

August 2023



Dear Club Members,

The University of Al-Qarawiyyin is the oldest continually operating university in the world. Based in Fez, Morocco it was founded in 859 by Fatima al-Fihri .

When her father died she used her inherited fortune to establish a mosque and associated educational institution. students would have studied a wide range of subjects, such as languages, astronomy, and medicine. During medieval times it was a major intellectual centre. In context, Oxford University, the second oldest university was first established around 1096, the University of Al-Qarawiyyin was approaching it's 250th anniversary, when teaching was only just starting on Oxford.

The University formed part of the flourishing Islamic golden age from the 8th to the 14th centuries. In context the Islamic Empire spent the equivalent to about twice the annual current research budget of the United Kingdom's Medical Research Council on translating ancient Greek texts in to Arabic. Many classic works of antiquity that might otherwise have been lost were translated from Greek, Syriac, Middle Persian, and Sanskrit into Syriac and Arabic, in turn these were later translated into other languages like Hebrew and Latin. Education began at a young age, with many primary schools attached to mosques. In comparison to Europe in that time, literacy levels would have been much higher. By the 11th and 12th centuries the education system had developed in to a system of madrasas, an institute of higher educational learning with scholars responsible for the teaching of students. Formal studies were only open to men in the madrasas, but many women were highly educated at home, and were recognised in the outside world as being leading scholars.

What little we do know about Fatima al-Fihri comes from the writings of Ibn Abi Zar' who wrote in *The Garden of Pages (Rawd al-Qirtas)* in the early 1300's. This was long after the death of Fatima in around 880 CE. Indeed its quite possible that Fatima is a myth, a convenient creation story, with a legendary figure (though I'm somewhat intrigued about why a woman was chosen as the founder if the story is entirely fictional). Fatima also supposedly had a sister, Maryam bint Mohammed bin Abdullah al-Fihri, who founded the Mosque of the Andalusians, also in Fez. What we now know as Spain and Portugal was then called Al-Andalus and was under the control of Islamic rulers, just across the straights of Gibraltar many Muslims would have migrated backwards and forwards between the 2 countries.

In 1963 the University of Al-Qarawiyyin became a state university operated by the Moroccan Government, some scholars argue until that point it was only a Madrasa, and that the term university is distinctly European invention. Women weren't admitted until the 1940's.

Your fibre today is inspired by the roof of the library building. This is possibly the oldest working library in the world and had fallen in to disrepair. In 2012 the Moroccan Minister of Culture commissioned architect Aziz Chaouni to renovate and modernise the space. She was an unconventional choice, a woman in a field dominated by men, especially in a country like Morocco. The task she faced was huge, there was no climate control to preserve manuscripts dating back to the 7th century, and security was reliant on 4 different keys held by 4 different staff members to access the manuscript room. Renovation on a building this old was a challenge, with

extensions having being added with very little planning, and doors covered with layers of plaster that would be revealed after work had begun. It's now a place where scholars can work and study, but also where members of the public can now visit, just as they would have been able to do when the library was founded.

Happy Spinning

Katie

Fibre Content- In case your parcel is missing the label

50% Merino

50% Bamboo Rayon

Further Reading-

The University-

<https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/the-world-s-first-and-still-operating-university-is-in-morocco-36652>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPjZySUwh2w>

Renovation of the library

<https://ideas.ted.com/restoring-the-worlds-oldest-library/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/sep/19/books-world-oldest-library-fez-morocco>

<https://www.odysseytraveller.com/articles/the-fascinating-history-of-the-worlds-oldest-library/>

Fatima al_Fahri

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOzIEc0jCYE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lBupa8hfFl>