

# Islamic Architecture through Western Eyes



# Islamic Architecture through Western Eyes

*Volume 1*  
*Spain, Turkey, India and Persia*

*By*

Michael Greenhalgh



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Cover illustration: Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India: the Chini Ka Rauza, or Tomb of Afzai Khan Shirazi, Prime Minister to Shah Jahan. Built 1635, and seen here in a print of 1844 by William Henry Sleeman, a British administrator; at that date, a lieutenant-colonel in the Bengal Army, and later a major-general.

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## Preface for the Three Volumes

*Islamic Architecture through Western Eyes* offers a commented anthology of western descriptions of Islamic buildings, with the accounts for each structure arranged in chronological order. The majority are from the seventeenth century through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as travel from the West became easier, more popular, and cheaper, thanks to viable roads and then steamships and railways. The anthology ends about the time of the First World War, which changed forever most of the countries it covers.

The anthology will appear in three volumes, each volume independent of the other two, and each with its own complete bibliography. Each will offer often lengthy accounts of the studied buildings, referenced in the printed book as brief notes (author, date, page) at the end of each chapter, and in full <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.21229334>. [#Exact URLs for successive volumes to be added later]. These source notes will total up to some three hundred thousand words for each volume. There follows a tasting list of the contents of each volume.

**Volume 1: Spain, Turkey, India and Persia**, the book you are now reading, examines the more northern latitudes, beginning with Iberia, Islamic for some eight hundred years from the Umayyad Conquest of 711. In Córdoba, conquered by Ferdinand II of Castile in 1236, the Mezquita immediately became a church. The whole peninsula became Christian after the fall of the Nasrid Kingdom of Granada in 1492, when the Alhambra at Granada became the Court of Ferdinand and Isabella. We shall examine why, apart from these stars, so few Islamic buildings survive throughout the peninsula. Our attention then moves to Constantinople, as did that of western states who sent ambassadors to the Ottoman Empire (settled there in 1453), where they are the source of much information on that city's buildings. A note on Greece, in Ottoman hands until 1829, helps clarify how the Ottomans dealt with the antique, especially its marble, as do a multitude of accounts of travel into the large expanses of Asia Minor. The volume ends with a brief survey from Arabia to Persia and British India, offering accounts by traders, politicians, and diplomats, many of whom journeyed through Turkey to get there. Each of these countries deserves its own volume, and perhaps the notes here will inspire full accounts.

**Volume 2: Syria, Egypt and North Africa** will examine southerly latitudes, namely the Mediterranean from Syria and the Holy Land, Lebanon, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. Jerusalem, much visited by pilgrims of three faiths, made its money from shepherding them (often with entrance fees) through what were now Muslim, not Christian buildings; Jews could face charges to pray at the Temple Wall, Christians to baptise in the Jordan.

Damascus attracted attention for its Umayyad Mosque, which could have been as difficult to access as the late seventh century Dome of the Rock itself. Easier to visit were the mosques and tombs of Cairo, which boasts the finest collection of Islamic architecture anywhere in the world. Selim I conquered the Mamluk Sultanate in 1517, signalling the end of Cairo's years of architectural glory. This is because the heavy Ottoman hand eventually nurtured a version of modernity for which trade imports and finance, both from the West, were the main motors. In North Africa, mosques were (and remain) forbidden to non-Muslims (except for Algeria and Tunisia when they were under French control), and hence our travellers had to resort to third party accounts. Morocco was to remain independent, its architecture safe from foreign hands. Not so in Algeria or (later) Tunisia where, although many monuments survived and indeed were assiduously restored (as in Cairo), French hegemony – westernised modernisation again – destroyed many Islamic buildings and town layouts.

*Volume 3: Palaces around the Mediterranean* studies only civil architecture. We know of many early and prestigious palace complexes (Samarra, Konya), but have no descriptions until Topkapi Sarayı in Constantinople was visited by ambassadors and their secretaries, who reckoned assessing imperial strength in part by what they saw there. Palaces proliferated (with a veritable rash of them in Constantinople) because, in contradistinction to the attitude in the West, where some survived for centuries (Louvre, Buckingham Palace, Karlsruhe) Islamic rulers were generally averse to the continuing occupation of earlier structures. Hence, most of the palaces we deal with in this volume are late constructions, dating from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, all rich in fittings and ornaments if not (to western eyes) in architectural form. In Damascus, some sumptuous eighteenth and nineteenth century palaces were much visited and described at length, perhaps as compensation for the difficulties of entering the Umayyad Mosque. Remembering Ibn Khaldun's fourteenth century description of how such contents were moved around and their original structures were left to rot, we can understand why few earlier palaces have survived into our century. Travellers' descriptions often allow us to assess the impact of western trade, taste, and imports on their decoration and fittings, and to examine the encroachment of westernised modernism, responsible according to many commentators for the degradation of Islamic styles.



The full endnotes can be accessed via this QR code and the following dynamic link: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.21229334>.

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