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Lucknow: City of Illusion
Theuns-de Boer, G.

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Lucknow: City of Illusion

Llewellyn-Jones, Rosie. ed. 2006. *Lucknow: City of Illusion*: New York, London, New Delhi: Prestel and the Alkazi Collection of Photography. 296 pages, ISBN 3 7913 3130 2



Felice Beato, albumen print 1858. Panorama of the Husainabad Imambara, Lucknow. The Alkazi Collection

Gerda Theuns-de Boer

This beautifully produced and printed book presents a visual and historic record of the development of the city of Lucknow, (Uttar Pradesh, India), from its establishment as the Nawabi capital in 1775 until its annexation by the British East India Company in 1856. The main visual source of the material used is the fabulous Alkazi photo collection.¹ This naturally brings the focus of the book on the second half of the 19th century. A time when photography developed from pioneering activities into professionalism and advancing photomechanical techniques resulted in the birth of the postcard, around 1895. A selection of photographs dating from the 1850s to the 1920s testify to the original context of the buildings, their alterations and decay or even their disappearance. The book successfully merges, (and therefore strengthens), a number of different sources. The quality of both the research by its seven contributors and the careful selection of the imagery, originating from 15 early photographers, makes this book a treat. For too long the written and the visual record were explicitly separated, as if its respective scholars missed the drive to look beyond their self-constructed walls. Historical books were sparsely illustrated, which resulted in readers having to put their own, not always accurate, interpretation on the text; whereas photo books still had a strong album format, predominantly stressing the picturesque, but seldom contextualising their historical content.

Monumental grief

Architecture is the focus of the book as it is the only means to express not only the city's former wealth, but also the effects of general decay and the partial destruction caused by the '1857-58 Uprising', (a mutiny by Indian soldiers serving under the British Army), in which 'large sectors of a once radiant and sparkling city were reduced to rubble', (p.7). Lucknow was transformed

into a city of severe grief. The albumen prints of the Greek-British photographer Felice Beato (1834-c.1907) are the main source for studying the city's architecture and design in the direct aftermath of the mutiny and are well represented in the book.² Beato is regarded as one of the first war photographers, documenting army campaigns and their devastating effects. The moment he heard of the British campaigns against the rebel

sepoys, (Indian soldiers who served in the British armed forces), he decided to come down from the Crimea, where he had been photographing, among other things, the fall of Sebastopol in September 1855. He arrived in Calcutta in February 1858. In March of that same year he was licenced by the East India Company to photograph in Lucknow, Cawnpur and Delhi.³ His photographs have become landmark visual historic

records of human and monumental disaster. His photographs of the human remains of the slaughter of around 2000 sepoys in Lucknow's Sikandar Bagh are renowned, but it is his images of the ruined city which are featured in this book.

The prints evoke the oppressive atmosphere of a city in ruins, with its 'sounds of silence'. The absence of people in the compositions and the limited tone scale of 19th century photography, add a sense of drama. The eight enlargements of Beato's 360 degree panoramic views taken from the minarets of the Asafi Mosque within the Great Imambara Complex, have great historic value and also bear witness to the British efforts to hastily dispose of any references to the city's former glory by general clearance.

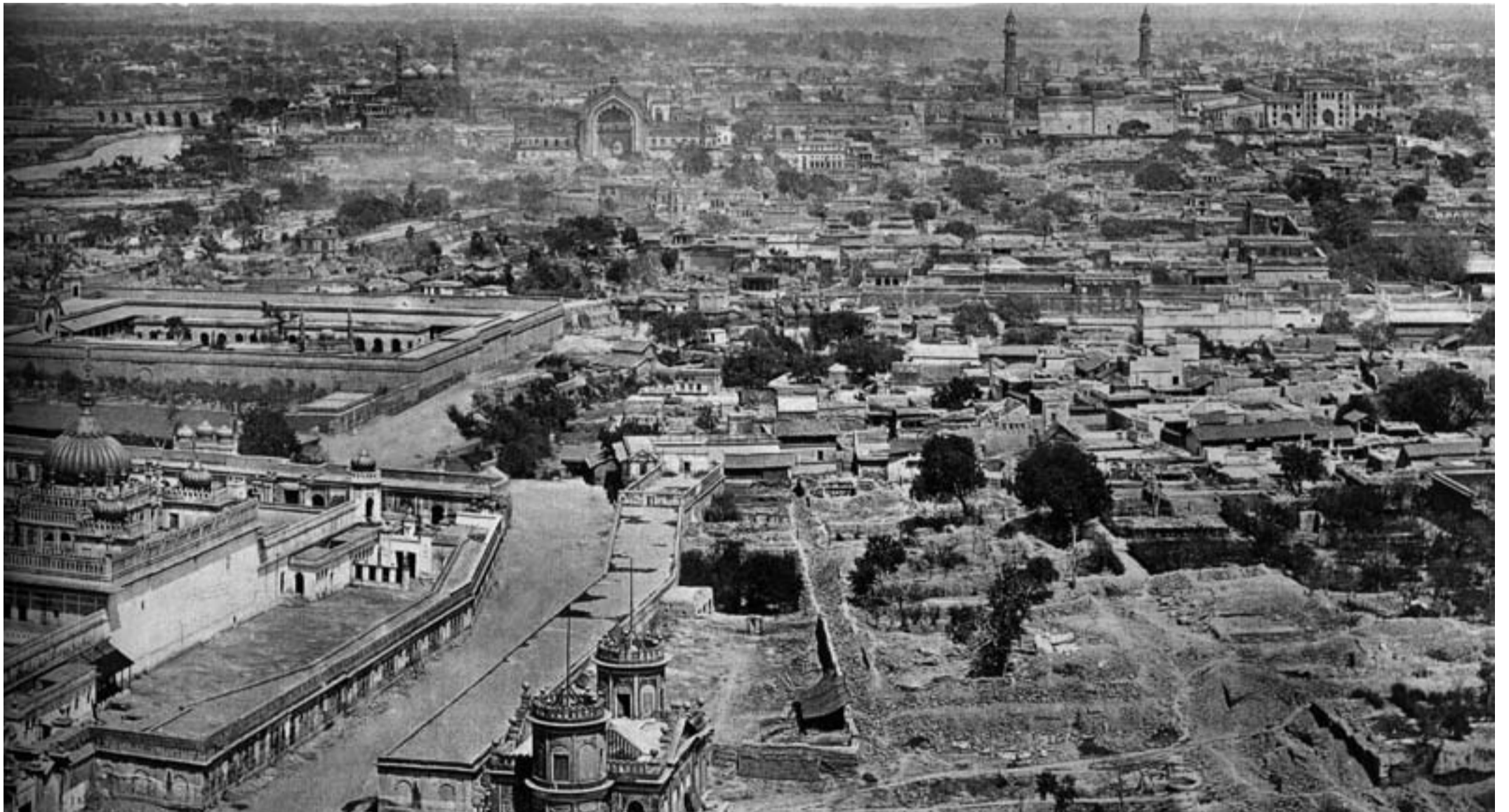
From Kothi to country house

But the book is not meant to commemorate the Uprising. Its seven contributors construct a contextual background to the many photographs and other illustrations which are rendered to sketch Lucknow's development from a Nawabi capital into a spatial organisation influenced by European styles and programmes of decorations, testifying to the growing political pressure on the indigenous rulers, the Awadhi nawabs. Whereas Sophie Gordon focuses on the nine royal palaces which constituted the dream world of Nawabi culture from 1739 onwards, E. Alkazi and Peter Chelkowski focus on Lucknow's number one monument - the



Felice Beato, albumen prints 1858. Four albumen photographs from a set of eight views taken from one of the minarets of the Asafi Mosque, Great Imambara, Lucknow.





Bara Imambara or the Asafi Imambara. Built by Kifayutullah between 1784-1791, this is the world's largest complex devoted to the rituals and cult of Shia Imam Husain, who was massacred by Sunni Muslims in Karbala (Iraq) in 680. Alkazi presents Beato's 360 degree photographic survey of the complex - a cluster of buildings and open spaces formed by mosques, gateways, tombs and bazars; Chelkowski provides a religious and cult framework. The still extant Husainabad Imambara, built by Muhammad Ali Shah in 1837-78, is another example of an Islamic monument of grief'. In Neeta Das' contribution 'The country houses of Lucknow', we witness the process of acculturation between Nawabi and Western architectural styles. Das discusses fourteen 'villa type' houses (kothis) made by and for the European and Indian elite between the late-18th and early-19th century. The oldest kothi dates back to 1775 and was built by Captain Marsack for Nawab Asaf-ud-daula, whereas Nawab Saadat Ali Khan, who commissioned several houses and roads, showed a strong predilection for 'things European'. Rosie Llewellyn-Jones traces the history of the Residency complex, the symbol of colonial power, which started as a modest bungalow, but was replaced in 1786 by a more impressive series of buildings. After the final siege of the British, the demolished, but much photographed, residency became an object of obsessive public interest, not least because of its cemetery containing the graves of British victims. Another intriguing monument, La Martinière, is dis-

cussed by Nina David. It is a tribute to the French military man, educationalist, 'engineer-architect' and businessman, Claude Martin (1735-1800). The central building of the complex, known as 'Constantia' was turned into a college in 1845 and still functions as such today. Martin's skeletal remains are kept in the basement of the building; a tangible reference to a period in which Nawabs and Europeans could live side by side.

Although the book is clear in its aims, the strict focus on architecture results in a somewhat ghost-like image of the town, in which photographic portraits of its inhabitants are seriously missed. As the Scottish essayist, Thomas Carlyle once wrote 'portraits are the candle to history'. The 'sounds of silence' of the Uprising's aftermath dominate the book in this respect. The only photograph which catches a glimpse of street life is a print of a shopkeeper by Edmund Lyon. In all the other photographs people are depersonalised and merely serve the purpose of stressing the architecture's monumentality by their limited size.⁴ Also, the book barely touches upon early photography as such. How did its photographers manage to create these photographic jewels in a tropical, photography-hostile environment and by what means did they, each in their own way, succeed in rendering Lucknow's overpowering monumentality and aesthetics? Thanks to a valuable appendix by Stéphanie Roy, which includes short biographies of the various photographers, we at least get to know some of their background. Equally useful is the

catalogue part of the book in thumbnail-format and the short descriptions of Lucknow's buildings up to 1856, which includes details of their current state.

In brief, a marvellous book of serious scholarship and perfectly reproduced prints, which brings out the technical characteristics of each photograph. Revealing the splendours of Lucknow's past, and to some extent, its present, was a must. If its architecture had not been the victim of such a monumental disaster, it would surely have become one of India's most beautiful cities. ◀

Notes

- 1 The privately owned Alkazi Archive is available for scholars in New York, London and New Delhi and comprises 75,000 photographs of South Asia, North Africa and the Middle East.
- 2 The book also includes a few 1858 views by Alixis de la Grange, Captain J. Milleken, P.G. Fitzgerald, Ahmad Ali Khan and Robert and Harriet Tytler.
- 3 For a selection of his Delhi views see Jim Masselos & Narayani Gupta *Beato's Delhi 1857, 1997*. Delhi, 2000: Ravi Dayal Publisher.

- 4 To catch some more glimpses see Sophie Gordon's article 'A city of mourning: The representation of Lucknow, India in nineteenth-century photography', in *History of Photography* 30:11, pp. 80-91.

Gerda Theuns-de Boer

Art historian for South and Southeast Asia
Photography manager, Kern Institute collections, University of Leiden
g.a.m.theuns@let.leidenuniv.nl