

# AL- FUSTAT: THE SEED OF CAIRO

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## ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the issue of the real beginning of Cairo and defines the proper boundaries of historical Cairo.

In fact, ever since civilized man became established in the Nile Valley, there have been important settlements within and close to the present boundaries of the city of Cairo. Memphis which lies 20 km to the south of the centre of Cairo on the west bank of the Nile was the capital of Egypt during the third to sixth dynasties ( 2720 BC to 2420 BC ). However, the more recent history of Cairo can be traced from the founding of Al- Fustat in AD 641 which lies towards the southern boundary of the existing city on the east bank of the Nile.

When Amr Ibn Al- As defeated the Roman in Egypt in the year 641 AD, he regarded the provisional fortress town of Babylon as a more strategic site than the Greco- Roman capital of Alexandria. He, therefore, founded a garrison town north and east of Babylon named Al- Fustat( signifying the tent). This was the real beginning of Cairo the capital standing on the east bank of the Nile and replacing ancient Memphis to the west. Later rulers were to add other administrative centres to Fustat. Under the Abbasids, Tulunids and Fatimids subsequent expansion was always to the north east, with the city finally centering around the area lying between the Citadel and Bab Al- Foutouh. The focus of new quarter was always its mosque.

In later centuries, subsequent expansion occurred under the Abbasids and Tulunids. The Abbasids, in the year 751 A.D., founded their provincial capital known as Al- Askar. It was built little to the north east of Al- Fustat. As the time went on, Al- Askar grew until it joined Al- Fustat. In AD 870 , the Tulunids constructed a new suburb to the north of Al- Askar called Al- Qataie. This new suburb was partly destroyed in AD 905. What was left merged with Al- Fustat.

## KEYWORDS

Al- Askar; Al- Qataie; Al- Fustat; Al- Qahira Al- Fatimiya; Misr; Babylon; Abbassids; Tulunids; Ayyubid; Mameluke; Ottoman.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent writings and popular usage there is a great misunderstanding of the historical reality concerning the origin of Cairo. It is the erroneous conception that regards the Fatimid Cairo (Al- Qahira Al- Fatimiya ) as the origin of the modern metropolis. Accordingly, the history of the Egyptian capital is considered only since AD 969, the date of the Fatimid founding of Al- Qahira. This could be because the name of Cairo ( Al- Qahira ) was given to the city at that date ( AD 969 ). When Jawhar, minister and commander in chief of the Fatimid Caliph Al- Muizz took Egypt in 969 A.D., he established a new place city as a capital of Fatimid empire. To celebrate the triumphal victory, the new city was named Al- Qahira ( the conquerer or the victorious ), a name which passed into English as Cairo.

At the time of the Fatimid invasion, the inhabited areas of the populous cities of Al- Fustat, Al- Askar, Al- Qataie were joined together into a triple city called collectively " Misr ". Its length, according to Maqaddassi ( AD 985 ), was about three kilometers with the densest section in the neighbourhood of the mosque of Amr. The site chosen for Al- Qahira lay immediately to the north of Misr. It was a fortified walled enclosure designed as a residence for the Caliph and his family as well as government offices, quarters for the garrison and other buildings.

The walled Al- Qahira was a royal city, entry to which was forbidden except for those of official business. However as the time went on, the population of the triple city " Misr " had grown up and gradually moved to the immediate vicinity of the imperial stronghold. By the extinction of the Fatimid dynasty, the population

overflow into the enclosure of Al- Qahira. Thus the urban development of Cairo greatly accelerated. During the ensuing centuries, the city has developed from the settlement that it was to the expanding metropolis that is today. The metropolis is now by far the largest urban center on the African continent and one of the largest cities of the world.

The present paper is a study of the history of the site of Cairo and its development with emphasis on the historical reality of Al- Fustat as the seed of modern Cairo rather than Al- Qahira Al- Fatimiya.

### **THE SITE OF CAIRO BEFORE AL- FUSTAT**

The history of the city of Cairo began approximately 3500 B.C. when the Pharaoh Menes, an upper Egyptian king, conquered the Nile Delta. Thus the two states, Lower and Upper Egypt were linked into one Kingdom. A new capital was then founded at Memphis, a city built precisely where the Delta and the Valley met. At that time the Delta started to fan out where Memphis now is at a distance of about 20 km from the heart of modern Cairo. Mit Rahina and Abu Sir, today, made the site of ancient capital of Egypt in the vicinity of Cairo.

The west bank of the Nile River was chosen as a site for the new capital to protect it from the east ; the source of most attacks in Egyptian history. This provided a natural impediment to enemies by the whole stream of the river.

The Nile, at that time, ran close to the mountains on the side of Libya. Therefore, the ground on the west bank of the river was insufficient for the new capital of Menes with the grandeur. Therefore, he diverted the Nile in a very huge operation ( described in details by Herodotus ). The river, formerly ran close to the western mountains, was conducted into a canal so as to make it flow between the eastern and western mountain ridges. The original river bed was therefore, filled in to provide flattened ground for the city ( **Fig. 1** ).

The achievement of Menes proved to be more lasting than the work of most town planners. For many thousand years. Memphis had been either the capital of Egypt or its second city. The strategic motives that inspired the choice of the site are as evident today as when those first engineers set their movements to work.

However, after the diversion of the Nile, some changes in the river gradually took place. One was the emergence of the considerable island of Rowda lying to the east of Memphis and immediately to the west of the heights of Al- Rassad ( a spur of the Muqattam Hills ) and separated from the east bank ( as it is today ) by a narrow channel. This channel could be easily crossed or bridged by linked boats and traversing the other half of the Nile from the west bank of the island in a similar way. Therefore, the position of Memphis had become open to attack from the east. This was justified in the late sixth century B.C. when the Persian occupied Memphis ( **Fig. 2** ).

Aware of the vulnerability of the position of Memphis, the Persian gave a new importance to the east bank of the Nile. On that side, they had chosen a site of great strategic advantages where they built, around the year 500 B.C., the fortress of Babylon.

Constructed on the heights of Al- Rassad ( a spur of the Muqattam Hills ), the fortress commanded a westward view of Memphis; eastward view embracing the Muqattam Hills; northward and southward view of long reaches of the Nile. Moreover, located at the apex of the Delta, it guarded the northernmost single crossing of the Nile.

North of it, the Nile divides and one must cross two or more channels to pass over it. Furthermore, according to Butler, the island of Rowada itself was strongly fortified at that epoch and by its commanding position in the mid channel of the Nile, it added immensely to the military value of Babylon. On the same site, the Persian fortress was succeeded by a Roman one built again in the year AD 27.

### **AL- FUSTAT**

When Amr Ibn Al- As entered Egypt in the year AD 641, he captured the Roman fortress of Babylon. The strategic site of the fortress advantages that inspired the choice of the site of Babylon was as evident to Amr as to those who firstly built the fortress. Moreover its location would assure easier communication with the headquarters of Islamic state in Arabia rather than the Greco- Roman capital of Alexandria. Therefore, Amr set up his camp near to fortress and established a garrison town called Al- Fustat ( signifying the tent ) north and east of this fortress. He also established his headquarters and built his mosque which was at that time on the firm bank of the Nile.

The new town had been established in the year AD 641 with the embryo of the mosque of Amr to serve as a place of worship, council chamber, law court and other activities. Outside it was an immense open space in which thousands could pray. Near to the Mosque they built treasury house, markets, public baths as well as

scattered quarters. The quarters were scattered because ( according to Al- Qalaqshandi ) the Arab Army consisted of diverse groups or tribes of different past nomadic life. Therefore each of these groups or tribes had assigned its own separate quarter.

Al- Fustat grew fast and the separate quarters expanded until the space left open between them were filled. The final result was a compact city stretching from Qasr Al- Shama ( the Arabic given name to the fortress of Babylon ) and Nile border eastward to the Muqattam Hills and northward to the vicinity of the mouth of El - Khalig which was situated at that time near to Sayyeda Zeinab Square. This was the real beginning of Cairo, the capital standing on the east bank and replacing ancient Memphis to the west.

Later rulers were to add other administrative centres to Fustat. But in building where they did they were preoccupied by the Nile and its changes. Therefore selection of a site for new extension had to be: high enough the Nile bank to escape the engulfing floods which annually covered much of the riverine plain; and in the same time near enough the river or El- Khalig for its water to be freely available. Therefore, in early stages of its development, Cairo spread away from the Nile toward the north east creeping closer and closer to the Muqattam Hills. In later centuries, the river had constantly changed its course and its eastern edge had progressively withdrawn further from the Muqattam Hills. This caused more sediments to be deposited towards the east and the land below water level was built up. As a result, the direction of growth turned westward toward the river. Meanwhile, until the 19 th Century, no distinguished development occurred beyond the three small villages of Imbaba, Duqqi and Guizah.

During the Umayyad dynasty ( 661- 750 ), there were no significant expansion of the city and the only important construction was the Qantara done by the governor Abd El- Aziz Ibn Marwan. Moreover, it was the last Umayyad Marwan II who, in the year AD 750, set Al- Fustat on fire to prevent the Abbassids gaining control during the struggle on the land of Egypt, but to a little effect. The Abbassids put an end to the Umayyad and succeeded to the caliphate.

### **THE ABBASSID EXPANSION ( AL- ASKAR ) - AD 751**

Because a large portion of Al- Fustat had been destroyed during the fire ( set up by the Umayyad ), the Abbassids proceeded in AD 751 to build a new suburb, to be a provisional capital in Egypt, a little to the north east of Al- Fustat. It was called Al- Askar ( **Fig. 3** ).

The chosen site was in the neighbourhood of Gabal Yashkur in a place known at that time as Al- Hamra al- Qousswa. Construction started by a palace for the governor called Dar Al- Ijarah. Al- Askar was originally planned as a princely city separated from Al- Fustat. But as the time went on it grew up until it merged with Al- Fustat to become by the time of the Tulunids a big metropolis.

### **THE TULUNID CITY ( AL- QUATAIE ) - AD 870**

Al- Quataie of the Tulunids ( AD 870 - AD 905 ) was the next subsequent expansion to the existing settlement. In the year AD 868, Ahmed Ibn Tulun was appointed by the Abbassids as a vice governor of Egypt with authority over Al- Fustat region. One year later, the governorship of the whole of Egypt was conferred upon him. After another year, in AD 870, he made himself independent of Baghdad and set about creating a capital worthy of an independent state. On the hill- lock of Gabal Yashkur, east and slightly north of Al- Askar, Ibn Tulun founded a new fine planned suburb called Al- Qataie.

The design of the new city was a new conception. It contained palace, government offices, a race course and polo ground, a hospital, a zoo, baths and markets together with the great mosque of Ibn Tulun. Moreover, because the location of the new town was farther from the Nile, Ibn Tulun constructed an aqueduct to supply the city with fresh water from its intake tower at Birket Al- Habash ( Clerget, 1934 ).

The Tulunids dynasty extended for thirty seven years during which Al- Qataie attained a prosperity never experienced since the Arab conquest and the inhabitants continued to construct until its houses reached a number of about ten thousands which caused the city to expand until it reached the borders of Al- Fustat and Al- Askar.

In AD 905, the Tulunid dynasty collapsed and the Abbassids, once again got control. To avenge the humiliation caused by Ibn Tulun abortive independence, the Abbassids demolished Al- Qataie out of spite leaving only the mosque standing and resumed their rule from Dar Al- Ijarah at Al- Askar; but only for 29 years. In AD 934, the Ikhshidis, like the Tulunids seized power through the governorship and founded a short lived dynasty until they were arrested by the Fatimids.

## **THE CAPITAL OF THE FATIMID EMPIRE ( AL- QAHIRA ) - AD 969**

The name of Al- Qahira dates from the Fatimids, when in AD 969, Jawhar Al- Siquilli ( the Sicilian ), minister and commander in chief of the reigning Fatimid Calif, Al- Muizz, took Egypt and founded Al- Qahira to become the capital of the Fatimid Empire.

At the time of the invasion, the inhabited areas of the populous cities Al- Fustat, Al- Askar, Al- Qataie were joined together into a triple city called collectively " Misr ". Its length, according to Muqaddassi, was about three kilometers with the densest section in the neighbourhood of the mosque of Amr. The eastern bank of the Nile was still unchanged and the land to the left of El- Khalig was periodically flooded ( **Fig. 4** ).

When Jawhar entered the triple city of Misr looking for an open land for his troops to camp and a site for his new city, there was little choice. They encamped on the only logical space available to them: the relatively elevated areas east of El- Khalig and to the north east of the existing settlement. Then immediately to the north of that site where they encamped, they started to lay out the foundation of a new palace fortress city called Al- Qahira ( the conquerer or the victorious ), a name which has passed into English as Cairo.

The new quarter was marked out over a square roughly one kilometer each way. Then they began to stake out the walls which were to enclose the rectangular city. The fortified enclosure contained two palaces for the caliph and family, government offices, quarters for the garrison, the treasury, the arsenal and other buildings together with the great assembly mosque and university of " Al- Azhar " named after Al- Zahraa ( Fatima ) ( **Fig. 3** ).

The Egyptian topographer Maqrizi devotes more than two hundred pages to describe Al Qahira. Based on his description the outline of the enclosure has been traced ( Ravaisse, Haswell, Creswell ) with considerable accuracy. It was bounded on the east by Muqattam Hills, on the west by El- Khalig, on the south by a line extending from Ahmed Maher square eastward past Bab Zwaitah up to Muqattam Hills and on the north from Bab El- Shaaryya square eastward passing by Bab El- Futuh and Bab El- Nasr up to Muqattam Hills.

The walled Al- Qahira was a royal city, entry to which was forbidden except to those of official business. It was designed as a residence for the Caliph whilst his subjects continued to live in the triple city of Misr. However as the time went on the population of the triple city had grown up and gradually moved to the immediate vicinity of the Imperial stronghold. By the extinction of the fatimid dynasty, the population overflowed into the enclosure.

## **THE AYYUBID CAIRO ( 1171- 1250 )**

In AD 1171, Salah Al- Din Youssuf Ibn Ayyoub ( Saladin ) took over from the Fatimids and founded the Ayyubid dynasty. With him, a major change in the plan of Cairo came into existence and to this plan the capital owes its unity as a city. While all previous rulers used to add a new suburb to the existing settlement, Salah Al- Din's conception was the amalgamation of the four successive capitals Al- Fustat, Al- Askar, Al- Qataie and Al- Qahira. Therefore, in a scheme of fortifications, a new wall was constructed to embrace Al- Qahira and the triple city of Misr. In this scheme, the Citadel was built intended as a strong point in the fortification (**Fig. 5** ).

Furthermore, the northern wall ran due west from Bab Al- Futuh across El- Khalig ( which constructed at that time the western limit of the habitable land ) to the tower on the Nile called Qal'at Al- Maqs. With this addition, the enclosed area became ten times as great as the Fatimid enclosure of Al- Qahira.

## **MAMELUKE CAIRO**

By the time of Mameluke ( 1250 A.D. ), who ruled up to the Ottoman conquest in 1517, the area enclosed by Saladin was well built up. Therefore buildings had to be squeezed into spaces confined between existing structures and streets; but eventually; commercial prosperity led to further expansion of the city south, west, and north. Beyond the northern gates of Al- Qahira, there grew up a new suburb.

## **OTTOMAN PERIOD**

During the Ottoman period, the area between the city and the Nile was given over to gardens and palaces, the names of some of which survives in such present day names as Qasr Al- Aini, Qasr Al- Dubara and Qasr Al- Nil.

## **THE FRENCH EXPEDITION**

When Napoleon came in 1798, " le Grand Caire " as distinguished from " le Vieux Caire ", lay well to the west of the Nile. The southern boundary of the city was roughly the Mameluke aqueduct which still runs from the Nile to the east and then turn north to the Citadel.

## **PRESENT CAIRO**

In the nineteenth Century and the beginning of Twentieth Century, new development occurred over the flood plain on the west bank of the Nile and on the islands of Rawdah and Zamalek. During the last few decades, the city began to expand very rapidly in almost all directions. This rapid expansion is continuing at the present time on a scale previously unknown.

The urban area of Cairo today, home for more than 8 million inhabitants, stretches along both banks of the Nile for a distance of 60 km from Abu Zaabal in the north to Helwan and Dahshur in the south and occupies some 250 km<sup>2</sup> of which 50 km<sup>2</sup> is located on the west bank of the Nile.

## **ERRONEOUS CONCEPTION AND HISTORICAL REALITY**

Hana ( 1998 ) recorded in his study a series of laws and decrees that define the boundaries of historical Cairo. According to these laws& decrees, historical Cairo is enclosed into 4 borders as follows:

The northern boundary can be delimited by a hypothetical line drawn between the intersection of El- Nasr Road with Al- Amir Qar Qarqmas street until its intersection with Salah Salem street until its intersection with Traffic Department street passing by Al- Mansuriya street and Baghala street until its intersection with El- Geish street.

The western limit can be delimited from the intersection of Baghala street with El- Geish street southward until Bab El- Shariya Square. Then to Port Said street until Sayyeda Zaynab Square. Then El- Sadd El- Barrany street until its intersection with Salama street.

The southern limit can be delimited from the intersection of El- Sadd El- Barrany street with Salama street eastwards in Salama street until Ibn Tuloun street extending to the intersection of Ibn Tuloun street with Darb El- Masdood until Darb Aateka and El- Gaafary passing by Al- Ashraf street. Then it extends southward to Al- Sayyeda Nafissa Square, Sayyeda Nafissa street to its intersection with Magra El- Oyoon then extends eastwards to its intersection with Salah Salem street.

The eastern limit can be delimited from the intersection of Magra El- Oyoon with Salah Salem street extending northwards to Salah Salem then El- Nasr Road until its intersection with Al- Amir Qar Qmas street. Furthermore, the map of rehabilitation and historical Cairo - UNDP- December, 1977 gives a similar boundaries as given above.

The above mentioned boundaries of historical Cairo were drawn on **Fig. 6**. They show that Al- Fustat which is the origin of Cairo is not included. Therefore a re-evaluation should be made and a new map of historical Cairo must be done including Al- Fustat in its boundary.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

- 1- There is a great misunderstanding of the historical reality concerning the origin of Cairo. It is the erroneous conception that regard Fatimid Cairo ( Al - Qahira Al- Fatimiya ) as the origin of the modern metropolis.
- 2- The erroneous conception that regards Fatimid Cairo as the origin of modern metropolis could be due to the fact that the name of Cairo ( Al- Qahira ) was given to the city by the Fatimids in AD 969.
- 3- In fact, ever since civilized man became established in the Nile Valley, there have been important settlement within and close to the boundaries of the city of Cairo. Memphis which lies 20 km south of the centre of Cairo was the capital of Egypt during the period ( 2720 BC to 2420 BC ).
- 4- The more recent history and origin of Cairo can be traced from the founding of Al- Fustat in AD 641.
- 5- Laws and decrees concerning preservation of monuments in Cairo issued by the ministry of Culture defined the boundary of Cairo with Al- Fustat outside this boundary.
- 6- It is a requisite that the concerned bodies should re-evaluate the boundary of historical Cairo with Al- Fustat included as the real origin of Cairo.

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Fig. 1 Memphis and Nile River in Ancient Time ( After Haswell, 1922 )

Fig. 2 The Site of Cairo at The Time of The Arab Conquest and The Founding of Al- Fustat

Fig. 3 Ravaisse's Boundaries of Al- Fustat, Al- Askar, Al- Qataie and Al- Qahira Based on Al- Maqrizi ( super - imposed by present time Cairo )

Fig. 4 The Site of Cairo at The Time of The Founding of Al- Qahira Showing The Populous Triple City of Misr ( Al- Fustat, Al- Askar, Al- Qataie ) - After Abu- Lughod, 1971

Fig. 5 Ayyubid Cairo Encircled by Salah El- Din Wall  
( super- imposed by present time Cairo )

Fig. 6 Geographic Limits of Historical Cairo as defined by Official Laws and Decrees For The Preservation of Monuments