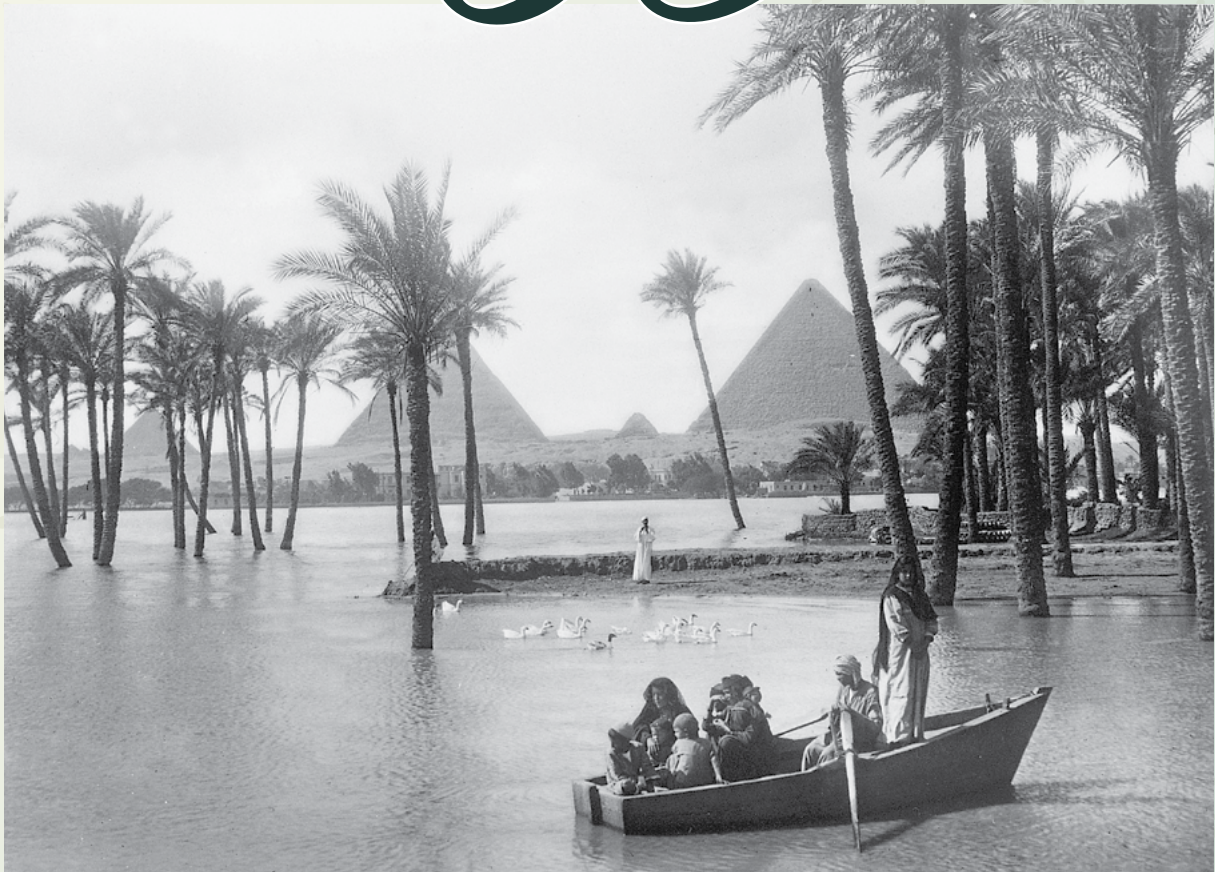


*Hail to thee, O Nile!
Who manifests thyself over this land,
and comes to give life to Egypt.*

(From an ancient Egyptian prayer)

Old Egypt

■ by *Cynthia Culbertson*



O&D Egypt



"Egypt is the gift of the River Nile" said the Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century B.C., and this mighty river, the longest on earth, gave birth to a country whose name has evoked a sense of awe, mystery, and enchantment for thousands of years. Egypt is a land like no other, where both nature and civilization transcend time. On the plain of Giza, just outside Cairo, the inscrutable visage of the Sphinx bears silent witness to centuries of human history. The Great Pyramid, perhaps the world's most recognizable monument, was already more than 2,000 years old when the Coliseum in Rome and the Great Wall of China were newly built. Like the river Nile, Egypt's monuments seem to defy eternity, as reflected by the ancient Arab proverb which proclaims *"Man fears time. But time fears the Pyramids."*



Cairo, fabled city of the Arabian Nights, was known in history as *"The Mother of the World"* and is both the capital of Egypt and the largest city in Africa. The renowned Arab philosopher and historian, Ibn Khuldun, wrote that that the city "surpasses anything one may imagine," and while his words were penned over seven centuries ago, his description is timeless. Cairo is a modern city – with multi-lane highways, high-rise buildings, and a subway system – yet a savvy visitor can quickly disappear into the vibrant heart of the old city, where the vistas in all directions delight the senses like an orientalist painting come alive.

The history of the city of Cairo is among the richest in the world and the tantalizing remnants of each of its historical epochs fascinate all who embrace this ancient city. Most visitors are drawn to the great architecture, art, and artifacts of ancient Egypt, but the Ptolemaic Empire, the Roman and Byzantine Periods, as well as the many Islamic Empires are equally fascinating.



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The Fatimid Empire, one of several great Islamic periods in Cairene history, was an era of great luxury, with an emphasis on the fine arts, music, and the greatest library of the medieval world. Stretches of the ancient wall around their royal enclosure still exist, and this area was known as "Al Qahirah" from which the modern city gained its name. Three massive fortified gates, Bab al Futuh, Bab an Nasr, and Bab Zuwayla still stand in glorious reflection of the Fatimids, and the sights and sounds of this part of medieval Cairo are truly a journey back in time.

Mamluk slave dynasties also ruled Cairo for several centuries, and left behind many stellar examples of Islamic architecture. The 13th century Mosque of Sultan Hassan is perhaps their greatest architectural achievement, and its graceful courtyard and intricate minaret are but two features of its sublime beauty. The Mamluks were also superior horsemen whose mounts were decorated in bejeweled splendor. Who can walk along the Darb al-Ahmar, an ancient road linking the medieval district with the Citadel, without imagining the magnificent processions of the Mamluk Sultans on their prancing Arabian steeds?



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*He who hath not seen Cairo hath not seen the world:
her soil is gold, her Nile is a marvel,
her women are like the black-eyed houris of Paradise;
her houses are palaces; and her air is soft,
more odorous than aloes-wood, rejoicing the heart.
And how can Cairo be otherwise
when she is the Mother of the World?*

(From the Tales of the Arabian Nights)

The souks and bazaars of Cairo are another feast for the senses, and the winding passageways of the famed Khan al Khalili are in a section of the city also adorned with magnificent mosques, madrasahs, and palaces. Relaxing in a tiny café to drink tea, it seems as if one is watching the whole world pass by. A short distance away is the Coppersmith's bazaar, which has existed in this location since the fourteenth century, its craftsmen producing the same designs and products as in countless centuries past.

One of Cairo's greatest attractions is its people, whose variety and numbers are astounding. Yet despite living in the clamor of one of the world's busiest cities, its citizens greet visitors with welcoming smiles and boundless hospitality. All manner of dress can be seen, from haute couture to limitless varieties of traditional attire, and conveyances range from sleek motor cars to donkey carts. Perhaps most compelling, however, are the enchanting scenes of everyday life: graceful feluccas floating silently down the Nile; street vendors chanting the attractions of their wares; musicians leading a lively procession in celebration of a Saint; a muezzin calling the evening prayer as the sun sets over the breathtaking silhouette of the Pyramids.

To experience the wonders of Egypt and her great city of Cairo is simply unforgettable.



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