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Political symbolism in Mohammad Ali's mosque: Embodying political ideology in architecture



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Abstract As a cultural product, architecture reflects the state of society and the relationship between the state and the public. Egyptian modern architecture had undergone major changes, since the early 19th century, because of the shifts in the ruling regimes, and the associated consequential cultural and societal transformations. This paper examines how the political ideology of the ruling regimes influenced architecture and shaped the built environment. The central research question is: how did ruling regimes use built environment to achieve political goals? The paper aims to define the influence of the political ideology of the state on shaping architecture in the era of Mohammed Ali Pasha, through analyzing the architectural characteristics of the Mosque of Mohammed Ali. The research adopts a qualitative research strategy, based on a case study methodology. The analysis incorporates tools from both semiotics and hermeneutics to analyze the symbolic meanings implied in the architecture of the mosque. Findings show how the mosque of Mohammed Ali functioned as a social and political tool, to set a new form for the relationship between authority and people. This research provides an insight into the political and cultural role of architecture, in the modern history of Egypt.

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1. Introduction

Architectural monuments are the perceptible record of society's history, as they are the physical clues for the ongoing, social, economic, and political conditions, at a specific historical moment [1,2], under particular rules, laws, institutions, and political regime. We, therefore, can read the political

and social history of a city, and the relationship between authority and people, through its monuments [3–5]. This reading is possible by observing the architectural style, scale, form, plan syntax, architectural details, ornaments, site, position, and the relationship between the building, and its surroundings [6,7].

Al-kawakebi [8] argued that the political tyranny is always accompanied by exaggeration in construction state, luxurious palaces, and memorial buildings, in parallel with lavish celebrations and grand ceremonies [8]. The proposal complies with Ibn-Khaldun's connection between the power of the state and the greatness of its memorial buildings. He states that: “*The greatness of state monuments is commensurate with the state power, where memorial buildings can only be built with power*”

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and authority. so, they will be as great as the power of the state, this applies to authority buildings and memorial structures.” [9].

Memorial architecture can affect the feelings and behavior of the audience [5,10]. It can express the authority and political practices [11,12], propagate political ideologies [13], grant its sponsors a prestigious manifestation [14–16], and help to reinforce their political power [5].

Architecture acts like a communication tool: [17–21], through its visual aspects [5,7,22–24], internal space [25,26], and plan arrangement [5,16,27], a spectator may deduce the purpose of the building [28].

Since the early 19th century, Egyptian architecture and built environment had undergone significant changes. Shifts in the ruling regimes, their ideologies, attitudes, and the associated consequential cultural and societal transformations pursuing western modernity, were the driving forces for these transformations [29–31]. Many argue that these changes caused the Egyptian architecture to lose its identity, its connection to the past, and the trajectory into the future [32].

This paper examines how the political ideology of the ruling regime in Egypt, at the beginning of the 19th century, influenced architecture and shaped the built environment. The paper attempts to answer the following questions: (1) Which of the building elements appear to reflect specific meanings? (2) How did the ruling regime use architecture to achieve political goals, and accentuate their identity and traditions? (3) How can a memorial building act as a physical record of political history, and embody or symbolize a specific political Ideology?

The paper aims to trace the political and ideological influence on shaping state architecture in the era of Mohammed Ali Pasha. It attempts to identify the relationship between authority and people by analyzing the architectural characteristics of the mosque of Mohammed Ali Pasha, where it stands as a symbol of the state's architecture. The mosque was described by R. Flower [33] as “*more important than beautiful*” because it oversees Cairo, and can be seen from anywhere in Cairo [34–37].

2. Material and methods

The research adopts a qualitative inductive research strategy, which relies on a case study method. Sources of data include archives, and historical inquiries to gather data regarding the political and economic circumstances associated with the building of Mohammed Ali's mosque. The analysis incorporates tools from both semiotics and hermeneutics to examine the symbolic meanings embodied in the physical characteristics of the mosque.

In order to determine the socio-political goals of the mosque, and how they were achieved, the inquiry firstly reviews the building patron and the historical and political context of the building. The inquiry then examines the physical and visual characteristics of the building, including: the function, location, scale, architectural style, form, internal space formation, decorations, and space arrangement syntax. Fitting these aspects into their historical and sociopolitical context to interpret the embodied meanings and their purposes, can reveal the political and social role of that building.

2.1. Context

As a viceroy of the Ottoman Sultan, Mohammad Ali seized the rule over Egypt in 1805 [37,38]. He faced several obstacles, such as: riots, protests, and attempts to depose him [39–41]. It was not until 1811, that Mohammed Ali could monopolize authority and power by massacring the Mamluks and seizing their properties [37,38,41,42]. From 1811 to 1819, Mohammad Ali extended his ruling over the Arabian Peninsula [43–45] and continued to fight on behalf of the Ottoman Sultan, until the destruction of his armada in the Battle of Navarino in 1824. In 1832, Mohammad Ali started to fight against the Ottoman Sultan, to expand his authority over Sham and Anatolia [43,46].

In 1820, he started to build his modern army. He monopolized all sources of income, which turned him to be the sole owner of lands, factories, and trading [36,38,40,41,47–50]. He established the bureaucratic administrative system to organize and control the means of production [42,50–52], and to provide the army with its needs [46]. He also established a modern education system to provide the bureaucratic system with the necessary employees [46,48,50,52]. The new system relied on documentation, registration, and control over the lives of the Egyptians as means of production [46,53,54].

The construction of the mosque began in 1830, at the time when Mohammad Ali was trying to consolidate his power, and extend his authority, supervision, and control over Egypt [46,53,54]. The mosque was completed in 1845, in the reign of Abbas I.

2.2. Function

Mohammed Ali decided to build the iconic figure that symbolizes his regime, in the form of a mosque, in reference to his spiritual authority as a deputy to the Ottoman caliph.

2.3. Location, site, and approach

He chose to build his mosque inside the castle, out of public's reach (Fig. 1) and (Fig. 2), and at the highest spot in Cairo, making it visible from all over the city (Fig. 3). This privileged location gave the mosque a sense of dominance and supervision over the entire city. He also chose to build it in the western area of the citadel, in place of Mamluk's state buildings (Al'aplaq Palace), which were demolished to build the mosque [39,55].

The choice of this exact location can be understood as a reference to the termination of Mamluk ruling and the stability of the new regime. The mosque was built in front of Al-Jawhara Palace, beside the mosque of Al-Naser Mohammad Ebn-Qlawon, which may give a hint about the political role of Mohammad Ali's mosque as a state building, erected in place of the Mamluks demolished buildings.

So far, there are three political symbolism issues concerning the site:

- (a) Iconoclasm: as the mosque was built in place of the demolished authority buildings of the Mamluks. According to Mancini and Bresnahan [56], Clay [57],

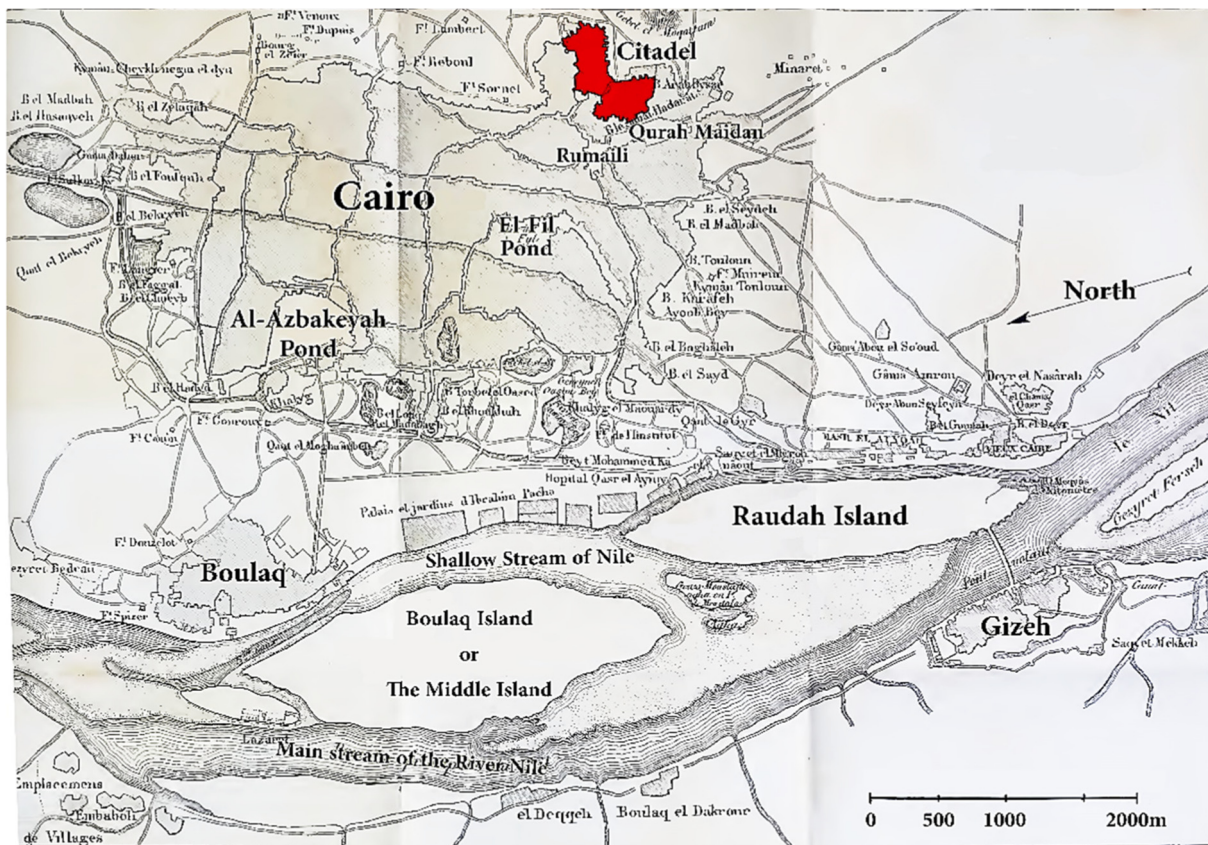


Fig. 1 General plan of Cairo in 1840, by Clot Bey, showing the location of the Citadel. Source: A.B. Clot-Bey, *Aperçu général sur l'Égypte*, 1-2, Société Belge de Librairie, 1840.

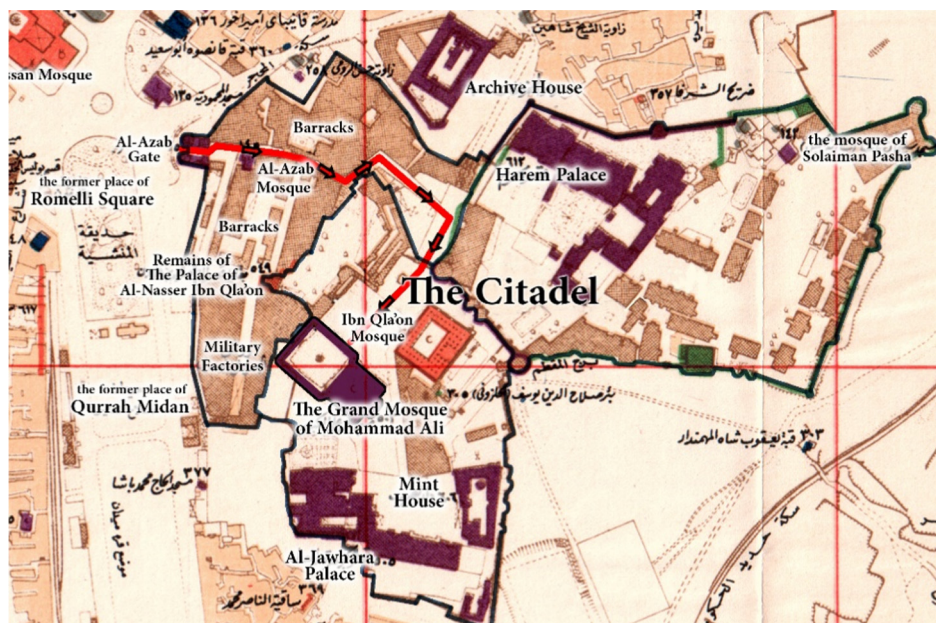


Fig. 2 General plan of the Citadel, showing the site of the grand mosque of Mohammad Ali Pasha, and the uphill ramp approach (the red line with arrows). Source: based on: Egyptian Department of Survey, *Cairo Islamic Monuments Map*, Archive.Org. (1948). <https://archive.org/details/CairoIslamicMonumentsMap> (accessed October 9, 2018).



Fig. 3 The mosque was elevated on the top of Al-Moqattam mountain, inside the citadel, which makes it visible from all over the city. Such location gives the mosque a sense of visual domination over the city's skyline, where it expresses the meanings of domination and supervision. Source: Part of: G. Ducher, La citadelle vue depuis depuis le Parc Al-Azhar, Le Caire, Égypte., [Commons.Wikimedia.Org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:GD-EG-Caire-Ville038.JPG). (2006). <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:GD-EG-Caire-Ville038.JPG> (accessed October 8, 2018).

and Gamboni [58], that would indicate the end of the former authority – of the Mamluks – and the rise and stability of the new regime.

- (b) Being noticeable and well seen: by choosing the highest spot in Cairo to build the mosque, which – according to Ching [59], Wong [60] and King [23] and Ismail [15] – gives it a sense of visual domination over Cairo's skyline. The strong and permanent presence of the mosque materialized the mental image of the new regime, that monitors and controls everybody's everyday life.
- (c) The mosque was built to act as a state building – Here we can refer to Flower's description of the mosque as “more important than beautiful” [33] – where there was no functional need for a mosque in that location.

2.4. Scale

The mosque was built in monumental scale. It was extravagant in length, width, and height. The prayer hall measured 41×41 meters and roofed with a central dome 21 m in diameter, based on four half-domes, and surrounded by four smaller domes in the corners. Two Ottoman minarets with conical tops, 82 m high, were built on the western side of the prayer hall [34,37]. The scale of the mosque – according to Coaldrake [5], Crinson [22], and King [23] – refers to its significance and its role as a symbol of the ruling regime. It – according to Coaldrake [5], Ismail [6,15] and Alraouf [61] – bestowed a prestigious manifestation upon Mohammad Ali.

2.5. Architectural style and description

The mosque was designed in classical Ottoman style [34,53,62,63], by the Turkish architect Yousuf Bushnaq, imitating the mosque of Sultan Ahmed in Istanbul. It was constructed using stone and covered with alabaster cladding.

The prayer hall is square in plan (Fig. 4), with four pillars bearing the central dome. The Qibla niche (Mihrab) is prominent in the southeastern façade and roofed by a half-dome. On the opposite side of Qibla, there is an arcade of one row of marble columns, where the tomb of Mohammad Ali is in the West End. To the north, there is an open courtyard (Sahn) surrounded by four corridors of one row of marble columns and

domed roof. Furthermore, there is a marble ablution fountain, located in the middle of the courtyard, and a clock tower, which was a gift from the King of France in 1845 [37,62,64,65].

2.6. Form

The form was modeled symmetrically about a vertical axis. It has a sculptural appearance, gained by manipulating the modeling of the building and its skyline, using the upward formation for the mass: starting from the surrounding arcades, through the light domes, into the massive block of the mosque, ascending to the large-scale half-domes, then the central dome, and ending up with the tall minarets (Fig. 5).

Meanings and symbols integrated into the form and façades can be summarized as follows:

- (a) Massive scale draws the attention to the importance of the building [5]; arouses a sense of awe in the audience [5,15]; demonstrates the superiority of the building's sponsor [6,15]; gives a hint of Mohammad Ali's greatness; exhibits the power of his regime; reinforces his immediate authority [15,16,23,66], and projects his influence on society.
- (b) The dramatic sculptural effect and the upward direction of the form would evoke feelings of impressiveness in the audience [5,23], raise the sentiments of the public towards the building's sponsor (the governor), and lend visual prestige to him [16].
- (c) The form encompassed a variety of architectural details including; Domes, half-domes, minarets, columns, crowns, arcades, etc., which draws the attention of the audiences. They would also demonstrate the richness of the building's sponsor [14,15,67].
- (d) Symmetry about a clear axis, with a strong focal point, would attract the viewer's eyes [68], and express the meanings of the stability and power of the building sponsor and his regime [14,25].

2.7. Internal space and decorations

The prayer hall was discriminated and enhanced using carpeted floor, domed roof, alabaster-cladded walls, and dense

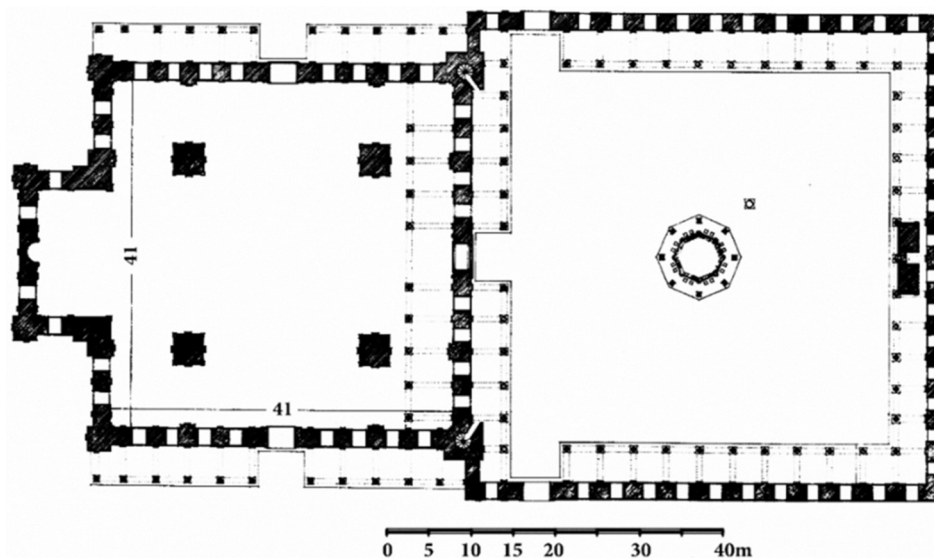


Fig. 4 Plan of the mosque, shows a symmetry about a clear axis, with exaggeration in prayer hall length and width to make a monumental space of it. The four pillars exist to support the central dome. Source: based on (S.M. Mohammed, Encyclopedia of Egypt's Mosques, and their Righteous Holy men (Mawsouat masajid Misr w awliya'ha as-salihoun), Ministry of Awqaf – Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, Cairo, Egypt, 1983).

decorations as shown in (Fig. 6). It represents – according to Weber [25] – a Spatial Hierarchy, which shall reflect a perceptual dominance, that embody a sense of spirituality [15].

The prayer hall was also exaggerated in length, width and height to form a monumental space (Fig. 7), with intense use of the ornaments carved in alabaster, along with the dense colorful decorations of the ceiling (Fig. 6). It can produce a higher sense of awe [69] and create perceptual dominance. Such space can demonstrate the social distinction and authority of the building patron [15,16].

3. Results and discussion

3.1. The mosque of Mohammad Ali tells the history

The mosque of Mohammad Ali reflects the historical conditions of the ruling regime, at the time, in which it was built. Mohammad Ali started to build the mosque when he was establishing his institutions. He needed to draw the image of his ruling regime as legal, powerful, stable, present, and dominant over the members of society.

3.2. The mosque of Mohammad Ali symbolized the ruling regime and embodied its ideology

The mosque represented the three sources of legitimacy of the ruling of Mohammad Ali: The Ottoman identity, the military power, and the religious authority. He decided to build his iconic symbol as a mosque, he chose to follow the classical Ottoman style, and he built it inside the citadel. On the other hand, choosing to build the mosque out of the reach of the public symbolizes Mohammad Ali's vision of himself as an autocratic ruler, far above his ruled subjects and separate from them.

3.3. The mosque of Mohammad Ali was used to draw the mental image of his ruling regime, through its site, architectural style, scale, form, and internal space

Mohammad Ali used the visual characteristics of his mosque to draw a perceptual image of his ruling regime:

- Position and Site were used to make the mosque visible from all over the city, to give the ruling regime the sense of presence and administration.
- Scale, Form, and Façades were used to show the richness, prosperity, power, and achievability.
- The internal space, shape, form, and architectural details of the mosque were used to affect the viewer, and heighten the feelings of admiration towards the ruler.

4. Conclusion

Symbolism and meanings incorporated in the Mosque of Mohammad Ali cannot be fully perceived, without considering its own historical, political and social context within the time, in which it was built.

The Mosque of Mohammad Ali was established for a purely political purpose, namely to physically express the authority, power, and identity of the ruling regime. The mosque is loaded with various political symbols and meanings, including the religious function of the building, which can support the spiritual authority of Mohammed Ali as a deputy to the Caliph.

Iconoclasm can be seen in choosing the position of the mosque, as it necessitated the demolition of Mamluks' authority buildings.

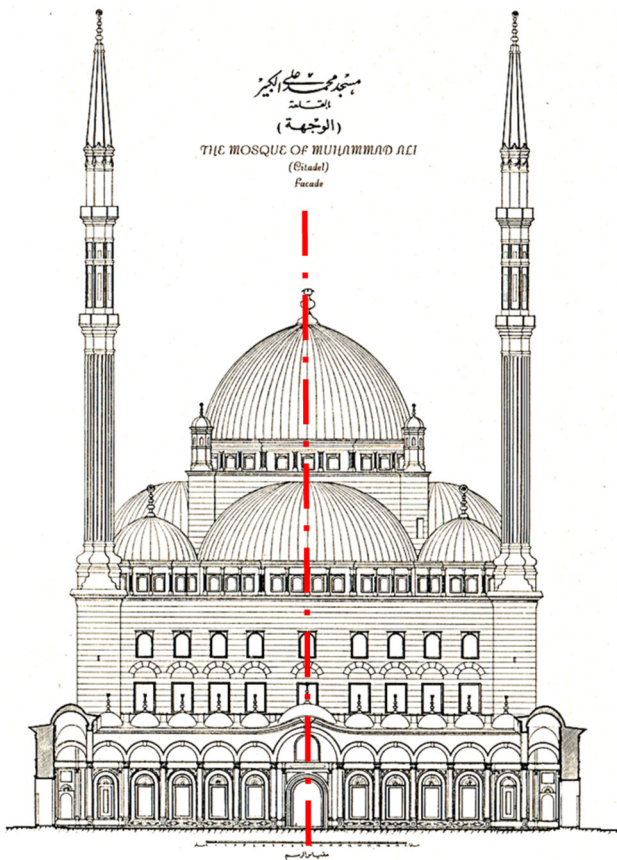


Fig. 5 A longitudinal section of the Mosque of Mohammad Ali, crossing through the (Mihrab), showing the monumental internal space of the Prayer Hall. Source: based on (S.M. Mohammed, Encyclopedia of Egypt's Mosques, and their Righteous Holy men (Mawsouat masjid Misr w awliya'ha as-salihoun), Ministry of Awqaf – Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, Cairo, Egypt, 1983).

The architectural style, Form, Modelling, Façades, internal spaces, ornaments, and Architectural details of the Mosque are full of meanings and political symbolism. The aforementioned elements express the Ottoman identity, status, and the superiority of the ruler over the public. They were also used to represent and strengthen the authority of the ruling regime and embody its political ideology.

The mosque announced – and materialized – Mohammad Ali's vision of his own identity, as an Ottoman deputy and a military ruler, where he considered Egypt to be his own property "which he seized by his sword" in his own words [41]. Such a vision had shaped the relationship between him and the public, as an autocratic ruler [70], and the sole owner of all means of production, specially Arable lands [36,49,50], the thing that made him seek to control and supervise the lives of the Egyptians as means of production. As an embodiment of his vision, he chose to build his iconic building – the mosque – in classical Ottoman style, to announce his affiliation. He also chose to build it inside the citadel – which symbolized the authority and the military power-and made it out of public's reach, to distinguish himself from the Egyptians. He built



Fig. 6 Inside the Prayer Hall of the Mosque of Muhammad Ali, the image shows the heavily ornamented central dome and half-domes, the pillars, the internal façades with white marble cladding, and the dense decorations carved in the marble cladding. Source: D. Jarvis, Overall view of the interior of the mosque, Wikimedia Commons. (2004). [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Flickr_-_archer10_\(Dennis\)_-_Egypt-13A-042.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Flickr_-_archer10_(Dennis)_-_Egypt-13A-042.jpg) (accessed February 1, 2018).

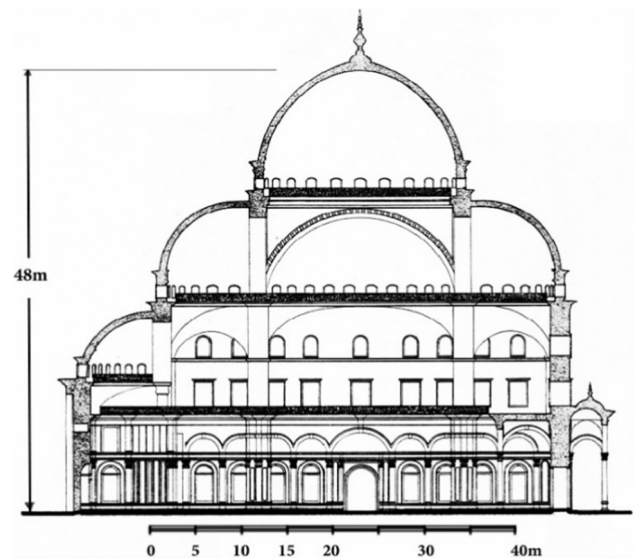


Fig. 7 A longitudinal section of the Mosque of Mohammad Ali, crossing through the (Mihrab), showing the monumental internal space of the Prayer Hall. Source: based on (S.M. Mohammed, Encyclopedia of Egypt's Mosques, and their Righteous Holy men (MawsouatmasajidMisr w awliya'ha as-salihoun), Ministry of Awqaf – Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, Cairo, Egypt, 1983.)

his mosque in the southwestern domain of the citadel, facing the city, at the highest spot in Cairo's landscape. The monumental scale, sculptural form, the rich cladding materials, and the site of the mosque reflected Mohammad Ali's superiority, achievability, richness, and supervision over the city.

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