

LANDSCAPES AND MONUMENTS: IRAN TO SPAIN

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A scholar-traveller's archive of photographs may be viewed from many angles. For its creator, it conjures bygone experiences. Other students of the times and places that once engaged him may find materials for their own researches. My archive has another dimension. The Middle East and North Africa I travelled through, starting in 1966 in Beirut and Jerusalem, is now barely recognizable. Population explosion, dam building, irrigation, water shortage, civil wars and invasions have turned this 'cradle of civilizations' and object of Orientalist desire into one of the most stressed and threatening places on earth.

Evocative but also informative old photographs of the region are being retrieved from archives and studied. The early twentieth-century English scholar, explorer, Alpinist and passionate anti-suffragette Gertrude Bell left a rich collection now cared for by Newcastle University Library (<http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/photos.php>). Hugely superior in quality and usefulness are the photographs shot by Bell's much longer-lived contemporary, the English historian of Muslim architecture, Archibald Creswell, and held in various collections, for example the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (<http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/6/6245/6246>). In our own day, scholars continue to build visual archives, sometimes collectively, hence the site known as Manar al-Athar based at Oxford (<http://www.manar-al-athar.ox.ac.uk/>).

At Cambridge, the Sultan Qaboos (of Oman) Chair of Abrahamic Faiths has funded, and the University Library has digitized and now hosts on its website (<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/landscapes/1>), the collection of some 4300 slides I created during my travels between 1985 and 2007, when I went over to digital photography. This collection could become the core of another collaborative enterprise of visual documentation. Ideally, the various collections would eventually be indexed and made searchable as a single resource.

One approach to introducing my archive is the autobiographical. A year spent in Jerusalem in 1970-71, between school and university, introduced me to Eastern Christianity, Islam and Judaism, and their various modes of rivalry and co-existence. Conversations with Greek monks in the Judean wilderness prompted me to visit the Orthodox monasteries on Mount Athos in 1973, when it was just on the cusp of its revival. That sparked my interest – and eventually my decision to live – in Greece. The archive documents my researches on Greece's post-classical history, and my many hikes in its mountains and islands [1]. In 1985, when I started to photograph systematically, I was exploring late antique and Byzantine Athens accompanied by my six-year-old son Iason, now a well-known Middle East journalist, photographer and film-maker. In the mountains, and on many parallel journeys through Turkey and the Middle East, I was accompanied and much assisted by my wife Elizabeth Key Fowden, who is a specialist in the late antique East [2], and by our son Gabriel.



[1] *Winter light, looking from the Monastery at Theologos, near the northern tip of the Cycladic island of Amorgos, Greece, toward the chapel of S. Barbara. (January 2001)*



[2] *Elizabeth takes notes on a rock-cut second- or third-century Syriac inscription on the 'temple mount' of the god Sin at Sumatar Harabesi near Harran in south-east Turkey. (December 1992)*

In 1996-97, six months living in Aleppo and five weeks wandering round Yemen familiarized us with two regions that less than twenty years later became war zones with catastrophic consequences for their antiquities, traditional settlements and environment more generally, a loss that will profoundly affect the refugees if they return. It is possible that photographic records like mine will cumulatively assist in the task of reconstruction – though far more probable that the outcome will be a dehumanizing Abu-Dhabification of cities and Disneyfication of ‘heritage’ sites (to use the now-standard term for commercial packaging of the past for tourism and other forms of exploitation). [3]

Some of my archive’s most striking images are from Yemen [4-5]. Aleppo, a tightly packed medieval stone city, was far harder to photograph [6]. But I have preserved some record of the Syrian Orthodox Christians among whom Elizabeth and I lived, thanks to the kindness of Archbishop Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, who was abducted allegedly by Chechen fighters in 2013, perhaps in a bid to behead the whole community at one go, and has not been heard of since [7].



[3] *Martyrs' Square, Beirut, wrecked in the Lebanese civil war, with archaeological excavations of the ancient city in progress, and a signboard showing the planned regeneration. (March 1996)*



[4] *Jibla, Yemen, showing the two minarets of the mosque built by the Ismaili Shiite Queen Arwa bint Ahmad al-Sulayhi, who ruled from 1085 to 1138 (alone from 1101). (July 1997)*



[5] *Wadi Daw'an, Hadramawt, Yemen. (July 1997)*



[6] *Khan al-Wazir, one of Aleppo's biggest caravanserais, built by an Ottoman governor in 1678-82. (June 1996)*



[7] *Archbishop Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim heads the Good Friday Epitaphios procession in the church of S. George, Hayy al-Suryan, Aleppo. (April 1996)*

Although this autobiographical approach helps explain why the archive exists, its practical usefulness to others is best appreciated through selected images that flag themes and areas of emphasis that emerge despite the inevitable haphazardness of coverage. (Iran is quite prominent in the archive, Spain only barely present, but I have featured neither in this presentation. They do, though, mark the outer boundaries of my travels during the period in question – and, as it happens, of the early Islamic Caliphate.)

For instance, the monasteries of Mount Athos yield a long sequence from the 1980s and 1990s when the community was revived by an influx of young, often educated monks who restored the crumbling and rotting monasteries. Anyone can – if male – enjoy the Athos peninsula’s physical beauty [8-9], though forest fires and road building have deeply scarred it in recent decades. Its monastic life requires a subtler adjustment, even in the Orthodox pilgrim.



[8] *Mount Athos, Greece, with the Simonopetra Monastery in the foreground.*
(November 1989)



[9] *The spectacle from the peak of Athos at dawn: the pyramidal mountain's shadow gradually retreats toward the viewer across the neighbouring peninsula of Sithonia. (September 1996)*

The new generation has imported modern amenities. But I encountered older monks living in traditional simplicity **[10-11]**, as well as remarkable



[10] *The hermitages of Karoulia, perched above the sea on the remote and abrupt southern face of Mount Athos. Supplies reach the monks, some of them cave-dwellers, by pulleys (hence the name). (July 1990)*



[11] *Fr Andreas the hermit, at the Vatopedi Monastery. He arrived on Athos in 1925. (October 1992)*

ascetics such as Fr Paisios (1924-1994) [12], who is now venerated as a saint and whose 'prophecies' find an enthusiastic audience in certain sectors of Greek society.



[12] Notice on the path down from the Koutloumousiou Monastery to the

hermitage of Fr Paisios: 'To Fr Paisios. There are signs. Do not disturb the hermitages'. (February 1987)

Besides the daily liturgical round in the grand monastic churches, you may encounter unusual ceremonies such as the departure of the Virgin Mary's girdle from the Vatopedi Monastery where it is the most prized relic [13] – occasionally it is sent outside the Mountain, to be venerated by, for example, women who have difficulty conceiving.



[13] *The Holy Girdle carried by the abbot of the Vatopedi Monastery, on its way to visit the nearby island of Amouliani. (October 1992)*

Vatopedi also illustrates how Byzantine churches and monasteries often functioned as proto-museums, with curious antiquities built into their walls [11 (background), 14-15]. Viewed from a distance, the monastery gives you an idea of what a Byzantine town looked like, with its churches, clusters of houses along narrow winding streets, and defensive walls [16]. A group of houses outside the walls, intended for lay workers [17], hints at another of my archive's themes: traditional domestic architecture, usually neglected in favour of churches, mosques, palaces, and military structures.



[14] *An ancient relief carving built into the facade of the main church of the Vatopedi Monastery. (October 1992)*



[15] *A fresco in the main church of the Pendeli Monastery outside Athens, depicting the monastery, and its environs scattered with ancient fragments and populated by hermits and omnivorous goats (banned from Athos, along with women). (September 1986)*



[16] *Vatopedi Monastery viewed from the south. (February 1987)*



[17] *Vatopedi Monastery, boathouses and accommodation for lay workers. (February 1987)*

As a flourishing centre of Orthodox Christianity, Athos contrasts starkly with the fate of the Middle Eastern Churches generally, not only in Aleppo. For fourteen hundred years, Christians have been on the defensive against Islam

[18], while European interventions – Crusaderism, colonialism – have in the long term only served to make their situation worse.



[18] *The Archangel Gabriel, labelled in Greek, holding an orb in which has later been inscribed, in Arabic, the name of Allah; in the Antalya Museum, Turkey. (December 1988)*

In northern Syria, Christian villages, churches and monasteries abandoned after the Arab invasions in the seventh century lie as they were left, with often only their roofs missing. You can walk through whole landscapes that can have changed little since the seventh century [19-20], though a number of monuments, including the famous shrine of S. Symeon the Stylite west of Aleppo, have been hit by bombing during the current hostilities. An ancient Greek Catholic monastery at Ma'lula outside Damascus, where we passed a snowy Christmas in 1992, has since been completely trashed, along with all the town's other Christian shrines [21].



[19] *The ruined late antique village of Serjilla, north-western Syria. (May 1989)*



[20] *The sixth-century church at Surqanya, north-western Syria. (June 1996)*



[21] *The Greek Catholic Monastery of Mar Sarkis, Ma'lula, Syria. (December 1992)*

In Asia Minor, Christian 'Karamanli' tombstones inscribed in Turkish, though still in Greek characters, hint at the long-drawn-out process of assimilation [22]. In 1890 the English traveller David Hogarth visited Yeşilada in Lake Egirdir in western Turkey. 'A remnant of fifty Christian families huddles at one end of the island, where is a church served by two priests. No service is held except on the greatest festivals, and then in Turkish, for neither priest nor laity understand a word of Greek. The priests told us that the families became fewer every year; the fathers could teach their children nothing about their ancestral faith, for they knew nothing themselves; the Moslems were "eating them up". We had to force the church door, and brush dust and mould from a vellum service-book dated 1492. It was all like nothing so much as a visit to a deathbed.' (*A wandering scholar in the Levant* (London 1896) 84) This same church has been decaying away ever since the last Christians left in the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey in 1924 [23].



[22] A Karamanli tombstone in the garden of the Silifke Museum, Turkey. (June 1988)



[23] *The church on Yeşilada, Lake Egirdir, Turkey. (June 1988)*

My interest in Eastern Christianity is not the only way my researches have mirrored characteristic emphases of European scholarship, and sometimes of

Europe's politics and diplomacy too. Pre-Islamic Antiquity – what we commonly call 'Greece and Rome' – has been another major attraction. But a violent reaction against European involvement with and, up to a point, exploitation of a local, but alien, pagan past has been manifest in the recent Islamic Caliphate's destruction of parts of the ruined desert city of Palmyra. Palmyra's previous state – excavated and extensively restored mainly by European archaeologists – is illustrated by another extended sequence in my archive [24].



[24] *Palmyra, Syria, viewed from its mediaeval castle. The great temple of Bel in the middle distance was dynamited by ISIS in August 2015. (May 1989)*

In the Yemen, the damage has been done by a rivalry within Islam, between Sunnis and Shiites and their backers, respectively Saudi Arabia and Iran. Arms were always freely available in Yemen, and reinforced a machismo culture in which women were inconspicuous on the public stage [25]. The fate of Yemen's vast and unique repertoire of mud-brick architecture – a still living tradition – is as yet hard to ascertain [26]. And what of the boys who, twenty years ago, followed us wherever we went, and were so eager to be photographed? [27-29].



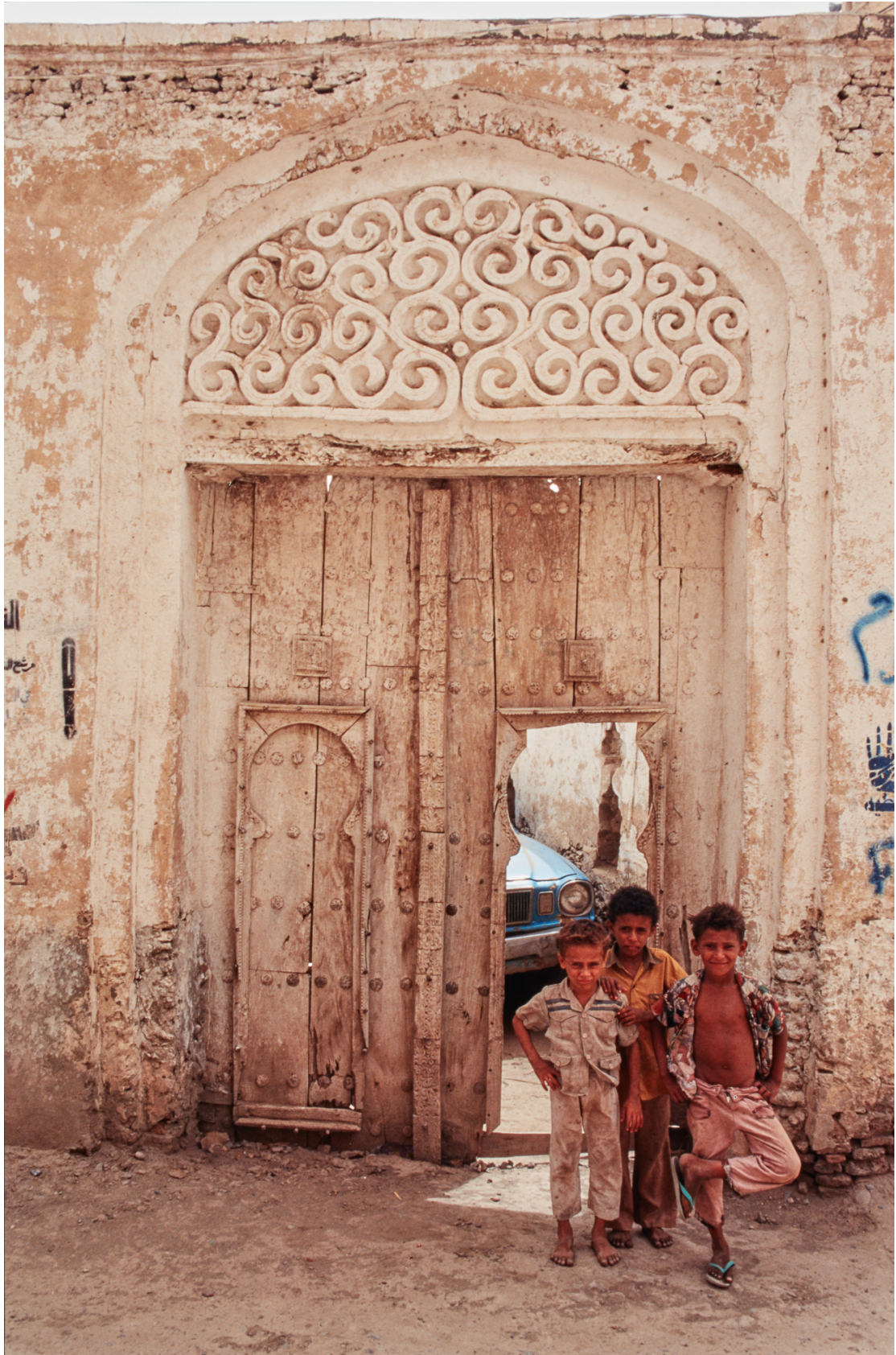
[25] *A wedding in the Manakha area, Yemen. (July 1997)*



[26] *The 'Amudi house, Sif, Wadi Daw'an, Yemen, characteristic of the overblown residences recently constructed with remittances from Saudi Arabia. (July 1997)*



[27] *Boy at a mosque in Zabid, Yemen. (July 1997)*



[28] *Boys outside a gateway in Zabid, Yemen. (July 1997)*



[29] *Boy in front of a wall of spolia at Zafar, Yemen. (July 1997)*

After our travels, we would return to our village of Limni, very much off the beaten track in the northern part of the Greek island of Euboia [30-31]. The Aegean Sea in which Euboia lies is among Europe's most sybaritic holiday destinations, and at the same time a particularly sensitive sector of the frontier between the Christian and Muslim worlds. Several times a year we Limniotes reaffirm our Christian identity by processing round the village behind our beautiful Byzantine icon of the Mother of God. But on our beach is the cave where, almost a thousand years ago, the Blessed Christodoulos, founder of the great Monastery of S. John on Patmos, took refuge from the Saracen pirates who were making life there intolerable.

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[30] *Limni, Euboia, Greece, looking across the Euboian Gulf toward Mount Parnassos. (December 2003)*



[31] *Limni, Euboia, Greece: Epiphany procession of the icons. (January 2000)*