The mother of al-ʿAzīz, the fifth Fāṭimid imām-caliph (r. 365–386/975–996), is described by contemporary writers as an Arab slave named Durzān (d. 385/995), referred to as taghrīd (lit. twittering) thanks to her beautiful voice. Durzān’s legacy, however, is not that of a singer, but is primarily that of an architectural patroness. Her patronage spanned a period of more than twenty years, marked first by significant dates in her role as mother of the heir apparent al-ʿAzīz, with her public role flourishing after she assumed the role and title as queen mother after the death in 365/975 of her consort, the imām-caliph al-Muʿizz. She would go on to become the first of a number of high-ranking women

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2 The date of Durzān’s death is provided by Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī, in his Ittiʿāẓ al-Ḥunafāʾ bi-Akhbār al-Aʾimma al-Fāṭimiyyīn al-Khulāfāʾ [henceforth Ittiʿāẓ], ed. J. al-Dīn al-Shayyāl (Cairo, 1967), 1: 289; she died one or two months after al-ʿAzīz’s wife, the ʿumm walad al-Sayyida al-ʿAziziyya, either during the second half of Dhū ʿl-Qaʿda or during Dhū ʿl-Ḥijjah 385/December 995 or January 996.

3 According to Ibrāhīm al-Ḥāmidī, Durzān was not a slave but a cousin, see majlis 117 in W. Ivanow, Ismaili Tradition Concerning the Rise of the Fatimids (London, 1942), 309. Durzān is also mentioned by the chronicler Abū Jaʿfar b. Zubayr (d.708/1308) as participating in her son’s party in the treasury hall at the Fāṭimid court. See D. Cortese and S. Calderini, Women and the Fatimids in the World of Islam (Edinburgh, 2006), 88–89.
during the Fāṭimid era whose architectural patronage, recorded mainly by literary sources but also preserved in a select few material ones, would serve varied dynastic purposes—genealogical, political and economic.  

The first part of this paper will focus on the significance and meanings of the literary and material evidence as they relate to the buildings Durzān is attested to have sponsored. Two buildings in particular will be discussed—those most sources regard as having been the first and the last she commissioned. The first is the pavilion known as Manāzil al-ʿIzz, no longer extant but the existence of which is attested to in various literary sources. The second is a building that has been presumed to be a mausoleum on the basis of a single piece of evidence, a slab discovered in the vicinity of Fusṭāṭ, in an area called Isṭabl ʿAntar. So far, this slab constitutes the only surviving epigraphic and material evidence of her sponsorship. The second part of this paper will be devoted to two of Durzān's major architectural works: the mosque of al-Qarāfa and the qaṣr (fortress, or citadel). Durzān's contribution to the landscaping of Fusṭāṭ will be appraised in light of a contextualized analysis of the prevailing political, social and economic climates in Egypt at the time of her building activity. The overall aim of this study is to assess the contribution and limitations of the available sources with reference to Durzān's architectural patronage, and to critically evaluate through the use of interdisciplinary interpretative tools the varied purposes her buildings might have served.

1 The Buildings Ascribed to Durzān

A list of buildings attributed to Durzān and arranged according to location was first compiled in 1974, by the historian of Egypt, Yūsuf Rāghib. Below is a tentative list of the architectural works she sponsored, in chronological order, based on references found primarily in the works of the Mamlūk historian al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442), supplemented where possible by information gleaned from the works of earlier historians such as Ibn Muyassar (d. 677/1278), Ibn Duqmāq (d. 809/1407), and al-Qalqashandī (d. 821/1418), to name but a few: