

A Historical and Geographical Reading of Rusadir (Melilla) through the Writings of Historians and Geographers

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.

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

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

40 comprehensive picture of the city and its rural surroundings, and to better understand the
41 relationship between its geographical location and its economic and cultural roles within the
42 network of Mediterranean ports.

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

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

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

56 **Results and Discussion**

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

64 **1. The Historical Extension of Rusadir across Mediterranean Civilizations**

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

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

80 **Rusadir in the Phoenician and Carthaginian Period**

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

91 **Rusadir during the Roman Period**

92 Following the fall of Carthage, Rusadir was incorporated into the Roman political sphere and
93 attached to the province of Mauretania Tingitana, where it developed into a city with
94 administrative and commercial functions. Epigraphic evidence and discovered coinage
95 suggest that it attained municipal status, reflecting its integration into the Roman urban
96 system (Rebuffat, 1986). The geographer Ptolemy listed it among the important coastal cities,
97 specifying its position within the geographical sequence of the African coastline, which
98 demonstrates Roman awareness of its value in maritime navigation and trade (Ptolemy, 1932).

99 **Rusadir in the Islamic Period**

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

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

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

113 During the medieval period, the city was referred to in the writings of Arab historians under
114 the name Melilla, replacing the earlier name Rusadir. In the 10th century, Ibn Hawqal, the
115 Arab geographer from Nisibis, mentioned Melilla among the cities of the Mediterranean coast
116 (Boudouhou, N., 2025). In the 11th century, Al-Bakri, an Andalusian geographer, described
117 Melilla as an ancient city and referred to its visible ruins in his time. In the 16th century, Leo

118 Africanus noted that “Melilla is a large ancient city built by Africans,” and also mentioned the
119 presence of a port.

120 **2. Geographical Characteristics of Rusadir and the Importance of Its** 121 **Strategic Location**

122 **Location and Position of the Historical City of Rusadir**

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

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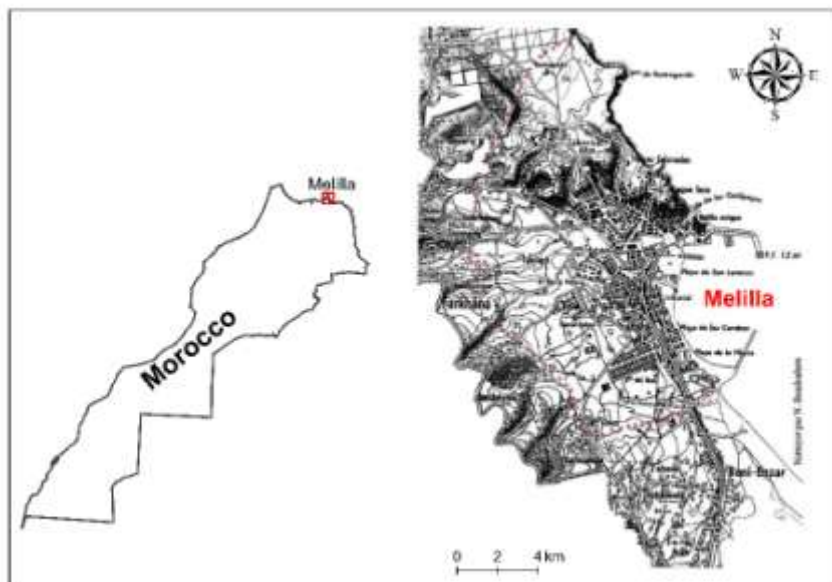
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Map 1. Geographical Location of the Historical City of Rusadir (Melilla)

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Source: Topographic map at a scale of 1:50,000 (1966), Administrative division map of Morocco
143 (2015)

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

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Port Characteristics and Maritime Dynamics

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The presence of a naturally sheltered bay, relatively protected from northern and western
150 winds, constitutes a decisive factor in the emergence of Rusadir. Mediterranean cities

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

160 **Regional Location: A Contact Zone between Mountain and Sea**

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

170 **Geopolitical Dimension and Control of Maritime Routes**

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

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

179 **Defensive Geography and Urban Fortification**

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

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

188 **Functional Continuity of Rusadir**

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

196 **3. Rusadir in the Writings of Historians and Geographers: An Analytical** 197 **Reading**

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

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

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

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

216 **Rusadir in Arab Geographical Writings: From Port to Fortress**

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

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

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

231 **Rusadir in Moroccan Historical Writings: Integration into the Sultanian Space**

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

239 **Rusadir in Modern Studies: From Description to Structural Analysis**

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

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

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

- 248 The classical stage: the city is defined as a port within a maritime navigation network.
- 249 The Islamic medieval stage: the city is understood as a fortress and a defensive site.
- 250 The modern stage: the city is analyzed as a long-term historical geographical structure.

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

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

261 **4. Conclusion and Recommendations of the Study**

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

268 The historical and geographical analysis demonstrates that the importance of Rusadir was not
269 static, but rather closely linked to shifts in Mediterranean power balances. The site flourished
270 during periods of active maritime trade and declined when communication networks changed
271 or when economic centers shifted elsewhere. The continuity of settlement at the site reflects
272 its capacity to adapt to political and economic transformations, which explains its persistent
273 presence in the writings of historians and geographers. From a spatial perspective, Rusadir
274 represents a model of coastal sites where geographical factors intersect with strategic
275 considerations, as its location made it a zone of competition and mutual influence between the
276 African and European shores, and a laboratory for understanding the dynamics of maritime
277 control in the western Mediterranean.

278 Accordingly, the study proposes the following recommendations:

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

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