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Le Vie dei
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Carmine Gambardella



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The Fatimid Palace at Ajdabiya in Libya as drawn by the French explorer Jean-Raymond Pacho

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Abstract

Jean Raymond Pacho was born in Nice, France, on January 23, 1794. After his initial experiences travelling in Egypt he immediately showed an innate passion for architecture started working on painting important Islamic monuments that he had visited. Between 1827 and 1829 two volumes of work were published in Paris; the second of which contains illustrations accompanying the text of the first volume. Immediately after the publication he ended his life by committing suicide in Paris at the age of only thirty-five. Among the monuments of the medieval Libyan territory described and drawn by Pacho the Fatimid palace of Ajdabiya also known as *Kasr Ladjedabiah* or the castle of Ajdabiya figured prominently.

The Palace, typical rectangular layout, was built so as to accommodate the Fatimid Caliph and his court. It was equipped with round towers at each corner and with rectangular ones in the centre. On one of the shorter sides the only monumental entrance portico - very similar to that of the contemporary palaces of North Africa like Raqqada (9th century), Al-Qa'im in Mahdia (10th century), Ziri in Ashir (11th century) and the entrance of the Great Mosque of Mahdia (912) - was located.

In summary, the palace of Ajdabiya is as one of the first Fatimid constructions built between 934 and 946 by Amer al-Qa'im bi-Allah al-Mahdi. For this reason, Pacho's designs take on a far more important role of that of just simple architectural significance.

Keywords: Libya, Ajdabiya, Fatimid architecture, Jean Raymond Pacho, Fatimid palace.

Jean-Raymond Pacho was born in Nice in 1794 [1]. At the very early age of 8 he lost his father and was sent to a boarding school in Tournon in the Ardèche. It was here that he learned about drawing, literature and botany. In 1812 he was forced to follow courses in law at the university of Aix-en-Provence, though after only two years he abandoned his studies and returned to his birthplace so as to gain the inheritance left to him by his parents. His first foreign journey enabled him to confirm that which he had always held dear: an innate passion for archaeology and architecture. After squandering most of his inheritance, he was forced to return to Paris in July 1817 where he practiced drawing and painting. After almost a year, his brother, who lived in Alexandria in Egypt, implored him to return, but his stay lasted very little. Back again in Paris, he continued painting and even wrote some articles in daily newspapers. Financial hardships were not long in coming and Pacho was forced to return to his brother for a second time. Arriving in Cairo in 1822, he immediately set about drawing the city's important Islamic monuments.

After some setbacks and a number of survey expeditions of the Egyptian oases, he returned to Cairo in August 1824. But by this time the explorer had formulated a great dream - Cyrenaica. In this new exploration, he would have the general consuls of both France and Britain on his side. He was to be joined by a young orientalist by the name of Müller, who spoke Arabic and who had accompanied him on the exploration of the oases, and a number of rich merchants who were very curious to explore that part of North Africa - which had not yet been entirely explored up to that point. The news that was circulating up to then was of an Italian explorer by the name of Della-Cella [2]. The information was very vague and superficial, as he had not left any graphical documentation, though what he had left was a valuable legacy nonetheless. This last aspect, the lack of drawings that represented in some way that strip of North Africa, had in some way heightened the curiosity to know Libyan architecture and its landscape visually. The purpose of the exploration was to examine completely the sea between Alexandria and the coast of Sirte.



Fig. 1: Sites visited by J.R. Pacho in Libya (3th November 1824-17th July 1825).



Fig. 2: Libya, ruins of Ajdabiya palace, view from the north-east.



Fig. 3: Ruins of Ajdabiya Palace, from a drawing by J.-R. Pacho in 1824, pl. XC.



Fig. 4: Ruins of Ajdabiya Palace, from a drawing by J.-R. Pacho, 1824, pl. LXXXIX.

The journey started on November 3, 1824 in Alexandria and ended on July 17, 1825 with their arrival in Cairo. The sensational architectural and archaeological discoveries were collected and brought back to Paris by Pacho some months later. The documentation was scrutinized by the Geographical Society and the *Academy of Inscriptions and Belles-Lettres* in Paris and a special mention was given by both societies. All the honours obtained allowed the scholar to publicise his work to the French culture elite and to finally see his work published which, considering the enormous quantity of illustrations, had a very high cost. Between 1827 and 1829, two volumes of works were published of which the second contained the illustrations and accompanied the text of the first volume.

Pacho described and drew much of the Libyan territory he visited: the cities of Cyrene, Derna and Ajdabiya and many others at the oases of Awjila, Marada and Siwa. Amongst the most representative and least known, until recently, is the medieval monument that figures the Fatimid palace at Ajdabiya, defined by Pacho as *kasr Ladjedabiah* or The Castle of Ajdabiya [3]. Pacho immediately had the impression of finding himself in front of a piece of Islamic architecture of particular interest underlining the «l'élégance moresque de l'ensemble de l'édifice», which was built on ancient Greek ruins [4].

In the 10th century, the Fatimids, in preparation for their conquest of Egypt, built, in modern Cyrenaica, a series of constructions and infrastructures of significant importance which correspond to a number of strategic points on the coast and the principle camel trains that come from the Libyan desert, and are closely linked to the trafficking of gold [5]. Amongst these building projects, brought to light thanks to the exploration of the Niçois, the urban settlement of Ajdabiya deserves a special mention (the name Ajdabiya derives from the surrounding typography, that of a dry arid land) [6]. The area defined by Pacho as «la plaine qui sert de confins aux terres fertiles» [7], was sparsely covered with sand and was surrounded by rocky hills with one very important natural resource: water. The city, located in the extreme east and in the inner area of the Gulf of Sirte, «à treize lieues [8] du cap Carcora, à trois des bords de la mer» [9], turned out to be an area where refreshments could be had on the coast road that went from Egypt to the sea and, also, the end of the trans-Saharan route that connected the oases of Jalu and Kufra coming from Sudan. As early as the 10th century, the Arab historian al-Bekri offered a description of the building even if, as we know, he did not leave with a graphic representation of the city's monuments: «Ajdabiya: a big city found in a desert of hard rock with some wells dug in the rock with good quality water. The gardens of Ajdabiya are few and dates are not plentiful, all the other tree species are missing apart from the arak tree (*cissus arborea*). This city contains a large Mosque of imposing stature built (between 934 and 946) by al-Qa'im bi-Amer Allah son of 'Ubayd Allah al-Mahdi. Its octagonal minaret is built admirably; with baths, caravansaries and a highly frequented bazaar [...] The city has a port called *al-Mahur*, which is 18 miles distance; and also contains three castles. In Ajdabiya, the roofs of the houses are made of wood; they build with bricks in the shape of a vault to resist the wind which is very strong in this location» [10].

In the 12th century, the town of Ajdabiya was described by the Arab geographer al-Idrisi as «a city built in stone and surrounded by boundary walls of which there are only two buildings left in the desert two miles from the coast. On the outskirts of the town there is no vegetation and its inhabitants are mainly Jewish with a few Muslim traders; the surrounding villages are inhabited by Berbers» [11].

The Libyan city entered into a long period of decline after the Hilalian invasion which started in the middle of the 11th century and the fall of the Fatimid empire [12]. The ruins of the medieval city, still visible in 1824, have been excavated only in these last few decades and reconstruction has been possible thanks to Pacho's drawings [13].

The archaeological excavations performed on several occasions and published, to a large extent, by the journal «Libya Antiqua», since 1964, and «Libyan Studies», from 1969, have revealed that in the middle ages, inside the urban confines of the city, there existed a Mosque of notable architectural importance, public toilets, shops, caravanserais and a port located a few kilometres from the city.

The holy building, most lightly built in the 9th century, was partly destroyed during the invasion of the Benu Hilal tribe from the middle of the 11th century [14]. According to what has come to light from the excavations carried out in the 1980s, it was built on a pre-existing structure which served the same purpose [15]. The Mosque was planned with a central courtyard (47m x 31m), under which a cistern is located. The courtyard is surrounded by a portico with a prayer room located on the south-east side; the minaret is slightly raised from the ground with an octagonal plan and the *minbar* is decorated with stucco and features a dome in front of it.

The building, instead, which is of a rectangular layout, was intended to receive the Fatimid Caliph and his court. It was built in stone with the aid of *pierres colossales* [16] and surrounded by a boundary wall (33,5m x 22,5m) with one metre thick walls, and equipped with circular towers at the corners and a rectangular centre. On one of the shorter sides, in a north-eastern direction, is found the only monumental porch entrance which is very similar to the ones found at the Raqqada palace (9th century), the al-Qa'im a Mahdiya (10th century), Ziri ad Ashir (11th century) and the entrance of the Great Mosque at Mahdiya (912) [17].

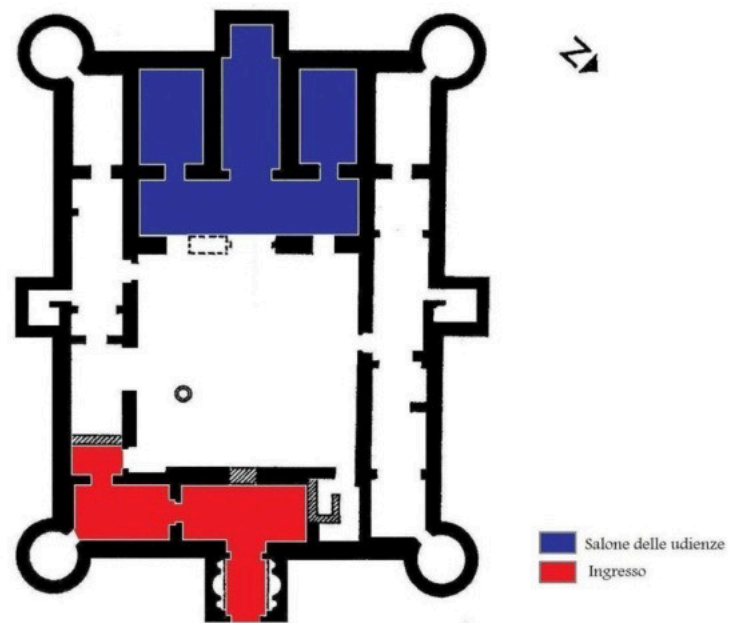


Fig. 2: Ajdabiya Palace, general plan.

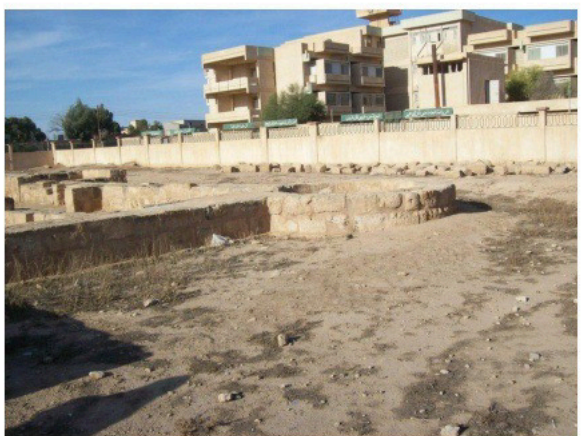


Fig. 3: Ruins of Ajdabiya Palace, entrance and forepart.

Fig. 4: Ruins of Ajdabiya Palace, throne room.

Fig. 5: Ruins of Ajdabiya Palace, low inner ward wall with round towers at the corners.

Fig. 9: Ruins of Ajdabiya Palace, general view of the site.



Fig. 10: Ajdabiya Palace, throne room.

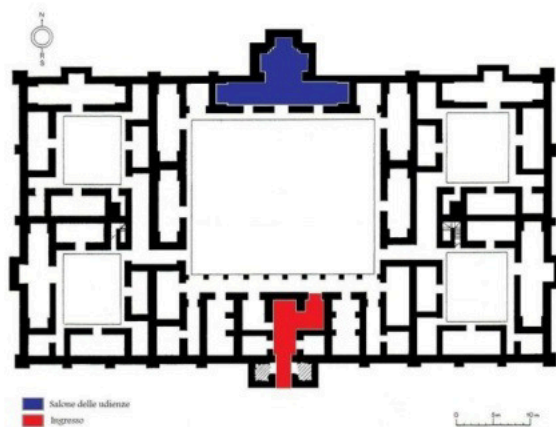
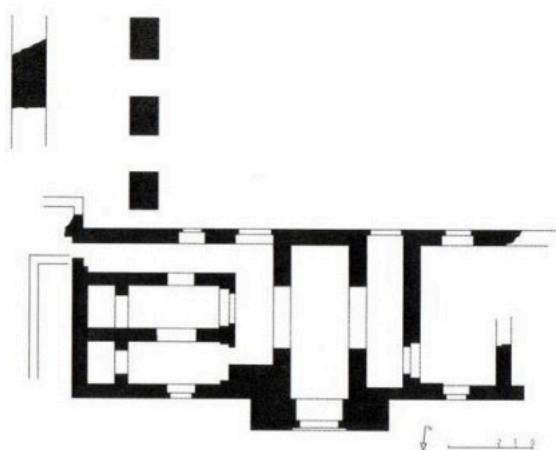


Fig. 11: Tunisia, Mahdiya, al-Qa'im Palace, plan of the entrance.

Fig. 12: Mahdiya, ruins of the al-Qa'im Palace.

Fig. 13: Algeria, Ashir Palace, plan.

Fig. 14: Aerial view of the archaeological site of Ashir.

The elbow entrance opened onto a square shaped central courtyard 14 meters on each side. On the south-west side, in line with the entrance, one would find an oblong shaped throne room closed by a 3 metre-wide apse (*īwan*), 2 metres deep and covered by a hemispherical dome supported by horns with shell motif decorations. The central hall, *īwan*, is lined on both sides by two vaulted spaces of smaller dimensions. The three rooms open onto the central courtyard with a transverse anteroom covered by vaulted ceilings and ending with three arches.

The layout of the hall has a strictly formal function, similar to the palace of Sabra al-Mansuriya (947-973) [18]. Ultimately, this example of the inverted T room of Ajdabiya with its form and layout seems, at least as far as we presently know, to be the oldest in North Africa.

In conclusion, the considerations that arise from this analysis identify the construction at Ajdabiya as the first Faimid residence built between 934 and 946 by al-Qa'im bi-Amer Allah al-Mahdi and, for this reason, Pacho's drawings are significantly more important than simple architectural surveys.

By analyzing the architecture of the Fatimid Palace at Ajdabiya more closely, it is possible to state that the building could be attributed to a Syrian tradition given the similarity to the castles of the desert: fortified walls, monumental entrance and an internal courtyard [19]. Another element that cannot be neglected is the layout of the throne room in the shape of an inverted T. This layout is typical of the Mesopotamian tradition as evident in Sassanid architecture [20].

We can therefore affirm that the value of the French explorer is represented by his brilliance, through the use of simple paper, in bringing to light an enormous quantity of topographical, botanical, artistic, architectural and archaeological detail from the places he visited. Essentially, the uniqueness of Pacho's work consists in the ability to transport readers directly to the architectural complexes that he himself drew, accompanying them through the detailed description in a brilliant and passionate style. During the long editing process of his travel memoirs he lived in complete isolation. This isolation enveloped him in such melancholic gloom that it brought his turbulent life to a premature end. He committed suicide in Paris in 1829 at the tender age of 35. His death created deep sense of regret not only amongst the members of the Geographical Society, but also in all the Parisian and French cultural societies. He is remembered as a fine scholar who, thanks to a dangerous expedition with limited means, was able to bring back to Europe, after many years of neglect, the glorious past of the city of Cyrene and the long forgotten Libyan districts of Marmarica and Cyrenaica, for example the Fatimid palace at Ajdabiya.

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[8] A league (fr. lieue) is a unit of measure that expresses the distance that a person or a horse could travel in footstep in a hour of time. In France a league is equivalent to about 3,898 kilometers.

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[¹⁴] According to Charles-André Julien Tripolitania and Ifriqiya suffered innumerable disasters due to frequent Hilalian invasions, see: JULIEN, Charles-André. *Histoire de l'Afrique du Nord*. Tunis: Cérès Éditions, 2003, p. 99-103.

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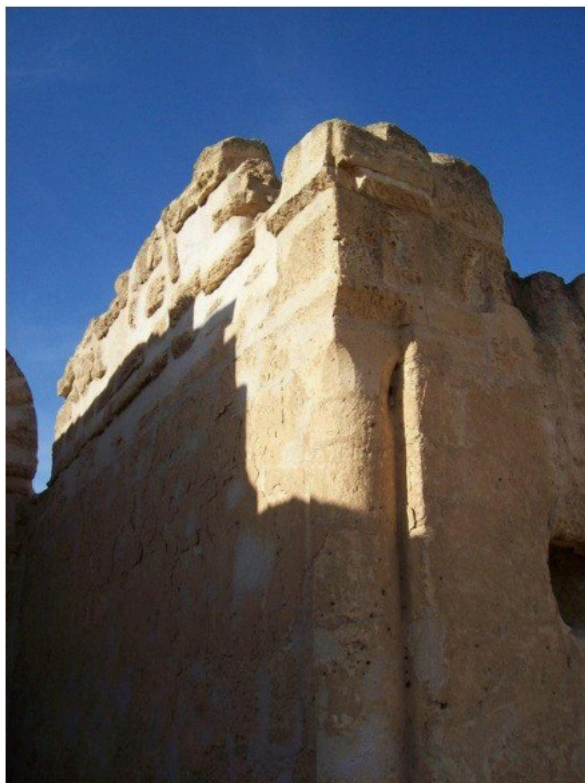


Fig. 15: Ajdabiya Palace, corner column of the throne room.

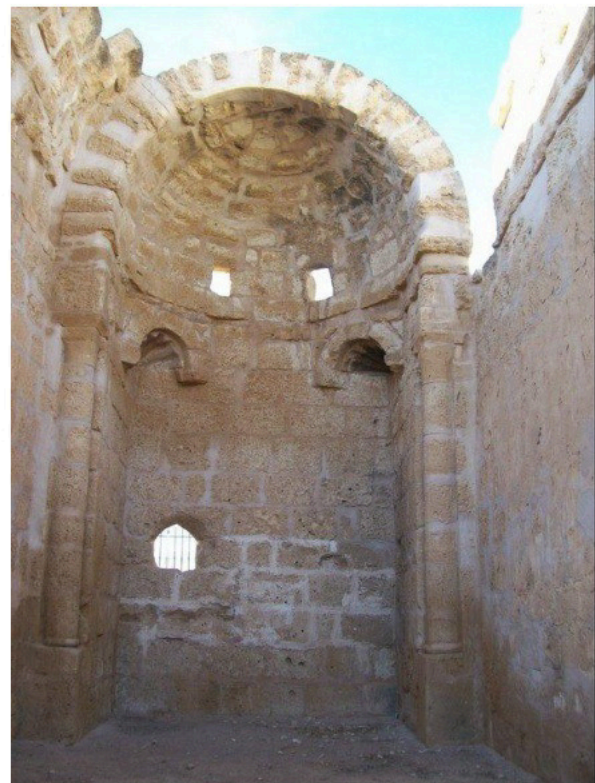


Fig. 16: Ajdabiya Palace, semispherical dome of the *iwan*.