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AL-AZHAR MOSQUE:
AN ARCHITECTURAL CHRONICLE OF CAIRO’S HISTORY

In 1924, Martin Briggs, a British architect who was embarking on a study of Islamic architecture in Egypt and Palestine, had these words to say about al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo:

To a European, al-Azhar offers an oriental spectacle, unparalleled save by the Mecca pilgrimage, where one may realize at the same time the backwardness of Islam and its tremendous power. Nor does this picturesque scene lose anything by its staging. The dazzling white arcades that surround the sahn with their quaint battlements silhouetted against the brilliant blue sky, the duster of minarets above them — some bizarre, one at least graceful — all enhance the glow of color presented by the many hued robes of the students and their teachers.¹

To Taha Hussein, the pioneering Egyptian thinker and educator who came to al-Azhar in 1908 as a young blind fellâh, the mosque sparked a totally different feeling. He wrote about his impression in the third person, “It was enough for his bare feet to touch the stone paving, and for his face to be caressed by the fresh breezes in the sahn to have his heart filled with peace and hope.”²

For a single structure to induce such powerful feelings a thousand years after its building is surely a sign of vitality. Over the centuries, al-Azhar has played a significant role in the cultural, intellectual, and political life of Egypt and the Islamic world generally. Its authority, sometimes rising sometimes ebbing, whether triumphant or vanquished, fought for or fought against, has survived the vicissitudes of history in Islamic Egypt from the end of the tenth century until today.

The mosque was first built in 970 by Jawhar al-Siqilli, the Fatimid general who had conquered Egypt for his master al-Mu’izz li-Din Allah a year earlier. He intended it to be the Friday mosque for the new city he had founded and named al-Mansuriyya, probably after the earlier Fatimid capital near Qayrawan in Ifriqiya (Tunisia) built by al-Mu’izz’s father, al-Mansur (946–53).³ Soon afterward in 972, al-Mu’izz himself arrived in Egypt and the mosque underwent a face-lift. This was followed by a succession of expansions, additions, alterations, and annexations of new dependencies and semi-independent institutions that went on until the twentieth century. The sequence of changes in al-Azhar’s architecture reciprocates and reflects its rise to become the foremost institution of religious learning in Egypt and the concomitant political influence its denizens enjoyed among both the ruling classes and the general population. It also closely follows the fortune of the city of Cairo itself in its progress from capital of the self-consciously religious Fatimid dynasty to center of the aggressive and expansionist Mamluk military state, to provincial capital of the Ottoman Empire, and finally to contemporary metropolis.

By the end of the sixteenth century, if not earlier, al-Azhar had reached such a high degree of sanctity that it was considered Islam’s fifth most important mosque, after those in Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem, and Damascus.⁴ In the public mind, the mosque was both sanctuary and a space for spontaneous acts of civic resistance. Many riots against cruel or foreign rulers began there or converged in its courtyard, including the revolt of the people of the Hussayniyya quarter against the rapacious Mamluk amirs in 1785 and the uprising against the French occupation in 1798.⁵ But, although al-Azhar became the people’s assembly place par excellence, and although it functioned as an independent institution with its shaykhs and students forming a self-governing community, its upkeep, expansions, and embellishments were initiated and paid for by Egypt’s rulers. In fact, there seems to have been, and to a large extent still is, a discernible correlation between the political order in Cairo and the care and attention bestowed on al-Azhar both as a structure and as an educational and religious institution. With a few exceptions, one can read the intentions of the rulers in the type of work they effected at al-Azhar, or in the neglect they showed towards its maintenance. Consequently the architectural development of al-Azhar can be seen as a chronicle of the rise and fall of leaders and factions in the religious and political history of the city and the country.
THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE MOSQUE

The mosque’s original core is now totally enclosed in a cluster of later dependencies and secondary structures ranging in date from early in the fourteenth century to recent times. The expansion of the mosque could be described as following a spiral, that is, new structures grew up around its circumference until they completed a full circle, then, in the eighteenth century, a new series started to the south and east around the older circle. These additions continuously changed the mosque’s perimeter and did not always respect the neighboring buildings, especially in the late nineteenth century. They also replaced sections of the mosque’s original walls against which they were built. Consequently, only a tiny portion of the Fatimid western façade remains; it tells us that the mosque was originally built of brick and was plastered over on several occasions.6

On approaching the mosque from the Maydan al-Azhar, which was laid out in the late nineteenth century, the northwestern façade displays an amalgam of pseudo-Mamluk patterns fashionable at the turn of the century. Above this façade, three minarets and one pointed dome frame the main entrance. They are, from north to south, the minaret and dome of the Madrasa al-Aqbaghawiyiya (1389; rebuilt several times), the minaret of Qaytbay (1495), and the double-finial minaret of Qansuh al-Ghuri (1509). The present main entry for al-Azhar is the Bab al-Muzayinin (Gate of the Barbers), a double-arched portal built of stone with recessed arches surrounding the two doors and four panels of stone-cut, floriated ornaments with roundels in between. The gate is attri-