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## Public Workers, Private Properties

### SLAVES IN 'ALI MUBARAK'S HISTORICAL RECORDS

The yellowed pages of the first editions of *Al-Khitat al-jadidah al-tawfiqiyah li misr al-qahirah* resemble woven tapestries, with regular patterns of sentences printed in very small font that form a block of text that continues for pages and pages, seldom relenting into separated paragraphs. These twenty volumes were first published in Cairo between 1886 and 1889; following their lines requires patience on the part of the twenty-first-century reader. There are few of the modern printer's merciful rest stops (paragraphs, illustrations, double-spacing, or frequent punctuation). The reader must learn, page by page, to trust her guide, 'Ali Mubarak, to lead her eyes into the streets of Cairo and the villages of Egypt, through some of the most vivid descriptions of different eras of life in the country. But eventually, through the tightly ruled print, emerge images of temples, mosques, canals, castles, and the people who walked through them or worked in them over hundreds of years of history.

Many of these people, as 'Ali Mubarak unfailingly observed, were slaves. Some of those found in these pages were elite, military slaves who helped establish, build, and shape the city of Cairo under the Fatimid Empire in 969. Others contributed to battles that raged across the city, before the end of the Fatimids in 1171. Some of the slaves built armies, palaces, and infrastructure for the Mamluk Empire that ruled Egypt until the Ottomans conquered it in 1517. And while 'Ali Mubarak covered their centuries-old legacy over Cairo's palaces and streets, he also offered his readers details about the circumstances of slaves that his contemporaries owned, slaves that he himself owned, and the lives of notable ex-slaves who found new ladders to prominence in his lifetime.

Because there are no pictures in *Al-Khitat*, 'Ali Mubarak counted on a cultural connection he could share with his readers, one in which author

and audience shared a profound sense of place. It is my sense that the historical and contemporary presence of slaves in *Al-Khitat* strongly exemplifies this bond with readers in his lifetime and leaves readers of later generations (and perhaps from other cultures) struggling to understand the racial and ethnic diversity of the enslaved in Egypt. In this chapter, I explore 'Ali Mubarak's understanding of slavery in Egypt. The ways in which he identified slaves—as *'abid* or *mamluk*, black or white—reflected the social, legal, and cultural understandings of slaves' identities then current among him and his readers (many of whom also owned slaves). Contemporary historians of Egypt and of slavery have depended on him for so long, I believe, that as outsiders to the historical moments that so engulfed him, we have sometimes failed to see just how intimately connected to slavery our longtime guide was and how that connection influenced his vocabulary about slaves. Extricating the details of particular slaves' lives from the tight lines of *al-Khitat* requires a complicated close reading.

### Reading 'Ali Mubarak

Other readers have noted the visual challenge presented by 'Ali Mubarak's *Khitat*.<sup>1</sup> There are no maps or illustrations in these volumes, which were printed at least seventy years after the publication of the brilliantly illustrated *Description de l'Égypte*, the French-commissioned topographical study of Egypt published in Paris in 1809, after the failed French invasion of Egypt. Instead, as Nezar AlSayyad has noted, 'Ali Mubarak

starts the section on Cairo by slowly building through his narrative a full map of the city. He first introduces the concept of sea level, and invokes the different flood levels that the city had experienced in recent history. Having established this horizontal plane, he then outlines the main streets of the city and the structures that they lie on. It is a method that allows the reader to mentally construct the topography of the city in relationship to specified coordinates—akin to building a three-dimensional physical model with only the important landmarks.<sup>2</sup>

The reader's mental construction of Cairo's topography is work that, AlSayyad remarks, proceeds unaided by "a single illustration or diagram," even though 'Ali Mubarak "was a skilled draftsman who drew and used

maps." Perhaps, AlSayyad speculates, "Mubarak felt that his audience did not need, or would not have understood, such a medium."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps he also intuited that his readers understood the theory and practice of writing a *khitat*. Literally, this word can be translated as "a plan," "a survey," or "topography." Literarily a *khitat* represented a historiographical genre established centuries earlier throughout the medieval Arabic-speaking world, a tradition especially well practiced by Egyptian historians.<sup>4</sup> This genre originated as a survey, assigned by authorities to document the resources of a particular area. Samia Mehrez has analyzed this genre as one particularly sensitive to "a patron whose interests it served and represented."<sup>5</sup> This is clear even in the title of 'Ali Mubarak's topography—*Al-Khitat al-jadidah al-tawfiqiyah li misr al-qahirah*, which means "the new plans of [Khedive] Tawfiq for Cairo Egypt"—referring to the ruler of Egypt, Tawfiq, at the time of Mubarak's writing. And his learned readers would have recognized the literary tradition to which 'Ali Mubarak's twenty volumes referred; his work was built on the fourteenth-century *khitat* written by al-Maqrizi, particularly because

according to him, the Cairo described by al-Maqrizi was hardly recognizable any more. The city had expanded, its topography, geography and demography had changed and new structures had been erected, all of which needed to be recorded. In addition, there seems to be another equally valid reason for undertaking the project of re-writing, namely, the change of authority in the city, and the need to represent that new authority.<sup>6</sup>

'Ali Mubarak's audience of contemporaries would have read *Al-Khitat* at a time of great cultural and political change in Egypt, much of it engineered by the author himself. 'Ali Mubarak's own life mirrored the decades of dramatic change experienced by Egyptians in the middle to late nineteenth century. Born in 1823, he was the proud product of a secular educational system introduced to the country by the Ottoman governor (*wali*) Muhammad (Mehmet) 'Ali Pasha in the 1820s and 1830s. Although born in the Egyptian Delta to a family of religious teachers (*shaykhs*), 'Ali Mubarak flourished when he began a secular curriculum and excelled as a student in Muhammad 'Ali's School of Engineering (the *Muhandiskhanah*). His talents earned him a place in one of the educational missions that Muhammad 'Ali sent regularly to France. After

Muhammad 'Ali's death in 1848, 'Ali Mubarak held different positions in education and in the military, valued for his engineering expertise but vulnerable to the changing politics of Muhammad 'Ali's successors.<sup>7</sup> It was only after Muhammad 'Ali's grandson, Khedive Isma'il, took over the throne that 'Ali Mubarak's role in influencing the physical infrastructure of Cairo soared. In 1868, Isma'il appointed him minister (*nazir*) of both public works and education. It was a position with onerous duties; Khedive Isma'il had assigned to him the following gargantuan tasks: "(1) supervising the execution of plans for the quarter of Isma'iliyah; (2) redeveloping the older and vacant lands peripheral to Azbakiyah; and (3) drawing up a master plan for the entire city in accordance with the style of Paris."<sup>8</sup> This meant, as Nezar AlSayyad has noted, that "he was no doubt the chief planner and architect of Cairo during its transformation before the twentieth century."<sup>9</sup>

This also means that those readers who had the opportunity to read *Al-Khitat* when it was first published could have walked the streets 'Ali Mubarak described and would have recognized the corners of streets, perhaps at the tip of Shari'a 'Abdin, as indicated by the author's careful directions, where a palace used to be, yet "now it is destroyed and there is not a trace of it that informs of the history of its foundation."<sup>10</sup> If these readers were adults of a certain age, they may have remembered small alleys in old neighborhoods of Cairo that had, at the time of their reading, been removed upon order of the author. Although the author relied on his fellow Egyptians' familiarity with the topography of their country, he put little trust in their historical education or their memory of the past. He did not believe that his contemporaries, Cairenes in particular, knew the facts of their history. He wrote, in the beginning of *Al-Khitat*, of Cairo:

We have found no one among the sons of Egypt who can interpret for us these changes or instruct us in the causes thereof, or guide us aright in understanding the country's notable monuments. We look upon these works but do not know who made them . . . how many the mounds that were once towering buildings, the ravines that were once splendid gardens, the tombs that lie hidden along the narrow lanes and the shrines scattered in the open country, which the common people are wont to misidentify. . . . How many the mosques that are ascribed to

men who did not build them, and temples to persons who had not even seen them. . . . But it is our duty to know these things, for it is not fitting for us to remain in ignorance of our country or to neglect the monuments of our ancestors. They are a moral lesson to the reflective mind, a memorial to the thoughtful soul. . . . For what our ancestors have left behind stirs in us the desire to follow in their footsteps, and to produce for our times what they produced for theirs; to strive to be useful even as they strove.<sup>11</sup>

In *Al-Khitat*, his great duty is pronounced clearly: bringing this history to his fellow Egyptians. As we read through this history, it is interesting to observe where he maintains silence and where he includes anecdotes of his personal experience. 'Ali Mubarak admits very little about his own vast administrative power in these volumes but spends pages on the details of the ruin of his disastrous second marriage. He places his own life story firmly in the middle of the story of his natal village, Birinbal (where he retired and where he wrote *Al-Khitat*), but says nothing about the political upheaval that had disrupted his patron's authority—the early nationalist movement of Colonel Ahmad 'Urabi Pasha in 1881, a powerful political drive that protested the glass ceilings imposed by the khedive and his highest officials on indigenous Egyptians and called for Egypt for the Egyptians. There is no mention that the British occupied the country in the fall of 1882, in response to the 'Urabi rebellion; this may well be due to his significant role negotiating between the khedive's officials, 'Urabi's followers, and British agents; the sensitivity that the rebellion elicited (he began publishing *Al-Khitat* only a year after the British occupation); and the fact that 'Ali Mubarak spent years in debate with European officials about the preservation of medieval architecture in the neighborhoods of Cairo.<sup>12</sup>

Because 'Ali Mubarak's *Khitat* has served as a seminal text for more than a century, and because, I believe, historians of Egypt have trusted him as a unique and deeply insightful guide, this absence of social commentary has left careful readers wanting much more. Nezar AlSayyad sees the problem as one brought by the genre: "His earlier *khitat* reflects the imaginary of Egypt and Cairo's built legacy through the lens of a planner. Though it does document Cairo's architectural heritage with great faithfulness, however, his *khitat* does not pay adequate attention to social reality, presenting its

built fabric as a closed chapter of the city's history."<sup>13</sup> Samia Mehrez also faults the genre of *khitat* writing for its inherent and repeated use of the passive voice—"it is said that" (*yuqalu inna*):

The interesting aspect of the passive voice and reported speech is that both stylistic devices introduce a kind of polyphony in the text. Statements of "fact" are relegated to voices other than that of the author; as much as they appear to be objective statements, they do not allow for *one* reliable source of information. On a different level, the direct asides to the reader serve to reinforce the dialogic aspect of the text, where author and reader engage in a kind of direct exchange.<sup>14</sup>

This is true, which makes it even more significant that 'Ali Mubarak did pay close attention to particular groups of people whose lives in Cairo most dramatically reflected social realities—slaves. In these pages, in this narration of a capital city whose streets and buildings reverberated between what was old, beautiful, and worthy of preserving and what was old, decrepit, and necessarily destroyed, live the slaves. They are among the ancestors who, as mentioned earlier, built the monuments and the mosques. Their presence also populates the project between antiquity and modernity that 'Ali Mubarak and Khedive Isma'il tried so hard to build. Their presence is often felt in those particular neighborhoods that have been commissioned for dismantling or in the houses of notables on the rise in Muhammad 'Ali's, or Isma'il's, Egypt. Slaves figure prominently in 'Ali Mubarak's topographical description of Cairo and Egypt—the markets where they were sold, the buildings that they erected, the armies in which they fought, the country over which they ruled for centuries. Although their presence is felt very strongly in Mubarak's discussion of contemporary times—he himself owned slaves—it is my impression that slaves in *Al-Khitat* represent an institution that Mubarak knows will be dismantled, although he had nothing to do with that razing. For as his contemporary readers knew, by the time of *Al-Khitat*'s publication, Khedive Isma'il's projects had plunged the treasury into bankruptcy; his successor, Tawfiq, had only barely overcome a nationalist rebellion; and the British government, with a keen eye toward abolition, had invaded and occupied Egypt. 'Ali Mubarak's readers would not have been surprised by the presence of slaves, in either the distant past or in representa-

tions of Egypt's present, or in their own homes. One wonders, though, when reading these volumes so filled with sensitivity to the timing of urban decay and renewal, what 'Ali Mubarak considered to be the legacy of slavery and of the slaves. With many of them having built the monuments and great edifices of Egypt, could they be claimed as ancestors? As movers and shakers in Egypt's past? Could they be included as participants in Egypt's future?

### The Many Topographies of Slavery

'Ali Mubarak's openness about slaves and slavery serves as an important guide to how slavery was remembered in the Egyptian society of 1889, and would be remembered by later generations of Egyptians. Written after the completion of his commissioned projects of municipal destruction and rebuilding, 'Ali Mubarak's *Khitat* describes, it can be argued, textual sites of memory. Although not nearly as mournful of the past as al-Maqrizi was when writing his own *Khitat*, 'Ali Mubarak makes his pages realms of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) by reconstructing Egypt's historical past in as physically vivid terms as possible to ensure that Egyptians will understand the significance of their environment's past.<sup>15</sup> His volumes offer us a glimpse into a unique moment in Egyptian history, when different traditions of slavery had not been eliminated but were losing their relevance. The perceived wisdom about slaves that 'Ali Mubarak offers from within the changing traditions of his society permit us, I believe, a rare look at an institution in the process of being remembered before it is erased or before it is monumentalized as "history." As Pierre Nora wrote,

Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectics of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past.<sup>16</sup>

I think 'Ali Mubarak catches just this moment, between history and memory, in regard to the slaves he describes and the effects of their actions, or

even their presence in particular positions in society. Here are slaves, like 'Anbar Effendi, whose voice the reader can almost hear, as remembered by 'Ali Mubarak. Yet there are slaves, like the black Fatimid slave soldiers, fully rendered as historical markers of an important and changing Cairo neighborhood.

Almost all studies of the phenomenon and experience of slavery in the late nineteenth century draw on *Al-Khitat* for insights into the roles that slaves played in Egypt.<sup>17</sup> We know from 'Ali Mubarak that slavery had existed in Egypt for many centuries, that the Fatimids employed slave soldiers of different ethnicities, and that the Mamluks who built much of Cairo in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were themselves slave soldiers.<sup>18</sup> Volume 1 of *Al-Khitat* traces the roles of slaves in state building through the Ottoman conquest of Egypt and the conquests and reforms of Muhammad 'Ali to the end of the 1880s. Throughout these centuries, being a slave did not exclude one from either power or, as 'Ali Mubarak presents the circumstances of his own century, knowledge. In *Al-Khitat*, 'Ali Mubarak presents knowledgeable slaves who know where they come from, such as the *mamluk* slave woman resisting her Coptic master, and 'Anbar Effendi, a confident and powerful administrator whose education is the envy of people who otherwise would not have considered him a peer. So, in continued reflection of Pierre Nora's statement about the place between memory and history, it is clear that contemporary historians of slavery in the Middle East must rely on 'Ali Mubarak's own sense of the historical role of slaves, as well as on his vivid and powerful memories of slaves he knew.

'Ali Mubarak's texts remain monumental sources about the complicated positions and interactions of slaves in Egyptian society, but his terminology for the different kinds of slaves to be found is almost Manichean in its simplicity: black slave ('*abid*) and white slave (*mamluk*).<sup>19</sup> I chose to begin this study of slavery's remembrance and legacy with Egypt because so many different slave routes ended there and thousands of slaves who originated in different cultures eventually made their homes there. Once settled, all that diversity is erased in *Al-Khitat*: 'Ali Mubarak describes them as "white" (*mamluk*), or "black" ('*abid*); this elides who they were and where they came from. It is also somewhat surprising to me, because 'Ali Mubarak wrote *Al-Khitat* at a time when slavery was under much discussion in Egyptian



society, and Egyptians found the structure of their society and their homes under both the uncomfortable scrutiny of the British administration that had occupied the country in 1882 and the glare of politically powerful abolitionist societies in London.<sup>20</sup> I will return to how he navigated his memories between the tumultuous politics of the last decade of his life at the end of this chapter, but let us first break down what and who it meant to be a black slave or a *mamluk*, in Egypt in the late nineteenth century.

### Slaves and Destruction in Medieval Cairo

As we explore 'Ali Mubarak's investigation into the past, it is important to bear in mind that he followed in the literal footsteps of the medieval Egyptian historian al-Maqrizi, who spent the years between 1417 and 1440 writing his own *khitat* (known in Arabic as *Kitab al-mawa'iz wa-l-I'tibar bi-dhikr al-khitat wa-l-athar*). 'Ali Mubarak relied heavily on al-Maqrizi, particularly for information about Cairo during the Fatimid and Mamluk Empires. Taqi al-Din al-Maqrizi was a scholar, teacher, and historian. Unlike 'Ali Mubarak, he did not bear the great administrative authority over the city about which he wrote, serving more as a witness to its changes.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, al-Maqrizi brought a sense of dread to his text concerning what he feared would be the imminent destruction of his beloved city due to neglectful rulers and incompetent administrators. As Nasser Rabbat writes, "A heightened sense of loss imbues him with an urgent desire to capture cherished memories—both his own and those of the denizens of Cairo—before they slip away with the disappearance of the places and buildings to which they are attached."<sup>22</sup> One historical event, long past even by al-Maqrizi's time, served as an apocryphal warning if a ruler's care in governance faltered. This was the civil war between black slave troops and Turkish-speaking soldiers that ravaged Cairo in 1062 during the reign of the Fatimid caliph al-Mustansir.<sup>23</sup> Al-Maqrizi called this years-long armed struggle "days of calamity and death" (*ayam al-shidda wal-ghala'*).<sup>24</sup> As presented by Mubarak, however, a malaise and disorder infected the city before the days of calamity had begun. Al-Mustansir's predecessor had lost his senses, and there was an increased widespread fear "of the immorality that had raided the neighborhoods and plundered the countryside, and the greed of the slaves [*abid*] had increased and overtaken them."<sup>25</sup>