

**Paula Sanders, *Ritual, Politics and the City in Fatimid Cairo*,
(Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994)**

In 358 AH, the Fatimid general Jawhar conquered Egypt on behalf of the caliph al-Mu`izz and began the construction of the new capital of Cairo, thus beginning a two century long period of Fatimid rule in the region. The Fatimids were Isma`ilis, Shi`ites who believed that their caliph was not only descended from Fatima daughter of Muhammad and her husband `Ali but was also the *imam*, the spiritual heir to Muhammad and the rightful leader of Islam. Histories of the Fatimid period have traditionally focused upon political or religious history, cataloguing the turbulent events of the age. However, Paula Sanders, in *Ritual, Politics and the City in Fatimid Cairo*, takes a new approach to the Fatimids.¹ Analyzing mostly Mamluk sources, she asserts that ritual within Fatimid society served as a means of legitimizing caliphal rule, negotiating power and denoting status. Moreover, as the political and religious situation changed, so too did the rituals. Of course, ritual was not unique to the Fatimids but the significance of ritual to this dynasty, especially within the “ritual city” of Cairo, causes Sanders to investigate what was unique about Fatimid ritual and what it can tell us about the society in which it emerged.

After a brief but useful introduction to the tumultuous history of the Fatimid caliphs and wazirs, Sanders first examines the use of protocol and symbolism within the Fatimid court, especially in comparison to that of the Abbasid court. While outwardly similar, the Fatimid protocols of homage and salute took on a religious as well as a socio-political meaning that resulted from the role of the Isma`ili caliph as both political leader and *imam*. Indeed, the caliph was central both spatially and symbolically to the Fatimid court and everything from his clothes to his insignia of authority took on enhanced meaning. Spatial proximity to the caliph both established caliphal authority and also denoted status, while symbols

and material objects received from the caliph gave status and his blessing (*baraka*) to the recipient. Further Sanders argues, that the people of the Fatimid state – both elite and poor – sought out such honors speaks to a widespread investment in the social order.

Nevertheless, while the caliph remained the “permanent and immobile” symbol of the Fatimids, the socio-political situation within the Fatimid Empire changed drastically over the course of their rule.² Likewise, the rituals evolved in both form and meaning to better meet the new imperatives. Sanders studies these ceremonial developments within the context of Fatimid history and in particular, the creation and growth of the “ritual city.” Cairo, founded as a closed, palace complex in the reign of the caliph al-Mu`izz, did not begin as a center for ritual although it took on an early spiritual importance as home to both *imam* and to the tombs of previous imams. Ritual function, along with administrative duties, belonged to neighboring Fustat. Yet, the caliph al-`Aziz’s construction of a ritual complex within Cairo and the moving of two major processions to new routes between the palace and this complex began the elaboration of Cairo as a ritual city. This process continued under later caliphs and expanded to include Fustat within the ritual city.

Within the ritual city, the elaborate processions of the caliphs on religious days had not only religious meaning but also political and social functions that changed over time. The earliest processions, for instance, chiefly served to legitimize the caliphate within an urban area that had a large and diverse population of non-Isma`ilis. With the introduction of Turkish slave soldiers and rebellions in parts of the Empire, the reinforcement of caliphal religious and secular authority was critical and became entrenched within ritual. Thereafter, as caliphal authority weakened, ceremony became used to negotiate power between the

¹ Paula Sanders, *Ritual, Politics and the City in Fatimid Cairo*, SUNY Series in Medieval Middle East History, Jere Bacharach ed., (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994)

² *Ibid.*, 32.

competing groups and to emphasize the role of the caliph as the uniting symbol of the state.

Sanders studies in turn five of the major ceremonies that characterized Fatimid rule as well as how they changed over time. The Festival of Fast-breaking and the Sacrificial Festival both provided a broad religious and socio-political functionality, especially in the turbulent later periods of the dynasty. The New Year festival not only negotiated power between the caliph and the disparate and often fractious elements within the army but also symbolized the integrity of the coinage system upon which trade depended. The Festival of the Nilometer – celebrated at the time of when the Nile was at its height and the Cairo canal was recut – not only brought the Nile within the ritual city, asserting the caliph’s authority over the canal and the trade routes with which it was associated, but also reinforced the caliph’s legitimacy through the “public and formal assumption of administrative responsibilities” for both the Nile and for the canal.³ Sanders further notes that all four of these celebrations, which included lavish processions, increasingly took on a broad Muslim rather than a specifically Isma`ili tone – casting a “wide ceremonial net” – emphasizing the unity of a transformed urban community.⁴ This, she characterizes as the creation of a Islamic “ritual *lingua franca*.”⁵

The last ceremony that Sanders analyzes, the Festival of Ghadir, was initially part of this ritual *lingua franca*. Previously a solely Shi’ite commemoration of Muhammad’s designation of `Ali as his legitimate spiritual and secular successor, it frequently led to Sunni-Shi’i violence in other cities. Indeed, under the early Fatimid caliphs, there is no evidence of it being celebrated, presumably for fear of similar violence in society in which the Isma`ilism was “the ideology of the dominant group, not the dominant ideology.”⁶ Under al-`Amir, the Fatimids did begin to celebrate the festival with elaborate ceremonial yet with little or no explicit Shi’i content, but rather the broad Muslim tone of the *lingua franca*. However, under the caliph al-Hafiz, whose reign was challenged by rival

Isma`ilis, the ceremonies once more took on a specifically Isma`ili tone, marking the use of this ritual by al-Hafiz to reiterate the legitimacy of his claim to being both *imam* and caliph by mirroring his situation to that of `Ali.

For each of the ceremonies that she describes, Sanders provides exhaustively detailed descriptions to illustrate the nature of the rituals, how the features of each contributed to their meaning and how they differed from each other. These descriptions come predominantly from Mamluk texts, her primary sources, of which she has a reasonable supply. While she acknowledges the difficulties in working with such sources – including a century-long gap during the wazirates of Badr al-Jamali and his son al-Afdal – Sanders does not gloss over these problems, but tackles them directly, drawing her conclusions cautiously and making it clear when she is speculating. However, this is not a weakness but rather gives the arguments both precision and strength. This is particularly important given that Sanders is taking a new approach to Islamic and Fatimid historiography. Rather than following in the tradition of traditional religio-political narrative history of the Fatimids, she is emulating the work of such European historians as Ernst Kantorowicz and Marc Bloch who examined the articulation of religious and political authority through ritual in medieval Europe.⁷ No doubt, this approach is particularly complex given the absence of formal institutions and associations within Islam in general and the Fatimid caliphate in particular, yet Sanders navigates her way carefully and successfully to produce a valuable and interesting addition to the understanding of Fatimid court and urban life. It is not an introductory text to the subject, nor is it intended to be, but rather provides a new level of sophisticated analysis to the existing *corpus*. As such it is of particular value to scholars of the Fatimid period as well as graduate students and academics interested in new techniques for studying Islam.

³ Ibid., 117.

⁴ Ibid., 80.

⁵ Ibid., 73.

⁶ Ibid., 126.

⁷ For examples of the traditional approach see Bernard Lewis, *The Origins of Isma`ilism: A Study of the Historical Background of the Fatimid Caliphate* (New York: AMS Press, 1975) or Lev Yaacov, *State and Society in Fatimid Egypt* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991).