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## **Roman forays into the interior of sub-Saharan Africa: the mysterious landscape of Agisymba**

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A. D. the Alexandrian geographer Claudius Ptolemy (100 – about 166 A. D.) mentioned a huge area in Central Africa.<sup>1</sup> This area is called Agisymba and belonged obviously to the kingdom of the Garamantian king; the Garamantes were an ancient people in the Sahara (Fezzan). Up to now it is not entirely clear where to locate the landscape of Agisymba; there are a lot of suggestions for localisations.<sup>2</sup> The most part of researchers locate Agisymba in the Tschad region and its vicinity, based on Ptolemy's report on Agisymba where he underlines particularly the presence of rhinoceroses and the mountain ranges.<sup>3</sup> Researchers who try to localise Agisymba in Aïr or Asbin argue with „*zahlreiche Felsdarstellungen von Nashörnern*“.<sup>4</sup> According to the research of Dierk Lange Agisymba is to be found in the Lake Chad region. In earlier centuries, he argues, the seafaring Phoenicians who founded several trading posts along the North African coast created there in the Lake Chad region a military base to perform slave raids. Over time the various bases in Central Africa developed life of its own and became to „*weitgehend unabhängigen Staaten. Aus Agisymba entstand das Reich Kanem, gegen Westen bildeten sich die Hausa- und im Süden, entsprechend dem weiten Einzugsgebiet des Sklavennachschubs, die Yoruba-Stadt-Staaten.*“<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ptol. 1,8,4 Nobbe; for Garamantes generally: Ruprechtsberger (1997).

<sup>2</sup> It can only be given a selection of the extensive literature here: Thomasson (1996), 139 („*Land der Ägypter*“); Desanges (1989), 37 (Tibesti); Milburn (1958), 246 (from Aïr to Tibesti, then to Northern Niger and via Ghat back to Garama); Mauny (1978), 290 (Tibesti); Snowden (1970), 142 (steppe of Sudan); Kirwan (1968), 225 (Lake Chad); Ayoub (1968), 201 (Agadès/Niger); Wölfel (1961), 220 (not Sudan); Picard (1959), 225 (Sudan); Hennig (1944), 417 (Lake Chad); Stein (1919), Sp. 676 (Lake Chad); Dessau (1912), Sp. 752 (Sudan); Kiepert (1878), 223 (Lake Chad); Huss (1989), 6 (Lake Chad); Masonen (1997), 120 (northern part of Lake Chad); Salama (1981), 517-518, leaves question of the localisation open (south of Fezzan, Lake Chad or Niger); Brinkmann (2013), 32 (presumably Chad Basin). Kratochwill (1984), 13-14, behaves skeptical about the „*Faszination der Sudantheorie*“ (S. 13). He accepts attempts for localisations like Tibesti or southern Fezzan. Newest geographical researches about the „*Geography*“ of Claudius Ptolemy still could not show an accurate localisation of Agisymba because the details mentioned by Ptolemy are inaccurate. A Localization in the area of Lake Chad is therefore still uncertain: Geus / Mittenhuber (2009), 289: „*Wenn es (sc. Agisymba) tatsächlich mit dem Raum des Tibesti-Gebirges im Tschad bzw. mit der Gegend nördlich des Tschadsees zu identifizieren ist, wird es von Ptolemaios zu weit südlich angesetzt.*“; cf. for possibilities of Agisymba's identification with Chad, Tibesti oder Asbin: Geus / Mittenhuber (2009), 289, note. 27; Lange (2005), 266 and 278; he also pleads for the region of Lake Chad and sees in Agisymba a early precursor of the kingdom of Kanem.

<sup>3</sup> On this important aspect Kratochwill (1984), 12-13 makes attention.

<sup>4</sup> Geus / Mittenhuber (2009), 289, note 27.

<sup>5</sup> Lange (2005), 266.

In the southern part of today's Fezzan the king of Garamantes controlled trade routes, which led far into the interior of sub-Saharan Africa, that means in areas between the Niger Bend and until Lake Chad. Very important oases in the southern part of the Garamantian kingdom from which traders penetrated to tropical Africa are Ghat and Barkat. Ghat which formed the (known for us) southern boundary of the Garamantian kingdom was until modern times a center of trans-Saharan trade. In the vicinity of the oasis Barkat was recently excavated a citadel of Garamantian times. The site is Aghram Nadharif, which means in Taghi dialect "Salt City". The ancient name of this citadel is unknown. The fortified citadel, on a mountaintop located, was built for controlling the trade routes leading from the north to the southern border. Walls of the buildings were made of adobe, the ramparts, however, were made of stone. Archaeologists dated the founding of this citadel to about B. C. and assume that the context of this foundation is likely the expansion of the Garamantes into the Wadi Tanezzuft. Archaeologists also suggest that there was prevailing a long-established nuclear family, probably as a clan or tribe. Until about 150 A. D. there can be seen an intense settlement in Aghram Nadharif while about 200-340 A. D. decaying appearances are shown. Perhaps about 350 A. D. the citadel was abandoned. In Aghram Nadharif the excavators found bones of dromedaries, but these discoveries do not prove yet the thesis that the camel in North Africa played an important role before the first century A. D. in the transport of merchandise into the heart of Africa.<sup>6</sup>

Because of the fact that this enormous big area of Agisymba is not mentioned in ancient literature before Ptolemy, researchers and archaeologists believe that Agisymba had been visited first by Iulius Maternus, a traveler from Roman North Africa, in the wake the Garamantian king. This event is, as already mentioned, only known by Ptolemy (Ptol. 1,8,4 Nobbe). Maybe Maternus wrote an account of his journey. Whether this report is already mentioned in the geographical work of Marinus of Tyre (time of Emperor Hadrian) which work Claudius Ptolemy revised, or whether the report on Agisymba was inserted later by Ptolemy, remains controversial in research. Iulius Maternus probably came from the North African commercial town of Leptis Magna. The real aim of the expedition on which Iulius Maternus participated was obviously a campaign of the Garamantian king against his black-skinned African subjects in the landscape of Agisymba.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Liverani (2006a), 445-456; Liverani (2006b), 375; Liverani (2003), 23-36 (for archaeology of Aghram Nadharif cf. S. 24-29); Liverani (2000), 37.

<sup>7</sup> Brinkmann (2013), 32.; Lange (2004), 280.

In research one partly assumes that a Roman military expedition under the command of Septimius Flaccus preceded. This Flaccus operated a campaign in Libya and came from the land of the Garamantes even further in a southerly direction until he reached within three months the area of the Aithiopes. There are controversial views between researchers, which Roman commander could be this Septimius Flaccus. Some researchers suggest that the name Septimius Flaccus could possibly be a mistake of Ptolemy or his predecessor Marinos Tyre, so in reality the the legate of Legio III Augusta in Numidia, Suellius Flaccus, was meant. Flaccus led during his tenure 85/86 A. D. a campaign against the nomadic Nasamones. The Nasamones lived in the coastal area in the eastern part of the Great Syrtis, but they also extended to Oasis Augila in the inland. In the 3rd century A. D. the historian Cassius Dio said that the high taxes, which had been imposed on the Nasamones, were the cause of this conflict. Initially the Nasamones fought successfully against the Roman soldiers, however, they were then defeated by a trick of Flaccus. After completion of this campaign in Roman propaganda the total annihilation of the Nasamones was common, although this tribe lived in later times a little further inland.<sup>8</sup> Also in identifying Iulius Maternus the views of researchers are very different. Older scientists believed him as a Roman commander<sup>9</sup>, while modern researchers see in this man a Roman merchant who apparently was a native North African.<sup>10</sup> There is also the theory that Iulius Maternus had been an ambassador from the Roman Empire who was active in the role of a diplomate at the court of the Garamantian king after the Roman military campaigns at the beginning of the 70s of the 1st. century A. D.<sup>11</sup> As uncertain also is the date of this undertaking.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Law (1967), 193; Mattingly (1995), 72; Gutsfeld (1989), 83-86; cf. also Birley (1999), 17-18.

<sup>9</sup> Fleischhacker (1969), 40; Hennig (1944), 417; Stein (1919), Sp. 676.

<sup>10</sup> Thomasson (1996), 139; Franke (1991), 60; Desanges (1989), 37; Mauny (1978), 290; Snowden (1970), 141; Bovill (1956), 62; Altheim (1952), 62; Lange (2004), 280.; Kratochwill (1984), 8, considers it implausible that Iulius Maternus and Septimius Flaccus could be Roman merchants.

<sup>11</sup> Rebuffat (1982), 502, who refers in this context to the mausoleum of Germa; cf. also Ferguson (1969), 13.

<sup>12</sup> Lange (2004), 280 (about 90 A. D. Ruprechtsberger (1997), 28 (first century A. D.); Huß (1996), Sp. 260 (between 83 and 92 A. D.); Mattingly (1995), 72 (between 88 and 92 A. D.); Gutsfeld (1989), 83 (between 83 and 92 A. D.); Desanges (1989), 37 (between 83 and 92 A. D.); Mauny (1978), 290 (90 A. D.); Snowden (1970), 141 (after 86 A. D.); Kirwan (1968), 255 (before 150 A. D.); Clauss (1964), 71 (reign of Emperor Domitianus); Wölfel (1961), 220 (between 86 and 90 A. D.); Bovill (1956), 19 (about 100 A. D.); Hennig (1944), 416 (short time after 100 A. D.); Stein (1919), Sp. 676 (reign of Emperor Domitianus ?); Bates (1914), 234 (about 100 A. D.).

There are several courses why there are various conflicting views of researchers concerning proposals on the chronology of the journey of Iulius Maternus to the landscape of Agisymba. Approximately For the year 70/71 A. D. the Roman historian Tacitus reported in his "Histories" (4, 50, 4) that the commander Valerius Festus marched against the Garamantes. Pliny the Elder added in his "Natural History" (nat. hist. 5, 38) that the Roman army did find a shorter way during this campaign into the heartland of the Garamantes. Therefore some historians assume that the Garamantes were defeated during this campaign and the Garamantian king had to sign a peace or a trade treaty. Archaeological finds prove that just since the 70s of the 1st century A. D. the import of Roman merchandise goods increased in the Garamantian kingdom. Discoveries of amphoras and grave goods prove that the prosperity of (the richer) Garamantes increased. In this context the intensity of trade in the Garamantian kingdom can thoroughly be compared with other affluent "peripheral countries" of the Roman world, such as the Arab (Nabataean) kingdom of Petra or the Syrian kingdom of Palmyra. Some researchers believe that Garamantian raids or military expedition into Roman North Africa were banned by such a treaty; but after all the Garamantian king shall continue to have possessed the trade monopoly for the Aethiopian areas. Yes, some scholars are also persuaded that the Garamantian kingdom had become a Roman client state too.<sup>13</sup> In the extant written sources for this time there is no mention of such treaties. A complete submission of the Garamantes is questionable. Valerius Festus fought against Garamantian robbers, but in this report I can not derive any subjugation of the Garamantes. Tacitus himself says that the Garamantes in his time (he published his "History" in 109 A. D) were still unconquered ("*gentem indomitam*"). Obviously the military campaign under Valerius Festus led only to some skirmishes on the northern periphery of the Garamantian kingdom. Whether it was a pretended peace or trade agreement or not - at least it must have been a close or "loose" relationship between the Garamantenkönig and North African Roman cities to enable the journey of Iulius Maternus into the interior of Africa. In research the vague date of travel of Iulius Maternus into the landscape of Agisymba during the reign of Roman Emperor Domitian (81-96 A. D.) goes back to Ptolemy's mention of mating rhinoceroses in the countryside of Agisymba. It has been suggested that African rhinoceroses (*Diceros bicornis*) were first seen under Domitian in the Colosseum in Rome and one is leaning onto a note of the Roman poet Martial (Martial. spect. 9).<sup>14</sup> I come to talk about the dating into the second century A. D. later.

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<sup>13</sup> For the archaeological finds see especially the recent studies of Mattingly et al. (2003 and 2007) and the book about Aghram Nadharif of Liverani (2006); cf. also Ruprechtsberger (1997), 30-36; 66-67; for the thesis of a complete defeat of the Garamantes cf. Mattingly (1996), 320; Salama (1981), 522; Birley (1999), 15-17; Wölfel (1961), 220; Altheim (1952), 66.

<sup>14</sup> Desanges (1989), 37; Kirwan (1968), 255; Birley (1999), 17-18, proposes as temporal limitation the early nineties of the 1st century A. D. Strabo the geographer, who relies on late Hellenistic sources testifies that African rhinoceroses were known in turn of eras. Probably the supply of African rhinoceroses, however, accumulated because of the journey of Iulius Maternus.

First it is important to speak about the motives of Iulius Maternus. The problem is, that - as already stated - Maternus' purpose is estimated differently. We know not with certainty whether Iulius Maternus was now commander, merchant or diplomate. His presumed origin in Roman North Africa and his knowledge of the political and everyday conditions in the Roman world should have been very helpful to the king of the Garamantes in the joint co-operation.<sup>15</sup> The researchers who see in Iulius Maternus a Roman general assume that Maternus supported the king of the Garamantes militarily in his campaign against his vassals in Agisymba. So they believe that the southern vassal state revolted against the king of Garamantenkönig and therefore this state had to be brought back to its senses. According to Lange there were charges against which the inhabitants of Agisymba outraged.<sup>16</sup> The "merchant" Maternus is said by some authors to be profit-seeking, and only his greed of gain was the real reason for accompanying the king of the Garamantes to Agisymba.<sup>17</sup> So they say, it was not a campaign, but it had been a possible raid, as they were still undertaken in the 19th century into Central Africa by Tuareg warrior to make slaves.<sup>18</sup> If Iulius Maternus was a Roman envoy and diplomat, then his journey to Agisymba could have been a political program or could have been a geographical mission. Ferguson, who sees in Iulius Maternus both, a diplomat or merchant, draws attention that his journey began right where the Roman campaign under Cornelius Balbus in the year 20 B. C. founds its endpoint.<sup>19</sup> Since that moment the geographical knowledge of the Romans about the interior of Africa ranged south of the coastal towns in North Africa to Garama, capital of the Garamantian kingdom. This knowledge was possibly expanded during the campaign of Septimius Flaccus (he came at least to certain Aethiopes) and was completed by Iulius Maternus. If we regard Iulius Maternus as diplomat, he had the opportunity to describe the landscape of Agisymba in its whole extent. As often assumed, Agisymba should not be regarded as an oasis, because Ptolemy spoke detailed about the enormous widening of this landscape.<sup>20</sup> And also the many peoples, which he enumerates in those regions seemed to have become known to the Alexandrian scholars only through the journey of Iulius Maternus.<sup>21</sup> For a diplomat there is also the „*längere Erkundungsreise*“, which is assumed by Gutsfeld, suitable.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ruprechtsberger (1997), 27; Kratochwill (1984), 8.

<sup>16</sup> Fleischhacker (1969), 40; Bates (1914), 105; Ayoub (1968), 201; Lange (2004), 280 und 284.

<sup>17</sup> Birley (1999), 17-18; Mahjoubi (1981), 490; Lange (2004), 284

<sup>18</sup> Kiepert (1878), 223; Bovill (1956), 19-20.

<sup>19</sup> Ferguson (1969), 13.

<sup>20</sup> Ptol. 1,8,5 Nobbe; cf. also Anonym. Geogr. Compend. § 18 = GGM Bd. 2, 498.

<sup>21</sup> Ptol. 4,6,16.

<sup>22</sup> Gutsfeld (1989), 83.

Now it remains to be determined whether the travel of the Iulius Maternus to Agisymba is set in the 1st or 2nd century A. D. Franz Altheim wrote that the name of Agisymba arose at a later time in recensions of Claudius Ptolemy's "Geographika". He also believes that this Septimius Flaccus who moved into the land of the Aethiopes was the *consul suffectus* of the year 183 A. D., L. Septimius Flaccus. Both events, the military expedition of Flaccus and the journey of Iulius Maternus to Agisymba, Altheim dated in the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius (161 - 180 A. D.). However, major campaigns in North Africa from the time of this Emperor is not mentioned by ancient authors and on the one hand it is questionable whether this Emperor had enough financial resources for such African adventures, and on the other hand it is questionable whether he was able to promise economic benefits. Both expeditions were actions with a significant geographic radius. In addition, Marcus Aurelius was too much busy with the defensive battles at that time: Germanic peoples at the Danube border, as well as against the Parthians in the Euphrate border.<sup>23</sup>

Altheim suspected also that the rule of the Garamantian king could have extended even further than Agisymba. So he believed that Agisymba, although being a part of sub-Saharan Africa, was politically a subject of the king of the Garamantes; but Agisymba was hardly the outermost border of the Garamantian kingdom in the south: „*Agisymba hat (sc. die Oase) Asben nicht nur erfaßt, sondern es begann allenfalls dort. Es hat sich bis zum Nigerbogen und in die Gebiete südlich dessen ausgedehnt.*“<sup>24</sup> Altheim invokes in his thesis on ancient authors since the time of Ptolemy who equate Garamantes with Aethiopes that means with black African peoples.<sup>25</sup> As further evidence that Agisymba had stretched out south into areas of the Niger Bend, Altheim quotes an old African heroic epic, which the famous African explorer Leo Frobenius noted in 1909 when he was present upon a tribe at the Niger Bend. This epic is called “*The lute of Gassire (Gassires Laute)*”.<sup>26</sup> Frobenius believed that a Mediterranean culture, living in earlier times in the territory of the North African Syrte and also in the Fezzan, penetrated in a period of several centuries further and further south and finally settled between the regions from Senegal to the Niger Bend. It should have been white-skinned tribes which occupied castle-like buildings and exercised control over sub-Saharan farmers. The journey of Iulius Maternus had thus been occurred chronologically in the middle of this great migrations. During the middle of the 2nd century A. D. the Garamantes yet lived in the Fezzan, however, they migrated gradually in more southerly areas.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Altheim (1973), 327 = Altheim (1952), 65. This thesis is adopted by Rössler (1980), 276.

<sup>24</sup> Altheim (1973), 327 = Altheim (1952), 66.

<sup>25</sup> Ptol. 1,10,1 Nobbe; cf. also Solin. 30,2; Isidor. orig. 9,2,118.

<sup>26</sup> Frobenius (1929), 42-58 (Translation in German); 59-84 (Commentary).

<sup>27</sup> Altheim (1973), 327-328 = Altheim (1952), 66; Frobenius (1929), 60-70.

The reasons of these migrations should have been the smashed power of the Garamantes by Roman military forces and also the lost impact on the North African coast areas. That just the Garamantes should have taken such a migration of peoples goes back to Frobenius who identified some appearing name in the epic as follows: Dierra / Djerma = Garama; Agada = Agadez; Ganna = an area west of Timbuctu.<sup>28</sup> This epic surely seems to have a historical core. In fact the Garamantes controlled areas until the Niger Bend and it can be noticed a kind of decline of the Garamantian kingdom from the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century A. D. Perhaps the wanderings which are described in the epic were no true migrations, but only descriptions of the caravan routes from Garama to the Niger Bend in a poetic embellishment. In any case there was at least until the time of the Arab conquest of the Maghreb in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A. D. still a Garamantian king in the Fezzan. Altheim, however, thinks that there were in late Antiquity no more Garamantes in the Fezzan. He relies on a note in the work of John Biclaensis who wrote that the Garamantes sent ambassadors to the Byzantine Emperor Justin II in 569 A. D.; they asked for Christian missionaries and for peace. Regarding this literary source, Altheim writes: “*Bei unmittelbarer Nachbarschaft war das zweite nicht nötig. Die christliche Mission erreichte den Norden des Zentral-Sudan, und war zumindest auch bis zur Oase Asben gekommen.*”<sup>29</sup>

Strange is the finding that the landscape of Agisymba is no longer mentioned in later times. The so-called Geographer of Ravenna, however, mentions an “*Aethiopia of the Garamantes*”. This country which is also called *Asbyste*, included approximately some areas of Cyrene (*Lake Licumedis*), parts of the Eastern and Western Sahara and also the Fezzan with the Tibesti mountains. That there are still parts of Cyrenaica in the Garamantian kingdom could be ment that these parts were still inhabited by Garamantes.<sup>30</sup> The Geographer of Ravenna adheres in his “*Geography*” strongly to the *Tabula Peutingeriana* (4<sup>th</sup> century A. D.), but in this *tabula* only the Roman coast of North Africa is considered. After the Geographer of Ravenna there flows in the land of the Garamantes the river *Ger* which extends in a long run very far to the southwest and finally, after the river passed the country *Biboblatis*, the river leads to the ocean. It was assumed that this country *Biboblatis* is today’s Upper Guinea, and some Sudanese areas whose population consisted of Fulani and Fellata could have belonged to it.<sup>31</sup> This land of *Biboblatis* could be very likely be identical with Ptolemy’s landscape of Agisymba; so this part of the river *Ger* in this country could be identified with the Niger.

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<sup>28</sup> Frobenius (1929), 60-70; cf. Altheim (1973), 327-328 = Altheim (1952), 66.

<sup>29</sup> Altheim (1973), 329; cf. also Ioh. Biclaensis anno III Iustini imp. 1 (569 n. Chr.): „*Garamantes per legatos paci Romanae rei publicae et fidei Christianae sociari desiderantes poscunt, qui statim utrumque inpetrant.*“

<sup>30</sup> Geogr. Rav. 1,2,5; 3,3, 1-2; cf. also Funaioli (1920), col. 305-310; Miller (1962); Schwabe (1927), col. 2119.

<sup>31</sup> Sethe (1899), Sp. 424.; cf. also Joorde (2001).

### Summary

The landscape Agisymba embraced a vast area south of the Sahara from Lake Chad to the west to the Niger bend and belonged politically to the reign of the king of the Garamantes. This king had his headquarters in the city of Garama in today's Fezzan. Agisymba is first time mentioned in the geographical work of the Alexandrian scholar Claudius Ptolemy (2nd century A. D.). An accurate localization of the landscape of Agisymba is still expected, but it is also believed in modern research to be an antecedent kingdom of Kanem. In the second half of the 1st century. A. D., Iulius Maternus who was probably a native of Roman North African, traveled from Leptis Magna to Garama. There he joined the entourage of the king of the Garamantes and traveled further four months a southerly direction until the landscape Agisymba. There are various considerations, what role Iulius Maternus had played during this expedition: he was seen as a Roman general, as a businessman or as a diplomat. I see in Maternus a diplomat who received the unique opportunity to make the extensive territory south of the Sahara accessible for the geographers in the Greco-Roman world. The cause of this long journey is assumed by many researchers to be a military campaign of the king of the Garamantes against rebellious subjects, or as a razzia.

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