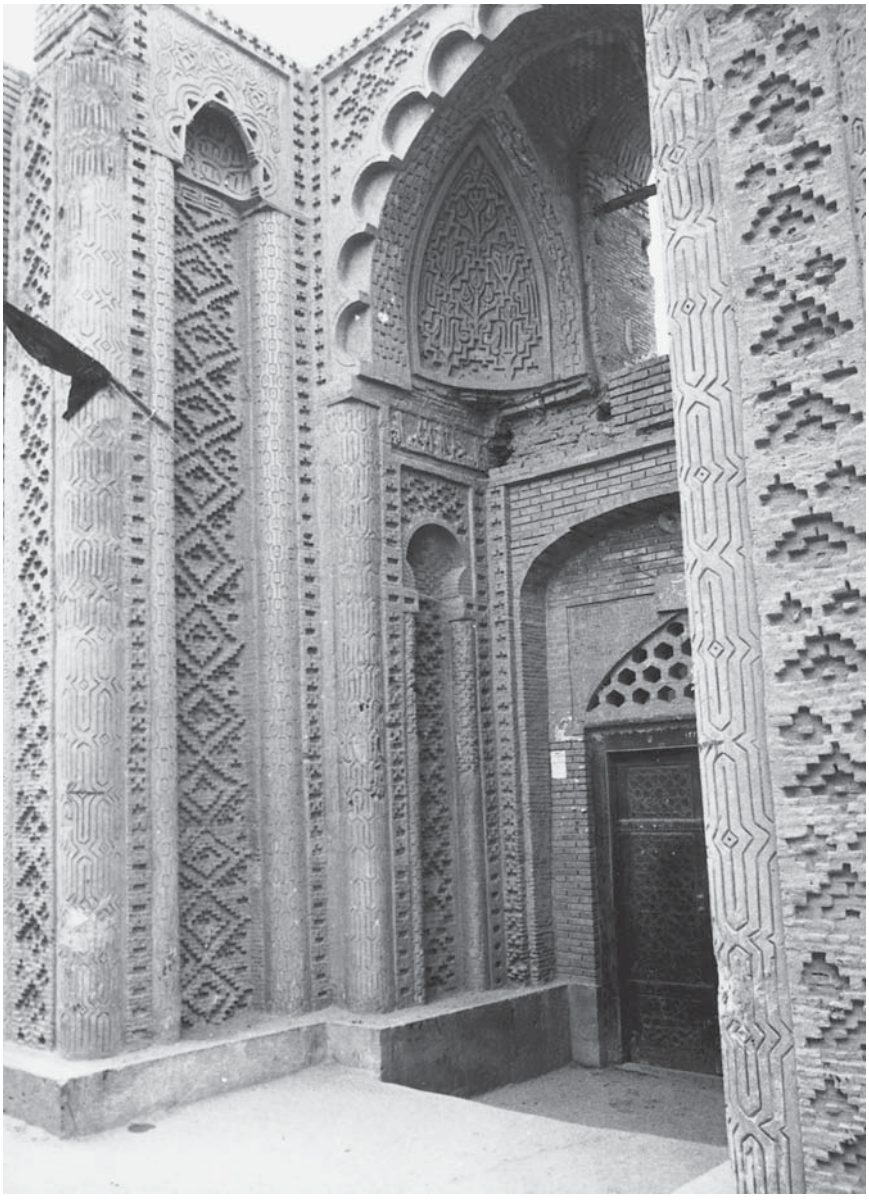
Chapter XV

Isfahan as a Mirror of Persian Architecture*

All travelers to Iran are aware of the saying that Isfahan is *nesf-e jehan*, "half the world," and few visitors to that city, even jaded and cynical scholars, have failed to be infected by an enthusiasm for it which is usually more characteristic of travel agents and cheaper guide books. In a way there is something odd about this enthusiasm, for most of its palaces are now gone, its great avenue, the Chehar Bagh, is crowded with bicycles, automobiles, souvenir shops, and cheaper versions of ten-cent stores, and its celebrated bridges cross a non-existent river blocked somewhere else by a modern dam. Isfahan is a modern industrial town and, while its setting is no doubt impressive, it does not at first glance have the spectacular quality of Persepolis or the deeply felt holiness of Qumm or Mashad, nor does it possess the feverish activity, the libraries or the museums of Tehran.

Why then this reputation? There are, I submit, two reasons. One is perhaps limited in its importance to students of traditional Iran and of classical Islamic civilization. It is that Isfahan is fairly well known, not only through its monuments but also through the life it contained in its heyday in the seventeenth century. The Persian sources have been combed and analyzed by Professor Falsafi and related in the four volumes of his *Zendegani-e Shah 'Abbas-e Avval*, but a sense of the city is also available through contemporary Western eyes. The critical businessman Tavernier, the enthusiastic traveler Pietro della Valle, and the longtime resident Chardin have recreated its streets and buildings. One can reconstruct its building activities, its mercantile excitement, its royal parades and ceremonies, its polo games and entertainment, its often cruel law enforcement, its varied population, even its seamy sides like the apparently flourishing prostitution in its main square. Only Cairo and Istanbul are similarly well documented, but the accounts pertaining to Isfahan are unique for their liveliness and for their literary merits. As they describe the glorious and the shoddy but mostly the immensely human mechanics of seventeenth-century life, they illustrate much more than one period only; they are [214] a document for

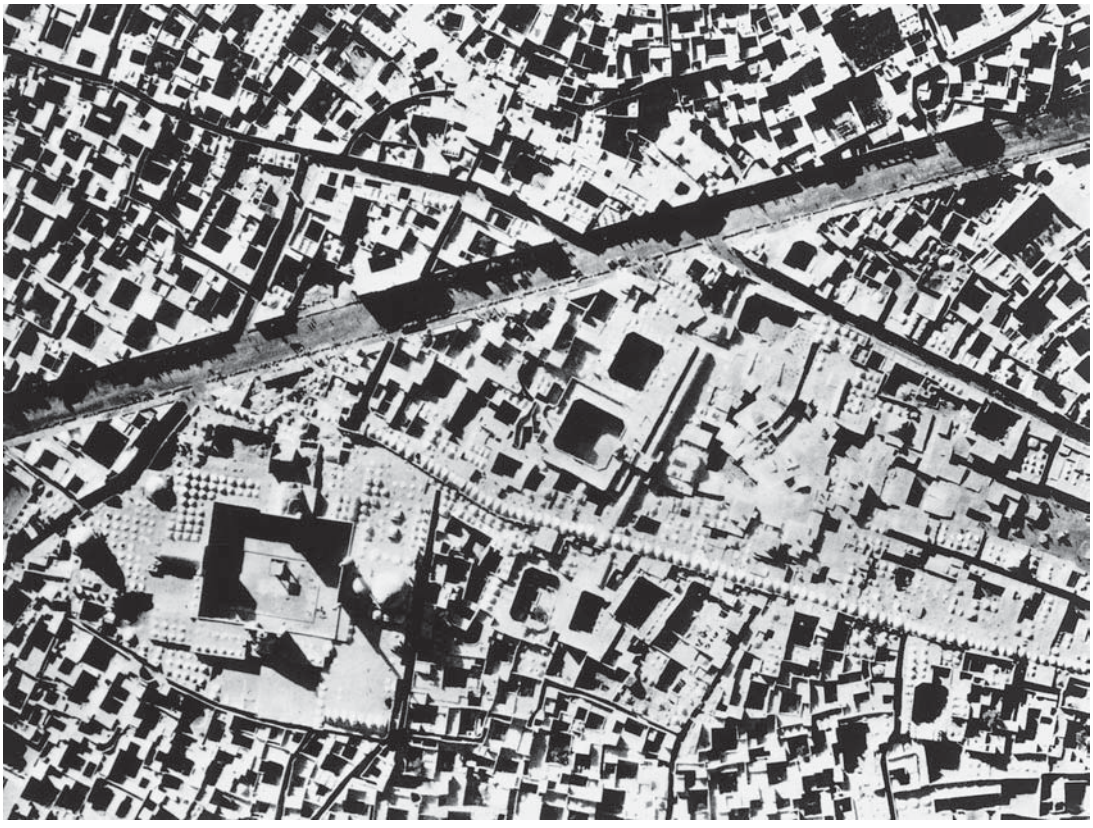
* First published in R. Ettinghausen and E. Yarshater, eds, *Highlights of Persian Art* (Boulder, 1979), pp. 213–42.



1 Isfahan, the so-called Jurjir mosque, façade, tenth century

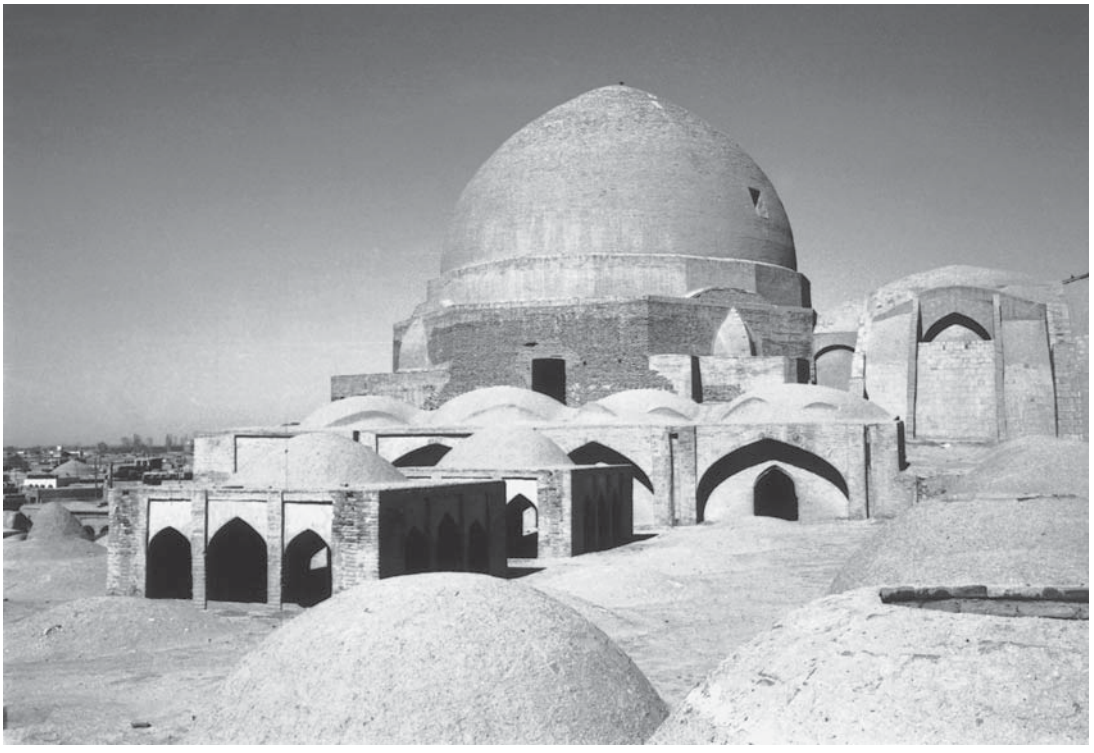
the whole of the Near East and, in a broader sense, a superb and precise panorama of one version of human experience.

The other source of Isfahan's reputation is its architecture. From the so-called Jurjir mosque façade (Fig. 1), probably of the tenth century, through the Masjed-e Jom'eh with its eleventh-, twelfth- and fourteenth-century elements, the Darb-e Emam or the Masjed-e 'Ali of the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, ending with the seventeenth-century complex around the Meydan-e Shah and the eighteenth-century *madrasa* of the Madar-e



2 Isfahan, Masjed-e Jom'eh, air view

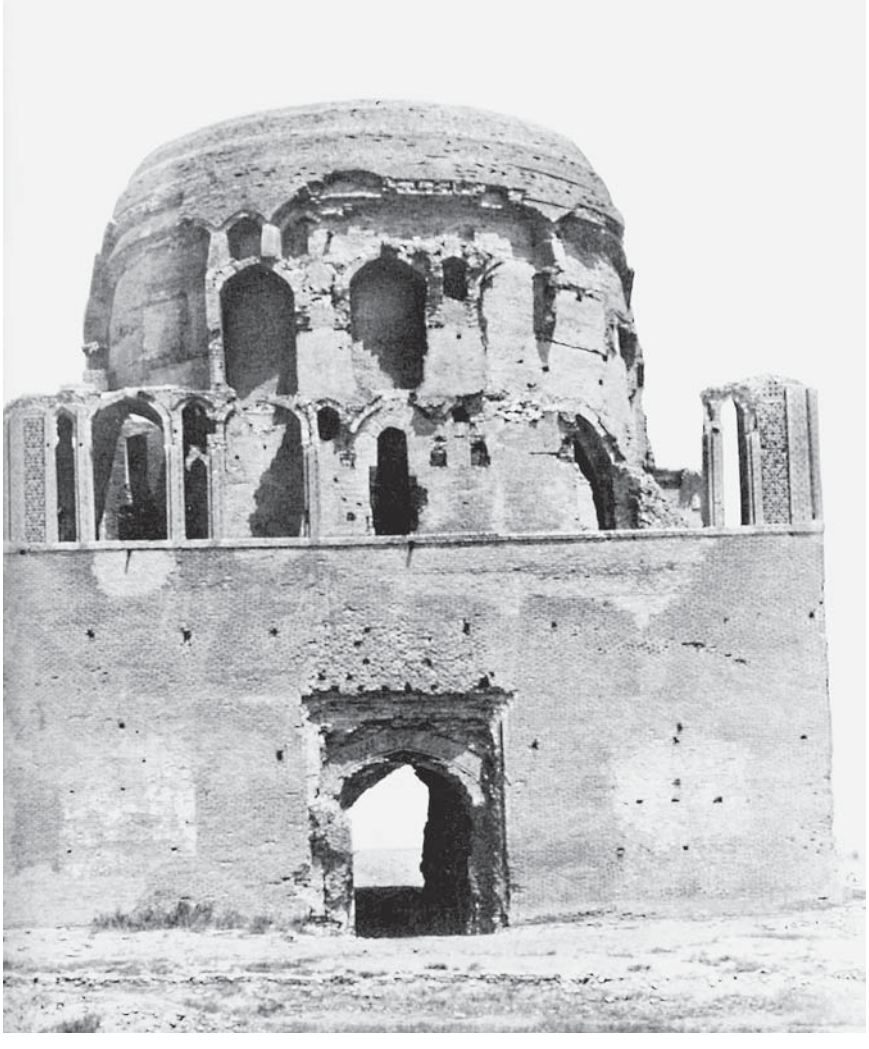
Shah, it is the whole panorama of Iranian Islamic architecture which is visible in Isfahan. No other Iranian city possesses the same range and only the early fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are better represented in Tabriz, Soltaniyeh, Samarkand, or Mashhad. It is true of course that individual monuments elsewhere – Oljaytu's Mausoleum, the *madrasa* of Khargerd, the Kharraqan tombs, the fourteenth-century buildings of Yazd, or the monuments of Herat – may be far greater masterpieces than all but two of Isfahan's remaining buildings. But the presence in one city of so many monuments and especially the preservation of the two unique ensembles of the Masjed-e Jom'eh and of the Meydan-e Shah make it possible to pose there better than anywhere else in Iran some fundamental questions about Islamic Iranian architecture, in a way about any architectural tradition: what kinds of meaning can and should be attributed to the visible and measurable forms? How should one see and appreciate them? Are there specific and unique characteristics of the Iranian architectural experiment which in some fashion or other explain or illustrate a facet of the broader culture of Islamic Iran? Or is the cultural uniqueness secondary to a more general human search for sheltering a variety of activities? How are we to interpret differences and changes which may have occurred? Do they



3 Isfahan, Masjed-e Jom'eh, *qiblah* dome from the outside, late eleventh century

illustrate variable aspects of the same culture or are they incompatible with each other?

Such are the kinds of questions which have so far hardly been investigated in Islamic or Iranian art, except in very recent months by Nader Ardalan, whose *Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture* is a revolutionary attempt at explaining at least one facet of Iranian architecture. Part of the reason for the paucity of such research is simply that it is a new field; few monuments are well published or archaeologically investigated and only fifty years ago most of them were not even accessible. Hence it seemed only natural that so much effort has been centered on apparently prosaic, but in reality essential, publications of standing or ruined monuments, on lists of inscriptions, and on the search for historical documents. But another reason is that traditional Iranian writing lacks the formally expressed [215] thoughts of practitioners like Vitruvius or Alberti to guide us in the interpretation of monuments. We have no contemporary aesthetic judgment to initiate discussion in the manner, for instance, of Rudolph Wittkower's study of Renaissance architecture in Italy; we do not even possess a coherent terminology for the parts of buildings or for their ornament, although some research is being carried out to record at least contemporary terms before they are submerged in a new vocabulary of building. The historian is, therefore, compelled to use principles and methods developed in other lands and for other times and, with them, to seek



4 Merv, tomb of Sultan Sanjar, *c.* 1150–60

answers in the monuments themselves. This technique has obvious dangers of misinterpretation, either because it applies alien methods to an indigenous tradition or because it seeks to draw conclusions and to develop hypotheses before a sufficient number of monuments have been adequately published. The remarks which follow must, therefore, be considered as a very preliminary and very tentative attempt at setting up the sort of intellectual framework through which medieval Iranian monuments could be understood as aesthetic phenomena and not simply as historical or cultural documents for various types of human activities or for certain forms of piety. The manner in which I should like to present these remarks consists of describing briefly the two most impressive monuments of Isfahan, of proposing an aesthetic definition of each one, and then of drawing up a few hypothetical suggestions for further work and meditation.

5 Dashti, *qiblah* dome in mosque, fourteenth century

The Masjed-e Jom'eh

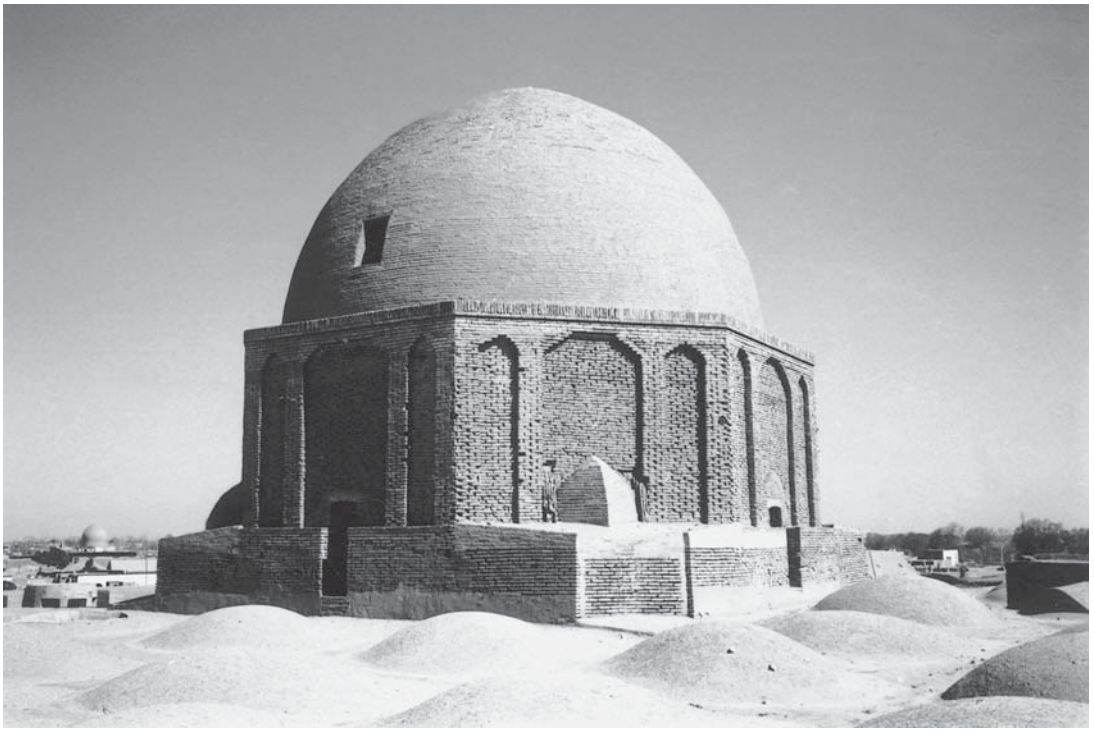
This is not the place to discuss the immense chronological problems of this most celebrated building, often seen as the Chartres of Iran, for its archaeological investigation is in progress and preliminary reports have already brought to light many new documents. Our concern in the context of this essay is less with details of chronology or with specific dates than with the character and significance of its major features.

As it appears in air photographs (Fig. 2), it consists of a central open area with a typical façade of four *eyvans* around the open space; from this core, aesthetically a sort of inverted Parthenon whose fixed modular anchor is in the middle of the building rather than on the outside, the monument spreads out and almost melts into the surrounding city. There are many separate elements involved in the monument, including an almost independent fourteenth-century *madrasa*, and much discussion has taken place about the chronological development of the mosque. Without concerning ourselves with the possibly pre-Islamic fragments found recently, we may agree that there are Muslim remains ranging from the ninth to the seventeenth [217] century but that the central core existed in approximately its present architectural if not decorative scheme either in the twelfth or in the fourteenth century. Whichever date is to

6 Samarkand, Bibi Khanom mosque, *qiblah* dome, early fifteenth century

be eventually adopted, the key point is that the mosque is a complex conglomerate which did not acquire its presently visible compositional unity until relatively late. Very much as at Chartres, therefore, any consideration of its aesthetic values must, at this stage of our knowledge, be limited to individual parts.

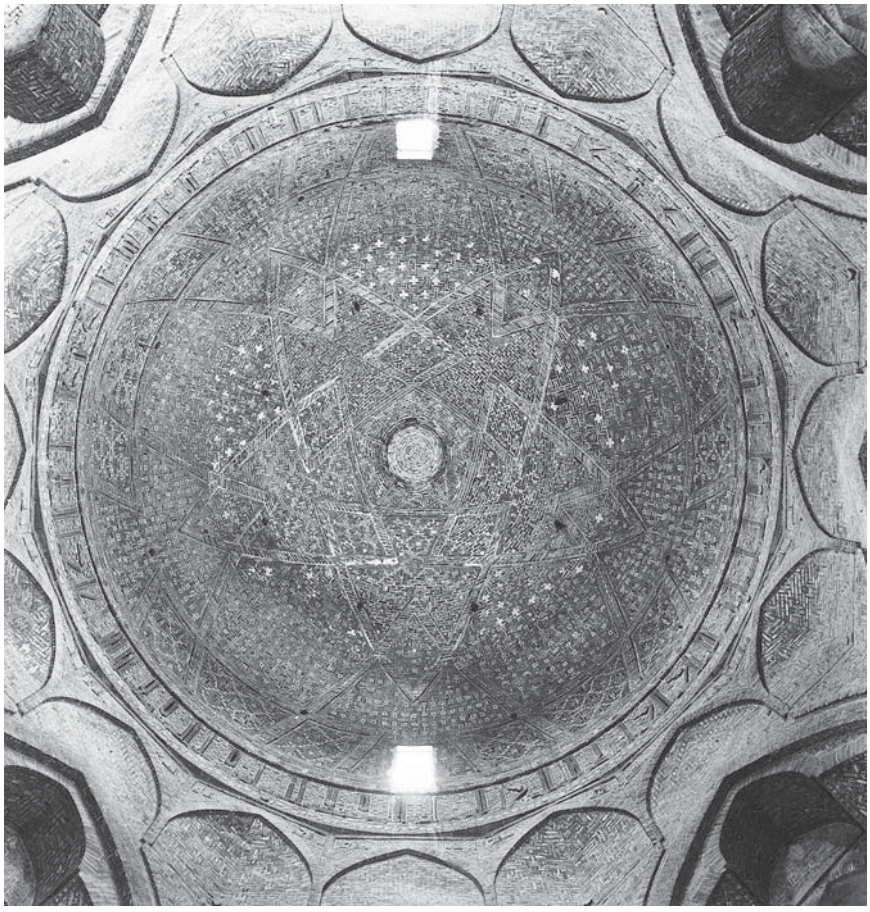
Two of these stand out as unique masterpieces and have been recognized as such since they became known. One is the *qiblah* dome (Fig. 3). It belongs to a well-established group of cupolas either standing alone as holy places or central foci of a larger mosque. The former appear most frequently as mausoleums, as for instance the tomb of Sultan Sanjar in Merv (Fig. 4); the latter are particularly characteristic of mosques from the eleventh to the fourteenth century in western Iran (Fig. 5) where they were frequently built separately from the rest of the building, while in later times they became integral parts of architectural compositions, as in Samarkand's Bibi Khanom mosque (Fig. 6). On the same axis, but at the opposite end of the monument, is found the so-called North dome (Figs 7–10), whose original purpose is still somewhat of a mystery. Both of these two domes are dated in the second half of the eleventh century and, while they differ in that the northern one possesses a far more complex elevation, they share a number of features as well. They are large, massive brick constructions towering above everything around them. From the outside the *qiblah* dome appears as an almost contemporary construction in which nothing is visible except the medium of construction and the solid purity of simple forms. The North dome is



7 Isfahan, Masjed-e Jom'eh, North dome, outside, late eleventh century

articulated through a series of recesses on its octagonal section, but this articulation is accomplished through the bricks of the construction and only serves to emphasize the main lines of the monument.

The interior of both domes is more complex. In the *qiblah* dome the square, with its articulated heavy piers, appears as a separate entity from the octagonal zone of transition with *muqarnas* squinches providing the main rhythm of the zone and from a simple cupola with clearly visible ribs. The North dome is a much more unified composition, with the square and the zone of transition composed together through an elaborate articulation of piers logically connected with the superstructure. As has been demonstrated by Schroeder, every major point in the elevation was consciously determined according to the irrational proportions of the Golden Mean. The cupola itself is not connected with its lower part according to the same visible articulations [220], but it contains its own complex compositional rhythm based this time on a central pentagon from which a linear pattern is generated. While not an architectonic one, the latter utilizes the medium of construction and, even though it appears unnecessary to the construction, almost like an applied ornament, it is in reality intimately bound to the overall composition of the room, for its pentagonal design is also the result of the same type of numerical proportions as are required by the Golden Mean. It is almost like a two-dimensional elaboration of the three-dimensional room. [222]

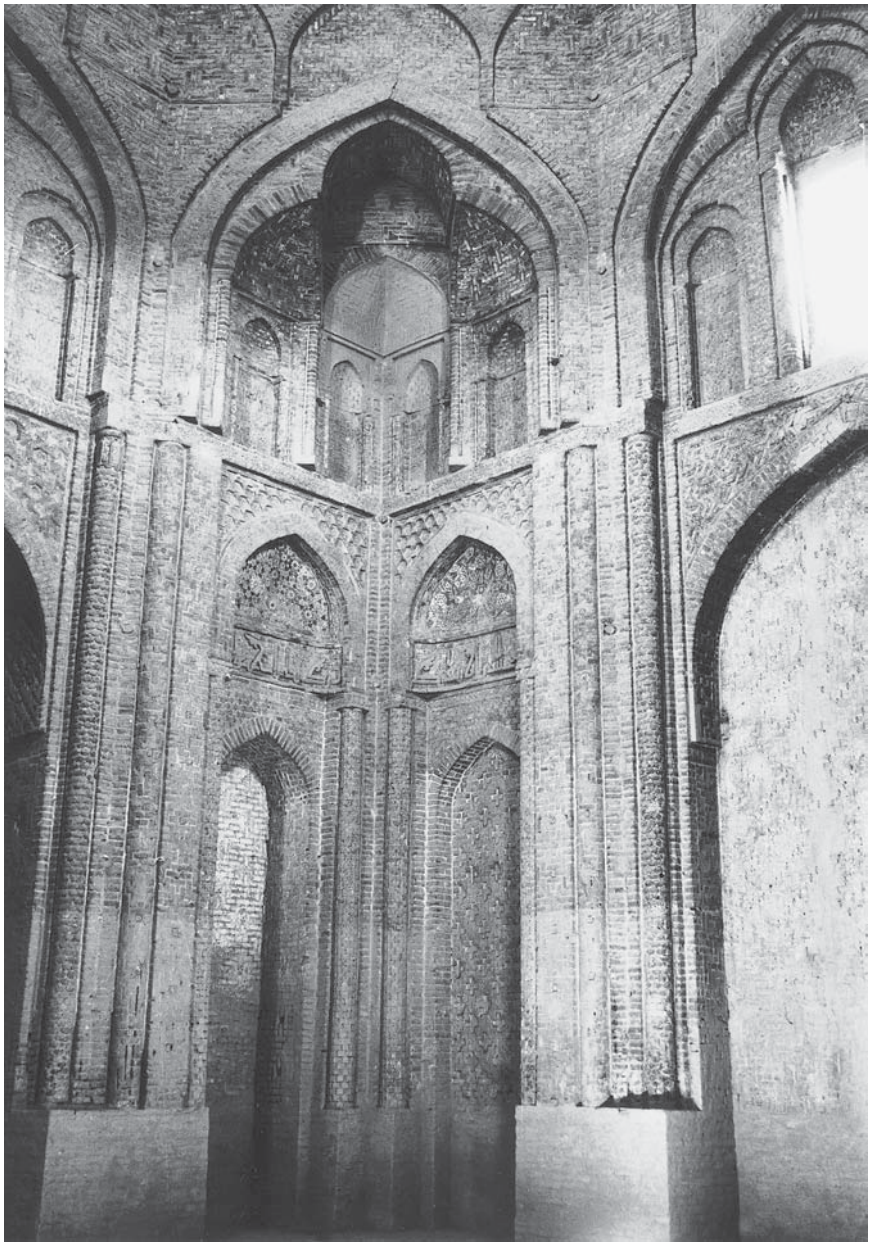


8 Isfahan, Masjed-e Jom'eh, North dome, inside of dome

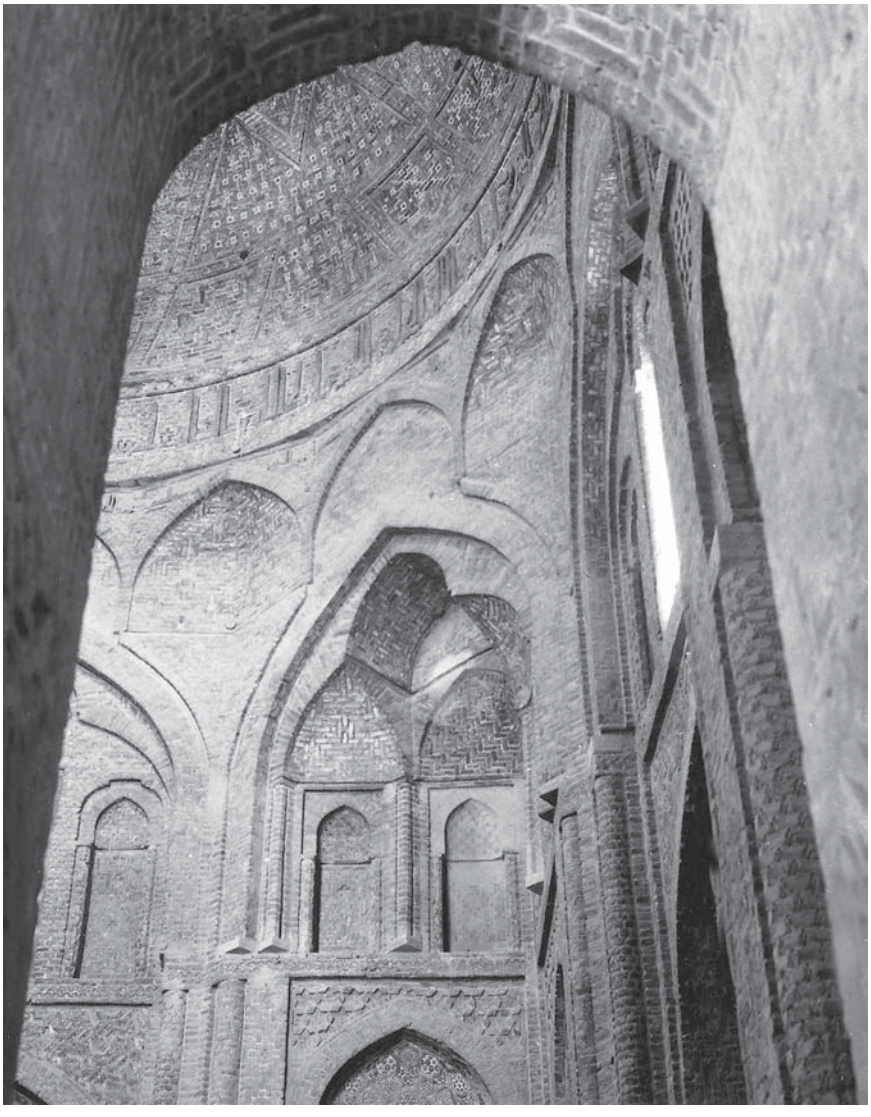
In both cupolas the *muqarnas* in the octagon (Fig. 10) serves best to illustrate the main point. For this formal unit, which breaks up the curvature of the squinch niche and possesses only minimal structural value, if any, has been made to appear as belonging to the logic of construction. Its segments, which in many earlier and at times later monuments seem arbitrary combinations of vaulted parts, are here provided with architectural sense. Even if they do not really support the dome, their arrangement suggests that they may do so. And the surface decoration which exists in both domes in the form of stucco or [223] terracotta does not overwhelm the spatial and architectonic perception one acquires of the building.

Much more, of course, can and should be said about these two domes. But my main point is that, through their immediate visual impact as well as through an analysis of some of their parts, they illustrate what I should like to call an architectonic strand in Iranian architecture, a concern for solid large masses, for constructional logic, for a coherent and immediate identification of the spatial units of a [225] building. It is a tradition that is

9 Isfahan, Masjed-e Jom'eh, North dome, interior of room



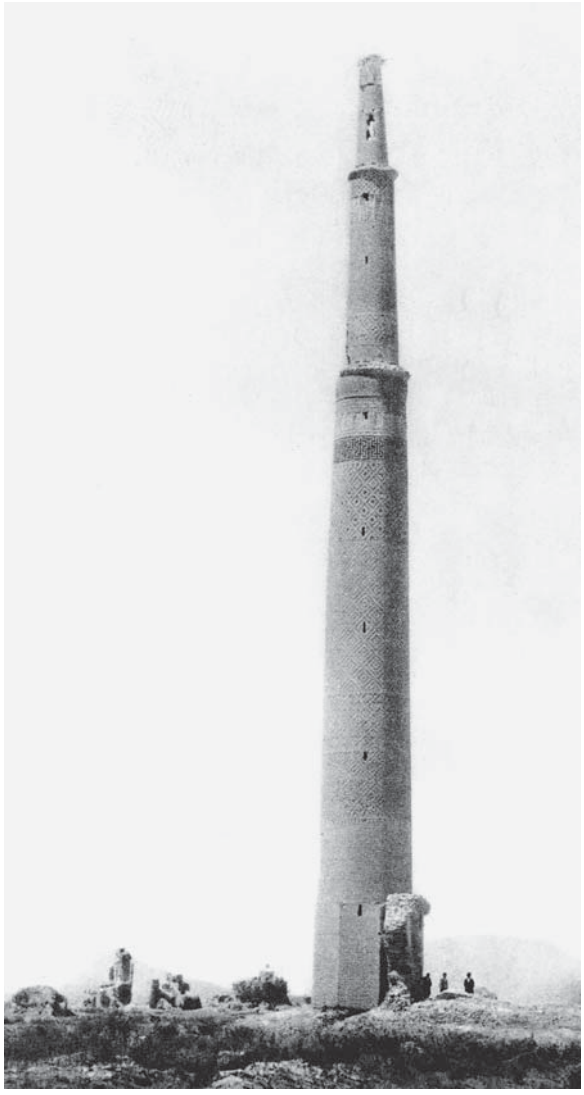
illustrated elsewhere in the mosque in many of its smaller domes and vaults; it appears in twelfth-century minarets in the area of Isfahan (Fig. 11), and in a celebrated series of twelfth-century mosques like those of Ardestan, Barsian and Zavareh or in many tower tombs and mausoleums of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, like the strikingly modern Gonbad-e Qabus (Fig. 12). It certainly continues in the fourteenth-century buildings with the spectacular and megalomaniac mosque of 'Ali Shah in Tabriz and with the mausoleum



10 Isfahan, Masjed-e Jom'eh, North dome, *muqarnas* squinch

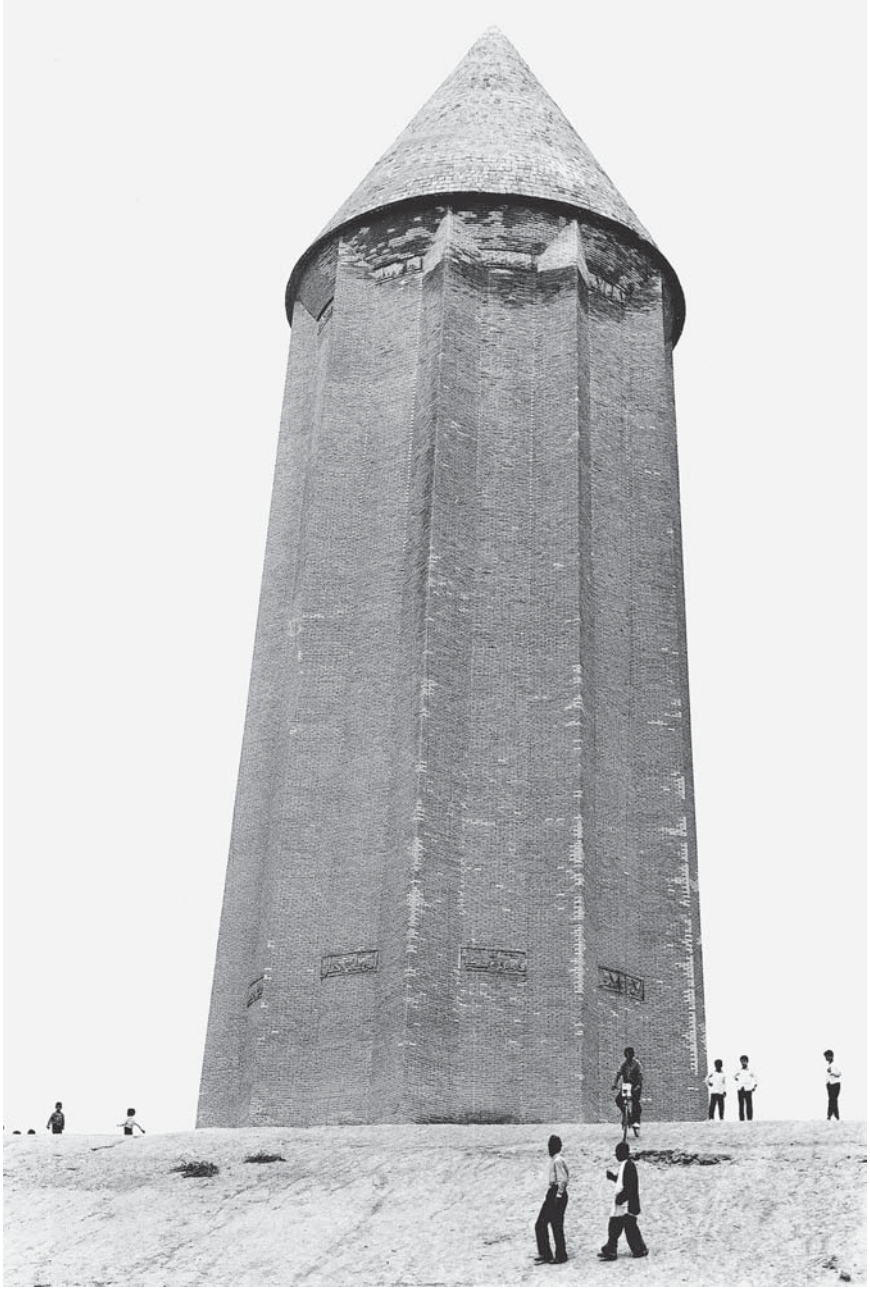
of Oljaytu (Fig. 13). It reappears in fifteenth-century buildings like the *madrasa* of Khargird, the Eshrat-khaneh in Samarkand, or the Tayabad sanctuary (Fig. 14). In other words, even though it is most characteristic of eleventh- and twelfth-century monuments, a primarily architectonic tradition emphasizing engineering skills and structural values remained for several centuries as a central concern of Iranian Islamic architecture, the extent and temporal or geographical limits of the concern still requiring investigation. [228]

A word of caution is, however, necessary. While the two late eleventh-century Isfahan examples I have discussed are particularly brilliant examples

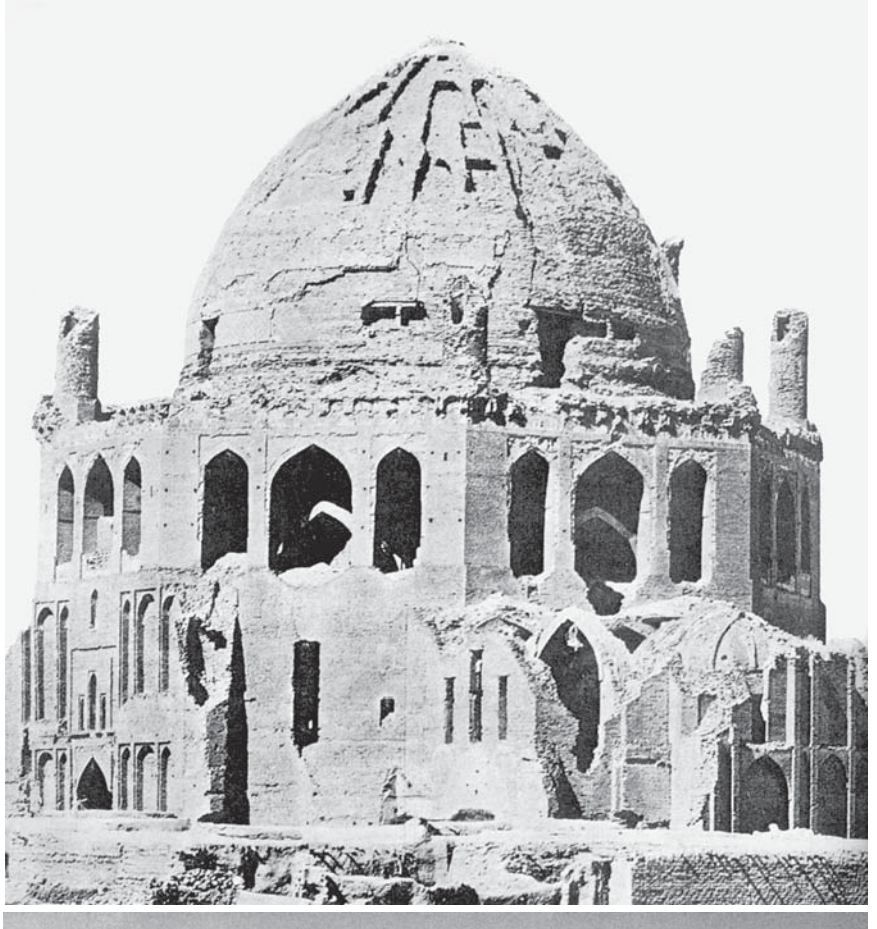


11 Ziyar (near Isfahan), minaret, twelfth century

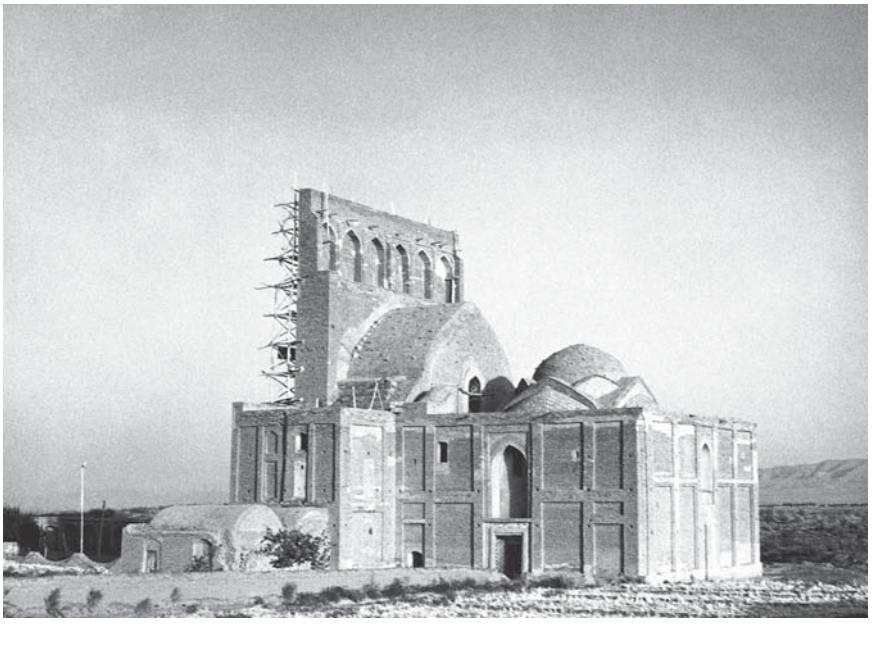
of an architectonic conception of a building, many details of these or of contemporary and comparable buildings suggest something else. A detail of a niche in the North dome of Isfahan (Fig. 15), or sides of mausoleums like those of Demavend or of Kharraqan, or else the detail of many minarets (Fig. 16) introduce another concern, with which I shall deal presently, even though the buildings themselves possess the massive sturdiness of the architectonic tradition. The question is to decide what was primarily meant to be seen, the detail or the ensemble, and in what relationship to each other. While the concern for overall proportions in the North dome of Isfahan makes it likely that the whole unit took precedence [229] over its details, the matter is not always clear, and research



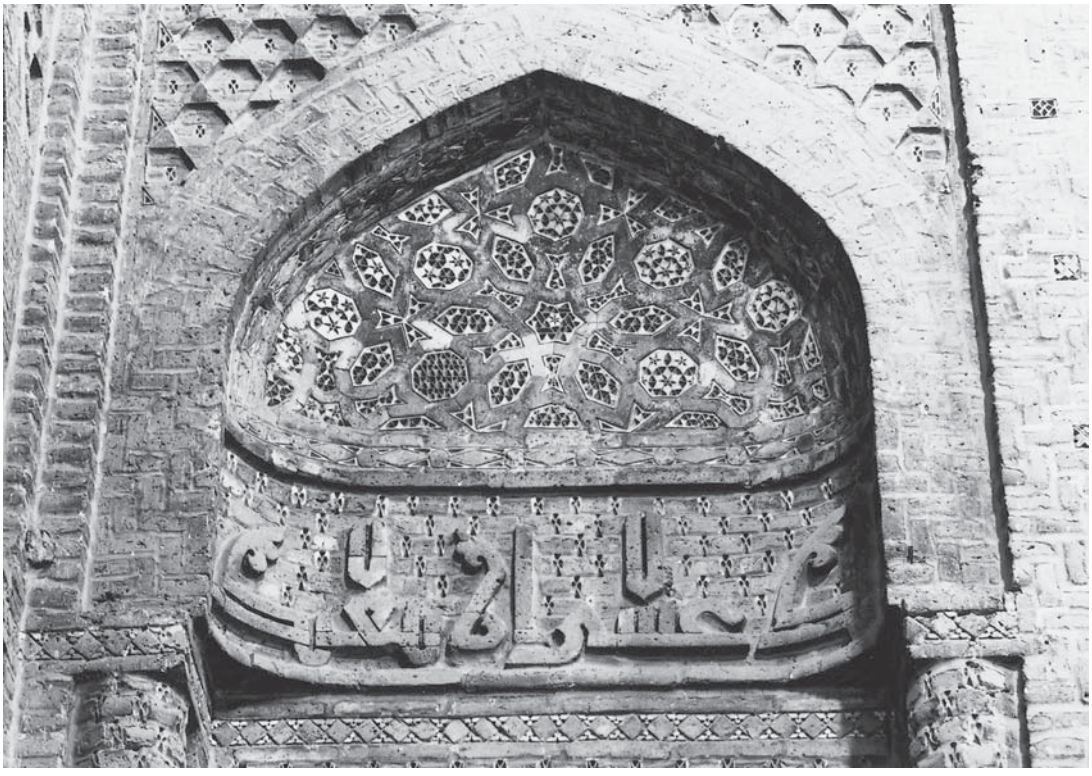
12 Gonbad-e Qabus, tower-mausoleum, early eleventh century



13 Sultaniyah, mausoleum of Oljaytu, early fourteenth century



14 Tayabad, mausoleum of Zayn al-Din, fourteenth–fifteenth century



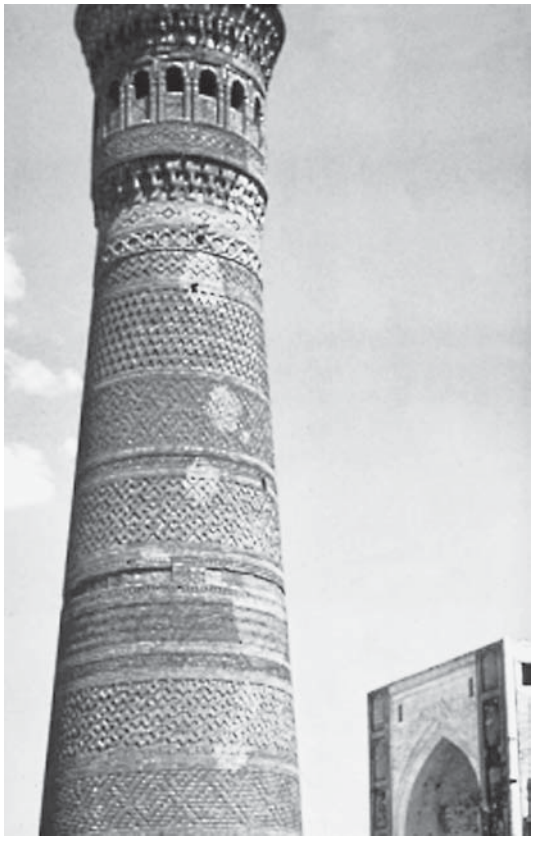
15 Isfahan, Masjed-e Jom'eh, North dome, detail of wall decoration

of a different kind other than art-historical analysis is necessary to find out how these and other buildings were meant to be perceived. But in a broader sense the conclusion I want to emphasize is that the tradition I am seeking to isolate should not be considered as exclusive of other ways of conceiving a work of monumental architecture.

Safavid Constructions around the Meydan-e Shah

The Meydan-e Shah and its immediate surroundings are a creation of Shah Abbas between 1598 and 1628 with a number of additions and completions under Shah Safi and other seventeenth-century monarchs. The center of the composition (Fig. 17) is a huge (512 by 159 meters) open space used for a variety of purposes: polo playing, [230] parades, games, festivals, executions and so forth. The Meydan was lined with shops in what was originally, according to Tavernier, a reasonably organized hierarchy of trading and manufacture.

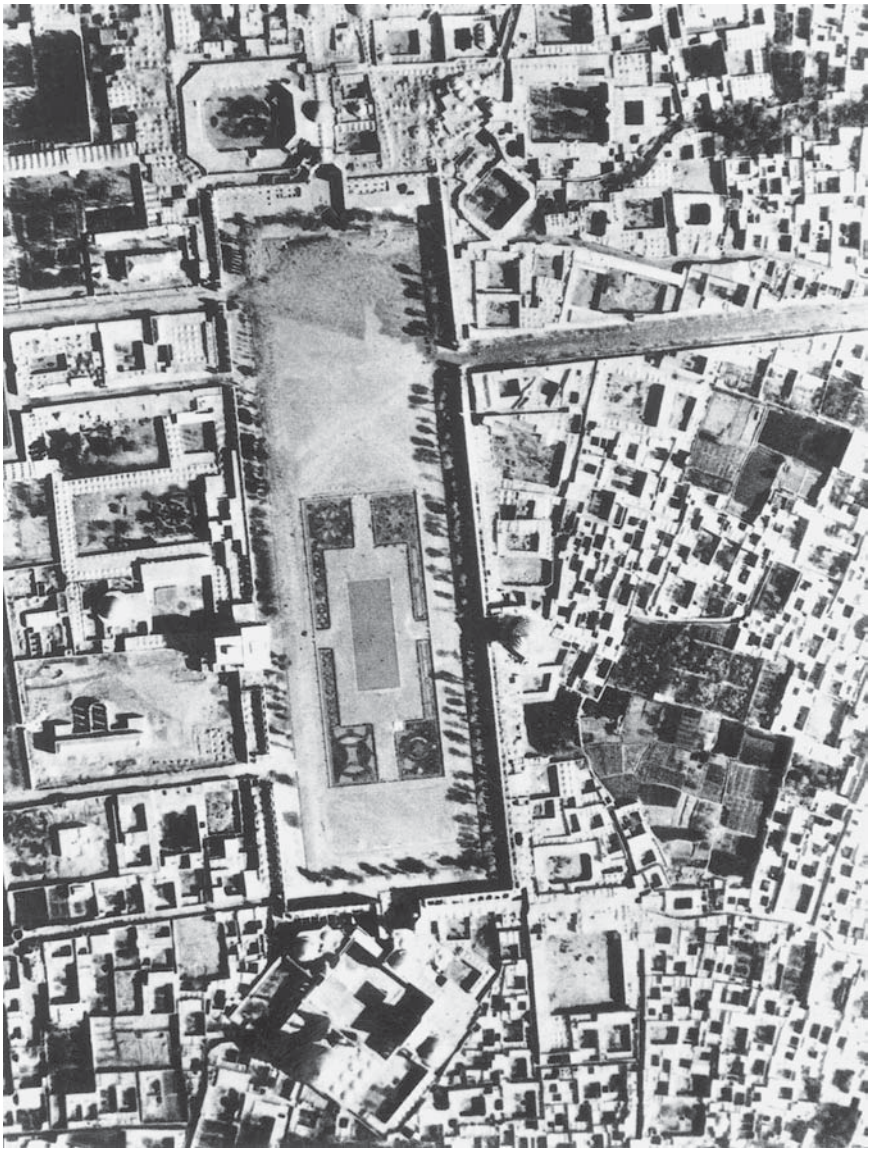
On each side of the Meydan a monumental façade leads to some major architectural unit. To the south it is a mosque, the celebrated Masjed-e Shah. It has a monumental portal framed by two minarets (Fig. 18). While



16 Bukhara, Kalayan minaret, detail, early twelfth century

there is nothing unusual about the portal's *muqarnas* half-dome, its setting in a sort of polygonal recess is original. The mosque itself is at an angle to the portal because the Meydan was not canonically oriented. It is an almost perfect mosque with four *eyvans*. Each *eyvan* is followed by a dome and the *eyvan qiblah* is larger and [231] more monumental than the other three, while its dome towers over the whole city (Fig. 19). The areas immediately adjacent to the axial *eyvans* were divided into squares and covered with smaller cupolas set on the modified pendentive construction developed in Timurid times. The two corners of the building which are farthest from the Meydan were left uncovered, somewhat like courts with an inner façade. The whole building was lavishly decorated with tiles, thus transforming its effect into a sort of festival of colors (Fig. 20).

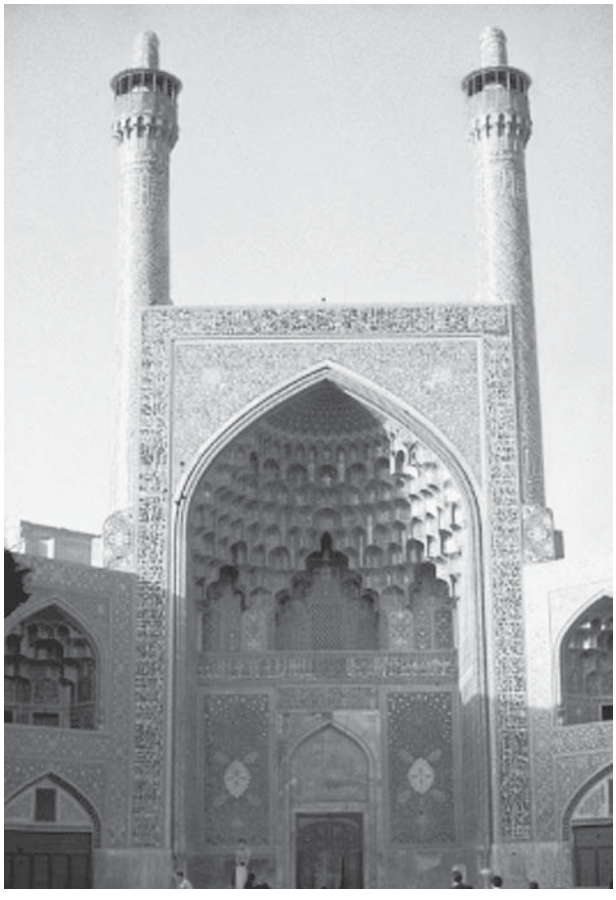
On the opposite side of the Meydan stands the monumental entrance into the bazaar. The bazaar is at this time being studied and surveyed by a team of Iranian architects whose results have so far only [232] been partially made public and, therefore, all that ought to be said about it is that it was an enormous commercial enterprise organized around domed nodes and intersecting covered streets, leading from the new Safavid creation all the way to the earlier city surrounding the Masjed-e Jom'eh.



17 Isfahan, Meydan-e Shah, air view

On the eastern side of the Meydan stands the jewel of Safavid architecture, the private oratory built in honor of Shaykh Lotfollah, the saintly father-in-law of Shah Abbas (Fig. 21). An architecturally less elaborate but decoratively far more complex portal than at the mosque leads through a series of passageways into a single square chamber covered with a dome (Fig. 22). [233]

Finally, the western side of the Meydan contains the Ali Qapu, the High Gate (Fig. 23). It is on the one hand the first unit in a string of royal buildings, mostly pavilions set in gardens, which extends all the way to the river. Of these only a few still remain, like the Chehel-Sutun or the Hesht



18 Isfahan, Meydan-e Shah, portal of Masjed-e Shah, late sixteenth century

Behesht, recently restored by Italian teams of specialists. But the Ali Qapu is also a unique building on its own. It is like a series of individual boxes set within each other (Fig. 24). Some are mere passageways, horizontal ones leading into the gardens beyond, or vertical ones moving in and around a core of more official units of composition. The latter comprise the celebrated open platform on wooden columns which overlooks the Meydan and rooms of varying size with most extraordinary systems of vaults done entirely in thin [235] stucco and reproducing in a baroque – almost rococo – fashion themes of palace life: places for vases, cups, goblets, flowers, and other symbols of a life of pleasure (Fig. 25).

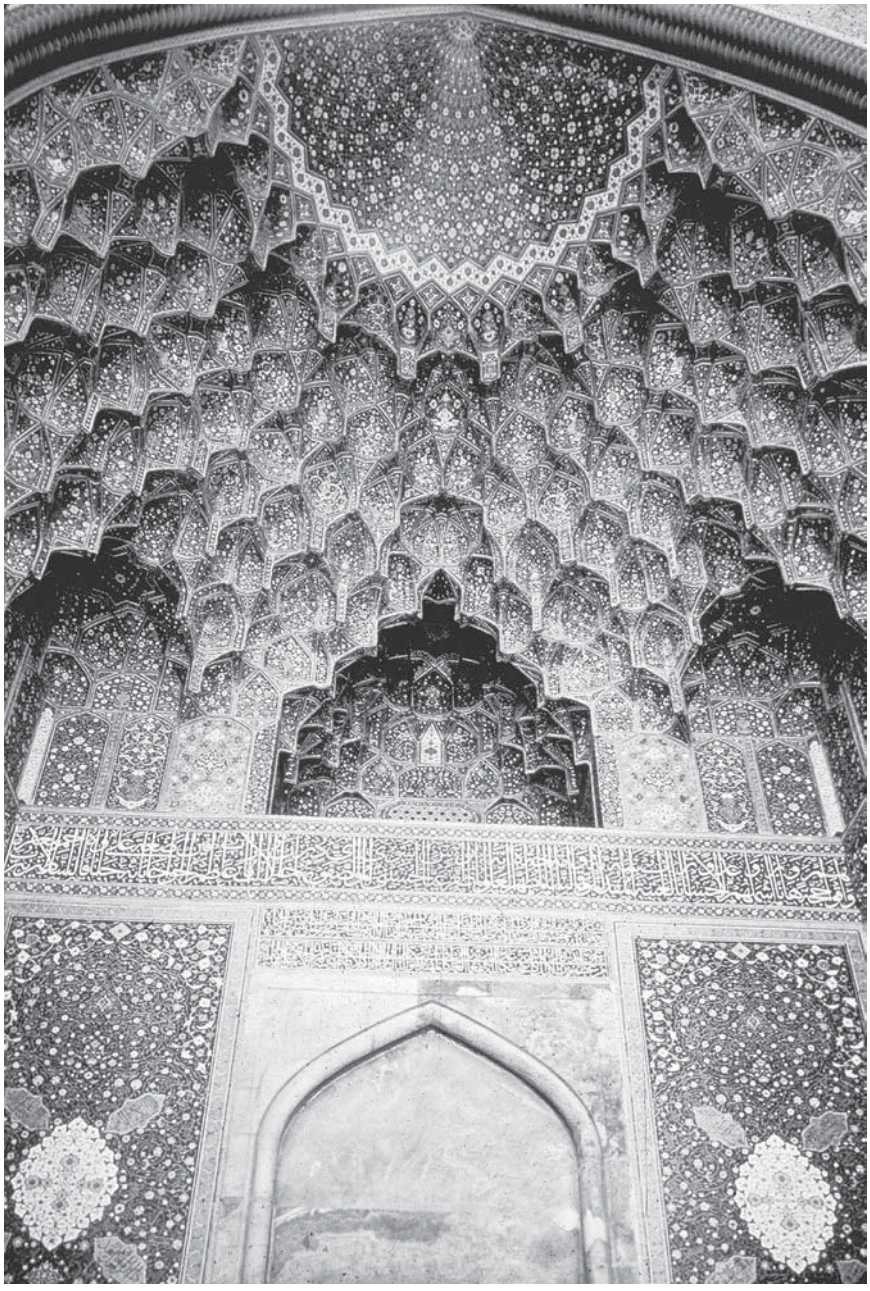
It is true, of course, that there is something grandiose and magnificent in the seventeenth-century constructions. But it seems appropriate to add that their grandeur lies in their planning, in their layout over a vast area, not in the character of any one of the units. For these were not conceived as architectonic masses but as elaborate surfaces, at times simple successions of flat panels, at other times more complex three-dimensional compositions or curved spaces. But in all instances the main point of the artistic effort

19 Isfahan, Meydan-e Shah, *qiblah* dome of mosque

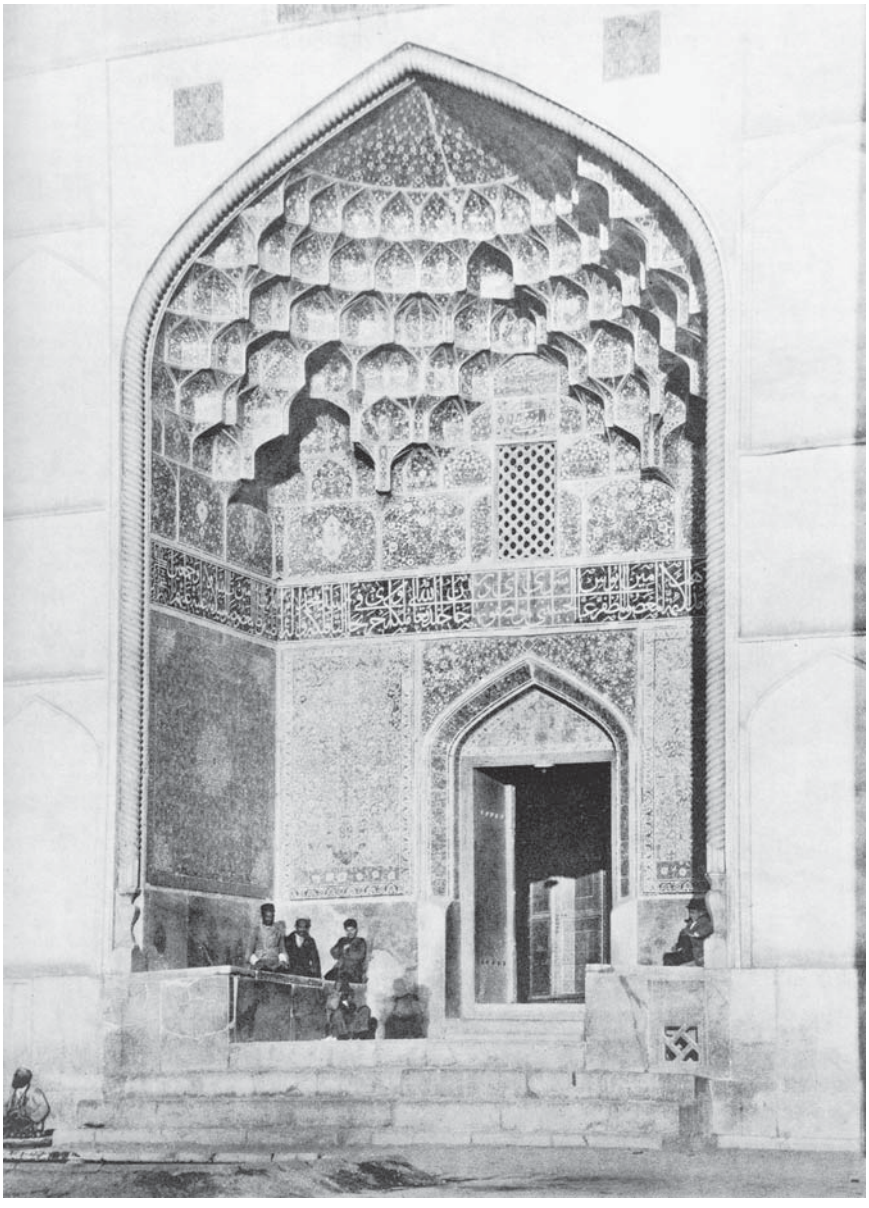
was a sort of transfiguration of the building through the covering of walls with colorful tiles, whose designs tend (with a number of exceptions) to develop inwardly within each panel rather than outwardly toward the unit of construction. In contrast to the architectonic quality of the domes in the Masjed-e Jom'eh, the main characteristic of this tradition may be called decorative, in the sense that its most immediately perceptible features are not necessary for the buildings to stand up or to be used; they can almost always be considered separately from the architecture. In fact, if one looks for instance at a section of the Masjed-e Shah (Fig. 26) or of the Ali Qapu, one can hardly avoid the feeling of an architecture of theatrical flats which could be shifted around almost at will and whose surfaces could be redone at any time with little effort and without affecting the building.

While this tradition is superbly expressed in the imperial monuments of Safavid Isfahan, it is not unique to the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. Partly subdued under the impact of numerous constructional experiments

20 Isfahan, Meydan-e Shah, detail of tile work

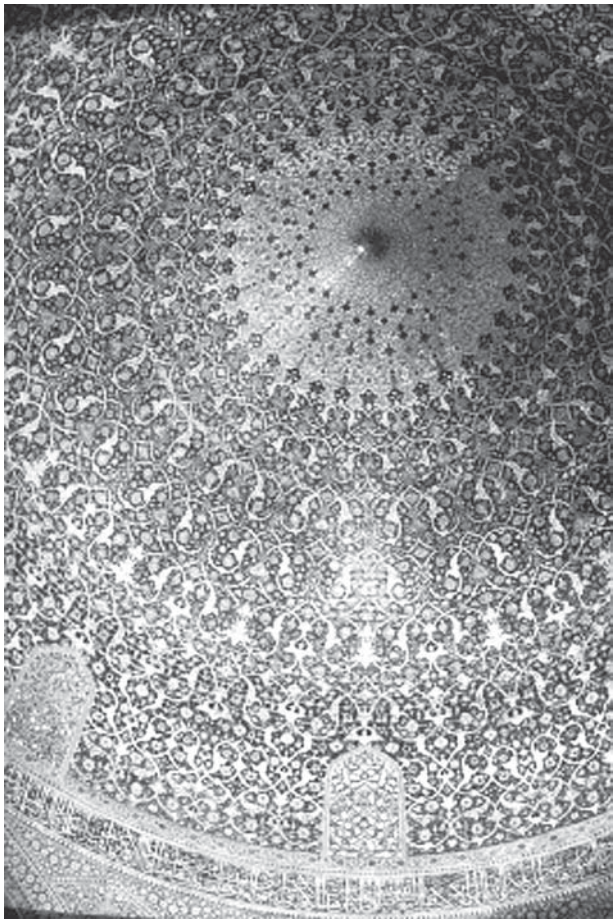


in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it is present in the great buildings of Mashad (Fig. 27), Samarkand, Khargerd, and in the sanctuary of Pir-e Bakran near Isfahan, to name just a few examples. It is visible in many mausoleums and minarets of earlier times and occurs in a particularly curious form in the stucco ornament of the northeastern Iranian caravanserai at Robat Sharaf dated in the middle of the twelfth century (Fig. 28).



21 Isfahan, Shaykh Lotfollah sanctuary, façade

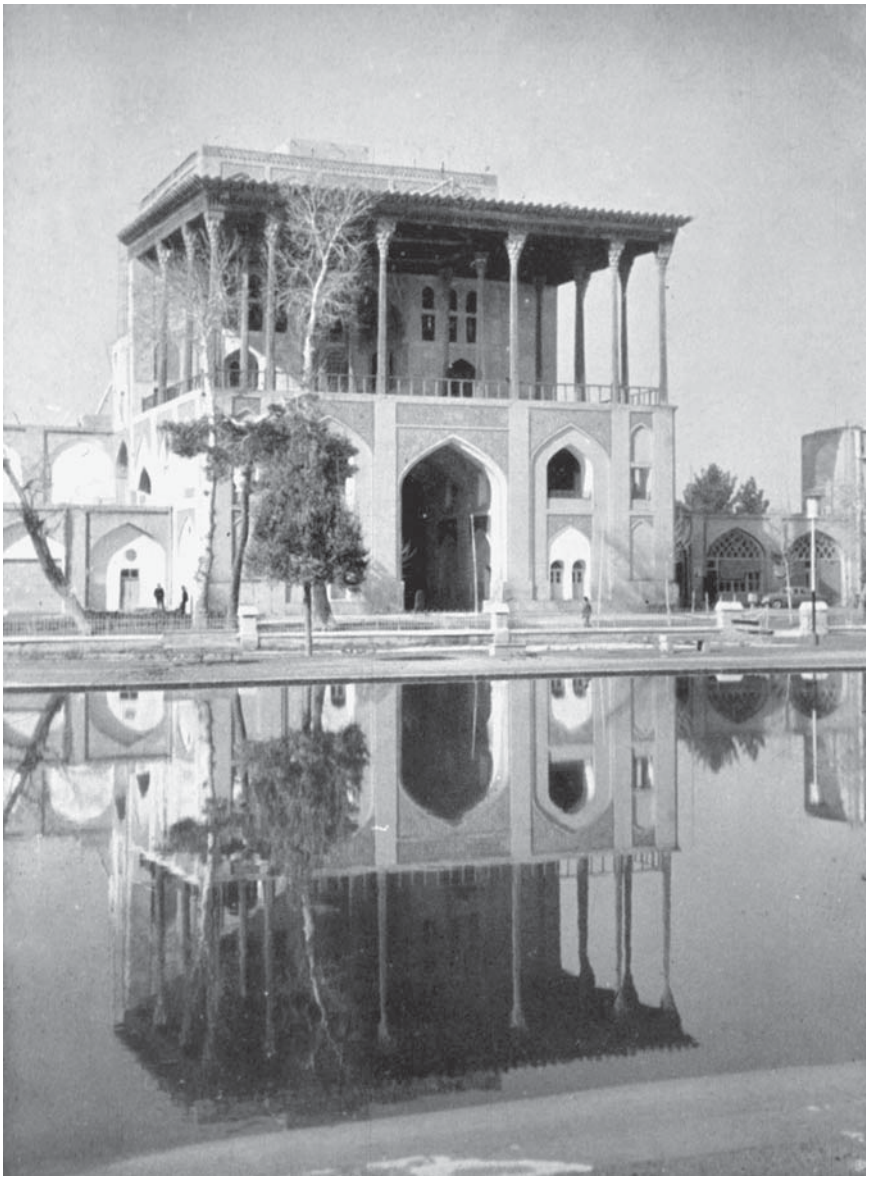
Thus the rapid analyses of two major ensembles created at different times in Isfahan have led to the suggestion of the presence of two aesthetic traditions or tendencies, one concerned with large masses and architectonic values, the other with surfaces and with decorative values. One should hasten to add that with both traditions it is not so much sharp contrasts that are involved as emphases. For one could not deny the spatial values of a building like the Masjed-e Shah, or the ornamental detail of brickwork in the North dome of the older [236] mosque. Should we then see in Isfahan's



22 Isfahan, Shaykh Lotfollah, dome from inside

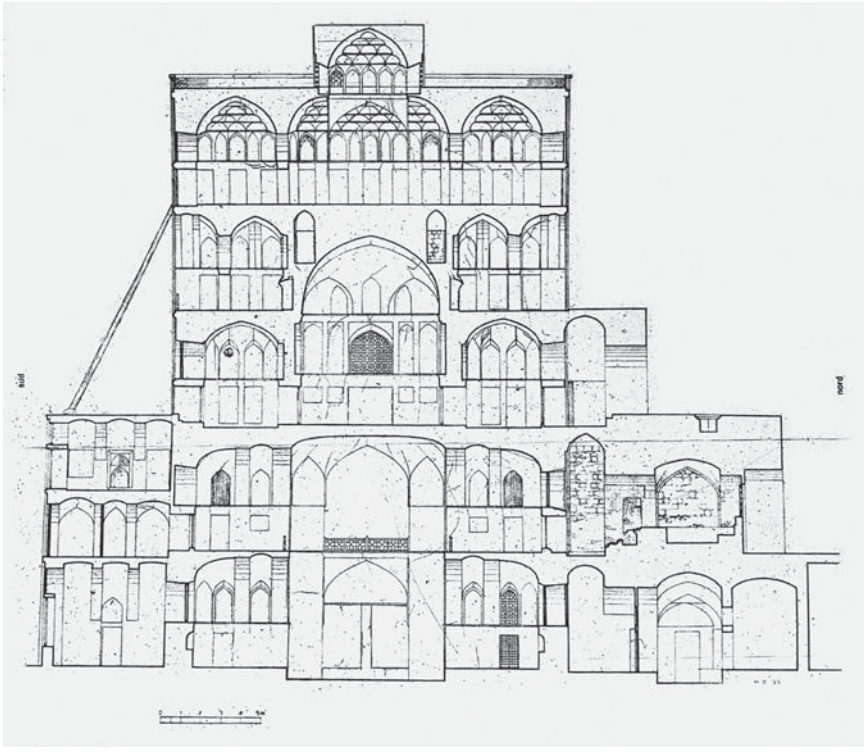
architecture an oscillation between two ultimately antagonistic but ever-present poles and envisage the whole of Iranian architecture *historically*, as taste or other reasons still not investigated compel one or the other tradition to come to the fore? Should we tend to contrast these poles and conclude that, just as Romanesque or Baroque churches are aesthetically incompatible, so are the monuments of Isfahan? They reflected such different purposes and visions that there is no point in envisaging them together as expressions of the *same* culture, except in the sense that, by harboring Santa Maria Maggiore, San Pietro and Gesu, Rome expresses in unique fashion the varieties of Christian architecture, but not the same Christian culture.

We may also interpret these monuments in a different way. We may suggest that temporal differences are secondary and that, beyond immediately perceptible oppositions, there remains a commonness of value which would identify a continuous culture, in the manner in which, for instance, the transfer of the Italian Baroque to France, [237] Germany, or Spain acquired features which presumably make some of the monuments in the new countries



23 Isfahan, Ali Qapu

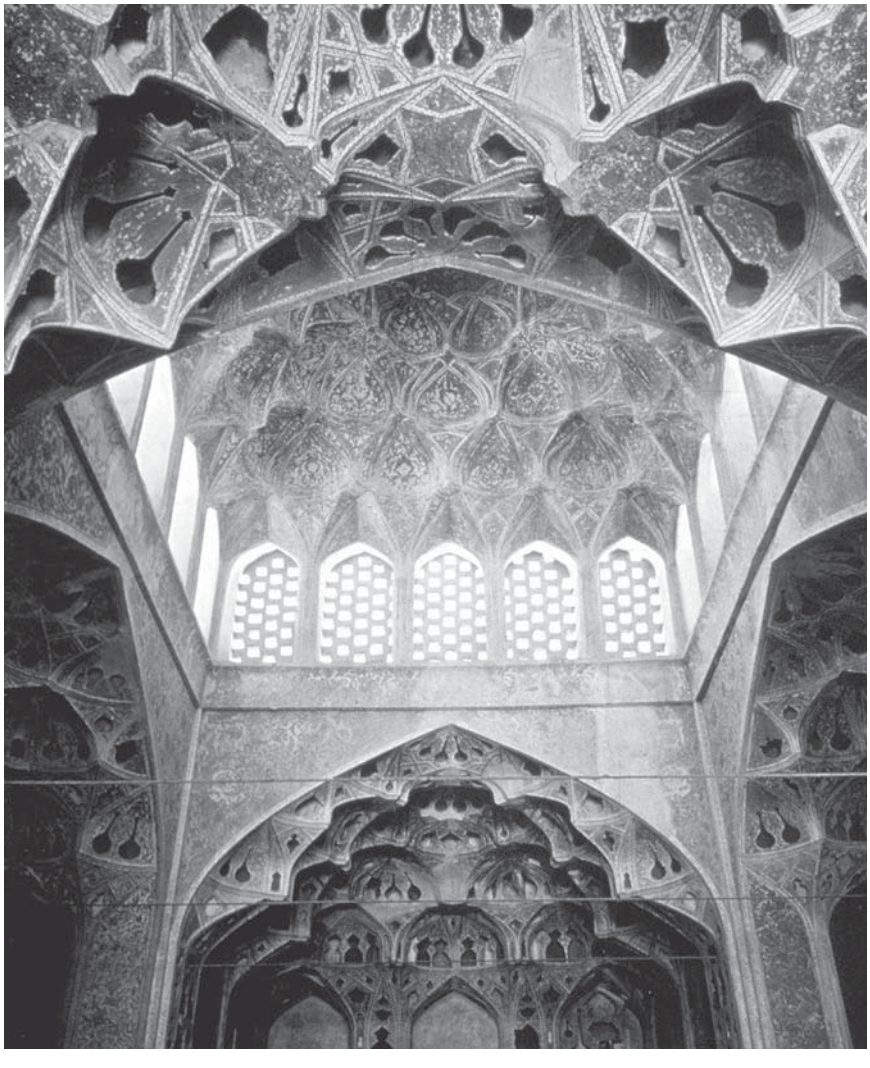
French, German or Spanish rather than only imported Italian. And indeed a unifying theme may exist in all these buildings and could be called an attempt to create an illusion of something other than the building itself. Thus, even though actual means of creating illusions vary from building to building or from time to time, the consistency with which exteriors and interiors differ from each other, or with which attention is caught in details of construction or decoration rather than in large ensembles, can be interpreted to mean that the point of monumental architecture was to create a means of suggesting something other than immediately perceptible common



24 Isfahan, Ali Qapu section (after Zander)

life. In this sense the brilliant colors of the mosque of Shaykh Lotfollah and the interior façade of the Masjed-e Jom'eh serve the same aesthetic purpose of proposing a rarefied and unreal mood to user or beholder, and, in understanding or explaining the monuments of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the apparently minor key of their decoration should be considered as their main effort. Or perhaps it is the subtle geometry and logic of the architectural effect through design which should be seen as predominating rather than the power of large masses.

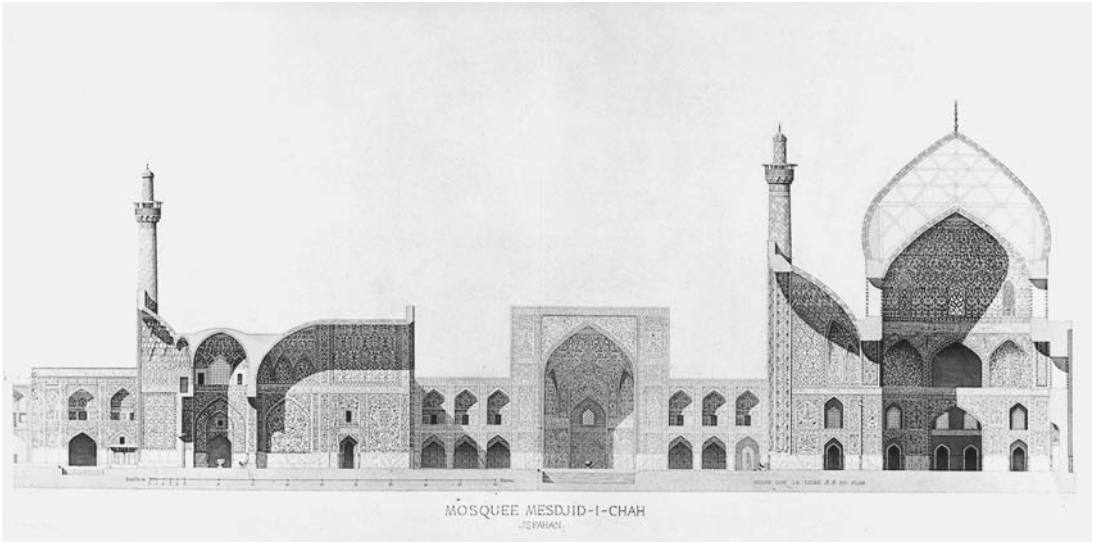
Such a search for a mood and for an illusion in architecture can easily be related to a series of deeply Islamic ideals. Monuments are [238] not built for God but for men, and the creation of consistent and often repetitive settings for very diverse human activities is a reminder of the unreality of nature and of the world, not an attempt to compel a concrete conception of the divine. The illusion of an artificial architectural creation demands a meditation on the holy, and its abstract and arbitrary qualities of ornament or even of planning transform monuments into settings for a wide range of human activities or thoughts. Architecture, as in Hafez's poem, is a messenger "only bound to carry the message sent," not to elicit responses. It is an illusory setting in which anything can happen, for in truth each man [239] is free to make his own choice of behavior. Architecture is but the inactive setting of his good and evil deeds, having merely by its



25 Isfahan, Ali Qapu, detail of stucco vaulting

artificiality sent the message of the transitory and unreal character of the world.

We are thus confronted with two ways of seeing Iranian architecture in the Middle Ages, in Isfahan or elsewhere. One, historical and scientific, emphasizes *differences* in taste and in types, searches for chronologies and influences, and sees each period and almost each monument as uniquely different, as an expression of highly immanent [240] needs and visions, often in willed contradiction to whatever preceded or followed. The other, more transcendental and more deeply embedded in cultural continuity, emphasizes *common* features and seeks in each period and each monument an illustration of a single attitude characteristic of a land and of a civilization, such as, for instance, the theme of illusion which was sketched here but



26 Isfahan, Masjed-e Shah, section

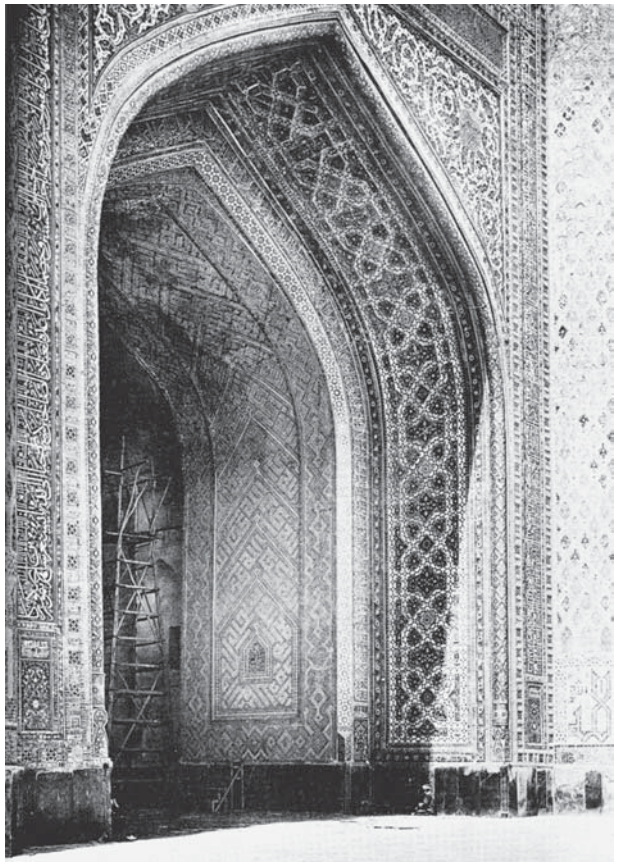
which is only one of the many possible. Between these two views it is at this time impossible to choose. This is so in part because both need considerable further elaboration in details and in theoretical considerations. But it is possibly also so because the choice between them is not, in the final analysis, imposed by a knowledge of monuments as much as by the mind of the investigator. Perhaps, like the Iranian architecture we discussed, they are simply two contradictory but ever-present facets of man's mind and taste.

Bibliographical Note

An interpretative essay such as this one, given originally as a lecture, does not lend itself to organized annotation. What follows is instead a general bibliographical introduction to Islamic architecture divided into the two categories of broad surveys and works dealing specifically with Isfahan.

A. SURVEYS

The only fairly complete, although very out-of-date, survey is A. U. Pope and Ph. Ackermann, *A Survey of Persian Art* (Oxford, 1939), with an excellently illustrated summary in A. U. Pope, *Persian Architecture* (New York, 1965). A brilliant and controversial interpretation of Iranian architecture can be found in N. Ardalan, *The Sense of Unity* (Chicago, 1973). Two books contain numerous illustrations but more debatable texts: D. Hill and O. Grabar, *Islamic Architecture and its Decoration* (London, 1967) and S. Seher-Thoss, *Design and Color in Islamic Architecture* (Washington, 1968). Models of careful scholarship but limited in chronological scope are D. Wilber, *The*



27 Mashad, Gawhar Shad *madrasa*, façade on court, fifteenth century

Architecture of Islamic Iran: the Ilkhanid Period (Princeton, 1955) and M. B. Smith, "Material for a Corpus," *Ars Islamica*, 2, 4, 6 (1935–38). The best surveys of Islamic architecture in the Soviet Union are those of G. A. Pugachenkova and L. I. Rempel for Central Asia and L. Bretanitskij for Azerbayjan.

B. ISFAHAN

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E. Galdieri, *Isfahan* I and II, Rome (1972, 1973 and 1984).
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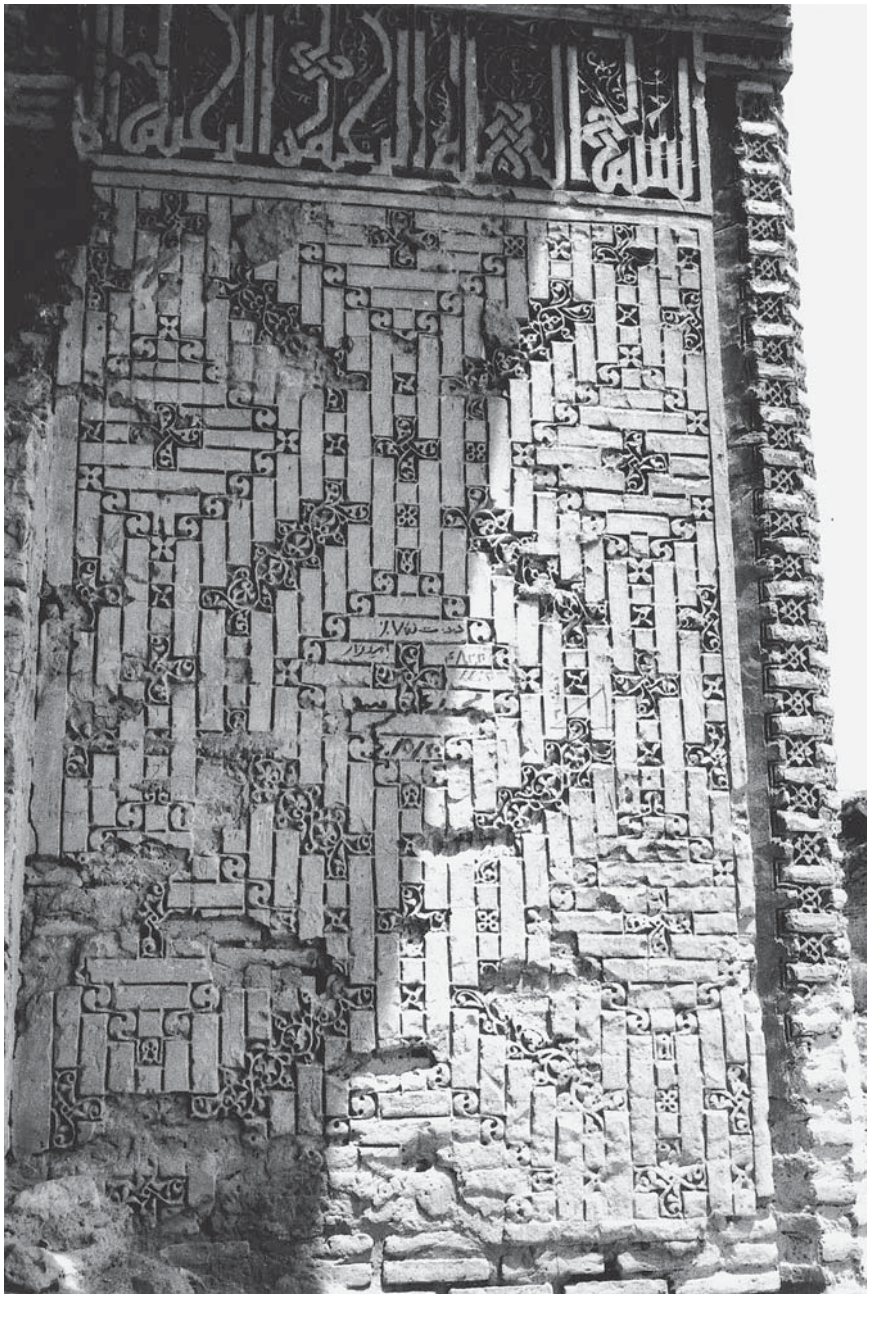

28 Robat Sharaf, caravanserai, detail of wall decoration, twelfth century