Admiration for the antique was sometimes accompanied by the desire to own objects, and perhaps to sell them. But for most travellers our Crescent was a long way from home, and its antiquities located in intractable deserts, under sand-dunes, and in any case many possibly stormy sea-miles from home. Actually dismantling antiquities could be a problem, and transport over land was generally difficult. Transport by sea, on the other hand, was easy – always assuming the artworks could be satisfactorily shipped. This was by no means always the case, and the difficulties experienced even in the highly mechanised 19th century in distant lands explain why so many antiquities remained safely where they lay until museum fervour took hold.

Building, Dismantling and Destruction

Even in the mid-19th century there were still plentiful remains to be taken from the regions of our Crescent, if transport were available. And of course, in all centuries when the supplies were needed, bulk transport (for grain as much as for marble) went by sea. Thus Van de Velde writes of what he could have taken from Tyre in 1854, “had I a vessel at my disposal.” These might have included the great triple shafts of the Cathedral, now re-erected, which were perhaps left behind because they were heavy, but especially because it was impossible easily to reduce such triplets to three separate shafts.

Conservation

Architecture and its conservation, on the other hand, are the preserve of men who understand and appreciate civilisation, as Belisarius is supposed to have reminded Totila; perhaps because the Romans (according to Procopius’ unlikely statement) preserved “all their ancestral treasures.” Ibn Khaldun relates how ambassadors from Bougie to Fez in 1304 were very interested in the surviving architecture of that kingdom’s Almohad ancestors. He perhaps mentioned this because he was himself so interested in old monuments, and of course ruminations on the building cycle form an
interesting part of his *Muqaddima*. But he also noted that sultans sometimes visited the remains left by earlier dynasties – and El Djem as well. vi

Islam adopts materials and building techniques from the Romans and the Sassanians, l but their attitude to the past is more variable. Although he could not read any of the inscriptions on the Pyramids, Mas’udi assures us that one reads: “C’est nous qui avons bâtì les pyramides. Que celui qui veut égalier notre autorité, obtenir notre pouvoir et renverser notre trône, abatte ces édifices, et en efface les vestiges, bien qu’il soit plus facile d’abattre que de bâtir, et de disperser des matériaux que de les réunir,” and goes on to tell of how a Moslem king started their demolition, but could not complete it. vii This moral tale is repeated with embellishments by Al-Maqrizi centuries later, viii and is part of a tradition of smart sayings about these structure. ix Their counterpoint is the common theme that even monuments crumble to dust x – or survive to echo the vanity of later efforts. xi

In other words, the Middle Ages were in wonder at the structures of the ancients: building confirmed authority and, as Ibn Khaldun states, the greatness of their monuments is in direct proportion to the greatness of the dynasty which built them. xii Rebuilding, after the destruction caused by earthquakes, might also serve a dynastic cause – as when the 1220 quake destroyed or severely damaged several Crusader forts. The Christians were frantic to rebuild, for fear of attacks by Nur al-Din. But he was in Aleppo, where he is said to have directed the reconstruction work himself – the ruler as builder, indeed!  

*Dismantling and Demolition*

The term “dismantling” implies disassembling into constituent pieces so that these individual members may be re-used in some other configuration. Had this always been the case, then much more would survive of the ancient world, albeit needing to be rebuilt lego-wise. Thus when Lucas went to investigate a pyramid at Sakkara in 1715, it was demolished because the entrance could not be found xiii – and presumably not rebuilt!

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1 Arce 2007, 494–498 for the adoption of technologies by the Arabs, and 498–503 for the next stage – hybridisation.

2 Guidoboni & Comastri (p. 433), earthquakes, Cat 089 another large one in 1170, Eastern Syria and Lebanon; caused extensive damage to the Krak, as did subsequent quakes, so that what we see today is a part-rebuilding, finished c.1220.