

A NOTE ON THE CEMETERY OF THE ABBASID CALIPHS  
OF CAIRO AND THE SHRINE OF SAIYIDA NAFĪSA

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## NOTES

### A NOTE ON THE CEMETERY OF THE ABBASID CALIPHS OF CAIRO AND THE SHRINE OF SAIYIDA NAFĪSA

In the cemetery of Saiyida Nafīsa in Cairo there is a mausoleum which contains the tombs of the Abbasid caliphs of Cairo. Although little visited, it is of artistic importance and historical interest—as is the whole site. The mausoleum, which stands behind the modern mosque of Saiyida Nafīsa, is well known, but it is difficult to find out anything about the surroundings.<sup>1</sup>

The vast area known as the cemetery of Saiyida Nafīsa, or the *Ḳarāfa al-kubrā* ("the great cemetery"), lies between the site of Fustāṭ on the southwest, and the Muḳaṭṭam hills on the east, and to the north is the mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn. Immediately to the west is the site of al-Ḳatā'i' (by the mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn), dating from about 860 A.D., and south of that al-'Askar, built about 751 A.D. To the northeast of the mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn stands the Citadel on a spur of the Muḳaṭṭam, and farther to the north, about a

<sup>1</sup> The following bibliography has been kindly given to me by K. A. C. Creswell: Maḳrīzī, *Ḳhiṭaṭ* (Bulaq, 1270 H. [1853-54 A.D.]), II, 242. Al-Sakhāwī, *Tuḥfat al-aḥbāb* (Cairo, 1927), IV, 119 (on the margin of the *Nafḥ al-tīb*). Al-Djabartī, *Merveilles biographiques et historiques* (Cairo, 1889), III, 126 and 241-42. E. J. Rogers, "Rapport sur le lieu de sépulture des khalifes abbassides," *Procès verbaux du comité de conservation . . .*, 1884, pp. 21-28. Ali Pasha Mubārak, *Ḳhiṭaṭ al-djādīda* (Cairo, 1888), V, 134. M. van Berchem, "Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum," *Mém. mission archaeol. française du Caire*, XIX (1894), 63-64. M. Herz, "Les Sépultures abbassides," *Procès verbaux du comité de conservation . . .*, 1910, pp. 131-41. K. A. C. Creswell, "Brief Chronology," *Bull. instit. français archaeol. orientale*, XVI (1919), 76 (mentions only the mausoleum). R. Strothmann, "Al-Saiyida Nafīsa," *Encycl. Islām*, III (1934), 826-27.

mile away, is the city of al-Ḳāhira, founded in 969 A.D., by the Fatimids.

The area was used as a burial place from very early times. At first it was probably limited to a small portion of the present site, and there were houses on part of what is now the cemetery. We know that the Imam Shāfi'ī and Saiyida Nafīsa lived there. Saiyida Nafīsa, the great granddaughter of Hasan, grandson of the Prophet, was considered a holy woman. It has been related that the Imam Shāfi'ī used to go to her house to collect traditions of the Prophet and that after his death his body was taken there in order that she might recite the prayers for the dead over it. She died in Ramadan 208 H. (824 A.D.), and the site of her tomb, as well as that of the Imam not far away, soon became a holy place. Eventually a shrine (*mashhad*) was erected over it, and the surrounding area took its name from this. Many people chose to be buried near her tomb.

When, four centuries later, some members of the Abbasid family escaped the conquest of Baghdad by the Mongols (1258 A.D.), the Mameluke Baibars realized their political value and brought a representative of the line to Cairo. He and his descendants, known as the second dynasty of the Abbasid caliphs, signed their masters' fatwās and gave countenance to the rulers' actions. They were technically the center of Islam and, as such, were valuable pawns, as Sultan Selim perceived when he conquered Egypt in 1517 A.D. and took with him to Constantinople the last of the line, who, after having bequeathed his title and rights to the Sultan of Turkey, was allowed to return to Egypt, where he died in 945 H. (1538 A.D.).

In 640 H. (1242 A.D.) Abū Nadla, the ambassador of the first dynasty of the Abbasid caliphs, was buried in the cemetery behind the

shrine of Saiyida Nafīsa. Presumably, when his masters' successors came to Cairo some twenty years later, in 1261 A.D., they liked the place of sepulture of their predecessors' ambassador so much that they built the mausoleum there about 1261-64 A.D. Abū Nadla's inscription of 640 H. (1242 A.D.) on a large cenotaph is the earliest date in the mausoleum. The next date is in the inscription of a child who died in 664 H. (1265 A.D.); it seems unlikely that Abū Nadla would have built such a tomb for himself, as it is far too imposing for a man of his position; nor is it very likely that the caliphs would have taken over someone else's mausoleum for themselves. The style of the mausoleum is so similar to that of *Shadīar al-Durr*, dating from 1250 A.D., that it is almost certainly contemporary; the caliphs probably built their mausoleum so as to include Abū Nadla's tomb, or else moved the latter.

This mausoleum (*Figs. 3-6*) is well known and, as it is illustrated in most books on Cairo, I shall not describe it here. But little has been written about the entire site and the buildings that have been replaced by the modern mosque of Saiyida Nafīsa.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Creswell, to whom I owe the photographs in this article, provided me with further literary information. Rogers Bey, who found the mausoleum, published the inscriptions of the cenotaphs (*Rogers, op. cit.*, pp. 21-28). He seems never to have seen the south wall of the cemetery, though, of course, he knew the old mosque and *mashhad*. By going through the reports of the *Comité de conservation des monuments de l'art arabe*, I obtained a great deal of miscellaneous information about the site, mainly concerned with credits for repairing various parts of it and with inquiries as to who were the owners to the rights over it. The plan here reproduced (*Fig. 1*) is from Herz (*op. cit.*, pp. 131-41). Through the plan is incomplete in that it does not have the wall to the north of the mosque, Herz obviously must have seen the old mosque and shrine before the fire which destroyed the mosque about 1892. In the subsequent rebuilding by the Khedive Abbas, the shrine was destroyed. Unfortunately, I could not find any further

Our starting point (*Figs. 1-2*) is the mausoleum of the Abbasids' for, though it has no historical inscriptions, it gives us a series of dates on the eight cenotaphs which are those of the various individuals buried in the vault beneath (*Fig. 5*); not all of them are members of the Abbasid family, for a son of Baibars, and Abū Nadla are buried here.

The approach is from the *Shāri' al-Ashraf*, the great street from the north leading to the cemeteries. To the right are the ruins of al-'Askar (the pre-Ṭulūnid suburb). The entrance is under an attractive but late stone gateway beside a *sabil* of not much interest and through a long passage which leads between somewhat heterogeneous buildings up to the modern mosque of Saiyida Nafīsa. These buildings are of great interest for, though apparently none of them is older than the seventeenth century, they are on the site of the dependencies of the *mashhad* of Abbasid days; to the left is the house of the hereditary sheikh. The present sheikh is a descendant of the sheikhs of the Abbasid period who were confirmed in their tenure by Sultan Selim. The little square opposite the mosque has suffered much from reconstruction and bears no relation to what was there in early times, but in spite of ruin, fire, and reconstruction there is a remarkable continuity about this place.

We have no knowledge of what the tomb of Saiyida Nafīsa of 824 A.D., was like, but we know that it was restored in 553 H. (1158 A.D.) by al-Ḥāfiẓ and that Maḳrīzī saw an inscription here in the name of Mustanṣir of the year 482 H. (1080 A.D.). Al-Dījabartī said that the mausoleum was repaired in 1173 H. (1759-60 A.D.) and that the tomb as well as the mosque was repaired, presumably at the same date. The buildings that Herz saw must have been late Turkish

record of what was there before the fire, though it is almost inconceivable that there does not exist somewhere an account of these buildings.

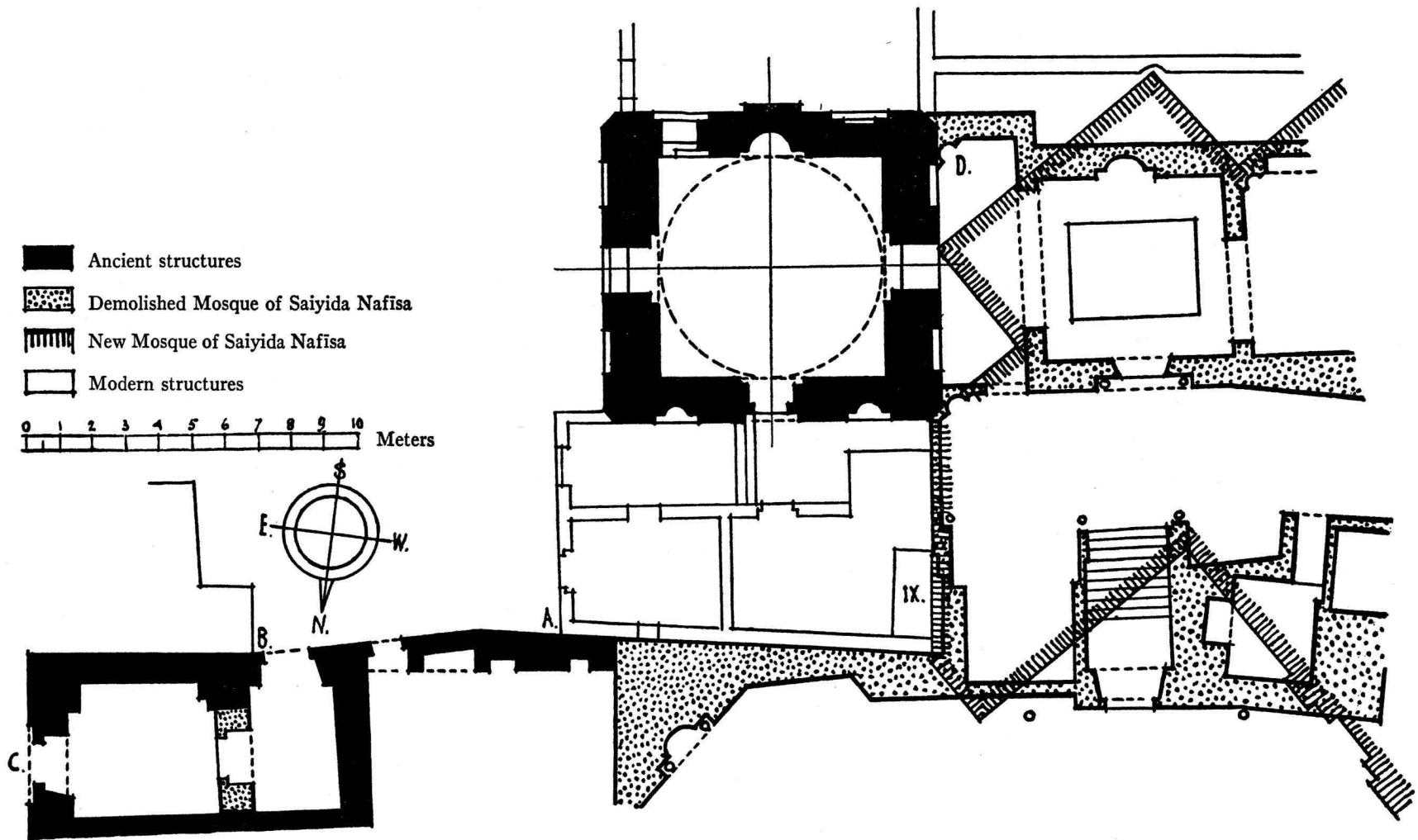


FIG. 1.—TOMB OF THE ABBASID CALIPHS IN CAIRO  
(Plan made by Max Herz, 1910)

# THE CEMETERY OF THE ABBASID CALIPHS OF CAIRO IN THE KARĀFA AL-KUBRĀ (SAIYIDA NAFĪSA)

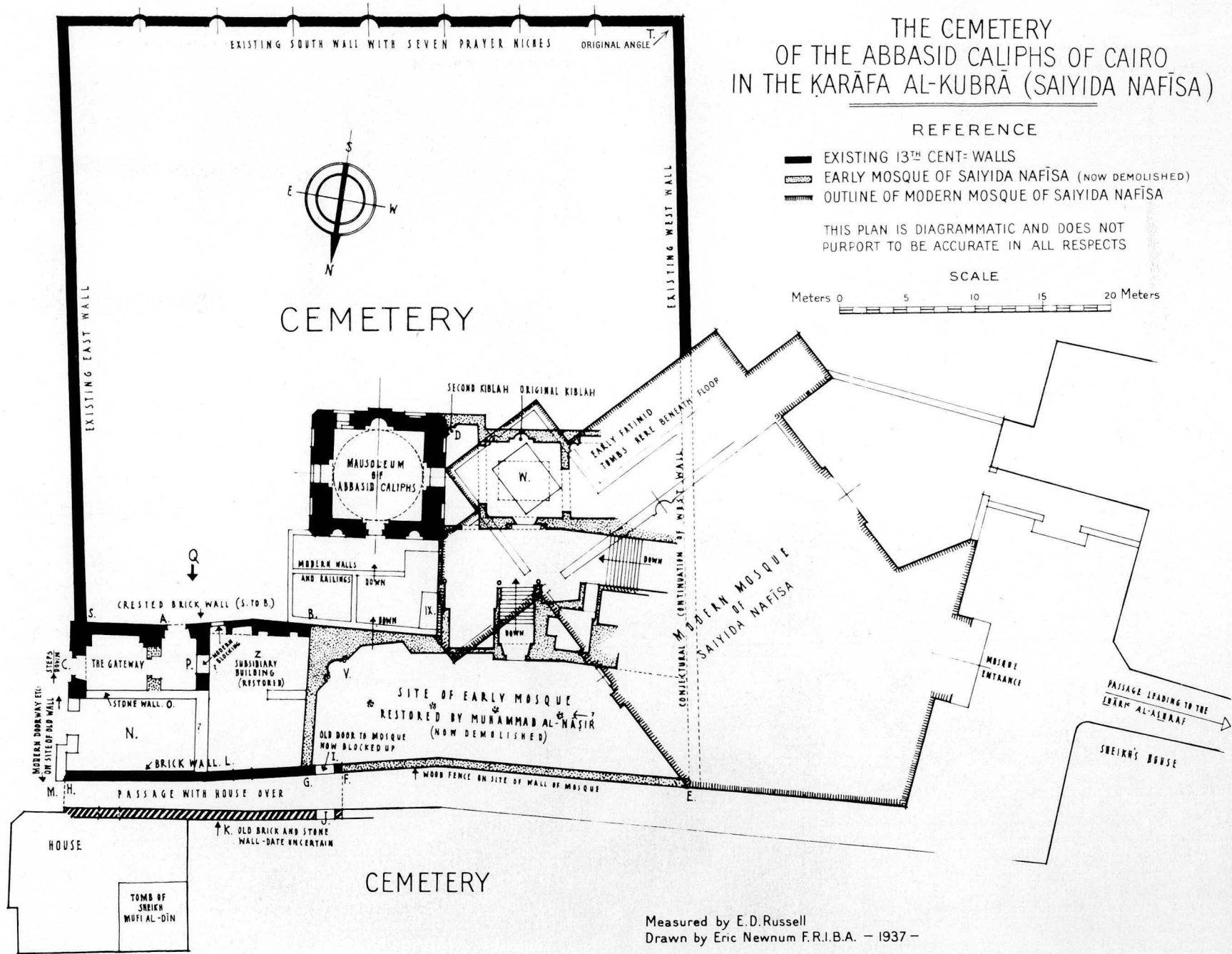
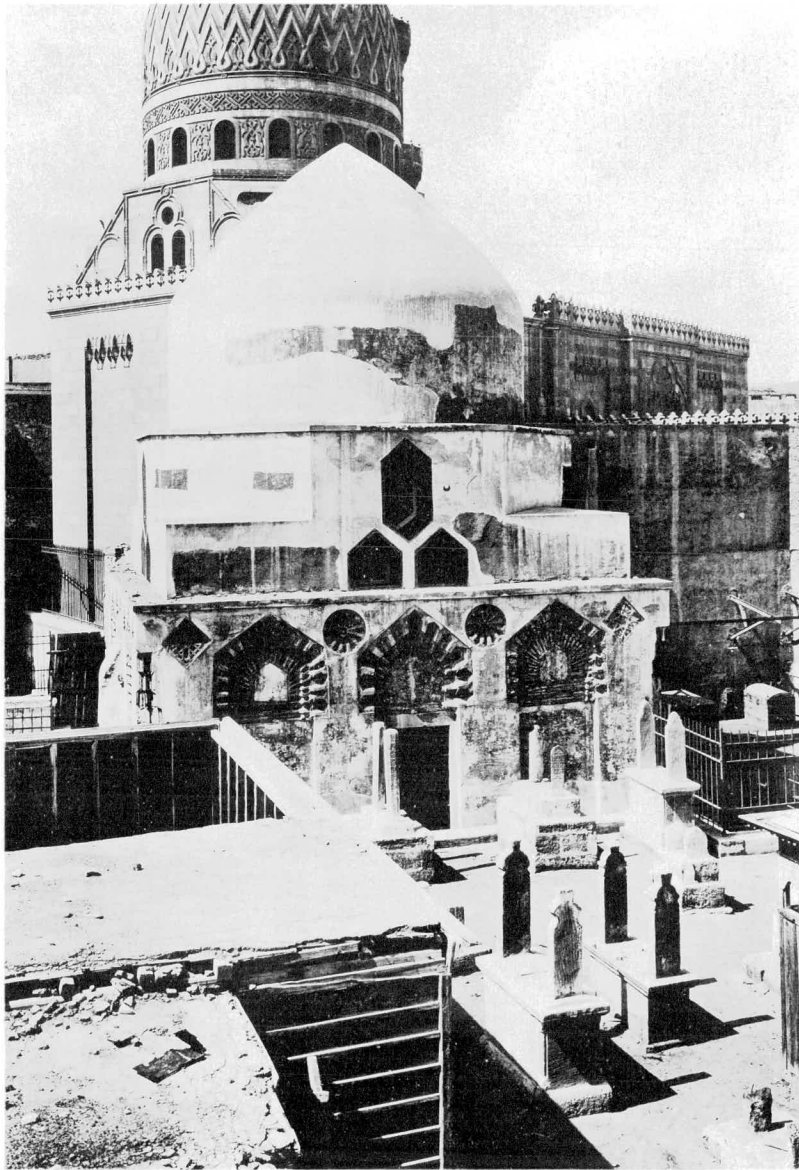
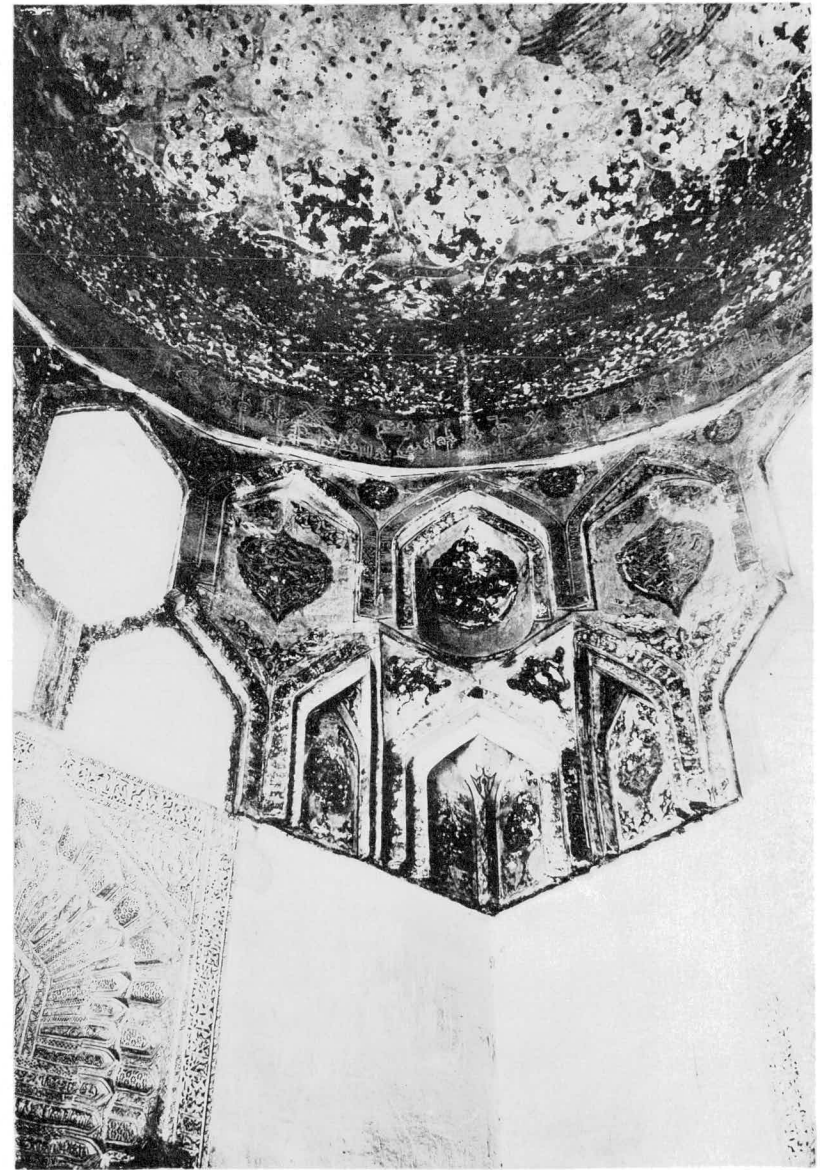


FIG. 2



PHOTOGRAPH: CRESWELL

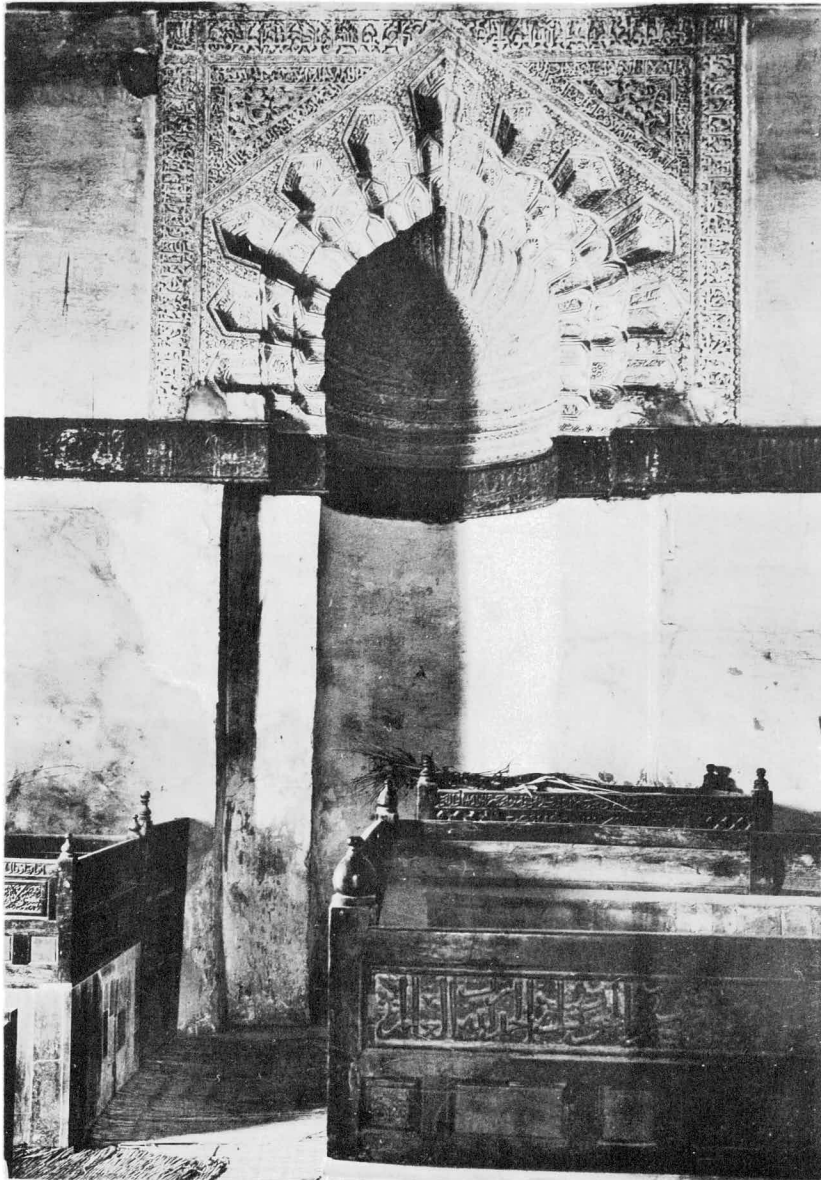
FIG. 3—MAUSOLEUM OF ABBASID CALIPHS. VIEW FROM EAST



PHOTOGRAPH: CRESWELL

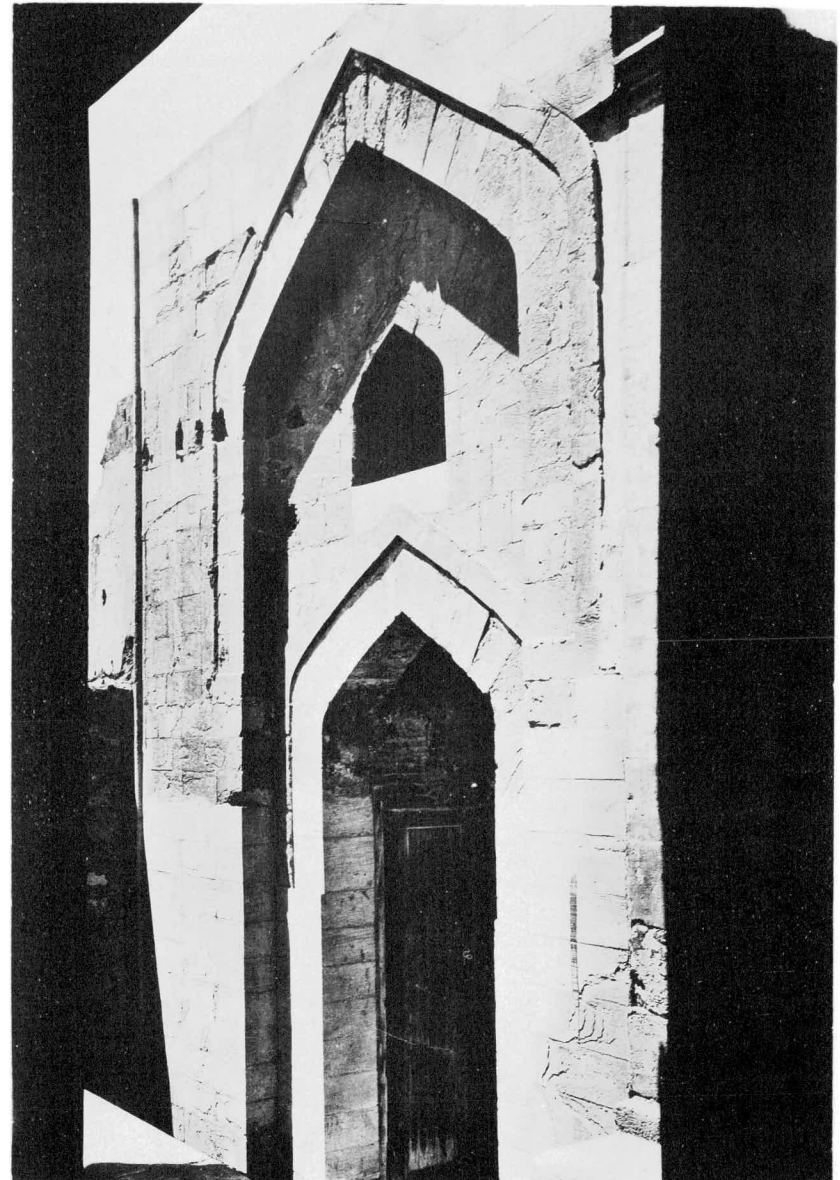
FIG. 4—DOME AND PENDENTIVES OF MAUSOLEUM





PHOTOGRAPH: CRESWELL

FIG. 5—KIBLAH-WALL AND TĀBŪTS



PHOTOGRAPH: CRESWELL

FIG. 6—MONUMENTAL DOOR OF CALIPH'S CEMETERY (FROM EAST)

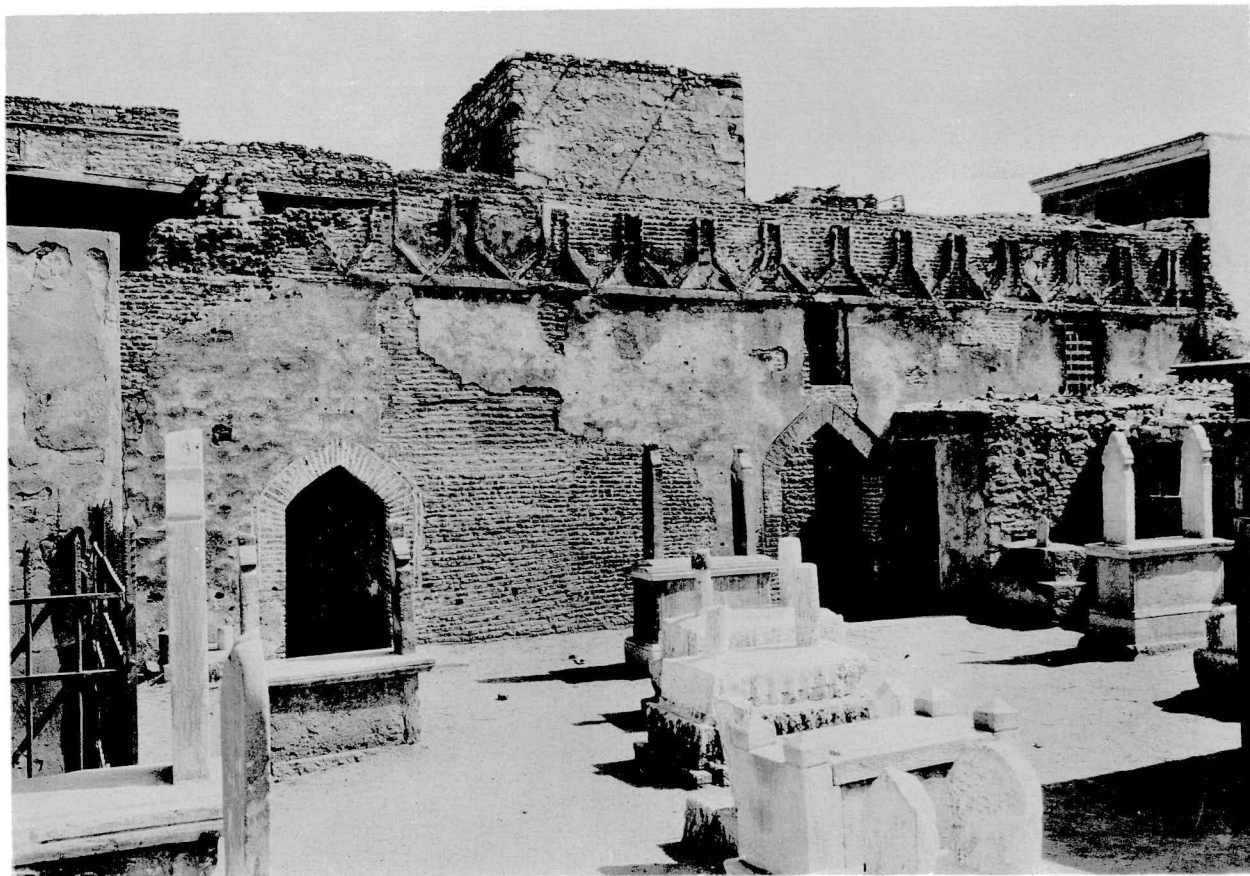


FIG. 7—WALL OF GATE SHOWING CRESTING (FROM SOUTH)

PHOTOGRAPH: CRESWELL



FIG. 8—SOUTH WALL OF CEMETERY. THREE SOUTHWEST NICHES

PHOTOGRAPH: CRESWELL

reconstructions of no particular interest, which would account for there having been no photographs or plans of them left on record. The *mashhad* also must have been a muddle of old buildings, probably largely Fatimid, for at that time there was much building, and there was an increased veneration for the saint during this Shiah rule. The site of the tomb is marked on both plans; Figure 2 gives the modern superimposed building, beneath which lies the old tomb. It will be seen on Figure 2 that there were Fatimid tombs close to the *mashhad*. The first kiblah of the early shrine is approximately to the south. It will be seen that two stairs led down from the higher level to the little court before the *mashhad*. In this little court, which was on the ground level of the caliphs' mausoleum, were other graves. As is evident from the plan the mausoleum was placed as close to the tomb as possible, apparently it backed on to the old wall of the *mashhad*, and its kiblah faced in the same direction that the shrine did.

The date of the erection of the mosque on the north side is unknown, but it was restored in 693-94 H. (1294-95 A.D.) by Muhammad al-Nāṣir ibn Ḳalā'ūn. At this stage it must have been later than was the *mashhad*; otherwise there would have been no necessity for the descending steps, for the ground was originally level (*Fig. 2*, steps descending from north and west). I take it that this mosque was on the site of still older buildings and, possibly, tombs, and that these were left and the mosques superimposed upon them. The pious would have been reluctant to destroy a tomb, but would not have hesitated to put it under the floor of a mosque.

Both plans show that the position of the kiblah of this mosque had been changed—almost certainly at the time of al-Nāṣir. The caliphs sited their kiblah to face in the same direction as did the *mashhad*; the kiblah marked *D* in the corner must also be of the later date.

This change of direction of the kiblah is also the reason for the extraordinary shape of the modern mosque. The superstructure of the tomb has been turned, without interfering with the tomb below, in order to make it face the changed direction of the modern kiblah, which is of the time of al-Nāṣir.

My information about the wall was received from the sheikh who drew me a plan of it as it was forty-five years ago. According to his plan the wall *E* to *L*, where there is now but a wooden paling, was the old north wall of the mosque of al-Nāṣir, and he stated that it is still beneath the ground. The original mosque might have been wider and not the peculiar shape that it is on the plan, but it must be remembered that on a holy site dating from an early period, with many previous buildings already in existence, later buildings had to accommodate themselves to the limitations of the site without regard to symmetry. The whole place was probably cluttered up with buildings in Herz's time. The sheikh also said that there was a line of pillars down the middle of the mosque. I have shown these conjecturally.

The passage *G* to *H* projects a little to the west of the kiblah wall of the old mosque; here there is an old stone door, *I*, now blocked up. The sheikh stated that this was the egress from the mosque to the passage and that there was no door in the east wall of the mosque.<sup>3</sup> The passage is roofed, and over part of it are superstructures, houses, and remains of buildings. The right-hand wall of the passage, *L*, is an ancient brick wall with many coats of old stucco; I have counted four coatings of tremendous thickness. The wall *K* to the left is apparently on a stone foundation, the upper part being of brick and

<sup>3</sup> There is actually a door here now in the modern wall, but I have left all such extraneous details out of my plan.

stone. Behind it is the cemetery of Mufi al-Dīn, who has a little domed Fatimid tomb here, now sunk deep below the ground, at the level of the Abbasid mausoleum to the south of the passage; a door at *J* leads into the cemetery opposite the old door, *I*, to the mosque; it is similar, but considerably lower, and the passage floor is at a higher level—that of the early mosque. Behind the cemetery of Mufi al-Dīn there is another little mausoleum, which is said to be the tomb of al-Djawharī, Saiyida Nafisa's servant.

The passage leads to a stone doorway *M* at the end, exactly like *I* and *J*, except that it has had a later segmental arch fitted into it. To the south there is a short length of modern wall, with a door which leads into a little cemetery, *N*, of no interest. Beyond this is the monumental doorway *C* (*Fig. 6*), which, as shown on *Figure 2*, is the gateway to the enclosure in which the mausoleum of the Abbasid caliphs is situated. It is built in the usual oblique fashion of such portals and is now ruined, the vaults being broken away. On the right is a modern wall. I do not think there ever was an old wall exactly at this place, inasmuch as this one cuts through the brick vaulting. It would appear that the wall, which must have existed, was slightly farther to the north. I do not see why Herz gave this and did not give what is without doubt the original farthest north wall of the gate (see *Fig. 2*, *L* and *O*) and its dependencies—buildings which must certainly have been there because adjacent to all mausoleums were structures where the women of the family passed the days of mourning.

Beyond the gate is the cemetery at *Q*; on the south side of the gate there is an old wall with most interesting archaic cresting, the only example of cresting in the enclosure (*Fig. 1*, *A* to *B*; *Fig. 2*, *S* to *B*, and *Fig. 7*). In the building to the west of the gate *Z* just behind the site of the kiblah *V*, is the old brick wall, *L*, of the

corridor. There is no intervening wall, and the floor level is only slightly higher than that of the gate. The gateway *C* was possibly cut off from *N*, but perhaps it communicated with *Z* by *P*, where there seem to be traces of a door with later filling.

There are no traces of cresting in the wall of the corridor, although one would have expected to find it here in what was the outer wall of the building. But it must be remembered that cresting is structurally weak and would have easily tended to disintegrate.<sup>4</sup> I cannot state whether this cresting was open or always solid as it now appears.

At the corner of the gateway at *S* is a fragment of wall projecting south near the top and above the existing wall. This was unnoted by Herz (there were other buildings here in his time); but it is an old wall bonded with the gate and must be the beginning of the east wall of the enclosure, for it is in alignment with the southeast angle of the south wall. This wall is brick and part stone, mended in places with the old bricks, and broken off below what would have been the line of the cresting; it joins the south wall of the enclosure, where there are seven prayer niches, which form a unique feature among Cairo monuments. They are placed in the south wall of the cemetery at regular intervals (*Fig. 8*). These alternate in size, and the center one is the largest; it is flanked by two smaller ones, these again in their turn by two larger medium-sized ones, and the wall toward each end is completed with smaller ones.<sup>5</sup> The niches (see *Fig. 2* and *Fig. 8*) are Ayyubid in

<sup>4</sup> This can be seen in the mausoleum of Mustafa Pasha where we have similar but open cresting, forming a cutout pattern; this has been filled in in places where a superstructure had been erected above it (see mausoleum of Saiyida 'Ātika and of al-Dja'farī).

<sup>5</sup> Herz mentioned three, the Survey map (1:1000) gives two.

type, keel-arched like those of the mausoleum (*Fig. 5*); they had pillars at one time at each angle, but these have lost their shafts in the course of time. They still retain their ancient coating of stucco, and their apses form salients on the back of the wall. This wall is still about ten feet high, but must have been much higher; it is broken away just below the top of the tallest niche, and the level of the ground is now more than a niche higher than the floor of the mausoleum. The center niche was probably about fifteen feet high. Was this wall surmounted by a cresting similar to that of the gateway, or did it originally have a roofed *riwāk* in front of it similar to the short one in front of Saiyida Ruḳaiya? At the southwest corner the angle appears to be original; the stucco here is old, but I can find no trace of the spring of the arches of a *riwāk*. Possibly the wall is broken off below what would have been that level. This wall continues north until it is lost in some buildings at the back of the modern mosque.

We are now in a position to reconstruct the whole site. The enclosure originally included the *mashhad* in its perimeter, but appears to have ended just short of the steps that led down from the west to the little court at about the place where the main *kiblah* of the modern mosque is now situated. To the north of these steps was the early mosque, which in turn had its own steps leading down to the little court. From this I conclude that first of all, in 824 A.D., the tomb of the saint was built. The *mashhad* was probably built next, and then other tombs rapidly followed.

There are Fatimid tombs beneath the floor of the modern mosque, situated outside the site of the old *mashhad*. The sheikh told me that there were once many more; at IX, under the wall of the present mosque and beside the old wall of the *mashhad* court was the tenth-century tomb of *Khadīdja* now moved to another posi-

tion near *B*; on the other side of the passage is the Fatimid tomb of Muḥi al-Dīn. No doubt a mosque was soon built (where the mosque of Muhammad al-Nāṣir is shown), but possibly considerably later than the *mashhad*, and on the site of tombs, the area having already become congested. The Abbasid caliphs built the present mausoleum as close to the *mashhad* as they could get it, in or about 1261 A.D., and included in it the tomb of Abū Nadla. The next step, taken by the Abbasids or Baibars, possibly at the time of the erection of the mausoleum, was the building of the enclosure, which took in the *mashhad* and the mosque (the north wall of which makes the outside of the enclosure), many tombs remaining undisturbed within the walls. These caliphs also built the great gate and the monumental south wall, and thus a magnificent private cemetery was formed, with the *mashhad* and mosque as a part of it.

The cresting of the gate is archaic in form and is similar to that of the mausoleum of Mustafa Pasha, which dates from 1267-72 A.D. If turned upside down it becomes an Ayyubid keel arch, such as occurs in the niches of the mausoleum and of the south wall. It is agreed by all authorities that the gate is of the middle of the thirteenth century and that the mausoleum presents an appearance more in consonance with the early period of the tomb of *Shadjar al-Durr* of 1250 A.D. than with the mosque of Muhammad al-Nāṣir in the *Naḥḥāsīn* of 1303-4 A.D. All these buildings are at a lower level than the site of the mosque of Muhammad al-Nāṣir. As all stylistic evidence seems to establish this early date, we may assume that the caliphs built their mausoleum, the gateway, and the surrounding walls at about the same time; that is, probably not later than the seventh decade of the thirteenth century.

The next step in the history of the site was probably Muhammad al-Nāṣir's restoration of

an already existing mosque in 1294 A.D.; this in turn, as related by al-Djabartī<sup>6</sup> was repaired by the Emir Abd al-Rahman Katkhudā in 1173 H. (1759-60 A.D.).

There is still one puzzle left—the covered passage *G-H*. It will be remembered that the tomb of Mufi al-Dīn, the mausoleum of the caliphs, and their gateway are all at the lower level; but the site of the early mosque and the passage are at the higher level. The three stone doors in the walls of the passage are late, presumably of about the seventeenth century. The door *I* to the mosque is in an old wall obviously much older than the door. All three doors are similar and were almost certainly made at the same time. But the door *J* is lower than *I*, the inference being that its threshold was at the original low level. Is it possible that the wall *K* is the oldest of all? Now patched and mended, it is of great thickness, with what seems a stone foundation; the upper part of brick and stone is of an indeterminable date. It has had windows all along it which are now mostly blocked up or obscured by later buildings behind it. Was this wall here first, and did the caliphs leave the passageway free when they built their gate? Were the roof and the buildings constructed over it then, the windows being pierced in it to give sufficient light? The construction of passages beneath dwelling houses is a frequent feature of the Fatimid quarter of al-Ḳāhira. Such a development would account for the absence of cresting here. I have the impression that this part is

<sup>6</sup> Al-Djabartī, *Merveilles biographiques et historiques* (Cairo, 1889), III, 126 and 241-42. I owe this reference to the kindness of Professor Creswell.

very old and that it has gone through many changes in its long history. It is clear from the inquiries made by the Comité in their attempt to clear this site and to get some kind of order into it that many different interests were concerned. The wakf of Saiyida Nafīsa claimed rights to it, as also did the descendants of the family of the caliphs; and a kind of right of way to the passage which connects two large cemetery areas with the mosque was also established by the religious authorities.

Strange as it may seem after the lapse of seven hundred years, individuals stated to be of the family of the caliphs are still buried in the vaults of the mausoleum, though the descent is now in the female line. The people speak of the members of the family as "Saiyid" and "Saiyida," the titles given to the descendants of the Prophet. This the Abbasids are not, strictly speaking, but they are the descendants of his uncle, and by virtue of their caliphate are given the title.

There were many other tombs here previous to those of the caliphs, but the only tomb of importance now remaining is that of *Khadija*. It dates from the time of the *Ikhshīds*, and the fine Kufic inscription in the old yellowed marble states: <sup>7</sup> "This is the tomb of *Khadija* daughter of Muhammad ibn Bark al-Ṭarā'ifī, died the nineteenth *Shawwāl* of the year 347 (January 4, 959 A.D.). May God have mercy on her."

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<sup>7</sup> *Répertoire chronologique d'épigraphie arabe*, ed. E. Combe, J. Sauvaget, et Gaston Wiet (Cairo, 1933), IV, 144-45, No. 1491.