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The Central Maghreb: A Geographical and Demographic Study

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Abstract: *This study investigates the geographical delineation and human demographic landscape of the Central Maghreb (modern-day Algeria) throughout the medieval era. It analyzes the etymological emergence of the term across classical geographers and chronicles, explores the fluctuating boundaries governed by regional polities, examines tribal demographic restructuring—contrasting indigenous Berber confederations (Butr and Baranis) with Arab migratory waves (Qaysi, Yamani, and Banu Hilal)—and assesses the political, commercial, and intellectual roles of leading urban centers. Findings demonstrate that the Central Maghreb maintained an enduring Amazigh sociocultural identity enriched by Islamic culture, serving as a vital strategic bridge across Mediterranean and Saharan networks.*

Keywords: *Central Maghreb, Historical Demography, Medieval Geography, Berber Confederations, Arab Migrations, Tahert, Qal'at Bani Hammad, Bejaia, APA 7th Edition.*

1. Introduction

The historical emergence of the Central Maghreb (al-Maghrib al-Awsat) was intrinsically linked to the territorial conceptualization of the Nearer Maghreb (al-Maghrib al-Adna) and the Farther Maghreb (al-Maghrib al-Aqsa). Had it not been for the administrative imperative of regional division mandated by the Islamic Caliphate in the East, the threefold Maghrebi territorial continuum would have remained known comprehensively under the unified

designation of the Islamic Maghreb, stretching from Cyrenaica (Barqa) in the east to the Atlantic Ocean ('Sea of Darkness') in the west (Amara, 2003; Ben Halima, 2021).

Furthermore, the early rise of autonomous regional dynasties in this territory at the onset of the Abbasid Caliphate necessitated precise geographical demarcation. These polities had to distinguish between territories held under their sovereignty and external domains, whether governed by rival independent entities or nominally answering to the Abbasid Caliphate. Consequently, the three Maghrebi divisions coalesced, with the Central Maghreb roughly corresponding to modern-day Algeria. Notably, the borders of this realm oscillated dynamically across the Middle Ages depending on the political potency and expansionist reach of successive governing dynasties (Amara, 2003; al-Hariri, 1985).

Throughout the medieval era, this territory represented a paramount crossroad in terms of strategic geography and geopolitical leadership. Concurrently, its demographic fabric was characterized by intricate heterogeneity, shaped by indigenous Berber confederations displaying diverse sedentary and nomadic modes of subsistence, as well as arriving Arab groups whose migration profoundly restructured the regional demographic landscape (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/2000). This article provides a comprehensive investigation of the Central Maghreb, delineating its historical geography, examining its fluid borders, analyzing its demographic and tribal compositions, and spotlighting its preeminent urban citadels.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a rigorous historical-geographical and demographical methodology grounded in primary source critique and comparative historiographical analysis. Primary documentation is derived from medieval Arabic geographical treatises, travelogues, and chronicles, including the seminal works of al-Bakri (d. 487 AH / 1094 CE), al-Idrisi (d. 559 AH / 1166 CE), al-Istakhri (d. 346 AH / 957 CE), al-Muqaddasi (d. 380 AH / 990 CE), Yaqut al-Hamawi (d. 626 AH / 1229 CE), Ibn Sa'id al-Maghribi (d. 685 AH / 1286 CE), Ibn 'Idhari al-Marrakushi (d. 712 AH / 1312 CE), Abu al-Fida (d. 732 AH / 1331 CE), Ibn Khaldun (d. 808 AH / 1406 CE), and al-Himyari (d. 900 AH / 1494 CE).

Textual evidence from these historical authorities was subjected to cross-comparative content analysis and juxtaposed with contemporary academic interpretations (e.g., Amara, 2003; Dabbuz, 1963; al-Hariri, 1985; Hawala, 1999). Territorial configurations were evaluated along four directional axes (Northern Mediterranean frontier, Eastern boundary, Western boundary along the Moulouya River, and Southern Saharan threshold). Demographically, tribal distributions and sociocultural transformations were categorized following Ibn Khaldun's

genealogical classification into the Butr (nomadic/transhumant) and Baranis (sedentary) branches, alongside the successive waves of Arab settlement.

3. Results

3.1 Conceptual and Etymological Origins of the Term 'al-Maghrib al-Awsat'

The analytical review of primary geographical literature indicates that Abu 'Ubayd al-Bakri (d. 487 AH / 1094 CE) was among the earliest geographers to explicitly utilize the designation 'al-Maghrib al-Awsat,' noting: 'And this city of Tlemcen is the capital of the Central Maghreb' (al-Bakri, 1068/1992, p. 76). The term was likewise employed by al-Sharif al-Idrisi (d. 559 AH / 1166 CE), who stated: 'And Ashir, which belongs to the lands of the Central Maghreb' (al-Idrisi, 1154/1989, p. 258).

In the 7th century AH, Ibn Sa'id al-Maghribi (d. 685 AH / 1286 CE) referenced it alternately as 'al-Gharb al-Awsat' (the Middle West) in his biographical chronicle *Al-Mughrib fi Hula al-Maghrib*, writing in the entry for Abu al-Qasim Muhammad ibn Hani al-Azdi: 'Ja'far ibn 'Ali al-Andalusi, king of the Zab, journeyed from the Central Maghreb' (Ibn Sa'id, 1286/1955, p. 112). He also confirmed this in *Kitab al-Jughrafiya*: 'And to its east lies the metropolis of the Central Maghreb' (Ibn Sa'id, 1286/1970, p. 142). That Ibn Sa'id intended the exact geopolitical entity of the Central Maghreb is corroborated elsewhere when he explicitly referred to: 'The sultan of the Central Maghreb, Abu al-Rabi' ibn 'Abd Allah ibn 'Abd al-Mu'min' (Ibn Sa'id, 1286/1970, p. 165).

The designation was systematically utilized by successive chroniclers: Ibn 'Idhari al-Marrakushi (d. 712 AH / 1312 CE) recorded: 'Then 'Uqba turned back, retreating toward the lands of the Central Maghreb' (Ibn 'Idhari, 1312/1980, p. 28). The anonymous author of *Kitab al-Istibsar* dedicated a chapter heading to 'Mention of the Lands of the Central Maghreb' (Anonymous, 1191/1985, p. 120). Similarly, al-Ghubrini (d. 714 AH / 1314 CE), writing of jurist 'Abd al-Haqq ibn al-Rabi' al-Ansari, documented: 'I heard many scholars praise him, affirming that in his time, none equaled him across our Central Maghreb' (al-Ghubrini, 1314/1979, p. 84). Abu al-Fida (d. 732 AH / 1331 CE) observed in *Taqwim al-Buldan*: 'And the second parcel is known as the Central Maghreb' (Abu al-Fida, 1331/1840, p. 132).

In the 8th century AH, 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun (d. 808 AH / 1406 CE) solidified this usage, recounting his voyage from al-Andalus to Bejaia: 'The Banu 'Abd al-Wad were monarchs of Tlemcen and the Central Maghreb' (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/2000, Vol. 7, p. 287). He affirmed elsewhere regarding tribal tenure: 'As for the Central Maghreb, it was predominantly the

homeland of the Zanata, belonging to Maghrawa and Banu Yafran' (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/2000, Vol. 6, p. 115). In the late 9th century AH, al-Himyari (d. 900 AH / 1494 CE) recorded in *Al-Rawd al-Mi'tar*: 'Bejaia: The capital of the Middle West' (al-Himyari, 1494/1984, p. 95).

Table 1. Historiographical Conceptualization and Territorial Divisions of the Islamic Maghreb

Geopolitical Division	Modern Approximation	Historical Core Dynasties	Principal Urban Capitals
al-Maghrib al-Adna (Nearer Maghreb)	Tunisia, Tripolitania, Eastern Algeria	Aghlabids, Zirids, Hafsids	Kairouan, Mahdia, Tunis
al-Maghrib al-Awsat (Central Maghreb)	Algeria (central, western, coastal, Saharan)	Rustamids, Hammadids, Zayyanids	Tahert, Ashir, Qal'at Bani Hammad, Bejaia, Tlemcen
al-Maghrib al-Aqsa (Farther Maghreb)	Morocco (beyond Moulouya River)	Idrisids, Almoravids, Marinids	Fes, Marrakesh, Rabat

3.2 Geographic Delimitation: The Four Frontiers

Defining strict, permanent boundaries for medieval Maghrebi states remains challenging due to dynamic territorial fluctuations (Amara, 2003; Hawala, 1999). However, textual synthesis across medieval geographers reveals four well-established geographical markers:

1. Northern Frontier: Geographers unanimously identified the Mediterranean Sea as the invariant northern limit (al-Hariri, 1985). Unlike the Nearer Maghreb (which projected naval power into Sicily and Southern Italy) or the Farther Maghreb (which expanded into the Iberian Peninsula), the Central Maghreb's ruling states between the 2nd and 6th centuries AH (8th–12th CE) directed their geopolitical focus inland and along coastal littoral trade routes.
2. Eastern Frontier: The eastern boundary fluctuated significantly over time. Hawala (1999) and al-Hariri (1985) indicated that between the completion of the Islamic conquest and the mid-5th century AH, the boundary stretched from Bejaia and Tahert eastward toward the southern reaches of Ifriqiya, the Tripoli district, and Jabal Nafusa. Ibn Khaldun (1377/2000, Vol. 6, p. 120) affirmed that the Central Maghreb bordered eastward upon the Sanhaja lands encompassing

Algiers, the Mitidja plain, and lands extending toward Bejaia. Dabbuz (1963) established that Bejaia functioned as the definitive pivotal borderland dividing the Nearer and Central Maghreb.

3. Western Frontier: Geographers achieved broad consensus regarding the western frontier. Dabbuz (1963) noted that the Farther Maghreb extended from the Moulouya River (Wadi Muluya) westward to the Atlantic Ocean. Al-Qalqashandi (d. 821 AH / 1418 CE) emphasized in *Subh al-A'sha* that the western limit of Tlemcen—the western gateway of the Central Maghreb—terminated at the Moulouya River separating it from al-Gharb al-Aqsa (al-Qalqashandi, 1418/1913, Vol. 5, p. 154). This delimitation was fully endorsed by Ibn Khaldun (1377/2000, Vol. 6, p. 116).

4. Southern Frontier: The great Sahara Desert constituted the southern boundary of the Central Maghreb (al-Hariri, 1985; Hawala, 1999). Desert strongholds and oasis metropolises, most notably Ouargla (Warjlan), served as premier southern terminal ports for trans-Saharan commerce, binding sub-Saharan African trade with northern Mediterranean maritime outlets.

3.3 Historical Demography: Berber Confederations and Arab Migrations

The demographic structure of the medieval Central Maghreb comprised two primary human strata: the indigenous Berber populations and the inbound Arab tribes.

Indigenous Berber Confederations: Ibn Khaldun (1377/2000) classified the Berbers into two principal stems: the Madghis (surnamed al-Abtar, yielding the Butr confederations) and the Barnis (yielding the Baranis confederations). The Butr were largely pastoral, nomadic, and highly mobile, whereas the Baranis exhibited sedentary, agricultural lifestyles in mountain massifs and valleys:

- The Zanata: The largest Butr confederation occupying the Central Maghreb. Ibn Khaldun noted that this region was so overwhelmingly populated by them that it was termed 'Watan Zanata' (The Homeland of Zanata). Their habitats stretched from Ghadames in the east to Wadi Saoura near modern Bechar in the west, encompassing major branches such as Banu Yafran, Maghrawa, Banu Tujin, Banu 'Abd al-Wad, and Jarawa (al-Istakhri, 957/1927; al-Himyari, 1494/1984; Ibn Khaldun, 1377/2000).
- The Sanhaja: The preeminent Baranis confederation whose lands formed the core heartland of the Central Maghreb. Their territory extended along an axis from the Zouaoua mountains west of Kutama territory down to M'Sila in the south, and from the Mediterranean coast to Mount Zaccar along the Chelif River. Sub-tribes included Marasa, Azdaja around Oran, and Awraba near Tahert (al-Bakri, 1068/1992; Ibn Khaldun, 1377/2000).

- Other Major Confederations: The Kutama, who formed the formidable military bedrock for the rise of the Fatimid Caliphate in the highlands of Setif, Constantine, and Jijel; the Lawata and their offshoots (e.g., Mazata and Sadrata); the Hawwara; the Zouaoua in the Kabylie mountains; the Nafzawa near the Aures; and the Kumiya in the Honaine and Tlemcen littoral, who later constituted the military foundation for 'Abd al-Mu'min ibn 'Ali in establishing the Almohad Empire (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/2000).

Arab Settlement Waves: Ibn Khaldun (1377/2000) famously reflected on the scarcity of Arab presence in the Maghreb during early antiquity, attributing it to formidable Berber defense. Following the initial Islamic conquests of the 1st century AH—which introduced Qaysi and Yamani garrisons—the most consequential demographic transformation occurred during the 5th century AH (11th century CE) with the Hilalian migrations (Banu Hilal, Banu Sulaym, and allied groups) dispatched from Upper Egypt under Fatimid incitement against the Zirids (Dabbuz, 1963; Ibn Khaldun, 1377/2000):

- Banu Zughba: Settled intensively throughout the Central Maghreb, dominating the regions spanning between M'Sila, the central plains, and southern Tlemcen, eventually subjugating local Zanata factions (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/2000).
- Banu Riyah, Athbaj, and Dawawida: The Athbaj settled in the regions of Constantine and the Aures Mountains, while Banu Riyah took control of the M'Sila and Zab plains. The Dawawida held sway across the Zab, the Hodna basin, and trade routes toward Ouargla (Ibn Sa'id, 1286/1970; Ibn Khaldun, 1377/2000).
- Banu Mirdas and 'Atiyya: Banu Mirdas al-Sulaymi settled in the north near Annaba, while 'Atiyya occupied the environs of Jijel. In the western province of Oran, early Arabization was widespread through tribes such as Banu 'Amir, al-Dawa'ir, and al-Zamul (Ibn Khaldun, 1377/2000).

3.4 Urban Metropolises and Intellectual Radiance

Urban capitals in the Central Maghreb served as dynastic command centers, military bastions, and hubs of scholarship:

- Tahert (Tiaret): Founded as the capital of the Rustamid Imamatus (161–296 AH / 778–909 CE). Described by al-Istakhri (957/1927) as an expansive, fertile city governed by the Ibadi community, and hailed by Abu al-Fida (1331/1840) as 'Iraq al-Maghrib' (The Iraq of the Maghreb). Al-Muqaddasi (990/1906, p. 228) famously likened it to 'the Balkh of the Maghreb,' praising its abundant orchards, gushing springs, elegant bazaars, and prosperous scholars.

- Qal'at Bani Hammad: Established circa 398 AH (1007 CE) in the Hodna mountains by Hammad ibn Buluggin as the first capital of the independent Hammadid state (Yaqut al-Hamawi, 1229/1977; al-Himyari, 1494/1984). It represented an impregnable military citadel, prioritizing fortress defense during its foundational consolidation before imperial transfer to the coast.
- Bejaia (al-Nasiriyya): Renovated and designated in 460 AH (1067 CE) by al-Nasir ibn 'Alannas as the second Hammadid capital (al-Himyari, 1494/1984; Yaqut al-Hamawi, 1229/1977). Due to its premier Mediterranean seaport, Bejaia established flourishing commercial and academic exchanges with southern European maritime republics, becoming an indispensable channel through which Arab-Islamic science, mathematics, and philosophy entered Europe.
- Ashir and M'Sila: Ashir served as the foundational military stronghold of the Zirid and early Hammadid dynasties in the Titteri mountains (al-Idrisi, 1154/1989), whereas M'Sila (al-Muhammadiyya) was founded by the Fatimids in 315 AH (927 CE) as an advanced frontier outpost against western Zanata incursions.
- Constantine, Setif, and Algiers: Constantine maintained strategic prominence as an unbreachable rock fortress contested between Zirids, Hammadids, and Hafsids; Setif functioned as a commercial junction connecting mountain trade routes; while Algiers (Jaza'ir Bani Mazghanna), described by al-Himyari (1494/1984), grew around a sheltered anchorage welcoming merchant vessels from al-Andalus and Ifriqiya, rising to maritime eminence under the Zirids, Almoravids, and Zayyanids.

4. Discussion

The historical-geographical evolution of the Central Maghreb reveals that administrative and political nomenclature in medieval North Africa was dynamic rather than static. As articulated by Amara (2003), the designation 'al-Maghrib al-Awsat' was fundamentally a geographical expression reflecting a shifting geopolitical reality. It emerged prominently during the 5th century AH to delineate the Hammadid state mediating between the Badisid Zirids in Ifriqiya and the Almoravids in the Farther Maghreb. It receded during the unified Almohad Caliphate, only to re-emerge vigorously following Almohad fragmentation with the rise of the Zayyanid Kingdom of Tlemcen balanced between the Hafsids of Tunis and the Marinids of Fes.

Historiographically, the assertion advanced by Sheikh Muhammad 'Ali Dabbuz (1963)—positing that this threefold administrative division originated during the reign of the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan at the close of the 1st century AH—lacks corroborating primary source evidence. The systematic territorial designation of the Central Maghreb was the

tangible outcome of dynastic autonomy inaugurated by the Rustamids and institutionalized by later medieval geographers.

Historiographical Synthesis

Key Insight: While military conflict accompanied the arrival of Hilalian Arab tribes into the central plains, the enduring historical outcome was the comprehensive linguistic and cultural Arabization of North Africa. The indigenous Amazigh population absorbed Arab elements, forging a syncretic Islamic civilization that underpinned the modern national character of Algeria.

Furthermore, the demographic synthesis between the indigenous Amazigh populations (Zanata, Sanhaja, Kutama) and arriving Arab tribes produced a resilient cultural synthesis. While certain Hilalian incursions caused documented instability in agrarian plains, their long-term legacy achieved the linguistic Arabization of major regions and consolidated a cohesive religious and legal identity (Maliki-Sunni and Ibadi traditions) that successfully navigated Mediterranean conflicts and Saharan commercial integration.

5. Conclusion

The Central Maghreb represented a unique historical, geographical, and demographic matrix within the Islamic civilization. Its political fluidity, characterized by the multiplicity of capitals (Tahert, Ashir, Qal'at Bani Hammad, Bejaia, and Tlemcen), distinguished it from its neighboring eastern and western counterparts. Despite substantial territorial oscillations and successive demographic influxes, the region preserved its fundamental Amazigh-Berber substrate while seamlessly assimilating Arab-Islamic cultural and linguistic currents.

This rich ethnic and tribal mosaic elevated the Central Maghreb into a vibrant geopolitical and intellectual nexus, maintaining vigorous diplomatic and commercial relations with the Abbasid East, al-Andalus, sub-Saharan kingdoms, and Christian Europe. Ultimately, the historical developments of the Central Maghreb laid the territorial and cultural foundations of modern Algeria, serving as an enduring bridge in Mediterranean and Maghrebi history.

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