

JONATHAN M. BLOOM

## CRESWELL AND THE ORIGINS OF THE MINARET

K. A. C. Creswell's articles on the origin and the development of the minaret, which appeared in 1926, were an early product of his characteristic method of arranging buildings and texts in precise chronological order to understand the evolution of a building type.<sup>1</sup> He was brought to write about the minaret because the subject had been surrounded by decades of misunderstanding and confusion.<sup>2</sup>

Creswell believed that the functional core of the minaret was the adhan, or call to prayer. The first Muslims came to pray without any preliminary call, but "having heard that the Jews used a horn and the Christians a naqqus or clapper, they wanted something equivalent for their own use."<sup>3</sup> One of the Prophet's Companions suggested using the human voice, and after some deliberation the Prophet agreed and ordered his herald to call the people to prayer. The earliest mosques lacked minarets, for at first, the adhan was chanted from city walls or from the roofs of mosques or other buildings.

The idea of a minaret first arose under the Umayyad dynasty in Syria, where Muslims first came in contact with Syrian church towers, which they adopted and spread throughout the lands they conquered. In 673, four *sawāmi'* (sg. *sawma'a*) were erected on the roof of the mosque in Fustat by the Umayyad governor of Egypt. Creswell identified them as the first minarets built as such in Islam. As the Umayyad caliphs ruled from Damascus, where the mosque retained four squat corner towers from the pre-Islamic temple enclosure, Creswell presumed the Fustat deed was inspired by a Damascene precedent, for he believed that the muezzins there must have used the four towers left over from the earlier temple enclosure. His hypothesis was apparently confirmed by the Umayyad construction of four corner towers at the mosque of Medina during their renovation of the building in the first decade of the eighth century. Creswell believed that these early minarets were called *sawma'a* because they were likened to the small square cells used by the Christian monks of Syria. Square minarets followed Umayyad expansion into North Africa and Spain, where minarets continued to be square towers known as *sawma'a* throughout medieval times.

Coming in contact with other tower traditions, Islam

developed regional minaret types. In Egypt and Syria, Creswell derived a new theory for the formal development of the Mamluk minaret, determining that the typical minaret had a square shaft supporting a finial dome resting on an octagon, each story separated by stalactite cornices. Over time, the square shaft became increasingly elongated and the dome increasingly elaborate. Eventually, the square shaft atrophied to leave octagonal minarets surmounted by small lanterns, which became popular under the influence of the octagonal minarets that were relatively common in the eastern lands of Islam in the period before the Mongol conquest. Creswell's conclusion is worth repeating: "By merely arranging our material in strict chronological order, we are brought to a conclusion . . . that the octagonal type of minaret came from Syria to Egypt and that in its evolution the Pharos played no part."<sup>4</sup> That the ninth-century helicoidal minarets of Samarra and of the mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo derived from ziggurats was self-evident. Had Creswell's interests carried him beyond the tenth century in the eastern Islamic world, he would have undoubtedly related the circular minarets of Iran to ancient or Indian sources and the slender minarets of Ottoman architecture to Iranian precedents.

Over the following decades Creswell repeated his theories and amplified his conclusions in *Early Muslim Architecture* and *The Muslim Architecture of Egypt*.<sup>5</sup> His meticulous method and magisterial voice ensured that his statements would be widely accepted. Even the discoveries of recent decades have brought only minor modifications.<sup>6</sup> For example, Creswell believed the freestanding tower at Qasr al-Hayr East to be the "third oldest existing minaret in Islam," but excavation of the site revealed the tower to date no earlier than the thirteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Although Creswell included many Iranian and eastern Islamic minarets in his original articles, they were eliminated from further consideration in his later volumes by his increasing focus on Arab and Egyptian architecture. Most scholars dealing with the minaret in eastern Islamic lands realized that Creswell's work did not answer many of their questions; while some proposed alternative solutions, others tried,

with varying success, to reconcile their theories with Creswell's.<sup>8</sup>

Creswell's sober and logical investigation of the history of the minaret must be understood in the context of several decades of wild speculation about the origins and meaning of this most distinctive Islamic building type. Not surprisingly, classicists such as A. J. Butler and H. Thiersch had seen the origins of the minaret in either antique lighthouses, particularly the Pharos of Alexandria, or in commemorative columns.<sup>9</sup> Philologists, such as R. Hartmann and R. J. H. Gottheil found the origins of the minaret (Arabic *manāra*) in the use of fire (*nār*) signals by the ancient Semites, and they derived its form from the ziggurats of the ancient Near East.<sup>10</sup> The most farfetched hypotheses were those proposed by the art historians J. Strzygowski, E. Diez, and G. T. Rivoira. The first two likened minarets to Central Asian pillars of the universe and derived them from ancient Indo-Aryan practices, such as the pine trunks which the Nagas of the Himalayan valleys erected in front of their wooden temples to symbolize the deity and the maypole (*maibaum*) of the western Aryans.<sup>11</sup> Rivoira proposed that the characteristic Mamluk minaret derived from the "no less bizarre forms" found in Indian architecture of the eighth to thirteenth centuries.<sup>12</sup>

Creswell's explanation of the origin and development of the minaret must also be understood in terms of the contemporary understanding of Islam and Islamic architecture. Belief that the minaret was invented in the Umayyad period reaffirmed a concept of a monolithic Islam, whose normative institutions were introduced at a relatively early date. It also confirmed Creswell's belief that no significant architecture existed in Arabia before Islam to have had any appreciable impact on the course of Islamic architecture. Rather, the formative moment in Islamic architecture was in Umayyad Syria, particularly the construction of the Great Mosque of Damascus. There, Islamic architecture grew directly out of the late antique and early Christian architecture of Syria, and from there it radiated, like the power of the Umayyad Caliphate itself, over the lands of Islam. The minaret, like the mihrab and the minbar before it, was invented neither by the Prophet Muhammad nor by later Muslims, but was adopted from a pre-existing Christian tradition by Umayyad patrons. Although Creswell tended to favor Egypt, his scrupulous honesty prevented him from making it the source of the first minarets, for the four minarets of the mosque of 'Amr in Fustat clearly imitated those of the Great Mosque of Damascus, but he was able to show that the first minarets

*built as such in Islam* were for the mosque of 'Amr in Fustat, a minor victory.<sup>13</sup>

Creswell's apparently exhaustive history of the minaret nevertheless neglected several important questions. If the first mosques to have had minarets, such as the mosque of 'Amr at Fustat, had multiple minarets, why then did most later mosques, especially those of Abbasid times, which followed immediately thereafter, have only one? Why did some mosques, such as the Umayyad Mosque of Medina, have four minarets, while others, such as the contemporary mosque surrounding the Ka'ba in Mecca, had none? Was the number of minarets a mosque might have entirely arbitrary? Why did most early Fatimid mosques lack minarets, but why did the mosque of al-Hakim in Cairo have two?

Intrigued by these and other questions, I was led to reexamine the history and development of the minaret. My work has brought me to conclusions quite different from Creswell's, but I have been consistently impressed by Creswell's careful and logical analysis, which was conceptually based on the work of the "perfect friend and perfect scholar," the noted Swiss Arabist and epigrapher Max van Berchem.<sup>14</sup> Van Berchem himself had written about the minaret in his study of the Arabic inscriptions of Egypt.<sup>15</sup> He stated that in order to understand the minaret one had to analyze the problem's philological, functional, and formal components logically, rather than haphazardly as most earlier scholars had done. By accepting van Berchem's analysis, however, Creswell himself made three inadvertent assumptions about minarets, which, paradoxically, were also philological, functional, and formal.

Philologically, he and virtually all his contemporaries believed that the three Arabic terms used for towers attached to mosques — *manār(a)*, *mi'dhana*, and *sawma'a* — were and had always been synonyms. He believed that in any Arabic or Persian inscription or text, these terms meant "tower"; use of one or another indicated only geographical, not formal or functional, differences. Not an Arabist, Creswell had to rely on the help of his colleagues, and only Gaston Wiet, van Berchem's epigraphic heir, discreetly suggested a few years later that these words might not always have been synonymous.<sup>16</sup> Wiet was right: the three terms were used in different contexts and at different times to mean different things. *Manār(a)*, from which the word minaret is derived, usually meant sign, signpost, or marker. *Mi'dhana*, the place (or instrument) of the call to prayer, was initially used for the muezzin's shelter on the roof of a mosque, but never for a tower. *Sawma'a* originally referred to the

cell of a Christian monk, and the word was used in popular and literary discourse for a *mi'dhana*, but never in early epigraphy because it was too colloquial. Eventually these three words would all come to mean a tower attached to a mosque, but in the early centuries of Islam, they had specific and quite different meanings.

Creswell's reliance on others to read his primary sources also meant that he usually took the information his colleagues translated at face value. He was unable, unlike Jean Sauvaget, to ask how reliable a particular source might be or how correct or corrupt a chain of transmission was. Unraveling the early history of the minaret demands a degree of historiographic sophistication which Creswell did not claim to have because medieval authors had already reinterpreted and rewritten the history of the minaret in light of what it had become.

Creswell's functional assumption was that the history of the tower attached to a mosque was identical with the history of the call to prayer. Living as he did in Cairo, Creswell needed only to look about him and see muezzins calling the faithful to pray from slender towers attached to mosques, but, as anthropologists are quick to point out, modern practice does not necessarily explain the past. Simply calling any tower attached to a mosque a "minaret" predisposed him to believe that it had been built for the call to prayer. In truth, careful analysis of the data from the eighth and ninth centuries shows that the history of the tower attached to the mosque was independent of the history of the call to prayer. The call to prayer is nearly as old as Islam, but towers were not attached to mosques in the Umayyad period at all (apart from the exceptional case of the mosque of Medina), and they were not regularly attached to mosques until the ninth century. Furthermore, there is nothing to indicate that muezzins used these towers at all. Indeed, Shi'ites believed that the call to prayer should not be given from any place higher than the roof of the mosque, so that specifically Shi'ite mosques (e.g., those of the Isma'ili Fatimids) had no towers for the call to prayer.

Creswell's formal assumption was that the shape of minarets helped explain the origin and development of the type. The towers of the Damascus mosque were square, as were later Syrian towers and those in North Africa and Spain, so Creswell assumed that the first square minarets spread from Syria to North Africa and Spain. If the mosque tower did not appear until the ninth century, however, Syrian towers can have had no impact on North African or Spanish ones, and Cres-

well's neat evolutionary theory collapses. It is far more likely that the idea of attaching a tower to a mosque was quite separate from any notion of what form that tower should take and that each region of the Islamic world looked to its own tower traditions when called to build one. Only in specific instances, such as the clear imitation of the helicoidal towers of Samarra at the mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, did tower types travel long distances.

Creswell's method of arranging the evidence in chronological order was solid, if simplistic, for it assumed that the monumental, archaeological, and literary record was (or could be) complete. What we see, however, is not what there was, and every building that survives in fact or in some textual reference represents scores destroyed or ignored by history. Reliance on the record led Creswell to make lists of first occurrences wherever they might be and then connect them like the dots in a child's game, however unlikely the resulting image might prove. Ernst Herzfeld, his contemporary, had more imagination and a far firmer grasp on the problem: he, for example, understood the crucial role of Abbasid Baghdad in the formation of a common language of Islamic architecture despite the complete dearth of monuments and the unyielding ambiguity of the texts.<sup>17</sup> The survival of stone buildings in Syria led Creswell to overestimate the importance of the Umayyads for the history of the minaret, and the loss of brick ones in Arabia, Mesopotamia, and Iran led him to underestimate the importance of the Abbasids for it. Although Creswell knew that texts described the Abbasid renovations to the mosque surrounding the Ka'ba in Mecca, he was sublimely unconcerned with this building and any impact that it might have had on the development of Islamic architecture elsewhere.

Positive results from the reexamination of the origins and development of the minaret some sixty years after Creswell first published on the subject also suggest that it might be worthwhile to reexamine other "solved" subjects in Islamic architecture. Possible topics, suggested by a quick glance through Creswell's volumes, include such perennial chestnuts as the origins and development of the mihrab,<sup>18</sup> minbar, maqsura, and four-iwan plan. The intense investigations of recent decades suggest that few major monuments remain to be discovered in the way the fabulous minaret of Jam was found in a remote Afghan valley in the 1950's.<sup>19</sup> Rather, the major voyages of discovery will be in rereading and rethinking texts and reinterpreting the physical remains in their light. Any scholar embarking on such a voyage

will, however, rely heavily on Creswell's essential manuals of navigation for many years to come.

*Richmond, New Hampshire*

NOTES

1. This is a revised and refocused version of the paper presented in Oxford. Much of it is based on my book, *Minaret: Symbol of Islam* (Oxford, 1989), to which I refer the reader for a more complete discussion of many of the points raised.
2. K. A. C. Creswell, "The Evolution of the Minaret, with Special Reference to Egypt," *Burlington Magazine* 48 (1926): 134–40, 252–58, 290–98. This article seems to have been planned as a chapter of a projected History of the Muslim Architecture of Egypt written under the patronage of King Fuad I of Egypt. See R. W. Hamilton, "Keppel Archibald Cameron Creswell 1879–1974," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 60 (1974), 8, reprinted in this volume.
3. Creswell, "Evolution," p. 137.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 296.
5. Idem, *Early Muslim Architecture (EMA)*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1932–40); 2d. ed. of vol. 1 in 2 pts. (Oxford, 1969); idem, *The Muslim Architecture of Egypt*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1952–59).
6. E.g. Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven, 1973), esp. pp. 119–20; Ghazi Rajab Mohammad, "The Minaret and Its Relationship to the Mosque in Early Islam," Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh, 1964; A. B. M. Husain, *The Manara in Indo-Muslim Architecture* (Dhaka, 1970), and most recently, Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *The Minarets of Cairo* (Cairo, 1985).
7. *EMA* 1: 532, and Oleg Grabar et al., *City in the Desert*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 1: 108.
8. E.g., Antony Max Hutt, "The Development of the Minaret in Iran under the Saljuqs," M.Phil. diss., University of London, 1974.
9. A. J. Butler had seen a reconstruction based on literary sources of the Pharos of Alexandria that depicted its three stories, successively square, octagonal, and cylindrical, surmounted by a lantern, and later, as he wandered through the streets of Cairo, the three-storied form of the Cairene minaret seemed strangely familiar. See *Athenaeum*, November 20, 1880, p. 681, and Creswell, "Evolution," p. 252. Hermann Thiersch took the theory further in his *Pharos: Antike, Islam und Occident; ein Beitrag zur Architekturgeschichte* (Leipzig-Berlin, 1909). He derived only multistoried Mamluk minarets from the Pharos; cylindrical minarets were derived from the pillars of Stylite monks.
10. Richard Hartmann, "Manāra = Minaret," *Memnon* 3, 3 (February, 1910): 220–23; Richard Hartmann, "Zum Thema: Minaret und Leuchtturm," *Der Islam* 1 (1910): 388–91; Richard J. H. Gottheil, "The Origins and History of the Minaret," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 30 (1909–10): 132–54.
11. E.g., Josef Strzygowski, "Antike, Islam und Occident," *Neue Jahrbuch für das klassische Altertum* 23 (1909): 354–56; and Ernst Diez, *Churasanische Baudenkmäler* (Berlin, 1918). More recently, see Ernst Diez, "Die Sigestürme in Ghazna als Weltbilder," *Kunst des Orients*, 1 (1950): 37–44.
12. G. T. Rivoira, *Moslem Architecture* (Oxford, 1918), p. 164.
13. Creswell, *EMA* 1, 1: 60.
14. K. A. C. Creswell *A Bibliography of the Architecture, Arts and Crafts of Islam* (Cairo, 1961), dedication.
15. Max van Berchem, *Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum, 1ère partie: Egypte* (Paris, 1894–1903), p. 481.
16. Gaston Wiet, *Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum. 1ère Partie: Egypte*, vol. 2 (Cairo, 1929–30), pp. 4–5.
17. "To underrate Baghdad is to underrate Rome" (Ernst Herzfeld, "Damascus: Studies in Architecture," *Ars Islamica* 9 [1942]: 40).
18. Notwithstanding Estelle Whelan, "The Origins of the *Mihrāb Mujawwaf*: A Reinterpretation," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 18 (1986): 205–23; and Alexandre Papadopoulos, ed., *Le Mihrab dans l'architecture et la religion musulmanes* (Leiden, 1988).
19. André Maricq and Gaston Wiet, *Le Minaret de Djem: La Découverte de la capitale des sultans ghoris XIIe–XIIIe siècles*, Mémoires de la Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan, 16 (Paris, 1959).