

ICOMOS

INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON MONUMENTS AND SITES
CONSEIL INTERNATIONAL DES MONUMENTS ET DES SITES
CONSEJO INTERNACIONAL DE MONUMENTOS Y SITIOS
МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЙ СОВЕТ ПО ВОПРОСАМ ПАМЯТНИКОВ И ДОСТОПРИМЕЧАТЕЛЬНЫХ МЕСТ

WORLD HERITAGE LIST

N° 499

A) IDENTIFICATION

Nomination : Medina of Kairouan

Location : Governorate of Kairouan

State Party : Tunisia

Date : December 30, 1987

B) ICOMOS RECOMMENDATION

That the proposed cultural property be included on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria I, II, III, V and VI.

C) JUSTIFICATION

The establishment of the garrison at al-Kayrawan by Oqba Ibn Nafî in the year 50 of the Hegira (670 A.D.) marked a decisive step in the history of the Islamic conversion of Ifrîqiya. The first Arab incursions, which began in 647, had been more an offensive raiding strategy than attempts at permanent occupation. Replacing a temporary encampment at Al-Karn, Kairouan became an essential element in the conquest because of its key position, midway between the coast threatened by the return of the Byzantine fleets and the mountains controlled by the Berbers.

The city's beginnings were difficult due to Berber irredentism. In the 7th century, it was menaced by Kosaila, then by the Kahina, and was taken in 688. In the 8th century, the Kharidjite Berbers overran it (745). The Arabs, however, never disputed the important status accorded Sidi Oqba's settlement. Kairouan remained the chief city of Ifrîqiya, the seat of the governor representing the authority of the Omeyyad caliphs in Damascus and later the Abbassid caliphs in Baghdad.

When the Aghlabid emirs became nearly fully independent from the Abbassids (800-909), Kairouan became a true capital city. The Great Mosque was rebuilt by the Emir Ziyadat Allah I in 836 and again in 862-863 by the Emir Abou Ibrahim Ahmad, who also had certain spectacular urban projects carried out. These included the Basin of the Aghlabids filled by water brought through a 36 km aqueduct from the Cherichera Djebel. During a period of civil and religious peace, the Aghlabids relinquished the governor's palace and emirs had residences built several kilometers south of Kairouan at Al-Abbassiya and Raqqada (876).

It was at Raqqada that the Fatimid Obaid Allah made a triumphant entry in December 909 after his victory over the Aghlabid forces. Declaring he was the Mahdi, he proclaimed himself imam and caliph. Under the rule of this Shi-ite imam (910-934), Kairouan at first receded somewhat in importance. The new capital Mahdia, founded in 916, was better suited to the imam's expansionist policy directed toward the Orient. But when troubles began, the Fatimids returned to Kairouan. In 947-948, the third caliph, Al-Mansour, founded the new city of Sabra Al-Mansouria. Located 1.5 km south of the former capital, it was a circular walled area of approximately 100 hectares. The transfer of the Fatimid caliphate to Cairo in 972 put an end to the two-capital situation.

After the 10th century, Kairouan no longer directly participated in the major events shaping world history. The city had many religious and political problems and was invaded and sacked by the Hilalians in 1057. Beginning in 1160, and particularly during the Hafside dynasty (1230-1574), Tunis, which up to then had occasionally been a capital city, became a real centre of political power as well as one of the most populated cities in Africa. But it never succeeded in stripping Kairouan of its status as the holy city of the Maghreb, a position it still enjoys throughout the Islamic world.

The considerable weight of history is still palpable in the 54-hectare medina which is surrounded by more than 3 kilometers of walls, and in the neighborhood districts described in the nomination. However, certain remarkable monuments dating from the early centuries of the Hegira (the Great Mosque, the Mosque of the Three Doors, the Basin of the Aghlabids) need to be carefully distinguished from the profusion of more recent or remodeled religious edifices (the mosques of el Bey and el Malek, the Zawiya of Sidi Sahab, the Zawiya of Sidi Amor Abbada, the Zawiya of Sidi Abid el Ghariani). In their present form, these buildings date for the most part from the last three centuries. The immense majority of houses and souks in the ancient honeycomb of passageways, where a number of wells and fountains are still to be found, form a traditional and coherent urban fabric.

ICOMOS recommends the inclusion of Kairouan on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria I, II, III, V and VI.

- **Criterion I.** The Great Mosque, rebuilt in the 9th century, is not only one of the major monuments of Islam but also a universal architectural masterpiece. The many but small changes in it have not altered the layout of this place of prayer, which forms a quadrilateral of 135m by 80m. At its southern end is a hypostyle prayer room with 17 naves supported by a "forest" of columns in marble and porphyry. On the north is a vast flagstone courtyard bordered with porticoes, interrupted in the middle of the smaller northern end by the massive square-shaped three-story minaret.

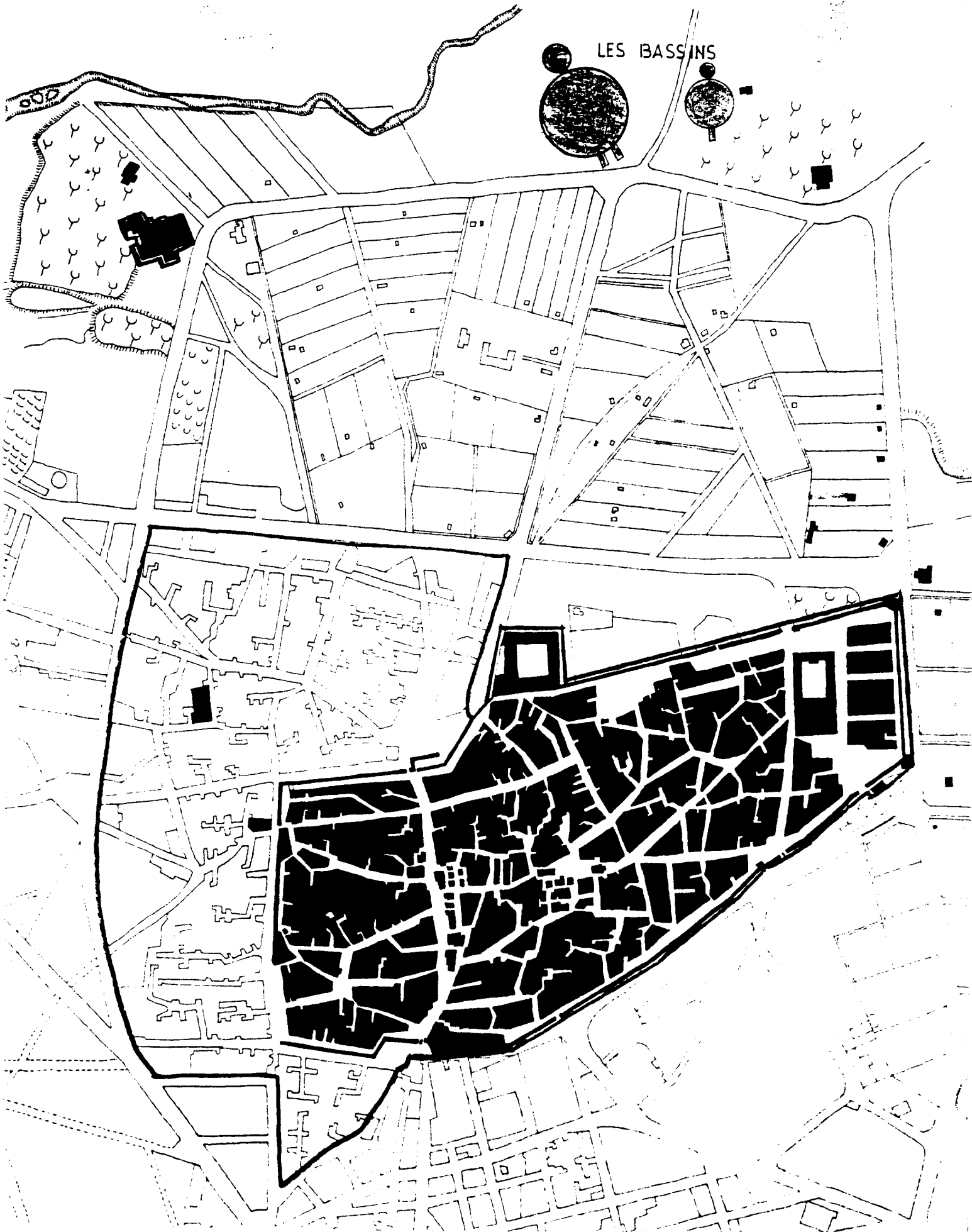
- **Criterion II.** The Great Mosque served as a model for several other Maghreban mosques, particularly for its decorative motifs, which are unique. Moreover, the Mosque of the Three Doors (866) is the oldest known Islamic mosque with a sculpted facade.

- **Criterion III.** With the Great Mosque, the Mosque of the Three Doors, and the Basin of the Aghlabids, not to mention the numerous archaeological vestiges, Kairouan bears exceptional witness to the civilization of the first centuries of the Hegira in Ifriqiya.

- **Criterion V.** Protected by its walls and gates (Bab et Tounes, Bab el Khoukha, Bab ech Chouhada) the medina of Kairouan, whose skyline is punctuated by the minarets and the cupolas of its mosques and zawiya, has preserved its network of winding streets and courtyard houses. Very few small windows or arched doorways are cut in the exterior walls, but inner walls have larger openings that give onto the central courtyard. This traditional architecture, having become vulnerable through the impact of socio-economic changes, constitutes a valuable heritage which must be protected in its entirety.

- **Criterion VI.** Kairouan is one of the holy cities and spiritual capitals of Islam. Next to the Great Mosque, the first place of worship founded in the Maghreb only 38 years after the death of the Prophet, is the Zawiya of Sidi Sahab where the remains of Abu Djama, one of Mahomet's companions, are kept. It is not surprising that in the past seven pilgrimages to Kairouan could take the place of the one pilgrimage to Mecca prescribed for all Muslims.

ICOMOS, May 1988



Plan of the Medina

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ICOMOS, July 1988

LES BASSINS

