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Author(s): Abdallah Kahil
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ABDALLAH KAHIL

THE ARCHITECT/S OF THE SULTAN HASAN COMPLEX IN CAIRO

"It was typical of the spirit of the age that the sultan [Hasan] was so delighted with the building when it approached completion that he cut off the architect's hand lest that unfortunate official should ever produce a more beautiful monument to rival it." 1

INTRODUCTION

The Sultan Hasan Complex, built between 757/1356 or 758/1357, and 766/1364, was the first monumental royal religious complex to have been erected outside of the walls of Fatimid Cairo since the beginning of the Mamluk period (1250–1517). It is located on the Rumeila Maydān across from the Citadel on a parcel of land formerly occupied by sumptuous palaces from the time of Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. There have been many unanswered questions about this monumental edifice, among them the identity or the origin of its architect. 2

A stylistic analysis of the decoration of the Sultan Hasan Complex and textual evidence has led to the suggestion that two Cairene individuals collaborated on its design and decoration. There are three types of evidence for the identity of these individuals: inscriptions on the edifice itself, accounts or statements by medieval writers, and inferences based on stylistic analysis. The two individuals are Muḥammad ibn Bilik al-Muḥṣinī and al-Ḥujayj ibn ʿAbdallah al-Ṣāliḥī, who is often mistakenly referred to as Ibjij or Abjij. The name Muḥammad ibn Bilik al-Muḥṣinī is inscribed on the building as its construction supervisor (shād ‘imāratih?) and the calligrapher of its inscription (katābahu). He is also known to have had a long administrative and managerial career. Muḥammad ibn Bilik al-Muḥṣinī had demonstrated his artistic skill, as well as his strong loyalty to the Sultan. The architect al-Ḥujayj ibn ʿAbdallah al-Ṣāliḥī is less well-known, and his participation in the design and construction of the Sultan Hasan Complex can be deduced but is not supported by documentation, an inscription, or a clear historical account. Both individuals had long careers before they embarked on the construction of this edifice.

Their collaboration is also indicative of two trends in fourteenth-century Mamluk architecture. The first is the architectural use of decorative features adopted from other artistic media. The second is the interest that the Mamluks and their architects had in buildings situated outside of Cairo, and their quest to study them and to incorporate their features either by imitation or, at times, by removing some of their components to integrate them within a new Mamluk building.

The suggestion that these two individuals designed and supervised the construction of the Complex does not exclude the possibility that workers and artisans trained outside of the Cairene and Syrian architectural traditions of the Mamluks may have been among the many masters who participated


2 The Complex of Sultan Hasan was studied in my dissertation under the supervision of Professor Priscilla Soucek. Many of the conclusions about stylistic analysis in this article are based on the discussion in that text. Abdallah Kahil, "The Complex of Sultan Hasan, Cairo 1357–1364" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2002).
in its creation. It is thus possible that a stucco carver from Iran or Baghdad worked on the bands in the Complex’s east iwan and madrasas (fig. 1). The meticulous control of the stucco design attests to its execution by an experienced practitioner with a strong aesthetic sense.

Maqrizī, the major historian of the period, does not provide any information about the identity of the architect or the builders of the Sultan Hasan Complex. However, Ibn Taghri Birdī, ibn Shāhīn Khalīl al-Zāhīrī, and Ibn Iyyās (after al-Ṣafādī) make various statements in this regard. Ibn Taghri Birdī states that Sultan Ḥasan appointed mubahāddīn wa muhānādisīn (supervisors and architects) when he began the construction of his complex. He also refers to the fact that the work force included numerous sūnūs wa mu‘allīmūn (artisans and craftsmen).3 A statement by Ibn Shāhīn Khalīl al-Zāhīrī4 has received more attention from art historians because it refers to the presence of architects from outside of Cairo.5 He states that:

Al-Malik al-Nāṣir Ḥasan summoned all architects from all the places on earth and ordered them to build a madrasa taller than any building on earth. When he asked them to name the tallest building in the world, they informed him it was the iwan of Kisrā Anushirwān. He ordered that the iwan be measured and that the madrasa be built ten cubits higher, and so it was built, and it included four minarets, but it is also said that there were only three minarets. Then some minarets [sic] were demolished and only two remained. This building has four minarets while the iwan of Kisrā has only one. This madrasa is one of the wonders of the world, the thickness of its walls is eighteen Egyptian cubits, and its minarets can be seen from a distance of day-long journey, or even farther.6


This description provided the catalyst for the hypothesis of regional involvement in the construction of the Sultan Hasan Complex. When this statement is read analytically, it reveals that it is hyperbolic and need not be taken literally.

Ibn Iyyās, quoting al-Ṣalāḥ al-Ṣafadī, a historian contemporary with the Complex’s construction, provided a more realistic description of the work force. He also indicated that it had a “chief architect” who directed the various artisans and workers.

The inaugural ceremony at the Sultan Hasan Complex took place on a Friday. The four chief qādis of the four madhhabbs and the high-ranking amirs were first among the most important guests. During the ceremony, the Sultan is said to have bestowed special gifts on the kabbīr al-muhandisīn (chief architect). Unfortunately, Ibn Iyyās does not name this architect. He describes the inauguration as follows:

After the prayer, and in the presence of the amirs and the four qādis, lemonade was served in abundance from the fountain in the courtyard. The Sultan bestowed approximately five hundred khilāhs (robes of honor) on the mushiddīn (supervisors or managers), ma‘alimīn (masters), bannā‘īn (builders or stonemasons), murakkhbhimīn (marble workers), najjārīn (carpenters), haddādīn (blacksmiths), and muhaliṭīn (marble layers), and others. The Sultan also bestowed a special robe on the kabbīr al-muhandisīn (chief architect), in addition to one thousand dinar.

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7 Meinecke, MAAS 1, 117.
8 Al-Zāhirī’s description of other buildings is even more fantastic. Throughout the Zubda, there is a tone of exaggeration. He constantly compares the Cairene buildings to those outside of Egypt, in order to praise Cairene examples.
9 Al-Ṣafadī died in 1363, two years after Sultan Hasan. Ibn Iyyās quotes al-Ṣafadī’s Tārikh (History). This book is also called al-Tārikh al-ḥanafī and is listed among volumes authored by al-Ṣafadī by Ibn Qādi Shuhba (Tārikh Ibn Qādi Shuhba, vol. 2 [Damascus, 1994], 229). Unfortunately, this ‘History’ either did not survive or is still unpublished. Al-Ṣafadī’s major biographical work, al-Wafā bi-al-wafayyāt, has only a short entry for the first reign of the sultan. Another recently edited compilation of biographies by al-Ṣafadī, A‘yān al-‘asr wa-a‘wān al-nasr (Damascus, 1998), includes the information about the second reign of Sultan Hasan, he even includes a poem he wrote for the Complex. Al-Ṣafadī’s account, cited by Ibn Iyyās, may be included in which neither survived or has not been published yet.
10 He does not cite a complete date.
Brief as it is, the list in this account reveals a clear division of labor and expertise and a hierarchy among those involved, particularly when Ibn Iyyās informs us that there was a "chief architect." Clearly absent from this account, and that of Ibn Tağhrī Birdī before him, is any reference to the gathering of architects from all the "places on Earth," although they both refer to large numbers of workers being involved in the building's construction.

Before discussing the careers of Muḥammad ibn Bilik al-Muḥṣini and al-Ḥujayj, it should be recalled that another name is inscribed on the margin of the large stucco inscription band on the southeastern corner of the courtyard. This inscription reads: "'amal (the work of) ʿAbdallah Muḥammad al-Naqqāš 'Alī," but this section of the stucco band has obviously been restored, possibly during the Ottoman period.12

MUḤAMMAD IBN BİLİK AL-MUḤSİNI

The name of Muḥammad ibn Bilik al-Muḥṣini is inscribed at the end of a Qur'anic passage on the stucco band around the courtyard and the eastern iwan of the al-Hanafiyya Madrasa. This inscription, in kufic script, identifies him as the šḥādād (supervisor) of the construction of the Sultan Hasan Complex. The inscription of the whole band, which is partly damaged, includes Qur'anic verses from Sūrat al-hijr (XV: 45–48), followed by a prayer. It starts at the southwestern corner of the iwan, on the level of its springing with the basmala, and ends with the name of Ibn Bilik al-Muḥṣini at the southeastern corner of the courtyard (figs. 2–4). The signature formula is:

Due to the absence of diacritical marks and vowel marks, this statement has two readings:

a) wa katabahu nashwu dawlatahu wa šhaddu 'imāratihī Muḥammad ibn Bīlik al-Muḥṣinī.

"... This was written by the ennobled one in [the sultan's] reign and the supervisor of its construction Muḥammad ibn Bilik al-Muḥṣini."14

b) wa katabahu nashwu dawlatahu wa šhadā 'imarātabhun Muḥammad ibn Bilik al-Muḥṣinī.

"... Muḥammad ibn Bilik al-Muḥṣini, the ennobled one in [the sultan's] reign wrote [the inscription] and erected [the building]."15

12 The reading of this name is unclear, only the word "Muḥammad" is clearly legible. Laila 'Ali Ibrāhīm, who published this text qualified her reading by saying "it probably read . . .," the rest of the text is illegible. Laila 'Ali Ibrāhīm, "The Zāwiyā of Shaykh Zain al-Dīn Yūsuf in Cairo," Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Abteilung Kairo 34 (1978), 100, n. 93.

13 The full text of the legible Qur'anic verses and prayers is cited in Kahil, "The Complex of Sultan Hasan" chapter 5.

14 Shḥādād was an administrative position in the Mamluk bureaucracy. The duties of such a person included supervising a department or a province. Shḥādād al-'amārīr was in administrative charge of the construction and renovation of the royal religious and civic buildings, usually assisted by a nāẓir (supervisor) who managed the employees and workers of the department or a project. In the case of a single project, the šḥādād was the manager of the project. (Hasan al-Bāshā, al-Funūn al-islāmiyya wa-al-wazī'if 'alā al-āthār al-ʿarabiyya [Cairo: Dār al-Nahḍīdī al-'Arabiyya, 1965], vol. 2: 616–18). In addition to a detailed definition, this entry includes a detailed bibliography from primary sources.
The two authors who were initially concerned with reading this inscription—‘Abd al-Wahhāb and al-Bāshā, did not offer any further information about the career of Ibn al-Muḥsīnī, nor about his role in the construction of the Sultan Ḥasan Complex. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb only indicates that Ibn al-Muḥsīnī belonged to an established family and that at times the chroniclers confused him with his father. The possibility that Ibn al-Muḥsīnī might have played any role in designing the Sultan Hasan Complex was dismissed by L. A. Mayer in his compilation of names of Islamic architects. Mayer, who listed names collected primarily from architectural inscriptions, states that his list excluded “the patrons or supervisors of buildings who have crept into our literature as architects, such as Hasan the Persian or Muḥammad ibn Bilik al-Muḥsīnī...” Recent studies have shown, however, that in some cases the šādd could also be the architect of a given monument.

Muḥammad ibn Bilik al-Muḥsīnī was a prominent member of Sultan Ḥasan’s administration, and belonged to the administration of his father before him. In the course of his career, he lived in all the major Mamluk cities, including Cairo, Alexandria, Tripoli and Damascus. He was among the awlād al-nāṣ whom Sultan Ḥasan had promoted to the highest rank in the Mamluk echelon, an Amir-of-One-Hundred, and he was a loyal supporter who stayed with the Sultan up to the last minute of the latter’s life. Toward the end of the revolt of Amir Yalbughā al-ʿUmarī against Sultan Ḥasan, in Jumādā I, 762/March–April 1361, the Sultan and Ibn Bilik al-Muḥsīnī left the Citadel in disguise. The latter defended the Sultan and fought the mamluks of Amir Yalbughā, but he was defeated. He and the Sultan eventually fell into the hands of the mamluks of Yalbughā, the Sultan was murdered and Ibn Bilik al-Muḥsīnī was imprisoned in Alexandria, where he presumably died, or was killed, at an unknown date and age, for after this date nothing further about him was recorded.

His full name was Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Bād al-Dīn Bilik al-Muḥsīnī al-Jazrī. He was born in Mistr (it is not clear whether this means al-Fustat or simply Egypt) at an unrecorded date. He came from a well-positioned and accomplished family. He, his father and his brother were all respected in Mamluk society, and were connected to both the ruling and intellectual elite. The three of them served in the Mamluk administration, although his brother is better known for his literary talent.
Their father Badr al-Din Bilik ibn `Abdallah al-Muhsini was an amir, a prominent member of the administration of al-Nasir Muhammed, and a well-known jāris (equestrian). He occupied various administrative positions; he was the wālī (governor) of Alexandria from 711/1311 until 723/1323, when he was deposed in Sha`bān of that year. He is first mentioned in the chronicles during the second reign of al-Nasir Muhammed. In Shawwāl 707/ March–April 1308, when he was sent with another amir to Barqa (the Libyan plateau) on an unspecified mission, he was already an amir. After 1330, references to the career of Amir Bilik are confusing. Sources confuse him with his son Nasir al-Din Muhammed ibn Bilik. One of them occupied the office of the wālī of the city of Cairo in Dhū al-hijja 730/September–October 1330, during the third reign of al-Nasir Muhammed. It is probable that it was the father who was appointed to this office. He was dismissed, four years later, by al-Nashwu, the nāzir al-khāṣṣ (Superintendent of the Purse), and was exiled to Tripoli on the Levantine coast along with his two sons, Nasir al-Din Muhammed, and Shihāb al-Din. He died in Tripoli in the year 739/1338-9. He owned a qaysiriyya outside of Bab Zuweila. After his death in exile his imra (the income from an iqtā) was transferred to his son Nasir al-Din Muhammed ibn Bilik.

The career of Muhammed’s brother, Ahmad, was less active but equally impressive. His full name is Shihāb al-Din Ahmad ibn al-Amir Badr al-Din Bilik al-Muhsini. He is the only one of the three whose birth date of 699/1299-1300 is recorded. He was an author and a poet who had friends among...
the Mamluk amirs and Shafi‘i theologians and judges and was close to the nā‘ib of Damascus Amir Tankiz al-Nāṣirī. When Aḥmad was exiled to Tripoli along with his brother and father, Tankiz pleaded, successfully, with Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad to allow Badr al-Dīn to move to Damascus. When he arrived, Tankiz favored him and gave him an iqtā‘. In addition to his friendship with Amir Tankiz, to whom he often read at night, Aḥmad was also close to the respected author and Shafi‘i qādī in Damascus Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, who listened to the drafts of Aḥmad’s poetry until he had completed a long poem. When the animosity toward him in Cairo had abated, Aḥmad returned to Egypt, and served as the governor of Dimyat but continued to visit Damascus regularly. He died in 753/1352-3.

The confusion in historical accounts about the father Amir Bilik and son Muḥammad arises from the question as to which of them was appointed in 1330, then dismissed in 1334, as the wāli of the city of Cairo. This confusion does not diminish our knowledge of Muḥammad’s career. The earliest accounts of Muḥammad ibn Bilik’s artistic career are also from around 1330. In Dhū al-Ḥijja 731/September 1331, Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad put Amir Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn al-Muhsinī in charge of demolishing the old Maydān al-zāhirī on the Nile (presently Garden City), and of building a new one which became known as the Maydān al-nasirī al-kabīr. In what is his first documented architectural activity, Ibn al-Muhsinī completed both tasks in two months. It is not clear, however, whether he was simply the shādd (supervisor) of this work, or whether he designed the new maydān. In any event, the Sultan was pleased with his work and, when the new maydān was inaugurated, he bestowed a khil‘a on Ibn al-Muhsinī.

Even if one is uncertain about whether the father or the son carried out this task, a little known fact about Muḥammad ibn Bilik al-Muhsinī gives strong evidence of his artistic talent and practice. He was a calligrapher who completed a manuscript of the Qur‘ān, which he dedicated to the Sultan al-Nāṣir in 730/1330. This manuscript is now in the Keir Collection in London. Its colophon states that the manuscript was written by “Muhammad b. Bilbek (?) [sic] al-Muhsini al-Nasiri for the treasury of the victorious lord, the Sultan Malik al-Nasr [sic].” The name “Bilbek” is an archaism; the correct name is “Bilik.”

31 Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Durar* 1, 124. Later, the Shafi‘i great qādī Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī was appointed by Sultan Hasan a muftī for life in any location he chose to live, provisions for this office were part of the Sultan Hasan waqf, “Maṣārīf awqāf al-sulṭān Hasan Muḥammad bin Qalāwūn ‘alā maṣāliḥ al-qubba wa al maṣjīd al-jāmi’i’ wa al-madārīs wa maṭla‘ al-sabīl bi-al-Qāhira.” Exacts of the Sultan Hasan waqf documents with commentaries on expenditures; published as an appendix of the third volume of Ibn Habīb’s *Tadbīrāt al-nābib fi ṣarīrk al-muṣār wa baḥīr*. Edited by Muhammad Muḥammad Amīn (Cairo: al-Hay’al-Miṣriyya al-Amm li-al-kitāb, 1982), vol. 3, 399–400.
33 The editor of Sulāk points out that in one of the manuscripts he used, the name listed is Badr al-Dīn (the father) and another manuscript it is Nāṣir al-Dīn (the son). Sulāk 11, 372; n. 1. Al-Ṣafadī mentions that when Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad was exiled to Tripoli, his brother Shahāb al-Dīn went with him, but that author does not mention the father. al-Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfi*, vol. 6, 280; Mūsā ibn Muḥammad al-Yūṣūfī, *Nuzhat al-nāṣir fi ṣirāt al-Malik al-Nāṣir*. Edited by Aḥmad Ḥuṣayn (Beirut, 1986), 194.
34 *Nasīr* 11, 97, n. 2.
35 *Nasīr* 11, 97–98; Sulāk 11, 334.
clearly a misreading of the name Bilik in which the letter ya was misread as the letter ba. An extensive search in biographical dictionaries and the indices of chronicles from this period does not reveal the name Bilbek in either of its possible Arabic spellings (*?Ai or ^?J'JJ)*. What comes closest to this spelling are a couple of individuals whose names were Bilek, and they are either from earlier or later periods. In modern Azerbaijani “Bilik” means “knowledge,” and “Bilik” means “wrist.” One or both spelling occurs in other Turkic languages. The Turkish and Turkic dictionaries consulted do not include the word Bilbek.38

Not only was Ibn al-Muhsini entrusted by Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad to create his new *maydân*, but contemporary historians relied on his knowledge. In his geographical description of cities known to the Egyptians, which Ibn Fa'dallah al-'Umarî wrote in 738/1338, he quotes Muhammad ibn Bilik al-Muhsini’s impression of the Lybian Plateau (Barqa, Barka), and refers to him with obvious respect. Al-'Umarî states:

The learned man al-Amir Nasir al-Dîn Muhammad ibn al-Muhsini told me that [Barqa] is a land with abundant water, clean air, mostly of rugged terrain, but it has plains and an abundance of trees. It also has uninhabited cities with still standing buildings, among them high palaces and ruins that point to their past glories. Bedouins inhabit its land, and they rely on livestock of camels and sheep. Some cultivate the land, but most of them are Bedouins who have no interest in architecture or agriculture.39

Ibn al-Muhsini was most likely referring to the Roman ruins along the Mediterranean coast. It is not clear when he visited the Libyan plateau and how often. It is possible that he went there with his father when the latter was sent by the Sultan to inspect the area; it is also possible that he often traveled west of Alexandria while his father was the governor of this city. In any event, his observation reveals sophistication and a clear interest in architecture and its role in societies. The Libyan plateau was not the only area to which he traveled; he also lived for a few years in Tripoli and in Damascus.40

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38 See Kortuluş Öztöpçü, *Dictionary of the Turkic Languages* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 174. I am indebted to Professor Soucek’s guidance and help in consulting the lexicons.

39—أخيرنَي الأمير الفاضل ناصر الدين محمد بن الحسنَي أنَّهُ (إِبَّانَاتَهُ) بِلَدَة كَثِيرة الْمَاءَ، صَحيَّة النَّهَوَاءَ، وَرَضِيَتْهَا محجر وَجوَرَن وَرَعَةٌ فِي الْفَالَقَ مِمَّا لَا يُقَدِّرُونَهَا، وَالْأَشْجَار الكثيرة. وَبِهَا الْمَدنَةُ الْبَلَّاقِيَةُ الْبَنْاءِ إِلَى الْآنَ وَهُيَ خَالِقَةُ السُّكَّانَ، وَبِهَا الْقُصُورَ الْعَلَيْلَةَ وَالْأَثَّارَ الدَّالِّةُ عَلَى مَا كَانَتْ عَلَيْهَا مِنَ الْحَلَالَةَ، وَهُيَ الْيَوْمُ بِالْوَرَبَ وَهُمُ أَصْحَابُ مَثَايَةٍ وَدُوَابَّ سَائِمَةٌ كَثِيرةٌ مِّنَ الإِبَلِ وَالْعَلْجَةِ، وَمِنْهُمْ مِّنْ بَرَزُّهُنَّ فِي بَعْضِ أَرْضِهِنَّ فَقْصِحَتُ زَوْرُهَا وَلَكْنَهُمْ أَهْلُ بَانْدِيَةٌ لَا عَانَىَهُمْ بِبَعْمَةَ وَلَا بَرَزَّ.


After 1339, the date of the death of his father, the historical accounts about Ibn al-Muhsini’s activities are clearer. He returned to Cairo in Muharram 742/June–July 1341 at the invitation of Amir Qawsün, after which he was appointed as governor of the city of Cairo. In this instance, there can be no doubt who was appointed because the father had already died.41 This occurred during the reign of Sultan Abû Bakr, a period of fierce struggle between the factions led by Amirs Bihstâk and Qawsün. Due to his alliance with Amir Qawsün, who was eventually defeated, Ibn Bilik was again arrested and imprisoned in Alexandria, along with a few other amirs.42 He was released in Muharram 743/June 1342, after the enthronement of Sultan al-Šâlih Iṣmâ’îl, and, in the following year, the Sultan promoted him to the rank of an Amir of Tablakhāna.43 Two years later, in Ramaḏān 745/January 1345, he was sent to Damascus to reorganize the administration of the city’s provinces, and was appointed as shāṭḥ [al-ţibā’h]. He apparently remained in that post for eight years until his return to Cairo on 15 Dhū al-qi’dā’ 753/23 December 135246 because during this period the chronicles are silent about him.47

During the reign of al-Šâlih Šâlih, Sultan Hasan’s brother, who ruled between the two reigns of Hasan, Ibn Bilik was invited to return to Cairo and was appointed to the highest position of his career. In Safr 754/March 1353, he became the mushīr al-dawlah (Advisor/Consultant of the State), a position listed by al-Qalqashandi as one of the three highest in Mamluk administration and surpassed only by the nā’ib al-saltanah and the vizier. Although no specific duties were ascribed to this position, the mushīr al-dawlah attended the meetings of the vizier and approved his decisions. At that time, the vizier was Muwaffaqa al-Dīn Hibatallah Ibrāhîm.48 When the latter died in Rabi’ I, 755/June–July 1354, Ibn al-Muhsini declined offers to become either the vizier or the nāzir al-ţibā’ (Supervisor of the Purse).49

During these years, the chronicles are silent about any activities of Ibn Muhsini that relate to calligraphy or architecture. However, in 755/1354, he led a group of amirs on a mission to al-Fayyum to build embankments or barriers along the banks of the Nile because of the unusual height of the Nile and the extent of the flooding it had caused.50 It is probable that his presence in the group was due both to his engineering knowledge as well as to his administrative expertise. His rise in the Mamluk administration continued during the two reigns of Sultan Hasan, of whom he was a favorite. Ibn Bilik

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41 Sulâk II, 563, 565; al-Shuja’î, Tarîkh al-malik al-Nâşir 134.
42 Sulâk II, 590; al-Shuja’î, Tarîkh al-malik al-Nâşir, 190.
45 Sulâk II, 671.
46 Sulâk II, 884.
47 He probably had a son who died in Damascus in 751/1350–51. A tombstone inscription from Damascus includes the name of “Ghânim, the son of Muhammad al-Muhsini. N. Elisséeff et al., Répertoire chronologique d’épigraphie arabe (Cairo: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 1964), vol. 16, 105, no. 6156. His wife died earlier while he was in Tripoli. Maqrizi reports that in 739/1338–9, the wife of Nâşir al-Dīn al-Muhsini died in Cairo, after she had returned from Tripoli. She was the daughter of Amir Kabir Shams al-Dīn al-Dhukr (Ildakiz (Ildaki)) al-Manşûrî. Sulâk II, 180, 464.
49 Sulâk II, 919.
50 Sulâk III, 13.
was one among the ten *awalād al-nāṣ* who were promoted by Hasan to the highest rank in the Mamluk echelon, an Amir-of-One-Hundred.

None of the sources suggests that Ibn Bilik held the post of Supervisor of Construction, but he was known to have overseen specific projects. First, he supervised the rebuilding of the *maydān* of al-Nāṣir Muhammad, and second, he was the supervisor of the construction of the Sultan Hasan Complex. The fact that he was also a calligrapher suggests that he was not a mere administrator but may have played an active role in the design or decoration of the Complex.

The duties of a *shādd al-'imāra* (plural ‘amā‘ir) varied from the reign of one sultan to the other, and from one project to the other. In general, the *shādd al-'amā‘ir al-sultāniyya* supervised the management of royal buildings, including their renovation, and the administration of the income from their *waqf*. Al-Qalqashandi defines it as "someone who would supervise the sultan's buildings, and implement what the sultan chooses to establish and renovate palaces, houses and fortifications . . ." It is a position that could also be limited to a single project so that the *shādd al-'imāra* ’s duties would cease once a project had been completed. The position gained importance during the reign of al-Nāṣir Muhammad who, in 1313, established a new department for the royal buildings called *dar al-'amā‘ir al-sultāniyya*. It had office and storage spaces located in the Citadel, and a substantial budget. He appointed an amir to run it whose title was *shādd al-'amā‘ir*. This department ceased to exist during the first reign of Sultan Hasan, when the amirs who held actual power abolished it as a part of fiscal measures to reduce the royal spending.

According to Hasan al-Bāshā, some Mamluk documents indicate that the *shādd* had to have architectural knowledge (*umūr al-handasa wa al-binā‘*). In the case of the construction of the Sultan Hasan Complex, one would imagine that the Sultan would appoint a knowledgeable person to manage this enormous project. Moreover, recent studies and lists of architects from various periods of Islamic architecture have shed new light on the education of an architect.
Fig. 1 Sultan Hasan Complex, eastern iwan, A section of the stucco inscription band

Fig. 2 The Madrasa al-Ḥanafiyya, Sultan Hasan Complex, courtyard and eastern iwan, The inscription band is right under the springing of the iwan arch (after Louis Hauteceur and Gaston Wiet, *Les Mosquées du Caire* [Paris: Librairie Ernest Leroux, 1932]).
Fig. 3  The Madrasa al-Hanafiyya, Sultan Hasan Complex, courtyard inscription. This section reads: “wa shaddu (or shâda) ‘imâratibi Muhammad ibn Bilik al-Mu[hsini].”

Fig. 4  The Madrasa al-Hanafiyya, Sultan Hasan Complex, courtyard inscription, southwestern corner
Fig. 5 "Tear-drop" motifs. a) and b) Sultan Hasan Complex, portal, lateral niche; c) Qur’an of Arghûn al-Kâmilî, 1329–30, border decoration (after David James, Qur’ans of the Mamlûkîs [New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988], fig. 112); d) page from the ‘Great Mongol’ Shâhnâmâh, ca. 1335
Fig. 6 A comparison between the carved foliate band on the buttresses of the Sultan Hasan Complex’s portal, and two border bands from manuscripts of the Qur’an: (middle) the Qur’an of Arghûn al-Kâmilî, (below) a detail from the border decoration of a page from the Qur’an of Sultan Hasan alîhî
L. A. Mayer’s compilation of names of architects from building inscriptions is a very useful source, but using it as the sole source limits our understanding of the role and the education of an architect. Another list compiled by Ahmad Taymūr Pāštah, primarily from literary sources, shows that many individuals who were involved in one way or another with architecture had other careers, such as that of a religious scholar or a carpenter. This list also shows that the distinction between an architect and a geometrician is often unclear because they can both be described as a muhandis.

However, this seeming ambiguity is not only linguistic, it is also inherent to the career and education of an architect in the medieval Islamic period. In the late fourteenth-century, Ibn Khaldūn clearly describes the long established connections between the fields of geometry, applied geometry, carpentry, architecture and engineering. He clearly states that theoretical knowledge, transmitted through manuscripts, was essential to the architect and the engineer. Gülru Necipoğlu has also explored this question of theoretical knowledge in her study of the Topkapı Scroll. She has surveyed the connection between theoretical work in practical geometry and architectural decoration from the Abbasid period to the Ottoman period. Although she did not discuss the Mamluk period as an age in which theoretical knowledge was essential for the craft of architecture and decoration, one should recall that a major compiler of treatises on various branches of geometry, Ibn al-Akfan, died in Cairo in 1348, and his work must have reflected the knowledge of the time.

Another often-cited example shows that some architects had only common sense and power, namely the Sultan al-Nāšir Muḥammad, who designed his mosque at the Cairo Citadel as well as the palace of Amir Yalbughā al-Yahyāwī that once stood on the location of the Sultan Hasan Complex. Possibly, the fact that the Sultan undertook to design buildings without having the background of a trained master builder, gave him the freedom to innovate. A conversation that is said to have occurred between al-Nāšir Muḥammad and his architects reveals something about Mamluk architecture. When he decided to build a structure and the best among his architects would try to dissuade him from doing it, they would say: “Our Lord, if those who came before us knew that what you are suggesting would work, they would have done it.”

Thus, in sum three reasons support the suggestion that Muhammad ibn Bilik al-Muḥšinī had a prominent role not only in the supervision of the construction of the Sultan Hasan Complex, but in its design as well. The first is the possible reading and translation of the word shāda as “he constructed,” as opposed to shādd (supervisor). The second is the extensive reliance in this building on decorative

56 Ahmad Taymūr Pāštah, al-Muhansisūn fī al-‘asr al-islāmī (Cairo, 1979).
59 Ibid., 140.
60 Sulāk II, 537; Khitat II, 71. Al-Shuja’ī, Tarīkh al-malik al-Nāṣir, states that the Sultan, in 738/1337–8 went to the site and designed the palace himself.
61 Sulāk I, 542.
motifs and schemes that appear to have been derived from manuscripts or objects (figs. 5 and 6), which may have been incorporated in the decoration of this edifice because of Muḥammad ibn Bilik al-Muḥsinī’s personal knowledge of calligraphy and illumination. The third is that many of the stylistic features and motifs of the Sultan Ḥasan Complex make reference to Cairene, Tripolitan, and Damascene monuments, which I have fully considered elsewhere. These cities are all places where he lived for some time. If it can be assumed that he looked at monuments in these cities with the same eye and critical mind as revealed by his description of Barqa, one could imagine how he assembled various designs, which he then included in the Sultan Ḥasan Complex. This would also increase the possibility that the enormous scale of the Complex may have been inspired by monumental Roman ruins like those he appears to have seen on the Libyan Plateau or in various Syrian locations. It is also possible that he employed his administrative skills to quickly gather various workers and artisans from these places and involve them in this project.

AL-HUJAYJ IBN ‘ABDALLAH AL-ṢĀLIḤĪ

The participation of al-Ḥujayj in the construction of the Sultan Ḥasan Complex is not well defined. We know that he had the title muhandis al-sultān (the Architect of the Sultan) when he died in 762/1360–61. We also know about his journey to the city of Hamah, where he was sent by Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā‘īl in the month of Rajab 743/December 1342, to study the qa‘a of Abū al-Fidā in order to build one like it in the Citadel. He built the qa‘a al-dubaysha in the Citadel of Cairo, and it was inaugurated in Ramaḍān 745/January–February 1344. The inauguration festivities included vocal performances in the new building. His visit to Hamah in order to study a building and then to replicate or surpass its magnificence provides an interesting insight into an aspect of Mamluk architectural history. Here it is clear that the ‘influence’ was not transmitted by the gathering of architects or artisans from other architectural traditions, but rather that the mamluks themselves are seeking examples in other locations that they wanted to emulate.

Al-Hujayj al-Hujayj had previously been known under the name Ibjii, or Abjii, due to a misprint in the earliest publication of his name in the Bulāq edition of the Khitāt of Maqrīzī. Later, the editor of Maqrīzī’s Sulāk retained this spelling of his name, probably based on its use in the Khitāt,
and thus he was mentioned as Ibjîj.67 The unusual spelling of his name led scholars to speculate about his identity,68 but the publication of al-Shujā‘ī’s history of Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, included the correct spelling of his name, something that is also supported by the use of this same spelling in the biographical dictionaries.

In this text, the events of the year 745/1344–5 include a report about the construction of the qa‘a al-duhaysha in the Citadel of Cairo, and the trip of al-Hujayj to Hamah that was made in order to study the dahsha of the late Ayyubid ruler of the city, al-Shujā‘ī reports that:

In this year, sultan al-Malik al-Ṣālih [Ismā‘īl] began to build al-Duhaysha in the Citadel. This was after the Sultan was informed about a unique dahsha that ‘Imād al-Dīn, the ruler of Hamah, had constructed. Thus, the Sultan ordered [Amir] Āqībā, the shādh al-‘imāra,69 and al-Ḥujayj al-muhandis to travel to the city and explore the building, and to return and to build one like it, and so they did. They brought along with them two-thousand white stones from Aleppo, and two-thousand red stones form Damascus, transported by camel. They also requisitioned marble from various areas. A water pool was also built in it, along with a fountain and a garden with various plants.70

Maqrīzī transmits a similar story with the misspelled name of the architect and with few variations in details about the events.71 He lists the cost of the stones brought from Aleppo and Damascus, and states that the marble was requested about a unique dahsha from arbāb al-dawā’in (the Heads of the departments of the Mamluk bureaucracy).72 Ibn Iyyās reports that in the Citadel, the duhaysha overlooked the sultan’s hawsh and its construction was started by Sultan al-Nāṣir Muhammad, but he died before it was completed. This puts the date of its inception sometime before 742/1341–2 and raises a question about the date on which al-Hujayj was first employed.73

67 Sulâk II, 632–33.
68 Doris Behrens Abouseif wondered whether he was a Copt, “Muhandis,” Shâd, Mu’allim “Muhandis,” 295, n. 13. I also searched dictionaries of Armenian names, but with no results.
69 Amir Āqībā al-Hamawī was originally an amir in Hamah, and was removed to Cairo during the reign of Sultan al-Ṣālih who favored him. After the sultan’s death, Āqībā was exiled to Hamah. Then, during the reign of Hajji, he came back to Cairo and stayed until his death in 759/1357, al-Manhal al-ṣāfi 11, 493–94.
70Michael Meinecke noted the difference in the two spellings by al-Shujā‘ī and Maqrīzī. Meinecke, MAĀS II, 198, no. 16/7.
71 Sulâk II, 632–33.
72 Ibn Iyyās, Zubār 1, 504.
Al-Ḥujayj’s obituary is listed in three biographical compilations, all of which spell his full name and list his kunya and occupation. In Dhayl tathkarat al-ḥuffāz we read:

...والقاهرة الحجاج المعمر الصالحي، مهندس السلطان بالقاهرة

...in this year [762] in Cairo, al-Ḥujayj the master builder al-Ṣālihi, the architect of the Sultan in Cairo [also died].

It should be noted that he is described as both a mi’mār (master builder), and a muhandis (architect). However, neither title gives us any indication about his exact role in the construction of the Sultan Hasan Complex, nor about his architectural training and education. Moreover, neither the Hamah dahsha nor the Cairo dubaysha has survived. Therefore, we cannot see what it was that interested the Sultan about the Hamah building, but it is clear that it was a pleasure pavilion with a garden and running water.

It seems that ‘Imād al-Dīn Abū al-Fidā‘, the ruler of Hamah, had built a remarkable structure that may have also piqued the curiosity of the Mamluk sultans. Abū al-Fidā‘ probably built his dahsha sometime in 720 or before it because in his history, Mukhtasar fī tārīkh al-bashar, he mentions his palace under the events of the year 720/1320.75 It was a palace with two nicknames, it was called al-Marba‘ and it overlooked the river in the midst of a garden. Then it became known as al-Dahsha because “it dazzled the visitor with its location, beautiful architecture and decoration.”76 Other accounts attest to the visual impact of these citadel buildings on visitors. Ibn Faḍlallah al-‘Umarī in his brief description of the city of Hamah presents a lively impression about its artistic atmosphere. He states that buildings in the Hamah Citadel, overlooking the Orontes, are built with colored stones and surrounded by a fortification wall. He adds that masters of various crafts visited the Ayyubid rulers and offered their art objects.77 The reference to the use of colored stones in the Citadel’s buildings, gains significance when we remember that in the accounts of the journey of al-Ḥujayj to that city, he brought back with him red and white stones form Aleppo and Damascus. There are no details given about the nature of the decoration of the dahsha or other buildings in the citadel of Hamah. However, two references may give some ideas about the quality of its decoration.

The citadel of Hamah was excavated by the Carlsberg expedition from 1931–38, and its discoveries, which were published recently, revealed fragments of carved marble and limestone of a very fine quality.78 Their patterns and motifs belong to the same family of patterns and motifs as those used in the carved marble bands on the mihrab in the eastern iwan of the Sultan Hasan Complex as well as those in the railing of the minbar of the Mosque of Āq Sunqur built in 1346. Moreover, the carving on

74 Dhayl tathkarat al-ḥuffāz, 130. Almost identical passages are in al-Dhayl alā al-‘ibār fī khahar man‘ābar, 78.
75 Ahmad Ghassan Sabānū, Mamlakat Hamāh al-ayyābiyya (Damascus, 1984), 129.
76 Sabānū quoting Abū al-Fidā‘, ibid. 128.
77 al-‘Umarī, Masālik al-ahjār, 196.
a marble basin that comes from Hamah, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, shows a fine carving of foliate scrolls, with a sculptural quality. The basin, however, dates to 676/1278.79

Another possible indication about the decoration of the dhasha of Hamah and the duhaysha of the Cairo Citadel comes from Maqrizï's description of the qa‘a that Sultan Hasan built to surpass the duhaysha. During the construction of his complex, in the beginning of Shab‘an 761/June 15, 1360, Sultan Hasan also began the construction of the qa‘a al-haysariyya, which was completed on the eighteenth of Dhū al-hijja of the same year (October 29, 1360). Maqrizï tells that it was a tall structure, eighty-eight ḏbirâ‘ (cubits) high, and that one of its windows overlooked a garden from which the onlooker could see the Bāb Zuweilah.80 In addition to the lavish furnishing of this qa‘a, which included silver and gold utensils, forty-nine metal lamps inlaid with silver and copper, and carpets, it included a muqarnas made of a single block of stone that "almost dazzled the onlooker."81

It is only logical to surmise that al-Hujayj was involved in the construction of this new qa‘a, since he was still alive in that year, and throughout the period of the construction of the Sultan Hasan Complex. There is no reason to think that he left the service of the Sultan, especially after constructing the much-admired duhaysha. Furthermore, the date of his death may point to his active involvement in the design and construction of the Complex. Al-Hujayj died in 762/1360-61. His obituaries mention neither his age nor the cause of his death. Nevertheless, we recall that in this year, the minaret built over the Sultan Hasan portal fell and that it caused the death of almost three hundred people, including workers and orphans who were studying in the adjacent maktab al-sabil.82 It is possible that al-Hujayj perished in this accident.

If the chronicles do not provide enough specific information about al-Hujayj, the stylistic development in Cairene architecture during the period of his activities may shed more light on his career, and his possible involvement in the construction of the Sultan Hasan Complex. There are several monuments that correspond to the period of al-Hujayj's documented career. They include the Mosque of Ašlam al-SilâhÎdâr, the Mosque of Âqsunqur, the Khâんqâh of Khawand Tûghây, the Mosque, Sabîl, and Khângâh of Shayhû, the Madrasa of Sirghatmish, and the Madrasa Taṭâr al-Hijâziyya. The patrons of these buildings were powerful figures and close to the sultans who ruled when they built their buildings, including Sultan al-Sâlih Isma‘îl, and Sultan Hasan. It is therefore possible that they employed architects who were on the payroll of the sultan to construct or supervise the construction of their own projects.

Stone carving, which became a regular feature of Mamluk architectural decoration during this period, is prominently used in all of the above-cited monuments. In this context, we should remember the carved fragments from Hamah. With the exception of the building of Shaykhû, the buildings listed above also show an increase in the use of color in their decoration, a feature that is prominent in the decoration of the Sultan Hasan Complex.

80 Khitat 11, 212.
81 Khitat 11, 212. Maqrizï provides a lavish list of the furniture of this qa‘a.
82 Ibid., 316.
The Khānqāh of Tughāy is of a special interest in this context. This funerary complex was built in 1347–8, and one may surmise that it was designed by the Sultan’s architect because of Tughāy’s position at the Citadel as the favorite wife of Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, whose power and influence continued even after his death. This building, constructed only three years after the duhaysha, has two features that set it apart from many of the buildings of this period and relate it to the design of the Sultan Ḥasan Complex. The first is that its qibla iwan is a true iwan, unlike the iwans in the Mosque of Aṣlam or the Madrasa of Širghatmish, whose iwans have either a flat roof or a dome over the sanctuary. The second feature is the stucco band in this khānqāh’s iwan, which runs on the same level on the three walls of its iwan in a fashion similar to the position of the inscription band in the east iwan in the Sultan Ḥasan Complex. It is unlike those in earlier buildings where the inscription usually serves to frame a mihrab and has the shape of an inverted “U.”

Finally, it is possible to suggest that Muḥammad ibn Bilik al-Muḥsinī and al-Ḥujayj might have collaborated in designing and constructing the Sultan Hasan Complex. The first may have provided administrative skills, designs and motifs inspired by Qur’ānic illuminations. Al-Ḥujayj could have provided his engineering and decorative skills. This hypothesis however does not eliminate the possibility that other specialists or workers from other areas, including Baghdad and Tabriz could have executed specific tasks.