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THE MAMLUKS AND THE PHARAOHS
Karen R. Mathews

The Mamluks and the Pharaohs

Karen R. Mathews

Medieval Islamic Egypt has generally been thought to have been hostile to the ancient Egyptian past, disdainful of a time when people were ruled by tyrants and worshipped idols. In both architectural monuments and written works of the period, however, we receive a more nuanced and complex picture of medieval attitudes towards pharaonic culture.

In the realm of popular culture, people emphasized continuity with the ancient past, essentially “pharaonizing” the Islamic present. At more elite levels of society, numerous scholars sought to reconcile the two cultures by “Islamizing” the ancient past, attempting to make ancient Egyptian culture seem more like medieval Islamic Egypt. The artistic patronage of the Mamluk dynasty (1250-1517 CE) appears to have incorporated both such approaches to understanding the past.

Mamluk rulers employed ancient objects in their architectural constructions and sponsored scientific investigation of and scholarly writings on ancient Egyptian culture to associate themselves with

what they deemed the positive aspects of the culture, while showing themselves to have superseded or gone beyond other elements that could not be reconciled with a medieval Muslim world view.

VISUAL EVIDENCE

In the Mamluk period, pharaonic spolia, or reused objects from ancient buildings, were prominently displayed on the exterior and interior of buildings. Columns from ancient temples were the most ubiquitous spolia, as their size and beautiful granite material made them excellent supports for hypostyle mosques—that is, structures that use columns as supports for the roof. Several beautiful red granite columns, for example, adorn the prayer hall of the Mosque of the Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad at the Citadel in Cairo (Fig. 1). The columns in this building are arranged so that they flank the most important part of the prayer space, the aisle that leads to the prayer niche or mihrab (Fig. 2).

Reused columns were not the only kind of ancient Egyptian spolia employed in Mamluk architecture. There was a great interest in employing ancient blocks of stone as thresholds and lintels of doorways. They generally graced the most visible part of the building, one that people would look at and experience (walking through or over) regularly.

A majority of these reused stones feature hieroglyphs that are displayed in full view, either facing up or out as a person enters the building. One excellent example of this is the Khanqah, or Sufi lodge, of the Sultan Baybars al-Jashankir (Fig. 3). The threshold at the entrance consists of a carved stone depicting Ramesses IX kneeling and offering wine jars to the gods (Fig. 4). And, in one of the most extravagant displays of ancient Egyptian materials, the Sultan al-Mu’ayyad Sheikh reused an entire portal from an ancient Egyptian structure on the façade of his mosque located in the heart of medieval Cairo (Fig. 5). This type of doorway, featuring a broken lintel, first appeared in ancient Egyptian architecture in the 18th Dynasty and became increasingly common in the Late Period (Fig. 6).

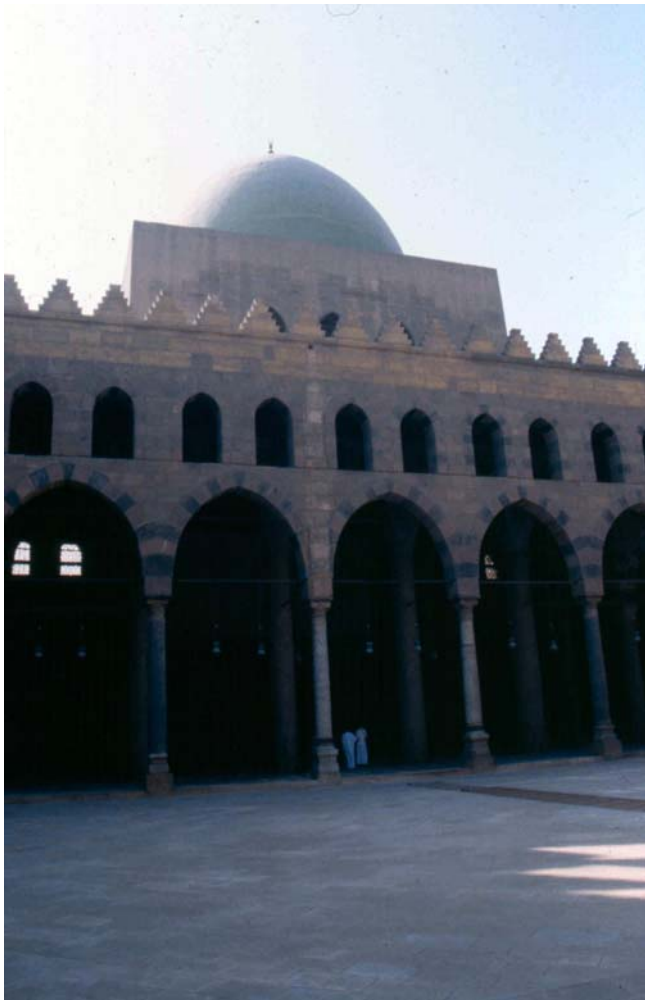


Fig. 1. Courtyard of the Mosque of Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad.
Photo by Karen Mathews.

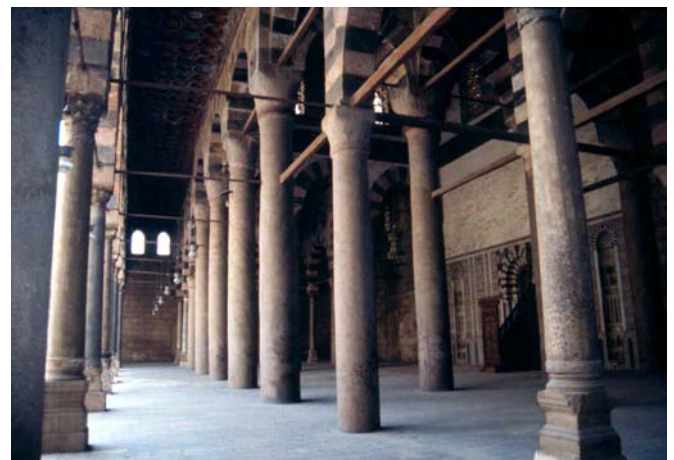


Figure 2. Detail of red granite pharaonic columns in the prayer hall of the Mosque of Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad.
Photo by Karen Mathews.

MEDIEVAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS ANCIENT EGYPT

Along with this reuse of pharaonic material in Mamluk buildings, medieval writers displayed a great scholarly interest in the ancient past. Mamluk literary and historical texts display two distinct attitudes toward ancient Egypt. On one hand, there was a strict, religiously motivated rejection of ancient Egyptian religious practices and the role of the pharaoh; on the other hand, a folkloric attachment to the ancient past continued in a number of popular practices, rituals, and celebrations. Tempering these two entrenched positions was a third, mediating one, embodied by moderate scholarly attitudes towards the ancient past as a topic worthy of scientific investigation.



Fig. 3. Doorway of the Khanqah of Baybars al-Jashankir. Photo by Karen Mathews.



Fig. 4. Threshold in the Khanqah of Baybars consists of carved stone depicting Ramesses IX kneeling and offering wine jars to the gods. Photo by Karen Mathews.

It has been argued that the medieval rejection of ancient Egyptian culture was the result of a deep historical and conceptual chasm separating ancient and medieval Egypt. By the time the Muslims arrived in Egypt in 640, the ancient Egyptian cult had



Fig. 5. Main portal of the Mosque of al-Mu'ayyad Sheikh. Photo by Karen Mathews.

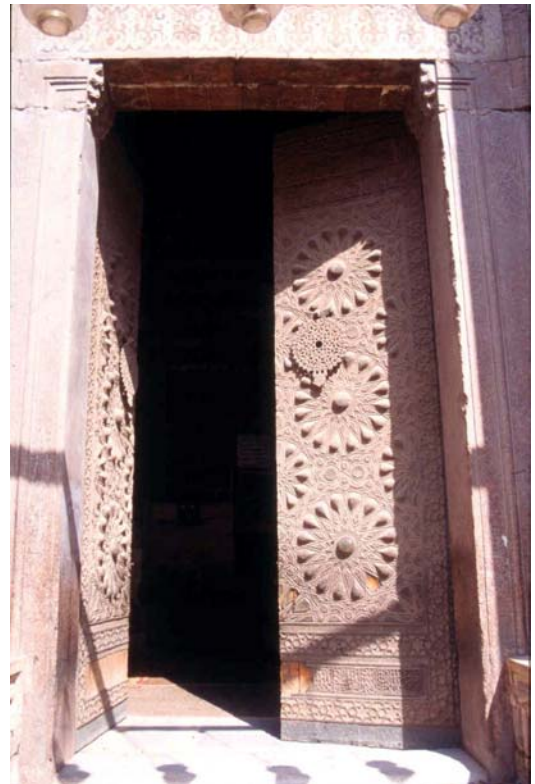


Fig. 6. Detail of reused ancient Egyptian doorway in the Mosque of al-Mu'ayyad Sheikh. Photo by Karen Mathews.

not been practiced in more than a century. In addition, the rejection of ancient Egypt on religious grounds was prevalent in the medieval period, and the history of the prophets and the Qur'an by and large determined the medieval image of ancient Egypt. The Qur'an portrayed the pharaoh of ancient Egypt as the personification of hubris and tyranny, and the polytheistic religion was condemned as idolatrous.

Much historical evidence, then, points to a deep alienation on the part of medieval Muslims from the pharaonic past. The ancient past was not their past, and they saw little need to recover it to serve their own needs. In the realm of popular culture, however, it appears that ancient culture never quite died out, and remnants of ancient beliefs and practices wove themselves into the fabric of medieval Egyptian society. This continuation or re-integration of pharaonic culture manifested itself in various ways. In times of political and economic instability and natural disasters, the people increasingly sought recourse in the ancient practices and beliefs, making the 14th century CE in Egypt a time when these pre-Islamic practices were overwhelmingly popular.

In medieval popular culture, Egypt of the pharaohs was a repository of great knowledge in science, medicine and magic. It was a realm of wonders where spectacular, magical events occurred and wondrous treasures were buried, protected by fierce guardians and elaborate magical spells. Wise and learned priests inscribed all the knowledge of the civilization on the walls of their religious buildings, and they protected this knowledge with talismans and spells. Ancient Egypt was the land of magic *par excellence*, and the Sphinx was the ancient object credited by medieval Egyptians with the greatest magical and apotropaic power. It was to this monumental sculpture that people turned for help and guidance in times of great calamity.

On rare occasions, pharaonic beliefs and practices were interwoven into the fabric of mainstream Islam. This can best be seen in the Islamic cult of saints, where cult sites such as the Temple of Luxor were transformed into Islamic religious sites and Muslim saints, in this case Abu el-Haggag, replaced the god or gods worshipped there in antiquity. The pragmatism of the common people dictated that one continued to use whatever proved efficacious, and this kept many ancient beliefs and practices alive through the Middle Ages and into the present day.

SCHOLARLY APPROACHES TO ANCIENT EGYPT

If the popular approach to the ancient past was characterized by continuity and syncretism, the educated elite saw pharaonic Egypt as a distinct culture, separated historically from medieval Egypt but worthy of scientific study. This interest in historic preservation was connected to two other significant motives for Egyptian historical writing: patriotism and pride in the wonders that Egypt possessed. In addition, authors wrote about ancient Egypt to satisfy the curiosity of a general, literate public and to provide information for the tourists who came to visit Egypt's wonders.

One strong impetus for the writing of Egyptian history was national pride and patriotism. Medieval Egyptians felt a strong love for their country and believed it to be unique among Muslim nations. This pride is reflected in texts praising the assets and merits of a particular nation, region or city. As the greatest of the wonders of Egypt, medieval scholars were understandably preoccupied by the pyramids. They were so wondrous, massive and so skillfully built that even the scholarly audience concluded they could only have been constructed with magic. Medieval writers pondered whether the pyramids were built before or after the Flood, and by

whom. They put forward theories about who was buried in the pyramids and why the monuments were built. They also waxed eloquent about the staggering treasures that accompanied the dead in the pyramids, treasures that had mostly vanished by the medieval period. The pyramids were above all a great tourist attraction, and medieval Egyptian writers recorded illustrious visitors to the tombs as an indication of their importance as one of the world's great wonders.

The second topic of great interest to medieval scholars was the nature of hieroglyphs. Scholars, rulers, tourists and people from all levels of society shared a fascination with the ancient writing. What is significant is that in the Middle Ages it was understood that hieroglyphs represented a writing system, and were not thought to be simply images or illustrations. Medieval writers believed the inscriptions they saw on ancient buildings contained all ancient Egyptian knowledge, but scholars would have to wait several centuries for the decipherment of the language that would reveal this wisdom.

Finally, a last and fascinating aspect of these medieval texts on ancient Egypt is the tendency to Islamize, i.e. make Islamic, the pharaonic past. Ancient rulers were given Arabic names and secretly professed monotheism. Medieval writers also believed pharaonic monuments could be made acceptable, redeemed, as it were, through their connection to pious Muslims. One author in particular, al-Idrisi, noted that the companions of the Prophet legitimized the ancient sites by living, dying and being buried near the pyramids and ancient temples. Their presence sanctified the space and made Giza a holy site that everyone should visit.

CONCLUSION

So, what conclusions can be drawn from the visual and textual evidence concerning medieval attitudes towards ancient Egyptian culture? The reuse of ancient materials in medieval, particularly Mamluk, buildings, and the scholarly fascination with ancient history and culture manifest a generally positive attitude towards ancient Egypt.

Medieval viewers could admire the beauty and technical skill inherent in the ancient monuments and appreciate the great knowledge concealed in hieroglyphic inscriptions. It was clear from the remains that this was a great civilization, one that could be admired for its power, wealth and longevity.

The Mamluk period in Egypt was a time of political instability and economic difficulty, and this turning to the ancient past, its rituals and beliefs, could have provided reassurance for the general population. The Mamluks were foreign invaders, separated from the local population by ethnicity and language, and their references to ancient Egypt in architectural structures and their patronage of historical works on Egypt could have served to legitimize their reign and establish them as the worthy successors to the pharaonic rulers of this ancient culture.

Karen Mathews received her Ph.D. in art history from the University of Chicago. She has taught at Southern Methodist University, the University of Notre Dame and the University of Texas. Most recently, Mathews was Visiting Professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is now completing a book-length project on Mamluk architecture in Cairo.

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