

DORIS BEHRENS-ABOUSEIF

THE FAÇADE OF THE AQMAR MOSQUE IN THE CONTEXT OF FATIMID CEREMONIAL

The mosque built by the Fatimid vizier al-Ma²mun al-Bata²ihi in 1125 and known as *al-jāmi^c al-aqmar* is one of the most important monuments of medieval Cairo. Its importance derives essentially from its façade which has two features of great significance. One is its adjustment to the street alignment in contrast with the interior of the mosque which remains oriented towards Mecca (fig. 1). The second is that it is the earliest extant façade in Cairo with lavish decoration. The contents of this decoration are remarkable and are unparalleled whether in Cairo or elsewhere.

The special meaning of al-Aqmar's façade has already been the subject of an article by Caroline Williams,¹ in which she argues that its decoration program should be seen in the context of Fatimid Isma^cili religious doctrine. I agree with the general view that the Aqmar façade is indeed full of meanings peculiar to Fatimid history, but I will adopt an approach to interpret this façade that differs from hers and will also lead to different conclusions. The divergence of opinion lies essentially in our respective interpretations of the symbolism in the carved panels.

The arguments presented here suggest that the façade should be related to the court ceremonial of the specific period during which the mosque was built, rather than to Fatimid religious doctrine. Vizier al-Ma²mun (1121–25) who ruled during the caliphate of al-Amir (1101–31), had a great impact on the ceremonial life of the palace. What follows is an attempt to demonstrate how al-Ma²mun's al-Aqmar Mosque enhanced the architecture of the palace quarter and celebrated at the same time this ceremonial.

Adjusting façade to street was a device that was to characterize Cairene architecture for centuries to come. The interior of the mosque continued to be oriented toward Mecca and its inner symmetry remained undisturbed, while the wall of the façade was made, by means of variations in thickness, to accommodate the angle that formed as a result of the difference between the street and the Mecca alignments. The Aqmar façade is not only the earliest extant case of such an adjustment, but also

most probably the first façade in Cairo ever to have been built using such a device.

Al-Aqmar was the third Friday mosque to have been erected in the caliphal precinct of al-Qahira, after al-

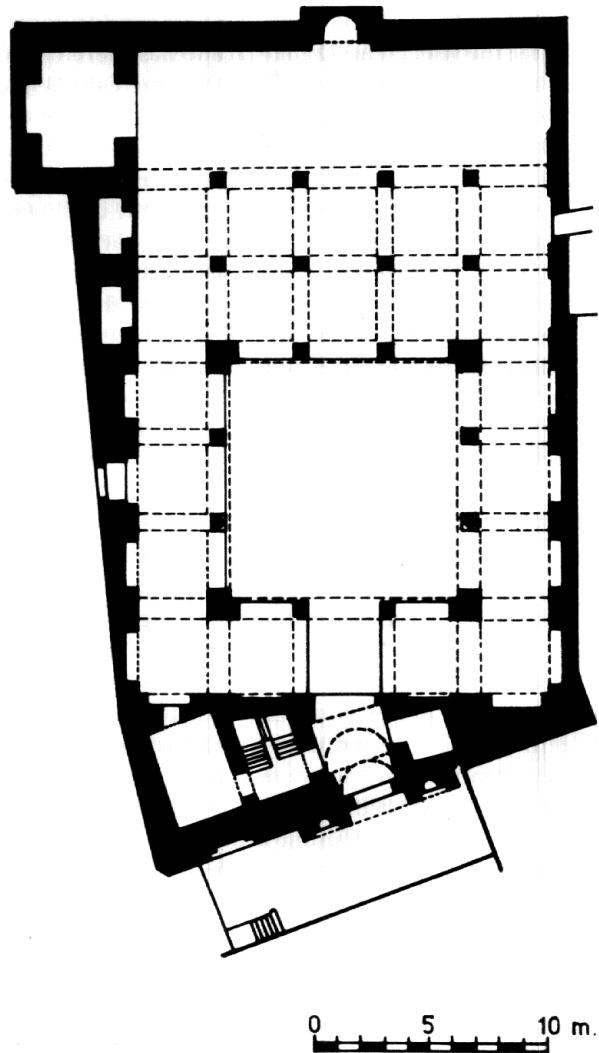


Fig. 1. Aqmar Mosque. Plan. (From Creswell)

Azhar and the mosque of al-Hakim,² and the first to be built along the main avenue. Neither of its predecessors, al-Azhar or al-Hakim, required such an adjustment. Al-Azhar was built at the same time as the rest of the city, off the main avenue and overlooking a square. The Hakim mosque was built *extra muros*, before Badr al-Jamali rebuilt and extended the city wall and included the mosque within its confines. Neither mosque overlooked a preexisting street, and neither therefore could have been subject to any of the urban constraints that would have required an adaptation of the façade's alignment.

The street adjustment invented by the Aqmar architect must have been dictated by the special character of the area that surrounded the site, an importance also suggested by the extensive and outstanding decoration of the façade itself. The Aqmar façade has therefore to be associated with its location in the immediate neighborhood of the caliphal palaces and in the middle of the main avenue of al-Qahira, the royal precinct of the Fatimid caliphs, where it stood on the northeastern edge of the great esplanade overlooked on either side by the two caliphal palaces. The mosque, separated from the main palace by only a narrow lane, was thus in the ceremonial heart of the city. For an interpretation of the Aqmar façade, it is essential to consider the "choreography" of the activities that took place in this quarter.

THE SACRED CHARACTER OF THE FATIMID PALACE

Al-Qahira was not merely the residential capital for the caliph; it was also the stage for all the religious performances that the caliph led as imam of the Isma'ili Shi'a community to which the Fatimids belonged. As a descendant of the Prophet, the imam was infallible according to Isma'ili doctrine, and he was venerated as almost divine. The two-palace complex which formed the residence of the caliphs and their court was therefore not only the administrative and ceremonial center of the caliphate, but it was at the same time, and unlike any other royal complex of the Muslim world, the stage for the most solemn religious rituals and thus the spiritual focus of the city.³ This is reflected in the size of the complex and its location within the Qahira enclosure as well as in its relation to al-Azhar and the other mosques (fig. 2). The palace complex in the very center of the city constituted, according to Ravaisse, over a fifth of its total area.⁴ Its height surpassed that of all other buildings; it dominated the city like a mountain, as the Persian traveler Nasir-i Khusraw said.⁵

The complex included numerous oratories (*masjid*, without the Friday sermon) and shrines and, most important of all, the cemetery for the ancestors of the caliphs. Beginning in the last decade of the Fatimid period it also lodged the shrine for the head of the Fatimid ancestor al-Husayn, son of 'Ali.⁶ Despite the parallels which can be drawn between Fatimid ceremonial, on the one hand, and that of the Byzantines and Abbasids on the other, the Fatimid Isma'ilis added a religious emphasis to the rituals, though these have often been overlooked by modern historians.⁷ Unlike the palace of al-Mansur at Baghdad, which adjoined the Great Mosque,⁸ the Fatimid palace complex alone occupied the center of the city (al-Azhar was off the main street), and most of the religious rituals of the Fatimid caliphs took place there, including religious instruction for members of the court.⁹ The palace also housed the greatest Fatimid library and an academy for religious and secular sciences.¹⁰

Compared to the palace, the mosque of al-Azhar —

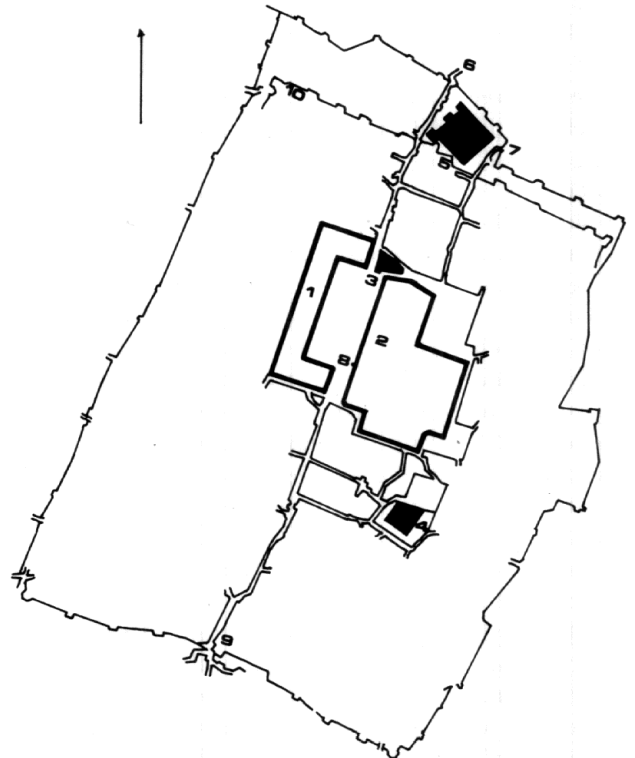


Fig. 2. Aqmar Mosque. Plan showing the location in relation to the palace complex. (after Ravaisse) 1. The western palace, 2. The eastern (great) palace, 3. The Aqmar Mosque, 4. The al-Azhar mosque, 5. The mosque of al-Hakim, 6. Bab al-Futuh, 7. Bab al-Nasr, 8. Bab al-Dhabab, 9. Bab Zuwayla, 10. Bab al-Bahr.

much smaller than its predecessors, the mosques of ʿAmr and Ibn Tulun — appears to have played a rather limited role in the religious life of the Fatimid court. The caliphs went there on only two annual occasions: once a year they performed the Friday prayer there,¹¹ and on the *layālī al-waqūd*, or nights of illuminations, they would watch the festivities, together with their family, from a loggia attached to the mosque.¹² The prayers on the two great religious feasts, always attended by a large crowd, were performed at the *muṣallā*, or prayer ground, outside the northern gates of the city. Other religious occasions and feasts were celebrated at the palace. It was thus not al-Azhar or any other mosque, but the caliphal palace, that fulfilled the function of the capital's main sanctuary. The religious priority of the palace is further confirmed by the circumstances which accompanied the transfer of the head of al-Husayn from Ascalon to al-Qahira during the last decade of Fatimid rule. The vizier al-Salih Talaʿī^c who wanted to rescue the holy relic before the advance of the Crusaders in Palestine, had originally planned to bury it at the mosque he had erected outside Bab Zuwayla. The members of the caliph's family, however, insisted that it was not appropriate to bury the head of al-Husayn anywhere else than within the caliphal palace. They argued that the palace had priority over the mosque because it included the tombs of the Fatimid caliphs, and they were considered to be descendants of the Prophet.¹³

Maqrizi's description of the religious feasts celebrated by the caliphs always mention that the caliph's appearance before the people on one of the loggias of the palace, behind a grilled window or *shubbāk*, was the high point of the ceremony. Maqrizi's sources are numerous and date from various times in the Fatimid period. The most substantial material, however, deals with the reign of the caliph al-Amir.

On New Year's day, for example, Caliph al-Amir reviewed a military parade, behind a *shubbāk* on the loggia of the Golden Gate (Bab al-Dhahab), the main gate of the palace.¹⁴ Ghadir day, a Shiʿa feast commemorating an oath the Prophet is believed to have given to ʿAli that nominated him as his successor, was also celebrated at the palace. For the Fatimids it was more important than the feasts of ʿId al-Fitr and ʿId al-Adha (ʿId al-Nahr). The festivities began with a procession (in which the caliph did not participate) that started at the palace gate of Bab al-Qaws, proceeded to the Azhar mosque (later to the Husayn shrine), and then returned. The prayer and the khutba then took place in the presence of the caliph, not at the mosque but in the palace, after the call to prayer

was performed at the palace gates. The caliph would sit first behind a *shubbāk*, then on the left side of the minbar. In al-Maʿmun's time this celebration included the distribution of alms to the poor, as well as donations and the bestowing of robes of honor upon the members of the caliph's entourage. Caliph al-Amir would sacrifice animals and give a banquet.¹⁵ ʿAshura, a day of mourning for the martyrdom of al-Husayn, was likewise celebrated at the palace, to which the caliph invited religious dignitaries for a banquet.¹⁶

During the holy month of Ramadan until the feast of ʿId al-Fitr the palace was the scene of religious ceremonies. Qurʾan recitations, chanting, and Sufi performances took place there and banquets were served with the caliph and his vizier attending. The historian Ibn al-Maʿmun, the son of the vizier al-Maʿmun, records the presence of his father with his whole family and relatives on such occasions.¹⁷

On the nights of illuminations, *layālī al-waqūd*, during the reign of Caliph al-Amir and the rule of his vizier al-Maʿmun, the climax of the feast was reached at the moment when the caliph opened one of the windows of the loggia (*manzara*) of Bab al-Zumurrud at the main palace to appear before the crowd. At a second window one of the courtiers would appear to respond in the name of the caliph to the salutation of the audience standing underneath. Then under the *manzara*, religious dignitaries would give sermons and perform recitations. The vizier accompanied by members of the religious establishment would then visit the mosques of al-Qahira and al-Fustat.¹⁸ The celebrations of *maulid*, or religious birthdays, were similar except that al-Amir appeared at the loggia of Bab al-Dhahab, instead of Bab al-Zumurrud.¹⁹ The preachers, or *khatibs*, of the mosques of al-Qahira, al-Azhar, al-Hakim, and al-Aqmar would stand underneath the loggia to perform their part of the recitation ritual.²⁰

These celebrations show the palaces of the Fatimids to be the center of religious life and the stage for rituals in which the caliph played the protagonist. It may not be exaggerated therefore to interpret the Fatimid palace complex itself as a kind of sanctuary dedicated to the living caliph.

THE CEREMONIAL REVIVAL

Al-Maʿmun's vizierate occupied four years of al-Amir's long reign. In those four years there was a revival of court ceremonial after a long period of neglect²¹ that had been the result first of calamities and economic catastrophes in the land during the reign of al-Mustansir, and later the

absence of a powerful caliph. Ibn al-Ma²mun's account, which is integrated into Maqrizi's chronicle and constitutes his main source for the reign of al-Amir and Fatimid court ceremonial, is mainly descriptive, however.²² Maqrizi's other source for Fatimid court life was Ibn al-Tuwayr (d. 1217–18) whose account deals essentially with the reign of al-Amir. Both sources focus on Fatimid court life, evidence in itself for the ceremonial splendor of the era.

Al-Amir was still a child when he assumed the throne in 1101, and the vizier al-Afdal Shahinshah remained the de facto ruler of Egypt until he was assassinated in 1121. Al-Amir, who had been oppressed by the authority of his vizier, started to emancipate himself after the assassination, for which he was even held responsible.²³ He directed his attention toward restoring the glory of the Fatimid caliphs which had greatly suffered since the economic catastrophes of al-Mustansir's reign (1036–94) and which had also been affected by the long rules of the mighty viziers Badr al-Jamali and his son al-Afdal.²⁴ He wishes to revitalize his capital, depopulated and devastated by famine and catastrophe.²⁵ His second vizier al-Ma²mun was to help him in this undertaking, which he seems to have done with enthusiasm, considering the numerous reforms initiated within a short time. Belvederes were built within gardens from which to view parades and for the caliph's excursions which were staged to attract large crowds of spectators who flocked to see him and to collect their share of his generous donations.²⁶ Al-Amir also restored a palace at the cemetery where he used to watch Sufi dances by candlelight. For the religious foundations, al-Ma²mun ordered in 1122 the restoration of the shrines dedicated to the relatives of the Prophet and the building of the Masjid al-Kafuri,²⁷ as well as the Friday mosque of al-Aqmar.²⁸

In the meantime the Crusaders were conquering Fatimid territories in Palestine, but the caliph's interests continued to remain on his court life and his public performances, a fatal error for which some historians did not forgive him.²⁹ One of the ceremonial reforms al-Ma²mun introduced was to have the caliph show himself to the public during the festivities of the ²Id al-Nahr. In the time of his predecessors Badr al-Jamali and al-Afdal, the vizier attended the celebration without the caliph, but al-Ma²mun found the caliph's absence on this occasion inappropriate and advised al-Amir to make an appearance in the loggia of Bab al-Dhahab.³⁰ This *manzara*, a creation of al-Ma²mun,³¹ delighted the caliph. Three of these novelties at the palace are attributed to al-Ma²mun. One was near Bab al-Dhahab and another above its arch;

Maqrizi writes of a *manzara* near the Aqmar Mosque which may have been the third.³² It seems that they were all built to overlook the main street.

Al-Ma²mun also revived the *mawlid* celebrations and the forgotten feasts of *layālī al-waqūd* observed by his predecessors.³³ When al-Amir told al-Ma²mun, "You have brought back glamour to my reign and achieved great deeds that have no equal in the past" (*a²adta li dawlati bahjatahā wa jaddadta fihā min al-mahāsīn mā lam yakun*), he added that his reforms had been dedicated to the daytime; for the nights there were things still to be done. Al-Ma²mun responded by reviving the *layālī al-waqūd* and returning to the caliph's palace the tradition of serving a banquet on the day of ²Ashura, which under his predecessor al-Afdal used to be held at the vizier's palace at Fustat.

SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS

The carved upper panels. All the religious ceremonies staged in and around the palaces suggest an interpretation for the invention of the street-alignment device introduced by the al-Aqmar façade (fig. 3). The palatial surroundings dictated for the mosque an architecture that reflected the solemn environment. Had the façade been Mecca-oriented and thus askew to the alignment of the street, it would have deviated also from the alignment of the main palace itself and would have disturbed the symmetry of the parade ground enclosed inside the palace complex. The fact that the caliph was concerned about how his residence looked from outside is confirmed by Maqrizi, who reports that al-Amir, probably disturbed by the presence of shops near his palace, asked al-Ma²mun to build a mosque on the site. Al-Ma²mun's mosque was built above a row of shops, but these shops faced north and opened into a side lane, so that they could no longer disturb the view of the palace's façade on the main street. . . .³⁴ On New Year's day the caliph's procession on its way back to the palace halted in front of the Aqmar Mosque. There, the caliph, mounted on horseback, made a small sign of greeting to al-Ma²mun, who stood in front of him. This gesture was considered to be the greatest sign of honor a caliph could bestow, and it could only be granted to a vizier of the sword such as al-Ma²mun was.³⁵

The second notable feature of the façade is the decoration, and in particular the two peculiar panels carved on the left side of the portal.³⁶ On these panels are representations of real objects: on the right, a closed door (fig. 4) and on the left an arch on two colonnettes which frames a star-shaped grille. From the apex of the arch

hangs a lamp. In Cairene religious architecture the presentation of real objects was not common. Among the few exceptions are occasional representations of trees or vases with plants, a carved panel at the portal of Sultan Hasan showing architectural patterns, and some stylized views of the Ka'ba from the Ottoman period.

The identification of the right panel as a door is made easy, as Caroline Williams notes, by the presence of a very similar actual Fatimid door, now at the Islamic Museum in Cairo, that was donated by Caliph al-Hakim for the Azhar Mosque. Like the representation, this door is divided in vertical carved panels.

The left motif has been interpreted by Williams as a prayer niche because of the lamp traditionally associated with prayer niches (fig. 5). What seems to contradict this interpretation, however, is the fact that among the several Fatimid mihrabs that have survived, none — and

especially none in the buildings erected during the reign of al-Amir — looks like this niche. The mihrab at the mosque of Ibn Tulun with which Williams compares this niche has lost a great part of its stucco so that very little is left to be compared. Moreover, the object hanging from a chain is not a lamp but a star.

At the Aqmar façade the grille framed by an arch is reminiscent of a window, such as one finds from the Fatimid period at the mosques of Ibn Tulun and al-Azhar, composed of an arch flanked by a pair of colonnettes and covered by a stucco grille with geometric patterns. The arched grille window on the Aqmar façade may well have represented the *shubbāk* at the caliph's loggia (fig. 5) behind which he made his solemn appearance on ceremonial occasions.³⁷ The lamp might be a symbol for the caliph himself whom the Fatimid sources often compare with a light. In the letter of investiture of al-Amir — at



Fig. 3. Façade of the Aqmar Mosque.

that time a child of five years — as caliph, the imams, i.e., the caliphs, are described as lanterns guiding the believers to the right path.³⁸

If we agree that the right panel is a door, it would not be farfetched to interpret the panel with the arched grille as a *shubbāk*. Both the *bāb* and the *shubbāk*, which are architectural features, are frequently mentioned in the context of Fatimid ceremonial rituals, and specifically in connection with Caliph al-Amir and his vizier al-Ma²mun. *Shubbāk* originally meant “grille” or “grilled window,” and the word often turns up in descriptions of Fatimid ceremonial in connection with the public appearance of the caliph that was the culmination of every ceremony. It was al-Ma²mun’s inspiration to have built the *manzara* of Bab al-Dhahab and to have had the caliph appear there at its *shubbāk*. The arched grille with the lamp represents the caliph.

An episode in Fatimid history well supports the suggestion that the *shubbāk* was regarded as a symbol for the caliph. During a rebellion in Baghdad in 1055–56 by the amir Abu’l-Harth al-Basasiri, the Abbasid Caliph al-Qa²im bi Amr Allah was overthrown and the khutba was preached for ten months in the name of the Fatimid Caliph al-Mustansir to whom the rebels had declared their allegiance. During this period al-Basasiri sent to Egypt as a trophy for the Fatimid caliph the insignia of the Abbasid caliphs, the caliphal turban and gown and a large iron window grille behind which the caliph sat in state. The grille was installed in the vizier’s palace.³⁹

Before the reign of al-Amir the throne of the caliphs was at the Iwan Kabir or Great Hall, where the caliph sat behind a *shubbāk*, or grilled loggia, surmounted by a dome.⁴⁰ Later, however, Caliph al-Amir transferred his audiences from the Iwan Kabir to the Qa²at al-Dhahab,



Fig. 4. Carved door on the façade of the Aqmar Mosque.



Fig. 5. Carved *shubbāk* on the façade of the Aqmar Mosque.

or Golden Hall. The dais of the throne there is described as standing in an elevated section within a recess⁴¹ in a so-called *majlis*. Maqrizi, quoting Ibn al-Tuwayr, further mentions an elevated passage (*sabat*) supported by arches, but it is not clear how this passage is connected with the *majlis*. The *majlis* had a door, the threshold of which was the place assigned to the vizier. At specific times the door would be opened and the curtains raised to reveal the caliph. At the end of the audience the caliph would disappear again behind the curtains and the door would be closed.⁴² The Bab al-Majlis, as this door was called, is associated with an important ceremonial reform of the Amir Ma²mun era. The investiture protocol of al-Ma²mun was the first such document ever to have been presented at the Bab al-Majlis in the palace.⁴³ Until that time the investiture protocol of a vizier (*sijill*) was read at the iwan.⁴⁴

The association of the *bāb* with the function of the Fati-

mid viziers is further confirmed by the presence at that time of an office called *ṣāhib al-bāb* (master of the door) who was the vizier's deputy and who sat next to him on the threshold of the door which connected the vizier's dais with the caliph's throne.⁴⁵ Thus the *bāb* was the place where the vizier exercised his official functions. During the rule of al-Afdal there was a Bab al-Sirdab or "gate of the underground passage" which used to connect the dais of the vizier with the caliph's throne room. Through this door the vizier was ushered in to the caliph's presence. The symbolic character of the door as a connection between caliph and vizier is confirmed by a sentence spoken by al-Ma²mun's predecessor al-Afdal: "As long as I sit on this dais behind the door smelling the steam [coming from the caliph's hammam located nearby] I feel like a sultan."⁴⁶ The door carved on the right-hand side of the *shubbāk* is therefore symbolic of the vizier who always sat at the right-hand side of the caliph.

The vase with two plants. Below the panel with the lamp is another, diamond-shaped, carved relief (fig. 5) in which is a vase with two plants that Williams interprets as symbolizing al-Hasan and al-Husayn. Seen from the viewpoint of the Aqmar façade's commemorating specific moments of al-Amir's reign and al-Ma²mun's rule, however, it is tempting to interpret it rather as a symbol for the entente between the two. At first glance such close association between the caliph and his vizier might appear to exaggerate al-Ma²mun's prestige, but historical evidence clearly indicates that in fact al-Ma²mun's power did grow abnormally, to the point where it later proved to be a threat to the caliph. At the beginning the caliph himself might have encouraged al-Ma²mun's aspirations. He delegated to his vizier the caliphal duty of preaching the Friday sermon, for example, because he himself, despite his love for ceremonies, did not excel at this task.⁴⁷ Al-Ma²mun also managed to extract an oath of allegiance from the caliph according to which document al-Amir committed himself to inform his vizier of any intrigue that might be directed against him. In exchange al-Ma²mun promised to transfer back to the caliphal palace some of the administrative functions which since the days of al-Afdal had been fulfilled by the vizier at his official palace, the Dar al-Mulk at al-Fustat.⁴⁸ By demanding such an oath the vizier humiliated his caliph, and in the long run this proved to be a mistake.

A further manifestation of al-Ma²mun's prestige was that the amirs in his time added *al-mā²mūnī* instead of the customary *al-āmīrī* to their names. Al-Ma²mun's ambition to immortalize his own name is further illus-

trated by his foundation of an observatory to replace that of his predecessor al-Afdal, which was found deficient. Al-Ma²mun's project was successful, and the observatory functioned well.⁴⁹ The vizier made the mistake, however, of calling it *al-raṣad al-ma² mūnī* after himself instead of *al-raṣad al-āmirī* after the caliph and thus gave al-Amir an additional reason for mistrusting him. After al-Ma²mun's arrest the observatory was destroyed, and no one dared mention it again.⁵⁰ Al-Ma²mun's extreme ambitions cost him his life. He was accused of trying to overthrow al-Amir with the help of the latter's brother Amir Ja²far ibn al-Musta²li and was executed in 1125, the year the mosque was completed.

Returning to the carvings of the Aqmar façade, there was once a medallion between the two rectangular panels, but it was later neatly removed, leaving a clean-cut circle which reveals the bricks once hidden behind the

stone facing. Was it perhaps removed by order of the caliph after al-Ma²mun's arrest because its content explicitly over-glorified the vizier?

The medallion above the entrance (fig. 6). A further feature at the Aqmar façade associates its decorative program with al-Ma²mun's reforms during al-Amir's reign. The carved medallion above the entrance bears a striking resemblance to the golden dinars of the Fatimids (fig. 7), with their concentric rings of inscriptions. Al-Amir's dinars were coined according to this pattern, though not necessarily with the same inscriptions. It was al-Ma²mun who for the first time established a mint in al-Qahira, using the argument that, as the seat of the caliphate and imamate, the city ought to have its own mint. There were already mints at al-Fustat, Alexandria, and Qus but none in the caliphal residence. Al-Ma²mun ordered that the



Fig. 6. Carved medaillon above the entrance.



Fig. 7. Golden dinar of Caliph al-Amir. (courtesy: American Numismatic Society, New York)

dinars coined at al-Qahira should have the highest standard of gold.⁵¹

Of the inscriptions on the mosque, the foundation text (of which a substantial section is missing) mentions both the vizier al-Ma²mun and his master Caliph al-Amir and wishes the caliph a victory over the infidels — most likely here a reference to the Crusaders who a year before had taken Tyre from the Fatimids. Al-Amir is reported to have considered this loss to be al-Ma²mun's greatest sin.⁵² In this case the inscription had a talismanic significance, wishing for a triumph in the face of past defeat. Other inscriptions, which include the names ⁶Ali, Muhammad, and the Qur²anic reference to the *ahl al-bayt* (Qur²an, 33: 33) with its specific Fatimid interpretation, recall, like many other Fatimid inscriptions, the ruling Shi⁶a cult. They thus conform with Fatimid architectural epigraphy.⁵³

The niches on the façade. The other niches on the façade, including the main one above the entrance, Williams interpreted as prayer niches. I think, however, that especially in this building, where the façade so deliberately diverges from the qibla, it would be a mistake to see the niches as mihrabs. They are obviously not Mecca oriented and therefore would have led worshipers to pray in the wrong direction. The only and essential difference between a prayer niche and any other niche is its Mecca orientation. A niche that is not Mecca oriented cannot be a prayer niche. At the mausoleum of Sayyida Ruqayya the situation is different; the niches on the exterior correspond exactly to the Mecca-oriented interior and can therefore be used as prayer niches by worshipers standing in the courtyard. The niches on the Aqmar façade should rather

be seen as part of a long tradition of using niches for façade decoration. The niches which alternate with the windows on the façades of the mosque of Ibn Tulun might have been one of the earliest cases. For the Fatimid period the arched recesses which adorn the portal of the mosque of al-Hakim form the most immediate extant predecessors. The niches of the Aqmar Mosque, with their variety of patterns and shapes, were designed to enhance a façade.

THE MESSAGE

In the context of Fatimid architecture the mosque of al-Aqmar is not a unique example of a religious building being erected to transmit a message that reached beyond its immediate function. Literary and epigraphical sources leave little doubt that Fatimid religious architecture was to a great extent memorial architecture.⁵⁴ This applied not only to mausoleums built as funerary monuments erected to commemorate the names of venerated persons, but it also applies to mosques. Grabar has convincingly demonstrated how the Juyushi Mosque, designated by its inscription as a mashhad or memorial, commemorated the military triumphs of its founder Badr al-Jamali.⁵⁵ Similarly, a mosque called the Jami⁶ al-Halawiyin was erected by the vizier al-Salih Tala⁶i⁶ to commemorate the death of Caliph al-Zafir who was killed by his vizier Nasr ibn ⁶Abbas on the mosque's site.⁵⁶ Another Fatimid mosque is reported to have been founded by the Caliph al-Zafir to commemorate a far more insignificant episode, the miraculous escape from death of a sheep which managed to outwit its butcher!⁵⁷

In its function as a monument and commemorative building, the Aqmar Mosque therefore belongs to a Fatimid architectural tradition. However, the combination of patterns chosen, or rather invented, to adorn the Aqmar façade has nothing comparable either in earlier or in later Cairene architecture. The message the Aqmar Mosque was designed to convey to its viewer was also unorthodox. It celebrated a specific moment in Fatimid history: the return of splendor to the city and its palace under Caliph al-Amir. After decades of obscurity the caliph, like a light, revealed himself in a splendid ceremonial to a rejoicing population in a revived capital. The ceremonial had been choreographed by Vizier al-Ma²mun. Both caliph and vizier have therefore been recorded on the façade not only in the text of the inscription but also through the themes of its carving.

Munich, Germany

NOTES

1. "The Cult of 'Alid Saints in the Fatimid Monuments of Cairo, Part I: The Mosque of al-Aqmar," *Muqarnas* 1 (1983): 37–52; see further K. A. C. Creswell, *Muslim Architecture in Egypt*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1952–60) vol. 1, pp. 247 ff.
2. Ibn al-Ma'mun, cited in n. 22 below, p. 63.
3. The eastern and greater palace is the one referred to in this context. Built by the caliph al-Mu'izz, it was the first to be erected and included the main official functions of the caliph. The western and smaller palace, erected by al-'Aziz, son of al-Mu'izz, overlooked gardens and a hippodrome. It had a more private character and is not mentioned in any ceremonial context except the slaughter of the animals by the caliph on the occasion of 'Id al-Nahr (Taḡyīy al-Dīn Ahmad 'Alī ibn 'Abd al-Qādir ibn Muḥammad al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-mawā'iz wa'l-i'tibār bi dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa'l-āthār* (Bulaq, 1306 H.), vol. 1, pp. 457 f.
4. P. Ravaisse. "Essai sur l'histoire et sur la topographie du Caire d'après Maqrīzī." *Mémoires . . . de la Mission Archéologique Française au Caire*, 1/3 (1886–89): 409–89; 3/4, 33–11; 1/3, 428.
5. Charles Schefer, *Sefernameh: Relation du voyage de Nasir-i Khusrau* (Paris 1881), p. 128.
6. Al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 2: 293.
7. On Fatimid ceremonial, see M. Canard "Le Cérémonial fatimide et le cérémonial byzantin," *Byzantion* 12 (1951): 355–420; P. Sanders, "Mawākib" (under the Abbasids and Fatimids) and "Marāsīm" (under the caliphate and the Fatimids), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden, 1989).
8. G. Le Strange, *Baghdad during the Abbasid Caliphate* (Oxford, 1900, rept., New York, 1972), pp. 30 f.
9. Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 1: 391, 403.
10. *Ibid.*, 1: 408.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 495.
12. These were four nights in the year, at the beginning and the middle of both months of Rajab and Sha'ban during which the mosques and palaces were lit with multitudes of candles (Ibn al-Ma'mun, p. 36. See below, n. 22).
13. Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 1: 427.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 445 f.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 388 f.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 430.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 387 f.; 492 f.
18. *Ibid.*, 2: 467.
19. These were the birthdays of the Prophet, 'Alī, Fatīma, al-Hasan, al-Husayn, and of the ruling caliph (Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 1: 432 f.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 362, 433.
21. A detailed documentation on al-Ma'mun's vizierate and his building activity is included in Gaston Wiet, *Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum*, I, *Egypte*, vol. 2, *Mémoires . . . de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire* (Cairo, 1930), pp. 165–86.
22. The Fatimid sources of Maqrīzī, Musabbiḥī (d. 1029), Ibn al-Muyassar (d. 1278–79), and Ibn al-Ma'mun (d. 1192), have been published recently in a series of separate volumes: al-Amīr Jamāl al-Dīn . . . Ibn al-Ma'mun al-Baṭā'iḥī ibn al-Ma'mun, *Nuṣuṣ min akhbār Miṣr li Ibn al-Ma'mun*, ed. Ayman Fu'ād Sayyid (Cairo 1983); (cited above and below as Ibn al-Ma'mun); Tāj al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn 'Alī . . . Rāghib ibn al-Muyassar, *al-Muntaqā min akhbār Miṣr li Ibn al-Muyassar*, ed. Ayman Fu'ād Sayyid (Cairo, 1981) (hereafter cited as al-Muyassar); al-Amīr al-Mukhtār Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Musabbiḥī, *Akhbār Miṣr fī sanatayn (414–415H.)*, ed. William G. Millward (Cairo, 1980); al-Musabbiḥī, *al-juz' al-arba'ūn min akhbār miṣr li'l-Musabbiḥī*, ed. Ayman Fu'ād Sayyid and Thierry Bianchis (Cairo 1978).
23. Jamāl al-Dīn Abū'l-Mahāsīn ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira fī mulūk Miṣr wa'l-Qāhira*, 16 vols. (Cairo 1963–72); hereafter cited as Ibn Taghrībirdī), 5: 222.
24. Wiet, *Matériaux*, pp. 132–60.
25. Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 1: 125, 305.
26. Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz al-hunafā' bi akhbār al-a'imma al-Fāṭimiyyin al-khulafā'*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥilmī Muḥammad Aḥmad, 3 vols. (Cairo, 1973), 3: 129 f.; *Khiṭaṭ*, 1: 471, 473; 2: 163.
27. Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 2: 410.
28. Ibn Muyassar, p. 91; Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 2: 290.
29. Ibn Taghrībirdī (quoting Ibn Khalikān and al-Dhahabī), 5: 174, 178.
30. Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 1: 451 f.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 452; Ibn al-Ma'mun, p. 24.
32. Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 1: 384, 404.
33. *Ibid.*, 1: 432 f.; Ibn al-Ma'mun, p. 62.
34. Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 2: 290.
35. *Ibid.*, 1: 450; the first Fatimid vizier with a military career was Badr al-Jamālī; his predecessors were men of the pen (al-Qalqashandī. *Suḥ al-a'shā fī šinā'at al-inshā'*, 14 vols. (rept., Cairo, 1963) (henceforth cited as al-Qalqashandī); 3: 478 f.
36. The portal was built in the middle of the façade. The left-hand side was hidden until recently behind a modern building. It is generally assumed that this side, for the sake of symmetry, had a similar arrangement. The destruction of this building lately revealed a damaged wall which did not preserve any of its decoration.
37. Canard, "Cérémonial fatimide," pp. 361 f.
38. Ibn Muyassar, p. 71.
39. Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ* 1: 438; 2: 416.
40. *Ibid.*, 1: 386 ff.
41. Beneath the *badhahanj* or wind-catcher.
42. Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 1: 386 f.
43. *Ibid.*, 1: 463 f.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 441.
45. Qalqashandī, 3: 479; Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 1: 386.
46. Ibn al-Ma'mun, pp. 26 f.; Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 1: 442.
47. Ibn Taghrībirdī, 5: 176.
48. Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 1: 441 f.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 463.
51. Ibn al-Ma'mun, p. 38; Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 1: 445, George C. Miles, *Fatimid Coins in the Collections of the University Museum, Philadelphia, and the American Numismatic Society* (New York, 1951), p. 44 and pl. 5; N. D. Nicol, R. el-Nabarawy, J. L. Bacharach, *Catalog of the Islamic Coins, Glass Weights, Dies and Metals in the Egyptian National Library, Cairo* (Malibu, 1982), p. 65, pl. 10; Michael Mitchiner, *Oriental Coins and Their Values* (London, 1977), p. 119.
52. Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz*, 3: 115.
53. Caroline Williams, "The Cult of the 'Alid Saints in the Fatimid Monuments of Cairo," pt. 2, *Muqarnas* 3 (1985): 39–60.
54. Williams, "Cult of the 'Alid Saints," pp. 54 f.
55. Oleg Grabar, "The Earliest Islamic Commemorative Structures, Notes and Documents" *Ars Orientalis* 6 (1966): 7–46; esp. pp. 27 f.; Y. Raḡīb, "Un oratoire fatimide au sommet du Muqattam," *Studia Islamica* 65 (1987): 51–67.
56. Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ* 2: 410.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 293.