Chapter XIII

A Preliminary Note on two Eighteenth-century Representations of Mecca and Medina*

For better or for worse, depending on one's own ideological bent, much of our perception of the world and its history was shaped during the eighteenth century. It is during this century that the Viennese architect Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach (1656–1723) published his *Entwurf einer historischen Architektur in Abbildung unterschiedener berühmten Gebäude des Alterthums und fremder Völker*, freely translated as "Project for a History of Architecture through Pictures of Various Important Buildings from Antiquity and Foreign People."[1] This "project" for a history of architecture is acknowledged as the first one of its kind to claim some sort of universal coverage.[2] It has practically no text, except for some lengthy captions under high-quality line drawings or next to them. The book consists of several parts and begins, of course, with the reconstruction of Solomon's Temple most fashionable in those times, and continues with the ancient Near East (Egypt, Persia, Syria), Greece and Rome, as well as with an image of Stonehenge, which was uncommon at that time. It ends with several of the author's own projects, and with a fascinating sequence of representations of antique vases and other containers, beginning with the "sea" of Solomon's Temple and including real or imaginative Egyptian vases, which are indirectly related to a long tradition of funerary urns.

Between the unoriginal historical scheme from Solomon and ancient Egypt to Rome and the self-promoting last section, there are thirteen architectural drawings from "foreign" lands, a striking novelty in the history of architecture. Four depict Far Eastern architectural ensembles, but nine portray Islamic architecture. The latter include an Ottoman bath in Budapest

---

* First published in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, vol. 25 (2001), pp. 268–74.
[1] The first edition was published shortly before his death in 1721, and the second, posthumous edition appeared in 1725. Both early editions were published in Vienna; they contain extensive captions in German and French. An English version was printed in London in 1730. For a biography of Fischer von Erlach and a bibliographical guide, see Jane Turner, ed., *The Dictionary of Art* (London, 1996).
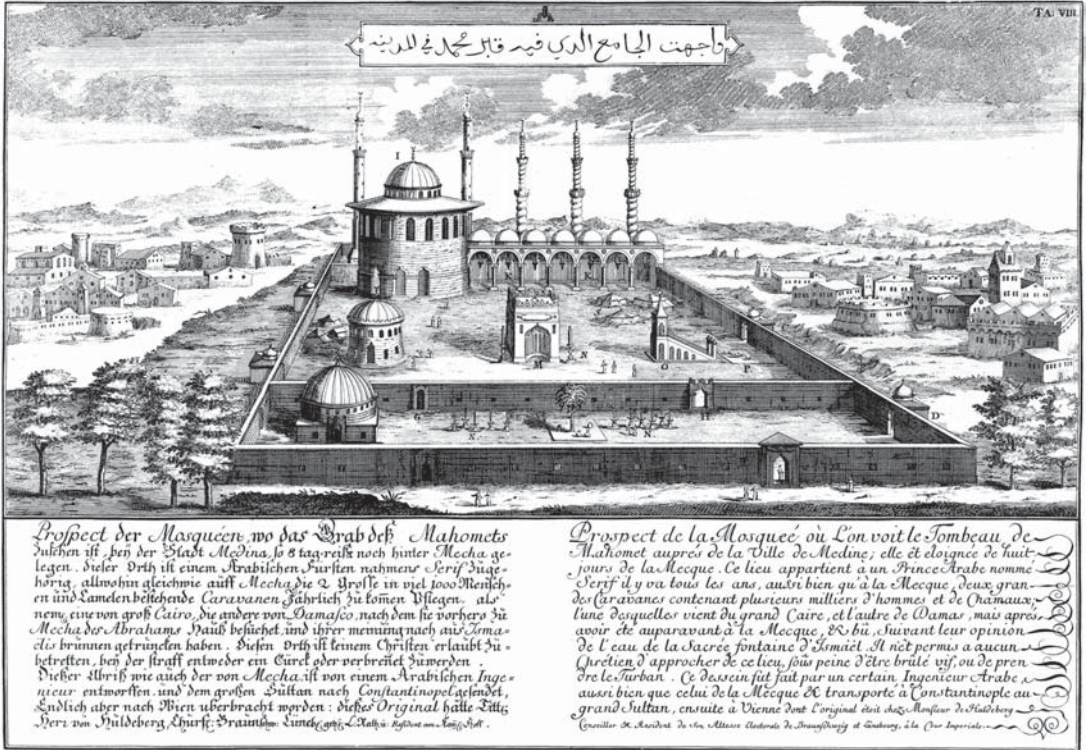[2] Joseph Ryckwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), pp. 130–31.

1   Mecca

(plan and elevation), a mosque in Hungary, the tomb of Orkhan in Bursa (a rather fanciful drawing), the Süleymaniye and Sultan Ahmet complexes in Istanbul (quite accurate in general impression), and [269] the Safavid *meydan-i Shah* and the Allaverdi bridge in Isfahan. Fischer's sources for all these buildings have been fairly certainly established as illustrated accounts by recent travelers to Istanbul and to Iran.[3]

There is nothing particularly unusual or surprising about these drawings, which are mixed with a rendering of Hagia Sophia and one of the stunning Byzantine underground cisterns. The connections between the Habsburg and Ottoman empires were numerous, if not always friendly, and various documents which reveal what they knew about each other are extant.[4] Similarly, Isfahan had been depicted and drawings were made of its main monuments by French, Italian and Dutch travelers in the seventeenth century.

---

[3]   U. Illig, *J.B. Fischer von Erlach, Ausstellung* (Graz, 1956–7) and G. Kunoth, *Die Historische Architektur Fischers von Erlach* (Düsseldorf, 1956), pp. 197–9. On the whole I have been struck, after a cursory search, by the paucity of scholarly discussions on Fischer's book as opposed to his architecture.

[4]   For the latest example concentrating on the arts, see Wien, Österreich Nationalbibliothek, *Österreich und die Osmanen* (Vienna, 1983) and Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, *Im Lichte des Halbmonds: das Abendland und der türkische Orient* (Dresden, 1995); both contain extensive bibliographies.

Prospect der Mosqueen wo das Grab des Mahomets

Prospect de la Mosquée où l'on voit le Tombeau de Mahomet auprès de la Ville de Medine

Their accounts were popular among the general public, as were the Jesuit accounts of China and a French account of recently visited Siam/Thailand, all of which appear in Fischer's book. These accounts were adapted to his purposes by illustrating varieties of architectural expressions found all over the world.

2   Medina

The book's originality lies, however, in the presence of two drawings of places that were not accessible to European travelers and diplomats, or even to adventurers as far as we know. These are representations of the Muslim sanctuaries of Mecca (Fig. 1) and Medina (Fig. 2). To my knowledge, these are the two earliest renditions of the sanctuaries included in a European source. I believe that they also represent the first drawings of those holy places exhibiting the very special bird's-eye view developed since the Renaissance (on the basis of classical Roman models), which allows for the immediate visual comprehension of a large space. Both drawings pose a number of problems which, at this stage of research, can only be outlined. The purpose of these remarks is therefore simply to draw attention to these two images and, it is hoped, to initiate further research into their origins.

There are, of course, many earlier representations of the *haram* in Mecca. There are partial two-dimensional drawings of parts of the sanctuary in some of the medieval manuscripts of al-Azraqi's *Akhbar Makkah*. Hundreds of Ottoman tiles exist with images of the Ka'ba and of its immediate

surroundings.⁵ Illustrations of the sad life of Majnun or of the Prophet's Ascension (*mi'raj*), as well as more popular accounts of the lives of prophets or divination books of all sorts, also contain representations [270] of the Ka'ba, alone or in its surroundings.⁶ The earliest representation known to me is on a steatite plaque in the Iraq National Museum in Baghdad, dated from 486/1093 or 488/1095.⁷ All of these representations from the Islamic world itself are standardized evocations of an otherwise known space through placing two-dimensional (at times three-dimensional for the Ka'ba) sketches of constructions associated with that space in an order which makes them all recognizable. They are rendered without much concern for the accuracy of their actual location. The semi-circular *hijr*, the various *mihrabs*, the *maqam Ibrahim*, and the surrounding porticoes are usually included, at times with identifying labels, but they are not shown in the appropriate scale, individually or in relation to each other.

Fischer von Erlach did something quite different. He created a large enclosure seen in perspective within an urban context. Inside, most of the traditional and expected structures are represented (except for the Zamzam well, unless it is one of his unidentified buildings). Instead of labeling them, he identifies them by letters and then provides a key with captions on another page. The interpretation of these captions still requires much investigation, since many letters are defined as "unidentified in the original" (I shall return to what this "original" may have been). There is a building called "tomb of the four prophets of Muhammad," which reflects, I suspect, a confusion with the four schools of jurisprudence, each one of which had a building in the *haram.* Just outside the enclosure, a large octagonal building is identified as "the mosque where one prays before entering the holy place." It could have been a *masjid* of some sort, but may also have been misunderstood as the place for ablutions. A *madrasa* sponsored by Suleyman the Magnificent is depicted to the right of the main enclosure.

It should also be noted that the sanctuary is located in an urban area consisting of independent building ensembles with little cupolas and, at times, minarets. Such houses are occasionally found in Persian miniatures, but usually without domes and minarets. It is as though the designer of Fischer's drawing wanted to provide Mecca with an "Oriental" flavor. In fact, his urban clusters recall those of Matrakçi's celebrated illustrated account of Suleyman's trip to the eastern provinces of the empire.⁸ The mound to the left of the sanctuary is strikingly similar to the representation of Aleppo in that manuscript. The inscription on the drawing reads: *wajihat bayt Ibrahim*

⁵   K. Erdmann, "Ka'bah-Fliesen," *Ars Orientalis*, 3 (1959), pp. 192–7.
⁶   The latest book on this subject is R. Milstein, K. Rührdanz and B. Schmitz, *Illustrated Manuscripts of the Qisas al-anbiyd'* (Costa Mesa, 1999).
⁷   V. Strike, "A Ka'bah Picture in the Iraq Museum," *Sumer*, 32 (1976), pp. 195–201.
⁸   Nasuhu's-Silahi (Matrakçi), *Beyan-i menazil-i sefer-i 'iraqeyn-i Sultan Suleyman Han*, ed. Huseyin G. Yurdaydin (Ankara, 1976).

fi madinat Makka, "façade of the house of Abraham in the town of Mecca."
It is written in a rather [271] awkward script which stands in contrast to the
fancy frame in which it is found. I shall return to this shortly.

On the whole, while a great deal was unclear to Fischer von Erlach
regarding the functions of the various parts of the sanctuary, and while some
of his explanations are misleading or incorrect, the overall picture of the
Meccan sanctuary is a reasonable approximation of the place. The sources
for most of its elements can probably be found in existing Ottoman images
of the holy place to which an "Oriental" city would have been added. It may
also have been inspired by Ottoman sources, although images provided by
western travelers may account for some of the exotic aura.

Matters are quite different when one turns to the representation of the
mosque of Medina, which had been rebuilt by 1487 under the rule of the
Mamluk Sultan Qaytbay. It was then, as it has been since the time of al-
Walid (AD 705–15) until today, a large hypostyle building, with, off center, a
wider nave leading to the early *mihrab* and, not far from it, a separate
construction, still within the confines of the mosque, enclosing the tomb of
the Prophet. A two-dimensional sketch of the building exists, dated from
between 1329 and 1423, which also depicts a hypostyle building.[9] However,
this is not what Fischer represents. There is indeed a large rectangular
enclosure divided into two unequal parts. The smaller one contains a few
small buildings and serves primarily to identify two gates, one of which is
permanently closed. It also contains a curious platform framed by candelabra.
The large area consists mostly of open space with three large buildings
identified or identifiable as a *minbar*, a large building framed by two enormous
candelabras (M on the plan), several buildings (N) with unknown purposes,
and a number of tents. In the back an enormous circular mausoleum is set
in front of an arcade preceding a row of domes and five minarets set on the
back wall. The mausoleum's size is in total contradiction to what actually
was (and still is) the case in Medina, and it resembles the only slightly less
fanciful depiction of Orkhan's mausoleum in Bursa, which also appears in
Fischer's book. The source of inspiration for both buildings requires further
investigation.

The caption for the drawing is once again written in a hesitant script
which reads as follows: *wajihat al-jami' alladhi fihi qabr Muhammad fi al-
Madina,* "Façade of the mosque in which [is found] the tomb of Muhammad
in Medina." The inscription was obviously not composed by a Muslim, nor
by anyone familiar with the common Muslim discourse on the Prophet. The
buildings around the mosque are arranged in clusters, like those in the
representation of Mecca, but there is not a single [272] orientalizing feature,

---

9   The classic study on the mosque is still J. Sauvaget's *La Mosquée Omeyyade de Médine*
     (Paris, 1947). Modifications and alternate theories developed since then deal primarily
     with the earliest mosque and are not of concern to our present topic.

and many of them look like standard signs of urban space found in the background of Christian scenes in northern European paintings. In contrast to the image of Mecca, that of Medina bears almost no relationship to the actual building, which has existed there since the eighth century.

One last bit of information is important before I propose an explanation for these two drawings. Fischer von Erlach wrote in one of his captions (Fig. 2) that he copied drawings in the possession of one Count von Huldenberg from Braunschweig, who was a British ambassador in Vienna, and who had acquired these drawings from an "Arab engineer" in Istanbul. Preliminary investigations in Germany and Austria failed to unearth these original drawings.[10] It is possible that they can be found in an Ottoman archive, since the "Arab engineer" would have gone to the Holy Places on behalf of some Ottoman government authority, most probably the army. But while such a source is reasonable for the representation of Mecca, it is not so for that of Medina. The representation of the mosque of Medina is a fanciful construction, unrelated to the mosque of that time. Yet the discrepancy between the mosque and this representation may be explained if the latter was not based on visual sources, but rather on written or oral accounts of early Islamic history. For the shape and interior arrangement of the mosque correspond best to the image one could draw upon hearing or reading the hallowed story of the original house of the Prophet. It consisted of a large open space used for prayers and meetings. There were tents, often used before the house was built, and rooms to the side, in one of which the Prophet was buried. There were indeed five minarets in the mosque in Ottoman times, instead of the four of the Umayyad building, but their absurd location can be explained as an attempt to transform something one had heard or read about into an image, without understanding it.

While further details need to be worked out through a survey of the sources which might have been available to an obscure "engineer" in Istanbul or to a Viennese architect, the hypothesis I am putting forward is that whoever produced the first drawing of the mosque in Medina translated information received orally or from one or more written sources into an image. For the representation of Mecca, on the other hand, we can assume the existence of a visual model made by Muslims for Muslim purposes, with many details that could not be understood by a non-Muslim ignorant of Arabic. Therefore, many features are left unexplained. There are hardly any in the picture of the Medinese sanctuary; once again this suggests that it was a novelty of Fischer's source.

My last remark deals with the Arabic captions or titles given to these two drawings, and it also applies to the captions found with other [273] pictures from Muslim lands. The script is awkward and certainly not befitting the

---

10   Kunoth, *Die Historische Architektur*, pp. 103 ff.

formal frames in which it appears. This can best be explained as Fischer von Erlach's (or his immediate and acknowledged model von Huldenberg's) own copy of something written in a language he did not understand. But the original Arabic is also rather strange, if perfectly clear and grammatical. No Muslim would make a reference to the Prophet without the *tasliya*, or identify the Medinese sanctuary as "the mosque in which the Prophet's tomb is located." The word *wajiha* does mean "façade" today, but I am not certain that this meaning was already in use in the seventeenth century. It translates the German "Prospekt" meaning "extended view," a kind of drawing which may not have had an Arabic equivalent. My own hypothesis is that these captions were made in Vienna, possibly by a Christian Arab[11] upon the request of Fischer von Erlach. The latter would have spelled out what he wanted to be translated; the author sought to provide a proper "Oriental" flavor for the illustrations of the architecture of "foreign" people, or those whom we would call today the "Other."

We can thus propose the following scenario for the creation of these two drawings. In his search for universal coverage, designed to fit his own architecture into a grand historical scheme, Fischer von Erlach discovered or stumbled upon a drawing of the Meccan sanctuary prepared for some purpose within the Ottoman empire and acquired by von Huldenberg, a diplomat active in gathering documents from foreign lands for his own collection, or for deposition in state archives and libraries. Either von Huldenberg himself or Fischer von Erlach discovered that Mecca is paired with Medina as a second, almost equally holy, Muslim sanctuary in Arabia, to which non-Muslims had no access. Failing to find a visual source for it, especially the sort of bird's-eye view which was available for Mecca and relatively easy to translate into European systems of representation, one of our heroes sought information about this second city. They may even have commissioned a Christian or a Jew from the Ottoman empire to find this information. Whoever did so was well versed in the history of early Islam, which was for a long time far more readily available than contemporary or even late medieval accounts. This individual came up with the sort of information that he himself, or someone else in Istanbul or in Vienna, transformed into the absurd drawing which we now possess. Fischer von Erlach appropriated it, added a standard "European" city to it instead of adapting the "Oriental" one he (or, more likely, his source) had provided for Mecca, and wrote captions and detailed explanations for whatever he understood.

This is probably only one of several possible scenarios which explain [274] these two unusual drawings. Further investigations, especially in the Ottoman archives, may clarify some of the problems they pose; likewise,

---

[11]   Of course, it could also have been an Armenian, a Greek, or a Jew, or anyone familiar with Arabic without necessarily writing it well.

alternate explanations for many of their details are also possible. In the meantime, these drawings are left as an extraordinary document, possibly the earliest instance of trying to integrate Islamic architecture into the history of world architecture. But it is also a curious document in the long history of how images and language operate between different cultural strata, and how curiosity and a thirst for knowledge can be mixed with the search for the "exotic." Thanks to the travelers of the latter part of the eighteenth century, such as Niebuhr, Napoleon's expedition to Egypt, and numerous translations of "Oriental" religious, historical and literary texts, the amount of new and accurate information grew enormously. But it will take another century or more to find attempts to introduce a true history of world architecture, such as those of Perrot and Chipiez or Choisy. It is difficult to argue that any of them have succeeded in making a lasting impact on art historians. Ultimately, these drawings may in fact be more interesting as documents which illustrate the ways in which texts affected the making of images, and for revealing the fascinating ways in which European and Islamic cultures intersected with each other.