

Mamluk Architecture and its Related Arts as Evidence for State Stability and Administration in Egypt and Syria

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Abstract

The Mamluk dynasty (1250-1517) succeeded to the rich heritage of the Ayyubids in Egypt and Syria. For two hundred and sixty-seven years, the Mamluks had a complex, hierarchical system, with the sultan's own Mamluks at the top of the structure. The sultans power was supported by chief emirs and bureaucracy. Construction projects of all types and functions were sponsored by sultans, Emirs, and members of elite in Cairo, Damascus, Aleppo, Tripoli, and Jerusalem, and also in smaller towns and villages. The existing architecture of the Mamluk period in Egypt and Syria is one of the most important visual sources indicating, together with its decoration, related emblems and inscriptions, urbanism and prosperity of this period in different life aspects. Although a large number of essays have attempted to understand the architecture in the context of the Mamluk state and society, many further efforts and micro-historical and art-historical studies are still needed to explore more evidences resulted such stability and developed administration of this period. This paper will endeavor to illuminate the mamluk architecture and its related arts as evidence for the power and stability of the Mamluk dynasty and community, provide evidence for interactions between local and regional builders and artisans, and how architecture provides new visual data on the dynasty ruling system in Egypt and Syria.

Introduction

The Mamluk dynasty was founded in a very complicated political atmosphere and increased domestic civil needs. The dynasty has to face military challenges of the Mongol standing beyond borders and the Crusade threat standing within the dynasty borders, in cities and fortifications along the Mediterranean coast. Sultan Baybars (reigned 17 years, 1260-1277) realized the charges he has to undertake. He started laying out the basic foundations of a Mamluk State that succeeded to live 267 years. During his long reign sultan Baybars financed a large number of buildings of military and domestic purposes in Egypt and Syria attesting his economical power and state stability. In Egypt he fortified the citadel on the al-Rauda Island in Cairo, and secured the coastal front line in Damietta and Rosetta by providing the existing forts with additional towers. He consolidated the walls of Alexandria as well. In Syria (ash-Sham), Sultan Baybars restored forts in Damascus, and along the northern borders in Gaziantep, and in Belenozu (ar-Rawadan), as well as forts in the areas of Ajlun, ar-Rabad, Baalbek, Busra, Salkhad, as-Salt, Baniyas and as-Subayba. In his long reign he restored and consolidated 27 forts providing them with additional structural additions and towers (Meinecke 1992).

Sultan Baybars realized how to gain the support of the spiritual community. He build series of sacral buildings and encouraged the elite to do the same. His mosque in Cairo is an example of the Mamluk architecture in which Syrian influences are in integrated in local Egyptian construction traditions (Creswell 1959). In addition, Sultan Baybars restored the noble sanctuary (*Al-Haram ash-Sharif*) in Mecca, the dome of the rock in Jerusalem, al-Haram al-Ibrahimi in Hebron, The Ummayyad mosque in Damascus, the two great mosques of Aleppo and Hims. He also rebuilt important sacred places (shrines) and zawiyas used to be visited by people, such as those dedicated to a number of companions of Prophet Muhammad such as the shrines of Ja'far Ibn Abi Talib in al-karak, Abu Huraira in Asdud, Abu 'Ubayda Ibn al-Jarrah in 'Imwas ('Ammata), Khalid Ibn al-Walid in Hims, the Prophet Muses in Jericho, and the shrine of Prophet Noah in al-Karak. Some Crusade churches were also converted to mosques during his reign (Meinecke 1992) and afterwards such as the Crusade Cathedral of John the Baptist in Gaza which was converted to a mosque and expanded during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods adopting in the same architectural styles and roofing system (Sadeq 1991).

Egypt and Syria enjoyed an era of economical prosperity and neighborhood outreach. In order to secure the inter-regional trade between Egypt and Syria on the one hand and between the Mamluk sultanate and the neighboring regions on the other Baybars built a roads serving his advanced interregional post service and exchange of expertise and skills. The most important road is the sea road used in ancient times between Asian and Africa.

It is the same road which was called Horus way in ancient Egypt, the way to the Land of the Philistines in the Old Testament, and *via maris* (the sea way) during the classic period, and finally *ad-darb as-sultanu* (the sultan's way) during the Mamluk period. At present day, the latter name is still in use indicating parts of the way across Gaza Strip, the bordering area between Africa in south and Asia in the north. Along this road Baybars and the succeeding Mamluk sultans erected series of stations serving as post stations, hospices for travelers, and as centers for commercial and good exchange. One of such stations is a caravanserai (*khan*) still extant, albeit partially, in the center of the present day city of Khan Younis, approximately 23 km south of the city of Gaza. The city was named after emir Yunus an-Nawruz, the khan's founder in 1387 (Abu Khalaf: 1983; Sadeq: 2002). It is a unique example of the Mamluk caravanserai standing along the road between Egypt and Syria.

Based on the architectural remains, the observations of Austrian Schumacher, who visited the Khan in 1866 (Schumacher 1886), and based on a reconstruction made in the 1930s by the Palestinian Department of Antiquities of the British mandate of Palestine, the khan had a square plan. Each side being approximately 85.5 m in length. While the ground floor was used for storage and exchange of goods and for stabling the animals, the upper floor accommodated the khan's guests and embedded a Friday mosque with a prayer niche, a pulpit, and minaret. The latter (an octagonal shaft on a square base) is still standing on the west façade. Due to the khan's location on a deserted spot on the road prior to the foundation of the city of Khan Younis, the khan was well equipped and supported with several defense elements, such as massive outer walls, corner round towers, arrow-slits, battlements and a slot over the gate for dropping missiles. These defensive features is distinguishing the khans built along the highways from those ones situated safely inside the city walls.

State stability and prosperity require food security. Mamluks developed the agricultural sector to increase the product, they enhanced, for instance, the Hydrological system by widening the Nile arms in the delta and the irrigation canals as well. Furthermore the Mamluks built a large number of wells and aqueducts. One of them is the Abu al-Munajja aqueduct built by Baybars and still extant in Cairo (Creswell: 1959).

Recruiting inter-regional builders and artisans

The achieved stable community and economical prosperity resulted a large number of constructions and infrastructural projects which could be not achieved without advanced supervision and central organization. The Mamluks recruited a large number of builders and artisans. The historian 'Abd az-Zahir reports that sultan Baybars has sent a number of handworkers with their own tools from Damascus to Jerusalem. In the same year he sent Crusades prisoners from Jaffa and Beirut to Damascus participate in the restoration project of the citadel and the justice house (*dar al- 'adl*). He also sent builders, plaster workers, carpenters and other handworkers from Cairo to the city of 'Ain Jalut to work side by side with their Syrian colleagues in construction activities. When he besieged Caesarea in 1275 he recruited stone and hand workers from the Syrian governorates (*an-Niyabat ash-Shamiyya*). This inter-regional recruiting of builders, artisans, and hand workers has resulted common architectural traditions appearing today in series of Mamluk buildings in Egypt and Syria alike.

The rich and high quality stone decoration of the Mamluk architecture produced by inter-regional artisans in Egypt and Syria attest state prosperity. As example of this regional artistic interaction we mention the decoration technique called *Ablaq* (piebald) which started in Syria. It is the color change of the masonry courses, mostly lime stone and basalt alternation of white and black or merely alternation of white and pink lime stones. While basalt is available in Syria (Hawran region), lime stone is available in both regions; Egypt and Syria. *Ablaq* decoration is an earlier technique dated to the Byzantine period, produced for instance in Ibn Wardan palace near Hims in 561-566 AD. *Ablaq* decoration technique had merely an aesthetic function especially in the building facades, entrances and around the window openings. The earliest example of *Ablaq* in the Mamluk architecture is in the palace of sultan az-Zahir Baybars (1260-1277) in Damascus, as well as in his mosque in Cairo.

As school of *Ablaq* decoration originated in Syria, the sultan an-Nasir Muhammad invited artisans and builders from Damascus to construct his palace in Cairo citadel in cooperation with Egyptian colleagues. Since basalt quarries were not available in Egypt, an-Nasir Muhammad imported basalt from Syria. In other later cases builders replaced the basalt by lime stone absorbing black or dark color. The Wealthy and flourishing economy of the Mamluks is also reflected in architectural elements serving merely aesthetic purpose. One of these elements is the rhythmical arrangement of vertical niches in the large and uninterrupted spaces such as the facades and minaret bases.

The monumental gate of the Fatimid great mosque of al-Mahdiya seems to be the birth place of this technique (Creswell 8), and then in the 10th century was introduced by them to Cairo and became afterwards one of the characteristics of the Mamluk architecture in Egypt. During the Mamluk period this technique appears, first, in the mosque of az-Zahir baybars in Cairo (Meinecke 1992). Later, in the second half of the 14th century it reached Syria (ash-Sham) coming from Egypt and applied in the madrasa (Islamic college) of the emir al-Malik al-Jukandar in Jerusalem as well as in various buildings in Gaza such as in the governor palace and the mosque of Shahab ad-Din Ibn 'Uthman (Sadeq 1991). Mamluk buildings are also characterized with rich geometric stone decoration such as the polygonal forms decorating the facades. The leading form of this decoration is a star or disk of the sun. Many examples of this decoration are still seen in Tripoli (Salam-Liebich 1983), Jerusalem (Burgoyne: 1987) and Gaza (Sadeq 1991).

Flourishing economy is also evident in other decorative elements for pure aesthetic purpose such as the braid or twisted band which is a stone relief ornamentation runs mostly around the arch face forming a knot or medallion above the keystone and other two besides the both arch feet. This aesthetic element reflect the regional inter-impacts during the Mamluk period as in was introduced in the Byzantine architecture in Syria, and then appeared in the Umayyad and Crusade architecture in Egypt and Syria and became one of the characteristics of the Mamluk architecture. The first Mamluk example of the twisted braid in Egypt was around the arch of the prayer niche of *al-madrasa at-Taybarsiyya* dated to 1309. stalactite (*muqarnas*) is an another decorative element but also serve structural purpose. It is applied in various forms and types and used mostly as a domes transition, surmounted the portals niche and support Mamluk minaret balconies. It developed during the reign of the Mamluk sultan an-Nasir Muhammad in the way that the stalactites ending down with pendants (*dallayat*).

The stability and wealthy of the Mamluk period is reflected in exchange of architectural and art skills with the neighboring regions as well. During the last century of the Mamluk dynasty, the small constructed buildings became a dominant phenomenon, the engraved inscriptions, geometrical and floral decoration on stones and marble became more and more characteristic for the interior and exterior building spaces; they decorate portals, minarets, and domes. It gave them an optical spectrum which was not existing before. We see, for instance, twisted bands as decoration on the dome outer face of the madrasa and the mausoleum of the sultan al-Ashraf Barsbay (1422-37) in Cairo. This is the first appearance of dome outer decoration. Further example of such dome decoration by vertical ribbing and horizontal zigzags were also produced. Meinecke is suggesting that the origin of this decoration came is Iran (Meinecke 1992), albeit is produced here in ceramic tiles. As a supporting statement for his example he mentions the dome of the Mausoleum of Ni'mat Allah in Mahan, near Kerman, dated to 1436. Using of ceramic tiles for decorating the internal and outer spaces reached afterwards Damascus, where the artisan Ghaybi Taurizi decorated the interior walls of the mosque and mausoleum of the emir Khalil at-Tawruzi (1420-23) using ceramic tiles. This kind of decoration technique came afterwards from Damascus to Cairo, nevertheless produced here without ceramic tiles but engraved in lime stone as seen in the dome of the sultan al-Ashraf Barsbay.

The Sultan cartouche and emir blazons

Most of the Mamluk buildings and daily life movable objects designated to sultans and emirs are decorated with sultan inscribed cartouches, and emir's blazons. This is a heraldic science developed during the Mamluk period evidencing Mamluk organization and official posts.

The first datable Mamluk cartouche goes back to the end of the 13th and beginning of the 14th century (Mayer 1933). They were depicted on lamps, bowls, and similar objects. In the early Mamluk (*Bahri*) cartouches are divided into three fields, of which the middle one bears the inscription, whilst the upper and lower fields were left blank. The following versions are seen in the middle of various early Mamluk cartouches: "*izz li-maulana*" (glory to our lord) "*izz li-maulana as-sultan*" (glory to our lord the sultan), "*izz li-maulana as-sultan al-malik*" (glory to our lord the sultan al-malik), "*izz li-maulana as-sultan 'azza nasruhu*" (glory to our lord the sultan. May his victory be glorious).

Mottos of the late Mamluk (Circassian) period are distributed over the three fields of the cartouche. The middle register is embedding the name and title of the Mamluk sultan.

One example for the late Mamluk Cartouches is depicted on the façade of the caravanserai of the city of Khan Younis, approximately 23 km south of the city of Gaza. The cartouche bears the sultan's name and mottos. Its three line inscription says:

In the middle field: *'izzun li-maulana as-sultan al-malik az-Zahir* (glory to our lord the sultan al-malik az-Zahir).

In the upper field: Barquq (the sultan's name).

In the lower field: *azza nasruhu* (may his victory be glorious).

In addition to the sultans' cartouches, emir blazons are displayed, engraved, painted, or sculptured everywhere: in architecture and artifacts indicating their official posts. Emire blazons can in a few cases be granted by sultans but in most cases they were apparently left to the discretion of the emir himself. In the Mamluk contemporaneous literature there are fewer lines devoted to the blazon science. According to the historian Al-Qalqashandi (d. 1418) it is the custom that every emir has his special blazon and according to his choice or preference. The emirs used to change their blazons when they change their offices, but some emirs remained their blazons unchanged.

Examples of the Mamluk blazon's heraldic devices or emblems are: the cup of the cup-bearers/taster (*saqi*) which was one of the most frequently occurring devices; the pen-Box of the pen-box holder (*dawadar*), a secretary in the sultan court. The typical pen-box consists of four elements: the first, containing the ink-pot, the second the sand-pot and the starch paste-pot, the third a receptacle for reeds; the Napkin (*buqja*) of the master of the robes (*jamdar*). The *buqja* is a piece of cloth in which clothes, chancery deeds, etc were wrapped up. The napkin's normal shape being either square or rhomb; the small table (*khanja*) of the food taster (*jashnigir*); The polo-stick (*jukan*) of the polo-master (*jukandar*), a well-known emir/officer at court; the fesse of the dispatch-rider (*baridi*). It is depicted as a dark bar representing a strip of cloth used to be wrapped around the arm of the dispatch-rider; the bow of the bowman (*al-bunduqdar*), who was of the same rank as the armor-bearer; sword or a pair of swords represent the armor-bearer (*silahdar*). Besides the sword, there are Mamluk blazons of army officials displaying a scimitar, the dagger and a fight axe.

The Mamluk heraldic science developed and became composite during the late Mamluk period serving in this case as the emir curriculum vitae as each blazon may depict more than seven heraldic devices/emblems displaying the emir's previous and present posts. According to Meinecke (1973), the composite blazons are classified in three groups: blazons of emirs released by sultans still in power and emirs of former sultans and blazons of emir's sons (*aulad an-nas*) who received military education and religious studies and had official posts. Animals are rare in Islamic heraldic science. The best known case of animal blazon is the panther (*as-sab'*) of the sultan Baybars. According to the historian Ibn Iyas (d. 1524), the panther of Baybars indicates his courage and power (Sadeq 1991). An another blazon depicting a pictorial image (eagle) is the blazon of sultan Muhammad Ibn Qala'un represented in two varieties, the one-headed and two-headed.

Concluding notes

Mamluk architecture and its related calligraphy and blazons in Egypt and Syria are extremely important primary sources for reconstructing, albeit partially, the power, stability, prosperity and administration system of Mamluk Dynasty. The Mamluks realized the importance of the state domestic needs and social security. They large number of buildings, stations and strongholds built in cities and along the regional roads does shed light on the strategic defense vision. They could achieve a high level of economical prosperity. They developed the dynasty infrastructure and fulfill the urban and services of the metropolis and pilgrim cities.

The ambitions of the Mamluk sultans in building military and domestic architecture in Egypt and Syria required recruiting a large number of local and foreign builders and artisans reflecting the advanced organization and effective supervision under the Mamluks. The power, stability and inter-regional contact of the Mamluks have resulted exchange of skills and expertise melting various schools of architecture and decoration of Egypt, Syria and neighboring regions in one pot. In addition, the Mamluks integrated some of the architectural and decorative elements, styles and techniques of the Crusades such as the cross vault and the buttresses which are the basic roofing system of the Crusade Cathedrals. Mamluks had their own heraldic system and administration. Sultan cartouches and the large variation of the emir blazons provide essential supplemental data to the contemporaneous works of the court chroniclers and historians and shed lights on the Mamluk state's structure and official posts.

A large part of the Mamluk architectural heritage in Egypt and Syria has been experiencing a daily dramatic decay and loss due to human, institutional and environmental reasons. Urgent interventions and further field survey and studies of the standing architecture are urgently needed in order to understand it in imperial, cultural and daily life contexts.

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