

Faith, Religion, and the Material Culture of Early Islam

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To write about the material culture of religion in Early Islam is to indulge an anachronism rooted in the Enlightenment dogma that religious belief is a personal, private affair, distinguishable from the secular sphere of public action. In addition, to focus on the religious dimensions of Early Islamic material culture is to commit what critics of the very concept of Late Antiquity—a concept central to this volume—have identified as one of its cardinal sins: an excessive focus on religiosity.¹ Such criticisms reflect broader skepticism about a shift in emphasis from discontinuity and rupture to continuity and transformation in recent histories of the eastern Mediterranean between roughly the fifth and eighth centuries. This shift has been especially marked in scholarship on the early culture and history of Islam. The advent of Islam and its conquest of the eastern territories of Byzantium in the seventh century were once taken to mark the end of Late Antiquity. Alternatively, Islam was integrated into Late Antique history as the end point in a narrative of decline that began with the abandonment of classical administrative structures and aesthetic canons in the second or third century C.E.²

Recent archaeological investigations have confirmed that many of the material transformations central to these narratives of decline were in fact under way well before the advent of Islam, but few scholars today would characterize them in this way. One consequence is that recent scholarship has tended to subsume the culture and history of Early Islam into an extended Late Antiquity rather than seeing them as its terminal points.³ While the upper limits of this new “long Late Antiquity” are a little vague, most scholars now accept that the art and architecture of Early Islam form part of the art of Late Antiquity rather than marking a substantial break with it.

These welcome developments have done much to address the imbalances of a historiography rooted in a priori notions of cultural and sectarian difference. However, they also entail the risk that by emphasizing continuities and intersectoral similarities rather than narratives of conflict and rupture, contemporary scholarship has lurched from one end of an interpretive spectrum to the other. Part of the challenge in dealing with the cultural histories of the eastern Mediterranean during the period covered

by this volume lies in the need to acknowledge the complex dialectic of alterity and identity that marked contemporary cultural forms and practices. In this respect, a focus on the art and architecture produced to articulate the religious beliefs, or to facilitate the religious practices, of the early Muslim community may be justified, despite the anachronisms that it entails. It is in the sphere of religious identity and its public articulation that one might reasonably expect the finely honed cultural negotiations necessitated by the emergence of a major new religion to be most apparent. The use of distinctive scripts and formats for Early Islamic sacred texts (see Flood, p. 265) or of particular kinds of ornament for sacred space points in this direction.

Most narratives of Islamic history begin around 570 with the birth of the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca, a city in the Hijaz region of western Arabia. Mecca is said to have been the site of a major annual pilgrimage focused on the Ka‘ba, a distinctive cuboid shrine that lay at the center of a sacred enclosure.⁴ At the time of Muhammad’s birth into the Quraysh, the dominant Meccan tribe, the eastern Mediterranean and Near East were divided between two “superpowers,” Byzantium and the Sasanian Empire, each with its own Arab client state, the Ghassanids and Lakhmids, respectively. Arabia lay on the margins of these empires, although what little is known of its material culture suggests a relation to both.⁵

Orphaned at an early age, Muhammad was raised by his uncle, who was involved in long-distance trade and with whom he may have traveled to Syria. According to Muslim tradition, about the age of forty, he received the first of a series of divine revelations transmitted by the angel Gabriel, revelations that would later constitute the text of the Qur’an. Following these revelations, the Prophet began to preach against the polytheistic religions of Mecca. While the presence of Jews and Christians in pre-Islamic Arabia is well documented, the nature of these polytheistic religions has to be gleaned from later texts, which were often shaped by polemical concerns. They seem to have included worship of both aniconic and anthropomorphic cult images, a pattern documented for Late Antique Syria.⁶

The defining characteristic of the new religion was its emphasis on *tawhid*, the uniqueness and unity of God. The rejection of polytheism earned the Prophet and his followers the wrath of the

Meccan elite. As a result, in 622 the nascent Muslim community migrated to the city of Yathrib (later Medina), two hundred miles (322 km) to the north. This foundational act of migration, the *hijra*, rather than the birth of the Prophet, was to be adopted by the early Muslim community as the year zero of its new calendar. In 630 that community was in a sufficiently powerful position to take the city of Mecca, an event that marked the decisive victory of Islam. After that conquest, the Ka'ba and its surroundings were cleared of their images, although according to some accounts, Muhammad spared a painting of Jesus on the lap of the Virgin inside the shrine.⁷

The communitarian values of the new religion were articulated in its five ritual requirements, referred to as the Pillars of the Religion (*arkan al-din*): to profess faith in one god and in the belief that Muhammad is his messenger; to pray five times a day (initially toward Jerusalem, then after 624 toward the Ka'ba); to fast during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar; to give a percentage (usually one-fortieth) of one's salary as mandatory alms for charitable purposes; and, for those Muslims financially and physically able, to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once, during Dhu'l-Hijja, the last month of the Muslim calendar. Four of these five emphasize practice in relation to belief, with consequences for the material needs and obligations of Muslims.

The Prophet Muhammad died in 632, two years after the conquest of Mecca, and was buried within the mosque he had constructed in Medina. The following decades were marked by periodic instability related to the question of succession and doctrinal disputes. Of the Prophet's four successors, three were assassinated. One of these killings, that of Caliph Uthman in 656, provoked the first of two debilitating civil wars, in which the Prophet's son-in-law, 'Ali (r. 656–61), was opposed by a faction led by Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan (r. 661–80), the governor of Damascus. The victorious emergence of Mu'awiya's party laid the groundwork for a permanent split between Sunnis and Shi'ites (Shi'at 'Ali, the party of 'Ali). It also marked a shift in the balance of power, both tribal and geographic, by establishing the line of the Umayyads, the first Islamic dynasty, which was based in Syria rather than in the Hijaz. The resulting disjunction between centers of

political and religious authority was never to be overcome and played a role in the second civil war (681–92). This erupted after Mu'awiya's death, during the early years of the caliphate of 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (r. 685–705). The decade saw dissent against Umayyad rule, led by Shi'ite factions (including the Prophet's grandson Hussein) and various heterodox groups, as well as the emergence of a countercaliph in Mecca, 'Abdallah ibn al-Zubayr, who controlled access to the Meccan sanctuary between 683 and 692, when he was decisively defeated by 'Abd al-Malik.⁸

Remarkably, the conquests through which the adherents of the new faith established their rule over vast swaths of the known world took place during these turbulent decades. By 651 the Sasanian Empire had ceased to exist, its former lands incorporated into the burgeoning territories of the emerging Islamic state. In the preceding decades, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and the North African territories of Byzantium had been taken. Less than a century after the Prophet's death, Muslim armies had reached the Atlantic and advanced into southern France, while in the east they raided the mountain valleys of Afghanistan, seized large parts of Central Asia, conquered much of the southern regions of the Indus Valley (present-day Pakistan), and advanced toward the western territories of Imperial China.

The conquests of the early Muslims mark one of the most remarkable achievements in human history. Yet, from the point of view of material culture, surprisingly little exists with which to document their impact or indeed the early history of the Muslim community itself. There are reports of attempts, as early as the 640s, to codify the text of the revelations comprising the Qur'an and perhaps the architecture of the mosque (see Flood, p. 265). It is also becoming increasingly clear that the reign of Mu'awiya saw sporadic minting of coinage in Syria and, conceivably, plans for major architectural projects on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (not brought to fruition until the last decade of the seventh century).⁹ However, apart from a few rock-carved inscriptions found along pilgrimage routes in Arabia, some papyri, and tombstones with confessionally indeterminate inscriptions, there is little material documentation for the early Muslim community before the late 680s and 690s, when invocations of the Prophet and quotations from the Qur'an began to appear.¹⁰ The first dated occurrence of

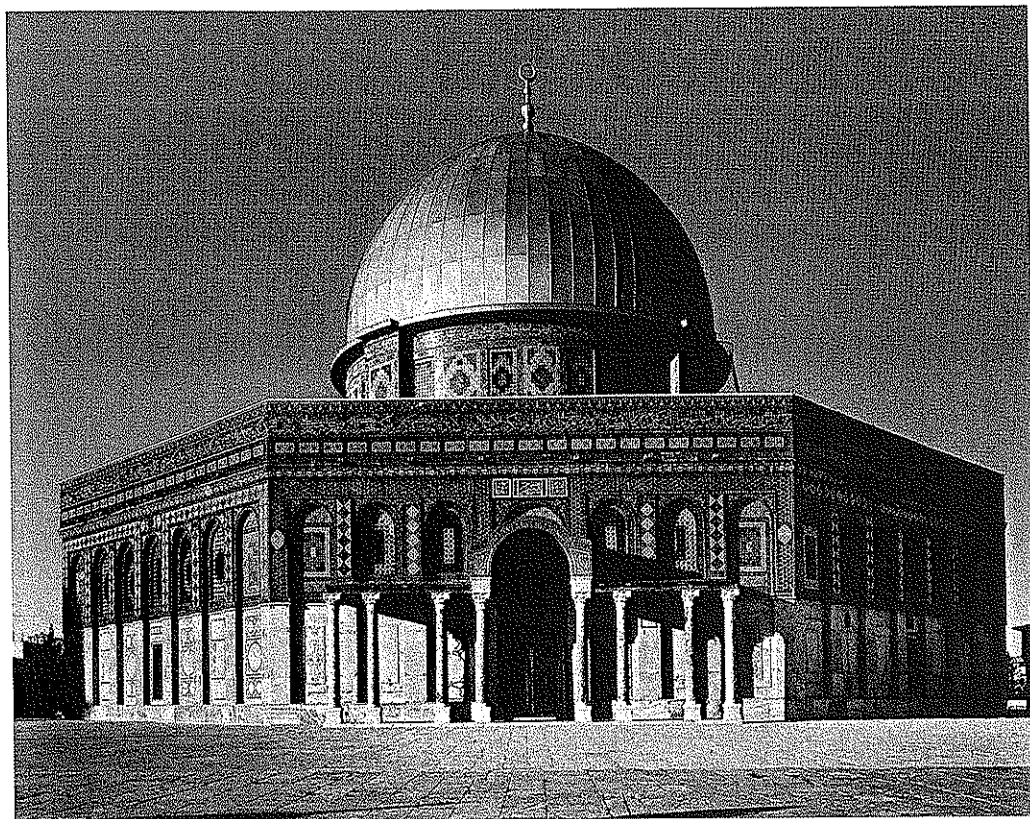


Fig. 95. Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, completed 691/92

the word "Muslim" in an extant Arabic inscription is not before 741; previous texts had used the term "believer." It has recently been suggested that the earliest incarnation of Islam was as a community of believers (*mu'minun*) that shared a faith in fundamental axioms, such as one god, revealed scripture, and an afterlife, but was otherwise "conceptualized independent of confessional identities."¹¹

One does not have to subscribe to this controversial view in order to recognize the period between roughly 690 and 720 as a watershed, fundamental to the self-definition of the Muslim community under the aegis of Umayyad rule. Marked by a proliferation of religious rhetoric in official texts, including the use of the title *khalifat Allah* (deputy of God, from which "caliph" derives), this period also saw significant investments in monumental architecture, coinage bearing religious texts, and the production of spectacular Qur'an manuscripts (cat. nos. 188–190), probably at the behest of the Umayyad elite. Although these developments appear to come from nowhere, they are likely to be related to the emergence of well-defined state structures, witnessed by major reforms, including the replacement of Greek and Persian by Arabic for administrative purposes, and the consistent minting of an Islamic coinage.¹² The reforms followed 'Abd al-Malik's victory over Ibn al-Zubayr in 692 and his infliction of a decisive defeat on the Byzantines at Sebastopolis in the same year, both of which freed up resources previously expended on tribute and warfare.

It was in these circumstances that the Umayyads erected the Dome of the Rock, a monument as spectacular as it is unexpected (fig. 95). The choice of Jerusalem, the sacred city of the two earlier monotheistic religions, rather than Damascus, the Umayyads' administrative center, is significant. The shrine was built atop the platform on which the Jewish Temple had stood before its destruction by the Romans in 70 C.E., and which was known in Arabic as al-Haram al-Sharif (the Noble Sanctuary). It assumed the form of a double octagon framing a rocky outcrop and crowned with a high dome. The lavish interior was adorned with marble and metal veneers as well as with gold-ground glass mosaics inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Featuring images of trees, jewelry, and winged motifs, these mosaics originally extended to the exterior before they were replaced by tiles in the sixteenth century.¹³ An Arabic inscription, 787 feet (240 m) long, encircling the summit of both sides of the octagon bears citations of Qur'anic texts and historical information, including the year A.H. 72 (691/92 C.E.), which most scholars accept as the date of completion (fig. 96).

In its form, decoration, and topographic relationships, the Dome of the Rock—visible from afar across the city of Jerusalem (fig. 10)—engaged in a dynamic dialogue with the most celebrated monuments of monotheism. Its marbles and mosaics seem to have been planned with reference to accounts of the Solomonic and Herodian temples, while its measurements, architecture, and topographic relation to the Aqsa Mosque (located on the Haram

platform to the south) evoke the formal, metrological, and spatial relations of the tomb of Christ to its adjoining basilica, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.¹⁴ Its well-defined geometric form and double ambulatory around a sacred rock also inevitably call to mind the focal shrine of Islam, the Ka'ba of Mecca.¹⁵

While the engagement of the building with iconic monuments of the three monotheistic faiths is clear, its precise *raison d'être* is not. It has sometimes been described as a mosque, but its form precludes this. A number of theories, none necessarily exclusive, have been offered to explain the form and iconography of the shrine.¹⁶ There may have been an attempt to overcome the distance between sacral and political geography, after the shift in political power from Arabia to Syria, although this does not mean that the intention was to divert the pilgrimage to Mecca or usurp the place of the Ka'ba, as was claimed by medieval chroniclers.¹⁷ Mu'awiya had been crowned in Jerusalem, a city that was evidently important to the development of an Umayyad dynastic image, perhaps because of its association with Davidic and Solomonic kingship.¹⁸ A suggested allusion to the victory of Islam or of 'Abd al-Malik, based on the depiction in mosaic of hanging crowns and jewelry (fig. 96), would accord with this theme and may have been enhanced by the suspension of resonant objects, including the crown of Khusrav II, the defeated Sasanian ruler, and the horns of the ram sacrificed by Abraham in place of Isaac (a pair of which also hung in the Ka'ba).¹⁹

In addition, the location of the Dome of the Rock, certain elements of its iconography, and the fact that it was open to the

public on Mondays and Thursdays, the same days as the Jewish Temple had been, have led to suggestions that it was intended as a restoration of the Jewish Temple.²⁰ It has even been suggested that the building was conceived as a baldachin to house the divine presence on the Day of Judgment, a function that may explain analogies with a series of pre-Islamic octagonal commemorative structures in Jerusalem and elsewhere.²¹ Such interpretations acknowledge the role that Jerusalem plays in Islamic eschatological traditions as the site of the events of the Last Days; they may have been given additional impetus by the circulation of Messianic traditions related to the approach of the end of the first Islamic century in the decades after the building's construction.

The Dome of the Rock is in many ways a unicum, but in its harnessing of preexisting forms and techniques to address both inter- and intrasectarian concerns, it can be considered paradigmatic of Early Islamic religious art. Providing the clearest statement of these concerns, the mosaic inscriptions (figs. 96, 98) emphasize themes common to Christianity (belief in the Last Days, the prophecy of Jesus, and the venerability of the Virgin), while stressing the Muslim belief that Jesus was merely one in a line of mortal prophets, of whom Muhammad was the last.²² That chapter 112 of the Qur'an (*Surat al-Ikhlās*) is the only one repeated in the inscriptions suggests that it emblemized both the limits and possibilities of shared belief. Its text, implicitly rejecting the core Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and Trinity, had been affixed to the doors of Egyptian churches by 'Abd al-Malik's brother, the governor of that country, along with

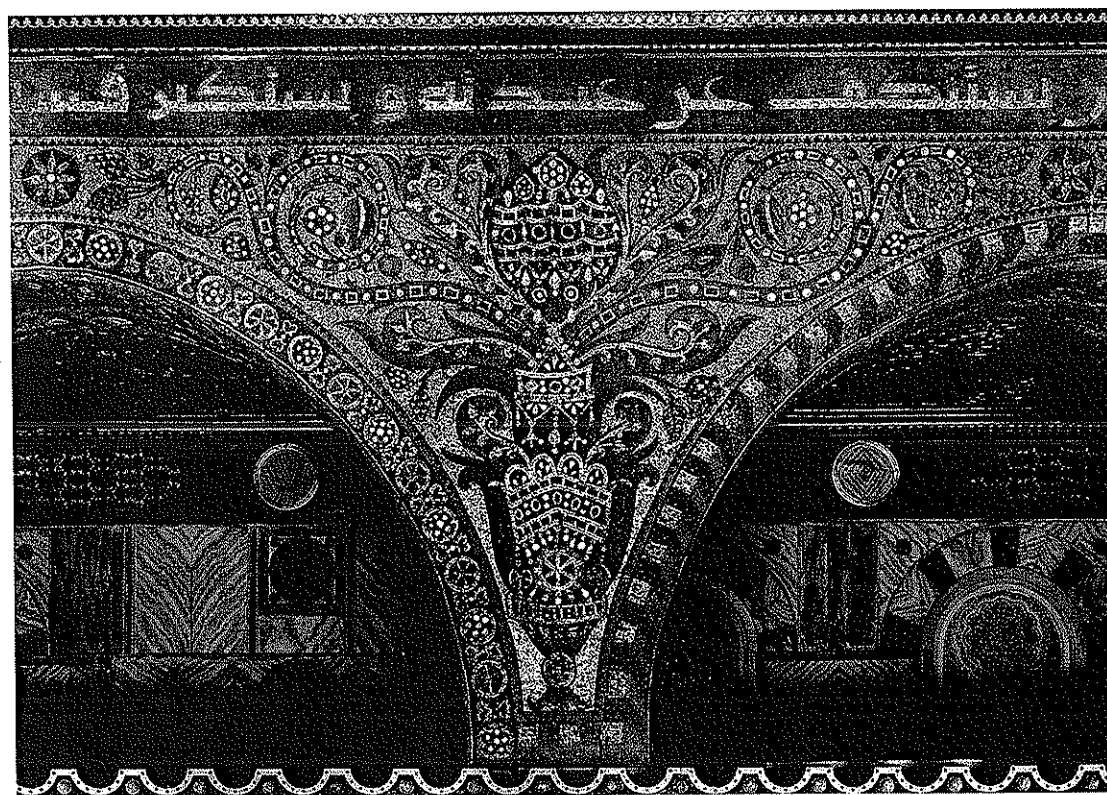


Fig. 96. Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, completed 691/92; detail of the interior mosaics showing hanging crowns, jewelry, and inscription. © Said Nuseibeh

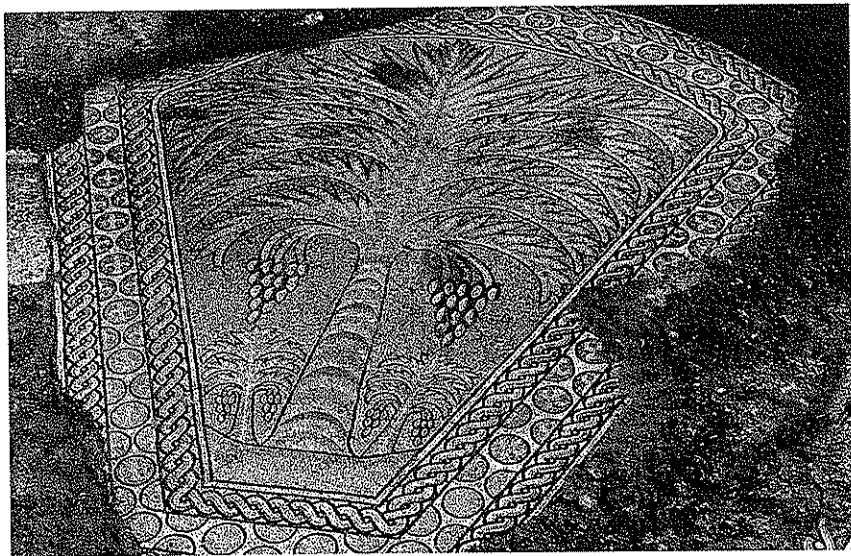


Fig. 97. Church of the Kathisma, Jerusalem; mosaic pavement with palm tree laid late 7th–early 8th century. Photo Sandu Mendrea, courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority



Fig. 98. Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, completed 691/92; detail of the interior mosaics showing palm tree and inscription. © Said Nuseibeh

a statement asserting the common prophetic missions of Jesus and Muhammad.²³

Qur'an 112 was also chosen to appear on a radically new coin type introduced by 'Abd al-Malik at the end of the 690s (cat. no. 91). The adoption of this epigraphic coin ended a brief series of experiments with a figural iconography between 691/92 and 697.²⁴ Although modeled on Byzantine prototypes, the first issues soon demonstrated an adaptive use of existing iconographic motifs. For example, the cross-on-steps depicted on the obverse of earlier Byzantine issues was transformed, first by the removal of its crossbar, then by its reconfiguration into a kind of staff topped by a sphere (cat. nos. 86B, 88B, and fig. 65). Usually described as a negation of the cross, a symbol of Byzantine imperialism and doctrinal difference to Muslims, this altered image may also have given visual expression to a literary image of the caliph as the axis or fulcrum of his community found in contemporary Arabic poetry.²⁵ If so, it anticipated the appearance of a standing figure, usually identified as the caliph himself, on gold, silver, and copper coins minted from 693/94 (cat. no. 89), perhaps in response to the introduction of a bust of Christ on coins minted by the Byzantine emperor Justinian II (r. 685–711).²⁶

Both monument and coins were clearly designed with the Christian majority in mind, but the common assumption that the Arabic texts in the Dome of the Rock constituted an address to

the Christians of Jerusalem begs unanswerable questions about access and visibility. More likely, they were intended to articulate a focal statement of Muslim communal belief. Just as earlier priests and rabbis had worried about the allure of synagogue and church to their respective communities, so the Jerusalemite geographer al-Muqaddasi (b. 945 or 946) tells us that the Umayyads built the Dome of the Rock and the Damascus mosque to counterbalance the impressive, richly decorated Christian churches of the region.²⁷ There is some evidence for the sharing of sacred space between Muslims and Christians in the decades immediately following the conquests of the 630s, and complaints about Muslim visitation to Christian pilgrimage sites in Jerusalem are frequent well into the Early Islamic period.²⁸ Moreover, the cult of saints such as Sergios, long popular among Arab Christians, continued to attract pilgrims of both faiths (see Ratliff, p. 86); decades after the completion of the Dome of the Rock, a Friday mosque, a mosque capable of accommodating the entire male Muslim population for the Friday prayer, was built by the caliph Hisham (r. 724–43) at Rusafa in northern Syria to connect with the church and shrine of the saint.²⁹

It is against this background that one should probably understand the dialogue with Christian pilgrimage sites manifest in the Dome of the Rock. Along with the Holy Sepulchre, these sites included the fifth-century Church of the Kathisma, a double

octagon built around a rock on which the Virgin was believed to have rested. A concave niche excavated in the southern part of the church and tentatively identified as an early eighth-century mihrab (prayer niche) has given rise to suggestions that the status of the Virgin in Islamic tradition led Muslims to pray there. In the late seventh or early eighth century, the Kathisma was provided with a floor mosaic featuring palm trees that were less ambitious than but clearly inspired by the Umayyad mosaics in the Dome of the Rock (figs. 97, 98).³⁰ Other analogies are offered by the Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives, originally a circular structure built around a rock from which Jesus was believed to have ascended to heaven and which bore marks identified as his footprints. The rock under the Dome of the Rock bore similar marks at its southern end, described at various times as the footprint of God, of Isaac and, more consistently, as the trace of the Prophet Muhammad.³¹

Only in the 680s did the Prophet's name regularly appear in public texts, most notably on coins minted by the partisans of the rebel Ibn al-Zubayr. The convention of invoking Muhammad on coinage seems to have been taken up by 'Abd al-Malik as a way to cast Umayyad rule in a more pious mold.³² The Prophet is alluded to or mentioned by name no fewer than eight times in the interior inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock and four more times on the Umayyad metal plaques covering the northern and eastern entrances, a prominence that contrasts with the more qualified emphasis on Jesus. Two of the Dome of the Rock inscriptions (including one on the eastern gate, facing the Mount of Olives, where the righteous will assemble) emphasize the Prophet's intercession on behalf of his community on the Day of Resurrection, an event in which the Rock and its environs will occupy a central role.³³ These sentiments anticipate invocations of Muhammad on many eighth- and ninth-century tombstones, which also employ Qur'anic quotations referring to the Last Days or paradise.³⁴

The unusual prominence of the Prophet in the Dome of the Rock inscriptions may have been part of the same series of competitive iconographic experiments witnessed on Umayyad coinage. It also calls into question a scholarly consensus that, whatever its original meaning, the Dome of the Rock was never intended to commemorate what pious Muslims to this very day believe that it does: the Night Journey (*isra'*) and Ascension (*mi'raj*) of Muhammad, described in chapter 17 of the Qur'an. The first clear epigraphic indication that the "farthest mosque" (*masjid al-aqsa*) mentioned in Qur'an 17:1 was identified with the Haram al-Sharif is provided by a mosaic of 1035 in al-Aqsa Mosque citing that text. However, textual sources indicate that the association had already been made in the Umayyad period, possibly as part of Umayyad attempts to enhance the status of Jerusalem.³⁵ The association of the Prophet Muhammad with the Dome of the

Rock is reinforced by other elements of the building, among them a polished black stone disk incised with a star motif, now set within a ninth- or tenth-century marble mihrab in the cave beneath the rock. This seems to be one of a series set in place during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods at locations in which the Prophet was believed to have prayed.³⁶

Such commemorative artifacts collapsed space and time, making the historical Prophet accessible to the pious long after his death, even outside of Arabia. Their veneration was subject to periodic censure from theologians worried that popular pilgrimage practices were usurping the rites specific to the sanctuary in Mecca. Nevertheless, the growth of pilgrimage spurred the production of artifacts designed to meet the needs of pilgrims, among them a series of glass flasks produced before and after the Arab conquest of the city, their representational iconography varied to reflect the respective beliefs and needs of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim patrons (cat. nos. 60, 72, 186).

Although it is often said that Islam lacks a devotional art, the commemorative aspects of pilgrimage seem to have provided a powerful impetus to the generation of graphic images of sacred places. The Persian scholar Nasir-i Khusrau, who visited Jerusalem in 1047, wrote that he measured the monuments of the Haram and drew them in his journal, which raises the intriguing possibility



Fig. 99. The Mosque of Medina on a fragmentary paper scroll, 9th–10th century, Dar al-Kutub, Cairo, 513. Visible in the top left corner is the chamber containing the tomb of the Prophet and the graves of the first two caliphs. The fourth grave (not generally shown on later images) probably reflects traditions that the Prophet's daughter, Fatima, is buried there or that a tomb within the chamber was reserved for Jesus.

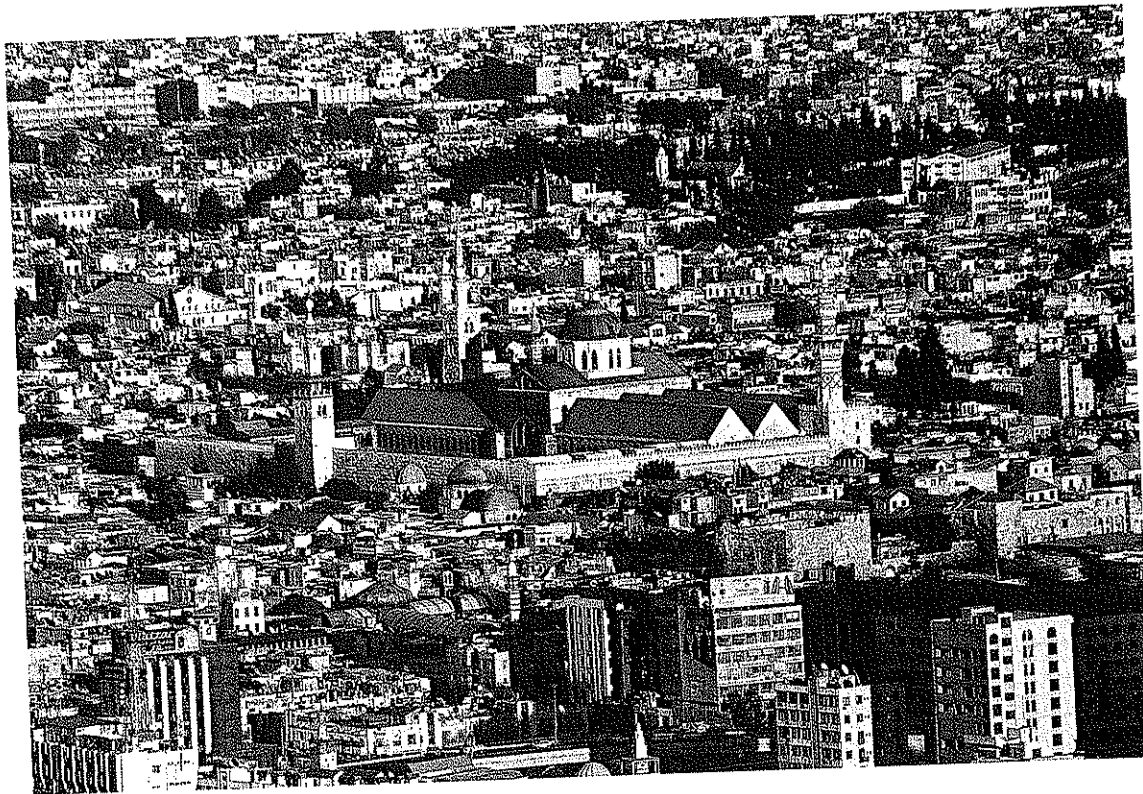


Fig. 100. View of the Friday Mosque, Damascus, 705–15

that some pilgrims produced images of the sites they visited.³⁷ Such personal records found a commercial counterpart in the scrolls produced to commemorate pilgrimage, illustrated with images of Mecca, Medina, and sometimes Jerusalem.³⁸ The scrolls are well documented from the twelfth century onward, but a fragmentary Egyptian paper scroll showing what is likely to be the earliest extant image of the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina (fig. 99) suggests that they were produced as early as the ninth or tenth century.³⁹ On the fragment, a schematic view of the mosque and Muhammad's tomb is combined with hadith (traditions of the Prophet) and praises of the Prophet and tomb;⁴⁰ these anticipate the illustrated texts containing eulogies of Muhammad and his tomb and relics that were to become popular in the Islamic world from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries onward. The apotropaic, or protective, function of these later texts and their images is also foreshadowed by the fragment, whose vertical format establishes a relation to the magical or talismanic scrolls produced in Egypt before and after the Muslim conquest.

Less canonical talismanic practices survived on the margins of established religion, both figuratively and literally. In the tenth century, for example, at the entrance to the Great Mosque of Hims in northern Syria, there stood a stone bearing the image of a man with a scorpion's tail, one of a number of antique spolia in Syria invested with apotropaic or talismanic properties.⁴¹ Clay impressed with the image protected the house against reptiles; dissolved in water and consumed, it cured the bite of the beast.⁴² The context and function recall analogous Byzantine practices,

including the ingestion of dust or plaster from sacred images and the carrying away of clay tokens impressed with images of sacred persons from pilgrimage sites, including the Holy Sepulchre and the shrine of Saint Symeon Stylites the Elder at Qal'at Sem'an (cat. no. 64). Combining sacred image and matter, these clay tokens were also said to repel snakes and reptiles, and, dissolved in water, to have curative properties.⁴³ The tokens impressed with the talismanic image from Hims belong to the same universe of magic and medicine, but they also find analogies in other Early Islamic pilgrimage practices, including the purchase of tablets comprised of earth from the Shi'ite shrines at Kerbala and Najaf in Iraq, which may represent further continuities with earlier pilgrimage rituals.⁴⁴

The location of the scorpion talisman of Hims underlines the role of congregational, or Friday, mosques as the ritual and geographic heart of the community. Whether built within existing urban landscapes or in new cities founded on an orthogonal plan, congregational mosques in Syria and the Jazira, including those at Aleppo, Damascus, Edessa, Jerash, and Tiberias, were generally located at the crossroads of the city, in close proximity to existing commercial and religious centers.⁴⁵

The architectural history of the early mosque is somewhat obscure, with few extant remains dating before the early eighth century. While the Qur'an does refer to mosques (*masajid*: places of prostration), their architectural form is unclear from the text, although there is some suggestion that they could be distinguished from the sanctuaries of Jews and Christians.⁴⁶ The basic formal features of the congregational mosques founded in Syria and Iraq seem to

have been established by 700, and perhaps as early as a decade after the Prophet's death in 632. In all cases, a hypostyle, or pillared hall, was preceded by a courtyard that was sometimes surrounded on three sides by a portico. This combination remained consistent, although in Syria a "basilical" plan characterized by parallel aisles was favored, and in Iraq a squarer and internally undifferentiated plan.

In its basic arrangement, the early mosque shows similarities with basilical churches, some synagogues, and pre-Islamic Arabian temples. It has been generally assumed that it developed organically from the house of the Prophet at Medina, a multifunctional space that served the three basic functions later associated with congregational mosques: community prayer, the delivery of the Friday sermon (khutbah), and the reception of petitioners. Recently, however, this scenario has been challenged by a suggestion that the form was deliberately created by the Meccan elite, perhaps as early as the reign of the caliph 'Umar (r. 634–44), when attempts to assemble the text of the Qur'an are also reported.⁴⁷

If the 640s were, as it seems, a significant moment in the codification of both sacred architecture and sacred text, the patronage of the Umayyad caliphs between roughly 690 and 710 represented a second, more extensively documented phase. Pre-Umayyad mosques appear to have been relatively unpretentious structures. The Umayyad period witnessed a monumentalization and decorative elaboration of the congregational mosque, perhaps related to the codification of religious ritual.⁴⁸ Fragments from luxury Qur'ans datable to the late seventh or the eighth century indicate a concomitant increase in size and ornamentation (cat. nos. 188–190). This implies a coordinated investment in

the architecture of the mosque as well as in its liturgical furnishings, seen elsewhere in the elevation of the Prophet's minbar (pulpit), which became a standard liturgical element of the congregational mosque, used for delivery of the khutbah.⁴⁹

The extent of the undertaking is clear from the patronage of al-Walid I (r. 705–15). This son of 'Abd al-Malik constructed or completed the Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem; rebuilt the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina, the Friday Mosque of Sana'a in Yemen, and the Mosque of 'Amr in Fustat, the capital of Egypt; and refurbished the Meccan sanctuary.⁵⁰ Many of al-Walid's mosques have been replaced by later structures, but the jewel in the crown of his architectural program, the Friday Mosque of Damascus (705–15), is reasonably well preserved (fig. 100).⁵¹ This edifice supplanted the Cathedral of Saint John, in one of the few documented cases in which a church was transformed into a mosque.⁵² The cathedral had itself replaced a polytheist temple; many of the columns reused in the mosque were already ancient, some having served in both temple and church. Behind the mosque lay the palace of the Umayyad caliphs, a pattern followed in many other administrative centers, where the governor's palace (*dar al-imara*) lay directly behind the qibla wall, the wall that indicated the direction of Mecca, of the Friday mosque.⁵³

The mosques rebuilt by al-Walid saw the introduction of several new formal features, including a mihrab in the form of a concave niche, which was an honorific device in the vocabulary of Late Antique art (cat. no. 24). In Medina at least, this marked the place where the Prophet had led the prayers a century earlier.⁵⁴ In many of al-Walid's mosques, the niche was preceded by

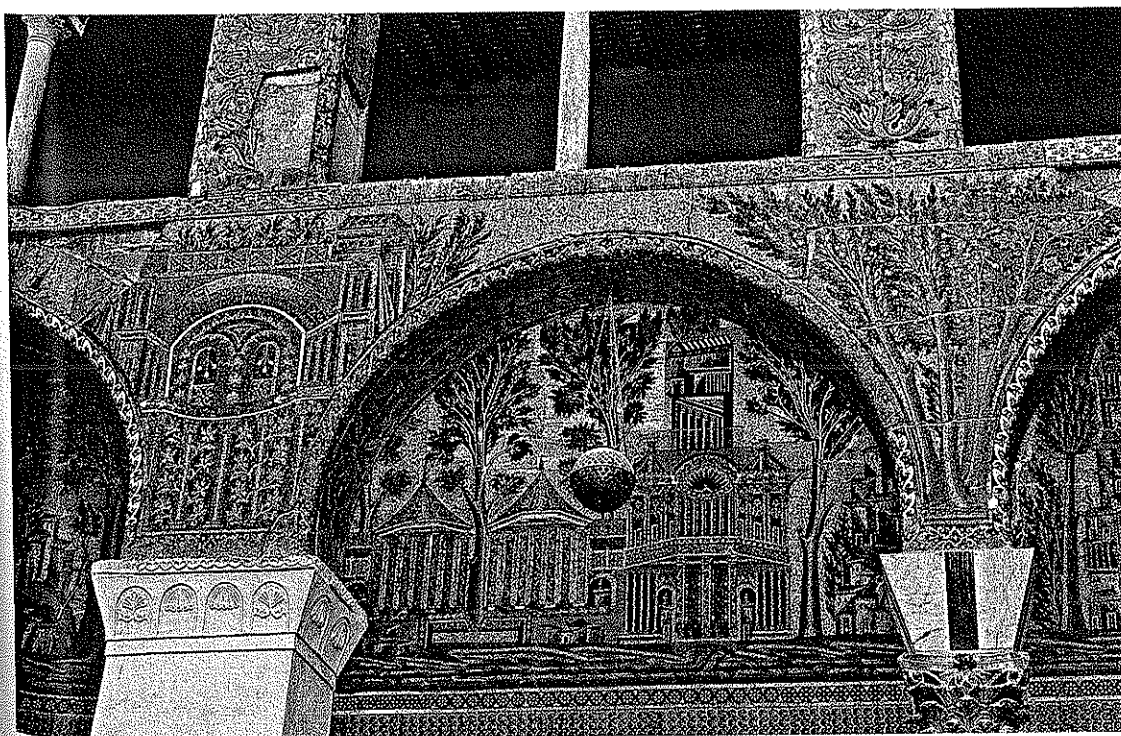


Fig. 101. Friday Mosque, Damascus, 705–15; view of the mosaics on the western courtyard wall

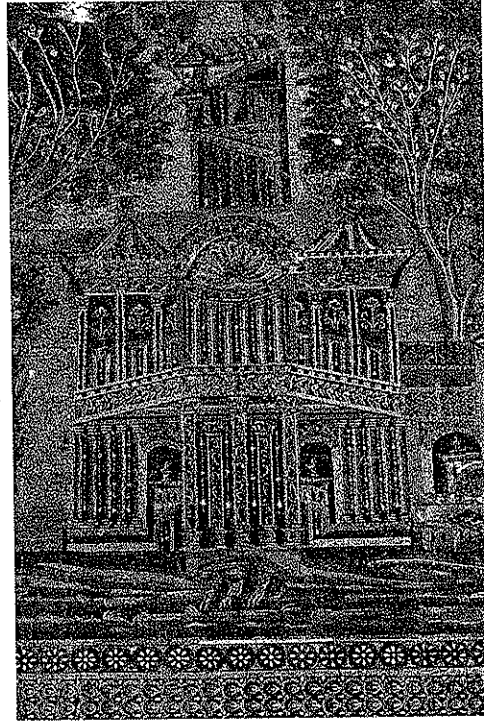
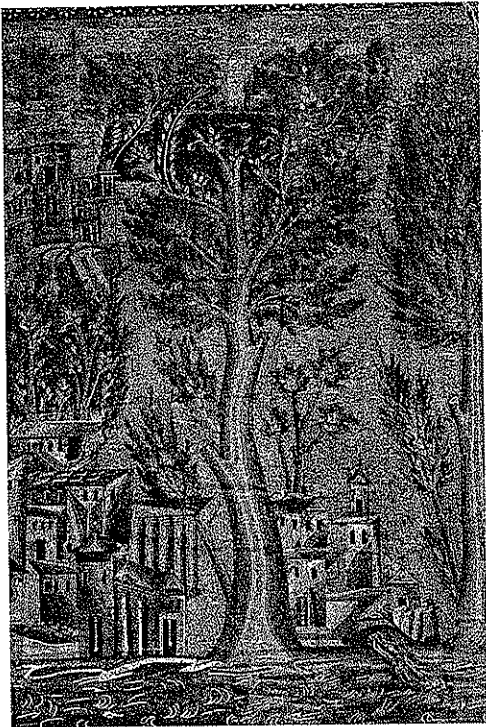


Fig. 102. Friday Mosque, Damascus, 705–15; detail of the mosaics on the western courtyard wall showing a pastoral scene punctuated by tall trees

Fig. 103. Friday Mosque, Damascus, 705–15; detail of the mosaics on the western courtyard wall showing a fanciful pavilion with hanging pearl chains

a nave created by widening the intercolumnar spaces along a single bay, usually at the center of the prayer hall, and by a dome directly in front of the mihrab. While this axial nave imparted a strong directional organization to an otherwise undifferentiated pillared space, whether it had a precise liturgical or other function is unclear.⁵⁵

Al-Walid's building program saw the canonization of an existing decorative vocabulary entailing the use of marble, gold-ground mosaic, and gilded inscriptions arranged in narrow bands on a deep blue ground. This color combination may have been chosen for either its visual or symbolic properties, but its consistent association with projects of the Umayyad elite suggests the latter.⁵⁶ The preference for gold-on-blue inscriptions set the tone for later Qur'anic inscriptions in imperial contexts (cat. no. 192).

Closely related to that used in the Dome of the Rock, the decorative vocabulary of al-Walid's mosques omitted certain features apparently specific to the meaning of the Jerusalem shrine (crowns and jewelry, for example) and made extensive use of architectural and architectonic images that were only secondary within it. Such themes predominate in a spectacular mosaic panel, 115 feet (35 m) long, on the western courtyard wall of the Damascus mosque (fig. 101). Offering a glimpse of the mosque's original splendors, the mosaics illustrate pastoral scenes punctuated by depictions of architecture, pavilions, monumental trees, and flowing rivers (fig. 102). The scenes have been variously identified as topographic renderings of Damascus itself or of the cities under Umayyad control, although they lack the identifying labels found in comparable floor mosaics from Jordanian churches

(cat. nos. 1, 79A).⁵⁷ Alternatively, they have been read as an evocation of paradise as described in the Qur'an and hadith—a petrifed, superlative version of the natural world, characterized by a golden radiance and bejeweled architecture.⁵⁸ Similar combinations of rivers, fruit trees, and garden pavilions were used to evoke paradisiacal landscapes in pre-Islamic Syrian church mosaics.⁵⁹ The ubiquity of the motif of pearl chains hanging in doorways (fig. 103), and the manner in which it has been adapted from Byzantine eschatological iconography, recall not only Islamic traditions that the denizens of paradise will shine with pearl-like beauty but also metaphorical comparisons between radiant female beauties and pearls in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry.⁶⁰

The mosaics in Damascus and Medina (but not, interestingly, those in Jerusalem) were reportedly executed with help from the Byzantine emperor, and there are indeed iconographic parallels with Byzantine mosaics from both religious and secular contexts (see Evans, p. 4), including pastoral scenes in the sixth-century floor mosaics of the palace of the Byzantine emperors in Constantinople (fig. 5). There are also Arabian precedents informed by Byzantine practice, among them al-Qalis, the cathedral built in Sana'a during the sixth-century Ethiopian occupation, which is said to have had mosaics featuring trees.⁶¹ Few wall mosaics survive from the sixth and seventh centuries, but the gap might be filled by other media. The large, imposing, regularly spaced fruit trees in the Damascus mosaics may, for example, be compared to those on a series of large-scale Egyptian tapestry wall hangings probably dating to the fifth or sixth century (cat. no. 2), which also show little evidence for the presence of images of animate beings.⁶²

Despite precedents for aniconic wall decorations, the exclusion of figural imagery and the promotion of architectural and vegetal imagery as primary subjects in the decoration of Umayyad mosques and shrines undoubtedly reflect a deliberate choice, for such characteristics are common to the illuminations of several fragmentary Umayyad Qur'ans, which may have been produced in Syria (cat. nos. 189, 190). The most spectacular example of this style of illumination is a unique double frontispiece that appears to offer alternative views of one or more mosques (fig. 110). This work can be related to a "family" of illustrated Christian and Jewish scriptural codices, produced in Egypt or Syria between the seventh and tenth centuries, that featured architectural motifs and frontispieces (see Flood, p. 265). In its details, it is closely allied with the formal and decorative aspects of the mosques built by 'al-Walid and typified by the Friday Mosque of Damascus. The similarities include the trees and plants that sprout along the qibla wall in one view (fig. 110), recalling the decoration of the prayer halls in Damascus and Medina, and the narrow vine scroll that frames the scenes, recalling a celebrated gilded marble vine scroll that encircled the prayer hall in Damascus and that may ultimately have been modeled on a similar feature in the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.⁶³

Like the sudden appearance of the Dome of the Rock, the decoration of Umayyad mosques and the illuminations of early Qur'an manuscripts suggest that in the construction of an Umayyad visual identity, architecture was privileged as paradigmatic. The representational imagery used in these early Qur'ans (baskets, chalices, columns, lamps, trees, vases) also occurs in the illumination of earlier Christian Gospel manuscripts, especially their canon tables (cat. no. 39). This is perhaps not surprising, since evidence exists for Christian (including Iraqi) calligraphers having worked on early copies of the Qur'an.⁶⁴ There are, however, two key differences: the omission of the birds that usually flank the vessels in Christian manuscripts (compare fig. 110 and cat. no. 39) and the redeployment and reorientation of architectonic elements so that they no longer function according to their structural logic (cat. no. 189).

The occlusion of figurative imagery invariably raises the specter of the *Bilderverbot*, the prohibition on image making that is often said to have shaped the development of both Jewish and Islamic art. So far as Islam is concerned, the key documents are the hadith. These recommend that artists take trees as their subjects rather than animate beings (*hayawan*), a distinction based on the capacity to possess breath or spirit (*ruh*). Although the canonical collections of hadith were compiled only at the end of the eighth century or the beginning of the ninth, there is little reason to assume that they did not circulate earlier.⁶⁵ The focus on inanimate forms, trees, and vegetation in Umayyad religious art is perfectly in keeping with the spirit of the hadith. Paradoxically,

however, it may be alterations to the floor mosaics of more than sixty churches in Jordan and Palestine that offer the first evidence for their practical impact on existing figurative art (see Flood, p. 117, and cat. no. 79).

The role of aniconism in distinguishing Muslim sacred space and texts is clear, but it should not be equated with the rejection of representation. Despite the privileging of word over image in modern scholarship on early Islam, Early Islamic sacred space was extraordinarily rich in images of architecture, jewelry, plants, rivers, trees, and vessels, which occupied far more wall space than texts, however carefully chosen. There are indications of experimental attempts to evoke living beings by nonfigurative means in Umayyad religious art (cat. no. 190), and a preference for aniconism in religious art was not reflected to the same extent in all media and regions. The lead seal of the caliph 'Abd al-Malik combined Qur'anic texts with images of paired birds and lions; glass pilgrim flasks featuring stylized figural imagery may have been used to carry away oil or unguent from the Dome of the Rock (cat. no. 186); and as late as the 780s, a silver censer bearing figures, gifted by the pious caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (d. 644), was used on Fridays and during Ramadan at the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina.⁶⁶ In certain cases at least, images were evidently tolerated by some, even within mosques, as long as they did not form part of monumental or permanent decorative schemes.⁶⁷

According to one recent evaluation, aniconism or iconophobia manifest in subtractions from an existing artistic vocabulary was the "only self-consciously Islamic trait" in an Umayyad art that otherwise looked to established Late Antique, Byzantine, and Sasanian artistic norms.⁶⁸ This sentiment illustrates the dangers of emphasizing continuities between Late Antique, Byzantine, and Early Islamic art at the expense of innovation, as well as the disproportionate part that the *Bilderverbot* has played in shaping the reception of Early Islamic religious art. In fact, the treatment of sacred space and texts displays three consistent features that might be considered hallmarks of Umayyad religious art and architecture (and perhaps Umayyad art in general). The selective omission of elements within an existing visual vocabulary, evidently considered inappropriate to the new religion, is just one of these.⁶⁹ Equally relevant is a preference for formal reconfiguration at the syntactic level. For example, the prayer hall of the Umayyad mosque in Damascus employs the pedimented facade found in earlier Syrian basilical churches, but rather than fronting the shorter end of the prayer hall, it marks the entrance to the axial nave at the center of the mosque's long side.⁷⁰ The third, related characteristic is the amplification, through monumentalization or repetition, of minor or secondary elements in the pre-Islamic arts of Syria and the eastern Mediterranean. Examples include the use of single columns or arcades as major features in the illuminations

of early Qur'ans (cat. nos. 189, 190), the elevation of trees to the principal subjects of floor and wall mosaics, and the multiplication of motifs used more sparingly in Byzantine iconography, among them the hanging pearls in the Damascus mosaics (fig. 103).⁷¹

These three formal operations—selective omission, syntactic innovation, and amplification—represent deliberate manipulations of established forms and iconographies. They addressed the need to walk a tightrope between continuity and innovation, to articulate a visual identity (both dynastic and sectarian) that was at once sufficiently differentiated from its competitors to be coherent and yet sufficiently legible to be intelligible to its intended audiences. Arabic texts may have conferred a sense of distinction on Muslim places of worship,⁷² but in terms of linguistic access and visibility, they had a limited audience. By contrast, the selective use of specific forms (concave niches, columns, domes, naves, pillared halls) and materials (gilding, marble, mosaic) that had belonged to an earlier Byzantine and Syrian artistic repertoire ensured familiarity, while the innovative twists in the manner of their deployment conferred a distinction from previous usage. Here, it is surely significant that the reorientation of ornament in certain Umayyad Qur'an codices (cat. no. 189) prefigures a more dramatic reorientation of the sacred codex itself from a vertical to horizontal format (cat. nos. 191–193), a development that marked the Qur'an as visually distinct from either the codices of the Christians or the scrolls of the Jews (see Flood, p. 265).⁷³ The reluctance to figure animate beings in sacred space and texts might be understood as an integral part of this broader context of competitive self-definition. Analogies exist in an “aniconic turn” among the Jewish communities of Palestine just before or shortly after the Muslim conquest of the region—an attempt perhaps to distinguish the space of the synagogue from that of Christian churches.⁷⁴

Most of the material discussed in this essay represents the patronage of elites and entails facets of both dynastic and sectarian self-definition. Yet, it is worth noting that Early Islamic tombstones also perpetuate the combination of architectonic elements, texts, and vegetation established as canonical in Umayyad religious art. The earliest dated grave stele that uses a *hijri* date commemorates an Egyptian man who died in A.H. 31 (652 C.E.) and is a simple incised affair.⁷⁵ The carvings on such tombstones became increasingly elaborate during the eighth and ninth centuries (cat. nos. 180, 183), sometimes making use of architectural elements such as capitals and columns.⁷⁶ Religious art found in domestic or more private contexts employs a similar iconographic range: a floor mosaic from a wealthy dwelling of the Umayyad or early Abbasid period at al-Ramla depicts what appears to be a mihrab in the form of an arch borne on capitals

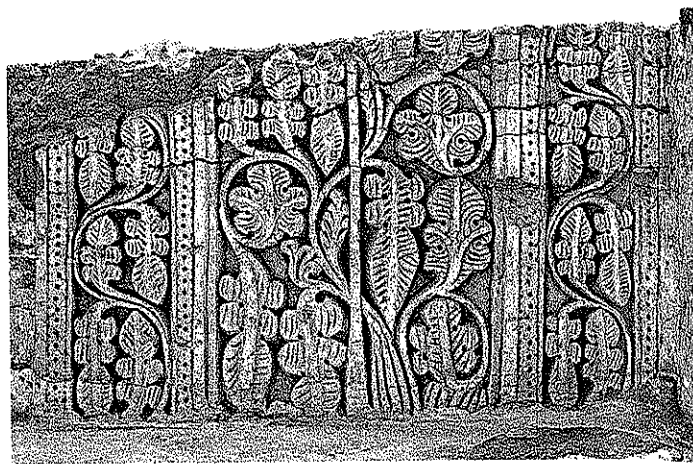


Fig. 104. Stucco mihrab, Western Palace, Room 1.2, Raqqa, early 9th century

and columns within which a Qur'anic inscription appears;⁷⁷ recent excavations of a series of palaces at Raqqa, in northern Syria, which served as the Abbasid capital between 796 and 808, have produced a stucco mihrab decorated with a large, tree-like vine (fig. 104).

The material evidence for attempts to distinguish Early Islamic religious art and architecture from that of other monotheistic traditions finds a literary counterpart in the hadith, juridical texts, and the Ordinances of 'Umar, the statutes that reportedly governed the treatment of Christians and Jews in the conquered lands. Emphasizing that Muslim imitation of practices associated with unbelievers produces identity with them, these texts all stress the need for differentiation (*ghiyar*) in relation to modalities of architectural decoration, dress, hairstyle, and social practice in order to make sectarian difference immediately apparent to the eye.⁷⁸ Such concerns with boundary definitions are particularly focused on ritual practices, including modes of calling the faithful to prayer and prayer itself; some jurists even denounced as characteristically Christian or Jewish the practice of reading the Qur'an rather than reciting it from memory.⁷⁹ Similarly, the hadith denounce the construction of tombs, sometimes along with images, while the elaboration of tombstones and funerary practices with Christian antecedents attracted criticism from conservative jurists.⁸⁰ Such concerns find parallels in contemporary Christian and Jewish texts. Written before 708, Jacob of Edessa's proscriptions against the use of textiles embroidered with the Muslim profession of faith for altar cloths, church curtains, or priests' vestments provide interesting counterparts to the hadith forbidding the general use of figured textiles for clothing or curtains.⁸¹

The need for periodic reiteration and reinforcement of these regulations indicates that they were honored more in the breach than in the observance; indeed, they may have often had a performative purpose, seeking to establish or actively reinforce modes of distinction that were less clear-cut in practice. Nevertheless,

these rules highlight the role of the visual in both asserting and undermining modes of differentiation considered essential to constructing or maintaining the boundaries between different communities of faith.

For some conservative members of the early Muslim community, however, even the nuanced reimagining of an antecedent architectural vocabulary was not sufficient to convey the distinctive character of the new religion in visual terms. On the contrary, the monumentalization of the mosque and the materiality of even aniconic ornament—specifically marble and mosaic—were considered decadent ostentations that risked causing confusion between different monotheistic places of worship. According to a hadith, the Prophet condemned the elevation of mosques as a practice akin to that of the Christians and Jews, as well as a sign that the end of time was near. The second caliph, 'Umar, is reported to have condemned the ornamentation of mosques as evil, and objections to the embellishment of Qur'anic texts may underlie the production of a group of small early Qur'an manuscripts devoid of decorative and textual elaboration.⁸² Concerns with excessive height and ornamentation are anticipated in earlier Syrian Christian discourses on asceticism, which trace an inverse relation between the spiritual heights to which the Syrian stylites aspired and the depths plumbed by their successors in erecting lofty structures. Writing in the fifth or sixth century, Isaac of Antioch contrasts the ostentatious monasteries of his day with the simple rustic structures of an earlier generation, comparing the former to churches or even palaces.⁸³ Similarly, when the caliph al-Walid came to Medina to inspect the Mosque of the Prophet as he had rebuilt it in 707, he was reproached by the son of Uthman, the third caliph, who contrasted the simple mosque built by his father with the lavish structure erected by al-Walid, declaring, "We built it in the manner of mosques, you built it in the manner of churches."⁸⁴

The governor responsible for overseeing the rebuilding of the mosque in Medina later reigned as the caliph 'Umar II (r. 717–20). When he acceded to the caliphate, the pious 'Umar apparently turned against the lavish ornamentation favored by al-Walid, for he reportedly attempted to efface the glittering mosaics and golden ornaments of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, sending the gold that they contained to the public treasury.⁸⁵ At the same time, 'Umar is said to have banned Christians from entering the mosque.⁸⁶ The context and timing of these events may shed new light on a question that has long been central to the entangled histories of Byzantium and Early Islam: the possible relationship between Islamic aniconism and the beginnings of Byzantine Iconoclasm (see Flood, p. 117). The removal of the Chalke icon by Emperor Leo III in 726 or 730, which is usually seen as initiating the period of Byzantine Iconoclasm, occurred shortly after an edict was

apparently issued by the caliph Yazid II (r. 720–24) that targeted both Christian symbols and images of animate beings. While Yazid's edict is not mentioned in Muslim sources until the ninth century, it does feature a century earlier in Iconophile attempts to smear the Iconoclasts by depicting them as crypto-Muslims.⁸⁷ The edict is often spoken about as if it came out of the blue, but it makes more sense to see it as one in a series of moves designed to effect what Oleg Grabar called the "symbolic appropriation of the land."⁸⁸

As has frequently been pointed out, despite the chronological coincidence between these events, the controversies over images in Byzantium and the Umayyad caliphate were quite different in nature (cat. no. 79).⁸⁹ However, 'Umar II's attempt to "purify" the Damascus mosque by removing its aniconic golden ornaments provides a broader context in which to view Yazid's edict, which it anticipates, albeit on a small scale, by just a few years. His endeavor coincided with the failure of a major Umayyad assault on Constantinople, which had been planned for many years (the topography of Umayyad Damascus may even have been planned as a mimetic appropriation of Constantinople in advance of the expected seizure of the real thing).⁹⁰ Although the Byzantine forces initially gave ground, by 718 the siege had clearly failed and 'Umar called home the troops.⁹¹ The psychological impact of defeat was apparently considerable, coinciding as it did with the end of the first Islamic century. Despite their eventual outcome, these events also brought home to the Byzantines their vulnerability in the face of determined Muslim armies. The experience has even been deemed responsible for the rejection of icons by Leo III (r. 717–41), initiating the period of Byzantine Iconoclasm.⁹²

This may be too simplistic an explanation for an extremely complex concatenation of events, but seen in a cross-cultural perspective, the timing is suggestive. Leo III and 'Umar II both came to power in 717, the year that Arab armies almost captured Constantinople. At the end of that siege, both seem to have turned against established modes of embellishing sacred space: in one case rejecting the presence of icons, in the other turning against ostentatious forms of ornament. Parallel reactions to the failed Umayyad assault on Constantinople would explain the curious chronological coincidence without insisting upon any direct relationship between their theological concerns. Although this must remain a hypothesis, it is worth noting reports that the person charged with executing Yazid's edict against images in 721 or 723 was none other than Maslama ibn 'Abd al-Malik, the Umayyad general who had led the unsuccessful assault on Constantinople.⁹³

The failure of this major assault on Constantinople was to have a significant impact on the architectural patronage of the Umayyad elite. The last decades of Umayyad rule saw a palpable

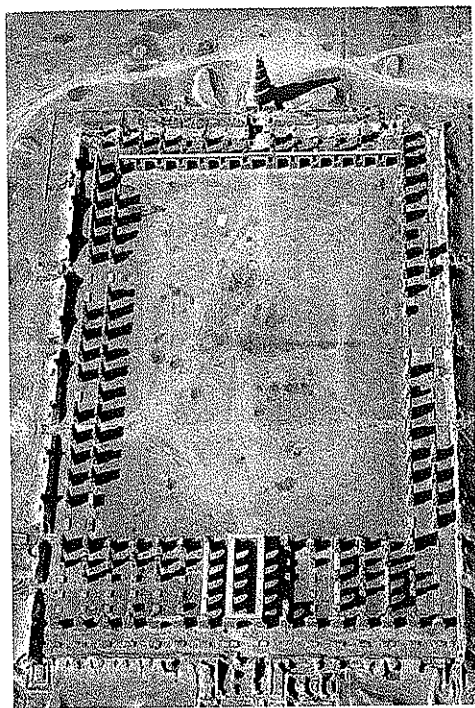


Fig. 105. Aerial view of mosque and minaret, Abu Dulaf Mosque, Samarra, 859–61

increase in media, forms, and techniques derived from the traditions of the former Sasanian lands in Iran and Iraq, ranging from the proliferation of stucco ornament to the growing sense of monumentality in palace architecture, typified by the massive scale of the palace at Mshatta (see Ballian, p. 209, and fig. 89).⁹⁴ Umayyad expenditure on architecture also appears to have provoked a backlash, anticipated perhaps by ‘Umar II’s interventions in Damascus. Upon his accession, the Umayyad caliph Yazid III (r. 744) was forced to guarantee not to “place stone upon stone” or “brick upon brick,” while also promising not to accumulate wealth and to deploy any economic surplus in the service of the poor.⁹⁵ The opposition to Umayyad rule that gained strength in the second quarter of the eighth century culminated in the

Abbasid revolution, which gathered pace in the eastern provinces of the caliphate and overthrew the first Islamic dynasty in 750.

In 762 the successor Abbasid dynasty founded its capital in Baghdad, which was destined to play a more enduring role in the fortunes of the Islamic world than had Umayyad Damascus. A circular city founded on a Sasanian rather than Byzantine model, Baghdad was centered on the palace of the Abbasid caliphs rather than on the adjacent Friday mosque, a topographic detail that hints at a growing formalization of courtly ritual. Unfortunately, our knowledge of Abbasid Baghdad derives entirely from textual sources. We are better informed about the more northerly Iraqi city of Samarra, which was founded as a new capital around 836 and abandoned by 893, when the capital reverted to Baghdad.⁹⁶ Samarra’s mosques and palaces far exceeded their Umayyad predecessors in scale. Moreover, the Friday mosques of the caliph al-Mutawwakkil (r. 847–61), including the Abu Dulaf Mosque (859–61) at Samarra, introduced significant formal innovations, including the provision of an open enclosure (*ziyada*) around the mosque and a single spiral minaret located opposite the main mihrab, on a central axis (fig. 105). Built of brick rather than the stone used in Syria and embellished in stucco, the mosques of Samarra continued nonetheless to employ the Byzantine-derived materials and techniques first adopted in the Umayyad mosques of Syria, including marble cladding and glass mosaic (the latter now used more sparingly to distinguish the qibla wall).⁹⁷

The distinctive “abstract” forms and styles of ornament developed in Samarran mosques and palaces—manifest in marble, stucco (fig. 106), and wood (cat. no. 165), and even in portable arts such as ceramics (cat. no. 166)—were to have a profound impact on the art and architecture of the Islamic world.⁹⁸ It is clear, however, that their antecedents lie in the late Umayyad and early Abbasid architecture of Syria.⁹⁹

Paradoxically, the spread of the decorative styles developed in Samarra can be related to a process of political fragmentation that gradually undermined the unity of the Abbasid caliphate. This had already begun after the Abbasid revolution of 750, when al-Andalus, the Islamic territories of southern Spain, was lost to the fugitive Umayyad prince ‘Abd al-Rahman. It increased exponentially from the last decades of the ninth century, as provincial governors in eastern regions such as Sindh and Sistan established their *de facto* independence. In the following century, fragmentation was exacerbated by the rise in North Africa of the Fatimids, Isma‘ili Shi‘ites who captured Egypt in 969 and claimed the title of caliph.

The loss of Egypt had been foreshadowed a century earlier when Ahmad ibn Tulun, the Abbasids’ provincial governor, rebelled and established an independent line that ruled between 868 and 905. To supplant the Early Islamic settlement of Fustat, Ibn Tulun founded a new capital, al-Qitai, the sole remaining

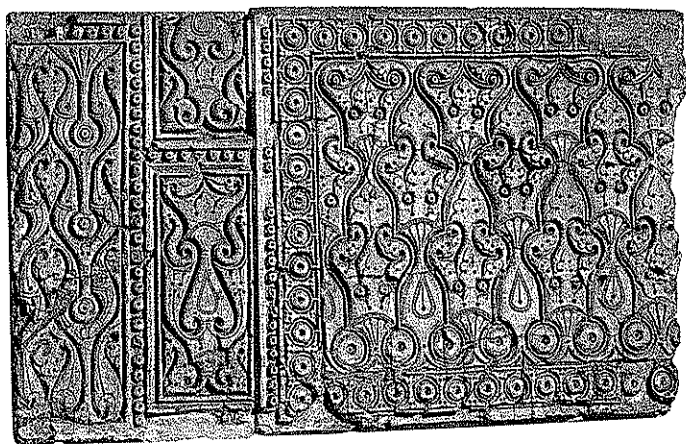


Fig. 106. Beveled-style stucco wall covering, House 1, Room 1, Samarra, 9th century. Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Museum für Islamische Kunst (I.3467)

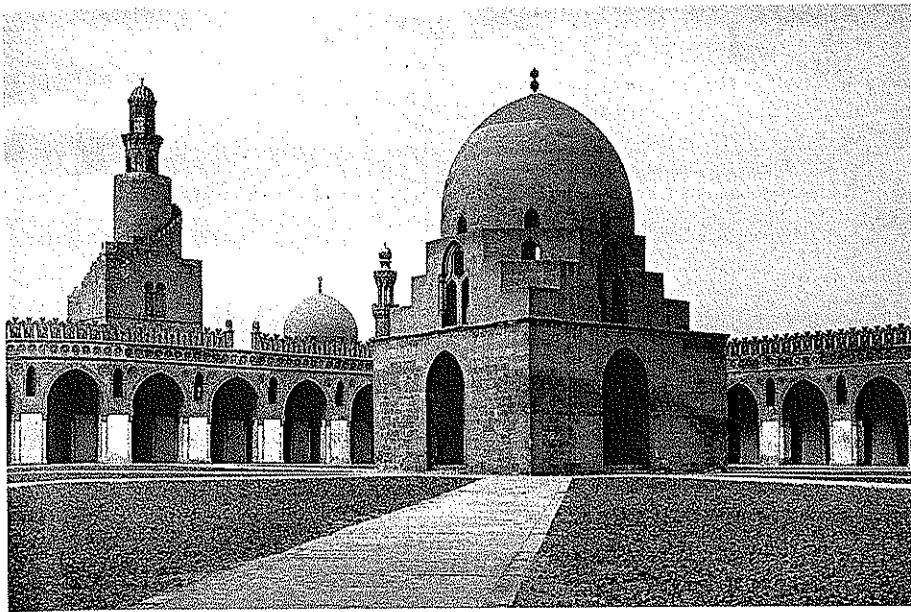


Fig. 107. Inner courtyard, Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo, 879



Fig. 108. Capital from the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo, 879

monument of which is the massive congregational mosque built in 879. The scale of this mosque, its use of brick piers and pointed arches, and the presence of innovative formal features such as an outer enclosure and a spiral minaret (rebuilt in the late thirteenth century) are sufficient to indicate a heavy debt to the mosques of Samarra, where Ibn Tulun had lived (fig. 107). In addition, its carved woodwork (cat. no. 181) and stucco ornament (fig. 108) show the impact of the visually ambiguous decorative styles developed in Samarra in the decades after 850 and disseminated from there throughout the Islamic world.¹⁰⁰

The migrations and transformations of Late Antique vegetal ornament from Umayyad Syria to Abbasid Iraq and back to the Mosque of Ibn Tulun return us to the dialectic between continuity and discontinuity discussed at the outset as one that has traditionally structured writing on Umayyad and early Abbasid art and architecture. This dialectic is directly related to debates about where to locate the upper limits of the "long Late Antiquity," to the historiography of the early mosque, and to the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, in particular, thanks to the pioneering work of the German art historian Alois Riegl on the history of ornament.

In his groundbreaking book *Stilfragen*, Riegl anticipated the spirit of much recent scholarship, rejecting the idea that Late Antique and Early Islamic art witnessed a decline of classical Greco-Roman ideals and seeing instead a continuous, vibrant development of both Byzantine and Islamic ornament from that of Greece. Nevertheless, in tracing the parallel development of Late Antique vine ornament in Byzantine and Islamic art (cat. nos. 119; 120B, C; 121A–C, E), Riegl identified a specific moment when the two diverged, when Islamic ornament took a different path that

eventually led to the characteristic convolutions of the arabesque.¹⁰¹ Working with the materials available to him in the 1890s, Riegl located this moment in the stucco ornament from the Mosque of Ibn Tulun (fig. 108), unaware that the specific styles he saw in the stucco and woodwork of the Egyptian mosque had in fact been developed in Samarra. Excavations at the Abbasid capital would not begin until two decades after the publication of *Stilfragen*, and the relationship between Abbasid and Tulunid ornament was first noted only in 1913.¹⁰² Nevertheless, Riegl's intuition is shared by many scholars today, who regard the stucco, wood, and marble ornaments of Samarran mosques and palaces as evidence for the emergence of new ways of imagining and treating forms inherited from both Late Antiquity and Umayyad art.

Riegl's brilliant intuition also reminds us of what is at stake in the use of art and architecture as indexes of the cultural continuities and discontinuities between Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and Early Islam. Despite his endeavor to emphasize common roots and overcome the idea that the transition from Late Antiquity to Early Islam witnessed cultural decline, Riegl failed to transcend the binary opposition between Semitic abstraction and Hellenic naturalism that structured much nineteenth-century scholarship on Early Islam. As a consequence, the repetitive, stylized vegetal motifs derived from Late Antique vine ornament in the Mosque of Ibn Tulun represented for him an enduring Oriental spirit reemerging from under a thin veneer of Hellenic culture laid in the Near East by Alexander the Great and his Hellenized successors.¹⁰³ Within the racially inflected debates of nineteenth-century scholarship at least, this return of the repressed thus marked a final, decisive break with Late Antiquity.

Floor coverings such as this, commonly found in domestic and religious interiors, may have been used during prayer sessions. According to the Geniza records—letters and documents discovered in the synagogue of Fustat (in today's Cairo)—they were regularly commissioned as made-to-measure objects, often in pairs, and were arranged to fill all the available space.¹ Written Arabic sources mention the region of Tiberias (modern Tabariya), in the Jordan Valley, as a reed-growing area and a center for the production of high-quality woven floor coverings.²

A similar woven reed mat, now in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, is attributed to the same workshop and date. It has an analogous layout, with two benedictory *linaz* inscriptions for an anonymous owner.³ Another complete but much smaller example, attributed to the same workshop, is in the collection of the Benaki Museum. It shows two parallel lines of inscription that repeat the word *baraka* (blessing) in a poorly executed Kufic script.⁴

MM

¹ Goitein 1983, pp. 127–28.

² Combe 1939. The eleventh-century Persian traveler Nasir-i Khusrau mentions in his *Safarnama* (Book of Travels): “In the town of Tiberias [Tabariya] they make reed prayer mats, sold there for five dinars.” Nasir-i Khusrau 2001, p. 24.

³ Dimand 1942.

⁴ Moraitou 2008a.

References: Combe et al. 1931–56, vol. 4 (1932), no. 1542; Combe 1939; *Trésors fatimides* 1998, p. 204, cat. no. 188; Ballian 2006, p. 77, fig. 73; Moraitou 2008a, p. 63.

186. Hexagonal Pilgrim Jug

Palestine, late 7th–early 8th century

Glass, molded

13.5 × 6 cm (5 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ in.)

Provenance: Purchased together with a collection of Byzantine and Roman glass and some terracottas via Mr. Audley Miller in Oxford from an unnamed dealer in Gloucestershire in 1949 (1949.141–182). Donald Harden's entries in the registers state that the collection “seems to have been formed in Syria or Palestine.”

Condition: The vessel is in good condition.

The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (AN1949.144.2)

This unprepossessing jug is of considerable importance for the history of Islamic art. It belongs to a group of mold-blown glass flasks whose iconographic programs include eschatological motifs, ritual objects, and allusions to the sacred topography of Jerusalem (in or around which they were likely made). It has long been recognized that such jugs were produced for



Christians and Jews (cat. nos. 60, 72),¹ but it was not until the late 1990s that Julian Raby demonstrated the existence of a third, smaller class of flasks apparently produced for Muslims.² This vessel, the best-known example of the latter group, features a figurative image similar to that found on the coinage issued in the name of the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik in the years between 693–94 and 697 (cat. no. 89).³ Here, the image, conventionally known as the “standing caliph,” appears alongside motifs including an *ethrog*, a lozenge, and a star; related flasks feature other motifs also found on ‘Abd al-Malik’s coinage.

The meaning of some motifs and of the ensemble remains uncertain. The flasks may reflect Umayyad attempts to promote Jerusalem and its sanctity in Islam. They certainly bear witness to attempts to develop and disseminate a distinctive Umayyad iconography in media other than coinage in the decade during or after the completion of the Dome of the Rock (692). Their function in an Islamic context is unclear. Based on their use by Christian pilgrims to carry away earth, oil, and water sanctified as *eulogiai* (blessings) through contact with the Holy Sepulchre and other shrines, it has been suggested that Muslims collected in the flasks the unguents used to anoint the rock beneath the Dome of the Rock. Related functions in other contexts are also possible. Excavations at the Church of the Kathisma

in Jerusalem, to which the Dome of the Rock has strong formal affinities, have, for example, produced evidence for an elaborate canalization of water across the surface of the rock at the center of the building, on which the Virgin is believed to have rested. The find of a hexagonal glass flask there suggests that this water was collected by pilgrims. Muslims are known to have visited sites associated with the Virgin in and around Jerusalem, and the “neutral” iconography of the Kathisma flask has led to suggestions that it may have been used by Muslim pilgrims.⁴

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¹ Barag 1970, 1971.

² Reworking an existing iconographic repertoire, the flasks find a more literal (and aniconic) counterpart in a series of molded clay lamps from Early Islamic Palestine on which crosses and images of animate beings have been erased; see Dauterman Maguire 2009.

³ See, however, Hoyland 2007, pp. 593–96; Flood 2009, pp. 114–15.

⁴ Avner 2006–7, p. 547.

Reference: Raby 1999.

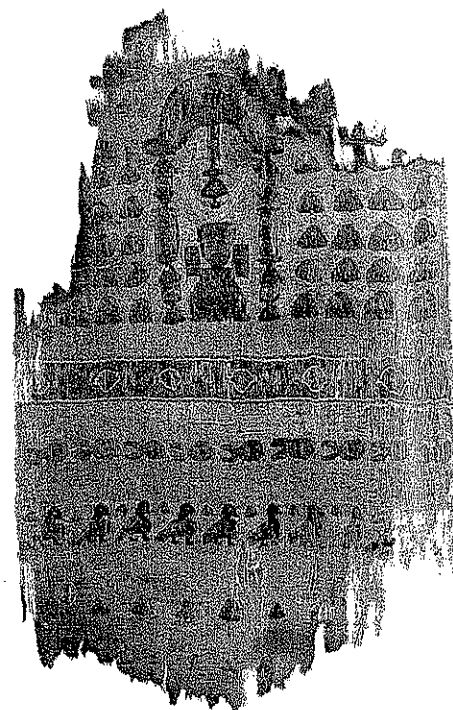
187. Textile Fragment Depicting a Male Figure under an Arch

Egypt, 11th–12th century

Tapestry weave in polychrome silk and undyed linen on plain weave ground of undyed linen

24.8 × 15.7 cm (9 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 6 $\frac{1}{8}$ in.)

Provenance: Acquired by Antonis Benakis (1873–1954) in Egypt in 1929; collection of Antonis Benakis; part of the



BYZANTIUM
AND
ISLAM

AGE OF TRANSITION

7th – 9th Century

EDITED BY

Helen C. Evans with Brandie Ratliff



The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

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