

## The importance of the Central Maghreb Urbs after the Islamic conquest: from the influence of the conquerors to the political and economic role –the city of Mila as a model-

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### Abstract

The city of Mila was a model for the ancient cities of Eastern Algeria as it started as a center for human gatherings and, then, developed in the Numidian Era until the Roman, the Vandal, and the Byzantine periods . In this line, after joining the Maghreb areas to Dar al-Salam after the 6th century, the pivotal role of the coastal cities and ports decreased in the 1st Islamic age after the conquest. However, it blossomed again with the growth of the maritime trade with Andalusia in the 10th century. The decrease of the role of these cities was on behalf of the domestic urbs such as Kairouan and those in the Middle Maghreb such as Mila, Tihrit, Telemcen, and other urbs whose primary role was political, military, and economic after the appearance of the commercial routes that link the internal cities of the Maghreb. Thus, this paper sheds light on the historical origins of the city of Mila that had been one of the Eastern urbs in the Middle Maghreb since the preIslamic conquest until turning into a political and urban center for the Muslim conquests; later, it became a center for political, sectarian, and tribal tensions in the Median era..

**Key words:** Islamic conquest; Abu Muhajir Dinar; Middle Maghreb; Milev; Kutama area.

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## **I- Introduction :**

Taking Mila as a center for the Muslim conquests in the mid 1<sup>st</sup> Hijri century was a continuation for the changes witnessed in the Islamic Maghreb in general. These changes include the prominent role of the internal cities and the continuity of the Byzantine style that is based on the defense line and settling far from the coast due to the absence of the military culture and traditions for the new leaders (Amara, 2008, p. 227). In this line, Mila was a center for the military and political will for two years starting from 680 (59 Hijri). Moreover, it was a source for the Arabic Islamic though in the Maghreb. Thus, the city played a strategic, economic, cultural, and urban role. In this line, the conqueror Abu Muhajir Dinar had the main role thanks to his new strategy that enlarged the Islamic conquests in the region. Besides, he had a big impact on settling the 1<sup>st</sup> Islamic city in the Middle Maghreb through the aspects of the religious and economic construction that developed with time to get a main position in the political, sectarian, and tribal events. Hence, to what extent did Mila, with its geographic, agricultural, and economic weight, contribute to those events? In addition, what are its main impacts and contributions in that period?

We relied on the descriptive historical method and the analytical method to analyze the data and information. Besides, we had a reading in the previous studies that shed light on the history of Mila in the Medieval Age. These studies include: “the city of Mila in the Medieval age: political, cultural, administrative, and urban study” by Ibrahim Behaz & Filali Abdel Aziz, and the study of Abdel Aziz Filali entitled “the city of Mila: the historical development in the Medieval Islamic Age”. In this line, this paper aims at showing the role played by the urbs of the Middle Maghreb in the 1<sup>st</sup> century of the Islamic conquest, and the following implications taking, Mila as a model. Besides, the study investigates the political and economic contribution of these urbs amid the events witnessed in the Maghreb.

### **1. Mila: Toponymy and domain:**

#### **1.1 The connotations of the name:**

The connotation conveyed by the name given to this geographic and spatial area emerged with the diachronic and synchronic accumulations. "There are many views about the origins of the name, as some see it as barbarian while others see it as Latin. In this line, there are other names for the city as follows:

- Milo: it is a name that was given to the Kingdom of Numidia in the past. This is confirmed by the statute discovered lately, during the excavations by some archaeologists, which dates back to the Numidian Age (Al Jilali, 1980, p. 70).
- Milev: it is a Punic term made up of “Mil” that means “one thousand” and “Ev” that means “water or source” (Al Wazzan, 1993, p. 322). This name appeared for the 1<sup>st</sup> time in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C in the writings of St. Spearian (Gsell, 1911, p. 05).
- Millah: it is the name given to the city by the Muslims in the conquest. It is an appropriation of the Roman name Milev to facilitate the pronunciation (Filali, n.d., p. 10)
- Marmol Krabkhal: this name refers to the Latin origin, which signifies a city that is rich with the fruits of Famila “apple” according to Latin (Krabkhal, 1998, p. 13).
- Medius: this means the central region. It is based on its geographic region, as it is located in the center of the main ancient cities in the East, namely Cirta, Rusicade, Ajijli, and Stivis (Al Ayebn 2014, p. 4).

## **1.2 The ancient Mila: -before the Islmaic conquest-:**

The ancient tangible ruins are a witness of the existence of the ancient man and show his activities and life with all the political, economic, social, cultural, and religious aspects. The prominent tangible ruins in Mila date back to the Modern Stone Age in the form of Libyan and Punic writings and engravings, including archaeological texts and different size utensils of the Numidian age (Ghanem, 2003, p. 223).

In the age of the Numidian kingdoms until 46 B.C, Mila was ruled by King Manassas, the ally of King Juba I. However, due to the lack of resources, we cannot know whether Mila was a city with the old meaning, or just a prefecture. After the defeat of Juba I and his ally by Julio Cesar, Milev became part of the Cirtian Confederation that included Cirta, Collo, Rusicade, and Milev (Medjani, 2016, p. 11). Besides, after the collapse of the Roman Empire, Milev was taken over by the Vandals from 431 to 534 and was made a station to control the neighboring regions (Tamlíkhet, 2011, p. 63).

Then, in the Byzantine Age, Mila collapsed after the conquest of Solomon on North African in 539. Thus, he established a defense line in the form of a wall with gates such as “al Balad gate”, “al-Hadid gate”, and al-Rous gate”. In addition, the wall included 14 bridges on its edges. It played

a big military role for the Muslim conquests, and some of its parts are still existing now (Cambuzat, 1986, p. 286). In addition to the Byzantine wall, “al-Balad” water source dates back to the Roman era and is one of the tangible witnesses that al-Bakri mentioned and called “Ain Abi al-Sabaa” (al-Bakri, 1992, p. 729). In addition, we find 04 churches, according to some sources; some are built on the ruins of Abu Muhajir Dinar mosque, known as the mosque of Sidi Ghanem (Medjani, 2016, p. 22).

### **1.3 Mila: from the tales of wanderers and geographers:**

The first tales came from al Yaakobi (897) saying that Mila is glorious, great, fortified, has a fort without fort, and never had a ruler (Al Yaakobi, 1860, p. 148). This shows the role of the Byzantine fort that maintained its structure until that age. Topographically speaking, the city is on the top of a middle height mountain called “Marshow” (Saaidoni, 1985, p. 21). In this regard, al-Bakri says that Mila had been ruins and, then, was reconstructed and had a rocky wall. He adds that it extends to Al-Zaytona Harbor and Jijel Mountain (Al-Bakri, 1992, p. 64). As for al-Idrissi (1153), he says that it was beautiful, with lot of fruitful trees and sweet water (Al-Idrissi, 1957, p. 66).

Regarding its fertile nature, the writer of al-Istibsar says there is a mountain near Mila called “Zaldoi” that does not exist elsewhere. He adds that it is the most fertile mountain in Africa and contains all fruits including apples, grapes...etc (Unknown, 1985 p. 166). As for the determination of the location regarding the urbs of Constantine and Bejaia, Yakout al Hamawi says that Mila is a small city in the far Africa that is 03 days far from Bejaia and 01 day far from Constantine (al Hamawi, 1967, p. 31).

The tales of the wanderers and geographers in the Medieval Era agree on the importance of Mila, as they described it as a model for the fortified city with a good and strategic location amid the Easter Algerian urbs, and as a meeting point between the cities that gained their position and importance before the conquest such as Cirta Rusicade, Setif, Jijel etc. Besides, the sources mentioned the natural advantages including the fertile land, the abundance of the water sources, and the good quality of the fruits; which reflect the agricultural importance of the city since the ancient ages.

## **2. Mila the cradle of the 1<sup>st</sup> conquest to the Middle Maghreb: sweeping out the Romans and forming the Berber:**

### **2.1 The conqueror Abu Muhajir Dinar and Mila:**

### **2.1.1 The character of Abu Muhajir Dinar between glory in the Arab sources and neglect in the Western studies:**

Unlike the urbs of the East Middle Maghreb, Mila was mentioned by the historians when talking about the 1<sup>st</sup> conquest to this area. Its name is linked with that of Abu Muhajir Dinar who was one of the allies of the ruler of Egypt and Ifriqiya, Muslim Ben Mokhallad al-Ansari. In this regard, Abu Muhajir led the army and the conquest in 675 (Filali, 1993). The sources did not give many details about this leader as there are only 04 versions; the first and the last are Iraqi versions by al-Baladhri who quoted al-Waqidi who neglected Abu Muhajir and praised his adversary Ukba Ibn Nafi. The second version is Egyptian by Ibn Abdul Hakam who pointed to the positive role of Abu Muhajir and attributed the Islamic stability in the open areas in the West of Kairouan to him. In addition, the version mentioned his confining in his struggle against Ukba. Finally, the other version is African "Kairouan" that mentions the establishment of Tikrouan basis near Kairouan and ignored Mila (Amara, 2010, pp. 37-38).

On the other hand, the Western studies, mainly the French, such as that of Emilie Felix Goutier about the Islamization of North Africa minimized Abu Muhajir. This study states that the patriotism was represented by the European Berber leader "Kessila" and minimizes Abu Muhajir Dinar due to the colonial background. Moreover, the study of the US Walter Keagy relied on Arabic, Greek, and Syriac texts and compared them to the field data. It considered Abu Muhajir Dinar as the engineer of the strategy that relies on gaining the local element and seeking his help against the remaining Byzantines and in enlarging the conquest process (Amara, 2010, p. 39). This study agrees with that of Moussa Laqbal about the character of Abu Muhajir Dinar who believed that a neutral and fair reading to the policy of this man leads to recognizing his importance in the advance of the conquest and the spread of Islam amid the Berbers of the Middle Maghreb who turned into reliable allies. Besides, he established centers to break the Roman resistance, gain a foothold on the Maghreb, and join it to the Islamic Arabic group (Laqbal, 1981, p. 40)

### **2.2 Mila: a model for the Islamization of the city in the Middle Maghreb after the conquest:**

Unlike his predecessor, Ukba Ibn Nafi, Abu Muhajir adopted a different policy based on the alliance with the local population and making them part of the conquest army later. Nevertheless, he marginalized the 1<sup>st</sup>

Islamic capital in Ifriqiya “Kairouan” through founding close camps such as Takronat and Dhekrou (al Waqidi, 1989, p. 15). Then, he exceeded the domain of Ifriqiya to the Middle Maghreb, passing by Tebessa, Guelma, and Constantine, to conquer the fortified Byzantine Mila in 680. In this regard, he made it a center for his army for two years as mentioned by Khalifa Ben al Khayat when he said that Abu Muhajir conquered Cartage, making a bloody war on two periods. It ended with the conquest of Mila (al-Khayat, 1995, p. 134). He chose it as a new capital for the Muslims in the Maghreb, established in it the aspects of the 1<sup>st</sup> Islamic construction such as Dar al Imara, and turned the city from Byzantine into Islamic.

Moreover, there is a debate about the mosque that was built on the remains of a church as mentioned by the excavations of the Ministry of Culture in 1968 (Filali, 1993, p. 70). The debate was on whether there is, now, a mosque known as the Mosque of Abu Muhajir Dinar or it is a falsification of the name of Sidi Ghanem Mosque. The latter dates back to the Aghlabid Era as confirmed by excavations since it is built with the African architecture influenced by the Byzantine architecture (Amara, 2010, p. 41).

During two years as a capital, Mila was a basis for actions that allowed the conquest leaders to expand in the rest of the Maghreb land and apply the policy of “kindness and gain”. The latter was applied by Abu Muhajir Dinar with the local Berber tribes during 07 years and in the Kutama that extended from Jijel to Collo, passing by Setif until Constantine and Mila. This Kutama would have a pivotal tribal and sectarian role in the political scene (al- Maliki, 1951, p. 28).

### **3. Mila and the struggles about the political and sectarian loyalty from the era of Walis to the end of the Oriental Heads states:**

#### **3.1 The age of Walis and Aghlabids: the decline on behalf of Tobna the capital of Zab territory:**

Amid the intellectual and sectarian struggle, and with the emergence of Khawarij, Ibadis, and Sufrites in the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Hijri century, the Sunni thought keep prevailing in Mila despite the injustice of the Umayyad rulers (al-Nouiri, 1984, pp. 24-25). In this line, Massal Ben Hammad was the ruler of Mila at that time. He was an ally of Prince Abdu Rahman Ben Habib al-Fihri who was an important element in keeping away the revolutions of Khawarij from the region and imposed on the population of

Mila and its surroundings taxes thanks to the Arabic military troops in the edges of Mila (al-Marrakchi, 1950, p. 71).

Amid the sectarian trouble and the spread of the Sufrite and Ibadi creeds in the Maghreb mainly after the revolution of Assem Ben Jamil al-Warfajoumi in 755, Mila adopted the Ibadi creed just nominally for political purposes before being restored by Kairouan.

In the second half of the Hijri century, the military and political role of Mila emerged through its Wali "Malik Ben al-Mondher al-Kalbi" who leaned to one of the conflicting sides inside the army in Kairouan and Tunis. In this line, his army, made up of soldiers from Kutama and his garrison in Mila, supported him. Nevertheless, he was defeated by Khorassane army that ended the rule of the Muhallabid dynasty in Kairouan. This was the main cause of the decrease of the role of Mila on behalf of Tobna, which was the capital of Zab territory. Hence, Mila became part of that territory that went on until the Aghlabid era that witnessed the continuity of the agricultural and commercial role of Mila thanks to its location and agricultural advantages (Filali, 1993, p. 75).

### **3.2 Mila, Kutama area, and its role in the Ismaili call and the Fatimid state: "the political Shiite"**

The area of Kutama covers a group of Berber tribes that belong to the branch of "al-Brans". It is called Kutama after the oldest father whose name was "Kutam" or "Katam". He was the son of Brans Ben Mazigh Ben Kanaan Ben Kham (Laqbal, 1979, pp. 31-32). The domain of these tribes extends to Setif, Jijel, and Mila (Boubidi, 2020, p. 8). The call of the Shiite Abu Abdullah in the light of "al-Taqiah" started from Mila and spread in al-Akhyar, Ikjan, Beni Aziz, and Tazrot (al-Qadi, n.d., p. 118).

Kutama was a main tribal basis in the start of the call, which expanded rapidly thanks to the love of the jurisprudents and scholars by the people of Kutama. Hence, when the call of Abu Abdullah gained a solid ground, the ruler of Mila, Musa Bin al-Abbas, gathered people from Kutama such as Latana Jimla Melousa, Lahissa, Ashman, and Oursa to fight him. However, the ruler was defeated and Abu Abdullah took over Mila, appointed Abu Yusuf Maknoun Bin Dhabara al-Ajani al-Kutami as a Wali, and went back to Ikjan, near Tazrot.

In the same context, the Aghlabid prince, Abu al-Abbas II, tried to restore Mila. Then, he was succeeded by Zyada Allah al-Aghlabi who was defeated by Abdullah the Shiite in the battle of Kairouan in Grarem, near Mila, in 904. Later, Abu Abdullah took over the remaining part of Kutama

area, Zab region, and the rest of Ifriqiya with the fall of Kairouan under his rule in 908. Then, after Abu Abid al Mahdi was appointed as a Caliphate, he made a coup and killed Abu Abdullah leading to an upheaval and rebellion by the people of Kutama against him. Thus, they appointed Kado Bin Maarik as a leader of the rebellion in Mila and called him "al-Mahdi". Nevertheless, their rebellion did not succeed. Therefore, al Mahdi was killed and the people of Mila fled northwards (al-Marrakchi, 1950, pp. 233-234).

#### **4. Mila and its role in the local political authority:**

##### **4.1 The era of Zyrids and Hammadids:**

After the immigration of the Fatimid kings to the Orient, a rebellion against the al-Mansour Bin Abi al-Fetouh, the Zyrid Wali, started as people refused to pay taxes. They took Mila as a center for their rebellion and revolution, which ended with the response of al-Mansour who swept the rebels to Baghai. Then, in the late 05<sup>th</sup> century, Mila became part of the struggle between the Hammadids and Zyrids from one side, and the creeping Hilalian tribes that took over the domains surrounding Mila (al-Hamiri, 1984, p. 568). In this line, Mila witnessed a commercial and economic renaissance in the Hammadid era as confirmed by various wanderers and geographers.

##### **4.2 The Almohads and Hafsids era:**

Mila was a target for the expansion of Abdul Momin al-Mowahidi after taking over Constantine and Annaba after the fall of the Hammadids state (Khalidoun, 1981, p. 336). In this era, Constantine was an administrative center for the territory while the role of Mila decreased; however, it kept its strategic, defensive, and agricultural dimensions. In this context, Mila kept under the Almohads until their collapse and the division of the Maghreb between the Hafsids, Zayyanids, and Marinids (Filali, 1993, p. 87). Amid that struggle between the small states, it was witnessed that:

- Mila faced attacks by the Arabic Hilalian tribes, mainly in the 07<sup>th</sup> and 08<sup>th</sup> Hijri centuries. Thus, these tribes took over some countryside regions and took Mila as a back base for the attacks against Constantine thanks to the logistic support it provides (Berchvic, 2000, p. 320).

- Sultan Abu Assida (1295-1309) attacked the Western side of the state and took over it in 1295, mainly the cities of Constantine and Bejaia. Thus, he



settled in Mila many days before his return to Tunis (Khaldoun, 1981, p. 739).

- Sultan Abu Yahya Oubakr (1318-1346) attacked the city of Bejaia and defeated the Marinids. Then, the Marinid al-Mansor Bin Khelouf Sheikh Beni Yaban, the ruler of Bejaia then, sent an army that defeated him. Consequently, the Hafsid Sultan went back to Constantine. However, the Marinid army followed him to Mila, entered it forcefully, and then besieged Constantine (Khaldoun, 1981, p. 790).

- Sultan Abu Anan (1348-1358) appointed his minister Bin Ali as a Wali on Bejaia. However, he failed in taking over Mila and Constantine. As a result, the Sultan fired him and went out himself to Ifriqiya to punish the people of Mila, overcome the effects of the defeat, and take over Mila and Constantine (al-Namiri, 1990, p. 52).

-When the Zayyanid Sultan Abu Hamou Musa II (1359-1389) decided to go back to Telemcen, the land of his ancestors that had been occupied by the Marinids, he was supported by some Arabic and Moroccan tribes and the Hafsid State. He departed from Ifriqiya towards Constantine where Sultan Abu Adnan and big number of Marinids resided. Before he reached there, he heard that Abu Adnan left it back towards his state. Hence, he turned towards Mila and took it over in an official convoy. Later, he departed from it towards the city of Ain Smara (al-Matwi, 2000, p. 445).

## **5. Conclusion:**

The city of Mila was a center for religion spread and the basis from which the state is managed. Besides, it was the center of leadership of Abu Muhajir Dinar during the Islamic conquest. In the start of the Walis era, it had an administrative and military importance as it was annexed directly to Kairouan. As for the end of that era, its importance decreased and kept as it is in the Aghlabid era. Later in the Fatimid age, the Shiite Abu Abdullah took it over and appointed a ruler from Kutama that fell under the hands of the Fatimids. As for the Hammadids era, Mila was completely destroyed and abandoned by its native people. Then, it was reconstructed, developed, and had gained a position. It witnessed an economic renaissance and a commercial activity. Hence, Mila was a city that gets affected by the big events in the region, mainly in Constantine and Bejaia. It was under the Hafsid state and was in the space of Constantine whose rulers used to appoint the Walis of Mila in the Hafsid age to manage its economic and political issues and the taxation. In this regard, the amounts collected from taxation in the 15<sup>th</sup> century reached about 4000 Dinar according to Hassan

al-Wazzan. Its people then were about 15000, living in about 3000 houses. These people were known for their recurrent rebellion against the rulers, not paying the taxes, and killing the rulers.

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