

# CAIRO 1993/94, POLISH-EGYPTIAN MISSION FOR ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE, AMIR KEBIR QURQUMAS PROJECT

## Jarosław Dobrowolski

The Mission, organized jointly by the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities and the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of Warsaw University, works on a constant basis. The following report covers the period from October 1, 1993, to December 31, 1994.<sup>1</sup>

### RESTORATION WORK

#### RESIDENTIAL PART (*arawaqa* or *khanqa*)

Following a study of the technical conditions of this building in November 1993, it was decided to take immediate action in the seriously endangered structure. First, emergency reinforcement of the existing walls was done by filling in voids in the

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<sup>1</sup> The Polish members of the Mission were: Mr. Jarosław Dobrowolski (head of the Mission), Mrs. Agnieszka Dobrowolska, architects, year-round members; Dr. Grzegorz Bogobowicz, structural engineer, 1 October-1 December 1993; and Mr. Paweł Jackowski, sculptor-restorer, 1 February-28 April 1994. The SCA was represented at the site by Mrs. Mervet Saad Mahmud, Chief Inspector, for whom highest credits are due for her extremely effective and involved work. In December 1994 she was replaced by Mr. Mohammad Othman and Mrs. Fatim Hasan, inspectors. They were aided by Mrs. Badriya Mohammad, inspector, and by engineers Mr. Tariq Bahgat and later Mr. Wahid Barbari. The Mission acted under the general supervision of Mr. Medhad Husein al-Minnabawi, General Director, Foreign Missions Department, Islamic and Coptic Sector, whose personal involvement was of great importance for our work. The Mission's work was possible thanks to friendly cooperation and concern of the SCA authorities at all levels. Our sincere gratitude is extended to all these people who cannot be listed here for lack of space.

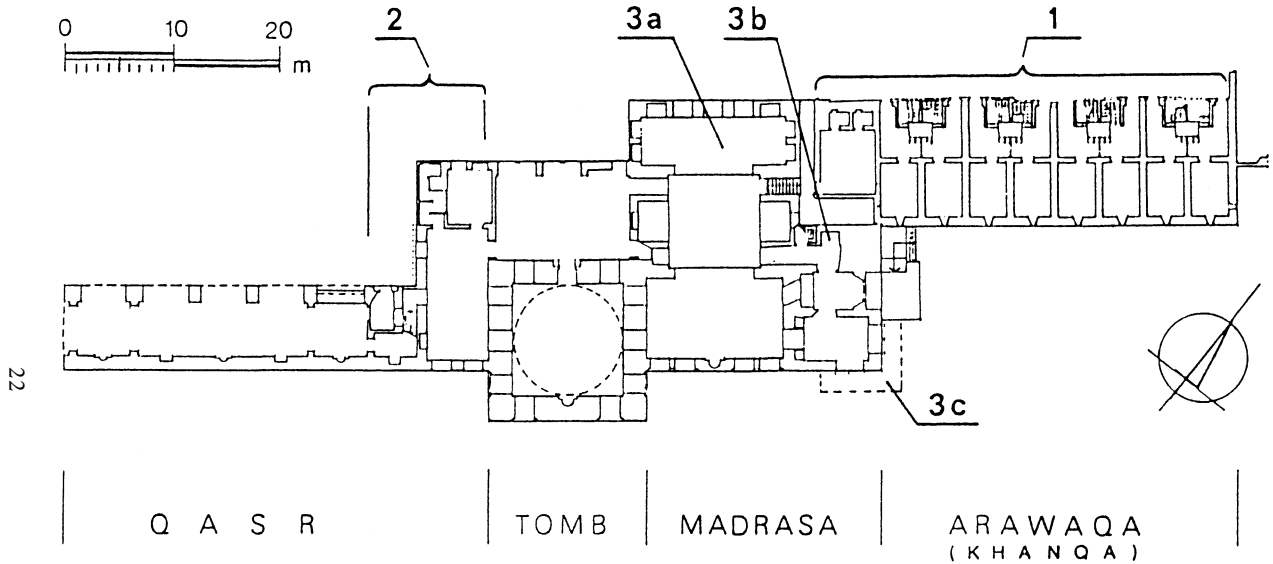


Fig. 1. The funerary complex of Amir Kebir Qurqumas in Cairo, key plan:

1 - residential building, 2 - area of the western entrance to the qasr and adjoining rooms, 3a - western liwan of the madrasa, 3b - mazmala niche, 3c - overhanging roof over the kuttab (rafrac).  
Drawing J. Dobrowolski.

joints, fixing loose masonry and replacing fallen lintels. Missing parts of walls and vaults are presently being restored, with an eventual aim to insulate the structure from rainwater and render it structurally safe. Upon cleaning the rubble numerous potsherds were discovered, with an interestingly high percentage of genuine Chinese porcelain. Remnants of original staircases were discovered and examined.

#### **AREA OF THE WESTERN ENTRANCE TO THE QASR AND ADJOINING ROOMS**

The original entrance to the *qasr* was unblocked and the outer stairs were reconstructed according to preserved remnants. A roof was constructed over the upper storey toilet area (this involved restoring the uppermost parts of the walls), and a roof-cover was installed over the southern vestibule of the *qubba*. The whole complex has thus been put under roof. Repairs of faulty old roofcovers will remain the Mission's concern for the future.

**STRUCTURAL REPAIRS** were undertaken all through the season: (a) in places posing serious structural hazards and (b) with an aim to prepare interiors for facing with marble. Eroded stone blocks were replaced in the endangered places, the most important being pillars and lintels in the western *liwan* of the *madrassa*. The damaged stone vault over the *mazmala* niche in the entrance vestibule was repaired and water-insulated. The badly deteriorated wooden overhanging roof over the *kuttab* (*rafraf*) was restored.

#### **WOODWORK**

Original decorated wooden panels from the ceiling of the western *liwan* of the *madrassa* had been taken down for conservation in 1992 and were treated by a team from the SCA's Restoration Department. They were cleaned mechanically and with alcohol-soaked tampons, the disintegrating parts of

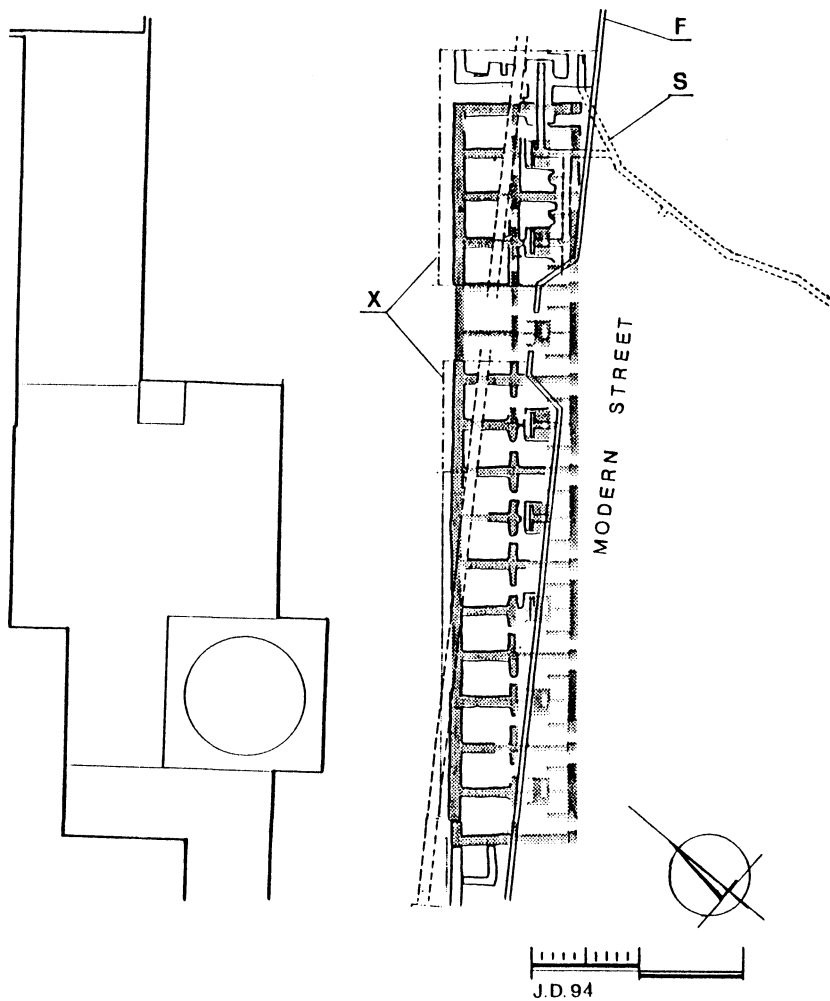


Fig. 2. Residential building excavated in the eastern part of the Amir Qurqumas complex (lines in bold mark excavated walls): X - limits of the area excavated in 1993-1994, S - medieval sewage channel, F - modern fence.  
 Drawing J. Dobrowolski.

wooden boards were infused with Paraloid B72 in acetone, palm-wood beams were infused with vinyl polyacetate and cracks sealed with a polyacetate-base putty reinforced with hemp. A team of highly skilled carpenters from the Bayt Sinnari Restoration and Training Center supplemented missing parts of the panels with new pieces of wood, on which carved designs were reconstructed. Wooden elements were introduced into interiors. The balustrades of the *kuttab* were reconstructed, their design modeled after contemporary examples preserved in other monuments. Many decorative window grills and doors were installed and the wooden balustrades of the main staircase were made. This work, which is aimed at closing the interiors and rendering them safe for use, will be the Mission's concern also in the next season.

## EXCAVATIONS

From November 1993 until February 1994 c. 500 m<sup>2</sup> were excavated east of the Amir Kebir Qurqumas *madrassa*, a continuation of former exploration toward the north. The work was financed and completed by the Egyptian Antiquities Organization, under the general supervision of Mr. Medhat Husayn al-Minnabawi. The excavations were managed on site by Mrs. Mervet Saad Mahmud and the Mission's architects prepared the documentation.

Excavations exposed the foundations of a huge residential building, belonging to the same structure that had been partly investigated in previous seasons. Nothing remained of the building except the stone foundation walls and traces of an elaborate sewage system. It has been identified beyond doubt as the building described in the foundation deed (*hogga*) as containing 16 living units called *tibaaq*. This is tentatively the edifice referred to in the document as *rab'a*. Excavations proved the accuracy of the description in the *hogga*. The plan of the building was very similar to that of its counterpart preserved north of the *madrassa*.

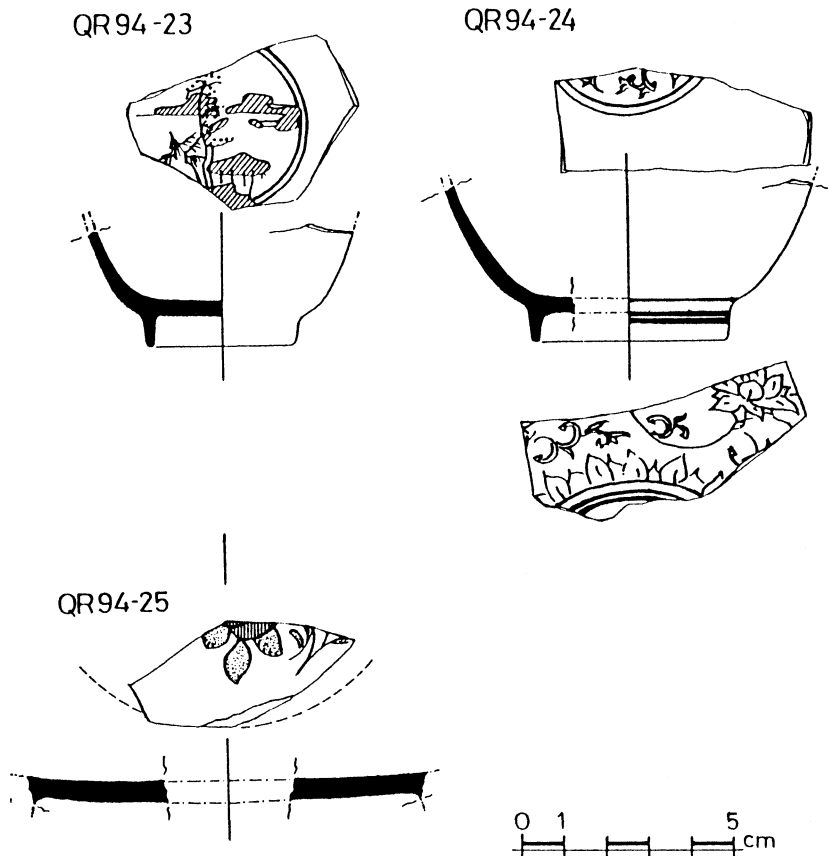


Fig. 3. Examples of Chinese porcelain from the 1993-1994 excavations.  
 Drawing J. Dobrowolski.

North of the described building the excavated area included parts of other structures which were connected to the same sewage system as the *rab'a*. These were earlier buildings rebuilt when the Amir Kebir's complex was erected. Further explorations will help determine the plan and character of these structures.

The excavations determined the course of the main road crossing the area; the width of the thoroughfare between Amir Kebir's buildings was found to be 12 to 16 m.

Numerous potsherds dating from the late Mamluk to late Ottoman period were found, but the date of the final abandonment and destruction of the building could not be clearly established. The pottery represents glazed Mamluk wares, unglazed utility vessels and a high percentage of imported wares, apparently North African, Persian and Turkish, as well as many pieces of Chinese porcelain. There is no perceptible difference between pottery from these excavations and that retrieved from the residential building located to the west (*arawaqa*, "*khanqa*").

## DESIGNING, DOCUMENTATION AND STUDY WORK

Throughout the season, apart from direct supervision of work and designs needed for immediate implementation, the members of the Mission prepared studies and designs for future work. These included a design for the structural reinforcement of the cracking *qasr* building, designs for restoration of the minaret damaged in a recent earthquake (partly implemented already), a theoretical reconstruction of the original staircases in the residential building according to discovered relics, a design for the muezzins' balcony in the *madrassa*, and numerous other woodwork designs, all preceded by studies of relevant contemporary material.