

The Minaret

*Symbol of Faith
and Power*



WRITTEN BY JONATHAN M. BLOOM

Among the most distinctive sights in any Islamic city are the minarets, tall slender towers attached to the city's mosques from which muezzins call the faithful to prayer five times a day. Indeed, the minaret—along with the dome—is one of the most characteristic forms of Islamic architecture, and the sound of the *adhan*, the call to prayer, is as typical of Cairo or Istanbul or Riyadh as the sound of bells is of Rome. In West and East alike, minarets have become such a distinctive symbol of Islam that political cartoonists use them as shorthand to indicate a Middle Eastern or Islamic setting, and authors and publishers use the word similarly to refer to the Muslim world or Islam itself.

Bishop Kenneth Cragg, for example, titled his classic study of Muslim-Christian relations The Call of the Minaret; the American Friends of the Middle East published the "Minaret" series of pamphlets in the 1950's; and there are periodicals named Minaret or The Minaret or Manara (the Arabic term) published in the United States, Pakistan, Sweden and several Arab countries—as well as a Web portal of the same name.

Despite the recent proliferation of skyscrapers and television towers, soaring minarets still give a distinctively "Islamic" look to the skylines of cities from Morocco to Malaysia. And though tape recordings may have replaced and loudspeakers amplified many "live" muezzins, minarets remain essential elements in mosque design the world over, and architects are repeatedly challenged to reinterpret this traditional form in new and distinctive ways.

In recent years, as Muslims have established communities and built houses of worship in European and American cities, minarets have come to mingle with the traditional verticals of western cityscapes, often with surprising results. In Oxford, England, the university town whose "dreaming spires" were commemorated by the poet Matthew Arnold in the 19th century, a furor erupted in the summer of 2000 when the Egyptian architect Abdel Wahed El- Wakil proposed to erect a 10-story minaret on the playing fields of historic Magdalen College as part of a new Islamic center. In Frederick, Maryland, whose church spires, as Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, gave the town "a poetical look...as if seers and dreamers might live there," the local Muslim community was recently denied a construction permit to build a mosque, although Frederick's "clustered spires" had long been obscured by blocky, angular office buildings.

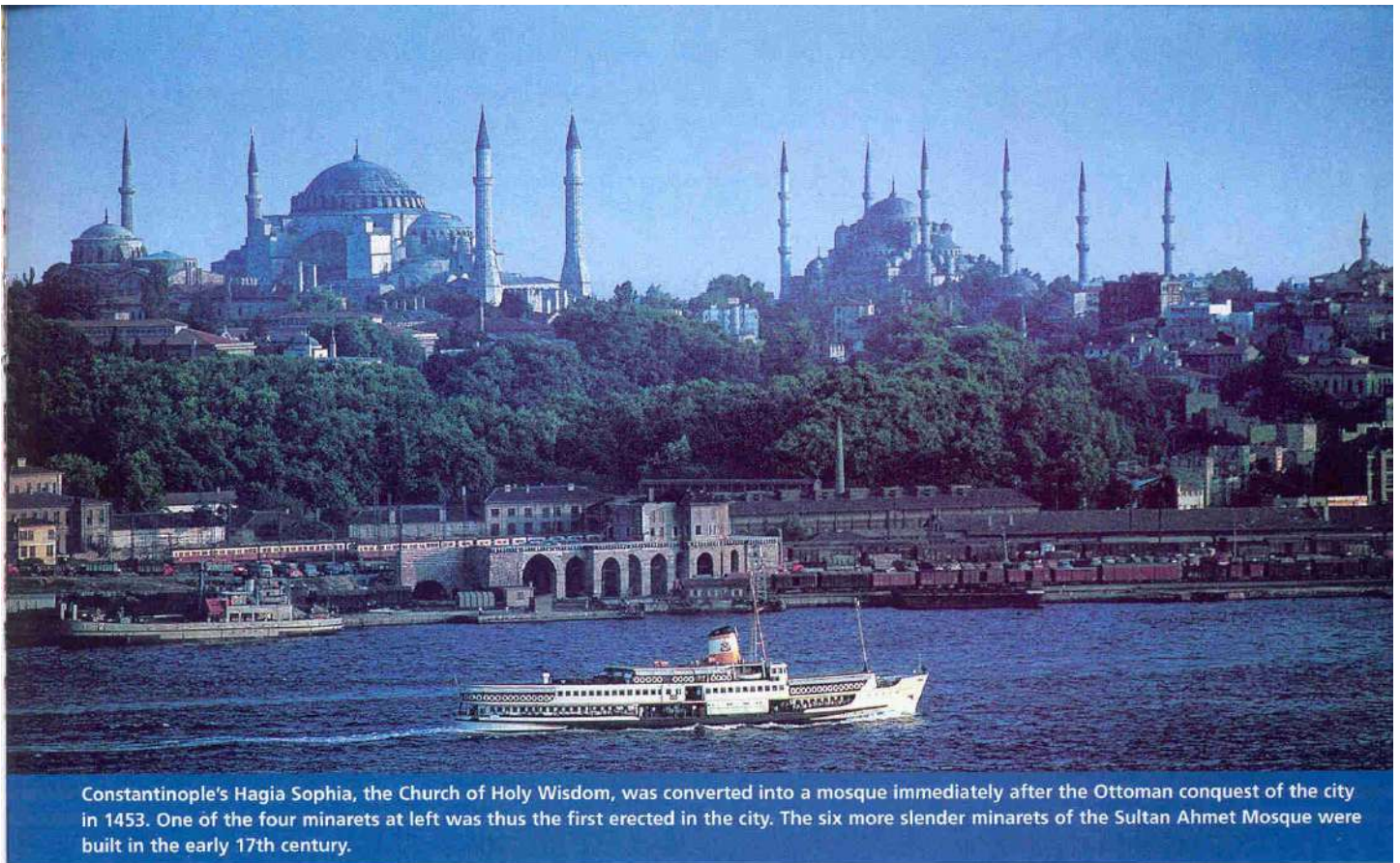
Once, a muezzin could rely on the strength of his lungs to lift the call to prayer above the clamor of a traditional city's activities, but today's muezzin cannot be heard without amplification above the modern city's incessant traffic and industrial noise. And outside the Muslim world, municipal noise restrictions often limit the volume at which Muslims can call the faithful to prayer, thus obviating the need for a muezzin's tower—and giving rise to imaginative substitutes: In some British cities with large Muslim populations, enterprising Muslims have brought the *adhan* into the electronic age by "beeping" the daily prayer times on an Internet website and broadcasting a text alert to Muslim subscribers' mobile phones.



In today's cities, muezzins need amplification.

Whether or not minarets are actually used to call the faithful to prayer, they remain potent symbols of Islam, and have sometimes been targeted accordingly. During the horrendous civil war in Kosovo, for example, Serbian forces regularly placed explosives inside minarets, not only destroying the towers but ensuring that they would collapse onto and damage the adjacent mosques. By this destruction, the Serbs hoped to erase what they saw as signs of centuries of Ottoman oppression.

Such clashes between competing visual cultures are unfortunately not only recent news, although modern weapons and explosives tend to make the results more dramatic. After the Ottoman sultan Fatih Mehmet conquered the Byzantine capital of Constantinople in May 1453, one of his first acts was to order a wooden minaret added to the 900-year-old church of Hagia Sophia to signal its conversion into a mosque. The temporary wooden minaret was soon rebuilt in stone and three others added for good measure. As Mehmet and his successors built other mosques in their new capital, Istanbul's skyline came to be punctuated by dozens of slender, arrow-like minarets that gave the Ottoman capital a distinctive aspect and signaled to all that it was no longer the capital of Christian Byzantium but the new capital of an Islamic empire (opposite page, top).



Meanwhile, at the western end of the Mediterranean, as Christians wrested the Iberian Peninsula back from Muslims in the late Middle Ages, the victors transformed the great stone or brick minarets of Andalusian congregational mosques into church belltowers. The magnificent 10th-century minaret in Cordoba, once the pride of the Muslims' city, was encased in more stonework to give it a "Christian" look, and topped with a belfry and a set of bells. Tourists can still climb the remains of the old minaret, intact inside the belltower. Similarly, the celebrated 12th-century tower of the Almohad congregational mosque of Seville was given an elaborate belfry between 1558 and 1568 by the Andalusian architect Herncin Ruiz the Younger. Where once the minaret had been crowned with four large gilded bronze balls, Ruiz crowned the new belfry with a revolving human figure—an allegory of Faith—that serves as a weathervane and gives the building its popular name, "La Giralda" (Photo 1, page 30).

From the perspective of the history of architecture, these episodes can be seen as rounds in an ancient game of architectural "tit for tat." Some 500 years earlier, Christians in ninth-century Cordoba had accused the Muslims of pulling down the "pinnacles"—that is, the belltowers—of their churches and "extoll[ing] their prophet" from their "towers and foggy heights." The Cordoban theologian Eulogius histrionically recounted how his grandfather had had to clap his hands over his ears to shield himself from the muezzin's cry.

But it is not only Christians who have objected to minarets: At certain times and places some Muslims believed—and some still believe—that minarets have no place in the design of mosques. In many parts of the Muslim world—Malaysia, Kashmir and East Africa, for example—tower minarets were virtually unknown before modern times. In the 10th century, however, the expansion of visual communication and travel has homogenized regional architectural styles into an international "Islamic" norm of domes and soaring towers. Nevertheless, one expert, Dr. Mohamad Tajuddin bin Mohamad Rasdi of the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, recently stated that modern architects

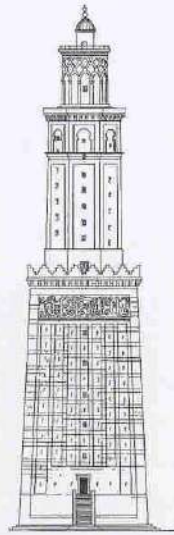
Contemporary architects reinterpret traditional forms: Sherefudin's White Mosque in Visoko, Bosnia-Herzegovina won an Aga Khan Award in 1983. It is now destroyed.



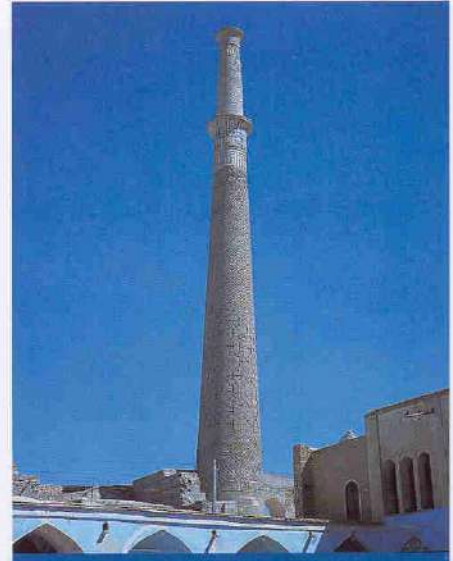
and their clients who build monumental mosques with fancy minarets, domes and muqarnas ignore the teachings of the Prophet.



(1) The Giralda, Seville



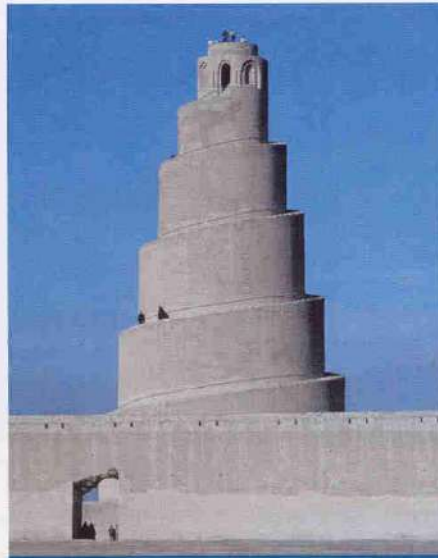
(2) The Pharos, Alexandria



(3) The Minaret of 'Ali, Isfahan



(4) The Kalayan minaret, Bukhara



(5) The Malwiya, Samarra



(6) Minaret of the Great Mosque, Damascus

Other Muslims may differ with Dr. Rasdi's interpretation of Islamic tradition, but there can be no doubt that while the beautiful *adhan* clearly dates back to the time of the Prophet, the minaret is certainly a later invention. When Islam was revealed in the early seventh century, Jews called the faithful to prayer with the *shofar* (ram's horn) and Christians used a bell or a wooden gong or clacker. Indeed, the sound of a bell wafting in the breeze from a distant monastery is a frequent image in pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry. In this context, we can well understand how 'Abd Allah ibn Zayd, one of the Prophet's companions, dreamt that he saw someone calling the Muslims to prayer from the roof of the mosque. After he told the Prophet about his dream, Muhammad recognized it as a vision from God and instructed Bilal, an Abyssinian freedman and early convert to Islam, "Rise, Bilal, and summon all to prayer! " Bilal, who was known for his beautiful voice, did so, thereby becoming the first muezzin. (The word *muezzin* comes from the Arabic *mu'adh-dhin*, or "one who gives the *adhan*.")

According to Islamic tradition, Bilal and his successors normally gave the call to prayer from a high or public place, such as the doorway or roof of a mosque, an elevated neighboring structure or even the city wall, but never from a tall tower. Indeed, it is said that 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's cousin, son-in-law and fourth caliph, ordered a tall *mi'dhana* (a place

from which the call to prayer was given) torn down, because its height enabled the muezzin to see into the homes around the mosque. The call to prayer, Ali believed, should not be given from any place higher than the roof of the mosque. It is for this same reason that, in later years, blind men have often been selected and trained as muezzins, for they are unable to inadvertently violate the privacy of other people's homes.

Since tower minarets were unknown in Muhammad's lifetime and for many decades after his death, how then did the tower come to be so identified as the preeminent architectural symbol of Islam? And why do minarets take such different shapes—ranging from the tall, pencil-slim towers of Ottoman mosques through the multistoried towers of Egypt to the square shafts of North Africa and Spain—while such other features of the mosque as *minbars* (pulpits) and *mihirabs* (the wall niche marking the direction of Makkah) are remarkably consistent in form?

In trying to understand how the tower got its special meaning in Islamic societies, scholars have attempted—with mixed success—to trace minarets back to various traditions of tower building in the pre-Islamic cultures of Eurasia. Over a century ago, for example, A. J. Butler, the British historian of Roman Egypt, speculated that the multistoried form of the typical Cairene minaret of the Mamluk period might have been derived from the Pharos (lighthouse) of Alexandria, one of the wonders of the ancient world, which—although long destroyed—is known from descriptions by ancient writers to have been square in the lower part of its shaft, octagonal in the middle and cylindrical at the top (Photo 2). Butler's contemporary, the German architectural historian Hermann Thiersch, elaborated this theory by publishing a detailed study of the history of the Pharos. He showed that the ancient tower had stood well into Islamic times and could have inspired Mamluk builders in Egypt.

Even Thiersch acknowledged, however, that the answer was not quite that simple. Not all minarets had three different cross-sections like the Egyptian ones—some had entirely square shafts and some had cylindrical ones. He therefore suggested that square minarets, Tower minaret such as those found in Syria, North Africa and Spain, were derived from church towers. His church-tower theory was strengthened by the survival the minaret of the Arabic term *sawma'a*, used in medieval North Africa and Spain to refer to minarets. Derived from the Arabic word once used to describe the cell of a Christian monk, *sawma'a* is the source of the obsolete Spanish word, *zoma*, or "tower."

But this theory still left cylindrical towers unexplained. Thiersch believed that cylindrical minarets, like those common in Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia (Photos 3, 4), derived from Roman and Byzantine monumental victory columns—an explanation that supported his view that minarets were erected principally as symbols of Islam's triumph over other religions. But while it was relatively easy to see how square church towers in Syria might have led to square minarets in Syria, Thiersch was unable to explain how—or why—something like Trajan's Column in Rome could have inspired Central Asian builders to erect cylindrical brick minarets!

Another group of European scholars sought the minaret's origins in the ancient nomadic cultures of Central Asia and India. The Austrian art-historian Josef Strzygowski (1862-1941), for example, compared the round brick minarets of Iran and Central Asia to round campaniles in Italy and early medieval round towers in Ireland, and hypothesized that all these towers derived from a common source in the folk arts of the steppe nomads of Asia, who had migrated to western Europe in the early Middle Ages. Ernst Diez (1878-1961), his fellow Austrian and a historian of Islamic art, interpreted minarets similarly as vestiges of the ancient Indo-Aryan practice of erecting wooden posts to represent deities. In some respects Diez was following in the footsteps of the 19th-century British architectural historian James Fergusson, who believed that the minarets of Indian Islamic architecture were adaptations of Buddhist and Jaina towers or pillars of victory. According to Fergusson, minarets had in turn inspired the Chinese to build pagodas—except for spiral pagodas, which he thought had been inspired by ziggurats, the stepped towers that the Sumerians and Babylonians had erected in Mesopotamia from the third millennium BCE!

Still other experts thought that minarets were themselves direct descendants of the Mesopotamian ziggurats. Many have remarked on the supposed resemblance of the Malwiya (Photo 5), the SO-meter (162') spiral tower erected at Samarra, Iraq in the middle of the ninth century, to a ziggurat. However, though there is a centuries-old tradition of representing the Tower of Babel, the most famous ziggurat of all, as a spiral tower, in fact, modern archeologists have determined that only a few ziggurats—such as the one at Khorsabad and perhaps another at Babylon—actually did spiral, and those were square, not round, spirals. The vast majority of ziggurats were actually square stepped towers, with separate flights of stairs at right angles to their sides, so whatever inspired the Malwiya, it was not a ziggurat of the usual type.

Indeed, Muslims commonly associated ziggurats in general; and the Tower of Babel in particular, with idol-worship.

Commentators on Sura 16 of the Qur'an ("The Bee"), for example, understand verse 26, which says that God "struck at the foundation of their building, and then the roof fell down upon them, from above them," as a reference to the immense tower that Nimrud built at Babel in order to ascend to heaven. It is therefore most unlikely that pious Muslims would have considered a ziggurat to be an appropriate model for any addition to an Islamic religious building. Clearly, the tower must have had other associations for Muslims, and any explanation of the origins and meaning of the minaret must begin by searching for those associations. The first mosque to have had towers is the Great Mosque of Damascus, erected early in the eighth century, which had relatively short, square towers—some of them are still visible today—at its four corners. These structures, however, were left over from the building's earlier incarnation as the enclosure surrounding the Roman temple to Jupiter that once stood on the site (Photo 6). Historians do not know what purpose, if any, the Roman towers may have served in Umayyad times, although it is quite possible that muezzins would have climbed them to give the call to prayer from their tops. Many centuries later, two of these short towers were surmounted by taller towers in the Mamluk style and a new third tower was built on the north side of the mosque.

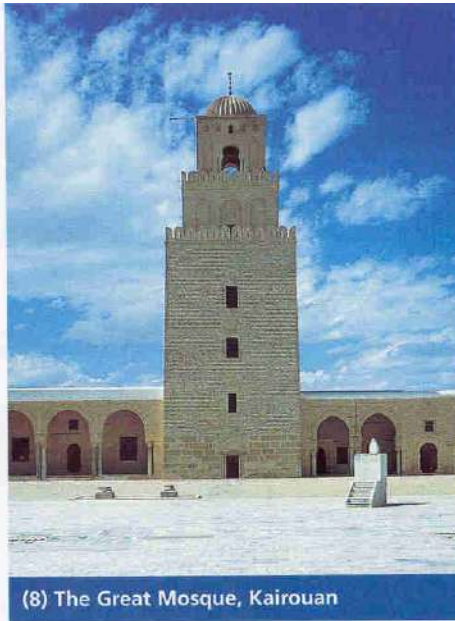


Tower minarets were unknown in the Prophet Muhammad's time.

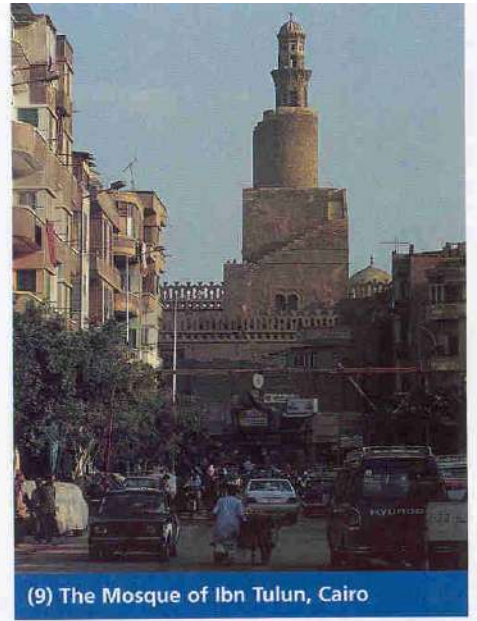
Scholars have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to trace the minaret to pre-Islamic tower traditions throughout Eurasia.



(7) Fathy's staircase minaret, New Gournia



(8) The Great Mosque, Kairouan



(9) The Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo

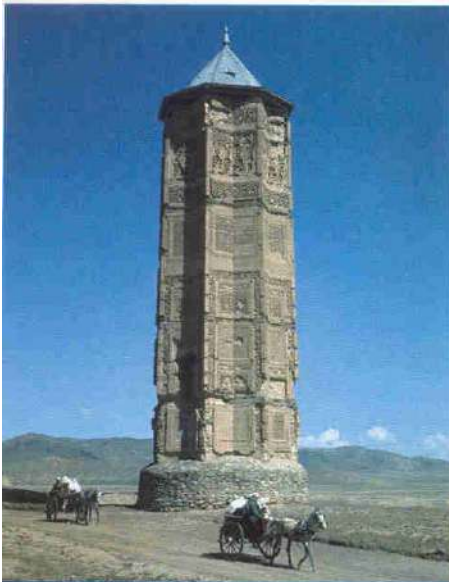
The first mosque to have had purpose-built towers was the Mosque of the Prophet at Madinah, which was extensively remodeled by the Umayyad caliph al-Walid in the early eighth century, at just the same time that he was having the Mosque of Damascus rebuilt. Unlike the Damascus mosque, nothing survives of the Umayyad mosque at Madinah, but according to historical accounts, it too had a tower in each of its four corners. However, the Madinah towers were slender and tall, measuring nearly fifty cubits (something like 25 meters or 82') high. The historical sources call those towers either *manar* or *manara*, but do not reveal the purpose they were expected to serve. At approximately the same time, the Umayyad caliphs ordered similar tall, slender towers erected in the corners of the Great Mosque in Makkah (also repeatedly repaired and restored in later times), but no other mosques had towers at this time. One must imagine that in both cases the towers were erected not for the call to prayer—which was given from all mosques—but to mark and proclaim the particular sanctity of the sites they adorned.

The first mosque built with tower minarets was the eighth-century reconstruction of the Mosque of the Prophet at Madinah by the Umayyad caliph al-Walid.

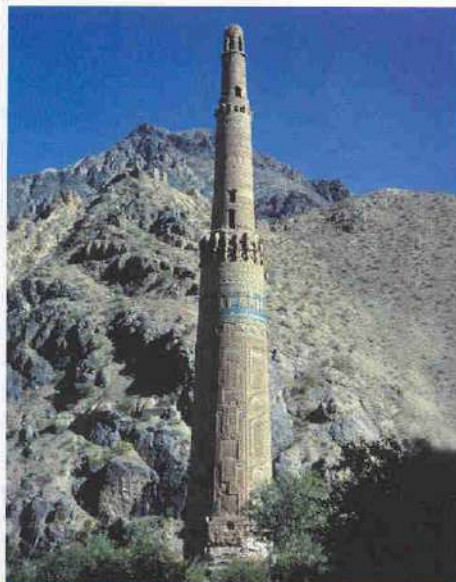
In contrast, some early mosques—though certainly not all—are known to have had structures on their roofs used to shelter the muezzin when he gave the call to prayer. These small structures, normally called "sentry-box" or "staircase" minarets, were reached by a staircase outside the mosque, and they resemble a small version of the *minbar*, or pulpit, normally found within congregational mosques. The earliest surviving example is at the Great Mosque of Bosra in Syria, where a narrow external flight of steps leads to the mosque's roof. This staircase can be identified with a fragmentary inscription (now in Istanbul) which refers to the construction of a *mi'dhana* in the year 720 or 721.

Muslims have continued to build staircase minarets over the centuries in several areas, especially in remote areas of Upper Egypt, East Africa, Anatolia and along the Gulf coast of Iran. The Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy, for example, included one in the mosque he designed along traditional lines for the village of New Gouma near Luxor (Photo 7). Early Muslims had a number of different terms for "a tower attached to a mosque from which the call to prayer is given." The most common word, *manara*, and its relatives *manar* and *minar* describe neither the tower's supposed function nor its form. *Manara*, from which the English word minaret ultimately derives, is a "place or thing that gives light"; *manar* is specifically a "marker" or "sign." *Sawma'a*, as we have seen, was used in North Africa and Spain. *Mi'dhana*, "the place of the *adhan*," is the most accurate term, but it didn't refer specifically to a tower and wasn't all that common. Of course, all of these terms eventually became a synonym, but originally each had limited geographical currency or referred to different types of towers. Thus, a square tower in Spain or North Africa was called a *sawma'a*, while a cylindrical tower in Iran was a *manar*.

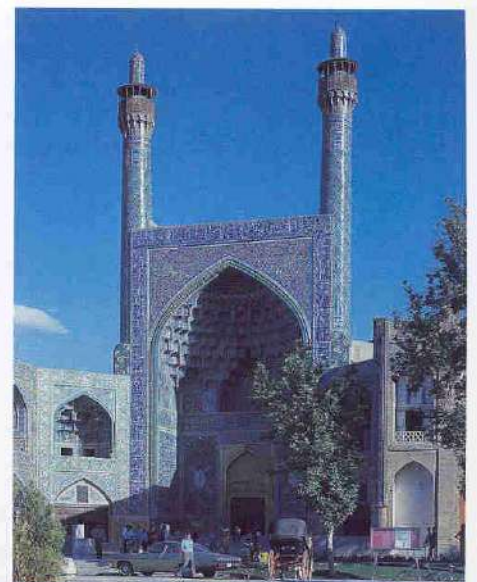
It was only in the ninth century, when the Abbasid caliphs ruled from the shores of the Atlantic to the deserts of Central Asia, that towers began to be consistently attached to mosques. Whereas the holy shrines at Makkah and Madinah had multiple towers set at the outer corners of the sanctuaries, Abbasid mosques were normally built with only one tower, located on the wall of the mosque opposite the *mihrab*—the niche in the Makkah—facing wall that marks the direction of prayer. Perhaps the most famous example of an Abbasid tower is the great Malwiya at Samarra, but there is also a much smaller tower of the same shape attached to the nearby mosque of Abu Dulaf.



(10) The Tower of Mas'ud III, Ghazni



(11) The Minaret of Jam, Firuzkuh



(12) The Shah Mosque, Isfahan

The historical sources do not exactly explain why Muslims started attaching a single tower to their mosques at this time, but evidence suggests that the single tower signaled the growing importance of the congregational mosque as a religious institution and as the center of the *'ulama*, the class of religious scholars that was crystallizing at this time. Whereas in early Islamic times great height had been an attribute associated with royal power in the palaces that towered over neighboring houses and mosques, by the ninth century height came to be associated with religious power instead. Abbasid palaces might be immense but they remained relatively close to the ground, while mosques—or at least the towers attached to them—had an exclusive claim to height. Thus, the minaret served the purpose indicated by its most popular name: it was introduced primarily as a marker or indicator of the presence of Islam, not specifically as a place to give the

call to prayer. Though Mesopotamian builders erected helicoidal spiral towers like the Malwiya, their model was not normally imitated elsewhere in the Abbasid Empire. Instead, builders in each province followed models in their own architectural traditions. At Kairouan in Tunisia, for example, where the Great Mosque was erected in the mid-ninth century by the Aghlabid governors for the Abbasids, a multi storied tower was built of small stones laid like bricks (Photo 8). The massive square shaft has slightly sloping walls that give the building a sense of great solidity—a design based not on an Abbasid model but on a Roman lighthouse which once stood nearby on the Mediterranean coast.

Only in Egypt was the Mesopotamian type of spiral tower copied, namely at the mosque erected by Ahmad ibn Tulun, the semi-independent Abbasid governor of the province in the late ninth century. The present stone tower (Photo 9), with its spiral top, is a later replacement of the original brick one, which was also spiral in shape. Contemporary sources tell us, however, that the call to prayer was normally given not from the tower but from the top of a multistoried fountain-house in the mosque's courtyard, while the tower was used for other purposes.

An account that shows that Egyptians didn't consider the tower an integral part of the mosque comes from Nasir-i Khusraw, a Persian visitor to Egypt in the mid-11th century. He reported that the descendants of Ibn Tulun had sold the mosque to the caliph for 30,000 gold coins. When the descendants then tried to tear down the tower, the caliph demanded to know what they were doing, since he had just bought the mosque from them. They replied that, although they had sold him the mosque, the price did not include the tower; in the end, the caliph had to pay another 5000 dinars for it. Though the story bears a certain resemblance to a popular Jaha folktale, it does reveal that mosque and tower were still considered separate structures in the 11th century.

Elsewhere, the tower was becoming an essential architectural feature of the mosque. Over 60 towers dating from between the early 11th century and the mid-13th still stand in Iran, the Central Asian republics and Afghanistan, either attached to mosques or isolated. Generally these are smooth cylinders of brick with an internal spiral stairway leading to a balcony supported by a deep *muqarnas* cornice. The exterior is usually covered with broad bands of geometric patterns separated by narrow bands and inscriptions. Sometimes the towers stand on low bases, and sometimes the shafts are decorated with lobes, flanges or decorative arcades. A fine example is the Tower of Mas'ud ill, built in the early 12th century at Ghazni in today's Afghanistan (Photo 10). Only the lower 20-meter (64') section remains, but it is magnificent: Its plan is an eight-pointed star, and seven bands of ornamental brickwork, terra-cotta panels and stucco decorate the shaft, including an inscription band giving its patron's name and titles. The tower's upper section fell to an earthquake only in 1902, after eight centuries; it remains a mystery how medieval builders ensured that such tall and slender structures stood for so long in some of the world's most active earthquake zones. It is thought that wooden beams inside the brickwork may have provided some of the necessary tensile strength.

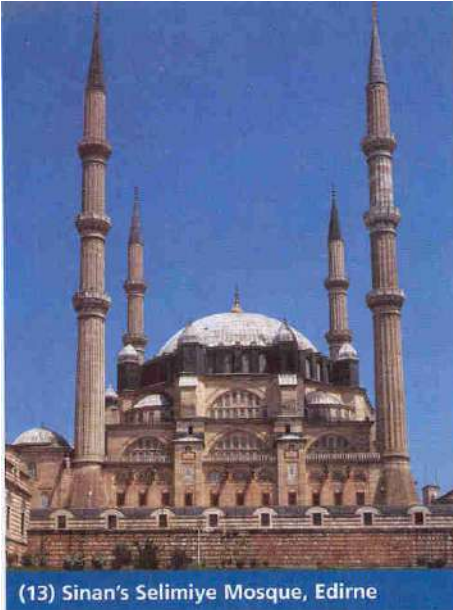
The special taste for towers in this period, when the Seljuq Turks were the dominant political force in this region, can be ascribed to the widespread recognition of the form as an appropriate symbol of Islam triumphant. For patrons with limited resources, towers were far less expensive to build than entire mosques, yet they were gratifyingly visible. Some towers that appear independent today were once attached to mosques built of sun-dried brick that have now disappeared, but other towers were conceived to be independent of any adjacent structure, and served as landmarks or beacons to guide caravans across the landscape, or to signify the presence of Islam. The most impressive of this latter type is undoubtedly the minaret of Jam (Photo 11), located in a remote Afghan valley. Scholars only reached the site, once known as Firuzkuh and serving as the capital of the Ghurid dynasty, in 1957, and the discovery of its enormous three-tiered brick minaret caused a great sensation. Standing about 65 meters (213') tall, it is decorated with a variety of geometric patterns in brick and stucco.

The builders of the Qutb Minar, which was begun in 1199 as the minaret of the Quwwat al-Islam ("Might of Islam") Mosque in Oelhi—the first great Muslim construction in northern India—were undoubtedly inspired in part by the minaret of Jam. Standing 72.5 meters (238') tall, the Qutb Minar (page 27) took decades to complete and was a potent symbol of the Muslim conquest of northern India. A century later, one of the Khalji sultans attempted to build a minaret nearby twice its size and height, but the project barely got off the ground, and only the enormous base remains as a testament to its builder's overweening ambition.

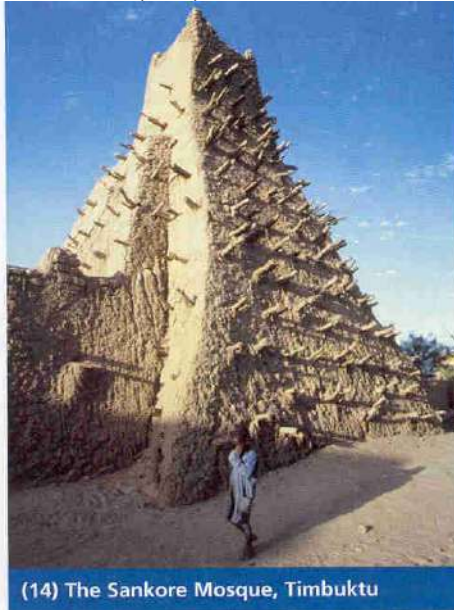
At the same time that builders were erecting taller and taller minarets, they also realized that towers could be used effectively in pairs to decorate portals and arches. This idea spread quickly from Iran both west to Anatolia and east to Afghanistan and India. Indeed, pairs of minarets flanking a portal became standard in 14th-century Iranian architecture

(Photo 12) and remained so throughout the following centuries, while a single minaret became the exception. The mosque at the Mongol capital of Sultaniyya in northwest Iran had four minarets, two flanking the portal and two flanking the principal facade, and the sultan's tomb there was crowned by eight towers. The Taj Mahal at Agra is enclosed by four elegant minarets of white marble.

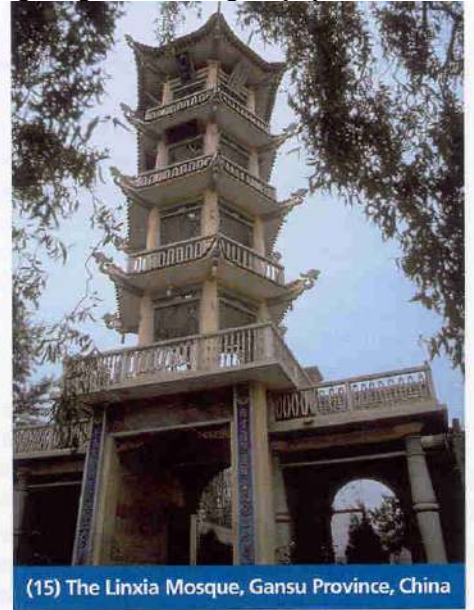
In Anatolia, which was opened to Muslim settlement after the battle of Malazgirt in 1071, the first minarets followed the Iranian model, having slender cylindrical brick shafts, sometimes decorated with glazed tiles, a circular balcony and a conical roof. The Ottomans, who expanded from northwest Anatolia into eastern Europe, further developed this type in stone, and the presence of multiple minarets came to indicate that a mosque had been founded by a sultan. The Uc Serefeli ("Three-Balcony") Mosque in Edirne, built for Sultan Murat II in 1438, is the first Ottoman mosque to have had not only multiple minarets but also multiple balconies on a single minaret. Each of its four stone towers has a differently decorated shaft; that at the northwest corner rises to 67 meters (220') and has three balconies, giving the building its popular name.



(13) Sinan's Selimiye Mosque, Edirne



(14) The Sankore Mosque, Timbuktu



(15) The Linxia Mosque, Gansu Province, China

The varied minarets of early Ottoman mosques gave way to soberer and plainer types, particularly under the masterful hand of Sinan, the greatest Ottoman architect. Sinan's mosque for Siileyman the Magnificent in Istanbul (1550-1556) has two pairs of minarets framing the courtyard: The taller two measure 76 meters (250') and have three balconies each. Sinan's mosque for Sultan Selim in Edirne (Photo 13) has four identical minarets framing the dome; each stands over 70 meters (230') tall and has three balconies reached by three nested helical staircases.

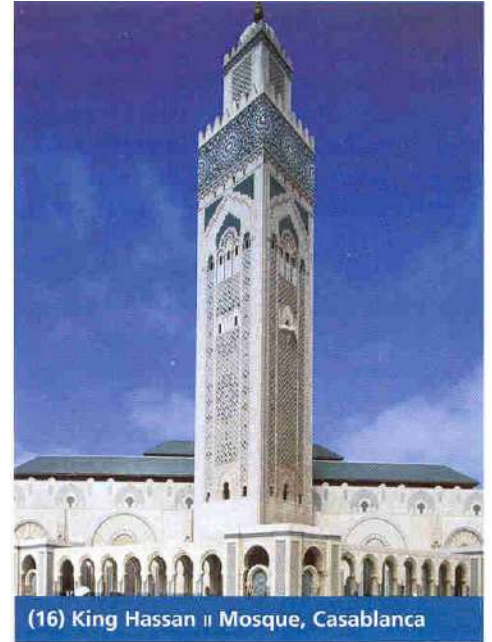
This series climaxed in the early 17th century with the Sultan Ahmet Mosque (the "Blue Mosque") in Istanbul, where six minarets—a pair with two balconies and a quartet with three balconies—frame the mosque and courtyard. Tour guides often say that the sultan provoked the ire of the theologians by surpassing the number of minarets at the sanctuary in Makkah, but this story, like many associated with minarets, is pure fancy: The mosque at Makkah had already had seven minarets for several centuries when the Sultan Ahmet Mosque was built. The engineering mastery of Ottoman architects should not be underestimated: Even the devastating earthquake of August 1999 failed to damage the great Ottoman minarets, although many lesser modern structures were toppled or rendered unsafe.

Seventeenth-century European travelers to the Ottoman Empire record that teams of muezzins gave the call to prayer antiphonally from the several balconies of minarets, but the increasing height and multiplication of minarets in Ottoman times cannot be explained by piety alone. For architects, the minarets served to frame the domed masses of the mosque; for patrons they remained a powerful symbol of Islam—and the Ottoman sultanate—triumphant. Ottoman minarets consequently became a familiar sight as Ottoman domination extended around the Mediterranean basin into Syria, Arabia, Egypt, North Africa, Greece and the Balkans. The traditional square minaret continued to hold its own in Morocco, where the Ottomans never ruled. Beyond the traditional lands of Islam in the Mediterranean basin and West Asia, minarets had a varied history. For example, in West Africa, minarets were often mud towers with slightly sloping sides and wooden projections like beam-ends (Photo 14), while along the East African coast, the staircase minaret was most common. In China, minarets were unusual. The cylindrical form of the 36-meter (120') minaret at Guanzhou (Canton) shows that it was modeled on an Iranian type, but elsewhere in China the traditional forms of portals and pagodas were adapted for use as minarets (Photo 15). In Java, the square minaret at Kudus is one of the oldest Muslim

buildings in the region. Dating from the 16th century, the brick tower differs in both material and style from the traditional timber and fiber mosques, and it shows many formal and functional similarities to indigenous Hindu gatehouses.

Minarets remain essential elements in mosque design the world over, and architects are repeatedly challenged to reinterpret this traditional form in new and distinctive ways.

Mosque builders in recent decades have generally tried to reconcile local minaret traditions with the pressures of international architectural modernism, with varying degrees of success. The Islamic Center Mosque (1957) in Washington, D.C., for example, has a Mamluk-revival stone minaret built on a steel frame. In contrast, the architect of the Sherefudin Mosque (1980; page 29) in Visoko, Bosnia-Herzegovina, brilliantly exploited the full potential of modernism in his cylindrical white minaret with a balcony detailed with green industrial tubing. The four slender, pointed, futuristic minarets of Islamabad's King Faysal Mosque (1986) anchor the building firmly to the ground. And the minaret of the King Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca is a tribute to 20th-century engineering (Photo 16): Its 200-meter (650') minaret has a pierced, square shaft enclosing a high-speed elevator. Decorated with a broad band of colored tilework and a crenelated top, it is a modernizing reinterpretation of the great towers of the Almohad period, such as the Kutubiyya in Marrakech and the Giralda in Seville. From its summit, a powerful laser beam indicates the direction of Makkah.



(16) King Hassan II Mosque, Casablanca

The minaret, we see, is at once less and more than it appeared at first sight. Although often and commonly used as a place from which to give the call to prayer, it wasn't invented for that purpose at all. Today, as cities become noisier and more crowded, the minaret faces an uncertain future as the place from which a muezzin can be heard. Nevertheless, minarets continue—and will continue—to be built, and to serve as silent but visually powerful symbols of the worldwide presence of Islam.

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