

FATIMA AL FIHRI AND THE OLDEST UNIVERSITY OF AL QUARAOUYINE

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The person of Fatima Al-Fihriya is associated to the special distinction of having founded in the Moroccan city of Fez the University of Al Quaraouiyine, recognized as the oldest existing, **“still and continually operating”** and the first degree awarding educational institution in the world according to **UNESCO** and **Guinness World Records** [1]. It's important to mention that the UNESCO considers Al-Quaraouiyine to have been a university since its founding. Dating back to 859 [2], there is no doubt that Al- Quaraouiyine is older than Egypt's Azhar University (970) and its European counterparts: the University of Oxford, which is considered as the oldest university in the English-speaking community world (approximately 'roughly' founded in 1096), and University of Bologna (1088). It became a place of religious education and memorization of Holy Quran, Arabic language's rules, mathematic sciences, music, chemistry, Islamic legislation, astronomy, as well to study political debate and lessons focusing mainly on the natural sciences. Near to the Madarsa of Quarawiyine, you can found hostels, businesses areas, “Hammams”, etc. many of which still function properly today.

Fatima Al Fihriya migrated with her family from Kairouan in Tunisia to Fez in the early 9th century. She was well educated and she inherited a large amount of money from his father. She decided along with Maryam, her sister, to dedicate their wealth and education to the profit of their community.

According to Dr. Abdelhadi Tazi, a national historian, Fatima dedicated her wealth with the approval of the Idrissi king Yahya Ist to build the mosque and the “Madarsa”. As a pious Muslim woman, Fatima made an oath to stay fasting until completing the development of the mosque and made her first prayer within the mosque in gratitude to Allah. The Mosque and “Madarsa” were achieved two years later. It's said that the XIIth century cartographer Mohammad Al- Idrissi, whose maps helped European exploration in the Renaissance, lived sometime in Fez, suggesting that he may have worked or studied at Al Quaraouiyine. The Quaraouiyine has produced renewed scholars who influenced the academic history of the Muslim world. Among these are **Ibn Rushayd al-Sabti** (d. 1321), **Mohammed Ibn al-Hajj al- Abdari al-Fasi** (d. 1336), **Abu Imran al-Fasi** (d. 1015), the theorist of Maliki Islamic jurisprudence and the famous explorer **Leo Africanus**. Pioneer scholars like **Al-Idrissi**, **Ibn al-Arabi**, **Ibn Khaldun**, **Ibn al- Khatib** and **Al-Bitruji** were either students or lecturers in the Quarawiyine University. The Belgian Nicolas Cleynaerts, Dutchman Golius and **Pope Sylvester II^d** were among Christian scholars visiting Al Quaraouiyine. In 1947, under protectorate, the “madarssa” was considered as a part of the state educational system, [4] and in 1963, it was finally transformed by a Royal decree after independence into an institution under the supervision of the Ministry of education. Modern textbooks were introduced and the professional training of the teachers improved. [5, 6] Following the reforms, Al Quaraouiyine was officially renamed "University of Al Quaraouiyine" in 1965. [5]

The most admirable thing about Fatima Al Fihriya is undoubtedly her vision. She decided to use her wealth in a way that would benefit the society in the long term. She died in 880 CE leaving to Morocco, the Muslim world and all the Humanity one of the leading religious and educational centers. Al Quaraouiyine University is still in operation and is one of the highly appreciated universities in Morocco. It had made the reputation of the imperial city of Fez worldwide, as a cultural and traditional Moroccan city.

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