

ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE FROM TRAVELOGUE TO SURVEY. THE DISCOVERY OF ISLAMIC CAIRO

Doris Behrens-Abouseif

Emeritus Professor, SOAS, University of London

da30@soas.ac.uk

Abstract

Islamic Architecture from Travelogue to Survey. The Discovery of Islamic Cairo

This paper follows the long tradition of European interest in Egypt by looking into travelogues and exploration accounts down to the 19th century. Because of its strategic significance, its Antiquity and biblical associations and the greatness of medieval Cairo, Egypt has attracted attention long before the age of colonialism and Orientalism, as documented in a plethora of travelogues. Although ancient Egypt was the main attraction, from the Middle Ages Islamic Cairo and its monuments added to the travellers' curiosity who increasingly dedicated their attention to its urban and architectural features.

The unbroken European tradition of interest in Egypt from pilgrims to explorers, Orientalists, art historians, architects and conservationists that provided the ground for the historiography of Islamic architecture to emerge and develop and along with it the initiatives to preserve it and revive it. Such initiatives had at the same time an impact on the Egyptians' concepts of their artistic identity.

Keywords

Egypt, Cairo, Travelogue, Exploration, Pilgrimage, Islamic Architecture, Islamic Art, Orientalism, Architectural Heritage, Age of Colonialism.

This paper presents an overview of the discovery of the Islamic architecture of Egypt in the West, and the impact on its heritage preservation. Much has been written in the past decades about the 19th century European interaction with the East and its culture, in particular following and reacting to Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Although studying and collecting are aspects of colonial culture and self-representation, it is now generally agreed that European academic and artistic interests in the Orient cannot be viewed as exclusively or entirely motivated by imperialistic schemes, rather they involved a genuine scientific urge and endeavor to map and document the world, which went hand in hand with a romantic trend for the exotic. However this is not the subject of this paper, which is instead confined specifically to Islamic architecture, how it began to attract European academic attention and the role of Cairo in this discovery. Western interest in Egypt's architectural heritage does not begin in the 19th century and cannot therefore be confined to the Orientalism of this period. Rather it goes back to a long premodern

tradition that evolved over the centuries. Since Herodotus there has been a continuous European fascination with Egypt's ancient culture. While conquerors invaded the country for its strategic and economic potential, thinkers and travelers pondered over its ancient marvels. Although Egypt's Antiquity has always been the main subject of travelers' interest, in the late Middle Age and early Renaissance when Mamluk Cairo was a prominent player on the international diplomatic scene being described as the largest city in the world, its Islamic architecture and material culture earned a growing attention in travelogues.

Egypt's position at the crossroads between the Mediterranean, the Levant and Africa on the road to the Indian Ocean has given it significant leverage in international trade since the Ptolemies. Augustus's conquest of Egypt in 30 B.C.E made it effectively the gateway to the Red Sea, and thus to the Indian Ocean, providing Europe with direct access to the riches of the East. The emergence and spread of Islam in the 7th century brought about a new geo-political