

Book Review

BENGHAZI BARRACK-BUILDING 1890–2020: A STUDY IN HISTORY AND ARCHITECTURE OF QASR AL-BERKA (in Arabic)

By Jumma A. Kashbour. *Eusesperides for Publication and Advertisement, Benghazi, 2022. ISBN 9789959 905055, pp. 392, 111 black-and-white photographs, 28 maps, 8 drawings, plans and elevations. Distribution for free (paperback)*

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The Ottomans took Tripoli from the Knights of Malta in 1551. This notionally brought Cyrenaica under their rule, but had little practical effect until 1638 when a military expedition was sent to take control of the province and a small castle was erected in Benghazi, then a relatively minor port and settlement built on the ruins of ancient Berenice. From this time onwards, Cyrenaica was ruled from Tripoli, principally by the Karamanlis (1711 to 1835) and then by direct Ottoman rule until the Italian invasion of 1911. The fascinating architecture of the Benghazi barrack-building has often been neglected in English-language academic literature. This book, written in Arabic, stands as a notable contribution to the research on this subject. The building is known as Qasr al-Berka or qishlat 'kışla' al-Berka (a Turkish word for barracks). Work on the main building started about 1890 by Rashid Pasha (1889–93) and was finished by his successor, Thaer Pasha, in 1895. It is a huge U-shaped structure of 220 × 1555 m, making it a unique monument of great historical and cultural importance.

The book is organized into two parts. Part 1 aims to reconstruct the overall history of the construction of the barrack-building during the Ottoman era and consists of two chapters. Chapter 1 is dedicated to the history of the barrack-building and is divided into six sections. The first (27–30) provides an overview of the building's geographic and topographic setting and the reasons that led the Ottomans to choose this part of the city of Benghazi for the site of the barracks. The following section (30–44) examines the motivations for establishing such a building, along with what was already pointed out on the early date of its establishment and the rulers during whose reign the construction work was established and completed. Section 3 (44–50) reviews the date of construction of the building, while section 4 (50–60) gives information on the individuals involved in the building work, from Rashid Pasha to Thaer Pasha. Section 5 (60–65) offers an evaluation of previous research on the construction phases. The final section (65–70) addresses the financing of the construction of this enormous building, which is considered to be the largest urban project undertaken by the Ottomans in Libya.

Chapter 2 consists of five sections and is devoted to presenting the role that this building played throughout its history, starting in the late Ottoman era (section 1: 71–80), through the period of Italian occupation (section 2: 81–99) and concluding with the period of British administration (section 3: 100–12). A fourth section (113–21) summarizes the building's history during the monarchy, ending with the post-1969 era. In addition, it provides

further details about several historical events that the building witnessed, with more information about its use following a change in its name. This chapter concludes with the history of the barrack-building (122–32) after it was no longer used for military purposes and was being considered as a potential site for a museum.

Part 2 is divided into three chapters. It delves into the architecture of the barrack-building and forms the core of the book, analysing its components in detail, describing the layout of the complex and explaining the different structural units. It is noteworthy that a section of the east wing recently collapsed, exposing the building to numerous threats and risks that may lead to its eventual destruction. The author's architectural analysis of the barracks is based on a series of field investigations that commenced in 1994 and is supported by old photographs and plans obtained from various sources. In describing the plan of this majestic building and analysing its architecture, the author divides it into six sections, labelled A to F, across its three levels of basement, ground and first floor. The comprehensive descriptions include measurements of internal divisions and details of the inner and outer façades. The building is complex, with numerous construction phases commencing in the late Ottoman era, followed by additions and modifications during Italian rule and British administration, culminating in the post-independence period.

Chapter 1 is further divided into three sections. Section 1 comprises three sub-sections, with the first (140–60) providing a detailed description of the front elevation on the north side that contains the main portal. The second (161–93) describes the eastern and western wings, with the basement portions belonging to the late Ottoman period and completed later during Italian occupation. The third sub-section is dedicated to the most significant annexes of the barracks (194–217), namely the mosque, the perimeter wall (214–16) and the military hospital (216–17). Nothing remains of the mosque, and information about its date, plan and architecture is scarce. The mosque was situated in the middle of the south side of the barracks between the southern ends of the west and east wings. Relying on a small collection of old photographs and some trial trenches that were opened on the site, the author has successfully reconstructed its minaret, ground plan and architectural layout. The mosque was covered with a gabled roof, a distinctive architectural feature previously unattested anywhere else in Libya. The mosque was probably built at the same time as the main barrack-building and underwent multiple phases of alteration. Part of the mosque was severely damaged by a bomb in 1911 and was later reconstructed

and repurposed into a bakery. The cone of its minaret was removed to allow the minaret to serve as an observation tower for examining wind forecasts. During World War II, the British army used the mosque inappropriately as a wine cellar. In 1959, the mosque underwent extensive renovation to serve again its original purpose as a place of worship, only to be eventually demolished in 1989.

Chapter 2 (221–63) gives a descriptive and analytical study of the building's architectural and structural elements, including walls, columns, timber posts and joists, as well as segmental and semi-circular arches, floors and roofing. It also provides information about façades, entrances and windows, along with their specifications and typologies. Additionally, this chapter gives details of the defensive installations and the rainwater drainage system.

Chapter 3 (267–93) examines the style of the masonry and is divided into three sections, each covering different aspects of the building. The first section (267–75) examines the Ottoman building style, which was largely influenced by modern European architecture while also reflecting some local influences. The second section (276–88) presents a comparative study of the building with similar barracks from different parts of the Ottoman empire; while there are similarities and differences, the Benghazi barrack-building stands out as one of the largest. The third section (289–93) offers an architectural overview and evaluation of the building from both technical and architectural perspectives.

Finally, the book draws together the most important features of the author's findings. It also offers a list of sources and references, including a collection of historical manuscripts,

correspondences, newspaper reports, plans and several old and modern photographs illustrating the barracks in its various stages of use. In this work, the author has successfully untangled the various construction phases of the building. Epigraphic and architectural evidence suggests that the entire plan of the barrack-building was laid out during Ottoman rule and then completed in the early days of the Italian occupation. This contradicts the previously held belief that the east and west wings were solely the work of the Italians.

This book serves as a valuable resource for those interested in Ottoman architecture. I found the documentation of this significant building particularly intriguing, providing a refreshing perspective compared with academic research that is often dominated by Classical archaeology. While Kashbour intends his book for archaeologists, it is also a valuable resource for historians, researchers in Libyan heritage and members of the general public interested in the history of the city of Benghazi. Throughout these pages, readers can uncover a wealth of information. Plans, sections, elevations and drawings (though not with accompanying scales) all bear witness to the diligence of the author, providing a valuable addition to the fundamental record of Libya's heritage. The language is flawless and the book is well-illustrated throughout. While many questions remain open for further study of the barracks and its environs, this research is groundbreaking, establishing a solid and outstanding scientific foundation for future investigation. It represents a major contribution to the field of Ottoman civilization, serving as a rich source of information for scholars and providing important datasets for discussion, benefiting both local and cross-regional studies.