

Staging the City:  
Or How Mamluk Architecture Coopted  
the Streets of Cairo

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Nasser Rabbat

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## Staging the City: Or How Mamluk Architecture Coopted the Streets of Cairo

In January 1383, Ibn Khaldun arrived in Cairo from Tunis. His reaction to the city, often quoted, captures a feeling that was to engender a staunch nostalgia to his era among subsequent generations of Egyptians. He wrote

I beheld the metropolis of the world, orchard of the universe, hive of nations, iwan of Islam, throne of royalty, bursting with palaces and iwans within, shining on the horizon with *khanqahs* and *madrasas*, illuminated by the moons and stars of its learned scholars.<sup>1</sup>

Despite its ornateness, Ibn Khaldun's passage held true for many of his contemporaries who waxed lyrical about Cairo's vast expanse, diverse population, and architectural splendor. And notwithstanding the overwhelming signs of aging and neglect, the city still has a similar effect today. Indeed, among the cities usually associated with Islam, Cairo is still the most "Islamic" in spirit and character, and decidedly the richest in architecture.<sup>2</sup> Its vast architectural legacy spans the entire gamut of styles from the seventh through the twenty-first century that we now

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad ibn Tawit al-Tanji, *Al-Ta'rif bi Ibn Khaldun wa Rihlatahu Gharban wa Sharqan* (Cairo: Lajnat al-Ta'lif wa-l Tarjama wa-l Nashr, 1951), 246; English translation in Walter Fischel, *Ibn Khaldun in Egypt; His Public Functions and his Historical Research, 1382–1406; a Study in Islamic Historiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 18–19; also Carl Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), XXI. My translation differs slightly from Fischel's.

<sup>2</sup> The best general source on the urban history of Cairo remains Janet Abu-Lughod, *Cairo, 1001 Years of the City Victorious* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971). A newer and richer in data though less visually oriented study is André Raymond, *Le Caire* (Paris: Fayard, 1993), translated by Willard Wood, *Cairo* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

call Islamic. But the most spectacular among them belong to the Mamluk period, when the city assumed an imperial status and produced a wealth of architectural landmarks that synthesized the achievements of earlier ages and symbolized the image of the city for centuries to come.<sup>3</sup>

When the Mamluks took over in 1250, they made Cairo the capital of their expanding empire, and its citadel their seat of government and the residence of their sultan, his great amirs, and his royal Mamluks. At first, Mamluk urban interventions were aimed at filling the sparsely populated land between Fatimid al-Qahira, the Ayyubid Citadel, and the northern reaches of the older settlement of al-Fustat (**Fig 1**). But the power, prosperity, and stability of the sultanate soon resulted in a building boom that joined the two older cities and spilled over beyond the intermittent walls built under Salah al-Din around them. By the middle of the fourteenth century, the city had more than doubled in size and had spread into areas that had until then been farmland, desert, or marshland recovered from the westerly receding Nile river. It is true that the city shrunk in the fifteenth century due to a combination of economic, military, and natural disasters, but the core of the Mamluk city within Salah al-Din's walls remained firmly urbanized to the present day.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The Mamluk architecture of Cairo has yet to have a truly interpretive treatment of its own. For general studies see the following: Michael Meinecke, *Die Mamlukische Architektur in Ägypten und Syrien (648/1250 bis 923/1517)*, 2 vols. (Glückstadt: Augustin GMBH, 1992); K.A.C. Creswell, *Muslim Architecture of Egypt*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), which unfortunately stops in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century. Notable too are the brilliantly idiosyncratic book of Martin S. Briggs, *Muhammadan Architecture in Egypt and Palestine* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1924, reprint 1974); and the romantically photographed volume of Henri Stierlin and Anne Stierlin, *Splendours of an Islamic World: Mamluk Art in Cairo 1250–1517* (London; New York: Tauris Parke, 1997). For a new general introduction see, Irene Bierman, "Art and Architecture in the Medieval Period," in *The Cambridge History of Egypt, volume 1, Islamic Egypt 640–1517*, Carl F. Petry, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 339–74.

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of the growth of Cairo under the Ayyubids and early Mamluks see my *The Citadel of Cairo: A New Interpretation of Royal Mamluk Architecture* (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1995), esp. 50–89, and 229–43; see also, John Alden Williams, "Urbanization and Monument Construction in Mamluk Cairo," *Muqarnas* 2 (1984): 33–45. On the long-term effect of Mamluk urbanism, see the incisive analysis of Jean-Claude Garcin, "Outsiders in the City," in *The Cairo Heritage: Essays in Honor of Laila Ali Ibrahim* ed-

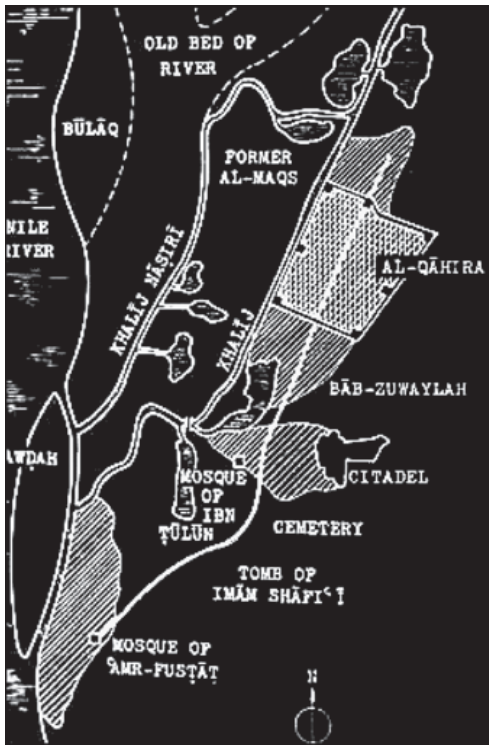


Fig. 1: Mamluk Expansion beyond the Fatimid City

An intensely dependent relationship to Cairo with its citadel and princely palaces cum Mamluk households made the city the natural arena for the public display of Mamluk power and pomp.<sup>5</sup> The sultans sponsored various processions and public rituals—some revived, others borrowed,

ited by Doris Behrens-Abouseif (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2000), 7–15.

<sup>5</sup> On the function of ceremonial and processions in traditional societies, see the various essays in David Cannadine and Simon Price, eds. *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremony in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). A detailed study of the Fatimid rituals in Cairo is Paula Sanders, *Ritual, Politics and the city in Fatimid Cairo* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994), esp. 39–82. Ceremonials and processions in Mamluk Cairo still awaits a comparable study.

and still others invented—to mark special functions, dates, events, or persons.<sup>6</sup> They opened up parts of the Citadel to the public on a regular basis for certain state functions so as temporarily to remove the barriers that existed between the ruler and his people. On religious holidays, coronation days, and after military victories, the Mamluks paraded in carefully designed processions that crossed the city from north to south or east to west and stopped at designated landmarks to perform highly flamboyant charitable acts, before reaching the Citadel, the scene of most ceremonies' culmination.<sup>7</sup> On other occasions the public display of the Mamluk might took place in the *maydan* (hippodrome) under the citadel, or in one of the other lesser *mayadin* around the city where the Mamluks performed equestrian exercises (*furusiyya*, which was the principal form of Mamluk military training) and played polo (*al-kura* or *al-akra*) as open spectacles that highlight their gallantry, martial skills, and prowess.<sup>8</sup>

Other qualities that the Mamluks were keen on publicly asserting were those that showed their commitment to Islam by adhering to its tenets and by serving its institutions. In the city, they endowed mosques for the faithful, madrasas to educate a new class of ulama, *ribats* and *khanqahs* to lodge the sufis and acculturate the unruly elements among them, bimaristans (hospitals), caravanserais, city walls, and water tanks to fulfill their public duty, and mausolea to commemorate themselves and to aggrandize their deeds. These structures lined up the major thoroughfares, especially those that had ceremonial functions such as the north-south *al-Shari' al-'A'zam* (Grand Street today al-Mu'izz Street)

<sup>6</sup> An introductory essay is Karl Stowasser, "Manners and Customs at the Mamluk Court," *Muqarnas* 2 (1984): 13–20.

<sup>7</sup> See Doris Behrens-Abouseif, "The Citadel of Cairo: Stage for Mamluk Ceremonial." *Annales Islamologiques* 24 (1988): 25–79.

<sup>8</sup> David Ayalon, "Notes on the 'Furusiyya' Exercises and Games in the Mamluk Sultanate" *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 9 (1961): 31–63, reprinted in his *The Mamluk Military Society: Collected Studies* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1979), ch. 2; Shihab al-Sarraf, "Furusiyya Literature of the Mamluk Period," in David Alexander, ed. *Furusiyya*. 2 vols. (Riyadh: King Abdulaziz Public Library, 1996), vol. 1, *The Horse in the Art of the Near East*. 118–35; Rabbat, *Citadel of Cairo*, 104–106, 194–99.





Fig. 2: Al-Shari' al-'A'zam (Grand Street, today al-Mu'izz Street)

or the east-west al-Saliba al-Kubra or al-Darb al-Ahmar leading to the citadel (Fig 2).<sup>9</sup>

Mamluk patrons vied with each other to secure the best location that provided maximum street exposure and the highest visibility to their buildings, with the most commanding sites obviously going to sultans. In the crowded public space of Cairo, builders had to resort to a number of architectural tricks to grab the attention of the passerby. They constructed tightly composed façades with layered surfaces and cleverly placed recesses, which exploited the contours of the street to be seen from all possible angles (Fig 3). They emphasized the verticality of certain choice elements such as arched portals with trilobed conches and geometric decorative patterns, tall and tiered minarets with bulbous finials, and slender, carved stone domes with high drums and tapered profiles. The end result was a multi-volume buildings arranged to both accommodate and dominate their urban surroundings and to reflect and represent their patrons' wealth, piety, and ceremonial pomp.<sup>10</sup> In this ingenious scheme,

<sup>9</sup> Muhammad Husam al-Din Isma'il Abd al-Fattah, "Ba'd al-Mulahazāt 'alā al-'Alaqa bayna Murūr al-Mawākib wa-Wad' al-Mabāni al-Athariyya fi al-Shawari'", *Annales Islamologiques* 25 (1990): 1–10; Rabbat, *Citadel of Cairo*, 238–40

<sup>10</sup> A partial list of studies on Mamluk urban monumentality includes: 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,"



Fig. 3: Façade of Salar and Sanjar

the street itself became a component of the design process: its contours, straight lines, angles, and turns were incorporated in the composition of the building, and, often, they were enhanced, exaggerated, or even invented altogether to accentuate a view or to appropriate some space. Thus, unlike earlier or later architects who accepted streets' layout as fixed and inviolable, Mamluk architects manipulated the winding street layout of Cairo for maximum visual effect and even for some actual space gain by enclosing parts of the street within the recesses and projections of their buildings' façades.<sup>11</sup> A particularly successful example of this

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*Muqarnas* 2 (1984): 1–12; Williams, "Urbanization and Monument Construction in Mamluk Cairo;" Bernard O'Kane, "Monumentality in Mamluk and Mongol Art and Architecture," *Art History* 19, 4 (December 1996): 499–522; Howyda al-Harithy, "The Patronage of al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun, 1310–1341," *Mamluk Studies Review* 4 (2000): 219–36; Nasser Rabbat, "Perception of Architecture in Mamluk Sources," *Mamluk Studies Review* 6 (2002): 155–76.

<sup>11</sup> Howyda al-Harithy, "The Concept of Space in Mamluk Architecture," *Muqarnas* 18. (2001): 73–93, p. 84, eloquently calls these spaces "urban pockets."



Fig. 4: Plan of the Complex of Sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri (1503–04)

street appropriation is the complex of Sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri in the Fahhamin quarter, built between 1503 and 1504, which actually has the public space enclosed in its serrated contour listed in its waqf as rentable space (Fig 4).

To elucidate this urban character of Mamluk architecture, I will focus on one example of medieval Cairo’s major streets: al-Darb al-Ahmar, which is also the name given today to the district surrounding the street.<sup>12</sup> This is not a random choice. Al-Darb al-Ahmar has more than 40 registered monuments, most of which belong to the Mamluk period, and is second in historic importance only to the main thoroughfare, *al-Shari‘ al-’A‘zam* (al-Mu‘izz Street) (Fig 5).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The evolution of the meaning of the term *darb* is studied in Jean-Claude Garcin, “Toponymie et topographie urbaines médiévales à Fustat et au Caire,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 27, (1984): 113–55.

<sup>13</sup> On the history of this major thoroughfare see Seif el-Rashidi, “The History and Fate of al-Darb al-Ahmar” in *Cairo: Revitalising a Historic Metropolis*, Stefano Bianca and Philip Jodidio, eds. (Turin: Umberto Allemandi & C. for Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2004),



Fig. 5: Al-Darb al-Ahmar- Aerial View

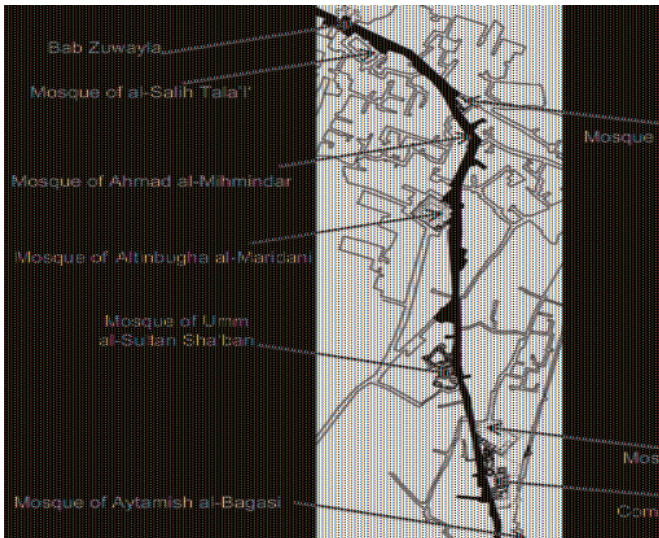


Fig. 6: Al-Darb al-Ahmar- Plan with Mamluk monuments

## The Topography of Al-Darb al-Ahmar

Looking at a map of historic Cairo, one is immediately struck by the irregular alignment of the main thoroughfare in al-Darb al-Ahmar (**Fig 6**). Beginning right outside the Bab Zuwayla, the imposing southern gate of Fatimid al-Qahira, the street runs almost due east behind the Fatimid Mosque of al-Salih Tala'i' (1160) along the royal city walls for about 200 meters. It then bifurcates and the main branch takes a mild turn to the southeast in front of the late Mamluk Mosque of Qijmas al-Ishaqi (1480–81) and runs straight for another 100 meters to the corner of the Mosque of Ahmad al-Mihmindar (1324–25). At that point, the street makes a sharp turn further to the south and continues more or less uninterrupted for almost a kilometer until it comes to the side of the Mosque of Aytamish al-Bagasi (1383). There it turns very slightly to the southwest and goes on for almost 250 meters until it hits the foot of the hill upon which the Citadel stands. After that intersection, the street tilts considerably to the southeast and metamorphoses into the famous ascending Sikkat al-Mudarraaj (Passage of the Stairway), carved in the rock, which led originally to the main Ayyubid gate of the Citadel, the Bab al-Mudarraaj (Gate of the Stairway). In the Mamluk period, al-Darb al-Ahmar in fact formed the sole route to the Citadel for the citizens coming from the city.<sup>14</sup>

At first glance, the curved shape of **al-Darb al-Ahmar** is incomprehensible as it clearly diverges from the dominant orientation of the north-south avenues connecting al-Qahira with al-Fustat to the south. The two other main Mamluk streets south of Bab Zuwayla, known today as al-Khiyamiyya and Suq al-Silah Streets, follow the alignment of the main north-south streets inside the royal al-Qahira, especially al-Mu'izz and al-Gamaliyya Streets (**Fig 7**). They all clearly conform to the orientation of al-Khalij, the main canal that brought the Nile water to the Fatimid capital, and per force the basic axis in that urban environment

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55–65; Muhammad Husam al-Din Isma'il Abd al-Fattah, "Mantiqat al-Darb al-Ahmar," Master Thesis, Asyut University (1986).

<sup>14</sup> Rabbat, *Citadel of Cairo*, 67–69, 237–39.

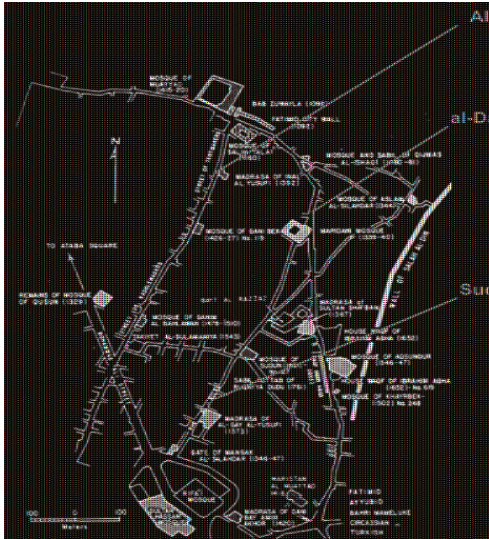


Fig. 7: Plan: Al-Khiyamiyya, Suq al-Silah, and al-Darb al-Ahmar



Fig. 8: The orientation of al-Khalij

(Fig 8). Only al-Darb al-Ahmar deviates from this obviously intentional planning scheme, and this must have been for an overriding reason.<sup>15</sup>

Al-Darb al-Ahmar grew as the umbilical cord that linked the old Fatimid capital al-Qahira, which slowly became the hub of economic life in the early Mamluk period, to the Citadel, the new seat of government and the center of the empire. We have no exact date for the urbanization of this area south of Fatimid al-Qahira, but al-Maqrizi, our main source for the history of Cairo till the fifteenth century, states that one of the Fatimid extra-*muros* neighborhood, Harat al-Yanisiyya, extended outside the walls to the east and south of Bab Zuwayla.<sup>16</sup> Al-Maqrizi also informs us that the first monument to be built outside of Bab Zuwayla was the Mosque of al-Salih Tala'i' towards the end of the Fatimid period, and that the rest of the area south and east of the Mosque became a cemetery for the inhabitants of al-Qahira afterward until the end of the Fatimid Caliphate (Fig 9).<sup>17</sup> The area began slowly to be built up in the twelfth century after the construction of the Citadel by Salah al-Din, but the cemetery seems to have been left relatively undisturbed well into the fourteenth century when several Mamluk amirs chose to build their religious complexes along the passageways that have evolved between Bab Zuwayla and the Citadel. In the accounts of the first three mosques endowed by three of the amirs of al-Nasir Muhammad—Ahmad al-Mihmindar (1324–25), Altinbugha al-Maridani (1338), and Aqsunqur (1346)—al-Maqrizi mentions that their sites had belonged to the cemetery and that bones were uncovered whenever workers dug up the foundations of new buildings in the area.<sup>18</sup> The development of the other end of al-Darb al-Ahmar under the Citadel must have started at an earlier date since we have the ruins of at least one major structure, the Palace

<sup>15</sup> Janet Abu-Lughod, *Cairo*, 27–36.

<sup>16</sup> Al-Maqrizi, *Kitab al-Mawaiz wa-al-I'tibar fi Dhikr al-Khitat wa-al-Athar*, 6 vols, ed. Ayman Fuad Sayyid, ed. (London: al-Furqan Foundation, 2002–2004), 3: 46–48.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:367, 451–52.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 4,2: 612, for al-Mihmandar, where al-Maqrizi states that the mosque was built across from the *musalla al-amwat* (funerary prayer hall); 4, 1: 227, for al-Maridani, and 4, 1: 239 for Aqsunqur, where al-Maqrizi says that they were built where tombs previously existed.



Fig. 9: Bab Zuwayla and the Mosque of al-Salih Tala'i

of Amir Alin Aq, dated to before 1293, standing 300 m. down from the beginning of the street below the Sikkat al-Mahjar, well in accordance with the policy of building the palaces of the great amirs around the citadel (Fig 10).<sup>19</sup> We know little about other major structures in the

<sup>19</sup> Alin Aq al-Husami is a little known amir who was executed in 1293 because he took part in the assassination of his master, Sultan al-Ashraf Khalil. Al-Maqrizi, *Khitat*, 3:375, identifies him as A'naq al-Husami, which is obviously a corruption of the name Alin Aq. And lists him among the *khassakiyya* (private mamluks) of Khalil. For Alin Aq's execution, see, al-Maqrizi, *al-Suluk li-Ma'rifat Duwal al-Muluk*, 4 vols. ed. Muhammad M. Ziyada et al., (Cairo, 1934-72), 1, 3: 795. For a description and a discussion



vicinity of the Palace of Alin Aq before the middle of the fourteenth century.

Goods were transported daily along al-Darb al-Ahmar's spine to supply the Citadel, home of the Mamluk army and court, with its needed provisions. Citizens traversed it to reach the part of the Citadel that was open to them, and Mamluks crossed it when they came down from the Citadel to the city for business or pleasure. But most importantly, the street formed the last stretch of the processional route of *al-mawkib al-sultani* (royal procession) taken by the sultan and his retinue in major ceremonies, such as coronation day, and victory parades (Fig 11). The sultan would cross al-Qahira from the north through the Bab al-Nasr (Victory Gate) and come out from the Bab Zuwayla riding along al-Darb al-Ahmar to the horse market (*suq al-khayl*) below the Citadel. He then would climb up to the Citadel from the Bab al-Silsila (the Chain Gate) and proceed up to the Great Iwan, the scene of the ceremony's culmination, the royal banquet (*simat*).<sup>20</sup>

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of the palace see, Jacques Revault et al., *Palais et maisons du Caire, l'époque mamelouke* (Paris: CNRS, 1982), 49–74, 180–87 and figs. 12–13; Laila A. Ibrahim, "Residential Architecture in Mamluk Cairo," *Muqarnas*, 2 (1984): 55 and n. 40; Rabbat, *Citadel of Cairo*, 214–19.

<sup>20</sup> Stowasser, "Manners and Customs at the Mamluk Court," 16–19; *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2d edition, Paula Sanders, art. "Mawakib," 6: 849–52. The most elaborate description of a *mawkib's* route is that of the victory parade for Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad in 1303, see al-Maqrizi, *Suluk*, 1, 3: 939–40; see also Boaz Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 74–75.



Fig. 10: The Palace of Amir Alin Aq

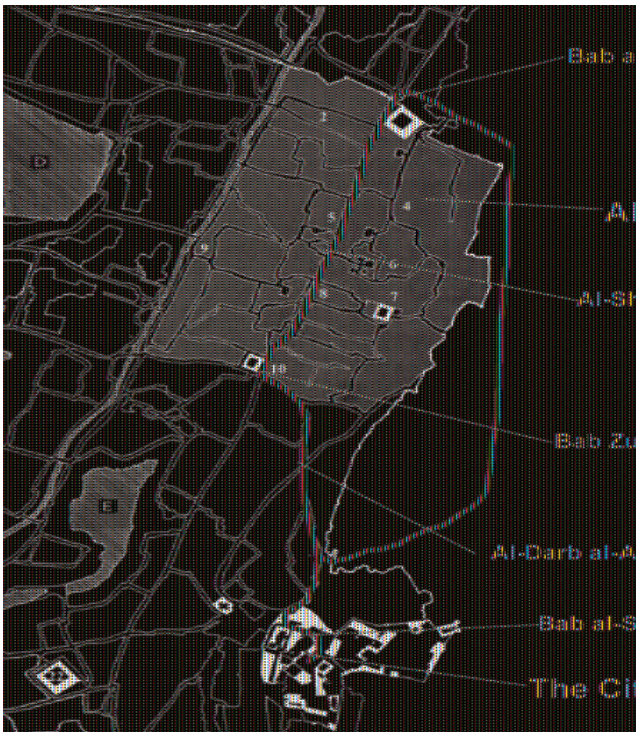


Fig. 11: Reconstruction of the procession route of *al-mawkib al-sultani*

## Mamluk Procession and Architecture

The section of the processional route inside al-Qahira through *al-Shari' al-'A'zam* (the old *Bayn al-Qasryn* of the Fatimids between Bab al-Nasr and Bab Zuwayla) seems to have been reserved exclusively for royal religious complexes.<sup>21</sup> By the end of the Mamluk period, at least ten of these complexes aligned the street from north to south.<sup>22</sup>

The amirs' religious structures were apparently not permitted to border on *al-Shari' al-'A'zam*; only their palaces and commercial establishments did, although not frequently. Instead, the amirs sometimes built their religious monuments (often but not always with a funerary dome attached) on the winding side streets that led off from *al-Shari' al-'A'zam*. More often, though, they built their religious complexes and their palaces in various districts outside the boundaries of Fatimid al-Qahira, such as *al-Saliba al-Kubra* (Fig 12). This process seems to have begun during the reign of al-Nasir Muhammad (1293–1341 with two interruptions), who initiated the greatest expansion of Cairo in the medieval period.<sup>23</sup> Many of al Nasir's great amirs followed the example of their master and built their religious endowments in the newly urbanized areas. We have no indication in the sources of any order of preference governing the choice of various areas for amirial endowments. But as the principal processional passage between the

<sup>21</sup> Studied in Dina Ghaly, "The Shari' al-A'zam in Cairo: its topography and architecture in the Mamluk period," Ph.D. Thesis, University of Toronto, 2004, pp. 153–87.

<sup>22</sup> A series of articles by Nezar AlSayyad trace the evolution of Bayn al-Qasrayn from the Fatimid to the Mamluk period, see *The Streets of Islamic Cairo* (Cambridge, MA: Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, 1981); idem, "Bayn al-Qasrayn: The Street between Two Palaces, in Zeynep Celik, Diane Favro, and Richard Ingersoll, eds., *Streets: Critical Perspectives on Public Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 71–82. For a computer reconstruction of that evolution see, idem, "Virtual Cairo: An Urban Historian's View of Computer Simulation" *Leonardo* 32, 2 (1999): 93–100. See also the spatial analysis by al-Harithy, "The Concept of Space in Mamluk Architecture."

<sup>23</sup> A concise overview is André Raymond, *Cairo*, 111–189; Viktoria Meinecke-Berg, "Quellen zu Topographie und Baugeschichte in Kairo unter Sultan an-Nasir b. Qala'un." *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, supplement 3 (1977): 539–50; Rabbat, *Citadel of Cairo*, 235–43.

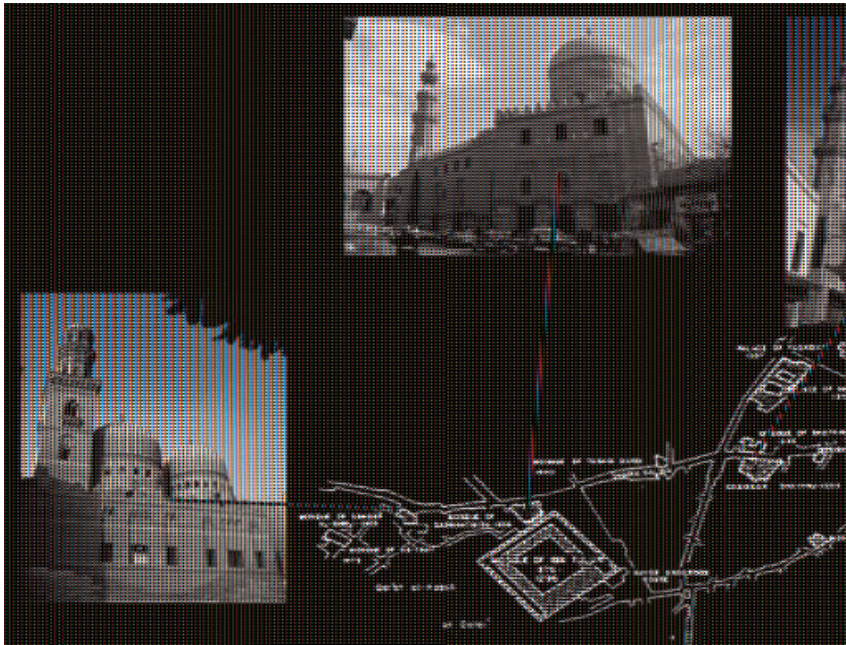


Fig. 12: Amirial Religious Endowments on *al-Saliba al-Kubra*

city and the Citadel, al-Darb al-Ahmar seems to have attracted a good number of amirs to build their religious structures there, which in turn helped embellish the street and raise its urban standing further, although it has never received any royal religious endowment.

Three major buildings, the Madrasa/Khanqah of Ahmad al-Mihmandar (1324–25), the Mosque of Altunbugha al-Maridani (1338), and the Mosque of Aqsunqur (1346) were built by these high-ranking amirs of al-Nasir Muhammad during his third and long reign (1310–41). Together, they mark the beginning of the process of monumentalization of al-Darb al-Ahmar.

Like everywhere else in Cairo, building activities slowed down after the prosperous reign of al-Nasir Muhammad but they never stopped.

In 1368–69, Sultan Sha‘ban constructed a monumental madrasa for his mother, the Madrasa of Umm al Sultan Sha‘ban to the south of al-Maridani Mosque. It was followed by the Mosque of Aytamish al-Bagasi (1383), situated on the southern tip of al-Darb al-Ahmar before the ascent towards the citadel. Then, after a halt of almost a century, came the elegant complex of Amir Qijmas al-Ishaqi in 1480, which commanded the northern bifurcation of the street near Bab Zuwayla. The last Mamluk complex on al-Darb al-Ahmar was that of Amir Khayer bek, which was built in two stages before and after the fall of the Mamluk Empire (1502 and 1520). The first construction was a mausoleum for Khayer bek (1502) built when he was still a rising amir under Sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri. He attached it via a secret doorway to the early Bahri Palace of Alin Aq, which he had appropriated as his own residence. The second stage comprised a mosque with a fine minaret and a sabil (1520) erected when Khayer bek became the viceroy of Egypt for the Ottoman Sultan Selim I (See Fig 6). Khayer bek was given that high position as a reward for his treason of his Mamluk master al-Ghuri in the decisive battle of Marj Dabiq (1516), which sealed the fate of the Mamluk Empire and delivered Syria and Egypt to the Ottomans for the next four centuries.

## Dominating the Urban Space on al-Darb al-Ahmar

Mamluk amirial endowments on al-Darb al-Ahmar display a great degree of spatial and visual sensitivity to the street's contours in their alignment, orientation, and massing. But the early structures show only modest attempts to enlist the street itself in the orchestration of their overall visual effects and control of their urban surroundings. The first securely dated Mamluk structure on the street, the Khanqah-Madrasa of Ahmad al-Mihmandar (1325), which was part of a larger complex that included a *qaysariyya* and a *rab'* now lost, treats the street in the most familiar way (**Fig 13**). It has a long, straight façade along the street, which was probably possible because the designers decided to ignore the correct *qibla* orientation and to instead adhere to the street alignment (the *qibla* direction is off by about 30°, a tremendous deviation even in a city with several known and sanctioned *qibla* orientations).<sup>24</sup> The one clear urban gesture in this façade is placing the ribbed funerary dome on the northeastern corner of the building where the street turns almost 60° so that the dome is the first element of the building that anyone coming down from Bab Zuwayla would see (**Fig 14**). Another possible urban gesture is the internal passageway at the southern end of the façade next to the main portal, which, according to Maqrizi, originally led to the street behind in the Fatimid Harat al-Yanissiya.<sup>25</sup> This corridor might have functioned as a transitional space between the

<sup>24</sup> See the discussion of the various *qibla* orientations in Medieval Cairo in David A. King, "Architecture and Astronomy: The Ventilators of Medieval Cairo and Their Secrets," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 104, 1, Studies in Islam and the Ancient Near East Dedicated to Franz Rosenthal. (Jan.–Mar., 1984): 97–133, esp. 112–19. See also Christel Kessler, "Mecca-Oriented Architecture within an Urban Context: On a Largely Unexplored Building Practice of Mediaeval Cairo," *Arab Architecture: Past and Present*, Anthony Hutt, ed. (Durham, University of Durham, The Centre for Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies, 1984), 13–20; idem, "The 'imperial reasons' that flawed the minaret-flanked setting of Sulṭān Ḥasan's mausoleum in Cairo - another note on medieval Cairene on-site planning according to street-alignments and Mecca-orientations," *Damaszener Mitteilungen* 11 (2000): 307–316; Michael Bonine, "The sacred direction and city structure: a preliminary analysis of the Islamic cities of Morocco," *Muqarnas* 7 (1990): 50–72, esp. 50–51.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Maqrizi, *Khitat*, 4, 2: 612.

Fig. 13: Plan of the Khanqah-Madrasa of Ahmad al-Mihmandar

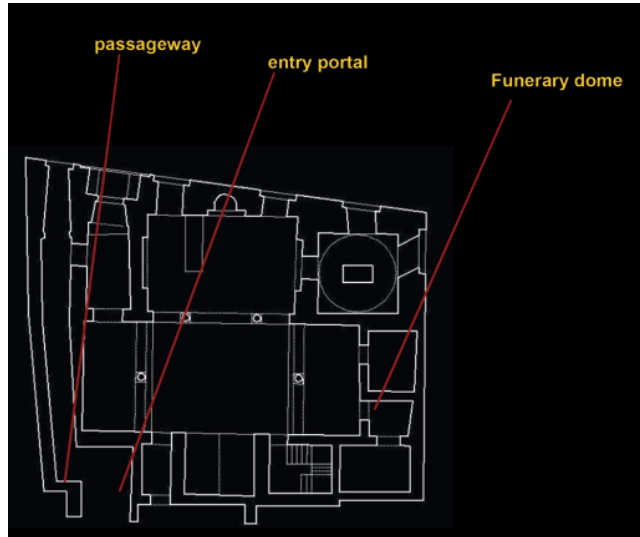


Fig. 14: The ribbed funerary dome of Ahmad al-Mihmandar

street and the complex.<sup>26</sup> But with the disappearance of the rest of the complex's components, the *qaysariyya* and the *rab'*, as well as *musalla al-amwat* (funerary prayer hall) across the street, and the blocking of the passageway today, it is impossible to ascertain the intentionality of such a gesture.

The plans of the two other early Bahri Mamluk structures of al-Maridani and Aqsunqur—both congregational mosques of the hypostyle type—are skewed to more or less correspond to the correct *qibla* direction. This shift of course results in irregular space left over from the divergence between the *qibla* orientation and the street alignment. Resolving this problem and maintaining a regular plan are old architectural challenges that have had various solutions in Cairo. The most common was to add a triangular wedge on the street side that fills up the left over space and to insert various small rooms of diminishing size within the wedge as a means to justify it functionally. This is precisely how the Mosque of Aqsunqur resolves the problem: an almost isosceles triangle extends out of the northwestern side of the mosque rectangular plan with the domed mausoleum of the founder prominently occupying the tip of the triangle facing the street and protruding slightly into the public space (**Fig 15**).<sup>27</sup> The arched main entrance of the Mosque of Aqsunqur is nestled next to the dome while the minaret occupies the corner where the triangle and rectangle meet. Another entry portal opens on the southwestern oblique side onto a rhomboidal urban pocket as if to greet the passerby coming from the south on al-Darb al-Ahmar. But the house built by Ibrahim Agha Mustahfizan before 1652 and squeezed wedge-like against the Mosque's southwestern wall obscures the extent to which Aqsunqur's façade interacts with the public space (**Fig 16**). The end result, however, is a building that parades all of its main elements on its regular street façade while following its functional requirements by turning behind its façade to face Mecca.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Harithy, "Concept of Space in Mamluk Architecture," 85–87, and figs. 6, 13, 14.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Meinecke, "Die Moschee des Amirs Aqsunqur an-Nasiri in Kairo," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Kairo*, 29 (1973): 9–38.





Fig. 15: Plan of the Mosque of Aqsunqur

The Mosque of al-Maridani engages the street in a totally different manner that will be further developed to brilliant results in several later religious complexes in Mamluk Cairo.<sup>28</sup> Unsatisfied with only reconciling the two orientations of the street and the *qibla* through space fillers, the architect of the mosque actually co-opts the street to create an “urban pocket” next to its main entrance on its northeastern façade (Fig 17).<sup>29</sup> This is achieved primarily through a stepped corner whereby the mass of the building recedes to create a first semi-public area and the main portal

<sup>28</sup> Examples studied in Christel Kessler, “Mecca-oriented urban architecture in Mamluk Cairo: the madrasa-mausoleum of Sultan Sha’ban II,” in *In quest of an Islamic humanism: Arabic and Islamic studies in memory of Mohamed al-Nowaihi*, A.H.Green ed. (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1984), 97–108; idem, “Funerary architecture within the city,” in *Colloque international sur l’histoire du Caire* (Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization, 1972), 257–67.

<sup>29</sup> Al-Harithy, “Concept of Space in Mamluk Architecture,” 84–85, and fig. 17.



Fig. 16: Aerial view of the Mosque of Aqsunqur and Street Façade Treatment

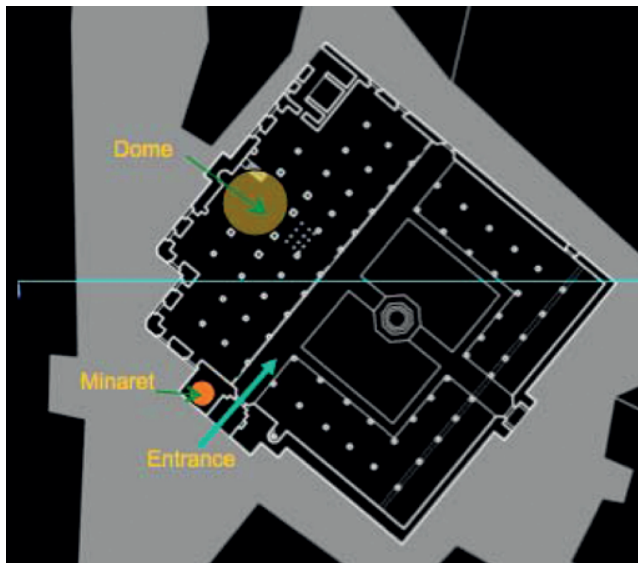


Fig. 17: Plan of the Mosque of al-Maridani

projects out to generate a second area that visually and spatially force the passerby to take notice of the building.<sup>30</sup> To take advantage of the vistas opened up by the designed encroachment of the building onto the street, the projecting portal, the minaret rising on its northern jamb, and the dome above the mihrab are gathered on the two sides of the jagged corner probably as added emphases.

The Madrasa of Umm al-Sultan Sha‘ban continues the use of the two strategies of stepped corners and tilted plans to address the three expectations of engaging the street, accommodating the *qibla*, and projecting monumentality (Fig 18). But the two later Burij Mamluk structures on al-Darb al-Ahmar, the Mosque of Qijmas al-Ishaqi (Fig 19) and the complex of Khayer Bek supersede all of their precursors in literally “hugging the street,” and in the arrangement of their fragmented façades so as to command the view from different vantage points. Both manage to exploit their advantageous sites to achieve maximum visibility that highlights various components of their complexes. Both also appropriate sections of the street and nearby buildings through various techniques: engulfing with architectural components, staggering, projection and draw back, and rotating elements off axis, in addition to a secret passage in the Dome of Khayer Bek and a bridge in the Mosque of Qijmas al-Ishaqi.

Situated on a wedge where al-Darb al-Ahmar bifurcates and the street’s main branch veers south, the Mosque of Qijmas al-Ishaqi represents a novel street-oriented architectural configuration (Fig 20). The overall plan of the complex follows the triangular contours of the wedge by staggering its main components in three incremental planes facing the street to the west: first the façade of the main prayer hall, second the *sabil* (public fountain) surmounted by the minaret, and third the main entry portal with the domed mausoleum behind it. The pockets generated by the staggering provide for transitional public space in front

<sup>30</sup> This may be seen as a design response to the condition diagnosed centuries later by Walter Benjamin when he noted that “architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction,” see Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt ed. (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217–51, p. 240.

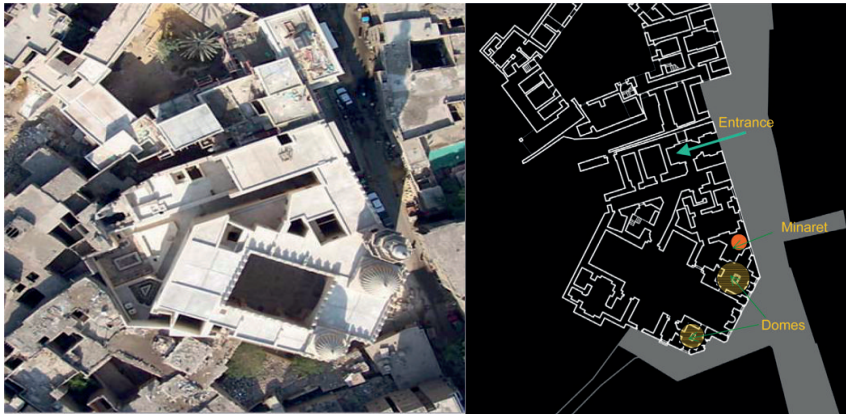


Fig. 18: Plan and Aerial View of the Madrasa of Umm al-Sultan Sha'ban



Fig. 19: Aerial view of the Mosque of Qijmas al-Ishaqi

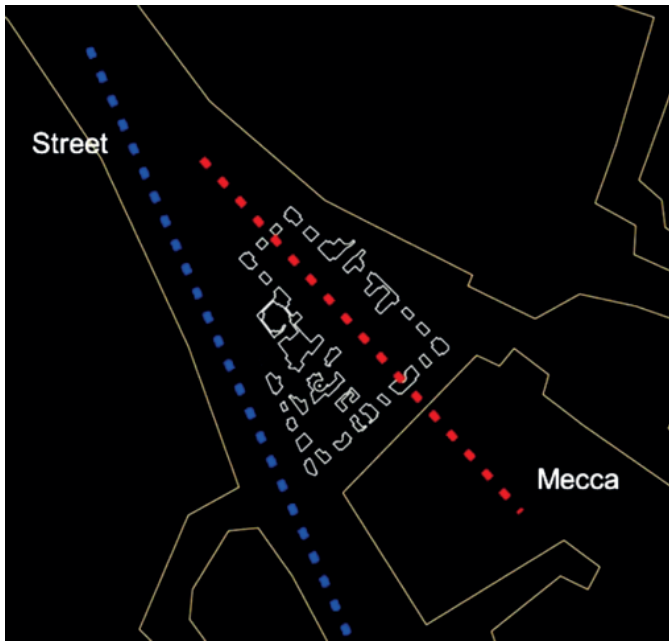


Fig. 20:  
Plan of the  
Mosque of  
Qijmas  
al-Ishaqi

of the *sabil* and the entrance portal, exactly where it is most needed. The wall of the domed mausoleum along al-Darb al-Ahmar breaks with this jagged configuration and resumes the alignment with the street in a conciliatory gesture that seems to release the passerby coming from Bab Zuwayla from the pause caused by the two angled edges of the building projecting onto the street space (Fig 21). But the most impressive effect of the staggering is visual: the building gradually unfolds for the viewer coming from the west (i.e. from Bab Zuweila) in an order that seems to reflect its components' relative importance in the overall composition. This is confirmed by the fact that some service elements—a *kuttab* (Qur'anic school), an ablution court and a *hawd* (basin)—are grouped together across the narrow passageway north of the complex proper so as not to encumber the pure view of the mosque/funerary dome proper. A *sabat* (covered bridge) connects them to the northern side of the prayer



Fig. 21: Three incremental planes of Qijmas al-Ishaqi

hall and anchors the main structure standing on an urban island within the neighborhood's fabric surrounding it (Fig 22).<sup>31</sup>

The last Mamluk amirial religious endowment on al-Darb al-Ahmar, the relatively **small complex of Khayer Bek**, presents the most elaborate engagement both with the street and the surrounding urban fabric (though the latter is very difficult to study due to the various layers of building and rebuilding around the complex, which started immediately after the death of the patron) (Fig 23). That the relationship with the street was well thought-out and intentional is substantiated by the fact that the complex was constructed in at least two stages, each of which presents a differently impressive facet of street architecture that seems to respond directly to the changing political context, yet maintains the focus on the engagement with the street and the vantage points it offers. The **first stage**, a funerary dome built in 1502 when Khayer Bek was a Mamluk amir, introduces a visually genial step: the dome and its drum are rotated to face the *qibla* but by the same token the observer coming

<sup>31</sup> Warner, *The Monuments of Historic Cairo*, 106 and references.



Fig. 22: Sabat, Kuttab, and Hawd behind the Mosque of Qijmas al-Ishaqi



Fig. 23: Aerial view of the Complex of Khayer Bek

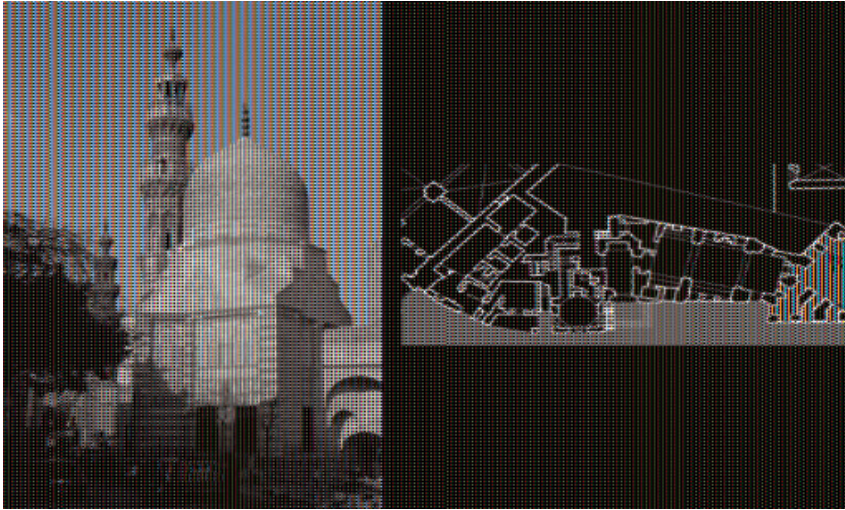


Fig. 24: Complex of Khayer Bek: First Stage: Funerary Dome

from the Citadel is offered a magnificent perspectival view of two sides of the dome's base with the minaret (probably added during the second stage of construction) springing behind the arc of the intricately stone carved dome (Fig 24).<sup>32</sup> The second stage is an oblong mosque/madrassa constructed later when Khayer Bek became the *amir al-umara'* (effectively governor of Egypt) under the Ottoman Sultan Selim Yavuz and finished before 1521 the date of the *waqf* endowing the entire complex (Fig 25).<sup>33</sup> A *sabil/kuttab* block was added shortly thereafter by one of the *mamluks* of Khayer Bek (probably after the latter's death in 1522) to

<sup>32</sup> This perspective clearly fascinated the most famous French Orientalist painter, Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904), to the point that he used it in one of his most illustrated paintings, *un Muezzin Appelant du Haut du Minaret les Fideles a la Priere* (1879), albeit he depicted it from an impossible angle, probably to balance the composition on the canvas.

<sup>33</sup> Awqaf 292/44, waqf of Amir Khayer Bak, dated 8 Muharram, 927/1521, pp. 8–10; text published in M. Hussam al-Din Isma'il 'Abd al-Fattah, "Arba' Buyut Mamlukiyya min al-Watha'iq al-'Uthmaniyya," *Annales Islamologiques* 24 (1988), 82–87.





Fig. 25: Complex of Khayer Bek: Second Stage: Madrasa

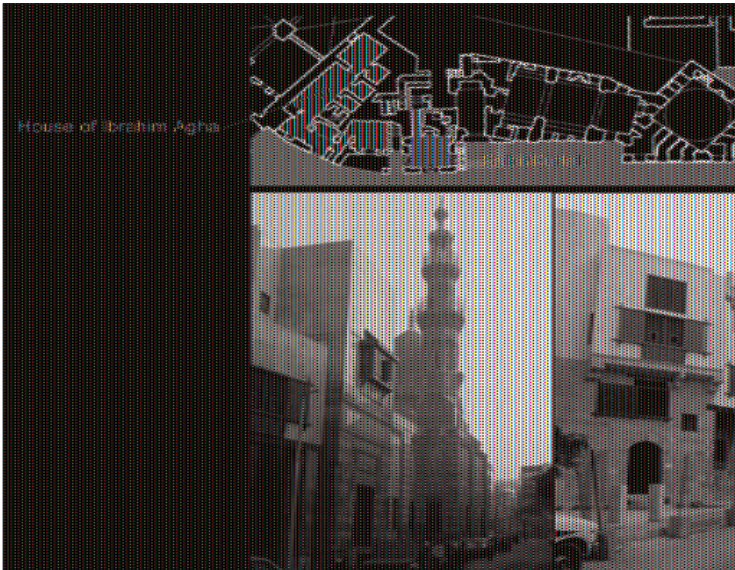


Fig. 26: Complex of Khayer Bek: The Sabil and the House of Amir Ibrahim Aga Mustahfizan

the north of the mosque, rounding up the composition and framing a substantial transitional space, akin to a vestibule, in front of the entire complex.<sup>34</sup> The Ottoman amir Ibrahim Aga Mustahfizan appropriated the complex later and inserted a house between it and the Mosque of Aqsunqur around 1652.<sup>35</sup> He may have added some structures behind the complex, but he does not seem to have modified the street façade (Fig 26).

The complex of Khayer Bek has an unusual sequence of construction. The Amir resided in the old and magnificent palace of Alin Aq when he served in the court of Sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri in Cairo. He began the appropriation of the palace surroundings by building his funerary dome without any religious complex attached. Instead, he connected the dome to the main *qa'a* of the palace via an elaborate stepped secret passage, a very unorthodox gesture, which suggests a more pronounced arrogance on the part of the patron than most other Mamluk amirs (Fig 27). The funerary dome is correctly oriented toward the *qibla*, whereas the *qibla* of the mosque/madrasa, built almost twenty years later, deviates from the true direction by about 30°. This divergence is utterly puzzling (Fig 28). It cannot be explained by neglect or by the possibility that the complex was left incomplete.<sup>36</sup> The probable explanation should be sought out in the fact that Cairene mosques followed at least four different *qibla* orientations,<sup>37</sup> and that a major shift in polity (and in the hierarchy of the schools of jurisprudence) occurred in Egypt between the two constructions. But if the eastern outside walls of the mosque and the funerary domes do not follow the same alignment, the western ones are aligned and follow the street line. This is achieved by varying

<sup>34</sup> For the description of the complex, see Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Egypt's Adjustment to Ottoman Rule: Institutions, Waqf and Architecture in Cairo (16th and 17th centuries)* (Leiden : New York : E.J. Brill, 1994), 232–35.

<sup>35</sup> Awqaf 952, waqf of Amir Ibrahim Aga Mustahfizan, dated 10 Safar, 1062/1652, pp. 117–18. The reference is taken from 'Abd al-Fattah, "Arba' Buyut Mamlukiyya," 86–87; see also Behrens-Abouseif, *Egypt's Adjustment to Ottoman Rule*, 171.

<sup>36</sup> Kessler, "Funerary architecture within the city," 265–67, observes that the deviation from the correct *qibla* is usually observed in funerary domes, which are added later to religious complexes, not the reverse.

<sup>37</sup> King, "Architecture and Astronomy," 114–19.

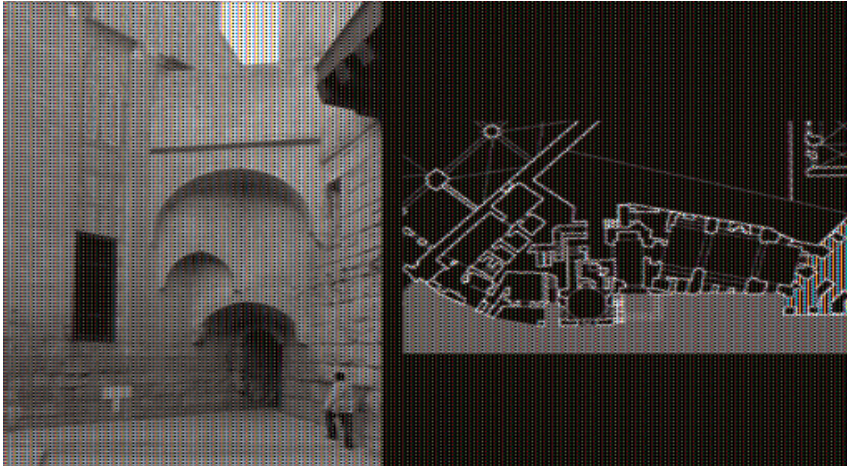


Fig. 27: Complex of Khayer Bek: Secret Passage to Alin Aq Palace



Fig. 28: Complex of Khayer Bek: Divergence between the Two Qiblas and the Varying Wall Thicknesses

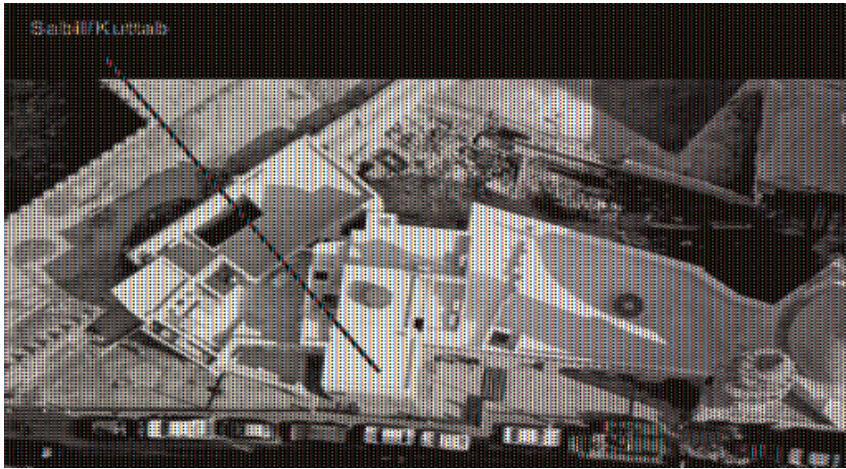


Fig. 29: Complex of Khayer Bek and its Relation to the Sabil/Kuttab

the thickness of the street facing walls of the mosque and especially the mausoleum, whose northwestern façade is more than 5 m. thick where it meets the mosque. The morphology of this area is unclear though as it must have been greatly modified when the mosque was constructed and connected to the extant funerary dome. Another subtle gesture is achieved by pushing the *sabil/kuttab* unit onto the street a bit further than the funerary dome so that parts of its façade are seen behind the dome's wall as the viewer approaches the complex from the south (Fig 29). But further speculation about the aim of this configuration is hampered by the fact that we do not know whether the *sabil/kuttab* was planned originally as an integral part of the complex or was an after-thought added by a loyal *mamluk*.

## Directionality and Monumentality

The Mamluk structures on al-Darb al-Ahmar, especially the complexes of Qijmas al-Ishaqi and Khayer Bek, raise the challenging question of the limitations of differential façade treatments that depend on the direction of approach.<sup>38</sup> But with the apparently puzzling exception of the Madrasa of Umm al-Sultan Sha‘ban and the understandable one of the complex of Khayer Bek, all other Mamluk structures on al-Darb al-Ahmar primarily address the viewer coming from one direction: from Bab Zuwayla to the Citadel. This of course is the principal trajectory of the royal procession during the Mamluk period; the opposite direction is never mentioned in the sources as the route of a procession.<sup>39</sup> Drawing the attention and manipulating the view of people in the procession coming from Bab Zuweila was thus a primary concern of the designers of these intricate Mamluk façades. Even the treatment of the façade of the Madrasa of Umm al-Sultan Sha‘ban may be explained from this angle: its main portal, minaret, and larger funerary dome are what first greet the viewer coming from Bab Zuwayla. The projecting mass of Bayt al-Razzaz (built between the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and 1778), which blocks part of the view of the Madrasa of Umm al-Sultan Sha‘ban’s façade, is a later addition (**Fig 30**). More importantly, the second floor *qa‘a* of the house overlooking the street, which is the true perspectival obstruction, is an Ottoman addition, built well after the approach from Bab Zuwayla had lost its ceremonial and political significance.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, the apparent divergence of the complex of Khayer Bek from the dominant ceremonial orientation can be explained by examining the sequence of building on that site. The first unit that Khayer Bek built

<sup>38</sup> Asfour, “Learning from Mamluk Architectural Esthetics,” 249–50, notes varying impressions of the building depending on the direction of approach and analyzes its impact in Cairo.

<sup>39</sup> For a copious collection of references to Mamluk processions, see ‘Abd al-Fattah, “Ba‘d al-Mulahazāt ‘alā al-‘Alaqa bayna Murūr al-Mawākib wa-Wad‘ al-Mabāni al-Athariyya fi al-Shawari‘.”

<sup>40</sup> On the architecture of Bayt al-Razzaz, see Bernard Maury et al., *Palais et maisons du Caire: 2 époque Ottomane (XVIIe–XVIIIe siècles)* (Paris: CNRS, 1983), 120–32.

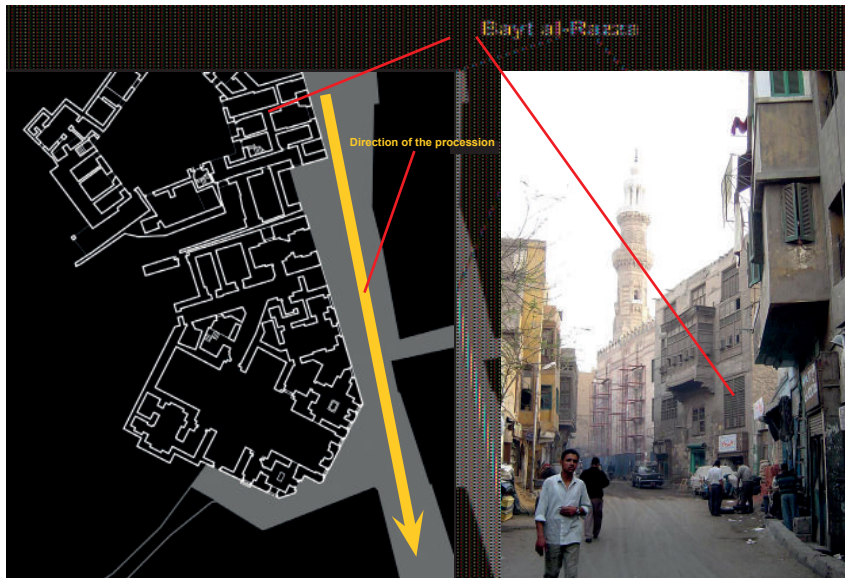


Fig. 30: Approaching the Madrasa of Umm al-Sultan Sha'ban

was the unusually skewed funerary dome. It is perhaps difficult to imagine it today, but the view from the northern approach must have been as impressive as the view from the southern approach is today, before the construction of the mosque and especially the *sabil-kuttab*, which blocked some of that view on the street level. In fact, the view from the northern approach might have been more impressive initially as it offered a seemingly stand-alone dome, whose connection to the Palace of Alin Aq behind it was hidden from view (**Fig 31**). It is probable also that the original entrance to the dome was on that north facing side before it was modified into a deeply recessed window with the construction of the abutting mosque around 1520. Moreover, the whole idea of directionality may have lost its primacy in the interim between the two phases of construction as Cairo lost its role as an imperial capital and became a provincial capital ruled by a turncoat, Khayer Bek, dubbed

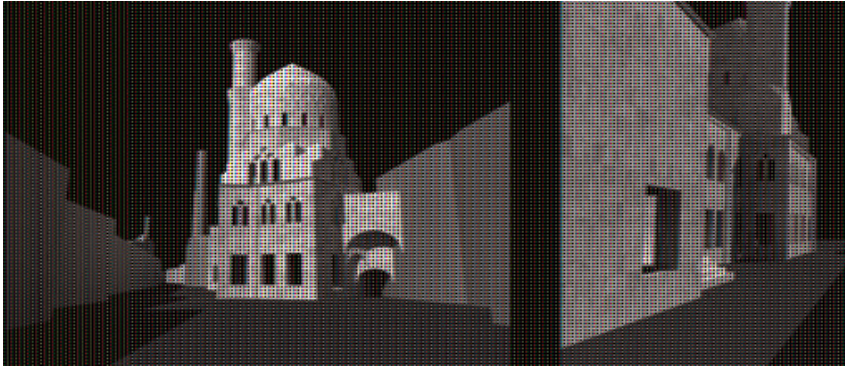


Fig. 31: Approaching the Complex of Khayer Bek from the South and the North

Khayen Bek (or Traitor Bek by the Egyptians), who was more than eager to prove his loyalty to the new regime and careful not to assert any symbol of supreme and independent sovereignty, especially after the revolt of his *khushdash* and fellow turncoat Jan Bardi El-Ghazali was smashed by the forces of Suleiman Qanuni in February 1521. But this observation will have to remain only hypothetical due to the lack of sufficient supporting evidence.<sup>41</sup>

The practice of endowing flamboyant amirial religious buildings along al-Darb al-Ahmar came to an abrupt end after the complex of Khayer Bek. The Ottomans were to reduce Cairo to a provincial capital whose governors were appointed from Istanbul for very short terms. Subordinate status is not conducive to either pompous processions or grand architectural gestures. Nor did al-Darb al-Ahmar preserve its role as a processional route, even on the modest scale of a regional seat of

<sup>41</sup> Behrens-Abouseif, *Egypt's Adjustment to Ottoman Rule*, 160, notes a curious aspect of Khayer Bek's *waqf*, where he specifies that his Madrasa has no Friday Mosuq function, and therefore no *khutba* (Friday sermon), possibly as a way to avoid having the name of the Ottoman Sultan mentioned in his religious complex, the first to be completed after the Ottoman conquest.

government. The Ottoman Pashas took to coming to Cairo by boat via the Nile and to lead a modest procession of entry from Bulaq to the Citadel along the outskirts of the city, bypassing al-Darb al-Ahmar and the city altogether. Slowly, al-Darb al-Ahmar retreated to the status of a principal commercial and residential avenue living in the shadow of the Citadel, whose inhabitants constituted its main customers.

Al-Darb al-Ahmar, like most major streets in pre-modern Cairo, was thus an ingenious Mamluk creation. Its overall orientation was dictated by the need to link the Mamluk Citadel, which became the center of a true imperial court, to the economic center of the city, which occupied the former walled Fatimid city. Its plan was gradually adjusted to fit the refinements and trajectory of Mamluk royal processions, which involved multiple stops along the ceremonial route. Mamluk amirs endowed all the religious and most of the secular monuments along the street's sides. They competed with each other to command the best location that provided the highest visibility to their buildings and the most compelling reasons for the leader of the procession, the sultan, to stop in front of them or to visit them. Like *al-Shari' al-'A'zam* and its extensions and the *al-Saliba al-Kubra*, al-Darb al-Ahmar was consequently transformed into a venue of exhibition where Mamluks amirs displayed their elaborate spatial, visual, and ceremonial grandeur. Not only the buildings' forms and functions, but also their artful manipulation of the street were designed to enhance their overall architectural impact. All were mobilized in the service of an expressive ceremonial pomp that reflected and represented the strictly hierarchical Mamluk system of rule and the peculiar relationship this caste of outsiders maintained with their adoptive city.