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Pyramids in the Medieval Islamic Landscape: Perceptions and Narratives

MARTYN SMITH

Abstract

Contrary to the expectations of contemporary visitors who perceive Cairo through the lens of the 19th century divisions of the city into modern, medieval, and Pharaonic sites, in the medieval period (9th–15th centuries A.D.) the pyramids were an integrated part of the Islamic landscape. This paper examines the strategies by which the pyramids were incorporated into that landscape. The physical layout of the city was one contributor to this integration. The 13th century writer al-Idrisi describes in great detail the road from Bab Zuwayla to the pyramids, demonstrating that the pyramids were not part of any other cultural zone, but were a unified part of the landscape. Two popular stories about the pyramids (the visit of al-Ma'mun to the pyramids and the construction of the pyramids by the antediluvian king Surid) point to the conceptual integration of the pyramids within the medieval frame of reference. Previous interest in these stories has tended to focus on discovering their historical origins, but the contention here is that they are most interesting for the cultural work they do in establishing a conceptual frame for the medieval understanding of the pyramids.

The pyramids were part of the medieval Islamic landscape. People thought about them, told stories about them, and visited them. A humorous story illustrating their importance is found in a medieval book with a New Age sounding title: *Lights Lofty of Form in Revealing the Secrets of the Pyramids*.[1] The historian Abū Ja'far al-Idrīsī (1173–1251) recounts the story told by a young man concerning his return to the Maghreb after completing the ḥajj and the questioning he endured from his teacher:

> I attended a sitting of the Sheikh al-Fāḍil al-Ḥakīm, seeking benefit and education from him. He met me with welcome and honor and awe. Then he said: "Tell me about the pyramids of Egypt and what you saw of them! . . . " I said to him: "Teacher, I don't have any sort of observation about them which I could relate or convey to you as a true tradition." So he responded: "Lowly in his zeal for seeking knowledge and wisdom is he who does not turn from his determination [for the ḥajj] to see the likes of the pyramids when he is staying nearby![2]

The young man hurried back to Egypt to visit the pyramids and thereby satisfy his teacher.

An anecdote like this may come as a surprise for guidebook reading visitors to Egypt. Scan a popular guidebook to Egypt—such as *Lonely Planet* or *Blue Guide*—and one finds plenty of details about the

[1] *Anwār 'ulwiyy al-ajrām fī al-kashf 'an asrār al-ahrām*, Ulrich Haarmann, ed. (Beirut, 1991). Haarmann also wrote a short essay that functions as an introduction to this text: "In Quest of the Spectacular: Noble and Learned Visitors to the Pyramids around 1200 A.D.," in Wael B. Hallaq and Donald P. Little, eds., *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams* (Leiden, 1991), 57–67.

[2] *Anwār*, 14–15.

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pyramids at Giza, but little or nothing about the pyramids during later stages of their history.[3] An unspoken theory of originalism dominates the literature of tourism. That is to say, the goal is to allow visitors to imagine the first cultural context in which the pyramids were experienced. But monuments that stand their ground over the course of centuries accumulate layers of meaning and interpretation in much the same way as texts like the *Iliad* or the Bible.[4]

One reason this approach comes so naturally to tourists is that Cairo has been perceptually carved up into separate sections—often visited on alternate days by tourists traveling in package tours. Irene Bierman has described some of the nuts and bolts of this process, tracing this division of Cairo back to key events to the 19th century. It was at this time that sections of Cairo were labeled "medieval" or "modern." In addition the "Pharaonic" space of ancient Egypt was designated as extra-urban.[5] An implication of this historical account is that prior to the 19th century Cairo would have been perceived in a more unified fashion. Residents and visitors alike would not have read the city in the perceptual categories that came to dominate the city in the 19th century and after.

The pyramids make an exceptional test case for understanding how sections of Cairo that are now perceived as separate were once interconnected. Despite the obvious antiquity of the pyramids and their descent from a non-Islamic civilization, medieval Egyptians found creative ways to weave these structures into the experience of their city. In other words, the pyramids—perhaps the most dramatic monuments to survive from the ancient world—were a part of the Islamic cultural landscape. This process involved both a physical integration of the pyramids within the layout of the city and a then more subtle integration of them within an economy of historical stories.

The Road to the Pyramids

In addition to the story about the pilgrim from the Maghreb who skipped the pyramids, al-Idrīsī provides a wealth of historical detail about the place of the pyramids in Egyptian society. His central strategy is to sketch the personages of sacred history who encountered the pyramids. This list begins with the prophets (the patriarchs would have had to pass the pyramids on the way to the ancient capital of Memphis),[6] continues with the companions of the prophet Muḥammad (the early Muslim forces on their way to Upper Egypt camped beneath the pyramids),[7] and moves on to the important rulers in Islamic history who visited the pyramids (the Caliph al-Ma'mūn).[8] In a similar vein, al-Idrīsī mentions a report from a person who had observed writing on the pyramids:

> I found there among the many scripts that I regarded a beautiful example of the Kufic script carved into the stone. I studied it and read: so-and-so declares God to be One. It occurred to me as reason-

[3] See, for example, the *Blue Guide Egypt* (New York, 1988), 427–34, which provides a detailed account of what a visitor is likely to see at Giza, but makes only one brief mention of the Arab period (that the modern entrance to the Great Pyramid of Khufu was opened in the 9th century by al-Ma'mūn).

[4] With respect to accumulated layers of interpretation for the *Iliad*, note the series of essays contained in Robert Lamberton and John J. Keaney, eds., *Homer's Ancient Readers*, (Princeton, 1992) as well as Robert Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian* (Berkeley, 1986). These works make clear that the *Iliad* cannot be studied as a work with a single fixed context, but one that has continually changed as it is received and re-read by later generations. It is an approach that could be mimicked when it comes to the study of ancient monuments.

[5] Irene Bierman, "Disciplining the Eye: Perceiving Medieval Cairo," in Nezar Alsayyad, Irene A. Bierman, and Nasser Rabbat, eds., *Making Cairo Medieval* (New York, 2005), 10.

[6] *Anwār*, 21.

[7] *Anwār*, 23.

[8] *Anwār*, 34.

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> able, though without proof, that someone who witnessed the conquest of the companions [of Muḥammad] carved these words upon it when they passed through Giza and contemplated the pyramids.[9]

The point of these reports is to construct the pyramids as physical witnesses to sacred history. Despite any questions that might exist concerning the pagan beliefs of their builder, one can be assured that these monuments gave shade and comfort to prophets and caliphs. If one looks carefully at the strange scripts carved onto their surface, one might even find a line from an early companion of the prophet.

Following this account of the important visitors to the pyramids, al-Idrīsī embarks on a complementary project of setting down an elaborate description of the physical road a person would take in order to visit the pyramids. He begins at Bāb Zuwayla, the southern gate to the walled city of Cairo. We proceed along the main road and quickly encounter some of the most important Islamic sites in Cairo:

> Then comes the mosque of Ibn Tulun, which will be on the person's right. He turns to his left so that he can visit the three shrines, which are the shrines of Muhammad the lesser, Sukayna, and Ruqqaya. Then he arrives at the shrine of Sayyida Nafisa (daughter of Hasan, son of Zayd, son of Hasan) in a neighborhood known anciently in the books of *Khitat* as Darb al-Siba', where she had her house.[10]

The road continues and more mosques and shrines are introduced along the way. The traveler reaches Fusṭaṭ, crosses over to Giza, and then continues ahead, crossing numerous bridges, until the pyramids are reached. The reader could be excused for feeling a bit confused about how these pages fit into a book on the pyramids. The point, though, is to understand how this elaborate portrayal strategically positions the pyramids within the Islamic landscape. The pyramids are not in any way foreign structures, but directly connected to the sacred sites of the city. The motif of a road stretching from Bāb Zuwayla to the pyramids allows al-Idrīsī to verbally stitch the city and its constituent parts into a seamless whole.

It is no accident that this most creative of works on the pyramids was written in the first half of the 13th century. The end of the 12th century brought a series of challenges to the physical wholeness of the pyramids. It is sometimes asserted that during the reign of Salāḥ al-Dīn (1138–1193) stones from the two great pyramids were used for the walls of Cairo, and further: "The plunder of casing stone from the Great Pyramid continued during succeeding generations until the outer mantle was finally stripped bare."[11] Our sources, however, give a more limited description of the stone scavenging of Salāḥ al-Dīn and the Emir Qarāqūsh:

> At Giza a large number [of pyramids], all of them small, were destroyed in the time of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Yusaf ibn Ayyūb at the hands of Qarāqūsh, one of the amirs . . . [12]

Emphatic here is the specification that the *small* pyramids at Giza were destroyed in the time of Salāḥ al-Dīn. This will refer to the diminutive pyramids built for queens, whose ruined state is evident today. These small pyramids—and likely a portion of the cemeteries of low mastabas that lay nearby—were destroyed for their stone at this time.

[9] *Anwār*, 65–66.
[10] *Anwār*, 52–53.
[11] Mark Lehner, *The Complete Pyramids* (London, 1997), 41.
[12] 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī, *The Eastern Key* [*kitāb al-ifādah wa al-'itibār*] trans. Kamal Hafuth Zand, John A. Videan, and Ivy E. Videan (London, 1964), 109.

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There is no mention that any of the large pyramids were stripped. It may seem strange, given the need for stones,[13] for Salāḥ al-Dīn to have spared the large pyramids, but an explanation is provided by the account of al-Idrīsī, writing perhaps a generation after the events took place:

> Salāḥ al-Dīn was on the point of supporting the hand of his officers to destroy them until someone said to him: "That task is difficult and the cost is great. What is procured of its stone is not useful in what is erected and raised with it in the way of constructions. The stone from the pyramids does not arrive on the ground but has been broken by the impact on its sides and shattered. So Salāḥ al-Dīn refrained from destroying the large pyramids.[14]

At the time of Salāḥ al-Dīn the damage was confined to the smaller structures in the area of the pyramids, but it was a close call. A concerted effort was made to destroy the small pyramid in 1196/97 during the reign of ʻUthmān, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's son and successor. The effort proved expensive and was largely a failure, but it succeeded in dismantling the outer casing of the pyramid, which in its lower half consisted of the distinctive red granite quarried in Aswan.[15] Even today the visitor to the pyramids comes across an exposed litter of large granite blocks, remnants of this attempt to dismantle the pyramid.

This context explains the labor of al-Idrīsī in composing *Lights Lofty of Form in Revealing the Secrets of the Pyramids*. The idea that the imposing pyramids standing a little ways outside Cairo could be plundered for stone seems to have stirred him to write a careful defense of them. It is primarily a physical defense, arguing that these ancient monuments stood witness to key events in sacred history and further they are tied to Cairo on account of their location at the end of the same road along which can be found many of Cairo's most important structures. There is no way of separating the pyramids from Islamic Cairo; they are *part* of Islamic Cairo.

Caliphs and Ancient Monuments

Ancient ruins in a landscape provide a challenge to systems of thought. The 10th century Arab historian al-Masʻūdī provides an example of the implicit challenge of an ancient ruin, telling the following story about the Abbasid Caliph Ḥarūn al-Rashīd (r. 786–809):

> It is related that al-Rashīd, after the arrest of the Barmakids, sent to Yahya ibn Khālid ibn Barmak, who was under arrest, seeking counsel from him about tearing down the Great Iwān [of the ancient Persians]. Yahya sent back to him: "Don't do it!" al-Rashīd said to those present: "In his soul he is Zoroastrian, and he has sympathy for that religion. His prohibition stems from [his concern about] the tearing down of its remains." So al-Rashīd began to tear down the Great Iwān. Then he saw that great wealth—how much is not precisely known—would be required of him in tearing it down. So he ceased from tearing it down and wrote to Yahya letting him know his decision. Yahya answered him that he should spend whatever wealth was required to tear it down, and that he was desirous of that. Al-Rashīd was astonished at the inconsistency between his talk on these two occasions, and he sent to him asking about that. Yahya said: "Yes, as for what I counseled at the beginning, I had a mind for the permanence of fame for the nation of Islam and the distance of its fame, and that anyone who wandered to times past and came across other nations in time might see the likes of this great building

[13] In his travel through Upper Egypt during the reign of Salāḥ al-Dīn, the traveler Ibn Jubayr notes that ships traveling downstream were required to carry one stone to Cairo (*The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, trans. R. J. C. Broadhurst [London 1952], 51).

[14] *Anwār*, 39.

[15] *The Eastern Key*, 123.

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> and say: 'The nation that conquered the nation that built this, that stripped away its remnants, and that took over its kingship, certainly that nation is great and powerful and impervious.' But as for my second answer, you had reported that you had begun tearing it down, and then had lacked strength. So I had a mind to preclude lack of strength from the nation of Islam. So that the one I described who wandered to times past might not say: 'This nation is unable to tear down what the Persians built.' "[16]

One can read this encounter of a Caliph with this ancient Persian ruin (built in the 3rd century A.D. under the Sassanids) as an example of the anxiety of influence. The anxiety in this case was over perceptions of power. The great Islamic Caliph Ḥarūn al-Rashīd hardly wanted his own accomplishments to be judged inferior to those of a pre-Islamic empire, and the interest of this story therefore turns on the proper course of action with respect to an awe inspiring ruin.

In the case of the pyramids a similar anxiety was felt. Instead of Ḥarūn al-Rashīd, his son al-Ma'mūn (r. 813–833) was cast as the lead figure around whom stories accumulated. The steady growth and elaboration of these stories over time indicates that the anxiety was not simply the matter of a single ruler measuring himself against the past, but al-Ma'mūn was to some degree a stand-in for broader cultural anxiety concerning the standing of Islam with respect to the past. The stories that were told and re-told had the power to assuage that anxiety by making sense of the pyramids within the narrative of Islamic history.[17]

Many of the surviving references to the pyramids from classical Arabic literature were compiled by the Egyptian historian al-Maqrīzī (1364–1442)[18] in his compendium on Egypt known as the *Khiṭaṭ*.[19] Al-Maqrīzī has no interest in settling all these contradictory accounts into a single narrative, but sets down what he finds in the tradition of Arabic literature. His compilation is a convenient source for following out the growth and transformations of stories about the pyramids. The story of al-Ma'mūn is of particular interest since it receives many re-tellings, and it is instructive to follow the various incarnations of the story through several centuries.

The earliest account of the pyramids collected in the *Khiṭaṭ* was that of the geographer Ibn Khuradadhbeh (820–912), in whose account we find adumbrations of the story that would become attached to al-Ma'mūn:

> Written upon [the two pyramids] in Himyarite is all magic and every wonder of medicine. Written upon them is also: "I built these. Whoever claims power in his reign, let him destroy them—although to destroy is easier than to build, so take heed! Certainly the taxes of the world could not accomplish their destruction!"[20]

[16] Al-Mas'ūdī, *murūj al-dhahab wa ma'ādin al-jawhar* (Beirut, 2004), 1:269.

[17] This social process can be thought of as analogous to the kind of misprision of the past described by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York, 1973). Bloom proposes that English poets must misread their poetic forbears so as to distinguish themselves and their own poetic project. Bloom writes: "The *clinamen* or swerve . . . is necessarily the central working concept of the theory of Poetic Influence, for what divides each poet from his Poetic Father (and so saves, by division) is an instance of creative revisionism . . . The poet so stations his precursor, so swerves his context, that the visionary objects, with their higher intensity, fade into the continuum" (42). Cultures and societies likewise face anxieties about their past, and the necessity of something like a swerve, or misreading, must often be invoked for them to establish their own uniquely important historical narrative.

[18] On the life of al-Maqrīzī see the article in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* 2nd ed. and a more recent article by Nasser Rabbat, "Who Was al-Maqrīzī? A Biographical Sketch," *Mamluk Studies Review* 7.2 (2003), 1–19.

[19] *Al-mawā'iẓ wa al-i'tibār fī dhikr al-khitat wa al-āthār.* The standard edition of this work has been the edition published in 1854 (Būlāq), and reprinted many times. The page references in this essay refer to this edition. Erich Graefe's *Das Pyramidenkapitel in al-Makrizi's 'Hitat'* (Leipzig, 1911) provides a critical edition of the Arabic text, correcting the standard Būlāq edition through a comparison with several Arabic manuscripts.

[20] *Khiṭaṭ* 1:114.

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This is a remarkable note, containing as it does in an early form two of the most long-lasting stories concerning the pyramids: the theory that their original construction served as a means to conserve scientific knowledge and the presence of an inscribed challenge to future kings.

The account by the 10th century A.D. Arabic historian al-Mas'ūdī (893–956) should be of particular interest to us since he was living in Egypt as he completed the work for which he is mostly remembered, *The Fields of Gold* (*murūj al-dhahab*).[21] Al-Mas'ūdī would have been well positioned to know something about the visit of al-Ma'mūn, and elsewhere he betrays a keen curiosity with respect to confrontations between Islam and ancient Egypt.[22] The following is his version of the story about the challenge inscribed on the face of the pyramid:

> Inscribed upon their surface are the sciences, attributes, magic, and secrets of nature. In that writing is the following: "We built these, so whoever maintains equality with us in sovereignty, attainment of power, and fulfillment of the charge of dominion, let him destroy these pyramids and efface their inscriptions, although to destroy is easier than to construct, and taking apart is easier than to put together." It is related that one of the kings of Islam started to destroy one of them, but the land tax was not sufficient for their tearing down.[23]

With allowance made for poetic amplification, this is almost exactly what had been noted in the previous century by Ibn Khuradadhbeh. The primary concern of both these accounts is to provide an explanation for the copious writing that was on the pyramids, referring to the accumulation of graffiti. Such writing, most of it in an unknown script, challenged the ingenuity of visitors, and in this kind of environment it was possible for the story of an improbable challenge to gain wide currency.

At the end of this story of a challenge we find a note concerning the visit of "one of the kings of Islam" and his intent to destroy one of the pyramids. It is notable, though, that there is no necessary connection between this king and the inscription of the challenge. For al-Mas'ūdi these appear to be two separate anecdotes.

A little later the geographer Ibn Hawqal (10th century) adds the caliph to the mix:

> One of the Abbasids read upon one of the two pyramids: "I have built these. Whoever claims power in his reign, let him destroy them—although to destroy is easier than to build." And he was on the point of doing just that. (I think it was either al-Ma'mūn or al-Mu'taṣim.) But it was the time when the land tax of Egypt was not carried out . . . [there follows a brief note about that tax and how much it would net] . . . He relinquished that project and did not think of it anymore.[24]

The inability of Ibn Hawqal to recall which caliph was connected to this story, al-Ma'mūn or his half brother al-Mu'taṣim who succeeded him, is telling. It alerts us to what we have already begun to sense: with each successive re-telling of the incident we are getting a further elaboration of the seed story. The report of a challenge written onto the walls of a pyramid is slowly becoming mixed up with the story of al-Ma'mūn's visit to Egypt.

Al-Ma'mūn's trip to Egypt was dramatic, and of the type likely to attract stories. It is important to realize the uniqueness of this visit by al-Ma'mūn: this was the only visit by a caliph during the entire

[21] On his probable location in Egypt cf. Ahmad M. H. Shboul, *Al-Mas'ūdī and His World: A Muslim Humanist and His Interest in Non-Muslims* (London, 1979), 15.

[22] In his chapter on Egypt (*Murūj al-dhahab* [Beirut 2004], 1:360–68) he reports an extended (and undoubtedly fictional) conversation between the ruler Ibn Ṭūlūn and an ancient Coptic man.

[23] *Khiṭaṭ* 1:115 = al-Mas'ūdī, *murūj al-dhahab* 1:376.

[24] *Khiṭaṭ* 1:114 = Ibn Hawqal, *kitāb ṣūrat al-arḍ*, M. J. de Goeje, ed. (Leiden, 1939), 136.

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two and a half centuries in which Egypt was part of the caliphate. It took place in the year 832 on the heels of a chaotic period in Egyptian history and lasted for only 49 days.[25] Given the pressing political issues, it is hard to believe that a large portion of his time was spent in and around the pyramids—trying to tear them down no less! Questions concerning the veracity of al-Ma'mūn's confrontation with the pyramids were raised early, and these concerns, although dismissed on occasion,[26] have never been answered.

Given the slow gestation of the stories concerning al-Ma'mūn's visit to the pyramids, their historical accuracy is doubtful. Rather than strictly historical considerations, we might more profitably ask *why* this popular story drew al-Ma'mūn into its orbit. One answer would be that al-Ma'mūn—especially as the height of the 'Abbasid Caliphate came to recede and grow golden with distance[27]—was a figure who represented the pinnacle of Islamic power. Al-Ma'mūn was also singularly available for use by storytellers by virtue of his visit to Egypt. The story took on a symbolic cast: Islamic ruler confronts great ancient monument. It is ambiguous in terms of its message since this Islamic ruler does not actually destroy the pyramids. The story can be thought of as an announcement of detente with respect to the pyramids. The story of al-Ma'mūn would have provided cover for later Islamic rulers who likewise allowed these buildings to stand. The pyramids thereby found an accepted place within the Islamic landscape. It was a place that would remain unchallenged until the arrival of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and his son 'Uthmān in the latter part of the 12th century.

Having looked at the earliest sources for this story, we can now turn to three later elaborations of the basic story of al-Ma'mūn confronting the pyramids. The first passage is found in a work attributed throughout the medieval period (falsely)[28] to al-Mas'ūdī, *Reports of Time and Whom Its Events Destroy*:

> . . . the Caliph 'Abdallah al-Ma'mūn . . . when he went to Egypt and came upon the pyramids wanted to destroy one of them so that he might know what was inside it. He was told: "That is impossible." He responded: "I must open a portion of it." So there was opened for him a breach which is even now open. This was done by means of fire being lit, vinegar sprinkled, pickaxes, and ironsmiths knowledgeable about this [kind of undertaking]. It came to the point that they had expended a great fortune in this undertaking. They found that the width of the walls was close to 20 cubits, and when they reached the end of the wall they found behind the bore-hole a green purification room, in which was minted gold . . . Al-Ma'mūn was amazed at this gold and its excellence, and he then ordered a tally of what he had spent on the breach. It was found that the gold which he acquired did not exceed what he had spent, nor did it fall short of that amount either. He was greatly amazed by their information about the measure of what he spent upon it, and about how what the ancients left in the place equaled that measure.[29]

[25] Hugh Kennedy, "Egypt as a province in the Islamic caliphate, 641–868," in Carl F. Petry, ed., *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1998), 83.

[26] Michael Cooperson in his brief biography *Al-Ma'mūn* (Oxford, 2005) asserts that Egyptologists have proven such doubts wrong, but the information he offers concerning the tunnel bored into the Great Pyramid hardly proves al-Ma'mūn's presence (3–4).

[27] Note the later popularity of Imam Shafi'a (who died during the reign of al-Ma'mūn) and the *madrasah* built for him by Salaḥ al-Dīn.

[28] Shboul, *Al-Mas'ūdī and His World*, xxii, 72–80, and *passim*.

[29] *Khiṭaṭ* 1:113 = [pseudo-] Mas'ūdī, *Akhbār al-Zamān* (Beirut, 1966), 165. It is interesting how similar this account is to the description of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and his encounter with the pyramid cited above. In both cases the ruler first intends to destroy the pyramid, he is told by an unnamed person that his goal is impossible, and finally he arrives at a second more limited plan that can be carried out with profit. This parallel strengthens the case that the story of al-Ma'mūn served as a template for future interactions of rulers with the pyramids.

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It is evident that this story has been composed without any real knowledge of the actual physical composition of the pyramids. No one who had been inside the pyramids would have suggested that the walls of the pyramid were 20 cubits thick. We have entered the realm of popular fiction: the pyramids functioning as part of a treasure story, and al-Ma'mūn being the treasure hunter *par excellence*. The impression of fictionalization is strengthened by the occurrence of a shorter version of this same story in the *1,001 Nights*.[30]

Opposed to these fantastic versions of events is a more sober account given by the 12th century Andalusian writer Abū Ṣalt. As expected, al-Ma'mūn comes to Egypt and orders excavations, but this time the interior of the pyramid appears strikingly natural:

> After great effort and toil they found inside it passages and chasms, whose state was terrifying and following difficult. They found at its high point a square chamber, the length of each side being about 8 cubits. In its middle was a marble sarcophagus that was covered. When its lid was removed, nothing was found in it except a decayed cadaver that past ages had destroyed. At that point al-Ma'mūn ordered that all other excavations be given up. It is said that the expenditures on the excavation were great and the provisions extreme.[31]

This de-marvelized version will be preferred later by al-Idrīsī (author of the already mentioned *Lights Lofty of Form in Revealing the Secrets of the Pyramids*).[32] Michael Cooperson points out the realism of this description: "As anyone who has visited the pyramid of Khufu knows, the Egyptian author's description of the interior is accurate . . . "[33] At the same time, this realistic account, coming from the early part of the 12th century, a full 400 years after the visit by al-Ma'mūn, is historically suspect. As we have seen, the story of al-Ma'mūn's entrance grew more elaborate and longer as the centuries passed. Given this developmental perspective, the more realistic account of Abū Ṣalt should be understood as a later rationalized version of the events, which had the advantage of matching the story with what was actually present at the pyramids.[34]

Another independent version of the story of al-Ma'mūn is given by another, slightly earlier, Andalusian: Abū 'Abdallah al-Qaysī (1081–1170), author of *The Gift of Understanding*.[35] In al-Qaysī's retelling the caliph is said to have found in a small domed shrine an "image of Adam from green stone like malachite." Upon the "body of Adam" was found—"armor of gold decorated with different kinds of gems." One of those gems is described as a ruby the size of an egg! We know that stories are told for a motive, but at times it can be hard to guess what drove such fictional expansions. Al-Qaysī is helpful in this respect since he gives us a glimpse into the context of his story-telling:

> I have seen the idol (al-ṣanam) from which that dead man was taken, encountering it at the door of the residence of the king in Egypt in the year 511 AH [1117 AD].[36]

[30] *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, trans. Richard F. Burton (New York, 1934), 1675–77 (night 398).

[31] *Khiṭaṭ* 1:118 = *al-risālah al-maṣriyah*, 27.

[32] *Anwār*, 34–35.

[33] *Al-Ma'mun*, 3.

[34] An aspect of Abū Ṣalt's treatment of the pyramids is his willingness to incorporate details drawn from his actual experience. This is evident in one passage in which he visits with two friends and then bursts into poetry. Consider also his direct testimony to the graffiti contained on the surface of the pyramid: "*We saw* the surfaces of both of these pyramids inscribed from their top to the bottom with narrow parallel lines of the writing of their builder" (*Khiṭaṭ* 1:119 = *al-risālah al-maṣriyah*, 28).

[35] *Tuḥfat al-Albāb*, a work that survives only in citations from other authors.

[36] *Khiṭaṭ* 1:116.

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What seems fantastic acquires grounding in the actual experience of al-Qaysī. Toward the end of the Fatimid period, as the dynasty was already failing, he had witnessed this "idol" and was likely told a story about its origin.[37]

It is highly doubtful that the Fatimids had preserved an actual relic from the visit of al-Ma'mūn, but it is reasonable to hypothesize that an ancient Egyptian "idol"—probably a coffin—was on display somewhere in the Fatimid palaces of Cairo, and witnessed there by al-Qaysī in 1117. This date places his visit to Cairo in the midst of a fervid period. Caroline Williams describes the political climate between the years 1122 and 1154:

> This was a period of both crisis and turmoil for the Fatimid government, whose spiritual credibility and political authority had been undermined by two successive crises (1094 and 1130) and by two periods of assassination (1121 and 1130).[38]

She goes on to tell how the Fatimids in this period turned to the construction of monuments honoring members of the 'Alid family who were buried in Cairo. The climax of this period involved the arrival in 1154 of the head of al-Husayn, which was housed in the Fatimid palace within the walls of Cairo.[39] In this context it is not difficult to imagine the presence of an ancient Egyptian relic exhibited in connection with a well-known popular story. Thus we can glimpse the way stories about the pyramids were circulated in order to accomplish actual political ends.

The Builder of the Pyramids

The first question liable to be asked about the pyramids has always been: Who built them? A large portion of the material contained in al-Maqrīzī's chapter in the *Khiṭaṭ* on the pyramids attempts to answer that question. Several different answers are supplied in the course of the chapter, and although al-Maqrīzī does not provide an explicit confirmation of the correct one, the structure of his chapter gives strong sanction to the Hermetic version of their origins.[40] His chapter begins with a lengthy telling of the story of Sūrīd,[41] from a work by Ibrāhīm ibn Wasīf Shāh entitled *Reports about Egypt and*

[37] It may appear strange at first to find the Fatimids preserving a relic from a former Abbasid caliph, but Paula Sanders has called attention to a late tendency for the Fatimids to identify themselves in more broadly Islamic terms. She identifies the 12th century as the period when this reached its height. Thus a claim to have identified a relic from the visit of al-Ma'mūn would not be out of character ("The Fatimid State, 969–1171" in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1, 173).

[38] Caroline Williams, "The Cult of 'Alid Saints in the Fatimid Monuments of Cairo Part II: The Mausolea," *Muqarnas* 3 (1985), 39.

[39] "The Cult of 'Alid Saints," 52–34.

[40] The central story concerns the figure Sūrīd, who is not identical to Hermes. However, the story of Sūrīd bears strong resemblance to a story circulating in Baghdad by the 10th century concerning Hermes (the clearest version of which is contained in *Al-Fihrist* by the 10th century compiler known as al-Nadīm). Alexander Fodor, "The Origins of the Arabic Legends of the Pyramids," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 23 (1970), 335–63, writes concerning the origin of the story of Sūrīd: "The basis for the Arabic pyramid legend thus was supplied by the combination of two motifs: that of the hiding of knowledge with the Jewish Flood-story. This resulted in a new Flood-story in which the part of the Biblical Ark was played by the ancient Egyptian monuments, especially by the pyramids, and the place of Noah, the Ark-builder, was taken by Hermes, the builder of the pyramids" (342). On the basis of this thematic link the story of Sūrīd can be reckoned part of the "Hermetic version" of the origin of the pyramids.

[41] The origin of the name Sūrīd is not known. Fodor speculates that the name may be a slightly garbled version of the Greek Σοῦφις, a ruler set in the 4th Dynasty by Manetho ("Origins of the Arabic Legends," 357), but it is simpler to explain the name Sūrīd as a reversal of the consonants in the name Idrīs, the Arabic name for Hermes. This explanation becomes more likely if one accepts Michael Cook's arguments about the relatively late date for the Sūrīd story ("Pharaonic History in Medieval Egypt," *Studia Islamica* 57 [1983], 67–103, esp. 87ff.).

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Its Wonders.[42] The idea that al-Maqrīzī means to endorse this story is reinforced by the inclusion of a second elaborate telling of this story, this time drawn from the historian al-Qudā'ī.

In its outline, the story is about an antediluvian civilization over which Sūrīd was king. Through vivid, apocalyptic dreams Sūrīd was warned about a coming disaster. The truth of these dreams was confirmed through the astrological research of his group of diviners. Convinced that his world was doomed, he commanded his people to build the temples and pyramids that lined the Nile valley, and to inscribe on their walls all their sciences and accumulated knowledge, therefore saving them from annihilation.

The version of this story by the historian al-Qudā'ī incorporates a lengthy frame story, in which monks from the monastery of Abū Ḥermīs[43] discover a papyrus roll buried in a grave. On this papyrus roll was "writing in the language of the first Copts"—referring to a form of ancient Egyptian writing. Since nobody was able to read this writing they took the papyrus to a monk in the Fayyum who could. In the hands of this monk, the writing is interpreted, and it turns out to contain a further frame story, explaining how the text was copied during the reign of Diocletian from a manuscript which was copied in the reign of Philip (father of Alexander the Great). That manuscript in turn was derived from "a page of gold"—taking us back to the first Egyptians. The frame story thus works as a kind of long distance isnād, tying the story to the earliest possible authority. After this double frame the text tells a story almost identical to the one told by Ibrāhīm ibn Wasīf Shāh, with the addition of more elaborate astrological descriptions and certain interesting details, such as the fact that Sūrīd was buried inside the Great Pyramid.

The story of Sūrīd is unquestionably a fiction. At issue is how far back this fiction goes. Alexander Fodor accepted the Coptic origin of this material and even the primary frame story about the discovery of a papyrus roll at the monastery of Abū Ḥermīs. He was also keen to demonstrate that the story had antecedents in ancient Egyptian material.[44] Michael Cook has more recently argued against any Coptic origin for this material.[45] He suggests that the story of Sūrīd was a later fiction, finding its earliest form further east, perhaps among the Hermeticists associated with the Sabaeans of Harran. Examining a host of circumstantial details, Cook concludes: "None of this can establish that the Hermetic history was actually composed in the east; but at the very least it shows, in the case of the Sūrīd legend, a predominance of eastern influence."[46] In this account, the story of Sūrīd migrated to Egypt and became incorporated in Arabic histories of Egypt—such as that by al-Qudā'ī and other works that detailed the wonders of Egypt.

In clarifying the possible origin of this material, and short-circuiting attempts to trace the material back to ancient times, Cook stops short of inquiring into the contextual meaning of these stories. The stories may well have originated outside Egypt, but this still does not explain why medieval Egyptian historians accepted this story and amplified it. The answer to that question requires looking past issues of origin and authenticity, and noting instead the way stories like this would have functioned within the medieval Egyptian social context.

In the case of the construction of the pyramids there is a persistent connection to material derived from the Copts, and this ought to be explained. We have already noted how al-Qudā'ī incorporated a

[42] *Akhbār Miṣr wa 'ajā'ibhā*. This work contains much of the material found in the work *Akhbār al-Zamān* by [pseudo] Mas'ūdi. All of the material culled from the work by Ibrāhīm ibn Wasīf Shāh can be found in the latter work as well.

[43] Scattered remains of this monastery can still be seen at Saqqara near the Step Pyramid. The most significant remains are now housed in the Coptic Museum in Cairo.

[44] "The Origins of the Arabic Legends," 350ff.

[45] "Pharaonic History in Medieval Egypt," 92.

[46] "Pharaonic History in Medieval Egypt," 98.

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frame story which established the Copts as discoverers and translators of the story of Sūrīd. Ibrāhīm ibn Wasīf Shāh provides no elaborate frame story, but at the beginning of the story of Sūrīd he notes:

> Sūrīd was the one who built the two great pyramids of Egypt which are generally attributed to Shaddād ibn ʻĀd—although the Copts deny that the tribe of ʻĀd entered their lands on account of their magic.[47]

This Shaddād ibn ʻĀd comes up again at the close of the same account, this time by way of discussing who built the pyramids at Dahshūr. Some claimed they were built by Shaddāth ibn ʻAdhīm, but others that this figure was actually Shaddād ibn ʻĀd. There follows a technical explanation as to the reason for this misidentification: "Some who deny that the tribe of ʻĀd ever entered Egypt said that rather those mistook his name for Shaddāth ibn ʻAdhīm."[48] The "some" who deny the entrance of the tribe of ʻĀd, preferring the near homonym, are presumably again the Copts.

Shaddād ibn ʻĀd's construction of the pyramids seems to have been the earliest story of the origin of the pyramids known to the Arabs who settled in Egypt. Tucked away in his chapter on the pyramids, al-Maqrīzī relates a report taken from the earliest history of Egypt to survive, the *Conquest of Egypt* by Ibn ʻAbd al-Ḥakam:

> In the time of Shaddād ibn ʻĀd the pyramids were built, according to what some of the tradition tellers mention. We did not find one person of knowledge from among the people of Egypt who knew about the pyramids or had a firm report.[49]

This is followed up by another quotation whose source was the brother of the early historian:

> I don't reckon that the pyramids were built except before the great flood because if they were built afterwards then there would be knowledge of them among the people.[50]

It is highly unlikely, of course, that there were no stories circulating among Copts to explain the presence of these ancient monuments, but it also seems evident that there was no settled and broadly held story which could be taken over by the Arabs—i.e., no "firm report." In this narrative vacuum, it was clearly tempting for the Arabs to settle over the landscape their own stories. From the Riḥlah of Ibn Jubayr we learn that in 1183 the story of Shaddād ibn ʻĀd was still popular—evidence for the lasting success of this story.[51]

The story of Shaddād ibn ʻĀd could only have been a product of the Muslim conquest. It is explicitly tied back to "some of the tradition-tellers" (baʻḍ al-muḥaddithīn) by ibn ʻAbd al-Ḥakam—and such tradition-tellers were by definition Muslim sources. The tribe of ʻĀd is itself a distinctively Arab memory, mentioned a number of times in the Qur'ān and there described as a formerly prosperous people upon whom God sent judgment. The Qur'ān relates their prophet Hūd's suggestive warning:

> Do you build on every hill monuments, committing folly? You take fortresses—perhaps you will be immortal?[52]

[47] *Khiṭaṭ* 1:111= [pseudo-] Masʻūdī *Akhbār al-Zamān*, 159.
[48] *Khiṭaṭ* 1:113.
[49] *Khiṭaṭ* 1:117.
[50] *Khiṭaṭ* 1:117.
[51] Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, 46.
[52] 26.128–9. For the basic story of judgment, see 11.50–60; 29.38–41; 51.41.

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In another passage the Qur'ān mentions the people of 'Ād and connects them to a certain Iram of lofty pillars—"a place whose like has never been created in the land."[53] These details are enough to establish the people of 'Ād as great builders. If within the context of early Islam one were engaged in a search for a possible suspect for the construction of the pyramids, the people of 'Ād would be an obvious choice.

The story of Shaddād ibn 'Ād and his construction of the pyramids thus had at least two elements which would please the Arab settlers: it tied some of the most stupendous monuments in human history to their own ancestral past and attributed them to a figure around whom fantastic stories were circulating.[54] These reasons for its popularity also serve as reasons for why Copts would find the story objectionable: it was one more example of their landscape being appropriated and made to serve another sacred narrative.[55] The Coptic origin of the story of Sūrīd may well be doubtful, but there is no reason to suspect the reports concerning their firm denial of the popular Arab story of Shaddād ibn 'Ād and his invasion of Egypt.

Near the end of the account from Ibrāhīm ibn Wasīf Shāh is a series of details said to be derived from the "books of the Copts." Among these details is a description of the guardian spirit of each pyramid. The spirit (ruḥāniyah) of the northern pyramid, for example, is "a young beardless boy, naked, with yellow skin and large fangs in his mouth."[56] The spirits of the "southern" and "colored" pyramid are similarly grotesque. It is difficult to imagine anything but a local origin for such descriptions. In fact, they are reminiscent of the kinds of stories reported by Winifred Blackman in *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt*. Blackman notes that stories about buried treasure are common "all over the country"[57] and mentions that "a Coptic priest in the neighborhood owns a book in which is entered a list of all the buried treasures in that province."[58] Cook has argued that the material described as coming from "the writings of the Copts" is fraudulent, there being no trace of the legend of Sūrīd in surviving Coptic literature.[59] But surely the kind of "book" described by Blackman would exist under the radar, so to speak, of anything marked as "literary" remains.

Some of this material may well be taken from oral and popular sources. A possible example is the description of the guardian spirits. Blackman describes a similar "guardian" story that she encountered among her villagers:

> On the outskirts of a certain village in Upper Egypt there is a very large stone. It lies on the ground and is covered with water for a great part of the year . . . Under this stone treasure of great value is believed to be buried . . . A cock is supposed to be the guardian of the treasure, and it sometimes appears to certain of the villagers, crows two or three times, and then disappears.[60]

[53] 89.6–8. There was confusion among later commentators as to the identity of this Iram of lofty pillars. Ṭabarī notes an early tradition that the identity of Iram was in fact Alexandria. Another tradition disagrees and identifies it as Damascus (*Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 12 [Beirut, 1992]). The early placement of Iram in Egypt must have made it easier for stories about 'Ād's presence there to proliferate.

[54] Note, for example, the appearance of Shaddād in the *Arabian Nights* where he is credited with building a fantastic city in the desert (*The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, nights 276–79).

[55] The concern with which the Copts guarded their landscape can be seen in the growing tradition concerning the journey of the Holy Family through Egypt. Stephen Davis notes: "By the twelfth century, as more oral legends about the Holy Family were being written down and connected with other landscapes, Coptic writers began to draw up quasi-official itineraries—lists of places where the family was thought to have stayed during their flight into Egypt" ("Ancient Sources for the Coptic Tradition" in G. Gabra, ed., *Be Thou There: The Holy Family's Journey in Egypt* [Cairo, 2001], 143).

[56] *Khiṭaṭ* 1:113.

[57] *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt* (Cairo, 2000), 190.

[58] *Fellahin*, 189.

[59] "Pharaonic History in Medieval Egypt," 92–93.

[60] *Fellahin*, 189.

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Blackman also discovers a tendency to connect superstitious meaning to physical artifacts and monuments from the ancient Egyptian past.[61] It may be *possible* to see details such as the guardian spirits as outright fictions, but it is hard to see the motive for the creation of these fictions by a distant people. The glimpses of popular life given by Blackman allow for an alternative explanation for this material: genuine popular tales and superstitions have made their way into written sources—albeit, written sources whose authors are actively searching for fantastic accounts of Egyptian history.

Recognition of this popular origin for at least some of the material challenges the scholarly frame with which both Cook and Ulrich Haarmann approached this material. Haarmann had objected to the "extreme stand" taken by Cook and Patricia Crone in their work on early Islam and used the literature surrounding ancient Egyptian marvels as a way to demonstrate the strength of an Egyptian identity during the medieval period.[62] By way of reply Cook made a critical examination of the Arabic versions of ancient Egyptian history, and found that they were neither locally produced nor historically deep-rooted. Toward the close of his essay, taken up with a careful examination of Arabic texts, he returns to his main theme:

> A genre of writing on the 'excellences of Egypt', to which Haarmann has rightly drawn attention, did indeed emerge in Muslim Egypt, and it displays a considerable pride in the ancient monuments of the country; but it conveys no sense whatever of identification with the people and culture which created them.[63]

Unfortunately the terms of this debate have foreclosed one of the most striking aspects of these texts. These texts indeed do not establish a unified Egyptian identity, but rather give us a glimpse into a significant fracture within that identity—the continuing presence of a Coptic identity that was able to push back against Islamic narrative assertions. Telling the story of Sūrīd became a way for them to assert their own identity and to counter a story which tended to give a lot of credit to the ancestors of the Arabs in the creation of the historic monuments in their landscape. We also get a glimpse into the usefulness of stories in mediating conflicts over identity and history, since the clear virtue of the story of Sūrīd was that it could fit neatly into Islamic accounts of sacred history.[64]

Places and Stories

At the conclusion we can take a step back and compare these two popular stories about the pyramids, the first concerning al-Ma'mūn and the second concerning the legends about Sūrīd as their ancient builder. Both stories moved through history according to their own logic, being transformed

[61] *Fellahin*, 98–99.

[62] Ulrich Haarmann, "Regional Sentiment in Medieval Islamic Egypt," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 43.1 (1980), 55–66.

[63] "Pharaonic History in Medieval Egypt," 102.

[64] This was not the first time that the antiquities of Egypt had become a flashpoint for competing religious and ethnic identities. In *The Antiquities of the Jews* the historian Josephus (*The Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston [Peabody, 1987] attributes some Egyptian landmarks to the Jews: "having . . . forgotten the benefits they had received from Joseph, particularly the crown being now come into another family, they became very abusive to the Israelites . . . and they enjoined them to cut a great number of channels for the river, and to build walls for their cities and ramparts . . . they set them also to build pyramids, and by all this wore them out; and forced them to learn all sorts of mechanical arts" (2.9.1). The work of the Egyptian historian Manetho was likewise raided to find a place for the Jews in the history of Egypt. W. G. Waddell writes: "The Jews of the three centuries following the time of Manetho were naturally keenly interested in his *History* because of the connexion of their ancestors with Egypt—Abraham, Joseph, and Moses . . . and they sought to base their theories of the origin and antiquity of the Jews securely upon the authentic traditions of Egypt" (*Manetho*, trans. W. G. Waddell, *Loeb Classical Library* [Cambridge, 1980], xvi.).

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in unique ways as they encountered different social and political contexts. Both start small but get ever more elaborate through their successive re-tellings. Both stories settle the pyramids comfortably into the Islamic cultural landscape. The tool for this settling was narrative. The pyramids proved to be a powerful engine for narrative production. Cognitive psychologists have noted how departure from what is expected is a powerful generator of stories:

> . . . when you encounter an exception to the ordinary, and ask somebody what is happening, the person you ask will virtually always tell a story that contains *reasons* . . . The story, moreover, will almost invariably be an account of a possible world in which the encountered exception is somehow made to make sense or to have "meaning."[65]

This refers to individuals, but something similar can be posited for cultures: they feel a push to account for exceptional elements in their landscape. The stories surrounding the pyramids, then, can be understood not merely as fanciful compositions, but as tools for giving acceptable meanings to these structures. The story of al-Ma'mūn and his visit allows the pyramids to be associated with a major figure in Islamic history and settles them as a legitimate presence in the landscape. The story of Sūrīd and his antediluvian construction of the pyramids assigns to them a place in sacred history and establishes a neutral narrative ground upon which Muslims and Christians could agree.

The medieval perception can be differentiated strongly from their perception in contemporary Cairo. One need only look at the contemporary Egyptian currency to feel the difference. These notes, both small and large, feature an Islamic side that includes a mosque or Islamic interior, and Arabic writing; the other side is Western and features a picture of some temple or artwork from Pharaonic Egypt, and English writing. Such designs are an example of the divided perception of Egypt that Irene Bierman argued is a legacy of the 19th century. Were we to imagine the existence of a paper currency from the medieval period, we would surely not expect a design similar to these modern notes. The pyramids were not the flip side to Islamic experience, but were bound up with Islamic experience of Cairo and the Islamic perception of sacred history. The credit for this perceptual unity must go to the power of narrative to assign meaning and value to elements of the landscape.

[65] Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, 1990), 49.

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