MYTHOLOGIS

THE BERBER MYTHOLOGY BOOK

The Amazigh: Gods, Spirits, and North Africa

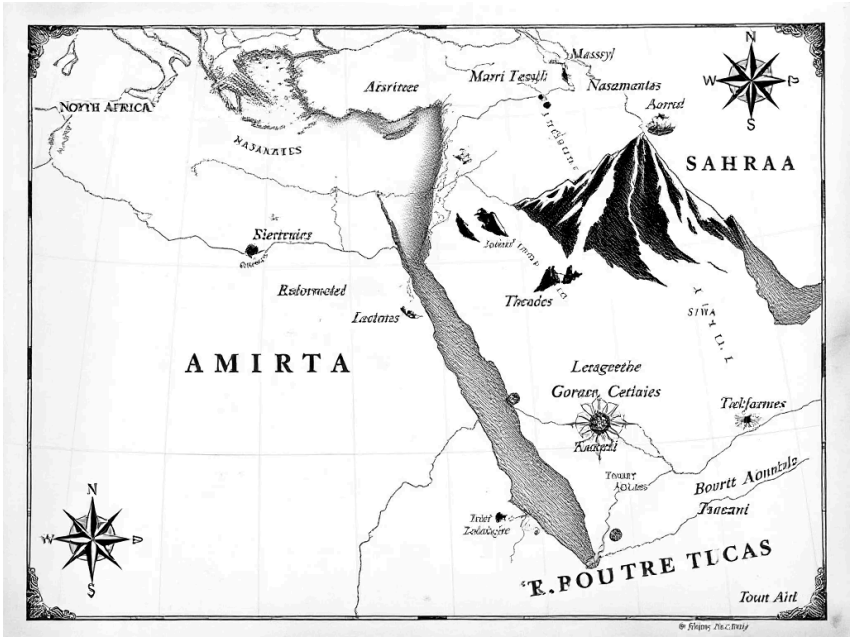
GUILLAUME HENRY

Copyright © 2026 YAVOK LLC. All rights reserved.

Imprint: Mythologis.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission of the publisher.

For more from the Mythologis Library, visit mythologis.com.



NORTH AFRICA
NASANATES
Atsritees
Marri Tesulli
Massyl
Nasamantas
Aorrul
SAHRAA
Siertenies
Redormeted
Lactones
Theades
AMIRTA
Letagoethe
Goraen Cetlaies
Tekfarmes
Bourtt Aounbale
Tanzani
Tout Aitl
N
S
W
E

For the keepers of memory in the Atlas and the Rif, who never forgot.

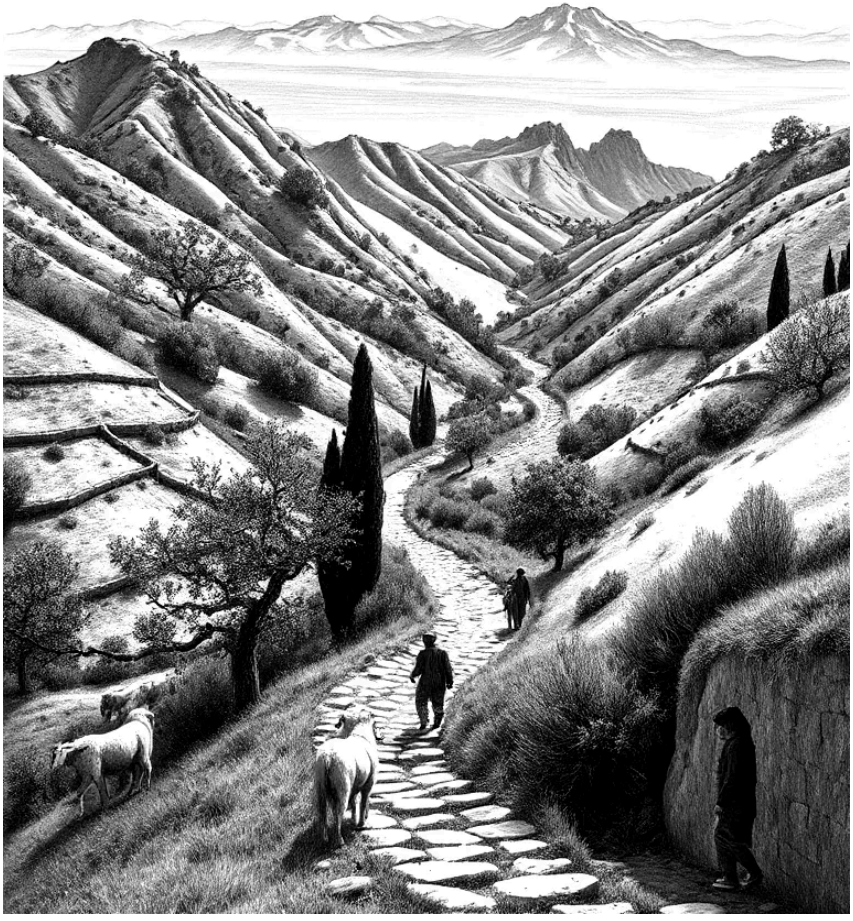
INTRODUCTION

I am standing in a painted cave near Tassili n'Ajjer, Algeria, my headlamp picking out ochre handprints and a procession of horned figures older than pharaohs. The air smells of stone and time. Outside, the Sahara wind carries dust that was green pasture when these paintings were made. The figures on the wall are not crude. They move with the grace of people who knew their cattle, their lions, their gods. Whoever painted them lived in a world we can barely reconstruct, but they left this: proof that the land now called the Maghreb has been thinking about the divine for at least six thousand years. I came here because I wanted to understand what happened before the Romans named these people, before the Arabs arrived, before the textbooks decided their stories did not matter enough to preserve in full. This is a book about Berber mythology. I use that term because it is still the one most readers will recognise, but I need to say plainly that many of the people whose ancestors created these stories prefer to call themselves Imazighen, the free people. The word Berber comes from the Greek barbaroi, a contemptuous label for anyone who did not speak Greek. The Romans adopted it, the Arabs preserved it, and by the time European scholars began cataloguing North African traditions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Berber had calcified into academic shorthand. It is not a slur in the way it once was, but it is also not a name anyone chose for themselves. Amazigh is older, rooted in self-description rather than outsider judgment. I will use both terms in this book, depending on context and clarity, but I want the reader to know from the start that the people who carried these myths forward called themselves free, and the name meant something. The geography matters. We are talking about a vast stretch of North Africa: the Maghreb, from the Atlantic coast of Morocco east to the

oasis of Siwa in Egypt, and from the Mediterranean shoreline south into the Sahara as far as the Hoggar massif and the Fezzan. This is not a single culture. The Berbers were never a monolith. They were farmers in the Atlas valleys, pastoralists in the plains, traders in the desert, sailors along the coast. They spoke related languages, worshipped overlapping pantheons, and recognised each other as kin, but a Numidian in the second century BCE would not have shared every ritual with a Garamantian far to the south. The timeframe I focus on runs roughly from 3000 BCE, when the rock art of the Sahara begins to show pastoral rather than purely hunter-gatherer scenes, up to around 700 CE, when the Arab conquest began to reshape the religious landscape in ways that would make older traditions harder to trace. That gives us five millennia, most of them unwritten. Which brings me to the central problem of this book: we do not have a Berber Theogony. There is no Popol Vuh, no Prose Edda, no Sanskrit epic composed and transmitted by the culture itself. The Libyco-Berber inscriptions that survive are mostly funerary, terse, more interested in names and genealogies than in cosmology. If the Imazighen had their own Hesiod, his poems did not survive the arrival of alphabets that cared more about tax records than about how the first mountain came to be. What we have instead is a patchwork. Greek and Roman authors who visited or conquered Berber lands left descriptions, often brief and shaped by their own assumptions. Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BCE, devoted sections of his Histories to Libyan customs and deities, though he tends to map them onto Greek equivalents in ways that obscure as much as they clarify. Pliny the Elder's Natural History offers geographic and ethnographic fragments. Corippus, a Latin poet of the sixth century CE, wrote the Iohannis, an epic about Byzantine campaigns in North Africa that includes tantalising glimpses of Berber religious practice, filtered through Christian moralising and hexameter conventions. These sources are valuable, but they are outsider accounts, and I treat them accordingly. Archaeology helps. The painted caves, the megaliths, the funerary monuments called bazinas, the inscriptions, the votive objects left at springs and mountain shrines: all of this is evidence, mute but real. Living oral tradition helps too, though it must be handled carefully. Folklorists and ethnographers working in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries recorded stories, rituals, and beliefs that many Berber communities still practiced, and some of those threads reach back centuries, perhaps millennia. But oral tradition is not static. It adapts, it

borrows, it forgets, it reinvents. I will draw on it, but I will not pretend that a folktale collected in 1920 is an unbroken transmission from the Bronze Age. The gap between evidence and certainty is wide, and I will not paper it over with speculation. Here is the thing I find most striking about Berber religion: it survived by going vernacular. The Phoenicians founded Carthage and other colonies along the North African coast, bringing the worship of Baal Hammon and Tanit. The Romans annexed Numidia and Mauretania, built temples to Jupiter and Juno, and insisted on emperor cult. The Vandals came and went, the Byzantines tried to reassert control, and then the Arabs arrived with Islam, which ultimately reshaped the region more thoroughly than any previous power. Through all of this, the older gods did not vanish. They went underground in the sense that they stopped being the official state religion, but they stayed alive in the rhythms of agricultural festivals, in the reverence shown to springs and caves, in the stories grandmothers told children about why you do not disrespect certain rocks or trees. Some deities were absorbed into new frameworks: Roman interpretatio turned Berber gods into Mars or Saturn, Islamic saints inherited the shrines of older spirits. But the bones of the old cosmology persisted, visible if you know how to look. I spent years in the French Navy working on encrypted communications, and I learned that patterns survive even when the surface message changes. A ciphertext looks like noise until you find the key, and then the structure appears. Berber mythology is not a ciphertext, but the metaphor holds. The primary sources are fragmentary and encoded in the languages of conquerors. The living traditions have been overwritten by later beliefs. But the patterns are still there: the sacred king who must die, the earth goddess who guarantees fertility, the trickster who mediates between worlds, the ancestors who haunt the high places. These are not unique to the Berbers, but the way they combine, the specific names and places and rituals, those details belong to this landscape and no other. This book is structured to move from the large to the specific. I begin with cosmology, the creation stories and the shape of the universe as Berber tradition imagined it. Then deities, both the major figures who appear across multiple sources and the localised spirits who ruled single valleys or oases. Then heroes, kings, and ancestors, the human-divine figures who mediate between the mortal and the eternal. Then ritual and practice: how people actually engaged with these beliefs, from birth rites to funerals, from seasonal festivals to the maintenance of shrines. Finally, I look at how these

traditions changed under external pressure and what traces remain today. Each chapter follows the same rhythm: I open with a sensory scene, something to put you inside the world, and then I move into the sources and the scholarship. I cite Herodotus, Pliny, Corippus, the inscriptions, the archaeologists who dug up the votive altars and mapped the painted shelters. I acknowledge when the evidence is thin or contradictory. I do not invent where I do not know, but I also do not flatten the material into a catalogue. These were living beliefs, held by real people who looked up at the same stars we see and asked the same questions about where it all came from. I am not Berber. I am French, a former serviceman who learned to love mythology the way some people love maps or music, by reading obsessively and looking for the patterns that repeat. I started Mythologis because I kept finding that the stories I wanted to read, the ones that treated non-European traditions with the same seriousness given to Greek and Norse myth, either did not exist or were locked behind academic paywalls. This book is my attempt to fill one of those gaps. I have tried to write with the rigour of a scholar and the clarity of someone who knows the reader has other claims on their time. If I have made mistakes, they are mine. If the book succeeds in making the Berber gods feel as real and complicated as they deserve, the credit belongs to the people who painted the caves, built the tombs, sang the hymns, and kept the old names alive long enough for us to hear them again. Turn the page. The first chapter begins at the edge of the world, where ocean meets sand and the goddess who holds the sky was born.



CHAPTER 1

THE FREE PEOPLE AND THEIR LAND

The Rif Mountains rise green and sudden from the Mediterranean coast, terraced with almond and olive. The air smells of resin and salt carried on the wind from the strait. A shepherd moves his flock between summer pasture and the valleys below, following paths worn smooth by generations of sandaled feet. He speaks Tarifit to his dog, the same consonant clusters his grandfather spoke, the same rhythms that predate the arrival of Arabic by a millennium. Inland, the High Atlas holds snow even in summer. The peaks catch the light at dawn like white teeth. Beyond that, the Sahara begins. The rock art changes as you descend. Near the coast, painted figures harvest grain. Further south, they herd cattle. In the deep desert, at Tassili n'Ajjer and Tadrart Acacus, the paintings show the great wild aurochs of a wetter world, giraffes drinking from rivers that are now sand, hunters with bows taller than themselves. The oldest images date to six thousand years before the present. They were made when the Sahara was savanna, when Lake Mega-Chad covered an area the size of the Caspian. The people who made them wore ochre and knew the movements of herds. They buried their dead under tumuli of stone. They carved spirals and handprints into cliff faces that catch the afternoon sun. Stand in one of those painted shelters now. The ceiling is low. The stone is cool even at midday. Outside, the temperature climbs past forty degrees. Inside, you can hear your own breathing. The figures on the wall are in profile, moving left

to right across the rock face. A woman carries a basket. A man raises his arms. The ochre is still vivid. Whoever painted this knew what mattered: the gesture, the gait, the curve of a bull's horn. They left no written explanation. They left the image itself. This is the world of the Imazighen, the free people. The name is older than the Greek word "Berber," older than the Latin "barbari," older than the Arab "al-Barbar." It means, simply, the people who are not enslaved. The land they inhabited stretched from the Canary Islands to the oases of Siwa, from the Mediterranean to the Niger bend. They were never a single nation. They were a language family, a way of life, a set of obligations to the ancestors and the land. The Tamazight language family is attested in the Libyco-Berber script from roughly 300 BCE. The script appears on tombs, boundary stones, and cave walls across North Africa. It is consonantal, written right to left or left to right depending on the region. The letters are geometric: circles, crosses, vertical strokes. Some of the inscriptions are bilingual, paired with Punic or Latin. Most are not. The language itself divides into branches. Tuareg in the south, spanning the Sahara from Mali to Libya. Kabyle in the mountains of Algeria. Shilha in the High Atlas and Anti-Atlas of Morocco. Riffian along the northern coast. Each branch is mutually intelligible to a degree, the way a speaker of Portuguese can follow Spanish if they slow down. Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BCE, offers the earliest detailed Greek account of the Libyans in Book Four of his *Histories*. He lists tribes by name: the Adyrmachidae near Egypt, the Nasamones in the desert, the Garamantes far to the south. He describes their customs with the clinical curiosity of a man who has never seen a dromedary. The Nasamones, he writes, leave their flocks on the coast in summer and travel south to the date palms to gather fruit (4.172). The Garamantes hunt the Troglodyte Ethiopians in four-horse chariots (4.183). The detail is uneven. Some of it is hearsay. Some rings true. Herodotus also notes that the Libyans sacrifice to the sun and moon, but he does not name the gods (4.188). He mentions divination by the tombs of ancestors, sleeping on graves to receive dreams. He describes the dress: leather cloaks, hair styled with red ochre, tattooing. The picture is fragmentary. It is also the best we have from a Greek source before the Roman conquest. Sallust, writing in the first century BCE, offers a different angle in his *Jugurthine War*. He claims the Libyans descend from the army of Hercules, which dissolved after the hero's death in Spain (17.1-3). Medes, Persians, Armenians wandered west. They intermarried with the

locals. The story is legend dressed as history. But Sallust also records something valuable: the Numidian kings traced their legitimacy through descent and alliance, not through conquest alone. Kingship was a matter of lineage, of which ancestors you could name. Strabo, in his *Geography*, divides the inhabitants of North Africa by ecology (17.3). The coastal peoples farm and fish. The mountain peoples practice transhumance, moving flocks between lowland winter pasture and highland summer grazing. The desert peoples, the Garamantes and their neighbours, control the trade routes and the oases. They domesticated the dromedary, which appears in the archaeological record around 500 BCE. The camel changed everything. It made the deep desert crossable. It connected the Mediterranean world to sub-Saharan Africa. The Garamantes grew wealthy on the trade in gold, ivory, salt, and slaves. The material record fills in what the texts leave out. The tumulus graves scatter the landscape from the Atlantic to the Nile. They are circular mounds of stone, sometimes fifteen meters across, covering a burial chamber lined with slabs. The bodies inside are flexed, knees drawn to chest, oriented east or west. Grave goods include pottery, jewelry, weapons. In some tombs, red ochre covers the bones. In others, the skulls are removed and placed in niches. The practice suggests ancestor veneration, a belief that the dead remain present and require attention. The painted caves are older. Tassili n'Ajjer holds more than fifteen thousand images, dated by style and superimposition to periods spanning eight millennia. The earliest show hunters with bows and bags. The middle period, sometimes called the Pastoral or Bovidian, depicts herders with cattle, sheep, goats. The animals are painted with care: dappled hides, curved horns, the musculature of a bull in motion. The human figures are often schematic, reduced to triangles and lines. But the cattle are rendered with devotion. Some of the Tassili paintings show figures with round heads and no facial features, arms raised. Scholars call them the Round Head period, dating them to the sixth or seventh millennium BCE. They may represent spirits, gods, masked dancers, or simply a different artistic convention. The paintings offer no captions. They resist easy interpretation. What is clear is that the people who made them had a symbolic vocabulary, a way of marking what mattered: the hunt, the herd, the dance, the dead. The standing stones, called *azib* in some Tamazight dialects, mark thresholds and boundaries. They are rough-hewn pillars, sometimes inscribed, sometimes plain. They stand at the edge of fields, at mountain passes, at the entrances to settlements. Some are

Neolithic. Some are Roman or later. The practice of marking sacred space with stone is continuous. It does not require a temple or a priest. It requires only the recognition that some places are different, that crossing a threshold changes what you owe the world. A market day in the Draa Valley, two thousand years ago. The sun has just cleared the mountains. Stalls are laid with dates, leather, copper bracelets beaten thin. A woman sets out clay lamps, each one marked with a symbol: a palm, a crescent, a hand. She speaks Shilha to the buyer, a mixture of Punic and Latin to the merchant from the coast. The transaction is small. The gods are watching. She pours a libration of milk at the corner of the stall, a few drops into the dust. The earth drinks it. The day can begin. The economy of the Imazighen was diverse. Coastal groups fished and farmed. They grew barley, wheat, figs, grapes. They traded with Carthage, later with Rome. Inland, pastoralism dominated. Sheep and goats moved between highland and lowland. Cattle were wealth, status, bride-price. The Tuareg, further south, specialized in camel herding and trans-Saharan trade. They controlled the wells. They knew which routes were passable in summer, which required winter travel. They taxed the caravans. They raided each other and the settled oases in cycles as regular as the seasons. The social structure was segmentary. Tribes divided into clans, clans into lineages. Authority was dispersed. Elders mediated disputes. Councils of free men made decisions about grazing rights, marriage alliances, feuds. Kingship emerged in some regions, particularly where trade or war required centralized leadership. The Numidian kings, Masinissa and Jugurtha, are the best-attested examples. They commanded armies. They minted coins. They negotiated with Rome. But their power rested on the support of the tribal confederations, not on a bureaucratic state. Religion was equally decentralized. There were no temples in the sense that Greece or Rome would recognize. There were sacred caves, sacred springs, sacred mountains. There were ancestors buried under stone. There were spirits of place, the *jnun* who inhabited thresholds and wild spaces. There were gods whose names we know only from later sources, refracted through Punic or Roman interpretations. Tanit, Baal Hammon, Mastiman. Some were borrowed. Some were indigenous. The line between the two is not always clear. Herodotus mentions that the Libyans swear oaths by their most respected ancestors, laying hands on their tombs (4.172). Divination by dreams was common. A petitioner would sleep at a grave and wait for the dead to speak. The practice assumes continuity be-

tween the living and the dead, a porous boundary. The ancestors are not distant. They are below the stones, listening. Strabo records that some Libyan groups practiced exposure of the dead, leaving bodies on platforms for birds (17.3.7). Others buried them in jars. Others cremated. The variation suggests that belief about the afterlife was local, clan-specific, not codified into a single doctrine. What mattered was that the dead received their due. The form varied. The obligation did not. The Roman conquest changed the landscape. Colonies spread across the fertile plains. Latin displaced Punic in the cities. The cults of Jupiter, Juno, and Saturn absorbed or replaced the older gods. But the mountains and the desert remained harder to control. Roman garrisons guarded the *limes*, the frontier. Beyond that, the tribes raided, traded, and ignored the edicts from Carthage or Rome. The language survived. The ancestors stayed in their tombs. The painted caves were forgotten by the literate world, remembered by the herders who still sheltered there in storms. A cave in the Tadrart Acacus, southern Libya. The entrance faces east. The first light of morning strikes the back wall, illuminating a procession of cattle painted in red and white. The horns are lyre-shaped, the bodies massive. A human figure stands among them, one arm raised. The gesture could be prayer. It could be command. It could be recognition. Outside, the desert wind is already warm. The sand has buried the river that once flowed here. The paintings remain. This is the inheritance of the Imazighen. Not a single story, but a landscape layered with stories. Not a scripture, but images on stone, words in a language that adapted and survived. The Greeks called them Libyans. The Romans called them barbarians. They called themselves the free people. The name held. ---
Further reading on Mythologis:

- The Sacred and the Profane
- The Jnun of the Thresholds
- Tanit, Queen of Heaven
- The Ancestors in the Caves
- Oral Memory and the Long Tradition


Siwy
@IudaArpitar

CHAPTER 2

THE SKY FATHER AND THE EARTH MOTHER

The rock chamber at Siwa cuts into the hillside like a throat. The stone is pale limestone, cool even when the desert air outside shimmers past forty degrees. Light enters through the doorway in a wedge that moves across the floor as the sun climbs. The spring beside the temple still flows, green water pooling in a basin worn smooth by centuries of hands. The air smells of wet stone and salt. Palm fronds rattle in the wind above the ruins. A ram-headed figure is carved into the lintel, weathered but recognizable: horns curled tight against the skull, the broad muzzle, the blank stone eyes that once held inlay. This is where Alexander came in 331 BCE to ask the oracle if he was Zeus's son. The god he met here was not Greek. The Greeks called him Ammon, but the name is older. Hammon, Hamon, Amun grafted onto Libyan root stock. The cult had been receiving petitioners for a thousand years before Alexander arrived. Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BCE, mentions the oracle at Siwa and the temple of Zeus Ammon in the Libyan desert, noting that the Ammonians are colonists from Egypt and Ethiopia and speak a language mixed from both (4.181). The ram is the god's animal. Not a symbol. The god himself. Fertility, sky, storm, the power that makes the barley grow and the ewes bear twins. The Libyans brought offerings: oil, grain, small bronze rams with exaggerated horns. They came to ask questions about water, about war, about the future of their herds. The god answered through the priests, through the move-

ment of the statue on its palanquin, through dreams in the chamber where you slept on stone. Stand in the doorway now. The desert stretches west, pale sand and darker gravel braided in ridges. The oasis is a green wound in the dryness, date palms rooted in water that rises from aquifers trapped beneath the sand. The temple is half-collapsed. Tourists come in buses and take photographs. The spring still flows. The god is gone, or dormant, or renamed. But the rock remembers. The Libyans who painted the Tassili caves six thousand years ago left no written theology. They left bulls with lyre-shaped horns, processions of cattle, human figures with arms raised toward the sky. The sky mattered. The sun mattered. The ancestors in their stone tombs mattered. By the time the Greeks arrived, those instincts had crystallized into gods with names and cults with oracles. Ammon was one. The sun was another. The moon, in some traditions, was a third. The earth beneath it all, unnamed but present, the body that received the rain and gave back grain. Ammon is attested at Siwa from at least the eighth century BCE, though the cult is likely older. The Greeks identified him with Zeus because both commanded the sky. The Egyptians had long worshipped Amun-Ra at Thebes, a god of hidden power and the solar disk. The Libyan Hammon shares the ram iconography, the association with fertility, the oracle tradition. Whether the Libyans borrowed from Egypt or Egypt from Libya, or both drew on a shared proto-Saharan cult, is a question the evidence cannot settle. What matters is that by the time Herodotus wrote, Ammon was a god the Greeks recognized and respected enough to consult. Herodotus describes the temple as being ten days' journey from Thebes through desert (4.181). He notes that the water of the spring is cold at midday and warm at midnight, an inversion of natural expectation. He records that the Nasamones, a Libyan tribe living east of the Garamantes, travel to the oracle to swear oaths and to seek divination by sleeping on the tombs of their ancestors (4.172). The pairing is instructive. The god at Siwa is a node in a network of sacred sites. The ancestors in their tumuli are another. Both receive petitions. Both offer answers. The ram-headed god is not an import. The iconography fits the pastoral economy of North Africa: sheep as wealth, rams as markers of virility and the turn of seasons. The god's dominion over sky and fertility makes sense in a land where rain is scarce and its arrival determines survival. The Egyptians depicted Amun with a ram's head in his chthonic aspect, the god of the underworld and regeneration. The Libyans seem to have emphasized the sky and storm. The oracle at

Siwa flourished through the Ptolemaic period and into Roman rule. Cambyses II of Persia reportedly sent an army to destroy it in the sixth century BCE; the army vanished in a sandstorm, a story Herodotus recounts with evident satisfaction (3.25–26). Alexander's visit gave the site prestige across the Hellenistic world. Later sources claim the god confirmed Alexander's divine parentage, though what the oracle actually said, and in what language, is lost. The oracle declined after the rise of Christianity. The temple was abandoned. The spring kept flowing. The ram carvings were defaced or buried. The god withdrew into the stone. Herodotus also reports that the Libyans sacrifice to the sun and the moon, though he does not name the deities or describe the ritual in detail (4.188). The archaeological record supports solar veneration. Tumulus graves across the Maghreb are oriented east–west, the body positioned to face the rising sun. Rock art from the Saharan Pastoral period frequently depicts solar disks, often with rays or surrounded by concentric circles. Some images show human figures with raised arms beneath a large circle, posture suggesting worship or invocation. The sun as giver of life and marker of time is a near-universal religious intuition. In a region where agriculture depends on the brief window between the end of the rains and the onset of summer heat, the sun's movements are not abstract. They are the difference between harvest and hunger. The solar cult required no temples. It required only the recognition that each dawn is a gift, that the light returns because something wills it so. The moon, by contrast, is harder to trace. In some Berber cosmologies, the moon is male. Ibn Khaldun, writing his Muqaddimah in the fourteenth century, notes in passing that some Berber groups in the Atlas venerated the moon before their conversion to Islam, regarding it as a masculine power linked to time and the regulation of the calendar (1.2). The claim is late and secondhand, but it finds support in linguistic evidence. In Tamazight, the word for moon, *ayur*, is grammatically masculine in several dialects. The sun, *tafukt*, is feminine. The inversion of the Mediterranean pattern, where the sun is typically male (Helios, Apollo) and the moon female (Selene, Artemis), suggests an independent tradition. The moon's phases govern the timing of festivals, the start of months, the planning of transhumance. A masculine moon is the measurer, the one who counts. The feminine sun is the nurturer, the one who makes things grow. The pairing is not universal across all Berber groups, but it recurs often enough to indicate a pattern older than the Islamic period. The cosmogonic egg is stranger still. The

Guanche, the indigenous inhabitants of the Canary Islands who spoke a Berber language closely related to mainland Tamazight, preserved creation accounts that Spanish chroniclers recorded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Fray Juan de Abreu Galindo, writing in his *Historia de la conquista de las siete islas de Canaria* around 1632, describes a Guanche belief that the world emerged from an egg laid by a primordial bird or spirit. The egg split into sky and earth. From the halves came the first beings. The account is mediated through Catholic interpreters and written more than a century after the Spanish conquest of the islands, so its reliability is contested. But the motif of the cosmic egg appears in other mythologies: the Orphic egg of Greek tradition, the Hiranyagarbha of the Rigveda, the egg of Pangu in Chinese cosmology. Whether the Guanche inherited the motif from a shared Afro-Asiatic substrate, developed it independently, or absorbed it from Mediterranean contact is unresolved. What the egg motif does is provide a narrative structure for differentiation. Before the egg, unity. After the egg, the separation of categories: sky from earth, light from dark, male from female. The story explains why the world is divided without requiring a creator god who acts with intention. The egg cracks because it must. The sky rises because it is lighter. The earth settles because it is heavier. The logic is almost mechanical, closer to philosophy than to prayer. A funeral in the Tell Atlas, six thousand years before the present. The body lies flexed in a shallow pit, knees drawn to chest. Red ochre has been rubbed into the skin, staining the bones the color of rust. Beside the body: a clay figurine, no larger than a hand. The figure is female, breasts and hips pronounced, face blank. The mourners fill the grave with stones, then pile more stones above it until the mound rises waist-high. They do not speak. The wind carries dust from the west. The sun is already past its zenith. One of the mourners pours milk onto the stones, a thin stream that darkens the dust. The earth drinks it. The dead woman is gone, but the stones will mark her. Her daughters will come here to ask questions. The figurine in the grave suggests that the earth, or the principle of fertility, was conceived as female long before Tanit's cult crystallized in the Punic cities. The Capsian culture, which flourished in the Maghreb from roughly 10,000 to 6,000 BCE, left behind hundreds of burials containing such figurines. They are schematic: enlarged hips and breasts, minimal detail elsewhere. Some have incised patterns on the torso, possibly representing tattoos or scarification. None have facial features. The interpretation is contested. Some scholars argue they are

representations of a mother goddess, a Neolithic fertility cult similar to those attested in Anatolia and the Levant. Others suggest they are portable ancestors, representations of specific deceased women rather than a deity. Still others propose they are simply dolls, objects of play or sympathetic magic with no fixed religious significance. What is not contested is their ubiquity. The figurines appear across North Africa in contexts that suggest they mattered. They are buried with care. They are made from durable materials: clay, stone, bone. They are gendered. The human body, particularly the female body capable of gestation and birth, is being marked as significant in a way that male figures are not. Whether this represents worship, respect, or instrumental magic is a question the artifacts alone cannot answer. By the time the Phoenicians established Carthage in the ninth century BCE, the iconography had evolved. Tanit, the queen of heaven, appears on stelae with a triangular body, arms raised or outstretched, a solar disk above her head. The gesture echoes the Capsian figurines and the painted figures in the Saharan rock art. The continuity is not proof of an unbroken cult, but it suggests that the visual language of the sacred, particularly around femininity and fertility, had deep roots in the region. The Phoenicians did not invent Tanit. They named her, systematized her cult, and built temples. But the instinct to pair the earth with the feminine, to honor the body that receives seed and returns grain, was already there. The relationship between sky and earth, masculine and feminine, solar and lunar, structures the rhythm of life in a pastoral and agricultural economy. The sky gods, Ammon and the unnamed sun, provide rain and light. The earth, whether personified as a goddess or understood as a generative principle, receives those gifts and transforms them into food. The ancestors, buried in the earth, mediate between the two realms. They are dead but not gone. They rest in the earth's body. They dream. They answer when called. Herodotus records that the Nasamones practice divination by sleeping on the graves of their ancestors, trusting the dead to send true dreams (4.172). The practice assumes that the earth is not inert. It is animated by those who have returned to it. The dead are closer to the earth's secrets. They know where water hides, when the rains will come, which pastures will stay green through summer. The living consult them not out of sentiment but out of need. Plutarch, in his essay *On the Obsolescence of Oracles*, speculates that the power of oracular sites waxes and wanes with the presence of certain vapors or exhalations from the earth (Moralia 432c–438d). He is writing about

Delphi, but the principle applies. The earth gives off power. Some places concentrate it. Springs, caves, fissures in the rock where the breath of the earth can be felt. The oracle at Siwa is such a place. The spring is the god's gift, proof of his presence. The rock chamber is the womb where the god speaks. The petitioner enters, asks, and waits. The god answers or does not. The structure of the cult, oracle and spring and sacred animal, replicates the structure of the cosmos: sky (the god), earth (the chamber), and water (the medium that sustains life and carries messages between realms). The sacrifices brought to Ammon, grain and oil and the blood of rams, feed the god but also feed the earth. The smoke rises. The blood soaks into the ground. The cycle is completed. The theological sophistication should not be overstated. There is no surviving Berber equivalent to Hesiod's *Theogony*, no narrative that lays out the genealogy of the gods or the origin of the cosmos in systematic detail. What we have instead are cult sites, iconography, and the reports of outsiders. The gods are known by what they do, not by what they are. Ammon brings rain. The sun marks time. The moon measures months. The earth grows grain. The ancestors remember. The theology is functional. It does not speculate about the nature of divinity. It responds to the needs of the living: water, food, knowledge, children. The gods are partners in survival, not objects of contemplation. This is not to say the Imazighen lacked a sense of the numinous. The painted caves, the care taken with burials, the orientation of the dead toward the rising sun all indicate a conviction that the world is more than material. Something watches. Something listens. The threshold between the visible and the invisible is thin, and certain actions, certain words, can move things from one side to the other. But the emphasis is on practice, not doctrine. You pour the libation. You sleep on the grave. You bring the offering to the spring. The god responds or does not. If the god responds, you return next year. If the god is silent, you try another site, another ancestor, another spring. The system is decentralized, adaptable, responsive to local conditions. It survives because it does not require belief in a single narrative. It requires only attention to the signs and respect for the boundaries. The sun is setting over Siwa. The light turns the limestone temple gold, then rose, then shadow. The spring catches the last of the light, a mirror of sky in a pool of stone. A bird, perhaps a kestrel, circles above the palms. The wind has dropped. The air cools fast. In an hour, the stars will be out, the same constellations the herders watched six thousand years ago. The ram-headed god is silent now,

his oracle closed, his name folded into history. But the spring still flows. The date palms still root in the same aquifer. The earth still receives the rain, when it comes, and gives back green. The pairing holds: sky and earth, light and dark, the eternal conversation between what rises and what remains. A painted hand on a cave wall in the Tassili, ochre fingers splayed against the stone. The person who made it is dust. The image endures, palm open, reaching toward something the rock will not name. --- **Further reading on Mythologis:**

- Tanit, Queen of Heaven
- The Ancestors in the Caves
- The Jnun of the Thresholds
- Tribal Gods and Sacred Kings
- Antaeus, Atlas, and the Greek Borrowings
- The Sacred and the Profane