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EGYPT VI. ARTISTIC RELATIONS WITH PERSIA IN THE ISLAMIC PERIOD
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EGYPT

vi. Artistic relations with Persia in the Islamic period

Although direct evidence of artistic links between Persia and Egypt before the Mongol invasion of the Near East in the 13th century is limited, surviving works of art suggest that transfer of artistic ideas resulted from the movement of artisans and their works, rather than from the specific demand of patrons. In the following centuries before the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 922/1517, however, the predominant artistic role of Persia was recognized even in Cairo, which had replaced Baghdad as the cultural capital of the Arabic-speaking world.

Before the Mongol invasion. Where the technique of decorating ceramics with overglaze luster painting was discovered has been a matter of debate, but it now seems likely that it originated among glassmakers in pre-Islamic Egypt or Syria, was adapted to ceramics in ʿAbbasid Iraq, and was reintroduced in that form to Egypt, whence it was transferred to Persia in the 12th century. Similarly the artifical ceramic body made of ground quartz pebbles bound with white clay, known as “frit” or “stone paste,” which formed the basis for

the flowering of ceramic arts in 12th-century Persia, is technically similar to Egyptian faience, used from ancient Dynastic times onward for turquoise-glazed figurines and beads. It is not yet known, however, whether the technique was revived or reinvented in medieval Persia (see CERAMICS xiii–xiv).

The potential for transfer of architectural ideas was limited by intrinsic differences in building materials and techniques between the two regions. Most Persian buildings of the early Islamic period were constructed of baked bricks and covered by brick vaults and domes; with time carved stucco and colored tiles were increasingly used to decorate interior and exterior surfaces respectively. Egyptian buildings of the same period, particularly from the 11th century onward, were notable for fine limestone ashlar and ashlar-faced walls, spaces covered with wooden roofs or stone vaults, and decoration with stone veneers. Thus, even if the characteristic forms of Persian architecture were known in Egypt, it would have been difficult to transfer many of them.

It was once thought that the keel-shaped arches in buildings of the Fatimid period (358-567/969-1171) in Egypt reflected the “influence” of Buyid architecture in Persia and Iraq (see BUYIDS), as both dynasties were Shiʿite. This theory was demolished by K. A. C. Creswell (I, pp. 289-90), who also argued that the “stalactite pendentive” in Egyptian architecture evolved independently of the Persian *moqarnas* squinch (both composed of small vault sections set at angles to one another in oversailing courses). Although the early history of the *moqarnas* remains to be clarified, this conclusion requires acceptance of an improbable coincidence, and it is far more likely that both regional forms developed from common sources in buildings of Iraq and Arabia that are now lost (Bloom, 1988). Egyptian architects of the 11th and 12th centuries were apparently unaware of developments in contemporary Persia, notably the mosque with an *ayvān* (q.v.) in the middle of each facade on the rectangular courtyard and a large dome behind the qibla *ayvān* and in front of the mihrab, as in the Great Mosque of Isfahan (ca. 479-80/1086-87; see DOMES). After the collapse of Fatimid rule and the establishment of the Ayyubid dynasty (566-648/1171-1250 in Egypt) *madrasa*s (religious schools) with one or more *ayvān*s became common in Egypt, though the immediate prototypes seem to have been in Iraq and Syria, rather than in Persia itself.

The Il-khanid and Turkman periods. The situation changed dramatically following the collapse of Ayyubid rule and the establishment of the Mamluk sultanate in Egypt and Syria (648-922/1250-1517). Despite political antagonism

between the Mamluks and the Il-khanids of Persia (654-736/1256-1336), Persian elements appeared more frequently in Mamluk architecture, probably as a result of the presence in Egypt of individuals with firsthand experience of Persian architecture. The characteristic Persian four-*ayvān* plan was first introduced to Mamluk Egypt in *madrasa*s, though it was rarely, if ever, used in mosques there. The large dome before the mihrab first appeared in the mosque of Baybars I (667/1269). Although this feature can be more convincingly related to mosques in northern Mesopotamia or eastern Anatolia, a Persian origin cannot be excluded, for it was combined with axial units comparable to *ayvān*s (Bloom, 1982). The 15th-century Cairene historian Taqī-al-Dīn Aḥmad Maqrīzī reported that a builder from Tabrīz worked on the mosque of the amir Qawṣūn in Cairo (730/1330), modeling the minarets after those of the vizier ʿAlīšāh's mosque at Tabrīz (ca. 722/1322; Maqīzī, 1270/1874, p. 307; idem, 1972, p. 320; see ARG-E ʿALĪŠĀH). Traces of glazed tiles on several Cairene buildings, including the bulbous stone minarets of the mosque of Nāṣer Moḥammad in the citadel (718-36/1318-35), indicate that craftsmen from Tabrīz operated a workshop in Cairo in the 1330s and 1340s (Meinecke, 1976-77; Plate I).

The unusual form of the vestibule to the complex of *madrasa*, mosque, and mausoleum of Sultan Ḥasan (757-64/1356-63) led J. M. Rogers (1976, p. 103-04) to suggest architectural sources in Anatolia or Central Asia. Although it is clear that there is some connection, it is more likely that all were based on now-lost sources in metropolitan Persia, for example, the Ḡāzānīya complex at Tabrīz or the congregational mosque at Solṭānīya. Following the collapse of the Il-khanid state in 736/1336, the imperial building tradition came to a halt in Persia, and in the ensuing period of turmoil and plague Persian artisans must have gravitated to Cairo, bringing with them techniques and forms such as *moqarnas* vaults, square Kufic inscriptions, and chinoiserie, already popular elsewhere.

For example, several funerary domes erected in Cairo in the mid-14th century have bulbous profiles with ribs rising from *moqarnas* cornices encircling tall drums (e.g., the two domes of the mausoleum called "Solṭānīya," in the southern cemetery, probably of the 1350s). The technique of cementing a ribbed stone shell onto a brick shell and buttressing the whole with a system of hidden supports represented an attempt to translate the structural requirements of a Persian brick dome into limestone. Although the earliest examples of bulbous domes in Persia and Transoxania, such as the Gūr-e Mīr

in Samarqand, date from the early 15th century, there must have been earlier examples that have not survived, for double-shelled domes constructed in brick are attested from Persia in the 11th century. In addition, the decoration carved in low relief on the drum of the eastern tomb at the Solṭānīya complex, including floral arabesques between the windows and a band of square Kufic above, is a translation of Persian tile designs into carved stone (Plate II).

Motifs of Chinese origin, such as lotus and peony flowers, first appeared on Egyptian metalwork during the reign of Nāṣer Moḥammad (693-741/1294-1340, with interruptions), probably as a result of increased contact with the Persian cultural sphere, where they were already popular. These motifs also appeared in other media, including enameled glass, textiles, and manuscript illumination.

Calligraphers and illuminators trained in the tradition of Yāqūt Mostaʿṣemī in Baghdad had, like other artists, migrated to Cairo at the beginning of the 14th century. The impact of Persian models on calligraphy and illumination of Mamluk Qurʾān manuscripts has long been recognized, but it has usually been attributed to a single source, a thirty-part manuscript (National Library, Cairo, ms. no. 72) copied for Sultan Öljeitü (Ūljāytū) at the charitable foundation of his vizier, Rašīd-al-Dīn, in Hamadān in 713/1313 (Blair, p. 61); it was presented to the mausoleum of Abū Saʿīd Sayf-al-Dīn Baḵtīmūr b. ʿAbd-Allāh, cupbearer to Nāṣer Moḥammad, in 747/1326 (James, pp. 103-10 no. 45). Other manuscripts in similar style were commissioned locally, including an unusually large seven-volume Qurʾān (British Library, London, ms. no. Add. 22406-1; 48 x 32 cm), commissioned in 904/1304 for the *ḵānqāh* of the amir Baybars Jāšnegīr in Cairo, already showing the impact of Il-khanid manuscript design, in such features as size, repeat patterns, borders, and “exploding” (radial) compositions (James, pp. 34-72 no. 1; Plate III). Production of these manuscripts appears to have ceased in Cairo about 1330.

Although creation of a tradition of narrative illustration for luxury books was one of the most important contributions of Persian artists in Il-khanid Persia, illustrated books played a minor role in Mamluk domains, and narrative imagery was relatively unimportant. Most Mamluk illustrated manuscripts were produced in the late 13th and first half of the 14th centuries. One exception is a copy of the Ottoman poet Aḥmadī’s Turkish version of the *Eskandar-nāma* (q.v.; University Library, Istanbul, ms. no. T 6044), made for Ḵošqadam b. ʿAbd-Allāh, treasurer of Sayfī ʿAlī Bey, secretary to Sultan Tīmūrboḡā (872/1468). The style of the paintings in this and related

manuscripts, derived from those produced for the Turkman ruler of Shiraz and Baghdad Pīr Būdāq Qara Qoyunlū, suggests that they were produced by artists who had fled to Cairo after his death in 871/1466 (Atıl, pp. 160-63). The same artists may have illustrated two Mamluk manuscripts on horsemanship (*forūsīya*), one in Istanbul (Topkapı Saray Library, ms. no. Revan 1933), the other divided between Richmond, Surrey (Keir collection, ms. nos. II.7-87), and Cairo (Museum of Islamic Art, ms. nos. 18019, 18235-36; Atıl, p. 160). A two-volume Turkish translation of the *Šāh-nāma* (Topkapı Saray Library, ms. no. Eminet Hazine 1519) transcribed by Ḥosayn b. Ḥasan b. Moḥammad Ḥosaynī Ḥanafī for Qanṣūh Ḡawrī (906-22/1501-17), contains sixty-two paintings generally inspired by Turkman models, though embellished with details of Egyptian architecture and costume (Atıl, pp. 163-69).

The Turkman presence in 15th-century Egypt can also be hypothesized from the so-called “Mamluk carpets,” with a pile of asymmetrical knots open to the left and characterized by intricate designs centered on one or more large octagons. Production of these carpets may have been encouraged by virtually continuous warfare in the carpet-weaving region of Persia and eastern Anatolia, where Ottoman, Mamluk, and Āq Qoyunlū domains converged. Workmen may have emigrated from there to the safer haven of Cairo.

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Plate I. Cairo, Mosque of al-Nāṣer Muḥammad on the Citadel (1318-35), top of northwest minaret showing tile decoration. Courtesy of Jonathan M. Bloom.

Plate II. Cairo, "Solṭānīya" complex, eastern mausoleum, ca. 1350, showing bulbous ribbed dome, band of square Kufic on the drum, and floral arabesques between the windows. Courtesy of Jonathan M. Bloom.

Plate III. The Koran of Baybars Jowšangīr, folio 2r from ms. Add. 22411. By permission of The British Library.