Morocco’s relations with the outside world underwent a definitive shift during the more than three decades of Sīdī Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh’s reign between 1757 and 1790. This was a response, however, to changes that had been maturing over a much longer period. The shift was not a transition from Morocco being “closed” to being “open,” the dichotomy often used as the criterion to analyse his policy. Trade and travel were always a feature of Moroccan life, although of course the volume and conditions of both varied. The question is not whether the country was involved in economic, political or cultural networks stretching beyond its own boundaries, since it patently always was; it never isolated itself from the world in the way that Japan did, for example, nor was it isolated by geography to the extent of, for example, Australia.¹ The question is how this involvement was managed and what significance it had for Moroccan state and society. This chapter considers this issue over the *longue durée*, and then relates it to the changes instituted during the reign of Sīdī Muḥammad.

The development of particular dynasties and the stability of state power in general in the area we now call Morocco were closely related to the control of long-distance trade.² This was true to a certain extent from the beginning of the Islamic period, and certainly by the decline of the Idrisids (780-974), by which time the trans-Saharan gold trade was becoming crucially significant. Each dynasty “was powerful in relation to its ability to monopolise a substantial portion of the gold traffic—the

¹ This is not to say that the relative geographical isolation of Morocco, as part part of the wider Maghrib, has been an unimportant factor in its history. See, for example, Brent Shaw, “A Peculiar Island: Maghrib and Mediterranean,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 19 (2003), 93-125.

² Obviously the use of the terms ‘Morocco’ and ‘Moroccan’ to indicate or describe a political entity or even a geographical area before the modern period is problematic. It is used in in this study when referring to the period before the Sa’di dynasty as a purely geographical term, meaning the approximate area that is now the modern state of Morocco, to distinguish it from the wider Maghrib. Used in reference to subsequent periods, these terms refer to the place and the dynasty that ruled it, in the awareness this might strictly be considered anachronistic. Although this usage is somewhat arbitrary, it is adopted here with its shortcomings for the sake of convenience.
principal factor in the development of power and economic importance; consequently,

the North African state of the Middle Ages was not definable by its frontiers. It was essentially a political and commercial centre of gravity ... the heart of [which] was a great commercial city which was a terminus for the Saharan caravans.³

As Braudel has suggested, the development in the Maghrib of states primarily concerned with the control and exploitation of trans-shipment activities was largely a consequence of the region’s position as an intermediary zone between the two economic regions of West Africa and the Mediterranean.⁴ This development was retarded to some extent by the disruption of urbanised life around the Mediterranean during and following the collapse of the Roman Empire in the west, weakening the forces attracting trade northwards across the Sahara. It has been argued that as a consequence of this, the Idrisids relied much more heavily on the taxation of agriculture and much less on trade than did their successors.⁵ However, although our understanding of urbanisation during that period remains somewhat limited, recent work has strongly suggested the continued importance of trade not just for the development of Idrisid power, but in relation to the whole process of early Islamisation in Morocco. This can be seen, for example, in the early history of Idrisid Fes, or the association of the Ibādíyya with the mining and trade of silver from Morocco to Ifriqiyya and al-Andalus.⁶

Whatever the case, the revival of trade and urbanisation in the western Mediterranean, and the disruption of routes across the Sahara further east, did increase the economic importance of trade during the later ninth century, and with it the political importance of its control. At first, this control was more or less indirect, an aspect of the rivalry between the