, and use of natural materials—all of which remain preserved across generations in Algeria as a continuous and undivided cultural heritage.

3. The Numidian royal burnous:

This section examines archaeological evidence and numismatic representations of Numidian rulers such as Syphax, Masinissa, Juba, and Jugurtha, depicted wearing a draped cloak, and analyzes its role as a sovereign emblem in contrast to the Roman toga.

• **The burnous in coinage (official document):**

As previously noted in the analysis of coinage attributed to King Syphax and King Masinissa, these rulers are systematically represented wearing a burnous characterized by dense and structured folds.

Numismatic evidence confirms the deep historical anchoring of cloaked garments in Numidia. Coins attributed to King Syphax depict him wearing a long outer garment, potentially with a hood positioned at the back (Gsell, 2007, p. 27), highlighting the cloak's enduring function as a marker of sovereignty and social authority since antiquity (see image no. 6).

Regarding the iconographic features of these coins, the obverse typically presents the head of King Syphax with curly hair and a short, unpointed beard, crowned and facing left. Cheniti notes a notable contrast between this formal portrait and his mounted representation, in which he appears vigorous and dynamic. The reverse depicts the king as a mounted warrior in full charge, wearing a cloak (burnous) flowing behind him, accompanied by Punic inscriptions translated as “Syphax the King” or “Syphax, possessor of kingship” (Cheniti, 2017, p. 98). Most of these bronze coins were minted between 213 and 203 BCE in Siga, his capital near present-day Aïn Témouchent.

In contrast to Roman-aligned rulers who adopted the toga (Toga), Numidian kings consistently wore the burnous, thereby affirming that their political legitimacy was grounded in territorial and indigenous authority rather than external imperial endorsement.

• **The military burnous (Numidian cavalry attire):**

The Numidian cavalry was widely regarded as one of the most effective military forces in the Mediterranean basin, with the burnous serving as its principal garment. Roman historiographical accounts, particularly those of Sallust, describe King Jugurtha and his cavalry wearing coarse wool cloaks (the burnous) during mountain warfare, emphasizing their superior mobility compared to Roman soldiers encumbered by heavier military attire.

Archaeological and visual evidence further supports this interpretation. Reliefs from Trajan's Column³ (Imperial period) depict Moorish horsemen wearing garments closely resembling the burnous, often as their primary and occasionally sole military covering during campaigns (Aoualmi, 2016, p. 29). Functionally, this cloak was designed to remain loose and non-restrictive, enabling rapid mounted movement and effective use of javelins. In visual representations, the garment is frequently shown flowing behind the rider, reinforcing an impression of speed and tactical agility.

Symbolically, Roman sculptors deliberately emphasized Moorish cavalry wearing simple cloaks—sometimes bare-chested—to categorize them as light auxiliary troops (Auxilia) and to underscore the perceived resilience and endurance of the Moorish warrior (Gsell, 2007, p. 27).

³ Trajan's Column is a monumental structure in Rome designed by the architect Apollodorus of Damascus in 113 CE to commemorate Emperor Trajan's victories in the Dacian Wars. It stands 29 meters high and consists of 17 spiral turns. The column is renowned for its continuous marble reliefs that wrap around it in a spiral form, depicting in detailed narrative the battles and military life of the Roman army. Its base was also used as a tomb for the emperor's remains.



Image no. 7: A detailed view from Trajan's Column highlighting Moorish horsemen known for their distinctive features (clothing, hairstyle, and horsemanship) (Cheniti, Mohamed El-Bachir, *Algeria: Reading in the Roots of History*, p. 183).

3. The burnous as an instrument of cultural resistance:

Late historical sources and textual testimonies indicate that Maghrebi clothing functioned not only as material culture but also as a political and symbolic marker of identity. The wearing of the cloak (burnous) gradually acquired connotations of resistance to Roman occupation and, more broadly, a refusal of cultural Romanization.

From a linguistic and descriptive perspective, the Birrus cloak mentioned by Saint Augustine (St. Augustine, *Serm.*, 356, 13), as well as the rough wool coverings (*Horrida stragula*) referenced by Corippus in his epic (Corippus, *Ioh.*, II, 134), can be interpreted as early textual reflections of the camel-hair burnous pattern. These references suggest continuity in local textile production traditions and their adaptation to North African environmental conditions (El Briga, 1992, p. 1669).

On the political level, such garments acquired sovereign significance, particularly in investiture rituals of Moorish leaders (*Praefectus Gentis* and *Princeps Gentis*). Procopius of Caesarea notes the adaptation of the Roman *chlamys* to local aesthetic frameworks (Procopius, *Bell. Vand.*, 1, 25, 7), a process culminating in the use of purple garments (*Pourpre*), notably worn by Firmus (372–375 CE), as documented by Ammianus Marcellinus (Ammianus Marcellinus, XXIX.V.3.49–48). Collectively, these sources indicate that clothing operated as an instrument of political legitimacy and cultural differentiation within Maghrebi societies under imperial pressure.

Analysis of color and social status:

Historical analyses suggest that color functioned as a significant indicator of social hierarchy during the Numidian period. Purple, as well as red or dark-toned burnous garments, was associated with kings and high-ranking leaders among Numidians and Moors, as reported by Herodotus and corroborated by Numidian coinage attributed to Syphax (Aoualmi, 2016, p. 29). By contrast, the natural white burnous was predominantly worn by common populations and cavalry units, reflecting a clear visual codification of social stratification.

Conclusion:

Archaeological evidence derived from rock art in Tassili and Ahaggar indicates that the burnous should not be regarded as a transient or later cultural addition, but rather as an indigenous development deeply embedded in the desert and steppe environments of Algeria from the earliest historical periods. Its morphological configuration—defined by the hooded structure and fluid draped form—has preserved a remarkable degree of material continuity over millennia, reflecting long-term stability in both function and form.

Classical written sources, ranging from Herodotus to Roman historiographers, further substantiate that Libyan and Numidian populations consistently adopted this cloak as a primary visual and cultural identifier. This recurrent attestation across multiple textual traditions challenges hypotheses of external derivation and instead reinforces its interpretation as a garment rooted in the indigenous cultural matrix of ancient North Africa.

Numismatic evidence likewise demonstrates a significant transformation in the semantic and political status of the burnous, evolving from a functional protective garment adapted to climatic conditions into a visual emblem of sovereignty and authority. The representation of rulers such as Syphax wearing this garment on official coinage constitutes an early material articulation of political legitimacy, as well as an assertion of cultural autonomy in relation to Roman power structures.

In contemporary terms, the Algerian burnous persists as a materialized historical archive, functioning as a cultural continuum linking prehistoric visual expressions, the political symbolism of Numidian kingship, and later forms of resistance within Algerian history. Its sustained presence as a marker of dignity, identity, and elevation reflects the resilience of Algerian cultural heritage and its capacity for continuity without loss of authenticity across successive historical transformations.

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