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Economic activity in the medieval city of Biskra as described in travelogues and geography books

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Abstract :

The city of Biskra is considered one of the most important cities in the central Maghreb desert due to its unique geographical location as the gateway to the desert, forming a link between north and south and east and west. It also played a major role in stimulating economic activity in central Maghreb. This economic activity is highlighted by travelers and geographers who described the city of Biskra and its surroundings in their books. The agricultural sector enjoyed an abundance of various crops, including dates, olives, and other fruits, in addition to livestock such as camels and sheep. In the industrial sector, agricultural and animal products flourished, and domestic and foreign trade was very active, with a variety of commercial exchanges, especially in dates and salt. Biskra was considered one of the major markets in the Middle Ages, as it was characterized by an abundance of trade routes connecting the northern cities with the Sudan.

Keywords: Biskra; economic activity; travel books; geography books.

Introduction :

Throughout history, the Saharan cities of central maghreb have played prominent roles in various fields, including politics, society, culture, science, and economics, especially after the Islamic conquests. Among these cities is Biskra, where the venerable companion Aqaba ibn Nafi al-Fihri and a group of companions and followers were martyred. Biskra is considered the gateway to the Sahara and a link between north and south and east and west. Its strategic location made it an important economic center during the Middle Ages. Travel and geography books have contributed to revealing the features of economic activity in this city.

The problem addressed in this research is as follows: How did economic activity manifest itself in the city of Biskra during the Middle Ages? To answer this question, we pose the following questions: What was the reality of agriculture and industry in the city of Biskra? What were the most important trade routes? How did domestic and foreign trade contribute to the revitalization of the economy?

The methodology adopted in this study is the historical descriptive approach, which involves studying travelogues and geography books, examining them, and comparing them with each other in order to arrive at a correct scientific view.

This study aims to highlight the effective role played by one of the cities of the central maghreb desert in stimulating economic activity, and to emphasize the pivotal role of this city in stimulating trade and commercial exchanges both internally and externally.

1- Historical and geographical context of the city of Biskra:

Biskra is one of the cities steeped in history, as old as history itself. Historians and researchers disagree on when it was founded, but it has been home to many nations and peoples since the dawn of history and up to the Islamic conquests. It also played an important role in medieval history, with travelers and geographers describing it in their books and blogs.

1-1 Foundation of the city of Biskra:

The founding of the city of Biskra dates back to ancient times. and historians' opinions differ on the date of its founding. Some trace it back to the Roman period, when it was known as Vesera, a Roman name meaning “commercial site,” while others trace it back to the Roman word Piciname,

meaning “mineral spring,” in reference to the Baths of the Righteous¹. Some believe that the name Vescera is of Phoenician origin and means “weapons depot,”², as mentioned by ancient historians under different names. Ptolemy referred to it as “vescether,” As for Pliny the Elder, he mentioned it in connection with ethnicity (vescera natio), meaning the people or nation of Vesera³. Hassan al-Wazzan says of the city of Biskra that it is “an ancient city founded in Roman times, which was later destroyed and rebuilt when the Islamic armies entered Africa ”⁴.

However, archaeological studies and research conducted in several areas of the city of Biskra indicate that its foundation dates back to the period before the Roman presence, based on evidence and archaeological finds discovered in the areas of Shatma and Al-Qantara, such as arrowheads and scrapers, in addition to a group of rock inscriptions in the Ras Al-Mi'ad area and the areas of Amzaira and Mashounch⁵, This indicates that the city of Biskra has deep historical roots and was founded in ancient times. With the arrival of the Islamic conquests in the Maghreb, the conqueror Uqba ibn Nafi al-Fihri managed to reach central maghreb. Biskra was among the cities he conquered, and he was able to expel the Roman garrisons. Biskra thus came under Islamic rule. Near Biskra, in a place called “Tahouda,” Uqba ibn Nafi and his companions were martyred.

1-2 Biskra through travelogues and geography books:

Travel and geography books provided a variety of information about the desert cities of central Morocco, which they obtained either through observation or from others. The city of Biskra was among these cities, as it featured prominently in their books and blogs.

Al-Maqdisi describes it as having abundant water, explains its agricultural character, and points out its abundance of palm trees⁶, Al-Bakri provided more detailed information about Biskra, describing it as a city with many towns and that Biskra was its base. He also described its agricultural activity, noting that it was famous for growing palm trees and olives, as well as its abundance of water, which was an important factor in agricultural activity. He also touched on its urban aspect, noting that it included a mosque and a number of other mosques and baths. He also touched on its scientific activity, describing its people as highly knowledgeable and followers of the doctrine of the people of the city⁷. We find the same description in the book Al-Istibsar by an unknown author, who describes the most important crops, such as palm trees and olives, in addition to the abundance of water. He also describes Basra as a city with many scholars and a center of jurisprudence and science⁸.

As for Al-Idrisi, when describing Biskra, he mentioned that it had a market and buildings, in addition to its diverse dates⁹. This illustrates the dynamism witnessed in the agricultural, commercial, and urban sectors. Yaqt al-Hamawi mentioned in his dictionary the abundance of palm trees and the presence of a mountain of salt, saying that it was known as the palm tree capital. He also described its people as scholars who followed the doctrine of the people of Medina¹⁰.

From the above, we conclude that travelers and geographers before the middle of the seventh century AH described Biskra in various ways, such as a large city, an impregnable fortress, or one of the cities of Zab. This is what we find in the works of Al-Maqdisi, Al-Bakri, Al-Idrisi, Al-Hamawi, and the author of Al-Istibsar. Biskra was not mentioned in their books and writings as the base of the Zab region until after the second half of the 7th century AH, following the fall of the Almohad dynasty¹¹.

Among the travelers and geographers who made Biskra the base of the Zab region was Ibn Sa'id al-Maghribi, who said that the city of Biskra was the base of the Zab region¹². We also find this in Al-Hamiri, who said that Biskra is in the land of Zab, which is his base¹³. The same thing was mentioned by Al-Nimiri, author of the book Faydh al-Abbab, where he said that Biskra is the base of the Zab region¹⁴. Ibn Khaldun says that this country, Biskra, is the base of the Zab region for this era, describing the Zab as a large homeland comprising a group of villages, with Biskra being the most important of them all¹⁵.

From the descriptions provided by travelers and geographers about the city of Biskra, we can conclude that it was distinguished and prominent in various fields, especially in agriculture, as it was famous for growing olives, palm trees, and various other fruits. In terms of urban development, we note the presence of mosques, baths, and palaces, as well as the distinction of its inhabitants in terms of knowledge and scholarship.

2- The human framework of the city of Biskra:

Looking at the historical map, one finds that Biskra has been the scene of many events throughout history, with many nations and peoples settling there since the dawn of time, such as the Moors, the Jettuls, the Phoenicians, and others. and other nations mentioned in ancient sources. It was also the object of desire for many colonial powers, such as the Romans, Vandals, and Byzantines. As a result of this momentum of events from the dawn of history until the Islamic conquests, a diverse human composition emerged. By tracing travel and geography books,

we can divide the human composition of the city of Biskra in the Middle Ages into three elements: the Berbers, the Arabs, and the Mouloud.

2-1 Berbers:

They are the inhabitants of ancient maghreb, and historians disagree on the origin of the name Berbers. Some attribute it to Afriqish ibn Qais, one of the kings of the Tababa, who, upon hearing them speak, said, “What is the meaning of your Berber language?” and thus they were called Berbers. For the Arabs, Berber refers to sounds that are not understood¹⁶. Genealogists agree that the Berbers are divided into two great tribes: the Berans and the Batr. The Berans are divided by genealogists into seven tribes: (Azdaga, Masmuda, Urba, Ajisa, Katama, Sanhaja, and Oryga). Some genealogists add three other tribes to these seven, namely: Lamta, Haskura, and Kezula. As for the Batra, genealogists divide them into four tribes: Adasa, Nafusa, Daria, and Banu Lwa al-Akbar¹⁷.

Referring to travelers and geographers, we find that they have mentioned the Berbers and their presence in the city of Biskra in their books and blogs. Ibn Hawqal says: “Most of the Berbers of Morocco are from Sijilmasa to Souss, Agmat, and Fez to the regions of Tahert, Tens, M'Sila, and Biskra...”¹⁸. Here we note that Ibn Hawqal, while discussing the Berbers scattered throughout various cities and towns, also mentioned their presence in Biskra. Similarly, Al-Bakri, in his book *Al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik*, referred to the presence of Berbers in Biskra, saying: “... and around it are the Berber tribes of Sidrata, Banu Magrawa, the people of Banu Khazar, and Banu Yazmarti ...”¹⁹, We find the same information mentioned by Al-Bakri in *Al-Hamiri*, where he says: “... and around it are the Berber tribes of Sidrata and Magrawa ...”²⁰.

From the above, we can conclude that the Berbers have inhabited Biskra since ancient times as branches of the Zenata tribes. They have been described as nomads and semi-nomads who move with their herds northward toward the steppe pastures in search of fodder in the summer and autumn²¹.

2-2 Arabs:

The presence of Arabs in Central maghreb dates back to the early days of Islamic conquest in the second century AH. Their arrival continued until the middle of the fifth century AH, when the region witnessed the arrival of the Hilalians, known as the Hilalian migrations²², in addition to many other migrations that took place in the region.

The Zab region, Biskra, and Mount Aurès are considered the gateway through which these tribes entered, with a number of Bani Hilal and Salim clans settling in the Biskra region and its surroundings²³, One of the most prominent Arab tribes that settled in Biskra was the Dahak tribe. We should also mention that one of the most prominent Hilali tribes that settled in Biskra and its suburbs was the Bani Mazni family²⁴.

2-3 The Mawludun:

the Mawludun are considered the third component of the human composition of the city of Biskra, who are a mixture of Berbers and Byzantines, such that some researchers believe that there was intermarriage between Byzantine soldiers and Berber families. This intermarriage also occurred between Arabs and Berbers after the Islamic conquests²⁵, We also find references to this element in travel and geography books, such as in Al-Bakri, where he says: "... its inhabitants are the Mawludun ..." ²⁶, and in Al-Hamiri, where he says: "... and a third gate inhabited by the Mawludun ..." ²⁷.

3 – The economic situation in the city of Biskra:

The city of Biskra witnessed vigorous economic activity during the Middle Ages, as clearly evidenced by the accounts of travelers and geographers in their books and blogs about agricultural, industrial, and commercial activity.

3-1 Agricultural activity:

Talking about agricultural activity in the city of Biskra leads us to the need to refer to what travelers and geographers have written in this field, where they referred to the prosperity that Biskra witnessed in the agricultural field, as agricultural crops diversified, especially the cultivation of palm trees and olives, which the region specialized in, as well as the emergence of animal husbandry, especially camels. Several factors contributed to the development of agricultural activity, including the abundance of water and the suitable climate and environment.

3-1-1 Main crops:

Biskra is famous for its many crops, such as palm trees, olives, and various fruits. Travel and geography books agree that the most important agricultural product is palm trees, which produce dates. Al-Maqdisi describes Biskra as the land of palm trees²⁸, Al-Bakri also mentioned the most important crops that were produced in Biskra, such as palm trees, olives, and various fruits, without specifying the types of these fruits. He mentioned the abundance of orchards

around Biskra, then explained the types and varieties of dates, mentioning two types: Al-Kasba, known as Al-Sihani, and the second type, Al-Lubari, which was white and smooth. The first type was used as a proverbial example of its value and superiority over other dates, and the second type was also of great value, as Ubaydullah al-Shia prevented his workers from selling it and ordered them to send it to him²⁹.

The same information was mentioned by the author of the book Al-Istibsar (who lived in the sixth century AH), where he stated that the most common type of dates in Biskra is the Kasba date, which is known in the city of the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him), in addition to the second type, which is the Liyari date³⁰, Al-Hamiri, author of Al-Rawd al-Maatar, also mentioned the same types of dates referred to by Al-Bakri, which indicates the high quality of the dates that were available in Biskra. In addition to the dates known as Al-Kasba and Al-Liyari, there were many other types produced in Biskra that are difficult to count. Al-Idrisi said: "... It also has all kinds of strange and unusual dates ..." ³¹, Ibn Sa'id al-Maghribi also described Biskra as a land of palm trees and crops³², Al-Hassan Al-Wazzan also pointed out that it is famous for producing dates³³.

We also find that Al-Bakri, the author of the book Al-Istibsar (The Insight) by an unknown author, and Al-Hamiri mentioned another type of agriculture, namely olive cultivation, which was widespread in Biskra. The author of Al-Istibsar says: "... many palm trees, olive trees, and fruits ..." ³⁴, Al-Hamiri says: "...many palm trees, olive trees, and types of fruits ... and it is known as the palm tree of Biskra." ³⁵, Al-Nimiri, in his book Fayd al-Abbab, refers to the types of crops that were widespread in Biskra: "... gardens with sloping branches mixed with palm fruits, figs, pomegranates, and other fruits scattered among the branches ..." ³⁶.

From what travelers and geographers have written in their books, we can see that Biskra was famous for growing palm trees and olives, as well as a bunch of other fruits that they didn't mention, but Al-Numeiri told us about some of them, like figs and pomegranates, which shows how lively Biskra was when it came to farming.

3-1-2 Animal husbandry:

By examining travel and geography books, we found no clear references to the types of animals or livestock that were present in the city of Biskra, but it is well known that camels are raised in desert areas, as noted by Ibn Hawqal: "... They have many camels in their wilderness and desert dwellings, which are

unmatched in number by the camels of the Arabs”³⁷, Camels played an important role in stimulating trade, as they were used to transport goods and merchandise by trade caravans.

3-1-3 Water abundance:

Travel and geography books refer to the abundance of water in Biskra. Al-Bakri says that there are many fresh water wells, explaining that there is a well inside the mosque that never dries up, meaning that it has plenty of water. He also mentions the existence of gardens inside the city that are irrigated by water from the river, which descends from the Aurès Mountains³⁸, This river was mentioned by the author of the book Al-Istibsar, whose name is unknown, who said: “... A large river flows through Biskra, descending from the Aures Mountains and watering its orchards and palm trees. It is about six miles long and runs through a forest connected to the city, cutting through its woods and villages...”³⁹ The same information about the existence of a large river descending from the Aures Mountains and the existence of fresh water wells, including a well that never dries up, is also mentioned by Al-Hamiri⁴⁰.

From the above, it is clear that Biskra was rich in water, both underground (wells) and surface (rivers), which helped to stimulate agriculture and develop farming in this city, where the water from these rivers and wells was used to irrigate various gardens and orchards.

3-2 Industrial activity:

Travelers and geographers referred in their books and blogs to the availability of salt in the city of Biskra, which was one of the industrial resources that contributed to the revitalization of economic activity. Al-Bakri refers to the existence of a mountain of salt in Biskra from which salt was extracted, and which Obaidullah al-Shi'i and his sons used in their food⁴¹, Yaqut al-Hamawi also mentioned the presence of a mountain of salt in Biskra, from which salt is cut like rock⁴², Al-Hamiri referred to the same information about the existence of a salt mountain in Biskra⁴³.

There may have been other industries associated with agriculture and animal husbandry, such as manufacturing, particularly related to dates, olives, leather, and animal milk, although travel and geography books do not mention this in the city of Biskra. Industry was based mainly on agricultural and animal production, including the processing of grains by grinding and kneading, as well as the textile and leather industries, in addition to dairy products. This industrial similarity exists throughout central maghreb⁴⁴.

3-3 Commercial activity:

The city of Biskra was a strategically important location as it was the gateway to the desert and a meeting point for trade caravans, connecting north and south and east and west. This made it an important trading center. Among the most important trade routes passing through Biskra were:

A / The road from Tahert to Kairouan via the city of Warglan. Travelers would leave Tahert for Warglan, then on to Biskra and Kairouan. Although this route was difficult and tiring, it was a secret route with no obstacles or taxes, and the region was dry in winter, This allowed commercial trips to be made throughout the year⁴⁵.

B / The road from Nagaous to Badis via Biskra⁴⁶, as mentioned by Al-Idrisi.

C / A road connecting central maghreb with Sudan. Travelers arrive in Saskra and from there head to Warjlan, then to Tadmka, passing through the Adrar region, and then on to Gao⁴⁷.

Biskra is also located on the trade route linking Kairouan and the fortress of Abi Taouil, on the road linking M'Sila and Afriquia, and on the inland road stretching from the Jerid region to Tlemcen and Marrakesh⁴⁸.

From Biskra, various types of fruit were sent to different cities and towns, as mentioned by Ibn Sa'id al-Maghribi: "... from there, various types of fruit are brought to the cities of Tunis and Bejaia ..."⁴⁹. Al-Idrisi says that Biskra has a market and buildings⁵⁰, which indicates the commercial activity that Biskra witnessed in the Middle Ages.

Conclusion:

Through our study of economic activity in the medieval city of Biskra, we have reached the following conclusions:

Agricultural activity flourished in the city of Biskra, particularly in relation to palm and olive cultivation. This was noted by most travelers and geographers in their books and blogs, such as Al-Maqdisi, Al-Bakri, Al-Idrisi, Al-Hamawi, Ibn Sa'id Al-Maghribi, the author of the book *Al-Istibsar* (The Insight) by an unknown author, Al-Hamiri, Al-Nimiri, and Al-Hasan Al-Wazzan.

The city of Biskra had several types of dates, the most famous of which were the Kasba and Liyari varieties. It also had large quantities of salt, which was used in food preparation, as dates and salt were important commodities in trade.

The city of Biskra was characterized by an abundance of water, both from wells and rivers, which was used to irrigate orchards and various crops, as water is considered one of the most important factors contributing to agricultural and farming development, as well as economic prosperity.

The city of Biskra enjoyed an important strategic location, as it was the gateway to the desert, a meeting point for caravans and travelers, and a crossing point between north and south and east and west, due to the trade routes and roads that passed through it.

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