

Maritime trade during the Rustumid dynasty (160-296 AH/777-909 AD): The port of Oran as an example

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Abstract---The Maghreb ports represented the lifeline of the region's inhabitants, as they were an economic gateway to the interior and the outside world. The ports of the central Maghreb in the medieval period were an important part of the export and import of various goods and commodities. Therefore, the study came to investigate the history of the founding of Oran as a port and city, and the roles it played during the second and third centuries AH, when it was one of the most important ports of the Rustumid state (160-296 AH). The city and port were a hub for various economic activities.

To address this topic, we posed the following problem:

What were the various economic functions of the port of Oran during the Rustumid era?

To simplify its treatment, we broke it down into the following sub-questions:

When the port of Oran founded? What were the most important maritime trade activities of the Rustumid dynasty through the port of Oran? Was this port the only one through which the Rustumids traded, or were there other, less important, ports? To answer these questions, we employed a descriptive historical approach to map the Rustumid coast of medieval North Africa, alongside an analytical approach that helped us analyze various sources and references that addressed the topic generally or specifically. Our research also reviewed previous studies on the subject, beginning with geographical travelogues. Al-Idrisi and Al-Istakhri, who described some of the important coastal cities before the founding of Oran, and Ibn Khurradadhbih in his travels, then the writings of geographers such as Al-Ya'qubi, who visited the Maghreb coast, and Ibn Hawqal, who listed the ports and mentioned the port of Oran and what was opposite it on the northern bank. Among the most famous historians who spoke about the coast of the Maghreb, we mention Al-Bakri in his travels, who gave us a detailed overview of Oran and the cities that connected it to it by land and sea. Add to that the references that spoke about the Rustumid state in its economic aspect. Examples include the writings of Ibrahim Bahaz, and Archibald Lewis, who described various Rustumid goods and

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merchandise, both those traded in the markets and those transported through the ports and cities of the southern and northern Rustumid state. Also noteworthy is Asma' Khulut's treatise on ports and their role in trade relations between the two shores, and Valérian Dominique's writings on trade networks along the Moroccan coast. The study concluded that Oran rivaled other cities like Béjaïa, Ténès, Dellys, and Mostaganem in commercial importance. It was the most important Rustumid port for exports to Andalusia, handling various goods from Tihert, the Sudan, and other markets in the Maghreb. It also served as an import gateway for various goods from Europe, particularly Andalusia. Thus, it can be said that Oran was a crossroads of land and sea trade routes. Although it did not remain under Rustumid rule for long, it established a solid economic foundation under their leadership, which benefited subsequent states.

Keywords---Oran, Rustumid State, Middle Ages, Commercial Activities.

Introduction

The cities of the northern coast of the Maghreb, stretching from Barqa in the east to Tangier in the west, constituted a starting point for knowledge and trade toward the southern shores of Europe. They also served as a gateway to the African interior in the south, while many of their principal ports represented a central hub for both domestic and foreign commercial transactions. Historical sources have extensively highlighted the economic importance of the ports of the Central Maghreb during the Almoravid and Almohad periods, whereas such detail is scarcely found regarding the Rustamid era.

This study seeks to examine one of the important ports of the Central Maghreb, namely the port of Oran, located in the west and geographically close to the Andalusian coast. The study investigates the nature of the activities carried out at the port of Oran during the Rustamid period and whether it represented the most important northern commercial gateway to Africa in comparison with Béjaïa, Ténès, Dellys, and Mostaganem.

Numerous studies have addressed the coasts of the medieval Central Maghreb throughout its various historical periods; however, those dealing specifically with the Rustamid period remain limited, perhaps due to the scarcity of available sources. To the best of my knowledge, I have only encountered a few works that briefly referred to the Rustamid maritime sphere within their pages. Among them is the doctoral dissertation by the researcher Nouredine Ennouri entitled *The Central Maghreb during the Banu Rustam Period*, in which he explained the Rustamid commercial routes, both maritime and overland, particularly those linking Tahert with al-Andalus in the north and Ghana in the south, though without extensively discussing the major ports and their commercial activities.

The second study is likewise a doctoral dissertation entitled *The Maritime Orientation of the Central Maghreb and Its Impact on Trade and Communication Routes (2nd–10th AH / 8th–16th CE)* by the researcher Ali Achi. In its first chapter, covering the period between the 2nd and 5th centuries AH, the author discusses the coastal domain of the Central Maghreb as utilized by successive states, drawing upon the works of early geographers and historical sources such as al-Bakri and al-Idrisi. Concerning relations between the two shores, one may also refer to the dissertation of the researcher Asma Khellout entitled *Ports and Their Role in Commercial Relations between the Central Maghreb and al-Andalus from the 3rd to the 6th Century AH / 9th–12th Century CE*, which also touches upon the Rustamid period.

We may also mention the study by the researcher Mohamed Anbaoui entitled *Coastal Cities in the Medieval Maghreb Region up to the Fourth Hijri Century*, included among the proceedings of the symposium *The City in the History of the Maghreb*.

Accordingly, through this research, we aim to examine carefully the Rustamid maritime domain in general and the port of Oran in particular by raising the following research question:

What were the various economic activities of the port of Oran during the Rustamid era?

To facilitate its treatment, we divided the main issue into the following sub-questions:

When were the port and city of Oran established?

What were the principal Rustamid maritime commercial activities conducted through the port of Oran?

Was this port the only one through which the Banu Rustam conducted trade, or were there other ports of lesser importance?

In order to answer this problematique, it was necessary to employ the descriptive historical method to identify the map of the Rustamid coastline of the medieval Maghreb, extending from the Aghlabids in the east to the Idrisids in the west, in addition to the analytical method, which proved useful in analyzing the historical material found in the various primary and secondary sources that addressed the subject either generally or specifically.

The sources relied upon include geographical travel accounts such as those of al-Idrisi and al-Istakhri, who described some important coastal cities before the establishment of the port of Oran, as well as Ibn Khordadbeh in his *Kitāb al-Masālik*. We also relied on the works of regional geographers such as al-Ya'qubi, who visited the Maghrebi coast, and Ibn Hawqal, who listed the ports and mentioned the port of Oran together with the ports situated opposite it on the northern shore. Among the most renowned historians who wrote about the coast of the Maghreb, we may mention al-Bakri in his *Masālik*, where he provided us with a detailed overview of the routes linking Tahert, Oran, and other cities by land and sea.

1. The Coast of the Central Maghreb during the Rustamid Era

The Mediterranean coast of the Central Maghreb during the medieval period long represented an area of conflict among the many states that controlled it at different times, as well as with neighboring powers and ambitious overseas states. This was primarily due to its important strategic location; controlling it meant controlling the course of global maritime trade. Consequently, most successive Islamic states sought not to relinquish this coast or its economic wealth.

The Rustamid state (160–296 AH / 777–909 CE) was among the first states to recognize its significance and economic value. Despite the extensive treatment of the history of the Banu Rustam state in various aspects by historical sources and references, we have observed a certain ambiguity surrounding its maritime coast and the extent of its authority over it throughout its prosperous period. Therefore, we sought to investigate this gap that has remained largely absent from both classical and modern historical studies.

Returning to the available historical, geographical, and travel sources related to the Rustamid period (2nd–3rd centuries AH / 8th–9th centuries CE), we do not find a clear or unanimously agreed-upon definition among them. Most sources merely mention famous ports such as Ténès, Marsa al-Dajaj, and Marsa Farrukh, without referring to the other anchorages and cities from which Rustamid ships sailed in various directions. Nor do we know whether these ports emerged before or after the Rustamid presence; this matter requires further investigation into the history of the establishment of each port. It appears that the three ports mentioned above were older than the others, which explains why their names circulated widely and were repeatedly mentioned in geographical and regional literature.

On the other hand, al-Istakhri mentions in his *Masālik* that Nakur and the islands of Banu Mazghanna contained many towns and villages close to Upper Tahert, which may indicate the coastal boundaries of the Rustamid state. (*Al-Istakhri, 1927, p. 39*)

It is also important to determine the extent of the dependence of the coastal cities on the Rustamid state: was this dependence political and economic, or merely nominal? It is well known that the

Rustamid state was among the most expansive, unified, and cohesive states, and the most influential at the doctrinal level, especially during the reign of the second Imam, Abd al-Wahhab ibn Abd al-Rahman ibn Rustam. **(al-Saghir, 1986, p. 17)**

The Maghrebi territories whose inhabitants adhered to the Ibadī doctrine were under the authority of the Imam and the sovereignty of the state, whether through direct administration by governors appointed by the Imam or through indirect authority based on adherence to the Ibadī madhhab **(Al-Nuri, 2018, p. 58)**.

Questions also arise regarding the emergence of these coastal cities: were they established upon the ruins of ancient Phoenician or Roman cities, or were they Islamic cities built alongside older settlements in a complementary relationship? Or were they purely Islamic foundations? **(Ammara, 2008, p. 139)**

Likewise, what was the demographic composition of the Rustamid coastal cities? Were they homogeneous, or were they similar to the capital Tahert in terms of doctrinal and ethnic diversity? All these questions require careful examination of the sources, for they rarely provide explicit details, though much may be inferred from between the lines. Thus, our topic concerning the city of Oran during the Rustamid era constitutes an attempt to investigate one of these particular aspects. Before discussing the port and city of Oran, however, it is necessary to define the maritime coastal domain that belonged to the Rustamid state.

It is perhaps difficult to determine the names of all the Rustamid ports extending from the Aghlabid frontiers in the east to the Idrisid territories in the west. Nevertheless, it may preliminarily be said that this coastal domain extended from the borders of Béjaïa to Marsa Farrukh before the establishment of Oran. This conclusion is based on what the historian and geographer al-Ya‘qubi mentioned when he stated:

“Connected to the city of Tahert is a great territory attributed to Tahert under the authority of [Abu Bakr] Muhammad ibn Aflah ibn Abd al-Rahman ibn Rustam (who assumed power in 240 AH). The fortress located on the coast of the Great Sea, where the ships of Tahert anchor, is called Marsa Farrukh.” **(Al-Ya‘qubi, (n.d.), p. 192)**

Al-Ya‘qubi himself had visited Tahert and the Rustamid coast. Al-Istakhri also indicated that the merchants of Tahert used the port of Nakur as well, since the distance between Tahert and Nakur was twenty stages.

Ibn Hawqal (d. 367 AH) enumerates these ports as follows: Marsa Bani Jannad, Marsa al-Dajaj, the Islands of Banu Mazghanna, Tamdafus, Barshak, Ténès, and Marsa ‘Atta. He also referred to Oran while discussing al-Andalus and the ports of the Maghreb facing it, stating:

“The land of al-Andalus stretches along the sea and faces, from the land of the Maghreb, Tunis, then Tabarka, then the Islands of Banu Mazghanna, then Ténès, then Oran, then Nakur, then Ceuta, and finally Azili.” **(Al-Nasibi, 1992, p. 65)**

It appears that in this passage he combined both cities and ports. New anchorages would later emerge, mentioned by al-Bakri (d. 487 AH). Most of these maritime outlets were not villages or cities, but rather anchorages and ports for commercial ships and vessels, whose role was limited to the dispatch of goods inland or abroad. Urban settlements did not develop around many of them until later, as was the case with the city of Oran. This may have been due to the desire to distance settlements from external danger zones, since the coasts were regarded as Islamic frontier regions (*thughūr*). Nevertheless, some historians maintain that the Rustamids did not establish cities along the borders of their emirate.

1. Oran during the Rustamid Period

Historical and geographical sources in particular spoke of Oran both as a port and as a city. Numerous references have also dealt with the history of its establishment and its founders in antiquity and during the medieval period. These sources agree that the city is ancient, owing to the presence of remains dating back to the Roman era and earlier. As for its formal foundation, most geographical and regional sources state that it took place around 290 AH at the hands of Andalusian sailors. They also discuss the

fate of the city after the fall of Rustamid rule and the disturbances it experienced during and after the fourth Hijri century. For this reason, I have preferred to avoid delving into the details of its foundation and to limit the discussion to matters related to Oran and its commercial role during the second and third Hijri centuries (eighth and ninth centuries CE).

The opinions of historians and geographers differ regarding the geographical extent of the Rustamid state, as was the case with most states in the Maghreb, whose borders were not fixed. The geographical sources and travel accounts available to us do not clearly define the boundaries of the Rustamid Imamate or the territories included within it. Nevertheless, it may be said that every region and village adhering to the Ibadi doctrine fell under the authority of Tahert, extending from Jabal Nafusa in the east to Tahert in the west. **(Zaghoul, 1980, p. 405)**

Dr. Ibrahim Behaz discussed this issue and arrived at what appears to be the most accurate conclusion, namely that the possessions of the Rustamid state were those identified by al-Habib al-Janhani, comprising almost the entirety of the Central Maghreb, with the exception of Idrisid Tlemcen in the west and the Aghlabid region of al-Zab in the east. Its territory also included Jabal Nafusa, the southern regions of Tripoli, Djerba, and Bilad al-Jarid. **(Behaz, The Rustamid State, 2015, p. 99)**

It cannot be said that these borders remained fixed throughout the entire Rustamid period; rather, they fluctuated in expansion and contraction according to the prevailing political and security circumstances with neighboring powers. The silence of the sources regarding the northern frontiers of the Rustamid emirate may indicate that the Mediterranean maritime façade itself constituted its natural boundary. It is certain that its northern borders bordered the Mediterranean Sea near the present-day city of Mostaganem. **(Levitsky, 2008, p. 38)**

Some sources mention that the merchants of the Banu Rustam used most of the ports of the Central Maghreb, extending from Marsa al-Kharaz in the east to Oran in the west, whereas other sources define the extent of Aghlabid influence as including Marsa al-Zaqqaq, al-Kharaz, Béjaïa, and Tedellis. Therefore, determining precisely which ports belonged to the Aghlabids and which to the Rustamids still requires further investigation.

The Rustamid Imams also appointed governors over regions distant from the capital, Tahert. The sources mention by name those who carried out this task in the eastern regions of the state, such as Sirte, Nafusa, Gabès, Jabal Demmer, Gafsa, and al-Jarid. However, they remain silent regarding those who governed the Aurès region, northern Tahert, its western territories, and its southern areas. The sources do not reveal the names of the governors appointed in these provinces. This may be due to the fact that certain Rustamid regions came under the authority of rebels who had withdrawn obedience from the Rustamids, or under the control of the Idrisids and Alids, particularly in the coastal ports. Indeed, there existed emirates independent from Rustamid authority. From Tahert onward there was a territory ruled by a man from the Hawwara tribe named Ibn Masala, as well as a kingdom belonging to the descendants of Muhammad ibn Sulayman ibn Abd Allah ibn al-Hasan ibn al-Husayn. There was also another Berber kingdom known as Matmata, whose inhabitants were spread across several cities, among them a city called Ayzaraj. **(Al-Ya'qubi, (n.d.), p. 195)**

ruled by a man named Ibrahim ibn Muhammad al-Barbari al-Mu'tazili **(Ibn Khordadbeh, 1889, p. 88)**. Another city belonging to them was called al-Hasanah, governed by a man among them named Abd Allah (Karrum, 2016, p. 1003).

The Rustamid state also opened its borders to many Alids fleeing Abbasid persecution, most of whom were descendants of Muhammad ibn Sulayman al-'Alawi, the brother of Idris ibn Abd Allah, founder of the Idrisid state. After the fall of the Rustamids, they settled along the banks of the Chelif River in places such as al-Jazira al-Khadra', Souq Ibrahim, and others. Idrisid influence later extended to include the northeastern region of Oran and the Chelif Valley, while to the south it reached the plains of Ghris

near Mascara and the Mediouna Mountains south of Fez. Accordingly, it may be said that this influence stretched along the coast from the Rif in the west to the land of al-Hodna within the province of Constantine in the east, then returned westward toward the region of Ténès, extending south of the Chelif to Miliana and ending at Mitidja. **(Al-Jilali, 1984, p. 247)**

The Sulaymanid emirates in certain cities of western Central Maghreb—most notably Tlemcen, Arshgul, Jarawa, and Ténès, together with their surrounding villages and regions—were situated between the Idrisid state in the Far Maghreb, the Rustamid state to the south and partially to the east, and other non-Sulaymanid Alid emirates in some eastern areas, alongside portions of the Aghlabid state in the east. **(Karrum, 2016, p. 144)**

From these data, it may be concluded that Rustamid Oran functioned as a commercial port linking the region with al-Andalus and other coasts until its formal establishment as both a port and a city by Andalusian sailors. In other words, Rustamid control over the port came to an end with the arrival of the Andalusian sailors at the close of the third Hijri century. Concerning this, Ibn Hawqal states that it was “a newly established city,” implying that the Rustamids did not develop urban settlement there for permanent habitation, but rather that it served during their era solely as a commercial port until the arrival of the Andalusians.

The sources do not explain the reason for this, despite the region’s strategic and geographical importance and its proximity to the Andalusian coast. Likewise, al-Ya‘qubi did not mention the names of the ports connecting the coast of Tahert with that of Cordoba, limiting himself instead to referring to the presence of settlements along the Chelif Valley. He states:

“Between it and the salt sea is a distance of three stages across level land, some of which consists of salt marshes, and there is a river called Wadi Chelif along which there are villages and settlements. It overflows in the same manner as the Nile of Egypt, and cultivation is carried out upon its banks.” **(Al-Ya‘qubi, (n.d.), p. 149)**

Many scholars have considered the Banu Rustam state to be an inland polity with a predominantly terrestrial character. However, research has demonstrated the contrary. **(Archibald & Lewis, (n.d.), p. 250)**

Historical and geographical texts reveal their control over a coastline extending from Tlemcen in the west to Béjaïa in the east, and from Djerba to Barqa in the far east. Consequently, the Banu Rustam possessed more coastal cities than either the Aghlabids or the Idrisids. **(Anbaoui, 1988, p. 89)**

Oran was perhaps among the regions that came under the authority of the Banu Rustam through the voluntary allegiance of its inhabitants, without warfare or conquest, much like many coastal and inland regions. This was due to the justice, wisdom, fairness, and equality for which the Rustamid Imams were renowned. It appears that the Umayyad rulers of al-Andalus recognized this advantage and consequently sought to establish commercial centers along the Rustamid coast. Tahert itself likely welcomed this development because of the profits these centers and cities would generate. As a result, the Andalusian element increased in number and proceeded to establish Ténès, Oran, Béjaïa, and other cities. They went even further by penetrating inland in order to connect Tahert to the coast through Marsa Farrukh and later through the port of Ténès. **(Achi, 2017, p. 64)**

Ibn Khaldun confirms in his Muqaddimah that the Mediterranean Sea had effectively become an Islamic lake without rival during approximately the 2nd to 5th centuries AH. He states:

“During the era of the Islamic state, the Muslims dominated this sea from all its shores. Their power and authority over it became immense, and the Christian nations could do nothing against their fleets on any of its coasts... They possessed all the islands detached from its shores... Their fleets moved back and forth across it... and they filled most of the expanse of this sea in equipment and numbers. **(Ibn Khaldun, 2001, p. 244)**

Piracy had also largely disappeared as a result of Islamic control over the Mediterranean. This maritime supremacy was not significantly affected by the Umayyad-Fatimid conflict, as though the two powers had implicitly agreed to repel Frankish aggression and weaken their enemies. One of the factors that contributed to this situation was the attention both sides devoted to their naval fleets. This favorable condition had a positive impact on foreign trade and economic activity in general, as merchants felt secure in conducting their commerce. **(Yusuf, 1992, p. 196)**

After the end of the sectarian conflicts in the Maghreb and the resulting insecurity along the commercial routes, the political map of the Maghreb and al-Andalus became clearer beginning in the middle of the second Hijri century. Despite doctrinal differences, the Maghrebi states generally adopted a policy of peaceful coexistence. Consequently, the Islamic Maghreb experienced a period of political stability extending until the end of the third Hijri century, which contributed significantly to the development, prosperity, and security of trade routes **(Rashid, 2021, p. 48)**.

It appears that the Central Maghreb was familiar with the institution of the dihqān. Ibn Hawqal mentions regarding Oran that “in its hinterland there are dahaqina and skilled people.” Yaqut al-Hamawi defines the dihqān as “the owner of landed estates,” which is similar to what Louis Lombard describes as a “great landowner.” These dahaqina may have preserved their estates and extensive lands either through peaceful agreements with the Muslims or through conversion to Islam. **(Al-Nasibi A. a.-Q., 1992, p. 79)**

Political stability, security of life and property, and the good conduct of the ruler are among the most important factors sought by every merchant who desires profit in trade and peace of mind for himself. These were conditions that the Rustamids provided to all who came to their state. There is no doubt that Tahert represents a clear example of what the other commercial towns and villages of the country may have been like. (Behaz & Ibrahim, 2015, p. 176)

1. The Organization of Trade during the Rustamid Era

Ibn al-Saghir, who had direct contact with the Rustamids, never mentioned any coastal city or port in his accounts, despite the fact that we know such ports existed. Speaking about the Rustamids, he states: “They expanded throughout the land and prospered therein, and delegations and caravans came to them from all regions and the farthest countries... Routes were used toward the land of the Sudan and toward all lands of the East and West for trade and various kinds of goods... Prosperity increased, and people and merchants from all regions engaged in commerce.” **(al-Saghir I. , 1986, pp. 31-32)** However, he mainly discusses the trade between the Sudan and Tahert, and he describes the caravan routes extending from east to west across the desert. Al-Idrisi likewise says: “They possessed commerce, merchandise, and flourishing markets.” **(Al-Idrisi, 2002, p. 112)**

Mubarak al-Mili, in his book *The History of Algeria in Ancient and Modern Times*, denies the existence of a Rustamid naval fleet or state shipyards. According to him, maritime trade was in the hands of others because the Rustamid kingdom was not directly connected to the coasts. At that time, maritime commerce was dominated by the Andalusians, who frequented the Algerian ports with their various goods, such as Marsa al-Dajaj, Ténès, and Marsa Farrukh near present-day Mostaganem in the east. They maintained commercial relations with the Rustamids, especially through Marsa Farrukh. Al-Mili explains this by arguing that the Rustamid kingdom was essentially a desert kingdom whose inhabitants were predominantly nomadic, living in tents, tending livestock, and engaging mainly in overland trade. **(Al-Mili, 1989, p. 75)**

Although there may be some truth in this view regarding the early period of the state and the establishment of the capital, once the state became stable its inhabitants were no longer characterized by nomadism. Rather, this stability enabled them to establish new inland and coastal cities and to

engage in maritime navigation. Their expertise in navigation may have been acquired through Ibadi communities living along the Mediterranean coast, such as those of Tripoli, Djerba, and others.

1.3. Land Routes To and From Oran

The cities and villages of the Maghreb were connected by an extensive network of roads, some of them major routes and others secondary ones. The principal roads functioned much like modern highways, used continuously by commercial caravans traveling to and from various markets and ports. Of particular interest to us are those routes linking Oran with both nearby and distant cities.

From the Islands of Banu Mazghanna, the coastal road coming from the coast of Ifriqiya continued its course toward the coastal cities of the Central and Far Maghreb. It passed through Ténès, Oran, Waslan, Arshgul, and Nakur. These cities served at that time as active centers of maritime commerce, and their commercial activities were closely connected with the inland cities. The final commercial stations along the coastal route were Ceuta and Tangier.

As for the inland overland route, it crossed the regions of the Maghreb situated between the coastal zone and the wilderness and desert expanses that separated the Maghreb from the Sudan. Within this network existed numerous principal and secondary roads, most of which passed through Tahert, the economic capital and the principal inland commercial station for caravans traveling in all directions. Here, we shall limit ourselves to mentioning those routes connecting Oran with other cities, among them the route beginning in Kairouan, which had three branches converging at al-Masila in al-Zab.

“Two roads connected the city of Oran to Kairouan, the first measuring approximately twenty-five stages.” (Al-Bakri, 2002, p. 232)

1.1.3. The Tahert–Oran Route

Historical sources indicate that commercial routes connected Tahert with several ports along the coastline of the Central Maghreb. Among the most well-known of these ports mentioned by historians are the port of Ténès, Marsa Farrukh, and Marsa al-Kharaz. The port of Oran may also have been used for commercial dealings with the cities and famous ports of al-Andalus, such as Valencia and Tortosa.

However, we do not find evidence of a direct overland road linking Tahert to Oran. Al-Bakri, while mentioning the length of the route connecting Tahert to the sea, referred to Chelif, al-Ghazza, Qal’at Mughila, Mostaganem, Tamazghran, and even Arzaou (Arzew), before reaching Oran at a distance of forty miles. (Al-Bakri, 2002, p. 252). From this, we may infer that no direct route linked the Rustamid capital to Oran. In contrast, there existed a road connecting Oran to Tlemcen, covering a distance of two stages. (Al-Bakri, 2002, p. 259): One departs from Tlemcen to Wadi Waru in one stage, then from there to the village of Tanit in another stage, and from there to Oran. (Muqaddish, 1988, p. 78)

2.1.3. Oran–Kairouan via the Great Route

The route departed from Oran to Tansalmat, then to Jarawa, al-‘Azizuwa, and Qasr Ibn Sinan, from where it joined the Jāda—that is, the coastal road—and continued toward Kairouan. (Al-Bakri, 2002, p. 739)

The term al-Jāda al-Kubrā (the Great Route) likely referred to the equivalent of an international highway linking the eastern and western Maghreb, traversed by various commercial caravans. Along this route were numerous cities and stations where long-distance travelers would stop to rest and recover during their journeys.

3.1.3. Oran–Kairouan via Qastiliya

Al-Bakri states that this route extended over forty-three stages. It departed from Oran to Qasr Mansur ibn Sinan, then to the city of Ya’la ibn Badis, followed by the river of Banu Dammar, then to Abar al-‘Askar or Arsan in the Berber lands. From there, travelers crossed the territory of the Maghrawa for three or four stages until reaching Saqiyat Ibn al-Khazar or Izmin, then the three towns of Bantiyus, one of which followed the doctrine of Wasil ibn ‘Ata’ and Ibadiyya, while the other two adhered to Sunni doctrine.

From the towns of Bantiyus the route continued to Biskra, then Tahudha, then one stage to Badis, followed by Qaytun Bayada, the first territory of Samata. From there, the road diverged either toward

the land of the Sudan, Tripoli, or Kairouan via Nafta, which lay two stages away from Qaytun Bayada, then onward to Tozeur, the capital of the region of Qastiliya. Thus, the journey from Oran to Kairouan through Qastiliya covered forty-three stages. **(Al-Bakri, 2002, p. 258)**

2.3. Maritime Routes To and From Oran

It may be said that Oran functioned as a crossroads for both Maghrebi and eastern trade. The maritime route linking Ifriqiya with the Central and Far Maghreb constituted an extension of the sea route leading toward the Mashriq. Abd al-Wahid al-Marrakushi describes a route beginning in Ifriqiya and ending in Tangier, departing from Tripoli to Tunis, then Béjaïa, Algiers, Oran, Ceuta, and finally Tangier. **(Al-Marrakushi, 1949, p. 283)**

This route was among the most important maritime routes for Muslim traveling merchants, especially after Byzantium succeeded in wresting the islands of Crete and Cyprus from Muslim control, thereby eliminating the protection that these islands had previously provided. **(Jabouda, 2008, p. 85)**

Economic exchanges between the Maghreb and al-Andalus did not take place through legal entities (such as ministries of trade or finance), but rather between individuals, either independently or organized in groups within commercial partnerships. **(Jabouda, 2008, p. 124)**

1.2.3. Internal Water Routes

Oran and its port constituted a link between the eastern and western Maghrebi coasts. Maghrebi traders transported their goods along a coastal maritime line connecting the ports extending from Tripoli in the east to Rabat in the west, passing through Oran. From Oran to Ténès, the distance was estimated at 204 miles (each stage being approximately 100 miles and 2 miles).

Available sources provide limited information regarding this aspect of internal maritime trade. It appears that it was not widely used, possibly due to the limited development of maritime navigation techniques in earlier Maghrebi history.

Al-Ya'qubi mentions that there were two ports under Rustamid rule: the port of Ténès and Marsa Farrukh. **(Al-Ya'qubi, (n.d.), p. 232)**

At his time, the port of Oran had not yet been established, meaning it did not exist during his visit to the region. Ibn Hawqal, however, informs us that between Ténès and Oran there were several maritime stations or anchorages: from Ténès to Marsa 'Atta, then to Marsa Qasr al-Fulus, and finally to the port of Oran **(Al-Nasibi A. a.-Q., 1992, p. 78)**.

Al-Bakri links Oran directly to Marsa Farrukh, stating: "From there to the city of Oran there are anchorages but no well-known cities, such as Marsa 'Atta, where no one resides, and Qasr al-Fulus. **(Al-Nasibi A. a.-Q., 1992, p. 79)**

From this statement, it appears that Ténès and Oran were the only true cities in the region, while the remaining stations were merely maritime anchorages for ships.

2.2.3. External Maritime Routes

Al-Habib al-Janhani states that the Rustamid state had no maritime outlet except the port of Ténès, since the eastern ports were under Aghlabid control. However, other sources confirm that Rustamid goods were also shipped through Marsa al-Dajaj and Marsa al-Kharaz.

There was a commercial route linking Tahert to several ports on the Central Mediterranean coast, including Marsa Farrukh, Marsa al-Kharaz, Marsa al-Dajaj, and possibly the city of Oran. It also connected Ténès to the Umayyad capital of Córdoba and the ports of al-Andalus. Oran, in turn, maintained direct contact with the Andalusian port of Almería and several other Andalusian cities and anchorages. Among these routes were the one linking the Great Port of Oran to Marsa Ashkurbish, and another connecting Oran to the port of Al-Munkab **(Khalout, 2021, p. 204)**.

2. Relations between the Rustamids and the Umayyads in al-Andalus

It is noticeable that the vitality of the Central Maghreb's maritime façade and its connection with Andalusian activity increased significantly from the first half of the third Hijri century, reaching its peak in the sixth century during the Almohad period. **(Khalifi, 2009, p. 138)**

Some historians trace the beginning of these relations to an even earlier period, stating that Abd al-Rahman ibn Mu'awiya al-Umayyad, when he arrived from the East fleeing the Abbasids, took refuge for a time at the court of the Banu Rustam before crossing into al-Andalus. Mercier, relying on al-Maqqari, affirms that he spent a period in Tahert and its surroundings before departing to al-Andalus around 138 AH, whereas Mahmoud Isma'il 'Abd al-Razzaq completely rejects this view, arguing that Abd al-Rahman ibn Rustam had not yet established his rule in Tahert at that time and was instead in Kairouan in 141 AH, when the Umayyad prince passed through the Maghreb in 133 AH (**Isma'il, 1985, p. 204**). The Banu Rustam established relations of friendship and goodwill with the Umayyads of al-Andalus, exchanging embassies and gifts. They also strengthened their ties with the Banu Midrar and the Ibadī communities of the East due to their shared religious doctrine and political fate. They did not engage their enemies among the Abbasids, Aghlabids, and Idrisids except when necessary for defense. At times, they even turned a blind eye to their neighbors' ambitions in border regions of the state, remaining passive when the Idrisids annexed Tlemcen and its surroundings, removing it from the influence of Tahert. (**Isma'il, 1985, p. 203**)

One of the reasons that led the Umayyad princes to strengthen their relations with the Rustamids was that they no longer had any outlet in the Maghreb except the Central Maghreb. The Lower Maghreb was under the control of the Aghlabids, who were loyal to the Abbasids, while the Far Maghreb was ruled by the Idrisids, whose policy toward the Umayyads was characterized by hostility, caution, and vigilance. Thus, all doors were closed to them except those of the Rustamids, who became the only vital artery capable of sustaining the Andalusian emirate and cooperating with it politically, economically, and culturally.

The Rustamids played the role of commercial intermediaries, transporting Andalusian products and distributing them in the lands of the Sudan, Egypt, and the East. These facilities were the result of several correspondences and treaties—no longer extant, and perhaps destroyed along with what was burned in the library of al-Ma'suma. This also confirms the frequent movement of both Rustamids and Andalusians within each other's territories. The Rustamid state was the only power capable of breaking the Andalusians' social and economic isolation, making the Rustamid economy a support for the Umayyad emirate in import and export operations and in supplying it with its various needs.

This does not negate the disturbances that emerged in al-Andalus following the increasing influence of the Banu Rustam there, to the extent that some of them assumed governorships, such as Muhammad ibn Sa'īd ibn Rustam, who became governor of Shadhuna, and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Rahman ibn Rustam, who served in the army of al-Hakam ibn Hisham. This provoked the Andalusians during the reign of al-Hakam I, prompting poets to urge him to strike them down. He then personally set out, entered al-Jazira, and struck down most of its inhabitants with the sword. (**Isma'il, 1985, p. 205**)

The gap between Tahert and Córdoba disappeared after the death of al-Hakam in 206 AH / 821 CE. Abd al-Wahhab al-Rustami sent an embassy accompanied by his three sons—Abd al-Ghani, Dahyun, and Bahram—to renew ties of friendship with the Caliph Abd al-Rahman ibn al-Hakam (238–306 AH), who welcomed them warmly and spent one million dinars on them, in addition to gifts and honors bestowed upon them.

Friendly relations continued during the reign of the Andalusian Caliph Muhammad ibn Abd al-Rahman (238–273 AH), after the death of Imam Abd al-Wahhab al-Rustami. He found in his son Aflah a warm reception, and the Andalusian prince brought many members of the Rustamid family close to him, appointing them as viziers, chamberlains, and commanders. Among them was Abd al-Rahman ibn Rustam, who reportedly served as chamberlain to Abd al-Rahman II and is said to have also held the position of vizier.

The Umayyads benefited from the expertise of men who held high-ranking positions, such as Isa ibn Shahid, Yusuf ibn Bakhit, and Abd Allah ibn Umayya ibn Zayd, who served as ministers in the

Umayyad state in al-Andalus. Thus, Rustamid relations were largely shaped by the geographical conditions of their state, their religious doctrine, and their political and economic interests. **(Isma‘il, 1985, p. 206)**

However, the sources do not mention the names of Rustamid merchants who engaged in maritime trade with al-Andalus or other cities along the Mediterranean coast, limiting themselves instead to general descriptions.

The Rustamids befriended the Umayyads in al-Andalus not because their economic interests were tied to them, but because good neighborliness is one of the requirements of Islam.. **(Behaz, The Rustamid State, 2019, p. 244)**

Al-Ya‘qubi mentions the ships of Tahert that anchored at the port of Farrukh ,which corresponds to the Andalusian ports of Shatiba, Tudmir, and Marsa Aqla . **(Al-Bakri, 2002, p. 18)** This port was located near Oran, noting that he visited the region during the Rustamid period. Here, Dr. Behaz raises a question in his discussion of the Rustamid army: were these ships commercial or military vessels? Or was it the Andalusian Umayyad fleet that protected Rustamid commercial ships, especially since this trade was directed toward al-Andalus itself? **(Behaz, The Rustamid State , 2015, p. 265)**

Ships regularly sailed between the port of Oran and Almería, carrying goods, scholars, and travelers. Several factors brought together the Umayyad princes of Córdoba and the Rustamid Imams of Tahert, the most important being the common threat posed by the Abbasid state. One historian considers that the establishment of the Rustamid state prolonged the life of the Umayyads in al-Andalus, and that Tahert served as a bridge connecting the Umayyad state in al-Andalus with the East. For this reason, the Umayyad princes were inclined toward reconciliation with the Rustamids and sought their goodwill. The agricultural produce of Tahert also contributed to resolving economic crises in al-Andalus. **(Isma‘il, 1985, p. 278)**

Many Andalusian merchants and craftsmen preferred to reside in Tahert and work in its markets and shops. The port of Oran was used for trade with Córdoba and its famous ports such as Seville, Algeciras, Valencia, and Tortosa which confirms, the strong relations between the Banu Rustam and the Umayyad Caliphs of al-Andalus.

The people of Tahert used a standard measure equivalent to five and a half Cordoban qafiza **(Al-Bakri, 2002, p. 250)**, a clear sign of Andalusian Umayyad influence, especially in the later period, when surplus production increased and was increasingly directed toward external markets. Wealth accumulated in their hands, giving rise to a wealthy class that built palaces. The simplicity and asceticism of the first Imam, Abd al-Rahman, gradually disappeared with the emergence of luxury, reflecting the influence of maritime orientation toward Umayyad Córdoba.

Political relations were not the only ties linking the Rustamids with the Umayyad emirate in al-Andalus. Rather, close economic relations also developed between the two states, particularly in the form of commercial exchange. This development was facilitated by the privileges granted by the Rustamids to merchants arriving from al-Andalus, as they opened for them access to other parts of the Islamic world. Trade relations became stronger due to the Umayyads’ need in al-Andalus for various goods, especially agricultural products, as internal unrest and revolts during the period under study prevented the Andalusians from achieving food self-sufficiency. In addition, they required external markets to export their surplus production.

3. Relations with Europe (Italian Republics)

It is extremely difficult to discuss maritime outlets linking the ports of the Central Maghreb with their European counterparts during the 2nd and 3rd centuries AH, Most sources address such relations only from the 4th and 5th centuries AH onward, meaning that the available texts are chronologically later than the Rustamid period, with the exception of al-Ya‘qubi, who visited the region between 263–276 AH.

No clearly defined commercial relations between the two shores are mentioned; thus, it is too early to obtain reliable information about Maghreb–European maritime routes during the first three centuries of the Hijra. Trade between Genoa and Pisa and the coasts of the Central Maghreb is not well documented before the mid-6th century AH / 12th century CE (**Ammara & Alaa, 2008, p. 144**).

It is difficult to determine the exact beginning of commercial relations between Europe and the Islamic Maghreb, as historical sources do not give this issue sufficient attention. Researchers generally rely on broad generalizations and approximate dates. Based on available findings, it may be said that Christians from some Italian cities began interacting with Muslims in the coastal cities of the western Mediterranean basin as early as the 4th century AH, that is, during the same period in which commercial exchange between the Maghreb and Western Sudan became organized. The presence of two Venetian ships in Mahdia and a third in Tripoli in 361 AH / 971 CE is evidence that ships from the lands of the Rūm had already reached the ports of the Maghreb. (**Yusuf, 1992, p. 234**)

The sources do not provide detailed information about trade between the Banu Rustam and Europe, neither in terms of the cities with which they traded nor the types of goods and commodities exchanged. However, it is possible to move forward chronologically to the 6th, 7th, and 8th centuries AH and examine the accounts of certain travelers in order to gain some insight, although it does not appear that the situation had changed significantly.

What the references mention regarding commercial exchange between the Islamic and Christian shores after the 4th century AH may serve as a model for what Rustamid trade with the Italian republics looked like. It is unlikely that the volume of trade in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AH was comparable to that of the 4th century AH and beyond. It is therefore risky to speak of flourishing trade between them without the emergence of new documentary evidence.

4. Commodity Exchange

The activity of a port can only be understood if it is connected, on the one hand, to its hinterland, and on the other, to the broader Mediterranean economy. Thus, the port of Oran and other ports derived their vitality from Tahert, which supplied them with goods and commodities that continuously flowed into them. Any interruption in this supply would result in the complete paralysis of the port.

The Rustamids opened their ports in Ténès, Marsa Farrukh, and Oran to receive Andalusian goods, especially silk textiles. They also acted as intermediaries in transporting and distributing these products to the lands of the Sudan, Egypt, and other eastern regions. In return, the Rustamids supplied the Andalusians with various goods they needed, particularly agricultural products and slaves. Thus, the Rustamid state became a strong support for the Umayyad emirate in export and import operations, providing it with all necessary supplies. This resulted in increased activity of Andalusian commercial fleets and the flourishing of both Rustamid and Andalusian cities and ports alike .

The Rustamids also extended their trade to al-Andalus, establishing contact with its major ports through various goods such as wheat, ivory, and processed leather coming from the Sudan and Ghana, including Shatiba, Tudmir, and Marsa Afla. They also received Andalusian merchants in their own territories . (**Al-Bakri, 2002, p. 250**)

Gold and slaves were transported as commodities to al-Andalus via the port of Oran and other ports ,“From the western sea came Slavic, Byzantine, Frankish, Lombard slaves, as well as Roman and Andalusian slave women, along with furs of sable and beaver, perfumes such as myrrh, medicinal substances such as mastic resin, as well as brocade, fur garments, sable skins, and swords.” (**Khordadbeh & Allah, 1889, p. 153**)

The urban society of Oran experienced a life of prosperity due to trade with the Sudan, maritime commerce with al-Andalus, and the abundance of livestock and agricultural production. (**Behaz & Ibrahim, 2015, p. 256**)

If Alexandria represented the Orient, then Oran was, in a sense, the Alexandria of the Maghreb. The author of *al-Istibsar* mentions that from the cities of Ténès and Oran large quantities of foodstuffs were transported to other cities of the Maghreb and Ifriqiya, although he does not specify their exact types or categories.

In conclusion, commercial exchange flourished significantly during this historical period across the various cities of the Maghreb. Merchants generally imported what their local markets lacked and exported surplus goods beyond local consumption, whether within the same region or to other regions. In doing so, they overcame numerous obstacles that often hindered their movement, such as instability, revolts, and taxation.

Conclusion

The city of Oran represented the economic gateway of the Rustamid state and its main maritime outlet on the Mediterranean coast toward various destinations such as al-Andalus and others. It functioned as both a land and sea crossroads linking Northern Europe with the Aghlabid East, the Idrisid West, and the Sudanese South. Oran initially began as a port frequented by merchants from different regions, before becoming both a port and a city around 290 AH. Despite its relatively short period as a city and port under Rustamid rule, it experienced remarkable commercial vitality that rivalled other major ports along the Mediterranean coast.

Goods exported through the port of Oran were diverse, including slaves, gold, livestock, agricultural produce, and manufactured goods. It also received various Andalusian products, serving as an import and export hub for the capital Tahert. The political stability and religious tolerance that characterized the Rustamid state throughout its rule—allowing coexistence among different Islamic sects and non-Muslim communities under protection (*dhimmis*)—greatly encouraged merchants of various origins to frequent its main port and inland markets.

The Umayyads placed full trust in the Banu Rustam despite doctrinal and ethnic differences, which did not prevent the flow of goods between the two sides, in addition to the exchange of gifts and diplomatic visits. Political relations were closely intertwined with economic relations, particularly due to their shared hostility toward common rivals, namely the Aghlabids and the Idrisids.

Researchers can further expand on many aspects addressed in this study. What has been presented here represents only a small part of the economic dimension of the Rustamid state on the maritime front, and especially in the port of Oran. Further investigation is encouraged into the role of other coastal and inland cities, which remain insufficiently studied despite the scarcity of information available about them. Such inquiry may be pursued through various secondary sources, including works on jurisprudence, legal cases (*nawāzil*), biographical dictionaries, and other historical references.

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