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TITLE:

ABSTRACT ART AND COMMUNICATION IN 'MAMLUK' ARCHITECTURE

ABSTRACT

Fourteenth-century Cairo saw a movement towards abstract, geometric art. This movement reflected contemporary intellectual interests and represents the culmination of the ascendancy of Islamic philosophy over the humanist vocabulary of art. The thesis seeks explanations for the positive, i.e. for the forms which art actually took, rather than concentrating on prohibitive mechanisms.

In architecture, the disappearance of stucco vegetal decoration may have been partly due to the effects of an outbreak of plague, but the main influences on contemporary art and architecture came from the esoteric habits of thought induced by sufism, alchemy and hermeticism, and from the dualist concerns of Islamic philosophy.

The thesis discusses the continuity between sufism and Shī'ism, the history of sufism in Cairo as it affected art and architecture, concepts of the microcosm and the macrocosm, and theories of colour, substance and gilding. The thesis examines talismans and other esoteric material. It discusses architectural incorporata, presents a catalogue of Pharaonic material re-used in Islamic architecture, and argues that blocks bearing Pharaonic hieroglyphs represented Hermetic lore and, at entrances to buildings, paralleled the use of Pharaonic references at the beginning of esoteric manuscripts.

The detailed discussion of architecture takes the form of an examination of a religious building, scrutinising the underlying principles of decoration and then moving on to specific elements such as the entrance and the mihrab.

The thesis discusses, and dissents from, iconographic interpretations of architectural imagery.

It attempts to evolve a terminology for discussion and concludes that 'mamluk' is inappropriate as a cultural term, since the influence of the individual patron on art and architecture was less innovative than the intellectual background of the period, and the dissociation of the patron from contemporary society has been over-estimated. It comes to the conclusion that 'an art of the *bāṭin*' would more effectively express the major influence on the art and architecture of fourteenth-century Cairo.

**ABSTRACT ART AND COMMUNICATION**

**IN**

**'MAMLUK' ARCHITECTURE**

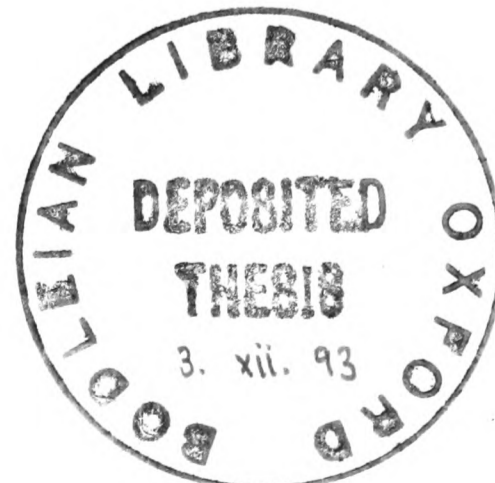
**A thesis submitted for the degree  
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Volume Two contains the illustrations to the main text and the catalogue, statistics and appendices relating to Pharaonic spolia.

The list of abbreviations, bibliography and notes have been bound separately as Vol. Ia.

For J.M.  
and in memory of P.

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## TRANSLITERATION, DATES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

The transliteration follows the scheme of the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, except that where there is a more usual form of a proper name, I have preferred that form, and where an Arabic term appears in the Oxford English Dictionary I have used that version.

All dates are A.D.

Illustrations are given in Volume II and are listed and acknowledged at the beginning of that volume. Illustrations to the main text are numbered in red in the text. Illustrations to the Pharaonic material appear in the catalogue of that material given in Volume II.

PLEASE NOTE !  
NUMBERS IN THIS FORM  
②  
AND IN THIS  
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ALL REFER TO THE SAME  
SET OF ILLUSTRATIONS,  
SEPARATELY BOUND IN VOL. 2

## INTRODUCTION

### PURPOSE

This thesis argues that the history of art and architectural decoration in fourteenth-century Cairo was influenced chiefly by intellectual considerations. These lay behind the drive to abstraction which was visible in all art forms of the period and provide a means of re-assessing the term 'mamluk' as an artistic description. It is hoped that this will constitute a contribution to the general principles of art history, as an attempt to study the effects of what is essentially an esoteric mentality on the appearance of works of art and architecture.

In fourteenth-century Cairo, Islamic concepts finally break through the classical inheritance of art and dispense altogether with its vocabulary. The outer world, the *zāhir*, loses its importance as the subject of art: instead the *bāṭin*, the inner world which was a pre-occupation of sufism, takes its place. Before this period, the Islamic philosophical tradition, with its questions about how we perceive and what we perceive, had held implications capable of breaking through the inherited visual vocabulary<sup>1</sup>, but this process was not only destructive: it can also be seen as a positive affirmation of abstract, conceptual art which expresses an esoteric rather than an overt meaning.

In discussion of abstract art, I have been very conscious of the need not to make false parallels between two quite different cultures or to transpose twentieth-century historical versions and causal mechanisms to fourteenth-century Cairo. Thus, the search for spirituality of Mondrian and Kandinsky was of a quite different

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order from that of a medieval sufi. Nevertheless, concepts, problems and terminology which may originate from discussion of modern abstract art may allow us to view the art of the past in a new and constructive way. Abstract art of any period displaces the nominal subject and enforces an approach which goes deeper than looking for reflections of history. Modern art criticism has the further great merit of starting from the assumption that abstract art is to be valued:

‘After seventy years of abstract art, anyone can see that it is one of the abiding forms of consciousness.’<sup>2</sup>

The experience in Islam is much longer. However, intellectual events and their transfer to the artistic sphere are not necessarily contemporaneous: historical factors intervene, both steadily progressing ones such as the mass movement towards sufism and ones with immediate impact, such as the outbreak of the Black Death in 1347-9. It would be false to separate intellectual movements from their historical contexts, which must also come under consideration.

This thesis is not intended as a conventional historical or archaeological study: that is, it does not present a body of new evidence; its claim to be an original contribution to knowledge lies rather in the relationships which it discusses. There is an evident difficulty which I can only admit at the outset: works of art are related to such an extensive spectrum of life that one would need to be, as well as an art historian, an expert in social and political history, a theologian, a scientist, in order to present a full picture of the intellectual background, and a life-time’s study would be insufficient. I make my claim as an art historian, and in this thesis present some themes and indicate some paths for future research. In that it discusses the

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conditions in which art becomes abstract, my thesis may provide art historians with parallels for our own century which will perhaps suggest formulation of some general principles about the circumstances in which such a change in aesthetic can occur. But any parallels made with our own abstract art are made to that limited purpose. The purpose of this thesis is to relate thought to art in its own time.

## METHOD

There are various ways in which connections between thought and art can be made; the traditional ones, those using direct historical evidence, tend to be very deceptive, in that evidence apparently satisfactory may not be so when the basic assumptions of the inquirer are questioned.

In searching for influences on art and architecture, for an answer to the question 'why does this object look as it does?', historians of Islamic art have been pre-occupied with four traditional grounds: the search for the individual, whether as patron or artist/architect, then the tracing of iconographical traditions, the search for contemporary material history of the socio-economic or political kind, and, lastly, the attempt to see some universal Islamic principles transcendent of time and space. The problem that this thesis attempts to confront is that these approaches do not, except in the most general sense of wealth or scale, or in isolated details, account for the appearance of a work of art or a building. Why should stucco have been replaced by marble as a dominant architectural material, and how can we account for the appearance of marble inlay? Such questions are not answered by Western concentration on the individual, because, even where an architect or patron can be identified, the exact roles they played in the work are not known, nor by assertions of the working of universal timeless religious beliefs, as has been claimed by some art historians such as Burckhardt,<sup>3</sup> since works of art in Islamic countries plainly vary enormously from place to place and period to period. Nor do iconographical traditions explain why some images were accepted and others rejected: an account of

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Mamluk painting as ‘a combination of Syro-Iraqi elements in the Byzantine and late-classical tradition, and Arab elements peculiar to the Baghdad School; to these have been added Seljuk elements and even Mongol elements’<sup>4</sup> is an admirably succinct summary of historical influence but not a description or explanation.

The attempt made here is to locate connections between currents of thought of a particular kind and in a particular place, and the physical elements which sheltered and served that thought.

I am not therefore following the conventional presentation of material followed by discussion, but rather aiming to isolate particular concepts whose internal relationships are reflected in works of art. The art of the period under discussion is notably abstract, and an attempt to understand abstract art forces us to look further afield than the iconographer’s insistence on content and tradition, and abstract art, in its geometric and structured aspect, as in fourteenth-century Cairo, rather than in its expressionist and emotive form as in the late twentieth-century west, lends itself to the search for intellectual pattern because of its clear and unequivocal structures.

Netton has indicated in a discussion of Isma‘īlī philosophy, an approach which may also be rewardingly applied to art: he sees ‘a Neoplatonic universe, (which), because of its great insistence on order and hierarchy, constitutes a structuralist’s dream.’<sup>5</sup> The geometric art of fourteenth-century Cairo, it will be argued, also possesses those same qualities of order which allow for the identification of underlying patterns for comparison with systems in other areas, in particular, systems of thought.

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Without going so far as to suppose a Hegelian zeitgeist which infuses every single product of an era with characteristic traces, modern art history has developed the process of relating a work of art to contemporary thought without depending on the conventional historically documented approach.

For a thesis, a stricter demand than that described by Baxendall in his *Patterns of Intention*, an influential discussion of the links between art and thought, must be satisfied. Baxendall's point of departure is the question: what is the nature and basis of statements about the cause of a picture? For him, the answer may be given in terms which are perhaps too vague and general to be acceptable in a doctoral thesis: thus, Baxendall's conclusion that Chardin was probably affected by the thinking of Locke, that the painter 'lived in a culture that was Lockean'<sup>6</sup> is not necessarily invalidated by the inability to produce documentary evidence that Chardin had read Locke and painted accordingly, but may be invalidated by the vagueness of Baxendall's claim about the nature of Chardin's culture, unsupported by specific points of relationship between thought and paintings. Baxendall speaks of a 'sense of affinity, a current of thought, linking the philosopher and the painter.' In his words, they 'share a instinctive sort of perceptual awareness and self-consciousness, an awareness of the complexity and even fragility of the act of perception.'<sup>7</sup> As Baxendall himself comments on this relationship between art and thought: 'It is very vague indeed and hardly historical.'<sup>8</sup>

This thesis will attempt to demonstrate the kind of connection that Baxendall has perceived between art and thought, but with more precision in identifying similarities, and with evidence of the historical context which links the two.

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Gombrich, approaching the problem of the relationship between works of art and patterns of thought from the iconographer's viewpoint, nevertheless makes use of what is essentially a structuralist method of identification of the subject of a work of art:

'If a complex illustration can be matched by a text which accounts for all its principal features, the iconographer can be said to have made his case. If there is a whole sequence of such illustrations which fits a similar sequence in a text, the possibility of the fit being due to accident is very remote indeed.'<sup>9</sup>

Gombrich's remarks were in the context of the representational world of the iconographer, but show how the emphasis on recognisable content of an individual piece can be shifted to the structure embracing it.

In the field of critical discussion of abstract art, we have two polarised approaches: a reversion to the 'content' emphasis of the iconographer, or a continuation of the shift towards identification with surrounding formations. The dilemma is well exemplified, in the field of western art, by two interpretations of an apparently totally abstract work. Mondrian himself was absolutely determined that his later work was totally non-representational<sup>10</sup>. Yet the critic Robert Hughes has pointed out that a painting such as *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* reproduces the scheme and atmosphere of New York streets<sup>11</sup>. Mondrian's account of his work must be given weight, yet it does not vitiate Hughes' comment: indeed, one could say that the painting, not only because of the grid-pattern which it represents but because of the aerial perspective from which that pattern is perceived, could only be the product of a particular place and a particular century. One could go further and say

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that Mondrian's emphasis on abstraction was in itself influenced by interests of his own time, such as the theosophical movement of the early twentieth century. The perceptions of both Mondrian and Hughes are valuable to our understanding of how the painting was conceived and how it works. Both the emphasis on overt content and the consideration of background relationships are legitimate aspects of art criticism.

The 'iconographical' approach, in the field of Islamic art, may be seen as continuing through the search for western-style physical representations as in the solar-rayed nimbus,<sup>12</sup> for example, or the depiction of a lamp.<sup>13</sup> It will be argued later that, in the field of Islamic art, these are sporadic and untypical identifications of representational imagery in what is essentially an abstract aesthetic; the abstract aesthetic more fully reflects the intellectual background of the time.

The search for connections with contextual thinking has been utilised in western contexts with regard to architecture. Thus, Otto von Simson, in his discussion of S. Denis, has noted:

'... the history of ideas has given a more precise meaning to the term [Gothic] by clarifying the extent to which faith and doctrine have left their imprint upon all aspects of medieval thought, scientific as well as metaphysical. Is the same influence traceable in medieval art, and, if so, can we define the manner in which Christian experience impinged upon the vision, perhaps even upon the technique, of the medieval artist?'<sup>14</sup>

Von Simson essentially saw Suger's work at S. Denis as defined by conceptual elements, rather than technical advances in architecture, and saw the

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Gothic window, in Rudolph's words, 'as a demonstration of pseudo-Dionysian light mysticism.'<sup>15</sup>

One would think that, if any case in the history of architecture justified documentation as a necessary link between patronage, thought and architecture, it is that of S. Denis, since we have not only the theological works attributed to the patron saint of the building, but contemporary statements by the medieval patron, Suger, about his enlargement and adornment of the original building, plus the surviving architecture, to study. But Rudolph has pointed out that the documentation is only illusory evidence: that neither ps.Dionysius nor Suger actually mentions light in relation to windows,<sup>16</sup> that Suger may not in fact have studied ps.Dionysius.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, in an Islamic context, the *waqf* documents, which might seem such an important contribution to architectural history, in fact fail to tell us much about the actual appearance of the buildings. Reliance on documents tells us about legal intentions, can tell us about the social and economic background, but may not take us much further.

In Islamic history, Crone and Cook have described a method of identifying relationships, which they call the 'calque,'<sup>18</sup> elements of legend whose correspondences are traced across different cultures, a concept perhaps descended from the myths of Barthes' *Mythologies*. Thus, Crone and Cook perceive the structural legacy of Samaritanism in two Islamic 'calques,' in which features such as the sacred city, the holy mountain, the pilgrimage from one to another, the grave of the patriarch, re-appear in the same internal relationships.<sup>19</sup>

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This approach has been used in Islamic architecture by Jonathan Bloom, in his discussion of the minaret and his derivation of its significance from the relationship between mosque and palace in Baghdad.<sup>20</sup> Bloom's approach suffers, not from its method, but from lack of evidence, physical or intellectual, for the early stages and from the attempt to extend the argument to universality within Islam in the later stages. The structuralist method has been applied here to Islamic architecture, but Bloom's book warns us that factual limitations, the constraints of the historical and material evidence, must be respected, and rebutting arguments which they may supply be considered. Structuralism is a method, not a substitute for evidence: it does demand evidence, though it can use evidence of a different kind and in a different way from traditional historical thinking. Ultimately, it is also subject to a quantitative test: are similar relationships apparent, not just between sweeping generalities, as in the calque of Cook and Crone, but present in sufficient number to convince that there is a genuine connection? For example, the presence of an imagery of light does not necessarily indicate the presence of specifically Islamic thought: light is a metaphor for revelation in Christianity as well as Islam. For an imagery of light to be identified as specifically Islamic, it must be studied in sufficient detail to relate it to specifically Islamic concepts or history.

The approach in this thesis will attempt to use structuralist methods, as in Netton, Crone and Cook, and Bloom, to try to answer the question: 'Why does the art and architecture of fourteenth-century Cairo look as it does?' by finding common patterns in thought and art that might account for the selection and rejection, perpetuation and change, which result in the preference for certain materials and

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designs over others. But I would not wish to claim that this can provide more than a partial explanation, or that the structures which I try to identify here have any kind of universal meaning or application. It seems to me also necessary to provide more detailed structural correspondences than are found in Bloom and Crone and Cook, whose arguments essentially stand on a very bare outline. Whether I supply enough to support my argument is essentially a quantitative matter, but I submit that this does not, of itself, need apologies: perfect and absolute proofs are possible only in the realms of pure logic or science.

## TERMINOLOGY

I should make clear at the outset the sense in which I am using some terms. There are two contexts for Islamic art terminology: one is that of the modern language, the vehicle of discussion, in this case a western one where usages have been developed to discuss art by people who have mainly evolved their specialised vocabulary in the context of western art, and the other context being that of the period and place within Islam under discussion. There is no reason why the vocabulary of the first should not be used to analyse the second, provided they are not confused so that terms inimical to medieval Islam are not made part of the subject-matter rather than the means of approach. We can analyse from our own position, indeed, it would be dishonest to pretend we can really adopt any other critical posture, but without imputing our thoughts to people in another culture and another century. Nevertheless, it is important that the modern terms of discussion do not conflict with the culture on which they are imposed<sup>21</sup>.

It may cause some surprise that I have avoided the use of the word 'symbol' which has appeared so frequently in recent discussions of Islamic art, so much so that I perhaps need to justify my reluctance to use it. It is often used to imply certain kinds of meaning and appearance understood and intended in the past, whereas these implications may well just appear to the writer. Burckhardt, for example, discusses the 'symbolism' of the features of a mosque, taking the word 'symbol' to mean some Jungian 'universal signifier' or archetype.<sup>22</sup> This avoids the

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question of contemporary signification, of independent evidence of the transference of meaning, altogether.

'Sign' will be used throughout to include pictures, secret letters and other such signals. At one extreme of this meaning of the word 'sign' lie language and number themselves: at the other, unambiguous representational depiction. I have deliberately not used 'symbol,' except where it occurs in quotations, as one too fraught with meanings in our own culture to be unambiguously applied to another. I have used throughout the more neutral 'sign,' meaning, as to function, merely something which represents something else, whether it resembles it evocatively or pictorially or not.

'Symbol' comes to us in the west through millennia of debate between two traditions: the rational or conventional tradition of Aristotle and the revelatory tradition of Plato and its meaning in the west tends to depend in which of these contexts the user is working or to imply both interpretations. We could use it within the Islamic tradition of revelation,<sup>23</sup> as has happened in some translations, meaning a sign placed in this world by the divinity to allow cognition of a truth in a metaphysical world (an equivalent term might be *مِثَالُنْ*, *mithālun*, as in al-Ghazālī's description of the correspondences between the physical and the divine worlds,<sup>24</sup> the sign which carries a *وضع*, *wad*<sup>25</sup>), or transmission of the ulterior meaning), but the word 'symbol' is never quite devoid of the suggestion that we are dealing with an image, a depiction, as this is the kind of sign that has been most examined by western art historians. This is also the association which the word 'symbole' carries for a modern Muslim art historian, Daoulatli:

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‘Islam does not possess a religious symbolism like others. Communication is made directly with the divine without intervention. The Koran is the instrument of communication: words are signs of ideas, whereas symbols are concrete representations of abstract things or the images of those things. A Muslim wishing to represent an idea would write a word, not a picture.’ [My translation from the French original.]<sup>26</sup>

Al-Azmeh’s discussion of the word,<sup>27</sup> emerging from the greater rigour of philosophy, suggests that meaning, the *وَضْع*, *wad*, of al-Ghazālī, the action of transmission and not the appearance, of a sign, is what dominated Arabic thinking, whereas in western iconography, because usage has evolved in a pictorial tradition, an emphasis is placed on appearance, so that ‘symbol’ is almost always used of a depiction and rarely in a way which is defined by the transfer of meaning.

‘Symbol’ is used by Hussein Nasr as a translation of *تَشْبِيْهِ*; *tashbth*,<sup>28</sup> but here the Arabic seems to imply the concept of an equivalence, a counter-part, which the word ‘symbol’ does not reflect, as well as carrying echoes of the Islamic controversy over anthropomorphism of the deity which are not suggested by ‘symbol’<sup>29</sup>.

In the language of historians of Islamic art, terminology is not much discussed and the strict discipline of using the word ‘symbol’ only where there is independent evidence of the transmission of a connotative meaning or at least of setting up a definition or working parameters of meaning for the purposes of discussion, seems little observed.

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The heaviest emphasis on the word has probably been that of Oleg Grabar in *The Foundation of Islamic art*, where the word is frequently, yet very loosely, used.<sup>30</sup> In what way is a palatial building a symbol of power, for example? It is itself, an actual and present physically real and full embodiment of power. One might as well say an army was a symbol of power, when actually it is that in which power subsists and its symbolic potential is a matter for subjective interpretation.

Marshall Hodgson's discussion of what he terms 'the death of symbols'<sup>31</sup> in Islam approaches the symbol (which, for him, is primarily the poetic expression, such as the vocabulary of moth and flame, rose and the nightingale) only descriptively: 'that inter-resonance of disparate parts of experience which, through some common structural character, serve to illuminate one another and to enrich one another's implications.'<sup>32</sup> This account stresses the transitions of meaning as necessary qualities and implies a mutuality in those processes, but seems largely drawn from the operations of language and leaves aside the question of physical form, a difficulty (converse to that of the iconographical tradition) presented by the history of structuralist and post-structuralist discussions of symbolism as primarily linguistic studies. This lack of concern for the visual perhaps accounts for Hodgson's view of Islamic iconophobia (if, indeed, this is an acceptable term) as a monolith rather than the complexity of different physical degrees, emphases and interpretations in which it actually took physical shape.

Where modern Islamic art historians are concerned, an architectural specialist, Jonathan Bloom, has devoted an entire book to the minaret as a symbol without, however, defining what he means by 'symbol.'<sup>33</sup> A recent book on

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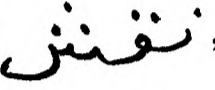
Paradise symbolism in Islam is so vague in its use of the word as actually to be destructive to thought.<sup>34</sup>

The careful and complex (some might say too complex) analyses which linguistic and iconographical studies<sup>35</sup> have given to the symbol seem to have found no counterpart in Islamic art history. To sum up, the word 'symbol' has such vague connotations that it seems best to avoid it rather than to use something which may carry unintended overtones.

'Picture,' 'depiction,' are words that perhaps need some discussion: is the notion of depicting an external reality a western concept which it would be false to impose on Islamic art? The picture as a sign, the relation between picture and meaning, has, in the western tradition, through a long history of discussion, been resolved fairly clearly into the denotative and connotative meanings of an image. Did such a separation, essential for the purposes of any semiotic discussion, exist in the Islamic field under discussion here, or is it merely a western convenience? The main emphasis of discussion has centred on the legitimacy of depiction rather than on the process, but that very debate has meant a focus in Islam on the representation and its meaning.

The question of pictorial representation and whether linear or solid form constituted forbidden representation will be taken up at a later stage, but the important point for the present purpose is the usage of 'sura' in the fourteenth century, when it seems that there was a fairly wide distinction between *صورة*, 'sūra' and *منظر* 'mathal,' clarified in the usage in contemporary art. The Bodleian copy of *Kalīla wa Dimna*, Syrian from 1354, makes the distinction clear

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in the text<sup>36</sup>an illustration shows a ‘sūra’ but the story has a ‘mathal,’ what in corresponding western fables would be called the moral. They correspond approximately to picture and meaning, and it is tempting to relate them to the denotative and connotative elements of the pictorial sign, but the equation is not so neatly made, because ‘sūra’ can be used of the copying of signs and letters as well as images. If we look, for example, at the Hermetic text, Bod. Ms. Arab. d. 221,<sup>37</sup> the maker of a talisman will , naqqasha, the ‘sūra’ of a creature such as a bird-headed human, the personifications of a planet, or whatever is desired. ‘Sūra’ is also the word used to describe this depiction by ibn Khaldūn in his famous account of the lion-seal.<sup>38</sup> But the ‘sūra’, according to the Hermetic text, need not be a picture of something or somebody: it is used of *hurūf* letters in the same manuscript, for example.<sup>39</sup> ‘Limning’ might better express this but is archaic: ‘delineation’ is probably better. ‘Picture’, at any rate, seems an acceptable concept for modern use.

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The meaning of the word ‘abstract’ may also raise some difficulties, and here I turn to the problems of interpretation of works of art described by both Kandinsky and Mondrian in their searches for definitions of the abstract. In Kandinsky’s discussion of form:

‘(1) Either form aims at so limiting surfaces as to fashion of them some material object;

‘(2) Or form remains abstract, describing only a non-material spiritual entity.

Such non-material entities, with life and value as such, are a circle, a triangle, a

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rhombus, trapeze, etc., many of them so complicated as to have no mathematical value.

‘Between these two extremes lie the innumerable forms in which both elements exist; with a preponderance either of the abstract or the material.’<sup>40</sup>

The difficulty in making clear-cut distinctions in critical discussion was perceived by other modern pioneers of abstract art. Mondrian expressed it thus:

‘So-called non-figurative art often creates a particular representation: figurative art, on the other hand, often neutralizes its forms to a considerable extent.’<sup>41</sup>

The conclusion would seem that there is often a co-existence of the perfectly abstract and the naturalistically representational and that their identification is often subjective. Whether a work of art is abstract or representational is something therefore which can vary between cultures and between individuals.

In Islam, the problem seems to have been not so much a distinction between abstract and representational as between animate and inanimate, between things possessing روح<sup>2</sup>, ‘rūh’ and things which did not,<sup>42</sup> the one being impermissible as a challenge to the life-giving powers of god, the other acceptable.

For art which does not have any recognisable elements of the outer world, nor any apparent contextual evidence to suggest that there was such a representation, I use the term ‘abstract.’ ( لا تَصْوِير , lā taṣwīr, occurs as a modern equivalent.<sup>43</sup>) I use ‘vegetal’ or ‘non-figural’ as appropriate where the inanimate world is shown, but elements such as birds and fishes are sometimes difficult to assign as the question of recognition cannot always be easily answered: bird-shapes

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appear but may not have been consciously intended, bird and fish designs may have been so traditional that they were not thought about with any particularity.

Some vegetal motifs raise another point. They may be examples of Mongol or Byzantine representations of fruit or flowers, for example, but did they retain any of that meaning when used in a different locale at a different date? We have the benefit of carefully-ordered museum collections so that we can trace the development of the lotus blossom or paeony flower, but whether these blooms, so far from any living examples of their species and from their original context, carried any degree of recognition as representations in fourteenth-century Cairo is another matter.

Motifs which we tend to describe as astronomical signs, such as suns or stars, are another difficult category. Such terms are convenient descriptions for us, but whether they carried such meanings in their original contexts must be verified. I have tried to deal with this problem at length in later discussion, where it is my contention that to place a single meaning on a possibly polyvalent form is to devalue it.

'Geometric' is another term that may arouse disquiet. Some may object to it as a description of regularly proportioned linear formations of the kind that we find in Islamic art, and that Kandinsky described in the quotation above, on the grounds that strictly speaking we have no evidence that they were connected with the measurement of the earth, but a clear modern usage has evolved amongst artists and art-historians to describe an art which uses the terms of true geometry, and to limit

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the use of the term *strictu sensu* would seem pedantic. In fact, the O.E.D. accepts 'geometric' as an term of artistic description.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, in a discussion of terminology, I cannot avoid the big question: the appropriateness of 'mamluk' as applied to art. The answer to this question is, I believe, that the term is meaningless, indeed, positively misleading, in this context, except in the most limited of applications. I hope the reasons for this claim will become apparent in the course of this thesis and will return to the subject in the conclusion. If we do not use the term 'mamluk', what are we to use? Assuming we want something that describes the nature of the art under consideration, rather than a handy label, I would suggest 'the art of the *bāṭin*,' art as a reflection of the inner world and will return to this in my conclusion.

## THE DRIVE TO ABSTRACTION

‘He was more interested in the meanings of things than in their looks ...  
objects served Klee more or less as words.’

Clem Greenberg<sup>45</sup>

## HISTORICAL SUMMARY: THE RISE OF SUFISM

A historical summary of sufism, one of the main intellectual influences in the fourteenth-century background and whose essential quality is a focus on the *bāṭin*, the inner life, will help to provide a frame-work for interpretation of architectural decoration within the contemporary religious context.

In a sense, the change from interpretations dealing with the outer world to those dealing with the inner world is perhaps not as great as might be expected. In my M.Phil. thesis, I proposed the term ‘architecture of *jihād*’ to cover the constructions of the period from the Ayyubid conquest to the end of the reign of al-Nāṣir, meaning architecture reflecting military characteristics.

I would still hold to ‘architecture of *jihād*’ as a description, but, in extending it to cover another century chronologically, would enlarge the interpretation of *jihād* for the latter part of the period concerned. The thesis I propose about the architectural decoration of Cairo in the fourteenth century is that we witness a reflection of *jihād* as an inward and spiritual struggle, the external enemies having been defeated.<sup>46</sup> One sufi master in Cairo, the follower of al-Shādhili, ibn Aṭā’illāh, expressed the internal spiritual struggle as a double metaphor: it was a battle between darkness and light:

‘Light is the army of the heart,... So when God wishes to come to the help of his servant, he furnishes him with armies of lights and cuts off from him the reinforcements of darkness...’<sup>47</sup>

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The artistic form that this struggle took was demonstrated in abstract art and this extends through all major art forms, including architectural decoration, encompassing the rejection of the external world and a corresponding expression of esoteric meaning through codings expressed in colour or marble or designs, in the hard contrasts expressing the dualistic darkness/light metaphor, or in the incorporation of alien material.

A preliminary sketch of the growth of sufism in Cairo and its reflection in architecture may be helpful at this point, beginning with the way in which sufism continued some established features, which may help to account for its success in Cairo, and for the success of the esoteric interpretations which it favoured.

Definitions of sufism may vary, but Trimingham's very broad one covers the core of the matter: a sufi is anyone who believes it is possible to have direct experience of god and is prepared to put himself in a state where he may be enabled to do this.<sup>48</sup> However, it is the formal codification of this path to experience that was the task of the shaikhs who founded the various sufi 'orders'. Whether any particular individual or path is described as sufi or not seems a subjective matter: Winter notes that western scholars tend to consider both 'orthodox' or 'antinomian' believers as sufis, but the antinomian dervishes were not considered to be sufis by the contemporary '*ulama*'.<sup>49</sup> The impracticality of drawing a hard and fast definition is highlighted by Baldick, who notes that there is no distinction made between clerical and lay members.<sup>50</sup> We cannot draw a parallel with membership of the religious orders of the Christian church, clearly distinguished by their permanent life-style from the wider community, since sufism was not incompatible with

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membership of the lay community, and persons could move in or out of the condition of following the sufi path. I do not propose a descriptive definition beyond that just outlined: some defining characteristics of sufism will emerge from the following brief history, most notably that the search for experience of god enjoined the following of a particular pattern of thought and feeling defined by stages, *maqāmāt*.

The earliest figure in Egyptian sufism is Dhū'l Nūn of Egypt (d.861), to whom are attributed works on alchemy, medicine and magic. Whatever their authenticity, he was claimed by later sufis as originating important concepts such as the stations of the path. Baldick sees Dhū'l Nūn as a link between the Greek philosophical tradition and the beginnings of sufism. At this stage, no lavish provision seems to have been made architecturally for sufism and where it existed it was presumably in the form of private houses and tombs.

Later sufi doctrines seem to have been imported into Egypt rather than to have emerged from a local tradition. There may have been individual wanderers under the Fāṭimids, but before their appearance on any scale in Cairo founders of paths such as Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā Suhrawardī, al-Maqtūl, d.1191, (probably the grandfather of the calligrapher), are first documented, travelling notably from Iran and into Mosul and Syria under the Ayyubids, where the first *khānqāh* was established under Saladin. With the Ayyubid dynasty, the *khānqāh* form travelled to Cairo.

At this point, the flexibility of religious architectural form should be stressed: since sufism was a fluid concept, compatible with many other states and conditions,

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so that it was quite possible to have sufis amongst the *'ulama* in a madrasa, and to have royal support, under Baybars I for example, of the much humbler *zāwiya*. Carl Petry, in his study of fifteenth century Cairo, has noted that:

‘Although individuals joined a mystic community to enter an environment conducive to contemplation, self-perfection and spiritual harmony with God, they rarely withdrew permanently from society. Members of an order could engage in numerous temporal activities and still retain their identification with it. Sufis rarely spent the majority of their mature years confined to a hospice.’<sup>51</sup>

Petry notes that the distribution of sufis, although not uniform, was very extensive, including many in the ranks of the lower *'ulama*, and concludes:

‘There was a strong connection between people in religious fields and the sufi community ... The figures, at the very least, show that there were sufis in the staffs of foundations dedicated to Sunni religious service.’<sup>52</sup>

The breaking-down of divisions between the inhabitants of the various kinds of religious institutions was established before the fifteenth century. Jonathan Berkey notes that the clear distinctions made in early foundations between *khānqāhs* and madrasas soon began to break down and provision to be made in the same institutions for both formal instruction and sufi worship, exemplified by the foundation of Mughultay al-Jamālī in the 1330s.<sup>53</sup>

The first known specific foundation for sufism, the *khānqāh*, was established in Egypt by Saladin; numbers of sufi mystics, the *khānqāh* and madrasa forms and the characteristic marble ablaq decoration all appear to have moved through Syria and into Egypt at about the same time, under the Ayyubids. This movement south

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towards Egypt continued throughout the thirteenth century. Although aspects of the sufi movement were sometimes rejected by legalists in Egypt, since sufism claims that a direct relationship with god can be attained outside codified religion, Egypt nevertheless, as the only middle eastern state to hold out against the Franks and the Mongols, provided a refuge for Muslim theologians generally, and the state does not seem to have rejected sufi shaikhs. There seems to be only one record where this was done, as a result of the nervousness felt at reports which reached Cairo in 1306-7 from the governor of Damascus concerning certain fakirs, originating in the land of the Tartars, according to Maqrīzī.<sup>54</sup> Their leader, Shaikh Būraq, was accompanied by about a hundred followers. They wore extraordinary costumes, with felt hats covered with turbans from which protruded buffalo horns. Clean-shaven but for moustaches, they had white felt garments strung with small bones. Each of them had a broken upper canine tooth. The shaikh claimed to have ridden a lion and also an ostrich in the *maḍān* at Damascus. These dervishes were forbidden to come to Egypt, but similar groups had presumably done so earlier, since the tomb of Aḥmad ibn Suleīman al-Rifā'i dates from 1292,<sup>55</sup> and the Rifā'i path were noted for their outlandish activities.

This is one of the very few cases where we can connect an extant building with a particular path and it would be satisfying to connect the exotic decoration of this richly decorated tomb, painted glass inlay, set into stucco, with the Rifā'i themselves. Direct connecting evidence is lacking although we can conclude that both founders and decor were exotic and heterogenous, but more examples would be

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required before we could be certain this decoration was not an individual and local occurrence.

By the end of the century, dervishes were so accepted that the chief qadi of Egypt, was accustomed to dress as a dervish.<sup>56</sup>

The Rifā'i and their monument exemplify the general problem in trying to connect any aesthetic to a particular sufi path. Evidence may be found for the path in the pages of the historians, but the decoration of buildings named in connection with that it has rarely survived. In addition, the fluidity of movement between *khānqāh* and other types of religious building makes it impossible to be categorical about usage of a building, and, furthermore, even where the foundation documents specifically mention sufis, they do not specify any particular path.

An iconography of an order has been built up by Frederick de Jong for the Bektashi dervishes in Anatolia.<sup>57</sup> The Bektashis were present in Cairo, though their exact date of origin there seems uncertain, but they had a cemetery outside the city from the early fifteenth century and legend had it that they were introduced into Egypt at the end of the fourteenth century.<sup>58</sup> De Jong has noted that the Bektashis represented the twelve imams in geometric carvings and in candles arranged in three groups of four on the steps of the shaikh's stone or marble throne.

In Bektashi thought, the mosque was considered a paradigm of the human being, with the dome as a head and minarets as the ears. The human face was a *mihṛāb*, and the qibla is located between the eyebrows of the spiritual guide. Here the building is a macrocosm: other thinkers regarded it as a microcosm, as will be discussed later.

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The implications of such an approach as de Jong's for the study of religious art and architecture are enormous, but to collect up his evidence de Jong has had to take in a very broad chronology, including material ranging from the foundation of the order (the founder probably fl. 1248-1337) up to the present day, much of his material coming from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and a huge geographical sweep following the movement of the order. In a thesis dealing with fourteenth-century buildings, I cannot make the implications permissible within de Jong's approach, which allows a continuous tradition to give meaning to artefacts of an earlier date. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the relationship between belief and the artefact which I wish to claim was instrumental in the art and architecture of fourteenth-century Cairo, and there have been studies which have taken a similar view of Persian sufism, linking it to the world of art.<sup>59</sup>

A vital figure in the formation of the *ishrāqi* or illuminationist school of sufism, which was to find a home in Egypt in the Shādhili order, was Suhrawardī known as al-Maqtūl, already mentioned, the *Shaikh al-Ishrāq* (Master of Illumination) who died in Aleppo in 1191, where he had stayed in the *khānqāh* of the Qādiriyya order of sufis, who were to be prominent in Cairo. (Carl Petry noted that references to two orders, the Qādiriyya and the Shādhiliyya, were mentioned frequently in the biographies which he analysed.<sup>60</sup>) The original decoration of this particular *khānqāh* is no longer extant, but the Shadhbakhtiyya madrasa of 1193, one of several constructions by its founder, remains in Aleppo to display the kind of architectural decoration found on well-endowed religious buildings in Suhrawardī's time: fine marble inlay in strong colour contrasts and broad and bold designs.

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Suhrawardī's teachings, though unpopular with Saladin, were nevertheless of great influence. A recent discussion of Suhrawardī's work<sup>61</sup> suggests that the motive for Saladin's hostility to Suhrawardī was not simply religious opposition: that the philosopher died as a result of Saladin's enmity towards the ruler of Aleppo. 'It is likely that the Philosophy of Illumination' may have been viewed as the 'constitution for a new 'city' to be ruled by the philosophically educated Malik Zāhir Shah with the aid of the philosopher Suhrawardī, who would serve as the spiritual power behind the throne.'<sup>62</sup>

After his death the works of Suhrawardī continued to be studied and disseminated, with commentaries by such figures as Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzi (1236-1311), astronomer and physician amongst other accomplishments. Quṭb al-Dīn visited Qalāwūn in Cairo as an ambassador.<sup>63</sup> Suhrawardī was influential in the doctrines of the Cairene mystic, al-Shādhili, in the first part of the fifteenth century.<sup>64</sup>

As to the social history of the sufi movement in Cairo, some sufi shaikhs developed close links with the sultanate. The al-Khidr who exerted an influence over Baybars I, presumably styling himself after the mysterious 'green man' of the Koran, interpreted by sufis as a spirit-guide, is rather a shadowy figure. None of his own writings appears to survive. The most detailed account, more detailed than that of Maqrīzī, is that of the Coptic historian Mufazzal ibn Abi'l Fazail.<sup>65</sup> The Shaikh's career had started in the Jazīra, and he moved thence to Aleppo and Damascus. Baybars discovered him living in a mountain cave in Syria, was impressed by the rightness of his prophecies, and sent for al-Khidr when he gained

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the Sultanate. Baybars built him a *zāwiya* 'outside Cairo on the canal' and we have confirmation of the existence of this in the foundation deed of the hospital of Qalāwūn, where property belonging to the *zāwiya* of al-Khidr is mentioned. Baybars set aside great revenues for the al-Khidr *zāwiya* in Cairo and also constructed them for him in Damascus, Ba'albek, Hama and Homs. Al-Khidr was responsible for the sacking of the 'Panther Church' in Damascus and its conversion into a mosque and for ravaging the Church of the Crucifixion in Jerusalem and turning it into a *zāwiya*, but these events may be distorted by the viewpoint of the Coptic historian, Mufazzal.

According to Mufazzal, Baybars sited his mosque in Cairo near the *zāwiya* of al-Khidr because of the quantity of people visiting the shaikh there.<sup>66</sup> This is a motivation quite different from those assigned by Creswell or Bloom, although Bloom acknowledges the al-Khidr influence.<sup>67</sup> Creswell accepts Maqrīzī's story<sup>68</sup> that the Sultan chose it because it was his polo-ground, refusing to allow it to be sited on the kneeling-ground for the royal camels.<sup>69</sup> This version perpetuates a view of the Sultan as a monster of selfish whim, and although Jonathan Bloom gives a new interpretation for the siting of the mosque, which he sees as a political decision to counterbalance the Shāf'ī monument on the other side of the city he also relies on Maqrīzī's account.<sup>70</sup> The latest scholar to publish a study of Baybars, Peter Thorau, follows the Creswell version: 'it was decided to erect it on the hippodrome of Qaraqush.'<sup>71</sup> None of these scholars contemplates the possibility of royal piety which Mufazzal's account raises but which in fact is supported by other items in Maqrīzī's list of Baybars' works<sup>72</sup> which includes a number of '*waqf*'

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charities, such as one for washing and burying the indigent, and a tomb in the Qarāfa. (Baybars' bridge-building is often mentioned, but it is rarely noted that a bridge could be counted as a pious cause for 'waqf'.<sup>73</sup> It seems a pointless task to try to disentangle political acumen from 'genuine' religious belief in a mind so far removed from ours.)

Although al-Khidr's career eventually came to a sorry end, he was, (if we can see more than the medieval historian's imposition of past legend upon his contemporary world, and Mufazzal's account is so detailed and circumstantial that we surely can) the source of a large spiritual movement which was given impetus by royal patronage. He may also have been the advisor who interpreted ancient script in the episode of Baybars' discovery of Pharaonic remains during the construction of his madrasa in Cairo, an episode which will receive fuller attention in discussion of the Hermetic tradition.

The influence of sufism on Baybars was not the only example of its penetration to a very high level. To this rank we should assign the emir Shaykhū, who ruled the kingdom in all but name at the zenith of his career, and whose career was both powerful and devout. During the Black Death of 1347-9, he was credited with assisting the washing and burial of the dead.<sup>74</sup> The dedicatory inscription of his *khānqāh* uses sufi phraseology such as the reference to incorporation of a single drop in an ocean, a metaphor for union of the mystic with the immensity of god and Van Berchem has commented that it is the most important document of sufism found in epigraphy.<sup>75</sup> This particular metaphor was taken up by al-Shādhili; although he

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was teaching in Cairo nearly a century after Shaykhū's constructions, he may be cited as demonstrating the sufi exegesis:

'A certain gnostic said: "We sailed over a sea, at whose shore the prophets stood;" to which we responded: "The gnostics have sailed over the sea of unification, first by proof and evidence, and afterwards they reached the rank of contemplation and seeing."<sup>76</sup>

The same text gives us al-Shādhili's understanding of the physical thirst as a metaphor for the spiritual:

'A certain gnostic said "And all the woe of Job is but a part of my affliction." To which we reply, "Job's ordeals concerned the body not the spirit, while the ordeals of this gnostic partake of the spiritual burning thirst (*awām*) as well as bodily affliction."<sup>77</sup>

We can relate this to the inscription on the *sabīl* of Shaykhū, built outside Bāb al-Wazīr in 1354, the year before the date on the foundation inscription of his *khānqāh*. The *sabīl* inscription refers to the slaking of thirst as the most pious of actions; the dualistic interpretation of sufism, seeing the thirst as spiritual as well as physical, illuminates the whole tradition of the fountain-school as providing for the thirsts of both mind and body.<sup>78</sup> The Koranic inscription of the *sabīl* also suggests wider interpretations for sufism, for it refers to (Koran, LXXVI, 6) the heavenly fountain where the devotees (*'Ibādun*) of Allah, those who perform vows (*tadhrun*), may drink.

Taking the whole picture together, the *sabīl* as well as the other buildings, the personality of the founder, the architecture, the richness of the décor, the

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religious exegeses in the *khānqāh* and mosque which he built, we have a collection of incorporated material whose presence may be best explained by a combination of influences on the patron, both mystical and worldly. The courtyard of the *khānqāh* is paved with porphyry and marble; the porphyry must have been obtained from an earlier source, probably Roman, for the quarries in the Eastern Desert, the sole source, were not worked later than the fifth century A.D.<sup>79</sup> The marble tiles, mainly *giallo antico* and *bianco e nero antico*<sup>80</sup> are probably re-cut from imports of the same period. The vestibule of the mosque is marked by a curious incorporation of three pieces of obsidian in the walls (these may be interpreted by reference to alchemical texts and will be the subject of further discussion). In the foundations of a small room of the mosque was found a Ptolemaic stela (no. 98 in the catalogue of Pharaonic material); it is two metres high, and its size and completeness would militate against its being interpreted as foundation rubble. In the lintel and threshold of both mosque and *khanqāh* are incorporated large blocks of greenish stone (see no. 99 in Pharaonic catalogue) whose removal from a Pharaonic site at Memphis was described by al-Qalqashandī.<sup>81</sup> Shaykhū ordered that it should be removed in one piece; it broke up, and he gave instructions that the blocks should be placed in his new buildings. We do not know what he would have intended to do with the whole naos, but such a piece was used as a *sabīl* in the corridor between the madrasa and mausoleum of Qalawun, and a sarcophagus was also used as a *sabīl* near the mosque of Ibn Tūlūn. Another sarcophagus, now in the British Museum, is pierced with drainage holes and may have served a similar function in a mosque in Alexandria (although we do not know exactly at what

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dates.<sup>82</sup>) It is not impossible that Shaykhu intended the naos for his *sabl*, whose superstructure, the vault in which the cistern, now vanished, was contained, bears a striking resemblance to Mayer's engraving of the vault built over the sarcophagus near ibn Tūlūn which was used as a *sabl*. (It is interesting to note that Ainslie and Mayer in 1805 recorded its traditional name of 'The lovers' fountain'<sup>83</sup> along with the belief that its waters would cure the pains of love, perhaps a trace of an earlier religious significance. This *sabl* was probably either at the entrance to the madrasa of Ṣarḡhitmish or to that of Salar and Sanjar.) It might not be unreasonable to infer that Shaykhū's *sabl* was originally intended to contain something similar. In any event, the purpose of his buildings, the inscriptions and the collection of re-used materials in his mosque and *khanqāh* may be seen as reflecting the interests of the patron on several levels: not merely that it was lavish, that to bring pieces from Memphis was a feat demonstrating power, but that there was a reflection of sufi influence, of their concerns with alchemy and Hermeticism, in the use of Pharaonic material. The wish of the patron is not necessarily an alternative explanation to esotericism in the intellectual background of the time, but may be part of the mechanism through which it worked.

This can also be a reasonable interpretation in other cases where we have particular individuals, patrons or craftsmen, associated with particular architectural features. In Syria, for example, we can trace a design associated with the emir Tankiz<sup>84</sup>, a design which follows those found in Aleppo mihrābs more than a century previously, for example, in the Shadhbaktiyya madrasa mentioned above.<sup>85</sup> At Tankiz' madrasa in Jerusalem (1328-30) we find marble panelling in a notable

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overlapping design, which bears a close resemblance to work at the Aqsā and in the Ḥaram at Hebron, both also ordered by Tankiz. Burgoyne concludes they are the work of the same team of specialists. It is a pattern that is found again in Jerusalem, at the madrasa of al-Ālmalikiyya in 1340<sup>86</sup>, and later at Cairo, at the madrasa of Sultan Ḥasan (although in these cases carried out in stone and used as a window surround.) We could conclude that the work in Cairo (in which Tankiz cannot have been involved since he died in 1343) is that of the same craftsmen, or, more probably those trained by the original craftsmen. But this would not explain why the design had found favour originally with Tankiz, nor why it could be translated to Cairo. It would be logical to assume that it corresponded to some requirement both in Syria and in Egypt, but that requirement, or set of requirements, may not have been the same in all its uses: Aleppo, Jerusalem and Cairo may have viewed the design differently. Nevertheless, we have the problem of accounting for its use in these different sets of conditions, and of trying to perceive common factors. The single thread which seems to link all uses is that of the dualist aesthetic which parallels the contrasts perceived by sufism. In personal terms, Tankiz' known severe rectitude may point the way to a theological interpretation, that this particular design expressed or was associated with religious concepts; we may not be able to recover exactly what they were, but they can provide the framework that relates the actions of individuals to the society in which they moved.

This brings us to the difficulty of attempting to assess whether the marble inlay style was found also in secular life, and whether a theory concerning religious buildings would be vitiated by this use. The evidence of secular buildings is very

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slight, even if we add some conjectures based on historians' accounts and contemporary manuscript illumination. In Cairo, we have accounts of the citadel, from which Doris Behrens-Abouseif has concluded that 'the decorative devices used in its architecture were the same as those used in urban religious or secular architecture: marble floors and dados, wooden inscriptions gilded and painted, carvings and mosaics, stalactites on portals and bases of domes.'<sup>87</sup> Unfortunately, we do not know whether the designs used were similar to the marble inlays of surviving religious buildings, in particular whether there were secular parallels for the complex designs in the mihrāb. A major difference, of course would have been the presence of representational work in secular decoration: there were architectural and vegetal mosaics, but whether they paralleled mosaics in religious buildings in date seems unclear. Behrens-Abouseif notes traditions that Baybars I and Khalīl had their palaces adorned with portraits: the problem with this kind of evidence is that the writers (ibn Taghrī Birdī and Makrīzī respectively) were not contemporary with the architecture. Not only this, but they worked in a pattern of inherited information rather than external observation, and the tradition of palatial figural and portrait painting to which Behrens-Abouseif refers is very largely, in Egypt, a literary one, the only actual surviving work being a few Fāṭimid sketches. We may therefore be dealing with the tradition of a literary topos, an account of what was thought suitable for a prince's hall, rather than a real description. There is some evidence to be had from manuscripts, which suggests that the style of marble panelling was found in luxurious private houses, in the *Maqāmāt* of 1337, although

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we do not know whether the painter was representing a contemporary scene or drawing on a pictorial tradition.

The evidence from the Turkish period, from which there is much more in the way of secular survival, suggests that distinctions between religious and secular architecture in that period were not rigid. But in religious architecture, although the marble dado of the later fourteenth and early fifteenth century survives, the linear geometric contrasts of the inlaid mihrāb designs have been replaced by flowing vegetal and floral ceramic.

It is not necessary for the purpose of my arguments, however, that a style be confined to religious architecture: merely that, in a religious environment, it was likely to have a religious interpretation. That this interpretation was not one which would be excluded from secular life, was in fact compatible with courtly life, is supported by the flexible nature of sufism and the record of royal involvement with it.

The iconography of the king and the philosopher, a theme as ancient as the story of Alexander and Diogenes, runs through the period, with allusions to sultans and mystics forming a variant on it. Baybars I formed a close association with Shaikh al-Khidr. Petry has noted that 'the Mamluks, despite their own military and political preoccupations, tended to respect, even to fear individuals exhibiting a special relationship with the divine.'<sup>88</sup> The relationship of ruler and philosopher appears repeatedly, both directly and in animal metaphors, in perhaps the most popular illustrated work of the period, the *Kalīla wa Dimna*.

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Ibn Taimiyya, seen as perhaps the epitome of 'orthodox' theology, is the figure who perhaps best fulfilled the Diogenes role, haranguing the rich lax life-style. He has also been seen as opposed to sufism but it has emerged, as a result of the work of Makdisi, that ibn Taimiyya was himself a sufi, initiated by a Qādiriyya shaikh; his opposition in this regard was to revelatory and mystical sufism as practised by ibn 'Arabi, rather than to the pursuit of the sufi path in itself.<sup>89</sup>

There are several allusions in ibn Ṭaḡhrī Birdī which suggest that Barqūq was a supporter of sufism. In 1384, because of his respect for the Shaikh of the Shaykhū *khānqāh*, Barqūq walked in the shaikh's funeral procession and continued standing at the grave while the body was interred<sup>90</sup>. Barqūq's will directed that he should be buried in the desert plain at the feet of certain dervishes.<sup>91</sup>

The extent of the spread of sufism is amply attested in the sheer physical extent of the buildings which were provided for them. Sufism was acceptable in Cairo, according to Trimingham, to Islamic legalists as early as the twelfth century.<sup>92</sup> Fernandes repeats Trimingham's claim that the *khānqāhs* made sufi teaching respectable, but claims also that the *khānqāh* served to separate orthodox sufi teaching from that practised in the *zāwiya* or the *ribat*, bringing it under state control.<sup>93</sup> However, as has already been noted, there were great varieties of practice within any one religious building and Fernandes may be too prescriptive. The official support of the *khānqāh* does however indicate the huge numbers involved. Their extent has been charted in detail by Fernandes and by John Alden Williams,<sup>94</sup> and it is clear that this was a large-scale movement in the bigger structures, such as that of al-Nāṣir at Siryāqūs, which supported a hundred sufis.<sup>95</sup>

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The foundation of Baybars II maintained four hundred sufis in 1309/10, when it was first established, and although at first it met with hostility from al-Nāṣir, its endowments were increased during the course of the fourteenth century. In the fifteenth century, Petry found 785 sufis among his 4631 biographical subjects,<sup>96</sup> which means about one-sixth of the *'ulama*. That it was a mass movement which cut across the social scale is shown in the great set-pieces of ibn Ṭagh̃rī Birdī's accounts of al-Mu'ayyad's ceremonies in the Qarāfa.<sup>97</sup>

The Qarāfa had been a cemetery for private burial for many centuries, but it had also been a place where they dwelt and meditated, perpetuating the tradition of the desert mystic. Qarāfa mystics abounded in the Fāṭimid period and official establishments in al-Qahira had been balanced by the local cults in the Qarāfa, where were the tombs of particular local veneration such as those of Imam al-Shāfi'ī and Nafīsa. The growth of settlement outside Cairo and its royal encouragement can be seen as an essentially economically motivated expansion along the road to Syria. It can also be seen as a pragmatic move outside the urban area to have greater space for building. But it also continued an ascetic tradition of great antiquity.

If we accept Trimmingham's dictum that sufi organisations tended to absorb popular cults, even that the *khānqāh* needed a cult in order to survive successfully<sup>98</sup> we can see religious motives at the heart of the move to the northern cemetery. Barqūq's will established a *waqf* for the graves of the brothers of Joseph in the Qarāfa, and distributed a dinar to each dervish. The site of his mausoleum/madrassa was chosen for religious reasons as the burial ground of certain

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sufis, dervishes and ecstasies.<sup>99</sup> The pattern of use in this foundation in the reigns of Faraj and al-Mu'ayyad suggests that, although it did provide a convenient sojourn on the way to and from Syria, it developed a life in the fifteenth century as a local shrine to which the populace of Cairo resorted in times of trouble. It was a place of pilgrimage for Faraj, who made frequent visits, sleeping there at night and slaughtering sacrificial animals.<sup>100</sup> He did so before beginning his Syrian campaign in 1412, in an episode which reminds us of the vigils of prayer kept in the Qalāwūn foundation before Khalīl's attack on Acre. In neither of these episodes does the physical convenience of the Sultan and his retinue seem to have been placed above piety.

Al Mu'ayyad supported the khānqāh at Siryāqūs founded by al-Nāṣir and stayed two nights there in 1416 on his way back to Cairo from Damascus.<sup>101</sup> It may have made a convenient stopping-off point, but the fact that the sultan stayed all night watching the dervishes dance suggests something beyond that.

Later come the episodes which furnish the great set-pieces of ibn Ṭagh̃rī Birdī,<sup>102</sup> and the focus is once again the desert and the tomb of Barqūq. In 1419 the sultan, plainly dressed, his horse without its customary gold trappings, leads his people as they stream out of Cairo to the desert, where sacrifices and prayers are offered for release from the scourge of the plague. 'Proclamation was made among the men that they should fast three days and on [the last] day they should go out with Sultan al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad to the Desert Plain and pray to God that he lift the plague from them ... that the scholars, jurists, shaikhs and dervishes of the monasteries - all should go ... the sultan rode down without any royal regalia

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wearing a white woollen cloak and a woollen shawl in the sufi manner. When he reached the place of the Friday prayers in the desert plain he dismounted [and prayed] and then rode to the court of Barqūq's tomb where the meal was to take place. He sacrificed rams, cows, water-buffaloes, camels ...'

The next year there was a low Nile, and again the Sultan in the dress of the sufis prayed in the plain with a large congregation. Barsbay continued the desert tradition, but created his own foundation there.

The historical evidence amply shows the ascendancy of sufism, at all levels of society, and both within the city and outside it in the desert plain.

Sufism was, of course, not the only form of Islamic esotericism, which was also a characteristic of Shī'ism; the two have much common ground, some main aspects of which will now be summarised.

## SHĪ'ISM AND SUFISM: SOME COMMON GROUND

Both Shī'ism and sufism accept the possibility of direct communication from the divinity to the individual and venerate prophecy and prophets. For both, light is a powerful image, representing, to the Shī'a, the divine light transmitted through the Imamate and, to the sufis, the light received and transmitted by the prophet. In this cosmogony, darkness is ignorance and sin, resulting in a dualist allegory of light and dark, perhaps arising from gnostic and Manichaeian teaching which influenced Islamic esotericism.

Both have a tradition of exegesis which relates exterior phenomena to an internal world. In Shī'ism, this perhaps resulted from a combination of two forces: the esoteric processes of identification of incumbents for the Imamate and the occasional necessity enforced by circumstances of concealment from persecution; certainly, it produced the belief that every appearance implied an inner reality, and this was also true of the sacred texts and rituals of Islam.<sup>103</sup> In Sufism, the doctrines of the spiritual meanings of physical realities were expounded by the great teachers such as al-Ghazālī and ibn 'Arabī. It is true that al-Ghazālī launched an attack on the Shī'ite emphasis on the *bāṭin*, with his polemical work against the Ismā'īlīs,<sup>104</sup> but his method in other works, such as his treatise on light, follows the exegetic principles of relating inner and outer experiences, as Ettinghausen noted in a brief discussion of the *Alchemy of happiness, Kīmiyā-i Sa'ādat*, viewing it from the tradition of prescriptive aesthetics of the Coomaraswamy school.<sup>105</sup>

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Dualism is a feature of such a system of exegesis, where each phenomenon has a spiritual counterpart and therefore a concept of parallelism or of physical/metaphysical counterparts arises.

Also common to both sufism and Shī'ism was the importance of a central figure and religious authority, in sufism the qutb, in Shī'ism the Imam, who both upheld and transmitted the system. Sufism had much respect for 'Alī. Further, for both, there was the central figure of the 'perfect man,' the *insān al-kāmil* of the sufis and the Imam of the Shī'a, who was a perfect microcosm of the universe.<sup>106</sup>

We might note also that both systems are, in general, highly ordered and organised and full of enumerations. There were, of course, dervishes who followed no methodology, but characteristic of sufi orders are the *Maqāmāt*, the stations, the markers of progress of the way to spirituality. For the various branches of the Shī'ites, the processes of calculation in counting past prophets and imams and future incumbents were an essential part of their religious system, often leading to the most complex divisions and sub-divisions of ranked orders of spiritual beings. It is possible to see two progressions here, one linear, the movement of the suppliant along a path which is very characteristic of the sufi search for spiritual perfection, and the other a movement of the divinity or his representative radiating out from a central point, a movement which describes the functioning of the imam or shaikh, and is also the movement of qualities associated with the divinity, such as illumination and forgiveness.

It is probably also desirable to mention that in both traditions complex sciences were studied and knowledge transmitted. Both were associated with

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Hermeticism, with secret codes and ciphers, with astronomy and alchemy. The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', authors of a vast compendium of such knowledge, were Ismā'īlī Shī'ites.<sup>107</sup>

Jonathan Bloom has studied the influence of Fāṭimid Shī'ism on the architecture of the dynasty, and has come to the conclusion that certain aspects of it, such as the Shī'ite belief in the portion of the divine light transmitted to the various Imams, can be seen reflected in architecture and inscriptions.<sup>108</sup> His difficulty seems to be the identification of those attributes that were characteristic of Shī'ism as opposed to those which were features of Islamic esotericism generally: thus, the imagery of light is common to both.

His assumption of deliberate and programmatic intention on the part of the Fāṭimid patrons creates another difficulty: to explain why the esoteric habit of expression should be found among the rulers who were absolute masters of Cairo to such an extent that they could surely have made any overt statements of Shī'ite belief which they desired.

Both these difficulties can be resolved if we accept the esoteric tradition of Shī'ism as continuing and intensifying Islamic tradition in a particular way. This is as a methodology of exegesis, of esoteric interpretations of overt statements, so that, by intellectual habit, as a craftsman's productions are stamped by the habit of his manual methods, it progresses by allusions rather than by deliberate statements. The esoteric reference thus becomes an intellectual method which is not necessarily in opposition to what has gone before in history, nor necessarily abandoned along with Shī'ism. Indeed, it illuminates the subsequent success of esoteric interpretation

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in Cairo as a continuation of method, in a way similar to Trimingham's analysis of the sufi tradition of prophetic transmission, the *silsila*, as replacing the gap left by the suppression of Shī'ism<sup>109</sup> A break in overt profession of belief does not mean necessarily a break in habits of thought.

We cannot, of course, lay claim to Shī'ism as a direct cause of esoteric interpretation of art and architecture after the Fāṭimid period. But some points might be noted: there seems to have been no attempt under Sunnism to destroy local traditional Shī'ite shrines whose popularity was widespread, such as that of al-Ḥusān or Nafīsa, in spite of the destruction of the Fāṭimid library. Shī'ite beliefs, in the form of *Hamlet* without the Prince, may therefore have added another level of interpretation of works of art in the post-Fāṭimid period and help to explain, not only the success of sufism in Cairo, but its interest in esoteric expression.

## SUFISM AND ESOTERIC MEANING

‘Il y a un secret unique du monde, et ce secret tient dans un mot, l’univers est un coffre-fort dont l’humanité cherche le chiffre: Einstein l’a presque trouvé, voilà le mythe d’Einstein; on y retrouve des thèmes gnostiques; l’unité de la nature, la possibilité idéale d’une réduction fondamentale du monde, la puissance d’ouverture du mot, la lutte ancestrale d’un secret et d’une parole ...’

*Mythologies*, Paris, 1957, p.104

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With customary brevity, Barthes sketches the elements of the esoteric understanding of the physical universe. This kind of understanding was that of the sufi mystics: it will be argued that the theory of correspondence between the physical and metaphysical worlds ('world' used here to translate *'ālam*) provides us with an interpretative key to the architectural decoration of the buildings in fourteenth-century Cairo and that in this period the history of architectural decoration broadly parallels the spread of the sufi movement. Architectural decoration demonstrates a shift from the outer to the inner worlds, accompanying the increasing emphasis on the metaphysical which resulted from the success of sufism.

The great sufi scholar, ibn 'Arabī, who in the early part of the thirteenth-century had taught in Anatolia, Syria and Cairo, had used the visible world as a means of understanding the invisible:

'The Reality is, in relation to a particular shadow, small or large, pure or purer, as light in relation to the glass that separates it from the beholder to whom the light has the colour of the glass, while the light itself has no colour. This is the relationship between your reality and your Lord; for, if you were to say the light is green because of the green glass, you would be right as viewing the situation through your senses, and if you were to say that it is not green, indeed it is colourless, by deduction, you would also be right as viewing the situation through sound intellectual reasoning. That which is seen may be said to be a light projected from a shadow, which is the glass, or a luminous shadow, according to its purity.'<sup>110</sup>

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This reference develops the postulation of two corresponding worlds, the one substantial and the other metaphysical, which was a key element of Islamic theology and became a corner-stone of sufism. Melikian Chirvani notes that ‘the idea that the physical world is a metaphor of the true and only reality, that which transcends matter, is at the heart of sufi meditation.’<sup>111</sup>

According to the great sufi master, al-Ghazālī, these similarities between the two worlds, the spiritual and the physical, made possible the upward journey of the soul from the baseness of this world to the spirituality of the next:

‘The world is two worlds, spiritual and material, a world sensual and a world intelligential, a world supernal and a world inferior ... the visible world is the point of departure up to the world of the realm supernal ... Were there no relation between the two worlds, no inter-connexion at all, then all upward progress would be inconceivable from one to the other. Therefore the divine mercy gave to the World Visible a correspondence with the World of the Realm Supernal, and for this reason there is not a single thing in this world of sense that is not a symbol of something in yonder one. It may well hap that some one thing in this world may symbolise several things in the World of the Realm Supernal, and equally well that some one thing in the latter may have several symbols in the World Visible ... A complete enumeration of these symbols would involve our exhausting the whole of the existing things in both of the Two Worlds.’<sup>112</sup>

Al-Ghazālī’s doctrines were perhaps among the most influential versions of this thinking, and he also provides an extensive terminology, in which the two worlds are *rūhhānī* and *jismānī*, the spiritual and the fleshly, or *hissī* and ‘*aqlī*,

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the sensory and the intelligential, or *'alūt* and *siflī*, above and below. These correspond also to the worlds of *al-mulk* and *al-shahādah*, of power and of manifestation, on the one hand, and of *al-ghaib* and *al-malakūt*, the worlds of non-being and of sovereignty.<sup>113</sup> (The relevant Arabic text is given in this footnote.)

Al-Ghazālī sets out with great clarity the connection between the opposing worlds, and the purpose of that connection, which is to allow humanity to progress upwards from an earth-bound state to a spiritual one, and to this end, the creator has made the visible world to correspond with the invisible.

The means of access to the higher world was through *kashf*, the disclosure of hidden meanings, and the way of pursuit is called by al-Ghazālī the *ṭarīq*, which could perhaps be described as a generic term for the sufi search, as well as the individual paths which were developed.

The sufis inherited both Neoplatonic and Koranic thinking in the history of esoteric correspondence.

In the theories of Plato and Aristotle, the visible world was only one existence: there was also a world of heavenly spheres beyond, in the Platonic World of Forms which contained the perfect types of earthly objects. To this concept, the *'ālam al-mithāl* of Islamic thinkers bears a relationship.<sup>114</sup> The nature of the connection between the physical and the metaphysical worlds and of both kinds to a creative being exercised Islamic philosophy and underlay much mystical thought.

This thinking depends on analogy, though the relationship between the world of the creator and his creation may be expressed in other ways, as polarities linked by the Great Chain of Being, for example.<sup>115</sup> The notion of especial

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correspondences between the two kinds of actuality, physical and spiritual, are, in Koranic terms, as in XXX 20-27 or XLV 3-6, the signs with which the creator has marked his creation, the function of which is to allow humanity to arrive at an understanding of the divine. The Koran also presents (LV) a visionary dualism of two worlds in which parallel existences are conceived.

The number of worlds in later thinking is not limited to two: there may be three, four, five, or more, although Islamic philosophy had also to stress an ultimate unity of being, so that the appearance of diversity concealed an apparent unity, and the thought of Islamic philosophers such as ibn ‘Arabī and Suhrawardī oscillates between statements which define separations between worlds and statements of divine unity which resolves them. Esoteric interpretation of the exoteric proposes a form of reconciliation where apparent opposites and polarities, things that are outwardly different in form, can be reconciled because of their inner nature. Thus, in ibn ‘Arabī, for example, apparent opposites such as God and worshipper, lord and slave, are reconciled through the basic concept that all being is one.<sup>116</sup> Ibn ‘Atā’illāh, the Malikite teacher who was also a sufi of the Shādhili order, teaching in Cairo at the end of the thirteenth century, expressed the basic unity of both outward and inward worlds, the reconciliation of seeming paradox, thus:

‘He [god] manifests everything because he is the interior (*al-bāṭin*) and He conceals the existence of everything because He is the Exterior (*al-zāhir*).’<sup>117</sup>

Suhrawardī presents three<sup>118</sup> or four worlds,<sup>119</sup> and includes in these a *barzakh*, or intermedial zone (in Suhrawardī’s case a double *barzakh*, as in the perception of ibn ‘Arabī and his follower Dā’ūd al-Qaysarī, who saw one *barzakh*

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as intermedial for entry into the mystical state, and another as intermedial when leaving that state.<sup>120</sup>) Gardet has noted five worlds described in Islamic thinking.<sup>121</sup> But the essential principle, however many spheres of existence are defined, is that one cosmos is a reflection of another.

By the fourteenth century, this concept of corresponding worlds was a widespread part of Islamic thinking, as described by al-Azmeh.<sup>122</sup> Contemporary references to corresponding worlds are found, for example, in the commentary of Dā'ūd al-Qayṣarī, long resident in Cairo in the middle of the century, on ibn 'Arabī.<sup>123</sup> But it was the growth of sufism which would have made it widespread in Cairo, not just its continuance as a theory of the learned.

The implications for buildings and works of art, as for other corporeal objects, of metaphysical correspondences for physical phenomena meant that the theory could provide a system of esoteric reference, meanings beyond the immediate and overt. This was surely as applicable to the buildings which sheltered the sufis as it was to everything else in the physical world.

At this point, it may be useful to introduce a summary of the physical facts of that decoration and to describe a major change which occurred in it before going on to examine it in the light of metaphysical interpretations.

## HISTORICAL SUMMARY OF ARCHITECTURAL DECORATION:

### THE MOVE FROM STUCCO TO MARBLE

My claim will be that marble inlay reflected contemporary thinking at the beginning of the fourteenth century, in its hard dualist contrasts, its clear differentiations, as between body and soul, darkness and light. But why did it take until the middle of the century, to become the dominant aesthetic of the age, the classic 'mamluk marble' ? Stucco was still a prominent part of decorative schemes until the middle of the century: its last major occurrences are in 1347-8. Can we account for its decline at the turn of the century?

We can chart the move from stucco to marble in the surviving monuments. Although marble appeared in the mihrāb of the mausoleum of Ṣālīḥ Ayyub in 1250 (a date whose possible revision will be mentioned in later discussion), elsewhere stucco was the leading decorative element for another half-century. Entire insides of domes (Zāwiyat al-Abbar, 1285-6, Aḥmad ibn Sulāiman al-Rifā'ī, 1291) were covered with it, as Hautecoeur and Wiet point out.<sup>124</sup> It covered minarets, the most striking example perhaps being that of the madrasa of al-Nāṣir. It did not retreat from the mihrāb: Leila Aly Ibrahim has noted<sup>125</sup> four linen-based stucco mihrāb hoods, Lājīn's at ibn Ṭūlūn, 1296, Baktimūr's at al-Ṣālīḥ Ṭalā'i', 1296, the madrasa/mausoleum of Qarāsunqur, 1300, Salār's at al-Azhar, 1303. Salār's stucco mihrāb on the outer wall of 'Amr was recorded by Creswell.<sup>126</sup>

There is also some evidence of the regard in which the tradition of the stucco mihrāb was held at the start of the fourteenth century. At ibn Ṭūlūn are two

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interesting 'archaicizing' exercises in flat stucco mihrābs, that called 'the mihrāb of Sayīda Nafīsa' and that mentioning Sultan Lājīn in the inscription, both of 1296.

The first of these has large-scaled interlace decoration, very reminiscent of the style of the Tūlūnid mihrābs. The second mihrāb of 1296 is a close copy of that of al-Afdal, the Fāṭimid vizier.<sup>127</sup>

At this date it seems therefore that the stucco mihrāb was understood as a traditional form, respected enough to be studied and copied.

Extensive stucco panels of wall-decoration have survived above Salar's mihrāb at al-Azhar, demonstrating lavish use of the medium beyond the confines of the mihrāb itself. This is still visible in the mosque of the emir Hussein of 1319, where, although the mihrāb itself is of marble inlay, it is surmounted by great panels of fine stucco. At al-Māridānī, (1339-1340) on the upper part of the qibla wall are fine stucco ornaments including designs in the form of stylised trees. As for the stucco mihrāb hood, it was not finished yet, for it features at the khānqāh of Princess Tughay of 1348, possibly, like the mihrāb of al-Nāṣir,<sup>128</sup> Mongol or Mongol-influenced work<sup>129</sup> receiving a new stimulus from that direction.

The last extensive use of stucco seems to be in this foundation of Tughay and in a closely contemporary building, the mausoleum of Kujuk in the mosque of Aqsunqur<sup>130</sup>, where elaborate stucco roundels were used. After this, however, stucco seems to dwindle as a medium for decoration on any scale. From the middle of the fourteenth century, its use is almost confined to a medium for small details high up on the walls, or for inscriptions, where its fluidity facilitates and

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complements the movement of naskhi script. Its place in more prominent areas is taken by marble.

The move from stucco to marble represents a shift not only in materials but in content, for stucco was admirably suited to flowing arabesque vegetal designs, the relief increasing the naturalistic representation of flowers and plants. Intertwining leaves, flowers and stems, buds and fruit are the characteristic stucco themes: stucco geometric patterns feature only in small lozenges and roundels. In the marble inlay, angular abstract geometric work predominates.

The shift from stucco to marble therefore means a loss in naturalistic representation, as the fruits and tendrils of stucco give way to angular outlines. Curvilinear art is preserved in panels to a small extent, particularly in paste inlay, as found in wall-panels at Sultan Hasan, but has quite lost its prominence when expressed in stucco.

Even in religious buildings, a representational element had appeared in the decoration of Fāṭimid mosques, as in the description of the mosque of the Qarāfa given by Maqrīzī, where:

‘... there was a painting on the intrados of one of the arches showing a fountain on steps, decorated in black, white, red green, blue and yellow.’<sup>131</sup>

It is not clear whether this painted decoration was flat or on stucco or on wood in relief, but in any case it was evidently considered a very good likeness.

Was the shift in content, the loss of vegetal depiction in the fourteenth century, due to the religious change, to the change in medium, or to neither in isolation?

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The visual world at the beginning of the fourteenth century must still have held many elements from the past, in particular, the Fāṭimid mosques, with their vegetal painted stucco, were still in operation. Subsequent benefactors added new mihrābs, sometimes, as we have seen, carefully styled on the old patterns. The religious change seems to have meant no degradation of the Shi'ite buildings, apart from Saladin's economically-motivated removal of silver from the mihrābs,<sup>132</sup> they continued to be used and adorned with respect.

That the shift in content from representational to abstract was not simply due to the change in medium is borne out by the presence of a third medium, which bore motifs similar to those of the traditional stucco mihrāb. Glass mosaic presented for a brief period the representation of the vase and vine motif found in mihrābs of the Fāṭimid period.<sup>133</sup> The mihrāb of Shajarat al-Durr had a tree motif in naturalistic colours of green and red with the fruit indicated in mother of pearl, although the branches here do not emerge from a vase.<sup>134</sup> The vase, with tendrils and fleurons, appears at the foundations of Aqbugha and Sitt Miska, again in glass mosaic, in mihrāb hoods. These examples are very close in date, c.1339-40, and they are the last, both in subject matter and material. If it had been considered desirable to continue the subject-matter, although stucco was not available, a possibility would presumably have existed to do so in the medium of mosaic, but the opportunity was not taken up.

Nor was the medium of faience, which offered a similar tradition in subject-matter, the Persian-influenced floral and vegetal motifs. Meinecke's study<sup>135</sup> has tabulated the use of this material: its movement from plain tiles used in cladding or

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lettering to patterned designs and then its disappearance save for a tiny window in Sultan Ḥasan. Its disappearance may be, as Meinecke thinks, caused by the death of the craftsmen of al-Nāṣir, but the question has to be asked: why did the medium not become established in Cairo, as was to happen at the end of the next century? For those who take a ~~patron~~ patron-driven view of the aesthetic machine, then the problem arises that although al-Nāṣir's name was constantly evoked in the inscriptions of his descendants, his artistic tastes, it seems, were not.

Dodd has suggested that the vase and vine motif derives from antiquity, and is of Byzantine-Syrian origin<sup>136</sup>, but, like the Mongol-style stucco motifs, foreign style or workmanship was not necessarily rejected on that score. The use of both Byzantine and Mongol style work in the two most prestigious buildings of the two great founders of the Qalāwūnid house, Qalāwūn and al-Nāṣir, whose names were cited proudly in the titular descriptions of their descendants, would surely have been enough to counteract any possible objections on the ground of external origins. It seems that a technical explanation, such as the loss through disaster of stucco, mosaic and faience workshops, is not sufficient to explain the loss of the vegetal subjects associated with them as prominent elements of architectural decoration. Furthermore, the success of marble cannot be due solely to the abstract form which marble decoration expressed, since small amounts of abstract stucco, mosaic and faience can be found: we need to find an explanation which covers both the new medium and the new content.

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Both, it will be claimed, are part of the wider movement which might be described as the overwhelming of representations of the external world by intellectualised and abstract art.

The change in the status and importance of abstract geometric art has been recorded by Manuel Keene,<sup>137</sup> who used the work of Bourgoïn to demonstrate a quantitative preponderance of geometric design in the mamluk period as compared with any other, basing his work on all media. As Keene points out, this in itself may be due to the greater quantity of material surviving, but he also notes that the mamluk period is characterised by the introduction of new designs and design-systems. Keene notes that 115 new designs appeared in mamluk Egypt overall. In the period 1250-1350, 40 new motifs appeared, of which 28 originated outside Egypt. Keene sees a change in the mid-fourteenth century, after which few geometric designs originate outside Egypt, where geometrical patterns flourish and the emergence during the period 1350-1517 of 62 new designs, of which only 9 occur earlier elsewhere. His conclusion is:

‘Beginning in the mid-fourteenth century and reaching a climax in the reign of Qayt Bay, Egypt was the Islamic world’s most creative centre of geometric art.’<sup>138</sup>

The theme of change from representation to abstraction has been noted by other art historians in the fields of manuscripts, metalwork and woodwork. The figural manuscripts, the illustrated literary tales and legends of Isfahan or Baghdad, did not succeed in Cairo, as did the refugees who established themselves there. Narrative illustration is an art difficult to find in Egypt after the mid-fourteenth-

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century; instead of it, the illumination of Korans with gilded geometric designs forms the great vehicle of artistic expression in manuscripts.

Haldane's view is that, 'During the fourteenth century the manuscripts become steadily more inclined towards pure decoration. Indeed, style has made way for stylization.'<sup>139</sup> This reflects Ettinghausen's comments on an art that became, in his view, intellectually stifled and spiritually decadent<sup>140</sup>. Ettinghausen speaks of 'the death of Arab painting,' no less, and comments 'there was no longer a place for the forbidden activity of figural painting, with its suspect predilection for individual inventiveness.'<sup>141</sup> Grabar also follows Ettinghausen in claiming a general decline in artistic activity within the Arab world, in the context of the discussion of painting, in this case, manuscripts of al-Ḥarīrī and 'meaningful visual translations' of a text.<sup>142</sup>

James Allan has described the changes in metalwork,<sup>143</sup> noting that the style in inscriptions had begun to change by the early fourteenth century, with a magnificent inscription on a candlestick demonstrating the commanding role which script had assumed instead of its former more modest position in relation to the rest of the decoration. By the third reign of al-Nāṣir, Allan notes, the broad band of script forming a central royal or emiral blazon had evolved, and epigraphy, in this very stylised form, had now replaced the figural style of Ayyubid metalwork. On architectural fittings, we have the great star-polygon door-panels, such as the bronze door-revetments, appearing in Cairo in such features as the doors of the mosque of Sultan Hasan (though they had predecessors in Ayyubid Syria.)<sup>144</sup>

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The whole pattern of change is well exemplified by Gloria Karnouk's description of the difference between the Fāṭimid throne and that of al-Nāṣir in her discussion of qanāt-woodwork, the art of carving inlaid polygon panels and strapwork:

'Qanat-work, delicately carved and inlaid with fine woods and ivory, was considered a luxury since the throne of al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad in the palace on the Citadel was of qanat work with ebony and ivory inlay. This contrasts strikingly with the Fāṭimid throne, described by Nāṣir-i-Husraw, which had three gilt sides representing court scenes and inscriptions.'<sup>145</sup>

Two factors may be noted in this pattern of change. Firstly, the repertoire that now comes to the fore in all media emphasises radial angular geometric designs, especially the star polygon, complex strapwork and other interlace, with a prevailing mode of strong and definite contrasts and an importance place for epigraphy. These had been elements of Fāṭimid art; it is their degree of prominence that changes. Secondly, the change was not all at one particular date: but it does seem to focus around the middle of the century.

If the change from stucco to marble also reflects a change from representation to abstraction which extends throughout the arts, the task here is not merely to describe that change, but to account for it, and to account for the chronology as well as for the content. Can we account for it by seeing conventional theology as a repressive mechanism? What evidence is there of theology as a repressive force operating to enforce exclusion of the outer world in art and architectural decoration? It is not necessary to rehearse here in detail all the earlier

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history of Islamic attitudes to figural work: the interest is the position which had developed in the fourteenth century, and the extension to all representational art.

We may take first the traditional discussions of legitimacy, centring on the Koran and the Hadith. The discussion of what was legitimate or not as decoration for a religious building seems to have emerged by the fourteenth-century as defined by three essential tests: did the thing depicted have life, did the depiction cast a shadow, where was the depiction sited? Al-Nawawī, in his commentary on Muslim, defined the test as whether a depiction was of a living being, *صورة الحيوان*,<sup>146</sup> in which case, the work of the artist was a challenge to the creativity of god, and he would be unable to obey the command to breathe life into creation;<sup>147</sup> for the purposes of this viewpoint, it did not matter if the work was a statue or two-dimensional. Al-Nawawī specifically exempted trees as inanimate objects.<sup>148</sup> These guide-lines were repeated by al-Bukhāri,<sup>149</sup> who defined the forbidden as those pictures with *rūḥ*, *روح*, and his collection of hadith continued the tradition that all representation of living creatures was forbidden, including such two-dimensional imagery as appeared on textile hangings.

The Malikite qadi, ibn Iyād, had forbidden all representation that cast a shadow, *ظل*,<sup>150</sup> and this would presumably extend to relief stucco such as that of the mihrāb of al-Nāṣir. Fruit-trees seem to have presented a particular problem, however; whether on account of the three-dimensional nature of the fruit, or because the fruit was seen as potentially possessing *rūḥ* is not clear.<sup>151</sup>

So the question arises as to whether the change from relief vegetal stucco, even though it did not represent beings with *rūḥ*, to flat inlay, came about as a

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result of religious prohibition upon three-dimensional work. It seems that ibn Iyād was exceptionally strict, but it may have been, that if the Malikites for whom an iwan of a madrasa was built, and the *waqf* documents make it very clear that each rite was to be autonomous in its own iwan, insisted that work even in partial relief was forbidden, then it is possible that this policy was extended to the building as a whole, either because it made matters easier for the workmen, or because it was a kind of bottom-line of safety in appropriate decoration. However, one can still argue that since vegetation had been specifically exempted from being forbidden by other authorities, it would have been possible to continue with it provided it was not in relief, even in the mihrāb. There are examples of mosaic decoration which would have complied with the prohibition of shadows, such as that of Lajīn at ibn Ṭūlūn, but, like the stucco, vegetation in mosaic is not found after the middle of the century. Some small vegetal details still appeared in mosque architecture, for example stone panels and paste inlays, or as ornaments of miniature pillars in mihrābs, so probably these had not been subjected to strict scrutiny. The interesting thing about the adoption of flat abstract marble inlay in contrasting colours as the principal form of decoration seems to have been that it was uncontroversial between the classes of people commissioning and using the buildings; to reach this degree of acceptance seems to argue that it was the expression of a general feeling rather than enforcement by a particular sect.

The location of imagery was subject to theological discussion and al-Bukhāri, in the sections of text quoted above, quotes hadith which show it to be acceptable in inferior positions, but unsuitable for walls. These quotations of authority derive

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from remarks concerning textiles, and their extension to all kinds of wall-covering would still have to be shown before we can say that they played a role in what actually appeared on walls or floors. However, it is interesting to note that ibn Taimiyya considered it more reprehensible to pray in a funerary mosque than in a church where the only imagery was floor-decoration which would be trampled under-foot.<sup>152</sup> Laoust has noted that ibn Taimiyya's strictures were opposed not only by the ruling class but by fellow theologians; he may nevertheless have been of some influence as one of his followers achieved an important position in the madrasa of Sultan Hasan.<sup>153</sup>

The conclusion we may reach from seeing theology as a repressive mechanism is that it perhaps affected the exclusion of vegetation, in addition to an aversion from the natural world caused by other historical factors. But these are negative reasons and cannot explain the positive aspects of art and architecture: why are certain features *present*? We also have a chronological question.

Abstraction may have reflected the general theme of intellectual life: the aversion from the physical world. But why should it appear to concentrate at a particular point, in the middle of the century? No explanation seems to lie in conventional theology for this. Is this a convenient point at which art historians like to break their narrative, or does it reflect events? What feature can we find that corresponds with the artistic turning-point?

## DISASTER AND THE NATURAL WORLD

Can aesthetic change occur in response to disaster? Sidra Stich comments:

‘In the aftermath of World War I, concern about human nature and the future of civilisation reached a high level of intensity. The recognition of violence as a distinctive human trait and the realisation that human will had caused destruction on a previously unfathomed scale shifted western thinking about the nature of life. Conflict and disaster, irrationality and destruction, became actuality that could not be ignored or treated as aberrant conditions.’

‘Traditional ways of seeing and thinking were broken down ... they set forth alternative perspectives.’<sup>154</sup>

Stich goes on to show that the injured and deformed victims of war presented a surrealist version of the traditional artistic subjects of the human face and body. The landscape, the other great subject of art, was subject to massive destruction, and landscape and figures were further distorted by the industrialization of the world’s first mechanised war, producing such works of art as the ‘mechanomorphic denaturalized figures of Ernst.’ The paradisiacal versions of the natural world which artists had presented were driven away - driven underground, in the case of Meret Oppenheim’s ‘Paradise is in the earth’ for example.<sup>155</sup>

The Spanish Civil War had crucial influences on surrealism, through the work of Miró. The combined effect of these experiences, and of the Second World War and the development of atomic theory, was that nature was no longer a force of

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calm and order, but an agent of recurring change, perpetual destruction and re-formation.

The thesis explaining the twentieth century fixation with abstract art in terms of contemporary social history continues with the views of Serge Guilbaut on Pollock, which follows lines similar to Strich's in relation to the Second World War. Guilbaut sees Pollock's work as expressing post-Hiroshima longing to be free of associations of memory and myth: the traditional forms and techniques of art could not accommodate the experiences of the war: 'The American avant-garde felt that to describe destruction was to accept it and turn it into a spectacle. Naturalism was not adequate to cope with horrors.' The linear features of Pollock's work are seen in this analysis as deliberate obliteration paralleling mass destruction.<sup>156</sup>

These theories cannot entirely explain the development of a new version of reality in our century, for Kandinsky's *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* had been published in 1911, already setting out an aesthetic of non-representation, but the work of the art historians mentioned above very clearly demonstrates the closeness of much of visual experience to surrealist and expressionist painting. If war was not the only factor in the development of abstract art, it was clearly a crucial one.

A less marked, but still distinct, effect has been observed in the painting of medieval Florence and Siena. Millard Meiss<sup>157</sup> has described the impact of the Black Death of 1348 as reflected in art and comments on the urge to a more intensely religious painting and on a profound pessimism and horror of the flesh appearing in works of art. A further change is described in the artistic presentation of the figure of Christ, shown after the Black Death as a figure of denunciation and

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punishment, thus following the theological view of the plague as divine chastisement for sin.

It has been suggested that a Persian parallel to the effect of the plague in Florence and Siena occurred in Tabriz,<sup>158</sup> for the Mongol court also was probably struck by plague in the middle of the fourteenth century and an increase in morbidity and in representations of a world of unnatural beings in the Demotte ShahNameh.

The Black Death was not a solitary calamity, however. The fourteenth century was a time of increased suffering through other causes, such as the Mongol invasions of Persia. For Egypt, Hautecoeur and Wiet have published a table of natural disasters<sup>159</sup> which demonstrates not only the greater number of disasters which occurred in the second half of the fourteenth century as compared with the previous half-century, but the shortness of intervals between low Niles occurred. (A low Nile meant two years of shortage because less seed was available for planting in the subsequent year).

There is clearly a pattern of increasing natural disasters from 1304-5, the greatest of which, both physically and psychologically, was the Black Death. Here we have to be especially careful of the evidence, since we are dealing with a community whose psychology was even further removed from ours than that of fourteenth-century Florence or Siena, and we cannot make assumptions about its reactions. However, those reactions are attested by contemporary Islamic writers.

There had been some minor outbreaks of plague, possibly not bubonic, but this epidemic, which attacked Cairo at the end of 1347 and abated in the spring of

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1349, was certainly a calamity to the Islamic world proportionately as great as the western tragedies. For ibn Khaldūn:

‘The entire inhabited world changed ... It was as if the voice of existence in the world had called out for oblivion and restriction and the world responded to its call.’<sup>160</sup>

A particular feature of Islamic accounts of the plague is the way in which it is seen, not just as a disaster affecting human life, but which extends to all living beings, and, beyond this, the accounts also all stress the destruction wrought in the countryside as a result of the deaths. Maqrīzī<sup>161</sup> narrates that in Gaza the beasts in the fields were stricken, flocks and dogs with their shepherds and in the Delta, the very birds and fish died. At Damietta, the gardens and water-wheels were abandoned and the trees died for lack of irrigation. The plague swept through the Egyptian countryside as through the towns: the birds brought down by falconers were found to have plague boils beneath their plumage. Cats disappeared altogether. All wild creatures, from lions to hares, were found dead, tainted with plague-boils. At harvest-time, the soldiers were sent, unsuccessfully, to gather in the crops which the deaths of the country people had left standing the fields. Ibn Iyās said that all creatures were affected, and the animals of the desert were found dead with plague buboes under their paws.<sup>162</sup> The cumulative picture is of a calamity not of humanity alone, but of a sympathetic suffering in all existence.

The question now to be addressed is what effect this disaster had on the art and architecture of the period, and whether it was reflected in some way more than the mechanical physical consequences of a loss of population.

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The plague in Cairo was played out against the backdrop of the great religious buildings. Processions were held under caliphal banners and accompanied by the great emirs in official dress glittering with gold. These great men were also directly involved in relieving the suffering: the emirs Shaykhū and Mughultay directed the washing, shrouding and burial of the dead.<sup>163</sup> The Traditions of al-Bukhāri, with their terrifying realism ('death is nearer than the thong of your sandal'<sup>164</sup>) and their counsel of submission, and their affirmation that a Muslim should not flee from plague, were read aloud for several days at al-Azhar and other places of prayer.

Maqrīzī tells us that so many died that Cairo had become an abandoned desert by the beginning of 1348, so that one could walk from Bab Zuwayla to Bab al-Naṣr without encountering a living soul. On one Friday, funeral prayers at al-Ḥākim were held over a double row of coffins stretched from the entrance to the maqsūra so that the living could not get inside the mosque to pray. The al-Tabbanāh district was abandoned entirely and fell into ruin. Mosques became closed as quarters emptied and the call to prayer was no longer heard at all in some parts of the city.<sup>165</sup>

The Arab chroniclers' estimate of the scale of the disaster is now corroborated by the research of Dols, who calculates that the Black Death caused the loss of close on one-third of the population.<sup>166</sup> And the Black Death was not the end of the plague: there was another outbreak in 1353 and sporadic recurrences thereafter.

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Clearly, in simple statistical terms, there would be an effect on the number of craftsmen and artists available after the epidemic, and Maqrīzī notes that the artisan class suffered severely: he says bluntly that most of them died.<sup>167</sup> Art historians of different subjects are agreed on a sudden change in production levels at about this time: James Allan has noted that in metalwork there was a decline in quantity of production, though not in quality, between about 1360 and 1382, which would be accountable by the loss of a generation of craftsmen.<sup>168</sup> Meinecke's article tabulates faience in Cairene architecture showing that the last work was a single small window grille at Sultan Hasan. The tiraz factory in Alexandria was severely affected by the loss of skilled artisans.<sup>169</sup>

If the plague affected the craftsmen, it also severely affected the class where they found many patrons. Wealth could provide protection from famine, even be increased by it when speculators benefited from increased prices, but not against the plague. Ayalon has noted that 'the Black Death destroyed a very large proportion of the population and military forces of the Mamluk state.'<sup>170</sup>

Even the small advantage gained among the ruling classes by clean, spacious quarters and good diet was offset by communal living conditions, such as the barrack-style accommodation of the royal mamluks and the enclosed confines of the harems. Here the plague was especially easily spread, and exceptionally severe as a result. Both of these categories would have been great consumers of rich textiles, plate and jewels, and provided customers for craftsmen in large numbers, and their loss must have quantitatively represented a great drop.

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Death duties and uninherited property accumulating to the sultan may have been used for building, as has been claimed for the madrasa of Sultan Ḥasan, although surviving evidence in the form of either documents or buildings seems lacking.<sup>171</sup> There does seem to have been an increase in pious foundations in the first half of the fourteenth century, but no particular concentration after the Black Death ended in 1349. However, the especial encouragement of al-Nāṣir set a high level of building up to his death in 1340 and it may be that the standard and number of religious buildings for which fourteenth century Cairo is so notable would not have been sustained after 1340 without the impetus and movement of wealth caused by the plague.

The chances of survival make any hard and fast conclusions dangerous. For example, nothing remains of the madrasa/mosque built by Sultan al-Ashraf Sha'bān near the citadel, yet ibn Ṭaḡhrī Birdī described it as one of the world's most beautiful buildings, constructed to resemble Sultan Ḥasan.<sup>172</sup> We happen to have a description of that particular building, which drives home to us that mere numbers of buildings are not informative: in terms of material, social and artistic meaning one could not rank a small mausoleum with the same weight as such a great madrasa.

Among the population at large, and not merely the upper classes, the plague must have had a far worse psychological effect than famine. Famine, however dreadful, was familiar. It was a regular occurrence; its mechanism of death was obvious, as was the means of alleviation. Plague, by contrast, worked mysteriously and usually incurably. Egypt suffered from several strains of plague which produced

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death in different ways, including the pneumonic and septicaemic forms which acted with extreme rapidity so that people could be seemingly capriciously and instantaneously smitten. Nevertheless, although orthodox Islam held that death by plague was the direct work of god and Muslims should not flee from it, there were thoughtful people who observed the epidemic process at work and objective assessment thus warred with official doctrine. There was a conflict between what was heard in the mosques and what people were prompted to do through fear of infection.

There was a further conflict, that between the notion that, as in Western doctrine, pestilence was a punishment from god, and the belief that death from the plague constituted martyrdom and gave entry to Paradise. As Dols puts it,<sup>173</sup> in Islam there was a range of views, contrasting with the predominant western notion of apocalyptic punishment. For the Muslim, plague could be viewed as warning or punishment, but also as divine reward.<sup>174</sup> Death from the plague constituted martyrdom equally with death in battle: the victims of the plague died in *jihād* just as had those who fell storming the battlements of Acre. Consequently, the deceased had great privileges in the after-life: the dead martyr escaped interrogation by examining angels and received the highest rank in Paradise. Death freed the martyr from all sins. This view explains some of the inscriptions which describe the deceased in terms of a warrior for the faith at a time when the military possibilities were unlikely.

Whatever the promised consolations of Paradise, the realities of contemporary suffering must have formed a brutal contrast. Not only the outbreak

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of plague, but the recurrent famines must have made the natural world of present existence seem jejune and cruel. Indeed, where there seemed to be most plenty, in the grain stores themselves, was found one of the greatest sources of infection, because the plague flea, *Xenopsylla cheopsis*, breeds most freely in cereal debris. As Dols put it:

‘Grain is the favourite food not only of this species of flea but also of the domestic rat and man. The staff of life was perversely the sceptre of death during plague epidemics.’<sup>175</sup>

It is not surprising that there was much recourse to magic and the great Islamic traditions of script and mathematics were suborned for remedies and preventions of disaster. Some religious practices might seem to be verging on superstition and born of desperation: an obsession with repetition, of prayers, or of the names of God - some were to be repeated 136 times, or 898, or 312, or even 2142 times, turning the Islamic interest in numeracy into bizarre ritualism.<sup>176</sup> Some divine names were to be written down as talismans, or placed in violet ointment which rendered one safe from the plague.<sup>177</sup> Various signs were to be written on cups, and sometimes signs and letters were both to be used in this way. Numerous cryptograms and secret alphabets were invented to this end: the science of letters turning towards an esoteric cult of arcane knowledge, the power claimed by the possessor of such secret knowledge vastly, if paradoxically, increased by the very terrors of the disease he claimed to control.

The emphasis on letters and numbers may have been in response to such comments as those of the theologian ibn al-Hajj (d.1337) who attacked imagery on

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bowls to hold curative draughts. How, he asked, could one procure the treatment of a disease through images expressly forbidden by hadith?<sup>178</sup> The plague may thus have caused a religious impetus away from the image and towards other, more coded, communication. As Ittig pointed out in her discussion of talismanic bowls, orthodox Islam sanctioned the use of charms for the treatment of disease, but laid stress on the use of accepted texts, allowing those who used the Koran for this purpose to charge a fee. The specific verses of the Koran used in these contexts have been described by Ittig<sup>179</sup> and by Dols,<sup>180</sup> and their therapeutic value constitutes an interpretation very different from that which a straightforward reading might suggest. An examination of 'curative' sūras and their appearance on monuments has yielded no particular correlation. Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind that a particular inscription may have had a special contemporary meaning because of the plague, quite different from that usually imputed to it, or it may have taken on an extra level of significance. An inscription on the inner door of Shaykhū's khānqāh, for example:

'There is no fear with the friends of god: they shall not grieve'

(Koran, X, 62) is a clear reference to sufis, who referred to themselves as the friends of god,<sup>181</sup> but also holds more than its banal meaning when we consider how closely its founder had been involved with victims of the plague. It further suggests the inner security which sufism offered to those afflicted by the external world.

Co-existing with Islamic mainstream religious practice we find, as a result of the plague, much semi-religious or semi-superstitious ceremonial.<sup>182</sup> The great

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communal ceremonies in the mosques, the readings from the Koran and from venerated theologians, were not sectarian activities but arranged by the *'ulama* as a whole and aimed at the entire populace.

The ceremonies developed for time of plague were even more striking during the epidemic that occurred under al-Mu'ayyad in 1419-20. Then, the whole male population of Cairo streamed out into the desert to pray with the Sultan at the tomb of Barqūq. The Sultan rode down without any royal regalia, wearing a white woollen cloak and a woollen shawl, in the sufi manner. When he reached 'the place of the Friday prayers in the desert plain' he dismounted and then rode to the courtyard of Barqūq's tomb, where a great feast was to be consumed. Here, he sacrificed rams, cows, water-buffaloes, camels. The carcasses were distributed to the poor and among the various religious institutions.<sup>183</sup>

This extraordinary and dramatic ceremonial seems to have had no precedent. Chelhod's study of sacrifices in the Arab world<sup>184</sup> yields no parallel, either in the scale or the methodical nature of the event. Its practical consequences would have included a re-distribution of food at a time when normal mechanisms might have collapsed, so it would have had a material as well as psychological effect in uniting the community and presenting the sultan in a patriarchal role seeking the welfare of his people. It suggests that suffering had joined the population across both sectarian and class divides and achieved, at least in crisis, the identification of Sunni Islam with sufism, and of the mamluk class with the populace.

What can we conclude as the consequences for art and architecture of this experience of death on a huge and sudden scale?

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Firstly, it is important to note that Islam met the Black Death as a community. The stress on remaining in one's place, on communal prayer, on special public ceremonies and processions, on mass propitiation and sacrifice, meant at its most basic that the great meeting-places of Islam were more important than ever. It may have been impossible to keep all the mosques of Cairo manned throughout the disaster, but the traditional places of mass gatherings, al-Hākim, al-Azhar, the Qubba al-Nāṣir, served as places for especial prayers and to them were later added some of the huge new foundations. The importance of great buildings for communal worship must have been emphasized, not lessened by the experience. The public aspect of private foundations and of the special prayers against pestilence that took place within them should be stressed, as was the way in which, if there had been a cultural gap between rulers and ruled, the common disaster over-rode divisions.

A sense of desperation ensues from the manifold remedies: almost any recourse is possible. A major manifestation of this desperation was the search for esoteric values for signs, letters, numbers, strange scripts, cryptograms. Here was a society where writing took on an added dimension, and straightforward meaning could be suborned into private code. Repetition could be of value in itself: a formula inefficacious in the singular could be a sovereign remedy if repeated a certain number of times or inverted or re-formulated in other ways. Surrounded by death and decay, Muslims were still required to believe in the Paradise promised by the Koran, and to believe also that those lost to this world through plague had entry to that Paradise. But it could no longer be seen in terms of the real natural world which had betrayed them. If architecture had directly represented the connection

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between the earthly Paradise and the heavenly one, as Jonathan Bloom has claimed for the stucco of al-Azhar,<sup>185</sup> that representation was almost obliterated now, surviving tenuously in tree-like forms of little windows high above the great expanses of austere marble panelling. Overt meaning was nothing: only by knowing previously assigned values and formulae, by specifically calculated repetitions or associations, could a sign be made into a remedy. Esoteric interpretation, in the context of the plague took on a desperate new significance.

## ESOTERIC INTERPRETATIONS OF ARCHITECTURE

### THE OVERALL DESIGN OF A BUILDING

### THE MICROCOSM AND THE MACROCOSM

The principle of relating physical phenomena to metaphysical realities can be extended to include the human being as a paradigm of a world or worlds beyond, or of realities in this world such as architectural forms, which can also have divine counterparts.

The expression of the correspondence between the material and the divine as that which exists between a microcosm and a macrocosm was extensively described by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in his study of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'. One of the major manifestations of such a correspondence was in the human being itself.

Anthropomorphism as a metaphor for exegesis had been a feature in early Shī'ism, notably expounded in the teachings of al-Mughira, sometimes called the first Shī'ite gnostic, in the eighth century A.D.<sup>186</sup> For the Ikhwān the universe as a whole was expressed by the anthropomorphic microcosm, *al-insān al-kabīr*, and they developed detailed analogies between the parts of the human mind and body and those of the universe, this including the physical and metaphysical worlds.<sup>187</sup>

The concepts of correspondence between worlds, a continuing feature of Islamic exegesis, can be located in Cairo in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and, as in the case of the Ikhwān, the anthropomorphic metaphor is also found in the writings of al-Shādhili, who codified the doctrines of the Shādhili sufis.

### *Microcosm and macrocosm*

Not only were there followers of Suhrawardī's doctrines of the relationships between worlds in Egypt in the form of the Shādhiliyya *ṭarīq*, in the fourteenth century<sup>188</sup>, but earlier the commentator and follower of Suhrawardī, Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, had been sent on an embassy to Qalāwūn and had collected material for some of his writings during his stay in Egypt.<sup>189</sup> Quṭb al-Dīn quotes his master's view of the world of the archetypal image, or imaginative forms, and those of the intelligence and of the senses. This world of forms, *al-'ālam al-mithālī*, acted as an intermediary between the spiritual and the physical, and Quṭb al-Dīn sees this as a crucial principle:

'Here, indeed, we have a magnificent secret, something of supreme importance. It means that the totality of things which exist in the higher world have their nadir and their analogue in the lower world.'<sup>190</sup>

In the fourteenth-century we also have the presence in Cairo of the noted commentator on ibn 'Arabī, Dā'ūd al-Qayṣarī. Dā'ūd's exegesis of the *Fuṣuṣ al-ḥikam* included the same principle of a world of forms, intermediary between higher and lower levels, as was found in Suhrawardī, and re-capitulates his master's statement:

'For each of the beings existing in the world of the senses there is, respectively, a captive archetypal form perceived in the human world on the plane of the imagination, whether it be Heaven, a star, or an Element, a mineral, a plant, or an animal, because there are a Spirit and spiritual energies for each of them

...'<sup>191</sup>

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The exegesis of the physical world as metaphor for the divine was found also in al-Shādhili, teaching and respected in fifteenth-century Cairo and another follower of the '*ishrāqi*' path of Suhrawardī. For al-Shādhili, the general principle of the significant universe held good:

'Contemplation: The mysteries of the universe are manifested to the gnostic who understands their mysteries and can read the significance of their lines.

'Meditate on the lines of the universe for verily they are Messages sent to you from the King on High.'<sup>192</sup>

Within this general principle, he subscribed to the doctrine of man as a microcosm,<sup>193</sup> and also to one which is more germane to the purpose of this thesis, a concept which sees a building as a microcosm of the universe.<sup>194</sup>

These two analogies have been inter-related in sufi mysticism. The Bektashi idea, described by de Jong, has already been noted: 'Each human being is a mosque and each human face is a mihrāb.'<sup>195</sup>

The building as a microcosm of another universe, without the intervening human image, has received considerable discussion in the form of the identification of a cosmic meaning for the dome, both in palatial contexts and in religious contexts. Thus, Robert Hillenbrand views the circular Baghdad of al-Mansūr as a 'cosmic symbol'<sup>196</sup> and Grabar sees a dome of the Alhambra in the same way<sup>197</sup> Ardalan and Bakhtiar devote much time to the 'cosmic space.'<sup>198</sup>

The problem with most of these claims is that they do not particularise which cosmos, which '*alam*', we are dealing with, nor in what shape it was conceived. We may perhaps take it that, from the time of al-Kindī, Islamic astronomers would have

### *Microcosm and macrocosm*

conceived the earth and the heavenly bodies as spherical: whether this image would have extended to all conceptual states of existence, and at all times and places in later Islamic philosophy is more doubtful. Suhrawardī seems to have conceived of states of existence as having spherical analogies, but this is not to say that he visualised all states of existence as spherical: indeed, such an enclosed image as a cosmic sphere leaves no place for the external force of the creator, whom Suhrawardī appears to conceive of as a force outside the spherical worlds of his creation.<sup>199</sup>

As for relationships with more conventional Islamic thought, the seven layers of decoration identified in the dome of the Alhambra, for example, may correspond to the seven heavens of the Koran (XXIII) but how do we know that the Koranic universe was conceived of as spherical? It may be that in much of this thinking there is an imposition of the western Renaissance world-view on to Islamic concepts. These comparisons of Islamic architecture to cosmic concepts do not give us, as can the study of medieval sufi texts, an understanding of contemporary metaphors for architecture firmly located in chronology and culture. For example, the thinking of the *ishrāqi* movement in sufism, those who constructed a systematic philosophy built on concepts of divine illumination, yields a context for architecture which provides it with a contemporary exegesis. But this correlation of ideas with physical reality must be used with care; sometimes the iconographer's stress on content, on finding an image rather than a method, is less reliable than finding underlying principles of construction in architecture which parallel principles of intellectual argument.

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Thus it may be tempting to note that the seven lobes of the mihrāb hood of Baybars II's madrasa may be a reference to the Koranic seven heavens. But it is more historically precise, and as art history surely a deeper perception of a particular mode of design, to observe also that the new pattern of the mihrāb inlay, one which appears at about the same time in other mihrābs such as that of Salār and Sanjar's madrasa or the zawiya of Zaīn al-Dīn Yūsuf, and which is an innovation replacing the old stucco designs, reflects in the shape and arrangement of its elements the muqarnas designs of contemporary domes<sup>200</sup>. (The original muqarnas of the Baybars II dome do not survive.) The mihrāb may represent therefore a dome in miniature. Its hemisphere may be further reflected in the semi-domes and muqarnas of the portals. The mihrāb may have reflected some concept of the cosmos; the principle on which it is designed is one in which it forms a microcosm of another architectural element, the dome, which, in turn, was seen to have further significance: for the Bektashis, as we have seen, it was a macrocosm of the human skull; for Suhrawardī, we shall see, it was a microcosm of the earthly world, reflecting in turn the spiritual world through which the seeker travelled. The mihrāb and the dome can be seen as reflecting various concepts, but the essential aesthetic principle at work, the one which dictates their overall appearance, and harmonises two disjunct parts of the building, is that they are linked together by a principle of miniaturization.

Another similar feature appearing at this period is the miniaturization of other features of the building within mihrābs: small-scale arches and columns, as an internal element in the tiers of the mihrāb itself, as found, for example, in the

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mihrāb of Qalāwūn's mausoleum. These arches and columns reflect not only features of the courtyard and iwans, but of the mihrāb itself: the arch between two columns is repeated in tiny arcades in the mihrāb.

In other cases, one can see minarets as echoing other architectural elements, as the windows in the minaret and the walls of the madrasa of Sultan Ṣālīḥ, or the minaret of the madrasa of al-Nāṣir, for example, which is replete with miniature pillars and arches, and seems to constitute a kind of repertoire of architectural detail. In some cases, the profile and patterns of design of the minaret echo those of the dome, for example, at the foundation of Ṣarghitmish (1356) and at the Sulṭānīya (c.1360), and at the early fifteenth-century foundation of Qānibāy al-Muḥammadī. One cannot make too much of the apparent possibility that the minaret was a miniaturization of the repertoire of the interior, however, because of the difficulty in finding enough buildings where a complete set of evidence survives: minarets are probably the most disaster-prone and the most re-built of architectural features.

Nevertheless, the general principle of design seems one that was not common in Cairo in Ṭūlūnid or Fāṭimid times. These miniaturised elements seem to become widespread along with Ayyubid architecture and the influx of sufism: it is my contention that the architectural development of Cairo after the Fāṭimid period does not blindly follow and build on Ayyubid Syrian tradition for the sake of it, but because that tradition included conceptual expression. Among these concepts was that of the microcosm which reflects the macrocosm.

The use made by theologians of the application of this concept of architecture can be seen in the writings of Suhrawardī and al-Shādhili. For both of them, the

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religious building is an extended metaphor of their quest; it may be that this trope is a formal inheritance of sufi writing. Suhrawardī's<sup>201</sup> is the more detailed account: he enters the khānqāh of his [spiritual] father. This khānqāh has two doors, one giving on to the city, the other to a garden and an immense plain. The seeker enters, closes the door to the city behind him, and sets out to open the door which gives entry to the plain. He perceives ten sages, forming an ascending hierarchy and, overcoming his fears, questions them, and is told that he is in another state of existence. There follows an exegesis of the centre of the building which sees it as a microcosm of the universe, and as a macrocosm of the human body. The seeker sees a great bowl, which can obviously be interpreted as the dome, inverted on the surface of the earth, with eleven stages in its concavity, and water and sand at its centre, encircled by animals. The sand and water are described as the physical products of the seeker himself. Luminous discs ('buttons' in Thackston's translation) punctuate all stages within the dome, except for the lowest. These tiers are ruled by the sages already seen outside the bowl; the seeker himself makes the eleventh element.

One of the sages makes a long discourse on darkness and light; the material world, the world of illusion, replicates the left wing of the angel Gabriel, where red stains darken the white wing, gross physicality disfiguring pure spirituality. Dawn arrives, and the door giving on to the plain is closed, and that to the city re-opened.<sup>202</sup>

The relationship with some architectural features will be obvious: decagonal panels of doors: the dome: the sand and water representing perhaps a courtyard and

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a fountain, the tiers of muqarnas, small circular windows, decoration in contrasting colours such as the black and white or red and white of *ablaq* on the walls. What is also clear is the variability of interpretation possible in such thinking: in this particular enumeration, the seeker himself is included to create eleven tiers instead of the ten which would correspond to the sages; al-Shādhili presents a different system again.

Al-Shādhili's exemplar has less visual detail. He instructs the seeker to kneel at the threshold and seek refuge, offering incense. The door to secret knowledge will be opened; a long exposition of travel over a sea of unification follows. The seeker is to perform his ablution with the water of the unseen. The wings of the saint are to be found at different stations and can be observed in the world through contrasts, including darkness and light,<sup>203</sup> echoing Suhrawardi's image of the wings of Gabriel.

An elaborate enumeration follows, comparable to the imagery in Suhrawardī, but in al-Shādhili's system, the enumeration differs from the system of Suhrawardī and is related to the image of man as a microcosm: he sees skies of seven layers, but nine substances in man, and twelve constellations in each sky corresponding to twelve orifices in the body.

Al-Shādhili's use of architectural elements seems to relate the dome to the layers of the universe, and appears to contain some lesser elements such as an ablution fountain which could represent the sea into which the initiate must launch himself.

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Even without a particular text which we can tie to a particular surviving building, these texts nevertheless provide evidence of detailed comparative enumeration as a contemporary way of scrutinising architectural features; for al-Shādhili, they appear to have provided *maqāmāt*, marking the stages of the mystic's progress.

We may sum up the microcosm-macrocosm analogy of architecture as metaphor, but it should also be noted that the similarities between physical and metaphysical realities were not solely a matter of intellectual comparison: things in the real world were actually seen as having divine counterparts: we tend always to understand these metaphors as figures of speech rather than as the expression of belief. Still less do we now understand them as functional, yet, in these texts, they are clearly aids to the intellectual path which the religious mind must take.

Finally, lest we take the analogy of architecture as a macrocosm within the Islamic tradition to be solely classical in origin, a recent study has described African views of the building as a macrocosm of the human body.<sup>204</sup> This seems a pointer to the necessity of research extending the study of Islamic architecture south of Egypt.

## DECORATIVE PRINCIPLES: COLOUR, GILDING, NUMBER.

### COLOUR

In Suhrawardī's doctrine, in the formation of which the thought of ibn 'Arabī had played a part, god, the light of lights, gives rise to ordered ranks of angelic and material light. Suhrawardī represents the combination of this tradition with the older, Zoroastrian, influence of Persian fire religion.

The interest of Suhrawardī for art historians lies not just in his theory, nor in the strictly orderly organization of it, although both the subject and the graduated monocentric ranked arrangement of his philosophy of light suggest the illumination of the Korans produced during the reign of Sha'bān. He was possessed of an unusually clear visual sense and great interest lies in the very organised and clear visual world which he describes and uses for his teaching. In this world, the mystic moves through certain stages, indicated by a sequence of coloured lights, and guided by the Angel Gabriel. The visions of Suhrawardī included real and contemporary features: the lapidaries' quarter of a town, a *khānqāh* seen as a microcosm of the inner world of the sufi, the 'personal city,' as Corbin calls it.<sup>205</sup> Suhrawardī's account of the *khānqāh* presents architecture as significant of the spiritual life and progress.

The colour spectrum of Suhrawardī, as of other sufis, demonstrates an interesting process in the development of a coding of colours, which are now regarded, not as having their own laws of behaviour, as an artist would regard them, nor in their relationship to objects, as a scientist would regard them, but as a

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system which represents spiritual states or reflects moral concepts. The studies into the colour spectrum conducted by neo-classical authors had been inherited by intellectual Islam, but colours came to have special significances which were codified in hermeneutics of colour, differing between the various sufi orders.

Two of the earliest contributions derived from accounts of the cosmic throne of mercy, where the throne is described as having four coloured columns of light, white, yellow, red, green, each corresponding to an archangel.<sup>206</sup> The two key features of the theological treatment of colour, the coded associations and the clear separation between colours are already present. (There is an interesting episode of Shī'ite history which suggests their use of this account: in 1164, the Nizāri Imam Hasan II delivered a divine message to his followers from a pulpit set up in the prayer-ground at Alamut. The minbar had four pillars, and attached to each pillar was a banner of each of four colours, white, yellow, red and green.<sup>207</sup> It is tempting to look for columns in actual buildings which might embody the description, but I have not found any grouping which exactly corresponds to this, although the presence of columns of different coloured marble is almost a commonplace of Islamic religious architecture, both in large-scale work and in smaller columns at mihrābs. The work of Ewert<sup>208</sup> at the Great Mosque of Qairawan has revealed symmetrical arrangements according to the colours of the shafts of the columns, which Ewert derives from three purposes: the general Islamic preference for geometrical design; to emphasise the mihrāb by means of lines radiating out from it; to allude to The Dome of the Rock by means of octagonal arrangements. The principal colours of marble in the columns noted by Ewert are

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white, red and green, and his illustration of the colours of the marble shows also a red-ground breccia which is a dark yellow in colour. The groups of columns at the transection of the mihrāb aisle and the qibla īwān at Qairawan would correspond to the white, yellow red and green of the Throne of Mercy mentioned above. The colours of columns may sometimes have been interpreted to reflect this particular belief, but whether it lay behind the placement of columns at Qairawan would require a study of Aghlabid exegesis of the relevant Koranic texts.)

These four columns, according to the thinking of the *Ishrāqi* philosophers, supplied the generation of all other colours, as the four elements of fire, air, earth and water supplied all other substances.

As well as by Suhrawardī, the colour concepts indicated here were developed in the works of three other very influential visionary exponents of colour hermeneutics, Najm Kubrā of Khwarazm (d.1221) Najm Razi (d.1256) and al-Dawla Simnānī (b.1261).<sup>209</sup> The doctrines of all three of these exponents of *ishrāq* spread rapidly and widely. Each set out a colour formula by which the visionary could recognise the different stages of his vision. Thus, the intermediary colour between black and white, in Suhrawardī's doctrine, is not a naturalistic merging of colours, not grey, but red, the colour of dawn and dusk, standing for the 'barzakh' or intermedial states between the earthbound material world and the spiritual level to which the sufi aspires.

Without an intellectual context, the development of *ablaq* in architectural taste seems almost perverse. Much of it is worked in marble: given that there was almost no marble in Egypt itself and all had to be re-used or imported, although it

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was a natural enough decoration in Syria, whence the madrasa form had travelled to Cairo. It could be argued that the sheer scarcity of it appealed to the patrons of architecture, who were thus able to display their wealth, but this is an inference of their motivation. It can equally well be inferred that the dualist aesthetic which arose, of clearly contrasting ordered panelling in comparison with which marble mosaic seems a naturalistic medium, was a reflection of key elements of theological thought: of oppositions and intermediaries, clearly defined stages of movement through spiritual states. The passages from Suhrawardī demonstrate how sufism could use architecture as signs of the inner life. It is not improbable that it was selected to serve such a cause; at any rate it reflects it.

For Najm Kubrā, the visionary would experience a sensation of being borne aloft, and in this condition would perceive green, red, yellow and blue on the horizon.<sup>210</sup> These colours were signs of stages on the spiritual path: green was the sign of the life of the heart, red of the vitality of spiritual energy. Blue represented the lower, worldly self and yellow was a sign of the lessening of spiritual activity. But, when the vision became more intense, a well of light or of green colour is perceived, and a rainbow vision appears. The atmosphere of the uppermost heaven is a green light, and on the surface of this heaven are points more intensely red than fire, ruby or carnelian, which appear lined up in groups of five. On seeing them, the mystic longs to unite with them.

The path of the mystic, as perceived by Najm Kubrā, leads from the black cloud turning to dark blue, which represents the lower being, to the upper plane of the emerald light of the perfected, 'pacified' soul. Within the emerald can be seen

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orbs of light, indicating the presence of the 'man of light,' the spiritual guide, who will ultimately be identified with god himself. Between the upper and the lower worlds lies the consciousness or intellect, visually perceived as a great red sun. Beyond this stage, a black light may herald superconsciousness and belong to the highest spiritual stage achievable. A black light may also mark the step immediately preceding the green light. This duality of black arises because there is a darkness which is matter and a darkness which is also the absence of matter: thus there is an upper darkness, the black heaven, and a lower darkness.

It is worth pointing out the growing use of black in the decoration and art of the fourteenth century: it appears as a new feature in Koran illumination in the groundwork of Ibrāhīm al-Āmidī, and black glass features in architecture, as inlay in the naskh of the mihrāb of Lājīn at ibn Ṭulun and in the decoration of the tomb of ibn Sulāīmān al-Rifāī and obsidian insets are found in the vestibule of the mosque of Shaykhu.

Najm Razi<sup>211</sup> was a disciple of Kubrā; his treatise on photisms was widely read. He saw the mystic as entering seven valleys marked by coloured lights related to spiritual states. These were: white = the sign of Islam, yellow = the sign of fidelity, dark blue = the sign of benevolence, green = the sign of the pacified soul, azure = the sign of god's reassurance, red = mystical knowledge and the active intelligence, and black, the sign of passionate, ecstatic love.

Simnānī connected the seven colours with seven visionary stages, the seven esoteric meanings established for the Koran, seven sages, and seven subtle organs.

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The first stage was indicated by black, turning to a smoke grey. Then the visionary progressed through blue, red, white, yellow and 'luminous black' to green, for Simnānī the ultimate colour rather than a stage on the way. Corbin associates green with the *visio smaragdina*, the green light which heralds the highest mystical station<sup>212</sup> and is linked with the vegetation of Paradise, particularly the lotos tree where the Prophet reached the highest vision of his own personal journey.

The *visio smaragdina* was originally connected with the Hermetic tradition. The statue of the sage found underground by the seeker after knowledge was holding an emerald tablet. Baldick notes that this theme<sup>213</sup> originated with the alchemical work 'The emerald tablet' attributed to the god Hermes Trismegistus. The emerald vision appears in the sufi *ishrāqi* philosophers as indicating the ultimate goal. It is perhaps more than a coincidence that the naos of Ptah at Memphis, which was broken up and re-used in some Islamic buildings, was called the 'green house' by Arab writers: if the theory which will later be propounded, that the inclusion of pieces of this naos in the thresholds of some Islamic buildings was an architectural metaphor for the tablet of Hermes which represented the esoteric learning within the building, is correct, then it may have been important that the stone should be described as green. (The colour of the stone is in fact a greenish-black: something which could be subjectively assigned to either category of colour.)

To the Ashraf, a green turban was a symbol of their descent.<sup>214</sup> Another significance of green was associated with the figure of al-Khidr, the 'green man' or spirit guide in Sūra XVIII of the Koran,<sup>215</sup> taken as the example of a tutelary guide or sheikh by sufis, and after whom the adviser of Baybars I, prophet and

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interpreter, perhaps called himself. Green was also, of course, the colour of nature: God created the air blue and the plant green, according to the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', but these two colours were seen as related by classical and Arab authors<sup>216</sup> and it may be difficult to say how intermediate shades such as turquoise were classified, except in the cases of particular authors where there is contextual information, so that the significance of these two particular colours to architectural decoration such as turquoise-coloured paste inlay or faience may be not be separable.) Details of green/turquoise and red do appear more commonly in architectural decoration later than the type of basic black/white ablaq which is found at the beginning of the century at the Baybars II *khānqāh*: red plays quite an extensive role in the decoration of Sultan Ḥasan, for example. Green seems to have been an earlier feature in the form of the faience tiles appearing from the beginning of the century in the Baybars II *khānqāh* and surviving sporadically to its appearance in a lunette at Sultan Ḥasan, but in these cases of faience tiling, it does not appear as a feature of the mihrāb or qibla wall, but in minarets, portals, windows and archways. In the mihrāb and around the qibla wall, green appears as small pieces of mineral inlay in mosaic, as large-scale marble panels and as colonettes in faience (if blue/green be considered). It may be that the association with tiled faience was perhaps connected with royal traditions of the 'green dome' of Islamic tradition, and the appearance in mihrābs and qibla walls was more reflective of *ishrāqi* theology. The problem with trying to assemble any consistent quantitative survey of the usage of various colours is also largely difficulty with surviving evidence: old engravings, photographs and

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sketches are largely in black and white, so that they are better evidence for original design than for colour.

The general conclusion to be derived from theology is that hermeneutic colour codes may vary from one mystic to another, but it is clear that colour did have specific meanings within the sufi traditions, although it also had sporadic significance for groups other than the Illuminationist paths; the Bektashi dervishes saw red as the colour of Ḥusain, presumably reflecting martyrdom, and green usually as evoking Paradise, but sometimes signifying Ḥasan.<sup>217</sup> For some sufis, red was a badge of a Sharīf, or descendant of Fāṭima and ‘Alī (although green was also associated with ‘Alī). Winter recounts a derogatory story of a shaikh who rose to salute a dog with a red rag tied around it.

These were occasional examples, but the theologians who followed esoteric paths such as *ishrāq* developed systems where colours were read as signs and organised into clear arrangements. Colour was no longer viewed for its capacity to represent or simulate. In this capacity, shade and tone and naturalism no longer mattered; the hard-edged dualistic contrast of *ablaq* would better express intellectual polarities, the mathematical precision of its arrangement would better correspond to theological formulae of orderly progression, such as would be found in abstract and geometric formulae carried out in clear-edged inlay, which will later be discussed as appearing in architectural decoration.

## MARBLE

Marble could express such contrasts and definition, and is much referred to in documentation, especially in the *waqf* documents.

As evidence for social history, these documents are clearly of prime importance and have enabled scholars such as Leonor Fernandes and John Alden Williams to build up a whole world contained within religious foundations, although it must be remembered that the documents may express pious intent rather than actual history. Further, if we ask ourselves 'What do these documents describe?', the answer is a legal act, and not a building. Consequently, they are concerned with setting scales and quality within a formula: they are an important part of the study of architecture as it relates to patronage, but they answer the question of why the buildings look as they do only in the most general of terms.

As evidence for architecture, the documents are scanty. The deeds of Sultan Hasan's madrasa have very little about the actual building: they concentrate almost entirely on use rather than on appearance. The same is true of the Hospital of Qalāwūn; we can build up a very detailed picture of the treatments and charities available but the architecture is described in general terms: marble fountains, arcades with columns, but no suggestion of how they were to appear. The implication is that a good deal must have been left to the discretion of individuals: as far as the building was concerned, the lawyers concentrated on detailing the boundaries rather than the structure. The size of the site is carefully given, and the surroundings described, so that the hospital document builds up a detailed picture of

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this part of Cairo, but the deed is not concerned with appearances, any more, in fact, than are modern conveyances. Nor do the very detailed descriptions of the various occupations to be followed within the foundation tell us much: there is sometimes a *murrakhim*,<sup>218</sup> who must have had some duty towards the marble, but he is paid on a very lowly scale, about as much as a sweeper, whereas the planning and cutting of the thin marble inlays must have been a highly skilled job. His pay is not conclusive evidence of his status, however, as he may have fulfilled this role at more than one foundation and collected a number of salaries.

The deed of the Qalāwūn foundation seems not untypical in its scanty information about the architecture. There is nothing detailed about the appearance of the buildings, about the designs that were to appear, in the *waqf* document of Sultan Hasan, nor in that of the *khānqāh* of al-Nāṣir at Siryāqūs, nor about the appearance of the *khānqāh* of Baybars II, nor the foundation of al-Mu'ayyad at Bab Zuweila, one of the most famous concentrations of rich decor in Cairo.<sup>219</sup>

Fernandes has discussed the main question concerning the documents' relation to the actual work of building, which is the question of the stage of building that they reflect.<sup>220</sup> Her conclusion is that a document was usually drawn up before the building was finished but after it had been planned. Thus, in the *khānqāh* of Baybars II, for example, the qubba, minaret and other units were not in place when the *waqf* was written. However, there was often more than one document, and, as Fernandes points out, another was sometimes drawn up after the building had been completed; this is in contrast to the views of Rogers who, in discussion of Anatolian *waqf* documents,<sup>221</sup> says that these were usually drawn up after the

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buildings were completed. He takes the same view of the dating inscriptions on or within the building, and assigns these to the completion, not the commencement, of work. Fernandes assumes that the documents are descriptive as far as the architecture is concerned, though prescriptive as regards administration and function, but the problem for the architectural historian remains, that the description of the superstructure of the buildings is usually minimal. Although the documents are meticulous as to the location and boundaries, and show a detailed concern for the quality of the materials to be used, they usually tell us little beyond the units of which the building is to be comprised and the broad categories of material, stone, marble, etc., with the evident intention of 'quality control.'

Occasionally, nevertheless, we have a document which is much more detailed. Two outstanding examples, one of a minor foundation, the other of a major one, the first from the beginning and the second from the end of the fifteenth century, survive. The first is that of the sabil of Faraj,<sup>222</sup> and the other that of the madrasa of Qait Bey in the Qarāfa.<sup>223</sup> Both of these, and in particular the Qait Bey document, are extremely detailed, so detailed in fact that one must assume the Qait Bey deed was drawn up after the building was finished, as all the details such as the gilding of the ceilings, the decorative panels on the doors are described in so much detail that one gets the sense of following someone who is going round taking an inventory rather than someone who is working from ground plans. Whether this, like the Faraj document, has so much detail because a final record happens to survive (John Alden Williams notes that the architectural details have disappeared from the Siryāqūs *waqf*<sup>224</sup>) or whether increasing detail is a characteristic of later

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documents as the fifteenth century progresses does not seem susceptible of assessment on the basis of the evidence so far.

Even the Qait Bey document omits a great deal. It tells us of the types and colours of marble used, but not how the patterns were arranged. It tells us that blue and gold inscriptions were mounted on the walls but not what they said.<sup>225</sup>

There is a way of approaching these documents which may yield dividends without relying on them for conventional description and explanation. There is a key theme of the language used to describe different kinds of marble inlay and that is its relationship to the natural world. It is an Arabic terminology, which does not derive in any way from the terms used in the classical world, which were usually derived from the source of the marble. The Arabic vocabulary is almost entirely drawn from comparisons with the natural world. Thus we have *زرزر* to describe a type of marble in the Qait Bey madrasa,<sup>226</sup> starling,<sup>227</sup> implying not only colour and pattern but dappling, sheen and iridescence. Darker marble is *غراب*,<sup>228</sup> crow. (Both were and are common everyday words for the birds, which appear in ornithological guides to Egypt.<sup>229</sup>) Dark green marble is described as *الطر سبين* myrtle. Porphyry is *سماق*, the sumac plant.<sup>230</sup> White marble is *حباب*,<sup>231</sup> milk. Red and white is the graphic *الحم و اللحم*,<sup>232</sup> fat and meat.

Throughout the Qait Bey document, muqarnas and window-grilles are described as *مُحَرَف*,<sup>233</sup> that is, veined, derived from a verb which meant to sweat and to take root, with botanical derivations which include words for stems and veins of plants.



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decorative code for the natural abundance promised them in the Koran and for which they prayed. In this case, the colour of the marble would have been regarded as something which bore a relationship to the natural world, but which eschewed the representation of that world, and referred to it in an indirect way. The religious art of medieval Islam could not dispense with the idea of god's abundance, for it is a recurrent feature in the imagery of the Koran, significant of god's bounty and of the paradise to come. But, if direct representation of that world retreated because of the actual impact of the plague and the philosophical impact of sufism, then a codification of that world may have survived in marble inlay. This helps to reconcile what sometimes seem paradoxical elements in the architectural decoration of fourteenth-century Cairo: the retention of a certain amount of vegetal detail, of tree-like patterns in stained glass and in mihrāb hoods, of plant-like forms in the surviving stucco, alongside the new and striking abstract marble inlays. As the Koranic traditions continued alongside the newer philosophies, so did some of the old representational vocabulary which expressed them in art, alongside the newer one of a coded esotericism. But the old and the new were not fundamentally in opposition, much as Koranic teaching and sufism were not fundamentally in opposition. The surviving vegetal elements in stucco and glass and the new hard geometry of marble may essentially express the same Islamic concerns to see meaning in natural phenomena, but in their different ways. We perceive a stylistic conflict, but the concepts underlying the styles may have presented a continuum.

It may be that if, as Makdisi has described the course of thought in the madrasas,<sup>236</sup> the inheritance of classical philosophy gave way to Islamic

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theological studies, then the attitude to colour went along the same path: no longer a matter for experiment and art, but formulated theoretically and conceptually, chosen and designed for its ulterior significance. The movement from Hellenistic values of representation may be seen as corresponding with this change.

## GILDING

Gilding and gold inlay of metalwork and woodwork, gold thread in textiles, would have been a prominent features within a religious building. They now survive mainly in a few restored examples, such as the ceilings of the Barqūq madrasa, and this discussion will therefore turn to a range of media for supportive evidence.

Gilding has been commented on as a particular feature of the art and architecture of the period, and writers such as Humphreys have seen in it an expression of worldly grandeur. This section will argue that gold had deeper connotations than an expression of wealth and luxury.

In manuscript illustration, the great achievements of the fourteenth-century lie, not in narrative illustration, but in the great Korans of the Sha‘bān/ Hasan period. The three most important specific changes which have been noted in the course of the fourteenth century, when considering secular manuscripts are, firstly, a change in subjects, secondly, increased formality of compositions, and thirdly, a lavish increase in the use of gold. The second and third of these features are also characteristic of Koranic illumination, and these changes seem fundamentally linked in the intellectual background of the period.

In the discussion of subject matter, we can note a difference in the nominal subjects of art and their actual ones, and also, perhaps, in what constitutes illustration of a narrative and what does not. To a western critic, the representation of active figures in proportionate scale is what illustrating a story means: the depiction of the narrative by other means, a kind of parallel text. But in an Islamic

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manuscript of the early fourteenth century such as the Bodleian *Maqāmāt*, the interest of the artist may be focused elsewhere.

A scene in a mosque may, for example, show a minbar on which a geometric design is shown with far more care and emphasis than the rest of the sketchily-indicated structure: it is evident where the artist's real attention lies. An illustration in the Bodleian *Maqāmāt* shows the side of a minbar in great detail, almost obsessively reproducing the patterns of the woodwork and covering a large area of the painting, which in an earlier version was relatively unimportant.

A curtain, as in the Vienna *Maqāmāt*, may be drawn with such care and clarity that it is more eye-catching than the human figure over whom it hangs and whom presumably its role was originally to emphasize.

Clothing can assume patterns of such intricacy and colour that it is more striking than the persons wearing it: not merely the thing as opposed to the person, but the pattern as opposed to the form of the thing, take over as prime subjects: good examples are found throughout the Bodleian *Maqāmāt*, where robes have intricate patterns on which more care has been lavished than anything else in the picture, or in the frontispiece of the Vienna *Maqāmāt*, showing an elaborate pattern on a tent which is a striking feature of the picture. The same feature is found in the emphasis on caparisons, robes and saddle-cloths in the *Manāfi' al-Ḥayawān* of the Escorial, dating from 1354, where Anna Contadini has noted a similarity in this respect to the Ambrosian MS, and notes that there are resemblances to details in the mid fourteenth-century Paris *Kalīla wa Dimna*.<sup>237</sup> For Contadini, these manuscripts provide opportunities to distinguish between the Syro-Iraqi and the

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Seljuk and Mongol traditions, but for an explanation of their similarities, one has surely to look at their common denominators as evidence of the pre-occupations of fourteenth-century Syro-Egyptian art.

One can argue from this shift in what is selected for emphasis that embodiment of the narrative or the nominal subject, the creation of a pictorial parallel to the story, has lost its interest, and this perhaps reflects new interpretations of the stories of the *Maqāmāt* on an anagogical level as expressions of the religious path. (Such interpretations have been proposed for some examples of narrative illustration in Persian painting. R. Milstein has discussed this in relation to Herat painting, claiming that narratives in fifteenth-century Herati work are illustrated to suggest stages and conditions on the sufi path rather than the narrative event.<sup>238</sup> Milstein regards such elements as the development of division of picture planes, or of the connotations of colours, as a process in which ‘symbols replace events.’<sup>239</sup> A similar analysis has been proposed for paintings in the *Dīwān* of Sultan Aḥmad Galā’ir, which Deborah Klimburg Salter relates to the sufi poem ‘The conference of the birds,’ by ‘Attār.<sup>240</sup>) These are sufi readings of the texts: there is also a suggestion that there were alchemical interpretations.<sup>241</sup> One of the most interesting points about this emergent polyvalent interpretation of depictions is its creation of other ‘narratives’ different in meaning from the overt story which the illustration tells, but the Persian examples do not show the same loss of interest in narrative depiction as is displayed by the Syro-Egyptian examples.)

I propose that, concerning the subjects of the manuscript art of fourteenth century Syria and Egypt, the real focus of the painters’ attention was no longer

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narrative at all, but the arrangement and structuring of colour and shape either for its own sake or as part of a sign language, but no longer to form recognisable pictures to parallel the written text. One could argue partly that there was an introduction of new semiotic systems, as, for example, in the language of gesture, but, more than this, there appears to be also, and seemingly at first paradoxically, an invasion of direct effect, of the presentation to the spectator of large and powerful areas of colour and pattern which make an impact in their own right, and not for their value in denotative pictorial representation; one might say sometimes that there is almost the equivalent of collage effect, as large areas of gold are pasted in, as textiles are rendered in such detail and prominence one might almost be looking at the fabric. Where woodwork is shown, the woodcarving is often given more care than the object on which it appears. When we consider these slices of the physical world imposed into the picture, the effect recalls the varying degrees of reality entering painting which Robert Hughes has described in the development of cubism from traditional representation in our own century, a determination to confront us with physical fact and not with illusion.<sup>242</sup>

This accords well with a general quality of other fourteenth-century Cairene Islamic art forms: they are notably arts of inlay, in metalwork and woodwork, for example. In architecture, we can note the incorporation of spolia, such as Pharaonic material and Crusader booty such as the Acre gateway built into al-Nasir's madrasa in Cairo, and of extraneous pieces of unknown origin such as the obsidian inserts into the vestibule of Shaykhu's mosque. The whole art of marble panelling as found in the classic 'mamluk' mihrāb can be described as one of inlay on a large scale.

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This aesthetic might also be detected in literature: the pre-eminence of history may be seen as an obsession with the arrangement of fragments of reality, a general approach of incorporation rather than illusion.

Apart from the shift in emphasis in painting noted above, a decline in human subjects, and an immobility and puppet-like quality in those retained, has been noted as characteristic of fourteenth-century manuscript illumination. Thus Julian Raby has commented on the lack of animation and the puppet-like depictions of people in the Vienna *Maqāmat* of c. 1334 as compared with earlier versions.<sup>243</sup> Esin Atil remarked on the liveliness of animal depiction, seeing a positive revival of *Kaltla and Dimna* tradition in the 1354 MSS.<sup>244</sup> The other favoured subjects - music, herbals, cosmology mechanics - all imply a movement away from depictions of human beings. There is an emphasis on very stylised plant life: Haldane has noted how large and significant plants become in relation to other subjects, formalised arrangements of stems, buds and leaves.<sup>245</sup>

The structure of this movement in the subjects of art as really emphasised rather than as nominally presented as accompaniments to the text could be seen as shifts in the artists' preoccupations from man to animals, from animals to plants, from plants to inanimate materials.

The most striking use of the inanimate is that of gold leaf, its elaborate use being a feature not only of Korans but also of secular manuscripts, where it progresses from highlighting details to covering whole areas of the ground and is often the most powerful element of a picture, whatever the nominal subject. Gilding was stressed by Rachel Astor in her study of manuscripts<sup>246</sup> and has again been

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noted by Anna Contadini as a feature of manuscripts dating between 1334 and 1354.<sup>247</sup> Astor has identified a group of manuscripts dating from c. 1334-1360 where the text is 'liberally scattered with gold rosettes, and the chapter headings are not simply written in red ink, but are in white on a gold ground, and framed,'<sup>248</sup> and a further group which shares these characteristics of gilded ornament. As well as ornamental detail, we have, in secular illustration, extensive areas of gold-leaf which are later reflected in the great achievements of the gilder's art of the fourteenth-century Korans. Other connections between the art of narrative illumination and that of the Koran can be adduced, particularly in those details which Haldane notes as appearing in representational art as disproportionately emphasised. If we return to the detail of a knotted curtain in the Vienna *Maqāmāt* of 1334 we can see that it is quite naturalistically shown in the wedding banquet scene of the *Maqāmāt* of 1225-35. When such a curtain is shown in the scene where Abu Zaid pleads before the Qadi in the Vienna *Maqāmāt*, its size is not emphasised, but the careful and strikingly contrasted depiction of its pattern draws the eye away from any other surface in the painting: in the care and emphasis given to it, it may be said to be the real visual subject of the picture. If we turn the painting sideways, we can see how striking a resemblance, both in outline and decoration, this curtain bears to Koranic marginal palmettes, for example the central palmette on the Damascus Koran of 1341 (James, cat. 21). May we not postulate an artist skilled in Korans who uses a feature familiar to him, and for whom that feature is also the most important thing about the narrative picture, although it is perhaps a much less

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important feature of the Koranic page? Technical skills found in Koranic illumination go hand-in-hand with the new emphasis in narrative illumination.

Can we look beyond some vague concept of lavishness or luxury as a motive, at particular meanings that might be associated with gold? In the traditional Jābirean alchemy practised in medieval Egypt and Syria and promulgated in the fourteenth century by the noted alchemist al-Jildakī, gold was the first of the hierarchy of minerals, first of the seven bodies, the malleable metals (gold, silver, zinc, lead, copper, iron and one on whose identity there was no agreement - mercury and jade not being counted as malleable substances) from which forms and other substances were produced. Gold was the king of malleables.<sup>249</sup> The alchemist's purpose is usually stated as to create gold from base substances, the 'perfect' combination of mercury and sulphur, but according to ibn Khaldūn, the alchemist's purpose was not so much as to create gold, as to realise qualities inherent in nature: it was this fundamental human inability to recreate it that, in ibn Khaldūn's view, doomed the enterprise to failure ('Those who claim to have made gold with the help of alchemy are like those who might claim the artificial creation of man from semen'<sup>250</sup>) and theologically this seems the Koranic objection to the creationist claim of the artist re-stated in terms of alchemy: neither the artist nor the alchemist can reproduce the creative powers of the divinity.

As the prime mineral, gold was related to the sun, not only by its appearance but by its occupation of a similar position in a hierarchy. To the alchemist and to the astrologer, there was a nexus of colour, mineral, planet, animal, quality: gold,

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sun, lion, yellow, heat, dryness.<sup>251</sup> 'Each star has its own kind: that of the sun is gold.'

In alchemy, gold was therefore the prime substance and the aim of the entire science. It was a theological connection that gave gold its second context of meaning, which lay in the significance of the sun in the spiritual hierarchy where, as al-Ghazālī described it, the sun represented the almighty by virtue of its supremacy over other heavenly bodies and, further, represented the almighty and his prophets by virtue of its function as an enabler of perception, a giver of light.

Further interpretations could be made by particular groups: the Bektashi dervishes held an interpretation in which Husain had said:

“Alī was the gold, Fāṭima was the silver, I am the son of the gold and the silver. My father was the sun, my mother was the moon. I am the sun of the sun and the moon.”<sup>252</sup>

This is a theological rendering of the alchemical versions of the generation of the homunculus from the sexual congress of the sun and moon,<sup>253</sup> the gold and silver. The Bektashi interpretation is perhaps similar to those suggested by Kraus in his Shī‘ite interpretations of Jābir’s alchemy, which took on a political aspect with his equation of Jābir’s western sunrise to the advent of the Fāṭimid dynasty.<sup>254</sup> In his treatises, Jābir’s form of address to his readers, ‘my brothers,’ is seen by Kraus as marking his teaching as an initiation to ultra-Shī‘ite thought. This interpretation is Kraus’s own reading: he does not seem to have adduced evidence of early interpretations. Nevertheless, like the Bektashi version, Kraus demonstrates the possibilities of theological interpretations of alchemical texts.

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The point is, of course, not that any particular reading can be proved to have been the 'right' one, the interpretation that corresponded to the intentions of the author, but rather the effects that such sub-textual readings could have on illustrated manuscripts: in a society which is highly conscious of ulterior meaning, of the possibilities of encoded secrets, unselfconscious and innocent naturalism will not long remain so.

What other aspects of intellectual life might be reflected in considerations of substance? A structure such as that outlined earlier in the development of manuscript painting in the fourteenth century shows a movement from human to animal to vegetable to mineral life, as along the Great Chain of Being, a structure which would reflect theological creationist philosophy, with gold as *jawhar*, or to *ishrāqi* philosophers, the light, the underlying substance from which all else in the chain is created. This substance, the protoplasmic *qabīl* in some philosophers,<sup>255</sup> atoms to others,<sup>256</sup> light itself to others again,<sup>257</sup> forms a parallel to the molten bronze in the Koranic argument on artistic creation, the bronze of Solomon from which forms were created, and which the deity claims as his original creation. In alchemical terms, Jābir described the substance as filling the interstices, capable of receiving any form, composing everything, a fairly good description of the way in which gold is used in some manuscript illumination such as the Bodleian *Maqāmāt*.<sup>258</sup> For Abu'l-Qāsim al-Majrīfī, gold is an essential substance and all other metals are really gold which has taken on other 'accidental' qualities. 'Thus Jābir says that all metals would in their mines become gold were it not for the fact that accidental qualities are acquired by them, and they thus fall short of the level of gold.'<sup>259</sup>

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This is a parallel to the theories of the Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites, which identify gold as the primal essence which takes on accidental forms.

A progression from the source, through the stages outlined above, through the Great Chain of Being, if one can think of it in that way, was, according to the Bektashi dervishes, the means of experiencing the divine truth by passing through stages of creation, through the four elements of fire, air, earth and water, and through the stages of mineral, vegetable, animal and human existence to the state of the Perfect Man.<sup>260</sup>

The argument I would like to make to explain the lavish use of gold in secular manuscripts is that its increased use is due to the prevalence of theological and alchemical theory and, like alchemy, it reflects a theological search, although human greed is often postulated as a motive for alchemy and it would be naive to discount this possibility. Indeed, the moral problem gold could present as an earthly temptation was a theme of Muslim theology originally sounded in the Koran.<sup>261</sup> But in the theological connection also lies the appropriateness of gold for development in Koranic illumination; we may see it as a paradoxical material in conflict with the inner meaning of the text it adorns, as with the religious building which it beautifies, but that was not necessarily a conflict in the mind of the gilder; it is an interpretative problem for us.

Neither the craft of the Koranic gilder nor belief in theories will provide a complete explanation for the triumph of gilding, but a nexus of the two, driving in the direction of the development of gilded Korans, may be a more complete explanation of that aesthetic, and, in practical terms, one which does not conflict

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with the economic changes postulated by Allan,<sup>262</sup> which suggest that extensive use of gold in craftsmanship in the late fourteenth-century (on the evidence of Damascus, at least) declines in the fifteenth. Gilding is in any case a technique for displaying small quantities of gold to dramatic effect, while still using the *real thing* rather than an imitation, so its appearance need not necessarily indicate a contemporary economic boom.

The proposition that gilding represented movements in the intellectual background of the times also puts a problem of Islamic art history into a different perspective: the assignation of work to Damascus or Cairo. A continuum between the two in essentials of thought and aesthetic, reflecting the historically evident cultural and intellectual interchange between the cities, allows for the study of separate workshops (Contadini assigns the Bodleian *Maqāmāt* to Syria rather than to Egypt)<sup>263</sup> but without postulating a dichotomy between the two areas that may partly be an imposition of the modern mind.

Traces of gilding survive in much architectural decoration, and a document such as the foundation deed of Faraj's sabil gives us a glimpse of how much would have originally been applied: the doors, the inscriptions, the bronze lions, parts of the fountain itself, the shutters, the ceiling, the muqarnas - all were gilded. Of course, one can interpret this as a display of wealth. But the propositions above concerning the meaning of gold in manuscripts would have applied equally to the use of gold generally: it had a significance rooted deeply in the thought of the surrounding world.

## AT THE ENTRANCE

It will be claimed that the features which were incorporated into the entrance of the great medieval religious buildings constituted a system of reference. This section will discuss the following elements: militaristic spolia, Pharaonic spolia, obsidian inserts, the rayed half-circle of the portal-hood, the star-polygon design.

Militaristic spolia had been a feature of the mosque of Baybars I (1266-9), which had incorporated material sent back from the Sultan's successful campaigns in Syria, and triumphal gateways and entrances were a feature of Islamic building practice.<sup>264</sup> For example, the Umayyads incorporated captured Byzantine gates into the walls of the city of Wāsit, which were afterwards taken to Baghdad<sup>265</sup>. Baybars I sent the Bāb al-'Īd of the Fāṭimid palace from Cairo to be erected in Jerusalem after his conquest there<sup>266</sup> and a Crusader portal from Acre was brought back after Khalīl's conquest there, and erected eventually in al-Naṣir's madrasa in Cairo.<sup>267</sup> At the entrance to the Qalāwūn corridor appears a grille of French workmanship, which Creswell conjectures was originally a screen around the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.<sup>268</sup> It is possible that one can see a reference to the claims of the Sultanate over Jerusalem in the carving apparently showing the Dome of the Rock which is built into the main entrance to the madrasa of Sultan Ḥasan. These spolia were presumably intended to be interpreted in a militaristic and political way, the signs of successful *jihād*, the material proof of Islamic victory.

There is a much larger category of material incorporated into religious architecture, however, the category of Pharaonic spolia. It will be argued that a

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data-base presented here can be interpreted to make a new claim for Cairene religious architecture: that it incorporated Pharaonic material deliberately as part of the cult of Hermetic studies. The pre-occupations with militarism of the previous century were now joined and overtaken in architecture by incorporata which referred to the internal struggle towards the goal of union with the divine.

The following sections argue that the conclusion achieved by combining the evidence from manuscripts with the evidence of architecture is that Pharaonic reliefs and hieroglyphs were valued for their potential as material for codes and their association with the Hermetic tablet tradition. These are the most reasonable explanations for their incorporation into Islamic building.

There are two kinds of justification for these conclusions. One is the nature of the intellectual climate, a hermeneutic cast of thought in which esoteric material was valued; the other is the body of statistical evidence showing that the incorporation of ancient material demonstrates a distinct pattern of deliberate re-use.

To place the pattern of re-use which emerges from the statistics within its intellectual context seems to me an essential part of understanding its purposes. A brief survey of Islamic views of Pharaonic material is an essential preliminary here.

There had been indications of an interest in Pharaonic material under the Fāṭimids. Maqrīzī repeats an account of a festival in 1024 when crowds ran amok demanding money from the merchants to visit the 'prison of Joseph' at Giza. The caliph enforced the distribution of the money and the crowds were promised they would be given the expenses of their visit, as in previous years. The crowds of inhabitants, with the chief qadi and the troops, crossed the river, and spent two

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nights at Giza. The people continued to run through the city for a fortnight afterwards, carrying fans and statues and hideous objects which they took to al-Qahira to show the caliph.<sup>269</sup>

Quantities of Pharaonic material were re-used in the Fāṭimid walls of al-Qahira and the north minaret of al-Ḥākim. The Fāṭimids followed the traditional annual celebrations of the rulers of Egypt, the breaking of the dyke and celebrations connected with the rising of the Nile at the Nilometer on Roda, where much Pharaonic material was to be found. The remains at Memphis which tradition connected to Joseph and Moses would also have had a particular interest for them given their emphasis on the prophetic traditions. There was therefore a general local interest in the physical remains, as well as the specific Hermetic intellectual tradition.

Broadly speaking, one can place the Islamic interests, as they had evolved by the fourteenth-century, surrounding Pharaonic material into five different groups, 'treasure-hunting,' political concerns, the search for 'marvels,' psychological needs and the quest for knowledge. Of these groups, the last is the most important for present purposes.

The first, 'treasure-hunting,' is to some extent a special literary genre or a branch of Islamic travel-literature. Usually this search is associated with esoteric ciphers and so on, as it gives conjurations which enable the seeker to reach the treasure with impunity. Its view of history was indiscriminating: both the distant and the more immediate past might be evoked in this type of search. In Egypt, particular people associated with buried treasure were the caliph, al-Ḥākim,<sup>270</sup> and

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Joseph, who, according to some writers had collected and buried all the treasures of previous kings.<sup>271</sup>

'Treasure-hunting' is a fluid category, which cannot be fully separated from other motivations. It is associated with mineralogy and alchemy, as evidenced in the Bodleian manuscript which may be conveniently referred to here by the title of its first section as *Madātt̃s*, the title given to it by Hajji Khalifah:<sup>272</sup>

... 'there is found in the diamond mines a white gem resembling white pearls, having in it small narrow black veins, whoso possesses himself of a piece of this gem can make himself invisible and go where he pleases without anyone seeing him. In the mine of red rubies there is a jagged yellow gem having in it veins of clear green; wherever a piece of this is placed, no snake, asp, locust, nor any other crawling thing will come near ...'<sup>273</sup>

This kind of mineralogical lore is also a branch of the Hermetic tradition, which will be discussed in greater detail below, as Hermes the Great was seen as the donor of knowledge to the author of stone-books such as that of Balinus, for example.

The second type of Islamic interest in Pharaonic history might be broadly described as political, concerned with the history and achievements of the great rulers of Egypt's past and their implications for rulers of the present. There are various attempts recorded by Islamic rulers to destroy the Pyramids.<sup>274</sup> For the interpretation of the surviving architectural evidence, it would be possible, of course, to make some broad political claim, such as the desire of later rulers to acquire some of the glamour and prestige of the builders of the pyramids by placing

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Pharaonic material in buildings which they patronised, and that may indeed have played its part. It could be seen, for example, as a motive behind the attempts of Shaykhu to bring the 'green naos' of Memphis intact to Cairo, which would have been a considerable achievement.<sup>275</sup> (This interpretation of the 'power' motif seems logically at odds with the explanation of Pharaonic incorporata as convenient spolia, since there would not have been much of a demonstration of power in using easily accessible and mundanely useful material.) However, with one or two exceptions, the political analysis of architecture seems often to rest, not on evidence, but on modern reconstructions of past self-perceptions and motives, on modern impositions of concepts such as state-hood and policy. The exceptions are perhaps the occasional historical references to rulers who encourage some kind of identification, or see themselves prognosticated by, the Pharaonic past. Maqrīzī cites an interesting belief that the walls of the temple of Akhmīm portrayed all the future rulers of Egypt, and that Dhū'l-Nūn al-Akhmīmī, who could read hieroglyphs, demonstrated a remarkable wisdom and effaced most of them. We see this potential of decipherment exploited in Maqrīzī's account of the discovery made, during the reign of Baibars I, of what would correspond to a scribal statue. In 1273, one of the principal gates of the eastern Fātimid palace was demolished, and a coffer was found which contained a hollow yellow bronze statue seated on a pyramidal base, crouching on its thighs. The hands held a plaque on which were engraved figures, and also found were tablets with the names of Alexander and Baybars, in what was said to be the writing of al-Hākīm. These were interpreted as a talisman composed by al-Zāhir, son of al-Hākīm, invoking the protection of God

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upon Egypt. The sultan placed it in his collection of rarities.<sup>276</sup> This would seem to demonstrate the use of decipherment as a political weapon, in order to legitimise the rule of the present by invoking great names of the past.

The 'political material' category can also be described as material for national pride: as evidenced by Maqrīzī, the marvels of Egypt's past made his country unique and wonderful.<sup>277</sup> Within this category are included buildings, talismans and treasures, all combining to make up the glories of Egypt. The question of national consciousness and past history, of how and whether the Pharaonic past was transmitted and understood, has been discussed at length by Michael Cook<sup>278</sup> and by Haarmann,<sup>279</sup> but their studies did not extend to its possible effects on art.

A third aspect, closely related to this view of Egypt as a land of marvels, was the moral aspect of miraculous objects and events: al-Idrīsī's view is that all pious believers<sup>280</sup> have a duty to visit 'mirabilia,' of which the pyramids were the greatest, and to exercise the capacity of wonder. Al-Idrīsī believed 'that it is a sign of humility and true intelligence to let oneself become stupefied and overwhelmed by the sight of the miraculous' and he saw the pyramids as signs of God's admonitory power.<sup>281</sup> In this we may perhaps see an attempt to reconcile the non-Islamic past with the morality of Islam.

The next aspect has been identified by Haarmann as the desire to take refuge in the past from present calamities; he notes that in the fourteenth century, with frequent famines and low Niles and the outbreak of plague, there was a marked increase of interest in hieroglyphic magic and Pharaonic spolia, a point which reinforces comments made in the discussion of the Black Death. An extension of this,

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possibly merging into the next category, is the specific belief in a healing elixir to be found underneath the Pyramids, recorded by Jābir.<sup>282</sup>

The last category is the most important from the point of view of its consequences for art and literature, and this is the intellectual tradition which saw the Pharaonic past as a treasury of preserved knowledge, to be studied, preserved and transmitted, identifying the legacy of Hermes Trismegistus with the sciences preserved by the inscriptions of the pyramids and other Pharaonic remains, a tradition attributed specifically to Hermes in the aspect of Hermes Trismegistus. Three individuals were postulated and merged into this identity. The first was an antediluvian ruler-savant, who built the Pyramids and recorded knowledge on them in order to save it from the Flood. In another version, he was a post-diluvian Babylonian who revived the study of lost sciences, and migrated to Egypt. In the third aspect, Hermes was a post-diluvian Egyptian writer and recorder of sciences. In various versions, the records of Hermes were preserved in underground tunnels or caverns; the account of Balinus describes the threefold Hermes as a sage discovered by the author in a crypt, holding in his hand the *emerald tablet* with the book which was to be transmitted by Balinus at his side. This formed a type of Islamic literature, the *Kitāb al-sirr*,<sup>283</sup> which claimed to hand on secret knowledge which had been revealed to the author, often relating to wealth or gems.

The Hermetic tradition was not the sole prerogative of Sunni Islam, but part of the more general esoteric Islamic tradition shared by both sufism and Shī'ism, and attributed by many authors to Sabaeen, Harranian transmission.<sup>284</sup> Massignon notes that, for many Muslims, Hermes was a genuine prophet identified with Idris

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and Enoch, and is also of the opinion that the early Muslim Hermeticists were Shī'ite.<sup>285</sup>

Netton has commented on Hermetic influence in the thinking of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā:

'Akin to the Sufi movement in the *Rasa'il*, and sometimes difficult to separate from it is a Hermetic strand ... The Ikhwān manifest a deep liking and respect for the *Corpus Hermeticum* and seem to have plundered it for much astrological, alchemical and ante-diluvian information ... the end of the *Risala* on magic is riddled with a variety of quotations attributed to Hermes himself.'<sup>286</sup>

In Egypt, there was a tradition of associating the Fātimid caliph al-Ḥākim with the learning of Hermes, a tradition which persisted beyond the dynasty. Thus, the *Book of lost pearls*, whose text Ahmad Kamal took from a fifteenth-century copy, described an underground hall with a table which had been studied by al-Ḥākim.<sup>287</sup>

The Hermetic tradition might be described as part of the common inheritance of esoteric Islam, in which Shī'ite figures played a part. It forms part of the intellectual background of such influential sufi writers as Suhrawardī al-Maqtul<sup>288</sup> and appears also in conventional historians such as Maqrīzī.<sup>289</sup>

## HERMETICISM AND HIEROGLYPHS IN MANUSCRIPT TRADITION

The evidence of Hermetic manuscripts is probably not of a very contentious kind: what is new is its discussion by art-historians, for whom the Hermetic and alchemical manuscripts have not been an important subject, perhaps because of a belief that these manuscripts do not, somehow, constitute 'high art,' that they have nothing of importance to tell the art-historian because the subjects of their illustrations, the talismans, fabulous creatures, '*hurūf*' letters, and so forth, do not correspond to those which fall within the scope of the fine arts as defined in the west. Their significance for the art historian may lie not only in the subjects themselves, but also, and perhaps more importantly for other contemporary works of art, in the intellectual viewpoint and methods which the Hermetic and alchemical manuscripts reveal.

Within the intellectual traditions of inheritance from Pharaonic times we can distinguish two lines of thought, as evidenced by the manuscripts. The first is that of the decipherment of esoteric script, a tradition concerned with secret languages, and expounded primarily, as least in the surviving manuscripts, by ibn Wahshiyya, a rather shadowy figure who appears to have been a tenth-century Iraqi, claiming to be a Harranian.<sup>290</sup> The second has more of an alchemical character, and is the descendant largely of the description of the venture of ibn Umail (also called 'al-Tamīmī') into the 'Prison of Joseph,' which lies to a great extent behind the iconography of the European Hermetic tradition. Both attribute their original knowledge to Hermes, and these attributions may be regarded themselves, but as

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validatory traditions, stamping the text with the imprimatur of ancient authority. It is in this last capacity that we see their fragmentary survivals, as in the occasional Pharaonic character appearing in scientific manuscripts such as of the text of al-Jazarī.<sup>291</sup>

The two principal sources of hieroglyphic tradition in the west are the texts of *Horapollon* and of *Picatrix*.

The oldest (fifteenth-century, discovered on Andros) manuscript of the text of *Horapollon*, which claims to be a decipherment of hieroglyphs, seems to have no association with Coptic, Syriac or Islamic tradition. It may, according to its principal editor, Boas, be in a line of Neo-Platonic descent. Plotinus noted that the Egyptian sages 'drew pictures and connected one picture for each thing in their temples, thus making manifest the description of that thing. Thus each picture was a kind of understanding and wisdom and substance and given all at once and not discursive.'<sup>292</sup> It is interesting that the *Horapollo* text translates some hieroglyphics correctly,<sup>293</sup> including correctly associating the baboon, the sign of Thoth, with the scribe, an interpretation which could not be made by direct deduction from the depiction without any additional information. The baboon was associated particularly with Ashmunain as incarnating one of the presiding deities of the place and appeared on many inscriptions and statues with a provenance from Ashmunain. It was from this place that al-Nasir obtained columns and obelisks for his mosque in the citadel (see Appendix I and Pharaonic catalogue nos. 106-7.) and it would be an attractive conclusion that its association with script survived into Islamic tradition; unfortunately, the absence of association between the *Horapollo* and an Islamic

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context debars us from using it as evidence for the survival of a correct Muslim interpretation of the baboon image.

Boas' conclusion on the authorship of the *Horapollon* is:

'The work is of composite authorship. Book I contains Egyptian words and correct symbols, especially cosmological terms, meteorology and psychology. Book II deals with various conditions of human life, sickness and health, good and bad fortune and the like. Each book had its own author or editor and the compiler of the second book was a Greek or Hellenistic Alexandrian.'<sup>294</sup>

The other major inheritance in the west has been the *Picatrix*, which survives as a Spanish translation, made from the Arabic, c. 1256-8. Its ascription to Abu'l Qāsim is incorrect, in the view of the modern editor, Pingree who has published a Latin/English version. Nothing of the original meaning of hieroglyphs would seem to survive in this text.

The *Horapollon* and the *Picatrix* have survived in un-illustrated versions only, so we do not know what the hieroglyphs and pictures which lay behind them might have looked like.

In the west, the influence of Hermeticism was very long-lasting; Dame Frances Yates traced its descent to Renaissance thought<sup>295</sup> and John Robinson has pointed out that in a certain hand-gesture found in the paintings of Picasso we can see the gesture of Hermes the Great: one hand pointing down, one upwards, in token of the dictum 'whatever is below is above and whatever is above is below.' Robinson sees this as a derivation through the Tarot,<sup>296</sup> but the gesture, and the placement of the fingers in Picasso's major painting, *La Vie*, would also appear to

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relate closely to the image of Hermes in Siena Cathedral. As Robinson notes, Picasso also received information about Hermeticism through his friend Apollinaire and this would, no doubt, have included artistic and literary imagery of a more formal kind than the Tarot, such as the Siena depiction.

*La Vie* derives much of its power, as Robinson has noted, from an intrinsic mystery: this power, the sense of some ulterior meaning beyond the work of art itself, may be the twentieth-century inheritance of esotericism.<sup>297</sup>

To return to the use made by medieval Islamic writers of the ancient hieroglyphs, considering the aspect of linguistic decipherment, we might begin by noting that to a scholar such as ‘Abd al-Latif (d.1229), the ancient inscriptions clearly had meanings: they were signs with a coherent purpose:

‘It is manifestly evident that these representations were intended to portray important matters, remarkable actions, extraordinary incidents, and under the figure of implements to delineate secrets most profound. It is clear that all this was not effected for mere diversion, that the efforts of art were not exhausted upon similar works for the mere purpose of embellishment and decoration.’<sup>298</sup>

The hieroglyphic depictions were recognised as having a serious meaning, and in a culture that we may sometimes feel was obsessed with the esoteric (though this may be an index of our failure of understanding). The contemporary concept of the physical world as full of signs with hidden meanings appears both in the Sufi mystics and more orthodox writers such as Maqrīzī. The three sources of this hermeneutic way of thinking seem to lie in the Neoplatonic (and later, the Islamic) concept of signs placed everywhere in creation to reflect a metaphysical world, the

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Hermetic tradition of the tablets decipherable only by initiates, and the Koranic statements of signs given by God to believers (LI, 21; XLI, 53). The combination of these traditions in Islamic mysticism produced an acute awareness of the interior references of the external world, even though rejection of that external reality might be sought. In Corbin's evocative words, the intellect is a hunter questing for signs.<sup>299</sup>

In Pharaonic material, such a mind was presented with what it understood as an intelligent code, and it is ancient languages as codes for contemporary purposes with which Ibn Wahshiyya is concerned. His systematic and orderly work, which covers a number of alphabets as well as the hieroglyphic, is concerned with understanding hieroglyphs, not according to what they look like, but as ciphers within a particular context, which forms a cryptographic key or frame within which the signs may be understood. It is particularly interesting that the majority of his meanings for Pharaonic signs do not depend on some attempt at understanding them as representations, but on assigning a particular significance to them according to context. Thus, the same signs can mean different things depending on whether they are understood to relate to minerals, to plants, to planets. Occasionally, one sees an obvious figural interpretation; clearly, a foot can be seen as connected with power, but these interpretations are not only rare but indirect and emblematic allusions. What we have is, in effect, the creation of systems, of signs which can be ordered and patterned to give meaning and altered to give fresh meaning, like the elements of a language, but which can only be understood within a particular context. Ibn Wahshiyya seems to have been clear that the hieroglyphs were distinct from the

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other alphabets: he gives another 'Hermetic' alphabet which is quite unlike the hieroglyphic one. He makes it clear that the Pharaonic signs were not *Hurūf*.

Hammer Purgstall rendered the relevant passage as follows:

'Alphabet of the philosopher Hermes the great.

This alphabet is used on the *Obelisks*, the *Pyramids*, the *inscription tables* and *stones*; the *temples*, and other old buildings from the time of the first *Pharaohs*. It does not consist in a series of letters like other alphabets, but in expressions composed according to the arrangement made by Hermes the great. These expressions consist in innumerable figures and signs, which are to lead the mind directly, and immediately to the object expressed thereby, viz: there is a sign which signifies the name of God Almighty, simply and alone. If they wish to express one of the particular attributes of God they add something to the original sign, and proceeded in this manner ...'<sup>300</sup> (The Arabic text is given at plate 26)

Since literal depiction is not a major part of the system, for example, god is represented by a bird of prey, Blochet's understanding of Ibn Wahshiyya's Hermetic alphabet as a system of emblemata or similar signs, which are pictorial but allusive rather than direct depictions, seems a correct description.

Examination of ibn Wahshiyya's signs against the list of hieroglyphs given in Gardiner's index shows that he did not, of course, convey the 'correct' or original meaning (although some at least of the groups of signs suggest they are copied from authentic original groupings. Interestingly, those signs that are apparently closest to real hieroglyphic inscriptions, resembling, in their groupings, late Ptolemaic

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inscriptions of private tombs in the Memphite area <sup>301</sup>) are not attributed by Ibn Wahshiyya to the Pharaohs or to Hermes, but to the Nabataeans. 29

Ibn Wahshiyya seemingly continued to be known in Egypt; ibn Khaldūn refers to his letter-magic, although he thought the text was lost;<sup>302</sup> the Bodleian has a manuscript of his work on Nabataean agriculture which bears the autograph of Maqrīzī;<sup>303</sup> the copy from which Hammer-Purgstall prepared his text was found in Cairo (although of a late date, 1752, it was taken from an earlier one dated 413 A.H.).<sup>304</sup> The hieroglyphs in Hammer-Purgstall's edition are very close to the Paris MS. 6805, which is dated 1751. Blochet has noted other Pharaonica appearing in later texts, such as a hieroglyphic alphabet in a Hermetic text of 703 A.H.,<sup>305</sup> and there does seem evidence that there was a continuing tradition of decipherment, as the episode concerning Baybars I mentioned above would suggest. 43

Ibn Wahshiyya also gives a set of planetary signs, with which the work of Abu l'Qāsim, as set out in the Bodleian manuscript (Marsh 155, 1369) makes an interesting comparison. Abu l'Qāsim gives two planetary sequences. (In the accompanying plates, to allow comparison with a totally iconographic system, I have also reproduced the planetary signs from the *Kitāb al-Bulhān*) 32

In ibn Wahshiyya's arrangement, each planet presides over a set of signs which form an alphabet corresponding to the Arabic. In Abu l'Qāsim, there is simply a small group of signs for each planet. A few signs in Abu l'Qāsim's system bear resemblances to corresponding ones in ibn Wahshiyya, but the interesting point of comparison is surely this: that ibn Wahshiyya presents a complete code which can be used as a vehicle, can be re-arranged to convey differing meanings, like any 33

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other script. Abu l'Qāsim's letters exist only in their groupings, on their own account. This seems a crucial difference between a cryptic and a talismanic sign. In the cryptic sign, the function of a code is still present and usable. In the talismanic sign, the letters form a conjunction which has a direct effect of itself (in conjunction additionally with other actions or materials, such as engraving the letters on a particular gem or at a particular time). An important shift in the understanding of letters seems to have happened here. One can only conjecture that the cause might to some extent have been the desperate search for talismanic powers occasioned by the Black Death.

The *Madāṭṭṣ* Hermetic manuscript reproduces letters with no apparent relation to hieroglyphs that, although sometimes similar to the forms of those of ibn Wahshiyya, are used in a way closer to that of Abu l'Qāsim. Here they are combined with a pictorial tradition which presents both Pharaonic figures of creatures with bird and animal heads and more conventional Islamic astronomical forms. The resemblance between the seated figures of the sun and Saturn to their equivalents in the *Kitāb al-Bulhān*, for example, is striking, as is that of both manuscripts to metalwork roundels.

It is perhaps worth adding that there are no Pharaonic-style illustrations in the *Kitāb al-Bulhān*, although that manuscript invokes the name of the Egyptian temple of Akhmīm. (The creatures appearing on the arch in this illustration are actually those of the Chinese calendar.) The *Madāṭṭṣ* MS. invokes the name of Akhmīm (fol. 35r). Akhmīm, associated with the great sufi Dhū'l Nūn, was also mentioned by Maqrīzī, (noted above, p.143) as a source of legend and predictions.

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It may be that, at any rate in some contexts, we can regard the appearance of the name of Akhmīm as a profession of authenticity rather than any real pointer to the source of material.

The Hermetic manuscripts discussed thus appear to draw on different sources. There is what we might call the philological tradition, which is concerned with handing on letters which function in the way of language, the tradition of Ibn Wahshiyya, and there is also one concerned with depictions of objects such as astrological emblems: the talismanic, which appears combined with lettering. The Pharaonic signs are not continued in this pictorial tradition, except to a very minor extent, but some Pharaonic imagery, such as the bird-headed beings, does continue. It is interesting to note relationships between the imagery of the *Madātīṣ* and contemporary metalwork; for example, the double-headed serpent which is slain by the lion-headed deity in the manuscript illustration appears also on the Toronto magic bowl. (This may represent an identification of the Islamic motif of the double-headed serpent, as found, for example, at the Talisman gate in Baghdad, with the serpent Apophis of Pharaonic myth. This creature, the enemy of the sun, was shown as being slain by the divine cat, in an iconography which continued into the Ptolemaic period. The snake-eating lion is found in a western alchemical figure which may derive from Pharaonic/Islamic tradition: we note the sign for mercury, similar to the Pharaonic *ankh* sign, in the background of an alchemical illustration.)

The concept of the talisman or the effective sign, which was mentioned earlier in the discussion of talismanic signs, is one lost to western art criticism: it

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gains its effects not from what it 'says,' but from what it 'does.' Its main purpose is not so much to imitate the appearance of things as to influence events.

It may be necessary to make some formal justification within the field of art history for the study of 'unprestigious' art such as that of Hermetic and talismanic texts. Studying the ways in which meaning was read into a character or a picture gives us a new insight into fourteenth-century art: we can, as Harold Rosenberg has seen in modern expressionist work, see art as the arena or trace of an activity, that activity displacing any nominal 'subject' as the most important thing it records.<sup>306</sup> We can see the cryptograms, the ciphers, the talismans, that result from this kind of intellectual activity as an art-form in its own right, the vocabulary created for a special language: we may not be privy to it, but study of the Hermetic texts can at least reveal it for coherent and systematic expression, rather than disconnected superstitious scribbles.

## THE 'TABLET' AND PHARAONIC TRADITION

The tradition of the secret tablet is perhaps more significant in the history of alchemical manuscripts than in the tradition of secret alphabets and ciphers, since, like the name of Akhmīm, it lay at the start of the *silsila*, part of the authentication, the source of the chain of transmission, of the alchemical text. In the version of Balinus transmitted by Sājīūs of Nablus (probably a twelfth-century MS.) studied by Ruska, Hermes is claimed as the originator at the start of the text, and the contents of the 'emerald [in this case, *zabarzad*, chrysolite] tablet' are given at the end of the text, claiming the text to be the entire effusion of Hermes.<sup>307</sup> (Text and translation are given in Vol. II, Appendix II.) It is in this relationship, as a preliminary, and in this capacity, as an authenticator, that we can see parallels for the architectural use of the Pharaonic tablet. Like the child's writing-tablet held out by Suhrawardī's shaikh at the start of his path to learning, like the depiction of the tablet of Hermes at the start of the alchemical text, so the Pharaonic inscription at the entrance to a building signified and authenticated the knowledge to be acquired beyond it. This interpretation of the meaning of these inscribed blocks which were set at entrances depends on a structuralist proof demonstrating parallel relationships: it is not, and does not claim to be, a causal historical proof: I can point to no instance where there is some surviving record of the deliberate siting of the Pharaonic material at the entrance to a building so as to signify knowledge within. But the validity of this approach is not disproved by such a lack: the structural proof may operate correctly in areas where conventional evidence is lacking.

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The essence of the story is that, in an underground vault, Hermes is discovered, holding a tablet on which is carved secret lore. This is an aspect of Hermeticism which accords with sufi thinking.<sup>308</sup> The messages which the 'emerald tablet' was claimed to convey echo, crudely, some of the essential points of thought of such learned and eminent sufis as al-Ghazālī: that whatever is below on this earth is a reflection of what is above, that the highest and the lowest are interconnected, that the highest is identified with light. (The Arabic text, in Ruska's edition, and my translation, are given in the Appendix in Vol. 2)<sup>309</sup>

The microcosm-macrocosm analogy discussed earlier, as well as operating as a principle of exegesis, contains within it a feature of permanent importance to Islamic thought; the concept of the divine, guarded tablet<sup>310</sup> '*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*' of Koran LXXV 22, which must, if the theories expressed by al-Ghazālī and other thinkers were correct, have its counterpart on earth. The divine tablet was a recurring metaphor in sufi thought, a counterpart of the divine intelligence which, as a pen, writes on a tablet, inscribes its will.<sup>311</sup>

A third possibility of meaning is suggested by a fourteenth-century text. The term '*al-lawḥāt*' is that used by the historian, Ibn al-Dawādārī, to describe the mines of Ashmūnain from which, he speculates, the columns transported thence by al-Naṣir, were quarried.<sup>312</sup> (Vol. II, Appendix I.) This may be a pointer towards the extension of the meaning of '*lawḥ*' to embrace ancient material.

The Guarded Tablet of the Koran and the Emerald Tablet of Hermeticism are merged into one in the work of Suhrawardī (as discussed by Corbin in his commentary on Suhrawardī's *Book of the Tablet*, which exists in both Arabic and

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Persian texts) who has another interpretation: the tablet is also a sign of the initiate starting upon his path of learning, as a child starts to learn with a tablet. Thus, in the treatise *The rustling of Gabriel's wings*, the sage to whom the visionary speaks is asked to teach the word of god. He takes the pupil's tablet, and writes on it 'a marvellous alphabet with which I could understand all sūras of the Koran.' Then the shaikh teaches the science of *abjad*. 'After I had studied this, I covered the tablet with signs, as much as my capacity would allow and so far as my thoughts had arisen to a heavenly vision.'<sup>313</sup> In another treatise, *Epistle on the state of childhood*, Suhrawardī uses this image again: the seeker encounters a shaikh in a desert country who begins to teach him the letters which he writes on a tablet, and the seeker is transported with joy. The shaikh disappears, however, and the pupil searches after him, but does not encounter him again until he finds him in a *khānqāh*.<sup>314</sup>

For al-Shādhili, secrecy became part of the metaphor of the tablet, as did the concept of the mirror:

'The heart is the mirror of manifestation; therefore seek the polishing value of consecration. The heart is the throne of your Lord, the Divine consciousness, the observed pocket. Read the tablet of your heart, your "preserved tablet," you, the beloved, the observed one, and it shall reveal your secrets to you. What he discloses to the heart shall never become deficient ... knowledge of your sanctified self (*nafsuk al-qudsīyah*) is the door (*bāb*) to the presence of sovereignty.'<sup>315</sup>

This thinking still sees the tablet at a metaphorical level, but it is remarkable that at least one building in Cairo, the mosque of Shaykhū, displays some features

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which might correspond to those cited by al-Shādhili in the same conjunction: at the entrance were incorporated Pharaonic blocks as lintel and threshold, and in the walls of the vestibule beyond, three large pieces of obsidian. These three pieces, about two feet high, and rounded at the top but rectangular below, as if they were perhaps originally sections through a pilaster, form a triangular plan at the entrance of the mosque. The reflective powers of obsidian made it an efficient mirror and the mirror was a metaphor for some sufi thought, but it is difficult to see correspondences in the Shaykhū arrangement to the philosophical implications. De Jong noted that many Bektashi images consist of two halves, one being a mirror image of the other, this constituting a reference to the *zāhir* and the *bāṭin*. The mirror image was used by other sufis, notably by ibn 'Arabī, for whom it formed a sophisticated image of the creator and his creation: Adam represented both the mirror and the observing subject who sees his reflection: the cosmos was conceived as an unpolished metal mirror, given its reflective burnishing by the breathing of life into his creation by the creator. The metaphorical usage is continued in the work of Ibn 'Aṭā'illāh, teaching in Cairo, follower and champion of ibn 'Arabī:

'How can the heart be illumined while the forms of creatures are depicted in its mirror?'<sup>316</sup>

(This takes us a stage towards the undesirability of outward form, which can only keep the mind on earthly concerns: in this case, the form is as reflected in a mirror, but logically the same objection would have applied to a representational work of art. The mirror was of importance in Western esoteric belief, at least till the last century<sup>317</sup>.)

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There are other possible associations of these obsidian inserts, such as the growing appearance of black glass, to which it is similar in appearance, and which has been mentioned in connection with the 'black light' of certain visionaries. However, a reference, to which the arrangement and context of these inserts would be better suited, is a comparison with the three roundels on the Hermetic tablet, (44) - (45) (representing spirit, *rūh*, body or physicality, *jasad*, and void, *fadawa*.) This is an image which appears at the beginning of the alchemic text in the Islamic world and passed to the west, forming a kind of guarantee that what was to follow was the gift of genuine esoteric knowledge, and testifying to the Pharaonic origin of the material in the text. This reference would fit well with the other Pharaonic incorporata. Four pieces from the 'green naos' of Memphis, the lintels and thresholds of Shaykhūn's mosque and khānqāh, have been identified by Stricker, only one of which (the lintel of the khānqāh) has been included in the data-base, as it is the only one certainly identifiable as inscribed material; the other pieces may well bear inscriptions hidden or badly worn.

In alchemical texts, we have a pre-occupation with the actual ciphers on the tablet and their interpretation, rather than on the tablet as a metaphor for philosophers. At this second level, the identification was made between the Pharaonic writings and the wisdom of Hermes. The pre-eminent example of this is found in the preface to the *Kitāb al-mā' al-waraqī wa'l ard al-najmīya* of ibn Umail, the tenth century alchemist whose writings lie behind many later alchemical treatises; the sage in his account is not named, but most of the circumstances he describes are identical to those of the Hermes legend.

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This particular treatise was utilised by Abū 'l Qāsim<sup>318</sup> and the preface was given as an introduction to the work by the fourteenth century alchemist, al-Jildakī, contained in a manuscript (probably Syrian of the early Ottoman period) in the Bodleian (MS. Greaves 14) which also reproduces illustrations of the contents of the tablet. These are similar to, though much more finely rendered than, the version in the Bibliothèque Nationale. (MS. arabe 2610; this was in the 'fonds Colbert' and is probably sixteenth-century). The characteristic three circles had been illustrated in a manuscript in the Topkapi of Ibn Umail's text; this manuscript, which is dated 1339, presented Faris with a puzzle<sup>319</sup>, since one page appears to be Jalairid in style and the other, facing it, to be a Syrian or Byzantine-style representation of a sage holding out the tablet of wisdom. Ibn Umail's text, however, refers clearly to a site near the pyramids. The illustration in the Topkapi text seems a combination of traditions, part of which passed to the west, since the three circles form a feature of later, western versions of alchemical prefaces.

The ibn Umail text actually credits the tablet, (stone in his version, not emerald, and shown as black in the illustration in the Topkapi manuscript) to the 'prison of Joseph,' at Būsīr, and the details may be compared with the illustrations in the Topkapi and the Bodleian texts. (These two manuscripts were not mentioned by Stapleton: the Paris MS does not show this scene.)

'We went towards the Pyramid (*Birbā'*) which the keepers opened, and I saw on the roof of the galleries [*dahlīz*, the word used for normally used for vestibule or corridor in the *waqf* documents; Stapleton gives 'verandahs' or 'vestibules, in a foot-note.] of the Pyramid a picture of Nine Eagles with out-spread wings as if they

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were flying, and with outstretched and open claws. In the claw of each of the eagles was a thing like a fully-drawn bow that is used by soldiers [Stapleton found *Jund* in one MS he consulted and *Khail* in two others.] On the wall of the gallery on the right side of anyone entering the Pyramid, and on the left side, were pictures of people standing, most perfect in shape and beauty, wearing clothes of various colours and having their hands stretched out towards a figure seated inside the Pyramid, near the pillar of the gate of the Hall. The image was (seated) in a chair like those used by physicians, the chair being separate from the figure. In its lap, resting on the arms - the two hands of the figure being stretched out on its knees - was a stone slab (*balāṭah*) - also separate - the length of which was about 1 cubit and the breadth about 1 span. The slab was like an open book exhibited to all who entered as if to suggest they should look at it. On the side, viz., in the Hall (*riwāq*) where the image was situated, were different pictures, and inscriptions in hieroglyphic (*birbāwī*) writing. The tablet which was in the lap of the image was divided into two halves by a line down the middle; and on one half of it, towards the bottom, was a picture of two birds having their breasts (contiguous) to one another. One of them had both wings cut off, and the other had both wings (intact) Each of them held fast the tail of the other by its beak as if the flying bird wished to fly with the mutilated bird, and the mutilated bird wished to keep the flying bird with itself. These two linked birds that were holding each other appeared like a circle, a symbol of 'Two in One'. Above the head of the one that was flying was a circle and above these two birds, at the top of the tablet, close to the fingers of the image (*sic*), was the representation of the crescent moon (*hilāl*). At the side of the

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moon was a circle similar to the circle near the two birds at the bottom. The total of these symbols is Five - three at the bottom, *viz.*, two birds and the circle: and above, the figure of the Crescent Moon and another circle.

'On the other half of the stone tablet at its top, close to the fingers of the image (*sic*) was a picture of a Sun with two rays, as if they were a symbol of 'Two in One' and next to them was another Sun with one descending ray. These are three things - I mean three lights, *viz* the rays of the 'Two in One' and the one descending ray extending to the lower part of the tablet. These rays enclose a black circle of which one-third is divided off. Thus it became one-third and two-thirds. One-third of it had the form of the Crescent Moon because the interior of it is white, free from blackness: and the black circle surrounds it because these figures are the representation of Two in One.' That which is at the bottom is 'One of two' and these are the Black Circle and the Crescent Moon which is included in the circle. Two Suns are also at the top, I mean, the figure of 'Two in One', and the single Sun, which [is] the figure of 'One in one.' Consequently, these also total Five [as in the other half of the tablet] and the [grand] total is Ten, according to the number of these Eagles, and the Black Earth.

'This was he who made that image in his Pyramid in which he summed up all his knowledge by means of his own image and (taught) the knowledge of his wisdom which he wished to show to the world in stone.'<sup>320</sup>

Ibn Umail's text is a kind of imprimatur, a guarantee of the authenticity of the material, to be handed down with the alchemical text itself. There is perhaps a similar role to be assigned to the occasional hieroglyphic signs to be found in the

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scientific manuscripts, such as those of al-Jazarī, where they play no part in the directions to the reader, but rather perhaps imply, as Blochet has suggested, an authentication for the contents.

It is thus in a different tradition from that of ibn Wahshiyya's decipherment of hieroglyphs and other alphabets. These were not regarded so much as legitimations or prefaces, but as subjects of study in themselves.

However, the feature which affects the way in which things were seen, the kind of meaning that was attributed to referents in the outer world, is, in both kinds of Hermetic and alchemical tradition, the concept of the hieroglyphic sign as part of a code, whether that code was to be deciphered or whether its mere presence signified ulterior meanings. In either case, the literal or narrative meaning of an image would recede in importance.

It is also very difficult to see in this complex account the essentially simple contents of the Hermetic tablet, with its basic message of the correspondence between everything below and everything above, but it is possible to see how such interconnections between the spiritual and the physical underlie ibn Umail's account.

We also seem to have two very different visual versions. The Topkapi MS presents a fairly straightforward rendering of the persons with their hands stretched out to the seated figure with the tablet and the three circles, including two entwined birds. The Bodleian and Paris MSS have the three circles, and the Bodleian also the two entwined birds. The Paris MSS would seem to render a non-figural version.

But the Bodleian MS also has a very complex image, which seems to incorporate some elements of the account of Hermes the Babylonian, supposed to

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have given his name to the pyramids. The description of what was at the top of one of the Pyramids, given in al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*, is as follows:

'In the middle of the platform was an elegant dome, immediately underneath which was something like a tomb, and at the head of the tomb were two stones of most exquisite beauty and of many colours. On each of them was a figure in relief of a human being - one being male and the other female - who were facing each other. In the hand of the male was a tablet (*lawh*) bearing an inscription, while in the hand of the female was a mirror and a golden instrument resembling a pair of pincers (*minqāsh*). Between these two stones was a stone vessel (*barnīyah*) with a golden lid.'<sup>321</sup>

The Bodleian image perhaps represents the combination of two traditions of Hermeticism, of Hermes the Babylonian and Hermes the sage. Only a detailed study of the imagery of Hermetic texts can reveal the stemmae of the different traditions of illustration: I hope to have indicated some possibilities in the foregoing account.

The preceding sections have discussed the literary context of the tablet bearing the secret signs. The architectural evidence shows that tablets bearing the Pharaonic hieroglyphs were inserted mainly at the entrances of medieval Islamic buildings, where they would correspond both to the esoteric knowledge handed to the sage on the tablet of Hermes, and to the beginning of alchemical manuscripts both in the text and in illustrations, and to Suhrawardī's image of the tablet held out by the shaikh for study by his pupil at the beginning of the path to knowledge. In actual location, they therefore correspond to imagery of writing-tablets which signify the start of an esoteric enterprise.

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The assumption, in the past, has been largely that Pharaonic material formed convenient spolia for Islamic builders. This may have sometimes been true, but it is not difficult to rebut convenience as the sole reason for re-use, or even, the major reason, since the locations concerned were often very inconvenient indeed. There was no Pharaonic site closer at hand than Heliopolis, 10 kilometres as the crow flies from the north wall of al-Qāhira, and many stones can only have been brought from their original sites with considerable difficulty. The pieces inserted in Shaykhū's khānqāh came from Memphis, whence they were attempted to be transported in one piece, as was the case with the complete shrine which was inverted to serve as a cistern between the mausoleum and the maristan of Qalāwūn. The account of the movement of columns from Ashmunain by al-Naṣir's officials (Appendix I) shows the planning and effort put into obtaining those pieces. Muqaṭṭam limestone, readily at hand, would have been far more convenient. The distances over which large and heavy pieces were moved argues against convenience; even with Nilotic transport, these distances were sometimes uphill and over the desert. There was no Pharaonic site, except for some small tombs which would not provide architectural material, within convenient reach of the major Islamic sites.

Suggestions of cultural inferiority seem to underlie the thinking of Creswell and Budge, as expressed by Creswell's discussion of the sill in the mausoleum of Ṣālīh:

'Such sills are almost the rule in the monuments of Cairo, possibly because it made people feel they were trampling on idolatry. But Budge believes they were used on account of their supposed magical value. He says:

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'The ancient Egyptians used to bury figures of gods etc. under their houses to prevent evil spirits and devils entering them from the earth, and I found in Fustat, or old Cairo, that many householders had under their thresholds bronze figures of gods, stone ushabtiu figures and even portrait statues, for the same purpose as their ancestors. In one quarter, the first stone a man stepped on after passing through his street door was always an ancient Egyptian sepulchral stele and the greater number of which I saw were laid with the inscribed sign uppermost. Both the stones and the inscriptions were supposed to be "lucky," and the hieroglyphic characters were believed by many to have magic in them' (*M.A.E.*, II, p. 101).

Budge's anecdotal account is quite contradicted, in two respects crucial to his assignation of domestic superstition as motive for re-use, by the statistical evidence, which shows that Pharaonic pieces were in fact found principally in religious contexts, and very few in Fustat at all. We might also note that the picture was perhaps obscured by the western tendency to classify a building as domestic or civil in function, when in an Islamic context a religious viewpoint could be assumed. Thus, Pharaonic pieces found in the doorway of a shop might take on a different aspect when one learns that the shop was a bookshop near al-Azhar, since that suggests a concern dealing with religious works. A fountain was not just a civil benefaction, but might be associated with the fountain of the Islamic paradise, and was a suitable subject for a waqf, which was essentially a religious foundation in character.

Nevertheless, no explanation has really advanced on the views of Budge and Creswell. The explanation of Viktoria Meinecke-Berg in a Symposium paper

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published in 1985 quotes Budge<sup>322</sup>; she also sees a general significance of wealth and power attached to the ancient pieces.

The explanation proposed here will be that the ancient stones were originally re-used in accordance with a rational part of the intellectual life of the users of the architecture, whatever beliefs may have subsequently accrued around them. This represents a radical change: Pharaonic material has been torn from its Islamic context, both in the earlier years of Egyptology and in the present day, without any thought that it might have some meaning in that context.

The architectural material dealt with in the catalogue of Pharaonic material in Vol. II is confined to inscriptions and depictions on pieces found in Cairo, whether in Islamic buildings or detached from any context; it does not cover other, uninscribed, categories of Pharaonic building material.

Nor does it cover material *in situ* in the locality, much of which has been dealt with extensively by historians discussing Islamic interpretations of the history of Egypt. Probably the most important of such sites is the Pyramids-Sphinx group; Ulrich Haarmann<sup>323</sup> has extensively researched the Arabic histories and traditions surrounding this group. The inscribed material in the data-base does not support the various legends that the Pyramids were robbed for re-building, but of course would not show uninscribed spolia from this source.

Other sites important in Islamic tradition are those associated with Joseph, such as Memphis and Abūšīr, where 'Joseph's prison' was claimed to have been; the Hermetic manuscript traditions associate Joseph's prison with the origins of the 'tablet' of Hermes. Stricker has identified the underground chamber described by

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ibn 'Umail, in which the statue of the sage is found with the Hermetic tablets, with a temple of Aesculapius at Abūṣīr; it is his view, as is Ruska's, that ibn 'Umail's text is based on an account of a real discovery of Pharaonic remains. Material from Memphis appears in the data-base, but cannot be shown to have any particular associations with Joseph-legends.

Another group of material consists of the very large number of columns re-used in Islamic architecture; of these, only the few inscribed pieces are included in the data-base given here. Any comprehensive work on the re-use of columns should probably await the completion of Dr. Judith Mackenzie's corpus of re-used pre-Islamic Egyptian columns.

There is a group of building material which is made up of pieces of stone such as porphyry or Aswan granite which may be spolia but cannot be conclusively shown to be so; there are many such pieces remaining in religious buildings, and there is always the possibility that they bear inscriptions on areas which are not visible, but their Pharaonic origins are really a matter of speculation and they are not included here.

A notable feature about the locations of Pharaonic material as shown in the data-base here presented is that there are very few palatial or military contexts, which would be likely locations if such usage were systematic and deliberate. This may be due to the disappearance of evidence from civic contexts, which have been less well-protected than their religious counterparts; the Citadel has of course been the subject of much re-building. But, on the other hand, it is notable that there is a very heavy emphasis of pieces in al-Qāhira (52) and the Ṣalība area (12) and very

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few pieces from the cemeteries, (an imbalance of 64 to 4) and one would expect the cemeteries to have survived with a comparably undisturbed state similar to al-Qāhira. The development of the cemeteries may be regarded as the development of religious foundations from two strands in religious life: at one level, the personal mausoleum of the wealthy patron and, at another, the pious centres formed by the tombs of the solitary ecstasies and ascetics. The large sufi institutions, the communities of lawyers and scholars, falling between these desert foundations, were to be found mainly in al-Qāhira and the Sultan Hasan - ibn Tulun areas.

With the above qualifications in mind, it is nevertheless possible to put forward some propositions resulting from statistics of locations of Pharaonic spolia in Islamic monuments. (More detailed statistics are presented in the appendix in vol.2, but a summary of the figures is given here for convenience.)

**RE-USED PHARAONIC MATERIAL: SUMMARY OF STATISTICS**

**TOTAL OF ALL PIECES RECORDED, including statuettes, seals, fragments, etc.:**

**160**

**TOTAL OF ARCHITECTURAL PIECES: 118**

*Pieces from buildings of identifiable functions: total 83*

Religious foundations	36
Domestic	10
Civic (hospitals, shops)	9
Military	12

In addition to these, there were 16 pieces found in the north minaret of al-Hākīm, which may count as military or religious, depending on whether they are seen as part of the city wall or part of the mosque. Since some of them are actually in the staircase of the minaret or its enclosing wall, the religious context might arguably be the prior one, but I have not assigned them to either context in the above table.

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*Pieces with specific locations in buildings. Total: 69*

Lintels	5
Thresholds	21
'Entrance'	2
Columns (inscr. only)	4
Mihrāb	2
Walls	23
Sabil	2
Mortar for dye	3
'Foundations'	3
Ledge/Sill	2
Pavement	1
Stair	1

*Pieces from specific areas. Total: 113*

Al-Qāhira	52
Sh. Saliba	11
Citadel	10
Darb al-Ahmar	9
Fustat	7
Bulaq	3
Qarāfa	1
N. Cemetery	3
All other areas:	17

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*Pieces from dated contexts. Total: 62*

Fāṭimid	34
1200-1300	2
1300-1400	15
1400-1507	7
Post 1507	4

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The first point to make when discussing the evidence presented above is that the preponderance of pieces in religious contexts in al-Qahira, as against all domestic, civic and religious contexts, suggests deliberate re-use in that area, and not merely for the purposes of convenient spolia, which would have spread the figures more evenly amongst types of building. I accept that the typology of buildings in al-Qāhira is bound to be very heavily religious, but the total of all civic and domestic architecture for the whole city amounts only to 19 pieces, and 12 for military contexts. Furthermore, the cemeteries are comparable areas in dates of development, in the religious character of the buildings, and in the lesser exposure to disturbance which one would expect for religious buildings, yet the Qarāfa and the northern cemetery together have yielded only four pieces. (Neither the religious nor the secular figures quoted above include 16 around the N. minaret of al-Hākim, which may be treated as military or religious.)

Of the locations set into buildings, we have 28 pieces at entrances, as against 41 for all other locations, the largest of these being the 23 pieces set into walls. It may be argued that of course the entrance to a building gets most wear, and so the hardest stone available would be used. (Table 3 of the statistics in Vol. II shows type of stone and locations in buildings.) On the other hand, one would expect it also to appear at other points of great stress, such as at the springing of arches which bear the weight of the dome. There is also a possible piece of evidence that the wearing properties of stone were not much considered to be found in the courtyard of the Shaykhū *khānqāh*, where pieces of very dense stone such as porphyry lie alongside pieces of deeply-worn marble, making the surface very

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uneven. One hopes it is hardly necessary to add that the continuous tradition in Egypt of excellent stone and stone-cutting continued to flourish under Islam, which was quite capable of providing good quality stone of its own.

It was precisely in the buildings where the largest concentration of inscribed material was found that the largest concentrations of theologians, particularly of sufis, was to be found. It might be noted that, of the few cemetery pieces, the most prominent was at the main entrance of the Faraj/Barqūq *khānqāh*. The link, it is reasonable to infer, can be supplied by the Hermetic tradition, which made the presence of these inscriptions desirable for the inmates of the buildings in which they were placed. At present, it would be difficult to go to the next logical step and say that one can reconstruct decipherments of the Pharaonic material along the lines of ibn Wahshiyya, but if more records can be obtained, that might be possible. (I have the impression, but it is no more than that, and not at present susceptible of proof, that the pieces in Fāṭimid contexts contain a much larger proportion of pictorial material, and those in later context a much higher proportion of hieroglyphs, but this could, of course, be totally biased by the nature of the original, Pharaonic, contexts.) But, even without entering into any particular decipherments, the pre-eminent position at entrances could be explained by the inclusion of Pharaonic material as a statement at the entrance to the *ṭarīq* of the learning to be obtained therein, as the child's tablet held by his shaikh signalled Suhrawardī's entrance upon his path of knowledge. It is at least as likely an explanation as the pragmatic one.

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Whether this material was always considered desirable to display is raised by the remarkable block found in the lintel of ibn Ghūrab, (catalogue no. 85) placed in such a way that the carved face could not be seen. Before this is dismissed as certainly a pragmatic re-use, we might consider whether it would in some circumstances be enough to know that piece of esoteric lore was present, and sometimes perhaps there may have been a climate in which it was better not to display such very figural pieces. The sheer size of this piece, over a metre high, militates against conveniences an explanation of its re-use as a lintel.

It is at any rate a reasonable inference that many of the Pharaonic incorporations into Islamic religious buildings constituted an intentional and deliberate expression of meaning which could perhaps be read by the initiates in a certain way, and, to passers-by, indicated the esoteric knowledge that lay within. In this way, it was the equivalent of the Hermetic tradition in manuscripts, turning an old sign-system to a new use, part of the pre-occupation with covert meaning that was suborning the straightforward representation.

The material dealt with here is confined to inscriptions and depictions; it does not cover three other possible categories of Pharaonic building material.

The first of these unincluded categories consists of uninscribed material from the Pyramids - Sphinx area, the history and lore of which has been the subject of extensive work by Ulrich Haarmann. Legends that the pyramids provided stone for works such as the walls of Saladin may or may not be true, but since the stone would have been uninscribed, it cannot be identified in its second locations. (It would be very interesting if Egyptologists could identify any uninscribed material

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from quarry techniques, etc., but there do not seem to be any recorded discoveries of this kind in re-used material.)

The second consists of the very large number of columns (and here it is probably not practicable to dissociate Pharaonic from Hellenistic material: we can only guess at whether Islamic builders did so). My claims should be taken as referring to inscribed material only, so uninscribed columns, which can be identified purely stylistically are not included. Thirdly, uninscribed blocks which may be surmised to come from Pharaonic sources because of the nature of the stone, such as Aswan granite or porphyry, have not been included. The most striking features emerging from the data-base is that positively identifiable Pharaonic pieces were re-used pre-eminently in religious buildings and at entrances to those buildings. It is possible that this location could be explained by the use of Pharaonic hardstones as particularly durable building materials, but this does not prove a satisfactory explanation, since it does not occur at other points of stress, such as the springings for domes, nor does it occur in military architecture, where one might expect the strength of the stone to be particularly important. It should, though one hopes it is not necessary to do so, be added that the capacities of Islamic builders as evidenced in this period did not need re-inforcements. We must look, then, for an explanation related to the function of the buildings, and hence to an intellectual interpretation rather than a practical one.

The entry to a building, that microcosm of the universe, that opening and entering of a place of knowledge, especially the home of those possessing esoteric knowledge such as alchemy, may be regarded as similar in location to the

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preliminary to a text, or to a path of learning. Thus, the Pharaonic tablet at the entrance occupies the position of the 'imprimatur' preface of ibn Umail. It also occupies the place of the tablet of learning held out to the pupil by Suhrawardī's visionary shaikh. It marks the beginning or completion of a path of learning. It thus becomes a metaphor for Hermetic knowledge.

## AT THE ENTRANCE: SUN AND STAR DESIGNS

At the entrance of a religious building, the seeker after knowledge might note two kinds of incorporated material: the militaristic references which suggested the success of worldly *jihād*, and the Pharaonic material which suggested the learning acquired in the path of spiritual struggle. There were other aids at the entrance to the sufi search, such as the metal-sheathed doors, with their sun and star-pattern designs. It will be claimed in this section that these designs were talismanic in function. The attempt to view them iconographically, that is, as representations, does not help us with meaning because we should not be looking for an overt content, as displayed in works of art in the west, but for a function.

From the iconographical point of view, the interesting question for the art historian is : how were the heavenly bodies pictured at the time under discussion? It is all too easy for us to refer to 'suns' or 'stars,' and to allow this modern descriptive convenience to slide into an assumption that fourteenth-century Cairenes also saw a pointed centralised form as a star or a radiant disc as a sun. The only safe evidence of meaning can come from contemporary contexts, and here we are on fairly secure ground in identifying, for some sections of the population at any rate, a radiant disc as a sun, the convincing evidence coming from documentation, from astrology and from literature.

As previously noted, ~~in the waqf document of Qait Bey~~, in the *waqf* document of Qait Bey, this kind of ornament on doors and ceilings is described by the term *نُشُور* or the diminutive, <sup>324</sup> *نُشُورَة*.

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The sun was sometimes shown with a rayed nimbus. Although astrolabes invariably show the sun and other heavenly bodies as plain discs, without a nimbus, the lid of a pen-case shows us, amongst other astrological signs, a radiant disc with a face in the centre which, by a process of elimination, we can deduce to be the sun; a very similar concept appears in a Hermetic manuscript which identifies a creature with a similar visage as the sun. 39

The rayed round disc might therefore have been interpreted as an image of the sun. If we accept that the calligraphically formed blazon of al-Nāṣir was also intended to be seen as a sun, as in James Allan's reading, this gives us another version, in which the face has been eliminated from the centre in favour of script, and takes the image to perhaps a higher, courtly, level. Al-Ghazālī's comparisons between the two worlds include one which creates a relationship between heavenly and earthly rule:

'It is clear, is it not, that the sun, when seen in a vision, must be interpreted by a Sovereign Monarch, because of their mutual resemblance and their share in a common spiritual idea, to wit, sovereignty over all, and the emanation or effusion of influence and light on to all. the antitype of the moon will be that Sovereign's Minister; for it is through the moon that the sun sheds his light on the world in its own absence; and even so, it is through his own Minister that the Sovereign makes his influence felt by subjects who never beheld the royal person.'<sup>325</sup>

Considered in this context, the comparison to the sun was not a personal claim for al-Nāṣir but a part of this accepted system of reference. If we see the art of his reign as moving to systems of coding, then we can see the sun-monarch

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equation as part of that code. It is not that the monarch's similarity to the sun derives from his similarity to the sun itself, but that he has the same relationship to other beings in his world as the sun holds to other creations in the heavenly world. In other words, the comparison being made is one of relationships, not of absolute values.

The same concept had appeared in the titulature of former dynasties; the Zengid ruler Nūr al-Dīn was described in the dedication of the Halawiyya madrasa as 'the sun of the high spheres' and this was a descendant of an even earlier usage, that of al-Birūnī's patron.<sup>326</sup>

Another level of meaning of the sun after its royal connotation is that it signifies prophet or divinity. It is not an equilateral triangle in which the sovereign is of equal weight with the sun and with the divinity, but rather that the sun is an image of both the ruler and the divinity; all three have a dual capacity, as the chief of all bodies and the shedder of light. It was in this role that al-Birūnī described his patron, 'he was among the princes of the world like the sun which illumines their darkness.'<sup>327</sup>

I have come across no representations in manuscripts, metalwork or other contemporary evidence of the portrayal of a half-nimbus to depict a rising or setting sun. The arguments of Hillenbrand<sup>328</sup> and Flood<sup>329</sup> for an iconographical interpretation of this pattern, seeing it as a depiction of the sun and thus a signification of divinity and/or monarchy, would not seem to be supported by contemporary evidence: the fact that we may see this particular device as solar is not supported by evidence that the fourteenth-century world saw it in the same way.

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Nor can context support a regal or religious significance for this feature: it is found in too great a variety of contexts, in all types of religious and secular vaulting, including usages that would seem incompatible with monarchical interpretations, such as over a latrine in the Ṭashtamuriyya madrasa of 1382-3 in Jerusalem..<sup>330</sup>

A relationship with contemporary depictions in astrological designs can be found with the crescent and full moons, but, although we casually refer to pointed centralised designs as ‘stars,’ these seemingly cannot be identified as such by reference to contemporary sources. Stars (or planets: I do not think we can usefully differentiate here) are always shown either as personifications in traditional figural manuscripts such as the Jalairid *Kitāb al-Bulhān*, or as plain circles as on astronomical instruments. (I use the term ‘star-polygon’ when discussing this sign as conveniently descriptive, not as a reference to heavenly bodies.) It may be that if we consider configurations of the kind which we refer to as ‘stars’ or in similar terms, but whose visual relationship to the original is a matter for subjective assessment, in a different way, asking not what they show us, but what they might affect, we shall understand the grammatical principles of such sign-language, if not the meaning of individual terms.

The most strikingly affective principle of signs was that of the talisman. Ibn Khaldūn notes that the talisman is a union of spirit and substance, the high celestial natures being tied with the lower ones.<sup>331</sup> Although ibn Khaldūn classifies the talisman as nominally illicit, he clearly believes in its efficacy, and nowhere implies in his very lengthy account that there was ever any action to suppress the practice. Dols’ account of the Black Death outbreak of 1347-9 gives a picture of how

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extensive was the use of talismans.<sup>332</sup> Physically, the talisman is pictorial, numerical or literary, or a combination of all three, as Annette Ittig has described.<sup>333</sup> It gave whoever controlled it mastery over the corresponding aspects of the natural world, and invoked the powers of the celestial world. Letters, number and pictures were inter-connected. Some correspondences may be iconic, e.g. the talisman effective for scorpion stings is the image of a scorpion deployed at a time when the moon is in the sign of Scorpio ... 'A talisman is a particular realisation of the correspondences - sympathetic and antipathetic - that obtain between the stars and the elements, along with their icons, letters and numbers which contain their secret and their trigger, and operate as medicaments do.'<sup>334</sup>

We are thus in a visual world where pictorial material may be not merely representational nor even simply significant, but effectual. The treatment of mamluk art has normally been to parallel the treatment of art in the west, and to divide it into matters of high seriousness and of low import, paralleling fine and applied art. Of low import have been considered the kind of material art historians have consigned to anthropology, such alchemical, medical or astrological works. Of high import have been courtly materials and imaginative literature. The inhabitants of fourteenth century Cairo, however, lived in a visual continuum where they might move from receiving a drink from a basin engraved with talismanic pictures (Ittig has some interesting notes on the hiring-out of such bowls<sup>335</sup>) to entering a doorway with magnificent bronze panels. The key facts of visual response were that this was a world in which, to anyone with a small amount of religious information, any depiction might have some reference beyond itself, and that to someone in

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danger of illness or difficulty, pictures could be efficacious. These were minimum characteristics of visual response which would have united swathes of the populace, and annul the cultural boundaries which historians have tended to draw between a mamluk class and the rest of the populace.

One of the commonest signs in fourteenth century art, one which develops in almost all fields, is the 'star-polygon.' If we ask whether it has any meaning or is simply decorative, we will in most cases be unable to find enough context to treat it as something having a particular correspondent meaning, as the sun stood for the monarch in al-Ghazālī's system of correspondences.

We could count the number of elements in any given example and try to relate it numerically to some such quantity as the number of imams or prophets, or to Joseph's brethren, but, again, without context, we are not justified in saying, for example, that the twelve-pointed sign indicates the 'twelver Shī'te.' It may have that potential, but, as I will suggest in discussion of 'number', even if we were to find it in a twelver Shī'te text, to say that it stood only for the twelve imams would be to deprive it of its other potential meanings and to deprive the imams of their relationship to the network of groups of twelve to which they belong.

Are we therefore to assign it to the category of 'design' into which much Islamic art was consigned in the nineteenth-century? Is our only other recourse the attempt to identify some uncontexted iconographical feature which is recognisable to modern western eyes? If we examine the star-polygon with the question in mind, not of what it represented or represents now, but of what activity it related to in its own world, we may develop a different understanding of what art can do.

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It can be asserted that nothing can be safely regarded as having a simple meaning or function, since in fourteenth-century Cairo we are in a world where any image might have a spiritual correspondence, and furthermore, if it be considered as functioning like a talisman, an efficacy. Thus, if we look at the location of the star-polygon sign as an experimental case, it is consistently found in relationship to an activity of utterance or entrance, of transition, and that this relationship is consistently greater than that with medium, country, sect or other factor. (A corpus of examples is given in the illustrations, nos. <sup>50-54</sup> ) Thus, the star-polygon appears in doorways, at the entrances to iwans, in the opening pages of a Koran, in the minbar, the cenotaph. Dr. Jeremy Johns has recently noted a striking example in a portal at Krak.<sup>336</sup> One of the most interesting is in the courtyard of the Great Mosque at Aleppo, where small star polygon designs are found at the entrance to the minaret and before the qibla iwan, the biggest being in front of the principal entrance to the qibla iwan, facing the mihrāb. I have found very few associated closely with mihrābs: the doubtfully identifiable patterns in the wooden mihrābs of Aleppo and a late fifteenth-century inlay above a mihrāb in Damascus seem the only mihrāb examples, at least before the Ottoman period.

The conclusion for the use of the star-polygon, rather than any particular meaning which might have been assigned to it but whose context is now irrecoverable and may in any case have been fleeting, is that it seems to have been emphasised at particular locations accompanying a particular action, that of embarking on a new undertaking or activity, of entering a different spiritual state, including death as a transition to another existence. May we not therefore suppose

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that it is intended to accompany that activity and to influence its outcome? In linguistic terms, it has an adverbial function: we are used to adjectival art.

It may be possible to see other motifs of the period in the same way. But the problem is to define a consistent location and period. It may be that sometimes a meaning can be particularised for some special period or culture but that the design can continue to function with other meanings, and, presumably, with other implied effects. Motifs may move in and out of the category of signifier or talisman, and perhaps at times simply be recognised as traditional or appropriate. Meaning must derive from context, even if we sometimes have to admit that context is irrecoverable.

If we turn from a consideration of depicted content to a consideration of function, we will find that the star-pattern plays an important role in architecture when considered from this view-point. First, however, it may be useful to consider its appearance in other art-forms.

Metalwork considered from a practical viewpoint seems somehow to have become divided into two groups: luxurious objects and humbler functional ones. This may be a false dichotomy: lavish and valuable objects may be achieved by group patronage, such as that of a religious community, and the rich and powerful also have humble needs, like medical treatment. Furthermore, intrinsic value of materials may be counterbalanced by other associations, of age or spirituality, for example.

It is possible therefore to argue that objects such as the talismanic bowls such as those described by Annette Ittig<sup>337</sup> could have served the same communities as

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the more elaborate objects described earlier, and that both categories share certain aspects of their common cultural background. The most striking of these aspects, I would suggest, is the presence of encoded meaning. In the earlier cases, this may have been in the form of heraldry or script. In the case of the bowls, it is in the form of conjurations made from combined letters, numbers, pictures and other signs, including stars.

Both heraldry and conjurations show us depictions within semiotic codes: we are a long way from the naturalistic creatures of metalwork such as the Baptistiere de S. Louis. Although it could be argued that even there the creatures form a kind of code, stressing the traditional royal nature of the pursuits in which their owners or hunters are engaged, as they do sometimes in manuscript illumination, the evident artistic pre-occupation is naturalism of proportion, shape and movement. For the purposes of both heraldry and conjuration, on the other hand, all that is needed is a bare resemblance that will permit identification on a general classificatory basis. This resemblance derives its meaning not from its relationship to the thing depicted, nor even from its relationship to other pictorial elements in the same plane, but from a special significance given to it by a context outside that plane altogether. To know what it means, one must know that context, which when it is narrowed to a specific group of signs which the observer must be instructed to understand, then becomes a code. Thus, a picture of a cup is meaningless by itself. If it is illustrating a religious text, it may be the sufi conundrum of whether the glass takes its colour from the wine or vice versa which gives it a meaning.<sup>338</sup> If it is on a shield, it may be a heraldic blazon. But one would have to know a considerable amount about the

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rituals of the mamluk court before one could infer that it is a sign of office. How far its meaning spread in the contemporary world is a matter for speculation: outside mamluk territory, it would probably have reverted to no more than the picture of a cup and within it would have been by no means self-explanatory, though if it is a sign of rank and possession it is in the interests of the owner to make his blazon known as widely as possible.

Similarly, context is necessary before one can suppose that a lion, a serpent and a scorpion in a bowl probably represent an astrological combination, as Ittig describes. Without that necessary background, one could not infer anything about the use of the bowl from the paratactic relationship between the creatures depicted and real animals or their syntactic relationship to each other. It is characteristic of both heraldry and conjuration that other media, such as script, numerals and esoteric signs, are added to depiction, which becomes part of the special language and operates on the same level as the letter, sign or number, or combination of all acting together.

If heraldry and conjurations are readings of pictures on the same level in that they require the same minimal recognition of the things depicted, the signifiers in semiotic terms, they are very different in the functions those signifiers perform, and it is in this point that we reach one of the most important aspects of art of this period, and one which distinguishes it sharply from the art of the west, representational or abstract. This is that whereas both heraldry and conjuration include depictions, heraldry is declaratory, conjuration is affective. Heraldry seeks to proclaim facts, usually rank or ownership: conjuration seeks to influence events.

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Both are therefore different artistic modes from simple representation. The most complex and the most wide-spread in the art of the period is the mode of conjuration, which necessitates a consideration of the talisman, and underlies much of the visual appearance of the minor arts, including astrological and alchemical works.

Talismans are part of the interlocking system of correspondences between the two worlds described by al-Ghazālī. Al-Azmeh gives a succinct account: 'Letters, numbers, elements and things correspond and stand for one another according to specific patterns, exactly as do stars and mundane matters ... Talismans themselves operate along principles derived from these correspondences, their principle of operation being the intervention of spiritual potencies brought down from heaven by corresponding alphabetical or numerological proportions, and these lie at the basis of particular arrangements of letters which act upon nature in much the same way as medicaments do, by re-inforcing a quality and repelling another, an effect which can also be elicited with iconic correspondences rather than numerological or alphabetical ones.'<sup>339</sup>

A talisman is thus active: not, as we are accustomed to in representations, a passive imitation nor a mere sign, but capable of having an effect and thus an appropriate feature of an entrance, to influence the act of transition.

Portals have been the subject of a valuable study by H.L. Roe,<sup>340</sup> although the chronological typology Roe has put forward is perhaps over-rigid. Roe considers features such as the basic stalactite portal shape, ablaq and strapwork details to be imports from Syria and Anatolia, but sees a period of Cairene experimentation and

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elaboration, especially between 1330 and 1350, followed by a standardisation and simplification.<sup>341</sup> She notes the first example of a complex pattern, the tri-chevron, which she thinks is a local invention, in red and black, in the madrasa/mausoleum of Sunqur al-Sa'ādi, founded 1315 (the façade here seems certainly of that date, although a Mawlawī dervishry was later founded at the rear of the building). Such increased boldness and complexity of portal decoration would parallel the mihrāb design groupings which I will propose, but, after the turn of the century, Roe observes a simplification and standardization: this is the stage at which the mihrāb and qibla wall decoration seem to increase in vibrancy and complexity. The discrepancy may arise from Roe's termination of the discussion in 1382 to accord with the accession of Barqūq, leaving the Umm Sha'bān example suspended at the end of a sequence rather than seeing it as part of a continuum. If we do so, we observe, for example in the portal of the Barqūq madrasa in al-Qāhira, an elaboration of contrasting inlay which corresponds to the interior decor, and takes up the theme of inlaid black and white marble panels which was conspicuous earlier, for example, in the north entrance of al-Marīdānī (1339-40).

Roe asks the vital question: 'What was the purpose of the decoration?' Was it for beautification, or did it convey a deeper significance? Her conclusion is that it had no independent intellectual purpose or design, and that its importance 'lies not in itself, but rather in its relation to the historical body of pure ornament.'<sup>342</sup>

The opposing view is precisely the argument of this thesis: that the decoration did reflect the intellectual climate of the period. That reflection, as I hope to demonstrate in the discussion that follows, can be seen in the principles of

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incorporation of materials and in the ordering of the decoration, rather than in one-for-one correspondences between individual concepts and individual detail.

## THE MIHRĀB AND QIBLA WALL

The aesthetic of marble inlay is a very distinctive one, but to create a rigid chronological sequence for the period would be dangerous on several grounds.

Marble inlay co-exists with stucco for much of the century, the changes being rather of emphasis, so that inlay becomes more and more prominent a feature of the decoration. What follows is, therefore, only a suggested typology of marble-inlay decoration. The difficulties in presenting a categorical scheme are numerous.

Firstly, we might note that some features are very long-lived and liable to recur over a long period of time: for example, fine mosaic, rather than bold design, in the hood of the mihrāb, occurs in buildings as far apart as the mausoleum of Shajarat al-Durr, 1250, and the mosque of al-Māridānī, 1339-40.

Then, there has been much restoration, particularly during the Ottoman period and again in the modern period. Reading through the reports of the 'Comité de conservation des monuments de l'art arabe,' one is struck by the care with which Herz, the architect to the Comite, carried out the restoration work, but even with such an important building as Sultan Ḥasan, one must be doubtful, after reading the civil wars described by ibn Ṭaḡhrī Birdī and then the Comité's account of the building as it was in 1893, that the present state of decoration accurately reflects the original. The Comité's report, after noting that the portal had been re-constructed in 1422, continues:

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‘Les marbres du dallage de la grand cour sont formés de morceaux brisés entièrement ... les lambris du sanctuaire et du tombeau en marbre et autres pierres rares se détachent des murs..’<sup>343</sup>

It is odd that in a city so popular with artists, the decoration of the principal religious monuments was not much recorded. One reason for this we may glimpse in Marcel’s account of his hopes for the *Description de l’Égypte*, that :

‘...La victoire nous facilitait la libre entrée des nombreuses mosquées, et nous donnait le droit non contesté de pénétrer dans les autres monuments ... dont l’intérieur avait été si rigoureusement interdit aux européens ...’<sup>344</sup>

This does not seem to have been achieved, judging by the few plates of Islamic monuments included in the work, but also there was much greater interest in Pharaonic monuments than in Islamic ones. Furthermore, the ‘Islamic’ members of the team seem to have been more concerned with domestic interiors, costume and atmosphere, and the architect Protain, who executed the drawings of Ibn Ṭulun and Sultan Ḥasan, produced dull and uninterested renderings: he did not show the decoration of Sultan Ḥasan, except for the portal and a small part of the courtyard, and may not have been allowed in. Pascal Coste, some twenty years later, did illustrate the decoration of Sultan Ḥasan, Barqūq, and several other buildings, in great detail: he evidently, however, tidied up all the details so as to produce an immaculate architect’s scheme rather than a representation of reality. Prisse d’Avenue’s work showed details of decoration, including much inlay, but often does not specify which building his plates are based on. The needs of western artists and designers could be filled by simply demonstrating the patterns, as in the work of

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d'Avennes and Bourgoïn, without actually creating a historical record. The taste of the art-appreciating public lay in the direction of David Roberts' beautiful and evocative street scenes and exteriors, creating a pictorial *Thousand and One nights*.

In the case of some of the major buildings, such as Sultan Hasan, it is therefore not till the work of the Comite in the late nineteenth-century that we encounter objective recording of the interior decor.

Another problem is the danger of assuming that the date of foundation is the date of decoration. Recently, Dr. Meinecke has questioned that the date of the mihrāb in the Šālīh madrasa is the same as that of the madrasa itself.<sup>345</sup> And, also on methodological grounds, it is dangerous to assume that any feature is typical of its period when so much has been destroyed.

The following analysis is, therefore, subject to these qualifications, but, by using as far as possible photographs taken before the extensive modern restoration work, by taking as our examples buildings which, though more obscure than Sultan Hasan, do not have such an extensive history of damage, and by casting the net wider to study material in Syria for purposes of comparison, we can distinguish certain trends within a dominant ethos of bold design and strong contrasts. The discussion will focus primarily on the mihrāb, usually the best-respected and best-preserved feature.

Where and when did the marble-inlay design originate? Marble panelling on a large scale was, of course, not new to Islamic architecture; it had been extensively used in the great mosque of Damascus, for example. But the style of slim, bold, vertical marble panels in the drum of the mihrāb (Group A in the accompanying

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plates) was generally held to have its first extant example in Cairo in the mihrāb of the Ṣālīḥ mausoleum, 1242-1250. Dr. Meinecke's assignation to a later date<sup>346</sup> may now challenge this chronology, but his re-dating is based on the paste inlay of which traces remain in the arch. This is not found elsewhere until the madrasa of Baybars II some fifty years later than the date of foundation of the Ṣālīḥ madrasa. However, there may be intervening examples that have disappeared; in any case, we can say that there were very similar marble mihrābs in Syria at an early date. Meinecke has noted the characteristic Ayyubid decoration of mosaic in the hood and alternating panels of marble in the drum in Jerusalem at al-Aqsa, dating from 1187,<sup>347</sup> but the contrasting panels are found also in less traditional foundations which catered for the new rise of formalised mysticism in the form of sufism. In Aleppo, where Suhrawardī had stayed in the Qadariyya (original decoration no longer extant), we have the example of the Shādhbaktiyya, a madrasa/mausoleum (founded by a former Hindu) from 1193, and here we can be certain that the mihrāb is contemporary with the building.<sup>348</sup> Designs of this type in portals and mihrābs in Aleppo, Jerusalem and Konya have been the subject of a typology by Herzfeld.<sup>349</sup>

The dedication of Shādhbakht's foundation is particularly interesting: it is 'to the friends of the light-giving lamp,' a double reference to sufis, as 'friends,' and to *ishrāq* philosophy. The mihrāb bears a plaque stating, in Ayyubid Naskh, that it is the work of two brothers who were also named on another Aleppo work, the mihrāb of the Mashshad al-Husain, about seven years later. Three more Aleppo mihrābs followed this type: the Sultāniyya madrasa of c.1217-1220, the Firdausiyya

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of 1237-1242 and the *khānqāh* al-Farāfrā of 1242, the last known in Aleppo. The very distinctive overlapping curved design around the outside of the Aleppo mihrāb hoods are not found in surviving buildings in Cairo in the same positions, but the portal of the zāwiya of Mustapha Pasha of 1272-3 has similar work.<sup>350</sup>

In the Great Mosque of Aleppo, we have the overlapping design combined with rectangular interlace, very similar to that over the entrance to the Qalāwūn foundation. Although the Great Mosque was restored by Nūr al-Dīn in 1158, the portal may date from its further reconstruction in 1260, still ante-dating the Cairo example by some 26 years.

The design was found again in the Tankiziyya madrasa in Jerusalem, c. 1330 and in very similar examples in Cairo in Sultan Ḥasan, though the Sultan Ḥasan examples may have been subjected to much reconstruction as a result of fifteenth-century civil warfare. (Burgoyne notes that the Tankiziyya example is closely related to Tankiz' works at al-Aqsa and at Hebron.<sup>351</sup>) This type of rectangular interlace retained its popularity in Cairo: it occurs over the mihrāb in the madrasas founded by the Emir Ḥussein of 1319 and al-Baqari, 1376.

It looks therefore as if the bold-panelled style, related to geometric designs, originated in Syria, particularly in the madrasas and khānqāhs of Aleppo, and spread through Syria and Egypt. (There are similar designs of overlapping semi-circles, after the Syrian examples, (c. 1251), in the Karatay madrasa in Konya). We may say that the design, in its early stages, was the work of particular craftsmen, but what made their speciality flourish? In Syria, this popularity would, of course, accord with the availability of marble, but it is an extraordinary feature that marble

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workmanship was to become so dominant in Cairo, where marble was not easily obtained. Of course, we may rationalise it by saying that it was some manifestation of temporal power, since the greater the difficulty in obtaining the material, the costlier it became. But an explanation which takes into account more of the facts and is less of an imposition of our own psychology, would be that we have a nexus of religious practices, political power and craftsmanship which brings the bold marble style to Cairo with the Ayyubid dynasty and an influx of sufism. It may be, but this is well outside the scope of this thesis, that one could trace the relationship of dynasty, ideas and designs back to Persian sufism and further east, but this thesis must focus on its appearance in Cairo.

Aesthetically, this 'strong-contrast' style seems to be in some conflict with the fine detail which is found in some circumstances. The mosaic inlay and the delicate arcaded columns of the Qalāwūn mausoleum are striking elements. The Qalāwūn mihrāb is, of course, a total restoration, but photographs are extant of two mihrābs in the mosque of al-Nāṣir in the citadel before restoration, and these show how a very similar design was mounted there.) Dr. Meinecke has described Byzantine workmanship in the Qalāwūn madrasa, and other influences of fine inlay may have been transmitted from the west, through the designs and workmanship of Sicilian craftsmen.<sup>352</sup> We might consider as influences the Cosmati family's inlaid floors of thirteenth-century Italy, but the distinctive Cosmati patterns are not repeated in Islamic buildings, and the overall aesthetic has no similarity to that of the Islamic floors, where we do not find the fine detail that appears in walls and mihrābs, nor the great variety of colour, nor the sweeping circular patterns. This

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does not amount to something we can speak of as Byzantine or Italian influence as far as the overall nature of the prevailing aesthetic is concerned, and such foundations as those of Qalāwūn and al-Nāṣir are exceptional though spectacular. If we can see two prevalent tastes, one for fine detail and the other for bold contrast, the latter is more widespread.

These 'strong contrast' designs can be placed in several groups.

After the Ṣālīḥ mausoleum, if its date is indeed contemporary with the building, we have a group (Group B) of strong vertical designs with transverse bands executed in a distinctive 'horn and diamond' pattern, in which red and white are prominent colour contrasts. Of such a type is the mihrāb of Baybars I at al-Azhar, mounted over Fāṭimid stucco workmanship and with a stucco hood moulded on linen.<sup>353</sup> We see the design again at ibn Ṭulun in the mihrāb of Lājīn. The pattern seems not to have been confined to the mihrāb; in the photograph of the zāwiya of Zayn al-Dīn Yūsuf, founded in 1298, taken before the fire which severely damaged it, such a 'horned' design seems recognisable on the adjacent walls, although the photograph is very poor. This pattern occurs again at the mosque of al-Ḥākim, this time with a rayed hood: again, it was mounted over an old stucco mihrāb. Some authorities (Aḥmad, al-Waḥḥab) accept the date of the al-Azhar example as belonging to the period of Baybars I; others (Creswell, Garcin) prefer a date closer to the ibn Ṭulun example.<sup>354</sup> Meinecke, in the study cited above,<sup>355</sup> prefers the dating of 1303 (post-earthquake restoration). There is no reason why the designs should not have been carried out over a period in the second half of the century.

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The designs become more elaborate (Group C). At Zayn al-Dīn Yūsuf and again at the mausoleum of Baybars II, constructed 1306-10, we have the interlocking pattern which I have described as schematised 'muqarnas.' Inlay panels in various designs, as in the mausoleum of Qalāwūn, now extend beside the mihrāb: at this stage they are tile-script or mosaic rather than the large strips and circles found towards the end of the century, notably in the foundations of Barqūq. So few floors survive that it is difficult to generalise as to them, but, concentrating on the more reliable records, they would seem to follow the same course, from a small-scale and brightly coloured inlay recorded at Qalāwūn's foundation by James Wild to a bold large-scale design in a limited, sombre and contrasting range as exemplified in the foundation of Barqūq, which the Comité considered to have well-preserved decoration.

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Two buildings of 1319, the madrasa of Emir Ḥussein and that of al-Malik al-Jukandār, feature strong vertical panels in the drum combined with a zig-zag pattern in the hood (Group D). The surrounds in these buildings, still incorporate much stucco, which is in a quite different mood of delicate curvilinear detail. The zig-zag design is found again in the mosque-mausoleum of 'Mir Zādeh,' also called that of the Emir Sūdūn, 1401, where it appears spectacularly in the drum of the mihrab, and in a building of a few years later, the foundation of Jamāl al-Dīn Yūsuf al-Ustādār, where it appears in the hood of a mihrāb and in external panels at the sides of a window. The zig-zag is found in the hood of the mihrāb at the mosque of al-Mu'ayyad (1415-1422), combined with the broad transverse panel which is a characteristic of the next grouping.

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Another formula can be seen in the mihrāb of the mosque of al-Māridānī, 1339-40 (Group E). Here, the arch over the mihrāb has a very elaborate joggled pattern, which we will see repeated in many buildings. In the drum is a broad transverse panel containing small-scale inlaid detail. This panel is found again at the madrasa of al-Baqari, probably c. 1376 and in the Barqūq madrasa of 1384-6. It is there combined, as in al-Māridānī, with the extremely bold and large-scale style of hoods, arches and surrounding panels, but stucco detail, this time clearly representational of plant forms, survives higher up above the dadoes at al-Māridānī.

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The rayed hoods and panels over the mihrābs become ever more elaborate (Group F); the first really complex versions are found in the madrasa of Umm Sha'bān, and continue through the foundations of Ḥasan, Barqūq, and on into the next century with those of Faraj<sup>356</sup> and al-Mu'ayyad. In this bold marble aesthetic the lines radiate further and further out of the mihrāb, yet cross and re-cross one another in the most complex of angular geometries which dis-orient the spectator in their dazzling schemes and so distract the eye as to destroy the shape of the structure, dissolving architectural form itself.

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A fine example of the full-blown style is exemplified in a small foundation, the madrasa/mosque/mausoleum/ construction of Jawhar al-Lālā of 1430, which also exhibits the large-scale marble dado that has now replaced more detailed patterns. (The Comité found, in a survey carried out before it began restoration,<sup>357</sup> that much of the decoration was well-preserved, and it seems therefore that this is a very reliable reconstruction.)

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At the Umm Sha'bān madrasa, as again at al-Mu'ayyad and at Gawhar Lala, we may note examples of curvilinear paste inlay above the mihrāb: perhaps a point was reached at which the exigencies of marble did not provide sufficient fluidity for the complexities desired and paste inlay allowed curvilinear forms to be more easily executed. These forms are surely too regular and stylised to be regarded as representations of vegetation: they are an arabesque extension of the angular geometry of the marble inlay.

This is perhaps a convenient point at which to examine J. M. Rogers' theory that there was a severe shortage of marble in medieval Cairo which resulted in a black-and-white aesthetic. This is expounded in his discussion of the removal of marble from Cairo to Istanbul during the Ottoman period.<sup>358</sup> Rogers claims that, by the reign of Qait Bey, as a result of depredations by Ottomans and Italians, 'little remained but black and white marble for panelling, together with very small amounts of *giallo antico*. Red had to be provided by patinated limestone from the Aleppo area, known to historians and in the *waqfiyya* of Qāyt Bāy's funerary complex as *rukhām ḥalabī*.'

It is rather difficult to sustain this argument when one looks at the descriptions of marble in the document: there are frequent references to الرخام , coloured marble, which might presumably cover many eventualities, there are references to porphyry, to a dark marble, to a speckled variety, as well as to black and white. In the mosque and mausoleum areas, the floors are to be of coloured marble, as are the dadoes. The arches of the loggia, the floor of the basement, and numerous benches and columns throughout the building are to be of

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marble. The 'Aleppo marble' can also be rendered as 'milk [white]', occurring alongside black, and on dadoes as well as floors, where it surely cannot mean limestone (and, where the unrestored panelling appears to survive in the building itself, it clearly meant white marble).

There is a suggestion that marble came into short supply in ibn Taghrībirdī's account of al-Mu'ayyad's acquisition of marble from all over Cairo,<sup>359</sup> but this is one reference only. The surviving physical evidence, such as the lavish use of marble in the foundations of Barsbay, following al-Mu'ayyad, the abundant references to marble in the Qait Bey document, suggest that marble on a grand scale could still be found during the fifteenth century. This would also mean that the introduction of paste inlay was not, as Rogers claims, the result of a shortage of marble but due to a change in aesthetic or craftsmanship: more probably, to a combination, since, if curving arabesque patterns are desired they are more easily expressed with paste inlay than with marble.

Rogers notes as a peculiar feature that there appears to have been no attempt to exploit the granite and porphyry quarries of upper Egypt. However, the peculiarity of this apparent failure to overlook obvious sources of ornamental stone is overcome if we cease to assume a purely utilitarian interest in the source of building material. Assuming instead that the interest in decorative stone lay in its history as much as in its appearance, we can reason that it was preferable as a general rule to re-use the work of former great rulers or sages than to quarry afresh. This surely was one of the reasons for the Ottoman re-use of marble from Cairo in the building of Istanbul.

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Rogers' supplementary question of why Aswan granite columns etc. were not re-used as wall decoration is answered functionally if we assume that there was in fact no shortage of other decorative stones and thus no need to use red granite for cladding: red granite could be re-used in block form for whole items such as columns and thresholds. Difficulty of workmanship is not, presumably the answer here, as porphyry, a much harder material, could be worked. Hazel Dodge's list of decorative stones and their uses in antiquity may provide an addition to this answer: red granite was not used in antiquity as a veneer or for mosaic, whereas porphyry was.<sup>360</sup> Islamic builders may have followed, not merely the materials, but perhaps the practices of previous architecture.

I would argue, then, that the striking features of Cairene architectural decoration, namely the panels in strongly contrasting colours, are not accounted for by a shortage of material. They are reflections of the intellectual concerns of their day.

This explanation will account, not only for the colours selected, but for the patterns in which it was arranged. Among selecting principles, I would suggest the desire to be associated with past greatness (both within Islam and without it.) As ordering principles, I would suggest, firstly, the enumerative compulsions of sufi rituals, such as the *dhikr*, exacerbated by the repetitive nature of incantations against the Black Death, and secondly, the continuing process of contrast and resolution which the demonstration of the principle of unity entails, the perpetual need to return to a point of origin in the movement of thought and the inescapable

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limitations of definition: an unlimited cycle of dualism and reconciliation, of antithesis and synthesis.

## NUMBER AND ESOTERIC SCRIPT

There is surely ample evidence in the minute scrutiny of detail which was part of the intellectual method of a world which sought hidden meanings in everything, that, if there is such a thing as 'pure ornament,' it could not have survived in the intellectual climate of fourteenth-century Cairo. This scrutiny extended to other decorative features often found on the qibla wall, such as complex script. The interest in exotic scripts which has been noted in a discussion of Hermeticism, the general tendency towards the creation of codes and ciphers, gives us a context for the popularity of the panels of elaborately obscure script. They are apparently given especial prominence, appearing in qibla walls, as in the foundations of Qalāwūn and Baybars II, for example.

Systems of ciphers and codes based on the letters of the Arabic alphabet had been a long-standing feature of Islamic thought. The belief in the existence of a secret tradition possessed by the descendants of 'Alī had led Shī'ites to postulate the existence of a *Jafr*, or book of secret knowledge. It was not the sole prerogative of Shī'ism, however: al-Ghazālī was believed to have studied the *Jafr*.<sup>361</sup> The study of ḥurūf, or prediction by assigning numerical values to letters, and other cabalistic systems known collectively as *sīmiyā'* became widespread; it was an important part of the study of alchemy and was the subject of discussion by ibn Khaldūn.<sup>362</sup>

A preoccupation with concepts of number is also the impression gained from a stylistic study of the increasing formality of manuscript illustration. Unnatural

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proportions appear. Spatial relationships are schematic rather than realistic, with 'floating bowls' and other objects suspended in space. It is important now, not that the appearance of objects should be rendered, but that they should be understood, so that whereas the contents of a bowl of food at a banquet shown in a Baghdad *Maqāmāt* of c.1225-35 are generally indicated, in later Syrian or Egyptian versions, a bowl of fruit will be schematised so that each fruit is separately shown and there is 'countability' rather than a representation of appearance. It may not have mattered that the number of fruit in the bowl should be twelve but on the other hand it may have been important that they could be counted, so that those for whom the number twelve meant something (imams or astronomers, for example) could deduce that further meaning. We see an obsession with number, with its potential and algebraic aspects century art. The importance of number in Islamic thought has often been pointed out<sup>363</sup> Anne Marie Schimmel has noted that 'For the Brethren of Purity, numerology was a way to understand the principle of unity that underlies everything. It is a science that is above nature and yet is the root of all other sources. Thus, the relation of God to the world, or of Pure Being to Existence, is equated with the relation of the One to the other numbers.'<sup>364</sup> She describes the continuing importance of these concepts at a later date, and the esotericism which accrued to numerology, for example, the thirteenth-century al-Būnī, who wrote a compendium of esoteric knowledge including number games, and that Gematria, the art of interpreting letters and numbers, for example, playing on the roots of Arab words, played an important role in sufism.<sup>365</sup>

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Trimingham gives a table of things arranged by sevens, including prophets, colours, mystical stages, climes.<sup>366</sup> Similar lists could be made of groups of twelve, imams, months, and so on. Other more obscure numbers were given esoteric significance: Ittig notes that nineteen was significant, being the total of the letters of the bismillah and of the spirits guarding the gates of hell.<sup>367</sup> Dols has described an obsessional and fervent belief in the power of repetition in certain patterns, such as repeating particular prayers specific numbers of times, 136, 898, 312, 2142, 299, which would ward off plague.<sup>368</sup> *‘Ilm al-hisāb*<sup>369</sup>, the art of arithmetic, was a traditional Arabic study: the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ had produced a study based on Nichomachus’ *Introduction to arithmetic*, but adding to the conventional divisions into tens, hundreds and so on another series of arrangements based on division by four, into the four elements, the four humours, etc, and seeing a metaphysical significance in god as the divine prototype of the number one. The cryptic significance of assigning a numeral value to Arabic letters was the essential element of *hurūf*, the cipher devised for esoteric writing.

The concept of number thus played an important part in intellectual life, but the plague provided an impetus for a fervid belief in the importance of enumeration as a way of approaching protective religious texts.

The importance of number to art is not so much that one can claim that any particular numerical grouping of signs stands for some particular meaning, such as imams or heavenly bodies. The point to be made is that number, when given its particular significance, loses its general applicability. The pure concept of seven may refer to all things that occur in groups of seven: if we say that it refers to

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constellations, we limit its potential references to imams. It is precisely this potency of multiple reference that creates the importance of number as a prime key in correspondence if, as al-Azmeh notes, connections in medieval Islamic thought were characteristically made by correspondences.<sup>370</sup> Polyvalence of meaning is central to the work of ibn 'Arabī, who formulates a principle of differing interpretations, very notably in his comment on the dream of Joseph. Developing the ramifications of a Koranic sentence, he comments:

'Joseph said, "I saw eleven stars and the sun and the moon prostrating before me." (Koran, XII,4). He saw his brothers in the form of stars and saw his father and aunt as the sun and the moon. This is the view-point of Joseph. However, had it been from the standpoint of those seen, the manifestation of his brothers as stars and his father and aunt as the sun and moon would have been according to their wishes.'<sup>371</sup>

Thus, interpretations of formulae will vary. Of course we will sometimes get a specific context that limits the polyvalence of reference. But the dictates of this overall concept of the potentialities of number as they affect art are two: firstly that things should be countable, that specific numbers can be produced, rather than a general impression of size or distance as is common in the art of naturalistic illusion, and secondly, that these numbers should be abstractly represented, so that they can apply to many groups rather than one. A painting of twelve imams, a parallel to the twelve Christian disciples, would not only be an offence against feelings about representing religious persons. It would be a limitation, for it would prevent the implication of other things occurring in groups of twelve, such as

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heavenly bodies and their potential association with the imams. An abstract design, by contrast, in which twelve units could be counted would have manifold potency.

The clearly differentiated pieces of fruit, such as a bowl with radially-arranged fruit in f.89 of the Bodleian *Maqāmāt*, the numerous scenes which show carefully separated wall-tiles, or leaves, and their grouping in mathematical ways, radial or pyramidal arrangements, the mathematical divisions of picture planes into dual or tripartite arrangement shown so often in painting of the period are, I submit, a step along this road of number which ultimately leads to the inexhaustible potential richness of the Sha‘bān Korans. We can see it also in the decoration of architecture, the patterns, repetitious perhaps to us, and the use of panels of tile-script in which Arabic letters become a stylised code.

Not only the concept of pure number was significant, but that of geometry, of division and subdivision, multiplication and extension. The author of the *Rutbatu’l-Hākim* notes that geometry is the foundation of alchemy, and of equal importance with geometry is arithmetic, the science of numbers, and for this mathematical training, the alchemist should read Euclid. Astronomy was also recommended as a subject of study.<sup>372</sup> The great Islamic scientific traditions were thus continued, rather than displaced, by the more esoteric science of alchemy.

Number, counting, regularity of progression, suggest patterning. Patterns in narrative painting are sometimes close to the geometric designs of Koranic illumination. Water appears as a fragmented pattern; the patterns are not always random, however: sometimes they form specific arrangements which we will recognise elsewhere: in the Bodleian *Kalīla and Dimna*, the pool in the ‘Hare and

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the King of the Elephants' forms a pattern around the reflected circle of the moon which corresponds to the octagonal arrangement of pentagrams in the Damascus Koran of 1341 (James, cat. 21).

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The frontispiece of the Vienna *Maqāmāt* demonstrates a composition closely approaching the early fourteenth century Cairene Korans, such as that of a volume of Baybars II (James, cat. 1), and one of 1330 (James, cat. 12), the first the work of Sandal and the second very close to it. Tracing the outlines of the main elements of the composition reveals that the work is centralised, but has four distinct areas outside the centre, so that it is not yet the absolute centralisation of the Sha'bān Korans. James' description of the frontispiece of volume 3 of the Baybars Koran could very well read as an account of the outline of the Vienna frontispiece:

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'The central star-polygon is surrounded by geometric shapes, all of which interlock as in a jigsaw puzzle. Each shape bears a motif conceived both as part of the whole and as a mini-composition in its own right.'<sup>373</sup>

Alchemy, with its formulae concerning the nature of the physical world, was concerned not only with substance, but with the proportions and combinations of those substances, and thus would have supported the importance of calculation, of number and proportion, in intellectual life. As decorative principles, the presence of distinctly separable and countable elements, the processes of repetition and division, the precise distinctions of shapes, the understanding of geometric skills, are clearly reflected in the diverse forms which the abstract patterns of architectural decoration took in the fourteenth-century.

### *Number and esoteric script*

An interesting example survives of the kind of exegesis which sufism might apply to the reading of tile-script. Al-Shādhili's metaphorical journey around a religious building, which was mentioned earlier, contains a contemplation of script, where:

'the head of Adam is a *mīm* and his hand is a *ḥā'* and his middle part is a *mīm*; the remainder is a *dāl*. Thus it was that the name Muḥammad was written in the old script. If you ask, "Why not show the other hand that the word be read from both right and left?" we answer that, even though Muhammad be written this way, he is greater in praise; for it has been proved that he ... could see what lies behind him as he saw what lay before him. Thus, what lies to the left side of Muḥammad when he looks backward, becomes his right side when he looks forward ...'<sup>374</sup>

These panels can be seen, like the Pharaonic material at the entrance, as indications of esoteric knowledge and aids to exegesis. Expressed through tile or inlay, they formed another part of the prevailing aesthetic of sharp contrast and complex systematic patterns, and another step to a preference for the cipher over the overtly recognisable which characterised the art of the fourteenth-century.

## LAMPS: A REPRESENTATIONAL AESTHETIC?

The claim that the art of fourteenth-century Cairo was essentially abstract is, however, in opposition to one major theory advocated in recent years in connection with a particular image : that the depiction of a lamp was deliberately used as a religious sign, particularly in association with the mihrāb. This theory has been further extended to claim that there is a verbal version of lamp imagery which was used in such a way as to form the verbal equivalent of a visual sign, a kind of verbal icon<sup>375</sup>. So much attention has been paid to what we may call 'lamp imagery,' whether visual or verbal, that the question of whether the perception of such imagery is more than a projection of western iconography claims attention.

Before we consider the connotation of the depiction of a lamp, we must ask ourselves whether we are correctly interpreting the denotation, that is, whether we are actually looking at the picture of a lamp. There are surviving enough Egyptian lamps which are contemporary with the depictions to be sure that we are not imposing an image of our own upon them in most cases. Nevertheless, even the fundamental denotation is not always certain, due chiefly to the frequent use of a vase motif which is not always distinguishable from a lamp. Incense burners are sometimes another image which can be confused with a lamp. We should therefore be alert to the possibilities that other vessels may have outlines similar to a lamp, so that when, for example, Caroline Williams describes the object hanging in the centre of a ninth-century mihrāb at Ibn Ṭulūn as a lamp,<sup>376</sup> it is difficult to see on what this identification is based: it may be a vase or an incense burner in this case.

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There is an interesting question of identification posed by the *Kitāb al-Bulhān*, the Jalairid early fourteenth-century manuscript, where at least three types of object are shown suspended in religious contexts. The entrances to the houses of the prophets Shu'aīb, and 'Issa have depictions of lamps of the suspended glass type (A) hanging in the door-ways and another such lamp hangs in an archway within the interiors of the houses of Yaḥya ibn Zakarya and of Nūḥ. A vessel of a different type (B) hangs in an arch in the house of Ayyub. A depiction of the great mosque of Damascus shows a vessel (C) which may be an incense-burner hanging in the miḥrāb and a row of lamps of type A above it. The evidence from this manuscript would suggest that the conventional type A was strongly associated with prophecy and not with the miḥrāb, at least in the time and place where this imagery was recorded.

The evidence of the occasional manuscript depiction of a mosque scene in which a miḥrāb occurs, such as that shown in the *Maqāmāt* of c. 1300, suggests that where a lamp occurs, it is shown as hanging from other arches as well, that of the miḥrāb being proportionately larger, and that is thus a feature of the scene rather than an important object in its own right. But manuscripts present evident difficulties, such as the question of whether the image was contemporary with production, and whether it is widely representative. The evidence of architectural decoration will, I believe, bear this out: the carved or ceramic depictions of lamps are more likely to be re-used tomb-stones than features intended for the mirāb. This interpretation is re-inforced by the exegesis of al-Ghazālī, for whom the sūra of

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light is a metaphor of the light of prophecy and that of Suhrawardī, for whom also the olive is the source of divine inspiration.

Further consideration of lamp imagery as architectural decoration is clearly needed.

The essential claim made for lamp imagery is that the religious context, especially that of Sūra XXIV, v. 35, extends the lamp from the category of the merely functional object to the intentionally significant, that is, that the appearance of this Sūra on some lamps is more than a simple connection of ideas, of the kind used in the imagery of most revealed religions ('Dominus illuminatio mea') and not worthy of further remark, the kind of association that a structuralist might suggest in no way creates a 'symbol,' communicating meaning, but merely an association<sup>377</sup>. But the claim of some art historians is that the lamp imagery is located at specific places, the entrance and more especially the mihrāb, of religious buildings, and is echoed in the inscriptions, in such a way as to create a kind of associative iconic imagery for the features of the building.

Erica Dodd's argument is that the Sūra of light, the depiction of a lamp, and certain architectural features, portals and mihrābs, interconnect, so that the lamp in a mihrāb is symbolic of the light referred to in the sūra, that is, that it represents god, the divine light. At this point one might perhaps point out that the word meant any kind of niche, including the kind that might be found in a private house. This broad sense is that in which al-Ghazālī interprets it: the niche is an aperture through which the spirit can penetrate, the aptest sign for which is the niche for a lamp in a wall. The only place we in the twentieth century west are likely to see

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such a lamp in situ is, of course, in some historic building like a mosque, and it is easy to let this dominate our thinking, but the word 'miḥrāb' is not the word used in the sūra.

Nevertheless, it seems to be assumed that miḥrāb is the primary meaning of and in discussing the theme of a vase found in some Fāṭimid wooden miḥrābs,<sup>378</sup> Dodd comments 'What is reasonable for the Islamic connotations is that it should have been chosen as suitable decoration of a miḥrāb, where no other pictorial decoration was permitted other than the well-known symbol of a lamp.' (In fact, vegetal representation is found in varying degrees in Cairene stucco miḥrābs of all periods.) A possibility is thus hardened into a rule.

Dodd's argument is fully expounded in 'The Image of the Word.' Essentially, it is that the sūra of light describes the glass lamp that hangs in the niche of a miḥrāb and likens god to that light. The inscription above the doorway of Sultan Ḥasan is thus the link between the light of god, the lamp and the architecture: the doorway is thus the 'symbol' (undefined in Dodd's argument) of the miḥrāb for the outside world and the lamp is the 'symbol' of God.

In forming this view, Dodd does not seem to have taken into account such influential Arab commentators as al-Ghazālī. In his analysis, a complex five-fold interpretation in which the niche, the glass, the lamp, the tree and the oil represent different types of divine spirit, the lamp typifies the spirit of a prophet, lit with inspiration; the prophet himself is a lamp for others: the prophets are a 'light-giving lamp', as the dedication of the Shadhbaktiyya in Aleppo called them.<sup>379</sup> The fire which causes the oil to burn is that of divine inspiration.

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This accords with Baldick's comment that Sufis saw themselves as lights; this does not of course exclude the divinity as a signification of a lamp, but it suggests that the Sufi understanding of the sūra of light was more complex than the modern western assumption which equates light with the divinity alone. Al Ghazālī's interpretation in fact gives a high place to reason, the logical faculties which, branching out in propositions, resemble a tree, the oil from which is that referred to in the Sūra. The niche, for al-Ghazālī, represents the bodily apertures, the eyes, ears, nostrils, etc., through which the divine spirit may be perceived. The view of the verse as iconic suggests that the lamp is an emotive image, whereas the way it is treated by this foremost sufi commentator is as an intellectual parallel. However, this is a matter of interpretation of the Sūra and we need also to examine Dodd's case as reflected in the architecture itself.

The first subject of analysis will be the actual existence of the lamp as a depicted feature in a mihrāb.

It may have been the case that there was often a real lamp hanging in, or in front of, the mihrāb of a Cairene mosque. But a depicted lamp in a mihrāb is difficult to find in Egypt in an architectural context, at least before the Ottoman conquest. There are depicted lamps in Iran, particularly on ceramic plaques, but the plaques are not necessarily mihrābs. Oliver Watson suggests<sup>380</sup> that ceramic plaques bearing lamps may have been made in pairs for decorating sarcophagi, and Sheila Blair<sup>381</sup> has given an example of the way in which the image of the lamp was used as a memorial of the deceased. A set of lustre tiles in the Metropolitan Museum showing a lamp covered the cenotaph of Shaikh 'Abd al-Samad at Natanz,

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a Sufi of the Suhrawardīyya (not that of the Suhrawardī martyred at Aleppo) who died c. 1300. If the lamp is to stand for an idea in these cases, we should bear in mind that, since for sufis, they themselves were lights, the lamp is as likely to refer to the deceased as to anything else, and thus to be preponderantly a tomb-stone image. This is supported by other examples of its use on stelae, for example, those recorded by Rogers at Akhmim, which greatly out-number those in an architectural frame-work. On a stela placed at the head or feet of the deceased, a lamp could not of course be in a mihrāb or intended as a functional mihrāb, since the deceased would have been buried facing Mecca.

This difficulty may account for the curious corner mihrābs of Mosul, in the tombs of Imam Yahya and 'Aun al-Dīn. The buildings, which were heavily restored in the Ottoman period, were originally un-oriented, since there is no architectural mihrāb and the sides of the building are not aligned with qibla. These lamp images again occur primarily in a funerary context. The triple lamps in the mosque of P. 'Aly seem clearly to be in the mihrāb, but, again, this building was the subject of later and heavy restoration and the decoration could well date from that period. In short, there is no unequivocal evidence from the lamps depicted in Mosuli contexts that we are dealing with a mihrāb rather than a tomb-stone.

In Cairo, the unequivocal depiction of a lamp seems extremely rare. It is difficult to accept the argument that the lamp on the outside of al-Aqmar is intended as indicating some sort of mihrāb: it is very high up and irregularly placed. Of course, in a building with a rectangular courtyard the outer wall is generally going to be parallel to the opposite inner wall and therefore the wall opposite the mihrāb

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will be 'facing Mecca' but this physical truism does not make it into a mihrāb wall in the sense that it therefore becomes a similar object of religious and architectural attention: in fact, one might argue that the pollution and dirt of the street with which it is in contact militate against such treatment. In any case, at al-Aqmar the outer wall is not aligned with the mihrāb wall. Caroline Williams, while claiming the al-Aqmar lamp as a mihrāb, relates it to keel-arched wooden panels in the Islamic Museum which are pierced with nail-holes, suggesting they were once attached to a wall as household mihrābs for private prayer, but she notes that they came originally from Shī'ite tombs where they were placed under the heads of the dead.<sup>382</sup>

In considering possible lamp imagery in Cairo, one should also mention the apparent vessel on the marble slab from the madrasa of Ṣarghitmish. There seems no evidence that this was ever in the mihrāb, and in any case if it is indeed a vessel and not an abstract design it seems a vase and not a lamp.

The Cairo Museum's publication of stelae contains only 5 showing lamps (100, 6378, 6379, 10928, 10931) and I have only been able to find two examples in a real mihrāb, both of which seem rather doubtful. The first is the painted mihrāb in the vault of a Nasrene princess. The excavators thought that this was contemporary with the building but there seems no especial evidence that this was so. Here, we do not have an actual mihrāb, but a painted depiction of what may, or may not, be a mihrāb. To claim it immediately as a mihrāb seems to fall into the trap of thinking it is a mihrāb because it has a lamp, therefore mihrābs have lamps. The other seems to be the only example of a lamp shown in a real mihrāb, and is the carved slab

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removed in the nineteenth-century from the Badriyaa madrasa to the Islamic Museum. A photograph of the Comité de Conservation shows a gap in the mirāb of the same size and shape as the slab, evidence that it was indeed taken from here. But the piece is still quite problematic. It is only about 24 ins. high by 14 ins., an odd size for a mihrāb. As part of a mihrāb, it is in the wrong style, as the mihrāb of the Badriyya, according to the Comité, was well-preserved, and is clearly in the marble inlay style. (There is evidence that the Fātimid palace provided material for the madrasa, so this may be an example of earlier re-use, but it does not much resemble lamps on Fātimid tombstones in style.) Thirdly, what would appear to be the most clinching evidence, the appearance on this carved lamp of the start of Sūra XXIV, is in fact one of the most problematic features.

This third point needs explanation at some length. The start of the sūra in this case is depicted across the body of the lamp. But in an examination of the 19 real lamps listed by Lamm which display this verse, only two have it across the body: in all other cases, it is actually around the neck, above the titles of the patron. This is true not only of this particular Sūra but of all other Koranic verses which appear on lamps, so perhaps it was a deliberate effort to keep the Koranic verse in the superior position. Of the two exceptions, one (Lamm no. 29) has verses 36 and 37 across the body, not 35, the verse concerning light, but ones which are often found at mosque entrances and which may have been appropriate to a lamp which hung in a doorway. The other, purportedly of c. 1441-2 (Lamm 227) which has a Koranic inscription and heraldic blazons on the neck and Sūra XXIV 35 on the body is noted by Lamm as having been long suspected as not of oriental origin (though

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unjustly, in his opinion) and is compared with an example from the reign of Qait Bey which may be Venetian in origin. (Lamm, I, p.482).

The sole Cairene example of a lamp pictured in a mihrāb is thus a stylistic intruder in its architectural context and at variance with contemporary real lamps. Such evidence surely cannot be adequate to demonstrate that the lamp was an important image in Cairo of the fourteenth century ( or of any earlier date). I think it can safely be claimed that it would not seriously challenge a categorization of the religious art of the period as overwhelmingly abstract.

Besides the Badriyya example, I have been able to find only one other depicted lamp that bears any inscription at all, the single word 'Allah' on one of Rogers' stelae from Akhlat (Fig. 15). Rogers notes that, on those stelae with lamps where the stela also bears a Koranic inscription, the verse is either III,18, or II, 255, and comments:

'The choice of Koranic verses is consistent not with the choice of decoration but with the function of the tombstone.'<sup>383</sup>

The lamp is thus a particularly rare feature to find in a Cairo mihrāb, and we are reduced to one example with some dubious features.

Inscriptions are, however, an essential part of the case of those who claim an iconographical approach is fruitful. That at the portal of Sultan Ḥasan is an essential part of the argument for the link between light, portal and mihrāb. The first point to state with regard to the factual evidence is that the ayat describing the lamp in the niche does not actually appear at Sultan Ḥasan, although Dodd does not explicitly discuss this point. It might be noted here that the difficulty does not arise from

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variant numberings, as this sūra is one case where the Flügel and Cairo numberings agree. According to the index of Koranic Sūras in Dodd's work, XXIV 35 appears in only one architectural context, that of the Dome of the Rock. Here, however, it is a slip for XIV, which concerns Abraham and is therefore much more appropriate in Jerusalem. However, Jonathan Bloom's work on the mosque of al-Ḥākim<sup>384</sup> has subsequently provided an architectural example; he points out that XXIV 35 is found there around a window of the north minaret.

The Sultan Ḥasan inscription is, in any case, too high above the portal to be read in any normal sense. It is actually the verse following the description of the lamp, a verse normal for the entrance of a religious building. Dodd's thesis thus would require us to accept that the viewer in the fourteenth century would have known what the inscription was, even though it could not be physically read in a normal sense, and furthermore, that the verse which appears there was understood as referring back to the verse describing a lamp, thus presenting the image through a process of intellectual back-reference.

The first premise is acceptable, since this particular verse was very common at entrances (Dodd's own index lists eight occurrences at doorways in Cairo alone) and its location might have suggested its content; also the doorway might have been lower than it is today after many restorations - we cannot be sure of its original height - and in addition many of those frequenting the madrasa would have been religious literati who would be able to read an available inscription with ease. But the second is more difficult to accept, for we have to assume the occurrence of complex mental processes. What warrant is there for a theory that Sūras 36 and 37

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implied Sūra 35 to the contemporary mind? The verse referring to the lamp is not connected grammatically with the following verse, and explanation of the lacuna appears to have occupied much learned commentary. One of the main and much-respected fourteenth-century commentators, al-Baidhawi, did see verse 36 as referring back to the image in the previous one, as noted in Sale's summary of the principal arguments of commentators:

'The connection of these words ('light' and 'houses') is not very obvious. Some suppose they ought to be joined with the preceding words, "like a niche," or "it is lighted in the house," etc, and that the comparison is more strong and just, by being made to the lamps in Mosques, which are larger than those in private houses. Some think they are rather to be connected with the following words, 'Men praise', etc. And others are of opinion they are an imperfect beginning of a sentence, and that the words 'Praise ye God' or the like, are to be understood. However, the houses here intended are those set apart for divine worship.'

If the connection was made between the verse over the portal of Sultan Ḥasan and the Sūra of light, therefore, it was by an intellectual process of back-reference, a quite different process from the kind of immediate emotional impact suggested by the word 'icon.' We are dealing with linguistic, not visual, expressions of meaning.

## CONCLUSION: NOT 'MAMLUK' ART, BUT 'AN ART OF THE BĀṬIN'

Can we continue to use 'mamluk' as a term to describe art? I would argue that it is fallacious to try to see art as necessarily a reflection of political and social events.

How has the 'mamluk' exegesis affected the interpretation of art?

Firstly, there is an extraordinary contradiction as to its effects. There is, it seems, no hope for the medieval Syro-Egyptian state: either it is seen as hopelessly corrupt or crushingly righteous, its rulers seeking personal aggrandizement and luxury, yet its theologians severely repressive. Haldane, in his discussion of manuscripts, offers a third possibility: that 'it was a feudal society where each individual had his place clearly marked out in the hierarchy. At court there was a complicated system of order and precedence and society became much more inflexible than before. Mamluk painting reflects this static type of society and formality to a very great extent in its stiff compositions.'<sup>385</sup>

The extraordinary point about this argument is that the state under discussion was in fact the very opposite of a feudal society: ownership and status were not hereditary fixtures. True, each individual might have to keep firmly in his place as long as he held it, but the possibility of moving from the very bottom to the very top was always a real one, and one such individual moving to the position of sultan meant a similar upheaval in the ranks as his enemies were punished and hangers-on rewarded. Outside the mamluk ranks, such movement was also possible through the enormous fortunes that could be accumulated in trade, and through the opportunities

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provided by scholarship. There are many biographies of saints and teachers that stress the humble origins of some learned man who accumulated not only respect but position and influence as he moved up through the theologians' ladder. Reading the turbulent history of the times, one is struck by how disorderly this society appears: arrangements of titles on paper do not necessarily translate into actual social and political terms. In any case, it would be faulty logic to argue that an ordered art reflects an ordered society; ~~but~~ the demands of a structural proof are more stringent; we need to establish, not only that both are ordered, but also that both are ordered in the same way. Only then can we postulate a connection between them.

Haldane sees another specific political element in the historical background which contributed towards a static and formal style in art.<sup>386</sup> This was an influence of Mongol art. This has been noted in other contexts, such as those on architecture and metalwork discussed by J.M. Rogers.<sup>387</sup> But identification is not explanation, and if we wish to inquire beyond a descriptive level, two immediate questions spring to mind. If the work of artists trained at the Mongol court and/or representing Mongol personages is evidenced in Cairo well before the Mongol collapse of 1330, why should such artists have left their patrons for Cairo? And why should their work have been appreciated there, other than at the odd times when the Sultan might be seeking to please a visiting embassy or some similar special occasion? To identify foreign influences is not to account for them; that such a self-confident city as Cairo, the hub of the world, should accept outside craftsmen and designs for its most prominent architecture, for example the foundation of Sultan Hasan, seems to require comment. The obvious explanation might be that Cairo under the

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descendants of Qalāwūn and al-Nāṣir had sunk to such a point that any outsider could muscle in, but not only was the actual picture much brighter than concentrating on royal personalities would suggest, the projected image of the ruler was as great as ever, as inscriptions attest.<sup>388</sup> Foreign influence cannot be accounted for by a theory of cultural decline.

We might note one final point in which a case of decline in manuscript illustration is perceived as part of a general decline. Haldane expresses this as a decrease in creative literature, the preference for history and biography over poetry and narrative literature. Such sharp distinction between literary forms is highly arguable: it is quite tenable that history and biography are creative forms, in which the creativity takes the form of re-arranging reality to give a simulacrum of objective record, and history is arguably one of the great literary forms of the period. Maqrīzī's elegiac version of Fāṭimid Cairo is overtly an assemblage of facts which is actually so evocatively linked and overlaid by the mind of the narrator that it becomes one of the great cities of the mind, like Defoe's London or Zola's Paris, while it presents itself as an intellectual account. John Alden Williams has commented that Maqrīzī's description of how Qawṣūn's career was advanced by a besotted sultan 'is worth quoting for its *Arabian Nights* character and shows how the popular literature of the times paralleled historical realities.'<sup>389</sup> It could equally demonstrate how much historians shared the selectivities of popular literature.

Ibn Ṭaḡhrī Birdī moves like a novelist to create a character development for al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh; similarly, he plants the necessary narrative curiosities by cunning recurring references to the haunting story of Barsbay's obsessional hatred of

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Janibak al-sufi, with its satisfactory moral and physical resolutions at the deaths of the protagonists.<sup>390</sup> These are highly- skilled manipulations. In al-Azmeh's words: 'There is no question, in the real practice of historical writing, of 'pure' events ...'<sup>391</sup> Nevertheless, we find that the sweeping label, 'mamluk,' is used to cover a variety of works of art and architecture in which the slave origins of some of the presiding rulers seem to play only a shadowy and conjectural part. Heraldry has received a lot of attention, but it is actually displayed only on a small amount of the material culture of the period, and can be seen as part of the move towards the understanding of form as codes to be deciphered: in this sense, it is part of the general esotericism of the age rather than a specific political influence.

The disproportionate attention which seems to have been given to heraldry may result from most historians having been males obsessed with militaristic glamour who have preferred to see the mamluks as an exotic caste. But how separate, in cultural terms, were rulers from ruled? Much has been made of Turkish origins and ethnic differences, but there seem little in the way of scientific and objective ethnographic studies which would examine this anecdotal approach; one is the report of the 'mamluk' cemetery at Pella<sup>392</sup>, which concluded that there was some slight evidence that the skeletons of this period were of a slightly different racial type to earlier inhabitants, but that the picture was really inconclusive. As to the ruling elite's being linguistically separated from their subjects, the case for a reduction in the importance of the Arabic language does not seem by any means established. The first language of first-generation mamluk patrons during their infancy may have been some form of Turkic, but after that, for the first generation,

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there was intensive training in Arabic as part of their religious education,<sup>393</sup> as indeed in Koranic Arabic for every Muslim, and, for the second generation, we are entitled to ask, what about their mothers? Small children would have learned their first language in the harem, and no-one ever seems to have investigated the languages of the harem; there, presumably, Arabic was a common tongue.

Private households of course probably varied but Jonathan Berkey has pointed out that mamluks often married the daughters of the *'ulama*,<sup>394</sup> and these mothers would surely have spoken Arabic to their children.

If we add the justifiable claims that Arabic was the language of theology, that it was the language of historical and legal record and therefore of cultural and social supremacy, and that it was the lingua franca of the wider community (the books owned by the Jewish community of the Geniza contained works in Arabic<sup>395</sup>) then the total picture is surely one which does not justify a linguistic isolation of the upper class from the literary language.

Haarmann has investigated the Turkic cultural influence on an anecdotal basis,<sup>396</sup> and takes the view that Arabic was a literary language for the cultivated mamluk, but that otherwise some form of Turkic prevailed in mamluk life. But Arabic was also the language of the army,<sup>397</sup> of military command and written records, and the questions of how many Turkic dialects were spoken, of whether communication would have been practicable amongst people from diverse areas, do not seem to have been considered. Some manuals were translated from Arabic into Turkic, but such sporadic examples do not constitute enough evidence to generalise about a change in Arabic literature.

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As a historical term, 'mamluk' seems open to objection as a description of the ruling person or principle. Even when sophisticated to the traditional topographical and chronological division of burji and bahri mamluks, nothing more accurate emerges from the use of the word, since both groups in fact used various areas of the city of Cairo. Rachel Astor has noted in connection with her discussion of manuscripts that there is now 'increasing evidence that the traditional view of the Mamluks as a hieratic group isolated from society is mistaken'<sup>398</sup> and drawn attention to the discussion by Lapidus, for example, of relations between the mamluks and the upper levels of indigenous society such as the '*ulama* and the merchants.'<sup>399</sup> There were clearly restraints on the mamluk as patron of architecture which will be discussed below.

The reason why this inappropriate cultural adjective is still so much in use is probably because the major present-day approach to Islamic architecture can be broadly described as 'political,' the approach of such historians as Fernandes, Bloom, or Behrens-Abouseif. This is a modern version of the older view which emphasised the patron above all. It is a bias which perhaps can be said to begin with Maqrīzī, who saw history as a succession of individual reigns and the character of individuals as a decisive historical factor. The description of a building, for him, was very largely the description of its founder and his motives and achievements. To this basis, European historians added judgemental attitudes to Islamic piety, and sometimes do not consider the restrictions upon the founder. He was, for example, forbidden by Malikite interpretation to constitute himself the administrator of his own *waqf*. Nothing could be illegally appropriated, nor the workmen ill-treated.<sup>400</sup>

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The *waqf* documents, and the architecture, generally painstakingly respect the boundaries of properties. Stray exemptions tend to have been emphasised, rather than the overall picture of restraints.

In terms of the contemporary world, 'mamluk', even in Maqrīzī, is a term based on hind-sight and gives little sense of how the rulers of Egypt perceived themselves. They had to be freed men before they could achieve high office (a slave may not command Muslims) and before they could constitute a 'waqf'.<sup>401</sup> This might be held to be a peculiarly 'mamluk' system as an attempt to provide permanence. A system long known to Islam, it certainly developed to a remarkable extent and was connected to much Cairo architecture. But argument that it was the result of fears of instability because of the slave origins of the ruler breaks down. The heirs of a freed man were perfectly free to inherit his private wealth and continue his foundations. But times were turbulent: that is why European monarchs made foundations in perpetuity such as the Oxford colleges: slave origins are not necessary to explain them.

The term 'mamluk' actually describes the replacement of the military caste, not a system of selecting the sultan, for which a variety of qualities was required, as discussed by Irwin.<sup>402</sup> These included power, piety, the support of one's peers, but not slave origin. As to brute force, it was the Ayyubid sultan al-Adil who said 'Kingship is not for inheritance but for the conqueror,' when he took the throne from his nephew.<sup>403</sup>

The 'mamluk' rulers were possessed of dynastic ambitions: Baybars I may have been of slave origins, but he made his emirs swear loyalty to his son.<sup>404</sup>

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Qalāwūn's dynasty actually lasted longer than that of the Ayyubids, and the burial in Qalāwūn's tomb of his son, al-Nāsir, suggests that closeness of the blood-tie and a concept perhaps similar to the western family chapel. Some historians have discussed the *Khushdashiyya*,<sup>405</sup> or bond between mamluks emancipated by the same master, but this did not in itself create a claim to supreme power, but was rather a means of creating a power-base. The evidence suggests that each mamluk sultan may have thought of himself as the possible start of a new dynasty. The struggle of Faraj and his sons to retain Barqūq's throne illustrates the strength with which dynastic principles could resist other claims.

Nor does the term 'mamluk' give any sense of the relationships of the sultan. 'Mamluk' or no, he was enmeshed in a web of traditions, hostilities and obligations beyond the military fraternity: the support of Islam and respect of its law, the examples set by his predecessors, which might be emulated or over-turned but were ever-present, the neighbouring rulers, or to Egypt itself. There has been a great emphasis on individual patrons, yet perhaps one of the most extraordinary features of Egyptian architecture has been the consistency with which large-scale building was achieved, over many centuries and on difficult terrain, and the extent to which successive rulers endowed the works of their predecessors. The chronological approach traditional to Islamic architectural history obscures the extent to which they continued to support existing architecture, even where its founders might have had deep dynastic and religious differences, as in the successive additions to al-Azhar in all periods succeeding the Fatimids.

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Furthermore, building was seemingly at will, but only in Xanadu does a dome arise by decree alone: in real life the stones and bricks must somehow be laboriously assembled, as Bihzad revealed in his version of the building of the legendary Khawarnaq. Economic, not personal, history tells us more about this hard work of building. In Egypt, the economy that provided the building sultans with what we should call their 'infrastructure' did not essentially change from Ayyubid times. The *iqtā'* system remained.<sup>406</sup> This had existed under the Fatimids; the Ayyubids introduced the element of military obligation. The supply of labour, materials and beasts of burden to central government could still be requisitioned, and this enabled the great builders to carry out their civil engineering. These projects in turn increased the feasibility of prestigious architecture: al-Nāṣir, for example, used a canal for the supply of crops and materials to his palace and *khānqāh* at Siryāqūs.<sup>407</sup>

In addition to these Egyptian traditions, one can sometimes see the reflection of the behaviour thought suitable for a prince. The reign of al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh, for example, as presented by ibn Taghrī Birdī,<sup>408</sup> is that of a character who progresses from being just a rough diamond to the role of father of his people, leading them in the great set-pieces of prayer and sacrifice and in working with his own hands on the embankment of the Nile, as did Alexander on the wall to defend his people. It is also in this light that one can view the illustrations of the theme of the prince in discussion with the philosopher in the Bodleian *Kalīla and Dimna*, and other 'Mirror for Princes' type episodes: the 'mamluk' sultan fitting into the traditional roles for an Islamic ruler, which over-ride his individual origins.<sup>409</sup>

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One is reminded of the belief of some Americans that, even if the president starts out as quite unsuitable presidential material, the incumbency will make him grow into the office.

Among modern historians of the occident, we see in any case the emergence of a view which presents less of an abrupt contrast between a dynastic west and a totally foreign eastern system. There has been discussion of other principles at work in civil wars and family struggles in the west, and the matter may eventually be seen as one of emphasis rather than contrast.<sup>410</sup> After all, position and salary, as distinct from feudal status and wealth, have never been hereditary in the west.

But with the 'exotic mamluk' view, nineteenth century western historians were in accord. The 'Mamluk myth' of a separate race of super-cruel luxury loving warriors, took shape, and the religious buildings of Cairo were seen as evidence for their history. This long-enduring view is essentially that of writers such as Humphreys,<sup>411</sup> who tried to move the argument to a more analytical level than the pure description which the work of Creswell supplied. Humphreys' conclusion, that mamluk architecture embodies a tension between religious and secular form, has produced a paradigm of the conflict between the conscience of the WASP historian and the attractions of the sybaritic Saracen image. There is actually no reason why religious buildings should not be luxurious and no reason for supposing a conflict between luxury and religion within architecture, the assumption that lies at the heart of Humphreys' view. The contradiction lies, not in the architecture itself, but between the architecture and the supposed feelings of the viewer.

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By and large, the analysis of architecture as embodying the political desires of the founders, viewing those desires as broad expansion of their personal wishes, has been followed by later writers and is essentially the view behind the work of Leonor Fernandes, although now in terms of class rather than individual. The thrust of Fernandes' work on the khānqāh is that it was an instrument of control over sufism; her claim is that the khānqāh organised sufism under state control, and that this was deliberate choice and official policy.<sup>412</sup>

The problem with this kind of analysis is the assignation of actions to categories either of official state function or of personal and private ends. It is difficult to know whether in the case of some particular action, the contemporary world shared our view of an 'official act,' or indeed, our concept of a state. Mamluk rulers tend to get the worst of both worlds: if they create a waqf, it is a private act to preserve their wealth for their own families, yet it is seen also as an act in the public domain, one of state control. The possibility of personal piety is not admitted. But foundations such as the madrasas were actually private institutions, though they fulfilled a public need and their staff were sometimes legally compared to public servants.<sup>413</sup> There is a tendency to impose a modern concept of the state upon the past: a royal foundation was not necessarily an act of state, but could be an act in a private capacity as a gesture of personal piety. Such rigid claims as those of Fernandes, who sees the mamluks as manipulating the various sufi groups to serve their own interests seem extravagantly intentionalist readings which assume that private acts had necessarily a public character.<sup>414</sup> In connection with the madrasa, Van Berchem's influential view of the foundation of

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the madrasa as an act which was at first private but later became officially-motivated, public and political,<sup>415</sup> has been challenged by Makdisi, who points out:

‘The madrasa remained an institution of private, independent and personal origin, destined for a limited public purpose, limited by its founder acting as a private Muslim.’<sup>416</sup>

and again:

‘There are still those who think that the official or public status of the founder endows his institutions with an equally official or public status. But the status of the founder did not in any way alter the legal status of the institution he founded: the institution remained a waqf, a charitable trust.’<sup>417</sup>

Makdisi’s comments on the madrasa would apply equally to the *khānqāh*, founded in similar conditions.

To speak of ‘official’ or ‘unofficial’ acts seems fraught with danger as dangerous as making rigid definitions between the functions of religious buildings. Imputing motivation seems essentially doomed to failure, but since it has been done so extensively in order to write what is essentially political history, it is worth pointing out at least that there may be a mixed bag of motives operating in any particular case, and the evidence of the very standardised waqf documents is that the conformity of action which produced a number of similar institutions came from conformity of belief, law and custom, and not from any concerted deliberate purpose. The fragmented and individualistic nature of the support of education thus

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achieved has been mentioned by Berkey and also militates against the interpretation of a consistent public policy.<sup>418</sup>

The polyvalent uses of a building with consequent difficulty of defining purpose and effect, the complex business of construction with *ad hoc* adjustments which it often entails, the ultimate pointlessness of correlation between intention and result as a measure of achievement,<sup>419</sup> all suggest that architecture actually makes poor material for political history. The documentation of that architecture may be excellent as a source for political history, but the *waqf* document should not be confused with the building itself. *Waqf* documents usually tell us very little about elevation or decoration.

For these reasons, 'mamluk' seems to me meaningless as a label for art or architecture, and perhaps not particularly helpful as a general historical term. I have not used it, except where it is a political or social description. The restriction at first seems disabling, but in fact it enforces thought of what might be really appropriate as a cultural term. 'An art of the *bāṭin*' seems to me to express the processes at work in the development of abstraction which have been described above.

The art of fourteenth-century Egypt deserves better than analyses of its derivations, deserves in fact the process of scrutiny which we accord to our own abstract art. But it is an art which conducts its workings on several levels between pure linguistics and pure representation, a gamut between the verbal and the pictorial. The hard and fast distinction between figural and geometric art is in fact a series of gradations, just as the hard and fast distinction between legitimate and forbidden thinking is a range of fluid categories.

### *Conclusion*

The issue of whether we should try to understand the meaning of art within the world of its creator is a vexed one: the position that this is not in any way necessary, is indeed a falsification. <sup>yet,</sup> The belief that we can, with any honesty approach art only on our own terms, is a tenable one.<sup>420</sup> The answer has been provided by a pre-historian, for whom the struggle for contextual meaning must seem tempting to abandon. For Howard Morphy, 'Much of human life is based on the presupposition that we share meanings with others, that we are able to interpret their actions and the objects they produce in the way they intended ... the cognitive overlap we share with others may diminish with time and space. In a sense, the reconstruction of representational systems by developing models of how art-forms encode meaning, how they may have been interpreted, is a way of crossing that cognitive divide.'<sup>421</sup>

We may not understand those meanings, like ibn Wahshiyya, we may reconstruct them wrongly, but we can at least try to understand the processes, if not the result. If we do so, we may see the abstract art of fourteenth-century Cairo not as an expression of repression or aggrandization, but as the final triumph of the inner world over the outer.

