# Chapter XI

# Art and Architecture*

## (A) Architecture

Of the two ways of looking at a legacy, either from the point of view of its impact or that of its achievement, the first is almost meaningless in the case of Muslim architecture. There are many reasons for this, some connected with the nature of architecture itself, others more peculiar to the Muslim phenomenon. Before photography and rapid travel the contemporary impact of an architecture was limited and slow, because architecture is more strongly tied than other arts to its setting and to concrete aims and means. Exceptions are found, no doubt, as in certain frontier areas like central Spain, where Muslim architecture – and not merely decorative motifs – inspired Christian and Jewish monuments during and after the times of Muslim domination.[1] In general, however, until the Renaissance the contemporary impact of a culture's architecture beyond the frontiers of the culture itself was minimal and usually the result of some unique historical circumstance.

Matters are different when a tradition is no longer alive. In Western architecture revivals occur constantly and there is an endless return to classical or medieval architectural sources. The position of Islamic architecture – or of any one of its individual phases – in a pattern of life, death and rebirth is still almost impossible [245] to establish properly. Internally, within the culture itself, revivals of earlier forms did occur in classical periods and, partly, under the impact of a Western Levantinized taste; a revival of actual or presumed traditional forms took place in the garish villa architecture of Alexandria around the early 1900s or, much more successfully, in the Morocco

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1  The whole problem of *mudéjar* architecture still awaits a proper historical as well as formal investigation. In the meantime see G. Marçais's chapter in *L'Architecture musulmane d'occident* (Paris, 1954), pp. 361 ff. A major controversy exists around the question of the possible impact of Islamic architecture on the Gothic and even on the Romanesque. For a recent statement with bibliography see A. U. Pope, "Possible Contributions to the Beginning of Gothic Architecture," *Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte Asiens. In Memoriam Ernst Diez* (Istanbul, 1963). In our judgment such an impact, if it existed, was secondary and poses many more problems than it solves. Hence we shall not deal with it here.

of the 1930s, or else with a sort of Muslim historical eclecticism in the concrete of the recent mosque at Kuala Lumpur. Yet none of these revivals has had the force and the importance of the continuous dialogue of Western architecture with its own past; or, if they did (as may be suggested in a number of features of Safavid architecture of Iran or in Mamluk architecture in Egypt), contemporary scholarship has not yet been able to capture them properly.

Externally, the impact of Islamic architecture occurred in several different ways. Specific themes of Islamic architecture, such as actual writing or imitations of it, are quite common all over the world, but, like certain floral or other motifs, these imitations of writing derived in all likelihood from textiles, ceramics or metalwork, not from architecture as such. With a few possible exceptions in Byzantium or in Italy[2] – and always excepting Spain – it is not until the eighteenth century that an actual impact of Muslim architecture can be detected. It was part of the fascination with the exotic of late Classical and Romantic Europe. Its most important examples were not much more than *turqueries*, but in the peculiar palace of Brighton there appears a luxurious Islamic mood in Western architecture which continued in cinemas and restaurants called Alhambras or Taj Mahals and in occasional public buildings. At its most absurd in the unique Corn Palace of Mitchell, South Dakota, whose Near Eastern cupolas are made of imitation corn-stalks, this tradition of exotically decorative wealth [246] has also influenced the far more creative works of Yamasaki. But such examples are not very numerous and it would be difficult to argue that most of them are major works of non-Islamic architecture.

There is, therefore, not much point in attempting to search for a major impact of Muslim architecture – as opposed to Muslim decorative arts – on other, contemporary or later, architectural traditions. The legacy of Islamic architecture should therefore be sought in terms of achievement, and we could list those structural or aesthetic characteristics which best expressed the needs of the Muslim world and identify those monuments which are acknowledged masterpieces of the culture. Yet this sort of roster of quality might not, in the final analysis, succeed in identifying the true legacy of the culture, for it would measure the achievement in non-Islamic terms, according to some abstract criterion of value. Furthermore, there are considerable intellectual dangers in attempts to determine priorities of invention or scales of quality when comparing cultures to each other. If an architectural tradition has not had (as the classical tradition has had) a long and highly documented impact, and if we try to avoid the useless exercise of ranking according to

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2    See E. Grube, "Elementi islamici nell' architettura veneta del mediaevo," *Bolletino del Centra Internazionale di Studi d'Architettura 'A. Palladio'*, 8 (1966); G. Miles, "Byzantium and the Arabs," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 18 (1964); R. A. Jairazbhoy, *Oriental Influences in Western Art* (New York, 1965), esp. pp. 49 ff. about one group of examples.

comparative merits, what then can the legacy of an architecture be? Very much like literature, it is a unique combination, or a series of combinations, of forms which, in the time and space of a culture, succeeded in expressing something of value or necessity to that culture. Some of these combinations, a village mosque for instance, are merely folk creations and barely literate; others, like the Alhambra, are major works of poetry. The legacy of an architecture is then that language of constructional forms which most clearly expressed the needs and the dreams of a culture, whether or not it had a significant impact beyond itself. Like any heirloom, it can be useless, sentimentally valuable, or a uniquely meaningful contribution. In the case of Islam, however, special circumstances exist which pose a series of problems of much wider significance than the culture itself or any one of its monuments. In order to understand them we must try to define the meaning for [247] architecture of the extraordinary decades of the seventh and eighth centuries AD, when apparently almost *ex nihilo*, an Islamic civilization was created.

The central peculiarity of the Muslim world is, as has often been said, that it is a cultural moment in the development of many ethnically or geographically definable entities and not the expression of any one people or region. It is further agreed that Islam penetrated into and developed within a world which had already acquired an extraordinary formal complexity. Traditionally, art historians have divided that world into a Hellenistic *koiné* west of the Euphrates and an Iranian one east of it; but recent scholarship has shown that the problems are very much more complex and that the use and understanding of artistic forms in the pre-Islamic Mediterranean basin and Near East varied not only regionally, but also across regions, according to many social and intellectual levels. In general terms there were, before the appearance of Islam, several architectural traditions in which a wide variety of technical means ranging from very ancient and simple trabeated systems all the way to the most sophisticated vaults were used for purposes which spread from the open streets or public baths of a city to highly restricted and unique holy sanctuaries. Much uncertainty still exists as to how the formal wealth and the technical virtuosity of the Near East around AD 600 were actually translated into purposes and functions. Both the single cupola of Sasanian architecture and certain kinds of basilical halls with apses in Christian architecture could be interpreted equally easily as secular or religious buildings, and the actual contemporary identification was probably made through such means as decoration as much as through architectural forms. What is essential, however, is to realize that Islamic architecture was formed out of a world of tremendous architectural wealth as far as forms and techniques are concerned, but apparently also a world of considerable fluidity in the meanings to be given to forms and techniques.

The other component in the making of Islamic architecture is [248] Islam itself. The remarkable point here is that in its formative moments Islam

neither required nor desired an architectural identification. The eventual acceptance by the Prophet of the Ka'ba in Mecca as a holy sanctuary transformed it into a unique site, a symbolic *omphalos* and *qibla*, a center and a direction. This uniqueness removed the Meccan sanctuary from becoming, as the Holy Sepulcher became in Christianity, a theoretically possible model for later Islamic architecture. There is only scattered later evidence – much of it quite unclear and uncertain – of an actual impact of the Ka'ba on other buildings and, while its sacred character was largely responsible for this lack of physical impact, it could also be argued that its formal primitiveness – an irregular cube set in an ovoid space identified by use and ideology rather than as an aesthetic conception – made it an unsuitable symbol of Islam to compete with the great sanctuaries of Christianity and even of Zoroastrianism. There is nothing strange about this formal primitiveness, since the Meccan sanctuary was – as a physical entity – a creation of the rather primitive world of pre-Islamic Arabia.

What is far more original is that the new faith itself – as it was revealed to the Prophet and as it grew under his first successors – did not seek or need a monumental expression. The word *masjid* (place of worship, whence mosque) in the Qur'an may have referred only once to a specifically Muslim building and even there the passage is not very clear: "For had God not repelled some people by means of others, churches (*sawami'*), synagogues (*biya'*), oratories (*salawat*) and *masajid* would have been destroyed" (XXII, 40). Only because of the juxtaposition of the word *masjid* with more precise terms for churches and synagogues can we suggest that a specifically Muslim sanctuary was meant, but it is almost as probable that we have in this passage a typical rhetorical device of pairs of terms with the same meaning and that no precise type of building was meant. The place of worship of the early Muslim, his *masjid*, was, to paraphrase a celebrated tradition, wherever he was himself. It seems clear that there was no physical setting [249] imposed or created by the faith and that no physically perceptible symbol was developed which could identify the new faith. The term *musalla*, literally "a place for prayer," seems to have referred simply to a space outside the city where, on certain occasions, the Prophet met with his followers for prayer alone. No evidence is known to me which would suggest that the *musalla* had any sort of unique architectural feature. Without clergy and without building or symbol, early Islam was a uniquely pure system of faith. And it is interesting to note that as late as in the early fifteenth century, Ibn Khaldun mentions in his chapter on *masajid* only three sanctuaries, Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem, while he discusses what we know as mosques in relation to cities or to the question of legitimate and illegitimate authority.[3]

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3    Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, translated by F. Rosenthal (New York, 1958), II, pp. 249 ff.

Islam also involved a number of practices. There were set hours for prayer, individual or communal. There was a call to prayer and a direction for prayer. There was an obligation of ritual cleanliness, and Fridays were identified as days for the community as a whole to demonstrate its force and cohesion not only for itself but also for others to see. The Prophet used to sit on a *minbar* or chair on such occasions, and he would lean on a lance.[4] These practices may have taken place in the Prophet's own house, but they rapidly acquired a ceremonial, if not yet liturgical, character. These were all activities which unified the community of the Muslims and which separated them from others. They were signs of identification and of restriction but they had no architectural connotation.

Further research and especially archaeological work in Arabia may some day modify the conclusion of an architectural *tabula rasa* in the peninsula just before the beginning of Islam and during its formative decades. Yet, for the time being, such is the premiss [250] with which we have to begin. It compels us to set the problem of Islamic architecture in terms of the relationship between a new faith and system of life without actual architectural setting and a highly complex and immensely developed architectural tradition in the Near and Middle East. The problem as such is not peculiar to Islam; it is also the problem of Christian art several centuries earlier. But, whereas in the latter instance it was only a very small number of new purposes which had to find a new architectural expression within an otherwise shared vocabulary of forms and needs – and yet the process took three centuries – in the case of Islamic architecture almost all aspects of life had to find architectural forms and the process took only a few decades. By the time of al-Walid I (705–15), an Islamic architectural *koiné* seems to have been established, at least as far as religious architecture is concerned. The degree to which this official *koiné* was actually accepted is a debatable point, and it is likely that all sorts of anomalies and oddities were cropping up, since in 778 the Caliph al-Mahdi ordered the destruction of all *maqsuras* and *minbars* in congregational mosques and their replacement by new ones according to the standard of the Prophet's mosque in Medina.[5] The process by which a characteristically Islamic secular architecture was created is a far more complicated one, and in spite of the numerous examples of secular architecture which have been preserved from the first half of the eighth century, the *Islamic* quality of any part of this architecture is difficult to determine because of our considerable lack of comparative non-Islamic material evidence.

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4   See C. H. Becker, "Die Kanzel im Kultus des alten Islam," *Orientalische Studien Theodor Nöldeke gewidmet* (Giessen, 1906), I, pp. 331–51, reprinted in *Islamstudien* (Leipzig, 1924–32), I, pp. 450–71; S. D. Goitein, "The Origin and Nature of the Muslim Friday Worship," *The Muslim World*, 49 (1959), pp. 183–95, reprinted in *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions* (Leiden, 1966), pp. 111 ff.

5   al-Tabari, *Annales*, ed. M. J. de Goeje et al. (Leiden, 1879–1906), III, p. 486.

The reasons for the rapidity and success with which a definable Islamic architectural tradition was formed are to be sought primarily in the necessity – so amazingly seen by rulers like Umar, 'Abd al-Malik, al-Walid, and by their provincial governors – to make visible the physical reality of Islam as something different from what surrounded it and yet understandable as Islamic.[6] The importance of this point is considerable in attempting to assess [251] the legacy of Islamic architecture, for to the historian of architecture the formation of Islamic architecture may be used to illustrate a rarely observable phenomenon, which is how a culturally definable architecture creates itself, whereas to the historian of Islam it illustrates what the culture chose and what it rejected and thus suggests something of its own image which the culture sought to project. But the very existence of an Islamic architecture – perhaps even of an Islamic culture – raises an even more fascinating and fundamental question. Since the forms and techniques of the architecture were all provided by a wide variety of non-Islamic cultures, although Islam itself was, at least at the beginning, a unified entity, was the architecture which was eventually created a sort of architectural Esperanto without roots and usable or meaningful only as a convenience? Or is it impossible to speak of an *Islamic* architecture and should one limit oneself to the consideration of a presumably definable number of separate regional or ethnic traditions of architecture which are only accidentally Islamic? Or, finally, did there indeed occur a "structural"[7] modification in all the areas of Islamic civilization to the point where a fully meaningful and deeply rooted Islamic architecture would have been created out of definable mutations in a vast number of separate formal systems? These are, it seems to me, the crucial questions posed by a consideration of the legacy of Islamic architecture, and the appropriate parallels here are no longer those of early Christian architecture but those of Renaissance or Baroque times, where also certain kinds of change were imposed on a wide variety of traditions. Yet it must be admitted that answers to these questions can only be attempted, for the state of scholarship in the field of Islamic art has not reached the point where theories and general considerations can find a proper place between unproved intuitions and demonstrable nonsense. It is with some uncertainty [252] as to which of these two extremes best qualifies our essay that the following remarks are presented. We shall first attempt to define the architectural *koiné* created in the eighth century and refined over the ninth and tenth centuries which seems to have been the starting point of most later developments. Then we shall take up some of the themes created by the

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6   O. Grabar, "Byzantium and the Arabs," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 18 (1964).

7   In dealing with architecture, the term "structural," so important and so fashionable in contemporary thought, is of course ambiguous. Whenever we use it to mean not construction but such internal characteristics, explicit or implicit, by which a building is understandable, we shall put it in quotation marks.

*koiné* and illustrate their later evolution and meaning. In conclusion we will try to suggest a few answers to the questions posed here.

Since Sauvaget's work on the Umayyad mosque of Medina – and regardless of the modifications which may have to be added to it[8] – it can be agreed that it was during the first two decades of the eighth century that the new Islamic religious architecture acquired its most characteristic first forms. Best known through the well-preserved mosque of Damascus (Fig. 1), which has, however, too many unique features to be considered wholly typical, this first Islamic architecture was the dominant type for at least four centuries and its masterpieces are found all the way from Spain with the celebrated mosque of Cordoba (Fig. 2) to Egypt (the mosques of Ibn Tulun, Fig. 3, al-Azhar, al-Hakim) and Iraq (the great Samarra mosques). It is almost certain that the majority of early Iranian mosques belonged to the same type, although the remaining examples are known mostly through texts or through partial archaeological sources. The type may appropriately be called *hypostyle*,

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8   J. Sauvaget, *La Mosquée Omeyyade de Médine* (Paris, 1947); see also O. Grabar, "La Mosquée de Damas et les origines de la mosquée," *Synthronon, Bibliothèque des Cahiers Archéologiques*, 2 (Paris, 1968), pp. 107–14.

2    The Great
Mosque of
Cordoba, general
view of interior

3    The Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, general view

for its essential characteristic is that space is created by the skillful, if very simple, use of a single unit: the bay or open space between two supports (columns or piers). Numerous compositional variations are possible with this simple module, many of which were in fact used. Into this flexible system of composition a number of more or less fixed features were introduced: courts with or without trees, minarets, *mihrabs* (i.e. niches indicating the *qibla* or direction of prayer), often preceded by an honorific [253] dome, axial naves, *maqsuras* or reserved spaces for princes, usually combined with the *mihrab*, fountains or pools, and, somewhat later, formal doors and gates. In most early examples the place for ablutions was outside the mosque proper. Each of these elements has its own history and poses its own problems and few have been satisfactorily analyzed so far. There is no need to do so in this essay, but it should be pointed out that only the *mihrab* seems to have become fairly rapidly a symbolically or liturgically required form. In varying ways all other features were optional.

   Equally optional is the decoration of the mosque. Lavish in the mosque of Damascus, subordinate to architectural lines in the mosque of Ibn Tulun, it is limited to a few areas of the mosque of Cordoba or of al-Azhar and almost absent from the mosques of Samarra and from many small sanctuaries. Except in a few early instances – as in Damascus[9] and possibly Medina – this decoration had a limited direct iconographic meaning, in the sense that, so far as we can judge today, the identifiable decorative designs served to

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[9]    R. Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting* (Geneva, 1962), pp. 62 ff.; K. Otto-Dorn, *Kunst des Islam* (Baden-Baden, 1964), pp. 30 ff.

embellish or to emphasize certain parts of the building but did not, as designs, define functions, purposes or other possible lessons of the faith, as decoration did in Christian, Buddhist or pagan architecture. When it was felt necessary, iconographic meaning was introduced through inscriptions, and such meanings were limited to expressions of piety (mostly through appropriate quotations from the Qur'an) or to technical matters, primarily the recording of foundations, repairs and additions. By being set in the precincts of the mosque such inscriptions exemplified for all times the piety of the men mentioned in them, but they also served as decorative elements in the composition of the building.

Altogether, however, the large space of the hypostyle mosque is its most obvious characteristic, and we must on the one hand explain it and on the other evaluate it as an achievement. Even though it can be related formally to ancient *apadanas* in Iran, to certain parts [254] of ancient Egyptian temples, or to certain types of Roman forums, there is little doubt, it seems to me, that the hypostyle mosque was not influenced by any older architectural type but was an original Muslim creation. There are many reasons for this conclusion, in particular the fact that its first developments took place in the newly founded Muslim cities of Iraq where none of the possible parallels to the Muslim hypostyle can be found. But perhaps an even more important point is that the needs which led to the creation of the mosque were original needs which could not be met by existing architectural traditions. These were not primarily religious needs, in the sense that there was no obvious ceremonial or liturgical purpose to a Muslim building; several decades after the erection of the mosque of Kufa, its ground was still unpaved and complaints were made that the dust which arose during the mass movements of the ceremony of prayer was a hazard to cleanliness and health. The mosque was the social center for all sorts of public and private activities and early writers have preserved an amazing number of anecdotes illustrating the highly official or the ludicrously trivial and even vulgar events which took place in mosques. These were indeed civic centers with all the implications of the term. Yet, to the extent that the great Roman tradition of a monumental civic architecture was still in use – at least west of the Euphrates – its forms could not readily be used by the newly arrived Muslims, because on one essential point the activities which took place in the mosque were different from those which took place in the earlier forums or *agorai*: they were restricted to the Muslim *umma*, to the new Community of the Faithful. And especially in those older cities like Damascus and Jerusalem where the Muslims were in a minority, their own architecture had to be at the same time something which could unite all Muslims for their manifold common activities and something which would clearly and visibly separate them from non-Muslims. It is thus a combination of the need for a common space for the Muslim community alone and of the necessity for a space which would distinguish itself from other, Christian, Zoroastrian or Jewish [255] spaces which created the Muslim mosque. The latter was not a

necessary product of the faith of Islam revealed and elaborated in Medina but a direct result of the nature of the conquest which, initially at least, either put Muslims in a minority or segregated them in separate towns. In either case the mere utilization or imitation of older buildings was not possible and, while it is true that instances exist of the transformation of churches or other kinds of religious buildings into mosques, the amazing thing is how rarely this occurred. In such cases as Damascus and Jerusalem where a Hellenistic space was transformed into a Muslim sanctuary, the result of the transformation cannot be confused with a Roman or Hellenistic composition. Comparable instances are rare.

The conquered pre-Islamic world thus did not possess living architectural compositions which could have been used directly, or with only minor modifications, by the Muslims for their own restricted purposes. Few transformations occurred of complete pre-Islamic architectural units into Muslim ones. At the same time the structural details of the early mosque were entirely of pre-Islamic origin. The arch on pier or on column, the organization of naves, the systems of roofing, the towers, and the techniques of decoration were all earlier than Islam, often in fact taken from older buildings. Even such spectacular creations as the double tiers of polylobed arches in Cordoba (Fig. 4) or the sturdy brick piers of Samarra are but modifications – changes in accents – of earlier elements of construction. The architectural uniqueness of the Muslim hypostyle mosque does not lie in the minor technical improvements it may have brought into earlier building methods but in the fact that it succeeded in creating a new architectural expression by reshuffling and rearranging the constructional and "structural" elements from older traditions. The process took only a few decades and its main centers were in Iraq and in Syria. In a way of course this achievement testifies to the remarkable possibilities of the architectural *koiné* which issued from Hellenistic and Roman times. But it also testifies to the extraordinary way in which [256] the tightly knit early Muslim community was able to preserve its identity and to make it architecturally visible in the very terms of the previous cultures of the Near East.

In addition to its historical meaning the hypostyle mosque has yet another point to make. By having concentrated on the organization of internal space to suit the changing need of an expanding community, it became a remarkably flexible building which, thanks to its small module, could easily be expanded or contracted. In Cordoba for instance three successive additions were made to an original unit. Similar additions are documented in Kufa, Basra, Baghdad and Cairo. The only instance of contraction which can clearly be proved, at least among major buildings, occurs at the Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem.[10]

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[10]   R. W. Hamilton, *The Structural History of the Aqsa Mosque* (Jerusalem, 1949); similar contractions may have occurred in smaller mosques, such as at Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi in the Syrian desert.

4    Arches and dome in front of the *mihrab* in the Great Mosque of Cordoba

From a theoretical point of view this possibility of modifying the shape of the building according to the needs of the community is a remarkably modern feature, completely unknown in earlier or contemporary architecture. From an aesthetic point of view it must probably be considered as less successful, for façades and the whole apparatus of external monumentalization and ordering which gave so much of their value to Roman temples or to Gothic cathedrals were impossible. Yet we must remember that the purpose of the hypostyle mosque as a whole was not aesthetic, and it is only in exceptional buildings like the Great Mosque of Damascus that peculiar local circumstances led to the creation of a unified architectural ensemble. The severity and simplicity of the forms found in early Islamic mosques illustrate superbly the austerity of early Islam and its view of itself by which man can and must praise God directly, without the intermediary of a clergy or of a mystery. And in the more conservative areas of Islam, such as Morocco, the hypostyle remained for centuries the only type used, while quite often in newly conquered or converted areas, such as Anatolia or India, the hypostyle was the first type of mosque to be built, symbolizing no doubt the purest [257] qualities of Islam, but also simple enough to be adapted to any architectural tradition.

Secular architecture was quite another matter. There was not much of an Arabian or early Islamic model to follow and, except in so far as a pious rejection of luxury and high living accompanied a partly admiring suspicion of alien ways and alien things, no religious or intellectual objection existed to any aspect of secular architecture. On the contrary, the very ideal of urban living which characterized early Islam automatically demanded the adoption of ways which had not been typical of pre-Islamic Arabia. What all of this meant architecturally is little known[11] and it is likely that the situation varied from region to region. On the simple level of the architectural infrastructure of Muslim life, therefore, it is not possible to define an "Islamic" way as opposed to some pre-Islamic one, nor can we suggest the creation of some new architectural type like that of the mosque.

A different picture emerges when we move away from the daily world of houses, streets, walls, baths, canals and markets to that of princely constructions. A curious paradox occurs here. Whereas it is possible to identify nearly eighty sites of probable early Islamic palaces, not more than a dozen are known from texts as being unique in any way, and we have no contemporary identification of the spectacular establishments discovered at Khirbat al-Mafjar, Qusayr 'Amrah, Jabal Says, the two Qasr al-Hayr, or Ukhaydir.[12] Either the literary sources are ill informed, or these buildings were so typical that there was no need to mention them, or else they were works of private art, not part of the official version of the history of early Islam as it was developed by the chroniclers. A discussion of the various hypotheses and explanations which can [258] be woven around this rather extraordinary series of princely buildings need not concern us in this essay, except perhaps on one point. It is that, even though all these constructions are of related types, they are actually known through different kinds of sources. At one extreme are the Umayyad palaces, known only through archaeology; at the other extreme lies Baghdad, a unique entity known only through texts; and between the two are found such establishments as Samarra in Iraq or Madinat al-Zahra' in Spain for which incomplete archaeological and textual material is available.[13] When we realize further that most archaeological sources have never been properly published while many texts

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11    U. Monneret de Villard, *Introduzione alto Studio dell'archeologia Islamica* (Venice, 1966), is a partial attempt to gather documents on these problems.

12    There is as yet no convenient list of early Islamic sites; I am helping to prepare one in conjunction with the work at Qasr al-Hayr and a comparable one is being put together by Dr K. Brisch, of the Berlin Museum, in connection with his excavations at Jabal Says. For the time being the best introductions are in the notes and bibliographies attached to Monneret de Villard's posthumous book.

13    Beyond the basic works in our bibliography, see various articles by J. Lassner, especially "Massignon and Baghdad," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 9 (1966), and "Municipal Entities and Mosques," ibid., 10 (1967). A more complete statement is in idem, *The Topography of Baghdad* (Detroit, 1970). For Madinat al-Zahra', see the bibliography in K. Brisch, *Kunst des Orients*, 5 (1968), pp. 67 ff.
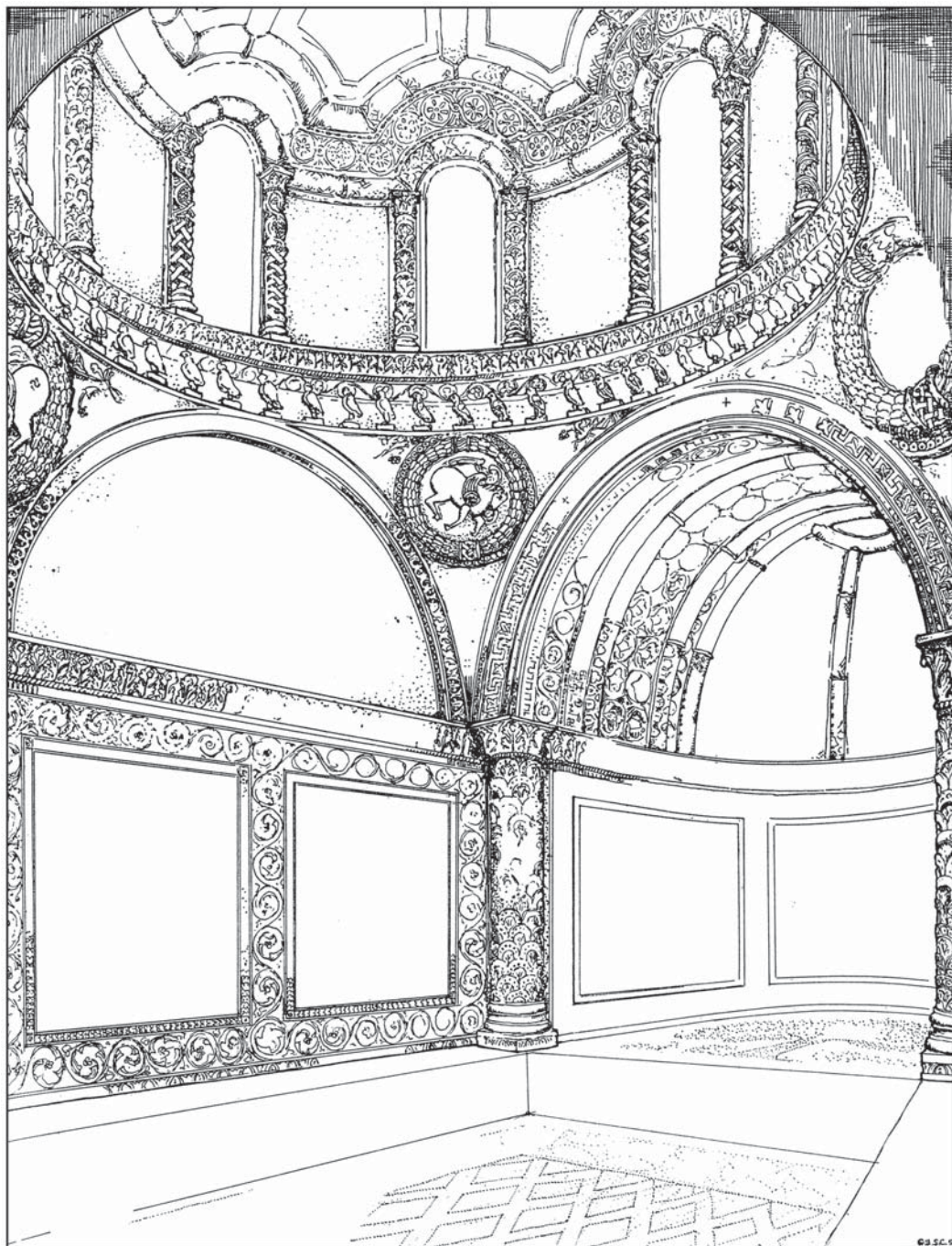
5   Qasr al-Hayr
East, caravanserai,
façade

are not very clear, it will become apparent that an exact typological definition of these palaces is difficult to achieve and that our conclusions have still to be very tentative.

In a general way three themes can be identified in the art of early Islamic palaces, none of which is a purely Muslim theme yet all three of which appear to have been accepted as parts of the fabric of secular princely life. The first theme is that of the clear-cut separation of the princely establishment from the surrounding world, a separation which may have found its origins in the *villa urbana* and *villa rustica* of ancient Rome.[14] At its most extreme in the sumptuous palaces of Umayyad princes hidden away in their domains all over the Syrian steppe, this separation occurs as well in Samarra or in the heavily fortified city palace at Kufa. Only Baghdad's original palace was less obviously remote, but then the whole of the original layout of the city had a unique palace-like quality and its central part, the palace proper, did not remain in use for very long. The consequences of this remoteness would be, [259] first of all, that the identifying feature of the palace on the outside is its walls adorned with towers and perhaps an impressive gateway (Figs 5 and 7). A more important consequence would be that the interior of the palace

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[14]   A. Grabar and O. Grabar, "L'Essor des Arts inspirés par les cours princières à la fin du premier millénaire," *L'Occidente e l'Islam nell'alto Medioevo* (Spoleto, 1965).

6    Khirbat al-
Mafjar,
reconstruction of
a room in the
bath

7    Qasr al-Hayr
West, palace,
façade

tends to become a myth. Inaccessible to most and transforming itself quite often into a huge walled city within the city, the palace becomes the source of stories, adventures and of all sorts of mysterious events in which fact and fancy are difficult to separate. Only the gateway remains as a physical tie between real and mythical lives.

A second theme is more specific. Like the mosques – and with the exception of Baghdad and of a small group of Umayyad constructions which are direct imitations of Roman castles – early Islamic palaces were not highly ordered and formally planned compositions. They consisted rather of a series of self-sufficient units which could be modified, increased, destroyed or replaced, as needs or tastes changed. Among these units are found mosques or oratories, baths, audience-halls of varying degrees of formality, courts with fountains, gardens, gates, private kiosks, and a whole paraphernalia of living quarters and of service areas. Any one of these units can exist both alone as a separate architectural entity (like the single bath at Qusayr 'Amrah) and as a cell in a larger composition. None of the units seems to have been a Muslim invention and their background may be either Roman or Iranian. The important point is that the palace was not an aesthetically conceived and aesthetically organized entity, but a series of separate elements related to each other by a small number of typical activities by which the life of the prince was identified. These included audiences, some of which reached extraordinary splendor, but also pleasure and pastime, drinking, bathing, singing and so on.

Finally the palace was a far greater sponsor of decoration than the mosque. Mosaics, paintings, stone or stucco sculptures were media used for such an astounding variety of decorative or representational themes that the discoveries of Qusayr 'Amrah, Mshatta, and even Khirbat al-Mafjar were greeted first with considerable [260] doubt as to their Islamic origins. And yet what has remained is but a minor part of the decorative wealth of early Islamic palaces, for they must in fact be imagined with all the rich textiles and precious objects gathered in by the princes from all over the world. In the better-known Umayyad palaces there is at times something of a *nouveau riche* bric-à-brac (Fig. 6) in the accumulation of technical, stylistic and iconographic features from many lands and from many periods, and the exact process by which this enormous vocabulary of forms was transformed into more coherent styles and programs is still far from being well understood. That it was so transformed is likely indeed, for in the later fragments remaining from Samarra, Madinat al-Zahra' or Cairo a certain classicism of form can be detected. Yet this is a whole area of investigation in which more can be guessed than demonstrated.

These brief remarks on the earliest Islamic art may not yet have answered the fundamental questions raised earlier, but they may provide us with a number of threads or "modes" by following which we can usefully examine later monuments. One such thread is the extraordinary ease with which an

Islamic architecture was created. One reason was no doubt that the architecture of previous centuries lent itself to the kind of transformations which were required by Islam. Another reason seems to have been the fact that the main concern of Islamic architecture did not lie in the maintenance or creation of certain forms but in the expression of certain activities. General needs of the faith – gathering of the faithful and separation from non-Muslims – rather than canonically or liturgically compelling forms created the mosque. The palace was identified in terms of activities, audiences or pleasure, none of which had a necessary form attached to it. The corollary of this adaptability of Islamic architecture to a variety of forms should then be that what identifies it is not a set of forms, a style, but a way of transforming styles, an attribute or a group of attributes imposed on a variety of forms, which could be called a "mode".

A second conclusion is that, whereas religious art was limited [261] both in its forms and its purposes, secular art, and especially the art of the palace, was not, and thus the conclusion may be drawn even for early Islamic architecture that secular inspiration tended to predominate and certainly offered a much greater field for development than religious architecture. It became most easily the crucible in which the infinite variety of themes offered to the new civilization by the past of the conquered territories could be molded into something specifically Islamic. Finally, even though somewhat limited in mosques, architectural decoration clearly played an important part in the first monuments of Islamic architecture. Many techniques and many themes were involved in it. It is around these three threads of decoration, of secular inspiration, and of transformation of forms that I should like to discuss later developments of Islamic architecture.

It can indeed be argued that the vast majority of the more important and more original creations of Islamic architecture were inspired by needs and tastes other than those created by the faith of Islam. These needs and tastes which we shall call secular are of course less obviously Islamic than the needs of the faith and, in dealing with the secular arts, we should eventually learn to distinguish between the kinds of themes which are specifically Muslim and those which the Muslim world shared with many other living or dead cultures. This is unfortunately not possible within the space available and we have to limit ourselves to a consideration of a few buildings and to the conclusions which can be derived from them.

The most characteristic secular building was the royal or princely palace. After the ninth century, however, palaces are much less well preserved than those of the early centuries of Islamic civilization, and it is through fragmentary ruins and through literary descriptions that we can best be made aware of the Cairene palaces of the eleventh century, of the Mongol extravaganzas rapidly erected in Azerbaijan or near Samarkand, or of the numerous residences in cities or in the country which are known [262] in

North Africa and Sicily, in the Euphrates valley, in thirteenth-century Anatolia, all over Iran, or in early Muslim India.[15] To this list of ruins and literary references there is one major exception, the extraordinary Alhambra in Granada,[16] and, even though there is some danger in using only one monument in the extreme west of the Muslim world for a whole culture, we shall attempt through the Alhambra to define some of the apparent characteristics of the Muslim palace in the later Middle Ages.

The Alhambra is located on a hill overlooking the city. It is surrounded by walls and has a fortified look, although in fact only the lowest part of the large enclosure could be and probably was used for any sort of military purpose. By its location and by its fortified aspect the Alhambra is characteristic of a tradition going back to the early Islamic period. It is of the city and yet not quite in the city. But it is not only part of what we have called the early fortified *villa* tradition. It has also been influenced by a later development, that of the *qal'a* or urban citadel. The origins of the latter are far from being clear and in all likelihood several separate sources were involved in its formation: an eastern Iranian tradition of pre-Islamic origin, the growth of a military aristocracy of different ethnic stock from that of the city's inhabitants, and general insecurity going together with the growth in power of individual towns. Whatever the reasons, from the tenth century onward and [263] with considerable regional variations, the citadel appeared as a characteristic feature of almost every city. At times spectacularly located as in Aleppo (Fig. 8) or in Cairo, it was at other times, as in Damascus, barely visible above the rest of the city. The *qal'a* never acquired the mythical qualities of the earlier royal palace, even though accounts and limited archaeological remains suggest that many citadels had considerable amenities of life. It did, however, emphasize anew the importance of military models in the development of architecture, and a number of technical novelties in vaulting and in the planning of gateways or of towers derived from the new architecture of citadels.

If the Alhambra's first characteristic is its fortified look relatable to two separate traditions of secular architecture, its second feature is that its vast

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[15]    A complete bibliography on this subject would be too long to include here, for it is a remarkably scattered one and for the most part difficult of access. One may suggest as beginnings for future investigations the monuments of Algeria, conveniently accessible through recent works by L. Golvin, such as *Le Maghreb central à l'époque des Zirides* (Paris, 1957); the descriptions of Cairo, primarily Maqrizi's *Khitat* (Bulaq, 1270/1854); and the Iranian monuments, for which information can be found in the numerous works of G. A. Pugachenkova, most recently *Istoriia Iskusstv Uzbekistana* (Moscow, 1965), or in excavation reports, French and Italian for Afghanistan, German for Iran.

[16]    See F. P. Bargebuhr, *The Alhambra* (Berlin, 1968) for an exciting but controversial statement which does not entirely supersede the author's earlier "The Alhambra Palace of the Eleventh Century," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 19 (1956), pp. 192–258. The monument itself is still best described in various guide books such as L. Torres Balbas, *La Alhambra y el Generalife* (Madrid, 1953), or in *Ars Hispaniae*, 4 (Madrid, 1949).

8    Aleppo,
citadel
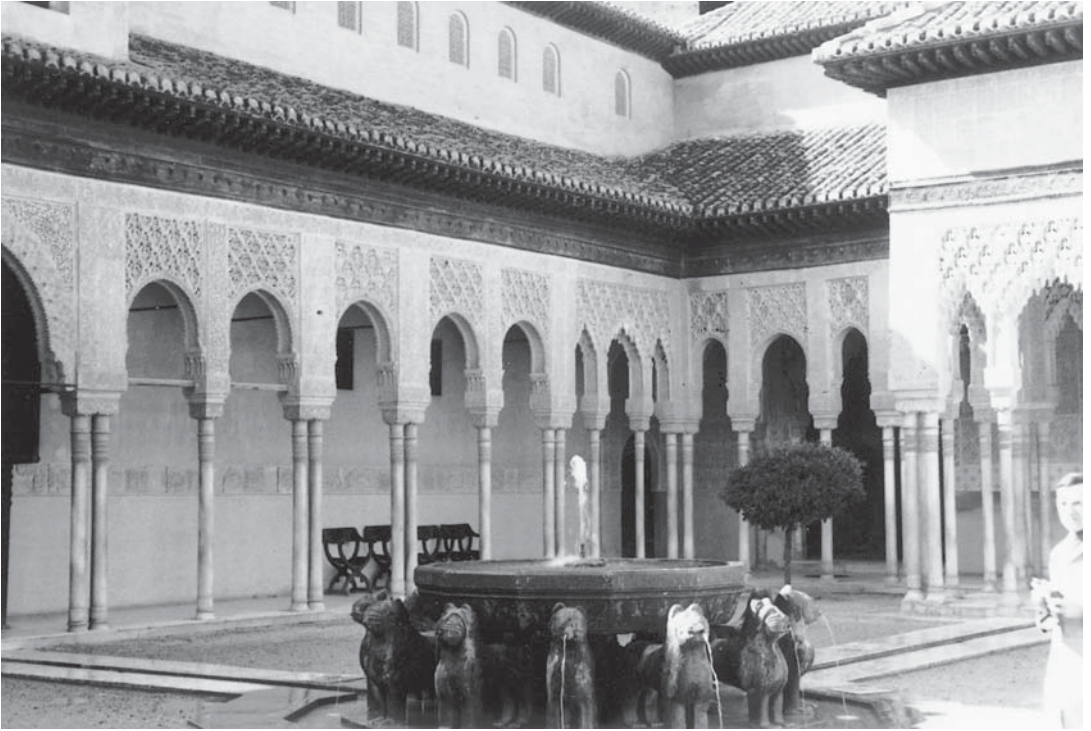
area is not composed as one entity but is broken up into a series of separate
units. Some of these are gardens with pavilions artfully set up on the slopes
of the mountain, and such gardens are part of a Muslim tradition which
extends to Iran and to India.[17] The most celebrated remaining units in the
Alhambra are the two units of the Lions and of the Myrtles, where, around
magnificent courts, more or less complex arrangements of square and
rectangular rooms have been put together (Fig. 9). This additive principle of
architectural composition appears to have been characteristic of all known
Islamic royal constructions, except perhaps a number of late Iranian examples,
and its sources are already to be found in the great palaces of Samarra.

   The most important point is that very few of the halls and courts of the
Alhambra had an architecturally definable purpose. A curious dissociation
seems to have occurred between building and function, as though individual
forms which are definable in architectural terms as courts, porticoes, square
or oblong halls and so forth were merely generalized forms in which a
variety of purposes, from traditional audiences to various pastimes, could be
performed. On this point, just as in its fortified aspect, the Alhambra
illustrates a phenomenon valid for Islam as a whole. Thus, for [264] instance,
the masses of kiosks or pavilions known in Cairo, Istanbul, Konya or Isfahan

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[17]    D. N. Wilber, *Persian Gardens and Garden Pavilions* (Rutland, Vermont, 1962).

were also simple formal entities (generally a more or less developed domed unit) which do not in themselves suggest precise activities and in which many different events could take place. While at first glance quite different from what is known in most of Western architecture, this Muslim characteristic of the Middle Ages is remarkably similar in type to the "multi-purpose" rooms of today's architecture. To be made secure, however, this point still demands further investigation, especially in the field of lexicography, for it would be essential to know as precisely as possible the terms which were used at any one time for different parts of the palace.

The third essential feature of the Alhambra is the extraordinary importance of its decoration. We shall return later to some technical aspects of this decoration, but the significant point is that the decoration provides the main effect of the building from the inside and, whether in Iran, in Central Asia or in Turkey, the spectacular character of the themes and techniques of palace decoration is self-evident. The question we have to raise is whether this decoration had no further aim than to beautify, whether its aim was only luxuriously aesthetic. Thanks to F. Bargebuhr's work the Alhambra provides a clue, for it can be argued that much in it – from the Fountain of the Lions to the stupendous stalactite domes almost miraculously held on thin supports (Fig. 10) – can be related to the mythology which throughout the Middle Ages had developed around Solomon, the Prophet–King. The impression of an other-worldly and separate paradise, the gardens, the decorative tricks and *tours de force* are perhaps attempts to translate into earthly terms the great and beautiful vision of what the jinns had made for Solomon and his Queen of Sheba. It cannot be within the purview of this chapter to recount the many instances all over the Muslim world which would tend to justify this interpretation, but what I should like to emphasize is that the Solomonic myth was not a Muslim invention but a generally medieval one which continued in the West as late as the Baroque [265] period. In this sense the splendor of the palace architecture of Islam, like its textiles and objects, was a splendor meaningful far beyond the frontiers of Islam, and its monuments may serve as major examples of medieval art in general.

Yet it would not be proper to illustrate Islamic secular architecture through palaces alone, for in a number of other areas the Islamic achievement, while less spectacular, was far more distinct. Most interesting is the monumentalization of common urban functions. Schools, shops, hostels, hospitals (Fig. 11), caravanserais, baths, street fountains, even warehouses acquired great façades and decoration, and the latest and most sophisticated techniques of construction were used, as for instance in the spectacular caravanserais of Anatolia in the thirteenth century.[18] The reasons for this development are to be sought in a

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[18]    K. Erdmann, *Das Anatolische Karavanseray* (Berlin, 1961).
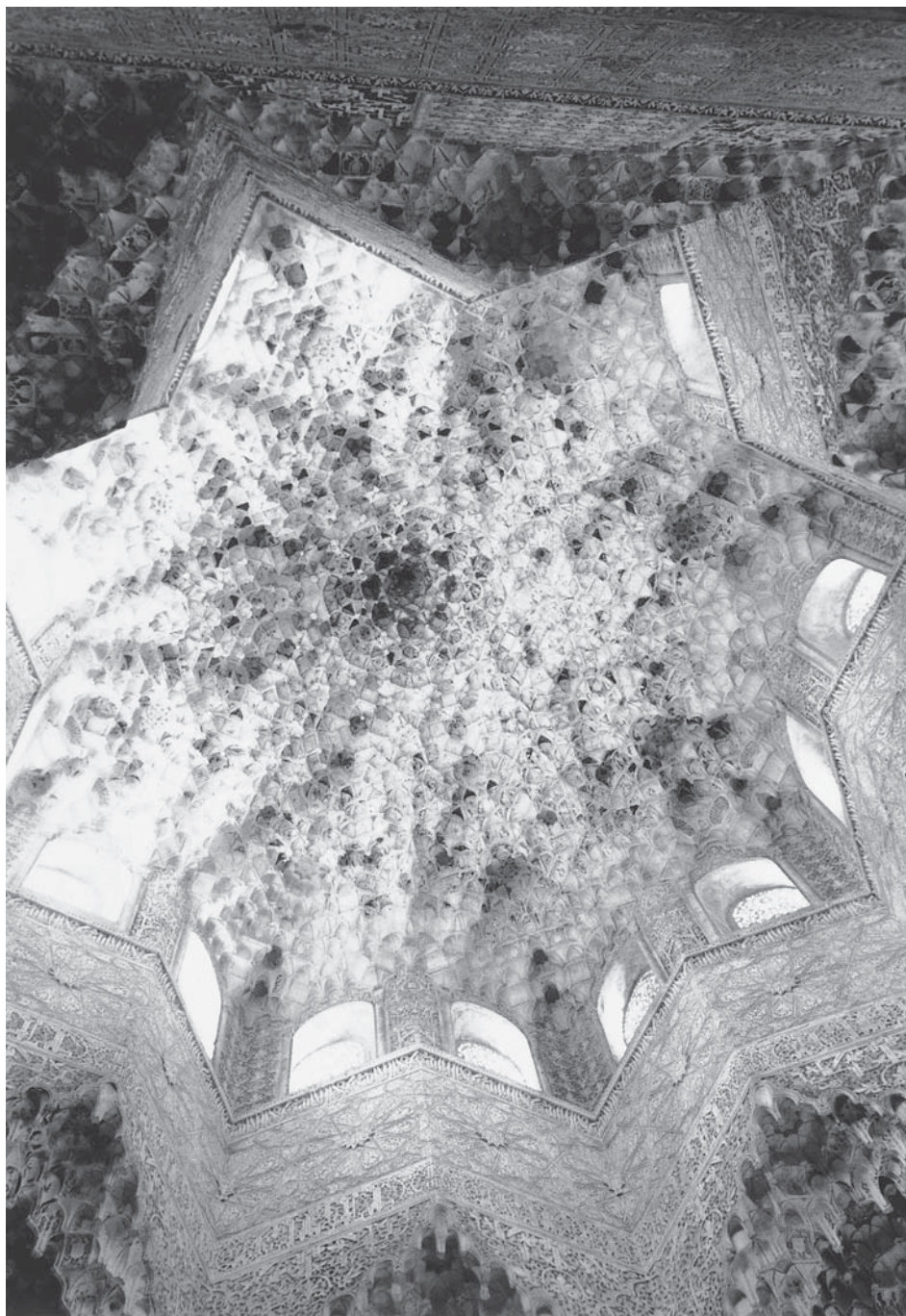
10   Granada, Alhambra, Hall of the Two Sisters, dome

11    Damascus,
hospital of Nur
al-Din, façade

number of social and religious characteristics of the Muslim world: the importance of "works" next to faith which gave particular stress to social activities, the power of an urban bourgeoisie with its own taste and needs,[19] the institution of the *magi* which gave religious sanction and freedom from confiscation to many humanitarian and economic institutions, and the tendency of the medieval period to invest in construction and land rather than in trade or industry. The forms used in these various kinds of buildings tended to be alike, regardless of functions. Façades, for instance, the first and most obviously visible part of a building, rarely if ever make it possible to distinguish a mosque from a hostel or from a school. For here again the activity of man – known to us today in disused buildings through inscriptions or through very minor variations in form – was the actual identifying feature of the building, and its visible forms, its plan or its decoration were merely the contemporary signs of wealth and conspicuous consumption without necessary [266] functional purpose or identification. Regardless of these uniquely Muslim characteristics, however, the significant point is that not since the Roman empire had there occurred such a development of monumental architecture for a variety of secular purposes. Although there were a number of instances (Samarkand, Isfahan, Istanbul) of organized city planning for all these functions, in most cities the development tended to be more haphazard. In religious architecture itself the appearance and development of façades from the tenth century onward,[20] the growth of domes in front of *mihrabs*, the multiplication of highly decorated minarets, and the ubiquitous growth of mausoleums all served to publicize the building or the men who sponsored it in ways which are far more characteristic of secular than of religious art. It would not be an exaggeration to conclude that in medieval art as a whole, which is so often seen as centered on religion, Islamic architecture appears as a sort of conscious secular variant.

It has already been pointed out that decoration played from the very beginning an important part in Islamic architecture, especially in secular buildings. Interest in decoration continued over the centuries and it is indeed by the wealth of their ornamentation which at times hides the construction that Muslim buildings have been characterized from the time of the Dome of the Rock in 691 all the way to the great Iranian monuments of Safavid times (Fig. 12). Whether in the development of stucco, in the extraordinary ways of laying bricks so as to make designs, or in the eventual

19    O. Grabar, "The Architecture of the Middle Eastern City: the Case of the Mosque," in *Middle Eastern Cities*, ed. I. Lapidus (Berkeley, 1969), and "The illustrated Maqamat of the Thirteenth Century," in *The Islamic City*, ed. A. H. Hourani and S. M. Stern (Oxford, 1970).

20    The earliest instances of monumental façades which seem clearly datable are the San Esteban gate in the mosque of Cordoba in the ninth century and the mausoleum at Tim in Central Asia of 976, for which see G. A. Pugachenkova, *Mavzolei Arab-ata* (Tashkent, 1963).
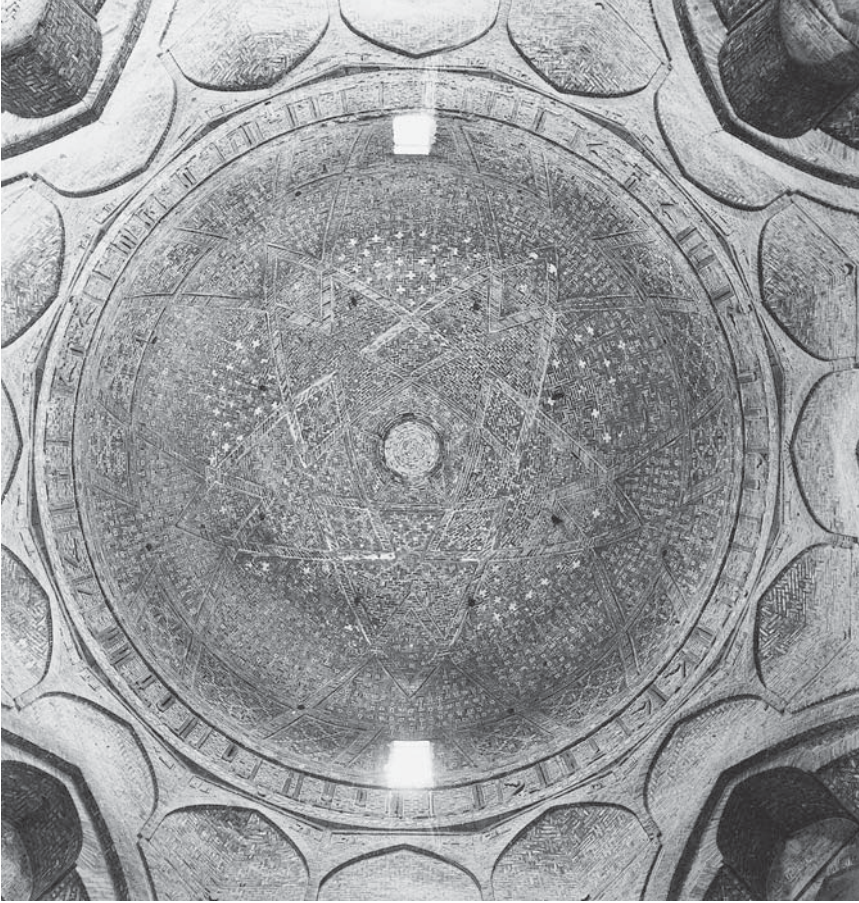
12   Isfahan,
Masjid-i Shah,
façade
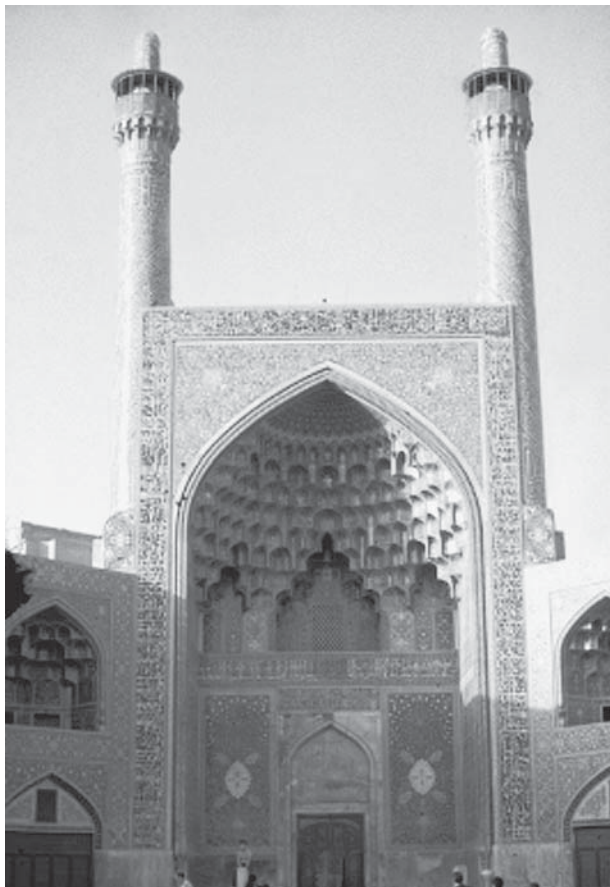


discovery and development of colored tiles,[21] there is much that is technically
original in Islamic architectural decoration, just as many themes are unique
and worthy of study. Yet what I should like to discuss here is a different and
perhaps more original [267] aspect of this decoration. It is the manner in
which construction and ornament relate to each other, for in this way one of
the most debated problems of Islamic architecture can be posed.

Already in the domes by the *mihrab* of the mosque of Cordoba (Fig. 4) we
can see a rather unusual combination of such features as ribs which appear to
support the cupola and which yet have been shown to form a static mass with
the cupola. The ribs are accompanied by squinches, a characteristic unit of
domical support, which in this instance do not support anything, while below,
the polylobed arches have been broken up into sections and recomposed. A
century later in the north dome of Isfahan's great mosque (Fig. 13) a very

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21   D. Wilber, "Development of Mosaic Faience in Islamic Architecture in Iran," *Ars
Islamica*, 6 (1939), pp. 16–47; for more general remarks see D. Hill and O. Grabar,
*Islamic Architecture and its Decoration* (London, 1965).

unusual articulation of supports corresponding to every single part of the superstructure gives the impression of a type of structural grid or net which would then have been filled in with a highly decorative brick masonry. Yet here also it appears that from the point of view of statics a single mass was created and not a series of interplays and balances between separate parts.[22] Then, from its earliest known occurrence in the Tim mausoleum to the spectacular compositions of Safavid Iran or of Cairene façades and Andalusian domes, the *muqarnas*, a type of device which uses in many combinations a small number of three-dimensional shapes, appears no doubt as a decorative feature used in cornices and often without structural significance and yet also as something inspired by architectural forms (Fig. 14) and at times drawing attention to the principal parts of the building.

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[22]    We are still almost totally lacking in any sort of engineering study of Iranian monuments. The only usable work is found in M. B. Smith's exemplary publication of Barsian, "Material for a Corpus of Early Iranian Islamic Architecture," *Ars Islamica*, 4 (1937), pp. 7–41.

14   Cairo,
mausoleum of
Sultan Barquq,
interior dome
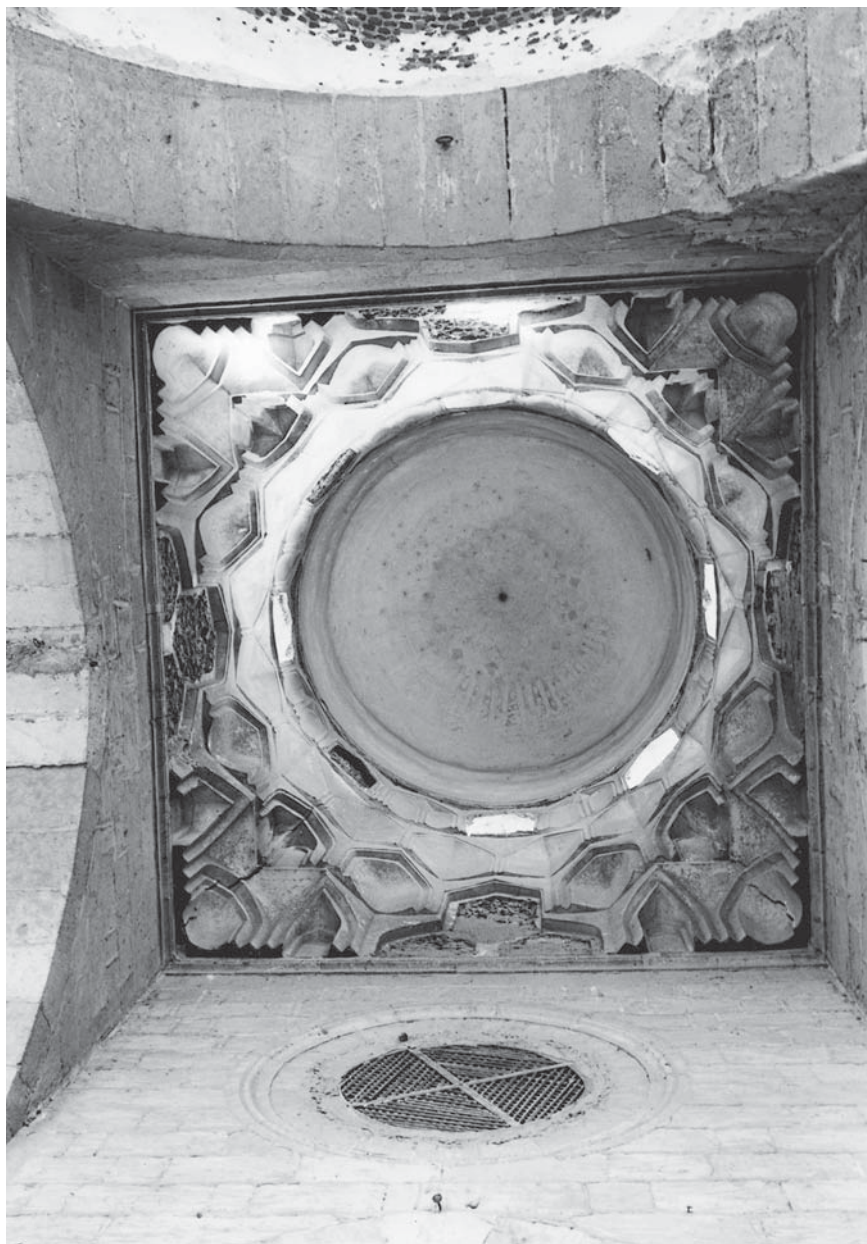


These three examples – two specific monuments and an architectural device – are all features which have an ambiguous value in that they are all meaningful in the construction of the building (or at least could be made to be meaningful) and yet none of them appears simply as a device for construction. In a unique fashion structural meaning and decorative value have been blended and [268] the respective importance of either can vary considerably. Several ways of interpreting this ubiquitous Muslim phenomenon (see Fig. 16 for the use of

bricks) are open, and cogent arguments exist for each of these ways, although none is totally persuasive. It can be argued that these examples illustrate primarily solutions of constructional problems which, as in many instances elsewhere, moved from constructional to decorative. It can also be argued that the decorative impulse was the main one and that it is only exceptionally – in Spain in the tenth century, in Iran and in Egypt in the eleventh and twelfth centuries – that a constructional value was given to basically decorative forms. Or perhaps, in line with our earlier arguments about secular architecture, we could suggest that this particular development of Islamic architectural decoration is another instance of a sort of principle of formal ambiguity by which the visible forms of the architecture are not to be judged according to their variable relationship to a Vitruvian contrast between construction and decoration, but rather according to the effect given to any one building or clear unit of a building. In the latter case, the opposition or the contrast between ornament and construction could become a false problem, like the misunderstanding of the phonetic structure of a word or the mistranslation of a sentence.

Much theoretical work and research are still necessary before this latter interpretation can be made secure. As a hypothesis it has several advantages. It sets the question of architectural decoration in its own cultural and temporal context rather than according to some external criterion. It explains the apparent contradiction of using architectonic themes without architectonic function or the transformation of walls and other means of support into tapestries or illuminations by means of color and of decorative designs. It also compels us to look more closely at the total effect of an architecture rather than at its separate parts and to draw the conclusion that in a great masterpiece as opposed to "typical" works the significance of the work of art is larger than the sum of its parts. It is in this fashion for instance that the *muqarnas* domes [269] of the Alhambra (Fig. 10) can justifiably be interpreted as revolving heavens, for, as the source of external light moves around the base of the dome, the topologically complex surface of the cupola is constantly illuminated in a different manner and, like the heavens, never looks the same while remaining motionless. It is only the architectural context of the decorative designs which gives meaning to the ornament, but it is only by being decorated in a certain fashion that the static cupolas can be understood as revolving. In this particular instance, of course, additional epigraphic evidence exists to make the interpretation plausible.[23] Elsewhere we still have to learn to "read" the monuments properly.

As far as architectural decoration is concerned, our central point would, therefore, be that, regardless of the aesthetic merits a foreign taste may see in the colorful decoration of Islamic architecture, this decoration when seen in

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[23]    G. Gómez, *Ibn Zamrak* (Madrid, 1943); D. Emilio Lafuente y Alcantara, *Inscripciones Árabes de Granada* (Madrid, 1859).

its full context rather than as a series of themes was what gave meaning to the building. What that meaning was in each case is still problematic, for we are in effect in the presence of something like Minoan or Hittite, languages in which some words and some structures are clear but the language as a whole is not yet fully understood.

In dealing both with secular inspiration of architecture and with architectural decoration, we have tried to define the achievement of Islamic architecture less in terms of precise characteristics and motifs than as a series of attitudes such as the preponderance of activity over form, the monumentalization of an unusually large number of functions, and the partial replacement of the dichotomy of construction and decoration by a single morphemic entity whose exact meaning probably varied from century to century, region to region, and monument to monument in ways yet to be elucidated. These achievements appear to have been particularly original in the Muslim world and may serve as a convenient starting-point for a brief consideration of the last theme I should like to consider, the modal transformation of non-Islamic forms. [270]

This theme, we may recall, derived from the fact that early Islamic architecture had to be created as a phenomenon *sui generis* out of a complex cluster of earlier or contemporary forms. It is a further remarkable feature of this architecture that the syntheses formed by the first two or three centuries were not the simple prime movers from which all later developments derived but that they were themselves but one example – admittedly the first and most influential one – of a unique power of transformation into something Islamic of many other formal or functional entities. This transformation occurred over the centuries on any number of different levels. The simplest one was that of transformation of non-Islamic forms into Islamic purposes. This is probably what happened in the eleventh century in Iran when a pre-Islamic *aywan* (a large vaulted hall opening directly on to an open space) was transformed into the axial feature of mosques (Fig. 15) and of a multitude of other buildings. A similar phenomenon occurred in Ottoman Turkey where a dome-centered type of edifice[24] was evolved, which, under the impact of Hagia Sophia, was to create the superb mosques of Istanbul. Things were somewhat different in India where several Near Eastern models were introduced and adapted to local media of construction, giving to the monuments a partly hybrid character which succeeded far better in highly thought-out compositions like the Taj Mahal than in the more common provincial monuments.

These instances merely illustrate the remarkable adaptability of forms from many different regions to the needs of Islam. Of even greater interest

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[24]  The subject of the formation of Ottoman architecture has been considerably modified in recent years by A. Kuran, *The Mosque in Early Ottoman Architecture* (Chicago, 1968), and R. Goodwin, *A History of Ottoman Architecture* (London and Baltimore, 1971).

are functions which at a certain moment became Islamic. Such was the case of the mausoleum,[25] whose very existence went against the precepts of the faith. What made the mausoleum as an architectural form so characteristic of Islamic [271] architecture is that, even though there are instances of very ancient cults transformed into Muslim ones and even though the forms used (Fig. 16) are relatable to pre-Islamic forms of mausoleums, it did not make its appearance as an influence from elsewhere but in response to the conscious need of the Muslim community, or certain sections of it. This ability to give a coherent Islamic meaning to a vast variety of styles is what we should like to call the Islamic mode. And it is in the existence of a history of an Islamic mode over and above the history of specific styles that Islamic architecture acquired one of its unique characteristics.

Any attempt at suggesting in a few pages the achievement of a thousand years of architecture over three continents is bound to leave out a great deal. There might have been a fuller discussion of aesthetic characteristics or of the particularly original decoration of Islamic architecture or even of such constructional features as may be considered peculiar to the Muslim world.

15    Isfahan, Masjid-i Jum'a, aywan in court

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25    O. Grabar, "The Earliest Islamic Commemorative Structures," *Ars Orientalis*, 6 (1967), pp. 7–46.

16    Dashti (near Isfahan), detail of masonry

But I think that these questions cannot be considered meaningfully until the nature and purpose of architecture within the culture have been determined, because the very occurrence and maintenance of an Islamic civilization over such diverse lands poses problems like that of its architecture in a unique fashion. Our most significant conclusions seem to be two. One is that what gave an Islamic quality to the architecture of the Muslims is less identifiable in terms of visually perceptible forms than in terms of human activities. Forms varied and there is almost nothing in common between the mosque of Cordoba and the Süleymaniye in Istanbul or the mosque of Bibi Khanum in Samarkand. Yet the activities of men and the prayers uttered in these buildings have made all of them Islamic. An essential corollary of this point was that the forms themselves tended to be generalized ones, rarely acquiring a specific meaning and purpose. Only in this fashion was it possible to maintain Islamic needs in a vast variety of lands and of architectural traditions. More interesting perhaps is the point that Islamic architecture becomes in this way a remarkably modern architecture.

The second conclusion is a more obvious one, although it has a consequence which is less so. There seems to be little doubt that a variety of reasons – among which one of the most important was the lack of a Muslim ecclesiastical organization – led to the development of secular architecture of a far greater degree of originality than religious architecture. It is true, of

course, that the faith is involved in such buildings as mausoleums and even in much of the urban architecture which we have discussed. Yet the primacy of the non-spiritual is made clear for instance by the lack in Islamic literature of statements about God and His buildings similar to those which Procopius or Suger wrote about churches, whereas the mythology of the palace is a commonplace subject in Arabic and Persian prose or poetry. It is in terms of this primacy of the secular that one has to understand, at least in part, the great Muslim achievements in architectural decoration. The consequence of this is a curious problem. Since much of palace architecture in particular was private architecture, not visible to most men and rarely built for more than passing enjoyment, should it not be considered like the miniatures as a secondary art in the culture as a whole, even though it was a particularly creative one? Should we conclude that its importance grew only by default, because the prime motive in the culture of Islam, the faith itself and all its social corollaries, could not be a major source of monumental and spiritually meaningful architecture? Or should we instead consider this architecture as a major historical document, an expression of the secular aspect of Islamic power? It is still much too early to answer these questions and many detailed investigations are needed before we can even attempt to do so. Yet in the final analysis, perhaps the most important achievement of Islamic architecture may be that, by providing a profile of a culture parallel to and different from the profiles suggested by literary sources, that culture is shown to have been far more complex and far more intricate than is generally believed.

It is, however, not sufficient to see Islamic architecture solely as a uniquely rich although poorly exploited source for an [273] understanding of the culture. Its more profound achievement pertains to the history of architecture, for, issued from many of the same sources as Christian architecture of the Middle Ages, it utilized its inheritance in significantly different ways, and suggests a variety of new meanings for commonly known forms or provides old meanings for new formal inventions. While the precise explanation of each meaning and form lies within an understanding of Islamic culture, their actual occurrence can enrich our comprehension of architectural processes in general.

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