



Islamic Architecture Between Its Doctrinal Dimension and the Orientalist Perspective: The English Orientalist K.A. Creswell as a Case Study

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Abstract:

In this research paper, we worked to study the doctrinal dimension of architecture in Islam and the Orientalist stance towards it, represented in the views of the English Orientalist K.A. Creswell on Islamic architecture. We chose him based on clear scientific grounds, namely that he is an Orientalist specialized in Eastern architectural research and that he held professorial positions teaching this field at Egyptian universities, as well as military positions related to antiquities in Arab countries.

The research is divided into three sections. In the first, we defined the key terms of the study, presenting definitions of Islamic creed, Orientalism, the English Orientalist school, and Islamic architecture. We then moved to the second section of the study, where we examined the doctrinal dimension in Muslim architecture. In the third section, we researched the life and works of the Orientalist K.A. Creswell, presented his views on Islamic architecture, and concluded with a set of results.

Keywords: *Islamic Creed, Islamic Architecture, Orientalism, English Orientalist K.A. Creswell.*

L'architecture islamique entre sa dimension doctrinale et la perspective orientaliste : l'orientaliste anglais K.A. Creswell comme étude de cas

Résumé :

Dans cet article de recherche, nous avons cherché à étudier la dimension doctrinale de l'architecture dans l'islam et la position orientaliste à son égard, représentée par les opinions de l'orientaliste anglais K.A. Creswell sur l'architecture islamique. Nous l'avons choisi pour des raisons scientifiques évidentes, à savoir qu'il est un orientaliste spécialisé dans la recherche architecturale orientale et qu'il a occupé des postes de professeur dans ce domaine dans des universités égyptiennes, ainsi que des postes militaires liés aux antiquités dans les pays arabes.

La recherche est divisée en trois sections. Dans la première, nous avons défini les termes clés de l'étude, en présentant les définitions de la croyance islamique, de l'orientalisme, de l'école orientaliste anglaise et de l'architecture islamique. Nous sommes ensuite passés à la deuxième partie de l'étude, où nous avons examiné la dimension doctrinale de l'architecture musulmane. Dans la troisième partie, nous avons étudié la vie et l'œuvre de l'orientaliste K.A. Creswell, présenté ses points de vue sur l'architecture islamique et conclu par une série de résultats.

Mots-clés : *croyance islamique, architecture islamique, orientalisme, orientaliste anglais K.A. Creswell.*



Introduction

Orientalism has taken an interest in the East in general and the Islamic world in particular, introducing it into its research laboratories, dissecting it from all its aspects and branches, without neglecting any field related to religion, Islamic heritage, or Islamic civilization.

Islamic architecture is considered one of the most important material manifestations of Islamic civilization, as it mirrors the spiritual and doctrinal Islamic dimension that is embodied in architectural structures reflecting Islamic teachings.

Orientalists have paid attention to Islamic architecture, and their stances varied between those who were fair in recognizing what Islamic civilization offered in this field of art, and those who believed that Muslims did not create an architectural art of their own, claiming that all architectural structures in Islamic lands were merely a blend of Persian, Sassanian, Christian, and Coptic influences, among others.

The English Orientalist K.A. Creswell is one of those interested in researching Islamic architecture and produced many studies and works in this field, which have come to be regarded as references for Orientalist studies in this domain.

Problem Statement

From the above ideas, the problem of this study becomes clear:

What is the position of the English Orientalist K.A. Creswell on Islamic architecture?

Objectives

- To study one of the most important fields of Orientalist research in Islamic heritage, which has been neglected in Islamic studies—namely architecture—because of its direct connection with Islamic civilization.
- To analyze Orientalist stances on Islamic architecture and attempt to classify them.

Axes of the Study

1. Defining the terms of the research: Islamic creed - Islamic architecture - Orientalism - The English Orientalist school.
2. The doctrinal dimension in Islamic architecture.
3. The Orientalist K.A. Creswell and his perception of Islamic architecture.

1. Defining the Research Terms

Defining and clarifying terms is a crucial step in any study. We chose to begin this research by tracing the meanings of the following terms: Islamic creed, Orientalism, and Islamic architecture.

1.1. Islamic Creed

Linguistically: The word *'Aqeedah* (creed) is derived from the verb *'aqada*, meaning to bind or tie something firmly. The noun *'aqeedah* means “that which is tied or bound.” The root conveys meanings such as connecting one thing to another, tying firmly, and strengthening by binding—as in the Qur’anic verse: “*And from the evil of the blowers in knots.*” The word also carries the sense of affirmation, as in “*...and those with whom you have made a covenant, give them their share.*”



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Later, it came to be used in the sense of firm belief or conviction—that is, what a person firmly believes in his heart so that it becomes a judgment not open to doubt due to its stability and rootedness in the soul.

1.1.1. *Terminologically:*

According to Ibn Khaldun, creed is “a set of self-evident truths accepted by reason, revelation, and natural disposition, upon which a person firmly closes his heart, attaining a settled conviction that produces in the soul a firm disposition called faith or belief in divine unity.” ‘Adud al-Din al-Ijī defined creed as “what is intended by belief, such as saying ‘God Almighty is knowing, powerful, hearing, and seeing’; these are called articles of belief, and the science of theology was codified to preserve them.”

Thus, Islamic creed is the firm belief in God and in what He deserves in His divinity, lordship, names, and attributes; and belief in His angels, books, messengers, the Last Day, and divine decree—both good and bad—as well as all that is established by authentic texts among the fundamentals of religion and matters of the unseen.

1.1.2. *Orientalism*

Linguistically: The word derives from *east*, meaning the direction of sunrise. The prefix “*ist*” implies pursuit or interest, so it literally means “seeking what is in the East.”

In Latin, *orientate* means “to direct the mind toward a certain relation” in fields like ethics, sociology, literature, or spirituality. Some universities even call their preparatory year *orientatio*. In German, *sich orientieren* means “to gather information about something.”

1.1.3. Terminologically:

Definitions vary between Western and Eastern scholars due to differing perspectives.

The Orientalist **Arthur J. Arberry** said: "The original sense of the term *Orientalist* appeared in 1638, and in 1691 Anthony Wood described Samuel Clarke as a distinguished Orientalist, meaning that he knew some Eastern languages."

The Orientalist **Rudi Paret** defined Orientalism as "a recognized discipline in European countries, institutionalized in universities as official chairs held by professors who were Orientalists, with government support for such studies."

On the Arab side, **Najib al-'Aqqi** (1916–1982), one of the most prominent Arab researchers on Orientalism, said: "They examined our heritage by collecting, preserving, cataloging, editing, and translating it; they did not leave it to perish within library walls and museums but studied, published, and analyzed it." Al-'Aqqi thus highlighted the positive contributions of Orientalists in collecting and publishing Islamic manuscripts, while acknowledging that such work does not erase the deliberate or unintentional errors of Orientalist thought.

Edward Said (1935–2003) defined Orientalism as "a field of knowledge through which the East is systematically approached as an object of learning, discovery, and application... a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the East." This definition is one of the most insightful, as it shows that Orientalism has both a scholarly and a political dimension aimed at control and domination.

Hence, Orientalism is a Western-born term whose meaning varies between general definitions focusing on the



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study of the East and its intellectual heritage, and critical ones exposing its colonial and hegemonic motives.

1.1.4. The English Orientalist School

British Orientalism began in the Middle Ages when many scholars studied Arabic language and literature. The first chair of Arabic studies was established at Cambridge University in 1623 and at Oxford University in 1626. Initially, the focus was linguistic.

Later, however, British Orientalism took a distinctly political and colonial direction. The British school emphasized sectarian and nationalist studies to serve its imperial agendas, enabling Britain to dominate much of the world—earning it the title “the empire on which the sun never sets.” Thus, the British Orientalist school most clearly embodied the link between Orientalist scholarship and colonial ambitions.

Prominent Orientalists of this school include:

- **Wood Britchard**, British consul in Tunisia
- **George Sale**, translator of the meanings of the Qur’an
- **William Muir**, missionary and Orientalist active in India

1.1.5. Islamic Architecture

Linguistically: The term derives from *‘amara*, meaning to build or inhabit. The Qur’an states: “*He produced you from the earth and settled you in it.*” i.e., He permitted you to build upon it. *‘Imarah* is also the opposite of ruin and can mean a tribe or clan.

1.1.6. Terminologically:

Architecture “is part of an integrated system of interaction with cultures and civilizations; it cannot be separated from them in any way. Beyond its functional purpose, it reflects identity, religion, sect, ethnicity, and other elements.” This definition presents architecture as an essential element of civilization, as architectural style is deeply linked to the religious and cultural background of any society.

2. The Doctrinal Dimension in Islamic Architecture

Creed plays an important role in directing human productivity through the set of ideas and certainties that it instills, transforming inner convictions into material achievements.

“The formation of Islamic architecture begins from principles defined by Islamic law—the Qur’an and the Sunnah. Anything outside that framework cannot be called Islamic architecture, even if built by Muslims. The process occurs on both theoretical and practical levels, connected by an area of acknowledgment where architecture fulfills moral functions and expresses the spirit of the age, producing works termed righteous deeds.”

We reject the claim that there is no link between Islamic faith and Muslim architecture. The presence of *iwans* in mosques, for example, reflects the diversity of Islamic schools of thought. Religious and political motives led Salah al-Din to spread Sunni schools and establish *khanqahs* for religious studies. The religious impulse also inspired the creation of hospitals (*bimaristans*) and fountains (*sabils*) for public welfare.



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The cubic form of the Ka'bah is not merely geometric; it symbolizes stability and perfection, echoing the heavenly square temple that the Ka'bah represents on earth. The octagonal shape seen in many mosques is not a mere structural solution for supporting a dome over a square base but symbolizes the divine throne carried by eight angels, as in the verse: *"And the angels will be on its sides, and above them, on that day, eight will bear the throne of your Lord."* The dome represents the vault of heaven and the spiritual realm beyond, which is why it became essential in Islamic architecture.

Thus, Islamic architecture is a deep reflection of Islamic creed and spiritual and aesthetic values. The religious specificity of Islam has been embodied throughout Muslim architectural history.

Furthermore, serious study confirms that structures built by non-Muslims in Islamic lands lacked the spiritual features of Islamic belief and therefore cannot be classified as Islamic architecture. As one scholar notes, "These inherited forms entered Arab culture as they were built in their sources; thus, the relationship between them and Islam was not at the level of structure but rather coexistence, sometimes even mutual inclusion."

2.1. Islamic Architecture in the View of the Orientalist K.A. Creswell

K.A. Creswell was an English Orientalist born in 1879. He graduated from Westminster School, joined the army in 1914, and was appointed inspector of antiquities. He served as professor of art and architecture at the Egyptian University beginning in 1937, as a member of the board of

the Museum of Antiquities in Palestine in 1949, and later as professor of architecture at the American University in Cairo in 1956. Orientalists unanimously agree that his works remain fundamental references for the study of Islamic architecture.

2.2. His Works:

- *Fortifications in Islam before 1250 CE*
- *A Historical Summary of the Islamic Monuments of Egypt up to 1517 CE*
- *Some Recent Tulunid Discoveries*
- *The Origin of the Cruciform Plan in Cairo Schools* (with 12 plates and 10 drawings)
- *Excavations at the Citadel of Cairo* (with 30 plates and 13 drawings)
- *The Development of the Minaret, Especially in Egypt*
- *Al-Aqsa Mosque*
- *The Early Muslim Architecture*
- *The Great Mosque of al-Mansur in Baghdad*
- *The Foundation of Cairo*
- *The Coptic Influence on Islamic Architecture*

2.3. Creswell's Views on Islamic Architecture

Orientalist studies have long focused on Islamic architecture as a component of Islamic civilization and heritage. "Since the late 19th century, this focus was limited to describing Islamic monuments, cataloging them, and publishing illustrated records; later, research expanded to explore their artistic sources." Western studies, in fact, did not engage seriously with Islamic architecture until the late 19th century.

Some Orientalists acknowledged that modern archaeology had paid little attention to Muslim architecture.



Régis Martin, for example, said: "Perhaps in time we may be able to assess with some confidence what the Islamic world has left in the art of architecture, but for now, existing studies remain doubtful and insufficient for any decisive conclusion."

Monsieur Bâtissier remarked that "research in the history of Islamic architecture requires significant expansion." This does not imply that Islamic civilization lacked architectural art, but rather that Orientalists began studying it late. Louis-Pierre Sédillot lamented: "It is regrettable that we have not yet undertaken a general study of the buildings erected by Arabs in Syria, Iraq, Persia, and as far as India during their periods of dominance."

Interest in this field emerged in the Italian school in the early 1890s, in Germany during the 1880s through research teams at Friedrich Alexander and Tübingen Universities studying Middle Eastern cities, in America through Oleg Grabar, and in Spain in the 1980s through a Franco-Spanish team researching Andalusian and Moroccan cities under the French Cultural Center in Madrid.

In this study, we focus on the English Orientalist school's view of Islamic architecture as represented by **K.A. Creswell**. He studied the Dome of the Rock, dividing its elements and decorations into parts and attributing each to a different architectural source other than Islamic architecture. He concluded that the building consisted of 22% Roman sources, 22% Byzantine sources, 55% Syrian Christian sources, and the remaining 1% without a specified source.

Creswell believed that the Arabian Peninsula contained no architectural monuments worthy of being classified as art before the advent of Islam. He argued that the Sacred

Mosque (al-Haram) was merely a simple structure of four walls enclosing the Zamzam well, basing this view on *Akhbar Makkah wa ma ja'a fiha min Athar* by the historian al-Azraqi.

He also linked the rise of Islamic architectural art to the Islamic conquests – particularly after Muslims entered Syria, which had been influenced for nearly a thousand years by Hellenistic art, and Iraq, which reflected Persian styles that he is aware of.

- The orientalist K. A. Creswell stated that when the Muslims entered these lands, they converted their churches into mosques and made only minor changes to their walls and entrances to align them with the qibla of Muslims. In Iraq, however, they turned to founding new cities. After lengthy analyses, he concluded that Muslims did not care about architecture and did not develop themselves in this field except when they encountered the Persians in Kufa and the Syrians. He always returned to his main thesis, namely, that Muslims did not create an architectural art of their own. Creswell also argued that “in the early days of Islam, the Muslims did not bring to the conquered lands any Islamic architectural art except what served the needs of their prayers...” meaning that they entered these lands without any knowledge of architecture until they were influenced by its inhabitants. Even regarding their prayers, according to him, they did not build mosques but merely converted existing churches into mosques.

He affirmed that before the Islamic conquests, Muslims knew nothing of architecture. For him, “the Arabian Peninsula represented a complete architectural void, and the word ‘Arab’ should not be used to refer to Islamic architecture.” This statement reflects a blatant European



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racist mindset that refuses to attribute any creative achievement to Islamic civilization and insists on ascribing its accomplishments to preceding civilizations.

When discussing the Kaaba, and after offering extensive analyses of the origin of its architectural style and the concept of alternating layers of stone and wood, he suggested that this style came from Abyssinia, since wood was abundant there but scarce in the Arabian Peninsula. Moreover, this architectural type was common in Abyssinia, as seen in the Church of Dair al-Sibanos. Thus, he implied that Muslims did not even participate in constructing their most sacred Islamic monument.

When speaking of the reconstruction of the Kaaba, he stated that Ibn al-Zubayr expanded it in 684, widened its walls, and used glass mosaics taken from a church in Sana'a, Yemen. To that extent, did Muslims not contribute even slightly to building the Kaaba?

As for minarets, Creswell claimed that Muslims did not know of the call to prayer (adhan) or the minaret during the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Yet he contradicted himself by saying: "Islam did not know minarets during Muhammad's lifetime. When the Prophet and his followers came to Medina, they prayed without a call to prayer. When they learned that the Jews used the trumpet and the Christians used the bell, they wanted something similar. Therefore, Muhammad ordered Bilal to call for prayer from the top of a roof in the area." In summary, what Creswell presented in his study of the earliest Islamic monuments—or what he termed the architectural art of the first Islamic generation—is that Muslims had no architectural landmarks, nor even simple

signs of a genuinely Islamic architectural art. They also showed no readiness to benefit from the architectural expertise of the peoples of the conquered lands. In Syria, they merely converted churches into mosques without building new ones, and in Iraq, the first mosques they built were extremely primitive.

He also considered that the Muslims' initial interest in architecture stemmed from political reasons and that, in the beginning, they relied on skilled craftsmen from the conquered lands, as Ibn al-Zubayr did when he employed Persian builders in rebuilding Kufa in 684, and as al-Walid did when he used Coptic builders in Egypt.

He further believed that Islamic architecture in its early period flourished more in Syria than anywhere else, because it was the seat of government and because it included Christian, Sasanian, and Coptic architectural heritages.

Nevertheless, he did not deny that the Umayyad caliphs-built palaces, but he described them as having a desert Bedouin character, such as Qasr Amra, al-Minya, al-Mishatta, and Qasr al-Hayr. Creswell admitted that brick walls and domes appeared during the Umayyad period and had not been seen before in Syria, but he traced their origin to Iraq, claiming that they were not Muslim innovations either.

In Creswell's view, Islamic architecture in Syria was predominantly influenced by Hellenistic and Christian elements, whereas in Iraq and Iran, it bore a Persian character.

He then moved on to study Islamic architecture in the Abbasid period, when the caliphate shifted from Damascus to Baghdad, and the cultural and artistic center moved with it. Creswell confirmed that mosques of this period differed



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from those of earlier times. For instance, the “hypostyle” plan—with roofs directly supported by wooden columns—spread in Kufa, Baghdad, and Samarra, whereas mosques with roofs supported by arches remained in places such as Egypt.

Creswell also noted the emergence of vertical arches on the qibla wall in al-Aqsa Mosque—which he claimed was built by Caliph al-Mahdi in 780—as well as in the Mosque of Córdoba and the Great Mosque of Kairouan. He further pointed out the appearance of the square minaret, which he believed was derived from church towers in Syria rather than being an original Muslim creation, though it spread widely across Islamic lands.

He considered Persian influences dominant in the Abbasid period, overshadowing Islamic architectural art, where Muslims adopted Persian-style courtyards, complex domed audience halls, and vaulted iwans at the front. The axial planning phenomenon in palaces was also prominent in this era.

Creswell affirmed that Muslims did not show interest in building mausoleums during this period, since caliphs avoided constructing domed shrines over their graves to prevent them from being identified, given the political sensitivity of the time. Geometric ornamentation also did not gain much popularity in this period as it did later; it was limited to window grilles in the form of interlaced circles.

This is the summary of what Creswell presented in his book *Early Muslim Architecture*, which we have relied upon in this study.

We do not deny that Islamic architecture laid its foundations upon the remnants of Christian, Persian,

Sasanian, and Coptic architectural arts, as is the case with all art forms. As researchers, we find no difficulty in acknowledging this, for we begin from the premise that civilizations are interconnected. Yet architecture in Islam was tied to Islamic doctrine—emanating from the human role as God’s vicegerent and builder on earth—as reflected in the verse: *“He produced you from the earth and settled you therein; so seek His forgiveness, then repent to Him. Indeed, my Lord is near and responsive.”* (Hud 61). Moreover, it was bound by specific rulings that governed Muslim life—such as privacy—which manifested architecturally in houses that opened their windows inward toward central courtyards to ensure natural lighting and ventilation. Thus, it becomes clear to us that Muslims excelled in the art of architecture and built magnificent structures immortalized by history, which continue to serve as subjects of research and study in the most prestigious universities in the world.

Conclusion:

At the end of this research, we reach a set of conclusions summarized as follows:

- Islamic architecture is not merely aesthetic or artistic forms but a tangible reflection of the principles of Islamic belief, expressing the comprehensiveness of Islamic civilization between functional purpose and spiritual symbolism.
- Islamic architecture today faces one of its most serious moral challenges—preserving the particularity of Islamic religion and ethics while keeping pace with

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