

History and monuments of the city of Ashir Al-Ziriya

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• **Abstract:**

The city of Asher, the capital of the Zirid state, is the second capital in the central Maghreb built by "Ziri bin Manad" in (324 AH / 936 AD) for reasons dictated by the political conditions of the region at the time, as it is an archaeological city par excellence that currently follows the state of Medea distributed in three places: Menzah bint al-Sultan, Yashir and Buniya.

The city has played different roles in the history of the Islamic Maghreb, whether it is political, economic, military or cultural.

- **Keywords:** Zirid state, Asher city, history, monuments

الملخص:

تعد مدينة أشير عاصمة الدولة الزيرية ثاني عاصمة بالمغرب الأوسط شيدها "زيري بن مناد" سنة (324 هـ/ 936 م) لأسباب أملتھا الظروف السياسية للمنطقة آنذاك، فهي مدينة أثرية بامتياز تتبع حاليا ولاية المدية تتوزع على ثلاثة مواضع: منزہ بنت السلطان، ياشير وبنية. لعبت المدينة أدوارا مختلفة في تاريخ المغرب الاسلامي سواء تعلق الأمر بالجانب السياسي أو الاقتصادي أو العسكري أو الحضاري.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الدولة الزيرية، مدينة أشير، تاريخ، آثار.

• Introduction

The city of Ashir is one of the earliest cities in the Central Maghreb, second only to the city of Tahert of the Rustamid dynasty. It was founded by "Ziri ibn Menad" in the mid-3rd century AH/9th century AD in a fortified area, now located in the Wilaya of Médéa. Key historical and geographical sources describe it due to the significant historical and cultural role it played during a rich period marked by political events closely tied to the introduction of Islam in North Africa. Ashir witnessed a vibrant commercial, economic, and industrial movement, attributed to its strategic location atop a rocky plateau on Mount El-Kaf El-Akhdar, where it was naturally fortified on three sides, with a massive wall on the fourth side to protect against enemy incursions. Numerous archaeological studies have been conducted around Ziri's city of Ashir to uncover its significant landmarks and artifacts. These findings will greatly contribute to rewriting the history of the region and, more broadly, of Algeria. Given the importance outlined above, this research paper aims to shed light on part of the history and heritage of this region to raise awareness and encourage further field research projects that would build on centuries of previous studies. This paper will therefore address the following question: What are the history and heritage of the Zirid city of Ashir? To answer this question, two methodologies will be applied: the historical approach to trace the region's historical periods from its founding to its decline, and the descriptive approach to describe the archaeological findings and landmarks discovered through prior studies.

2. A Historical Overview of the Zirid Dynasty :

The Zirid dynasty originated from the Sanhaja tribe, whose territory stretched from Msila to Hamza, including Algiers, Médéa, and Miliana. During the era of the Aghlabids, the Sanhaja, under the leadership of Menad ibn Munqush, held influence in parts of Ifriqiya and the Central Maghreb, supporting the Abbasid cause. After Menad's death, his son Ziri took over and allied with the Shiites, liberating the Maghreb from Aghlabid and Rustamid control in 296 AH/909 AD. Ziri supported Abu Yazid Makhlad ibn Kidad, founded the city of Ashir, and instructed his son Buluggin to establish the cities of Algiers and Miliana on the eastern bank of the Chelif, as well as the city of Médéa (Medouna)¹. During his rule, Ziri faced numerous conflicts with the Maghrawa, who were allied with the Umayyads of al-Andalus, until his death in 360 AH/971 AD. After Ziri, his son Buluggin took over, avenging his father by defeating the Zenata, gaining control over Ashir, Tahert, and other regions of the Maghreb. In 361 AH/972 AD, the Fatimid Caliph al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah (341-365 AH/952-975 AD) decided to move to Egypt and appointed Buluggin ibn Ziri to govern Ifriqiya and the Maghreb². Following Buluggin's death in 373 AH/984 AD, his son al-Mansur inherited the leadership but resisted the Fatimids' influence by refusing to be appointed or dismissed by decree³. This led to a conflict with the Fatimid Caliph al-Aziz bi-Allah,

¹ Ibn Khaldun, *Kitab al-Ibar wa Diwan al-Mubtada' wal Khabar fi Ayyam al-Arab wal-Ajam wal-Barbar wa man 'Asarahum min Dhawi as-Sultan al-Akbar*, Vol. 6, Dar Al-Kitab Al-Alamiya, 1st Edition, Beirut – Lebanon, 1992, p. 181.

² Ibn Abi Dinar, *Al-Munis fi Akhbar Ifriqiya wa Tunis*, edited and commented by Muhammad Shamakh, Al-Maktaba Al-Atiqah, Tunis, p. 76.

³ Ibn al-Athir, *Al-Kamil fi at-Tarikh*, Vol. 9, Dar Beirut lil-Tiba'a wal-Nashr, Beirut, 1966, p. 67.

who sent the preacher Abu al-Fahm al-Khurasani to challenge al-Mansur's rule, but al-Mansur defeated him and his followers in 378 AH/989 AD⁴.

During al-Mansur's reign, Hammad was appointed to govern Ashir. After al-Mansur, his son Badis ruled, during which Hammad founded the city of al-Qal'a in 395 AH/1010 AD, asserting his own control there⁵. This led to Hammad's break from the Fatimids, declaring allegiance to the Abbasids in 405 AH/1015 AD. Upon discovering this, Badis besieged Hammad in al-Qal'a until his death in 406 AH/1016 AD. Badis's son, al-Mu'izz, succeeded him and made peace with Hammad in 408 AH/1018 AD⁶, splitting the Sanhaja state into two: the Zirid state in Kairouan and the Hammadid state in al-Qal'a.

After the split, al-Mu'izz ibn Badis ruled the Zirid state, which retained only Ifriqiya. He sought to sever ties with the Fatimids, aligning instead with the Abbasids in 440 AH/1049 AD⁷. Enraged by this defection, the Fatimid Caliph al-Mustansir bi-Allah sent the Banu Hilal Arabs to punish the Zirids. They ravaged Ifriqiya, Kairouan, and surrounding areas, forcing al-Mu'izz to take refuge in Mahdia, where he died in 454 AH/1062 AD. His son Tamim succeeded him, but retained control over only a narrow coastal strip around Mahdia⁸. After Tamim's death in 501 AH/1108 AD, his son Yahya ruled, compelled to renew loyalty to the Fatimids due to pressure from the Banu Hilal. Yahya shifted his focus to fighting Christian forces until his death in 509 AH/1116 AD. His son Ali ruled briefly, passing away in 515 AH/1121 AD, succeeded by his son al-Hasan, the last Zirid ruler.

During al-Hasan's rule, Christian forces captured Mahdia and other coastal regions like Sfax, Sousse, and Tripoli in 543 AH/1148 AD. With little control left in Ifriqiya, the Zirid dynasty's end came when 'Abd al-Mu'min ibn Ali, founder of the Almohad dynasty, defeated the Christians and reclaimed Mahdia in 555 AH/1159 AD, consolidating the Zirid territories into his empire, thereby bringing an end to the Zirid dynasty⁹.

3. The Zirid Central Maghreb:

During the Fatimid period, the Central Maghreb (present-day Algeria) was divided into four provinces: Ashir, Tahert, Msila, and Baghaia. Under the rule of the Zirid dynasty, these four provinces were merged. The administrative region of Baghaia and the northern part of Msila were incorporated into the province of Ashir, while the southern part of Msila was added to Tahert. As a result, the Central Maghreb became two major provinces: Tahert and Ashir¹⁰.

Like any state, the region was characterized by vitality, industrial activity, and economic movement, with its architectural developments serving as evidence of this prosperity. The Zirid dynasty also had a significant influence in applied industries. Ashir was founded in 324 AH (936 AD) by Ziri ibn Menad¹¹, further demonstrating the dynasty's role in advancing industrial and architectural achievements.

⁴ Ibn Khaldun, *Kitab al-Ibar* ..., p

⁵ Ibid., p. 186.

⁶ Ibn Khaldun, previously cited source, p. 203.

⁷ Ibn Adhari al-Marrakushi, *Al-Bayan al-Mughrib fi Akhbar al-Andalus wal-Maghrib*, Vol. 2, edited and translated by G. S. Colin and Levi-Provençal, Dar Al-Thaqafa, Beirut, Lebanon, 1960, p. 277..

⁸ Abdelaziz Salem, *Al-Maghrib al-Kabir*, Vol. 2, Dar Al-Nahda, Beirut, 1981, p. 671.

⁹ Ibid., p. 671.

¹⁰ Abderrahmane Ben Mohamed Al-Jilali, *Tarikh al-Jaza'ir al-Am*, Vol. 1, Diwan Al-Matbou'at Al-Jami'iya, Algiers, 1994, p. 323.

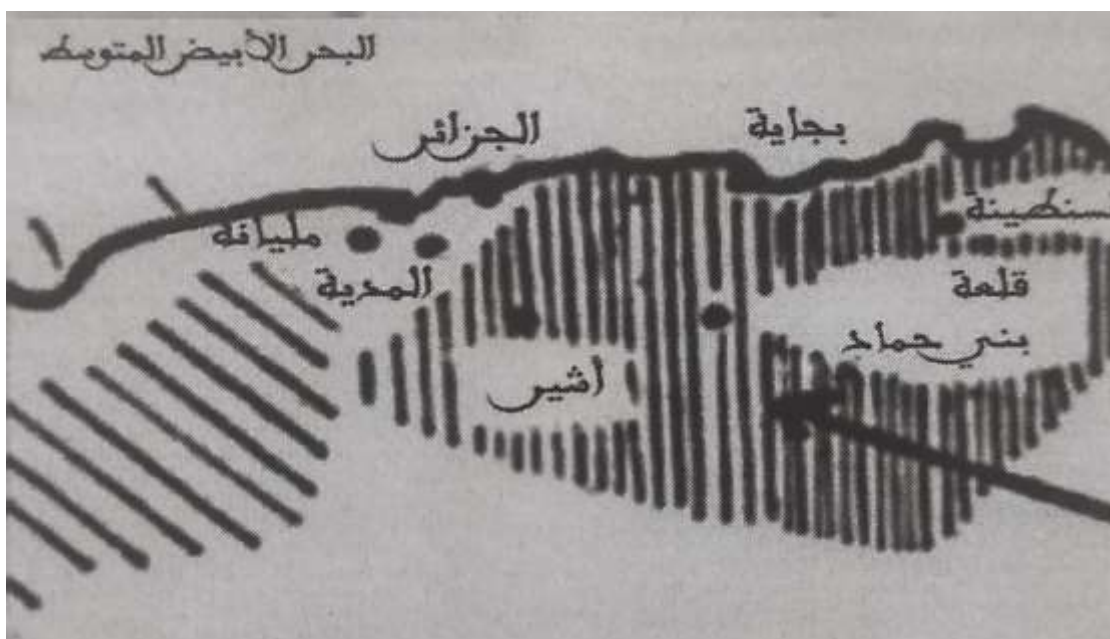
¹¹ Abderrahmane Al-Jilali, *Tarikh al-Jaza'ir al-Am*, Vol. 1, p. 349.

4. Geographical Location of the City of Ashir:

The city of Ashir is located between the coordinates 90.3°E and 90.24°E longitude, and 33.43°N and 80.94°W latitude¹².

Geographically, it lies on the eastern slope of Mount Titteri, which was historically known as Mount al-Kaf al-Akhdar (the Green Mountain). The mountain range currently extends from east to west as part of the Atlas Mountains. Ashir is situated approximately 930 kilometers south of Algiers, near the town of Ain Boussayf in the Medea province.

To the north, it is bordered by Qsar al-Bukhari, close to three districts, while to the southwest, it borders the town of El-Borouj, and to the west, it is bordered by Jebel Shaba¹³.



Map 01: Geographical Location of the City of Ashir / by Naima Boukredimi

5. Geographical Location of the City of Ashir:

Ziri bin Manad al-Sanhaji (493 AH / 679 AD) is considered one of the greatest Berber kings and the first to rule the Sanhaja people in central Morocco. In his youth, he gathered a group from among his relatives and those who were willing to support him. He led raids against the Zanata tribes, killing, capturing, and distributing the spoils among his followers, without keeping anything for himself¹⁴.

Ziri found himself, from the early stages, facing strong opposition from the Sanhaja, who became embroiled in conflict with him¹⁵. The Zanata envied him for his success and prepared to fight him.

¹² Mohamed Meshmouh, "Madinat Ashir, Capital of the Zirid Emirate in the Central Maghreb (324 AH/935 AD)," *Al-Majalla at-Tarikhiyya al-Jaza'iriyya*, Vol. 06, Issue 01, 2022, p. 112.

¹³ Khair al-Din Bin Tarzi, "Al-Tahsinat at-Tabi'iyya lil-Mudun al-Ziriyya bil-Maghrib al-Awsat – Madinat Ashir Namudhajan," *Hawliyyat at-Tarikh wal-Jughrafiya*, Vol. 08, Issue 02, 2019, p. 111.

¹⁴ Shihab ad-Din Ahmad bin Abdul Wahab al-Nuwairi, *Nihayat al-Arb fi Funun al-Adab*, Vol. 24, edited by Abdul Majid Tarhini, Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyya, Beirut, Lebanon, n.d., pp. 87, 88.

¹⁵ Ismail Al-Arabi, *Dawlat Bani Hammad*, p. 43.

He raided their lands in many battles, killing many of them and returning with great spoils, and his followers increased in number. Their lands were devastated, and they said to him: "Why don't you choose a city for us?" The choice of this location was not arbitrary but based on its strategic advantages. He then led them to the site of Ashir¹⁶, a fortified place with water sources. Al-Hamawi mentions that regarding the water sources: "...Inside the city, there are two springs whose depth cannot be measured¹⁷."

The city was founded in 324 AH / 936 AD during the reign of Al-Qaim bin Ubaid Allah al-Mahdi. Ziri selected the summit of a mountain, which has an area of 9300 square meters and is located at the highest point of Jabal al-Khadr in Titrī, he established this base to manage the affairs of his tribe, while also making it a central place for expansion. Ziri ordered for builders and carpenters to be brought from Souq Hamza (Bouira)¹⁸ and from Dhamhamiya (M'sila) and Tabbana. Ibn al-Athir mentions that the city was founded during Ziri's reign and expanded during the rule of Bulkin¹⁹. On the other hand, al-Bakri said that Ashir was established during the reign of Ziri bin Manad, and it was later developed by Bulkin bin Ziri, and Yusuf bin Ziri bin Manad al-Sanhaji²⁰.

6. Origin of the Name:

Ashir is a word in the Berber language, meaning "Ya'ashir," which translates to "claws" in Arabic. It is a powerful expression and a metaphor for the city's strong fortifications²¹, which allowed it to eliminate anyone who dared to threaten its security. The name is pronounced with an elongated hamzah, though al-Hamawi made it without elongation. It is located at the western edge of Africa, opposite Bejaia, south of Algiers. The city sits on the surface of Jabal Titrī, north of Qasr al-Bukhari, and southeast of Milyana, to the west of Jabal Shabha. Its area is about 95 feddans²². The city of Ashir is spread across three separate sites: Manzha Bint al-Sultan, Ya'ashir, and Baniya²³.

7. The City of Ashir in Historical and Geographical Sources:

The city has been described in various ways by geographers and historians, including Ibn Hawqal, who lived during the time of the Fatimid state. He only mentioned the city's walls, fortifications, springs, and markets without delving into its cultural aspects, saying: "...and from there to Ashir, a city with a stronghold inhabited by the descendants of Ziri bin Manad. It has a strong wall, springs that flow, orchards, and fertile lands²⁴."

Al-Bakri described it, saying: "It is a magnificent and fortified city, and it is said that there is no better or more distant city than it. No one can reach it through battle except from a location guarded

¹⁶ Ibn al-Athir, *Al-Kamil fi at-Tarikh*, edited by Muhammad Yusuf al-Daqqaq, Vol. 7, Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyya, Beirut, Lebanon, 1987, p. 333.

¹⁷ Al-Humairi, previously cited source, p. 60.

¹⁸ Mohamed Tamar, *Al-Maghrib al-Awsat fi Zill Sanhaja*, Diwan Al-Matbou'at Al-Jami'iya, University of Algiers, 2010, p. 25.

¹⁹ Ibn al-Athir, previously cited source, p. 334.

²⁰ Al-Bakri, previously cited source, p. 60.

²¹ Moussa Hissam, "Ashir, Capital of the First Zirid Dynasty: A Civilizational Radiance and Distinguished Scholars," *Al-Thaqafa Magazine*, Cultural Periodical published by the Ministry of Culture, Issue 12, Algeria, June 2007, p. 84.

²² Abdul Halim Awais, *Dawlat Bani Hammad: A Glorious Page in Algerian History*, 2nd Edition, Alexandria Library, Egypt, 1991, p. 86.

²³ Moussa Hissam, previously cited source, p. 84.

²⁴ Abu al-Qasim bin Hawqal al-Nassibi, *Kitab Surat al-Ard*, Dar Maktabat al-Hayat, Beirut, Lebanon, 1996, p. 89.

by ten men, which is on its eastern side leading to Ain Masoud and its surrounding areas. The springs are far from it, let alone the feet²⁵."

Yaqut al-Hamawi mentioned it in his *Mu'jam al-Buldan*, stating: "...A city in the mountains of the Berbers in the western part of Africa, opposite Bejaia... It is an empty place, with many springs, vast open spaces, and a beautiful view. Ibn Ziri built a stronghold on its mountain, and there is no way to reach the stronghold except from one direction, protected by ten men²⁶."

Ibn al-Athir described it as: "It was known for its fortifications and strength..."²⁷ Meanwhile, al-Nuwairi mentioned its strategic location, saying: "This place can only be penetrated from its eastern side, guarded by ten men. Even without a wall, its height would have sufficed for protection²⁸." Additionally, it was mentioned in the *Kitab al-Istibsar* as: "...an ancient city with remarkable ruins. There is no other city as fortified as it. It is surrounded by towering mountains, and inside the city, there are two springs whose depth cannot be measured. Near the city, there is a grand structure known as the Mihrab of Solomon, with columns and inscriptions that no description can fully encompass²⁹."

As for "Al-Idrisi," he mentioned it, saying: "And from there to Ashir of Ziri is a two-day journey. It is a well-fortified stronghold with abundant resources, and it has a well-known market where every rarity is brought and every novelty is sold³⁰."

It is worth noting that the two springs mentioned by Al-Himyari include one known as Ain Suleiman, which is currently located on the plateau opposite the archaeological site of Ashir, specifically to the southeast of the present-day headquarters of the municipality of Kef El-Khadra. The other spring is known as Ain Tala N'tberg, which was fortified by Yusuf ibn Ziri ibn Manad³¹. Ibn Khaldun described it, saying: "(Ziri) established the city of Ashir as a fortified place on the slopes of the mountain called Titreh in this era (Fatimid). It had strong foundations, and it was fortified by Al-Mansur. It became one of the greatest cities in the Maghreb, expanded its layout, flourished with buildings, and attracted scholars and traders from afar..."³²

8. Reasons for the Founding of Ashir:

Ahsir is considered the second capital of Central Morocco after Tihert, the capital of the Rustamids. It was the first capital of the Zirids before their move to Lower Morocco. Its founding occurred after the Fatimids left for the East. Several factors contributed to its establishment, including but not limited to:

- The weakness of the Fatimids' authority and their inability to extend their influence over two important regions in central Morocco: Tihert and Sijilmasa. The inhabitants of these areas remained loyal to the Khawarij ideology and opposed Shiite beliefs

²⁵ Al-Bakri, previously cited source, p. 57.

²⁶ Yaqut al-Hamawi, *Mu'jam al-Buldan*, Vol. 1, Dar Sader, Beirut, 1977, pp. 202, 203.

²⁷ Ibn al-Athir, previously cited source, p. 276.

²⁸ Al-Nuwairi, previously cited source, p.

²⁹ Anonymous author, *Al-Istibsar fi 'Aja'ib al-Amsar wa Wasf Makka wal-Madina wa Misr wa Bilad al-Maghrib*, edited by Saad Zaghloul Abdul Hamid, Dar al-Nashr al-Maghribiya, Casablanca, Morocco, 1985, p. 170.

³⁰ Al-Idrisi, *Al-Maghrib Ard al-Sudan wa Misr wal-Andalus min Nuzhat al-Mushtaq fi Ikhtiraq al-Afaq*, Al-Madinah al-Mahrousa, Leiden, Beirut, Lebanon, 1862, p. 85.

³¹ Ismail Al-Arabi, previously cited source, p. 147.

³² Ibn Khaldun, previously cited source, Vol. 6, p. 313.

- The growing population of the Ziri tribe, which led them to demand a new land that could accommodate them³³.
- The increasing fame of Ziri bin Manad, particularly after his repeated victories and his ambition for leadership³⁴.
- The intense rivalry between Moroccan tribes: Sanhaja, Zanata, and Kutama, and the ongoing wars which led to the construction of fortifications for protection.
- The extension of the Fatimids' control over all lands previously ruled by the Aghlabids after Ubayd Allah al-Fatimi defeated their king in 296 AH / 909 AD³⁵.
- Strengthening the position of the Sanhaja tribe to ensure that the Fatimids could create a tribal balance between the Sanhaja, Kutama, and Zanata tribes spread across Africa and Morocco.
- The active efforts of the Zanata tribes, led by Musa ibn Abi Afia, a prominent leader of the Miknasa tribe, in strengthening the Fatimid Shiite rule, with support from the Sunni Umayyads in Morocco and Andalusia³⁶.

9. The City of Ashir During the Reign of the Zirid Caliphs:

The city of Ashir held an important position in Central Morocco due to its strategic geographic location and its pivotal role in trade caravan routes³⁷. Al-Bakri mentions three main routes that branched from Ashir: one leading to Marsa al-Dajaj, another to the islands of Beni Mazghna, and a third to the port of Ténès via the city of Milyana³⁸. To protect these routes, Ziri ibn Bilkīn ordered the founding of three cities: Mediya in 355 AH / 966 AD, Milyana in 360 AH / 971 AD, and the islands of Beni Mazghna in 362 AH / 972 AD, which significantly reinforced the fortifications of Ashir³⁹, before the Fatimids moved to the East, Al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah, the Fatimid caliph, entrusted the rule of Ifriqiya and Central Morocco to Bilkīn, whom he appointed as "Sayyid al-Dawla" (Sword of the State). Bilkīn chose to reside in Ashir, the capital of his father and tribe, instead of in Qayrawan. He took great care to strengthen and fortify Ashir⁴⁰. Ibn Khaldun mentions that in 362 AH / 973 AD, Bilkīn learned that the Zanata had gathered in Tlemcen, so he went there, besieged them, and then moved them to Ashir. After Bilkīn's death in 373 AH / 984 AD, near Sijilmasa, his son Al-Mansur succeeded him in early 374 AH / 984 AD and continued managing Ashir. Al-Nuwairi states, "His time was the best of times for Ashir, but it was also its most troubled."⁴¹ Later, Al-Mansur appointed his brother to oversee Ashir when he moved to Tunis to take power under the rule of Badi's.

During this period, Ashir experienced several revolts, including the revolt of Ziri bin Atiya and the construction of the Qal'at Bani Hammad. As a result, Ashir lost its status as the capital of the Zirids in 426 AH / 1016 AD, but it remained well-known⁴².

³³ Al-Nuwairi, previously cited source, p. 333.

³⁴ Yaqt al-Hamawi, previously cited source, p. 202.

³⁵ Moussa Hissam, previously cited source, p. 86.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 86.

³⁷ Charles-André Julien, *Tarikh Shamal Ifriqiya min al-Fath al-Islami ila Sanat 1830*, Vol. 2, translated by Muhammad Mazali and Bashir bin Salama, Al-Dar al-Tunisiya lil-Nashr wal-Tawzi', Tunisia, 1883, p. 86.

³⁸ Al-Bakri, previously cited source, p. 60.

³⁹ Moussa Hissam, previously cited source, p. 86.

⁴⁰ Abderrahmane Al-Jilali, previously cited source, p. 244.

⁴¹ Al-Nuwairi, previously cited source, p. 97.

⁴² Rachid Bouraouiba, previously cited source, p. 73.

Hammad retained the leadership of the Qal'a (fortress), and history records the division of the Zirid state into two parts: the eastern part, with Qayrawan as its base, ruled by the Banu Badis, and the western part, with the Qal'at Bani Hammad as its base, ruled by the Banu Hammad⁴³. In 408 AH / 1018 AD, an agreement between the Zirid and Hammadid states allowed Hammad to reclaim Ashir, making it part of the Hammadid domain.

10. The Architectural Development of Ashir:

The city of Ashir made a significant civilizational contribution to Central Morocco, particularly through its urban development, which is reflected in the three key historical sites that constituted the city of Ashir: Manzah Bint al-Sultan Ashir (or Yashir) and Baniya. These sites contained walls, palaces, springs, funerary inscriptions, and mosques, which clearly illustrated the urban and civilizational progress that the city had achieved at that time. Its architectural development also caught the attention of many historians, including the author of *Al-Istibsar*, who described its architecture saying: "Near the city is a great structure known as the Mihrab of Solomon, no building greater or more skillful has been seen. It contains marble, columns, and inscriptions that defy description..."⁴⁴ "(Image: 01)," "(Figure 01 and 02)."

As for its defensive wall, it was built by Bilkīn in 367 AH / 977 AD. After 440 AH / 1049 AD, the city was destroyed by Yusuf ibn Hammad, who ruled Morocco on behalf of his brother, the leader Ibn Hammad. The city was rebuilt again in 455 AH / 1063 AD. Al-Idrisi also mentioned that by the 12th century, the city of Ashir continued to play an important role in the region⁴⁵.

11. Archaeological Studies in the City of Ashi

Interest in the city of Ashir began in the 19th century, immediately following the exploration of the region between 1954 and 1956 by a group of researchers led by Lucian Golvin. Several excavations were carried out in the area, revealing the historical, archaeological, and architectural significance of the Zirid capital, which led to continued research efforts.

Before Lucian Golvin, the region had been studied by several researchers, including Barbroguer (1850-1852), Chabassière (1869), Captain Rodet (1908), and Georges Marçais (1921). The primary focus of these researchers was to create plans of the discovered buildings, while the study of pottery and ceramics did not receive much attention. Starting in 1981, excavation and digging efforts continued in Ashir, organized by the National Agency for Antiquities and the Protection of Monuments and Historical Sites, along with the National Center for Historical, Prehistoric, and Anthropological Research. Due to the conditions in Algeria, however, excavations ceased in 1993, and all the archaeological finds, including pottery, ceramics, and glass, were destroyed in a fire that broke out in the warehouse where they had been stored⁴⁶.

12. Archaeological Components of Ashir:

⁴³ Abderrahmane Al-Jilali, previously cited source, p. 252.

⁴⁴ *Al-Istibsar*, previously cited source, p. 170.

⁴⁵ Hady Roger Idris, *Al-Dawla al-Sanhajiya*, Vol. 2, translated by Hamadi Sahli, 1st Edition, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1992, pp. 94-95.

⁴⁶ Malika Ben Misbah, *A Typological Study of the Hamadi Pottery through the Collection of the National Museum of Ancient Art, the National Museum of Sétif, and the National Museum of Cirta*, Institute of Archaeology, University of Algiers 2, Academic Year 2006/2007, p. 29.

Rodet's Discovery of Three Sites: The pioneer researcher Rodet was able to uncover three significant sites: Manzah Bint al-Sultan, Yašir, and Baniya.

12-1 Manzah Bint al-Sultan:

Manzah Bint al-Sultan is a fortress built on the highest part of a flat rocky summit, surrounded by deep valleys that make it almost inaccessible. Only a few small gaps remain, which assist in accessing the site. The Zirids fortified the area while relying on natural defenses for the rest of the city. The site covers an area between 275 meters in length and 25 meters in width, which corresponds to the dimensions of the rock that serves as the location for this part of the city. Despite the natural fortifications, the Zirids surrounded the city with massive walls approximately 2 meters thick, but the exact length of the walls is unknown due to their current ruin, some studies suggest that a half-circular tower existed at the highest point of the site, consisting of a room that served as a shelter for soldiers and a lookout post for monitoring the northern areas of the city's fortifications. The western side also contained another tower whose purpose was to control the only path leading to the main fortress⁴⁷. This rectangular structure is 30 meters long and 15 meters wide, divided into two equal sections by an internal courtyard that measures 5 meters long and 6 meters wide. Each section consists of two equal-sized rooms, each 7 meters long and 6 meters wide, with two rooms on the eastern side and two on the western side. The courtyard was used as a gathering center⁴⁸. The site's cistern measures 10 meters on each side, with a depth of 1.5 meters and a capacity of 150,000 liters. It is connected to a cylindrical well with a diameter of 2.56 meters, a depth of 1.50 meters, and a capacity of 7,363 liters⁴⁹.

12-2 Baniya:

The city of Baniya is located on the northwestern slopes of Kaf Tismasail, facing Ashir, separated by a distance of 2.5 km. This location is strategically significant as it offers a commanding view and control over the surrounding area, overlooking three directions: west, north, and east. To the south, the site ends at a fortress situated at the summit of the rocky Kaf Tismasail Mountain, making it a prime defensive position. The city's wall rests on a rocky base with a thickness of 2 meters, taking advantage of the natural fractures formed by the hillside on which it was built. The city covers a total area of 35 hectares⁵⁰ and is divided into two parts, differing in their architectural features. The upper section, defined by piles of earth between the Bab al-Ma' and Ain Baniya, is marked by regularity and was likely inhabited by the nobility and soldiers. The lower section, which is more expansive than the upper, is constructed in a terraced manner, with many of the buildings positioned on sloping ground⁵¹.

12-3 Yašir (or Ashir):

Yašir is located approximately 112 kilometers northeast of Ain Bousif, south of Kaf al-Khadr, opposite Baniya, on a plateau that slopes southward. This site is fortified by an impressive wall, approximately 2 meters thick, built with small stones to protect it from the eastern and western directions. The total area of the site is about 15 hectares. Numerous fragments of tiles, bricks, and

⁴⁷ Rodet, C., *Les Ruines d'Ahir*, Revue Africaine, Société Historique Algérienne, Algiers, 1908, p. 88.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 89.

⁴⁹ Rachid Bouraouiba, *Mudun Mundathira: Tahert, Sedrata, Ashir, Qal'at Bani Hammad*, Series on Art and Culture, National Publishing and Distribution Company, Algeria, 1981, p. 76.

⁵⁰ Rodet, C., op. cit., p. 93.

⁵¹ Mubarak Youtarn, "Madinat Ashir: Al-Nash'ah wal-Tatawwur," *Ecole Normale Supérieure – Assia Djébar*, Issue 05, December 13, 2011, p. 144.

pottery have been found here⁵². The palace uncovered at this site is one of the most important buildings. The palace is rectangular, measuring 72 meters in length and 70 meters in width, fortified with square supports at the corners and rectangular ones along the sides. The entrance is a protruding gate, 9 meters wide and 3 meters projecting from the wall. Upon entering, one encounters a barrier that forces visitors to either turn right or left to reach an inner courtyard, 35 meters long and 33 meters wide. One side of the courtyard is surrounded by a colonnade, with columns still visible in their original position. The courtyard also contains various rooms, and the remains of a staircase leading to the first floor are still present today. The palace's layout, with its harmony and symmetry, bears a resemblance to Umayyad palaces⁵³.

(Plate: 02) (Image: 02).

13. Artistic Aspect of Ashir City:

Through archaeological research conducted in Ashir, numerous architectural and artistic remnants were uncovered, pointing to the high level of artistic sophistication that the city experienced. This includes vegetal and geometric decorations, as well as written and animal motifs.

13-1 Vegetal Decorations:

During the research conducted by George Marçais, remains of marble were found, including a piece measuring 220 cm in height and 137 mm in diameter, decorated with three-lobed leaves and vine leaves folded in the Middle Eastern style. Additionally, palm leaf patterns were found, and decorative motifs with acanthus leaves were discovered on the capitals of some columns⁵⁴(Figure 01).

13-2 Written Inscriptions:

Many inscriptions were found on marble fragments, written in foliated Kufic script. One notable discovery was a sandstone gravestone, 50 cm in height and 44.5 cm in width, engraved with three lines of text in Kufic script:

- Line 1: "In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful, blessings upon Muhammad and his family."
- Line 2: "This is the tomb of the Tamimi who passed away."
- Line 3: "(From the month... year thirteen or four hundred)⁵⁵. This inscription is dated (134 AH / 2022 AD)." These letters resemble those found in the ornamental inscriptions of the shrine presented by the Zirid prince al-Mu'izz to the Great Mosque of Kairouan ⁵⁶(Figure 01).

13-3 Animal Motifs:

Among the discoveries uncovered by Lucien Golvin were many flat plates decorated with animal motifs, including drawings of horses and donkeys. Another plate depicted fighting animals, while a stone was decorated with a frieze of lion heads ⁵⁷(Plate 01).

⁵² Rachid Bouraouiba et al., *Previously cited source*, p. 191.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 77.

⁵⁴ Marçais, G., *Achir, Revue Africaine*, Société Historique Algérienne, Volume 36, Algiers, 1922, p. 36.

⁵⁵ Marçais, G., *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁵⁶ Rachid Bouraouiba, *Previously cited source*, p. 67.

⁵⁷ Golvin, L., *op. cit.*, p. 207.

13-4 Geometric Decorations:

George Marçais discovered a column capital decorated with dotted circles and arches (Figure 02). It is worth noting that the historian and writer Rashid Bourouiba mentioned in his article "The Influence of Sanhaja Architecture on the Architecture of the Normans in Sicily" that the domed palaces of the Qubba and Aziza in Palermo were made of stone and resemble the architectural model found in Ashir, the first capital of the Zirids. From this, we can conclude that Ashir's architectural style became an internationally recognized model⁵⁸.

14. Conclusion:

- Ashir was established amidst the rapid developments that took place in the central Maghreb, particularly following the rise of the Fatimid Caliphate in 296 AH / 909 AD, which resulted in the downfall of the Aghlabid, Rustamid, and Midrarid states.
- The Zirids strategically chose elevated locations to establish their cities, providing natural defenses against enemies.
- The city of Ashir was designed with an organized layout, aligning with water sources and other criteria essential for choosing urban sites during the Islamic era.
- Ashir was founded by Ziri ibn Manad in 324 AH / 936 AD as a fortress to resist the Zenata tribe, who had refused allegiance to the Fatimids.
- Skilled artisans and craftsmen, brought in from neighboring cities like Hamza (Bouira), Muhammadiyah (Msila), and Tlemcen, were instrumental in building the city, contributing to the spread of trades and industries.
- Ashir is among the first cities in the central Maghreb with robust natural fortifications, playing a significant role in commerce due to its strategic geographic location.
- Ashir played an important role in the history of the central Maghreb. Initially built as the second capital in the region by the Zirids, it was also used by Hammad as his residence before he founded Qal'at Bani Hammad, after which it was annexed by the Almoravids during the reign of Yusuf ibn Tashfin.
- Archaeological research has revealed the architecture of this city, shedding light on its cultural and artistic development. These insights have been gleaned from artifacts such as pottery and ceramics, yet existing studies remain scarce and insufficient. Conducting thorough excavations at the three main sites of Ashir has become essential to further uncover the history and civilization of this city.

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⁵⁸ Moussa Hissam, *Previously cited source*, p. 87.

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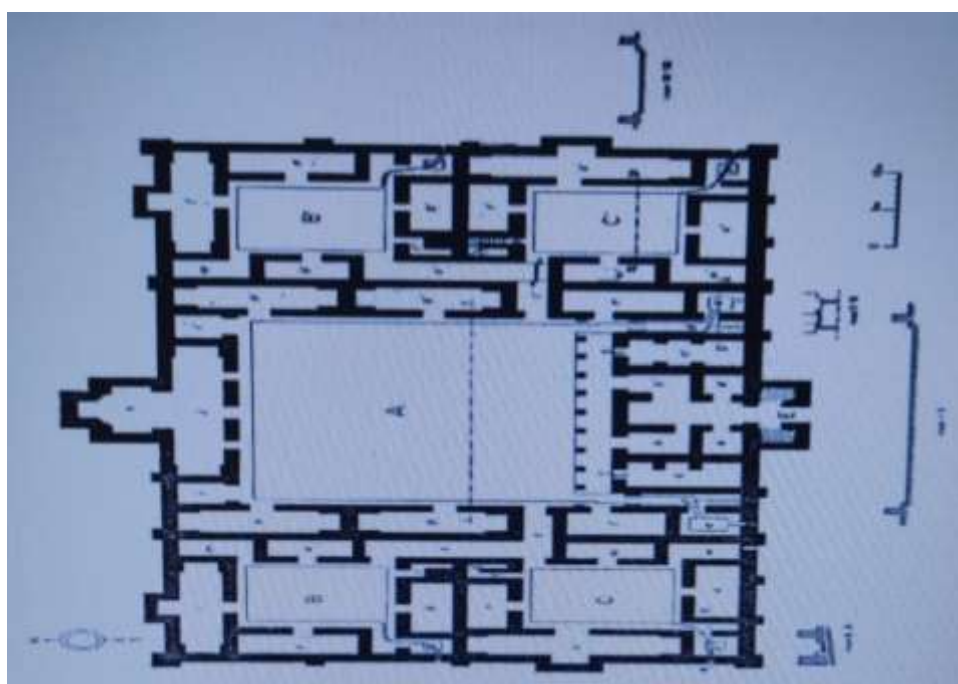


Diagram 01: Palace of Ashir / by Golvin, L.

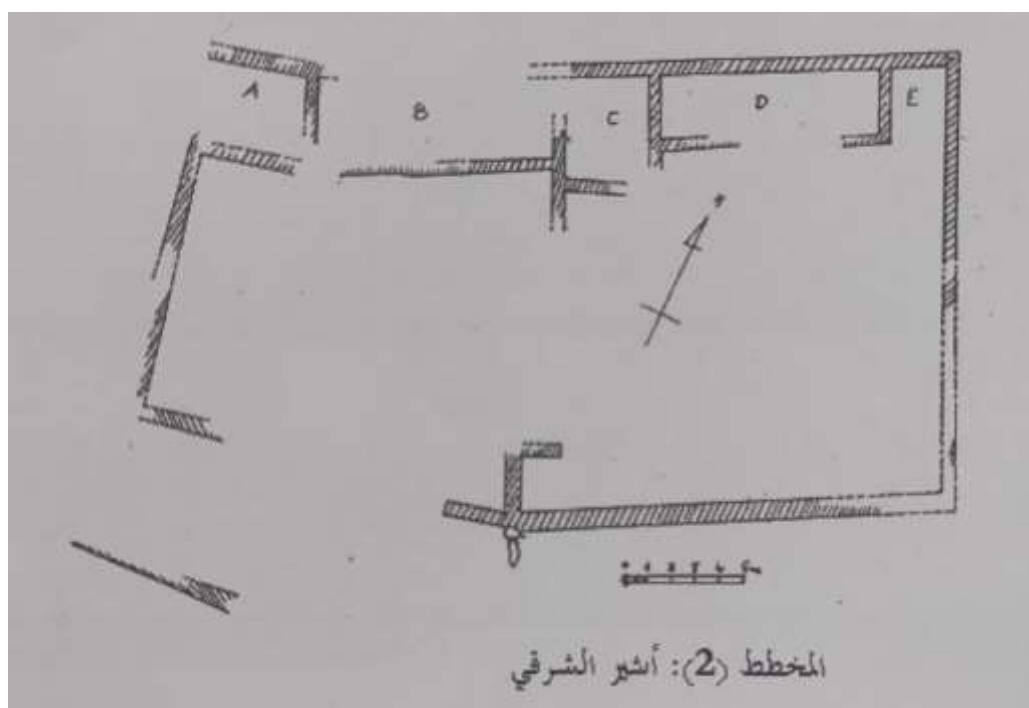
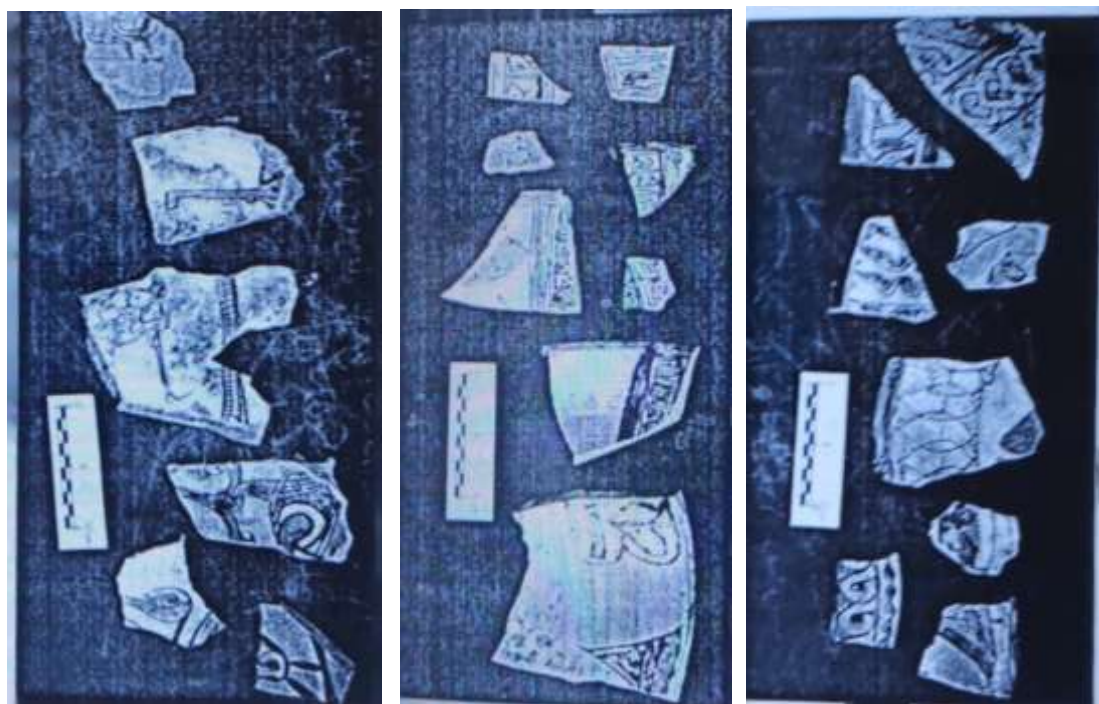


Diagram 02: The Eastern Part of Ashir / by Mohamed Mechmouche



Image 01: Ceramic Pieces from the City of Ashir / by Malika Ben Msabah



Panel 01: Various Decorations on Pottery and Ceramics from Ashir / by L. Golvin

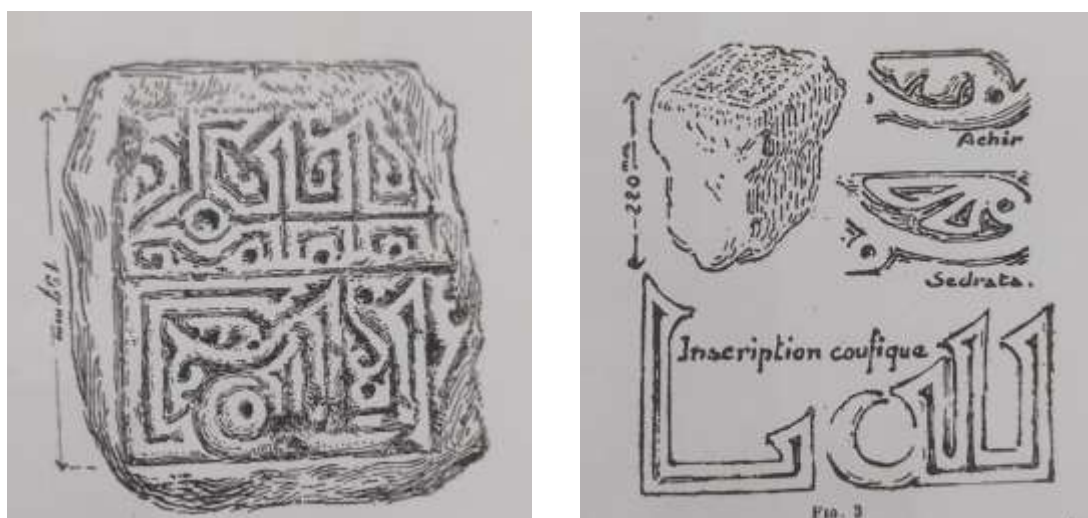


Figure 01: Inscriptions on Sandstone / by Georges Marçais

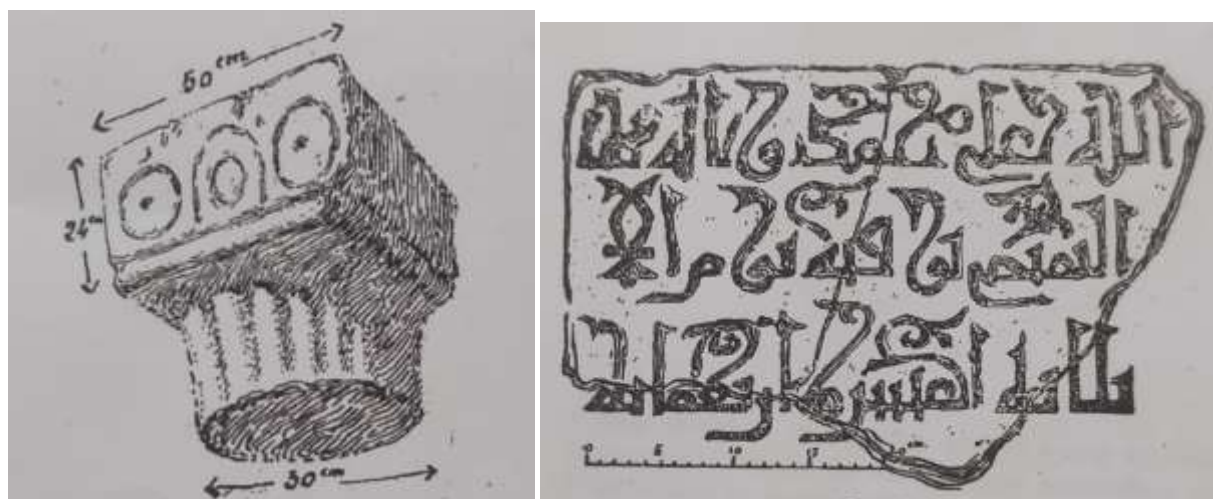


_Figure 02: Column Capital with Geometric Decoration + Tombstone Inscription in Kufic Script

/ by Georges Marçais_



Plate 02: Part of the Ashir Palace/ <https://www.google.com/search?sca>



Image 02: Building Materials of Ashir City Landmarks / <https://www.google.com/search?sca>