

Housni Alkhateeb SHEHADA  
*Al-Ḥākim Mosque:  
 Religion and Propaganda in Fatimid Egypt*

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The importance of and interpretation of Quranic verses on monuments, after long neglect, has shifted in recent decades to a potentially important element in historical and art historical analysis. This could arguably be of special import in Fatimid monuments, whose analysis could be subject not only to exoteric (*zāhir*) but also esoteric (*bāṭin*) interpretation (*ta'wīl*).<sup>(1)</sup>

First of all, one may ask why should the Quranic inscriptions of the mosque of al-Ḥākim have been selected for study. Why only this mosque, and why only the Quranic inscriptions? According to the author, he chose this mosque because of “the great richness of its inscriptions; because of its political and religious significance, and the importance of the patron who completed its construction; and also due to the fact that the inscriptions adorning it form a whole whose various meanings can be traced with the help of religious literature contemporary with the mosque.” (p. 3, 5). It does have more original inscriptions than any other Fatimid building. But it is highly doubtful that the remaining ones represent more than a fraction of those originally present. Shehada claims (p. 104) that “Only in the Fatimid period were entire arrays of inscriptions, covering all the walls and other parts of the religious monuments, introduced into religious architecture.” But earlier the mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn had the ceilings of its entire interior lined with Quranic inscriptions, and in addition had two foundation inscriptions (the original location of the latter is unknown). Given the similarities of the placement of the Quranic inscriptions in the remaining

arcades of the mosque of al-Ḥākim to those in the Ibn Ṭūlūn mosque (and the similarities of its plan and use of rectangular piers), it is likely that all the arcades were similarly adorned – but none of those at al-Ḥākim in the side aisles or that opposite the qibla has survived, and most in the main prayer hall are heavily, not just restored, but rebuilt. In addition, it may be asked why the historical inscriptions were omitted – as Paula Sanders has remarked, “The visual prominence of the caliph’s titulature in the foundation inscriptions constituted a powerful assertion of his legitimacy in particular.”<sup>(2)</sup>

Given the exclusive study of the Quranic inscriptions, how should one go about determining the weight given to the interpretation of the different verses? Shehada claims that “it is assumed that the choice of placing specific verses in a given place was not fortuitous, but rather followed a certain order that was related to the verses’ importance and their relation to one of the concepts of the *da’wa*” (p. 105). In support of this he further proposes that “The relative importance of various parts of the building, as reflected in the inscriptions and their location, will be here clarified in the order of their presentation and interpretation” (p. 106). However, rather than analysing what is on the building at present, a sounder methodology would have been to determine the ideal choice of verses and their placement, and then see the extent to which any particular building conforms to this. Otherwise, the risk is of circularity – an assumption, unthinkingly followed here, that the current placement automatically conforms with the argument one is trying to make.

But in this case the argument is even more flawed because of a pervasive problem in the author’s analysis, the inability to distinguish what is original from later work. The author tries to smooth this over by talking of restorations, but he fails to realise, or at least to realise the implications, that the inscriptions in marble on the qibla wall are not restorations by the Bohra, who have been working on the rebuilding the mosque since 1982, but are brand new copies of inscriptions on other Fatimid monuments, both earlier and later (al-Azhar and al-Aqmar mosques). A closer reading of Creswell’s account of the mosque would have been beneficial: Creswell showed how a mihrab dated 1223/1808-1809 stood until 1931 in the center of the qibla wall. Following the discovery of the original mihrab at the al-Azhar mosque after the removal of later revetment, it was hoped that a similar find would be made at al-Hakim,

(1) A good example is the analysis of the Shi’i content of the Quranic inscription on the cenotaph of Husain: “The Qur’anic Inscriptions on the *Tabut* of al-Husayn in Cairo.” *Islamic Art*, 2, 1987, p. 3-14.

(2) Paula Sanders, *Ritual Politics and the City in Fatimid Cairo*, Albany, 1994, p. 56.

but unfortunately nothing remained of the original.<sup>(3)</sup> Shehada did note that the Bohra's marble decoration copied the mihrab of al-Azhar and the grilled window of the entrance of the Aqmar mosque, but failed to emphasise that they therefore have no evidentiary value as to what was there originally. Rather, he surmises that "the choice of the inscriptions located today in this part of the mosque has been guided by similar or identical inscriptions located in the *mihrāb*-s of other Fatimid mosques built in Cairo before and after the Mosque of al-Ḥākīm" (p. 115). This might have been a more encouraging methodology, although there is but one other Fatimid mosque for which we have a mihrab with original inscriptions, that of al-Azhar. There are indeed many other *mihrāb*-s with inscriptions in the Fatimid shrines of Cairo – al-Juyushi, Sayyida Ruḡayya, Sayyida 'Ātika, and al-Ḥaṣawātī. Did the choice of inscriptions on those *mihrāb*-s reflect that of al-Azhar, for instance, or were they completely different? Such a comparative study would have lent greater weight to Shehada's analysis, but these *mihrāb*-s are simply not mentioned.

Are the other remaining inscriptions in the qibla prayer hall original, or at least can we be confident that they are restorations of the original? The answer may be yes, for the most part, although the extent of new work is much greater than acknowledged. This is evident from a photograph of this area taken by Creswell in 1921, showing the transept and the dome over the mihrab intact, together with the two bays (perpendicular to the qibla wall) to either side of the transept.<sup>(4)</sup> This means that most of the inscriptions on the eight bays beyond those two had disappeared.<sup>(5)</sup> Do the inscriptions in each of the bays parallel with the qibla start with the Basmala and end with the same *sūra* (and at an appropriate length<sup>(6)</sup>) on the wall of the transept beside it? If so, it would be a

reasonable assumption, even though it has been largely rebuilt and redecorated, that it was a continuous extract from the beginning of the passage in question. But in the bay south of the transept adjacent to the qibla wall there remain extracts from two Quranic *sūra*-s, one of which, Quran 2:255-6, is also found on the third arcade from the qibla wall (p. 107, PL. 4.1). It is unlikely that two identical passages were placed there originally. A much more detailed study of what remains, and comparison with older photographs, is therefore needed to verify which parts might be original.<sup>(7)</sup>

Only a small fragment of the original inscription in the southeast dome was visible in 1921.<sup>(8)</sup> This fragment contained the beginning of Quran 13:27 and ended with Quran 13:30; the missing parts have been redecorated, and so here it is a reasonable assumption the verses were continuous. However, the northeast dome now contains Quran 4:173-5. Creswell's photographs from 1921 show that absolutely nothing of the dome or the inscription remained in this area,<sup>(9)</sup> so Shehada's analysis of it is irrelevant, except as regarding the Bohra's choice of restoration material.

The other concentration of inscriptions on this monument is on the two minarets. Considering that the author uses his own photographs for several of the inscriptions here, it is astonishing that he misidentifies their location. Figures 9.5 and 9.6 are not, as the caption suggests, on the upper band of the northern minaret, but on the bastion (*rukṅ*) of the southern (or western, as designated by Shehada) minaret. It is also surprising that he does not mention the single most puzzling feature of the mosque, over which scholars have argued for decades – why were the bastions added in 1010 by al-Ḥākīm, covering the magnificent foundation inscriptions, Quranic verses and decoration of the original minarets inside them? The only rational explanation for this was first hinted

(3) K.A.C. Creswell, *The Muslim Architecture of Egypt*, Oxford, 1952-1959, vol. 11, p. 83.

(4) <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1289069/view-from-west-minaret-over-photograph-kac-creswell/?carousel-image=2015HR8892>.

(5) Max van Berchem, *Matériaux Pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum I: Egypte 1*. Mémoires de la Mission Archéologique Française au Caire, XIX, Le Caire, 1894-1903, p. 55, n. 2, wrote that the inscriptions of the sanctuary were in a deplorable state and would soon disappear, and that only in the arches nearest the centre were they better preserved, thanks to roof of the depot that now occupied this space.

(6) This is crucial, but demands the meticulous calculations that informed, for instance, Laila Irahim's verification that the minaret in the southern cemetery belonged to the *khānqāh* of Qawsūn: Layla 'Alī Ibrahim: "The Great Ḥānqāh of the Emir Qawṣūn in Cairo", *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Abteilung, Le Caire*, 30, 1974, p. 41.

(7) Jonathan M. Bloom, "The Mosque of al-Hakim in Cairo," *Muqarnas*, 1, 1983, p. 18, notes that the inscriptions begin at different points in different bays, suggesting that this might be the result of later restorations.

(8) <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1289063/squinch-in-qibla-iwan-of-photograph-kac-creswell/?carousel-image=2015HR8904>.

(9) <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1289117/squinch-at-northeast-inner-corner-photograph-kac-creswell/?carousel-image=2015HR8596>

<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1289119/squinch-at-northeast-inner-corner-photograph-kac-creswell/?carousel-image=2015HR8592>

<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1289116/squinch-at-northeast-inner-corner-photograph-kac-creswell/?carousel-image=2015HR8591>.

at by Jonathan Bloom. He noted that since at the time of the foundation of the mosque of al-Ḥākim only the mosques at Madina and Mecca had more than one minaret, and only they had minarets with tiers of different shapes (as at al-Ḥākim), then these must have been a visual reminder to the viewer of the links to those cities. In other words, it underlined the Fatimids' crucial and prestigious role as *khādim al-ḥaramayn*, the servant (and protector) of the two holy Shrines.<sup>(10)</sup> However, in 1010 the *shārif* of Mecca supported a revolt in Palestine led by the Jarrahids, and accordingly al-Ḥākim prohibited travelling to Mecca, attempting to cut off the city's supplies.<sup>(11)</sup> This loss was such a blow to al-Ḥākim's prestige that the bastions were most likely ordered to cover up this now embarrassing visual reference.

Unfortunately, in support of this, many scholars<sup>(12)</sup> have mentioned (as does Shehada, p. 244) the presence of Quran 9:107 on the bastion, which contains the phrase "And those who have taken a mosque in opposition and unbelief, and to divide the unbelievers...". However, as Dina Montasser pointed out as long ago as 2009, Quran 9:107 does not appear on the building; the extract from the *sūra* begins with the word *masjid* in Quran 9:108, emphasizing the importance of prayer within mosques.<sup>(13)</sup>

Regarding two of the inscriptions on the bastion of the northern minaret Shehada writes as follows (p. 256): "The two verses whose Fatimid Shī'ī message is most charged appear side by side, complementing each other with the idea, meaning and message of the Fatimids. To me, they constitute an explicit statement that the Fatimid Imām-caliph, al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh, rules thanks to the power and abilities that God has given him. Like the passers-by in the

area of the mosque, al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh must have seen before his eyes these verses, high up on the minaret of the mosque he built and viewed them as support for his rule by divine right."

One of these inscriptions is the Throne verse (Quran 2.255), the single most popular verse Islam-wide, for Shi'ī and Sunni alike, to adorn works of architecture and art. But this analysis calls into question Shehada's whole project of interpreting Quranic inscriptions with regard to Fatimid *ta'wīl*, since these two cursive inscriptions were added by the Sunni Mamluk amir Baybars al-Jāshinkīr in his restoration of the mosque after the earthquake of 1303.<sup>(14)</sup>

The author of the present study is well versed in Fatimid history and theology, and is able to expound with great expertise on the possible meanings of Quranic inscriptions in relation to the Fatimid *da'wa*. Unfortunately, his methodology and lack of art historical expertise severely compromise his findings and the usefulness of this work.

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(10) Bloom, "The Mosque," p. 22.

(11) Bloom, "The Mosque," p. 28.

(12) The first to mention it was Bloom, "The Mosque," p. 36, quoting Creswell, MAE, 1, p. 88. Creswell (actually p. 87) mentions Quran 9, part of verse 108. In the Flügel Quran verse 108 equals verse 107 of the standard Egyptian edition, so perhaps Bloom automatically assumed Creswell was using the Flügel numbering. Later scholars referring to Quran 9:107 include Paula Sanders, *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo*, Albany, 1994, p. 59; Irene A. Bierman, *Writing Signs: The Fatimid Public Text*, Berkeley, 1998, p. 94-95 and Jennifer Pruitt, *Building the Caliphate: Construction, Destruction, and Sectarian Identity in Early Fatimid Architecture*, New Haven and London, 2020, p. 101.

(13) Dina Montasser, "Modes of Utilizing Qur'anic Inscriptions on Cairene Mamluk Religious Monuments," in *Creswell Photographs Re-examined: New Perspectives on Islamic Architecture*, ed. Bernard O'Kane, Le Caire, 2009, p. 195. The correct reading of the sequence of verses on the bastion is found in Bernard O'Kane et al., *The Monumental Inscriptions of Historic Cairo*: <https://islamicinscriptions.culnat.org>, inscription number 15.35.

(14) Van Berchem, *Matériaux*, p. 54. Shehada notes that these two inscriptions were not mentioned by Bloom – did he not stop to think why? Or to wonder at their use of *thuluth* as opposed to all the other inscriptions on the mosque, which were in Kufic? Some other passages that need attention are:

p. 6: "Moreover, the claim that all the verses chosen are from the beginnings of the suras is incorrect: rather, several verses were chosen from the ends of the suras, such as Q. 2 (al-Baqara), p. 255–68. See Flury, *Die Ornamente*, fig. 2d." Flury's figure in question illustrates just one letter.

p. 79: "A photograph of al-Ḥākim Mosque (Jāmi' al-Anwar), by the English photographer Francis Frith, 1850s." The photo is in colour – was it colourized, or taken by another photographer?

p. 105: "Indeed, the Imām who leads the prayer does so from the pulpit or another prominent position." The Imam leads the prayer from the space in front of the mihrab, not the minbar.

p. 117: "the Shī'ī custom of adding the [*basmala*] at the opening of the suras." This is of course equally common in Sunni Quranic quotations.

p. 231: "some [of the windows of the north minaret] were even transferred to the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo." No reference is given for this; none were transferred there or anywhere else, to my knowledge.

p. 232: "The scholar Aḥmad Muḥammad 'Īsā attaches great importance to this verse." The reference to this passage in n. 44 does not give a reference to the person; neither does he appear in the bibliography.

p. 249: "This is probably the only original inscription extant on the envelope of the western minaret." All of the extant inscriptions on the bastion of this minaret are original.