

Islamic Architecture through Western Eyes

Islamic Architecture through Western Eyes

Volume 2
Syria, Egypt and North Africa

By

Michael Greenhalgh



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Cover illustration: Girault de Prangey (1804-92), a French draughtsman, travelled in the eastern Mediterranean from 1842 to 1845. This lithograph of the Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo appeared in his *Monuments arabes d'Egypte, de Syrie et d'Asie Mineure, dessinés et mesurés de 1842 à 1848*, Paris 1846-55 (followed by more images in his *Monuments et paysages de l'Orient*, of 1851).

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Preface to 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 on Brill's website. 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, and Points East*, published in 2022, examines 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 short study of Greece (in Ottoman hands until 1829), in addition to a multitude of accounts of travel into the large expanses of Asia Minor, help clarify how the Ottomans dealt with the antique; especially its marble, so prominent in mosques and palaces. The volume ends with a brief survey of points east, from Arabia to Persia and British India, offering a few 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 at least one more volume.

Volume 11: *Syria, Egypt and North Africa*, the book you are now reading, studies 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 be baptised in the Jordan. Damascus attracted attention for its Umayyad Mosque, which could

at times be 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 mediaeval Islamic architecture anywhere in the world. Selim I conquered the Mameluke Sultanate in 1517, and this signalled the end of Cairo's architectural glory years. Why? Because the heavy Ottoman hand eventually nurtured a version of architectural and decorative modernity for which trade and finance, both imports from the West, were the main motors. In North Africa, mosques were (and remain) forbidden to non-Muslims (except for when Algeria and Tunisia were under French control), and hence our travellers usually 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 III: Palaces around the Mediterranean, will deal only with civil architecture. We know of many early and prestigious palace complexes (Samarra, Konya), but have no descriptions by westerners until Topkapi Sarayi in Constantinople was visited, often by ambassadors and their secretaries, who assessed imperial strength in part by what they saw there. New palaces proliferated throughout areas under Ottoman control because, in contradistinction to the attitude in the West, where some survived for centuries (Louvre, Buckingham Palace, Karlsruhe), Islamic rulers were generally averse to occupying existing structures, which often meant their dilapidation, stripping and eventual destruction. (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.) 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. Travellers' descriptions often allow us to assess the impact of Western trade, taste and imports on their decoration and fitments, and to examine the encroachment of westernised modernism, responsible according to many commentators for the degradation of Islamic styles. There were plenty of palaces for our authors to describe, since palace building was a continuing passion for many potentates.



The full endnotes of volume 2 can be accessed via this QR code and the following dynamic link: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.24637806>.

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