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AN ANALYSIS OF
“MOSQUE OF CORDOBA”

by

Helin Yeşim Akbulut

Introduction

When we say Islamic architecture, we always think of the Middle East, but in fact, Europe is home to many Islamic works. There are many mosques, especially in Spain, which was once predominantly Muslim. Including those who have lost their mosque function now. Mosque of Cordoba is one of these mosques. It has a fascinating atmosphere and history with its unique structure. In this article, the architecture, history and remarkable features of the Mosque of Cordoba will be examined.

Keywords: Mosque, Cordoba, Islam, architecture, art, Spain

1. Historical Background

It was 711 when the Muslims took their first steps in Spain and the Visigoth kingdom that ruled at that time was grappling with many internal and external problems. The army, led by Commander Tariq bin Ziyad, easily conquered Spain and Islam kept on spreading at a great pace. There was not much objection to this situation by the people, because they wanted to get rid of the bad conditions of the former Visigoth Sovereign.

The Golden Age was when the Andalusian Umayyads ruled Spain. After Abbasids came to power, they went to Spain and ruled it. In that time, Muslims and non-Muslims lived in peace and harmony.

“The Muslim period in Spain is often described as a 'golden age' of learning where libraries, colleges, public baths were established and literature, poetry and architecture flourished. Both Muslims and non-Muslims made major contributions to this flowering of culture.” (BBC 2009)

One of the cities that lived under the Islamic rule was Cordoba. This city was the capital of the Muslim Spain. As in other cities, there was a cultural explosion here too. The city has prospered in many ways and was home to many magnificent structures.

The Great Mosque of Cordoba, a.k.a Mezquita -means masjid in Arabic- is one of the most magnificent and unique structures in the world. In 1984, it was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

“The Great Mosque, with its juxtaposition of cultures and architectural styles, has retained its material integrity. It was built in the 8th century, over the remains of the Visigoth Basilica of San Vicente. There were consecutive extensions carried out over three centuries, and in 1236 the Christian Cathedral was installed. The greatest reconstruction was carried out in the Renaissance period, between 1523 and 1599, which resulted in its present structure of space. Its continued religious use has ensured in large part of its preservation.” (UNESCO n.d.)

This building, which was used as a church in 600s by the Visigoths, was converted into a mosque by the order of Abdurrahman I. The transformation process went on for one year. The very large size of the building was one of the requests of him. The reason for this can be given as the ruler's desire to show the power of Islam to the surroundings. Over the years, the mosque had so many changes in it. Almost every ruler ordered new extensions and features.

Later, the Umayyads began to encounter internal conflicts and gradually dwindled to extinction. The Mosque of Cordoba was later converted into a cathedral. Although the Muslims wanted to worship here, this was not allowed and there were long discussions about it.

2. Architecture

Before going into the building, a large courtyard welcomes us. It is really spacious and creates a beautiful scene with its greenery.

“The Naranjos Courtyard (the Orange Tree Courtyard) was used for public activities in the Islamic period, such as teaching or for justice purposes. The arches that go from the praying hall to the courtyard were opened. From the beginning it was conceived as a courtyard with a colonnade”. (History of the Mosque: The Orange Tree Courtyard, n.d.)

The first thing that catches your eye when you enter the building is the large hypostyle prayer hall. We can see lots of mosaics in here. Symmetry is another dominant aspect of this space, along with the repeated patterns. The horseshoe style arches consist of red brick and white stone, and they support the timber ceiling. Those arches divide the hall into aisles and creates corridor-like spaces.

It is a known fact that the Umayyads exchanged many cultural traits with the Byzantines. Therefore, it is possible to see Byzantine breezes here, albeit a little, especially in the mosaics.

After finding our way in the aisles, we reach the *mihrab*. The mihrab here covers a much larger area than the usual mihrabs. It's like a small room. This space is more striking and ornate than the other parts. The decorative, symmetrical ornaments and motifs can be seen. Interesting fact is, while every mihrab faces towards Mecca, the mihrab of the Mosque of Cordoba faces to Damascus. Although the actual reason for this is still unknown, it is possible that the direction of Mecca was miscalculated at the time it was built.

If you look up after examining the mihrab, you will see a dome that is as spectacular as the mihrab. According to Shadie Mirmobiny, it is built of crisscrossing ribs that create pointed arches all lavishly covered with gold mosaic in a radial pattern. This astonishing building technique anticipates later Gothic rib vaulting, though on a more modest scale. (n.d.) The fact that the light coming from the dome falls right in front of the mihrab, which is the most important place of worship in the area, can also be considered as symbolically valuable, just like the usage of light in Baroque period.

The minaret, which was destroyed by a storm and rebuilt, draws your attention, to which Abdurrahman III gave the first order to be built. Unfortunately, the originality of the minaret has not been fully preserved. Unlike the minarets that we usually see as circles, this minaret sits on a square foundation.

3. Conclusion

The Mosque of Cordoba is a very valuable mosque in many ways. First of all, aesthetic perceptions of east and west was synthesized very well, thus an aesthetic structure emerged. Secondly, it is very valuable in terms of architecture since many of its structural features are unique. Although its functions have changed throughout history, it has preserved its character and I personally adored this multi-styled structure that still lives. It is sad that it does not serve to Islamic purposes.

“Its amalgamation of old, reused, and original architectural elements in new inventive combinations, its system of double-tiered arcades with superimposed horseshoe arches supported by slender pilasters on marble columns, and the originality of its overall compositional effect are all factors that enhance its value to the history of western Islamic architecture in particular and Mediterranean architecture in general.” (Khoury 1996)

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