

Conference report

Through the lens of Henry Viollet: an undisclosed photographic and paper archive on Islamic monuments (1904-1913)

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Bibliothèque universitaire des langues et civilisations, Paris

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The international conference *Dans l'objectif d'Henry Viollet. Les monuments islamiques à travers un fonds d'archives inexploré (1904–1913) / Through the Lens of Henry Viollet: an undisclosed photographic and paper archive on Islamic monuments (1904–1913)*, organised in Paris on 23 and 24 June 2022, focused on the archives of the French architect and archaeologist Henry Viollet (1880–1955). Formerly part of the James Darmesteter Iranian Studies Library of the Institut d'études iraniennes (today known as the Centre de recherche sur le monde iranien - CeRMI, UMR 8041), since 2011 the Viollet's archives have been housed at the Bibliothèque universitaire des langues et civilisations (BULAC) in Paris. Counting 916 negatives on glass plates, 1650 photographs and about 2000 papers, these archives testify to Viollet's works as a pioneer in the field of Islamic architecture and shed light on his excavations at Samarra and architectural surveys of Northern Syria, Mesopotamia and Persia. Formats include correspondence, travelogues, field notebooks, architectural drawings, sketchbooks, manuscripts of scholarly work and photographs.

The conference was organised as part of the project *Épigraphie du Proche-Orient Médiéval* (EpiPOM), laureate of the GIS CollEx-Persée Residency Program 2021. This project had the twofold objective of studying the iconographic and paper archives of Henry Viollet and making them available to scholars in Islamic art and architecture and to the larger public through a panel of scientific and cultural activities. The conference, organised by the BULAC and the CeRMI, was one of the leading scientific actions overseen by the project. The event was also supported by the Louvre Museum (Department of Islamic art), the Institut Français de Recherche en Iran (IFRI), the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales (Inalco) and Sorbonne Nouvelle University.¹ The conference invited a group of European scholars (from France, Germany, Austria and Italy) to present current research related to Islamic architecture through the lens of the Henry Viollet archives. The focus was on the glass plates' negatives which, during the last year, have undergone

¹ We wish to thank all the institutions and people that contributed to the conference. A special thanks to Maria Szuppe (CNRS, CeRMI, UMR 8041), Marie-Lise Tsagouria and Benjamin Guichard (BULAC) for their introductory and concluding speeches. We are also grateful to Marie-Odile Rousset (CNRS, Archéorient), Hélène Renel (CNRS, Orient & Méditerranée), and to Alka Patel (University of California, Irvine), who kindly lead the meeting acting as chairpersons.

a full process of cataloguing and identification in order to be published online on the Internet Archive and the BULAC digital library (BiNA), and to ensure long-term storage of their digital records. The conference opened with a first session introducing Henry Viollet, his biography, his archives, but also the related archival material of André Godard (1881–1965) kept at the Louvre Museum. The second section explored Viollet's archival documentation about Samarra, ephemeral capital of the Abbasid caliphs (836–892), with special attention paid to the political dispute on the excavations of this emblematic site in the early twentieth century. The last two sections were respectively devoted to Viollet's official missions to Mesopotamia (1908–1912) and Persia (1912–1913) with different papers focusing on famous as well as on lesser-known monuments of the Iraqi, Iranian or Central Asian provinces from an architectural, decorative or epigraphic point of view.



Figure 1. Henry Viollet and Major Sikes with their wives in front of the Gunbad-i Haruniyya at Tus (Iran), 1913. Gelatin-silver photographic print, Fonds Henry Viollet FV/PRS/409. Paris: BULAC. © Maria Lavabre Viollet/CeRMI - UMR 8041 du CNRS.

French architect and archaeologist Henry Viollet travelled throughout the Near and Middle East between 1904 and 1913, including Sudan, Egypt, Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran². From his travels, he brought back a huge amount of documentation on the monuments he visited. Photographs, in particular negatives on glass plates, and architectural drawings represent the bulk of these archives and provide exceptional data on monuments that have disappeared, been profoundly altered or are today totally inaccessible, giving the scholars an unprecedented glimpse on the state of

² Besides his first trips to Egypt and Sudan (1904-1905), Henry Viollet's travels to Mesopotamia and Persia correspond to official missions granted by the Ministry of Public Instruction and Fine Arts (Ministère des l'Instruction Publique et des Beaux-arts, Paris). Archives nationales, 'Dossier d'élève de Henry Viollet', AJ/52/412; 'Dossier de la mission Viollet à Bagdad en 1913', F/17/17251; 'Mission scientifique en Mésopotamie', F/17/17292.

Islamic monuments from the Near and Middle East at the beginning of the twentieth century.



Figure 2. Gunbad-i Haruniyya at Tus (Iran), 1913. Negative on glass plate, Fonds Henry Viollet HV.606. Paris: BULAC. © Maria Lavabre Viollet / CeRMI - UMR8041 du CNRS.

While in Iraq, Viollet was also appointed chief architect of the architectural and road services of Baghdad, alternating with André Godard³. Trained together at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, the two architects worked closely together and shared the same network of scholars and collaborators. Their archives sometimes document the same monuments at different times and from different but related perspectives. The two collections combined thus offer remarkable geographical coverage of Islamic architectural heritage, especially of Iraq and Iran. Presenting these two prominent figures and their works, as well as past and recent activities on their archives, was the aim of the first two papers presented by **Marine Fromanger**⁴ (*Compagnie Nationale des Experts*), and by **Yannik Lintz** and **Sophie Paulet**

³ Godard went with Viollet in Iraq (1910), travelled to Egypt and Syria (1912), then left for Afghanistan where he undertook archaeological excavations (1922-1924). From 1928 to 1960, he directed the archaeological services of Iran, with the mission of preserving and promoting the Persian heritage. For more information about the Godard archives at the Louvre Museum, see Sarah Piram, 'S'appropriier un modèle français en Iran? L'architecte André Godard (1881-1965) et la conception des musées iraniens', *Les Cahiers de l'Ecole du Louvre*, 11, online since 26 October 2017, last accessed on 08 March 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/cel/825>.

⁴ Marine Fromanger devoted both a Master's and doctoral thesis to the Viollet archives. See: Marine Fromanger, *Henry Viollet en Perse 1911-1913: l'architecture iranienne à la période islamique d'après une source inédite: le Fonds Viollet*, Université de Provence, 2002, PhD Thesis and *Les missions d'Henry Viollet en Orient: inventaire et analyse du fonds de l'I.E.I.*, mémoire de DEA, Université de Provence, 1998.

(Louvre Museum). In Iraq, Viollet and Godard worked together on the site of Samarra, where Viollet was the first to survey and undertake the excavation of the palace of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mu‘taṣim (796–842). Located on the banks of the Tigris, Samarra was the object of interest for many Western travellers and archaeologists from the nineteenth century onwards. Henry Viollet visited the site twice between 1907 and 1910 and published his work in 1909⁵. He partly documented his fieldwork on the site, but this documentation was little known at his time. His results were indeed overshadowed by the major fieldworks – and the subsequent publication – conducted by the German archaeologists Ernst Herzfeld and Friedrich Sarre between 1911 and 1913. After Viollet’s mission, in fact, permission for the excavations was granted to the German team by the Ottoman government and its representative, Halil Edhem, at that time recently appointed director of the Imperial Museums. Through the study of Henry Viollet’s correspondence with Halil Edhem, which includes unpublished letters in Ottoman, as well as with the local authorities in Baghdad and his German colleagues and rivals, the paper presented by **Maxime Durocher** (Sorbonne Université) shed light on the diplomatic dispute over the legitimacy of Viollet’s fieldworks and more broadly documented both the scientific and diplomatic competition on the excavations of the Abbasids’ capital at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the same session, **Safa Mahmoudian** (Austrian Academy of Science, Institut für Iranistik), questioned some dominant ideas about the architecture of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mu‘taṣim’s Palace (Dār al-Khilāfa or Jawsaq al-Khāqanī) and discussed a possible reconstruction of its riverside garden. She also highlighted how Viollet’s documentation and descriptions turned out to be sometimes more precise than Herzfeld’s, although later scholars mostly follow the latter’s studies.

However, Samarra was not the first nor the only stop on Viollet’s journey through Mesopotamia. Even though the negatives on glass plates may not reflect the totality of his peregrinations, they show the path Viollet followed along the Euphrates river from Aleppo to Babylon. He then crossed the Tigris Valley, passing through Baghdad and Samarra, and then northwards to Mosul and Diyarbakir. His archive thus offers views of famous and lesser-known sites, most of which were visited by other great travellers (Gertrude Bell, Ernst Herzfeld, Friedrich Sarre, Louis Massignon etc.). **Bassam Dayoub** (associated with UMR 8167 Orient et Méditerranée) retraced Viollet’s journey in this region, whose archaeological and architectural landscape have been strongly altered in the last decades, in the attempt to identify the correct location and state of conservation of monuments, mostly *mashads*, located in the Mayadine province (Syria). In the following paper, **Andrea**

⁵ Henry Viollet, ‘Fouilles à Samara en Mésopotamie: un palais musulman du IX^{ème} siècle’, *Extrait des Mémoires présentés par divers savants à l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 12, 1911, 679-715 and ‘Le palais de Al-Mutasim, fils d’Haroun-al-Raschid, à Samara et quelques monuments arabes peu connus de la Mésopotamie’, *Comptes rendus des séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 53:5, 1909, 370-375. An enriched version of this latter paper was published by Viollet a few years later, see Henry Viollet, ‘Description du palais de Al-Moutasim, fils d’Haroun-al-Raschid, à Samara, et de quelques monuments arabes peu connus de la Mésopotamie’, *Mémoires présentés par divers savants à l’Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres de l’Institut de France. Première série, Sujets divers d’érudition*, 12:2, 1913, 567-594.

Luigi Corsi (Sapienza Università di Roma) focused his attention on the Mashad Maqām ‘Alī, along the Euphrates, in northern Iraq. Viollet’s photographs and notes, together with the few images taken by Friedrich Sarre on the site – presented by Corsi in a global reappraisal of the monument – show a new, in-depth view on stucco architectural decoration from the Abbasid period, deserving of further study.

The value of the Viollet collection lies in its breadth, documenting numerous sites and monuments from all over the Middle East and the Turco-Iranian regions, and providing a window to a scholarly world very different from ours today. In Viollet’s time, architects and art historians were also photographers, draftsmen, philologists and archaeologists. Henry Viollet was no exception and during his missions he recorded, photographed and sometimes drew a number of Arabic inscriptions belonging to the monuments he visited. This was the topic of the conference paper by **Martina Massullo** (CollEx-Persée post-doctoral researcher at BULAC/CeRMI), who presented the preliminary results of her research on the epigraphic evidence collected by Viollet, emphasising the points of contact with the photographic archives of other Orientalists of the time and the potential of a cross-reading of this documentation for an up-to-date publication of some Near and Middle Eastern Arabic inscriptions.

The last session of the conference focused on Viollet’s missions to Persia. Henry Viollet was one of the few pioneers to stray from the main routes used by travellers of the time, to explore more remote regions. **Sandra Aube** (CNRS/CeRMI) introduced this topic showing the contribution of the Viollet archives to the study of mausoleums and woodwork decorations from mediaeval Mazandaran. The province of Mazandaran (north-western Iran) hosts a remarkable network of fifteenth-century mausoleums, generally associated with carved wooden cenotaphs, often signed by their authors. Aube pointed out that these structures, which are poorly documented and studied, have been the subject of major restoration works since the 1980s, and that the documentation brought back by Viollet from his missions in the early 1910s is a remarkable source for reconstructing the original aspect of these funerary complexes. Two more interventions started from the same premise: **Iman Aghajani** (Otto-Friedrich Universität Bamberg) devoted his paper to the *madrassa* al-Nizamiyya in Khargird (northeastern Iran). This building was studied by Godard and Herzfeld, but it was Henry Viollet who took the first photographs of the monument. Viollet’s images allowed Aghajani to suggest that the *madrassa* al-Nizamiyya had at least two phases of construction, and to argue that Khwāja Nizām al-Mulk was the orchestrator of the building’s reconstruction, a phase to which the famous monumental inscription in floriated Kufic script adorning the monument would also date. The primacy of Viollet photographic documentation was also the starting point of the paper by **Ana Marija Grbanovic** (Otto-Friedrich Universität Bamberg). Following a path outlined in her recent doctoral thesis, Grbanovic presented some Ilkhanid stuccos documented by Viollet prior to major conservation interventions, or even deliberate destruction, which significantly altered their appearance and state of preservation. The main monuments and stuccos addressed in the paper were the Uljaytu *mihṛāb* and the small Ilkhanid *mihṛāb* from the Isfahan Friday mosque, the Kashan Friday mosque carved stucco *mihṛāb*, stuccos of the Bayazid Bistami complex in Bistam and the Ilkhanid *mihṛāb* of the Abarkuh Friday mosque.

The conference concluded with a paper by **Yuka Kadoi** (Institute of Art History, University of Vienna), who also focused on the Friday Mosque in Isfahan, albeit with a different theoretical and methodological approach. Kadoi reassessed some of the earliest photographs of the Friday Mosque of Isfahan prior to the influx of American scholars, not only those made by Henry Viollet, but also those collected by other archaeologists and architectural historians of the time, such as the Austrian scholar Ernst Diez (1878–1961). The aim was to trace the image-making process of this most iconic building in the history of mediaeval Persian architecture. In Kadoi's opinion, the Friday Mosque of Isfahan – a congregational mosque under continuous construction and renovation from the eighth to the twentieth century – became a key building to be viewed as 'the ultimate embodiment of Persian beauty'.

The ensuing and final discussion revealed that the exploration of the Viollet's archives by an international network of scholars, initiated by this conference, can lead to new ways of understanding and approaching architectural Islamic heritage through documents collected and preserved in the scientific archives of travellers and archaeologists. Most of the contributions to the conference were based on Viollet's photographs as historical documents, which are much appreciated given the recent destruction of some of the monuments photographed or the severe damage most of them suffered. In 1915, Viollet was given a new mission to Astarabad, but this mission was never accomplished and, after the war, Viollet abruptly ended his research on Islamic art. As the conference has shown, unprocessed excavation notes or photographs of monuments since heavily altered, could provide scholars with new information about ancient sites or shed light on assumptions they may wish to rethink. Beside art and architecture, the conference was an occasion to discuss Viollet's collection being also of historical, geographical, sociological and ethnographic interest (photos of the habitat, various ethnic groups and nomadic populations, local costumes, religious institutions, etc.), all aspects of this archival material that still wait to be studied.

Some related scientific activities were set up in the days immediately preceding or following the conference. A workshop to consult the paper archives of Henry Viollet was organised for the conference speakers with parallel working sessions at the Department of Islamic Arts of the Louvre Museum (21-22 June), giving researchers the opportunity to consult unpublished documents from the Godard archives. An exhibition was also inaugurated on June 23th in the BULAC library to show a sample of the archives' papers and photos. The exhibition unfolds core images and texts from Henry Viollet's expeditions: original, gelatin-silver photographic prints, sketches and architectural drawings, as well as handwritten travel journals.

A monographic volume issued by the conference proceedings will be published by the Istituto per l'Oriente C.A. Nallino in Rome. The aim of the publication is to allow this still partly undisclosed material to circulate, presenting unpublished or very little-known data on Islamic architectural heritage. By inviting additional authors to collaborate, this volume expands the boundaries of themes and sites presented during the conference.

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