



Shedding Light on the Minaret: Methods & Limitations of Historical Inquiry

Sayer Al Sayer¹

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7035-0722>

¹-GSAPP, Columbia University, NY, United States; sa4477@columbia.edu

Abstract

Though minarets, like domes and mihrabs, are commonly regarded as an essential characteristic of mosque architecture, they were never a feature in Islam's earliest structures. The first mosque, built by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his followers in 622 AD, was a simple rectangular open-air enclosure with a large, central courtyard (The Met, 2019). This early design, often called the "Arab-plan" or "hypostyle," featured palm-trunk columns supporting a shaded area within an open-air courtyard; a layout that set the standard for future mosque architecture.

Introduction

Though minarets, like domes and mihrabs, are commonly regarded as an essential characteristic of mosque architecture, they were never a feature in Islam's earliest structures. The first mosque, built by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his followers in 622 AD, was a simple rectangular open-air enclosure with a large, central courtyard (The Met, 2019). This early design, often called the "Arab-plan" or "hypostyle," featured palm-trunk columns supporting a shaded area within an open-air courtyard; a layout that set the standard for future mosque architecture. Many "essential" elements of mosque architecture emerged later, with the earliest known minarets only beginning to appear during the Umayyad dynasty's rule in Syria in 673 AD (Bloom 1990, 55). Before this, mosques featured no minarets, domes, or mihrabs, calling into question the essentialism often expressed in descriptions of the components necessary for identifying and creating Islamic sacred architecture. The tension between the omnipresence of these architectural elements, which almost universally

embellish mosques, and the question of their necessity has inspired many to study and speculate about their origins. Using the minaret as a lens, this essay will briefly explore the methods and limitations of studying its history. Here, I will highlight some of the intellectual frameworks that have influenced these proposals and touch on Jonathan M. Bloom's critique of K. A. C. Creswell in his 1990 journal entry, "Creswell and the Origins of the Minaret." Bloom is more popularly known to have authored *The Minaret*, the most expansive study of the minaret's history to date, which also aimed to serve as a corrective to the "several decades of wild speculation about the origins and meaning of this most distinctive building type" (Bloom 1990, 56). The essay will then analyze T.M.P Duggan's *Review of J. M. Bloom, The Minaret, Edinburgh Studies in Islamic Art*, where he examines the centrality of light in the study of the minaret, not merely as a functional object used for wayfinding, but as a symbol deeply embedded in the Islamic understanding of spiritual guidance. Duggan's review critiques Bloom's disregard of light in his understanding of the minaret's inception and symbolic

function. After presenting Duggan's arguments, the essay will briefly touch on the various case studies he proposes examining the role of light in the function and symbolism of minarets.

Presenting the various scholars involved in curating the history of the minaret and the methods behind their study would give readers a clearer understanding of the complexity inherent in historical inquiry.

Methods & Limitations in Studying the History of the Minaret

Scholarship surrounding the origin of the minaret is multifaceted and has developed through several competing intellectual frameworks, each shaped by the historian's assumptions about form, function, and cultural transmission. Diffusionist or source-hunting history, common in the 19th and early 20th centuries, was one of the earliest and most influential frameworks for studying the history of the minaret. Diffusionism is an anthropological and archaeological theory that explains cultural similarities between societies as the result of the spread of cultural traits from a few central, "innovative" locations. This approach to history, often called source hunting, assumes that major human innovations were rare and spread throughout the world via migration, trade, or conquest (Barnard 2000, 47). Diffusionist scholars such as A. J. Butler and Hermann Thiersch treated the minaret as an architectural form that must have been derived from a prototype, especially the Pharos of Alexandria, or from early church towers. In one instance, Butler emphasized the possible formal resemblance between the Pharos and later Cairene minarets in Egypt, while Thiersch expanded the argument by comparing tower profiles and cross-sections. Because Diffusionist perspectives on history assume a single origin, they often reduce complex architectural development to a single, sequential line of descent. This overlooks regional variation, functional change, and the multitude of simultaneous influences (Bloom 2013, 23-31).

A second framework for studying the origins of the minaret, especially associated with the architectural historian K. A. C. Creswell, is formal typology. Formal typology emphasizes the importance of studying the formal evolution of architecture and its relationship to local building traditions. Influenced by this, Creswell classified minarets by shape, chronology, and regional development. The formal approach is valuable, especially compared with earlier Diffusionist logic, because it establishes a more careful architectural chronology. Although it provides a more careful alternative to the historical study of minarets, the formal approach can rely too heavily on morphology. Though minarets, whether square, cylindrical, or spiral, may appear distinct, form alone cannot entirely explain why a building was made, how it was used, what it symbolized, or where it originated. (Bloom 2013, 52-60)

A third approach, strongly developed by Jonathan M. Bloom, was philological and textual analysis, which stresses the significance and centrality of language in the study of history. With this newfound appreciation for text, Bloom argued that the origin of the minaret cannot be understood without language. In addition to their formal qualities, Bloom studied minarets through Arabic terms used to describe them. Some of the earliest words used to describe minarets, like *manāra*, *manār*, *sawma'a*, and *mi'dhana*, do not mean the same thing and highlight the possibility of the towers' shifting roles and origins. Using this framework, Bloom writes, "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. *Mi'dhana*, 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. *Sawma'a* originally referred to the cell of a Christian monk, and the word was used in popular and literary discourse for a *mi'dhana*, but never in early epigraphy because it was too colloquial. Eventually these three words would all come to mean a tower attached to a mosque, but in the early centuries of Islam, they had specific and quite different meanings" (Bloom 1990, 56-57). Although it adds a necessary facet to the study

of minaret history, the philological framework falls short, as words do not always faithfully express the function or origin of buildings. Terms may survive even as their functions change, and the same building may be identified in different ways depending on time, location, and custom. (Bloom 2013, 15-22)

A fourth framework for studying the origins of the minaret employs functional and ritual interpretations. Here, scholars like K. A. C. Creswell examine the minaret as part of the ritualistic or action-oriented history of the *adhan* (call to prayer), visibility, and mosque ritual. Because the earliest form of *adhan* did not require minarets, often performed from mosque roofs, front doors, or high geographical points, the purity of their function as speech platforms had to expand to include their use as beacons, symbols of power, and watchtowers. Although useful, the functional approach to studying the history and origin of the minaret can be limited because an architecture's function can change over time. This approach may make it likely for researchers, historians, or scholars to project later roles into earlier towers. (Grabar 1987, 105-110)

More recent scholarship uses cultural and postcolonial frameworks, treating the minaret as a product of negotiation, reuse, and adaptation rather than a "pure" Islamic invention. This approach is useful in understanding the relationship and emergence of minarets through contact with Roman, Byzantine, Syrian, North African, and Andalusian precedents. However, broad cultural readings frequently become too general unless grounded in specific buildings, dates, and archaeological evidence. (Grabar 1987. 115-122)

When considering the various frameworks employed in studying the history and origin of minarets, it becomes clear that they are best understood not as a single invention, but as a historically layered architectural form shaped by language, empire, ritual, and local building traditions.

Duggan Critiquing Bloom Critiquing Creswell:

Jonathan M. Bloom, author of *The Minaret*, the most extensive study into the history of the minaret, revisits and critiques K. A. C. Creswell's scholarship in the article *Creswell and the Origins of the Minaret*. In it, Bloom explains that Creswell's 1926 study attempted to solve the "problem" of the minaret through a chronological analysis of surviving buildings and texts.

Bloom points out that Creswell's analysis of surviving buildings leaves out the influence destroyed structures may have had on the history of the minaret's development. Creswell argued that the minaret originated in Umayyad Syria, where early Muslims first encountered Syrian church towers and adapted them for Islamic use. According to Creswell, the essential function of the minaret was practical, providing a location for the *adhan*. Through this functional framework, Creswell interpreted the four towers attached to the Great Mosque of Damascus as the earliest true minarets in Islamic architecture. (Bloom 1990, 55)

In studying Creswell's contributions to the history and inception of the minaret, Bloom shows a clear admiration for Creswell's methodological rigor but argues that his conclusions were shaped by several flawed assumptions. Bloom begins by critiquing Creswell's lack of concern in analyzing the language used to refer to the minaret. Terms such as *manār(a)*, *mi'dhana*, and *sawma'a* were used interchangeably, despite their historically distinct meanings. Bloom then demonstrates that each of these words originally referred to different concepts. The *manār(a)* meant marker or sign, the *mi'dhana* referred to the place of the call to prayer, and the *sawma'a* described a Christian monk's cell-like structure (Bloom 1990, 57). Bloom then points out that Creswell incorrectly assumed that mosque towers existed primarily for the function of the *adhan*, arguing instead that the history of minarets developed independently from the history of the call to prayer. As previously stated, early Muslims gave the *adhan* from the front doors or roofs of mosques, and

many early mosques, such as Shi'i Fatimid Mosques, lacked minarets altogether. Bloom also highlights Creswell's flawed assumption that the form of the minaret revealed its origin, rejecting the evolutionary or diffusionist model of thinking, and proposing instead that regions adopted local tower traditions independently once the concept of the mosque tower spread. In his critical text of Creswell, Bloom shifts attention away from Umayyad Syria towards the Abbasid world, especially Baghdad, and emphasizes the role of political and symbolic concerns in the emergence of the minaret (Bloom 190, 58).

T. M. P. Duggan, a researcher specializing in Mediterranean history, art, and archaeology, expands the conversation around effective historical inquiry in his *Review of J. M. Bloom, The Minaret*. Here, he suggests that Bloom, ironically, overlooks one of the most significant dimensions of the minaret, the symbolic and functional importance of light within Islamic culture and architecture. While Duggan praises Bloom's book and methodology, characterizing it as the most comprehensive study of the minarets' development, he argues that Bloom remains overly concerned with architectural form and political symbolism rather than the luminous function that historically defined the structure (Duggan 2013, 363). Duggan's critique is important because it attempts to reframe the minaret not merely as an architectural form fulfilling functions of ritual or political power, but as a luminous marker deeply connected to Islamic understandings of divine light, guidance, visibility, and sacred presence.

Central to Duggan's argument is the linguistic association between the words *manār* and *manāra*. In his analysis, he emphasizes that these terms were used not only to refer to towers, but specifically to lighthouses, beacons, and places of illumination. Although Bloom acknowledges the etymological connection between the minaret and lighthouse traditions, Duggan argues that he fails to pursue the implication inherent in their relationship. Following this critique of Bloom, Duggan argues that the minarets' association with light is not incidental but fundamental. Duggan goes as far as to

claim that meanings associated with the minaret were derived less from its architectural form than from the light it emitted during the night and reflected during the day. He continues this argument, writing that scholars have mistakenly concentrated on "the support for the substance," focusing on architectural form rather than on the symbolic and practical role of illumination. Duggan supports these claims with several case studies, including the Great Mosque of Kairouan. Prior to Duggan, Bloom discussed the mosque primarily in terms of architectural transmission and its relationship to ancient Roman lighthouse precedents. Duggan, however, shifts the focus from its formal relationships and historic precedents to its function as a visible beacon, whose significance depended on luminosity as much as visibility (Duggan 2013, 357). Similarly, Duggan references the tower at Siraf, an early Islamic port city whose mosque tower simultaneously served as a lighthouse, marker, and minaret. In this case, the minaret at Siraf's religious and maritime functions were inseparable. The tower at Siraf is an early minaret that clearly illustrates the multifaceted role of light in physically guiding ships, spiritually guiding early Muslims, and signaling the presence of the Islamic community. (Duggan 2013, 358)

A more recent precedent Duggan uses to illustrate light's fundamental role in minarets is the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca, completed in 1993 and a defining landmark of modern Moroccan architecture. The mosque, commissioned by King Hassan II and designed by architect Michel Pinseau, uses light by projecting a laser beam toward the qibla. Duggan interprets this contemporary feature as a continuation of a longstanding tradition in which minarets functioned through light. The modern laser in Hassan II Mosque simply updates the older practice of illuminating minarets with lamps, flames, or reflective material. Additionally, Duggan discusses the unfinished Hassan Tower and the Huaisheng Mosque, both of which served multiple purposes as markers, lighthouses, and minarets. In each of these cases, light is shown to be elemental in transforming the towers into instruments of orientation and symbolic communication. (Duggan 2013, 362-365)

Through historical descriptions of illuminated minarets, Duggan further strengthens his arguments. He cites the architectural historian Robert Hillenbrand, who notes that by 1186, lamps placed atop minarets in Khurasan were sufficiently common that chroniclers barely remarked upon it (Duggan 2013, 363). Duggan interprets this casual reference as evidence that illumination was an accepted and widespread function of the minaret. He also refers to accounts by Venetian diplomat Ottavio Bon, who described Ramadan lamps surrounding Istanbul's minarets in the seventeenth century. Additionally, Duggan references Richard Francis Burton, a British explorer, who documented oil lamps hanging from the minarets of Medina in the nineteenth century. Duggan also discusses how the reflective qualities of minarets underscore their symbolism. In his text, he mentions glazed tilework, metallic coverings, and even reports a brass-covered minaret in Zaranj, ordered by Ya'qub ibn al-Layth (Duggan 2013, 362-363). These material considerations and their daytime reflective properties suggested that light was likely a significant factor in minaret design, transforming the minaret into a structure that captures and radiates sunlight during the day while supporting visible lamps at night. Through these examples, Duggan helps foster confidence in the claim that light was not an exception, but an essential feature in Islamic structures, past and present.

Duggan goes further in his argument about the central role of light in minaret designs by more explicitly highlighting the concept of light in Islamic theology. One way he does this is by citing the notable verse in Surah al-Nur (24:35) that describes God as "the Light of the heavens and the earth." Here, he argues the illuminated minaret acted as a material reminder or symbol of this metaphysical concept (Duggan 2013, 364). In Duggan's interpretation, the minaret's symbolic power lay not in its height or form, but in the light it carried. Considering the etymological roots of the word *manār(a)*, Duggan argues that the minaret became analogous to a candlestick or lampstand supporting sacred illumination. With these positions in mind, he argues that Minarets should be understood alongside the history of mosque lamps,

candle holders, and other luminous objects that reflected and amplified light within Islamic sacred spaces (Duggan 2013, 364). Furthermore, Duggan believes that this emphasis on light helps explain why the minaret spread so successfully despite early Islamic anxieties about the concept of *bida'a* or innovation. Because the first mosques established lacked a minaret, later mosques' towers could easily be seen as architectural innovations within the religion, ones that threatened the "purity" and humility that characterized early Islamic sacred spaces. In response to this concern, Duggan argues that the symbolic associations of light with divine guidance, revelation, and sacred truth helped the minaret gain acceptance across the Islamic world (Duggan 2013, 360-361). The towers' function as luminous objects helped deepen their connection to Quranic and mystical traditions surrounding the divine *Nur* or light. Consequently, the minaret was accepted not simply because it was functional or politically beneficial, but because its luminous symbolism resonated profoundly within Islamic religious culture.

Although Duggan presents a coherent argument for considering luminated minarets in light of Islamic theology, it may have been further strengthened by noting Islamic reservations about the construction of tall buildings. In Islamic theology, towers, among other forms of vertical architecture, are commonly read as signs of human hubris and sometimes as direct challenges to God's authority. Various verses in the Quran and hadith draw attention to magnificent structures that served as signs, whether through their destruction or preservation, of God's power over apparently invincible rulers, tribes, or people. One example of the negative connotation ascribed to monumental architecture can be found in Surah Al-Fajr (89:6-8) when God says, "Have you not considered how your Lord dealt with 'Aad – [With] Iram – who had lofty pillars, The likes of whom had never been created in the land" (Nasr 2015, 1510). Here, Allah (SWT) uses the "lofty pillars" associated with the people of 'Aad and Iram to illustrate the transience of human perceptions of power and permanence. Additionally, a variety of Islamic eschatological hadiths warn about monumental or extravagant architecture as

a sign of the end times. One of the most frequently cited eschatological hadiths related to architecture is found in *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, where Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is said to have warned Muslims against the “barefoot, naked, destitute shepherds competing in constructing tall buildings” (Ibn Majah 2007, 116). Similarly, and in another *sahih* (authentic) hadith, the Prophet (PBUH) is claimed to have said, warning his contemporaries, that “The Final Hour will not be established until the people compete with each other in the building of [elaborate] Mosques” (Ibn Majah 2007, 485-486). Highlighting the wariness Muslim communities would likely have felt towards the construction of monumental structures, especially minarets, given their proximity to Islamic sacred spaces, would have strengthened Duggan’s argument about the centrality of light. These examples provide another obstacle that Muslim communities and religious leaders would have had to overlook with minaret construction. The centrality of light, as both a sacred symbol and a functional element, may have been one of the most potent factors behind the creation and proliferation of minarets.

Ultimately, Duggan’s response reshapes the debate initiated by Creswell and Bloom. Whereas Creswell focused on formal architectural evolution, and Bloom redirected attention toward philology and political history, Duggan argues that both scholars insufficiently addressed the symbolic and functional role of light itself. His critique suggests that the true meaning of the minaret cannot be understood through architectural form alone.

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