

THE MINARET

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EDINBURGH
University Press

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Preface

This book, originally published by Oxford University Press for the Board of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford in 1989 as volume VII in *Oxford Studies in Islamic Art*, argued that the minaret—"a slender lofty tower attached to a mosque and surrounded by one or more projecting balconies from which the faithful are summoned to prayer by the muezzin"—was invented, not as previously had been believed early in the first century of Islam, but at the end of its second century. It argued that it was not an invention of Umayyad Syria but of Abbasid Mesopotamia. Finally, and most controversially, it argued that the invention of the minaret originally had little—if anything—to do with the call to prayer. Towers appear to have been an optional feature of mosques until the eleventh century when new players in Islamic societies found the mosque tower to be a gratifyingly visible manifestation of their piety. But by then the tower's original purpose as a marker of the congregational mosque had been entirely supplanted by a more generic meaning as a universal symbol of the presence of Islam.

In the late 1970s I had stumbled on this subject quite by accident while writing a dissertation on the art and architecture of the Ismaili Shi'i Fatimid dynasty in North Africa and Egypt in the tenth century. I noticed that the first Fatimid mosque in Tunisia did not have a minaret although it was largely a copy of the nearby mosque of Kairouan, which did. The first Fatimid mosque in Egypt (built in 970) also lacked a minaret, whereas the Mosque of al-Hakim built a few decades later had two. I wondered why some mosques had minarets and why others did not, why some minarets were cylindrical and others cuboid, and why some mosques had only one minaret while others had two, or six or eight. I began to explore these issues, particularly in reference to Egypt, first in a series of articles, and then I decided to write a book about when the minaret was invented and why.¹ Following in the footsteps of such great scholars of Islamic history and architecture as Max van Berchem, Gaston Wiet, and K. A. C. Creswell, I used a tripartite method to look at the history of the words used for towers and what they originally meant, the history of the call to prayer and where it was performed, and finally

the physical and literary evidence for the history of towers in Islamic architecture, but I came to very different conclusions than my predecessors had.

In the two and a half decades since the original publication, I have spent much of my time as an editor, writer, and teacher who attempts to make the study of Islamic art more rather than less accessible to a public broader than just the community of scholars in the field. I see in retrospect that I could have condensed my argument about the early period on the one hand and expanded coverage of the later periods on the other. Rarely does one have the opportunity to correct the mistakes of one's youth; at the urging of my dear friend and colleague Robert Hillenbrand, I have seized this opportunity and tried to streamline the text, refine certain parts of the argument, and make the whole a bit easier to follow.

Nevertheless, even in this new edition the reader will not find a complete catalogue of ancient and modern minarets, for this book is concerned primarily with the minaret's origins and spread. In the first edition I proposed to leave elucidation of the minaret's formal development after the twelfth century to others, but nobody appears to have taken up the challenge, although Doris Behrens-Abouseif has written about the minarets of Cairo,² most of which date from the period after 1260. For this second edition I have, therefore, expanded my treatment of later minarets outside the core areas of the traditional Islamic lands in southwest Asia and North Africa. In the twenty years since this book was first published, scholars' perceptions of the world of Islam have changed enormously; it is no longer acceptable to imply that Islamic art "ended" in the eighteenth century or ignore such regions as south and southeast Asia where the vast majority of Muslims live—and build—today, let alone the growing Muslim presence in western Europe and the Americas. The continuing importance of this architectural form is underscored by the rather silly "Minaret Controversy" in Switzerland during 2009, where 57.5% of Swiss voters opposed the construction of new minarets in the country, although there were only four in existence there.³

In the years after it was published, the original edition of this book was reviewed a few times in the scholarly press, and opinions ranged from disapproving to admiring.⁴ A few reviewers pointed out omissions and errors of fact, and I have been delighted to incorporate their corrections in this second edition. Some reviewers noted the controversial nature of my argument and said that my hypotheses couldn't be proven, but they—or others—were equally unable or unwilling to offer alternative explanations that fit the available facts. Indeed, one archaeologist colleague told me that he had excavated an Umayyad mosque in Jordan hoping to disprove my theory by finding the remains of a minaret. As he found none, he reluctantly had to accept my theory—at least until his next campaign. Other scholars have claimed to disprove my hypothesis by presenting evidence for

towers in the Umayyad period, but these claims rest on a difference of opinion about what exactly we mean by the word “tower.” In the twenty years since this book appeared, my argument has been repeatedly cited, if not always believed, but no one has (to my knowledge) offered a comprehensive alternative to my contention that the minaret—a freestanding tower associated with a mosque—was invented not as a place for the call to prayer but as a symbol of Islam.

Over the years some colleagues have told me that the book was a useful tool for teaching, because it presented an argument that students who already had learned the basic history of Islamic architecture could critique. The book, however, quickly became unavailable, for the small edition in which it was originally published sold out, and the series in which it was published ran out of steam in 2000, so it was not possible to reprint. Remaining copies got more and more expensive on the antiquarian market. I have recently seen some offered for up to \$1100, although one bookseller in New Hampshire recently gave me a pristine copy he had acquired, saying that it was like returning a lost child to his parent. In short, the book became unobtainable to both scholars and students, and I occasionally got letters from people asking me where they could find a copy. It was, therefore, with great delight and little forethought that I accepted Robert Hillenbrand’s invitation to make a new edition for *Edinburgh Studies on Islamic Art*. Robert had sat on the *Oxford Studies* board that approved the publication of the first edition, and over the intervening years he has become a close friend and colleague. His great enthusiasm for the project led me to underestimate how much work it would actually take to produce a revised edition, but his honey-coated entreaties have extracted more than one publication from my desk. I take this opportunity to thank Dr. Julian Raby, formerly editor of *Oxford Studies* and now director of the Freer and Sackler Galleries of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, and Prof. Jeremy Johns of Oxford University, for allowing me to take this book from one great university press to another.

Both editions were produced using versions of *Nota Bene* (NB1.1 for DOS running on an IBM XT and NB9.0 Lingua Workstation for Windows running through Parallels on a MacBook Pro), a wonderful if quirky word-processing program specifically designed for academics, particularly those who deal with foreign languages, foreign scripts, and complicated notes and bibliographies. Over the course of these many years, Steve Siebert has always come to my rescue when the program has challenged my limited abilities to take advantage of its myriad possibilities. In view of my changing preferences I have tried to minimize the use of diacritical marks in the text, except for the transcription of italicized words, since I believe that they are distracting to people who don’t recognize them and are redundant for people who do. I have also abandoned the double dating system of the first edition, as I have realized that many readers have enough

difficulty keeping one set of centuries straight, let alone two. The two decades since the original publication have seen a revolution in publishing, particularly in the ease with which photographs can be reproduced and plans redrawn. I have taken the opportunity to replace many of the gray and white illustrations of the original with much better ones, many of them my own color photographs. I hope this will be not only a better book but a more attractive one.

Finally, the past decades have witnessed a revolution in the ways people do research, particularly as extraordinary tools have become available on the internet. When I prepared the first edition of this book, checking a few references often required an eighty-mile drive from my home to Harvard's Widener Library, simply to look up an obscure word or a publication place or date. The internet was not then available in rural New Hampshire, and I thought I was technologically advanced to have a fax machine. Today, many of the primary sources I used in the library can be found online with the tap of a few keys and clicks of a mouse. Obscure publications are now easily available through JSTOR, dissertations can be read on a laptop screen, and photographs of out-of-the-way buildings in their ancient and current states can easily be found using Google. Nevertheless, I am deeply grateful to the Boston College Libraries for their incomparable Interlibrary Loan Department, which has provided me with a wealth of obscure material with nary a murmur, and to the boundless generosity of the late Stan and Norma Jean Calderwood, whose endowment of our professorial research fund at Boston College has facilitated my research in innumerable ways since 2000.

Many colleagues and friends helped in the preparation of the first version of this book, the manuscript of which was completed in 1987. All their names will be found in the preface to the first edition, which was dedicated to the memory of my father and grandfather, who had died tragically the year before the manuscript was finished. In the decades since then, some people have played greater roles in my life and work, while others have moved on. Particularly missed are Estelle Whelan, who thoughtfully reviewed the original book, and Marianne Barrucand, who gently reminded me of the remains of the Almoravid minaret in Marrakesh I forgot to discuss. Margaret Bentley Ševčenko, the immensely gracious editor and friend who meticulously reviewed the first drafts and asked me all the pointed questions everyone else was too polite (or ignorant) to ask, died long before her time in 2002. For answering specific questions related to this new edition, I thank Ruba Kanaan, Katia Cytryn-Silberman and Wheeler Thackston; for permission to use particular photographs, I am grateful to Hamra Abbas, Ross Burns, Renata Holod, Robert Schick, and Oliver Watson. At Edinburgh University Press, Nicola Ramsey has been a paragon of patience, as several deadlines have come and gone, and Eddie Clark has overseen the production of this complicated project with his usual aplomb.

The first edition of this book was published just after the birth of our first child; the second is published after our second has completed his university studies. Throughout the last three decades, Sheila Blair has remained my beloved wife and intellectual companion; she knows well that all my best work is a product of our fruitful collaboration not only as scholars and writers but also as parents and friends. Neither edition of this book would exist without her constant encouragement, support, and love, which is why I dedicate this book to her.

JMB

Richmond, New Hampshire
December 2012

Notes

1. Jonathan M. Bloom, "Five Fatimid Minarets in Upper Egypt," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 43 (1984): 162–7; Jonathan M. Bloom, "Creswell and the Origins of the Minaret," *Muqarnas* 8 (1991): 55–8; Jonathan M. Bloom, "The Minaret Before the Seljuqs," in *The Art of the Seljuqs in Iran and Anatolia*, Proceedings of a Symposium held in Edinburgh in 1982, ed. Robert Hillenbrand (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 1994), 12–16.
2. Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *The Minarets of Cairo* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1985); Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *The Minarets of Cairo: Islamic Architecture from the Arab Conquest to the End of the Ottoman Empire*, with contributions by Nicholas Warner and photographs by Bernard O'Kane (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010).
3. Available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minaret_controversy_in_Switzerland> (last accessed 15 February 2011).
4. George Scanlon, "Minaret: Symbol of Islam by Jonathan Bloom," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 18, no. 2 (1991): 269–71; Ülkü U. Bates, "Bloom, Jonathan. Minaret, Symbol of Islam," *Choice*, April 1991; Bernard O'Kane, "The Rise of the Minaret," review of *Minaret: Symbol of Islam*, Jonathan Bloom, *Oriental Art* 38 (1992): 106–13; Caroline Williams, "Minaret: Symbol of Islam by Jonathan Bloom," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24, no. 1 (February 1992): 143–5; Estelle Whelan, "Minaret: Symbol of Islam. By Jonathan Bloom," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116, no. 4 (1996): 785–6.

Introduction

ACCORDING TO STANDARD reference works, such as Webster's *Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, a minaret is a "slender lofty tower attached to a mosque and surrounded by one or more projecting balconies from which the summons to prayer is cried by the muezzin."¹ The word entered English in the seventeenth century and, like its equivalents in other European languages, derives from the Ottoman Turkish *menāre*, a word itself derived from the Persian *minār* and *mināre* and Arabic *manār* or *manāra*, meaning either "place of fire" (*nār*) or "place of light" (*nūr*).² Although the earliest mosques did not have minarets, it is usually believed that towers began to pierce skylines in all the cities of the rapidly expanding Islamic empire, perhaps as early as the seventh century, soon becoming universally recognized signs of Muslim places of worship. Nevertheless, unlike the minbar (a stepped raised seat or pulpit which was known and used by the Prophet Muhammad) or the mihrab (an empty niche in the *qibla*, or Mecca-facing wall of a mosque, which seems to have been introduced to the mosque several decades after his death in 632 CE), both of which have a standard form throughout the Muslim world, there is no one single type of minaret, and they consequently range from the rectangular cuboid shafts of North Africa to the cylindrical towers of Iran and Central Asia and the multi-storied towers of Mamluk Egypt, quite apart from the pagoda-like towers of China. Some regions are distinguished by the complete absence of minarets, particularly before the modern era.

Scholars have traced the origins and the varieties of the minaret to the various pre-Islamic tower traditions in the late-antique Mediterranean world, especially Christian Syria, or ancient Mesopotamia, Sasanian Iran, and India. They have explained the real purpose of the minaret as announcing the presence of Islam to non-Muslims. The common denominator of all these theories is that the minaret is always explained in terms of other cultures and almost never in terms of the culture that produced it. This book seeks to explain when and why Muslims decided to attach towers to mosques, why they look so different in different places, and what they were intended to mean.

The minaret presents something of a paradox. Although the call to prayer is one of the oldest practices in Islam, the tower was not used in the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime (c. 570–632) and was introduced to the mosque at a later date. In addition to the varied forms it can take, the tower attached to a mosque is called by several names, only one of which (*mi'dhana*, "place of [or instrument for] the call to prayer") has anything to do with its supposed function. Mosques may have one or more minarets, or even none at all, and paradoxically they can be located in apparently total disregard of where the muezzin's voice would reach the greatest number of worshipers. Indeed, most minarets today have loudspeakers attached to their balconies to better project the muezzin's voice (which is often recorded).³

This book explores the history and development of the minaret in different ways. The first part consists of five chapters exploring the evidence for the call to prayer and how and when towers came to be associated with mosques. Chapter 1 investigates the history of scholarship on the minaret and the problems studying this architectural form. Chapter 2 explores the history and location of the call to prayer in early Islam and shows how it was often associated with a short structure sometimes known today as a "staircase minaret." Chapter 3 looks at meanings of the words *manār* and *manāra*, from which our word minaret derives, and determines when and how tall towers were first attached to the holiest shrines in Islam. Chapter 4 looks at when and where Muslims began to add a single tall tower to the standard mosque plan, and Chapter 5 concludes that the single tower plan had to have been invented in the heartlands of Islam, specifically the Abbasid capital of Baghdad, following the civil war in the early ninth century.

I readily admit that the crucial evidence linking the invention of the single-tower plan to Baghdad is largely circumstantial, but Muslim chroniclers were far more interested in recording the deliberate acts of individuals than in describing long-term cultural developments, so this kind of information is rarely found and must be teased out of the sources with extraordinary difficulty. My conclusion is that the introduction of the mosque-tower originally had very little, if anything, to do with the call to prayer. Some readers will find the argument overly detailed and intricate, and I encourage them to move on directly to the second part of the book.

The second part, Chapters 6–10, deals with regional developments and how the idea of attaching a tower to a mosque met with different responses in different areas of the Muslim world, as the tower came increasingly to be identified with the place of the call to prayer. Chapter 6 explores the reaction to the new Abbasid plan in the Maghrib, or western Islamic lands, especially North Africa, in the ninth century; Chapter 7 continues this story under the Fatimids of North Africa and the neo-Umayyads of Spain in the tenth century and

later. These two chapters are methodologically significant because they use evidence from the Maghrib, normally considered somewhat peripheral in the general scheme of Islamic history, to explain events elsewhere, where the evidence is much thinner. Chapter 8 picks up the story begun in Chapter 5 in the central Islamic lands, particularly Egypt, from the ninth century to the twelfth, and Chapters 9 and 10 do the same for the central and eastern Islamic lands in the period between the arrival of the Seljuqs in the eleventh century and the Mongol conquests in the thirteenth. As the Islamic world expanded and more mosques and minarets were built, the story gets increasingly difficult to present as a narrative, so Chapter 10 presents the material in a thematic, rather than chronological fashion.

The first edition of this book ended with a breathless summary of later developments, partly because I did not know much about the later period and also because I hoped that other people would take up the challenge and do it themselves. This has not been the case, so this new edition expands coverage of the later period in the third part, which considers the evolution of the minaret in such areas as the Ottoman empire, Iran, Mughal India, tropical Africa, Central Asia, southeast Asia, and East Asia as well as the Muslim diaspora in Europe and the Americas. Considering the chronological and geographical ranges involved, it is still somewhat breathless, but I hope to have sketched out the major developments in these regions.

When the first edition of this book was published in 1989, the minaret and its history appeared to be arcane subjects of interest only to a small number of specialists, and indeed this book reached only a limited audience. In the intervening decades minarets have entered everyday discourse as Muslims in the Islamic countries have built ever taller and more monumental minarets for state mosques in such cities as Casablanca and Tehran, while Muslims in the West have sought to build mosques and Islamic centers using such traditional architectural forms as domes and minarets. The book concludes therefore with a brief summary of their efforts and the sometimes violent reactions to them. It is true, as many people opposed to building minarets will say, that the minaret evolved long after the formative years of Islam. By that same token, it is equally true that the campanile or steeple, not to mention the use of bells, evolved as symbols of Christianity long after Jesus walked the earth. This book shows how a particularly architectural form came to acquire meaning, and how the minaret and the campanile, let alone Muslims and other monotheists, are inextricably linked together.

Notes

1. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, MA, 1976), s.v.

2. In English the accent fell on the second syllable of the word "minaret" into the twentieth century; from the 1930s on the U.S. pronunciation placed the stress on the final syllable, probably following the precedent of other words with an *-ette* suffix. See *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), s.v.
3. Neil MacFarquhar, "Cairo Journal: God Has 4000 Loudspeaker; the State Holds Its Ears," *The New York Times*, October 12, 2004.