MAMLUK THRONE HALLS: QUBBA OR IWĀN?

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The Mamluk sultans of Egypt and Syria were associated with the citadel of Cairo from the foundation of their regime in 1250 until its ultimate fall in 1517. In the early part of this long period, four prominent sultans, al-Zahir Baybars (1260-77), al-Mansur Qalawun (1280-90), al-Ashraf Khalil (1290-94), and al-Nasir Muhammad (1294-1340, with two interruptions) developed the citadel they had inherited from their masters the Ayyubids to become both their seat of government and their royal residence. They established a palatial complex in its southern part and separated it from the northern part which was reserved for the administrative functions and for the lodging of the royal mamluks. Each of these four sultans is known to have ordered the construction of a number of palaces and audience halls, which either replaced or complemented those of his predecessors and which extended the citadel’s southern enclosure to the west and south while maintaining its overall spatial division. Three of the four, Baybars, Qalawun, and al-Nasir Muhammad, instituted ceremonies and processions which followed a strictly prescribed order aimed at engendering the rigid hierarchical structure of the Mamluk sultanate in the form and plan of the palatial complex. In fact, the ceremonial program they followed seems to have been so pervasive as to govern not only the relationships between the various components of the northern and southern enclosures but also those between the entire citadel and the city outside.¹

One royal structure, the public audience or throne hall, was so pivotal in the representation of the Mamluk hierarchy with the sultan at its apex that it persistently played a central role in the conception of the citadel’s layout. Each of the four sultans destroyed the throne hall constructed by his predecessor and built a new one in its place soon after he ascended the throne. Early in his reign, Baybars built a throne hall as a replacement for, or as an addition to, the original one in the citadel. Qalawun ordered the demolition of Baybars’s hall in 1284 to build a new one in its stead. The building of the new hall can be ascribed to Qalawun’s desire to be the patron of this most visible and most public structure in the palatial complex, for otherwise he did not demolish any of the other structures Baybars had built. Both the sons and successors of Qalawun, al-Ashraf Khalil and al-Nasir Muhammad rebuilt the citadel’s audience hall within the next half century, presumably because they too wanted to have their own names attached to it. In 1293, al-Ashraf Khalil restored, or perhaps rebuilt, the structure attributed to his father, as the sources are unclear about the extent of the work achieved during his short reign. This last structure was in turn destroyed by Khalil’s brother and successor al-Nasir Muhammad, to be replaced by his famous hall, the Iwan al-Nasiri, concurrently called the Dar al-'Adl (Palace of Justice) and used as the official setting for the royal dispensation of justice, also called dār al-'adl.

The Iwan al-Nasiri remained in use throughout the Mamluk period, was neglected in the Ottoman period, and was finally razed to the ground during the reign of Muhammad ‘Ali (1805-48), who replaced it with his monumental mosque. Its location and form, however, are known, for it was still standing at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when it was documented for the Description de l’Égypte. Its site is marked on the Description map where it is labeled “le Divan de Joseph” (fig 1). Its plan, elevations, and sections were reproduced in a series of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources of which those of the Description are probably the most accurate.²

An interesting and revealing aspect of these four Mamluk halls is the vocabulary used to designate them in contemporary sources. Instead of standard Arabic terms, such as qāṣr, qī'a, majlis, or takht, they are consistently named either qubba or iwān in the sources. More interesting is the interchangeability of iwān and qubba in naming the halls of Baybars and Qalawun. The use of the term iwān only became fixed with the building of al-Ashraf Khalil ibn Qalawun, which was called the Iwan al-Ashrafi. Al-Nasir Muhammad’s hall was always referred to as the Great Iwan throughout the Mamluk period. But its name became distorted as the diwrin of Sultan al-Ghuri under the Ottomans,³ and it changed again at a certain point to become Diwan Yusuf, which is the name the French cartographers heard from the local
residents and recorded on their Description map in 1800.4

The two words iwan and qubba present complex ranges of meaning in the medieval context. Both normally denoted architectural elements: the first a vaulted hall open at one end or a raised portion of the floor in a vaulted hall, the second any kind of dome. Yet both words were used to designate the whole structure in a number of instances throughout pre-Islamic and Islamic history. In commemorative architecture, the word qubba often signified the mausoleum of an amir or a pious man, which was usually, but not always, a cubical structure covered with a dome.5 In the palatial context, qubba appears less frequently as the name of an entire structure, but it is still encountered in a few famous examples, especially in the early or classical period. There are references to the Qubbat al-Khadra6 (the Green Dome) as the name of a number of Umayyad palaces in Damascus, Wasit, and Rusafa, and the early Abbasid palace built by Abu Ja’far al-Mansur in the center of the Round City of Baghdad.6 Later palaces with the same generic name, qubba, are also attested as far afield as Egypt and North Africa. They include the palace known as the Qubba (la Cuba) in Palermo, Sicily, built for the Norman king William II in 1182,7 and the famous Qubbat al-Hawa (Dome of the Winds) which was built in 809–11 by Hatim ibn Harthama, the Abbasid governor of Egypt, on the hill upon which the citadel was later constructed, and which was used as a pleasure pavilion by all subsequent rulers of the country until the end of the Tulunid period.8 Similarly, the word iwan is used in several instances to designate an entire palace. The most important examples are the legendary Iwan Kisra (Arabic for Chosroes), the Sasanian palace in ancient Ctesiphon,9 and the Iwan al-Kabir (Great Iwan) which was the main ceremonial hall in the Fatimid Eastern Palace in Cairo built by al-‘Aziz in 979.10

These palaces were presumably named after their most visually impressive element, be it the iwan or the dome. Both features appear to have represented one underlying concept: monumentality, in both its formal and spatial aspects. The iwan in a palace seems to have conveyed, in most cases, a ceremonial value as the place of honor in which royal audiences took place. The dome, too, seems to have symbolized authority and domination.11 But, as the examples at the citadel of Cairo suggest, the process of naming structures was not always connotative. This paper proposes a different explanation for the terminology used in Mamluk throne halls that raises a number of wider questions about the conscious use of the past in Mamluk architecture, and about the survival of ancient architectural paradigms in the medieval Mediterranean world in both its Islamic and Christian parts.

The Sequence of Building Throne Halls at the Citadel

At the citadel of Cairo, the structure known as Iwan al-Qal’a (Iwan of the Citadel) is first mentioned in the sources during the reign of al-Zahir Baybars.12 He, however, is not credited with its building, nor are any of his Mamluk predecessors. The iwan was most probably built by al-Kamil Muhammad (1218–58), for he is the sultan credited with most major structures at the citadel in the Ayubid period. In fact, one early Mamluk chronicler, Baybars al-Mansuri, calls it the Iwan al-Kabir al-Kamili (the Great Iwan of al-Kamil), when he reports the ceremony of recognition of the second Abbasid caliph, al-Hakim, in 1261.13 To Baybars, however, is attributed another structure called the Qubba which he ordered built in the main court at the citadel. It was supported by twelve colored, marble columns, was profusely ornamented, and figures of the sultan and his amirs were painted on its interior surfaces.14

The Qubba was most probably added to, or part of, the Iwan al-Kamil for we have no report that the iwan was demolished when the Qubba was constructed. Ibn al-Dawadari, who generally speaks of Baybars holding audiences in the iwan, says in one instance that the sultan “sat in al-iwan wa-l-qubba" with the newly appointed caliph,” implying that the two words refer to a single structure.15 Maqrizi offers us another clue in his description of the circumcision celebration of Baybars’s son in 1273: “He sat in the seat of his sultanate in the qubba al-sa’ida” (the exalted qubba)16 which indicates that the same throne hall called in the earlier reference iwan and qubba could also be referred to simply as qubba.

The use of these two terms together or interchangeably in designating a single structure could be interpreted in one of three ways. It may signify that the original structure of al-Kamil did not have a dome, and that the building of Baybars added a dome to it and caused viewers to shift their emphasis from the iwan to the dome when they mentioned the new audience hall. It may...
also mean that both architectural elements belonged to Baybars’s rebuilding and both were prominent in the perception and description of the new hall so that the authors used them at will. The third possibility would discount the notion of looking for a correspondence between the name of the hall and its most impressive architectural element and seek an explanation for the shift in terminology in the wider context of early Mamluk architecture and its use of historical references. The nascent Mamluk architectural style appears to have developed a visual and symbolic system of references to venerated precedents, references that may also have been reflected in the terminology of buildings.

The Qubba al-Zahiriyia did not last for long, nor was it described anywhere, so there are no data on which to base an analysis of its possible referential or historicizing form and layout. In 1284, al-Mansur Qalawun ordered its demolition and the building of a new qubba in its place. This number, if correct, must have included all the columns in the qubba, both those supporting the dome and those adorning the interior and exterior surfaces of the building. Decorative columns could be numerous, especially in the early Mamluk period when double-arched windows with three engaged columns each were the norm, as shown in other structures of Qalawun, such as his mausoleum (completed in 1285), and that of his wife Umm al-Salih or Fatima Khatun (built in 1283–84).

By the time Khalil demolished his father’s hall in 1293, the sources were already calling it the Iwan al-Mansuri instead of the Qubba al-Mansuriyya. Afterward, the structure’s name changed in the sources from the Iwan al-Mansuri to the Iwan al-Ashrafi, although it seems that no major structural or spatial changes were introduced to the building, which essentially remained as Qalawun had built it.

Khalil’s Iwan also did not survive long after his death. Al-Nasir Muhammad’s first work in the citadel, after his return to the throne for the third and last time in 1310, was the demolition of his brother’s iwan and the building of a new one in 1311. Three reasons could be advanced to explain this rebuilding. The first is that al-Nasir disliked the gloom (ghils) of the old iwan and the additional, awkward supports (arkān) erected after the earthquake of 1303. The second is that he hated the iwan of his brother because it carried the memory of previous sultans and the two earlier humiliating periods of his reign, when he held the title of sultan but had no real power. The third reason stems from the political and ceremonial changes introduced by al-Nasir Muhammad. Shortly after his return to the throne, he started to hold the regular sessions for the dispensation of justice, dār al-ʿadl, in the iwan where he sat twice weekly surrounded by all the important amirs of the realm who either sat or stood in a strict hierarchical order. The old iwan may have become inadequate for this novel ceremony, as al-Nasir had designed it, and thus may have prompted him to order its demolition and to build a new, more accommodating hall.

Conditions seem to have changed again in the later part of al-Nasir’s reign, for he rebuilt the iwan a second time in 1333. The new iwan remained the official throne hall at the citadel where coronations, iqṭā distributions, reviews of troops, receptions of envoys, and the biweekly dār al-ʿadl sessions were held throughout the rest of the Qalawunid period until 1382. In the Burji period, it lost its function as the setting for dār al-ʿadl, but was still used to receive foreign embassies, undoubtedly because of its size and spatial arrangement which made it the most impressive structure at the citadel and most expressive of the sultan’s might. Otherwise, it was neglected throughout most of the Burji and Ottoman periods, and its site was finally cleared by Muhammad ‘Ali, along with those of all the other palaces and halls that the Mamluks and the Ottomans had built, so he could construct his new structures there.

The Description of the Great Iwan

Fortunately, the Great Iwan was documented at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the Description de l’Egypte, although it was already in a ruined state and lacking its dome. The invaluable plan and views the Description provides permit an architectural analysis of the structure that is not
possible for the majority of the other Mamluk monuments that existed in the citadel (fig. 2).

The French plan shows the Great Iwan to have been a rectangle (measuring 36 x 31 meters without the corridor behind it), open on three sides: the northeast, which constituted its main façade, the southeast, and the northwest. The fourth side, which faced back toward the rest of the sultan’s palaces across from the passageway (called diihâz al-'ubûr, or the corridor of crossing, in Mamluk sources), was built up with a thick wall. This wall was pierced with doors in five places; the central door, according to the eighteenth-century traveler Pococke, “was adorned with that grotesque sort of work, which is common in the Eastern buildings.” He, of course, was not acquainted with the muqarnas conch, which was the element he observed above the central door (fig. 3). The shape of this arched door was confused by Jomard, the author of the entry on the citadel in the Description de l’Egypte, with that of a mihrab, which led him to conclude that the iwan must have been used as a mosque. The door opened onto the sultan’s private domain behind the iwan through the passageway seen in the plan, which led to the Ablaq Palace and beyond it to the private quarters (al-diir al-sultaniyya). The iwan’s layout consisted of three parallel aisles formed by four rows of reused red-granite columns. The central aisle was almost three times as wide as the lateral ones. The frontal one-third of its length was subdivided into three parts formed by two pairs of columns. The columns in the iwan numbered thirty-two in all and were taken from pre-Islamic Egyptian temples. The back section of the central aisle, covering two-thirds of its length, was surmounted by a dome. That dome—which had already collapsed when the drawing was made—had once been the most striking feature of the iwan. It was constructed of wood, like most Bahri Mamluk domes, and covered on the outside with greenish tiles. It was supported by twelve columns which, together with the back wall, formed a square plan, almost 20 meters to the side. The transition from square to circle was achieved by four wooden muqarnas pendentives, whose units, to judge from the perspective of the Description de l’Egypte, were huge (fig. 4). A broad inscription band, whose characters were made of large carved and gilded wood units, ran around the full perimeter of the inner square under the dome and even followed the curve of the central aisle’s arch. Its text seems to have consisted of the full titulature of Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad and probably the construction date.

The Interpretation of the Great Iwan’s Architecture

The iwan of al-Nasir Muhammad was certainly the most public and most ceremonial of the sultan’s palaces, and therefore made to impress and to inspire awe. Its royal and monumental character was visually and spatially articulated through its massiveness, height, the lavishness of its surface articulation, and a number of other architectural features (fig. 5). Two of these features—the layout and the green dome—were particularly effective as historically recognizable signs of royalty: the first as a spatial and functional frame of action, the second as a visual referent.

The plan of the iwan was different from the common hall type of Islamic Egypt, generally known as a qâ’â’ (fig. 3). This difference has been noted by many scholars, and a number of architectural precedents have been proposed. Doris Behrens-Abouseif suggests that the plan for the main hall in several Fatimid shrines (mashhads) in Cairo may have provided the model for the plan of the Great Iwan. She specifically mentions the shrines of al-Juyushi (1085) and Sayyida Ruqayya (1133), whose halls she compares to the Great Iwan in form and arrangement (fig. 6). However, the plans of these shrines are only variations on the majlis plan, the most widespread hall type in Egypt until the thirteenth century. A majlis has a T-shape plan with a large space in the center and two smaller, and sometimes shallower, ones flanking it. It has a frontal gallery (riwaq) with a set of doors that separate it from the central space, whether it is an open court or a roofed dârqi'a (the name of the central square in a hall, usually covered with a lantern). The type first appeared in the houses of Abbasid Samarra and seems to have been imported to Egypt during the Tulunid period (868–905). The majority of houses excavated at Fustat, dating from the ninth through the twelfth century, had at least one majlis around their open courtyard, which probably functioned as the place of honor in the structure (fig. 7). The halls of both Fatimid shrines clearly derive from the majlis plan, but have in addition a dome above the central back space, probably either to acclaim the sacrosanct persons to whom they were dedicated, or to emphasize the qibla side, an
arrangement encountered in several large Fatimid mosques such as the Azhar mosque (970–72) and al-Hakim mosque (990–1013).

Alexandre Lézine proposes as a prototype for the iwan and other royal Mamluk structures the hall of al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub at the Roda Citadel\(^2\) (fig. 8). This may have been the hall that Ibn Sa'id al-Maghribi, who visited the Roda Citadel shortly after its completion in the 1240s, identified as the iwan that al-Salih used for his audiences.\(^3\) The plan of this hall, which was still standing in the early nineteenth century, comprised two iwans facing one another across a huge diirqa'a. Four sets of columns, each composed of three columns arranged as a triangle, formed a smaller rectangle inside the diirqa'a. They framed the side iwans and the two alcoves (suffas) on the longitudinal sides and may have supported a dome, or perhaps a wooden lantern in the center of a flat roof, similar to those found in later Cairene houses and called shukhshākh. Lézine considered this plan to have formed a transitional stage between the hall plan in Fustat houses, which we now know was another architectural type called majlis, and that of the later qa'as of the Bahri Mamluk period.

Though al-Salih Najm al-Din’s hall may have presented the model for other Mamluk halls, the Great Iwan’s plan is radically different from any of the stages of this simple linear development from majlis to qa'a. It was a unique structure designed for a specific set of functions and with other architectural paradigms in mind. Reduced to its essence, al-Nasir Muhammad’s iwan was a roof supported on pointed arches carried by columns with open façades on three of its four sides, while both majlis and qa'a plans are by definition enclosed spaces. The openness of the Great Iwan was one of its essential characteristics, since it functioned both as stage and reviewing stand for the sultan. He could be seen from all sides when he sat to hear the grievances of his subjects on dār al-ṣadī days or for embassy receptions,\(^4\) and he could view the parades taking place in the court in front of the iwan on audience (khidma) days.\(^5\) Only the back wall, which functioned as the screen that separated the iwan proper from the royal palaces, was solid. The Great Iwan was in fact considered by contemporaries to be a public structure standing alone “outside” (zāhir) the royal palaces.\(^6\) Besides, the form and function of the central door on the iwan’s back side, complete with its recessed arched opening, topped with the muqarnas conch and flanked by the two customary stone benches called mastabas or maksalas, give it the appearance of a typical Mamluk portal leading to the private royal palaces behind.

Analysis of drawings and descriptions from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century suggests that the plan of the Great Iwan may be related to another established type, the basilica,\(^7\) though basilicas were uncommon in Cairo at the time. The basilical plan was used in only one other contemporary Cairene structure: the qibla iwan of the madrasa of Sultan Qalawun in the complex he had established in 1284 on the site of the western Fatimid palace in Bayn al-Qasrayn\(^8\) (fig. 9). There, the three aisles with four arches each that form the tripartite arrangement appear to have been added to the qibla iwan as an afterthought to what was otherwise a madrasa with the usual ubiquitous two-iwan plan. It may have been that the madrasa was already started with its two iwans when an order was given to insert the three aisles in the qibla iwan. They may have been applied to provide the prayer space with a different treatment or an impressive façade, or to suggest a royal association.\(^9\) They may also have been meant as an imitation of other structures admired by the patron or suggested by his architects.

The context was evidently different for the Great Iwan at the citadel. Its plan seems to have been a well-thought-out variation of a basilica without the anachronistic envelope of an iwan or a qa'a. The basic tripartite division leading to a focal point in the center of the back wall is kept in it, though the hall is modified by shortening its sides to become almost a square, thereby transforming the traditional longitudinal arrangement of basilicas. The apse is replaced with a monumental portal, and the sides are opened up to provide an unobstructed view to the outside, implying the accessibility of the sultan sitting within. These alterations, important as they may be, do not conceal the fundamental affinity of the Great Iwan’s plan with the domed basilica type, examples of which abound in eastern Roman, Byzantine, and Umayyad urban and provincial architecture.\(^10\)

But where did this basilical plan come from? It may have been inspired by its four direct predecessors at the citadel in Cairo, but this is impossible to ascertain for we know little about their layouts besides each having had a dome and
possibly iwans or surrounding porticoes. However, even if these halls did provide the models for the Great Iwan, this still does not explain the resurgence of a basilical plan in medieval Cairo, which had no such palatial precedents from the Islamic era. This leaves us with two alternatives. The first is that the basilica type survived in Egypt through some unknown series of structures, to which the forerunners of the Great Iwan at the citadel may have belonged. The second is that the type was reintroduced to Mamluk Cairo after it had disappeared from the secular architectural vocabulary of the country following the abandonment of the classical tradition with the fall of the Umayyads in 750.

Both alternatives are plausible and both are difficult to verify on archaeological or architectural grounds. Ultimately, the Great Iwan plan has to be traced back to the Roman basilical model, which may have provided not only the original architectural paradigm, but also the ceremonial functions and the symbolic attachment to it and developed for it. The historical circumstances of the Great Iwan's building and the elaborate descriptions of the ceremonies that took place in it point in this direction, but the complete image is still too sketchy and the sources too inadequate to allow for any firm conclusion. However, the meaningful connection for the Great Iwan is not its ultimate origin in antiquity, which was probably obscure to Mamluk builders and patrons alike. Rather, its intentional formal and symbolic associations should be sought in the intermediate Islamic types that had already adapted the basilica form to new functions. This proposition would allow us to postulate a number of political and social reasons for the adaptation of such a plan for the Great Iwan.

Basilicas must have existed in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt, though no hard evidence remains of them. The great majority of churches built in Egypt from the fourth century to the seventh, much as elsewhere in the Byzantine realm, followed a basilical plan. This certainly argues for a local tradition that might have survived in the country after the Islamic conquest. But the absence of any trace of an Islamic palace based on a basilical plan before the thirteenth century makes this possibility unlikely. Furthermore, the ubiquitous majlis plan in all the known large houses of Fustat, with its proven ties to Samarran models, weakens such a possibility. It is very difficult indeed to identify any intermediate model in Islamic Egypt that may have provided the inspiration for the Great Iwan at the citadel. The only pre-Mamluk halls whose arrangement we know something about besides that of al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub are the two Fatimid halls, the Great Iwan of the Eastern Palace and the Qa'at al-Dhabab (Hall of Gold), but Maqrizi's descriptions of them clearly indicate that both belonged to the majlis type.

The situation is different in Syria, where the existence of a long tradition of basilical audience halls well into the early Islamic period has been demonstrated. The tradition was apparently localized before the coming of Islam, as evidenced by the basilical audience hall built between 569 and 581 for the Ghassanid chief, al-Mundhir ibn al-Harith (fig. 10). This hall, which stood outside the north wall of the city of Rusafa (Sergiopolis), was for a long time considered to have been a church until Jean Sauvaget conclusively proved its palatine function. It had a dome or a lantern over the center of the nave, and its apse, which is much smaller than apses in contemporary basilical churches, was absorbed in the thickness of the back wall with flanking rectangular rooms.

Despite being the only known example of a basilica/audience hall of the period, al-Mundhir's structure has been used to postulate a possible "Arabic" precedent for a later Umayyad hall, Khirbat al-Mafjar, attributed to al-Walid ibn Yazid (743–44). Al-Mundhir's hall, it has been claimed, provided not only the model for the architectural arrangement of the Umayyad hall, but also its functional and ceremonial references. Several other early Umayyad palaces, such as the Dar al-Inara at Kufa and the palace at 'Anjar, took up basilical themes for their audience halls. In one celebrated case, Mshatta, the three naves led to an elaborate triple apse or a triconium. The audience hall of Mshatta, similar to and yet distinguished from the examples of the local Syrian developments of triclinia, was considered to have been either a later imitation of a little-understood classical type, or a syncretic creation of a new Umayyad type that synthesized Sasanian models of audience halls with the local, classically inspired basilica.

Palatial architecture in Islamic Syria after the Umayyads and until the twelfth century is very badly known. Few vestiges remain, and only the names, locations, and extravagant decorations of palaces are mentioned in the medieval sources. This obviously renders the task of proving the
persistence of Umayyad models in medieval Syrian architecture, and their subsequent transfer to fourteenth-century Cairo, very difficult. There are, however, a few suggestions that indeed this was the case. These clues range from circumstantial to interpretative ones, and, put together, they make the association between the early Islamic halls and the Great Iwan plausible not only on the formal but also on the ideological level.

The first level of argument is tangential to the specific question of the basilica, but it provides the impetus and the plausible conduit for the transfer of Syrian building traditions to Cairo. The motivation is suggested by the reports on the enthusiastic reaction of many of the early Mamluk sultans to a number of buildings in Damascus and their desire to replicate these structures in Cairo. Two examples are especially relevant, for they refer to two sultans, Qalawun and al-Nasir Muhammad, who were responsible for two of the audience halls at the citadel of Cairo. Qalawun visited Damascus several times, before and after he became sultan, and was once successfully treated for dysentery at the bimaristan of Nur al-Din (built 1154). He consequently renovated that bimaristan in 1281, and is said to have wanted to follow Nur al-Din’s example when he constructed his own bimaristan in Cairo three years later in Bayn al-Qasrayn as part of a complex which comprised also his madrasa with its basilica/ivan, and his funerary qubba (mausoleum). Al-Nasir Muhammad also visited Damascus many times in the early period of his sultanate. During many of these visits, he stayed at the Ablaq Palace in Damascus, which was constructed by al-Zahir Baybars in 1264. In 1312–13, al-Nasir went to Damascus, after rumors of an imminent new Mongol invasion had reached him, and stayed at the Ablaq Palace for a month. When the invasion failed to materialize, he went to the Hijaz for the hajj and returned to Cairo via Damascus. Upon his return to Cairo, he at once ordered the building of an Ablaq Palace at the citadel, which was, we are told, modeled on that of Baybars in Damascus.

Both Qalawun and al-Nasir Muhammad re-created an admired Damascene structure in Cairo, the first because he was inspired by the social and charitable role fulfilled by Nur al-Din’s bimaristan, the second because he was impressed by the striking appearance and opulence of Baybars’s palace. Both were also, in their sponsorship of these structures, trying to emulate the example of the two princes, Nur al-Din and Baybars, who had been remembered after their death, the former as a just, pious, and brave ruler and the latter as an energetic and valiant one.

Qalawun and al-Nasir Muhammad also appear to have summoned workers from Damascus to help build their structures in Cairo. In Qalawun’s case, Michael Meinecke has argued a Damascene source for many decorative and structural techniques found for the first time in Cairo in his complex. He suggests a direct link between the decoration of a number of Zangid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk structures in Damascus and Qalawun’s complex in Cairo, and maintains that Syrian craftsmen were brought to Cairo to execute the decoration of the latter. This hypothesis is critical for Meinecke’s contention that the decoration of Qalawun’s complex functioned as the main vehicle for Damascene decorative influences in Mamluk Cairo. But here we can extend the proposition that Syrian influence accounted also for both the basilical plan of Qalawun’s madrasa and the octagonal plan of his mausoleum, which has been compared to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the first Umayyad monument (built in 692) and rarely copied in Islamic architecture.

In the case of al-Nasir Muhammad’s Ablaq Palace, we possess a more direct reference. Mu’addal ibn-Abi al-Fada’il says that Christian marble cutters from Damascus were brought to build the Ablaq Palace at the citadel in 1311. He goes on to tell us that the citadel palace was built like (nażir) the Ablaq Palace of al-Zahir Baybars in Damascus and followed the same arrangement (tartib), implying that the marble cutters brought with them not only their craftsmanship, but also their architectural traditions.

The second level of argument concerning the provenance of the Great Iwan’s plan reveals its symbolic association with early Islamic precedents through its use of a green dome. Textual references to at least three Umayyad halls, in Damascus, Rusafa, and Wasit, and an Abbasid one in Baghdad call them by the generic name qubbat al-khadra, which is generally understood to have meant “green dome.” The medieval historians, who are our only source of information on the four palaces, had never seen the domes themselves. Thus, it comes as no surprise that objections have been raised as to just how “green” the domes of these palaces were. But even if it were valid to pose the question in relation to the origin and meaning of the word khaḍrā, the fact...
remains that for medieval authors the dome of any qubbat al-khāḍrī' was invariably assumed to have been green in color. The first example, the palace of Mu'awiya in Damascus which he had built when he was still governor of Syria between 640–61, was called the dār al-imāra (the palace of government), or the khāḍrī' (the green), or the qubbat al-khāḍrī'. The palace was surmounted by a great green dome, and was used as the official seat of the Umayyad caliphs in Damascus until the Abbasid revolution of 749–50. The concept and name of Mu'awiya's palace were taken up by al-Hajjaj, the mighty governor of Iraq and the East under 'Abd al-Malik (685–705), when he established the new capital Wasit in Iraq in 695 and built the governor's palace in it with a monumental dome also called the qubbat al-khāḍrī'. The same was done a while later by Hisham ibn 'Abd al-Malik (724–43) when he moved the caliphal seat to Rusafa during his reign and constructed his qubbat al-khāḍrī' there. Abu Ja'far al-Mansur, the second Abbasid caliph, built himself a qubbat al-khāḍrī' as well when he planned his Round City of Baghdad. His structure was so monumental it could be seen from outside the city. It also had on top of it a figure of a mounted horsemanship a long spear in his hand. Al-Mansur's qubbat al-khāḍrī' was probably an appropriation of an already established architectural sign of dominion and authority and an assertion of the recently won transfer of that authority from the Umayyads to the Abbasids.

The known qubbat al-khāḍrī' halls belonged to palace/mosque complexes that formed the administrative nucleus of the early Islamic centers and symbolized the visual and spatial expression of the rulers' power. Modern scholars have traced the green dome's symbolism to the wide range of meaning given to domes in two precursors of Islamic architecture—the Byzantine and Sasanian traditions. Arabic sources are silent on the iconography of the Umayyad halls, but the green dome of al-Mansur in Baghdad, which collapsed in 941 long before the sources at our disposal were composed, is recognized as "the emblem of Baghdad and its crown, and the triumph of the Abbasids." Similar praise for the Abbasid qubba appears in many medieval sources, which indicate that the memory of the green dome has survived through the literary and artistic tradition well into the Mamluk period although its actual examples were long gone.

The green dome of the Great Iwan, whose prominent position is emphasized by all contemporary sources, appears to have been a deliberate reference to the image of the qubbat al-khāḍrī', for otherwise green domes were unknown in medieval Egyptian architecture. The only mention we have of a pre-Mamluk audience hall with a dome is that of the Fatimid Great Iwan in the Eastern Palace of al-Qahira, which had a gilded, not a green, dome under which the caliph sat on audience days. The revival of the green dome as a recognizable royal sign may have been one way of forging the link with the early Islamic caliphate and dissociating the Mamluk ceremonial and official image from that of the Fatimids.

If al-Nasir Muhammad's hall was ultimately a descendant of early caliphal models, why then did a shift occur in terminology from qubba (the Umayyad and Abbasid term for the known audience halls) to iwan? The sources do not offer any explanation, but the prevalence of the latter term over the former in late-thirteenth-century Cairo may have been related to a local, contemporary development. The meaning of the word qubba had evolved in such a way that it was abandoned in the secular architectural vocabulary of Egypt around that period and migrated to the domain of funerary architecture. The use of domes in both secular and commemorative architecture in the Islamic lands, as elsewhere, obviously served the same purpose as a symbol of preeminence and sovereignty. But in medieval Cairo, with the diffusion of domed mausolea for religious and public figures, the funerary connotation of the word qubba had become so dominant that it eventually obscured its secular association. The word iwan replaced it in naming the throne hall at the citadel primarily because it was never applied to commemorative or funerary structures, and because its connotations, which were appropriate for a royal structure, remained fairly consistent throughout the medieval period. From early Islamic times, iwan, as a term for an entire structure, designated a commemoratively highly charged palace, the Iwan Kisra. The word's meaning developed over time to encompass all types of audience or reception halls, but it maintained the ceremonial and royal connotations. This is most probably why the structures of al-Ashraf Khalil and al-Nasir Muhammad were referred to as iwan in the sources. They conveyed an image of royal grandeur appropriate for the ceremonies they were built for.

If some of the palaces built in Syria between the
eighth and thirteenth centuries can be shown to have perpetuated the basilical model of the Umayyad palaces, then the Great Iwan of al-Nasir Muhammad would only be the last of a line of development. But if the palaces of post-Umayyad Syria did not continue the basilical tradition and were instead analogous to the development in palatial architecture in the neighboring regions, Iraq, Jazira, and Egypt, then al-Nasir Muhammad’s Great Iwan can be interpreted as a revival of the early caliphal tradition. Given the uniqueness of its layout among the known medieval Islamic palaces, we can conclude that it was a consciously historicizing structure through which al-Nasir Muhammad wanted to reintroduce not only an early form but also its well-established associations with a caliphal golden age.
Notes


4. It is not clear whether the name Yusuf refers to the patriarch Joseph, whose hagiography is connected to Egypt in many ways, or to Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi, whose given name was Yusuf. Both attributions are of course erroneous, and both reflect the popularization of the citadel's toponyms in the late Ottoman period with the complete deterioration of its architecture and its role as the center of power in the country.


6. References are collected in Oleg Grabar, "Al-Mus-hatta, Baghdad and Wasit," in The World of Islam: Studies in Honour of Philip K. Hitti, ed. J. Kritzeck and R. B. Winder (London, 1959), 105-6; Jacob Lassner, The Topography of Baghdad in the Early Middle Ages: Texts and Studies (Detroit, 1970), 239-40 n. 22. There might have been another early Abbasid palace named also al-Khadra in the Mursab's early capital of al-Hashimiyya. Muhammed ibn Jarir al-Tabari, Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk, ed. M. Aḥū al-Fadhl Ibrāhīm (Cairo, 1963), 8:83, says that the Rawandiyya (a rebellious religious group) ascended the caliph's Khadra during their revolt in 758 and jumped off it as if to fly. Lassner, Topography, 136, doubts the existence of such a palace in this unofficial Abbasid capital and raises the possibility that Tabari may have confused the palaces of Baghdad and Hashimiyya in describing the event. This is very plausible, especially since no other reference exists to this early Abbasid Khadra.


9. In every Arabic lexicon until the present day, the word iwan is mentioned in connection with Iwan Kisra; see A. A. al-Bustānī, al-Bustān (Beirut, 1927), 1:85; E. W. Lane, Arabic-English Lexicon (Edinburgh, 1863), bk. 1, pt. 1, 129. These persistent references suggest that this particular monument might have represented the archetype for iwalls in the medieval collective memory; see Nasser Rabbat, "The Iwans of the Madrasa of Sultan Hasan," American Research Center in Egypt Newsletter 143/144 (Fall/Winter 1988/89): 5-9.


15. Ibn al-Dawādārī, Al-Durra al-Dhahiyya, 73, for the reference to the iwan and qubba, 63, 94, 303, where he mentions only the iwan.

17. Ibn al-Furat, Tarikh al-Duwal wa-l-Muluk, ed. K. Zura'y and N. Izedine (Beirut, 1939), 8:38.

18. Perhaps except for Maqrizi, Khitaat, 2:112, who states that Qalawun demolished the qulla (keep) of Baybars and built his qubba in its place in 1285, which is the same date given by Ibn al-Furat for the demolition of the qubba of Baybars. The concurrence of dates in these reports permits the correction of the spelling of al-qulla in Maqrizi's sentence (most probably a typographical error in this generally inaccurate printed text) which should read al-qubba instead when reporting Qalawun's replacement of Baybars's structure. This should be differentiated from the qulla, also built by Baybars inside the wall separating the two enclosures of the citadel, which was not rebuilt until the time of al-Nasir Muhammad.


20. Ibn al-Dawadari is the one who offers the most direct reference for his reports in the events of 1293 that "al-Iwan al-Ashrafi was completed by Amir 'Aliām al-Din al-Shuja'i," Ibn al-Dawadārī, al-Durr al-Dhakiyya, 345; Maqrizi, Khitaat, 2:206; Ibn Iyās, Badā'ir al-Zuhūr fi-Waqātī al-Duhūr, ed. M. Muṣṭafā (Cairo, 1982) vol. 1, pt. 1, 378, states specifically that Khalil is the builder of al-Iwan al-Ashrafi, thus preventing any confusion between the two structures.


23. Many chroniclers have noted the zeal with which al-Nasir built his autocratic rule after the two first reigns in which he had only nominal authority. See P. M. Holt, The Age of the Crusades: The Near East from the Eleventh Century to 1517 (London, 1986), 107–20; Robert Irwin, The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate, 1250–1382 (Cambridge, Ill., 1986), 85–124.

24. Baybars al-Manṣūrī, al-Tuhfa, 231, 233–34, gives an elaborate description of the ceremony, listing the names of the amirs who were required to sit around the sultan; Nuwayrī, Nihāyat, vol. 30, fol. 66; the anonymous author edited in Zetterstéen, Beiträge, 158, reports another activity, the review of the troops, that was instituted in the iwan.

25. Ibn Taghri-Bardi, Nuṣūm, 9:180, noted the complex rituals introduced by al-Nasir in the iwan, and detected the important function of these rituals as inspiring awe among envoys of foreign rulers, who were more common in al-Nasir's court than any Mamluk sultan before him.

26. Ibn al-Dawadārī, al-Durr al-Fakhir, 372, only says that the iwan of al-Ashraf was demolished on the third of Sha'bān 733 (1333), along with other structures; the anonymous author edited in Zetterstéen, Beiträge, 186, gives the same date of completion, but a different one for the beginning of construction, and specifies that the dome was the only part of the old iwan that al-Nasir destroyed; al-Shujā'ī, Tarikh al-Malik al-Nasir Muḥammad, ed. Barbara Schäfer (Wiesbaden, 1977), 113, only says that al-Nasir demolished the iwan of al-Ashraf twice, presumably in the same dates given by Ibn al-Dawadari, but unfortunately the part of al-Shujā'ī's chronicle covering the years between 1310 and 1338 is missing. The same vague report is repeated by Maqrizi, Sulūk, vol. 2, pt. 2, 538, and Ibn Taghri-Bardi, Nuṣūm, 9:180.


32. Evliyâ Çelebi, Seyahatnâmesi, 9–10:389, says that the divān of Sultan al-Ghuri had thirty-five columns. Paul Casanova, Histoire et Description de la citadelle du Caire, published in Arabic as Tarikh wa-Wasf Qalat al-Qahira, trans. Ahmad Darraj (Cairo, 1974), 124, reports that Maillet counted thirty-four columns, probably including two of the square pillars as columns. Pococke's plan has forty-four columns, but it is doubtlessly wrong as he extends the middle two rows all the way to the end wall,
thus adding six columns, even though he himself says in his text that the middle rows were designed to support a dome.


34. Casanova, *Tanikh*, 127, was the first correctly to read the remainder of the inscription, which confirms that the drawing represented al-Nasir’s iwan. A similar inscription band runs around the drum of the Nasirī Mosque’s dome. Both inscriptions were possibly done at the same time.


39. The Florentine traveler Brancacci, who reported on the audience he attended there during the reign of Barsbay, says that the sultan was seated on a raised platform inside the iwan and was perfectly visible from all sides; see Behrens-Abouseif, “Citadel of Cairo,” 42–43.


41. Ibn Shāhīn, *Zubdat*, 26, says exactly that about the iwan. He was writing in the mid fifteenth century, however, when the iwan was only used for important ceremonies.

42. Though basilicas are mostly connected with early Christian churches, the original Greco-Roman functions and symbolism of this widespread type were never lost or forgotten; see Irving Lavin, “The House of the Lord,” *Art Bulletin* 44 (1962): 16–17; William L. MacDonald, *The Architecture of the Roman Empire: An Introductory Study* (New Haven, 1982), 59 and n. 21. It is in its royal and congregational connotations that the word basilica is used in this paper.

43. Behrens-Abouseif, “Citadel of Cairo,” 76, notes this precedent.

44. In fact, the entire complex of Qalawun may have alluded to palatial symbolism in the original functions of its site, its architectural references, and the lavishness of its decoration. The conversion of an exclusive, old Fatimid palace to a public socio-religious complex may have been an intentional gesture aimed at advertising the generosity and charity of the ruler. See the description of the buildings, the waqf, and the social functions of the bimārīstān and the mausoleum in Nuwayrī, *Nihāyāt*, vol. 29, fols. 28 ff., reproduced in Maqrizi, *Sulik*, vol. 1, pt. 3, 997–1001, and translated in Creswell, *MAE*, 2:191.

45. A variety of domed basilicas, modified in different ways to accommodate the dome, span the entire historical and functional ranges of late Roman and Byzantine architecture: see Cyril Mango, *Byzantine Architecture* (New York, 1985), 52–88, where the domed basilicas of the age of Justinian are discussed, including the most famous of them all, the Hagia Sophia of Constantinople.

46. Jean Sauvaget was the first persuasively to argue the persistence of royal connotations in the adaptation of the basilica to early Islamic architecture; see *La Mosquée omeyyade de Médina: Étude sur les origines architecturales de la mosquée et de la basilique* (Paris, 1947), 158–84; also Elias J. Bickerman’s review of the book in *Classical Philology* 44, 1 (Jan. 1949): 142. Many of Sauvaget’s ideas on the adaptations and transformations of the basilical plan are still unchallenged and warrant further research despite recent scholarship that modified, and sometimes disproved, his conclusions concerning the Prophet’s mosque at Medina and the chronological development of the mosque in general.


51. The basilical hall with a domed room behind it at the dār al-imāra at Kufa is dated to the early Umayyad period and believed to have been the work of Ziyad ibn Abihi during the caliphate of Muʿawiya; see K. A. C. Creswell, A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture, ed. James W. Allan (Cairo, 1989), 10-15 and fig. 2. For the basilical hall in the palace at ʿAnjar, dated to the end of the reign of al-Walid I (705-15), see Maurice Chéhab, "The Umayyad Palace at ʿAnjar," Ars Orientalis 5 (1963): 17-25 and fig. 2.


54. There exist, however, some intriguing palatial examples, scattered in Syria and datable to the medieval period, which may prove the survival of Umayyad models; see the plan of Qasr al-Banat in Raqqa, ca. 1168, reproduced in Yasser Tabbaa's article in this volume. It is a basic majlis plan whose riwāq was extended to form a basilical layout.


59. Creswell, MAE, 2:203, accepts the opinion of Sala̲din (Manuel d'art musulman, I, l'architecture [Paris, 1907], 117-18) and Herzfeld ("Die Bauphase des Sultans Qalaṭun," Abhandlungen des Hamburgischen Kolonialinstitut 42 [1919]: 19) before him concerning the affinity between the qubba of Qalawun and the Dome of the Rock, although he notes the differences in the arrangement of supports under the dome in the later structure. He also establishes a possible context for the transfer of the Dome's plan to Cairo by remarking that Qalawun visited Jerusalem many times during his reign and had ordered the building of a riwāq there in 1282 that still stands today.


61. For a discussion of the possibilities of colors and meanings attached to the qubbat al-khadr̄, see Charles Wendell, "Baghdad: Imago Mundi and Other Foundation Lore," International Journal for Middle East Studies 2 (1971): 117-20. Wendell seems to have overlooked the fact that his sources, all post-eleventh century, refer to green-colored domes and differently colored domes. One contemporary example is the dome called the qubbat al-zarqāʾ (Blue Dome) because it was covered with blue tiles, which was finished in 1292 at the citadel of Damascus; see Ibn Ḥaṭīb, Ṭadhkirat al-Nābī ḥī-AYyām al-Manṣūr wa-Banāḥ, ed. M. M. Amin (Cairo, 1976), 1:140; also, Ibn Katbīr, al-Bidāya wa-l-Nihāya, 13:323, 327. For a new interpretation of the qubbat al-khadr̄ that follows Wendell's in questioning the real appearance of the original domes, see the article by Jonathan Bloom in this volume.

62. Although Ibn-ʿAsākir, Tārīkh Madinat Dimashq, ed. S. al-Munajjid (Damascus, 1951-54), 2:134, speaks only of al-Khadr̄ of Damascus, Ibn Katbīr, al-Bidāya wa-l-Nihāya, 9:145, explains that the palace was called the Qubbat al-Khadr̄ after the green dome built in it. For the other palaces, the references always mention green domes.

63. References to the Qubbat al-Khadr̄ of Muʿawiya are collected in al-Rihāwī, "Qusūr al-Hukkām," 22:34-36.

64. Lassner, Topography, 52-53, 134-35; Creswell, Short Account, 239.


66. This is a verbatim translation of the attributes of this dome as reported by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, Tārīkh Baghdad, 14 vols. (Beirut, n.d.), 1:78, repeated by Zakariyya al-Qazwīnī, Kitāb阿zhār al-Bilād wa-Akhbār al-Libāb, ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld (Göttingen, 1848), 310. See Lassner, Topography, 53, for his translation of this passage.

67. The memory of the Baghdad dome with its horseman on top may have been preserved in the design of an arbiter for a drinking session illustrated in
Badi‘ al-Zamān al-Jazarī, Kitāb fī Ma‘rifat al-Ḥiyāl al-Handasiyya, trans. Donald Hill, The Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices (Dordrecht, Holland, 1974), 99, fig. 82, and 219, pl. 13. Al-Jazarī composed his work and illustrated it for Nasir al-Din Mahmud, the Artuqid ruler of Amid (Diyarbakir) (1200–22), around 1204. Hill’s figure 82 belongs to a manuscript dated to 1486. His plate 13 belongs to a manuscript dated to 1354.

68. Maqrīzī, Khīṭat, 1:388.

69. With the completion of Qalawun’s funerary qubba in Bayn al-Qasrayn, also known as the Qubba al-Mansuriyya, in 1284 the use of the same name for his throne hall at the citadel would have caused some confusion.

70. Two additional designations of the word qubba in Mamluk Cairo, though in the Burji period, which would strengthen the argument that the term has definitely migrated to the funerary domain, were noted by Doris Behrens-Abouseif, “The Qubba, an Aristocratic Type of Zāwiyā,” Annales Islamologiques 19 (1983): 1–7.
Fig. 1. Plan of the Citadel. After the Description de l’Egypte.
Fig. 2a. Plan of the Great Iwan. After the *Description de l'Egypte*.

Fig. 2b. Plan of the Great Iwan. After L. Cassas.

Fig. 3. Façade of the Great Iwan. After the *Description de l'Egypte*. 
Fig. 4. Perspective of the Great Iwan. After the Description d’Egypte.

Fig. 5. View of the Great Iwan. From Robert Hay, Illustrations of Cairo (London, 1840).

Fig. 6. Plan of the Mashhad al-Juyushi. After Creswell.
Fig. 7. Plan of a Fustat house. After Mihriz.

Fig. 8. Plan of the hall of al-Salih. After Creswell.

Fig. 9. Plan of Qalawun’s madrasa. After Creswell.

Fig. 10. Plan of al-Mundhir Basilica. After Sauvaget.