8.11: The Fatimid Caliphate

While Egypt grew increasingly independent of Baghdad under the Tulunids, the rule of the ‘Abbasids over their broad empire generally declined. From this vacuum of power, the Fatimids (910 – 1171) emerged. Members of the Isma’ili sect of Shi’a Islam, the Fatimids traced their genealogy to the relationship between Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter, and ‘Ali. Isma’ili believe that the divinely ordained spiritual leadership of the Islamic community, or caliphate, descended from ‘Ali down to Isma’iil, the son of Jafar al-Sadiq. They refused to recognize the legitimacy of the ‘Abbasids and sought to convert the masses of Sunnis to their own schismatic brand of Islam. To do so, Isma’ili missionaries spread out to the far flung fringes of the empire and preached a religious revolution. These emissaries achieved their greatest success in the North African Maghreb.

‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi, founder of the Fatimids, proclaimed himself the mahdi, the precursor to the final judgement,
representing an ideology that compelled people to change. Hounded by ‘Abbasid agents of persecution who sought to uphold Sunni orthodoxy, he fled from his family’s homeland in Syria and, disguised as an ordinary merchant, traveled westward through the Maghreb to Sijilmasa, where he went into hiding. In 909, local Isma’ili missionaries rescued him from Sijilmasa. By 920, he had consolidated power and made his capital at Mahdiya, located in present day Tunisia. As the mahdi and a catalyst for change, he converted tribal troops and inspired them to fight on his behalf. ‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi endowed the Fatimids with a new ‘asabiyah, providing them with the unity of purpose necessary to defeat the ‘Abbasids in North Africa. Within forty years, ‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi had conquered the whole of Northwest Africa. He aimed his expansion at Egypt but failed to seize it. His grandson, al-Mu‘izz, however, succeeded in this aim.

Al-Mu‘izz (953 – 975) used a combination of mamluk and tribal armies to capture Egypt in 969. Rather than contend with older, possibly rebellious cities like Alexandria, al-Mu‘izz founded Cairo, the City of the Conqueror. He developed Cairo into the preeminent cultural and economic center of the Islamic world, taking over from a Baghdad in decline. Al-Mu‘izz established al-Azhar, the largest and most famous mosque in Egypt, which also served as a religious center that focused on the theological development of Shi‘a Islam. Once in power, the Fatimids changed the official state religion of Egypt from Sunni orthodoxy to Shi‘a heterodoxy, though the majority of the population in Egypt remained Sunni Muslims.

Al-Hakim (991 – 1021) ascended to the throne of his father, al-‘Aziz, at the age of eleven. As a young man, he quickly displayed a pattern of unpredictable behavior. Just four years after taking command of the empire, he had his regent, the eunuch Barjawan, murdered. Additionally, al-Hakim earned a place in infamy by targeting Christians and Jews, worsening the generally amiable relations with the People of the Book that the Fatimids had previously enjoyed. For instance, in 1004, al-Hakim prohibited Christians from celebrating Epiphany and Easter. He also forbade the use of wine, a prohibition which caused religious difficulties for Christians and Jews alike. In 1005, al-Hakim decreed the Law of Differentiation, requiring all of the People of the Book to prominently display religious icons indicating their particular religious adherence. In 1009, he became infuriated by some of the Orthodox Church’s religious practices and consequently razed the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in response. A few years later, he ordered the destruction of thousands of churches and synagogues in Palestine. Al-Hakim even made Western pilgrimage to the Holy Land difficult. During this period, pilgrimages to Palestine had been increasing, and many pilgrims returned home complaining of Muslim treatment of Christians in the Holy Land. His behavior towards Christians elicited a strong Western reaction, for Europeans used his conduct as a way to encourage support for the Crusades.
Around the year 1010, Muhammad adDarazi, an Isma’ili preacher, began teaching that al-Hakim was a manifestation of God. Ad-Darazi believed that universal rationality was made incarnate in the person of Adam and then passed down through the prophets to the family of ‘Ali and his descendants, including the Fatimids. His doctrines eventually spread to the Levant, where these ideas found reception amongst the Druze, a cognate of Darazi, although they viewed Ad-Darazi as a heretic. A follower of Isma’ilism, al-Hakim did not want to be associated with ad-Darazi and his teachings, so he had the preacher executed in 1018.
Al-Hakim continued his tendency to display erratic behavior when he walked out into the desert in 1021 and never returned. While his disappearance has remained a mystery for the ages, those who worshiped the caliph believe that he went into Occultation, later to return as the messianic mahdi.