

Immortality through Monuments

A Fascinating Glimpse of an Unfamiliar Aspect of Egyptian Heritage: Mamluk Cairo

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In our May lecture, Omniya Abdel Barr from the Egyptian Heritage Rescue Foundation, based at the V&A, introduced us in a richly illustrated whirlwind tour to a part of Cairo's history many foreign visitors to the city do not see, or at least do not understand.

Fustat and Al-Qahira

Cairo had been founded in 969CE and functioned as an imperial capital for around 500 years, weathering several dynastic changes. When the Mamluks succeeded the Ayyubids, Cairo consisted of two urban centres, the older Fustat south of the Citadel and the Fatimid foundation, Al-Qahira, to the north-east of it. Saladin had started ambitious fortifications that were never completed, abandoned the Fatimid palaces and established the Citadel on the edge of the Muqattam Hills, in keeping with Syrian tradition.

Al-Qahira had been the site of royal residences before the Mamluk period. For more than 250 years, the Mamluks were at the helm of one of the great medieval Islamic powers controlling a large territory, and Cairo became the centre of gravity for Arab-Islamic civilization. From the outset, they aimed to consolidate their legitimacy through the patronage of a lavish urban culture, which led to an expansion of Cairo to an area covering 21 km², despite repeated economic and political crises. The non-hereditary Mamluk aristocracy sought to achieve immortality and legacy by endowing monuments and charitable foundations. They managed large-scale adventurous and innovative building projects with high standards of craftsmanship and a striking attention to detail, overcoming many engineering challenges, and substantially shaped what we see as "medieval Cairo" today.

Monumental construction

The sultans and their amirs seemed to compete with each other. Construction activity mainly focused on two areas, west of the Khalij al-Masri Canal, where new land had been created by the shifting course of the Nile, and in the intermediate zone between Al-Qahira and Fustat. New quarters developed around the base of the citadel. The mid-14th century saw the peak of monumental construction represented by the Complex of Sultan Qaytbay (see below) before the city was hit by the plague. The Mamluks favoured Al-Qahira over Fustat, where they invested very little. Before their ascendancy, Al-Qahira had been a royal enclave with most of the population residing in Fustat; now, parts of the civilian population were allowed to settle there, while industrial activities remained in Fustat.

The main north-south avenue through Al-Qahira was extended, with connecting avenues leading to new urban quarters. Space was always at a premium, with no empty plots available in the centre, but the Mamluks had no qualms demolishing, remodelling or building on top of Fatimid monuments. Some projects required not-quite-voluntary land transfers and requisitions. Bayn al-Qasrayn, a quarter dominated by Fatimid palaces, underwent a complete Mamluk makeover, with residences erected for the new aristocracy, and new religious foundations established.

Mausoleums, madrasas and a hospital

In the Salihyya area, Shajarat al-Durr took the innovative step of placing the mausoleum of her husband, the last Ayyubid sultan, inside the building of his religious foundation, establishing a

new tradition of locating rulers' funerary monuments in the heart of the city. However, she had her own mausoleum built outside the central area.

Sultan Baybars constructed his madrasa in central Al-Qahira. Only a fragment and some decorative elements survive. By attaching his madrasa to the mausoleum of his old Ayyubid master, Baybars may have tried to show respect, gain popular support and enhance the legitimacy of the newly established sultanate. Later, Baybars commissioned the construction of a Friday



Funerary Complex of Sultan Qaytbay

Mosque, a large courtyard mosque, in the northern suburb of Hussayniyya.

His successor, Sultan Qalawun, was one of Cairo's great builders. His complex, including the attached hospital modelled on one in Damascus, was one of the most ambitious of the Mamluk period, and was completed within 13 months on land still belonging to an Ayyubid princess. The land transfer required was originally very unpopular with Cairenes, to the extent that people would not pray in his mosque. His son, Al-Nasir Mohammad, another important patron of the city, built his religious monument on the site of a former hammam opposite his father's complex. It includes spolia acquired in a successful campaign against the crusaders, a Gothic portal taken from Acre in 1291 (shown above). The minaret clad in gypsum of his mosque shows North African influences in terms of decoration. He also constructed a mosque on the Citadel, whose green-tiled dome became an important landmark.



Gothic Portal from Acre

After that, it took 80 years before more significant construction occurred along Al-Qahira's main thoroughfare. Later, the funerary khanqah of the first Burji Mamluk sultan, Al-Zahir Barquq, was attached to Al-Nasir Mohammed's foundation.

More gradual change

Gradually, the character of the area changed; what once had been an area of royal residences became a place for worship, education and celebration. The end of



Madrasa of Umm al-Sultan Sha'ban

the conflict with the Crusaders ushered in a period of stability that was reflected in the architecture of the city. Now, the treasury was overflowing with the revenue from international trade and improved methods in agriculture. This cemented the power of the Mamluks and influenced urban development. New quarters developed. Sultan Al-Nasir Mohammed had a very ambitious programme and even set up a department for architecture, and he encouraged his amirs to engage in construction projects. This led to a proliferation of monuments, such as the Palace of Amir Qawsun, the Mosque of Altinbugha al-Maridani, and the Mosque of Aqsunqur. Mamluk women also left a monumental presence, such as the Madrasa of Umm al-Sultan Sha'ban on Darb al-Ahmar leading from Bab Zuweila to the Citadel.

"City of Water"

Cairo was very much a city of water – in addition to the ponds there was the Canal, securing the city's water supply. The Mamluks invested in many engineering projects and hydraulic structures to protect the city from the Nile and maintain the Canal, which followed an old bank of the Nile. Mamluk sources list many bridges. The Canal and ponds would fill up during the Nile flood and the water would slowly evaporate and seep into the soil. Then, the ponds were turned into gardens until the next flood. Plots along the major ponds were popular with the upper classes.

Around the end of the 15th century, two more neighbourhoods were developed in the north of the city, Bulaq and Azbakiyya. Bulaq, previously an island, was now connected to the east bank of the Nile and became Cairo's main river port. Birkat al-Azbakiyya was a large pond that became the focus of a new aristocratic neighbourhood.

The necropolises developed in parallel with the city. During the Bahri period, the Mamluk amirs continued the tradition of building their mausoleums in the southern cemetery, the Qarafa Sughra, which had been in use since the arrival of the Arabs. Sahara, the northern cemetery, became a place of royal patronage at the end of the 14th century. The outstanding monument



Funerary Complex of al-Ghuri

there was the funerary complex of Sultan Qaytbay. These cemeteries were not just for the dead, but also for the living, with facilities like drinking fountains.

At the very end of the Mamluk period, Sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri managed to secure a plot for his mosque and mausoleum in the centre of Al-Qahira, and endowed other fine monuments in the city. However, under Ottoman rule the patronage and the investment for urban renewal were lost.

Report and photographs by **Birgit Schoer**

Richard Jaeschke and the Friends of the Petrie Museum

Richard, who sadly died in January 2022, was a key figure in the formation of the Friends of the Petrie Museum, which was founded in 1988 by his close friend, the then Curator of the Petrie Museum, Barbara Adams, together with the then Head of Egyptology at UCL, Professor Harry Smith, and George Hart of the British Museum. Barbara's aim was to establish a means of raising funds for desperately needed conservation that the museum's limited budget just could not cover.

The first project funded by the PMF was Richard's conservation of this 21st Dynasty painted wooden coffin base in the Petrie Museum (UC8899B). It had been damaged by major flooding through the roof of the museum in the early 1980s, so was an urgent priority. To celebrate Richard's conservation and mounting of this coffin base, we staged our first Saturday morning opening of the museum (in October, 1989), and Richard was the star attraction, speaking to the Friends about his work.



Richard at the first Saturday morning opening of the Museum (October 1989)

But Barbara's primary goal in founding the PMF had been to raise funds to complete the conservation of the museum's internationally important collection of Egyptian Roman Period wax encaustic mummy portraits; the largest collection of these portraits in the world. Richard and Helena had already taken on this monumental task in the late 1970's funded by the Area Museums Service for South Eastern England. But this grant source dried up, and so the PMF stepped in, partially funding the work from 1989, and funding it entirely from 1993.

In an article for the first PMF newsletter of Autumn 1988, Richard and Helena wrote as scientists, but also as clear lovers of ancient Egyptian material culture, with descriptions of 'the translucent deep colours and richness of the paint' giving the portraits 'an air of sumptuousness'. They ended with, 'Though the entire process requires continual concentration, the rewards are great as yet another face emerges from the dirt and we see again the solemn-eyed people of Hawara.' Through their mammoth conservation project of some 40 mummy portraits, Richard and Helena really did bring those ancient faces back to life for us.

Richard's masterful conservation of so many objects in the Petrie Museum is just one part of the exceptional legacy of a wonderful man.

Lucia Gahlin

adapted from my in-person contribution to an online celebration of Richard's life in March 2022