

## Symbolism in Fatimid Pottery Decorative Arts

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"Stare at them and listen, they are murmuring to you", this was my starting statement when I stood, as a tour-guide, in the Northeastern Ziyāda of Ahmad Ibn Tulūn mosque (879), back in April 2010, to show an American tourist group, of Abercrombie and Kent travel agency, those magnificent anthropoid-shape crenellations which surmount and decorate the inner and outer enclosure walls of the mosque. Those massive crenellations which are equal in magnitude and height are considered, from my point of view, a clear illustration of symbolism in Islamic art. Despite the fact that they do not display any calligraphic inscriptions, one could still detect few meanings from the silent bricks. For example, they show the idea of how the Muslim should be lined up behind the Imam while performing mass prayers, namely foot to foot and shoulders to shoulders. Moreover, the interlaced hands demonstrate a verse in the holy Qur· ān which calls for unity between Muslims, that is "and hold firmly to the rope of Allah and do not become divided"<sup>1</sup>. In consequence, symbolism could be defined as a silent language and a letterless script used by patrons, architects or artisans to deliver a specific meaning indirectly via a materialistic object. In Egypt, symbolism had been used as early as the Pharaonic civilization period, for instance, when the ancient Egyptians used lily and papyrus plants in connection with symbolizing the kingdoms of upper and Lower Egypt. Accordingly, symbolism is about the artist's choice and display of an element which features specific structural and artistic characteristics relevant to the theme or the idea which is tended to be delivered indirectly to the

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<sup>1</sup> -القرآن الكريم، سورة ال عمران، أية ١٠٣

viewers<sup>2</sup>. In the same context, so far as we believe that symbolism is based on signs and symbols, it could be acceptable to state that it enjoys a unique metaphysical dimension which is highly admired and appreciated by those who contemplate and approach arts from a metaphysical perspective<sup>3</sup>. Islamic art has always been classified as a distinctive art for various reasons, especially for accommodating various aspects of special symbolism philosophy, a trend which is based on the strict adherence between the form and content of Islamic art<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, it is obviously essential for the viewer of Islamic art artifacts to get acquainted, as much as possible, with Islam, from an ideological perspective<sup>5</sup>, in respect of achieving a clearer understanding to the deep meanings which lie behind the visible surface of those artifacts. Being one of the most distinctive dynasties in the history of Islam, the Fatimid Caliphate had succeeded, within a short time span, in shaping the major outlines of Islamic art and architecture across central Islamic lands. The Fatimid dynasty started around the year 908 in Ifriqiya before they moved their capital to Egypt in 969, then it lasted for almost 263 years till it was knocked down by Saladin in 1173<sup>6</sup>. The Fatimids succeeded in dominating spacious areas of the Islamic world, at the time of their greatest expansion they extended from central Algeria to northern Syria, the middle Euphrates valley, and the holy places of Arabia<sup>7</sup>. Accordingly, we can conclude that the Fatimids as a political-religious entity aimed at expanding their territories to the maximum through a series of well organized military campaigns, then, to exploit their political expansions in disseminating their Shī · ī creed among the populations of the conquered states, especially in Egypt for being considered later the center of the

<sup>٢</sup> - رمضان بسطاويسي، جماليات الفنون، الحياة المصرية العامة للكتاب، القاهرة، ١٩٩٨، ص ١٨

<sup>٣</sup> - عبد الناصر ياسين، الرمزية الدينية في الزخرفة الإسلامية، مكتبة زهراء الشرق، القاهرة، ص ١٨

<sup>٤</sup> - عبد الفتاح رواس قلعه جي، مدخل إلى علم الجمال الإسلامي، دار قنبيه للنشر، دمشق، ص ٧٤

<sup>٥</sup> - بلاسم محمد، تأويل الفراغ في الفنون الإسلامية، دار مجدلاوي، ٢٠٠٨، عمان، ص ١٥٥

<sup>6</sup> - Oleg Grabar et.al, *Islamic Art and Architecture 650-1250*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2001, p.187

<sup>7</sup> - Grabar, et al., *Islamic Art*, p. 187

Fatimid world. Being affiliated to the *Ismā'īlī* order, the Fatimid's main objective in Egypt was to exploit every possible facility to propagandize their creed, whether those facilities were physical, such as the truly grandiose building program of the *Shī'ī* religious-educational foundations, or incorporeal, such as the *Shī'ī* oriented decorative arts which were applied to the surfaces of minor arts products, namely metalwork, glasswork and ultimately pottery.

This study aims to analyze and interpret many examples of the different available decorative arts and themes which were applied to Fatimid pottery in respect of determining the contribution of those decorative arts to the systematic process of disseminating the *Shī'ī* *Ismā'īlī* creed. This study will be tackled from the tour-guiding perspective in terms of boosting the scientific-based analytic eye of the professional Egyptian tour-guide towards Islamic arts and its various symbolic components.

Clay had always been regarded as a prime material which had its unique contribution in shaping the cultural and artistic lives of many civilizations across the world. Indeed, creating different products form clay, in its different forms, is considered by some scholars to be the oldest *métier* in the history of mankind<sup>8</sup>. Subsequently, it is not surprising to know that pottery, in many cases, could be used as an index in metering the rate of advancement and urbanization of a certain nation<sup>9</sup>. Pottery, as an art of excellence, had enjoyed distinctive rank in the history of Islamic art for its physical functionality along with its moral significance, especially for being mentioned in the holy *Qur'ān*, that is "And we did certainly create man out of clay from an altered black mud"<sup>10</sup>. The pottery industry in Egypt had witnessed a real renaissance during the Fatimid period, Nasir Khusraw, *Ismā'īlī* scholar, traveler and famous writer in Persian literature, mentioned in his

<sup>٨</sup> - سعيد حامد الصدر، الخزف، المطابع الاميرية، القاهرة، ١٩٤٨، ص ٨

<sup>٩</sup> - زكى محمد حسن، كنوز الفاطميين، مطبعة دار الكتب المصرية، القاهرة، ١٩٣٧، ص ١٤٧

<sup>١٠</sup> - لآقرآن الكريم، سورة الحجر، آية رقم ٢٦

accountants, that "the Egyptian pottery, out of its finesse, was so thin and transparent to the extent that if somebody puts his hand on one side of the pot, it could be clearly viewed from the over side<sup>11</sup>.

During the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> the centuries Egypt had been actively producing opaque white glazed and polychrome glazed wares<sup>12</sup>. This last type was developed later into the were known as al-Fayyumi whose designs and patterns were, in most cases, restricted to simple radial panels which were gradually developed into true cuerda seca technique. In the same counteract, the arrival of luster technique towards the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century was another Fatimid booming artistic incident, but the simultaneous end of two centuries of luster technique in Iraq suggested that this new trend was caused by the luster potters themselves. In Iraq the luster decoration was confined to a single type of decoration, while in Fatimid Egypt wide range of decorative styles was proliferated<sup>13</sup>. The supremacy of Fatimid lusterware was based on the sedulity of the potters back then in carrying out many experiments in connection with developing the ceramic bodies. Accordingly, their attempt resulted in the formulation of the true frit body, the one pure while fabric which enjoyed many advantages, such as being thrown and burned thinly, it did not need a coating of thick expensive opaque white glaze, thus, it become a suitable standard fabric for fine quality luster painted and incised wares<sup>14</sup>.

According to the Shī · ī Ismā · l · order, Islam is based on seven pillars: the Imamate, purity, performing prayers, giving alms, fasting, performing pilgrimage and Jihad<sup>15</sup>. Thus, it is clearly

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<sup>11</sup> - ناهض عبد الرزاق دفتر القيسي، الفنون الزخرفية العربية و الإسلامية، دار المناهج للنشر و التوزيع، عمان، 2009، ص ٤١

<sup>12</sup> Oliver Watson, *Ceramics from Islamic Lands*, Thames & Hudson in association with the al-Sabah Collection, Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait National Museum, New York, 2004, p.53

<sup>13</sup> - Watson, *Ceramics*, p. 54

<sup>14</sup> - Watson, *Ceramics*, p. 54

<sup>15</sup> - محمد عبد الستار عثمان، الجامع الأقمري: دراسة أثرية مذهبية، دار الوفاء لدنيا الطباعة و النشر، ٢٠١٢، الإسكندرية، ص ٧

understood that the Imamate is considered the spiritual core of the Ismā'īlī order, for the Imam himself was a sacred figure who acquired his divinity from being a descent of ahl al-bayt, namely, Alī and Fa'ima. In the same context, the Imam is believed by the followers of the Ismā'īlī order to be a temporal enforcer the prophets' duties, thus, he is the door of Allah, and being chosen by him to lead the people in both their mundane and religious lives<sup>16</sup>. Accordingly, the Fatimids in Egypt had chiefly aimed at affirming the idea of the divine Imamate in connection with exploiting that religious trend as a prime gear in disseminating their creed in Egypt. The following part of the study will focus on studying and analyzing different examples of Fatimid pottery products in terms of unveiling the symbolism vocabulary of their decorative arts, and how does that symbolism relate to the Fatimid's ultimate tendency of spreading their creed among the Egyptians.

This bowl is one of the Fatimid pottery masterpieces in the Kuwait museum (fig.1), its fabric is earthenware, painted in luster on an opaque white glaze<sup>17</sup>. The informal naturalism of the bowls' decorative arts recalls the mannered abstractions and stylizations of the earlier Iraqi wares<sup>18</sup>. The center of the bowl exhibits a lion painted on a grand scale. The lion's state of motion catches the attention of the viewer as the main decorative element of the artifact. From the artistic point of view, the lion had always been an effective tool of symbolism in the Fatimid artist's kit. Certainly, the lion, as a decorative element, could not be considered as a Fatimid artistic innovation, for it had been widely in different parts of the world since the earliest civilizations. It is unique for being a mighty non-evil creature which has always been associated with power and dominance. Consequently, it has been regarded as a prime symbol

<sup>١٦</sup> - محمد عبد الستار عثمان، موسوعة العمارة الفاطمية، دار القاهرة للطباعة و النشر، الطبعة الأولى، ج١، القاهرة، ٢٠٠٧، ص٣٣٩

<sup>17</sup> - Watson, *Ceramics*, p.274

<sup>18</sup> - Watson, *Ceramics*, p.274

of royalty, whether the symbolized person was a king or a prince<sup>19</sup>. As for the Fatimids, they were oriented towards illustrating different animals in their artistic works<sup>20</sup>; therefore, the lion was a perfect animal to be illustrated in their minor arts artifacts, especially pottery which was broadly used by the populace. In this case, it could be possibly accepted that the lion here was symbolizing a Fatimid caliph in terms of showing the Sunni public the strength, power and dominance of the Fatimid Shī'ī rulership. In his description of the current bowl, Oliver Watson, Professor of Islamic art and architecture at the University of Oxford, states that the inscriptions on the rim do not show any coherent reading, and the displayed Arabic letters were merely used as decorative elements<sup>21</sup>. In this context, I have a different point of view, because if we detach the connected inscription into separate letters we will be able to distinguish the five Arabic letters which form the name "Fatima", wife of 'Alī and daughter of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). What is most striking here is the presence of two trilobed grape leaves as parts of the previously mentioned inscription. A similar trilobed grape leaf is found straight under the name of 'Alī in that outstanding roundel which surmounts the portal of al-Aqmar mosque (fig.2). Most probably, the grape leaf had been used in Fatimid art as a vegetal symbolism of 'Alī, accordingly, the indirect way of demonstrating 'Alī and Fatima in this piece was intentionally executed by the artists in connection with the affirming the lineage of the Fatimid caliphs to Ahl al-Bayt.

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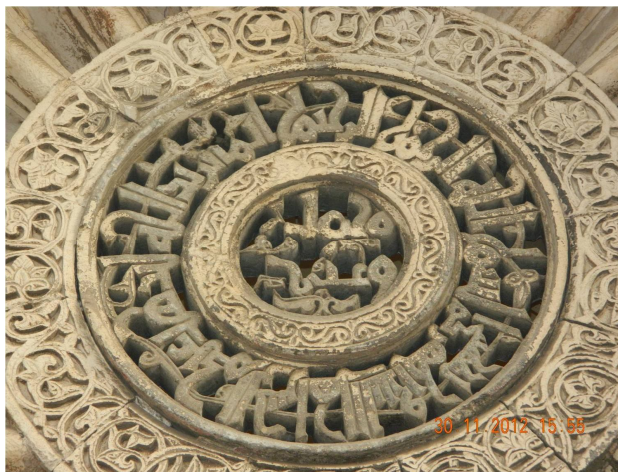
<sup>19</sup> - Mirjam Jelfer-Jorgesen, *Medieval Islamic Symbolism and the Paintings in the Cefalù Cathedral*, Brill Academic Pub, Leiden, 1997, p.126

<sup>20</sup> - Grabar, et al., *Islamic Arts*, p.200, 201

<sup>21</sup> - Watson, *Ceramics*, p.274



**Fig. 1 (by Oliver Watson)**



**Fig. 2 (by author)**

This impressive bowl dates back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century; its main fabric is earthenware and painted in luster on opaque white glaze<sup>22</sup>. The bowl here follows the Fatimid traditional trend in applying a central figure, on grand scale, in the middle of the artifact. This central figure exhibits a peacock which was one of the main birds used in both Byzantine and Islamic arts within the context of symbolic arts<sup>23</sup> (fig.3). As for Christian arts, the peacock had always been used in symbolizing Jesus in the cradle, while in other cases it symbolized eternity, but the symbolic usage of the peacock in Islamic art was different. It was considered the master of the birds in the paradise; furthermore, Archangel Gabriel was entitled as the peacock of the angels<sup>24</sup>. In many cases, this beautiful colorful bird, especially during the Fatimid period, did symbolize optimism, thus, in many cases when the peacock was applied in an artifact it was encircled by a variety of optimistic words, such as "النصر..الْيَمْن" which translates as "Victory, good fortune" as the case in this piece<sup>25</sup>. What is noteworthy that in Islamic arts when the peacock was illustrated next to the tree of life it was considered a royal bird which symbolizes sovereignty<sup>26</sup>. For this reason, it could be possibly assumed that the peacock in this artifact is symbolizing a Fatimid caliph who is being wished happiness, fortune and victory, again, another symbolic device used in demonstrating the Fatimid Dominance.

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<sup>22</sup> - Watson, *Ceramics*, p.277

<sup>٢٣</sup> - ياسين، الرمزية، ص٦٢، ٦١

<sup>٢٤</sup> - ياسين، الرمزية، ص١٦٤

<sup>٢٥</sup> - ياسين، الرمزية، ص١٦٣؛

Watson, *Ceramics*, p.277

<sup>26</sup> - *Jorgesen*, Symbolism, p.129



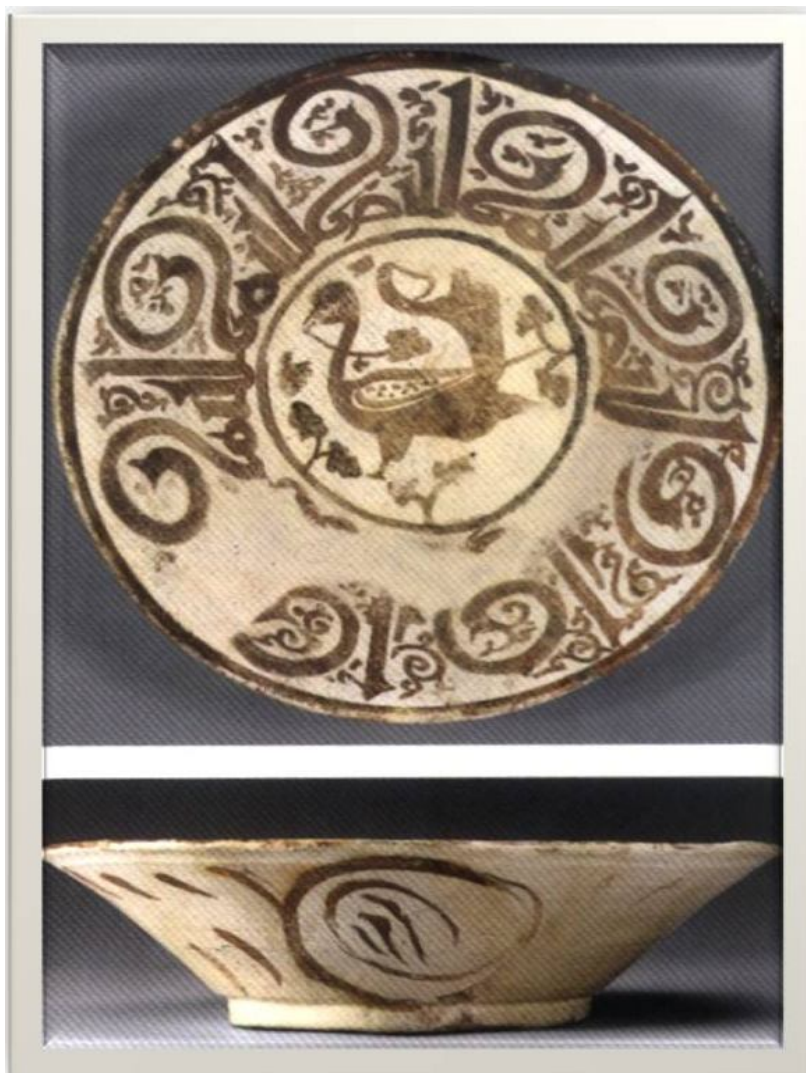


Fig. 3 (by Oliver Watson)

The rabbit was one of the predominant animal motifs in the Fatimid art. The museum of Islamic arts in Cairo and Kuwait national museum display a wide variety of Fatimid pottery decorated with the rabbit. The rabbit, as an animal motif, was used during the Coptic era in Egypt as a symbol of the spirit<sup>27</sup>, while in Islamic art it

<sup>27</sup> - Abbas Daneshvari: *Animal Symbolism in Warqa wa Gulshāh*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986, p.26, 27

was applied as a decorative motif to different artifacts in terms of illustrating good luck and bringing good fortune<sup>28</sup>. In other cases, when the rabbit was shown surrounded by grape vines or even eating grapes or its leaves, it symbolized the eternal life in paradise, thus, it featured an eschatological connection<sup>29</sup>. The rabbit in the Fatimid art could be approached from a different perspective. Possibly, when the Fatimids used the rabbit as decorative motif they were trying to establish an artistic continuity with the past, namely, the Coptic era in terms of pleasing the Christian society in Egypt, in the same time, when the rabbit was shown with a grape leaf in its mouth, it could had been used in the same Coptic symbolic trend as a soul, and the grape leaf as a sign of 'Alī, therefore, the symbolism here would be rotating around the idea of illustrating the current Fatimid caliph as the spirit of 'Alī during that period. This 11<sup>th</sup> century Fatimid bowl is a good example of the previously mentioned trend in illustrating the rabbit with grape leaves, it is earthenware, painted in luster on opaque white glaze. The rabbit here dominates the central part of the bowl; again Watson states that the surrounding inscription is meaningless, although, through taking a precise look at the letters one could read the Arabic word "امام" which translates as Imam in a popular trend of affirming the role of the Fatimid caliph as an Imam (fig.4).

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<sup>28</sup> - ياسين، الرمزية، ص ١٨٤، ١٨٣

<sup>29</sup> - Jorgesen, *Symbolism*, p.128, 129



**Fig. 4 (by Oliver Watson)**

Ahl al-Kitab or the people of the book were one of the Fatimids' magical devices in securing their existence in Egypt, the heart of the Fatimid world. Being minorities in Egypt during the Fatimid era, the Jews and the Christians were, in most times, very well treated by the Fatimids who regarded Ahl al-Kitab as a very effective human device in their conflict with the Sunni community of Egypt. Accordingly, it is not surprising to find many pottery products, dating back to the Fatimid era exhibiting Christian motifs. The next gorgeous bowl is a good example of this artistic trend. It is a Fatimid masterpiece in Victoria and Albert museum. The bowl's fabric is fritware with an overglaze decoration; it roughly dates back to the period between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. The central part of the bowl displays a human figure, who is clearly a

Christian monk or priest; he holds an incense burner or possibly a lantern in his right hand<sup>30</sup>, while the area to his left hand side is displaying the ancient Egyptian sign of life "Ankh". From the symbolism perspective, if we consider the right hand object to be a lantern, it could be regarded as a physical evidence or source of light. Al-Noor, or light was a major axes in the Shī · ī Ismā · ī lī creed, the Ismā · ī lī s believed that light is Allah's pulse in the mind of the true believer, it is transferred signal from the Prophet to the Imams who are responsible for transferring that light between the believers from one generation to another. They also believed that Allah is light, the Prophet is light, · Alī is light, Fatima is light and the Imams as well are lights which guide the believers in their mundane life to achieve the best rewards in their hereafter. For that reason, it was so common in the Fatimid artistic life to illustrate the light in different forms and ways<sup>31</sup> (fig.5).



**Fig. 5 (Victoria and Albert Museum)**

<sup>30</sup>- Anna Contandini, Fatimid Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum, V&A Publications , London, 1998, p.120

<sup>31</sup>- محمد عبد الستار عثمان، الأقمرة، ص٧٤،٩١،٩٢، أحمد فكرى، مساجد القاهرة و مدارسها، دار المعارف، القاهرة، ١٩٦٥، ج١، ص١٠٢

Ultimately, this outstanding Fatimid jar is the last, but not least, example and evidence in this research of symbolism in Fatimid pottery decorative arts (fig.6). It is made out of frit body, with a carved decoration under green glaze. It consists of several sections luted together before glazing and firing.<sup>32</sup> Despite the fact that the jar displays, through its color, a clear Chinese celadon effect, the symbolism trend of this artifact could possibly spring from that pure, uninterrupted, green color which entirely coats the outer surface of the jar (except for some parts near the bottom). The green color was the main slogan of the Alīds, it was used in Egypt during the Fatimid dynasty as an indirect decorative device in affirming the political- religious presence of the Shī'ī stream. For example, shortly after Jawhar conquered Egypt, he ordered the inner and outer walls of al-Fusṭāṭ mosque to be painted in green in terms of showing the official slogan of the Alīds in front the Egyptian Sunni community<sup>33</sup>.

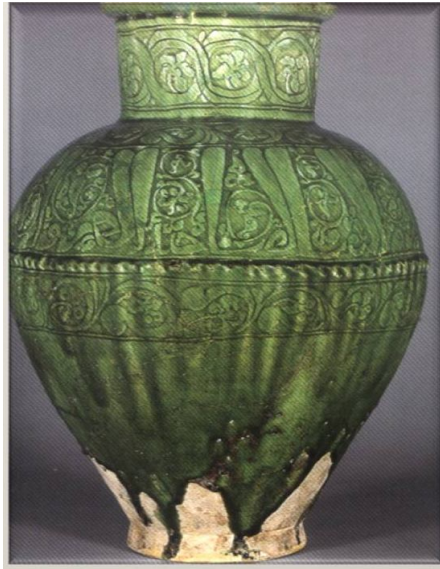


Fig. 6 (by Oliver Watson)

<sup>32</sup> - Watson, *Ceramics*, p.285

<sup>33</sup> - حسن ابراهيم حسن، الفاطميون في مصر وأعمالهم السياسية والدينية بوجه خاص، المطبعة الأميرية، القاهرة، ١٩٣٢، ص ١٢٠

In the final analysis, the Fatimids embarked on a very systematic program of exploiting every possible option, physical or moral, in securing their political-religious existence in Egypt. Symbolism in different decorative arts was one of their main devices in achieving their targets. This study proved, through the given examples, that most of the decorative arts applied to Fatimid pottery products, apart from their aesthetic role, did deliver indirectly a specific message and meaning. The symbolism in some decorative arts was about affirming the political power and dominance of the Fatimid state, while in other cases symbolism was rotating around the idea of connecting the Imams to Ahl al-bayt in terms of imposing the Shī•ī creed. Ultimately, symbolism was also exploited as a device in respect of pleasing and attracting Ahl al-Kitab in Egypt towards the Fatimid side to gain a good support in their doctrinal conflict with the Sunni community of Egypt. Symbolism is about silence, and silence is a universe language which is in many cases much stronger and effective than any other spoken language in delivering various concepts and meanings to people from all over the world.

In the shadow of what was previously mentioned, I strongly suggest that student and professional tour guides should always learn how to analyze and interpret any monument or artifact, on correct scientific bases, through carefully mixing between the descriptive and analytic methods in any culture related tour or site. Moreover, I also recommend that the academic staff of tour guiding departments in the various Egyptian schools of tourism should focus, with more concern in their classes, on the symbolic side, whenever possible, of the studied monuments or artifacts in respect of properly boosting the analytic sense in the minds of our future professional tour guides who are and will always be the backbone of the Egyptian tourism.

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