Manazir
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Nostalgia and Belonging in Art and Architecture from the MENA Region

Essay Collection

Research project conceptualized and edited by Laura Hindelang and Nadia Radwan

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Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts,
Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region

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Impressum

Manazir is a platform of exchange that aims to connect researchers interested in the study of visual arts, architecture and heritage in the MENA region (Middle East & North Africa) in Switzerland.

The term "Manazir" refers to landscape, perspective and point of view in Arabic, Ottoman Turkish and Persian. Thus, Manazir is oriented toward a diversity of transcultural and transdisciplinary "landscapes" and "points of views" and open to a multiplicity of themes, epochs and geographical areas.

It is a non-hierarchical platform that will connect scholars, PhD candidates and art professionals working in Swiss universities and institutions, in order to give higher national and international visibility to a rich but yet relatively unknown field.

The Platform disseminates information regarding conferences, workshops, publications and exhibitions taking place in Switzerland. Research results are also promoted through *Manazir Journal*, a peer-reviewed online journal that regularly publishes thematic issues in open access.

Manazir is associated with the Swiss Society Middle East and Islamic Civilization (SSMOCI/SGMOIK) which is a member of the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences (ASSH/SAGW).

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Linda Herzog

Between Photography and Architecture
Gertrude Bell's Sense of Nostalgia

Figure 3: Gertrude Bell. *M_004: Mosul - Iraq, Tomb of the Imam Yahya.* 1909. Photograph, negative size: 9.7 x 11.7 cm. © Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, United Kingdom.

Since the invention of photography in 1839, historical monuments in the Middle East have been widely photographed by European scholars and others (Behdad 2, 20). This essay discusses the circumstances and aesthetic characteristics of historical archaeological photographs that offer the potential to evoke nostalgic imaginations and idealizations. To elaborate on this issue, a photograph of the tomb of Yahya Abu al-Qasim in Mosul, Iraq, will be discussed. The picture was taken in 1909 by the British traveler, archaeologist, and diplomat Gertrude Bell on her archaeological journey throughout the Ottoman Empire.

Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" and speaks of a "sentiment of loss and displacement" in combination "with one's own fantasy" (Boym xiii). To illustrate the multiple nostalgic notions that Bell's photograph of the tomb of Yahya Abu al-Qasim may trigger, I used my own imagination and pictured her photograph nicely framed as an exhibit in the Abbasid art section of the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin. The tomb was an important Abbasid building in Iraq that had been well preserved until it was destroyed by soldiers of the so-called Islamic State (IS) in 2014 (Hasan et al. 4; McClary 129). Given the refined decoration, forms and materials of the tomb, its photograph would undoubtedly fit the museum's collection. The tomb was built in 1239 by Badr al-Din Lulu, who ruled Mosul from 1233 to 1259, shortly before the end of the Abbasid caliphate. He was a slave of Armenian origin who had converted to Islam, but it seems unclear whether he converted to Shia or Sunni Islam (McClary 129–130). In the photograph, the building's distinguished architecture, with its ornaments and inscriptions, is very noticeable, despite the tomb's state of evident decay. Its state of decay can be interpreted as the material "traces of a glorious past" that evoke the sentiment of loss (Behdad 58). The feeling of timelessness is additionally intensified by the constant and calm flow of the river Tigris as well as the view of the opposite bank. In this sense, Bell's photograph conveys the "'Orient' as a timeless space" that forms a subject evoking "historical nostalgia" (Behdad 48, 58). This nostalgic notion is not necessarily interrelated with one's belonging to the "Orient", but inspires "dreams of another place and another time" (Boym 41).

From a historical perspective, Gertrude Bell's photograph brings into focus the transnational European archaeological interests in the Ottoman Empire. German archeologists Friedrich Sarre and Ernst Herzfeld visited the tomb of Imam Yahya on their archaeological journey through Mesopotamia two years before Bell (Sarre and Herzfeld 3: plates IX 1., XCIII 1., IC 1.–CII; 2: 249–263). They photographed the courtyard façade of the tomb from a similar angle, but evidently their photographs differ from one another. The tomb of Imam Yahya was in a much better state in 1907 than in 1909 when photographed by Bell (Sarre and Herzfeld 2: 249). In Sarre and Herzfeld's publication, the restoration of the building in 1916 was reported, but it was not mentioned who commissioned the repairs (Sarre and Herzfeld 2: 249). Likewise, it remains unclear whether locals visited the tomb at that time or whether it was just of interest to Europeans.

The printed photograph in Bell's travel book *Amurath to Amurath* (published in 1911) was from the original photograph in the online Gertrude Bell Archive (http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/photo_details.php?photo_id=3306). The spots and marks from the chemical development process were retouched for printing and the left part of the photograph (which depicts the river and the opposite bank) was cropped (Bell fig. 174). As a result, the photograph in *Amurath to Amurath* has an object-bound gaze that focuses solely on the historical building. In this way, the photograph was adapted to archaeological representation practices and resembles the photograph in Sarre and Herzfeld's publication *Archäologische Reisen im Euphrat- und Tigris-Gebiet* (Sarre and Herzfeld 3: plate CI 1.). In contrast to the picture in Bell's travel book, the original photograph in the Gertrude Bell Archive evokes a stronger sense of nostalgia due to the visible traces of the chemical

development process, the building's depicted surrounding as well as the tomb's desolate state of decay which is shown in both pictures.

From a contemporary perspective, Bell's photograph of the tomb of Yahya Abu al-Qasim may trigger a sense of loss and displacement. The monument no longer exists, much like larger parts of the old city of Mosul, which were destroyed during the occupation by the so-called Islamic State (IS) between 2014 and 2017. Due to these circumstances, the photograph's meaning has shifted. It now exists detached from the actual tomb and no longer relates to the original building in Mosul. Instead, it serves as a symbol of the time when the photograph was taken. On the one hand, the photograph testifies to the fact that the tomb possessed historical value. On the other hand, the picture's independence from its object is shown by the photograph's existence in European collections as an aesthetic artifact of its own. Furthermore, this shift has created a space for a longing for the past when European scholars on adventurous journeys explored historical monuments in the Middle East. This sense of nostalgia underlines the significance of European knowledge on Middle Eastern heritage sites. However, the nostalgic sentiment that Bell's photograph of the tomb of Imam Yahya can trigger refers to a past shaped by imperial rule and European colonial interests.

The question therefore arises whether it is appropriate to speak of nostalgia when talking about ruins that resulted from war and terror (Huyssen 7–8). Envisioning a person who has escaped from occupied Mosul, I imagine that they would be overcome by profound sadness and anger as well as a longing for their hometown when visiting the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin and seeing Bell's photograph among the artworks from the Abbasid period as part of Iraq's cultural heritage. Although Svetlana Boym mentions the "creative rethinking of nostalgia" as "a strategy of survival, a way of making sense of the impossibility of homecoming", I would not call this sense of longing for one's hometown nostalgia (Boym xvii). In my view, the physical and mental aftermath of the destruction caused by the IS occupation of Mosul is not yet overcome. This prevents the utopian dimension that would be needed for nostalgia in this case (Boym xiv).

In the endeavors to rebuild the old city of Mosul, one approach calls for using the area of the tomb of Yahya Abu al-Qasim "for social and mixed religious group development" (Hasan et al. 1). This proposal reports that the tomb was transformed into a modern concrete building during its last renovation between 1997 and 1999 (4). Contemporary photographs on the internet do not clearly indicate whether the tomb was restored or newly built and additionally equipped with the historical elements visible in Bell's photograph. The renovation of the tomb has endowed Bell's photograph with an original quality because the picture shows the tomb's authentic architecture, with its materials and forms, and therefore the building's historical value. What Bell's photograph does not convey, however, is the tomb's symbolic significance that resonates in contemporary photographs. In this sense, Bell's photograph represents a different history than the tomb of Yahya Abu al-Qasim in Mosul itself.

Returning to Boym's definition of nostalgia as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed", we could say that if this longing for a home is not related to one's belonging to a place or time but associated with one's imaginations and "dreams of another place and another time", then Bell's photograph of the tomb has the potential to take the viewer on a nostalgic journey to a distant place in the past (Boym 41). Not every historical archaeological photograph possesses this potential. In the case of Bell's photograph, the distinguished architecture of the building in its state of decay and the photograph's technical imperfection are the vehicles for these sentiments. The fact that the IS destroyed the tomb of Imam Yahya can also evoke nostalgia as the feeling of loss and as a longing for real monuments that no longer exist.

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