



## Sunflower Ornamentation in Bādshāhī Mosque Lahore

**Syed Farjood Ailya Rizvi** (*Corresponding Author*)

Assistant Professor, College of Art & Design,  
University of the Punjab Lahore, Pakistan

**Dr Atifa Usmani**

Chairperson, Department of Art & Design,  
University of Home Economics Lahore

**Khalifa Ahmad Moiz**

Assistant Professor, College of Art & Design,  
University of the Punjab Lahore, Pakistan

### KEYWORDS

BĀDShĀHĪ MOSQUE, SUNFLOWER,  
BODDHISATTVA, SHAMSAS, AURANGZĪB



Date of Publication:  
28-06-2021

### ABSTRACT

This research is about the investigation of sunflower motif as a theme and usage at Bādshāhī Mosque Lahore. Sunflower is applied as an ornamentation theme at the different points in the Bādshāhī mosque. However, its application is traced back in different civilizations before and after Islam. An emphasis on historical context and examples are discussed concisely. The representation of sunflower as decorative element is also described in the Muslim architecture in sub-continent. The ancient expansion of sunflower, inspirations from east and standards of ornamentation are also discussed. Its visual value and criteria are investigated to find its meanings. This document highlights details of sunflower designs composed according to the sun movement in the mosque. Both primary and secondary sources are used as reference. This is a qualitative researched based upon observation and visual analysis. It fulfils the gap of information and contribution to add a source for further research projects.

## Introduction

Sunflower is an eminent mythological decoration subject, which transmits a noteworthy meaning over the time. The ancient civilizations until the Mughal period monument, the evolution of the sunflower motif is analysed. The goal of the study is to suggest the cause and application of sunflower among ornament essentials in the mosques at subcontinent. The sunflower ornamentation in ancient civilizations is an evidence of the value of this motif. Starting with Egyptian, Persian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Arabs to Hindu ornament, sets up a track to the findings. The floral decoration on architecture is beyond its association with colour and fragrance. Some particular Mughal and other monuments are selected to analyse the concept behind the sunflower motif. The evidences highlight the sunflower motif at Bādshāhī Mosque Lahore. The examination has documented the ornaments layout on the edifice. The sunflower motif highlights a new episode of observation themes on Mughal monuments at Lahore. Through deep observation it traces and explores Islamic philosophy of architectural ornamentation at that time.

The Bādshāhī Mosque Lahore, is the zenith of the architectural plans developed for the mosques in the subcontinent. The mosque is considered as the culmination of mosque design scheme in subcontinent under Mughal empire. Mughal depiction of sunflower is close to nature. The examples of sunflower motif at Bādshāhī Mosque is an evidence of the subject. The prayer chamber of Bādshāhī Mosque has revealed the sunflower motif in fresco on the ceilings of the arches. The sunflower is composed in the ceiling of each arche as a focal feature of the arabesque theme. In southern flank of praying chamber sunflower are found, which reveals that the sunflowers are arranged according to the sun movement over the southern flank of the prayer chamber. In southern arches the life cycle of a plant's life is portrayed in the arabesque design schemes. This sequence is like storyboard or animation depicting the plant's life starting from the southern arch one towards the main arch of the prayer chamber. The northern section of the prayer chamber depicts the vases and bouquets themes. The repetition of the motif indicates that the architect kept the harmony in check while the decoration plan was executed. The figures explain the character of the flower as a subject of design. The images are treated by the Adobe Photoshop software to improve the quality of photography. The images are photographed by the author and rest of the images are cited with sources.

### **Sunflower in Ancient Civilizations**

Helianthus is the scientific name of sunflower. Helios is a Greek word means sun and Anthos means flower. The flower of the sun abbreviated as sunflower. The carbon dated proves that flower was imported from north America in 2300 BCE. <sup>1</sup> (www.vegparadise.com 1999-2015). The references of ornamental designs in the book *Grammar of Ornamentation* by Owen Jones supported the evidence of sunflower motif. The evidences from the ancient Egyptians civilization creates a connection with the findings of the sunflower as symbol. The phase far before Mughal era makes traces linking to Greek, Roman and Byzantine. Byzantine inspired the Arab art during 6<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the byzantine art set the trends of ornamentation schemes in East and Europe and became basis for art forms created onwards. The Mosque at Tulūn in Cairo displays Persian influence on Arab art. <sup>2</sup> (Jones 2006). When Islam reached in East, most of the Muslims monuments were inspired by byzantine. The architecture evolved due to the need and over the remains of the monuments. Persian and Byzantine influences contributed to the early ornamentation techniques. It also presents that how the design was developed by mixing nature and style in a decoration theme. The Hindu ornament by the statue of *Surga* (the Sun) proves sunflower existence between 5<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century. All these references indicate the presence of sunflower ornament in different cultures and regions. The above discussion provides a concise flash back about the historical influences of sunflower ornamentation and its relation with the Arabs who later converted to Islam. Later on, the Muslim architecture developed under these influences. Muslims created new styles in ornamentation.

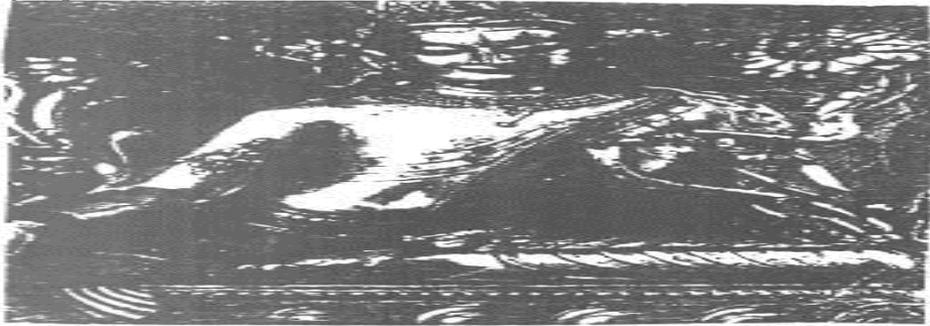
### **Sunflower in Subcontinent until the Mughal Reign**

Professor Shakti M. Gupta a ethnobotanist and Indologist at Delhi University claims that sunflower was a symbol used in decoration. She discovered the sunflower at cave named Rani Gumpha at Udaigiri, built during second century BCE. <sup>3</sup> The seated sculpture in style of Bodhisattva Manjusri, Pit River Museum is an example. It carries a sunflower placed his left side hand while sitting on a lotus motif. Furthermore, the similar flowers are composed near head and ears of the sculpture. It is because of this sculpture the Dhaka Museum is well-known. At Udayagiri hilltop 1<sup>st</sup> BCE sunflower is found on the piece of lotus ceiling, see figure 1-3. <sup>4</sup> (Misbah 2003, 63-64). The finding of sunflower at Swat valley temples built in 5<sup>th</sup> century indicates the existence in subcontinent.



**Figure 1:** Udayagiri hilltop.

Source: *Floral Decoration in Mughal Buildings, Lahore, PDF Chapter II fig. b p 86*



**Figure 2:** Bodhisattva Manjusri, Pit-River, museum, seated in stylized manner.

Source: <httprrr.hec.gov.pk> Chapters1946-3 fig. c page 86.pdf

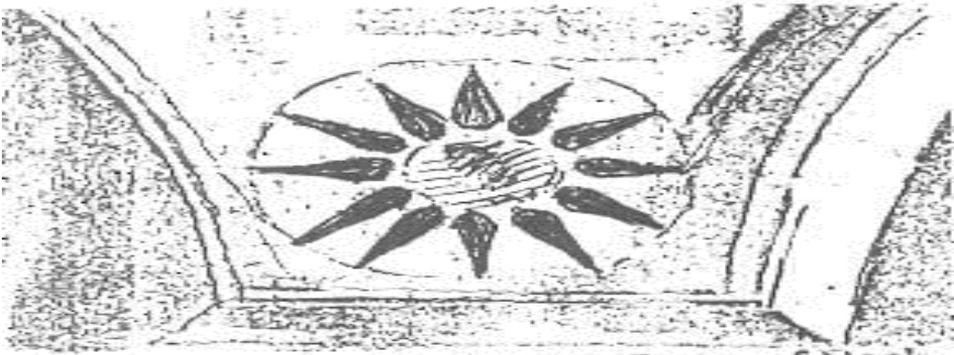


**Figure 3:** Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism Swat valley.

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/travelpakistan/5186921196/sizes/l>

The findings of sunflower in subcontinent before the conquest of Islam is an observable feature. It helps to understand the meaning and presence of sunflower as both ornament and symbol. Sunflower was grown in

subcontinent frequently. This herb belongs to the large head family in terms of design and motif. Mughal representations of the sunflower are closer to nature. The findings of sunflower in Islamic monument starts with the dome of the Rock. The sunflower motif with twelve-petal is designed under the niche in northern façade inside the Qubbat al-Şakhrah, Jerusalem see figure 4. <sup>5</sup> In the mid of the *mihrāb* of Aḥmad Şhāh's Jāmi' mosque 1424 at Aḥmadābād a large sunflower of sixteen petals is composed. A large scale shadowy tinted floral pendant supporting sunflower motifs repeatedly. A distinctive sunflower is designed on the spandrel of the arch. The bowl-shaped flower presence is skilfully accomplished. The round with flowers is insignificant and swollen. <sup>6</sup>



**Figure 4:** Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, and its interior reveals a Single Twelve Petal Sunflower beneath the niche in northern façade.

**Source:** <http://rr.hec.gov.pk/Chapters/1946-3>, fig. a page 86.pdf

The sunflower motif is found on some of the Sūrī and Mughal monuments. It appears that the Sūrī monuments depicted it more frequently and might have inspired the Mughals later. The examples of Purāna Qil'a 1533, Qil'a-i Kuhna Masjid 1541 and Qil'a Rawhtās built in 16<sup>th</sup> century. The sunflower at Mughal monuments includes the Būland Darwāza by the great Akbar 1601. Āşif Khān built the Şhīsh Maḥal for Şhāhjāhān 1631-32 in north-western corner of Lahore Fort at Şhāh Burj Block. Here the sunflower is finished with looking glass work material. During the reign of Şhāhjāhān (1634-35) the Wazīr Khān Mosque was built. Its ceiling of the sanctuary is decorated inside with a huge sunflower at its centre (see figure 8). Another mosque by Şhāhjāhān the Jama Masjid Delhi built during 1644-58 displays sunflower in more or less abstract form on the spandrel over the main arch of praying chamber. Şhāhjāhān was succeeded by Aurangzīb who built Pearl Mosque (Moti Masjid) for personal prayers inside the Red Fort Delhi during 1659-60. This mosque is covered with

sunflowers schemes in white marble carving. This mosque is famous for private use by Aurangzīb. Following are account of the sunflower ornamentation in subcontinent. It establishes the link of the reoccurrence of this motif as it must be a specific symbol for the Muslims till the Mughal reign.

### **Mughals and Solar Symbolism**

The head of state is perceived as sun had its inspirations from Jain, Hindu, Persian and Turko-Mongol, beliefs. Mughal sun perception was inspired by Hindu traditions. Brahmans considered Akbar embodied the sun. The holy appearance of the sovereign symbolized the circle of light around the ruler (Malecka 1999). The imperial chairs were ornamented with *shamsas* (sunflower) or sunbursts pendants. The sunbursts as ornament were applied over the flags, banners, coins, shields or manuscripts. The application of sun motif is specific on the gateways and walls of the palaces and mosques.<sup>7</sup> Even animals like falcon, peacock, elephants and lions were used as supporting the intergalactic ceremonial chair for a sovereign. The discussion above is a point of view about solar imagery as embellishment subjects. It elaborates the Persian, Turko-Mongol and Jain influences on solar visuals.

### **Types of Sunflower at Bādshāhī Mosque**

The Bādshāhī Mosque was made by the sixth Mughal emperor Abūmuẓaffar Muḥiyy al-Dīn Muḥammad Aurangzīb Ālamgīr. He was the third son of Shāhjahān and commonly known as Aurangzīb or regional title Ālamgīr. He is considered to be the last effective Mughal emperor. It is mostly stated that the mosque was started building in 1671 and completed in 1673. The history of mosque construction started by the Prophet Muḥammad PBUH migration to Madina and constructed the Masjid-i Quba. Afterwards various types of mosques developed, which was due to the availability of material and circumstances. There are no instructions for a particular mosque size and design type in Islām. Generally, mosques are quadrilateral in form. M. Abdullah Chaghtāi's book *The Badshahi Masjid* a thesis which provides the architectural sizes and details with structural characteristics of the Bādshāhī Mosque. Here the sunflower motif and its findings are discussed as a character feature over the mosque.

The sunflower ornamentation at Bādshāhī Mosque is characterised according to the findings of the motif into three major categories.

1. Sunflower in low relief of red stone.
2. Sunflower in low relief of white marble.
3. Sunflower in fresco

Sunflower in stucco is only found inside the prayer chamber at the southern flank so it is not included into types. The three types mentioned above are used as individual and with combinations at different locations of the mosque.

### **The Eastern Entrance**

At entrance, all the three types of sunflower ornamentations design are executed. The white marble sunflower is made in low relief and composed on the spandrel of the main arch. Sunflower are composed near the historical inscription on the entrance to the mosque. Sunflower stands out due to the contrast of white marble against red sandstone background (see figure 5). The sunflower in low relief on red stone is different in design from the low relief sunflower on main arch of prayer chamber (see figure 6). The sunflowers in fresco are found inside the main entrance arch in vegetal ornamentation scheme and in the centre of the hemispherical dome.



*Figure 5: Sunflower of white marble inlaid in red stone on the spandrel of the main entrance arch.*

*Photograph 12, January 2014.*



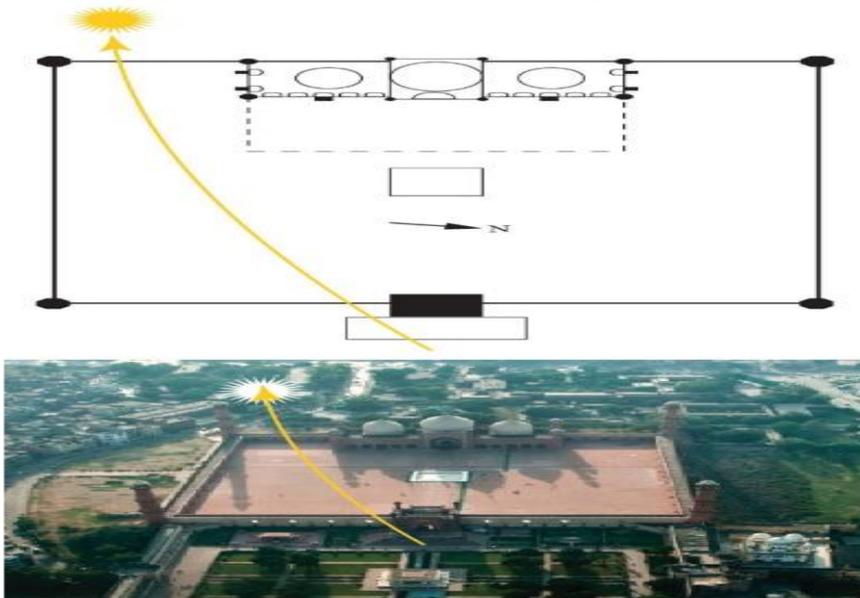
*Figure 6: Sunflower in stone carving of red stone on the main entrance.*

*Photograph 12, January 2014.*

### **The Prayer Chamber**

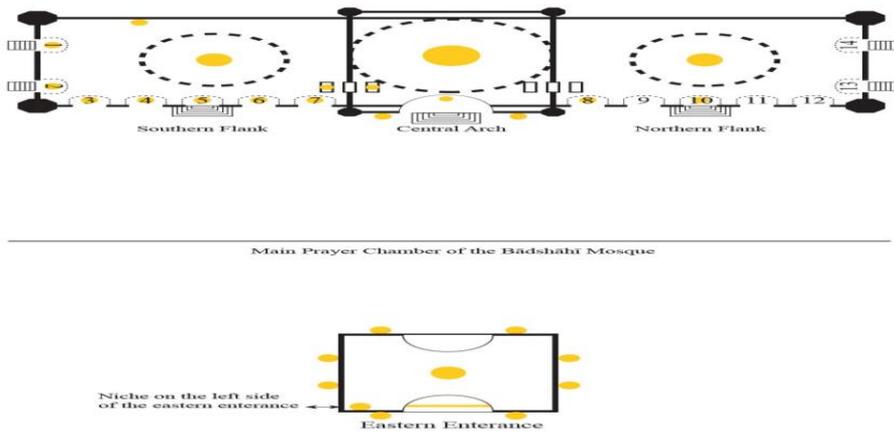
The praying chamber is situated towards western side of the mosque. It faces Makkah and finished according to the ideals established by Mughals at Agra and Delhi. The three domes crowning and enhancing the aesthetic

impact of this section. The five feet higher floor in the courtyard followed by steps. The central huge arch divides the whole chamber into southern and northern flanks. On each flank, there are seven multifoil pointed arches. <sup>8</sup> On the southern flank, each ceiling of the arch is decorated with vegetal patterns in fresco. It is observed that all the southern arches are decorated with the sunflower motif in fresco design schemes. The sunflower is composed in the midpoint of each southern arch. It also exhibits the variety of sunflower motif in fresco. The sun sets behind the southern arches. The centre of the flowers is painted in blue with covering of yellow petals around in circles, thus creates harmonious visual relation among design patterns (see figure 10). The fresco works on the ceilings of southern flank arches also reveal the life cycle of the plant's life. Whereas the northern flank is composed with the bouquet and vase designs. The different flower motifs create an impact of spring in the garden.



**Figure 7:** *Movement of the Sun*

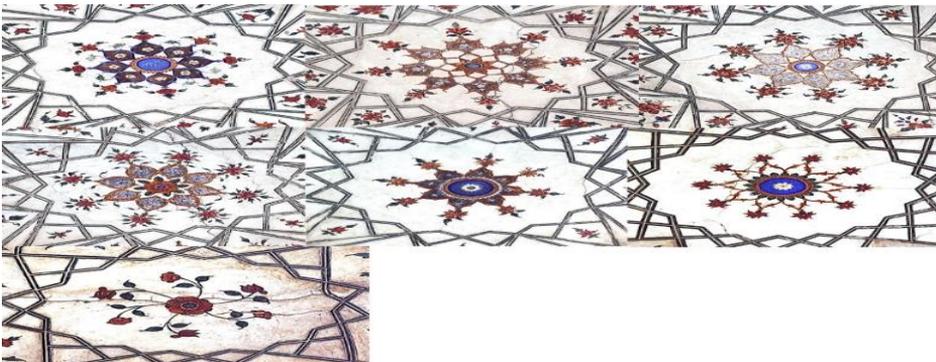
*Drawing 3, June 2015: Image taken from Google earth and edited in photoshop.*



**Figure 8:** Yellow circles show the locations of the sunflower  
Drawing made in Adobe Illustrator software on 3, June 2015



**Figure 9:** Sunflower in fresco on the ceiling of southern flank, arch- 1 of praying chamber.  
Photograph 30, October 2014



**Figure 10:** Close-up photograph of sunflower motif from left to right arch one to seven, 30, October 2014  
Photograph 30, October 2014.

The ceiling of the entrance arch is decorated with sunflowers with sixteen petals larger than the disc of flower. The sunflower inside the large three domes also has sixteen petals. However, the proportions of petals are variable. The central dome has flower on its ceiling having smaller petals in size as comparison to the disc of the flower. It also has eight corner stars in its nucleus. The sunflower on the both adjacent domes around the central main dome has petals size equal with the disc size of the flower. A keen eye can observe that the restoration and finishing of the fresco works are not up to the standards of the monument. It can be due to the lack of availability of fresco painting experts.

### Conclusion

This research documents the sunflower motif as symbol and ornament in subcontinent. The concept of symbolism in association with the sunflower and monuments is explained. However, sunflower as ornament at Aurangzīb's mosques has been found without any isolation. The Moti Masjid (Pearl Mosque) at Red Fort Delhi was built for private use by Aurangzīb. The sunflower motif is extensively used in low relief white marble in the interior of the mosque. The sunflower at Purana Qil'ā is one of the early references of the motif on Muslim architecture in subcontinent. Shīr Shāh Sūrī's Qil'ā Rawhtās and Būland Darwāza by Akbar are carrying the legacy of sunflower as motif. The above-mentioned discoveries prove that sunflower was a special decoration style before it was adapted on Bādshāhī Mosque. The sunflower's association with the sun and its movement is respected by the artist of that time. The recent research on Mughal gardens explains that the plan following the sunrise and sunset directions on solstices. The article by Amelia Carolina Sparavigna used a programme on website [www.suncalc.org](http://www.suncalc.org), which proved that in architecture the sun movement was considered in the Mughal monuments.<sup>9</sup> It was applied in fresco and relief at Bādshāhī Mosque as significant feature and not noticed by general visitors. The sunflower at Bādshāhī Mosque has three types in general as mentioned before. Muslims were exposed to different cultures owing the growth of Islam. So, the variety in ornamentation carried different native and foreign elements in ornamentation styles. Sunflower appears as sacred symbol and a connection between heavens and earth. Muslims might have visualised it as a divine sign from God in natural environment. The Muslim adaptation of the sunflower seems a statement of appreciation for nature. Like lotus is associated to Buddha so the sunflower associated to sun the gift of light from God.



## Notes and Reference

- <sup>1</sup> www.vegparadise.com. <http://www.vegparadise.com/highestperch511.html>. © 1999-2015 vegparadise.com. n.d. (accessed January 8th, 2015).
- <sup>2</sup> Jones, Owen. *The Grammar of Ornament*. London: Bernard Quaritch, 2006.
- <sup>3</sup> Gupta, Shakti M. <http://www.econ.ohio-state.edu/jhm/arch/maize.html>. Edited by J. Huston McCulloch. 18 October 2006. (accessed August 25, 2014).
- <sup>4</sup> Misbah, Ghazala. “<http://pr.hec.gov.pk/Chapters1946-3.pdf>.” Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations/ Quaid-i-Azam University. 2003. (accessed December 31, 2014).
- <sup>5</sup> -Misbah, Ghazala. “<http://pr.hec.gov.pk/Chapters1946-3.pdf>.” Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations/ Quaid-i-Azam University. 2003. (accessed December 31, 2014).
- <sup>6</sup> -Misbah, Ghazala. “<http://pr.hec.gov.pk/Chapters1946-3.pdf>.” Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations/ Quaid-i-Azam University. 2003. (accessed December 31, 2014).
- <sup>7</sup> Malecka, Anna. “[http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/arasi\\_0004-3958\\_1999\\_num\\_54\\_1\\_1430](http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/arasi_0004-3958_1999_num_54_1_1430).” Persée © 2005-2014 | Ministry of State for Higher Education and Research. 1999. (accessed May 9th, 2015).
- <sup>8</sup> Chaghatai , Muhammad Abdullah. *The Badshahi Masjid History and Architecture*. Lahore: Kitab Khana-I-Nauras, 1972.
- <sup>9</sup> Sparavigna, Amelia Carolina, Observations on the Orientation of Some Mughal Gardens (January 13, 2015). PHILICA, Article number 455. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2745160>

## Secondary sources

1. Moody, Burnett H. <https://www.saudiaraworld.com/issue/196804/gem.of.gems.htm>. July/August 1968. (accessed June 20, 2015).
2. Novin, Guity. <http://gdiran.blogspot.com/2011/03/iranian-miniature.html>. 1st march 2011. electronic. 29th march 2014.
3. plantsinmotion.bio.indiana.edu. “<http://plantsinmotion.bio.indiana.edu/plantmotion/movements/tropism/solartrack/solartrack.html>.” n.d. electronic. 1st May 2015.
4. Thackston, Wheeler M. *The Mosque*. Ed. Hassan-uddin Khan Martin Frishman. London: Thames & Hudson, 1994. Print.
5. Whitcomb, Donald. [http://poi.uchicago.edu/pdf10\\_11\\_Mafjar.pdf](http://poi.uchicago.edu/pdf10_11_Mafjar.pdf). Ed. Donald Whitcomb. n.d. PDF. 28 April 2014.
6. www.britannica.com. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/573676/sun-worship>. 20 May 2014. The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. Electronic. 7th January 2015.
7. www.infoplease.com. <http://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/society/sun-worship.html>. n.d. The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th ed. Copyright © 2012, Columbia University Press. All rights reserved. Electronic. 7th January 2015.