

DORIS BEHRENS-ABOUSEIF

SCHOOL OF ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Sultan al-Ghawrī and the Arts

In the last decades of Mamluk rule the visual arts flourished, despite a deplorable economy and a fatal political and military situation. The reigns of Sultans Qāyṭbāy and al-Ghawrī each in its own way turned a page in the history of Mamluk art. Judging from the handsome and richly decorated monuments and from the originality of the objects produced during his reign, Qāyṭbāy appears to the modern viewer to have been a great patron of the arts. For his contemporaries, however, he was regarded more as a sponsor of religious and philanthropic foundations rather than as a patron of artistic creations. The image conveyed by his chroniclers and biographers is of a good and pious Muslim ruler who founded a large number of religious institutions and restored and refurbished major mosques and shrines in his empire. Together with his amirs he also contributed to Cairo's revitalization and embellishment. In addition to his piety, however, Qāyṭbāy must also have had an esthetic appreciation of the visual arts; otherwise it is difficult to explain the explosion of decorative ideas that characterizes the monuments and the art objects produced during his reign. Nevertheless, it was the pious works rather than the esthetic innovations that shaped his image in late Mamluk historiography. His successful military campaigns against the Ottomans and the Turcoman principalities which threatened the borders of the Mamluk empire and his humble life-style, not to mention his performance of the hajj—a rarity among the Mamluk sultans—earned him the reputation of being a pious and good sultan.¹

The profile of his successor, Sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī, that emerges from the chronicles is indeed quite different from Qāyṭbāy's pious image. It is of a monarch with clear artistic and hedonistic inclinations.² Seen in retrospect and considering

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¹Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw' al-Lāmi' li-Ahl al-Qarn al-Tāsi'* (Cairo, 1896), 6:201–14.

²Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i' al-Zuhūr fī Waqā'i' al-Duhūr*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, Bibliotheca Islamica, vol. 5 a-e (Wiesbaden and Cairo, 1960–75), 5:87 ff.; 'Abd al-Wahhāb 'Azzām, *Majālis al-Sulṭān al-Ghawrī* (Cairo, 1941); Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī, *Al-Kawākib al-Sā'irah bi-A'yān al-Mi'ah al-'Ashirah*, ed. Jibrā'il Sulaymān Jabbūr (Beirut, 1979), 1:294–97; 'Abd al-Ḥayy ibn Aḥmad Ibn al-'Imād, *Shadharāt al-Dhahab fī Akhbār Man Dhahab* (Beirut, n.d.), 8:113 f.; Barbara Flemming, "Šerīf, Sultan Ġavrī und die 'Perser,'" *Der Islam* 45 (1969): 81–93; Carl F. Petry, *Protectors or Praetorians? The Last Mamlūk Sultans and Egypt's Waning as a Great Power* (New York, 1994), 158–73; idem, *Twilight of Majesty: The Reigns of the Mamlūk Sultans al-Ashraf Qāyṭbāy and*



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its catastrophic end, al-Ghawrī's reign could by no means be evaluated favorably. Even if the causes of the fall of the Mamluk empire were complex and began long before his reign, that it happened during his reign had to be attributed to his conduct and his politics, in contrast to Qāyrbāy, who appears as having been able to stave off that fate. From the perspective of the modern art historian, however, the reign of al-Ghawrī, had it not coincided with the final stage of Mamluk history, could have changed the history of Mamluk art. It was a tragic coincidence that al-Ghawrī did not have the personality needed for that particular time in Mamluk history when the empire was facing fatal threats from inside and outside its territory which ultimately led to its downfall.

Al-Ghawrī has already attracted a relatively good deal of scholarly attention. 'Abd al-Wahhāb 'Azzām in the 1940s and Barbara Flemming in the 1960s dealt with the remarkable literary activities at his court; Esin Atıl discussed his patronage of the art of the book; and more recently Carl F. Petry focused on the political history of his reign. This article discusses the artistic vision of this sultan as a whole while speculating on its origins and motivations.

Sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī was sixty years old when he came to power in 906/1501. A mamluk of Qāyrbāy, he was first appointed governor of Upper Egypt, then governor of Tarsus in northern Syria and subsequently grand chamberlain in Aleppo and governor of Malatya. Upon his return to Cairo he became great *dawādār* and great *ustādār*.³

Like Qāyrbāy before him, al-Ghawrī had to deal with inherited economic and fiscal problems, with increasing Safavid and Ottoman pressure, with Portuguese threats, and with domestic unrest. Although he was well aware of his precarious military situation, which he tried to cope with by modernizing the army and consolidating fortifications, al-Ghawrī became increasingly absorbed by his role as glamorous ruler and patron of the arts.

Ibn Iyās describes the sultan as having a distinguished and awesome appearance, which he cultivated and enhanced with lavish ceremonial (*muhāb jalīl mubajjal fī al-mawākib, mil' al-'uyūn fī al-manẓar*). His opulent dress and hedonistic tendencies (*al-mazah wa-al-mujūn*) earned him the reputation of preferring pleasure to work. Both Ibn Iyās and the historian al-Ḥalabī describe his rule as characterized by the pursuit of pleasure and luxury and by his taste for literary colloquia.⁴ He loved fine clothes, perfumes, scents, and jewelry; he wore many rings with precious stones; and he preferred a golden belt to the traditional draped girt of Ba'albakī fabric. He was a gourmet who ate from golden vessels, and he loved flowers.

Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī in Egypt (Seattle and London, 1993), 185–99.

³P. M. Holt, "Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 4:552–53.

⁴Petry, *Twilight*, 12.



Al-Ghazzī describes him as fat with a big belly. Ibn Iyās says that al-Ghawrī's faults outweighed his merits and he criticized him for his greed and profligate ways, which were paid for by harsh and tyrannical measures that led to economic crisis.

COURT AND CEREMONIAL

One of the features of al-Ghawrī's court life was his predilection for the *a'jām*, who were numerous in his entourage as well as in his army. According to Flemming the *a'jām* frequently mentioned by Ibn Iyās might have been not just Iranians, as the term usually means, but rather Turcomans from Iranian lands.⁵

His Fifth Corps (*al-ṭabaqah al-khāmīyah*), whom he armed with handguns in one of his attempts at modernizing the army, included Persians and Turcomans along with local recruits of mamluk origin and Egyptian birth. Ibn Iyās connects al-Ghawrī's weakness for the *a'jām* with his enthusiasm for the Nasīmīyah order, whose founder was 'Imād al-Dīn Nasīmī, a Turkish sufi poet of the esoteric and occult-oriented *ḥurūfī* school.⁶

A'jām were also among the court musicians and poets who accompanied the sultan wherever he went. One of his *nadīms*, or boon companions, was Ibn Qijiq, the chief of the musicians.⁷ Another was a man whom Ibn Iyās calls "*al-'ajamī al-shanaqajī*, a Turkish word for potter. He was very close to the sultan, and as a result enjoyed great prestige and influence. He went on political missions to Damascus and Aleppo, and he headed an embassy to the Safavid shah Ismā'īl.⁸ There were other *a'jām* among the artists and intellectuals of the sultan's entourage and in the communities of the great Mamluk religious foundations.

Al-Ghawrī was particularly interested in regal esthetics, and often took into his own hands the staging of his processions and parades and the elaborating and inventing of court rituals. At the same time as he elaborated the royal processions, including those of his family, to enhance his image, he abolished the traditional and important procession of the grand *dawādār*, who at that time had the status of a grand vizier, a measure which Ibn Iyās deplored.⁹

Among his innovations was replacing the finial with a bird that was carried above the sultan's head in processions with a gold finial called a *jallālah*, which

⁵Flemming, "Šerīf," 84.

⁶Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i' al-Zuhūr*, 4:401; see T. Fahd, "Ḥurūf," *El²*, 3:595–96.

⁷Flemming, "Šerīf," 83. He is also mentioned in Sharīf Ḥusayn's introduction to his translation of the *Shāhnāmah*. Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i' al-Zuhūr*, 4:481f., 5:35.

⁸Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i' al-Zuhūr*, 4:325; see also 206, 293.

⁹*Ibid.*, 104.



had the shape of a crescent.¹⁰ When his wife went on pilgrimage he designed a special procession for her in the course of which her camel, carrying an empty palanquin, paraded across the city.¹¹ He also let his son, although he did not have any official function in the pilgrimage, cross the city in a grand procession behind the *maḥmal* litter.

Ceremonial elephants were another of al-Ghawrī's innovations. When Ibn Qijīq was sent to Syria, he arrived in a procession that included three elephants, an unusual scene at that time. The first of these elephants to be mentioned was brought from Africa in 916/1510; it was one year old and the populace, who had not seen an elephant in more than four decades, was thrilled at the spectacle. (In contrast, elephants were a common sight at the Timurid court). A few months later another elephant followed,¹² and from then on elephants became part of the Nile festival which celebrated the Opening the Canal or Khalīj of Cairo.¹³ Al-Ghawrī also enjoyed watching animal combats, and attended elephant fights as well as the more common bull and ram fights.¹⁴

Al-Ghawrī was following Qāyṭbāy's example when he sponsored the games and parades of lancers which his predecessor had revived after a long period of neglect.¹⁵ These performances used to take place during the pilgrimage season. On the occasion of the visit of Ottoman and Safavid ambassadors the sultan proudly displayed his lancers to his guests to demonstrate "*furūsīyat 'askar Miṣr*," or the chivalry of Egyptian soldiers.¹⁶

Most important was the innovation al-Ghawrī introduced to the Mamluk throne or *dikkah*. Until his reign the Mamluk sultan sat in state in the *ḥawsh* of the Citadel on a portable bench above which a yellow tent was erected on particularly solemn occasions. This bench was called *dikkat al-ḥukm*, which means "bench of judgment" or "bench of government" (Fig. 1).¹⁷ Al-Ghawrī replaced this bench with a masonry structure called *maṣṭabah*, built with richly lavish polychrome stones and marble and decorated with a gilded frieze inscribed in relief with his

¹⁰Ibid., 419, 423. I wonder whether the word *j-l-a-l-h* is not a misreading of *hilāl*, or crescent.

¹¹Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i' al-Zuhūr*, 4:409f.

¹²Ibid., 187, 206.

¹³Ibid., 325.

¹⁴Ibid., 448.

¹⁵Ibid., 61.

¹⁶Ibid., 391.

¹⁷Ibid., 2:400; 4:103, 203, 219.



name. The bench had a *wazrah*¹⁸ or marble dado four cubits high. Ibn Iyās was impressed, commenting that no monarch had ever had such a thing before.¹⁹

This new form of throne, however, did not meet everyone's approval.²⁰ After al-Ghawrī died on the battle field of Marj Dābiq, his successor, al-Ashraf Ṭumānbāy, demolished the *maṣṭabah* and reestablished the *dikkah* on which he sat in state, just as Qāyṭbāy had done.²¹ This was more likely to have been a symbolic gesture than an expression of esthetic preference.

The *maṣṭabah* attracted the attention of the artist who illustrated the Turkish *Shāhnāmah* commissioned by Sultan al-Ghawrī. In this manuscript the painter borrows Mamluk architectural patterns to depict scenes of enthroned rulers and other episodes. In two miniatures published by Atıl the throne differs from the usual type depicted elsewhere in the manuscript in being a masonry structure consisting of a domed canopy standing on an elevated platform and resting on four columns of granite and porphyry. Marble decoration of Mamluk style is also recognizable (Fig. 2). The frontispiece of al-Ghawrī's anthology of Turkish poetry held in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin shows an enthroned ruler, probably the sultan himself, seated in a similar structure. The ruler sits under a domed canopy crowned with a balustrade with a spherical object at either end (Fig. 3).²² These could be what Ibn Iyās describes as *ifrīz*, or a decorative band of white marble with two gilded pomegranates. The representation of an enthroned ruler in the frontispiece of a book of poetry composed by a monarch recalls Timurid and Ottoman traditions.

FESTIVALS

Music and dance are often mentioned at al-Ghawrī's court. The sultan himself is reported to have danced at the mosque or Dome of Yashbak, accompanied by musicians.²³ Such performances, which must have been related to sufi rituals and *samā'*, also took place in profane settings, as in the pleasure palace on the island of Rawḍah.²⁴

Ibn Iyās describes at length a feast held on the island of Rawḍah near the Nilometer. The sultan's palace, together with the Nilometer and the adjoining

¹⁸Ibid., 4:203 f. For *wazrah*, see Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn and Laylā 'Alī Ibrāhīm, *Al-Muṣṭalahāt al-Mi'mārīyah fī al-Wathā'iq al-Mamlūkīyah, 648–923 H/1250–1517 M* (Cairo, 1990), 121.

¹⁹Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i' al-Zuhūr*, 4:207.

²⁰Ibid., 5:107, 117.

²¹Esin Atıl, "Mamluk Painting in the late Fifteenth Century," *Muqarnas* 2 (1984): 159–71, pls. 12, 13, 14; idem, *Renaissance of Islam: Art of the Mamluks* (Washington, 1981), 264f.

²²Atıl, "Painting," pl. 14.

²³Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i' al-Zuhūr*, 4:171.



mosque with its minaret, were entirely covered with lights, as were all houses along the shores of the island and Fustāṭ on the opposite shore, with its great aqueduct tower built by al-Ghawrī. The sultan's great galley, which had cost 20,000 dinars to build, was anchored near the Nilometer with all its masts illuminated. Fireworks were shot from fifty boats floating around the island's southern tip, where the event took place. Music accompanied the spectacle. By order of the sultan, all twenty-four grand amirs appeared in their boats on the Nile, each with his ceremonial band or *ṭablakhānah*. The sound of their drums and trumpets rose from the Nile along with the sultan's own orchestra playing on the island, creating a "formidable thunder" (*al-ra'd al-qāṣif*). Al-Ghawrī watched the nightly scene from the roof of his palace. Ibn Iyās remarked that nothing like it had ever been done before during the Mamluk sultanate, not even in Barqūq's or al-Mu'ayyad's reigns.²⁵

Another author, al-Sharīf Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī, gave a similarly vivid description of the celebration of the Prophet's birthday at the Citadel.²⁶ The sultan sat in a blue tent surrounded by all religious dignitaries. After the banquet and the distribution of the robes of honor, the procession of the great amirs took place, each bowing before the sultan and reciting a couple of panegyric verses. Then came the sufis wearing *khirqahs* with long sleeves to present their *samā'* or musical performance; they danced until midnight. At that point the sultan, wearing a blue *khirqah* himself, joined the sufis and danced with them until morning.²⁷

LITERATURE

Al-Ghawrī's taste for literature is well documented.²⁸ He was knowledgeable in poetry, history, hagiography, and music. He composed poems in Turkish and in Arabic.²⁹ According to the author of the *Nafā'is* he also spoke Persian, Kurdish, and Armenian. Al-Ghawrī was a patron of Egyptian poets. Once when he received an offensive message in the form of a poem from the Safavid shah Ismā'īl, he launched a literary campaign in Cairo, inviting all poets to counter-attack with their own verses. Ibn Iyās dedicates several pages to this event.³⁰

²⁴Ibid., 254f.

²⁵Ibid., 376f.

²⁶See below, *Nafā'is al-Majālis al-Sultānīyah*.

²⁷'Azzām, *Majālis*, 1:38–50.

²⁸Atıl, "Mamluk Painting"; Barbara Flemming, "Literary Activities in Mamluk Halls and Barracks," in *Studies in Memory of Gaston Wiet*, ed. Myriam Rosen-Ayalon (Jerusalem, 1977), 249–65.; Dieter George et al., ed., *Islamische Buchkunst aus 1000 Jahren* (Berlin, 1980), 17, 45.

²⁹Atıl, "Mamluk Painting"; idem, *Renaissance*; Nurhan Atasoy, "Un manuscrit mamlūk illustré du Šāhnāma," *Revue des Etudes Islamiques* 37 (1969): 151–58.

³⁰Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i' al-Zuhūr*, 4: 221–28.



Despite its significance for the history of literature, the fact that al-Ghawrī commissioned the first rhymed Turkish translation of the *Shāhnāmah* has not been recorded by Arab historians. Its translator, Ḥusayn ibn Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī al-Ḥanafī, of *sharīf* genealogy, credits Sultan al-Ghawrī in his introduction with being a bibliophile who possessed several copies of the *Shāhnāmah* in his library. This fascination with the *Shāhnāmah* and the art of the book had no precedent among Mamluk monarchs. The translator seems to have been one of several *a'jām* whom the sultan appointed in the religious foundation of al-Mu'ayyad. Ibn Iyās mentions a person of '*ajamī*' origin named al-Shaykh Ḥusayn al-Sharīf al-Ḥanafī who was appointed in 908/1503 as the Hanafī shaykh of the madrasah-*khānqāh* of Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh and held this post "to this day," i.e., to the date of the manuscript, which is 922/1516.³¹ On another occasion in 917/1511 the historian mentions a man of '*ajamī*' origin and *sharīf* descent who was summoned to the court to translate a Persian poem sent by Shah Ismā'īl.³² Most likely this person is identical with the *Shāhnāmah* translator and the sufi shaykh at the Mu'ayyadīyah.³³

Another *sharīf*, also of eastern origin and with a similar name, Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī, was the author of *Nafā' is al-Majālis al-Sulṭānīyah*, a book that records al-Ghawrī's scholarly colloquia for the year 910/1504-5.³⁴ The *Nafā' is*, of which the copy dedicated to the sultan is now in the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul, consists of the protocols of the sessions organized by the sultan to discuss political, religious, and literary themes with the ulama. Al-Sharīf Ḥusayn's Arabic is deficient; he must have been of Turkish or Persian origin. In his book he reports that in 910/1504 al-Ghawrī gave him a *wazīfat taṣawwuf*, i.e., he appointed him to a sufi position in his own religious foundation; but for some reason the author never received his salary from there. In one of al-Ghawrī's literary sessions, the origins of the *Shāhnāmah* were discussed. Sultan Maḥmūd of Ghaznah was mentioned as asking his advisers what would be more likely to make him immortal, the sponsoring of a book or a monument, to which he received the answer that a monument falls in ruins after a certain time, whereas a book is more likely to

³¹Ibid., 54. This information is confirmed in the introduction of the manuscript itself by the translator, who states that it was completed at the Mu'ayyadīyah in 916/1511. Flemming, "Šerīf," 89.

³²Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i' al-Zuhūr*, 4:221.

³³According to a Turkish source, the translator of the *Shāhnāmah* had the *nisbah* "al-Āmidī" attached to his name. He was close to the Ottoman prince Jem, who came to Cairo in 1481, and he died in Cairo in 920/1514. 'Azzām, *Majālis*, 1:45f.; Flemming, "Šerīf," 85, 90, quoting Mehmed Tahīr, *Osmanlı Müellifleri* (Istanbul, 1334–43/1916–25), 2:256. This is, however, in contradiction to Ibn Iyās, who testifies that in 1516 he was still at the Mu'ayyadīyah.

³⁴'Azzām, *Majālis*, 1:36, 90.



survive. This story might have inspired al-Ghawrī with the idea that a Turkish translation of the *Shāhnāmah* might endow him as well with immortality.³⁵

SULTAN AL-GHAWRĪ AND ITALIAN PAINTERS

Like the Ottoman sultans, Sultan al-Ghawrī had a portrait of himself made by a European artist. It shows him with the famous great turban (*takhfīfah kabīrah*) with two long horns, also known as *nā'ūrah*, i.e., waterwheel. This turban, which has been well described by Ibn Iyās, seems to have been typical of this sultan's reign.³⁶

The tradition of Muslim sultans sitting for portraits by Italian artists was initiated by the Ottoman sultan Mehmed the Conqueror and was also cultivated by Iranian and Mughal monarchs. It seems that Italian artists also had the opportunity of portraying both Qāyrbāy and al-Ghawrī. A portrait of the latter, published by Julian Raby, is datable to the late sixteenth century, but must have been based on an earlier work; it shows the sultan as quite an old man wearing the great double-horn turban described by Ibn Iyās. Another portrait showing a younger al-Ghawrī was published by 'Azzām without any reference to its origin (Fig. 4).³⁷ A painting in the Louvre, attributed to a Bellini disciple, depicts the reception of an embassy by al-Ghawrī (despite its Damascene setting); it suggests that Italian artists were admitted to the sultan's presence.

Leonardo da Vinci seems to have had contacts with the Mamluk court. In his diary the artist writes that he was sent by a Mamluk *daftardār* of Syria during the reign of Qāyrbāy on a special mission to the Taurus mountains.³⁸ This mission, for which the diary itself gives no date, has been dated by his biographers to between 1482 and 1487, on the grounds that Leonardo, whose journey to the Middle East is not contested, seems to have been absent from Europe during this particular period. Moreover, Leonardo's diary contains the text of a letter to this amir in which he apologizes for his delay in submitting his report.³⁹ This letter refers to an earlier extended correspondence with the amir with whom he seems to have been familiar. It is possible that this *daftardār* was al-Ghawrī himself, who at the beginning of his career, between 889/1484 and 894/1489, was sent by Qāyrbāy to this area (*al-bilād al-ḥalabīyah*) on military missions against the Ottomans and also as governor of Tarsus, prior to his appointment to Aleppo in 1489. The Taurus mountains form the northern part of the province of Cilicia, which borders

³⁵ Ibid., 2:81f.

³⁶ Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i' al-Zuhūr*, 4:212, 254, 332.

³⁷ 'Azzām, *Majālis*, 1:1.

³⁸ *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, ed. Irma A. Richter (Oxford, 1980), 264f., 296.

³⁹ It is well-known that Leonardo da Vinci often failed to complete things he had started.



Syria to the north and where the city of Tarsus is situated. Tarsus itself was integrated into the Mamluk empire during the reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. In the late fifteenth century it became involved in the border skirmishes between the Ottomans and the Mamluks; when the Ottomans conquered Syria, Tarsus became part of their Aleppo governorate. Al-Ghawrī was involved in warfare in this area, and could well have sent a European to survey the territory.⁴⁰ There is an artistic connection between Leonardo and the late Mamluks: the pattern of the logo he made for his workshop is a knotted rosette very reminiscent of late Mamluk metalwork decoration.⁴¹

ARCHITECTURE

An episode recorded by Ibn Iyās in 917/1511 demonstrates al-Ghawrī's interest in architectural history. Shortly after he had the fortifications of Alexandria restored, the sultan had a gypsum model of the city made by an architect from there called Ibn al-Ṣayyād. This model must have been large, for the sultan had to ride to the northern outskirts of Cairo to see it. It showed Alexandria with its walls and towers and with the Pharos, built in the Ptolemaic period in the third century B.C., which once stood there, represented to scale: "wa-al-manār allatī kāna (*sic*) bihā wa-qadr 'arḍihā wa-ṭūlihā."⁴² This model must have been historical, or at least combination of the actual Alexandria with historical landmarks, because at that time the ancient Pharos had already been gone for approximately 180 years.⁴³ The protocols of al-Ghawrī's colloquia show that he was interested in history and in ancient monuments. He also inquired about the pyramids, their builder, and their purpose.⁴⁴

Ibn Iyās criticized the sultan for squandering funds on useless constructions, and misusing the *bayt al-māl* funds for decorating and gilding walls while neglecting his duties as the supreme judge. In fact, the list of the monuments he erected during his reign clearly shows the relative predominance of secular buildings: residential structures, the restoration of the palaces of the Citadel,⁴⁵ a palace near the Nilometer at Rawḍah,⁴⁶ and another expensive pleasure complex at Maṭarīyah,

⁴⁰C. E. Bosworth, "Ṭarsūs," *EF*², 10:306-7.

⁴¹ Francesco Gabrieli and Umberto Scerrato, *Gli Arabi in Italia*, 3rd ed. (Milan, 1989), pls. 614-15.

⁴²Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i' al-Zuhūr*, 4:196.

⁴³It collapsed between 1326 and 1341, before the death of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, *Rihlah* (Beirut, 1985), 1:38.

⁴⁴Azzām, *Majālis*, 2:54ff.

⁴⁵Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i' al-Zuhūr*, 4:165.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 243.



near Yashbak's *qubbah*,⁴⁷ for which an aqueduct was built to pipe water from the Nile to create a pond. His major secular building seems to have been the complex of the hippodrome at the foot of the Citadel, which he also equipped with a great aqueduct.⁴⁸ There he built a garden with imported trees and a pool surrounded by residential and ceremonial structures with loggias. Sometimes he would spend several days there; for holding audiences and receiving embassies he preferred it to the Citadel.⁴⁹

The reign of Sultan al-Ghawrī introduced innovations in architectural forms and in the relationship between architecture and its decoration. The exquisite stone-carving characteristic of Qāyrbāy's architecture was replaced by the use of ceramics in architectural decoration, as can be seen in the sultan's minaret at the Azhar mosque. The minaret is strikingly tall and has a double-headed upper story. The faceted middle shaft is inlaid with blue ceramic in the pattern of repetitive arrows.

The two minarets of the mosque of Qānibāy al-Rammāh, built during al-Ghawrī's reign, combine the double head with a rectangular two-storied shaft. Stone carving is kept to a minimum, confined to the *muqarnas* of the balconies. Here for the first time since the octagonal minaret of al-Māridānī, built more than a century and a half earlier, a new minaret design was created.⁵⁰

The funerary complex of Sultan al-Ghawrī is in many respects an innovative monument. It was built on both sides of the main street or *qaṣabah* of al-Qāhirah (Figs. 5, 6). There was already a Cairene tradition of building religious complexes on both sides of a street, such as the mosque and the *khānqāh* of Shaykhū,⁵¹ and the complex of Bashtāk, which had a bridge connecting a mosque with a *khānqāh* across a street.⁵² By building his twin minarets above the towers of the southern gate, Bāb Zuwaylah, al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh similarly straddled the street with a monument. In the northern cemetery Sultan Barsbāy arranged the structures of his religious complex on both sides of the road.

Al-Ghawrī's buildings in the city center display a bold and unprecedented arrangement.⁵³ In the complex the mosque is located on the western side of the main avenue; the mausoleum, the *khānqāh*, and the *sabīl-maktab* are on the eastern

⁴⁷Ibid., 289, 325, 327, 381.

⁴⁸Ibid., 110.

⁴⁹Ibid., 10, 137f., 173f., 268f.

⁵⁰Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *The Minarets of Cairo* (Cairo, 1985), 87f.

⁵¹Ibid., 93.

⁵²Ibid., 82.

⁵³Michael Meinecke, *Die Mamlukische Architektur in Ägypten und Syrien*, Abhandlungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Kairo, Islamische Reihe, vol. 5 (Glückstadt, 1992), 1:167.



side. Actually, although the *waqfiyah* defines it as *khānqāh*, it was not a traditional *khānqāh* with boarding facilities; it consisted only of a gathering hall without living units for the sufis. The traditional *khānqāh*, with living units for the sufis had already disappeared, being replaced by a multifunctional institution which served as a Friday mosque at the same time as it included a teaching curriculum for students and sufi services.⁵⁴ These multifunctional foundations usually included a *rab'*, or group of apartments, which the endowment deed does not dedicate specifically to the sufis or the students, but instead specifies that it be rented to whomever the administrator of the *waqf* judged suitable. The fusion of the *khānqāh* with the mosque-madrasah reflected the total integration of sufism in late Mamluk religious life.

The fact that the *khānqāh* in al-Ghawrī's complex was an independent structure, separate from the mosque, should not, however, be interpreted as a response to some change in the status of the sufis or their rituals. The stipulations of al-Ghawrī's *waqf* indicate that his foundation was structured like all other Mamluk foundations of this period, such as Qāyrbāy's funerary complex. There, however, all activities took place within the same structure. The splitting off of the *khānqāh*, therefore, was only an architectural device with an esthetic purpose rather than a response to a functional requirement. It served the design to place a structure on the other side of the street, facing the mosque. The sultan's mausoleum was not adjacent to the mosque, as one would expect on the basis of Mamluk architectural traditions, which regarded the optimal location for a princely mausoleum to be on either side of the prayer hall and overlooking the street. This layout combined proximity to the sanctuary and its sacred associations with visibility from the street.⁵⁵ The layout also allowed the sultan to build a mausoleum with a width equal to that of the prayer hall, which only occurs in the funerary madrasah of Sultan Ḥasan.⁵⁶

Al-Ghawrī's mausoleum was attached to the *khānqāh*, which included a Mecca-oriented hall with a mihrab, in front of which sufi gatherings were to take place; the mosque, also called madrasah in the *waqfiyah*, fulfilled the functions of a Friday mosque. The splitting of the *khānqāh* thus created a second mosque to which the mausoleum could be attached. It served the design of a symmetrical composition that fully dominated the street in the very heart of the city.

The western building had a protruding minaret to the south. A massive four-story rectangular tower of conspicuous height, this minaret had a four-headed upper

⁵⁴Behrens-Abouseif, "Change in Function and Form of Mamluk Religious Institutions," *Annales Islamologiques* 21 (1985): 73–93.

⁵⁵Christel Kessler, "Funerary Architecture Within the City," in *Colloque international sur l'histoire du Caire*, ed. André Raymond et al. (Cairo, 1972), 257–68.

⁵⁶In the case of the *khānqāh* of Barsbāy in the Northern Cemetery, the mausoleum's width equals the depth of the adjoining prayer hall.



structure covered with blue tiles.⁵⁷ Ibn Iyās claims that this was the first four-headed minaret ever to be built in Cairo. The *waqfiyah* describes the tiles as of lapis blue color (*qāshānī azraq lāzuwardī*).⁵⁸ The color must have been similar to the blue ceramic decoration of the sultan's minaret at al-Azhar. A drawing by Pascal Coste shows that the blue tiles of the minaret covered the entire third floor as well as the four-headed top and that they were pierced in their center, where they were attached by a nail. Moreover, nails were driven between the tiles to provide additional support (Fig. 7).⁵⁹ An inscribed cartouche is included in the ceramic revetment.

The minaret faced the mausoleum dome, which was similarly covered with blue tiles.⁶⁰ A nineteenth-century drawing by Girault de Prangey shows the dome prior to its collapse, covered with tiles (Fig. 8).⁶¹

Both the minaret and the dome, with their blue tiles, must have been an unusual spectacle. On the north-eastern side the *sabīl-maktab* projected onto the street on three sides, also an innovation. A wooden roof connected the two buildings, providing shade for the street market.

The first stipulation of the *waqf* refers to the maintenance of the tiles, stating that they should be replaced as soon and as often as needed. Tiles had not been used since the domes of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad at his mosque and his palace at the Citadel, which also had a ceramic revetment, so Cairene craftsmen were no longer accustomed to the construction of tiled domes. This may explain why, soon after the building was finished, the dome of al-Ghawrī had to be pulled down and rebuilt.⁶² The sultan himself sat on the roof of the madrasah under a tent to supervise the work. The minaret also had to be rebuilt. Ibn Iyās writes that its upper structure was rebuilt in brick; it collapsed in the nineteenth century and was replaced with a five-headed structure.

The use of ceramics in architectural decoration was fashionable in Cairo in the Bahri Mamluk period. Faience mosaic decoration, influenced by Ilkhanid Iran, was used on a limited number of buildings, the earliest extant example of which is the mosque of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad at the Citadel, and the latest the mosque of

⁵⁷Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i' al-Zuhūr*, 4:249.

⁵⁸*Waqf* deed, Ministry of Awqāf MS 883, 14.

⁵⁹Pascal Coste, *toutes les Egypte* (exhibition catalogue) (Marseille, 1998), 129.

⁶⁰Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i' al-Zuhūr*, 4:58, 249, 299, 306; 'Azzām, *Majālis*, 1:28.

⁶¹Joseph Philibert Girault de Prangey, *Monuments arabes d'Egypte, de Syrie et d'Asie Mineure, dessinés et mesurés de 1842 à 1845* (Paris, 1846), 80. K. A. C. Creswell, *The Muslim Architecture of Egypt* (Oxford, 1952–59), 2:73.

⁶²Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i' al-Zuhūr*, 4:249.



Sultan Ḥasan.⁶³ Underglaze-painted tiles were produced in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Damascus and in Cairo. Underglaze-painted epigraphical blazons and tiles for lintel decoration were produced during Qāyṭbāy's reign.⁶⁴ The dome of Sultan al-Ghawrī used to have an underglaze-painted ceramic band on the drum.⁶⁵ Sultan al-Ghawrī had some renovation work done on the dome of Imām al-Shāfi'ī and may have also tried to decorate it with green tiles. Creswell mentions green rectangular tiles found covering the upper five meters of the dome.⁶⁶ Both Sultans Qāyṭbāy and al-Ghawrī are reported to have undertaken restoration work on the sanctuary, but no source mentions that the dome of Imām al-Shāfi'ī was covered with tiles. Al-Ghawrī might have started such a revetment project, but been unable to complete it.

The workshop that produced the tiles for Sultan al-Ghawrī continued to operate in the early Ottoman period. Green tiles, also pierced in the center, cover the mausoleum dome of Shaykh Abū al-Sa'ūd, built by Sulaymān Pasha. The mosque of Sulaymān Pasha also has green and blue tiles, and the minaret of Shāhīn al-Khalwatī has green tiles at the conical top. The mausoleum of Amir Sulaymān, built in 951/1544, is adorned with underglaze-painted blue and white tiles in the tympanum between the lintel and the relieving arch, and with a blue and white underglaze inscription on the drum.⁶⁷ This type of architectural decoration continued to be seen on many buildings of the Ottoman period. The blue dome of al-Ghawrī's mausoleum had a particular significance; it included the relics of the Prophet along with the Quran said to have belonged to the caliph 'Uthmān,⁶⁸ which up to then had been housed in the building called *ribāṭ al-āthār*, which had fallen into disrepair. Its founder had been the vizier Bahā' al-Dīn ibn Ḥannā (d. 707/1303), who had purchased the relics from a family in Yanbū' and installed them in the *ribāṭ* which he founded for that purpose on the Nile shore south of Fuṣṭāṭ. Ever since its founding the shrine had been a place of pilgrimage, one that al-Maqrīzī describes as lively and filled with great numbers of worshippers.⁶⁹ Sultan al-Ashraf Sha'bān (1363-76) endowed it with a Shafi'ī madrasah, and Sultan Barqūq (1382-89)

⁶³Michael Meinecke, "Die mamlukische Fayencemosaikdekoration: Eine Werkstatt aus Täbriz in Kairo 1330-1350," *Kunst des Orients* 11 (1976/77): 85-144.

⁶⁴Marilyn Jenkins, "Painted Pottery: Foundations for Future Study," *Muqarnas* 2 (1984): 95-114.

⁶⁵Claude Prost, *Les revêtements céramiques dans les monuments musulmans de l'Égypte* (Cairo, 1916), pl. 4/2.

⁶⁶Creswell, *Muslim Architecture*, 2:73.

⁶⁷Prost, *Revêtements*, 17; Christel Kessler, *The Carved Masonry Domes of Mediaeval Cairo* (Cairo, 1976), pl. 46.

⁶⁸Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i' al-Zuhūr*, 4:68.

⁶⁹Aḥmad ibn 'Alī al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Mawā'iz wa-al-l'tibār bi-Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-al-Āthār* (Bulaq, 1854), 2:429.



built a dam on the Nile banks. The relics were moved to al-Ghawrī's mausoleum accompanied by a grand procession. Ibn Iyās comments that relocation of the relics was a violation of the founder's *waqf* stipulations.

Although al-Ghawrī does not seem to have cultivated the religious aspect of his image very much, the transfer of the relics to his mausoleum was undoubtedly meant to add to its prestige by making it a place of pilgrimage. His *waqfiyah* stipulates that a eunuch had to be present in the mausoleum to serve the visitors and pilgrims who came to see the relics and the Quran of 'Uthmān.⁷⁰

Ibn Iyās also mentions that the *khānqāh* of al-Ghawrī had a magnificent Quran which was originally in the *khānqāh* of Baktimur. Since that *khānqāh* had fallen into ruins more than a century earlier, al-Ghawrī must have acquired it from Baktimur's heirs, paying a thousand dinars. This Quran was comparable only to the one which al-Nāṣir Muḥammad bought for his *khānqāh* at Siryāqūs, which had fetched the same price of a thousand dinars.⁷¹ The Quran of Baktimur's *khānqāh* could have been the famous Quran of Uljaytū which is now in the Dār al-Kutub in Cairo; it is inscribed with the name of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, Baktimur's master, and the statement that it was made *waqf* by Baktimur.⁷² A Quran box that was once in the Mosque of al-Ghawrī, and is now in the Islamic Museum in Cairo, could have contained this Quran.⁷³ Although it is anonymous, its style puts it in the reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, Baktimur's patron, who might have given the box with the Quran of Uljaytū as gifts to his favorite amir.⁷⁴

Sultan al-Ghawrī seems to have had a predilection for the color blue. The tent in which he used to celebrate the Prophet's birthday at the Citadel was blue, like the color of his *khirqah*, and as were his dome and the top of his minaret. The Uljaytū Quran of Baktimur's *khānqāh* is illuminated predominantly in blue.

The evolution of the arts in al-Ghawrī's reign was not the by-product of an intense religious patronage, as was the case with his master Qāyṭbāy. With all his acknowledgment and admiration for Qāyṭbāy's achievements, al-Ghawrī himself had different motives. His approach to the arts was from the outset profane rather than pious. He worked carefully at constructing his image as a poet and scholar and a patron of secular arts, pursuing the kind of princely image that was cultivated by the Timurid, Safavid, and Ottoman princes, but was unfamiliar in the culture of

⁷⁰Copy of the *waqfiyah* dated 911 at the Daftarkhānah, Ministry of Awqāf, MS 883, 93.

⁷¹Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i' al-Zuhūr*, 4:69.

⁷²David James, *Qur' āns of the Mamluks* (London, 1988), 109.

⁷³Atıl, *Renaissance*, 86.

⁷⁴Doris Behrens-Abouseif, "Waqf as Renumeration and the Family Affairs of al-Nasir Muhammad and Baktimur al-Saqi," in *The Cairo Heritage: Papers in Honor of Laila Ali Ibrahim*, ed. Doris Behrens-Abouseif (Cairo, 2001).



the Mamluk court. Moreover, there is an undeniable Iranian flair to al-Ghawrī's cultural life, which is evident in his entourage of *a'jām* and his preoccupation with the *Shāhnāmah*. His literary colloquia demonstrate his interest in Iranian history and culture with references to Timurid princes and citations of poems by Ḥusayn Bāyqarā. The fashion of ceramic revetment points to the same source of inspiration. One may also speculate that the layout of his complex, with the madrasah facing the *khānqāh*, was inspired by descriptions he might have heard of Samarqand and Ulūgh Beg's Rājistān.

The obsession with regal glamour in this critical phase of Mamluk history, however, raises the question of al-Ghawrī's true motives. Was his patronage inspired merely by frivolity and hedonism? Or was it perhaps part of a political agenda? Al-Ghawrī's major enemies, the Safavid shah Ismā'īl and the Ottoman sultan Selim, were both of royal lineage. The former descended from an alliance of a sufi saint with royalty; the latter had a long royal genealogy. That al-Ghawrī was defensive about his own humble origins is clearly documented in the *Nafā' is*. In one of his colloquia the sultan is reported to have claimed that the Circassians were of Arab origin, descended from the Ghassanid tribe which had converted to Islam, an idea that had already surfaced during the reign of Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh.⁷⁵ A vendetta, however, forced the Ghassanid chieftain to escape and seek refuge at the court of the Byzantine emperor Heracles, where he converted to Christianity. The emperor eventually granted him and his people the land that became henceforth Circassian territory.⁷⁶ In another session, al-Ghawrī claimed again to be of Arab stock as a result of his Circassian origin, which thus qualified him to be a true *khalīfah*!⁷⁷

Sensitivity over of the Mamluk lack of pedigree seems to have been provoked by the Ottomans. Again in the *Nafā' is* it is reported that Jānibak, a Mamluk envoy to the court of Bāyazīd II (1481–1512), was told that the Holy Cities should not be governed by the sons of unbelievers (*awlād al-kafarah*), but rather by a *sulṭān ibn sulṭān*, in other words, the Ottomans. To this Jānibak replied that on the Day of Judgement lineage would play no role; nobility is defined by knowledge and *adab* rather than descent.⁷⁸ Al-Ghawrī is quoted as saying that *adab* is the most important thing in the world (*mā fī al-dunyā aḥsan min al-adab*).⁷⁹ On another

⁷⁵ Badr al-Dīn Maḥmūd ibn Aḥmad al-Aynī, *Al-Sayf al-Muḥannad fī Sīrat al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh al-Maḥmūdī*, ed. Fahīm Muḥammad Shaltūt and Muḥammad Muṣṭafá Ziyādah (Cairo, 1967), 28. I thank Prof. Donald Richards for having drawn my attention to this point.

⁷⁶ Azzām, *Majālis*, 1:85.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 108.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 134f.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 4.



occasion the Mamluks are said to have replied to the Ottoman scorn at their lack of lineage with the question, "And who was the Prophet's or Abraham's father?"

Al-Ghawrī, sensitive about the shortcomings of his pedigree, seems to have launched the Circassian-Arab legend to bestow on himself an Arab nobility that would enable him to stand up to his rivals. His appropriation of the Prophet's relics for his mausoleum should be seen in this light. Al-Ghawrī seems to have been trying to modernize the image of the Mamluk sultanate shortly before its collapse, by adopting the artistic language of the great powers at that time, the Ottomans and the Safavids, hoping perhaps that this image might deter his enemies and perhaps rescue his kingdom.



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Figure 1. Sultan Qāytbāy enthroned on the *dikkah*. (From *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff*, trans. Malcolm Letts [London, 1946], 107).



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Figure 2. The enthronement of Kayqubād in the *Shāhnāmah* of al-Ghawrī
(Courtesy of Esin Atıl).



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Figure 3. Frontispiece of the anthology of Sultan al-Ghawrī
(Courtesy of Esin Atıl).



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Figure 4. Portrait of Sultan al-Ghawrī by an unknown artist
(From ‘Azzām, *Majālis*).



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Figure 5. The religious-funerary complex of Sultan al-Ghawri



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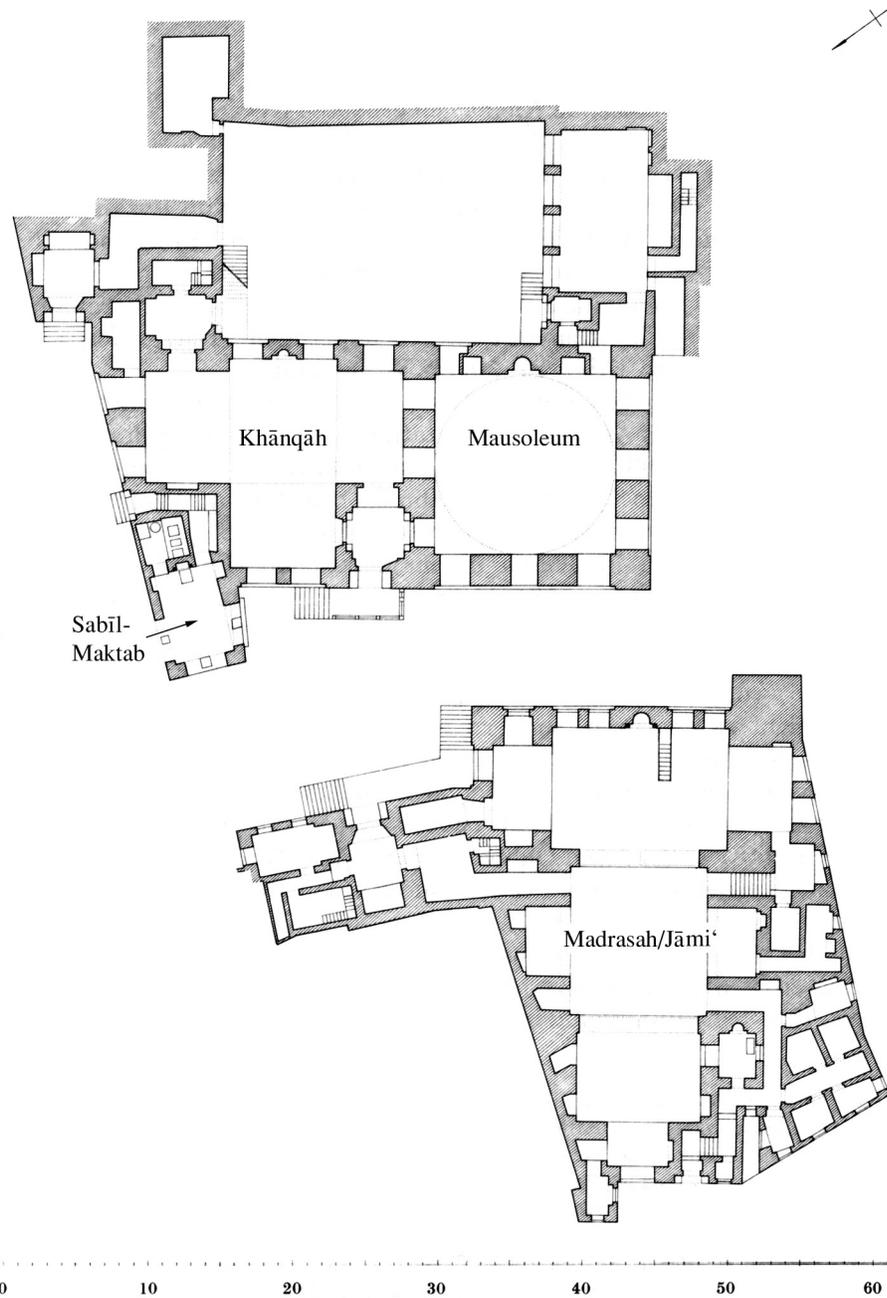


Figure 6. Plan of the religious-funerary complex of Sultan al-Ghawrī
(From Meinecke, *Mamlukische Architektur*, 1:167).



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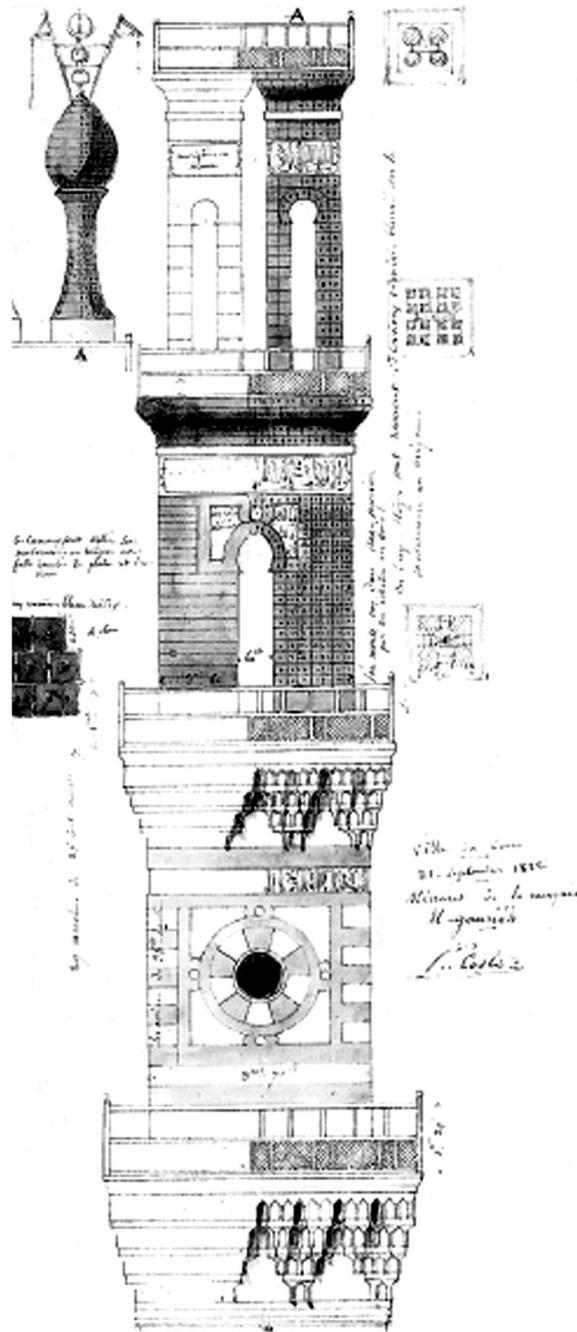


Figure 7. The minaret of al-Ghawrī covered with tiles (From *Pascal Coste*)



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Figure 8. The religious complex of Sultan al-Ghawrī seen from the south, before the collapse of the dome and the minaret (From Girault de Prangey, *Monuments arabes d’Egypte, de Syrie et d’Asie Mineure*).



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