

# Conservation of the Mosque of Shajar al-Durr

## Report on Phase II

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### Summary

Conservation of this mid thirteenth century mausoleum was carried out by the Built Environment Collective – Megawra in partnership with the Ministry of Antiquities and with primary funding from the American Research Centre’s Antiquities Endowment Fund and additional funding from the Barakat Trust, UK. This project is part of Athar Lina Initiative, a participatory initiative based in the neighborhood of al-Khalifa in Historic Cairo. Athar Lina’s mandate is to integrate conservation with socio-economic-development in an attempt to convert heritage into a community asset that the community benefits from and therefore conserves. Between November 2013 and December 2015, conservation work was carried out on painted plaster and carved stucco and painted, carved and plain wood, in addition to plaster and masonry conservation and site presentation works. Its most important achievement was to reveal the vegetal and geometric decoration on the interior of the drum of the dome and the transitional zone and the Quranic inscription on the wooden beam preceding the *mihrab*.

### History and Location

The mausoleum of Shajar al-Durr was built by in 684|1250 by ‘Ismat al-Din wa’l-Dawla Shajar al-Durr, wife of al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub, the last of the Ayyubid sultans, mother of his son Khalil, and most importantly, the only woman to have ruled Egypt in the Islamic period. It is located in the area of al-Khalifa in Historic Cairo, a neighbourhood with a wealth of architectural heritage of both cultural and religious value.

### Description of Interior

The mausoleum in its current state consists of a square shaped chamber of an internal area of c. 50 sq. M. Its interior is accessed through three doors located in the middle of three of its facades while the fourth, south-eastern one, contains the distinctive *mihrab* whose interior hood is coated with glass mosaic, the only intact example of its type remaining in Cairo today. The doors and the *mihrab* are framed by carved stucco panels with mostly vegetal decoration surrounding by bands of Quranic calligraphy. The brick masonry structure is topped by a keel-shaped dome with eight keel shaped windows distributed evenly along the drum. The transitional zone consists of two tiers of squinches with four sets of tripartite windows. It has two inscription bands. The upper foundational inscription runs immediately below the transitional zone and contains in *naskhi* script the date of foundation (684/1250) as well as reference to Shajar al-Durr as *sultana*. The lower band runs at the level of the door lintels and consists of pieces of a re-used Fatimid inscription band, probably taken from the Fatimid Palaces, cut up and placed in this

building.

## Description of Exterior and Surroundings

The south-eastern and south-western external facades are decorated with carved stucco panels. The northwestern façade has remains of what seems to have been a portico preceding the main entrance but has since disappeared. The pattern of the masonry fabric of the north-eastern façade and the information on the marble plaque adorning it tells the story of a mosque that had been attached to the dome in the mid nineteenth century only to be demolished by the Comité de Conservation des Monuments d'Art Arabe less than a 100 years later. The 19<sup>th</sup> century mosque may have stood in the location of the mausoleum's surrounding buildings also built by Shajar al-Durr, which according to the sources included a mosque, minaret, bath and oratory within a palatial garden complex.

## Shajar al-Durr Conservation Project and Athar Lina Initiative

The Shajar al-Durr Conservation Project was funded by the American Research Centre in Egypt with additional funding from the Barakat Trust. It is one of a combination of projects implemented in al-Khalifa by Athar Lina Initiative in which conservation and rehabilitation interventions are used as a vehicle for socio-economic development activities related to education, health, tourist development and improvement of services and public space. Athar Lina's mandate is that the well-being of heritage is inextricably linked to the well-being of its urban setting and that no conservation is possible without the community's participation which in turn will only come if heritage is perceived by the community as an asset and a resource. Athar Lina Initiative thus adopts a participatory approach to heritage management integrating conservation with development. It is jointly run by the Built Environment Collective – Megawra and the Ministry of Antiquities in collaboration with a network of partners ranging from Cairo Governorate to Cairo University's Faculty of Planning to private development firms such as Takween for Integrated Development, all in coordination with the residents of al-Khalifa.

## Highlights of Conservation Work (November 2013 – January 2016)

Painted plaster: Traces of painted decoration could be seen on the interior of the transitional zone and between the drum windows. Closer examination showed that the original geometric and vegetal decoration painted in blue-green had been coated with a thin layer of plaster. It was painstakingly removed using scalpels, consolidated, coated with a protective layer of dammar resin and retouched using stippling only where there was clear indication of the original design.

Carved stucco: The interior and exterior panels of carved stucco were consolidated and cleaned. Bird droppings and cement deposits were removed mechanically. In the case of cracks and separation from the substrate, both panels and walls were grouted and cracks were filled with a lime/gypsum mortar with linen thread where necessary. The decoration was reconstructed only where there was clear indication of the original design.

External and internal undecorated plaster: With the exception of the interior of the dome and the transitional zone, all undecorated plaster was modern cement render. It was simply removed where necessary and replastered with lime render.

Decorated wood: All wood was treated with pesticide. The painted inscription on the upper foundational frieze was fixed and cleaned from bird droppings and cement deposit. The lower frieze is a reused Fatimid inscription that was stripped clean of paint by an earlier conservation. It was cleaned and missing wood was replaced with plain boards. Of the eight wooden beams meant to carry lamps, the three missing ones were replaced and a Quranic inscription was revealed on the beam in front of the mihrab.

Masonry repair: Condition was poor due to damage from salt laden rising damp exacerbated by the modern cement plaster coating the walls. After the cement plaster was removed from the lower damaged zones, the walls were desalted and grouted, cracks were fixed and damaged stone and brick repaired and repointed.

Site presentation: Damaged stone in the walls and fence of the surrounding buffer zone was replaced or consolidated. All walls were cleaned and the structural problems of the masonry and iron fence were resolved. External lighting and information panels were installed.

## **New Discoveries**

The Decorated Dome Interior

Almost all descriptions of this dome have referred to the traces of painted decoration that could be seen by the naked eye between the windows and on the squinches of the dome interior. Yet, with the exception of photo-documentation from afar, there was no comprehensive documentation nor were there any successful attempts to reveal the decoration and present it in its full glory. This conservation project revealed the blue-green vegetal and decorative decoration, uncovering some elements that we had not known existed.

While the dome interior is plain, the eight windows piercing the drum alternate with eight medallions with arabesque designs with elegant tendrils of leaves and split palmettes and tulip-like flowers emanating from them. While all eight patterns are close, none of them are similar. The spandrels of the upper tier of squinches and tripartite windows are decorated with arabesque designs while the three corner squinches contain a lobed medallion in the central squinch and two medallions closer in design to the drum medallions in the side squinches. The spandrels of the lower row of squinches contain a central medallion with a star pattern flanked by an arabesque pattern within a triangular frame. The triangular soffits of the pendentives flanking the central lower squinch contain a geometrical six-pointed star pattern. The central lower squinches are not as well preserved but they seem to enclose a design of vegetal arabesques covering their whole surface. One totally new discovery is the interlacing pattern framing the tripartite windows, a pattern that had been coated with a much thicker layer of plaster.

Layer analysis of the plaster has shown that this decoration is contemporary to the dome. It has also shown that in some cases, particularly around the tri-partite windows, alterations were introduced halfway through the application of the design. The design is comparable to that of the interior of the mausoleum of the 'Abbasid Caliphs (pre 640|1242) whose architecture is also quite similar. Yet in the case of the 'Abbasid Caliphs dome, the whole dome interior is decorated, some of the designs are gilded and are in relief and there are no drum windows or medallions. Instead, a painted foundational inscription runs along the base of the dome.

The painted inscription on the beam used for hanging lamps

Traces of a naskhi Quranic inscription (7:54) were discovered under a layer of modern green paint coating the beam in front of the mihrab. Only the face of this beam is decorated. The rear and soffit are plain as are the other remaining beams

Cairo, 2016

### Selected Readings

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