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The Mediterranean Seminar Review

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Review Editor: Andrew Devereux (History: University of California San Diego)

Editorial Assistant: Aaron Stamper (History: Princeton University)

Bloom, Jonathan M. *Architecture of the Islamic West: North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula, 700-1800*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9780300218701. 320 pages. 281 color + b/w illus. Hardcover \$65.00.

Reviewed by: Cristelle Baskins, Tufts University (Cristelle.baskins@tufts.edu)

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Jonathan Bloom's *Architecture of the Islamic West* comes at the height of a long and distinguished career. It offers a capacious review of monuments dating from 700-1800 C.E., drawn from decades of study and research. Yet, the book wears its erudition lightly and aims to be accessible to all:

This is a deliberately old-fashioned type of book, written for the widest possible audience, ranging from curious general readers and travelers to students and specialists in other fields of architectural history, art history, Islamic studies, or Mediterranean studies...I have tried to present a fair and balanced summary of the evidence and previous scholarship. (pp. 9-10)

In fact, Bloom corrects an older architectural history that bifurcated the eastern and western Mediterranean, leading to the near erasure of the Maghrib. He critiques studies that jump from Umayyad Cordoba, to Norman Sicily, to Mamluk Egypt, and on to the Ottoman empire. Bloom forcefully argues that we should understand the western Mediterranean as a coherent region spanning al-Andalus and Ifriqiya. Bloom also expresses caution about complex iconographic readings, citing Michael Baxandall's "patterns of intention." He challenges scholars to prove that contemporaries would have expected or appreciated iconographic programs. He notes that, for the most part, builders, masons, and craftsmen applied traditional planning methods, addressed practical concerns, and aimed to please. Patrons and their projects should be seen as engaging in dialogue with local examples rather than referencing buildings in far off Syria only preserved in memory or mentioned vaguely in texts. For some readers this return to the building *per se* will appear as a welcome correction; for others, it may seem overly reticent. But all can benefit from the thorough chronological account presented here. Bloom's revisionist stance can only spur scholars to make better use of evidence and offer stronger argumentation.

Bloom lays out the problem of uneven survival: Iberia and Sicily preserve Islamic palaces, while their mosques or madrasas have been converted or destroyed. In the Maghrib, in contrast, few secular buildings have been preserved and sacred architecture predominates. The author also explains how lack of access to mosques poses a major challenge for non-Muslim scholars. Each chapter opens with a helpful historical introduction followed by close description of the buildings, along with maps, plans, and color illustrations. At times an old black and white photograph reveals the state of a building before damage, alteration, or modern reconstruction.

Bloom avoids overly technical terminology and strives for clear, straightforward prose. He also takes care to define unfamiliar terms, such as hypostyle, spolia, or lambrequin. Those coming to the field for the first time (or even experienced readers), will find fascinating the roots of names or terms: Kairouan, from “garrison”; Marinids and merino wool; *ziliġ* (mosaic) derived from *azulejo*." Bloom engages etymology not for its own sake but rather to highlight the overlapping centuries and interrelated cultures of the western Mediterranean: Berber tribes, Romans, Arabs, Portuguese, Spaniards, Ottomans, and more.

Two topics of longstanding interest to Bloom run throughout the chapters. The first is the origin and development of the minaret. The second is the impact of paper on architectural planning. While non-specialists might take minarets and paper for granted, Bloom demonstrates that the minaret was a contested form only slowly accepted and formalized. Likewise, the gradual introduction of paper eventually allowed for the planning of complex structures. But we should remember that paper was more often reserved for books rather than made available to builders. Bloom suggests that modern architectural historians would do well to keep in mind the scarcity of paper in the region and to depend less on models or comparisons based on plans.

In the final chapter, Bloom looks at the reception of Islamic architecture, starting with the Normans in Sicily and ending with Epcot Center at Disney World in Florida. This material is worthy of a book length study in itself and touches on a rapidly expanding sub-field in architectural history. Equally tantalizing is Bloom’s mention of the production of “pioneering” scholarship under colonial regimes in the 19th-20th centuries. I suspect that many instructors will assign this section to their students before launching into the historical material. Since students come to classrooms already conversant with Orientalism, Post-Colonialism, and Decolonizing curriculum, they will find the Epilogue an accessible point of entry.

Note: I offer a small correction regarding the fortress of La Goletta in Tunis (pp. 217, 219). The original tower and foundation date to Kheir ed-dine, the corsair who worked for the Ottomans. The structure was rebuilt and expanded by the Spanish. See Elizabeth Kassler-Taub, “Building with Water: The Rise of the Island-City in the Early Modern Mediterranean,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 78 (2019): 145-166.



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Author's Response:

The author was provided with an opportunity to respond to the review, but declined.