

**Manifestations and Expressions of the Presence of
the Maqqari Company in Trade Relations Between
Zayyanid Tlemcen and the Western Sudan as
Reflected in the Book *Nafḥ al-Ṭīb min Ghuṣn al-
Andalus al-Raṭīb***

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Abstract:

A key feature of trade relations between the Saharan regions and Tlemcen during the Zayyanid period was their functional interdependence, rooted in mutual exchange. Tlemcen played a central role due to its strategic location, political influence, and economic potential. The Zayyanid rulers supported foreign trade by ensuring national security and promoting free exchange. The Saharan regions also contributed significantly, particularly through the flourishing gold trade in Western Sudan, which formed the backbone of Tlemcen's exports, especially as Sudanese demand for salt grew.

This extensive trade activity led to the development of structures to facilitate the movement of goods, giving rise to various commercial practices such as barter, credit sales, agency, and partnerships. Among these, the Maqqari trading company stood out, playing a key role in shaping trade routes between Tlemcen and Western Sudan.

This study explores the role and importance of this company in commercial relations, as reflected in *Nafḥ al-Ṭīb min Ghuṣn al-Andalus al-Raṭīb* by Abu al-'Abbas Ahmad al-Maqqari. To achieve this, the study adopts both analytical and descriptive approaches: the analytical approach is used to examine the ideas and previous studies on which the research is based, while the descriptive approach is

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employed to present the commercial journeys and the most important exchanges on which the Maghrebi Company relied.

Keywords: Maqqari Company; foreign trade; Tlemcen; Western Sudan; Zayyanid period.

Introduction:

Referring to the commercial exchanges of Tlemcen, it becomes clear that its merchants extended their activities beyond the local level to reach international markets. The reason behind this lies in Tlemcen's strategic geographic location, which made it an essential and unavoidable hub for international trade. As a result, caravans of merchants naturally traveled in all directions, loaded with various goods.

Despite the prosperity of trade between Tlemcen and other Maghribi countries, these exchanges were less significant compared to those linking Tlemcen with the kingdoms of Western Sudan. The reason for this was the gold trade, which brought immense and timely wealth to Tlemcen.

Notably, as trade between Tlemcen and Western Sudan progressed, certain merchants emerged as intermediaries between North Africa and sub-Saharan regions. These intermediaries often took the form of communities resembling modern-day commercial lobbies or trading companies. These companies appeared in various forms within the trade system, and some contemporaries of that period defined them as partnerships established for the sake of profit and mutual gain¹. Such partnerships were typically formed between two or more individuals who invest and work together, with profits divided according to each partner's share of investment. Partnerships were classified into three types: body-based partnerships (*sharikāt al-abdān*), reputation-based partnerships (*sharikāt al-wujūh*), and capital-based companies (*sharikāt al-amwāl*)².

The Maqqari Trading Company likely represents the most prominent example of capital-based companies in Tlemcen and was among the most important commercial enterprises in the Central Maghreb during the Zayyanid era.

¹ Mohamed Fatha, *Juridical Cases (Nawazil) and Society: Research in the History of the Islamic West (from the 6th to 9th Century AH/12th-15th CE)*, Publications of the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Casablanca, 1999. p.312.

² Ibid.

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From this point, the following research question arises:
To what extent was the Maqqari Trading Company involved in the commercial exchanges between Zayyanid Tlemcen and the Western Sudan?

2. The Maqqari Trading Company and the Factors Behind Its Formation

2.1 Definition of the Maqqari Trading Company:

The Maqqari Trading Company was established during the second half of the 6th century AH / 12th century CE, coinciding with the settlement of the *Maqqari family* in Tlemcen. Members of the family became involved in trade, which was then thriving with the southern Saharan regions through trans-Saharan caravan commerce. They became known for investing significant capital in extensive commercial ventures, particularly in the gold trade, which led to the emergence of their company as a commercial entity owned by a group of individuals.

The company was founded by the Maqqari brothers, sons of *Yahya ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān* (the great-great-grandfather of Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad al-Maqqari, d. 759 AH / 1358 CE). The five brothers—Abu Bakr, Muhammad, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, ‘Abd al-Wāḥid, and ‘Alī—established a family partnership during the 7th century AH / 13th century CE, pooling both their existing and future assets equally and fairly³.

The company was organized into multiple trade agencies located in economically significant markets throughout the Saharan oases⁴. The Maqqari Company came to monopolize the Sudanese trade route, establishing branches across Saharan trade hubs and their outlets. Two of the brothers, Abu Bakr and Muhammad, settled in Tlemcen, which served as the company's headquarters. Their eldest brother, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, settled in Sijilmāsa, where he opened a commercial office. The two younger brothers, ‘Abd al-Wāḥid and

³ Ahmed Abu Al-Abbas Al-Maqqari, *Nafh al-Ṭib min Ghushn al-Andalus al-Ratib, wa Dhikr Wazirihā Lisan al-Din Ibn al-Khatib*, Dar Sadir, Beirut, 1968. p.205.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 206-207.

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‘Alī, settled in the Saharan village of Iwalatan, where they built a residence and a trading post⁵.

It is worth noting that the brothers divided tasks and responsibilities among themselves. Those residing in Tlemcen were responsible for receiving European goods demanded in the Sudanese regions, based on lists provided by the Saharan partner—that is, the brother in Iwalatan. This was mentioned by Ahmad al-Maqqari in his book *Nafḥ al-Ṭīb*, where he wrote: “according to what the Saharan agent instructs regarding the goods”⁶. In turn, the Saharan partner handled the export of Sudanese goods to Tlemcen.

As for the fifth brother, who resided in Sijilmāsa, he played a coordinating role. His tasks included correspondence about profits and losses, monitoring global market trends, identifying supply and demand, and gathering intelligence on political or economic developments that could impact trade. According to al-Maqqari, the brother in Sijilmāsa acted as “*the tongue of the balance, informing them of profit or loss, and writing to them about the condition of merchants and the news of cities*”⁷. Based on these reports, the company would determine the departure time of caravans and the volume of exchanged goods in accordance with projected profits.

2.2 Factors Behind the Emergence of the Maqqari Trading Company

Several factors contributed to the establishment of the Maqqari Trading Company, among them:

- **The Islamic View of Trade:**

Members of the Maqqari family were deeply engaged in commercial activity, inspired by Islamic teachings that encouraged trade. Allah Almighty says:

“O you who have believed, shall I guide you to a commerce that will save you from a painful punishment?”⁸.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also stated: “You should engage in trade, for nine-tenths of livelihood lies in it.”⁹.

⁵ Ibid., p. 205.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Surat al-Ṣaff, Ayah 10.

⁹ Abu al-Fadl al-‘Iraqi, *Al-Mughni ‘an Hamli al-Asfar fi Takhrij ma fi al-Ihya’ min al-Akhbar*, Vol. 1, Dar Tabariyya Library, Riyadh, 1995. p.418.

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Furthermore, Islam encouraged travel for the purpose of trade, as in the verse:

“And when the prayer has been concluded, disperse within the land and seek from the bounty of Allah, and remember Allah often that you may succeed.”¹⁰

Books of legal verdicts (*nawāzil*) show that Islamic law facilitated commercial transactions. Jurists provided practical rulings on partnership¹¹, lending¹², and agency¹³, offering traders a robust legal framework for trade. As a result, many inhabitants of Tlemcen, including members of the Maqqari family, turned to commerce. Notably, some of the city's scholars were also engaged in trade alongside their academic and intellectual work, such as the jurist Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Yakhlaf al-Tunusī (d. 680 AH / 1280 CE) and the scholar Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Marzūq.

• Political Power:

The rulers of the Zayyanid state played a significant role in supporting trans-Saharan caravan trade¹⁴. Although trade with the Sudan was primarily driven by private initiative—as was the case with the Maqqari company—it was not separate from the state's support. The Zayyanid sultans recognized early on the value of commercial exchange with the Western Sudan, which required supporting trade with its kingdoms¹⁵; and in view of the effective role the region played—especially in the commercial field—the movement of traders there was facilitated (Abitbol, 1979, p. 194),

¹⁰ Surat al-Jumu‘ah, Ayah 10.

¹¹ Abu al-Abbas Ahmad al-Wansharisi, *Al-Mi‘yar al-Mu‘arrab*, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, Beirut, 1982. p.319.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 207.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 131, 186.

¹⁴ Khalid Bel‘arbi, *Tijarat al-Qawafil ‘Abr al-Sahra al-Kubra fi al-‘Asr al-Wasit*, *Al-Wahat Journal for Research and Studies*, Issue 15, 2011. p.38.

¹⁵ Ridha Tlili, "Tombouctou : le mythique trajet des caravanes," *Cultures Sud. Maghreb – Afrique noire : Quelles cultures en partage ? Revue des littératures d’Afrique, des Caraïbes et de l’océan Indien*, n°169, Paris, 2008. p.23.

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believing that national wealth lay in acquiring as much gold as possible¹⁶.

Additionally, the state benefited greatly from trade through customs duties imposed on merchants crossing its territory. This prompted continued state support for trade by providing essential security measures, such as protecting trade routes, digging wells, and placing markers along the roads¹⁷.

One clear example of this support is Sultan Yaghmurāsan's efforts to strengthen ties with West African kingdoms such as Mali and Songhai¹⁸. Similarly, Sultan Abū Ḥammū Mūsā I recognized the importance of Saharan trade. This is evident from his statement:

“Were it not for disgrace, I would admit no merchants into my land except for those of the Sahara—who carry worthless goods and bring back gold, the substance upon which the entire world depends. Others carry away gold from our land, and with it comes corruption and temptation.”¹⁹.

Accordingly, he ensured the protection of frontier regions near the desert, safeguarding them from rebellious elements and hostile tribes.

This commitment by the Zayyanid rulers to secure trade routes was mirrored in the Sudanese kingdoms, where rulers also guaranteed safe passage for caravans coming from the Maghrib²⁰. This is confirmed by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, who visited the Sudan in 753 AH / 1352 CE. He wrote:

“Among the virtues of their kings is their avoidance of injustice—they are the farthest from it. Their sultan tolerates no form of oppression. Their land is characterized by comprehensive security: neither travelers nor residents fear theft or assault. Furthermore, they never seize the property of any foreigner who dies in their land, even

¹⁶ Latifa Bachari, *al-‘Alaqaṭ al-Tijariyya li-l-Maghrib al-Awsat fi ‘Ahd Imarat Bani ‘Abd al-Wad min al-Qarn al-Sabi‘ ila al-Qarn al-‘Ashir Hijri (13th–16th centuries CE)*, Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments, Algeria, 2011. p.119.

¹⁷ Ibn al-Ahmar, *Tarikh ad-Dawla az-Zayyania*, Religious Culture Library, 2011. p.17.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ahmed Abu al-‘Abbas al-Maqqari, *Nafh al-Tib min Ghusn al-Andalus al-Ratib, wa Dhikr Wazirihā Lisan al-Din Ibn al-Khatib*, p.206.

²⁰ Ibid.

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if it be great wealth. Instead, they entrust it to a reliable person from the Maghrib until the rightful heirs can claim it.”²¹.

There is no doubt that all these factors contributed to the growing prominence of the Maqqari Trading Company. Thanks to the respect and appreciation shown by the kings of the Western Sudan toward foreign merchants, routes were made easier and safer, enabling the Maqqaris to build good relations with rulers in the regions reached by their caravans. As Ahmad al-Maqqari stated in his *Nafh al-Tib*:

“Once they gained the trust of the kings, the land became smooth for their journey.”²².

The Maqqaris dealt directly with the kings of Mali, who welcomed them and encouraged their commercial activity in the region. This is reflected in al-Maqqari’s words:

“Then they established ties with the king, who honored their stay and granted them full access to trade across his lands.”²³.

They even exchanged letters with Mansa Musa, who addressed some of them as

“the most beloved friend and closest confidant.”²⁴.

Mansa Musa would also request goods from them, as noted by al-Maqqari:

“He would then write to those in Tlemcen, asking them to fulfill his needs, addressing them with the same affectionate language.” (al-Maqqari, 1968, p. 206).

• **Geographic Factors:**

Geography played a significant role in the flourishing of trade with the Western Sudan. As the capital of the Zayyanid state, Tlemcen had a strategic position along the trans-Saharan trade routes, allowing its merchants to maintain strong trade relations with Saharan oases. This influence even extended into the Western Sudan, where some Tlemceni families settled and played a key role in maintaining trade ties, such as the Maqqari family, some of whose

²¹ Ibn Battuta, *Rihlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭa*, Lebanon, Dar Sader, 1992. p.674.

²² Ahmed Abu al-‘Abbas al-Maqqari, *Nafh al-Tib min Ghushn al-Andalus al-Ratib*, wa Dhikr Wazirihā Lisan al-Din Ibn al-Khatib, p.206.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 205-206.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

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members settled in Iwalatan, where they “built homes and walls, married local women, and fathered children by concubines...”²⁵.

• Trade Competition:

Many prominent Tlemceni families were engaged in commerce and became known for their wealth and prosperity—such as the families of Ibn al-Najjār, al-Marāziqa, and al-‘Uqbānī, the latter of which combined religious scholarship with commercial activity. These families had strong ties with both Tlemcen’s rulers and the kings of the Western Sudan, who encouraged their trading ventures²⁶.

Ibn Baṭṭūṭa mentions several Tlemceni merchants he encountered during his travels in Mali, including Muḥammad al-Faqīh al-Jazūlī, who rented a house there; his relative al-Maqqari ‘Abd al-Wāḥid and his son; and al-Shaykh al-Lubnānī al-Tilimsānī, who was close to Mansa Sulaymān²⁷.

It was therefore natural for members of the Maqqari family to engage in trade—especially in gold, which Western Sudan was rich in—fully aware of the value of this precious commodity and of the advantages of long-distance commerce. Transporting goods from distant and dangerous regions often yielded much greater profits than local, common goods. This is confirmed by Ibn Khaldūn, who wrote:

“That is why the merchants who venture into the lands of the Sudan are the wealthiest and most prosperous, due to the remoteness and hardship of the route, the dangers of the desert, and the risks of thirst and fear...”²⁸.

• Commercial Expertise

There is no doubt that the success or decline of trade is closely linked to the strength and expertise of merchants—their ability to negotiate with foreign traders, their knowledge of local consumer behavior, and their awareness of ongoing developments in the regions with which they trade. In this regard, **Ibn Khaldun** stated:

“The shrewd merchant only deals in goods that are universally needed—by both the rich and the poor, the rulers and the

²⁵ Ibid., p. 205.

²⁶ Latifa Bachari, al-‘Alaqaṭ al-Tijariyya li-l-Maghrib al-Awsat, p.121.

²⁷ Ibn Battuta, Riḥlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, p.444.

²⁸ ‘Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun, Muqaddimet Ibn Khaldun, p.321.

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commoners—since such goods guarantee the sale of his merchandise.”²⁹

The commercial expertise of the **Maqqari merchants** is evident in their consideration of the demands of all social classes. They carefully selected products based on the needs of the **Sudanese market** and the population at large. This high level of organization reflects principles similar to those of today’s major corporations.

The Maqqari traders stationed in desert markets would set the **prevailing prices** and **list the most in-demand products**, instructing their counterparts in the north to prepare and ship them accordingly. In return, they themselves would procure Sudanese goods requested in the north³⁰.

3. Manifestations of the Maqqari Company’s Presence in Saharan Trade

3.1 The Maqqari Trading Expedition

The company’s involvement in trade between Tlemcen and the Western Sudan required organizing regular commercial expeditions to both export local Tlemcen’s goods and import goods lacking in the region, while also satisfying Sudanese market demands. These expeditions were accompanied by a range of logistical and security arrangements, both before and during travel, and passed through key commercial hubs and trading posts before reaching their final destination in the Sudan.

• Organizing and Preparing the Caravan

Due to security concerns and harsh desert conditions, Maqqari merchants could not travel alone but had to join large caravans, which served as the only safe means of connecting the two ends of the desert. Their trading journeys were therefore organized in caravan format, as evidenced by several logistical measures taken to cross the vast desert.

Like other Tlemcenian merchants, the Maqqaris likely conducted their annual trading expeditions, departing from Tlemcen toward Sijilmasa in the west, then to Ouargla in the center, and from

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ahmed Abu al-‘Abbas al-Maqqari, *Nafh al-Tib min Ghushn al-Andalus al-Ratib*, wa Dhikr Wazirihā Lisan al-Din Ibn al-Khatib, p.205.

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there to the Western Sudan³¹. The most probable season for departure was winter, to avoid the natural hazards of the desert, such as sandstorms and extreme heat. Alternatively, they may have departed in early autumn, when temperatures were cooler, water was more available, and grazing for camels was sufficient. As Al-Idrissi notes:

“The caravan departs during the autumn season.”³².

To ensure goods were delivered over long distances with minimal losses, the Maqqari Company established a set of regulations suited to desert routes—covering logistics, organization, and other operational aspects. The merchants had to implement careful planning, setting departure points, connecting with supply stations, securing provisions (food and water), ensuring road safety, and maintaining consistent communication with major trade centers.

Before departure, the company’s traders would beat drums to announce the start of the journey—likely because of the large number of men involved in the caravan—using the sound to gather them. They also carried a banner at the front of the caravan to distinguish their company from others³³. As Ahmad al-Maqqari wrote:

“Their reputation for trade became well-known. They paved the desert route, dug wells, secured the trade path, used drums to announce departure, and carried a flag at the front of the caravan.”³⁴

• Risks of the Trade Journey:

The movement and management of the trade caravan, both for Saharan traders in general and for the merchants of the Maqqari company in particular, was by no means an easy task. Such an undertaking posed several challenges. In addition to those related to security, transportation, and passing through regions beyond the political control of the caravan's point of origin, there were difficulties associated with the length of the journey itself, which usually lasted two months round-trip. These included climatic

³¹ ‘Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun, *Al-‘Ibar wa Diwan al-Mubtada’ wa al-Khabar fi Ayyam al-‘Arab wa al-‘Ajam wa man ‘Asarahum min Dhuwi al-Sultan al-Akbar*, Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, Beirut, 2016. p.77.

³² Al-Idrissi, *Nuzhat al-Mushtaq fi Ikhtiraq al-Afaq*, Religious Culture Library, Cairo, 2002. p.107.

³³ Ahmad Abu al-‘Abbas al-Maqqari, *Nafh al-Tib min Ghusn al-Andalus al-Ratib, wa Dhikr Wazirihā Lisan al-Din Ibn al-Khatib*, p.205.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 205–206.

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conditions such as winds and sudden sandstorms, considered among the greatest dangers facing the caravan³⁵.

Another common risk was getting lost in the desert, where there were no visible paths or tracks. The inevitable result of losing one's way was death. The fear of this was so deeply rooted in the travelers' minds that they attributed it to the work of demons³⁶. Ibn Battuta remarked on this, saying: "*That desert is full of devils. If the scout travels alone, they play with him and lure him until he loses his direction and perishes...*"³⁷.

The main and most natural danger that trade caravans faced during their long and exhausting journey across the desert was the scarcity of water sources and the vast distances between them. It was rare to find water every day—sometimes it would not be found for a week or even two³⁸. This prompted traders in general—and those of the Maqqari company in particular—to search for water sources, leading them to dig wells along the trade routes to ensure their survival³⁹. They would also fortify wells exposed to the risk of sandstorms and reinforce them internally with the bones of dead camels, covering them with the animals' skins to preserve them.

Moreover, they tried to collect rainwater in areas where it accumulated, especially where trees with thick trunks grew—rainwater would settle inside these trunks, forming natural basins from which people could drink⁴⁰. However, relying on such water was a gamble, since its availability depended on chance. A lack of favorable luck could lead to the caravan members' death⁴¹.

³⁵ Belarbi, Khaled. *al-Alaqat al-Maghribiyya al-Sudaniyya: Mundhu Duful al-Islam ila al-Qarn 19*. Algeria: Dar al-Huda, 2011, p. 39.

³⁶ Latifa Bachari, *al-'Alaqat al-Tijariyya li-l-Maghrib al-Awsat fi 'Ahd Imarat Bani 'Abd al-Wad min al-Qarn al-Sabi' ila al-Qarn al-'Ashir Hijri (13th–16th centuries CE)*, Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments, Algeria, 2011. p.83.

³⁷ Ibn Battuta, *The Journey of Ibn Battuta*, 1992, p. 441.

³⁸ Al-Idrissi. *Nuzhat al-Mushtaq fi Ikhtiraq al-Afaq*. p. 19.

³⁹ Ahmad Abu al-'Abbas al-Maqqari, *Nafh al-Tib min Ghushn al-Andalus al-Ratib, wa Dhikr Wazirihā Lisan al-Din Ibn al-Khatib*, p. 205.

⁴⁰ Ibn Battuta, *The Journey of Ibn Battuta*, 1992, p. 441

⁴¹ Latifa Bachari, *al-'Alaqat al-Tijariyya li-l-Maghrib al-Awsat fi 'Ahd Imarat Bani 'Abd al-Wad min al-Qarn al-Sabi' ila al-Qarn al-'Ashir Hijri (13th–16th centuries CE)*, pp. 82–83.

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In addition to natural dangers, trade caravans also faced harassment from bandits who were particularly active along desert routes⁴². Since the distance covered by the caravans passed through desolate lands with little water or pasture—essentially sand dunes—these areas often served as hideouts for raiders who launched sudden attacks on caravans, stripping them of their goods and wealth⁴³. These attacks were most frequent on the return journey, when the caravans were laden with gold dust.

2.3 Trade Routes and Centers:

Although the desert constituted a vast and naturally hazardous space, this did not diminish the prosperity of Saharan trade. Undoubtedly, this prosperity was due to the routes and paths traced by trade caravans over the centuries. These routes became the true connection between many Maghrebi cities—particularly Tlemcen—and Western Sudan.

In any case, the trade caravan that included merchants from the Maqqari company undoubtedly followed, in its first stage, the route from Tlemcen through Sijilmasa. This path, although longer, was safer from bandit attacks. Additionally, Sijilmasa served as a key meeting point for the exchange of goods by Maqqari merchants⁴⁴. Thus, the caravans would depart from Tlemcen toward Oujda, cross the Anjād region, and continue to Taza and then Fez, which is about a ten-day journey from Tlemcen. From there, they would proceed to Safrou, Tadla, Aghmat, Rika, and finally reach Sijilmasa⁴⁵.

The second stage connected Sijilmasa with the cities of Western Sudan, marking the final stretch for Maqqari traders heading into the Sudan region. From Sijilmasa, the caravans would proceed to Taghaza, the salt-producing city—a journey of approximately twenty-five days—then continue to Iwalatan, the first administrative

⁴² Muhammad Zanbir, *al-Maghrib fi al-‘Asr al-Wasit, al-Dawla al-Madina, al-Iqtisad*, Rabat, Al-Najah Al-Jadida Press, 1999, p. 415.

⁴³ Jamila bin Moussa, *Tijarat al-Dhahab fi al-Maghrib al-Islami wa al-Sudan al-Gharbi min al-Qarn al-Thalith Hijri – al-Ashir Miladi ila al-Qarn al-Tasi‘ Hijri – al-Sadis Ashar Miladi*, Algeria, Pluto Publications, 2011, p. 70.

⁴⁴ Ahmad Abu al-‘Abbas al-Maqqari, *Nafh al-Tib min Ghusn al-Andalus al-Ratib, wa Dhikr Wazirihā Lisan al-Din Ibn al-Khatib*, p. 205.

⁴⁵ Latifa Bachari, *al-‘Alaqat al-Tijariyya li-l-Maghrib al-Awsat fi ‘Ahd Imarat Bani ‘Abd al-Wad min al-Qarn al-Sabi‘ ila al-Qarn al-‘Ashir Hijri (13th–16th centuries CE)*, p. 73.

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town of Western Sudan. The full journey from Sijilmasa to Iwalatan took about two full months. Thus, we can say that the route commonly used by the Maqqari company merchants started at Sijilmasa, passed through Taghaza, and reached Iwalatan, the entry point into the Western Sudan. This was the route frequently used by trade caravans in the 8th century AH / 14th century CE ⁴⁶

What is particularly noteworthy about these caravan routes is that they led to the emergence of several important trading centers along and near the trans-Saharan trade corridors. As the primary goal of Maghrebi merchants in general—and Maqqari merchants in particular—was to reach the Sudanese cities after penetrating the desert, some areas along these routes became permanent settlements where they conducted their commercial activities.

This is evident in the words of Ahmad al-Maqqari, who said: "*‘Abd al-Rahman was in Sijilmasa, and ‘Abd al-Wahid and ‘Ali were in Iwalatan. They built homes and walls in these regions, married local women, and fathered children with their concubines...*" ⁴⁷.

This shows that the most important commercial centers for the Maqqari company were Sijilmasa—which became the starting point for caravans heading north, east, and south due to its strategic location on the trade route connecting Mediterranean cities with Western Sudan. It evolved into a kind of desert port, where various goods exchanged between the Mediterranean and Sudanese regions converged. The Maqqari merchants adopted it as the central hub for exchanging goods between the northern cities and the Sudan ⁴⁸.

Perhaps the city of Taghaza also served as a stopover for the trade caravans coming from Sijilmasa, as the credit for establishing the route that passed through it—connecting the cities of the Maghreb with those of the lands of the Sudan—goes to its richness in salt⁴⁹.

⁴⁶ Ibn Battuta, *Riḥlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭa*, pp. 674–677.

⁴⁷ Ahmad Abu al-‘Abbas al-Maqqari, *Nafh al-Tib min Ghushn al-Andalus al-Ratib*, wa Dhikr Wazirihā Lisan al-Din Ibn al-Khatib, p. 205.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Latifa Bachari, *al-‘Alaqat al-Tijariyya li-l-Maghrib al-Awsat fi ‘Ahd Imarat Bani ‘Abd al-Wad min al-Qarn al-Sabi’ ila al-Qarn al-‘Ashir Hijri (13th–16th centuries CE)*, pp. 59-60.

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Iwalatan was considered the final station for those crossing the desert in general, and for the Maqqari company merchants in particular, due to its geographic location on the border between the savannah and the Sahara Desert, and its distance of about two months' journey from Sijilmasa. It was the closest city to the Maghreb from the Sudanese side, which made it an important commercial center frequently visited by Maghrebi traders. Moreover, the city's residents played a vital role as guides for trade caravans in the desert. Two members of the Maqqari family, 'Abd al-Wahid and 'Ali, settled in Iwalatan and established direct ties with Mansa Musa, king of Mali (1307–1332 CE). When Mansa 'Ali, king of Takrur, attacked the city, Mansa Musa protected them and facilitated their commercial activities, and they began supplying him with the goods he needed⁵⁰.

It is worth noting that these regions gradually developed—thanks to trade—into staging posts where caravans would rest, stock up on provisions, and replenish their merchandise. These stops became important markets that attracted merchants from both north and south of the Sahara. Major trade deals were conducted there, and they also served as consumer markets for goods exported from Western Sudan.

3.3 The Impact of the Maqqari Company on Public Life in Tlemcen and the Saharan Regions:

It is certain that the **Maqqari company** played a major role in strengthening trade relations and connections between Tlemcen and Western Sudan. It was largely responsible for supplying both regions with the goods they needed. Ahmad al-Maqqari provides us with some valuable information about the company's organization—specifically regarding how it studied the needs of both Tlemcen and the lands of Western Sudan, paid attention to supply and demand, and monitored market conditions⁵¹. The company's merchants would travel to the Sudanese kingdoms to acquire rare goods, which were in fact destined for export to Europe.

Meanwhile, the company exported to the Sudan a variety of goods not locally produced, based on what had been requested. Among the most important imports of the Maqqari company was

⁵⁰ Ahmad Abu al-'Abbas al-Maqqari, *Nafh al-Tib min Ghusn al-Andalus al-Ratib*, wa Dhikr Wazirihā Lisan al-Din Ibn al-Khatib, p. 206.

⁵¹ Ibid.

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leather⁵²—no doubt including tanned goatskins, used to make khuffs (leather slippers) for kings, as well as other types such as fitch and lamṭ skins. They also imported ivory⁵³, sourced from the tropical forest regions of the south where elephants and rhinoceroses lived. Ivory was widely used for inlaying, pulpits, luxury furniture, and was sometimes ground into powder for medicinal uses⁵⁴.

In addition, the Maqqari company merchants also sent walnuts from the desert, which were brought from the forested regions beyond the Sahara and sold in large quantities in Tlemcen⁵⁵. They also traded in ostrich feathers, which were highly sought after by the upper classes of Zayyanid society and the Maghreb in general, as they were used for making fans for ventilation or decoration in homes, halls, and other settings. A significant portion of these feathers was also exported to Europe, particularly to Majorca.

Another key product imported by the Maqqari merchants from Western Sudan was gold dust (al-tibr), which was abundantly available in the regions of Gao, Aoudaghost, and Ghana—the major gold-supplying cities⁵⁶.

On the other hand, the Maqqari company's exports to Western Sudan were quite diverse. Among the most important commodities they carried was salt, which was greatly lacking in the Sudanese regions. Salt was so valuable that its importance to the Sudanese was comparable to that of gold for the Maghrebis. This is why Sudanese merchants were willing to exchange it for equal weight in gold. Controlling the salt trade effectively meant monopolizing the gold coming from the south⁵⁷.

⁵² Ibid., p. 205.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Latifa Bachari, al-‘Alaqaṭ al-Tijariyya li-l-Maghrib al-Awsat fi ‘Ahd Imarat Bani ‘Abd al-Wad min al-Qarn al-Sabi‘ ila al-Qarn al-‘Ashir Hijri (13th–16th centuries CE), p. 229.

⁵⁵ Ahmad Abu al-‘Abbas al-Maqqari, *Nafh al-Tib min Ghushn al-Andalus al-Ratib*, wa Dhikr Wazirihā Lisan al-Din Ibn al-Khatib, p. 205.

⁵⁶ Al-Idrissi. *Nuzhat al-Mushtaq fi Ikhtiraq al-Afaq*, p. 24.

⁵⁷ Al-Wazzan, al-Hasan b. Muhammad (Leo Africanus). *Wasf Ifriqiya*. Translated by Muhammad Hajji and Muhammad al-Akhdar. 2nd ed. Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1983, p. 280.

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In addition to salt, the Maqqari merchants—like other Maghrebi traders—transported other goods to Western Sudan, such as glass jewelry. Ibn Battuta noted: "The traveler carries with him nothing but pieces of salt and glass trinkets."⁵⁸ They also brought spices, various fabrics, and metal items used in daily life, which were products of Maghrebi craftsmanship—used either as adornments or even as a form of currency⁵⁹. Other exports included wheat⁶⁰, as well as books, which were among the most important categories of goods traded in Western Sudan. Books were sold at high prices, especially in cultural centers like Timbuktu and Djenné, which eagerly welcomed all kinds of books brought by the traders.

The impact of the Maqqari company on the economic life of Tlemcen—and even Western Sudan—was also evident in the development of various industries, such as metalwork and textile production, turning Tlemcen into a market for Sudanese products. Undoubtedly, the influence of the company extended beyond the economic sphere to the social fabric of Tlemcen as well. The company's traders contributed to shaping the city's society through the slave trade, which was one of the most important commodities imported from Sudan⁶¹. The high demand for slaves stemmed from their use in the army as soldiers, in various crafts and industries, and in agricultural labor such as plowing. They were also employed as domestic servants.

Thanks to the effective organization of the Maqqari trading company, it came to control the trade routes linking Tlemcen with Western Sudan. The area over which it extended its influence enabled it to become part of the international trade network, as merchants would depart from Tlemcen in the north—considered a gateway for various ethnic groups coming from Europe—toward Sijilmasa, and from there into the Sahara. As a result, trade flourished between the

⁵⁸ Ibn Battuta, *Riḥlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭa*, p. 68.

⁵⁹ Al-Idrissi, *Nuzhat al-Mushtaq*, p. 39.

⁶⁰ Ibn Battuta, *Riḥlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭa*, p. 453.

⁶¹ Latifa Bachari, *al-'Alaḳat al-Tijariyya li-l-Maghrib al-Awsat fi 'Ahd Imarat Bani 'Abd al-Wad min al-Qarn al-Sabi' ila al-Qarn al-'Ashir Hijri (13th–16th centuries CE)*, p. 218.

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three regions, and the profits of the Maqqari company grew significantly, with its wealth multiplying beyond measure⁶².

Perhaps the most important factor contributing to this success was the company's close relationships with the kings of those regions. They established and solidified ties with them, which enabled the Maqqari merchants to conduct business throughout all areas and territories. Their trade routes and methods became smoother and more accessible. As al-Maqqari noted in *Nafh al-Tib*:

“One of the two brothers established a relationship with the king of Tadrart, treated him kindly, and won his favor, which allowed him to trade freely across the entire kingdom... Their profits grew and multiplied beyond limits, almost surpassing what could be counted or measured.”⁶³

Thus, the dangers surrounding the Maqqari traders in particular—and Maghrebi traders in general—were neither intense nor frequent enough to deter them from trading. On the contrary, the privileges they received helped them expand their capital wealth, as pointed out by Ibn Khaldun, who said:

“We find that the merchants who venture into the lands of the Sudan are the most well-off and wealthy, despite the long and exhausting journey, the dangers of the wilderness, and the constant threats of fear and thirst.”⁶⁴

This commercial activity was not only vital for the Maqqari traders—it also became a source of livelihood for the Saharan tribes who provided protection and guidance to the caravans.

Furthermore, the commercial movement of the Maqqari company actively contributed to the continuity and development of Saharan areas like Sijilmasa and Iwalatan, as a result of the company's settlements in these regions and the economic importance it brought⁶⁵. This had a significant impact on the lives of the local population, gradually transforming these towns into commercial

⁶² Ahmad Abu al-‘Abbas al-Maqqari, *Nafh al-Tib min Ghushn al-Andalus al-Ratib*, wa Dhikr Wazirihā Lisan al-Din Ibn al-Khatib, p. 206.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ ‘Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimet Ibn Khaldun*, p. 321.

⁶⁵ Muhammad al-Sharif, *Muhadharat wa Mabath fi Tarikh al-Maghrib al-Marini wa Hadaratih*, Tetouan, Al-Hidaya Press, [n.d.]. p. 156.

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centers that attracted caravans for buying, selling, and replenishing supplies before continuing their journeys to other destinations.

The Maqqari merchants also contributed to the population density of these regions, becoming involved in urban and social development. This is evident in what al-Maqqari also noted:

“They built homes and walls, married local women, and had children with their concubines...”⁶⁶

This indicates that their influence was not limited to trade techniques and material life, but also extended to cultural and social aspects of Sudanese society. The presence of Maqqari family members in the desert regions, and their marriages to Sudanese women, led to a continuous blending of bloodlines, which certainly helped integrate Maghrebis into Sudanese society, including learning the local language.

In return, they contributed to spreading Islam, Islamic culture, and the development of religious sciences in Sudan, thanks to the strength and influence of their commercial networks, which represented Islamic civilization. Since writing was essential for all commercial transactions, the Maqqari traders no doubt took part in teaching literacy to the Sudanese to facilitate trade dealings.

Test	Result 1	Result 2	Result 3
15.21	15.21	15.21	15.21
18.58	18.58	18.58	18.58
11.14	11.14	11.14	11.14

4. The Bankruptcy of the Maqqari Company:

There is no doubt that the era of prosperity once experienced by the Maqqari company did not last into the later centuries. The company's activity declined and entered a phase of deterioration during the second half of the 8th century AH / 14th century CE. By the time "the grandfather," Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad al-Maqqari was born, only remnants of the company remained—among them, a large library. He expressed this by saying:

⁶⁶ Ahmad Abu al-'Abbas al-Maqqari, *Nafh al-Tib min Ghusn al-Andalus al-Ratib, wa Dhikr Wazirihā Lisan al-Din Ibn al-Khatib*, p. 205.

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"Their condition continued to deteriorate until this time, and here I am, having witnessed only the traces of their fortune. We have lived off its leftovers and respected its origins. Among what remained was a large library and many resources that supported the pursuit of knowledge."⁶⁷

In discussing the reasons behind the Maqqari company's decline, one must return to what al-Maqqari himself noted:

"When those elders passed away, their sons began to spend what they had inherited without working to grow it. They were met with successive strife and did not escape the tyranny of rulers."⁶⁸

It seems that the great profits made by the company's founders did not last into the hands of their descendants, as those profits were not reinvested in productive sectors. Instead, the heirs spent what they had inherited without engaging in development or investment. Certainly, part of the wealth was spent on acquiring property, building houses and palaces, and buying slaves and servants, while the rest was spent on various forms of consumption. This eventually had a negative impact on their trade.

Al-Idrissi presents a historical example of such behavior, though from an earlier period (6th century AH / 12th century CE), concerning the merchants of Aghmat. Despite the chronological gap between them and the Maqqari merchants, the example remains relevant. He described how merchants managed their wealth:

"If one of them possessed four thousand dinars, he would keep half for himself and invest the other half in trade."⁶⁹

Moreover, internal conflicts and wars in Tlemcen contributed to the company's downfall. The city experienced periods of war and instability, which had a damaging effect on commercial activity. Tlemcen suffered many shocks due to the intense struggle between the Zayyanids and the Marinids over control of Sijilmasa, as it was the most important transit hub for Saharan trade⁷⁰.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Al-Idrissi, *Nuzhat al-Mushtaq fi Ikhtiraq al-Afaq*, p. 232.

⁷⁰ Ahmad Azzaoui, *Qaḍāyā Tārikhiyya Khilāl al-ʿAṣrayn al-Muwaḥḥidī wa al-Marīnī*, Rabat, Ranit Publishing, 2010. pp. 151–154.

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Additionally, repeated sieges imposed on the city caused severe economic and human losses⁷¹. These sieges disrupted commercial life and inflicted heavy damage, especially considering that Tlemcen was a major commercial center with a prominent role in both Maghrebi and Saharan trade.

Conflicts within the ruling Zayyanid dynasty also had a negative impact on trade, as they led to road blockages and insecurity. In many cases, safety vanished, and banditry became widespread along several trade routes and in regions far from the state's center or those controlled by Arab tribes⁷². This situation undoubtedly weakened major trade routes such as the Sijilmasa route, which began to gradually decline when Bedouins spread along the road linking Sijilmasa to Tlemcen. As a result, merchants were forced to reroute through Tuat instead⁷³.

Likewise, the city of Iwalatan also began to decline from the second half of the 8th century AH / 14th century CE, as merchants—including those from the Maghreb—started abandoning it in favor of Timbuktu and Gao⁷⁴. It was thus natural for the activity of the Maqqari company to weaken in tandem with the decline of these trade centers—Sijilmasa and Iwalatan—that had served as hubs for its merchants.

Another factor to consider is the role of Jewish intermediaries in trade. During this period, the Jewish community gained increasing control over the economy in the Zayyanid state. Although Muslim merchants dominated the caravans headed to Western Sudan, the Jewish presence in Saharan trade hubs along these caravan routes allowed them to take on the role of intermediaries, resulting in a decline in the influence of trading agencies and companies, including the Maqqari company.

5. Conclusion:

From the foregoing, it can be said that the Maqqari company represented a model similar to today's major trading corporations, as seen in its significant role in commercial relations between Tlemcen

⁷¹ 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun, *Al-'Ibar wa Diwan al-Mubtada' wa al-Khabar fi Ayyam al-'Arab wa al-'Ajam wa man 'Asarahum min Dhuwi al-Sultan al-Akbar*, Beirut, Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2016. p. 100.

⁷² Hasan al-Wazzan, *Wasf Ifriqiya*, pp. 122–123.

⁷³ Ibn Khaldun, *al-'Ibar*, pp. 330–333.

⁷⁴ Latifa Bachari, *al-'Alāqāt al-Tijāriyya*, p. 62.

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and Western Sudan. The company's internal organization clearly shows that it analyzed the needs of both regions—Tlemcen and Sudan—in terms of goods and commodities, paid attention to supply and demand, and monitored market conditions, all of which contributed to its growth and prosperity.

Through its trade with Saharan regions, the Maqqari company brought substantial revenue to Tlemcen. In particular, the gold trade, which flourished in Western Sudan, played a vital role in the Zayyanid economy and became the pillar of its exports. This trade enriched Tlemcen and its people to such an extent that its princes were capable of granting loans to others. This is evident in a letter sent by Abu Tashfin I to James II of Aragon, in which he said:

“If you accept our terms, peace will be established between us. And if you need us to lend you gold, we shall do so.”

The Maqqari company also contributed to the prosperity of the Sudanese through the importation of gold, which was highly important in Sudanese history. The trade connected them to the outside world, breaking their isolation. During the medieval period, this trade played a major role in the rise of empires in that region.

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