

## INTRODUCTION

This book has risen from the ashes of the 15 April 2019 fire at Notre-Dame de Paris.

On that fateful night the world was gripped by images of the cathedral engulfed in flames. No one imagined that a building on fire could spark such interest and mesmerise global audiences for days on end. The French nation went into mass mourning on a scale that took everyone by surprise.

Why? What did this building represent to the French and to the world? In due course, statements by international leaders, not least French president Emmanuel Macron himself, would suggest that the cathedral somehow encapsulated French nationhood. All of France was burning in sympathy. In a country where statistics show that before the fire only 5 per cent of the population was church-going and 47 per cent described themselves as non-practising Catholics, what could explain such an outpouring?

Part of it, without doubt, was a reaction. France has a long tradition of *laïcité*, secularism, that began with its revolution in 1789, and its constitution today guarantees that ‘all citizens regardless of their origin, race or religion are treated as equals before the law.’ But the twenty-first century brought unforeseen challenges. During Europe’s migration crisis in 2015, France found itself overwhelmed with Arab and African refugees, most of whom were Muslim. Later that year, the streets of Paris were convulsed by a series of terrorist attacks, inspired by the extremism of Islamic State. In response to these upheavals and the perceived threat of Islam, many sought to revive a Christian national identity.

## STEALING FROM THE SARACENS

Now the French were in danger of losing this magnificent treasure at the heart of their capital city, the very symbol of their Catholic faith. The non-church-going mayor of Paris said she was convinced the cathedral had been saved from collapse by the power of prayer. After the fire, church attendance soared and the number of pilgrims walking between Notre-Dame and Chartres, especially the young, reached new heights. France, that most secular of countries where even wearing a crucifix to work is not allowed, is having a religious renaissance, a spiritual awakening.

But what if that very building itself, that intricate Gothic style so deeply associated with Catholicism in Europe, was in fact inspired by Islamic architecture brought into Europe centuries earlier? How would people feel about that?

The answer soon became clear after I put out a tweet the morning after the fire:

Notre-Dame's architectural design, like all Gothic cathedrals in Europe, comes directly from #Syria's Qalb Lozeh 5th century church—Crusaders brought the 'twin tower flanking the rose window' concept back to Europe in the 12th century. It's in #Idlib province, still standing...<sup>1</sup>

The reaction within a matter of minutes was staggering. Realising the tweet had struck a nerve, I decided to explain more in a blog on my website that same morning. I called it: 'The heritage of Notre Dame—less European than people think'.<sup>2</sup>

It created a storm of interest. By lunchtime I had been contacted by *Middle East Eye* and by *Asharq al-Awsat* asking if they could reblog the piece on their websites. Within the next few days the blog was published by AFP Beirut and ended up being translated into Arabic, French, German, Chinese, Japanese and Hindi for most international media outlets. For whatever reason, this kind of information no longer seems to be mainstream and has somehow dropped off people's radar.

Are we ready, in the current climate of Islamophobia, to acknowledge that a style so closely identified with our European Christian identity owes its origins to Islamic architecture? I wonder. In October 2019 I visited the British

Museum's 'Inspired by the East' exhibition, not expecting to find anything of relevance to this book since the focus was on portable objects, like Orientalist paintings, ceramics, glass, jewellery and clothing. But one exhibit caught my eye—the widely reprinted and influential fifteenth-century pictorial map of Jerusalem showing all the Christian pilgrimage sites carefully labelled in Latin. It was a Christian vision of Jerusalem, with any evidence of the contemporary Mamluk Muslim rule quite literally airbrushed out of the picture—or so the map-maker thought. I laughed out loud, for the central building of the map, dominating all else, was an enlarged representation of the Dome of the Rock, carefully mislabelled as King Solomon's biblical temple. The unwitting Bernhard, canon of Mainz Cathedral, in documenting his pilgrimage of 1483, had perpetuated the mistake of the twelfth-century Crusaders, who did not realise the structure was a Muslim shrine built in 691 by the ruler of Islam's first empire. As a result, well into the eighteenth century when the error was finally realised, many European churches were modelled on a Muslim shrine.

A profound Islamic influence can be seen in many of Europe's most iconic buildings. This may be an uncomfortable and startling thought, when some still struggle even with the concept of 'Arabic numerals'. A 2019 survey in the US asked Americans if they would ever use Arabic numerals—'Certainly not!' came the resounding response.<sup>3</sup>

Yet while we in the West may not be ready to acknowledge our debt to Islamic architectural influence, Sir Christopher Wren, regarded as Britain's greatest architect, was. He saw it clearly over three centuries ago, when he wrote, after extensive study and research: 'The Gothic style should more rightly be called the Saracen style.'<sup>4</sup>

How could our great European Gothic cathedrals, the very incarnation of our national and Christian identities, have any connection with the Saracens, or, as Wren says, 'what is the same thing, the Arabians and the Moors'? What could he possibly have meant by that and what was the evidence for such a bold statement?

The title of this book, *Stealing from the Saracens*, builds on his assertion but still requires some more explanation, for it was chosen with care and can be read in several ways. The word 'Saracen' has dropped out of everyday language

these days, but in Wren's time it was commonly used as a pejorative term to describe the Arab Muslims against whom the Crusaders fought for some 200 years, from 1095 onwards, in their 'Holy War' to regain Jerusalem. Scholars give several derivations, but the most common etymology is from the Arabic root 'saraqā', meaning 'to steal'. The clear connotation was that 'Saracens', seen from the Eurocentric point of view, were looters and thieves—never mind the fact that the Crusaders looted their way across Europe, Jerusalem and later Constantinople. The title is therefore meant to convey the double irony that we in the West are 'stealing' from those we think of as thieves.

While recognising the Saracen origins of Gothic, Wren himself was no fan of the Gothic style, dismissing its weak roofing, its poor construction, and its fiddly decor and ornamentation. In his writings he is consistently rude about its shortcomings. It is another irony that his avowed dislike of the Gothic led him to reject it as the style for the new St Paul's Cathedral after the old one was destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666, despite coming up against strong resistance from the church authorities of the time, who clung to the Gothic architecture of the old St Paul's as a symbol of their national identity, just as tenaciously as the French cling to Notre-Dame. Church architecture all across Europe was closely associated with the Gothic style, much loved and treasured. Gothic cathedrals are seen as representing the pinnacle of Christian spirituality.

If Wren's theory is right, that the origins of Gothic are Islamic, it would mean that Muslims provided the inspiration for what Christianity regards as its own unique architectural formula—a most inconvenient truth.

Wren far preferred the classicism of 'the Ancients', as he called them, with its true sense of perspective, clean lines and symmetry. Yet he too 'stole' from the Saracens, not their style but their method, specifically their more advanced vaulting techniques, all of which were based on their mastery of geometry. Wren clearly states in his Tract on Architecture that he has used the superior 'Saracen' method of vaulting at St Paul's to support the colossal weight of the dome, even providing a diagram to show why it is the best way—successful vaulting is all about highly complex geometry.<sup>5</sup> That is why the front cover of this book shows the inside of the St Paul's dome.

After attending a mass beneath the dome at St Paul's in June 2019, I mentioned Wren's theory to the priest who had been officiating. He visibly blanched. This is what we have come to in Europe. We have arrived at the point where the Middle East and Islam are associated only with negative images of violence, extremism and terrorism. Few Westerners have had the chance to go and experience the region for themselves since the Arab Spring of 2011 and its resultant civil wars. But even if we cannot go—as indeed Christopher Wren himself never went beyond France—maybe we can still, like him, keep an open mind about the knowledge and cultural influences that had their origins in that part of the world. No society exists in isolation and everything is interconnected. As John Donne, poet, priest and onetime Dean of St Paul's, now buried in its crypt, expressed it: 'No man is an island.'

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The current European inward-looking mindset, in addition to the prevailing strong hostility to Muslim immigrants arriving in Europe after fleeing war in their own countries, makes this book a necessary and important corrective. I've long been fascinated by architecture, by the force that pushes people to design buildings in certain ways in specific locations and for specific purposes. It was an interest in early human civilisation and the world's first buildings and communities that led me to study Arabic at the University of Oxford back in the 1970s in the first place.

In architecture there are always reasons behind the facade—nothing is accidental. Wren was a hands-on 'surveyor'—the profession of 'architect' did not exist in his day—who worked on site with his masons and craftsmen most days for the thirty-six years that it took to build St Paul's. The three years I spent restoring my house in Damascus with local craftsmen—including stonemasons, carpenters, tilers, painters, plumbers and electricians—gave me many insights into building design that I could never have acquired solely through research, although my subsequent MA in Islamic Art and Architecture at SOAS helped deepen my knowledge. Even before the Damascus experience, I'd spent a year supervising and collaborating with a similarly wide range of workmen during the complex renovation of my nineteenth-century home in Kent.

Starting in my early twenties, I'd spent decades travelling round the Middle East, absorbing the archaeology and architecture of the region, writing about it, touching the stones. Maybe I was always an architect *manquée*.

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Christopher Wren was a highly rational man of science, not of whim, a reasonable man with restraint and self-discipline, not given to making wild unfounded claims. Such a man could not possibly have arrived at so bold a conclusion, that Gothic architecture should more rightly be called Saracen architecture, without having first satisfied himself of the evidence.

To understand his thinking we must first look closely at the man himself, at the influences he was exposed to throughout his own ninety-year life. And we also have to know what he meant by the 'Saracen' style.

What was the architectural legacy of the Crusades in both the religious and the military arenas? What did Europe learn from its first mass venture into the Holy Lands of the Middle East, the lands where Christianity itself was born? What about earlier borrowings of architectural styles from Andalusia—Muslim Spain—Sicily and Italy centuries before the Crusades, and from cross-cultural trading hubs like Venice, Malta, Rhodes and Cyprus in the years that followed the Crusades? And what about the Ottomans, the superpower on Europe's doorstep for 400 years, with whom Wren was contemporary—what did he know of them and their architecture?

When embarking on the construction of St Paul's, Wren dug right down through the London clay to the shingle riverbed of the Thames, far deeper than the previous foundations of the old Gothic St Paul's. Likewise, the footings of this book—the opening two chapters—dig down into the man himself and give an exploration of the Gothic = Saracen concept. Then, foundations laid, the story unfolds chapter by chapter, starting from the pre-Islamic architectural inheritance of the region which forms today's Syria, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Israel and Turkey. The aim is to track these visible influences as they entered Europe. Far from being a simple linear process, it is more like a giant circular jigsaw.

It is essential to see the picture in the round and to acknowledge that many characteristics of Islamic architecture grew out of the earlier Byzantine heritage already extant. The Byzantine, Arab Christian heritage in turn had grown out of the Hellenistic-Roman legacy of the eastern Mediterranean region, but it is important to recognise that this does not make it 'Western'. The architectural influences on the Near East have their roots in ancient Mesopotamian traditions which, as will be explained later, were incorporated into the subsequent development of church architecture.<sup>6</sup> Before the Greek and Roman conquests imposed an east–west political division on the Near East, the whole area was far more culturally unified than the brief, superficial appearance of a few Graeco-Roman art forms might imply.<sup>7</sup> Everything builds on and is influenced by what came before, and although academic historians like to focus on one period or another, as if they are distinct and separate, the reality of history is that everything is a continuum—nothing just appears out of a vacuum.

Wren freely acknowledged the European debt to Saracen architecture in his writings, mentioning it no fewer than twelve times, even as the Ottoman armies pressed at the gates of Vienna in 1683, when he was in the thick of building St Paul's. He was a man of science, not of politics, whose mind was open to all knowledge, no matter where it came from. From his extensive experience after a lifetime of research and study, he devised his own views on the origins and early development of architecture. Starting 'from the most remote Antiquity', he examined universal 'principles' or 'grounds of architecture' and concluded that these are 'not only Roman and Greek, but Phoenician, Hebrew and Assyrian... founded upon the experience of all ages.'<sup>8</sup> Such an approach speaks volumes of Wren's openness to foreign influences, wherever they came from, even if from the enemy. It is precisely this openness that enabled him to produce in St Paul's such a harmonised blend of styles, which did not simply follow the earlier models but built on them, improving on them. No society exists in isolation. If it does and closes in on itself, it will soon die, for lack of stimulation and original thought.

On some primordial instinctive level, it is this that we respond to in St Paul's. We recognise that it transcends the norms to achieve something higher. That's what makes it an icon.



Sir Christopher Wren (1632–1723) , painted in 1711 aged seventy-nine, after St Paul's was completed in 1708.