

The Minbar from the Kutubiyya Mosque

Jonathan M. Bloom et al.
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A minbar, best translated as pulpit, is essentially a series of steps from which the khatib, or preacher, addresses the congregation at the Friday noon prayer, and is an important item within any Jum`a or Cathedral Mosque. The minbar from the Kutubiyya Mosque (pictured on the cover), crafted of three different kinds of wood and bone for their various coloring, was begun on the first of Muharram (New Year's Day) in the year A.H. 532 (A.D. Sept. 19, 1137) in Cordoba, for the Almoravid sultan `Ali ibn Yusuf. The latter was the son of the Sanhaja Berber Yusuf ibn Tashufin (1061-1106), the founder of the Almoravid dynasty (from his union with a captured Spanish Christian) who had first visited Spain on the invitation of the Spanish Muslims to help vanquish their Christian enemies, but found himself returning to become their ruler on account of the factionalism that prevailed.

The extraordinary work of art, celebrated by this book, was probably transported in parts and finally assembled only once it reached the newly constructed Jum`a Mosque of Marrakesh for which it had been ordered. By 1147, Marrakesh was seized by the Almohads, Masmuda Berbers, whose leader `Abd al-Mu'min proudly transferred the minbar, along with other items from that mosque, to a new mosque built on the razed palace grounds of the Sanhaja leader; this mosque, however, was also demolished because its qibla or orientation was incorrect and another mosque was erected. The minbar from Cordoba was moved to this mosque which came to be known as the Kutubiyya Mosque, because of the dozens of booksellers who worked in the vicinity. It remained here until in 1962, when Morocco was granted independence, it was transferred to the Badi` Palace where it can be seen today.

There are five articles in all: "The Minbar from the Kutubiyya Mosque," by Jonathan M. Bloom focuses on the minbar's artistic significance, history and historiography. What had been considered to be a product of Almohad times by E. Levi Provençal but reassessed in 1946 by Jean Sauvaget as belonging to Almoravid times, is now finally confirmed as the latter by the inscription on the back of its left flank discovered during the recent clean-up undertaken for the preservation of the item. The Qur'anic and other inscriptions are analyzed, with their complete citation and translation provided as an appendix. In "The Pulpit of an Empire: The Contemporary and Political and Religious Environment of the Minbar from the Kutubiyya Mosque," Ahmed Toufiq details the history of the minbar in relation to the contemporary political and religious contexts of Morocco and the Maghrib. He establishes its installation in Marrakesh as an event that took place when the Almoravid culture was at its height, the Maliki doctrine reigned supreme, and the community stood by their allegiance to the `Abbasid caliph, and then shows how it was also used by the Almohads whose leader proclaimed himself to be 'al-Mahdi' and a direct descendent of the Prophet. "The Historical and Artistic Significance of the Minbar from the Kutubiyya Mosque," by Stefano Carboni establishes the art-historical significance of the pulpit. He examines the genesis of the minbar and the ritual that surrounds it, and evaluates its structure in terms of the other existing minbars of the Maghrib, to make his case. For him the Minbar from the Kutubiyya Mosque

represents the apogee of Andalusian decorative taste which became the standard on which later minbars came to be modelled. "The Conservation of the Minbar from the Kutubiyya Mosque," by J. Soultanian A.M. Wilmering, M. D. Minor, and Andrew Zawacki, tells us of the techniques used by the builders of the pulpit when they built it, the condition in which the team of conservators found it, and what they did to try and preserve it for the generations to come. Unable to explain the recent loss of decorative panels, the reader is informed of a traditional story that reveals how easily it could have been lost to us: one of the keepers of the minbar who was subject to migraine removed pieces of it to produce an elixir which he believed could relieve him of his pain. Finally, "The Structure and Artistic Composition of the Minbar from the Kutubiyya Mosque," by El Mostafa Hbibbi looks at the detail of the design which covers the minbar surfaces. "The approximately six hundred carved panels that remain on the minbar are disconcertingly diverse in composition. Each piece has its special charm and is executed differently; in all, the decorative perfection shows the sure hand of genius." According to him every little twirl of foliage ornamentation has been faultlessly executed.

What at a first glance appears to be a typical coffee table volume on the "Minbar" turns out to be an extremely fascinating academic work because of the quality of the articles that accompany the very fine and informative photography that fill its 114 pages. Every student of Islam cannot but be grateful for the magnificent effort contributed by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, which not only helped restore this exquisite piece of mosque furniture, but has also made available to us (at an extremely reasonable price) this volume which so neatly brings together the various aspects of its historical, cultural and artistic significance.

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