

CAIRO

CHAPTER I

Cairo before the Fatimides

IF modern Egypt is a doubly dependent country, tributary to one empire, and protected by another, a few centuries ago it claimed to be not only independent but imperial. Its capital, Cairo, was founded when the power of Baghdad was already declining, and for two centuries it maintained a Caliph who contested with his Eastern rival the possession of Syria, Palestine and Arabia. And when in the thirteenth century the Mongol storm wrecked the great metropolis of Islam on the Tigris, it was at Cairo that sovereigns arose capable of rebuilding an Islamic empire, and repelling the Mongols beyond the Euphrates. For two-and-a-half centuries Cairo remained the capital of western Islam, and the seat of the most powerful Mohammedan state, sending out governors to many provinces, and recognized as suzerain even where it did not appoint the ruler: being itself the laboratory of a political experiment perhaps never tried elsewhere. Its monarchs bore the title Slaves (*Mamluke*), not in mock humility like the *Servus servorum Dei*, but in the plain and literal sense of the term. The occupant of the throne was ordinarily a Turk, Circassian or Greek, who had been purchased in the market, and then climbed step by step, or at times by leaps and bounds, a ladder of honours at the top of which was the Sultan's throne. A slave with slaves for ministers constituted the