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The Impact of Commercial Caravans Crossing the Sahara on the Archaeological Heritage of Southern Algeria

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Abstract:

The different historical periods in Algeria have produced various components of the Algerian cultural heritage, whose depth extends from prehistory to the present day. This heritage is characterized by its diversity and presence in the different regions of Algeria, from north to south. The various successive civilizations have left historical imprints and material testimonies that have highlighted the importance of these historical periods as well as archaeological sites. The Algerian Sahara has experienced commercial activity through caravan routes that had a major impact on cultural exchanges between the Algerian Sahara region and sub-Saharan countries, particularly after the spread of Islam that reached Sudan, thus facilitating commercial, cultural, and even social exchanges between the two shores, including heritage and art, especially architecture. Along these caravan routes, centers of civilization emerged, that had a significant impact on defining the cultural characteristics of the region. These places have now become archaeological sites testifying to human passage and stops at numerous stations, as evidenced by Arabic inscriptions on rocks. Moreover, the appearance of certain architectural features in sub-Saharan regions has demonstrated the influence of Algerian architectural heritage and the importance of mobility between the two regions.

Keywords. Algeria. Archaeological sites. Sahara. Caravans. Heritage.

1.Introduction:

The commercial caravan routes across the Sahara constituted bridges of deep cultural interaction between the peoples of the northern Sahara, particularly southern Algeria, and those of the southern Sahara. Caravan trade is considered one of the most important commercial activities that have marked the history of these regions, representing a vital artery for the tribes and peoples of these areas and beyond. It also played a civilizational role affecting economic, social, political, and cultural aspects. Along the routes of these commercial caravans, from southern Algeria to the countries of Sudan, centers of civilization were born that are today archaeological sites testifying to human passage and stops at these stations, considered among the most important archaeological sites in Algeria. We have therefore attempted to highlight this important historical and economic field that has not yet received the attention it deserves in terms of study and explanation, namely the vestiges of caravan trade that has fascinated many researchers who have explored various aspects of commercial caravans crossing the Sahara.

The subject of commercial caravans crossing the Sahara is one of the most important economic and civilizational phenomena in history. Two main routes crossed the Algerian Sahara: the eastern route leading to Ghat and Ghadames, and the western route connecting Sudan to Sijilmassa via Touat. Through the transport of goods and people, various skills and sciences were transmitted, and the mutual influences between the two regions had a profound impact on defining the architectural characteristics of Saharan palaces.

This subject highlights a region of North Africa that has experienced significant historical and cultural events, such as the economic role of commercial caravans in the regions of southern Algeria, as well as the contribution of caravan trade to the transmission of various architectural arts and creations between Sudan and North Africa. It also aims to highlight the main common architectural features between Sudan and the Algerian Sahara, as well as the role of the scientific movement in enriching manuscript libraries and revealing similarities between manuscripts from both regions.

The subject of commercial caravans has already been addressed, but not from the perspective of archaeology, whereas remains constitute the most certain testimonies of past historical events, documented by archaeological sites scattered here and there. Among the articles dealing with commercial caravans, one can mention that on the role of the Hoggar region in Saharan caravan trade between the 17th and 18th centuries, which addressed only the historical data of caravans by highlighting their political importance, as well as the contribution of the introduction of Islam in deep Africa to the spread of the culture of the Arabic language and Islamic principles. Another article entitled "The Impact of Caravan Trade on Manuscript Making in the Touat Region" focused on the concepts of caravan, Saharan region, Touat areas, and book manufacturing. As for our study subject, it is new in the field of archaeology given the angle from which it will be approached, concerning the emergence of stations and archaeological sites as well as the main manifestations of influence and cultural exchange between the Algerian Sahara and the countries that received caravans coming from the north.

In light of this, we can pose the following problematic: How did commercial caravans crossing the Sahara influence the achievement of economic and cultural exchanges between Algeria and neighboring countries? How did these caravans affect the components of archaeological heritage and define the architectural characteristics of many regions of the Algerian Sahara? What role did these caravans play in serving the cultural heritage between southern Algeria and the southern shore of the Sahara, and in enhancing their archaeological sites?

In addressing this subject, we relied on the historical method to understand the historical context that affected much of North Africa and the regions of Sudan, as well as the archaeological method that helps us describe and analyze the components of archaeological heritage. Thus, both methods seem necessary to lift the historical, archaeological, and cultural veil on economic and cultural exchanges and their mutual impact between Sudan and the Algerian Sahara. The movement of trade caravans connecting the north of the African continent to Sudan constituted a solid bridge through which economic material needs transited, greatly contributing to the creation of important markets in the Algerian Sahara, such as the markets of Aïn Salah, Akabli, and Touat, in addition to the passage of mutual influences between the two regions, particularly the culture of habitat and urbanism, the results of scientific movement, and the routes and paths taken by caravans.

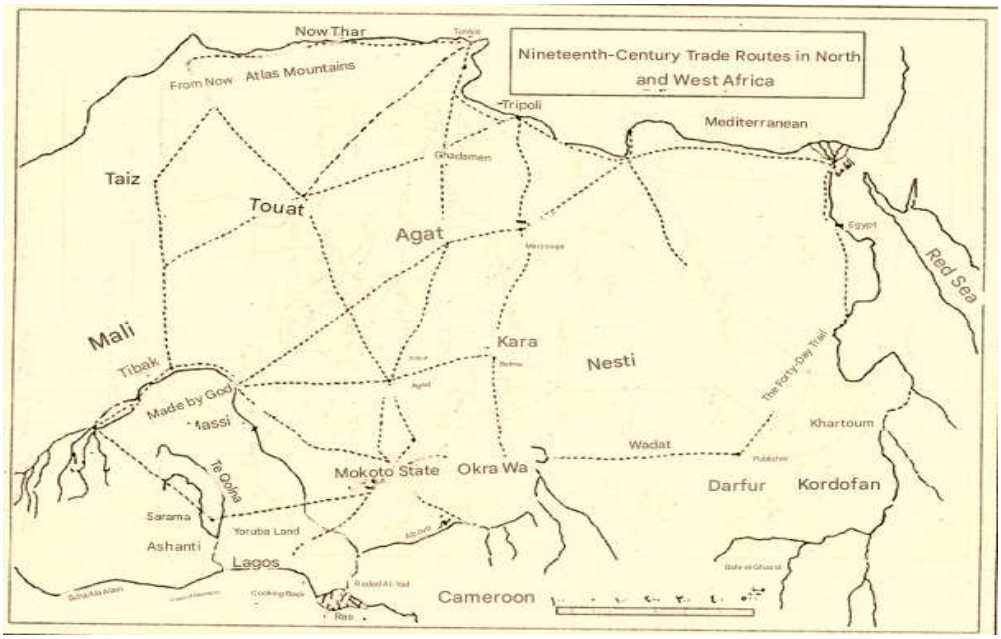
2.Trade Caravans :

Throughout their civilizational journey, Muslims have known caravan trade across the world, whose history dates back to the beginning of the first millennium BCE. Among its most important manifestations are those that existed in the Arabian Peninsula, through which centers of civilization were born. The Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula succeeded in extending their influence over caravan trade, thus contributing to the prosperity of many stations and their transformation into markets, the most famous of which is the incense route [1] .

Africa also experienced, through its great desert, an active movement of trade caravans, where several stations emerged, reported by Herodotus around the 5th century BCE, describing the stations of Fezzan and Ghadames as important, which experienced a great boom in cities such as Sijilmassa, Tiaret, Ouargla, Touat, and others [2].

The routes of trade caravans also experienced great prosperity during the Islamic era, thus bringing to prominence several emerging cities, notably: Timbuktu and Djenné, **Aoudaghost**, a Mauritanian city that was one of the most important urban centers in the history of the region[3], Oualata, **Koumbi Saleh** it is the kingdom of Ghana and the city of Muslim merchants[4]. Many historians have spoken of the Sahara, such as Abu Obaid Allah al-Bakri, Sharif al-Idrisi, Ibn Battuta, Ibn Said al-Maghribi, Ibn Khaldun, and Leo Africanus. They described it distinctively, highlighting its most important regions, particularly those that witnessed the passage of trade caravans, accompanied by scientific pioneers, preachers, and sheikhs who greatly contributed to sowing the seeds of civilization[5] .

Various centers and stations developed, and these cities became famous as destinations for caravans coming from different regions of the world, carrying various goods such as salt, gold dust, ivory, gold, and other products[6].Water was an essential element for caravan merchants, who could be forced to alter their routes across the vast desert. The points where wells and water were present, where caravans supplied themselves, thus constituted strategic points, forming a fundamental factor in the emergence of centers of civilization and oasis clusters along the route of these caravans[7].



Map. 01. Showing the trade routes caravans crossing the Sahara during the 19th century, according to (Al-Mahi, 2001,p 78)

2.1. The Economic Importance of Trade Caravans :

Commercial activity constituted the backbone of trade caravans that traveled through various regions of the world, including the southern Algerian regions and the adjacent sub-Saharan regions. The caravans connected Touat, Saoura, Tidikelt, and Hoggar to the countries of Sudan, ensuring an active movement of trade exchanges. Among the most important goods were: dates, cotton products, fabrics, tea, oils, as well as salt from the mines of Amadghor in Hoggar, considered one of the best qualities of salt[8]. It was exchanged for products such as saddles, weapons, rice, and livestock. The caravans provided all conditions for economic and social growth and development, and individuals and groups were interested in them for an essential purpose: ensuring food security and financial income in gold and other forms [9].

2.2. The Civilizational and Cultural Role of Trade Caravans:

Ismail Al-Arabi, in his work "The Great Sahara and its Shores," referred to the existence of large urban centers, some of which owed their existence to water, such as the site of Timissao, and others to a market, such as Timi, Aïn Salah, Akabli, Djanet, Ghat, and Ghadames. The role of these caravans was not limited only to goods but extended to the transport of various trades, skills, and civilizational experiences in engineering, sciences, books, and works[10].

Many might think that these regions of the great Sahara were devoid of manifestations of civilization and urbanism, given the difficulty of settling there due to the natural conditions that prevailed in its different parts. However, these centers of civilization located on the route of these caravans played a remarkable role in the construction movement. Several places in southern Algeria testify to the presence of sites on these routes, particularly in Hoggar, Azdjer, as well as Touat, Gourara, and the Saoura region. Going back to the pages of history, we find that many monuments and archaeological sites that exist today in world cities and capitals are the remnants of civilizations that developed along the routes of trade caravans, including the pyramids of Giza in Egypt, the rock drawings and engravings of Hoggar and Tassili, and Ksour, commercial agencies, and warehouses of Touat, as well as other world sites[11].

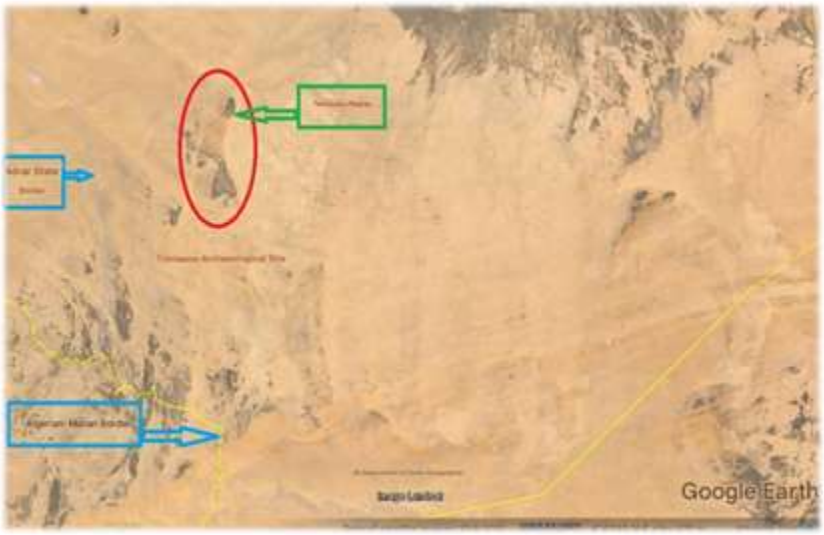
3. Remains and Archaeological Sites on the Routes of Trade Caravans:

The points where wells were present along the routes of trade caravans on the southern Algerian route to Sudan were important places for caravans to rest, such as the "Tablo in Agadès" well, the "Timissao in Hoggar" well, and Akabli in Tidikelt. Caravans were constantly obliged to search for water sources to supply themselves and rest[12]. Due to the mixing of arriving and departing merchants near the Timissao well, one of the most important archaeological sites in Hoggar, called Timissao, appeared at this location.

The Timissao site is one of these archaeological sites, located in the southwestern part towards the regions of Tinzaouatine and Timiaouine, precisely north of the "Adrar Ifoghas" mountains whose borders run along the Tamanghasset wadi that crosses the region. It is a shelter whose floor and walls are covered with drawings, inscriptions, and rock engravings[13], near the Timissao well that most Saharan trade caravans crossed. This well constituted a stopping point for caravans to replenish water and continue their journey[14]. Among the drawings at this site is an Arabic Kufic script that also raises many questions about the authors of this writing and also indicates the passage of conquering Muslims on this route.

In terms of archaeological remains, the site contains human remains of lithic industries, including stone tools. The artistic phenomenon of rock drawings and engravings constitutes the distinctive characteristic of this site, as indicated by the first explorers and researchers of these regions[15].

The themes of the main scenes of the Timissao site appear in the form of rock engravings and drawings representing humans with animals, particularly engravings of gazelles and bovids, as well as Tifinagh writings, alternating between the naturalistic and sometimes schematic style. The Timissao site includes shelters considered among the richest sites of the Tassili Timissao. These drawings date back to the horse and camel phases, with most subjects telling aspects of daily human life in interaction with animals [16].



Map. 02. The archaeological site of Timissa,

(by Google Earth.2015)

The most striking scene of this site, particularly regarding archaeological studies, is constituted by the Arabic writings drawn in this shelter. These are simple Kufic writings executed in a square frame approximately 1 m long by 0.80 m wide, made in red like the drawings surrounding them. As this site was once a stopping point for trade caravans, these inscriptions could be their work. This writing consists of four lines whose letters are drawn in simple red Kufic calligraphy, where it is written: 1- "Fasayakfīkahum 2- Allah wa huwa as-samīʿ 3- al-ʿalīm. Allāhumma 4- ṣalli ʿalā Muḥammad." [17]



Plate. 01. showing Kufic Arabic writings from the Timissao site,

(by the researcher)

The importance of this site lies in the method of executing the writing drawings. From this scene, one can describe these writings on the wall facades as archaeological inscriptions that have presented to us an important aspect of Islamic history on the rocks, whereas they were previously limited to drawings of animals and people in scenes of daily life. These writings thus resemble the drawings of Tassili Azdjer, particularly chariots drawn by horses. These regions are among the richest in terms of prehistoric archaeological heritage, as evidenced by the widespread diffusion of rock art and surface sites of lithic industries, particularly from the Neolithic period. The site combines various components of lithic industries, rock art, and funerary culture "funerary monuments"[18].



Plate. 02. showing rock drawings from the Tassili N'Ajjer site,

(Source: O.N.P.C.T, 2017)

4. Historical Buildings:

Many ksour and oases of southern Algeria today retain architectural features that distinguish them from the ksour of the north of the country. This is due to the specific characteristics of each of the Gourara, Tamentit, Touat, Tidikelt, Oued M'zab ksour, the ksour of Ouargla, Touggourt, and Oued Righ. When examining the technical characteristics, both architectural and constructive, we find them influenced by buildings erected in the countries of Sudan like Djenné, Timbuktu, Gao, and others, as appears in the pyramidal-shaped minarets. We have an example of this in the minaret of the ancient mosque of the Zelouaz district in Djanet, as well as in the minaret of the Ghatia mosque in Aïn Salah, and the minaret of the mosque of the Ida Ou Ali ksar in the Kali region of Gourara. These minarets were designed according to the same model, with a square base and a polygonal body that narrows as the construction rises, characteristics that are found in the buildings of the countries of Sudan.

Merchants contributed to the digging of wells along their route, which led to the establishment of certain tribes around these water points. Trade created a close relationship between merchants and inhabitants along the cities, markets, and stations. The caravans were behind the construction of the Admer ksar in Touat as well as the digging of several foggaras in the ksour of the Kunta zaouia, for example, which greatly contributed to the water supply of caravan merchants[19].



Plate. 03. showing the Omar Al Mukhtar mosque in Ksar Zelouaz -Djanet (by the researcher)



Plate. 04. showing the minaret of Kali in Gourara mosque

(by the researcher)



Plate. 05. showing a mausoleum in Timbuktu

Source (https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki)



Plate. 06. showing the mausoleum of Sheikh Bassa in western Sahla in Ain Salah

(by the researcher)



Plate. 07. showing the big mosque of Djenné in Mali,

Source https://www.google.com/search?q= جامع+جينيه+الكبير+في+مالي

5. Manuscripts:

The manuscript heritage also constitutes an important historical link for the Saharan region. The libraries of these regions contain a rich heritage of manuscripts resulting from a vast scientific movement, particularly related to the mobility of scholars and preachers. This produced varied manuscripts, including books and works on different subjects, notably in the religious, social, and scientific fields. Thanks to caravan trade, many copies and models of manuscripts and works circulated between the centers of Timbuktu, Djenné, Touat, Gourara, and Tidikelt, passing through the lands of Hoggar, Aïn Salah, and Akabli;ko. These regions bear witness to certain copies of manuscripts, such as the library of Sheikh Al-Bakay in Tamanrasset and the libraries of Taleb Najmi, Maghrebi, and Taleb Abdullah in Aïn Salah and Akabli[20].

Caravan trade also facilitated the introduction of manuscripts and copying tools among the goods exchanged between the two shores[21].

The cultural centers of southern Algeria and Sudan contributed to the enrichment of Arab culture from the zaouias of Tamentit, Bouda, Melouka, Zaouia Kunta, Reggane, Akabli, and Ouled Saïd. In this regard, the scholars of Touat, during their travels with the trade caravans connecting Touat to sub-Saharan regions, played an important role[22]. Among them, Abou Al-Qasim Al-Touati, who was imam of a mosque in Timbuktu and directed a Quranic school, as well as Mohammed ben Aba ben Othman, originally from Ouled El Hadj in Reggane, who went to Timbuktu where he contributed to the spread of the Arabic language and wrote in the fields of language and literature.



Plate. 08. : Shows a manuscript from the libraries of Touat

(from the researcher)



Plate. 09. : Shows one of the manuscripts of Touat

(from the researcher)]

6.Conclusion:

From the preceding, we can understand the economic role that connected the countries of the North to their counterparts in Sudan through the exchange of various goods, as well as the important cultural role played by caravan trade between the regions of southern Algeria and Sudan in the rise of several cities and the emergence of various cultural and civilizational aspects that still bear witness to this part of the region's history. This is evidenced by the material archaeological remains of sites that emerged thanks to these caravans which transported, in addition to goods and merchandise, the best craftsmen, artists, and scholars who contributed to influencing and being influenced by the places

where they worked, thus producing an important part of the common historical heritage between the two shores of the Great Sahara. Among the most important influences, we can mention:

- The movement of craftsmen and copyists and their contribution to the writing and copying of manuscripts. The Timbuktu region is undoubtedly the greatest proof of the continuity of manuscript heritage between the two regions.
- The great similarity in architectural characteristics, particularly the main facades, such as those of religious buildings, mosques, and shrines of the Malian city of Djenné, which are found in Touat and Tidikelt, in addition to the transfer of the form of Mozabite minarets between the minarets of Djenné and Timbuktu.
- The inclusion of manuscript books among goods, which facilitated the circulation of different copies between Sudan and Algeria.
- The appearance of archaeological sites at the stopping and resting points of caravans as in Timissao.

In conclusion, the contribution of trade caravans crossing the Sahara to the development and prosperity of the Sahel and Sudan countries is evident, as is their impact on cultural, civilizational, and archaeological aspects. They played a decisive role in shaping various cultural characteristics of the regions of the Great Sahara, in its different provinces, and played a central role in the prosperity of many urban centers and ksour such as Azdjer, Touat, Ouargla, M'zab, and the Saoura region in southern Algeria.

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