

The Tribes of the Central Maghreb: A Toponymic Study

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Abstract

Tribal organization constituted one of the defining features of society in the Central Maghreb. As centralized authority collapsed toward the end of the Byzantine period, tribes increasingly emerged as the principal framework for social organization and collective protection. Under these circumstances, the tribe became a dominant institution that structured Maghrebi society. Its prominence grew even further during the medieval period, when it evolved into a fundamental component of the region's economic, social, political, and cultural fabric. Although tribal structures assumed diverse forms over time, their functions and influence varied according to changing historical contexts.

This paper investigates the imprint of tribal groups on the toponymic system of the Central Maghreb by identifying place names derived from tribal designations and examining what these toponyms reveal about tribal distribution, mobility, and patterns of settlement across the region. Through a toponymic approach, the study seeks to reconstruct aspects of the historical geography of tribes and to assess their spatial presence within the Central Maghreb.

Keywords: Central Maghreb; Tribal Mobility; Onomastics; Settlement; Toponymy.

Introduction

Historical sources preserve a rich corpus of place names referring to both the natural and urban landscapes of the Central Maghreb. A close examination of this toponymic corpus reveals a remarkable diversity in its linguistic origins and semantic motivations. Place names often emerged through the interaction of geographical, historical, and linguistic factors, while in many cases they derived directly from the names of the communities that inhabited or occupied the surrounding territory. Consequently, the toponymic inventory of the Central Maghreb contains numerous names associated with both Arab and Berber tribes that played prominent roles in the historical development of the Islamic Maghreb, particularly following the resurgence of tribal organization as a major social and identity-based institution shaped by specific historical circumstances.

The systematic collection, classification, and analysis of these tribal toponyms can provide valuable insights into the historical presence of tribal groups and the roles they played in the civilization of the Central Maghreb. This study therefore addresses two principal questions: Which tribal names have been preserved in the toponymic system of the Central Maghreb? And what historical information can be inferred from their onomastic analysis?

1. Study Sample

This study is based on a systematic survey of tribal names preserved in the toponymic system of the Central Maghreb as recorded in historical sources composed during the first six centuries of the Hijri era (seventh–twelfth centuries CE). Nearly all extant sources from this period were examined in order to identify the tribal names associated with the historical landscape of the Central Maghreb.

The corpus was deliberately confined to texts produced within this chronological framework, excluding later works in order to avoid projecting the realities of subsequent periods onto earlier historical contexts. The date of composition of each source was treated as evidence for the contemporary circulation and use of the recorded toponym within the written discourse of its time. Because these sources differ considerably in the attention they devote to place names and geographical nomenclature, the compilation of the recorded tribal toponyms resulted in the dataset presented in the following table.

Hijri Century (CE)	No.	Toponym	Source	Page
1st century AH (7th century CE)	0	—	—	—
2nd century AH (8th century CE)	0	—	—	—
3rd century AH (9th century CE)	5	Jabal Jazūl	al-Ya‘qūbī, <i>Kitāb al-Buldān</i>	198
		Ḥiṣn Lawāta	Ibn al-Ṣaghīr, <i>Akhbār al-A‘imma al-Rustamiyyīn</i>	74
		Qal‘at Nafūsa	<i>Ibid.</i>	73
		Darb al-Nafūsiyyīn	<i>Ibid.</i>	71
		Katāma	al-Khwārizmī, <i>Ṣūrat al-Arḍ</i>	60
4th century AH (10th century CE)	8	Qal‘at Kiyāna	al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān, <i>Iftitāḥ al-Da‘wa</i>	333
		Banū Wārīfan	Ibn Ḥawqal, <i>Ṣūrat al-Arḍ</i>	91
		Raṭl Māzūgha	<i>Ibid.</i>	91
		Rīgha	<i>Ibid.</i>	91
		Qaryat al-Mahriyyīn	<i>Ibid.</i>	86
		Bilād Katāma	al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān, <i>Iftitāḥ al-Da‘wa</i>	170
		Bilād Ajāna	<i>Ibid.</i>	171
		Jazīrat Banī Mazghanna	al-Iṣṭakhrī, <i>al-Masālik wa al-Mamālik</i>	93
5th century AH (11th century CE)	16	Jabal Maṭmāṭa	al-Bakrī, <i>al-Masālik wa al-Mamālik</i>	Vol. 2, p. 258
		Jabal Tājūrā’	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 2, p. 263
		Jabal Banī Yārūt	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 2, p. 245
		Qal‘at Majjāna	al-Raḡīq al-Qayrawānī, <i>Tārīkh Ifrīqiya</i>	10
		Ḥiṣn Marnīsa al-Bīr	al-Bakrī, <i>al-Masālik wa al-Mamālik</i>	Vol. 2, p. 263
		Qal‘at Mughīla Dalūl	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 2, p. 252

		Sūq Hawwāra	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 2, p. 241
		Sūq Jarāwa La' zīzwā	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 2, p. 253
		Marsā Saqda	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 2, p. 245
		Marsā Mughīla Banī Hāshim	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 2, p. 267
		Marsā Astūra	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 2, p. 269
		Bāb Katāma	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 2, p. 288
		Madīnat Banī Jinād	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 2, p. 246
		Jazā'ir Banī Mazghanna	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 2, p. 247
		Madīnat Banī Jadās (Jalīdāshan)	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 2, p. 251
		Maḍīq Miknāsa	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 2, p. 258
6th century AH (12th century CE)	12	Ḥiṣn Bakr	al-Idrīsī, <i>Nuzhat al-Mushtāq</i>	Vol. 1, p. 262
		Sūq Banī Zindīwī	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 1, p. 266
		Qaryat Rīgha	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 1, p. 254
		Qaryat Māwargha	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 1, p. 254
		Qaryat Matūsa	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 1, p. 267
		Qaryat Banī Khalaf	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 1, p. 266
		Banī Jinād	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 1, p. 272
		Ṭaraf Banī 'Abd Allāh	<i>Ibid.</i>	Vol. 1, p. 272
		Qal'at Banī Ḥammād	al-Zuhrī, <i>al-Jughrāfiyya</i>	107
		Zwāwa	<i>Ibid.</i>	107
		Jazā'ir Banī Mazghanna	<i>Ibid.</i>	107
		Sāḥil Kūmiya	al-Baydhaq, <i>Akhbār al-Mahdī</i>	16

2. Statistical Analysis of the Data

A. Mountains Named after Tribal Groups

The survey identified four mountain toponyms in the Central Maghreb whose names derive from tribal designations. The earliest attestation dates to the third century AH (ninth century CE) in the geographical work of al-Ya‘qūbī, who refers to a mountain in the region of Tāhart known as Jabal Jazūl¹. The name is clearly related to the well-known Saharan tribe of Jazūla. Al-Ya‘qūbī further notes that this mountain was known by different names among the various populations of the Maghreb, each community using its own designation: the people of al-Sūs called it Darn, the inhabitants of Tāhart knew it as Jazūl, whereas the people of the Zāb referred to it as Aurās². Three additional mountain names of tribal origin appear in sources from the fifth century AH (eleventh century CE): Jabal Maṭmāṭa, Jabal Tājūrā’, and Jabal Banī Yārūt. Al-Bakrī describes Jabal Banī Yārūt as the principal source of the water supply that reached the city of Mīla through an underground aqueduct fed by the spring known as ‘Ayn al-Sibā³. As for Jabal Tājūrā’, he locates it adjacent to the town of Nadrūma⁴, in the vicinity of Tlemcen.

B. Urban Toponyms Derived from Tribal Names

The historical sources record a number of urban settlements whose names are derived from tribal designations. Some of these place names refer to tribal subdivisions or specific communities, reflecting the association of a town with a particular tribe through its foundation, occupation, or political control. The emergence of this category of tribal urban toponyms is not attested before the fourth century AH (tenth century CE).

Among the earliest examples are Banū Wārīfan, Qaryat al-Mahriyyīn⁵, and Jazā’ir Banī Mazghanna, the latter deriving its name from the Mazghanna⁶, a Berber tribe of Ifrīqiya. Sources from the fifth century AH (eleventh century CE) record additional examples, including Banī Jinād and Banī Jadās (Banī Jalīdās). By the sixth century AH (twelfth century CE), the corpus had expanded to include toponyms such as Dār Marīn, Dūr Madīn, Zwāwa, Malāla, Tājūrā’, Qaryat al-‘Alawiyyīn, Qaryat Rīgha, Qaryat Māwargha, Banī Wāzalfan, and Qaryat Matūsa.

C. Fortresses and Citadels Named after Tribal Groups

A number of fortresses and citadels in the Central Maghreb likewise bear names derived from Berber and Arab tribes. The earliest references appear in the work of Ibn al-Ṣaghīr, who mentions Ḥiṣn Lawāta⁷ and Qal‘at Nafūsa in the vicinity of Tāhart, noting that these strongholds were used by the respective tribes in both times of peace and periods of conflict.

¹ Aḥmad b. Abī Ya‘qūb al-Ya‘qūbī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, ed. Muḥammad b. Amīn al-Ḍannāwī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, n.d.), p 198.

² Ibid.

³ Abū ‘Ubayd Allāh al-Bakrī, *Al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik*, ed. Jamāl Ṭalaba (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2003), 2:245.

⁴ Ibid., 2:263.

⁵ Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat al-Ard* (Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāt, 1992), 86.

⁶ al-Wazzān, al-Ḥasan. *Waṣf Ifrīqiya*. Translated by Muḥammad Ḥajjī and Muḥammad al-Akhḍar. 2nd ed. Vol. 2. Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1983, 37.

⁷ Ibn al-Ṣaghīr, *Akhbār al-A‘imma al-Rustamiyyīn*, ed. Muḥammad Nāṣir and Ibrāhīm Baḥḥāz (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1986), 74.

Al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān refers to another fortress in the region of the Zāb known as Qal'at Kiyāna⁸, also called Qal'at al-Marā. According to his account, the Berbers used the latter designation because a mirror (*mir'āh*) had once been installed on the site⁹, giving rise to its popular name. He also mentions Qal'at Majjāna, which, following its capture during the early Islamic conquest by Bishr b. Abī Artāt, came to be known as Qal'at Bishr. Additional tribal fortifications recorded in sources from the fifth century AH (eleventh century CE) include Ḥiṣn Balzama of the Mazāta tribe, Qal'at Mughīla Dalūl, and Ḥiṣn Marnīsa al-Bīr.

D. Market Toponyms Derived from Tribal Names

Several market places in the Central Maghreb bore the names of the tribes that exercised authority over them or dominated their commercial activities. Examples include Sūq Hawwāra, attested in the fourth century AH (tenth century CE), Sūq Jarāwa, recorded in the fifth century AH (eleventh century CE), and Sūq Banī Zindīwī, mentioned in the sixth century AH (twelfth century CE). Ibn al-Ṣaghīr's references to the Mosque of the Kūfans (*Masjid al-Kūfiyyīn*) and their public square (*raḥba*)¹⁰ likewise suggest that commercial spaces could be identified by the communities associated with them. The same naming pattern is observed for other groups, such as the Kūfans and the Basrans, whose communal identity became embedded in the urban toponymy.

E. City Gates Named after Tribal Groups

A small number of city gates also preserved the names of tribes from the Central Maghreb. Although the available evidence is limited, al-Bakrī records a gate in the city of Ṭubna known as Bāb Katāma,¹¹ while another gate in Arshqūl bore the name of the Marnīsa tribe¹². These examples illustrate how tribal identities were incorporated into the urban landscape and commemorated through the nomenclature of city entrances.

F. Maritime Toponyms Derived from Tribal Names

Several coastal anchorages and harbours likewise derived their names from the tribes that controlled or occupied their surrounding territories. This category of toponyms does not appear before the fifth century AH (eleventh century CE), when sources mention Marsā Mughīla Banī Hāshim and Marsā Saqda. Their emergence reflects the growing importance of Mediterranean maritime networks at a time when inland routes had become increasingly insecure because of Bedouin incursions. As a consequence, many tribes redirected their commercial activities toward the Mediterranean and the northern ports. This economic reorientation stimulated the development of previously marginal anchorages into expanding urban centres. Indeed, several major coastal cities originated as medieval anchorages whose names display remarkable continuity throughout the medieval period.

G. Other Toponymic Associations

⁸ al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān, *Ifitāḥ al-Da'wa*, ed. Farḥāt al-Dashrāwī, 2nd ed. (Algiers: Dīwān al-Maṭbū'āt al-Jāmi'iyya, 1986), 333.

⁹ Ibn Ḥammād al-Ṣanhājī, *Akhbār Mulūk Banī 'Ubayd wa-Sīratuhum*, ed. al-Tihāmī Naqra and 'Abd al-Ḥalīm 'Uways (Cairo: Dār al-Ṣaḥwa, n.d.), 73.

¹⁰ 'Abd al-Karīm Jawdat, *The Economic and Social Conditions in the Central Maghrib during the Third and Fourth Centuries AH (Ninth–Tenth Centuries CE)* (Algiers: Office des Publications Universitaires, n.d.), 135.

¹¹ al-Bakrī, *Al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik*, 2:228.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2:260.

Other categories of tribal toponyms are also attested. Some are associated with physical geographical features, such as the strait named after the Miknāsa tribe¹³ and the coast bearing the name of the Zanāta tribe of Kūmiya. In other instances, the tribal ethnonym itself evolved into a territorial designation referring not only to the tribe but also to the region under its control. Representative examples include Katāma,¹⁴ Bilād Katāma¹⁵, and Bilād Ajāna¹⁶, where the tribal name came to denote a wider geographical and political territory rather than merely the tribal community itself.

3. The Rise of Tribal Organization in the Central Maghreb

Onomastic research, particularly the study of personal names in relation to their tribal affiliations and the shifting patterns of individual allegiance between tribal groups, provides valuable insights into the processes through which tribes expanded and evolved. One historical account preserved by al-Dabbāgh in connection with the Islamic conquest of the Maghreb illustrates one such mechanism. It indicates that the Arab tribes that entered the Maghreb experienced a process of tribal aggregation, by which tribal communities expanded through the incorporation of individuals who were not originally descended from them. According to this account, Zuhayr b. Qays al-Balawī denied being of Balī origin, explaining instead that he belonged to the Arab tribe of Ghassān. He stated that his father had fled his native tribe after committing an offence and sought refuge among the Balī, where the family gradually came to be identified with its host tribe. As Zuhayr himself declared: *“By God, I am one of the adopted Arabs. I am from Ghassān. My father committed an offence against his people and sought refuge among the Balī, and consequently their lineage came to prevail over ours”*¹⁷. This account illustrates one of the mechanisms through which tribal communities in the Maghreb were constituted, demonstrating that blood ties alone did not define tribal cohesion. Rather, it reveals that tribal affiliation could also be established through forms of social integration that transcended common ancestry, shared descent, or lineage from a common forefather. Consequently, the incorporation of new members into a tribe remained possible for individuals who had separated from their original communities or who consciously adopted new genealogical identities. A comparable example is provided by al-Ya‘qūbī, who mentions a resident of Nakūr claiming descent from Ḥimyar, whereas the local population regarded him as belonging to the indigenous Nafza tribe¹⁸. In the North African context, therefore, the tribe should not be understood primarily as a genealogical entity but rather as a form of social organization and collective mobilization shaped by multiple factors, foremost among them territorial proximity, co-residence, and the sharing of a common geographical space¹⁹. Since territorial competition continually reshaped the tribal landscape, tribes frequently expanded through the incorporation of branches of diverse origins that gradually fused into cohesive social units. Conversely, tribal groups could also fragment, leading to the dissolution of earlier

¹³ Ibid., 2:744

¹⁴ Muḥammad al-Khwārizmī, *The Configuration of the Earth: From Ptolemy’s Geography of Cities, Mountains, Seas, Islands, and Rivers*, ed. Hans von Mžik (Lebanon: Bibliyon Library, 2009), 60.

¹⁵ al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān, *Iftitāḥ al-Da‘wa*, 170.

¹⁶ Ibid. 171.

¹⁷ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Dabbāgh, *Ma‘ālim al-Īmān fī Ma‘rifat Ahl al-Qayrawān*, ed. Ibrāhīm Shabbūḥ, 2nd ed. (Egypt: al-Sunna al-Muḥammadiyya, 1968), 1:56.

¹⁸ al-Ya‘qūbī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, 196.

¹⁹ Muḥammad al-Kūkhī, *The Question of Identity in North Africa: Diversity and Integration in the Reality of Human Beings, Language, Culture, and History* (Casablanca, Morocco: Afrique Orient, 2014), 90.

solidarities and the emergence of new tribal formations. More generally, tribal mobility, migration, and political instability fostered these continuous processes of fusion and fission, explaining why the names and composition of tribes are not always consistently represented in the historical sources²⁰. As Auguste Bernard aptly observed, “*a tribe grows not only through integration but also through aggregation.*”²¹

4. Identifying the Tribes of the Central Maghreb through the Toponymic System.

To this day, numerous place names in the regions of Jijel and Béjaïa remain closely associated with the tribes, clan segments, or tribal confederations that once controlled them. Examples include Banī Ḥasan, Banī Yatūrgh, Banī Ghabrīn, Zwāwa, Katāma, and Banī Zaldāwī. Similar cases are found in the regions of Guelma, Annaba, and Constantine, where toponyms such as Hawwāra, Lahāša, and Sadrāta²² have likewise preserved the memory of former tribal occupation. If systematically collected, such names would make it possible to compile a comprehensive lexicon of tribal names whose survival in the toponymic landscape constitutes evidence of their historical presence and enduring imprint on the geographical memory of the Central Maghreb. Anyone examining the tribal nomenclature of the Maghreb in general, and the Central Maghreb in particular, is confronted with an exceptionally large number of tribal names, making it difficult not only to identify and locate these groups but also to determine their origins and reconstruct aspects of their historical role. Jacques Berque acknowledged this difficulty in his study of the tribes of the Western Maghreb, observing that the repeated occurrence of identical tribal names across different regions rendered their precise geographical localization virtually impossible²³. A similar conclusion was reached by Georges Marçais, who emphasized the difficulty of reconstructing a reliable settlement map of the Maghreb in the ninth century, especially in the Central Maghreb, situated between the domains of the Aghlabids and the Idrisids²⁴. The problem is further compounded by the nature of many tribal names themselves, whose orthography and pronunciation are often uncertain in the historical sources. This raises the question of whether all these tribes exercised a genuine historical role and maintained an effective presence within the geography of the Central Maghreb, or whether some existed only as names preserved in the written record. In many instances, these tribal names occur exclusively in the documentary sources, without any corroborating toponymic or anthroponymic evidence capable of confirming their historical presence. From this perspective, the persistence of tribal names within the onomastic landscape may itself be regarded as a useful criterion for distinguishing tribes that exercised a tangible historical influence and maintained a lasting territorial presence from others whose names remained confined to the literary tradition without leaving discernible traces in the toponymic record.

²⁰ Raḥma Touras, *The Arabization of the State and Society in al-Maghrib al-Aqṣā during the Almohad Period* (Casablanca, Morocco: Al-Idrissi Foundation for Research and Studies, 2015), 74.

²¹ Jacques Berque, “On the Meaning of the Tribe in North Africa,” in *Anthropology and History*, trans. ‘Abd al-Aḥad al-Sabtī and ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Falaq (Morocco: Dār Tūbqāl, 1988), 115.

²² Asya Saḥli, “Toponymy of Eastern Algeria and Its Relationship to Tribal Affiliations during the Medieval Period,” *Majallat al-Ma‘ālim* 20 (2017): 91.

²³ Hashem Al-Alawi, *The Society of al-Maghrib al-Aqṣā up to the Mid-Fourth Century AH (Mid-Tenth Century CE)*, vol. 2 (Rabat: Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs, 1995), 218.

²⁴ Ghaniya Abbasi, *The City of Mazouna and Its Hinterland during the Medieval Period: A Monographic Study*, Master's thesis in Medieval History, supervised by Ammara Alaoua (Emir Abdelkader University, Constantine, 2012), 43.

The following table seeks to identify and catalogue the tribal names preserved within the toponymic system of the Central Maghreb by compiling all attested place names recorded in the available historical sources up to the sixth century AH (twelfth century CE).

Tribal Names Preserved in Toponyms	Number
Kiyāna, Banū Wārīfan, Raṭl Māzūgha, Banī Mazghanna, Kiyāna, Banū Wārīfan, Banī Yārūt, Ajāna, Banī Jinād, Jazūl, Banī Jadās, Mughīla Dalūl, Jarāwa La‘zīzwā, Miknāsa, Maṭmāṭa, Marnīsa al-Bīr, Tājūrā’, Mughīla Banī Hāshim, Astūra, Banī Jalīdāsan, Kūmiya, Māwargha, Banī Zindīwī, Banī Khalaf, Banī Jinād, Banī ‘Abd Allāh, Zwāwa, Banī Hammād	29

The following table presents the complete corpus of tribal names preserved within the onomastic system of the Central Maghreb. It includes twenty-nine (29) names referring either to tribes or to tribal subdivisions. In most cases, these names have survived through toponyms designating territories, villages, towns, or mountains that retained the memory of the tribes after which they were named. Representative examples include *Qal‘at Kiyāna*, *Qaryat Matūsa*, *Jazā‘ir Banī Mazghanna*, *Jabal Maṭmāṭa*, *‘Adwat Nafūsa*, *Sūq Hawwāra*, and *Marsā Astūra*. Other toponyms refer to military and architectural structures, such as *Ḥiṣn Lawāta* and *Qal‘at Banī Hammād*. It is noteworthy, however, that the number of tribal names preserved in the toponymic record remains relatively limited when compared with the extensive lists of tribes and tribal subdivisions recorded in the historical and geographical sources dealing with the Central Maghreb.

5. Tribal Mobility within and beyond the Central Maghreb

Attempting to reconstruct a settlement map of the tribes of the Maghreb is an exceptionally complex undertaking owing to their continuous mobility across the region. For example, any attempt to define the territorial distribution of the branches of the Ṣanhāja or Zanāta confederations immediately reveals that these tribal groups were dispersed across almost the entire Islamic Maghreb. Tribal territories were therefore in a constant state of transformation, shaped by a variety of factors including warfare, military campaigns, voluntary migrations, and, in many instances, forced displacement. Historical sources, for example, refer to the enormous numbers of captives and slaves acquired during the Islamic conquest²⁵, many of whom were transferred to the Mashriq and other regions. According to these sources, the captives taken by Mūsā b. Nuṣayr alone numbered one hundred thousand²⁶. Georges Marçais consequently described the Maghreb as an inexhaustible reservoir of slaves, reporting that ‘Uqba b. Nāfi‘ deported approximately 80,000 captives, Ḥassān b. al-Nu‘mān 35,000, and Mūsā b. Nuṣayr 100,000. Although Marçais himself expressed reservations concerning these figures²⁷, despite their transmission by Arabic sources relatively close to the events, even a substantially reduced estimate would still imply demographic losses of considerable magnitude. The

²⁵ Ḥassān then launched a second campaign, during which he took a number of Berbers captive. See Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā al-Balādhurī, *The Conquest of Lands (Futūḥ al-Buldān)*, ed. ‘Umar Anīs al-Ṭabbā’ (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Ma‘ārif li-l-Ṭibā‘a wa-al-Naṣhr, n.d.), 321.

²⁶ Ibn Abī Ḥassān relates that, after Mūsā conquered Suqūma, he wrote to the Umayyad caliph al-Walīd ibn ‘Abd al-Malik: “O Commander of the Faithful, one hundred thousand captives from Suqūma have been sent to you.” Al-Walīd replied: “Woe to you! I suspect this is one of your fabrications. If what you say is true, then this is indeed the gathering of entire nations.” See Abū ‘Ubayd Allāh al-Bakrī, *Al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik*, 2:302.

²⁷ Georges Marçais, *The Maghrib and Its Relations with the Islamic East during the Middle Ages*, trans. Maḥmūd ‘Abd al-Ṣamad Haykal (Egypt, 1999), 27.

impact of these deportations is reflected in the names of slaves, concubines, and the mothers of Umayyad and ‘Abbāsid princes. The removal of such large numbers of people from the Central Maghreb must have profoundly disrupted the Berber social fabric, a process that continued well after the Islamization of the region and only gradually came to an end. This development is reflected in the letter sent by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ḥabīb to Ja‘far al-Manṣūr during the second century AH, in which he apologized for his inability to provide slaves and concubines, declaring: *“Today Ifrīqiya has become Muslim, and the taking of captives there has ceased.”*²⁸

Some tribes and tribal branches consequently became populations that could be uprooted and resettled according to the political objectives of the victorious power, whether to populate a newly established territory or to depopulate another. A ruler might found a fortress or a citadel and settle within it members of a particular tribe. Thus, Ḥammād b. Buluggīn transferred members of the Jarāwa tribe from their original homeland to his newly founded capital, al-Qal‘a, shortly after its establishment in 398 AH (1007–1008 CE). This relocation resulted in the depopulation of the area lying between Constantine and al-Qal‘a, formerly inhabited by the Jarāwa²⁹. Likewise, the Fāṭimids transferred families from the Zāb to Raqqāda in Ifrīqiya³⁰, while ‘Abd al-Mu‘min b. ‘Alī relocated members of the Kūmiya tribe, together with groups of Arab tribal leaders, in order to weaken the tribal solidarity of the Maṣmūda³¹ in the Western Maghreb.

The toponymy of the Islamic Maghreb preserves numerous traces of these patterns of tribal mobility. One notable example is Jabal Jazūl, whose name clearly commemorates the Saharan tribe of Jazūla. The mountain is explicitly associated with the tribe in the historical sources, and Ibn al-Ṣaghīr's account suggests that the Jazūla were present in this region before—or at least at the time when—the mountain acquired its name. Although traditionally regarded as a Saharan tribe, the Jazūla are particularly renowned for having produced the famous religious leader ‘Abd Allāh b. Yāsīn al-Jazūlī, who organized the Almoravid movement in the Sahara and laid the foundations of the Almoravid dynasty. According to Bouziane Derraji, the geographical domain of the Jazūla extended across al-Sūs, where they moved seasonally in search of pasture and neighboured the Lamṭa, with whom they maintained hostile relations³². This mountain toponym therefore constitutes valuable evidence for the presence of a tribe originating from al-Sūs in the vicinity of Tāhart, reflecting the broader historical movement of tribal migrations toward western Morocco and the Sahara, as documented in several historical sources³³. The case of Jabal Maṭmāṭa closely parallels that of Jabal Jazūl. Located not far

²⁸ Ibn al-Athīr. al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh, ed. Abū al-Fidā’ ‘Abd Allāh al-Qaḍī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1987), 4:501.

²⁹ Asya Saḥli, “Toponymy of Eastern Algeria and Its Relationship to Tribal Affiliations during the Medieval Period, 102.

³⁰ Sourīya Medyaz, The Zab Region from the Islamic Conquest to the Fatimid Transfer to Egypt (21–362 AH / 642–972 CE), Master's thesis, supervised by Mas‘ūd Mazhūdī (University of Batna, 2010), 62.

³¹ Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Khaldūn, The Book of Lessons and the Register of Beginnings and Events in the History of the Arabs, the Berbers, and Their Powerful Contemporaries, ed. Khalīl Shaḥāda and Suhayl Zakkār (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2001), 6:28.

³² Bouziane Derraji, The Amazigh Tribes: Their Roles, Territories, and Notable Figures, vol. 2 (El Qobba, Algeria: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 2007), 177.

³³ Ibn Khaldūn refers to this in his discussion of the Ṣanhāja al-Lithām, stating: “This branch of the Ṣanhāja are the al-Mulaththamūn (the Veiled People), settled in the desert beyond the southern Saharan sands. They have roamed those vast expanses since long before the Islamic conquest, for a time whose beginning is unknown. They abandoned the cultivated countryside, found in the desert what they sought, forsook the highlands and turned away from them, replacing them with

from it, this mountain is mentioned by al-Bakrī on the route linking al-Ghaza to Tāhart³⁴. Ibn Khaldūn likewise records a mountain near Fez bearing the same tribal name, further illustrating the westward movement of the Maṭmāṭa, from whom the celebrated Berber genealogist Sābiq al-Maṭmāṭī³⁵ originated. Similarly, Jabal Tājūrā', situated near Nadrūma³⁶ in the vicinity of Tlemcen, finds a parallel in another mountain of the same name mentioned by Ibn Khaldūn in the region of Gabès in the Central Maghreb³⁷, again pointing to the geographical mobility of tribal groups throughout the Maghreb.

The names of several markets likewise preserve evidence of tribal movements. The historical sources mention Sūq Hawwāra in the fourth century AH (tenth century CE), Sūq Jarāwa in the fifth century AH (eleventh century CE), and Sūq Banī Zindīwī in the sixth century AH (twelfth century CE). The Jarāwa, who are best known from the accounts relating to al-Kāhina in the Aurès Mountains, appear here in connection with a market near Oran³⁸, suggesting either an expansion of the tribe or a shift in its territorial domain. The same observation applies to the Banī Zindīwī, whose name became associated with a locality described as a mountain, a fortress, and a market. Al-Idrīsī provides a detailed description of the favourable conditions enjoyed by this tribe during his lifetime, emphasizing its ability to remain largely beyond the fiscal demands of the ruling authorities. This picture accords with the testimony of Ibn Khaldūn, who regarded the Banī Zindīwī as one of the surviving branches of the Katāma that had taken refuge in the mountains, thereby preserving their identity and continuity until the eighth century AH (fourteenth century CE)³⁹.

6. Changing Tribal Roles in the Central Maghreb: Between Expansion and Decline

The historical influence of tribal groups in the Central Maghreb varied considerably from one period to another and from one geographical setting to another. No tribe maintained a continuous position of dominance or an uninterrupted monopoly of power throughout the medieval period. This observation is supported by a quantitative assessment of the historical actors who shaped the political history of the Central Maghreb. A notable example is the decline of the Jarāwa, the tribe of al-Kāhina, which played a leading role in resisting the Muslim conquest. Together with the Awraba, the Jarāwa constituted one of the most powerful tribal groups in the Central Maghreb in terms of military strength, manpower, and political organization. Their prominence, however, declined dramatically after they suffered devastating losses in their confrontations with the Muslim armies⁴⁰. These defeats

the milk and meat of their livestock. They deliberately distanced themselves from urban life, preferring solitude, and embraced the wilderness out of a desire to preserve their independence from domination and subjugation." See 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Khaldūn, *The Book of Lessons and the Register of Beginnings and Events in the History of the Arabs, the Berbers, and Their Powerful Contemporaries*, 6:241.

³⁴ al-Bakrī, *Al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik*, 2:258.

³⁵ Ibn Khaldūn, 'Abd al-Raḥmān. *Kitāb al-'Ibar wa-Dīwān al-Mubtada' wa-al-Khabar*, 6:260.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 6:263.

³⁷ *Ibid*.

³⁸ al-Bakrī, *Al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik*, 2:253.

³⁹ Asya Sahlī, "Toponymy of Eastern Algeria and Its Relationship to Tribal Affiliations during the Medieval Period, 97.

⁴⁰ Ibn Khaldūn states that the final battle in which the tribe of al-Kāhina was defeated by Ḥassān ibn al-Nu'mān resulted in the annihilation of nearly one hundred thousand of its members—a remarkably large figure. Although this number is undoubtedly exaggerated, it nevertheless reflects the magnitude of the losses suffered by the tribe. See Ibn Khaldūn, *Kitāb al-'Ibar wa-Dīwān al-Mubtada' wa-al-Khabar fī Tārīkh al-'Arab wa-al-Barbar wa-Man 'Āṣarahum min Dhawī al-Sha'n al-Akbar*, 7:13.

broke the tribe's military power and forced its remaining members to withdraw westward in order to escape further conflict and preserve what was left of the community. Thereafter, the Jarāwa virtually disappeared from the historical record of the Central Maghreb. Ibn Khaldūn describes their subsequent fate as follows: “*Thereafter their remnants dispersed, their power came to an end, and the Jarāwa became scattered among the various Berber tribes.*”⁴¹

The decline of the Jarāwa is reflected in the onomastic evidence, as little remained to commemorate the tribe except a single memorial toponym in the western part of the Central Maghreb. Al-Bakrī records the place-name *Jarāwa La ‘Azīzwā* on the route linking Oran and Kairouan, attested in the fifth century AH (eleventh century CE)⁴². In contrast, the Katāma maintained a continuous presence over several centuries and constitute the tribe most frequently represented within the toponymic system of the Central Maghreb. Their name is attested as early as the second century AH (eighth century CE) and appears again in place names from the **third century** AH (ninth century CE), notably in the toponym *Bilād Katāma*, denoting the territory inhabited by the tribe. The tribal name reappears in the fifth century AH (eleventh century CE) in the urban toponym *Bāb Katāma*⁴³, one of the gates of the city of *Ṭubna*. The continuity of these toponymic attestations may be regarded as a strong indicator of the prominent political, territorial, and cultural role played by the Katāma in the history of the Central Maghreb throughout the medieval period.

7. Tribal Territorialization

A survey of the toponymic corpus containing tribal or sub-tribal names—such as *Sūq Hawwāra*, *Ḥiṣn Lawāta*, *Bāb Katāma*, and *Qal‘at Nafūsa*—reveals an important pattern: no toponym referring to a tribe or tribal subdivision is attested during the first and second centuries AH (seventh–eighth centuries CE). Although numerous place names are recorded for this period, none preserve the name of a tribe from the Central Maghreb. Instead, the surviving toponyms consist primarily of generic designations such as *Qal‘at Bishr*, *Nahr al-Balā’*, and *Wādī al-Nisā’*, none of which bear any explicit tribal reference. This absence is particularly striking given the rich anthroponymic evidence for the same period, where tribal affiliation constitutes a prominent component of personal nomenclature throughout the Central Maghreb.

The absence of tribal toponyms before the end of the second century AH (eighth century CE) may be explained by the pronounced mobility of Maghrebi tribes during the first two Islamic centuries. Throughout this period, the Central Maghreb underwent an extensive process of tribal reorganization and territorial redistribution. The prolonged military campaigns of the Islamic conquest, followed by the consolidation of Arab rule and the successive revolts and resistance movements of the Berber tribes, created a political environment in which stable tribal territories had not yet fully emerged. Under such conditions, the establishment of permanent geographical areas identified with particular tribes remained unlikely. This interpretation is supported by historical evidence indicating that numerous tribes migrated westward or into the Sahara in order to escape the advancing Muslim armies. The geographical descriptions of al-Bakrī, al-Idrīsī, and al-Ḥimyarī likewise portray tribal

⁴¹ Ibid.

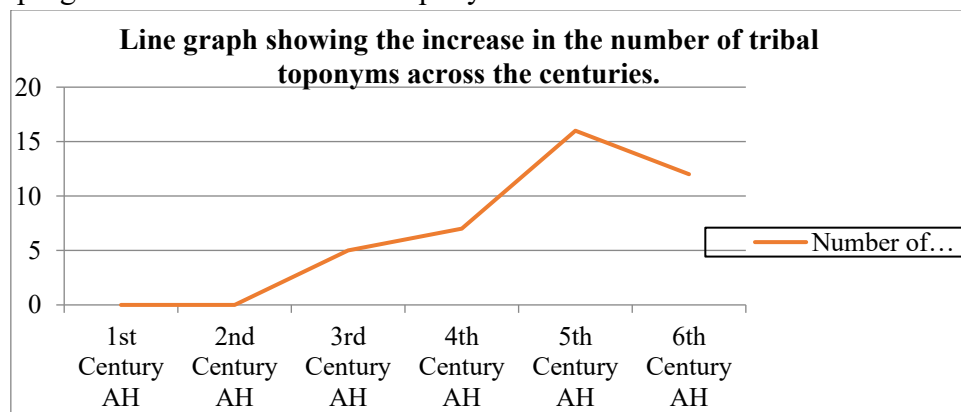
⁴² al-Bakrī, *Al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik*, 2:253.

⁴³ Ibid, 2:228.

communities in a state of continual movement and territorial relocation.⁴⁴ Anthroponymic evidence from al-Andalus and other regions further demonstrates that many individuals originating from the Central Maghreb emigrated for a variety of political, military, and economic reasons⁴⁵. As Hāshim al-‘Alawī has observed, tribal identity during this period was more closely associated with the social organization of the tribe and its kinship structures than with attachment to a specific territory.⁴⁶

Toponyms incorporating tribal names begin to appear only from the third century AH (ninth century CE), during which five examples are recorded: *Darb Nafūsa*, *‘Adwat Nafūsa*, *Qal‘at Nafūsa*, *Ḥiṣn Lawāta*, and *Bilād Katāma*. These place names constitute clear indicators of territorial occupation and the appropriation of geographical space. Significantly, they are associated with the establishment of the Rustamid state in the region of *Tāhart*, since the emergence of a political state necessarily presupposed a degree of territorial stability based upon control of both land and population.

From the fourth century AH (tenth century CE) onward, toponyms derived from tribal and sub-tribal names became increasingly common. Six new examples are recorded during this century, referring to fortresses, islands, and tribal territories, including *Qal‘at Kiyāna*, *Jazīrat Banī Mazghanna*, *Rīgha*, and *Raṭl Māzūgha*. The fifth and sixth centuries AH (eleventh–twelfth centuries CE) witnessed a marked increase in the number of tribal toponyms, with tribal names becoming attached to villages, towns, city gates, markets, anchorages, fortresses, and castles throughout the Central Maghreb. This development constitutes an important indicator of the transformation of tribal society, reflecting the growing territorial attachment of tribal groups and their increasing integration into the cultural and social identity of the population. Tribal names had by then become enduring markers of territorial belonging and collective identity. This interpretation is further supported by the emergence, from the fourth century AH onward, of geographical *nisbas* identifying individuals through their place of origin, such as *al-Wansharīsī*, *al-Zābī*, and *al-Jazīrī*. Such designations reflect the consolidation of a durable relationship between communities and their territories and attest to the territorial stabilization experienced by many tribes during the fourth and fifth centuries AH. The following table and graph illustrate the progressive increase in tribal toponyms over successive centuries.



⁴⁴ Souriya Medyaz, *The Zab Region from the Islamic Conquest to the Fatimid Transfer to Egypt (21–362 AH / 642–972 CE)*, 12.

⁴⁵ See ‘Ammār Hilāl, *al-‘Ulamā’ al-Jazā’iriyyūn fī al-Buldān al-‘Arabiyya al-Islāmiyya fīmā Bayna al-Qarnayn al-Thālith wa-al-Rābi’ ‘Ashar al-Hijriyyayn (3/14 AH)*, 2nd ed. (Algiers: Office des Publications Universitaires, 2010).

⁴⁶ Hāshim al-‘Alawī al-Qāsimī, *The Society of al-Maghrib al-Aqṣā up to the Mid-Fourth Century AH (Mid-Tenth Century CE)*, 1:171.

The table and the accompanying graph demonstrate a gradual increase in the number of place names derived from tribal names over time. This trend suggests the progressive territorial stabilization of the tribes of the Central Maghreb, particularly from the third century AH (ninth century CE) onward. From this period, tribal communities became increasingly settled and more firmly attached to specific geographical territories. This process was facilitated by the transition from a predominantly nomadic way of life to an increasingly urban mode of settlement. Newly established towns functioned as geographical anchors for tribal groups: some tribes came to possess their own urban centres, while others shared the same towns with neighboring tribes. These emerging urban nuclei played a decisive role in promoting tribal stability and territorial consolidation. This transformation is clearly reflected in the onomastic evidence. A comparison between the toponymic corpus of the early and later medieval periods reveals a marked shift in the nature of place names, from predominantly rural designations in the early centuries to increasingly urban toponyms referring to city gates, mosques, residential quarters, inns, and other components of the urban landscape.

Conclusion

Tribal names constituted a significant component of the onomastic landscape of the Central Maghreb, becoming associated with a wide range of natural and urban features. Tracing these names provides valuable insights into the tribal groups that played an active role in the region's history. The analysis presented in this study reveals a progressive increase in the presence of tribal names within the toponymic system of the Central Maghreb. Moreover, the spatial distribution of these names, when examined alongside the historical evidence, highlights the mobility of tribal groups and the shifting of their territorial domains, a movement that was predominantly westward. While certain tribes remained influential over successive centuries, as reflected by the recurring appearance of their names in the toponymic record, others experienced decline, disappeared altogether, or fragmented into smaller tribal branches. Over time, however, this tribal mobility gradually diminished as communities became increasingly sedentary. This process is evidenced by the growing association of tribal names with villages and with various forms of urban toponymy within medieval towns, reflecting the progressive territorial consolidation of tribal communities during the middle centuries of the medieval period.

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