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## The Mamluk Minarets of Ramla\*

Katia Cytryn-Silverman

### Introduction

One of the most remarkable symbols of Ramla is the thirty meters high *minaret*, standing at the northern wall of the city's old Umayyad mosque – best known as the White Mosque. This tower from which the faithful were called to prayers was erected in 1318, in the third rule of the Mamluk Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qalāwun (1310-1341). Four years earlier, another minaret, which has not survived, was erected by the same ruler over Ramla's Great Mosque, a converted church dating to the Crusader period.

From around the sixteenth century, the Mamluk minaret became known as “The Tower of the Forty”, as it is sometimes called today. According to Muslim sources, this name refers to the forty Companions of the Prophet, while Christians believed it was associated with the forty martyrs of Sebastia in Armenia, believed to be buried underneath this mosque.

Despite being reminded of in almost every description of Ramla – be it in Arabic geographical and historical texts, in Christian travelogues throughout the ages, in modern scholarly works, and even in banknotes of the Mandatory period – this important architectural landmark has until now lacked an in-depth research, which combines architectural aspects, its *in-situ* epigraphic evidence, together with its contemporary historical setting. Such an approach not only enriches our understanding of architectural trends and developments, but also allows us to assess the semiotics of this structure. Nevertheless, to enable a discussion on the architectural language of the minaret of the White Mosque – and also of a number of local late thirteenth-early fourteenth century minarets – it is imperative to introduce and survey the main building under discussion.

Two brief reports dealing with Ramla – by the surveyors of the British Palestine Exploration Fund (Conder and Kitchiner 1882: 269-275) and by the French explorer Charles Clermont-Ganneau (1896: 119-122), were published in the end of the nineteenth century. They dealt with the Crusader Church and with the White Mosque, also reserving a few lines for their respective minarets.

The first detailed documentation of the White Mosque's minaret was done in 1949 on behalf of the Committee for the Preservation of Muslim Religious Buildings (Mayer *et al.* 1950: 25-27). Ground plans, sections and elevations were produced, and are still in use today.

The few archaeological works undertaken at the White Mosque – in 1949 by Yaakov Kaplan (Kaplan 1959), in 1965 by Myriam Rosen-Ayalon and Avraham Eitan (Rosen-Ayalon and Eitan 1966 and 1969), and in 1979/80 by Meir Ben-Dov (Ben-Dov 1984) – checked the foundations of the minaret in order to establish its chronology, allowing some general assessments as to the development of the mosque. Nevertheless, the study of this structure remained detached from the general study of Mamluk architecture, and of minarets in particular. It was neither included in K.A.C. Creswell's study on the evolution of the minaret (Creswell 1968), nor in Jonathan Bloom's monograph *Minaret, Symbol of Islam* (Bloom 1989).

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\* This lecture is part of a continuing work on the minarets of the Mamlūk period in southern Bilād al-Shām. A popular article on the minaret of the White Mosque in Ramla has been published in *Qadmonyot* 138, 2008 (in Hebrew). For a full version of this present study, see K. Cytryn-Silverman, “The Mamlūk Minarets of Ramla”, in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 35, 2008, pp. 379-432.

## The White Mosque's minaret

The minaret is a square structure of ca. 7 x 7 meters, which rises to a height of thirty meters. The façade is divided into six main fields, corresponding to the tower's seven internal landings, and an upper open gallery surrounding a narrow top storey (whose original roof has been replaced), all connected by a spiral staircase of 119 steps. The corners of the tower are each reinforced by a pair of buttresses which rises up to the third row of niches/windows. These buttresses, which end up with a slanting top, create a larger base for the high tower.

The entrance to the minaret is on its southern façade. It consists of a recessed high arch flanked by a pair of benches, in the typical Mamluk style of the period. The door's lintel, carved with the foundation inscription is relieved by a shallow arch. The original doors, seen on a photograph from the 1950s, were typical of the Mamluk period and comparable to doors in Jerusalem: they consisted of wooden boards covered by metal strips joined together, with a continuous pattern of hexagons hammered from their back.

The entrance to the minaret is topped by a narrow slit which opens from the tower's second landing. This slit provides the building with a military aspect, given that similar openings on gates and machicolations were used for pouring hot liquids and other unpleasant substances over the enemy. Together with the window-slits and reinforcing buttresses, this element has led some scholars to identify this minaret also as a defensive building.

Nevertheless, despite its massive construction, the general appearance of the minaret is lightened both structurally and decoratively by the five rows of arched niches with windows, each in a different style. These niches repeat themselves on all four sides of the minaret, apart from the entrance level. The first three levels, ascending from equally-narrow single to trefoil arched niches, were clearly designed to counterbalance with the corner buttresses and bestow the tower a central vertical, and "slimming" line. The triple-arches of the next two levels were built within the limits created by extending the vertical lines of the corner buttresses, thus also contributing to a narrowing appearance of the tower.

In terms of architectural style, the arches in use are in line with those common in the Levant from the Crusader period onwards. The gadroon arches on the fourth storey, as well as the molded arches of the fifth, are of special mention, and could well be in secondary-use, even though such arches were still in vogue during the early Mamluk period and could also be original.

Certainly in secondary-use are the building blocks with mason's marks used as steps, the grayish-white marble columns used in the windows, the column-drums threaded into the building's fabric, both as decoration and as a structural reinforcement, and the marble plaques imbedded on the building's corners and on top of the central windows. Together, they contribute to the building's chromatic scheme, predominantly of yellowish tonality following the limestone ashlar in use.

A foundation inscription, embedded over the entrance to the building, refers to its patron and dates its erection (*RCEA* 14, no. 5401):

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. "The mosques of Allah shall be visited and maintained by such as believe in Allah and the Last Day, establish regular prayers and practice regular charity, and fear none except Allah" (Qur'ān 9 – sūra of the Ultimatum /Bara'ah, verse 18). Has ordered the erection of this blessed minaret (*ma'dhana*), our lord the Sultan al-Malik al-Nāṣir, the learned, the righteous, the holy warrior, the warrior in the frontier fortress, the defender of the frontier, sultan of Islam and of the Muslims, the reviver of the justice in the world, slayer of the infidels and the polytheists, king of the Arabs and the non-Arabs, possessor of the necks of the nations, guardian of the places of Allah, Nāṣir al-Dunyā wa 'l-Dīn Abū 'l-Faṭḥ Muḥammad, son of our lord, the martyr sultan al-Malik al-Manṣūr Sayf al-Dunyā wa 'l-Dīn Qalāwun al-Ṣāliḥī, associate of the Commander of the Faithful. May Allah prolong his days and spread his banners and standards through victory. The completion of its construction took place in the middle of the month of Sha'bān, in the year 718 [ca. October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1318].

The inscription, together with the archaeological evidence, points out to the fact that this minaret was erected from scratch with no remains of a previous tower underlying its foundations. But two pieces of evidence teach us that at least another minaret stood at the White Mosque when al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ordered a new one to be built: first, the writings of the tenth century geographer al-Muqaddasī, according to which a “splendid minaret” was built during the early 8th century by the Umayyads. The second evidence is an inscription commemorating Baybars’ historical victory over the Crusaders at Jaffa in 1268, today embedded over the westernmost entrance to the prayer hall at the Great Mosque of Ramla, but originally found at the White Mosque. Following Baybars’ many names and titles, the inscription reads (*RCEA* 12, no. 4588):

... He departed from the land of Egypt with his victorious army on the tenth of the month of Rajab the Separate, in order to go on a holy war and a raid on the men of idolatry and obstinacy; and he camped at the fort of Jaffa early in the morning, and he conquered it by the permission of God at 3 o’clock of the same day. (4) Then he ordered the erection of this dome over the blessed minaret (*manāra*) and this gate at the blessed mosque, by the needy servant [...] [in the year 66] and 600 [March 26<sup>th</sup>, 1268]...

The beginning of its fourth line refers to the erection of a dome on top of the minaret, together with the entrance to the mosque. That implies that Baybars ordered a dome over an existing structure, probably also a square structure as usual in Syria, the location of which is unknown. That Baybars’ minaret was still standing when al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ordered a new one, is learned by the passage written by the Jerusalemite historian Mujīr al-Dīn who wrote at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Mujīr al-Dīn, *al-Uns*: 68-69):

And the Sultan al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn erected in it a minaret, one of the wonders of the world in its shape and height. The travelers mention that it is unique of its kind...

After the conquest of Jaffa by al-Malik al-Zāhir Baybars in the year 666, he built the dome over the *miḥrāb* and the door facing the *miḥrāb*, next to the *minbar* (pulpit) from which the sermon was preached on the festival. In the place of the still remaining old minaret, Baybars ordered the building of the one which exists today.

A few locations within the perimeter of the White Mosque have been suggested as the probable site for the Umayyad minaret refurbished by Baybars, but that would shift this discussion from its main topic.

### The Great Mosque’s minaret

Another foundation inscription (*RCEA* 14, no. 5342) relating to the erection of a minaret by al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn is found at the tympanum of the western entrance to the Great Mosque of Ramla, a converted Crusader cathedral of the twelfth century, as mentioned above. It was originally embedded at the entrance to the minaret rising above this gate, as documented by Clermont-Ganneau in the 1870s. It dates the minaret to 714/1314, i.e., four years before that of the White Mosque was erected, also mentioning that it was done during the office of the important amir Sanjar al-Jāwulī, governor of Gaza and Superintendent of the Two Ḥarams (Holy Precincts) – Jerusalem and Hebron between 712-720/ 1313-1320.

The Mamluk minaret was replaced by a cylindrical shaft in the end of the nineteenth century, but written and visual evidence allow us to trace back its appearance.

The British surveyors who visited the site in 1874, had a brief comment on this minaret; they wrote (Conder and Kitchiner 1882: 270): “The minaret probably was the belfry; on the east side, above the staircase door, which leads out on to the roof, is a lintel, with a beautiful bas relief, representing two conventionally represented animals.”

Clermont-Ganneau also considered the possibility of this minaret having served as the church’s belfry, though he also had some reservations (Clermont-Ganneau 1896: 122).

What led the above archaeologists to consider the minaret’s origins as a belfry was doubtless its appearance, apparently similar to that of the minaret at the White Mosque. That is learned from old photographs from the end of the nineteenth century, in which we can still see the square shaft with

reinforced buttresses rising above the mosque's roof. It is even possible to see some of its arched niches, and the narrow top-floor surrounded by a veranda and topped by a cylindrical shaft (a lantern?).

This squared tower also appears on a late sixteenth century etching of Ramla, which appeared in various *itineraria* to the Holy Land.

### **A dual function: religious and military?**

It is thus notable that three squared minarets stood out in the skyline of Ramla and could probably be seen from afar. Two of them, dated to the same period, were of a "militarized" type, mainly for their corner buttresses. Should their appearance be interpreted as a result of a dual function – religious and military – or did it result from the semiotics of the contemporary architecture?

The foundation inscription at the minaret of the White Mosque, together with an unfinished inscribed medallion near it, leaves us no doubt as to the building's primary function: the term in use for the minaret is *ma'dhana*, i.e., the "tower from which the call to prayers is announced". But while building this important piece of religious architecture, the builders perhaps also had in mind its strategic potential, both for its location (at that time in the outskirts of settled Ramla) and for its height (overlooking the whole coastal plain of central Palestine).

In their description of the White Mosque's minaret of 1949, Mayer, Pinkerfeld and Hischberg noted the "special attention to strategic requirements." They mentioned the small room over the entrance, as well as the internal passages crossing the tower, to allow easy and quick access to the window-slits, overlooking all directions. In her latest book on Islamic archaeology of Palestine, Prof. M. Rosen-Ayalon discussed the minaret and also called attention to its military character (Rosen-Ayalon 2006: 101-104).

The slit over the entrance is doubtless a genuine defensive element. The window-slits, however, despite being of a military type in which space is provided for a person to stand within it, are not all easily accessible. This arrangement seems awkward for a military structure. On the other hand, one should keep in mind that narrow openings were also a common form of window in the Levant, allowing enough light and air to penetrate the building without exposing it to the extreme heat and rain of the region. In addition, such slits were also common elements of the fortified appearance of Islamic buildings, which not necessarily played military roles, but rather symbolic ones.

That is in line with the symbolic role of the minaret itself, which is perhaps one of the most expressive forms of political and religious victory and supremacy. J. Bloom had already stated in his work on minarets (Bloom 1989: 175):

... the *adhān* not only called people to come to prayer but also represented the new liturgical time of Islam, expressed the presence of Islam in a given locality, and proclaimed the names of those who ruled, the places from which that signal was sent became confounded with the signal and its context.

So it seems no coincidence, for example, that the inscription referring to Baybars' addition of a dome over the minaret of Ramla's old congregational mosque mainly celebrated the sultan's victory over the Franks in Jaffa.

### **The architectural style**

The two minarets by al-Nāṣir Muḥammad in Ramla are examples of an architectural approach which characterized both Ayyubid (1187-1260) and early Mamluk architecture in Palestine, a continuation of the Crusader style which developed in the region from the twelfth century onwards, a topic that has been discussed elsewhere. But it is the use of Crusader *spolia*, i.e., building elements in deliberate secondary use, that mainly expresses the religious victory and supremacy of Islam.

This style, also present in Jerusalem's late thirteenth century Ghawānima Minaret (ca. 697/1298) at the north-western corner of the Ḥaram al-Sharīf (Temple Mount) in Jerusalem, has close ties to the partly extant belfry of the church of the Holy Sepulchre, and should thus be interpreted as a direct response to it.

It should be noted, nevertheless, that at the Ghawānima Minaret the expression of Islamization is much clearer than in Ramla: the emphasized use of *muqarnaṣ* on top of the second storey and below the gallery is clearly an Islamic addition to the 'Romanesque' style of the Crusader belfry.

In Majdal near Ashqelon, the still standing minaret of 700/1300 is of a different type due to the polygonal shape of the shaft, but in terms of decorative style, it is in line with the previous examples – note the use of multiple types of niches, framed by gadroon, molded trefoil arches, while polylobed fenestrations replace the slits seen in Ramla (at the Ghawānima the original system of windows is not clear).

This style is in clear contrast to contemporary works in Cairo, the Mamluk capital, for example. There, the local architectural traditions which developed from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards were continued into the early Mamluk period, gradually adding northern Syrian and eastern elements. Nonetheless, this was a conscious choice, as the Romanesque style was well known in Cairo: the complex of Qalāwun, as well as the gate of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's madrasa, are examples of its use, which perhaps for traditionalist reasons, or mainly for being in the wrong cultural context, was not much repeated in the Mamluk capital.

The 'Romanesque' style seems to have passed in Palestine by the end of the 1320s, as evident at minaret Bāb al-Silsila (730/ 1329-30) over the western portico of the Ḥaram in Jerusalem, erected twelve years after the minaret at the White Mosque. Despite sharing the square shaft typical of Syrian minarets, the decorative scheme varies deeply from the White Mosque. It is much plainer, with little use of arched windows and secondary building material.

## Conclusion

In view of the above, the minarets of Ramla, the Ghawānima in Jerusalem, as well as the octagonal minaret at Majdal (700/1300), should be understood against the background of a period in which the Crusader chapter in Palestine was still an open wound. The shadow of more than a hundred years of Christian dominance over Jerusalem (1099-1187; 1229-1244) and more than a hundred and fifty years over Ramla (1099-1187; 1192-1197; 1204-1266), as well as major cities of greater Syria, still guided the political and ideological behavior of the time. Ramla, capital of Jund Filasṭīn from the early eighth century up to the Crusader period, was returned to Islamic hands following the crushing victory by Ṣalaḥ al-Dīn at the Battle of Ḥiṭṭīn, but only for a short time. Twice the city came into Latin hands and remained mostly Christian up to Baybars' victory in 1266. The choice of connecting a military victory with the erection of a dome over a revived minaret, as well as the adoption of a Crusader-styled tower to display *spolia*, fits the atmosphere by which Islam should clearly display its supremacy over Christianity.

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