

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

FATIMID HISTORY: AN OVERVIEW

The Fatimids came onto the scene in the Islamic world when both the political hegemony and the religious authority of the Abbasid caliphate were being challenged. Some of the most serious challenges to Abbasid religious authority came from various Shi'is, groups who insisted that 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib should have succeeded the Prophet as head of the *umma* (community of believers). These partisans (*shī'a*, hence the term *Shi'i*) of 'Alī eventually argued as well that the headship of the Islamic community should rest with the descendants of 'Alī and his wife Fāṭima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad; the partisans believed these descendants had inherited spiritual authority. The disputes between different groups of Shi'is often centered around genealogy, and the Isma'ilis asserted that the line of the imamate should be traced to Ismā'īl, the son and designated successor of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765). The Isma'ilis maintained that even though Ismā'īl had predeceased his father, the imamate remained in his line and was passed to his son Muḥammad. The founder of the Fatimid dynasty, 'Ubayd Allāh, thus claimed direct descent from Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl and, ultimately, from the Prophet Muḥammad through 'Alī and Fāṭima.

Although 'Ubayd Allāh's origins are obscure (and his lineage hotly contested by medieval polemicists), his history is known from the year 286/899, when he assumed leadership of the Isma'ili movement in Syria. At that time, the movement acknowledged Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl as the hidden imam and believed that he had not died but gone into concealment and would reappear as a messianic figure called "the rising" (*al-qā'im*) or "the guide" (*al-mahdī*). According to early Isma'ili doctrine, this messianic figure would abrogate the external religious law (*ẓāhir*) and reveal instead the esoteric and inner truths of true religion (*bāṭin*). Some considered 'Ubayd Allāh's claim to be the imam, and his assumption of the

messianic title *al-mahdī*, as fraudulent. These dissenters considered 'Ubayd Allāh to be a usurper and split off under another leader, Ḥamdān Qarmāṭ; they became known as the Qarmatians.

'Ubayd Allāh was then compelled to leave Syria, and he headed for North Africa, where an Isma'ili missionary, Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Shī'ī had already successfully proselytized the Kutāma Berbers of Ifriqiyya (modern-day Tunisia). With the support of the Kutāma, 'Ubayd Allāh al-Mahdī established the Fatimid state in North Africa in 296/909. He was succeeded by his son, who took the regnal title al-Qā'im, in 322/934. Al-Qā'im (r. 322–34/943–45) consolidated Fatimid power in North Africa by concluding an alliance with another Berber group, the Ṣanhāja. These were relatively quiet years, with the exception of a Berber rebellion led by the Kharijite insurgent Abū Yazīd; this was finally crushed by al-Manṣūr (r. 334–41/945–52), the third Fatimid caliph.

The accession of al-Mu'izz in 342/953 marked a turning point in the history of the Fatimid dynasty. After three previous attempts (twice by 'Ubayd Allāh, once by al-Qā'im), al-Mu'izz succeeded in conquering Egypt in 358/969. The relatively bloodless campaign was led by his general Jawhar, who founded a new capital city, Cairo. Several years later, al-Mu'izz moved his court from North Africa to Cairo, and Egypt remained the center of the Fatimid empire until the end of the dynasty.

Soon after the conquest, al-Mu'izz appointed Ya'qūb b. Killis, a Jewish convert to Islam, as his chief administrator. He introduced a series of far-reaching administrative and fiscal reforms that included the establishment of a centralized system of tax collection. Al-Mu'izz also carried out a successful program of propaganda in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, where local rulers recognized Fatimid rule until the eleventh century. However, he continued to face challenges from both the Qarmatians and the Buyids in Syria, and shortly before his death in 365/975, Syria fell to the Buyids.

The reign of his successor al-'Azīz (r. 365–86/975–96) was dominated by the ambition to control southern and central Syria, and in this period the Fatimid empire reached its greatest extent. In addition, Egypt itself flourished under al-'Azīz, who also introduced a series of military reforms. He fixed the rates of pay for his army and court personnel, and he brought Turkish slave troops into the army. These Turkish troops rose to prominence at the expense of the Berbers who had brought the Fatimids to power.

The Turks were often at odds with both the Berbers and new regiments of black slave troops, and factional strife continued to plague the Fatimid army.

Al-ʿAzīz was succeeded by al-Ḥākīm (r. 386–411/996–1020), perhaps the best known Fatimid caliph. His reign has been the object of much study, and modern scholars have puzzled over his often erratic behavior. In a state that had been marked by its tolerance of Jews, Christians, and Sunnis, al-Ḥākīm introduced numerous repressive measures against those groups. However, he often repealed those measures as suddenly as he announced them. His eccentricities were a source of encouragement to a small group who believed him to be an incarnation of divinity. This group, the Druze, believed that when he disappeared in 411/1020, he had gone into concealment and would return at a later time. It appears, however, that al-Ḥākīm was the victim of a murder planned by his own sister, Sitt al-Mulk. She acted as regent for his son al-Zāhir (r. 411–27/1020–35), whose reign was marked by famine and unrest internally and by a series of foreign relations failures, most notably with the Byzantines.

The exceptionally long reign of al-Mustaʿṣir (r. 427–87/1035–94) did not provide much relief from the empire's problems. During his rule, Egypt was plagued by a series of low Niles resulting in intermittent famine for nearly twenty years and compelling the caliph to appeal to the Byzantine emperor for grain. These years also witnessed the eruption of Turkish and Sudanese slave soldier rivalry into open warfare, forcing the caliph to sell the contents of his treasuries in order to placate the troops. By 465/1073, the situation had deteriorated so much that al-Mustaʿṣir asked for help from the governor of Acre, Badr al-Jamālī, who held the title *amīr al-juyūsh* (commander of the armies).

Badr, a freed slave of Armenian origin, arrived in Egypt in 466/1074 and restored order in a matter of months. His arrival inaugurated the long period of rule by military wazirs that characterized the second century of Fatimid rule. Badr assumed leadership of the civil bureaucracy, the military, and the propaganda mission. After Badr, Fatimid wazirs were almost exclusively military officers, and they were the real rulers of the state.

Badr died in 487/1094, only a few months before the caliph al-Mustaʿṣir, and was succeeded in the wazirate by his son al-Afḍal. Al-Afḍal installed the younger son of al-Mustaʿṣir as the caliph al-Mustaʿlī (r. 487–95/1094–1101), and the supporters of

the dispossessed elder son Nizār broke with the state. The Nizārīs never accepted the legitimacy of the Musta‘lian line, and they worked actively (but unsuccessfully) to overthrow the Fatimid government. The short reign of al-Musta‘lī was dominated by the Nizārī threat and by al-Afḍal’s relatively successful attempts to recapture lost territories. In 495/1101, al-Afḍal raised a five-year-old son of al-Musta‘lī to the throne. This caliph, al-Āmir (r. 495–524/1101–30), remained under the thumb of al-Afḍal until the latter’s death in 515/1121.

The reign of al-Āmir saw the restoration of some of the power of the caliph, and al-Āmir ruled directly after imprisoning his wazir al-Ma’mūn al-Baṭā’ihī in 519/1125. But al-Āmir’s rule was challenged constantly by the Nizārīs, as well as by marauding Berber tribes. In 516/1122, he issued a public proclamation that asserted the legitimacy of the Musta‘lian line, but in 524/1130 he was assassinated by the Nizārīs. At his death, al-Āmir left an infant son, al-Ṭayyib. A cousin of the late caliph, ‘Abd al-Majīd, was named as regent by factions of the army. However, the son of al-Afḍal, Abū ‘Alī Kutayfāt, overthrew the government, confiscated the palace treasuries, and imprisoned ‘Abd al-Majīd. He also deposed the Fatimid line in favor of the expected imam of the Twelver Shi‘is. Abū ‘Alī Kutayfāt remained in power for a little over a year and was murdered in 526/1131. At that time, ‘Abd al-Majīd was restored as regent; but the infant al-Ṭayyib had disappeared, and there was no apparent heir. ‘Abd al-Majīd thus proclaimed himself the imam with the title al-Ḥāfiẓ (r. 524–44/1130–49). His authority was contested both by the Nizārīs, who opposed the Musta‘lian line altogether, and by the Ṭayyibīs, who maintained that al-Ṭayyib was in concealment in the Yemen.

The last three Fatimid caliphs, al-Zāfir (r. 544–49/1149–54), al-Fā’iz (r. 549–55/1154–60), and al-‘Āḍid (r. 555–66/1160–71), came from the Ḥāfiẓī line. All were children, and the state was controlled by powerful wazirs. The last few years of Fatimid rule were essentially a contest for power between generals and wazirs. The last wazir of the Fatimid caliphs was Saladin, best known to modern readers as the heroic figure who successfully fought the Crusaders. But he also dealt the final blow to the Fatimid caliphate. In 566/1171, Saladin had the name of the Abbasid caliph read in the mosques of Cairo for the first time in over two hundred years. A few days later, the last Fatimid caliph, al-‘Āḍid died.

APPROACHING FATIMID RITUALS

This book is about Fatimid political culture in Egypt as it can be reconstructed from court rituals. Ritual stands at the center of this book. Although it is commonly said of Islam that it is an “orthopraxic” rather than an “orthodox” religion, few scholars have dedicated their energy to studies of Islamic ritual in the premodern period. To the extent that such studies have been undertaken, they have tended to focus on the prescriptions found in legal literature. The day-to-day ritual practices of Muslims have thus received little attention, and when they have been studied, it has ordinarily been from the point of view of “popular religion.” This state of affairs is, on some level, understandable. The sources are generally unyielding when it comes to the daily lives of ordinary men and women. We might expect, then, that the situation would be different with respect to the history of the caliphates, where there are many court histories that record the details of the daily lives of men in power. And yet it has not been so.

The modern historiography of Islamic dynasties has had surprisingly little to say about ritual of any kind and almost nothing to say about political ritual. This may be because our understanding of political legitimacy in Islamic dynasties has been focused on the formal claims in investitures and proclamations that can be recovered in written documents. Thus, for example, we may look at polemics over genealogical claims or dream prophecies that we understand to be implicitly political. Or, we might look at certain prerogatives like naming the ruler in the Friday sermon (*khutba*) and minting coins (*sikka*) that explicitly assert a ruler’s political claims. But we have not, by and large, looked at other ways in which a ruler’s or dynasty’s claims to authority might be articulated.

This book approaches ritual as a dynamic process through which claims to political and religious authority in Islamic societies may be articulated and in which complex negotiations of power may take place. Therefore, I am not looking at ritual in terms of its role as the vehicle for the fulfillment of the individual believer’s obligations to God. Religious rituals in a political setting do, of course, fulfill such obligations. My interest here, however, is to discuss the ways in which ritual at the court was embedded in changing social and political realities and how court rituals responded to those changes. I will thus be arguing throughout this

book that rituals have a multiplicity of meanings and functions that may conflict without being mutually exclusive and that change over time.

The study of political culture through ritual and ceremony is not new. Beginning with Marc Bloch and Ernst Kantorowicz, European historians recognized that ritual could articulate claims to royal authority, assert royal power, and express changing conceptions of the character of kingship.¹ As subsequent studies focused on the political functions and meanings of ritual symbols at court, historians began to question the meaning of religious symbols and the relationship between the sacred and social life.² Even more recently, historians have asked how ritual might express urban concerns.³

We may ask the same questions about Islamic dynasties, but we must do so in a very different context. European historians discuss ritual and ceremony in the context of a set of formal institutions and associations that provided stability and continuity in medieval and early modern European societies. Building blocks of the European sort, often described in terms of corporate identities, were generally not present in medieval Islamic societies. The continuity of social and political life in medieval Islamic societies, as Roy Mottahedeh has shown for the Buyid period, depended largely upon mutual ties of loyalty and obligation between individuals.⁴

How are we to understand court rituals in this context? First, we may look to ceremonies as a source of information about relationships of loyalty and obligation that are not discussed explicitly elsewhere. The tenth and eleventh centuries in the Islamic world were a time when men began to write systematically about the sources of political and religious authority. Al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), for example, wrote *al-Aḥkām al-Sultāniyya* (The Rules of Government) in response to a compelling set of political circumstances: the fragmentation of the Abbasid empire, the rise of the petty principalities, and the loss of the caliph's political and military power. His work is an attempt to create a systematic framework for the delegation of political power, one that would preserve the religious authority and prestige of the caliphate. However, al-Māwardī does not discuss explicitly the formal ties between individuals that Mottahedeh distills and extracts from the historical chronicles. The actual operation of government depended upon those relationships of loyalty that cannot be accounted for in a work like *al-Aḥkām al-Sultāniyya*.

The writing of political theory was not the primary way in which medieval Muslim bureaucrats and administrators dealt with the problems of political authority and power. Relationships of authority were elaborately articulated in ceremonies. Ceremonies worked within a complex system of references that included both the theoretical sources of a ruler's authority (whether caliph, sultan, or amir) and the particular network of loyalties that made it possible for him to exercise his authority. Symbolic expressions of authority in ceremonies could take into account what a theoretical work (often written after the fact as an apologia) could not: the fluidity of social and political boundaries and commitments. And ceremonies could do what systematic theoretical accounts could not: negotiate power relationships and reshape political configurations. Thus, while we can learn from *al-Aḥkām al-Sultāniyya* about the theoretical structure of Abbasid government in the Buyid and Seljuk periods, we will probably learn more from *Rusūm dār al-khilāfa* (Protocol of the Caliphal Court), written by his contemporary Hilāl al-Šābi' (d. 448/1056), about how the caliph actually exercised his authority and wielded the power left to him.

The Fatimids shared the same cultural assumptions as other medieval Islamic rulers about the workings of government and, in particular, the obligations of the ruler to his subjects. As Isma'īlis, however, the Fatimids challenged the hegemony of the Abbasid caliphate, and they therefore had a stake in appropriating its most visible signs of authority. Fatimid insignia of sovereignty and protocol look very much like Abbasid insignia and protocol. The protocol of both caliphates asserted their claims to political and religious leadership of the community of believers as well as established the relative ranks of men at court who stood beneath the caliph. These contingent hierarchies, and the symbols of rank and authority that expressed them, are the primary focus of chapter 2.

For the Abbasids and the Fatimids both, the multiplication of symbols of authority occurred in a political context in which the relationship of religious and political authority was becoming increasingly complex. Whereas earlier in the history of the Islamic empire, contests for power occurred among dynasties with competing claims to caliphal authority, now these contests took place between caliphs and military powers who could make no claims at all to religious leadership. This contest over authority and power was played out in the Abbasid lands with the Buyids, Ghaznavids, and Seljuks. For the Fatimids, as for the Abbasids, the struggle to

assert authority was directed not only against rival pretenders to the caliphate, but also against the military powers upon whom they relied and who relied, at least in theory, upon them for legitimacy. What emerged was a symbiosis in which the tensions inherent in this contest for power were never fully resolved. To be sure, many disputes were quite open. But they were as often lying just beneath the surface, operating as a sort of subtext to any ceremony and percolating to the surface as powerful men at both the Abbasid and the Fatimid courts attempted to appropriate ceremonial prerogatives and space for themselves.

If Fatimid and Abbasid insignia and ceremonial resemble each other so closely, then what made Fatimid ceremonial "Fatimid"? To begin with, it was the Fatimids who were doing it. This is by no means an obvious answer, for it tells us something about how generalized the symbols of authority were in the medieval Islamic world. Prerogatives, insignia, and protocol were appropriated by men who claimed political authority. The real question for us, then, is, how did the Fatimids invest these symbols with a meaning that was particularly their own? For the Isma'ili Fatimids, the world could be interpreted on many different levels. This is most often expressed in the tradition of allegorical interpretation of the Qur'an (*ta'wīl*) by the terms *zāhir* (external manifestation of phenomena) and *bāṭin* (esoteric meaning). As I will be discussing throughout this book, the Fatimids invested their ceremonies with multiple meanings that did not have to be, indeed were not intended to be, understood by all. We can see these multiple meanings at work most clearly in the celebration of the festival of Ghadīr Khumm. The Fatimids' formulation of a new relationship to their history and the distant 'Alid past in that ceremony is the central concern of chapter 6.

The most striking difference between Abbasid and Fatimid ceremonial, however, is the urban and processional character of Fatimid ceremonial. Abbasid caliphal ceremonies were static; they took place almost entirely in the palace. In fact, the two accounts we have of urban processions in the city of Baghdad are both processions of wazirs. The Abbasid caliphs clearly had a different conception of their capital city than did the Fatimids. From the beginning of the Fatimid period, Cairo was a setting for ceremonial. Although the Fatimids declared their aspirations to have the Friday sermon (*khutba*) read in their names in Baghdad, it is clear that Egypt was not merely a way station for them. This declara-

tion has been taken literally by modern historians, who argue that the Fatimids never intended for Cairo to be their permanent capital. There is compelling evidence, however, to support a view that the Fatimids always intended Cairo to be their permanent capital. The desire to exercise the caliphal prerogative of *khutba* in Baghdad should not be taken as a statement of intent to move their capital. It means, simply, that the Fatimids challenged openly the authority of the rival Abbasids. Every caliphal dynasty had established its own capital in a geographically distinct region of the Islamic world: the Umayyads built Damascus, the Abbasids built Baghdad. There is no reason to think that the Fatimids would have felt any particular need to establish themselves in Baghdad. It was far more consistent with the culture of their times, and far more expeditious, for them to build a new capital that would, by definition, embody their authority.

The primary focus of chapter 3, therefore, is how the Fatimids articulated their claims to political and religious authority in the physical setting of their capital Cairo. By studying the history of the celebration of Ramaḍān and the Two Festivals, I argue that the Fatimids consciously constructed Cairo as an Isma'ili ritual city in the early years of Egyptian rule. This ritual city was constructed not only architecturally and topographically, but also ceremonially. The landscape could be, and was, reinterpreted as the Fatimids responded to changing political, religious, and social concerns. Thus, I would argue that Fatimid "court" ceremonies were as deeply embedded in the social and religious life of Cairo and Fustat as they were in more narrowly conceived concerns for political legitimacy, and by the twelfth century they had developed into a complex urban language.

This "urbanness" was equally characteristic of the ceremonies for the New Year and the inundation of the Nile. Chapter 4 discusses the history of the urban procession of the New Year in the twelfth century in terms of changes in the composition of the Fatimid army and the structure of Fatimid administration. Chapter 5 deals with the processions to cut the canal and perfume the Nilometer during the inundation of the Nile. In these processions, the Nile was incorporated into the urban landscape and commercial centers of Cairo and Fustat.

Fatimid ceremonies had other meanings, as well. They might communicate very particular pieces of information about individuals or groups in power. Or, as discussed in chapter 4, they could

involve complicated negotiations of power. Even when there were no apparent changes in the organization of a procession, for example, new political configurations could change the meaning of a ceremony dramatically. The historicity of Fatimid ceremonial is, therefore, an important underlying theme of this book.

Each of the three major Mamluk historians of the Fatimid period wrote about ceremonies in a different context. Al-Qalqa-shandī (d. 821/1418) embedded his descriptions of Fatimid ceremonies (based entirely on the late Fatimid-early Ayyubid historian Ibn al-Ṭuwayr) in his systematic discussion of the organization of the Fatimid state.⁵ Al-Maqrīzī (d. 845–46/1442), on the other hand, wrote about Fatimid ceremonial in his monumental topography,⁶ where people and events, institutions and ceremonies, were incidental to street plans and buildings. Although he authored a chronicle of the Fatimid dynasty,⁷ the long descriptions of ceremonies that he included in his topography are almost entirely missing from his history. Ibn Taghrī Birdī (d. 874–75/1470) reported these ceremonies in an abbreviated and rather unreliable account within the obituary of the caliph al-Mu‘izz, whom he mistakenly credited with establishing them.⁸

Thus, the most important texts upon which this study depends reflect the sensibilities of men who wrote nearly three centuries after the fall of the Fatimid dynasty, and the original context of the descriptions has been lost. We do not know how the Fatimid historians themselves might have structured their discussion of court ceremonies. The longest and most detailed descriptions are those of Ibn al-Ṭuwayr, but we do not know how he organized his history of the Fatimids, what place ceremonial occupied in it, or what he thought the appropriate context for its discussion. What we do know is something of the Mamluk context in which these descriptions found a readership. The Mamluks had an intense and abiding interest in the ceremonial of previous Egyptian dynasties that matched their preoccupation with the ceremonial of their own court. But the social and political structure of the Mamluk empire differed dramatically from that of the Fatimids, and their understanding of Fatimid ceremonial must also have been very different. Most of what we know about Fatimid ceremonial has come to us from Mamluk texts that decontextualize and depoliticize the ceremonies, as they do much of Fatimid history.

A modern historian who wishes to repoliticize these ceremonies is working at cross-purposes with the Mamluk sources.

For this book is about how deeply political these rituals and ceremonies were. In other words, it is about precisely those things that made Fatimid ceremonial “Fatimid.” Thus, it is an attempt to understand, through these rituals, something of how the Fatimids saw themselves in relation to other Islamic political powers, to the population they governed most directly in Cairo and Fustat, and to their own history; to discuss the character of the Fatimids’ capital city, Cairo, in terms of social and political changes that left their mark on the city; and finally, to understand the dynamic relationship between politics, ritual, and urban life that gave shape and meaning to Fatimid rule.