

Mamluk History through Architecture: Monuments, Culture, and Politics in Medieval Egypt and Syria

Nasser Rabbat

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This exhaustive series of fifteen essays, all produced by the author during 1989-2005, covers many relevant facets of the Mamluk slave dynasty (1250–1517). By collecting these previously published essays in a single volume, a trajectory of interpretation can be contextualized and understood. Nasser Rabbat, a key figure in the contemporary study of Islamic architecture, is director of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT. The essays, organized into four thematic parts, begin with a conceptual understanding of the

Mamluks and their role and then look at their architecture through the lenses of history, language, and cultural index.

Part 1, “Unpacking Mamluk Sources,” features four essays. “The Changing Concept of Mamluk in the Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt and Syria” delves into the evolution of the definition and role of the Mamluks and their tumultuous ascent to power. “Representing the Mamluks in Mamluk Historical Writing” describes the urban society in the writings of the time. Rabbat notes that the first two social classes (viz., the ruling Mamluks and the common people) were either minimally or poorly described, as opposed to the third social class (viz., the literati, mostly composed of *ulama* [religious scholars] and *kuttāb* [authors]). This third class, which forms the dominant body of the text in both authorship and description, often portrayed the ruling Mamluks in a severely critical light. This essay thus emphasizes that the ruling Mamluks themselves left very little in written form to explain their motives and beliefs, and that the contemporaneous text is interpretative.

“Perception of Architecture in Mamluk Sources” continues in the same vein but details and documents Mamluk architecture in Cairo, Aleppo, Jerusalem, Damascus, and Tripoli, all of which were amply described by the chroniclers of the time. However, as in the previous essay, the authorship and motives greatly exaggerated (if not actually overshadowed) the buildings’ actual qualities due to their patrons’ and chroniclers’ emphasis upon these edifices’ role and magnificence. The essay concludes that very little contemporaneous writing actually described any qualities of the buildings’ spaces or reflected the architects/master builders’ intentions. “Architects and Artists in Mamluk Society: The Perspective of the Sources” picks up where the previous left off in order to theorize, based on select sources, on the role of architects in Mamluk society. The author, after evaluating the documentation of the exceptionally few architects chronicled by historians of the time, concludes that most architects/master builders essentially belonged to the anonymous class of artisans and craftsmen. Those who had become known as “men of the pen” were, according to the literati chroniclers, worthy of (and thus deserved) acknowledgment.

Part 2, “Architecture as History,” consists of three essays. “The Mosaics of the Qubba al-Zahiriyya in Damascus: A Classical Syrian Medium Acquires a Mamluk Signature” focuses on the short-term revival of glass mosaic embellishment during the Mamluk era (in total, seventeen buildings during the thirteenth century) with a study of the al-Zahir Baybars mausoleum in Damascus. The author, who focuses on the iconographical interpretation of the architectural depictions in the mosaics, postulates that the reappearance of this method was due to the patrons’ involvement in repairing Umayyad mosaics and that the images in the mausoleum represent the Mamluks’ pride in terri-

torial conquest. “The Militarisation of Taste in Medieval Bilad al-Sham” postulates that three effects of the military were evident in artistic production: the strict hierarchy, a “fortress mentality” of both physical separation (construction of citadels) and social separation (via differences in language and ethnicity), and, finally, an intentional “propagandist patronage” that sought popular approval through representation as “defenders of the faith.” “Al-Azhar Mosque: An Architectural Chronicle of Cairo’s History” traces the history of this 1,000-year-old mosque, its pivotal position as an eminent place of learning, and the multiple additions and modifications made to it over time. Rabbat traces the specific changes made by the ruling elite, citing three Mamluk sultans who sought to outdo each other in their successive additions (viz., the minarets). He evaluates the modifications made until the present day.

The third part, “Architecture as Language,” features four essays. The very short “Documenting Buildings in the *Waqf* System” summarizes the qualities of this type of documentation. The Islamic concept of *waqf*, endowing funds or properties to charitable foundations or people, necessitated the keeping of accurate records. The resulting specific documentation of buildings provides rich written descriptions of the context (for boundaries) and of the sequence of interior spaces. Such descriptions, according to the author, captured what the culture at the time deemed important, such as particular finishes or materials.

“The *Iwans* of the Madrasa of Sultan Hasan” defines in historical terms the *īwān*’s spatial element as well as earlier iterations of the form prior to its inclusion within the Mamluk architectural repertoire. Rabbat focuses on the patron’s intention to outdo all earlier *īwāns* as a monumental show of political power. The fact is that the dense program, which included a madrasa, a congregational mosque, and accommodation for 150 students on a limited site, only supported the vertical monumentality intended for the project, rather than seeking to propel it in functionalist terms. The author posits that this particular building, along with others of its time, created a new typological paradigm of the iwan. “*Qasr*: An Agent of Monumentality in Mamluk Architecture” focuses on the term *qasr* (palace). He contends that in the early Bahari period of Mamluk rule (thirteenth to fourteenth centuries) the *qasr* specifically referenced the lofty halls of a palatial structure that was extroverted and monumental in its urban presence. Rabbat posits that this was quite different from the subsequent Burgi period of Mamluk delineation of *qasr* space, which was introverted and less monumental. “Mamluk Throne Halls: *Qubba* or *Iwan*” focuses on the Ayyubid citadel of Cairo inherited by the Mamluks and which they used both as the seat of government and the

royal residence. Four major sultans of the early Mamluk period successively demolished and rebuilt the throne hall, the citadel's most important space. The author traces the shift of terms referring to the throne hall from *qubbah* to *iwān*, reflecting thereby the shift of the words' meanings and not necessarily a change in the forms.

The fourth and final section, "Architecture as Cultural Index," is the collection's most critical and synthesized section. "Writing the History of Islamic Architecture in Cairo" takes a critical look at the major documents describing the city, beginning with Taqiyy al-Din al-Maqrizi's *Al-Mawā'iz wa al-I'tibār bi Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa al-Athār* and moving on to Napoleon's compendium *Description de L'Égypte* and K. A. C. Creswell's *Muslim Architecture of Egypt*. The author is critical not only of the approaches in these influential documents, but also of the Egyptian text produced subsequently that largely focuses, like Khitat, on the particularist and independent development of Cairo's Islamic architecture.

"The Ideological Significance of the *Dar al-'Adl* in the Medieval Islamic Orient" describes this unique and lost building type. The *dār al-'adl* (house of justice) was instituted by Nur al-Din Mahmud ibn Zengi in Damascus in the early twelfth century; four others were established in Aleppo and Cairo during the Ayyubid and Mamluk eras. The author notes that this building type, with no extant physical remains but ample literary description, was a necessary product of the times that essentially vanished once the Mamluks secured complete dominance of the land formerly held by the Crusaders and the Mongols. "*Ajib and Gharib: Artistic Perception in Medieval Arabic Sources*" focuses on the limited commentary on the contemporaneous literati's artistic products despite the ample description of other forms of creative production. Rabat notes that the minimal descriptions of art are often limited to the terms *'ajīb* and *gharīb* (marvellous, wondrous, and extraordinary), which were borrowed from literary categories. He argues that the distance between the literati circles and the artistic/craftsmen simply made for a limited understanding and description of works. In addition, he postulates that the minimal description of fine arts is due to this limited understanding, rather than to an overarching religious edict of the era banning its production, as there are ample secular examples of the production of art.

"The Formation of the Neo-Mamluk Style in Modern Egypt" traces the documentation of Islamic architecture (*Description de L'Égypte*) to the classification and synthesis of its elements, primarily by Pascale Coste in his study, *Monuments du Kaire*, and early designs. It continues this process by analyzing the creation of a nineteenth- and twentieth-century "style" of ar-

chitecture to its complete appropriation in order to create an identifiable mosque and public architectural style for modern Egypt. The book appropriately ends with this article, which chronologically demonstrates the extension of the Mamluk era to the modern resurgence. It also synthesizes the historical material used in modern design, much as the author has carefully synthesized the varied aspects of the Mamluk era for relevant contemporary commentary and insight.

The intended audience for this work is specialized within the specific realm of Islamic art and architecture and, as the author puts it, for “Mamlukists.” For the specialist, this unique and insightful collection of essays presents its own continuity of thought and, within the context of larger academic writing on the subject, makes valuable contributions to different spheres. A certain level of background understanding of this era is therefore assumed. At times, the research and posited interpretations are subtle, even sublime.

Tammy Gaber
Adjunct Assistant Professor, School of Architecture
University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON, Canada