

Alberto Di Gennaro

JAM'I IBN TULUN

جامع ابن طولون

The Al-Qata'i's Oldest Surviving Monument
A Journey in the Shadow of the Minaret



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Alberto Di Gennaro, *Jam' i Ibn Tulun*
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via dei Casai, 6 – 38123 Trento
www.edizionidelfaro.it – info@edizionidelfaro.it

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Front cover: *The contemplative gaze of a believer*
Back cover: *The inscription of Badr al-Jamali*

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to my beloved daughter Giulia

PREFACE

The Ahmad Ibn Tulun Mosque is not just an architectural marvel; it is a living chronicle of Egypt's Islamic heritage, a symbol of cultural resilience, and a beacon of spiritual and artistic achievement. Built in the 9th century, this mosque is one of the oldest and most iconic Islamic monuments in Cairo, renowned for its unique spiral minaret, expansive courtyard, and intricate stucco decorations. It stands as a testament to the ingenuity of its builders and the rich cultural tapestry of the Tulunid era.

As someone who has dedicated over two decades to the study, preservation, and promotion of Egypt's cultural heritage, I have always been captivated by the Ahmad Ibn Tulun Mosque. Its grandeur lies not only in its physical structure but also in the stories it tells of a time when Cairo was emerging as a center of Islamic civilization, of the fusion of art and faith, and of the enduring legacy of a dynasty that left an indelible mark on Egypt's history. This mosque is more than a place of worship; it is a bridge connecting the past to the present, inviting us to reflect on the shared human experience across centuries.

This photo book is a celebration of that legacy. Through stunning visuals, it captures the mosque's architectural brilliance, its serene ambiance, and the intricate details that make it a masterpiece of Islamic art. Each photograph tells a story of the craftsmen who carved its arches, the worshippers who have prayed within its walls, and the generations who have marveled at its beauty. It is a tribute to the mosque's enduring significance and a reminder of the importance of preserving such treasures for future generations.

My work in heritage management particularly in Historic Cairo, during my tenure as General Manager for Heritage department in Cairo Governorate, has taught me that monuments like the Ahmad Ibn Tulun Mosque are not just relics of the past; they are living entities that continue to inspire, educate, and unite communities. They are a source of pride and identity, and their pres-

ervation is a responsibility we all share. This book, in its visual storytelling, contributes to that mission by fostering a deeper appreciation for this iconic site and the cultural heritage it represents.

I am honored to write this preface and to support my friend's endeavor in creating this remarkable photo book. It is my hope that these images will transport readers to the heart of Islamic Cairo, allowing them to experience the mosque's timeless beauty and to understand its profound significance in Egypt's cultural and historical narrative. May this book inspire a renewed commitment to preserving our shared heritage and to celebrating the stories that connect us all.

Riham Arram, Ph.D

GM for iCulture Consulting – Academic Lecturer
Certified UNESCO Expert

FOREWORD

My first encounter with Ibn Tulun Mosque in Cairo was in the year 2000 when I was invited by Dr. Gaballah Ali Gaballah, then Head of the Egyptian Supreme Council for Antiquities, to shoot Cairo's most important heritage sites.

I still remember the impact of its architecture on me: the Colonnade, the Spiral Minaret and the Ablution Structure, among others.

Few years later, in 2004, I was in charge of Qatar Museums as QP Lead Engineer and one of projects I was assigned to manage was the Museum of Islamic Art designed by IM Pei. And what a surprise to discover, then and as stated by the architect, that the same mosque-and more specifically its ablution structure- inspired him in the design of this magnificent Museum.

Today, twenty years later, the black and white images of this iconic Mosque, as taken and showcased in a book by Alberto Di Gennaro, will definitely not only shed an ancient light on this ancient and iconic monument but will act make us travel through time to capture the religious essentiality of this sacred place.

If one Alberto's aims is to capture heritage, traditions, people and places that are swiftly vanishing, he definitely achieved in this book something far more reaching: what I call the universal dimension of this religious monument.

Samir Nicolas Saddi
Architect, Founder of ARCADE
Arab Research Center for Architecture
and the Design of the Environment

INTRODUCTION

The Ibn Tulun Mosque in Cairo, nestled in the Islamic Quarter of Cairo, inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, is one of the most striking monuments in the Arab world, for its iconic spiral minaret and for having preserved its original structure over the centuries without having affected its original historical architecture.

The photo I chose for the cover of my photography book is one of those I am most proud of because it shows the wonder and spirituality of a believer in front of the beauty and history that this place emanates in all its most hidden corners. What I hope is that the same wonder and the same spirituality pervade all men, Muslims and non-Muslims, who come into visual and physical contact with the historical, cultural and architectural treasures of the Arab world. I chose the black and white for my photos because, my personal opinion, colors enhance the exteriority of what is witnessed through images, while black and white images better describe the essentiality of what the eyes see, privileging the spirituality and the pure beauty of a sacred and historical place like the Ahmad Ibn Tulun Mosque. I conceived this my photographic book on the Ibn Tulun Mosque as a photographic journey and a narration, by my photographs, on the oldest surviving monument of the Tulunid dynasty in Cairo; the Mosque of Ahmad Ibn Tulun is the oldest in the city surviving in its original form, an architectural masterpiece in terms of dignity and monumental simplicity, well preserved and, apart from the 13th century restoration works carried out by Sultan Lajin, retaining the integrity and coherence of its original design.

My visit to the Ahmad Ibn Tulun Mosque went far beyond appreciating its architectural beauty. It was an experience that opened my eyes to the peaceful nature of Islam. The prayer niches, the mihrab, and the calligraphy adorning the mosque, all serve as reminders of the profound spirituality that Islamic architecture seeks to reflect. Standing in the Ibn Tulun Mosque, you

can't help but be struck by the harmony between tradition and innovation. From the spiral minaret to the sycamore wood ceiling, every element of the mosque tells a story of Islamic architecture's dedication to beauty, functionality, and spirituality. I consider the mosque not just a relic of the past, it's a living, breathing example of how architecture can inspire, endure, and transcend time. My photographic book figuratively, wish to take the reader by the hand and lead him to visit one of the most peaceful and inspiring serenity sacred places in Cairo by showing him the architectural elements and the evidences of its history through the inscriptions present under the various shapes, such as the dedicatory inscription of Ibn Tulun Mosque fixed up on a pier to the right of the Mihrab, the plaque with the inscription of Badr al-Jamali placed just above the main entrance of the mosque, the flat mihrabs, as along the continuous wooden Kufic inscription of verses from the Qur'an just under the ceiling.

About The Organization Of This Book

I chose not to provide captions to the photographs, preferring to let the images speak for themselves. Additional information about the context of the photographs has been provided in "Notes on the Photographs" in a dedicated section of the book. Information regarding the architectural details of the Mosque of Ibn Tulun can be found in the "Historical Bibliographical Appendix".

A JOURNEY IN THE SHADOW OF THE MINARET

رحلة في ظل المنذنة

Aḥmad Ibn Ṭulun was born September 835 in Baghdad and died on March 884 in Egypt; he was the founder of the Ṭulunid dynasty in Egypt and the founder of the city of Al-Qata'i. His father, Tulun, a Turk from Bukhara was captured in 815/6 and sent as a tribute to the Caliph al-Ma'mu. As a child, Ahmad was enslaved and placed in the private service of the Abbasid Caliph in the new capital, Samarra; the mosque, that was built between 876 and 877, was named after him and was inspired by Samarran architecture because Ahmad Ibn Tulun used Samarra as a model in the construction of the city and mosques in Egypt. The mosque was called Al-Fouqany, meaning "upper", because it was built on a hill known as Mount Yashkar; this was intended to separate it from the Amr bin Al-As Mosque, which was sometimes called Al-Sufliyya, meaning "lower"; the architect in charge of this imperial mosque was Saeed bin Kateb Al-Farghani, a famous and talented Egyptian Coptic who supervised the construction. The mosque was built from a treasure that Ahmed Ibn Tulun claimed to have found while hunting. He built the new capital, Al-Qata'i, in the center of Fustat and then Cairo, with an enriched treasury, instead of paying tribute to Baghdad. From 876 to 879 he built the mosque, which was named after him. It is the oldest existing mosque in Cairo. Ibn Duqmaq says that when the mosque was completed, people refused to go to pray in the place, claiming that it had been built with money they did not know where it came from, so one Friday Ibn Tulun went up to the pulpit and assured them that he had built the mosque using a treasure he had found on the mountain. This reassured the people and on Friday they came in large numbers. It is very likely that Ibn Tulun had sufficient funds, since in the year 259 AH (873 AD) he refused to send tribute to the Caliph in Baghdad and that he invented the story of the treasure to hide the truth. This is one of the reasons why, in 905, the city of al-Qata'i was razed to the ground by

the Abbasids when they reconquered Egypt, for revenge to the many offenses suffered by the founder of the Tulunid dynasty, leaving standing only the mosque.

Samarra was always in the mind and the heart of Ahmad Ibn Tulun; medieval Islamic writers believe that the name of the city of Samarra comes from the Arabic “ Sarre men ra’a’,” which translates to “joy for all who see.” Later, Armenian soldiers changed it to “Samarra,” meaning “ a sadness for all who see”. The use of bricks in the public mosque was the same than in the one in Samarra, and, although highly specialized stonework had developed in Egypt since the time of the Pharaohs, backed solid bricks were used, according to the Mesopotamian tradition. Ibn Duqmaq, the medieval Egyptian historian and biographer from the Mamluk era, wrote in its “Kitab al-intisar li-wasitat ‘aqd al-amsar” book “Ahmad Ibn Tulun started to build his mosque wishing to build a structure that if Misr was burned down it would survive, and if it were inundated it would survive”.

The iconic minaret of the mosque is reminiscent of the Malwiya minaret of the Great Mosque of Samarra, recalling the zigurrat of Mesopotamian architecture; it was built by the Caliph Jaafar al-Mutawakkil between 848 and 851. Comparing some elements of the two minarets, the spiraling shape minaret of the Great Mosque of Samarra, made of sandstone, is 52 m. high and 33 m wide, is located quite isolated from the mosque but located on the main axis. It has a constant inclination and adequate separation distance between ascending curves for the convenience of the climbing visitors. At the top of the tower there is a round vestibule ornamented with eight pointed- arches niches. The high minaret was built to use it for the adhan, it was visible from a considerable distance and designed as a strong testimonial the occurrence of the Islam in Mesopotamian.

The building of the mosque encountered several reasons for controversy and mistrust among the faithful, pressing Ahmad Ibn Tulun to provide explanations to the faithful several times. After the request for explanations on the origin of the funds for the building of the mosque, about the piers instead of the columns and the position of the qibla were other elements of discussion and explanation between the Caliph and the faithful.

Al-Qalqashandi, a medieval Egyptian encyclopedist, states that piers were used instead of columns because columns from Christian churches were considered impure. The tall, elegant, pointed arches around the central courtyard supported by piers were such an innovation in Egypt that, according to tradition, people initially refused to pray in the mosque because of the lack of the familiar columns. Al-Maqrizi narrates: “When Ibn Tulun built the mosque, they estimated the need for three hundred columns and told him that he would not find them unless he sent them to the churches in the countryside and desert, from where they could be transported. He denounced this and did not use this means.” Ibn Tulun said to those who criticized, among other things, the lack of columns: “As for the columns, I have done the work with legitimate money, that is, with the treasure that I have found, and I will not mix it with anything else: columns can only be obtained from chapels and churches, and I want to cleanse the mosque of that.” Other stories were told about the mosque to explain its unusual features: for example, Ibn Duqmaq says that people wanted to know why the qibla did not follow the direction of the neighboring mosques; Ibn Tulun explained that his engineers differed in the direction until the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) appeared to him in a dream and ordered him to place the qibla in the place where Ibn Tulun had built it. The Prophet (PBUH) also drew an image of the mihrab on the floor of the mosque to trace it; Ibn Tulun went directly to the place where the Prophet (PBUH) was and found the drawing still on the ground. What these stories clearly show is the lack of familiarity of the inhabitants of the city with the enormous caliphate city of Samarra with its two great mosques, the largest in the world. Many elements of Ibn Tulun, even the confusion of the qibla, are imitated in the mosques of Samarra. Some distinctive architectural elements of the two mosques, the Great Mosque of Samarra and the Ibn Tulun Mosque, have influenced the development of some features of Western European architecture, in particular the use of the pointed arches, the pier, the buttressed wall battlements, essential elements of the Gothic architecture. Even if the form and the architectural elements of the mosques in Islam have changed across the time, the main components as the mihrab, the minbar, the prayer area, the ablution area or fountain has been maintained.

nades so long blocked up and disfigured. The Foundation Stone is considered one of the oldest inscriptions known in Egypt containing, among the others, the Ayat Al Kursi (Surah al-Baqarah 2: 255) from the Holy Qur'an. Ayat Al Kursi is considered one of the most significant verses in the Quran, emphasizing Allah's attributes and supreme authority. In Islam, it is often recited for protection, spiritual strength, and as a means of drawing closer to Allah based on the Quranic text and various Hadith.

The Foundation Stone is composed for more than two-thirds of Qur'anic quotations whose themes can be grouped as follows: the first distinguish the passages that proclaim the omnipotence of God, the truth of Islam preached by Muhammad as well as the superiority of Muslims over non-believers. The second theme, which recurs several times, is that of the uses of the mosque and the evocation of the name of God which are relative to pious practices less linked to the mosque, such as almsgiving; the inscription adds to these activities the recitation of the Qur'an. The third great theme is the Law of God: what God has decreed, what Muslims respect, and, above all, what God will apply during the Last Judgement. The very foundation of the mosque by Ibn Tulun is declared according to God's will to guarantee the Amir the desired salvation after death.

The Foundation Stone

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Merciful,
the King, the Evident Truth (al-ḥaqq al-mubin).

God! There is no god but Him: the Living, the Self-Subsisting! Neither drowsiness nor sleep have any hold on Him! Everything in the heavens and on the earth belongs to Him! Who will intercede with Him (allaḍi safa'a 'inda-hu), except by His leave? He knows what is before men and what is behind them, while they embrace only, through His knowledge, what He wills. His throne extends over the heavens and the earth: their continued existence is not a burden to Him. He is the Most High, the Inaccessible! (Surah al-Baqarah 2: 255) Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Prophet of God. His companions are violent towards the wicked, good and compassionate towards one another. You

see them, bowed, prostrate, seeking the grace of God and His satisfaction. We recognize them because we see on their foreheads the traces of their prostrations. This is the parable concerning them in the Torah and the parable concerning them in the Gospel: They are like the grain that puts forth its shoot, then becomes strong, grows, rises on its stalk. The sower is filled with admiration and the wicked are angry. To those among them who believe and do good deeds, God has promised unlimited forgiveness and reward. (Surah Al-Fath XLVIII:29) You form the best community raised up for men: you command what is right, you forbid what is blameworthy (ta'murun bi-l-ma'ruf wa-tanhuna 'an al-munkar), you believe in God. If the People of the Book believed, it would be better for them. (Surah Al-Imran III:110) Only he who believes in God and the Last Day (al-yawm al-aḥir) will frequent the mosques of God; he who performs the prayer; he who gives alms; he who fears God alone – perhaps these will be among the rightly guided (al-muhtadīn). (Surah At-Tawba IX:18)

The Emir Abu l-'Abbas Aḥmad b. Ṭulun, the mawla of the Commander of the Faithful – may God grant him long strength, consideration and full prosperity in the Hereafter as well as here below – ordered that this blessed and fortunate mosque be erected, from the purest and best revenues that God has assigned to him, for the community of Muslims, in order to satisfy the good pleasure of God, to gain paradise (al-dar al-aḥira), he (i.e. the Amir) who is attached to everything that can magnify religion and unite the believers, who desires that temples be erected to God, that His precepts (farḍ) be fulfilled, that His Book be recited aloud and that His name cease to be invoked.

For God, the Most Holy and Most High, says: “In the temples which God has permitted to be erected, where His name is invoked, where His praises are celebrated at dawn and at dusk. No trade or barter diverts them from the remembrance of God, from prayer and from almsgiving. They fear a Day when their hearts and minds will be turned upside down and God will reward them for the best of their deeds and increase His grace towards them – God provides, without counting, the needs of whom He desires”(Surah An-Nur XXIV:36-38)

In the month of Ramadan in the year 265. Glory be to your Lord! The Lord Almighty, far from what they imagine! Peace be to the prophets! Praise be to

God, the Lord of the worlds! Oh God, Your prayer be upon Muhammad and the family of Muhammad (peace be upon him)! May You bless Muhammad and his family. (peace be upon him) the best of the prayers, graces and blessings that You bestowed upon Abraham and the family of Abraham! You are worthy of praise and glory!

Ayat Al-Kursi

اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْحَيُّ الْقَيُّومُ ۚ لَا تَأْخُذُهُ سِنَّةٌ وَلَا نَوْمٌ ۚ لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۚ مَنْ ذَا الَّذِي يَشْفَعُ عِنْدَهُ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِهِ ۚ يَعْلَمُ مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمَا خَلْفَهُمْ ۚ وَلَا يُحِيطُونَ بِشَيْءٍ مِّنْ عِلْمِهِ إِلَّا بِمَا شَاءَ ۚ وَسِعَ كُرْسِيُّهُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ ۚ وَلَا يَئُودُهُ حِفْظُهُمَا ۚ وَهُوَ الْعَلِيُّ الْعَظِيمُ

Allah! There is no god 'worthy of worship' except Him, the Ever-Living, All-Sustaining. Neither drowsiness nor sleep overtakes Him. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth. Who could possibly intercede with Him without His permission? He 'fully' knows what is ahead of them and what is behind them, but no one can grasp any of His knowledge except what He wills 'to reveal'. His Seat encompasses the heavens and the earth, and the preservation of both does not tire Him. For He is the Most High, the Greatest. Surah al-Baqarah 2: 255

“When you go to your bed, recite Ayat-al-Kursi, for then there will be a guard from Allah who will protect you all night long, and Satan will not be able to come near you till dawn.” (When the Prophet (peace be upon him) heard the story) he said (to me), “He (who came to you at night) told you the truth although he is a liar; and it was Satan” (Sahih al-Bukhari).

Abu Umamah Al-Bahili (may Allah be pleased with him) reported: The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “The one who recites it after each of the obligatory prayers, then death will be the only thing preventing him from entering Paradise” (Ibn Sunni, Ibn Hibban).

“Ayat al-Kursi is equal to a quarter of the Qur'an. Whomsoever recites Ayat al-kursi in the night before sleeping, Allah The Highest will protect him, his house & the neighboring house” (Tafsir Al-Mazhari).

Mosque of Ibn Tulun, stands at a height of about 5 m; it is the oldest surviving inscription of his patronage.

The characters, thought to be large enough to be discernible to the naked eye, are just barely visible. Therefore, they cannot have as significant an impact as the letters and words in the large monumental inscriptions of the Bab al-Nasr and Bab al-Futuh gates, built by order of Badr al-Jamali.

The text of the inscription begins with the usual invocation to God (basmala): *بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم*: “In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate”. At first glance, this invocation seems banal, since practically all Arabic texts of Muslim origin begin in this way; however, it is worth remembering that this text, engraved above the gate of the mosque of Ibn Tulun, is the first inscription in the file concerning Badr al-Jamali: the inscriptions of this corpus, written from the year 1087 CE, are not limited to this usual formula, but differ as follows:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَحْدَهُ لَا شَرِيكَ لَهُ مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ عَلِيٌّ وَلِيُّ اللَّهِ
صَلَوَاتُ اللَّهِ عَلَيْهِمَا وَعَلَىٰ الْأَئِمَّةِ مِنْ ذُرِّيَّتِهِمَا أَجْمَعِينَ

“In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. There is no god but God alone, without companions. Muhammad is the Messenger of God. Ali is the friend of God. May the prayers of God be upon them and upon the Imams from their descendants, all together.”

For the first time in an epigraphic text concerning Badr al-Jamali, we note the combination of the following titles: al-sayyid al-agall “the most noble lord”; amir al-guyush “commander of the armies”; sayf al-Islam “sword of Islam”; nasir al-imam “defender of the imam”. Later inscriptions in the Badr al-Jamali file will contain other honorific titles, which correspond to other functions that the vizier would have obtained during his reign. In this sense, the text inscribed above the entrance door of the mosque of Ibn Tulun suggests a presence, on the site itself, of anti-Fatimid elements during the troubled period preceding the rise to power of Badr al-Jamali; it seems to be the condemnation of these adversaries, in the meantime marginalized and expelled from

mosques such as that of Ibn Tulun, thanks to the Fatimid reconquest of Badr al-Jamali, that is at the basis of the Qur'anic citation in the inscription on the the Foundation Stone:

سم لله الرحمن الرحيم انما يعمر مساجد لله من امن باليوم الاخر واقام الصلاه واتا
الزكاه ولم يخش الا الله فعسى اولئك ان يكونوا من المهتدين

“In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. Mosques will be maintained for God only by those who believe in the Last Day, perform the prayer, pay zakat and fear none but God. They are the ones who are expected to be of the truly guided” (Surah At-Tawba IX:18).