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# ASPECTUS

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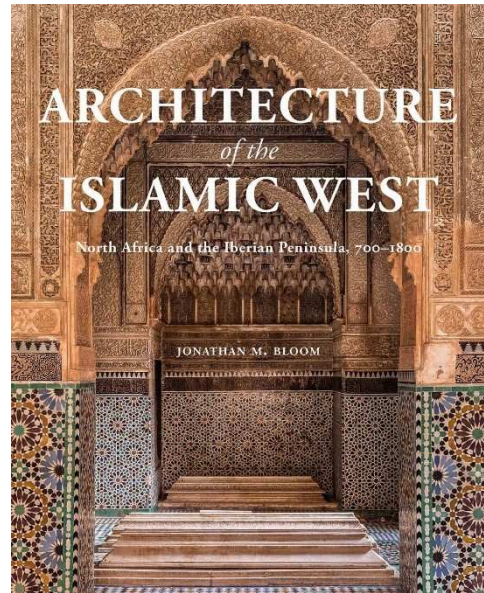
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# Jonathan M. Bloom, *Architecture of the Islamic West: North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula, 700-1800*



LYDIA ANN JESUDASON

## WRITTEN APPROACH

In *Architecture of the Islamic West: North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula, 700-1800*, Professor Jonathan M. Bloom explores the architectural history of several countries, including Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Spain, Italy, Libya, and Portugal, between the years 700 and 1800. Bloom draws upon the written approach of art historian, Michael Baxandall, who advocated the idea that influence was wrongly interpreted by many art historians, who often saw influence as something that is passive, rather than active. Engaging with Baxandall's methodology, in *Architecture of the Islamic West* Bloom seeks to focus on the culture that took part in the adopting, as opposed to focusing on the culture from which something might have been adopted. In the introduction, Bloom points out that many recent studies of Islamic architecture have taken iconographic approaches; his objective, however, is to demonstrate that architecture is an expression of accumulated knowledge, by asking questions such as "what was built and how", "what builders knew", "what they were able to construct" and where builders sourced certain materials.<sup>1</sup>

## DISCOURSE

Bloom's book is organised chronologically, with each chapter focusing on a series of "dynasties that ruled in particular times and places".<sup>2</sup> In the first chapter, one of the main arguments posed by Bloom stands in direct contrast to an argument that was formerly made by historian of Islamic architecture, K.A.C. Creswell, in 1969. Creswell claimed that the tower that formed part of the Mosque of Kairouan was built during the Umayyad period, between 724 and 728, yet Bloom supports the claim of French historian, architect and archaeologist, Alexandre Lézine, in suggesting that the tower of Kairouan was unlike Syrian Umayyad towers, and that during the Umayyad period (711-1031), tower minarets had not yet been invented.

The second chapter concentrates on rival caliphates in the west during the tenth century, and includes the argument that although many scholars have long recognised the significance of the Córdoba tower as the precursor to a long series of towers in the Maghrib, they have not yet fully explored the patron's motives for building it. Additionally, the author later points out that as our contemporary culture is saturated with visual representations, we often forget how medieval patrons and viewers might have known about certain monuments, without first-hand experience of them.

Bloom's third chapter highlights the fact that, after the Fatimids abandoned Ifriqiya for Egypt in 972 and Umayyad rule ended in 1030, a new power emerged in the region during the middle of the eleventh century. Indeed, a Berber revolutionary reformist movement, known as the Almoravids, founded the city of Marrakesh and came to control much of Al-Andalus, before it came to be succeeded by the Almohads, during the mid-twelfth century.

The fourth chapter focuses on the Almoravids and Almohads (1050-1250). Before c.1000, the major centres of culture had been located in Al-Andalus and Ifriqiya, with North-West Africa playing a relatively minor role. However, from the mid-eleventh to the mid-thirteenth century, two great empires arose in North-West Africa and extended their reach to Al-Andalus and the central and Eastern Maghrib. One of the empires, the Almoravid dynasty, expanded their territory throughout North-West Africa, conquering what is now western Algeria, in 1080. Bloom points out that no major Almoravid mosques survive in Spain, and that in Morocco, only parts of architectural structures can be attributed to the Almoravids. The Almohads, who seized power from the Almoravids, ruled a large expanse of North Africa and Al-Andalus between 1130-1269, and built both mosques and fortifications to protect their cities, some of which can still be seen in Marrakesh and Rabat.<sup>3</sup> Another point that the author raises is the fact that the Kutubiya Almohad mosque emulates the Mosque of Córdoba, due to the fact that the Almohads looked back to the legacy left by the Umayyad caliphs for legitimacy.

The fifth chapter draws attention to the Nasrids, in Al-Andalus. Following the Almohad retreat to North Africa, the major Muslim cities of the Iberian Peninsula, such as Córdoba and Seville, fell to Christians, yet the mountainous province of Granada came under the control of the Nasrids, or Banu'l-Ahmar (1232-1492), who effectively maintained a balance between their more powerful neighbours; Christians to the north and Muslims to the south. Bloom stresses the significance of Mudéjar art and architecture in this chapter, which initially referred to a style of works produced by Muslim artisans who were employed by Christian and Jewish patrons, although the connotations of Mudéjar art and architectural styles would come to change over time. To add to this, Bloom points out here that the Mudéjar style epitomises the theory of 'Convivencia', the idea that on the Iberian Peninsula, in medieval times, Muslims, Christians and Jews lived in relative peace and harmony.<sup>4</sup>

In the sixth and seventh chapters, Bloom discusses the ways in which the combined forces of the kings of Castile, Aragon, Navarre, and Portugal defeated the Almohads in July 1212. To add to this, the author then focuses on the regions of Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria between 1500 and 1800, and suggests that whilst the New Mosque of Algeria might have appeared as an archetypal 'Ottoman' example of architecture to contemporary viewers, in fact, its minaret,

which is Maghribi in shape and proportions, reveals that it is an unconventional Ottoman mosque.

The eighth chapter concentrates on the political history of the Sharifan dynasties of Morocco, and it is here that the author reveals that the architecture of the Sharifan dynasties differs to that of Tunisia and Algeria, in that it heavily relies on indigenous traditions established in Almohad and Marinid times.

The ninth and final chapter of Bloom's book considers how the architectural traditions presented earlier in the book were received in subsequent centuries. One of the main arguments that the author makes in this chapter is that, particularly in twelfth and thirteenth century Sicily, the Normans readily adopted many aspects of the traditions of Islamic architecture in their palaces. Additionally, Bloom makes a case for antiquarians and architects, such as James Cavanah Murphy (1760-1814), and Owen Jones (1809-1874), creating engravings and drawings of the Mosque of Córdoba and the Alhambra, which provided thousands of people who could never afford to visit the real Islamic monuments in situ, with an opportunity to view them through reproductions.

In conclusion, Bloom's *Architecture of the Islamic West* is a thorough and well-researched book, which draws attention to the fascinating histories of a variety of different Muslim peoples, as well as to the architectural history of regions across the Islamic West. Written for an academic audience, the written style is engaging and informative, and underlines the fact that architecture is an expression of accumulated knowledge. Indeed, one of Bloom's central arguments is that throughout medieval Islamic society, verbal representations were more important than visual representations, and that word was consistently valued over image. Subsequently, the author challenges a view, held by many art historians, that architectural motifs were simply shared, borrowed, and dispersed quite freely among people of the medieval Islamic west. Instead, Bloom persuasively suggests that the transmission of architectural knowledge, ideas, and motifs was a great deal more complex than scholars previously thought.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan M. Bloom, *Architecture of the Islamic West: North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula, 700-1800*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Bloom, *Architecture of the Islamic West*, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Bloom, *Architecture of the Islamic West*, 121.

<sup>4</sup> Bloom, *Architecture of the Islamic West*, 171.