The Fatimid Palace at Ajdābiya: New Data and Perspectives

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This is a reconsideration of the sole fully excavated palatial structure built by the Fatimids (909–1171 CE): the qaṣr of Ajdābiya in Cyrenaica (modern Libya). The structure, excavated by Abdulhamid Abdussaid in the 1960s and by David Whitehouse in the early 1970s, is the perfect example of how a small provincial site, generally overlooked by scholars, can nonetheless yield precious information on “royal” architectural patronage, provided the archaeological data are combined with a close scrutiny of primary sources and a re-evaluation of other local, equally neglected monuments and finds. The aim of this article is not to present new archaeological data, but rather to serve as an update of the material published forty years ago in the light of recent scholarship on a number of related topics—including new editions of primary sources—while awaiting the publication of Whitehouse’s final excavation report.

Introduction

This is a reconsideration of the sole fully excavated palatial structure built by the Fatimids, a Shiite dynasty of imām-caliphs who came to power in early 10th-century Ifrīqiyya (Brett 2001; Halm 1996; Dachraoui 1981) and, after conquering Egypt in 358/969 CE, moved their capital to the newly founded city of Cairo, from where they ruled their empire until 566/1171.

The historical reasons why nearly all traces of Fatimid palatial architecture have vanished—from al-Mahdiyya and Șabra al-Manṣūriyya (Tunisia) to the great palaces of Cairo, in contrast with the significant number of extant “palatial” artefacts—are several and complex, and have already been touched upon elsewhere (Bloom 2007, 65 ff.; Cressier and Rammah 2006, 613–614; Barrucand 1998; Bloom 1985; see also Rosser-Owen 2009). At present, the state of both the archaeological and art-historical research is still inadequate to reconstruct a satisfactory picture of the models, evolution, and functions of secular Fatimid architecture; however, an attempt can be made to better understand the scant material evidence already in our possession within the framework of Fatimid history and ideology.

Keywords: Fatimids, Libyan archaeology, palatial architecture, Islamic epigraphy, al-Mu’izz
Ajdābiya, in present-day Libya (Cyrenaica), is the perfect example of how a small provincial site, generally overlooked by scholars, can nonetheless yield precious information on Fatimid architectural patronage and practices, provided the archaeological data are combined with a close scrutiny of primary sources and a re-evaluation of other local, equally neglected monuments and finds. What follows focuses on the local significance of these sites, rather than treating them as the products of an “official” Fatimid architecture, a concept that is too abstract to be useful for this case study.

At present, the Islamic archaeological site of Ajdābiya consists of the ruins of a 10th-century congregational mosque and a contemporary qaṣr located one kilometre away, excavated by Abdulhamid Abdussaid in the 1960s and by David Whitehouse in the early 1970s (Abdussaid 1964; Blake, Hutt and Whitehouse 1970–1; 1971; Whitehouse 1971–1972; 1972–1973; Donaldson 1975–1976; see also Lézine 1971; Kenrick 2013, 21–25; for the Islamic pottery finds, see Riley 1982). Their brief interim reports represent to date the only published material on Ajdābiya, but thanks to the efforts of the Society for Libyan Studies, the beneficiary of Whitehouse’s private archive, a final report is expected to be published sometime in the near future. This important achievement will follow the final publication of the analogous Fatimid settlement of Surt (Fehérvári et al. 2002; see also Goodchild 1964; Mostafa 1966–1967; Abdussaid 1966–1967), and will hopefully encourage new work on the medieval city of Barqa, between Ajdābiya and Cyrene (modern al-Marj), although the current political situation in Libya is likely to hinder excavations in the years to come. The Libyan crisis of 2011 also put an end to a second campaign of excavations carried out in Surt al-Qadīma by a French mission directed by Jean-Michel Mouton (see Mouton 2008; Guilhot et al. 2010; Gnat, Guilhot and Mouton 2012).

These Libyan sites offer us new information to counter some of the grand-scale, speculative theories about Fatimid architecture formulated in the last century. The octagonal minaret at the mosque of Ajdābiya, for instance, throws into doubt Jonathan Bloom’s conjectures on the Fatimid aversion to mosque towers (Bloom 2013, 138–142), while reinforcing the existing archaeological evidence of a similar structure in the congregational mosque of Surt (Abdussaid 1966–1967, 158).1

1. Bloom’s theory is that the Ajdābiya minaret, once gracing the mosque erected by al-Qāʾīm (the second Fatimid caliph, r. 322/934–334/946), “must belong to another, distinct building campaign, since it follows an independent orientation and was not bonded with the walls.” As we shall see,
Likewise, a correct understanding of Ajdābiya’s enigmatic fortress-palace sheds light on the building campaign launched by caliph al-Muʾizz li-Dīn Allāh (r. 342/953–365/975) in the years preceding the conquest of Egypt, challenging at the same time the conventional dichotomy between provincial and “royal” architecture in the early Fatimid period.

Thanks to the Society for Libyan Studies, I was able to access David Whitehouse’s archive and gain in-depth knowledge of his four excavation campaigns at Ajdābiya through unpublished maps, photographs, and handwritten diaries. The aim of this article, however, is not to present new archaeological data, but to revisit the findings published forty years ago in the light of recent scholarship on a number of related topics—including new editions of primary sources—while awaiting the publication of Whitehouse’s final excavation report. I am extremely grateful to Isabella Welsby Sjöström, the editor of the Society’s journal, without whose help my research would not have been possible.

The archaeological evidence

The excavated structure

The ruined fortified palace of Ajdābiya is an isolated rectangular building 33.5m long and 25.5m wide, with a single access through the north-east façade (Figure 2). On the outer walls, which are more than one metre thick, each corner is marked by a circular tower measuring 5m across. Moreover, the middle of each side features a rectangular salient: bastion-like towers on the two long flanks, a monumental entrance marking the north-east façade, and the rear of an apsed chamber protruding from the south-west wall. In the centre of the building is a courtyard covering an area of 19 x 14.5m, paved with limestone slabs. Gallery-like rooms (buyūt) run along the long sides of the structure, while the north-east and south-west ends are occupied respectively by an elaborate bent entrance, and a transverse antechamber leading into three rooms, which do not communicate with one another. Of these three spaces, the central one is the apsed chamber, which represents the focal point of the whole structure.

Unlike the Fatimid mosque of Ajdābiya, partly built in mud brick (Blake, Hutt and Whitehouse 1971, 108), the qaṣr was entirely faced with limestone blocks bonded with lime mortar. Generally speaking, the level of workmanship is remarkable: the masonry is neat, and the details, though simple, were carefully executed. The four corner towers, now drastically reduced, were accurately laid out, and every stone was cut to the appropriate curve. An exception is the masonry of the lateral square towers, where the ashlars are rather poorly aligned and assembled. Whitehouse interpreted this as a sign of haste in the completion of the fortress, “with finish sacrificed to speed” (Whitehouse 1971–1972, 19).

The interior of the monumental entrance hall (or gateway) was embellished with three semi-circular niches on each side, the central ones being wider and deeper than the lateral. This passage then led to a vestibule, but before gaining entrance...
to the courtyard, visitors would have had to make three right-angle turns and pass through two other rooms, forming an elaborate and carefully planned bent entrance.

The most prominent vestiges of the qaṣr lie at its south-west end, beyond the courtyard, and can be either described as three parallel rooms entered through a cross-hall, or as an inverted T-shaped chamber with a smaller room on either side. The central part (i.e. the stem of the T) is an imposing space, originally covered by a barrel vault, with four engaged columns at its corners and a hemi-dome (qubba) at its inner end, supported by two seashell squinches (Figure 3). The four columns consist of circular shafts surmounted by chamfered capitals; above them are bevelled abaci supporting the impost, originally embellished with a narrow frieze of plasterwork scrolls (Figure 4). Although forbidding from the outside, the overall effect inside the chamber is elegant and carefully finished. In front of the tripartite “palatial suite,” the rectangular courtyard contains a well, but no trace of a cistern was found.

It is not clear whether the building had an upper storey: a staircase built in the thickness of the north-west wall could have been used either to reach an upper storey or, as it is more likely, a flat roof. An accurate engraving of the qaṣr made in 1824 by the French explorer Jean-Raymond Pacho (Figure 5), and the account of the
19th-century traveller G. A. Freund, both indicate that the four circular towers at the corners of the structure contained domed chambers at the ground level; however, the masonry continued upwards and probably sustained a fighting platform which, according to Whitehouse, was almost certainly graced by a crenellated breastwork (Blake, Hutt and Whitehouse 1971, 109; Pacho 1827–1829, 268–269, pl. XC, I a; for Freund’s account see Vigoni 1912, 164–165 and Abdussaid 1964, 110). Pacho’s engraving also seems to suggest that the protruding qubba of the axial chamber was originally not visible from the outside, hidden by a rectangular layer of additional masonry. The aspect of the building’s upper part is particularly difficult to reconstruct since,
Figure 4. Capital, impost, and decorated plasterwork surmounting the right engaged column at the entrance of the axial camber (after Blake, Hutt and Whitehouse 1971).

Figure 5. Jean Raymond Pacho’s engraving of the fortress-palace in 1824 (after Pacho 1827–1829).
with the exception of the axial chamber, the extant elevations hardly reach one metre above ground.

The original decoration

The English traveller James Hamilton, who visited the abandoned site of Ajdābiya in 1852, described the qaṣr as

...a castle of excellent architecture, which cannot be later than the third century of the Hejirah [sic]. It is a rectangular structure, terminating in three chambers, the extremity of the centre one of which has an octagonal niche, on which the plaster still remains. This end is flanked by round, dome-covered towers, whose sides are perforated with loopholes for arrows; but neither within nor without, neither above nor below, could I discover ornament or inscriptions. (Hamilton 1856, 174).

While it is certainly true that the excavations at the qaṣr did not yield the same amount of decorated stucco and epigraphic fragments found in the Ajdābiya mosque, it is now possible to demonstrate that, pace Sir James, the fortress-palace was indeed adorned with carved and moulded plaster, and probably featured an inscribed frieze. These elements provide important clues to the dating of the building.

In the 1930s, during the Italian occupation of Libya, several fragments of medieval reliefs were photographed at Ajdābiya. Their provenance was not recorded, but their style and subject indicate that they belonged to the qaṣr rather than the mosque. One of them represents a lion passant, quite crudely executed under a plaster band of heart-shaped palmettes (Figure 6). This appears to be a particularly fitting decoration for a fortress-palace, conveying an idea of authority and power to the visitors.

Figure 6. Plaster relief unearthed in the vicinity of the fortress-palace in the 1930s, now lost (after Abdussaid 1964).
A similar relief, dated by some scholars to the Fatimid period, was re-employed in the 16th-century fortifications of al-Mahdiyya and is still visible in situ (Figure 7). More importantly, the palmette pattern framing the Ajdābiya lion is identical to the moulded stuccowork from the Fatimid mosque of Surt, clumsily reused in its miḥrāb after the building had fallen into ruin (Figure 8) (Abdussaid 1966–1967, 158, pl. XLVIb and XLVIIa; Hutt 1977, 62). Unfortunately, this relief was lost during the Second World War and, if still extant, it probably lies abandoned in the depositories of some Roman or Libyan museum.

The remaining plaster decoration of the axial chamber of the qaṣr, consisting in a narrow frieze of vegetal scrolls (Figure 4), bears a striking resemblance to the stucco found at the Ajdābiya mosque (Figure 9). Likewise, the decorated squinches of the central hemi-dome, in the shape of half shells, are strongly reminiscent of the niches carved in the façade of the mosque’s prayer hall (Figure 10a–b). Needless to say, the seashell is generally recognised as a key ornamental element of Fatimid architecture since its appearance in the miḥrāb of the Great Mosque of al-Mahdiyya (Figure 10c) (Mahfoudh 1999, 133 ff.; Lézine 1965, 65 ff.).

During Whitehouse’s excavations at the qaṣr, no trace of monumental epigraphy was found. In 1971, however, Nicholas Lowick discovered in the museum of Cyrene two fragmentary inscriptions which had been unearthed in the vicinity of the for-
tress-palace in the 1950s (Lowick 1971–1972, 5). Only one of them is still legible: it bears the words “min mā ama[ra],” i.e. “...what was ordered by...” executed in floriated Kufic on a broken limestone slab 33 cm high and 10 cm thick (Figure 11). The fragment probably belonged to an epigraphic frieze celebrating the name of the patron who erected the fortress-palace, running above the monumental gateway, or at the entrance of the “palatial suite.” Its characteristic shape, with a 45° bevel coinciding with the mīm of the word min, suggests that this portion of the frieze originally decorated the corner of a projecting wall or salient.
Stylistically, the inscription is extremely close to a fragmentary slab (Figure 12) excavated elsewhere in Ajdābiya and probably coming from the mosque, bearing the date 351 H (962–963 CE). The treatment of the letters and their leafy stems is identical. In the qaṣr, the two narrow bands framing the text were decorated with incised roundels, whereas in the other inscription they were left unadorned. However, other epigraphic fragments with roundel-frames were found at the mosque, sketches and photographs of which are now part of David Whitehouse’s archive.

A particular style of foliated Kufic, framed by narrow continuous bands, seems to have flourished in the decoration of 10th-century Libyan monuments. As shown by Abdulhamid Abdussaid, sandstone and limestone epigraphic friezes similar to those discovered at Ajdābiya once decorated the minaret and prayer hall of the Fatimid mosque of Surt (Figure 13) (Abdussaid 1966–7, 158–159). At Barqa, in 1936, the Italian settlers unearthed several inscribed slabs of the same type during the works for a
new road in the eastern periphery of the town (Abdussaid 1971, 124). These fragments, now at the Ptolemais museum, must have come from an important building sharing numerous similarities with the fortress-palace of Ajdābiya: it was erected outside the medieval walled settlement and, as confirmed by a series of preliminary

Figure 11. Foundation inscription discovered in the vicinity of the fortress-palace (after Abdussaid 1964).

Figure 12. Foundation inscription found at Ajdābiya, most probably belonging to the second phase of the Fatimid mosque, bearing the date 351 H (after Lowick 1971-2).
trenches dug in 1958, it featured a paved courtyard with a well, walls of fine masonry, and arches (Abdussaid 1971, 125).

The fragmentary inscriptions found at Barqa are only partially legible, but of remarkable documentary importance. One of them is framed on three sides by the typical narrow band with circles, and displays what appears to be the beginning of a dedicatory formula equivalent to the Ajdābiya inscription: “amara bi-hi...,” i.e. “this was ordered by...”. The text continued with the name of the patron, of which a second slab bears a portion: “Tamīm al-Muʿizz li-Dīn Allāh,” namely the fourth Fatimid caliph, al-Muʿizz li-Dīn Allāh, who reigned between 342/953 and 365/975 (Figure 14). Further evidence of caliphal patronage in Barqa is provided by a couple of inscribed columns reused in the miḥrāb of a small zāwiya, featuring the name and title of the same ruler: “Mawlānā al-imām al-Muʿizz khalīfat Allāh” (Abdussaid 1971, 122, 126 and pl. LVII).
The historical framework

The foundation of Ajdābiya

The medieval town of Ajdābiya was founded and begun to flourish after the Islamic conquest of North Africa, probably in the early 8th century (Fehérvári et al. 2002, 15). However, several archaeological finds (especially Latin and Greek inscriptions, some of which dated—see Whitehouse 1971–2, 13–14; Ferri 1925–1926) confirm that the area was already occupied by a Roman garrison in the first century, probably established to protect the local wells and control the caravan traffic. The name of this military outpost, Corniclanum, appears in the Peutinger Map (Goodchild 1951, 15–16).

The earliest mention of the Islamic settlement is found in al-Yaʿqūbī’s Kitāb al-Buldān. Here, the famous historian and geographer (d. 284/897) reports that Ajdābiya had a congregational mosque, forts, and markets already in the Aghlabid period (al-Yaʿqūbī 2002, 181).

The town was founded in a region of semi-desert at the eastern end of the Gulf of Sidra, about 20 kilometres from the coast. Despite the harshness of the climate and barrenness of the soil, the area possesses an invaluable asset, namely a shallow aquifer. The wells of Ajdābiya yield brackish but drinkable water, and the Andalusī geographer al-Bakrī (d. 487/1094), our principal source for reconstructing the aspect and role of the Fatimid town, also mentions a sweet-water spring. In his Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik (“Book of Routes and Realms”) he writes that:

Ajdābiya is a big city situated in a rocky desert, possessing several rock-cut wells that yield good water. There is also a spring of sweet water and several pleasant orchards with small palm trees; there are no other trees apart from araks (Salvadora persica). There is a mosque of beautiful architecture, founded by Abū al-Qāsim, son of ‘Ubayd Allāh, whose octagonal minaret (ṣawma’a muthammana) is of admirable workmanship. The city also contains numerous baths, caravanserais, and much-frequented bazars, and most of its wealthy inhabitants are Copts; there are also some members of the Lawāta tribe. It has a seaport known as al-Māḥūr, which is 18 miles distant, and three forts (quṣūr). The buildings of Ajdābiya do not have wooden roofs, but they are vaulted with baked bricks (aqbāʾ tūb) because of the strong winds that blow incessantly. The prices here are moderate, and many different types of dates come from the city of Awjila. (al-Bakrī 1911, 5–6)

It is important to stress that al-Bakrī’s account is based, as often happens, on earlier sources, and is therefore very likely to reflect the situation of Ajdābiya already in the 10th century. In fact, Abbas Hamdani has identified al-Bakrī’s chief source of information on the settlements of medieval Libya with an inhabitant of al-Qayrawān, Muḥammad b. Yūsuf Ibn al-Warrāq al-Tāʾrikhī, who died in 362/973 (Fehérvári et al. 2002, 14, n. 9).

Because of the availability of water, Ajdābiya became a thriving caravan town with two important functions: it was a stopping place on the main route between the Maghrib and Egypt, and the terminus of the trans-Saharan route connecting the coast with the inland settlement of Awjila, the oases of Jālū and Kufra and, ultimately, Sūdān. As a crossroads-town with a port and extensive public facilities, Ajdābiya was
the most important settlement between the two main Libyan cities of the 10th century: Barqa, a six-day journey to its east, and Ṭarābulus al-Gharb (Tripoli), a sixteen-day journey to its west. The town of Surt, lying about halfway between Ajdābiya and Tripoli, was the only other significant settlement on the Libyan coast, with a local governor, caravan trade, and a harbour (al-Bakrī 1911, 17; Whitehouse 1971–1972, 19).

The Fatimid era until the conquest of Egypt

Following the rise of the Fatimid dynasty in Ifrīqiyya, the region of Cyrenaica was immediately seized by the army of the first imām-caliph ʿUbayd Allāh al-Mahdī (r. 296/909–322/934). The Moroccan historian Ibn ʿIdhārī reports that, in 299/912, the new ruler “made an example” of three Libyan towns with Abbasid sympathies—Surt, Ajdābiya, and Barqa—showing no mercy to their inhabitants (Ibn ʿIdhārī 1980, I, 170). On this occasion, Ajdābiya was probably sacked and its buildings damaged, including the pre-Fatimid mosque mentioned by al-Yaqūbī. In fact, al-Mahdī is known for having obliterated the names of the Abbasid caliphs and their Aghlabid governors from every single monument of his kingdom (Bloom 2007, 29).

Al-Mahdī’s son Abū al-Qāsim (280/893–334/946, r. from 322/934) made three attempts to conquer Egypt: as heir apparent, in 302/914 and 307/919, and as caliph in 323/935, with the regnal name of al-Qāʾīm bi-Amr Allāh. Each one of these attempts was unsuccessful, but provided the opportunity to consolidate Fatimid control over Cyrenaica and the important frontier city of Barqa.

During the first Egyptian campaign of 302/914, the Fatimid army was defeated not far from al-Fusṭāṭ (the capital of the Ikhshidid rulers of Egypt) and forced to return to Ifrīqiyya the following year. According to the Ismāʿīlī historian Idrīs ʿImād al-Dīn (d. 794/1392), the author of the most comprehensive work on the history of the Fatimid dynasty, prince Abū al-Qāsim and his army passed through Ajdābiya on the 12th of Ṣafar 302 (6th of September 914) while on their way to Alexandria. The heir apparent probably resided there for three weeks, since he only arrived in Barqa on the 30th of September (Dachraoui 1981, 145). His second expedition in 307/919 was supported by a fleet, but met the same fate as the previous one. Finally, a third abortive expedition was launched immediately after al-Qāʾīm’s succession to the throne. Thenceforth, the caliph was constrained to focus his military efforts on the Maghrib and the Ibāḍī revolts in Ifrīqiyya, and definitively abandoned his designs on the Ikhshidid territories (Dachraoui 1981, 142–150, 163–164).

Each time Abū al-Qāsim made for and returned from Egypt, he inevitably had to follow the coastal route running from Tripoli to Alexandria, therefore passing through Ajdābiya. The town held a remarkable strategic importance, as it was a staging post halfway between the seat of the Fatimid caliphs in al-Mahdiyya and their expansionist ambitions to the west. It is during one of his several visits to Ajdābiya that Abū al-Qāsim must have decided to rebuild the congregational mosque—as reported by al-Bakrī—thus leaving on the city a powerful mark of Fatimid rule. According to other sources, the same prince also rebuilt a mosque in Tripoli, before his accession to the throne (Whitehouse 1971–2, 17).
A fragmentary inscription found at the Ajdābiya mosque (Figure 15) refers to “[…the mo]nths of the year ten…” “[…fi šu]hūr sanat ʿashara[...]”). Its plain, solemn Kufic script seems to represent the earliest example of Arabic monumental epigraphy found in Ajdābiya. Hence, the fragment can only be attributed to the third century of the Islamic era, and accordingly completed: “[…in the mo]nths of the year ten and three hundred,” i.e. the year 922–923 CE, a date supporting al-Bakrī’s account.2

We know that the Fatimid town of Ajdābiya was administrated by a local wālī (“prefect”) entrusted by the central authority, whose functions, privileges, and duties are briefly mentioned by Ibn Ḥawqal (writing between the years 356/967 and 378/988):

Depending from Barqa is the city of Ajdābiya, built on a rocky plain. Its buildings are made of adobe, brick, and some of stone. It has an elegant mosque, and many Berbers live there. … The governor who resides there is in charge of the different branches of public administration: he collects the taxes from the Berbers and the tithes on agriculture, asking for a tenth of what their orchards and fields yield. He is the one who leads the people in prayer and is a military commander. He also collects duties on the caravans directed to and coming from Südān. The town is close to the sea … where merchant ships dock and from which they depart. The major exports are modest items of clothing and bales of good-quality wool. (Ibn Ḥawqal 1964, 79–80)

2. Even considering the possibility that the letters forming the word “ten” (ʿashara) are instead the first letters of the word “twenty” (ʿashirina), thus reading “the year twenty and three hundred” (i.e. the year 932–933 CE), that would make little difference since, as we have seen, Abū al-Qāsim visited Ajdābiya several times throughout the second, third, and forth decades of the 10th century. It is worth noting here that Bloom (1985, 35, n. 39), quite surprisingly and on the sole basis of the epigraphic style, read the fragment as “the year ten and (four hundred),” i.e. 1018–1019 CE. Therefore, he attributed the inscription to the late reign of caliph al-Ḥākim (r. 386/996–412/1021). This assumption is not supported by textual evidence and makes little historical sense, since Ajdābiya seems to have lost its importance in the early 11th century.
Under al-Qā’im’s nephew al-Mu’izz, the Fatimids were eventually able to launch their ultimate attack to Egypt, whose conquest had long since been prepared both militarily and psychologically by a skilful political propaganda. In 354/965, the caliph ordered the governors of Barqa and Tripoli to have wells and cisterns dug along the route to Egypt, and a fortress built at every stage, about thirty miles one from the other (al-Maqrīzī 2009, 58; Ibn al-Khaṭīb 1964, 59). The caliph had realised that the lines of communication were too long and weak, and that the troops required food, water, and military infrastructures in order to proceed efficiently along the invasion route.

The conquest of Egypt and the regional evolution of Cyrenaica

After the death of the last Ikhshidid amīr in 357/968, Egypt fell into a state of deep political instability: it was time for the Fatimids to take action. The Sicilian general Jawhar led the Fatimid army into battle, and in the June of the following year he conquered the Nile delta and al-Fustāṭ, founding there the palatial city of al-Qāhirah (Cairo) for his master. The time had come for al-Mu’izz to take possession of his new capital, leaving forever Ifriqiyya and the western dominions in the hands of a local viceroy, Buluqquin b. Zīrī. He set out in the direction of Egypt on Thursday the 3rd of Dhū-l-Ḥijja 361 (15th of September 972) at the head of a colossal ceremonial procession that passed through the main cities of North Africa. The furniture and treasures of his palaces were travelling with him, along with the coffins containing the bodies of his holy ancestors—al-Mahdī, al-Qā’im, and his father al-Maṃṣūr—so that they could be buried in the cemetery of the new dynastic seat. The caliph and his court finally reached Cairo in June 362/973.

Thanks to the historian Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1233) we know that the caliphal convoy stopped in Ajdābiya along the route; here the prince Yusūf—an old brother of al-Maṃṣūr—died a natural death (Halm 1996, 419). Ajdābiya was also where the powerful eunuch Jawdhar, a confidante of the first four Fatimid caliphs, saw al-Mu’izz for the last time before passing away in Barqa. In Jawdhar’s biography—composed by his servant Maṃṣūr al-Jawdharī shortly after his death—it is reported that the caliph honoured him by coming on foot to the mule litter in which the old man was travelling, embracing him as a brother (al-Jawdharī 2012, 160 ff).

Following the Fatimid conquest of Egypt, the provinces of Tripoli and Barqa were not included in the territory ruled over by the Banū Zīrī; instead, they answered directly to the central administration of the caliphate. Nevertheless, the name of Ajdābiya seems to disappear from later accounts, probably due to its loss of importance from the perspective of Fatimid political strategy, now focused on the Levant and ʿIrāq. In the early 11th century Tripoli, Surt, and Ajdābiya finally passed under the control of the Zirids, marking an important step towards their gradual detachment from Fatimid vassalage. In 443/1051, when caliph al-Muṣṭanṣīr finally sent the Banū Hilāl to North Africa so as to punish the Zirids for abandoning Shiism and rescinding their obedience to the imām-caliphs, Ajdābiya entered a period of irreversible decline. As pointed out by Abbas Hamdani, however, more than to the Hilalian invasion itself, the cause for the complete impoverishment of Cyrenaica and the Sirtic region must be ascribed to the long Fatimid-Zirid conflict, which dragged on from 391/1001
to 443/1051 (Hamdani 1970, 336). During this period Libya became a highly unstable buffer zone, and its coastal plains turned into a permanent battlefield (Fehérvári et al. 2002, 23).

The geographer al-Idrīsī, writing in 549/1154, regrets the “miserable state and scarce population” of both Ajdābiya and Surt. He also notes that: “In the old times, (Ajdābiya) was surrounded by walls, but now only two forts remain standing in the desert” (al-Idrīsī 2000, 129). Most likely, the whole of the city’s sedentary population was lost in the 12th century, when its monuments were abandoned, and its wells became frequented only by nomads and occasional travellers. Numerous Muslim pilgrims who passed Ajdābiya on their way to Mecca from the 13th century onwards—such as al-ʿAbdarī (1968, 236), al-ʿAyyāshī and al-Warthilānī (1974, 219 ff.)—describe it as a town long since ruined, without any vegetation in the vicinity, and with only a few visible, but abandoned, vestiges of its prosperous past (Abdul-Wahab 1960, 207).

The qaṣr: A caliphal pavilion for al-Muʿizz

Date and interpretation of the structures

After examining the historical parabola of Ajdābiya through the literary sources, there can be little doubt that what remains of its fortress dates from the early Fatimid period, when the strategic and economic importance of the town reached its apex, and the site repeatedly served as a stopover for military leaders, princes, and caliphs. The building was certainly erected between 299/912, the year of al-Mahdī’s punitive raid, and 443/1051, the year marking the beginning of the Hilālian invasions. The possibility of it being one of the pre-Fatimid forts mentioned by al-Yaʿqūbī is very slight, and even assuming this, the archaeological evidence would indicate a complete rebuilding during the 10th century, comparable to Abū al-Qāsim’s reconstruction of the congregational mosque in 310/922–923 (or 320/932–933). On the other hand, given the loss of importance and political stability suffered by Ajdābiya after the Fatimid migration to Egypt, it would be equally hazardous to attribute such a sophisticated structure to the period between 362/973 and 443/1051. Several features of the qaṣr also point to a 10th-century date.

First of all, we have the monumental entrance, recalling the main gate of the Fatimid mosque at al-Mahdiyya (Bloom 2007, 22 ff.; Lézine 1965), as well as the projecting portals of the ribāṭ-s at Sūsa and al-Munastīr (dating from the last quarter of the 8th century—see Lézine 1956). Another Libyan example of salient porch can be found at Qaṣr al-Ḥammām, a Roman fortified farm with a long history of reconstruction and repair between Surt and Tripoli (Whitehouse 1971–1972, 19). The square structure at the entrance of the qaṣr bears a dedicatory inscription dated 473 H (1080–1081 AD) whose simplicity—in fact, little more than a graffito—is an eloquent witness to the decline of the epigraphic tradition in Libya during the 11th century, especially if compared with the fine inscriptions—all in relief—from Ajdābiya, Surt, and Barqa (see Abdouli 2013 and his bibliography).

Secondly, elaborate bent entrances such as the one at Ajdābiya occur in other fortified buildings of similar date, all excavated in Ifrīqiyya: from the late Aghlabid citadel of Raqqāda (Chabbi 1968) to the palace built at al-Mahdiyya by Abū al-Qāsim in the
320s/930s (Marçais 1954, 78–79; Maoudoud 1991; Louichi 1991; Bloom 1985, 22); from the Ḍaṣr al-Baḥr at the citadel of the Banū Ḥammād in modern Algeria (early 11th century—see Bourouiba 1975, 40), to the slightly earlier ḍaṣr of the Banū Zīrī at Ashīr (Golvin 1966, 67–68; Bloom 1985, 22).

The decisive clue to the date of our fortress-palace, however, lies in its decoration. As already noted, its moulded and carved stuccowork was almost certainly made by the same craftsmen who decorated the congregational mosques of Ajdābiya and Surt. In the Ajdābiya mosque, the floriated Kufic inscription bearing the date 351/962–963 (Figure 12) must have been installed during the renovation undergone by the building under al-Muʿizz, when the double columns of the central nave were reinforced, the prayer hall was re-roofed, and plaster decoration was added (Whitehouse 1972–1973, 24). Here and at the palace the very same epigraphic style was chosen, as well as in the mosque at Surt, and in the mysterious building still buried in the periphery of Barqa, also erected by al-Muʿizz. Surely, this series of constructions and renovations sponsored by the fourth Fatimid caliph immediately before Jawhar’s conquest of Egypt must be read in terms of political propaganda and preparation for the dynastic migration of 362/973. But what exactly was the function of the ḍaṣr excavated at Ajdābiya?

The plan of the building (Figure 2) can be conveniently divided into three functional units: 1) the monumental entrance, disproportionately large and conveying a sense of ceremonial grandeur, occupying about 20% of the structure; 2) the dark buyūt and towers on the long sides, arguably employed as storage rooms and quarters for the troops and their equipment, occupying about 45% of the structure; 3) the axial “palatial suite,” possibly a vaulted throne room or audience hall, self-contained and appropriately decorated, occupying the remaining 30% of the edifice. With more than half of its space serving a symbolic rather than utilitarian purpose, the ḍaṣr was not a simple military fort, nor a caravanserai, but an imposing palace built for an important dignitary who would have held court under its qubba, with his retinue inhabiting the galleries, and his troops manning the towers and the roof. Therefore, it would be questionable to simply regard it as one of the fortresses established by al-Muʿizz along the coastal route to facilitate Jawhar’s military enterprise, as mentioned by al-Maqrīzī and Ibn al-Khaṭīb. If a similar structure was ever built in or near Ajdābiya around 354/965, that might have coincided with one of the three quṣūr seen by al-Bakrī, or one of the two mentioned by al-Idrīsī; its vestiges, however, must lie somewhere else.

The palatial character of the structure is confirmed by the hierarchical arrangement of the three functional units, conveying a strong sense of axial orientation towards the vaulted chambers at the opposite end of the building, beyond the central courtyard. This spatial layout is already found in Umayyad and Abbasid palatial architecture, and was adopted by the last Aghlabid amīr-s in their ḍaṣr al-sahn (“palace of the courtyard”) at Raqqāda, subsequently seized, renovated, and used as official residence by the first Fatimid caliph al-Mahdī between 296/909 and 309/921 (Chabbi 1968). At Ajdābiya, the same visual hierarchy emerges from the tripartite suite of chambers, with the central apse imposingly open towards the cross-hall and the courtyard, while the two lateral rooms were entered through smaller doorways corresponding to the side openings of the cross-hall. Lézine (1971) related this
architectural element to the early Abbasid palace of al-Ukhaydir (158/775) and to al-Mutawakkil's building campaigns at Sāmarrāʾ (232/847–247/861). However, closer in space and time to our structure is the audience hall of the south-east palace at al-Manṣūriyya (Figure 16), the round palatial city erected near al-Qayrawān by the third Fatimid caliph and completed by al-Muʿizz in the 340s/950s (Zbiss 1956; Terrasse 1977, 593). The resemblance is indeed remarkable—although the plan is comprehensibly more elaborate at al-Manṣūriyya—and it is tempting to see in both sites a reflection of the same approach to ceremonial settings.

The function of the qaṣr

Now, was our fortress-palace the residence of the local governor, who “would have preferred to sojourn outside the walls of Ajdābiya, surrounded only by his personal escort and followers” (Abdussaid 1964, 119)? As convincingly argued by Whitehouse, this is an erroneous assumption, since the structure is evidently inadequate for a permanent residence (Whitehouse 1971–1972, 20–21). In fact, the qaṣr might be more accurately defined as a fortified pavilion, lacking private apartments and intended solely for temporary ceremonial use. What I would suggest, in accordance with David Whitehouse, is that this pavilion was built by al-Muʿizz as a palatial rest house along his triumphal route from Ifrīqiyya to Egypt, between 358/969 and 361/972 (Whitehouse 1971–1972, 20–21; see also Bloom 2007, 65). Here, he would have received the homage of the local notables and the allegiance of the chiefs of the desert hinterlands in a daunting architectural setting, erected outside the walled city so as to keep himself aloof from the inhabitants of Ajdābiya.3

3. Whitehouse (1971–1972, 21) refers to the 14th-century author al-Tijānī, who allegedly wrote that the fourth Fatimid caliph had ordered a series of palaces to be built along his itinerary to Cairo. However, I could not find this reference in any of al-Tijānī’s published works.
It is also likely that the fortress-palace at Ajdābiya was only one of a series of caliphal pavilions built in a short period of time along the Libyan coast. A second qaṣr, for instance, was situated outside the city of Barqa, most probably where the ash-lars inscribed with the name of al-Muʿizz (Figure 14) were unearthed in 1936. Thanks to the biography of ustādh Jawdhar, mentioned above, we know that this palace occupied an outlying area called al-Mayāsir, and comprised a little mosque where the eunuch was buried, during a ceremony presided by the imām-caliph himself (al-Jawdharī 2012, 165). Here, al-Muʿizz resided for about six weeks in the spring of 362/973, before moving on to Alexandria (Brett 2001, 318, 324–325; Halm 1996, 419).

Some scholars have argued that at Ajdābiya the migrant caliph was housed in a grand tent or marquee, and used the fortress-palace and its audience hall only for ceremonial purposes (Bloom 2007, 65; Brett 2001, 324–325). This might well be true, given the non-residential character of the building, but it is equally plausible that the ruler resided and consumed his meals in the same “palatial suite” where he received his guests. Once more, the sources give us some important clues.

The passage of Jawdhar’s biography relating the events that occurred during the caliphal stopover in Ajdābiya was mistranslated by Marius Canard, probably due to some ambiguities in the original manuscript. His French translation reads: “...et il m’indiqua la colline (‘aqaba [?]) sur laquelle était dressée la grande tente (fāза) bénie dans laquelle il (i.e. al-Muʿizz) déjeunait” (Al-Jawdharī 1958, 220). However, this version has now been partially revisited in a new English edition of the Risāla Jawdhariyya, reading: “...and he showed me the dome (qubba) in which he was having his meal” (wa-ashāra ilayya al-qubba allati kāna yataghaddā fi-hā bi-l-fāza al-mubāraka) (al-Jawdharī 2012, 161). The term qubba, I believe, refers to the axial chamber of the fortress-palace with its hemi-dome, which may have then functioned also as the private dwelling of the caliph, though for only a few weeks.

As for the term fāza, the English translator still renders it as “tent,” despite its much broader meaning of “shelter” or “refuge,” confirmed by the fact that the 14th-century historian ʿImād al-Dīn, quoting the same passage of the Risāla, employed the word mafāza, meaning a “place of security” (ʿImād al-Dīn 1984, n. 249). Edward Lane’s Lexicon also indicates fāza as a synonym of mizalla (Lane 1877, VI, 2458), the term that the medieval sources use to define the ceremonial parasol of the Fatimid rulers (Halm 1996, 352), one of the regalia which al-Muʿizz might have used within the fortress-palace of Ajdābiya and during his journey. Hence, the term fāza/mafāza can equally indicate the qaṣr itself, or a canopy sustained by two poles under which the caliph sat enthroned in the apsed hall of his palace.

By renovating the congregational mosques of Surt and Ajdābiya, and building his palaces outside Ajdābiya and Barqa, al-Muʿizz endowed with some of the finest architectural achievements of the early Fatimid period an apparently marginal region of semi-desert, which only for a few decades came to play a crucial role in the realisation of his political ambitions. As a result, the caliph made very clear that the frontiers of royal patronage could extend far beyond the monuments of the capital cities—such as al-Mahdiyya, Raqqāda, al-Manṣūriyya—to wherever the Fatimid ideology of power would push them. This is an encouraging reality for archaeologists,
implying the possibility of new significant discoveries in previously neglected areas. At Surt, for instance, a still unexcavated mound outside the city walls—the so-called North Fort—might include the ruins of another qaṣr erected by al-Muʿizz as a rest house during his one-way journey to Egypt. This is possibly the reason why Géza Fehérvári, concluding his final report on the Surt excavations, made a suggestive reference to certain features reminiscent of the fortress-palace at Ajdābiya: “Another important area that will deserve attention is the North Fort, where several walls and the outline of a round tower are visible” (Fehérvári et al. 2002, 115).

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