

Chapter 4

Cultural Institutions Under The Fatimids

In this chapter an attempt is made to take stock of the Fatimids' varied contributions to Islamic culture and civilization and their patronage of learning. It examines in a historical perspective the intellectual and learning traditions among the Isma'ilis from the rise of the Fatimids in North Africa to Egypt. This period from 909-1171 undoubtedly belongs to the most momentous periods in the history of the Islamic nation and of Muslim culture in general.

The primary vehicle of this cultural renaissance was the Isma'i'li *da'wa*. We also examined the institutional features of this *da'wa* that contributed to its creativity and dynamism, such as its structure and organization, its concepts of teachings, the personal and intellectual qualities required of individual *da'is*, as well as the duties and responsibilities they were called upon to perform in remote areas of the Muslim world.

Another important aspect of Fatimid intellectual life considered in this chapter is that which centered on its academic and educational institutions such as Dar al-Hikma ("The House of wisdom") and the mosque of al-Azhar, the first truly University of its kind and continues to impart knowledge to this day since the time of its inception.

Al-Azhar was concerned mainly with the religious sciences, in particular the teaching of the Shari'a according to Isma'i'li doctrine, and offered free public education to all Muslims. The Dar al-Hikma provided

research facilities for scholars in the non-religious sciences, such as medicine, astronomy, mathematics, philology, logic, and the like. Both institutions were liberally endowed by the state and their teaching staff received regular remuneration. Another, more exclusive form of organized education was represented by the *majalis al-hikma* (sessions of wisdom) on Isma'ili philosophy and esoteric thought, which were reserved for members of the 'and held weekly under the personal supervision of the chief *da'i* in the palace of the caliph-Imam. In this short but highly informative assessment of Fatimid intellectual traditions, it becomes clear that the promotion of learning and scholarship was a planned, premeditated policy that the Fatimids pursued vigorously from the onset of their rule in Egypt. In fact, many of their cultural policies and educational institutions introduced in Egypt were prefigured on a smaller scale during the early period when the Fatimids were based in north-West Africa. Furthermore, the priority accorded to the intellect by the Fatimids was intentionally pluralistic and meritocratic, open equally to Muslims of all sects, Isma'ilis and others and also to Christians and Jews, enabling the original thinker, creative scientist or talented poet, as much as the astute politician and military strategist, to rise high in the offices of court and state.

The Fatimid Religious Thought and *Da'wa*

The Isma'ilis had organized in the third/ninth century a secret religio-political movement designated as *al-da'wa* (the mission), or more precisely, *al-da'wa al-hadiya* (the rightly guiding mission).¹ The Isma'ili *Da'wa*, carried out by their missionaries, dominated the evolution of

¹Farhad Daftary, *The Ismaili Da'wa outside the Fatimid Dawla* 1999 P 29. In Marianne Barrucand (ed.), *L'Egypte Fatimide Son art et son histoire* Pp 29-43 Paris Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne

intellectual life in the Islamic world from the fourth to the sixth centuries of the Hijra era. A large number of Moslem thinkers appear to have been influenced by the Isma'ili doctrine, including the famous philosopher and Father of Modern Medicine Abu Ali ibn Sina, known in Christian medieval Europe as Avicenna, (d. 1036/429).² Abu 'Ali Sina became acquainted with the tenets of Isma'ilism at an early age through the scholarly discussions held at the house his father.³

The Fatimid *da'is*, however, won numerous converts outside the Fatimid state (Yemen, Persia, the Indian Subcontinent), enabling the survival of Isma'ilism even after the fall of the Isma'ili states of Egypt and Alamut. For the Fatimids, *da'wa* and jihad seem to have been two distinct and separate activities. While jihad was a very earthly and physical endeavor, *da'wa* concentrated on the soul and spiritual matters.

The Fatimid *da'wa* must have started sometime at the end of the 8th century in Mashriq before moving to Maghreb, where the Fatimid state was created in the first half of the 10th century, was peaking during the Egyptian phase of the Fatimid state (969–1171).⁴

In the course of the fourth/tenth century, the Isma'ili doctors, many of whom were active *da'is* for the Fatimids, adopted a theology, which

²Op Cit, *The Bohras*, Pp 42-43 Ibn Sina (*Avicenna*) Abu Ali ibn Sina, who is said to have born thirty years after the death of al-Farabi and died in 429/1036 Ibn Sina was a native of Bukhara and familiar with both Persian and Arabic. He mentions in his autobiography that his father and his brother had Isma'ili sympathies, and this may have aroused his interest in philosophy, which had began to study systematically under the tuition of al-Natili, who sojourned at that time in Central Asia. Op Cit, *The Cambridge History of Islam*, vol 2, Pp 804-805

³ Op Cit, *The Isma'ilis*, P 212

⁴ Op Cit, *The Ismaili Da'wa outside the Fatimid Dawla*, P 34

derives from perhaps christianized neo-Platonism. The philosophical Isma'ili theologies teach the existence of two parallel hierarchies-the spiritual, constituted by cosmic entities (such as the universal Intellect and universal Soul), and the corporal, constituted by the dignitaries of the sect, from the Imam downwards.⁵

The Isma'ilis did not submit to the tendency found in the Shi'a from the earliest times to regard human beings, to the exclusion of cosmic entities, as the only intermediaries between God and men, and indeed sometimes as God incarnate⁶

Amongst the concepts of the Isma'ili teachings was the concept that for each major period there is a *Natiq* (a producer or law giver) who would interpret the *shari'a* (the Holy Law of Islam) for his times to the people; every *Natiq* appoints an *asas* (executor); the executor also called *wasi* (legatee) lays the foundation of *'ilm al-batin* (hidden knowledge) for every apparent (*zahir*) ritual or teaching of the *shari'ah* and unravels the hidden or allegorical (*batin*) aspects; a chain of Imams who organize the *da'wa* on the basis of hidden teaching follows this *wasi*⁷

Ali bin Abi Talib was the *asas* (i.e. the founder of the line of the Imams); Prophet Muhammad was the sixth *Natiq*, or lawgiver. The earlier Imams are hardly ever referred to, except for Ja'far al-Sadiq, who is occasionally cited simply as a theologian, in connection with some familiar sayings. According to Isma'ili belief, the seventh *Natiq* was Muhammad bin Isma'il, who cancelled the *shari'ah* promulgated

⁵ Op Cit, *The Cambridge History of Islam*, vol 2, P 803

⁶Ibid, *The Cambridge History of Islam*, vol 2, P 804

⁷Op Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, P 342 and Op Cit, *The Bohras*, P 43

by the Prophet.⁸ According to Idris Imad al-Din's *Zahru'l-Ma'ani*, "Muhammad bin Isma'il was chosen for this task of the organization of the (Isma'ili propaganda) ranks during the (impending) period of occultation (*sater*)⁹ because if thou takest the number of Adam, his *Wasi*, and the imams of his period, the last of them will be a *Natiq*, i.e. Noah (and so on, other Biblical parallels, ending with Jesus), his *Wasi*, and Imams of his period, the last was Muhammad the Prophet, who was the inheritor of their high offices. And he is a *Natiq*, and the final *Natiq*. His *wası* had a singular position, and if thou takest the number of his period, thou wilt see that Muhammad bin Isma'il is the Seventh. And the Seventh (Imam) possesses potential *quwwat* (rights to be a *Natiq*), above his predecessors. For this reason he has become a *Natiq*, the final member of the heptads¹⁰ and the *Qa'im*. He cancels the *shari'at* of the lord of the Sixth Cycle by explaining its hidden meaning and revealing its purposes."¹¹

According to the Isma'ili belief, the Imam is the supreme leader without whose existence the world of faithful cannot exist. "In contrast to prophet-hood and *wisaya*," P. J. Vaticiotis continues in his *The Fatimid Theory of State*, "the position of a designated heir, the *Imamat* is a permanent institution in the world. Its permanence is part of its nature. The Imam is not a mere temporal executive enforcing the sacred law

⁸ Ibid, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, P 342

⁹ Op Cit, *Zahru al-Amani*, (Texts Pp 55-56), in *The Rise of the Fatimids*, Pp 244-245

And Ibid, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, P 342

¹⁰ Heptads: the cardinal number that is the sum of six and one

¹¹ *Salas Rasa'al Isma'iliyah*, ed. Arif Tamir, First edition, Manshoorat Dar al-Aafaq al-Jadiyadah, Beirut, 1403/1983, Pp 19-20. If Muhammad bin Isma'il was the one who superseded or altered (*Nasikh*) the *shari'at* at the end of the sixth *dawr* (period), by "explaining its hidden meaning", - then logically we expect that all the Imams, before and after him were also seventh *natiqs*, because such was also their mission. Such a helpless struggle to reconcile superstitious beliefs with a philosophical theory is typical of Isma'ili esotericism, one of its great mysteries" Ibid, *Zahru al-Amani*, (Texts, P 56), and Ibid, in *The Rise of the Fatimids*, P 245n1

among the community of believers and adjudicating their disputes. He is rather an heir to Prophet's 'ministry' and a proof of God on earth. As the rightful heir of the prophetic mission, he possesses and knows the esoteric meaning of the 'Book' and its *ta'wil* (interpretation). Thus, the Imam rules and guides in the name of God" ¹²

According to the Isma'ili theory there could be only one *Natiq* and one *wasī* in a particular period and a number of Imams following one after the other, thus the institution of imamate become most central to it. The concept of Imam become so vital to it that the concept of every Seventh Imam being *natiq* was not given the importance it deserved after applying it to Imam Muhammad bin Isma'il ¹³

The development of Fatimid teachings and their *da'wa* entered a phase of high organization and institutionalization, something that had not been achieved earlier in Islamic history. The Fatimids made their *da'wa* into a state institution. The term *da'wa* referred to both the organization of the Isma'ili mission, with its elaborate hierarchical ranks of *hudud* (does and don'ts), and the functioning of that organization, including especially the missionary activities of the *da'is* who were the representatives of the *da'wa* in different regions" ¹⁴

The Fatimid *da'wa* was a major institution with a strictly defined hierarchy in the Isma'ili state of Egypt, with the imam-caliph at its top. Directly under his guidance and supervision was the Chief *Da'i* – *Da'i*

¹² *The Bohras*, P 47 and P J Vatiotis, *The Fatimid theory of State*, Oriental, Publishers, Lahore, Pp 29-30, and Op Cit, Vladimir Ivanow, *Studies in Early Persian Isma'ilism*, First Published in 1948, Second Revised Edition, A-8, Published by the Isma'ili Society, Printed by V N Hooda at the Isma'ili Printing press, Dongri Street, Bombay, 1955, P 133

¹³ Op Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, Pp 242-243 and Op Cit, *The Bohras*, P 47

¹⁴ Op Cit, *The Isma'ili Da'wa outside the Fatimid Dawla*, P 34

al-Du'at, who, at least in the early phase of the Fatimid state, was also the chief judge – *Qadi al-Qudat*. Directly responsible for regions where *da'wa* was undertaken were *Hujjat*, or regional chief *da'is*. Every high-ranking *da'i* had his subordinates – assistant *da'is* as well as so-called *mu'kassirs*, the disputes. The rules of command and rank were observed at all times so that all actions had to be approved by superiors and ultimately by the imam. Mustafa Ghalib provides a list of 12 ranks within the Isma'ili *da'wa*, with imam at the top and novices, who had taken an oath, at the bottom.¹⁵

The fundamental conception of the Isma'ili doctrines is founded on the permanent need of mankind for a divinely guided, sinless and infallible (*ma'sum*) imam who would act as the authoritative teacher and guide of men in all their religious and spiritual affairs. The true imam (*Sahibu'l-haqq*) can practice *taqiyya* (disguise), prescribed by Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, and unlike Muhammad who was the 'Seal of the Prophets', he does not receive divine revelation (*wahi*), nor does he bring a new message and sacred law. Although the imam is entitled to temporal leadership as much as to religious authority, his mandate does not depend on his actual rule or any attempt at gaining it.¹⁶

During the reign of the Fatimid State the practice of 'disguise' (*taqiyya*) was much reduced, and for many it was entirely removed. However, *taqiyya* as an accepted duty for an individual for whom concealment of his religion had become desirable had never been repudiated by

¹⁵ Wladimir Ivanow, *Kalami Pir, A, Treatise, Haft-Babi Baba Sayyidna and Matlub'l-minin* by Tusi, Bombay, Islamic Research Association, 1933, Lxv' and *The Shi'a of India*, P 260 and *Ibid, The Bohras*, P 48 and Muhammad Kamil Husain, *Ta'ifat al-Isma'iliyya*, Cairo, 1959, Pp 132-142 and Op Cit, *The Bohras*, P 49

¹⁶ Op Cit, *The Isma'ilis*, P 86 For more details about Taqiyya see Op Cit, *The Rise of The Fatimids*, Pp 288-289

Isma'ilism and during the pre-Fatimid period the Imams themselves lived in constant disguise¹⁷

In the basic structure of the Fatimids religious thought, they paid attention to both the *'ilm al zahir* and the *'ilm al batin*, (the exoteric and esoteric knowledge). The ultimate purpose of the Ismai'li *da'wa* was to prepare initiates to accept and absorb the *batin*. Because of this practice, the Isma'ilis have been nicknamed "*batiniyya*" by Sunni Muslims. Only chosen adherents were revealed this hidden knowledge. In this respect, the Ismai'li *da'wa* can be seen as twofold: on the broader level, it preached the Islamic law according to the Ismai'li *madhhab* (faith), revealing only *zahir*, and, on the narrower level, it concentrated on *batin*. On this narrower level, *da'wa* was done with *batin* staying virtually within the circles of the *da'is* who were undoubtedly intellectual and part of the political elite of Ismai'li Egypt and Alamut¹⁸

The Fatimid Isma'ili accepted only those traditions related from the Prophet which had been sanctioned by their Imams. In conjunction with those traditions related from their recognized imams, including especially to Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq. Must such traditions were compiled by al-Qadi al-Nu'man, the Fatimid *Qadi al-Qudat* and the author of the *Da'a'im al-Islam* and *Sharh al-Akbar*¹⁹

¹⁷ Op Cit, *The Shi'a of India*, P 260

¹⁸ In fact the term *batin* is mostly used in genuine Isma'ili works as a substantive, in the sense of the inner meaning revealed by *ta'wil*, or allegorical. Apparently it is never applied to the works, or doctrines. Al-Kulayni (al-Kulini), Abu Ja'far Muhammad b Ya'qub, (d 329/940-941), *al-Usul min al-Kafi*, ed Ali Akbar al-Ghaffari, Third Edition, Tehran, 1388,1948, Pp 376-377 and Op Cit, F Daftary, *The Ismailis*, P 233 and Op Cit, *The Rise of the Fatimids*, P 3 and Op Cit, *Zuhur al-Khilafah al-Fatimiah*, Pp 278-279. Also see Mustafa Ghalib, *Tankh al-Da'wa al-Isma'iliya* Dar al-Andalus, Beirut, 1979, Pp 33-34

Another important point of the Fatimid belief system is *ta'wil*. During this period the belief in the *Natiq* (a producer or law giver) also developed. The *Natiq* would interpret the *shari'a* for his times to the people; give an esoteric interpretation (*ta'wil*) of the Quran, whereby what is in the *batin* (hidden) in the Qur'an is interpreted (*ta'wil*) only by the divinely ordained and infallible Fatimid Imam, and that the Fatimid Imam could convey such knowledge of the inner meaning behind the religious prescriptions, to the lower members of the *da'wa* hierarchy.²⁰

Ivanow in his *Studies in Early Persian Isma'ilism* says that the Qur'an sent by God for humanity, consists of the revealed law (*zahir*), and also *tawil-batin*, i.e. the implied inner meaning or spirit of the preceding (*batin*). The philological interpretation of the text of the Quran (*tafsir*) may lead to difference of opinion, while its *ta'wil* (revelation of its inner sense) authorized by the Imam leads to the unification of and accord in the community. The revelation of its inner sense, *ta'wilu'l-batin* is, according to the Isma'ili belief, entrusted by God only to the Imams who are 'confirmed in knowledge' (*al-rasikhun fil'ilm*) and authorized by Him to teach on His behalf²¹

The Fatimid *iman* (faith) is based on several *Da'a'im* (pillars). Caliph al-Mu'izz once told al-Qadi al-Nu'man, citing Imam al-Sadiq, that Islam was founded on seven *Da'a'im*, viz., and *wilayah* (authority and devotion to the Imam), *tahara*, (purity, cleanness) *salat*, (prayer) *zakat* (alms giving, welfare tax)²², *sawm* (fasting in the month of Ramadan),

¹⁹ Op Cit, *Da'a'im al-Islam*, vol 1, Pp 25-27 and Op Cit, *The Isma'ilis*, P 233

²⁰ Op Cit, *The Bohras*, Pp 43, 54

²¹ Op Cit, *Studies in Early Persian Isma'ilism*, Pp 130-131

²² Op Cit, *The Bohras*, P 55 *Zakat* the alms tax, one of the five basic duties of a Moslem, according to Islamic law it is collected from certain categories of property and assigned to certain specified purposes, Op Cit, *Islam, Religion and Society*, P 303

hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca)²³ and *jihad*²⁴ (holy war).²⁵ Thus, the Fatimid Isma'ilis had added *walayah* and *tahara* to the five *Da'a'im* recognized by the Sunnis.

According to the Isma'ili the *wilayah* dealt with acts of devotion ('*ibadat*'), while the *tahara* dealt with worldly affairs, such as food, drink, clothing, inheritance, marriage, divorce etc²⁶ The philosophical teaching which had been the first object of the sect, died away in Asia, and was leaping over Egypt altogether, as though its premature development in the Ismai'li sect had inoculated the Fatimid community against it. The characteristically Persian doctrines of incarnation and transmigration took no hold in Egypt or Ifriqiya: when Persians vigorously preached them in Hakim's time they only provoked a riot.²⁷

With the demise of the Fatimids who brought about the triumph of the Ismai'li faith in Egypt, an era of prosperity, splendor, and toleration came to an end and the like of which the East may never possibly witness again.²⁸

After the decline and disintegration of the Fatimid (in 1171) and other Isma'ili states (notably, the Nizari state of Alamut in 1256), Isma'ili

²³ Op Cit, *Da'a'im al-Islam*, P 54 and Op Cit, *Zuhur al-Khilafah al-Fatimiah*, P 282 and Op Cit, *The Bohras*, P 55 *Hajj* the pilgrimage to Mecca, Arafat and mina, required of a Moslem at least once in his lifetime One who has performed the pilgrimage is called Hajj in Arabic and hajji in Persian and Turkish, *Islam, Politics and War*, P 248

²⁴ Op Cit, *Da'a'im al-Islam*, P 54 and Op Cit, *Zuhur al-Khilafah al-Fatimiah*, Pp 282-283 and Op Cit, *The Bohras*, Pp 54-55 *Jihad* literally effort or striving, the name commonly given to the holy War for Islam against the unbelievers Jihad, in medieval times usually un destroy in a military sense, was a collective duty imposed on the Moslem community by the Holy Law A fighter in jihad I called *mujahid*, Ibid, *Islam, Politics and War*, P 250

²⁵ Op Cit, *Mediaeval Isma'ili History and Thought*, P 127 and Op Cit, *The Bohras*, P 55 and Op Cit, *Da'a'im al-Islam*, P 54

²⁶ Op Cit, *The Isma'ilis*, Pp 250-251

²⁷ Op Cit, *A Short History of The Fatimid Khalifate*, P 259

²⁸ H M Balyuzi, *Muhammad and The course of Islam*, Oxford, 1976, P 273

da'wa lost its structure, scope, and appeal. Even worse, Isma'ili communities of Egypt, Syria, and North Africa almost entirely disappeared. Isma'ilis to the present day, however, have persisted on the Indian Subcontinent and in the Central Asia in the form of Nizari Isma'ili. Still, their *da'wa* efforts, revived recently, nowhere match the organization of *da'wa* under the Fatimids or even the Nizaris of Alamut. For several centuries no single Muslim dynasty or organization developed any significant institutionalized intra-*ummaic da'wa* activities. Though Muslims continued to perform *da'wa*-like methods within the *Ummah*, the terminology changed and the term *da'wa* was not used as extensively as in Isma'ili times.

The Religo-cultural Role of Mosques during the Fatimids

The Fatimids caliphate placed a high value on intellectual activities and Cairo, as the capital city, became a flourishing center of scholarship and learning. Under their patronage the Mosques had separate portions assigned for the important institutions, which imparted education in all branches of learning,

Mosques served also as centres of Isma'ili preaching. In North Africa the Fatimid *da'wa* was begun in the Mosque of Qayrawan. 'Abu Abd Allah al-Shi'i let the chiefs of the Kutama carry on their mission among the people to promote their doctrines. Many people were converted to the new faith. On 4th January 910, the caliph-Imam al-Mahdi himself made his entry into Raqqada, and the following day, a Friday, the *khutba* was for the first time read in his name in the Great Mosque of Qayrawan.²⁹

²⁹ Op Cit, *Mediaeval Isma'ili History and Thought*, Pp 99

Al-Mahdi was especially disposed towards construction of mosques and other edifices. He had erected a great Mosque in the Fatimid capital in Ifriqiya that came to be known as the Mosque of al-Mahdiyyah.³⁰ The mosque was the first example of a monumental entrance, recalling in appearance some of the Roman triumphal arches.³¹ The sessions of wisdom (*Majalis al-Hikma*), the teaching sessions of the *zahir*, i.e. the Isma'ili *fiqh* (jurisprudence) were public and accessible to everybody. Qadi Nu'man organized the Friday prayer in that mosque followed by preaching session, much to the displeasure of the people of the Maliki School of jurisprudence. The preaching was later done also in the mosque of Mansuriyyah.³²

The *Majalis al-Hikma*, however, were only accessible to the initiates. To control them better, they were held in mosque of the caliph imam in Mansuriyya, where special *majlis* or room was reserved for the purpose. Al-Nu'man held these *zahir* sessions himself as well, evidently also on Fridays, after the afternoon prayers. Thus all his lectures were first personally authorized by the caliphs (imams) al-Mansur and al-Mu'izz.³³

Al-Azhar Mosque

In 356/969 the Fatimids conquered Egypt and subsequently founded Cairo.³⁴ Soon they started building the Al-Azhar mosque-cum-seminary. Thus, al-Azhar ('the splendid') was founded along with the

³⁰Al-Bakri, Abu 'Ubayd Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz, *al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik*, ed De Slane, second edition, Algeria, 1913, P 683

³¹Op Cit, *The Cambridge History of Islam*, vol 2, P 713

³²Op Cit, *Mediaeval Isma'ili History and Thought*, Pp 14&101

³³Ibid, Pp 101-102

³⁴Their adherence to Shi'ism marked their religious and political differences with the Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad Op Cit, *The Cambridge history of Islam*, vol 2, P 713

city, which, together with its adjacent institution of higher learning (al-Azhar University), became the spiritual center for Isma'ili Shi'i.³⁵

The foundation stone of Al-Azhar mosque was formally laid by Jawhar, al-Siqilli on the orders of caliph al-Mu'izz in April 970. The original structure of this famous mosque was completed two years later in a porticoes style shortly after Jawhar, originally designed the founding of Cairo itself. Located in the center of an area teaming with the most beautiful Islamic monuments from the 10th century.³⁶

Caliph al-Hakim (996- 1020 A. D.) made further additions to the building for teaching purposes as well as made endowments to meet its running expenses Al-Maqrizi gives an account of the adoption of al-Azhar name, which, according to him is derived from Fatama az-Zahra, daughter of Prophet Mohamed, the origin of Fatimids.³⁷

The original mosque can be reconstructed as a simple hypostyle (85 by 69 meters), with a prayer hall of five aisles parallel to the *qibla* wall and porticoes. The hall of prayer was bisected by a wide axial nave leading to a superb *mihrab* (A niche in the center of a mosque)³⁸ decorated with stucco, in front of the niche was a *qoba* (dome), probably with two other domes framing it.³⁹

³⁵Op Cit, *Muslim Architecture of Egypt*, 59

³⁶ Op Cit, *Subh al-a'sha fi sina'at al-insha*, vol 3 P 464 and Op Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, Pp 534-535 and Op Cit, *The Isma'ilis*, P 173 See also Aga Khan and Zakı Alı, *Glimpses of Islam*, Printed in Geneva by the Imprimerie de "La Tribune de Geneve" Case Eaux -Vives, 67, Geneve (Switzerland), October, 1944, P 26

³⁷ Op Cit, *Heritage of Islam*, P 171

³⁸ *Mihrab*, A niche in the center of a mosque, which marks the direction of Mecca, and before which the Imam takes his position when he leads the congregation in prayer the word occurs four times in the Qur'an, where is used for a camper and its plural, *maharib*, once Op Cit, *Dictionary of Islam*, P 348

³⁹ Op Cit, *Creswell, MAE*, P 36

The remaining dome now in front of the axial nave, built between 1130 and 1149, recalls, by its position, the one introduced in the mosque of Qayrawan. Throughout the mosque the supports were columns, single or double, often spoils from older and abandoned buildings. A great deal of decoration - mostly stucco - remains in the spandrels of the axial nave, on the *qibla* wall, and elsewhere. To its themes we shall return later, its position seemed to emphasize the main directions and lines of the building. The Fatimid exterior has not been preserved. Al-Maqrizi relates that there were royal pavilions and that a number of official ceremonies took place, which was probably reflected, in architecture. Without these accessories, the first Azhar Mosque appears almost as simple as the first hypostyles with axial naves known in Islam.⁴⁰ In general plan, style, the use of brick piers etc, the mosque of al-Azhar followed the model of the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, and so was a development of the Fatimid state.⁴¹ Thus in architecture of mosques including al-Azhar, the Fatimids followed Tulunid techniques and used similar materials, but also developed those of their own.

The original mosque was nearly square in plan, with five aisles in the sanctuary running parallel to the *qibla*⁴² wall there were three domes, one in front of the *mihrab*, and two more at either end of the *qibla* wall. Later on there were several additions and alteration made in the mosque and today it looks like a labyrinth. Some of the original stucco decorations in the sanctuary, and a number of window grilles have

⁴⁰Op Cit, *al-mawa'iz wa'l-'tibar bi-dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar*, vol 1, Pp 280-281

⁴¹Op Cit, *A Short History of The Fatimid Khalifate*, P 106

⁴² *Qibla* The direction of Mecca, toward which Moslems turn in prayer. In mosques it is indicated by the prayer niche *mihrab*. Bernard Lewis, *Islam, Religion and Society*, P 299

survived up to the present day.⁴³ Also the minaret of this mosque was of heavy square type with outside stairs, which has always remained popular in western Islam⁴⁴

Al-Azhar was both a meeting place for Shi'a students, and through the centuries it has remained a focal point of the famous university, which has grown up around it. It was in 988-989, during the reign of the Fatimid Caliph al-Aziz with Ya'qub Ibn Killis (d. 991), the first vizier of the Fatimid state, that al-Azhar Mosque expanded into an academy, a teaching institute imparting knowledge and scholarship. This is the oldest university in the world, where the first lecture was delivered in 975 AD.⁴⁵ Under the Fatimids, al-Azhar played a crucial role also in the dissemination of Isma'ili doctrines with numerous Isma'ili scholars, jurists and students consistently participated in its seminars. It has remained the principal institution of religious learning in the Muslim world.⁴⁶ Here students received instructions in grammar, literature, and the interpretation of the Qur'an, jurisprudence, medicine, mathematics, and history.⁴⁷ Its magnificent library kept on growing with time and became the largest repository of Islamic books.

Many of the Fatimid *da'is*, were trained thoroughly at al-Azhar prior to being sent to the field. And the high degree of learning attained by the Fatimid *da'is*, many of whom were outstanding thinkers and scholars, is attested by the fact that the bulk of Fatimid literature surviving from

⁴³ Op Cit, *The Cambridge history of Islam*, vol 2, P 714

⁴⁴ Op Cit, *A Short History of The Fatimid Khalifate*, P 106

⁴⁵ Op Cit, *History of The Arabs*, P 628, and *Ibid*, *A Short History of The Fatimid Khalifate*, Pp 110-111,

⁴⁶ Op Cit, *The Isma'ilis*, P 173

⁴⁷ Op Cit, *The Spirit of Islam*, P 324

the Fatimid period was written by these *da'is*, who were well-versed in theology, philosophy and other fields of learning.⁴⁸

In 988 the vizier Ibn Killis appointed thirty-seven *faqih*s in the Mosque of al-Azhar, for reading out the sciences of the *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence).⁴⁹ As an incentive, Caliph al-Aziz paid a monthly stipend to them from the Fatimid palace purse. He also gave orders that a house should be built for them by the side of the Al-Azhar mosque; robes of honor were bestowed on them on 'Eid al-Fitr and they were given mules to ride. All this was to encourage them to propagate the Law of the Isma'ili and its doctrines.⁵⁰

Ibn Killis himself composed a manual of law based on what he had heard from Al-Mu'izz and his son 'Aziz; it was divided into sections, and was in bulk about half the size of the *Sahih* of Bokhari. It contained the law of the Isma'ili sect, and the Fatimids took trouble to circulate it among the Moslems; the vizier himself had audiences in which he read the book out to disciples, sciences which were attended by both high and low, and by most of the jurists, judges, and scholars, the book was made the great reference book for legal questions, according to which

⁴⁸ Op Cit, *The Isma'ilis*, P 231

⁴⁹ *Fiqh* the technical term for the science of Islamic law, the doctors of the law are called *faqih*, of the various schools of *fiqh* that arose amongst Sunnis, four are regarded as orthodox. They are named after the jurists whose teaching they follow: al-Hanafi (after Abu Hanifa al-Nu'man ibn Thabit, d 767), Maliki (after Malik ibn Anas, d 795), Shafi'i (after Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i, d 820), and Hanbali (after Abu Abdallah Ahmad ibn Hanbal, d 855). The Shi'a Kharijites, and other sects have their own schools of jurisprudence, differing in some particulars from those of the Sunni Muslims. See *Islam, Religion and Society*, P 291, about Schools of Muslim Law. See Op Cit, *Dictionary of Islam*, Pp 286-288

⁵⁰ Op Cit, *History of Islamic Civilization*, P 278 and Op Cit, *al-mawa'iz wa'l-'tibar bi-dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar*, vol 2, Pp 263 & 273, and Op Cit, *al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah fi Misr*, P 384

cases were decided, and it was taught in the Old Mosque (Mosque of Amr ibn al-'Aas).⁵¹

Amongst the famous historians whom had a chance of teaching in Mosque of al-Azhar such as Muhammad bin Ubayd Allah known al-Musabbahi (d.1029), Muhammad bin Salama al-Quda'i (d 1062), and Ibn Zulaq, Abu Muhammad al-Hasan bin Ibrahim, who died 996 A.D.⁵²

Al-Azhar was used for the dissemination of Isma'ili teachings to broader audiences. It also represented the center of Isma'ili religious activities: *Ghadir Khumm* was celebrated here and it was the center of the Fatimid da'wa as al-Qadi al-Nu'man worked for the da'wa from here.⁵³

The cultural standards of Cairo were considerable, surpassing at times those of Baghdad. No distinction was ever made (expecting during the reign of Al-Hakim) between the diverse Faiths and ethnic entities, in the common search for knowledge and the common effort to widen horizons of learning. The orthodox grip, which, in the Eastern domains of the realm of Islam, threatened time and again to fetter thought and knowledge, was absent in the Fatimid Egypt, which had also extended its power over Palestine and Syria.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Jurji Zaydan's, *History of Islamic Civilization*, Translated by D S Margoliouth, first Published 1907 London, Reprinted in India, 1978, P 278 Which built after conquest Egypt in the year 21A H by 'Amar Ibn al-Aas, it was during the reign of the *Kulafa al-Rashidun* (the Rightly Guided Caliphs) also called the orthodox caliphs See Op Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, P 374

⁵² Husain Mu'nis, *Al-Masajid Majalat 'Aalam al-Ma'rifah*, Silsilat Kutub Shahriah Yassduruha al-Majlis al-Watani l-saqafah wa al-Adaab, Kuwait No 37, 1981, P 205,

⁵³ Op Cit, *al-mawa'iz wa'l-'tibar bi-dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar*, vol 1, Pp 451-452 & *Itti'az al-Hunafa bi-akhbar al-a'imma al-Fatimiyyin al-khulafa*, vol 1, P 137 & vol 3, Pp 82-83

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, *Muhammad and the course of Islam*, Pp 274-275

Today the university built around the Mosque of al-Azhar is the most prestigious of Muslim schools, and its students are highly esteemed for their traditional training. While ten thousand students once studied here, today the university classes are conducted in adjacent buildings and the Mosque is reserved for prayer. In addition to the religious studies, modern schools of medicine, science and foreign languages have also been added.

Mosque of al-Hakim

Caliph al-Aziz built a mosque near the *Bab al-Futuh* in Cairo. The work on the mosque began in 380/990. Its construction work subsequently was carried forward by caliph al-Hakim in 1013 under the supervision of al-Hafiz 'Abd al-Ghani ibn Sa'id al-Misri. This mosque was the second largest one after al-Azhar built under the Fatimids.

This mosque is an important example of Fatimid style of architecture. Its decorative art is profuse and elaborate. It may be noted that architectural decoration played a critical role in Fatimid ceremonials and processions, which emphasized the religious and political role of the Fatimid caliph.⁵⁵

Originally the mosque stood outside the enclosure walls of Fatimid Cairo until Badr al-Jamali rebuilt the northern wall to include the al-Hakim mosque within the boundaries of the enclosed city. This is a good example of a congregational mosque that was typical to early Islamic architecture. The mosque is constructed of brick with stone facades and minarets, and covers about the same area as the Ibn

Tulun Mosque It has an irregular rectangular plan with a rectangular, central, open courtyard, surrounded by arcades supported by compound piers, with a prayer hall whose arcades are also carried on compound piers. The front facade on the north was given a central projecting monumental portal⁵⁶ At the west and south, on the corners of the facade, are two minarets now partly enclosed in later constructions, the entrance to the mosque is via a large projecting portal similar to that of the mosque of Mahdiyya, the Fatimid capital in North Africa. Probably the most famous feature of this mosque is the minarets are remarkable for their decoration and for being of different shapes, one cylindrical, and the other square Between them in the main facade is the monumental (15 by 6 meters) entrance; four more doors with flat arches and a very classical molding complete the composition, and there is a further gate on each side of the mosque.⁵⁷

The interior hypostyle combines features from the mosque of Ibn Tulun (five-aisled sanctuary parallel to the *qibla* wall, large brick piers with engaged columns, single arcade on the other three sides) with innovations from North Africa (higher central nave, *quba* in front of the niche with two corner domes on squinches and drums). Thus, compared to the Azhar Mosque, caliph al-Hakim's is much more carefully thought out, blending several architectural traditions and drawing especially on its North African roots. But it is still in most aspects traditional, and its most expressive features are the domes,

⁵⁵ Op Cit, *A Short History of The Fatimid Khalifate*, P 37

⁵⁶ Bloom, J M, *The Mosque of al-Hakim in Cairo*, Muqarnas, 1, 1983, Pp 16-33 and Creswell, K A C, *The Muslim Architecture of Egypt Ikhshids and Fatimids*, 1, oxford, 1981, Pp 65-66 and Op Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah* P 539 and *al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah fi Misr*, Pp 390-391

⁵⁷ S Flury, *Die Ornamente der Hakim- and Ashar-Moschee*, Heidelberg, 1912, whose comparative material is, however, much out of date

whose outer appearance (*muraba'* (square), *musaman* (octagon), dome) is one step removed from the inside (octagon, drum, dome), and the façade, whose symmetry is so curiously broken by the different shapes of the minarets which frame it.⁵⁸

Al-Hakim built his mosque in the tradition of the Mosque of Qairawan in North Africa. However, It's also resembles the mosques of Ibn Tulun and al-Azhar with its three *qubab* (domes) and a central nave in the prayer hall (*qibla*), higher and wider than the lateral aisles, with a basilican disposition⁵⁹ A dome carried on squinches⁶⁰ marks the termination of this aisle at the *mihrab*, and domes mark the outer corners of the prayer hall as well. There are two minarets at the corners of the main faced. The decoration of the sanctuary contains a band of beautiful flourished Kufic inscription running the length of the arcades were encased in projecting trapezoidal stone structures that project into the street, during the reign of al-Hakim.⁶¹

Rashida Mosque

In the year A.H. 393 caliph al-Hakim also began to rebuild the mosque in the distract of Rashida to the south of Katai near the Mukattam hills, on a ground where originally a Christian church had once stood and

⁵⁸ On al-Hakim mosque see Op Cit, S Flury, *Die Ornamente der Hakim- and Ashar-Moschee* See also *al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah fi Misr*, Pp 390-391 & *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, P 539

⁵⁹ Basilica (n) Basilican (adj) Originally, in ancient Athens, a portico used as a court of justice In ancient Rome, a rectangular building divided into nave and aisles used as a hall of justice and adopted as the type of the earliest building for Christian worship See Op Cit, Webster C D I, vol 1, P 118

⁶⁰ Squinch (n) Archit A small stone arch or series of arches, or of projecting courses, across an interior angle of a square tower, to support an oblique side of an octagonal spire or lantern See, Op Cit, Webster C D I, vol 2, P 1218

⁶¹ *The Cambridge history of Islam*, vol 2, P 714 Op Cit, Creswell K A C, Pp 65-66 and Op Cit, *The Mosque of al-Hakim in Cairo*, Pp 16-33 & *al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah fi Misr*, Pp 390-391

later a Mosque had been built of bricks. This al-Hakim destroyed and re-constructed on a larger scale and of more imposing appearance a new mosque. It was known as the Mosque of Rashida, named after the person who owned the old mosque.⁶²

The construction of Mosque of Rashida commenced in Rabi al-Awal A.H 393 and the astronomer 'Ali bin Yunus, the foremost astronomer Egypt ever produced, carefully adjusted the position of the *mihrab*.⁶³

Al-Aqmar Mosque

During the period of the Fatimids (1060-1171) there was a marked change in the functions and plans of religious buildings in Cairo. Congregational mosques were few. Instead, the common building for prayers was the Masjid, a small oratory, usually privately built and endowed, often with a specific commemorative or philanthropic purpose and without the citywide significance of the first Fatimid mosques.⁶⁴ Only much later did some of them acquire congregational status when they were assigned a special *khatib* (preacher) to represent the State. In plan, the two remaining examples, the Aqmar Mosque, which was built in 519/1125 during the period of Caliph al-Amir bi-Ahkam-illah ("the ruler by the decrees of God") and that of al-Salih Tala'i Mosque, which was built by al-Salih Tala'i ibn Ruzeik, the vizier of caliph al-Fa'iz bi-Nasrillah in 555/1160. Both are remarkable

⁶² Op Cit, *A Short History of The Fatimid Khalifate*, P 138

⁶³ Ibid, *A Short History of The Fatimid Khalifate*, P 138 and Desmond Stewart, *Great Cairo Mother of the World*, Cairo The American University in Cairo Press, 1981, Pp 79-82

⁶⁴ Op Cit, *al-mawa'iz wa'l-'tibar bi-dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar*, vol 2, p 298

for their modest dimensions, their location within the urban fabric, and their external shape.⁶⁵

The Al-Aqmar Mosque has a curious façade that is not parallel to the *qibla*; only bridges could reach the mosque of al-Salih Tala'i, since it was built over shops. In both instances, previously existing streets and monuments determined the shape of the building, for each is on or near the main north-south artery of Cairo, where property was expensive, and the religious monument had to adapt itself to the more consistent fixed order of the urban community.⁶⁶

The internal arrangement consists of a small central courtyard surrounded on four sides by triple arcades. The *harem* (sanctuary) consists of a small area divided into three aisles parallel to the *qibla* wall. Initially the mosque would have been covered with a flat hypostyle roof but it is now covered with shallow brick domes. Stylistically the most important feature of the plan is the way the entrance is positioned at an angle to the main building. This feature allows the mosque to be incorporated into a pre-existing street plan whilst having the prayer hall correctly aligned for the *qibla*. This is one of the earliest examples of this type of plan that was to become more pronounced in Mamluk religious buildings.⁶⁷

The other important feature of the al-Aqmar Mosque is the decoration of the facade that was developed in later mosques to be a main feature of the design. The facade is made of stone overlying a brick structure.

⁶⁵ Op Cit, Creswell, MEA, vol 1, P 241ff & P 275ff and Op Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, P 540, and Op Cit, *A Short History of The Fatimid Khalifate*, P 220 and Op Cit, *The Cambridge History of Islam*, vol 2, p 714

⁶⁶ Op Cit, *al-mawa'iz wa'l-'itibar bi-dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar*, vol 2, P 289

⁶⁷ Ibid, *Khitat*, vol 2, P 289

Today the right hand side is hidden by a later building but it is assumed that it was originally symmetrical with a projecting portal in the middle. The decoration of the facade is dominated by decorated niches with fluted conch-like arches, an arrangement used in more complex forms in later mosques.

The al-Aqmar Mosque is also significant as the earliest mosque to incorporate shops in its design (these were below the present street level and have been revealed by excavations).⁶⁸

Many other types of architectural remains of the Fatimid period are extant. There are various mausoleums called *mashahids* (lit. 'Places of witnessing'), such as those of Sayyidah Ruqqayah, Aswan, al-L'ul'uah, Atikah, al-Ja'fary and Mashhad al-Sayyedah Sukaynah.⁶⁹ They were places of pilgrimage (*ziyarat*) and continue to serve the same even today. Some portions of these buildings also served as mosques. There are also some structures that attracted Shi'a pilgrims but whose real identity is not very clear. One of them that also serves as a mosque is the mosque of *al-Juyushi* on the Moqattam hills overlooking Cairo. This mosque was built in 478/1085 by *Amir al-Juyush* (Badr al-Jamali), is referred to as mashhad, yet its function as such is unclear. It does not seem to have been associated with a tomb and the Qur'anic inscriptions suggest that it was erected in commemoration of some event, which has remained unrecorded.⁷⁰ The plans of most of these

⁶⁸ More details on both the Aqmar Mosque and that of al-Salih Tala' See Op. Cit, *Khitat*, vol 2, Pp 289-291 and Creswell, MAE, vol 1, Pp 241-246 and Williams, C, *The Mosque of al-Aqmar*, Muqarnas 1, 1984, Pp, 43-52

⁶⁹ Ragib, y, *Les Mausolees du quartiers d'al-Masahid*, Annales Islamologiques, Le Cairo, XVII, 1981, Pp 1-30 and Creswell, MAE 1, P 222 ff, & 247 ff

⁷⁰ On mysterious so-called mosque of *al-Juyushi* See Creswell, MAE 1, P 155 ff And see Max van Berchem, 'Une mosquée du temps des Fatimides au Caire', *Bulletin de l'Institut*

buildings are closely related. An entrance complex (domed at Aswan, topped by a minaret at al-Juyushi) leads to a small courtyard; the sanctuary has a large dome in front of the mihrab, always with a vaulted room on either side and usually with halls or rooms between it and the court (at al-Juyushi, three vaulted halls, one of which opened on the court through an ill-composed triple arcade, elsewhere all the rooms were covered with domes). The domes, like the zones of transition, were of brick, covered with plaster, and almost always four-centered in section, their surfaces varied from plain to ribbed. We have no record of how this kind of building was used, but we can say that religious practices must have changed significantly to justify the growth of this new type.⁷¹

Thus, the Mosques under the Fatimids were not just for offering prayers; they formed the nerve centers of political, religious and educational activities in Islam. In fact the mosques served as educational centers and made provisions for lectures on *fiqh*, *hadis* and *'Ilm al-kalam* (scholastic theology),⁷² besides language and literature.⁷³ Not only the Fatimid *khalifas* were highly cultured and learned themselves, they also gave full patronage to learning and scholarship.⁷⁴

d'Egypte 3 (1899), P. 605 ff. See Grabar O. 'The Earlier Islamic Commemorative Structures', *Ars Orientalis* 6, 1966, Pp27-29

⁷¹ Creswell, *MAE* I, 110 ff. and Op. Cit, *al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah fi Misr*, P 399

⁷² *Ilmu al-Kalam* (Scholastic theology), It is also known as *Ilmu al-Aqa'id*, the science of the articles of belief. *Ilmu al-Kalam* is the discussion of all subjects connected with the six articles of the Muslim Creed: 1- The Unity of God 2- The Angels 3- The Books 4- The Prophets 5- The day of Judgment 6- The Decrees of God, as distinguished from *al-Fiqh*, which is an exposition of the five foundations of practical religion: 1- recital of the Creed 2- prayer 3- fasting 4- al-Zakat 5- al-Hajj. Op. Cit, *Dictionary of Islam*, P 202

⁷³ Op. Cit, *Heritage of Islam*, Pp 154-155

⁷⁴ Op. Cit, *History of The Arabs from the earliest times to the present*, Pp 627-628

It is interesting to note that mosques were treated as private property of the person who had built it. Therefore, the descendants of the owner inherited their ownership. Thus the mosques of al-Amr and Tulun in Cairo, built by Amr ibn al-As and Ahmad ibn Tulun, the erstwhile rulers of the place, were purchased by the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim from their descendants. It is noteworthy that various parts of the mosque could be sold separately; al-Hakim paid 30,000 dinars for the main portion of the mosque and later paid 5,000 dinars additionally for the purchase of its minaret. He paid a huge sum of 100,000 dinars for the purchase of Tulun mosque.⁷⁵ The purchase of mosques of earlier rulers from their descendants by the Fatimid rulers on the one hand was an assertion of political authority, while on the other their sale made economic sense by the economically hard pressed descendants of the erstwhile rulers

Institution of Dar al-Hikma (house of wisdom)

Promotion of learning and scholarship was a planned, premeditated policy that the Fatimids pursued vigorously from the onset of their rule in Egypt. Many of their cultural policies and educational institutions introduced in Egypt were prefigured on a smaller scale during the early period when the Fatimids were based in Bilad al-Maghreb. Furthermore, the priority accorded to the intellect by the Fatimids was intentionally pluralistic and meritocratic, open equally to all Muslims, Ismailis and others, Christians and Jews, enabling the original thinker, creative scientist or talented poet, as much as the astute politician and military strategist, to rise high in the offices of court and state

⁷⁵ Op Cit, *Great Cairo Mother of the World*, Pp 79-82

There were also other sessions of wisdom and learning, as referred to above, which were primary tools of mass-based Isma'ili religious education. The Isma'ili faith (*madhhab*) was cultivated, developed and taught under Fatimids in Egypt⁷⁶

Caliph al-Hakim established in 1005 A.D. at Cairo an educational institution similar to the House of wisdom of the Abbasids. The Fatimid institution called *Dar al-Hikma* or House of wisdom was set up in a section of the royal Palace, with a large library. It served as a school where a wide variety of subjects, including theology, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and even Sunni law were taught.⁷⁷ It was also the training academy for Isma'ili missionaries. The lectures were aimed at both Isma'ilis and non-Isma'ilis. This institution was endowed as a *waqf* five years after its creation, which may have given it a measure of autonomy for both Shi'a and Sunni scholars.⁷⁸

The main purpose of establishing the *Dar al-Hikma* in addition to al-Azhar was to impart instructions of the beliefs of the Isma'ili sect to selected students, whereas al-Azhar was meant for public education, not devoted exclusively to Isma'ilism. Nevertheless, the *Dar al-Hikma* had a wide scope of sciences that were taught in its class rooms (*halaqas*). These sciences included Arabic language, jurisprudence, philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, medicine and astrology. Free tuition was provided to students in this institution and provision for their stay at the premises was also made. Regular teachers of merit were appointed to impart instructions to them.

⁷⁶ Paul E. Walker, *Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani: Ismaili Thought in the Age of al-Hakim*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1999, Pp 184-145

⁷⁷ Op. Cit, *Heritage of Islam*, P. 161

⁷⁸ Op. Cit, *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo*, P. 56

In the initial years the Dar al-Hikma was devoted to a general teaching of Islam. However, gradually it became institute of Isma'ili indoctrination. In 513/1119 when some scholars began to teach Ash'arite theology and al-Hallaj inspired beliefs. The vizier al-Afdal was forced to get these people arrested and the Dar al-Hikma remained closed until 517/1123. On its reopening, Dar al-Hikma came to be supervised by the Isma'ili head *da'i* until it was destroyed by Salah al-Din who ended the Fatimid caliphate in 567/1171.⁷⁹

The establishment of Dar al-Hikma lowered the sectarian tone of Azharite education, and non-Isma'ili books came to be tolerated at al-Azhar. At the same time the Fatimid –Shi'ite teaching in the mosque of al-Azhar became limited to some Shi'i jurisprudence, whereas the extreme forms of Isma'ilism was transferred to the Dar al-Hikma

The Dar al-Hikma organized teaching sessions twice a week, on Mondays and Wednesdays where candidates were initiated into the esoteric doctrines of Isma'ilism. The Chief Da'i convened and presided over these meeting sessions, and the candidates, both men and women, dressed in white, sat in front of him.⁸⁰ These assemblages were named Majalis al-Hikma (Assembly of wisdom). Before the initiation, the Chief Da'i waited on the Caliph who was the grand master and read to him the discourse he proposed to deliver to the neophytes, and received his sign-manual on the cover of the manuscript. After the lecture, the pupils kissed the hands of the Grand

⁷⁹ Op Cit, *al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah fi Misr* Pp 384-385 and see Walker, *Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani Ismaili Thought in the Age of al-Hakim*, Pp 192-93

⁸⁰ Op Cit, *The Spirit of Islam*, P 337

Da'i and touched the signature of the master reverently with their foreheads.⁸¹

The Fatimid *da'is*, who were carefully selected at the institute of Dar al-Hikma, were dispatched to various regions in the Muslim world, both inside and outside the Fatimid caliphate. Numerous *da'is*, such as Abu'l-Fawaris (d. 413/1022), who wrote a valuable treatise on the doctrine of the imamate, worked in Syria where they eventually won many converts amongst the Sunnis. In Egypt itself, the *da'is* operated in urban and rural areas, and a large numbers of Egyptians gathered at the Dar al-Hikma to listen to different lectures on Shi'ism.⁸² Amongst the *da'is* at the Dar al-Hikma was the famous Hasan ibn Sabbah of Iranian origin who traveled to Egypt and lectured at the Dar al-Hikma. He was later to found the Nizari Isma'ili sect, with his headquarter called Alamut in the Alburz mountain of Iran, that operated in secrecy and its members were permitted to assassinate ideological rivals. His order also came to be known as *hashishin* because its members were allowed to partake hashish and were discovered as members of Hasan's sect by the discovery of hashish on their person.⁸³ Another

⁸¹ Ibid, *The Spirit of Islam*, Pp 337-338 and Op Cit, *The Isma'ilis*, P 189

⁸² Op Cit, *The Isma'ilis*, P 192

⁸³ The French scholar Silvestre de Sacy, who solved the mystery of the name Assassin, utilizing the collection of Arabic manuscripts at the Bibliotheq Nationale in Paris, de Sacy prepared an important memoir which he read before the institute de France in May 1809. In its memoir, he examined and rejected previous explanations and showed, once and for all, that word Assassin was connected with the Arabic word hashish referring to the Indian hemp, a narcotic product of *cannabis sativa*. More specifically, he suggested that the main variant forms (such as Assissini and Assassini) occurring in base -Latin documents of the Crusaders and in different European languages were derived from two alternative Arabic forms, hashishi (plural, hashishiyya or hashishiyyin) and hashshash (plural, hashshashin) also Lewis has argued, this part of de Sacy's theory, with all that it implies, must be abandoned, and it would seem that all the European variants of the name Assassin are corruption's of hashishi and its plural forms. See Op Cit, *The Isma'ilis*, P 18 and Edward G Browne *A Literary History of Persia*, London, Cambridge, 1902-1924, vol 2, Pp 204-205 and Op Cit, *Assassins A Radical sect in Islam*, P 11 and Op Cit, *Studies in Islam*, Pp 97-98 and Silvester de Sasy, 'Memoire sur la dynasti des Assassins, et sur l'etymologic de leur nom', *Memoire de l'Institut Royal de France*, 4, 1818, Pp 1-84

famous *da'i*, who headed the Dar al-Hikma in 1062 was al-Mu'ayyad fi al-Din Abu Nasr al-Shirazi, the *Chief Da'i* of the Isma'ili, who is regarded as the spiritual father of the Yemeni *da'wa*. Another notable *da'i*, a contemporary of al-Mu'ayyad was Lamka bin Malik al-Hammadi, chief *qadi* and an Isma'ili *da'i* in Yemen who lectured at the Dar al-Hikma.⁸⁴ Another notable name was of Hamid al-Din al-Kirmanī who came to Egypt from Kirman in Iran and had been the chief of the *da'wat* in the east and referred reverently as Hujjat al-Iraqain.⁸⁵

Dar al-Hikma had come to signify a quasi-religious institution under the Fatimids. It was here that caliph al-Hakim made the declaration that he was God incarnate.

Dar al-Hikma housed a library that had a huge collection of works on various branches of Islamic theology and sciences. Al-Hakim instituted a fund whose income of 257 dinars was to be spent for copying manuscripts, repairing books and general maintenance. The hall of Dar al-Hikma was connected with the royal palace and housed the library and rooms for meetings.⁸⁶

The Egyptian chronicler al-Maqrizi in his *Khitat* provides an account of how some of the endowment for the Dar al-Hikma was to be used. For the purchase of mats and other household effects, 10 dinars, for paper for the scribe, i.e. the copyist, 90 dinars - that is the greatest single item -, for the librarian 48 dinars; for the purchase of water 12, for the servant 15, for paper, ink and writing reeds for the scholars studying

⁸⁴ Op Cit, *The Isma'ilis*, P 214

⁸⁵ Op Cit, *The Shi'a of India*, P 231 and Husain F Hamdani, *Some Unknown Isma'ili Authors and their works*, Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1933, P 372

⁸⁶ Op Cit, *History of The Arabs from the earliest times to the present*, P 628

there 12; for repairing the curtains 1 dinar; for the repair of possibly torn books or loose leaves 12, for the purchase of felt for blankets in the winter 5; for the purchase of carpets in the winter 4 dinars.⁸⁷

Other scientific *madaris* (schools) were established in the later part of the Fatimid rule in Egypt such as al-Madarasah al-'Awfiyah (named after the *Faqih* Abu al-Taahir ibn 'Awf) which, was built in 1138 at Alexandria city by the Sunni vizier Rudwan ibn Walkhashi. The main purpose of established this School was to teach the sciences of religious. It was based on the Maliki Sunni School.⁸⁸

In 546/1150 al-'Adil Ibn Salar, a Sunni vizier had established another Sunni school also at Alexandria. This *madrasa* began to teach the Shafi Madhhab, and the task of teaching was handed over to the Shafi *Faqih* Abi al-Taahir Ahmad al-Salafi. The main purpose behind the establishment of the Sunni schools during this period was to confront the Fatimid doctrines, subsequently, to put an end to the Fatimid rule in Egypt.⁸⁹

The Royal library

We have already taken note that the Fatimids established a huge library, within the palace compound, as part of the Dar al-Hikma. Also the mosques under the Fatimids that formed the nerve centers of all political, religious and educational activities, very often housed valuable libraries comprising books on religion, philosophy, history and different branches of sciences. Besides them, there were two royal

⁸⁷ Op Cit, *Khitat*, vol1, P 459 and Heinz Halm, *The Fatimids and Their Traditions of Learning*, London, 1997, P 76

⁸⁸ Ibid, *al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah fi Misr*, P 387

libraries. royal palace library and library of *dar al-'ilm* (house of Knowledge) ⁹⁰

During the reign of the caliph al-Mustansir (A H.427-487=A D 1035-1095), the debacle that resulted in the dissipation of his treasures brought about an even greater loss in the dispersion of the royal library started during the reign of the caliph al-'Aziz⁹¹ who conferred in the year 978 on his vizier Ibn Killis the title *al-wazir al-ajall* (the illustrious vizier) Ibn Killis was also noted for his patronage of learning and scholarship He gave rewards and incentives to scholars, jurists and poets, according pensions to such men in his own entourage Ibn Killis was an expert in Isma'ili jurisprudence, which had meanwhile been developed by al-Qadi al-Nu'man We have already taken note of his treatise *al-Risala al-Waziriyah*, based on the pronouncements of both al-Mu'izz and al-Aziz ⁹²

The halls of royal library were connected with the Great Eastern Palace. Al-Maqrizi tells us that al-Jaalis bin Abd al-Qawi who was amongst the chiefs presided over of this library ⁹³

There has been difference of opinion amongst scholars about the total number of books possessed by the royal library. According to the estimate of the historian Imad al-Din al-Isfahani (d 1201/597), it had 2,000,000 books However, Abu al-Mahasin (d 1470/874) mentions 100, 0000 volumes, while the historian ibn al-Tuwayer, (d.1220/617) a

⁸⁹ Op Cit, *Wafiatu al-A'ayan wa Anba Abna al-Zaman*, vol 1, P 105, vol 3, P 417

⁹⁰ *History of The Arabs from the earliest times to the present*, P 629 and Op Cit, *al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah fi Misr*, Pp 383-388 and Op Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, Pp 428-435

⁹¹ Op Cit, *History of The Arabs from the earliest times to the present*, P 629

⁹² Op Cit, *The Isma'ilis*, P 184 and Op Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, P 432

⁹³ Op Cit, *al-mawa'iz wa'l-l'tibar bi-dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar*, vol 1, Pp 408

high-ranking official of the later Fatimids, says the royal library contained more than 200,000 volumes. Also according to Jamal al-Din Muhammad bin Salim, also known as Ibn Wasil (d.1217/697), the library had 120,000 volumes.⁹⁴ By all account the royal library had a huge collection

It treasured 2400 copies of illuminated Qur'an. Among its rarities were manuscripts in the hand of Ibn-Muqlah and other master calligraphers such as the famous Arab poet and calligrapher Ali bin Hilal, also known as Ibn al-Bawab (d. 413 A H). Caliph al-Aziz had deposited in it an autographed copy of al-Tabari's *Tarikh* (History)⁹⁵. It had 1220 manuscripts of this work in the library according to *Kitab al-Rawdatayn fi Akhbar al-Dawlatayn* of the historian Abu Shama (d. 1267/665). Also the library contained 18,000 books on ancient sciences, according to al-Maqrizi⁹⁶. Once caliph al-Aziz called for the *Kitab al-'Ain* and the librarian presented 30 different copies of the required book, including a copy written in the hand of the author, Khalil bin Ahmad al-Basri. The royal library also possessed a globe made by Ptolemy that was 2,250 years old and another globe made by Abu al-Hasan Sufi for Azud al-Daulah, which was acquired at a huge price. Among the rare manuscripts were specimens of the artistic writings of the renowned calligraphist Ibn Muqla and an autographed copy of the history of al-Tabari.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Ibid, *Khitat*, vol 1, Pp 408-409

⁹⁵ Op Cit, *History of The Arabs from the earliest times to the present*, P 629 and Op Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah* P 433

⁹⁶ Ibid, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, P 433, and Op Cit, *Heritage of Islam*, P 182

Dar al-'Ilm Library (Library of Dar al-Hikma)

Another significant event during the reign of imam-caliph al-Hakim Bi Amr Allah was the inauguration, in 395/1005, of Dar al-Hikma (House of wisdom) on the lines of Dar al-Hikma of the Abbasid caliph, al-Mamun. It was rather a rival institution and was equipped with a splendid library called Dar al- 'Ilm, on whose upkeep its patron spent large sums. Great scholars and scientists were attached to the library, which was open to the public. Students were encouraged in research work and special apartments were reserved for the purpose. They were supplied with stationary free of cost⁹⁸

Muslim scholars of the Greek sciences carried out their work under al-Hakim's protection, and with his personal encouragements. They conducted practical sciences at library of Dar al- 'Ilm, and it was al-Hakim's personal treasure. Tall cabinets housed hundreds of thousands of academic and religious volumes⁹⁹

The subjects of astronomy, architecture and Greek philosophy by themselves filled over 6,500 volumes. Classical works as a whole filled 18,000 volumes.¹⁰⁰ Caliph al-Hakim had succeeded in restoring at Dar al-Hikma a wing of the lost library of Alexandria. A court chronicler relates Dar al-Hikma's inauguration.

⁹⁷ He is the famous Sunni historian, Abu Ja'far Muhammad bin Jarir al-Tabari (d 311/922), the author of *Kitab tarikh al-rusul wa al-muluk* known *Tarikh al-Tabari*. Op Cit, *Heritage of Islam*, Pp 182-183

⁹⁸ Op Cit, *Heritage of Islam*, P 183

⁹⁹ Nejla M. Abu-Izzeddin, *The Druzes: A New Study of Their History, Faith and Society*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984, P 83

¹⁰⁰ Heinz Halm, *The Fatimids and their Traditions of Learning*, London: I. B. Tauris, The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 1997, P 91 and for more details see D. Sourdel, "Dar al-Hikma," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965

The jurists took up residence there, and the books from the palace libraries were moved into it. After the building was furnished and decorated, and after all the doors and passages were provided with curtains, lectures were held there by the Qur'an readers, astronomers, grammarians and philologists, as well as physicians. Guardians, servants, domestics and others were hired to serve there¹⁰¹

Into this house they brought all the books that the commander of the faithful al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah ordered to be brought, that is, the manuscripts in all the domains of science and culture, to an extent to which they had never been brought together for a prince. He allowed access to all this to people of all walks of life. One of the already mentioned blessings, the likes of which had been unheard of, was also that he granted substantial salaries to all those who were appointed by him there to do service – jurists and others. People from all walks of life visited the House; some came to read books, others to copy them, and yet others to study. He also donated what people needed. ink, writing reeds, paper and inkstands

Excepting a few drawings on paper, virtually no art books produced in Egypt during the Fatimid period have up to now been identified. Because of the heightened interest in the human figure during this period to which so many of the decorative arts bear witness, it is difficult to imagine that the art of miniature painting was not highly developed. However, apparently no illustrated manuscript or fragment of one has survived. In fact, none has even been attributed to this period.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Op Cit, *The Fatimids and their Traditions of Learning*, Pp 73-74

¹⁰² *Kitab al-Dhakhir wa-l-Tuhaf*, paragraph, 413

The library of Dar al-'Ilm and the Royal library in Cairo which excelled all the rest because of the opulence of material and facilities and the munificence of the benefactor not only were there well-paid, deeply-versed librarians at the service of the public, but those who wished to follow a line of study were given a stipend to enable them to concentrate on their work

The corpus of knowledge housed in the form of books in the two above-mentioned libraries of Cairo was later destroyed due to political conditions leading to chaos during the time of caliph al-Mustansir (427-87/1035-95). Even though Mustansir received temporary recognition in various unexpected quarters and preceding Fatimid caliphs in the history of Islam, but meanwhile his kingdom was on the decline in Egypt. The period from 450 to 466 shows the nadir of Fatimid authority there. The death of vizier Yazurı in 450 was a very serious loss as it once more liberated the factions and forces of disorder, the evil influence being the Turkish general Nasır ad-Dawlah, the same who had succeeded Anushtakin in Syria. After the murder of Yazurı there were forty different wazırs in the space of nine years, many of these being put to death.¹⁰³

The faction fights between the Turkish mercenaries and the Negro troops became more constant and violent under this weak and incompetent rule. At length in 454 the Turks, led by Nasır ad-Dawlah, the Commander-in-Chief, drove the Negro regiments out of Cairo and chased them to Upper Egypt where they were kept, although for some

¹⁰³ Op Cit, *al-mawa'iz wa'l-'itbar bi-dhikr al-Khitat wa'l-athar*, vol 1, P 409 and Op Cit, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifhate*, Pp 203-204

years they made regular attempts to recover their footing in Lower Egypt. The victorious Turks dominated Cairo, held the successive wazirs in subjection, treated the caliph with contempt, and used their power to deplete the treasury by increasing their pay to nearly twenty times to its former figure. At last, Nasir ad-Dawlah's tyranny made him offensive even to his own officers, and gave the caliph the opportunity of getting rid of him in 462.¹⁰⁴

Though deposed in Cairo, he was able to hold his own in Alexandria where he had the support of the Banu Qurra Arabs and the Lawata Berbers. Thus, the Arabs and Berber tribes under Nasir, helped by some of the Turkish mercenaries, were in command of Alexandria and a considerable portion of Lower Egypt, whilst the expelled Negro troops were in possession of Upper Egypt, the caliph's authority being limited to Cairo and its immediate vicinity. Added to this was the fact that beginning with 458, there had been a series of bad floods in the Nile followed by a famine of seven years' duration (459-465), whose later period was aggravated by Cairo being particularly isolated by the rebel forces to the north and to the south, the Berber in Lower Egypt deliberately aggravating the distress by ravaging the country, destroying the embankments and the neighboring districts leading to starvation.¹⁰⁵

The Turkish mercenaries had in the meanwhile drained the treasury, the works art and valuables of all sorts in the Fatimid palace were sold to satisfy their demands. The precious library that had been rendered available to the public and was one of the objects for which many-

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, *A Short History of the Fatimid Khalifhate*, P 204

visited Cairo was scattered, the books were torn up, thrown away, or used to lighting the fires¹⁰⁶ In the homes of Turkish officers the exquisite binding of books served to mend the shoes of their slaves¹⁰⁷

Qadi al-Rashid ibn al-Zubayr has recorded the dispersal of the collection of libraries of Cairo. In his *Kitab al-Tuhaf wa al-Dhakhir* tells us that in 1068, books from Dar al-'Ilm and the Royal Library were transferred to the house of the vizier Abi al-Faraj Muhammad bin Ja'far al-Maghrebi, as well as to the house al-Kusayr ibn al-Muafaq fi al-Din laden on twenty-five camels.¹⁰⁸

Al-Mustansir's successors build up new collections When a century later Salah-al-Din made his triumphal entry into the royal palace its library still housed over a hundred thousand volumes, some of which together with other treasures were distributed among his men¹⁰⁹

The building of libraries was part of Islamic intellectual activity all over the Islamic world The Fatimids in Bilad al-Maghreb and Egypt and the Abbasids of Baghdad as if tried to excel each other in their patronage to academic pursuits including establishment of libraries Bukhara and Khwarazm at one end of the realm of Islam, to Qayrawan and Fustat and Cairo and the magnificent institutions of Moorish Spain, at the other, culminating in the superb library of Cordova, founded by the Umayyad Caliph, al-Hakam II (961-76), which housed 400,000

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, *A Short History of The Fatimid Khalifate*, Pp 204-205

¹⁰⁶ Op Cit, *A Short History of The Fatimid Khalifate*, P 205

¹⁰⁷ Op Cit, *History of The Arabs from the earliest times to the present*, P 629

¹⁰⁸ Al-Qadi al-Rashid ibn al-Zubayr al-Aswani, *Kitab al-Tuhaf wa al-Dhakhir*, ed M Hamidullah, *Silsilat al-Turaas al-Arabi*, Kuwait, 1959, trans and annotation, G Al-Qaddumi *Book of Gifts and Rarities*, Cambridge, MA, 1996, 413 and Op Cit, *Tarikh al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah*, P 428 and Op Cit, *al-Dawlah al-Fatimiah fi Misr*, P 386 and Op Cit, *Khitat*, vol 1, P 408

volumes, with a catalogue in forty-four volumes was the result of this academic competition ¹¹⁰ In this respect, the Fatimids rule in Bilad al-Maghreb and Egypt from 909 to 1171, and contributed much to the glory of Islamic culture ¹¹¹

This glory brought by the administrative foundations laid by the first two caliphs secured for Egypt extended periods of great prosperity, the magnificence of their court, regulated by an elaborate ceremonial performed down to the last detail, was unequalled by any of their rivals and splendid structures such as the Mosque of al-Hakim and al-Azhar, the later still flourishing today as the most celebrated institution of learning in Islam, bear witness to the lofty aspirations which inspired them. ¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Op Cit, *History of The Arabs from the earliest times to the present*, P 629

¹¹⁰ Op Cit, *Muhammad and the course of Islam*, P 302

¹¹¹ B Sheik Ali, *A culture Orientation*, First published by Macmillan India Limited, Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras, Published by S G Wasani for Macmillan India Limited, 9 Community Center, Naraina Industrial Area, Phase 1, New Delhi 110 028, 1981, P 9

¹¹² Op Cit, *History of the Islamic Peoples*, P 163