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Derleme Makalesi

## The First University in the World: Al-Quarawiyine University

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### Abstract

Most people would suppose that the first and oldest university in the world is in Europe. The first university in the world is in North-Africa Morocco and it was founded by the Tunisian Muslim woman Fatima Al-Fihri. The aim of the article is to raise awareness about the important role of this university and how it encouraged researches and scientists from all over the globe. In addition to this, most people are not aware of the existence of this university even though it was actually recognized by the UNESCO and the Guinness World Records. So, another aim of this article, is to make readers fully aware about how the idea of “University” was introduced for the first time in Morocco and then later expanded to the rest of the world. This article will also present a number of famous scholars who studied at Al-Quarawiyine University as well as how the university was being funded during that time.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Morocco, fatima al-fihri, al-quarawiyine university, unesco, guinness world records, famous scholars

## INTRODUCTION

Morocco is known for its long-lasting, resistant and stable monarchy. It has a close relationship with the west and a very colorful cultural life. During the second world war, the French defeat of 1940 aroused the hopes of Moroccan nationalists. Moroccan troops were integrated into the French army and participated in military operations until the end of the conflict. After the war, the nationalist push became more pressing. Sultan Mohammed Ben Youssef claimed independence from Morocco, but was forced into exile in August 1953. France already engaged in the war in Algeria, also had to face the nationalist revolt in Tunisia. France decided to move towards a political solution: The sultan was brought back to Morocco. The government of Edgar Faure negotiated the terms of La Celle Saint-Cloud declaration, November 1955, which led to the country's independence on March 3, 1956. The Sultan of Morocco signed a treaty of friendship with France who would thus maintain armed forces in Morocco until 1963. In August 1957, the sultan, who was already enjoying immense popularity, proclaimed himself king of Morocco, under the name of Mohammed the Fifth. For Moroccans, Mohammed the Fifth was the main architect of the independence of their country. He is considered by many to be the father of the modern Moroccan nation. From the day after independence, the Arabization policy was imposed because it was a question of erasing the colonial trace by promoting a past that was certainly prestigious, but also idealized. It was also a kind of legitimation of the new Moroccan authority against the old colonial authority. King Mohammed the fifth was kind enough to Arabize Morocco. Let us not forget that as in all in the other Arabic speaking countries, the Arabic

recommended was not the Arabic of the people, but instead that of the Quran. Arabity and Islam formed the pillars of a reappropriation of identity. Finally, the choice of classical Arabic as the official language had the effect of simultaneously evacuating French as a symbol of colonialism and Berber perceived as a symbol of division in the Moroccan society. It was Allal Al-Fassi (1906-1974), founder of the nationalist of Istiqlal, Minister of State in charge of Islamic affairs and member of the Arabic Language Academy of Damascus and Cairo, who undertook the Arabization of Morocco, although more than 80% of the Moroccan population at the time was of Berber origin. In 1970, several Moroccan personalities had signed a manifesto advocating Arabization (Miller, 2012). King Hassan Second took the throne in 1961 and promulgated a new constitution in 1962 establishing a two-chamber parliament. He endorsed the policy of Arabization of education and administration. This policy begun in 1957 when the French Language had been declared a "Foreign Language". Once Morocco became independent, nationalist claims became real with the language question, which arose quickly for reasons of legitimacy and identity. The higher council of national education demanded that Arabic become the only language of instruction. In reality, Arabization was part of a logic of decolonization by means of a process of legitimization and defense of the Arabic language (Hitti, 1970). King Hassan Second was the instigator of the Green March on the Sahara. The Spaniards left the region in 1976 and withdrew from the conflict in 1979, so that Morocco could occupy the abandoned territory. Consequently, Morocco will begin a policy of Moroccanization in Western Sahara. Today in 2021, it is finally confirmed that the Sahara is officially

The Moroccan Sahara (larousse.fr, nd) (frommers.com, n.d). The Idrissid dynasty reigned over much Morocco for more than a century, from 789 to 974. It takes its name from its founder Idriss the First, an Arab who, fleeing the persecution of the Abbasids, set out to conquer the Maghreb, including much of the north of present-day Morocco. The founder of The Idrissid dynasty, Idriss First, is best known for having been behind the founding of the famous city of Fez, in Northern Morocco. Idriss the first was the friend of the Berbers, and the enemy of The Abbasids. The latter had him assassinated in 791, but this was not the end of the line. In fact, his son Idriss the Second, took up the torch and completed the foundation of Fez, divided into two nuclei on the opposite banks of the Wadi Fez. It will not be unified nearly three centuries later by The Almoravids (Harris, 1921). Urban development went hand in hand with the rise of the Idrissid Dynasty. The Idrissids built new cities that still exist today, with several iconic monuments such as the Al Quarawiyin Mosque in Fez. But the Idrissids lost their breath following the death of Idriss the Second. The territories were divided between his sons and their power weakened eventually. It was finally in 974 that the Umayyads of Courdoue ended the dynasty with a fatal blow by defeating Al-Hassan ibn Gannun, the last Idrissid. The Idrissid dynasty left a strong imprint on the history of Morocco. It is notably at the origin of certain large cities of the Kingdom, such as Fez (herodote.net, 2019) (hertz.ma, n.d). It is highly primordial to talk about the Idrissid dynasty. Because it is under the reign of its kings and their acceptance that the Al Quarawiyin University got to exist. The mosque and the university were built under the supervision of the committed, compassionate and cultivated Muslim

woman Fatima Al-Fihria. Who is Fatima Al-Fihri and how did she get the idea of building a university? What kind of subjects were taught at the university? Who are the famous scholars who attended the university? And how was the university being funded during that time?

### **Fatima Al-Fihri**

Fatima bint Muhammed Al-Fihria Al-Qurayshi was the founder and patron of the world's first university in the history of mankind. The institution is commonly known as The University of Quarawiyin in Fez-Morocco. Today it stands and continues to promote learning and education. It was over a thousand years ago, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, that the concept of institutionalized academic learning and research was born. Fatima Al-Fihria was born in present-day Tunisia in about 800 AD and was the daughter of a well-off Arab merchant. Fatima's family migrated to the city of Fez in Morocco, around the same time Arabs were fleeing Cordoba and Southern Spain as they were being expelled from those regions. Fatima and her sister Mariam were well-educated young females. But what was the reason that made Fatima Al-Fihria build a mosque that is now the world's oldest operating educational center? Fatima came from a devout Muslim family that valued learning and she happened to inherit a very large sum of money after her father's death. At the time, a lot of people were migrating to Fez as did Fatima's family. The city quickly became a bustling cultural melting-pot, where arts and sciences flourished alongside religious devotion. Worshippers eventually outgrew the mosques that were available to them. So, Fatima decided to build a new mosque with all the money she inherited and name it the Quarawiyine Mosque after

the immigrants from her hometown of Qairawan. She made sure the Mosque was built under her supervision, and made sure to fast until the Mosque was completed (Sabah, 2020; Cherradi, 2016; Ilham, 2020; Buttery, 2018).

### **The subjects that were taught in the university**

After the Quarawiyyine mosque was completed in 859 AD, religious studies were taught at the center, then it expanded to include other topics such as: Astronomy, medicine, Sufism, languages, grammar, mathematics and even music and eventually it became a hub for symposiums and debates. Later on, Quarawiyyine transformed into a fully-fledged learning center and throughout the centuries it became a stop for many famous scholars, poets, jurists, astronomers, mathematicians and scientists. It welcomed students and teachers from all over the globe regardless of their country, religion and gender. Early Algebra is believed to have been developed within the walls of this university. Its library is one of the oldest in the world housing thousands of ancient manuscripts. Just like any university of nowadays, Al-Quarawiyyine also had a captivating tradition named “The Caliph of One Hour”. In this tradition during spring, students of the university will have to choose among themselves “The Governor of the Week”. Any student who was finally selected as the chosen one, had the honor to sit and meet with the king and discuss with him for an hour all political affairs and express his own thoughts freely with no tyranny or oppression (Al-Atlas, 1980). “The Dark House” is the name that the French occupiers gave to the university. The colonial resistance, faithfulness, peace and war and all kinds of political decision-making were made in sort of

petitions signed only by the scholars of the university (Arbaoui, 2012).

### **Famous scholars who attended the university**

Fatima herself studied at Quarawiyyine, the place she founded. Her diploma is actually still on display at the university’s library for everyone to see. Brilliant and famous scholars had the chance to study in this university, such as the well-known historian Ibn Khaldun. Abd Al-Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) is an Arab philosopher and historian who was considered as one of the brilliant thinkers and philosophers of the Middle Ages. One of the famous writings of Ibn Khaldun is “Al-Muqqadimah” (The introduction). This well-known writing deals with the philosophy of History, political theory, economics, Islamic theology, ecology and also historiography. Ibn Khaldun is considered the father of Sociology and the Science of History. The library of Al-Quarawiyyine university is one of the oldest and it has over 4000 manuscripts and one of them is Ibn Khaldun’s 14<sup>th</sup> century text Al-Muqqadimah (Snell, 2019). In addition to Ibn Khaldun, the Sufi philosopher Ibn Arabi also attended the university. Ibn Arabi gave the Islamic thought its very first full-fledged philosophic expression. The most famous works of Ibn Arabi are: Al-Futuh Al-Makkiyah (The Meccan Revelations) and Fusus Al-Hikam (The Bezels of Wisdom) (Izutsu). Furthermore, Abu Al-Walid Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Rushd (1126-1198), also known as Averroes was one of the attenders of the university. At a very young age, Ibn Rushd studied “Fiqh” (religious law) and “ilm” (religious sciences). But he quickly became interested in secular sciences (hikma): medicine, astronomy, physics and

especially philosophy (falsafa). He studied with the best teachers: for example, he learned medicine with Avenzoar, the great Arab doctor of Al-Andalus who served notably with Yusuf Ibn Tashfin, the first Al-Moravid ruler. It should be noted that Ibn Rushd will be more of a theoretician of medicine than a practitioner (Besson, 2013). Moreover, the Jewish doctor Moise Maimonides was also one of the attenders. Maimonides exercised medicine with great talent developing an experimental and clinical approach to medicine in which Ibn Sina's key influence is recognized. Treating all faiths, he advocates above all a rigorous lifestyle and soon became famous for the good results he obtained (Besson, 2013). Gerbert Aurillac who was also one of the attenders who later on became Pope Sylvester the second, is actually credited as the person who introduced his knowledge of Arabic Numerals to the rest of Europe giving us eventually the number system that we use nowadays. It is also reported that both Leo Africanus (Hassan Al-Wazzan) who was educated at Fes-Morocco whose writings stayed for about 400 years one of Europe's main sources of information about Islam and Mohammed Al-Idrissi who was the creator of Tabula Rogeriana one of the most advanced medieval world maps, have attended the university of Quarawiyyine (Tasci, 2020).

### **International recognition**

It is highly primordial to mention that the Quarawiyyine University is actually recognized by the most credible sources. According to the UNESCO, The United Nations, The Guinness World Records and The Manchester University Press, Al-Quarawiyyine University is the first and oldest university of the world still in use today. The official website stated under the title of Oldest Higher-

learning Institution, Oldest University, that: "The oldest existing, and continually operating educational institution in the world is the University of Karueein, founded in 859 AD in Fez, Morocco. The university of Bologna, Italy, was founded in 1088 and is the oldest in Europe. The Sumerians had scribal schools or é-Dub-ba soon after 3500 BC." (Gui). The Manchester University Press was also one of the credible sources to confirm such statement. Rebecca Mortimer, an author at Manchester University Press wrote a blog about Fatima Al-Fihri as the founder of the world's first university. It is undeniable that Al-Quarawiyyine University was 100 years before Al-Azhar university in Egypt, 200 years before Oxford University and 400 years before Sorbonne University in France. (Mortimer, 2018).

### **The funding of the University**

The establishment of the mosque and the university first started by Fatima Al-Fihri's large inheritance money. The Al-Quarawiyyine university had four major sources of funding which are: The individual fund, the collective Waqf fund, the Sultan fund and the Alumni fund. First of all, the individual fund refers to a person's donation. Fatima Al-Fihri is considered one of the most influential Muslim women who put all her wealth and inheritance to serve her community and later on, enlighten the whole world with the idea of university. Second of all, we have the Sultan fund. The ruling king at that time Sultan Moulay Idriss the first has always encouraged people to build pious places. Eventually, he accepted Fatima's offer to build the mosque that soon became a place of knowledge. During the reign of Sultan Abu Yousuf, the university's south wall got damaged and almost fell. So, Sultan Abu Yousuf provided enough

money to fix it and make it better by giving a five hundred Diner of Gold that belonged to his late mother. This shows the pure intentions of the Sultan to reconstruct and repair the university. Third of all, we have the collective Waqf fund. One of the special Waqf fund was for the teachers (Shuyukh). Every teacher that would come and teach in the mosque, the responsible people of Al-Qarawiyyine would build for him a house in where he can live. The society's contribution is another form of the collective Waqf fund. This money raised would usually be used to pay the costs of the administration, to buy materials for the institution and pay registration fees. The Waqf fund, is a form of donation. If a person wants to donate a certain property as Waqf, that property can never be transferred or given to someone else, perpetuity is the core element of Waqf. In the western world, many universities such as Oxford university have been influenced by the concept of Waqf. According to the western concept it is called "the endowment". Most of the universities were made by the endowment. Last but not least, we have the Alumni fund. Pope Sylvester the second represents the Alumni fund, he used to collect and manage the funds of the university. A very interesting amount of Alumni fund came from the Andalusian diplomat Leo Africanus and the Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides. This fund was donated in order to start a groundwork of a complex that would combine the library, the Quarawiyyine university and the Quarawiyyine Mosque all together. These different types of funding reached too many financial objectives that worked in favor of the university (Abdullah, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

Fatima Al-Fihria's altruistic and considerate contribution in regards to the intellectual development is one of the many things that unquestionably highly deserves our recognition and acknowledgement. A dazzling, brilliant woman like Fatima Al-Fihri whose astonishing legacy of dedication and empowerment almost 1200 years later is still giving us a hand in brightening and clarifying our world. Even though Fatima is the founder of the first university, she still remains unrecognized in modern times. The very first large volumes of the books that were translated and the scientifically proven discoveries were sent by Fatima to the newly opened famous European universities; yet, she is barely being taught about in modern European universities. Last but not least, the truth about the reason behind the existence of universities, Fatima's life and contribution to her society and to the whole world should be implanted and embedded in the current universities' curricula. Fatima Al-Fihri passed away; However, her light never went off. It will keep on enlightening the world and the humanity endlessly.

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