



Overleaf: Head of an owl. Limestone and pigment. Late Period-early Ptolemaic period, 664-150 BC. Purchased in Oakland, California, 1948. 10.8 x 10.5 x 6.3 cm. OIM E17972. Between Heaven & Earth Catalog No. 22

PROJECT REPORTS

ARCHAEOLOGY OF ISLAMIC CITIES

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Fustat, in modern-day Cairo, has a unique role in the archaeology of Islamic cities. It was one of the first capital cities founded after the Muslim conquest and, like Basra, Kufa, and other foundations, this settlement was a new location and not the modification of an older classical city (e.g., Alexandria). Descriptions from medieval geographers suggest an urban core called the Ahl al-Raya, around which the *khittat* or tribal districts were laid out.

A series of articles on the archaeology of Islamic cities within previous *Oriental Institute Annual Reports* have examined the principles behind early urban organization at Fustat. In the 2004–2005 *Annual Report*, a model was explored in light of al-Muqaddasi’s urban terminology from the tenth century (pp. 15–16). In the 2005–2006 *Annual Report*, this model was expanded with information from the extensive excavations to explain what George Scanlon, one of its most prominent archaeologists, called the “riddle” of the earliest foundation. In addition, the new landscape methodology of Tony Wilkinson was employed to address subsequent urban development (p. 23). This series of articles also examined the city of Rayy, medieval Teheran, and its beautiful glazed sherds recovered during Oriental Institute excavations, then being studied by Tanya Treptow. Soon afterwards, Tanya organized these artifacts and their story into a fine temporary exhibit and catalog in the Oriental Institute Museum.

Just a few months ago, Tanya defended her doctoral dissertation on “Evolving Excavations,” describing the origins of the practice of Islamic archaeology in Egypt from



Figure 1. Aly Bahgat sitting in the ruins of a house at Fustat, Old Cairo

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the 1880s to the 1980s. This is a fascinating examination of personalities and institutions involved with the recognition of an Islamic past and the stages of employment of excavation methodologies. The fundamental example for this “pre-history” of Islamic archaeology was the site of Fustat. The mounds of Fustat were the archaeological setting where Aly Bahgat devised a method for recovering artifacts, especially fine glazed ceramics, and architectural monuments, particularly large houses, on behalf of the Museum of Arab Art from 1914 to 1924. This presentation of archaeological remains led contemporary scholars to speak of the resurrection of the early Islamic city.

Some forty years later, George Scanlon regenerated interest in these ruins, which were under threat from urban development in modern Cairo. He benefited from the new currents of archaeology being employed in the Nubian salvage campaigns. The whole neighborhoods he uncovered became valued in terms of the cultural heritage of Egypt. The most recent campaigns for the recovery

of the city of Fustat have been conducted by Roland-Pierre Gayraud on behalf of the French Archaeological Institute (IFAO). He concentrated on a fringe of the city called Istabl ‘Antar, where he discovered a stratified sequence of early Islamic houses, as well as a Fatimid-period cemetery with magnificent Islamic works of art. Perhaps as important, he revealed another aspect of the urban planning and development. Regrettably, these areas were slated for modern housing developments and are now threatened to be entirely destroyed.

The history revealed in Tanya’s dissertation is another example of the magic of Egypt, even extended into its more recent archaeological periods. This suggests a need for new archaeological models, ones focusing on urban social structures available through medieval documents from the Cairo Geniza, as studied first by Solomon Schechter and then by S. D. Goitein. The heritage of Fustat has been under threat for over a century, and yet, with increasingly clear goals, methods, and practices, new models may enrich the experience of Egypt and the modern world.



Figure 2. Solomon Schechter studying documents from the Cairo Geniza

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