Hana Taragan

HISTORICAL REFERENCE IN MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE: BAYBARS'S BUILDINGS IN PALESTINE

Hana Taragan is a lecturer in Islamic art at Tel Aviv University, where she received her Ph.D. in 1992. Her current research concerns Umayyad and Mamluk architecture in Eretz Israel in the medieval period. She is the author of *Art and Patronage in the Umayyad Palace in Jericho* (in Hebrew) and of numerous articles in the field of Islamic art.

In the year 1274, al-Malik al-Zahir Baybars, the first Mamluk ruler of Palestine (1260–1277), ordered the addition of a *riwaq* (porch) to the tomb of Abu Hurayra in Yavne.[1] The *riwaq*, featuring a tripartite portal and six tiny domes, had two arches decorated with cushion voussoirs and one with a zigzag frieze (Figure 1). Baybars also installed a dedicatory inscription naming himself as builder of the *riwaq*.[2] The addition of a portal to the existing tomb structure typifies Baybars's building policy in Palestine. He rarely constructed new religious edifices, preferring rather to restore and refurbish existing buildings, as he did at Maqam Nabi Musa near Jericho and with the tombs of the patriarchs in Hebron[3]; or he added units, as with the tomb at Yavne.[4] At times he
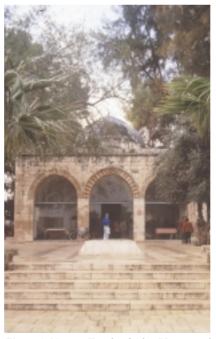

Figure 1: Yavne, Tomb of Abu Hurayra / Rabban Gamliel, north façade, with friezed arches.

also changed a structure's function from church to mosque, as he did in Qaqun.[5]

Baybars's choice of Yavne may be explained by the ruin of the coastal towns, or by Yavne's location on the main road from Cairo to Damascus. However, it seems to me that above and beyond any strategic and administrative considerations, Baybars focused on this site in an attempt to exploit Abu Hurayra's tomb as a means of institutionalizing the power of the Mamluk dynasty in general and providing a basis for the legitimization of his own rule in particular.

Abu Hurayra had been revered since the beginning of Islam, particularly within its Sunni division, as a Companion of the Prophet, with the claim to fame of having

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passed on 3,500 *hadiths* authored by Muhammad. For the Muslim population, the proliferation of tombs of the Prophet's Companions (*sahaba*) and other holy men meant that specific sites on the map gained the status of holy places, so that visiting them endowed the pilgrim with their blessing. Abu Hurayra, the mythical friend of the prophet, was particularly venerated during the Mamluk period, both in popular lore and among the rulers. By adding the porch, the domes, and the lofty foundation inscription to the tomb, Baybars created a sort of reliquary shrine, thus associating the memory or cult of Abu Hurayra with himself. Never mind that Abu Hurayra was actually buried in Medina. That we find a tomb bearing his name in Yavne epitomizes Baybars's exploitation of Muhammad's illustrious companions – and of military commanders, heroes of the early period of conquest, and biblical patriarchs like Abraham and Moses – to establish a clear link between the glorious past and the consolidated Muslim identity associated with his own figure and his new dynasty.

We should bear in mind that al-Malik al-Zahir Baybars al-Bunduqdari, founder of the Mamluk dynasty, was not a born Muslim. Like all the Mamluks, he was bought as a slave, converted to Islam, and conscripted into the army. Some of the Mamluks rose in the ranks, assuming official posts and even ascending to the throne. Thus, military slavery did not preclude career possibilities and social status, but in a world in which slaves were nobodies, and lineage – especially illustrious lineage – was an asset, the Mamluk

sultans, and especially Baybars as the first of their line, were singularly ill equipped to legitimate their rule. His path to legitimacy was by way of presenting himself as a devout defender and exalter of Islam who was conducting a *jihad* against the infidels. Baybars indeed served as the sultan of Islam and the Muslims. He was the first to dispatch the *mahmal* (the covering of the Ka'ba) to Mecca in 1266/664[6]; he brought the Abbasid Caliphate to Cairo[7]; he appointed *qadis* to the four legal schools in that city[8]; and, most importantly, he waged intrepid war against the Crusaders and the Mongols. It is thus of little wonder that his dedicatory inscription in Yavne dubs him *Abu l'fath* (father of conquest).

Allusion to historical referents is common in many cultures, but it is particularly meaningful in Islamic culture. The notion of *isnad*, or *sanad*, from the root *s-n-d*, means "to lean" or "to rely on." It generally refers to a chain of authoritative sources on which a certain piece of information or knowledge, mainly from the textual "traditions" (*hadith*), is based. This chain of transmission or reference often begins with the founding generation, mainly with the Prophet and his Companions, or in the first Umayyad dynasty, which shaped the state and its institutions. The acts and sayings of all these authorities have a unique significance as models for subsequent generations. In Islamic art and literature, this form of historicism and its derivatives (eclecticism, archaism, revival, continuity, copying etc.), in which models from the past give validity and canonical status to present events – including works of art and archi-

tecture – may be seen as a metaphorical *isnad*.

By establishing an affinity between past ideas and present events, Baybars made conscious, shrewd use of historical references in Palestinian architecture. Immediately after the conquest of Safed, for example, Baybars built a hypostyle mosque there, the so-called Red Mosque, al-Jami' al-Ahmar (1274–1275; Figure 2).[9] The construction of mosques of this type predominated in the Umayyad period, with the Great Mosque of Damascus constituting a likely prototype. The hypostyle mosque soon attained symbolic status, and throughout the Middle Ages mosques in this style were erected wherever Islam made a new conquest and its victorious presence was to be declared for all to see.

The same applies to the Mamluks' revival of the Byzantine

Figure 2: Safed, the Red Mosque (al Jami' al-Ahmar), constructed by Baybars in 1274–1275.

Figure 3: Damascus: Mosaic panel on the northern wall of the Qubba al-Zahiriyya.

mosaic technique used to adorn the walls of the Umayyad Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, as well as those of the Great Mosque in Damascus. Both the technique and the images were used for Baybars's own tomb, erected in Damascus in 1280 (Figure 3). In this way, to my mind, the Mamluk victory over the Crusader Christians was put on a par with the Umayyad victories over the Byzantine Christians. Here, again, the legitimacy of Mamluk rule was consolidated by connecting the present with the glorious past, in this case by transmitting the aura of the Umayyads to the Mamluks.

Islamic art forms generally were not interpreted in writing in medieval times, and it is therefore not certain why Baybars adorned the arches in his addition to Abu Hurayra's tomb with the cushion voussoir, or what this motif conveyed. We can venture an answer to this question only on the basis of a close reading of the work of art itself, by decoding its specific imagery and formal language with reference to its artistic models. We find a significant early example of

the cushion voussoir frieze, dating from the beginning of the twelfth century, on the south façade of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem (Figure 4), where it framed the doors and the double windows of the first and second stories. In the Holy Sepulcher, this motif was invested with a site-specific significance. Like the ground plan and other elements of the building, the

frieze became a canonic model for future churches.[10]

However, Clermont-Ganneau, at the end of the nineteenth century, found a more direct model for the cushion voussoir in the Abu Hurayra *riwaq*.[11] Yavne alternated between Muslim and Crusader rule until its ultimate Muslim conquest in 1244. In the early twelfth century, a Crusader church was built on the tell opposite the tomb of Abu Hurayra, and one of its doors was adorned with a cushion voussoir. The appearance of the cushion voussoir both in important Crusader buildings and in Baybars's structures, including the addition to Abu Hurayra's tomb in Yavne and the great mosque in Cairo (Figure 5), indicates that Baybars borrowed this motif from Christian architecture. For him, it was a *spolia*, a trophy taken from the Crusader churches. The façades of Muslim and Crusader buildings in medieval Palestine thus visually reflect the struggle for power between the two

Figure 4: Jerusalem, the Holy Sepulcher, south façade, doors and windows adorned with cushion voussoir.

Figure 5: Cairo, the Great Mosque of Baybars (1267–1269): Central portal adorned with cushion voussoir.

religions from the eleventh through the fourteenth century.

How did Baybars's subjects – the local populations in the province of Palestine and Syria, governed from Cairo – interpret the explicit and implicit intentions of their new ruler? In other words, how did Baybars convey his messages to this community?

It was here, I believe, that Baybars's clever use of regional practice steeped in historical reference (the cushion voussoir; glass mosaics; the use of local buildings already invested with sanctity; revival of the hypostyle mosque; etc.) came into play. They facilitated identification with the regime by signifying continuity and evoking a sense of familiarity. Repetition, simulation, and absorption of an aura by means of approximation and virtual spoliation were Babars's ways of endowing contemporary architecture with

historical reference. Although such appropriation was "legitimated" by the basic Islamic concept of *isnad,* it was not, of course, specific to Baybars and Medieval Islam.

In the region once ruled by Baybars – from which I myself hail – two cultures were deadlocked in a quest to consolidate their national and religious identity, and both likewise employed and manipulated their respective historical referents. Most of Baybars's building projects in Palestine are today administered by the Israeli government, and some have again been invested with a new religious identity. The site of Abu Hurayra's tomb is a case in point. It has recently been reclaimed by ultra-Orthodox Jewish circles as the tomb and site of veneration of Rabban Gamliel, who, following the destruction of the Solomonic Temple in 70 C.E., transferred the seat of Judaism's spiritual leadership from Jerusalem to Yavne.

Thus, the cycle of appropriation of religious sites has continued throughout the flux of history until the present moment: *plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose.*

Notes

1. L.A. Mayer, J. Pinkerfeld, and J. W. Hirschberg, *Some Principal Muslim Religious Buildings in Israel*, Jerusalem 1950, pp. 21–24. See also H. Taragan, "Politics and Aesthetics: Sultan Baybars and the Abu Hurayra/Rabbi Gamliel Building in Yavne," in A. Ovadiah (ed), *Milestones in the Art and Culture of Egypt*, Tel-Aviv 2000, pp 117–143.

2. Ch. Clermont-Ganneau, *Archaeological Research in Palestine during the Years 1873–1874*, London 1896, II, p. 177.

3. Ibn Shaddad, *Ta'rikh al-Malik al-Zahir*, ed. Ahmad Hutayat, Wiesbaden 1983, p. 350.

4. S. Tamari, "Maqam Nebi Musa Near Jericho," *Cathedra,* 11 (1979), pp.153–180 (Hebrew). See also J. Sadan, "The Tomb of Moses (Maqam Nabi Musa): Rivalry between Regions as to their Respective Holy Places," *The New East,* 28 (1979), pp. 22–28 (Hebrew); and idem, "The Maqam Nabi Musa Controversy as Reflected in Muslim Sources," *ibid.,* pp. 220–238 (Hebrew).

5. Ibn al-Furat, *Tarikh al-Duwal wa'l-Muluk*, English transl. and ed. by U. and M.C. Lyons, Cambridge 1971, II, p. 110.

6. Al-Maqrizi, *Kitab al-Suluk li-Ma'arifat Duwal al-Muluk*, ed. Muhamad Mustafa Ziyada and Sa'id A'bd al-Fattah 'Ashur, Cairo 1970–1973, I, p. 544.

7. *Ibid.*

8. P.M. Holt, "The Position and Power of the Mamluk Sultan," *BSOAS,* 38, part I (1975), pp 243–247.

9. H. Taragan, "Doors that Open Meanings: The Baybars Portal to the Red Mosque (Safed)," in M. Winter and A. Levanoni (eds.), *The Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society*, Sussex–London 2003 (forthcoming).

10. N. Kennan Kedar, "Decorative Patterns as Structural Forms in Medieval Art," *Motar,* 3 (1996), pp. 51–52 (Hebrew).

11. Ch. Clermont-Ganneau, *Archaeological Research* (above, note 2), p. 17.