

# Minarets of Damascus

by

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*The minaret in Muslim lands serves the same purpose as the Christian bell-tower—to call worshippers to prayer. It is of particular interest that the first minarets of Damascus, plain square towers, are directly derived from the earlier towers of Syrian churches built before the Arab Conquest. Later developments—octagonal towers on a square base, and many-sided or circular shafts—came in the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D., as a result of the successive conquests of Syria by Egypt and by the Ottoman Empire. A selection of photographs taken in 1933 here shows examples of the main types of Damascus minaret, from mosques great and small.*

God is most great; I declare that there is no god but God . . . Up to prayer! Up to Salvation! Prayer is better than sleep, is better than sleep. God is most great: there is no god but God.

Five times every day the call of the muezzin rings out from high on the minaret, whether of a great cathedral mosque, or of the prayer-hall of a small parish. Islam demands a total discipline of the believer by day and night. It is perhaps symbolic that the minaret, rather than the mosque itself, embodies an aesthetic appeal that is emotional and numinous.

The impact of this continually-repeated observance upon anyone coming to it first, from another way of life and a habit of Sunday services set apart, is startling. Even to me, brought up by parents who had lived in Palestine in 1908–9 and among my father's drawings of Saracenic architecture and colour decoration, it was a revelation of another world within this. My first contact with Muslim civilization was on 7 September 1933, on reaching Turkey at Edirne (Adrianople) late at night, for a stay of twenty-four hours. Turkey was then at the height of secularization under Atatürk and neither at Edirne nor at Istanbul was there an effective religious presence. Sublime architecture, especially that designed by Sinan, made an unforgettable impression but it was exclusively upon aesthetic grounds. It must here be said on behalf of the secular Turkey refounded by Atatürk that it has an exemplary record of strict application of religious trust funds (*Vakıflar*, Arabic *awqaf*) to the purposes intended, notably material conservation of the monuments, sometimes as ruins.

The real change came on reaching Syria, where we reached Aleppo on the night of 12 September, and stayed the whole of the next day and night. Even under French mandate, Syria was the East: Aleppo was chiefly notable for its splendid Citadel (Fig. 2) and for its cloth markets, where gorgeous silks had become relatively cheap owing to the strict puritanism of King Ibn Saud's Arabia. Pilgrims of high estate might no longer dress up for their visit to Mecca.

Architecturally, Sinan had left his mark on Aleppo only twenty years after the

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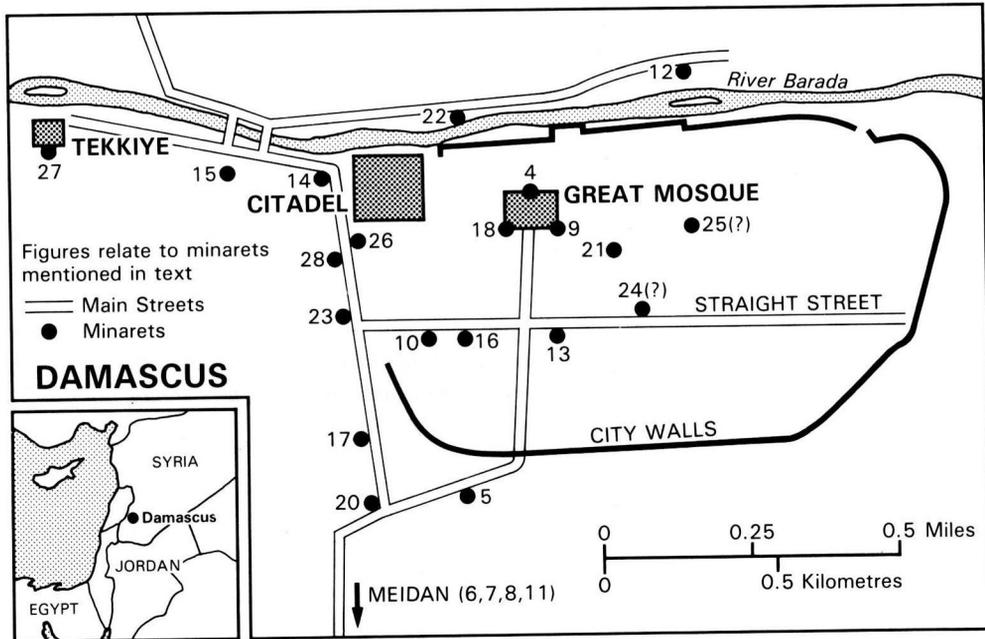


Fig. 1  
Plan of Damascus

Turkish conquest by building the Mosque of Hüsrev Pasha (Fig. 3) in 1536-7. This was his first design for a mosque and his earliest major work.<sup>1</sup> The minaret is typically Ottoman, though sturdy rather than pencil-thin; it preserves its original cap, decidedly blunter than the acutely pointed Turkish 'extinguishers', which belong to the eighteenth century. The shaft beneath the balcony has a perceptible batter and probably an imperceptible entasis; above the balcony the sides of the 'spire' rise vertically.

So on by way of Baalbek to Damascus, where we spent an evening and two whole days, from Friday 15 September until leaving for Palestine on the 18th. Most of my photography was done on Sunday 17 September, and was the outcome of an instant admiration—one might almost say love at first sight. For the Damascene minarets are in exquisite proportion and taste, compositions in themselves. They have the charm of variety and even small and relatively modern examples arouse interest by the quirkiness of their detail. There are four main types in Damascus: square towers; octagonal towers, commonly on a square base; polygonal towers of sixteen or twenty sides; and cylindrical towers.

These types correspond to four historical periods in so far as their origins are concerned. In his classic article on 'The Evolution of the Minaret', Creswell showed that before the thirteenth century A.D. all Syrian towers were square, and derived



Fig. 2

Aleppo: view over the city from the Citadel. The Mosque of Hüsrev Pasha can be seen on the right of the outer gateway

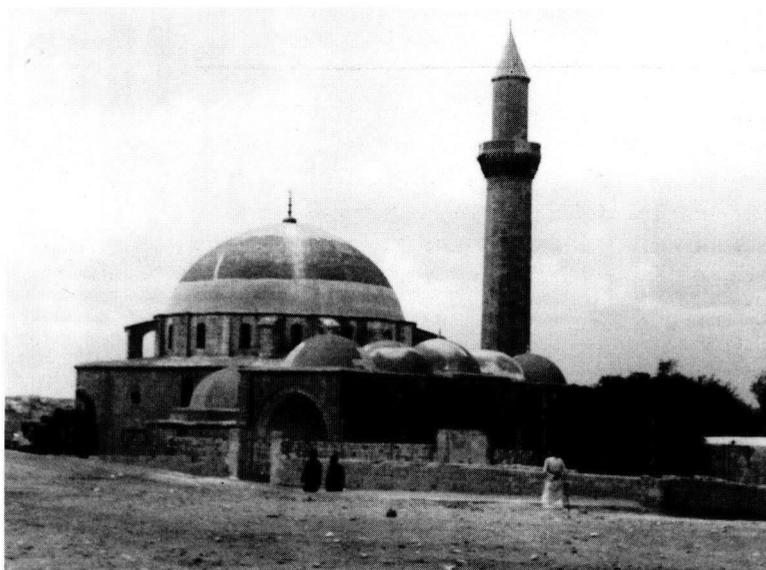


Fig. 3

Aleppo: the Mosque of Hüsrev Pasha (1536-7) by Sinan, his first mosque design and earliest major work. The cap of the minaret, unusually, is original



Fig. 4

Damascus: the Great Mosque in 1908, looking towards the Ma'adhanat al-'Arus, a classical square Syrian minaret of 1187-93

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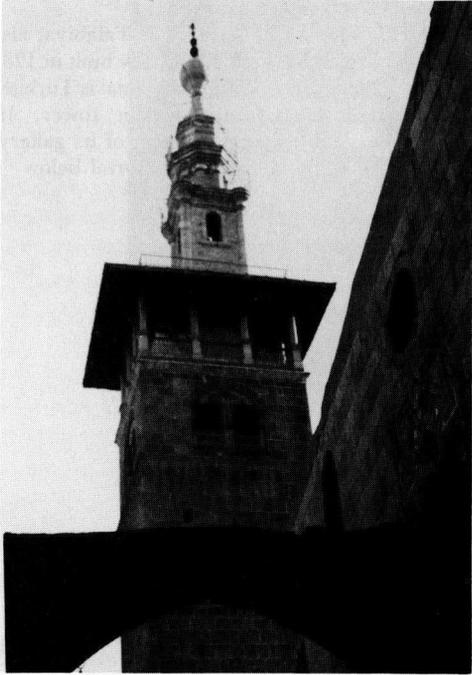


Fig. 5

Damascus: the Great Mosque, dominated by the Ma'adhanat al-'Arus, 'the Bride'. Built outside the main wall of the mosque in 1187-93 in the time of Sultan Saladin, this is the pattern of Syrian minaret design, derived from the plain square church towers of pre-Muslim times. The balcony and upper 'spire' are much later

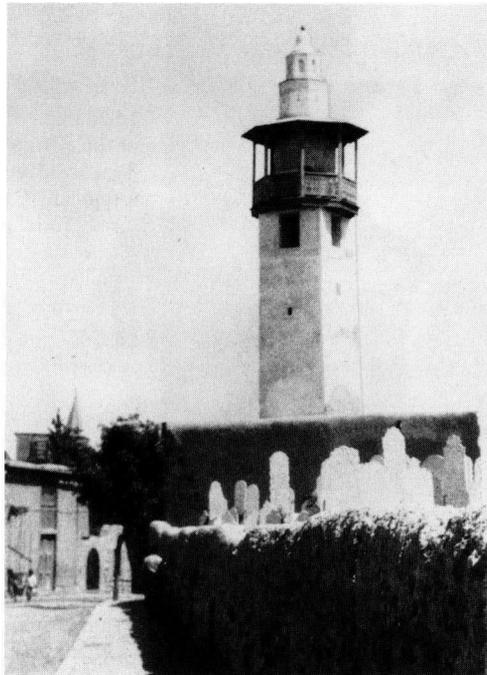


Fig. 6

Damascus: the al-Jarrah Mosque, south of the city, built in 1250-4 and probably repaired in 1566 after a fire. In its elegant simplicity this minaret typifies the Syrian tradition, with only plain openings and a spire of diminishing octagons and bell-shaped finial



Fig. 7

Damascus: Meidan, minaret of at-Talabiya, also called the Jubian Mosque. Originally built in 1284 it was heightened in 1377, and the finial is Turkish. The elegant proportions of the tower, its fenestration, and the rustic charm of its gallery, compose nobly with the fine portal below



Fig. 8  
Meidan: a variant of the design of at-Talabiya, but with a typically Cairene finial



Fig. 9

Meidan: close to the Muradiyya (Idên) Mosque. An impudent miniature of great charm, of the Turkish period

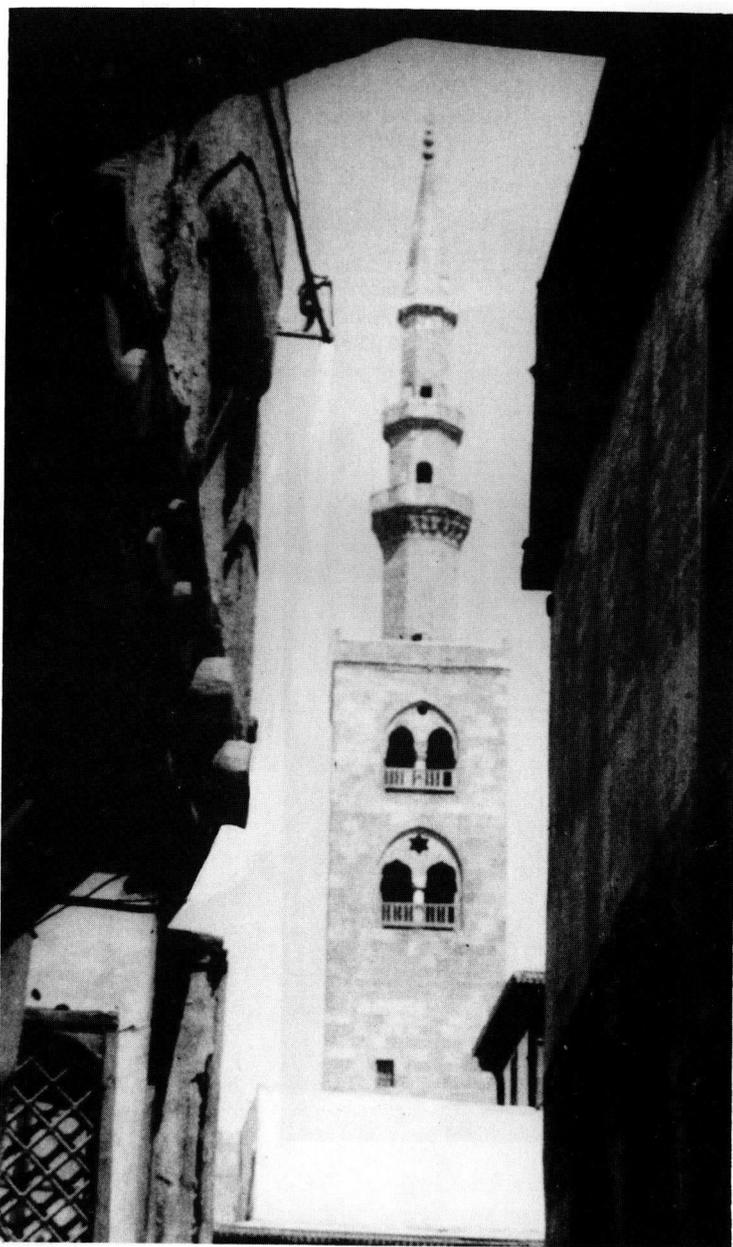


Fig. 10

Damascus: the Great Mosque. The south-east minaret, the Ma'adhanat 'Isa, is the tallest in Syria (250 feet); in Muslim tradition, Jesus will alight upon this minaret at the Last Day, when he comes to judge the quick and the dead. It was rebuilt after 1246 and probably again soon after 1340, but the upper stages belong to the Turkish period after 1520

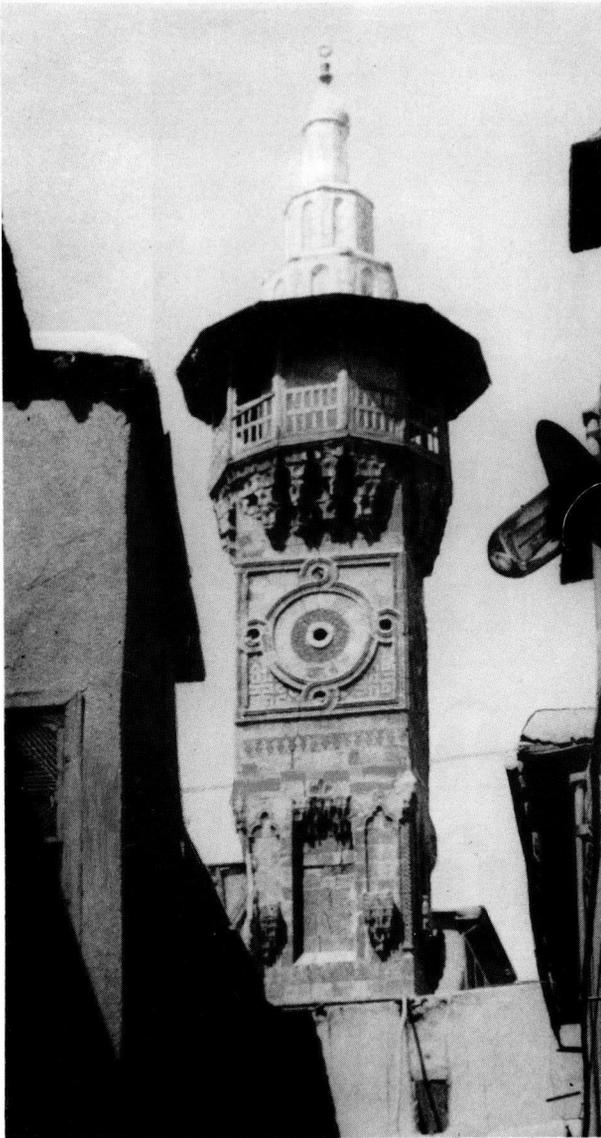


Fig. 11

Damascus: the minaret of the mosque known variously as al-'Ala, al-Qal'li and al-Munashidin, and also given the name of Sitti Sham, 'Lady of Damascus', in memory of Saladin's sister Zumurrud who died in 1220. The minaret is much later (?1382-99 or c. 1470) in the most highly enriched Cairene Mameluke style, but completed with a Syrian finial. This stands supreme as an example of enrichment subordinated to overall composition

Fig. 12

Damascus: Meidan, the minaret of the Manjak Mosque of 1368, restored in the eighteenth century. Apart from its traditional Damascene style it is noteworthy for retaining the scaffold-work used for illuminations during Ramadan. The masonry is divided into three zones by two dark courses of ashlar

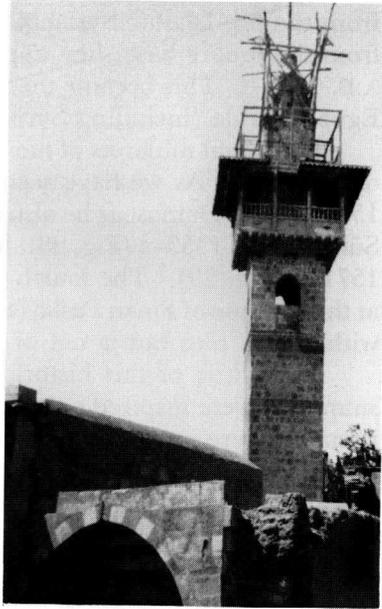


Fig. 13 *Left*

The minaret of al-Aqsab (al-Qasab or az-Zainabiya), built in 1321, rebuilt in 1408, but of an early type. In its present state it goes back to 1494-5. The use of blue-black basalt coursing as decoration marks its relatively late date

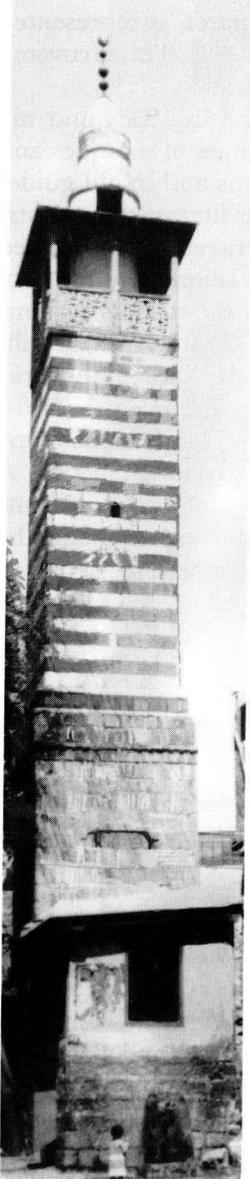


Fig. 14 *Right*

The Ma'adhanat ash-Shahm at the city centre, an elegant polychrome tower on a Roman base from the antique city

from the pre-Islamic Syrian church tower.<sup>2</sup> The second type, deriving an octagon from the square base, first appeared in the minaret of Sangar al-Gawli at Cairo of A.D. 1303-4. This became the principal form in Egypt, and thus in countries under Egyptian rule (including Syria until the Turkish conquest of 1516).

Polygonal minarets of more than eight sides were an innovation after the arrival of the Turks. As we have seen, this was the kind designed by Sinan at Aleppo in 1536, and in Damascus he also used it for the twin minarets of the Tekkiye of Sultan Süleyman of 1553-4 (Fig. 28); it was employed also at the Mosque of Derwish Pasha, 1571-4 (Fig. 29).<sup>3</sup> The fourth category, that of the circular minaret, is represented at the Mosque of Sinan Pasha (or as-Sinaniya) in Damascus (1585-90). This is covered with glazed tiles but is not of any special interest in its design.

Very little of this historical background was known to me in 1933, and my snapshots were inspired only by aesthetic considerations; the names of mosques and minarets were mostly unknown. A few appeared on tourist plans and in old guide-books, but in varying forms. Even after consulting such serious literature as exists, I cannot name all my photos, though the areas of Damascus traversed were noted at the time (Fig. 1). It has to be said that the literature of the Islamic buildings of the city is extremely defective, and that it is made obscure by the diverse systems (English, French, German and American) used to transliterate Arabic. Worse still, many buildings are known by two or more quite different names. Some fine works are mentioned or described only in a few, discrepant, sources; and even the most nearly perfect monumental inventory, with a detailed survey plan,<sup>4</sup> omits some monuments named elsewhere (e.g., Baedeker 1894) and extant in 1933. A corresponding volume produced under the French Mandate is of selected monuments only.<sup>5</sup> As it has not been possible to seek out the Arabic for every monument, the names here given are merely a practical compromise, avoiding accents as far as possible.

#### THE SQUARE MINARETS

In Damascus the northern minaret of the Great Mosque, the Ma'adhanat al-'Arus ('the Bride') dates in its present form from A.D. 1187-93 in the reign of Saladin, but with a much later upper stage above the balcony (Figs 4, 5).<sup>6</sup> This is the basic type of the square-towered minaret, also found in simple variants at lesser mosques (Figs 6-9), and again at the south-east minaret of the Great Mosque, the Ma'adhanat 'Isa or Minaret of Jesus (Fig. 10), rebuilt after 1246 and again(?) soon after 1340. With its Turkish 'spire' added after 1520, this is the tallest minaret in Syria, some 250 feet, and according to Muslim tradition it is upon this that the Prophet Jesus will descend on the Last Day to judge the quick and the dead here on earth.

The triumph of the square minaret was seen in the Sitti Sham (Fig. 11) of the al-'Ala (or al-Qal'i, or al-Munashidin) Mosque just off Straight Street, probably built under Sultan Barquq (1382-99). With its polygonal balcony, niches and stalactites it represents a peak of luxury construction. In contrast are the tall plain towers with square jettied balconies which occur at several mosques, in the suburb of Meidan (Fig. 12) and to the north of the city at the Mosque of az-Zainabiya (or al-Aqsab or al-Qasab) (Fig. 13), perhaps built in 1408 and partially rebuilt about 1494. The

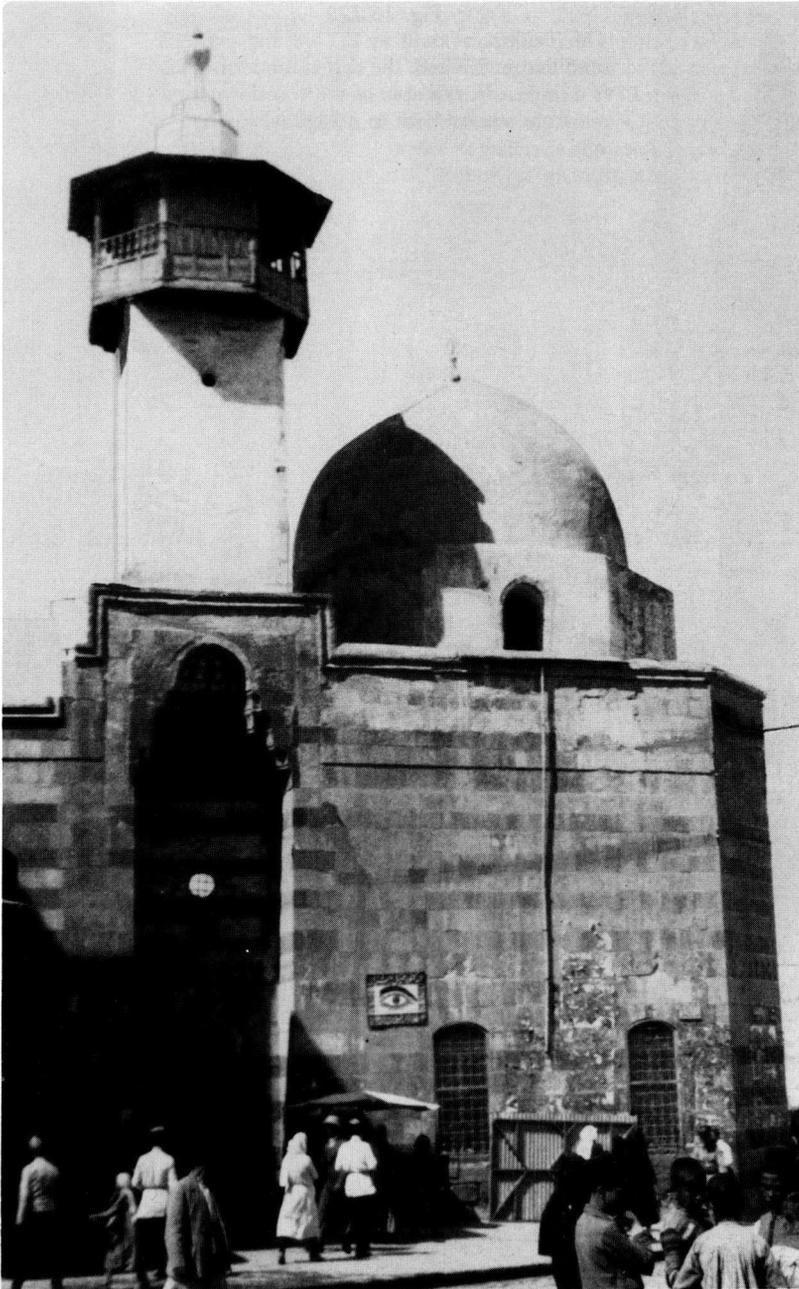
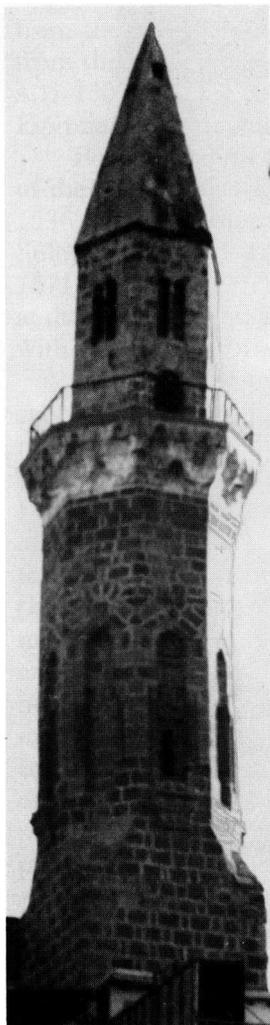


Fig. 15

Damascus: the as-Sanjaqdar, or Mosque of the Holy Flag, opposite the Citadel. Built as late as 1820, and with this east front rebuilt in 1916, the building demonstrates the continuity of Damascene style, uncontaminated by western influence, down to our own times

Fig. 16 *Left*

The Tenkiziya, built in 1317-8 and perhaps modified in 1367-8; the cap is modern. This is a fine early example of the transformation from square base to octagonal tower

Fig. 17 *Right*

The great central minaret of the Hisham Mosque of 1427, with typically Syrian finial



Fig. 18

On the way to Meidan is the Madrasa as-Sabuniya, built in 1458-63. Unlike the Hisham minaret, this has adopted the bulbous finial brought from Cairo by architects to the Mameluke sultans

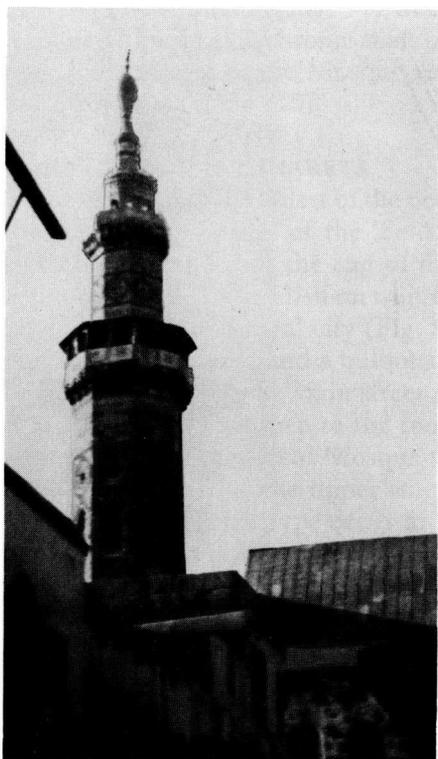


Fig. 19

The Great Mosque. the third or western minaret, al-Gharbiya, is the finest of the octagonal towers. After a disastrous fire in 1479 it was completely rebuilt at the expense of Sultan Qaitbay in 1488. In Cairene style, its gallery is of masonry, and not wholly or partly of timber, as in most other minarets of Damascus

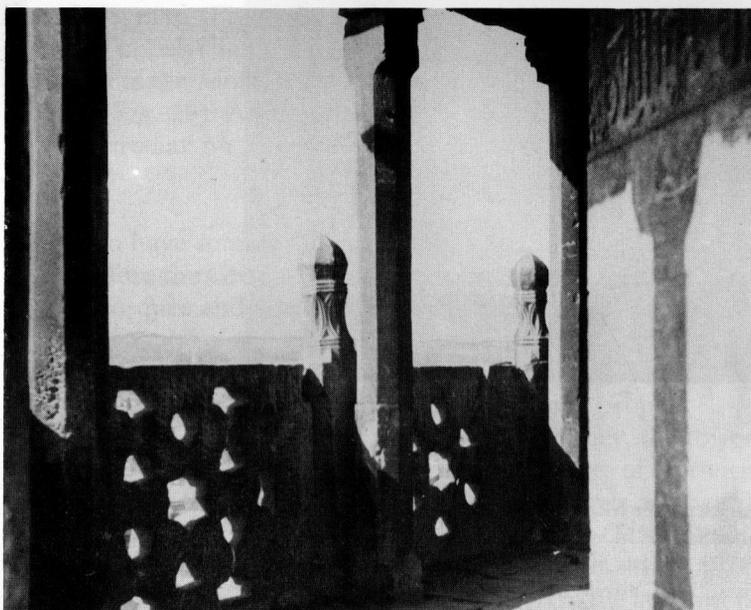


Fig. 20  
A detail of the pierced  
marble parapet of the  
gallery of al-Gharbiya,  
in 1908

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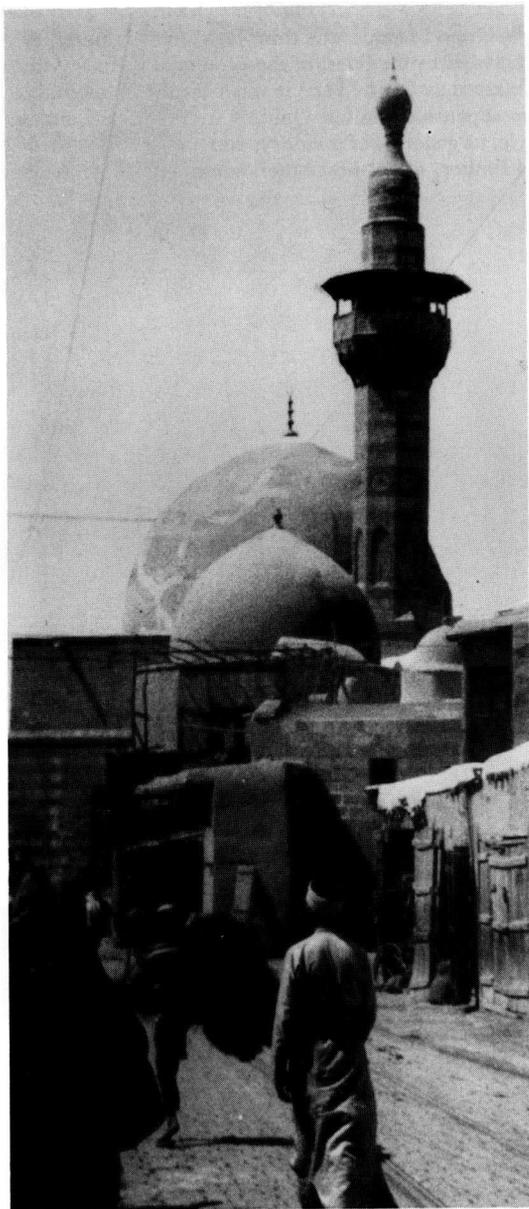


Fig. 21

Damascus: the Mosque of Murad Pasha or Muradiyya, also called the Idên Mosque. Said to have been founded in 1209, the date of the minaret is given as 1573, though it is still in Cairene Mameluke style with no trace of Turkish influence

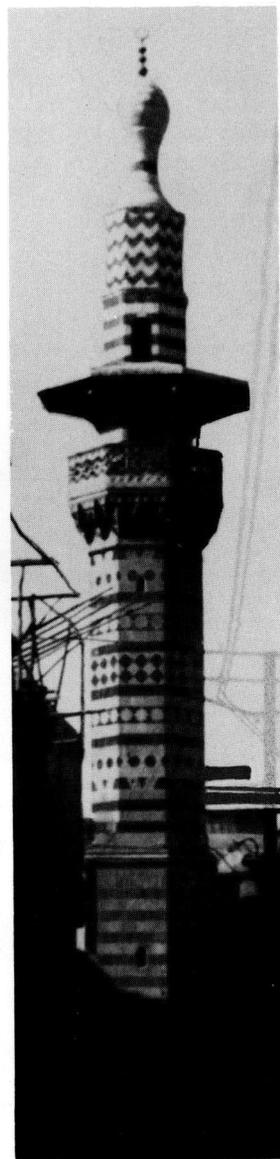


Fig. 22

The minaret of al-Qari, near the edge of the Christian Quarter. Built in an extreme version of polychrome masonry about 1640, this represents the final outburst of Arab style in Damascus

minaret of ash-Shahm (Fig. 14), at the centre of the city, has an early base of Roman masonry,<sup>7</sup> but its polychrome shaft of alternating courses is late. The plain little tower over the entrance to the Mosque as-Sanjaqdar (or Mosque of the Holy Flag) dates only from 1820 (Fig. 15).

#### THE OCTAGONAL MINARETS

What is probably the oldest of the octagonal minarets, transformed by squinches from a square base, is that of the Tenkiziya Mosque of A.D. 1317 (Fig. 16). It has a stalactite balcony, but the cap of the spire is modern, following the Turkish style. A later example is the Hisham minaret of *c.* 1417, off Straight Street, one of the main landmarks of the central city (Fig. 17). A more slender version of the design, with polychrome coursing and a bulbous finial of Cairene style, is as-Sabuniya (Fig. 18), built in 1458–63 on the main street going southwards to Meidan and the Pilgrimage Road. From this we turn to the most magnificent specimen of the class, the south-west minaret of the Great Mosque (Figs 19, 20), rebuilt for Sultan Qaitbay in 1488 after a fire of 1479. The upper stages, with Cairene terminal, are of 1520 or later. Other versions of the type occur at the Muradiyya (or Eden or Idên) Mosque (Fig. 21) at the north end of Meidan (of ?1573);<sup>8</sup> at al-Qari (Fig. 22) near the centre of the walled city, built *c.* 1640; and al-Mu'allaq (Fig. 23) across the river, built in 1519 and rebuilt after 1648. Alternating or patterned coursing appears on these and at al-Kharratin (or Madrasa as-Sibaiya) of (?1509–15 (Fig. 24) and al-Qaimariya (Fig. 26), with its curious hybrid finial of Turkish inspiration. Finally, at the small mosque of as-Suyyas (Fig. 27) is a minaret of modern (?late nineteenth-century) date, reduced to an octagonal balcony upon a low base and surmounted by a Turkish finial.

#### THE TURKISH MINARETS

At the Tekkiye of Sultan Süleyman (Fig. 28), a superb design by Sinan (1553–4), are twin minarets of classical Turkish character, exquisitely composed with the domed sanctuary. The single minaret of the Mosque of Derwish Pasha, of 1571–4 by a local architect, is a sturdy variant (Fig. 29). As has been mentioned already, the minaret of as-Sinaniya (1585–90) is circular on plan, and covered with glazed tiles.<sup>9</sup>

#### AN ASSESSMENT

Damascus as a whole is said to have some 200 mosques, about twice as many as the parish churches of London before the Great Fire of 1666. Of this large number some seventy are reckoned great mosques and these, together with a few madrasas, have minarets of significance. Out of a total of rather under one hundred, my rapid selection in the central city and its outskirts recorded only about a quarter, though this does include almost all the outstandingly famous examples in Damascus proper.

Seen as a collection, under the brilliant sky of Syria in late summer, the towers exerted a powerful fascination. As with the Perpendicular church towers of Norwich, or Wren's steeples in London, it is the variety of forms that strikes first; afterwards common factors, of shaft or gallery or finial, begin to group together. Certain main motives in design emerge, of which the chief are clarity of outline and simplicity of effect. Hardly any display meretricious factors merely for show. Even in the late towers,



Fig. 23

Damascus: the al-Mu'allaq, or Great New Mosque, rebuilt in 1519 but again largely rebuilt after 1648 when it was struck by lightning. This is another example of the later style of the Mameluke period, brought from Cairo but simplified at Damascus

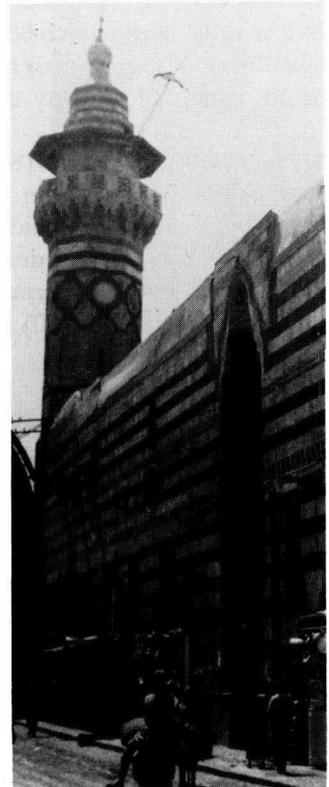


Fig. 24

The minaret of the Madrasa as-Sibaiya, also known as the Mosque of al-Kharratin. Built in 1509-15 it is a notable example of Cairene style

Fig. 25

Damascus: a minaret on the north side of Straight Street, so far unidentified, but possibly that of the Mosque Taht al-Qanatir. With its sturdy octagon well planted on a square base, and Damascene finial, it is a noble example of later medieval design

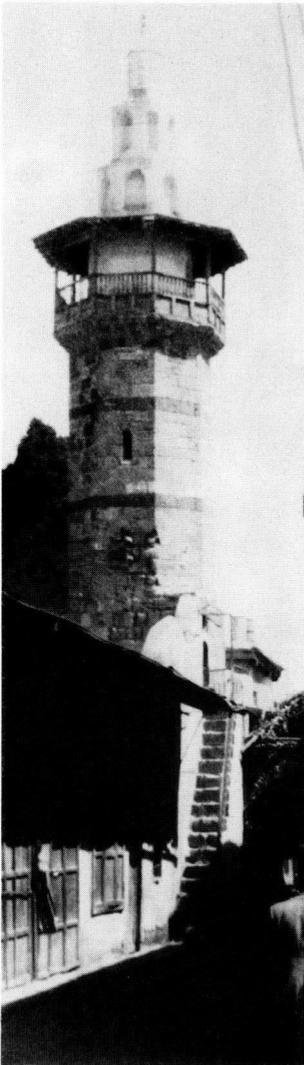


Fig. 26 *Right*

A late minaret in the Christian Quarter, apparently that of al-Qaimariya, built about 1743. The polychrome style is that of al-Qari not far away, but with a Turkish finial

Fig. 27 *Far right*

The last chapter in the story of the strictly Damascene minaret: as-Suyyas, of somewhere near 1900

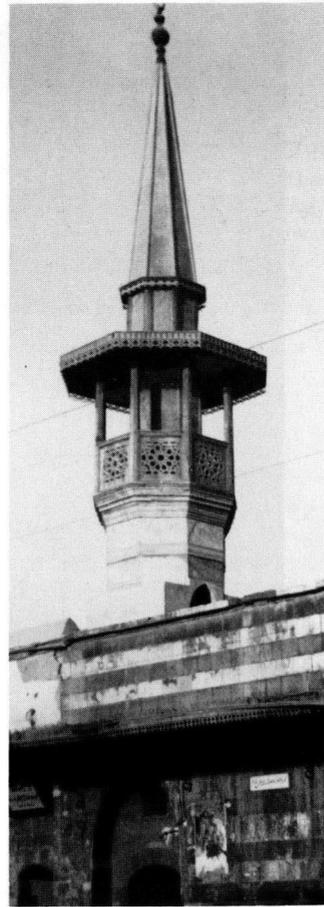
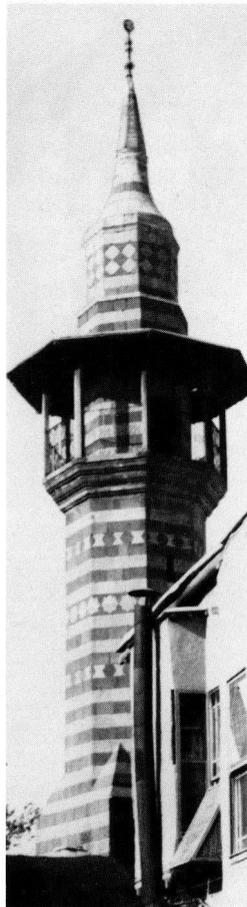




Fig. 28

Damascus: the Tekkiye of Sultan Süleyman, built in 1553-4 to the designs of Sinan. A masterpiece of Ottoman architecture, this shows the fully developed Turkish minaret as planted in Damascus by the chief master to the Sublime Porte



Fig. 29 *Left*

Damascus: the minaret of the Mosque of Derwish Pasha, built in 1571-4 by a local follower of the school of Sinan. The incorporation of a canopy above the gallery brings back a principal element of the style traditional in Damascus

Fig. 30 *Below*

Acre, Palestine: the coastal defences of the last stronghold of the Crusaders, who held it from 1110 to 1187, and recaptured by Richard Coeur de Lion from Saladin in 1191. Exactly a century later the Franks withdrew, in spite of the spirited campaign of 1271-2 under Edward of England (soon to be Edward I)



where polychrome masonry is sometimes strident, it is hard to find signs of poor taste. Sauvaget, in discussing the minaret of the Muradiyya (which he dates to A.D. 1573), complains that it exhibits a *perte totale du sentiment des proportions*, and an *accumulation des détails pittoresques*.<sup>10</sup> Is this condemnation really warranted? It smacks of the facile objections to English Perpendicular formerly rife in artistic circles. To a stranger, the most remarkable characteristic of the Damascus minarets is their superb sense of proportion. This regardless of date, or category of design, and even irrespective of whether the work is of a single date or the result of repairs and additions.

Forced to make a choice, one may favour the stern simplicity of the early square towers; another choose the octagonal spires of the Mameluke period; a third pick the exquisite classicism of the pencil-minarets in Turkish style. In their own kinds, all offer profound interest, all deserve the most careful study. What can here be said is that the minarets of Damascus constitute a magnificent collection of artistic forms, a many-sided album of design, spread over seven centuries.

And so away into Palestine, with a brief tour of Acre, full of Crusading memories, green lawns watered by convicts from the prison, and ramparts along the bright Mediterranean (Fig. 30).

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## NOTES

1. Goodwin (1971), pp. 202-3.
2. Creswell (1926).
3. Goodwin (1971), pp. 256-7; 313.
4. *WW* (1924).
5. Sauvaget (1932).
6. Creswell (1926), p. 7.
7. Hanauer, J.E., in *PEFQ* (1911), p. 50 and Fig. 5.
8. Sauvaget in *RAA*, VIII (1933-4), p. 48.
9. Dates have mostly been taken from *WW* 1924 and Sauvaget 1932, with some details from Herzfeld in *AI*, XIII/XIV (1948).
10. In *RAA*, VIII, p. 48.