

Essex Egyptology Group

Meeting Report – 2nd July 2023

Dr Omniya Abdel Barr: “Ancient fragments finding new life: the reuse of building materials in Cairo’s medieval monuments”

In July we welcomed Omniya Abdel Barr who started her working life as an architect. She now has experience in urban conservation, monument restoration and cultural heritage documentation and digitisation, focussing on Mamluk art and architecture in Egypt. She is currently the Barakat Trust Fellow at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, working on the K.A.C Creswell’s photographic collections. Professor Sir Keppel Archibald Cameron Creswell (1879 – 1974) served in the Royal Flying Corps in Egypt during the First World War and became an inspector of monuments in Syria and Palestine. He settled in Egypt after the war and his photographs are an invaluable record of Islamic architecture – see more at K. A. C. Creswell's photographs of the Middle East · V&A (vam.ac.uk). Omniya is also leading the ‘Rescuing the Mamluk Minbars of Cairo’ project and since 2012, she has been documenting the looting and destruction in historic Cairo and has actively campaigned to save Cairo’s architectural and cultural heritage.

Medieval Cairo is something a lot of us probably have a vague idea about. We’ve driven past the huge cemeteries from that time (in the news at the moment because parts of them are being destroyed for road widening schemes) or been on tours of ‘Coptic Cairo’ but would be hard pressed to come up with precise facts. Omniya filled us in on the period she is dealing with – Mamluk Egypt. The Mamluks were freed slave soldiers who remained loyal to their sultans and leaders. Their ethnic origins were often from Turkey or central Asia. The sultanate was established in 1250 with the overthrow of the Ayyubid dynasty and lasted until 1517 with the arrival of the Ottoman empire. Mamluk power covered Egypt, the Levant and the western part of Arabia. The convoluted history of rebellions, battles (often with Crusader forces), assassinations and betrayals matches ‘The Game of Thrones’ and Omniya commented that her own early knowledge of the Mamluks came from 1960s Egyptian ‘sword and sandals’ films – featuring a young Omar Sharif if you were lucky. My opinion of them did go up when I read that the second Sultan, Baybars, donated and financed a cat garden in Cairo providing its inhabitants with food and shelter.

They were busy builders creating mausoleums, mosques, madrassas (religious schools often attached to mosques and similar to early universities), caravanserai, hospitals and water fountains. The design of these buildings was built on a strong understanding of geometry and they had mastered the use of many decorative materials such as bronze, marble and mosaics. We are currently commemorating the 300th anniversary of the death of Sir

Christopher Wren, the man who created the first domed buildings in this country but the Mamluks were doing it 400 years earlier. So much of old Cairo is Mamluk and their presence is very strong today. Omniya's enthusiasm for the architecture with its beautiful proportions and rich decoration sent me to websites to see examples. It looks as though the V&A might be the best place to start. Books on Mamluk architecture are rare – and often expensive – though there is plenty to look at on the internet. Omniya's paper which contains many of her own photographs and from which her talk was taken is readily available on Academia.edu.

Why did they build so much? The desire to create dominant buildings was connected to the need to establish their own power and legitimacy in turbulent and dangerous times. Not only was there a lot of new building: buildings from earlier times were re-fashioned in the Mamluk style. They needed to build a lot and they also needed to build fast which led to the re-use of materials from earlier buildings including those from pharaonic times. Old buildings were convenient 'quarries', especially for materials such as marble which were not readily available in Egypt. Using materials from the buildings of previous rulers showed respect for the past as well as a hope that such respect would give legitimacy to the new rulers. The strange carvings and hieroglyphs may also have conferred magical powers on the new buildings and it is noticeable that such blocks are often found at the entrance to Mamluk buildings where they would have been very noticeable.

Awareness of the re-use of pharaonic materials in Mamluk buildings goes back to the time of Napoleon and the *Description de l'Égypte*. Egyptologists noted fragments in Mamluk building during the nineteenth century but did not record their location. At the beginning of the twentieth century a French Egyptologist, Georges Daressey, published reports on ancient stones in later buildings. Only one of these buildings was from the Mamluk period and has now been demolished. In the 1930s two British Egyptologists, Bertha Porter and Rosalind Moss reported on reused blocks found in city. None of the 11 blocks which they located in Mamluk buildings are in situ today as they have been moved, often to foreign collections.

Two museums which received such items are the Louvre and the British Museum. The Louvre now houses a block used as the threshold of Mosque of Qanī Bāy al-Rammāḥ, and in the Great Court of the British Museum you can see two small black obelisks which once formed the threshold of the Mosque of al-Nāṣir Muhammad in the Citadel. They originally came from the Temple of Thoth at Ashmunein, built by Nectanebo II.

Blocks which Omniya has identified include the threshold from the khanqah (a Sufi religious institution) of Sultan Faraj b. Barqūq. The inscription might refer to Nectanebo I and can be read as (Kheper-Ka.Ra). A second is from the mosque of Amir Mithqāl, where the inscriptions are fading but could suggest the form of the God Anubis while the third is from the mosque of Amir Khayrbak and it shows a cartouche from queen Hatshepsut (Maat-Ka Ra).

The hieroglyphs on the threshold of the mosque of Amir Aqsunqur al-Rūmī (the blue mosque) read n- ti hs s and probably mean 'to glorify it or to favour it.' Although the wikala (a caravanserai) of Amir Qawsun has been demolished the entrance gate survives with a granite block dating to the reign of Ramses II and probably from Heliopolis. It is considered the most important ancient Egyptian spolia used in Islamic architecture in Cairo.

Stones from ancient times continue to be discovered as new building works or restoration projects are carried out. Two other stone blocks were unearthed in 2004 during the restoration project of the madrassa of Umm al-Sultan Sha'bān in Bāb al-Wazīr. The stone block show traces of two knees; the first to the left belongs to a king as part of his kilt is visible.

Columns were also very easy to reuse with or without their capitals. The fact that this was done so frequently is shown in a song from the times about the moving of columns. Some columns can be linked to particular ancient sites such as the ones in the madrassa of Sultan al-ẓāhir Barqūq which are very similar to columns still standing in the temples at Abusir. Many other items such as bronze doors and wooden panels from earlier buildings were reused.

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