

Iwān El-Ser at Al-Malik Al-Şāleḥ Najm Al-Dīn Ayyūb Complex in Cairo: Reconsidered Based on Its Foundation Inscription

Mohamed Abd al-Sattār UTHMĀN

Faculty of Archaeology

Sohag University

muhammad.abdalsattar@arch.sohag.edu.eg

and

Ahmed AMEEN^{a&b}

^aFaculty of Archaeology

Fayoum University

ahmed.ameen@fayoum.edu.eg

^bFaculty of Archaeology & Tourism Guidance

Misr University for Science and Technology

(MUST)

ahmed.ameen@must.edu.eg

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the significant architectural component known as “*Iwān El-Ser*”, located within the Complex of Al-Sultān Al-Malik Al-Şāleḥ Najm Al-Dīn Ayyūb. The study focuses on the historical and archaeological aspects of this administrative foundation, which served as a court during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. The research investigates the function and evolution of *Iwān El-Ser* from the Ayyūbid era to the Ottoman period, shedding light on its historical context and archaeological implications.

The study delves into several key areas, including the layout of the complex based on historical and archaeological resources. Additionally, it explores the specific role of *Iwān El-Ser* during the reign of Al-Şāleḥ Najm Al-Dīn Ayyūb, highlighting its function as an integral part of his complex in Cairo. Furthermore, the paper examines the reasons behind the construction of *Iwān El-Ser* within the complex and its subsequent utilization as a court during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods.

The main findings of this research can be summarized as follows: Firstly, it is revealed that the Complex of Al-Malik Al-Şāleḥ Najm Al-Dīn Ayyūb in Cairo housed an administrative foundation known as *Iwān El-Ser*, thus rectifying a previous misinterpretation regarding the Mamluk title “Katib Al-Ser” within Ayyūbid history. Secondly, the study establishes that *Iwān El-Ser* as a court during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, known as “Al-Şāleḥiyā Court.” Following its destruction by fire, the court was relocated to a neighboring historic building called “Maq’ad Māmāi,” assuming the name “Al-Bāb Al-‘ālī.” Finally, this study defines the specific placement of *Iwān El-Ser* within the overall structure of the Complex. This study contributes to the understanding of the architectural and historical significance of *Iwān El-Ser* within the broader context of the Ayyūbid and subsequent periods. It rectifies past misinterpretations, provides new insights into its functions, and offers a comprehensive analysis of its historical and archaeological implications.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received 12 August 2023

Received in revised form 20 October 2023

Accepted 28 October 2023

Available Online 28 December 2023

KEYWORDS

Iwān El-Ser;

Al-Şāleḥiyā Al-Najmeiā;

Katib Al-Ser;

Al-Şāleḥiyā Court;

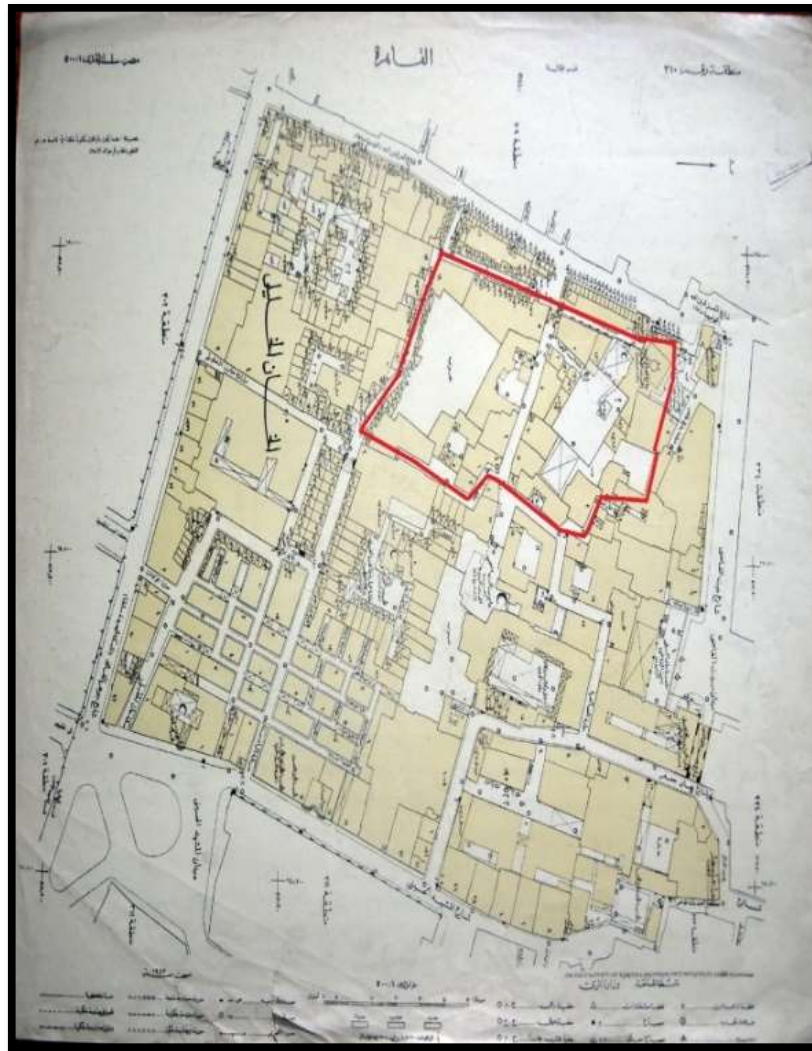
Ayyūbid Architecture.

INTRODUCTION

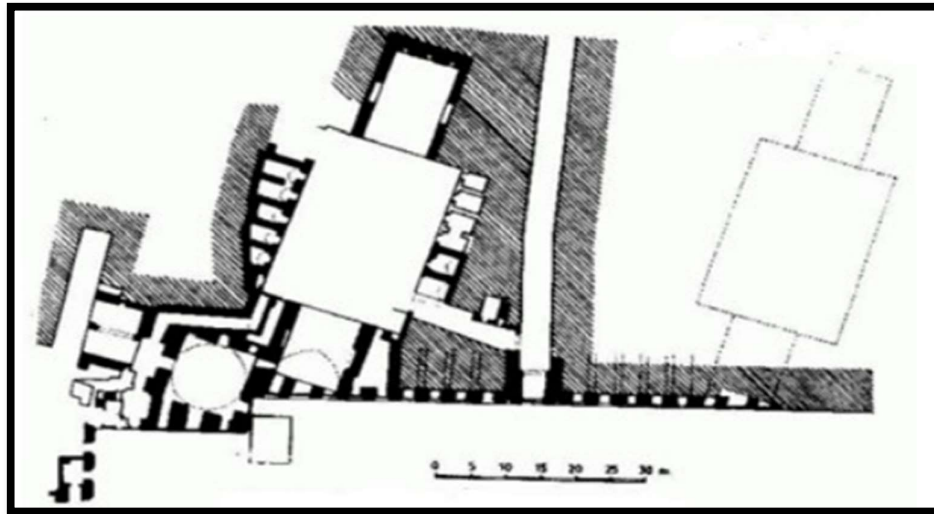
Unveiling the Architectural Complex of Al-Malik Al-Şāleḥ Najm Al-Dīn Ayyūb: Rediscovering the Significance of *Iwān El-Ser*

Because of its historical and cultural significance, the architectural complex of Al-Malik Al-Şāleḥ Najm Al-Dīn Ayyūb (639-641A.H/1241-1243A.D) has long been the topic of scholarly inquiry. However, a significant section of this complex, including the notable *Iwān El-Ser* structure, is missing. Consequently, a thorough understanding of the historical urban structureⁱ surrounding Al-Şāleḥiyā Complex is required to shed light on this architectural enigma.

Map 1: The initial outlines of Al-Şāleḥiyā district in Cairo.
Source: After Ministry of Irrigation, Survey Dpt. 1942.



Historical Ottoman archives dating back 200 years refer to Al-Şāleḥiyā Complex as “Mahallat Al-Şāleḥiyā,” reflecting a shift in the area's urban layout. The urban structure has changed continuously throughout time, affecting the road network as well as the advent of modern buildings such as houses and shops. Al-Şāleḥiyā district is now a residential and commercial area, a dramatic departure from the original plan of Al-Şāleḥ Najm Al-Dīn Ayyūb Complex (Fig.1).

Fig.1: Plan of *Al-Madāres Al-Şāleḥiyā*. After: Creswell

Previous studies have estimated the size of the Al-Salehyah zone to be approximately 6000 square metres. The corridor that once formed part of the original complex has now been transformed into a street known as “Ḥāret Al-Şāleḥiyā.” Meanwhile, modern constructions have replaced the original components of the complex, further altering the landscape. Consequently, the current state of the Al-Şāleḥiyā zone starkly contrasts with the hypothetical layouts proposed in previous studies, which have now been proven incorrect in light of new discoveries (Uthmān, Hamza and Al-Husseini, F. 2023, 246-260).

The Al-Salehyah district has been previously estimated to have an area of around 6000 square metres (Abdelrazeq 2009, 187). The corridor that was once a part of the original complex has now undergone a conversion and is currently recognised as “Ḥaret Al-Şāleḥiyā,” i.e. Al-Şāleḥiyā lane. Consequently, contemporary structures have replaced the initial missing parts of the complex, thereby modifying the scenery to a greater extent. Therefore, the present condition of the Al-Şāleḥiyā region sharply differs from the speculative designs put up in earlier research, (Creswell 1952-1959, 95: 100) (Fikry 1969, 70-71) which (Fig. 2 “A”) have now been disproven due to recent findings.

Fig. 2(A): Plan of *Al-Madāres Al-Şāleḥiyā*.
After: Fikry

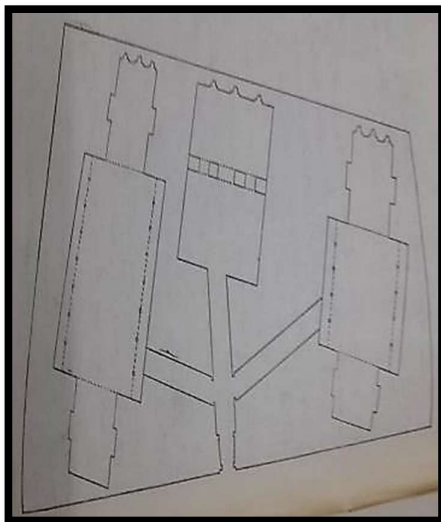
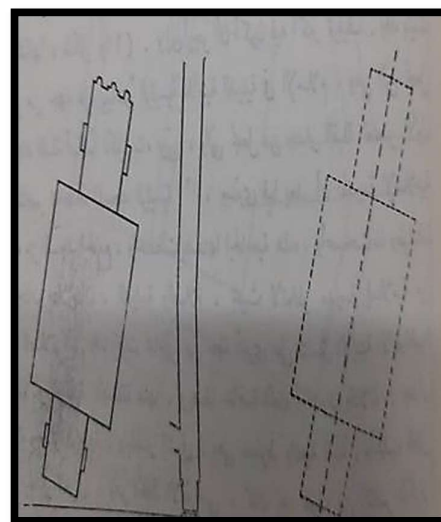


Fig. 2(B): Plan of *Al-Madāres Al-Şāleḥiyā*.
After: Fikry



The new discovery of *Iwān El-Ser* as a prominent part within Al-Şāleḥ Najm Al-Dīn Ayyūb Complex has revealed a key architectural truth that requires more investigation. The examination of *Iwān El-Ser* is particularly important since it reveals essential knowledge about the intricacy and historical circumstances of the Complex. An analysis of this architectural feature provides fresh insights on the Al-Şāleḥ Najm Al-Dīn Ayyūb Complex, enhancing future research in this domain.

Given these factors, the focus of this paper is to delve into the complexities of *Iwān El-Ser*, analysing its historical and cultural relevance within the context of Al-Şāleḥ Najm Al-Dīn Ayyūb Complex. This study aims to contribute to the expanding body of knowledge around this exceptional architectural masterpiece by examining architectural features, historical sources, and archaeological evidence.

RECONSTRUCTING THE ORIGINAL PLAN OF AL-ŞĀLEḤIYĀ COMPLEX: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

Scholars have long been interested in Al-Şāleḥiyā Complex because of its historical and architectural significance. Previous hypotheses concerning the original layout of this complex are being reconsidered considering new evidence, particularly the rereading of its foundation inscriptions (Fig. 3) on the western façade that prove the existence of an important component known as *Iwān El-Ser*. As a result, a thorough examination of the complex's layout and borders is required (Map 1-A).

Architectural, archaeological, and historical resources, as well as recent studies, have yielded significant findings that establish key facts regarding Al-Şāleḥiyā Complex. First, the complex's eastern border contained the entrance known as “Bāb Al-Ser,” which provided access to a street located between the complex and the Badr Addin Al-‘āgami Mosque (Map 1), also known as Al-Madrasah Al-Badriyā (Al-Maqrīzī 2003, 570-571). Second, the complex's western façade opened directly onto Al-Mu‘iz Street. Third, the complex's northern edge was adjacent to Al-Zāahir Baybars Madrasah. Finally, the complex's southern façade was interconnected with the lane leading from Al-Mu‘iz Street to the Khān Al-Khalīl (Fīkry 1969, 72). These cross-disciplinary discoveries lead to a better understanding of the spatial layout and contextual relationships within Al-Şāleḥiyā Complex.

The architectural parts within the complex can be classified into three distinct groups based on their characteristics and spatial relationships. The first group comprises the existing parts and elements that have endured over time. These include the main entrance, which serves as the primary access point to the complex, as well as the prominent main western façade (Fig. 4). Additionally, the northern section of the schools (*Al-Madāres*) features two Iwans known as Iwan Al-Shāfe‘iyah and Iwan Al-Mālikiyah. Both Iwans are closely positioned to one other, with a central court located between them. The students’ cells are aligned along the central court, providing accommodation for the students. Located next to the main entrance, there is a square area known as “*Dirkāh*.” Furthermore, a significant main corridor named “*Dihlīz*” serves as a thoroughfare, connecting various parts of the complex, including the northern and southern sections (*Al-Madāres*), and *Iwān El-Ser* (Fig. 1). The spatial organisation and hierarchy inside the Al-Şāleḥiyā Complex are influenced by the arrangement and functionality of these architectural units.

Fig. 3. First Foundation Text on Western Façade of Al- Madāres Al- Şāleḥiyā
Source: (Uthmān, Hamza and Al-Husseini, F. 2023)

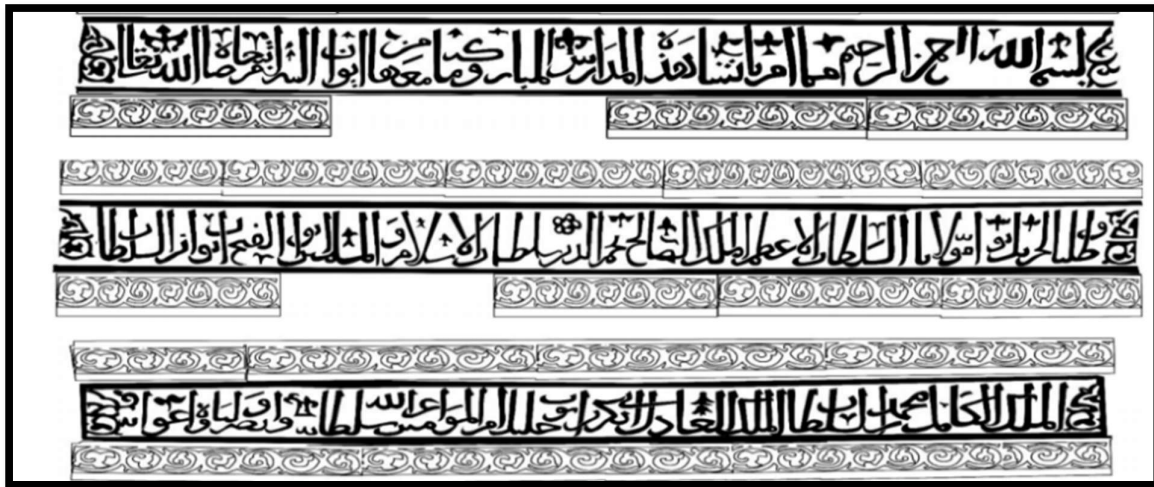
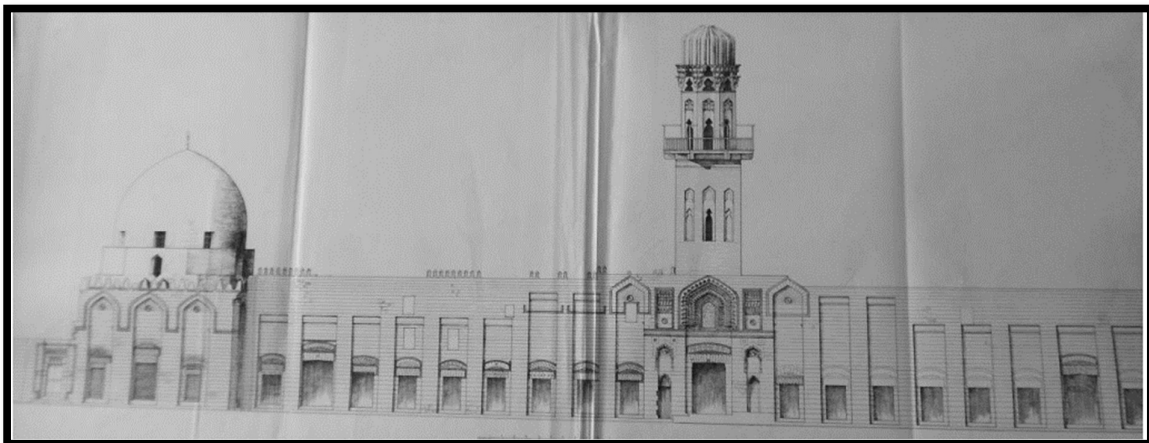


Fig. 4. Western Façade of *Al-Madāres* Al-Şāleḥiyā and Mausoleum of Al-Şāleḥ Najm Al-Dīn Ayyūbī After: Creswell



The second group of architectural parts in the complex comprises of nonexistent units, as identified through Al-Maqrizi's renowned account and recent studies. The author provides a definitive classification of these units based on the complex's layout (Fig. 5). Two Iwans, specifically Al-Ḥanabaliyah and Al-Ḥanafiyah, are absent from the southern area of the schools. In addition, the northern part of the schools (*Al-Madāres*) originally housed a *Qā'ah* (residence) dedicated to the *Shikh* (professor) of Al-Mālikiyah. There was a courtyard located between the two iwans, serving as a central gathering area. Like the student cells in the first group, the students' cells would have opened onto this central court. There was another *Qā'ah* at the name of Shikh Al-Ḥanabaliyah situated in the southern part of the schools (*Al-Madāres*). Significantly, the missing architectural section of utmost significance is the *Iwān El-Ser*.

Lastly, the third group encompasses additional missing units whose names and locations remain unknown due to limited or incomplete available data. These units potentially include both *Qā'ahs* of the *Shikhs* Al-Shāfe'iyah and Al-Ḥanafiyah, a possibly second minaret, and additional units utilised for diverse educational functions. The identification and understanding of these missing architectural units will contribute to a more comprehensive reconstruction of Al-Şāleḥiyā Complex, shedding light on its historical and educational significance.

LOCATION OF THE *IWĀN EL-SER* SITE

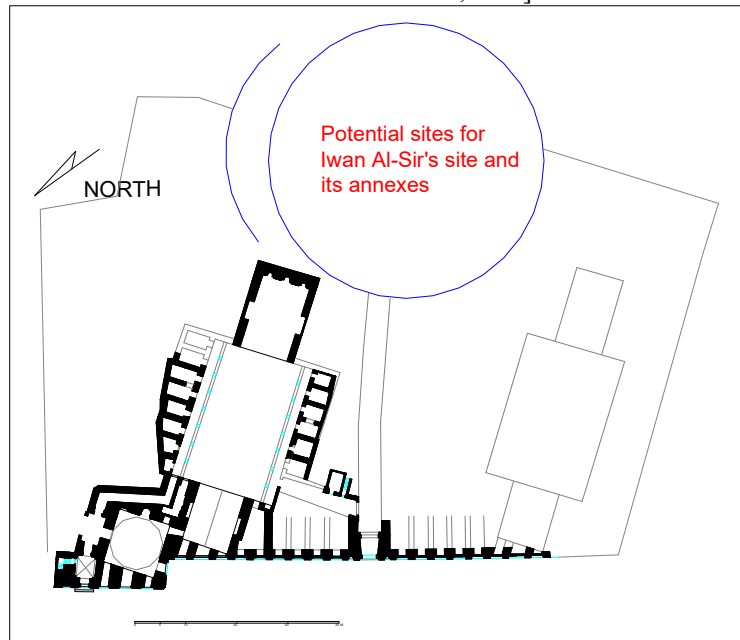
The precise site position of *Iwān El-Ser* within the layout of the complex has been a subject of uncertainty, necessitating further investigation. This paper draws upon archaeological investigation, historical resources, and previous studies to elucidate the location of this Iwan. In particular, the interpretation of the evidence requires meticulous examination. The main corridor, “*Dihlīz*” featured doors along its southern and northern walls, granting access to the two sections of the schools (*Al-Madāres*). At the terminus of this corridor, an area was identified that was previously occupied by *Iwān El-Ser*. Further elaboration on this point is warranted. This area encompasses the space behind the eastern side of Iwan Al-Shāfe‘iyah in the northern section of the schools and Iwan Al-Hanafiyah in the southern section (Fig. 1 & Map 2).



Map 2 displays the prospective site locations for *Iwān El-Ser* and its annexes within Al-Şāleḥiyā Complex and nearby historic buildings. After the Historic Cairo Map (©2001, ARC Egypt).

The author posits that this area served as the site of the demolished *Iwān El-Ser*, with other units annexed to it to fulfill its functions and accommodate its personnel. The historian Ibn Iyas's account merits attention, as it mentions that “one of the judges of the Al-Şāleḥiyā Complex Court perished in this Iwan due to a falling stone from its masonry.” (Abdelrazeq 2009, 187) This information is significant, indicating the use of stone in the construction of *Iwān El-Ser* and its architectural resemblance to the Iwans of the four schools (*Al-Madāres*). Furthermore, historical resources provide numerous instances of judges who met their demise within the court (Ibn Iyās 1984, 203), affirming the continued utilization of the *Iwān El-Ser* as a judicial space during the Mamluk period. Based on these facts, it is plausible to propose that the form of the *Iwān El-Ser* mirrored that of the iwans found in the four schools within the complex.

Fig. 4. Potential site locations for *Iwān El-Ser* and its annexes behind *Al-Madāres Al-Şālehiyā* (after Meinecke) [CAD drawing, after Saeed Arida, © Nasser Rabbat / Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, MIT]



THE ROLE OF THE *IWĀN EL-SER* THROUGHOUT THE AYYŪBID PERIOD

The term of *Iwān El-Ser* during the Ayyūbid era carries exceptional importance in the domain of Arabic and Islamic inscriptions. Comprising two words, the architectural connotation of the first word “*Iwān*,” is readily apparent. However, the interpretation of the second word “*Al-Ser*,” necessitates further investigation. Historical studies provide insights into an alternative designation closely linked to the significance of “*Al-Ser*”: “*Kātib Al-Ser*.” During the Mamluk era, the Circassian (or Būrjī) period (784-923H/1382-1517) (Darrāg 1981, 315: 330) (Darrāg 1980, 275: 282), (Rajah 2005, 5-92) the position of *Kātib Al-Ser* had the highest authority in the “*Diwān Al-Inshā’*,” (Mīlād 2008, 82 - 88) which was an administrative department tasked with recording both domestic and foreign matters. The main goal of *Diwān Al-Ser* was to protect state secrets, which required absolute loyalty from the department's leader and staff. The name *Diwān Al-Inshā’* holds great significance in the historical records of the Islamic era. Its origins may be traced back to the time of Prophet Muhammad, and it has been known by different names throughout history. During the Fatimid era, this place was referred to as “*Dist Al-Ashrāf*,” which translates to “Hand of the Nobility.” The primary compilation of inscriptions in *Al-Şālehiyā* prominently displays the name of this department under the designation of “*Iwān Al-Ser*.”

From a functional standpoint, Iwan has historically acted as an administrative foundation, with Khosrau Iwan being the most prominent and ancient example. This role was prevalent during the Fatimid and Ayyūbid periods, (Al-Maqrīzī 2003, Vol. 2, 89-92; Vol. 3, 609; Vol. 4, 281) according to historical sources. In the Mamluk period, the term “*Diwān*” had the same meaning as *Iwān El-Ser*. As a result, the author contends that during the Mamluk period, the title *Diwān Al-Inshā’* corresponded to the prominence of *Iwān El-Ser*. During the reign of Al-Şāleḥ Najm Al-Dīn Ayyūb, who shifted his seat of power from the Saladin Citadel to a newly constructed centre on Al-Roda Island in the Nile, *Iwān El-Ser* was built as an integral component of his Cairo architectural complex. The construction of this *Iwān El-Ser* in Cairo, away from the Al-

Roda Citadel, which the Sultān Al-Şāleḥ Najm Al-Dīn Ayyūb planned to reserve solely for himself and his Mamluks (Mackenzie 2007, 121-128), was most likely motivated by safety concerns. The proximity of the Sultān and the head of the *Iwān El-Ser*, *Kātib Al-Ser*, was desired. According to historical records, important persons designated as heads of this *Iwān* include Ibn Loqmān and Bahā' Aldin Zohair (Ibn al-Furāt 1936-1942, 186) (Rajah 2005, 107-108). Employees of the *Diwān Al-Inshā'*, or *Iwān El-Ser*, dressed according to Mamluk administrative conventions and apparel, which were influenced by Ayyūbid traditions. Detailed reports from historical sources and modern studies give light on administrative methods, personnel clothing, and behaviour related to these traditions. A comparison of these rituals reveals interesting details about the *Iwān El-Ser* during the Ayyūbid dynasty. *Iwān El-Ser* served as the functional central unit, accompanied by numerous architectural annexes for distinct purposes such as record preservation and employee facilities. According to the author, the *Iwān El-Ser*, as the centre unit, would have been large in scale, like the four *Iwāns* found in the schools (*Al-Madāres*).

THE ROLE OF THE *IWĀN EL-SER* THROUGHOUT THE MUMLUK PERIOD

Following the death of Al-Malik Al-Şāleḥ Najm Al-Dīn Ayyūb, the Saladin Citadel, which housed all the state's administrative institutions, became the new centre of power. As a result, the use of the *Iwān El-Ser* within the Al-Şāleḥiyā Complex was no longer required. According to historical sources, Al-Malik Al-Mu'izz Aybak directed Al-Amīr Aydukīn Al-Būnduqdāri, the Sultan's vice-governor, to visit Al-Şāleḥ Najm Al-Dīn Complex with the judges of the *Dār Al-'adl* (official court) to address public issues (Al-Maqrīzī 2003). According to some investigations, the *Iwāns* of *Al-Madāres* were used for this purpose (Abdelrazeq 2009, 186). This viewpoint, however, is incorrect because the *Iwāns* of *Al-Madāres* were only used for educational and prayer-related purposes. The author believes that the *Iwān El-Ser* was a better setting for such trials, as it was the first time it was used as a court.

Throughout the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, *Iwān El-Ser* served as a court. Following the fire that destroyed the *Iwān El-Ser* building in 1109 H (1746), the court of Al-Şāleḥiyā relocated to "*Maq'ad Māmāi*" and changed its name to "*Al-Bāb Al-'āli*." (Salem 2022, 58-78)

KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Finally, *Iwān El-Ser* was a key figure within the Al-Şāleḥ Najm Al-Dīn Ayyūb Complex. It served as an administrative foundation during the Ayyūbid period, then known as the *Diwān Al-Inshā'* in the Mamluk era. During the Mamluk period, the function of the *Iwān El-Ser* was turned into a court known as the Al-Şāleḥiyā Court. With the inclusion of *Iwān El-Ser* in the architectural design of the Al-Şāleḥ Najm Al-Dīn Ayyūb Complex, it became the first complex in Cairo with such a configuration, followed by the Qalawūn Complex. Al-Şāleḥ Najm Al-Dīn Ayyūb Complex was divided into three sections: *Al-Madāres*, *Iwān El-Ser*, and the main entrance connecting both. This arrangement could have served as a basis for the Qalawūn complex's design (Map 1). When both complexes are compared, the Al-Şāleḥ Najm Al-Dīn Ayyūb Complex performed religious and administrative services, whilst the Qalawūn Complex served religious and therapeutic ones. Following the fire that destroyed the *Iwān El-Ser* building in 1159 H (1646), the court of Al-Şāleḥiyā was relocated to the *Maq'ad Māmāi* historic building and renamed as the *Al-Bāb Al-'āli* Court. *Iwān El-Ser*, located in the complex's eastern part, served as an administrative foundation in charge of documenting internal and foreign activities. Its placement outside the centre of rule in Al-Roda emphasises its distinct status within the complex even more.

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إيوان السر ضمن المجموعة المعمارية للملك الصالح نجم الدين أيوب في القاهرة: تصور جديد في ضوء نقش الإنشاء

الملخص

يتناول هذا البحث المكوّن المعماري المهم المعروف بـ"إيوان السر" الواقع ضمن مجموعة السلطان الملك الصالح نجم الدين أيوب المعمارية. تركز الدراسة على الجوانب التاريخية والأثرية لهذا المبنى الإداري الذي تم توظيفه كمحكمة خلال العصرين المملوكي والعثماني. يناقش البحث وظيفة إيوان السر وتطوره من العصر الأيوبي إلى الفترة العثمانية، مسلطاً الضوء على سياقه التاريخي والشواهد الأثرية المرتبطة به.

تلقي الدراسة الضوء على عدة نقاط رئيسية، بما في ذلك تصميم المجموعة المعمارية بناءً على المصادر التاريخية والشواهد الأثرية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تناقش الدراسة الدور المحدد لإيوان السر خلال فترة حكم الصالح نجم الدين أيوب، مسلطة الضوء على وظيفته كجزء أساسي من مجموعته المعمارية في القاهرة. وعلاوة على ذلك، يعرض البحث لأسباب بناء إيوان السر ضمن المجموعة المعمارية، واستخدامه فيما بعد كمحكمة خلال العصرين المملوكي والعثماني.

وينتهي البحث بمجموعة من النتائج الرئيسية أهمها التأكيد على تضمين مجموعة الملك الصالح نجم الدين أيوب المعمارية في القاهرة لمؤسسة إدارية عرفت باسم إيوان السر، وهو ما يصحح تفسيراً سابقاً خاطئاً يتعلق باللقب المملوكي "كاتب السر" في تاريخ الأيوبيين. أيضاً، يؤكد البحث على أن إيوان السر كان يعمل كمحكمة خلال العصرين المملوكي والعثماني، والتي عرفت باسم "المحكمة الصالحية". وبعد تعرضها للحريق، تم نقل المحكمة إلى "مقعد مامي"، المبنى الأثري القريب منها، تحت اسم "الباب العالي". وأخيراً، يحدّد هذا البحث موضع إيوان السر ضمن التخطيط العام للمجموعة المعمارية بشكل محدد.

يسهم هذا البحث في فهم الأهمية المعمارية والتاريخية لإيوان السر في سياقه الأوسع للعصر الأيوبي والحقب التالية. ويصحح التفسيرات السابقة ويقدم نظرة جديدة حول وظائفه، ويقدم تحليلاً شاملاً للمعلومات التاريخية والشواهد الأثرية المتعلقة به.

محمد عبد الستار عثمان
كلية الآثار
جامعة سوهاج

muhammad.abdalsattar@arch.sohag.edu.eg

أحمد أمين أ.ب
كلية الآثار
جامعة الفيوم

ahmed.ameen@fayoum.edu.eg

كلية الآثار والإرشاد السياحي
جامعة مصر للعلوم والتكنولوجيا
ahmed.ameen@must.edu.eg

بيانات المقال

تاريخ المقال

تم الاستلام في 12 أغسطس 2023

تم استلام النسخة المنقحة في 20 أكتوبر 2023

تم قبول البحث في 28 أكتوبر 2023

متاح على الإنترنت في 28 أكتوبر 2023

الكلمات الدالة

إيوان السر؛
الصالحية النجمية؛
كاتب السر؛
المحكمة الصالحية؛
العمارة الأيوبية.