Al-Qahira: A Fatimid Palatial Town

**FROM THE AIR,** few mosques compete in size with the mosque of Ibn Tulun, but the mosque of al-Hakim, originally named al-Anwar, or the illuminated, stands out for its size and its expansive interior courtyard. The mosque, located inside the northern gates of Cairo, was built by its namesake, the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim. Standing atop its short minaret today and looking south, one can see the elegant minarets of the al-Azhar mosque, where the Sunni faithful continue to pray a millennium after its founding. Al-Azhar, at its height, was the greatest institution of Islamic learning in the Middle East. During Fatimid times, the mosque became the first Shi‘ite mosque in Egypt and the headquarters of Shi‘a Islam. Further south, one can also see the twin minarets of the mosque of al-Mu‘ayyad built above Bab Zuwayla, or Zuwayla Gate, which had often been used as the gallows for captives and rebellious Mamluks. During the Fatimid period the gate connected the new town to the older city of Fustat, where much of the population resided.

On the horizon are the minarets of the Ibn Tulun and ‘Amr mosques, which are obscured behind more-recent developments. These minarets mark the two cities that preceded Fatimid Cairo: al-Qata‘i and Fustat. Still looking south, only a couple of hundred yards away and completely hidden from sight, lies the revamped mosque of al-Aqmar. Half of its façade was rebuilt at the end of the twentieth century to match the other half from an earlier Fatimid time. Looking north, one can see a slumlike settlement situated in an area that had been used as a cemetery until a few centuries ago. During Fatimid times, these were fields that provided much of the daily needs of the city. Looking below the minaret in the same direction,
one can see Bab al-Futuh, or Conquest Gate, and Bab al-Nasr, or Victory Gate, which were built during Fatimid times and give Cairo its distinctive silhouette. All of these structures become important sites as our story turns to Fatimid Cairo. Indeed, they serve as a stage for some of the most important moments of the city’s millennial history. But that is a long story, and this chapter will attempt to describe only its first two centuries.

Today, if one were to descend the minaret to enter the al-Hakim mosque during prayer time, one would be surprised by the uniformity of dress among the majority of believers there: moustached, bearded men in white skullcaps donned in long white shirts over white trousers. Yet both the dress code and the mosque’s interior are relatively new additions to Cairo’s landscape of piety. If one were to enter the mosque during the festival of Ashura, commemorated by Shi’ites as a day of mourning for the martyrdom of Imam Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, one might come across the same community of believers performing important Shi’ite rituals. Yet if one had visited the same location some forty years ago, the space would have been mere dilapidated ruins partly repurposed as a local primary school standing behind a vegetable market specializing in onions. It was only with the arrival of the Dawoodi Bohra Ismaili community that this milieu changed and gleaming white marble and gold trim were introduced.2

The Bohras are practicing Shi’ites who reside primarily in India and had returned to Cairo almost a thousand years after their supposed predecessors, the Fatimids, built the city, which they called al-Qahira. The Bohras came as families dedicated to the mission of reviving this city—which we will refer to from now on as Fatimid Cairo—and began their work by rebuilding its mosques. Eight miles east, in the plush neighborhood of Mohandeseen, there is a palace designed as a strange eclectic mix of Islamic styles that demonstrates this desire to re-create a distant past. It is the palatial home of Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin, the head of the Bohra community.

Little attention had been paid to the restoration of Islamic monuments in Cairo until 1979, when an application was successfully submitted to the World Heritage Commission to declare “Medieval Cairo” a World
Heritage site. Around the same time, the Bohras secured a concession to restore several Fatimid-era monuments. The Bohra leaders were looking for ways to strengthen their community and anchor it in place, and they decided it was time to return west, to Fatimid Cairo. As many families relocated to Egypt to realize this plan, the Dawoodi Bohra leader issued several pronouncements setting out behavior guidelines for all observant Bohras. In particular, he announced a firman that set a dress code for both men and women during Ashura observances in Cairo in 1981. He also announced a major campaign to restore Fatimid architecture in Cairo to encourage ziyaret, a special pilgrimage that is meant to maintain the social cohesion of Bohra communities scattered over several continents.

The restoration of Fatimid architecture by the Bohras created heated debate in Cairo and was denounced by many scholars of heritage preservation. These specialists sought to preserve the “authenticity” of the old core of the city, continuing a project started in the nineteenth century, and the interventions by the Bohras disrupted this vision. The Bohras freely borrowed elements from one structure to apply to another; they introduced new materials; and they removed parts of structures that did not fit their imagining of Fatimid architecture. Ironically, in so doing, they borrowed heavily from Orientalist reconstructions of buildings of this time period. In essence, they sought to redefine and categorize Fatimid architecture as a style that represented them not only historically, but also in the present. But the story of the Bohras in late-twentieth-century Cairo cannot be fully understood without a reflection on events that occurred a millennium earlier in the heart of the Middle East. Because of al-Hakim’s significance to their faith, the Bohras’ most important project was the restoration of the mosque bearing his name. The story of the Fatimid ruler al-Hakim, as such, starts much earlier.

With the collapse of the central military authority of the Abbasids, who ruled from Baghdad, a series of local dynasties rose to lead the Islamic world. North African principalities were among the first to gain autonomy in the far-flung and loosely controlled empire. In Tunisia, the movement against the Abbasid caliphs, who were perceived as decadent, reached its peak when Sa’id ibn Husain al-Mahdi, an alleged descendant of the
Prophet (through his daughter Fatima—hence the name Fatimid) broke away from the empire and established a Shi’ite caliphate. The Fatimids were intent on moving eastward, possibly to challenge the Sunni Abbasids. After successive attempts, their movement gathered enough momentum to permit the conquest of Egypt. Al-Mu’izz, who ruled from 953 to 975 as the fourth Fatimid caliph, appointed Jawhar al-Siqilli (928–992) to lead his forces in the Egyptian campaign. Jawhar, whose full name literally means “the Sicilian jewel,” was of Christian slave origin. At the time, Egypt was ruled by the Ikhshidi dynasty (935–969), another feudalistic princedom with provincial autonomy from the Abbasids. In 969 the Fatimids easily defeated the Ikhshidis and marched through the cities of Fustat and al-Qata’i.

Almost immediately after his arrival, Jawhar began to search for a site to garrison his troops. According to at least one account, he maintained ideas pertaining to the construction of a new capital based on what al-Mu’izz envisioned as the seat of his caliphate and as a rival to Baghdad. Jawhar established the new city on the only available site in the area, to the north of the existing settlements. Seen in context, this city would add to a sequence of existing cities that bordered the Nile. Continuing what began with Fustat in 640, followed by al-Askar in 750 and al-Qata’i in 870, the new site of Fatimid Cairo would extend along a north–south urban axis and would tie the new city to its predecessors. Jawhar’s first step was to establish the boundaries of a city wall, locate its gates, and start construction of two major buildings—the caliphal palace and the mosque. Legend has it that on the following day when a delegation from Fustat arrived to welcome Jawhar, they found the foundation for the entire city had already been marked. Chronicles dating from the period contain no mention of architects or builders involved in this process, leading us to believe that Jawhar’s army may have included individuals with specialized skills.

Maqrizi (1364–1442), the renowned medieval historian of Cairo, relates that Jawhar initially planned for the city to follow the shape of a square with sides roughly 1,100 meters long. This defined a total area of about 138 hectares, of which 28 hectares were allotted to the caliphal palace, and another
Figure 4.1  Map of Fustat, al-Askar, al-Qata'i, and al-Qahira. (Key: 1. guesthouse; 2. minister's house; 3. stables; 4. gates; 5. residential quarters of different tribes.)
28 hectares to the existing Ikhlashi gardens, al-Bustan al-Kafuri, and other public squares, or *rahbahs*. The remaining area was assigned as *khittat*, or districts, to the twenty or so different groups making up the army. Jawhar may have consulted with astrologers before deciding on the location of the town, if not also the date for executing his plan. Several sources relate that the town was later called al-Qahira after a bright star that an astrologer observed in the sky that night. Maqrizi reports that Jawhar began laying out the town on the evening of a Friday in the Arabic month of Sha’aban in 969. Anxious to implement the project, Jawhar may have ordered his soldiers to carry on throughout the night. The following morning he came to realize that the city outline was built inconsistently, such that the result was a slightly distorted rectangle. According to Maqrizi, Jawhar decided not to correct it, saying that “it was laid out in a holy night and that its irregularity must have been caused by a divine logic.”

It is unlikely that the plan could have been so severely distorted during its execution that the envisioned square became a rectangle. Indeed, the sides of the city carried the proportion of 2:3, one not likely to have been achieved by mistake. The original plan, nevertheless, continues to be the subject of controversy. Some believe that Caliph al-Mu’izz designed the city himself and provided Jawhar with a precise plan with specific dimensions and a proposed procedure for execution. Others suggest that the plan of Cairo was initially envisioned along the lines of a Roman *castrum*. Still, other scholars maintain that the plan simply replicated elements of the town of al-Mahdiyah in Tunisia.

Whether it was modeled after a Roman castrum or a North African town, Jawhar started the city by building a palace, a mosque, and a perimeter wall of mud bricks. He originally called the city al-Mansuriyya, after a town built by al-Mu’izz’s father in Tunisia. Many of the gates of the new city also appear to have been named after the gates of that city in Tunisia—evidence supporting the view that the city was modeled after its North African counterpart.

Four years after the conquest, Caliph al-Mu’izz arrived at the new city, declared it the capital of his caliphate, and changed its name to al-Qahira. The name was later distorted by Italian travelers to *al Cairo*, hence its
current English name, Cairo.\textsuperscript{20} From the beginning, Caliph al-Mu’izz was intent on creating an imperial capital with an immediate sense of history. From Tunisia he brought three coffins housing the remains of his predecessors and ordered their burial in a site close to his palace. Upon his arrival, the caliph led the first public prayer, prefacing Cairo’s role as the religious and intellectual capital of the Muslim world in the years to come.\textsuperscript{21} To emphasize the change of dynasty, the Abbasid caliph’s name was eliminated from all official records and prayers, and a new coinage was struck. In place of black, the color of the Abbasids, white was pronounced as the new official color of the territory. For the first time in a thousand years, Egypt became a sovereign state headed by one person, the Fatimid caliph, who was its spiritual and political leader.\textsuperscript{22}

Maqrizi’s description of the urban elements that made up the Fatimid city exceeds a couple of hundred pages, of which a considerable portion is devoted to its palaces. He reports that Jawhar and his forces camped to the south of the proposed site and started the construction of the main caliphal palace in 969.\textsuperscript{23} In this account, the palace included several large halls and opened out to the rest of the city through nine gates. It was bordered by the city’s central square, or \textit{maydan}, which was later bounded by the addition of another caliphal structure, often called the Western Palace. The \textit{maydan} acted as a place where the caliph would review his troops. Indeed, it was a monumental space that could accommodate ten thousand soldiers.\textsuperscript{24} The caliphal palace was separated from the rest of the city by open spaces and gardens. To its west was al-Bustan al-Kafuri, a large garden established as a retreat during the time of the Ikhshidis. This garden was walled and connected by underground tunnels leading to the palace, and in the early days was exclusively reserved for use by the caliph and his family.\textsuperscript{25} Rahbahs on the northern and eastern sides separated the caliphal palace from a guesthouse and the city’s residential neighborhoods, respectively. Although the spatial configuration of the caliphal palace appears to be irregular, it nevertheless emulated the concept of isolating the caliph from his surroundings and placing him at the center of the settlement, a precedent set in the first planned Islamic capital, Baghdad.
Figure 4.2 The Mosque of al-Azhar.
Concomitant to the construction of the palace, Jawhar decided to build a congregational Friday mosque to the south of the palace. Initially named Jami’ al-Qahira, the mosque soon acquired its present name, al-Azhar—which both means “the magnificent” and is the masculine form of the honorific title Zahra, which refers to the Prophet’s daughter Fatima. The construction of the mosque began in 970 and was completed three years later. Al-Mu’izz led the first Friday prayer and delivered the khutbah sermon on the first Friday of the Arab month of Ramadan in 972.26

The original core of the mosque of al-Azhar is today buried under centuries of additions and alterations.27 The original structure was built of brick, following a simple rectangular plan. One would enter from the northwest through a projecting portal next to a minaret. Inside was the open courtyard, or sahn, which featured porticos along both sides. Facing the portal, on the opposite side of the courtyard, was the entry to the hypostyle hall—a hall with a flat ceiling supported by evenly spaced columns—which functioned as the sanctuary, or haram. This covered prayer hall consisted of four naves and a transept that terminated in a dome in front of the mihrab on the qibla. Some 150 years after the construction of the mosque, during Caliph al-‘Aziz’s reign, a new aisle with keel-shaped arches was added all around the courtyard to unify the appearance of the mosque and respond to the social needs of the community.28 The central transept of the covered prayer hall, indicating the qibla (in this case, southeast toward the holy city of Mecca), was made prominent by the addition of a tall screen wall from the courtyard to the prayer hall. Several domes were added to the mosque in later years.

In its early years al-Azhar served as the only congregational mosque in the city.29 In 988 the first organized school began there, with thirty-five scholars housed nearby to propagate Ismaili doctrine and train the faith’s missionaries. However, al-Azhar lost its status as the Friday mosque to the al-Hakim mosque after the fall of the Fatimid dynasty to the Ayyubids, Sunni Muslims of Kurdish origin who banned Shi’ite doctrines and neglected the building.30 The layout of the city of al-Mu’izz, at least during its first decade, seems to have been a regular grid with wide streets and large open squares. The city was well fortified, and the Fatimids built most
of their buildings inside its walls. In other early Muslim settlements in the region, the cities grew around a core, which was usually a mosque—such as the mosque of ‘Amr in Fustat, or the mosque of Ibn Tulun in al-Qata‘i. But in Fatimid Cairo this was not the case: palaces were designed to occupy its center, and the mosque of al-Azhar was located off to one side. The central location of the palace no doubt influenced the internal structure of the city and, accordingly, its streets. The major streets of Fatimid Cairo made up a simple network that tied the palace to the city gates. The area between the Eastern Palace (972) and the Western Palace (975–996) has survived to the present, at least in name, as Bayn al-Qasrayn, which means “between the two palaces” or “Palace Walk.”

Although it was al-Mu‘izz’s vision that brought Fatimid Cairo into existence, al-Mu‘izz did not live long enough to enjoy his new capital. When he died in 975, his son, al-‘Aziz, took over the caliphate and ruled for more than twenty years, until 996. ‘Aziz was a great builder, and during his reign several important buildings were added to Fatimid Cairo. Among these were the Western Palace and the al-Hakim mosque.

The small Western Palace, also known as Qasr al-Bahr because it fronted one of the canals connecting to the Nile, came to assume great significance in the city. Initially built as a residence for one of ‘Aziz’s daughters, it defined the central maydan of Fatimid Cairo and separated it from the caliphal gardens. When al-Mustansir, who ruled for fifty-eight years, ascended to the Fatimid caliphate in 1036, he refurbished the palace in preparation for making it the official residence of the deposed Abbasid caliph. At the time Mustansir sought to bestow greater legitimacy on his own caliphate by offering to relocate the collapsed Abbasid caliphate from Baghdad.

During late Fatimid times, the main artery of the city connected Bab Zuwayla in the south to Bab al-Futuh in the north, passing through the Bayn al-Qasrayn maydan. Entering the city through the southern gate and walking north, a visitor would have passed the al-Azhar mosque on the right before reaching Bayn al-Qasrayn. After passing this maydan, one would have encountered the mosque of al-Aqmar and finally the mosque of al-Hakim before exiting the city through its northern gate.