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*The Izara Friezes in the Sidlas
of the Great Amir Qurqumas' Madrasa
at Cairo North Cemetery (No. 162).
Some Notes on a Margin of an Epigraphic Survey
(1998–1999)*

INTRODUCTION

The late Professor Kazimierz Michałowski used to say, that no serious archaeological institute can really pretend to deserve that name, until it leads research into every historically important period of the country of its interest. Therefore, as early as 1972, he stipulated (in cooperation with Polish State Company for Restauration of Historic Monuments – PP PKZ, and under high patronate of the Egypt Antiquities Organization – nowadays Supreme Council for Antiquities of Egypt) the creation of what finally became the Polish-Egyptian Mission for Restoration of Islamic Architecture, and a branch of permanent activity of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the Warsaw University in Cairo.¹

Since then, pursuing the main goal of the Mission, i.e. the practical restoration and conservation of the unique cultic and funerary complex of the Great Amir Qurqumas (No. 162) at the Northern Cairo Necropolis, numerous specialists from both countries have lead and completed different parallel research in contiguous fields: cairene architecture and topography, anthropology, archaeology, archival and historical studies, etc., that substantially contributed to our present knowledge of the Late Mamluk Period in Egypt.²

Epigraphy, however, was always at the very end of these activities. Such a state of things probably resulted from difficulties in the recording of these inscriptions, the greater bulk of this material being situated at the completely (in that time) ruined and inaccessible parts of the Complex. Only recently then have they become the object of more systematic study.³

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The present study aims to introduce the reader into some minor questions ensuing from the study of the inscriptional decoration of cairene islamic monuments from the Mamluk Period, as illustrated by the example of two inscriptional friezes decorating the side *iwans* (also called *sidlas*) of the Great Amir Qurqumas *madrassa* – the key element of his cultic and funerary complex (No. 162), built on the Cairo Northern Necropolis between 1506 and 1507 A.D. / 911 – 913 A.H.⁴

¹ For the Mission's beginnings – cf. A. MISIOROWSKI, *Mausoleum of Qurqumas in Cairo*, Warszawa 1979, [= Qurqumas], pp. 1–3, 9–10; ID., *Polish Restoration Work on the al-Amir al-Kabir Complex in Cairo*, *Africana Bulletin* 28, 1979, pp. 9–29.

² Cf. *Mausoleum of Qurqumas in Cairo. Results of Investigations and Conservation Works 2–3*, Warszawa 1985, 1991 [= Mausoleum] and bibliography there; for recent works – cf. *PAM* 1992 ff.

³ Practically since 1995 only, when restoration of all main traffic arteries of the Complex rendered the inscriptional material easier to reach. The last of the bulk of inscriptions actually identified (situated above the uppermost range of windows in the dome drum of the Qubba/Mausoleum) was recorded only in April 2000, during the installation of *qamariyyas* in these openings – cf. J. KANIA, *PAM*, XII, 2000 (in press).

⁴ M.V. BERCHEM, *Materiaux pour un CIA I/3 – Le Caire*, MMAFC 19, Le Caire 1900 (repr. Beyrouth 1979) [= CIA I/3], pp. 592 ff. (Nos. 401 ff.).

The inscriptions were recorded during two campaigns of conservation and restoration lead on the ceilings of these *sidlas* in 1998 and 1999 by M. Popławska and B. Wołosz, both artists and experienced art conservators.⁵ The theoretical and practical reasons that decided of exclusively “puristic” treatment adopted for protection of these objects (as well as complete description of methods and materials used for that purpose) were fully expounded in the Mission’s special Conservation Report.⁶

STRUCTURE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS’ BEDDING

As already mentioned, the inscriptions of our interest were written on the so-called *izaras*, i.e. wooden friezes surrounding the upper part of the walls of the *sidlas*, which are reduced form of side *iwans* and a typical feature of cairene mamluk city-mosques of *madrasa* kind.⁷ The texts written on these *izaras* were “naturally” (i.e. according to the normal sequence of arabic script) surrounding tops of these rooms’ walls.⁸

Both ceilings and *izaras* in these rooms are original elements of the primary decoration of the Amir’s *madrasa* completed, according to the inscription situated at the mosque’s entrance “*in the month of ragab 913 [A.H.]*”, that is – in November 1507 A.D.⁹

The *izaras* form an integral part of the composite “coffer-like” ceilings of typical cairene form,¹⁰ providing them with a kind of frame aesthetically joining them with the walls’ surfaces. The following schematic diagram of these ceilings, as seen from the ground level, gives the best idea of their shape, equipment and the disposition of decoration motifs on them (Fig. 1) The drawing was conceived on the basis of the better preserved ceiling in the Western *sidla*, taking into consideration all fragments of the ornaments’ shapes preserved in both rooms and still visible *in situ*.¹¹ Thus, the disposition of the pattern of ceiling decoration could be established as follows:

⁵ Both graduated M.A. from Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, Department of Art Conservation.

⁶ Presented to the Supreme Council for Antiquities of Egypt in April 1998 by M. POPLAWSKA, B. WOŁOSZ, Polychromed Ceiling of the Eastern Sidella in the Madrasa of the Great Amir Qurqumas. Report on Conservatory Works, January – April 1998, (with additional epigraphical notes on the inscriptions by M.G. WITKOWSKI, MMS Report for SCAE), Cairo 1998 [= Eastern Sidella].

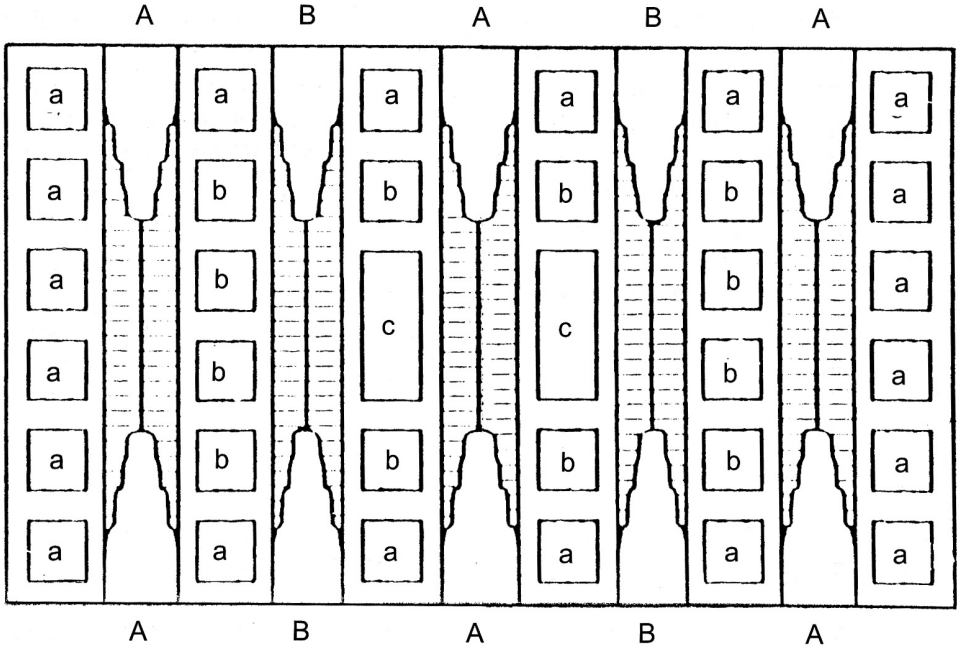
⁷ D. BEHRENS-ABOUSEIF, Islamic Architecture in Cairo. An Introduction, Suppl. *Muqarnas* III, Leiden–New York–København–Köln(–Cairo) 1989 [= Isl. Arch.], pp. 154 f., Fig. 31., pl. 115; M. MEINECKE, Die Mamlukische Architektur in Ägypten und Syrien (648/1250 bis 932/1517) I, Glückstadt 1992, *passim*; R. HILLENBRAND, Islamic Architecture, Edinburgh 1994, pp. 31–128; Architecture of the Islamic World. Its History and Social Meaning, ed. G. MICHELL, London 1978 [= Architecture], pp. 15–47.

⁸ Cf. S.S. BLAIR, Islamic Inscriptions, Edinburgh 1999, *passim*.

⁹ v. BERCHEM, CIA I/3, pp. 592 ff. (Nos. 401 ff.).

¹⁰ Cf. A. ŻABOKLIICKI, J. BRZozowski, L. SŁOŃSKI, The Structural Design Solutions of Wooden Beamed Ceilings in the Monumental Islamic Architecture at the Turn of the 15th and 16th Centuries, in: Mausoleum 3, pp. 29–38; A. MLYŃSKI, Polychromed Wooden Ceilings in Ameer Kebir Qurqumas Funerary Complex in Cairo, *ibid.*, pp. 39–53; for earlier examples of these structures – cf. V. MEINECKE-BERG, Materialien zur fatimischen Holzdekoration in Kairo, I–II, *MDAIK* 47, 1991, pp. 227–242, Pls. 23–26.

¹¹ Since the decoration of these ceilings is subject of separate study (M.A. thesis, Warsaw University, Institute of Archaeology) by Mrs. K. Wodarska, this question will not be further developed here.



1. Schematic diagram showing principles of decoration's display on the casseton ceiling of the *siddas*: A-A & B-B = decorated ceiling beams (with differentiated decoration); a-b-c = different "caissons" motifs. (Drawing: M. G. Witkowski).

Friezes of both *siddas* are almost identical (with exception, naturally, of the inscription's content) in their structure as well as in their decoration (Figs. 2–4). From the structural point of view the *izaras* on each wall forms a separate constructional unit composed of thin and narrow battens (narrow at the top part, and becoming quite broad at the bottom) forming an upturned, concave and trapezoidal surface. The main material used in their construction was timber of some coniferous species.¹² The best explanation of all details of these ceilings' construction will be provided by the drawing by our late colleagues L. Słowski and J. Brzozowski, summing up the results of his constructional examination of these structures (Fig. 2).¹³

At the rooms' corners and in the middle of their longer sides ("East" and "West"), the *izaras* are divided on six separate panels of similar composition by typical *muqarnasses* (Figs. 3–4). The *muqarnasses* situated at the rooms' angles are terminated with upturned *fleur de lys* shapes, descending well below the *izaras* themselves, along the rooms' corners (Fig. 2).

¹² To establish its precise species, however, the laboratorial expertise is needed – cf. *infra*, note 19.

¹³ L. SŁOWSKI, *Structural Expertise of the Eastern Sidella*; *Id.*, *Structural Expertise of the Western Sidella* (MSS Reports for the SCAE), Cairo 1976 and 1978, *passim*; cf. also *supra*, note 10.

The central space of each panel/facette was occupied by an inscription, bordered from each side with a broad decorative frame. The inscription itself – white letters outlined with broad black lines – was superimposed over the complicated volute turning runner of *sode islim* kind, executed in slightly raised relief and originally gilt.¹⁴ The background of the whole composition was primarily covered with a white, gesso-like substance. The bordering frame (also gilt) was decorated with a simply traced classical scroll runner, its “eyes” being painted alternatively green and red and decorated with small schematic six-rayed white stars situated in their centres.¹⁵

The inscriptions run naturally (i.e. according to the normal sequence of arabic script), surrounding the *sidlas* in a counter-clockwise way, starting in the “right hand” angle of these rooms, on the surfaces opposite the entrance bays to these units: in the “South-East” corner in the “East” *sidla* and in the “North-West” corner in the “West” one (Figs. 3–4).¹⁶ Displayed this way, they were immediately visible from the central space of the *madrasa* – *sahn/durqa'a*.¹⁷

THE STATE OF PRESERVATION OF THE IZARAS¹⁸

The preservation state of both *izaras*, before conservation was done, must be defined as very poor. The texts on almost all frieze panels were nearly completely obliterated. This destruction was due however less to the structural destruction of its timber bedding (although in the “West” *sidla* practically 2/3 of the frieze panel on the East wall was missing – cf. Fig. 4) than to the surface effacement by rainwater falls, which was penetrating there after the removal of the roofing, once protecting these ceilings from above (cf. Fig. 2). In some places, over the frieze surface, large “resinous” brownish-black stains were widespread, most probably efflorescences either of arabic gum (element of the painting ground

¹⁴ Cf. *infra*, p. 346 f.

¹⁵ The ornaments are of traditional, simplified character. For their characteristics and meaning (probable sense and signification) – cf. E. BAER, *Islamic Ornament*, Edinburgh 1998, pp. 7–28, 126 and O. GRABAR, *The Mediation of Ornament*, Boll. Series XXXV/38, Princeton 1992, *passim*.

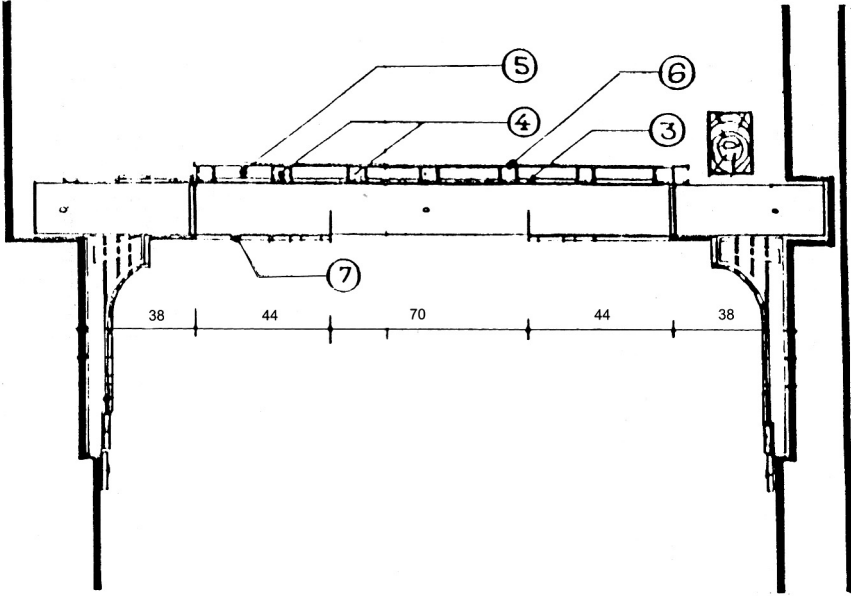
¹⁶ The terms “East” and “West” are used here only in conventional sense, since the real axis of the *madrasa* deviates, accordingly to the cairene custom/tradition, from the true South-North direction by almost 40 degrees towards the East – cf. *infra*, Fig. 5. and V. SETON-WILLIAMS, P. STOCKS, *Blue Guide*. Egypt, London–New York 1984, p. 104.

¹⁷ The *Waqfiyya* document of the Qurqumas' foundation regularly and consequently designates the central space of the *madrasa* as *sahn* – cf. *Waqfiyya* (No. 501), pp. 42–46 – seemingly suggesting thus that it was never covered (*sic!*). What is more, in case of other, certainly covered rooms, the same *Waqfiyya* precisely states even the kind of timber used for their roofing – cf. *ibid.*, *passim*.

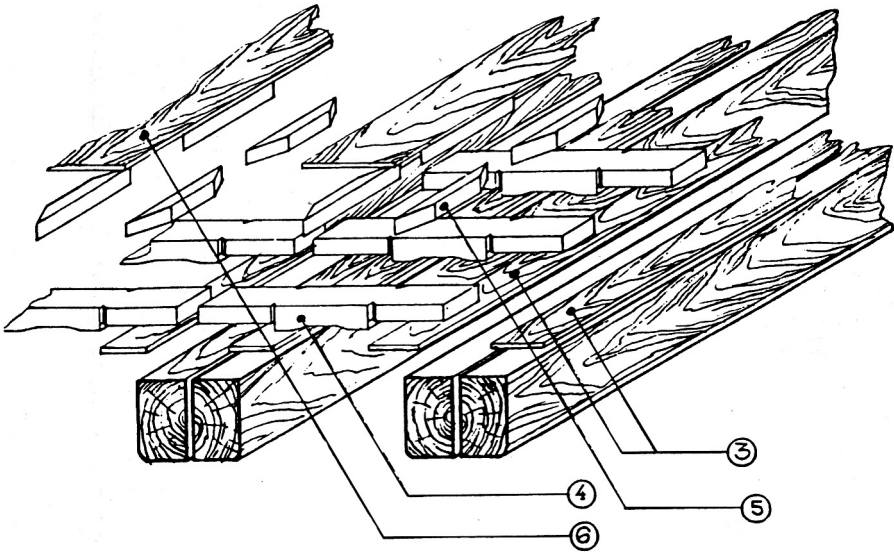
From the functional and formal point of view, however, the *sahn* in Qurqumas' *madrasa* clearly plays the role of the *durqa'a* – cf. A. RAVEREAU, M. ROCHE, *Le Caire. Esthétique et Tradition*, [Arles-Paris, 1997], pp. 131–134.

For the exact meaning of these terms during Mamluk times cf. M.M. AMIN, L. IBRAHIM, *Architectural Terms in Mamluk Documents (648–923H/1250–1517)*, Cairo n.d., s.q.v. (in arabic with english index).

¹⁸ The following is a brief summary of the conservators' observations, fully developed in their report – cf. POPLAWSKA, WOŁOSZ, *Eastern Sidella*, *passim*.



IZOMETRIC VIEW (not to scale)



and/or of the pigments used) or of resins from the wooden bedding (of coniferous timber) or else – of both of these combined.¹⁹

The different preservation state of the gilt elements, i.e. marked cracks on the bordering frame surface, clearly contrasting with the smooth texture of the preserved *islīmi* runner, might well have resulted from different techniques of their gilding or from different materials used for that purpose.²⁰

TEXTS

The lecture of the inscriptions written over the *izara* friezes of both *sidlas* has proved to be of great difficulty, due to their very bad state of preservation.²¹ Moreover, even in more legible places, the lines of the ornamental background *islīmi* runner, interwinding with those of the inscription proper, were hindering the deciphering of the letters' *ductus*. However, from the preserved and/or deciphered traces and fragments of the letters, both texts could be read, at least theoretically.

“East” *sidla* (Fig. 3)

From the preserved letters' traces on the *izara* of the “East” *sidla*, the following text could be restored:²²

- | | |
|---|--------------------|
| بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ رَبَّنَا | 1. “East” Wall (S) |
| لَا تُوَلِّنا اِنْ خِذْنَا اِنْ نَسِیْنَا اَوْ اِخْطَاْنَا | 2. “East” Wall (N) |
| رَبَّنَا وَ لَا تُحِمْ لَنَا اِثْمًا نَافِلًا اَوْ اِضْرًا كَثِیْرًا حَمَلْتَهُ عَلٰی الدِّیْنِ | 3. “North” Wall |
| مِنْ قَبْلِنا رَبَّنَا وَ لَا تُحْمِلْنَا مَا لَا | 4. “West” Wall (N) |
| طَلَقْنَا لِنَابِهِ وَ اعْفُ عَنَّا وَ اغْفِرْ لَنَا وَ ارْحَمْنَا | 5. “West” Wall (S) |
| اِنَّتَ مُوَلِّا ذٰلِكَ اَوْ اَنْصُرْنَا اَوْ اَلْقُوَامِ الْكٰفِرِیْنَ | 6. “South” Wall |

It seems, therefore, that the *izara* of the “East” *sidla* was decorated with the 287th *ayyath* of the 2nd *Surah* of the Holy Quran, i.e. *Al-Baqara* – “The Cow”, introduced with the standard *basmalah* formula. In consequence, the inscription was, almost certainly, running as follows:

¹⁹ The chemical analysis of this substance was included in the research programme of the SCAE laboratories; since their underretaking, however, depends seriously on the SCAE budget, rather limited (due to financial difficulties of the Organization at a moment), the chances of accomplishing them seem rather poor (at least for a while) – cf. POPLAWSKA, WOŁOSZ, Eastern Sidella, p. 19.

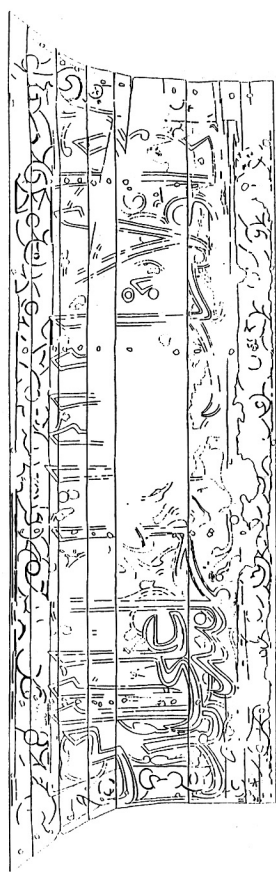
²⁰ Cf. *infra*, p. 346 f.

²¹ Cf. *supra*, p. 339 f.

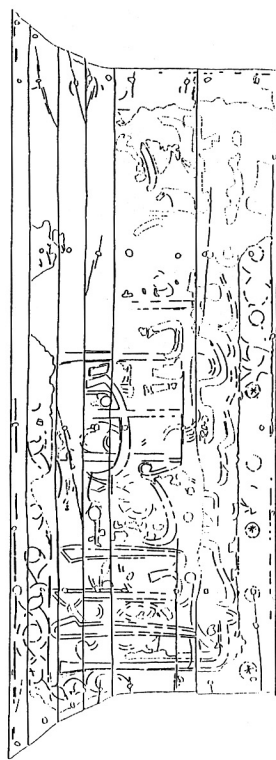
²² Each line gives the conteneue of separate panel facette.



1



3



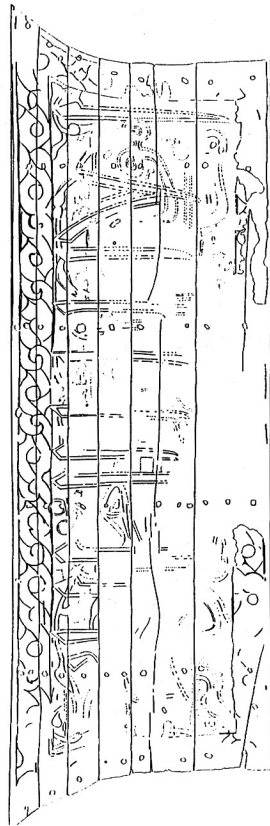
2



4



5



6



3. "East" sidla inscriptions: 1-2 = "East" Wall, 3 = "North" Wall, 4-5 = "West" Wall (over entrance bay), 6 = "South" Wall. (Drawing: M. G. Witkowski).

TRANSLATION:²³

1. *In the Name of God, The Merciful, The Compassionate! Our Lord,*
2. *take us not to task if we forget or [if we] make mistake.*
3. *Our Lord, charge us not with a load such as Thou didst lay upon*
4. *those before us. Our Lord, do Thou not burden us beyond*
5. *what we have the strength to bear. And pardon us, and forgive us, and have mercy on us.*
6. *Thou art our Protector, and help us against the people of the unbelievers.*

“West” *sidla* (Fig. 4 on pp. 346–7)

The inscription once written on the *izara* of the “West” *sidla* was preserved even more poorly. On its “East” side nearly half of the whole panel bedding is missing and the inscription was completely “washed out” – almost to the bare timber surface of the facets. On the remaining three sides, although relatively better preserved (“North”, “West” and “South” ones), the inscription is also almost completely obliterated. Only after the meticulous cleansing of the panels,²⁴ some more legible sequences of letters’ shadows appeared on them. These allow²⁵ to restore the virtually possible text as follows:²⁶

- | | |
|---|--------------------|
| بِسْمِ [اللّٰهِ] الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ | 1. “West” Wall (N) |
| یا ایُّهَا [ا]لَّذِیْنَ اٰمَنُوْا اِذَا نُوْدِی | 2. “West” Wall (S) |
| [ل]لصَّلٰوةِ [مِن یَوْمِ الْجُمُعَةِ فَا سَعُوا] اِلٰی ذِکْرِ [اللّٰهِ] | 3. “South” Wall |
| و ذُرُّوا [ا]لَّذِیْنَ یَبِغُوْنَ [ذُلًّا] لِّکُمْ [حِیْرًا] لِّکُمْ اِنْ کُنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُوْنَ | 4. “East” Wall (S) |
| [فَاذْقِیْطِ الصَّلٰوةِ فَا تَنْشُرُوْا فِی الْاَرْضِ] | 5. “East” Wall (N) |
| و ابْتَغُوا [مِن فِضْلِ] [ا]لّٰهِ [و] اذْکُرُوْا اللّٰهَ کَثِیْرًا لِّعَلَّکُمْ [تَعْلَمُوْنَ] | 6. “North” Wall |

It seems, then, that the inscription on the *izara* of the “West” *sidla* can be identified as *ayyaths* 10–11 of the 62nd, i.e. *Al-Gamc* – “Congregation” Surah of the Holy Qur’an,²⁷ introduced, as in previous case, by the habitual *basmalah* formula.²⁸ If it is a case, one can presume then, that the inscription was, most probably, reading as follows:

²³ After A. J. ARBERRY, *The Koran Interpreted*, London–New York–Karachi 1964 [= *Koran*], pp. 43 f.

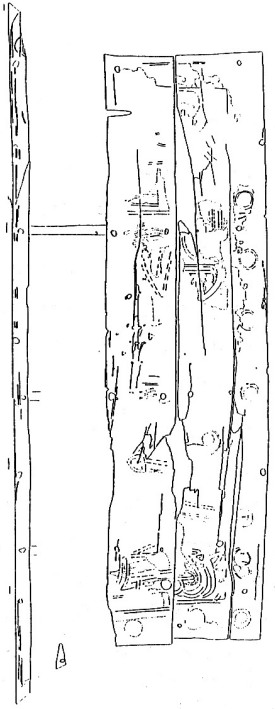
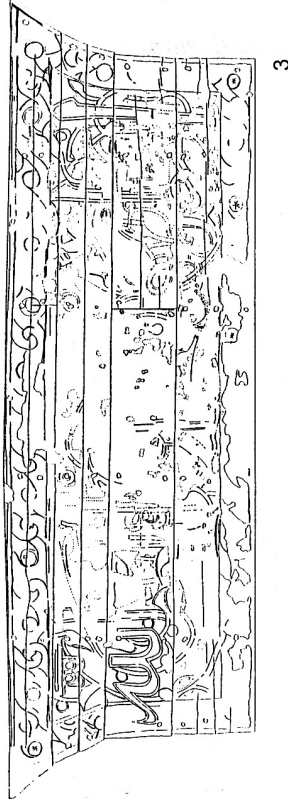
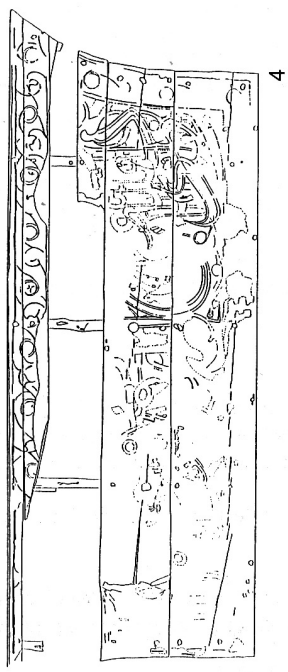
²⁴ cf. B. WOŁOSZ, *Western Sidella in the Madrasa of the Great Amir Qurqumas*. Report on Conservatory Works. February – April 1999 (With supplementary epigraphical notes by M.G. WITKOWSKI, MSS Report for SCAE), Cairo 1999 [= *Western Sidella*].

²⁵ The full merit of deciphering and identification of this inscription goes entirely to Mr. Ibrahim Farag, M.Sc., conservator at the SCAE.

²⁶ Cf. *supra*, note 22.

²⁷ With some reservation, however, since the only certainly identified fragment of text may appear also in other contexts – cf. MUHAMMAD FUAD ABD AL-BAQI, *Al ma‘ğmu‘ al-mafruš li-l fadi Al-Qur‘an al-Karim*, Cairo 1994, s.q.v.

²⁸ Cf. *supra*, p. 342.



4. "West" sidla inscriptions: 1-2 = "West" Wall, 3 = "South" Wall, 4-5 = "East" Wall (over entrance bay), 6 = "North" Wall. (Drawing: M.G. Witkowski).

TRANSLATION:²⁹

1. *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate!*
2. *O believers, when proclamation is made*
3. *for prayer on the Day of Congregation [= Friday], hasten for God's remembrance*
4. *and leave trafficking aside; that is better for You, did You but know.*
5. *Than, when the prayer is finished, scatter in the land*
6. *and seek God's bounty and remember God frequently; [than] haply you will prosper!*

THE STYLE AND TECHNIQUE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS

The large monumental letters of these inscriptions seem to combine features both of *thuluth* and mamluk *naskhi* style,³⁰ although, for the Egyptians themselves, they are undeniably written in “true” *thuluth*.³¹ The letters were painted white and outlined with broad black lines. As already said,³² the inscription was superimposed over the complicated “volute turning runner” of *sode islim* kind (with stylized leaves), executed in slightly raised relief. The runner was originally smoothly gilt, most probably by the application and polishing of sheets of real gold foil. The background of the composition was essentially covered with a white gesso-like substance. The bordering frame (also gilt) was decorated with a simply traced classical scroll runner, its “eyes” being alternatively green and red with small six-rayed schematic white-painted stars placed in their centres.³³

The marked cracks on the bordering frame surface, as opposed to the almost perfectly smooth texture of the preserved *islami* runner are, most probably a proof of the lack of bedding in the frame space or/and of a different gilding technique (different materials?) used there, most likely powdered copper “paint” instead of true gold leaves.³⁴

The unaided eye observations accomplished during epigraphical documentation procedures, combined with those done by the conservators,³⁵ allow to distinguish the following technical stages in the original decoration processing of these *izara* friezes:

1. The general planning of the composition – delineation of the text in broad, brownish strokes hastily applied on the bare timber surface of each panel of the frieze already mounted in its place on the top of the wall;
2. Covering of the central field of each panel with the white, gesso-like bedding, the places designated to receive the main developments of the *islami* runner being covered with

²⁹ After: ARBERRY, Koran, p. 584.

³⁰ Cf. *supra*, note 9.

³¹ Opinion of Mr. Ibrahim Farag, who identified the inscription – cf. *supra*, note 25.

³² Cf. *supra*, p. 339.

³³ Cf. *supra*, note 15.

³⁴ The authoritative statement concerning reasons of these crackings is impossible without further laboratory investigations. As for these, however, cf. *supra*, note 19.

³⁵ Cf. POPLAWSKA, WOŁOSZ, Eastern Sidella, pp. 23–32.

perceptibly thicker layers of the bedding. The broad stripes forming frames around the central panels were either covered with a different kind of ground (?) or could even have been left completely bare (cf. *infra* – 4).

3. Re-designing, in narrow red lines, of the general outlines of the *izara* frieze decoration (volute runner and text) on the already grounded (cf. *supra* – 2) surfaces of their central panels.
4. Gilding of the inscriptions' frames, probably with paint including copper powder (possibly laid on a different ground than the central panels' decoration or even, completely without it, cf. *supra* – 2) and of the ornamental volute *sode islimi* runners, likely by imposition and polishing of the gold foil over the pre-prepared thicker zones of ground (cf. *supra* – 2).
5. Final inner colouring of the main decoration elements and definition of the letters' shapes with regular, homogenous black line contours.
6. Painting of the polychromed details of the frame over a different bedding, imposed only in the "eyes" of the scroll runner, which were intentionally omitted for that purpose previously (i.e. during the gilding of the frame – cf. *supra* – 4).

CONCLUSION: PURPORT OF THE SIDLAS' INSCRIPTIONS – EPIGRAPHER'S POINT OF VUE

The true exegesis of texts decorating these friezes, entering deeply into the delicate and complicated questions of their multilayered theological implications does not, for obvious reasons, enter into the scope of the present study, the author being aware of his limitations in this field, needing appropriate formation, preparation, approach and practice. Instead, we will try to concentrate here on some, more prosaic observations that could (or can) be deduced from these inscriptions from epigrapher's point of view.

The first, immediate observation that comes into mind seems to be that both the disposition of these inscriptions and their contents are not accidental, but are resulting from someone's conscious and deliberate choice. Already at first glance it is obvious that the texts were placed and disposed here systematically, in a way that makes their beginnings immediately visible to anyone entering the central space of the *madrasa*, i.e. *sahn/durqa'a* area.³⁶ Namely, their "starting point" is situated always in the "right hand" corner of the room: that is – in the "South-East" corner in case of the "East" *sidla* and in the "North-West" corner of the "West" one.³⁷ Moreover, the inscriptions on the *izaras* of the main *madrasa's iwans* – although the one from the *iwana qibla* (so-called: "South *iwana*") is missing today – have been also disposed in a similar way (Fig. 5). It is almost certain that the

³⁶ The terms *sahn/durqa'a* are used here under reservation expressed *supra*, note 17.

³⁷ Cf. reservation expressed *supra*, note 16.

the doors, leading into the *sahn/durqa'a* were also “protected” by with similar inscriptions, once decorating the panels of their wooden framing.³⁸

Not entering into precise theological meaning of these inscriptions,³⁹ one can presume than that such (and not any other) disposal of these texts reflects the well known magic/apothropaic function of Qur'anic script in popular beliefs of the Islamic countries.⁴⁰ The same concerns *basmala* formulas, which open not only these inscriptions but also, in the same way, the inscriptions situated in remaining “main” *iwans* (i.e. “South” and “North” ones). Shifting the *basmala* to the “right hand” angle of each of these rooms was in fact – due to the specific orientation of Cairene Islamic cult monuments – putting the beginnings of these inscriptions exactly on axes of true “cardinal directions”, i.e. true South, North, West and East (Fig. 5).⁴¹

Thanks to such a procedure, the whole “holy space” of the mosque was placed under appropriate protection from all cardinal directions in a horizontal sense. What is more, on the monumental *tiraz* inscribed directly on the walls surrounding the *madrasa's sahn/durqa'a*, the *basmala* formula is placed only once (!), on the “West” wall of the *sahn/durqa'a*, in its “North-West” angle, opposite both “main” entrances to the mosque: the “South-East” one, giving access from outside (from the main street of the necropolis), and the “North-East” one, leading from the internal ablution area of the *madrasa*.⁴² It could, therefore, very well play the same apothropaic/protective role in the “vertical” sense, safeguarding the holy space of the mosque from above and exposing in this way the “vertical axis of the world”.⁴³ In light of these observations one can presume, that the disposition of inscriptions (and of *basmala* formulas in particular) in the *madrasa* was almost certainly a result of conscious and deliberate planning, explicitly intended to set forth the “universal” role of the *madrasa* as a “cosmic unit” and “condensed image” of the whole world.⁴⁴

Moreover, the very layout of inscriptions decorating the *madrasa's* interior also allowed anyone situated in the central space of the mosque, *sahn/durqa'a*, to start reading them immediately, although, to continue it (in a literal sense of the word), one would be forced to enter the appropriate room space. This was certainly not necessary in the case of

³⁸ P.ex. the funerary complex of Sultan Qait-Bay (No. 99), situated nearby on the same necropolis, which, moreover, apparently served as inspiration to the Great Amir's Qurqumas foundation – cf. MISIOROWSKI, *Qurqumas*, pp. 1–3, 9–10; BEHRENS-ABOUSEIF, *Isl. Arch. Cairo*, pp. 154 ff., Fig. 31, Pl. 115; R.B. PARKER, R. SABIN, C. WILLIAMS, *Islamic Monuments in Cairo. A Practical Guide* (4th ed.), Cairo 1991, pp. 259–264.

³⁹ For reasons mentioned already at the beginning of this chapter, cf. *supra*, p. 347.

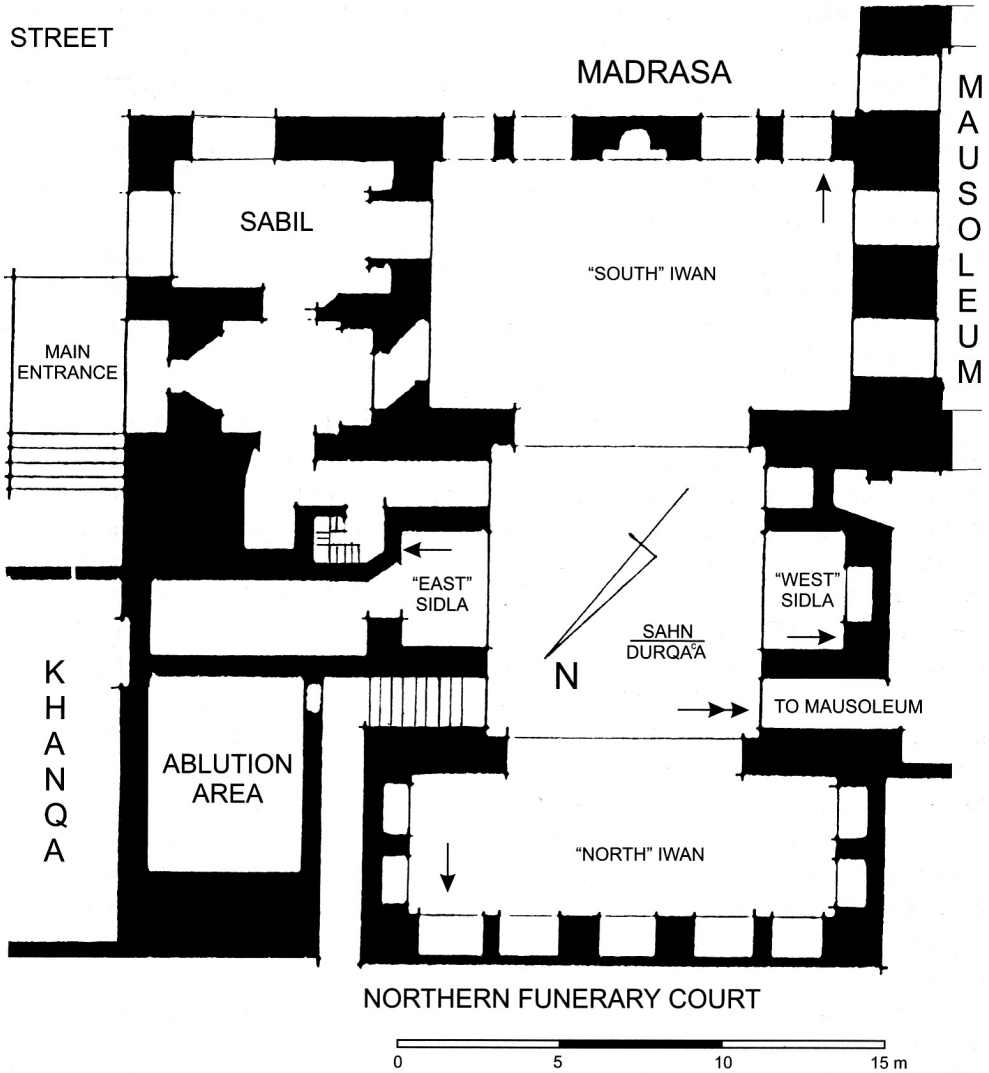
⁴⁰ To mention only some “classical” authorities in the field as: R. KRISS, H. KRISS-HEINRICH, *Volksglaube im Bereich des Islam*, Wiesbaden 1960, pp. I 3–136, II 1–139; H.A. WINKLER, *Ägyptische Volkskunde*, Stuttgart 1936, pp. 184–238, 336–339; E.W. LANE, *Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians*, London, 1846 (repr. Paris–Cairo 1982) [= *Manners & Customs*], pp. 223–277; W.S. BLACKMANN, *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt*, London–Bombay–Sydney 1927 (repr. Cairo 1999), pp. 82, 183–239. Cf. also EI¹ I, 700 and II² I, 1084a.

⁴¹ Terms used only in their conventional sense – cf. reservation *supra*, note 16.

⁴² Cf. J. DICKIE (Y. ZAKI), *Allah and Eternity: Mosques, Madrasas and Tombs*, in: MICHELL, *Architecture*, pp. 15–47.

⁴³ What seems even more “logic” and necessary if the *sahn/durqa'a* was really, as everything points out, open to the sky – cf. *supra*, note 17.

⁴⁴ Cf. *supra*, note 42.



5. Schema showing display of *basmala* formulas in the *madrasa*. (Drawing: M. G. Witkowski).

the followers of Islam, since their knowledge of the Qur'an is astonishing; it is sufficient to recall to them only a minute sequence of words from the Holy Text and they will continue to recite, from memory, the whole *ayyat* or even *sura* containing these words.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Cf. LANE, *Manners & Customs*, pp. 223–277. When recording the Qur'anic inscriptions from the Complex I often witnessed, myself, this phenomenon – being frequently aided by simple workers in identifications of these texts. Their indications were almost as certain as al-Baqi's Qur'anic concordance, i.e. *Al ma'ğmu' al-mafrušc li-l fadi Al-Qur'an al-Karim*.

In the light of these observations, one can not exclude then, that this truly ingenious layout of inscriptions in the *madrasa* precisely reflects the original intention lying behind it – to direct the mind of the faithful gathering in this very place on some, very precise and carefully chosen ideas through exposing the appropriate texts in such (and not any other) way to the eyes of the community. This, altogether, implicates someone's conscious intervention in the choice and the display of these texts. And there is not a single serious counter-argument that this might not have been the founder of the mosque in person.

From the latest research it is clear, that the Mamluk founders of different cairene cult places have had much bigger influence on architectural shape and decoration programme of these buildings than previously admitted.⁴⁶ In context of these studies one can then, rather safely assume that we might well be confronted here with “personal touch” of Qurqumas himself; and that it was the Great Amir's original intent to inspire the minds of people gathering in “his” mosque with thoughts resulting precisely from these (and not other) verses of the Holy Text, i.e. that “frequent (not only through Friday prayer) remembrance of God” is, truly, the best way of life (“West” *sidla*, panneaux 2–4) and perfectly within human reach, since God “does not burden a Man with obligations beyond his bearing” (“East” *sidla*, panneaux 4–5).

In other, more general terms, one seems justified then, when assuming that the inscrip-tional decoration of these rooms formed a part of a precise ideological programme of the mosque decoration, and that it might have been conceived personally by the Great Amir himself. Being given some details from Qurqumas' life, his personal intervention in de-signing of the “ideological” programme of decoration of his complex seems, at least, very plausible. Namely, the features of his character, at least as exposed by Ibn Iyyas in his Chronicle *Bada'i az-Zuhur...*⁴⁷ straightness, truthworthiness and reliability, compassion for the oppressed and courage in defending of the unfairly accused with visible admixture of a clear *penchant* for mysticism,⁴⁸ certainly allow to ascribe him high ethical qualities and spiritual capacities, making of him a man under many aspects falling quite away from the standardized image of a “typical representative” of the Mamluk class. Put in other terms,

⁴⁶ Public lecture by N. Rabbat in ARCE, Cairo, May 2000, relating results of his recent research on the role of Mamluk founders in conceiving of the architectural forms of their foundations and possessions, and on esthetic reception of these (to be published soon, in a book form); cf. also H.N. RABBAT, *The Citadel of Cairo. A new interpretation of royal mamluk architecture*, Islamic History and Civilization Studies and Texts 14, Leiden–New York–Köln 1995, *passim*.

For mosque as microcosmic image of the macrocosmos/Universe – cf. *supra*, note 42; for symbolic meaning of mosque decoration – cf. p. ex. D. JONES, *The Elements of Decoration: Surface, Patterns and Light*, in: MICHELL, *Architecture*, pp. 144–175.

⁴⁷ Cf. G. WIET, *Histoire des Sultans Mamlouks Circassiens II (872–906)*, Le Caire 1945, *passim*; Id., *Journal d'un bourgeois du Caire. Chronique d'ibn Iyas I*, Paris, n.d. [= Journal], *passim*.

⁴⁸ At least in later, more significant and better documented years of his career (after his first stay in Damascus in 986 A.H./1491 A.D.) – as proven, p. ex. by the “incident with rose” (cf. WIET, *Journal*, p. 356), the well-known sufi symbol – cf. L. BAHKTAR, *Sufi expression of the Mystic Quest*, London 1976, pp. 48–53. Cf. also the famous portrait of Mehmet the Conqueror smelling a rose by Sinan Bey (c. 1480) now in Topkapi Palace, Istanbul – *Islam. Art and Architecture*, [Köln] 2000, p. 567.

these features predispose Qurqumas very well to the role of the conscious conceiver (or, at least, of an active co-author) of the decoration programme of his cultic and funerary complex, perfectly able to “play” with all highly sophisticated, symbolic implications of these texts.

* * *

To put this thesis to its final proof, however, one should confront it with results of analogous investigations of other, at the very least – cairene monuments.⁴⁹ This, however, must wait until the state of publications of inscriptional material from these monuments improves because, even in case of “published” complexes, the Qur’anic inscriptions (being considered as “standardized” and “not revelant”) are, most often, recorded only by mention: “Qur’anic text” or “text with Qur’anic conteneue”,⁵⁰ at the best being followed by their more or less adequate identification.⁵¹ Some recent studies have proven, however, that the appearance of these texts on different buildings (or their parts) is not a matter of pure accident.⁵² Therefore, since better understanding and more complete sense both of these inscriptions and of function of places (contexts) of their appearance can be gained from their attentive study, it seems certain, that such an effort is worthwhile. A serious approach to these questions should bring us not only a better understanding of many cairene pious foundations themselves but, what is more, significantly contribute to the precise recognition of the true role of founders of these buildings, as being not mere investors, but also, at least, active co-creators of their spatial/architectural form and internal decoration. That, in its turn, will certainly lead to the revelation of quite unsuspected “faces” of numerous historical personalities of the period and, ultimately, force us to reconsider great many of current, frequently prejudiced opinions concerning top representatives of the Mamluk society.⁵³

⁴⁹ For the unique, known to me so far, attempt to deal systematically with the subject – cf. E.C. DODD, S. KHAIRALLAH, *The Image of the World. A Study of Qur’anic Verses in Islamic Architecture I–II*, Beyruth 1981, *passim*.

⁵⁰ Cf. p. ex. v. BERCHM, *CIA I/3*, *passim*.

⁵¹ Cf. p. ex. S.L. MOSTAFA, *Kloster und Mausoleum des Farag Ibn Barquq in Cairo*, Glückstadt 1968; *Id.*, *Madrasa, Hanqa und Mausoleum des Barquq in Kairo*, *Abh. DAIK-Islamische Reihe 4*, Kairo 1982, pp. 76–87.

⁵² Cf. p. ex. S.L. MOSTAFA, *The Cairene Sabil: Form and Meaning*, *Muqarnas 6*, 1989, pp. 33–42; author unknown/anonymous(?), *The Minaret Inscriptions in Cairo*, pp. 53–68 (This article is known to me only from a separate offprint, whose whereabouts I could not identify till now).

⁵³ For fructuosity of such a study (led from other, historian’s perspective) – cf., in last instance, C.F. PETRY, *Protectors or Praetorians? The Last Mamluk Sultans and Egypt’s Waning as a Great Power*, New York–Albany 1994, *passim*; *Id.*, *Twilight of Majesty: The Reigns of the Mamluk Sultans al-Aschraf Qaytbay and Qansuh al-Ghawri in Egypt*, Seattle-London 1993, *passim*; *Id.*, *A Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages*, Princeton 1981, *passim*; for sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri as poet – cf. A. ZAJĄCZKOWSKI, *Poezja stroficzna «muvassah» mameluckiego sułtana Qansuh (Qansav) Gauri*, *Rocznik Orientalistyczny XXVII/2*, 1964, pp. 63–89.

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