

# AN EARLY FĀTIMID MIHRĀB IN THE MOSQUE OF IBN ṬULŪN

BY

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One of the curious features in the Mosque of Ibn Ṭulūn, is the group of six mihrābs in the Qibla "riwāq". The principle mihrāb in the centre of the Qibla wall is the only concave one. A flat stucco mihrāb — the so-called Mihrāb of As-Sayyeda Nafisa — attributed to the Mamlūk period <sup>(1)</sup>, is applied to the face of the Qibla wall east of the principle concave one. Two other flat stucco mihrābs <sup>(2)</sup>, attributed to the Ṭulūnid period, are applied to the north-western faces of two piers next to the "dikka" in the second arcade from the Qibla wall. The two remaining mihrābs are also flat stucco ones applied to the faces of two other piers in the fourth arcade counting from the Qibla wall, the western one bears the names of the Khalif al-Mustaṣṣir and his Wazīr al-Afdal and is datable in 487 H. (1094 A.D.) <sup>(3)</sup>. The sixth mihrāb bears the name of Lājīn and is attributed to 696 H. (1296 A.D.) <sup>(3)</sup>.

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The present article deals with the mihrāb east of the "dikka" (Pl. I).

(1) CHASEWELL: E.M.A. vol. II, p. 350; MAḤMŪD 'AKKŪSH: al Gāmi' at-Ṭulūnī, p. 71.

(2) E.M.A. II., Pl. 123 a and b, p. 349.

(3) Ibid., pp. 349-50; M.A.E.I., pp. 220-2, Fig. 119, Pl. 77; M. 'AKKŪSH, op. cit., pp. 67-8.

Flury once attributed this mihrāb and the other one to the west of the "dikka" to the beginning of the IV th. cent. H. (X th cent.) (1). In a second article, (2), he suggested the 3rd. cent. H (IX cent.) as more suitable for the latter mihrāb, but hesitated to do so for the former one. Flury when analysing the decoration made use of some motives and elements, but left some other important features which would have rendered a great help to suggest a date nearer to the truth.

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One of these important features is the form of the arch that crowns the central panel.

We have two forms of the pointed arch commonly used in Islamic architecture: the simple pointed and the compound. The simple type is formed by two segments struck from two centres (Fig. 1). The compound form has two types: the four-centred and the keel-arch. The four-centred arch is constructed

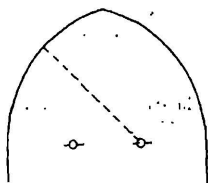


FIG. 1  
Simple Pointed Arch

from four segments and four centres (Fig. 2), while the keel-arch is constructed from two segments and two straight tangents (Fig. 3). Sometimes the two forms of the compound pointed type closely resemble each other when the two top lines are so short or so crudely executed that it becomes difficult

to recognise if the lines are curved or straight.

It is clear that the pointed arch of the mihrāb in question is not of the simple type. To make sure, I prepared a large

(1) FLURY: *Hakim u. Ashar*, pp. 19, 36-7, 40.

(2) Idem: *Sāmurrā u. Moschee des Ibn Tūlūn*, *Der Islām*, IV pp. 42<sup>11</sup>-30.

scale enlargement of the mihrāb and made a very careful tracing of the successive curves of the arches in the hood of the panel

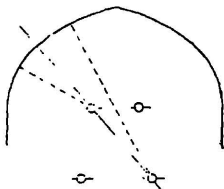


FIG. 2  
Four-centred Arch

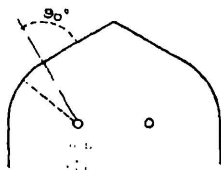


FIG. 3  
Keel-Arch

(Fig. 4), and it is clear from the drawing that each arch is formed by two curves joined at the top by two short tangents. The execution of these arches makes it difficult to decide if these tangents are straight or curved; but one fact, however, remains to be well established: the arches are certainly of the compound pointed form.

The earliest examples of the compound pointed arches known in Islām until the Fāṭimid period in Egypt are:—

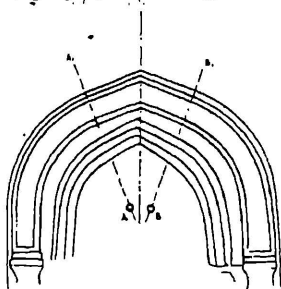


FIG. 4

(1) Raqqā: Baghdād Gate, 155 H. (772), the arch is four-centred (1).

(2) Sāmarrā: The Mosque of Abū Dulaf 246/7 H. (860-1). The four-centred type is used (2).

(1) CROWE-ELL: E.M.A. II, p. 43, Fig. 29 and Pl. 2c; M.A.E. I, p. 52.

(2) E.M.A. II, p. 279, Pl.; Archeol. Reise, III, Pl. XVI, Left.

(3) Sāmarrā: Qubbat aṣ-Ṣulaibiyya, built after 248 (862). Some arches are of the four-centred type<sup>(1)</sup>.

(4) Shīrāz: The Great Mosque, the remains of the original arch of the mihrāb with stucco ornament on its soffit—circa 262 H (875)—is certainly of the four-centred type<sup>(2)</sup>.

The arches in the south-west side<sup>(3)</sup> are of the keel-type, the top tangent is undoubtedly straight. The arches in the west corner<sup>(4)</sup> are probably of the same type, but it is difficult to be certain owing to their ruined state.

(5) Nāyīn: The Great mosque. The mihrāb, circa 350 H. (960), contains three arches<sup>(5)</sup>: the top one is of the compound pointed form and probably of the keel-type, but the tangent is too short to make certain; the intermediate is most probably a keel one, the tangent is longer and clearer; the lowest one is certainly a keel-arch, but seems to be of a later date. The old arches decorated with original stucco decoration are also of the four-centred type<sup>(6)</sup>.

(6) Sangbast: Mausoleum, 387/419 H. (997/1028). The arches in the interior are four-centred<sup>(7)</sup>.

It seems, therefore, that the compound pointed arch was born in 'Irāq and made its early steps of evolution in that country and in Persia.

If we come to Egypt in the 'Abbāsid period, we find that the half round and the simple pointed types are the two common forms of arches exhibited in the existing monuments from that period, viz. the parts of the Mosque of 'Amr attributed to

(1) E.M.A. II, Pl. 79 a; Archeol. Reise. III. Pl. XVIII, Top.

(2) Survey, Vol. IV, Pl. 259 A, B.

(3) Ibid., Pl. 299 C.

(4) Ibid., Pl. 260 A.

(5) Ibid., Pl. 267.

(6) Ibid., Pl. 260 B.

(7) CHESWELL: M.A.Eg., I. p. 52; Survey, op. cit., pls. 265-6.

Sālīḥ ibn 'Alī, 212 H. (827)<sup>(1)</sup> ; the Nilometer, 247 H. (861)<sup>(2)</sup> ; The Aqueduct of Basātīn, bef. 263 H. (876)<sup>(3)</sup> ; the 'Abbāsīd chapel in the Dayr as-Suriānī (A.D. 913/4)<sup>(4)</sup>.

There are two instances where some suspicion may arise in connection with the use of the four-centred arch in the 'Abbāsīd period in Egypt.

(a) A niche at the northern extremity of the south-west side of the Mosque of 'Amr<sup>(5)</sup> is crowned by an arch of two rings. The inner ring, built with edgewise bricks, is nearly round, the outer, built with headers, is slightly pointed, which is most probably a result of the crudeness of execution.

(b) In the second instance we find in the miḥrāb of a house in al-'Askar<sup>(6)</sup>, two curves meeting in a point at the middle axis which look, at first glance, to resemble the top part of a four-centred arch, but on second thought, it is difficult to stick to this suggestion as it is quite probable also that they formed the top part of a pointed segmental arch.

In the Faṭīmid period we find in the Mosque of al-Azhar, the earliest existing Fāṭīmid monument, some arches that are definitely not of the simple pointed arch, but of the compound type, *viz.* the four-centred. This form is adopted for nearly all the original arches of the transept<sup>(7)</sup>. The same form of arch is again to be met with in the Mosque of al-Ḥākīm, 393 H. (1003) in the hoods of the main miḥrāb<sup>(8)</sup> and the miḥrāb which existed once on the roof<sup>(9)</sup>. All the arches of the openings and

(1) CRESWELL, E.M.A., II, Pls. 37-39, 43.

(2) Ibid., Pls. 80-81.

(3) Ibid., Pls. 94-95.

(4) Idem., M.A.Eg., I, p. 17, fr. n. 9 ; WHITE (E.), the Monasteries of the Wādī'n Natrīn, III, pp. 197-8, Pls. LXVI-LXXI.

(5) E.M.A., II, Pl. 38.

(6) Ibid., Pl. 123.

(7) M.A.Eg., I, Pls. 4, 5, 6a.

(8) Ibid., Pl. 115 5.

(9) Ibid., p. 83, Pl. 115 a.

the squinches in the *Sahn' Banāt*, c. 400 H. (1010), are of the four-centred type<sup>(1)</sup>; openings and *mihrābs* in the Mosque of Lu'lu'a, 406 H. (1015/6) have compound pointed hoods<sup>(2)</sup>; the same type is used in the entrance to the "ziūda" of the Mosque of al-Ḥākim, 411/427 H. (1021/36)<sup>(3)</sup>; also in many of the mausoleums in the cemetery of Aswān, attributed to the XI<sup>th</sup> cent. A.D.<sup>(4)</sup>. The compound pointed arch is again extensively used in the later group of Fāṭimid monuments starting with the Mosque of al-Guyūshī, 478 H. (1085)<sup>(5)</sup>.

Thus it is quite clear that the compound pointed form of the arch of the *mihrāb* in question was well known and commonly used in the Fāṭimid period from the very start onwards, a remark that tempts one to think of a Fāṭimid date for that *mihrāb*.

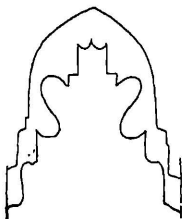


FIG. 5

Mosque of Ibn Tūlūn,  
Early Fāṭimid *Mihrāb*

The moulded hood (Fig. 5) within the arched panel provides another evidence for suggesting a date later than the Tūlūnid period.

The early stages of this feature start with the foundation of Sāmarrā, where we meet with two moulded forms that may be considered as the earliest steps in the evolution of this motive. The serrated crestings of the *Jawsaq al-Khāqānī* are each pierced with a panel having a moulded top and a lobed lower part (Fig. 6). In the walls of some houses of Sāmarrā there are niches with moulded hoods of rather an elementary type (Fig. 7).

(<sup>1</sup>) M.A Eg. I., Pl. 34 a-c.

(<sup>2</sup>) Ibid., Pl. 35 a-d.

(<sup>3</sup>) Ibid., Pl. 36 a-c.

(<sup>4</sup>) Ibid., pp. 137, 291, Pls. 41. 42.

(<sup>5</sup>) Ibid., Pls. 47 a-5, 48 a, c.

Unfortunately, there is a wide gap in the sequence of examples of this feature in East Islām until we meet with the later examples from the end of the XIth cent. A.D., but in advanced

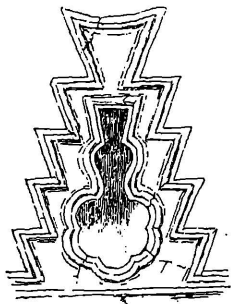


FIG. 6  
Samarra (Herzfeld, loc. cit., Fig. 16)

FIG. 7  
Samarra. (Herzfeld, loc. cit., Fig. 17)



stages of evolution, e.g., Imām Dūr, the Mausoleum of Muslim ibn Quraish († 478 (1085 A.D.))<sup>(1)</sup> (Fig. 8) ; Takrīt, al-Arbaʿīn, late Vth cent. H. (XI) <sup>(2)</sup> (Fig. 9) ; Persia, carved marble tombstone

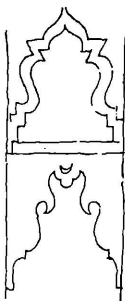


FIG. 8  
Imām Dūr, Tomb of  
Muslim ibn Quraish.  
(† 478 H./1085)  
(Herzfeld: loc. cit.  
Fig. 14).

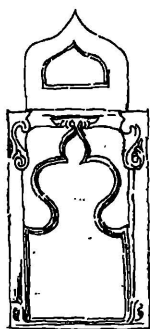


FIG. 9  
Takrīt, Al-Arbaʿīn, Late  
XIth cent.  
(Arch. Reise, abb. 111)

(<sup>1</sup>) HERZFELD: *Archeol. Reise*, I, p. 232, Abb. 120; III, p. 320; *Idem*, *Ars Isl.*, vol. IX Fig. 14.

(<sup>2</sup>) HERZFELD, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 222-3, Abb. 110-111.

d. Muḥarram 533 H. (Sept. 1138) <sup>(1)</sup> (Fig. 10); Persia, rock-hewn mihrāb above the Allāhu Akbar Pass, which I think, if attributed to the end of the XIth cent. and beginning of the XIIth cent., will not be too far from the correct date <sup>(2)</sup> Fig. 11). It



← Fig. 10  
Persian Marble  
Tombstone d. 533/  
1138.  
(Wiet, *Exp. Pers.*  
Pl. IX)

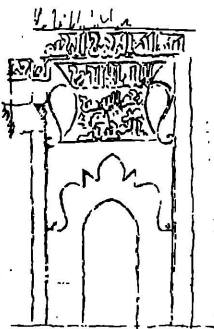


Fig. 11  
Persia. Rock-  
hewn Mihrāb  
(XIth XIIth  
cent.)  
(Hersfeld, loc. cit.  
fig. 52) →

can be seen also in the Māristān Nūrī at Damaskus, 549 H. (1154) <sup>(3)</sup>, (Fig. 12). These well-evolved examples are too late to suggest any relation with the mihrāb in the Mosque of Ibn Tūlūn.

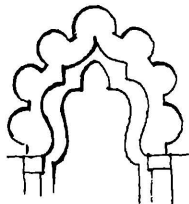


Fig. 12  
Damaskus, Māristān Nūrī-  
549 H. (1154)  
(Hersfeld, loc. cit. Figs. 3  
and 43)

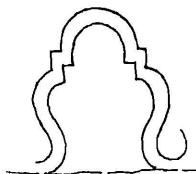


Fig. 13  
Mosque of Qairawān. Marble  
Slab, Xth-IXth cent. ?  
(Marensi, I Figs. 7. 36 E.)

<sup>(1)</sup> HERZFELD, *Damaskus...*, in *Arch. Isl.* IX, p. 21, Pl. 52.

<sup>(2)</sup> Loc. cit., Fig. 3.



Now if we turn to West Islām we find, an evolved example <sup>(1)</sup> (Fig. 13) carved on a marble slab to the east of the *mihrāb* of the Great Mosque of Qairawān, and bearing inscriptions which, according to Marçais <sup>(2)</sup> appears to belong to the Aghlabid period (Xth-XI th cent. ?) ; other examples (Figs. 14, 15) are

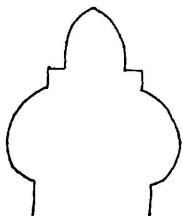


FIG. 14

Qal'a of Banī Hammād. X—XI cent.  
(Marçais, I, Fig. 80, A-B.)

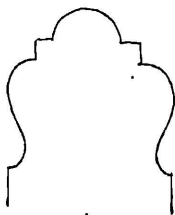


FIG. 15

found in the Qal'a of Banī Hammād (Xth-XIth cent.). The same feature can also be seen in the sketch of the minaret of Sfax drawn by Marçais <sup>(3)</sup> and attributed by him to the *Ṣanhāja* period, i. e. late X th cent. <sup>(4)</sup>.

The oldest dated example of this feature in Egypt is found in the western minaret of the Mosque of al-Ḥākim (Fig. 16) which bears resemblance to that of Sfax, as Prof. Creswell has pointed out <sup>(4)</sup>. In addition to this, there are many other features of Maghribī origin found in the Mosque of al-Ḥākim, e.g. the monumental entrance, the minarets at the two corners of the entrance facade, the double and triple stems in the floral ornament in the two minarets and the monumental entrance, the

(1) MARÇAIS, Manuel, I. Fig. 36 E.

(2) Ibid., p. 134, ft. n. I.

(3) Op. cit., Fig. 81.

(4) CRESWELL, M.A. Fig. I. p. 102, points to the necessity of confirming this attribution.

dome over the square in front of the Mihrāb, etc... All these feature makes one believe that the moulded hood was among the many Maghribi features conveyed to Egypt with the Fāṭimid invasion.

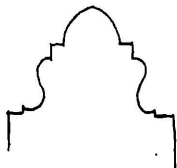


FIG. 16  
Mosque of al-Ḥākim  
Western Minaret, 393/1003  
(Creswell, *M.A.Eg.*, I  
Pl. 29, c.)

The moulded hood of our panel looks, in fact, to be more elaborate and advanced in evolution than that in the western minaret of al-Ḥākim's Mosque and can be considered parallel to the hoods of the windows in the octagonal drum under the dome of the Mausoleum of as-Sayyeda Ruqayya<sup>(1)</sup> 527 H. (1133), and, therefore, it is difficult to think that such a developed moulding existed in the Ṭūlūnid or even in the Ikhshidid period.

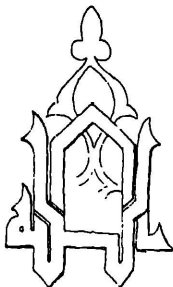


FIG. 17  
Mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn,  
Early Fāṭimid Mihrāb.

Another evidence for a Fāṭimid attribution is supplied by the decorative panel occupying the central field of the mihrāb and formed by the stems of the Kūfic word, which can be read "Allāh", in spite of the lost parts (Fig 17). Such an idea of forming a symmetrical decorative motive out of a Kūfic word, is only known to have been practised by West Islamic artists. It is curious to notice that the preliminary steps are very few and chronologically sporadic and that this practice became to be widely used in the medieval period in West Islām, but

<sup>(1)</sup> CRESWELL: *M.A. Eg.*, I, 86-c.

this is most probably due to lack of published material of archaeological documents and researches on West Islamic art. The oldest trial, I could find, was the word "Allāh" (Fig. 18) contained in a

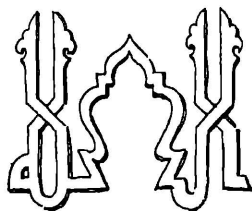


FIG. 18  
Qairāwan, Tombstone, 440/1040  
(Marçais, I, Fig. 934)

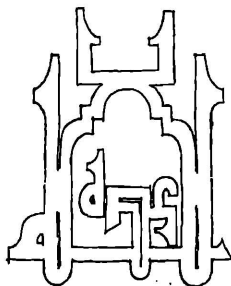


FIG. 19  
Qasba of Oudāia, End XII th cent.  
(Ricard, Fig. 403)

"Basmalah" carved in a tombstone from Qairawān, dated 440 H. (1018) <sup>(1)</sup>. I found the next example in the Qasba of Oudāia, end of XII th cent. A.D. <sup>(2)</sup>. This time the motive is composed of two words: "al-'Izza Lillāh" (Fig. 19), which means "Glory to God". Another contemporary example comes from the Mosque of Tūzur, end of XII th cent A.D. <sup>(3)</sup> (Fig. 20). In the later steps, the motive is formed by one word or more placed on one side of a middle



FIG. 20  
Mosque of Tūzur, End XII th cent.  
(Marçais, I, Fig. 233. C.)

(<sup>1</sup>) MARÇAIS: I, Fig. 934.

(<sup>2</sup>) RICARD: Pour Comprendre..., Fig. 403.

(<sup>3</sup>) MARÇAIS, I, Fig. 233 c.

axis and again placed, reversed this time, on the other side of the axis. The examples can be seen in the Mosque of Sidi bel-Hasan, end of XIIIth cent. A.D. <sup>(1)</sup>, and became very frequently used in the XIVth cent. A.D. in N. Africa and Spain, *e.g.* : in the Mosque, of Abū Madian, at Tlemcen <sup>(2)</sup>, 739 H. (1339) ; Rabāt, Shella, Tomb of Abu'l Hasan, middle of XIVth cent. A.D. <sup>(3)</sup> ; Granada Alhambra, 2<sup>nd</sup> half of XIVth cent. ; Sevilla, Alcazar, XIVth cent. A.D. <sup>(4)</sup> etc.

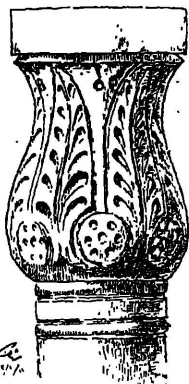


Fig. 11

Mosque of Ibn Tūlūn,  
Early Fāṭimid Mihrāb

These examples leave little doubt concerning the origin and home of this feature. West Islām. was the place where it first appeared and where it made its successive steps of evolution.

Thus, we are tempted once more to think that the Fāṭimid invasion of Egypt was again responsible for the appearance of this Maghribi feature in the mihrāb in the Mosque of Ibn Tūlūn.

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If we come now to the floral ornament we notice an apparent evolution in the decoration of the capitals of the two engaged columns carrying the outer arch (Pl. II, and Fig. 21). We have a good opportunity for comparison with the many examples of capitals from the Mosque of Ibn Tūlūn (Fig. 22) and the later capitals

<sup>(1)</sup> MAUCALF, II, Fig. 355.

<sup>(2)</sup> Ibid., II, pp 489 ff. ; RICARD, *op. cit.*, Fig 405.

<sup>(3)</sup> KÜHNEL: *Maurische Kunst.* Pl. 56.

<sup>(4)</sup> Ibid., Pl. 45.

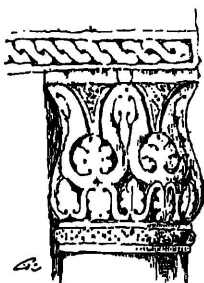


FIG. 22  
Mosque of Ibn Tūlūn.  
(Crenwell, I, Pl. 107, d)

in the Dair as-Suriāni (Fig. 23). One of the chief characteristics of 'Abbāsid ornament of Style "C" is the idea of crowding the elements and to make them too close together so that no back-ground is left in between. This idea is not honestly followed in the capitals of our mihrāb. The ornament is simplified to an elongated leaf with internal grooves distributed palmette-wise, and triangular spaces between the tops of the leaves occupied by two-lobed ones. It is quite clear here that some evolution has taken place and most probably happened not in the Tūlūnid period, but in a later stage in the early Fāṭimid period.

\* \* \*

Lastly we come to the compact floral ornament in the architrave of the arch, in the spandrels and in the vertical bands flanking the column. The above-mentioned characteristic of Style "C" of Sūmurrā is quite clear here, *viz.* each element is placed so



FIG. 23  
Dair as-Suriāni,  
913/4.  
(M. de Villard :  
Wādi en-Natrūn  
Pl. II)

closely in contact with the others so that no background may be visible between the elements. In spite of the apparent presence of that characteristic in the mihrāb, yet we notice that each of the compact winged-leaves, forming the greater part of the decoration is, in fact, a frame enclosing a split-palmette which has a convex section, while the space between it and the winged-leaf

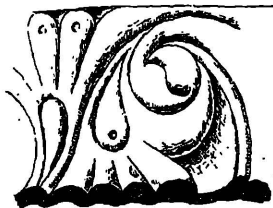


FIG. 24

Mosque of Ibn Tūlūn,  
Early Fāṭimid Mihrāb

frame is concave (Fig. 24)

The concave section of this space makes it look as if it were a modelled background for the split palmette, a feature not known in Sāmarrā.

Another characteristic of Style "C" is the growth of one element from another, the connecting stems are too short to be noticed. In our mihrāb the leaves grow one from the other true to Sāmarrā tradition, but the stems are quite elongated and clearly visible.

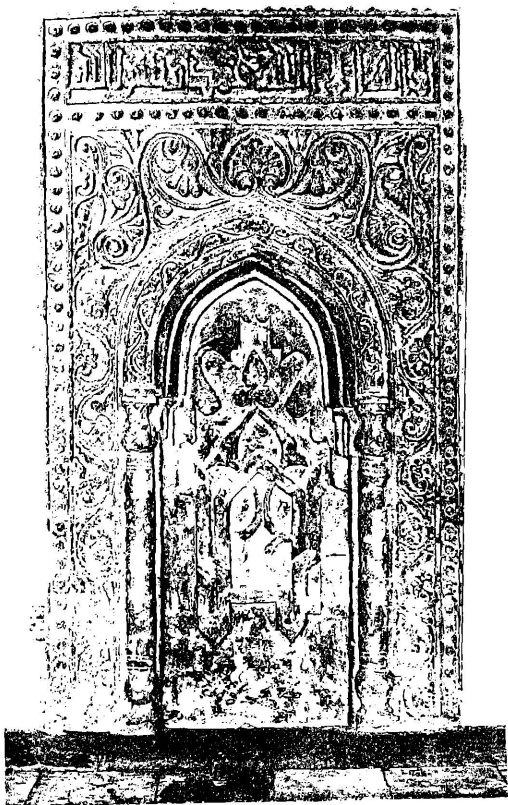
To conclude the remarks about the floral decoration of the mihrāb, I admit that it has no parallel in Fāṭimid stucco-work, yet it has a good one in the decoration carved on the wooden tie beams of the arches carrying the central dome in the Mosque of al-Hākim<sup>(1)</sup>.



The evidence collected from the analysis of the mihrāb in question can be summarised in two groups as follows:—

(a) Features that made their appearance, or at least became to be frequently used, since the early Fāṭimid period, and most

(1) CHESWELL: M.A. ED. I, P. 201.



Pl. I

[Farid Shāhī.]

MOSQUE OF IBN TULŪN — EARLY FATIMID MIHRĀB



[Farid Shāfi'i]

Pl. II  
DETAIL from Pl. I



probably introduced from other Islamic countries, mainly from West Islām which was quite natural to happen with the Fāṭimid invasion of Egypt.

b) Local features of Ṭūlūnid or more precisely of Sāmarrā origin that show an apparent transition stage of evolution.

Conclusion — In view of the evidence provided by all these features I am strongly tempted to suggest the end of the VIth cent. H. (Xth. cent. A.D.), as a more reasonable date for that particular Miḥrāb in the Mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn.

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