

## History of Islamic Art and Architecture (650-1250)

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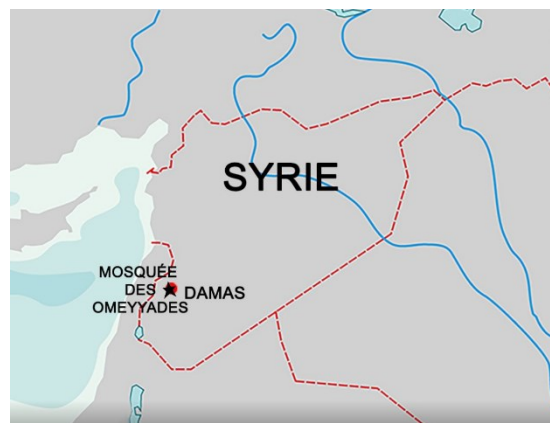
Student: Aymen Aiblu

### "The Great Mosque of Damascus"

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#### Introduction

The Great Umayyad Mosque is located in Damascus, the capital of Syria. It is situated at the heart of the city, where the two main axes of the city, the "cardo" and the "decumanus", intersect. The Great Mosque of Damascus is the earliest surviving stone mosque, built between 705 and 715 CE by the Umayyad Caliph al-Walīd I, who proclaimed to his citizens: "People of Damascus, four things give you a marked superiority over the rest of the world: your climate, your water, your fruits, and your baths. To these I add a fifth: this mosque." Adjacent to the mosque is the tomb of one of the most illustrious Muslim leaders, Saladin, who recaptured Jerusalem from the Crusaders. (A. Schreiber and G. Lotha, 2021)



After the Muslim conquest of Damascus in 634, the mosque was built on the site of a Christian basilica dedicated to John the Baptist, honored as a prophet by both Christians and Muslims. A legend dating to the sixth century holds that the building contains the head of John the Baptist. (Burns, 2005) Two shrines commemorating Husayn ibn Ali (Arabic: مقام الحسين), whose martyrdom is frequently compared to that of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ, exist within the building premises. The mosque is also believed by Muslims to be the place where Jesus will return before the End of Days. (Michael P. 2014)

To understand the importance of the Great Mosque of Damascus we need to look into the recesses of time. Damascus is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world, with archaeological remains dating from as early as 9000 B.C.E., and sacred spaces have been central to the Old City of Damascus ever since. As early as the 9th century B.C.E., a temple was built to Hadad-Ramman, the Semitic god of storm and rain. Though the exact form and shape of this temple is unknown, a bas-relief with a sphinx, believed to come from this temple,

was reused in the northern wall of the city's Great Mosque. The role of the mosque was to accommodate believers for Friday prayers, as well as to bear witness to the power of the Umayyad dynasty. (E. Macaulay)



*Source: Audience d'une ambassade vénitienne à Damas Louvre 1511*

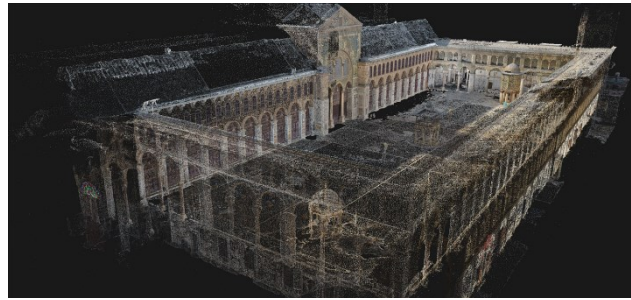


*3D rendering of the courtyard of the Great Umayyad Mosque*

*Source: DGAM & ICONEM 2016*

## The Art and Architecture of the Mosque

The design of the mosque was completely new at the time. It was based on the basilican design of Byzantine churches. The building is noteworthy both for its harmonious proportions and its large size: 157 meters long and 97 meters wide. The courtyard measures 122 meters by 50 meters, and the prayer hall is 136 meters by 36 meters.



*Stage of the 3D rendering of the Grand Mosque of the Umayyads in HD point cloud*

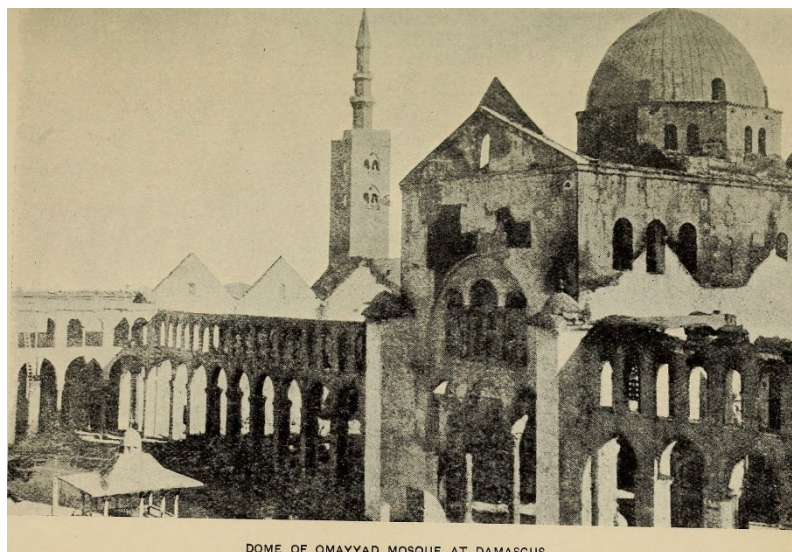
*Source: DGAM & ICONEM 2016*

The history of the mosque is marked by fires, which occurred in 1060, 1166, 1401, 1479, and 1893, when the frame and furnishings were completely destroyed. It was restored between 1904 and 1910, and its current condition is fairly close to how it would have appeared originally.



*Umayyad Mosque of Damascus before the fire taken from the Baudin terrace in 1843*

*Source: Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey*



DOME OF OMAYYAD MOSQUE AT DAMASCUS.

*The mosque after the 1893 fire photo from 1898*

*Source: LanePoole and Stanley*

## Sanctuary (prayer hall)

Three arcades make up the interior space of the sanctuary. They are parallel to the direction of prayer, which is towards Mecca. The arcades are supported by two rows of Corinthian stone columns. Each of the arcades contain two levels. The first level consists of large semi-circular arches, while the second level is made up of double arches. This pattern is the same repeated by the arcades of the courtyard. The three interior arcades intersect in the center of the sanctuary with a larger, higher arcade that is perpendicular to the Qibla wall and faces the mihrab and the minbar. (ArchNet, 2021). The central transept divides the arcades into two halves each with eleven arches. The entire sanctuary measures 136 meters by 37 meters and takes up the southern half of the mosque complex. Four mihrabs line the sanctuary's rear wall, the main one being the Great Mihrab which is located at the center of the wall.

The Mihrab of the Companions of the Prophet (named after the Sahaba) is situated in the eastern half. According to ancient Muslim engineer Musa ibn Shakir, the latter mihrab was built during the mosque's initial construction, and it became the third niche-formed mihrab in Islam's history. (Grafman and Ayalon, 1999)



*Panoramic view of the prayer hall, with the mihrab in the center (looking south) and the Shrine of John the Baptist visible to the left*

*Source: Photographer Ali Alsamadi*

## The Courtyard of the Mosque

In the courtyard (sahn), the level of the stone pavement had become uneven over time due to several repairs throughout the mosque's history. Recent work on the courtyard has restored it to its consistent Umayyad-era levels. Riwaq surrounds the courtyard supported by alternating stone columns and piers. There is one pier in between every two columns. Because the northern part of the courtyard had been destroyed in an earthquake in 1759, the arcade is not consistent; when the northern wall was rebuilt the columns that were supporting it were not. The courtyard and its riwaq contain the largest preserved remnants of the mosque's Umayyad-era mosaic decoration. (R. Ettinghausen and O. Grabar, 2001)

Several domed pavilions stand in the courtyard. The Dome of the Treasury (Qubbat al-Khazna) is an octagonal structure decorated with mosaics, standing on eight Roman columns in the western part of the courtyard. The dome was built under orders from the Abbasid governor Fadl ibn Salih in the 8th century, but its mosaics were largely remade in the late 20th-century restoration. In a mirror position on the other side of the courtyard is the Dome of the

Clock, another octagonal domed pavilion. Near the middle of the courtyard, sheltering an ablutions fountain at ground level, is a rectangular pavilion which is a modern reconstruction of a late Ottoman pavilion. (Alain George, 2021)



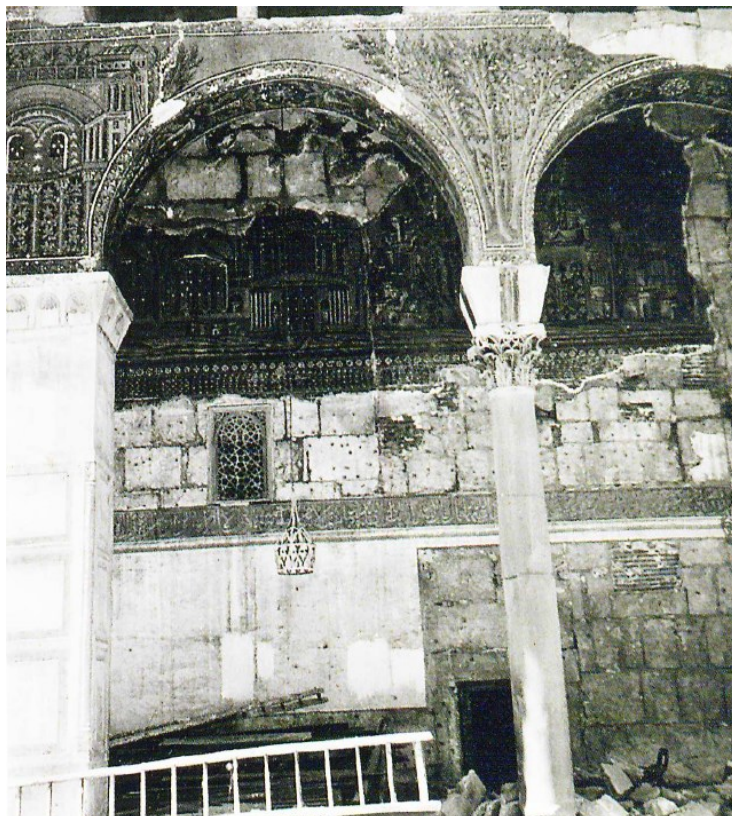
*Courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque, view from east left towards west right.  
Notable structures Dome of the Clock far left, and the Minaret of Isa Jesus*

*Source: Photographer Ali Alsamadi*



*West courtyard pier with mosaics set in modern concrete*

*Source: Alain George 2010*



*West riwq, section of temenos wall with exposed masonry  
Source: Rene Mousterde after 1928 Beirut Bibliotheque orientale*



*section of west riwq  
Source: Alain George 2010*

## Bayt al-Mal at the Courtyard of the Mosque

Of the three-domed structures that now stand in the courtyard, only one existed in the first Islamic centuries: the raised octagonal chamber on columns near the northwest corner. In the tenth century, al-Muqaddasi wrote: "On the right (if one faces the qibla), in the courtyard, is a treasury (bayt mal) on eight columns, its walls inlaid with mosaics". This was also the term used by sources in early Islam to describe similar structures at Fustat and elsewhere. This suggests that it served as treasury – the general meaning of bayt al-mal – whether for mosque endowments or some other public fund, as assumed by some medieval writers. With the passing of time, it grew into a repository for discarded old manuscripts that began to attract the attention of European scholars from the turn of the twentieth century. According to al-Badri, the Bayt al-Mal dates to the days of al-Walid and was built with stones from the northeast and northwest temenos towers. Al-Dhahabi and Ibn Taghri Birdi assert that it was founded by the Abbasid governor of Damascus al-Fadl ibn Salih in Ali, under the caliph al-Mahdi. (A. George, 2021)

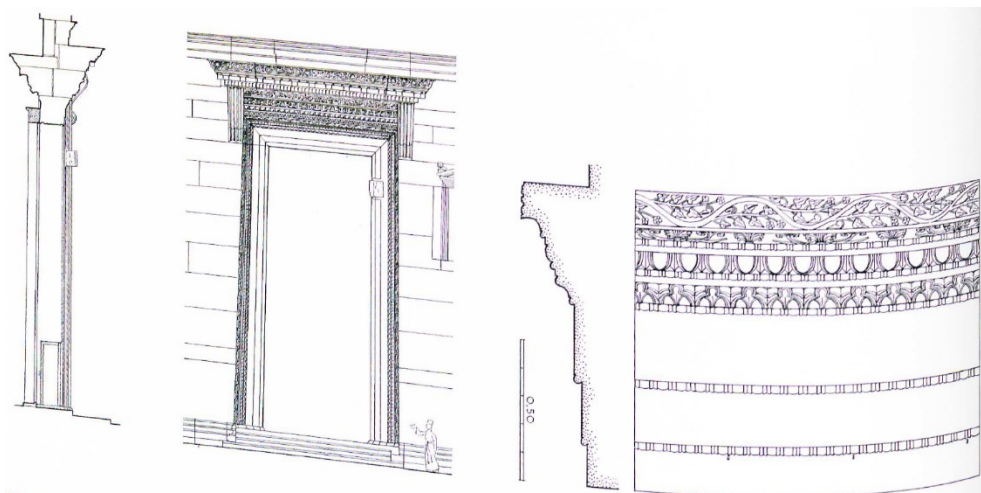


*Bayt alMal south side*  
*Source: Alain George 2010*

The walls of the Bayt al-Mal are currently concealed by its mosaics, most of which are twentieth-century creations based on limited original fragments. These were revealed underneath plaster in 1928-29, together with the mosaics of the west courtyard arcade. The masonry and historical mosaics can thus be documented through photographs taken in that interval. The architraves, with their downward-facing ovoid globes, vegetal motifs, and three recessed steps, echo the outer frame of the cella gate at the Temple of Bel in Palmyra, as well as other Roman monuments. The inner dome below the chamber has its apex at the same level as the top of the second stone course: its structure is concealed by plaster, making it impossible to date. In photographs from the early twentieth century, the original mosaic panels cover the upper decorative border of the architrave fragments. This border appears to have been cropped vertically from a larger frieze, and it has no counterpart on the inner sides of the architraves. (A. George, 2021)



*Bayt al-Mal, dome and architraves viewed from the interior by  
Ross Burns Manar al-Athar 2009  
Source: Alain George*



*Cella entrance gate and detail of carved mouldings of lintel,  
Temple of Bel. Palmyra  
Source: Alain George*



## Minarets

Within the Umayyad Mosque complex are three minarets. The Minaret of Jesus (Madhanat Isa) on the south-east corner, second on the south-western corner is the Minaret of Qaitbay (Madhanat al-Gharbiyya), and the third, the Minaret of the Bride (Madhanat al-Arus), is located along the northern wall.



*Minaret of Isa, the mosque's tallest minaret*  
Source: Bernard Gagnon



*Minaret of Qaitbay, constructed in 1488 on the orders of Sultan Qaitbay*  
Source: Bernard Gagnon



*Minaret of the Bride, the first minaret built for the mosque*  
Source: Bernard Gagnon

## The Mosaics of the Mosque

The Umayyads used various decoration techniques to embellish their mosques. In the Great Mosque of Damascus, the decoration, for the most part, comprises mosaics, which adorn the upper parts of the building, while the lower sections of the walls were clad with marble panels. The same division is found in Byzantine churches. The mosaics of the Great Mosque of Damascus are, together with those of the Dome of the Rock of Jerusalem, the best-preserved examples of this form of art under the Umayyads, but are only a remnant of the entire original decoration, most of which was destroyed by several fires, the last of which occurred in 1893. Although there were still a few fragments visible early in the twentieth century, the most important mosaics that can be seen today were first uncovered in 1929, when the plaster covering them - applied by the Ottomans - began to be removed. The main Umayyad-era mosaics, created circa 715, that have survived are in the western vestibule, in the courtyard's western portico, on the façade, and on the façade of the transept of the mosque. Over the



*Details of upper tier, west courtyard riwaq, Great Mosque of Damascus*  
Source: Alain George 2006

centuries, the repairs carried out on the mosaics altered their original appearance very little. However, the twentieth-century restorations were not always undertaken with great scientific rigor. Large blanks were covered in a more or less felicitous imitation of Umayyad mosaics in places. These restorations are generally easy to identify because of the dividing lines, if not by their style and color, which are often different from the older mosaics.

The decoration is essentially comprised of landscapes in which images of towns or isolated houses take a central place, as well as of groups of geometrical and plant ornamental motifs. The subjects stand out against a golden background, and the predominant colors are most certainly blue and green.

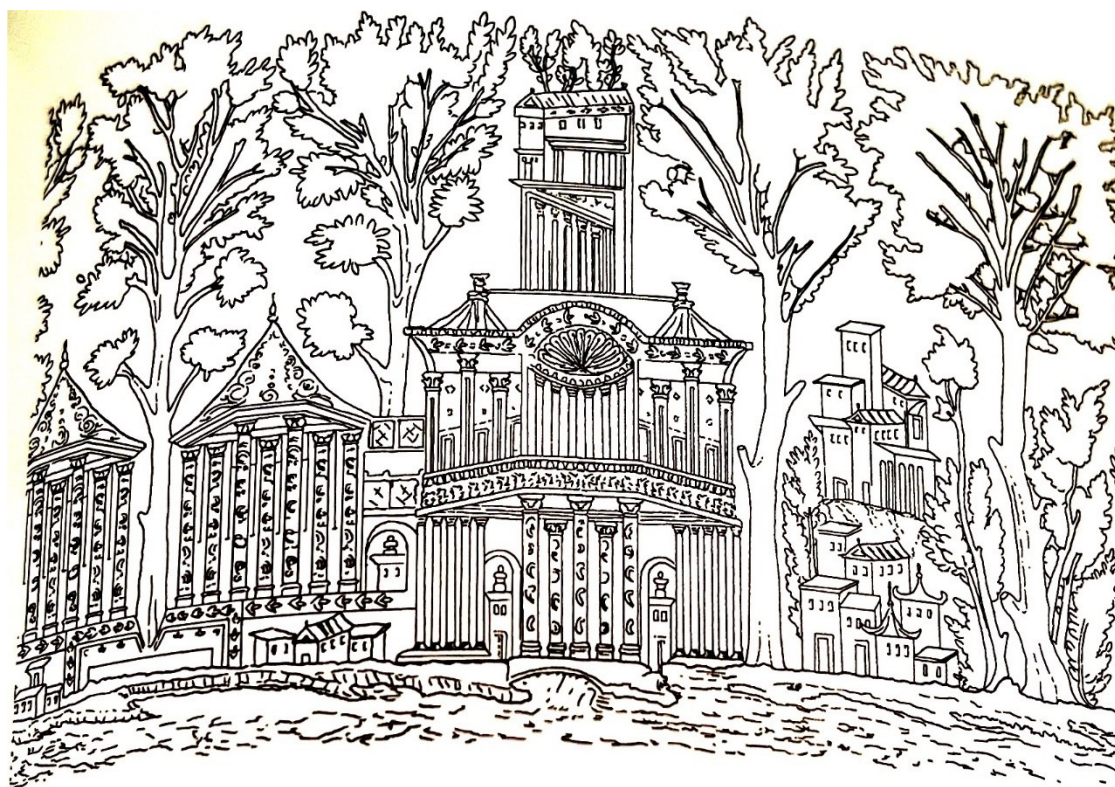
The most important remaining panel, known as the "Barada" because the river shown all along this mosaic is often identified as the one that crosses Damascus, measures approximately 34.5 meters by 7.15 meters. It is located in the western portico. The towns and villages are formed of various architectural elements assembled somewhat curiously; many varieties of trees stand between them. The same subjects were reproduced everywhere, such as on the transept façade, where two architectural works still remain. Several hypotheses have been put forward to interpret this decoration, which may consist of images of paradise, as was often the case in other Byzantine buildings where this type of subject was also depicted. (Gautier-Van Berchem, M., 1969)

The artists who created this decorative work were trained in Byzantine art and may have been local Christian or Muslim artists. However, precedence should perhaps be given to the suggestion that Byzantine artists were at work here. Although the style of the Damascus mosaics and their repertory of ornamental forms, as well as the images of landscapes, are clearly based on Byzantine and late classical models, the iconography as a whole is nevertheless different from that of Byzantine churches. The most striking difference is the absence of humans and animals in the illustrations, which implies, of course, the absence of narrative scenes. This is one of the first examples of the application of the Islamic ban on the representation of animate creatures. Here it should be remembered that this ban concerned sacred art, profane art being mainly figurative.

Thus Christian art of late Antiquity and Byzantine art both provided forms and styles, and sometimes even artists to the Arab world, who made use of them to develop a new art according to their own rules and tastes. (O. Grabar, 1964)



*Mosaic, Great Mosque of Damascus, 8th century*  
*Source: photo by american rugbier*



*Drawings of Mosaic, Great Mosque of Damascus, 8th century*  
*Source: Alain George*



*Bayt al-Mal panels 2010*  
*Source: Alain George*



*The Bayt al-Mal, original mosaics on north side 2009*  
*Source: Alain George*



*The northwest courtyard corner viewed from the west arcade by Said Nuseibeh 2006*  
*Source: Alain George*

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