

The Civilizational Role of the Port Cities of the Central Maghreb in the Mediterranean World : Béjaïa and Oran as Case Studies Based on Geographical Sources

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Abstract

The Central Maghreb attained a prominent civilizational standing, aided by its strategic geographical location. This position had a positive impact on various aspects of life in the region, especially maritime trade. Its extensive coastline contributed to the emergence of several ports. These ports played important roles and enhanced the commercial and civilizational value of the Central Maghreb during the medieval period. The true significance of this important historical feature is closely linked to the establishment of these ports in coastal cities, from which they usually took their names. The ports of Béjaïa and Oran, which are the subject of this study, were among the largest ports of the Central Maghreb in both size and activity during those periods. They possessed natural and human assets that enabled them to play a significant civilizational role in the Mediterranean world.

Keywords: cities; ports; Béjaïa; Oran; geographical sources; civilizational role; Central Maghreb; coastline.

Introduction

The Central Maghreb occupied a prominent civilizational position during the medieval period because of its strategic geographical location. This position had a positive impact on various fields of civilization, especially maritime trade. Its long coastline contained several ports of different sizes and levels of importance. Under the states that arose in the Central Maghreb, these ports played an important role whose commercial and civilizational value cannot be underestimated.

These ports were associated with coastal cities and usually took their names from them. Among them were the ports of Béjaïa and Oran. During those periods, they were among the largest ports of the Central Maghreb in terms of both size and activity. Their natural and human assets enabled them to perform an important civilizational role in the Mediterranean world.

What factors contributed to the commercial vitality of these two ports? What were the main features of their commercial activity? What civilizational standing distinguished them within the Mediterranean world?

A Historical and Geographical Overview of Béjaïa and Oran

Béjaïa and Oran had a significant presence in the economic and civilizational landscape. This prominence was largely due to the distinction achieved by the ports of these two cities. The earliest

development of the port of Béjaïa dates to the Hammadid period, and its influence extended into later phases of the modern era. The origins of the port of Oran go back to the early foundation of the city by Andalusians during the second half of the third century AH/ninth century CE.

First: Béjaïa and Its Port

Béjaïa is a coastal city situated between Ifriqiya and the Maghreb¹. It was a principal center of the Central Maghreb and the political capital of the Banu Hammad. The author of *al-Rawd al-Mi'tar* admired its natural setting, which abounded in rivers, valleys, and orchards².

The history of the city was closely linked to the Banu Hammad in both its foundation and development. Al-Nasir ibn Alnas al-Hammadi³ founded it in 460 AH/1067 CE⁴, after the destruction of the city of Ashir⁵ by the Zirids and the Hilalians. It was known as Qal'at Bani Hammad, the first capital of the Hammadid state, which Hammad ibn Buluggin had initially built. The choice of the Béjaïa region was not arbitrary. It had defensive advantages because the area was mountainous, better fortified, and more defensible. It formed a strong fortress against the Hilali Arabs⁶.

It should also be recalled that the site of Béjaïa had been a small anchorage belonging to an ancient city known as Saldæ or Salda⁷, whose remains were still clearly visible⁸.

¹ Yaquṭ al-Hamawī, *Mu'jam al-Buldan* [Dictionary of Countries], vol. 1, ed. Ihsan Abbas (Beirut: Dar Sader, 1977), p. 339.

² Abd al-Mun'im al-Himyari, *al-Rawd al-Mi'tar fi Khabar al-Aqtar*, ed. Ihsan Abbas (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnan, 2nd ed., 1984), pp. 81-82.

³ Al-Nasir ibn Alnas (d. 481 AH/1088 CE): son of Hammad ibn Buluggin ibn Ziri al-Sanhaji; the fifth ruler of the Hammadid state in the Central Maghreb, and its most famous and greatest in stature, highest in rank, and most firmly established in kingship. He assumed rule in 454 AH/1062 CE. During his reign, in 457 AH, the Hilalians entered the land of Algeria, seized several cities such as Constantine, M'sila, Tubna, and others, and caused destruction in the land. He was the ruler who built the city of Béjaïa and named it "al-Nasiriyya" after himself. See Adel Nuwayhid, *Mu'jam A'lam al-Jaza'ir* [Biographical Dictionary of Algeria] (Beirut: Nuwayhid Cultural Foundation, 2nd ed., 1980), p. 328.

⁴ Muhammad Ben Amira and Latifa Bashari Ben Amira, *Tarikh Bijaya fi Zill Mukhtalif al-Anzima al-Siyasiyya min 'Ahd al-Qartajiyyin ila 'Ahd al-Atrak al-'Uthmaniyyin* [History of Béjaïa under Different Political Regimes from the Carthaginians to the Ottoman Turks] (Algiers: Dar al-Faruq, 1st ed., 2015), p. 39.

⁵ Ashir: the name is vocalized with a kasra on its second letter, followed by a quiescent ya and a ra. It was a city in the Berber mountains of the Maghreb, on the western edge of Ifriqiya and inland opposite Béjaïa. The first to develop it was Ziri ibn Manad al-Sanhaji, who was the leader of that tribe in his time. He was the grandfather of al-Mu'izz ibn Badis and of the rulers of Ifriqiya after al-Mu'izz's departure from it. See al-Hamawī, *Mu'jam al-Buldan*, vol. 1, p. 202.

⁶ Al-Himyari, *al-Rawd al-Mi'tar*, p. 81.

⁷ Abd al-Hamid Uways, *Dawlat Bani Hammad* [The State of Banu Hammad] (Cairo: Dar al-Sahwa, 2nd ed., 1991), p. 102.

⁸ Anonymous Moroccan author, *al-Istibsar fi 'Aja'ib al-Amsar*, published and annotated by Saad Zaghlul Abd al-Hamid (Baghdad: Dar al-Shu'un al-Thaqafiyya al-'Amma, Afaq Arabiyya, n.d.), p. 129.

Second: Oran and Its Port

Oran was a fortified city with running water, mills, and gardens⁹. It lay two miles from Mers el-Kébir¹⁰. It was also described as a large city with extensive space, gardens, trees, and fresh water¹¹. Its foundation as an urban settlement dates to 290 AH/902 CE and is attributed to Muhammad ibn Abi Awn and a group of Andalusian merchants¹². They settled there with members of the Banu Musqin Berber tribes¹³ for seven years, until 297 AH/909 CE. In that year, the city was invaded by Berber tribes and destroyed. It was later rebuilt by order of Hamid ibn Dawwas ibn Sawlat¹⁴ and became better than it had been before¹⁵. The Azdaja tribe also took control of the city and inhabited it for a period.

It appears that the city laid out by the Andalusians was an expansion of an older city built by the earlier Africans¹⁶, which was called Ifri. Not far from it was the port of Mers el-Kébir, one of the largest anchorages of the Central Maghreb. Oran derived its military and political standing from this port¹⁷.

Third: Factors Behind Their Prosperity

A combination of factors made the ports of Béjaïa and Oran vital centers of the maritime trade of the Central Maghreb during the medieval period. The most important of these factors were as follows:

First: The Natural Factor

Geographical location played an important role in stimulating commercial navigation at both ports. The commercial activity of Béjaïa expanded, and the port became a link between the Near Maghreb and the Central Maghreb. Oran, meanwhile, played a leading role in the western Mediterranean. It linked four commercial spaces: the Central Maghreb, the Far Maghreb, al-Andalus, and Europe.

In the same context, the topography of the port of Béjaïa and Mers el-Kébir at Oran placed them among the best ports of the Central Maghreb and the Islamic West. They provided safety and security

⁹ Al-Bakri, al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik, vol. 2, ed. Jamal Talba (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 1st ed., 2003), p. 252.

¹⁰ Al-Himyari, al-Rawd al-Mi'tar, p. 612; al-Idrisi, Nuzhat al-Mushtaq fi Ikhtiraq al-Afaq, vol. 1 (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqafa al-Diniyya, 2002), p. 252.

¹¹ Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Zayyani, Dalil al-Hayran wa Anis al-Sahran fi Akhbar Madinat Wahran, ed. al-Mahdi al-Bu'abdali; prepared by Abd al-Rahman Duwayb (Algiers: Alam al-Ma'rifa, 1st ed., 2013), p. 43.

¹² Al-Bakri, al-Masalik, vol. 2, p. 252.

¹³ Banu Musqin were a branch of Azdaja of the Zanata. The author of al-Istibsar and Ibn Khaldun rendered the name as Banu Miskin. The form Banu Musqin reported by al-Bakri is considered more likely. See al-Bakri, al-Masalik, vol. 2, p. 252; Anonymous Moroccan author, al-Istibsar, p. 133; Ibn Khaldun, al-'Ibar, vol. 6, text established by Khalil Shahada, rev. Suhayl Zakkar (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 2000), pp. 190-191; Abd al-Wahhab Ben Mansur, Qaba'il al-Maghrib [Tribes of the Maghreb], vol. 1 (Rabat: Royal Printing House, 1968), p. 313.

¹⁴ After Ubayd Allah al-Mahdi's rule had become established following Abu Abd Allah al-Shi'i, he designated his son Abu al-Qasim Nizar as heir apparent. He appointed Habasa ibn Yusuf over Barqa and the surrounding territories, and his brother Uruba over the Maghreb. He settled him at Baghaya; Uruba then proceeded to Tahert, entered it by force, and appointed Dawwas ibn Sawlat al-Lahis as governor. See Ibn Khaldun, al-'Ibar, vol. 4, p. 48.

¹⁵ Al-Bakri, al-Masalik, vol. 2, p. 253; al-Himyari, al-Rawd al-Mi'tar, p. 612.

¹⁶ Al-Hasan al-Wazzan, Wasf Ifriqiya [Description of Africa], vol. 2, trans. Muhammad Hajji and Muhammad al-Akhdar (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 2nd ed., 1983), p. 30.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 31.

for passing vessels, which could enter them relatively easily because winds were weak there. Mers el-Kébir at Oran was particularly protected from strong winds during winter¹⁸.

Another factor that strengthened the commercial role of the port of Béjaïa and the ports of the Central Maghreb was the character of the region surrounding Béjaïa. It was mainly mountainous and forested and therefore became an important source of timber, the basic raw material for shipbuilding¹⁹. This timber was both varied and abundant, especially coniferous wood and the type known as takhtash wood²⁰. Al-Himyari confirmed this point when he wrote: "It has a shipyard for the construction of fleets, because timber is abundant in its valleys and mountains"²¹.

There is little doubt that the neighboring areas supplied Béjaïa with materials and agricultural crops, as well as mineral raw materials and manufactured goods. This was especially significant because a number of coastal cities were rich in minerals such as iron, copper, and others. One example was Majjana²², which was known as Majjana of Iron²³.

Mers el-Kébir at Oran became one of the most important anchorages of the Central Maghreb because it was among the best fortified and protected. Its distinctive natural topography sheltered it from strong winds and made it easier for ships to anchor. Several geographical sources reported and praised this feature. Al-Wazzan stated that Venetian merchant ships sought refuge at Mers el-Kébir when weather conditions were disturbed. The same point had earlier been confirmed by both al-Himyari and al-Idrisi²⁴.

Oran also benefited from similar conditions. Important circumstances supported shipbuilding, especially the availability of substantial forest and mineral resources. These included iron, which al-Bakri reported was extracted from a mountain near the Arzew region²⁵.

In addition to the factors already mentioned, the proximity of Central Maghrebi ports, including Oran, to the ports of al-Andalus greatly strengthened economic relations between the Maghreb and al-Andalus during the medieval period. It also increased the commercial and economic vitality of Oran. This is particularly evident in the accounts of travelers and geographers such as al-Himyari and al-Idrisi, who clearly affirmed that Oran traded more extensively with the Andalusian coast²⁶.

Second: The Human-Political Factor

There is no dispute that security and safety are the cornerstone of any human activity. These conditions were widely present under the Hammadid state. The establishment of security throughout

¹⁸ Asma Khelout, 'Ports and Their Role in Commercial Relations between the Central Maghreb and al-Andalus from the 3rd to the 6th Century AH/9th-12th CE,' doctoral dissertation, supervised by Abdelhak Cheref, Ibn Khaldun University of Tiaret, 2021, pp. 78-79.

¹⁹ Uways, Dawlat Bani Hammad, p. 224.

²⁰ Khadija Bourmala, 'Foreign Trade of the Central Maghreb in the Mediterranean Basin from the Sixth to the Ninth Century AH/12th-15th CE,' doctoral dissertation, University of Oran 1 Ahmed Ben Bella, 2018, p. 53.

²¹ Al-Himyari, al-Rawd al-Mi'tar, p. 81.

²² Majjana: pronounced with an open vowel and a doubled jim; a locality in Ifriqiya conquered by Busr ibn Artat. It was also called Qal'at Busr and lay five stages from Kairouan. See al-Hamawi, Mu'jam al-Buldan, vol. 5, p. 56.

²³ Al-Idrisi, Nuzhat al-Mushtaq, p. 291.

²⁴ Al-Wazzan, Wasf Ifriqiya, p. 31; al-Himyari, al-Rawd al-Mi'tar, p. 613; al-Idrisi, Nuzhat al-Mushtaq, p. 252.

²⁵ Al-Bakri, al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik, p. 252.

²⁶ Al-Himyari, al-Rawd al-Mi'tar, p. 613; al-Idrisi, Nuzhat al-Mushtaq, p. 252.

its territories created a favorable opportunity for economic prosperity and for the revival of both overland and maritime trade. This important condition had a positive effect on the port of Béjaïa during that period and in later periods, as reflected in the growth of exports and imports²⁷. Its effect became especially evident later, when large parts of the Islamic West came under the Almoravids and then the Almohads. Security along the Mediterranean coasts was reinforced by the strength of the naval fleets under both dynasties²⁸.

In addition to the factors already mentioned, another important factor contributed to the substantial revival of port activity. It was the peaceful climate that prevailed for long periods in relations between the states of the Central Maghreb and the Italian principalities. Agreements were concluded between the rulers of both sides. One of these was the agreement between al-Nasir ibn Alnas and Pope Gregory VII. It clearly expressed a policy of friendship and rapprochement. It allowed Italians to reside freely within the Hammadid state and to conduct their daily activities, including religious rites. They were even permitted to build a church at the Qal'a in 508 AH/1114 CE²⁹.

In the same context, Genoa moved quickly to conclude a treaty with the Hammadids around 546-547 AH/1152 CE, under which the Genoese were allowed to reside in Béjaïa³⁰. Between 528 AH/1133 CE and 533 AH/1138 CE, the Almoravids also concluded several agreements with the Italian principalities. These agreements enabled commercial relations that increased the pace of trade between the two sides³¹.

Within this climate of mutual respect, the port of Oran also benefited from these agreements. Although they were commercial in character, their political dimension was clear. The political rapprochement and peace that marked relations between the two sides were among the strongest factors behind commercial openness in the Mediterranean between the major political powers of the period. They also substantially stimulated commercial activity in the ports of the Islamic West, including those of the Central Maghreb and especially the ports of Béjaïa and Oran.

Within this broader context, the growing role of the ports of Béjaïa and Oran under the Almohads should also be noted. The Maghreb experienced under their rule a remarkable degree of stability that it had not known in other periods, including the Almoravid era. Much of the Almoravid period was devoted to campaigns of jihad in al-Andalus and expansion toward the Western Sudan. This limited their maritime economic and commercial capabilities.

²⁷ Saber Abd al-Mun'im Muhammad Ali al-Baltaji, 'The Impact of Political and Security Factors on Maritime Commercial Activity in the Near Maghreb,' *Journal of African Studies*, Cairo University, no. 38 (June 2015), p. 69.

²⁸ Al-Sayyid Abd al-Aziz Salim and Ahmad Mukhtar al-Abbadi, *Tarikh al-Bahriyya al-Islamiyya fi al-Maghrib wa al-Andalus* [History of the Islamic Navy in the Maghreb and al-Andalus] (Beirut: Dar al-Nahda al-Arabiyya, 1969), pp. 241-256; Khadija Bourmala, *Foreign Trade of the Central Maghreb*, pp. 92-93.

²⁹ Kada Bouzid Yahyawi, 'Commercial Relations between Béjaïa and the Italian Principalities,' *Annals of the University of Algiers*, University of Algiers 2 Abu al-Qasim Saadallah, vol. 3, no. 1 (June 2023), p. 107.

³⁰ Hady Roger Idris, *Al-Dawla al-Sanhajiyya: Tarikh Ifriqiya fi 'Ahd Bani Ziri* [The Sanhaja State: A History of Ifriqiya under the Zirids], vol. 2, trans. Hammadi al-Sahili (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1st ed., 1992), pp. 296-297.

³¹ Kheira Belarbi, 'Routes and Roads and Their Role in Stimulating Commercial and Cultural Activity in the Islamic Maghreb,' master's thesis, Abu Bakr Belkaid University of Tlemcen, 2010, p. 112.

Third: The Economic Factor

The central role of the port of Béjaïa was linked to several economic factors. Foremost among them were the industries that flourished in the city, especially woodworking and shipbuilding, for which two shipyards were established³². These supplied commercial vessels to the maritime trading fleet. Other industries also existed in the region, including oil production. Béjaïa's oils had a good reputation both within and outside the Central Maghreb and were among the most important goods exported abroad at the time³³. Oran likewise had a shipyard for building vessels, since it was a coastal port city and maritime trade required large numbers of ships³⁴.

Agricultural and craft products were also among the most important factors that generated activity and vitality in the ports of Béjaïa and Oran and in other Central Maghrebi ports. Most exports from the two ports were agricultural products, including olives and olive oil, cotton and flax, cereals, and various fruits. These were supplemented by animal products such as wool, animal hair, and hides, as well as a variety of craft products.

In this context, it is also necessary to note the significant role played by treaties concluded between the states of the Central Maghreb and European principalities and kingdoms. These treaties stimulated and strengthened commercial exchanges between the two sides through the ports of maritime trade.

Among these treaties, by way of example rather than limitation, was the treaty concluded between Venice and the Zayyanid state during the reign of the Zayyanid sultan Muhammad al-Thabiti³⁵ in 879 AH/1483 CE. It stipulated that a funduq in the city of Oran be granted to Venetian merchants³⁶.

It should be noted that the funduqs built in the cities of the Central Maghreb and throughout the Islamic Maghreb during the medieval period were important economic factors that greatly strengthened the commercial role of the ports. They were primarily commercial institutions with several functions, while also serving social and service purposes. They provided comfort and accommodation for merchants arriving from distant regions, especially Europeans, during their stay in the cities of the Islamic Maghreb. Their services included sleeping rooms, bathing facilities, stables and fodder for animals, and storage areas for goods. A section of the funduq could also serve as the consul's residence. Funduq owners also provided health care by assigning a physician to attend to their residents. The Béjaïa funduq, for example, had a physician named Gherardo de Longis in 652 AH/1252 CE³⁷.

³² Anonymous, al-Istibsar, p. 130.

³³ Rehab Muhammad Kamal Muhammad Ahmad al-Maghribi, *Al-Tijara fi 'Asr Bani Hammad (408-547 AH/1017-1152 CE) [Trade in the Hammadid Period]* (Damietta University, Egypt, 2015), p. 17.

³⁴ Zahra Miloudi, 'Maritime Activities and Their Role in Stimulating Coastal Trade in the Cities of the Central Maghreb from the First to the Eighth Century AH,' *Al-Ibar Journal for Historical and Archaeological Studies in North Africa*, Ibn Khaldun University of Tiaret, vol. 6, no. 2 (2023), p. 192.

³⁵ Muhammad ibn Abi Thabit (d. 909 AH/1503 CE): Muhammad (al-Mutawakkil 'ala Allah) ibn Abi Zayyan Muhammad (al-Musta'in bi-Allah) ibn Yusuf, known as al-Thabiti in reference to his grandfather al-Mutawakkil 'ala Allah; the twentieth ruler of the Zayyanid state. See Nuwayhid, *Mu'jam A'lam al-Jaza'ir*, p. 89.

³⁶ Driss Ben Mustapha, 'Political and Economic Relations between the States of the Islamic Maghreb and the States of Southwestern Europe in the Period 7th-10th AH/13th-16th CE,' doctoral dissertation, Abu Bakr Belkaid University of Tlemcen, 2014, pp. 221-222.

³⁷ Fatima Filali, 'Markets in the Islamic West under the Almohads (524-667 AH/1126-1269 CE): A Study of Their Organization and Statistical Data,' doctoral dissertation, University of Sidi Bel Abbès, 2022, p. 263.

It should also be noted that, during the periods under discussion, funduqs could take the name of the commodity stored and sold in them. At other times, they bore the name of the community that frequented them. Examples in Béjaïa included the Funduq of the Pisans, the Funduq of the Genoese, and the Funduq of the Leatherworkers. In Oran, there were the Funduq of the Genoese, the Funduq of the Marseillais, and the House of the Venetians³⁸. Al-Wazzan confirmed this when he referred to a funduq specifically for Catalans in Oran and to the existence of other funduqs in Béjaïa³⁹.

The accounts relating to this subject indicate that the cities contained a considerable number of funduqs, although their capacity to accommodate guests varied. There were large or principal funduqs as well as smaller ones.

It must also be emphasized that treaties signed between the states of the Islamic Maghreb and Italian and other European principalities required each foreign community to have its own funduq bearing its name. One such agreement allowed the Pisans to establish funduqs in Ifriqiya and Béjaïa in 628 AH/1230 CE⁴⁰. This clearly indicates that the presence of funduqs was among the most important factors that increased the flow of merchants to the Central Maghreb, especially to its coastal port cities. The facilities available in these establishments encouraged larger numbers of merchants to come, contributed to the prosperity of commercial activity in the ports, and affected the economic activity of these cities as a whole.

It is therefore clear that natural and political factors were the strongest factors behind the prosperity of these two ports. They contributed effectively to the maritime commercial activity of the Central Maghreb.

The geographical location of the port of Béjaïa also had a major influence because of its proximity to the eastern Mediterranean space, especially the Italian principalities. The same was true of Oran, whose port occupied a leading position in western Mediterranean trade.

As for the political influence of the two ports, the prominence of Béjaïa was linked to the Hammadids, who founded the city and made it their capital. This in itself was an important factor in the significance of the port. The port of Oran experienced its golden age under the Zayyanids, although it had already displayed distinguished commercial activity under the Almohads.

Fourth: The Commercial Exchange Sphere of the Ports of Béjaïa and Oran

Béjaïa and Oran experienced unparalleled dynamism in their maritime commercial activity. Ships arrived at Béjaïa repeatedly and continued to anchor in its port, while goods were brought to the city by both land and sea⁴¹. Genoese activity in the Central Maghreb was initially concentrated at the port of Béjaïa during the Almohad period. Political circumstances led Genoa to reduce its trade with the eastern coasts and intensify it with the coasts of the Islamic Maghreb⁴².

³⁸ Ibid., p. 278.

³⁹ Al-Wazzan, *Wasf Ifriqiya*, pp. 30-50.

⁴⁰ Fatima Filali, *Markets in the Islamic West*, p. 265.

⁴¹ Al-Himyari, *al-Rawd al-Mi'tar*, p. 81.

⁴² Izz al-Din Ahmad Musa, *Al-Nashat al-Iqtisadi fi al-Maghrib al-Islami Khilal al-Qarn al-Sadis al-Hijri [Economic Activity in the Islamic Maghreb during the Sixth Century AH]* (Beirut: Dar al-Shuruq, 1st ed., 1983), p. 291.

Al-Idrisi confirmed this when he wrote: "Béjaïa in our time is the city of the Central Maghreb and the foremost place in the lands of Banu Hammad. Ships set sail for it and caravans arrive there. Goods are brought to it by land and sea, merchandise sells readily, and its people are prosperous merchants. It has industries that are not found in many other lands, and its inhabitants associate with merchants from the Far Maghreb, merchants of the Sahara, and merchants of the East..."⁴³.

The port of Oran also played a commercial role whose value and importance should not be underestimated. The city was highly important in maritime trade because of the large number of commercial transactions between its merchants and Andalusian merchants, facilitated by geographical proximity.

Oran's very existence was also linked to the Andalusians, since the city was built by them in 290 AH/902 CE. Among them were Muhammad ibn Abi Awn and Muhammad ibn Abdun. Its foundation was also connected with the presence of a small anchorage whose importance increased in later periods. Al-Idrisi confirmed this when he wrote: "It has well-regulated markets, many crafts, and active trade... Andalusian vessels call there frequently, and among its people are notables, self-respect, and pride"⁴⁴.

It should be noted that Oran's industrial and commercial standing did not become prominent until the later periods of the medieval era, especially under the Banu Zayyan. It is clear that, in its early phase, the port's activity was largely limited to Andalusian merchants.

Not far from Oran lies Mers el-Kébir, which was considered part of Oran because of its proximity. It experienced substantial commercial activity under the Zayyanids⁴⁵. The writings of travelers and geographers are almost unanimous in emphasizing its economic importance to that state because commercial ships could anchor there easily⁴⁶. Its position on the western coast of the Central Maghreb also placed it close to Tlemcen, the Zayyanid capital. This facilitated commercial exchange with European states and the conclusion of commercial and political treaties with the Zayyanid authorities by consular representatives present in the Central Maghreb, with the aim of strengthening trade relations with the parties dealing with the Zayyanid state.

No clearer evidence of the strength of this commercial activity can be found than al-Wazzan's statement that the ports of Oran and Mers el-Kébir were renowned. Their most frequent visitors were Genoese and Venetian merchants, whose trade there was active and profitable⁴⁷.

In light of this important evidence, it should be noted that the ports of the Central Maghreb served as commercial intermediaries between the Mashriq, the Maghreb, al-Andalus, and Europe, especially the port of Béjaïa. The author of al-Istibsar confirmed this when he wrote: "It is a great harbor at which the ships of the Rum from Syria and from the farthest lands of the Rum put in, as do Muslim ships from Alexandria at the edge of the land of Egypt, and from Yemen, India, and China"⁴⁸.

⁴³ Al-Idrisi, Nuzhat al-Mushtaq, p. 260.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 252, with adaptation.

⁴⁵ Muhammad Ben Saou, 'Trade and Merchants in the Islamic Maghreb, 7th-10th AH/13th-15th CE,' master's thesis, University of Batna, 2014, p. 109.

⁴⁶ Al-Himyari, al-Rawd al-Mi'tar, p. 612; Khadija Bourmala, Foreign Trade of the Central Maghreb, p. 121.

⁴⁷ Al-Hasan al-Wazzan, Wasf Ifriqiya, p. 9.

⁴⁸ Anonymous Moroccan author, al-Istibsar, p. 130.

Eastern goods also passed through these ports to al-Andalus and Europe. They included spices, perfumes, rubies, agate, diamonds, and various precious goods arriving from the Far East. In return, vessels came back laden with Andalusian goods such as timber from Tortosa, Maghrebi goods arriving from the Western Sudan such as ivory and gold, and European goods such as timber. Goods from the Central Maghreb also formed part of these exchanges, including cereals, oils, dates, honey, coral, and other products⁴⁹.

Amid this commercial abundance and continuous economic activity, the major role played by the port of Alexandria in Egypt cannot be overlooked. It served as the link between the ports of the Islamic East and the ports of the Central Maghreb and the Islamic West as a whole⁵⁰. This enabled Béjaïa to surpass the port of Algiers in the sixth century AH/twelfth century CE and to become the principal base linking Hammadid and Andalusian trade⁵¹.

Fifth: The Civilizational Functions of the Ports of Béjaïa and Oran

Commercial relations between states are an important channel of civilizational communication. This was also true of the ports of Béjaïa and Oran and their prominent civilizational role, whether through the transfer of science and knowledge to Europe or through the acceleration of European influences toward the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

What passed to and from these ports was not limited to commercial and consumer goods. The ports also created opportunities for transporting passengers to different destinations, including pilgrims departing for the Holy Lands to perform the pilgrimage⁵².

Commercial relations with European states, especially the Italian principalities, enabled Italian merchants to conduct their commercial activities in Béjaïa and even in Oran under the treaties discussed above. This gave them an opportunity to become acquainted with important aspects of Muslim civilization. In this context, merchants from Pisa learned the craft of wax production in Béjaïa and transferred its techniques to their own country. The influence of Islamic architecture was also evident in Sicilian palaces and buildings⁵³.

It is also clear that commercial exchanges through these two major ports had a substantial effect on strengthening relations with the parties involved. This enabled the Central Maghreb to attain an international political standing during the medieval period, from the Banu Hammad to the Banu Zayyan. The existence of treaties with a number of European states is itself evidence of the strength and breadth of these political relations.

The maritime imports and exports that passed through these ports to other countries also clearly show that many of the goods exchanged had considerable civilizational value. One example, among

⁴⁹ Rehab Muhammad Kamal Muhammad Ahmad al-Maghribi, *Al-Tijara fi 'Asr Bani Hammad (408-547 AH/1017-1152 CE) [Trade in the Hammadid Period]* (Damietta University, Egypt, 2015), p. 35.

⁵⁰ Muhammad Ben Saou, *Trade and Merchants in the Islamic Maghreb*, p. 109.

⁵¹ Rachid Bourouiba, *Al-Dawla al-Hammadiyya: Tarikhuha wa Hadaratuha [The Hammadid State: Its History and Civilization]* (Algiers: National Center for Historical Studies, Office of University Publications, 1977), p. 151.

⁵² Abd al-Hamid Uways, *Dawlat Bani Hammad*, p. 230.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 282-283.

others, was paper. Paper was exported from al-Andalus⁵⁴ to the Central Maghreb and the rest of the Islamic Maghreb⁵⁵, and also came from Genoa and the Islamic East⁵⁶ through the ports discussed above. Paper was highly beneficial to scholars in the Central Maghreb because it assisted them in authorship and the copying of books, as it was a basic raw material for professional copyists and stationers.

Accordingly, the commercial activity of the ports of the Central Maghreb, especially Béjaïa and Oran, strengthened the cultural standing of the coastal cities. Cultural activity accompanied the commercial activity of these two cities because of their extensive commercial connections with merchants from most Mediterranean ports⁵⁷.

Conclusion

From the preceding discussion, it can be concluded that the ports of Béjaïa and Oran played a major role in the maritime trade of the Central Maghreb. This role was linked to the interaction of several factors, the most important being the natural factor represented by geographical location and the topography that shaped the two ports.

The human factor, based on the available political conditions, also elevated these two commercial institutions to the rank of major medieval ports. This reflected rulers' awareness of the economic and civilizational importance of maritime trade for their states.

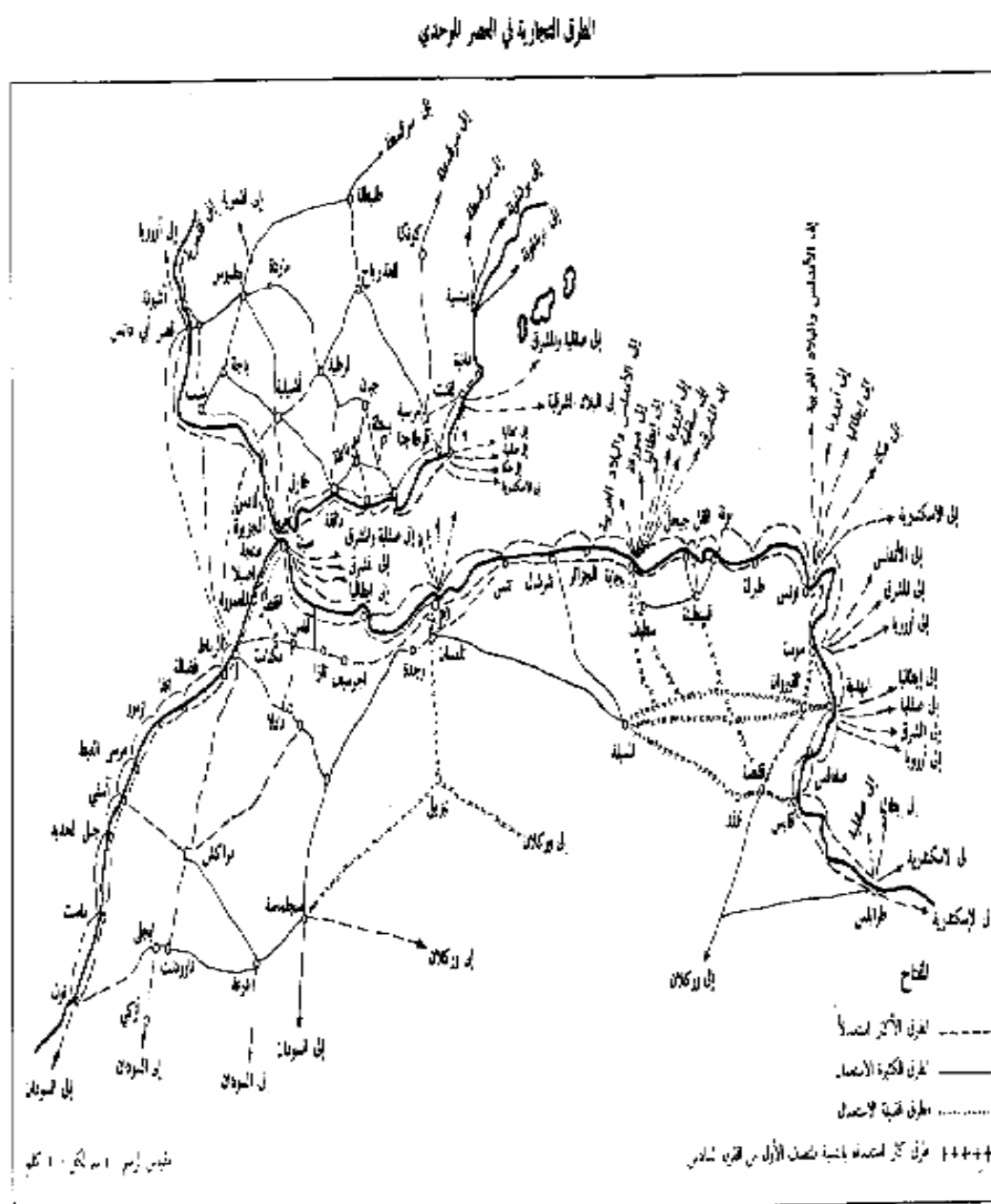
This is evident in the effort to establish security, which gave merchants the opportunity to conduct and develop their activities and to extend the horizons of trade as far as possible. This benefited the economy of the state, as was the case with the ports of Béjaïa and Oran.

⁵⁴ Paper from Xàtiva was considered one of the most important and finest types of paper in al-Andalus and was in high demand in different countries. See Khalil Khalaf al-Juburi, *Al-Mawani' al-Andalusiyya [Andalusian Ports]* (Damascus: Dar Safahat, 2016), p. 133; Rabah Ramadan, 'Commercial Activity in al-Andalus during the Fourth and Fifth Centuries AH/Tenth and Eleventh Centuries CE,' master's thesis, University of Oran, 2008, p. 146.

⁵⁵ Izz al-Din Ahmad Musa, *Economic Activity in the Islamic Maghreb*, p. 323.

⁵⁶ Fatima Filali, *Markets in the Islamic West*, pp. 414-415.

⁵⁷ Yahya Bouaziz, *Madinat Wahran 'Abr al-Tarikh [The City of Oran through History]* (Algiers: Alam al-Ma'rifa, 2009), p. 29.



Source: Izz al-Din Ahmad Musa, *Economic Activity in the Islamic Maghreb*, p. 310.

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Appendix

1. Overland and Maritime Trade Routes of the Islamic West under the Almohads (Commercial Exchange Network of the Ports of Béjaïa and Oran)