

Urban Activity of The Fatimids in The Levant Through the books of AlBuldanyun  
Geographers and travelers

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Research Article

**Urban Activity of The Fatimids in The Levant Through the books of  
AlBuldanyun Geographers and travelers**

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**Abstract**

The Fatimids were interested in the religious and civil construction facilities in the cities of the Levant, and the construction of religious facilities occupied the first place of their urban interests because this field was linked to the nature of the emergence of the Fatimid ideological state, so this field gained a distinguished place among the Fatimid caliphs. The urban field was not limited to the addition of urban units to these facilities, but it is called that due to their keenness on the sustainability of these facilities to preserve their distinctive architectural splendor and this is what was found in their contributions for the continuity of Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Dome of the Rock, and other architectural facilities. The research problem was manifested in the overlap of this activity with other aspects such as the political and economic committees in the previous studies and the failure to shed light on the urban activity of the Fatimids in the cities of the Levant in that era. This research aimed to highlight the Fatimid architectural imprint in the cities of the Levant, and in particular, in the books of travelers and the countrymen in their importance, as they wrote down most of their observations and sayings of those they met during their travels in those countries and their codification of some of the writings of other authors.

**Keywords: Jerusalem, Al-Aqsa Mosque, Dome of the Rock, Resurrection, Tripoli.**

**Introduction**

The Levant has gained great importance due to its strategic geographical location, which links the Arab countries with other European countries. The coastal location on the Mediterranean Sea for most of its cities helped to be the strongest means of communication throughout the ages. This is in addition to its religious importance represented by the presence of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and other religious facilities that occupied a great place in the hearts of the Arab people in general.

**1. Jerusalem during the rule of the Fatimids**

Ibn Hawqal says: ((Palestine is the purest country in the Levant, and its great city is Ramleh, Bait Al-Maqdis is next in old age, and it is a city high on mountains, to which it is climbed from every place that is intended for those who come from Palestine, Bait Al-Maqdis is a mosque, and there is no larger mosque in Islam than it. It has a building in its qiblah that is covered in a corner to the west of the mosque, and this roof extends over half the width of the mosque, and the rest of the mosque is empty, with no construction except the place of the rock, for there is a stone high like a large, uneven bench, and on the rock is a high dome with a round head that has been covered with thick lead. The height of this rock from the ground that is known as the Rock of Moses under this dome to the chest of Alqaem, its length and width are close, and it is surrounded by a waving wall, and the area of the stone is a few ten cubits.. and in its wall, there is a place known as the mihrab of David the Prophet, peace be upon him, which is a high structure, about fifty cubits high of stones, and its width is about thirty cubits...”) (Hawqal, 1938). Ibn Hawqal describes the Al-Quds Mosque at the beginning of the Fatimid rule over the Levant, and this building was before successive generations of the eras of the Arab Islamic state. The city of Al-Quds has gained special importance for Muslims because of the presence of the mosque because its great place in the hearts of Muslims. It is the first of the two Qiblahs, and the Muslims have turned their faces towards it. It is the third of the two sanctuaries to which one is most traveled, but Mecca and Medina are above it. Its importance was not limited to the presence of the mosque, as Jerusalem was distinguished by the natural and architectural characteristics that distinguished it from the rest of the cities and regions of the Levant. Its son, the traveler al-Maqdisi, who lived through the Fatimid rule over Jerusalem in its early periods, describes it in the middle of the fourth century AH / tenth century AD, and he mentions ((Beit al-Maqdis is not in the cities of al-Kur larger than it, and many streets are smaller than it. Their building is a stone that you do not see better than it, nor is it more perfect than its construction, nor is it more generous than its people, nor is better than living in it, nor is it cleaner than its markets, nor is it larger than its mosque...)) (Al-Maqdisi, The best divisions in Ma’rifat al-Aqalim, 1904).

Certainly, the presence of the mosque made it one of the largest and most important towns in the Levant, as it was full of elegant buildings, mosques, and markets, which made it a comfortable life.

The traveler Khusraw elaborates on the urban details of the city of Jerusalem during the reign of the Fatimid Caliph Al-Mustansir Billah, where the visit of the traveler corresponds to the time of that Caliph, Khusraw paints an accurate picture of the urbanization of the city and its vital facilities, so he says: (The people of the Levant and its outskirts call Bait Al-Maqdis Al-Quds, it is a city built on the top of the mountain, there is no water but rain, and its anchors have eyes. The city is surrounded by a fortified wall of stone and plaster, and it has iron gates, and there are no trees near it. It is on top of Sakhr, and it is a large city in which there were twenty thousand men at that time. It had beautiful markets and tall buildings, and all its land was paved with stones. They leveled the mountainous sides and the heights and made them flat so that the whole land was washed and cleaned when the rains came. There are many artisans in the city, each group has its market, and the mosque is in the east of the city, and its wall is the eastern wall, after the mosque, there is a large plain called Al-Sahira. It is said that it will be the arena of the Resurrection and for this reason, many people are brought to it”) (Khosrow, 1983).

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Khosrow's description shows that the city of Jerusalem enjoyed the good architecture and luxury of living, as its markets were full of manufacturers and trade exchange, which resulted from the stability that it enjoyed in that era, even though the capital of the Fatimid Caliphate, Cairo, suffered from economic crises, especially during the reign of Al-Mustansir Billah the Fatimid, especially the intensity of al-Mustansiriya.

### **2. The Fatimid Building of the Al-Aqsa Mosque**

Al-Aqsa Mosque has acquired special importance for Muslims, and in mentioning the virtue of the mosque, the Almighty said in his book (Exalted [722] is He who took His Servant [i.e., Prophet Muḥammad by night from al-Masjid al-Ḥarām to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā, whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him of Our signs. Indeed, He is the Hearing the Seeing) (Quran).

It means from the mosque of Makkah to the al-Aqsa Mosque, which is the Holy House, and it was said al-Aqsa because of the distance between the two mosques and because it is the farthest mosque that is visited and for which reward is sought. It was said that behind it there is no place of worship, and it was said that it is far from dirt and impurities (Al-Jawzi, 1980).

Al-Aqsa Mosque has many virtues. Al-Hamwi mentions: ((In the report, whoever prays in Jerusalem, it is as if he prayed in the sky, and Allah raised the son of Mary to heaven from Jerusalem. The first thing about which the water ceased after the flood was Jerusalem, in which the trumpet will be blown on the Day of Resurrection, and on its rock, the herald will call out on the Day of Resurrection. Allah Almighty said to Solomon bin Dawood, peace be upon them both, when he finished building Bait Al-Maqdis: Ask me, I will give you. He said: Lord, I ask you to forgive me my sin. He said that to you. He said: Lord, I ask you to forgive those who came to this house wanting to pray in it and to free him from his sin for the day he was born. He said: That is yours. He said: And I ask you who came poor to make him rich. He said: That is yours. He said: And I ask you who came sick to heal him He said: And You have that. (Al-Hamwi, 1979).

Al-Aqsa Mosque gained the attention of the Fatimid caliphs, as it was characterized by its good architecture and its expansion under the Fatimid rule over Jerusalem. This was demonstrated during Khusrau's visit to the city of Jerusalem, where he says: (Al-Aqsa Mosque is the one that God Almighty made the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, traveled on the night of the Ascension from Mecca to him and from it ascended to heaven. They built very ornate buildings in it and furnished luxurious carpets on it. Dedicated servants always work on it. When the walker returns to the southern wall at two hundred cubits in that corner, he does not find a roof and there is the courtyard of the mosque. As for the covered part of the Great Mosque, which contains the maqsoura, it is located at the southern and western walls. The length of this part is twenty and four hundred cubits, and its width is one hundred and fifty cubits. It has eighty and two hundred marble columns on its crowns, layers of stones. The capitals and frames of the columns were carved and the joints in them were fixed with lead very tightly, and between every two columns, six cubits were covered with colored marble covered with lead and the maqsura in the middle southern wall. It is very large and accommodates sixteen columns. It has a very great dome engraved with the enamel, in the manner of what we have described. It is furnished with Moroccan mats, and it has lamps hanging from chains and spaced apart from each other, and it has a large mihrab inscribed with the enamel...) (Khosrow, 1983).

Al-Harawi says: I read in the ceiling of the dome of Al-Aqsa, In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful ((Exalted [722] is He who took His Servant [i.e., Prophet Muhammad by night from al-Masjid al-Harām to al-Masjid al-Aqṣā, whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him of Our signs. Indeed, He is the Hearing the Seeing) (Quran). A victory from God for Abdullah and his guardian, Abi al-Hasan Ali, the apparent imam to cherish the religion of God, the Commander of the Faithful, may God's prayers be upon him and his pure fathers and his honorable sons, ordered the construction of this dome, sayidna alwazir al'ajal Safi, he Commander of the Faithful, and his consummate Abu al-Qasim Ali bin Ahmed, may God support him and help him, and completed all of that until Dhul-Qa'dah in the year four hundred and twenty-six. All the writing and papers are in gilded lobes, and all the verses on the doors of the Holy Qur'an and the names of the Caliphs were not changed by the Franks, and I read on the rock what is written: ((The length of the Al-Aqsa Mosque is seven hundred cubits by the king's cubit, and its width is four hundred and fifty-five by the king's cubit)) and this rock remains built into a wall to the north of Al-Aqsa. (Al-Harawi, 2002)

He also mentioned that the mosque has fifteen porticos with ornate doors, each of which is ten cubits high and sixteen cubits wide, and its lighthouse goes to everyone who needs ablution, and basins and cisterns have been dug in the mosque's grounds. The entire mosque is built on a rock, so no matter how much rain it falls, it does not go outside these basins, and they do not need construction at all, because they are made of solid stone. If a crack or hole occurs in it, make sure it is fixed. The mosque has doors, the most important of which is the Prophet's Gate (peace and blessings of God be upon him and his family) next to the Qibla, and it is the door through which our Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him and his family) entered the mosque on the night of the Ascension. This gate is on the side of the road to Mecca, and there is an eastern gate called Bab al-Ain, and there is a gate called al-Hata. It is said that it is the gate from which God Almighty commanded the Children of Israel to enter into the mosque, and al-Sakina gate and bab Dhu misraeayn, the height of the wall from the outside is approximately fifty cubits. This door was designated for entering the quarter adjacent to the side of the mosque so that they would not have to go to another quarter (Khosrow, 1983).

### **3. Dome of the Rock Mosque**

Travelers and countrymen mention that a mosque was built in the place of the rock, which is a solid, blue-colored rock whose height is about a meter. It was mentioned in the antiquities that the Prophet (peace and blessings of God be upon him and his family) ascended to heaven, and on this rock was built what resembles an octagonal house with four doors: the Qibli Gate, the Israfil Gate, the Women's Gate, and a door that opens to the west (Al-Maqdisi, Khosrow, Al-Harawi, and Al-Hamawi).

The Dome of the Rock mosque retained its main features until the Fatimid era when Khusraw describes it saying: (((The Dome of the Rock is an octagonal house, organized on each of its eight sides, thirty-three cubits. It has four doors on the original sides, one east, one west, a third north, and fourth south, between each of the two doors there is a wall and all the walls are made of hewn stone, their height is twenty cubits, and the circumference of the rock is one hundred cubits. It is irregular in shape, neither is it round nor square, but it is an irregular stone like the stones of a mountain. They built on the four sides of the rock four square pillars, with the same height of the

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wall of the aforementioned house, and between two pillars on the four sides were two cylindrical columns of marble of the same height. On top of these pillars and these twelve pillars, they built the dome under which the rock, whose circumference is one hundred and twenty cubits. A group of neighbors and worshipers reside in this house of the rock, and its land is decorated with beautiful silk carpets, and in the middle, there is a lamp of silver on which is written its weight, which was ordered by the Sultan of Egypt, and the amount of silver there is estimated at one thousand. There I also saw a very large candle, seven cubits long and three cubits in diameter, its color like blue camphor, and its wax mixed with amber. It is said that the Sultan of Egypt sends there every year a lot of wax from this large candle bearing his name in gold) (Khosrow, 1983).

While the Dome of the Rock Mosque retained its main features on which it was built, the Fatimids were able to leave a trace in the architecture of the Dome of the Rock mosque, and this is what we found through Khosrow's description by providing the Fatimid Caliph Al-Mustansir Allah in that era with silk furnishings for the mosque, silver lamps, and candles embroidered with gold, which included the name of the Sultan of Egypt are nothing but works that helped to sustain the lives of these sacred scenes to preserve their appearance, brilliance, sanctity, and position in society in general without distinguishing between one sect and another.

The Dome of the Rock Mosque has preserved its architectural brilliance, its decorative advantages, and its marble walls, which made Ibn Battuta, who visited it in the middle of the eighth century AH / fifteenth century AD, describing it by saying: The Dome of the Rock Mosque has preserved its architectural brilliance, its decorative advantages and its marble walls, which made Ibn Battuta, who visited it in the middle of the eighth century AH / fifteenth century AD, describing it by saying: ((It is one of the most impressive, perfect and strangest buildings in a form that may provide its urging of beauties and taken from every exquisite side. The circle in it is furnished with marble, too, with tight workmanship, as well as the interior, exterior, and interior of the types of glamorousness, and the fine workmanship is beyond description, and more than that, it is covered with gold, as it is shining with light and shining with the brilliance of lightning.) (Batouta, 1996).

#### **4. Church of the Resurrection**

Travelers and countrymen pointed out the difference in naming this church located in the center of the city of Jerusalem, so it was called the Church of the Resurrection because they believed that Christ was resurrected there when he was killed by Israel. It has wood on which they claim that he was crucified, and there is also his grave, as they claim. As for calling it a rubbish church, because it was built in a place that was a dump for the country. The outward appearance of the country was that the hands of the corrupters were cut off and the thieves were crucified, and this was mentioned in the Bible (Al-Muhallabi, Al-Harawi, and Al-Hamawi, 2006).

This church had a great place among the Christians, and every year many people from the countries of the Roman pilgrimage to it, and he mentioned that the Fatimid Caliph Al-Hakim by Allah had ordered the demolition of this church. (Al-Hanbali and Al-Dhahabi, 1968).

Khusraw says in this regard: ((The ruler ordered this raid on the church, destroying it and ruining it, and it remained in ruins for some time. After that, the tsar sent him messengers and offered many gifts and services, and asked for reconciliation and intercession to be authorized to reform the church, so the ruler accepted and reconstructed it) (Khosrow, 1983).

The reconstruction of the church came after the reconciliation and the improvement of the relationship between the Fatimids and the Christians. It took place during the time of Al-Zahir to honor the Fatimid religion of God, the son of the Caliph Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah in the year 418 AH / 1027 AD. In this, Al-Maqrizi says: ((In the eighteenth year, a truce was signed with the Romans and he addressed Aldhhir in his country, and he restored the mosque in Constantinople and worked as a muezzin in it, so Aldhhir returned the Church of the Jerusalem Rubbish, and authorized those who showed Islam during the days of the ruler to return to Christianity, so many returned to them)) (Al-Maqrizi, 1997).

The calm deteriorated and the relationship between the Romans and the Fatimids improved, which led that the Aldhhir li'ieezaz din Allah period and the beginnings of the rule of his son Al-Mustansir Billah the Fatimid period witnessed prosperity coincided with Khusrau's visit to Jerusalem to enter a rubbish church and provide us with a beautiful description of the church after its reconstruction by saying: ((This church is spacious and can accommodate eight thousand men. It is hugely decorated with colored marble, inscriptions, and images. It is adorned from the inside with Roman brocade and pictures. It was decorated with gold paint in many places, including the image of Jesus, peace be upon him, riding a donkey, and the images of other prophets such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their sons, peace be upon them. .)) (Khosrow, 1983).

It is noted from the population density that Khosrow mentioned while describing it as nine and eight thousand men, which are large numbers that allow us to imagine the area of the church and the size of reconstruction in it after its destruction, so that in that era it accommodated nine thousand, in addition to what he mentioned of marble decorations, wonderful artistic inscriptions, gold-plated decorations, and pictures of the prophets who were mentioned, gives us an idea that they gained a great deal of importance and ages in that era.

The Fatimids' interest was not limited to the ages of mosques and churches in Jerusalem but rather called for their interest in the affairs of the other parish, including allocating huge endowments to treat patients and provide treatment for them and thus found the greatest hospital to fulfill this purpose. Khusraw says ((There is a great hospital in Bayt Al-Maqdis that has huge endowments and gives treatment and medicine to its many patients, and there are doctors who take their salaries from the endowment set for this hospital)) (Khusraw, 1983).

## **5. City of Tripoli urban structures in the Fatimid era**

Tripoli is a great city on the shore of the Roman Sea. It has a wall of impenetrable stone, full of good things. It has groves and great estates, and it has olive trees, vines, sugar cane, and various types of fruits and types of crops (Al-Idrisi, Al-Qazwini, and Al-Haq, 1988).

The city of Tripoli flourished during the Fatimid era, and the city became one of the most important and largest cities in the Levant because of its geographical location. It has a coastal location on the Roman Sea, which made it occupy the first line in the conflict with the Romans, in addition to the wealth it contained and the surrounding estates. In this we find Al-Maqrizi saying:

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((Sidon and Beirut are fortified cities on the coast, as well as Tripoli)) (Al-Maqdisi, The best divisions in the knowledge of the regions, 1904).

As for the construction of Tripoli and its facilities, the traveler Khusraw put for us a picture that included accurate details of the urbanization that the city enjoyed during the Fatimid era. He describes it as saying: (the city of Tripoli is built so that three of its sides overlook the sea, and when its waves rise, the wall rises. As for the side overlooking the dry land, there is a great trench with a tight iron door on it, and on the eastern side of the city is a fortress of polished stone with balconies and battlements of the same stone, and on its top, there are arrows to protect it from the Romans, they are afraid that these people will change them by ships, and the area of the city is a thousand square cubits, and its bonds are four or five layers, and some of them are also six layers...) (Khosrow, 1983).

The fortified architecture in the city of Tripoli occupied the first place in its construction, as noted by the description of the traveler Khosrow. This was due to the repeated invasions of the Byzantines, as it was mentioned that they were trying to control the coastal cities of the Levant in particular, which prompted the Fatimids to build a fortress on the eastern side, and the military character prevailed over it. It was a center for the fighting armies of the Byzantine invasion, in addition to the presence of the trench on the land side and the wall surrounding its three other seashores, thus, the city will be fortified with an impenetrable military fortification.

Khosrow turns once more to describe the civilian facilities Tripoli enjoyed in addition to its military fortifications, by saying: (Its streets and markets are so beautiful and clean that you would think that every market is a decorated palace. In the center of the city is a great, clean and beautiful mosque with a fortified engraving. In its area is a large dome with a marble basin under it, and in the middle of it is brass, and in the market, there are five taps, from which a lot of water comes out, from which people take what they need, and it overflows what remains on the land and is gone to the sea. It is said that it has twenty thousand men, and many of villages follow it, and they make beautiful paper like the Samarkand paper, but even better than it, and it belongs to the Sultan of Egypt. The reason for this is that at a certain time the infidel Roman army attacked it, so the soldiers of the Sultan of Egypt fought him and conquered him. So the Sultan removed the tax from it, and set up an army, and delegated a commander to protect it from the enemy. Excise duties are collected in this city, so the ships coming from the countries of the Romans, the Franks, Andalusia, and the Maghreb paid to the Sultan, so he pays from the sustenance of the soldiers to the Sultan ships that travel to the countries of the Romans, Sicily, and Morocco for trade, and the inhabitants of Tripoli are all Shiites, and the Shiites have built beautiful mosques in all the countries...)) (Khosrow, 1983).

It is noted from the description that Tripoli was politically and ideologically subordinate to the Sultan of Egypt, so Khusraw referred to the density of its residents and their Shiite faith, and their building of beautiful mosques, which is nothing but the prosperity of the city in light of its subordination to the Fatimid rule, in addition to the construction of mosques, there is a reference to the collection of tolls, and this is due to the presence of the port for the docking and launching of ships. The Sultan of Egypt had several ports and this certainly helped the city's economic recovery and the welfare of its residents. It was not limited to maritime trade, fleets of ships, and their tolls, he also established in Tripoli the paper industry, stressing that the paper industry is

closely linked to the spread of culture and the growth of the scientific movement and its centers represented by the role of science or schools.

This explains what Al-Omari said when describing Tripoli by saying: ((It was called in the past, the House of Knowledge, and the kings of Bani Ammar deliberate it and the first to judge it) (Al-Omari, 2010).

### Conclusions

1. The Fatimids were particularly interested in religious facilities in the Levant and were able to leave a clear impact on their urban activity in those countries.
2. The Fatimids demonstrated, through their urban influences in the facilities of the cities of the Levant, the breadth of the Arab civilizational horizon, and their non-alignment with one sectarian sect over the other, and that the holy places are the property of all Islamic sects.
3. During their rule in the Islamic East, they were keen on the permanence of building mosques, churches, hospitals, and others alike, by participating in painting, decorating, and covering their walls with various types of brocade.
4. The Fatimid architecture indicated the sophistication and loftiness of the Arab-Muslim thought and the distinctiveness of the civilizational history of the Fatimids in particular and the Islamic in general.
5. The construction of the Fatimids in the cities of the Levant and their establishments indicated the expansion of the Fatimid kingdom in that era and their constant keenness to achieve a bright civilized destination for the cities under their authority.

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