

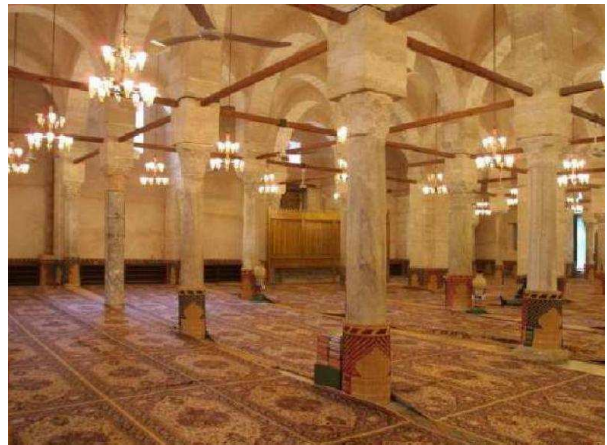
Great Mosque at Sfax

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- Location:** Sfax, Tunisia
- Date of the monument:** Hegira 235 / AD 850
- Period / Dynasty:** Aghlabid, Zirid, Husaynid
- Patron(s):**

Ali ibn Salim, foster-brother of the great Kairouanese judge Sahnun ibn Saïd (AH 240 / AD 854).

Architect(s) / master-builder(s): Haj Saïd al-Qatti (amine of the masons) and Tahar al-Manif.



Description:

The mosque stands right at the heart of the *medina* and is loosely rectangular in shape. The four walls are surrounded by *suqs*. The decoration of the facade is harmonious and Eastern in style. The spandrels of the alternating doors and windows are encircled by arches with triple curves. Cut into these are niches in the form of *mihhrabs*. The decorative motifs are typical of the Ifriqiyian repertoire of the Fatimo-Zirid era and can be found in several AH 4th-century monuments (AD 10th century), an example of which is the Great Mosque at Mahdiyya. Entering the mosque by the side door to the north, one finds oneself in a small courtyard surrounded on four sides by cruciform pillars supporting pointed horseshoe arches. Secondary columns flanking the pillars add a weighty elegance to the ensemble. The galleries are covered using groin vaulting separated by horseshoe beams. The *qibla* gallery has a prominent porch topped with a dome built onto a square base carved with niches in its four corners.

The minaret rises from the northwest corner. Constructed of cut stone on a square base, it consists of two superposed towers topped by a lantern. Fifteen meters high, it reminds one of the minaret of the Great Mosque at Kairouan, but has a more refined façade, comprising a series of discs surmounted by

some splendid floral *kufic* script featuring quarry stones decorated with five-lobed floral motifs. Close examination has revealed that the original Aghlabid minaret was enclosed by sculpted masonry added during the Fatimo-Zirid era. Ten doorways lead from the courtyard into the prayer hall, which is built on a very unusual square floor-plan. The western section was built out onto a part of the original courtyard.

The prayer hall has nine naves and is covered by groin vaulting supported by horseshoe arches. These arches have both horizontal and vertical stripes and rest on columns with ancient capitals. True to the Kairouanese manner, the central nave is wider than the others. However, there is a dome, similar to the one in the courtyard, situated off-centre in the extension of the nave and above the *mihrab* in the 6th-/12th-century prayer hall.

The current AH 12th-century *mihrab* (AD 18th) is endowed with an inscription running over round-bottomed niches in the form of *mihrabs*.

History:

The mosque was embellished during the Zirid era. It was totally reworked, probably in the 6th / 12th century before being restored to its original state in the 12th / 18th century.

How monument was dated:

Historical and literary sources, for example Tijani and the Sfaxian historian Ibn Magdish, attribute the founding of the mosque to Ali ibn Salim. Two inscriptions on the eastern parts dating from 378 / 988 and 478 / 1085 bear witness to the works carried out along the façade. Furthermore, a poetic inscription engraved on the current *mihrab* states the name of its builder and the date 1172 / 1759.

Selected bibliography:

Golvin, L., *Essai sur l'architecture religieuse musulmane*, t.3, Paris, 1974, pp.162 ff.

Marçais G. et Golvin, L., *La Grande Mosquee de Sfax*, Tunis, 1960.

Ifriqiya: Thirteen centuries of Art and Architecture in Tunisia, pp.212–14.

Prepared by: Saloua Zangar

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