

The Architectural Legacy of al-Malik al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub: A Transformative Decade in Ayyubid Buildings

el-Melikü's-Sâlih Necmeddîn Eyyüb'un Mimari Mirası: Eyyübi Yapılarında Dönüştürücü Bir On Yıl

ABSTRACT

The reign of al-Malik al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub witnessed significant construction activities despite intense political and military engagements. The Sultan's construction activities began with the fortification of Diyarbekir walls during his regency period and intensified in the early years of his sultanate. After establishing his authority in Egypt, the most important works of his construction initiative were the Rawda Castle and the Salihyya Madrasa. The Rawda Castle, construction of which began in 638/1241 on the strategic Rawda island on the Nile River, emerged as a magnificent architectural complex with 60 towers after three years of work. The castle held critical importance as the sultan's administrative center and military base. The Salihyya Madrasa, whose foundation was laid in 640/1242 and completed in 641/1243 in Cairo, was the first madrasa in Egypt where education of all four schools of Islamic law was conducted simultaneously. Additionally, the sultan commissioned various structures such as the Salih Square, Bab al-Harq Bridge, Sedd Bridge, Kabsh Palace, and Zawiya of Abu'l-Khayr. Furthermore, the repair of Jerusalem walls and construction activities in Mansura were also significant. Al-Malik al-Salih's construction activities brought a fresh perspective to the architectural understanding of the period and set an example for subsequent periods. This article aims to contribute to the studies in the field of Ayyubid Architecture by examining the construction works during the reign of al-Malik al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub, the last great sultan of the Ayyubid State, based on information from primary sources.

Keywords: al-Malik al-Salih, Ayyubid Architecture, Rawda Castle, Salihyya Madrasa, Construction Activities

ÖZET

el-Melikü's-Sâlih Necmeddîn Eyyüb dönemi, yoğun siyasi ve askeri faaliyetlere rağmen önemli imar çalışmalarına sahne olmuştur. Sultanın imar faaliyetleri naiplik döneminde Diyarbekir surlarının tahkimi ile başlamış, saltanatının ilk yıllarında yoğunlaşmıştır. Mısır'da otoritesini sağladıktan sonra başlayan imar hamlesinin en önemli eserleri Ravza Kalesi ve Sâlihiyye Medresesi'dir. Ravza Kalesi, Nil nehri üzerindeki stratejik Ravza adasında 638/1241'de inşa edilmeye başlanmış, üç yıl süren çalışmalar sonucunda 60 burçlu muhteşem bir yapı kompleksi ortaya çıkmıştır. Kale, sultanın yönetim merkezi ve askeri üssü olarak kullanılması bakımından kritik bir öneme sahiptir. Sâlihiyye Medresesi ise Kahire'de 640/1242'de temeli atılıp 641/1243'te tamamlanan, Mısır'da dört mezhebin eğitiminin bir arada yapıldığı ilk medresedir. Bunların dışında sultan; Sâlihî Meydanı, Bâbü'l-Hark Köprüsü, Sedd Köprüsü, Kebş Köşkü ve Ebü'l-Hayr Zâviyesi gibi çeşitli yapılar inşa ettirmiştir. Ayrıca Kudüs surlarının tamiri ve Mansûra'daki imar faaliyetleri de önemlidir. El-Melikü's-Sâlih'in imar faaliyetleri, dönemin mimari anlayışına yeni bir soluk getirmiş ve kendisinden sonraki dönemlere örnek teşkil etmiştir. Bu makale Eyyübi Devleti'nin son büyük sultanı olan el-Melikü's-Sâlih Necmeddîn Eyyüb dönemindeki imar faaliyetlerini temel kaynaklardaki bilgiler ekseninde irdeleyerek Eyyübîler dönemi imar faaliyetleri alanındaki çalışmalara katkı sunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: el-Melikü's-Sâlih, Eyyübi Mimarisi, Ravza Kalesi, Sâlihiyye Medresesi, İmar Faaliyetleri

INTRODUCTION

After the death of al-Malik al-Kamil in 1238, the Ayyubid State began to experience internal turmoil, with rivalry among dynasty members intensifying significantly. The power struggles between dynasty members, who sought both internal and external alliances to gain supremacy, gradually weakened the state's authority, particularly in the regions of Syria and al-Jazira (Ibn Wasil, 1977, 5/172-173). Al-Malik al-Adil Sayf al-Din (al-Adil II), who ascended to the throne after al-Malik al-Kamil's death, failed to maintain political unity, alienated high-ranking emirs whom his father had valued, and neglected the populace (Ibn Wasil, 5/174-175). Al-Malik al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub, who was in al-Jazira during his father's death, came to Cairo in 1240 and declared his sultanate with the support of the Khwarezmians and the Mamluk emirs in Egypt who were dissatisfied with al-Adil II's policies (Ibn al-Adîm, 1968, 3/247).

Al-Malik al-Salih, who ascended to the throne during a period of political disintegration and intense power struggles among dynasty members to establish hierarchies of power and prestige, only managed to achieve political unity after eliminating Imad al-Din Ismail, the ruler of Damascus, and conquering Damascus in 1245. The disappointments he experienced during the power struggle with his uncle Imad al-Din Ismail increasingly strengthened al-Salih's

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tendency toward centralization. Influenced by his authoritarian temperament and sense of alienation from his relatives, al-Malik al-Salih established a centralized state structure administered by officials who were not members of the dynasty (Ibn al-Jawzī, 23/391).

Although the political system evolved toward centralization during al-Malik al-Salih's reign, there were no significant changes in the state organization. The administrative, judicial, financial, and military institutions of this period remained similar to those of Salah al-Din's era, with only minor modifications. (Basuguy, 2017, 255). Despite intense and exhausting political and military activities, al-Malik al-Salih's reign was a period when social developments continued. While this period was vibrant in terms of construction activities, economic and scholarly activities relatively declined compared to previous periods.

AL-MALIK AL-SALIH'S EMPHASIS ON CONSTRUCTION ACTIVITIES

The reign of the Ayyubid Sultan al-Malik al-Salih, while marked by intense political and military activities, was also a period that placed significant importance on construction activities. Al-Salih's construction initiatives began during his regency and continued to develop particularly during the early years of his sultanate. After establishing residence in Hasankeyf as the Eastern regent, he completed the fortification and repair work of Diyarbakır walls that had begun during his father al-Kamil's reign. The existence of inscriptions on the Diyarbakır walls confirms al-Salih's fortification and repair work. There are inscriptions belonging to al-Malik al-Salih on the 3rd and 4th towers of the wall extending from Hindibaba Gate to Mountain Gate. Both inscriptions, dated 634/1236-1237, include prayers for al-Malik al-Salih followed by the names of the architect and painter (Beysanoglu, 1/359-360).

Although al-Malik al-Salih spent a significant portion of his approximately ten-year reign on political and military activities, his active period in terms of construction began after his first year of rule and continued intensively for the next three years. After ascending to the throne in Egypt in 637/1240 and suppressing opposition against him during his first year, al-Salih began his construction activities. Known for his fondness for construction activities and refined residences, he started construction work on the Rawda Castle immediately after consolidating his authority in Egypt (Ibn Wasil, 5/278).

Maqrizi provides the following information about his construction activities in the section describing al-Malik al-Salih's death:

"Al-Malik al-Salih loved construction and personally supervised building works. He undertook construction projects that no other Ayyubid dynasty ruler had accomplished. He built the castle on Rawda Island opposite the city of Fustat, spending great wealth on its construction. The Rawda Castle was the most beautiful among all structures built by sultans. He also built extremely beautiful palaces overlooking the Nile in the Luq region. Being fond of polo (al-kura), he arranged the Luq field as an area for playing polo. He built a palace called Kabsh on the mountain near Ibn Tulun Mosque between Cairo and Egypt. He constructed another palace near 'Alaqlima in Sanih lands. Around this palace, he established a garrison city known as Salihiyya, which included mosques and markets" (Maqrizi, 1/ 443).

Al-Malik al-Salih showed special attention to Jerusalem's reconstruction. When visiting Jerusalem on his way from Damascus to Egypt in 645/1247, the sultan, upon seeing the damaged walls, ordered their repair. After measurements determined the walls to be 6,000 Hashimi cubits in length, the sultan ordered Jerusalem's revenues to be used for fortification, promising to send aid from Egypt if needed (Nuwayri, 29/210).

Even while seriously ill in Mansura, where he arrived on 25 Safar 647/9 June 1247 after Damietta fell to the Crusaders, al-Malik al-Salih continued his construction activities. After settling in the palace built by his father, he restored previously constructed buildings, established markets to meet the army's needs, and improved the water wall built on the Nile (Ibn al-Furat, 20).

AL-MALIK AL-SALIH'S CONSTRUCTION ACTIVITIES IN EGYPT

Maqrizi provides details about structures built or restored by al-Malik al-Salih in Egypt that are not found in other sources. His construction works in Egypt can be listed as follows:

Salihi Square: In 643/1245², al-Malik al-Salih purchased a 65-feddan garden belonging to Emir Husn al-Din Sa'lab al-Jafari for 300,000 Egyptian dinars and converted it into a vast square. Located in the Luq area of Cairo, this square extended from the Tabbah Mosque to the Qadadar Bridge over the Nasiri Canal. Al-Salih built pavilions overlooking the Nile for relaxation and spent his leisure time horseback riding and playing polo in this square. The Salihi Square maintained its importance during the Mamluk period and continued to serve as a recreation and relaxation spot for sultans until it was submerged under the Nile's waters (Maqrizi, 3/26-27).

² Maqrīzī, while discussing the Bāb al-Kharq bridge that provided access to the square, mentions that al-Malik al-Sāliḥ built pavilions here in 639/1241 after constructing his square in the Lūq area (Maqrīzī, 2/710). If there is no error in the given dates, al-Sāliḥ must have constructed the Sāliḥī square in 639/1241 or at an earlier date. In this case, the year 643/1245 can be accepted as the date when the sultan purchased the garden and added it to the square.

Bab al-Harq Bridge: This bridge was located on the shore of the great canal in Cairo. Built by al-Malik al-Salih at a point used by water carriers during the Fatimid Caliphate period, the bridge was constructed to provide access to the Salihi Square he established in the Luq area (Maqrizi, 2/710).

Sedd Bridge: Built in the mouth of Cairo's great canal in the area where the Nile waters receded. Al-Malik al-Salih constructed this double-arched bridge after 640/1242 to provide access from the western side of the canal to the Hashab garden (Maqrizi, 2/707).

Kabsh Palace: Located on Mount Yashkur in Cairo, this palace was built by al-Malik al-Salih around 640/1242. Constructed at the summit of Mount Yashkur, it was one of Egypt's most beautiful palaces, offering views of Cairo, Egypt, Rawda Castle, Rawda Island, and the Nile (Maqrizi, 2/676-677).

The Kabsh Palace maintained its importance after al-Malik al-Salih, hosting Abbasid caliphs al-Hakim Biamrillah and al-Mustakfi Billah. Sultan Baybars also resided there before moving to Qal'at al-Jabal. In 673/1274, Ayyubid rulers of Hama were hosted there. The palace was demolished by Mamluk Sultan al-Malik al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun in 723/1323 and replaced with other buildings (Maqrizi, 2/677).

Abu'l-Khayr Zawiya: This zawiya was built by al-Malik al-Salih for Sheikh Abu'l-Khayr in Fustat, along the Dar al-Nahhas line by the Nile, opposite the 'Alima garden³. Abu'l-Khayr, one of the prominent Sufis of his time, resided there until his death, after which his children took over the management of the zawiya (Ibn Duqmaq, 1/103, 2/676-677; Mackenzie, 280-282).

Since the Rawda Castle and Salihiyya Madrasa were the two most distinguished structures built during al-Salih's period, we will examine these two buildings in more detail.

The Rawda Castle

The Rawda Castle, also known as al-Jazira, Miqyas, and al-Salihiyya, was built on the strategically protected Rawda Island in the middle of the Nile River, opposite the city of Fustat (Maqrizi, 2/799; Rabbat, 86). Al-Qalqashandi notes that Rawda Island, formerly known as Jazirat al-Sina'a, was an ancient island known since Byzantine rule in Egypt, featuring a famous castle with walls and towers. The wooden bridge connecting the island to Fustat resembled the bridge over the Tigris that connected the two sides of Baghdad (Qalqashandi, 3/339)

After Amr ibn al-As's conquest of Egypt, the partially demolished Rawda Castle was rebuilt by Ahmad ibn Tulun in 263/876 and allocated for the harem and treasury. The structures on Rawda, left unrepaired for an extended period, were eventually damaged by the Nile's erosive effects (Suyuti, 2/377).

During the early Ayyubid period, Rawda Island was purchased from Bayt al-Mal by Saladin's nephew Taqi al-Din Omar and endowed to the Taqawiyya Madrasa (Manazil al-Izz) in Fustat (Suyuti, 2/380). Al-Suyuti, quoting Ibn al-Mutawwaj (d. 730/1329), states:

"Al-Malik al-Muzaffar Taqi al-Din Omar ibn Shahinshah ibn Ayyub purchased the Egyptian island known as Rawda from Bayt al-Mal. The island remained his property until Sultan Saladin sent his son al-Malik al-Aziz Uthman and al-Malik al-Adil to Egypt... When al-Malik al-Salih came to power, he leased the island from the Taqawiyya Madrasa's professor, Judge Fakhr al-Din Abu Muhammad Abd al-Aziz, in two phases for 60 years..." (Suyuti, 2/380-381).

Ibn Wasil describes Rawda Island as an elegant location overlooking the Nile from all sides, noting that al-Malik al-Salih's father al-Kamil had a palace there for relaxation. Unlike his father, al-Salih not only used it for relaxation but also transferred his administrative center there after constructing magnificent palaces beginning in 638/1241 (Ibn Wasil, 5/278).

Maqrizi records that the foundation of the Rawda Castle was laid on Wednesday, 5 Sha'ban 638/19 February 1241, requiring the demolition of existing houses and palaces (Maqrizi, 1/405). During construction, a Jacobite church was demolished and incorporated into the castle grounds. After three years of construction, al-Malik al-Salih built numerous palaces, added 60 towers to strengthen the castle walls, and constructed a mosque. The buildings utilized columns from old structures along with brick and plaster. After completing the construction in 641, having spent substantial amounts, he moved there with his harem and Mamluks from Qal'at al-Jabal (Ibn Wasil, 5/278; Maqrizi, 1/405).

Creswell estimates the castle's length based on its 60 towers, suggesting it was approximately 3 km long with towers spaced 50-60 meters apart. The island's circumference was calculated at around 3 km with an average width of 500 meters (Creswell, 2/85).

³ Although Maqrīzī dedicates an extensive section to the zāwiyas built in Egypt, he does not mention this zāwiya. As far as we have determined, the only source providing information about this zāwiya is Ibn Duqmāq's work titled *al-Intiṣār*. The zāwiya of Abū al-Khayr al-Qulaybātī (d. 912), which was built as an addition (ziyāda) to the al-Ḥākīm Mosque in Cairo, was constructed during the Fatimid period and has survived to the present day. For Abū al-Khayr al-Qulaybātī's biography and tomb, see (al-Munāwī, 4/27-29; Mackenzie, 259).

While no traces of the original structures remain today, French engineer Jean-Joseph Marcel, who participated in Napoleon's Egyptian expedition in the early 18th century, provided descriptive information based on the palace ruins. According to Creswell's citation of Marcel:

"The ruins of al-Malik al-Salih's palace can still be seen east of the Miqyâs⁴... There are two entrances to these ruins... The only notable remnant is a large rectangular hall measuring 12.70 m east to west and approximately 14.60 m north to south. The hall's oblong central dome, measuring about 5.60 m east to west and 6.80 m north to south, is supported by three columns at each corner designed in a triangular style. Various rooms of different sizes and corridors open into this hall" (Creswell, 2/85).

The Salihyya Madrasa

The Salihyya Madrasa was the first institution in Egypt established for teaching the jurisprudence of all four Sunni schools of law (madhahib) and remains the only partially preserved madrasa from the pre-Mamluk period (Ibn Abd al-Zahir, 1996,85: Leiser, 409)

Located in the Bayn al-Qasrayn area of Cairo, it was built on the site of the eastern Qasr al-Kabir. After deciding to build the madrasa, al-Malik al-Salih demolished part of Qasr al-Kabir on 13 Dhu al-Hijja 639/14 June 1242 to prepare a large area. Construction began on 14 Rabi al-Awwal 640/11 September 1242 and was completed in 641/1243, with separate sections arranged for teaching all four schools of law. The four-iwan madrasa designated a separate iwan for each school's adherents. Entry was through the Zuhuma gate, formerly the entrance to Qasr al-Kabir, which was later used by Hanbali scholars during the Mamluk period (Maqrizi, 3/465; Salam, 1999, 122).

Evidence suggests that Frankish prisoners were employed in the construction. Maqrizi notes that in 638/1241, al-Malik al-Salih captured many Franks after defeating Imad al-Din Ismail's allied forces and used them in building both the Rawda Castle and the Salihyya Madrasa (Maqrizi, 1/407).

The foundation inscription on the madrasa's facade, written in naskh script, identifies its patron and construction date:

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم امر بانشاء هذه المدرسة المباركة مولانا السلطان الاعظم الملك الصالح نجم الدين و الدنيا أبو الفتح ايوب خليل امير المومنون اعزه الله و نصره في سنة ٦٤١

"In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. The construction of this blessed madrasa was ordered by our master, the greatest sultan, al-Malik al-Salih Najm al-Din wa'l-Dunya Abu'l-Fath Ayyub, friend of the Commander of the Faithful (may Allah strengthen and support him) in the year 641." (Berchem, 1894, 104)

Swiss epigraphist and historian Max van Berchem, among the earliest to publish the inscription, suggests that the date 641 likely indicates the completion year, based on Maqrizi's chronology of site preparation (639/1242), foundation laying (640/1242), and readiness for teaching (641/1243) (Berchem, 1894, 104).

Maqrizi's use of three different forms - singular "al-madrasa," dual "al-madrasatayn," and plural "al-madaris" - has led architectural historians to propose various theories about the building's structure. Berchem (1894) suggested two similar madrasas divided by a Street (Berchem, 1894, 104); Ernest Richmond (1926) described it as a single madrasa with four iwans (Hampikian, 1997, 78-79); Nuweiser proposed two separate madrasas each with two iwans (Nuwaysar, 78); while Creswell's detailed architectural drawings show one large madrasa divided into two blocks by a passage (harat al-salihyya) (Creswell, 2/94)

The term "madrasa" in Islamic history refers not only to physical educational spaces but also to abstract institutional identities associated with different schools of thought and sciences. Maqrizi's varied usage should be understood in this context. Given that the Salihyya Madrasa taught all four schools of law, his use of "madaris" likely refers either to the four iwans designated for each school or to the four schools themselves, suggesting a single building with four iwans. The dual form "al-madrasatayn" might be interpreted within Creswell's framework of two connected blocks forming a single structure (Creswell, 2/94).

Approximately seven years after the madrasa's completion, al-Malik al-Salih's mausoleum (Qubbat al-Salih) was built adjacent to it. Construction began under his wife Shajarat al-Durr following his death in 647/1249 in Mansura. Keeping his death secret, she had his body secretly transferred from Mansura to the Rawda Castle. In Rajab 648/September 1250, his coffin was ceremonially moved to the mausoleum in a grand procession led by Izz al-Din Aybak (Maqrizi, 3/466-467).

CONCLUSION

⁴ The Miqyâs or Nilometer was a special mechanism established to measure the water level of the Nile River according to seasons. The oldest nilometer in Egypt was the one established on Rawḍa Island after the conquest of Egypt. The nilometer, which determined the flood levels of the Nile according to months, also played an important role in the systematic collection of taxes. See (Behrens-Abouseif, 1992, 50).

The construction activities during al-Malik al-Salih's reign (1240-1249) reflect a complex interaction of political, architectural, socio-cultural, economic, and urban development dynamics of the period. The sultan's construction initiatives, particularly the strategic positioning of the Rawda Castle and the multi-madhab structure of the Salihyya Madrasa, aimed at both consolidating political authority and supporting cultural pluralism.

The architectural understanding of the period demonstrates military defensive technological advancement, as evidenced by the Rawda Castle's magnificent structure with 60 towers and approximately 3-kilometer walls, while the four-iwan design of the Salihyya Madrasa represents an innovative approach in educational architecture.

The effective use of the state treasury in financing construction activities and the employment of Frankish prisoners in construction work illustrates the period's economic resource management approach, while commercial infrastructure investments such as markets and bridges reveal a systematic effort to stimulate economic life.

The strengthening of Cairo's urban fabric through the construction of bridges, roads, and the integration of strategic points like Rawda Island indicates the existence of planned urban development. The presence of social spaces like the Salih Square, Sufi structures like the Abu'l-Khayr Zawiya, and the Salihyya Madrasa, where all four schools of law were taught together, demonstrates the richness and diversity of the period's socio-cultural life.

The comprehensive construction activities carried out during al-Malik al-Salih's nine-year reign, despite intense political and military struggles, reveal the importance given to urban development and cultural progress. The architectural heritage created during this period influenced the subsequent Mamluk period and made significant contributions to the development of Islamic architecture. Particularly, structures like the Rawda Castle and Salihyya Madrasa provide valuable information about the period's architectural technology, aesthetic understanding, and functional design approach.

In conclusion, the construction activities of al-Malik al-Salih's period should be evaluated not merely as the construction of physical structures but as a holistic reflection of the period's political, economic, social, and cultural dynamics. The construction activities carried out during this period represent an important stage in the development of Islamic urbanism and architecture and help us understand the multifaceted historical character of the period.

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