

In the second half of the tenth century, Egypt in general suffered not only from a number of low Nile floods, which in turn caused famine, but also from poor leadership of these last few Abbasid rulers. While the time was ripe, the Fatimid general Gawhar, a former slave, marched to Fustat-Misr and took the city on August 5th, 969 for his khalif, al-Muiz. But this conquest had really began in the last century.

It had been planned by Abdallah Ibn Maymun, a Persian occultist with visions of imperial grandeur, who had established himself in Tunisia. He died in 875, but his descendents continued on. They would create an Egyptian Khaliftate that would last for over 200 years in Egypt, and also an empire that would encompass a considerable area of the Middle East. By this time, most Egyptians were Orthodox Sunni Muslims, and the khalif of their sect was in Baghdad, a regime that the Fatimids bitterly opposed. The Fatimids practiced a more introverted religion, which seems not to have impressed the more practical Egyptians. Then too, we are told that the Fatimids sent out missionaries to the lands still held by the Sunni Abbasids, and were more interested in converting them than their own subjects in Egypt.

El Kahira was founded by a Shi'ite. The difference between the Shi'i and the Sunni is very important during the next 200 years of the history of Cairo. The Sunni believe that the sunna (a path) is considered to be as powerful as the Koran itself. The sunna is a collection of traditions and interpretations of the Koranic law. After Mohammed died, he left no indication about who his successor should be. The Sunni decided that a chosen caliph would be an elected head of all legitimate secular power. The Shi'i believe that the Koran was absolute and divine. They believed that the authority should only continue through Mohammed's family. Mohammed had four daughters of which Fatima was the youngest. Two of his grandsons by Fatima were al Hasan and al Husein. Of course, the Fatimid period is named for this daughter.

General Gawhar, when he seized Fustat-Misr in 969, had no intentions of basing his authority on what was already a powerful city with its traditions already established. The very night that he arrived he placed his army on a site a little north of Fustat-Misr. He wanted to place his own capital there. Historians tell the story of how El Kahira was started. Gawhar had marked out the site where he wanted to place the city. Poles were placed at the corners and ropes were strung to show the perimeters of the walls. Hundreds of workmen were placed around the perimeter and waited to start digging. A special signal was to be given at the moment the digging was to commence. Bells were hung on the ropes and a signal was to be given. The astrologers were waiting for some astrologically correct moment to give the signal. Suddenly the bells started ringing although no one had given the signal. A raven sitting on the ropes had rung the bells, but the diggers took it to be the signal and started digging. The astrologers were terrified. El Kahira, which means Mars, was in the ascendant and this was sure to be a bad omen. The original name of the city was to have been El Mansuriya, which means "the victorious", but instead was called El Kahira, which can also mean "the victorious".

The Fatimid caliph, Muiz, who had sent Gawhar to Egypt, placed himself in the new royal enclosure in El Kahira in 973. For two hundred years after there has been bitter opposition to the Sunni caliphs of Baghdad. The Fatimids' real trouble was that they were so concerned with a "revealed" and "inner" religion that they were unable to convert the practical Egyptians. The Egyptians were still recovering from the same sort of thing from Byzantine Christianity. The Fatimids were only able to rule Egypt by using the Christians and Jews that they had formed a

powerful allegiance with. The Fatimids were similar to the Christians in many ways in that they believed that a Messiah was coming to protect them against sin and error and would save them all.

Al Kahira was originally intended to be a private, fortified, royal enclosure, not a public city. Gawhar built palaces for his master so that he and his friends and their armies could be separated from the general public. No ordinary citizen was allowed to set foot in al Kahira unless he was needed for something. Even ambassadors had to be met outside the enclosure and led through the proper gate. It was over 200 years before Fustat-Misr's people overflowed into the city and built mosques, pavilions and houses. In Muiz's time, the population of Kahira was between twenty and thirty thousand people, all of which were court officials, servants, slaves and soldiers.

Gawhar laid the foundation for the Mosque of al Azhar while he was still building the walls of the city and the palace for Muiz. The courtyard for this mosque was where the courtyard still is today. The mosque itself has been considerably rebuilt. When enough of the city had been built, Muiz arrived to take over the city in 975. Fustat-Misr had been decorated to welcome him, but when he arrived he went straight to Kahira, which had not been decorated at all. The people had not expected him to occupy his new city yet.

The original plans for Kahira were very simple. The city measured twelve hundred yards by sixteen hundred fifty yards with a wall surrounding it that was wide enough for two horsemen to ride side by side on top of the wall. The whole west side ran along the old Red Sea canal, which was filled in 1899 and had tramlines placed over it. There were two main gates in the wall; Bab el Zuweila on the south side, through which Muiz entered the city, and Bab el Futuh (the Gate of Succor) on the north. On the east side of the city was the Mukattam Hills. Inside the city walls, each group of the population had their own quarters. The army quarters were known as Harat al Askar and the Greek quarters were called Harat al Rum.

Muiz had invested most of his own fortune to conquer Egypt, so he wanted a return on his investment as quickly as possible. The Red Sea canal was the means in which he implemented his wealth. At a bend in the river near the canal that ran almost up to the walls of Kahira, was a customs port of al Maks. Muiz took this over almost immediately and began to expand it into a proper docking yard. He kept the tax collecting character, but also laid the foundation for a new port of his own. This new port immediately took most of the business that normally went to Fustat-Misr.

In this area he built six hundred ships that were about 275 feet long by 110 feet abeam. These ships were a very wise investment since they could carry large amounts of cargo. Muiz changed the whole tax system into a central collecting body that did away with the local collectors. In one day it is said that he collected over \$475,000 (in modern equivalent) in taxes in Fustat-Misr alone.

Muiz only lived for two years after he entered the city. Mostly what he did was lay the foundation that was solid, rich and clever. Seventy-seven years after Muiz died, Khusrau gives a description of a city that literally grew up overnight as the wealth that was amassed was

spent lavishly on construction. No buildings were allowed near the palace, but the buildings that were in the enclosure were so tall and numerous that they looked like mountains when approaching the city. There were twelve thousand servants that took care of the caliph in the palace and no one knows how many women were within those palace walls.

The palace had twelve pavilions and ten gates some of which were named; the Gate of Gold, the Gate of Oil, the Gate of the Emerald, the Gate Where You Smell Meat and the Gate of the Slippery Ground. It is said that there was a special gate underground which opened into a tunnel that the sultan rode through to his harem.

The city of Kahira had five gates and the fortified walls did not quite enclose the city. Fifty-two thousand camels were used to bring fresh water to the city. The Fatimids were different from the other foreign invaders of Egypt. The others had built their capitals, but they had not since the Romans built the high walls around their cities the way the Fatimids did. The Fatimids enjoyed the arts and some sciences, especially astronomy. Many writers and artists came to Kahira and the gardens were sometimes filled with poets.

Muiz died at the age of forty-five and his son Aziz ruled after him for about twenty-one years. Aziz was just as much responsible for the financial administration that was organized and has kept Egypt running so effectively for so long. Many of the unusual financial methods that were introduced during this time were the ideas of Aziz's chief minister, Ibn Killis. Kahira prospered very rapidly and bridges, mosques, palaces and a new canal were built. Aziz started the mosque which his son Hakim finished. This mosque is considered to be one of the most romantic ruins in Cairo today.

Hakim was eleven years old when his father died. He was playing in one of the gardens when his tutor, Bargawan came to tell him of the news. Bargawan was a eunuch and had nicknamed his student "little lizard". Aziz looked and acted like a lizard. He had big blue eyes like his father and he scared people. His face was frightening and he preferred darkness to daylight. He went out only at night, wandering through the city on a donkey. He ordered all of the shops to close during the day but to stay open during the night. The people eventually began to grow accustomed to this change but when they began to have parties and entertain at night, he punished them. Hakim began to enjoy his authority and exercised it in very unreal ways. In 1004, he had all of the dogs of Kahira killed. No wine, grapes, beer, mulokhiya, lupin pellets or fish without scales could be sold. All sorts of fruits were to be burned and the vines cut down. Honey, which was a delicacy to the Egyptians, was ordered to be poured into the Nile. Over five thousand jars of it was destroyed. No women could go out onto the streets during the day or night. This restriction lasted for over seven and a half years. One of his favorite challenges to his friends or enemies that were visiting his palace, was to challenge them that for six hundred dinars, they could not jump on a piece of wood that floated on the surface of the pool. A royal challenge could not be refused, but when the challenged jumped in the pool, he would find himself impaled on a spear which was hidden under the floating wood.

Hakim loved to go off alone at night on his gray donkey that he called al Kamr, which means "the moon". He would go out in the Mukkatam Hills. On February 13, 1021, he went out riding alone on Kamr in the Mukkatam Hills. He was seen in the hills near Helwan on the next day,

but was never seen again after that. His clothes were found with holes stabbed in them, stuffed in a well.

Hakim's list of horrors is very long but he did also enjoy literature and poetry as well as astronomy. The Hakimite astronomical tables were designed for Hakim by the Arab astronomer al Yunus. Hakim also had built the Hall of Science in the palace grounds for the study of the Shi'i doctrine, science and astronomy. Scholars came here from everywhere to discuss whatever they wanted. The Egyptians of Fustat-Misr always resisted Hakim. He had to stay hidden in his city for days after he had Bargawan killed. The women hated him for the laws forbidding them to leave their homes. One time, they placed a very well made dummy in the middle of the street where they knew that Hakim would see it. He ordered his guards to cut her to pieces and when they tried they found it made of paper. He was so angry that he sent his Sudanese troops to burn Fustat-Misr to the ground. The people resisted and there was a civil war that lasted for about three days.

Hakim's son, Zahir, became caliph after the murder of Hakim. Zahir was much like his father in that he also enjoyed making people suffer. Once he had a huge party at his palace that he invited 2,660 young ladies. They came to the party dressed in their most beautiful clothes. They were all asked to wait in a nearby mosque because of some delay. While they waited inside the mosque, masons bricked up the doors and they were left to die in agony. Six months later their bodies were found still inside the mosque. The Fatimids amassed a great amount of wealth that was mostly cash. They were a very wasteful and extravagant group.

Kahira reached its peak when al Mustansir, Zahir's son, became caliph. Mustansir was just a baby when his father died, but he took over the rule from his mother when he became old enough. He reigned for fifty-eight years. He collected cash rents on twenty thousand boutiques that he owned in Kahira and Fustat-Misr and on twenty thousand houses as well. He also had three hundred sixty-nine villages along the Red Sea canal. The main problem with such a fortune based on a delicate trading economy, is that it could be lost so fast. Mustansir did lose his wealth almost overnight when Egypt's crops failed. The Nile failed to rise as it needed to and caused bad harvests. The peasants revolted and there were shortages. The people of Kahira and Fustat-Misr began to go hungry.

Al Yazury, the first minister of Mustansir managed to keep the grain prices low and the supply still coming in. Yazury built the Joseph's Granaries at Fustat. He was murdered in 1058 and the internal authority began to crumble because the merchants reigned supreme. They didn't care who starved or what happened to Kahira. The merchants encouraged the Turks and the Berber soldiers to revolt and expel fifty thousand Sudani soldiers. The Sudanis went to Upper Egypt and set up a bandit kingdom where they raided the villages nearby. The Sudanese destroyed the irrigation systems there and the Berbers raided the Delta area. Almost no crops were planted in Upper or Lower Egypt and the economy stopped dead in its tracks.

The Turks destroyed the city of Kahira. They stole most of the treasures of Mustansir as well as the library, which was one of the world's most extensive. One hundred thousand books were taken out of the city and piled up on a hill, which was known for years as the Hill of Books. A period of famine went on for seven years. Plagues hit the city. Mustansir sent his family to

Baghdad to keep from starving to death and he had to sell everything that he had to survive. Cannibalism became so common that human flesh was sold by butchers.

The Turkish soldiers set parts of Fustat-Misr on fire and then occupied the city. They then rushed to the royal city and found al Mustansir sitting alone in his palace with nothing left. Everything was gone, but they did not dethrone him. They obviously controlled the city. In the year 1073, a good crop made Mustansir send for Badr al Gamali, who was a former slave. Gamali said that he would come only if he could bring his Syrian soldiers with him. Mustansir agreed and Badr arrived in December of 1074. The Turkish soldiers welcomed him, not knowing what he was there for. He told his Syrian officers to entertain a Turkish officer for just one night only. The next morning, the officers brought to him the heads of the Turks that they had entertained.

Mustansir and Badr were responsible for most of the remnants that we have of Kahira today. The city had mostly outgrown its walls so they built a new wall and removed all the old gates. The old brick gates were replaced with stone gates, three of which remain today; Bab el Nasr (the Gate of Victory), Bab el Futuh (Gate of Succor) and Bab el Zuweila (Gate of the tribe Zuweila). Badr was titled Emir Giyushi and built a mosque that is on top of Mukattam Hills. He built it there because he wanted to be able to see the graves of his seven favorite wives in the valley below. Badr and Mustansir died in the same year, 1094. Badr left to his family six million gold dinars, seventy-five thousand satin robes, two hundred fifty bags of silver coins, thirty camel loads of Iraqi golden boxes, one hundred gold nails, each of which held a jeweled turban, and two large trunks of gold needles for his slaves and wives to use. After the deaths of al Mustansir and Badr, six Fatimid caliphs would rule for seventy-five years.

Fatimid Rulers