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4.614 Introduction to Islamic Architecture

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Madrasa-Khanqah of Sultan Barquq: The Role of Architecture in Consolidating the
Power of the Early Burji Mamluks

The Madrasa-Khanqah of al-Zahir Sayf al-Din Barquq (Madrasa Barquq, or Madrasa, of sultan Barquq) is an architectural rendition of a critical point of transition in Islamic history. Constructed between 1384 and 1386 (Harrell et al.), it was designed to legitimise sultan Barquq's rise to power. To do so, the structure had to employ the architectural vocabularies of power of historic and recent empires alike, while developing key stylistic differences to distinguish Barquq from his predecessors. Moreover, the Madrasa had to affirm its own presence by engaging its contemporary visitors physically and spiritually, which the architects achieved by conforming the Madrasa's function and form to accommodate establishments of religious and intellectual power. The framing of architecture through politics permeates the Madrasa Barquq, and context is essential to understanding its success as a monument.

Contemporary political events motivated the construction of the Madrasa Barquq. As architectural monuments are a large draw on state resources and take time to build, their future benefit to society or to an individual's legacy must justify the initial investment. The Madrasa Barquq satisfied both these demands. Most importantly, as the first monument built during his

reign, it confirmed sultan Barquq's political power over the Mamluk empire. Barquq had claimed the throne through a series of political intrigues and murders, a common method of seizing control over the sultanate during the Mamluk era (History Today).¹ Each new Mamluk ruler had to legitimise themselves. For Barquq, this challenge was further complicated by his unusual ethnic background. The Mamluks were unique amongst Islamic dynasties in that they had been brought to Egypt as slaves, with the original ruling class, known as the Bahri Mamluks, originating from southern Russia. By contrast, Barquq and his successors originated from the Caucasus. The rise of the new Circassian, or Burji, Mamluks symbolised the beginning of a new era in Mamluk rule. The desire to confirm this shift had to be fulfilled politically as well as publicly, through architecture.² After his marriage to the widow of the late Bahri sultan al-Shaban to legitimise his bloodline, the construction of the Madrasa is considered Barquq's greatest act of consolidation of power, and is one of his crowning achievements (Strizik). Outside of the physicality of the structure, it offered Barquq an opportunity to publicly express his values and priorities, and physically concentrate powerful individuals in a location dedicated

¹ The Mamluk system of succession was a meritocracy under which sultans were forbidden from passing on regency to their dynastic heirs. In practice, this meant that military leaders often came into conflict with the heirs of late sultans, and that there was a constant struggle for power. Very few Mamluk rulers died natural deaths. It is ironic that even in one of those rare cases the sultan died of pneumonia caused by his habit of wearing armour to ward off assassination attempts (History Today).

² Architecture was a preferred medium for expressing power in the Mamluk empire. This is indicated by the names of the Mamluk dynastic phases, which refer to the architectural setting of their power. The Bahri (River Island) Mamluks were based on an island in the middle of the Nile (History Today), whereas the Burji (Fortress) Mamluks were garrisoned at the Citadel Khankah (Behrens-Abouseif, *Islamic Architecture in Cairo*).

to himself, including scholars and religious leaders.³ For this reason, the Madrasa Barquq served a multitude of functions, one of which was a khanqah, a gathering-place for the Sufi brotherhood which produced many of the intellectual leaders and officials in Barquq's regime, who would help him rule (Jeffery). The Madrasa Barquq was therefore both a physical monument to the new sultan's personal power as well as a political centre from which he could draw legitimacy in governance.

The legitimisation of Barquq's rule through monumental architecture required that he draw upon established typologies of power. His sources included regional ancient empires, such as the Roman and Egyptian, as well as foreign empires, like the Persian and Syrian. Together they provided Barquq with a cosmopolitan array of symbols from which he could derive authority. For example, the decoration of mihrab was highly inspired by Pharaonic or Ptolomaic techniques. Instead of typical marble mosaics, Egyptian faience embellishes the capitals of its flanking colonnettes as well as the prayer niche (Blair and Bloom). Madrasa Barquq also makes use of the core elements of monumental Abbuyid architecture, such as domes and iwans, which would have been familiar to his subjects (Rabbat, "In Search of a Triumphant Image"). In addition to local influences, Barquq's craftsmen embraced the influx of foreign historic tradition. The surge in foreign inspiration owes to the extensive regional conflicts that drove refugees to flee to Egypt and Syria, Cairo's reputation for being a metropolitan centre, and finally to the

³ Of all cities in the Mediterranean region, Cairo, the Mamluk capital, presides over the largest number of medieval Islamic monuments (Harrell et al.). It has been argued that the Mamluk elite's pursuit of expensive architectural patronage ultimately impacted the Mamluk economy and led to the decline of their empire (Ayalon).

Mamluk's openness to exploration, all of which motivated foreign craftsmen to contribute their artistry to the construction of the new building (Behrens-Abouseif, *Islamic Architecture in Cairo*).⁴ Large domes, such as that crowning the mausoleum, may have been introduced by monks from Edessa or travelling Persian artists, while murqanas and ablaq, decorative techniques heavily featured in the Madrasa Barquq, were originally Syrian inventions. By the time of its completion, foreign influence permeated the Madrasa Barquq from plan to decorative embellishment.⁵

In many instances, material scarcity limited the implementation of ancient typologies, forcing the architects of Madrasa Barquq to differentiate themselves from their sources by innovating. Egypt was experiencing a shortage of building resources, including bronze, wood, and marble.⁶ These materials were necessary for conveying a sense of monumentality and wealth, so Mamluk artisans developed creative strategies to source and use the limited quantities available to them. Aside from proconnesian marble, which was quarried during the Mamluk period, many stones were taken from Roman and Byzantine buildings in Egypt and Palestine

⁴ The Mamluks themselves, having originally been slaves, considered themselves foreign. They culturally, linguistically, and spatially separated themselves from their subjects. It is unsurprising that, in search of group cohesion, they regularly imported new architectural and artistic styles. (Rabbat, *Perception of Architecture in Mamluk Sources*).

⁵ The foreign influence on Mamluk architecture is one of several reasons scholars debate the emergence of a cohesive Mamluk style (Rabbat, "In Search of a Triumphant Image").

⁶ The scarcity of marble was such that in the Complex of Faraj Barquq the walls were painted to simulate marble, for using the stone would have been too expensive (Blair and Bloom).

(Harrell et al.).⁷ They were applied in *opus sectile*, a mosaic technique that was itself imported from Byzantine tradition.⁸ By breaking down the reused stones into small pieces craftsmen could repurpose them for religiously significant elements like the mihrab, capitalising on the quality of the plundered materials without diluting their own aesthetic with the foreign cultures. *Opus sectile* is found throughout the Madrasa Barquq, particularly in the elaborate decorations of the qibla wall and in the delicate polychrome patterns of the pavements. The exotic colours are a powerful attestation of the wealth and status of the building's patron. In a way, their presence in the Madrasa is a claim to ownership of the architectural heritage of Egypt.⁹ A second way the craftsmen of Madrasa Barquq used material constraints to make an architectural and political statement was by embracing frugality. Bronze was becoming increasingly scarce, and elaborate doors and chandeliers like those found in the Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Complex were difficult to replicate (Williams).¹⁰ The craftsmen's solution was to use bronze embellishments rather than full-sheet cladding for doors (Behrens-Abouseif, *Islamic Architecture in Cairo*). The final design, a central medallion surrounded by four quarter-circles, each pierced to reveal the wooden door beneath, is strikingly reminiscent of contemporary book bindings. The bronze decoration of Madrasa Barquq thus visually recalled its function as a place of teaching and knowledge,

⁷ Egyptian Dynastic monuments also served as a source of stone, but far more rarely (Harrell et al.).

⁸ In contrast to regular mosaic, which consists of regularly shaped pieces arranged to form an image, the tiles used in *opus sectile* are cut to form and irregular.

⁹ A similar dynamic would play out when the Ottomans conquered Egypt. A large quantity of Mamluk stonework was stripped from Cairo's monuments for reuse in Istanbul (Harrell et al.).

¹⁰ This particular door is currently found in the Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Complex, where it was moved in 1422 (Behrens-Abouseif, *Cairo of the Mamluks*).

anchoring the building in the rich history of Islamic scholarship. Frugal use of scarce material thus led to the development of a symbol of the sultan's respect for knowledge, education, and religion. Finally, matchwood, or grooved and jointed splinters gradually replaced turned wood in screenwork and window grilles (Blair and Bloom). This allowed the craftsmen to use smaller, poorer-quality pieces of lumber, saving costs while retaining the effect of wealth that had been achieved in previous Mamluk structures. All of these materials, which represented historical claims, ties to the intellectual class, and the wealth of preceding rulers, proved essential to formulating the narrative of sultan Barquq's rise to power, granting him legitimacy through artistry.

Not only did the architects of Madrasa Barquq utilise ancient architectural techniques and materials to corroborate sultan Barquq's power, they also referenced recent Bahri structural conventions. The Burji sultan sought to reference the familiar grammars of Bahri structures and adapt them to suit his own unique legacy. To the extent that a unified stylistic theme can be extracted from Mamluk architecture, one can see a clear shift between Bahri and Burji structures that begins with the Madrasa Barquq (Eilouti and Al-Jokhadar). While there are still four monumental iwans, the Madrasa's two lateral iwans are smaller compared to the qibla iwan than in Bahri madrasas. Furthermore, the residential structures, or *rab*, for students and the Sufi scholars of the *khanqah*, were expanded (Behrens-Abouseif, *Islamic Architecture in Cairo*). Over time, the importance of the *khanqah* in contrast to the Madrasa increased in proportion to its architectural footprint, until their functions eventually merged. Nevertheless, the Madrasa Barquq still makes use of the geometric proportionality exhibited by Bahri structures, and retains key elements such as iwans, minarets, and a domed mausoleum for the patron. This would have

made the Madrasa Barquq familiar enough to be a recognisable emblem of power, while the subtle differences distinguished it from surrounding structures, mirroring the transition of power between the Bahri and the Burji Mamluk.

In addition to drawing extensively from the past, the Madrasa Barquq had to make an impression on its visitors in the present. It did so by means of its site, function, and form. Sultan Barquq chose to build the Madrasa on the prestigious al-Mu'izz street, on the site of an old caravanserai (Blair and Bloom). The street, though narrow, was crowded with Qalawunid monuments constructed during the early Mamluk era and was closely associated with the power of the sultanate (Archnet). In addition to extending 45m along the length of the street, the façade of the Madrasa projects three metres into the street, interrupting the urban flow and adding to the building's prominence.¹¹ The constraints imposed by the narrow site forced the architects to build taller and afford more prominence to features such as the dome and minaret, further dominating the cityscape. The Madrasa Barquq also sets itself apart from its neighbouring structures by using Syrian ablaq stonework to aesthetically contrast neighbouring façade of the Madrasa of al-Nasir Muhammad (Behrens-Abouseif, Cairo of the Mamluks). All in all, the building, which maximised its visibility while adapting to spatial constraints of the site, served as a mechanism for sultan Barquq to widely declare his pre-eminence and legitimacy as a true Mamluk sultan.

¹¹ The practice of adjusting the urban fabric to accommodate a new building would be adopted by Sultan an-Nasir Faraj at an extreme scale. When he constructed the family mausoleum or complex outside of the walls of Cairo, he forced engagement with it by developing an enormous urban center on its periphery, and redirecting the pilgrimage to Mecca through the site (Blair and Bloom). Sultan Barquq's urban intervention is comparatively mild.

The Madrasa, or a place of learning, is but one of the many functions served by the Madrasa Barquq. It was an extensive complex that housed a Friday mosque, or jami, a mausoleum, a madrasa, and a khanqah (Omar et al.). These programs affirmed the sultan's connections to religious and intellectual leaders. The madrasa is a particularly interesting feature. By housing religious learning, at the time considered "only true science" (Inalcik), the building became a physical representation of the human endeavour to understand God's word. The architects of the Madrasa Barquq reinforced this by referencing each of the four Sunni schools of thought, or madhab, throughout the building. For instance, the calligraphic sciences are represented by the numerous inscriptions on the façade and in the courtyard, such as the tirāz band (Behrens-Abouseif, *Islamic Architecture in Cairo*). The spiritual sciences are symbolised by the joining of mosque and mausoleum, and the oral sciences by the elegant acoustics of the space. Finally, in homage to the intellectual sciences, the architects of the Madrasa Barquq paid careful attention to the geometric principles underlying the arrangement of its interior spaces, making sure that they were rectilinear and aligned with the Qibla despite the irregular boundary imposed by the site (Eilouti and Al-Jokhadar). Accompanying the four themes of learning and science are details that represent the sultan's own power. First, the royal rank, or blazon, is applied throughout the Madrasa to embellish objects like window grilles, leaving no doubt over the building's patronage. Moreover, the elegant calligraphy on the tirāz bears the name of Jarkas al Khalili, who was the construction master as well as sultan Barquq's master of horse (Strizik). These two features establish an intimate connection between the importance of resident religious scholars and the sultanate's military might. The second function served by the Madrasa Barquq, the khanqah, represented and offered residence to the extremely influential Sufi sheikhs, tying

their political allegiance to the sultan. Finally, these functions would have played out in the context of the public space of by the Friday mosque, or Jami, ensuring that the public regularly congregated in this space and beheld its symbolism. The many programs housed in the Madrasa-Khanqah-Jami-Mausoleum Barquq complement one another, representing the sultan's sway over the intellectual, religious, and political spheres of the Mamluk empire.

The design of the Madrasa Barquq engages as many of the senses of its visitors as possible. It is a visually striking complex, from the bulbous dome atop the sabil, or water fountain, to the dripping murqanas embellishing the wooden pole-table pendants of the mausoleum (Takahashi). Exquisite decorations on the murqanas on and the ceiling of the prayer hall display the skill of Mamluk's artists to any beholder, and the generous use of marble cladding adds an ephemeral quality to religious spaces (Omar et al.). It would have been awe-inspiring. In addition to their visual qualities, these decorations served a further, acoustic purpose. Measurements today show that the murqanas in the mausoleum absorb and scatter sounds coming from the mihrab, mellowing harsh reverberations from the stone walls (Omar et al.). This would make the voice sound clearer and more comprehensible, heightening the sense of being present in a space. It is possible that carpets originally covered the floor of the mausoleum, which would have a similar auditory dampening effect. The presence of carpets would also have added appeal to the visitor's sense of touch, with their pliability and warmth providing pleasing contrast to the otherwise smooth, cool marble. While the presence of taste and smell are difficult to determine today, it is recorded that at the inauguration of the Madrasa, sultan Barquq had the sabil filled with sugared water and distributed sweetmeats (Behrens-Abouseif, *Islamic Architecture in Cairo*). It is evident that entering the complex was designed to

be a holistic sensory experience, ensconcing the visitor in an all-encompassing religious and political ambience.

The mausoleum of Madrasa Barquq was not the final resting place of sultan Barquq's remains, yet to this day it remains a physical reminder of his legacy. The building, constructed to weather a time of dynastic change, is an emblem of Mamluk political power. The tumultuous beginning of the Burji Mamluk era made it imperative for sultan Barquq to express strength and endurance through the architecture he patronised. For this reason, the materiality, function, form, and decoration of the Madrasa Barquq is rife with symbolism that celebrates his power. The legacy of sultan Barquq is ensconced in the stones of his religious-educational-political complex, leaving an imprint on the fabric of history, and setting the tone for the architectural heritage of the Mamluk dynasty.

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