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A HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL READING OF RUSADIR (MELILLA) THROUGH THE WRITINGS OF HISTORIANS AND GEOGRAPHERS

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| ABSTRACT

This article examines the ancient city of Rusaddir (historical Melilla) from both historical and geographical perspectives, drawing on classical sources cited by ancient historians and geographers such as Strabo, Ptolemy, Pliny the Elder, and Pomponius Mela, in addition to modern archaeological and geographical studies that have addressed the city.

| KEYWORDS

Rusaddir, Melilla, Ancient History, Historical Geography, Civilizational Transformations, Mediterranean Ports.

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Abstract

This article examines the ancient city of Rusaddir (historical Melilla) from both historical and geographical perspectives, drawing on classical sources cited by ancient historians and geographers such as Strabo, Ptolemy, Pliny the Elder, and Pomponius Mela, in addition to modern archaeological and geographical studies that have addressed the city. The study focuses on analyzing the city's strategic location on the eastern coast of northern Morocco and its role as a commercial and urban port in antiquity, linking it to broader Mediterranean trade networks. It also reviews the urban, economic, and cultural transformations the city witnessed across different historical periods, highlighting the relevance of classical sources in reconstructing the city's cultural and spatial landscape and in understanding its interactions with its surrounding region. The article concludes that Rusaddir was not merely a coastal settlement with ancient habitation, but rather an important cultural and commercial hub. The writings of ancient geographers and historians provide deeper insights into its spatial development and the economic and political functions it fulfilled in the region. The study further emphasizes the need for integrating archaeological and geographical research with historical analysis to reconstruct a comprehensive picture of the ancient city and its broader environment.

Introduction:-

The city of Rusadir (Rusaddir), known today as Melilla, is considered one of the most prominent historical coastal settlements in northern Morocco. Since Phoenician times, it has represented a major civilizational and commercial anchor on the eastern Rif coast. The city played a strategic role in connecting North Africa to Mediterranean trade networks, making it a hub for the

exchange of goods and cultures among various ancient civilizations, from the Phoenicians and Carthaginians to the Romans. The study of ancient historical and geographical sources reveals the status of Rusadir as an important port and an active urban center. It was mentioned by Strabo, Ptolemy, and Pliny the Elder as a settlement of economic and military significance, strategically located between the sea and the mountains, capable of supporting maritime trade and linking coastal cities within a complex network of economic and political relations in the eastern Rif and northern Morocco. These classical sources, despite their limitations in providing precise details about urban organization or population structure, allow for an understanding of the spatial distribution of the city and its economic and cultural functions throughout antiquity. They also highlight the need to integrate historical analysis with modern geographical approaches—such as archaeological studies, remote sensing, and geomatics—in order to reconstruct a comprehensive picture of the city and its rural surroundings, and to better understand the relationship between its geographical location and its economic and cultural roles within the network of Mediterranean ports.

From this perspective, the main research problem emerges, centered around the following question:

To what extent do the writings of ancient historians and geographers allow for the reconstruction of the historical and geographical development of Rusadir, and its connection to the economic and cultural transformations that shaped northern Morocco throughout history?

The research aims to analyze the historical and geographical role of the city as reflected in ancient sources, and to reconstruct the civilizational and economic profile of Rusadir, while comparing these findings with data provided by modern archaeological and geographical studies. It also seeks to highlight existing research gaps and propose directions for future studies, enabling a deeper understanding of the city's history and its spatial and urban development, and linking it to the broader regional context of the eastern Rif and Morocco as a whole.

Results and Discussion:-

Rusadir, the ancient site of present-day Melilla, represents one of the most important coastal urban centers in Mediterranean Morocco. Its location on the southern shore of the Mediterranean constituted a structural factor in shaping its historical development, as it evolved from ancient times into a point of connection between Africa and Europe. Historical studies indicate that Mediterranean coastal cities often emerge through the interaction between trade, navigation, and natural geography—an observation that applies to Rusadir, which maintained its role across successive civilizations (Braudel, 1979).

The Historical Extension of Rusadir across Mediterranean Civilizations:-

The early emergence of Rusadir was closely linked to Phoenician maritime activity, as traders from the Levantine coast sought to establish commercial outposts along the Mediterranean shores to secure maritime exchange networks. With the expansion of Carthaginian influence, the region became part of the commercial sphere connected to Carthage, granting it a role in linking the western and eastern Mediterranean. Later, with the incorporation of the area into the Roman imperial domain, within the broader expansion of the Roman Empire, Rusadir acquired an additional military and administrative dimension, becoming integrated into the network of Mediterranean ports that supported Roman control over trade and supply routes.

Tracing this historical continuity highlights that Rusadir was not a limited local entity, but rather a strategic pivot in the geopolitical landscape of the Mediterranean. Various maritime and commercial powers successively controlled the city, leaving their marks on its urban structure and economic function. Therefore, studying the history of Rusadir across Mediterranean civilizations not only allows for an understanding of its local development, but also reveals its position within a broader dynamic that shaped the history of the Mediterranean basin as a whole.

Rusadir in the Phoenician and Carthaginian Period:-

Research indicates that the emergence of Rusadir was closely linked to Phoenician expansion in the western Mediterranean during the first millennium BCE. The Phoenicians relied on the establishment of maritime outposts to secure long-distance trade routes. The site was carefully selected due to its natural bay, which provided effective protection for ships, as well as its proximity to the inland resources of North Africa (Moscati, 2001). With the rise of Carthaginian power, the city became integrated into its commercial network, playing a mediating role between Iberian metal trade and African agricultural products. The continued mention of Rusadir in Roman sources confirms that its importance did not decline after the fall of Carthaginian influence; rather, it remained an active port in the western Mediterranean (Pliny, 1952).

Rusadir during the Roman Period:-

Following the fall of Carthage, Rusadir was incorporated into the Roman political sphere and attached to the province of Mauretania Tingitana, where it developed into a city with administrative and commercial functions. Epigraphic evidence and discovered coinage suggest that it attained municipal status, reflecting its integration into the Roman urban system (Rebuffat, 1986). The geographer Ptolemy listed it among the important coastal cities, specifying its position within the geographical

sequence of the African coastline, which demonstrates Roman awareness of its value in maritime navigation and trade (Ptolemy, 1932).

Rusadir in the Islamic Period:-

With the Islamic conquest of North Africa, Rusadir became part of the political domain of emerging Islamic states, while maintaining its maritime role. It was described by the geographer Al-Bakri as an ancient fortified city and an important port, indicating the continuity of its defensive and commercial functions (Al-Bakri, n.d., p. 214).

Medieval texts further indicate that the city served as a vital point of connection between the Moroccan hinterland and al-Andalus, facilitating active flows of trade and population. This reflects the continuity of its intermediary role within the Mediterranean economy (Ibn Khaldun, 2004, vol. 6, p. 311).

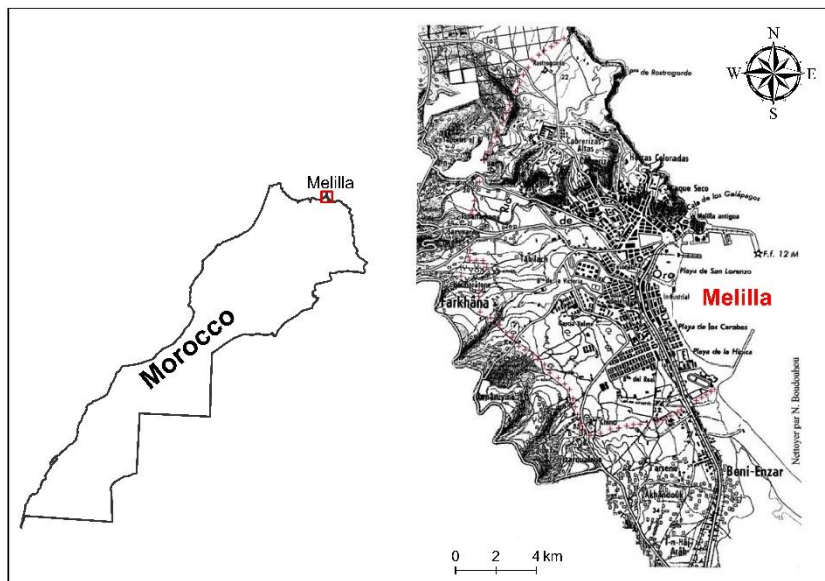
Through this long historical trajectory, it becomes evident that the history of Rusadir is one of successive civilizational layers, in which the city was shaped as a space where commerce intersected with military functions, the Mediterranean with the local, and the classical heritage with the Islamic legacy. This makes it one of the most significant urban models reflecting the dynamism of Mediterranean history across time.

During the medieval period, the city was referred to in the writings of Arab historians under the name Melilla, replacing the earlier name Rusadir. In the 10th century, Ibn Hawqal, the Arab geographer from Nisibis, mentioned Melilla among the cities of the Mediterranean coast (Boudouhou, N., 2025). In the 11th century, Al-Bakri, an Andalusian geographer, described Melilla as an ancient city and referred to its visible ruins in his time. In the 16th century, Leo Africanus noted that “Melilla is a large ancient city built by Africans,” and also mentioned the presence of a port.

Geographical Characteristics of Rusadir and the Importance of Its Strategic Location:-

Location and Position of the Historical City of Rusadir:-

Rusadir (the site of present-day Melilla) is located on a rocky peninsula projecting into the western Mediterranean basin. It extends into the sea in the form of a rocky promontory, a morphological configuration that gives the site a dual advantage: maritime and defensive. The coastal rocky formations, combined with steep slopes descending toward the sea, significantly limit the possibility of hostile maritime landings, while at the same time allowing the formation of natural anchorages on the less exposed sides to waves. This type of geographical setting corresponds to what Braudel describes as the “stability of geographical structures,” which generates long-term urban continuity (Braudel, 1979).



Map 1. Geographical Location of the Historical City of Rusadir (Melilla)

Source: Topographic map at a scale of 1:50,000 (1966), Administrative division map of Morocco (2015)

In geography, the landscape is not a neutral background but an active element in shaping urban history. The promontory projecting into the sea also provides a panoramic view of navigation routes, thereby enhancing its early maritime surveillance function.

Port Characteristics and Maritime Dynamics:-

The presence of a naturally sheltered bay, relatively protected from northern and western winds, constitutes a decisive factor in the emergence of Rusadir. Mediterranean cities endowed with natural harbors often evolve into commercial nodes due to their capacity to accommodate ships under variable climatic conditions (Braudel, 1979). Historically, Rusadir functioned as a transit station between the Moroccan coast and the southern Iberian Peninsula, particularly given the relatively short maritime distance between the two shores. Classical studies indicate that the inclusion of the city in Roman cartographic representations reflects its recognition as a key reference point in coastal navigation (Talbert, 2000). Control over maritime traffic crossing between the eastern and western Mediterranean, even in a partial sense, granted the site a strategic value that extended beyond its local scale, integrating it into the broader network of ports that structured Mediterranean trade.

Regional Location: A Contact Zone between Mountain and Sea:-

Rusadir is situated on the eastern fringes of the Rif, within a transitional zone that combines both mountainous and maritime environments. This transitional position is fundamental in explaining its economic role, as the city became a maritime outlet for agricultural and pastoral products coming from the interior. Coastal cities located in contact zones often function as intermediaries between different ecological systems (Naciri, 1985). This setting helped create a dual exchange space: a maritime sphere open to the Mediterranean and a terrestrial sphere connected to surrounding tribes and rural areas. Rusadir was therefore not purely a maritime city, but rather a nodal point linking two economies: an inland mountainous economy and a Mediterranean maritime economy.

Geopolitical Dimension and Control of Maritime Routes:-

From a geopolitical perspective, Rusadir is part of the coastal arc linking the Strait of Gibraltar with the eastern Maghreb shoreline. This positioning placed it within a maritime surveillance zone during periods of intensified competition over trade routes. Historians emphasize that peninsular coastal sites often become strategic military strongholds due to their ability to monitor both sea and land (Parker, 1988).

Its proximity to the European shore also enhanced its importance in contexts of conflict or exchange between the two sides of the Mediterranean, particularly during the medieval period when ports became both cultural and military contact zones.

Defensive Geography and Urban Fortification:-

Analysis of Rusadir's spatial structure shows that fortifications were not incidental but deeply rooted in the nature of the site itself. Rocky elevations and sloping coastlines facilitate natural defensive systems, which explains the continuous fortification of the city across Phoenician, Roman, and Islamic periods.

Military geographers note that peninsular locations reduce the number of possible landward attack fronts, thereby increasing defensive capacity (Parker, 1988). Consequently, Rusadir's geomorphological structure directly contributed to its military significance, a feature reflected in Arab geographical accounts that emphasized its fortified character (Al-Bakri, n.d.).

Functional Continuity of Rusadir:-

The historical evolution of Rusadir shows that its port and defensive functions did not undergo fundamental change despite successive political regimes. This aligns with Fernand Braudel's concept of the "longue durée," where geographical structures remain relatively stable while political structures change (Braudel, 1979). The maritime location that attracted the Phoenicians was the same one later utilized by the Romans and preserved during the Islamic period. Thus, Rusadir's strategic importance is not the result of a temporary political circumstance, but rather the product of a deep spatial structure.

Rusadir in the Writings of Historians and Geographers: An Analytical Reading:-

The study of Rusadir's presence in historical and geographical writings does not merely reveal descriptive information about the city, but also reflects the evolution of perceptions of coastal cities within geographical thought across different periods. Each epistemological stage produced a distinct representation of the city, shaped by the political, economic, and scientific contexts in which the texts were written.

Rusadir in Classical Writings: Geography as a Tool for Maritime Navigation:-

Rusadir is mentioned in classical geographical works within descriptions of the African coastline, where Ptolemy included it among the coastal cities of North Africa, specifying its position within the sequence of maritime harbors (Ptolemy, 1932). This inclusion was not merely a spatial description, but rather reflects the practical function of ancient geography, which was primarily used to support maritime navigation and to organize imperial space. Coastal cities were defined according to their role within trade routes rather than their social or urban structures.

Pliny also referred to the city in his description of African coastal ports, indicating that Rusadir was known to Roman sailors and administrators and served as a navigational reference point (Pliny, 1952). From this perspective, classical geography offered a “functional” representation of the city, defining it as a node within the Mediterranean maritime network.

Rusadir in Arab Geographical Writings: From Port to Fortress:-

With the shift of political power toward the Islamic world, the perspective of geographers on coastal cities also changed. Al-Bakri described Rusadir as an ancient fortified city with an important maritime position (Al-Bakri, n.d.).

This description reveals a shift in focus from a purely maritime function to a defensive one, reflecting the geopolitical transformations of the Mediterranean during the Islamic period, when coastlines became zones of contact and conflict. Medieval Arabic geographical texts often link the fortification of coastal cities to their role in monitoring maritime routes, indicating that military geography became a central element in the description of urban settlements.

Ibn Khaldun also emphasized the importance of coastal ports in linking the hinterland with the sea, arguing that coastal cities derive their significance from their capacity for commercial mediation (Ibn Khaldun, 2004, vol. 6). Thus, Arab geography produced a “politico-military” representation of the city, where it is understood within a broader system of state defense and maritime economy.

Rusadir in Moroccan Historical Writings: Integration into the Sultanian Space:-

In later Moroccan historical sources, such as the writings of Al-Nasiri, Rusadir appears within the context of coastal conflicts, where it is mentioned as a strategically important site for controlling maritime routes (Al-Nasiri, 1894, vol. 1). This perspective reveals that Moroccan historians treated the city as part of the political domain of the state, rather than merely a geographical location. This representation reflects a shift in historical writing from geographical description to political narrative, where the city becomes an element within the history of power and regional conflict.

Rusadir in Modern Studies: From Description to Structural Analysis:-

With the development of modern historical geography, the focus shifted away from simple spatial description toward interpreting the relationship between places and long-term economic and political structures. In this context, Rusadir stands as a clear example of a city whose continuity has been shaped by geography, as its maritime location has remained a constant factor in its economic and military importance.

Modern studies show that the city is not merely a point on the coastline, but part of a broader Mediterranean urban system based on the interaction between trade, navigation, and defense.

By comparing these texts, three main stages in the representation of Rusadir can be identified:

The classical stage: the city is defined as a port within a maritime navigation network.

The Islamic medieval stage: the city is understood as a fortress and a defensive site.

The modern stage: the city is analyzed as a long-term historical geographical structure.

This evolution reflects the transformation of geographical thought itself, moving from descriptive geography toward analytical and structural geography. It also highlights that coastal cities are not fixed entities, but rather spaces whose meanings change according to the civilizational context in which they are described.

The presence of Rusadir in the writings of historians and geographers demonstrates that the city was not merely a local site, but an element within Mediterranean geographical thought across different historical periods. The ancients viewed it as a port, medieval scholars as a fortress, and modern researchers as a strategic geographical structure. Through this shift in representations, it becomes clear that geography does not only produce cities, but also produces the ways in which they are understood in historical writing.

Conclusion and Recommendations of the Study:-

This study has shown that the site of Rusadir, corresponding to present-day Melilla, was not merely a simple coastal location, but rather a major geostrategic hub in the Mediterranean basin throughout history. Its position overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, and its proximity to maritime trade and navigation routes, made it a space of civilizational and commercial interaction from the Phoenician period through the Carthaginian and Roman phases, and later into the Islamic and modern periods.

The historical and geographical analysis demonstrates that the importance of Rusadir was not static, but rather closely linked to shifts in Mediterranean power balances. The site flourished during periods of active maritime trade and declined when communication networks changed or when economic centers shifted elsewhere. The continuity of settlement at the site reflects its capacity to adapt to political and economic transformations, which explains its persistent presence in the writings of historians and geographers. From a spatial perspective, Rusadir represents a model of coastal sites where geographical factors

intersect with strategic considerations, as its location made it a zone of competition and mutual influence between the African and European shores, and a laboratory for understanding the dynamics of maritime control in the western Mediterranean.

Accordingly, the study proposes the following recommendations:

- **Deepening archaeological and historical research at the site:** by encouraging archaeological excavations and multidisciplinary historical studies to uncover the different settlement phases, allowing for a more precise reconstruction of Rusadir's history.
- **Adopting an integrated geo-historical approach:** combining geographical analysis, historical study, and archaeological research to better understand the role of Mediterranean coastal sites as dynamic spaces rather than static points on the map.
- **Incorporating Rusadir into comparative Mediterranean studies:** by including the site in comparative research with other Mediterranean ports in order to understand maritime exchange networks and the evolution of trading centers over time.
- **Enhancing the cultural and heritage value of the site:** as Rusadir's history represents an important heritage asset that can be used in academic research and in strengthening awareness of shared Mediterranean identity, which calls for its inclusion in educational and cultural programs.
- **Encouraging contemporary geostrategic studies:** understanding the historical role of the site may contribute to interpreting current geopolitical transformations in the western Mediterranean, particularly regarding ports, migration, and economic exchange.

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