# Pre-Islamic spolia in Islamic Egypt: Case studies on the reuse of pre-Islamic building material in Mamluk buildings

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P.M. Potter
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Case studies on the reuse of pre-Islamic building material in Mamluk buildings

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# Table of Content

# List of figures

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# Introduction

In Islam, the concept of *jahiliyyah* refers to the time before the arrival of Prophet Muhammed. *Jahiliyyah* emphasises the identity of the Muslim religion by labelling other religions and cultures, which already existed before Prophet Muhammed, as 'pre-Islamic'. However, the precise meaning of *jahiliyyah* is debated in academic publications. Some scholars translate it as "the time of ignorance".[1] These 'pre-Islamic' people were seen as 'ignorant' because they did not possess the correct knowledge about God. The concept of pre-Islamic does not imply that during the Muslim era no other identities than Islam can exist. Rather it is a Muslim view that refers to other religiously formed identities, such as Christianity, as originating from a time before Islam existed.

Ignaz Goldziher started a discourse on the concept of *jahiliyyah*.[2] Goldziher does not agree with the translation of '*jahiliyyah*' as 'the time of ignorance'. Rather he interprets the concept of *jahiliyyah* as the 'time of barbarism'. According to him, Muhammed wanted to contrast the way of life according the Islam that he preached with the uncivilised way of life or barbarism of previous times.[3] Furthermore, Gerald Hawting points out that in the Quran there are some myths about the Arab and the pre-Islamic identity. Hawting concludes that the polytheists mentioned in the Quran probably also include monotheists. By referring to Christians and Jews as polytheists, the Quranic texts try to differentiate Islam from the other religions as being the sole monotheist religion.[4] From this perspective, *jahiliyyah* is used to underline the difference between the Islamic identity and the other – already existing – identities. Overall, these three different definitions and interpretations of *jahiliyyah* tend to reject the pre-Islamic past as something that should be avoided.

There is a presumption amongst scholars that Medieval Muslims disapprove of the pre-Islamic past. The aforementioned academic discourses show that there are other ways of interpreting, which makes the concept of *jahiliyyah* not as black and white. The question for me remains: How do Muslims look back at and interpret the pre-Islamic past? This question is a broad one, furthermore, there is not one way of studying this. This thesis elaborates on that

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[1] W.P. Heinrichs et al., eds., "Djahaliyya," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* (BRILL, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_sim_1933.

[2] Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam.* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016) 285.

[3] Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies* [Muhammedanische Studien], ed. S. M. Stern, trans. C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern, vol. I (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967) 202.

[4] Gerald Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

question by looking at architectural evidence of the way pre-Islamic building elements were incorporated into Islamic buildings for worship or religious gatherings. In Cairo some Islamic buildings contain elements of the pre-Islamic period. The use of these elements in Islamic buildings could provide more insight into how Muslims look back at and interpret the pre-Islamic past.

Egypt has a rich pre-Islamic building tradition. While wandering through the streets of Cairo, one is surrounded by buildings from different periods. The remnants of the pre-Islamic past are present everywhere in Egypt: in pyramids, in monuments displaying hieroglyphs, and also in Coptic churches and monasteries. Many of these buildings were made of stone and had survived through the years which means that the reuse of their material was possible. The reuse of older building material was part of the Islamic architectural style in Mamluk Egypt.

Buildings often tell us a lot more about other periods than only the period they were originally built in. Over the years, buildings can be adjusted, parts are exchanged or broken down, renovations and restorations are done, and so on. From the way adjustments are done to individual buildings, academics can extract valuable information about the trends and developments that occur throughout the history of a building and their context. The concept of *spolia* offers a particular way to study the history of buildings. The word '*spolia*' is derived from the Latin word '*spolio*' which means "to strip, to deprive of covering, or to rob of clothing".[5] Put into the context of buildings, the concept of *spolia* refers to artefacts or elements from other buildings that are being deliberately incorporated into new buildings. This interpretation of *spolia* is used by Dale Kinney based on his studies conducted on the Arch of Constantine. Kinney states:

> "[S]polia are indices of destruction. They are the residues of violence
> inflicted by man, nature or time. All of these agents produce *spolia*, but only
> man practices spoliatio."[6]

In other words, *spolia* are remnants from the past which are reused in a newer context. By researching the Muslim use of pre-Islamic *spolia*, the debate of the Muslim view on the pre-Islamic past could be settled. Therefore, this thesis focuses on the use and presence of *spolia* in Islamic Cairo to provide insight into what the Muslim view is on the pre-Islamic.

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[5] Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1969), 1745.
[6] Dale Kinney, "Rape or Restitution of the Past? Interpreting *Spolia*," in *The Art of Interpreting* (Penn State University Press, 1995): 52–67, there 58.

The concept of *spolia* is multi-layered and complex. Kinney notes three different approaches to the study of *spolia*. He explains these using different references from different periods. The first phase is illustrated by the example of the famous Roman orator Cicero (d. 43 BC), who mentioned the use of *spolia* in his speeches. According to Cicero, *spolia* refer to objects seized from enemies by the victor. Cicero defines *spolia* as a deliberate act of reuse. Given the need to deliberately choose an object, but in that choice to also take into account limitations of transportation methods, an emperor should carefully consider what kind of loot to take with him or to request to be taken, and at the same time consider in what place and how to display it as *spolia* – in English this is also known as taking "the spoils of war". The purpose of the act of taking away, then transporting and displaying the building materials by using them for other buildings can be seen as the act of appropriation to demonstrate the power to conquer. In this definition, the aspect of legitimacy is an inherent characteristic of *spolia*.[7]

In the sixteenth century, a new approach to the study of *spolia* came to light. *Spolia* were not only seen as martial booty but also as industrial products to be reused as building elements because of their material properties. Kinney marks this second phase by introducing the work of Giorgio Vasari (d. 1574 AD). Vasari studied *spolia* from a historical art perspective. Instead of merely focusing on the act of stripping buildings, Vasari paid attention to the reusable elements produced by that act. The scholarship was based on the perceived distinction between the *spolia* and their later setting. This approach implies a more historical interpretation of *spolia*. These scholars used interpretations which tear the *spolia* apart from their last destination and replace them in the original context.[8]

In the 1940s, a third approach of studying *spolia* was raised by the works of Hans Peter L'Orange followed by F.W. Deichmann. Both scholars published works on *spolia* wherein they treated *spolia* "not as archaeological shards to be reintegrated, but as components of coherent medieval or pre-medieval representations."[9] Central is the new setting of *spolia* as the object of interpretation. The study of such objects leads to a set of meaningful interrelationships of different aspects, which explain the use of *spolia*. This third phase marks the shift in the focal point of the academic perspective from the archaeological field to the art historical domain.[10]

In summary, there were three different kinds of interpretations of *spolia* in the Roman context. The first one interprets *spolia* as booty of war in their present use; the second approach

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[7] Kinney, "Rape or Restitution," 52-55.
[8] Kinney, 54-56.
[9] Kinney, 56.
[10] Kinney, 56-58.

is characterized by scholars looking for references to earlier times focusing on the past use of *spolia*; the third approach focuses on *spolia* as the recycling of an industrial product in the building process.

The previously mentioned studies serve as an overview of the scholarship of *spolia* in the Italian context. Actually most published research on *spolia* has been done in the Roman regions. In comparison with the literature on the Italian context, *spolia* in the Islamic context is relatively understudied. In 2006, Finbarr Barry Flood has written an article about *spolia* and its relation to amulets and talismans in the pre-modern Islamic world. Flood points out that *spolia* are not being dealt with systematically in the historiography. The majority of studies examines the concept of *spolia* from the perspective of single buildings and generalising their conclusions to a regional level.[11]

The last two decades, several studies on the presence of *spolia* in Egypt have been done. There are three possible reasons that could explain the focus on Egypt. First, an important condition for studying the presence of *spolia* in the field is the use of strong and durable building material, for example stone, in the architectural tradition. The Egyptians built with stone, in contrast to much of the rest of the Muslim world, e.g. Iraq, Iran and central Asia where brick is mostly used. Bricks, however, are breakable and not solid enough for reusing. Second, Egypt is a country that has a very strong pre-Islamic architectural tradition of monuments that survived until today. The survival of these pre-Islamic buildings could serve as a quarry for newer buildings. Third – when only focusing on the Mamluk period in Egypt, the Mamluks had a rich society, which was not afraid to show their status in architectural style. The Mamluks were pretty involved in the business of building.

Available academic literature offers different possible motives for the reuse of specific building material in Egypt. Michael Greenhalgh, for example, has studied the use of marble in medieval Egypt by reconstructing the trade networks for and means for transport of marble. In addition Greenhalgh examines the reuse of marble in Egyptian buildings and the reason for this reuse by discussing a few individual buildings. Greenhalgh argues that the most plausible motivation for the reuse of marble in the Egyptian buildings is the fact that marble was readily available through the trade and transport network.[12] Furthermore, *spolia* is discussed in a recent publication by Mercedes Volait. In her book, Volait studies the cultural appropriation and

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[11] Finbarr Barry Flood, "Image against Nature," *The Medieval History Journal* 9, no. 1 (April 2006): 143–66, https://doi.org/10.1177/097194580500900108.
[12] Michael Greenhalgh, *Marble Past, Monumental Present* (Leiden: BRILL, 2009); Michael Greenhalgh, *Plundered Empire: Acquiring Antiquities from Ottoman Lands* (Leiden: BRILL, 2019).

exchange in nineteenth century Cairo by examining the trade of antiques and antiquities. Volait connects the appearance of *spolia* to the display of victory and power. In addition, the reuse of building material sometimes suggests a link to the ancient past of the Egyptian people.[13] Doris Behrens-Abouseif published a study diving deeper into the possible motives for the presence of *spolia* in Egypt in which she argues that different categories of *spolia*tion co-existed in Medieval Egypt and these were associated with different meanings.[14]

Whereas Flood noticed in 2006 that scholars were too much focused on *spolia* in singular buildings, these recent publications offer a more comprehensive overview of *spolia* in the Islamic context. These studies do not focus on a single building anymore. Rather they look at multiple religious buildings, gates, city walls, palaces, fountains et cetera. However, a study focusing on a specific typology of the occurrence of *spolia* in Egypt is still lacking.[15]

When studying the motives for the reuse of building material in Egypt, it is more of a puzzle to connect all the bits and pieces that are spread amongst all different kinds of publications. It seems that a comprehensive study that examines the reasons for the presence of *spolia* in Egypt is not available in the existing literature. Besides, the link between *spolia* and the concept of *jahiliyyah* has not been made in the academic literature. This thesis aims to fill the gap in the existing literature by conducting a more in-depth research on the possible reasons of the existence and use of *spolia* in Egypt and by doing so to contribute to a better understanding of the concept of *jahiliyyah*. The goal is to study one specific type of building, namely religious foundations, to be able to find more reliable conclusions on the main reasons for the use of *spolia* in an Islamic context.

## Research question & method

The academic literature shows that there is not one way of interpreting the concept of *jahiliyyah*. The suggested translations and definitions of *jahiliyyah* tend to portray the pre-Islamic past in a negative light. In the academic literature, the idea prevails that the Muslims try to triumph over the past. This thesis is studying whether the Muslims really triumphed over the past by looking further into the use of *spolia* in the Mamluk period. Academic literature about *spolia* is readily available. Most of this literature focuses on the region where the Romans once ruled. It

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[13] Mercedes Volait, *Antique Dealing and Creative Reuse in Cairo and Damascus 1850-1890* (Leiden: BRILL, 2021).

[14] Doris Behrens-Abouseif, "Between Quarry and Magic: The Selective Approach to *Spolia* in the Islamic Monuments of Egypt," in *Dalmatia and the Mediterranean*, vol. 1 (The Netherlands: Leiden: Brill, 2014), 402–25.

[15] I am limited to the academic literature written in English or Dutch, as I do not have knowledge of the Arabic language.

is known, that in Egypt *spolia* are also present in large numbers. Academic literature about *spolia* in the Islamic world is available – even though it is understudied in comparison to the amount of literature available on this topic in the Italian context. However a more in-depth study which systematically deals with a specific typology of *spolia* in Egypt is a relatively unexplored domain.

This thesis aims to fill this void in the academic literature, by proposing the following research question: **What are the reasons for the reuse of pre-Islamic building materials in religious buildings built by the Mamluks in Cairo?** This research question focuses on the pharaonic and Christian *spolia* placed in a Islamic context by the Mamluk builders in their religious buildings in Cairo. The central focus in this thesis is on the possible reasons for both the existence, and the use of *spolia* in the Egyptian context. Inherent to this question, is the question that originated from the scholarship on *jahiliyyah*: How did the Muslims think about the pre-Islamic past?

The overarching goal of this research is to create a better understanding of the Muslim identity and it's perspective on the past by studying the presence of pre-Islamic *spolia* in Islamic buildings. This also broadens the knowledge of architecture in the Islamic world through the lens of *spolia*. The research questions deals with Muslims under the reign of the Mamluks. By dealing with the research question specifically focused on the Mamluk period in Egypt, the issues coming to light in this thesis could also apply to the rest of the Muslim world. Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that this thesis merely focuses on the Islam in the context of the Mamluk period in Egypt and avoids assumptions about Islam in general.

This study aims to offer a useful insight of the meaning of reused pre-Islamic building material and the mindset in the Mamluk architecture. The term 'pre-Islamic' in the research question calls for some more attention. 'Pre-Islamic' could suggest that the building materials that have been reused originally came from buildings that had been built before the emergence of Islam. This would mean that this thesis only would study the reused building elements dating earlier than 632 AD. On the contrary, this is not the case. Rather, this thesis focuses on reused building material from any time until the building wherein it was placed as *spolia* was built.[16] Here, 'pre-Islamic' is closely linked to the concept of *jahiliyyah*. 'Pre-Islamic' refers to those elements that are not Islamic, it refers to the identity that came before Islam. This identity is interpreted as Christian and the identity of the pharaonic era in this thesis. This means that the Christian *spolia* that is analysed in this thesis, could have come from Christian buildings that

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[16] Since I am no expert in building materials or architecture, I am not able to locate any origins or dates.

were built in the same time period as the Muslims were present in Egypt. However, the religious identity is from before Islam.

The main research question of this thesis is broad. To narrow down the scope, the question is researched within the context of a few case studies. Before conducting the case studies, the available literature will be studied to determine the different interpretations of the concept of *spolia* in the Islamic world. Since the literature covering the Islamic context is limited, where needed, the literature on *spolia* in the western context is also reviewed. Maria Fabricius Hansen defines *spolia* as older building material that are incorporated in newer buildings. Another form of *spolia* is that complete buildings are converted to new purposes, such as the Hagia Sophia in Turkey. The working definition of *spolia* that is central in this thesis is derived from this literature study.

The case studies that will be examined for this thesis are focused on religious buildings built by the Mamluks in Cairo (1250 – 1517 AD). These buildings include, mosques, madrassas and khanqahs. Those built by the Mamluks are built with reused building elements but are not – as so far known – built by reusing or repurposing a complete building. Therefore, this thesis solely focuses on the first definition of Hansen and leaves out the second defintion.

The different reasons for the reuse of building materials, such as *spolia* as a martial or political statement, or as material for recycling will be examined. The findings of the literature study of both, the Roman and Islamic *spolia* together, will lead to a comprehensive understanding of the reasons for the reuse of building material. This study will be done by keeping the academic literature on the concept of *jahiliyyah* in mind.

The findings of this literature study will be tested in a corpus of case studies. As already mentioned in the historiography, Egypt is an obvious choice to conduct fieldwork on this topic for several reasons. First, the Egyptian building tradition is mostly based on the use of stone which makes the reuse of those materials possible. Second, there was and still is a very strong pre-Islamic architectural presence in Egypt which was partly still present during the Mamluk era. These pre-Islamic buildings could have served as a quarry of building materials for the Mamluk builders. Third, during the Mamluk period in Egypt, there was a rich Mamluk society which invested much effort and resources in the business of building. Many (religious) buildings that are still part of the street life in Cairo nowadays were built by the Mamluks. From a practical standpoint, I would like to add safety of travel as a reason. Egypt is not the only country that uses stone in their architecture, Syria for example also uses a lot of stone for buildings. However, in 2023, Egypt is a safer environment to conduct research. These four

obvious reasons lead to Egypt to be chosen as the location of the case studies that are central in this thesis.

This thesis examines a selection of buildings containing *spolia* located in Egypt. There are many different buildings built with reused pre-Islamic material scattered over Egypt, however, this thesis solely focuses on the ones in Cairo. In relation to reflecting on the concept of *jahiliyyah*, I only focus on buildings built for a religious purpose, namely mosques, madrasas and khanqahs. Since the academic literature mostly mentions the reused building elements in Mamluk monuments, the fieldwork focuses on the period of Mamluks. This fieldwork is conducted during five weeks, divided over two journeys in the months of February and April 2023.

The goal of the fieldwork is to gather detailed information about the reused pre-Islamic building materials in these Islamic buildings and the history and context of the buildings itself. This is done by an *in-situ* observation, which means that I visit the buildings themselves. During these visits, I look for the reused elements myself and study these in their own context by observing the rest of the building that the *spolia* is part of.

The academic literature is the starting point for identifying the specific buildings that are examined in the case studies.[17] One would expect that the two volumes written by K.A.C. Creswell – which is a real classic in the study of architecture – about the Muslim monuments in Cairo also would mention the presence of *spolia* in the buildings. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Creswell mentions that one khanqah "has a granite sill carved with hieroglyphs". [18] However, he does not elaborate on this detail any further. Therefore, I had to look elsewhere for more clues on where to find *spolia*, which lead to accessing two travel guides which mention the reuse of building material.[19] On the basis of these findings a list of twenty buildings has been identified. The academic literature states that the Mamluks are known for the reuse of building material in their buildings.[20] From this list of twenty buildings, ten religious buildings have been built during the Mamluk period. One of these is not open for visit, so this mosque was to excluded from this thesis. Thus, the final number of case studies is nine: Khanqah of

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[17] Behrens-Abouseif, "Between Quarry and Magic"; Greenhalgh, *Marble Past*; Greenhalgh, *Plundered Empire*; Bernard O'Kane, *The Mosques of Egypt* (American University in Cairo Press, 2016); Volait, *Antique Dealing and Creative Reuse*.

[18] K.A.C. Creswell, *The Muslim Architecture of Egypt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959). This publication contains detailed descriptions on Muslim monuments in Egypt until the year 1326. This publication does not discuss the majority of the buildings that are studied in this thesis as these were established after 1326.

[19] Jessica Lee and Anthony Sattin, *Lonely Planet: Egypt*, 14th ed. (Lonely Planet, 2021); Caroline Williams, *Islamic Monuments in Cairo: The Practical Guide*, 5th ed. (American Univ in Cairo Press, 2002).

[20] Volait, *Antique Dealing and Creative Reuse*; Greenhalgh, *Marble Past*; Behrens-Abouseif, "Between Quarry and Magic."

Sultan Baybars Al-Jashinkir II, Mosque of Sultan Al-Nasir Muhammad, Mosque of Al-Maridani, Aqsunqur Mosque, Mosque and Khanqah of Shaykhu, Mosque of Sultan Hassan, Mosque of Sultan Al-Zahir Barquq, Funerary Mosque of Sultan Al-Mu'Ayyad Shaykh and the Funerary Complex of Khayrbak. The reused materials in these mosques vary from columns, capitals, column bases, architrave, shafts, portals and thresholds. Three of these buildings contain a threshold from the pharaonic era and two include a column capital showing a cross. One of these buildings is a khanqah instead of a mosque. Since both are places of worship in the Islam and contain similar architectural Mamluk elements, this building is included in this study. This thesis examines the reason for the reuse of these two specific pre-Islamic elements in the Islamic buildings in Cairo. I aim to test whether the Mamluks really see pre-Islam as barbaric by triumphing over the past.

Caroline Williams has written a practical guide for visiting Islamic monuments in Cairo. This publication contains an overview of the architectural styles during the different periods.[21] Although somewhat outdated, it still contains valuable information on the buildings. I use this as a starting point for understanding the architectural features of the religious buildings.

Once all the data has been gathered, the outcome of the fieldwork is linked to the findings of the literature study. The evidence will be considered in the light of the possible interpretations that resulted from the literature study.

The conclusion is derived from the analysis of the case study results. In the conclusion, the different findings and possible interpretations will be considered in order to gain more insights in the Mamluk view on the pre-Islamic past. Despite the fact that this thesis limits itself to a more in-depth study of five religious buildings, the examination of a wider variety of sources is essential for a thorough overview of the subject of *spolia*. This architectural perspective is only one way of handling this topic. The analysis of other buildings or other sources possibly leads to a different outcome. Other sources, such as official documents, travel journals and chronicle accounts, will lead to a deeper understanding on this matter. However, due to the abovementioned considerations, this thesis is limited to several specific buildings located in Cairo.

## Outline

The introduction presents the discourse on *jahiliyyah* and introduces the concept of *spolia*. It shows how this thesis is trying to gain further insights on the concept of *jahiliyyah* by looking

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[21] Williams, *Islamic Monuments*.

into architectural evidence of the incorporation of pre-Islamic elements in Islamic buildings. The state of the art, historiography and context of this thesis have been discussed. Since the academic literature on *spolia* in the Islamic world is limited, the literature study starts with the debate of *spolia* in the Italian context. In Italy many studies on the concept of *spolia* have been done.[22] Ancient Roman art in the form of statues, pillars decorations et cetera are placed in buildings constructed centuries later. This literature study develops a working definition of *spolia* that will be leading in this thesis.

Chapter 1 "Interpreting *spolia*" discusses the different interpretations of *spolia* that are suggested in the academic literature. Where needed, the literature on *spolia* in the Italian context will be referenced. The paragraphs are categorised based upon the three different interpretations: victory, industrial product and meaningful interrelationships. This chapter tries to connect the interpretations of *spolia* to the academic research on *jahiliyyah*.

Chapter 2 "Case studies of the Mamluk use of *spolia*" presents the findings of the fieldwork conducted by on-site visits. In total, a collection of nine case studies have been observed, whereof five contain pre-Islamic evidence. This chapter elaborates on these five case studies by discussing each individual building per paragraph which leads to some findings of the collection as a whole. It is a quantitative description of the data gathered during the fieldwork trip.

Chapter 3 "Interpreting *spolia* in the Mamluk context" contains an interpretation of the findings of the case studies. This chapter exists of two parts. The first part discusses the Muslim vision on Christianity and the pharaonic era by studying academic literature.[23] The second part tries to link the findings of Chapter 1 and Chapter 2. This is a qualitative part, which focuses on how the user of the buildings would experience the presence of the identified *spolia*. Evidence for the possible reasons for the use of *spolia* will be discussed. The paragraphs are categorised by the possible interpretations.

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[22] F. Antonelli et al., "The Architectural Reuse of Roman Marble and Stone *Spolia* in the Early Medieval Monte Sorbo Church (Sarsina, Central Italy)," *Archaeometry* 58, no. 3 (April 30, 2015), 353–70; Sinclair Bell, *At the Crossroads of Greco-Roman History, Culture, and Religion: Papers in Memory of Carin M.C. Green* (Oxford Archaeo press Publishing Ltd, 2018); Lex Bosman, *The Power of Tradition: Spolia in the Architecture of St. Peter's in the Vatican* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2004); Clare Lapraik Guest, *The Understanding of Ornament in the Italian Renaissance* (BRILL, 2015); Maria Fabricius Hansen, *The Eloquence of Appropriation: Prolegomena to an Understanding of Spolia in Early Christian Rome* (Rome: L'erma Di Bretschneider, 2003); Maria Fabricius Hansen, *The Spolia Churches of Rome Recycling Antiquity in the Middle Ages* (Aarhus University Press, 2015).

[23] Michael Cook, "Pharaonic History in Medieval Egypt," *Studia Islamica*, no. 57 (1983): 67–103; Michael Cooperson, "Al-Maˆmun, the Pyramids and the Hieroglyphs," in *'ABBASID STUDIES II: Occasional Papers of the School of 'Abbasid Studies Leuven 28 June – 1 July 2004*, ed. John Nawas, vol. 177 (Uitgeverij Peeters en Departement Oosterse Studies, 2010); Petra M. Sijpesteijn, "Akhmīm," ed. Kate Fleet et al., *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, August 4, 2014.

These three chapters lead to the conclusion which aims to answer the research question and discusses the new questions it raises. Additionally, the limitations of this research are examined in this part. The thesis ends with the bibliography.

# CHAPTER 1: Interpreting *spolia*

In Egypt, *spolia* are everywhere. Many buildings contain reused building material. Different kinds of materials have been reused, such as marble, stone and granite. Even wood was being reused in Islamic architecture, however due to the limited extent of this thesis the reuse of wood is not included in this study. In Egypt, a huge amount of reused building material is made from hard stone material, and therefore, this study focusses solely on these hard materials. The building materials come in different forms, such as panels, blocks and columns. The reason why these specific building materials have been reused is subject of discussion. The academic literature offers several possible explanations for the presence of *spolia* in specific buildings.

This chapter aims to offer an overview of the different interpretations of *spolia* by examining the available secondary literature. The categorization that is operated is based upon the three phases of scholarship as distinguished by Kinney.[24] These interpretations are derived from studies on *spolia* in the western context. This chapter aims to categorize the literature on *spolia* in Islamic context within these 'western' interpretations. Hereby is the literature on the reuse of building material in the Islamic context the central focus. In addition, further literature on *spolia* in the western context will be accessed there where needed.

## 1.1.  Emblem of victory

"The spoils of war" is a well-known phrase in modern times and refers to the booty which is collected and displayed after a military victory as opposed to the plundering and looting by individual combatants. In the academic literature, *spolia* are often explained as symbols of victory. This victory did not only take place in the military domain, but also on a political, religious and historical level. For example, the succession of a ruler could lead to a new political era that could be marked for all to see by demolishing or defacing buildings from the past era. The different domains are intertwined and hard to distinguish from each other. In spite of this, this paragraph discusses the interpretation of *spolia* as an emblem of victory by these four subcategories: military victory, political power, religious authority and historical authenticity. By examining each domain apart, this paragraph aims to better understand the interpretation of *spolia* as an emblem of victory.

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[24] Dale Kinney, "Rape or Restitution."

### 1.1.1. Military victory

Some scholars interpret *spolia* as a symbol for a military victory. Volait noticed that some columns used by the Mamluk builders show engraved crosses. She argues that the display of these specific columns serve as an emblem of victory over the Crusaders.[25] Behrens-Abouseif also studied building material reused in Egyptian buildings that originated from the Crusaders. Behrens-Abouseif interprets this kind of *spolia* as a Mamluk celebration of their victory over the Crusaders. Here, the focus is on the emotional nature of this victory. However, Behrens-Abouseif argues that it is difficult to identify the *spolia* as a trophy. Some building material showing architectural characteristics of the Crusaders are not *spolia*. The Gothic style became a tradition in the region because of the many contacts – not only in the form of warfare but also in the form of trade – between the Crusaders and Mamluks. Sometimes an object that looks like *spolia* are not actually reused building material, but just newly manufactured because it fits a certain architectural style.[26] This makes it difficult to distinguish the Gothic style as *spolia* or as newly built.

### 1.1.2. Political power

In the political domain, Hansen argues that architecture and political power were consciously connected. *Spolia* were therefore used as a tool in religious and political "endeavours". In the western context, the reuse of specific Roman building material could symbolize the greatness of the ruler by comparing themselves to the Roman emperors.[27] In the Mamluk context, a similar idea could be the reason for the reuse of specific building material. Using Roman columns or other specific building material, manufactured under the reign of another powerful ruler, could emphasize the religious or political power of that leader.

### 1.1.3. Religious authority

Also in the religious domain, *spolia* could be interpreted as a metaphor for a specific kind of authority. Again in the western context, Hansen argues that *spolia* could be interpreted as "a victory over tainted structures" by destroying an ancient pagan religion and reusing their building materials.[28] This could explain the reuse of building material originating from specific

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[25] Volait, *Antique Dealing and Creative Reuse*, 169.
[26] Behrens-Abouseif, "Between Quarry and Magic," 416-423.
[27] Hansen, *The Eloquence of Appropriation*,157; *The Spolia Churches*, 65-71.
[28] Hansen, *The Spolia Churches*, 70-71.

religious communities. Moreover, Behrens-Abouseif argues that the religious authority is translated to the targeting of popular beliefs by ether destroying, or Islamicizing specific monuments and religious buildings.[29] The latter corresponds to Goldziher's interpretation of *jahiliyyah*, that the pre-Islamic religion(s) are barbaric and therefore there is a deliberate destruction of their buildings needed.

### 1.1.4. Historical authenticity

Some academics closely connect the presence of *spolia* to reference to "a glorious past". Hansen understands *spolia* in the western context as reflecting respect towards the older culture and a wish to let it live on in the new structures. Moreover, the use of *spolia* should be understood in relation to ideas about the past and as "a rejection, transformation, or continuation of the powers and qualities of previous times".[30] The reuse of certain building elements to incorporate the authority and sanctity of the past could also be applicable to the Mamluk context. The era of the ancient Egyptians is known for their pharaohs and their supernatural status and power. For the Mamluks who lived many centuries later, it would definitively become a form of dignity to be compared to this sophisticated civilization. Chapter 3 will further elaborate on how the Muslims viewed upon the pre-Islamic past.

This paragraph has examined the interpretation of *spolia* as an emblem of victory by studying the four different domains. These four domains, however, should not be understood as isolated categories. Rather, these categories are closely connected and even intertwined on all levels.

By contrast, some scholars try to warn that one should be careful about assuming that the presence of *spolia* automatically indicates a certain victory, political agenda or an identification with a glorious past.[31] According to these scholars, *spolia* should be interpreted as an industrial product or as a magical talisman.

### 1.2. Industrial product

During the second phase of the studies of *spolia* in western context, *spolia* were studied as an industrial product.[32] This scholarship took a turn to the historical art domain by focusing on the

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[29] Behrens-Abouseif, "Between Quarry and Magic."
[30] Hansen, *The Eloquence of Appropriation*, 271.
[31] Greenhalgh, *Marble Past*, 464; Yekaterina Barbash and Kathlyn M. Cooney, *The Afterlives of Egyptian History* (American University in Cairo Press, 2021), 86.
[32] Kinney, "Rape or Restitution."

different contexts of the reused building material. The focus of this discourse was to study *spolia* as a solid, useful building material instead of a display of martial booty. In more recent publications *spolia* are also studied as an industrial product. This category can be divided into four different subcategories: accessibility, availability, aesthetic and conspicuous consumption. The first two subcategories are more practical solutions and the latter are explanations from decorative perspectives. Before looking further into these subcategories, the way how *spolia* could become an industrial product of recycling is shortly discussed.

Greenhalgh dismantled a system of "partage" that evolved throughout the nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century which facilitated *spolia* becoming an industrial product:

> "[T]he Europeans did the digging and paid the costs, and the finds were shared out between the excavators and the Empire. It was, in effect, the rich robbing the poor [...]."[33]

Many antiquities had already been removed from Egypt by travelers, sometimes bolstered by consular aid. This removal of antiquities evolved into a "division of spoils"- system which was sustained by official regulation under the Ottomans – who ruled over Egypt from 1517 until the nineteenth century. As a result of this system, many Egyptian artifacts ended up in European museums and public squares and fora. Since many of the ancient sites were located on the flanks of the transport-accessible River Nile, Egypt was easiest of all countries to despoil of large monumental stone artefacts.[34]

### 1.2.1. Accessibility

In a book published a decade earlier, Greenhalgh unraveled the trade and transport network of marble. Greenhalgh states that Alexandria had a good accessibility by sea and was therefore a port and supplier of old marble, already since late antiquity. It was still the source of the majority of marble used by the Mamluks in Cairo until the sixteenth century.[35] The accessibility of marble through the River Nile could be seen as an important reason for the existence of *spolia* in Cairo. It is known that in the sixteenth century, marble was plenty available since it was often used in palaces, private houses, mosques and madrasas. As a consequence, this enthusiastic use of marble led to the material becoming more sought after and scarcer.[36]

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[33] Greenhalgh, *Plundered Empire*, 546-547.
[34] Greenhalgh, 388.
[35] Greenhalgh, *Marble Past*, 447-459.
[36] Greenhalgh *Marble Past*, 447

### 1.2.2. Availability

As solution for the scarcity of good quality marble, the Mamluks started reusing building materials by plundering the surrounding area, for example the ancient city of Alexandria. Several earthquakes had left a substantial section of the ancient city of Alexandria in ruins. These ruins supplied building materials for the rebuilding of medieval cities in Egypt, such as Cairo. So Alexandria was not only the pass-through for marble, but the buildings in the city itself were also a source of marble.[37] Furthermore, Greenhalgh argues that the pharaonic columns, which are often reused in mosques and madrasas, "were no doubt employed because plenty were available."[38] The availability also becomes clear by the fact that there is no direct evidence that the Mamluks quarried hard stone material themselves. Rather, medieval Egyptian builders made use of already existing building materials.[39] From a financial perspective, the reuse of building material is a rather pragmatic solution to save on quarrying and transportation costs.

### 1.2.3. Aesthetic

The availability of these older building materials in the form of blocks, columns and many other shapes lead to a diversity in styles. Columns and capitals of different styles and sizes were combined in the same buildings. The *spolia* used in medieval Egypt do not suffice to meet serial requirements.[40] In the western use of *spolia*, however, Hansen notes that the reused building materials often serve a specific style, such as symmetry. According to Hansen, there was even a hierarchy of building material. Certain material had a specific meaning, for example porphyry was a figuration of divinity. According to this hierarchy, the most important materials were deliberately placed in the most important places.[41]

Barbash argues that the most plausible reason for the presence of *spolia* in Egypt is their decorative purpose.[42] Williams, on the contrary, is not so sure of the decorative role of these reused building materials. Williams notes a lack of aesthetic feeling by the "somewhat haphazard use of such materials in many other Islamic buildings."[43] This lack of symmetry and flexibility in style is in contrast to the reuse of building material in western context. Whether

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[37] Greenhalgh, 447-448.
[38] Greenhalgh, 464.
[39] Greenhalgh, *Marble Past*, 452; Behrens-Abouseif, "Between Quarry and Magic," 405.
[40] Behrens-Abouseif, "Between Quarry and Magic," 413.
[41] Hansen, *The Eloquence of Appropriation*, 122-123.
[42] Barbash, *The Afterlives of Egyptian History*, 86.
[43] Williams, *Islamic Monuments*, 55.

this flexible use of *spolia* is part of an intended architectural style is not sure. The flexibility of style could be a result of the absence of any better options. By contrast, it could also be the result of the intent to send a certain message.

### 1.2.4. Conspicuous consumption

This intended message could be linked to the wealth and status of the owner or builder of a certain building. In the academic literature, Volait states that the display of a precious ancient object projected the wealth and a taste of art of the owner or builder.[44] Greenhalgh, in turn, argues that Mamluk rulers viewed architectural magnificence as an important element in their reign.[45] This use of *spolia* brings to mind the concept of 'conspicuous consumption', which refers to the "spending on goods and services primarily to display income or wealth, or to attain a certain social status."[46] This concept is mostly used in the western context and often explained by the example of the Roman elite. In Roman Italy, some elites had slaves for very specific tasks such as holding a sunscreen or helping their master to put on their shoes. These slaves are not exactly 'need to have'. Rather they are used by the Roman elite to display their own richness and (social) status.[47] Turning back to the Egyptian context, the aesthetic use of reused building material could be explained by this concept of conspicuous consumption. The flexible use and placement of *spolia* could have been done on purpose with the intent to show as many different elements of specific materials as possible. In this way the use of *spolia* as an industrial product is also connected to the reason for the reuse of building material to show political power and authority.

## 1.3.    Meaningful interrelationships

The third phase of the scholarship of *spolia* is characterized by the meaningful interrelationships "of part to part and part to whole".[48] Within this phase, academics focus on the connection between the reused building material within the context of its new setting and how they affect each other. In this thesis, interpretations of *spolia* as a talisman are discussed within this category.

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[44] Volait, *Antique Dealing and Creative Reuse*, 170.
[45] Greenhalgh, *Marble Past,* 460.
[46] N. Hashimzade, J. Black, and G. Myles, eds., "Conspicuous Consumption," in *A Dictionary of Economics* (Oxford University Press, 2012).
[47] Pia Marie Potter, "Beroepen in Steden in Romeins Italië: Een epigrafisch onderzoek naar de relatie tussen de mate van urbanisatie en de arbeidsmarkt in Romeins Italië," (Bachelor's thesis, Leiden University, 2020), 30.
[48] Kinney, "Rape or Restitution," 56.

In the western context, the emphasis of interpreting *spolia* is often understood as the translation of authority, dignity or a holy power.[49] This is in contrast with the magical idea that is ascribed to some specific forms of *spolia* in the Islamic world. In the Islamic context, the interpretation of *spolia* as magic talismans in Egypt is ascribed to the Byzantine culture. Greenhalgh noticed that some columns reused in Egypt contain certain inscriptions. These columns were probably used on purpose because of these inscriptions. They function as talismans against spiders and scorpions. Also pharaonic material was used as magical talismans. Part the magic could be probably read in the inscription.[50] However, Behrens-Abouseif noticed that the inscriptions do no refer directly to any magical indications. Behrens-Abouseif also ascribed apotropaic – to prevent evil – meanings to specific use of *spolia*. Many thresholds with hieroglyphs hold magic powers, even though the inscriptions do not refer to any of this.[51] The use of *spolia* as threshold or architrave is logically connected to their function, since apotropaic powers are mostly needed at the entrance or exit of an building.

By analysing the history of Arabic literature, Behrens-Abouseif states that temples and pyramids of ancient Egypt were seen as "repositories of knowledge and wisdom."[52] The latter could explain the absence of any magical or apotropaic references in the inscriptions that were used as *spolia*. Then this could mean that the Byzantines probably did not even know how to translate the Egyptian writing and therefore were not even able to read the inscriptions. The belief that hieroglyphs symbolize their wisdom and knowledge could have been enough for the Byzantines to attribute magical powers to those building materials.

## 1.4.    Sub-conclusion

This chapter examines the different interpretations of *spolia*. The focus is on the interpretations within the Islamic context and, there where needed, the literature on the western context is reviewed. In order to better understand the concept of *spolia* as a whole, it is studied by distinguishing three main interpretations that come to light in the literature: (1) *spolia* as an emblem of victory; (2) *spolia* as an industrial product; (3) *spolia* as meaningful interrelationships. Within these categories sub-categories have been distinguished and examined. The categorisation used in this chapter is not the only way to interpret *spolia*. It gives

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[49] Hansen, *The Eloquence of Appropriation*, 148.
[50] Greenhalgh, *Marble Past*, 464.
[51] Behrens-Abouseif, "Between Quarry and Magic," 408-409.
[52] Behrens-Abouseif, 408.

an overview of the different ways of interpreting *spolia* to create a better understanding of the concept.

Some interpretations are more practical, others take a more symbolic approach. This chapter shows that these different (sub-)interpretations are not isolated, but interwoven. The arguments of the discussed academics confirm that there is not one useful interpretation, but often a combination of different (sub-) categories gives more insight. The interpretation depends on the context of the *spolia*. This asks for an *in situ* study of the reused building material in order to identify the possible reasons for the presence of *spolia* in a specific building.

Next chapter tests the proposed interpretations by conducting several case studies in the Mamluk context. The case studies examine the *spolia* in the religious buildings built by the Mamluks in Cairo. Overall, *spolia* as an industrial product would probably be the most likely explanation in these case studies. Since these buildings are religious foundations, the political and religious affiliation will also be examined.

# CHAPTER 2:    case studies of the Mamluk use of *spolia*

The previous chapter discussed the ways of interpreting *spolia*. This second chapter introduces the data gathered during the fieldwork The focus of this thesis is on the reason for the application of *spolia* in the Mamluk period in Egypt (1250 – 1517 AD) to acquire more insights on how the Mamluks viewed upon the pre-Islamic past. In order to do so, this second part of the thesis is built upon fieldwork conducted on-site. Nine religious buildings built during the Mamluk period in Cairo have been studied during on site-visits. Specifically the reused building elements in these religious buildings were observed. It is important to note that the phenomenon of *spolia* is not an 'original' characteristic of the Mamluk architecture. Already during the preceding period of the Abbasid and Fatimid Caliphate (750 – 1250 AD), *spolia* were used in the architecture of religious and other buildings.[53] However, this thesis focusses on the religious buildings built by the Mamluk Muslims because the literature on the topic of *spolia* mostly mentions buildings built within this period.

The fieldwork was conducted over five weeks in Cairo. The first three weeks took place in February 2023 and were used to investigate the context of the buildings and to lay the foundations for the second phase of the fieldwork. I made contact with some local institutions that could help me in my quest to locate *spolia* in religious buildings built by the Mamluks and to investigate their context within the site in its current form and use.[54] The information gathered in the first field visit to Cairo was then combined with the findings of the academic literature to make a list of ten religious buildings which contain *spolia* and were built by the Mamluks in Cairo. This list of buildings was the starting point for the second visit to Cairo. The in-situ observations were done during last two weeks of April 2023. The listed buildings were visited one by one, and observations, notes and photos of the *spolia* within their context were gathered. The study is based on a total of nine religious buildings; the Mosque of Sultan al-Zahir Baybars-I is excluded because of construction work.

The *in-situ* observations of the nine Islamic buildings show that *spolia* are used in different ways. Columns, marble panels, pilasters, stone blocks, monoliths et cetera have been taken from other sites and placed in these buildings. The fieldwork demonstrates that there are three different kinds of *spolia* present in the religious buildings built by the Mamluks in Cairo.

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[53] The Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo is built by the Fatimids. This mosque contains *spolia*, such as three column capitals showing a Christian cross.
[54] I would like to specially thank Dina Bakhoum (IFAO) for the sparring moments and her guidance.

The first one is the reuse of pharaonic building materials such as the stone that is used as a threshold in the Funerary mosque of Khayrbak which contains hieroglyphic inscriptions. The second form of *spolia* is the reuse of Christian building elements, mostly visible in the reuse of column capitals in several Mamluk mosques. The last one is the reuse of Islamic materials, which is clearly visible in the doors of the Funerary Mosque of Sultan Al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh that were taken from the Sultan Hassan Complex.[55] This shows that the concept of *spolia* has different layers and is a complex topic which has to be studied carefully. Since the leading research question in this thesis is about the pre-Islamic past in the Mamluk architecture, not all the *spolia* found, is discussed. In other words, the field study focusses on the pharaonic and Christian *spolia* present in the studied religious buildings. This focus does not imply that the other *spolia* are not noteworthy. Rather, further research is needed to determine and interpret these *spolia*, along the same lines as this thesis.

This chapter discusses the results of the *in-situ* observation done on the pre-Islamic *spolia* used in the buildings of religious functions built during the Mamluk period. First the pharaonic *spolia* are discussed, followed by the Christian *spolia*. Within these paragraphs, the Mamluk buildings containing that specific reused building material are examined within the sub-paragraphs according to the chronological order of the year of construction.[56] This chapter only discusses the evidence of specific Christian and pharaonic elements which were found in a total of five different Islamic buildings built by the Mamluks. The rest of the evidence of *spolia* will not be further discussed. I recommend to read the Appendix A, which includes the field notes on the remaining evidence, that could perhaps lead to suggestions for further research.

An important note is that this data is the result of my own observations. Because of language barriers, I was not able to speak with the custodians of the buildings. Depending on the level and accuracy of historical knowledge of the current custodians, this could have added more information that could be useful for this study. However in order to be used as a scientific reference, data from interviews with current custodians requires further study to be able to distinguish present religious or political beliefs from published data on historical developments. In Chapter 3 the results will be analysed by linking it to the findings of Chapter 1.

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[55] O'Kane, *The Mosques of Egypt*, 165; Volait, *Antique Dealing and Creative Reuse*, 170.
[56] I have followed the dates as given by Bernard O'Kane, *The Mosques of Egypt*.

## 2.1. Pharaonic *spolia* in religious Mamluk buildings

The academic literature on reused building material in Mamluk Egypt mentions many different forms of pharaonic elements, such as: pharaonic columns, granite panels and hieroglyphic blocks. I came across all these three forms of pharaonic *spolia* in the Mamluk context during the fieldwork. The first two are not further analysed in this thesis, since I do not have the required knowledge of the relation between the building materials, technical properties and their use in architecture to discuss this topic in depth.

During the fieldwork, I came across three different kinds of hieroglyphic stone blocks as *spolia* in religious buildings built by the Mamluks. In the Al-Mardani Mosque (1334), an hieroglyphic stone is used as a base of a column. A second kind is the architrave of the Mosque and Khanqah of Shaykhu (1349) showing hieroglyphic inscriptions. A third type of reusing hieroglyphic stone blocks is to be found at the entrance of a building, as a stone threshold. This type is remarkable since I have found these thresholds in three different Mamluk buildings, namely in the Khanqah of Sultan Baybars Al-Jashinkir II, Aqsunqur Mosque and Funerary Complex of Khayrbak. The *in-situ* observation of the hieroglyphic stone threshold is further discussed in the following sub-paragraphs.

### 2.1.1. Khanqah of Sultan Baybars Al-Jashinkir II (1307 AD)

As a religious foundation, this khanqah is included in this study. A khanqah is a meetinghouse for the Sufi community. It is a house of worship and therefore has similar functions to a mosque. This specific khanqah is built in 1307 AD by its name holder Sultan Baybars Al-Jashinkir II who ruled from 1309 until 1310 AD.[57] I visited this building to observe the threshold block, see Figure 1. I do not know the specific origin of this block, or any details about how this pharaonic stone ended up in this khanqah. However, it is very likely to assume that this block was made during the pharaonic era as the threshold shows hieroglyphic inscriptions. In fact, Haitham Sotohy states in his article that this threshold is a Pharaonic red granite reused block.[58] Granite is a very strong material, harder than other stones. I observed during the fieldwork that the most important locations to hold the construction of the arches in the mosques are held by granite columns as these are the stronger than the marble or stone columns.

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[57] Leonor Fernandes, "Baybars II, Al-Malik Al-Muzaffar," ed. Kate Fleet et al., *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, 2012, https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_com_24315.

[58] Haitham Sotohy, "Reused Pharaonic Blocks in Cairo Islamic Monuments: Part Two," *Journal of Association of Arab Universities for Tourism and Hospitality* 21, no. 1 (December 1, 2021): 25–33, https://doi.org/10.21608/jaauth.2021.80047.1191.
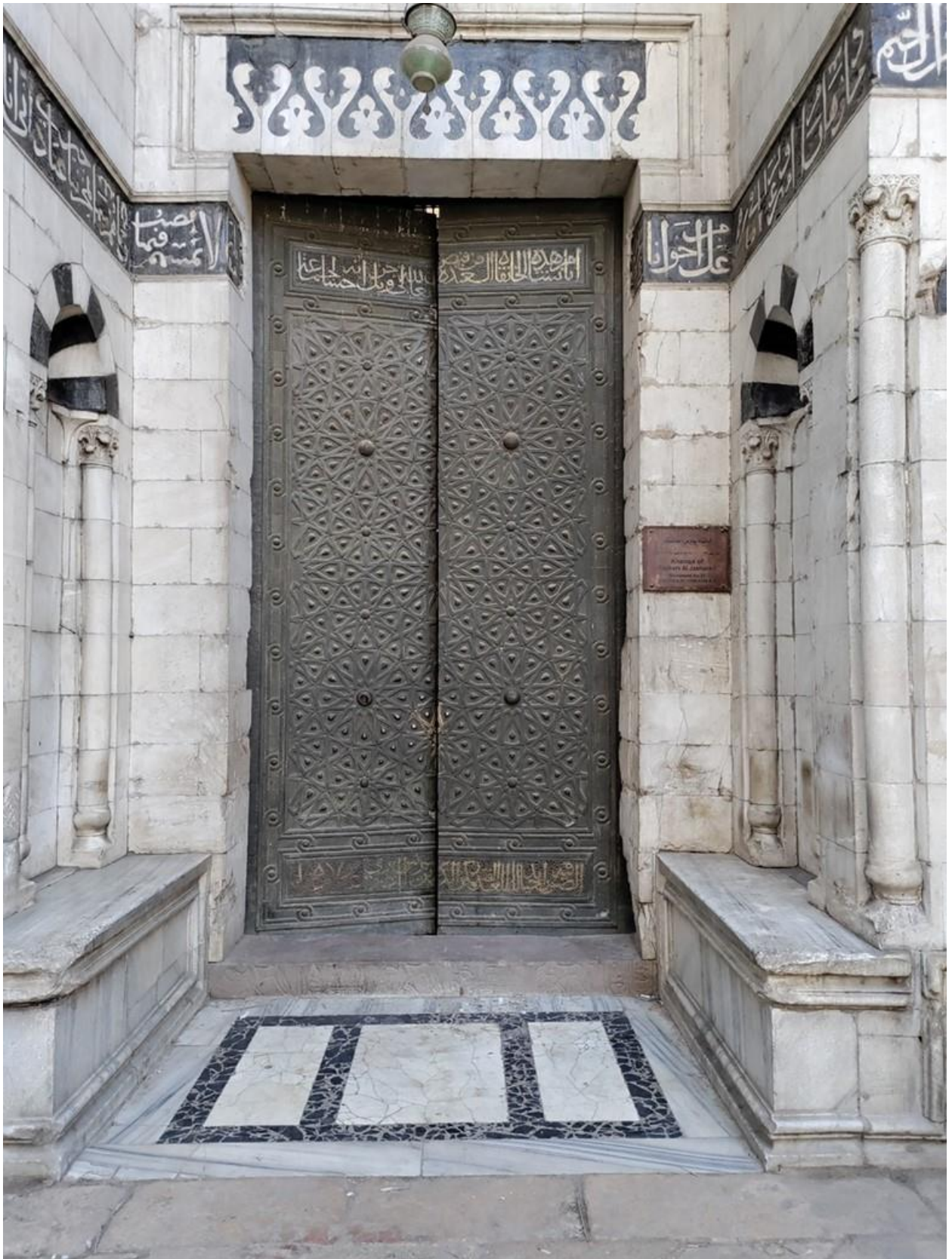
*Figure 1. Entrance of the Khanqah of Sultan Baybars Al-Jashinkir II (1307 AD) as seen from the road* (PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR).

*Figure 2. Threshold at the entrance of the Khanqah of Sultan Baybars Al-Jashinkir II (1307 AD)* (PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR).

The khanqah was closed the moment I visited, so I was not able to study the threshold from the perspective on the inside of the building. This means that the observations are solely based upon the perspective from the outside of the building. When looking at the direction in which the hieroglyphs have been engraved, one can assume that in order to place this pharaonic block as a threshold in this new location, it was turned a quarter to the left (Figure 2). The hieroglyphic inscriptions are turned to the outside of the building and are therefore visible from the street. The stone has some signs of wearing out by its use as a threshold. Despite the abrasion, some parts of the inscriptions are still legible. The inscription contains three larger figures with some hieroglyphic text beneath. Most of the hieroglyphs and cartouches are only half visible. At the end, so in the right corner of the threshold, two (and a half) cartouches are visible. In the cartouches, the names of King Ramses IX (ca. 1130-1110 BC) are inscribed: "Neferkare Setpenre, Ramesses [Cha?]emwaset Meryamun".[59] Ben Haring thinks that the three

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[59] B.J.J. Haring, e-mail message to author, April 30, 2023.

prominent figures are probably images referring to the same king with the same names inscribed beneath.[60] Also the Ankh, which is the Egyptian hieroglyph for "life", is visible in this inscription. This fragmental translation in combination with the fact that the text stops abruptly suggests that the block was originally part of a larger artefact. It could have been cut off in order to fit the measures of the threshold for its new location, thus ignoring its context as a symbol of life.

### 2.1.2.  Aqsunqur Mosque (1346)

In 1346, the Mamluks built the Aqsunqur Mosque, later known as the Blue Mosque, on the orders of Amir Shams ad-Din Aqsunqur. When observing the main entrance of the mosque, no trace of *spolia* is visible at a first glance (Figure 3). When observing more closely, some inscriptions on the threshold become visible. These are only visible in the corners and show some hieroglyphs which are turned upward (Figure 4 and Figure 5). In the middle of the threshold there is no sign of a pre-Islamic past. The direction wherein the stone is put, with the hieroglyphs turned to the sky, could explain why the inscriptions are only visible in the corners. Since this stone functions as the threshold placed at the main entrance, many people have passed this doorstep to enter and to leave the mosque. Through the centuries, all these people stepping on the stone could have led to the smoothness of the material and the fading away of the hieroglyphs by erosion, as opposed to a deliberate act of polishing by craftsmen.

This threshold exists of two equally long blocks which are made from the same material. The style in which the hieroglyphs are carved also look very similar. This makes it very likely that the blocks originally also belonged together. The endings of the stones are covered under de stone of the doorframe. These parts of the blocks could also contain hieroglyphs but are not visible. The hieroglyphs that are visible are probably part of a larger sentence. The sections that are visible refer to a personal name of a woman and the rest could be translated as "standing … all …".[61]

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[60] Haring, e-mail message to author, April 30, 2023.
[61] Haring, e-mail message to author, April 30, 2023.

*Figure 3. Main entrance of the Aqsunqur Mosque (1346 AD)* (PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR).

*Figure 4. The left block of the threshold showing hieroglyphs at the main entrance of the Aqsunqur Mosque (1346 AD). The photo is taken from the road* (PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR).

*Figure 5. The right block of the threshold showing hieroglyphs at the main entrance of the Aqsunqur Mosque (1346 AD). The photo is taken from the road* (PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR).

### 2.1.3. Funerary Complex of Khayrbak (1502 AD)

Khaybrak established a funerary complex in 1502 AD – before he became the Ottoman governor of Egypt in 1517 AD. Within this complex there is also a mosque. The doorstep to this mosque is made from a pharaonic stone showing hieroglyphs (Figure 6). The hieroglyphs are only visible when entering the mosque and are engraved on top of the stone, directed upwards to the sky. As in the case of the Aqsunqur Mosque, the hieroglyphs are only clearly visible in the side corners. The middle of the threshold has eroded to greater than the depth of the engraved hieroglyphs. However, in this threshold there are still some traces of hieroglyphs visible in the faded part. Thus, I assume that the stone block originally had hieroglyphs in the middle of the stone, which are now eroded by the use as a threshold as opposed to deliberate erasure by the stone craftsmen who placed this *spolia*. Again the endings of the stone block are covered by flanks of the doorframe. Looking closer at the hieroglyphs, it looks like the stone

*Figure 6. Entrance of the Funerary Mosque of Khayrbak (1502 AD). Photo is taken in the funerary complex from the outside of the mosque* (PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR).

*Figure 7. Threshold showing hieroglyphs at the entrance of the Funerary Mosque of Khayrbak (1502 AD). Photo is taken from inside the mosque* (PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR).

has been placed here deliberately and with care. The hieroglyphs do not seem to be a piece of text that is interrupted and cut off as is the case with the threshold placed in the Khanqah of Sultan Baybars Al-Jashinkir II. It looks like the constructor handled it with care and tried not to cut off the hieroglyphs in the middle.

From the perspective of the inside of the mosque, the hieroglyphs are turned to the left by a quarter (Figure 7). At the top of the text, a standing figure of the god Ptah is engraved followed by a king's title – also known as the Serekh – and a cartouche which starts with "Re". Ptah is originally a local deity of Memphis and was seen as the patron of craftsmen. Due to the political importance of Memphis, this cult of this Ptah spread all over Egypt.[62] On the right of the stone block, so the last two sentences of the hieroglyphs are to be read from right to left:

[62] Britannica Academic, s.v. "Ptah," accessed May 10, 2023,
https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/Ptah/61743.

"Her Majesty ensured the […] repeated/ redone/ created […]".[63] These hieroglyphs could refer to a restauration, extension or decoration of an already existing monument. The interrupted text indicates that this stone also must have been part of a larger original. The context of the engraved text does not really make sense in its newer context of the Mamluk mosque.

## 2.2. Christian *spolia* in religious Mamluk buildings

There are different types of Christian *spolia* traced in the Mamluk buildings in Cairo. Some of the *spolia* are described as "Crusader *spolia*", for example the pilasters that are placed at the entrance of the Sultan Hassan Complex.[64] Also, many columns, bases and capitals have been reused.[65] Unfortunately it is very difficult to trace the origins of these building elements. It is known that columns, bases and capitals were taken from churches but also from Roman sites. Since I am no expert on building materials, I am not able to speculate on the original location of specific columns, capitals or bases. Therefore, this thesis only focuses on the capitals of which I can most likely assume as having been taken from a Christian building as these show the specific Christian symbol of a cross.

During the fieldwork, a noteworthy element that returned in at least two different mosques is a small cross in the column capital: Mosque of Sultan Al-Nasir Muhammad and Funerary mosque of Sultan Al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh. In this thesis the concept of column capitals are discussed as an isolated artefact, so independent from the column or base. Many of the columns that have been studied for this research clearly show a history of reuse. Figure 8 is a clear example of how the reused base and column or column and capital are attached to each other. The use of a metal band to attach the elements to eachother show that these bases, columns and capitals were not specifically designed for that building, but have been stripped from a different building and transported to its new location. The *in-situ* observation of the capitals showing a cross is discussed in the following sub-paragraphs.

I am aware of two other buildings that show a cross in one of the column capitals. The first one is the building that is abuts the Khanqah of Shaykhu. On the outside, two columns are placed in the walls. These probably function just as decoration, since they are not likely essential for the building construction. One of these columns supports a capital which shows a small cross. Dina Bakhoum pointed out another example in the Mosque and Khanqah of

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[63] Haring, e-mail message to author, April 30, 2023.
[64] Cathleen A. Fleck, "Crusader *Spolia* in Medieval Cairo. The Portal of the Complex of Sultan Ḥasan," *Journal of Transcultural Medieval Studies* 1, no. 2 (January 1, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1515/jtms-2014-0019.
[65] Volait, *Antique Dealing and Creative Reuse*; Greenhalgh, *Marble Past*; Behrens-Abouseif, "Between Quarry and Magic."

*Figure 8. Example of a metal band with graffiti (red arrow) that attaches the base to column in the Mosque of Sultan Al-Nasir Muhammad (1318 AD)* (PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR).

Al-Ashraf Barsbay built in 1437 AD. There is one column capital displaying a cross which is placed close to the entrance, so on a visible location.[66] I was not able to examine this capital myself, because it is in another area of Cairo called al-Khanqah. This chapters does not elaborate on these two examples as they do not fit the demarcation of this thesis. The first example is outside and placed in a building abuts the khanqah, so it is not located in the religious buildings itself. The second example is not in Islamic Cairo – the area of study in this thesis, but on the flanks of the city of Cairo. I was not able to visit this building because of its location. Nevertheless, it is important to mention the existence of these two examples as it shows that this phenomenon occurs more often than this chapter perhaps suggests.

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[66] Dina Bakhoum, e-mail message to author, May 3, 2023.

### 2.2.1. Mosque of Sultan Al-Nasir Muhammad (1318 AD)

Al-Nasir Muhammad is known for his many years ruling as sultan over Egypt. His reign was interrupted twice because of his young age. He established a mosque named after him in 1318 AD which is located in the citadel. The mosque is based upon a hypostyle plan, which means that the construction is held by many columns. There is a great variety in materials and sizes of the columns, bases and capitals. The academic literature mostly focusses on the reuse of the pharaonic columns within this mosque.[67] Contrary to what is argued in the literature, my attention was attracted by something else. There are two column capitals that stood out during the examination of this mosque.



*Figure 9. The entrance and hypostyle plan from the courtyard in the Mosque of Sultan Al-Nasir Muhammad (1318 AD). Third column on the left (red circle) of the entrance contains the cross in the capital* (PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR).

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[67] Behrens-Abouseif, "Between Quarry and Magic"; Greenhalgh, *Marble Past*; O'Kane, *The Mosques of Egypt*; Williams, *Islamic Monuments*.

*Figure 10. Column capital with a depiction of a small Christian cross (red circle) in the Mosque of Al-Nasir Muhammad (1318 AD)* (PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR).

When entering the mosque, the third column on the right catches the eye because it displays a small cross (Figure 9 ). Just like many other column capitals is this one made in the byzantine style. However, the small cross is not usually shown in the other reused column capitals. This specific cross is visible from the perspective of a person standing at the entrance of the building, but can also be seen from the courtyard. It is easy to recognize that this symbol is a cross despite some small damage, presumably abrasion caused by transport, construction or the centuries (Figure 10).
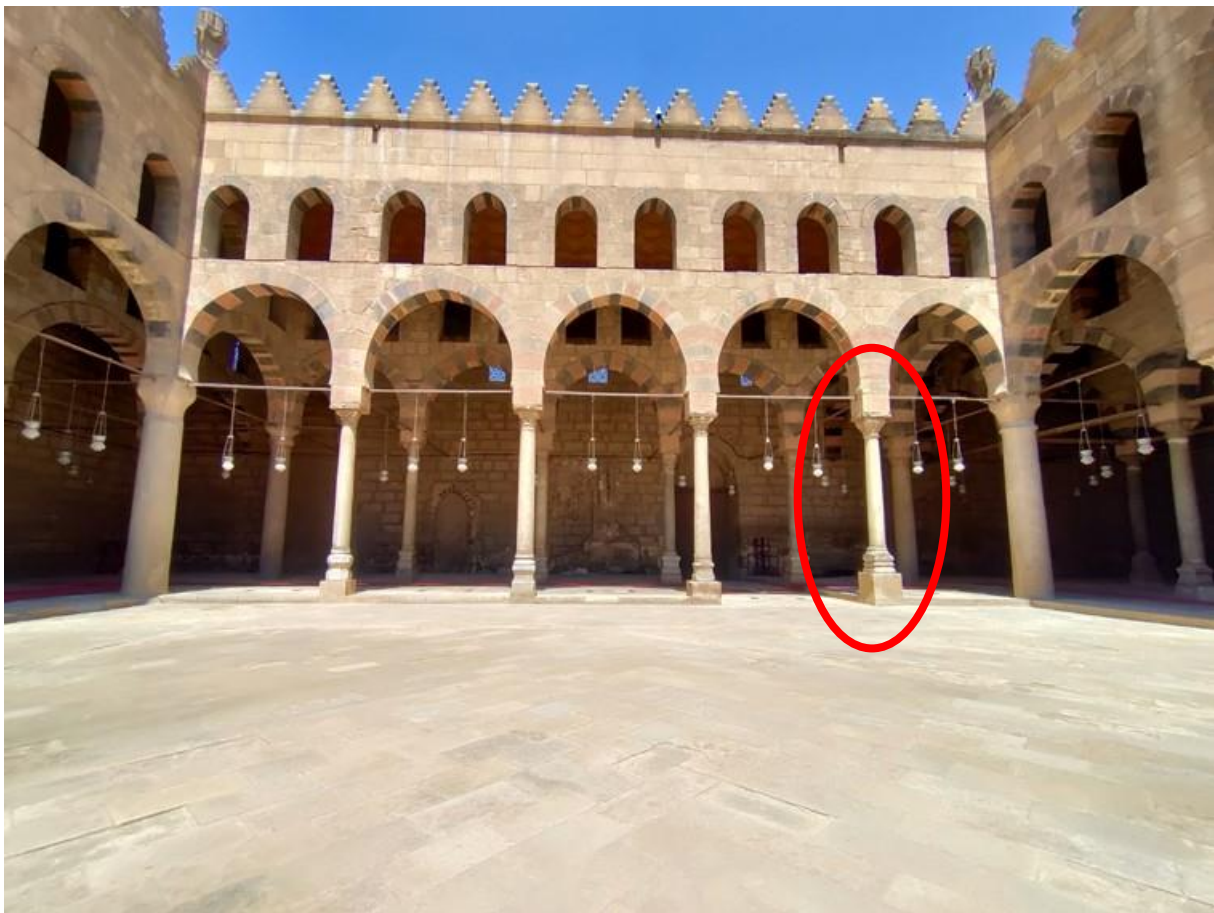


*Figure 11. The hypostyle plan viewed from the courtyard in the Mosque of Al-Nasir Muhammad (1318 AD) . On the left of the hypostyle is the entrance and on the right the mihrab. The red circle shows the specific column that displays the two miniatures* (PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR)*.*
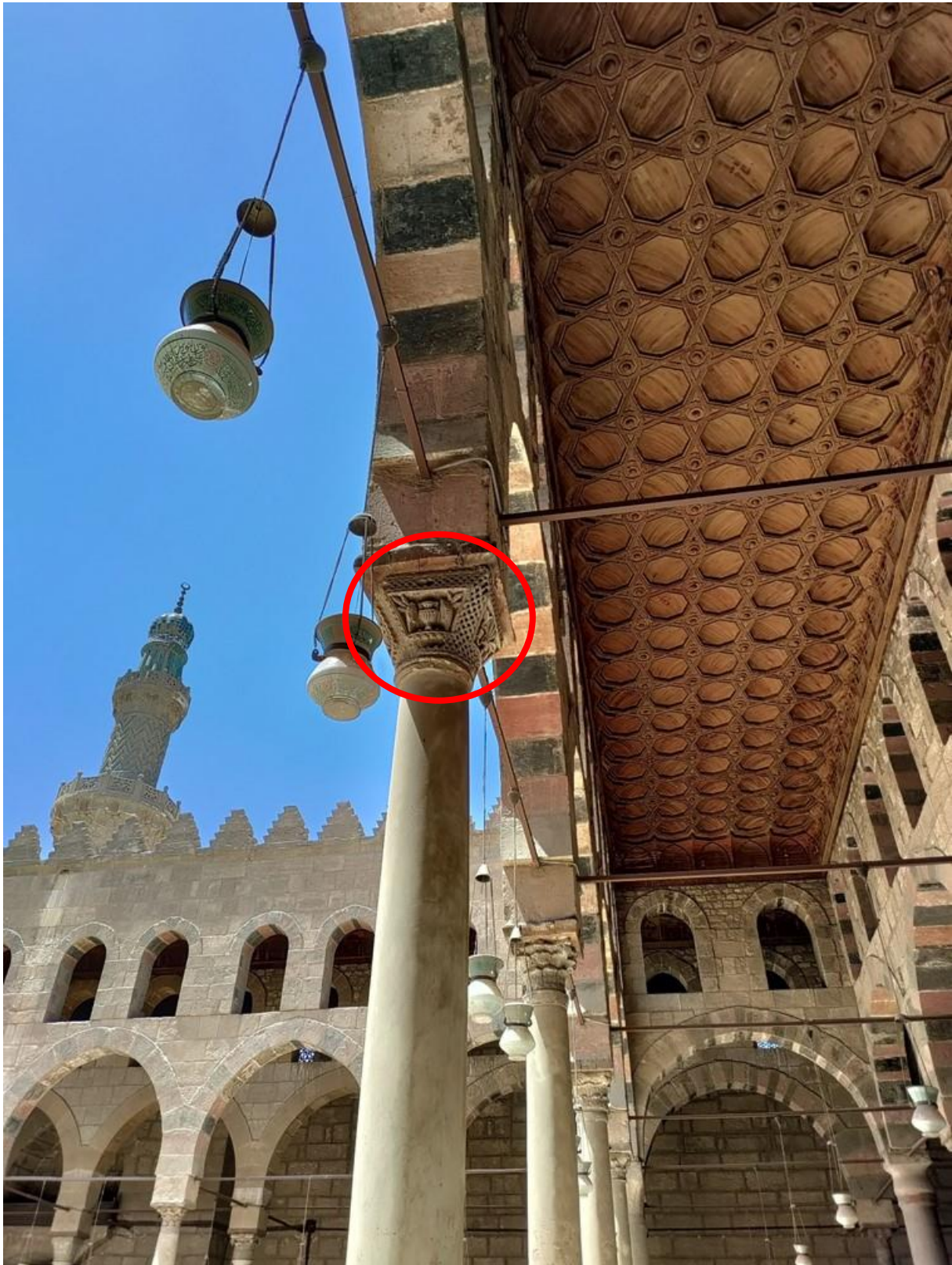
*Figure 12. Column capital showing a miniature of a vase flanked by two birds (red circle) in the Mosque of Al-Nasir Muhammad (1318 AD)* (PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR).

*Figure 13. Column capital showing a miniature of flowers (red cicle) in the Mosque of Al-Nasir Muhammad (1318 AD)* (PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR).

Resuming the path of the colonnade surrounding the courtyard, one comes across another remarkable column capital (Figure 11). This one is different than any other capital that I have seen during this fieldwork. This capital shows two different miniatures. The sides that can be seen when walking the hypostyle hallway show a vase surrounded by two birds (Figure 12). The sides directed to the courtyard and to the wall show some flowers (Figure 13). These two miniatures are comparable to the ones used in column capitals in the Basilica of San Vitale located in Ravenna, Italy. Rizzardi describes the column capital containing a similar flower miniature in his article:

> "combinazione di temi geometrici e vegetali astratti di ascendenza sassanide (palmette fiancheggianti un fiore di loto), strette da un nastro "a pativ", simbolo di regalità, incorniciati da un bordo a treccia viminea che annulla ogni senso naturalistico"[68]

These capitals depict a lotus in the centre flanked by palmettes held together by a "pativ" ribbon which appears to be a royal symbol (Figure 14). This miniature is very similar to the one found in the Mosque of Sultan Al-Nasir Muhammad. The other miniature showing an artefact that looks like a vase flanked by two birds, is also present in Ravenna. In the Basilica San Vitale, there are some double-zone capitals, of which one shows a similar image as the capital found in the mosque: a vase flanked by two birds (Figure 15). Despite the similarities in miniature, the capitals themselves are different. The capital in the basilica is a double-zone one, but the capital in the mosque does not have a second zone. Here, the miniature is carved into the capital itself instead in a band above it. These resemblances suggest a connection between the two buildings which leads to an inevitable question: How does a column capital which is very similar to the ones in the Basilica in Ravenna end up in a mosque in Egypt?

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[68] Clementina Rizzardi, "Ravenna, Il Suo Porto E I Suoi Orizzonti Mediterranei: L'importazione Di Materiali Marmorei Fra Dinamiche Commerciali Ed Ideologiche (v - vi Secolo)," *Hortus Artium Medievalium* 22 (May 2016): 190–99, there 196, https://doi.org/10.1484/j.ham.5.111342.

*Figure 14. Column capitals showing the lotus flowers in the Basilica San Vitale in Ravenna (from* Rizzardi, "Ravenna, il suo porto," 197).
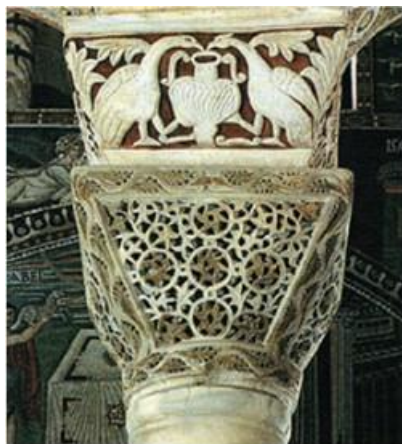


*Figure 15. Double-zone column capital in the Basilica San Vitale in Ravenna (from* Rizzardi, "Ravenna, il suo porto," 195).

### 2.2.2. Funerary Mosque of Sultan Al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh (1416 AD)

This mosque also is built according to the hypostyle architecture. The arches are constructed with columns. It is notable that the majority of the columns including the bases and capitals are in the same style. Some columns even contain Arabic calligraphy. This could be a clue for the indication that these columns have been made specifically for this mosque. In contrast, two columns stand out. These two differ from the rest and are placed in front of the *mihrab*. The columns are made from a black material instead of white. Also, the columns show abrasion which implies that they have been reused. Furthermore, the capital of one of these columns is remarkable for showing a cross placed in a flower wreath (Figure 16). The upper part of the vertical stem is broken off. I do not think that this damage has been done on purpose (Figure 17). If it would be on purpose, why not destroy the rest of the cross as well? I rather think it should be seen as abrasion due to the reuse, transportation or just the many years that have passed.

The capital showing the cross is placed in front of the *mihrab* and is directed to the courtyard. The *mihrab* is an important part of a mosque as it is the direction in which all the Muslims pray. Therefore, the cross is visible for all those praying in this mosque. All these features make the capital showing the cross very visible and it has quite a prominent place in the mosque.

*Figure 16. The qibla wall of the Funerary Mosque of Sultan Al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh (1416 AD). In front of the qibla is the column with the capital showing the cross (red circle). The niches in the carpets show the prayer direction towards the qibla.* (PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR).
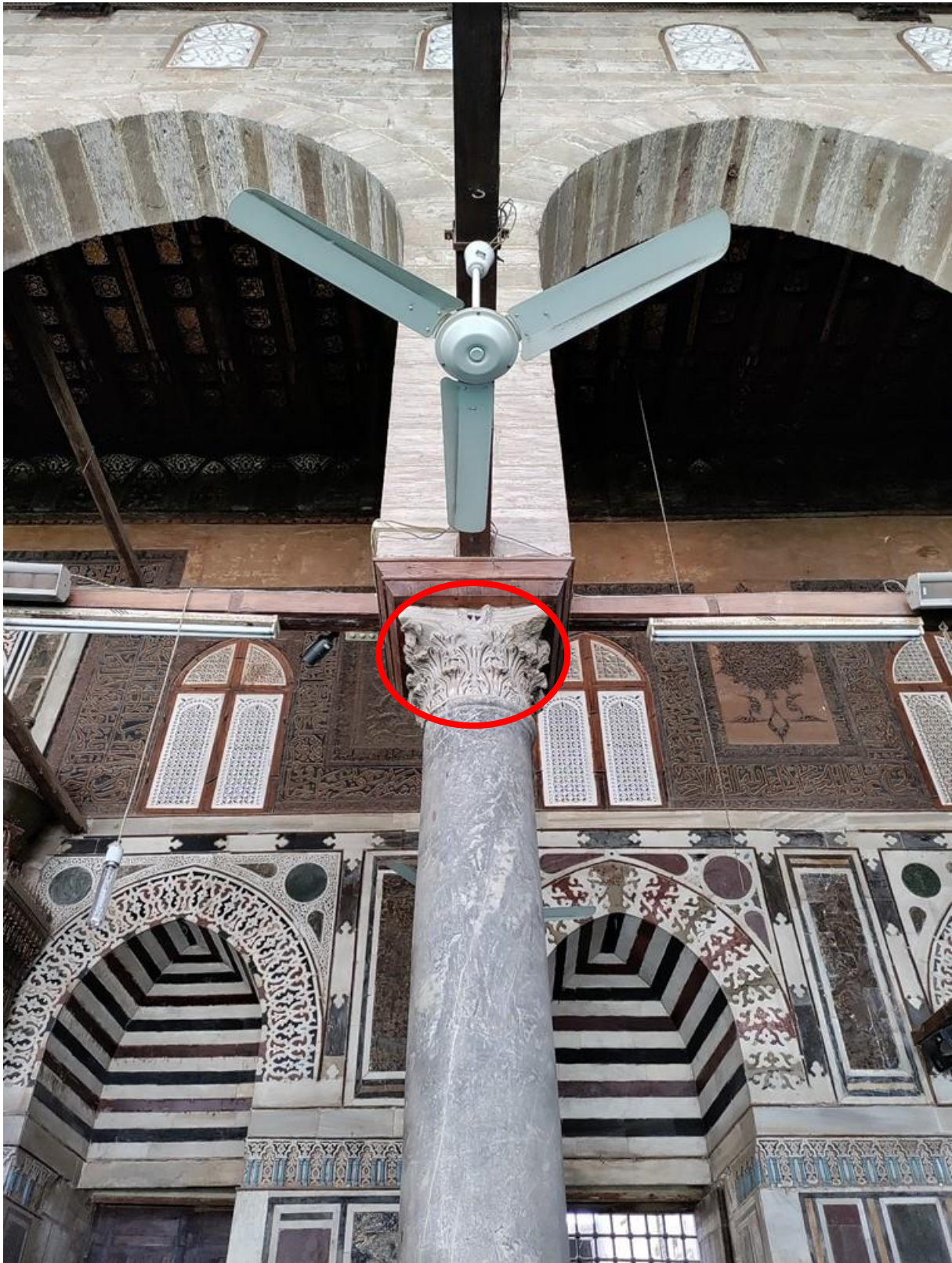
*Figure 17. Column capital displaying a small Christian cross in a wreath (red circle) in the Funerary Mosque of Sultan Al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh (1416 AD). This column is placed in front of the mihrab, of which a small part is visible in the left of the photo.* (PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR).

*Figure 18. Detail of column capital displaying a small Christian cross in a wreath (red circle) in the Funerary Mosque of Sultan Al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh (1416 AD)* (PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR).

## 2.3.   Sub-conclusion

The evidence of *spolia* found during the fieldwork show some remarkable reused building materials from the pre-Islamic past. This chapter presented the data found on the pharaonic blocks used as threshold in religious monuments built by the Mamluks. Three of the nine observed buildings contain such a reused pharaonic threshold and all are placed in the main entrance of the building. This is not decisive number. Nevertheless, this number suggests that it is probably not a coincidence that these hieroglyphic blocks ended up as a threshold in a religious building constructed by the Mamluks. One expects that there should be a specific reason to explain why these blocks were placed in such an important place in an Islamic building. Indeed, the threshold holds a prominent place as all the visitors have to cross the threshold in order to enter the building.

Furthermore, this chapter discussed the data found on the Christian column capitals showing a cross which were placed in pretty striking locations in two mosques. Two of the nine mosques is not a very remarkable score, however, it the prominent location it is placed inside the mosques raises suggest it has been placed there on purpose. This leads to questions: Why were those capitals placed in these visible locations? Why not destroy the crosses or where they perhaps not seen as not symbols of Christianity as another religion? Furthermore, not to forget the column capital displaying the two miniatures which raises questions: Is there any link between the column capital in the Al-Nasir mosque and the ones in the Basilica de San Vitale in Ravenna? The next chapter deals with these questions by linking the results of this second chapter to the outcomes of the literature study done in the first chapter. Chapter 3 discusses the plausible reasons for the use of pre-Islamic *spolia* in Islamic buildings which could provide more insight on how the Mamluk Muslims looked upon the pre-Islamic past in Egypt.

# CHAPTER 3: Interpreting *spolia* in the Mamluk context

The previous chapter presented the findings of the conducted fieldwork in Cairo. Nine religious buildings built by the Mamluks have been observed for their reused building materials. Five of these buildings are the central focus of the analysis since these contain pharaonic or Christian *spolia*. To be more specific, three of the buildings contain pharaonic stones as threshold and two display a cross on a column capital. The other four buildings are left out of this more in-depth analysis. Chapter 2 is a more quantitative investigation of the data gathered during the fieldwork. This third chapter deals with the fieldwork data in a more qualitative way. In this chapter the interpretations that were raised by the academic literature are tested on the case studies. In order to do so, this chapter is divided into two parts. It starts with a textual background about the Muslim perspective on the pre-Islamic era. The academic literature on *jahiliyyah* is examined in order to determine whether there is a positive or negative connotation of the pre-Islamic past. In addition, this chapter looks further into secondary literature on the medieval Arabic manuscripts.[69] Three examples present in the medieval Arabic manuscripts are elaborated on: the pre-Islamic buildings of Akhmim, the story of Hermes and the pyramids.

After analysing the literature, the findings about the Muslim vision on the pre-Islamic era are applied to on the observations made during the fieldwork. This part investigates the Muslim perspective on the concept of 'pre-Islamic' by looking into the differences and similarities between the secondary literature and the findings of the fieldwork. First the pharaonic case studies are examined followed by the Christian *spolia*. The paragraphs are organized according to the three main interpretations of *spolia*: *spolia* as an emblem of victory; *spolia* as an industrial product; *spolia* as meaningful interrelationships. Each interpretation is considered and analysed in the light of the case studies.

## 3.1. Muslim perspective on 'pre-Islamic' era

There is a debate about the exact meaning and translation of the word '*jahiliyyah*'. In the *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* it is stated that almost all the translations and definitions suggest that '*jahiliyyah*' means the opposite of the word '*Islam*'. Many of the

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[69] The secondary literature that is accessed in this thesis is limited to literature written in English, since I do not have knowledge of the Arabic language. A study on this topic in the Arabic literature could lead to different insights.

interpretations refer to the history that took place in Arabia prior to Islam.[70] Before looking into the academic research on *jahiliyyah*, the Quran is consulted on this topic. In the following verse, *jahiliyyah* is described as something 'evil':

> "Then after distress, He sent down serenity in the form of drowsiness overcoming some of you, while others were disturbed by evil thoughts about Allah—the thoughts of ˹pre-Islamic˺ ignorance."[71]

Later on in another verse, the "pre-Islamic ignorance" is repeated again:

> "Is it the judgment of ˹pre-Islamic˺ ignorance they seek? Who could be a better judge than Allah for people of sure faith?"[72]

Again, in a third verse, the Quran recites that women should settle themselves in their homes and not display themselves "as women did in the days of 'pre-Islamic' ignorance."[73] These three examples clearly show the definition of this Quranic's translation of the concept of *jahiliyyah*: "a pre-Islamic ignorance". When looking into the specific example of Pharaoh – a word used to describe the kings of ancient Egypt – in the Quran, a same rejecting view is to be found:

> "˹Remember˺ how We delivered you from the people of Pharaoh, who afflicted you with dreadful torment, slaughtering your sons and keeping your women. That was a severe test from your Lord."[74]

This verse in combination with other examples[75] show that the Pharaoh in the Quran was depicted as tyrant who was ignorant towards God. These examples show that the Quran rejects the pre-Islamic past and that it should be avoided. It depicts Islam as the saviour of these "ignorant" people by presenting Islam as the opposite of the pre-Islamic past. The following paragraphs deal with the interpretations coming forward in the secondary literature that interprets *jahiliyyah*.

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[70] Heinrichs, "D*jahiliyyah*."
[71] Quran 3:154, translated by Quran.com: "Surah Ali 'Imran - 1-200," Quran.com, accessed June 5, 2023, https://quran.com/3?startingVerse=154.
[72] Quran 5:50, translated by Quran.com: "Surah Al-Ma'idah - 1-120," Quran.com, accessed June 5, 2023, https://quran.com/5?startingVerse=50.
[73] Quran 33:33, translated by Quran.com: "Surah Al-Ahzab - 1-73," Quran.com, accessed June 5, 2023, https://quran.com/33?startingVerse=33.
[74] Quran 2:49, translated by Quran.com: "Surah Al-Baqarah - 1-286," Quran.com, accessed June 5, 2023, https://quran.com/2?startingVerse=49.
[75] For example, Quran Ash-Shu'ara (26), translated by Quran.com: "Surah Ash-Shu'ara - 1-227," Quran.com, accessed June 5, 2023, https://quran.com/26?startingVerse.

### 3.1.1. Modern scholarship on 'pre-Islamic' era

As discussed in Chapter 3.1., this translation of the Quran defines *jahiliyyah* as the 'time of ignorance'.[76] *Jahiliyyah* emphasises the identity of the Muslim religion by labelling other religions and cultures as 'pre-Islamic', by technically defining them as ignorant. The latter implies that the Muslims criticized them for not having the correct knowledge about God. In this interpretation, this form of ignorance should be avoided by the Muslims. Another interpretation has been suggested by Ignaz Goldizher who translated it as the 'time of barbarism'. This interpretation of barbarism goes a bit further than labelling the pre-Islamic people as ignorant. With this interpretation, Goldziher casts the non-civilised out as a whole instead of describing them as not knowing about God. According to him, Muhammad was trying to contrast the Islamic identity that he preached with the uncivilised way of life or barbarism of previous times.[77] This interpretation shows a rejective view upon the pre-Islamic past.

Others approach the concept of *jahiliyyah* from yet another perspective. Gerald Hawting, for example, examined the myths in the Quran about the Arabs and pre-Islamic identity. Hawting argues that the idea of *jahiliyyah* was invented by Muslims in the Quran, to make the pre-Islamic past seem pagan, in order to cut out the competition with existing beliefs. The Quran refers to polytheists in order to differentiate Islam from other religions as being the sole monotheist religion. However, these so-called 'polytheists' refer to the Christians and Jews who are actually also monotheists.[78] Hawting argues a more oppressive view upon the pre-Islamic past.

These interpretations of *jahiliyyah* show that the precise meaning of this concept is debated until today. The discussed translations and definitions all tend to reject the pre-Islamic identity as something that should be avoided. However, by contrast, some of the transmitted manuscripts written by medieval Arabic chroniclers show indications for a more neutral attitude towards the pre-Islamic past.

### 3.1.2. Medieval Arabic chroniclers on the pharaonic era

Both, the Quran and the modern scholarship tend to interpret the concept of *jahiliyyah* as rejecting and avoiding the pre-Islamic past. Both sources are focussed on the pre-Islamic period

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[76] Heinrichs, "D*jahiliyyah*."
[77] Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, 202.
[78] Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*.

in geographical terms of Arabia in general. Is this rejecting attitude towards the pre-Islamic history representative for all the Muslims, also of Muslims of the Medieval era? In order to further investigate that question, the secondary literature that deals with the medieval manuscripts written by Arabic authors on certain Egyptian topics is examined. The story of the city of Akhmim, for example, contains relevant information on how the Arabs look upon the pre-Islamic monuments in this city. Petra Sijpesteijn argues that the city of Akhmim was an important religious, economic and administrative centre from antiquity to the medieval period. Medieval Arabs have written about the pagan temples in full colours. Sijpesteijn could tell that these authors were fascinated by the construction of the pagan temples because of their "elaborate descriptions with detailed measurements".[79] At the end of the fourteenth century, these pagan temples were demolished and their material were most likely reused to build Islamic buildings in the neighbourhood. Additionally, a large number of (ruined) monasteries and churches have been described by medieval Arabic chroniclers.[80] The fact that both the pharaonic temples and Christian buildings have been mentioned in the Arabic manuscripts shows their interest in these buildings. The absence of the rejecting and avoiding perspective in these elaborated descriptions of the pagan temples suggest a more neutral attitude towards these pharaonic buildings.

Not only temples and monuments caught the attention of Arabic chroniclers, but also the pyramid monuments. Cooperson has written an article wherein he discusses "certain strains of Egyptological lore current in early Islamic times"[81] by arguing that Caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813-833 AD) actually dug a tunnel to enter the pyramid of Cheops. Cooperson reasons that this Caliph was not a tomb robber, but he was rather trying to enter the pyramids in search of knowledge about and gained by the Egyptians. However, these conclusions are merely based upon speculation. Less speculative is the more neutral view upon the ancient Egyptians by the Arabic chroniclers examined by Cooperson. The use of words like "the wise men of Egypt" and "texts containing wise sayings, talismans, wonders and spells"[82] suggest that these Arabic authors saw a relation between the ancient Egyptians and knowledge. The example of Caliph al-Ma'mun and the Arabic chroniclers are very likely a response to the specific concerns of their time and place.

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[79] Sijpesteijn, "Akhmīm."
[80] Sijpesteijn.
[81] Cooperson, "Al-Ma'mun," 206.
[82] Cooperson, 208.

Michael Cook has also written an article on how the Muslims in medieval Egypt looked upon the pharaonic history, which looked into the medieval stories about how the pyramids were built. In the medieval Arabic manuscripts, different Islamic figures are mentioned as possible builders of the pyramids.[83] This example clearly shows the attempt of medieval Muslims to incorporate the pyramids into the Islamic history.

Not only did the Arab chroniclers argue that the pyramids were built by Islamic figures, some were convinced that Hermes was the builder of the pyramids. A variety of Arabic authors mentioned Hermes, which is the name given by the Greeks to the Egyptian god of knowledge. In the Medieval Arabic discourse, often referred to as Hermis, some Arabic authors even ascribe a prophetic character to Hermes. He is seen as the prophet of science. Van Bladel states that the interest in this figure is not from a certain school of thought, however:

> "The characteristic shared by the dozens of premodern Arabic scholars who discussed Hermes or who dealt with Hermetica was not a putative Hermeticism but merely their common interest in the ancient past and particularly in the study of the works of the ancients in Arabic translation. This interest held across confessional and doctrinal boundaries." [84]

Van Bladel's comment shows that the medieval Arabic authors were receptive to the important role of Hermes. Nevertheless, this interest in Hermes was not clustered in a distinct school of thought. According to Van Bladel, this interest is rather explained by a common interest in the ancient past. The discourse on Hermes shows that the Arabic authors were open to the existence of pagan gods and some even tried to ascribe prophetic characters to this figure. This could be seen as an attempt to Islamicize the Egyptian God of knowledge by integrating it into the Islamic story. The questions remains, whether this integration is due to sincere interest, or to make the pre-Islamic history fit into the Islamic story.

The lack of indications that point to rejection and intentions of avoidance in these three examples suggests a more neutral perception of the pharaonic era amongst the Arabic chroniclers. They tend to describe, discuss and interpret the pharaonic era with admiration for the extensive knowledge of the ancient Egyptians. Some of Arabic chroniclers even try to fit this pre-Islamic Egypt into the overall Islamic identity. The latter is in contrast to the Quran and the discourse in the secondary literature about the concept of *jahiliyyah*, which tends to reject

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[83] Cook, "Pharaonic History in Medieval Egypt."
[84] Kevin van Bladel, "Hermes and Hermetica," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, ed. Kate Fleet et al. (BRILL, August 4, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_com_23130.

the pre-Islamic past and describe them as something that should be avoided. The Arabic chroniclers try to remove ancient Egypt from that stigma. The Islamic manuscripts dealing with Akhmim, Hermes and the pyramids indicate a more embracing interpretation of the concept of *jahiliyyah*. These examples show the attempt of medieval Muslim authors to fit this pre-Islamic past into the Islamic identity. However, the arguments proposed in the publications on the medieval Arabic manuscripts are less strong, since it is mostly based upon assumptions. Furthermore, the Arabic manuscripts, analysed in the accessed publications, focus on the pharaonic era and leave out the Christian identity, which is also considered as 'pre-Islamic'. Despite these issues, this analysis concludes that amongst Muslims – and through the years – there are multiple ways of thinking about the concept of "pre-Islamic" Egypt. Some have more neutral connotations to the concept of *jahiliyyah* and others more negative. In the following paragraphs, these two different connotations on the pre-Islamic past are tested by analysing the fieldwork.

## 3.2.   Pharaonic *spolia* in Mamluk context

Chapter 2 discussed in detail the observations that resulted from the fieldwork. Three of the nine buildings contain a pharaonic stone block which was placed as a threshold: Khanqah of Sultan Baybars Al-Jashinkir II, Aqsunqur Mosque and the Fuenrary Complex of Khayrbak. These oblong thresholds show hieroglyphic texts which have partly faded. This paragraph tries to interpret the observations according to the findings of Chapter 1 on how to interpret *spolia*. After the most plausible interpretation of the pharaonic *spolia* is proposed, it is compared to the different connotations of *jahiliyyah* in order to determine how the Mamluks viewed upon history of ancient Egypt.

### 3.2.1. Pharaonic *spolia* as an emblem of victory by the Mamluks

The fact that the threshold blocks are placed in such a way that the hieroglyphs are visible, implies that there must be a message intended by the Mamluk builders. They could also have chosen to turn the hieroglyphs facing downwards so that they were not visible. This suggests that the builders wanted the visitors to see them. But why? As shown in Chapter 1 *spolia* could be interpreted as an emblem of victory distinguished in several domains: military, political, religious and historical. This interpretation states that the *spolia* is placed with the intent to display a symbolic function. The hieroglyphic thresholds originating from the pharaonic era that were placed in three religious buildings built by the Mamluks in Cairo are definitely not a

trophy of military victory. The pharaonic era was long over before the Muslims came to Egypt so no physical confrontation between the pharaohs and Muslims could have been possible.

The hieroglyphic inscriptions in the thresholds show an immediate connection to ancient Egypt. Already during the Mamluks, the hieroglyphs were linked to the pharaonic era.[85] Rather, the placement of these specific blocks in such a prominent place, as a threshold – which every visitor has to pass in order to enter the building – could perhaps be linked to a political or religious power motive. The latter is however not likely as the ancient Egyptians were polytheists and therefore seen as ignorant of God. The power motive is also unlikely since the thresholds were placed in religious buildings. Of course, religion and political are very much intertwined, but the buildings were constructed for specific reasons of religious worship.

As Chapter 1 showed, *spolia* could also be interpreted as a "victory over tainted structures", in other words, with the destruction of a pagan religion by reusing that building material. This corresponds to the rejection interpretation of the pre-Islamic past, as argued in the Quran. It could be a way to interpret the placement of the pharaonic blocks as threshold. Within the Aqsunqur Mosque and the Funerary Complex of Khayrbak, the thresholds are the only elements that show hieroglyphs in these buildings.[86] In the other buildings, except for two examples – one architrave and one column-base – I did not find any traces of hieroglyphs carved in stone. This suggests that the builders intended to deliberately display these blocks by placing them in a prominent location for all to see. Two of the blocks were displayed with the hieroglyphic text upside down which implies that they did not really place them with care. Moreover, two of these blocks were placed with the hieroglyphs towards the sky which lead to abrasion of the many visitors entering the building. This implies that they did not anticipate about how they would be preserved. Furthermore, nowadays it is a significant insult for Arabs to show ones shoe sole, because of the dirt that is attached to it.[87] It is not clear where this negative connotation comes from, or how old it is. If it was already a stigma during the Mamluk period, it could explain the placement of the pharaonic blocks as a statement of religious authority. One would literally step on the pagan gods and pharaohs of ancient Egypt by stepping on the threshold when entering the mosque or khanqah. This would fit the negative view of the Quran about the Pharaoh as being ignorant to god. Nevertheless, until the origin and background

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[85] Cooperson, "Al-Ma'mun"

[86] I was not able to enter the Khanqah of Sultan Baybars Al-Jashinkir II so I cannot draw any conclusions here.

[87] "Arabieren Zwaar Beledigd Door Schoenzolen." *Nos.nl*, 23 Feb. 2011, https://nos.nl/artikel/220967-arabieren-zwaar-beledigd-door-schoenzolen. Accessed June 6, 2023.

of the stigma of showing the shoe sole is researched, this interpretation is merely an anachronistic assumption.

As discussed in the first part of this chapter, the medieval Arabic chroniclers showed an interest in the history of the pyramids, pharaonic monuments and knowledge of the ancient Egyptians. The placement of the pharaonic threshold in such a prominent place that every visitor should pass could imply a form of continuation. It could represent a diffuse from the pharaonic era into the Mamluk period. If this would be the case then the Mamluk builders could have placed these thresholds to embrace the history of ancient Egypt and incorporate it into the Islamic identity. Nevertheless, reasoning from this interpretation the direction of the hieroglyphs do not make sense. Why not place the hieroglyphs in their original direction by placing them in another location and keeping thereby also the hieroglyphs intact against abrasion?

The last two interpretations of the placement of the pharaonic blocks as threshold seem the most plausible ones. However, these two contradict each other. On the one hand, interpreting the thresholds as a motive of religious authority could be connected to the negative connotation of the pre-Islamic past. This interpretation views upon the pharaonic era as pagan and ignorant. Therefore, it is unlikely that both are interpretations could be applied at the same time. On the other hand, interpreting the thresholds as an intention to display historical authenticity fits a more neutral view on the pre-Islamic past. The arguments linking the placement of the pharaonic blocks as thresholds to the interpretation of religious authority seem the most plausible ones.


### 3.2.2. Pharaonic *spolia* as an industrial product

The interpretation of *spolia* as an industrial product is more focussed on the functional and pragmatic side of reusing instead of symbolic displaying. This interpretation is divided in sub-categories: accessibility, availability, aesthetic and conspicuous consumption. This paragraph examines the likeliness of pharaonic stones reused as thresholds could be best interpreted as an industrial product. The accessibility perspective is mainly focussed on all the material that does not come from around Cairo or Egypt as transporting materials from outside Egypt would require an effort in terms of time and money. Cairo is connected to Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt through the river the Nile. The reused pharaonic materials that were not closely located to Cairo were probably transported via the Nile to its new location. The examined religious buildings are all located in Cairo, so the connection is obvious.

The availability of the hieroglyphic blocks is evident. Cairo was surrounded by pharaonic monuments but these were no longer used for their original purpose under Mamluk rule. Perhaps these were destructed by the Mamluks in order to reuse the materials for their own buildings. Another explanation could be sought in the natural circumstances. Alexandria is located close to some active tectonic plates which means that it is often subject to earthquakes.[88] Some heavier than others, these earthquakes would leave parts of the city in ruins. Additionally, the Black Death occurred during the Mamluk period. The many deaths due to this sickness could have caused many deserted places. Both, the ruins and deserted buildings, would be a great and easy quarry for reusing building material. Another part of this interpretation could explain the reuse of at least one pharaonic block. The threshold in the Khanqah of Sultan Baybars Al-Jashinkir II is made of red granite. This is a very strong material, stronger than stone and marble. The placement of this granite block as a threshold could be a pragmatic solution for holding the construction in place. However, if this would be the case, why would the Mamluk builders have placed the hieroglyphs in sight? If they reused it for pragmatic reasons, why not just place the block with the hieroglyphs directed downwards to the ground?

It is difficult to estimate whether the placement of these pharaonic blocks as thresholds was because of aesthetic reasons. The Islamic art mainly focussed on geometric patterns in for example coloured windows or carved in wood. Hieroglyphs do not really fit into that style. If it was placed for aesthetic reasons, why not place it with the hieroglyphs turned in the right direction?

It is unlikely to interpret the pharaonic blocks placed as threshold as a form of conspicuous consumption. The Mamluk builders could have deliberately placed these blocks as threshold to show the world that they were able to combine different materials, even from the pharaonic era. If this would be the case, the *spolia* became an industrial product and a tool to show status and wealth. As already mentioned, in the case of pharaonic material a lot of material was available in the area so it's reuse would not per se show any special status or wealth.

Within this interpretation of *spolia* as an industrial product, the first two sub-categories seem applicable to the reuse of the pharaonic blocks as threshold of these religious buildings. Both, the accessibility and the availability could be checked for these materials. Cairo was surrounded by pharaonic monuments and the earthquakes, Black Death or the act of deliberate

[88] Ahmed Badawy, Hanan Gaber, and Hamza Ibrahim, "Earthquake Risk Assessment of Alexandria, Egypt," *Journal of Seismology* 19, no. 1 (September 9, 2014): 159–70, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10950-014-9456-x.

destruction by people could have led to the reuse of these materials as construction elements for important religious buildings.

### 3.2.3. Pharaonic *spolia* as meaningful interrelationships

The manuscripts written by the Arabic chroniclers discussed in Chapter 3.1.2., show a certain admiration towards the Egyptians for their knowledge and wisdom. This third interpretation is connected to these forms of knowledge and interprets *spolia* as a magical talisman. The pharaonic *spolia* in these Islamic buildings are located at the entrance of the building. These *spolia* could have been deliberately located here to use it as a magical talisman to keep the evil spirits or insects outside. In Chapter 1, the literature study showed that the magic could probably be read in the inscription of the reused pharaonic material. This is probably not applicable on the pharaonic thresholds in the examined religious buildings, because during the Mamluk period the hieroglyphs were not deciphered yet.[89] More so, the translations of the hieroglyphic inscriptions do not make any sense in the context of the threshold stones. They are just small fragments of a probably larger text. Also, the fragments that are shown are not connected to any form of magic, knowledge or wisdom. Nevertheless, the Mamluk builders could still have used the hieroglyphs as a magical talisman, without knowing the real translations of the texts. Perhaps the mystery of not knowing their meaning created a more magical sense of the hieroglyphs in the stone blocks.

In the Funerary Complex of Khayrbak, the figure Ptah is to be found in the hieroglyphs. Ptah is the patron of craftsmen. Perhaps the Mamluk builders saw Ptah also as their patron. However, this is probably more a case of coincidence. The assumption that the Mamluk builders really knew who this figure is not very likely since the hieroglyphs were not deciphered yet.

### 3.2.4. Sub-conclusion: Pharaonic *spolia* in Mamluk context

This paragraph discussed the possible ways of interpreting the pharaonic blocks that were reused as threshold in three religious buildings built by the Mamluks. Some of the interpretations are more practical and pragmatic. Others are more symbolic. As already mentioned in Chapter 1, these different interpretations are not isolated but interwoven. It is obvious that their accessibility and availability explain the presence of the pharaonic blocks in

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[89] Cooperson, "Al-Ma'mun," 208; Petra M. Sijpesteijn, "Building an Egyptian Identity," in *The Islamic Scholarly Tradition: Studies in History, Law, and Thought in Honor of Professor Michael Allan Cook*, ed. Asad Q. Ahmed, Michael Bonner, and Behnam Sadeghi (BRILL, 2011), 85–106, there 85 https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004194359.i-386.22.

these religious buildings. Without the access to available material, these building elements could not have been reused. This implies a pragmatic interpretation of this case of *spolia*.

The fact that the hieroglyphs are placed in such a prominent place – where each visitor should pass in order to enter the building – suggests that there is also a more symbolic reason for the presence of these pharaonic *spolia*. The blocks are being displayed, there to be seen for every visitor entering or leaving the building. Moreover, in the case of the Khanqah of Sultan Baybars Al-Jashinkir II, passers-by could already see the hieroglyphs from the road. This suggest that these pharaonic blocks were placed in this specific place as a symbol. But what do they symbolize? It could be found in the interpretation of *spolia* as an emblem of victory. Two contrasting 'victories' could be represented by this symbolism. On the one hand, the pharaonic *spolia* in Mamluk context could be interpreted as the religious victory over the pagan structures of ancient Egypt. This fits the interpretation of 'pre-Islam' as uncivilised or maybe even barbaric. On the other hand, the pharaonic *spolia* as historical authentication could explain its presence. The builders could have placed this block here in an attempt to Islamicize the hieroglyphs as a way of connecting to their glorious ancestors. This suggests that the Mamluk use of pharaonic *spolia* could be explained as an act of assimilating the pre-Islamic past. Interpreting the *spolia* to emphasize the religious supremacy of Islam has the most plausible arguments, in this discourse.


## 3.3.    Christian *spolia* in Mamluk context

Chapter 2 showed that two of the nine examined religious buildings contain a specific element which is very likely to be defined as Christian *spolia*. In both, the Mosque of Sultan Al-Nasir Muhammad and the Funerary Mosque of Sultan Al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh, a small cross is visible in one of the column capitals. In addition, there is another column capital in the Al-Nasir mosque that is also interesting to study. This capital does not show a cross, however the miniatures are similar to the ones carved in the column capitals in the Basilica of San Vitale located in Ravenna, Italy. The similarities to the ones in this basilica suggests that the capital located in the mosque is very likely to also be Christian, and therefore this capital is included in this in-depth analysis. This paragraph is testing the different interpretations – as discussed in Chapter 1 – on these case studies. After the most plausible interpretation of the Christian *spolia* is decided on, this is connected to the different connotations of *jahiliyyah*.

### 3.3.1. Christian *spolia* as an emblem of victory by the Mamluks

All three column capitals are located in very prominent places in the religious buildings and therefore easily noticeable for visitors and worshippers. In the Al-Nasir Mosque, the cross on the column capital is visible from the perspective of any person entering the mosque. Also, it is visible from the courtyard. The other capital, showing the two miniatures, catches the eye as it stands out compared to all other column capitals. In the Al-Mu'ayyad Mosque, the column carrying the specific capital is located in front of the *mihrab*, with the cross turned towards the people praying. These prominent locations suggests that there must be a symbolic function for displaying this *spolia*. It suggests that the Mamluk builders tried to send a certain intended message to the ones visiting. But what kind of message would that be?

As observed in Chapter 1, the Mamluks are known for incorporating Crusaders *spolia* into their architectural style. That *spolia* functions as a booty of war. When looking at the Christian *spolia* in the Mosque of Sultan Al-Nasir Muhammad, this could be a possible way to interpret the cross in the column capital. During the first ten years of Al-Nasir's reign (1293-1294, 1299-1309, 1310-1341 AD), the Mamluks had to deal with the Crusaders. The Mamluks eventually triumphed and as a booty of war they could have taken this column capital and prominently display it in the mosque. On the contrary, this is not a likely explanation for the cross in the column capital in the Funerary Mosque of Sultan Al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh as the Crusaders were already fought back in 1302 AD. This mosque was built a century later, in 1416 AD, and therefore this Christian *spolia* is unlikely to be a booty of war resulting from the crusades. However, it could be that the Mamluk builders tried to refer back to the victory that happened a hundred years ago by incorporating this Christian element.

The display of political power is not a very plausible interpretation of the Christian *spolia* in these mosques. The cross is a religious symbol of Christianity and they are carved in capitals which show the Byzantine style. Therefore, it is very likely to assume that these capitals are made by the Byzantines which would make sense since the Byzantines ruled Egypt until the Muslim conquest. Within the Byzantine Empire, the religious leader, namely the patriarch, is separated from the political leader. The latter is in contrast to the period of the Muslim reign wherein the political leader is often interwoven with the religious leadership. Thus, it is highly unlikely to assume that a Christian symbol that is incorporated in the Islamic buildings symbolizes a certain feeling of political "endeavours" by the Mamluks.

The interpretation of the Christian *spolia* in this Islamic context could perhaps be interpreted as a form of religious authority. The Mamluks lived in co-existence with the Egyptian Christian Copts and they even used the Copts for tax operations and civil administration. Even though, the Copts were treated as second rank citizens, in the shadow of the Muslim Mamluks, they were still allowed to practice and worship as a Christian.[90] Whether this co-existence was always as steady should be further examined in order to make any assumptions. When looking at the specific locations of the Christian column capitals in these two Mamluk mosques, the prominence of these locations is undeniable as the crosses are clearly visible for the visitors of the Islamic building. The prominent display of the Christian *spolia* could suggests a certain message of religious authority over Christianity. This idea would be in line with the interpretation of the Christian *spolia* as an emblem of military victory over the Crusaders as is discussed earlier to be likely to applicable to the Al-Nasir Mosque.

On the contrary, this is probably not the case with the Al-Mu'ayyad Mosque. When looking further into the column capital in this mosque, the location in front of the *mihrab* makes the cross visible for Muslims praying towards the *mihrab*. In fact, this capital is located between the praying Muslims and the *mihrab*. One suspects that this location would symbolise an element of embracing as it is literally located in the way Muslims pray to and thereby Muslims pray in a way facing this column capital. Reasoning from this perspective, the interpretation of religious authority is therefore not very plausible. In fact, it could be a sign of co-existence and assimilating the Copts as the Mamluks needed them for their administrative apparatus.

Perhaps the explanation for placing the Christian capital in front of the *mihrab* in the Al-Mu'ayyad Mosque can be found in the historical authenticity. The specific location could be interpreted as a form of respect to the Christian religion. Perhaps this Christian *spolia* represents a certain idea about the Christian past as being Islamicized. Some Muslims view upon Christianity as a 'proto-type' of Islam by, for example, by incorporating Jesus as a prophet. From this perspective, the Mamluk use of Christian *spolia* could be explained as assimilating the Christian religion into the Islamic narrative. Whether this hypothetical idea of historical authenticity is represented in the policy of Sultan Al-Mu'ayyad, should be further investigated to draw firmer conclusions.

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[90] Aziz Suryal Atiya, "Mamluks and the Copts," in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, 1991, Claremont Graduate University. School of Religion.

On the contrary, this interpretation of *spolia* as a symbol of historical authenticity is not likely to be applicable on the case of the Al-Nasir Mosque. Here, the Christian *spolia* is still located in very visible places, but not in the prayer direction. Therefore, this interpretation is not likely applicable to the Christian *spolia* used in the Al-Nasir Muhammad as it conflicts with the interpretation as an emblem of military victory and religious authority.

### 3.3.2. Christian *spolia* as an industrial product

The interpretation of *spolia* as an industrial product relies amongst other things on the extent of their accessibility to the Mamluk builders. The use of Christian *spolia* could be interpreted by the geographical accessibility of Cairo. The city was connected with Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt through the river the Nile. Alexandria was an important port of building materials that linked Egypt to the rest of the Mediterranean region.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the column capital showing the two different miniatures is comparable to the ones in the San-Vitale Basilic in Ravenna which was built in the sixth century. Judith Herrin and Jinty Nelson have written a book on the role of Ravenna in the medieval exchange, wherein they found evidence that the double-zone capitals of Ravenna were shipped to Constantinople for shaping and decoration.[91] Even though the capital that ended up in Egypt is not a double-zoned one, the similarities in the miniatures suggests that it is very likely to have been made by the same style of manufacturing. The basilica was built six centuries before the mosque. The miniatures in the basilica are less detailed than the one in the Mamluk mosque. This could mean that years could have passed by for the manufacturer – or his successors – to master the details of the miniature. This could perhaps imply that the column capital in the Al-Nasir Mosque was originally made in Constantinople and transported to Egypt. Before its current destination in the mosque, the column capital could have been used for another building, in maybe Egypt or somewhere else which was accessible for the Mamluks as the column capital shows signs of reuse. The band underneath, attaching the capital to the column, implies that it is a reused artefact. More in-depth research to the connection between the column capital in Egypt and the ones in Ravenna should lead to more certain conclusions on this specific matter.

In Egypt, for many years the majority of the population was Coptic. In the seventh century, the Muslims conquered Egypt and overthrew the Byzantines. This means that before

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[91] Judith Herrin and Janet L Nelson, *Ravenna: Its Role in Earlier Medieval Change and Exchange* (London: Institute Of Historical Research, 2016), 116-117.

the arrival of the Islam, there were many Christian buildings constructed in Egypt. The Mamluks did not have to go far in their quest to find Christian building elements which they could reuse for their own buildings. Just like with the pharaonic elements, the availability of Christian building material could also be explained by natural circumstances. The earthquakes could have led to ruined buildings and the Black Death could have caused deserted places. Both would be a great and easy quarry for reusing building material. In addition, it could be that the buildings or their remains were deliberately destructed by the Mamluks in order to reuse the materials for their own buildings.

The interpretation of reusing material because of aesthetic reasons is not very likely applicable to these cases of Christian *spolia*. Especially in the Al Mu'ayyad Mosque, the reused column including its capital stands out compared to the other columns which are all in the same style and do not show any signs of reuse. In the Al-Nasir Mosque, especially the column capital showing the two miniatures stands out. It is the only column capital that shows any form of miniature image. Perhaps the Mamluk builders highly appreciated the looks of this specific type of decoration, and therefore placed it here. However, it certainly does not fit the style of the rest of the building. The other Christian column capital in this mosque also stands out because of this small cross. Why not remove this cross by a single strike with a hammer to make it fit better to the style of the rest of the capitals? Therefore, I argue that it is not likely to interpret these examples of Christian *spolia* in the Islamic buildings purely for aesthetic reasons.

One would expect that the interpretation of *spolia* as an expression of conspicuous consumption is more applicable on scarce materials, such as marble. These column capitals have not been made of marble but of stone. Stone was not a scarce material in Egypt so this suggest that it is not likely that the Mamluks tried to show their status and wealth by reusing these specific Christian building elements.

### 3.3.3. Christian *spolia* as meaningful interrelationships

The third possible interpretation of *spolia* assumes the use of Christian *spolia* to function as a magical talisman. This is not a very likely to be applicable on these cases. The Christian *spolia* in these Islamic buildings are very much in sight of the visitors when they have entered and are inside the building. Nevertheless, it would make more sense that *spolia* that is placed to function as a magical talisman would be located in or around the entrance/exit of a building to ward off evil spirits or insects. However, the Christian column capitals found in these mosques are not

part of any entrance or exit, but are surrounded by other columns. The location of these Christian *spolia* makes it unlikely to interpret these *spolia* as magical talismans.

### 3.3.4. Sub-conclusion: Christian *spolia* in Mamluk context

This paragraph discussed the possible ways of interpreting the Christian capitals that were reused in two religious buildings built by the Mamluks. As already shown by the case studies of the pharaonic *spolia*, the pragmatic and symbolic aspects are inherently interwoven. This is also most likely applicable to the Christian *spolia* in the Mamluk context. Some of the interpretations are more practical and pragmatic. Others are more symbolic. It is obvious that the accessibility and availability explain the presence of the Christian *spolia* in these religious buildings. Without the access to available material, these building elements could not have been reused. This implies a very practical interpretation of these *spolia*.

The fact that the Christian symbols are placed in such a prominent place suggests that there is also a more symbolic reason for the presence of these Christian *spolia*. When observing the two column capitals in the Al-Nasir Mosque, it could be interpreted as a booty of war of the Crusaders. This would automatically be linked to the interpretation of religious authority as the Crusaders were Christian. Moreover, after the Muslim conquest of Egypt the majority of the population was not Christian anymore. The incorporation of this Christian *spolia* could therefore be interpreted as a break with the religious past which implies an oppressing view upon the Christian identity. On the contrary, this interpretation does not make sense for the other case study as the Crusaders were already defeated a hundred years before the establishment of this funerary mosque.

In the Al-Mu'ayyad Mosque, the *spolia*'s location in the prayer direction suggests another plausible interpretation: historical authenticity. The latter implies a motive of assimilation into the Islamic narrative which suggests a more neutral conception of the pre-Islamic past.

# Conclusion

This thesis studied the Mamluk view upon the pre-Islamic past, also known as the concept of *jahiliyyah*, by investigating the presence of pre-Islamic *spolia* in the religious buildings built by the Mamluks in Cairo. The scholarship shows that the translation and definition of *jahiliyyah* is not as black and white as stated in the literature. The current scholarship tends to interpret Muslims rejecting the pre-Islamic past as something that the Islam should avoid. This could be interpreted as a negative connotation of the concept of *jahiliyyah*. However, the secondary literature examining the medieval Arabic chroniclers does not show indications of rejection. Instead of rejecting the past, these Arabic chroniclers attempt to embrace and incorporate the pre-Islamic past into the Islamic identity.

The different interpretations found in the academic literature have been examined by comparing them to the observations of *spolia* present in five different religious buildings built during the Mamluk period (1250 – 1517 AD). During the on-site fieldwork, two different observations stood out. The first is that three of the nine buildings (Khanqah of Sultan Baybars Al-Jashinkir II, Aqsunqur Mosque and the Funerary Complex of Khayrbak) contain a threshold at the entrance made of a reused stone block from the pharaonic period. The second is that two other buildings (Mosque of Sultan Al-Nasir Muhammad and Funerary Mosque of Sultan Al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh) contain a column capital showing a small cross, in the style commonly seen in Christian artwork, prominently displayed.

Examining the reasons for the Mamluk use of these pre-Islamic building materials in their religious buildings, could help to better understand the Muslim view upon the pre-Islamic past. This thesis has tried to interpret these findings according to the different approaches of *spolia* as mentioned in the literature: (1) *spolia* as an emblem of victory; (2) *spolia* as an industrial product; (3) *spolia* as meaningful interrelationships. The second interpretation is a more pragmatic use of *spolia*, in contrast to the other two, which are more a symbolic reference to a certain victory or magical talisman.

The academic literature handles the three interpretations as individual explanations of the presence of *spolia*. However, the case studies in this thesis propose that these explanations of *spolia* are not isolated but rather should be seen in the light of an interaction. The availability and accessibility – indicating *spolia* as an industrial product – could be a plausible interpretation for their use in the buildings. Meanwhile the same *spolia* could also be explained as being placed there as a symbolic function.

The analysis of the fieldwork shows that the pragmatic interpretation could explain the Mamluk use of *spolia* in their buildings. By focussing on the visibility aspect of the location of the pre-Islamic *spolia* in all case studies, an additional symbolic interpretation of the presence of *spolia* in the religious buildings can be proposed: namely their use as an emblem of victory. Some interpretations of these *spolia* as an emblem of victory suggest a more oppressing or superior view upon the pre-Islamic past by the Mamluks. Other interpretations of *spolia* as an emblem of victory imply a more adoptive and assimilating motive. As elaborated in Chapter 3.3.1., there is evidence which suggests another interpretation, namely that by allowing the use of Christian symbols in prominent places in Islamic buildings reveals a more adoptive and assimilating motive.

In conclusion, this thesis finds that the motives for using pharaonic and Christian *spolia* in Mamluk buildings could best be explained using a combination of pragmatic and symbolic reasons. This specific interpretation suggests that the Mamluks had a negative view– in terms of supremacy – on the pre-Islamic past but with a tendency to a more neutral view – in terms of assimilation and adaptation. This means that the observations of the pre-Islamic *spolia* and the modern scholarship on *jahiliyyah* do not perfectly match. Therefore, I make an appeal to bring some nuances to the concept of *jahiliyyah*. The fieldwork on *spolia* did not find conclusive indications for this negative interpretation. In fact, Chapter 3.1.1. discusses evidence that even contradicts this negative interpretation which therefore should be nuanced. I do not think that the Mamluks actually looked down on the pre-Islamic past, as their buildings are built with the remnants of this past. Why incorporate elements that remind of the pre-Islamic past if this past is something to be regarded as inferior? This seems rather illogical, and therefore a more neutral interpretation of the pre-Islamic *spolia* in the Mamluk buildings would be more appropriate.

The current discourses on *jahiliyyah* focus extensively on the religious interpretations. However, this thesis shows that the Mamluk view upon the pre-Islamic past is not limited to the religious domain. Even though the buildings are religious foundations, they are not separated from the political domain as the establishers were sultans. These sultans were also the military and political leaders of Egypt, leading to an environment where religion and politics are very much intertwined. Applying this concept of mixing religion and politics to interpret the Mamluk view upon the pre-Islamic past, suggests that the remnants of pre-Islamic past had to be assimilated to fit with the Islamic truth. This thesis focussed on the architectural evidence of the pre-Islamic past in the Islamic context of the Mamluk period. As these religious buildings have been established by the ruling elite, these conclusions do not represent the total Muslim population under the Mamluk rule. The political involvement means that it is likely to assume

that the conclusion of this thesis is primarily applicable to the Mamluk elite. Individual non-elite Muslims probably did not have to deal with the political issues and would most likely focus upon the religious perspective. The latter could lead to the individual Muslims having a different perspective on the pre-Islamic past.

An important remark to this thesis is that the hypothesis is not (yet) supported with objective data but has been derived from the indications as discussed in Chapter 3. This thesis shows the need for additional research for studying pre-Islamic *spolia* in the broader Islamic concept of *jahiliyyah*. Follow-up research about the specific origins of the *spolia* – for example, the column capital that has similar details as the ones in the Basilica in Ravenna – would lead to a better understanding of the context of the pre-Islamic *spolia* in Mamluk buildings. Furthermore, further research on sources which contain, for example, information about policies of the Mamluk rulers concerning the Christians, such as manuscripts, administrative documents or inventories, could further test the hypothesis presented in this conclusion.

This thesis deals with the Mamluk use of *spolia* in Cairo. As Egypt was predominantly Muslim under the Mamluk rule, the findings of this thesis also broadens the knowledge of the Muslim world in general. To what extent these conclusions could apply to the rest of the Muslim world also needs further investigation.

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# Appendix A

Appendix A is included for academic transparency and shows an overview of the rough notes that I have made during the on-site visits of the religious buildings in Cairo. The on-site visits took place in February and April 2023. This appendix includes the field notes on all nine case studies. This overview could perhaps lead to suggestions for further research.

| nr | Religious Building | Fieldwork observed spolia | Fieldwork observations of the spolia 1 | Fieldwork observations of the spolia 2 | Fieldwork observations of the spolia 3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Aqsunqur / Blue Mosque | 1. threshold / 2. brackets / 3. columns | 1. Threshold made from a black stone with some hieroglyphs visible in the corners of the stone. The rest is faded, probably because people were stepping over it. | 2. Fan shaped brackets made from stone near the archcitrave at the entrance. Williams (2002) argues that the latter is spolia. I am not sure however. | 3. Two red granite columns with a smalll diameter. |
| 2. | Mosque of Sultan Al-Zahir Barquq | 1. columns / 2. marble inlay | 1. There are four granite columns that hold the arches. These columns have a large diameter. The columns have very simple bases made from stone and they are attached to the columns. The columns look damaged and more damaged than all the other granite columns I have seen so far. | 2. The qibla wall, the courtyard and the hallway are inlayed with marble. This marble comes in different forms and colors. I am not sure but the circles suggest this marble could have been cut from columns. | |
| 3. | Mosque and Khanqah of Shaykhu | 1. architrave / 2. columns | 1. The architrave is made from black material and shows a hieroglyphic line. It looks like the original artifact was larger and cut off to make it fit in its new location. | 2. There are two columns on the outside of the building that is abuts the khanqah. These columns are placed in a pretty random places that does not really make sense as they are probably not an essential part of the construction. The columns have no base and the capitals look lik the Byzantine style. The column on the right shows a small cross in the capital. | |
| 4. | Mosque of al-Maridani | 1. columns / 2. granite panels | 1. The mosque is built in a hypostyle style. There are many different columns used for the construction. The columns are made from marble, red granite, and black aswanian granite. The granite columns are placed in the corners and under the dome. | 2. The panels on the ground in front of the main entrance and the doorsteps of all entrances are made from red granite panels. | |
| 5. | Mosque of Sultan al-Zahir Baybars I | I was not able to visit this mosque because it is under construction. It is only open for prayer. | - | | |
| 6. | Mosque of Sultan Al-Nasir Muhammad | 1. columns, capitals and bases | 1. This mosque is built in the hypostyle style. There are many different columns made from different materials : stone, marble, red granite, black aswanian granite. Two columns stand out: one with a cross and one with four small miniatiures (two different miniatures which are the same on the opposing sides). | | |
| 7. | The Mosque Madrassa of Sultan Hassan | 1. pillasters / 2. marble panels | 1. At the entrance there are two pillasters placed in the wall at the stairs. You pass these pillasters by walking the stairs to the entrance. One pillaster shows a flower pattern, the other one shows three minitatures of Jerusalem buildings. | 2. The courtyard is made from marble panels and columns which have been cut in pieces. | |
| 8. | Funerary Complex of Khayrbak (mosque) | 1. threshold | 1. The threshold is made from a block of stone showing hieroglyphs. The hieroglyphs are inscripted on top of it so turned to the sky. The hieroglyphs have faded over time probably because people were walking over it. | | |
| 9. | Khanqah of Sultan Baybars Al-Jashinkir II | 1. threshold | 1. There is a pharaonic stone used as a doorsill and it shows hieroglyphs. The hieroglyphs are directed towards the street, so it will not fade when stepping on it. It shows three figures. It looks like there are three different figures show and in between there are some hieroglyphic texts. | | |
| 10. | Funerary Mosque of Sultan Al-Mu'Ayyad Shaykh | 1. Monoliths / 2. portal / 3. columns | 1. Two huge red granite monoliths that have some details which look like a molding. The monoliths were not big enough to cover the whole entrance so the builders attached stones on top of it. These stones show the same molding as the monoliths with some extra muqarnas. This suggests that the monoliths were already shaped in this molding. | 2. The portals are huge and made from wood with some iron or metal geometric decorations. The portals have been taken from the Sultan Hassan Complex. The custodians showed me on the back of the right door the name of Sultan Hassan. | 3. Except for four columns, all the columns including the bases and capitals look the same. Some of the columns have islamic calligraphy inscripted on it. There are two black marble(?) columns with captials that are different from the rest.Oone of the capitals show something that looks like a cross. Why would they have placed these columns here? right in front of the qibla? Also two other columns are placed as part of the wall. This is not really necessary for the construciton. Why are they displayed here? |