

REVIEWS

Ottoman Cairo: Religious Architecture from Sultan Selim to Napoleon. by Chahinda Karim, Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 2021, 256 pp, 189 b&w and 18 colour illustrations, £50, ISBN 9781649030849

In Egypt's more than 1500 years of Islamic architectural history it is the Mamluk dynasty (1250-1517) that is most celebrated. The Mamluks commanded a realm that spanned Egypt, the Levant and the Hijaz – lands around the eastern Mediterranean – turning them into the economic, cultural and artistic centre of the Arab Islamic world. For these 267 years, the 1951 Index to Mohammedan Monuments in Cairo lists 181 existing monuments. For the following years of Ottoman rule (1517-1798), from its book-end conquests by Sultan Selim and General Bonaparte, only 159 monuments are listed. Egypt had reverted to the status of a province to be exploited by a distant power, a period most historians overlook as decadent and inglorious. Why this was so in architecture is the subject of Chahinda Karim's new book.

Of the 138 Ottoman governors who ruled Egypt only sixteen commissioned buildings: thirteen in the 16th century, one in the 17th century and two in the 18th century (pp. 191-93). Of the 175 religious buildings built during the Ottoman period only four might be considered to follow new Ottoman ground plans (p. 8): a domed central space preceded by a courtyard framed with domed arcades. Karim contrasts this with Syria where many mosques were built in the Ottoman style (pp. 8, 84, 169), and she outlines the reasons for this Cairene discrepancy. Ottoman governors were not as rich as Mamluk Sultans since most of the collected moneys were sent to Istanbul as tribute and was not available for building. Furthermore, a governor's tenure in office was of short duration, most of them ruling less than three years. The urban tradition was also a factor. In an increasingly populated and built-up city there was simply not the available spaces for the large domed

arcaded courtyard mosques coming into vogue in 16th century Istanbul. Also the Mamluk building tradition was an accretive one. New forms and plans brought into the Islamic world by conquest of the Crusaders in the Levant, or by contacts with the Mongols, were grafted onto plans and artistic conventions in place from the preceding Fatimid and Ayyubid periods. In architecture and art there was a strong tradition of continuing and perfecting old forms rather than of adopting radical new departures. Furthermore, although Egypt had become a provincial part of the Ottoman Empire, Cairo remained a vital cog in the trade between East and West and thus it was the secular buildings such as *wikalas* and merchant houses that predominate – 360 *wikalas* as opposed to 50 of the Mamluk period. The resulting architecture of the Ottoman era borrowed from the preceding Mamluk period and adapted these elements to the straightened circumstances of their own rule.

The minaret, with cylindrical or circular shaft, a balcony and a pointed hood, is the one unmistakably new and obvious Ottoman element. Otherwise Karim finds Mamluk precedents for every distinguishing feature of mosques built in the Ottoman period: the five-lobed merlon as cornice, the hanging or suspended *dikka*, the use of glazed tiles, even the adapted plan of a square or rectangular shape with four columns supporting a roof suggestive of a central courtyard. What she does not mention as part of Ottoman simplification or economy is the change in minbar styles. Instead of the Mamluk minbars composed of geometric star patterns highlighted by inserts in ivory, bone, ebony, the Ottoman minbars are created from plain, intersecting wooden strips termed *mafruka*. Nor does she emphasize the Ottoman interest in flowers, carved on facades, and painted on minbar and furniture pieces, that are basically new and enliven Ottoman surfaces.

The book is subtitled: religious buildings, and in four chapters Dr. Karim describes the thirty-seven mosques which still survive as listed in the 1951

Index. Unfortunately, she did not live to see the publication of her book. The final chapter or Annex was added by Menna El Mahy who selected four sabil-kuttabs to discuss: only that of Khusruw Pasha adds new text, while the others, those of Taghribirdi, Sultans Mahmud I and Mustafa III have been included in the main body of the book. One wonders why El Mahy did not include the sabil-kuttab of Abd al-Rahman Katkhuda (1744/1157) on Sharia Mu'izz as well as the wonderfully Baroque fountain-school of Ruqayya Dudu (1761/1174).

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Karim's consideration of the monuments is a chronological one. This makes perfect sense. It would have been helpful, however, to have had a map, since sometimes her "location" is imprecise or confusing as in the location of the Mosque of Muhammad Bek Abu al-Dhahab as "overlooking Husayn Square and the Khan al-Khalili area," (p. 154) instead of placing it as fronting the south side of Sharia al-Azhar, or for the Mosque of Muhibb al-Din Abu al-Tayyib, which "lies at the beginning of Khan Abu Taqiya which is off al-Muizz Street on the west side, in al-Khurunfish area" (p. 58). One has to know Islamic Cairo very well for her designations to have meaning. She describes each monument in fairly exhausting detail (window listings, Index (p. 228), take up half a column) while her many black and white images provide useful, although limited, visuals. Yet in these descriptions there are significant omissions. In the account of the Mosque of al-Fakahani, (p.140,) she does not mention that the original Fatimid panels were stolen, and have been replaced by copies, nor is there

mention that the wonderful iron grills of the Sabil-Kuttab of Mahmud Sultan were stolen, which makes figures 6.5 and 6.6 deceptive. The tree featured in many Ottoman stain glass or on tiles (p.129, p.172), with its tall attenuated shape, should be identified as a cypress and not as a "pine-tree".

Chahinda Karim is to be commended for bringing to light the architecture of an era poorly thought of and widely neglected. To do so she consulted primary sources in Arabic, such as waqf (endowment) documents and historical narratives, as well as pertinent sources in Western languages. She was well qualified to undertake this study. Dr. Karim (1943-2021) had BA and MA degrees from the American University in Cairo and a Ph.D. from Cairo University. She was a Cairene resident and taught Islamic Architecture for many years. This reviewer is pleased that at last this period has been given due notice. In fact, several mosques were described which in my own discovery of Cairo's Islamic monuments I had overlooked or mentioned in only a few sentences. This will be a welcome and useful starting point for all students who can visit the religious monuments of the Ottoman period.

Caroline Williams is an Art Historian. She lived in Cairo for many years and is well-known as the author of that indispensable volume, *The Islamic Monuments of Cairo: The Practical Guide* (6th edn., 2008, AUC)

Charles Huber. *France's Greatest Arabian Explorer* by William Facey, London: Arabian Publishing, 2022, xxii and 552 pp, illustrated, £30 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-911487-67-8

Charles Huber (1847-84) was a French Alsatian explorer and geographer who made two remarkable journeys to northern and central Arabia in 1880 and 1884. He was without doubt a pioneer of scientific mapping of the area and made some of the earliest copies of the North Arabian inscriptions.

Huber was born in Strasbourg in 1847 to humble working-class parents. He showed no particular academic ability, though he was bright and ambitious, making clear attempts to educate himself