



The Role of Guides in the Trans-Saharan Caravan Trade (7th-9th AH / 13th-15th AD)

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Abstract:

Guides played an active and effective role, which flourished through their guidance of commercial caravans for both parties in exchange for a specified wage. The role of guides was not limited to periods of war and peace. Muslims relied on guides in the trans-Saharan caravan trade between the 7th and 9th centuries AH due to their knowledge of routes and paths, as well as the axes of commercial caravans that thrived thanks to them (Maza bint Al-Baqmi, 2017, p. 33). Thanks to these guides, caravans were able to avoid natural and human difficulties and obstacles. The caravans had an urgent need for a guide knowledgeable about the desert and skilled in navigating it with precision that left no room for error; otherwise, goods would be lost and lives would perish. The guide also had assistants whose tasks included conveying his directions to various parts of the caravan to ensure no one got left behind. Each assistant would guide the section of the caravan for which he was responsible to the station where they would stop for rest in case of separation for any reason (Maza bint Al-Baqmi, 2017, p. 33).

Key-words : Guides (Adilla') , Trans-Saharan Trade , Caravan Routes , Marinid State , Kingdom of Mali, Desert Navigation.

Résumé :

Les guides ont joué un rôle actif et efficace, qui s'est épanoui grâce à leur mission d'accompagnement des caravanes commerciales pour le compte des deux parties, en échange d'un salaire convenu. Le rôle des guides ne se limitait pas aux périodes de guerre et de paix. Les musulmans comptaient sur les guides dans le commerce caravaniers transsaharien entre le VIIe et le IXe siècle de l'Hégire en raison de leur connaissance des itinéraires et des chemins, ainsi que des axes des caravanes commerciales qui prospéraient grâce à eux (Maza bint Al-Baqmi, 2017, p. 33). Grâce à ces guides, les caravanes pouvaient éviter les difficultés et les obstacles naturels et humains. Les caravanes avaient un besoin urgent d'un guide connaissant bien le désert et capable de s'y orienter avec une précision ne laissant aucune place à l'erreur ; sinon, les marchandises seraient perdues et des vies seraient sacrifiées. Le guide disposait également d'assistants dont les tâches consistaient notamment à transmettre ses instructions aux différentes parties de la caravane afin de s'assurer que personne ne soit laissé derrière. Chaque assistant guidait la section de la caravane dont il était responsable jusqu'au relais où ils s'arrêtaient pour se reposer en cas de séparation pour quelque raison que ce soit (Maza bint Al-Baqmi, 2017, p. 33).

Mots-clés : Guides (Adilla') , Commerce transsaharien , Routes caravanières, État mérinide, Royaume du Mali, Navigation dans le désert.



Definition of Guides (Adilla):

The term is derived from "dalil" (guide). Linguistically, it comes from "dalla" meaning to indicate or show the way, giving "dalala" and "dalula". "Dalil" is the active participle meaning the one who shows the way (dal). The plural is "adilla". Synonyms include "**Murshid**" (guide), derived from "رشد" (rushd) meaning righteousness or guidance, and "Irshad" meaning direction and indication. The "Murshid" is the one who guides the lost person, i.e., leads him to the path and acquaints him with it (Maza bint Al-Baqmi, 2017, p. 33). It becomes clear from the definitions of linguists that "dalil" and "murshid" carry the same meaning. Therefore, the guide (dalil/murshid) can be defined as a skilled man who guides to the path, uncovers its hidden features, and leads to a destination with evidence. It is worth noting that linguists have other synonyms meaning guide, such as the one who shows the path, knows its hidden ways and unknown narrow passages if he is skilled in the route. Accordingly, one can say that the meaning of dalil and murshid is the one who guides and points to the path, despite the different terms used, all leading to one meaning: the guide (Maza bint Al-Baqmi, 2017, p. 34).

The guide held an important role for both Muslims and Christians alike. For Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) during his Hijra from Mecca to Medina, accompanied by Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq, hired a guide from the polytheists of Quraysh belonging to the Banu Al-Dail tribe named Abdullah bin Uraiquit to lead them to Medina, giving them his mount in exchange for his guidance (Maza bint Al-Baqmi, 2017, p.

34). The role of the guide also emerged in the conquest of cities during the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs. For instance, during the siege of Caesarea by Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab (13-23 AH / 634-643 AD) specifically in the year (19 AH / 640 AD), a Jewish guide showed them a route to capture the city in exchange for safety for himself, and that was accomplished. Muslims also used guides during conquests in parts of the Levant and Iraq, such as the Battle of Al-Anbar (13 AH / 633 AD) and the conquest of Al-Mada'in (16 AH / 637 AD), among others (Maza bint Al-Baqmi, 2017, p. 34). The role of guides was not limited to the Prophetic or Rashidun eras but extended into the Abbasid era (132-656 AH / 749-1257 AD), specifically in the year (19 AH / 640 AD) [Note: This date appears to be a typo in the original text; the context suggests a later Abbasid date, possibly 165 AH/782 AD as mentioned next]. During the siege of Caesarea, a Jewish guide showed them a route... [The text contains a repeated paragraph. Correcting based on subsequent content:] Caliph Harun al-Rashid (170-193 AH / 786-808 AD) concluded a treaty with the Byzantine Empress Irene (797-802 AD) in the year 165 AH / 782 AD, whereby she agreed to supply the Caliph with guides during his campaigns against certain forts in Byzantine lands. This demonstrates the importance of guides and their role for Muslims throughout historical periods (Maza bint Al-Baqmi, 2017, p. 35). For Muslims, their knowledge of guides dates back to early periods due to their journeys to the Holy Lands (Hajj and Umrah). These pilgrims needed someone to guide them to those places, as is evident from the accounts of Muslim and European travelers and geographers regarding the importance of hiring guides (Maza bint Al-Baqmi, 2017, p. 37). Both Arabs and Christians were in dire need of an Arab guide, especially across vast deserts



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and caves, for protection from getting lost. This pertains to the peaceful guidance of Christian visitors, but guides also played a role in warfare (Maza bint Al-Baqmi, 2017, p. 37).

1- Routes and Axes of Trans-Saharan Caravan Trade (Case Study: The Marinid State and the Kingdom of Mali):

By axes here we mean the network of routes and paths connecting two or more regions. Thus, an axis is a set of routes sharing a common direction and linking commercial centers. Researchers have differed on determining the number of trade routes and axes connecting North Africa on one hand with the Sahara and the Sudan region (West Africa) on the other. However, they agree on three main axes: The Eastern Axis connecting Egypt, Fezzan, and Ifriqiya with the Sahara and Sudan; the Central Axis connecting the Central Maghreb with the Sahara and Sudan; and the Western Axis, considered the most important, whose routes originated from the Far Maghreb (Morocco) towards the Sahara and Sudan. These trans-Saharan trade routes did not always follow easy paths or water points or other natural factors aiding desert crossing; they were also linked to security and political factors.

1.1. Guides and the Hardships of Travel:

Regarding the migrations of the Warjlan (Ouargla) tribes, Al-Idrisi described some aspects of their economic life, noting that their tribes were wealthy, known for their prosperity, and had prominent activity in sub-Saharan Africa, especially in the purchase and trade of gold. Many of them came to the region as merchants, scholars, or scholar-merchants, contributing to the spread of Islam and Arab-Islamic culture. Many settled there. The Warjlan merchant and scholar Abu

Ya'qub Yusuf ibn Ibrahim (d. 570 AH / 1174 AD) eloquently described the hardships and toil of travel in this region after returning safely, having seen the specter of death with his own eyes in the wastelands beyond the desert (Bahaz, 1993, p. 222). Guides contributed to the flourishing of the trade in books and manuscripts coming from the Islamic East or West, which were important commercial goods generating profits for their traders (Al-Idrisi, 1983, p. 39).

1.1. The Role of Guides in Solving Problems Facing Trans-Saharan Trade:

1.1.1. Obstacle One: The Problem of Water.

The locations of water sources played a role in determining caravan routes, controlling the network and direction of roads. Water remained a major obstacle to trade, especially on desert routes. Al-Hasan al-Wazzan noted that the Libyan desert has no rivers or water except for some brackish wells. In some areas, water is only found after six or seven days of travel (Al-Fasi, 1982, Vol. 1, p. 148).

1.1.2. Obstacle Two: The Difficulty of the Desert Route (Sanhaja).

Specifically, the routes from Walata to Timbuktu and from Sijilmasa to Timbuktu have scarce water, found only every 100 or 200 miles. Moreover, the water is salty and bitter, found in very deep wells (e.g., Azawad and Arawan wells; Arawan is 150 miles from Timbuktu), causing many deaths. On the Tlemcen-Timbuktu route through the land of the Wanzika (Almoravids), there is no water for nine days, forcing merchants to rely on water carried on camels or rainwater pools found by chance, though that only happens by accident (Al-Fasi, 1982, Vol. 1, p. 152). He described carrying water in



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leather bags (qirab) on camels. The wells were lined inside with camel hide or built with camel bones, vulnerable to winds and sandstorms, which are themselves natural problems, as winds carry sand and cover these wells. Merchants heading to sub-Saharan Africa sometimes found no water in usual places because sand had covered them, and they died of thirst. Travelers often see the bones of such men and camels in some places. A merchant might slaughter his camel to extract water from its stomach, drinking some and saving the rest until finding a well or dying of thirst. Additionally, he mentioned the problem of going astray due to the guide's error, noting that he lost his way when traveling from Walata to Cairo (Al-Fasi, 1982, Vol. 1, pp. 75-76).

1.1.3. Obstacle Three: Heat.

Heat is one of the most important problems facing caravan trade on their routes, especially in the desert. Al-Hasan al-Wazzan mentioned that many people die in the Sanhaja desert due to the heat, which is extremely dry and cannot be crossed easily (Al-Wazzan, 1982, Vol. 2, pp. 153-154). Ibn Khaldun described the route from Tamdult to Awdaghust, noting wells scattered along the way, which he said were the work of Abd al-Rahman ibn Habib. These wells, dug by or at least attributed to Abd al-Rahman ibn Habib, serve as evidence of this prince's (or the Umayyad governor's) southward orientation and his desire to secure the route towards the Sudan region and improve travel conditions. Al-Bakri mentioned a well in the desert on the route from the Draa Valley to the Sudan region called "Tazamt." It is a specific, non-fresh well, closer to salinity, dug into solid rock from earlier times. Some people claim the Umayyads made it.

This account, if true, confirms that Umayyad officials were digging wells on the route to the Sudan region, desiring to exploit its resources and keen to encourage caravan trade, which would flourish later (Houari, 2021, p. 325). Sub-Saharan Africa is also characterized by intense heat and contains many predatory animals, wild beasts, and snakes (Al-Wazzan, 1982, Vol. 2, p. 148).

1.1.4. Obstacle Four: Lack of Security.

Insecurity is a major barrier for Maghrebi trade heading to sub-Saharan Africa. They usually face numerous security risks. Tension between regions is among the factors negatively affecting the activity of commercial caravans heading there. Al-Hasan al-Wazzan mentioned the conflict between the Sahara inhabited by the Lamta tribe and the Warjlan, the latter expanding at the expense of the former's territory, which negatively impacted commercial caravans passing through the desert because they plunder and loot passing merchants. Additionally, they face highway robbers and bandits who occupy and control the routes leading to water wells, aiming to intercept traders. The Tuareg also posed a significant obstacle to trans-Saharan trade between the 9th AH/14th AD and 10th AH/16th AD centuries, with Timbuktu being one of the most affected coastal cities. Their rise led to the decline of Walata as a commercial link between the North, the Taghaza salt mines, and West Africa (Al-Wazzan, 1982, Vol. 2, p. 81).

1.1.5. Obstacle Five: Payment of Taxes (Customs Duties).

Caravans in their trade typically pay transit taxes, especially at regional borders or during their movement. Al-Hasan al-Wazzan paid a tribute to their emir upon arriving at



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Arawan. On the route connecting Sijilmasa and Draa, a quarter mithqal was paid per camel, the same amount imposed on each Jewish merchant (Al-Wazzan, 1982, Vol. 2, p. 129). Similarly, on the route between Fez and Sijilmasa via Khenifra, merchants were forced to pay a high sum of money. Caravans crossing the Libyan desert pay a tribute to their emir consisting of a piece of cloth worth one dinar per camel load (Al-Wazzan, 1982, Vol. 1, p. 60).

1.2. Muslim Merchants, Routes and Axes of Caravan Trade, and the Role of Guides in the Western Sudan (West Africa):

Islam strongly propelled commercial activity, urging its followers to seek provision and migrate for that purpose. The Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates worked to develop Islamic state resources, stimulate trade, protect Muslim merchandise by land and sea, and ensure the safety of merchants and their goods, especially after gaining control over land and sea trade routes. Muslim merchant caravans crossed the Great Sahara to the kingdoms of the Western Sudan from Egypt and North Africa, using routes that existed before Islam. The caravans from Egypt to the Western Sudan took two main routes: (1) Via the oases to Kanem and then to the Western Sudan (Alexandria -> Ghadames -> Tadamaka -> Western Sudan). Caravans from Ifriqiya to the Western Sudan took two routes: (1) From Kairouan or Qal'at Abi Talib (which became a city after Kairouan's ruin) to Ghadames, then Tadamaka, then Western Sudan (Al-Nuqayrah, 1988, p. 34); (2) From Tlemcen to Tuwab, then Takrur (or Takedda), then Tadamaka, then Western Sudan (Al-Nuqayrah, 1988, p. 34). Caravans from the West (Maghreb) to the Western Sudan took two routes: (1)

From Sijilmasa to Awdaghust, then Western Sudan; (2) From Sijilmasa to Awlil on the Atlantic coast, then the mouth of the Senegal River, then Western Sudan. Some of these routes converged at specific points like Ghadames (meeting point of routes from Egypt and Ifriqiya), Tuwat (meeting point of routes from Ifriqiya and the Maghreb), and Awdaghust (meeting point of routes from Ifriqiya and the Far and Central Maghreb) (Al-Nuqayrah, 1988, p. 34). To overcome these obstacles, experienced guides were necessary. Each caravan route consisted of a set of parallel tracks, sometimes separated by several kilometers but merging at the end of each stage. Each caravan had to choose the suitable track, as no single track could provide all the caravan's needs. They had to distribute themselves across the route's tracks to secure sufficient pasture for their camels, firewood for warmth and food preparation, and access to water. Caravan movements increased in autumn to avoid flowing valleys or large pools whose waters cover relatively vast areas during this season (Al-Muhandis, 2017, pp. 185-186). Despite water scarcity and lack of wells along this route and the effect of salinity on the areas it crosses, Al-Bakri mentioned that travelers obtained fresh water by following unspecified routes, which we believe were suggested by guides knowledgeable about the region's secrets. Al-Bakri stated in this regard: "They drink from pools they find contemptible... but they find it fresh" (Al-Muhandis, 2017, p. 189).

1.3. The Caravan Guide:

Desert inhabitants covered their wells with stone slabs to protect them from being filled with sand, removing them only when necessary. Sand often accumulated over these slabs, covering them, leaving no marker for the well's location,



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making it difficult for non-locals to find it. This situation justified the caravans' urgent need for a guide knowledgeable about the desert and skilled in navigating it with precision that left no room for error; otherwise, goods would be lost and lives would perish (Ibn Battuta, 1997, Vol. 4, p. 242). Ibn Khaldun noted that between the Maghreb and Mali was a "trackless desert where no path is visible, and entry is only possible with an expert guide from the Mulaththamun (veiled Sanhaja), whom merchants hire on the best terms" (Bouaziz, n.d., p. 133). This guide was the most knowledgeable person about the trade routes due to his frequent travel across those wastelands. Ibn Battuta stated: "I saw among the wonders that the guide who led us was blind in one eye and had a diseased other, yet he was the most knowledgeable person about the road" (Ibn Battuta, 1997, Vol. 4, p. 243). This guide was highly knowledgeable about desert paths to prevent the caravan from getting lost. He also possessed great intelligence. The guide for Ibn Battuta's caravan was from the Masufa tribe.

1.3. Al-Takshif (Scouts/Forerunners) and its Relation to Guides:

The guide had assistants whose task was to convey his directions to various parts of the caravan to ensure no one got left behind. Each would guide the section for which he was responsible to the stop station in case of separation for any reason. Ibn Battuta called these assistants "Al-Takshif". The task of this type of guide's assistant was to be sent ahead by the caravan merchants when approaching a commercial center. They carried letters to their agents there, requesting them to reserve rooms for accommodation and storage, and

to meet them with water supplies at a distance of two or three days' journey, as the caravan crossed a vast waterless desert. If the Takshif got lost or died of thirst, the caravan could perish (Ibn Battuta, 1997, Vol. 4, p. 242). Ibn Battuta's description indicates that the Takshif was a man from the Masufa tribe hired by the caravan merchants. He would go ahead to Iwalatan (Walata) with letters from people to their contacts, asking them to prepare many houses and come out to meet them with water up to four days' journey (Al-Muhandis, 2017, p. 203). The task was difficult given the dangers surrounding caravans in desert paths. The caravan's successful arrival at Iwalatan depended on his success. The Takshif was likely not a single person but was assisted by a group of others, as indicated by Ibn Battuta's statement: "That desert is full of demons (metaphor for dangers/mirage). If the Takshif was alone, they would play with him and lead him astray until he perishes" (Ibn Battuta, 1997, Vol. 4, p. 242). The Takshif accompanied the caravan on its journey from the Maghreb to the Western Sudan. He was therefore part of the caravan leader's inner circle, although his task only began upon approaching the city of Iwalatan. Ibn Battuta did not specify where the Takshif was hired, only mentioning the village of Tasirhala as the place from which he was sent ahead to Iwalatan. From there, we might suggest that the caravan's organization involved a large crew headed by its commander and the men performing scouting or guiding duties. The Takshif was hired for one hundred mithqals of gold in the 8th AH/14th AD century, the price paid by Ibn Battuta's caravan to the one who performed this task (Al-Muhandis, 2017, pp. 203-204).



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