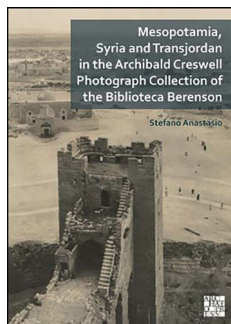


STEFANO ANASTASIO. 2023. *Mesopotamia, Syria and Transjordan in the Archibald Creswell photograph collection of the Biblioteca Berenson*. Oxford: Archaeopress; 978-1-80327-456-0 paperback £55.



Stefano Anastasio's publication takes the reader on a lively journey of monumental Islamic architectures photographed by Archibald Creswell between 1910 and 1930. The book focuses on photographs of Mesopotamia, Syria and Transjordan that Creswell took when he was the British Army's Inspector of Monuments. Anastasio does an excellent job highlighting Creswell's meticulous attention to architectural accuracy. Through written description, diagrams, maps and the photos themselves, Anastasio interprets the photographic methodology and precision of monument documentation. Creswell employed telephotography, aerial photography, close-up shots and multiple shots of the same subject to capture light variations. His

photographs of sites and monuments in the region are especially important because they were captured prior to radical and dramatic changes that followed French and British sanctions, archaeological excavations, restorations and destructions. Anastasio also argues that Creswell's collection can help to guide the design of restorative projects and anastylosis of monuments.

While Creswell's work is available online, it is scattered across different archival institutions such as the American University of Cairo, the Ashmolean Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Harvard Fine Arts Library. A complete synopsis of the photographs is in progress and will unite all the archives on one online platform called *The Creswell online network: documenting Islamic architecture through early photography*. Anastasio warns against the publishing of online photography collections without critical information such as the history of the collection and the analysis of subjects within the shot. He emphasises the need to analyse photographs in terms of the photographer's *modus operandi*, the larger context and the photographer's artistic choices, rather than simply seeing them as literal and static representations of the past.

This vibrant book begins with a discussion of Creswell's work in the context of Islamic architectural history. Anastasio introduces the collection, explains how the photo archives were processed and describes Creswell's photographic methodology. He further surveys photographs of Mesopotamia, Syria and Transjordan that were taken by people before Creswell. The inclusion of Arab photographers in this section, such as George Sabunji and Mahmoud Al-Azm, is impressive particularly since similar works often omit Arab photographers. After this important background information, Anastasio delves into cataloguing sites and monuments starting from Mesopotamia (e.g. the mesmerising al-Askari Shrine in Samarra), moving to Syria (e.g. the Aleppo city walls and Great Mosque) and ending with Transjordan (e.g. the Roman Nymphaeum and Umayyad Mosque in Amman). The author concludes the book by restating the great significance of Creswell's photography in studies of Islamic

architecture because many of these monuments have since been damaged or have disappeared entirely.

Paired with Creswell's distinctive photographs, Anastasio's historical narratives on the monument's lives amidst various Arab, Muslim and European societies created the perfect balance between visual and descriptive histories. I also found Anastasio's self-reflection on his discomforts of trying to balance archaeological perspectives with a photographic approach refreshing. Anastasio argues that understanding the entire context behind the production of these photos at that time in the Middle East is necessary for their appreciation. Tents had to be put up to develop negatives, water had to be transported from long distances for this process and props were often built to capture views from specific angles and scales.

Alongside the photographs and comparanda, Anastasio's inclusion of maps and figures of the sites was also helpful to position them within cities, nation-state boundaries and in the wider geography of the Middle East. Anastasio's diagrams are particularly useful, as in the case of Taq Kisra, Iraq, to mark the direction from which Creswell took shots of the monuments to illustrate his strategic method of photographic accuracy.

An area in which Anastasio could have elaborated is the choice of using the words 'Mesopotamia' and 'Transjordan' instead of Iraq and Jordan. This is particularly striking because the sites and monuments catalogued in this book are within the borders of Iraq and Jordan. Using the modern state names would better contextualise the photographs and acknowledge their role in local landscapes, residential areas and their importance in local and national identity.

But this is a minor point. Anastasio's book is a must-read for anyone interested in Islamic history and architecture and, more generally, cultural heritage and multimodal archaeology. I found the book a compelling introduction to monuments in the Middle East, especially given its relevance to topics including cultural heritage destruction, reconstruction and preservation. The Middle East that is depicted through this collection is beautiful. It elicits feelings of nostalgia and pride but also sorrow and resentment for its mistreatment. This book is a unique contribution to these ongoing issues of cultural heritage in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa).

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