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Attempting to Chronicle the Subject of Transportation in Algeria During the Ottoman Period : A Reading of a Historical Document

محاولة التأريخ لموضوع المواصلات في الجزائر خلال الفترة العثمانية: قراءة في وثيقة تاريخية

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ABSTRACT:

This study attempts to examine the text of a manuscript letter, which represents a safe-conduct letter or travel permit, serving as a passage and movement license at that time. It was carried by travelers and caravan leaders as a guarantee that no one would intercept their path with harm. Consequently, the document addresses an important aspect of transportation in the Regency of Algiers.

We will also attempt to examine this letter in detail and read between the lines of its content to reveal the value of the information contained in the text and the research horizons that the document offers for writing on a historical subject. We ask: What is the importance of this letter? What function does it perform? Where does its historical and scientific value lie?

Keywords: Transportation; Oran Province ;Beylik ; Documents; Ottoman Period; Security

الملخص:

تأتي هذه الدراسة في محاولة لاستقراء نص رسالة مخطوطة، والتي تمثل كتاب الأمان، أو تذكرة السفر، وهي بمثابة رخصة المرور والتنقل وقتئذ، يحملها المسافرون وأمناء القوافل كضمان؛ لئلا يعترض طريقهم أحد بأذى، وبالتالي فالوثيقة تتناول جانب مهم من موضوع المواصلات بإيالة الجزائر. كما سنحاول التعرض بالتفصيل لهذه الرسالة، وقراءة ما بين الأسطر لمضمونها، قصد الكشف عن قيمة المعلومات الواردة في النص، وآفاق البحث التي تتيحها الوثيقة للكتابة في موضوع تاريخي. متسائلين عن أهمية هذه الرسالة؟، وما هي الوظيفة التي تؤديها؟، فيم تكمن قيمتها التاريخية والعلمية؟.

الكلمات المفتاحية : المواصلات - مقاطعة وهران - الوثائق - العهد العثماني - الأمان

Introduction:

Locally written historical documents are the raw material for studying local history and writing in-depth, comprehensive scientific research on the history of a specific geographical area, especially with regard to daily life, economic activities, political and security conditions, and the accompanying administrative organization of the local community and its way of life. By relying on them, one can form a clear idea, an authentic picture, and accurate knowledge of the history of any region or city (Saidouni, 2000, p. 70).

These aspects are often obscured in sources, or information about them is scarce. Based on historical documents and their scientific value, it is not possible to conduct accurate studies without using documents, based on the saying, "History is made from documents, and where there are no documents, there is no history." (Bouchenafi, 2011, p. 295). Continuing the

statement "A researcher cannot write history without obtaining a set of basic documents and employing them in a complete scientific manner" (Yazbak, 1990, p. 89).

This study attempts to examine the text of a manuscript letter, which represents a safe-conduct letter or travel permit, serving as a passage and movement license at that time. It was carried by travelers and caravan leaders as a guarantee that no one would intercept their path with harm. Consequently, the document addresses an important aspect of transportation in the Regency of Algiers.

We will also attempt to examine this letter in detail and read between the lines of its content to reveal the value of the information contained in the text and the research horizons that the document offers for writing on a historical subject. We ask: What is the importance of this letter? What function does it perform? Where does its historical and scientific value lie?

Before addressing the subject and content of the letter, it is necessary to mention some technical and methodological specifications that the document carries, in order to give this study its due and place it in its scientific framework and historical context.

I. Methodological Study

1. Source of the Document: The document in our hands is a photocopied version obtained from the library of Taqi al-Din Boukaabeur in the city of Mascara.

2. Document Specifications: The document is a manuscript letter containing a travel permit, or what was termed a safe-conduct letter (kitab al-aman). The text of the letter includes the name of the caravan leader, the number of pack animals, the travel destination, and the date or validity period of the letter (see: Boukaabeur).

3. Language of the Document: The document is written in Arabic, handwritten in clear and legible Maghrebi script. However, the writing style is loose, mixing classical expressions with colloquial words, which may reflect the prevailing language during that period, namely the Ottoman era.

4. Author of the Document: We do not know who wrote the document, but it appears from what is mentioned in the last line of the letter that it was written by order of Agha Yahya, dated 20 Rajab 1240 AH, corresponding to February 1825 CE. We notice something else: the absence of a seal, and all that appears is the phrase "sealed by his servant Yahya ibn Mustafa." There is another thing that caught our attention: the presence of a date under the signature (year 1232 AH), completely different from the date mentioned in the text, which makes us doubt its authenticity, or perhaps it was an error made by the copyist.

II. Subject and Content of the Document

The document provides us with important information regarding the subject of transportation and transit in the Regency of Algiers during the Ottoman period, according to three main ideas:

Beginning with the organization of the caravan, counting its animals, and appointing a leader over it.

Determining the direction of travel, the travel date, and its duration.

The letter reflects the reality of transportation and communications of that period.

After establishing the concept of the document to be studied and defining it, it is necessary to study the content of the text and analyze its ideas so that we can understand the essence of the letter and extract its scientific value.

A. Caravan Organization

Important transport was carried out by organizing caravans between the city of Algiers and the rest of the country's cities, occurring at specific times and seasons (Saidouni, 2001, p. 240). Although Haedo mentioned during the sixteenth century that a man who knew the road could travel alone from Algiers to Oran (De Haedo, 1911, p. 287).

Organizing the caravan required a set of controls, including counting the number of pack animals and the amount of cargo, caravan escorts whether they were merchants or travelers, in addition to guards and guides. Then the travel date and direction of travel were determined (Bouderbala, 2013, p. 50).

It is evident from the phrase "this permit of ours is in the hand of its holder, Daoud ibn Ibrahim al-Mozabi" (see Boukaabeur); it appears to be the name of the caravan leader, and it may have been a caravan of the Beni Mzab. Although we are ignorant of this personality and have not found a definition for it, the history of the Beni Mzab is known, especially in this period, "namely the Ottoman era." The Beni Mzab engaged in caravan trade passing between the Tell cities and their villages (Ouaggad, 2009, p. 72).

The Beni Mzab community in both the cities of Oran and Annaba was subject to the leader of their community in the city of Algiers in administrative matters and management affairs (Ouaggad, 2009, p. 75).

"Among the activities practiced by the Mozabites of the city of Algiers was their performance for the public authorities of certain works, such as equipping their animals for transport, a task they obtained from the Ottoman rulers in Algeria. Their work was not limited to providing transport and shipping services for the benefit of the military garrison only, but more than that, we find them providing transport services for the benefit of civilians" (Ouaggad, 2009, p. 120).

B. Travel Route

There were three types of animals in the Beni Mzab caravan: camels, mules, and donkeys. The Mozabites used mules and horses in the Tell regions (Ouaggad, 2009, p. 133). This means that the means of transport changed and was affected by the nature of the roads used during the Turkish era, which were only suitable for animal transport (Bouderbala, 2013, pp. 44-46). This may be clear from the phrase "he goes to the land of Oran with twelve animals in the entire caravan with him" (see Boukaabeur); this means, according to our modest reading, that the travel route will be from Algiers to Oran, namely the Sultan's Road in its western section connecting the capital of the Regency and Oran, the capital of the Beylik of the West at that time (Bouderbala, 2013, pp. 14-16). The caravan's travel on this road means it will cover a distance estimated at about 400 km today. According to information from contemporary sources of that period, it is estimated at 60 farsakh (one farsakh equals 4 km) according to Haedo (De Haedo, 1911, p. 287), and 80 farsakh according to Boutan's estimate (Ouadane, 2009, p. 64).

As for the duration of travel, it varied according to the distance and nature of the journey, as the caravan took eight days to travel from the capital Algiers to the city of Oran (Ibn Sahnoun, n.d., p. 298). This seems approximately consistent with what is stated in the document: "until it reaches the land of Oran in ten days" (see: Boukaabeur).

C. Importance of the Letter

Such letters or safe-conduct covenants reflect the reality of roads in that period. Due to security disturbances along the roads, merchants had to hire armed men to repel attackers' assaults. Caravans also accompanied one of the religious marabout men, as these were objects of respect from highway robbers (Ben Kharouf, 2008, p. 64). "Haedo mentioned in the sixteenth century that travelers would accompany one of the marabouts to protect themselves from thieves and highway robbers. The Turkish authority itself relied on marabouts to transport money across unsafe roads. In the early nineteenth century, al-Muqrani, the marabout of Jijel, was tasked with transporting soldiers' wages from Constantine to his city" (Abbad, 2011, p. 363).

The nature of the roads and difficulty of passages sometimes, especially in narrow, rugged, and isolated areas, where they served as refuge and concentration points for highway robbers and thieves who launched raids on travelers and wayfarers. More than that, some tribes would not allow anyone to pass through their areas of influence without paying a transit tax. Once, a Turkish military division was on its way from Constantine to the city of Algiers, but the Beni Abbas stopped it at the Bibans passage, claiming that the Bey had not paid the five hundred sheep heads representing the customary fee for passage through the pass (Abbad, 2011, p. 363). This also happened with the Bey of Oran when he was heading toward Medea, and the tribes of that region confronted him; that is, when he traveled through two mountains belonging to people called "Ouled Allaoua," they raided the front of the camp. When the Bey asked about the reason, they told him that these people wanted to take passage fees through their lands (al-Wahrani, n.d., p. 100).

Regarding the Sultan's Road connecting Algiers and Oran, several tribes became famous for practicing brigandage and highway robbery, especially in rugged areas such as the Oued Djer straits located between Affroun and Miliana (Bouderbala,

2013, pp. 15). These straits aroused travelers' fears as they were the only passage to the western province and were the homeland of the Soumata tribe that practiced brigandage and highway robbery (Desfontanes, 1838, p. 145). Ibn Sahnoun said about it: "No one passes through it except robbed or killed" (Ibn Sahnoun, n.d., p. 317).

We also find the Flita tribe that inhabited the areas extending from Oued Mina to the Chelif basin approximately; and the difficulty of passing through this tribe's areas, about which Ibn Sahnoun also said: "The famous Flita tribe, which eagles do not circle, and no one passes through it except during camp days, except killed or captured; they cut off paths" (Ibn Sahnoun, n.d., p. 298).

Therefore, as we mentioned previously, travelers had to be armed, or accompanied by one of the marabout religious men who enjoyed influence and respect among the tribes. Travelers might carry a safe-conduct permit, which guaranteed travel safety more than anything else. This was expressed by Ibn Hamdan Khoja Reda Effendi when he was traveling with his father from the capital Algiers to Constantine in August 1832 (Effendi, n.d., p. 10), where he said: "Going to Constantine with letters from the Sheikh (Effendi, n.d., p. 13) instead of weapons." He continued: "During this time, the Sheikh was busy all the time and continuously writing personal letters to be carried and delivered by hand to the sheikhs whose areas of influence we would pass through, telling each one: 'Accompany the bearers of this letter to the next Sheikh,' so that the latter would lead them to another sheikh, and so on consecutively until reaching Constantine." He also said: "I later became certain that Ibn Issa's letters would be our best helper and most serious" (Effendi, n.d., pp. 20-21).

The caravan also set off with its leader holding this letter so that no one would harm it. Safe-conduct letters were a prevailing custom in the Arab Maghreb regions, which we can sense from the words of Ibn

Hammadouch; when he recorded in his journey to Morocco what he suffered from the road's effects when he stayed in Tetouan, the Rifi men (Ahmad al-Rifi's revolution in 1743 CE) demanded taxes on his merchandise that he brought from Algeria. He also suffered from its effects while passing on the road from Tetouan to Meknes, then from the latter to Fes and back (Saadallah, 1981, p. 237). He said: "When it was time to travel, I went to Sheikh Sidi Ahmed al-Waruzzi, and he wrote that I should not be harmed in anything. Among what he wrote, he said: This man has three qualities, each one of which, if alone, would require you not to harm him in anything: first, lineage; second, a learned man; third, lack of means. So he pardoned me and forgave me, after asking me to count what I had" (Ibn Hammadouch, 1983, p. 112).

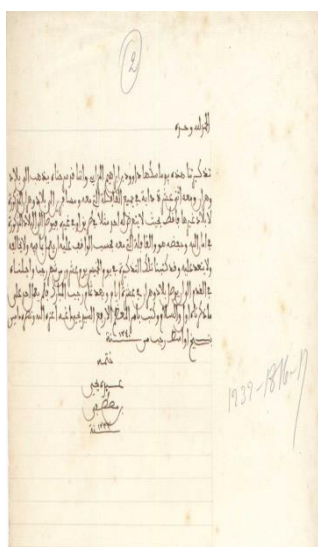
Historical and Scientific Value of the Letter

Through the evidence from the statements of both Ibn Hamdan Khoja and Ibn Hammadouch, and according to our modest opinion, the safe-conduct letter was issued by those with influence and high status, especially the marabout religious men. Among the characteristics of Maghreb societies in that period was that tribes' loyalty to marabouts was greater than their loyalty to rulers. This is on one hand. On the other hand, such letters were used by notables to preserve their dignity and property, and to ensure their safety during their movements and travels.

In conclusion of this study, it is worth noting the difficulty of examining all the information contained in the document. A comprehensive picture of the content of the letter or document cannot be obtained except by referring to local sources contemporary to that period—namely the Ottoman era—while we find the document's subject important from several aspects, as it reflects the reality of transportation, as well as political, economic, and even social conditions during the modern period of Algerian history.

The importance of these letters is also evident in the specificity of their subjects, which address issues from the depths of Algerian history in the Ottoman era (Saidouni, 2000, p. 06) (Appendix No. 01). Safe-conduct letters constitute important documents that researchers cannot dispense with for studying the reality of transportation in that period. One cannot speak of anything from history without referring to the document, as it is the witness and raw material for addressing any subject.

Appendix.



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