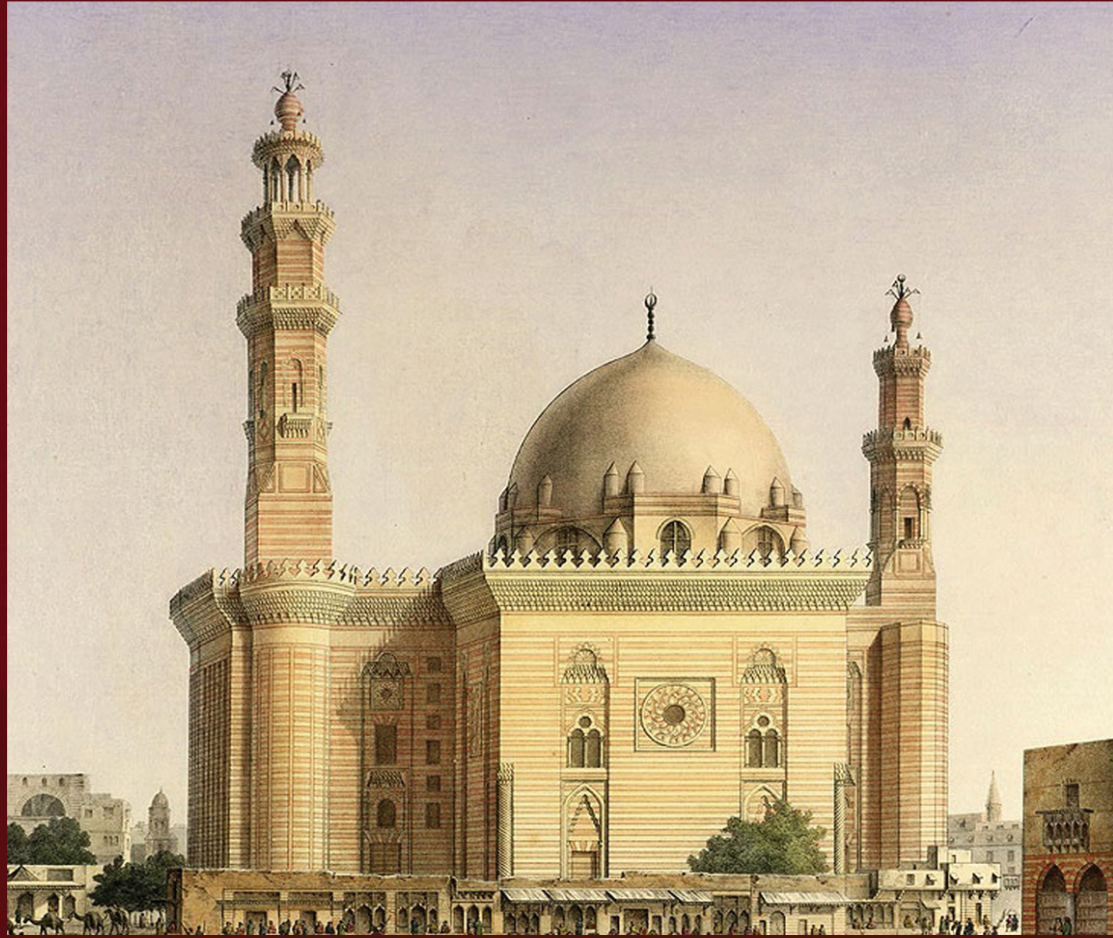


I S L A M I C H I S T O R Y A N D T H O U G H T

THE MAKING OF THE MOSQUE

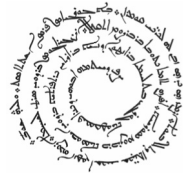
A Survey of Religious Imperatives



Essam S. Ayyad

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The Making of the Mosque



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The Making of the Mosque

A Survey of Religious Imperatives

Essam Ayyad

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*To the soul of my mother
And to my father, wife and kids*

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PREFACE

I studied the architectural heritage of historical Egypt during my undergraduate and early postgraduate years (1996-2004). Upon coming to Islamic religious architecture, on which I wrote a lengthy MA dissertation, I was soon enthralled by its charming gracefulness, elegance of proportion and carefully executed decorations. These very aspects prompted me with one keen question. How would such massive and lavishly decorated mosques, as those of mediaeval Cairo in particular, compare to the modesty assigned to the Prophet Muḥammad by Muslim traditions and the conventional concepts on his preference for simplicity in housing, eating, clothing, etc.? I later learned that the idea that the Prophet's career has only very little to do with such elaborate Islamic sanctuaries is almost ingrained in the literature. In the eye of modern art historians, these are artistic achievements of later times. In the eye of many Muslim legalists and puritan strands in various schools, however, they are later 'unorthodox' innovations.

For example, some recent religious groups (both Sunnī and Shī'ī) believe that the mosque should be simple in form and material just as that built by the Prophet more than fourteen centuries ago. Against this background, they build unpretentious mosques with no monumental façades, minarets, domes, concave prayer niches, etc. A relevant and more basic question is why there is nearly nothing in our university courses to help us evaluate the influence of Islamic faith (rather than customs) on the places of worship that bore its name, as we find in the cases of, for example, the Ancient Egyptian and Graeco-Roman temples (where many architectural variations are explainable only in view of doctrinal settings). I soon came to realize that this was too generic a problem to be just the mistake of those tailoring the syllabi of such courses. I also learned that what the term 'religious architecture' connotes might vary from one culture to the other. It is definitely a problematic one in Islam.



The author studying and appreciating the Muslim shrines of medieval Cairo during his early post-graduate years in Egypt (2003)

Later on, I was able to pursue my doctoral studies at the University of Leeds, thanks to a generous scholarship from the Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education. I joined Leeds as a PhD candidate in 2006. There, my questions became more persistent and my view of my prospective research became better defined. It became clear to me that the reigning wisdom in modern scholarship, which ‘unwillingly’ coincides with the Islamic traditional views, i.e. that the elaborate type of the mosque (as definable in the modern sense) is only due to a later ‘liberal’ tendency, runs counter to other evidence. For example, the earliest architectural innovations in the mosque were commanded by first/seventh century patrons and clients known for their adherence to the Prophet’s model rather than ‘liberal’ attitudes. Such contradictions and the gap they highlighted in the literature, added to my old inquiries and growing curiosity, provided enough momentum to embark upon exploring the religious context for the evolution of the mosque type. Islam’s holy book, the Qur’ān, while giving interesting insights into architecture, does not expound on the topic. We thus looked into the second main source in Islam, i.e. *ḥadīth*, ‘traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad’. As such, the thesis was entitled: ‘The Influence of *Ḥadīth* on the Architecture of Early Congregational Mosques’. Working on the thesis gave me the chance to throw myself into a number of related old controversies, notably those related to the historiographical issues of *ḥadīth* and early Arabic sources, the nature of the hypaethral building which the Prophet reportedly erected once he emigrated to Yathrib in 622 AD, and of course the types of evidence for studying the first/seventh-century mosques. I finished my thesis and earned my degree in 2010, but many questions remained unanswered. Also, the discussions in the thesis and its dense Arabic bibliography incited new questionings (the same is somehow applicable to the actual book). In a number of journal articles, I tried to tackle what I believed were the most urgent among these.

This book is a substantially modified version of the thesis. It benefited considerably from my readings and writings in the years that followed the completion of the latter and is written in the broader sense of investigating how the mosque type was made. The evolution of the mosque, and the many influences that shaped it, have been copiously discussed. However, all theories on the non-Islamic provenance of the mosque failed to withstand the scrutiny of subsequent scholarship. All failed to provide convincing answers for such central questions as when, where and how a certain architectural type (or types) inspired the mosque. All foreign types, including pre-Islamic temples in Nabataea and the Yemen, because of typological considerations or geographical or chronological barriers, cannot be considered the immediate origin of the mosque. The Prophet, it seems, was rather in favour of a simpler and a more regional-oriented type of building that best fitted the simple formal

requirements of the Muslim rituals as practiced by the earliest Muslim community.

That said, the book is not an attempt to isolate early Islamic culture from its Late Antique context; it is simply sterile to try to do so. Islamic societies were indeed built upon the framework of pre-existing Middle Eastern civilizations. However, the belief that the Prophet's career has no bearing on mosque design has led to inaccurate readings of the sources and dictated an unwieldy path of inquiry. While not excluding the clear impact of foreign types on the architectural character of the mosque, this study seeks to explore whether, how and to what extent Islamic religious prompts and modalities influenced the creation of the mosque during the first century AH. More particularly, it examines and contextualizes the different aspects of such an influence, should it exist, and integrates the verdict with the political, socio-economic and environmental contexts in which the mosque materialized. To this end, and in view of the deficiency of both the relevant archaeological evidence for the first-half-century mosque and the theories on its non-Islamic origins, the book also makes use of such branches of knowledge as philology, Qur'ānic exegesis, early poetry, geo- and urban morphology. The result is a work that is positioned at the intersection between art, historiography, religious sciences and politics; it is not a typical monograph on architecture. As readers will discover, it cuts across topics such as early Islam's outlook on visual arts and aesthetics in general...

In the absence of reliable archaeological evidence, the question of how the mosque was made represents a real challenge. Its origin remains moot despite many attempts to settle the question. This study sets out to explore whether early Islam, within the framework of the Prophet's teachings and practices, as well as the Qur'ān, might have provided the necessary prompts for the making of the mosque and the shaping of its essential functional and architectural features. It also investigates how such religious prompts may have interacted with the political, cultural and socio-economic contexts in which the mosque type materialized. As such, this book scrutinizes two dominant tendencies regarding the mosque type: the modern Western views on its non-Islamic origins and the Islamic legalist views on what it should look like.

Dr Essam Ayyad received a Ph.D. in the history of Islamic civilization from the University of Leeds, UK, in 2011. He is currently an assistant professor of Islamic history at Qatar University. Ayyad's primary research interest is to explore the range of impulses and modalities that could have moulded the different aspects of Islamic material culture, with most of his writings centring on Islam's formative period.

Cover: A Drawing of Sultan Ḥasan Mosque in Cairo (colour plate no. xxv by Pascal Coste, *Architecture arabe: ou Monuments du Kaire*, 1818-1826)