The Significance of Cairo

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The international renown with which the cultural and historical heritage of Egypt is held centres around Cairo, because of the incomparable accumulation of Pharaonic, Graeco-Roman, Coptic and Islamic treasures that are located there.

Following the Muslim conquest of the Byzantine city in AD641, and the establishment of a military encampment called Al-Fustat, the governmental seat of the province of Egypt, as a critical part of the rapidly expanding Islamic Empire that was then being established, was continually enlarged by a succession of powerful ruling dynasties until it became the largest Muslim city in the Middle Ages, following the fall of Baghdad to the Mongol hordes.

At its zenith, Cairo was the centre of vast holdings that included Syria, Palestine, northern Mesopotamia and the Hijaz of Arabia with its Holy Cities of Makkah and Medina; and extended as far south into Africa as the Sudan. The first stage of this development was reached in AD870 when Ahmad Ibn Tulun declared his independence from the Abbasid Caliph and built his own enclave, called Al-Qatai, north of Al-Fustat. Nothing now remains of this settlement except his spectacular Friday Mosque, which now serves as a western point of demarcation for the city that was to follow. In AD969 the Fatamids, moving eastward along the Mediterranean coast of North Africa, established a city which they named Al-Qahira, 'the Victorious', which then became the nucleus of the medieval quarter. As Doris Behrens-Abouseif has explained:

Under the Fatamids, Al-Qahira became the seat of power, a ceremonial residential centre where the Caliph dwelt with his court and army, but Al-Fustat remained the productive and economic centre of Egypt. 1 She goes on to explain the way in which this has affected the name by which citizens recognise their city today by saying that:

The word Cairo is derived from the Arabic Al-Qahira, which is not, however, the name commonly used by Egyptians to designate their capital. They have always called it Masyr (the popular form of Misr, meaning Egypt) . . . Egyptian medieval historians make a clear distinction between Misr and Al-Qahira. The habit of calling the entire Egyptian capital Cairo, or Al-Qahira, was begun by Europeans who visited Egypt. The name was reinforced by Napoleon’s French scholars, who made a survey of the city which they called Le Kaire, translated by the British as Cairo.2

The princely enclave which the Fatamids established was used as a base from which to challenge the authority of the Abbasids in Baghdad, making them a major power in the region. They set an architectural standard for all subsequent dynasties to follow, in the way that their significant monuments related to the urban context, which is a characteristic that now sets historic Cairo apart from all other cities in the Islamic world, because of the aesthetic standards that they applied. The Fatamid legacy, although regrettably reduced, is most evident today in the Al-Azhar Mosque and the University which they established with it, which quickly became renowned for setting the highest standards, as well as in the Al-Hakim, Al-Aqmar and Salih Talih Mosques. The walls which they also built, and which have played such an important part in protecting the historic core from encroachment by the sprawling metropolis that continues to metastasise around it, were judiciously expanded by the Ayyubid Sultan Salah ad-Din, the ‘Saladin’ of epic legend. He used Crusader prisoners to complete the city gates called Bab en Nasr, Bab Al-Futuh and Bab Zuwayla, and to connect the two cities of Al-Fustat and Al-Qahira, with extensive ramparts that extended out to include the Citadel, where he transferred the seat of government in 1176.

Within these expanded boundaries, which encompass an area of nearly four square kilometres, the population of the city, which was inflated by refugees fleeing from uncertain conditions in the east, as well as by Salah ad-Din’s decree that the princely enclave should be opened to all, and not reserved for the ruling class alone, forced changes in the linear, orthogonal structure, creating the twisting organic streets we see today.

Under the Mamluks, who ruled, in various forms between 1250 and 1517, this central core reached its height as a metropolis, since after the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols, the seat of the caliphate was transferred to Cairo in 1261, making it the political centre of Islam. Its wealth, due to its new status, and the monopoly it was able to establish on Red Sea trade, went into the construction of many large complexes, such as the extraordinary madrasa
and mausoleum of Sultan Qalawun, built between 1284 and 1285, which rivals the highest architectural achievements realised in Europe at this time.

Although the city did not regain this exalted position after the Ottoman Conquest in 1517, the momentum that had been established by that time continued, in the form of a conscious attitude toward the enhancement of an important legacy, and many fine architectural examples date from this period. A brief renewal of prosperity and power was achieved under Muhammed Ali; following the Napoleonic occupation of Cairo in 1798, and his rule, which was also administered from the Citadel, between 1805 and 1848, marked the final phase of the development of the historic core. The decision of Muhammed Ali to emulate European and especially French city planning techniques, and to open up vast new boulevards that moved outward to the north and west, is also significant, since it drew attention away from the centre, allowing Cairo to be spared the wholesale destruction suffered by other cities with such a distinguished historical legacy.

A succession of relatives that followed Muhammed Ali, namely his son Muhammed Said, his grandson Abbas, and his second grandson Isma'il, did not seem to share his capacity for leadership. With a few inspired exceptions, such as Abbas' decree of 1858, in which he renounced all governmental claims to ownership of land in favour of farmers who were allowed to both own land and pass it on after paying taxes on it for five years, the history of their rule is one of extravagance and increased borrowing from foreign banks, which took place in spite of unprecedented prosperity in Egypt, due to a shortage of cotton caused by the American Civil War during the rule of Isma'il Pasha. In his expressed desire to make Egypt, and Cairo in particular, 'a part of Europe', Isma'il spared no expense, and embarked on one ambitious project after another. These projects, as well as his own attempts to use financial inducements to wrest autonomy from the Sultan had consequences of staggering proportions. In the thirteen short years between his accession in 1863 and a declaration of national bankruptcy in 1876, the public debt had increased by three hundred per cent, which led to virtual bankruptcy in 1876, the public debt had in virtua...
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