



# ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

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ROBERT HILLENBRAND

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Form, function and meaning

Robert Hillenbrand

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For Carole, with love

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# Preface and Acknowledgements

This book contains only one man's view of Islamic architecture; it does not pretend to summarise the accepted views of the subject – if indeed they exist. To survey so vast a field is certainly daunting; and since a desirably high level of competence across it is impossible, there are bound to be mistakes. Nevertheless, the exercise does have its advantages. Chief among them, perhaps, is that recurrent themes and patterns gradually manifest themselves and take on a more than local significance. Hence the creeping diffusionism of some of the text – a persistent reminder that the Islamic faith and the particular type of society which it engendered could make light of vast gulfs of time and space. One further advantage of the survey method, though more personal, is worth mentioning. It is quite impossible to maintain a steady degree of objectivity when confronted with such a vast quantity and variety of monuments. One cannot feel equally enthusiastic about them all. Accordingly – with the exception of the chapter on palaces, where the scattered nature of the material and the total absence of any earlier general survey made a sequence of detailed analyses well-nigh mandatory – I have felt free within reason to make my own selection of buildings for discussion. Often this has involved ousting the familiar to make way for the unfamiliar. In the same spirit, I have not attempted to shy away from value judgements, for to make them is part and parcel of being an art historian. Besides, they are enjoyable.

Most earlier surveys of Islamic architecture, whether long or short, have opted for the chronological mode, which is indeed how the subject is taught at universities. I have no quarrel with this method, but thought it would be interesting to attempt instead a typological approach, and thus avoid unnecessary repetition and clarify the evolutionary process of the major Islamic building types. In the event, the desire to do justice to the sheer scope and variety of monuments within these general categories has led me to place much emphasis on detailed architectural analysis. It has also dictated a rather piecemeal approach, involving sustained focus

on one building type at a time. A by-product of this approach has been that a good deal of material in this book has already appeared in print in somewhat different guise. Architectural decoration is discussed throughout the book in the immediate context of the buildings themselves, as are materials and structural techniques. These three topics are, after all, secondary to the principal aim of the book.

My formal scholarly debts are only partially discharged in the bibliography at the end of the book. The decision to write a general book aimed at students and – yes – amateurs, rather than at scholars, has excluded the use of footnotes and, as a consequence, an exhaustive bibliographical apparatus. The titles have therefore been selected on the basis of their suitability for further reading. In this I have followed the general practice in the Edinburgh *Islamic Surveys* series, within which this book was conceived and written. To those readers who look in vain for the source of this or that statement, I can only apologise. Similar considerations have dictated the omission of diacritical points in the main text, though I am happy to refer *aficionados* to the index, where the fully transliterated form of every proper and Islamic name can be ascertained. Specific dates are given in the Islamic calendar first, with the Christian equivalent following after an oblique stroke; approximate dates and centuries are given in the Christian calendar only.

The inordinately long gestation of this book has been shortened by the encouragement and genial prodding of numerous friends and colleagues, among them James Allan, Robin Bishop, Sheila Blair, Jerome Clinton, Abbas Daneshvari, John Higgit and Bernard O'Kane. Thank you all. Special thanks go to Jonathan Bloom, who generously provided pages of valuable criticism and data when he read Chapter III in draft, and above all to David Gye, a dear friend of more than twenty years' standing, who devoted many hours of his time to discussing and criticising several of the chapters, and whose sterling good sense and feel for buildings has not only saved me from numerous errors but also



educated my eye. My parents took a lively interest in the book from the beginning, and their never-failing encouragement was a constant reassurance to me. More recently, my father freely gave precious help with the preparation of the index. Further back in time, my brothers Peter and Dieti shared and enriched my induction to the architecture of the Maghrib and Afghanistan respectively; I cherish those memories. But my longest-standing debt is to my old friend Richard Chinn, whose contagious enthusiasm drew me to Islamic architecture in the first place, and with whom I first saw many of the buildings described in this book.

Special attention has been paid to the choice of the illustrations used in this book. Indeed, to assemble all the visual material and to integrate it into the text in orderly fashion has taken longer than it did to write the text itself – though it has been a labour of love. Some preliminary remarks on this topic may therefore be in order. In writing the text, I inevitably found myself consulting earlier general surveys of Islamic architecture, and I was struck by the degree to which these works tended to cite the same buildings – not simply because of their status as unchallenged masterpieces but also to make some quite general points. The cumulative result of this persistent over-exposure of a few buildings is to obscure the sheer quantity and variety of Islamic architecture. It seems to me desirable that students as well as specialists should be aware of these characteristics, and the illustrations have been chosen with that aim in mind. I have not, for instance, tried to make them merely an elegantly presented appendage to the text. Accordingly the range of ground plans is designedly wide, and should highlight the extensive options open to a medieval Islamic architect operating within his local tradition, whether that was Andalusian or Central Asian. They are intended to flesh out some of the generalisations of the text, though there was not room to discuss all of them in the text itself.

A related aim has been to provide ground plans for most – though by no means all – of the buildings mentioned in the text and for virtually all of the three-dimensional drawings. But the sheer quantity of the illustrative material (1249 line drawings in all) has made it impossible always to place the illustrations close to the

relevant discussion in the text. Since the book uses a typological framework, the drawings are, wherever possible, gathered into groups – not just for ease of reference but also to allow a quick assessment of the salient characteristics of the type in question. The order of the captions follows the page layout of the illustrations (most of them assembled together at the back of the book) as closely as possible. For that reason, different views of the same building are sometimes marginally separated from each other. Often a wide range of ground plans of a given building were available; in such cases I have tried to choose the plan that gave the most information even if, for example, it was unscaled. Similarly, I have preferred unscaled plans to those whose clarity was marred by a surfeit of measurements recorded on the drawing itself, or which gave less information. In virtually every case where the drawing has no scale this is because the original drawing itself lacked a scale. Sometimes only plans of relatively poor quality were available; in many such cases I have chosen to reproduce these rather than provide no plan at all for the building in question. These decisions were not made lightly. The great range of drawing styles in the illustrations reflects the variety of sources trawled for them. Some variations of quality are thus only to be expected, but an attempt has been made to ensure as high a standard of reproduction as was practicable. Thus many published illustrations of poor quality were redrawn or reproduced by several different means to get the best result.

Ideally, of course, all these illustrations would have been redrawn according to a single convention and reproduced on a generous scale. But, quite aside from the daunting problems of time and finance that this would have caused, the resultant body of material could not possibly have been accommodated in a book of this size. After much thought, therefore, it seemed preferable to me (and to accord with the prime function of this volume as a handbook, a work of reference) to accept some loss in the quality of reproduction, in the interests of presenting as much material as possible – much more than in any previous one-volume work on Islamic architecture. The variations in tone and quality, and the sometimes postage-stamp scale of the illustrations gathered together at the back of the

volume, are the regrettable and inevitable price to be paid for this decision. But the presence of nearly 1600 illustrations should be ample compensation for these drawbacks and should to a great extent liberate readers from the need constantly to consult other works of reference. In order to help readers find their way amidst this mass of illustrative material, two cloth tabs have been provided and a supplementary index of monuments has been prepared which gives page numbers for the drawings and photographs of each building. The marginal numbers throughout the text are designed to help readers to locate the illustrative material that bears on any given monument; for the significance of the various type-faces, readers are referred to page v.

The 282 three-dimensional drawings – whether isometric, axonometric or perspectival – go still further towards underlining the often under-rated but still protean variety of Islamic architecture, for the majority of them have been specially commissioned for this book and therefore present wholly new material. Many of the rest of these three-dimensional drawings are taken from publications which are not easily accessible and thus they, too, especially when seen in the context of the other illustrative material, should shed new light on the buildings and the styles they illustrate. The aim throughout has been to make such three-dimensional drawings – a type of presentation hitherto largely ignored in surveys of Islamic architecture – the visual core of the book. Over twenty years' experience of teaching Islamic architecture has persuaded me that ground plans have an arcane flavour for most undergraduates, who indeed often find them positively rebarbative, while three-dimensional drawings are readily grasped and give a real idea of the building's impact. Islamic architecture – like all architecture – is about space, and not (as is often maintained) principally about decoration; and that point can best be reinforced by three-dimensional drawings. In the captions I have used the portmanteau and non-technical term "three-dimensional view" in preference to "axonometric", "isometric" or "perspectival". Ground plans have been provided for all but 20 of the three-dimensional drawings; in most of these exceptional cases, published ground plans were unavailable, incomplete or inadequate.

It should be emphasised that many of these three-dimensional drawings should be treated as sketches (indeed, some are specifically identified as such), and that no claim is made or implied here for their absolute accuracy in matters of detail. I hope this statement will not be misunderstood as a cavalier disregard for getting things right. Even a casual glance will reveal that some of them have taken many hours of concentrated thought and dedication, and are as accurate as they well could be; others are designedly more impressionistic in character, and their free-hand execution underlines this point. I wish merely to ensure that drawings of the latter kind are not interpreted (in the words of Myron Bement Smith) as "a definitive record of the monument" in question, but are properly recognised as documents for discussion, documents which future research should supersede. The varied styles of draughtsmanship in these drawings reflect the individual styles of those who executed them; I deliberately made no attempt at standardisation. Lynx-eyed readers will perhaps note several cases in which mutually contradictory interpretations of a single building have been presented in the drawings. That too is no accident; it will serve as a necessary reminder that reconstructions cannot, of their very nature, claim to be totally accurate. If the drawings make the buildings speak, they will have served their purpose.

The black and white plates, like the other forms of illustration in this book, have been chosen to emphasise the unfamiliar rather than the familiar. Of course this trend has not been pursued to the extent of omitting such central masterpieces as the mosques of Damascus, Samarra, Cordoba; but it would have been all too easy to fill up the quota of illustrations with hackneyed plates of monuments whose very familiarity has blunted some of their impact. Accordingly I have tried to introduce some surprises. A secondary aim has been to use, wherever possible, historic photographs – since these are often able to recreate the original setting of the monument much better than more recent photographs. Two major archives, those of Professor K. A. C. Creswell, the founding father of studies of Islamic architecture, and Professor Ernst Cohn-Wiener, provided the bulk of the black and white plates, and I hope

that their venerable photographs – taken for the most part in the 1920s – will not only add their own distinctive flavour to the book, but will bring these archival treasures the wider attention they deserve. This is all the more desirable since the aspect of some of these monuments has changed beyond recognition since the photographs were taken.

It is a pleasant task to record my debt to all those who have helped in the arduous task of assembling this body of visual information. Various scholars and publishers readily gave their assent to the copying of published or unpublished drawings, and my gratitude to them is profound, since these drawings lie at the very heart of the book. Helen Leacroft generously gave permission for some of her late husband's drawings to be reworked for this book; and numerous undergraduate and postgraduate architectural students at the University of Edinburgh prepared between them the bulk of the three-dimensional drawings. Individual acknowledgments are listed at the end of the book, but I must single out Ahmad Antar, Farnoush Hayati, Simon Shaw, Jeremy Sherring and Andrew Thomson for their devoted work on this part of the project. Through Alastair Duncan, The World of Islam Festival Trust shouldered the financial burden for most of these drawings; the Trust's open-handed support was absolutely indispensable, and was readily given at a critical juncture. Other drawings were prepared with the help of a grant from the Moray Fund at the University of Edinburgh. The Barakat Trust made a very generous contribution towards the cost of using the negatives from the Creswell Archive, and I am deeply grateful to my old friends Teresa Fitzherbert and James Allan for so selflessly facilitating my work in that collection. I am also much beholden to Mrs Nancy Kaiser for putting the Cohn-Wiener archive at my disposal. A very special "thank you" goes to Bernard O'Kane, who has freely allowed me the pick of his superb colour slides and his black and white negatives to help illustrate this volume – would that the interested reader could have seen the ones that got away! This is only the most recent of many such acts of munificence, and I truly appreciate his self-effacing generosity. Joe Rock has spared no pains to produce the best photographic plates

possible from these and other negatives. I would like to thank him in particular for his unflagging persistence and ingenuity in devising ways of printing the line drawings to best advantage. A timely and generous grant from the Aga Khan Foundation in Switzerland, through Said Zulfikar, made it possible to illustrate the book with colour plates, and – given the importance of colour in Islamic architecture – I am deeply grateful for this help. A supplementary grant from The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland provided further welcome help to this end. Without all these kind and helpful people the book would have had to be illustrated on a much more modest scale and in a much more conventional manner. I hope they can all take pleasure in the result.

I would not have been able to write this book without undertaking numerous visits to virtually all parts of the Islamic world. These journeys began some thirty years ago and have been a source of abiding happiness and intellectual stimulus. It is a great pleasure, therefore, to thank the official bodies whose financial support have made these field trips possible: the British Academy, the British Council, the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, the Carnegie Trust and the Universities of Cambridge, Edinburgh and Oxford. Thanks to them, I have been able to see and study at first hand the Islamic architecture of every country (except Niger) whose buildings are represented in this book. It was in fact this extensive and vivid experience of the sheer variety of Islamic architecture which prompted me to base this book on building types rather than on chronology. Last, but most emphatically not least in this connection, my heartfelt gratitude goes out to those hundreds of people throughout the Islamic world whose kindness and hospitality have not merely made it possible to visit all these buildings but have also given those visits an unforgettable personal dimension.

I am very grateful indeed to Mrs Gloria Ketchin for typing most of the manuscript; and warm thanks also go to Mrs Mona Bennett who did much supplementary typing at short notice.

My thanks to Archie Turnbull extend far beyond the customary civilities offered by author to publisher. When he commissioned this book some fifteen(!) years ago he not only gave a

welcome personal boost to yet another junior academic; he also made the project sound exciting and worthwhile, and so it proved. It is a pleasure to know that the book bears his imprimatur. After his retirement, Vivian Bone took on the thankless task of seeing the work through the press, a task made especially complex because of the number and variety of illustrations. Like him, she managed always to stay on the right side of that invisible dividing line between encouragement and importunity, and in the closing stages of production she has been consistently helpful in ways great and small. I am very grateful to Ian Davidson for so carefully overseeing the progress of the book in general, especially at what turned out to be a tricky proof stage. Gillian Waugh, the designer of the book, deserves special plaudits for impos-

ing her innate sense of style on it, for her unfailing ingenuity in meeting the many challenges it posed, and for her solid commitment to quality.

My final and most heartfelt thanks go to my wife Carole. She has been behind the project the whole way and has given selflessly of her time and energies to encourage, to give constructive criticism and to help out with historical and linguistic queries. In the past year especially I have drawn great solace from the support which I have received from her, and also from my daughters Margaret and Ruth, who both typed seemingly unending lists of unfamiliar names. Without Carole, the book might actually have taken twice as long; and it is dedicated to her from a full heart.

Robert Hillenbrand

## Preface to the paperback edition

The issue of a paperback edition has made it possible to correct some factual mistakes in this book. I am grateful to those reviewers who pointed them out. I am also indebted to my old friend Professor Bernard O'Kane, whose eagle eye spotted a dozen mistakes in the text proper plus others in the captions, and to Dr Bagher Ayatollahzadeh Shirazi, who in the course of translating the book into Persian came upon several errors which he kindly rectified for me. But my warmest thanks go to Ghassem Grantab, Massy Yazdchi and Kamran Mahmoodian, who laboriously compiled an extra index so as to make the book easier to use. I hope that many new readers will benefit from their hard work.

Robert Hillenbrand  
Edinburgh, 28 October 1999

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