

Chapter 3

Glimpses Of Social Life Under The Fatimid State

The Fatimids undertook construction work on a massive scale. In this chapter we have thrown some light on the building of cities, and the royal palaces during this period. Also an attempt has been made to discuss the socio-economic life under the Fatimid state. It takes note of various celebrations such as of the new *Hijri* era, the birth anniversary of the Prophet, the month of Fasting (Ramadan), '*Eid al-Fitr* and the '*Eid al-Adha*. Also taken notes of in the chapter is specific Shi'ite festival such as *Ghadir Khumm*. Also the annual commemorations of the martyrdom of al-Hussain bin Ali on the 10th of Muharam.

Under the Fatimids, as a result of religious freedom that they granted to their non-Moslem subjects, we have the evidence of many celebrations of the Coptic and other Christians such as the Feast of Nativity, Feast of Baptism or Epiphany and the Cross Festival. Marriage with black slave female slaves was one of the very prominent social practices all over medieval Islamic world. There are many instances of Fatimid rulers marrying black slave females in our sources.

Also Nasir khusraw, has described various crafts and embellishments that he came across in the Fatimid realm during his visit. In the Fatimid Royal Palace that Khusraw notices, bore excellent metal work and was decorated with scenes of a chase. Ivory work too was highly developed under the Fatimids. It would be interesting in here to throw some light on The Fatimid caliphs who were fond of music and patronized these

arts. Thus the nocturnal festivities of Cairo, well suited to the pleasure loving character of the Egyptian, some times led to many abuses, and so in 391 A.H. a strict orders were issued by the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim regarding the conduct of women at public places

Building of The Cities and Palaces under the Fatimids:

Mahdiyya: The First Capital

As we have discussed previously, the Fatimids first came to power in Ifriqiya (modern-day Tunisia). The first Fatimid caliph, Ubayd Allah al-Mahdi, (909-934), stationed himself at the Aghlabid residence Raqqada, a suburb of al-Qayrawan. He constructed a new city al-Mahdiyyah in the vicinity of al-Qayrawan in which he moved in year 920. Al-Mahdiyyah was to serve as the capital city of the Fatimids until it was replaced by another new city al-Mansuriyah in 947-48 by his second successor al-Mansur Al-Mahdiyyah, named after that of the caliph, was situated on the Tunisian coast sixteen miles southeast of al-Qayrawan.¹ It was equipped with an impressive shipyard, which soon enabled the Fatimid state to own a powerful naval fleet², by the help of which al-Mahdi hoped to make an attack upon Egypt.³

¹ Op Cit, *Itti'az al-Hunafa bi-akhbar al-a'imma al-Fatimiyyin al-khulafa*, vol 1, Pp 70-71 and Op Cit, *History of The Arabs*, P 618 and Op Cit, *The Cambridge History of Islam*, vol 2, P 218, Op Cit, *al-dawlah al-Fatimiah fi Misr*, P 57

² Op Cit, *The Isma'ilis*, P 155

³ The first Fatimid caliph, al-Mahdi tried to conquer Egypt on (301-302/914-915), and on (307-309/919-921), but did not succeed On his campaigns against Egypt see Op Cit, *Iftitahu al-Da'wa wa Ibtida'u al-Dawla*, P 326 See also *al-Caliphate al-Fatimiah fi al-Maghreb* (875-909/365-296), First Edition, translation from French to Arabic by Hamdi al-Saahili, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, Beirut, 1994, Pp 208-220 and Op Cit, *A Short History of the Fatimid Caliphate*, P 77

According to the accounts of the geographers of the period, notably Ibn Hawqal, who visited Tunisia and observed this city in 331/943 in his *Kitab surat al-ard*, Mahdiyya was a grand city, stone walled from all round, having two unique gates. The city's defenses were impregnable.⁴

Mahdiyya remained as the prosperous Fatimid capital for some generations, until the declaration of the revolt by Abu Yazid Makhlad ibn Kaydad against the Fatimid rule in 332/943-944. In Jumada I 333/January 945, the rebels began their siege of al-Mahdiyya. The weaknesses of the location of the town came to the fore during the siege of the town by Abu-Yazid. Since one side of the town touched the sea, the escape routes of the defenders of the fort were limited. The rebels almost succeeded in entering the city, which may have heralded the end of the Fatimid rule.⁵ The revolt though was finally crushed; the city lost its confidence as a defensible city. The social and economic activity slowed down although it continued to serve as the Fatimid capital for another generation.⁶

Though not much has remained of Mahdiah's superb walls and gates or its artificial harbor, but based on the surveys and early descriptions the archeologists have carried on the reconstruction of a magnificent gate decorated on both sides with lions, of parts of the harbor, and of a long hall or covered street similar to those already found at Baghdad.⁷

⁴ Op Cit, *Surat al-Ard*, P 71

⁵ On the revolt of Abu Yazid Makhlad ibn Kaydad. See Op Cit, *The Cambridge History of Islam*, vol 2, Pp 217-218 and Op Cit, *The Isma'ilis*, Pp 158-159 and foresaid, chapter 1

⁶ Op Cit, *A Short History of the Fatimid Caliphate*, P 77

⁷ K A C Creswell, *Muslim Architecture of Egypt*, Oxford, 1952 Pp 3-5 and

The parts of the palace so far excavated have yielded two features of interest.⁸ First, there was a curious entrance complex, consisting of a triple gate, its center set out within a large rectangular tower. As one proceeds inwards, however, this gate ends in a blank wall. Two narrow halls on each side of the central axis lead into the court, the side entrances, on the other hand, proceed directly into the interior. The purpose of this odd arrangement could hardly be defensive; perhaps the four entries were to accommodate some of the extensive processions that at least in later times, characterized Fatimid court life.⁹ Second, we cannot determine whether the decoration of some of the rooms with geometric floor mosaics sprang from memories of Umayyad palaces or imitated the many pre-Islamic mosaics of Tunisia.¹⁰

The second capital al-Mansuriyyah

The almost successful siege of al-Mahdiyyah by Abu Yazid constantly haunted the successors of al-Mahdi. Al-Mansur (945-952) was persuaded by his nobles to found another city as the capital, which he finally did in the form of al-Mansuriyyah located at a distance of half a mile from al-Qayrawan. The shifting of capital to al-Mansuriyyah gave a deathblow to al-Mahdiyyah.¹¹

According to account of the geographer of al-Bakri (d. 487/1094), the city of al-Mansuriyya, was conjoint with al-Qayrawan, and built in 948

⁸ S. M. Zbiss, 'Mahdia et Sabra-Mansourya', *Journal Asiatique*, 1956, Pp 79 ff

⁹ M. Canard, 'Le Ceremonial Fatimite et le ceremonial byzantin', *Byzantion*, 1951, P. 21

¹⁰ Alexandre Lezine, *Mahdiya*, Paris, 1965, Pp 55ff and Op. Cit, *Muslim Architecture of Egypt*, Pp 5-9

¹¹ Op. Cit, *Surat al-Ard*, P 71. Also see F. Daftary, *Medieval Isma'ili History and Thought*, Published by the Press of the University of Cambridge, The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA, to Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia, First Published 1966, Pp 79, 120.

A.D. by the caliph al-Mansur Bi'llah who named it after himself. Ma'ad, the son the caliph al-Mansur, translocated to the new city all markets (*aswaq*) and industries of al-Qayrawan. Al-Bakri in his *kitab al-Masalik* tells us that al-Mansuriyyah was a prospereous city and had five gates: *Bab Zuwaylah*, *Bab Kutama*, *al-Bab al-Sharqi* (Eastern Gate) *Bab al-Futuh* (Gate of Conquests) and *al-Bab al-Qibli* (Gateway to Mecca).¹² *Bab Zuwaylah* and *Bab Kutama* probably indicate that they were the quarters where these two tribes were settled in the new town. The gates consequently came to be known by their names

Very little has survived of al-Mansuriyyah city of those times. We only have the remains of a very remarkable throne room, which combines the eastern hall (*iwan*) with the characteristic western Islamic unit of two long halls at right angles to each other.

A remarkable piece of Fatimid architecture in the Bilad al-Maghreb is the palace of Ashir, situated in central Algeria, built by the Zirid governors of the Fatimids in 947. It is a rectangular structure measuring 72 by 40 meters with towers of varying sizes. The single outer gate of the complex is transformed into two entrances into the palace proper. On one side of the court is a portico. The presumed throne-room complex comprises a long hall with three entrances and a square shaped room extending beyond the outer line of the wall and no doubt dominating the landscape. On each side of the central official unit, lining a courtyard, are two residential buildings consisting mostly of long halls. This symmetrical organization of living quarters around official areas reminds one of Mashatta or Qasr al-Hayr, rather than the

¹² Op. Cit, *al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik*, vol 2, Pp 276-277

sprawling royal cities of Samarra and Madinat al-Zahra in Spain. The palace is remarkable for its great simplicity. limited design. no columns, probably simple vaults, and very limited applied decoration. Though but a pale reflection of the architecture created on the Tunisian coast, Ashir is nevertheless precious for the completeness and preservation of its plan ¹³

Posterity has not preserved any other piece of architecture of the Fatimids in the region of Ifriqiyah. Neither do we get any details about any other monument in the contemporary literature on the Fatimids.

Al-Qahira al-Mahrusa (the Guarded City)

Immediately after the conquest of Egypt by the Fatimids, a plan for construction of a grand city was undertaken. Late in the evening of 17th Shaban 358/969, in the camping ground Jawhar, the commander of the conquering Fatimid army marked out a great square of 1,200 yards base, and men were stationed, spade in hand, and ready to start the foundations of this new city, or rather a royal suburb, when the signal was given to commence work. The projected lines, all sketched out by al-Mu'izz himself beforehand, were marked with pegs, and bells were hung from connected ropes so that a signal might be given for the simultaneous turning of the first sod.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the astrologers were busy calculating the propitious moment for the birth of the city. Unexpectedly, however a raven settling down on one of the ropes set all the bells jingling and the men at once thrust their spades into the

¹³ Lucien Golvin, *Recherches archéologiques a la Qala des Banu Hammad*, Paris, 1965, 123ff. On statement of Lucien Golvin. See his book *Le Maghreb Central a l'époque des Zirides*, Paris, 1957.

¹⁴ Op. Cit, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, Pp 101-102

soil. It was too late to check them, though the astrologers found that it was a most inauspicious moment as the planet al-Qahir (Mars) was in the ascendant. There was nothing for it but to accept the omen and the city was named after the planet as al-Qahira (Cairo), or more fully as al-Qahira al Mahrusa (the Guarded City of Mars). The city was built according to the plan previously prepared by caliph al-Mu'izz himself. It contained large squares, palaces and official buildings.¹⁵ The city of Qahira, called Cairo in English, emerged as one of the most important cities of the Islamic world that was to play a critical role in shaping the Islamic culture in the centuries to follow.

In Egypt the Fatimid state enjoyed a degree of seeming tranquility and prosperity that made the Persian traveler Nasir Khusraw enthusiastically declare. " *I could neither limit nor estimate its wealth and nowhere have I seen such prosperity as I saw there*" when he visited Cairo in 1047A D.¹⁶ The prosperity and glory is evidently clear in the building of grand cities, such as Cairo, and the great royal palaces, ostentatious celebrations and commemorations Khusraw has left a most graphic account of the wealth and the splendor of the Fatimid palaces and the prosperity of Cairo. In the eyes of this traveler, familiar with the most prosperous and cultured city of Persia and 'Iraq, the magnificence of Cairo and its court seemed astonishing, and exactly the same impression was made years afterwards after the Fatimids had long passed the zenith of their glory, on the crusaders from the west¹⁷

¹⁵ Op Cit, *Kitab Wafiatu al-A'yan wa Anba Abna al-Zaman*, P 134 and Op Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, Pp 150-151 and *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, p 102 and Op Cit, *al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah fi Misr*, P 75

¹⁶ Op Cit, *History of the Arabs From The Earliest Times To The Present*, Pp 617-618

¹⁷ Op Cit, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, Pp 198-199

Nasir Khusraw informs that the city of al-Qahira was then divided into ten quarters, namely, the Harat Barjawan, Harat Zuweyla, Harat al-Jawdariya (certain troops originally from Barbary), Harat al-Umara (of the emirs), Harat ad-Deylima (Persians), Harat ar-Rum (Greeks), Harat al-Batiliya (originally some of Jawhar's veterans), Kasr-ash-Shawk (a subsidiary palace), 'Abid-ash-Shera (bought slaves), Harat al-Masamida (Masmuda Berbers). He mentions only five gates: the Bab an-Nasr, Bab al-Futuh, Bab al-Qantara, Bab Zuweyla, and Bab al-Khalij.¹⁸ It may be surmised from the names of these *harats* (quarters) named after tribes or ethnic and other social groups like Zuweyla (a Berber tribe), Deylima (Persians), Rum (Greeks), Masamida (a Berber tribe) and Umara (*amirs*, nobles) that these groups resided in these localities. Similarly, the association of certain social groups with the gates (*babs*), such as Zuweyla, not only indicates their location of settlements near that gate but also point to their social standing.

When Nasir Khusraw visited Cairo city in 1047, he observes that the city did not have a town wall. He notices that the grand city of Cairo had five gates and it had buildings taller than any city with a wall. He says there were around 20,000 such buildings, most of them five or six-storied. These buildings were constructed away from each other. There were beautiful gardens around, watered by wells and windmills.¹⁹

Al-Maqrizi's description of 1400 of Cairo mentions the city having a surrounding wall made of large bricks. In the middle of the great

¹⁸ Op Cit, *The Story of Cairo*, P 145

¹⁹ Op Cit, *The Bohras*, Pp 92-93 and Op Cit, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, Pp 198-199

enclosure was an open space between the two palaces as it was afterwards called, large enough for 10,000 troops to be paraded, a small portion of this open space remained as the Suq an-Nahhasin (the market of brassware artisans). On the east was the caliph's palace; one corner of its site is now marked by the *Khan al-Khalili*, another by the Hasanayn *masjid* a great thoroughfare led through the midst of Cairo from the *Bab* (Gate) *al-Zuweyla*, communicating with the old city (al-Fustat), and passing through the *Bayn al-Qasrayn* to the *Bab al-Futah*, which led out to the open country on the north. To the North of the caliph's palace lay the vizier's official residence, and to the south the mosque of al-Azhar, which Jawhar commenced constructing soon after the foundation of Cairo and completed on 7th of Ramadan, 361²⁰

When the caliph al-Mu'izz a reached Egypt, he entered the royal city by the *Bab al-Qantrah* "gate of the arch" one of the two openings in the *Bab az-Zuweyla*, The other opening which no longer existed in al-Maqrizi's time was generally regarded as unlucky. This Gate is now commonly regarded as the mysterious dwelling place of the head of all the dervishes who, wherever he may be, is supposed to be able to fly in spirit to this abode, and there the spirit is placated. The legends connected with this gate seem to have varied from age to age, but it has always been regarded as haunted by mysterious presences. Also a amongst these main Gates, were *Bab al-Faraj*, *bab al-Sa'adah* and *Bab al-Qasar*.²¹

²⁰ Op Cit, *The Story of Cairo*, P 126 and Ibid, *The Bohras*, P 75 and Op, Cit, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, Pp 104-105

²¹ Ibid, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, P 110 and Op Cit, *Khitat*, vol 1, Pp 361-362, & Pp 382-383 and Op Cit, *al-Hayatu al-Ijtima'iyah fi al-Asr al-Fatimi*, Pp 13-14

The fortified enclosure that has given its name to Cairo, though sometimes called *al-Medina*, "the City," was never intended to be an Egyptian metropolis. It was to be the residence of the caliph and his court, his slaves and officials, and his African troops. The public of Egypt had no access to it; none might pass through the gates without a permit, and even ambassadors from foreign states were obliged to dismount and were led into the palace between guards after the Byzantine custom. Thus, Qahira was a royal compound or enclosure, not a public city. Its high walls and guarded gates symbolized the seclusion and mystery in which the sacred person of the caliph was wrapped, and its familiar epithet "the Guarded City" (*al-Qahira al-Mahrusa*) illustrates its privacy.²²

The original walls were built of large bricks, nearly two feet long and fifteen inches broad, and the thickness of the walls was such that two horsemen could ride abreast upon them. The Topographer in 1400 measured the last fragment of this first wall, and says that none of it afterwards remained to be seen. The original enclosure was about 100 feet smaller every way. Than the later enclosure built in 1087, and we may easily realize the length of the city of Jawhar by remembering that the present Bab al-Futuh (with the mosque of al-Hakim) and the Bab-Zuweyla (with the mosque of al-Muayyad) stand a little outside the original enclosure; whilst its breadth extended from the Bab al-Ghureyyib beyond the Azhar on the east to the Khalij or canal on the west. The western boundary running beside the canal is still recorded in the street called Bayn-as-Surayn, "Between the walls". The

²² Op Cit, *The Story of Cairo*, P 125

enclosure was thus about 1200 yards each way, and formed an area of less than half a square mile.²³

Cairo was further to the northeast and for some time remained separate from the other cities that were known by the collective name of al-Fustat. Under the Fatimids Cairo remained a palatial city closed to the general public housing the caliph, royal officials and the administration. Both Cairo and Fustat each had their own port on the Nile and functioned as separate cities.²⁴

Later this situation changed when Fustat entered into a period of decline caused by famines, earthquakes and other natural and man made disasters. One of the most significant factors was that the Nile was gradually moving westward leaving the port facilities of Fustat high and dry. The decisive change came when the Fatimid vizier Badr al-Jamali allowed the transfer of some markets from Fustat and also permitted inhabitants of Fustat to build houses within Cairo. In order to accommodate the increasing population the walls of the Fatimid were expanded by Badr al-Jamali (*amir al-juyush*) between 1087 and 1091.²⁵

Bader al-Jamali, also rebuilt the walls of the Cairo by replacing the former mud-brick walls with excellent stone masonry, and strengthened them with towers. He also built three monumental gateways; Bab al-Nasr which has two great square towers and a beautiful semicircular arch; Bab al-Futuh, where the archway is again flanked by two solid

²³ Op Cit, *The Story of Cairo*, Pp 125-126

²⁴ Op Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, Pp 526-530 See also Margoliouth, Prof D S, *Cairo, Jerusalem and Damascus*, Oxford, 1907, P 21

²⁵ *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, Pp 526-530 & Ibid, *Cairo, Jerusalem and Damascus*, P 21

towers and Bab Zuweyla, very similar to that of Bab al-Futuh. All three gateways reveal the strong North Africa influence, which is obvious throughout the Fatimid epoch. This epoch also witnessed the introduction of a new kind of structure, the *Zawiya* or domed mausoleum with three bays²⁶

Fatimids Palaces

Amongst of the buildings of the Fatimid period, nothing has remained, but the lengthy compilation of al-Maqrizi and the on-the-spot descriptions of Nasir Khusraw (1047), have left behind some description of these palaces. Most remarkable was *al-Qasr al-Kabir al-Sharqi* (Great Eastern Palace), was also called *Qasr al-Mu'izzi*, and named after that of the caliph al-Mu'izz, who was very fond of building elegant structures. Its main Golden Gate opening on the central square did a pavilion from top of which the caliph watched crowds and parades.²⁷ Inside, a complex, succession of long halls led to the throne room, an *iwan* containing the *sidilla*; this was 'a construction closed on three sides, open on the fourth and covered by three domes; on the open side there was a sort of fenced opening known as a *shubbak*'. Painted scenes, probably of royal pastimes since we know that they included hunting scenes, constituted much of the decoration²⁸

The palace was one of the biggest structures of its time having 4,000 rooms. This palace remained a residence of the Fatimid caliphs from

²⁶ Op Cit, *The Cambridge History of Islam*, vol 2, P 714

²⁷ Op Cit, *Khitat*, vol 1, Pp 432-433

²⁸ Nasir Khosrow, *Safar-Nameh*, trans C Schefer, Paris, 1881, P 127 ff

362/973 to an end by Salah-al-din al-Ayyubi, who in 567/1171 dethroned the last Fatimid caliph, al-'Adid²⁹

Nasir Khusraw gives us a glowing description of the Great Eastern Palace during the reign of the Fatimid caliph, al-Mustansir Bil-lah. He says that he had an occasion to see the palace in 441 A.H. The grounds of the palace were very big. It had a mountain like palace in its midst, a building on each side of it called the Little Palace and the Great Palace, with a huge square in front where thousands of troops could parade. Palace guards numbered 500-foot guards and 500 horsemen. So, 30,000 people lived in the palace, of which 12,000 were servants.

The Caliph's throne was 12 feet high and gilded on three sides. It had engravings of hunting scenes and inscriptions in beautiful hand. It had delicate furnishing of silk from Constantinople and steps of silver. The throne glowed with different lights from different angles. Nasir Khusraw remarked that a whole book could be devoted to the description of the throne alone. From the palace ran a huge tunnel opening outside the palace grounds. Through it, a person could ride on horseback. The Caliph always used this tunnel.³⁰

Near the *Bab al-Futah*, al-Aziz built a lesser Palace on its west side, called the "Palace of Gold" also known as the Western Palace. To distinguish it from the Great Eastern Palace, it had been named the Small Western Palace. It faced his father's Palace across the great

²⁹ Op Cit, *History of the Arabs From The Earliest Times To The Present*, Pp 624-625 and Op Cit, *The Bohras*, Pp-78 79

³⁰ Op Cit, *Safar Nama*, P 48

square in the midst of Cairo, at the beginning of the beautiful garden which Kafur had laid out, and which the Fatimid caliphs maintained. The Western Palace (975-96, rebuilt after 1055) was smaller but more regular. It was centred on a long court with halls and pavilions on both axes. Al-Aziz also built Palaces of 'Ayn Shams and *Qasr al-Bahr* (Sea Palace).³¹

There were a number of gates and tunnels (subways) put-up and established in underground to link *the Bayn al-Kasrayn* "between the two palaces" and the caliphs were moving by intra combs and tunnels hidden from the people's eyes. Al-Maqrizi tells us that the Fatimid caliphs (al-Amir, al-Hafiz and al-Fa'iz) who expired in *Qasr al-Lulua'a* (Pearl Palace) were taken to the Great Eastern Palace through the tunnels and subways³²

During the reign of the caliph al-'Aziz, Princess Taghreed, wife of the caliph al-Mu'izz, also built the *al-Karafah* palace Al-Maqrizi says it was great palace that seeing it was a feast to the eyes And was connected to a garden through a canopy.³³

Al-Maqrizi gives a long list of heirlooms hoarded in the palaces of the Fatimid caliphs of Egypt, which include vases for narcissus flowers and violets, golden birds and trees set with precious stones.³⁴

³¹ Op, Cit, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, Pp 105, 115 and Op Cit, *Kitab Wafiatu al-A'yan wa Anba Abna al-Zaman*, P 525 and Op Cit, *The Bohras*, P 81 and Op Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, P 628

³² Op Cit, *Subh al-a'sha fi sina'at al-insha*, vol , 3, P 518 and Op Cit, *Khitat*, vol 1, P 387 and Op Cit, *al-Hayatu al-Ijtima'iyyah fi al-Asr al-Fatimi*, P 17

³³ Op Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, P 628

³⁴ K Jamil Ahmad, *Heritage of Islam*, Printed by Mr A Hameed Khan, Printed & Publisher at Ferozsons, Lahore- Peshawar- Karachi, 1956, P 250

The Fatimid caliphs were fond of song, music and dance and thus the musicians and dancers received great patronage from the caliphs. The caliph Al-Zafir 1149-1154 was frivolous in his tastes, and much given to the society of concubines. And to listening to vocal music al-Mustansir (1035-1095) is said to have erected a chamber (*maqsura*) in his Royal Palace where he used to drink wine to the accompaniment of stringed music and beautiful singers.³⁵ Al-Zahir 1021-1035 was wholly occupied with the pursuit of pleasure, finding his interest in the company of singing girls, buffoons, and such other characters, and showed little interest to take part in public affairs. In A.H. 424 he invited the palace girls to some 2,660 in number to a party. When they came to the feast they were led inside a mosque and then the doors were bricked up leaving the unfortunate girls to starve. For six months the mosque was left unopened and the bodies unburied. Many other instances of wanton cruelty are related of him.³⁶

Amongst the most famous female singers was Nasab al-Tabbala and she was very popular during the reign of al-Mustansir, just as Ibn Maysarah al-Kutami was the most well known male singer at the palace of al-Mustansir. A great name amongst musicians was of Abu al-Hasan bin al-Tahaan. He was considered the greatest musician of the time.³⁷

³⁵ Op, Cit, *History Of The Arabs From The Earliest Times To The Present*, P 626 Also Op Cit, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, P 227

³⁶ Ibid, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, P 192

³⁷ Op, Cit, *al-Hayatu al-Ijtima'iyah fi al-Asr al-Fatimi*, Pp 222-223 For more details on the Fatimid palaces see Op Cit, *Tarikh al-dawlah al-Fatimiah*, Pp -628-634

Festivities and celebrations

There were many public celebrations under the Fatimids that were celebrated with lots of enthusiasm by the public as well as the rulers. The most important ones were celebrations of the new *Hijri* era, the birth anniversary of the Prophet, the month of Fasting (Ramdan), '*Eid al-Fitr*' and the '*Eid al-Adha*'.

The new Hijri Era

The Hijra Era was established by 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, the companion of the Prophet and the Second Pious caliph. This Era, starting from the historic *hijra* (flight or migration) of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina was based purely on lunar cycles and was established in 638 A.D. Caliph 'Umar did it in an attempt to rationalize the various, at times conflicting, dating systems used during his time. 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, in consultation with his advisors agreed that the most appropriate reference point for the Islamic calendar was the *Hijrah*. The actual starting date for the Calendar was chosen (on the basis of purely lunar years, counting backwards) to be the first day of the first month (1 Muharram) of the year of the Hijrah. The Islamic (Hijri) calendar (with dates that fall within the Muslim Era) is usually abbreviated A.H. in Western languages from the latinized *Anno Hegirae*, "in the year of the Hegira". Muharram 1, 1 A.H. corresponds to July 16, 622 A.D.³⁸

³⁸ Washington Irving, *Muhammed and Islam*, Published in 2002 by Aryan Books international, 4378/4B, Pooja Apartments 4B, Ansari Road, Darya Ganj, New Delhi-110002, India, P 102 and Sayed Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam A History of The Evolution and Ideals of Islam with a Life of The Prophet*, Published by Muhammad Ahmad for Idarah-I Adabiyat-I Delhi-5803, Sadar Bazar, Delhi-6 & Printed at Jayyad press, Ballimaran-Delhi-110006, First published, 1922, Reprint, 1978, Pp 48-50

The Hijrah, which chronicles the migration of the Prophet Muhammad from Makkah to Madinah in September 622 A.D, is thus the central historical event of early Islam. It led to the foundation of the first Muslim city-state, a turning point in Islamic and world history. To Muslims, the Hijri calendar is not just a sentimental system of time reckoning and dating important religious events, e.g., Siyaam (fasting) and Hajj (pilgrimage to Makkah). It has a much deeper religious and historical significance.³⁹

The Fatimid society used to celebrate the start of Muharram month (1st Muharram), which signalled the start of the Islamic New Year. This celebration had assumed almost religious form under the Fatimids. The month was referred to as Muharram al-Haram (the pious month of Muharram).⁴⁰

In the night of the first of Muharram, the Fatimid caliph, tells al-Maqrizi, showered wealth and gave precious gifts consisting of gold and silver to people of various categories not forgetting the destitute and the needy. The caliph, accompanied by high dignitaries of the state, rode on a horse in a procession on the occasion showering his gifts. He also presented valuable arms and armaments to his high officials. The celebrated procession moved through the main roads, which lead

³⁹Op Cit, *The Isma'ilis*, P 34 and Op, Cit, *Muhammed and Islam*, P 102. The Islamic (Hijri) year consists of twelve (purely lunar) months. They are Muharram, Safar, Raby' al-awal, Raby' al-Saany, Jumaada al-awal, Jumaada al-Saany, Rajab, Sha'baan, Ramadhaan, Shawwal, Thw al-Qi'dah, and Thw al-Hijjah. The most important dates in the Islamic (Hijri) year are: 1 Muharram (Islamic new year), 27 Rajab (Isra & Miraj), 1 Ramadhaan (first day of fasting), 17 Ramadhan (Nuzul Al-Qur'an), Last 10 days of Ramadan which include Laylatu al-Qadar, 1 Shawwal (eid al-fitr), 8-10 Thw al-Hijjah (the Hajj to Makkah), and 10 Thw al-Hijjah ('Eid al-Adha'). Op Cit, *The Spirit of Islam*, Pp 49-50.

⁴⁰ Op Cit, *Tankh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, P 649.

towards the old mosque in Cairo city.⁴¹ And the state was preparing the most known disturbance funds, those contain the new-minted currency the Dinars and Dirhams by the date of the New Year, for the purpose distribution to various kinds of people⁴²

Kitchens of the Fatimid court, says al-Maqrizi, especially prepared for this occasion all sorts of foods and sweets that were to be distributed to all the high officials of the state and to the general populace and people of Cairo and al-Fustat.⁴³

The Muslim community continues to celebrate this historical event to this day, though in various ways, depending on their social customs.

Mawlid al-Nabi

Mawlid is an Arabic word that literally means 'time and place of a birth', but in Islam this word has come to denote the birth of Prophet Muhammad (*Mawlid al-nabi*) Muhammad, the last of the messengers of Allah, was born in Mecca, on 12th of Rabbi al-awl (April), in the year of the *amu al-Fil* or year of the Elephant.⁴⁴ His birth took place little

⁴¹ Ibid, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, Pp 649-650 and Op Cit, *Khitat*, vol 1, Pp 446-447 and Op Cit, *al-Hayatu al-Ijtima'iyah fi al-Asr al-Fatimi*, P 123

⁴² *Subh al-a'sha fi sina'at al-insha*, vol 3, P 500 & Ibid, *al-mawa'iz wa'l-l'tibar bi-dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar*, vol 1, Pp 446-447 & *al-Hayatu al-Ijtima'iyah fi al-Asr al-Fatimi*, P 123

⁴³ Ibid, *al-mawa'iz wa'l-l'tibar bi-dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar*, vol 1, P 447 and Ibid, *al-Hayatu al-Ijtima'iyah fi al-Asr al-Fatimi*, P 124

⁴⁴ Arabic '*Amu al-Fil* or Elephant, The year in which Muhammad was born Being the year in which Abrahathu al-Ashram, an Abyssinian Christian and Viceroy of the King of San'a in Yaman marched with a large army and a number of elephants upon Makkah, with the intention and his army destroyed in so sudden a manner, as to give rise to the legend embodied in the cvth Surah of the Qur'an, which is Known as the chapter of the Elephant Op Cit, *Dictionary of Islam*, P 108

more than fifty days after the destruction of the Abyssinian army, more the 29th of August 570.⁴⁵

Muhammad is portrayed in the Quran as Messenger of Allah who was an ordinary mortal in other respects. But he was the chosen one by Allah to complete His message to the world and hence his birth had a special place amongst the believers. The first recorded celebration of his birthday took place during the period of Fatimid state in Egypt.

It is Al-Maqrizi again who gives us the details of how the *Mawalid* celebrations were done at the caliphal palace. He informs that the celebrations began after at the time of *al-Zuhr* (after midday prayer) on the twelfth of Rabi al-Awal, wherefore the *qadi al-qudat* (the chief justice), led the celebrated procession, accompanied by high-ranking officials of Fatimid court, towards the *Azhar* mosque amid recitation from the Holy Qur'an. Then the procession moved towards the Royal Palace, where the people amassed at both sides of the route sighting the parade. At the Royal Fatimid Palace, the celebrated people gathered in front of the Golden Gate waiting to get a glimpse of the caliph through one of the crenellation galleries⁴⁶

The celebrations began at the Royal Palace after the arrival of the caliph. Verses from the Holy Qur'an made the initiation of the ceremony. Then the *Khatib* or the sermon deliverer of al-Hakim Mosque started his sermon before the gathering. When he reached the point of narration of Prophet's birth, he said, "*in haza layum*

⁴⁵ Op Cit, *The Spirit of Islam A History of The Evolution and Ideals of Islam with a Life of The Prophet*, P 8

⁴⁶ Op, Cit, *Subh al-a'sha fi sina'at al-insha*, vol , 3, P 499 See *al-mawa'iz wa'l-l'tibar bi-dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar*, vol 1, P 433 & *al-Hayatu al-Ijtima'iyah fi al-Asr al-Fatimi*, Pp 127-128

mawldh... ila ma mana Allah bihi ala milat al-islam min risalthi" (this day is his birthday.... the almighty Allah has gifted apostolate (Risaalah) to the nation of Islam) and concluded his *Khutbah* by praying for the caliph.⁴⁷ Thereafter, the *khatib* of al-Azhar mosque gave a sermon, followed by the *khatib* of al-Aqmar Mosque. The *qurra* then recited the Quranic verses and conclude the celebrations. The people would go back to their homes and all gates compasses and wings of the Royal Palace were then closed⁴⁸

The Fast of the Month of Ramadan

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Muslims calendar in which the Muslims observe strict fast from the dawn to sunset of each day throughout the month. The start of Ramadan, the month of fasting (*al-saum*) is taken after sighting the moon. If the moon could not be sighted due to bad weather, it begins upon the completion of thirty days from the beginning of the previous month⁴⁹

Ivanow tells us that, "the "Fatimid Creed" enjoined fasting because of its many spiritual advantages and its help in suppressing sensuality. Its inner meaning is said to be available through special books, the time for commencing the fast of Ramadan is dependent on the appearance of the moon as detected by astronomers, and on observation only when the astronomical time cannot be known. This scientific method

⁴⁷Ibid, *al-mawa'iz wa'l-l'tibar bi-dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar*, vol 1, P 433

⁴⁸ Ibid, *Khitat*, Pp 433-434

⁴⁹ Op Cit, *Outlines of Islam*, P 76

came to be used very early and was commanded to be observed in Egypt by Jawhar as soon as he occupied the country".⁵⁰

In the year 358/969, The Fatimid general Jawhar al-Siqilli declared on the 29th Ramadan the completion of the month of Ramadan without waiting for the moon. He performed the prayer of the 'Eid al-Fitr the next morning. The Sunnis, however, followed the advice of Shaikh abu al-Taahir who sighted the moon the next evening from the terrace of the old mosque. This was not liked by Jawhar who issued threats to the Shaikh.⁵¹

The Fatimids in 399 A.H. promulgated a calendar prepared on the basis of astronomical calculations. They decreed that henceforth, this calendar would guide the people all over the Fatimid kingdom and the dates of festivities would be in accordance with the calendar. People therefore were not to wait for sighting the moon to know the beginning of the month of Ramadan or the day of 'Eid al-Fitr. This novel order though was put in operation all over the Fatimid state, but this was greeted with disapproval by the orthodox.⁵² It may be mentioned that certain sects of Shi'i follow this calendar even to this day such as the Bohras, a branch of the Isma'ilis.⁵³

The month of Ramadan is considered a pious month by the Muslims. During the Fatimid rule too the Muslims rejoiced at the commencement of this month that was regarded as the month of Allah's blessings. The

⁵⁰ *The Shi'a of India*, P 259 See W. Ivanow, *A Creed of the Fatimids*, Bombay, 1936, Pp 50 & 78

⁵¹ Op, Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, P 651

⁵² Op Cit, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, P 155

⁵³ Op, Cit, *The Bohras*, P 161

people thronged to mosques for prayers and to break their fast and there was great hustle and bustle in the markets.⁵⁴ The Fatimid caliphs too made elaborate arrangements at the golden hall of the palace where princes, viziers, other high dignitaries and officials broke their fast. People came to the lavish table in relays to break the fast (*iftar*) with sumptuous dishes⁵⁵ And after the *iftar* (breaking the fast), a spiritual celebration began with the attendance of the caliph, and the recitation of verses from the Holy Qur'an. The evening came to an end by a prayer to the caliph by the invitees. At the order of the caliph the roads leading to the mosques and markets were kept lighted with lanterns borne by young boys, throughout the Ramadan month, so that people may not have to face any trouble in reaching the mosques and bazaars⁵⁶

The Fatimid caliphs carried out various philanthropic acts and works of charity during the month of Ramadan. The caliphs were generally known for their extravagance. Caliph al-Hakim surpassed all other Fatimid caliph in this trait. He constructed a magnificent mosque in Cairo that bears his name⁵⁷ In Jamadi II, 403 A.H. he resolved to furnish the mosque. The preliminary estimates suggest that he spent 5000 Dinars on the lamps, chains, mats etc. alone⁵⁸ Early in Ramadan he had presented a *tannur* (large candelabrum) to the old mosque in Fustat. This *tannur* weighed 100,000 drams and had 1,200 lights. It was carried to the mosque to the sound of drums and trumpets and

⁵⁴ Op Cit, *Itti'az al-Hunafa bi-akhbar al-a'immah al-Fatimiyyin al-khulafa*, vol 2, P 96, Op Cit, *al-Hayatu al-Ijtima'iyyah fi al-Asr al-Fatimi*, Pp 131,136

⁵⁵ Ibid, *Itti'az al-Hunafa bi-akhbar al-a'immah al-Fatimiyyin al-khulafa*, vol 1, P 387

⁵⁶ Ibid, vol 2, P 96, and Op Cit, *al-Hayatu al-Ijtima'iyyah fi al-Asr al-Fatimi*, P 136

⁵⁷ Op Cit, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, Pp 166-167

⁵⁸ Op Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, P 539

with cries of *tehlil* (there is no god but Allah) and *takbir* (Allah is Great). The caliph presented the mosque at the same time with 1,290 copies of the Holy Qur'an, some of which were written in letters of gold.⁵⁹

It was in Ramadan of 403 that al-Hakim showed the zenith of his passing orthodoxy. Each Friday during the Month of Fasting, he attended the Mosque of Rashida clad very simply, with a turban without jewel and having a sword adorned only with bands of silver, and he led the public prayers. On the 27th of Ramadan he went to the old Mosque and read the *khutba* and led the Friday prayer, a thing which no Fatimid had done before.⁶⁰

'Eid al-Fitr

This day is celebrated on the first day of the month of Shawwal, marking the close of the Ramadan fast.⁶¹ This is a festive occasion for the Muslims and a day of thanksgiving for completing the obligation of Ramadan fasts. After distributing alms called the *Sadaqatu'l-Fitr* on the evening of the last day of Ramadan, people offer prayers collectively in mosques.⁶² Then there is general feasting and people greet each other and call on each other.

On this day the caliph arrived in a ceremonial procession to the mosque and recited the *khutba* from the pulpit (*minbar*). He then made lavish gifts to the servants of the mosque like the *khatib* and the *qurra*

⁵⁹ Op Cit, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, P 167

⁶⁰ Op Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, P 539 and Op Cit, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, P 169. See *Kitab al-mawa'iz wa'l-l'tibar bi-dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar* vol 2, Pp 282-283

⁶¹ Op Cit, *Dictionary of Islam*, P 111, and Op Cit, *Islam Politics and War*, P 248

⁶² Ibid, *Dictionary of Islam*, P 194

al-Quran (reciters of the Qur'an) and others.⁶³ This was in keeping with the tradition of the Prophet. In practice, however, such assertions of the Prophet's model of leadership did not reflect even remotely similar humility and aversion to materialism by Fatimid caliphs in their public image.

The beginning of 'Eid al-Fitr celebrations by the Fatimids was made by al-Mu'izz in 973. He himself conducted the prayer on the occasion in al-Azhar mosque of the newly constructed city of al-Qahira (Cairo) by his general, Jawhar. After the prayers he headed the procession of his troops, escorted by his four sons in armour and preceded by two elephants, back to the palace.⁶⁴

In 990, he made the occasion still more pompous. In the words of Sanders, "the caliph rode with his troops, who wore costumes of ornamented brocade and were girded with swords and belts of gold. Horses led by the hand during the parade had jeweled saddles of gold and amber. Elephants, ridden by soldiers bearing arms, paraded in front of him. The caliph himself rode under a parasol ornamented with jewels".⁶⁵ Such displays of wealth and power among often starving Muslims were apparently used to re-enforce the Imam or the Caliph's religious authority.⁶⁶ His top administrators and judges in this parade-like fashion would accompany him from the Palace quarters to the open aired courtyard where the congregational prayer would be held. Throughout the procession, recitation (*takbir*) of "God is the greatest"

⁶³ *Al-Nujum al-Zahira fi Miluk Misr wa al-Qahirah*, vol. 4, Pp 94-104 and Op Cit, *al-Wizara wa al-wuzara fi al-asr al-Fatimi*, P 78

⁶⁴ Op Cit, *The Story of Cairo*, P 125 & *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, P 110

⁶⁵ Sanders Paula, *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo*, Albany State University of New York Press, 1994 P 49

⁶⁶ *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo*, Pp 49-50

(*Allah u-Akbar*) would continue until the Caliph entered the site of prayers. As an historian of the period observed, since congregational prayer of festivals of *Adha* and *Fitr* do not require the traditional call to prayer (*adhan*), the *takbir* served the purpose. Thus the festival prayer began at the start of the caliph's procession and that the procession itself later became part of the prayer.⁶⁷

The Muslim public, therefore, came to associate such extravagant spectacles with Fatimid doctrine, pioneered by Qadi al-Nu'man, which claimed an inner connection between the prayers of Friday, '*Eid al-Adha*, and '*Eid al-Fitr* on the one hand, and the role of the *Imam* in the overall mission of Islam, on the other. It may be tempting to dismiss these features as peculiar to the Isma'ili Shi'a, or the Fatimid, and their historical context in particular. But such features are inherent to the core of combining religious and political authority. As Levy Vacov put it, "whether called imam, caliph or president of a modern state, a ruler who bases his political authority on a religious claim will necessarily seek ways of associating his power with the sacred authority of Islam itself".⁶⁸

The only exception amongst the Fatimid caliph who did not display ostentation on the occasion was al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah who rode to the site of prayer without any adornments in 1012 with only ten led horses with saddles and bridles adorned with light white silver, with plain flags and with a white parasol without any golden adornment. He was

⁶⁷ Ibid, P 50

⁶⁸ Op Cit, *State and Society in Fatimid Egypt*, P 65

dressed in white with out embroidery or gold braid. He prayed on the 'Ed al-Fitr, without any pomp.⁶⁹

'Eid al-fitr was also called *al-Mawsim al-Kabeer* (the Great Season) and the 'Eid al-Hulal (Feast of Robes of Honour), as the caliph distributed apparels to the officials and others on a large scale.⁷⁰

People gathered on the road to catch a glimpse of the caliph when he marched back from the mosque to his palace after the prayers. The caliphs, as a matter of practice, paid a visit every 'Eid al-Fitr to the Saffron Graveyard, which had the graves of the father of al-Mu'izz and his relatives that he had carried from al-Ifriqiya to Cairo in coffins⁷¹

Sweets were especially prepared at the *Dar al-Fitr*, the kitchen set up exclusively for the occasion and sweets made there were distributed amongst officials of the state in Cairo. Also a royal decree was sent to provinces of the Fatimid state giving details of the conduct of the ceremony at the caliph's court.⁷²

⁶⁹ Op Cit, *The Cambridge History of Islam*, vol 2, P 56

⁷⁰ Op Cit, *Khitat*, vol 1, Pp 452, 455 and Op Cit, *Itti'az al-Hunafa*, vol 3, Pp 82-83 and Op Cit, *al-Hayatu al-Ijtima'iyah fi al-Asr al-Fatimi* P 139

⁷¹ Ibid, *Khitat*, vol 1, Pp 407&435&455&457, and Op Cit, *al-Hayatu al-Ijtima'iyah fi al-Asr al-Fatimi*, P 141

⁷² Op Cit, *al-mawa'iz wa'l-l'tibar bi-dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar*, vol 1, Pp 425-426 and Op Cit, *al-Hayatu al-Ijtima'iyah fi al-Asr al-Fatimi*, P 142 and Op Cit, Abd al-Mun'im Majid, *Zuhur al-Khilafah al-Fatimiah wa suqutuha fi Misr al-Tarikh al-Siyasi*, 4ed Dar al-Fikier al-Arabi, Cairo, 1414/1994, Pp 262-263

'Eid al-Adha

'Eid al-Adha means 'Feast of the Sacrifice'.⁷³ It is one of the major festivals of the Muslims and is also referred to as 'Eid al-Kabir (the Great Feast) It is celebrated on the tenth day of the month Zul-Hijja and is the concluding ceremony at the Hajj at Mecca⁷⁴

Al-Maqrizi informs us that after the prayers, when the official procession of the caliph marched back to the palace, high dignitaries of the state called on the caliph who sat on the throne. The poets recited their verses in praise of the caliph and the vizier in presence of the caliph⁷⁵ The caliph, wearing a robe of red colour, then walked up to a courtyard besides the Great Eastern Palace where he performed sacrifice of animals like cows, goats, sheep and camel. The meat was then distributed amongst state officials and students of Dar al-Hikmah (the house of wisdom) and pious people associated with mosques.⁷⁶

⁷³ The following is the account given by Muslim writers, when Ibrahim (the peace of God be upon him) founded Mecca, the Lord desired him to prepare a feast for him. Upon Ibrahim's (the friend of God) requesting to know what he would have on the occasion, the lord replied, "offer up the son Isma'il". Agreeably to God's command he took Isma'il to the *ka'bah* to sacrifice him, and having laid him down, he made several ineffectual strokes on his throat with a knife, on which Isma'il observed, Your eyes being uncovered, it is through pity and compassion for me you allow the knife to miss it would be better if you blindfolded yourself with the end of your turban and then scarified me. Ibrahim acted upon his son's suggestion and having repeated the words "Bi-smi'llah, allah akbar" (in the name of God, God is great), he drew the knife across his son's neck. In the meanwhile, however, Gabriel had substituted a broad-tailed sheep for the youth Isma'il, and Ibrahim unfolding his eyes observed, to his surprise, the sheep slain, and his son standing behind him. Op Cit, *Dictionary of Islam*, Pp 192-193

⁷⁴ Op Cit, *Outlines of Islam*, P 112 and Ibid, *Dictionary of Islam*, p 192

⁷⁵ Op Cit, *al-mawa'iz wa'l-l'tibar bi-dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar*, vol 1, P 242 and Op Cit, *al-Hayatu al-Ijtima'iyah fi al-Asr al-Fatimi*, P 146. For more details on the ceremonial processions under the Fatimids on the *Eid al-Adha* and the *Eid al-Fitr*. See Op Cit, *al-mawa'iz wa'l-l'tibar bi-dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar*, vol 1, Pp 450,455, 456 and Op Cit, *al-Nujum al-Zahira fi Miluk Misr wa al-Qahirah* Pp 94-104

⁷⁶ Ibid, *Khitat*, vol 1, Pp 436-437. In third day of this feast, especially when the caliph had been finished distributed of the slaughtered animals, for example the caliph al-A'amir gifted his red-color suit to his vizier al-Ma'amun. See Op Cit, *al-Wizara wa al-wuzara fi al-asr al-Fatimi*, P 61 and Op Cit, *Nuzim al-Fatimiyyin*, vol 2, Pp 103-104 and Op Cit, *Zuhur al-Khilafah al-Fatimiah*, P 263

The Shi'ite Festivals

The above festivals are common to all Muslims. We will now take note of the festivals and commemorations that were observed exclusively by the shi'i. The Ismai'ilis being a branch of the shi'i observed these occasions with lot of gusto and enthusiasm

Ghadir Khumm

The event is of cardinal importance to the shi'is as according to them, the Prophet had made a nomination of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib as the successor to his spiritual legacy after him. Of Ghadir Khumm It was on 18 Dhu al-Hijja 10 A.H. (16 March 632), when returning from his Farewell Pilgrimage to the Holy Ka'aba in Mecca, the Prophet stopped at a place called Khumm (near present day al-Juhfa), lying between Mecca and Medina. Khumm lay at the junction of routes and was expected to have the maximum audience. It was at this place that the Prophet addressed the assemblage. After repeating the basics of Islam, he mentioned that he is also mortal and will soon be called to Allah's presence. And after that he said that he was leaving behind two things to guide the *umma* to the righteous path - 'Ali and his Ahl al-Bait. Then holding the hand of 'Ali and raising it he uttered the following famous words, "*man kuntu maulahu fa hada 'Aliu'n maulahu*" (He of whom I am the patron, of him 'Ali is also the patron), which, according to the shi'a tradition was a declaration of 'Ali as the *khalifa* of Prophet Muhammad's spiritual legacy. This event of the spiritual investiture of

Ali continues to be celebrated as one of the most important Shi'i celebrations.⁷⁷

Al-Maqrizi tells us that, the practice of publicly celebrating the Ghadir Ghumm was started by the fourth Fatimid caliph, al-Mu'izz who celebrated it on 18th of Dhu 'l-Hijja 362/973.⁷⁸ However, during his reign this ceremony was restricted and confined only to Cairo. Ibn Khallikan (d. 681/1282) tells us that, during the reign of al-Mu'izz, on his orders, the words, " O my God bless Muhammad the chosen, 'Ali the accepted, Fatima the pure, and al-Hassan and al-Husayn, the grandsons of the Apostle, whom thou hast freed from stain and thoroughly purified O my God, bless the pure Imams, ancestors of the Commanders of the faithful" were added in the *khutba*.⁷⁹ This was at once an open profession of Shi'ite faith, and an assertion of the claim of al-Mu'izz to be a descendent from the house of 'Ali. There is no sign that any appreciable number of the Egyptians became converts to Shi'ite views: for the most part these claims were regarded with complete apathy until the celebration of the great Shi'ite festival of Muharram when there was some rioting. The people at large acquiesced in the new rule without paying any attention to its religious claims⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Op Cit, *Khitat*, vol 3, P 232 and Op Cit, *Zuhur al-Khilafah al-Fatimiah*, P 271 and Op Cit, *The Isma'ilis*, P 37

⁷⁸ Ibid, *The Isma'ilis*, P 185 and Op Cit, *Zuhur al-Khilafah al-Fatimiah*, P 271 and Op Cit, *Khitat*, vol 3, P 232 and *Nuzim al-Fatimiyyin*, vol 2, Pp-126-128 It seems that in 973, *Eid al-Ghadir* is officially sanctioned, as it was in the Buyid lands to the east sometime earlier. See also Lev Vacov, *The Fatimid Imposition of Isma'ilism on Egypt (358-386/969-996)* " *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenandischen Gesellschaft* 138, 1988, P 317 and Op Cit, *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo*, Pp 124-125

⁷⁹ Op Cit, O'Leary, p 104 Ibn Khallikan, *Kitab Wafiatu al-Aiyan wa Anba Abna al-Zaman* (Biographical Dictionary), strongly anti Fatimid Ed Wustenfelf, Gottingen, 1835 Eng Trans (cited in references) by De Slane, 1835-40, P 344

⁸⁰ Ibid, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, 104 and Ibid, *Kitab Wafiatu al-Aiyan wa Anba Abna al-Zaman*, Pp 344-345

It had become customary with the Fatimid caliphs that they arrived at the main hall of the palace in a grand procession, as on other occasions described above, in the morning of 18th Zulhijja. After the routine ceremonials of the officials paying their respects to the Caliph who sat on a throne, the Qadi read out the *khutba* with special mention of 'Ali and his family and the importance of the Ghadir Khumm day. In the *khutba* emphasis was laid on the claim of 'Ali as the rightful successor to the spiritual authority of the Prophet and his nomination by the Prophet at Ghadir Khumm. The chief Qadi then himself led the prayer and came out of the palace after offering greetings to the caliph and the vizier. Animal sacrifice was also offered on this occasion.⁸¹

The celebration of '*Eid al-Ghadir* remained a cause of lot of heart burning amongst the majority Sunni population under the Fatimids.

Muharam and Ashura (The annual commemoration of the martyrdom of Al-Hussain)

The month of Muharram, the beginning of Islamic calendar, holds a special place in the shi'a society all over the world. This month is called Muharram (from the Arabic word *haram* meaning forbidden) because fighting in this month was strictly prohibited in Islam. It is ironic therefore that this month came to be remembered in Islam for the sacrifice of the Husain, the grandson of the Prophet who was slain along with his family members and followers in this month by Yazid bin Mu'awiya, the ruler of Damascus.

⁸¹ Op Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, Pp 654-655

The hostility of the house of Mu'awiyah towards the family of the Prophet was a continuing one. Mu'awiyah had repudiated the authority of 'Ali and declared himself the khalifa in Damascus. After the death of 'Ali, he continued to pressurize his eldest son, Hasan to accept him as the rightful khalifa and declare his allegiance to him (*ba'yat*) which the latter refused. After Hasan was poisoned and died, Yazid, the son of Mu'awiyah continued the same demand, to Husain, the younger brother of Hasan. We will not go here into details of the negotiations that went on between Yazid and Husain leading to the tragedy of Karbala as it has already been discussed in Chapter I. The martyrdom of Husain and his immediate family members and a handful of supporters at Karbala in Kufa in present day Iraq on the 10th of Muharram 61 A. H. by the forces of Yazid proved to be a turning point in the early history of Islam. Husain became an icon of liberty and freedom against all those who did not approve the tyrannical Umayyid authority. For the shi'as, who regarded the legitimacy of the Imams from the family of the Prophet, Muharram came to signify a special occasion. The Fatimids, being shi'as, commemorated the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Husain in Muharram in a big way.⁸²

Al-Maqrizi tells us that under the Fatimids, the martyrdom of al-Hussain came to be commemorated by the state for the first time in 362/973, during the time of caliph al-Mu'izz. The institutionalization of '*Ashura*, (the 10th day of Muharram) as a state commemoration took place in 973 and it received greater patronage under caliph al-'Aziz, a devout

⁸² More details on the negotiations that went on between Yazid and Husain leading to the tragedy of Karbala, see Chapter 1

shi'a⁸³ It reached its zenith under caliphs Mustansir (427-487/1036-1094) and Mustali (487-495/1094-1101).⁸⁴ Ashura continued to be commemorated annually by the Fatimids, with a brief interruption under al-Hakim, until the end of their rule⁸⁵

The Ashura observance was a solemn occasion under the Fatimids, as it is even today. People in their gatherings observed mourning and grief by wailing on the tragic martyrdom of Imam Husain and his family and friends. The Shi'as wore black clothes associated with mourning throughout the month and eulogized the Ahl al-Bait in the gatherings. Markets and shops were kept shut on the 'Ashura. The Vizier himself led the prayer this day and gave the sermon in the mosque at al-Azhar. Later, he listened to the recitation of the Holy Qur'an from the *qurra*. The princes, judges, the Chief *Da'i* and other high state officials attended the assembly. Poets read out their poetry in praise of 'Ali and the Ahl al-Bait.⁸⁶

There are reports of violent clashes between the Shi'as and Sunnis on its observance in the initial years.⁸⁷ On the day of 'Ashura in 1005, Shi'a mourners gathered at the Mosque of al-Amr, and after Friday prayer, poured into the streets cursing the Companions of the Prophet (*Sahaba*) leading to a clash with the Sunnis. The state machinery came into operation and took action against the rioters. Many people were arrested and one person was executed for his deeds. There was an official announcement forbidding the cursing of 'Aisha or Abu Bakr,

⁸³ Ibid, *The Isma'ilis*, P 185

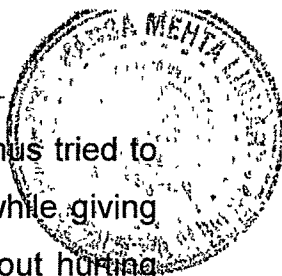
⁸⁴ Op Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, P 657

⁸⁵ Op Cit, *Kitab al-mawa'iz wa'l-i'tibar bi-dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar*, vol 1, Pp 431-432

⁸⁶ *Zuhur al-Khilafah al-Fatimiah*, P 272 and *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, Pp 653-656

⁸⁷ Op Cit, *The Fatimid Imposition*, P 318

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or else he would meet the same fate.⁸⁸ The Fatimid state thus tried to placate the Sunnis through such a policy announcement while giving freedom to Shi'as to carry out their 'Ashura mourning without hurting the Sunni sentiments. Fatimid caliphs took some other measures to placate Sunni sentiments. Since the order for the 'Ashura procession was given by the *qadi*,⁸⁹ caliph al-Hakim stopped this procession in 1009 and later appointed a Sunni *Qadi al-Qudat*, of the Hanbali School in order to appease the Sunnis.

The Fatimid state continued to patronize many other Shi'a festivals that were not so emotive for the Sunnis. Thus, there were official celebrations on 13th Rajab marking the birth anniversary of 'Ali, on 22nd Rajab of Imam Ja'far Sadiq and 27th Rajab, the commemoration of the night of *Mi'raj*, when Prophet Muhammad undertook his miraculous night journey to Heaven. Birth anniversary of Imam Husain was also celebrated in a big way on the 3rd of Sha'aban. Such innovations in the religious calendar could only be accomplished with the help of a powerful state infrastructure that utilized its resources to both implement and manipulate them. Such uses of power are regularly discouraged and reviled by Sunni *ulama*.⁹⁰

The Christian Festivals

Non-Muslims like the Christians, except in the times of a few caliphs, enjoyed freedom of worship and they celebrated their festivals publicly.

⁸⁸ Op Cit, *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo*, Pp 125–26. During the reign of al-Hakim in 1005 the usual Shi'ites feast of the 'Ashura commemorating the martyrdom of 'Ali and his sons, a regular occasion for an outbreak of Shi'ite fanaticism at the present day, was duly celebrated on the first ten days of Muharram. Op Cit, O'Leary, P. 143

⁸⁹ Op Cit, *The Fatimid Imposition*, 1988, P. 318

⁹⁰ Ibid, *The Fatimid Imposition*, Pp 320–323

We have thus evidence that the Coptic and other Christians celebrated various festivals during the Fatimid rule.

‘Eid al-Milaad (The Feast of Nativity)

The Cops and other Christians of Egypt celebrated the birth of Jesus (the Nativity or Yule) on the twenty-ninth of December (*Kayahk*, the fourth month of the Copt Calendar) every year. They regarded this date as the date of birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem in Palestine.⁹¹

The Copts and other Christians of Egypt celebrated this joyful occasion of Christmas by lighting streets, markets and their residences with candles and colored lanterns at night. Al-Maqrizi informs us that the Fatimid caliphs (from the time of al-Hakim)) joined the Christian community in this celebration and they distributed various kinds of sweets, mullet as well as the ritzy bread, made from white flour, to high-ranking officials of the Fatimid state.⁹²

‘Eid al Ghitas (The Feast of Epiphany or Baptism)

The historian Mas‘udi in his *Kitab muruj al-Dhahab* has given a description of one of the Christians festivals in Egypt, which, for Copts and other Christians. This festival was in commemoration of baptism of Jesus Christ by al-Nabi Yahya ibn Zakariyya, also known as Yuhanna al-Ma‘amadan, on the banks of Jordan River. It was called

⁹¹ Al-Mas‘udi informs us about the Copt Calendar. Telling us it was composed of twelve months. We have given equivalent of each month in the Gregorian calendar in brackets against each: *Tuot* (September), *Babah* (October), *Haature* (November), *Kayahk* (December), *Tobaah* (January), *Amshir* (February), *Baramahat* (March), *Barmodah* (April), *Bashans* (May), *Paoni* (June) and *Abib* (July) and ‘*Ussra* (August), Cf. *Muruj adh-Dhahab wa M‘aadn al-Jawhar*, vol. 2, p. 178.

⁹² Op. Cit, *Khitat*, vol. 1, P. 365, Pp. 393-494.

the *'Eid al Ghattas*. It was commemorated on the 10th of January whereby people gathered by the riverside by walking on foot from far and wide and took a bath in the Nile. This festival appears to have been patronized by the rulers of Egypt even before the advent of the Fatimids. We know that in 942 A.D. Ikhshid Mohammed bin Turgb ordered the bank of the Nile, opposite the bank of al-Fustat, to be illuminated with a thousand torches, besides private illuminations. Muslims and Christians, by hundreds of thousands, crowded the Nile on boats, or in kiosks overlooking the river, or stood on the banks, all eager for pleasure, and vying in equipage, dress, gold and silver cups, and jewelry. The sound of music was heard all about, with singing and dancing. It was a splendid night, the best in all Egypt for beauty and gaiety; the doors of the separate quarters were left open, and most people bathed in the Nile, believing it will cure all their ailments.⁹³

The Fatimid caliphs never participated in this celebration until the reign of the al-Hakim. This celebration was in fact banned before this period. In 977, the second year of al 'Aziz's reign, for example, a decree was issued which prohibited the Christians from participating in the rituals of Baptism (*'Eid al Ghitas*). Maybe the celebration of *'Eid al Ghitas* led to many abuses. Thus, the caliph al-Aziz threatened those who disobeyed the orders by exile.⁹⁴ The celebrations were allowed by caliph al-Hakim. However, in 401/1010 he forbade the games and amusements that accompanied the celebrations on the banks of Nile River. The Caliphs and other Muslims took part in the public festivities

⁹³ Op Cit, *Muruj adh-Dhahab wa M'aadin al-Jawhar*, vol 1, P 343 and Op Cit, *The Story of Cairo*, 1901, Pp 85-86

⁹⁴ Op Cit, *Itti'az al-Hunafa*, vol 1, P 242

of the Copts and other Christians⁹⁵ The ban on games and amusements during the festivities of *'Eid al Ghitas* were completely lifted by caliph al-Zahir in 1024.⁹⁶ Christians, joined by Muslims, once again gathered on the banks of River Nile and decorated boats with lamps and candles at night, and the shores of the river were lit up with lanterns and the torches

'Eid Al-Saleeb

Anniversary of the 'Eid al-Saleeb (Cross Festival) was coincident with the day the 17th Tout (July) The Copts and other Christians believed that in the year 328 A.D, the Queen Helen Mother of the Emperor Gustantine, found the cross that Jesus' crucified on it. And then the three wooden bars of crucifix laminated by gold, the Queen issued order to build of the resurrection in Jerusalem and kept the cross there⁹⁷

The Fatimids were generally tolerant of other faiths. Nevertheless, as the foundation of their state was laid on a theocratic doctrine, they had to impose restrictions on the practices of other faiths from time to time Apart from instances of restrictions imposed on individuals of the Copts and other Christians, certain constraints were also imposed on them as a community. In 991 another official pronouncement forbade the Christians from celebrating the festival of the Cross. However, this was not in any sense indicative of a permanent ban on the celebration of religious festivals by the Christians, as the very next year they were

⁹⁵ Op, Cit, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, P 159 and Op Cit, *al-mawa'iz wa'l-l'tibar bi-dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar*, vol 1, P 265

⁹⁶ Op, Cit, *al-Hayatu al-Ijtima'iyyah fi al-Asr al-Fatimi*, 167,

⁹⁷ Ibid, *al-mawa'iz wa'l-l'tibar bi-dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar*, 267 and Ibid, *al-Hayatu al-Ijtima'iyyah fi al-Asr al-Fatimi*, P 179 and *Subh al-a'sha fi sina'at al-insha*, vol 2, p 17

granted permission to celebrate the Festival of the Cross again. These decrees need to be understood as measures taken to curb moral laxity. For, as al Maqrizi explicates, many vile practices (*munkarat*), which were 'beyond description', took place at these festivals.⁹⁸ The caliph al-Hakim issued orders forbidding the Christians to observe the Feast of Cross in the autumn. In the year 1011 this decree was read out in the old Mosque and streets.⁹⁹ Al-Hakim also forbade the observance of the Feast of Hosannas i.e., Palm Sunday. Also al-Hakim, sent orders to Jerusalem for the destruction of the Church of al-Qiyama (Church of Resurrection). In compliance of that order the Church was plundered and then pulled down, an act that produced a deep feeling of anger in the Christian community generally, as well as among those who lived in al-Hakim's dominions. Indirectly it caused the Christian world to form an idea of Islam as a persecuting power, and so paved the way to the Crusades. The cause of the destruction of this sanctuary is said to have been a malicious report, which alleged that the Christians practiced a fraud in connection with the "holy fire" given out at Easter in that church.¹⁰⁰ Christians and Jews were also forbidden to mount horses. We are also told, however, that horse riding was prohibited for all civilians irrespective of their religion. After a decade of such harsh measures against the Christians and Jews, al-Hakim relaxed these measures and *dhimmis* (i.e , Christians and Jews) were permitted to follow their religious observances freely if they so desired.¹⁰¹ In spite of bans on religious observances on the Christians and the Jews from time to time by the Fatimid caliphs, they continued to be recruited in

⁹⁸ Op Cit, *al-mawa'iz wa'l-I'tibar bi-dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar*, vol 1, Pp 265- 267 and *Itti'az al-Hunafa*, vol 1, Pp 271&272& 276

⁹⁹ Op Cit, *Khitat*, v 1, P 267

¹⁰⁰ Op, Cit, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, P 157

¹⁰¹ Op, Cit, *The Bohras*, P 87

state services and were given responsible positions in the state¹⁰² They Christians too did not want to create any major problem for the Fatimid state, excepting expressing their anguish in times of bans on their festivals and other religious observances The advice of Patriarch Kirolos given to the Copts asking them to lead a virtuous life and obey the laws and practices of the country, clearly points out this attitude of the minorities towards the Fatimid state¹⁰³

Marriage with Black Slave Females

Marriages with black slave female slaves were one of the very prominent social practices all over medieval Islamic world. There are many instances of Fatimid rulers marrying black slave females in our sorceress.

Al-'Aziz was favorably disposed towards the Copts and other Christian slave females. He also had a Christian wife (Romanian Christian slave) whose two brothers were, by the caliph's influence, appointed Malkite patriarchs: patriarchs of the church in communion with the Orthodox Greek Church as distinguished from the Jacobite body to which the Copts belonged, the one at Alexandria, the other in Jerusalem The caliph's favor was extended to the Copt Church as well as to the Malkite body to which his wife belonged due to this marital relationship.¹⁰⁴

Caliph al-Zahir, we are told by al-Maqrizi, had bought a black Sudani slave girl from Abu Nasir Sa'd al-Dahir, son of Sahl (a Jewish merchant

¹⁰² Op Cit, *The Story of Cairo*, Pp 85-86

¹⁰³ Ibid, Pp 85-86

¹⁰⁴ Op Cit, *Islam Politics and War*, Pp 116-117

in Cairo), and she became the mother of the eighth Fatimid Caliph, al-Mustansir¹⁰⁵

Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi who later conquered Egypt found more than 12,000 female slaves and servants in the residence of the Fatimid caliphs.¹⁰⁶ 'Umara bin 'Ali al-Hakimi (d 569/1174), the famous Yamani historian and poet, tells us that, It was not the phenomenon restricted to the caliphs and high-ranking officials of the state only, also it also included any one from the populace who had a social and economic standing and was able to afford purchasing a slave girl.¹⁰⁷ These Christian females were married through a *nikah* indicating that they were converted to Islam before that.

The Islamic *nikah* being a contract, contract money called *mahr* had to be part of the contract. When the caliph al-'Aziz wedded his cousin in 979 A D, the agreed dower was two hundred thousand 200,000 gold Dinars.¹⁰⁸ The amount of dower varied from person to person and was mainly based on the paying capacity of the groom. Its amount ranged between one to eighty Dinars for people other than caliphs and the nobles in the Fatimid state.¹⁰⁹ Lavish gifts accompanied the *nikah*; the Turkish general Baltkin gifted his bride articles worth 100,000 Dinars, including lavish pieces of dresses, according to al-Maqrizi.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Op, Cit, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, P 193

¹⁰⁶ Op, Cit, *The Bohras*, Pp 79 & 93

¹⁰⁷ Umara al-Yamani, Najam al-Din Abu Muhammad Umara b Abi al-Hasan Ali al-Hakimi, *al-Nukat al-Asnah fi Akhbar al-Wizarah al-Misriah*, ed H D Shalon, vol 1, P 147

¹⁰⁸ Al-Nuwayri, Shahab al-Din Ahmad b Abd al-Wahhab, *Nihayat al-arab fi finoon al-adab*, Makhtut Musawar Bi Dar al-Khutub, No 549, Cairo, vol 26, plate, 47, and Op Cit, *Itti'az al-Hunafa*, vol 1, P 252

¹⁰⁹ Op, Cit, *al-Hayatu al-Ijtima'iyyah fi al-Asr al-Fatimi*, P 194

¹¹⁰ Op Cit, *Khitat*, vol 2, p 318 and *Itti'az al-Hunafa*, vol 1, P 271

It may not be out of place here to note that the Fatimid caliphs generally did not interfere in the freedom enjoyed by women in the society of the time. However, al-Hakim (386-411/996-1021) was the only caliph who issued a series of orders prescribing a code of conduct for males as well as females at public places. It may be noted that his period was marked with economic sluggishness. It is possible that through these orders, he was trying to divert the attention of the masses from the bad state of the economy during that period.

Cairo had a bustling nocturnal life and the caliph did not like the permissiveness enjoyed by the females. In 391/1000-1001, al-Hakim forbade women from coming out of their houses into the streets whether by day or by night, or even to look out through windows or from the roofs.¹¹¹ A little later, this was followed by a general decrees prohibiting the opening of the shops by night.¹¹² In the year 402 (1011-1012) new laws were issued forbidding all pleasure parties on the banks of the Nile and requiring all doors and windows opening on the Nile to be kept closed.¹¹³ Women were forbidden to visit graves and graveyard.¹¹⁴ According to al-Maqrizi not a single woman was henceforth seen in the cemeteries on public holidays.¹¹⁵

In the year 395/1004-1005, al-Hakim gave orders that no one should enter the public baths without wearing a loincloth, that women should not uncover their faces in the street or in a funeral procession and

¹¹¹ Op Cit, *The Shi'a of India*, P 232

¹¹² Op, Cit, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, p 133

¹¹³ Ibid, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, P 162

¹¹⁴ Op Cit, *The Cambridge History of Islam*, vol 2, P 55 and *Khitat*, vol 2, Pp 285-289

¹¹⁵ Ibid, *Khitat*, vol 2, Pp 285-289

should not bedeck themselves. He enforced all those rules with the utmost rigor; people violating the orders were flogged.¹¹⁶

Other decrees forbade music, games, or meetings for pleasure at *Sahra* and others, forbidding loose entertainments anywhere or the sale of singing girls.¹¹⁷ Al-Hakim imposed severe restrictions on such women and confiscated their properties including those of his mother and sister.¹¹⁸ In 1014 he forbade women from coming out of their houses into the streets at all, whether by day or by night, or even to look out through windows or from the roofs.¹¹⁹ Public baths for women were closed down and the shoemakers were forbidden to make women's footwears.¹²⁰ These laws continued throughout his reign and were repealed by his successor al-Zahir's when he became the caliph in 1021 A. D.¹²¹

Al-Hakim's attitude towards women has been a subject of discussion amongst historians. It appears that it was the result partly of Islamic laws and partly of intrigues that he faced from some influential women in the palace. His sister Sitt al-Mulk wielded enormous powers. Using her wealth, she could promote political intrigues. This prejudiced his mind against women in general that led to these anti-women orders from the caliph.¹²²

¹¹⁶ Op Cit, *The Cambridge History of Islam*, vol 2, p 50

¹¹⁷ Op, Cit, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, Pp 162-163 and Ibid, P 55

¹¹⁸ Op, Cit, *The Bohras*, P 88

¹¹⁹ Op Cit, *The Shi'a of India*, P 232

¹²⁰ Op Cit, *The Cambridge History of Islam*, vol 2, P 57

¹²¹ Op, Cit, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifate*, P 173 and Op, Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, P 647

¹²² For more details on al-Hakim attitudes towards women See Op Cit, *Khitat*, vol 2, Pp 285-289, & P 342 and Op Cit, *al-Nujum al-Zahira fi Miluk Misr wa al-Qahirah*, vol 4, Pp 178, 236 Op Cit, *al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah fi Misr*, P 104 and Op, Cit, *The Bohras*, P 88

The Art of The Fatimid period

The Fatimid period is of singular importance as the era when Egypt reached an outstanding position in the Muslim world, not only as the focal point of vast trading activities extending as far as Spain in the west and India in the east (as well as outside the Islamic regions) but also as a great manufacturing center. The arts and crafts were so highly specialized during that period that it has been possible to establish no fewer than 210 different categories of artisans, compared to 150 in ancient Rome.¹²³

Our most vivid and also most sumptuous picture of this period is provided by historical accounts, both contemporary and later, reporting on an event during the reign of al-Mustansir. In 1067-68 the great treasury of the Fatimids was ransacked when the troops rebelled and demanded to be paid. The stories of this plundering, mention not only great quantities of pearls and jewels, crowns, swords, and other imperial accoutrements but also many objects in rare materials and of enormous size.¹²⁴

Eighteen thousand pieces of rock crystal and cut glass were swiftly looted from the palace, and twice as many jeweled objects; also large numbers of gold and silver knives, all richly set with jewels; valuable chess and backgammon pieces; various types of hand mirrors, skillfully

¹²³ S. D. Goitein, 'The Main Industries of the Mediterranean Area as Reflected in the Records of the Cairo Geniza', *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 1961, Pp 168-169

¹²⁴ These data have been recorded by al-Qadī al-Rashīd ibn al-Zubayr, *Kitāb al-Dhakhair wa-l-Tuhaf*, ed. M. Hamidullah, Kuwait, 1959, trans. and annotation, G. Al-Qaddumi *Book of Gifts and Rarities*, Cambridge, MA, 1996, paragraphs 370-414 and by al-Maqrīzī in *Kitāb al-Mawā'iz wa'l-I'tibar bi-dhikr al-khitāt wa'l-'Athar*, I, Bulaq, 1854, 414-16, trans. P. Kahle, 'Die Schätze der Fatimiden', *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft*, N F 14, 1935, 338-61. They form the basis of Zaky M. Hassan, *Kunuz al-Fatīmiyyin (The Treasures of the Fatimids)*, Cairo, 1937.

decorated; six thousand perfume bottles in gilded silver; and so on. More specifically, we learn of enormous pieces of rock crystal inscribed with caliphal names; of gold animals encrusted with jewels and enamels; of a large golden palm tree, and even of a whole garden partially gilded and decorated with niello. There was also an immensely rich treasury of furniture, carpets, curtains, and wall coverings, many embroidered in gold, often with designs incorporating birds and quadrupeds, kings and their notables, and even a whole range of geographical vistas.¹²⁵

Relatively few of these objects have survived, most of them very small; but the finest are impressive enough to lend substance to the vivid picture painted in the historical accounts of this vanished world of luxury.¹²⁶

At first the artists working under the Fatimids seem to have continued to explore the possibilities inherent in forms long current in Egypt or more recently imported from the East. Only gradually do they seem to have introduced new decorative elements that had begun evolving in the western Islamic lands during the previous, early Islamic period. As regards wood, treasured in Egypt because of its scarcity, early in the Fatimid period we can witness the continued popularity of the beveled style first encountered in the Abbasid heartland and later in Tulunid Egypt. The carved decoration on a tie-beam in the mosque of al-Hakim, dated 1003, is still based on the true Samarra Style but it is also illustrative of a further development of that style in that the lines

¹²⁵ R. B. Serjeant, 'Material for a History of Islamic Textiles up to the Mongol Conquest', *Ars Islamica* 13-14, 1948, Pp 11-113

¹²⁶ K. Erdmann, 'Neue islamische Bergkristalle', *Ars Orientalis* 3, 1959, P 201

delineating the rather restricted number of motifs are wider, thus giving quite a different impression. Unlike the prototype, here the distinction between pattern and interstitial spaces is clearly defined.¹²⁷ This feature is even more pronounced on the panels of a wooden door dated 1010, also inscribed to the caliph al-Hakim.¹²⁸ Where the individual beveled patterns stand out clearly from a dark background. The major design elements are themselves decorated with small-scale surface patterns. The resulting textures, along with the contrast between light and dark, produce more varied, lively, and accented compositions than earlier on.¹²⁹

By the third quarter of the eleventh century, however, a further evolution is discernible. The beveled elements are reduced to thin, spiraling stems against a deeply carved background, and figural and animal designs begin to come to the fore. The early stages of this innovative trend are well illustrated by the panel. Although the vegetal and figural designs can here be interpreted as being given equal treatment, the former motifs are beginning to be relegated to the background, and pride of place is moving toward the zoomorphized split palmette. Instead of starkly abstract, static, and purely sculptural qualities, there is now a dramatic interplay between abstract and more realistic parts, between elements conceived three-dimensionally and

¹²⁷ R. Ettinghausen, 'The "Beveled Style" in the Post-Samarra Period', in G. C. Miles, ed., *Archaeologica Orientalia in Memoriam Ernst Herzfeld*, Locust Valley, N.Y., 1952, 75, pl. X no. 3.

¹²⁸ E. Pauty, *Catalogue general du Musée Arabe du Caire*, Cairo, 1931.

¹²⁹ The vogue for similarly decorated doors was to continue in Egypt for more than a hundred years. The panelled doors depicted on the stone façade of the Mosque of al-Aqmar are quite close in design to those illustrated here and also resemble the wooden doors in the mosque itself. See D. Behrens-Abouseif, 'The Facade of the Aqmar Mosque in the Context of Fatimid Ceremonial', *Muqarnas*, 1992, p. 34, and M. Jenkins, 'An Eleventh-Century Woodcarving from a Cairo Nunnery', in R. Ettinghausen, ed., *Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York, 1972.

purely linear ones, and between light and shadow. In addition there is a new sense of movement.

This panel and another in the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, are closely related to those comprising a fragmentary door believed to have come from the Western Fatimid Palace, built by the caliph al-'Aziz and completely renovated by al-Mustansir in 1058 which was destroyed by the Ayyubid conqueror Salah al-Din (Saladin) in the late twelfth century.

Particularly important among these is a series of horizontally oriented carved wooden boards - some with decoration organized in interlaced cartouches containing designs of animals and human figures all carved against a background of formalized vine scrolls in lower relief and others with a symmetrically arranged animal decoration.¹³⁰ The horse protomes seen on the contemporary door panel discussed earlier, because their outline was made to conform to that of a split palmette, appear very stiff when compared to the liveliness of the varied motifs on these friezes and the realism conveyed by them. Human figures predominate now, and the rich repertory of subjects includes a number of male and female dancers portrayed in animated postures. In keeping with the new taste for scenes from everyday life, a woman peers out through the open curtains of a palanquin on the back of a camel, which is escorted by a man. In another compartment a drinking

¹³⁰ Pauty, *Catalogue*. Some of the themes have been analysed by G. Marçais, 'Les Figures d'hommes ET betes dans les bois sculptes d'epoque fatimite musulmane', *Melanges Maspero, III Orient islamique*, Cairo, 1940, 241-57. See also Jenkins, 'Eleventh-century Woodcarving' 227-30, Pauty, *Catalogue*, and *Treasures of Islam*, exh. Cat. Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva, 1985, cat. No. 357, P. 343. For excellent illustrations of the series illustrated and many other objects produced under Fatimid aegis and presently housed in the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, see *Schatze der Kalifen Islamische Kunst zur Fatimidenzeit*, exh. Cat. Vienna, 16 November 1998-21, February 1999.

party is in progress. Two turbaned figures grasp goblets, one of them pouring from a bottle. From one side a servant approaches carrying a large vessel, presumably in order to replenish the bottle. Although the roughness of execution means that details are not as clear as those on similar representations in other media, traces of red and blue pigment suggest that specifics of facial features, costume, implements, etc. may have been precisely delineated in paint. Similar woodcarvings, more refined in workmanship but reflecting even more strongly the late Fatimid taste for observation from life, are to be found in a Christian context in Cairo, in the Coptic convent of Dayr al-Banat.¹³¹

Probably dating from about the same time is the fragmentary panel, decorated with a bird of prey attacking a hare, which must have originally functioned as one of the sides of a chest.¹³² This is a simpler but equally beautiful example of the technique known as marquetry that had a long life in Egypt. Both the latter, more intricate, version of this art and the particular adaptation seen here were to be adopted later by the Almohads in al-Andalus and the Maghreb.¹³³

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Although the earliest extant datable woodwork with figural decoration from Muslim Egypt is from the third quarter of the eleventh century, architectural elements with such ornamentation were being utilized in Fatimid Ifriqiya more than one hundred years earlier. The fact that the

¹³¹ See R. Ettinghausen, 'Early Realism in Islamic Art', *Studi orientalistici in onore di Giorgio Levi della Vida I* (Rome, 1956), 259-62. Echoes of this stylistic trend can be seen in the fragmentary wooden ceiling of the first half of the twelfth century from the Cappella Palatina, now in the Galleria Regionale della Sicilia, Palermo, cf. G. Curatola, *Eredità dell'Islam: arte islamica in Italia*, exh. Cat. Palazzo Ducale, Venice, 30 October 1993-30 April 1994, cat. No. 86, Pp. 197-98.

¹³² *Islamic Art in Egypt, 969-1517*, exh. Cat. Cairo, April 1969, cat. No. 234, P. 246, fig. 40.

¹³³ J. Sourdel-Thomine and B. Spuler, *Die Kunst des Islam*, Berlin, 1973, fig. 240, and Chapter 7, below, 457.

capital Sabra al-Mansuriyya, founded in 947, contained buildings adorned with carved wood decorated with birds and stucco sculpture in human, bird, and animal form may indicate that early Fatimid structures in Cairo which no longer survive were similarly decorated.¹³⁴ Thus, the vogue for carved wooden architectural elements with figural decoration may have been concurrent with that for the vegetal decoration that was evolving from the beveled style

Ivory carvings attributed to Fatimid craftsmen show close parallels in style and iconography to wood, but here the workmanship demonstrates the greater refinement appropriate to so expensive a material. The openwork plaque that apparently once sheathed a casket or other small object repeats a long-common motif: the scarf dancer, skipping, her draperies swirling about her twisted body, her arms gesturing sinuously.¹³⁵ Particularly noteworthy on this panel is the grace of the performer, her weight convincingly distributed, her headdress precisely knotted. The naturalism of all the figures on such plaques is heightened by the refined technique. Although there are two main levels of relief, as on the wooden boards, here the frames and figures are so delicately modeled that they appear fully rounded as if they were actually emerging from the vegetal scrolls that constitute the background.¹³⁶ A device that contributes to this three-dimensional effect is undercutting. Furthermore, the leaves project forward from the vine scrolls in the background so that the two planes of the carving seem interconnected. These ivories are distinguished by the care

¹³⁴ See *30 Ans au Service du Patrimoine*, Institut National d'Archéologie et d'Art, Tunis, 1986, nos IV 51-54, 56, Pp 257-9

¹³⁵ E. Kuhnelt, *Die islamischen Elfenbeinskulpturen VIII-XIII Jahrhundert*, Berlin, 1971

¹³⁶ R. Ettinghausen, 'Painting in the Fatimid Period: A Reconstruction', *Ars Islamica* 9, 1942, 112-13

lavished on detail, for example in the rendering of textile patterns, the texturing of animal fur and bird feathers, and the veining of leaves.

Because of their highly developed style, these ivories and comparable pieces in Berlin and Paris have been dated to the late eleventh or early twelfth century. However there appears to be no reason why they could not be contemporary in date with the carved wooden panels from the Western Fatimid Palace datable to 1050. When the paint was intact on the latter decorative elements, these panels could have been as highly developed in detail as the ornament on the ivories.

The stylistic development we have been able to follow in the carved decoration of wood during the Fatimid period can be observed also in the ornamentation of lustre-painted pottery. Early in the period the designs adorning ceramic objects are often based on the beveled style, but the motifs that took on sculptural qualities in carved wood had here to be rendered two-dimensionally. The earliest datable lustre-painted object so decorated is a fragmentary dish bearing the name of a commander-in-chief of the caliph al-Hakim who held the title for only two years - November 1011 to November 1013.¹³⁷ A fine example of such a transitional work is the bowl signed by Muslim ibn al-Dahhan, a very productive artisan whose period of artistic output is known to us by means of a fragmentary dish in the Benaki Museum bearing an inscription stating that it was made by the above-named ceramist for a courtier of al-Hakim.

¹³⁷ M. Jenkins, 'The Palmette Tree: A Study of the Iconography of Egyptian Lustre Painted Pottery', *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 7, 1968, 119-26, and R. Pinder-Wilson, 'An Early Fatimid Bowl Decorated in Lustre', in R. Ettinghausen, ed., *Aus der Welt der islamischen Kunst. Festschrift für Ernst Kühnel*, Berlin, 1959, pp. 139-43. Marilyn Jenkins-Madina saw another large single fragment from this dish in 1974 in the International Ceramics Museum, Faenza, Italy, acc. no. AB1231.

Although there are numerous lustre-painted bowls from Fatimid Egypt that bear figural designs as their principal decoration, there is only one such vessel known to us which can be securely dated, employed as a *bacino* in the Church of San Sisto in Pisa, Italy, dating to the last quarter of the eleventh century. We can be certain that the style of decoration exhibited on this bowl was current at this time since it must be assumed that this and the many other bowls from Egypt and elsewhere that once graced or still adorn the façades of Romanesque churches and/or campaniles in Italy were installed at the time of the construction of these buildings. The pottery decorated with luster painting was the most luxurious of the kiln production of Fatimid Egypt, it was not the only ceramic type manufactured during this period. The potters working in Egypt and Syria during this period also produced monochrome glazed carved and/or incised ceramics, decorative techniques previously met with on pottery produced during the Early Islamic period.

Another fine and famous example of the relief-cut technique is the bowl executed in opaque turquoise-coloured glass and obviously meant to imitate a bowl carved from a mineral¹³⁸ further supporting the hypothesis that the flowering of the craft of cut glass - especially relief-cut glass - was an offshoot of the technique for working precious or semi-precious stones, be they turquoise, emerald, or rock crystal. The

¹³⁸ cf. Avinoam Shalem, *Islam Christianized Islamic Portable Objects in the Medieval Church Treasures of the Latin West*, Frankfurt, 1996, no 77, P 227 and fig 16. And H. R. Hahnloser, ed., *Il tesoro de San Marco* (Florence, 1971), 2 vols, cat No 117. And two other complete objects in this metal are the carafes in the Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, N.Y. (*Islam and the Medieval West*, exh. cat. States University of New York at Binghamton, 6 April-4 May 1975, cat No G9), and a lustre-painted object in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. See M. Jenkins, 'Islamic Glass: A Brief History', *Bull. MMA*, fall 1986, 23, no 21. Threads of this metal are also to be seen on glass objects from the Arab world, e.g. The Madina Collection, New York, 110 G0060.

close relationship between cut glass and cut stone, especially rock crystal, had been fully understood by medieval Muslims, for they are repeatedly listed together in reports of the Fatimid treasures in Cairo ¹³⁹ The *ibriq* (ewer), bearing the name of the early Fatimid caliph al-'Aziz and exemplifying the finest quality of workmanship possible at the time, belongs to a group of highly important rock-crystal objects, several of which are firmly datable. ¹⁴⁰ This vessel and several others in the group share not only the same traditional shape with the cameo glass vessel just discussed but also many iconographic and stylistic features. However, whether the relief-cut glass objects led up to, were contemporary with, or were made in imitation of the rock-crystal ones is yet to be determined ¹⁴¹

The cup also excavated at Serçe Limani beautifully exemplifies the latter decorative device in the Fatimid period. The less time-consuming technique of thread trailing employed here in a boldly contrasting color to set off the rim of the drinking vessel was often used at this time as well to imitate relief-cut designs. ¹⁴²

¹³⁹ The green relief-cut glass vessel in Venice. See cf. *The Treasury of San Marco Venice*, exh. cat. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984, cat. No. 27, P. 100. See also M. Jenkins-Madina, 'Fatimid Decorative Arts: The Picture the Sources Paint', in *L'Egypte fatimide: son art et son histoire*, Paris, 28, 29, and 30 mai 1998, Paris, 1999.

¹⁴⁰ One of these is a closely related, and roughly contemporary (1000-08), rock crystal ewer in the Pitti Palace, Florence. See Ettinghausen, R. and O. Grabar, *Art and Architecture of Islam, 650-1250 A.D.* London, 1987, 194, fig. 179. The third datable object in this medium is a crescent in the name of al-Zahir (r. 1021-36) in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, Ettinghausen and Grabar, 193, fig. 178.

¹⁴¹ The similarly shaped glass ewer (without, however, the relief-cut decoration) found in the Northern Pagoda of Chaoyang and datable to the Chongxi reign (1032-51) of the Liao dynasty may indicate that the glass versions imitated those in rock-crystal, see An Jiayao, 'Dated Islamic Glass in China', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, N.S. 5, 1991, fig. 17.

¹⁴² Jenkins, *Islamic Glass*, no. 41, P. 34.

The vessel continues the tradition of luster painting on glass that we first met with in Egypt during the early Abbasid period.¹⁴³ While considerably simpler than the decoration found on Fatimid luster-painted pottery, the style of the rinceau and the convention of setting off the ornamented bands with double (or single) plain luster fillets, not to mention the shape of the vessel itself, are all familiar elements in the repertoire of the period.

Ample evidence for the importance of textiles during the Fatimid period is provided by the detailed descriptions of the dispersal of the imperial treasury in 1067-68 as well as by reports of contemporary geographers. These invaluable texts inform us as to the quantities and diverse origins of the numerous types of textiles being stored in various areas of the palace at the time of the catastrophe and the different types of textiles being woven in various parts of the Fatimid realm. We learn not only that this dynasty imported stuffs of many different kinds from al-Andalus, Mesopotamia, and Persia as well as from Byzantium, but that locally made products were also very highly valued both within and outside Egypt¹⁴⁴

The *tiraz* was probably the back of an over-garment similar to modern 'abaya and belongs to a rare and deluxe group of Fatimid textiles datable to the reign of the caliph al-Mustali (1094-1102) and to the

¹⁴³ C. J. Lamm, *Mittelalterliche Glaser und Steinschnittarbeiten aus dem Nahen Osten*, Berlin, 1930, I, 109, no. 3.

¹⁴⁴ R. B. Serjeant, *Islamic Textiles, Material for a History up to the Mongol Conquest*, Beirut, 1972, 135-60. See also J. A. Sokoly, 'Towards a Model of Early Islamic Textile Institutions in Egypt' and Y. K. Stillman, 'Textiles and Patterns Come to Life Through the Cairo Geniza', both *Riggisberger Berichte* 5, 1996, 115-22 and 35-52, respectively.

factories of Damietta in the Delta.¹⁴⁵ The decorative bands and ornamental roundels are tapestry woven in colored silks and gold file (silk core wrapped with a gold wire) on fine linen. This group has been associated with a type of textile called *qasab* described in 1047, by Nasir Khusraw, as being woven in Tinnis and Damietta for the sole use of the ruler.¹⁴⁶ While the gazelles and prancing sphinxes reflect a figural style with which we have become familiar on other objects of this period executed in many different media, the layout as well as the style of the garment itself were adopted from the fashion of the Copts in pre-Islamic Egypt.

For the most part earlier and considerably more plentiful than the deluxe group just discussed were the group of Fatimid textiles adorned solely with epigraphic and narrow decorative bands. This veil is particularly sumptuous and not only bears the name of the caliph al-'Aziz and the date of 373/983-84 but also informs us that this exclusive *tiraz* was made in Tinnis.¹⁴⁷

The vogue for small and large copper-alloy animal sculpture persisted in Egypt and the Maghreb at least until the end of the eleventh century. Representing griffins, stags, gazelles, lions, rabbits, eagles, and other

¹⁴⁵ *Tresors fatimides du Caire*, exh. Cat. 'Institut du Monde Arabe, 28 April-30 August 1998, cat. No. 209, pp. 232-33, one other piece in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acc. no. 29.136.4, unpublished, and that in *Tissus d'Egypte témoins du monde arabe VIII-XV siècles*, Collection Bouvier, exh. Cat. Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva, 1993-94, cat. No. 134.

¹⁴⁶ Serjeant, R. B. *Islamic Textiles, Material for a History up to the Mongol Conquest*, Beirut, 1972, pp. 142-43. Also the Metropolitan Museum of Art possesses two simpler fragments of this textile category. Employing a minimal amount of silk, these may have been knock-offs for the *hoi polloi* of the epitome in royal fashion at the turn of the eleventh century (acc. Nos. 1974.112.14a and 1974.113.14b).

¹⁴⁷ Ernst Kuhnel, 'Four Remarkable Tiraz Textiles', in G. C. Miles, ed., *Archeologica Orientalia in Memoriam Ernst Herzfeld*, Locust Valley, N. Y., 1952, 144-49.

types of birds, they were used as aquamaniles, incense burners, fountain spouts, padlocks, and possibly vessel supports, and they share not only a high degree of stylization, which, however, never impairs effective recognition of the subject, but also such secondary features as frequent all-over decoration and zoomorphic handles.¹⁴⁸ The most famous as well as the most beautiful and monumental example of this tradition in the central Islamic lands is undoubtedly the celebrated so-called Pisa griffin, the immediate precursor of which is a quadruped from Ifriqiya.¹⁴⁹

On this copper-alloy object (the original function of which is unknown) everything is formalized: not only the body and its parts but also the engraved decoration, which consists of roundels, inscriptions, and designs of small animals - none of them detracting, however, from the grandiose impression that this object, more than one meter high, makes on the beholder. Made under the Fatimid aegis most probably during the eleventh century, this object could very well have been part of the large booty taken by the Pisans after their successful invasion of the Zirid capital, Mahdiyyah, in the summer of 1087.¹⁵⁰

We are informed that the Fatimid treasury contained silver articles with niello decoration (the art, process, or method of decorating metal with

¹⁴⁸ The largest published group of such animals of copper alloy is to be found in G. Migeon, *Manuel d'art musulman*, Paris, 1927, figs 182-91, the only more critical evaluation is by K. Erdmann, 'Islamische Giessgefasse des II. Jahrhunderts', *Pantheon* 22, 1938, 251-54. See also E. C. Dodd, 'On the Origins of Medieval *Dinandene*: The Equestrian Statue in Islam', *Art Bulletin* 51, 1969, 220-32.

¹⁴⁹ *The Art of Medieval Spain, A.D. 500-1200*, exh. Cat. New York, 1993, P. 81.

¹⁵⁰ M. Jenkins, 'New Evidence for the Possible Provenance and Fate of the So-Called Pisa Griffin', *Islamic Archaeological Studies* I, 1978, Cairo, 1982, 79-85. For two different views see A. S. Melikian-Chirvani, 'Le Griffon Iranien de Pise: matériaux pour un corpus de l'argenterie et du bronze iraniens, III', *Kunst des Orients* 5 (1968), 68-86, and *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, exh. Cat. New York, 1992, cat. No 115, Pp. 216-18.

incised designs filled with the black alloy). Until recently we were at a loss as to the appearance of any of these items as none of them seemed to have survived. The box, therefore, bearing the name of a vizier of al-Mustansir who served only for three years - 1044-1047 fills an important gap. As Geniza documents support the idea that large quantities of silver vessels were exported to the Maghreb and India from Egypt in the medieval period¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ *Art of Medieval Spain*, no. 47, Pp. 99-100. See also S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, Vol. IV, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1983, 223. See Ayala Lester, Y. D. Arnon and Rachel Polak, 'The Fatimid Hoard from Caesarea: A Preliminary Report,' in *L'Égypte fatimide son art et son histoire* (ed. M. Barrucand), Paris, 1999, Pp. 233-48.