

THE MYTHICAL ACCOUNTS OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE FATIMID CITY OF MAHDIA IN TUNISIA

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ABSTRACT: *This article aims at dealing with the legendary narratives concerning the construction of the city Mahdia Fatemia in Tunisia. The article highlights that most Islamic cities in the east were constructed around several legends which aimed at glorifying the location in which these cities were constructed, and the commander who ordered their construction. This rationale applies on building the Mahdia city and its builder- 'Ubayd Allah Almahdi who is praised and glorified by resources which narrates many versions as to why he built the city. Some of the narratives pertain to predictions which Obeid Allah predicted as to the construction of the city. Moreover, the narratives reported the incident of the meeting between 'Ubayd Allah with a priest in the location of the city construction, the priest elaborated that the place is called the Caliphs Island Island. Obeid was assisted with the fortune-tellers in order to locate the construction, and the significance of the city's status,*

KEYWORDS: Mytha, Mahdia, Fatimyid, Tunis, Shi'a, 'Ubaydallaf al-Mahdi

INTRODUCTION

Most Islamic cities are connected to myths and stories that relates to establishment and construction phase. Developed cities (*hawader*) had been discovered along eastern and western sides of the Islamic world. The firmness of such methodology had been assured By Dr. Mahmoud Ismaeel who claimed that the establishment of such mythology in Morocco during the Islamic period in general and the recent period in particular is connected the spread of Sufiism since Sufi practices had turn to a popular religion practice.¹ In addition, sorcery and magic(*karamat*) were prevailed to the extent that was considered a part of science. As mentioned by Ibin Khaldon , believing in such effect has "no place among the intellectuals"² During the age of decadence intellectuality, there was absenteeism of intellectuality, absent which lead in essence enabled religion to play a large role in establishing such methods in the minds of Moroccans in the middle ages.³

It should be mentioned, however that these myths had played a large role in studying history in its general form, particularly, when describing scientific criticism, which based on scientific mythology and that is because such mythologies may grant materials, which can benefit different fields of studies.

¹Mahmoud Ismaeel, *Hwader Al-Magrib Al-islami fe Doe AL-methologya*, (Developing cities of Islamic Morroco) Majalat Alkhaleeg lltarekh walatha, vol, 3 , Kuwait 2007, p/94. A study that introduces a complete picture of Methlogy and its role in Historic studies regarding developing city.

²Ibn Khaldoon, *Almqadima* (introduction) Alhyaa Almasrya Alama lkitab ,Cairo 2006, p 479

³Ismaeel, *ibid* p. 93

Even if these cities' establishments were created under special conditions -- validity of construction in certain place, water availability and natural protection--- such conditions were reflected by Mythical accounts and fortunetellers who had the upper hand in choosing the construction location according to stars which elucidate the happy future of the inhabitants of the place.⁴

Stories within these methods on the one hand glorify the place, and on the other hand, exalt the leader with everything that is connected to him from God blessing⁵. Such trend was noticed when the city of Qayrwan was established by the leader called Oqba bin Nafi'a al-Fihri and all, connected to myths concerning the subject.⁶ The same happened at the case of Abu Jaafar al-Mansour, an Abbasside Caliphate at the time of building his new capital of Bagdad for his newly established state.⁷

Many myths illustrated madness about the construction of Bagdad and such habit was continued when the city of Fas and other cities were built in morocco in the first three *Hijri* centuries but no doubt, the same myths contain many historical facts within it.⁸

There is also an additional myth existed about the fatmaied city of Tunis, Al-mahdia, it has many common trends with other Moroccan cities. Yaqoot al-Hamawi, (deceased 262 AH / 1228 AD) the author of the book *Mojam Al-Buldan* (places dictionary) which contained the myth about building Al-mahdia. Some scholars had mentioned in their writings in 300 Ah\912Ad that Al-mahdi himself had come out to Tunis and he was looking for a protection place, where he could hide, His trip stopped when he reached Al-mahdia, an island connected to the main land and form a picture of a hand connected to an arm. When he crisscross the location, he found a priest in a cave who told him that this location was called the Calipete Island, so Al-mahdi liked that name and decided to build his kingdom at the same point.⁹

This meth is considered one of the most famous ones that contains the best novels within it. These stories consist of mythical imagination about Al-mahdya which was also mentioned in the book of Bakri, (deceased 487 AH / 1097 AD) author of the book dubbed *almsalek walmmalic* "Tracts and Kingdoms", in addition to Ibn Hammad (died: 628 AH / 1231 AD) author of the book "News of the kings of Bani Obaid and their biography". Both writers seen as the oldest historians who dealt with this subject. However, they did not mentioned all details that was introduced by *Hamawi*, in spite of the fact that Hamawi had based his claim on Bakari stori, but he added an additional story which says that he found the priest when he was looking for the place of construction. The same story was supported by Al-kzwini (d. 682 AH / 1283 CE), author of the book "The ruins of the country and the news of the worshipers" *athar ablbad wakhbar alebad*. He states: "he met a priest inside a cave and asked him about the name of the location, the later replayed the location was dubbed as the island

⁴Habani, Mphammad Khasaes Almoden Almagribya fe Asir Aldowel Almostaqla (Morrocan cities characteristics deuring the independent countries era) Arabic . non publishedthesis Fas university,morocco , p 268

⁵Ibn Abd Alhakeem, Ftooh Miser walsham, openeness of Egypt and Alsham ,Abd El-monem Amir investigation , education public committee ,1999,p 1

⁶Ibn Abd Alhakeem, Ftooh Miser walsham, openeness of Egypt and Morroco ,Abd El-monem Amir investigation , education public committee ,1999,p 119

⁷Almaqdsi, Ahsan Altaqaseem,fe Marefit Alaqaaleem, Bagdad, Maktabat, Almothna, 2nd edition, Ledn copy, 1906, p119,Ibn Akatheer,Alkamel Fe Alatarekh, Abdalla Alqadi, Beurit,Dar Alkotob Alelmia,1994,vol5 p 558

⁸Habani Mohammed,ibid,p 269

⁹Zakria Bin Mohameed Alqazwini, Athar Albelad Wakhbar Elbad.Beurit , Dar Sadir, n. d , vol 1, p489

of the caliphate, so the former decided to build his house kingdom at the same spot". It might be that he had cited from the Hamawi,¹⁰ and it is clear that the story of the priest concerning the city's location was told frequently when talked Moroccan cities of (fas and tunis) were brought up.¹¹ This might show the holiness of the location¹².

In the story of Ibn Adara al Marakishy (deceased after 712 AH / 1312 AD does not mention the story. He told that *Obayid Allah* (God Worshiper) left the city of Roqada going toward Tunis and Qirtagna and toward the seas looking for house kingdom, so he chose the island of Jomma and immediately started building it. It was named Almahdya.¹³

It can be noticed here that a consensus between the two stories does exist, however, ibin Adara did not mention the story about the person who will rebel against Mahdi and his kingdom, but most of the other stories had mentioned that event. E.g. the story of a judge called No'man who had mentioned a claim of the Mahdi: "all this was made for an hour of one day"¹⁴. A similar story was mentioned by Ibin Alathir, who says: "Almahdi himself went toward Tunisia and Carthage and other places particularly when he was looking for a place to build his city. He found information about abu yazid who rebeled against his country, so he found no place better protected than Al-Mhdia, which form a hand connected an arm so he build his city and made it his house kingdom"¹⁵

There were many stories which discussed prophesy mentioned by God worshiper. Almahdi *Obeyed Allah Almahdi* when he left in order to look for a place he can protect him from the donkey owner and its threat to the Fatimiyid country in morocco, and that was illustrated by Altijani about the story of building the city when he states: "he had known told me about something happen with his off springs."¹⁶ Few of the historians had mentioned the Fatimid Mahdi's prophecy had talked about it after finishing the construction process. In Ibn Al-Athir's book he states: "And when the wall went up, he commanded someone to throw a bow into the side of Morocco, he throws his arrow and went to the place of the prayer He said: "to this position will get the owner of the ass means Aba Yazid the outer because he was riding a donkey.

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This was also mentioned by Alqazwini¹⁸ and by Maqreezi¹⁹ and others. It was added by Tijani other elements on this story: He ordered to measure that hit which reached two hundred and thirty three arms (deraa) ذراعا. Almahdi said that is the end of what *Almahdia*

¹⁰Habani, Mohamed, Moroccan city characteristics, p 268

¹¹Ibid, ibid

¹²Ibid, p 269

¹³Ibn Athara almarakishy, Albyan Almagrib fe Ikhtsar mlook Alandlus walmagrib, Beirut: Dar althaqafa publishing, 1998, vol1, p.71

¹⁴Alnoman bin Mohamad alqayrawani. iftitah aldawa, resala fe Dohor Aldawa Alfatmya; investigated by Widad Alqdi, Beirut, Alalmi print house 2005, p. 199

¹⁵The complete history, vol6, p481

¹⁶Abdalla bin Mohamad Altijani, The tijani trip, investigated by Hassan Hossni, abd el-wahab, Trablus (Algarb: Aldar Alarabya lkitab, p321

¹⁷Ibid, vol6, p.482

¹⁸Alqazwini, Athar albelad wakhbar alebad, vol1, p490

¹⁹Ahmad bin Ali almaqrizi, itaad Alhonfa beakhbar Alaema alfatmyeen, The Honfa learning of Fatimiyed imamas, investigated by Jamal Aldeen Alshyal, cairo, the higher council of Islamic matters, 3rd edition, 2005, vol 1 p 70

put in our hand from years ²⁰ago, and these prophecy had received a sectorial religious dimension. This was classified under what may be called the two events (*Hadathan*)²¹ a phenomena that was known in Ismaili thoughts which represented the what might be called future history of Imams, if one is allowed to use such phrase. The *Ismaelies* were more experts than others in this field were.²² The Fatimi Mahdi was provided prophecy characteristics of predicting future events that he will take upon himself and upon his sons, which gave his base a special religious status. This lead to the appearance of the religious dimension clearly in the different stories of building the new base (*hadira*) of Fatimies.

Moreover, Fortunetellers had contributed in choosing the new place. This was shown in what was said : " He had a vision and understanding of Astrology ,so he draw it with the Lion horoscope because it considered a stable one, and because of that he stayed stable for the fact that it is also considered the kings guide"²³ Here is connected to the Fatimi chaliphate who were considered experts in astrology but they do not believe in its effect but they ask for it because it is a proof of god monogamy. ²⁴

This tradition in city planning was followed in old ages, it was known in different areas such Iraq, Greek and Romans, and was inherited by the Muslims.²⁵ This because it includes religious dimension that overwhelmed the place and the person who choose it. The clearest example that took place during the Islamic periods was what the Abbasi Chaliphite did when he established Bagdad in Iraq when he ask the advice of astrologists of using a happy horoscope in choosing the city. ²⁶ The Fatimiate Mahdi Had followed his step, and if this has indicated something woud show that the Islamic civilization has special trend: " diversity inside unity frame" . ²⁷

CONCLUSION

It could be summarized, that the diverse stories that was taken from mythology in regard to Mahdia city built and planning did not differ greatly from other Moroccan cities, which included Almashriqya . This was caused by rooting a trend that Islamic civilization had

²⁰Altijani, The trib,p 321, also Ibn Dinar ,Almoenis fe Akhbar Africa and Tunis:Old library,1967,p.53, it seems that some of these stories were not shown until after thr building of Almahdya city , and after the defete of Abu Alyazeed alnkari,Ala Abwab Almadina , and those who were telling thes storiees were at fault that the city was التجاني in the hand of the fatimietes in 233 because that number Is not logical.

Since the mahdya stayed in their hands between the period 308 and 358 H. After they moved to Egypt in Only 51 years , and even if Alsihnaji was considered as one who belong to the fatimyied king until 442 H. then we will not reach the result of the intention of the story creators. See Almarzoqi . Almahdya and its poet named ,Tamim . Tunis: National Archology institute ,1980. P 18

²¹Saed zagloul Abd Alhamid , Tarekh Almagreb Alarabi (History of Arabic Morroco,Alexandria , 1997,p 92

²²Investigated by Fiqi and others, Dar Algarb Alislami, Beirut 1997, p 142 Alqadi Alnomman, (Boards and confrences) Arabic, p1 31 also see Saad Sagloul ibid , p 92 .

²³Mohamed bin Ali Bin Hamad Alsaahnaji. Akhbar ,look bani Obied wseeratihim, investigated by aLtohami naqra abd elhamid oweis, 1980, p 41, it was known that Arabs were experts in Astrology, there were different horscobs like schorbios and others, which was measured by the sun and the moon, for more information see Alasfhani Book:alazmna walamkina (times and places)Arabic Beiurut ,ch 1, p 12 .

²⁴ Alqadi Alnomman, (Boards and confrences) Arabic, p1 31

²⁵Abd Elstar Ottman, Mawsoaat Alammara alfatmia (Ftimate building ensyclopdia)Arabic, Cairo publishing , Cairo , Ch.1, p 15

Ahmad Bin Ishaq Alyaqubi ,*Albuldan* (The countries) Berl publication 1891, chapter 1 , p ²⁶

²⁷Mahmoud Ismeel, *Tarekh Alhdara Alislamia*(history of Islamic civilizations)Kuwait 1990/p 172

inherited it from previous civilizations. Therefore, a religious dimension was needed in order to establish any cities that would receive along with its establisher a special religious status, a trend that made such stories a valid and significant document and source for most of historical research though it may not be logical sometimes. The stories about *almahdia*, mostly showed no contradiction. Regardless these stories were told by Ismailia's or Sunni, with a difference in doctrine in many of the other attitudes. This assure what was previously mentioned about the Islamic civilization that it is characterized by unity despite political and doctrine conflicts.

This how Obeyed Allah Al-Mahdi moved to his new base in 920/320 H. by the time he finished building the palaces and the walls around the city, in addition to some of houses of his entourage Kit, it was obvious that he wanted to move to it when it was totally completed. However, he had no choice but to do it earlier than it was planned because of the strong rain that had fallen on the city of Roqada and Qayrwan that year. The rough rain led in demolishing and destruction of many buildings in these cities. ²⁸

²⁸ Ibn Adara , Albyan Almigrib, chapter1, p 184