

## PART THREE

### ARCHITECTURE AND CULTURE



## Chapter XIV

### The Inscriptions of the *Madrasa-Mausoleum* of Qaytbay\*

It is well known that few periods in the rich history of Islamic architecture are as fully documented as the Mamluk centuries in Cairo. Hundreds of monuments have been preserved, many more are known through texts, chronicles and descriptions are comparatively easily available, and most inscriptions have been published. In other words it should be possible to begin writing a true history of this architecture, to identify its constructional, social, formal and aesthetic motors, and to explain how this extraordinary explosion of building activities could have taken place in the midst of a checkered and often brutal political history. In reality, however, we are still far from being able to write up the development of Mamluk architecture, for it is only occasionally that visual, epigraphic, literary, social and aesthetic documents have been put together in any sort of coherent and systematic form. In attempting to do so for one particularly celebrated monument, I shall rely primarily on inscriptions. In this fashion I hope to pay homage to George Miles in two ways. On the one hand it is an occasion to recall his admonition to me many years ago that any knowledge of Islamic art in its cultural setting requires a deep familiarity with the works and the thought of Max van Berchem. And then it is an opportunity to express in a very small fashion how much I owe to the sane wisdom and to the kindly learning of a most knowledgeable gentleman and scholar. As, I believe, the oldest Islamic alumnus of the Summer Seminars of the American Numismatic Society, it is perhaps not inappropriate for me to recall the endless trays of gold, silver and bronze coins through which so many of us learned most of what we know of Islamic history. But it is particularly proper to recall the wish often expressed by George Miles that a proper index of qur'anic quotations on monuments be put together for the help of scholars. What follows is a small contribution to this end.

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The complex of Qaytbay in the Qarafah cemetery of Cairo is one of the most frequently visited and illustrated ensembles of the late Mamluk period. As it remains now, it consists of a *madrassa* on what van Berchem called a “plan déformé,” of a fountain, of an elementary school, of a minaret, and of a mausoleum.<sup>1</sup> A number of other dependencies and possibly [466] a small palace existed around it and traces of these additions or annexes were still visible to early nineteenth-century travelers.<sup>2</sup> What remains, however, forms a coherent architectural ensemble tied together by the typically Mamluk elaboration of a stone exterior, dominated vertically by a particularly striking dome and minaret, and provided with a handsome entrance façade with a second-floor loggia. All of this is both characteristic of late Mamluk architecture and of striking quality.

The date of completion of the various parts is clearly indicated by inscriptions, AH 877 for the *madrassa*, 878 for its western *eyvan* (or at least its decoration), 879 for the mausoleum. These dates are corroborated and complemented by the chronicles. Ibn Iyas relates that the building was begun in 874 and that it was meant to consist of a mosque with a full complement of *sufis*, of cells, of a trough for animals, of a cistern, and of various additions for charitable purposes.<sup>3</sup> In 879 a group of officials whose names are provided were entrusted with the various liturgical and practical obligations of the building, the first funds were distributed for its upkeep, and in the month of Rajab the first *khutbah* was pronounced in the presence of all high officers and judges of the realm.<sup>4</sup> Altogether, then, it took five years to build the complex, a point which could be used eventually to determine something of the speed used in Mamluk constructions.

Even if both the physical character of the building and the time of its construction do not pose any major archaeological problem, some question remains about what it really was. For the chronicle refers to it as a mosque with a variety of charitable functions, while the inscriptions mention a *madrassa*, a *kuttab* and a *qubbah*, and occasionally simply refer to a “place,” *makan*, as in the various parts of the *madrassa*. This apparent imprecision of the architectural and functional terminology is one of the more interesting developments of the medieval architecture in Egypt, in Anatolia, and in Iran. Its elaboration would, however, require assembling a documentation which is far too large for the context of this paper and I only mention it because its very lack of contemporary specificity when compared with modern

<sup>1</sup> Max van Berchem, *Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum: Egypte* (Paris, 1894–1903), vol. 19 of the *Mémoires de la Mission Archéologique Française*, pp. 431 ff. For the building itself the latest mention is in D. Brandenburg, *Islamische Baukunst in Ägypten* (Berlin, 1966), pp. 233–5. It deserves a full monograph on the pattern of S. L. Mostafa, *Kloster und Mausoleum des Farag ibn Barquq* (Glückstadt, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> Prisse d’Avennes, *L’Art arabe* (Paris, 1877; reprint Beirut, 1973), pl. XIX.

<sup>3</sup> Ibn Iyas, *Histoire des Mamlouks Circassiens*, ed. G. Wiet (Cairo, 1947), p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

scientific certitude about the ensemble's functions and purposes contrasts quite sharply with the main document I should like to discuss: the Qur'anic inscriptions.

These are remarkably numerous and, there as in so many other buildings, are usually dismissed as "mere" Qur'anic inscriptions. At best a guide book or a writer may point out their calligraphic or ornamental value. In reality, of course, something else seems to me to be involved. The building is unusually rich in inscriptions and these can be divided into three groups, at least for this preliminary investigation and pending a more complete study of inscriptions in general.

A first group consists of generalized pious quotations. Such is the Throne verse, II, 256, found inside the *madrassa* or IX, 129–30, in one of its *eyvans*, which defines the Message of the Faith. In many other buildings, although curiously not Qaytbay's, occur either attributes of God or various other forms of the profession of the Muslim faith. A second [467] group consists of specific passages relatable to the functions of the building or of any one of its parts. Thus the entrance contains parts of II, 211, which begins as follows: "Whatsoever good you expend is for parents and kinsmen, orphans, the needy, and the traveler; and whatever good you may do, God has knowledge of it." Then the mausoleum contains inside II, 139, a passage requiring the faithful to turn toward the *qiblah*, and XLIV, 51–9, one of the eschatological passages describing eternal life. Similar meanings can be given to LVII, 21, and XV, 46, which are found in one of the *eyvans*. These passages are all indicative of functions and of purposes, and their utilization may be as common as IX, 11 or 18–19, used in so many mosques, or XXIV, 35, used in *mihirabs* or on lamps. Or they can be somewhat rarer, as the selection (X, 59; XVI, 71; XXVI, 78–80) found in Nur al-Din's hospital in Damascus which includes passages dealing with healing of the sick.<sup>5</sup> Whether common or rare, this second group of inscriptions is important for two reasons. One is that it makes it possible to identify concretely the contemporary purpose of a building, regardless of its later use; such identifications are essential when one recalls the lack of specificity of so many Islamic architectural forms.<sup>6</sup> The second reason is that through these inscriptions, through a study of their frequency and of the time of their appearance, we may be able to approximate an essential aspect of medieval Muslim relationships to architecture and in some ways also to objects and to painting: the process by which visually perceptible definition and presumably identification of monuments took place. For this second type of inscriptions defines the monument both functionally and socially; it implies a sort of consensus of

<sup>5</sup> E. Herzfeld, "Damascus: Studies in Architecture," *Ars Islamica*, 9 (1942), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> A striking example lies for instance in the minarets of Iran, which can be separated into several functional groups through their inscriptions, even though their forms are very much alike.

the literate *ummah* about the association between chosen passages of the Qur'an and the uses of a monument. Its study thus is as justified as that of Byzantine or Gothic iconography, for, as was recently shown by Erica Dodd, the intellectual process is the same.<sup>7</sup>

But then we have a third kind of inscriptions on Qaytbay's ensemble. Inside the *madrasa* there occurs twice XLVIII, 1–3: "Surely We have given thee a manifest victory, that God may forgive thee thy former and thy latter sins, and complete His blessing upon thee, and guide thee on a straight path, and that God may help thee with mighty help." Then on the outside of the same were inscribed the first sixteen verses of *surah* XXXVI, the celebrated *surah Ya Sin* with its liturgical context of burials. It is one of the several passages in the Qur'an which establishes the Prophet's truth as against false prophets. I should like to extract two passages from it: "Surely We have put on their [disbelievers who follow other prophets] necks fetters up to the chin, so their heads are raised; (v.7) ... the inhabitants of the city, when the Envoys came to it; when We sent them two men, but they cried them lies, so We sent a third as reinforcement (vv. 12–13)."

Now it is perfectly true that these two quotations can be understood quite simply as belonging to our first group indicating various forms of piety. But they are not very common and XLVIII, 1–5, for instance, is used in the al-Juyushi mosque with a highly concrete [468] meaning.<sup>8</sup> Their choice may become understandable when we turn to the chronicles of the time and to the main events of the years 874–9. Up to 874 the Mamluk regime was plagued by the revolt in the upper Euphrates area (near Ayntab) and in northern Syria of one Shah Suwar who, with his brothers, threatened Aleppo and Mamluk commercial, administrative and military communications. In 874 Qaytbay sends reinforcements and the brothers of Suwar are taken prisoner. Through various envoys Suwar seeks to make peace in exchange for a position in the Mamluk hierarchy. These negotiations fail and it is only in 876 that military victory is achieved and Suwar sues for peace. In 877 he is captured by an official plenipotentiary, Timraz, who gives him his word that his life will be spared. Another amir, Barquq, gives him a robe of honor which had fetters in the lining so that his neck was kept engaged. It is with irons around his neck that he was brought to Cairo, paraded all over the town, and eventually crucified, carried on the back of a camel around Cairo, and then hanged. As the chronicler put it, "it had been an unforgettable day, an extraordinary event, as one rarely sees them."<sup>9</sup> It should be added that the plenipotentiary who had negotiated for Suwar's safe-conduct felt betrayed and resigned for a while from his office.

<sup>7</sup> Erica Dodd, "The Image of the Word," *Berytus*, 18 (1969), pp. 35–61.

<sup>8</sup> O. Grabar, "The Earliest Islamic Commemorative Structures," *Ars Orientalis*, 6 (1966), pp. 28–9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibn Iyas, *Histoire*, pp. 46, 80 ff.

The suggestion one could make, then, is that the choice of some of the qur'anic quotations was the result of the concrete events which coincided with the completion of the building. The victory mentioned in one excerpt was the one over Suwar and the truncated excerpt from the thirty-sixth *surah* was chosen because it seemed to refer to the manner of Suwar's punishment and to the rather tricky negotiations by several messengers which led to his capture. The coincidence of dates and the importance given by chronicles both to the affair of Suwar and to the building of Qaytbay's masterpiece make the interpretation possible if not plausible.

The point of this paper does not, however, lie so much in the elucidation of a detail of Mamluk architecture and history as in the elaboration of a major direction for research. It consists first of all in the creation of a corpus of qur'anic quotations done in such a manner that it becomes possible to separate at a glance the typical from the unique inscription.<sup>10</sup> For, as our knowledge of Islamic art progresses, it becomes more and more evident that qur'anic citations were used in the manner of biblical subjects in Christian iconography. They were the vehicles – or at least one of the vehicles – through which the culture separated the typical from the topical, the transcendent and permanent from the unique and permanent. And because of its wealth of sources and of monuments, the Mamluk art of Egypt and of Syria is an excellent area to begin an investigation of the concrete motors of medieval Islamic creativity. In this fashion, through its iconography, Islamic architecture will acquire a new dimension not only for the art historian but for the social and political historian as well. [469]

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<sup>10</sup> A project in this direction has been initiated by Dr Erica Dodd and it is hoped that it will soon come to some sort of conclusion. See Erica Cruikshank Dodd and Shereen Khairallah, *The Image of the Word*, 2 vols (Beirut, 1981).

