



IN THE TRACKS OF THE QAJAR SHAH

*Memories of Travels in Mesopotamia
and Persia in 1870*

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63 albumen prints brought together in an album of imperial provenance bound in contemporary green velvet boards. They are the work of Aqa Reza Iqbal al-Saltaneh, known as Reza Akkasbashi, the first official photographer to the court of Naser al-Din Shah. At the request of the Qajar sovereign, Reza Akkasbashi documented the splendor of religious architecture, particularly that of the monuments of the Shi'ite branch of Islam whose great shrines contain the remains of the imams who are the successors in this tradition to the Prophet Muhammad. Unique to this album is both the oldest known photograph of the cuneiform inscription at Behistun giving a detailed account of the accession to the Persian imperial throne of the Achaemenid king Darius (who in the eyes of the Qajar shahs was a model in terms of the unification of Iran), and also the oldest view of the arch of Ctesiphon, a part of the great facade of the Sassanid palace of Shapur I.

Each page of the album — composed no doubt in 1871 and very likely of imperial origin as were all the velvet albums of the period — has either one or two photographic prints accompanied by a caption in Farsi, handwritten in blank ink.

This album originates from an expedition undertaken in 1870 by Naser al-Din Shah to several provinces in Iran as well as to neighboring Iraq. At the time, Iraq was part of the declining Ottoman empire; it was governed by the sultan and Islamic caliph Abdul Hamid II; and, with the Russo-Turkish War, the country had just undergone one of the most critical moments of its history. The Qajar shah visited the central governorates of Iraq (Saladin, Karbala, and Najaf) when a relative calm had returned to the area. As we can see from two photographs in the album, he set up a huge tent camp in a lowland area; and another picture shows the boat offered to the shah as a sign of welcome by the Ottoman authorities.

In Iraq, the work of Reza Akkasbashi chiefly highlights the exceptional groups of religious buildings in the cities of Samarra, Karbala, Najaf and Baghdad. The main treasures of this heritage are mosques and sanctuaries. In Samarra, Reza Akkasbashi obtains a daringly structured image of the Al-Askari Mosque, a very important

pilgrimage center named after Hasan al-Askari (845-874), the eleventh Shia Imam whose body is laid to rest in the sanctuary. He also provides a beautifully streamlined image of the famous spiral ramp encircling the minaret (*Malwiya*) of the city's great mosque, one of the treasures of Abbasid art (dating from 847). Still today a major site of devotional pilgrimage and the starting point of the main annual Shi'ite procession, the city of Najaf offered the opportunity for several photographs that show the wealth of its cultural heritage. The photographer provides two beautiful pictures of the courtyard and of the façade of the Mosque of Imam Ali (or the Ali mausoleum). In the holy shrine lie the remains of Ali Ibn Abi Talib (601-661), cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad, first Twelver Shia imam and fourth Caliph of Islam. In Karbala, Reza Akkasbashi took photographs of the shrine (mosque and mausoleum) of Imam al Husayn, the grandson of Muhammad and son of Ali, and the adjacent mausoleum of Al Abbas, Husayn's half-brother. He also obtained two pictures of the Great Mosque of Kufa, where Ali, the first Twelver Shia imam, was assassinated. He gives us a finely balanced view of the Al-Kazimiyya shrine in Baghdad, housing the tombs of the seventh and ninth Shia Imams, Musa al-Kasim and Muhammad al-Jawad; the majesty of its architecture is revealed through the play of rising and horizontal lines.

Following the shah's guidelines, Reza Akkasbashi focused on the ancient prestigious heritage of the two countries. In 1870, at Taq Kasra (or Ayyān-e Kesrā) on the eastern bank of the Tigris, he obtained the first photo of a unique monument, the only visible vestige of the ancient city of Ctesiphon, capital of Sassanid Persia: the oldest brick vault (*iwan*) and the biggest arch in the world built in pre-modern times. Part of a Sassanid palace complex (of which only the northern and southern wings subsisted at the time), it measures 37 meters high and 26 meters wide, making it an exceptional monument. This was what then remained of the facade of the palace of the Persian king Shapur I, also known as the palace of Chosroes, erected in the second half of the third century. Back in Iran, he stayed in the province of Kermanshah near the border with Iraq to examine the Behistun inscription and the sculpted bas-relief of which he took the oldest known photograph. The monumental

¹ The Behistun Inscription played a crucial role in the decipherment of the main systems of cuneiform writing in the Near East, helping in the establishment of the science of Assyriology. The inscription is the longest left by the Achaemenids and contains a royal trilingual text recounting in detail the accession of Darius to the throne of imperial Persia. It begins thus: *I (am) Darius, the great king, king of kings, king in Persia, king of nations; Hystaspes, his son, Arsames, his grandson, an Achaemenid.*

relief was hard to access, being carved on the face of a cliff 100 meters high; it was this inscription in three languages — Elamite, Babylonian and old Persian— that made possible the decipherment of cuneiform writing¹. Some distance from there, he visited and photographed the historic site of Taq-e-Bostan, comprising two arches and a bas-relief carved in rock. The rockfaces represent scenes from Sassanid mythology and history, making it one of the most beautiful examples of rock art in Iran, in a sought-after location which may have been a royal hunting ground (*paradeisos*). Reza Akkasbashi has provided the album with prints of a very fine hue. Following in the tracks of the shah, the trip continued in Iran to the Razavi Khorasan province in the far northwest and to its capital Mashhad, a holy Shia city. The photographer gives us several views of the mausoleum of Imam Reza, eighth of the Twelve Shia imams, and of the Goharshad mosque built in the 15th century contained within the sanctuary precincts. Also in the album are images of the mosques at Semnan and at Damghan as well as of the Bayazid Bastami religious complex at Bastam and of the Fatima Masumeh Shrine at Qom.

Finally, Reza Akkasbashi took several general views of towns such as Mashhad, Nishapur in the Khorasan founded by Shapur I and rebuilt by Shapur II under the name “New Shapur” in the 4th century, Shahrud and Kermanshah, views that enable us to precisely document different types of vernacular architecture.



Aqa Reza Iqbal al-Saltaneh’s apprenticeship and career bring us back to the very first years of photography in Iran. Naser al-Din Shah, the Qajar sovereign, played a major role in the inception and in the wide development of photography in his country as from the end of the 1850s. Foreign, especially Italian and French, photographers initially played their part, but the domain soon became the preserve of a growing number of Iranian photographers — so much so that it would be difficult to estimate the number of studios in activity in the major towns thirty years later.

The history of the transmission of photography in Iran has been amply studied in recent years and is now beginning to be widely known. Naser al-Din Shah, who reigned from 1848 until he was assassinated in 1896, founded the Royal Photography Studio (*‘akkashaneh-ye mobarakeh-ye homayuni*) within the walls of the imperial palace of Golestan in Teheran, setting up, in the process, his own studio. This was as early as 1858², and that same year he also instituted the teaching of the medium in the Dar al-fonun, just a few years after this first modern university was founded in 1851. The French photographer and daguerreotypist Jules Richard would teach there as would Francis Carlihan, the man who introduced the wet-collodion process to Iran. It is assumed that the latter played a decisive role

in the shah’s training in photography, although no traces of his role have been preserved. Carlihan’s first student at the Dar al-fonun was Aqa Reza Iqbal al-Saltaneh (1843-1889), the son of a family of courtiers. After his apprenticeship, he was the first to receive the title of court photographer (*‘akkās-bāšī*) in 1863, and he became known and is still known today as Reza Akkasbashi. Mirza Ahmad Sani al-Saltana was to succeed him in this post at the end of 1884 on his return from Europe, where he had perfected his photographic skills.

Like Abdullah Mirza Qajar³ after him, Reza Akkasbashi carried out a number of photographic expeditions to the different provinces of the Iranian empire — as well as to Iraq, as this album testifies — in the company of the shah, and sometimes after him, always following the sovereign’s instructions. We know that in turn Reza Akkasbashi trained part of the first generation of Iranian photographers. At the request of the shah, he opened the first public photography studio in Teheran in 1868. The studio was directed by one of his students, Abbas Ali Beyk, whose activity as of 1863 is known to us. Many other studios opened in the imperial capital, the most famous being those of Abdullah Mirza Qajar and of the Russian photographer Antoin Sevruguin. Following their example, public studios opened in most of the major cities such as Tabriz, Ispahan or Mashhad, revealing the keen interest in photography that had taken hold of a part of privileged or prosperous Iranian society.



PIERRE DOURTHE

Sources

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² As of 1858 a group of students from the Dar al-fonun was sent to France on the shah’s request in order to perfect their training in photography with the masters in Paris.

³ See our text accompanying an album composed in 1890: “A visual geography of the empire. The photographic expedition of Abdullah Mirza Qajar to the northern provinces of Iran in 1889”.



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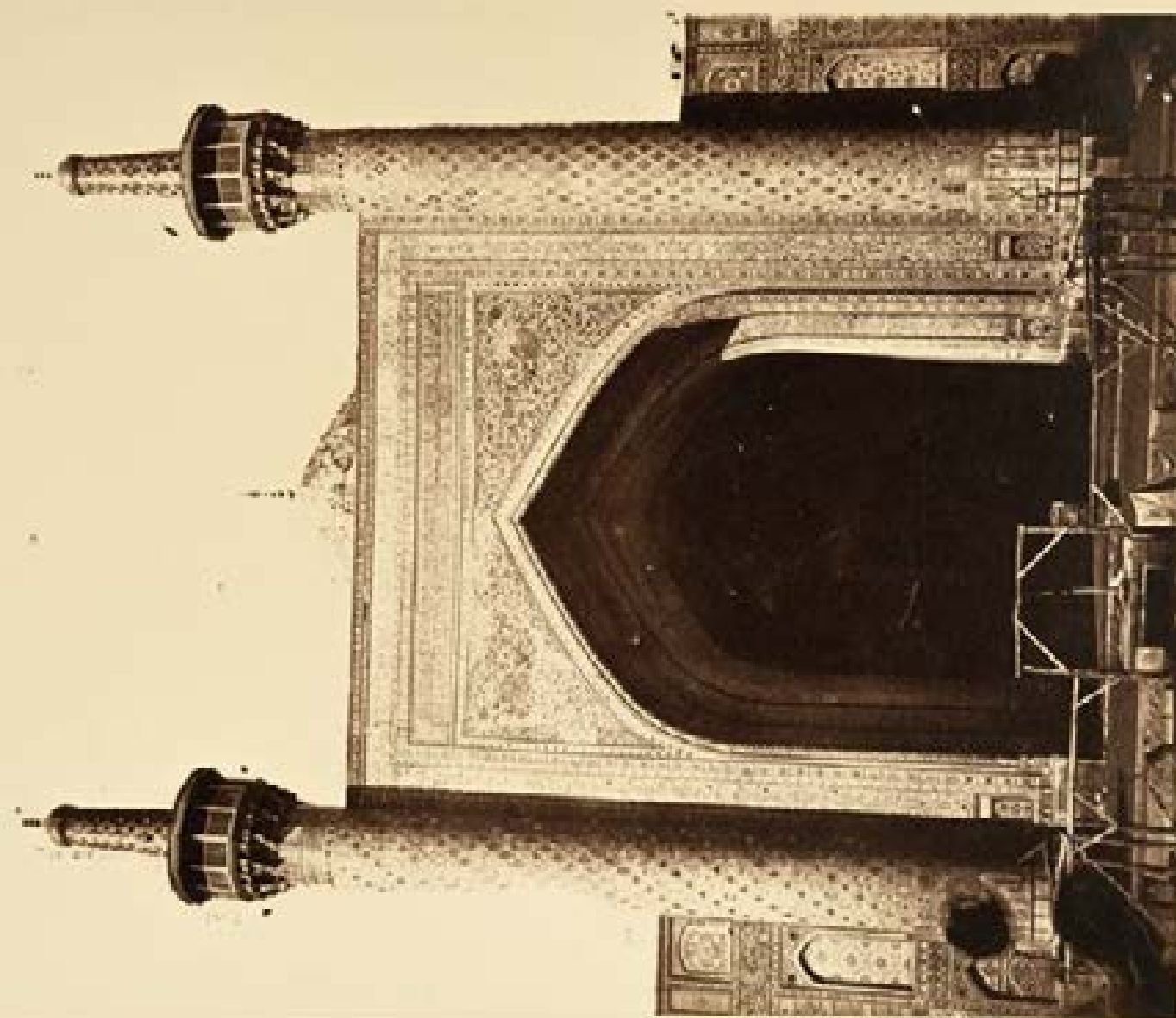
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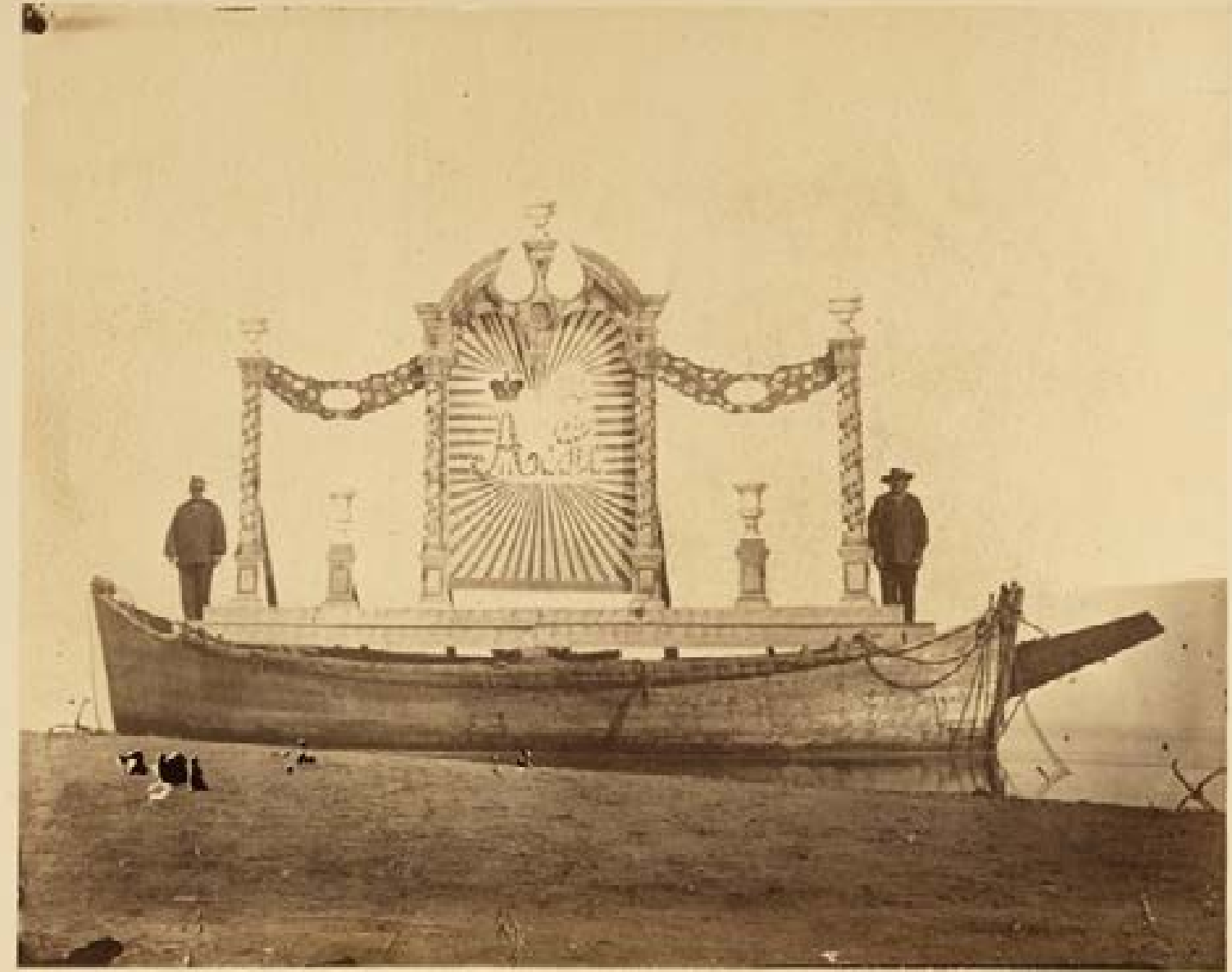
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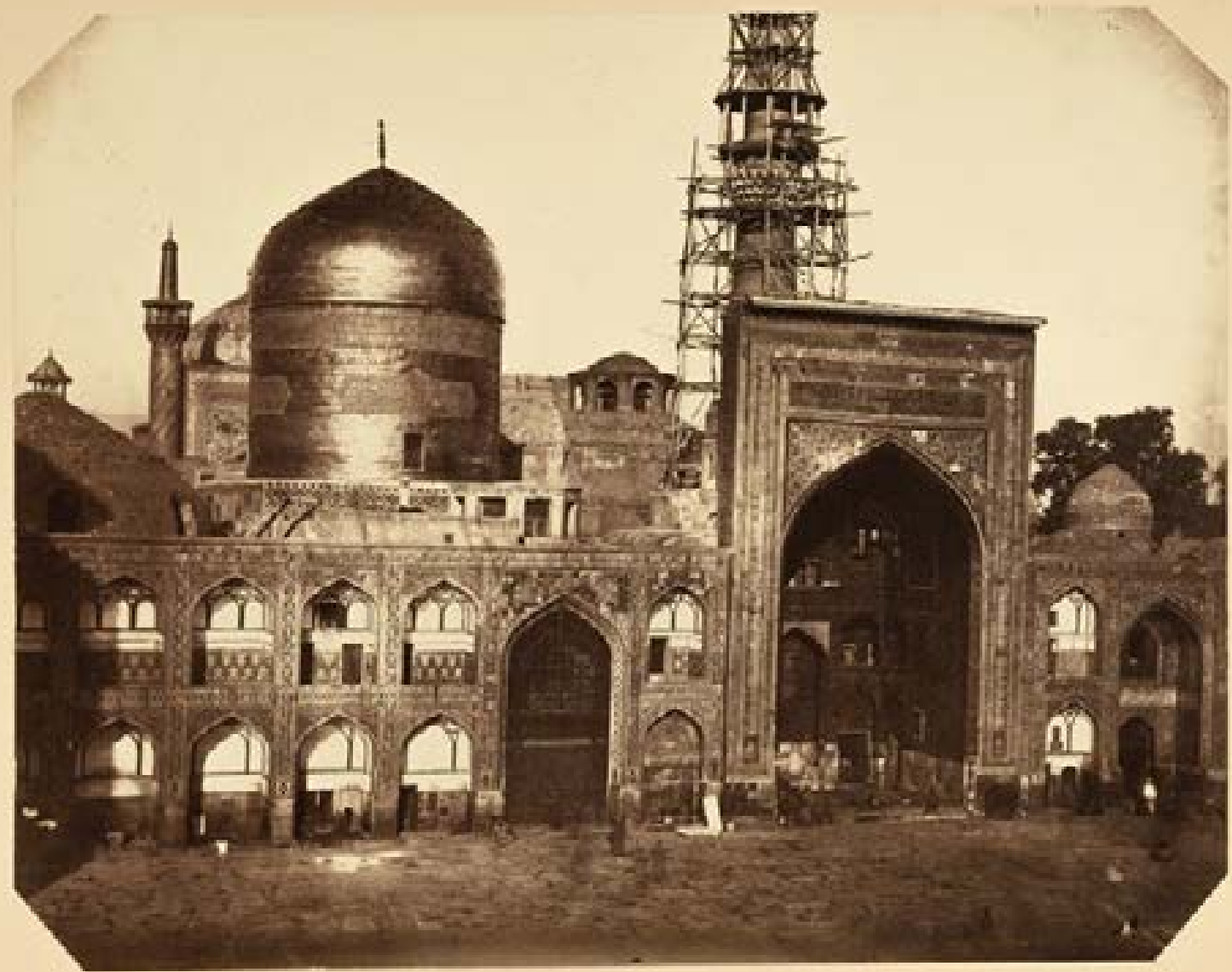
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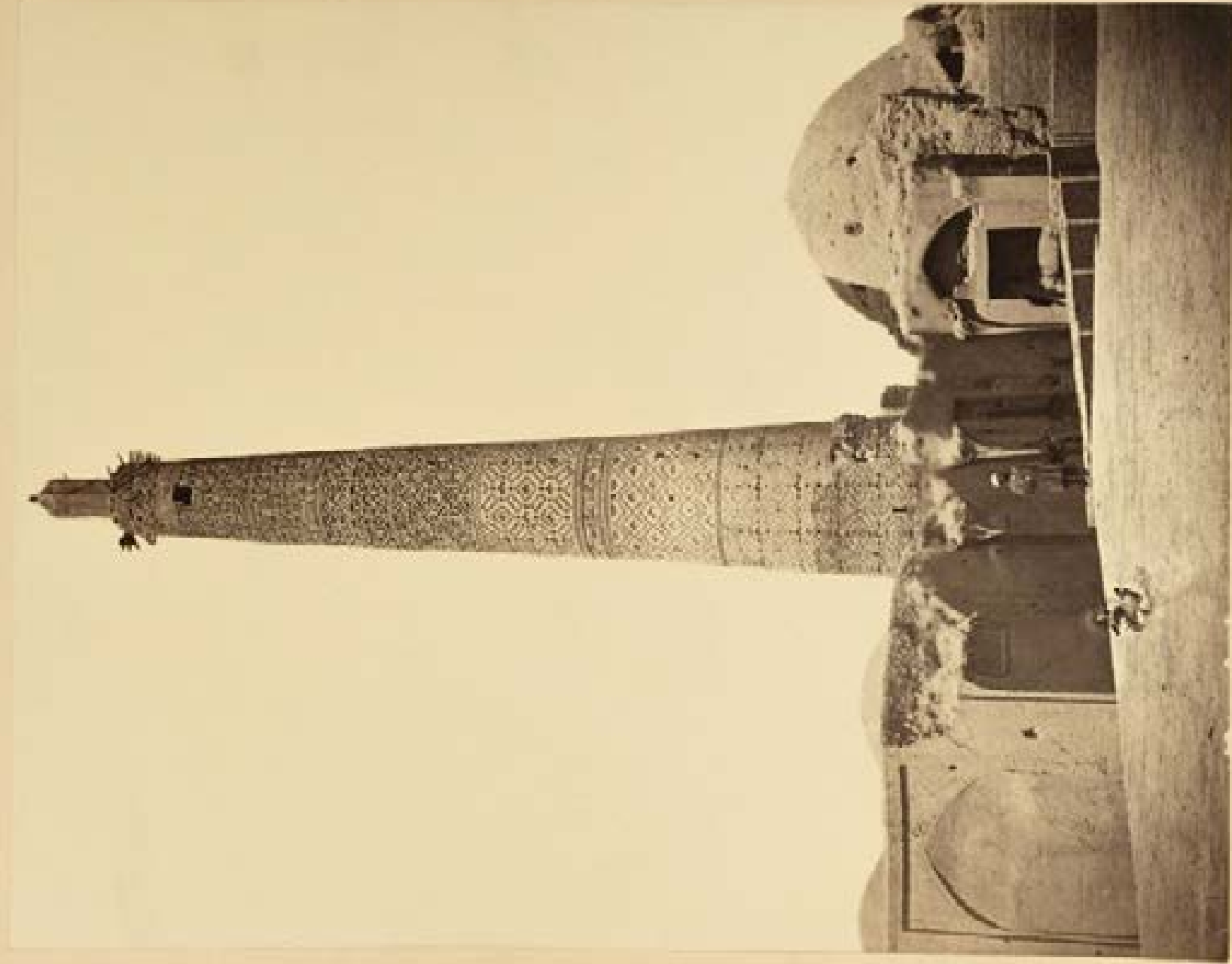
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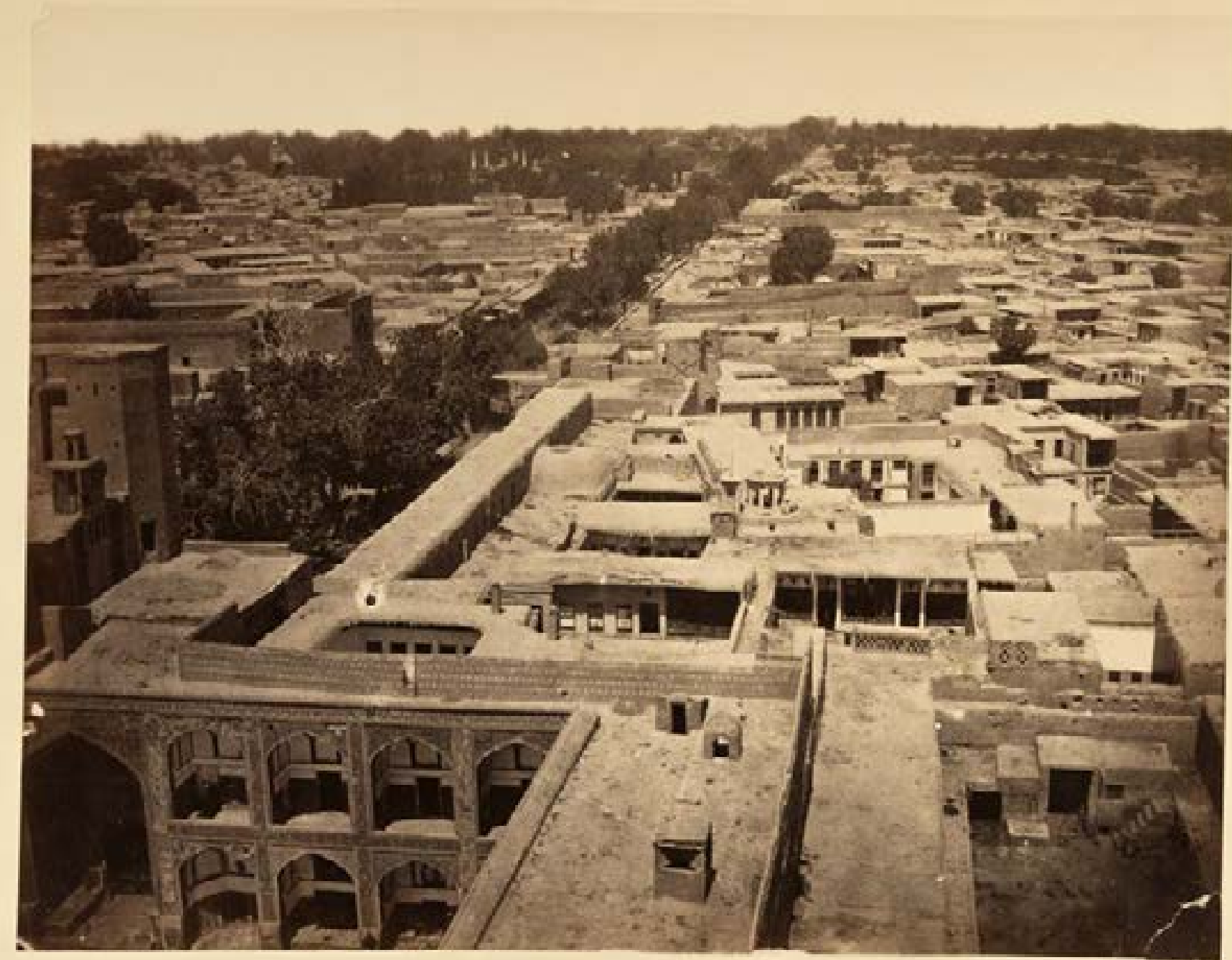
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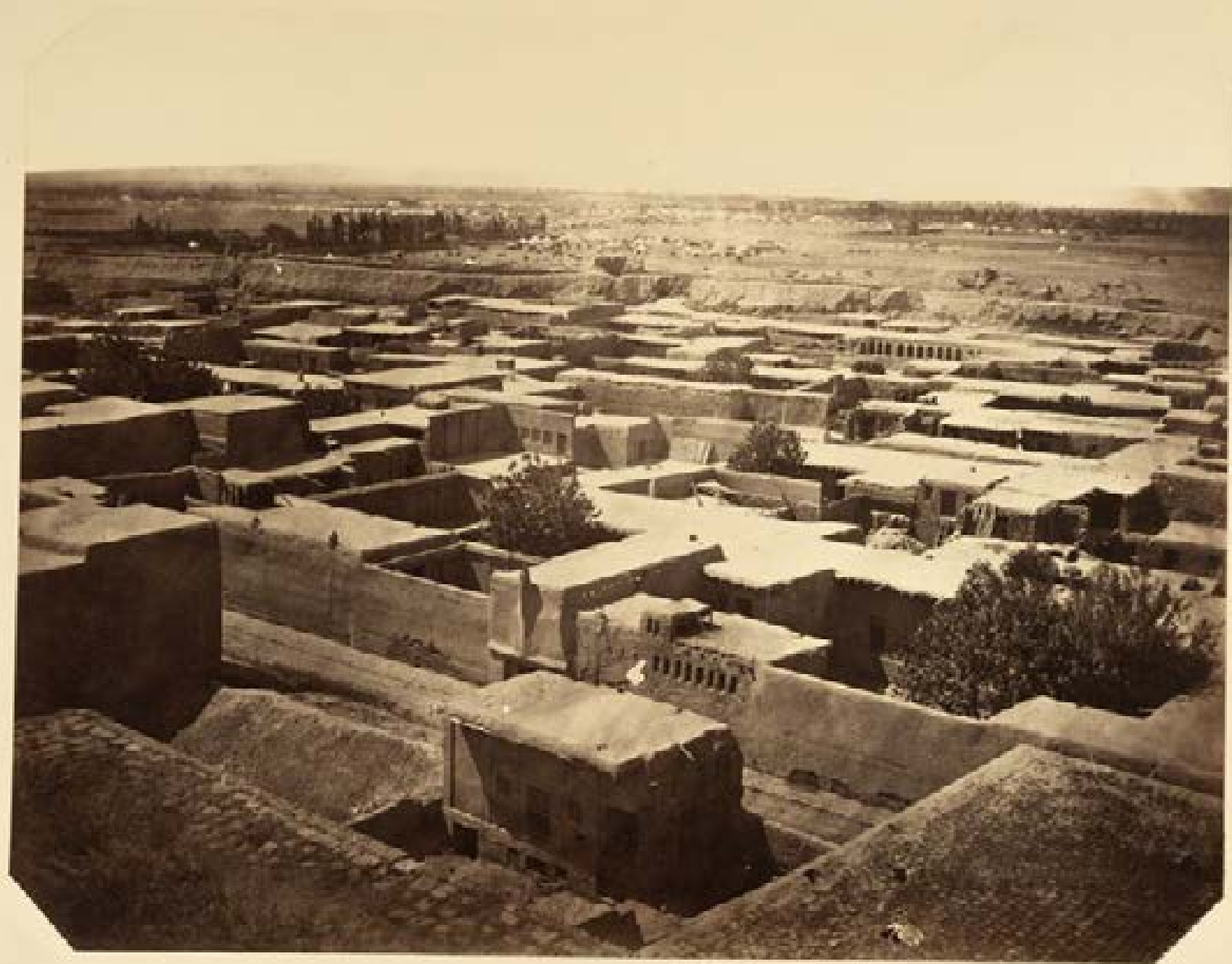
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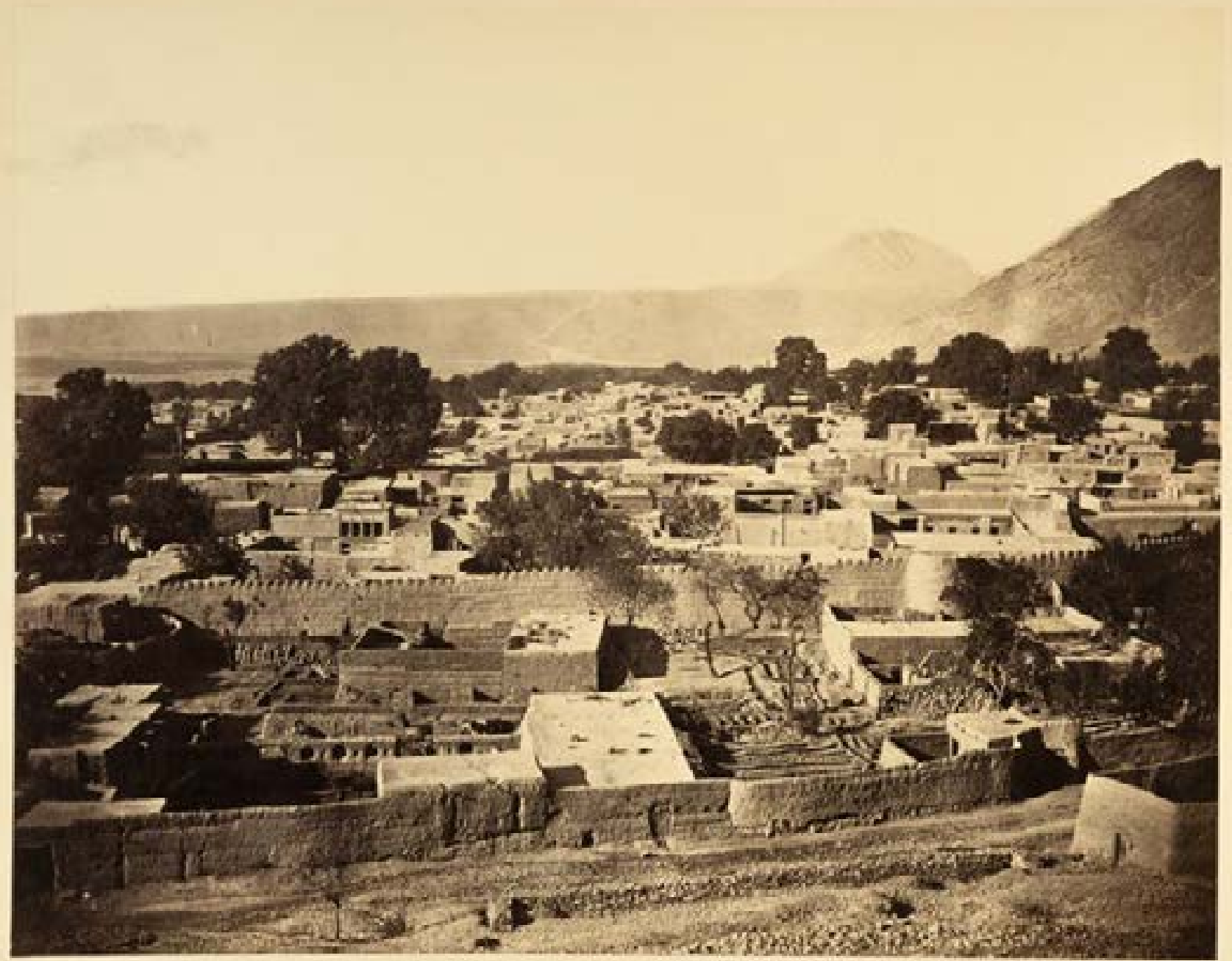
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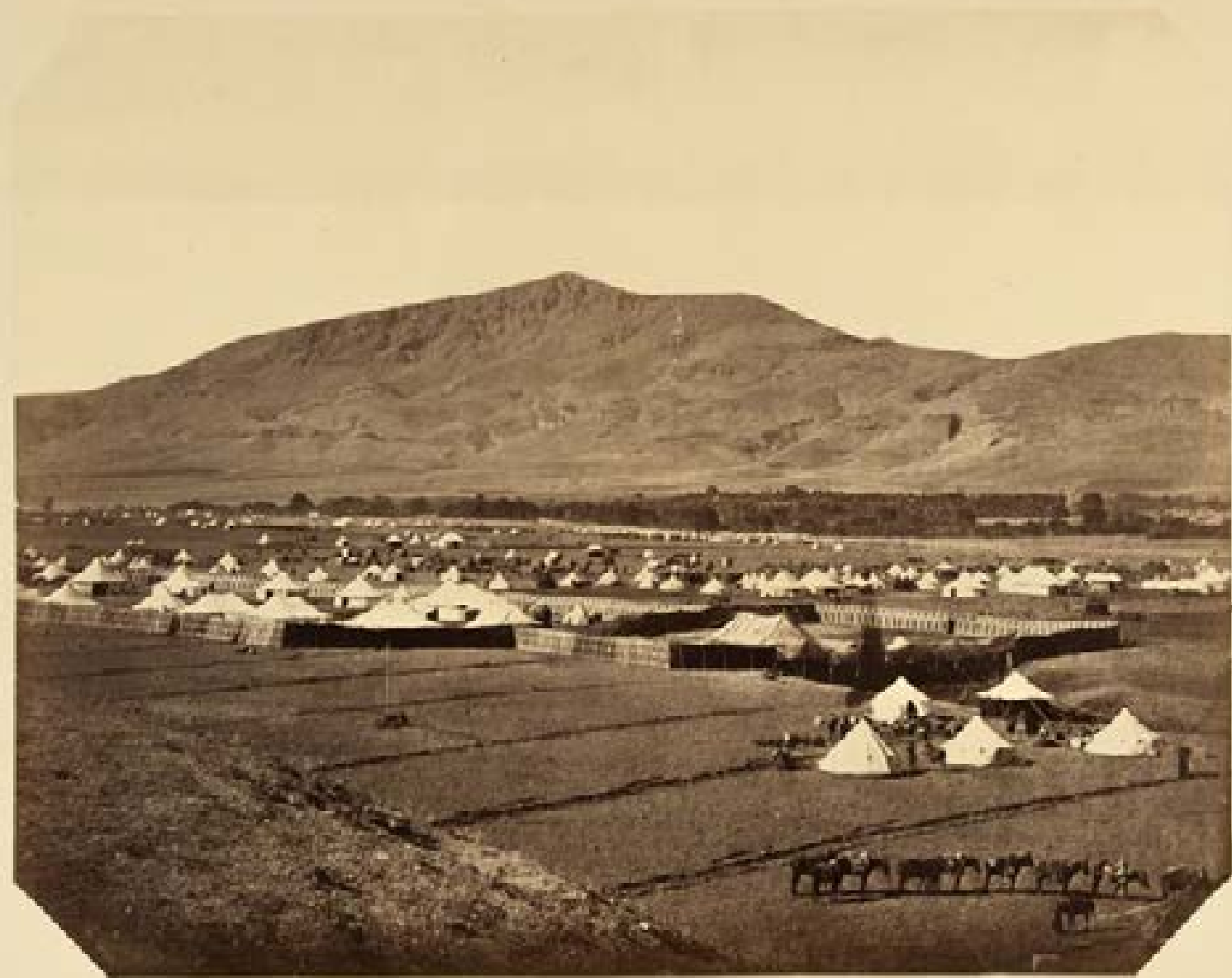
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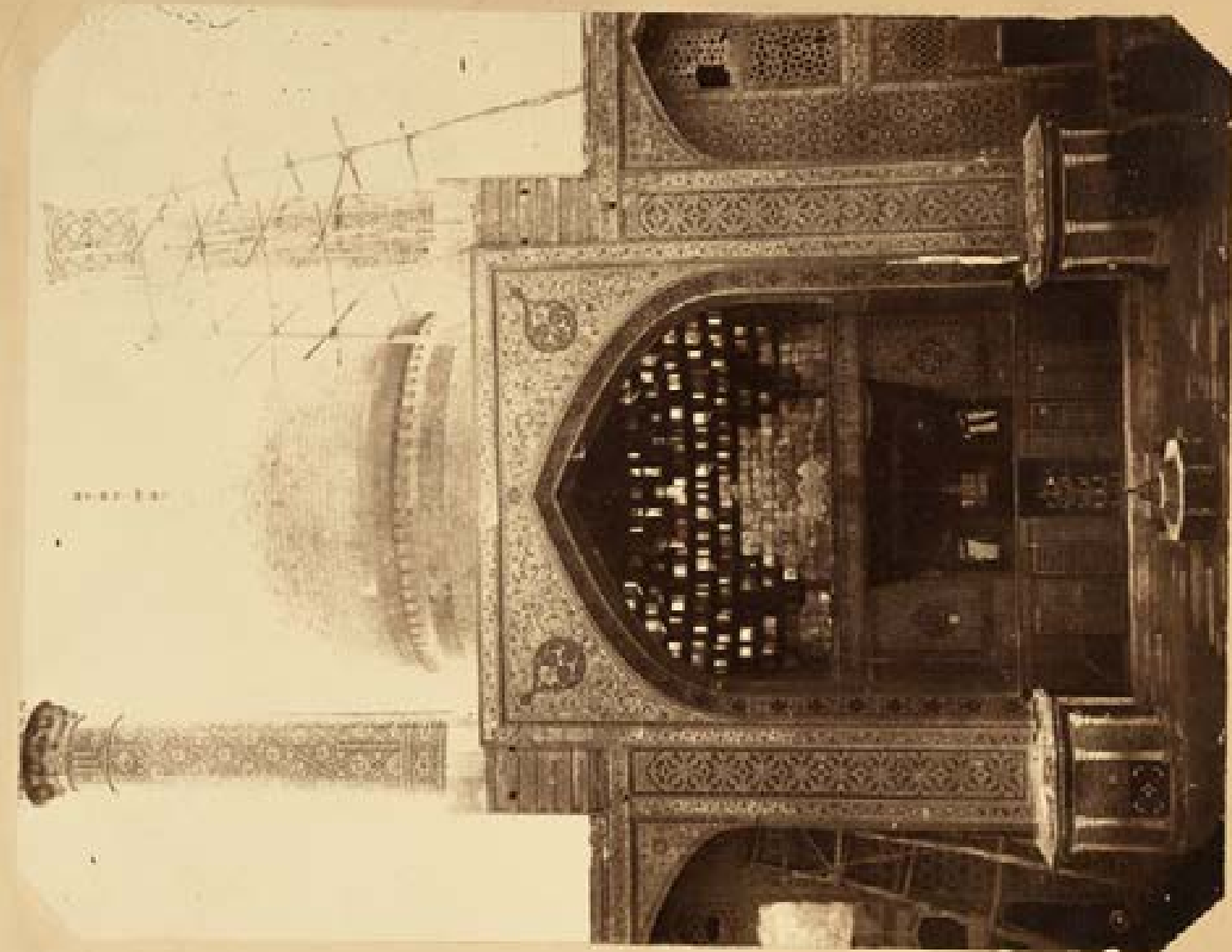
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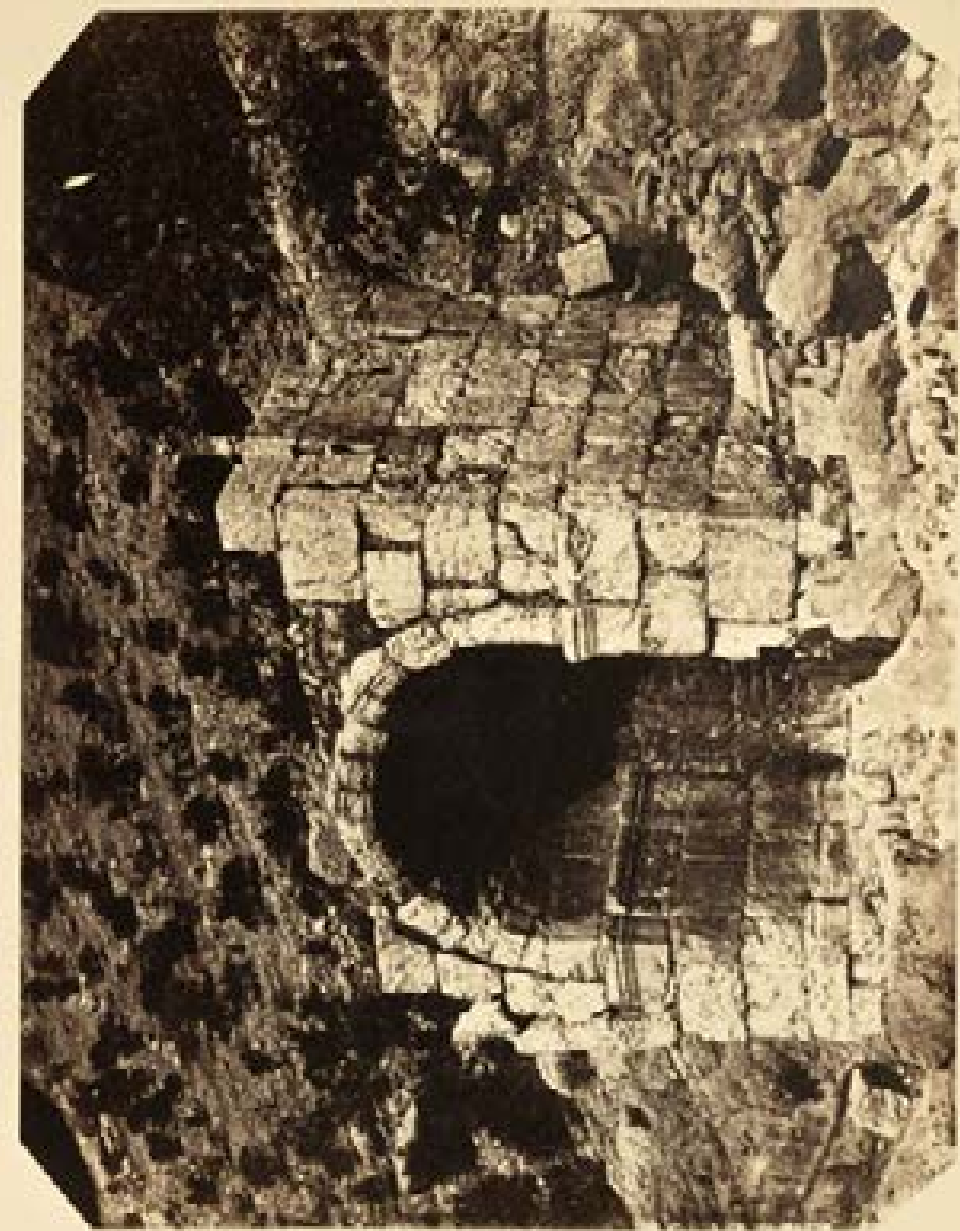
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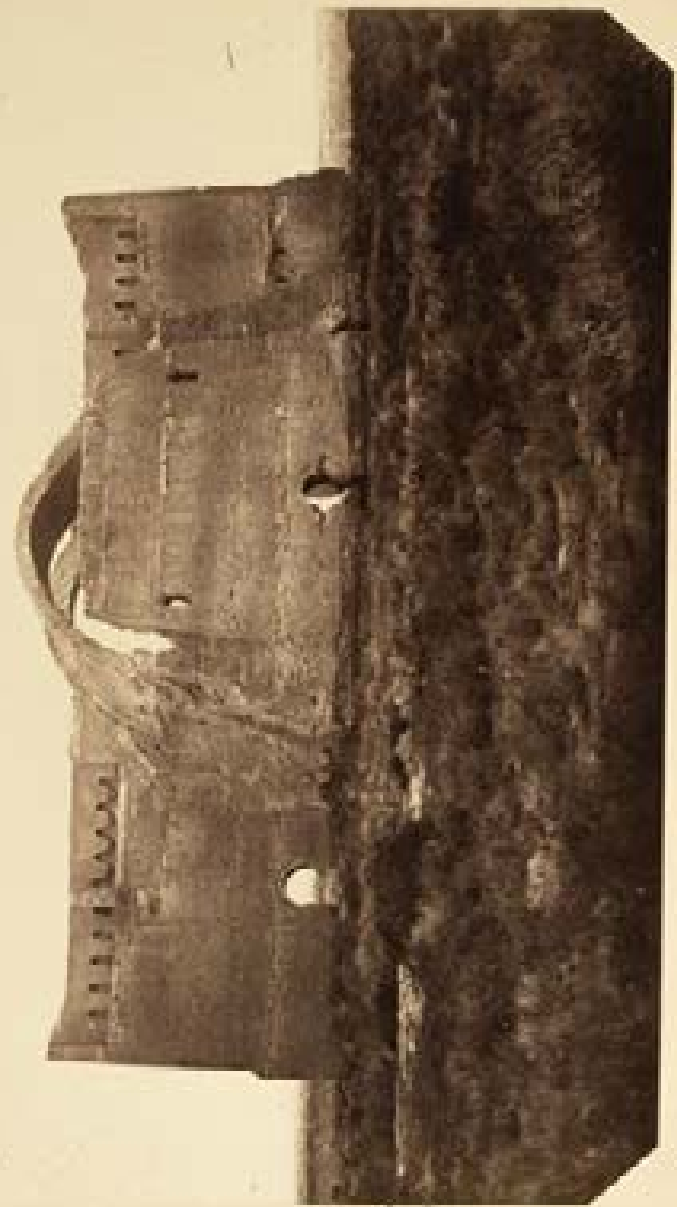
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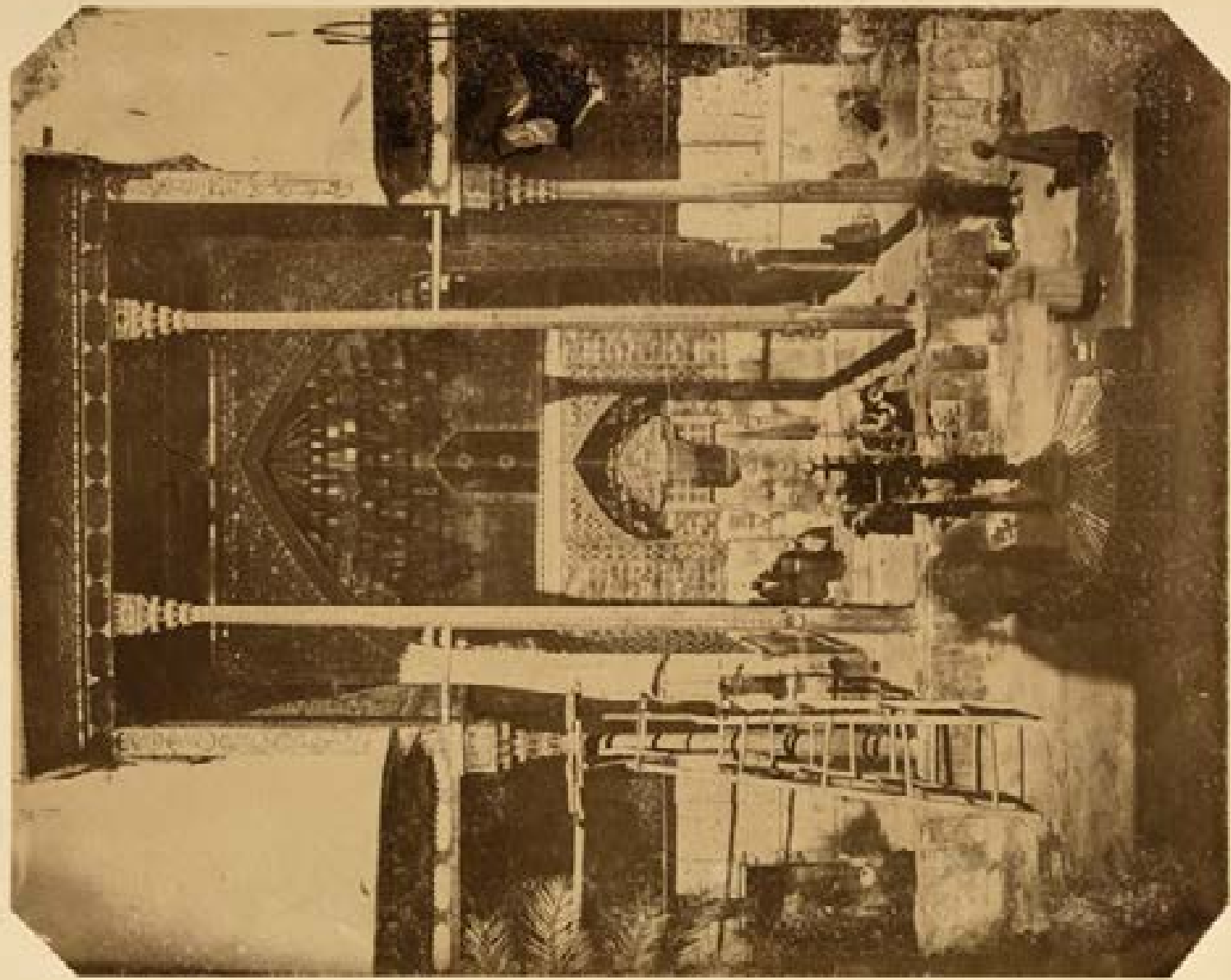
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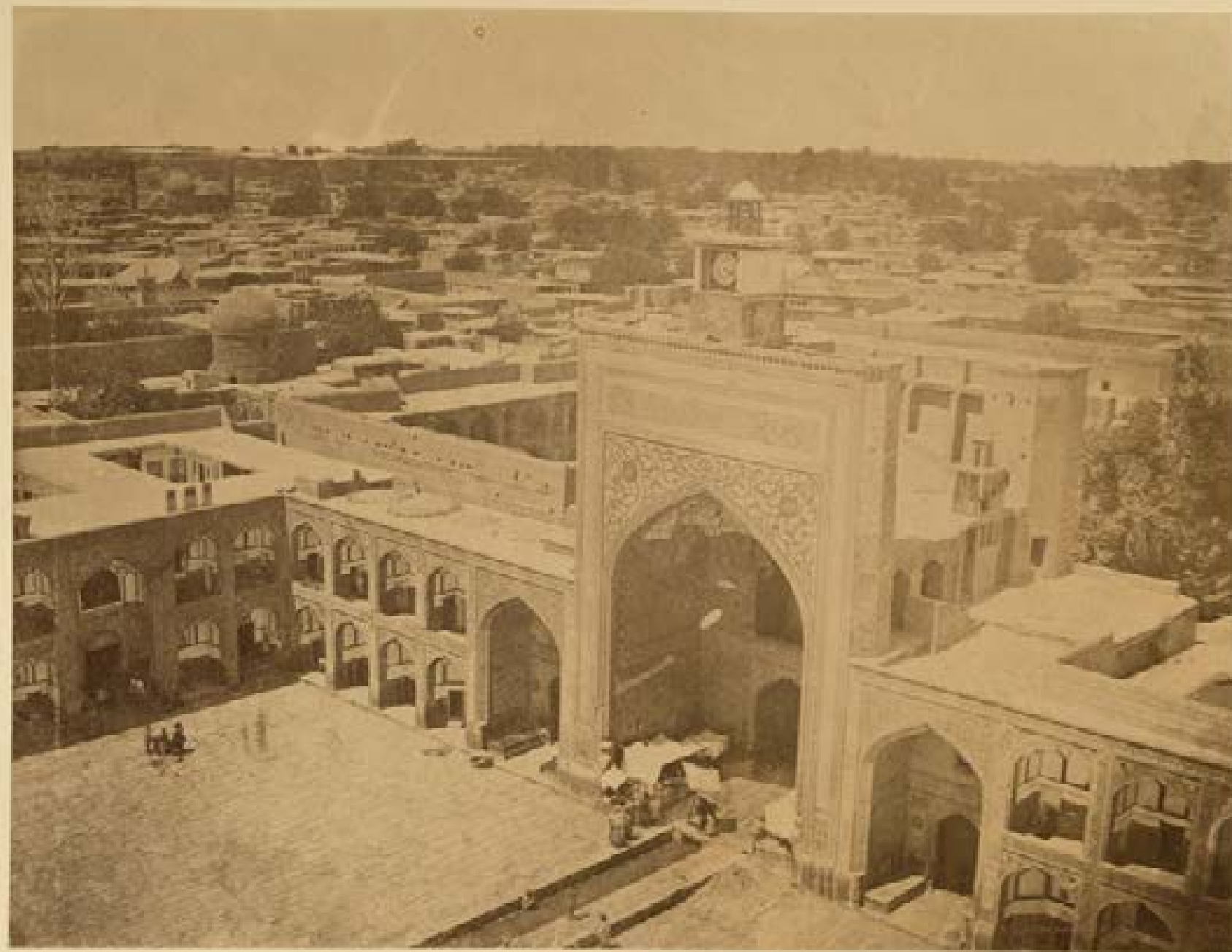
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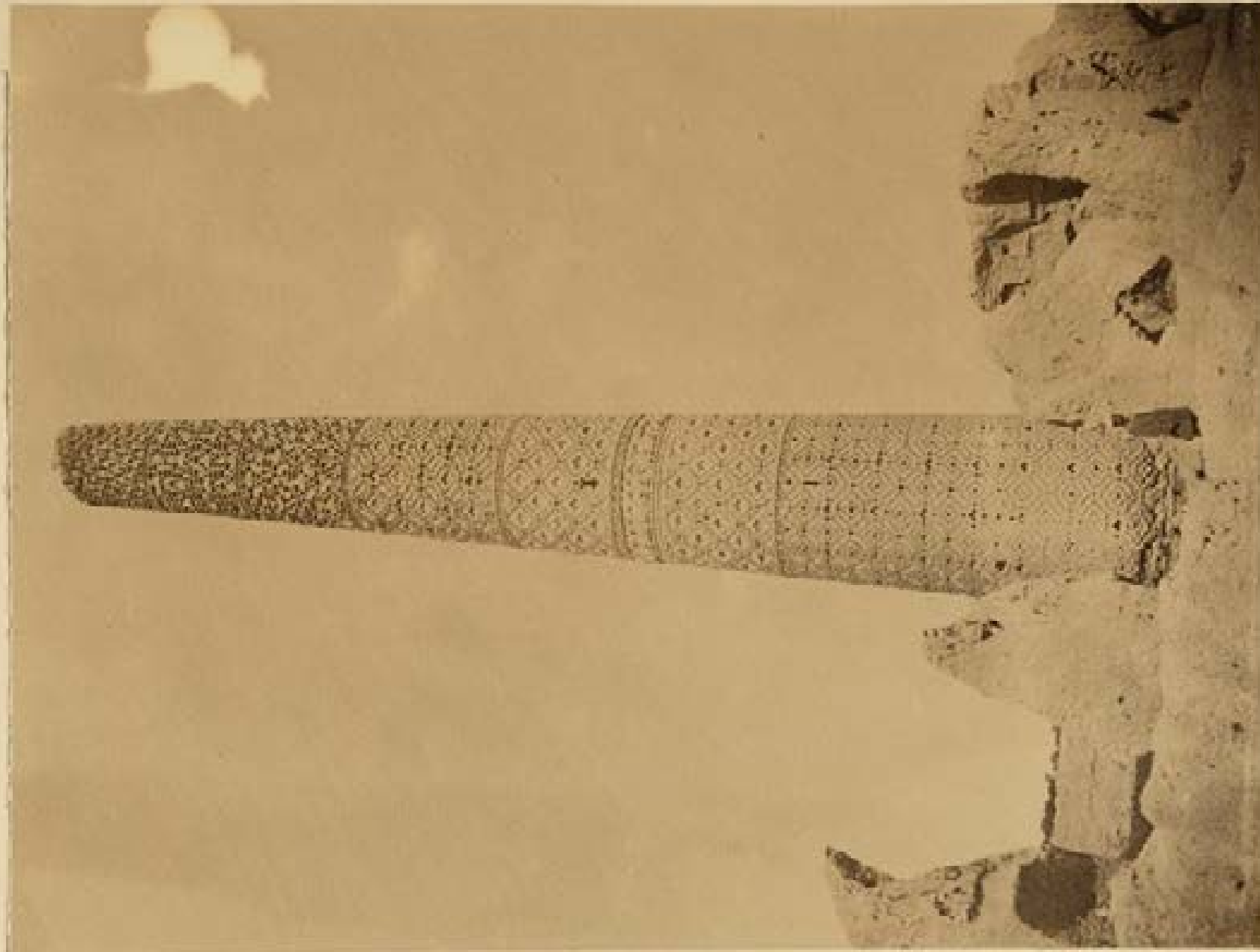
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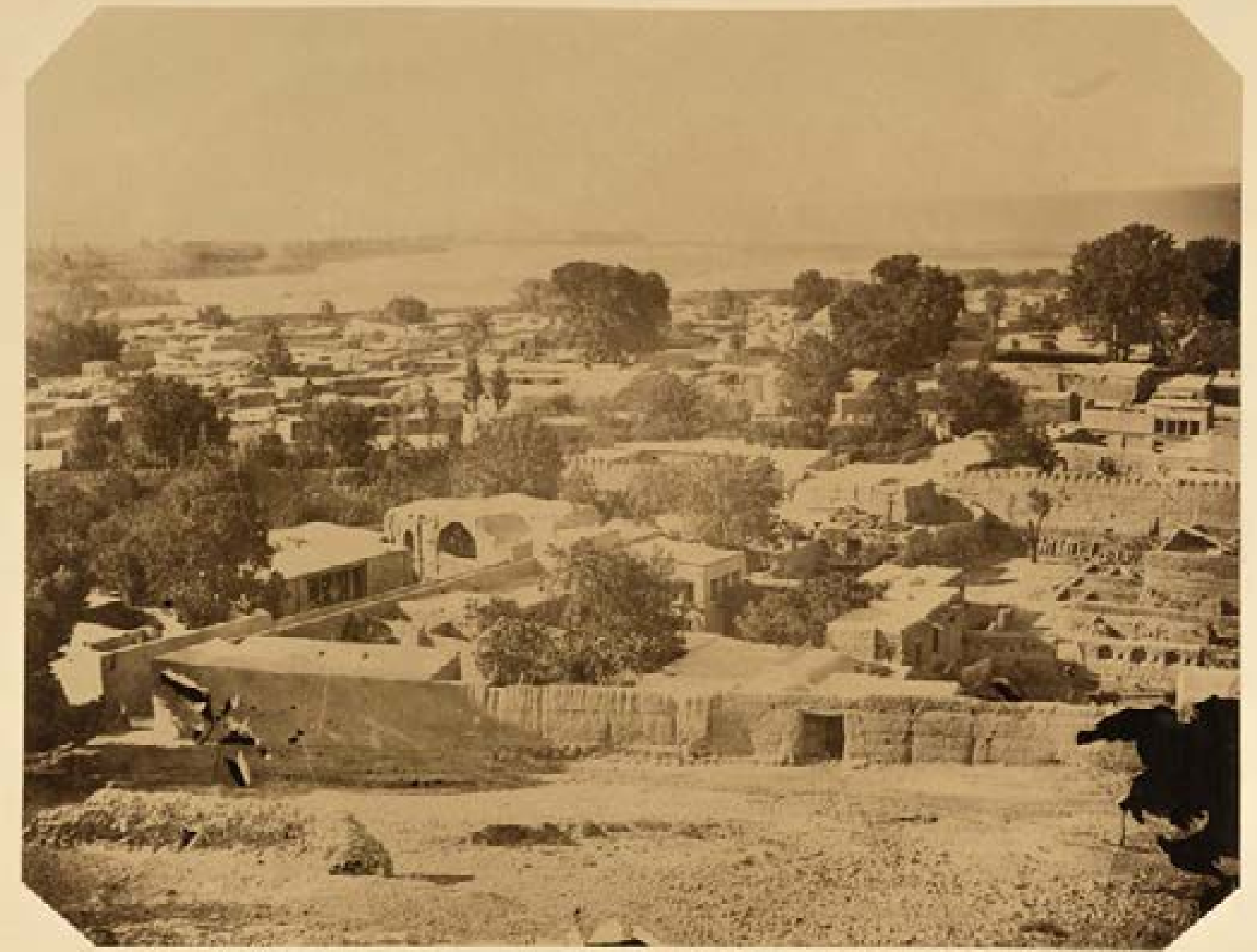
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Aqa Reza Iqbal al-Saltaneh (1843-1884),
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9 *Saint Abbas Shrine, Karbala, Iraq.*
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