

Architectural Decorations of The Mosques of Barqah (Eastern Libya)

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Abstract

A group of ancient mosques dating back to the Fatimid period were discovered in the Libyan region of *Barqah*, when examining its ruins, it became clear the extent of care in their architecture and decoration. The importance of the article lies in its interest in the architecture of the early Fatimid mosques in the province of *Barqah*, and its tracing of many of the discovered decorative patterns, trying to employ them, and making the necessary comparisons that help in dating them. The main question here is limited to how to identify the decorative artistic methods that surrounded the Fatimid mosques discovered in *Barqah*. Thus, the study aims to introduce the Fatimid *Barqah* mosques, and to highlight and analyze their decorative features. Perhaps what gives this study its original character is that it follows a group of decorative samples in some local and international museums, and subject it to study and analysis by following some research methods such as the historical, descriptive and comparative analytical method, in addition to the archaeological research method and its applied methods in the study of archaeological samples, and relying on field visits. Enables the study to sort out some of the features of the architectural decoration that characterized the architecture of the early Fatimid mosques in the province of *Barqah* by studying some of the decorative samples from them, its showed that there is a specific artistic style that appeared in many of the decorative examples discovered in *Barqah*, and it showed how consistent it was with the artistic styles coming from the mosques of Tunisia and Egypt. With regard to future studies, the study emphasizes the need to pay more attention to conducting more research on other samples that the researcher could not access due to some security conditions that the study area is going through.

Keywords: Barqah, Fatimids, Kufic Script, Ornament, Architecture.

Introduction

The Fatimids took control of North Africa after their victory over the Aghlabids (*Aghalibah*) in the battle of Arbes (*al-Aribus*) in the year 296 AH, and they captured *Ruqadah* and *al-Qayrawan* without resistance (*Ibn al-Athir*, 1987), and they declared the establishment of their state, whose influence extended to most parts of the Maghreb, and after the Fatimids

had established security, their eyes turned to Egypt, and they dispelled a land campaign led by *Habbasah ibn Yūsuf* (*Al-Kindi*, 1908), who was able to seize the province of *Barqah* in the year 301 AH (*Al-Maqrizi*, 1991), since that date, the Fatimids have taken *Barqah* as a center for assembling their armies heading to Egypt, so they took care of it, fortified its frontiers and repaired its roads. When *al-Mu'izz* took over the Fatimid Caliphate in 341AH, his reign witnessed an interest in administrative organizations in the *Barqah* region, where he appointed some governors over his cities, and organized his economic affairs (*Jūd'har*, 1954), and to improve the roads leading to Egypt, in the year 355AH *al-Mu'izz* ordered his governors in *Barqah* region to dig wells, preparing cisterns, and building palaces and rest houses at all stages of the road to Egypt (*Al-Nuwayri*, 2004). The Fatimids left a variety of architectural monuments in many areas of the region of *Barqah*, especially in the important cities they settled, such as *Surt*, *Ajdabiya* and *Marj*, the archaeological excavations launched by many different foreign missions since the beginning of the fifties of the last century have revealed some of the Fatimid palaces in *Ajdabiyah*, *Sirte*, and *Al-Izziyat*, the discovery of some mosques such as the *Sulṭan Mosque* in *Sirte*, the *Abū al-Qasim Mosque* in *Ajdabiyah*, the *Mechili Mosque*, and the *Umm albrakym Mosque* near *Bin Jawad*, all of which date back to the Fatimid period. During these works, many inscriptions and decorative paintings that adorned these mosques were revealed.

Problem Statement

There is no doubt that the student of early Fatimid architecture in *Barqah* finds it difficult to trace its architectural origins, due to the great destruction that befell most of its remaining models, whether as a result of natural or human conditions, for example, the buildings of *Ajdabiya* withered due to urban growth and was taken as a quarry for building materials by the people. (*Abdussaid*, 1964, p.118), the same applies to the Fatimid city of *Sirte*, when its stones were used during the Italian era in paving the road passing near it (*Fehervari*, 2002, p. 67), it is also possible to add, regarding the mosques of the Fatimid *Barca*, an ideological reason for their destruction, *Ibn 'Idhari* (1983) states that when the people of *Barca* broke off their pledge of allegiance to the Fatimids in the year 443 AH, they “burned the pulpits to which the *Ubaidiyya* was called, burned their slogans, repudiated them and cursed them on their pulpits, and prayed for the Abbasid ruler *al-Qa'im bi-amr Allah*”. because of this, these antiquities became subject to neglect and destruction, and the matter did not stop there, but made matters worse when these archaeological sites became the scene of some chapters of the Second World War, and some of their buildings were used as shields for soldiers (*Al-Sadiq*, 2016), also, with the beginning of the Libyan crisis (2011 AD), the phenomenon of archaeological thefts and attacks on archaeological sites spread, until the *ELBIRO* (2017) organization ranked *Sirte* among the most important stolen cities in *Libya* during the control of the terrorist organization *ISIS*, For fear that this cultural heritage will be exposed to more violations and grave attacks, the matter calls for documenting it well, studying it according to a scientific method, and drawing attention to the neglect it suffers from.

Research Objectives

This article presents a breakdown of some of the decorative features that characterized the architecture of the Fatimid mosques in the province of *Barca*, through a comprehensive review of some of its remaining monuments. General Objective: identify the decorative artistic methods that surrounded the Fatimid mosques discovered in *Barqah*. The research sub-objectives:

- introduce the Fatimid Barqah mosques, and to highlight and analyze their decorative features.
- sort out the Architectural decorations features that characterized the architecture of the Fatimid mosques discovered in the province of Barca, by conducting a comprehensive review of its remaining models.
- analyzing their architectural elements and artistic decorations, and making the necessary comparisons with their examples in Tunisia and Egypt, in order to lay down the outlines that help in the study of these rare examples that are part of the remaining Fatimid architectural heritage in the region.

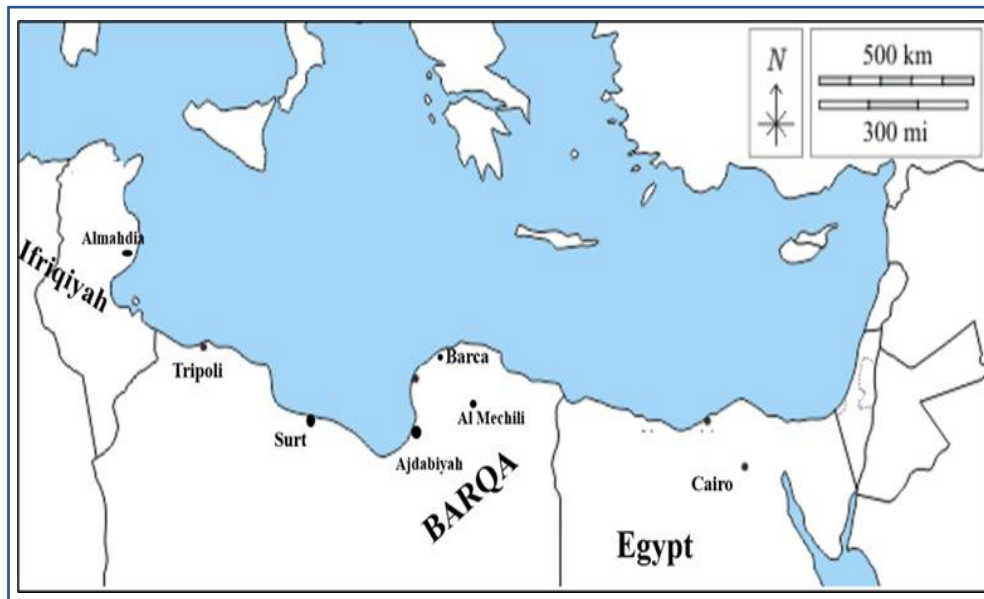


Figure 1: The location of the *Barqah* region.

Fatimid mosques in the province of *Barqah*

We owe the credit to a group of historical and archaeological studies that targeted some of the sites of Fatimid antiquities scattered in the province of Barca in expanding our understanding of the mosques of the Fatimid period and their remaining monuments, the Goodchild (1964) study on the ruins of Sultan City, the study of Abdussaid (1966) related to the city mosque of Sultan, also the reports presented by (Mostafa (1966) about his excavations in the Sultan City, the study (Blake, et al., 1971) is also considered one of the pioneering studies in defining the features of early Fatimid architecture in the province of Barca, also two studies of Whitehouse (1972); (1973) had a role in unveiling the Ajdabiya Mosque, and highlighting its architectural plan and decorations, in the same context comes the study of (Donaldson 1976), which is a completion to the archaeological excavations in the Fatimid Ajdabiya Mosque, the interest in the antiquities of the Fatimid city of Sirte increased when the Antiquities Authority and the English mission opened excavations inside the city in four consecutive seasons, the first season was in the summer of 1977 AD (Abdussaid et al., 1977), then the second season followed in the summer of 1978 AD (Abdussaid et al., 1978), the third season in the spring of 1979 AD (Shaghlouf et al., 1979), and the fourth and last, summer 1981 AD (Fehérvári et al., 2002), the results of these works revealed important information related to the religious, civil, and military architecture of the Sultan City (Sirte)

during the Fatimid period, with the progress of academic research in the field of Fatimid architecture in Barca, appeared a study (Shaghlouf, 1985) about the Fatimid Mosque in the Islamic city of Sirte, which dealt with the historical background of the city, highlighting the architectural planning of the mosque and its sections, and analyzing its decorative elements, it is also worth noting the important work presented by the French mission operating in Libya under the supervision of Mitchell Mouton, through a group of excavation and exploration seasons that it established at the Fatimid site of Sirte between the years (2007-2011 AD): (see Mouton, 2008; Guilhot et al., 2010; Mouton, 2010; Mouton and Racinet, 2011; Mouton, 2012; Gnat et al., 2012) Although its studies focused on the history and plan of the city and its military fortifications, it provides important information about the architectural condition of the city during the Fatimid period. With the exception of the two studies (Shaghlouf, 1985) and (Fehérvári, 2002), the rest of the studies are nothing more than short reports in which the information is presented in a succinct manner, while their final results remained trapped in the drawers and archives belonging to it, and did not reach the final publication status.

Sultan Mosque in Sirte

The ancient town of *Sulṭan* is located about 51 km east of the modern city of Sirte, in the middle of the Libyan coast overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, archaeological investigations began at the site in 1950, when Goodchild (1964) conducted an archaeological survey, which resulted in locating the mosque, the Libyan Antiquities Authority initiated the first archaeological excavations in 1963 AD, headed by *Ayyūb*, and followed it with another excavation headed by Abdussaid between 1963-1964 AD, the results of these works were encouraging to continue the work, as the mosque courtyard paved with stone slabs, and a piece of sandstone bearing a Kufic inscription was revealed, as soon as the excavation work was completed, the remains of the mosque were discovered in the fall of 1964 AD, where it appeared that its blueprint is rectangular in shape, its dimensions (31 x 41) (Abdussaid, 1966), and its longitudinal side extends from north to south, with a slight deviation in its axis towards the east, the location of the minaret was chosen at the northwest corner of the open courtyard of the mosque, as for the entrances to the mosque, they are three entrances, two of which opened on both sides of the courtyard from the western and eastern sides, while the third opened on the opposite side of The Sanctuary, the largest and widest of these entrances is located on the western side of the courtyard, as it is located in the direction of the city's neighborhoods, the covered area of The Sanctuary is about 312 square meters, its longitudinal side represents the *qibla* wall, in the middle of which is the *mihrab*, and its layout belongs to the traditional layout of the mosques, the excavations of the English mission contributed to identifying its architectural and artistic decorations during the excavations that lasted for four seasons, in the period between (1977-1981 AD) (Fehervari, 2002), the French mission also launched its work between (2007-2011) and the results of its work showed information related to architecture and arts in the Fatimid era (Mouton, 2008). (Figure 2-a).

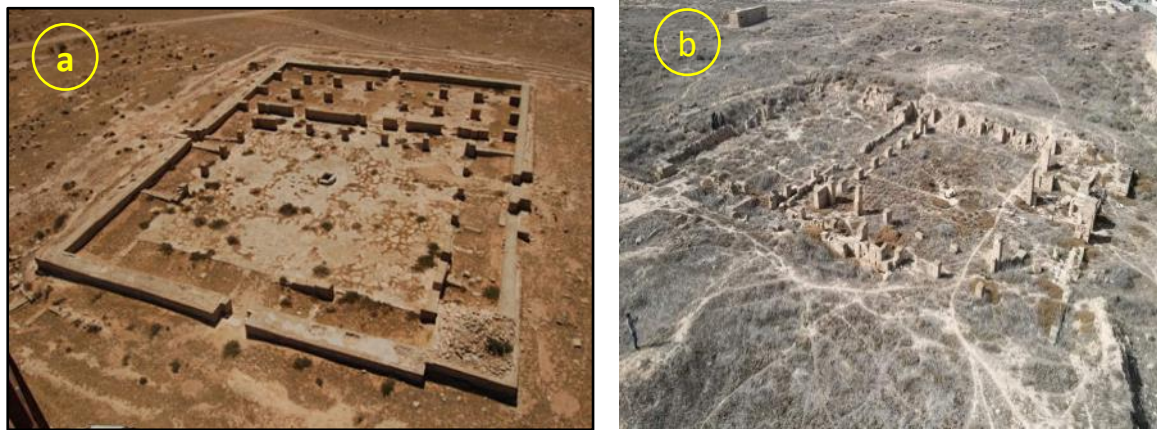


Figure 2: The Fatimid mosques in *Barqah*; Sultan Mosque in Sirte (Source: (Mouton, 2012) (a), and Ajdabiyah Mosque (Source: (Ajdabiya Antiquities Office) (b).

Abu al-Qasim Mosque in Ajdabiyah

The city of Ajdabiyah is located on the old road linking *Barqah* and *Ifriqiyah*, specifically to the southwest of the city of Benghazi, about 160 km. In the Islamic era, the city became a station for Islamic armies on their way to conquer *Ifriqiyah*, some geographers have provided important information about the city. *al-Ya'qūbi* (2002) indicated that it is a city with fortifications, a mosque and existing markets, likewise, *Ibn Hawqal* (1992), who spoke about its location, architecture, and economic activity, as for *al-Bakri* (1992), he described it as a large city in the desert, with good water, abounding with palm orchards, with a well-built mosque built by the Fatimids, baths, many hotels and markets, as of the sixth century AH, it seems that the city has lost its prosperity, as it is no longer mentioned until the century of its ruin, as *Al-Idrisi* (2020) describes it as the disappearance of its architecture and its walls. The archaeological excavations in the mid-fifties revealed parts of its Fatimid Mosque, and with the beginning of the seventies the English mission was able to reveal the blueprint of the mosque in the city, in addition to a group of inscriptions, writings and antiquities dating back to the Fatimid period. (Figure 2-b).

With the end of the excavations at the site of the Ajdabiyah Mosque, its huge rectangular plan with dimensions of 47 x 31 m became evident, and a courtyard surrounded by a single portico on all four sides, its main entrance facing The Sanctuary dedicated to prayer. The mosque has three entrances: one on the main axis opposite the prayer hall, and the others on the two sides, the minaret was standing to the left of the central entrance, the mosque was built with stones and mud bricks together, the qibla wall is approximately in the transverse side of the mosque, so that The Sanctuary is the deepest porticoes, in order to soften the atmosphere for the worshipers inside the mosque, The Ajdabiyah Mosque does not differ in its general layout from the first mosques in Islam, especially in North Africa, as its main layout architecture is clear, showing some similarities with the examples in Tunisia and Egypt. (Whitehouse, 1972).

Al Mechili Town Mosque

Mechili is located in the southeast of the Green Mountain (*al-Jabal al'akhdar*), about 160 km away from the city of Derna. It was mentioned by many Muslim travelers and geographers, as it was mentioned by *Ibn Khurdadhabah* (1889) in his determination of some distances in

the region, as for *al-Ya'qūbi* (2002), he mentions that it is a place like a city, with a mosque, water pools, standing markets, and a fortified fortress, in which there are mixtures of people, most of whom are Berbers, *al-Hamawi* (1977) also mentioned that Wadi Mechili, a fortress near *Barqah* in the Maghreb, It has a mosque and a bustling market, and around it are cisterns and pools of water, *al-'Ayyashi* (2006) also spoke about Al-Mechili on his journey to *al hajj* in the year 1072 AH, he pointed to the abundance of its water stored in two adjoining cisterns, they are built of perfect bricks, a hundred cubits long, for one cistern, he considered the palace one of the greatest abandoned palaces whose ruins remained visible, and mentioned its mosque and its remaining minaret, as for *al-Bakri* (1992), he talked about its mosque, water pools, the fort, and the market. During the Second World War, one of the Italian battalions was stationed at the site, where it built two castles round, and a group of other buildings on a highland, probably from the remains of the Islamic fortress, which is clear that they used its stones in building their modern buildings, in addition to repairing the old wells in the place.

The total area of the mosque is about 250 square meters, and it was built of mud, this is what made it affected by the factors of erosion, to the extent that only faint ruins of a single

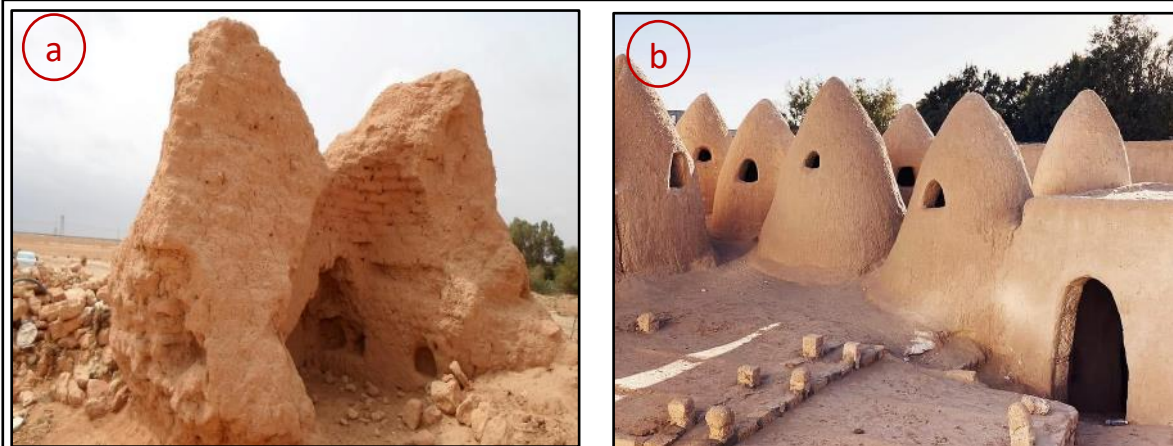


Figure 3: mudbrick mosques in *Barqah*; Mechili Mosque (Picture taken by the researcher) (a), and Awjilah Mosque (Source: Ajdabiya Antiquities Office) (b).

minaret are left of it, which the common people call *Şawma'ah*, in the form of a conical dome, stacked with mud bricks in a circular plan (Figure 3-a), and in this way of construction, it is similar to the style of the domes of the famous Awjilah Mosque, it appears from the general plan that the mosque had five rooms, one of which was completely open to a courtyard, and no trace of the mihrab was clearly visible, which undoubtedly has melted on itself due to the use of materials of clay and plaster in its construction, to the south of the mosque, remains of another dome appear, at its eastern end, some stairs that may have led to an upper floor are visible, this method, using clay, is a well-known Islamic method that was carried by the conquerors with them, and it appears clearly in several Islamic forts and mosques, such as the Awjilah Mosque (Figure 3-b), it is one of the most important treatments that have been resorted to due to the abundance of mud and the possibility of its formation near work sites, as well as because of its suitability to the prevailing climatic conditions and its thermal insulation property (Badr, H.& Daoud, O., 2020). For this reason, clay remained in *Barqah*, and until recently, a major structural material that is used in the construction of all facilities of different functions (*Daraji*, 2015).

Architectural Decorations of the Mosques of Barqah

During the archaeological studies that were carried out in the mosques of the Fatimid period in the study area, a group of artifacts and fragments bearing different decorative styles were found, it reflected the artistic sense of the local artist who decorated these buildings, The Sanctuary, with its capitals, its niches, and the interior surfaces of its domes had a great deal of these decorations.

Plastered Decorations

The domed areas that precede the mihrab are usually covered with different types of stucco decoration, including square, rectangular and triangular, it is decorated with roundels containing geometric and vegetable motifs, and with leaf scrolls, executed in the form of molds, and arranged so as to be a coherent decorative scene (Whitehouse, 1973). (Figure 4-a), this decorative style can be compared with similar styles found in the Maghreb, executed in the same shapes and molds, the outer arcades of the mosques are also decorated with plaster friezes bearing floral motifs and circular scrolls (Figure 4-b), the facades of the prayer halls that overlook the court are also shaped like two of half shells. This decorative style is considered an essential decorative element in Fatimid architecture since its appearance in the mihrab of the Great Mosque of Mahdia.



Figure 4: plaster friezes bearing decorations from Ajdabiyah; geometric and vegetable motifs (a), and floral motifs and circular scrolls (b). (Source: Ajdabiya Office)

On the other hand, the Fatimid artist sought to decorate the minute details of these mosques, like the niches and the windowsills, which are decorated with stucco friezes bearing



Figure 6: limestone decorative capitals from Sirte Mosque; decorative capitals with modified Acanthus leaf (a), and decorative capitals devoid of decoration (b). (Source: sultan Antiquities)

prominent decorations, an example of this is the friezes of the windows of the Sirte Mosque, one of which bore a medal of molded decoration, wrapped around a mutated palm, or something like a five-lobed abstract botanical leaf, the artist designed it as if it emanated from the center of the decoration, in similarity and beautiful repetition in the rest of the decorations without a difference, and it is noted on the five lobes of this leaf that it is altered and is far from nature (Figure 5-a), these frames are used to fix the stained glass windows with plaster, this decorative style was used in the architecture of Arab-Islamic buildings, to find a relationship that combines the aesthetic and utilitarian value (Akbar,1992), with the motive of reducing the intensity of light in the palaces built by the Caliphs in the Levant, then this type of windows spread in the religious buildings in abundance, we find the decorative style of the mutated palm tree in a contemporary example from the city of Ajdabiyah, where the lion decoration attributed to the Fatimid palace (Figure 5-b) frames a plaster band of heart-shaped palmettes, perfectly matched to this ornament (Bongianino, 2015), the niches were covered with a plaster slab bearing repetitive motifs of vegetal branches and half-palmette of varying sizes.

Carved Stone Decorations

The decorative works in the Fatimid mosques in *Barqah* we're not limited to stucco works only, but also included works of carving on stone, which appear through the many decorative capitals within the prayer halls, and also in stone tablets on which decorative inscriptions were engraved, through the archaeological finds, six types of these limestone decorative crowns were identified and used in the mosques of *Barqah*: Where the first pattern of crowns is decorated on three sides, it is a crown for one of the built-in piers inside the house of prayer,

decorated with modified Acanthus leaf (Figure 6-a), the second type of capital is that of independent columns, where its four sides are decorated with geometric motifs resembling niches. As for the third style of capitals, their architectural shape is based on a beveled angle at the base of the capital is in the form of a triangular leaf, its apex in the upper corners, and its base within the base of the capital, the fourth type of capitals bears decorations hanging from the top of a capital, the fifth pattern is decorated with vegetal leaves pointed at the top, the ends are prominently defined on the axis of the sides of the capital, as for the last type of capitals, it is small in size and made of limestone, and devoid of decoration, also among the decorative elements (Shaghlouf, 1985) (Figure 6-b).

The Decorations of the Kufic Inscriptions

The Kufic script is one of the important Arabic scripts whose artistic effects have emerged since the dawn of Islam, the Muslim artist paid him all the attention due to his close connection with daily life, it is the line that has increased its status and marked its position by its uniqueness in the codification of the Qur'an for nearly four centuries of migration, in addition to its association in official writings and inscriptions of coins, it was known as the Kufic script, based on the Arabs' custom of naming the fonts according to the cities in which they appeared, the researchers divided the Kufic script into two parts: the first section according to function, the second section is according to the decoration, and the types of the first section include editing fonts, fonts for writing the Qur'an, and memorial fonts, as for the fonts of the second section: simple Kufic script, Kufic script with triangular ends, leafed Kufic script, flowered Kufic script, Kufic script with a plant ground, braided Kufic script, and the last square Kufic script (Jumu'ah, 1967), as for the memorial Kufic script, was used in recording on solid materials such as all kinds of stones and wood, to prove Quranic verses, or founding texts of buildings, or confirmed deaths over the centuries since the first year of Hijrah, it is the heavy script that was used on important occasions and was used with the intent to last forever, and the script comes in three forms: the memorial inscriptions on the buildings in the form of ribbons and calligraphic friezes that adorn the interior of the arches and walls or the ring of domes or they revolve around the mihrabs and minarets, they are engraved in solid materials such as stone and plaster, and consists of Quranic verses, or propaganda, or foundational phrases, these are engraved on stone or marble, and the last picture appears in the form of funerary inscriptions known as the memorial inscriptions, it is a type of memorial writing that was widely used in the Islamic world since an early period (*al-Husayni*, 2007). During the work of local and foreign missions at the sites of Fatimid archaeological sites in the province of Braca, many of these Kufic memorial inscriptions were discovered from some mosques and Fatimid palaces that were targeted by excavations and archaeological excavations, as of the fifties of the last century, these inscriptions and tombstones were collected in Libyan stores and museums, some of which were targeted for study, while the bulk of them remained on the shelves of these museums without interest, there seems to be a certain style offoliated Kufic scriptframed by narrow bands, it appeared in many of the decorative examples discovered in the cities of the Braca region, during the tenth century, where it was possible to trace the extent of the conformity of this artistic style, in many of the friezes carved in sandstone and limestone, coming from the cities of Sirte, Ajdabiyah, and Braca(Marj), the following is a presentation of some of these discoveries after their classification according to the location in which they were discovered:

Ajdabiyah Mosque Inscriptions

The first indications about it were from the Italian Cervelli when he saw in the year 1812 AD on the wall of the mosque's qiblah an inscription that was not clearly defined, He was able to transcribe an incomprehensible word (كعطاهد) (Delaporte, 1825), (Figure 7-a), as for the second reference to these inscriptions, we go back to Hamilton (1856), who tried to trace an inscription consisting of three symbols on the capital of one of the pillars of the mihrab, and he think that these symbols are related to the declaration of faith, and given his previous information about Ajdabiyah inscriptions, Hamilton stayed two days in the same place to search for other inscriptions, to examine them, but his attempts failed, and he only found what he had previously discovered at the mihrab. With the launch of archaeological survey work after the independence of Libya in the early fifties, the Libyan Antiquities Department was able to collect many inscriptions dating back to the Islamic period in the city of Ajdabiyah, and they were preserved in the stores of the administration, some of these memorial inscriptions are carved prominently in stone blocks of various lengths they range between 33 cm and 54 cm, and vary in thickness between 6 cm and 18 cm, it was possible to identify the number of at least three inscriptions that are definitively related to the inscriptions of the Fatimid Mosque in Ajdabiyah (Lowick, 1972), and the most important of these inscriptions are:

(1) A founding inscription fragment preserved in the Ajdabiyah Antiquities Office: inscribed in foliated Kufic script on a limestone slab in raised calligraphy: "[...] *hūr sanat 'ashr* [...] ...", i.e., "[...mo] nths of the year ten..." (See Figure 7-b), You may read it between the two dates: "[...shu] *hūr sanat 'ashara* [...]" or "[...shu] *hūr sanat 'ashron* [...]", i.e., "[...mo] nths of the year ten..." or "[...mo] nths of the year twenty...", the rest of it has not been found to determine the exact date, but it may have been *al-'Ayyashi* (2006) while passing through the ruins of the Ajdabiyah Mosque in the year (1059 AH / 1649 AD), he had seen the rest of the inscription when he said: "There is a drawing of an old mosque that was destroyed, and we found in some of its stones the date of its construction inscribed in the year three hundred", it is also possible that the beginning of the text would be: "[...shu] *hūr sanat 'ashara* [...]" according to some speculations (*Ulwan*, 2020), so that the approximate reading would be "[...in the mo] nths of the year ten [and three hundred]" a date supporting *al-Bakri*' (1992) account, that The mosque was built by *Abū al-Qasim ibn Ubayd Allah*.

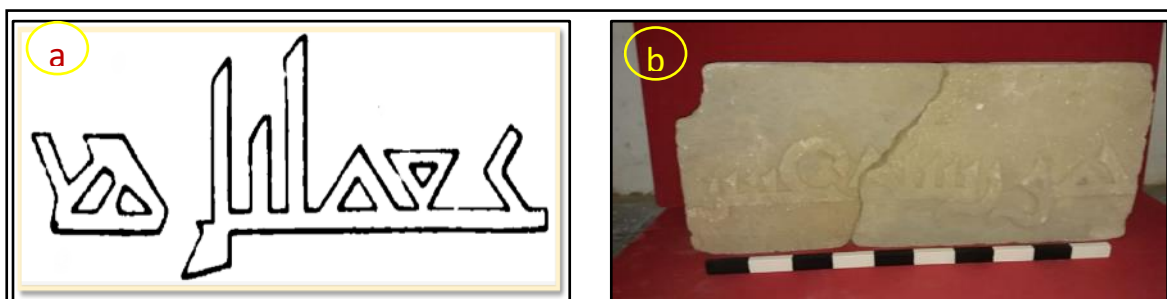


Figure 7: Kufic inscriptions from Ajdabiya Mosque; an incomprehensible word (Delaporte, 1825) (a), and foliated Kufic inscription (Source: Ajdabiya Antiquities Office) (b).

(2) A commemorative inscription on the stone, in prominent leafed Kufic script, which reads: "...[*wah*]id wa *khamysin* wa *thalathumiaya* " i.e. "Three hundred and fifty one" (962–963 AD), (See Figure 8-a), the engraving illustrates a more developed Kufic style involving floriation of

the upper case of letters, in terms of execution, writing style, decoration, letter shapes, and leafy stems, this inscription is very close to another inscription, which was brought in the fifties of the last century from the ruins of the Fatimid palace in Ajdabiyah, it is executed on a limestone slab, bearing the following words: “*min ma am [ra]*,” i.e. “...what was ordered by...”, However, this last inscription is distinguished in its frame by the presence of engraved rings, which are not present in the frame of the inscription attributed to the mosque (Abdussaid, 1964). This inscription is executed on a limestone slab in leafy Kufic script, the piece belonged to an inscription frieze dedicating the name of the builder who erected the palace, and extends above the huge gate, or at the entrance to the “royal pavilion”, He deduced the shape of the letters inclined at an angle of 45 degrees corresponding to the letter M in the word “mim” is that this part of the belt was originally decorated with a prominent wall corner or protrusion, and because this inscription bears a sophisticated Kufic style, including a flowery shape for the upper ends of the letters (Bongianino, 2015).



Figure 8: Kufic inscriptions from the Ajdabiya Mosque; commemorative inscription (a), and an inscription in prominent Kufic script (Source: Ajdabiya Antiquities Office) (b).

(3) An inscription on the stone in prominent Kufic script (See Figure 8-b), this panel has a semi-circular shape, and it consists of two bands, a decorative band consisting of a plant branch that wraps around itself in the form of circles, and the second band comes below the decorative band (Shaglouf, 1981).

Sirte Mosque Inscriptions

During the excavations in the Fatimid Sirte Mosque, a group of memorial Kufic inscriptions were discovered, they are of different sizes and materials, and were classified into three groups according to the places where they were found during excavation work, namely:

The First Group: It consists of eleven tablets of sandstone that were discovered during excavations in the courtyard of the mosque, with the exception of a group of them that had been discovered and reused in the construction of some of the late walls built inside the corridors of the courtyard, these panels are 50 cm high and 10 cm thick., the inscriptions of this group are written in leafy Kufic script, this type of font represents the next stage for exposing the lists of the letters of foliated Kufic script with triangular tops, since the late second century AH, the calligrapher developed the triangulation of the letter's head into plant motifs in the form of two-lobed or three-lobed leaves and imaginary half-fans emanating from the edges of the standing and lying letters and extending over the bodies of the letters themselves, so that the leaves and fans are directly connected to the head of the letter and not connected to its post, the reasons for creating this type of font are due to the calligrapher's desire to fill the void created by the different letter lengths and lengths of words, this calligraphy spread throughout the Islamic world starting from the first quarter of

the third century AH, and it seems that the panels were most likely adorning the front portico of the courtyard (Jumu'ah, 1967). (See Figure 9-a, b)

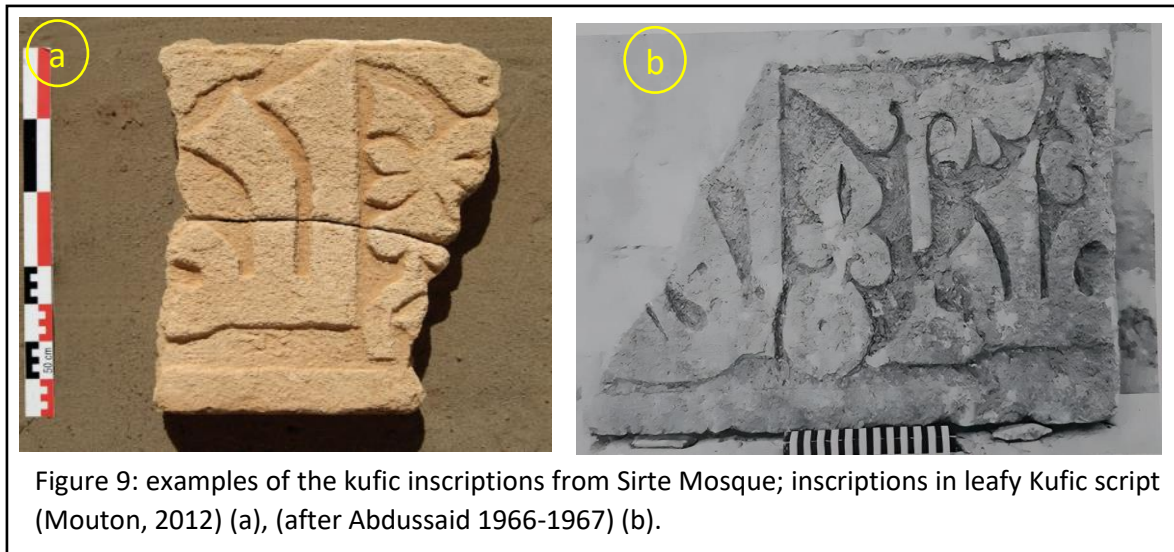


Figure 9: examples of the kufic inscriptions from Sirte Mosque; inscriptions in leafy Kufic script (Mouton, 2012) (a), (after Abdussaid 1966-1967) (b).

The second group: They are limestone slabs, their five parts were found near the minaret, they measure 31 cm in height and 13 cm in thickness, with horizontal margins of equal size, these tablets bear inscriptions in Kufic script with triangular indentations, this font is also known as the Buds Kufic script in which each letter ends with a sprout or bud decoration. which too is a simple font devoid of any braiding or leafing, except for buds on the edges of the letters, and it appeared at the beginning of the second century AH, it is the result of the artist adding a simple modification to the letters of the simple Kufic script, and this was represented by an increase in their tops in a form similar to triangles resulting from exposing the head of the letter and this was an introduction to the decoration of writings with plant motifs (*al-Basha*, 1999), it is clear from the style of this writing and the significance of its letters in which the word "Allah" was written, that it is the oldest writing in terms of history in relation to the writings that have been found so far in the mosque, Abd al-Sayed believes that these panels were used to decorate the face of the minaret, due to the fact that two of them had an obtuse angle (Abdussaid, 1966).

The third group: represented by part of a panel found at the western door of the mosque, the style of writing this painting is not different from the style of the first group, which combines the leafy Kufic script of both types with flowering and executed on a vegetal background, these botanical elements (the floor of the stems and leaves of the plant) were commonly represented and reached Fatimid art through North Africa and Andalusia, this panel is 40 cm high and 12 cm thick, and it is likely that it represents an inscription that extended directly above a doorstep, these fragments discovered in the Sirte Mosque are generally characterized by their few numbers and damaged letters.

Inscriptions of the city of *Barqah* (Marj)

In 1936, the Italian settlers discovered in *Barqah* the Merj several inscribed stone slabs while working on a new road in the eastern perimeter of the town, it is currently preserved in the Tolmeita Museum (Abdussaid, 1971), among these slabs are two pieces of limestone, this inscriptions is of exceptional documentary importance, as it appears in one of the two blocks decorated with a frame on three sides decorated with a belt of narrow traditional rings, a

consecration formula synonymous with the previous Ajdabiyah inscription, which can be read in as follows: “*amar bi-hi [...]*”, i.e. “this was ordered by...”, but in this inscription, the text continues to contain the name of the patron, of which a second panel appears as a part “*Tamim al [...]*”, through the form of the text and the method of executing the inscription and its decoration, the researchers were able to compare it with other Fatimid texts, to find out their historical compatibility between them, through which it is possible to imagine the full text of this fragmented inscription in this way: “*amar bi-hi Tamim al-Mu‘izz*”, i.e. “this was ordered by Tamim al-Mu‘izz”, perhaps the tablets came from a Fatimid palace that was located in Barqa, which Al-Muizz took to stay and rest on his way to Egypt, and this is what many historical sources have transmitted to us (as we mentioned). (See Figure 11-a).

The Tolmeita Museum also preserves two other inscriptions dating back to the same period, which were found during the maintenance of the old Zawiya Mosque in Marj, it is executed on a pair of columns reused in the old mihrab, the first inscription reads: “*la ‘ilaha ‘illa Alahu Muhammadun Rasūlu Alahi*”, the second text: “*Mawlana al-imam al-Mu‘izz khalifat Allah*” (Abdussaid, 1966). (See Figure 11-b

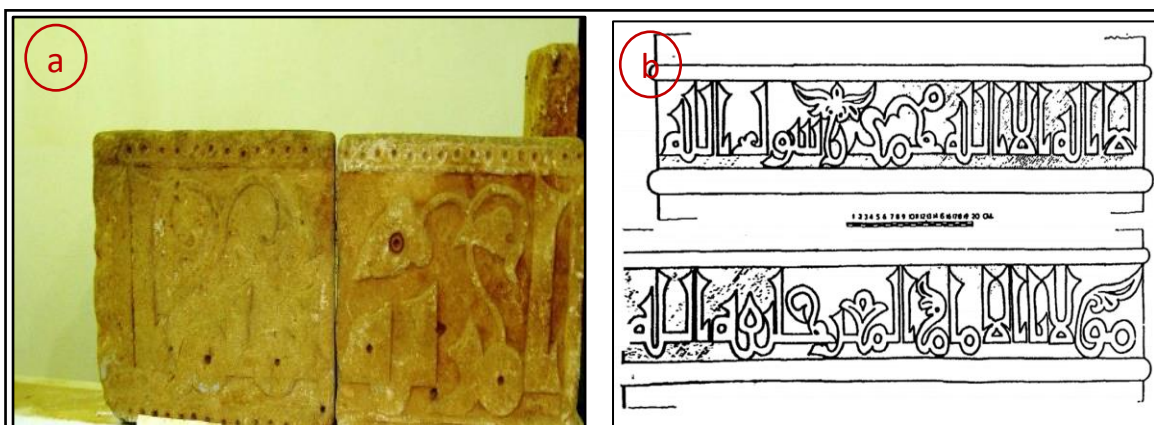


Figure 11: a consecration inscription from El Merj; (Source: Tolmeita museum) (a), (b).

what can be noticed in the Marj texts is that they represent a developed stage, where we see the letter (*kh*) in the word “*khalifah*”, executed in an ingenious manner, also the letter (*f*) in the form of a pear emerging in the form of a plant branch that bends right and connects with the letter (*y*) and bends left and connects with the letter (*h*), also, the letter (*d*) in the word (*muhammad*) is connected to the letter (*h*) in the same word, the letter (*r*) in the word (*Rasūlu*) Prophet was attached to it with a palm-shaped fan decoration that we did not see in the rest of the writings of *Barqa*, and also the letter (*l*) was received at the end of the same word in a decorative formation in the form of a triangular leaf, as for the letter (*a*) in the word (*Mu‘izz*), it was in the form of a three-lobed leaf, as for the letter (*m*) in the word: (*Imam*) Imam an ornament comes out of it in the form of a half-palm-fan, while the letters (*w*) in the word (*Mawlana*) Mawlana emerges from it a vegetal ornament in the form of a half-palm-fan (‘Abduh, 2002).

Conclusion

By analyzing the historical sources that dealt with the history of the *Barqah* region, and linking them to physical documents such as antiquities and inscriptions, and with the help of reports of archaeological missions that targeted some archaeological sites in the region, it was possible to sort out some of the features of the architectural decoration that characterized the architecture of the early Fatimid mosques in the province of *Barqah* by studying some of the decorative samples from them, which are preserved in the Tolmeita Museum, Marj, Ajdabiyah, and Sultan, where the following observations were made:

- The artist used in the interior surfaces various decorative plaster ornaments, including square, rectangular and triangular, which are decorated with circular ornaments containing geometric and floral shapes and paper scrolls, executed in the form of molds, and arranged so as to form a coherent decorative scene, and this decorative method can be compared with similar methods found in Tunisia, it is implemented in the same forms and molds.
- The Fatimid artist decorated the delicate details in these mosques, such as the mihrabs and the edges of the windows, with stucco and stone friezes bearing prominent decorations in the form of molded bowls that wrap around a pivoting palm, or an abstract plant leaf of five lobes in symmetry and beautiful repetition without a difference, and it is noted on the five lobes of this paper. It is centered and far from nature.
- The decorative works in the Fatimid mosques in *Barqah* we're not limited to stucco works only, but also to carving works on stone, which appears through many of the capitals of decorative columns inside the prayer halls, and also in the stone panels on which decorative inscriptions are engraved.
- The use of local materials in the implementation of the decorative pieces, which are mostly sand and limestone, and the artist also used some reused materials brought from nearby classical archaeological sites.
- The emergence of a distinct style of Kufic script surrounded by two narrow belts or a single dotted belt that can be traced in many of the friezes carved in sandstone and limestone, coming from the cities of Sirte, Ajdabiyah, and Marj.
- Most of the discovered fonts are of the type of commemorative leafed Kufic script with triangular tops, and this type of font represents the next stage for exposing the lists of the letters of the Kufic script with triangular tops, when the calligrapher, in the late second century AH, took the triangulation of the letterheads into vegetal decorations in the form of leaves with lobes and halves Imaginary fans emanating from the ends of the standing and lying letters.
- The commemorative inscriptions of Marj were distinguished by an innovative execution method, representing a developed stage in the Kufic script, when the artist embodied his letters in a variety of shapes, sometimes in a pear shape emerging from a stand in the form of a plant branch as in the letter (*f*), and sometimes these letters join with a palm fan decoration as in the letter (*r*), it may appear in the form of a three-lobed leaf, with exquisite formation, as in the letter (‘A).

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