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[Review of: N. Rabbat (2010) Mamluk history through architecture: monuments, culture and politics in medieval Egypt and Syria]

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RABBAT, N. — Mamluk history through architecture. Monuments, culture and politics in Medieval Egypt and Syria. I.B. Tauris, London & New York, 2010. (25 cm, XIV, 261). ISBN 978-184511964-5. £ 45.00.

While the field of Islamic art history is not as densely populated as its riches deserve, the period of Mamluk rule over Egypt and Syria (ca. 1250-1517) is relatively well tended to. Since 1997 many fruits of Mamlukist labour have found their way to the *Mamluk Studies Review*. Within the broad range of scholarship in this field, Nasser Rabbat has come to occupy the area where architectural history meets literary history and history proper. Few scholars are as consistent in bringing together architectural, literary and historical material to tell a story. Rather than adopting a clinical approach that basically informs on the size and shapes of architectural objects (which is a necessary, but not ultimately satisfying endeavour), Rabbat is interested in finding out how architecture can inform us about the history of its inhabitants and patrons. If this suggests that art to Rabbat is a mere ingredient for history telling, this may be right, but only if it is properly understood that this ingredient is indispensable to the meal.

*Mamluk history through architecture* consists of fifteen chapters that have all been published previously in the period between 1989-2005, in a range of mostly easy-to-access journals and edited volumes. The articles have not been updated

despite the fact that new research has been published that according to Rabbat 'may alter some of my conclusions and despite my own views having changed in the last twenty years.' (p. xiv).

The author seeks to explore two directions. First, he explores how Mamluk written historical sources represent Mamluk elite culture and architecture. Secondly, he explains through architecture the Mamluk world view in relation to culture, society and politics. The fourfold division of the book under the headings 'Unpacking Mamluk Sources'; 'Architecture as History'; 'Architecture and Language'; and 'Architecture as Cultural Index' is not exactly compelling, but it does no harm either.

The first four chapters discuss the evolution of the meaning of the term *mamlūk*, the gradual grafting of the Mamluk political system and the question of manumission. These chapters are very informative, showing also the various unresolved questions. Rabbat explains how the central problem of writing Mamluk history is that our sources are almost never written by members of the Mamluk elite themselves. It was the almost exclusively Arab class of literati, consisting of religious scholars and poets, that produced the written material at our disposal. As a consequence, the Mamluks may occupy centre stage in most historical narratives, 'but they appear literally as actors given lines to read, or worse still, they are spoken (or written) for and about, but rarely speak themselves.' (p. 13). It is then a bit confusing that Rabbat refers to 'Mamluk historians' when he really means historians of the Mamluk era, but this is a matter of little consequence. While most of the material that these chapters (the oldest of which was published in 1998) bring to the fore will still be relatively up to date, some issues would have been helped by an update using new insights. Rabbat's frequent reference to the Mamluks as a 'one-generation aristocracy' ignores the fact that there are numerous instances of hereditary succession, so numerous in fact that we may speak of Mamluk dynasties. Given that Rabbat admits in the foreword to have changed his mind on a number of issues, the reader wonders if this is perhaps such an issue.

Chapter five deals with the sudden reemergence of mosaic art in the thirteenth century, after its absence in Egypt and Syria since the late eighth century. The material is fascinating, but the chapter lacks a clear focus. The chapter on the militarization of taste consists mainly of an exposé on the reemergence of citadel-building under Turkish hands as of the eleventh century. While the military nature of the citadel is obvious, there should ideally be more to say about for instance stylistic matters that are to be linked to the highly military-oriented cultures of the Ayyubids and the Mamluks. The following chapter, that closes the second part of the book, offers an overview of the vicissitudes of Al-Azhar's prominence in the views and deeds of a millennium of rulers. Though this chapter is not for the most part concerned with the Mamluk era proper, the importance of Al-Azhar during the Mamluk era and beyond, warrants this article's inclusion. Part III begins with a clarifying article on the importance and peculiarity of *waqf* documents as sources for writing architectural history. Rabbat explains that in contrast to the European tradition, where precise graphic representation gradually developed, Islamic cultures' *waqf* (and other) documentation developed a system or tradition of verbal reconnaissance of architectural objects. This different approach, largely to be explained out of the fact that the

authors were specialists of the word, not of the image, requires that the contemporary scholar develops a familiarity with this kind of architectural information. In an article concerning the meaning of the word *iwān* Rabbat makes ample use of poetic evidence to show how the concept of the *iwān* was connected to 'monumentality' and more interestingly, to the so-called *iwān kisrā*, or Chosroe's Iwan at Ctesiphon. An explanation of what the author means by monumentality is not provided, but what makes this article so interesting is the way in which the author employs poetry to make some strong architectural-historical points. In the chapter on Mamluk throne halls, Rabbat reconstructs the Great Iwan on Cairo's citadel to have been of a basilical plan, which is odd because this type of plan had not been used in Egypt since the Muslim conquest. Rabbat suggests that the inspiration for a basilical plan came from Syria, where the basilical plan had survived long into the Islamic period. Rabbat's argument is convincing because it would not be the only example of Damascene import during the Mamluk age, witness Qalāwūn's Bimaristan (inspired by Nūr al-Dīn's *bimaristan* in Damascus) and Al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's *Qaṣr Ablāq* (also after an earlier Damascene model), which was in fact a forerunner of the throne hall under discussion in this chapter.

Part IV begins with a welcome clarion call to revise the historiographic tradition dealing with the story of Cairene architecture. Rabbat criticizes the tendency to isolate Cairo's architectural development as *sui generis*, and highlights the manifold ways in which Cairo's built environment has always been open to regional influences. This chapter ends however on a sour note, when Behrens-Abouseif's *Islamic Architecture in Cairo: An Introduction* is elaborately put down (this section fills around a third of the chapter). When this article was originally published in 1994, this critique was already coming a bit late (the work in question was published in 1989, and its flaws had already been pointed out by Caroline Williams in a review published in 1992, to which Rabbat refers). To publish this article again in 2010 seems uncalled for. Other chapters in this final section contextualize the so-called Palaces of Justice (*dār al-'adl*), review once more the difficulties of textual sources for the writing of architectural history and lastly take the reader to the modern age, when we see how the evolving ambitions of Muḥammad 'Alī's dynasty can be traced through the architecture it sponsored. This is one of the finest chapters for those who seek concrete examples of how architectural projects speak for the outlook of its sponsors. Rabbat shows how Muḥammad 'Alī's classicizing Ottoman imperial style mosque atop the citadel embodies his Istanbul-oriented ambitions, which contrasts sharply with how his descendants were to intervene in Cairo's city-scape towards the end of the nineteenth century. They ordered the construction of the Rifā'ī Mosque in a Mamluk style that is so strongly associated with Cairo, characterizing the dynasty's need to portray themselves as part and parcel of Egyptian national history, no longer eyeing Istanbul as ultimate goal or even as model.

A book consisting of previously published material of which the author himself says that it contains postulations he no longer holds true, is of course not without its problems. One could dwell on this unfortunate aspect of the publication, but this would be of little use. The question is whether this book is nonetheless a valuable contribution to

our collective library on Islamic art and architecture. This reviewer believes that this book's publication is more than justified. The field is helped by the wider availability of its scholarly work in convenient volumes, if only to increase readership. The book brings together a wealth of publications by one of the finest historians of Mamluk architecture that gives easy access to Rabbat's method and his various insights into a range of crucial architectural remains of the Mamluk period. In short, Mamluk history through architecture is not a side dish. It is a full and filling meal, albeit not made fresh.

University of Amsterdam,  
May 2011

Robbert A.F.L. WOLTERING

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