Bernard O’Kane

THE MOSQUES OF EGYPT

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WHAT IS A MOSQUE?

Whenever the time of prayer comes, pray there, for that is a mosque. (The Prophet Muhammad)³

The word mosque is derived from the Arabic masjid, meaning a place of prostration. The other main word used is jami', meaning a congregational or Friday mosque. As can be seen from the above saying of the Prophet Muhammad, there are no architectural requirements for prayer, making the definition of a mosque as a building a difficult if not impossible task.

In many Islamic countries, but perhaps especially in Egypt, the multiplicity of building types in which prayer was regularly carried out cautions against any attempt to apply a narrow definition. One of the simplest ways to recognize a place where prayer is encouraged is to look for the presence of a mihrab, a niche, frequently decorated, in the qibla wall. There have been various interpretations of the meaning of the mihrab. Popular opinion has it that it serves to identify the qibla wall in a mosque, but its frequent invisibility from most areas within the building makes this unlikely.

The form was an honorific one in the pre-Islamic world, and many early sources report that its first appearance was in the enlargement of the Mosque of Madina by al-Walid in the early eighth century. There it was not in the center of the qibla wall, but marked the spot where the Prophet had led the prayers as the imam of the first Muslim community.⁴ It has been suggested that it reflected the throne niche of pre-Islamic palaces,⁵ but its subsequent appearance not only in congregational mosques but also in all neighborhood mosques implies that it served to commemorate the Prophet in his role as the first imam, the leader of the community in prayer. Its intimate connection with prayer then led to its being incorporated into other buildings such as mausoleums.⁶ This latter option became more common where crypts were introduced into mausoleums, letting designers designate the main story as an oratory, and so lessening the objections of some religious scholars to the building of mausoleums in the first place.⁷ In Egypt the preference for a multiplicity of mihrabs is indeed first apparent in Fatimid mausoleums, and the slightly later Ayyubid Mausoleum of Imam al-Shaf'i
even has a fourth mihrab, correcting the orientation of the earlier triple-mihrab. Another indication of the importance of not just private but communal prayer in shrines is the number of portable wooden mihrabs made for them; they must have been needed when the attendees spilled out on to the areas adjoining the shrine. 

Some of the basic tenets of Islam have traditionally been described as its Five Pillars. The first is the *shahada*, bearing witness that there is but one God and that Muhammad is His prophet. Not surprisingly, this is one of the most common inscriptions found on mosques. The second is the requirement to pray five times a day. The centrality of prayer is reflected in the preponderance of neighborhood and congregational mosques in the Islamic world. Muslims are encouraged to pray together, but this is obligatory only at the noon prayer on Fridays. It was desirable that a mosque should be able to accommodate all of the local inhabitants, so clearly there was a need for large buildings in many towns. However, washing is necessary to achieve a state of ritual purity, so ablutions facilities were a normal adjunct to mosques. The call to prayer was given by the sound of the human voice, originally from the rooftop of the mosque. The benefit of tall towers for this purpose, both to aid the dispersion of the call and to advertise the presence of mosques, soon led to minarets becoming standard features of larger mosques, although exactly when this happened in Egypt is a matter of dispute.

In congregational mosques a sermon (khutba) preceded the prayer, during which the imam sat on a minbar (pulpit); these, usually made of wood, attracted some of the finest craftsmanship of the day.

Another pillar of the faith was the requirement to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. One of the unexpected consequences of this was the ease with which ideas, including artistic innovations, were quickly spread across the Islamic world. Artists and craftsmen who made the pilgrimage increased their opportunities for contacts. They may already have traveled a considerable distance to the Hijaz, and so if patronage had withered in their homeland they could more easily take their expertise to a patron in a neighboring country. We will see many buildings in Egypt that are reflective of forms and styles coming from other areas of the Muslim world, east and west.

Most of the buildings in this book are exclusively or primarily mosques—but in addition, mausoleums, madrasas, khanqabs (residences for Sufis), and shrines are also represented here. The distinction between mosques, madrasas, khanqabs, and zawiyas (small Sufi residences) became very fluid in the Mamluk period; from the second quarter of the fourteenth century, Friday prayer began to be permitted not only in some of those institutions but even in turbas (funerary complexes) in the cemeteries of Cairo.

Prior to the Mamluk period the primary legal school in Egypt was the Shafi'i, which permitted only one Friday mosque in each urban entity. But the Hanafi school, favored by the Mamluks, had no such restriction. The expansion of Friday prayer into multiple institutions is reflected in the number of buildings in Cairo by the end of the Mamluk period in which Friday prayer was permitted: 221 in total. The function of buildings thus often changed over time, and of course, in contemporary Egypt, where Sufis no longer live in khanqabs and where religious students are educated in universities, former madrasas and khanqabs have become the equivalent of not just masjids, or

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neighborhood mosques, but also of congregational mosques for much of the population. As noted above, the presence of a mihrab within a monument is an indication that it was intended for prayer, of at least a private nature. This applies to almost all mausoleums, whether the body was buried in a crypt or in the ground well below any grave marker that signaled the presence of a burial. This surprising development is emphasized by endowment deeds that occasionally specifically stated that the dome chambers were designated as masjids, with that of Sultan Hasan, for instance, having its own imam for Friday prayers. Prayer within or in the proximity of mausoleums was encouraged by founders for the spiritual merit (thawab) that they could convey for the soul of the deceased. In the case of shrines, the transfer of blessings could also be reciprocal. Pilgrims prayed for the pious intercession of the person buried at the site, but also wished to partake of the grace or blessings (baraka) bestowed there on visitors.

This array of building types also reflects the multiplicity of functions that the mosque performed within Muslim society. It was always a place of social gathering, and it was not unusual for commercial transactions to be carried out in it as well. Meals could be eaten within, and some of the major mosques, such as al-Azhar, at times even acquired many permanent residents. Recitations of the Quran or of the hadith were regularly performed, sometimes by personnel appointed in the waqf. During Ramadan especially, it was a place of retreat for many inhabitants of a city. Before the rise of the madrasa it was the main place of education, and before the rise of zawiyyas and khanqahs in the thirteenth century, a place for ascetics who preached to their followers. Nasir-i Khusraw’s description of the mosque of ‘Amr in Cairo, which he visited in the middle of the eleventh century, conveys some of this diverse activity:

Inside there are always teachers and Quran-readers, and this mosque is the promenade of the city, as there are never less than five thousand people – students, the indigent, scribes who write checks and money drafts, and others.  

**Early Islamic Egypt to the End of the Ayyubids (640–1250)**

Byzantine rule in Egypt had already been considerably weakened by the beginning of the seventh century, when the Sasanians launched a successful invasion of Syria and Egypt. They were forced to retreat, but it was only in 628 that the Byzantine emperor Heraclius succeeded in gaining back the territory that had been lost. Heraclius celebrated his return to power in Egypt by appointing Cyrus, formerly a bishop of Phasis in the Caucasus, to rule from Alexandria. Cyrus was a militant Diophysite, a follower of the orthodox Byzantine interpretation of the two natures of Christ, unlike the Copts who followed the Monophysite party. This had major consequences following the astonishing early conquests of the Muslim armies in Syria. The Muslim general ‘Amr ibn al-‘As took complete control of Egypt in the short span of three years, from 639 to 642. The ease with which he was able to do this may partly be attributed to the divided loyalties of the Copts, who formed the bulk of the rural population, as to whether they should be ruled by their persecutors, the Byzantines, or a new conquering power.
‘Amr established his capital at Fustat beside the old Byzantine fortress of Babylon, now the heart of what is today called Coptic Cairo. It was here that he built the first recorded mosque in Egypt. The present mosque has been so altered that almost nothing of the pre-modern building has been preserved. However, we have considerable knowledge of its earlier gradual enlargements from written sources and previous studies of the building. From the beginning and through its many alterations its plan has been what is called Arab hypostyle, one in which a courtyard is surrounded by arcaded bays supported on columns. This plan remained the basis of mosque design in Egypt for centuries, so it is worth asking where the design came from.

For this, we need to go back to Madina at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Muhammad and his followers had made a migration (hijra) to Madina in 622, a date so important that it marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar. The preeminent building associated with the Prophet had a very large open courtyard, with shade on the side facing Mecca provided by two rows of palm trunks covered with thatched palm leaves. It was here that Muhammad led the first Muslim prayers. Another smaller shaded area on the north was roofed in the same way. Near the courtyard were houses in which Muhammad and his wives lived. Although some earlier scholars thought of this as Muhammad’s house, which was coincidentally used as a mosque, more recent scholarship has stressed that it was intended as a mosque from the outset. The importance of this structure in the communal memory of the Muslim community would help to explain why so many early mosques adopted the plan of a courtyard building with a roof supported by columns on the side facing Mecca.

There is very little information on other mosques in Egypt before that of Ibn Tulun. The ‘Abbasids settled in a new location north of the town of Fustat called al-‘Askar, although it never replaced the previous settlement. As was the case in some earlier Muslim foundations, such as Basra, al-‘Askar included a governor’s palace (dar al-imara) and a congregational mosque adjacent to it. This, the Jami’ al-‘Askar, was built in 786, but we have no information on what it looked like, either from descriptions or archaeological remains.

A major shift in Islamic Egypt occurred with the governorship of Ahmad ibn Tulun, beginning in 868. By this point, the ‘Abbasids, ruling from Samarra, north of Baghdad, had been concerned for some time with putting down revolts in Iraq and with the rebellion of the Saffarids, rulers of eastern Iran. The caliphate itself had been weakened through its manipulation by the Turkish troops who formed the most powerful section of the ‘Abbasid army. They were resident in Samarra, and Ibn Tulun rose to prominence from their ranks. After Ibn Tulun became governor of Egypt, he soon had to raise a large number of troops to put down rebellions in Palestine and Syria, and having wrested control of the finances from the ‘Abbasid administrator he extended the boundaries of his authority as far as the borders of Iraq. In 877, the caliph dispatched an army to replace Ibn Tulun, but there were insufficient funds to pay the caliph’s soldiers, who returned to Iraq without having fought a battle. Thus began Ibn Tulun’s autonomous rule, one that was marked by sound financial administration and particularly by investment in irrigation, improving agricultural yields.
One of the reasons for the Abbasid caliphate's move from Baghdad to Samarra was the disruption caused by the Turkish troops. Similar complaints were made about Ibn Tulun's large contingent of Turkish troops, and may have been a factor in his decision to build a new city at al-Qita'i', north of the two previous foundations. His ability to build on a large scale was also facilitated by the fact that he no longer had to send any but a nominal tribute to Baghdad.

His mosque at al-Qita'i' is the earliest surviving one in Egypt that is mostly intact. Medieval historians credit a Christian architect with designing the piers of the building so that Christian churches would not have to be destroyed for their columns (as may have been the case at the mosque of 'Amr). This is clearly an attempt to explain the novelty for Egypt of using piers instead of columns, but in Samarra, bereft of stone, this technique was the norm for mosques. Other features such as the ziyada, the helicoidal minaret (even if the current one is a Mamluk replacement), and the style of the stucco all point to an architect familiar with Ibn Tulun's Abbasid heritage. This is also an early example of what was to become a familiar feature in Cairo and Egypt: the adoption and adaptation of traits from outside the area. While this is a characteristic of virtually all major regions, Cairo's prestige as a center of patronage proved a lure for craftsmen from the main centers of the Islamic world.

Little is known about other mosques in this period before the coming of the Fatimids, but one very different form can be identified from various sources: the nine-bay type. The plan was used in diverse pre-Islamic contexts, and proved to be very popular not just in the early period but throughout the history of Islam. It consists of a square room with four evenly spaced supports dividing the interior into nine equal spaces. The reasons for its perennial appeal are several. Its three-by-three bays create a plan of perfect symmetry, always a pleasing aesthetic consideration. In terms of practicality, it is a very economical way of roofing a space with a minimum number of supports. It is true that the most economical solution would be one column that would produce four bays of equal size, but this has the ugly result of encumbering the center of the room. This would be particularly unfortunate in a mosque, where the column would block the view of a centrally placed mihrab.15

At Raya, near the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, there is a sixth-century fort that was altered in the ninth or tenth century to include a mosque.16 Three of its walls are aligned, like the earlier fort, on the cardinal points, while the fourth, the qibla side, is inclined slightly toward the southeast, making the building marginally trapezoidal in plan. It had four one-meter-diameter pillars that divided the interior into nine almost equal bays. The excavators uncovered painted decoration on plaster of vegetal motifs, inscriptions, and, in a frieze along all the walls, a series of rosettes.

In the southern cemetery of Cairo are the remains of the Tomb of al-Sharif Tabataba (d. 943), a building that medieval pilgrimage guides describe as both a shrine (masbah) and a masjid.17 It may date from around the middle of the tenth century, around the date of death of the supposed occupant. When K. A. C. Creswell surveyed the building, the walls stood only to a level of around one meter high. His restoration of cross arcades is suggested by the central cruciform piers, although the "domes" above
this that Creswell drew could equally have been tunnel vaults or groin vaults. The entrances are at least certain: three on each side with the exception of the qibla, which had a mihrab in the central bay—a plan identical to that of the earlier Bab al-Mardum Mosque at Toledo in Spain, dated to 1000.19

The Fatimids (909–1171) were able to establish one of the longest-lasting Shi'i states in the Middle East. They claimed descent from the Prophet’s daughter, Fatima, the wife of ‘Ali and the mother of Hasan and Husayn—all figures of great reverence for Shi’is. An emissary of the Fatimids was able to convert the Berbers of Tunisia to their cause and to overthrow the Aghlabids, who had previously governed on behalf of the ‘Abbasids. The Fatimid ruler, ‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi, was then enthroned in 909. Al-Mahdi (his name means the Rightly-Guided One) declared himself caliph in opposition to the ‘Abbasids, putting an end to the semblance of unity that had prevailed in Muslim polity until then. He built a new capital named Mahdia after himself, furnishing it with a palace, a harbor, and a congregational mosque that was to be important in its shaping of later Fatimid religious buildings in Egypt.

The Fatimids’ ultimate goal was to supersede the ‘Abbasids, and they made several probing raids toward a much richer prize: Egypt. In 969, they finally succeeded in overthrowing the ‘Abbasid governors there, and consolidated their position by expanding into Syria. Their prestige also greatly increased with subsequent control of the holy cities of Mecca and Madina in the Hijaz, although they were never able, as they had hoped, to push on to Baghdad and eliminate the ‘Abbasids.

In Egypt, the Fatimid ruler al-Mu'izz founded a new princely city, naming it al-Qahira (the triumphant), the name from which Cairo and its synonyms in other European languages are derived. Al-Qahira is also the name used for the modern city of Cairo. This city was exclusively for the rulers and their followers; the common people
continued to reside in Fustat farther south, from where they would have commuted by donkey to serve in al-Qahira. At the centre of the new city was the royal palace, and near it to the southeast was the Mosque of al-Azhar (972). The mosque borrowed from Mahdiya doubled columns in the transept and the dome in front of the mihrab, although the stucco that decorates its walls is of purely Egyptian invention.

In 976, Durzan, the wife of al-Mu'izz and the mother of the new imam-caliph, al-'Aziiz, built the second Fatimid mosque that we know of in Egypt, in partnership with her daughter, Sitt al-Malik. This, the no longer extant Jami’ al-Qarafa, was situated in the cemetery between Fustat and Cairo. Whether this location was chosen to promote the Isma'ili cause among the inhabitants of Fustat or because a female patron was not permitted to build in the urban enclosure of Cairo is not clear; at any rate, her mosque proved popular with the whole Fatimid establishment, becoming a favorite place in which to pass Friday evenings. In the summer the courtyard, and in the winter the prayer hall near the minbar, were used for socializing, eating, and sleeping. We also have more specific information about the building, which was supposedly based on al-Azhar Mosque. Its entrance portal, probably projecting, had a door revetted with iron plaques. Above it was a minaret. Although we cannot be certain, these features were probably also present at al-Azhar. While the mosque at Mahdiya did not have a minaret, it being proscribed by earlier Fatimid legal texts, in Egypt the Fatimids evidently saw the need to compete for the skyline with the towers of Christian churches, more frequent in Egypt than in Ifriqiya (modern Tunisia). In al-Qarafa Mosque, Maqrizi particularly singles out the colorful painted decoration of the ceiling for praise, reminding us of how much is missing from the surviving pre-Mamluk mosques.

Al-Aziz himself in 990 began the mosque outside Bab al-Futuh that was finished by his successor al-Hakim after a gap of twenty-three years. It was earlier known as the Mosque of al-Anwar, “the brilliant,” although it is called the Mosque of al-Hakim today. It remained the largest of the Fatimid mosques, and even increased in size with the addition of a ziyada erected by al-Hakim’s successor, al-Zahir. Its layout combined much from the two major previous Cairene mosques, borrowing the piers with engaged columns from Ibn Tulun, and the clerestory and dome above the mihrab from al-Azhar. However, its two extra domes on the qibla side, and its two minarets on the opposite side, were novel.

Al-Hakim also erected major mosques at al-Maqs (modern Bulaq in Cairo), and at al-Rashida near Fustat. In 1005, he led prayers at the end of the Ramadan fast at the Rashida Mosque, the procession there being made more memorable for the six horses with jewel-studded saddles, six elephants, and five giraffes that preceded it. This mosque also seems to have had a minaret with, like that at the Mosque of al-Hakim, the name of its founder prominently displayed on it.

During the long reign of the caliph al-Mustansir (1036–94), there were insurrections and fighting between Berber, Turkish and Sudanese troops, accompanied by famine in the years 1062–72. Al-Mustansir called on the vizier Badr al-Jamali, governor of Acre in Palestine, to restore order in 1073. Al-Jamali, known as the amir al-Juyushi, brought his troops with him and was singularly successful in routing the various factions.
However, there was a price to pay: henceforth, the vizier had almost as much actual power as the caliph. Badr al-Jamali was an active patron, building the new stone walls around Cairo with its famous gates of Bab al-Futuh, Bab al-Nasr and Bab Zuwayla, as well as the Shrine of al-Juyushi. He also erected a mosque at the Nilometer, where the Monasterly Palace now stands. Its hypostyle plan was recorded in the *Description de l’Egypte*, although since it was restored by the Ayyubid sultan Najm al-Din it is not clear how much should be attributed to Badr al-Jamali. The *Description* also recorded an inscription of Badr al-Jamali on the outer wall facing the river traffic, in which his name was visible in letters nearly a meter high—at the time, a novel way to advertise the munificence of a patron.27

Al-Juyushi’s shrine on the Musqattam cliffs bears a strong resemblance to the later Shrine of Sayyida Ruqayya (1133), except that the latter’s courtyard has disappeared. It is worth noting that the mausoleums erected by the Fatimids in their propagandizing zeal28 almost always included mihrabs, and many even had multiple mihrabs. The Shrine of Sayyida Ruqayya, for instance, has five surviving mihrabs, and even had a further, portable mihrab, presumably for use in the adjacent street or open space on feast days when the crowds could not be accommodated within the shrine. The mausoleum of Ikhwat Yusuf even has a triple mihrab on the qibla wall, a feature also found in the Ayyubid Shrine of Imam al-Shafi’i.

The nine-bay plan mentioned above continued to be part of Fatimid architecture. At Aswan, the Shrine of the Sab’a wa Sab‘in Wali (seventy-seven governors, eleventh century) is now known only from its plan, the original having been destroyed in 1901. It had cross arcades surmounted by nine domes, and a projecting mihrab on the qibla side. There was one entrance opposite the qibla, and another in the middle of the east side. It is not known whether the adjacent minaret was contemporary, but it showed that the building functioned as a funerary mosque. A related plan is that of the Mashad al-Qibli, or Bilal, near Shillal, also probably eleventh century.29 This has a plan of six domed bays, with the three on the qibla side each having a mihrab. Here too a minaret, in this case certainly original, was adjacent to the prayer hall.30

Another mosque that was considered to have this plan was the Jam‘ al-Fiyala built near Birkat al-Habash in Cairo, founded by al-Afdal, the son of Badr al-Jamali, dating from 1104.31 Maqrizi states that there were nine specially decorated domes at its highest point on its qibla side.32 Some earlier discussions of this monument have assumed that the mosque contained nine domes and nothing else. However, Maqrizi’s statement could mean either that the main (or only) prayer hall had just nine domes, or, more