Architects and Artists in Mamluk Society: The Perspective of the Sources

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This article analyzes the social standing of artists and architects during the Mamluk period. It shows that the majority had a rather modest status. Those few who achieved social recognition had to transform themselves intellectually and socially to move beyond the confines of small-time artisanal limitations. They had to become something else, in addition to being artists and architects, before they could be acknowledged. This, however, is not a specifically Mamluk attitude. All medieval cultures shared it. Our modern expectations are retroactively and anachronistically inflated by the unprecedented phenomenon of Renaissance Italy, when architects and artists became the model humanists.

In the field of Islamic art and architectural history, the Mamluk period in Egypt and Syria (1250–1517) is perhaps the most thoroughly studied in all of the Islamic middle ages. This scholarly attention should not be surprising to anyone familiar with the sheer number of Mamluk monuments still standing in Egyptian, Palestinian, and Syrian cities, particularly Cairo, Damascus, Aleppo, and Jerusalem, and the dazzling array of Mamluk artifacts, especially metalworks, pottery, and textiles, held in numerous museums and private collections. Furthermore, our knowledge of this multitude of buildings and artifacts is enhanced by the existence of an unusually rich variety of historical sources, especially chronicles and biographical dictionaries but also encyclopedic manuals for the chancery, geographic treatises (maalik), and topographic tracts (khitat) that cover practically every one of the 250-plus years of Mamluk rule, often from different perspectives and by more than one observer. Consequently, we now have several surveys of Mamluk art and architecture, monographs on various cities, monuments, types, and celebrated objects, and some studies that compare Mamluk art and architecture to other Islamic and non-Islamic traditions. We even have a number of theoretical discussions of some of the formal, symbolic, and sociocultural attributes of this art and architecture, something that is generally lacking for other premodern Islamic artistic and architectural traditions.

Yet even this impressive body of knowledge suffers from fundamental lacunae in both basic and contextual data that render any conceptual, interpretive, or definitive statement on the subject of Mamluk art and architecture highly speculative. One of the most challenging of these gaps—especially to any contemporary student accustomed to viewing artistic output in the light of the artist’s life, background, and ideas—is the fact that we know very little about the artists and builders who conceived of and created Mamluk art and architecture. Not only have they left us no written testimonies about themselves or their work—a practice that was rather alien to the medieval mentality generally—but they very rarely, and then only cursorily, appear in the copious Mamluk biographical dictionaries, which otherwise accorded countless people from various walks of life their place in history. This neglect of artists and building craftsmen is the more perplexing since the Mamluk period witnessed a formidable outburst of artistic and architectural production and since it is clear from all of the historical clues we possess that art and architecture played a crucial role in the financial, cultural, and social lives of Mamluk cities and communities and in the exhibition, articulation, assertion, transfer, and symbolization of wealth and social status.

Meager as it is, however, the information in the Mamluk sources can still shed some light on several issues related to Mamluk art and building professionals. Among the most important of these issues is where artists and architects in general and specific classes among them in particular stood in the Mamluk social hierarchy—at least in the view of the chronicles and biographers. Were they regarded as members of a separate group or as an integral social group or even as part of a larger group such as artisans (arhab al-hriruf wa-al sana’)? Were they seen as craftsmen and therefore of rather modest standing? Or were they seen as educated professionals, more or less equal to others, including ulama (religious scholars), literati, or kuttabs (scribes or administrators)? Was their social position predetermined, static, and fixed, or were they mobile social agents able to improve their lot? If the latter was the case, what were the possible routes for them as individuals or groups to rise in the social order? And what do these routes tell us about the Mamluk society and about its views on men in building and the arts?

Some of these questions have been tackled before, particularly in regard to architecture. Leo Mayer, after carefully ferreting out the primary sources available to him in the 1940s, came to the frustrated conclusion that his work could only slightly lift one corner of the anonymity that covers the history of Islamic architecture, with the partial exception of Ottoman Turkey. He also conceded that building craftsmen seem to have occupied a rather lowly position in the hierarchy in all Islamic societies. Doris Behrens-Abouseif, who had many more sources at her disposal and who concentrated on Mamluk texts in particular, was able to sharpen Mayer’s conclusions. She distinguished between building craftsmen, who, with very few exceptions, remained anonymous, and building supervisors and construction managers, who are well documented in the sources. Among the latter, she noted that the majority in the first half of the Mamluk period, commonly called the Bahri period (1250–1382), were members of the ruling Mamluk or the powerful administrative classes. In the second, or Burji, period

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The Question of Terminology

When reading references to either artisans and artists or building craftsmen, one is immediately struck by the ambivalent terminology that the sources use to designate them. In the building crafts, the most frequently encountered terms are *mu'allim*, *mi'mar*, *muhandis*, and *shadd*. In the arts, most terms, on the face of it, seem to designate specific vocations or skills, such as *muzawwiq*, *naqqash*, *mu'tawwir*, and *muzammik*, while some appear to be generic, such as *mu'allim* and *sani*'. Scholars who have studied these terms have been unable to determine whether they were consistently used to indicate qualified artisans with particular skills or were vaguely and randomly applied. Furthermore, the apparent interchangeability of some of these terms betrays a certain flexibility, or even confusion, about their significance, at least among the authors of the sources if not in general.

S.D. Goitein, the eminent scholar of the medieval Jewish community in Egypt, for example, could not decide on the difference between a *dahhan*, a *muzawwiq*, and a *muzayyin* as they appear in the Geniza documents from the ninth to the early twelfth century. That is, just before the Mamluk period.† Dabhan today designates a house painter, but it may then have indicated a specialized kind of painter, perhaps one who used an oil-based paint. A *muzawwiq* was also a painter, most probably one who used *zawwawq*, an amalgam of gold- and mercury-based paint in a complicated painting, or rather gilding process. Another possible meaning of *muzawwiq* is mosaicist, for Goitein pointed out a Fatimid inscription in al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, dated 1035, in which the word appears to mean exactly that, perhaps in reference to the dominant color of the tesserae, that is, gold. Muzayyin is a decorator in today's usage but may have meant someone who painted figures and patterns in medieval times.

Similarly, of the eleven individuals from the Mamluk period in a list of people involved in the painting and drawing crafts throughout medieval Arabic history compiled by Ahmad Taymur Pasha, three are identified primarily as a *rassam* (draughtsman in today's usage), three as a *naqqash* (carver), two as a *dahhan*, two as a *mudhahhib* (painter in gold), and one as a *muzammik* (illuminator or engruber or simply colorist). However, it is not clear what the difference was between these specialties in the overall painting profession. Some are even interchangeably identified as both *rassam* and *naqqash*, or *dahhan* and *rassam*. Likewise, *tadhhib* (gilding) and *tazmik* are usually listed as independent professions associated with calligraphy, but they seem to overlap too much to warrant drawing a distinction between them. They both involve applying the laying on of colors, including gilt, and they sometimes seem to indicate sequential rather than separate tasks.

The same ambiguity turns up in the use of the term *mu'allim*, a relatively new term in the fourteenth century, which is usually translated as "master." J.W. Allan has recently argued that the term is far from clear in its connotation, especially as it appears in relation to craft industries, such as metalwork, weaving, or even building. He furthermore contends that craftsmen in the medieval period were not confined to one craft; they usually mastered the entire range of skills related to a basic art like metalworking. Allan has demonstrated, for instance, that a skilled artist in brass inlaying, such as the *mu'allim* Muhammad ibn al-Zain, who was active in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries and is famous today for his basin known as the Baptisterie de St. Louis (Louvre, LP 16) and his bowl (Louvre, MAO 331), was also an accomplished blacksmith who made window grilles and other objects of iron, a very different craft from the delicate and expensive inlaying of brass with silver (Figure 1).7

In the building crafts, there seems to have been no single word in the Mamluk period to encompass the meaning of "de-
signer” or “architect” as we understand them today. The term mi’mar, used today in most Islamic languages to mean “architect,” appears in the Mamluk sources only in the sense of “mason.” Muhandis (more correctly muhandiz from the Persian etymology bundas, meaning “measurement”) seems to be the closest to our architect. It is the only term that indicates a professional craftsman with a wide range of technical aptitudes and theoretical knowledge that we associate today with a designer-engineer. Basically, a muhandis was a surveyor with a primary training in geometry and perhaps hydrography, which he may have acquired through a combination of apprenticeship and formal education. In Fatimid and Mamluk Egypt (and elsewhere in the Islamic world), a muhandis was primarily responsible for the building of bridges, canals, aqueducts, and the like, somewhat like the French ponts et chaussées engineer. His architect-like role derived from his engineering background and function. In an urban context, his expertise was called on to check boundaries between properties, to estimate values of real estate, to assess the structural integrity of buildings, and in very few instances to “design.”

The problem in architecture, however, is less one of defining each profession clearly than of deciding between the design-oriented functions and the more administrative or managerial or financial roles that are not really art-related. The main reason for the indeterminate nature of these crafts is that royal building projects—about which we know the most—were usually entrusted to and supervised by nondesigners, sometimes even military officers who carried the title of shadd (superintendent of the project). This practice goes back at least to the early years of the reign of Salah al-Din (Saladin), when in 1171 he appointed his lieutenant, the eunuch emir Qaraqush, to oversee the building of Cairo’s fortifications and later its citadel, which he partially completed in 1176. The practice was, like many other aspects of construction, formally regulated by the Mamluk sultan al-Nasir Muhammad (1293–1340, with two interruptions) who displayed a keen interest in controlling and directing the prodigious urban expansion of Cairo that he initiated during his third reign (1310–1340). Chroni-
beginning of Barquq’s reign (1377) to the end of al-Ghuri’s (1517). The last one, Ahmad ibn al-Tuluni, was in fact among those notables expropriated to Istanbul by the Ottoman sultan Selim I in 1517 after he conquered Cairo and eliminated the Mamluk sultanate.

However, the family emerged initially from the professional classes. A Shams al-Din Muhammad Ibn al-Tuluni in the late fourteenth century was indeed a muhandis in addition to having occupied the taqdim (headship) of stonemasons and builders in Cairo. So was his son, Shihab al-Din Ahmad, whose biography found its way into the compilation of the time essentially because, through his dealing with Sultan Barquq as his mu’allim al-mu’alimin, he managed to marry his daughter to him, and not only because he was responsible for his madrasa in the main thoroughfare in Cairo among other buildings. His son, Shihab al-Din Ahmad (the younger), owes his place in the biographical dictionaries solely to his high standing in Barquq’s court. He is identified as an emir and is distinguished for having dressed à la Turque, that is like a member of the military ruling class. The sultan divorced the muhandis’s sister and married his daughter instead, and on the occasion gave him an emirate among the khasakiyya, the most privileged corps in the Mamluk army, which constituted the sultan’s immediate entourage.

Only individuals like the Tulunis have their names preserved in the sources in connection with building and architecture. Designers, builders, and craftsmen in all their variety who might have been involved in the actual design and execution of the buildings and their decoration are very rarely identified or commemorated. If they are mentioned at all, it is almost always indirectly and in passing. Abjij, an otherwise unknown muhandis, for example, appears only once in Maqrizi’s Khitaat. He was sent, we are told, by Sultan al-Salih Isma’il in 1345 to Hama with Emir Aqbugha, who was the royal shadd, and a group of craftsmen to inspect a palace built by its ruler al-Malik al-Mu’ayyad so he could build one like it at the Citadel in Cairo, a responsibility that would seem to warrant more than just passing mention.

Other, more revealing cases are those of the ulama who are introduced in the biographical dictionaries with the epithet ibn al-muhandis (the son of the muhandis), presumably because one of their ancestors was a well-known muhandis. The irony, however, is that the biographers in most cases did not preserve the name of the muhandis in question. Only one of these muhandisin who had sons among the ulama is known to us: Ibrahim ibn Ghana’im. He was the designer of al-Zahir Baybars’s famous Qasr al-Ablaq in Damascus, constructed in 1264, and his mausoleum, constructed between 1277 and 1281, where his name is still inscribed in a miniature niche on the left side of the portal’s muqarnas conch (Figure 2). Yet despite
his apparent connection to Sultan Baybars, Ibrahim ibn Ghana’im himself never made it to the prosopographies of his time. Only his two sons, Ahmad and Muhammad, and his grandson ‘Abdallah have their biographies included, but clearly because they distinguished themselves as ulama and not because they were the sons of a great royal muhandis.20

A few other builders managed to put their signatures in some corner of their buildings, but they too remain otherwise unknown to us; besides a name and a possible place of origin revealed in a toponymic nisba (surname), we have no further information about them. A well-known case is Muhammad ibn Ahmad Zaghlish al-Shami (the Syrian or the Damascene), whose name is inscribed above the portal of the palace of Qawsun al-Nasiri (1337) in Cairo.21 Aside from his nisba and the possibility that his father, whose name is Ahmad Zaghlish, may have been a Turk, we know nothing about the possible designer of this most spectacular of Mamluk palaces (Figure 3). The exasperation felt by an earlier generation of scholars is best exemplified by S.D. Goitein when he poignantly remarked that “although one of the glories of Islam was its architecture, ‘an Islamic roll of architects’ had to be created by a scholar of the twentieth century [L.A. Mayer, Islamic Architects and Their Works].”22

Social Mobility and Biographical Dictionaries

No Mamluk artist or architect (or any other medieval craftsman for that matter) seems to have left us any writing about his profession, his individual work, his general concepts of art and architecture, or craft schools he might have belonged to, in a manner comparable to the familiar way in which other cultural agents did, especially the ulama and literati in their assorted array of professions. Nor were artists of any category granted a voice of their own, either collectively or individually, in a separate volume or a special section in any one in the multitude of chronicles and biographical dictionaries covering that period (with the unverifiable exception of Tabaqat al-Muzawwiqin [The classes of painters] or Daw‘ al-Nibras wa Anas al-Jullas fi Akhbar al-Muzawwiqin min al-Nas cited once by Maqrizi).23 They only rarely appear in general biographical dictionaries. The two exceptions are the calligraphers, who probably show up because in a certain sense they were considered members of the intellectual class since they dealt with texts and writing, and the mu‘alims al-mu‘alimin, who were highly placed administrators and not real architects or builders.

There are, however, a few artists, in the broad sense of the word, who were neither calligraphers nor building supervisors but
who nonetheless made it to the pages of the biographical dictionaries. So few are they, in fact, that they ought to be studied individually to find out what, in each and every instance, warranted their inclusion in the texts when they are so obviously exceptions to the practices of the time. Can we speak of a predictable trajectory for them? Were they viewed differently from other artists because of their skills, connections, a combination of both, or mere coincidence? Was the pattern of inclusion consistent from one case to another? Here we will examine the biographical notes on four individuals. Three of them come from the well-known yet little-known collection of Salah al-Din Khalil ibn Aybak al-Safadi, the most comprehensive biographical lexicon of the early Mamluk period.24 The last one is lifted from Ibn Abi Usaybu'a's 'Uyun al-Anba fi Tabaqat al-Atibba, the largest medieval collection of bibliographical material on physicians.

The first biography is that of a polymath of the late Ayyubid period, al-ra'i 'Alam al-Din Qaysar al-Katib al-Hanafi, known by the nickname Ta'asif (?)(1179–1251).25 He was a katib (a scribe or clerk serving in the diwan, or chancery, in Cairo), a faqih (jurist, though not a refined one), a mathematician, and astronomer, and a muhandis, which seems here to mean a civil and military engineer. He is credited with building a mill on the Orontes for the Ayyubid king of Hama, al-Muzzafar Mahmud (d. 1244), and an unspecified number of towers around the city, for which he invented a number of engineering devices, or perhaps designs (hiyal handasiyya). He is also said to have built a wooden globe for the same ruler on a grain of rice (one is still preserved in the Military Museum in Damascus). We are told, in fact, that Tankiz wanted to make him a zaradakasib (supervisor of the armory) and gave him an iqta' (land tenure) in the halaja (a by-then minor Mamluk army division). The biographers do not fail to note, as if they needed to seal the biography with their stamp of approval, that Emir 'Izz al-Din had finally a carpenter and a stone carver who distinguished himself with his delicate woodwork, especially on the doors he reportedly made for the bimaristan (hospital) of al-Adil Nur al-Din ibn Zengi (built in 1154, but the doors may have been added later). After he reached the highest possible position in his craft, he aspired to improve his ability—and probably his social standing as well—by studying Euclid's Elements of Geometry, which had been translated into Arabic as early as the reign of the famous Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid (786–809).27 This led him to concentrate on geometry and to become a geometrician first, then a medical scholar and a clock maker, and even later on an adib (litteratour) who composed poetry.

With the exception of Aydaghdi al-Rukni, who represents a special case, the three others present some commonalities that might explain why they, as opposed to other artists and builders, were deemed worthy of being included in the dictionaries. The first is that none of the three individuals was limited to a single specialty; they all boasted a combination of outstanding skills in a variety of
artistic and architectural crafts. They also seem to have either combined theoretical and practical knowledge, as in the case of Ta‘asif, or acquired the theoretical knowledge to supplement their practical expertise, indicating perhaps a bias toward theoretical studies in Medieval society. This impression is corroborated by the fact that they all seem to have dabbled in some literary or religious fields, such as writing poetry, studying figh, and the like, which supplanted their professional architectural or artisanal identity and brought them closer to the mentality and occupation of the authors of the dictionaries. Finally, they all took the well-trodden path to renown and fortune, and possibly to immortalization through the biographical dictionaries, by attaching themselves to a powerful emir or sultan and climbing the social ladder in his wake. Al-Harithy made his name by working for Nur al-Din. ‘Alam al-Din Qaysar had both Sultan al-Kamil and al-Muzaffar Mahmud of Hama as patrons. And ‘Izz al-Din Jawad worked almost exclusively for Emir Tankiz and his entourage.

As interesting as these exceptional cases might be, their number is unfortunately too small to allow us to suggest specific patterns of selection and inclusion in the dictionaries for artists in general. The evidence at hand, however, indicates that being only a good muzzawwir or a talented naqqash was not enough to merit social recognition. Artists and architects had to transform themselves intellectually and socially to move beyond the confines of small-time artisanal limitations. They had, in fact, to become something else, in addition to being artists and builders, preferably men of the pen, before they would be noticed by the biographers, themselves obviously scholars and literates and predisposed to favor their intellectual kin. Otherwise, the overwhelming majority of artists and builders remained unacknowledged, even during their lifetime, given the fact that their names are very rarely noted when the completion of the monuments they built or the artifacts they made is reported.

So we come back to the question of the social standing of Mamluk artists in general. The majority who remained anonymous clearly had a rather modest status not so very different from other craftsmen. This, however, does not constitute a particularly Mamluk cultural trait. Hardly any medieval culture elevated its builders and craftsmen. This, however, does not constitute a particularly Mamluk social recognition. The professions themselves were transformed into highly celebrated and intellectually intense pursuits. Art and architecture acquired conceptual frameworks and the requisite body of theoretical and historical knowledge. In the process, the professional artists and architects became introspective and began to reflect on their professions. They also rose in the social esteem of their contemporaries and had biographers and critics to evaluate their work. From then on, the expectations of historians led them to search for similar roles for the artists and architects of earlier periods, when it is evident that they could not have played these roles both because of the hierarchized sociocultural and intellectual contexts in which they functioned and because of their own and their society’s view of themselves and their professions.

Notes


4. For the text of the inscription, see Max van Berchem, Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabischum, Jerusalem, 2 vols. (Cairo: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 1920–22), vol. 2, pp. 381–92.


8. Mayer, Islamic Architects, p. 26, and Taymur, Muhandisun, pp. 121–22, for the term muhandis; but a mubarris is the designer only in the sense of surveying and laying out the plot.


Ages, Awladahu, Shayyal, 4 of the Draftsman), see Safadi, quered by Salah al-Din in 1189.

see Michael Meinecke, regional architectural interaction between Syria and Egypt in the early Mamluk period.

vol. 4, p. 94; and Ibn Taghri-Birdi, Architecture, vol. 2, p. 1. 126, mention that he was put in charge of the repairs of the fortifications of Acre after it was briefly conquered by Salah al-Din in 1189.


Behrens-Abouseif, "Muhandsin, Shad, Mu'allim," p. 295.


18. Taymur, Muhandsin, p. 46. For other qahtis (legists) with craftsman nasihib (attributions), such as Ibn al-Naqash, see Safadi, Wafi, vol. 4, p. 209; and Ibn Taghribirdi, Najum, vol. 9, p. 252. For a qaht as known as Ibn al-Rasam (son of the Draftsman), see Safadi, Wafi, vol. 2, p. 179.


20. Taymur, Muhandsin, pp. 45-46.


24. For the importance of al-Safadi's lexicon, see Donald Little, "Al-Safadi as Biographer of His Contemporaries," in Essays on Islamic Civilization Presented to Niyazi Berke, ed. D. Little (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976), pp. 190-210. This is not the final number of biographies of artists or architects in al-Wafi. Other biographies might still be there to be discovered, for I have systematically checked only seven of the twenty-two published volumes out of a total of twenty-nine. But three out of approximately 2,500 biographies checked gives a fair idea of the relative unimportance of architects among the people worthy of being recorded in the early Mamluk period.


32. Beside the geometric basis of most of what carpenters do, there might have been a symbolic connection as well in the carpenters' interest in Euclid. He appears in the medieval Arabic sources with the epithet al-Najjar (the Carpenter).