

The merchants' Caravan Routes to the Markets of Touat in the Medieval Era.



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Abstract : The Tuat region in the south western part of Algeria is located in the heart of the Sahara Desert and is one of the most important desert areas that played a pioneering role in commercial activity, particularly in desert caravan trade during the medieval period. This is due to its strategic geographical location, which made it a transit point and meeting place for trade caravans by connecting the routes and paths of desert trade, thus becoming a link between the markets on the northern and southern sides of the Sahara Desert.

The markets of its cities became commercial centers for conducting transactions and trade exchanges, while also meeting the needs of its inhabitants. Goods such as gold, slaves, and ostrich feathers became a destination for trade caravans from all directions.

Accordingly, we will first provide a brief definition of the Tuat region in terms of its name, location, climate, and history. Then, we will discuss the factors that contributed to the flourishing of trade in the region, followed by an overview of the most important markets in Tuat and their diverse trade exchanges. Finally, we will address the significance of the Tuat region as a meeting and transit point for trade caravans.

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Keywords: Tuat region, trade caravans, Tuat markets, Gold trading, Slave trade, West Sudan.

. **Introduction:** The Tuat region in the south west of Algeria is considered one of the most important desert areas that played a distinguished role in the trade of desert caravans due to its strategic geographical location, which is in the heart of the Sahara Desert. In addition to being a transit area and a meeting point between the north and south, as well as the east and west for trade and pilgrimage caravans, this enabled it to take on a pioneering role in commercial activities throughout the ages, particularly between the 7th and 9th centuries Hijri.

The markets of the Tuat region played an important role in the economic life of its inhabitants. They are the vibrant heart of commercial activity, thus no city or palace in Tuat was devoid of them. Internally, they serve as commercial centers for conducting transactions and trade exchanges, alongside meeting the needs of the locals. Externally, they are the preferred place sought by traders' caravans coming from the north or south in order to barter their goods for those displayed in Tuat markets.

Moreover, its significant strategic location contributed to Tuat becoming a commercial hub by connecting various trade routes across the desert. It became a link between the markets on the northern and southern sides of the Sahara Desert.

Based on the above, this article will address the following main issue: How did markets and trade routes contribute to the cultural communication of the Tuat region?

To address this issue, we have divided our article into four sections: defining the Tuat region, factors contributing to the flourishing trade in Tuat, markets of Tuat and the main trade exchanges, and Tuat as a meeting and transit point for trade caravans.

-2. Defining the Tuat Region:

The Tuat region is located in the southwest of Algeria and consists of three main parts: Central Tuat, Tengourarin, and Tedikelt. Historians and narrators have differed on the origin of its name and its meaning. Among them is the view of Muhammad bin Omar al-Ja'fari, who claimed that when Uqba ibn Nafi al-Fihri conquered the lands of Maghreb and reached its coast, then returned until he reached the land of Tuat in the year 62 Hijri. He asked them about this land, meaning Tuat, and about what he heard about its weakness, whether "Tuat" meant the exile of criminals from the rebels of Maghreb. They answered him that it is

indeed "Tuat," and thus the term was popularized. (jaafari2009 ' , p.p. 16-17)

It is mentioned in the book "History of Sudan" by Abd al-Rahman bin Abdullah al-Saadi that the Sultan of Mali, "Musa," while on his way to pilgrimage, encountered an illness among his companions known as "Tuat" in the local language. They settled there, and the place was named after that illness(Al-saadi1981 'p.7)

Others believe that the term "Tuat" is of Berber origin, meaning oases or water oasis. Among those who hold this view are Élisée Reclus and Martin Alfred Georges Paul, among others. (Paul1923 'p.1)

"Despite the fact that most sources agree on the Berber origins of the name, none of the narratives have been able to provide conclusive evidence. This is due to the fact that the Berbers, particularly the Lamtuna and Zenata tribes, were the first inhabitants of the area. Furthermore, most palace names in Touat are of Berber origin. How can the branches be Berber while the roots are otherwise?" (jaafari M. , 2017,p.2)

Our opinion is that the name is Arabic, because it appeared late in the 5th century AH, when the Almohads pursued the remnants of the Almoravids and eliminated them in this region, so they called it Tawat, meaning the land of their end and death, and it will never exist for their kingship and authority.

The Tuat region is characterized by a desert climate, with high temperatures in the summer and cold winters, resulting in two distinct seasons: one cold from December to February and the rest of the year marked by high temperatures reaching 50°C, with scarce rainfall throughout the year. The area is also known for winds, especially in the spring and summer months, which at times can turn into strong storms. (Qatsh & Abd AL-Rahman, 2009 p.36,p.39)and (Houtia, 2007 p.45-46.)

Despite the harsh and difficult nature of the region, humans have managed to inhabit it since prehistoric times. The Phoenicians and Romans used the Tuat route in their relations with the southern Sahara. Bernard Saffroy believes that Jews settled in Tuat since the 1st century BC. (Saffroy, 1994,p.1);Q-F (jaafari M.2017,p.2)

After the advent of Islam in North Africa, the region played a mediating role in relations between the central Maghreb and Western Sudan. Starting from the 5th century Hijri (11th century AD), there was an influx of Berber and Arab tribes coming from the north due to political turmoil, turning Tuat into an important center for desert trade, especially after the

fall of the Ghana Empire and the establishment of the Mali Empire in the 7th century Hijri (13th century AD), as well as the decline of the western desert trade route linking Marrakech to Western Sudan, which was replaced by the Tuat-Timbuktu route. Furthermore, the main pilgrimage route for the inhabitants of the western and central parts of Western Sudan passed through Tuat, which increased the importance and status of the region and its development. (Jaafri, 2009,p.70,p.75)

Beginning in the 9th century Hijri (15th century AD), the Tuat region witnessed an intellectual and cultural renaissance that lasted nearly six centuries. This development was influenced by a number of factors, including the strategic location of Tuat in the middle of the desert, its role as a key transit area for trade caravans, the main route for African pilgrims, and the presence of zawiyas and Sufi orders which played a prominent role in various aspects of life. (jaafari M. , 2017,p.3)

3 - Factors that contributed to the prosperity of trade in Touat:

There are many factors that contributed to the prosperity of trade in the Touat region, including:

- Its strategic geographical location in the middle of the Sahara Desert, connecting it to various regions: north to south and east to west.
- The presence of water in a barren area, surrounded by veins and sand dunes, which makes it impossible for caravans to cross it without this feature. Wells played an important role in providing water for caravans. Wells are stations where camels rest and travelers water their water bags, monitor their loads, exchange news of the road, learn prices and perform prayers, and sometimes they are areas where buying and selling takes place.

The Touat region is characterized by the proximity of its water, which does not exceed fifteen meters, and next to the well there are usually irrigation channels that camels and sheep come to, and in their absence they pour water into basins made of camel or cow hides, and the process of digging wells was competed for by the people of Touat as an ongoing charity. (Houtia, 2007, p.142-143)

- The abundance of its palaces and its geographical extension, as the distance between its four dimensions is approximately a fourteen-day journey, which provides merchants with a connected environment in which it is easy to obtain water and provisions in the middle of a barren desert.

- The presence of a large number of residents and the diversity of their races, which provides merchants with a wide and profitable consumer market at the same time. (Jaafari, : The Oasis Palace System and its Role in the Development of the Touat Region between the 9th and 13th centuries AH / 15th and 19th centuries AD, April 19, 2018,p.10.)
- It provides security, especially for foreigners who find all respect and care in it, and most of the palaces provide a guest house. The best evidence of this is the arrival of Antonio Malfante, the Italian-Genoese merchant and explorer, in the year 851 AH / 1447 AD, and his stay for two years, then his return from it safely without being harmed. This argument is confirmed by Al-Hassan Al-Wazzan (d. 957 AH/1550 AD) when he said about the people of Tuat: “..and they often fight and quarrel among themselves, but they do not harm strangers.” (al-Fasi,1983,p.134)
- The vitality of the Touat community and its effective participation in commercial activity, either as merchants or as commercial brokers, three or four of whom are appointed upon the arrival of each caravan. (Harbash, 2011\2012,p.248,p.251)
- The presence of a network of commercial roads linking the Touat region to the rest of the regions, from different directions, and most of them are dry valleys with springs that provide water for those traveling the desert road. It is characterized by the strength of its soil, which helps in walking, and includes landmarks that are easy to follow, and grass, herbs and weeds grow on its sides, which provides food for animals, especially camels, during their long journey. (Salmi, 2011\ 2012,p.31; (Faraj, 1977,p.78)
- The stability of the political situation in the Touat region, and its non-subordination to any authority after the fall of the Almohad state, which contributed to the prosperity of trade there since the end of the 7th century and the beginning of the 8th century AH, and also facilitated the process of its communication and commercial dealings with various other regions, especially after it got rid of the taxes and duties imposed on it by the Almohad state. (Harbash, 2011\2012,p.246)
- The absence of natural obstacles in the Touat region, such as the difficult desert terrain that is difficult to walk on and cross, such as the Great Western Erg Desert, Hamada Guir, and others. (Jafari2021 ‘ p.29)

4 - Touat markets and the most important trade exchanges:

The markets of the Touat region played an important role in the economic life of the region's inhabitants by organizing the export and import processes. These markets are the beating heart of commercial

activity, so no city or palace in Touat was without them. They are a commercial center for making deals and trade exchanges, in addition to meeting the needs of the population for consumer goods, especially food. As for the outside, they are the favorite place for the owners of commercial caravans coming from the north or south to exchange their goods and merchandise for the goods and merchandise in the possession of Touat merchants (Faraj1977 ,p.63)

The most important of these markets are:

- **Timimoun Market:** Timimoun is the base of Tingourarin. It was a gathering place for commercial caravans, where merchants from different regions met. Al-Hassan Al-Wazzan says about its people: "The inhabitants of this region are rich, because they used to go a lot with their goods to the lands of Sudan." (al-Fasi 1983 ,p.133)

Among the most important goods and commodities exported by the Touat region to the western Sudan are: silk, iron and glass, and among the imports from them: slaves and gold dust. As for trade exchanges with the northern regions, especially Tlemcen during the Ziyaniid era, they were initially carried out through the Ouled Said market, then moved later to the Timimoun city market. Among its most important goods are: dates, red alum, sheep, horses, slaves, and gold dust sold by the weight of the mithqal in ounces, in addition to henna and the famous Touat shamma, and among the handicrafts are rugs, berets, covers, baskets and baskets, as well as table salt, charcoal, lime and gypsum. (al-Aghwati, 2011,p.93p.95)and (Faraj, 1977,p.65)

This market was also frequented by caravans coming from El Menia, Ghardaia, Saida, Mechria and Ain Sefra to exchange their goods and merchandise of coffee, sugar, wax and soap for the goods and merchandise of this market. (Faraj, 1977,p.65)

- **Souk Tamantit:** This market became famous and became a stop for caravan traders, after the star of Souk Bouda faded due to the continuous raids of the Bedouins of the desert tribes, and their blocking of the road for its passersby. (Khaldun, 2000,vol.7,p.77)

Souk Tamantit is considered one of the oldest markets in the Touat region. This was indicated by Muhammad al-Tayyib ibn Abd al-Rahim (Ibn Bada Haida), the author of the manuscript: "Al-Qawl al-Basit fi Akhbar Tamantit", saying: ".. Know that Tamantit is the name of a city in the Touat region. It is a base where knowledge, emirate, religion and leadership come together, and markets, industries, trade and goods are established in it, and almost no rich or ascetic can do without it.. It is the

source of travelers and the gathering place of Bedouins.. And merchants are satisfied with it (thus) at the time, and no one who knows a commodity is satisfied except with its price.." (Hida,p.3.Q-F, (Faraj, 1977, p.65,p.p13-14)

The goods and merchandise displayed in the Tamantit market varied due to their diverse sources, including: slaves, gold, white corn, salt, copper products, jewelry, decorative items, horses and their saddles, perfumes, wheat, oil, textiles, weapons, dates and henna.²² (Hajafri, 2011,p.394)

Many crafts and industries were also established there, including: blacksmiths' shops, carpenters' shops, perfumers and jewelry makers. (Hida,p.18.Q-F, (Faraj, 1977,p.183)

Tamantit market also received caravans coming from the northeast and west, loaded with wheat, ghee, oils, fat, sugar, wool and sheep to Touat, while the southern caravans carried slaves, gold, ostrich feathers and camels to the markets of Touat, including Tamantit market. (Tamouz, 2009\2010,p.29)

- **Tsabit Market:** This market is one of the thriving markets of Touat, visited by merchants from all over the world, in addition to the pilgrim caravans crossing the desert on their way to the Hijaz lands. These caravans used to set out from the cities of Sijilmasa, Tafilalt and Chinguetti every year, and during their journey to the east, they would take the road passing through the Touat region, and often buy their provisions from the markets of Touat, most notably the Tsabit market, and exchange gold there, as the exchange there was cheaper than in other markets, as confirmed by Abdullah bin Muhammad al-Ayashi (d. 1090 AH - 1679 AD), who visited Touat during his journey, saying: "Then we set out and entered the first province of Touat, which is the villages of Tsabit. We stayed there for six days and sold our horses and camels that were weak, and bought the dates we needed, and there are many types of dates, and we found dates there cheap. Most of its people are common people who are traders. The number of mithqals among them is twenty-four weighed. The reason for our stay in this country during this period is that many of the pilgrims, when the exchange of gold increased in Tafilalt, delayed the exchange to Touat, because gold is cheaper, as is the price of food from crops and dates. This town is a gathering place for caravans coming from Timbuktu and from the country of Aqdiz from the outskirts of Sudan. There are many goods and commodities brought from there, and the goods brought from the west, which are the Sudanese produce, are sold in these countries, such as horses, clothes, and silk.

When the caravan arrives, there is a busy market there. (al-Ayyashi, 2006,p.79-80)

- **Ain Saleh Market:** The largest of its palaces, the Great Arab Palace, was built, as it became a transit and meeting center for commercial caravans crossing the desert in all directions. These caravans used to place their loads in the Great Palace market, either to sell them or to resume their journey to other markets.

Ain Saleh Market is linked to the north with the markets of the cities of El Menia and Ouarglane, where dates, allies, slaves, and gold dust are sold, and this is through a number of wells at an average distance of one day between one well and another. The pilgrim caravans coming from Qasr Aqbali, which used to stay for days in the city and come to its market, also contributed to the diversity of goods and merchandise and the prosperity of commercial activity in the region. (al-Aghwati, 2011,pp.93-94)

The goods and merchandise offered in the market were diverse and cheap at the same time. Slaves, ostrich feathers, ivory, raw gold, cotton and fabrics came from the markets of Western Sudan. Coffee, sugar and red pepper came from the markets of Ghadames and Ghat. Knives, mirrors, sewing needles and jewelry came from the markets of the north (central Maghreb). Embroidered clothes, firearms and horses came from the markets of the far maghreb. (Faraj, 1977,p.67)

As for the commercial process of goods and merchandise in the markets of Tuat, it was either done by barter, and dealing with currency was not common until the modern era. The mudd, sa', bowl, mizwad and haml were used for measuring, and for measuring, the arm, stature, fatar, foot, rope, mile, farsakh, barid and grain were used. The weighing tools were: ounce and pound. (Houtia, 2007,p.131.p.161,p.165); (Lamine, 2016,p.28,p.31)

The markets of the Tuat region were also subject to the supervision of the town judge. Among his duties was to supervise the scales and measures used by merchants in the markets, to ensure their accuracy, and he also had the right to investigate any complaint submitted to him regarding disputes in matters of buying and selling or fraud in the goods and merchandise sold. Thus, an atmosphere of trust and security prevailed in the Touat markets. (Embarak,p.7).Q-F, (Faraj, 1977,p.68)

Thus, the Touat region became an important desert commercial port, comparable to the ports of the Far and Near Maghreb. In this regard, Muhammad Khair Faris, author of the book "History of the Modern

Maghreb", says: "The desert ports in the Draa Valley, Souss and Tafilalt were bustling with activity. However, these regions were exposed to severe economic damage as a result of the shift of African trade towards Touat, then the Central Maghreb and Tunisia.." (Faris & Amer, no date,p.32)

5 - Touat, a meeting and crossing station for commercial caravans:

The Touat region has been associated with commercial practices and transactions since ancient times, and its activity and importance have increased since the seventh century AH, after the region became the preferred passage for merchant caravans heading from the north of the Maghreb to the western Sudan, as Ibn Khaldun (d. 808 AH/1406 AD) indicates when talking about the Tamantast Palace, saying: "...and it is a station for the passengers of merchants traveling from Morocco to the country of Mali from Sudan to this era, and from the country of Mali to it.." and in another place when talking about Tingourarin, he says: "...and among them are foot soldiers and horsemen, and most of their livelihood is from palm dates, and among them are merchants to the country of Sudan.." . (Khaldun, 2000, vol.7,p.77)

In view of the needs of the inhabitants of the Touat region for consumer goods , some of which were not available to them, and since the agricultural income was often not enough for the needs of the population, the Touat people relied on foreign imports, and it was not long before many of them worked in the trade of exchange between the goods and commodities of the markets of Maghreb and the regions of the western Sudan, taking advantage of the location of their region in the middle of these markets, and their markets became full of goods brought from here and there, and thus became a destination for merchants coming from abroad. (Faraj, 1977,p.63)

Touat also contributed with its caravans to the desert trade. It was customary for two large caravans to set out every year heading to the markets of the city of Timbuktu, the first caravan setting out in the first half of the year, and the second in the second half.

The caravan sets out towards Timbuktu, crossing the lands of the Tuareg tribes after paying a financial tribute to the sheikhs of these tribes in exchange for passing through their lands known as the "right of way". The caravan continues its long, phased journey for about a month and a half, covering about 1,300 km at a rate of 45 km per day, until it reaches the city. The caravan usually stays there for about three months, during

which it exchanges the goods it brought with it from the northern markets for the goods displayed in the markets of Timbuktu, and the caravan returns taking the same outbound route. (Faraj, 1977,p.79-80)

The importance of Touat as a trading station lies in the fact that it has water sources and pasture for the animals, as well as provisions and provisions for the travelers, in addition to its location in the middle of the desert. The Touat region has gone beyond the role of crossings and passages to a more important role, as it has become a starting point for local caravans that are managed by their owners themselves or who choose someone to manage them on their behalf on the winter journey to the countries of western Sudan. (Khaldun, 2000,vol.7,p.77)

Many roads and paths have become tributaries that flow into this vertical road, which begins in the Maghreb in the north and ends in Sudan in the south. Among these paths and axes, we mention:

- **Tripoli axis, southern Tunisia, Tidiklt, Touat, western Sudan:** The importance of this axis lies in the fact that it is open via Tripoli to the Mediterranean trade, connected to the Italian cities with a wide reputation in commercial exchanges, most notably the city of Genoa, the birthplace of "Antonio Malfanti", who crossed this road until he reached Touat in 851 AH/1447 AD, and collected information of great importance regarding western Sudan and the Touat region as a crossroads of commercial routes. (J.T., 1988,p.620)

- **The Marrakesh-Touat axis, passing through Tafilalt and Sijilmasa in far Maghreb:** where the merchants of Touat were the ones who headed their trade caravans loaded with goods to the markets of the western Sudan. (Faraj, 1977,p.70)

Their goods included coffee, sugar, embroidered clothes, firearms, dates, henna and Touat snuff. The merchants of Touat exchanged them there for slaves, raw gold, ostrich feathers, ivory, cotton and other goods and merchandise, then returned with them to display and sell them in the markets of Touat. In many cases, they continued on to the markets of Tafilalt, Sijilmasa and Marrakesh to exchange them for horses, firearms, swords, dried fruits and embroidered clothes, then returned with these goods and merchandise to display and sell them in the markets of Touat, and so on. (Faraj, 1977,p70)

- **The Takda, Havar, Touat axis:** This is the return line for the merchants of Touat from the western Sudan, after they bought from its cities such as Timbuktu, Gao, Takda and Kaher what they needed of sheep and dried meat. This is what Ibn Battuta (d. 779 AH/1377 AD)

mentioned while passing through this road: "...people buy sheep from its Berbers and cut their meat and the people of Touat carry it to their country." (Battuta, 1997,p.277)

From this road, merchants can head east towards the Libyan lands, or west towards the Moroccan countries via Touat. Pilgrim caravans coming from the Takrur lands also pass through this road, which scholars from Touat have always led, until they reach the province of Aqbali. (Bousaid, 2011\2012,p27)

Before the caravans set off to and from the western Sudan, crossing the deserts and wilderness, it is necessary to hire guides from the Tuareg who have experienced the vast desert paths and have explored its depths, so that the caravan does not lose its way and be exposed to destruction. Ibn Khaldun referred to this while talking about the trade caravans between Touat and the western Sudan, saying: "...and between it and the border of the Mali country called Ghar, the unknown desert where one cannot find the paths, and the incoming one does not pass except with an expert guide from the veiled nomads who jump in that jump, whom the merchants hire to train them in it under the best conditions.." . (Khaldun, 2000,Vol.7,p.77)

Where the wells played an important role in providing water for the caravans. The wells are stations where the camels rest and the travelers water their water skins, monitor their loads, and exchange news of the road.

- North-eastern axis from the Zab region towards Touat:

It ends with two crossings: one heads east until it reaches eastern Tidikelt, and the other heads west until it reaches Tingourarine. Along these two paths are many wells and water sources that are considered rest stops and provide water for caravan traders and their camels,such as: Hassi Barrania, Hassi Chebana, Hassi Sid Jilali, Ain Qattara, and Faqara Zawa, the first Tidikelt palaces for the eastern crossing, and Hassi An-Nahel, Hassi Lafaaya, Hassi Targui, and Hassi Badmam for the western crossing. (Bousaid, 2011\2012,p.27)

6 - Conclusion In conclusion, we have reached a number of findings:

- Due to its strategic geographical location in the heart of the desert, the Tuat region played an important role in commercial activity, with many of its inhabitants working as traders or intermediaries.
- Its distance from centers of political conflict made it a safe haven for scholars and learned individuals, as well as for those fleeing the oppression of rulers.

- The vibrant commercial activity between the coast and the depths of Africa created a diversity of human populations with varied cultures and beliefs.
- The Tuat region has been mentioned in many writings by travelers and historians, such as Ibn Khaldun, Al-Wazzan, Ibn Battuta, Al-Ayyashi, and Ibn Bada Hida, who noted the abundance of its markets, goods, and commodities, their low prices, and the arrival and departure of caravans, which confirms the flourishing commercial activity in that period.
- Several markets in Tuat became famous for revitalizing both internal and external trade, including the markets of Timimoun, Tamanrasset, Tsaabit, and Ain Salah.
- Among the most important goods and commodities exported and sold by Tuat traders in the markets of the northern or southern Sahara were dates, henna, Tuat tobacco, and handmade products such as carpets, cloaks, baskets, and firearms. They also imported and purchased items such as slaves, gold dust, ostrich feathers, ivory, coffee, sugar, wheat, oils, and embroidered clothing.
- The Tuat region became an important commercial hub and a meeting point for trade caravans, serving as a link between the markets on the northern and southern banks of the Sahara through its location that connects desert trade routes, especially between the countries of the Islamic Maghreb and West Sudan.
- Tuat is also considered a transit point for pilgrimage caravans, which further boosted its commercial activity and the sales of its goods and commodities.
- It provided security and safety for traders and commercial caravans across all its routes throughout those years.
- The flourishing commercial activity in the Tuat region, both internally and externally, had numerous effects and results, particularly on the scientific and intellectual aspects of the area. Scientific tools such as manuscripts, paper, and ink became available, in addition to the scholarly traders who organized study circles alongside trade, and who also brought books to the region, leading to a diversity of sciences and exposure to various knowledge that contributed to the creative movement led by Tuat scholars in the 10th century AH.

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