THE COMPLEX OF SULTAN HASAN IN CAIRO: READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Ever since it was built in the mid-fourteenth century, the complex of al-Nasir Hasan (fig. 1) has dazzled those who have seen it, from contemporary chroniclers, to travelers through the ages, to modern scholars. In praise of the complex, al-Maqrizi writes, "There is no sanctuary of the Muslims, known in the lands of Islam, that equals this jamā'ī and its dome, the likes of which has not been built in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, North Africa, or Yemen." Both Ibn Taghri Birdi and Ibn Shahin describe it as an edifice with no equal in the whole world and one of the wonders of the world. In an elaborate metaphor, Ibn Habib judged it superior to the Pyramids of Giza and the Iwan of Kisra and says that compared with it all other edifices were weak and impoverished in artistry. Among Western travelers, both Pietro della Valle and Jean Thévenot, who visited Cairo in the seventeenth century, proclaimed it the most impressive jamā'ī they had ever seen. In modern times, the fascination with this complex began to elicit art historical studies beginning in 1899, when Max Herz, an Austrian architect and a member of the Comité de

Fig. 1. Complex of Sultan Hasan. General view. (Photo: Louis Hautecoeur and Gaston Wiet, Les Mosquées du Caire [Paris, 1932], pl.124.
Conservation des Monuments Arabes established by Khedive Tawfiq in 1881, published a monograph on the complex of Sultan Hasan, on which many subsequent studies have been based. But this architectural masterpiece remains a puzzle in terms of its symbolic content. This paper is intended, therefore, not as another reading to the form of the building, but rather as a reading of its meaning.

Among the many questions that have been raised about this imposing monument was one posed by Oleg Grabar. In a brief article on the complex of Sultan Hasan, he asked the most intriguing question of all: “How, then, did a weak ruler, murdered in his youth, find the time or the support to commission the most magnificent madrasa in Cairo and one of the few great ones remaining in the Muslim world?” This question is especially important when one considers that the construction of this great monument, which was begun in Rabi’ al-Awal 758 (1357), went on continuously for three years, “not stopping for a single day,” at a cost of twenty thousand dirhams a day at a time of great economic instability as Egypt was recovering from the ravages of the Black Death. The lavish spending on the complex reached unexpected sums. The timber frame used for centering the main arch of the qibla iwan, for example, was said to have cost one hundred thousand dirhams. As the costs mounted Sultan Hasan was supposed to have said, “If it were not that people would say that the King of Egypt was unable to finish the construction of his building, I would have abandoned the building of this jami’.” In the minds of the public, such extravagance could only be justified by some mythical explanation. Ibn Iyas writes, “It is said that the sultan Hasan found, upon digging in the foundation of the madrasa, a treasure full of Yusufi gold which has aided him in building this madrasa.” It was more likely that the properties of all the victims of the Black Death who had no legal heirs were his buried treasure. Not only the sultan but others of the ruling elite appropriated money from plague victims.

One important economic factor accounting for the high cost of the building of this complex, aside from its huge scale and high quality, was the cost of labor in the second half of the fourteenth century, owing to the increase in building activity and the decrease in available labor resulting from the plague. Al-Maqrizi comments on the shortage of workers in the beginning of the fifteenth century: “As for the sixth category, these are the artisans, wage workers, porters, servants, grooms, weavers, laborers, and their likes. Their wages multiplied many times over; however, not many of them remain, since most died. A worker of this type is not to be found except after strenuous searching.”

Sultan Hasan died in 1361, leaving the complex incomplete. Most of the remaining work, including a dome for the mausoleum, a dome over the fountain, marble paneling, and some inscriptions and decorative work, was completed by Bashir Agha al-Jamadar, the sultan’s valet, in 1363. Some of the decorative work, such as the carving of the decoration on the portal, remained unfinished.

We are told that this ambitious undertaking was intended to compete with the greatest of buildings, and to that end al-Nasir Hasan sought out experts from around the world: “It was said that when al-Malik al-Nasir Hasan ordered its building, he sent for all the muhebdisin from all around the world and ordered them to construct a madrasa greater than which has never been built on the face of the earth. He asked them which was the tallest building in the world; he was told Iwan Kiira Anushirwan, so he ordered it to be measured and recorded, and that the madrasa be built ten cubits (dhira’) higher.” But the great complex of Sultan Hasan, which surpasses the architectural achievement of his father, al-Nasir Muhammad, whose thirty-two-year third reign was the most stable and prosperous of the Mamluk period, and that of his grandfather, the victorious Qala’un, could not merely have been intended to satisfy a competitive streak in its patron.

One explanation for why the complex was built has been offered in terms of Mamluk architectural patronage generally: in her dissertation, Lobna Sherif interprets the complex — in line with the theory advanced by Stephen Humphreys that the architecture of the Mamluks was intended for their self-glorification and assertion of their domination over the local population — as a statement of power, a fulfilment of al-Nasir Hasan’s ambitions to be like his father, and to compete with Mamluk amirs and with the great dynasties of the time. A second interpretation of the building has been offered in light of a single component: in The Image of the Word, Dodd and Khairallah explain the building on the basis of the Qur’anic inscriptions it contains on the portal. They suggest that shifting the Light Verse, usually associated with the mihrab, to the entry transforms the porch into “a mihrab for the outside world,” making the complex a symbolic entry to the guided path leading to paradise. This interpretation is not only a generalized statement based on a fragment of the building, but wrongly based on the Light Verse which is not actually inscribed on the
porch at all. That inscription in fact used the verses from the Surat al-Nur that follows the Light Verse. 18

The interpretation of the symbolic content of the great complex of Sultan Hasan as proposed in this paper is first a reading suggested by the original context in which the complex was built and second a reading suggested by the observer’s own experience of the building. The first interpretation, which is the primary reading of the complex in this paper, needs not only to be formulated in light of the political, social, and economic dynamics of the Mamluk period but also to take into consideration the changing social structure of the ruling elite during the first half of the fourteenth century. In order to reveal its meaning, therefore, I will attempt to construct a profile of its founder’s personality and history and to reconstruct the sociopolitical atmosphere during the time of its foundation.

Al-Nasir Hasan b. Muhammad b. Qala’un, the seventh of the sons of al-Nasir Muhammad to come to power, was born in Cairo in 1335. His mother died when he was young, and he was raised in the Citadel by his mother-in-law, Khwandurd Urdukan. His name was Qamari, which he changed to Hasan upon his accession to the throne. 19 As a young man Hasan was subjected to humiliation by the Mamluk amirs many times over. He suffered exile, imprisonment, and torture (and eventually death) at their hands. He also witnessed the less-than-fortunate fate of many of his brothers, for he was one among twelve descendants, eight sons and four grandsons, of al-Nasir Muhammad, most of whom were young and inexperienced, who succeeded each other on the throne while the Mamluk amirs competed for influence over them. The years immediately following the death of al-Nasir Muhammad were dominated by the rivalry among the senior Nasirli amirs who had gained wealth and power during the reign of their master and acted as the guardians of his sons. The amirs installed the twelve-year-old Hasan as al-Malik al-Nasir on 14 Ramadan 748 (December 1347). 20 Al-Nasir Hasan was a minor and a figurehead. Four Nasirli amirs were actually in control of administering the affairs of the state: the viceroy Baybugha al-Qasimi, known as Aurus, 21 his brother the amir Manjak al-Yusufi, whom he appointed vizier and ushadir, 22 the amir Shaykh al-Nasiri, 23 and the amir Taz al-Nasiri. 24 It was then that the Black Death came to Egypt 25 from Central Asia, reaching its height during Sha’ban–Shawwal 749 (October–December 1348) and ending in the middle of Dhu’l-Qa‘da 749 (February 1349). 26

Four years after his accession to the throne, in 1350, al-Nasir Hasan sent for the four chief qadis, called a council meeting, dismissed his vizier Manjak al-Yusufi, and declared that he had reached his majority; 27 but when he tried to take over the administration of the state he was deposed and confined to his mother’s quarters at the harem by Amir Taz al-Nasiri. 28 His time in prison was devoted to study and learning. On 18 Jumada al-Akhir 752 (August 1451), he was succeeded by his brother al-Salih Salih, who was fourteen at the time. 29 Taz al-Nasiri was effectively the ruler of the empire for three years before the amirs Shaykh al-Nasiri and Sirghitmisht al-Nasiri 30 led a coup against him and decided to reinstate al-Nasir Hasan. His house arrest was lifted and he was enthroned a second time on 2 Shawwal 756 (October 1355). 31

Sultan Hasan was the first among the sons of al-Nasir Muhammad to have political ambitions. Following his father’s footsteps, he was determined to end the rivalry between the amirs and to take sole control of the sultanate. Throughout this second reign, which lasted six years and seven months, he took various steps towards achieving that objective. First of all, he arrested al-Amir Taz, but after Amir Shaykh interfered, he decided to send him to Aleppo as governor rather than to prison. 32 Two amirs, Shaykh and Sirghitmisht, retained the authority in the court of al-Nasir Hasan. On 25 Dhul-Qa‘da 758 (November 1357), Shaykh, who held the office of atabak al-acasikir, was murdered. 33 By then twenty-three years of age, al-Nasir Hasan took serious measures to seize power. He restricted the authority of Shaykh’s own faction, led by Khalil ibn Qusun, and sent most of them into exile; the rest were imprisoned in Alexandria. 34 He anticipated a coup planned by Sirghitmisht, who after the death of Shaykh had become the single most powerful amir in the court of al-Nasir Hasan. In Ramadan 759 (August 1358), al-Nasir Hasan was able to rid himself of Sirghitmisht and to send him to prison in Alexandria, where he was later killed. 35 Thus liberated from the grip the Nasiri amirs had had on him, he proceeded to establish his own power base and to replace those loyal to Amir Sirghitmisht with his own mamluks. He not only appointed his mamluks to high military and administrative offices, but also entrusted awlad al-nāšī (lit., the sons of the respectable people, i.e., free-born men) to key positions in his government.

This policy of relying on awlad al-nāšī was unprecedented. They were appointed to military and administrative offices, and served as governors as well as amirs of various ranks. One-third of the amirs holding the highest rank (amīr of one thousand) were from the awlad al-nāšī 36 (among them were two of al-Nasir Hasan’s ten
sons) and nearly all of the governors of important cities in Syria. "His objectives were to have the whole government run by awlād al-nās," stated al-ʿAynī.37 As for the reasons behind such a policy, al-Nasir Hasan is quoted as saying: "These people are reliable and under my flag. They go where I tell them, and when I want to remove them from office, I can do so easily. They also treat my subjects kindly, and understand the regulations." 38 Al-Nasir Hasan’s political reforms were never fully realized. At the age of only twenty-seven, he died at the hands of Yalbugha al-Khassaki, one of his own mamluks.

The answer to the question as to how a seemingly insignificant ruler could in three years build such a grand monument lies, not in the significance of Sultan Hasan as a victorious king, for his life was short; but rather in the political ambitions demonstrated during his short time in power, for they were grand. The experience of his early years seems to have generated a strong resentment of the Mamluk amirs; he rejected their abuse of power and disapproved of their treatment of their subjects. His efforts to stand up to these powerful amirs is testimony to his courage and ambition. Al-Nasir Hasan was second-generation free-born, an important factor in his profile. In the fourteenth century the awlād al-nās to which al-Nasir Hasan belonged had emerged as a new force. The social division of the ruling class between mamluks and awlād al-nās is an essential factor in understanding the relationship between Sultan Hasan, the Mamluk amirs, and the people of Egypt. He dissociated himself from the Mamluks, showed stronger affiliation with the awlād al-nās, and sought an alliance with the local population, who shared his resentment of the Mamluk amirs. It is in this context that the complex of Sultan Hasan can be interpreted. At one level, it is a manifestation of al-Nasir Hasan’s political agenda of reform, revealed first in the choice of site on which he built his complex, then in the imposing scale in which he built it, and finally in its architectural layout.

The complex is situated at the eastern end of the southern extension of the city of Cairo, an area referred to in the sources as Suq al-Khail (Horse Market).39 The sultan chose a site across the maydan of al-Rumaila from the Citadel (fig. 2) and on the eastern end of Qāfā (now Muhammad ʿAli) Street, previously occupied by two pal-
aces which were built for the amirs Yalbugha al-Yahyawi and Altunbugha al-Maridani by al-Nasir Muhammad in 1337. Sultan Hasan purchased the palaces, demolished them, and ordered the construction of his complex to begin. This choice of site was significant in two ways: first, the purchase and demolition of the two palaces of the Nasiri amirs was tantamount to abolishing them, especially since it must have occurred months before construction began and coincided with al-Nasir Hasan’s political actions against the senior Nasiri amirs in 1357. Second, the maydan of al-Rumaila had, especially since it was rebuilt by al-Nasir Muhammad, been the place where demonstrations took place, attacks on the Citadel were staged, and rebellions began. In 1293, for example, a revolt against al-Nasir Muhammad led by Amir Kitbugha was staged in the maydan from where the Citadel was besieged and its water supply was cut. Locating the complex of Sultan Hasan on the maydan can therefore be interpreted as a statement of revolt.

This idea of revolt is reinforced by the imposing scale of the complex, which was exaggerated (fig. 3) in its original context, before the building of the mosque of al-Rifa‘i (1869–1911). This and its fort-like appearance are only justified when considered in relation to the Citadel. The complex was apparently intended to establish a dialogue with the Citadel to allow for its message to be communicated. It stood as a challenge to the Citadel opposite, a structure which, by the time of Sultan Hasan, had become closely associated with the powerful amirs, who had taken up residence in it, and with the imprisonment

Fig. 3. Complex of Sultan Hasan. View from the Citadel. Photograph by Firth taken in 1857; from the Rhone collection. (Digital photo enhancement by Dana Bonstrom)

Fig. 4. Citadel of Cairo. View from the complex of Sultan Hasan.
Fig. 5. Complex of Sultan Hasan. Plan. (From: Max Herz, *La Mosquée du Sultan Hasan au Caire* [Cairo, 1899], pl. 2)

of the young members of the house of Qala‘un (fig. 4). The complex not only represents the founder’s challenge to the Mamluk amirs; his alliance with the people is also evident in its architectural layout. The complex has a cruciform plan (fig. 5). The regular and symmetrical form of the four-iwan court is contained in an irregular rectangle measuring a maximum length of 150 by a maximum width of 68 meters. The corners of the complex block are occupied by the four madrasas, each of which has a single-iwan plan (fig. 6). Flanking the southwestern iwan are the doorways to the Hanafi and Hanbali schools, and flanking the northeastern iwan are the doorways to the Shafi’i and Maliki schools. The four doorways are almost identical in architectural design and decoration (fig. 7). A great corridor of double height runs behind the northwestern iwan separating the four-iwan court from the section of the building containing the entry vestibule and the dependencies. Two vaulted corridors only one story in height flank the northwestern iwan that links the great corridor to the **sahn**.

At the other end of the great corridor behind the monumental porch lies the entry vestibule, or **dirga‘a**. It has a cross-axial plan which acts as a reference to the plan of the four-iwan court at the heart of the complex (fig. 8). A band of inscription, carved on stone and written in Mamluk thuluth script, runs around the four walls

Fig. 6. Complex of Sultan Hasan. Hanafiya Madrasa.
of the vestibule. It contains a lengthy quotation from Surat al-Tawbah beginning with the verse:

In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. The mosques of God shall be visited and maintained by such as believe in God and the Last Day, establish regular prayers, and practice regular charity, and fear none except God. It is they who are expected to be on true guidance. Do ye make the giving of drink to pilgrims, or the maintenance of the Sacred Mosque, equal to [the pious service of] those who believe in God and the Last Day, and strive with might and main in the cause of God? They are not comparable in the sight of God: and God guides not those who do wrong.  

These verses and the following ones are a clear reference to pious deeds, the highest of which is that of jihad, and to charitable foundations. One can therefore read a more specific reference in light of Sultan Hasan’s history and pious deeds in the holy city of Mecca. Sultan Hasan, like other Mamluk sultans, took pride in protecting the holy cities of Islam. He was committed to the people of Mecca and Medina and had established good relations with their rulers. "He had accomplished glorious deeds in the honored city of Mecca," writes Ibn Taghri Birdi. "His name is written on the eastern side of the holy mosque. The existing door of the Ka’ba was made during his reign. He also provided the cover for the Ka’ba which is now placed inside it. He was charitable to the people of Mecca and Medina."  

But most importantly, Sultan Hasan won a victory over the king of Yemen in Mecca, and had liberated and protected the city. Thus he has performed an even higher deed in the eyes of God than providing services to the pilgrims and maintaining the sacred mosque, as stated by the verses quoted in the inscription band.

Four great tunnel-vaulted iwans flank the ṣāḥn (fig. 9). The largest of the four is the iwan of the qibla. According to the waqf document, this iwan is dedicated to “the Fri-
day ḥuṣṭa, the reading of the Qurʾan, and the meeting of the Shafiʿis with their professor to conduct their general teaching and their usual reading.  

This complex was therefore the first to incorporate a congregational mosque into the program of the madrasa in the Mamluk period. The remaining three iwans that flank the sahn are approximately equal in size. Teaching sessions were assigned to each of the iwans. The southwestern iwan was reserved for the sessions of the Hanbali school, the northwestern for the Hanafi school, and the northeastern for the Malikī school.  

The mausoleum is the largest in Egypt. It is situated behind the qibla wall and projects outside the rectangular mass containing the rest of the complex into the open area of the maydan. It therefore reminds one of a similar gesture made by the mausoleum of his grandfather Qalaʿun, as it protruded into the space of the maydan of Bayn al-Qasrayn. The functions assigned to take place in the mausoleum were stated in the waqf document, which reads as follows: "As for the place called the qubba, he endowed it, grounds and structure, with a mosque for performing prayers, observing rituals, occupying oneself with the religious sciences, and for teaching the sessions of tafsīr (jurisprudence) and hadith . . . with the exception of the two fasqiyas built below the ground and the ground above them for he [the sultan], may God accept his deeds, has endowed them for his own burial — may God bless him with a long life — and the burial of his children, grandchildren, and descendants."  

The complex was also endowed with a hospital staffed with three doctors — a doctor of internal medicine, an eye doctor, and a surgeon — in addition to ten medical assistants. It was to occupy the area at the end of the great corridor leading from the vestibule to the
main court and behind the Hanbaliyya madrasa. This comprehensive functional program also included a sabibkuttab which was destroyed by the collapse of the first of two minarets that were intended to frame the portal.

The façade of the complex is dressed in fine stone and rises to a height of approximately 38 meters (fig. 10). It is articulated with tall shallow recesses that run the height of the building and are crowned with muqarnas in three tiers. Four minarets were planned for the complex, two were to frame the portal, but only one of them was built, and it fell down in 1360. The other two minarets flank the tomb chamber on the façade overlooking the maydan. Only the southern one dates to the original structure; the northern minaret collapsed in 1660 and was rebuilt in 1671. The monumental porch is the single most elaborate element of the northeastern façade. It stands four stories tall and is the largest portal in Cairo, with its deeply recessed bay, approximately 8.5 meters wide and 5 meters deep, surmounted by a fluted and slightly pointed semi-dome adorned with twelve tiers of stalactites. Its setting at an angle lends it an additional air of dominance. This angle is especially significant when seen in relation to the mausoleum and not, as usually assumed, to the alignment with the street. The southeastern façade facing the royal maydan and the Citadel incorporates the projection of the mausoleum (fig. 11), an impressive gesture especially when visually joined by the skewed portal as one views the complex from the north, that is, from the Citadel.

Through the educational, social, and religious institutions it contained, the main block of the building represented the people. Each institution filled a community need and referred to a different social group. The placement of the four madrasas at the corners of that block is an architectural translation of the idea that education is the cornerstone of a civilized society. The incorporation of a congregational mosque, a place in which all members of society gather, reinforces the symbolic reference to society. Finally, there is the unorthodox placement of the mausoleum behind the qibla wall and its projection outside the main block of the complex; it is the most symbolically charged gesture. As the one element most associated with the founder, its positioning and treatment accord with the reading of the complex. The mausoleum takes its place in a hierarchy over other elements of the complex, acquired not only by projecting beyond the rectangular mass of the main block but also by its more elaborate and distinct decoration. Translated into symbolic content, this means that the alliance between Sultan Hasan and the people gave the sultan authority and the people protection. Placing the mausoleum between the complex and the Citadel represents the sultan as standing between the people and the Mamluks. While the projection gives the mausoleum a sense of being attached to the rest of the complex, symbolic of the sultan’s alliance with the people, its placement behind the qibla wall and on an axis with the mihrab, traditionally the spot for the imam leading the prayer, is symbolic of Sultan Hasan’s leading the people in revolt against the political machinations of the Mamluks. This reading suggests that the complex of Sultan Hasan sets itself apart and could not have been interpreted in light of an overall reading of Mamluk architecture. Unlike its predecessors, the complex was not intended to represent the upper hand the ruling elite had over the people of Egypt. It was rather representative of the rising power of the new generation of awlad al-nas in opposition to the old establishment and in alliance with the people.

The message conveyed by the complex seems to have provoked actual opposition to the rulers in the Citadel. Historical accounts indicate that the complex became
the locale for actions taken against the Mamluks at the Citadel. "The jamī' [of Sultan Hasan]," writes al-Maqrizi "became an opponent of the Citadel. In every instance of riot among the ruling class, a number of amirs along with others climbed to the roof and launched an attack at the Citadel."

For example, when the rivalry between the two amirs, Barquq and Baraka in 1380 led to confrontation, Barquq and his mamluks entered the madrasa of Sultan Hasan, climbed the minarets, and attacked Baraka while he was in his maqṣūd in Hadrat al-Baqar. Again, in 1388, when conflict arose between al-Amir Tamiribgha al-Afdali and Yalbugha al-Nasirī, a group of Tamiribgha's supporters took refuge in the complex, ascended the roof, and shot at their opponents as they passed through the Suq al-Khalil. Similar incidents in which the building was used as a stage for attack or a refuge were numerous. "Al-Malik al-Zahir Barquq could not tolerate that, so he ordered the destruction of the steps leading up to the two minarets, the living cells of the juqafa, and the roof." In 1390, the front steps of the complex were ordered destroyed, the doors were locked, and the stairs of the minarets were demolished, and the muʿādhisūn had to perform the call to prayer from a platform at the main entrance. It was not until 1424 that the building was restored to its original state.

The complex can also be interpreted in light of the many long years of political and economic instability that preceded its foundation. Political unrest had affected the prosperity of the east-west trade, but most severe of all was the Black Death from which Egypt did not quickly recover, for it was followed by a series of famines. According to estimates by Dols, Cairo lost a third of its population, which had reached almost half a million before the plague struck. Up to twenty thousand lives were reported lost in a single day in Cairo during the peak of the epidemic. The city suffered extensive damage, was abandoned, and transformed from a lively flourishing metropolis into a ghost town. Though al-Maqrizi did not live during this time, he pieced together a revealing description of the state of the city: "By the time the month of Dhu'l-Qa'da began, Cairo was empty and abandoned, the streets were barren of passers-by. One would even go through the gate of Zuwayla to the gate of al-Nasr without crossing anyone's path, owing to the high number of victims and of those occupied with them. The dirt accumulated on the streets." He goes on to relate that many quarters were left deserted, the cemeteries were filled, and mosques and zawiya were closed. From the image painted of the city and the high mortality rate, one can only assume that the process of recovery was difficult. The complex of Sultan Hasan was part of that process, a grand gesture to uplift the spirit of the people, reassert the glory of Egypt, and renew the faith. One might even consider a commemorative function served by the complex that was partly financed by the wealth of those who perished during the plague.

Such an interpretation explains the metaphor of life celebrated by the complex. The experience as one moves in a sequence of spaces from the portal to the mausoleum, for example, resembles the path of life: the focal points of the procession are the portal and the tomb. They are placed at the beginning and the end respectively, as a reference to birth and death. The dark narrow passageway linking the entrance to the courtyard, with its ambiguous sense of orientation, alludes to the early years of life when goals have not yet been set. The passage leads to the courtyard, flooded with light, where the various functions taking place on all sides produce an image depicting the different directions life offers. Eventually, all activities and directions converge in the congregational mosque, which reorients the course of the procession. The terminal point is the tomb where the linear procession takes an upward direction, lent by the verticality of the square chamber and its dome, a direction taken as the human soul soars to the heavens after death.

These interpretations are not necessarily in conflict with one another. Reasserting the glory of Egypt, uplifting the spirit of the people, and renewing the faith are only complementary to the opposition and the challenge to a pattern of rule that had abused power and contributed to the economic decline of the sultanate.

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NOTES

Author's note: This paper, originally part of my dissertation entitled "Urban Form and Meaning in Bahri Mamluk Architecture," Harvard University, 1992, was first presented at the Middle East Studies Association meeting held in Portland, Oregon, in October, 1992.

5. Ibid.; it was originally published in both French and Arabic.
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7. Ibn Habib, Tadhkira al-Nabih, 3: 209-10; Ibn Iyad, Badda'is al-Zuhur fi Waga'is al-Dhahab, 5 vols. (Cairo, 1982-84), 1, 1: 559; Ibn Taghiri Birdi, al-Nujum al-Zahira fi Muluk Misr wal-Qahirah, 12 vols. (Cairo, 1929-36), 10: 306. According to al-Maqrizi, construction began in 757 (1556) (al-Maqrizi, Kihtat, 2: 316), but the date of 758 (1557) seems to be more accurate, for it is the date provided by the waqf document.


9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibn Iyad, Badda'is al-Zuhur, 1, 1: 560.


13. Quoted in Dols, Black Death, p. 270.


21. Al-Amir Baybugha al-Qasimi was later appointed to replace Aghun al-Kamili as governor of Aleppo in 1351. In 1592 he led a rebellion in Syria. During his reign, the al-Salih Salih led his army to Damascus, arrested the governors of Safad, Tripoli, and Hama along with Abruus. Baybugha Abruus was imprisoned at the Citadel of Aleppo where he died later that year. See Ibn Taghiri Birdi, al-Mushahal al-Safi wal-Mustawbî be'd al-Wâfî, 6 vols. (Cairo, 1984-90), 3: 487-89.

22. Al-Amir Manjak al-Yusuf was governor of Damascus before his brother Abruus promoted him to the rank of amir of one thousand and appointed him vizier. He enjoyed great wealth and power, the abuse of which eventually led to his imprisonment in Alexandria on 24 Shawwal 751 (1550). He was released along with Amir Shaykhu after the accession of al-Salih Salih in Rajab 1351. During the second reign of al-Nasir Hasan he was appointed governor of Tripoli, and in 1358, he replaced Taz as governor of Aleppo. For further information, see al-Maqrizi, Kihtat, 2: 320-24.

23. Shaykhu al-Nasiri became a high-ranking amir during the reign of al-Muzaffar Hajji and an influential figure at the court of al-Nasir Hasan. In 1550, he was sent to prison with the amir Manjak al-Yusuf in Alexandria. He was released after Sultan Hasan was deposed and was succeeded by al-Salih Salih, returned to Cairo in 1551, and shared with the Amir Taz the task of administering the affairs of the state. In 1554, Shaykhu and the sultan had a falling out, and Shaykhu managed to depose al-Salih Salih and reinstate al-Nasir Hasan. During the second reign of al-Nasir Hasan, Shaykhu enjoyed a great deal of power as akhbar al-`asâr. He was the first to hold the title of amir khâs, Ibn Taghiri Birdi, al-Mushahal al-Safi, 6: 257-62.

24. He was a senior Nasiri amir who played a major role in the deposition of al-Nasir Hasan and the accession of al-Salih Salih to the throne. He enjoyed a great deal of power during the reign of al-Salih until the conspiracy against him by Sirghit mish and Shaykhu ended in reinstating al-Nasir Hasan and appointing Taz as governor of Aleppo in 1554. His rebellion of 1557 ended that appointment. He was sent to al-Karak, where he was imprisoned. He died in 1631; Ibn Taghiri Birdi, al-Manushal al-Safi, 6: 362-65.


27. Al-Maqrizi, al-Suluk, 2, 3: 822.


30. Al-Amir Sayf al-Din Sirghit mish b. `Abdulllah al-Nasiri was one of the mamluks of al-Nasir Muhammad and a key figure at the court of al-Nasir Hasan. He was a powerful figure after the death of al-Amir Shaykhu until al-Nasir Hasan ordered his arrest. He was sent to prison in Alexandria in Ramadan 759 (1358), where he died in Dhu`l-Qa'da of the same year; Ibn Taghiri Birdi, al-Mushahal al-Safi, 6: 342-44.


40. Ibid., 2: 71; Ibn Taghiri Birdi, al-Nujum al-Zahira, 10: 306.
41. Al-Nasir Hasan seems to have initiated several architectural projects in Egypt and in Syria after his complex in al-Rumaila was started in 1360. He built the Qa‘a al-Baysariyya at the Citadel in 1360, described by al-Maqrizi as a high, marvelously structured unlike any other Mamluk building, with windows, a dome, and tawīs bands all of gold studded with jewels (see al-Maqrizi, Ḥiṣāyat, 2: 213). He also built a madrasa in Jerusalem (1561) in the manner of his complex in Cairo, in addition to a number of sabāl-kuttabs in Jerusalem, Gaza, Damascus and other cities.

42. It is called Maydan Salah al-Din today. Its history goes back to the time of Ahmad ibn Tulun. It was rebuilt by the Ayyubid sultan al-Kamil in 1214. During the reign of al-Nasir Muhammad the maydan was revived, planted with trees, supplied with water, and enclosed by a stone wall. It was to provide pleasant scenery as viewed from the Citadel, especially from the Qasr al-Ablaq, which was also built by al-Nasir Muhammad. Al-Maqrizi, Ḥiṣāyat, 2: 228; Ibn Taghri Birdi, al-Nujam, 9: 179.


44. Herz, La Mosquée du Sultan Hasan, p. 2.

45. Qur‘ān, Surat al-Tawbah, 9: 18–25. The inscription continues as follows: “Who believes, and suffer exile and strive with might and main, in God’s cause, with their goods and their persons, have the highest rank in the sight of God: Who will achieve [salvation]. Their Lord doth give them glad tidings of Mercy from Himself, of His good pleasures, and of gardens for them, wherein are delights that endure: they will dwell therein forever. Verily in God’s presence is a reward, the greatest [of all].” O ye who believe! take not for protectors your fathers and your brothers if they love infidelity above Faith: If any of you do so, they do wrong. Say: If it be that your fathers, your brothers, your mates, or your kindred; the wealth that ye have gained; the commerce in which ye fear a decline; or the dwellings in which ye delight are dearer to you than God, or His apostle, or the striving in His cause; then wait until God brings about His decision: and God guides not the rebellious. Assuredly God did help you in many battle-fields and on the day of Ḥumayy: Behold! your great numbers elated you, but they availed you naught: the land, for all that it is wide, did constrain you, and ye turned back in retreat,” quoted from ʿAli Zaghloul, “Madrasat al-Sultan Hasan,” p. 149.


47. The waqf document of al-Nasir Hasan, Mahkama 40/6, Dar al-Watha‘iq al-Qawmiyya, Cairo.

48. Ibid.


51. Ibid.

52. The stone used for the façade is believed to have been brought from the site of the Great Pyramid; see Stanley Lane-Poole, The Story of Cairo (London, 1902), p. 231.


55. Ibn Qadi Shuhbah, Tarikh, 1, 3: 281.

56. Al-Maqrizi, Ḥiṣāyat, 2: 316.

57. One of the windows of the mausoleum that opened onto the maydan was made into a door to provide access to the main floor of the building. Al-Khatib al-Jawhari, Nuzhat al-Nufús wa‘l-Abdān fi Tawārikh al-Zamān, 3 vols. (Cairo, 1970–73) 1: 322.

58. Al-Maqrizi, Ḥiṣāyat, 2: 316; Ibn Qadi Shuhbah, Tarikh, 1, 3: 368.

59. Dols, Black Death, p. 203.

60. Al-Maqrizi, al-Sultān, 2, 3: 782.

61. Ibid., 781.