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# BROTHERHOOD OF THE TOWERS: ON THE SPATIALITY OF THE MAMLUK CASTE

Nasser Rabbat

A boy, captured or sold into slavery in the Asian steppes, the Caucasus, or Crimea, is brought to Egypt with a number of other youngsters where he is acquired by an *amir* (commander) or the sultan as a *mamluk* (an owned one, a term used in the medieval period exclusively to designate slaves destined to be warriors) and sent to his new master's household. There he will spend his adolescence and early adulthood (around 10-12 years) in rigorous training that includes basic religious education followed by a military training of gradually mounting complexity, at the end of which the mamluk would have learned the principles of horsemanship, swordsmanship, archery, war and parade formations, and combat. Once he had completed his training the young mamluk is formally and publicly freed and appointed as soldier (*jundi*) in the Mamluk army, with a salary, a horse, and a sword.<sup>1</sup> After a certain period, he could rise to the rank of amir, receive an *iqta'* (property allotted by the state that provides revenues), and earn the right to purchase his own mamluks. If he is lucky, cunning, and ruthless enough, he may ascend to the highest levels of power in the sultanate, including that of sultan. This unique system of a one-generation ruling class reproducing itself through a cycle of enslavement, training, manumission, and promotion formed the backbone of the Mamluk State in Egypt and Syria, which lasted against all odds for more than 260 years from 1250 to 1517.

The young mamluk, uprooted from his family, environment, and culture must have endured tremendous psychological and emotional pressures. To cope, he had recourse to an artificial kinship construct that mimicked a motherless family structure with father figures and brothers. The father figures ranged from the eunuch responsible for his needs in the household (*agha*) to his military trainers all the way up to his actual master (*ustadh*), be it an amir or sultan. The "brothers," who were called (*khushdashiyya*), a loan term from Persian which means brothers-in-arms, were the mamluks under training who shared the same accommodations.<sup>2</sup> Thus, space was a factor in

1 On the Mamluk training system, see David Ayalon, "L'ésclavage du Mamelouk," *Oriental Notes and Studies* 1 (1951): 1-66, esp., 9-26; Hassanein Rabie, "The Training of the Mamluk Faris," in *War, Technology and Society in the Middle East*, eds. V. Parry and M.E. Yapp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 153-63; R. Stephen Humphreys, "The Emergence of the Mamluk Army," *Studia Islamica* 45 (1977): 67-99; 46 (1977): 147-82.

2 On Mamluk forms of solidarity see Nasser Rabbat, "The Changing Concept of Mamluk in the Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt and Syria," in *Slave Elites in the Middle East and Africa: A Comparative Study*, eds. Miura Toru and John Edward Philips (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 2000), 81-98; Winslow Williams Clifford, *State Formation and the Structure of Politics in Mamluk Syro-Egypt, 648-741 A.H./1250-1340 C.E.*, ed. Stephan Conermann (Goettingen & Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2013), 47-54; Julien Loiseau, *Les Mamelouks. XIII<sup>e</sup>-XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2014), 25-88.

3 Our primary chronicles, abundant as they are, are nonetheless laconic and on the whole inattentive to the spatial contours of the mamluks' social association, see Nasser Rabbat, "Representing the Mamluks in Mamluk Historical Writing," in *The Historiography of Islamic Egypt, c. 950-1800*, ed. Hugh Kennedy (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000), 59-75, reprinted in Rabbat, *Mamluk History Through Architecture: Building, Culture, and Politics*

in *Mamluk Egypt and Syria* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 12-19; Rabbat, "Perception of Architecture in Mamluk Sources," *Mamluk Studies Review* 6 (2002): 155-76.

Ulrich Haarmann, "Rather the Injustice of the Turks than the Righteousness of the Arabs—Changing 'Ulama' Attitudes Towards Mamluk Rule in the Late Fifteenth-Century," *Studia Islamica* 68 (1989): 61-79, notices a change in the late Mamluk period, which is nonetheless limited to few unusual individuals; Konrad Hirschler, "Studying Mamluk Historiography. From Source-Criticism to the Cultural Turn," in *Ubi sumus? Quo vademus? Mamluk Studies—State of the Art*, ed. Stephan Conermann (Bonn: V&R Unipress, Bonn University Press, 2013), 159-86, suggests new ways of dealing with Mamluk sources.

4 On *Tibaqs* and *qa'as*, as well as the division of mamluks according to function or ethnicity, see Rabbat, *The Citadel of Cairo: A New Interpretation of Royal Mamluk Architecture*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 110-19, 138-42, 283-91.

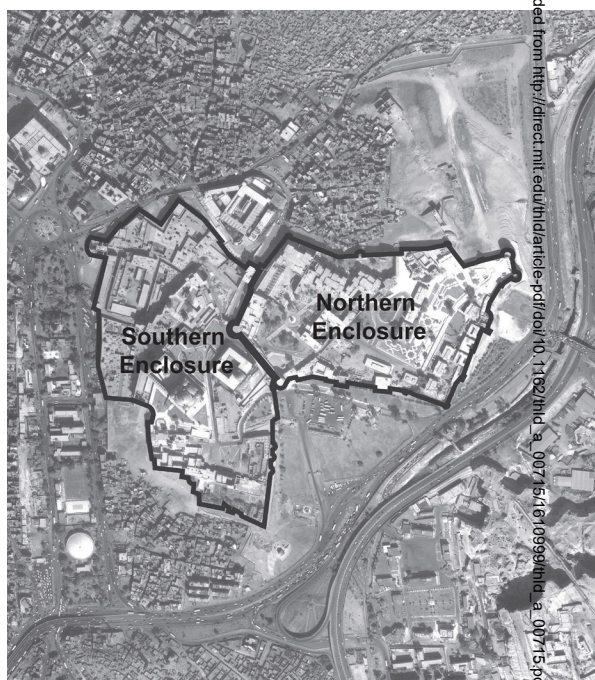
defining the artificial kinship of the mamluks along with the circumstances of their enslavement. In fact, it could be asserted that spatial restrictions defined not only the movements of the mamluk as he rose through the stages of the Mamluk hierarchy all the way to the top, but also his identity, social interactions, and military standing.

To assert their dominance as a new and distinct ruling class, the mamluks, with their internal hierarchy made up of layers of artificial kinship, restructured the spaces in which they lived. This was most thoroughly expressed in the Citadel of Cairo, the household of the sultan, and the most complete embodiment of the “Mamluk Space,” especially as it was organized during the two reigns of al-Zahir Baybars (1260-79) and al-Nasir Muhammad (1293-1341 with two interruptions). But the city itself felt the effects of the Mamluk system in its sociospatial arrangement and architecture with the introduction of ceremonial routes along its main thoroughfares and amirial households in its neighborhoods; they were most probably planned along the same artificial kinship lines as the household of the sultan, although on smaller scale and with less spatial differentiation than the Citadel. The same applied to other cities of the sultanate that had an appointed Mamluk amir as deputy of the sultan such as Damascus, Aleppo, Gaza, Jerusalem, Safad, Tripoli, Kerak, Homs, and Hama. They all had citadels that housed their Mamluk garrisons and amirial households dispersed in their urban fabric. Our information about the spatial configuration of the Mamluk system, however, most of which is textual with a few architectural vestiges in the citadels and the cities, is much more robust and abundant for the Citadel of Cairo. Any study of Mamluk spatiality, therefore, has to start from the Citadel of Cairo. But given the particularities of the textual primary sources, most of which are chronicles and biographical dictionaries written by scholars who did not speak the Turkish of their Mamluk rulers, a discussion of the terminology used by the mamluks to denote their organizational system has to precede any examination of the spaces in which that system was embodied.<sup>3</sup>

## THE TERMINOLOGY OF MAMLUK KINSHIP

Beginning with the reign of Sultan Baybars, young royal mamluks were quartered at the Citadel of Cairo. They lived in the *tibaqs*, a term usually translated as “barracks” but which in reality indicated a variety of building types such as towers and underground halls.<sup>4</sup> A few lucky ones—apparently those endowed with striking physical appearance

Fig. 1 Aerial view of the Citadel of Cairo with the two enclosures.



(at least during the reign of al-Nasir Muhammad) or those sent as gifts from other royal courts—were selected to reside in the royal palaces and to be tutored with the sons of the sultans as a prelude to their ascent to the highest ranks. But for the majority, the *tibaqs* were to become their home for five to ten years and even more. Life in the *tibaqs* must have been paramount in shaping the character, outlook, and behavior of the recruits. Our sources are, unfortunately, uninformed about it. They might mention some peculiar social arrangements in the *tibaqs* in reference to specific incidents, such as when the mamluks collected donations for the needy among them in 1342.<sup>5</sup> Otherwise they pass over Mamluk social formation in silence.

The sources, however, often use—and at times probably misuse—an evidently *tibaqs*-derived terminology to describe some of the relational and behavioral social patterns among the mamluks. The terms *ustadh*, *agha*, *ani*, and especially *khushdash*, appear to describe the alternative relationships which are said to have been developed by and for the mamluks and which seem to have governed and dictated their notions of kinship and loyalty.<sup>6</sup> An *ustadh* is the owner of the mamluk and is presented as a father figure who commands loyalty and obedience even if he was not always present in his charge's daily life. At the Citadel, the ultimate *ustadh* was obviously the sultan. A *khushdash* is a mamluk's companion in the *tibaqs*, training, and in the manumission ceremony. He is thus seen as the equivalent of a classmate or even a brother with whom to bond and to whom a mamluk owes fraternal devotion and support. This relationship continued after manumission and conscription in the army, and was sometimes reinforced through marriage alliances. An *ani* is a younger mamluk in the *tibaqs*, a sort of a younger brother in need of protection and guidance, and sometimes disciplining. The *agha*, finally, is the teacher and supervisor (there were many *aghas* at each *tibaq*), who was more often than not a eunuch, a normal condition in royal households and a necessary precaution in an all-boy environment. The *agha*'s figurative image, however, is a little ambiguous: he is part schoolmaster, part *lala* (the Mamluk term for governor), and part father figure.

These and other correlations explicitly made between the Mamluk relational terms and the usual terms for blood kinships suggest a Mamluk structure in the *tibaqs* that is analogous to, and perhaps even surrogate for, the normal family life of which the mamluks were effectively deprived.<sup>7</sup> But it is very difficult to confirm that this was indeed how the mamluks themselves saw their lot, or that their chroniclers had to fashion a structure that they understood to explain the alien criteria that gov-

5 Most detailed account in al-Shuja'i, *Tarikh al-Malik al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun al-Salihi wa-Awladahu*, ed. Barbara Schäfer (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1978), 149-55.

6 Ahmad 'Abd al-Raziq, "al-Mamalik wa mafhum al-usra ladayhim," *Majallat Kulliyat al-Athar* 2 (1987): 188-207; Ayalon, "L'esclavage du Mamelouk," 21-31.

7 The obvious anomaly is that a Mamluk *tibaq* family was totally masculine even, curiously, in their sexual conduct. Sodomy, that is sex with beardless boys (*murdan*), and perhaps even a more equitable form of homosexuality, was widespread in the Mamluk class as is clear in countless vague and clear reports, but it was rarely openly acknowledged and discussed, see al-Maqrizi, *al-Mawa'iz wa-l-I'tibar bi-Dhikr al-Khitat wa-l-Athar*, 2 vols. (Bulaq, 1854), 2: 104; also Ahmad 'Abd al-Raziq, *La femme au temps des Mamlouks en Égypte* (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1973), 102.

8 A number of examples are listed, without noting their contradictory nature, in 'Abd al-Raziq, "'al-Mamalik wa mafhum al-usra ladayhim." See also the discussion in Robert Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages, The Early Mamluk Sultanate 1250-1382* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 88-90.

9 See Rabbat, *The Citadel of Cairo*, 186-90, 277-80; Laila A. Ibrahim, "Mamluk Monuments of Cairo," *Quaderni dell'Istituto Italiano di Cultura per la R.A.E.* (Cairo, 1976), 9-29.

erned Mamluk relationships. The relevance of these presumed relational structures in accounting for the shifting loyalties among the mamluks after their manumission is at best mixed and often disappointing. The number of incidents reported by the chroniclers in which a *khushdash* came to the assistance of his *khushdash* or an *ustadh* was unquestionably backed by his mamluks are only exceeded by the incidents in which the exact opposite occurred.<sup>8</sup>

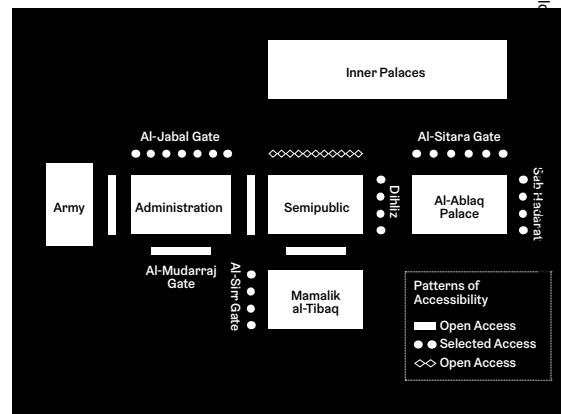
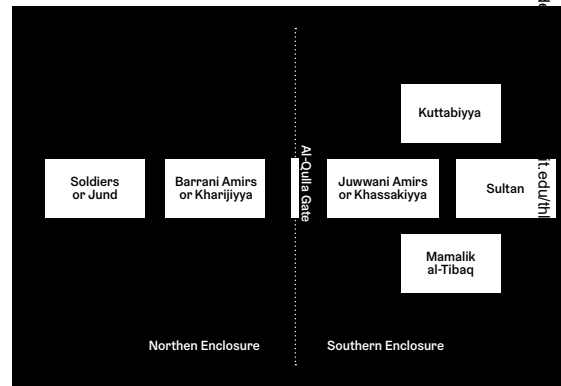
## THE CITADEL AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE MAMLUK SPACE

Al-Zahir Baybars reorganized the Citadel of Cairo in tandem with his reforms of the Mamluk system. He divided it into two enclosures separated by a wall and towers: the southern enclosure, which evolved into a royal palatial complex, and the northern enclosure, which enclosed the military and administrative areas. Baybars also subdivided each of these two enclosures into several elaborately delimited domains that reflected the complex hierarchy of the Mamluk caste. He built residences for the amirs closest to him, his *khushdashiyya*, between the royal domain and the administrative section of the northern enclosure, and began to develop areas adjacent to the Citadel, especially on the western and northwestern sides, by building palaces for other Mamluk amirs, probably as a ring around the royal domain in what had been vacant land until then.<sup>9</sup>

The reorganization of the Citadel and its surroundings reached its culmination under al-Nasir Muhammad. During thirty years of continuous construction (1310-41), he redefined the basic division of the Citadel into five concentric spheres of accessibility intersected by a few channels of circulation. The first sphere, confined to the northern part of the northern enclosure, contained the army barracks. The second was the public domain in the administrative part of the northern enclosure which was entered through the main gate of the Citadel and to which people were admitted on a daily basis. The third was the semipublic domain, which was located in the northern end of the southern enclosure and comprised the Iwan al-Kabir, which functioned as the Throne Hall, and the Nasiri Friday Mosque. Hours of access to this domain were restricted, but it was open to all: to worshipers at prayer time, to petitioners on audience days, and to amirs every day. The fourth sphere may be termed the semiprivate domain: it comprised the royal palaces, and access to it was restricted both to specific times and to specific ranks of mamluks and officials. The fifth sphere was the totally private domain where the family, concubines, and eunuchs

Fig. 2 Order of Arrangement of the Mamluk Hierarchy at the Citadel under al-Zahir Baybars.

Fig. 3 Al Nasir Muhammad's Five Spheres of Circulation at the Citadel.



of the sultan resided in hierarchically arranged halls and pavilions about which we know almost nothing. Al-Nasir Muhammad rearranged his private domain's configuration so that it could communicate with the rest of the palaces through a series of connecting passages (*dahaliz*) and gates, which added a level to the hierarchy of barriers inside the palatial complex. These barriers, consisting both of gates and eunuchs guarding those gates, blocked the access of outsiders who did not belong to the sultan's family and restricted the movement of women and children out except on specific occasions.<sup>10</sup>

Al-Nasir Muhammad also surrounded the Citadel with built-up areas as buffer zones and as a way to underline its centrality in the city, as well as the centrality of the Mamluk hierarchy in the urban social structure. He sponsored, and in a few instances even planned, palaces for his favorite amirs to the west of the Citadel.<sup>11</sup> He began the development of two areas that had heretofore been empty, the Qarafa al-Kubra (Great Cemetery) to the north and east and the Qarafa al-Sughra (Small Cemetery) to the south, where his amirs, probably with his encouragement and direct involvement, built mausolea for themselves or their family members that included spaces for social functions, such as madrasas and *sabils* (public fountains).<sup>12</sup>

## THE CITADEL AND THE MAMLUK SPATIAL HIERARCHY

The Mamluk system that Baybars instituted resulted in his close group of mamluks being more directly identified with his person and his place of residence, the southern enclosure. Named *khassakiyya* (a term derived from the Arabic *khass* or private), they were quartered in special *tibaqs* in the southern enclosure, which were given fancy names—the Qa'a al-Dhahabiyya (Golden Hall) and the Qa'a al-Zumurrudiyya (Emerald Hall)—possibly as a reflection of their status or their furnishing.<sup>13</sup> Baybars built two new *tibaqs* in the court of the Citadel near the mosque and renovated several others near his own palace, Dar al-Dhahab (Golden House), to house his growing corps of *khassakiyya*.<sup>14</sup> He constructed a number of structures in the northern enclosure to lodge non-*khassakiyya* corps such as old *jamadariyya* (from *jamadar*, wardrobe master), the *jumaqdariyya* (of *jumaqdar*, ax-bearer) in addition to ex-*khassakiyya*. The *khassakiyya* among the great amirs also had separate residences allocated to them inside the southern enclosure. Many of those amirs also had their own residences in the city.<sup>15</sup>

Al-Nasir Muhammad refined the plan begun by Baybars so that by the end of his reign the topog-

10 Rabbat, *The Citadel of Cairo*, 270-76.

11 Al-Maqrizi, *al-Suluk li-Ma'rifat Duwal al-Muluk*, 4 vols. ed. Muhammad M. Ziyada et al. (Cairo, 1934-72), 2: 438-39, says that al-Nasir planned the palaces of Qawusn, Yalbughu, and Altunbughu that were built in front of the Citadel; Ibn Taghri-Birdi, *al-Nujum al-Zahira fi Muluk Misr wa-l-Qahira*, 16 vols. ed. Muhammad Ramzi (Cairo, 1929-56), 9: 188-90, repeats the same report.

12 In the Qarafa al-Kubra, the first mausoleum was built by Amir Qarasunqur who died in 1328. In the Qarafa al-Sughra, al-Nasir built the first dome for one of his amirs, Baybugha al-Turkmani in 1307, see al-Maqrizi, *Khitat*, 2: 443-45; Ibn Taghri-Birdi, *Nujum*, 9:185-89.

13 Al-Maqrizi, *Khitat*, 2: 214.

14 Ibn Shaddad, *Tarikh al-Malik al-Zahir*, ed. Ahmad Hutait (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1983), 341.

15 Al-Maqrizi, *Khitat*, 2: 69-70.

16 Al-'Umari, *Masalik al-Absar fi-Mamalik al-Amsar, Dawlat al-Mamalik al-Ula* ed. Dorothea Krawulsky (Beirut, 1986), 143; al-Qalqashandi, *Subh al-A'sha fi Sina'at al-Insha*, 14 vols. (Cairo, 1913-18), 3: 373; al-Maqrizi, *Khitat*, 2: 205, copied the sentence but dropped the reference to the *khassakiyya* and added a sentence which shows that by his time the residential division at the Citadel as instituted by al-Nasir Muhammad had broken down.

17 Al-Qalqashandi, *Subh*, 3: 376, and 4: 56; al-Maqrizi, *Suluk*, 1: 686, no. 3, explanation by M. Ziyada, the editor of al-Maqrizi's text.

18 Nasser Rabbat, "The Ideo-

logical Significance of the Dar al-Adl in the Medieval Islamic Orient," *The International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 27, 1 (Feb 1995): 3-28.

19 Al-Maqrizi, *Khitat*, 2: 214; see also Ibn Taghri-Birdi, *Nujum*, 7: 328-29, where he deplores the changes in the Mamluk army structure from the time of Qalawun and describes the mamluks of his time as "holding their buttocks in the water and their nose in the sky" (meaning that they were both impotent and arrogant). See also the discussion of Julien Loiseau, *Reconstruire la Maison du Sultan, 1350-1450. Ruine et recomposition de l'ordre urbain au Caire*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 2010), 1: 157-77.

20 Julien Loiseau, "Les événements de l'année 806. Ou comment al-Maqrizi a pensé une rupture majeure dans l'histoire de l'Égypte," *Médiévales* 64 (Spring 2013): 119-34, esp. 129.

21 Carl F. Petry, *Twilight of Majesty: The Reigns of the Mamluk Sultans al-Ashraf Qaytbay and Qansuh al-Ghawri in Egypt* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993), 5-14, 73-87; Loiseau, *Reconstruire la Maison du Sultan*, 1: 35-66, 287-330, 2: 333-99; id., *Les Mamelouks*, 241-84.

raphy of the Citadel had become a reflection of the hierarchical framework of the Mamluk caste. It was during his reign that specific titles that reflect the places where the mamluks lived in terms of their relation to the sultan's private quarters made their first appearance in the chronicles. Ibn Fadl-Allah al-'Umari, al-Nasir's private secretary, says that mamluks who were removed from the *khassakiyya* had to move out of the southern enclosure to the northern one where they became *barrani* (of the exterior).<sup>16</sup> Al-Qalqashandi, in his mid-fifteenth century encyclopedic manual for scribes, *Subh al-A'sha*, explains that the word *barrani* was the equivalent of *khurjiyya* (from *kharij*, the outside) in designating mamluks, and that this was the opposite of *khassakiyya*, also called *juwwani mamluks* (of the interior), who lived inside the southern enclosure and were destined to ascend to the highest ranks.<sup>17</sup>

The Mamluk caste remained overtly alien in character and outlook for more than a century. But by the beginning of the fifteenth century, it began to lose its hostility toward local culture and to adopt many of the subjects' social practices, tastes, and preferences.<sup>18</sup> This process seems to have been accelerated by the softening of discipline in Mamluk training, which occurred under Sultans Barquq (1382-99 with one interruption) and his son Faraj (1399-1411). Al-Maqrizi (1364-1442), perhaps the harshest critic of the Mamluk sultans of his time, is also the most lucid, if excessively pessimistic, observer of the decline of both state and city under their watch. He hits his most perceptive moment in a little noticed digression in his *Khitat* where he is ostensibly describing the *tibaq* (barracks) of the young mamluks in the Citadel of Cairo, when he opined the following:

Mamluks used to be bought at a young age and were put through rigorous training and a thorough religious education before they were manumitted and enlisted in the army. That is why they were skillful and thoughtful leaders who managed a great empire and fought for the cause of Islam. The system was relaxed under Barquq, who allowed his mamluks to live in the city and to socialize with the local population through marriage and business transactions. It deteriorated even further under Faraj b. Barquq, when new mamluks were brought at a fairly advanced age, after their character had already been formed, and were no longer required to undergo an extensive religious education before their manumission. Consequently, the royal mamluks became the lowest of people, the most undignified and greedy, and the most ignorant in worldly matters and in religion. They became more lustful than monkeys, more ravenous than rats, and more harmful than wolves. No wonder then that the land of Egypt and Sham was ruined (*kharubat*) from the Nile to the Euphrates because of the venality in assigning governing positions, the exploitation of governors, and the depravity of those in charge [i.e. the Mamluk ruling class].<sup>19</sup>

Al-Maqrizi, who is our main source on Cairo under the Mamluks, may be waxing a bit too lyrical about the bygone days of the great early Mamluk sultans. But there is no denying that the Mamluk caste during his lifetime was slowly losing its group solidarity and strict hierarchy. To him, these were two major factors in the incremental political corrosion he was observing and lamenting. His pessimism may have caused him to exaggerate their actual effects on the sultanate or the city, for, after all, the Mamluks lasted for seventy-five years after his death.<sup>20</sup> Cairo, however, shrank in size after al-Nasir Muhammad and lost many of the new districts developed during his reign, although constructing monuments in its center continued almost unabated till the end. Its citadel was mostly neglected under the later Burji Mamluk sultans of the fifteenth century, except for the two long and relatively calm reigns of Qaytbay (1468-96) and Qansuh al-Ghawri (1501-16), when modest attempts were made to refurbish it. But neither the city nor the Citadel recovered the splendor or the strict spatial hierarchy of al-Nasir Muhammad's time.<sup>21</sup>

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