THE “FATIMID” DOORS OF THE FAKAHANI MOSQUE IN CAIRO

In 1969, soon after he had arrived at Harvard’s Fine Arts Department, Oleg Grabar presented a paper at the international colloquium celebrating the millennium of Cairo in which he proposed a new and provocative explanation for the prominence of figural iconography in Fatimid art. Following the publication of the article three years later, in the fall of 1975 he conducted a graduate seminar on the art of the Fatimids and two years after that published a reassessment of Fatimid art. Several of the students in that seminar, myself included, went on to work further on the subject of Fatimid art and architecture, and five years later, after extensive travel around the Mediterranean, I presented a dissertation on early Fatimid art in North Africa and Egypt. Its scope (I covered only the years before 400 AH) was limited principally by Professor Grabar’s insistence that I finish writing quickly and get my degree. Otherwise, he feared my project might continue for many more years, if not decades. In the following years I published several articles on various aspects of Fatimid art, some of them extracted from chapters in my dissertation and some of them representing new work, but I never felt that the dissertation itself was worthy of publication.

Professor Grabar himself returned occasionally to the subject of Fatimid art and dealt with it somewhat uneasily in the revised edition of *Islamic Art and Architecture: 600–1250*, the Pelican History of Art volume he had coauthored with Richard Ettinghausen and revised with Marilyn Jenkins-Madina. The authors had a problem with Fatimid architecture and art, which straddles almost all the categories they had established for early Islamic art (i.e., architecture/decorative art, early/late, east/west). They placed most but not all of it under the rubric “Medieval Islamic Art of the Central Islamic Lands,” noting in their preface,

To these organizational divisions we made one partial exception. The rich and brilliant period of the Fatimids (909–1171) could not, we felt, be cut into separate temporal or regional components in order to fit into our broad order of Islamic history. It belongs to the Muslim west as well as to the area of the central lands and it flourished during a period covered by both of our broad categories. We ended by putting most of its art in the Medieval Islamic section and in the central lands for reasons that will be explained in due course, but some early Fatimid objects are discussed under western Islamic lands in the earlier period. This is, no doubt, a shaky accommodation to a reluctant history.

I myself, after many years exploring other aspects of Islamic art, have recently returned to the art and architecture of the Fatimids in a book that attempts to finish what I had begun several decades earlier. One of my conclusions is that the medium of fine woodwork, which scholars have often overlooked, is remarkably important throughout the Fatimid period, with literally dozens of dated or datable examples that document the evolution of styles of writing, carving, and decoration in religious and secular milieux. (A notable exception to the overall scholarly inattention to this medium is the survey by Ettinghausen, Grabar, and Jenkins-Madina, who discuss and illustrate several examples of Fatimid woodwork.) Just when I had nearly finished the typescript of my book, I was asked by the Nederlands-Vlaams Instituut in Cairo (NVIC) to consult on a Getty Foundation-funded project concerning the advisability of restoring the al-Fakahani (“Fruitsellers”) Mosque. This apparently Ottoman-era mosque has two pairs of Fatimid-style wooden doors, presumably dating from an earlier Fatimid mosque on the site. These had already been noted by such scholars as Max van Berchem and K. A. C. Creswell. Over a century ago van Berchem declared that the building was “entièrement restaurée à l’époque turque et n’offre d’autre intérêt archéologique que la date de sa fondation,” while Creswell reported that the two sets of doors were “decorated with good crisp Arabesque carving of the Fâ«imide period, and may well be the original ones.” A close reexamination of the doors sheds surprising light not only on a lost
mosque of the Fatimid period but also on issues of historicism and reception, matters that few of us writing in the 1970s and 1980s had even thought about, let alone made the focus of our research.12

The Fakahani Mosque (Registered Monument no. 109) stands on the east side of Shari‘ al-Mu‘izz li-Din Allah/Shari‘ al-Ghuriyya, about 125 meters north of the mosque of al-Mu‘ayyad Shaykh (fig. 1). Built of stone and measuring approximately 30 x 37 meters, the mosque has flights of steps in the middle of the northwest and northeast sides (hereafter simply “west” and “north”) that lead from the street up to the entrances, each of which is closed by a fine pair of wooden doors (figs. 2 and 3). The entrance on the main façade is set within a deep porch flanked by shops on the street level and by subsidiary rooms or halls at the level of the mosque. To the left (north) of the principal entrance but set well back from the street is the base of the mosque’s minaret, a cylindrical tower that rises from the roof of the mosque to its conical top. The north corner of the mosque is occupied by a water-dispensary (sabil), with several rooms above it—presumably once a kuttab, or elementary school—and a relatively modern ablution complex (mida‘a) extends north from the mosque to the east of the secondary entrance. The interior of the mosque (fig. 4) is raised on a high plinth, which contains shops and a cistern in the center, and comprises a slightly trapezoidal hypostyle hall measuring 23 x 30 meters, with an area approximately 10 meters to a side in the center that is open to the sky and serves as a small internal courtyard. The flat wooden roof of the mosque...
According to the Mamluk historian al-Maqrizi (1364–1442), the first mosque on the site was founded by the Fatimid caliph al-Zafir (r. 1149–54) as al-jāmiʿ al-afkhar (“the Most Glorious Mosque”) in 543 (1148–49). It was built on the site of a cattle pen (zariba) known as the House of Rams (dār al-kibāsh). Although both al-Maqrizi and his contemporary al-Qalqashandi (1355–1418) quote an anecdote about the origins of the mosque by the historian Ibn ‘Abd al-Zahir (1223–92), who was extremely knowledgeable about the Fatimid period, they neglected to realize that al-Zafir could not have built the mosque in 543, since he had not yet begun to rule.15 His father, al-Hafiz, died in early Jumada II 544 (October 1149), and the prince did not ascend the throne as al-Zafir until 5 Jumada II 544 (October 1149). Therefore, either the date or the patron cited by al-Maqrizi may be correct, but not both.

Other medieval sources indicate that the mosque was damaged in the great earthquake of 702 (1302) but was restored in the same year by a Mamluk amir, although we have no idea of what he actually did. By al-Maqrizi’s time the mosque was known as jāmiʿ al-fakhān (Mosque of the Fruit Sellers), from which its present name derives. (Sources do not discuss whether a fruit market actually existed nearby, or whether the name is a bastardization of its original name, al-afkhar.) In 1440 the great scholar al-Jalal Muhammad b. Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Mahalli (d. 1459) ordered the construction of an ablution basin (mīdāʿa) in the mosque, and in the second half of the fifteenth century Yashbak min Mahdi, the powerful amir of the reigning sultan, Qaytbay, ordered the destruction of several buildings that concealed its façade. At around the same time, Yashbak also ordered that the façade of the nearby Fatimid-era mosque of al-Salih Talaʿī be cleared.16

Archaeological investigation of the building for the NVIC project has revealed that the Ottoman-style minaret was erected in the sixteenth century, after the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517, and that its base and zone of transition, quite apart from the shaft, would have been visible from the street. (The need to build a minaret base at that time indicates that there was no earlier one to reuse, a fact suggesting that the Fatimid and Mamluk mosques on the site did not have a tower.) The mosque was again rebuilt in 1736, when the amir Ahmad Katkhuda Mustahfizan al-Kharbutli, a sort of under-vizier from Kharput in Anatolia, who was in charge of an Ottoman regiment in Cairo, renewed the building and constructed a sabīl, or public dispensary for drinking-water, surmounted by a kuttāb.17 It has been said that the original mosque was built on a high basement (muʿallaq, “suspended”), but this cannot have been true, since the archaeological investigation of the early Ottoman
minaret indicates that it was originally entered by a door from the mosque’s floor, then approximately three meters below its current level. Al-Kharbutli therefore raised the building and projected its façade to its present position in order to incorporate shops on the street level. Of the original Fatimid building, al-Kharbutli is said to have preserved only the leaves of the north and west doors.18

Four inscriptions decorate the exterior of the mosque. Two rectangular plaques on either side of the mashrabiyya window over the main portal (fig. 5) state that “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his Messenger.” They are carved in a rather ungainly variant of an angular Kufic script with wedge-shaped terminals, a type of script popular during the Fatimid period. The final phrase is uneasily compressed, however, a fact that indicates that these plaques are not of the highest quality, in contrast to the inscription on the façade of the al-Aqmar mosque of 1125.19 Three other inscriptions of four lines in an Ottoman naskh are prominently placed over the main and subsidiary doors, as well as over the sabil. The two inscriptions over the doors state, following the basmala and the profession of faith, that “the poor [servant of] God, may He be exalted, the ḥajji, Ahmad, lieutenant-colonel of the Janissaries (katkhuda mustahfizan) from Kharput, renewed (jadada) the mosque in Ramadan 1148 [January 1736].”20 The inscription on the sabil states that that the same individual “renewed (jadada) this blessed fountain. And the [legal] cession of this blessed place occurred in the month of Ramadan 1148 [January 1736].”21

From this textual and epigraphic information one can extract at least seven stages in construction:

1. The Fatimid mosque, which was apparently “suspended” or raised on a high basement.
2. Reconstruction following the earthquake of 1302.
3. Addition of the ablution basin of 1440.
4. Clearing of the building by Yashbak min Mahdi (d. 1481).
5. Erection of the minaret in the early Ottoman period.

6. Building of the sabil and reconstruction of the building by the amir Ahmad Katkhuda Mustahfazan al-Kharbutli in 1736.²²

7. Registration of the doors in 1908 as Historical Monument no. 109 by the Comité de conservation des monuments de l’art arabe.

The Comité registered the doors when they decided to concentrate their efforts on cleaning them, expressing the view that the “finely carved ornament represents all that has survived from the mosque’s ruin and reconstruction.”²³ The remainder of the building, including the sabil-kuttāb, was registered in 1937, when Ottoman-era buildings were finally deemed worthy of classification as historical monuments.²⁴ It is still unknown whether the Comité did any work on the doors during the two and a half decades between 1881, when it was organized, and 1908, when the doors were first registered.

The two sets of doors are the most notable feature of the mosque. Each set consists of two leaves, and each of these consists of a mortised wooden frame of vertical stiles and horizontal rails on which sit five carved panels, alternately horizontal and vertical. The main doors on the west measure 4.14 m in height; each leaf is 1.22 m wide and 11 cm thick. The doors on the north are smaller—only 3.81 m high, .96 m wide, and 9.5 cm thick. The lower panels of the main door are now missing, but they were in situ in 1978 when I first visited the mosque (fig. 6); I have just learned that the two lower panels on the north doors have also been removed. Each pair of doors would have had six horizontal panels and four vertical ones. The horizontal panels on the main door measure 64 x 26 cm and the vertical panels 21.5 x 50.5 cm; those on the north door measure 49 x 27.5 and 16.5 x 41 cm respectively. Each vertical panel is enclosed within a carved and mitered frame (12 or 10 cm broad, respectively), which serves to make the entire unit (i.e., vertical panel and frame) the same width as the horizontal
panels above and below it. The individual panels are delicately carved with an arabesque design of a central vase from which issue curving stems and leaves that terminate in larger blossoms.

Although exposure to the elements has obscured many of their finer details, the panels exhibit a style of carving quite similar to that found on some of the panels decorating the portable wooden mihrab made ca. 1154–60 for the Mausoleum of Sayyida Ruqayya (fig. 7), now in Cairo’s Museum of Islamic Art. Despite the similarities, the Fakahani panels are rather conservative in style, demonstrating no interest in the new geometric style of decoration that had been introduced to Fatimid Egyptian woodwork, presumably by Syrian craftsmen, at the end of the eleventh century. This geometric style can be seen on the main face of the Ruqayya mihrab as well as on a virtually contemporary minbar ordered by the vizier al-Salih Tala‘ī’ in 1155–56 for the al-ʿAmri Mosque at Qus in Upper Egypt (fig. 8).25

The frames around the vertical panels on the Fakahani doors consist of a plain inner and a carved outer band. The pieces forming the outer band exhibit a meandering stem that is regularly punctuated with large leaves or blossoms; the interstices are filled with smaller leaves and tendrils. The vertical sections of frame have their blossoms oriented parallel to the length of the strip, while the blossoms on the horizontal elements are arranged perpendicular to the length. The horizontal bands are largely symmetrical, with the axis coin-
Fig. 8. Drawing of a detail of the minbar ordered by al-Salih Tala'i’ in 1155–56 for the ‘Amri Mosque at Qus in Upper Egypt. (After Prisse d’Avennes, *L’art arabe d’après les monuments du Kaire* [Paris, 1877], pl. 77)

Parting with the central axis of the vertical panel. This type of decoration, featuring large blossoms arranged on a scrolling stem, is more typical of the type of carving on the wooden tie beams between the columns of Fatimid mosques (e.g., the mosque of al-Salih Tala’i’, fig. 9) than of the frames on fine Fatimid woodwork. For example, the portable wooden mihrab made for al-Azhar in 1125–26 has beveled-style carving on the frame, while the mihrab made for the shrine of Sayyida Nafisa between 1138 and 1145 is framed with grooved strapwork. The carving of the Fakahani frames is somewhat coarser than on the panels, but this may be an artifact of the uneven state of preservation. Indeed, the wear on the panels varies remarkably from place to place, even in the same frame, indicating that the elements of the frame were assembled after the initial wear occurred (fig. 10). All the frame elements have similar, but not identical, designs.

The general arrangement of alternating horizontal and vertical panels is similar to but not exactly like that found on other doors of the Fatimid period, the earliest known examples of which are a set ordered for al-Azhar in 1010 by the caliph al-Hakim (fig. 11). Standing 3.29 m high, each leaf, which measures 1.01 m broad, has a mortised frame enclosing alternately horizontal and vertical panels, but the vertical panels are arranged in pairs and not enclosed within carved and mitered frames as at the Fakahani Mosque. In addition, the horizontal panels are as broad as the vertical panels are tall, while on the Fakahani doors the horizontal panels are broader than the vertical panels are tall. This same arrangement of a single horizontal panel alternating with two vertical panels is still found in 1160 on the interior face of a door to the mosque of al-Salih Tala’i’ in the Museum of Islamic Art (fig. 12), although the decoration of the individual panels is quite different in style, and still later on the door to the mausoleum of Imam al-Shafi’i (ca. 1200).

One might also compare the Fakahani doors to other interior doors of the Fatimid period, such as the closet doors at the al-Aqmar mosque (1125) (fig. 13), the doors to the mausoleum of Sayyida Nafisa (1145), or the massive doors from Mar Girgis in Old Cairo (fig. 14). While the carving of the individual panels is comparable to that found on the Fakahani doors, on all the interior doors multiple vertical panels of the same size are arranged in vertical rows within plain mortised frames. In short, while the carving of the Fakahani panels is comparable to other carving on contemporary Fatimid woodwork, the arrangement of the decorative panels on the exterior of the doors is anomalous in both organization and placement. Furthermore, to judge from the doors from the mosque of al-Salih, the fragile carved and decorated panels were normally placed on the interior, the exposed exterior surface of the doors being faced with metal plates. The Fakahani doors are therefore unlike either typical exterior doors of the period 1000–1200, with one horizontal panel alternating with two vertical ones on the interior side of the door, or typical interior doors, with only vertical panels, arranged in rows.

In contrast, the interior faces of both sets of doors from the Fakahani mosque show the expected and typical arrangement of single horizontal panels alternating with two vertical ones, although the panels themselves are quite devoid of decoration (fig. 15).
Fig. 9. Mosque of al-Salih Tala’i’, wooden tie beams in the prayer hall. (Photo: author)

Fig. 10. Fakahani Mosque, main (west) door, detail of woodwork. (Photo: author)
Indeed, the interior of the right leaf of the main door is missing one of its lower vertical panels, revealing the makeshift way in which the decorated panels have been attached to the exterior. Close examination of the decorated panels on the exterior shows that each has a projecting tongue along the exterior edge that was intended to fit into a corresponding groove carved into the rails and stiles of the door frame (see fig. 10). These grooves now serve no purpose, as the panels are simply affixed to, rather than made part of, the underlying structure.

The interiors of the Fakahani doors also reveal how long and narrow the vertical panels would have had to be had they been made to fit the present scheme.

To my knowledge, such long and narrow panels were never used on Fatimid-era doors; the present doors, although they may be decorated with Fatimid panels, do not have the proportions appropriate to Fatimid doors, which would have been shorter and broader. One may conclude, therefore, that the present doors are not the original Fatimid ones, but the product of a later campaign using decorated wooden panels and strips retrieved from the Fatimid woodwork in the mosque. The original Fatimid doors would have been shorter, with their panels arranged in the traditional way on the interior faces of the doors, for the exterior was too exposed to the elements for such delicate carving. It seems likely that any Fatimid exterior doors would have been plated with metal sheets on the exterior.

The Fakahani doors are then not works of Fatimid art, but rather pastiches assembled from genuine
Fatimid elements. When might this assembly have been done? Today, when scholars are constantly discovering how much of what we imagine to be “medieval” Cairo is actually an artifact of nineteenth-century restoration, it is very tempting to imagine that the Comité was responsible for creating them in the late nineteenth century. 27 This supposition seems quite unlikely, however, for although the Comité may have repaired the doors (new pieces of wood have been scarfed into the frames near the pivots), the doors must have been made to fit the entrances, which date from 1736, when Ahmad Katkhuda Mustahfizan al-Kharbutli ordered the restoration of the mosque and the construction of the sabil-kuttāb adjacent to it. If this is true, then we may imagine that al-Karbutli’s workmen discovered two sets of Fatimid-era doors as well as some other wooden pieces in the remains of the mosque they were in the process of reconstructing. The Fatimid doors were undoubtedly too short to fit the openings of the Ottoman-era mosque, so...
the decorated panels on their inner faces were saved and reused to good advantage, along with the Kufic inscription on stone and several rather good Iznik tiles (see fig. 5), which were placed in positions of honor around and in the mihrab hood and in the lunettes over the doors. Instead of being hidden from view, the beautifully carved wooden panels were now visible to anyone walking down the street, testimony to the venerable history of the mosque. Only someone extremely familiar with and attuned to the peculiarities of old doors would have ever noticed their slight incongruities, which make them not genuine Fatimid doors but good Ottoman-era fakes. Unlike forgeries, which are intended to deceive, these fake Fatimid doors were probably assembled in the eighteenth century from some genuine Fatimid carvings, with the purpose of creatively reusing and preserving vestiges of the old mosque. In this way, these lovely doors shed as much light on eighteenth-century Cairo as they do on Fatimid art.

NOTES


9. The project, efficiently administered by the NVIC, was generously supported by the Getty Foundation. I thank Kim Duistermat, director of the NVIC, for permission to publish some of my findings here. Agnieszka Dobrowolska, project director, not only invited me to participate in this project but also kept me abreast of the latest findings of the team, which also included Peter Sheehan, archaeologist, and Husam Mahdi, archival researcher. In addition Agnieszka read and commented on an earlier draft of this paper and kept me from making some very serious errors of interpretation.


14. The existence of such a utilitarian structure within the walls of the Fatimid city of Cairo is yet another piece of evidence that the Fatimid city was not, contrary to received opinion, a restricted royal enclosure for the caliphs and their court. For further exploration of this question see Bloom, *Arts of the City Victorious*, chap. 3.


22. Fu’ad Sayyid gives the incorrect Hijri date in *Capitale de l’Égypte*, 547.


25. For all these examples see Jonathan M. Bloom, “Woodwork in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt During the 12th and 13th Centuries,” in *Ayyubid Jerusalem*, ed. Sylvia Auld and Robert Hillenbrand (London: Melisende, forthcoming).
