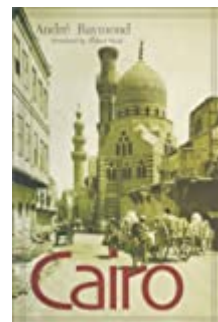


**Andr  Raymond.** *Cairo*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000. viii + 436 pp. \$23.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-00996-7; \$36.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00316-3.



**Reviewed by** Aida Bamia (Department of African and Asian Languages and Literatures, University of Florida)

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## **The Fascinating History of a Great City: Cairo Narrated throughout Thirteen Centuries**

The Fascinating History of a Great City: Cairo Narrated throughout Thirteen Centuries

The story of the foundation of the largest Arab city could not have had a better narrator than Andr  Raymond. With great attention to details Raymond provides a description of the foundation of Cairo/Fustat starting with the Arab conquest of the city, in 640. The event put an end to Byzantine rule, to the great relief of the Coptic population harassed by the Orthodox Church who viewed it as heretical. This English translation of the original French version *Le Caire*, published in 1993, puts at the disposal of the English-speaking reader an important and fascinating book for both the specialist and the layman.

The book is divided into four parts: Foundations (642-1250), Medieval Cairo (1250-1517), The Traditional City (1517-1798), and Contemporary Cairo (1798-1992). In his approach to the rule of the various dynasties over Cairo, whether Fatimids, Mamluks, or Ottomans, Raymond, a social historian, carefully and meticulously provides the reader with the details of the Cairene's daily life, the social interaction between the Christian and Muslim com-

munities, the economic activities of the city, its major trade and professions. Those factors greatly impacted the spread of the city and its living dispositions as well as the quality and nature of its architecture. He sums up the realities of Cairo's often puzzling growth trajectory in the following words: "Cairo was a living organism, and each of its elements to a degree reflected the entirety of its history" (p. 264). Raymond provides figures and facts such as health facilities, epidemics, wars, and trade which all contributed to the growth or stagnation of the city. He explains how the story of Cairo's development was impacted by the Nile and its various floods, slowly stripping old Cairo (Misr al-Qadimah) of its role as port.

Observing the unfolding panorama of Cairo's growth during the various political regimes, the reader cannot help but establish a mental connection with fiction writings inspired by the social history of the city, such as Jamal al-Ghitani's *Al-Zainy Barakat* (1974), Naguib Mahfouz's *Trilogy* (1952) and *Awlad Haratina* (*Children of Gebelawi*, 1981) and Amin Maalouf's *Leo Africanus* (1989), to cite only a few. Other incidents narrated by the author would easily inspire similar books, an exam-

ple being the story of a group of Bedouins who attacked strollers among whom was a ten year old Mamlouk Emir whose coat was stolen. Of equal interest is the story behind the names of famous Mamlouk Emirs such as Muhammad Bey al-Alfi.

There is an endearing side to Raymond's conscientious approach as he corrects long-held misconceptions regarding various political regimes, especially those of the Mamluks and the Ottomans. The former are generally believed to have been more involved in internal fights than in the growth and development of the city, a fallacy that Raymond rectifies by stating the need for a "nuance" in the account of events. Raymond gives due credit to two maligned dynasties, the Mamlouk and the Ottoman, wherever it is deserved; both have generally been held responsible for bringing stagnation to Arab societies under their control. Raymond painstakingly defends those dynasties by enumerating their contributions to the architecture of Cairo and its beautification, and providing figures, maps, and photographs in support of his argument. He makes extensive use of figures to illustrate the extension of certain activities and their adherents. It is noteworthy to mention here that he quotes primarily Arab historians, and rarely makes reference to Western historians or the accounts of Western travelers to Cairo.

It is especially interesting to read Raymond's account of the French expedition to Egypt considered by many as the starting date for Egypt's awakening and Westernization. He disputes the issue revealing the dissatisfaction of the Egyptians with the French military, and describing their two major uprisings against their presence. He strongly attributes the credit of modernization and Westernization of Egypt, and especially Cairo, to Khedive Ismail. He highlights the role played by Ali Pasha Mubarak in advising the Khedive and executing his vision as he tried to reproduce in Cairo what Haussmann did for Paris. He clearly demonstrates the connection between the Khedive's devastating loans and spending habits, and the British colonization of Egypt responsible for an influx of a large European community into the city.

A frequently quoted historian is Maqrizi, yet Raymond does not rely on him indiscriminately, and whenever his accounts contradict figures and facts Raymond provides other sources to establish a balance. For the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the author relies on the testimonies of the historian Al-Jabarti and *La Description de l'Egypte*, the major book written by the scholars who accompanied Napoleon Bonaparte during his expedition to Egypt in 1798.

*Cairo* is greatly enriched by detailed maps marking the gradual growth of the city and its extension throughout the centuries. As many of those districts and gates are still standing and carry the same name, history comes alive for the reader familiar with the city. Raymond has succeeded in capturing the vibrancy of the city, its spirit, and its social structure. The book fills the gaps left by history books as it indulges in details which highlight the social, political, financial, and religious make-up of the city and their impact on its expansion. The detailed account of social relations in Cairo and the resulting establishment of residential areas is quite important as it highlights the condescending attitude of both the Mamlouks and the Ottomans vis--vis native Egyptians. Though an outsider, Muhammad Ali reversed the situation when he took power in 1805, involving the people in their country's government, an approach that contributed to his success in establishing his rule and a dynasty that ended with King Farouk in 1952.

The book sheds light on little-known aspects of life under various empires, and answers questions by providing explanations for the ups and downs in the development and prosperity of the city. It explains, for example, the failure of the Fatimid Shi'i ideology to take root in Egypt, a fact that Raymond explains by the violent reactions of the people to declarations on the divine nature of the Caliph al-Hakim. This approach creates almost an element of suspense for the reader akin to that created by fiction writings, without losing its informative nature. An example is the accurate and simple explanation provided on the Waqf system in Islam, and the various methods adopted to restore security in the city. Raymond skillfully demonstrates the reasons behind the housing crisis in Cairo and the unusual but creative solutions reached by the population which led to the settlement of the living in the city of the dead. His concern for the environment is obvious in his disapproval of the latest trend in Cairo to build on agricultural land.

Andr= Raymond approaches the story of Cairo as a social historian and an archeologist, providing the stories behind the events with which a non-specialist can easily identify. The book is equally valuable for specialists in the various fields of the humanities and the social sciences, providing them with multiple topics of interest for research. The documented social, political, historical, medical, environmental, and architectural factors, to name only a few, would serve as a launching point for interested researchers. *Cairo* would be of interest to the Middle East specialist as well as the lay reader.

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