THE ELEPHANTS' MINARET IN BUDAPEST ZOO: REORIENTING A CENTURY-OLD DEBATE

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There is no animal on Earth whose provision is not guaranteed by God,
He knows where it lives and where it is laid to rest (Q 11,6)

In the summer of 2020, social media platforms began to spread misleading news in Arabic about a conspicuous building in Budapest, alleging it to be an Ottoman mosque converted into the elephants' shelter within the local zoo. Its turquoise domes and minaret-like tower signalling a touristic hotspot – *vis-à-vis* its profane function – made some Muslim visitors uneasy. Several Twitter and Facebook users repeated the same basic information with despising undertones.[1] Concomitantly, news agencies devoted to battling fake news in Arabic hastened to debunk the case and pointed out the confusion: the building was, in fact, dedicated to elephants (and other species of the Pachydermata order) ever since its inception in 1909 (al-Ġūl 2020; "Ḥaqīqat taḥwīl masǧid"). Yet, this is not to deny that its visual appearance extensively borrowed elements from Islamic architecture, a fact that has enabled it to be an object of recurrent debates throughout its history.

Constructed between 1909 and 1912, the Elephant House is one of the highlights of Budapest Zoo, an iconic monument enjoyed by a significant number of visitors every day (Fig. 1). However, Muslims living in Hungary at the time of its completion – including the Ottoman consul-general – raised concerns about its oft-noted resemblance to a mosque. Their criticism targeted the minaret-like tower in particular, initiating a dispute that led to the decision of its demolition in 1915. The peculiarity of this case emerges from the fact that although various earlier buildings, both in Hungary and elsewhere in Christian-majority Europe, had incorporated

Author's note: I am grateful to Dr Gábor Fodor and Dr Gergő Máté Kovács for their help with my research for this paper and also to Ajla Bajramovic and Professor Finbarr Barry Flood for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

[1] While visiting the zoo on 3 May 2022, I overheard a group of Arabic speakers coming up with the same impromptu interpretation at the site. It resulted from the building's general appearance, which they claimed to resemble that of a mosque, and from the knowledge that Hungary had once been part of the Ottoman Empire.

https://doi.org/10.58513/ARABIST.2022.44.7

towers that imitated the forms of minarets, none of those seems to have sparked such an outcry. In addition, when the Elephant House underwent restorations in the 1990s, the tower's reconstruction again raised more than a few eyebrows. Although the debate has partly faded away since, critical voices are occasionally heard still today. The apparent 'minaret problem' may thus give various food for thought, not to mention that the architectural language of this building has hitherto received inadequate scholarly attention.

Figure 1. Elephant House, Budapest Zoo, built in 1912, tower demolished in 1915 and reconstructed in 1999. Photo by the author.

A recent article by the Turkish scholar Oya Şenyurt (2020), focusing on the Ottoman perception of the Elephant House, addresses one of the questions that will resurface in the present contribution. The author interprets this building within Edward Said's paradigm, conflating Orientalism with the Hungarian phenomenon of Turanism.[2] According to her:

> Despite the cultural and economic ties developed between Hungary and the Ottomans, it is possible that using the mosque format for the architecture of the Elephant Barn in Pest was related to the expansionist policy behind the Turanist ideology and the imperialist orientation toward the East in Hungary (Şenyurt 2020: 472–3).

The author also states, even more explicitly:

> It cannot be a coincidence that the early twentieth-century imperialist discourse about the East was expressed in the Orientalist style of the elephant barn of the zoo in Pest, which was built in the same period (Şenyurt 2020: 471).

Although this view might have merit from an Ottoman perspective, the existence of a deliberate correlation between a state ideology and the building's style seems, at best, unlikely. On the general level, it would be implausible to assume that all Orientalising buildings sprang from an imperialist agenda,[3] and thus the style in itself, contrary to Şenyurt's implication, is no evidence of such a connotation. The Elephant House was part of a comprehensive construction programme at Budapest Zoo, financed by the municipality, that was meant to create a joyful setting for exhibiting both local and exotic animals in various new houses. Neither the Austro-Hungarian Empire nor the state of Hungary had a say in its physical appearance. In short, it is far from obvious why the zoo would have attempted to convey "expansionist policy" or "imperialist discourse" with this particular building.

I shall argue below that the Elephant House should deserve to be discussed primarily in its internal context, that is, focusing on its commissioner and designer. The opinion of its harshest critics, while undoubtedly a significant point, provides but an additional layer of interpretation of the building. Contemporary sources indicate that the original intent behind its establishment was, as often the case, not in parity with its perception. The first part of this paper will study the Elephant House, assessing its conception, design, models, and initial reproach, followed by a contextualisation of the 'minaret problem' problem' – that is, the potential reasons people occasionally opposed minarets. In particular, I shall enquire whether the Elephant House's tower embodied a conscious reference to the religion of Islam. The

[2] Cf. Ablonczy 2022, esp. 34–35, 39–71.

[3] See, for instance, MacKenzie 1995: 71–104; Giese, Volait, and Varela Braga 2020; Ormos 2021: 28–30; O'Kane 2022.

underlying question also concerns the singularity of this case: why did similar minaret-like towers not hit the nerves of anyone? By highlighting some new evidence relevant to this enigmatic debate, I aspire to take steps in a hitherto untrodden direction in the building's interpretation. Lastly, I shall propose a solution that may help to bring the ostensibly conflicting narratives closer to each other.

Figure 2. Main Portal (central section), Budapest Zoo, built in 1912. Photo by the author.

1. From construction to deconstruction

Budapest Zoo, a private enterprise established in 1866, went bankrupt in 1907, after which the municipality of Budapest took over its ownership and management. As a result, the entire site experienced a thorough reorganisation and reconstruction, with numerous new buildings popping up on its premises between 1909 and 1912. The head of the scientific committee was the zoologist Adolf Lendl (1862–1943), collaborating with the general designer Kornél Neuschloss-Knüsli (1864–1935). In 1908, the two of them embarked on a study trip to Western Europe, mainly to Germany and the Netherlands, where they investigated the current trends in the displaying of flora and fauna at other zoos. One of the outcomes of their research was the idea to create houses for the animals in line with the architectural characteristics of their native lands.[4] At least vaguely Orientalising forms of buildings, some even with minaret-like towers, could be seen in the zoos of Berlin, Hamburg, and Munich at the time as today.[5] Accordingly, Lendl decided to take the concept further:

> We wanted all animal species to be set in a building characteristic of their homeland. The buffalos are in a Russian house, the elephant and the rhino are in an Oriental building; towers (*sic*), domes, Arab ornaments – these are all appropriate in style. This gorgeous Oriental building was designed by Dr Kornél Neuschloss quite selflessly; the birds are in Hungarian houses; the ostriches are placed in an African hut; the crocodiles are in a structure standing on poles above that large lake ("Az új állatkert". *Világ*. 16).

In other words, the tower – just as the general appearance – of the Elephant House purportedly referenced the native environment of the animals kept inside. And so did many other houses of the zoo. The "Oriental building", as Lend labelled it, adopted characteristics of Islamic architecture, thus constituting part of a genre that had been well-known to Budapest during the previous decades.

Among the architects who participated in the renewal of the zoo, Neuschloss-Knüsli was in charge of its overall layout, as well as of designing two individual buildings: the Elephant House and the Main Portal (Fig. 2). Even though his life is poorly known today, a few pieces of biographic information might be relevant to highlight here. Born to a Jewish family with several relatives working in the construction and carpentry industry, he received his training at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule, Zürich, graduating in 1893. He also took courses at the École des Beaux-Arts, Paris, and then completed his doctorate at Eötvös Loránd

[4] "Az állatkert újjáalakítása"; Lendl, "Az új állatkert"; Lendl, "Újabb irányok", 1–2; Perczel 2014a: 219–226; Perczel 2014b: 71–76; see also Frazon 2014: 188–191.

[5] See also Koppelkamm 2015: 176–179. Another example, the Wilhelma Zoo at Stuttgart, features several Alhambresque buildings dating from the second half of the nineteenth century, but the site was opened to the public as a botanical garden only in 1919.

University, Budapest, in 1903, with a thesis on the Renaissance architects Filippo Brunelleschi and Leon Battista Alberti.[6] Having converted to the Reformed Church, he then assumed various roles as a politician, public servant, and university teacher, while remaining a productive designer of public and private buildings during his career. His projects were sober or even modest in style, fitting with the general trend at the time, although with two notable exceptions: the Elephant House and the Main Portal of Budapest Zoo.

The Elephant House forms an irregular, elongated structure divided into three aisles not unlike a church, in which the visitor walks down in the centre and views the animals on the sides. This utilitarian layout has no similitude to a mosque. Most of the inner decoration conforms with the style of Hungarian Secession, or Art Nouveau, with polychrome floral elements, even though a few details imitate Islamic motifs. The outside walls incorporate ceramic figures of animal heads, while the domes and semi-domes are clad in turquoise tiles produced by Zsolnay Factory at Pécs. The main gate opens on the southwest façade dominated by the 31-meter-tall octagonal tower with a balcony similar to those on minarets (Fig. 1). It is, therefore, not entirely misguided that, upon a brief view from the outside, one might associate the building's general appearance with that of a mosque. Some newspapers reporting on its completion indeed praised it as a "Turkish mosque" or "Turkish temple",[7] while Lendl described the tower as a "minaret".[8] As mentioned above, certain visitors likewise mistake the house for an Ottoman mosque still today, not surprisingly, given that no information on its history and architecture is available at the site.

The chief Orientalising elements in this building can be identified with their potential models, examples of Islamic architecture that were presumably known to the architect. The turquoise tiles call into mind monuments of Iran and Central Asia, such as the mausoleum of Ūljāytū at Soltaniyeh (1312).[9] The painted decoration on the inside of the main dome of the Elephant House is comparable with that in the mosque of Šayḫ Luṭf Allāh in Isfahan (1619), even though the former incorporates stylised animal figures into the design. The same dome's zone of transition, as seen from the outside, imitates Mamluk monuments in Cairo, especially the mausoleum of Ḫāyirbek (1502).[10] As for the tower, it is similar to the slender, pencil-shaped minarets adorning Ottoman mosques, but even closer in form is that of the Mosque

[6] "Miscellanea"; "Nekrologe"; Neuschlosz 1903; see also Gosztonyi 2012; Pfleghard 1935; Kassai 2015.

[7] "Az új állatkert". *Budapesti Hírlap*; "A budapesti új állatkertről"; "Milyen lesz az új Állatkert?". Many other reports simply labelled the new building as "dsámi" ('mosque'; from the Turkish word *cami*).

[8] Lendl, "Az új állatkert", 8; Lendl, *Milyen lesz az új állatkertünk*, 14.

[9] See Coste 1867, pl. 67; and also Brambilla 2019.

[10] See Behrens-Abouseif 2007: 312–315. This funerary complex, situated in the Darb al-Aḥmar Street of Cairo, appeared in numerous paintings and photographs in the period.

of Ḥammūda Pasha (1655) in Tunis, which appeared as an illustration in a Hungarian newspaper in 1906 (Fig. 3). It thus seems that the designer of the Elephant House, who was also a well-trained architectural historian, cherry-picked elements from various Islamic monuments, adopting (or adapting) them in accordance with his – as well as the commissioner's – general concept.

Figure 3. Minaret, Mosque of Ḥammūda Pasha, Tunis, built in 1655. "Tuniszi képek", 157 (cropped). Image in public domain.

The architect's design method inserts the Elephant House into the tradition of Orientalising buildings in Hungary; many examples of this genre can be highlighted from the second half of the nineteenth century. The common ground between them is that they consciously imitated Islamic architecture, often mixing characteristics of different regions from India to al-Andalus and co-opting them for functional or structural roles specific to the time. For instance, the Dohány Street (1859) and the Rumbach Street Synagogues (1873) in Budapest feature elements inspired by the palaces of the Alhambra, Granada, as well as minaret-like towers on their façades.[11] No less characteristic examples are the Vigadó (1864) and the Uránia (1896), both venues of entertainment with some – in the latter case, omnipresent – Alhambresque

[11] See Müller 1993; Klein 2017: 514–539. Many other Orientalising synagogues exist (or existed) in Hungary and the wider region; Klein's monumental monograph contains a comprehensive catalogue of those in Hungary

decorations.[12] Zsolnay Factory produced a variety of Orientalising tiles that have embellished, among others, the spa at Trenčianske Teplice (*c*. 1890, Slovakia) and the Zacherl Factory (1892) in Vienna.[13] The Museum of Applied Arts (1896) adopted architectural and decorative forms from Mughal buildings in India.[14] For the millennial year 1896, two ephemeral entertainment districts were set up in the Hungarian capital: Ős-Budavára ('Old Buda Castle') and Constantinople in Budapest.[15] Both assumed a pastiche of Orientalising characteristics; the former, standing on the premises of Budapest Zoo, even included a mosque with a minaret right near the location of the later Elephant House. It borrowed elements from several Mamluk monuments and remained in place up until the renewal of the zoo began in 1907. Remarkably, many of these buildings included minaret-like towers, just as such a structure stands in one of the courtyards of Zsolnay Factory.

Nevertheless, only the Elephant House among those Orientalising buildings had to endure heavy opposition from local Muslims in Hungary. Three consecutive Ottoman consul-generals to Budapest – Muhtar Bey, Fahreddin Bey, and Ahmet Hikmet Müftüoğlu – raised their voices against its mosque-like appearance between 1912 and 1915. According to newspapers, the situation escalated to the extent that unnamed Bosnian "fanatics" repeatedly attacked the building at night, throwing bricks at it; on one occasion, dynamites were discovered nearby.[16] Whether or not those allegations reflect reality is somewhat questionable, however, especially since the zoo filed no police report. In any case, the municipality of Budapest initially ruled out any changes to the Elephant House, except for taking down the crescent from the top of the main dome. They saw it as an innocent building of exotic style, intending no disrespect, and claimed the Ottoman consul-generals' reproach to be misguided. Newspapers also highlighted that the designer had selflessly requested no compensation for his work, indicating that any modification to the house would therefore dishonour his efforts and accomplishment.[17]

The pressure gradually intensified on the zoo not only through protests but also through diplomatic channels. The foremost reason for the local Muslims' dismay was the allegedly inappropriate misuse of a religious symbol, the minaret, as they

[12] See Gerle 2004: 72–94; Kelecsényi 2021.

[13] See Gerelyes 2004; Gerelyes and Kovács 1999; Ritter 2021; and also Merényi 2015: 43–61.

[14] See Sisa 2015: 175; Szántó 2015.

[15] See Kovács 2021; Perczel 2016. The architectural sources of inspiration for both entertainment districts remain to be investigated.

[16] "A török templom és az elefántok"; "A megbántott budapesti mohamadánok"; "A megbántott mohamedánok"; "Bonyodalmak az állatkerti dsámi körül"; "Bonyodalmak az állatkerti dsámi körül: Sziám meg Jónás". Some of the news reports are verbatim copies of each other. From these short notes, one has the impression that the journalists may have given voice to a rumour, even though some protests definitely took place at the zoo.

[17] "Bonyodalmak az állatkerti dsámi körül"; "Bonyodalmak az állatkerti dsámi körül: Sziám meg Jónás".

stated that such an architectural form was out of place in a zoo. On 21 June 1915, the Ottoman Consul-General Müftüoğlu sent an official letter to the Ottoman government about his efforts to have at least the tower modified so that it would resemble a minaret less. He added that the situation had been particularly unfortunate for the amicable relationship – and indeed Turanian 'consanguinity' – between the two nations, while expressing his relief that the 'minaret' was now to be demolished. Four days later, he sent a second letter enclosing a Hungarian newspaper article with illustrations as evidence of the ongoing modification to the building.[18] However, the main impetus for the Hungarian authorities' eventual compliance with his demand was the new political situation: the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire had begun to fight as allies in the Great War.[19] Any diplomatic disagreement hence had to be resolved.

The claim that Budapest Zoo misappropriated a religious symbol – that is, offended Islam – finds comparison in other, better-known cases of international notoriety. Among those were the satirical caricatures of the Prophet Muḥammad, first published by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005 and later borrowed and expanded by *Charlie Hebdo* in France.[20] However, those cartoons deliberately and graphically depicted scenes that Muslims would find obnoxious and blasphemous; such intentionality is anything but confirmed for the Elephant House. A closer analogy in that regard was the mishap with the so-called New York Kaʿba, the storefront of Apple Inc., which, at some point whilst under construction in 2006, resembled the Kaʿba in Mecca. The resulting outcry appeared online, spurring the company to deny intentional mimesis or any other reference to Islam (O'Meara 2018). Accidentally, their response was similar to that of the municipality of Budapest, implying that a visual similitude between two buildings, whether or not deliberate, may not necessarily embody a religious reference. Nonetheless, one may notice a fundamental difference between the New York Kaʿba and the 'minaret' of the Elephant House. The former resembled an individual (and supposedly unique) structure,[21] whereas the latter assumed characteristics of a building type with various regional manifestations.

[18] BOA, inv. no. HR SYS, 217/73/3–5. For another summary of these documents, see Şenyurt 2020: 466–468; and also "A vastagbűrűek házának átalakítása", which was the article enclosed with Müftüoğlu's second letter.

[19] "Újjáépítik a vastagbőrűek házát"; "A vastagbűrűek házának átalakítása"; "Az állatkert a háború alatt", 197.

[20] See, for instance, Flood 2013; Gruber 2018.

[21] Cf. Zarcone 2012; Iványi 2016: 37, 72–77; Nagy 2018; 2019: 274–276; Flood 2019: 35–47; O'Meara 2020: 17–18; 2022. Although the Kaʿba, in the eyes of Muslims, is generally held to be the most sacred building, this fact has encouraged many patrons to create its functional, conceptual, and even formal analogues throughout the Islamic world.

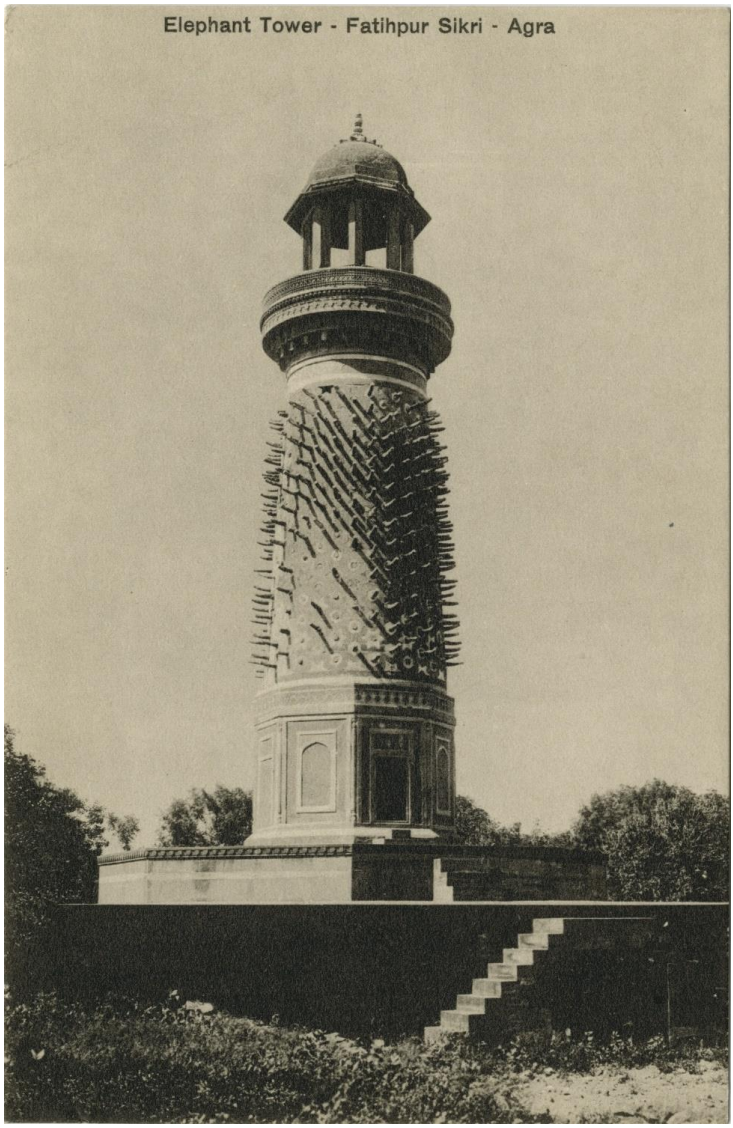

Figure 4. Hiran Mīnār, Fatehpur Sikri, built c. 1570s, early twentieth-century postcard. © Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky Libraries.

2. The ‘minaret problem’ in context

Since they are typically tall towers associated with a religion, the visibility of minarets has been a heatedly controversial subject in several European countries during the past century. For instance, Greece undertook systematic destruction of

Ottoman-era minarets in the 1920s, especially in Thessaloniki.[22] Another controversial case took place in Switzerland, where a national referendum was held in 2009 on the legal permissibility of such buildings, and the majority (57.5 per cent) voted against them. The resulting legislation did not concern, at least explicitly, the construction of mosques but rather what the electorates construed as the most conspicuous visual sign of such places of worship.[23] Leaving aside the intrinsic Islamophobia, those incidents in Greece and Switzerland raise the question of whether the minaret – an age-long characteristic of Islamic architecture – should always be seen as a religious symbol.

In the most comprehensive work on the history of minarets, Jonathan Bloom states:

> This book argues that the second type of structure – the tall tower – is a conscious invention of Muslim builders as a symbol of Islam. [… By the eleventh century the slender tower had emerged almost everywhere and the minaret became the symbol of Islam.[24]

That is, according to this authoritative view, there can be an overarching thesis fitting the different forms and uses of minarets throughout the territories under Muslim rule since the eleventh century. Plausible as it might sound, however, Bloom's statement finds little corroboration for premodern minarets in his monograph. While the broad subject, with particular attention to the building type's semantic perception, would deserve a more detailed analytical review, a few historical points highlighted below may suffice to demonstrate some of the complexities underlying such a generalising narrative.

The history of Islamic architecture indicates that minarets have often led to internal debates – including whether a mosque should have such a part at all – within the Muslim communities. The earliest mosques seem to have used their roofs for the *aḏān* ('call to prayer'). The specific place for the muezzin, described in the earliest Arabic sources as *miʾḏana* or *ṣawmiʿ*, is difficult to visualise today but likely to have meant a small, elevated pavilion on the roof. Only in the ninth century did tall towers begin to be habitually attached to major mosques.[25] Then, even in later centuries, some Muslim legal authorities occasionally opposed such practices. For instance, a ninth-century *ḥisba* manual written by a Zaydī scholar recounts that the *imām* ʿAlī (d. 661) prohibited the construction of minarets higher than the mosque's roof.[26] Another anecdote reported by al-Qāḍī an-Nuʿmān (d. 974) narrates that ʿAlī once

[22] Tsitselikis 2020: 250–251; see also Mazower 2005: 328–331.

[23] Cherti 2010; Wyler 2017: 413–415; see also Haenni and Lathion 2011, with several essays on the Swiss minaret ban.

[24] Bloom 2013: 18; see also pp. 264, 265, 275, and passim.

[25] Bloom 2013: 29–39, 71–91; cf. ʿAzab 2013: 190–196.

[26] Published in Serjeant 1953: 16; translated in Bloom 2013: 182 (note no. 4), and also p. 228.

saw a tall minaret and gave order to have it demolished.[27] According to the Mālikī jurist Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ (d. 1336), the construction of tall minarets is prohibited on three grounds:

> One is that it contradicts the [practice of our] ancestors (*al-salaf*), may God be contented with them, two is that it reveals the private quarter (*ḥarīm*) of Muslims, and three is that [the muezzin's] voice is [too] far from the people on the ground.[28]

In accordance with such legal opinions, there are various regions in the Islamic world where, at least in certain periods, Muslim communities were averse to minarets. The early Fatimid (909–1171) caliphs seem to have consciously avoided the building type, probably for their ideological opposition to the Abbasids (Bloom 2013: 138–142, 189–196). Ruling over the Maghrib and al-Andalus, the Almoravid dynasty (1060–1143) did not add towers to three of their great mosques in Nedroma, Algiers, and Tlemcen. The same tendency can be observed diachronically in premodern Sub-Saharan Africa, Oman, and parts of South Asia (such as Kashmir) at certain times: tower-shaped minarets were rare, if not absent. In addition, so-called staircase minarets, forming small pavilions accessible via stairs, have been documented in Nigeria, East Africa, Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey, and Iran.[29] Such structures were particularly common on the shores of the Persian Gulf, especially in Qatar, until recently.[30] During the Safavid dynasty (1501–1736), on the main square of the new capital Isfahan, the smaller of the two mosques known by the name of Šayḫ Luṭf Allāh (1619) did not receive a minaret, whereas the Masǧid-i Šāh (1629) has four, not to mention the muezzin's balcony (*guldāsta*) on top of one of the courtyard *īwān*s (Bloom 2013: 283–287). According to travellers to Iran in the seventeenth century, the muezzins avoided even the pre-existing minarets; instead, they customarily gave the call to prayer from the roofs.[31] In short, the minaret has not always been an essential part of a functioning mosque.

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[27] al-Qāḍī an-Nuʿmān, *Daʿāʾim al-Islām*, 1:147; translated in Bloom 2013: 138. On the question of Shīʿī jurists and the minarets, see also Bloom 2013: 108, 115–116, 132, 138–142.

[28] Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ, *al-Madḫal*, 2: 241. This passage was later quoted in the work of Usman Dan Fodio (r. 1803–1817), the founder of the Sokoto Caliphate in West Africa; Dan Fodio, *Iḥyāʾ as-sunna*, 164. His views instructed the subsequent Sokoto caliphs to build mosques without towers or even to destroy pre-existing ones; Leary 2016: 94–96.

[29] Schacht 1938; O'Kane 1992: 111–112; Lambourn 2017: 763–766; Prevost 2009; Bloom 2013: 31. The lack of tall minarets may indicate sectarian affiliation, such as in the case of the Ibāḍī communities.

[30] See Whitehouse 1972; al-Khulayfī 2003: 56–59; Jaidah and Bourennane 2009: 206–305.

[31] Ritter 2006: 203; Matthee 2011: 104. Illustrations of this practice appear in Safavid manuscripts, for instance, in Nizāmī, *Khamsa*, painting dated 1530s, British Library, Add. 25900, see Brend 2014; *Fālnāma* ('Book of divinations'), 1550s, The David Collection, no.

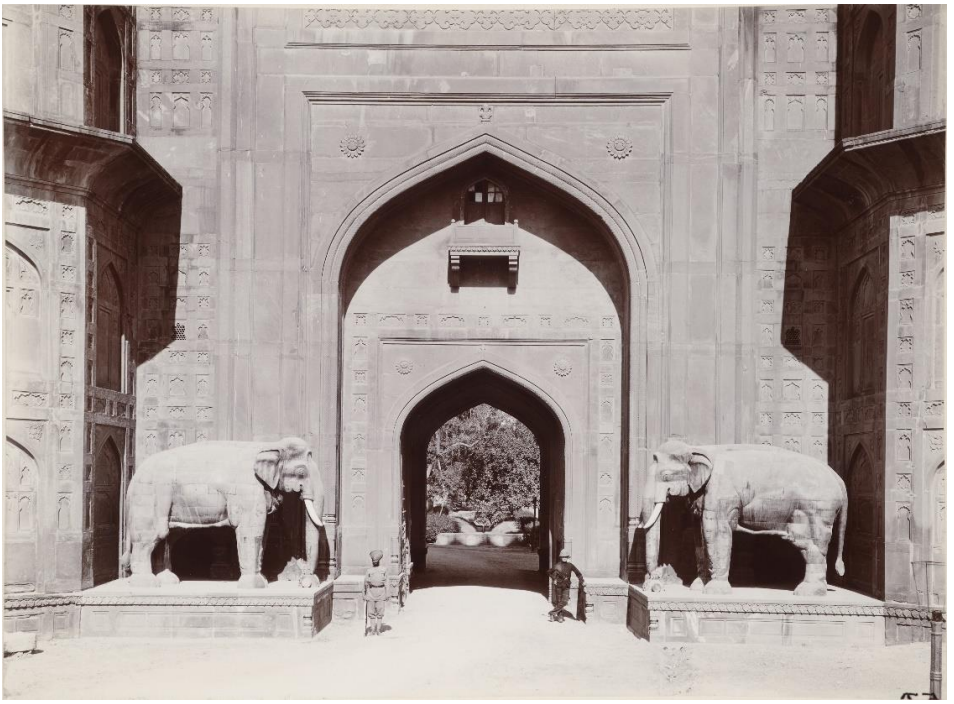

Figure 5. Red Fort of Delhi, Delhi Gate, built c. 1640s, with the elephant statues reconstructed in 1903. Albumen silver print, 15.5 x 21.0 cm, made in 1910 (or before). © Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal.

Other instances demonstrate that the building type has not always had a religious function. A group of medieval minarets in the eastern Islamic lands, mainly in Khurasan and South Asia, have repeatedly been described in modern scholarship as monuments of victory. Although this interpretation is debatable, since many of them stand virtually isolated, with no surviving mosque nearby, they warrant a purpose other than the *aḏān*.[32] Alongside the pilgrimage route from Kufa to Mecca, the Seljuq sultan Mālikšāh (r. 1072–1092) built a freestanding minaret named Manārat al-Qurūn ('Tower of Horns') and decorated with gazelle horns and donkey hoofs. According to its contemporary description, the patron used it for exhibiting his hunting booty.[33] This structure presumably served as a marker for pilgrims, which was a relatively common practice in both earlier and later Muslim patronage, while also advocating the sultan's virtues. Moreover, such towers with hunting booty are also known from later centuries, including the one near the tomb of Šams-i Tabrīzī

28/1997, see "Miniature from a copy"; *Fālnāma*, *c*. 1560, Aga Khan Museum, no. 96, see Graves and Junod 2012: 90–93 (esp. 93).

[32] Leisten 1993: 12–14; see also Flood 2002; 2009: 96–101.

[33] al-Bundārī, *Zubdat an-nuṣra*, 69–70; see also Bloom 2018: 243–244.

in Khoy, Iranian Azerbaijan. The architectural complex established by the Safavid ruler Ismāʿīl I (r. 1501–1524) originally included three minarets, one of which survives today, each decorated with over 800 mouflon skulls mounted into the brickwork (Bayramzadeh and Hassanzadeh 2020).

Figure 6. Giraffe House, Budapest Zoo, built in 1912 (rebuilt in 2009), with the Elephant House in the background. Photo by the author.

Figure 7. Bāb Šarqī ('East Gate'), Damascus, with the twelfth-century minaret. Photo by Maison Bonfils (cropped). Image in public domain (Archnet.com).

A few towers in South Asia, called '*mīnār*s' in the local languages,[34] deserve particular attention. Following earlier examples such as the Čānd Mīnār (1446) at Daulatabad[35] and the Fīrūz Mīnār (1489) at Gaur (West Bengal), Mughal emperors made peculiar uses of such structures. In his short-lived imperial capital Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar (r. 1556–1605) built a freestanding tower named Hiran Mīnār, which probably served as the 'mile zero' for measuring mileposts, as well as a hunting tower (Fig. 4). Additionally, according to a popular legend, it marked the grave of the emperor's favourite elephant.[36] This structure stands in contrast with the nearby imperial mosque that, just like all other early Mughal ones, had no minaret. The emperor Ǧahāngīr (r. 1605–1627) erected an artificial lake with a pavilion and a *mīnār* at Sheikhupura (Lahore) to commemorate the demise of his pet antelope. The

[34] *Mīnār* can also signify any vertical structure such as milestones (sg. *kōs mīnār*) and memorial pillars (sg. *stambha*); Flood 2009: 248.

[35] See Manohar 2022, interpreting this minaret as a victory tower.

[36] See, for instance, Mundy, *Travels*, 230, note no. 2, fig. no. 18; *Fatehpur Sikri*, 194–195; Latif 1896: 157; Havell 1904: 125; Koch 1987: 125; Asher 1992: 59; Nath 2018: 53–59.

tower features poetic inscriptions in praise of the animal (Asher 1992: 126–127). Šāh Ǧahān (r. 1628–1658) added a *mīnār* near his hunting lodge at Hastsal (Delhi) (Koch 2001: 279–280). Other similar towers reportedly displayed the chopped-off heads of executed rebels or criminals.[37] As a different example, a pair of minaret-like towers dating from the second half of the eighteenth century belong to the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar, the spiritual centre of Sikhism. They functioned as watchtowers for the community who expected their Muslim enemies to reattempt the destruction of their sacred site.[38]

The fact that Muslim patrons erected minarets with secular purposes provides a conceptual antecedent for the tower of the Elephant House in Budapest. No less relevant in that regard is the other monument of Budapest Zoo designed by Neuschloss-Knüsli, the Main Portal (Fig. 2).[39] The entrance arch is flanked by two pairs of elephant statues sculpted by Gyula Maugsch (1882–1946), which comprises a widely employed iconographic composition in South Asian architecture. One example is the Hāthī Pōl ('Elephant Gate') in Fatehpur Sikri, featuring the now defaced sculpture of two elephants.[40] Outside this gate stands the above-mentioned Hiran Mīnār, which, in early twentieth-century illustrations, often appeared with the caption 'Elephant Tower', since studies generally recounted the legend that Akbar had dedicated it to the memory of his favourite elephant (Fig. 4). Thus, the conceptual similarities between two iconic buildings in Fatehpur Sikri and two in Budapest Zoo are far too telling to be overlooked as coincidental. Another pair of life-size elephant statues, restored and re-erected in 1903, stands at one of the gates of the Red Fort in Delhi (Fig. 5).[41] Given the evident analogies between such Mughal monuments and Budapest Zoo, it appears that the designer of the Elephant House, rather than consciously appropriating a religious symbol, simply took inspiration from secular antecedents in India.

Conversely, Muslims in Hungary were surely unaware of those Mughal buildings; to them, the 'minaret' of the Elephant House could only be associated with a mosque. But this was not the only tower in Budapest Zoo, and not even the only one that could be mistaken for a minaret. The Giraffe House, also built between 1909

[37] Mundy, *Travels*, 72–73; see also Asher 1992: 97; Burton-Page 2008: 49–54.

[38] Arshi 1989: 27; Townsend 2014: 432–433. More specifically, the towers form part of a hospice building known by the name Ramgarhia Bunga (completed around 1770).

[39] A similar composition can also be seen in Berlin Zoo.

[40] See *Fatehpur Sikri*, 106–107; Latif 1896: 157; Keene 1899: 72; Havell 1904: 125.

[41] Cunningham 1871: 225–230; Marshal 1909; Beveridge 1909; Sanderson 1915: 26–27; Blake 1991: 37; see also Vanina 2019. The statues attributed to the patronage of Šāh Jahān (who established the Red Fort in 1638) were later removed during the reign of Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707). When rediscovered in 1863, some of the fragments turned out to belong to *mahout*s or elephant drivers, which were reconstructed separately from the animal statues; Marshal 1909. Similar *mahout* statues appear in Budapest Zoo, in between each pair of the elephants of the Main Portal.

and 1912, features a square tower (Fig. 6).[42] This structure presents ostensible similarities with the twelfth-century minaret standing on top of Bāb Šarqī ('East Gate') in Damascus (Fig. 7);[43] they both incorporate a balcony and a small turret above the square shaft. Although their resemblance is more likely to be coincidental, rather than the result of conscious mimesis, that may not rule out the potential to offend people. If Muslims had made the connection between the two, they could have raised their voice against it, just as in the cases of the Elephant House or the New York Kaʿba. When it comes to offence, recognisability seems to prevail over intentionality. The fact that the Giraffe House never had to withstand opposition demonstrates the significance of what forms a given audience would cognitively associate with the architectural vocabulary of religious significance familiar to them.

At the heart of the 'minaret problem' stands the thesis that the building type is a definitive symbol of Islam. This seemingly explains not only the Greek minaret destruction and Swiss minaret ban but also the outcry against the tower of the Elephant House. However, as Oleg Grabar remarked on this question:

> As a tower for the call to prayer, the minaret is but a sign suggesting a function; it becomes a symbol when it reminds one of Islam, when it appears on stamps identifying a specific country […], or when it serves to design a space […]. In other words, while the sign attribute is fixed, the symbol attribute is a variable which depends on some "charge" given to it or on the mood or feeling […] of the viewer ("referant"). Theory, therefore, compels us to identify and isolate the triple component of sign, symbol, referant. Of the three, symbol is the one which depends on predetermined conventions, habits or agreements which are not in the object but in those who share it. Our problem then becomes one of defining the semantic field of a symbol by finding the area in time or space of its contractual agreement with a social group (Grabar 1980: 5).

As noted above, some Muslim jurists' opinions against the construction of minarets shed light on the conflicts about this question within Islam. Also, the divergent forms in which minarets have manifested in different regions of the Islamic world, each with its local tradition,[44] renders it disputable whether one can speak of a single sign, let alone a single referent group. Be that as it may, Grabar's compelling argument explains, at least in part, why none of the nineteenth-century minaret-like towers in Hungary had to withstand an outcry. Since no Muslim community lived in Hungary

[42] See Fabó and Gall 2014: 128–129. The building suffered heavy damage in World War II, after which it was dismantled; however, it has now been reconstructed according to its original designs; Kis 2010.

[43] See Tabbaa 1986: 235–236; 2010: 68, note no. 47; Burns 2019, 196. Although the tower did not belong to a mosque, the contemporary traveller Ibn Ǧubayr (d. 1217) described it as a minaret (*manāra*); Ibn Ǧubayr, *Riḥla*, 282.

[44] On the forms of minarets in different regions of the Islamic world, see Hillenbrand 1994: 129–172.

during the construction of those towers, there was no referent reminded by the sign of the symbol. Or, when non-Muslims recognised the structures as ‘minarets’, that conveyed no explicitly religious connotation to them. Muslims began to settle in the country exactly about the time of establishing the Elephant House, for which the Hungarian Parliament declared Islam as an accepted religion in 1916.[45] Thus, although the narrative on the minaret as a symbol of Islam fails to account for the manifold notions about minaret-like towers in Budapest, their recognisability by a cognisant and religious audience emerges as a decisive factor.

3. Conclusions

In light of the above discussion, it seems reasonable to recapture some key aspects of the Elephant House. Adopting elements from various monuments of Islamic architecture, it belonged with the group of Orientalising buildings in Hungary, even though it was the swan song of this genre. In terms of motives, its commissioner and designer meant to create a building in line with the trend of expressing the animals’ native environments, however inaccurately, in other European zoos. This paradigm concerned all new houses at Budapest Zoo. Since the first inhabitant of the Elephant House, Sziám the elephant, hailed from Ceylon,[46] it is plausible to propose that Neuschloss-Knüsli came up with the idea of linking an elephant and a ‘minaret’ following South Asian antecedents. In particular, the Hiran Mīnār and the Hāthī Pōl in Fatehpur Sikri show unmistakable conceptual and iconographic analogies with the Elephant House and the Main Portal of Budapest Zoo. Although it is unclear how Neuschloss-Knüsli would have known about those Mughal buildings, it is worth mentioning that his cousin, Aurél Stein (1862–1943), was a renowned archaeologist and explorer of Central Asia and worked as a professor at Lahore.[47]

If Neuschloss-Knüsli could be accused of misappropriating an Islamic religious symbol, then so could many other architects who had designed minaret-like towers with a profane or secular function, whether inside or outside the Islamic world. It is undoubtedly more likely that he had no disrespectful intention. Nevertheless, this is not to deny that the opponents of the Elephant House had their reasons, too. Whereas the form of the tower seems to have followed a minaret in Tunis, roughly comparable pencil-shaped minarets had been typical of the Balkan region, which makes it no surprise that Bosnians and Turks perceived it as such. Or, in Grabar’s words, there

[45] See, for instance, Léderer 1988; Dán 2000; Fónagy 2014; Fodor 2017. The 1910 census registered only 553 Muslims in Hungary, but their number had been on the rise since the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908.

[46] Lendl, “Sziám a vad elefánt”.

[47] For a recent introduction to his research in India and Central Asia, see Kelecsényi 2018. The exact relationship between Neuschloss-Knüsli and Stein, especially whether they socialised or travelled together, has yet to be explored.

was now a referent who interpreted the given sign as a symbol of Islam. In the eyes of a Muslim minority in Budapest, the tower constituted a visual sign associated exclusively with places of prayer, and they, therefore, saw it as unfit for a profane purpose. The debate resulted from the situation that the two parties – the conceivers and the perceivers of the tower of the Elephant House – had incompatible, indeed mutually exclusive, sets of references in mind. Consequently, the broader question also sheds light on the inherent diversity of what scholars would classify under the umbrella of 'Islamic architecture', sometimes contrary to the buildings' regional, chronological, or semantical taxonomies.

As indicated by the most recent chapter in the Elephant House's criticism, manifesting on social media in 2020, the recurrent debates concerning its general appearance and tower are likely to remain with us for years to come. Over a century ago, Budapest Zoo sought to bring together flora, fauna, and architecture, thereby reifying a 'microcosm' of the world, but interpreted only the first two types of specimens in the form of explanatory plaques throughout its premises. This situation has partly changed since, as visitors can now read at least sporadic information about some of the houses. In contrast, the zoo has yet to attempt to defend the Elephant House from its opponents, potentially by engaging with its history and mitigating its debatable aspects. People arriving unprepared at the site find no explanation for its conspicuous architectural forms and, thus, may justly leave with a confused impression. Experience has taught us that some Muslims may even find the building offensive. It is, in other words, long overdue to better incorporate the built heritage into the zoo's educational programme and present to the visitors the motives behind establishing such an Orientalising monument in Budapest.

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