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SIR JOHN SOANE AND THE HAMMAMS OF CAIRO

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Since 1984¹ – if not long before – architectural historians have paid considerable attention to explaining how an interior space as singular as Sir John Soane’s Bank Stock Office (1791–93), built as part of the works carried out at the Bank of England, London, from 1791 to 1826, came into existence. But there has been less interest in two of his later offices, the New Five Per Cent (later Colonial) Office and the Old Dividend (previously Four Per Cent) Office, both of 1818–23. It has generally been assumed that the latter two merely evolved out of the formula set by the 1791 Bank Stock Office and later offices, but the purpose of this account is to suggest a possible outside influence.

‘Modern historians’, writes Daniel Abramson, ‘have generally overlooked Soane’s late remodelled Bank of England transfer halls, and derivatives like the National Debt Redemption Office dome, because they appear simple copies of the Bank Stock Office type’.² Sir John Summerson argued in 1984 for a Byzantine source, but there is another possible precedent for this type of late Soane interior: the hammams of twelfth- to fifteenth-century Cairo. There appears to be a curious resemblance between the *beit al-harara* – the hot-air room, equivalent to the caldarium in the baths of ancient Rome – and some of Soane’s internal spaces. In particular, there was one hammam, situated in the Gate of Qaramey area, Cairo, that seems particularly close in form to the vaulting of Soane’s New Five Per Cent Office (Fig. 1) and Old Dividend Office. Here it seems that Soane was influenced by a plate in the Napoleon-commissioned *Description de L’Egypte*, a 25-volume

topographical series published at Paris from 1809 to 1828.³ It includes two volumes of plates entitled the *État Moderne* – the modern state, as opposed to ancient Egypt – and published between 1809 and 1817.

The undertaking was described, a decade after completion, by Thomas Baring:

‘In addition to the descriptions, memoirs, and drawings, belonging to the illustrations of ancient Egypt, the savants and members of the Institute at Cairo most assiduously collected those materials which were the most proper to convey a lively impression of the modern condition of the country, [including] Gardens, baths, schools, family-burial-places, private-houses and buildings erected for manufactories’.⁴

View three of plate 49, drawn by a French architect and member of l’Institut d’Egypte called Protain, is captioned ‘Plan, section, and perspective views, of a public bath’,⁵ and was published in 1817. (Fig. 2) It shows the now-lost hammam at the Gate of Qaramey⁶, and was described in 1822, five years after the illustration, as follows:

‘I shall content myself with referring to a plan of the work and to an explanation with all the details required to understand the distribution of the steam baths; I shall limit myself to few words. The bath represented in this plan is, compared to the great baths of Cairo, a small edifice; it is located near the Qarâmeydân Gate in the square of this name. One enters from the street by a corridor which leads to the main room, where one takes one’s coffee. This room is approximately 13 metres square [more than 40 feet]; each side is decorated with eight marble columns. In the centre there is a large pool with a fountain; beyond

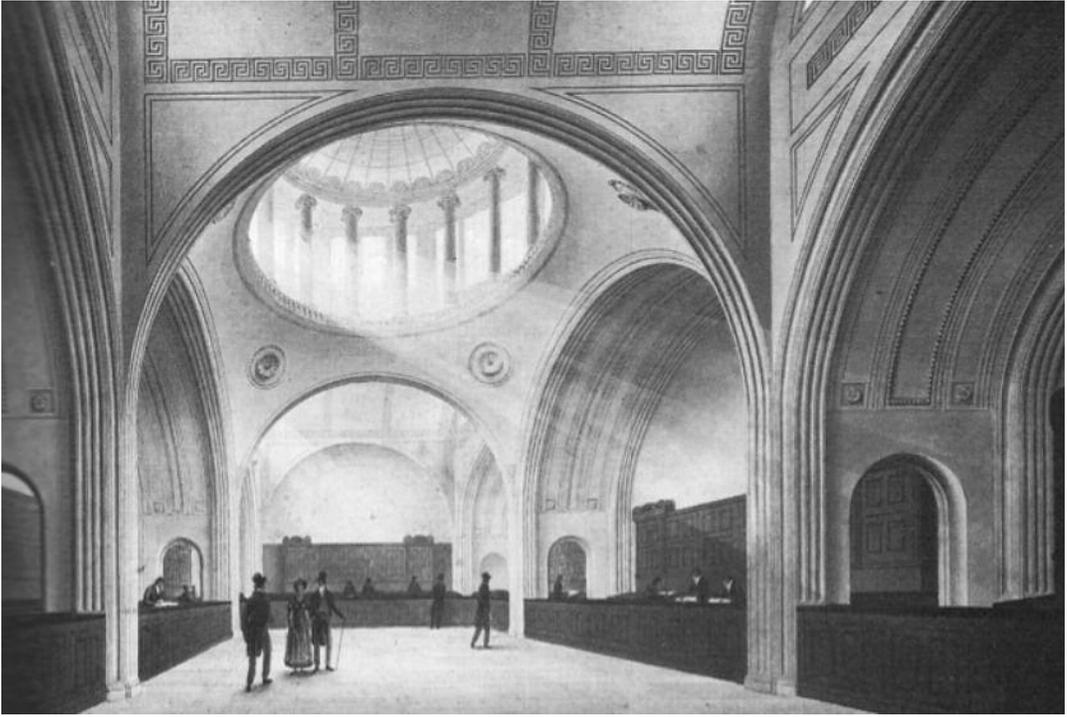


Fig. 1. Joseph Michael Gandy's perspective of the completed New Five Per Cent (later Colonial) Office, Bank of England, London, of 1818–23. *Sir John Soane's Museum*.

this there are several rooms, heated to varying degrees, from which one enters another large room to take a bath; this includes four recesses with basins coated with cement in which one can plunge, just as in our ordinary baths. In the middle is a large stone where the bathers lie down to be rubbed and massaged. Fountains cascade in the middle of the room and in the recesses; each of these rooms is lit with coloured glass; in several rooms one soaps oneself with oakum.⁷⁷

There is little need here to discuss the significance of public baths within the architecture of late-Islamic Egypt, save to say that the hammams at the Gate of Qaramey, Cairo, and at Alexandria (Fig. 3) have all the requisite features of this variant of public bath, including a plunge bath and several chambers for massage and relaxation. Moreover, the example at Qaramey was one of the most luxurious and noteworthy within the eight districts recorded in the

French topographical survey of Cairo. The absolutely pared-down geometric architecture of the *beit al-harara* appears to be peculiar to the city, and is not found in other hammams in Syria and Iran, or in Istanbul, Tripoli or Fez.

It is not known when Soane acquired his set of the *Description de L'Égypte* but we do know that he was in Paris in 1814 and 1819.⁸ He certainly did not visit Egypt or ever go east of Italy. However, as possessor of the *Description de L'Égypte*, and fluent in French, he must have seen and read about the hammam depicted in Plate 49. Arguably the reductionist geometry and associated circulation of space found in the diaphanous interiors in late Islamic architecture of the Egyptian variant is a closer exemplar for Soane's late vaulting than an Italian or Byzantine model. Although discussing the



Fig. 2. ‘Plan, section, and perspective views of a public bath’ of the hammam at the Gate of Qaramey, Cairo, Egypt, as depicted in 1817, and taken from Plate 49, *État Moderne*, plans, vol. 1, of *Description de L’Égypte*.

earlier Bank Stock Office, a Bank of England site-specific argument has been put forward more recently, as opposed to an Italian or Byzantine source of inspiration:

‘Summerson suggested Byzantine architecture as a possible influence upon Soane’s vaulting, noting a similarity between the Stock Office at the Bank and the monk’s choir which adjoins the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, illustrated by Lebrun in his *Voyage au Levant* (1714). More convincing, however, is Daniel Abramson’s argument that the innovative form of the Stock Office was generated by the restrictions of the site at the Bank, the precedents set by Taylor, and discussions with Dance.⁹ Such on-the-spot considerations were more stimulating than an image from a book. Soane did illustrate the Holy Sepulchre in his lectures but only to criticise its ‘dreadfully degraded’ architecture. He did, however, admire the ‘lightness of appearance and boldness of

construction’ of the dome of Santa Sophia in Constantinople: ‘the entire dome seems rather suspended in the air than supported by the piers’. As his [Royal Academy] lecture illustration showed, the arches and pendentives are contained within the spherical surface of the dome. But Soane never stood inside Santa Sophia and I suspect that for him to find its ‘suspended’ dome in a published illustration was a retrospective justification for a type of interior he had already created.¹⁰

Soane had not stood inside the hammams of Cairo either, but there are good grounds for suggesting that they supply an architectural link between Soane’s Consols Transfer Office of 1797–99 and the New Five Per Cent Office and the Old Dividend Office, both of 1818–23.¹¹ Joseph Michael Gandy’s perspective illustration of c.1818–23 (Fig. 1) showing the completed New Five Per Cent Office depicts¹²

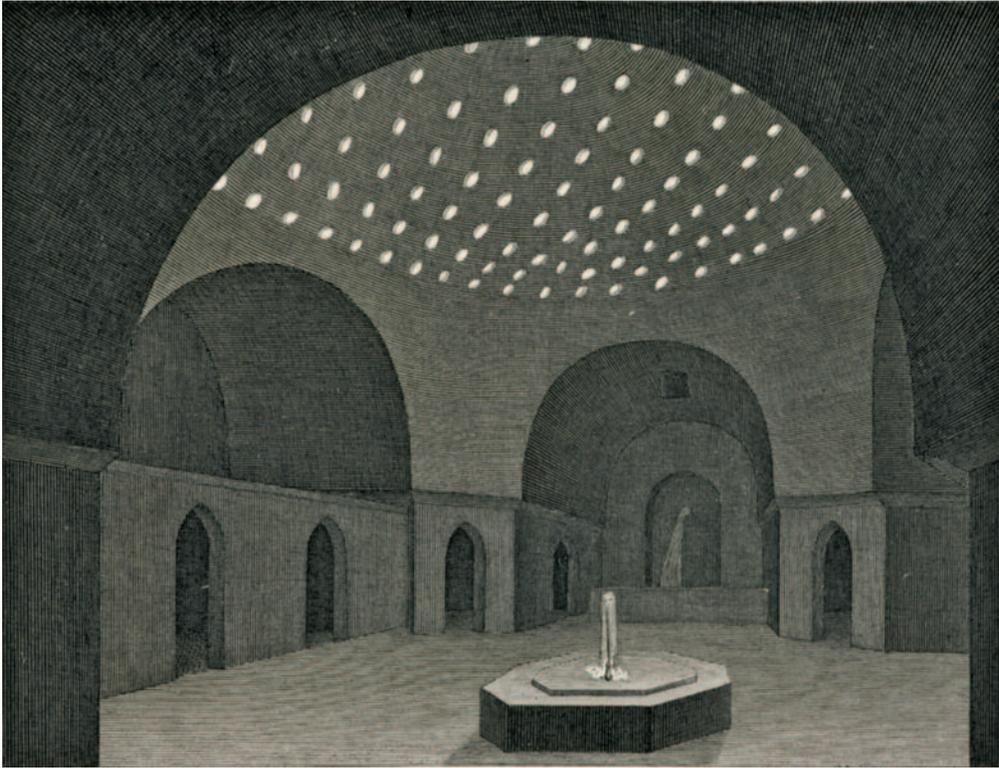


Fig. 3. The hammam at Alexandria, Egypt, from *Description de L’Egypte*.

one of Soane’s most sublime interiors, and according to Abramson:

‘This watercolour depicts significant changes in the evolution of Soane’s architecture. Here the thirty-year-old domed office prototype received its final refinements. Soane leavened the heavy Roman nature of the Consols Transfer Office with a new effect of Gothic lightness and with a conspicuous adoption of Greek ornamentation as seen in the ring of Greek Ionic columns around the lantern and the prominent Greek-fret pattern incised over the front and back arches.’¹³

Indeed, but what inspired or enabled this development?

Pictorial depictions of the hammams of Cairo, as published from 1818 to 1823 – the years of the New Five Per Cent Office and the Old Dividend Office –

may well have facilitated this considerable step forward in Soane’s late architecture. They illustrate a more compact, integrated and streamlined means of containing the arches and pendentives within the spherical surface of the dome than the precedents offered by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and Hagia Sophia at Constantinople. Other hammams at Cairo analogous to Soane’s late solutions to fashioning vaulted space include the *beit al-harara* at the Hammam of Kalaoun; Hammam el-eferdi, Haret el-Salehieh; and the 18th-century (Ottoman era) Hammam al-Tanbali (still extant and in continuous use until 2002) at Bab al-Shariya, Cairo.¹⁴

The similarity between the interior of the hammams at the Gate of Qaramey, Cairo, and Alexandria, as depicted in the *Description de L’Egypte*, and the New Five Per Cent Office and Old Dividend

Office might just be a coincidence, despite the *Description de L’Egypte* being part of Soane’s library. Historians since Summerson have somewhat taken for granted, unquestioningly, that the New Five Per Cent and Old Dividend Offices were merely a logical refinement of earlier Bank of England offices and that they just evolved over several decades into their final form. I suggest, however, that about 1818 Soane took careful note of a non-canonical source upon entering a new and last phase during the design process of these late offices. This was also paralleled in Soane’s Pitt Cenotaph and the National Debt Redemption and Life Annuities Office, Old Jewry, London, of 1817–23 and regrettably demolished in 1900, some quarter century before the Bank of England interiors went a similar way.¹⁵ In some ways the Pitt Cenotaph tribune is the most hammam-like of all Soane’s *oeuvre*, with an enclosed, all-enveloping diaphanous character. Compared to his more famous works, it is a somewhat under-studied late Soane masterpiece, unfortunately never photographed before demolition.

Christopher Woodward has succinctly described this late and final evolution of the Bank of England transfer halls but, like Abramson and, unlike Summerson, he does not proffer an exemplar to enable this three decade-long metamorphosis to reach its final form:

‘The Drawing Room at Wimpole Hall (1791) is the first realisation of Soane’s transformation of this [Renaissance dome] traditional type of dome into a ‘canopy’, and is deeply indebted to Dance’s Chamber at the Guildhall. Soane removes the intermediate storey formed by the arches and pendentives so that the dome springs directly from the walls of the room. The arches are still necessary to the structure and are therefore sliced out of its spherical surface. Two adjacent interiors at the Bank of England, the New Four Per Cent Office (1818)¹⁶ and the Old Four Per Cent Office (1821), represent the ultimate in Soane’s exploration of this theme. In the central area of each, Soane has all but removed the walls, placing the dome on the floor, as it were, so that the hemispherical space becomes the room.’¹⁷

Indeed, it is the elimination of the ornamental entablature, impost and almost all forms of horizontal mouldings below lantern level that gives these late interiors their absolute fluidity of form and clean astylar contours. In the absence of developmental drawings for the late offices there is an argument for a late-Islamic – as opposed to Italian, Byzantine or merely site-specific – model, for there appear to be virtually no other exemplars in the western classical canon that could enable Soane to take this type of interior to its final and most resolved form.¹⁸ The Qaramey exemplar enabled the hemispherical space to become a room in a way that no other precedent could, and, as we know, Soane was quite happy to plunder the ideas of others, having done so fruitfully with his old mentor Dance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

- 1 See John Summerson, 'The evolution of Soane's Bank Stock Office at the Bank of England', *Architectural History*, 27 (1984), pp. 135–149.
- 2 Daniel M. Abramson, *Building the Bank of England* (New Haven and London, 2005), p. 181. This conclusion is probably part based on the fact that – when compared to Soane's earlier Bank Stock Office – so little of Soane's developmental drawings survive for the New Five Per Cent (later Colonial) Office and the Old Dividend (previously Four Per Cent) Office. All that survives is an assortment of as executed internal elevations, sections and ceiling plans, often exquisitely rendered, and so probably record drawings: see Sir John Soane's Museum (SM) vol. 74/127–44. Better documented, however, is the more or less contemporaneous development of the interior of Soane's National Debt Redemption Office, which is recorded with various explorations of a top-lit tribune, a by then old theme of Soane's: see SM 48/1/157 and SM 48/1/1–35.
- 3 The fuller title is *Description de l'Égypte, ou recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l'expédition de l'armée française, publié par les ordres de sa majesté l'empereur Napoléon le grand . . .* This can be translated: *Description of Egypt, or anthology of observations and research made in Egypt during the expedition of the French Army, published by order of his majesty, the emperor Napoleon the great . . .*
- 4 T. Baring, *A bibliographical account and collation of La Description de L'Égypte, presented to the library of the London Institution* (London, 1838), p. 16.
- 5 As listed in *Etat Moderne*, plans, vol. 1.
- 6 Although depicted in 1817, this building had been demolished by 1933, for although it is featured in Edmond Pauty, *Les Hammams du Caire* (1933) – the point of departure for this investigation here (see 'Memoires, T. LXIV', plates I, II and XI), it is just a reproduction taken from the 1817 publication and there is no contemporary photograph, which is the case for other extant hammams recorded in Pauty's survey.
- 7 *Etat Moderne*, vol. II (Paris, 1822), p. 685. The associated footnote on p. 685 reads thus: 'See Plate 49, É.M. vol. I. Also consult plate 94, É.M. vol. II, showing a bath in Alexandria, and its explanation.' View 9 of plate 94 is captioned 'Plans, sections and interior views of a Public bath.' I am grateful to Christopher Ovenden for translating the French to English throughout this account.
- 8 And nor are there any marginalia in Soane's hand in the 25 volumes that formed part of an otherwise extensive library.
- 9 Christopher Woodward's argument (see next endnote citation) that 'the restrictions of the site at the Bank, the precedents set by Taylor, and discussions with Dance' are more convincing than Summerson's Byzantine suggestion are points all pretty much covered in Summerson's 1984 essay too.
- 10 Christopher Woodward, 'Wall, ceiling, enclosure and light: Soane's Designs for Domes', in *John Soane Architect*, ed. Margaret Richardson and MaryAnne Stevens (Royal Academy of Arts exhibition catalogue, 1999), p. 66.
- 11 See respectively pages 248–9 (catalogue no. 165) and fig. 172, p. 217, in Margaret Richardson and MaryAnne Stevens.
- 12 See pages 248–9 (catalogue 165) in Margaret Richardson and MaryAnne Stevens.
- 13 Daniel Abramson, 'The Bank of England', in *John Soane, Architect*, p. 248.
- 14 Elsewhere (*Etat Moderne*, plans, vol. II), of 'Soanean' interest are views 2 and 4 of plate 91 and captioned (views 1–4): 'Views of the ruins of a mosque and of several towers of the Arab fortifications.'
- 15 See Daniel M. Abramson, *Building the Bank of England*, pp. 179–181.
- 16 This is a repeated mistake in *John Soane Architect* (1999) and should instead be the New Five Per Cent (later Colonial) Office.
- 17 Woodward, pp. 62–64.
- 18 This absence of developmental drawings has also been confirmed by the Bank of England Museum, for they possess, like the Soane Museum, material relating to Soane's work at the Bank of England: *Ex inf.* John Keyworth.