The tombs and shrines of the Fatimid period in Cairo represent the earliest and largest related group of funerary monuments surviving from the first six centuries in Islam. Most of them have epigraphic or textual citations linking them with ʿAlid saints. They were built or restored between 1122 and 1154, the years between the vizierate of Maʿmun al-Bata’ihi (1121-25) and the arrival of the head of al-Husayn b. ʿAli b. Abi Talib in Cairo. This was a period of both crisis and turmoil for the Fatimid government, whose spiritual credibility and political authority had been undermined by two succession crises (1094 and 1130) and by two periods of assassination (1121 and 1130).

This paper will argue that the appearance of these mausolea represented the architectural manifestation of an officially sponsored cult of ʿAlid martyrs and saints that was used to generate support and loyalty for the Ismaʿili Imam Caliph who claimed descent from the Prophet through his grandson al-Husayn. The beginnings of this policy under Badr al-Jamali (vizier from 1074 to 1094), who discovered the head of al-Husayn at Ascalon in 1090, and Maʿmun al-Bata’ihi, who built the mosque of al-Aqmar in 1125, were traced in the first part of this study (“The Mosque of al-Aqmar,” Mugarras, volume 1). Its culmination was marked by the reinterment of the head of al-Husayn in 1154 within the palace area of al-Qahira. That event also represented the merging of two separate funerary traditions: that of the court in a private shrine within the palace, and that of the local population in constructions located in the Qarafa al-Kubra, the great popular cemetery east of Fustat.

Al-Qahira, the royal city founded in 969, was at first accessible only to the household of the caliph, his troops, court, merchants, and purveyors, and others on official business. It was a walled enclosure of roughly one square kilometer, several kilometers to the northeast of the then flourishing and populous quarters of Fustat al-Askar and al-Qata’i, the commercial and manufacturing area of Misk, in which most of the Sunni and local population lived and worked.

The Fatimid caliphs in Cairo, following the sunna of the Prophet, were buried in their residences, apparently also the custom of the Fatimids in North Africa. When al-Muʿizz entered al-Qahira in 972, he brought with him the bodies of his predecessors—ʿUbayd Allah al-Mahdi (the founder of the dynasty), al-Qaʿim, his grandfather, and al-Mansur, his father—which he reburied in a tomb constructed in the interior of the Eastern Palace. Eventually he, too, was buried there, and in time the tomb also received the mortal remains of eight of his successors, their wives, and their children. This funerary chapel was known as the turbat al-zaʿfarān, or “tomb of saffron,” a name deriving from the custom of anointing the tombs with that substance. No description remains of this tomb; al-Maqrizi mentions only that the incumbent caliphs called on their ancestral graves there whenever they left or entered the palace, as well as on Fridays, the ʿId al-Fitr, and other state holidays.2

The custom of house burial in Egypt was not confined to the Fatimid caliphs. The story of Sayyida Nafisa seems to have been characteristic of the early stages of the cult of saints. She was the daughter of al-Hasan b. Zayd b. al-Hasan b. ʿAli b. Abi Talib, and among the first of the ʿAlid families who left the Hijaz in the early years of the ninth century to resettle in Fustat. She was a woman renowned for her piety and to whom miracles were attributed. When Imam Shafiʿi, the Sunni legist and founder of one of the four schools of Sunni Islam, who used to exchange hadiths with her, died in 820 his body was taken to her house so that she might recite prayers over it.3 At her own death in 824, the people of Fustat begged her husband, Ishaq ibn Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, not to take her body back to Medina, but to bury it in Fustat because of her baraka (blessing or
grace from God). She was buried in her house in a grave reportedly dug by her own hands. Ahmad b. Muhammed b. Khalilikan says: "The spot on which her house stood is now occupied by her mausoleum. ... This tomb has a great reputation, experience having shown that prayers said near it are answered." 76

In Islam, the earliest instance of a cemetery is that of Baqi' al-Gharqad at Medina. The first person to be buried in it was 'Uthman ibn Maz'un, a Companion of the Prophet, who died in 626. Eventually members of the Prophet’s family, his descendants, and other Muslim notables were buried there, and it became an honor to be granted a final resting place among the ahl al-bayt, the Companions of the Prophet and friends of God. 7 A similar development must have taken place around the tomb of Sayyida Nafisa, as inhabitants of Fustat and al-'Askar sought a final resting place near her grave and the graves of other 'Alids nearby, 8 and this was one of the reasons behind the development and expansion of the Qarafa, the great public cemetery that lay in the desert to the south and east of the inhabited areas.

In their description of the various sites in the Qarafa, the literary sources refer constantly to their “holiness,” to their “ability to answer prayers,” and “to the baraka which they give to the people who visit them.” 9 For example, in 1083 Abu'l-Husayn Muhammad ibn Jubayr remarks of the Qarafa that “this is also one of the wonders of the world for the tombs [mashāhid] it contains of prophets, of the kindred of Muhammad, of his Companions, of the followers of the Companions, of learned men and ascetics, and of saintly men renowned for their miracles and of wonderful report.” 10 Ibn Battuta, in 1327, reports:

At [old] Cairo, too, is [the cemetery of] al-Qarafa, a place of vast repute for blessed power, whose special virtue is affirmed in a tradition related by al-Qurtubi among others, for it is a part of the mount of al-Muqattam, of which God has promised that it shall be one of the gardens of Paradise. These people build in the Qarafa beautiful domed pavilions [qubāb] and surround them by walls so that they look like houses, and they construct chambers in them and hire the services of Qur'ān readers, who recite night and day. The people go out every Thursday evening to spend the night there with their children and womenfolk and make a circuit of the famous sanctuaries. 11

The accounts depict the central position of the Qarafa in the lives of the common people. The various tomb complexes and their dependencies emerge as both a religious and a social meeting place. The traditional Islamic practices of ziyārat al-qubur (the visitation of burial places) and reliance on intercessory prayers appear well established by the early tenth century. Visiting the dead was a form of piety especially attractive to women, because it made up for their absence at the formal, exclusively male, communal mosque prayers and because it constituted an approved form of outing in an otherwise restricted and well-supervised life. This popular cult of the dead, however, was at variance with royal and official Fatimid procedures, according to which the veneration of the caliphal ancestors was strictly a family and court cult and one in which therefore most of the Fatimids' new Egyptian subjects—who in any case did not give unreserved allegiance to Isma'ili teaching—would not have been allowed to participate.

MAUSOLEA BUILT AROUND 1122

Mashhad of Umm Kulthum. The mashhad of Umm Kulthum (1122; plate 1) is located in that area of the Qarafa reserved by 'Anbas, the last Arab governor of Egypt (851-56), for the ahl al-bayt and descendants of 'Ali. 12 In it are buried the al-Tabataba family, prominent Ashraf descended from al-Hasan. 13 It was a representative of this family, who as naqib, or chief, of the 'Alid families living in Fustat, received the Fatimid imam al-Mu'tizz when he arrived in the city founded by his victorious general Jawhar. Ibn Khalilikan says that the tomb of Abu Muhammad ibn al-Tabataba “was in high repute for the fulfillment of prayers offered up at it.” 14

The mashhad is marked by a marble plaque on the qibla wall to the right of the mihrab, which gives the date of Umm Kulthum's death as 4 Shawwal 254 (26 September 868). 15 All the sources 16 agree that she was the daughter of al-Qasim b. Muhammad b. Ja'far al-Sadiq b. Muhammad al-Baqir b. 'Ali Zayn al-'Abidin b. al-Husayn b. 'Ali b. Abi Talib, buried among the Ashraf of the house of 'Ali in the Qarafa. Muhammad ibn al-Zayyayt adds that hers was a large mashhad, against which the mashhad of Zaynab abutted, and that a number of the Ashraf were buried in it. The most interesting information is supplied by Ibn Muyassar: "In the year 516 [1122] Ma'mun [al-Bata'ishi] ordered his agent (wakil) Shaykh Abu'l-Barakat Muhammad ibn 'Uthman to direct his steps toward the seven masjids which were between the mountain and the Qarafa, the first of which was the mashhad of Sayyida Zaynab and the last of which was the mashhad of Kulthum. He restored their buildings and repaired what was ruined