



# Early Cairene Tents

## The Fatimids and Ayyubids

### **Fatimid Tents**

For a sense of the importance of the ceremonial tent in medieval Cairo, the account of the fourteenth-century chronicler al-Maqrizi describing the storerooms of the great Fatimid palace cannot be bettered. The scene al-Maqrizi narrates is from an older text, capturing a time in the late eleventh century during famine, rebellions, and dire financial circumstances, when the “rogues’ demands were increasing”<sup>1</sup> and the Fatimid state was forced to act. In order to placate the rebels and save the state, the palace storerooms were emptied and their contents sold off. We discover that the storerooms were extensive and thematically arranged: there was one for books, another for garments, one for jewels and “wonders.” There were storerooms for furniture, weapons, saddlery, sugared drinks, spices, and of course, one for tents. The storerooms were kept in good order, for their contents were all highly prized items, under the care of custodians and subject to visits by the Fatimid caliph himself.

The description of the tent storeroom is attributed to a certain Abu al-Hassan al-Khayamy, meaning ‘the tentmaker,’ a man evidently knowledgeable about what must have been the best tents in Egypt at the time. Abu al-Hassan’s heart must have skipped a beat as he undertook the exciting but probably also heart-wrenching task of emptying the storeroom of its contents and divvying the tents up.

From the palace storeroom we brought out an immeasurable number of the walls of tents, and posts, and vases, and panels, and sections, and for-

tresses and palaces and awnings; and tents made of *dabiqi* [linen], and velvet, and royal silk, and Armenian and Bahnasi and Cordoban fabric, and quality Aleppine of all colours and types. And also of sondos [a green silk believed by Muslims to be worn by the pious in heaven], some of which have elephants, and some with leopards, and horses, and peacocks, and birds. And others have wild beasts and people of many types, and beautiful images. Some of them are plain, and others are patterned, and lined with wondrous designs. And the posts of these tents are covered with silver pipes. There are gold-threaded textiles, and textiles without gold of all types and colours. There are ropes covered with silk and others with cotton. There are skeins of Chinese silk, and *tastari* [heavy silk], and flattened silk, and feathered silk and other types of silks of all colours large and small.<sup>2</sup>

The “palaces” and “fortresses” found in the tent storeroom described above are a reminder that these tents were effectively ‘portable’ court architecture made of wood and fabric. At its most elaborate, the royal tent structure was an encampment rather than one simple tent space as such, and in accounts elsewhere, both by al-Maqrizi and other chroniclers, descriptions of people moving from one tent space to another confirm this. What was in the storerooms was clearly a wealth of expensive, lavishly-decorated tent parts—the trappings of an entire royal tent world—used to provide the ruler with a befitting setting whenever he needed a temporary base outside one of his ‘built’ palaces.

The tents were part of the royal insignia of the Fatimid court, along with a wide range of items, some of them textiles or textile-related, including the caliph’s parasol, his turban, and the solitaire that topped the royal turban, *al-Yatima*—the unique. The importance of the caliph’s textile world in royal ceremonies is perhaps captured best in the simple fact that the royal parasol, actually a horse-mounted canopy, always matched what the caliph was wearing. It was part of who he was and part of his aura, and an object usually not even afforded to his own son. By the late twelfth century, the caliph’s public appearances were accompanied by quite a range of textiles: not just tents and canopies, but banners and standards, which were as important as his symbols of physical power like his sword, lance, and shield.<sup>3</sup> It is in this context that the Fatimid royal tents must be seen.

There appear to have been two main types of tents in the royal storeroom. The first type was known as a *fustat*, which was essentially a round, pointed structure, in its simplest form a bit like a tepee. Many of the royal *fustats* must have been quite elaborate, and consisted of several round tent

spaces adjacent to one another. The second type was a more modular rectilinear structure, more like today's marquees, which existed in several different forms, and while it is hard to determine exactly what they looked like, it is possible to formulate some kind of idea of how they differed from the *fustat* type.

There was a flat type (*al-mustatih*), one example of which was described as being a square 'abode' supported by six columns. Four of the columns supported the interior of the tent, while the remaining two were used to support the entrance awning. Another version seems to have been of the same design only smaller, with only two interior columns rather than four. The advantage of this type of tent, as opposed to the *fustat*, was that because it was rectilinear, it was also modular, and thus could be extended easily as required. As al-Maqrizi reminds us, the larger the tent, the greater the number of columns.

Capturing the breeze and the light was another concern, and the description of the square tents in the royal storeroom mentions their great flexibility and that an awning could be created on any side of the tent. In fact, the side chosen depended on the direction of the sun: as it moved over the course of the day, the open side of the tent would be altered, too. In some cases, a back flap existed to create a flow of air through the tent. From these basic shapes, a whole array of tent forms could be created, many of them elaborate turreted structures not unlike today's Disney castles.

As the tents in the royal storeroom were a major part of the royal paraphernalia, in many cases, their provenance, their patrons, their history, and their peculiarities were well known. Like the palaces and mosques of medieval Cairo, the tents too had their stories.

## **Al-Yazuri's Tent: A Story of Patience and Opulence**

Abu al-Hassan the tentman recounts removing a huge tent from the storeroom, whose size and shape earned it the rather unimaginative name of 'the large round one.' It is reported to have been 500 cubits<sup>4</sup> in circumference with an appropriately tall central pole 65 cubits high, 6.3 cubits in diameter, and 20 in circumference. It must have been a two-tiered tent, as Abu al-Hassan records a 'wind-catcher' 30 cubits long on top. This probably would have been a perforated superstructure through which hot air would rise up through the tent, helping to ensure that it would remain cool. The architecture of Cairo masterfully evolved to deal effectively with the challenges of a hot climate, and it is perfectly logical that in this respect too, the tents reflected the engineering technology of their more

solid counterparts. The typical Cairene house of families that could afford it would include a large reception room, the *qa'a*, where the central area, often with a fountain, had a raised ceiling with openings close to the top to allow for the escape of warm air.

As with all large tents, 'the large round one' was made up of sections, in this case sixty-four of them, which were tied together with cords. These sections may have had textile panels with wooden posts sewn into them, not unlike a modern partition dividing a room. Moving such a large tent would have been a monumental undertaking, and Abu al-Hassan tells us that this one required 100 camels to transport, ropes and all, from one place to another. Unsurprisingly, this tent, like most of the others in the palace storeroom, was lavishly decorated. It had a beautiful arcaded design and a border supposedly depicting every animal on earth. A giant silver basin for water, apparently dispensed via three iron spouts, was one of the tent's accoutrements. There is little doubt that the basin would have served to cool the tent, creating an atmosphere of freshness.<sup>5</sup>

## **Al-Yazuri**

The patron of the large round tent was the Palestinian-born al-Yazuri, who rose in the ranks to great prominence in the Fatimid court, becoming both vizier and grand judge. Like others who saw stardom in medieval times, his ascent was interwoven with the stuff of legend. It is said that as a young man en route to Egypt, he went on pilgrimage to the holy shrines in Arabia and on visiting the shrine of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina, fell asleep in the sacred chamber. While he slept, some of the saffron which infused the walls fell upon him, and when a few of the attendants of the shrine noticed the sleeper and saw what had happened, they woke him up to tell him the news: "This is a great omen," they exclaimed, "you will be blessed with a career of great prosperity."<sup>6</sup> For the most part, they were right, as al-Yazuri's career really took off in Cairo. He began in the 1040s in the service of the caliph's mother, Sayyida Rasad. Rasad effectively controlled the reins of power as her son, al-Mustansir, was only a boy when he came to the throne. Predictably, al-Yazuri's rapid ascent earned him some enemies, namely the chief judge, who felt that he was rising too far above his station. Al-Yazuri pushed his luck a little too far by joining the chief judge's entourage, who would confer every Monday in one of the wings of the royal palace.

"What do you think you are doing here?" he was told angrily by the chief judge. "This isn't a meeting for just anyone!" The rebuff was

humiliating, and al-Yazuri left the meeting as fast as his legs could carry him. He waited by the palace gate, following the coterie of court notables as they left the palace after the meeting. Perhaps optimistically, he then followed the chief judge home in the hope that he could appease him for the awkward incident. But al-Yazuri was ignored. Heavy-hearted, he returned home to find that thirty loads of apples from his orchards in Palestine had arrived for sale in the Egyptian market. Rather than sell them, he decided to divide the apples up, sending five camel-loads to the chief judge and each of the key members of his entourage, and two camel-loads for his guards, hoping that the gift would sway the courtiers in his favor. Day by day, he loitered by the palace gate, hoping to catch a word here or there. His patience paid off though, when a courtier, Adit al-dawla, was struck by al-Yazuri's personality and grew enamored by his conversation, always asking him to stay on longer to chat. He eventually recommended al-Yazuri to Abu Nasr, a high-ranking court official, setting him on the path of his illustrious career.<sup>7</sup>

Al-Yazuri's patience extended to the commissioning of his tent as well. It is supposed to have taken 150 workmen nine years to manufacture, and even if this account is slightly exaggerated, it gives an indication of the tent's opulence and scale. It cost him 30,000 dinars to make when it was produced in the mid-eleventh century. Al-Yazuri was clearly somebody who wanted to create eye-catching architecture, whether temporary or permanent. For the decoration of one of his palaces, he is reported to have hired two outstanding trompe l'oeil artists, one of whom boasted that he could paint a figure so realistic that it looked as if it were walking into the wall, while the other said he could paint a figure so realistic it looked as if it were walking out of it. Al-Yazuri put them both to the test, and ended up with a mural of a woman clad in white dancing into the wall, and another, clad in red, dancing out of it. One can only imagine what the great round tent he commissioned would have looked like.<sup>8</sup>

By many accounts, al-Yazuri's tenure as vizier was marked by stability, and even those who did not like him admired his ability to quell rebellion. Unfortunately though, his extravagance eventually counted against him. He was accused of filling his own coffers while the country starved and his penchant for lavish banquets, specifically, was held against him, leading to his assassination at a banquet in 1058. Could his monumental and incredibly lavish tent have contributed to his unfortunate downfall?

In a strange twist to this tale, al-Yazuri's death actually precipitated the political chaos that saw the country collapse into a dire economic state.

Among the impacts of this was the stripping of the Fatimid palace of all its contents, leading to the fascinating account of the tent storeroom. Abu al-Hassan recounts his task that day of dividing the round tent up into pieces and distributing it among the claimants. “We spent a long time to separate one section from another,” he says, “and to cut it into pieces for distribution.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Al-Qatul: The Great Prototype**

For all its grandeur and the sense of wonder al-Yazuri’s tent gave Abu al-Hassan the tentmaker when tasked with removing it from the royal storeroom, it was not without precedent. It was based on a tent commissioned by the Fatimid Caliph al-‘Aziz, whose reign ended around fifty years before al-Yazuri’s rise to prominence. This older tent was nicknamed al-Qatul, ‘the killer,’ because on the first day that it was erected one of the tentmen fell from the top of its central pole and died. Al-Qatul was reputedly even larger, more magnificent, and better than al-Yazuri’s tent, and to manufacture it Caliph al-‘Aziz had sent for tree trunks from Byzantium and procured two which were seventy cubits high and cost him 1,000 dinars each. One of these was later cut down slightly and reused for al-Yazuri’s tent (having lost five cubits) and taken with him on an expedition to Alexandria.<sup>10</sup> The tent was so large that it is supposed to have covered an area of two acres (0.8 hectares) when set up.<sup>11</sup>

### **The ‘House of Watermelons’ and Other Wonders**

The next tent Abu al-Hassan took out of the storeroom was a large paneled one of iridescent velvet, made in Tanis in the North of Egypt, also for al-‘Aziz, the patron of al-Qatul. This one was known as Dar al-batikh, the ‘house of watermelons.’ This term seems to have often been used to refer to fruit markets, but could be used somewhat cynically to refer to other things that were a hotch-potch or overly ‘busy.’ For example, in the Abbasid Court in Baghdad, a tenth-century poem written by the renowned poet al-Rumi was nicknamed ‘the poem of the house of watermelons,’ partly because it had so many references to fruit, but also because its critics felt it to be over-wrought, ‘heavy,’ and excessively dense in imagery.<sup>12</sup> It is likely that the ‘house of watermelons’ tent shared these characteristics, and judging by the description of al-‘Aziz’s other tent, it is plausible that this one was particularly gaudy.

In terms of its structure, the ‘house of watermelons’ tent was pavilion-like, with a central dome supported by four columns eighteen cubits high, and two other columns at its center. In each of the four corners was a