

The Mosque of Al-Aqmar in Cairo

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Introduction

In the city of Al-Qaira, the Fatimid nucleus of the pre-existing Fustat, conquered in 969, it is possible to trace back some of the original configuration of the city plan that was based on the palace complex that consisted in a fifth of the total area of the city according to Ravaisse, divided into western Palace and Eastern Great Palace. It is in this very central nucleus, divided into two urban agglomerates by the main street that goes from the gateway of Bab al-Futuh and the Mosque of al-Hakim to the southern gateway of Bab Zuwayla (from north to south), that the Mosque of Al-Aqmar finds his place, just to the right to the original place of the eastern palace that no longer exists, being probably destroyed by later conquerors of the city (Img.1). It has been built by the vizier al-Ma'mun al Bata'ih in 1125 under the approval of the vizier and since then it has been considered one of the most unique and valuable examples of Fatimid religious architecture still surviving. The façade is the most important element in the overall structure, featuring characteristics that will influence the following periods of architectural production and stimulating different arguments regarding the interpretation of its decorative elements, that appear unexplored and mysterious, being almost all the sources of Shi'a cults destroyed by later Sunnis invasions, but relying on a well documented historical path, thanks to the writings of the son of the vizier al-Ma'mun. The renovation and partial building of the Mosque was done alongside a period of new flourishing of the Fatimid Caliphate after the economic and social crises that occurred during the vizierate of al Mustansir that affected also the conservation of religious and civil buildings resulting in the decay of them, from this the necessity of the restoration. Starting from the formal description of the façade it will be possible to analyze how the scholars tried to interpret the decorations in a context of ceremonial functions or cult of 'Alid Saints, all major features of the Fatimid Caliphate in Cairo around 1125.

1.The Plan of the Mosque

The Mosque is an hypostyle building that is ca. 24x38 meters, build around a sahn of 9.77x10.17 m composed of a total of four arcades that are one bay deep, for the entrance one and the side ones, and three bays deep for the qibla side one. According to Creswell the façade is rotated 21° in respect to the Qibla wall, this is the first example where we find such an adaptation. In fact the façade is not aligned with the rest of the mosque because it follows the direction of the street, being parallel in order to not visually interrupt the succession of the buildings and palaces that surrounded the religious building, that most probably had also plain facades in a similar style. It is unusual in old Cairene Mosques to find such an intervention because the previously realized mosque of al-Azhar was built contemporaneously to the rest of the city of al-Qaira and the mosque of al-Hakim, although was realized later, it was outside the city walls, so they didn't need a particular disposition that would accommodate the site but both were immediately oriented to Mecca.

There is one side room near the Qibla wall that probably was a later addition, just like the minaret that was added at the end of the 14th century or beginning of the 15th, in both cases evidenced by the difference in the masonry. It is understandable by Creswell's plan that the building is free on its left (northern) side whereas it is attached to other more modern buildings on its right (southern) side that also used to cover the right side of the façade, before a restoration during the 90s was carried out. Also from the same plan it is interesting to note that the 4 pilasters at the corners of the sahn are the biggest ones, supporting most of the weight of the roof, whereas smaller columns in-between the pilaster and under the qibla side roof, carry the rest. The bays are almost 3 meters wide but the entrance ones are 60cm smaller and the central one is 10 cm wider. (img.2)

2. The Interior

The interior has been recently renovated during the 1990s alongside the re-making of the right side of the façade and the general restoration. It is composed by a very small courtyard that is surrounded by arcades that feature keel arches (img.3), one of the earliest examples of this type that will later influence the realization of the inner arcade of the al-Azhar Mosque (img.4) that is not far from al-Aqmar. Inside the mosque on the qibla wall there is a marble mihrab (img.5) that was realized later based upon the wooden one given to the mosque of al-Azhar by the caliph al-Amir in the same year of the realization of the mosque (img.6). The Mihrab has also a keel arch and features the same inscription that was present on the wooden door, this shows how the characteristics were considered as strongly representative of the period under al-Amir.

3. The Façade, formal analysis

The façade is the most iconic element in the whole mosque (img.7), functioning as a turning point in architectural decoration and practice in Fatimid Cairo. The actual façade is tripartite, although the right part is a re-building, based on the assumption that both sides had the same configuration and decorations. On the sides there are giant niches that mimic the central portal, featuring the same arch, with the ribs emanated by a central medallion. Overall the façade appears quite flat with only some elements that interrupt the stone blocks pattern, giving a sense of monumentalism and solemnity. Similar ribbed arches are present also in the central part, in the small niches in the superior part of the portal and on the sides of it, but the ones on top are sustained by two small columns, whereas any other similar structure is directly engraved in the stone, without any further architectural element that suggests a pretended functionality. This difference has led to their interpretation with a religious

connotation, becoming a sort of outside mihrab but this clashes with the assumption that they only must be mecca-oriented, contrasting with the orientation of the qibla wall. The central part is also protruding from the rest of the façade by ca. 75cm, having a precedent in al-Qahira in the mosque of al-Hakim (img. 8), completed more than 100 years before and having its archetypal parallel in the mosque of Mahdiyya built in 916 AD (img.9). The latter has also niches positioned in the same places of the one of al-Aqmar with also similar proportions.

In the side parts there are some decorative stone slabs that are engraved with a similar style to the one present in the façade of al-Hakim. These are the two lozenges on the same level of the arches, one representing a vase with two plants coming out and another with a geometrical decoration (img.10). Moreover there is a representation of what might be a window (img.11), based on a similar example in the mosque of Ibn Tulun where these architectural elements have similar openings and negative spaces engraved directly in the stone, it also features a lamp, hanged in the center and framed by two small twisting columns that support a pointed arch. On the other side, on the same level there is the representation of a door (img.12), this is supposed after looking at the remaining examples of wooden screens from the Fatimid period, characterized by similar geometric decorations and rectangular panels distributed vertically and framed by an analogous decoration running all over the perimeter of the door(img.13). The medallion in the center of the left division is a 1990s reconstruction, photos of the façade before the restoration show the absence of any roundel, letting the bricks behind the stone cover appear (img.14). This has been interpreted by Caroline Williams as a removal operated by Sunnis after the Fatimids were deposed, because the original part featured the names of al-Hasan and al-Husayn, sons of Ali, therefore a testimony of only Shi'a worship and not accepted by Sunnis that wanted it taken down.

Another striking element in the façade is the presence of muqarnas on the left and side parts of the central protruding portal (img.15) , developing the same architectural decoration from

the one present in al-Juyushy minaret in Cairo (img.16). They appear more complex, to create a resemblance of natural element casually appeared on the façade surface. Around these muqarnas there is a non figural decoration that goes on left top and right side of them, framed in its lower part by a running frieze that features qur'anic inscriptions. The same framing structure appears in the bigger scale muqarnas at the extremities of the façade, where a single muqarnas module is placed, also featuring qur'anic inscriptions.

One of the most relevant decorations of the façade can be found in the ribbed arch above the main portal. It features a circular medallion (img.17) with three concentric circles around it with inscriptions. It may be considered as a symbol of the sun that radiates light, identified in the ribs. This particular shape has a precedent in the mihrab of the Mausoleum of Umm Kulthum (img.18), also built by al-Mam'um al Bata'ih in the same year of the beginning of the works at al-Aqmar mosque.

4. The Inscriptions on the façade

As one can notice there is more than one frieze on the façade, one running on top and is partial, with the initial and final part that are missing. The style is Kufic and it is the foundation inscription of the mosque itself. It contains the names of the Caliph al-Amir and his expression of the will of building the mosque under the suggestion of al-Mam'un, described as the 'commander of the armies and helper of the imam' but an unusual part quotes also the descendance of al-Amir from his father, al-Musta'li, in order to show his succession. In the written words there is also a strong stress on the infidels, probably referring to the crusaders that some years before, in 1099, clashed with al-Musta'li or it might refer to the ones that opposed the authority of the Imam within the caliphate. In the center of the façade, another inscription, in floriated Kufic divides it in two registers, functioning as a separator between the entrance door or niches on the sides and the respective arches above

them. In this case it has been possible to recognize the verses 24:36-37 of the Qur'an, making the reconstruction of the verse on the right side possible, and it says: "In temples God has allowed to be raised up, and His Name to be commemorated therein,; therein glorifying Him, in the mornings and the evenings, are men whom neither commerce or trafficking diverts from the remembrance of God and to perform the prayer, and to pay the alms, featuring a day when hearts and eyes shall be turned about." This verse suggest an economic activity that was closely linked to religious practices, in fact the mosque nowadays it is found on the street level but when it was firstly built it was on the first floor, having some shops and activities on the ground floor, now covered by the sediments accumulated through time, that aimed to support the worship of god and the maintenance of the building itself. Historical sources according to Williams evidence that it was common practice to have such a structure in religious buildings and the goods that were sold did not have to be taxed by the caliphate.

The central medallion above the main entrance has another qur'anic verse written in the circular part, quoting the verse 33:33 that says: "O people of the House, God only desires to put away from you abomination and with cleansing to cleanse you". It might refer to the moment when Mohammed came down and put under his cloak Fatima, al-Hasan and al-Husayn and said that only them had to be object of devotion, giving a strong meaning of Shi'a worship, in addition to that, in the center the names of Muhammad and Ali are present. The part that refers to the cleansing Behrens-Abouseif argues that it might relate to Ma'mun loss against the crusaders and that is his main sin that he has to cleanse, this argument, of the involvement of the vizier in the events behind the verse on the medallion, is also supported by the fact that it resembles the golden dinars coined in al-Qahira from the will of Ma'mun that wanted a mint in the city in order to gain more independence from far regions.

Finally it is possible to find a qur'anic inscription on the muqarnas module on the far left of the façade (img.19). The verse is the 16:128: "Verily God is with those who are God fearing and with those who are good doers" but on the sides of the module two roundels are present

with the inscription of the names of Muhammad and Ali so it could also be read as: “Verily God is with Muhammad and Ali” another sign of Shi’a branch of Islam.

5. The interpretation of the façade

There are two main interpretations that must be taken into account when analyzing the mosque of al-Aqmar, the one made by Caroline Williams and the one made by Doris Behrens-Abouseif. They contrast radically because when one is convinced of the religious function of the mosque in close relationship to the cult of Alid Saints and the other is convinced of a more secular function of the mosque in close relationship to the palatial practices and functions made by the vizier and the caliph that had the main aim to show the citizens the renewed splendor of the city after the failed govern of al-Mustansir.

Williams argues that the mosque, starting from its name, Aqmar, from Qamar that is the Moon, has a significance because usually al-Husayn was usually related to it, similar to the comparison of Mohammed to the Sun (as the central medallion exemplifies). Moreover he is attributed characteristics of light present in the representation of the mihrab with the hanged lamp, as if he was the person of main interest in the whole mosque. Finally Williams argues that the vase with the two plants coming out are the representation of the two brothers al-Hasan and al-Husayn that cover an equal role and come from the same vase that can be associated as the same provenience of birth, identifiable both with Fatima or Ali. All this evidence lead her to think that in the Mosque could have been placed the head of al-Husayn himself and was a devotional building, since most of the religious places had devotional purposes. This thesis is discarded by Behrens-Abouseif that imagined the mosque as an annex to the palatial activities that in the period of the rule of al-Amir implied great ceremonies and processions, having found evidence on historical sources that testify a new way of celebrating, after the choreography of al-Ma’mun. She also interprets the decorations

in a different way, considering the element on the left, in the left part of the façade as a window from which the caliph used to have a speech or show himself to citizens and the right element as a door used by the vizier to directly enter the rooms of the caliph. Finally the most important element of interpretation is the lozenge with the vase, interpreted as the co-presence of the caliph with the vizier that had the time used to have almost the same power.

Conclusion

The mosque of al-Aqmar is a very dense example of Fatimid art where many typical architectural and decorative elements can be found in a relatively small building. Its being so representative and at the same time innovative, allowed a diffusion of those elements across Fatimid Egypt, becoming a source and cornerstone for further religious buildings. The non figurative or stylized decorations on the façade, without having religious Shi'a texts remaining, offer a big room for interpretation and speculations on the meaning of the mosque itself. The absence of any civil palace or building from the same period is also a factor that adds shadows to a real understanding of the mosque.

Finally the texts that have been written on this mosque are a few, finding in Creswell the most authoritative source for many considerations and all moving from that formal analysis; this explains how the research on this building must be implemented in order to have a clearer understanding of al-Mam'un intervention and of Fatimid caliphate as a whole.

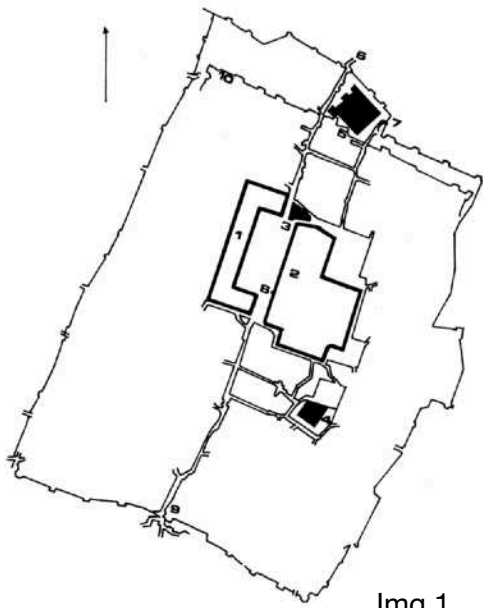
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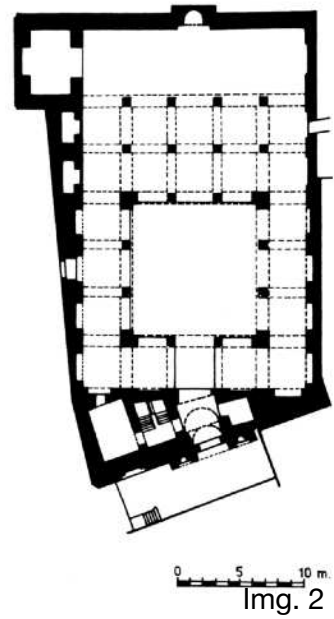
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Illustrations



Img.1



Img. 2



Img 3



Img. 4



Img.8

Img. 5



Img.6



Img. 7



Img. 8



Img. 9



Img.10



Img. 14

Img. 11



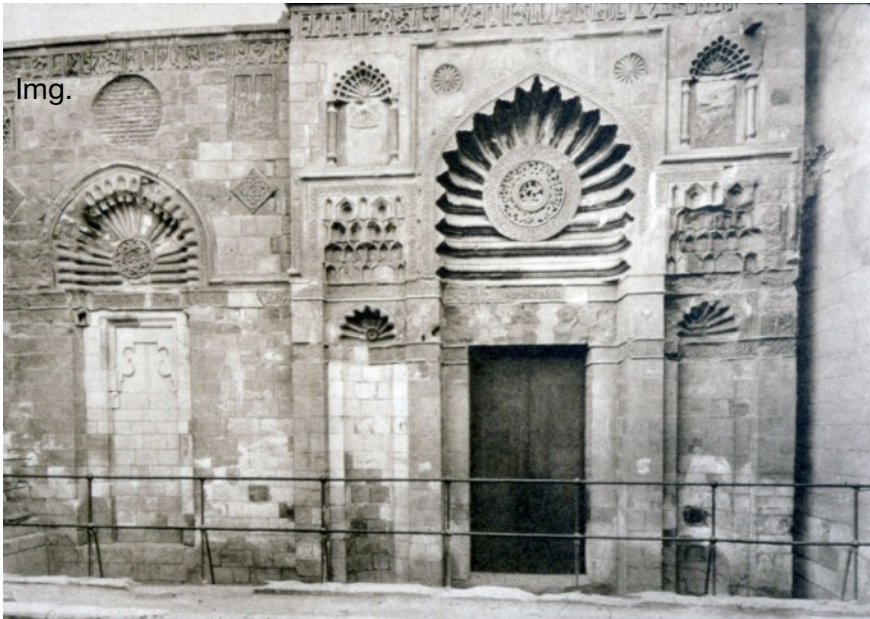
Img.

Img. 12



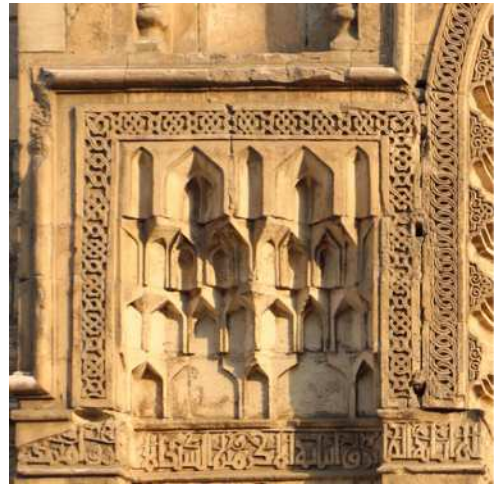
Img.

Img. 13



Img.

Img. 14



Img. 15



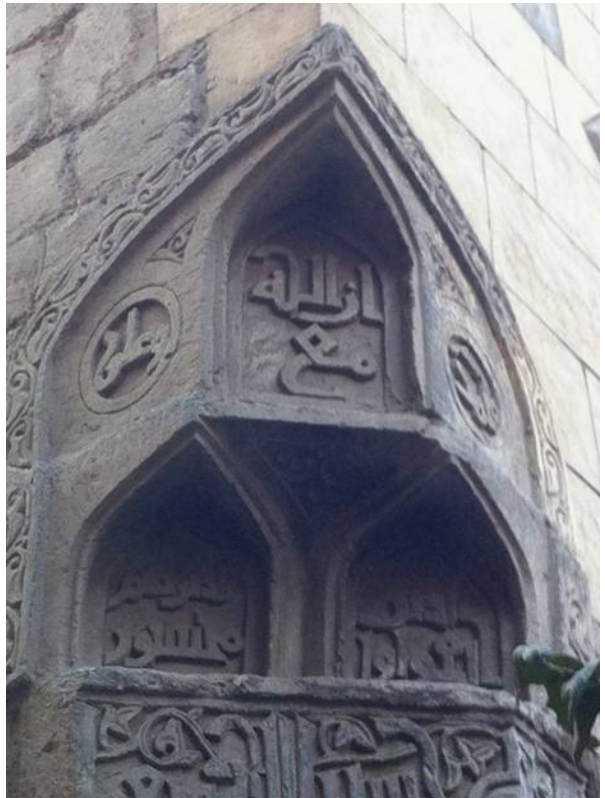
Img. 16



Img. 17



Img. 18



Img. 19

Eigenständigkeitserklärung

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