

THE DOCUMENTATION OF ALEPPINE `AJAMI ROOMS FROM THE OTTOMAN PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to document the polychrome wooden `ajami rooms. Aleppo is the second largest city in Syria (after the capital Damascus) and is the commercial capital of Syria. Aleppo has a long history, extending from the third millennium B.C to the Islamic era. Aleppo flourished and became a very important station on the Silk Road. Later, Aleppo became a part of the Ottoman Empire from 1516 to 1918, and the third largest city in the Ottoman Empire after Istanbul and Cairo. As part of this empire, local Aleppine architects and craftsmen combined their techniques and cultural heritage with Ottoman culture. This research employs a historical, photographic and descriptive approach to document the `ajami rooms by using mostly the photographs, that were taken by the first author in 2006. Since 2012 much of Syria's architectural heritage has been destroyed due to internal war. In Aleppo, the losses in both the ancient and modern parts of the city have been tremendous including some traditional houses with `ajami. This paper will highlight some recommendations to protect the ajami rooms from the current conflict and restore it for future use.

Keywords: Aleppo City, Aleppo Heritage, polychrome wood, `ajami rooms, Syrian war

INTRODUCTION

Ottoman style houses in Syria have become the icon of Ottoman Syrian art and architecture due to their unique design and decorations. The decorative art found in these houses includes several geometric designs, floral motifs, and inscriptions. Impressive polychrome wood panels (`ajami) dating from the 17th to the 19th century have been preserved in Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama (in Syria). The academic field has not studied this subject enough, especially the `ajami rooms of Aleppo. Since 2012 the conflict in Syria has destroyed much of Aleppo's architectural heritage. The losses in both the ancient and modern parts of the city have been tremendous. Old Aleppo city has been

bombed many times and many of the 'ajami rooms of the houses have been destroyed, burned or stolen. It has become urgent to bring awareness to this subject and cover it scientifically. The objectives of this paper are - first to document the date of ajami rooms in the five case studies, second to locate the 'ajami rooms in each house and finally, to document the damage of each house. In the following sections, this paper will elaborate Aleppine Ottoman houses, the history of 'ajami, and the current situation of five houses in Aleppo, by using the photos that were shot before the war and the data collected exclusively for this research.

OTTOMAN HOUSES IN ALEPPO

Syrians always tried to make their houses like heaven, and oriental design helped them (Gunay & Reha, 1998). The design of Aleppine traditional houses depend on the description of the paradise found in the Quran: {But those who feared their Lord will be driven to Paradise in groups until, when they reach it while its gates have been opened and its keepers say, "Peace be upon you; you have become pure; so enter it to abide eternally therein," [they will enter]}(The Holy Qur'an, Surat Az-Zumar:73, Surat Al-Kahf:31), and in other verses: {Those will have gardens of perpetual residence; beneath them rivers will flow. They will be adorned therein with bracelets of gold and will wear green garments of fine silk and brocade, reclining therein on adorned couches. Excellent is the reward, and good is the resting place}}(The Holy Qur'an, Surat Az-Zumar:73, Surat Al-Kahf:31). Just as walls and gates surround Syrian cities, Aleppine houses also have walls and a gate, replicating the walls and gates of Heaven. When walking through the alleys, one sees only simple walls and doors. But, upon entering the gate through an indirect corridor, they will reach the courtyard, an earthly paradise, adorned with plants, trees and a water fountain (Alafandi, Rami. Abdul Rahim, Asiah, 2013). The most important feature of the courtyard is the iwan, a room with an open wall facing the courtyard sometimes as tall as two stories. Here the family prefers to sit with its open view of the courtyard and its moderate temperature, especially during the summer. Surrounding the courtyard are the ground rooms, sealmlik, customized to receive men, and usually the upper rooms, haramlek, private for the family. All the rooms open to the

courtyard with big windows, which rarely face the outside (Alafandi, Rami. Abdul Rahim, Asiah, 2013). The house also includes a kitchen, service rooms, a toilet, and a cellar to save food. The house rarely includes a bath. Due to the importance of hospitality in Islamic and Arabic culture, guest rooms (qa'a) are more carefully decorated and furnished. Such rooms consist of one or three tazars (raised seating area of the room formed as T-shaped hall) and one 'ataba (low entry space of the room) (Alafandi, Rami. Abdul Rahim, Asiah, 2013). Ottoman tazars, contain the largest treasure of polychrome wooden decorations ('ajami). All traditional Aleppo houses are courtyard houses built of white limestone, whose color changes over the years into light gray. The most obvious feature of the living quarters is the windowless and undecorated appearance of the house's outer facade, noted by almost all the travelers who visit Aleppo (Mollenhauer, Anne; Karzon, Zouka, 2001).

POLYCHROME WOOD ('AJAMI)

According to Kyal (2007) and Scharrahs (2013): "These Syrian wooden elements are elaborately decorated with a particular relief technique, known as pastiglia in Europe but called polychrome wood ('ajami) in Syria. `Ajami is the Arabic adjective applied to an Ajam, a Persian or (relative to Arabic speakers) alien". Scharrahs used the term polychrome wood and polychrome wood ('ajami) together in her book.

The term al-`ajami ('ajami) is used to describe this decorative technique as a whole as well as the raised ornaments individually, and also provides a commonly used name for this type of interior, termed polychrome wood ('ajami) rooms; even though other materials and decorative techniques are also used in the rooms (Scharrahs, Anke, 2013).

'AJAMI IN ALEPPINE HOUSES

Aljdayda district houses belong to 16th and 17th-century. They were the houses of the Aleppine bourgeoisie who creatively decorated their houses. This paper will focus on five houses (Ghazaleh, Kube, Ajek-Pash, Zamria and Basil) that date back to the Ottoman period and have unique examples of `ajami.

Ghazaleh House

Is located in the extramural Aljdayda Quarter (Hajar, Abdullah, 1998) and was built in 17th century (Sauvaget, Jean, 1941) by Khajadour Bin Murad Bali in 1691AD/1102AH written in the northern room ceiling (Figure 1). Later the Christian family Saba 'Aidaa lived in this house 1737AD/1150AH (Figure 2), followed by the Ghazaleh family (Algazi, Kamel, 1991) (also Christian) with more than 45 people living in it in 1834AD/1250AH (Figure 3). In the early 20th century, the house was converted into a school for Arminians. By 2007, the Aleppo Antiquities and Museums Directorate refurbished the Ghazaleh House transforming it into a historical museum for the City of Aleppo. In conjunction with this endeavor, they restored its 'Ajami panels from 2009-2011. The locations of ajami were determined during the visits during 2006-2010 and photographed as the following: western room, northern room, T-shaped qa'a, winter room, the kitchen rooms, Iwan with sunshade, and small southern room (Figure 4). In 2013, Aleppo Antiquities and Museums Directorate (AAMD) reported to Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) and UNESCO that "the 'ajami panels were stolen from the Ghazaleh House", but neither DGAM nor UNESCO published the full reports or the photos of the Ghazaleh House after the damages (Alafandi, Rami. Abdul Rahim, Asiah, 2016).



Figure 1: Northern room ceiling (1691AD/1102AH), Rami, 2009

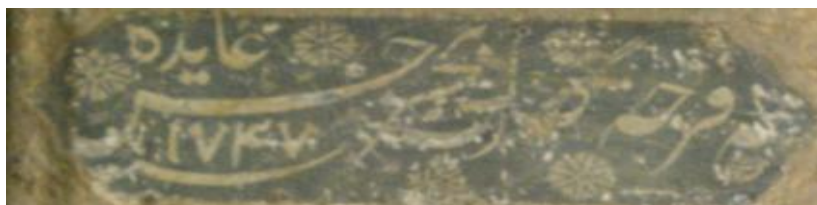


Figure 2: qa'a wall (1737AD/1150AH), Rami, 2006



Figure 3: Northern room wall cornice (1834AD/1250AH), Rami, 2006

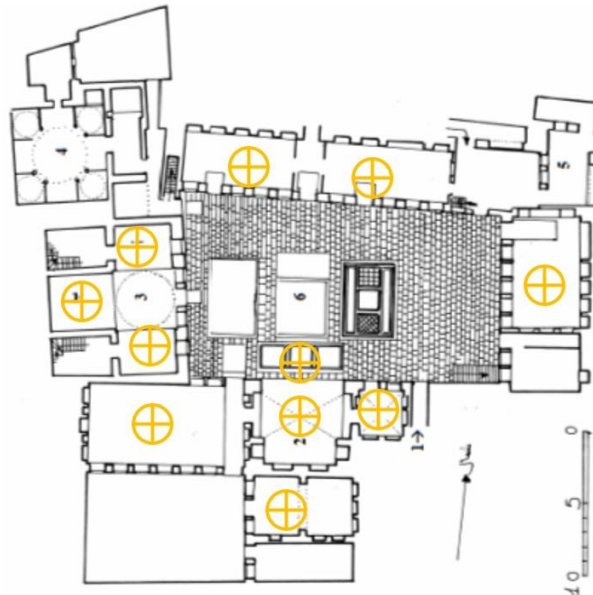


Figure 4: Ghazaleh plan with ajami locations, AAMD

Kube House

Located near Farhat Square in the Aljdayda Quarter, the house was built in 1718AD/1130AH according to the inscription in 'ajami on the ceiling of the upper room (Figure 5,6). The owner was Fateh-Allah Kube (De Sallé, Eusébe, 1840) and in 2004 this house was left by the inheritor who migrated to America. The locations of ajami were determined during the visit in 2006 and photographed as the following: Iwan sunshade, northern upper room and southern upper room (Figure 7). The house has been partially looted prior to the conflict. The wooden frieze in the northern upper room had painted glass (Alafandi, Rami. Abdul Rahim, Asiah, 2016).



Figure 5: Kube, the ceiling of Iwan, Rami, 2006

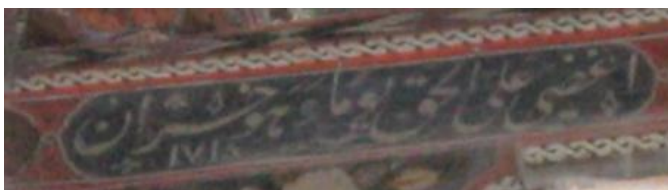


Figure 6: Kube, inscription date, Rami, 2006

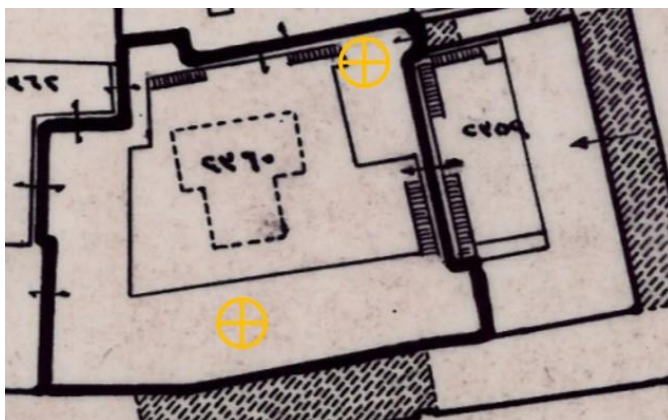


Figure 7: Kube plan with ajami locations, AAMD

Ajek-Pash House

Located near the Jasmine gate in the Aljdayda Quarter, and according to the inscription (Figure 8) it was built in 1757AD/1171AH by the grandfather of Yousef-Karaly¹⁵, then owned by Ajek-pash. Later the Syriac Catholic Church owned the house and used it as hostel for the poor. In 1967, the Aleppo Antiquities and Museums Directorate transformed it into a traditional museum for Aleppo City (Figure 9). The locations of ajami were determined during the visit during 2006-2010 and photographed as the following: Iwan sunshade and ceiling, the

two rooms on both sides the Iwan, and the rectangular qa'a in the north (Figure 10).

The major situation of the building structure is good, but there are some cracks in the wooden ceilings of the rooms and the internal facades. Some of the internal walls destroyed. The wooden shutters of the doors and the windows glass were stolen. The wooden wall and 'ajami cornice panels were stolen also (Alafandi, Rami. Abdul Rahim, Asiah, 2016).



Figure 8: inscription date, Rami, 2006



Figure 9: Ajeq-Pash, qa'a, Rami, 2006

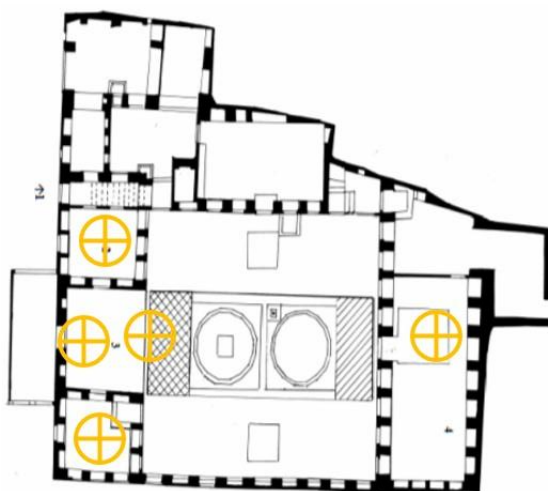


Figure 10: Ajek-Pash plan with ajami locations, AAMD

Zamria House

The house located in Aljdayda quarter and was built in 1733AD/1145AH (David, Jean, 1975) by Khazdar Osmani (Burabeh, Latifa. 2009). In 1808AD/1223AH the Zamria family owned the house (Figure 11). In 1997, Martini Co converted the house into a traditional hotel and restaurant (Burabeh, Latifa. 2009) (Figure 12). The locations of ajami were determined during the visit during 2006-2010 and photographed as the following: Iwan's sunshade and ceiling, the two rooms on both sides of the Iwan, and the rectangular qa'a in the south (Figure 13).

During the conflict in Syria Zamria house was shelled many times (2012-2013), and the house was partly damaged (Figure 14), then completely burnt and many parts were destroyed (Figure 14), All polychrome wooden decoration were burned, and none of the pieces remains have been found (Alafandi, Rami. Abdul Rahim, Asiah, 2016).

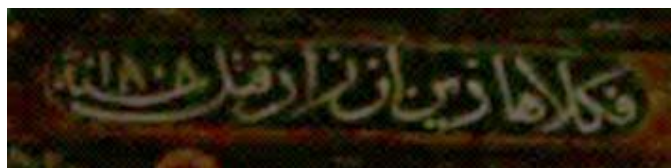


Figure 11: Inscription date, Rami, 2006



Figure 12: Zamria courtyard, Rami, 2006



Figure 13: Zamria plan with 'ajami locations, AAMD



Figure 14: Destruction of Zamria courtyard, Zamaria.com

Basil House

This is located in Bahira Monk lane in the Aljdayda Quarter and according to the inscription in its 'ajami, the house was built early in 1772AD/1186AH and decorated in 1785AD/1199AH (Figure 15) by the Basil family (Burabeh, Latifa. 2009). In 2002, the house was converted into an institute for languages and art.

The locations of ajami were determined during the visit in 2006 and photographed as the following: Iwan's sunshade and ceiling and three ceilings (Figure 16) of the T-shaped qa'a (Figure 17). The house has been vandalised during the conflict, but until now, it seems that no fixed items have disappeared (Alafandi, Rami. Abdul Rahim, Asiah, 2016).



Figure 15: inscription date, Rami, 2006



Figure 16: 'Ajami ceiling, Basil House , Rami, 2006

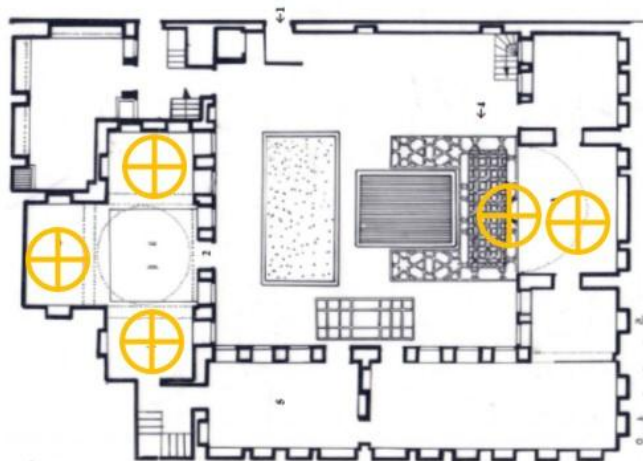


Figure 17: Basil plan with 'ajami locations, AAMD

DISSCUSION

Gahzaleh house includes the highest number of a'jami rooms; 6 ajami rooms and T-shaped qa'a of 'ajami. The five studied houses are dated by the 'ajami panels. The oldest is Ghazaleh 'ajami panels (1691AD/1102AH) then Kuba (1718AD/ 1130AH), Zamria in (1733AD/1145AH), Ajek-pash in (1757AD/1171AH), and finally Basil in (1772AD/1186AH). Ghazaleh and Basil houses are only the houses with T-shaped qa'a (the qa'a with three tazar).

Ghazaleh house is the only one with bath. The major styles of the 'ajami in the five houses are Hatayi, Rumi, Saz and şukufe which were influenced by the Ottoman art. Also, the geometrical designs found on the ceilings and shutters. Some of the 'ajami motifs did not originate in Syria but came to the Middle East via the Silk Road from Asia (Hatayi, Rumi, Saz) and Europe (şukufe). The Ottoman adopted, developed, and used some motifs which came from Europe. Ottoman art and architecture were also directly impacted by Rococo and Baroque styles from Europe.

The Ottomans synthesised all the previous skills and knowledge of craftsmen and artists from the Islamic world and other cultures. Whether the owner was Muslim or Christian, there are no big differences in the design or the decorations, especially in the houses studied above.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 'ajami panels were destroyed in Zamria houses and stolen from Ghazaleh, Ajek-Pash, and Kube Houses. The efforts to restore and renovate cannot succeed unless the fighting stops. However, some efforts have been made even in dangerous situations. In the meantime, a plan for restoration and renovation can be prepared. This requires doing the following:

- i. Accurately monitoring all the physical, social, and economic damages to estimate the cost of restoration and renovation.
- ii. Using the digital technology to document the physical damages in the houses such as 3D scanning, drones, and satellite.
- iii. Determining who will finance this project and how much funding will be needed
- iv. Finding competent consultants and experts who will participate.
- v. Learning from the previous local and global experiences.

CONCLUSION

This study is one of the very few studies which have investigated Aleppine 'ajami, particularly, those that have been eroded and in some cases have been destroyed, especially in the last three years

during Syria's internal war. These 'ajami panels with the motifs not only show the owner's aesthetic taste but represent the evolution of Islamic art and architecture during the Ottoman rule in Syria. The documentation of the houses in this paper can be helpful to restore the damaged houses.

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