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

The mosque built by the Fatimid vizier al-Ma‘mun al-Batali in 1125 and known as al-jâmi‘ 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, in which she argues that its decoration program should be seen in the context of Fatimid Isma‘ili 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-Ma‘mun (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-Ma‘mun’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-

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Fig. 1. Aqmar Mosque. Plan. (From Creswell)
Azhar and the mosque of al-Hakim, 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. 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. Its height surpassed that of all other buildings; it dominated the city like a mountain, as the Persian traveler Nasir-i Khusraw said.

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. 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‘ili added a religious emphasis to the rituals, though these have often been overlooked by modern historians. Unlike the palace of al-Mansur at Baghdad, which adjoined the Great Mosque, 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. The palace also housed the greatest Fatimid library and an academy for religious and secular sciences.

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