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The Izara Friezes in the Sidlas of the Great Amir Qurqumas’ Madrasa at Cairo North Cemetery (No. 162).
INTRODUCTION

The late Professor Kazimierz Michałowski used to say, that no serious archaeological institute can really pretend to deserve that name, until it leads research into every historically important period of the country of its interest. Therefore, as early as 1972, he stipulated (in cooperation with Polish State Company for Restoration of Historic Monuments – PP PKZ, and under high patronate of the Egypt Antiquities Organization – nowadays Supreme Council for Antiquities of Egypt) the creation of what finally became the Polish-Egyptian Mission for Restoration of Islamic Architecture, and a branch of permanent activity of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the Warsaw University in Cairo.1

Since then, pursuing the main goal of the Mission, i.e. the practical restoration and conservation of the unique cultic and funerary complex of the Great Amir Qurqumas (No. 162) at the Northern Cairo Necropolis, numerous specialists from both countries have lead and completed different parallel research in contiguous fields: cairene architecture and topography, anthropology, archaeology, archival and historical studies, etc., that substantially contributed to our present knowledge of the Late Mamluk Period in Egypt.2

Epigraphy, however, was always at the very end of these activities. Such a state of things probably resulted from difficulties in the recording of these inscriptions, the greater bulk of this material being situated at the completely (in that time) ruined and inaccessible parts of the Complex. Only recently then have they become the object of more systematic study.3

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The present study aims to introduce the reader into some minor questions ensuing from the study of the inscriptional decoration of cairene islamic monuments from the Mamluk Period, as illustrated by the example of two inscriptional friezes decorating the side iwans (also called sidlas) of the Great Amir Qurqumas madrasa – the key element of his cultic and funerary complex (No. 162), built on the Cairo Northern Necropolis between 1506 and 1507 A.D. / 911 – 913 A.H.4

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3 Practically since 1995 only, when restoration of all main traffic arteries of the Complex rendered the inscriptional material easier to reach. The last of the bulk of inscriptions actually identified (situated above the uppermost range of windows in the dome drum of the Qubba/Mausoleum) was recorded only in April 2000, during the installation of qamarîyyas in these openings – cf. J. Kania, PAM, XII, 2000 (in press).
4 M.v. Berchem, Materiaux pour un CIA 1/3 – Le Caire, MMMAFC 19, Le Caire 1900 (repr. Beyrouth 1979) [= CIA 1/3], pp. 592 ff. (Nos. 401 ff.).
The inscriptions were recorded during two campaigns of conservation and restoration lead on the ceilings of these sidlas in 1998 and 1999 by M. Popławska and B. Wołosz, both artists and experienced art conservators. The theoretical and practical reasons that decided of exclusively “puristic” treatment adopted for protection of these objects (as well as complete description of methods and materials used for that purpose) were fully expounded in the Mission’s special Conservation Report.

**STRUCTURE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS’ BEDDING**

As already mentioned, the inscriptions of our interest were written on the so-called izaras, i.e. wooden friezes surrounding the upper part of the walls of the sidlas, which are reduced form of side iwans and a typical feature of cairene mamluk city-mosques of madrasa kind. The texts written on these izaras were “naturally” (i.e. according to the normal sequence of arabic script) surrounding tops of these rooms’ walls.

Both ceilings and izaras in these rooms are original elements of the primary decoration of the Amir’s madrasa completed, according to the inscription situated at the mosque’s entrance “in the month of ragab 913 [A.H.]”, that is – in November 1507 A.D.

The izaras form an integral part of the composite “coffer-like” ceilings of typical cairene form, providing them with a kind of frame aesthetically joining them with the walls’ surfaces. The following schematic diagram of these ceilings, as seen from the ground level, gives the best idea of their shape, equipment and the disposition of decoration motifs on them (Fig. 1). The drawing was conceived on the basis of the better preserved ceiling in the Western sidla, taking into consideration all fragments of the ornaments’ shapes preserved in both rooms and still visible in situ. Thus, the disposition of the pattern of ceiling decoration could be established as follows:

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5 Both graduated M.A. from Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, Department of Art Conservation.
9 v. BERCHEM, CIA I/3, pp. 592 ff. (Nos. 401 ff.).
11 Since the decoration of these ceilings is subject of separate study (M.A. thesis, Warsaw University, Institute of Archaeology) by Mrs. K. Wodarska, this question will not be further developed here.
Friezes of both *sidlas* are almost identical (with exception, naturally, of the inscription’s content) in their structure as well as in their decoration (Figs. 2–4). From the structural point of view the *izara* on each wall forms a separate constructional unit composed of thin and narrow battens (narrow at the top part, and becoming quite broad at the bottom) forming an upturned, concave and trapezoidal surface. The main material used in their construction was timber of some coniferous species. The best explanation of all details of these ceilings’ construction will be provided by the drawing by our late colleagues L. Słoński and J. Brzozowski, summing up the results of his constructional examination of these structures (Fig. 2).

At the rooms’ corners and in the middle of their longer sides (“East” and “West”), the *izaras* are divided on six separate panels of similar composition by typical *muqarnasses* (Figs. 3–4). The *muqarnasses* situated at the rooms’ angles are terminated with upturned *fleur de lys* shapes, descending well below the *izaras* themselves, along the rooms’ corners (Fig. 2).

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1. Schematic diagram showing principles of decoration’s display on the cassetonic ceiling of the *sidlas*: A–A & B–B = decorated ceiling beams (with differentiated decoration); a–b–c = different “caissons” motifs. (Drawing: M. G. Witkowski).

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12 To establish its precise species, however, the laboratorial expertise is needed – cf. infra, note 19.

13 L. Słoński, Structural Expertise of the Eastern Sidella; Id., Structural Expertise of the Western Sidella (MSS Reports for the SCAE), Cairo 1976 and 1978, passim; cf. also supra, note 10.
The central space of each panel/facette was occupied by an inscription, bordered from each side with a broad decorative frame. The inscription itself – white letters outlined with broad black lines – was superimposed over the complicated volute turning runner of *sode islim* kind, executed in slightly raised relief and originally gilt.\(^\text{14}\) The background of the whole composition was primarily covered with a white, gesso-like substance. The bordering frame (also gilt) was decorated with a simply traced classical scroll runner, its “eyes” being painted alternatively green and red and decorated with small schematic six-rayed white stars situated in their centres.\(^\text{15}\)

The inscriptions run naturally (i.e. according to the normal sequence of arabic script), surrounding the *sidlas* in a counter-clockwise way, starting in the “right hand” angle of these rooms, on the surfaces opposite the entrance bays to these units: in the “South-East” corner in the “East” *sidla* and in the “North-West” corner in the “West” one (Figs. 3–4).\(^\text{16}\) Displayed this way, they were immediately visible from the central space of the *madrasa* – *sahn/durqa*c.a.\(^\text{17}\)

**THE STATE OF PRESERVATION OF THE IZARAS**\(^\text{18}\)

The preservation state of both *izaras*, before conservation was done, must be defined as very poor. The texts on almost all frieze panels were nearly completely obliterated. This destruction was due however less to the structural destruction of its timber bedding (although in the “West” *sidla* practically 2/3 of the frieze panel on the East wall was missing – cf. Fig. 4) than to the surface effacement by rainwater falls, which was penetrating there after the removal of the roofing, once protecting these ceilings from above (cf. Fig. 2). In some places, over the frieze surface, large “resinous” brownish-black stains were widespread, most probably efflorescences either of arabic gum (element of the painting ground

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\(^\text{14}\) Cf. *infra*, p. 346 f.


\(^\text{16}\) The terms “East” and “West” are used here only in conventional sense, since the real axis of the *madrasa* deviates, accordingly to the cairene custom/tradition, from the true South-North direction by almost 40 degrees towards the East – cf. *infra*, Fig. 5. and V. Seton-Williams, P. Stocks, *Blue Guide. Egypt*, London–New York 1984, p. 104.

\(^\text{17}\) The *Waqfiyya* document of the Qurqumas’ foundation regularly and consequently designates the central space of the *madrasa* as *sahn* – cf. *Waqfiyya* (No. 501), pp. 42–46 – seemingly suggesting thus that it was never covered (sic!) What is more, in case of other, certainly covered rooms, the same *Waqfiyya* precisely states even the kind of timber used for their roofing – cf. *ibid.*, *passim*.

From the functional and formal point of view, however, the *sahn* in Qurqumas’ *madrasa* clearly plays the role of the *durqa*c.a – cf. A. Raveau, M. Roche, *Le Caire*. Esthétique et Tradition, [Arles-Paris, 1997], pp. 131–134.

For the exact meaning of these terms during Mamluk times cf. M.M. Amin, L. Ibrahim, *Architectural Terms in Mamluk Documents* (648–923H/1250–1517), Cairo n.d., s.q.v. (in arabic with english index).

\(^\text{18}\) The following is a brief summary of the conservators’ observations, fully developed in their report – cf. Poplawska, Wolosz, Eastern Sidella, *passim*.  
and/or of the pigments used) or of resins from the wooden bedding (of coniferous timber) or else – of both of these combined.\textsuperscript{19}

The different preservation state of the gilt elements, i.e. marked cracks on the bordering frame surface, clearly contrasting with the smooth texture of the preserved \textit{islimi} runner, might well have resulted from different techniques of their gilding or from different materials used for that purpose.\textsuperscript{20}

**TEXTS**

The lecture of the inscriptions written over the \textit{izara} friezes of both \textit{sidlas} has proved to be of great difficulty, due to their very bad state of preservation.\textsuperscript{21} Moreover, even in more legible places, the lines of the ornamental background \textit{islimi} runner, interwinding with those of the inscription proper, were hindering the deciphering of the letters’ \textit{ductus}. However, from the preserved and/or deciphered traces and fragments of the letters, both texts could be read, at least theoretically.

**“East” sidla (Fig. 3)**

From the preserved letters’ traces on the \textit{izara} of the “East” \textit{sidla}, the following text could be restored:\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{align*}
1. & \text{“East” Wall (S)} \\
2. & \text{“East” Wall (N)} \\
3. & \text{“North” Wall} \\
4. & \text{“West” Wall (N)} \\
5. & \text{“West” Wall (S)} \\
6. & \text{“South” Wall}
\end{align*}

It seems, therefore, that the \textit{izara} of the “East” \textit{sidla} was decorated with the 287th \textit{ayyath} of the 2nd \textit{Surah} of the Holy Quran, i.e. \textit{Al-Baqara} – “The Cow”, introduced with the standard \textit{basmalah} formula. In consequence, the inscription was, almost certainly, running as follows:

\[\text{بسم الله} \text{اللّه [اللّه]} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّه} \text{اللّhé} \text{اللّhé} \text{اللّhé} \text{اللّhé} \text{اللّhé} \text{اللّhé} \text{اللّhé} \text{اللّhé} \text{اللّhé} \text{اللّhé} \text{اللّhé} \text{اللّhé} \text{اللّhé} \text{اللّhé} \text{اللّhé} \text{اللّhé} \text{اللّhé} \text{اللّhé} \text{اللّhé} \text{اللّhé} \text{الل…}

\textsuperscript{19} The chemical analysis of this substance was included in the research programme of the SCAE laboratories; since their undertaking, however, depends seriously on the SCAE budget, rather limited (due to financial difficulties of the Organization at a moment), the chances of accomplishing them seem rather poor (at least for a while) – cf. POPŁAWSKA, WOŁOSZ, Eastern Sidella, p. 19.

\textsuperscript{20} Cf. \textit{infra}, p. 346 f.

\textsuperscript{21} Cf. \textit{supra}, p. 339 f.

\textsuperscript{22} Each line gives the content of separate panel facette.
TRANSLATION: 23

1. In the Name of God, The Merciful, The Compassionate! Our Lord,
2. take us not to task if we forget or [if we] make mistake.
3. Our Lord, charge us not with a load such as Thou didst lay upon
4. those before us. Our Lord, do Thou not burden us beyond
5. what we have the strength to bear. And pardon us, and forgive us, and have mercy on us.
6. Thou art our Protector, and help us against the people of the unbelievers.

“West” sidla (Fig. 4 on pp. 346–7)

The inscription once written on the izara of the “West” sidla was preserved even more poorly. On its “East” side nearly half of the whole panel bedding is missing and the inscription was completely “washed out” – almost to the bare timber surface of the facettes. On the remaining three sides, although relatively better preserved (“North”, “West” and “South” ones), the inscription is also almost completely obliterated. Only after the meticulous cleansing of the panels, 24 some more legible sequences of letters’ shadows appeared on them. These allow 25 to restore the virtually possible text as follows: 26

It seems, than, that the inscription on the izara of the “West” sidla can be identified as ayyaths 10–11 of the 62nd, i.e. Al-Gam – “Congregation” Surah of the Holy Qur’an, 27 introduced, as in previous case, by the habitual basmalah formula. 28 If it is a case, one can presume then, that the inscription was, most probably, reading as follows:

25 The full merit of deciphering and identification of this inscription goes entirely to Mr. Ibrahim Farag, M.Sc., conservator at the SCAE.
26 Cf. supra, note 22.
27 With some reservation, however, since the only certainly identified fragment of text may appear also in other contexts – cf. MUHAMMAD FUAD ABÐ AL-BAQI, Al ma‘gmûr al-mafruš li-l fadi Al-Qur’an al-Karím, Cairo 1994, s.q.v.
28 Cf. supra, p. 342.
4. "West" sidla inscriptions: 1–2 = "West" Wall, 3 = "South" Wall, 4–5 = "East" Wall (over entrance bay), 6 = "North" Wall. (Drawing: M.G. Witkowski).
TRANSLATION:\textsuperscript{29}

1. In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate!
2. O believers, when proclamation is made
3. for prayer on the Day of Congregation [= Friday], hasten for God’s remembrance
4. and leave trafficking aside; that is better for You, did You but know.
5. Than, when the prayer is finished, scatter in the land
6. and seek God’s bounty and remember God frequently; [than] haply you will prosper!

THE STYLE AND TECHNIQUE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS

The large monumental letters of these inscriptions seem to combine features both of thuluth and mamluk naskhi style,\textsuperscript{30} although, for the Egyptians themselves, they are undeniably written in “true” thuluth.\textsuperscript{31} The letters were painted white and outlined with broad black lines. As already said,\textsuperscript{32} the inscription was superimposed over the complicated “volute turning runner” of sode islim kind (with stylized leaves), executed in slightly raised relief. The runner was originally smoothly gilt, most probably by the application and polishing of sheets of real gold foil. The background of the composition was essentially covered with a white gesso-like substance. The bordering frame (also gilt) was decorated with a simply traced classical scroll runner, its “eyes” being alternatively green and red with small six-rayed schematic white-painted stars placed in their centres.\textsuperscript{33}

The marked cracks on the bordering frame surface, as opposed to the almost perfectly smooth texture of the preserved islimi runner are, most probably a proof of the lack of bedding in the frame space or/and of a different gilting technique (different materials?) used there, most likely powdered copper “paint” instead of true gold leaves.\textsuperscript{34}

The unaided eye observations accomplished during epigraphical documentation procedures, combined with those done by the conservators,\textsuperscript{35} allow to distinguish the following technical stages in the original decoration processing of these izara friezes:

1. The general planning of the composition – delineation of the text in broad, brownish strokes hastily applied on the bare timber surface of each panel of the frieze already mounted in its place on the top of the wall;
2. Covering of the central field of each panel with the white, gesso-like bedding, the places designated to receive the main developments of the islimi runner being covered with

\textsuperscript{29} After: ARBERRY, Koran, p. 584.
\textsuperscript{30} Cf. supra, note 9.
\textsuperscript{31} Opinion of Mr. Ibrahim Farag, who identified the inscription – cf. supra, note 25.
\textsuperscript{32} Cf. supra, p. 339.
\textsuperscript{33} Cf. supra, note 15.
\textsuperscript{34} The authoritative statement concerning reasons of these crackings is impossible without further laboratory investigations. As for these, however, cf. supra, note 19.
\textsuperscript{35} Cf. POPLAWSKA, WOŁOSZ, Eastern Sidella, pp. 23–32.
perceptibly thicker layers of the bedding. The broad stripes forming frames around the central panels were either covered with a different kind of ground (?) or could even have been left completely bare (cf. infra – 4).

3. Re-designing, in narrow red lines, of the general outlines of the izara frieze decoration (volute runner and text) on the already grounded (cf. supra – 2) surfaces of their central panels.

4. Gilding of the inscriptions’ frames, probably with paint including copper powder (possibly laid on a different ground than the central panels’ decoration or even, completely without it, cf. supra – 2) and of the ornamental volute sode islimi runners, likely by imposition and polishing of the gold foil over the pre-prepared thicker zones of ground (cf. supra – 2).

5. Final inner colouring of the main decoration elements and definition of the letters’ shapes with regular, homogenous black line contours.

6. Painting of the polychromed details of the frame over a different bedding, imposed only in the “eyes” of the scroll runner, which were intentionally omitted for that purpose previously (i.e. during the gilding of the frame – cf. supra – 4).

CONCLUSION:
PURPORT OF THE SIDLAS’ INSCRIPTIONS
– EPIGRAPHER’S POINT OF VIEW

The true exegesis of texts decorating these friezes, entering deeply into the delicate and complicated questions of their multilayered theological implications does not, for obvious reasons, enter into the scope of the present study, the author being aware of his limitations in this field, needing appropriate formation, preparation, approach and practice. Instead, we will try to concentrate here on some, more prosaic observations that could (or can) be deduced from these inscriptions from epigrapher’s point of view.

The first, immediate observation that comes into mind seems to be that both the disposition of these inscriptions and their contents are not accidental, but are resulting from someone’s conscious and deliberate choice. Already at first glance it is obvious that the texts were placed and disposed here systematically, in a way that makes their beginnings immediately visible to anyone entering the central space of the madrasa, i.e. sahn/durqa’a area. Namely, their “starting point” is situated always in the “right hand” corner of the room: that is – in the “South-East” corner in case of the “East” sidla and in the “North-West” corner of the “West” one. Moreover, the inscriptions on the izaras of the main madrasa’s iwans – although the one from the iwan qibla (so-called: “South iwan”) is missing today – have been also disposed in a similar way (Fig. 5). It is almost certain that the

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36 The terms sahn/durqa’a are used here under reservation expressed supra, note 17.
37 Cf. reservation expressed supra, note 16.
the doors, leading into the sahn/durqaca were also “protected” by with similar inscriptions, once decorating the panels of their wooden framing.38

Not entering into precise theological meaning of these inscriptions,39 one can presume than that such (and not any other) disposal of these texts reflects the well known magic/apotropaic function of Qur’anic script in popular beliefs of the Islamic countries.40 The same concerns basmala formulas, which open not only these inscriptions but also, in the same way, the inscriptions situated in remaining “main” iwans (i.e. “South” and “North” ones). Shifting the basmala to the “right hand” angle of each of these rooms was in fact – due to the specific orientation of Cairene Islamic cult monuments – putting the beginnings of these inscriptions exactly on axes of true “cardinal directions”, i.e. true South, North, West and East (Fig. 5).41

Thanks to such a procedure, the whole “holy space” of the mosque was placed under appropriate protection from all cardinal directions in a horizontal sense. What is more, on the monumental tiraz inscribed directly on the walls surrounding the madrasa’s sahn/durqaca, the basmala formula is placed only once (!), on the “West” wall of the sahn/durqaca, in its “North-West” angle, opposite both “main” entrances to the mosque: the “South-East” one, giving access from outside (from the main street of the necropolis), and the “North-East” one, leading from the internal ablution area of the madrasa.42 It could, therefore, very well play the same apotropaic/protective role in the “vertical” sense, safeguarding the holy space of the mosque from above and exposing in this way the “vertical axis of the world”.43 In light of these observations one can presume, that the disposition of inscriptions (and of basmala formulas in particular) in the madrasa was almost certainly a result of conscious and deliberate planning, explicitly intended to set forth the “universal” role of the madrasa as a “cosmic unit” and “condensed image” of the whole world.44

Moreover, the very layout of inscriptions decorating the madrasa’s interior also allowed anyone situated in the central space of the mosque, sahn/durqaca, to start reading them immediately, although, to continue it (in a literal sense of the word), one would be forced to enter the appropriate room space. This was certainly not necessary in the case of

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39 For reasons mentioned already at the beginning of this chapter, cf. supra, p. 347.
41 Terms used only in their conventional sense – cf. reservation supra, note 16.
42 Cf. J. Dickie (Y. Zaki), Allah and Eternity: Mosques, Madrasas and Tombs, in: Micheli, Architecture, pp. 15–47.
43 What seems even more “logic” and necessary if the sahn/durqaca was really, as everything points out, open to the sky – cf. supra, note 17.
44 Cf. supra, note 42.
the followers of Islam, since their knowledge of the Qur’an is astonishing; it is sufficient to recall to them only a minute sequence of words from the Holy Text and they will continue to recite, from memory, the whole ayyat or even sura containing theses words.\footnote{Cf. \textsc{Lane}, Manners \& Customs, pp. 223–277. When recording the Qur’anic inscriptions from the Complex I often witnessed, myself, this phaenomenon – being frequently aided by simple workers in identifications of these texts. Their indications were almost as certain as al-Baqi’s Qur’anic concordance, i.e. \textit{Al ma’ğmu’\textasciitilde al-mafruṣ’\textasciitilde li-l fadi Al-Qur’an al-Karim}.}
In the light of these observations, one can not exclude than, that this truly ingenious layout of inscriptions in the madrasa precisely reflects the original intention lying behind it – to direct the mind of the faithful gathering in this very place on some, very precise and carefully chosen ideas through exposing the appropriate texts in such (and not any other) way to the eyes of the community. This, alltogether, implicates someone’s conscious intervention in the choice and the display of these texts. And there is not a single serious counter-argument that this might not have been the founder of the mosque in person.

From the latest research it is clear, that the Mamluk founders of different cairene cult places have had much bigger influence on architectural shape and decoration programme of these buildings than previously admitted. In context of these studies one can then, rather safely assume that we might well be confronted here with “personal touch” of Qurqumas himself; and that it was the Great Amir’s original intent to inspire the minds of people gathering in “his” mosque with thoughts resulting precisely from these (and not other) verses of the Holy Text, i.e. that “frequent (not only through Friday prayer) remembrance of God” is, truly, the best way of life (“West” sidla, panneaux 2–4) and perfectly within human reach, since God “does not burden a Man with obligations beyond his bearing” (“East” sidla, panneaux 4–5).

In other, more general terms, one seems justified then, when assuming that the inscriptive decoration of these rooms formed a part of a precise ideological programme of the mosque decoration, and that it might have been conceived personally by the Great Amir himself. Being given some details from Qurqumas’ life, his personal intervention in designing of the “ideological” programme of decoration of his complex seems, at least, very plausible. Namely, the features of his character, at least as exposed by Ibn Iyyas in his Chronicle Bada'ī' az-Zuhur... straightness, truthworthiness and reliability, compassion for the oppressed and courage in defending of the unfairly accused with visible admixture of a clear penchant for mysticism, certainly allow to ascribe him high ethical qualities and spiritual capacities, making of him a man under many aspects falling quite away from the standardized image of a “typical representative” of the Mamluk class. Put in other terms,

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these features predispose Qurqumas very well to the role of the conscious conceiver (or, at least, of an active co-author) of the decoration programme of his cultic and funerary complex, perfectly able to “play” with all highly sophisticated, symbolic implications of these texts.

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To put this thesis to its final proof, however, one should confront it with results of analogous investigations of other, at the very least – cairene monuments. This, however, must wait until the state of publications of inscriptional material from these monuments improves because, even in case of “published” complexes, the Qur’anic inscriptions (being considered as “standardized” and “not revelant”) are, most often, recorded only by mention: “Qur’anic text” or “text with Qur’anic contenue”, at the best being followed by their more or less adequate identification. Some recent studies have proven, however, that the appearance of these texts on different buildings (or their parts) is not a matter of pure accident. Therefore, since better understanding and more complete sense both of these inscriptions and of function of places (contexts) of their appearance can be gained from their attentive study, it seems certain, that such an effort is worthwhile. A serious approach to these questions should bring us not only a better understanding of many cairene pious foundations themselves but, what is more, significantly contribute to the precise recognition of the true role of founders of these buildings, as being not mere investors, but also, at least, active co-creators of their spatial/architectural form and internal decoration. That, in its turn, will certainly lead to the revelation of quite unsuspected “faces” of numerous historical personalities of the period and, ultimately, force us to reconsider great many of current, frequently prejudiced opinions concerning top representatives of the Mamluk society.

52 Cf. p. ex. S.L. Mostafa, The Cairene Sabil: Form and Meaning, Muqarnas 6, 1989, pp. 33–42; author unknown/anonymous(?), The Minaret Inscriptions in Cairo, pp. 53–68 (This article is known to me only from a separate offprint, whose whereabouts I could not identify till now).
* Last but not least, I wish to thank sincerely Mr Marcin Ciuk for improving English of this article.