



Structuring Sovereignty: Islam and Modernity in the Mosque of Muhammad 'Ali Pasha

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ABSTRACT

The monumental Alabaster Mosque of the Ottoman-appointed governor of Egypt Muhammad 'Ali Pasha (r. 1805–1848) has been varyingly examined as a visual representation of the Pasha's political ambitions, modernizing spirit, nationalist aspirations, and cosmopolitanism. Scholars have generally sought to explain the significance of Muhammad 'Ali's mosque through such structuring concepts as modernity and nationalism, but questions remain as to why Muhammad 'Ali sought to embody his political agenda and personal ambitions by monumentalizing a place of worship. What about the mosque as an Islamic object and a place of worship was significant for conceptualizing modernity and nationalism in early-nineteenth-century Egypt? By approaching the mosque as a structuring institution of Islam, this article highlights the distinctiveness of the mosque as a site and an object through which Muhammad 'Ali negotiated varying conceptions of sovereignty, power, and national identity at a time of transition in Egyptian history.

Keywords: mosque, Muhammad 'Ali Pasha, modernity, Egypt, sovereignty, Islamic architecture

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Around 1830, while the Ottoman Albanian governor of Egypt Muhammad 'Ali Pasha (c.1770–1849)¹ was engaged in a struggle with the Ottoman Porte for control over the Syrian province of the empire, he began construction on a monumental mosque at the western edge of the Citadel in Cairo.² Since the completion of the bulk of its construction in the 1850s, this mosque has stood as one of the most conspicuous buildings in Cairo. The alabaster slabs covering its lower exterior walls have lost their shimmer, but its soaring pencil minarets and its large central dome, surrounded by four semi-domes and a cascade of smaller domes and minarets, have for nearly two centuries drawn Egyptians' and visitors' attention to the influence Muhammad 'Ali has had in the formation of the modern Egyptian nation-state (Figure 1). The impact of Muhammad 'Ali's mosque runs so deep in modern Egypt that even after the successors to his dynasty were deposed by a popular revolution in 1952, the association of his mosque with Egyptian national identity endured and went on to survive the transformations Arab nationalism and Islamism introduced in Egypt in the latter half of the twentieth century. Contemporary Egyptians still find Muhammad 'Ali's mosque not only atop the Citadel in Cairo but also when they reach for a 20-pound bill or a 10-piastre coins in their pockets (Figure 2a and b) (Rabbat 2005).

Muhammad 'Ali's mosque covers over five thousand square meters. It is regarded as the largest mosque built in the first half of the nineteenth century (Blair and Bloom 1995, 311). It has a square *sahn* or forecourt that leads to a square prayer hall. The prayer hall is a lavishly decorated open space with four massive pillars that support the mosque's domed roof. The lower walls of the prayer hall, like the lower exterior walls, are covered by alabaster slabs. Having been shielded from the elements, these interior alabaster walls allow the modern observer to imagine how eye-catching the exterior of the building must have appeared when it was first covered with this glimmering stone (Figures 3 and 4). The white marble cenotaph of Muhammad 'Ali sits in the southwestern corner of the mosque behind a gilded bronze grill (Figure 5).

The forecourt eludes the traditional, stylistic categories applied to Islamic architecture. Because of its eclectic mixture of European, Egyptian, and Ottoman architectural motifs, art historians have varyingly described the structure as baroque, neo-gothic, and neo-classical (Parker and Sabin 1985, 238; Lyster 1990, 73; al-Asad 1992, 46; Blair and Bloom 1995, 311; Warner 2005, 163; Behrens-Abouseif 2006, 112; Behrens-Abouseif 2010, 300). Nowhere is this mixture more evident than in the decorations of the ablution fountain at the center of the forecourt and the inclusion of a French clock tower on the middle of the northwestern portico of the mosque (Figures 6 and 7).

The epigraphic program of the mosque includes verses from the Qur'an and religious invocations as well as medallions with the names of God, Muhammad, and the first four caliphs, which



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FIG 1

Muhammad 'Ali Mosque 1867. (Félix Bonfils, Maison Bonfils. 1867. Le Caire, mosquée de Mohamet Ali, Égypte, n.d. Place: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. https://library.artstor.org/asset/AWSS35953_35953_38098415.)

are commonly found in Ottoman mosques. An inscription dated to 1262 AH/1845–46 CE is found on the frieze above one of the entrances to the eastern forecourt of the mosque, and it mentions the name of the Ottoman Sultan 'Abd al-Majid, who in 1841 granted Muhammad 'Ali hereditary control over Egypt.



FIG 2
(a and b) 20-Egyptian-pound bill and 10-Egyptian-piastre coin.

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Above the windows that run along the wall of the mosque, an Arabic poem dated 1261 AH/1844–45 CE is inscribed that eulogizes the building for “creating a new marvel” in “the form of a mosque” (Figure 8).³ The poem presents the mosque as a “heavenly body that descended” on Egypt “brighter than any other lodestar” visible to humans.

Mosques have long played a structuring role in Islamic history. The moniker *masjid*, which is translated into English as mosque, predates the advent of Islam (Pedersen 1960–2007). It came gradually to be associated exclusively with Islam because it was adopted by Muslims to refer to the places where they



FIG 3
Prayer Hall of Muhammad 'Ali Mosque. Photograph courtesy of Sara Cordoba, 2017.

FIG 4
Mihrab and Minbar of
Muhammad 'Ali Mosque.
Photograph courtesy of Sara
Cordoba, 2017.



gathered for prayer. It literally means “the place of prostration.” The mosque as an institution is, thus, as old as the religion of Islam itself, and it could be found wherever Muslims have settled. In short, the mosque is an abiding Islamic institution. The reason for this is not because the mosque is a symbol of Islam that Muslims erect wherever they go; rather, the ubiquity of the mosque reflects the value Islam places on communal prayer and the obligation it imposes on free, Muslim men to attend the mosque at the time of the Friday noon prayer (*salat al-jama'a*).



FIG 5
Bronze grill around the cenotaph of Muhammad 'Ali Pasha. Photograph courtesy of Sara Cordoba, 2017.

The ritual prayer (*salah*) in Islam provides an ethical, temporal, and spatial orientation through a set of shared rites and liturgy that Muslims observe throughout the world. As Muslims of varying backgrounds gather in the public space of the



FIG 6
Forecourt (*sahn*) of Muhammad 'Ali Mosque. (Francis Bedford, 3 March 1862. Royal Collection Trust, RCIN 2700863).



FIG 7
Q15 Ablution basin and courtyard of Muhammad 'Ali mosque. Photo courtesy of Thomas Landvatter, 2019.

mosque for congregational prayer, they enter into a communal relation that embodies the ideal concept of the *umma* (the universal Muslim community) in a local context. As they stand shoulder to shoulder, toe to toe, to pray in the mosque, they somatically express and experience a sociality defined by the religious obligations of Islam. They not only learn about what they share in common as members of the *umma*, but they also learn about their differences from those who do not stand in prayer with them. These include not only non-Muslims but also members of the opposite sex. This structuring role of the mosque provides an institutional means for local understandings of Islam that are embedded in specific social and political contexts to be embodied publicly and expressed formally in a way that is recognizable to the world's Muslim population across time and across cultures. The mosque thus is a building and a space through which relations between Muslims as well as between Muslims and non-Muslims could be socially and politically mediated *and* negotiated.

Muhammad 'Ali's mosque—built in the middle of the nineteenth century amidst conflicting relations between Muhammad 'Ali, the Ottoman Porte, European empires, and native Egyptians—is an especially complicated example of the structuring role the mosque has played in Islamic history. This structuring role of the mosque, however, has been overlooked by most of the architectural historians who have written about Muhammad 'Ali's mosque. The general assumption in Islamic architectural history has been that around the time of Napoleon's conquest of Egypt between 1798 and 1801, Islamic sources of authority, epistemology, and politics gave way to European ones (Blair and Bloom 1995, 309; Behrens-Abouseif 2006, 113–114). To cite just one telling example, commenting on Islamic architecture in the nineteenth century, Hasan-Uddin Khan writes, “ruptures... can be detected in all regions of the Islamic world” as a result of “colonial rule by European powers. The effects of this non-Muslim hegemony on the physical environments and on the symbolic systems which created them cannot be underestimated.” Khan goes on to cite the mosque of Muhammad 'Ali as one of the “representative examples of the rupture of a symbolic language” (Khan 1994, 247). Seeing Napoleon's invasion of Egypt as an epitome of this rupture in Islamic architectural and cultural history, most of the scholarship on Muhammad 'Ali's mosque has relied on modernity and nationalism as structuring concepts that could explain its significance. In contrast to these approaches, I propose to look at the mosque itself as an Islamic institution and an Islamic object that has played a role in shaping Muslims' experiences and understandings of modernity and nationalism.

Given the major shifts in the domestic history and international relations of Egypt in the mid-nineteenth century, it is not at all surprising that scholars have grasped for structuring concepts such as modernity and nationalism to make sense of

FIG 8

Inscription of Shihab al-Din's *qasida* about the Muhammad 'Ali Mosque in Nasta'liq script. Photograph courtesy of Thomas Landvatter, 2019.



this mosque and to situate it in a broader historical narrative. The nineteenth century was a significant time of transition in Egyptian history. Following France's departure from Egypt in 1801 and Sultan Selim III's reluctant recognition of Muhammad 'Ali as the governor (*wali*) of Egypt in 1805, Egypt underwent many institutional reforms and became the most powerful of the Ottoman Empire's provinces. It defeated the Wahhabi insurgency in the Arabian Peninsula on behalf of the Sublime Porte and helped the Ottomans temporarily subdue Greek revolts for independence. It controlled territories in the Sudan and Greater Syria and increased trade as well as intellectual, and diplomatic relations with European states, particularly France. As evinced in nineteenth-century European travelogues, Muhammad 'Ali also became a commonly recognized name in Europe for his experiments with Westernization and modernization, which made Egypt's ruler a formidable threat to the Ottoman sultan. "No Eastern name," wrote a traveling biblical scholar around 1847, "has, since the commencement of this century, been more frequently mentioned in European circles than that of Mehemet Ali. Our sympathies with the east...must necessarily be kindled into active energy when reflecting upon a man who has evoked the light of a new day over the ancient land of the Pharaohs" (Tischendorff 1847, 17).

The mosque Muhammad 'Ali commissioned to be conspicuously situated atop of the Citadel of Cairo was to be an architectural representative of the power he held over Egypt. Paradoxically, this display of sovereignty, which came at the

expense of the Sublime Porte in Istanbul, was made in the classical architectural form that clearly indexed the Ottoman Empire (Figure 9). The mosque's pencil-thin minarets, monumental centralized dome, and cascading semi-domes—all common features of mosques in imperial Ottoman architecture—were not only notably foreign to Cairo's architectural landscape, they were also a reminder of the Ottomans' subjugation of Egyptians (Figure 10). Muhammad 'Ali's decision to index Ottoman authority through his mosque was programmatic. He had originally commissioned a French expert, Pascal-Xavier Coste who had helped plan and construct a number of building and irrigation projects for Muhammad 'Ali to design two mosques for him, one at the Citadel and the other in Alexandria. The latter was never constructed. Upon receiving Muhammad 'Ali's request, Coste explained:

I told him that, not being familiar with the inside of these monuments and not knowing the religious ceremonies, I would more likely design him a church than a mosque, and that it was important that he permit me to visit them. He understood this concern. He immediately wrote a *firman*, on which he affixed his



FIG 9

Exterior of the Süleymaniye Mosque at the turn of the twentieth century with the Golden Horn in the background (Photo by Sebah & Joaillier, between 1888 and 1910, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LOT 13554-2, no. 84. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003688284/>).



FIG 10

View of Muhammad 'Ali Mosque from Muqattam Hills 1870 s (Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1973; accession number 1973.594.38).

seal and in which the order was given to all the leaders of mosques to let me move about, measure, and draw in the interior of these monuments, just as I would the exterior, and to give me protection against anyone who would oppose my doing so (Coste 1878, 30).

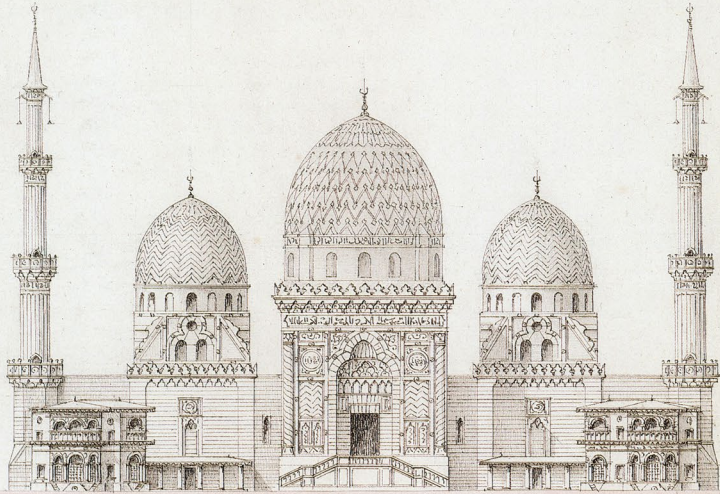
Coste spent two years (1822–24) studying the architecture and style of existing Egyptian mosques before presenting his plan for the Citadel mosque to Muhammad 'Ali in 1827 (Behrens-Abouseif 2006, 117–118; Rabbat 2005). Coste's design was expressly Mamluk in style (Figure 11) and coordinated with the existing architectural landscape of Egypt but was ultimately rejected for the Ottoman style in which the mosque is seen today (Figure 1) (Rabbat 2005).

Why did the Pasha build a mosque at the Citadel of Cairo that paid homage to the Ottomans at a time when he was in the middle of military and diplomatic struggles with the Porte in Istanbul over the scope of his sovereignty? This question has preoccupied most of the architectural historians who have studied Muhammad 'Ali's mosque largely because they have anachronistically expected the assertion of independence and sovereignty in the early nineteenth century to occur in the "modern" idiom of nationalism rather than in the "traditional" idiom of Islamic sovereignty that relied on the caliphate as a symbol of political legitimacy. The architectural historian Muhammad al-Asad, who has written arguably the most widely read study of this mosque, for example, argues that the monumental mosque built at the Citadel of Cairo was "a serious candidate" for the "Islamic world's architectural entry into the modern period" (al-Asad 1992, 52) and the beginning of

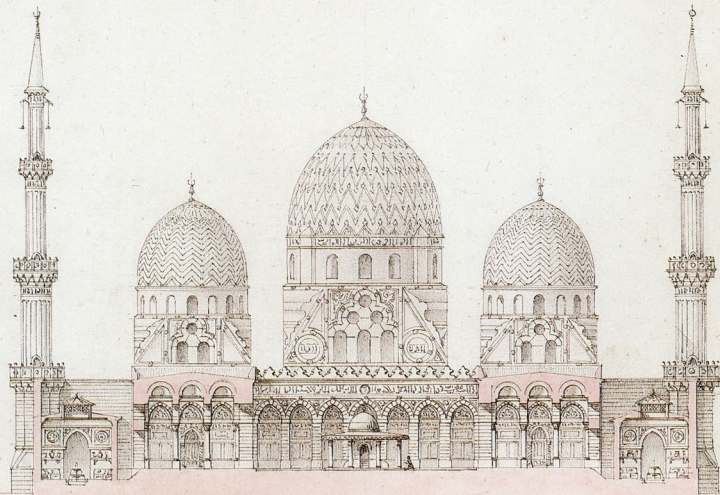
Egyptian nationalism. He interprets the mosque as an “architectural act of rebellion.” Al-Asad argues that by building a mosque in the imperial Ottoman style, Muhammad ‘Ali “expressed his equality with his overlord in an unambiguous way” (al-Asad 1992, 51). From this perspective, Muhammad ‘Ali did not passively borrow from the Ottoman architectural vocabulary but rather, he refined it to structure a new vision for Egypt. Doris Behrens-Abouseif similarly interprets the plurality of minarets in Muhammad ‘Ali’s mosque as a “political statement” that challenged “Ottoman authority, which reserved the right to double or multiple minarets as the prerogative of the sultan and the royal family” (Behrens-Abouseif 2010, 300, see also O’Kane 2016, 303). She explains that the slimming of the aforementioned Ottoman-style minarets past their already thin design and elongating their conical caps effected a unique style differentiated both from the iconic pencil minarets of the Ottomans and the signature “multiple tier minarets” of the Mamluks (Behrens-Abouseif 2010, 37). “The minarets of the mosque of Muhammad ‘Ali,” Behrens-Abouseif writes, “were the work of an avant-garde architect...capable of conveying a new image to a classical Ottoman pattern” (Behrens-Abouseif 2010, 302). Muhammad ‘Ali’s rebellion was thus not just against the Ottomans whose “classical” style the Pasha adapted to his own purposes, it was against “local Egyptian history and culture, which he viewed as an obstacle to his modernization program” (Behrens-Abouseif 2006, 118). According to these interpretations of the mosque, Muhammad ‘Ali did not passively borrow from Ottoman architectural vocabulary nor did he simply modify local architectural styles with foreign ones, but rather he inaugurated a new era in Egyptian history by demonstrating his political, technical, and cultural abilities to accurately transport knowledge across cultures and adapt styles from one context to another, without being weighed down by tradition (al-Asad 1992, 53–54).

Other scholars see Muhammad ‘Ali as ultimately an Ottoman aristocrat engaged in internal Ottoman struggles for power rather than as an Ottoman governor of Egyptians concerned with modernity or the welfare and autonomy of his reign. According to this line of thought, Muhammad ‘Ali’s mosque expressed the past glory of the Ottoman Empire in the face of its contemporary decline. It “visually assert[ed]...his aim to take the place of the Ottoman sultan and to revitalize the empire, and perhaps move its capital from Istanbul to Cairo.” In this interpretation of Muhammad ‘Ali’s mosque, “modern” period of Egyptian history begins not with the reign of Muhammad ‘Ali but with his progeny who succeeded him. Lacking his power, imperial ambitions, and Ottoman connections, his dynastic successors sought “independence from the hegemony of the Ottoman Sultanate” and worked “to assert a modern Egyptian image” by constructing a Neo-Mamluk style that historicized their rule in

Mosquée Mèhèmet-Ali-Pacha.
Vice Roi d'Égypte.
Les fondations commencèrent en Juin 1827,
à la citadelle du Caire.



Façade Principale.



Coupe sur les lignes A & B, du plan.

P. Coste
1827

5. 10. 20. 30. 40. 50. Mètres

FIG 11 Pascal-Xavier Coste's proposed sketch for the Muhammad 'Ali Mosque (1827) (repr. in Jacobi 1998, 113).

Egypt in a way that was “nationalistic in its aspirations” (Rabbat 2005).

A third group of scholars argue that Muhammad ‘Ali’s “aspirations for sovereignty encompassed both nationalist and imperialist attitudes” and are thus best described as a type of cosmopolitan nationalism (El Ashmouni and Bartsch 2014, 46–48). Muhammad ‘Ali’s monumental mosque accordingly materialized diverse styles, traditions, and ideas that are representative of his complex loyalties and strategic allegiances, all of which were a part of “a broader cosmopolitan project in the Mediterranean region that... [Muhammad ‘Ali] actively supported” (El Ashmouni and Bartsch, 2014, 44).

Despite their differences, all of these approaches assume that so-called “modernity” and “nationalism” ideally explain the significance of Muhammad ‘Ali’s mosque. Whether they see the mosque as the mark of Egyptian modernity or as a mark of pre-modern Ottoman imperial rivalries or as an expression of a cosmopolitan nationalism, this school of thought relies on modernity and nationalism as structuring concepts to develop an abstract idea of the mosque and place it within a temporal, spatial, and sociopolitical order. If Muhammad ‘Ali’s reign is seen as marking a new era of Egyptian independence and nationalism, it necessarily follows that his mosque be regarded as a modern edifice. However, if Muhammad ‘Ali is seen as an Ottoman aristocrat involved in internal Ottoman politics, it should necessarily follow that his mosque is to be regarded as a classical Ottoman building. Conversely, if the mosque is identified as either modern or classical as signified in its architecture, it also necessarily follows that Muhammad ‘Ali be regarded as either an Egyptian nationalist or an Ottoman colonizer. In either case, politics dictates the terms of analysis, while the function of the mosque as an intrinsically Islamic institution, and its indexing of changing concepts of sovereignty and national identity, go entirely unmentioned. In what follows, I aim to invert this paradigm. I will not seek to explain what political modernity and Egyptian nationalism tell us about this Islamic architectural object and space of worship, but instead what the mosque as an Islamic institution and a structured space of worship reveals about how Muslims experienced modernity and nationalism in Egypt in the mid-nineteenth century.

To begin with, given that Muhammad ‘Ali’s tomb is adjacent to the mosque and the mosque bears his name, it could be taken for granted that whatever statement the mosque made, it was intended to be about Muhammad ‘Ali’s reign and legacy. Taking this into consideration, the decidedly Ottoman style of the mosque represents the relation—in all of its complexity—that the Pasha had with Egyptians as well as the Ottoman Empire as the contemporary political manifestation of the caliphate as the symbol of Islamic sovereignty. Whatever the nature of his disputes with the Porte in Istanbul, Muhammad ‘Ali

had congregational prayers said in the caliph's name (Fahmy 1998, 146), and, as I mentioned earlier, he inscribed the reigning Sultan 'Abd al-Majid's name on the western entrance of his mosque (al-Asad 1992, 51).⁴ My point here is that the Ottoman-style of the mosque related Muhammad 'Ali's rule to the religious legitimacy that the Ottomans represented as the contemporary claimants to the caliphate, particularly for Hanafis but also for Sunni Muslims in general.

In addition to relating Muhammad 'Ali to Islamic notions of sovereignty, the mosque also related Muhammad 'Ali and his dynasty to local Egyptian signs of power. This is evident in the Arabic panegyric poetry composed in praise of the mosque and its patron by the Egyptian poet Muhammad Shihab al-Din, which as I mentioned above, run atop the windows surrounding the mosque (Figure 8).⁵ It could also be seen in the use of alabaster to panel both the lower interior and exterior walls of the mosque. Alabaster has a long and deep history in Egypt. It was widely used in both pharaonic and Mamluk architecture, and Egypt was known as one of the main sources of alabaster in antiquity (Lucas 1948, 75–77). Indeed, the quarries from which alabaster was mined during Muhammad 'Ali's reign had hieroglyphic inscriptions in them dating the mines back to the eighteenth dynasty (Lepsius 1852, 112–113). An account of how alabaster came to be employed in the mosque suggests that alabaster did not just root Muhammad 'Ali's mosque in Egypt, it was also the means by which the land of Egypt impressed itself upon the mosque:

The person charged with going to find samples [of marble for the mosque] was quite simply a *cawas* [or a gendarme], who knew neither where he was going nor what marble was; on the way, he found a piece of alabaster in Wadi Sannur, and however his guide tried to make him continue his route to the designated destination, he refused, saying that what he had found was superb marble. He returned to bring it to Muhammad 'Ali, who found it to be magnificent... [T]he extraction was ordered and a part of the mosque was constructed with this alabaster (Linant de Bellefonds 1872–1873, 367).

Muhammad 'Ali's mosque thus may have appeared alien formally, but the material from which it was constructed carried deep Egyptian resonances.⁶

The religious activities that took place at the mosque also demonstrated how the mosque structured relations between rulers and their subjects, particularly in situations where the two groups followed different schools of law (*madhhab*), as was the case in Egypt. Thus, according to 'Abbas Pasha's (r. 1848–1854) *waqfiyya* (endowment document) for the mosque, dated 9 Rajab 1269 AH (18 April 1853), not only did the mosque sponsor a variety of religious ceremonies and distribute food to the needy, but two different imams were hired to lead the five daily prayers,

one from the Shafi'i *madhhab*, which was the dominant school of law in Egypt, and the other from the Hanafi *madhhab*, which was the official school of law of the Ottoman Empire. The Hanafi imam's salary, however, was about three times (3000 *qirshs*) more than the Shafi'i imam's (900 *qirshs*), and only a Hanafi scholar was slated for hire to give lessons in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) at the mosque. The *waqfiyya* does not specify a *madhhab* for those hired to teach Hadith and Qur'an memorization at the mosque. So, it is likely that there would not have been any objections to hiring members of the local *madhhab* for these positions. Nonetheless, the difference in the salaries of the imams suggests that the mosque did not just bring people of varying socioeconomic backgrounds and religious understandings into relation with one another, it also played a role in reinforcing or asserting hierarchies established by the state through those relations (Mubarak 1888, 82–83).

At a more abstract level of analysis, the mosque negotiated spatial and visual tensions between the Ottomans' claim to the caliphate and local understandings of Islamic sovereignty. In so doing, it implicitly questioned the legitimacy of Muhammad 'Ali's right to rule Egypt as an Albanian appointee of the Ottoman Empire. As the historian Khalid Fahmy has noted, the thought of being deposed by the Ottoman sultan "haunted Muhammad 'Ali throughout his long career" (Fahmy 1998, 144). This anxiety—which stemmed from the tension between Ottoman and local justifications of Islamic sovereignty—re-imagined, if not re-invented Egypt in the midst of changing international relations in the nineteenth century. Muhammad 'Ali took the long view of both the Ottoman Empire and the welfare of his Egyptian subjects to assert his authority and maintain his rule. The mosque, as an elevated structure, effectively monumentalized the breadth of Muhammad 'Ali's vision to strike a balance between conceptions of sovereignty associated with the transnational caliphate and notions of national sovereignty associated with the modern nation-state. As a monument constructed by the ruler, its position and intricacy conformed to contemporary expectations of state-sponsored, architectural expressions of national identity. As an Islamic space of worship that converged Ottoman architectural styles with Egyptian material sources and local practices, the monument also expressed a transnational Islamic identity that brought conceptions of localized Islamic sovereignty into tension with caliphal Islamic sovereignty invoked by the Ottoman Empire. Importantly, these varying expressions of sovereignty and identity were not communicated exclusively. The effect of this structure lied in its monumental representation of them in dialog with one another.

The massive amount of treasure and labor that went into building a monumental mosque may have been religiously unnecessary because there was already a royal, congregational mosque at Cairo's Citadel that Muhammad 'Ali could have

appropriated,⁷ but they helped Muhammad 'Ali re-conceptualize Egypt and Egyptians under his rule through Islam. Insofar as the mosque was formally styled after classical Ottoman imperial architecture, it acknowledged the caliphal authority of the Ottomans, it represented Muhammad 'Ali's vision of Egypt as a country that was beholden to transregional and de-territorialized notions of sovereignty embedded in Islamic law and political thought. However, the mosque was also materially and socially embedded in local Egyptian culture. As such, it reflected a vision for the state as one that was responsive, but not subservient, to local Egyptians and their customs.

Furthermore, insofar as Muhammad 'Ali's most impressive monumental architectural project was a mosque, it also placed his reign at odds with the rising identification of Egypt with its pharaonic past. In the nineteenth century, European archaeologists, travellers, and historians were interested in ancient Egypt as a site where they could find material proof of the historicity of biblical stories. They were also interested in Egypt as a site for understanding the historical evolution of human civilization from ancient Mesopotamia to "the Modern West." Muhammad 'Ali's mosque—an Islamic monument symbolically perched at the Citadel overlooking the capital of Egypt—self-evidently challenged this European fetishizing of Egypt through pyramids, obelisks, and the Sphinx. In constructing his mosque, Muhammad 'Ali thus resisted the reduction of Egypt to just another province of the Ottoman Empire while equally resisting its reduction to its pharaonic past. By means of this *tour de force*, Muhammad 'Ali mediated, at once, between Ottoman representations of caliphal authority, contemporary practices of Islam in Egypt, and Egypt's ancient history.

This mediating role of the mosque is explicitly expressed in Muhammad Shihab al-Din's poem on the exterior walls of the mosque that boasts about the mosque to worshipers:

If you seek to be rightly guided, leave the Palace of Ghumdan
the pyramids of [Myos] Hormos, and the pavilion of Khusraw.

Leave Iram of lofty towers [Qur'an 89:7] and its surroundings
as well as the throne of Sheba, as though a crystal palace [Qur'an
27:44].

Leave the Umayyad [mosque] of Syria, and come to our Egypt.
Hasten to this [mosque], pointing you to guidance
('Abd al-Wahhab [1946] 1994, 386; Mubarak 1888, 80).

By referring to the mosque as a source for and a sign of correct guidance, these verses demonstrate how the mosque was successfully designed to be an embodiment of Muhammad 'Ali's reign and his epic vision for Egypt. Central in these verses is the comparison of Muhammad 'Ali's mosque to the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, Syria. The Umayyad Mosque was the first

monumental mosque patronized by a Muslim ruler. The Umayyad Caliph al-Walid b. 'Abd al-Malik (r. 705–15) ordered its construction as a way of impressing upon his contemporaries the power and splendor of his empire. Upon its construction, he reportedly told the people of Damascus, "...four things give you a marked superiority over the rest of the world: your climate, your water, your fruit, and your baths. To these I wanted to add a fifth: this mosque" (Ibn 'Asakir 1954, 36 cited in Flood 2001, 1). Al-Walid's mosque was part of a larger project to consolidate Umayyad rule following Umayyad victories over rival claimants to the caliphate in the Hijaz and Iraq (Flood 2001, 187–189 and 210–213). Shihab al-Din's poem thus compares Muhammad 'Ali's monumental mosque project to the first time a ruling Muslim dynasty sought visually to project its power and distinct identity through the construction of religio-social spaces. The different monuments cited in Shihab al-Din's verses reveal Muhammad 'Ali's ambitious project of synthesizing and surpassing the different states and modes of government known in history.

Writing nearly a century later, the Egyptian historian Hasan 'Abd al-Wahhab noted that "just as the pyramids were a symbol of Ancient Egypt, this mosque is a sign of modern Egypt, and they are both sought out by every visitor who arrives in the land of Egypt" ('Abd al-Wahhab [1946] 1994, 383). Till this day, visitors to Egypt can attest to the validity of 'Abd al-Wahhab's observation. Muhammad 'Ali's intervention was successful. It brought European portrayals of Egypt in terms of its ancient past into a tense balance with the reality of Egypt as a majority Muslim society that acknowledged the authority of the caliphate represented by the Ottoman Empire. Muhammad 'Ali's mosque situated contemporary Egypt in dialog with its ancient past, its Islamic heritage, and its changing conception of sovereignty. In doing so, it aesthetically drew attention to the power and the political authority of Muhammad 'Ali to structure this dialog.

The message of Muhammad 'Ali's monument was immediately grasped by contemporary Europeans. During his visit to Cairo's Citadel during Muhammad 'Ali's reign, the German, biblical scholar Constantin Tischendorf (1815–1874) wrote:

But two objects especially attracted my attention: the one was the solitary granite column which once formed a portion of the palace of Saladin, who founded this citadel; and the other the incomparable and splendid alabaster mosque of Mehemet Ali, which conspicuously rears its glittering crest as a *new wonder* of Egypt in the very face of those ancient ones, the pyramids. At the feet of the citadel reposes this "sea of the world," in the grandeur of its fullness and beauty, this "victorious" queen of cities, which, a new Memphis, has built for herself a glittering throne out of the ruins of the ancient one. I was absorbed in the contemplation of its majesty and the splendour of its view. But as the magnet turns to the north, so does the eye here fix itself upon the pyramids. And viewed from

the citadel, they exercise their full power upon the admiring stranger (emphasis added, Tischendorff 1847, 26).

Tischendorff typifies European scholars produced by “Egyptomania” for whom artifacts exotically epitomized a biblically based, teleological history of human civilization from the “Ancient Near East” to the “Modern West.” Muhammad ‘Ali’s mosque, however, interrupted this interpolation of Egypt into a European and Christian framework of human civilization. By aesthetically and prominently indexing Islam and the Ottoman caliphate as a manifestation of Muslim power in human history, the monumental mosque compelled Tischendorff, albeit momentarily, to acknowledge the Egypt of the present and its ruler’s ability to construct a “new wonder.”

A similar tension between Egypt’s monumental past and its present potential, between the new and traditional modes of living, was evidenced in the incorporation of an iron clock tower (Figure 12), which King Louis-Philippe gifted to Muhammad ‘Ali in 1845 (‘Abd al-Wahhab [1946] 1944, 386) in exchange for the obelisk of Luxor that was placed in the Place de la Concorde in Paris in 1836. The transport and erection of such massive objects were celebrated as displays of power, science, and technology in nineteenth-century Europe (Figure 13). They manifested modern European empires’ desire for the lasting power and influence of ancient Egypt while displaying their epistemological command and technological mastery over the contemporary world (Porterfield 1998, 37–40).

In Egypt, however, surprisingly little was said about the erection of a conspicuous clock tower in the middle of the northwest *riwaq* (portico) of Muhammad ‘Ali’s mosque (Figure 14). The official Egyptian records simply note that, on 27 Ramadan 1272 AH (18 September 1846), Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha ordered a sum of money to be paid to whoever brought the clock that the king of France gifted to him (‘Abd al-Wahhab [1946] 1994, 386). Regarding the obelisk, Muhammad ‘Ali is reported to have written to a French diplomat: “I did nothing for France that France did not do for me. If I gave it some debris of an old civilization, it was in exchange for the seeds of a new civilization that it had planted in the Orient” (Porterfield 1998, 161). It is unclear whether, in this correspondence, Muhammad ‘Ali is thanking the French for their “civilizational” gifts or for their invasion of Egypt which inadvertently led to Muhammad ‘Ali coming to power over it. Whatever he meant to say, he clearly associated the entry of the French into Egypt with the dawn of a new civilization. The successful incorporation of the French clock tower into the mosque thus displayed Muhammad ‘Ali’s ability to incorporate the new technologies originating in Europe into Egypt.

The clock, however, was never used to keep time until the 1940s when King Faruq ordered that it be made operational (‘Abd al-Wahhab [1946] 1994, 386; Yeoman 2006, 239). After all, there was no compelling need for a clock in a mid-nineteenth



FIG 12

Clock tower gifted to Muhammad 'Ali Pasha by King Louis-Philippe in 1845 (Photo by Arielle Kozloff Brodkey, 1984, Artstor ID number K_1183, https://library.artstor.org/asset/KOZLOFF_1039788090).

century mosque in Egypt where the call to prayer or the *adhan*, rather than the mechanical arms of a clock, marked time for Muslims. Nonetheless, the central position of the clock tower directly opposite the *qibla* wall of the mosque, in the middle of



FIG 13

Painting of the erection of the Luxor obelisk in Palace de la Concorde in Paris on October 25, 1836, François Dubois (1790–1871). Carnavelet Museum. (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/25/%C3%89rection_de_l%27ob%C3%A9lisque_de_Louqsor_sur_la_place_de_la_Concorde.jpg).

the northwest *riwaq* where one would normally expect an entryway into the *sahn*, placed two modes of keeping time, one from the minaret and the other by the clock tower, into a productive tension with one another. As a symbol of modern European technology, once aesthetically incorporated into the architecture of a functioning mosque, where a *muwaqqit* (official in charge of the timing of the *adhan*), with a salary of 750 *qirshs* (Mubarak 1888, 82), calculated the time of prayers in relation to the position of the sun, allowed Egyptians to not only imagine but also experience Islam in the context Muhammad 'Ali's desired "new civilization." The mosque mediated between Islamic traditions and modern technologies, allowing Muslim worshippers to experience them in relation to one another.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the construction of a monumental mosque on the edge of the Citadel, facing Cairo, transformed the literal sightline of government in mid-nineteenth-century Egypt. The Citadel was strategically constructed on Muqattam Hills for the Mamluk and Ottoman rulers who governed from it to keep an eye on the local population and protect themselves from internal rebellions (Figure 10). Its thick walls and cannons were a reminder of the sultan's power and distance from Egyptians (Rabbat 1995, 51 and 283–284). Europeans who travelled to the Citadel during the years when the mosque was under construction could not but take notice of

FIG 14

A western view of the Muhammad 'Ali mosque and clocktower from street level (CC BY-SA 2.0 Photo by Ahmed Al-Badawy, 17 April 2010, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flickr_-_HuTect_ShOts_-_Citadel_of_Salah_El.Din_and_Masjid_Muhammad_Ali_%D9%82%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A9_%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%A8%D9%8A_%D9%88%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AC%D8%AF_%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AF_%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%8A_-_Cairo_-_Egypt_-_17_04_2010_\(1\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flickr_-_HuTect_ShOts_-_Citadel_of_Salah_El.Din_and_Masjid_Muhammad_Ali_%D9%82%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A9_%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%A8%D9%8A_%D9%88%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AC%D8%AF_%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AF_%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%8A_-_Cairo_-_Egypt_-_17_04_2010_(1).jpg)).



and comment on its commanding view over the city (in addition to the examples given below, see Durbin 1845, 41–42). By way of example, an English traveller in 1848 noted:

The citadel... has a strangely interesting and varied view. The minarets of 400 mosques,—the square roofs of 30,000 dwellings,—the spacious palaces and court-yards of the nobles, are the prominent objects in Cairo the living. The city of tombs is equally striking, containing, as its mausolea, mosques, equaling, if not excelling, those within the walls; then the Mokattem ridge behind the citadel, the lofty aqueduct, extending to the Nile; that fine river itself among the rich green palms,—the Pyramids beyond, and all these objects surrounded in the plain by a wide waste of sand, are striking and unique—found in Egypt, and Egypt alone (Young 1848, 301).

Writing in 1845, the German Prince Puckler Muskau (1845, 147) similarly wrote:

I ascended the yet unfinished walls of the mosque, that I might select the most advantageous position for overlooking the renowned view, which extends over “the sea of the world,” its hundreds of minarets and domes, its innumerable mosques and palaces, backed by the lofty pyramids of Ghizeh, Dashour, and Sakkarah. In the midst of this sublime landscape flows the majestic Nile, bordered by the richest green.

In addition to the commanding views afforded by its location, the Citadel was also experienced as distant and

foreboding because of the history associated with it. The walk up to it often recalled in the minds of visitors the massacre of the Mamluk emirs whom Muhammad 'Ali invited to the Citadel on 1 March 1811 under the guise of a banquet. Dressed in their fineries, the Mamluk emirs climbed the Citadel through a narrow alley only to be trapped and fired upon by Muhammad 'Ali's troops (Fahmy 1998, 146). British parliament member, G. L. Dawson Damer, while writing about his visit to the Citadel in 1841, recalled, "We mounted a steep and slippery ascent, and passed through the very gates of the citadel which, in 1812 (*sic*), were shut upon the unfortunate Mamelukes, who were enclosed in the court of the fortress, and fired upon by its guns: about five hundred were massacred on the spot" (Damer 1841, 148).

Once the mosque was constructed, however, the sightline of government shifted to accentuate greater reciprocity between the ruler and the ruled (Figure 15). Then, not only did the ruler look down upon his subjects and Egypt's historic landscape, but when his majority Muslim subjects looked to his abode, they saw not just a set of fortified buildings but also the protruding domes and minarets of a place of worship to which their religious beliefs and practices gave a right of access. The Citadel capped with a monumental mosque oversaw Egypt at the same time as it drew the gaze of Egyptians upward, and importantly, it viscerally connected them to the seat of power through the quintessential symbol of ritual prayer. Access to the seat of government provided by this direct view of the mosque stood in productive tension with its foreboding placement within the walls of the Citadel and its imperial Ottoman design. This tension was strategic because it reminded Egyptians that it is

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FIG 15

View of Muhammad 'Ali mosque from Cairo. (Photo by Photoglob Company, ca 1890-1910; Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LOT 14192, no. 179, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017657139>).

because of the Ottomans that a non-native dynasty rules over them. But, it also obligated Muhammad 'Ali and his successors to the Egyptian people through an Islamic visual presence and an Islamic idiom of sovereignty.

This reciprocal visual relation between the ruler and the ruled was also reinforced by the epigraphic program of Muhammad 'Ali's mosque, which included qur'anic verses that emphasized God's mercy and how good works bring about heavenly rewards: "That He may cause the believing men and women to enter Gardens with rivers running below them, therein to abide, and that He may absolve them of their misdeeds" (Qur'an 48:5) (translation slightly modified from Nasr, et al. 2015, 1249). There is an analogy here between the image of "Gardens with rivers running below" and the monumental mosque of Muhammad 'Ali on Muqattam Hills with the Nile River below it.⁸ To the extent that the aesthetic experience of the mosque realizes this analogy, it shapes a perception of Egypt as the paradise that the Qur'an promises to believing men and women, and it posits Muhammad 'Ali as an agent of God's promise to humanity.

The verses of Muhammad Shihab al-Din's poetic inscriptions atop the windows surrounding the mosque also point to the reciprocal relation that the mosque establishes between the ruler and the ruled:

Whoever brings forth animosity, it angrily shuns away,
While many a times it pardons the servant, seeking affection.

It beautifies in both states of tenderness and cruelty;
To one it's a relief, to the other a constraint (Mubarak 1888, 81).

By personifying the mosque as a sovereign who reciprocates the way his subjects approach him, these verses do not simply affirm the ruler's power through the magnificence of the mosque. They also associate the beauty of the mosque with power. This association subjects the ruler's exercise of power to the behavior of the ruled while positing beautification as the aim of government. For the ruler to beautify Egypt as the mosque beautifies its surroundings, the ruler needs to be fair and reciprocate his subjects' works and affections.

Whether or not we date the beginning of Egyptian modernity to Muhammad 'Ali's rule, it is clear that both Islam and modernity were represented in Muhammad 'Ali's mosque. They were held in tension with one another in ways that reflected the anxieties of the time. Muhammad 'Ali's mosque materialized the social, political, and religious tensions embedded in modernity in ways that were experienced as productive of something new, historic, beautiful—indeed monumental. They were pregnant with a potential that was aesthetically represented in the eclectic ornamentation of the mosque (Figures 6 and 7). While this eclecticism challenges scholarly assumptions about

tradition and modernity in religious studies and taxonomies of style in architectural history, it evidently demonstrates the role religious practices and sites of worship play in structuring relations within a society as well as between different cultures and between people and their pasts.

Insofar as the eclectic motifs of the mosque are aesthetically appealing and facilitate Muslim ritual prayer, they demonstrate how shared Islamic practices that take place at the mosque negotiate relations between global and local conceptions of Islamic sovereignty, between transnational, cultural, and national identities, between new technologies and old ways of life, and lastly between rulers and the ruled. Muhammad 'Ali's mosque in Cairo, in all its complexity, is not unique in visually, and more specifically, architecturally effecting a conception of sovereignty, Islam, and modernity for nineteenth-century Egypt. Rather, it is but a telling example of the structuring role religions play in human history.

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notes and references

¹Given that the Pasha was a Turkish-speaking Ottoman of Albanian origin, he likely pronounced his name as Mehmed 'Ali. I have, however, decided to keep the Arabic transliteration of his name because the mosque in Cairo that is named after him and is the subject of this article has come to be known, both in Egypt and outside of Egypt as well as in Egyptian historiography, as the Muhammad 'Ali Mosque. There is some confusion around the year of Muhammad 'Ali's birth. In interviews with foreign visitors Muhammad 'Ali often gave 1769 as his birth year in order to associate himself

with Napoleon Bonaparte and the first Duke of Wellington, Arthur Wellesley, who were born in the same year. However, as Khalid Fahmy has explained he was more likely born in 1184 AH or 1770-71 CE (Fahmy 2009).

²The exact time when construction on the mosque began is not clear. In his pithy *al-Ahram* article, "A Mosque and an Imperial Dream," Nasser Rabbat (18-24 August 2005), reports that "in a note attached to his sketches, Coste says that the foundations for his mosque were excavated in June 1827." In his seminal essay, "The Mosque of

- Muhammad 'Ali in Cairo" in *Muqarnas IX* (1992, 41), Mohammad al-Asad cites Amin Sami (1928), 341, citing *al-Waqa'i' al-Misriyya*, no. 2, 9 Jumada II 1244 (17 December 1828) to say that construction on the mosque began in "late 1828." Ali Mubarak (1888, 7), however, dates the start of the construction of the mosque to 1246 AH (1830 or 1831 CE). 'Abd al-Wahhab ([1946] 1994, 381) similarly dates the beginning of construction on the mosque to 1830.
- ³There are also some Qur'anic inscriptions above the windows surrounding the walls of the mosque, which are in the Thuluth script and are dated 1267 AH. In March 2019, the number one in 1261 was missing from the inscription of Shihab al-Din's poem, but this date has been recorded in Mubarak (1888, 81).
- ⁴He also included Turkish inscriptions in the mosque.
- ⁵This inscription is in Nasta'liq calligraphy and dates to 1261 AH (1844/45) ('Abd Al-Wahhab [1946] 1994, 387).
- ⁶I am grateful to Dr. F. Barry Flood for drawing my attention to the significance of alabaster in Muhammad 'Ali's mosque (Flood 2016).
- ⁷Next to Muhammad 'Ali's mosque, there is a royal mosque that was built by the Mamluk sultan al-Nasir Muhammad in 1318–1335 and was used for congregational prayers and public religious ceremonies at the Citadel (Mubarak 1888, 7; Rabbat 1995, 263–276; Behrens-Abouseif 2007, 173–178).
- ⁸This association of the mosque with the heavens and the divine is also noted in the poetry inscribed around the mosque which identify the building as "*umm al-janna*" and "*umm al-makramat*."
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