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Perception of Architecture in Mamluk Sources

Mamluk architecture is one of the most extensively though unevenly studied categories in the field of Islamic architectural history today. Several surveys, varying in scope, numerous articles and monographs on individual monuments, and a few comparative studies of regional variations in architectural style exist. Many more are being published at an unprecedented rate as the field of Mamluk studies gains more students and researchers, and now has a journal of its own, *Mamlūk Studies Review*.¹ Even a few preliminary theoretical discussions have been held on some of the formal, symbolic, and sociocultural attributes of this architectural tradition, and a number of historiographic essays have attempted to understand it in the context of Mamluk and Islamic cultural and social history, something that is generally lacking for other medieval Islamic architectural traditions.² This scholarly attention should not be surprising to anyone familiar with the sheer number and variety of Mamluk buildings still standing in Egyptian, Palestinian, Lebanese, and Syrian cities—and they constitute only a fraction of the total that can be computed from the sources. For two hundred and sixty-seven years, scores of projects of all types: small and large, private and public, pious and commercial, pompous and poised, purposeful and frivolous, were sponsored by sultans, amirs, and members of the local elite in practically every corner of the

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¹For a recent review of the publications on Mamluk art and architecture, see Jonathan Bloom, "Mamluk Art and Architectural History: A Review Article," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 3 (1999): 31–58.

²See R. Stephen Humphreys, "The Expressive Intent of the Mamluk Architecture in Cairo: A Preliminary Essay," *Studia Islamica* 35 (1972): 69–119; Oleg Grabar, "Reflections on Mamluk Art," *Muqarnas* 2 (1984): 1–12; Michael Meinecke, "Mamluk Architecture, Regional Architectural Tradition: Evolutions and Interrelations," *Damaszener Mitteilungen* 2 (1985): 163–75; idem, *Patterns of Stylistic Change in Islamic Architecture: Local Traditions versus Migrating Artists* (New York, 1995); Nasser Rabbat, *The Citadel of Cairo: A New Interpretation of Royal Mamluk Architecture* (Leiden, 1995); Bernard O'Kane, "Monumentality in Mamluk and Mongol Art and Architecture," *Art History* 19 (1996): 499–522. Some of the still unpublished recent Ph.D. dissertations proclaim the new, more interpretive directions that the field in general is following; see, for example, Lobna Abdel Azim Sherif, "Layers of Meaning: An Interpretive Analysis of Three Early Mamluk Buildings," Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1988; Howyda N. al-Harithy, "Urban Form and Meaning in Bahri Mamluk Architecture," Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1992; Jane Jakeman, "Abstract Art and Communication in 'Mamluk' Architecture," Ph.D. thesis, Oxford University, 1993.

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sultanate, particularly in Cairo, Damascus, Aleppo, Tripoli, and Jerusalem, but also in smaller towns and villages.³

The Mamluk written sources, chronicles and biographical dictionaries, but especially encyclopedic manuals, geographical treatises (*masālik*), and topographical tracts (*khiṭaṭ*), in their capacity as records of their time reflect both the profusion of buildings and the interest in architecture that Mamluk culture manifested. They all pay more than passing attention to buildings and land reclamation projects sponsored by sultans, amirs, and lesser notables. Some, like Ibn Shaddād, al-Maqrīzī, and Abū Ḥāmid al-Qudsī, show a genuine interest in buildings and cities and, sometimes, even an expert and appreciative handling of their particular qualities in the descriptions they provide of them. In fact, each of them makes buildings the backbone of one key book in his historical oeuvre. Many biographers, especially those directly commissioned by a sultan or grandee, even wax lyrical on the projects sponsored by their patrons. Sometimes they exaggerate their numbers, costs, and sizes. At other times, they emphasize their grandeur and rhetorically compare them with paradigmatic monuments known from literature or from the past. The veracity, intensity, and enthusiasm of their coverage, or lack thereof, however, were neither constant nor uniform. They fluctuated over time, following both the shifting investment in architecture among the Mamluk patrons, sometimes from one reign to the next, and the inclination of the individual reporters to notice and discuss it, which may or may not have been affected by the importance placed on building by the Mamluk patrons.

Yet, over the entire Mamluk period, there is a marked progression in the reports towards a more informed and involved discussion of buildings and projects, and even a growing interest in their architectural, historical, and sociocultural qualities. This evolving attitude seems to have transcended the individual inclination of a particular author. It affects every genre of historical writing, even annals and biographies, aside from its more concrete consequence of animating special types with architectural focus such as the *masālik* and the *khiṭaṭ*. It is discernible in the texts of the most architecturally reticent among the late-Mamluk authors, such as al-Suyūṭī and al-Sakhāwī, who could not help but reflect the more sophisticated handling of architecture achieved by their literary peers.⁴

³Michael Meinecke, *Die Mamlukische Architektur in Ägypten und Syrien (648/1250 bis 923/1517)*, part 2, *Chronologische Liste der Mamlukischen Baumassnahmen* (Glückstadt, 1992), vii–ix, provides thorough estimates of the number of Mamluk monuments in all the major Syrian and Egyptian cities.

⁴This is apparent in al-Sakhāwī, *Kitāb al-Tibr al-Masbūk fī Dhayl al-Sulūk*, which is a chronicle continuing al-Maqrīzī's *Sulūk*, and in his little article *Al-Tuḥfah al-Laṭīfah fī Tārīkh al-Madīnah al-Sharīfah*. It comes across more distinctly in al-Suyūṭī, *Ḥusn al-Muḥāḍarah fī Tārīkh Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah*, which is his modest attempt at producing a *khiṭaṭ* book.

The trend appears to have peaked in the late fourteenth/early fifteenth century, at a time when the culture in general was coming to terms with the magnificent architectural endowments of the previous Bahri period which changed the face of many Mamluk cities, especially Cairo. This is the moment when Ibn Khaldūn came to Cairo and declared it to be the center of Islam and the epitome of *'imrān*, a concept encompassing both civilization and urbanization, which he was busy theorizing about at the same time.⁵ He was soon followed by his brilliant student, Aḥmad ibn 'Alī al-Maqrīzī, who devoted a tremendous amount of time and effort to producing the first encyclopedic work on the history, development, and architectural monuments of a city in Islam, *Al-Mawā'iz wa-al-I'tibār bi-Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-al-Āthār*, which is essentially a paean to Cairo. Other contemporary scholars like Ibn Duqmāq, Ibn al-Furāt, al-Qalqashandī, Badr al-Dīn al-'Aynī, Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, Ibn 'Arab Shāh, and Ibn Taghrībirdī, though not as architecturally articulate as al-Maqrīzī was or as theoretically astute as Ibn Khaldūn, still show in their different ways a maturing sensitivity to the role of architecture in the life of the city and the reputation of patrons.

But this cultural interest in buildings and urban projects was not without its immediate political agenda: Mamluk authors for a variety of reasons disapproved of the Burjī sultans, comparing them unfavorably to the great sultans of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century. One of the main arguments they used to disparage their contemporary sultans was that they could not maintain the urban and architectural momentum generated by their illustrious predecessors, and they thus lacked their drive, commitment, good management, and generosity. Many Mamluk authors harp on this point, even including some who belonged to the Mamluk ruling class, such as Ibn Taghrībirdī.⁶ This vocal criticism, however, may indicate not so much a general and popular disapproval of the Mamluks' performance as rulers as it did a growing divergence between the ruling Mamluks and the educated classes who controlled all historical writing and represented themselves and others through their own views, prejudices, and frameworks of interpretation.⁷

Historicizing the Mamluk interest in buildings, identifying its various proponents among the historians and analyzing their different approaches and textual techniques, and elucidating its conceptual ramifications for the study of Mamluk architecture

⁵Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, ed. 'Alī 'Abd al-Wāḥid Wafī (Cairo, 1960), 3: 829–36; for an abridged text in English, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, ed. N. J. Dawood (Princeton, 1967), 263–67.

⁶See the condemnation of al-Maqrīzī, one of the best critics of his age, in *Al-Mawā'iz wa-al-I'tibār bi-Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-al-Āthār* (Bulaq, 1854), 2: 214; see also Abū al-Maḥāsin Yūsuf Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah fī Mulūk Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah* (Cairo, 1929–56), 7: 328–29.

⁷See my "Representing the Mamluks in Mamluk Historical Writing," in *The Historiography of Islamic Egypt, c. 950–1800*, ed. Hugh Kennedy (Leiden, 2000), 59–75, esp. 60–71.

and culture form the subject of this article. My approach and interpretations have been greatly influenced by the ideas of the late Ulrich Haarmann on the writing of Mamluk history, especially as he began to articulate them in his latest contributions before his enormously regretted and untimely death. This article is but a small token of appreciation for his brilliant and original scholarship.

The Philological and Literary Context of Writing on Architecture

By its complex nature and exigencies, architecture can be neither a solitary nor modest activity. As Ibn Khaldūn noted, architectural projects, whether monuments or entire cities, required huge outlays of time, money, and manpower that can only be supplied by strong, stable, wealthy, and—most important—urban patrons.⁸ Architectural projects fulfilled social and pietistic functions and went a long way toward enhancing the reputation of their founders and patrons, propagating their claims and embellishing their images. This made architecture, especially when it came to monumental buildings, primarily a royal or elite pursuit, and, as such, grist for the mill of chroniclers and biographers who wrote on the lives and deeds of the ruling class. The interest shown in architecture by the chroniclers of the Mamluk period, however, is not new in Islamic historiography. Biographers from earlier times recorded royal architectural projects and noted some of their peculiarities when they summarized the deeds of their founders. But Mamluk authors paid considerably more attention to architecture than their predecessors had done both in scope and depth. Their references were more numerous, comprehensive, and detailed than those of earlier historians, although like their predecessors and their successors until the nineteenth century, they never used graphic illustration to convey their impressions of the buildings they described. They, however, made a great effort to emphasize urban, political, social, economic, and cultural contexts, though rarely to consider formal, artistic, or symbolic significance. Aside from mentioning how large or tall or strange a building was, or listing particularly expensive materials in its construction, or indicating that a certain surface was ornamented using a certain complicated technique, formal or spatial qualities of the buildings were passed over in silence.

This unaesthetic tendency is apparent in the language used by Mamluk authors as well. When they write about architecture, they use primarily mundane and functional terms and rarely treat any spatial, artistic, or conceptual point. Buildings are hardly ever qualified as beautiful (*ḥasan, jamīl*), proportionate or harmonious (*mutanāsib, mu'talif, muntaẓam*), or pleasing (*bāhij*),⁹ all terms associated with

⁸Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, 3: 832–36; abridged English text, *Muqaddimah*, 265–67.

⁹Except for some odd and not immediately explainable cases, such as the Madrasah al-Mu'izzīyah of al-Mu'izz Aybak (1250–57), in Miṣr al-Fuṣṭāṭ. Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa-al-Nihāyah fi al-Tārīkh*

aesthetic concepts that had a venerable history in philosophical and *adab* treatises of an earlier period. Although they appear most frequently in literary and abstract discussions, they may initially have been introduced to express formal or visual appreciation of human types, of objects, or of engineering projects.¹⁰ But they do not seem to have made their way into architectural description. On the other hand, they had been absorbed into literary criticism and were frequently used to express aesthetic judgment of prose or poetic style. Many of the Mamluk authors who write about architecture in fact show a certain ease with the denotative intricacies of these aesthetic terms when applied to literary analysis, which they all practiced and proudly displayed in their soberer books, though they seem not to have been able, or perhaps had no interest in, making the leap from literature to architecture.

Formal and architectural investigations seem to have been outside the intellectual curiosity or scholarly training of Mamluk authors.¹¹ Because of that handicap, they do not seem to have developed the techniques and terminology to carry out such examinations, and it shows in their texts. They apparently never attempted to transpose familiar aesthetic concepts from the literary domains, with which they were thoroughly familiar, or the less practiced disciplines of philosophy, geometry,

(Cairo, 1932–39), 13:196, comments that “although the madrasah’s span from the outside is of the best construction, its interior space is not so impressive”; al-Yunīnī, *Dhayl Mir’āt al-Zamān* (Hyderabad, 1954–61), 1:60, and Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nujūm*, 7:14, say that “its *dihlīz* is very wide and very long, while the structure itself is proportionally small.” See also Badr al-Dīn Maḥmūd ibn Aḥmad al-‘Aynī, *‘Iqd al-Jumān fī Tārīkh Ahl al-Zamān*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn, (Cairo: 1987–92), 1:44; Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad Ibn Duqmāq, *Al-Intiṣār li-Wāsītat ‘Iqd al-Amṣār*, ed. K. Vollers (Cairo, 1893), 4:35, 53–54, 92–93.

¹⁰A. I. Sabra in his edition of Ibn al-Haytham, *The Optics of Ibn al-Haytham: Books I-III, On Direct Vision* (London, 1989), 2: 99, discusses the example of the famous essayist al-Jāḥiẓ (767–869) in his *Risālat al-Qiyān* (The Essay on Singer-Slaves), ed. ‘Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn in his *Rasā’il al-Jāḥiẓ* (Cairo, 1965), 2:162–63. Al-Jāḥiẓ explains physical beauty in terms of two aesthetic principles: *tamām* (fullness) and *i’tidāl* (moderation); both are dependent on *wazin* (measure, balance, rhythm) which varies according to every case under consideration. Al-Jāḥiẓ goes on to say that *wazin* also governs the beauty of vessels, furnishings, embroidered textiles, and water channels, all of which have to achieve balance in form and composition (*al-istiwā’ fī al-kharṭ wa-al-tarkīb*). (Sabra considered *tamām*, *i’tidāl*, and *wazin* to be three separate principles, although it seems that al-Jāḥiẓ suggests that *tamām* and *i’tidāl* both derive from *wazin*.)

¹¹This area of research is not well covered. One notable pioneer is George Makdisi. His *Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West* (Edinburgh, 1990), *passim*, presents one of the most thorough discussions of the types of knowledge and kinds of settings available to medieval Islamic “humanists” (to use Makdisi’s term). Makdisi (Appendix A, 355–61) provides a summary of Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn ibn al-Athīr’s (1163–1239) eight scholarly requisites for poets and *kuttāb* from his *Al-Mathal al-Sā’ir fī Adab al-Kātib wa-al-Shā’ir* (Riyadh, 1983–84), which shows clearly that no visual concerns belonged in those lists.

music, and the like to the unfamiliar field of architecture.¹² Nor does it seem to have occurred to them to adapt the professional vocabulary that might have been used by the builders to describe the buildings because of the sharp social division that separated them from these craftsmen and artisans and that consequently hindered communication between the two social groups.¹³ Philosophical ideas, however truncated or distracted, sometimes did seep into Mamluk texts, but virtually no professional architectural or constructional terms at all found their way into them.¹⁴ The very few and significant exceptions, such as Ibn Shaddād, al-Maqrīzī, and Abū Ḥāmid al-Qudṣī, who at times reveal a certain affinity with professional terminology, may have developed their interest in the building crafts after having been exposed to them in some official capacity, such as serving as *muḥtasib* (city inspector) as in the case of al-Maqrīzī, or *shādd* (building supervisor), or some other similar function. It should be stressed, however, that the predisposition of these three to buildings and to the ways they are apprehended by craftsmen was peculiar to them: not all who wrote and also served at some point as building supervisors show either interest or a comparable mastery of professional terminology and modes of description.¹⁵

When buildings are at all noticed in the Mamluk sources for their visual qualities, they are generally described as unusual or marvelous (*‘ajīb* and *gharīb*) and never further elaborated on, or mentioned for their monumentality and display of wealth, usually expressed in terms such as *kabīr*, *‘azīm*, or *fākhir*. Although monumentality is primarily considered an aesthetic and spatial quality in today’s architectural discourse, the few references to monumentality in Mamluk sources

¹²A single exception, to my knowledge, can be found in the memoirs of the Iraqi physician ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī (1162–1231), a very sharp and perceptive resident of Cairo in the later part of the Ayyubid period (he wrote his text in 1204), *Al-Ifāḍah wa-al-‘tibār fī al-Umūr al-Mushāhadah wa-al-Ḥawādīth al-Mu‘āyanah bi-Arḍ Miṣr* (Cairo, 1869), where he uses aesthetic notions to analyze the naturalness and proportionality achieved in the ancient Egyptian statues. This exceptional short treatise deserves a study on its own.

¹³For a discussion of the status of the building professions in the Mamluk society, see my “Architects and Artists in Mamluk Society: The Perspective of the Sources,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 52 (1998): 30–37; Doris Behrens-Abouseif, “Muhandis, Shād, Mu‘allim—Note on the Building Craft in the Mamluk Period,” *Der Islam* 72 (1995): 293–309; and the pioneering Leo Mayer, *Islamic Architects and Their Works* (Geneva, 1956), 20–27.

¹⁴An interesting example of a philosophical framework is al-Qalqashandī’s chapter on *naḥṣ al-khaṭṭ* (“the writing itself,” used here in the sense of the nature of penmanship) in his voluminous *Ṣubḥ al-A‘shā fī Ṣinā‘at al-Inshā’* (Cairo, 1913–18), 3: 1–149, esp. 41–43, a well structured and competent, if platitudinous, discussion that relies heavily on older texts and poetic quotations.

¹⁵Badr al-Dīn al-‘Aynī, al-Maqrīzī’s rival, who served seven times as *muḥtasib*, is a case in point. For their dates of service as *muḥtasib*, see Aḥmad ‘Abd ar-Rāziq, “La ḥisba et le muḥtasib en Égypte au temps des Mamluks,” *Annales Islamologiques* 13 (1977): 115–78, 148–53.

seem to have been less aesthetically construed and more politically, or at least ideologically, driven. They often bore a competitive edge: the authors mention buildings as comparable in massiveness to those of their patrons that had been built in the realm of the Ilkhanids, the Mamluks' main Islamic rivals, or other less important Islamic powers such as the North African Marinids or the smaller Anatolian principalities.¹⁶ Praising the monumentality of their patrons' buildings was at times coupled with downplaying the monumentality of those of other sovereigns. That buildings served this propagandistic purpose may have been induced by the patrons themselves, especially during the early Mamluk period, when the Mongol Ilkhanid threat was real and the propaganda war between the two sides fierce and multifaceted.¹⁷

But the emphasis on monumentality may also have reflected a heightened historical awareness among the Mamluk authors, which was expressed in the comparisons encountered in the sources between the Mamluk buildings and famous monuments of both the mythical and historical past including the pre-Islamic period. This too is a pre-Mamluk phenomenon. But it found formal expression in the Mamluk period with the development of a more or less fixed list of venerated ancient monuments that constituted a monumental category in medieval Arabic literature and are often mentioned when the achievements of past nations, a favorite topic in *adab*, are discussed.¹⁸ Many descriptions of contemporary Mamluk monuments refer the reader to one or another of these structures, most frequently to the Īwān-i Kisrā in al-Madā'in (Ctesiphon) in Iraq, the epitome of monumentality which is sometimes brazenly claimed to have been matched or surpassed by the building under discussion.¹⁹

This practice is more than a literary trope despite its poetic and literary origins and its frequent usage in the sources. The veracity of the comparison itself is much less important to both authors and readers than the historic connection and the contest across time implied in it. The monumental category is a way of reclaiming the golden age inscribed in the Mamluk collective memory at a time

¹⁶O'Kane, "Monumentality in Mamluk Art," *passim*.

¹⁷On various aspects of this heated propaganda war, see my "Ideological Significance of the Dar al-'Adl in the Medieval Islamic Orient," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27 (1995): 3–28, esp. 24–28; Adel Allouche, "Teguder's Ultimatum to Qalawun," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 22 (1990): 437–46; Donald P. Little, "Notes on Aitamiš, A Mongol Mamluk," *Beiruter Texte und Studien* 22 (1979): 387–401.

¹⁸O'Kane, "Monumentality in Mamluk Art," 500, n. 4; see also my "Al-Īwān: Ma'nāhu al-Farāghī wa-Madlūluhu al-Tadhkārī," *Bulletin d'Études Orientales* 49 (1997): 249–67.

¹⁹O'Kane, "Monumentality in Mamuk Art," 510 and nn., discusses comparisons made in two Mamluk and Ilkhanid sources between two major monuments—the mosque of 'Alī Shāh in Tabriz and the madrasah of Sultan Ḥasan in Cairo—on the one hand, and the Īwān-i Kisrā on the other.

when the Mamluk state was showing signs of its ability to recoup some of the glories of that golden age. It had very swiftly defeated the Crusaders and Mongols, asserted its rule over all the Syro-Egyptian territories, and devised a new caliphal legitimacy with the installation of an Abbasid caliph in Cairo after the annihilation of the Baghdadi caliphate by the Mongols in 1258. The culture reacted to these Mamluk victories with renewed hope of recapturing the glorious past and reviving the true caliphate after two centuries of uncertainty, a feeling which lasted well into the fifteenth century. It was reflected in the reorientation of Mamluk historical writing towards a pan-Islamic outlook reminiscent of the writing of the eighth- and ninth-century historians who lived under an at least nominally unified Islamic world.²⁰ Thus, an entire generation of Mamluk historians—including al-‘Umarī and al-Nuwayrī in Cairo and Ibn Kathīr and al-Dhahabī in Damascus—adopted a universal and upbeat approach and covered the entire Islamic world in their writing. A similar historic emphasis is expressed in visual references to the venerated monuments of the early Islamic period which dot the early Mamluk architecture built in the time of Baybars and Qalāwūn and his sons.²¹ Both references to the monuments of the past in the sources and to the past in early Mamluk architecture embody and reinforce the rekindled Mamluk sense of historical continuity and represent a conscious effort to give it shape: one in space, the other in words.

If Mamluk sources lacked a developed aesthetic or architectural language, they did have another specialized language at their disposal, and that was the legal language of the *waqf* (endowment) documents with which they seem to have been thoroughly familiar. The institution of the *waqf*, an old and venerable Islamic legal-fiscal system for organizing charity, social services, and the management and inheritance of real-estate and agricultural land, had by the Mamluk period developed a language and a procedure for documenting buildings that satisfied contractual and legal requirements and reflected both an interest in the purely functional and socioeconomic dimensions of architecture and a specific vision of

²⁰See the analysis of Dorothea Krawulsky concerning the change in historical production in the Mamluk period in "Al-Intāj al-Thaqafī wa-Shar‘iyat al-Sulṭah," her introduction to Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyá Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār fī Mamālik al-Amṣār: Dawlat al-Mamālik al-Ūlá* (Beirut, 1986), 15–37, reprinted in a volume of her collected articles, *Al-‘Arab wa-Īran: Dirāsāt fī al-Tārīkh wa-al-Adab min al-Manẓūr al-Idiyulūjī* (Beirut, 1993), 94–116.

²¹See my "Mosaics of the Qubba al-Zahiriyya in Damascus: A Classical Syrian Medium Acquires a Mamluk Signature," *Aram* 9–10 (1997–98): 1–13; also my "Mamluk Throne Halls: Qubba or Iwan," *Ars Orientalis* 23 (1993): 201–18, for discussions of Umayyad echoes in early Mamluk architecture. See also Jonathan Bloom, "The Mosque of Baybars al-Bunduqdari in Cairo" *Annales Islamologiques* 18 (1982): 50–55; Hana Taragan, "Politics and Aesthetics: Sultan Baybars and the Abu Hurayra/Rabbi Gamliel Building in Yavne," in *Milestones in the Art and Culture of Egypt*, ed. Asher Ovadiah (Tel Aviv, 2000), 117–43, esp. 124–30, for discussions of conscious Fatimid references in the architecture of Baybars' mosque.

the role of buildings in social and urban space.²² The description of a building in a *waqf* usually begins with recording its surroundings—the other buildings, streets, and urban artifacts facing or abutting it in all directions. This sets the boundaries of the building and frames it within its urban context. Then comes the sequential description of every individual space in the building as it is seen by a person walking through it. The description ordinarily starts at the entrance and then moves in a set direction, enumerating the various aspects and features of each space in the building. In most cases, the description covers an entire level before moving up to the next. The individual descriptions pay more attention to circulation, especially location of doors, and to the specific functions of parts of the spaces than they do to their appearance. Yet they brought the verbal description of architecture to a sophisticated level where even formulaic expressions carried specific connotations that captured what was culturally important in the structure being described which could affect its monetary value and desirability.

These codified expressions found their way into the descriptions of buildings in the sources. Like the *waqfs*, the historical texts placed very little emphasis on the status of buildings as aesthetic objects to be looked at. They often even ignored it. They cared more about the buildings' contextual effects, experiential qualities, or functional capacity. A building, moreover, was never seen as a separate, stand-alone object: it could only make sense as a component in an urban context or in the landscape, probably a reflection of the prevalent forms of dense layout in the city and scattered pavilion arrangement in the garden. The only exceptions were citadels and isolated caravanserais or *khānqāhs* in the countryside which usually elicited brief comments on their exterior walls and mass and mainly on

²²Methods for the use of *waqfs* as historical documents in analyzing architecture have been developed by many authors in the recent past. The pioneering scholar was 'Abd al-Laṭīf Ibrāhīm 'Alī, "Wathīqat al-Amīr Ākhūr Kabīr Qarāqujā al-Ḥasanī," *Majallat Kullīyat al-Ādāb* 18 (1956): 183–251; idem, "Al-Wathā'iq fī Khidmat al-Āthār," in *Al-Mu'tamar al-Thānī li-al-Āthār fī al-Bilād al-'Arabīyah* (Cairo, 1958), 205–88. See also Michael Rogers, "Waqfiyyas and Waqf-Registers: New Primary Sources for Islamic Architecture," *Kunst des Orients* 11 (1976–77): 182–96; Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn, *Al-Awqāf wa-al-Ḥayāh al-Ijtimā'īyah fī Miṣr (684–923 A.H./1250–1517 A.D.)* (Cairo, 1980); Mona Zakarya, *Deux palais du Caire médiéval: Waqfs et architecture* (Marseilles, 1983); Donald P. Little, "The Haram Documents as Sources for the Arts and Architecture of the Mamluk Period," *Muqarnas* 2 (1984): 61–72; Leonor Fernandes, "Notes on a New Source for the Study of Religious Architecture during the Mamluk Period: the Waqfiya," *Al-Abḥāth* 33 (1985): 3–12. One of the best studies of the architectural particularities of *waqf* formulae and terminology is Hazem Sayed, "The Rab' in Cairo: A Window on Mamluk Architecture and Urbanism," Ph.D. diss., MIT, 1987; it is unfortunately still unpublished. For a summary of his research, see his "Development of the Cairene Qā'a: Some Considerations," *Annales Islamologiques* 23 (1987): 31–53.

their strength and solidity, as would be expected.²³ Otherwise, hardly any description of an urban façade can be found in Mamluk sources or in *waqf* documents. Only the location of entrances and position of minarets were noted, emphasizing the link between the public space of the street and the building proper. Even interior spaces were seen in the context of their connectivity and functionality and never in an abstracted way as arranged spaces or volumes. Their architectural characteristics were never noticed except to indicate how they were accessed and whether or not they had built-in usable spaces, such as recesses, niches, and alcoves.

Mamluk historical sources and *waqf* documents alike were most concerned with what can be termed the socioeconomic aspects of buildings. They spent most of their energy on discussing patrons, cost, intended functions, capacity for services, and the abundance or inadequacy of the *waqfs* attached to buildings for their upkeep and to support their designated users, and very little on anything else. The form and structure of the source descriptions resembled those found in the *waqf* documents themselves, not only because the two types stemmed from similar literary and legal traditions, but also because many of their authors were also legal experts and may have been personally involved in the redaction of *waqf* documents. The language of one form flowed into the other as authors themselves moved between the two. Many authors even incorporated parts of the *waqf* documents that they had access to, thanks to their position in the administration or the judicial system, in their historical texts describing major buildings, probably because the *waqf* texts already contained in an authoritative style the information they wished to present. This practice in fact has preserved some of the *waqf* texts that otherwise would have disappeared from the record.²⁴

Yet there is a small, though structurally and formally significant, difference between the two forms. The chronicles obviously did not have to carry the legal responsibility the *waqf* texts did. They thus were able to adopt a less rigid and formulaic structure and to allow literary tropes and storytelling techniques to permeate their *waqf*-inspired texts and imbue them with informative and entertaining anecdotal, historical, and comparative details.²⁵ The use of the "monumental

²³See my *Citadel of Cairo*, 9–14, 59–60, for an analysis of the texts describing the fortifications of the Cairo citadel.

²⁴See, for instance, Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, *Al-Rawḍ al-Zāhir fī Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir*, ed. A. A. al-Khuwayṭir (Riyadh, 1976), 278–79, who copied the section on al-Azhar from an original *waqf* document redacted for the Fatimid caliph al-Ḥākim. Al-Maqrīzī, *Khīṭaṭ*, 2: 273–74, reproduces what appears to be a more complete text from the same *waqf*.

²⁵A recent discussion of the purposes and techniques of historical writing in the Mamluk period is Ulrich Haarmann, "Al-Maqrīzī, the Master, and Abū Ḥāmid al-Qudsī, the Disciple—Whose Historical Writing Can Claim More Topicality and Modernity?," in *The Historiography of Islamic*

category" mentioned earlier is one of these techniques. So are the abundant poetic quotations, which may have been part literary bravado, part expressive tool. The same applies to historical references, mythically based comparisons, and reported conversations which seem often to have been totally fabricated.²⁶

This historical reporting laced with *adab* techniques and tropes would have to be seen within the larger framework of the profusion of "literarized" history with a popular bent, observed by some contemporary students of Mamluk history and recently problematized by Ulrich Haarmann as a testing ground for the post-structuralist challenge to the conventional historiographical binary opposition of "narrativity versus facticity."²⁷ "Narrativity," Haarmann observed, had always enlivened Arabic history writing with its close ties to *adab*, but its treatment by historians varied even during the same time period. Some, like Abū Ḥāmid al-Qudsī, may have intentionally ornamented their accounts to make them more novelistic and enticing, whereas others, like al-Maqrīzī, preferred a more serious, solemn, and learned outlook. The "literarized" modes seem to have expanded in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, when history was apparently a popular subject with a wide readership, judging from the large number of compilations and abridgments of earlier works and of new compositions produced during that period.²⁸

The Social and Political Context of Writing on Architecture

The language of the sources dealing with buildings can be summed up as financially concerned, conservatively driven, legally and literarily based, and visually inexperienced, qualities that distinguished the groups to which most of the Mamluk authors belonged. These groups comprised the *ulama* and the *kuttāb* (the two greatly overlapped in the Mamluk period) and the *awlād al-nās*, or the literarily-inclined sons of Mamluk amirs and soldiers who should be intellectually, socially, and ideologically classified with the *ulama* and *kuttāb* despite their Mamluk lineage,

Egypt, 59–75.

²⁶See my discussion of a conversation between two powerful amirs of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, Bashtāk and Qawṣūn, in my "Representing the Mamluks in Mamluk Historical Writing," 72–75.

²⁷Haarmann, "Al-Maqrīzī, the Master, and Abū Ḥāmid al-Qudsī, the Disciple," 149–51.

²⁸See Ulrich Haarmann, *Quellenstudien zur frühen Mamlukenzeit* (Freiburg, 1970), 129–37; idem, "Auflösung und Bewahrung der klassischen Formen arabischer Geschichtsschreibung in der Zeit der Mamluken," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 121 (1971): 46–60, esp. 49. A succinct restating of Haarmann's historiographical observations appears in his review of Bernd Radtke, *Weltgeschichte und Weltbeschreibung im Mittelalterlichen Islam*, in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115 (1995): 134. See also Li Guo, "Mamluk Historiographic Studies: The State of the Art," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 1 (1997): 15–43, esp. 33–37.

Mamluk privileges, and knowledge of the Turkish language.²⁹ Members of these groups, who can loosely be termed the *literati*, also formed the reading public for the same sources, which reinforced the development of a closed discourse and facilitated the formation of an endogenous and insular school of history, in which every member was linked in more than one way to the others, and every member's work was inevitably and immediately measured against the works of others, who practically covered the same terrain.³⁰ The *literati* also shared the same general ethos. Their sense of themselves was grounded primarily in educational background, scholarly or chancery specialization, or jurisprudential affiliation (*madhhab*). But they had little practical notion of group solidarity aside from superficial signs, ranging from dress codes to mannerisms of speech and conduct or their means of memorializing themselves. They nonetheless dominated the production and transmission of knowledge, with the *ulama* in particular maintaining their hold on the traditional religious functions, which kept them in touch with the people and in a position to affect public opinion. Members of the three groups of *literati* also controlled the judicial, administrative, educational, and *waqf* services through which they wielded tremendous influence as agents of mediation and arbitration, but hardly ever as agents of social change.³¹

These social groups depended on the Mamluk military elite for their livelihood; the Mamluks patronized and employed them to administer the religious, social, and fiscal systems of the sultanate, because they were the most educated groups. They were, however, excluded from any political decision-making and kept under constant check enforced with the threat of confiscation, arrest, and sometimes exceedingly brutal punishment. This paradoxical situation affected how they expressed their relationship with the Mamluk ruling elite to whom they were financially and socially indebted. A mixture of fear, servility, jealousy, affected flattery, and the occasional diatribe found their way into historical and biographical texts dealing with the Mamluk elite and their achievements and shortcomings. It

²⁹See the discussion in Ulrich Haarmann "Arabic in Speech, Turkish in Lineage: Mamluks and Their Sons in the Intellectual Life of Fourteenth-Century Egypt and Syria," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 33 (1988): 81–114, esp. 82–85; idem, "Joseph's Law: The Careers and Activities of Mamluk Descendants before the Ottoman Conquest of Egypt," in *The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society*, ed. T. Philipp and U. Haarmann (Cambridge, 1998), 55–84.

³⁰Donald Little, *An Introduction to Mamlūk Historiography: An Analysis of Arabic Annalistic and Biographical Sources for the Reign of al-Malik an-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalā'ūn* (Wiesbaden, 1970), 73–99, offers a comparative examination of specific years in the annals of six historians which shows their complicated patterns of interdependence.

³¹For a discussion of these social practices in Damascus in particular, see Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350* (New York, 1994), 37–54, 108–51.

colored the ways chroniclers and biographers structured and narrated their prose, and explained its nuances and innuendos.³²

The Mamluk sources treat architecture, therefore, in a way that reflects not only the personal inclination of an author or the collective social and intellectual structures or even the expectations, tastes, and preferences of the readership. Authors were powerfully beholden to the wishes and interests of their Mamluk patrons and their desire to have their work documented, celebrated, and memorialized. There were certainly sultans, such as Baybars, al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, and Qāyṭbāy, whose interest in building was pronounced to the point that it affected their rule and how their amirs and notables handled their wealth and expressed their positions in society.³³ Each in his own way and for his own particular set of reasons and preferences endowed the cities of the realm with large numbers of religious, charitable, commercial, military, and palatial monuments. Each also is reported to have been directly involved in the projects he commissioned, sometimes interfering in the planning stages, sometimes dictating the design and decoration of a specific building, and at other times even working on the construction. Commentators on their reigns did not fail to notice this prodigious production and personal involvement and to be impressed by both.³⁴ Whole sections of the biographies they dedicated to these sultans read like building rolls, recording every project they sponsored in every city of the sultanate. This practice, routine and trivial as it may seem to us, was a historical novelty in the early Mamluk period. This was the first time that an effort was made to list all the building projects and systematically register them in a separate section that could be inserted into what had become an established set of subjects considered essential to the biography of a grandee, especially a sultan: his personal qualities and

³²For a discussion of the textual techniques these groups used to assert themselves, see my "Representing the Mamluks in Mamluk Historical Writing," 59–75.

³³David Ayalon went so far as to assert that al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's predilection for grand building projects drained the Mamluk economy so much that it never recovered; see his "Muslim City and the Mamluk Military Aristocracy," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 2 (1968): 311–29; idem, "The Expansion and Decline of Cairo under the Mamluks and Its Background," in *Itinéraires d'Orient: hommages à Claude Cahen*, ed. Raoul Curriel and Rika Gyselen (Paris, 1994), 14–16. The decline of Cairo, which was congruent with the downfall of the Egyptian economy in the second half of the Mamluk period, is complicated and cannot be blamed solely on internal political factors; it still needs a thorough study. Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (New York, 1989), 224–47, presents a well-balanced synthesis of Egypt's economic plight in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

³⁴Behrens-Abouseif, "Muhandis," 293–95, lists a number of instances in which Mamluk patrons, most notably al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, played a direct role in the design of the buildings they sponsored; see also my *Citadel of Cairo*, 186–90, 277–80, for a discussion of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's involvement in the remodeling of the citadel and its surroundings.

virtues, his military campaigns, his embassies, his main associates and functionaries, and his buildings and other projects.

This arrangement seems first to have been introduced into the annals of the reign of Baybars I, an indefatigable builder and the first true organizer of the Mamluk state and system. The individual who can be credited with this biographical innovation is ‘Izz al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī Ibn Shaddād (1217–85), an Aleppine scholar and *kātib* who began his career in his native city in the administration of its last Ayyubid ruler, al-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Yūsuf. After the Mongol invasion of Syria in 1260–61, he fled to Cairo and as a distinguished refugee was soon serving in Baybars’ administration, in the entourage of the famous vizier Bahā’ al-Dīn Ibn Ḥinnā.³⁵ Ibn Shaddād’s annals of Baybars’ reign, of which only the last third survive, were recently published. Though probably not officially commissioned, they appear nonetheless to have been approved by the sultan and perhaps even compiled from conversations with him. They were, however, completed after Baybars’ death, during the reign of his son Barakah Khān (1276–79) as is clear from the last section. At the end of the annals, Ibn Shaddād affixes an extended and eulogistic biography of Baybars. In it, he provides an exhaustive list of the numerous structures Baybars built all over his sultanate, structure by structure, and city by city beginning with Cairo and moving on to all the Syro-Palestinian cities in which Baybars sponsored building projects.³⁶ For the royal structures in or around the Citadel of Cairo—that is, where Ibn Shaddād lived and worked—he sometimes even goes a step further and provides measurements or supplies superlatives to convey the quality of particular structures. He also enumerates the architectural components of every palace and *qā’ah* Baybars built for himself, his son Barakah Khān, and his favorite amirs.³⁷

In itself, Ibn Shaddād’s list is unusual, but more remarkable is the attention he devotes to space organization and architectural terminology, certainly rare among medieval historians (the only comparable historians are al-Maqrīzī and Abū Ḥāmid al-Qudsī, both of whom lived more than a century later). Two possible explanations can be advanced for this special treatment. First, the list could simply have resulted from the importance Baybars placed on architecture; he might have ordered these detailed descriptions of his most important projects to be included in his inventory of achievements. But this explanation is weakened by the fact that Ibn ‘Abd

³⁵On Ibn Shaddād, see Yoel Koch, “‘Izz al-Dīn ibn Shaddād and His Biography of Baybars,” *Annali: Istituto Universitario Orientale, Sezione Slava* 43 (1983): 249–87; P. M. Holt, “Three Biographies of al-Zāhir Baybars,” in *Medieval Historical Writing in the Christian and Islamic Worlds*, ed. D. O. Morgan (London, 1982), 19–29.

³⁶Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī Ibn Shaddād, *Tārīkh al-Malik al-Zāhir*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥuṭayṭ (Wiesbaden, 1983), 339–61.

³⁷The buildings are analyzed in my *Citadel of Cairo*, 100–31.

al-Zāhir, Baybars' official biographer, does not include anything comparable in his otherwise extensive encomium, *Al-Rawḍ al-Zāhir fī Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir*. Alternatively, Ibn Shaddād's list could have been inspired by his own expertise and interest in architecture, inducing him to dedicate a disproportionate amount of space to the reporting of building projects. His expertise is apparent from the precise and assured language, attention to detail, and professional terminology displayed in describing his patron's structures. Nor was this interest new: it is already discernible in his important compendium on the history and topography of Syria and the Jazīrah, *Al-A'lāq al-Khaṭīrah fī Dhikr Umarā' al-Shām wa-al-Jazīrah*, commissioned by Baybars and written during his reign, probably in recognition of Ibn Shaddād's knowledge of the various principalities in those two regions and in preparation for their ultimate annexation to the Mamluk sultanate. *Al-A'lāq*, a pioneering work that anticipated al-Maqrīzī's *Khiṭaṭ* in its orientation, structure, and appreciation of architecture, is divided into sections on Aleppo and its environs, Damascus and its surrounding regions (including Lebanon and Palestine), and the Jazīran cities. It includes a systematic list of the major buildings—citadel, main mosque, madrasahs, *khānqāhs*, and caravanserais—for each city and, in the case of the major cities such as Damascus and Aleppo, the history of each structure in detail as well.³⁸

The main difference between *Al-A'lāq* and Ibn Shaddād's biography of Baybars is that the list of buildings in the latter is presented as the final category of Baybars' achievements and qualities and is meant to complement and perhaps to illustrate or concretize them. It is an innovative modification to the usual structure of eulogistic biographies where the list of architectural projects undertaken by the subject, in addition to providing a record of the patron's architectural accomplishments, is invested with propagandistic and political import. Ibn Shaddād's biography inaugurated a new convention in Mamluk royal and princely biographies: it aimed at comprehensiveness and avoided the usual exaggerated and lyrical invocation of key monuments. His successors all begin to record all the building projects of their subjects, not just the highlights, although no one reaches the same degree of detail that Ibn Shaddād achieved. Later chroniclers, such as Ibn Shākir al-Kutubī (1282–1363) in his biographical dictionary *Fawāt al-Wafīyāt* and Ibn Taghrībirdī (1410–70), the fifteenth-century chronicler and son of a Mamluk amir, in his *Nujūm*, give shorter lists of Baybars' structures with slight differences from Ibn Shaddād's, but they both eliminate the description of the citadel's palaces and *qā'ahs*.³⁹ The details of the buildings that Ibn Shaddād so

³⁸For an analysis of the book, see Muḥammad Sa'īd Riḍā, "Ibn Shaddād fī Kitābihi Al-A'lāq al-Khaṭīrah, 'Qism al-Jazīrah,'" *Majallat al-Mu'arrikh al-'Arabī* 14 (1980): 124–204.

³⁹Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nujūm*, 7: 191–97; Muḥammad ibn Shākir al-Kutubī, *Fawāt al-Wafayāt wa-al-*

relished adding to his essential list thus seem to have been a personal quirk, perhaps a sign of some architectural expertise that was not recorded in his biography. They did not reappear in any later account of building projects by Mamluk patrons.

The Architecturally-Conscious Genres

By the end of the fourteenth century, a significant development can be detected in all the sources dealing with architecture, including the usual annals, biographies, and encyclopedias: they begin to show more interest in the sociocultural, symbolic, and expressive import of buildings. No comprehensive explanation of this shift has ever been offered, but several modern historians, notably Oleg Grabar and R. Stephen Humphreys, have tried to connect it to the sheer number of art objects that were being produced for both the upper and middle classes, including the wealthier *kuttāb* and ulama, and the monuments that were crowding urban space and influencing how people viewed and experienced their cities or used their public areas.⁴⁰

Humphreys and Grabar each used this observation to move in a direction that serves his aims. Humphreys, in a thirty-year-old study that is still quoted today by Islamic architectural historians, used architecture in the city to propose an interpretation of the social dynamics that developed between the Mamluk military elite and their indigenous subjects. He ascribed to the Mamluks, especially in Cairo, a heightened awareness of the role buildings can play in enhancing the reputation of their patrons and in assuring their position in the public eye. He saw in the endless rows of monuments whose façades competed along the streets of Cairo ample proof of that understanding, which he called "the expressive intent" of Mamluk architecture. He also detected a "tension" between the ostentation and striving for visibility of these monuments and their ostensibly pious and charitable functions, and read it as signifying the merger of the political agenda of the Mamluk military elite and the religious expectations and needs of its Muslim population, at least as it was articulated by the literati whose writing constitute our main source of information. Humphreys singled out other sociopolitical measures effected by the Mamluks, such as the reorganization of the court system under Baybars and the tightening of state control over the ulama class, as other manifestations of the same tension he saw in the architecture between the political and the social and religious forces in the Mamluk society.

Grabar's purpose was very different. He was seeking to classify and understand Mamluk art and architecture and to highlight the sources useful for their study. In an earlier essay, he had noted a correlation between the level of artistic and

Dhayl 'Alayhā, ed. Iḥsān 'Abbās (Beirut, 1973), 1:242.

⁴⁰Grabar, "Reflections on Mamluk Art"; Humphreys, "Expressive Intent of the Mamluk Architecture."

architectural production all over the Islamic world in the fourteenth century, but especially in the Mamluk sultanate, and the appearance in historical treatises of interpretations that linked the degree of cultural sophistication to sponsorship of art and architecture and interest in city life.⁴¹ He identified Ibn Khaldūn and his distinguished student al-Maqrīzī as the two most prominent protagonists of this correlation, and hailed their two famous works, the *Muqaddimah* of the former and the *Khiṭaṭ* of the latter, as its main illustrations.

This new awareness of the sociological significance of architecture makes its impact felt mostly in the language and orientation of the *masālik wa-al-mamālik* and *khiṭaṭ* books, two interrelated literary genres whose resurgence in the fourteenth century is tied in more than one way to the concurrent interest in architecture and urban development.⁴² Traditionally, however, neither *masālik* nor *khiṭaṭ* was primarily concerned with the buildings themselves, their forms and functions, and their intended or perceived messages. *Al-masālik wa-al-mamālik* was essentially a loosely defined *adab* type that was developed out of the combination of several scholarly, literary, and administrative genres including *futūḥ* (chronicles of the conquests), travel and *ziyārāt* (pilgrimage) literature, chancery and *kharāj* (taxation) manuals, and *ṣurat al-arḍ* (cartography).⁴³ Its framework was geographic, bordering on the cosmographic, with a universalistic Islamic scope that rarely ventured outside the frontiers of the Islamic world. Its heyday was the ninth and tenth centuries when a number of outstanding geographer travelers crisscrossed the Islamic world, compiling their depictions of one Islamic world, after its political unity held together by the Abbasid caliphate had passed. Buildings figured in it primarily as unusual and distinguishing features of a region or city. They would be noted in passing in a fashion akin to the way the natural and supernatural ‘*ajā’ib*’ of a place, including unusual or ancient monuments, were often mentioned.

The startling early victories of the Mamluks against the Crusaders and the Mongols in the thirteenth century reinvigorated the literati and renewed their trust in Islamic political and territorial unity. The *masālik*’s orientation moved toward the geopolitical, a shift exemplified by the seminal work of Ibn Faḍl-Allāh al-‘Umārī

⁴¹Oleg Grabar, “Reflections on the Study of Islamic Art,” *Muqarnas* 1 (1983): 1–14, esp.10–11.

⁴²This new awareness seems to have affected even the traditional form of *adab* collections. A fascinating example is ‘Alī ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Bahā’ī al-Ghazūlī (d. 1412), *Maṭāli‘ al-Budūr fī Manāzil al-Surūr* (Cairo, 1882), which integrates in an unprecedented way a number of architectural elements, such as fountains, tanks, and wind catchers, in the list of topics that an *adīb* needs to be able to discuss and to summon literary quotations about in his function as a literary companion.

⁴³André Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu’au milieu du 11e siècle* (Paris, 1967–80), 1:267–330; Ulrich Haarmann, “Auflösung und Bewahrung der klassischen Formen,” 46–60; idem, review of *Weltgeschichte und Weltbeschreibung im mittelalterlichen Islam*, by Bernd Radtke, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115 (1995): 133–35.

(1301–49), *Masālik al-Abṣār fi Mamālik al-Amṣār*,⁴⁴ compiled in the late 1330s when the author was serving as a high administrator at the court of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, including a stint as the sultan's private secretary (*kātib al-sirr*) between 1329 and 1332. In addition to geographical surveys of the countries of Islam and their immediate neighbors, al-ʿUmarī provides topographic descriptions of important Islamic cities and holy sites and firsthand information on the ceremonies and duties of their rulers and lists of the ranks, functions, and protocols of their officials and caretakers. Buildings in his text are presented in their sociopolitical context as expressions of dynastic and royal pride and splendor and as positive architectural achievements functionally and spatially distinguishing their urban setting. In other words, they are seen as cultural artifacts.

The *khiṭaṭ* form is an almost exclusively Egyptian and significantly more localized genre than the *masālik wa-al-mamālik*. Its cosmocentric focus is often linked to a deep-rooted affinity with Egypt as a homeland which persists in the writing of Egyptian historians from the early Islamic period on.⁴⁵ These feelings intensified in medieval times, especially after the establishment of the Fatimid caliphate, which created in Egypt a new and vigorous authority independent of Baghdad.⁴⁶ In the *khiṭaṭ* books, they are thought to have found expression in careful and meticulous descriptions of Egypt's topography, history, and monuments, and particularly Cairo as Egypt's capital and major political, economic, and cultural center. Within this framework, buildings most often appear as urban landmarks examined in the context of their streets and neighborhoods. Their patrons, costs, and circumstances are also noted and their historical significance weighed.

The *khiṭaṭ* genre reached its apogee around the middle of the fifteenth century with Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Maqrīzī's *Al-Mawāʿiẓ wa-al-Iʿtibār bi-Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-al-Āthār*. Composed between 1417 and 1439/40, this magisterial compendium offers the most elaborate and spirited testimony we have of Islamic Egypt's urban history.⁴⁷ In his introduction, al-Maqrīzī describes his book as a "summary of the

⁴⁴Dorothea Krawulsky, introduction to al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik*, 15–37.

⁴⁵The idea that Egypt had a specific character and was a clearly defined entity is the theme of many Egyptian historical and analytical studies. See especially Jamāl Ḥamdān, *Shakhṣīyat Miṣr: Dirāsah fi ʿAbqariyat al-Makān* (Cairo, 1980–84), passim. More recent studies include Milād Ḥannā, *The Seven Pillars of the Egyptian Identity* (Cairo, 1994); ʿIzzah ʿAlī ʿIzzat, *Al-Shakhṣīyah al-Miṣriyah fi al-Amthāl al-Shaʿbiyah* (Cairo, 1997); Muḥammad Nuʿmān Jalāl and Majdī Mutawallī, *Hāwīyat Miṣr* (Cairo, 1997); Ṭalʿat Raḍwān and Fathī Raḍwān, *Abʿad al-Shakhṣīyah al-Miṣriyah: Bayna al-Māḍī wa-al-Hāḍir* (Cairo, 1999).

⁴⁶Claude Cahen, "Khiṭaṭ," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 5:22; Jack A. Crabbs, Jr., *The Writing of History in Nineteenth-Century Egypt* (Detroit, 1984), 115–19.

⁴⁷Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh ʿInān, *Miṣr al-Islāmīyah wa-Tārīkh al-Khiṭaṭ al-Miṣriyah* (Cairo, 1969), 52–54.

history of the monuments of Egypt from the earliest times, and of the surviving structures in Fuṣṭāṭ, and the palaces, buildings, and quarters of al-Qāhirah with short biographies of their patrons and sponsors.⁴⁸ This is the most straightforward definition of a *khīṭaṭ* book we have and a rather truthful and precise description of the scope of the book, which briefly covers Egyptian cities other than the two capitals, expands its range when it deals with Fuṣṭāṭ, but reserves the most detailed treatment for Fatimid al-Qāhirah and its Ayyubid and Mamluk extensions. Al-Maqrīzī also presents a concise statement of the reasons behind the writing of the book, the most prominent of which is his filial affection toward his country, his city, and even his *ḥārah* (neighborhood), Ḥārat al-Burjūwān in the heart of Fatimid al-Qāhirah, which had prompted him since his youth to collect every bit of information on its history he came across. Miṣr (in this context probably meaning both the country and the city) was, according to him, "place of my birth, playground of my mates, nexus of my society and clan, home to my family and public, the bosom where I acquired my wings, and the niche I seek and yearn for."⁴⁹

Al-Maqrīzī's method was influenced by the sociohistorical theories of his revered teacher, the great Ibn Khaldūn, with whom he studied for a long time.⁵⁰ The overarching cycle of the rise and fall of dynasties that formed the basis of Ibn Khaldūn's hermeneutical framework in explaining historical process seems also to have informed al-Maqrīzī's thinking and structuring of his *Khīṭaṭ*, albeit indirectly.⁵¹ Al-Maqrīzī seems to have subsumed the Khaldunian structure in his text as a way of classifying and understanding the vast amount of historical, topographic, and architectural material he had collected over the years. He seems to have devised an analogous cycle of prosperity and urban expansion followed by decay and urban contraction to frame his exposition of the fate of Cairo under the successive dynasties that governed Egypt in the Islamic era: the Tulunids, Ikhshidids, Fatimids, Ayyubids, and Qalawunid and Circassian Mamluks. The political fortune of each of these dynasties or families is plotted against the fluctuations of the urban and

⁴⁸ Al-Maqrīzī, *Khīṭaṭ*, 1:2–3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:2.

⁵⁰ Al-Maqrīzī, *Durar al-'Uqūd al-Farīdah fī Tarājīm al-A'yān al-Muḥīdah*, ed. A. Darwīsh and M. al-Maṣrī (Damascus, 1995), 2:63, 193; *idem*, *Khīṭaṭ*, 1:50, 2:76, for the passages directly copied from Ibn Khaldūn's dictation, and bearing dates spanning more than ten years.

⁵¹ The influence of Ibn Khaldūn's interpretive framework is evident in a number of short thematic books by al-Maqrīzī, such as his treatise on the calamity of the early fifteenth century, *Ighāthah al-Ummah bi-Kaṣḥf al-Ghummah*, and his analysis of the rivalry between the Umayyads and the Abbasids, *Al-Nizā' wa-al-Takhāṣum fīmā bayna Banī Ummayyah wa-Banī Hāshim*. See M. Muṣṭafā Ziyādah, "Tārīkh Ḥayāt al-Maqrīzī," in *Dirāsāt 'an al-Maqrīzī: Majmū'at Abḥāth*, ed. M. Ziyādah et al. (Cairo, 1971), 13–22; see also Adel Allouche, *Mamluk Economics: A Study and Translation of al-Maqrīzī's Ighāthah* (Salt Lake City, 1994).

architectural prosperity of Cairo in a way that echoes the Khaldunian cyclical view of human history.⁵²

In this recursive scheme, architecture constituted the visual, palpable, and measurable signifier of every stage in the historical cycle of the rise and fall of Cairo. Buildings, streets, the entire city, and the whole country were analyzed and meticulously described by al-Maqrīzī, not only because they embodied the obviously idealized past but also because they narrated through their particular architectural and urban forms the history of Egypt under its various rulers. Al-Maqrīzī's work, under the combined impact of his passionate attachment to his city and the theoretical framework he absorbed from his teacher, is an idiosyncratically melancholy and culturally-oriented architectural and urban history which introduces a new role for architecture as the agency of both personal memories and collective aspirations. Such a powerful evocation of the meaning of architecture will not again be articulated as purposefully as al-Maqrīzī did until Victor Hugo wrote the celebrated chapter "Ceçi Tuera Cela" for his medieval novel, *Notre Dâme de Paris*, published in 1832, to convey the role of architecture as the carrier of meaning for historical cultures.⁵³

With al-Maqrīzī's *Khiṭaṭ*, we reach the most elaborate exploration into history writing through the chronicling of buildings and topography that remains an exception in Mamluk historiography. Although the book was copied and abridged numerous times by later Mamluk and Ottoman historians, as evidenced by its more than 185 extant manuscripts, no later Mamluk historian seems to have managed to absorb the method adopted by al-Maqrīzī from Ibn Khaldūn or to capture the mood and intensity displayed in al-Maqrīzī's text. Mamluk historians continued to produce books on urban and architectural history, such as al-Suyūṭī's *Ḥusn al-Muḥāḍarah fī Tārīkh Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah*, or Abū Ḥāmid al-Qudṣī's (and not Ibn Zāhirah as the published book asserts)⁵⁴ *Al-Faḍā'il al-Bāhirah fī Maḥāsin Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah*, or Ibn Shāhīn al-Zāhirī's *Zubdat Kashf al-Mamālik wa-Bayān al-Ṭuruq wa-al-Masālik*. But although they all show an understanding of the sociocultural significance of architecture, they all revert to older methods or frameworks, such as that of *faḍā'il*, or the *masālik* format, or the classificatory listings of early *khiṭaṭ* books with no underlying historical or cultural interpretations.

⁵²The most clearly structured cycles are those of Tulunid al-Qaṭā'i' and Fatimid Cairo, al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 1:313–26 and 360–65 respectively.

⁵³Victor Hugo, "Ceçi Tuera Cela," *Livre Cinquième*, pt. 2., *Notre Dâme de Paris* (Paris, 1830–32).

⁵⁴As convincingly argued by Haarmann, "Al-Maqrīzī, the Master, and Abū Ḥāmid al-Qudṣī, the Disciple," 154–55. Abū Ḥāmid al-Qudṣī's predilection for architecture and urbanism characterizes most of his work. See, for instance, his short treatise, *Al-Fawā'id al-Nafīṣah al-Bāhirah fī Bayān Ḥukm Shawāri' al-Qāhirah fī Madhāhib al-A'imma al-Arba'ah al-Zāhirah*, ed. Amāl al-'Umarī (Cairo, 1988).

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to articulate and contextualize the perception of architecture as gleaned from the Mamluk historical sources. For modern historians and architectural historians dealing with these sources, the findings presented here raise a number of methodological and historiographical questions.⁵⁵ The formidable architectural production of the Mamluk period suggests that architecture played a substantial role in the display, articulation, assertion, transfer, and symbolizing of wealth, social status, and perhaps other values as well. Most historians and architectural historians normally begin their analysis with this observation and “read” the architecture itself—and more readily its inscriptions—for clues about its significance to its society. They then scout the sources to confirm or further their formulations, glossing over the elementary fact that these sources do not necessarily represent common attitudes toward architecture in the Mamluk society at large. This oversight has led to a variety of sometimes conflicting, sometimes impressionistic interpretations, many of which rest on thin historical conjecture, which has prompted some observers to question the validity of the entire exercise of searching for architectural meaning.⁵⁶

Before using the sources for interpreting the meaning of architecture for Mamluk society, one must first understand their peculiarities and commonalities. For, aside from individual quirks, these sources essentially reflect the collective background, education, and social manipulations of their authors and, to a lesser extent, their readers, both of whom were almost certainly restricted to members of the educated classes. What they really and clearly tell us is that, for this influential and vocal group in Mamluk society, architecture was mainly thought of as a tool of political and personal propaganda and of legal and financial gain, as a source of complaint and employment, and perhaps of entertaining anecdotes. But it was puzzling aesthetically and almost meaningless symbolically. The few exceptional observers—‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī, Ibn Shaddād, Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umarī, al-Maqrīzī, and Abū Ḥāmid al-Qudsī—added primarily sociocultural and historical dimensions to the meaning of architecture, but their dealing with it remained

⁵⁵Some, of course, reject the whole historical method and emphasize the particularity of Islam as a religion in endowing all of its art and architecture with somewhat suprahistorical, spiritual, and esoteric qualities. For a discussion of this demarche with an emphasis on the Mamluk period see Aly Gabr, “The Traditional Process of the Production of Medieval Muslim Art and Architecture: With Special Reference to the Mamluk Period,” *Edinburgh Architectural Research* 20 (1993): 133–59.

⁵⁶Bloom, “Mamluk Art and Architectural History,” 40, dropped the whole issue by exclaiming, “It remains to be proven that Mamluk builders gave a hoot about symbolic meaning.” I am not sure whether he meant “builders” specifically or was referring to the entire Mamluk society.

essentially textual, literal, and unarchitectural. Al-Maqrīzī is obviously a special case. Although he too did not proffer an “architectural” understanding of architecture as we conceive of it today, his ingenious induction of the elements of the built environment as historical indices in the service of his overall interpretation of the history of Egypt put him in a class by himself. But this methodological innovation is not why he is usually consulted by modern historians. The exceptional historians otherwise did not really break rank with their social support group, the literati, either intellectually or politically, and therefore cannot be seen as representing a fundamentally different take on the meaning of architecture as seen from their vantage point.

This condition colors all modern explanations of Mamluk architecture which perforce have had to go through the prism of the sources before reaching their conclusions. Thus, we know practically nothing about the views of the architects (or master builders), or the general population for that matter, simply because their voices are never heard in the sources.⁵⁷ Conversely, the patrons—either members of the ruling Mamluk class or, to a lesser degree, wealthy merchants and ulama—appear to have played a major or defining role in the conception of architecture and its eventual signification and appreciation. They are not only said to have contributed to the design and decoration of the buildings they commissioned,⁵⁸ but they are also presented as the ones whose tastes, attitudes, and preferences habitually gave architecture its extra-artistic and extra-functional significance. Therefore, one could argue that the widespread and accepted scholarly assumption of today that Mamluk architecture should be understood primarily through the roles, aspirations, and circumstances of its patrons is predicated on the peculiar structures and limitations of the sources, as well as on the complex relationships that their authors, as individuals but primarily as social groups, had with the Mamluk elite. Elementary as it might seem, this conclusion helps us keep in mind that, although our views on the signification of Mamluk architecture are tilted toward a large role for the Mamluk ruling class, this bias is intrinsically sustained and probably exaggerated by none other than their sometime satisfied, sometime disgruntled interpreters, the Mamluk historians.⁵⁹

⁵⁷See my interpretation in “Architects and Artists in Mamluk Society: The Perspective of the Sources,” 30–37.

⁵⁸Behrens-Abouseif, “Muhandis,” 293–95, reminds us that many early Mamluk patrons, most notably al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, played a direct role in the design of the buildings they sponsored.

⁵⁹I am here obviously pushing Ulrich Haarmann’s salient observation about the presumed objectivity of the sources to locate their subjectivity in their collective mindset and their complicated relationships to the Mamluk elite. See Haarmann, “Al-Maqrīzī, the Master, and Abū Ḥāmid al-Qudṣī, the Disciple,” 150. See my full argument on the problem of representation in Mamluk sources in general in “Representing the Mamluks in Mamluk Historical Writing.”