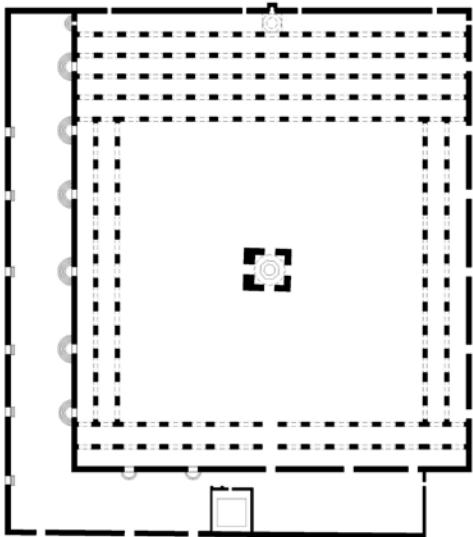


DISCOVERING OUR HERITAGE

# THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MOSQUES OF CAIRO (I)



TEXT BY GIHANE ZAKI



Mosque Ibn Tulun

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**DISCOVERING OUR HERITAGE**

**THE MOST BEAUTIFUL  
MOSQUES OF CAIRO (I)**



# THE MOSQUE OF AHMAD IBN TULUN

Once upon a time... In the year 876 when Charles le Chauve was recognised King of Italy, his contemporary Ahmad ibn Tulun has been chosen among the soldiers of Samarra troops in Iraq to be Emir of Egypt.



Few years later, Ibn Tulun announced his independency of the Abasside empire based in Baghdad and immediately decided to create the new Tulunid state in Egypt (Al Dawla al-Tuluneya) with a new and innovative capital to replace the old Fostat.

Once the decision was taken, architects hurried up to draw plans of the new city called Al Qata'i and moved forward with the creation of streets, sabils, houses and palaces for the ruler and his court.

In the centre of this capital, they built a huge palace complex, a hippodrome, and a large mosque which became known over the history by jami'a Ibn Tulun.



According to the inscription found in the mosque, the work was achieved in May 879 AD with splendid decor and very rich architectural motives. This mosque is now considered as the oldest and best preserved mosque in Egypt and the only remaining monument in the City of Qata'i'.



Children, come on... Let us notice firstly the wonderful crenellated outside walls merlons that are shaped and perforated in a decorative pattern.

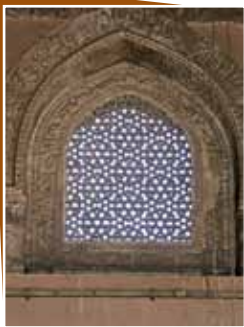
Woow! So much refined!  
Yalla, we will step  
towards the courtyards:  
Look at that, a splendid  
square space surrounded  
with elegant arcades of  
broad arches and heavy  
pillars while the roofed  
oratory of the mosque  
is divided by pillars into



five long naves, originally ornamented with panels of carved wood. In the middle of the courtyard, the ablutions fountain is beautifully present as a rare jewel, an innovation element of the summer 1296 signed by the Mamluk sultan, Hosam al-Din Lajin.

Take a look over, here and there, and you will notice that the decoration is elaborated with refined designs in carved stucco. In fact, the mosque contains the oldest and richest collection of stucco decoration in Egypt, which reflects a

strong relationship with the decorative styles of the Great Mosque of Samarra in Iraq (the capital of the Abbasid state during AH 221–79 / AD 836–92).



And what about all those windows? Said Peter astonishingly! One of the characteristic of this mosque is the 128 stucco windows, pierced in the walls all around the mosque and decorated with geometric motives and interwoven vegetal

ornaments that reminds those of the Umayyad Great Mosque in Damascus built in 714, responded Mostafa, the representative of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, who drew the children's attention that studies have indicated that only four of the windows date back to the period of Ibn Tulun due to the specific flounce that appears as intersecting circles while the rest of the windows are dated from the Fatimid and Mamluk periods.

Lucky you are to have this opportunity! This collection of stucco windows is considered one of the most exquisite architecture, since each window differs from the other in the layout of its decorative motives. What a richness!



Moreover, Ibn Tulun full of ambition and animated with zeal and enthusiasm expressed his wish to his advisors to have buildings that would stand fire and flood. He was told to build with plaster, ash and red brick, and not to erect any columns of marble as they do not stand well against fire.

Let us go now to visit the ziyada area... Is it an Arabic word? Said Karim. In fact yes! Ziyada is an arabic word that means extension. On the north,

west and south sides, a large wall surrounds the mosque. Between these walls and the walls of the building, there is an open area called ziyada by the autochthons, an example of which may also be seen in the Great Mosque of Samarra in Iraq as well as the Great Mosque of Sousse in Tunisia.



The Congregational Mosque of Ibn Tulun is considered to be one of the biggest mosques in Egypt whose entire surface area, including the ziyada, exceeds 26,318 sqm.

## THE MOSQUE OF AL-HAKIM BI-AMR ALLAH

Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah... Such a glamorous name in the Egyptian tradition! We can hear it here and there in the four corners of Egypt in various social contexts, especially when it comes to a husband or a director behaving like dictator!

Yes, a powerful and authoritative profile is instinctively, in the Egyptian tradition, compared to Al-Hakim bi Amr-Allah!

Oooh! Please Mostafa, tell us more about this curious personage: Who is he? A pharaoh? No, he was not a Pharaoh! Al-Hakim bi Amr-Allah was the first ruler of the Arab Fatimid dynasty, originally from Tunisia, to have been born in Egypt.



Almost one thousand years ago (In 996), he succeeded his father at the age of eleven with the caliphal title of Al-Hakim Bi-Amr Allah, literally, Ruler by God's Command and he carried on the political life in Egypt for 25 years until he went off on a mysterious one way ride to al-Muqattam hills and never returned!

But let me tell you that Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah was known to many by his weird dictatorial and eccentric decrees; once he declared himself a divine entity, unique among his ruler peers over Cairo medieval ages. Among his eccentric



decrees, he prevented eating molokheya to Egyptian people, knowing that it is their favourite dish. He also prohibited selling raisins for more than 5 pounds and prevented buying honey exceeding 3 pounds. Beside that, Al-Hakim put a curfew that restricted the inhabitants of Cairo to go outside after the last evening prayers (al eisha) and punished those who did.

Now you can figure our reasons why his name is closely related to dictatorship and weirdness.

And what about his mosque? Said John, did he give special instructions like the ruler Ibn Tulun for his mosque architecture?



Absolutely not, replied the professor and he carried on saying: this case is different because this mosque construction started in 990 under the Caliph Al Aziz bi-Allah, son of the famous Caliph Al Moez li-Deen Allah

Al Fatimy, and our eccentric ruler Al-Hakim had only to complete minor details of the completion phase of the work.



From that time, it means almost one thousands years ago, the mosque kept the name of Al-Hakim to be considered as the second largest Fatimid mosque in Cairo.

Mostafa, who is always around to provide some additional explanations, raised his voice to overcoat the noise of Al Muez street and said: Originally the mosque of Al-Hakim stood

outside the enclosure walls of the Fatimid Cairo until the very famous architect Badr al-Gamali, founder of the Fatimid capital Cairo, rebuilt the Northern Wall of the city and included consequently the mosque within the boundaries of the enclosed city.



Peter laughed, while stepping inside court. How tall was the people at that time?

Mostafa replied: I see! Your question was inspired from the monumental door that we have just crossed. He breathed profoundly and said: This mosque is characterised with this central monumental portal that was pierced in the front façade and it is also known with the three domes erected above a central nave higher and wider than the lateral aisles, with a basilica disposition that leads to the Qibla, so it is very natural than to end up with a Mihrab

Basically, the mosque has an irregular rectangular plan with a central open courtyard surrounded by arcades supported by compound piers with a prayer hall that, over its lifetime, has been converted many times; it served as a prison for captive Crusaders, Napoleon's warehouse, Salah al-Din's stable, a lamp factory, and a boys' elementary school in the 60's, in which a basketball court was marked off in the courtyard. Nevertheless, the mosque of Al-Hakim was largely known as House of Wisdom or Dar al-Hikma.

## THE MOSQUE OF AL-AQMAR



Here we are children... Look at that! Another Fatimid mosque like the one we have seen in the beginning of Al Muez street. This one is considered one of the most beautiful Fatimid mosques not only in Egypt but in Islamic world for its distinctive features of the western façade. This last is considered among the oldest stone façades, decorated in this rich varied style, in Islamic architecture in Egypt.



Very possibly, the decorative elements on monumental portal that we had crossed in Al-Hakim Mosque, had been behind the inspiration of this one. Historical sources indicate that stone was used in Fatimid architecture alongside bricks.



Tell me, Mostafa, were there any tourists at that time? I mean 1000 years ago? Said Peter. Of course, there were numerous trips and pilgrimages organised to the Nile Valley on different occasions of the year. One of the great travellers at that time was Nasir Khesrou who documented very meticulously sightseeing and different places he went through in his Carnet de Voyage. Nasir visited Egypt in 1048 AD and had a stop over many of Fatimid palaces that apparently, according to his comments, impressed him



with their stone façades carved out symmetrically and including a number of components with shell forms, blind-arched niches borne on spiral columns, in addition to vases, rosettes and diamond shapes.

The façade also consists of chamfered-edged niches (muqarnas); a new architectural element seen previously on the gate of Bab al-Futuh in Cairo built in 1087. The façade is also embellished with beautiful inscription bands carved in the kufic script. To the left of the entrance there is a minaret that was constructed in 1396 under the reign of Sultan Al-Zahir Barquq.

The mosque's interior measures 28 m x 17.50 m. At the centre, there is an open square courtyard whose length at the side is 10 m, and which is surrounded by four roofed areas with rows of columns. The deepest of these is the qibla area, which consists of three colonnades, while there is only one colonnade in each of the other three areas. All the arches of the colonnades are made of bricks. The colonnades of the mosque, with the exception of that, which precedes the mihrab,



are covered with small shallow domes, built of bricks. The transition zones of all the domes consist of spherical-triangular pendentive, a style previously applied in Bab al-Nasr and Bab al-Futih in Cairo, and both built in the Fatimid



period, in around AH 480 / AD 1087. The style was used subsequently in the Mamluk period for the construction of Khanqah Faraj ibn Barquq in Cairo (built AH 813 / AD 1410). The convention of spherical-triangular pendentive became widespread in Ottoman mosque where a number of small domes were used to cover the colonnades.

One of the most distinguishing aspects of the floor plan of this mosque is its response to the street alignment, which deviates from the direction of the qibla and where the western façade of the building and the entrance lie. However, there is a respect for the direction of the qibla, brought about by means of a rectangular cross-section that forms a transition area, since on the outside it faces the street whereas the inside faces the direction of the qibla. This mosque is considered one of the earliest examples in the Islamic world of a building that used a triangular section to adapt to the residential building surrounding it.

The mosque was exposed to encroachments in the AH 13<sup>th</sup>/AD 19<sup>th</sup> century, the most prominent of which led to the loss of the right-hand side of the western façade, which was replaced by a residential building. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century



the building that had encroached on the mosque was pulled down.

The façade of the mosque was then restored to its original form based on the features of the left-hand side of the façade, which was supposed to be identical to that on the right.

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