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The Mosque of Aṣlam al-Bahā'ī al-Silaḥdār (746/1345) [avec 6 planches].

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# THE MOSQUE

## OF AŞLAM AL-BAHĀ'Ī AL-SILĀHDĀR (746/1345)

Chahinda KARIM

The Mosque of Aşlam al-Bahā'ī is an excellent example of Mamluk mosque architecture towards the middle of the 14th century. The building was founded by the emir Bahā' al-Dīn Aşlam al-Silāhdār and is dated in the foundation inscription (746/1345). There is very little either in the primary or secondary sources on the founder and the exact building presents many problems of structure, decoration and building sequence, which will be discussed in this paper.

### THE FOUNDER.

The available sources are inadequate for a complete biography of the founder. There is no mention about the place and date of his sale or his coming to Egypt, or about his youth and military training or sources of his wealth when he became an emir.

Al-Safadī<sup>1</sup> mentions that he was one of the mamluks of al-Malik al-Manşūr Qalawūn al-Alfī, given to the emir Sayf al-Dīn Aqqūš al-Manşūrī, then dawadār of the emir Salār the Silāhdār. One may conclude from Maqrīzī's<sup>2</sup> account that he was promoted from the emir of ten to emir of one hundred *Muqqadim alf* sometime between 709 and 722 / 1309 and 1322 and that he became a *silāhdār* during the third reign of al-Nāşir Muḥammad ibn Qalawūn. But in 1326 he was sentenced to solitary confinement in the citadel of Alexandria on suspicion of treason and his iqtā' given to another emir. After his release in 1333, he was transferred to the *niyāba* of Gaza in 741/1340. After the death of al-Nāşir Muḥammad, his successor al-Nāşir Aḥmad allowed him to remain in Egypt as one of the members of the highest council of emirs and he retained this post during the rule of the next two sultans, al-Şāliḥ Ismā'il and al-Muzaḥḥar Ḥaḡḡi until he died in 1346.

1. Al-Safadī, « *al-Wāfi bi-l-Wafiyāt* », vol. 9, *Das Biographical Lexikon des as-Safadi*, Wiesbaden 1974, 205.

2. Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Mawā'iz wa-l-I'tibār fī Dīkr al-Ḥiṭaṭ wa-l-Aṭār*, II, Cairo, 209.

Al-Maqrizī<sup>3</sup> describes him as « *aḥad al-Mašāyih* » i.e. one of the leading pious men. This description of an emir as a *ṣayḥ* who sat at the head of *ḥalqas* is unusual considering his essentially emirial career, but it recalls al-Maqrizī's description of the emir Saḡar al-Ġāwli<sup>4</sup> as a *mufti* or one who gives formal legal opinions for the Šāfi'i school of law. Thus the preoccupation of some mamluk emirs with religious studies did occur but was unusual and therefore deserved special mention by al-Maqrizī.

### THE FOUNDATION.

Al-Maqrizī<sup>5</sup> states in 746/1346 that Aṣlam founded a mosque, a house, a charitable drinking trough outside the southern wall of Cairo in the *Sūq al-Ġanam* (Sheep market). Al-Safadi<sup>6</sup> adds a *rab'* (tenement building), a *turba* and an *iṣṭabl* (cavalry barracks often attached to a palace or town residence). Only the mosque and mausoleum are still standing.

One of the first problems raised by this building is the area chosen to built it in. It is situated south east of Cairo, outside Bab Zuwayla in the Darb al-Aḥmar area. Although it was only the privilege of sultans to built their funerary complexes on the Qaṣaba, the city's main boulevard, most of the emirs had the choice of sites in streets of secondary importance, such as that connecting Bab Zuwayla with the old government centers Fuṣṭāṭ and al-Qaṭā'i, the present Qaṣaba Ridwān, and those leading from Bab Zuwayla to the new government center in the Mamluk period, the citadel, namely the Darb al-Aḥmar and the Tabbāna; and that running from the maydān below the citadel to the ancient canal bridge on the Ḥaliḡ, i.e. the Ṣalība. Aṣlam was not a minor emir, yet his complex was built away from the main centers. No monuments are mentioned as having been built on the site before his foundation and it also appears that this area never attracted the attention of later emirs. Only two sabils, three mausolea, one bath, one house and several small tombs were built there, and the change of the area from a cemetery to a slowly developing habitation area seems to have started in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The Mosque occupies an area of 454 square meters (fig. 1, Ground Plan). It has two façades, the main one the south façade. At the south east corner of this façade

3. Al-Maqrizī, *Kitāb al-Mawā'iz wa-l-I'tibār fī Dīkr al-Ḥiṭaṭ wa-l-Aṭār*, II, Cairo, 35.  
4. *Ibid.*, 398.

5. *Ibid.*, 309.

6. Al-Safadi, *ibid.*, 285-286.

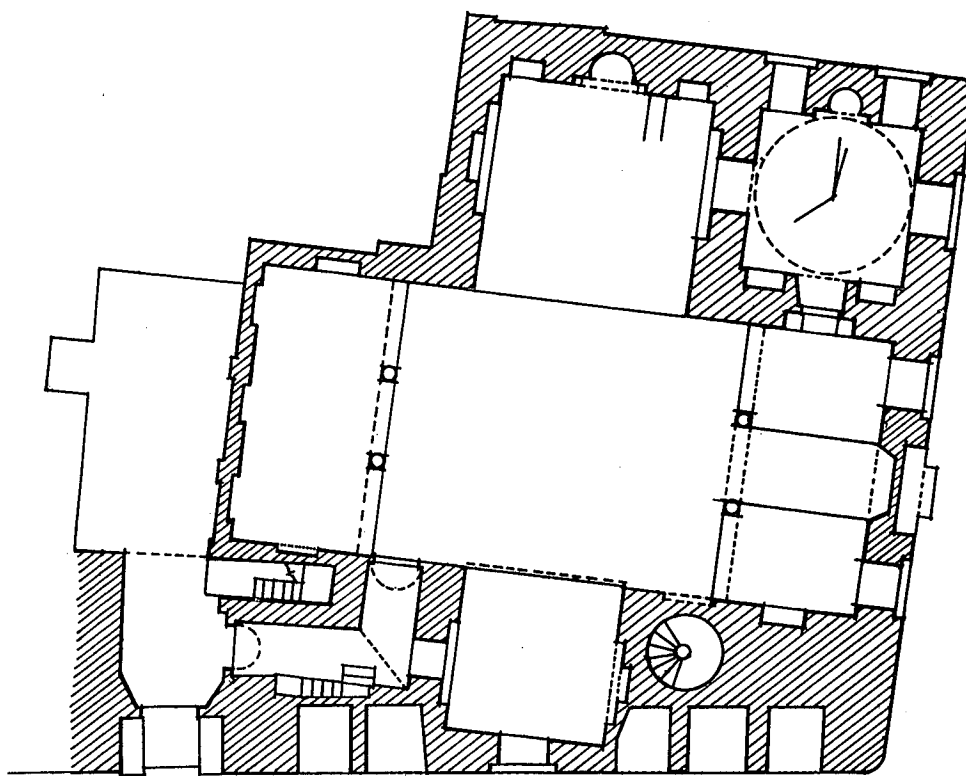


Fig. 1. — Ground Plan.

is the fluted brick dome of the mausoleum. It is constructed of convex ribs with angular fillets between them, all tapering. These ribs can be compared to the brick domes of the mausolea of ʿTaštīmūr (735/1334), Qawṣūn (737/1336) and Ḥawand ʿTuḡāy (before 748/1348). At the base of the ribs is a cavetto moulding topped by fleur de Lys cresting in green, white and blue faience mosaic of which fragments only remain (pl. 1). Crenellations around the bases of the domes appear rarely in Mamluk architecture. Their first extant occurrence is at the base of the bulbous top part of the cast minaret of the mosque of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad at the citadel (735/1335), then their next appearance is around the bases of the ribs of both the domes of Ḥawand ʿTuḡāy and Aşlam. One notices here the use of minarets as trial ground as already noted by L. Ibrahim<sup>7</sup>.

7. L. Ibrahim, «Transitional zones of Domes in Cairene Architecture», *Kunst des Orients*, 113 × 1/2 Wiesbaden, 129.

Below the fluting are the remains of a band of faience mosaic with a Quranic verse in dark blue on white ground. This inscription is enclosed in oblong lobed turquoise cartouches separated by octagonal medallions filled with a dark blue arabesque motif and joined to the oblong cartouches by a loop, all framed by a narrow band of green and blue faience then a green border. M. Meinecke<sup>8</sup> has identified 13 Bahri Mamluk buildings in Cairo bearing tiles and faience mosaic decoration, most being built between 1330-1350. This, he<sup>9</sup> explains, is because of the peace treaty of the year 722/1322 between sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad and the Ilḥānīd ruler Abu Sa'īd. One must point out here the close resemblance of the mosaic of Aṣlam's dome to the mosaic decoration on both minarets of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad at the citadel. It shows once more that minarets were trial ground for Cairene domes.

Mosaic around the exterior drums of domes appear first only in one colour, namely green and without inscription at Ṭaṣtimur's mausoleum (734/1335), then three colours with an inscription on the next three buildings namely Aṣlam's dome (746/1346), Ḥawand Ṭuḡāy's dome built before her death in 748/1348 and the sabīl of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad attached to the complex of Qalawūn. They all show high quality work, therefore probably made in the same workshop. Strangely enough, only the mosque of Aṣlam al-Silāḥdār was neither built by a sultan nor at the orders of one.

To the right of the entrance, almost to the south west corner, is a minaret which with its plain pointed Ottoman hood does not appear to be original. Whether it was entirely rebuilt during the Ottoman period is difficult to say. The transitional zone between the socle and the octagonal area is shaped like an upright pyramid on the exterior, which appears strange compared to the more usual inverted pyramid one encounters in Bahri Mamluk minarets, but it is not unique, for it appears on the 14th century minaret in the small Qarāfa (cemetery of Imām al-Šafi'i)<sup>10</sup> and can thus be original. But the octagonal brick zone is too short compared to the minarets of the same type and period. Also the ensemble of the decoration especially the double band of moulding forming loops at the apex framing the hoods of niches appears more Ottoman than Mamluk.

8. M. Meinecke, « Die Mamlukischen Fayencemosaikdekorationen, eine Werkstatt aus Tabriz in Cairo, 1330-1350 », *Kunst des Orients*, XI 1/2, 86-87.

9. *Ibid.*, 89.

10. Doris Abouseif, *The Minarets of Cairo*, A.U.C. Press 1985, fig. 11. It has been called the southern minaret because it stands to the south of the Ḥanqāh Qūsūn and the Sulṭāniyya tomb and is the only surviving structure of an unidentified building.

The probability of the minaret having been rebuilt entirely is enhanced by two factors :

1. The wall supporting its foundation shows reused stone and mosaic tiles in its upper part, placed haphazardly, some bearing inscription but placed upside-down as well as rough and not dressed stone as in the rest of the façade.
2. As one leaves the round staircase leading to the roof, one notices that the staircase continues two steps further and the wall surrounding the round staircase continues several meters above the roof level. This suggests that the minaret was originally above this staircase a continuation of the round staircase leading to the roof, comparable to the minaret of the Mosque of Ulmās al-Ḥāḡib (730/1330). The position of the minaret would thus dominate the southern and western entrances to the mosque.

It is on the whole very difficult to find a module for the position of minarets in the Bahrī Mamluk period. In urban areas the position varies from being placed at the far right end of the façade attached to the mausoleum, for example Qalāwūn's complex (683 / 1284-1285); on the right jamb of the vestibule also attached to the mausoleum as in Ṣalār and Saṅḡar al-Ġāwli (703 / 1303-1304). Above the entrance vestibule as in the Ḥanqāh of Baybars al-Ġāšenkir/Ġašneqir (706 / 1306-1310); emir Ḥusayn (719/1319) and Ṣayḡū (750/1349); on the left jamb of the entrance like the mosque of Aqsunqur (747-748 / 1346-1347) and Arġūn Ṣāh al-Ismā'ili (748/1347). It appears obvious from the above mentioned building that street direction dominated the position of the minaret. If one façade is on a main street; then the minaret will be placed on an entrance jamb. But if the building has two main façades, it is placed at the corner of both as in the mosque of Aşlam, Aqsunqur (747-748 / 1346-1347) and Arġūn Ṣāh al-Ismā'ili (748/1347).

The crenellations consist of an elaborate five lobed leaf and decorate the tops of three façades, except the south west corner around the minaret, i.e. the part that was probably rebuilt. It is a variation of the fleur de Lys type crenellation common during the Bahrī Mamluk period. The Bahrī Mamluk period shows two kinds of crenellations on buildings. The stepped crenellation<sup>11</sup> plain or decorated and the fleur de Lys or

11. Examples of Bahrī Mamluk Mosque showing stepped crenellations are : Mosque, mausoleum of al-Manşūr, Qalawūn 683-684 / 1284-1285 (Index N° 43); madrasa mausoleum of al-Nāşir Muḡammad b. Qalāwūn 695-703 / 1295-1304 (Index N° 44); Mausoleum of the emir

Qarāsunqur 700 / 1300-1301 (Index N° 31); mosque of Ṣalār and Saṅḡar al-Ġāwli 703 / 1303-1304 (Index N° 221); ḡanqāh of Baybars al-Ġāšenkir 706-709 / 1306-1310 (Index N° 32); mausoleum of Ṣafi al-Din Ġawḡar 714/1315 (Index N° 270); mausoleum of Taştımur 735/

trefoil on a base<sup>12</sup>. The addition of extra lobes to the trefoil shape appears first on the cresting of minbar portals e.g. the wooden minbars of Sit Ḥadaq Miska (740/1339) and Altunbuğa al-Māridānī (740/1340)<sup>13</sup> and finally the mosque of Badr al-Dīn al-ʿAḡamī (758/1357), and it is the use of this shape to decorate mosque façades which appears a novelty as introduced in the mosque of Aşlam.

The portals, the southern and north western are trilobed in profile, the first simple in shape i.e. plain trilobed hood without decoration, the second also trilobed but framed by a trilobe band which forms a loop at the apex, and the hood includes five tiers of stalactites crowned by a miniature conch decorated with five radial bands. The main decorative feature of the south portal is the square panel of marble mosaic decorating the centre of the portal recess (fig. 2). The four corners of the

1334 (Index N° 143); mosque of al-Māridānī 739-740 / 1339-1340 (Index N° 120); mosque of Aqṣunqur 746-748 / 1346-1347 (Index N° 81); mosque of emir Šayḥū 750 / 1349-1350 (Index N° 147); convent tomb of Šayḥū 756/1355 (Index N° 152); mosque of Šargatmiš 757/1356 (Index N° 218).

12. Examples of Bahri Mamluk Mosque showing fleur de Lys crenellations are : mausoleum of al-Šawābī 684 / 1285-1286 (Index N° 296). Creswell in *MAE* II p. 214 considers these as later restoration work because they are not stepped as the previous ones and strangely enough he adds that this trefoil shape does not appear again until the mosque of Ulmās 730 / 1329-1330. In fact the re-appear on the mosque of Salār and Saṅḡar al-Ġāwli 703 / 1303-1304 (Index N° 221) on courtyard façade. Creswell in *MAE* II p. 243 describes these as a row of leaf-shaped merlons, the earliest of their kind in Egypt. They reappear on the madrasa of the emir Baybars 709 / 1309-1310 (Index N° 97) around the mausoleum. This may be later work since the shape is slightly different from the above and following crenellation. The mosque of al-Ġukandār 719/1319 (Index N° 24), al-Mihmandār 729 / 1324-1325 (Index N° 115). Creswell in

*MAE* II 273 claims the trefoil crenellations as the second of their kind in Cairo after the madrasa and mausoleum of Salār and Saṅḡar al-Ġāwli. He seems to differentiate between the trefoil crenellations of the last two buildings and those on al-Šawābī's mausoleum which he claims does not re-appear before the mosque of Ulmās. As for the mosque of al-Ġukandār, he mentions the trefoil crenellations, but does not say whether he considers these later work or not, since they occur before the mosque of Ulmās and also before al-Mihmandār's crenellations. Other buildings showing the fleur de Lys crenellations are the mosques of Ulmās 730 / 1329-1330 (Index N° 130); mausoleum of Qawṣūn 736 / 1335-1336 (Index N° 290-291), mosque of Aydumur al-Bahlawān before 747/1346 (Index N° 22), madrasa of Ṭaṭar al-Ḥiḡaziyya 748 and 761 / 1348 and 1360 (Index N° 36); madrasa of Umm al-Sultān Ša'bān 770 / 1368-1369 (Index N° 125).

13. Gloria Ohan, Karnuk, *Cairene Bahri Mamluk Minbars with a Provisional Typology and Catalogue*, Masters Thesis, American University in Cairo, 1977, Fig. 58. See also by the same author «Fan and Ornament of the Cairene Bahri Minbars», *Annales islamologiques* XVII, I.F.A.O., 1981.

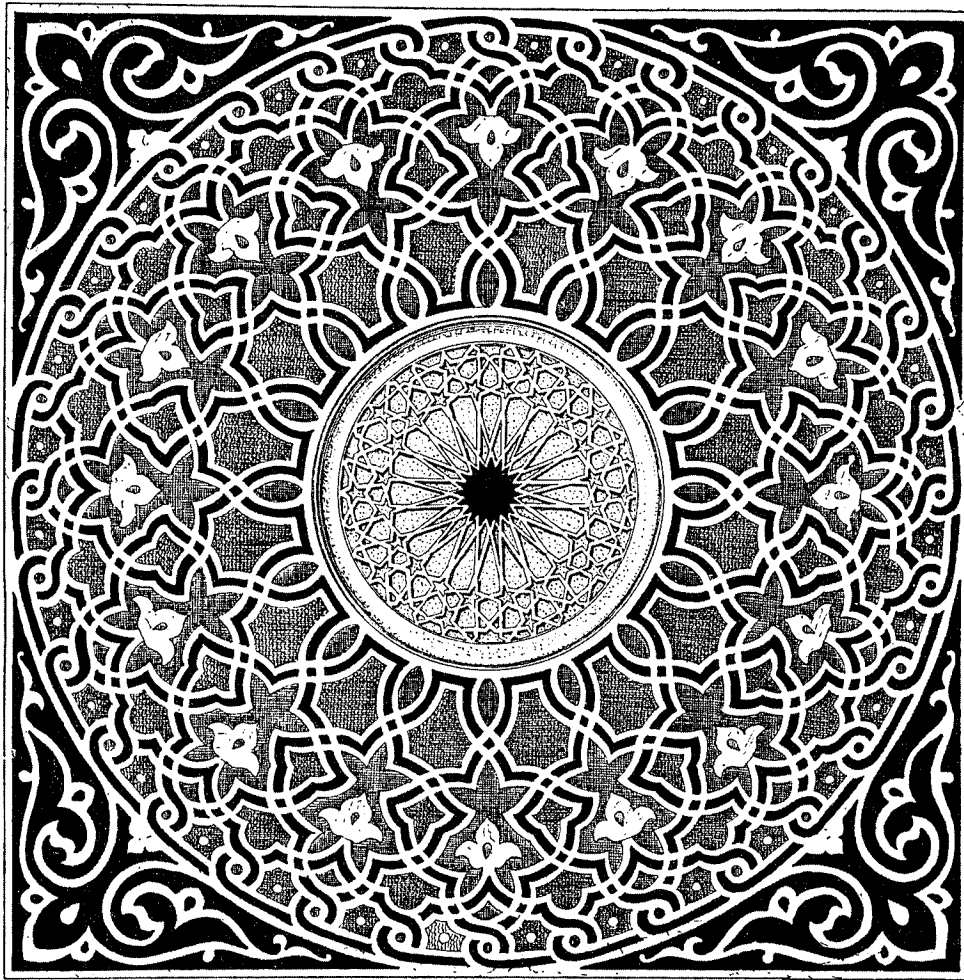


Fig. 2. — Drawing of marble panel of south portal (Bourgoin, *Précis de l'art arabe*).

square show a floral design consisting of a large central bud with a two-lobed leaf on either side in black and white marble. A raised fillet of black and white marble loops forming thirty two circles frames the large circle. The raised fillet is the bases of the filling decoration of the large circle for it interlaces, forming lobed floral shapes enclosing a fleur de Lys and angular shapes enclosing small pieces of red and yellow and turquoise glass paste. The inner circle consists of raised interlacing bands forming a large rosette of twenty petals surrounding a central oculus, surrounded in turn by ten octagonal half rosettes <sup>14</sup>.

14. Bourgoin, *Précis de l'art arabe*, Le Caire 1892, 9 Pl. 2511.



Such marble roundels are not a usual feature of the early Baḥrī Mamluk decoration, but two contemporary and similar panels should be mentioned. The marble mosaic framing the contemporary miḥrāb of the mosque of al-Bakrī dated in the index before 776/1374 (index n° 18) which is the date of his death. In fact, the date on the door jambs outside the main portal is clearly 746/1345, therefore contemporary to the mosque of Aṣlam. The close similarity in design and colours suggests the same workshop. The other contemporary and similar panel can be seen in the mausoleum of Sultan Ḥasan.

This feature of a panel of marble surrounding an oculus decorating a portal is a tradition which started with the mosque of Baybars al-Ġāšenkīr (706-709 / 1306-1310) where it is a simple bull's eye window surrounded with black and white joggled marble; then the madrasa of al-Malik al-Ġukandār (719-1319) where the oculus is surrounded by joggled polychrome marble. In the mosque of the emir Aḥmad al-Mihmandār (725/1325), the round windows filled with maṣrabiyya woodwork are surrounded by interlacing bands of white marble on black marble ground. The oculus in the portal of the next mosque, namely Ayduṣmur al-Bahlawān before 747/1346 is also framed by joggled white and black marble and finally the back portal of the mosque of the emir al-Maridānī (739-740 / 1340) where the oculus is surrounded by stone and not marble decoration. The mosque of Aṣlam comes next but while the earlier monuments show only angular interlacing bands or marble joggling around an oculus, that of Aṣlam shows intricate marble mosaic like that of al-Bakrī and Sultan Ḥasan suggesting perhaps a special workshop producing this more complex work at that time.

The lower part of this portal was heavily restored by the Comité<sup>15</sup> but shows typical Mamluk features, namely lintel, joggled voussoir, foundation and Qur'anic inscriptions. In fact both portals of this mosque bear a foundation inscription. Above the entrance of the south portal is a panel of three lines of Mamluk Nashī.

١ - بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ وَصَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَى سَيِّدِنَا مُحَمَّدٍ  
وَعَلَى آلِهِ وَصَحْبِهِ أَمْرٌ بَأْنِشَاءِ هَذَا الْجَامِعِ الْمُبَارَكِ بِفَضْلِ  
٢ - اللَّهُ تَعَالَى وَجَزِيلُ عَطَاءِهِ الْعَبْدُ الْفَقِيرُ إِلَى اللَّهِ تَعَالَى  
أَصْلَمُ بْنُ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ السَّلَاحْدَارِ الْمَلِكِيِّ الصَّالِحِيِّ .  
٣ - وَكَانَ ابْتِدَاءُ عِمَارَتِهِ فِي جُمَادَى الْأَوَّلِ سَنَةِ  
خَمْسٍ وَأَرْبَعِينَ وَسَبْعِمِائَةٍ وَفَرَاغَهُ فِي رَبِيعِ الْأَوَّلِ سَنَةِ  
سِتٍّ وَأَرْبَعِينَ وَسَبْعِمِائَةٍ .

15. *Comité de Conservation de l'art arabe*, Procès-verbaux des Séances, Rapports de la deuxième Commission, 1915-1919, n° 94.

Omitting blessings, this reads :

1. ... has ordered the construction of this mosque.
2. Aşlam ibn 'Abdallāh al-Silāhdār al-Mālikī al-Şāliḥī.
3. The beginning of the construction was on Ğumāda I in the year 745 and it was finished in the month of Rabī' al-Awwal in the year 746.

The term « Ibn 'Abdallāh », which indicates he was a convert to Islam <sup>16</sup>, is unusual, but the nisba al-Mālikī al-Şāliḥī refers to the sultan al-Malik al-Şāliḥ Ismā'īl who reigned until Rabī' II 746/1346, a few days after the inauguration of the mosque.

The inscription of the jambs of the door of the N.W. façade is inrouted foliate mamluk Nashī on a scroll background. This is the first appearance of scrolls as a ground and interlacing with the letters of ṭuluṭ inscription band <sup>17</sup>.

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم إنما يعمر مساجد الله من آمن بالله  
وأقام الصلاة وآتى الزكاة ولم يخش إلا الله . أمر بإنشاء  
هذا الجامع المبارك العبد الفقير الى الله تعالى البهائي  
أصلم السلحدار عز نصره وكان الفراغ في شهر رجب الفرد  
سنة ست وأربعين وسبعمائة .

The Qur'anic verse is IX, 18 appears on the right of the entrance portal, ending in « has ordered ». It continues on the left of the entrance portal with « the construction of this blessed mosque the poor slave of God al-Bahā'ī Aşlam al-Silāhdār » and the date of completion Raġab 745/1346, Van Berchem <sup>18</sup> points out that since al-Bahā'ī preceeds the name Aşlam, it must be his laqab and not the nisba of his owners. The nisba, he adds is missing because in 1345 the sultan Şāliḥ Ismā'īl was already dead. It also omits al-Silāhdār and that Aşlam by then has retired from political life. Ḥasan 'Abd al-Wahhāb <sup>19</sup> on the other hand reads al-Silāhdār and omits al-Bahā'ī.

The main feature of the portal of the N.W. façade are the spandrels of the trilobed hood because they are decorated with a flat stone arabesque. It consists of an interlacing

16. Ménage, « Seven Ottoman Documents from the Reign of Mehemmet III » in Stern, *Documents from Islamic Chanceries*, Oxford 1965, 112-113.

17. Muḥammad Sayf al-Nāşir abū-l-Futūḥ,

*Madāḥil al-'amā'ir al-Mamlūkiyya*, Masters Thesis, Cairo University, 1975, 127.

18. Van Berchem CIA Egypt I, 196.

19. Ḥasan 'Abd al-Wahhāb, *Tārīḥ al-Masāğid al-Aṭariyya*, Cairo, 1942, 470-472.

foliate scroll with elongated split leaves and broader smaller leaves. This flat stone carved arabesque has its precedent on the minaret of the mosque of emir Bištāk (730/1339) and the mosque of al-Māridānī (739-1740 / 339-1340) on the inner side of the side portal where the design consists of roundels of foliate design and split leaves. The sabil of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad dated 746 or 747 / 1345 or 1346 shows this feature on the spandrel of the arcade where the design consists of split leaves within an arabesque. Thus, the portal of Aṣlam shows the first occurrence of the flat stone carving decorating the outer spandrels of a portal, but the design retains the split leaves and carving scroll or arabesque. The use of the flat stone carving then continues in the mosque of Ṣayḥū (749/1349) and in the spandrels of the portal of the madrasa of Ṣargatmiš (756/1351). One must add here that the double moulding framing the trilobed portal with a loop at the apex, then further framed by a rectangular double moulding, is also a decorative concept introduced in the mosque of Aṣlam, one which becomes typical of Circassian Mamluk monuments.

#### THE FAÇADES : CONSTITUENT DECORATION.

The southern façade is broken by three niches one on each side of the portal and a third at the east end below the dome of the mausoleum (fig. 3). The corresponding niche on the west of this façade, below the minaret is missing which makes the whole façade appears asymmetrical. Only the niche on the east side below the mausoleum has the usual stalactite hood indicating that the whole west side was heavily restored or rebuilt at an earlier period. The Ṭirāz band of inscription which runs along the whole façades below the hoods of the niches is missing, but since the western side does not show signs of restoration, it was probably never finished.

The northwest façade is broken by a single central niche between the portal and the chamfered southeast corner, five shops and five tiers of windows (fig. 4). The lowest above the first two shops are two plain square openings topped by a third rectangular opening into a room. Above these openings are three windows of one of the rooms of the upper floor of the mosque and then a level higher, two windows opening onto the inner *ṣahn* of the mosque. Three rectangular and one square openings also open onto the staircase leading to the roof. The third façade facing the qibla one is partly hidden today by a baker's shop and only the mausoleum remains free standing.

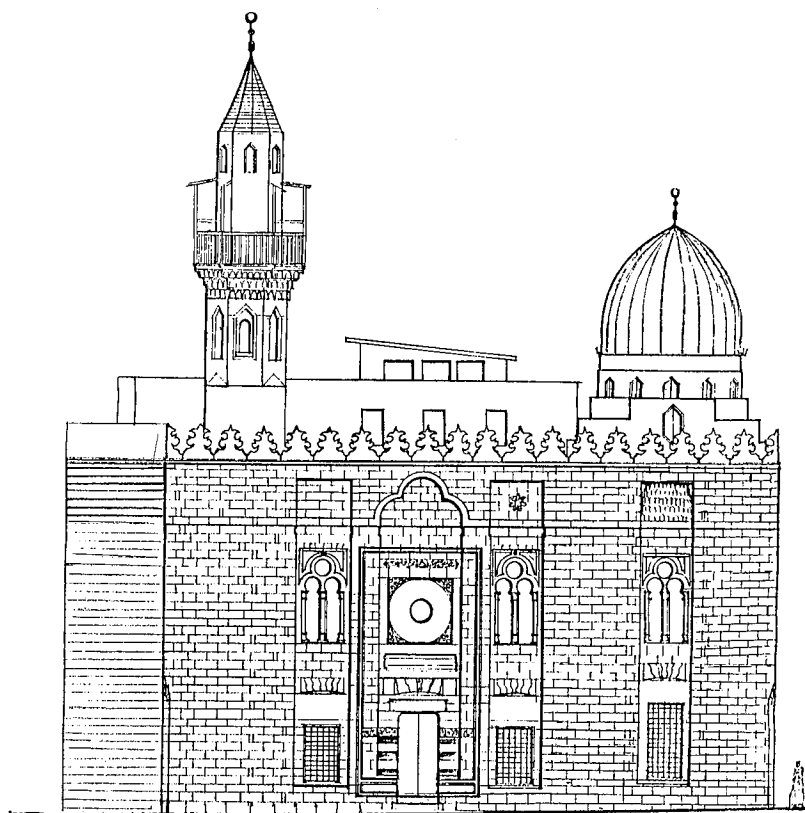
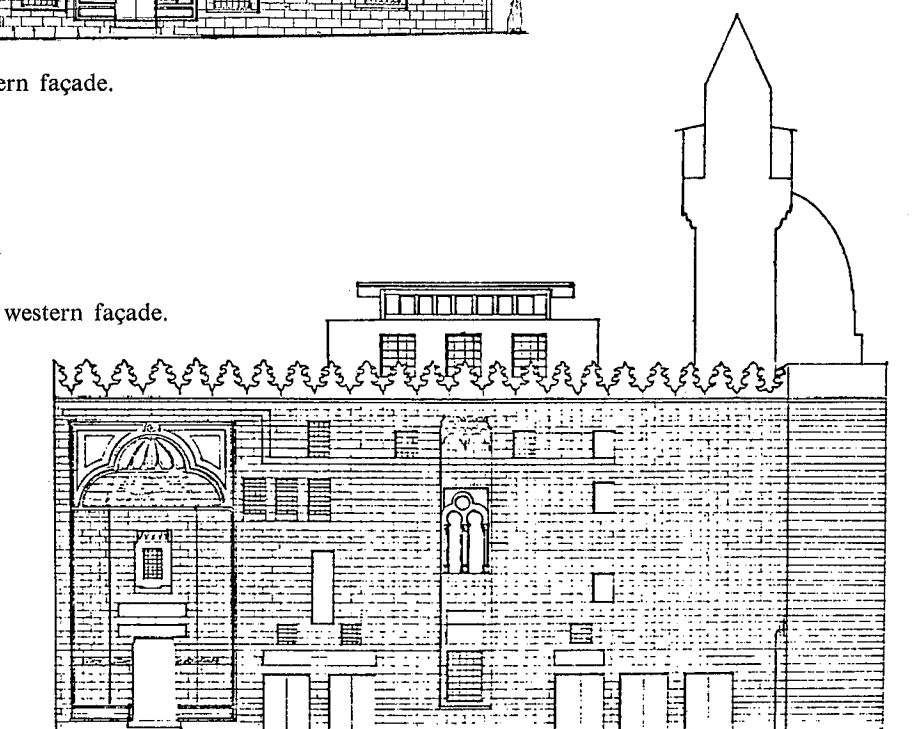


Fig. 3. — The southern façade.

Fig. 4. — The north western façade.



## THE INTERIOR OF THE MOSQUE.

Two large symmetrical arched iwāns with side niches open on the east and west onto the *ṣaḥn*, the qibla one being larger than the one opposite. The shallower and lower north and south iwāns are closed off by small arcades of three low arches on marble columns with corinthian capitals. The ceiling of all the iwāns are flat wooden and painted with blue, gold and red. Immediately below the ceiling is a wooden frieze bearing *nashī* Qur'anic inscription enclosed in oblong cartouches separated by lobed medallions. The iwān opposite the qibla shows two balconies. The first of wood hung across the iwān at approximately mid height and was probably the *dikka al-muballiḡ* (fig. 5) which can be reached from the staircase of the minaret (fig. 6). The second is above the iwān overlooking the *ṣaḥn* and can be reached by a staircase from the *mīdā'a* (or ablution area). It has a small cell or storage area as well as shelves and is undecorated.

An interesting architectural feature of this mosque are two long rooms overlooking the *ṣaḥn* over the arcade of the northern and eastern iwāns. Their function can only be hypothesized because of their uniqueness in Baḥrī Mamluk religious architecture. The complete lack of communication between the rooms of the south side including the *dikka* and the rooms of the north side including the balcony is very odd. Both sides are treated like separate buildings with separate entrances. Since the south portal may have been the private entrance of the emir, therefore the long room overlooking the courtyard on this side could be a reception room which was not uncommon in Baḥrī Mamluk funerary architecture. The mosque of Sulṭān Ḥasan (757-764 / 1356-1362), the madrasa of Ṣargatmiš (757/1356) and the *ḥānqāh* of Qurqumāš (911-913 / 1506-1507) all have reception rooms in the upper floor. The function of the long room opposite was probably related to the *rab'* situated on that side, i.e. for teaching and theological studies. Al-Maqrīzī<sup>20</sup> mentions under the necrologies of the year (782/1380) the death of al-Šayḥ 'Abbās b. Ḥasan al-Tamīmī al-Šāfi'i, the reader and *ḥaṭīb* of ḡāmi' Aṣlam who taught fiqh (religious law) and Qur'an reading there. This suggests that the north

20. Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk li-Ma'rifat Duwal al-Mulūk*, Vol. III, id. by Sa'id 'Aṣūr, Cairo 1972, 406.

Fig. 5.

The dikkat al-Muballig and balcony.

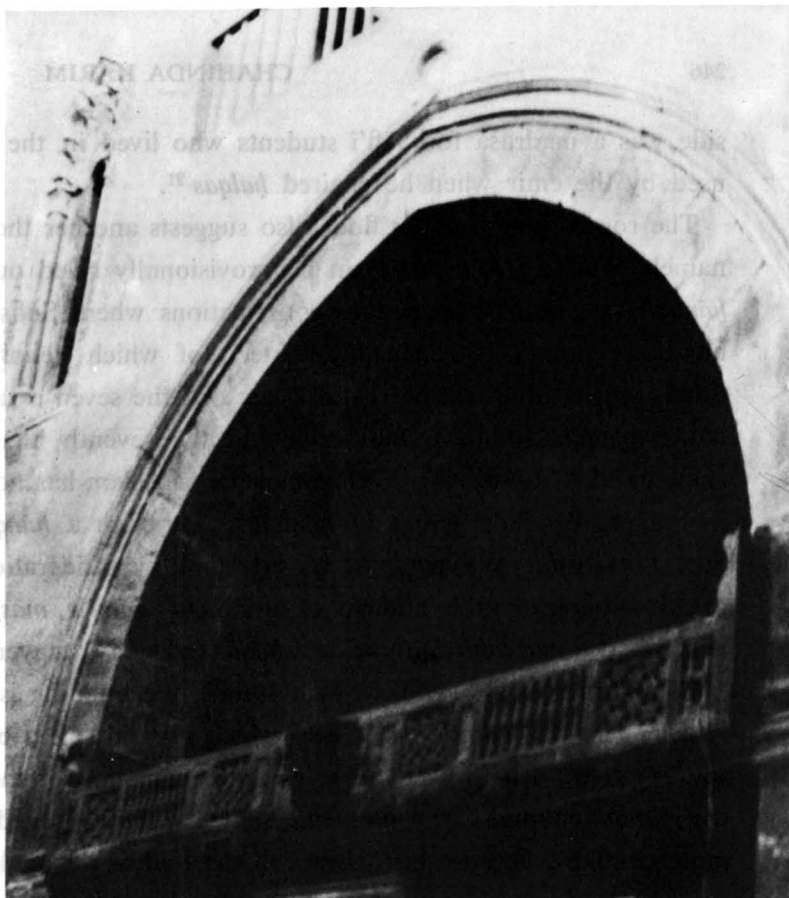
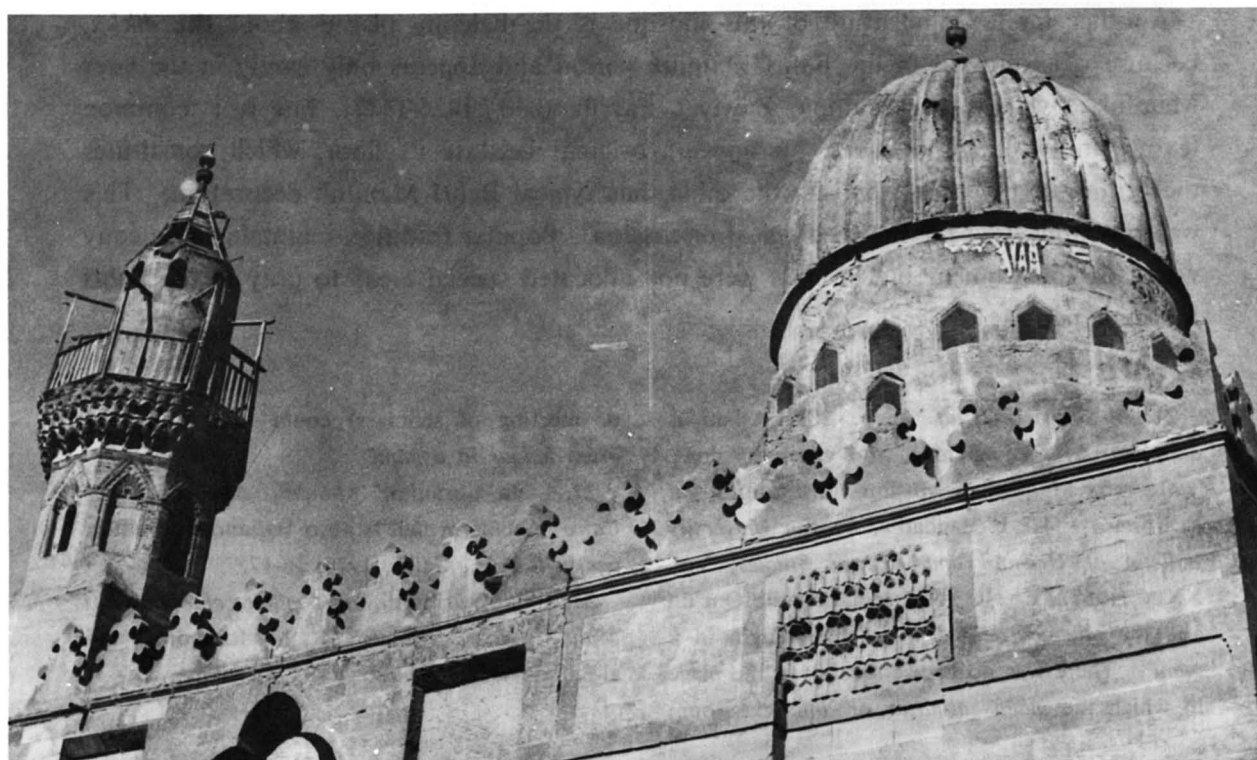


Fig. 6.

The dome and minaret.



side was a madrasa for Šāfi'ī students who lived in the *rab'* while the south side was used by the emir when he chaired *ḥalqas* <sup>21</sup>.

The rooms of the upper floor also suggests another theory concerning their function; namely Sufism. A *ḥānqāh* can be provisionally ruled out because in Cairo, the word *ḥānqāh* was usually applied to constructions where Sufis actually resided. Al-Maqrizī mentions twenty two *ḥānqāhs*, sixteen of which definitely had accommodations for Sufis; on the other six he is not clear. Of the seven extant monuments which bear the name *ḥānqāh*, six have Sufi cells and the seventh, that of Muğaltāy al-Ġamālī was ruined and partly rebuilt <sup>22</sup>. The mosque of Aṣlam has no cells which could have served as lodging for Sufis living in *ḥānqāh*. Although a *ḥānqāh* can be provisionally ruled out, a *mašyahit Ṣūfiyya* must be taken into consideration. Historians and waqfiyyas mention a considerable number of buildings : *ḡāmi's*, *masḡids*, madrasa, and mausoleum which had a *mašyahit Ṣūfiyya* or a *ḥudūr* (collective prayer and ritual gathering of Sufis).

To summarize the problem as it stands, the building is called a *ḡāmi'* by inscription. Attached to this *ḡāmi'* was a *rab'* which was inhabited by students or Sufis. Since the sources give no help whatsoever as to the function of the rooms of the upper floor of the *ḡāmi'* a madrasa or a *mašyahit Ṣūfiyya* were suggested. The first suggestion appears more probable because historians call the building a madrasa <sup>23</sup> and Aṣlam is described as chairing *ḥalqas* and these usually take place in madrasas.

Another interesting feature of this mosque is the balcony placed about the *dikka*, because it is unusual in the Baḥrī Mamluk period and appears only rarely in the later Mamluk Dynasty, for example Zāwiyat Fayrūz (830 / 1426-1427), but is a common feature in Ottoman mosques. It appears original because its floor, which constitutes the ceiling of the iwān opposite the qibla, has typical Baḥrī Mamluk decoration. This was probably used for the theological discussion. Popular tradition maintains a balcony was used for women, but women were not allocated special areas to pray in the Baḥrī Mamluk period.

21. Al-Maqrizī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* II, p. 309, Aṣlam is described as a pious man who chaired *ḥalqas*.

George Maqdisi « Muslim Institutions of Learning in 11th c. Bagdad », *London University Bulletin of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. XXIV (1967), 7. He points out that the Qur'ān and the sciences related to it were taught in a *ḡāmi'*. There was no restrictions as to the place in which the *maḡlis al-naẓar* or 'ilm (classroom

or meeting of scholars) could take place but often *ḥalqas* in a *ḡāmi'*.

22. Laila Ibrahim, *Mamluk Monuments of Cairo*, Quaderni dell'Istituto Italiano di Cultura per la R.A.E., Cairo, 1976, 16-17.

23. Ibn Tagribardi, *al-Nuğūm al-Zāhira fī Mulūk Miṣr wa-l-Qāhira*, IX, 174 footnote 1 and al-Safadi, *ibid.*, 285-286.

Finally one must add that this mosque is the third extant cruciform building with a covered *ṣaḥn* after the maṣḡid al-Ġūkandār (719/1315) and al-Mihmandār (725/1325), and in all three buildings the roof is not original. The present lantern ceiling in Aşlam's Mosque was built in the year 1900<sup>24</sup>. The remains of the early corner supports eliminates the possibility of an earlier brick dome but it could have been either a lantern ceiling or a wooden dome.

### THE STUCCO DECORATION.

The stucco of the mosque presents a problem, not in its dating since it follows the tradition of this period, but in its variety in the differences in execution. Stucco can be seen in the mausoleum, the miḥrāb and on the roundels decorating the walls in the qibla and opposite iwān, namely six roundels, and finally on windows, lozenges and medallions decorating the façades of the courtyard (fig. 7 and 8).

The miḥrāb of the mausoleum (fig. 9) can be added to Creswell's list of stucco miḥrābs<sup>25</sup>. The miḥrāb niche is a slightly stilted pointed arch which rests on two spiral fluted columns with bell-shaped capitals and wooden cushions. The left column rests on a stylized bell-shaped base and the right column on an unshaped stone base. The decoration of the miḥrāb conch shows an unclustered mamluk arabesque in the flat relief. The stem is single and the leaves varied (fig. 10). One can see split palmettes (fig. 10-1) with sepals one extending from the other (fig. 10-2 & 3), leaves with one elongated lobe with veins, a smaller lobe and a sepal (fig. 10-4), multilobed palmettes inside a contour panel (fig. 10-3), single elongated one lobe leaves with veining and a narrow sepal (fig. 10-5), trefoil with sepals which contain composite decorative palmette elements (fig. 10-6 & 7) and finally small trefoils inside a contour panel (fig. 10-8). This arabesque is surrounded by a thin band of oval and round elements framed by two thick bands, then a large band forming lobed arches interlacing with a plain band forming sort of pointed loops inside the lobed arches (fig. 10-9). The outer arch of the miḥrāb conch above the inscription shows a rising interlacing band containing a 3-lobed leaf which resembles the decoration of the balustrade of the mosque of al-Māridānī,

24. *Comité*, 1900, p. 48. — 25. Creswell, *Muslim Architecture of Egypt*, Oxford 1957, Pl. 107-114.



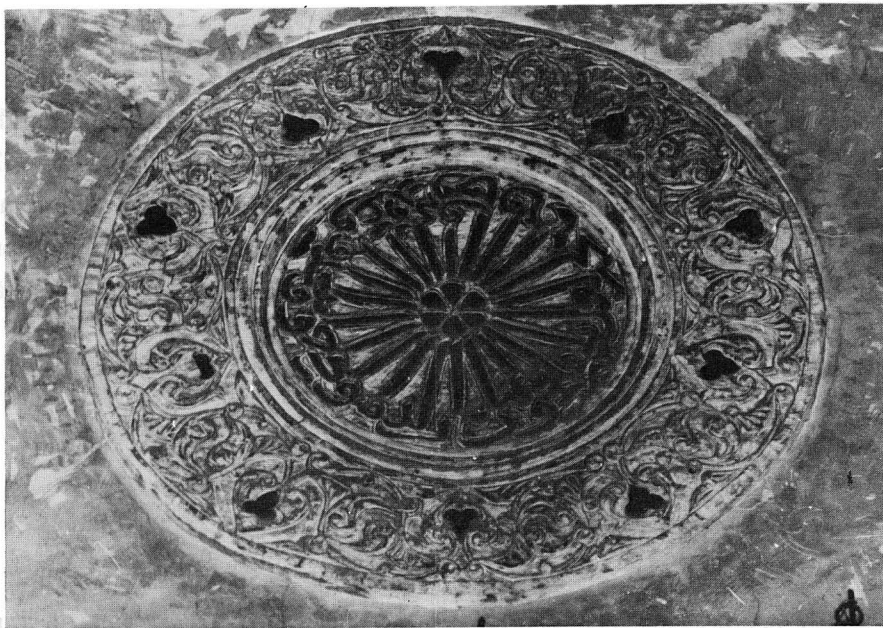
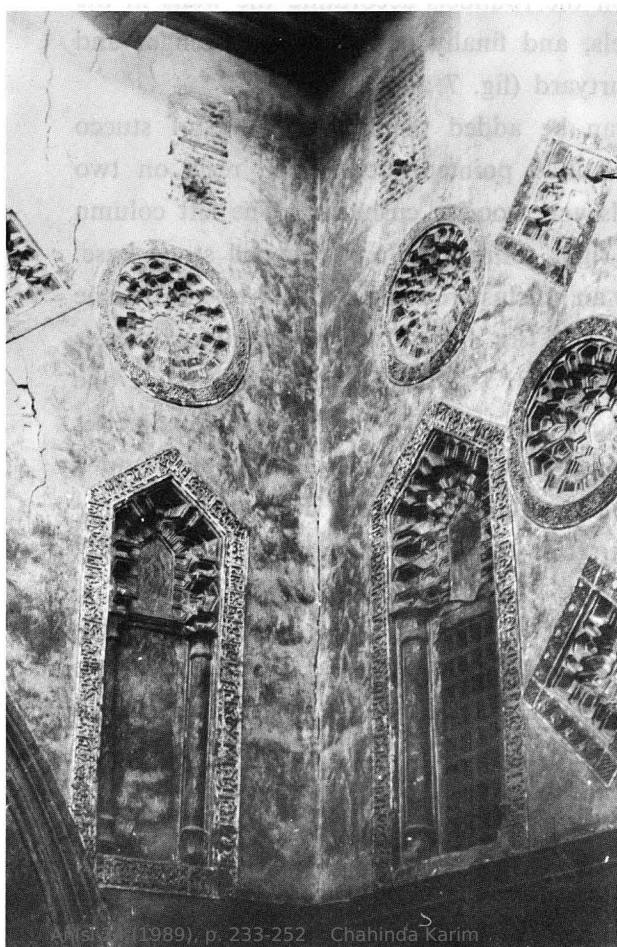


Fig. 7. — The stucco roundel of the qibla iwān.



The Mosque of Aṣḥam al-Baḥārī al-Silāḥdar (746/1345) [avec 6 planches].  
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Fig. 8. — The stucco.



Fig. 9. — The mihrāb of the mausoleum.

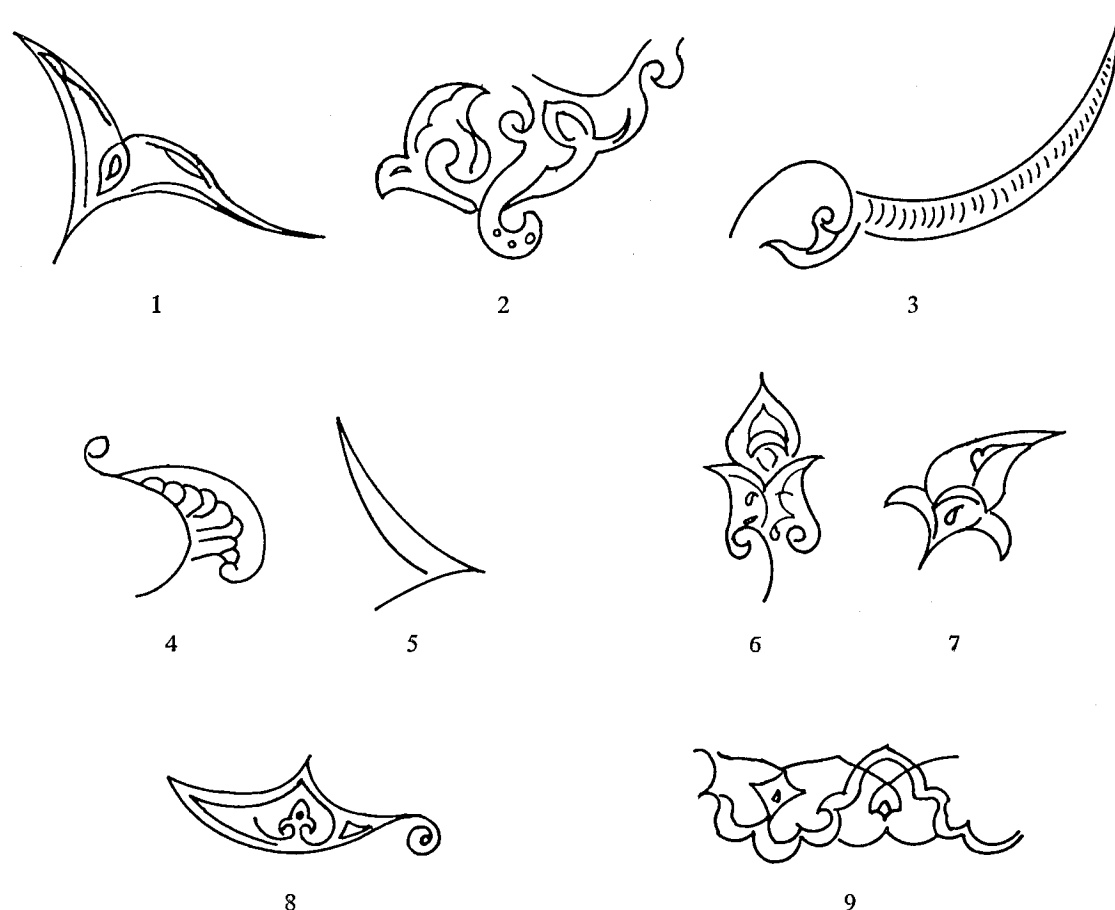


Fig. 10. — The stucco leaves.

but in the latter it is in stone carving and not stucco and it is also a variation of the stucco decoration in the interior of the mausoleum of Sunqur Sa'dī.

The spandrels of the miḥrāb are decorated with a flat relief stucco arabesque on a clear background, but with plain leaves. The two inscription bands (one surrounding the miḥrāb and the other the conch) are Qur'anic (XIII, 15, XXII, 77 & II, 144). Strangely enough the last two words do not form part of the *āyā*.

قد نرى تقلب وجهك في السماء فلنولينك قبلة ترضاها هُدى الله .

The inscription surrounding the conch of the miḥrāb is enclosed in its lower part in plain rounded oblong cartouches separated by a roundel filled with 3-lobed leaf enclosed in a rectangular frame. It may be an attempt at a very high stylized kufic script of the word Allāh.

Finally the lower part of the niche seems to have been covered with thin bands of coloured marble as in most Baḥrī Mamluk miḥrābs as can be judged from the remains.

The elements of decoration of this miḥrāb all have prototypes in the early Mamluk period beginning with the miḥrāb of ḥānqāh Bunduqdāriyya (683 / 1283-1284), but in the latter the relief is higher and the stem is double. The conch resembles to a great extent the spandrels of the miḥrāb of the madrasa al-Ğukandār (719/1319), but in the latter the background is not as clear. In fact this inclustered arabesque differentiates the miḥrāb of Aṣlam from most earlier ones. One must add here that the decoration of the conch of the miḥrāb of Aṣlam differs from its spandrels not only in type but also in quality. It appears that two workshops or artists worked on it. This variety in quality appears also in the stucco of the iwāns and *ṣaḥn*. The roundels of the iwān shows the typical Mamluk foliate design with bordering Qur'anic *ṭuluṣ* inscriptions<sup>26</sup>, while the stucco of the *ṣaḥn* shows the continuation of the Fatimid tradition including kufic inscription bands. Both types of stucco have prototypes in the varied stucco decoration of the Baḥrī Mamluk period.

The medallions are decorated in their center by pointed stalactites radiating from either a pointed or circular center. The lozenge shaped medallions are framed by bands of linear designs, the circular ones by bands of undulating foliate stems. The windows are contained in stilted keel arched recesses surrounded by bands of kufic inscriptions illegible today. The conches of the keel arches are supported on columns with bell shaped capitals and are filled with ribs radiating from central keel-arches. This type of stucco work goes back to the Mosque of al-Maridānī, where the same lozenges, circles and niches decorate the façades of the courtyard, but in the latter these are not framed by inscription bands in kufic script or bands of linear design as in the Mosque of Aṣlam. What attracts ones attention here is the sloppy way in which the roundels and lozenges were executed. One notices that the roundels touch the lozenges on one side, while large spaces are left on the other side. The courtyard was obviously decorated hastily even carelessly. Blocked up windows behind the stucco of the uppermost level suggests that the stucco may have fallen when the roofing of the courtyard fell, and in the process of putting it up again, the symmetry was unpaired while the wall behind the stucco was reinforced by an extra layer of the brick. It is impossible to give a definite date to the restoration done in the north and northwest side of the mosque, but since a preliminary date of about 1720 was suggested the rebuilding of

26. Stucco band surrounding the stucco roundel of the right wall of the qibla iwān overlooking

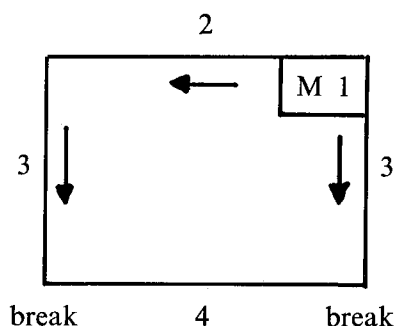
towards the miḥrāb, IX, 112; roundels of the side walls of the iwān opposite the qibla, IX, 18.

the minaret (same time as the rebuilding of the minaret of mosque al-Mihmandār) the same approximate date should be suggested for the north and northwest side. In all the cases i.e. minaret and stucco and staircase to rooms on the north side, restoration was probably not carried out under khedivial patronage, since the restoration inscription which appears in the mosque of al-Mihmandār is lacking in the mosque of Aşlam. It was probably promoted by local piety since Aşlam al-Silāhdār is known as Sīdī Aşlam al-Bahā'ī.

### CONCLUSIONS

The Mosque of Aşlam al-Silāhdār is very interesting because of its plan and decoration. It was built in stages as can be judged from the architecture of the building.

The mausoleum was built first and it probably had a *hawş* attached judging from the funerary character of the area and the lack of break in the bond at the northeast corner. The qibla iwān was then added and the two lateral iwāns.



The iwān opposite the qibla was added somewhat later judging from the breaks in the bond in the southwest-northwest corners. The two staircases leading to the upper floor were then built and then the rooms. In the case of the south side the long room was built from the staircase to the mausoleum and this probably explains the blocking of the windows of the transitional zone of the dome. The façades were then added. The south façade was built first judging from the foundation inscription, and then the northwest façade.

The plan of the mosque, although not unique (the prototype being the Mosque of al-Mihmandār) can still be considered a rare plan in Bahrī Mamluk buildings. Here the plan was obviously dictated by the pre-existing building i.e. mausoleum and *hawş*.

On the other hand the two long rooms overlooking the courtyard are unique, therefore their function was only hypothesized.

The decoration of the mosque is very interesting for it shows originality in the use of the existing forms of decoration. For example the large panel decorating the south portal was shown to be the product of a Cairene fourteenth century marble mosaic workshop. The novelty lies in the use of a panel in mosaic of marble on the entrance, and the decorative device was taken over by Barqūq for his madrasa at the end of the century.

The trilobed portal profile does not originate here, but the framing of its conch by a double moulded band which loops at the apex and is then framed by a rectangular moulding appears to be a novel feature judging from extant monuments. The same applies to the flat carved stone carving on the spandrels of the same entrance; although it appears earlier on the inner side of the portal of al-Māridānī, its application here on the exterior is new. Both of these features become a source of influence on many later mosques. Even the crenellation topping the façade which appears to be an innovation to the contemporary ones, was shown to have been used earlier as a cresting on wooden minbar joggled voussoirs earlier.

The Mosque of Aṣlam al-Silāḥdār is in fact a fine example of Cairene Baḥrī Mamluk religious architecture for it shows that one cannot really talk of « modules » for either plan or decoration. The plan depended on the land available and the decoration was like a jigsaw puzzle, where one puts together available scattered elements to form a new combination.