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The Strait of Gibraltar and its Role in the Conquest of the Iberian Peninsula

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Abstract: The Strait of Gibraltar is a maritime passage that connects two seas—the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea—and serves as a vital link between Africa and Europe. The Islamic conquest of the Maghreb lasted for decades and involved bloodshed on both sides. After these extensive efforts, the Muslims succeeded in crossing the strait and establishing one of the most important Islamic states: Al-Andalus. The history of Al-Andalus is vast, as it bridged the East and the West with Europe, leading to a fusion of civilizations that gave rise to one of the most remarkable cultures—the Islamic civilization in Al-Andalus. This era witnessed a flourishing of translation and knowledge exchange between the two worlds, all made possible by the Muslim crossing of this strategic and historically significant strait. Due to the immense historical and strategic importance of Gibraltar, this topic has been chosen for study.

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1. Introduction

The Strait of Gibraltar is a maritime passage that connects two seas—the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. It also serves as a vital link between Africa and Europe. The Islamic conquest of the Maghreb lasted for decades and involved bloodshed on both sides. After all these efforts, the Muslims succeeded in crossing the strait and establishing one of the most important Islamic states: Al-Andalus. The history of Al-Andalus is vast, as it connected the East with the West and the Maghreb with Europe, leading to a fusion of civilizations that produced one of the most remarkable cultures—the Islamic civilization in Al-Andalus. This era witnessed a flourishing of translation and knowledge exchange between the two worlds, all made possible by the Muslim crossing of this crucial strait, the Strait of Gibraltar. Due to its immense historical and strategic importance, this topic has been chosen for study [1].

We must first mention the various names of the Strait of Gibraltar. Throughout history, it has been known by several names, including the "Strait of Fars" or the "Strait of Hercules." It has also been referred to as the "Sea of the Passage" and the "Sea of Transition."

There is a legend that has been accepted about the Strait, that Alexander the Great entered the Iberian Peninsula and met with its people, who expressed to him their displeasure with their belligerent neighbours in the west, who were waiting for opportunities to move to the Iberian Peninsula using the landland of the Strait as a crossing point for them [2].

The Strait of Gibraltar is a link between Morocco and the Iberian Peninsula, and it is a narrow waterway in which the waters of the Mediterranean Sea from Morocco meet the

waters of the Atlantic Ocean from the Levant, and it is sixty-one kilometers long, while its land at its narrowest point is fourteen kilometers and its depth reaches six hundred nautical statures.

The coast of the Strait from the Moroccan side includes the city of Ceuta (Qasr Masmouda and Tangier), and the Moroccan coast of the Strait is dominated by mountainous nature, where the Rif and Hill mountain ranges or what is known as the Dart Mountains extend along the coast of the Strait.

We will start with Ceuta, as historians differ as to the reasons for naming it by this name, as it was accepted that it was called Ceuta because it was cut off from the sea, and it was said that its builder was named [3].

It is said that a good man named Sabbath built it and it was named Sabbath, but it is said that it was so named after the word Septemfratres, the name given by the Romans to the heights on which the city was built.

2. Methodology

This study employs a historical and analytical approach to examine the pivotal role of the Strait of Gibraltar in the conquest of the Iberian Peninsula by Muslim forces during the early Islamic expansion. The research methodology is grounded in a comparative analysis of historical sources, focusing on primary texts, archaeological findings, and secondary scholarly interpretations. The methodology is divided into three main phases:

The first phase involves a comprehensive literature review to identify the key sources and historical narratives regarding the conquest of the Iberian Peninsula. Sources include historical chronicles, such as Ibn Khaldun's *Al-Abr* and Ibn al-Athir's *Al-Kamil fi Tarikh*, which provide primary accounts of the military campaigns and geographical significance of the Strait of Gibraltar. Additionally, works by modern historians and researchers are analyzed to understand the various perspectives on the geopolitical importance of the Strait during the 8th century.

In parallel, archaeological evidence from the region, such as remains of fortifications, inscriptions, and maritime artifacts, is examined to support the historical narrative. This step allows for triangulation of written sources with material evidence, enhancing the robustness of the findings.

The second phase focuses on a geopolitical and military analysis of the role the Strait of Gibraltar played in the Muslim conquest. The study examines how the strategic location of the Strait served as a gateway for the Islamic armies, enabling their entry into the Iberian Peninsula. This analysis considers:

The military strategies employed by the Muslim forces, including the use of the Strait as a naval passage and its significance in the initial victory at the Battle of Guadalete.

3. Results and Discussion

Ceuta is a peninsula in a long and narrow strip of territory that extends from east to west and is surrounded by the sea on three sides, to the north by the Strait of Gibraltar, to the east by the Mediterranean Sea, and to the south by the Besol Sea, and connected to the land on the Moroccan side by a narrow strip Ceuta consists of the Saffar Mountains that are connected to each other, in the east is Jabal Alina and in the west is Jebel Moussa, while Belionche or Benoch is one of the most famous landmarks of the city and is visited by people for picnics and is located west of Ceuta, while the village of Oyan is of great importance as a source of drinking water for the people of Ceuta. Ceuta was ruled by the Finns in the past, then ruled by the Carthaginians, then by the Romans, then by the Vandals in the fifth century AD, and then by the Byzantines at the end, and Ceuta has great commercial importance because it is in the middle of the trade routes leading to Europe, and as it is close to the side of Morocco, the distance on both sides of the strait is about twenty-nine kilometers, in addition to enjoying a natural pier that descends from the direction of the city center, while its eastern edges are high, which made it a marina for ships In addition to being a fortified military base and an important crossing [4].

As for the city of Qasr Masmuda or (Qasr al-Majaz) it is connected to Ceuta from the west, and it is a small city and a village on the coast of the Iberian Peninsula, where the distance between them and the opposite island of Tariq is twenty kilometers, while there are accounts that say that the city is old and do not mention the date of its establishment, and other accounts that date back to Islamic times, where it was built by one of the princes of the Masmuda tribe during the tenure of Tariq bin Ziad of Tangier.

As for the city of Tangier, it is connected to the palace of Masmuda from the west, which is on the Atlantic Ocean, and it is the last site of the coast of Morocco to the Strait of Gibraltar, and it is considered an ancient city, as it was the capital of a number of kings of the local population, including Bocus I (about 1.5 BC), and during the reign of the Romans, it was declared the city of Jeddah and remained as it remained until the reign of Claudius (42 BC), it was raised to a colonial city and became the center of the state of Mauritania of Tangier, and when the Byzantines came, they failed to control the city and could not penetrate in the interior of the city of Tangier, as for its origin and construction, it is referenced that its origin dates back to the Roman era, where it was built on a high mountain called .

Tangier is adjacent to a number of small towns such as Tamches, Kasr Knamma, Assila and Kart, which are famous for their markets and economic resources, as well as for the cultivation of wheat, barley and cotton. As for the coast of the Strait on the side of the Iberian Peninsula, it includes Gibraltar, Algeciras Al-Khadra and Turaif Island, while Gibraltar is located in the far southeast of the Iberian Peninsula and northeast of the Strait of Gibraltar, and it has many names, the Viennese called it Mount Calbi, which means the hollow mountain because of the presence of a cave at the bottom of it from the sea side, and after the Arab-Islamic conquest, it was known as the Rock, Gibraltar, and then Jabal Al-Fath during the Almohad era, and the name Gibraltar prevailed over it in the end, so it was known. It has so far in all European languages.

The mountain is a peninsula of algebraic rock four and a half kilometers long, one and a half kilometers wide, seven kilometers wide, and four hundred and twenty-five meters high [5].

As for Algeciras, it is located west of Gibraltar and was built by the Visigoths and is of great importance as a fertile land for agriculture, and it is considered the Iberian Peninsula, which was used by the Muslim Arabs in the process of conquest, as it is close to the cities of the Moroccan coast, especially Ceuta.

As for Turaif Island, it is connected to Al-Jazira Al-Khadra from the west and is about twenty-nine meters away from it, and it was formerly known as the island of Las Palomas, and after the Islamic conquest, it was called Turaif Island after the commander Tarif bin Malik Al-Ma'afdi, and Al-Jazira Al-Khadra is a small town located on the northern shore in the middle of the Strait of Gibraltar at the foot of the Al-Qamar Mountains.

Second Topic

The Political, Social and Economic Conditions of the Strait Region Prior to the Arab-Islamic Conquest

As for the political situation of the Strait region from the side of Morocco before the Arab-Islamic conquest, we know very little about it, except for the governor of the city of Ceuta (Julian, Julian), whose personality was conflicting, there are those who believe that he is of Gothic origin, and there are those who believe that he is a Byzantine or a Berber from the tribe of Ghamara, and it is likely that he is a Byzantine ruler who rules Ceuta and rents it in the name of the Byzantine Empire, but it has the advance of the Muslim Arabs in northern Morocco, which cut off from Byzantium, so he became independent in this area and cooperated with the king of the Spain is a gitache, and then he dies of kindness with the rulers of Lazariq on the throne, and this good relationship with the rulers of the Iberian Peninsula ended, and he was forced to submit to the Muslim Arabs, cooperate with them, and make peace with them, according to which Julian remained governor of Ceuta in exchange for his recognition of Arab sovereignty.

As for the political situation on the side of the strait on the Iberian coast, the area was under the control of the Visigoths, the rulers of the Iberian Peninsula, and they had a military force in that area that resisted the Arab-Islamic conquest [6].

As for the social conditions of the Moroccan coast, we know that it was inhabited by two large Berber tribes, Sanhaja and Masmuda, as well as other minorities of the conquered Byzantine Romans and from the Afqa, and their pagan religion consisted of the worship of idols and natural phenomena such as the sun and the moon and the worship of animals. As for the coast of the Iberian Strait, it is difficult to determine their ethnic origins because they were displaced from different regions, and there is a theory that their origin is a mixture of Celts and Iberians, and this region has been invaded by multiple peoples, the last of which is the Visigoths, who ruled Iberia.

Gothic society consists of three classes, foremost of which is the nobility, the landowners, and the clergy, followed by the general and middle classes.

The majority of the population are free, labourers, small merchants and landlords, and these have suffered from heavy taxes imposed on them.

The slave class came last and these were subjected to the harshest kinds of persecution and injustice, and were harnessed to serve the nobility, clergy and high landlords, and the Jews also formed a large independent class in number, concentrated in the cities, and were oppressed by economic restrictions by the Gothic rulers with the support of the Church [7].

As for the economic conditions of the Moroccan coast, the inhabitants of Morocco have been engaged in agriculture to a large extent due to the fertility of its land and the abundance of its trees, especially fruit trees, as well as the trade that characterized this region due to the presence of commercial ships and ports such as the ports of Ceuta and Tangier.

The economic activity of the inhabitants of the Iberian coast is inclined to the activity of the inhabitants of the Moroccan coast, who were also famous for agriculture as well as their important commercial role due to the presence of ports and marinas due to the bad ships, and they also worked in industry, especially the shipbuilding, as well as the profession of fishing by virtue of their location on the sea [8].

Before talking about the conquest of the Iberian Peninsula by the Muslim Arabs, it is necessary to mention the most important motives for the conquest, as these motives were first represented in spreading the Islamic religion among other peoples and liberating them from injustice and oppression, especially since the Berbers were new to Islam, so they were enthusiastic about jihad and conquests, so Tariq bin Ziyad worked to direct their enthusiasm to conquer the Iberian Peninsula if it was the vital field for them.

Second, Morocco had to be secured from any possible attack by the Goths, and the constant contact of the Berbers in Beria made them fully aware of its economic importance, the nature of its political and social problems, and the weakness of the Visigothic state there.

As for the contact of the Byzantine governor of Ceuta Polyan, to the continent of conquest and his invitation to them to conquer the Iberian Peninsula was an encouraging factor for the Muslim Arabs and was not the main factor, as most historical sources mention to the story of his legendary daughter.

The operation of the Iberian Peninsula came within a central plan organized by the Caliphate in Damascus and the leaders of the Arab-Islamic conquest in Morocco (Tariq bin Ziyad and Musa bin Nusayr), after the whole of Morocco was conquered in 90 AH, except for the city of Ceuta, where Bulian was fortified, and the Islamic conquest became the way to the Iberian Peninsula [9].

Especially after the position of Bulian changed, he sent to Musa ibn Nusayr inviting him to conquer the island of Iberia and offering him help, and Musa ibn Nusayr agreed, but before he began the process of conquest, he called the Caliph al-Waleed ibn Abd al-Malik to inform him of what Bulian had offered him, to seek his opinion and to ask his

permission to begin the conquest, and the Caliph al-Walid replied to him with the condition that the area be tested with the companies, so Musa wrote to him, lightening the matter for him by saying: "It is not a sea, but a gulf that describes what he left behind to al-Nadir." [10].

Lulian reconnaissance ship provided aid to the Arabs, and this helped the Arabs to know the nature of the area so that he would tell the commanders of Julian's goal, Tariq bin Ziyad brought Tariq to present, so Tariq bin Ziyad, on the order of the Supreme Commander, Musa bin Nusayr, carried him to the region by sending a reconnaissance expedition by Abu Zara'a Tarif bin Malik in Ramadan in the year 91 AH and crossed the strait with four hundred men and one hundred horsemen on a ship prepared by Lulian. She returned to Morocco, which encouraged Tariq to continue the process of conquest [11].

In Rajab in the year 92 AH, Tariq bin Ziyad himself led a campaign to conquer the island of Iberia, where he crossed the port of Ceuta with seven thousand soldiers, most of them Berbers, and the crossing operation was carried out in complete secrecy on board merchant ships prepared by Julian, and the expedition landed in the Rock of Calpe (later Gibraltar), and the campaign faced violent resistance that forced them to change their military plan and landed in another place of the mountain using the tentacles and oars of ships and achieved victory and guaranteed him a position in the mountain, then conquered Algeciras Al-Khadra As he sent the commander Abd al-Malik ibn Amer al-Ma'arfi to open the fortress of Carthage, he opened it and secured the strait from the Iberian side to ensure that supplies could be received quite easily.

Then Tariq marched towards the city of Shathuna, and these victories terrified the Visigoths and their king Lazariq, who was busy with the Basque rebellion in the northeast, and when the sons of the Muslim conquests reached them, a large army estimated at forty to one hundred thousand fighters marched [12].

Tariq wrote to Musa bin Nusayr to provide him with soldiers, and he sent him five thousand fighters, and the battle took place in the city of Shathuna, which was known by many names, including Wadi Lakka or Bakkah, not Wadi Barbat, the Battle of Bayhra, Al-Sawaqi, and Al-Sawani.

The battle lasted for 8 days (28 Ramadan – 5 Shawwal) and ended with the defeat of the Goths and their heavy losses, while the fate of Zureik was unknown and no one found him, and it is possible that he drowned in one of the swamps.

One of the results of the battle was the conquest of the city of Shathuna and Istja, then the conquest of Cordoba by the commander Mughith al-Rami in cooperation with the Jews, and then Tariq continued his advance and succeeded in conquering the city of Toledo, the capital of the Visigoths, in 93 AH [13].

The reaction to the success of Tariq bin Ziyad's campaign in northern Morocco was great: the Berbers went from all directions and crossed the strait, and this is proof of the complete control of the strait by the Muslim Arabs on both sides.

After the success of Tariq bin Ziyad in the Iberian Peninsula, Musa bin Nusayr decided to cross to Iberia and participate in the conquest process himself, so he sailed from the city of Ceuta in Ramadan in the year 93 AH and landed in Algeciras and divided his army into twenty units, each unit under a banner, and built a mosque called Al-Rayah Mosque in memory of him in Algeciras Al-Khadra [14].

The importance of the strait is highlighted after the tightening of the control of the Muslim Arabs on a side in the peaceful crossing of the Musa bin Nusayr campaign, as it was carried out in a safe and stable situation with ease and ease, and therefore it is different from the campaign of Tariq bin Ziyad, which was characterized by secrecy and secrecy and was carried out in difficult and dangerous conditions [15].

In the year 95 A.H., the order of the Caliph Al-Waleed bin Abdulmalik came to stop the military operations and return to Damascus, and it is clear from the account that the two commanders Musa bin Nusayr and Tariq bin Ziyad returned and sailed from Seville that they took the road of the Great Valley leading to the northwestern side of the strait,

and this shows us that even this extreme point of the strait has become under the sovereignty of the Muslim Arabs and has become safe on the side.

4. Conclusion

Islam is the religion of monotheism and tolerance, so the Islamic religion spread between the East and the Maghreb until it reached China in the east and Andalusia in the west, and the Arabs were afraid of the seas, but with the passage of time, the conditions developed and they rode the sea and crossed the Strait, which is the Strait of Gibraltar, so that this historical crossing would be the crossing of a religion and civilization that extended to the south of France and included centuries of development and sophistication, and for the importance of the strait and its crossing, our research was this research, we hope that we have succeeded in referring to this transformation from the civilization of the East to Western civilization.

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