POETRY AND ARCHITECTURE: THE BĀDḤANJ

In a photograph of nineteenth-century Cairo, the rows upon rows of air shafts on the roofs of houses have an aesthetic appeal similar to that of the forest of television antennas extending today into the sky over a modern city. The orderliness and symmetry of the air shafts suggest a certain harmony and quiet, while the television antennas in all their different sizes and jagged shapes seem to reflect just the opposite, a restlessness and confused spirit of competition, which is, perhaps, expressive of the mood of our times. Poets might well be tempted to speculate on one object as well as the other and use their peculiar modes of thought and language to interpret its meaning. To be sure, it is not pure beauty that is involved here. Still, a certain stimulus to aesthetic and intellectual sensibilities is no doubt present.

In the tenth century, Cairo's air shafts appear already to have been as numerous and conspicuous as they were in the nineteenth. For, as D. A. King has shown, the astronomer Ibn Yūnus (d. 399/1009) thought fit to discuss their proper orientation. He would not have done so, if they had not been in common use. By the time of ‘Abd-al-Latīf al-Baghdādī (557-629/1162/3-1231), there was hardly a house in Cairo without one. Some were extremely large and expensive, costing from one hundred to five hundred dinārs. Others, on small houses, were cheap and cost no more than one dinār.

An article on the history of air conditioning in the Near East by Alexander Badawy refers to the existence already in ancient Egypt of airs shafts of the type known from Muslim times. Badawy’s drawings show the same triangular (in profile) structure high on the roof of the structure. This form is similar to the structure seen in the photograph of nineteenth-century Cairo. It is not clear from the text how this specific structure relates to the concept of the bādḥanj, which is mentioned in the text.

1 Cf. Francis Frith, Egypt, Sinai, and Jerusalem, pl. 11 (London 1860).
3 Ibn ‘Abd-az-Zāhir speaks of “the bādḥanj of the minbar” of the mosque in connection with al-Mu‘īzz (cf. Ibn Taghibirbiddī, Nujūm, IV, 102, anno 362). He may, however, have used the terminology of his own time.
4 Architectural Provision against Heat in the Orient, in Journal of Near Eastern Studies, XVII (1958), 122-8. More recently, A. Lézine, La Protection contre la chaleur dans l’architecture musulmane d’Égypte, in Bulletin d’Études Orientales (Damascus), XXIV (1971), 7-17, has discussed the air shaft (malqaf). He attempts to make distinctions between different types and also mentions in passing the term bād-hanj (p. 13, n. 1).
roof with its opening toward the direction of the cooling breezes, intended to catch them and channel them through ducts into a room below where there was an opening in the wall at some elevation from the floor for the air to be discharged. According to Badawy, its modern descendant is called *badgir* “wind holder” in Persian, and *malqaf* “grabber (of air)” in Arabic. *Badgir* is, in fact, still known in Iran and, possibly, was known there in times past, together with similar designations. *Malqaf* is a word still in common use in Cairo, as E. K. Rowson kindly informs me. It is, however, not known to me from medieval Arabic literature. The old term for the air shaft was the Persian word *badhanj* (Arabicized *badabhanj*) “drawer of wind.” It was by this term that the air shaft achieved a modest measure of literary celebrity already in Fāṭimid but especially in Ayyūbid and Mamlūk times.

A littérature known as al-Ghuzūlī who had worked his way up from lowly beginnings into the literary circles of Egypt and Syria (he died in Damascus in 815/1412-3, probably in his forties) compiled an anthology “rich in materials for cultural history,” entitled *Maṭāliʾ al-budzir*. The work was quite popular for a few centuries

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5 Cf. F. Steingass, *A Persian-English Dictionary*, 140b (London 1892, 1930): “*bād-hilj, bād-hanj*, A contrivance on the top of houses in the East, in the form of a chimney, having an opening face to the west, which, catching the breeze, gives a refreshing coolness to the apartments with which it communicates.” Steingass, 140a, defines *bād-gir, bād-gir* as “An airy house; a funnel perforated in every part for the admission of air.”

6 For the biography of al-Ghuzūlī, cf. as-Sakhwī, *Dawʾ*, V, 254, (Cairo 1533-5/1934-6). As-Sakhwī derived his information from the *Muʾjam* of Ibn Ḥajar, and he also states that al-Ghuzūlī was listed in al-Maqrizī’s *Uqud*. His supposed Berber connections, indicated by his name, are not mentioned by as-Sakhwī (Ibn Ḥajar) who speaks of him as a Turkish mamlūk, bought by Bahāʿ-ad-dīn and attached to ʿĪzz-ad-dīn al-Mawsīlī. The former appears to be Bahāʿ-ad-dīn ʿAbdallāh b. Abī Bakr (705-94/1305/6-92), a brother of the grandfather of Ibn ad-Damāmīni (cf. Ibn Ḥajar, *Dawr*, II, 251, (Hyderabad 1348-50); as-Sakhwī, *Dawʾ*, VII, 185). The scant biographical information of C. Brockelmann (*GAL*, II, 55, *Suppl.*, II, 55, *EI* 3, II, 1106b) presumably derived from the Vienna catalogue No. 397, whose author (G. Flügel) got the date of al-Ghuzūlī’s death from Ḥājjī Khalīfah, ed. Flügel, V, 598; the edition of Ḥājjī Khalīfah by Shereffettin Yaltkaya, II, 1717 (Istanbul 1941-3), leaves the date of death blank.