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. He was brought to write about the minaret because the subject had been surrounded by decades of misunderstanding and confusion.

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 naqṣ or clapper, they wanted something equivalent for their own use.” 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 sawāmīs (sg. sawma’ā) 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’ā 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’ā 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 Pharaohs played no part.” That the ninth-century heliocoidal 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. 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. 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. 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.  

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. 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. 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. Rivoira proposed that the characteristic Mamluk minaret derived from the “no less bizarre forms” found in Indian architecture of the eighth to thirteenth centuries.

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 ʿAmr 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 ʿAmr in Fustat, a minor victory.

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 ʿAmr 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 Kaʾba 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. Van Berchem himself had written about the minaret in his study of the Arabic inscriptions of Egypt. 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), miʾdhana, and ʿəwmaʾa — were and had always been synonymous. 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. 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. Miʾdhana, 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. ʿəwmaʾa originally referred to the