

THE DECLINE OF CAIRO UNDER THE OTTOMANS

The Ottomans conquered Constantinople in the afternoon of 29 May, 1453. It only took the army a number of hours, starting at dawn, to take the Byzantine capital. The victorious Mehmed II toured the city, entering the Church of Hagia Sophia and declaring it the city's congregational mosque. He also announced that the city would become his capital. It was still called Constantinople, but became popularly known as Istanbul. He vowed to establish Islamic rule over the lands stretching from the Euphrates to the Danube river, as well as the whole of the Byzantine Empire.¹⁾

Events in the Mediterranean were fast developing, and the conquest of Cyprus in 1571 by the Ottomans, was of great significance, since it left only Crete in the hands of the Christians. Their ships were attacked repeatedly and could not travel in the Levant without Ottoman approval. A large naval presence, with plenty of bases along the sea-lanes, enabled them to dominate the Eastern Mediterranean. Between 1470 and 1571, the Ottomans were able to defeat Venice and Rhodes and take control of most of the important islands. After their successes around the Eastern Mediterranean, and further successes in the sixteenth century, the control of the Christian West over Mediterranean trade was greatly reduced.²⁾

After the fall of Egypt in 1517, the trade route linking the Black Sea with Istanbul, Asia Minor and Alexandria became prominent, and only had a few Christian ships. Treaties were made to facilitate trade with the West in Ottoman Mediterranean waters, but the impact on the Italian Republics was severe. Genoa declined rapidly and shifted trade routes west towards Spain.

¹⁾ Blair (1994: 213).

²⁾ Pryor (1992: 178–182).

To weaken the power of Venice, the Ottomans encouraged trade with Florence, the French and the Catalans. The Ottomans' large navy, from Dalmatia to Morocco, seized the Mediterranean. Trade was encouraged in the Black Sea, while the link between Egypt and Syria, and Asia Minor and the Balkans, helped create new trade routes. They were controlled using Ottoman subjects, including Jews, Greeks, Turks, and Armenians.³⁾

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, a new power was rising in the West. The Portuguese were starting to use their technologically advanced navy to challenge the Ottomans. Their interests in trade with India resulted in the discovery of the route round the Cape of Good Hope and led to conflict with the Ottomans in the Arabian Sea.⁴⁾ Around the same time, the interests of Spain and Portugal shifted to the New World and the wealth provided by trade with the new colonies. The superiority of Portuguese naval power led the way for the future development of economic strength in the rest of Europe. Other powers emerged, with the new struggle between Britain and France over the control of the Mediterranean, which continued until the British occupation of Egypt. This happened in 1882, during the rule of the Mohamed Ali family, which extended until the Egyptian revolution of 1952.

THE ARCHITECTURE

Hagia Sophia, now called Aya Sophia, was transformed into a mosque by the addition of four narrow minarets. Later, they became known among scholars as pencil-shaped minarets. Nothing further was done on the exterior, which remained intact. The interior was kept unchanged except for the stucco, added to cover the mosaics of the Virgin and other Christian imagery. Large saucers, having the names of Allah, Mohamed, Omar, and Abu Bakr, written in gold, were added to the interior piers. Later on in 1935, the mosque was made into a museum. During my visit in 2002, I noted that the interior had been restored, and the mosaics of the Virgin were exposed once again.

Blair and Bloom described Ottoman architecture as follows: "The canon of classical Ottoman architecture of the sixteenth century consists of a rather limited range of forms combined in a limited number of ways. As practiced by such masters as Sinan, the achievement of classical Ottoman architecture lies in the calculated solution of problems and the meticulous execution of

³⁾ Pryor (1992: 188–191).

⁴⁾ Hess (1970: 1915).

details, with carefully controlled harmonies and dissonances. When practiced by his less talented successors, Ottoman architecture often became repetitious and dull, as the classical canon was fossilized. Ottoman public buildings are imposing, important, deliberate, and reserved; rarely are they inventive or playful, for the Ottoman scheme of things architecture was far too serious a business for levity.”⁵⁾

In 1538, Sinan was appointed as chief court architect. He was described by Blair and Bloom as follows: “As a Janissary, as well as an architect and engineer who could assist in the design and construction of bridges and fortresses, Sinan accompanied Suleiman on campaigns in Europe and the Middle East and undoubtedly became familiar with the great architectural monuments of the Islamic and pre-Islamic past. He is credited with designing buildings from Buda in Hungary to Mecca in Arabia, and these structures, whether or not by the hand of the master, were instruments in a concerted Ottoman policy of establishing sovereignty through the erection of buildings in a distinctively Ottoman style with hemispheric domes and tall thin minarets. The design and supervision of these works in the provinces by court architects in the capital were made possible not only by the Ottoman system of central administration but also by the development of imperial standards and a system of architectural representation.”⁶⁾

For 300 years, between the defeat of the Mamluks in 1517 and the arrival of Napoleon in 1798, Cairo was an Ottoman provincial capital. The city exported fine products, such as large wool carpets, to Istanbul and the rest of Europe. This period of Egyptian history was considered one of decadence and stagnation. The Ottoman governors of Cairo did not sponsor large projects for lack of funds or lack of interest. Most of them wanted to be buried in Istanbul. Therefore, they erected their buildings on the still remaining large parcels of land. The aesthetics of the preceding Mamluk architecture changed and new design elements were introduced. The multi-storey minaret type gave way to the pencil-shaped and domed. Prayer halls replaced the hypostyle plan and iwans. Stone domes were mainly used in funerary architecture under the Mamluks, but were introduced into mosques under the Ottomans. This is shown in the mosque of Suleiman Pasha, built in the Citadel in 1528. It's an open court, slender minaret, and the central dome, with the three flanking semi-domes, were directly inspired by Istanbul. The interior marble

⁵⁾ Blair (1994: 213).

⁶⁾ Blair (1994: 219).

panelling used by the Mamluks was initially copied, but later abandoned, in favour of glazed tile. The mosque of Aqsunqur (1347) was retrofitted in 1652 with blue and green tiles on the qibla wall of the mausoleum built by the Janissary Ibrahim Aga Mustahfizan. The mosque later became known as 'the Blue Mosque'.⁷⁾

MOHAMED ALI

Despite Napoleon's attempt to take Egypt from the Ottomans, the French were defeated and expelled in 1801. The 10,000 soldiers sent by the Ottoman Sultan to save the country saw Cairo as a conquered city. When the governor, Khurshid Pasha, failed to pay their salaries, they rebelled and attacked the streets. They took over private homes, robbed merchants, molested women in public and kidnapped prominent Egyptians for ransom money. The bulk of the Ottoman troops were made-up of 6,000 Albanian mercenaries led by Mohamed Ali.⁸⁾

The Mamluk-Ottoman struggle for power continued as Mohamed Ali was determined to win. He became governor of Cairo after vowing to uphold the law and consult with the leaders of al-Azhar before taking any action. The previous governor, Khurshid Pasha, refused to leave the Citadel so Mohamed Ali put artillery on the Muqattam Hills and bombarded the Citadel until the governor fled, never to return. Sultan Selim III approved his appointment as the new governor from Istanbul. His control over Egypt was shaky because, for financial support, he was depending on the civilian leadership and the Mamluk Beys.⁹⁾

The situation changed when Sultan Selim III was deposed in 1807 by revolting Janissaries. A year later, Mohamed Ali took advantage of this event and declared Egypt independent. He exiled his former civilian allies and confiscated their wealth. In 1811, he invited the remaining 24 Mamluk Beys and their 400 men to a banquet at the Citadel. After they had been fed and entertained, they mounted their horses and went down to the gate of Bab al-Azab, only to find it locked. They were trapped and attacked by the Ottomans, who opened fire until they were all dead. Only one Mamluk survived, Amin Bey, because he had heard gunfire as he was heading down to the gate. He

⁷⁾ Blair (1994: 251).

⁸⁾ Lyster (1990: 55).

⁹⁾ Lyster (1990: 55).

jumped with his horse over the walls of the Citadel to escape the massacre. The horse was killed, but he was unharmed and headed to Upper Egypt to hide there.¹⁰⁾

Mohamed Ali obtained large revenues for his reforms from the reorganization of the Egyptian economy. By 1816, he had nationalized all the available agricultural land and monopolized its produce. He bought crops from the peasants at the lowest price and sold them in European markets at the highest price. A massive program of irrigation, using conscripted peasants from all over the country, added a million acres of land for farming. As a result, he was able to introduce long-fibre cotton in 1821, which became a major cash-producing crop. He also built over 30 textile factories to reduce foreign imports and compete with the Europeans in the global market. All production was controlled by a government monopoly, in which raw material was supplied and the finished product was bought at a fixed price. He also founded military factories to reduce his dependence on foreign weapons and ammunition. In addition, he constructed shipyards in Cairo and Alexandria to build a strong Egyptian navy. His chief aim was to make Egypt strong militarily to ensure his independence from Istanbul. Everything else in the whole country was subordinate to this goal. To ensure his control over the country, he created a centralized bureaucracy in Cairo. To supply the manpower needed to fill newly developed positions, he introduced the first secular educational system in Egypt. He founded military academies and schools for medicine, science, engineering, administration, humanities and the arts. His plans and ambitions were self-centred however, as they impoverished the population. The peasants were burdened with high taxes and government monopoly. Furthermore, over a third of the workforce was employed in public works or in the military unwillingly. His aim was not to bring benefits to the people but to use them to achieve his own glory.¹¹⁾

Mohamed Ali succeeded in reviving the Egyptian economy, which was based on agriculture and European trade in the Mediterranean. He worked on integrating the country into the global economy of the nineteenth century. By the 1830s, a new Ottoman architectural style had started to emerge in Cairo. This integrated Greek, Italian, and Spanish elements and was rapidly replacing the Mamluk style. For his mosque in Cairo, however,

¹⁰⁾ Lyster (1990: 56).

¹¹⁾ Lyster (1990: 59).

he chose the imperial Ottoman style of Istanbul instead of this emerging Beaux-Arts school.¹²⁾

THE MOSQUE OF MOHAMED ALI

Construction of the mosque started in 1830 inside the walls of the Citadel. It was not intended to be a provincial structure of the Ottoman Empire, but rather a symbolic challenge to its authority. By building a mosque in the grand Istanbul style, Mohamed Ali was making a statement about his leadership of Egypt. Based on Ottoman design standards, only the sultan was allowed to build a mosque with more than one minaret. The Mosque of Mohamed Ali had two minarets that were each 82 metres high.¹³⁾

DESCRIPTION

The mosque was described by Lyster as follows: “A raised platform for the mosque was first erected on the site of the Mamluk palace complex using debris from the Hall of Justice and Qasr al-Ablaq. A Bosnian architect brought from Istanbul designed the building on the grandest possible scale. Its 52 meter-high dome, supported by four semi-domes and four massive interior piers, covers a prayer hall, which measures more than 1,800 square meters. Despite its gigantic size, the Mosque of Mohamed Ali is an unimaginative copy of the great mosques of Istanbul; it never achieves the soaring grace or the flowing lines of the religious buildings of the Ottoman capital. The decoration, ranging from the alabaster facing to the European-inspired frills, is overwrought and often gaudy. Consequently, the mosque ranks low in the estimation of historians of Islamic art.”¹⁴⁾

In addition, Blair and Bloom described the mosque by saying: “The Mosque of Mohamed Ali, which covers over five thousand square meters, is the largest mosque built in the first half of the nineteenth century. The design is often attributed to Yousef Bushnaq, a Greek from Istanbul, but all that can be said about the architect is that he was somewhat familiar with both Ottoman and contemporary European architectural practice. The general scheme – a square forecourt (55 by 57 meters) preceding a square prayer hall (45 by 57 meters)

¹²⁾ Blair (1994: 310).

¹³⁾ Lyster (1990: 66).

¹⁴⁾ Lyster (1990: 66).

covered by a central dome and four semi-domes resting on four great supports – repeats that of the Shehzad, Ahmed, or Fatih mosques in Istanbul, but few if any of the subtleties in the models were understood. On the north-west side of the court is a stubby tower surmounted by a pavilion decorated with a Gothic tracery and Moorish arabesques. It houses a clock presented to the sovereign by Louis Philippe in 1846 in exchange for the obelisk erected in the Place de la Concorde in Paris.¹⁵⁾

According to Lyster, the architect of the Mohamed Ali mosque was Bosnian, but Blair and Boom claimed that he was Greek. His name, Yousef Bushnaq, is obviously not Greek and is clearly Bosnian, so he was probably a Bosnian who had lived in Greece before moving to Istanbul. During a visit to Sarajevo in 2006, I observed that all the mosques built during the Ottoman period followed the model set by Sinan in Istanbul. Based on what I found, Bosnian architects at the time followed the same design rules both inside and outside the city. The more recent buildings, however, were designed by Austro-Hungarian architects and were either neo-Mamluk or neo-Andalusian. Early twentieth century Bosnian architecture rejected the Ottoman influences and looked to Mamluk Egypt and al-Andalusia for inspiration.

DESIGN ANALYSIS

The Mosque of Mohamed Ali is visible from almost any point in a 25 km radius around the citadel (Fig.1). It is located at a high point inside the walls, making it the only building fully visible from below. Its design has little in common with Egyptian architecture, as it appears to have neglected the almost 270 year tradition of the exuberant Mamluk style. It is not in keeping with the architectural style of the Mamluks and is a poor replica of Ottoman prototypes in Istanbul. The mosque has, however, some Mamluk design motifs that had persisted over the years and are visible in the details of the interior. The fleur-de-lis motif is used in the crenellations above the minbar door, which has bronze roundels reminiscent of the Bahri Mamluk period. Wrought iron window grilles around the prayer hall also have small fleur-de-lis motifs in semi-circles. This was most certainly due to the persistence of local workshops that worked on wood and metal for the mosque. The alabaster used on the interior and the exterior is native Egyptian stone and

¹⁵⁾ Blair (1994: 311).

was cleverly selected for its colour and quality (Fig. 2). It was arranged in a manner which takes advantage of its natural texture and visual impact. The beautiful alabaster veins were carefully matched to create a rich pattern on the walls and columns of the interior. This was done in lieu of the traditional Mamluk marble and stucco revetments. This is actually the best and most innovative feature of the mosque, as it took advantage of a local material to match the ornamentation of the Mamluks. The rest of the interior, including the domes, is gaudily painted with pure nineteenth century European motifs reflecting the prevalent eclectic style of the city (Fig.3).

DESIGN AESTHETICS

The mosque follows Ottoman aesthetic principles, based on the repetition of the half-circle as a motif, to create a harmonious composition. This is achieved using domes, half-domes, arcades and the arched windows. The soaring perimeter walls of the prayer hall act as a base for a crown made up of domes and half-domes. It starts at the top with the main dome, which is surrounded by four shallower and larger half-domes, buttressing the wall just below the octagonal drum. In addition, between the half-domes, there are four smaller domes at each corner of the perimeter walls. The two pencil-shaped minarets, which have thin turrets with tiny domes, frame this ensemble of domes. There is a progression of scale from small, to medium, to large. The use of the dome as a design motif in a repetitive system creates rhythm and visual movement. In the mid 1990s, because of severe cracks, the domes were replaced and refitted with reflective tin. The interior has this same repetitive logic, with the addition of clerestory windows, which dramatically affect the subdued light ambiance. The European motifs and the colour scheme of the interior of the domes are totally untraditional and represent foreign aesthetics.

The design of the mosque follows the standards developed by Sinan to create imperial architecture representing the power of the Sultan through its sheer size, which dominates the hilltops. Mohamed Ali's rule was seen as a high point in Egypt's history, however ironic that might be. The architecture and the arts had hit their lowest point since the beginning of Islamic rule. From this point on, Egyptian architecture lost its identity and followed French Beaux-Arts models well into the 1920s.

CAIRO OF KHEDIVE ISMAIL

The Europeans started flocking to Egypt after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and many of them settled in large cities such as Cairo, Alexandria, Ismailia, Port Said, and Suez. They started businesses and created large department stores to sell imported European products. The architecture of the city of Cairo was influenced by Spanish sources once more, when a wave of Italian and French architects designed buildings that had been influenced by the Romantic period.

The Khedive Ismail (1863–1879), the grandson of Mohamed Ali, had the dream of making Egypt a part of Europe, “l’Egypte fait partie de l’Europe.” Because of this, he undertook a major redevelopment plan for the city of Cairo. His first act was to improve the communication system by creating a postal service and extending the telegraph and railway network throughout Egypt and the Sudan. He built hundreds of new schools, including the first for girls; he supported newspapers and expanded the government press. He also founded the Khedival library, the Egyptian Antiquities Museum and the geographical society. Ismail increased agricultural production, developed new industries and encouraged European investments. The construction of the Suez Canal was his most ambitious and most expensive project. This grandiose undertaking resulted in thousands of European bankers, businessmen, and technicians flooding into Cairo, looking for opportunities, as has previously been mentioned.¹⁶⁾

In 1868, Khedive Ismail began the largest new development scheme in the city’s history. He started to build a new city west of the old medieval Cairo dubbed, “Paris by the Nile” by many, and “Paris of the Orient” by the Europeans. It had broad streets lined with modern buildings, designed by European architects, equipped with gas lighting and piped water.¹⁷⁾ He had been inspired to do this after a visit to the 1867 Exposition Universelle de Paris, where he had talked to Baron Haussmann about transforming Cairo. Khedive Ismail erected the Abdeen Palace, the new seat of government, replacing the Citadel, which had been modelled on the Palace of Versailles, on the edge of a large square, which used to be a lake. Many big lakes were filled in to create large parks that were filled with rare, imported trees. In 1872, he inaugurated Mohamed Ali Street, connecting the Citadel with the main train

¹⁶⁾ Lyster (1990: 67).

¹⁷⁾ Lyster (1990: 69–70).

station in the heart of the city. The layout created by Ali Pasha Mubarak, head of the Ministry of Public Works in 1868, which followed the Parisian plan of Baron Haussmann, continued to be implemented and expanded until the early twentieth century. Many of the new areas around the city were not filled with buildings for many years. The plan of the city was not complete with new buildings until the frenzy of construction activity during the construction boom of 1897 to 1907 and again in the 1920s. (Figs. 4, 5).¹⁸⁾

The building guidelines developed by Ali Pasha Mubarak did not dictate any specific architectural style, but had required the maintenance of high quality construction. This cleared the way for European architects to be inventive and the centre of Cairo became an eclectic architectural hub. In addition to French and Italian architects, many Austrians also designed buildings in the centre of the city. Some of those famous names were: from Austria, Antonio Lasciac and Marcel Dourgnon, from Italy, Mario Rossi and Francesco Battigelli, from France, Leo Nafilyan, and finally Franz Pasha.¹⁹⁾

The Suez Canal was completed in 1869, and the royalty of Europe, led by the French empress Eugenie, came to Cairo to celebrate the event.²⁰⁾ All these ambitious projects of Khedive Ismail, including a palace for dignitaries and an opera house, resulted in the bankruptcy of the country, which paved the way for the British occupation of 1882, to protect their interest in the Suez Canal. Despite the occupation, which actually helped the economy regain strength, Europeans continued to flock to Egypt and establish themselves in profitable enterprises. Khedive Ismail's dream of a Paris by the Nile was fully realized, as many areas of the city continued to follow European stylistic trends. Cairo totally lost its architectural identity and became a centre of eclectic design - mainly Beaux Arts. It was only in the 1920s, that a new sense of a regional style started to emerge. This was due in large part, to the newly found exoticness of the East, through the discovery of inspirational sources in the paintings of Orientalists and publications on the Alhambra of Granada.

Unfortunately, the plan of Khedive Ismail created a new Cairo that was eclectic in style but had lost the identity created by Mamluk architecture. A large area of the city known as 'Khedivian Cairo' has continued to improve and expand up to the present day. This area is bordered by the Nile in the west

¹⁸⁾ Hawas (2002:15).

¹⁹⁾ Hawas (2002:29).

²⁰⁾ Lyster (1990: 69–70).

and Port Said Street in the east, behind the Abdeen Palace. To the north, it is bordered by Galaa' Street and includes all of the Garden City to the south. On the bright side, Cairo had been transformed from a medieval city with dark and narrow streets, to a modern metropolis, that bustles with activity and continues to grow.

CONCLUSION

After the Ottomans gained control of the Mediterranean, they shifted trade to the east along the coast of the Levant and into the Black Sea, while the Portuguese expanded their control into the Indian Ocean. This resulted in the loss of Egyptian control over the spice trade going into Europe and the economic decline that followed. Furthermore, Spain shifted its interest to the new colonies in the New World and Seville became the dominant port for ships entering from the Atlantic. This resulted in 300 years of sterile designs in Cairo until Khedive Ismail achieved power and transformed the whole city.

The construction guidelines developed for Khedivian Cairo by Ali Pasha Mubarak did not dictate any specific style. As a result, European architects became inventive and the centre of the new city became eclectic. Of course, there were many Islamic buildings, both inside and outside the walled city, to be inspired by. In addition, elements of Andalusian design had been incorporated since the thirteenth century, and, as a consequence, became part of the neo-Islamic movement in Cairo. Khedive Ismail was more open than his grandfather, Mohamed Ali, and re-established stronger ties with Europe. Despite this, Egyptian architecture lost its identity, since the direct link with al-Andalusia, via Catalan trade in the Mediterranean, had been lost. Only Mamluk architecture was viewed as being representative of Cairo, which led to the birth of the neo-Mamluk movement.

The architect of the Mohamed Ali mosque, Yousef Bushnaq, was asked to make the mosque colossal like those he had learned to design in Istanbul. The mosque is a perfect example of the deficient architecture of the period preceding it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blair (1994) = Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250–1800*, New Haven 1994.
- Hawas (2002) = Sohair Hawas , *Khedivian Cairo*, Cairo, 2002.
- Hess (1970) = Andrew Hess, “The Evolution of the Ottoman Seaborne Empire in the Age of the Oceanic Discoveries, 1453–1525”, in: *The American Historical Review*, vol. 75, no. 7, Bloomington, 1970.
- Lyster (1990) = William Lyster , *The Citadel of Cairo: a History and Guide*, Cairo, 1990.
- Press (1979) = Irwin Press, *The City as Context: Urbanism and Behavioral Constraints in Seville*, Urbana, 1979.
- Pryor (1992) = Pryor John, *Geography, Technology, and War: Studies in the Maritime History of the Mediterranean 649–1571*, Cambridge, 1992.



Fig. 1. Mohamed Ali Mosque – Exterior View



Fig. 2. Mohamed Ali Mosque – Alabaster Arcade



Fig. 3. Mohamed Ali Mosque – Interior Domes



Fig. 4. Post-Khedivian Cairo 1910



Fig. 5. Post-Khedivian Cairo 1930