Leaving Beirut by car, you quickly ascend the steep western slope of the Lebanon Range, then drop precipitously into the Bekaa Valley—ancient Coelesyria—a high plain between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon ranges. The Bekaa seems to be a smaller version of California’s Central Valley: along the road north, you see the same kinds of nut and fruit trees and rows of vegetables that grow in California. But you also spot old stone and stuccoed houses, new tract houses with classicizing doorways, the boxlike burlap tents of Bedouins and Iraqi refugees, and women in abayas working the fields and selling produce by the roadside.

Eventually the road begins to rise at the north end of the valley. On the left you pass a hexagonal pavilion, assembled in the Middle Ages using antique parts. The road divides into a half-built or half-repaired boulevard. On the right a wall encloses al-Jaleel Palestinian refugee camp. Farther along on the left is a row of antique columns with a single, broken central arch. Banners bearing the Hezbollah logo and portraits of imams, fighters, and martyrs hang from utility poles in the median. In the distance, a high platform with a single row of six tall columns rises above the building line. South of the platform, a modern town climbs the lower reaches of the Anti-Lebanon, while to the north and east freshly green fields stretch into the distance.

This is Baalbek.

On a May morning last year, vendors eager for their first sales in months offered blurry postcards, prayer beads, and Hezbollah T-shirts to the site’s two visitors. It was a Friday, two days after the end of Lebanon’s most recent round of civil warfare. An all-encompassing silence was broken by periodic volleys of gunfire celebrating the truce that ended the conflict and, at noon, by the call to prayer broadcast from mosques around town, followed by fiery sermons that washed over the vast courtyard of the ancient temple.

The tale I began with is, I discovered, an entirely traditional type. From the sixteenth-century beginnings of European interest in Baalbek’s antiquities, the journey to Baalbek has been an integral part of the narrative. Every visitor felt compelled to describe his first sight of the ruins as the journey from Damascus or Beirut neared its goal, and to frame the meaning of the antique in the context of contemporary Baalbek. Like me, they sensed that, somehow, all of the disparate elements of the account were part of the same story. But how?

My charge tonight is to think about the enterprise of architectural history and its possible trajectories. And, since I think about such things much better using concrete examples rather than abstractions, I have chosen Baalbek as my standpoint. I do so not as a classicist or an ancient historian, which I am not, but as someone who has taken on the task of writing a world history of architecture “alone and without a leader,” as Horace Rumpole would say. This is a task, Sisyphian though it might be, to which I am deeply committed for reasons I hope you will come to understand this evening. In taking it on, however, one confronts the unease implied in the story I have just told you, about the limitations of the categories we traditionally use and the models of historical process that we assume. So my question is, What would it mean to write a history of architecture starting from Baalbek rather than from Rome—from a so-called periphery of architectural history rather than from a traditional center?

Baalbek has been a staple of architectural-history surveys since at least the time of James Fergusson’s Illustrated Handbook of Architecture of 1855, and it continues to find a place in most current survey texts. Despite its popularity, though, what makes Baalbek a particularly good starting place for me is that there’s almost no there. As commentators have remarked since the early Middle Ages, for such an enormous and obviously important site, ancient written documentation is almost non-existent, and most of what has survived was written centuries after the construction of these buildings. There is absolutely no evidence, for example, to tell us who commissioned, paid for, or designed any portion of the complex. The archaeological record is almost as thin, to the extent that it is impossible even to establish the plan of its major temple with certainty.
So ancient Baalbek is a figment of our imaginations. Much of what we see today was reconstructed by a German archaeological mission in the early twentieth century and by French and Lebanese archaeologists in the 1930s, 1950s, and 1960s. The rest we know from reconstruction drawings of the complex in a mythical state of completion. As a colleague said of some churches that I once studied, “There’s less there than meets the eye.”

That means that Baalbek has been a very accommodating screen upon which to project strikingly varied stories. I want to tell you three of them, each of which puts ancient and modern Baalbek together differently, each of which left traces in modern architectural histories of the site, and each of which centers around what I see as a central problem in architectural history at the present: the reification of culture in a manner that distorts our understanding of architectural historical processes—of the fluidity of architectural history.

The first is the story of “Roman Baalbek.” This is to all appearances an empirical Baalbek, constructed out of the archaeological remains of three temples (commonly but without evidence called the temples of Jupiter, Bacchus, and Venus, respectively), two courts, a massive podium, and a monumental propylaea, all built between the first and third centuries CE (Figure 1). For Fergusson, as for many of his successors, this was “The most magnificent temple group now left to us of their class and age” (315).

Roman Baalbek was carefully studied in the mid-eighteenth century by the Irish bishop and antiquarian Richard Pococke, followed soon after by the English architect-antiquarian Robert Wood and his patron James Dawkins. Pococke offered the readers of A Description of the East and Some Other Countries (1745) some of the first (semi-)accurate images of Baalbek’s ruins. Wood’s volume, The Ruins of Balbec, otherwise Heliopolis in Coelosyria (1757) inserted Baalbek permanently into the English-language canon (Figure 2). Fergusson, for example, obviously relied on it, since he tells us in 1855 that nine columns of the main temple stand, as Wood illustrates, when three of the nine fell in an earthquake in 1759, ninety-six years before Fergusson’s book appeared.

For Wood, Baalbek was profoundly European, the universal heritage of all cultivated Europeans. He pledged allegiance to “the Re-publick of Letters, which knows, or ought to know, neither distinction of country, nor separate interests,” and in its service published his book in both English and French editions (1). Britain was at war with France at the time, but the Republic of Letters transcended such conflicts.

At the same time, Wood and Pococke were at considerable pains to dissociate the ancient ruins from their contemporary setting. The contrast between the noble past and the squalid present struck Pococke forcefully as he entered the vaults under the Bacchus temple’s adyton, where he discovered the unclaimed body of a man robbed and murdered there six months earlier.

The rupture of past and present was elaborated at length by nineteenth-century visitors. The French traveler Alphonse de Lamartine, in Baalbek in the 1830s, “rose now with the sun, the first rays of which lighted the temples of Balbec, and gave to those mysterious ruins that appearance of eternal freshness which Nature can, when she pleases, confer even on what Time has destroyed.” To Lamartine, local Christians and Muslims stood in fundamentally different relationships to the eternally fresh Baalbek owing to its essential Europeanness. On the one hand, the Greek Catholic bishop with whom he
lodged used spolia as garden furniture, embracing the heritage of European antiquity, although Christians had closed the temples in the fourth century, crucifying those who continued to resist Christianity, and had built a basilica in the Great Court in the sixth century. On the other hand, the Muslim Arabs, whose ancestors had lived in the region when Roman Baalbek was constructed, were nevertheless aliens who superstitiously feared the ruins. According to Lamartine, they wouldn’t allow Europeans to visit the site without guides. “They imagine that these ruins enclose vast treasures guarded by genii or demons, and that the Europeans know the magic words which lead to their discovery, therefore they cause the Francs to be watched with extreme vigilance” (331).

Baalbek, then, revealed the essential incompatibility of Christian and Islamic cultures, but it also pointed to an opportunity for Europeans to reclaim Lebanon. Lamartine observed that

We were Christians—this was enough to [Baalbek’s Greek Christians]; common religion is the strongest bond of sympathy among nations. A common idea between man and man is more than a common country . . . and the Christians of the East, . . . always look upon the Christians of the West as their present protectors and future deliverers.

The moment has arrived, I think, for transporting into the heart of Asia a European colony, which would carry back modern civilization to those regions from whence ancient colonization came, . . . Nothing would be easier than to raise up a new monument on these desolate territories . . . (317–18).

The sense that Baalbek was profoundly European, a product of the Roman culture upon which “the West” was grounded, moved into the scholarly literature when the German archaeological excavations of the first years of the twentieth century gave us the Baalbek we know today. These excavations were a by-product of Kaiser Wilhelm II’s tour of the Holy Land in November 1898. The royal progress culminated at Baalbek, where a memorial tablet given by Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II, unveiled on the day of the Kaiser’s visit, proclaimed in Turkish and German (but not in Arabic, the local language) welcome and eternal friendship between the two empires.

The celebration and eventual excavation of Baalbek served parallel, if not quite congruent, agendas for the two rulers. For the Sultan, Baalbek represented a claim to Roman antiquity as an Ottoman patrimony and demonstrated Ottoman modernity in the care taken to preserve the pre-Islamic heritage. For the Kaiser, Baalbek was the ancestral homeland of the Holy Roman Empire, whose latest incarnation he headed. In fact, as German scholars of the expedition have recently shown, he was so obsessed with Baalbek that his aides were at some pains to persuade him to appear properly reverent toward Jerusalem. Baalbek’s location in the Levant was significant for the anti-democratic Kaiser: it represented European culture implanted autocratically in the East through imperial might, and so stood as a rebuke to the many late-nineteenth-century Europeans who derived democratic or republican lessons from the Classical past.

Figure 2 Temples of Jupiter (left) and Bacchus (right) (Robert Wood, The Ruins of Balbec, otherwise Heliopolis in Coelosyria [London, 1757], pl. XXIV)
This political theater rested first of all on the unarticulated assumption that Baalbek had a distinctive, coherent, and innate Roman cultural identity, demonstrated through meticulous archaeological excavation. It centered around the idea of Rome as a monolithic entity, a culturally and politically centralized empire whose power suffused and transformed everything it touched. (This was the essence of Lamartine’s view, as well.) It is an idea that survives in contemporary scholarly literature as “Romanization.” As the authors of the recent *Classical Panorama* put it,

Temples to Roman gods and the cults of the emperor could serve to enshrine Rome as a cultural absolute: at Baalbek in the Lebanon (Roman Syria), for instance, the huge 1st-century CE Temple of Jupiter, bigger even than the Parthenon in Athens, paraded Roman architectural styles, values, and gods as the city’s ultimate cultural determinant.²

This equation of culture and the state is a legacy to architectural history of nationalism and modernization movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as shown by recent studies of Turkey, China, Japan, India, and other modern nations, and it continues to shape the ways we periodize and organize our lectures and surveys. The idea of a common architectural culture equivalent to and co-terminous with the Roman state, for example, underlies Mark Wilson Jones’s and Rabun Taylor’s recent studies of Roman building practices, both of which feature Baalbek on their covers.

Our second story emphasizes a different aspect of Baalbek. The main temple complex rested on a much-enlarged podium that incorporated three particularly huge stones, known since at least the seventh century as the Trilithon (Figure 3). These megalithic blocks, still thought to be the largest worked stones ever used in building construction, were each about 64 by 14 by 12 feet in dimension and weighed over 800 tons. They were quarried about a kilometer away, where two more block of similar dimensions remain.³ Wood wrote, “All travellers have taken notice of those stones; some indeed of scarce anything else: nor is it surprising that after the decline of taste, when more attention was paid to magnitude than beauty, this temple should be chiefly noted for the largest stones which perhaps were ever employed in any building” (12). His statement points to an entirely different way of seeing Baalbek, one that informs our second story, of Oriental Baalbek. This story ignores the visible remnants of classical architecture, focusing on other aspects of the site, many of which are obscure or even invisible, that identify Baalbek as an indigenous production.

Since antiquity, local stories have identified the ruins at Baalbek as a palace built by King Solomon for the Queen of Sheba. These tales synthesized Biblical stories of Solomon’s adulteries with the Quranic account of the jinns (genies) given to Solomon to help with his construction projects. So the local lore attributed the moving of the huge stones of the Trilithon, otherwise inexplicable, to jinns, which may account for the popular belief that jinns were trapped in the ruins. The abandoned stone in the quarry seemed to have been left behind because the jinns went on strike against Solomon and refused to move it.

Nineteenth-century Euro-American travelers took an intense interest in these stories, which formed the core of a whole literature, alternate to the Enlightenment story of the progress of Roman/European civilization, that was centered on the idea of the Holy Land. These nineteenth-century travelers wished to historicize the sacred geography described in the Bible, which they believed was confirmed by local lore such as Baalbek’s. Unlike the seekers of Roman Baalbek, who excised the ruins from their surroundings and wrote off local stories as irrelevant foolishness, the partisans of Oriental Baalbek credited local knowledge as an authentic, unbroken link to the Biblical past, however corrupted it might have become in ensuing centuries.

The most interesting of these travelers was David Urquhart, a Scots diplomat who traveled extensively in the Levant and published *The Lebanon: A History and a Diary* in 1860. “The Greek and Roman temples did not attract me” to Baalbek, he claimed. Instead, he was looking for the Betylia. Baetys were ancient non-figural representations of...
looked closely at the ruins and compared them with other
gods in the Middle East, but Urquhart thought they were magical, magnetic stones that the Phoenicians used to navigate and that they stored at Baalbek when they were not using them (2: 369). During his visit to Baalbek, his attention was captured by the Trilithon. He asked himself four questions that he found impossible to answer:

First, why would anyone begin this work? Why build of such enormous blocks when they weren’t meant to be “an architectural performance,” meaning something aesthetically impressive like a palace or a colossal statue? Second, why was this work constructed here? “Preeminent structures belong to seats of dominion,” such as capitals or great ports, but Baalbek had never been either. Third, why was the work interrupted? Fourth, why was it unique? Why was there no other Baalbek on the face of the earth? (Remember that Urquhart was thinking of the podium and the Trilithon, not of the classical ruins above.)

Urquhart asked the local ruler, Emir “Hangar” [Harfush], who built Baalbek. “Expecting to hear the story of Solomon and his Janns, universally reported as the local tradition,” he learned instead that “There have been three builders; the first was Sanoud, the second was (I have forgotten the name [Urquhart confessed]), and then came the Deluge; after that it was repaired by Solomon” (2:364–65).

To Urquhart the specificity of the emir’s answer provided “positive evidence” of its veracity (2:377). After leaving Baalbek, he passed by the tomb of Noah a little way down the road. The conjunction of Noah’s relics and the emir’s words convinced him that the Trilithon had been built in three stages, the first two before the great flood and the third by Solomon. This insight answered his questions. The work was undertaken out of the excessive pride and presumption that had brought on the flood. It had been built at that site because exceptional men had lived there. Human development had run its entire course before the flood, so “The builders of Baalbeck must have been a people who had attained to the highest pinnacle of power and science; and this region must have been the centre of their dominion” (2: 376). After all, they had the knowledge to build an enormous ship, the Ark, so they must have found quarrying and moving these stones easy. The process seemed mysterious to modern visitors only because human capacities had not yet returned to their antediluvian levels. As to the third question, the work had been interrupted by the flood. Finally, it was unique because it was the only pre-flood architecture massive enough to have withstood the waters.

Before we smile knowingly at Urquhart’s credulity, we need to acknowledge that the only fault with his thinking was that it was empirically wrong, for reasons he could not have known. Like the proponents of Roman Baalbek, he looked closely at the ruins and compared them with other buildings he knew. The Roman Baalbekians assumed (then as now) the reliability of a handful of late antique and Byzantine texts, written long after the construction of the temples, as documents of its history and use. Urquhart relied on the Bible and local tradition, at a time, remember, when scholars were beginning to examine the Bible as a historical text and when other scholars studying the eastern Mediterranean during the centuries leading up to the construction of Baalbek were beginning to argue that ancient Greek literature was also reliable history. (Schliemann was not the first or the only one to do so.)

If we understand the Roman Baalbek project as an attempt to recuperate a unifying European–Western secular civilization from its ruins (and in the process to lay a cultural foundation for nation- and empire-building), we might think of the Oriental Baalbek project as one willing to grant the indigenous a degree of authority as a witness to the historicity of Western Christian mythology.

Like Roman Baalbek, Oriental Baalbek took on a newer, more scholarly cast in the early twentieth century, again without shedding the baggage of the nineteenth century. Interestingly, this development, too, was initiated by the German excavations. The original excavators found some troubling elements at Baalbek that didn’t fit standard models of Roman architecture. The interiors of the temples were elaborately organized with canopied platforms at their far ends, unlike those found in Roman temples elsewhere, while the remains of a striking towerlike structure were found inside the Byzantine basilica in the Great Court. When the basilica was removed in the 1930s, another tower structure was found underneath it near the base of the stairs of the Temple of Jupiter, and enough pieces of both had survived in the walls of the basilica to allow archaeologists to reconstruct their appearance (Figure 4).

In Oriental Baalbek, the most significant aspects were not the overscaled temple buildings, but the “high place,” the platform that raised them above the surrounding town and countryside, and the giant, open-to-the-sky temenos, a series of processional spaces leading from the propylaea to the Great Court with its two tower-altars, high places in the high place. Where nineteenth-century visitors had used local practice to confirm Biblical narratives, archaeologists Pierre Coupel and Paul Collart used Biblical passages to document and interpret the use of high places in the ancient Near East. They saw the differing sizes of the altars as indications that one was used for a mass “communion” and the other for a more exclusive ritual of sacrifice, consciously or unconsciously alluding to two major attributes of the Christian mass. In other words, space and ritual, rather than fabric and decoration, defined Baalbek’s identity.
Oriental Baalbek was found not principally in what one saw there—columns, capitals, and exedrae—but in what one couldn’t easily see—space and use—and in what couldn’t see at all—Baalbek before it became Heliopolis and the site’s Syrian context. Cryptic descriptions of unpublished 1960s excavations under the Great Court claimed that the podium was built around an ancient tell and that the tower altars stood above a fifty-meter-deep natural crevice (the dimensions always reported by later scholars with “(!)” appended) with an altar at the bottom. So Baalbek was an ancient center for the worship of local gods that had merely been monumentalized by the Romans (still treated as an undifferentiated collective).

Oriental Baalbek became a focus of Lebanese and Middle Eastern cultural nationalism. The Lebanese antiquities ministry initiated the clearance of the basilica and the probing of the tell to search for remnants of pre-Classical Baalbek, to show that the true character of the site was indigenous and that the Roman visual elements were an insignificant veneer over an entirely different cultural product. Nineteenth-century travelers’ reliance on the Bible as a historical source and their quest for the ancestral homeland of Christianity survived in Collart and Coupel’s allusion to Christian rites in the “communion” and “sacrifice” atop the altars. These identified Christianity as an Oriental religion rather than a European one, a position recently argued strenuously by the archaeologist Warwick Ball in *Rome in the East* (2000). Nevertheless, the key assumptions (which were all largely undocumented or thinly documented) were that Baalbek was an ancient place name altered to Heliopolis by the Seleucids but revived as soon as the Romans left, even though there is no evidence of the word *Baalbek* before the fourth century CE; that there were several earlier layers of temenos under the Roman-era Great Court; and that the major god of Baalbek, Jupiter Heliopolitanus, was a thinly disguised “Semitic storm god,” although elements of his customary iconography were both Classical and Egyptian, and although there is no record of his existence before the first century BCE, about the time that the Hellenistic construction began at Baalbek.

As much as Roman Baalbek, then, Oriental Baalbek is based on cultural reification, on a belief that some distinctively local cultural character persisted at the site through centuries of apparently incongruous transformations. In studying the larger of Baalbek’s monumental altars, Collart and Coupel were confident for these reasons that they could identify among the sculptural fragments “two distinct and irreducible artistic currents,” one “purely Roman” and the other local. Their analysis foreshadows the currently popular concept of hybridity, which presumes the confrontation of two or more distinct, bounded, internally coherent cultural systems. Baalbek in this model is a hybrid space: a Roman Jello with two big Oriental marshmallows in the center, or perhaps a Syrian cake covered with Roman icing.

Our third story of Baalbek—apparently the most preposterous but in some respects the most intriguing—also focuses intently on the podium (which was in fact built to support the structures whose remains currently stand on it). Call it Cyclopean Baalbek.

Around the time that Lamartine visited Baalbek, English traveler C. B. Elliott was also there. In *Travels in the Three Great Empires of Austria, Russia, and Turkey* (1838),...
he considered the “megalithic” nature of Baalbek’s podium, and particularly of the Trilithon. Elliott connected the Trilithon and the podium with the Cyclopean masonry of the Middle East and Greece and with the megalithic monuments of Britain, in all of which “there is a singular resemblance for which it is difficult to account” (121). Knowing nothing of the relative chronology of these structures, he attributed them all to the Cyclopeans, quoting travel writer Josiah Conder’s claim that the

Cyclopeans were a kind of freemasons employed to construct lighthouses, citadels, &c., who handed down their mysterious art from generation to generation; and that the stupendous nature of their edifices led to the fables with which the name is associated. Thus the true Cyclopean monster is very plausibly conjectured to be no other than a lighthouse with its one burning eye . . . . Wherever we trace these Cyclopean artists, they appear to have carried with them the worship of their great patron the Phoenician Hercules [thus placing us back in the neighborhood of Baalbek], or the sun [Heliopolis]; and the same deity was invoked by Electra as the ancestral god of the royal house of Mycenae, who was worshipped by the Hyperboreans in their circular temples, of which Stonehenge is so remarkable a specimen. The latest efforts of Cyclopean art were probably those which were made in the most distant regions, and it is not impossible that the last Cyclop was a Druid [121–22].

This is a very impressive chain of free associations, even omitting the parts that Elliott didn’t quote, which went on to add the rock-cut tombs of Syria and Turkey, the ruins of Persepolis, and the caves of Elephanta to the Cyclopeans’ achievements. Again, before we snicker at Conder’s and Elliott’s foolishness, we should recall that until the advent of radiocarbon dating in the 1950s leading scholars attributed Stonehenge to the Mycenaeans or the Phoenicians.

Elliott thought that some of the Baalbek platform must be at least 3,000 years old, although he recognized that it had been altered by the Romans, the “Saracens,” and the Arabs. Inspired by Conder, he saw the site as part of a worldwide architectural tradition knit together by a craft culture shared among a group of masons.

In doing so, he emphasized that aspect of the reification of culture that we might call the allegiance to authenticity. Elliott made an assumption that is critical to the connoisseurship of art architecture: that the object is an authentic or truthful index of its maker, as permeated with the maker’s identity as Roman or Oriental Baalbek was permeated with a national or cultural character. So similarity of appearance among megalithic monuments indicated that the same hand or group of hands had made them.

All three stories of Baalbek, then, were based on concepts of architectural history that identify a building or site with a collectivity—the Romans (a state), the Orient (a regional, ethnic, or religious identity), or the Cyclopeans (a craft tradition). They make assumptions about the sources of architectural authority: Who is the author of a building? Who makes the ultimate decisions about its plan, appearance, or use? Then they assume that the resulting structure has a definitive form in which the author’s identity is systematically and truthfully present and bounded, and can therefore be assessed, separating the essential from the superfluous, the genuine from the imitation, the original from the alteration or accretion.

This faith in architectural authenticity promotes the illusion, for example, that it is possible (and desirable) to determine, even in a mundanely descriptive way, what Baalbek really is or was, yet a closer looks shows that there was no authentic Baalbek. By this I mean, first, that Baalbek had no fixed form. All restored views are radically inadequate and misleading (see Figure 1). Even a plan showing Baalbek’s “stages” belies the fluidity of the building at every moment of its existence. Every part of the scheme of which we have any evidence was continually reconceived, reworked, and reconstructed, often independently of the other parts, at different rates and at different times. It is not possible to specify an original, ultimate, or ideal form of Baalbek. It probably never had one, or no single or enduring one.

In saying that Baalbek had no fixed form I mean, second, that the complex was never “completed” in either the narrower or the broader sense. Many details remained uncarved when the temple was closed by Christian authorities, but the building itself continued to be used in a variety of ways long after that date, after the end of Roman-Byzantine rule, after Arab rule, and even after Ottoman rule. These subsequent uses account for most of the building’s active history. Theodosius built a basilica in the Great Court, destroying the tower altars to do so. The temenos later became the citadel and palace of the Ayyubid ruler Saladin, perhaps inspired by the belief that it had been built as Solomon’s palace. Mamluk rulers strengthened and enlarged the fortifications in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Still later, the temple enclosure became the center of Baalbek as the town contracted. Small houses, mosques, and a bath were built within it.

This is a familiar pattern in world architectural history. From Stonehenge and Karnak to Tikal and Chartres, the illusion of permanence created by durable materials and monumental scale was just that—an illusion. Even the United States Capitol has undergone constant alteration. In the long run, no building that is truly significant to its makers and users...
escapes constant and often radical alteration. The relatively recent Euro-American fixation on small-scale art-architecture obscures this pattern, but the idea of a building as a work of art with a fixed and integrated form is a minor blip on the broad screen of architectural history.

If Baalbek had no absolute temporal limits, neither were its spatial boundaries static. As the buildings were altered, parts migrated off site. Some columns and capitals found their way into a medieval mosque adjacent to the ancient temples, while others of the red Aswan granite columns of the Great Court became the Qubbat Douris, the octagonal pavilion we passed on our way into town, and still others were laboriously hauled over the mountain and shipped over the seas to Istanbul to embellish the Suleymaniye, the monumental külliye of another Solomon. Other fragments became the garden furniture of the nineteenth-century Greek Catholic bishop, as we’ve seen, and some, indeed, provided stone for townpeople and farmers to build their houses and enclose their fields. But while it is sometimes said that the building was “quarried,” these were not merely convenient buildings materials, but usually “bearers of meaning,” specific and general, that continued to compound in new settings. In that spirit, the mosque across the road, ruinous since by the late nineteenth century, was recently reconstructed and returned to active use, extending the temporal reach of the ancient site still further.

So talk of Oriental Baalbek, Roman Baalbek, Byzantine Baalbek—or Arab Baalbek, Ottoman Baalbek, Syrian or Lebanese Baalbek—is rooted in the fantasy of the stability of authentic cultural forms. In contrast to the ruptures of empire, culture, and religion that these terms demarcate, we might set the continuity of the always ethnically diverse population of the city: “Phoenicians,” “Ituraeans,” “Greeks,” “Romans,” “Jews,” and “Persians,” among others, had all lived there since before the construction of the present temples. They formed an enduring matrix into which the accidents of politics, religion, and culture were absorbed. Seen in this light, the ruined-and-reconstructed mosque was not a case of “Muslims” robbing “Roman” ruins, or “Hezbollah” appropriating the “Umayyad” legitimacy, but Baalbekers reorganizing inherited architectural elements to extend and amplify their meanings. The ruins at Baalbek had no fixed or authentic cultural or national identity, either synchronic or diachronic. Their meaning and its material expressions have been expanding continuously and organically since the first century.

It is relatively easy to see the limitations of the reification of cultural identity in a small-scale case study such as that of Baalbek and to try to construct an account of a single place that flows through time and space. But what lessons might it have for larger-scale architectural histories? Is it possible or desirable to move up to larger scales—to the largest scale? Or does the complexity of Baalbek’s history reinforce the widespread argument against surveys and other grand narratives?

In his recent A World History of Art and Its Objects (2008), David Carrier argues that the study of expressive culture is the “concern for understanding how an artist comes into and then modifies a tradition.” He goes on to say that “because Islamic art derives from Byzantine visual culture, such important early monuments as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the Great Mosque in Damascus could be classified as Byzantine architecture. But these are marginal cases. When we look at major works of art from many cultures, the body of Islamic art is identifiable because it shares distinctive features” (37). This is what I mean by the reification of culture: art—one could substitute architecture, which is similar to, but not the same as, art—has coherent traditions, defined by polity, ethnicity, religion, geography, or some other criterion, with cores and edges.

That is the view from Rome, not Baalbek. The view from Baalbek emphasizes the unbounded fluidity and porosity of architecture. It shows us that there is no center, that architectural ideas flow from place to place and time to time. The places where we believe we can see clearly bounded traditions with “distinctive features” are the truly marginal places—the dead ends—and the closer we look, the fewer of them there are.

Baalbek teaches us to value fluidity on a variety of scales. On the smallest scale, that of the individual builder, it asks us to rethink our assumptions about the ways culture affects production. While architectural historians often rely on an implicit model of culture as a bounded set of beliefs or practices with internal integrity and varying degrees of permeability, contemporary anthropologists are more accustomed to think of culture as a process. Culture is manifested as improvisation in settings where disparate learned habits and predispositions pull us in certain directions, while circumstances constantly undermine and redirect our predilections. (I am paraphrasing Pierre Bourdieu’s The Logic of Practice [1992] here, but variants of this argument are widely voiced among contemporary anthropologists.) The construction and reconstruction of a site such as Baalbek is undertaken by individual actors confronting problems that are kind of like, but never exactly like, those they have encountered before. Every building project involves a degree of improvisation and as a result ideas and practices change or drift—“evolve” is too teleological a word.

Individual builders live in a milieu of accidents and contingencies that extend far beyond the construction site to
affect the societies to which they belong. States and empires are less important for their own building activities than for providing the medium—through war, trade, diplomacy, migration—through which architectural ideas move and for altering in often unpredictable ways the conditions within which individual builders are compelled to improvise.

One very obvious and straightforward implication of my argument is that if there are no centers, there are no edges. For starters, we need to give up the illusions that there is such a thing as a “Western” tradition, or that we can divide the “Western” from the “non-Western.” Once this was a straightforward way to relegate a large portion of the world to insignificance. Now it still is, hidden behind a convenient multiculturalism that argues that various “cultures” are so different that there can be no larger story. That claim often masks intellectual incuriosity or simple laziness.

If the population of Baalbek provided the continuity linking the discontinuities of successive political and religious regimes in the Bekaa, human universals may provide the continuities bridging the discontinuities caused by the contingencies of politics and culture. There are commonalities in world architecture that beg for explanation. The ubiquity of high places at sites as disparate as Baalbek, Borobudur, Teotihuacan, and Capitol Hill is one example. This is why I am sympathetic to C. B. Elliott and his Cyclopeans. He saw patterns that transcended superficial differences. It seems less likely that these were the products of a fraternity of Cyclopean masons than of hard-wired aspects of human self-awareness and orientation to the physical environment—what the psychologist James Gibson called “ecological” perception.

This tension between the particular and the general leads me to believe a large-scale architectural history—that elusive goal I mentioned at the beginning—should be grounded in the new world historians’ portrait of human history as a story of webs and flows. It would have to be more than a compendium of regional histories or a collection of self-contained stories compiled from monographs. The world historian Eric Lane Martin has argued that “the questions of world historians are qualitatively different from the kinds of questions asked by historians who focus on particular areas . . . As a whole, the literature of world history deals with questions related to what Marshall Hodgson called historical complexes—large-scale, overlapping historical processes.” The challenge to a world history of architecture is to avoid confining traditions, cultures, or regions within discrete cubbyholes by acknowledging such webs of connections. Local particulars are part of a broader stream of historical, cultural, and phenomenological processes by which architecture is created and used. At the same time, the world-history model cannot be applied to architecture uncritically. A history restricted to a single category of human endeavor—the built environment—will necessarily demonstrate more discontinuities and idiosyncrasies that one devoted to the entire range of human activity.

Accident, contingency, and human universals—fluidity without inevitability—offer the raw materials for a better model of architectural historical process than the static idea of culture (with either a capital or lower-case C). But to start there would commit us to lowering many of our traditional boundaries and reconsidering many of our most cherished categories. This would be an architectural history that started from Baalbek rather than from Rome.

Notes
This essay was adapted from the plenary talk delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians in Pasadena on 2 April 2009.

3. Only one abandoned stone was known until the 1990s, when a second was unearthed.