

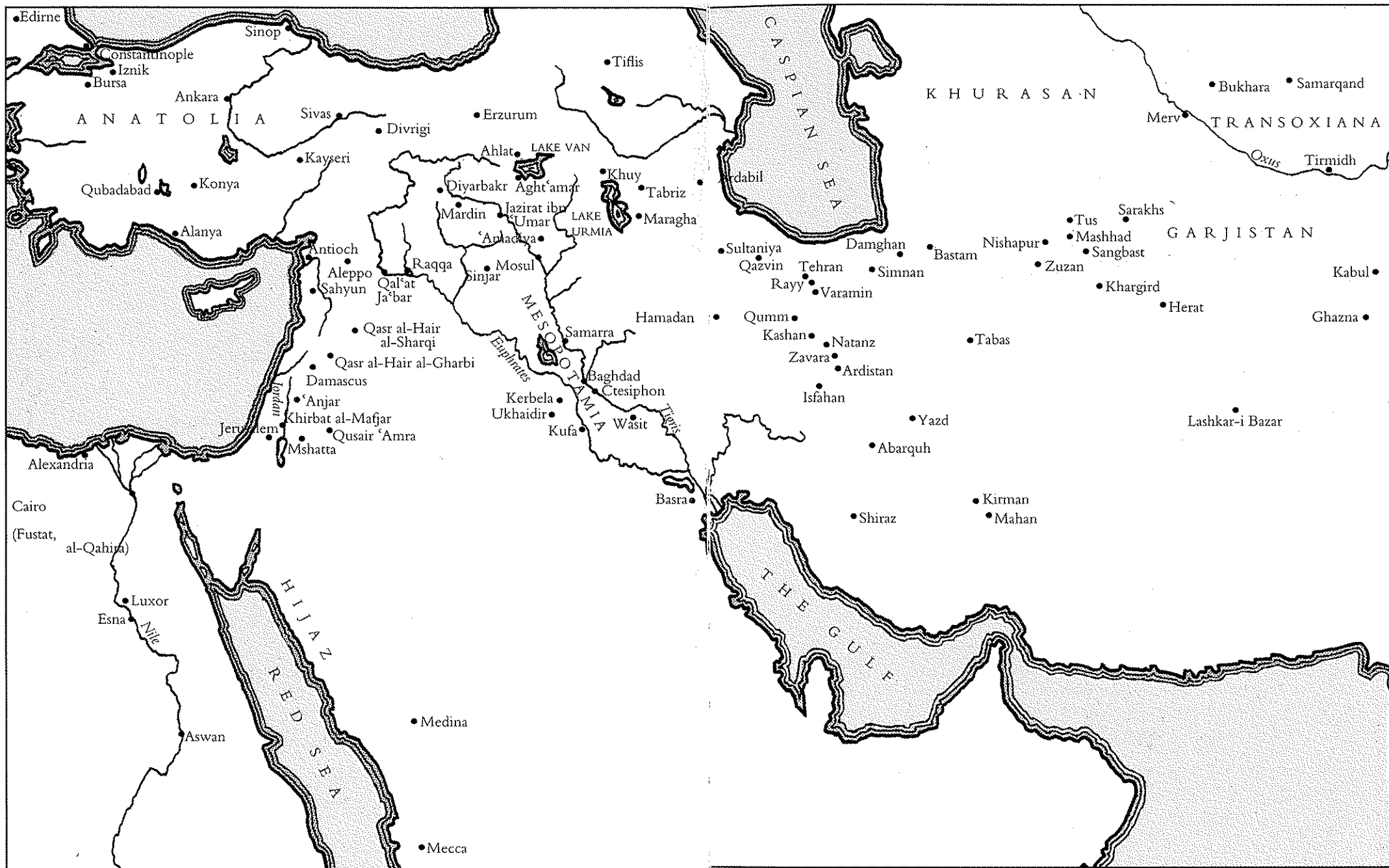


Robert Hillenbrand

Islamic Art and Architecture

270 illustrations, 80 in color

THE ISLAMIC WORLD FROM ANATOLIA TO CENTRAL ASIA



Introduction

Any attempt to make sense of Islamic art and architecture as a whole while retaining a chronological framework runs the risk of distortion. Bias of several different kinds is hard to avoid. It is simply not possible to be equally well informed and equally interested in all aspects of the subject. The need to consider in some detail the early centuries of Islamic art is made imperative by the major impact which work of this period had on later art. But a great deal of this early art has perished, and to do justice to what survives in the context of its own time and of subsequent periods demands a closer and more detailed focus than is appropriate for the more numerous examples of later art. Some degree of over-balance is therefore inevitable.

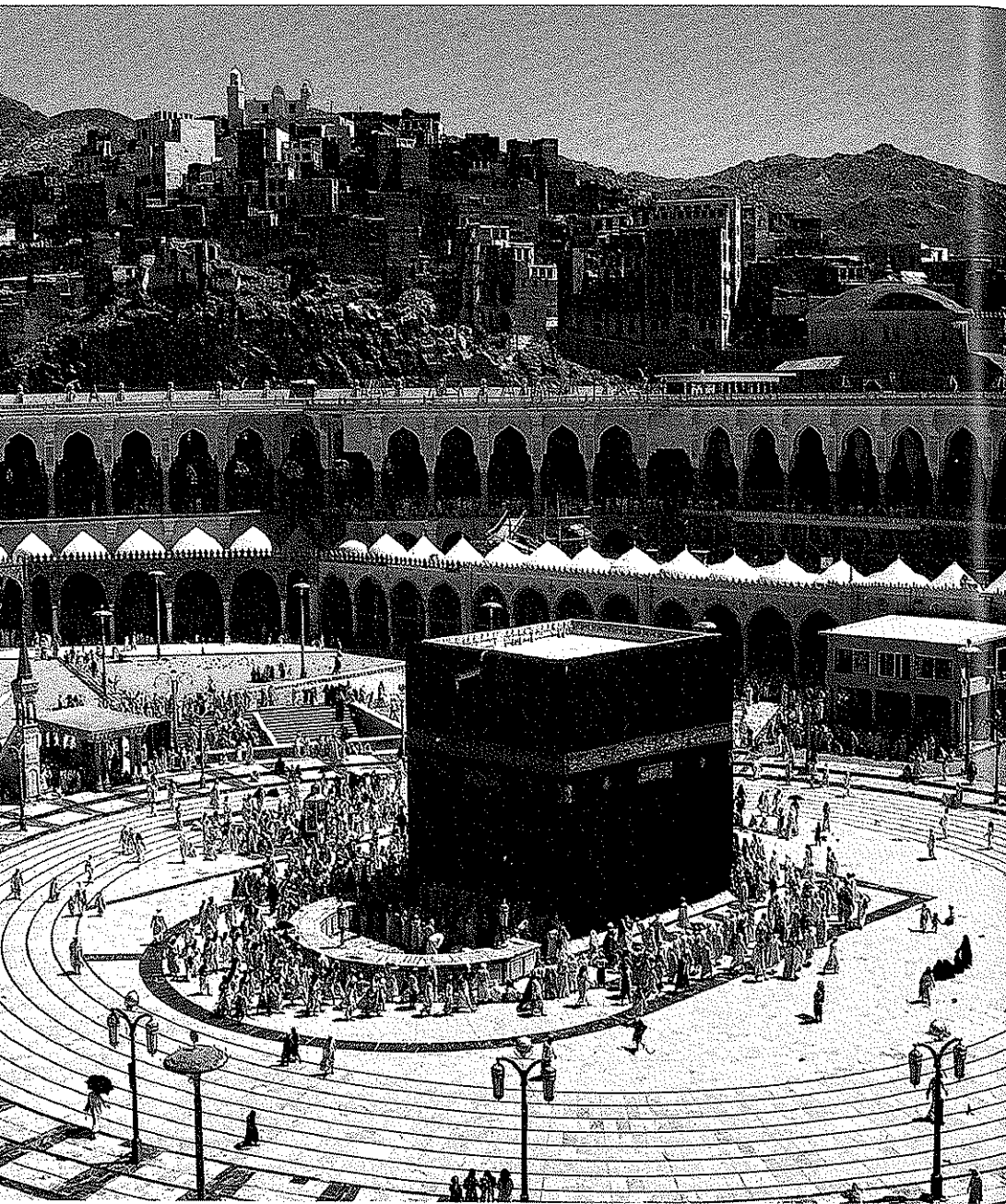
Certain art forms such as calligraphy or textiles continued to be produced in most parts of the Islamic world from early times, but they are not of equal significance in each area or period. Thus the absence of a discussion of, say, Tulunid woodwork, Maghribi pottery, Timurid textiles, Spanish metalwork or Ottoman Qur'ans should not be interpreted as a signal that they did not exist, have not survived or are of peripheral interest. It is simply that it seemed best to reserve a discussion of certain media for those periods in which production was of the most significant scale and quality. Similarly, the art of entire dynasties – Ghaznavid, Turcoman, the *beyliks* of Anatolia, the *muluk al-tawa'if* of medieval Spain – is virtually ignored. Such omissions are dictated by the rigorous word limit and the need to see the wood rather than the trees. In other words, the option of trying to say something, however little, about almost everything, and thus writing a rather bland and trivial text, was rejected. It seemed preferable to single out key objects and monuments for relatively detailed scrutiny, in the hope that they would provide a means of entry into the school or style that produced them. This book, then, is more a study of the peaks than of the valleys; its colours are intended to be bold and primary.

A secondary aim has been to set the various schools and types of Islamic art in a reasonably full historical context so that the images are not, so to speak, trapped in limbo. Specialists will have to console themselves with the thought that this book was not written with them in mind. It is truly no more than an introduction to a vast field.

Moreover, the very fact that a book with the all-inclusive title of *Islamic Art and Architecture* can be written – whereas the books on western European art in the World of Art series are of a very much more specialized kind, and are often devoted to a single school, or even artist – is a reminder that the volume of scholarship consecrated to this field is tiny in comparison with that available for European art. Basic guides to the territory therefore still have their function. But it would be a serious mistake to assume from that disparity that there is any less 'going on' in Islamic than in European art. You just have to dig rather deeper for it.

NOTE CONCERNING DATES

For the sake of simplicity and consistency, year dates are shown in accordance with the Gregorian calendar, but with occasional mentions of their equivalents in the Muslim calendar (based on the lunar cycle) in connection with specifically dated buildings or works of art. Muslim years are calculated from the date of the *hijra* – the Prophet's journey from Mecca to Medina – in July 622.



1 The pivot of Islam. The Ka'ba in the Masjid al-Haram, Mecca: principal Islamic shrine and the goal of Muslim pilgrimage. Frequently restored, it contains the Black Stone, the directional focus for Muslim prayer, and is covered – 'like a bride' according to medieval poets – with the *kiswa*, a silken veil, now black but formerly in many colours.

The Birth of Islamic Art: the Umayyads

The genesis of Islamic art is customarily linked with, indeed often attributed to, the whirlwind military conquests of the Arabs following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in AD 632. Such an idea is plausible enough. The creation of a world empire, the proclamation of a new faith, the formation of an art that bears its name – all seem to belong together. But do they? Is there a causal connection, and – if so – what is the exact chronological sequence? Dazzling and exciting as the spectacle of the Arab conquests is, it in fact has relatively little to do with the early years of Islamic art. Yet the formative nature of those early years is plain. What, then, is the precise connection between the seismic political events of the seventh century and the earliest Islamic art?

The answer to such questions demands a refinement of the chronological and geographical focus. To view early Islamic art as even approximately representative of an empire that stretched from the Atlantic to India and the borders of China is grossly to misunderstand its context. In the two generations which saw the Arabs flood out of their desert homeland and overrun all of western Asia and North Africa there was, it seems, neither the desire nor the time to foster artistic expression. That was to be the achievement not of the first conquerors themselves but of their grandchildren. At all events, no major building or artefact survives from these early years. This sluggish start may owe something to the fact that in this period the nascent Muslim state was being ruled from Arabia, an environment in which the visual arts, though by no means absent – as recent excavations at Qaryat al-Faw (frescoes of royal scenes) and elsewhere (figural sculpture) have shown – nevertheless had no very significant role, though architecture flourished. Arabia certainly lagged far behind the Levant. Similarly, there can be no question of a 'universal' Islamic art at this early stage. The horizons of that art were effectively limited to Syria. The rest of the Islamic empire might as well scarcely have existed at all, except insofar as works of art or

craftsmen from outside Syria were active within that province and thus exerted external influence on the art produced there.

These remarks might lead one to expect a somewhat parochial quality in the earliest Islamic art, and also a certain timidity or lack of purpose. Yet this is not so. Such characteristics might well have marked the very first monuments which the Muslims erected, for example in Fustat, Basra and Kufa – although there is no way of clinching this, for they have not survived. But if Islamic art was slow to start, it was quick to gather speed. Certainly the first major monument to survive, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, radiates assurance. A new art has arrived. It established itself quickly and, for all that numerous experiments and changes of mind can be detected during the rule of the Umayyad dynasty (661–750), the pervasive confidence of the age remained undimmed.

This confidence, one of the most striking features of Umayyad art, was founded on several interrelated factors. Chief among them, perhaps, was the astonishing military success of the Arabs in their foreign campaigns. To their enemies they must have appeared to bear charmed lives, their winning streak seeming unassailable for much of the Umayyad period. Decade after decade the borders of the *dar al-islam* steadily expanded, until in 732 – exactly a century after the Prophet's death – the Arab defeat at Poitiers in central France signalled (though only with the hindsight of history) the end of substantial territorial gains for some centuries. But the splendid confidence of the Umayyads was not based entirely on military success abroad; it was founded also on the ability of the new dynasty to survive numerous challenges from within. Such challenges were at their most dangerous in the first thirty years of Umayyad rule. It may be no more than a coincidence that this same period was singularly barren so far as the production of works of art was concerned. Yet it is probable that the outburst of building activity which followed the consolidation of Umayyad power and the dynasty's triumph over its internal enemies should be seen at least partly in a political light – in this particular case, as a celebration of Umayyad dominance. This propaganda dimension was frequently to reappear in Islamic art, especially in architecture, although it tended to be of secondary rather than primary significance.

Allied to the understandable confidence generated by spectacular military successes at home and abroad was a confidence based on a sense of secure dynastic power. The Umayyads had abrogated the primordial Islamic notion of an elective succession to the caliphate

and replaced it by the dynastic principle. The internal political turmoil of the later seventh century was in large measure caused – and maintained – by that action. Once victorious over their enemies, however, the Umayyads were able to indulge a heady consciousness of family power for which history can offer few parallels. For several caliphs – notably 'Abd al-Malik, al-Walid I and al-Walid II – this sense of dynastic pride found its most public expression in ambitious building campaigns. The caliphs Sulaiman and Hisham were not far behind, and other princes of the royal family, such as al-'Abbas b. al-Walid and Ghamr b. Yazid, followed suit. Indeed, to judge by the quantities of religious and secular buildings erected in Syria between 690 and 750 under the direct patronage of the Umayyad royal house, architecture speedily became a family business. The immense financial resources of the Islamic state, whose exchequer was swollen by the accumulated booty of the Arab conquests and by the taxation revenue which came pouring in thereafter, were at the disposal of the Umayyad builders. Thus 'Abd al-Malik was able to set aside the tax revenues of Egypt for seven years to pay for the Dome of the Rock, while his son al-Walid I devoted the entire tax revenue of Syria for seven years to the building and embellishment of the Great Mosque of Damascus. There was thus both the will and the means to embark on grandiose building projects.

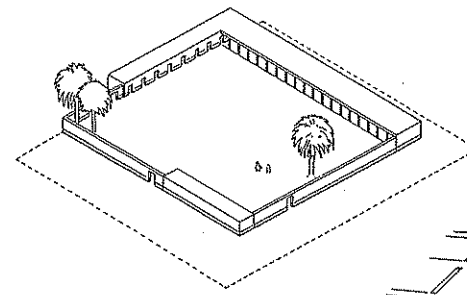
Enough has been said to account for the superb self-confidence which triggered and then fuelled the massive building programme of the Umayyads. Yet the geographical location of these buildings also requires explanation. Given that they are to be found, with very few exceptions, exclusively in Syria, how was an undue parochialism, peculiarly inappropriate to a world empire, avoided? The answer is three-fold. First, Syria under the Umayyads was beyond compare the most favoured land in the Islamic empire. Its inhabitants enjoyed privileges and concessions denied to those from other provinces. Its principal city, Damascus, was from 661 the capital of the empire. Here was established the Umayyad court and administration, when these were not to be found toiling in the wake of semi-nomadic caliphs. The massive caliphal investment in agricultural installations – canals, dams, wells, gardens and so on, culminating in the planned but abortive diversion of the River Jordan itself – made Syria perhaps even exceed Iraq as the richest province in the empire. Thus abundant wealth complemented its political prestige.

Parochialism in Umayyad art was further discouraged by the practice of conscripting labour and materials from other provinces. This

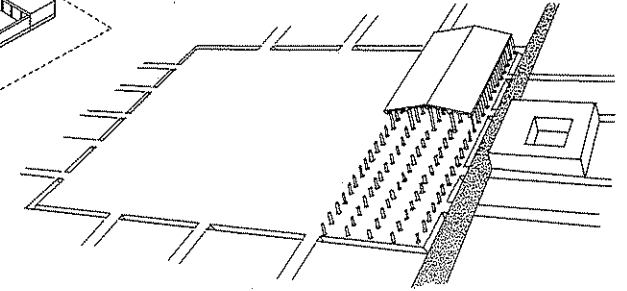
custom ensured that Syrian material culture would be metropolitan. The caliphs could dip at will into an extensive labour pool within their own domains, and could supplement this by importing still more craftsmen and materials from outside the Islamic world, notably from Byzantium. The chance survival of a cache of papyri from Aphrodito in Upper Egypt documents the workings of an Islamic *corvée* system – essentially the *leiturgia* practised by Rome and Byzantium – in the early eighth century. The local governor, one Qurra b. Sharik, was responsible for sending a specified number of men to work on the Damascus mosque, and he had to provide money to cover their living expenses too. Such documentary proof of the *corvée* system can be supplemented by literary references – for example, al-Tabari mentions the activity of Syrian and Coptic workmen in the building of the mosque at Medina – and, above all, by the evidence of the buildings themselves. Stucco sculpture of Persian type, Iraqi techniques of vault construction, mouldings from south-eastern Anatolia, a figural style closely paralleled in Coptic sculpture – all furnish unmistakable evidence that the style and building practice of Syria was enriched by ideas and traditions from much further afield. There was no danger that the local Syrian craftsmen would cling to their own traditions and thus risk stagnation.

Finally, the position of Syria, both geographically and politically, militated against parochialism. The province was uniquely placed to draw inspiration from the major cultures newly yoked together to form the Islamic empire. To the north, west and south-west lay lands in which Graeco-Roman culture was dominant and which were either Byzantine or, like Egypt and North Africa, had recently been wrested from Byzantine rule. To the south was Arabia, which at this early stage in Islamic history was still by no means a spent force in religious, cultural or political terms. To the east lay Mesopotamia and Persia, comprising the accumulated heritage of Assyria and Babylon, and of the Achaemenids, Parthians and Sasanians. Here the tradition of world empires died hard, though the horizons of these Middle Eastern states were appreciably narrower than those of the Umayyads.

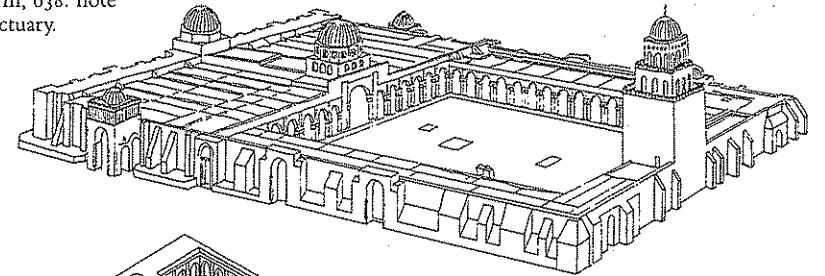
Within the Umayyad empire, then, which stretched from France to the Indus, Syria was ideally placed to act as a central point from which metropolitan influences radiated to the outlying provinces. No other region of the Islamic world combined such a deeply rooted Hellenism with an openness to the ancient cultures of the Near East. By virtue of its geographical position and its political pre-eminence,



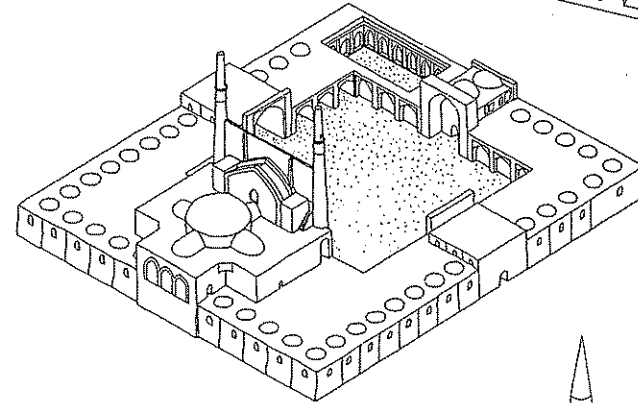
(above) The enlarged house of the Prophet Muhammad, Medina, 624: the inspiration for much mosque architecture.



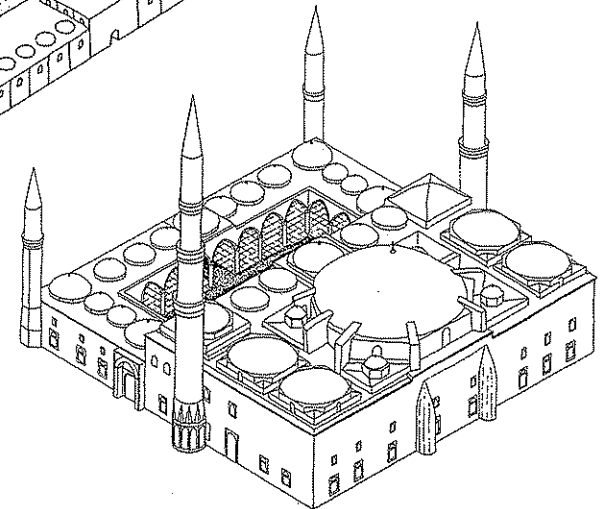
(right) The Great Mosque of Kufa, original form, 638: note the hypostyle sanctuary.



(above) The Great Mosque of Qairawan, principally 836–62.



(above) The Friday Mosque of Ziyaratgah, Herat, 1482: a standard Iranian 4-*iwān* layout.



(right) The Uç Serefeli Mosque, Edirne, 1447: an example of the domical emphasis in Ottoman mosque architecture.

Syria was a natural bridge between east and west, north and south. It was only to be expected that under the Umayyads its art should reflect this unique situation. The fact that those same Umayyads were not a family of local Syrian notables but the representatives of the greatest empire in the contemporary world gave their art a mission of the utmost seriousness. It had a public, an imperial, role. In the immediately pre-Islamic period Syria had perforce been constrained to yield centre stage to Constantinople and even Alexandria, and was thus to a certain extent an eastern appendage of a Mediterranean-centred empire. The emergence of Islam as a world power decisively changed all this and brought Syria its scant century of glory. Umayyad art was the public expression of that glory.

So far as the future of Islamic art was concerned, this was a crucial century, in which the face of the Mediterranean world and the Near East was permanently redrawn. This century established the principle that Islamic art, far from being intrinsically universal, could have (as it certainly began by having) a well-defined regional and dynastic character, a feature which it consistently retained in later centuries. The Umayyad period also ensured that the forms and ideas of classical art, which were much better understood in Syria than in the lands further to the east, would enter the bloodstream of Islamic art. As a result, Islamic architecture tends to feel familiar to a Western observer; it employs, after all, the familiar vocabulary of column and capital, pointed arch and dome, rib and vault. It was under the Umayyads, too, that a distinct iconography of princely life, centring around the formal, ceremonial activities of the monarch and his leisure pursuits, was developed and refined. This set of images was to become a leitmotif of secular art throughout the Islamic world. Similarly, the success of Umayyad solutions to many problems of religious and secular architecture ensured that the building types evolved during this period repeatedly recurred in one guise or another in subsequent centuries. This readiness of later generations to copy Umayyad prototypes was at least partly due to the unique glamour which invested this, the first and most powerful of Islamic dynasties. As already noted, too, the Umayyads recognized the propaganda dimension inherent in splendid buildings and symbolic images; this also was to remain a constant of later Islamic art. Yet this same development was viewed with some mistrust at first, and Mu'awiya, the first Umayyad caliph, when challenged about his taste for ostentation on the Byzantine model, defended himself by asserting that 'we are at the frontier and I desire to

rival the enemy in martial pomp, so that he may be witness to the prestige of Islam'.

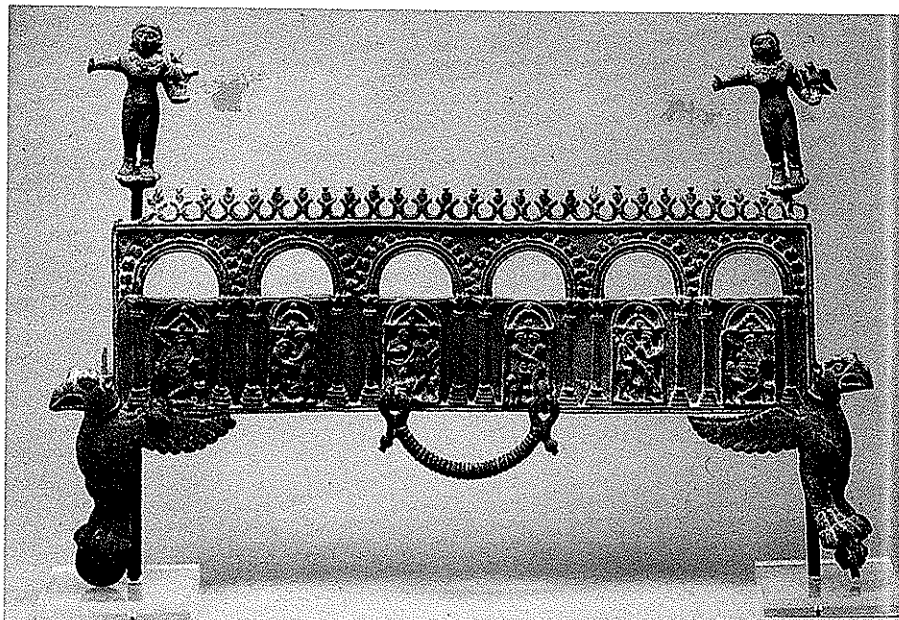
Finally, the Umayyads' choice of Syria as their power base had tremendous consequences for later Islamic art, since the generative impact of Syria was greater than that of any potential rival among the other provinces in the Islamic empire. Islamic art would have developed in a very different fashion if the Umayyads had settled, for example, in Arabia, in Spain or in India. At the same time, lest too much be claimed for the art of this period, it is worth remembering that some of the media which were later to become most typically Islamic, such as glazed pottery, metalwork, carpets, book painting and textiles, are either totally or virtually absent from art of this period.

What, then, are the principal expressions of Islamic art under Umayyad dominion? The so-called 'minor arts' are quickly disposed of: the textile fragment which, if its attribution to Marwan II is correct, would be datable to c. 750, and whose arabesques and figural style would readily suggest Coptic work but for the Arabic inscription; some ivories for which Coptic and Byzantine as well as Umayyad provenances have been suggested, a controversy which itself sheds much light on the intrinsic nature of Umayyad art; and a little metalwork, much of it also of disputed date and provenance. The so-called 'Marwan ewer' in Cairo may be late Umayyad or early Abbasid; but its date, and indeed its provenance, is less important than its form, which is prophetic of much of later Islamic metalwork in that it typifies the preferred Islamic response to the sculpture of living creatures. The body of the ewer is occupied principally by a continuous arcade enclosing rosettes and animals, all lightly incised. A pair of dolphins in high relief support the handle; but the *pièce de résistance* is the fully three-dimensional crowing cockerel, craning forward eagerly with his beak open in full cry, who perches on (and then himself forms) the spout of the ewer. The utilitarian function of such sculpture may well have sufficed, from the standpoint of strict orthodoxy, to justify its otherwise impiously mimetic quality. Several similar but less ornate pieces testify to the popularity of this model. A new chapter in Umayyad metalwork was opened with the discovery in 1985, at the ancient site of al-Fudain, of a square bronze brazier on wheels. At each corner stands a naked girl, sculpted in the round and holding a bird; along the only complete side is a set of panels with erotic images and scenes of revelling. The piece bears close affinities to the sculptures of Khirbat al-Mafjar (see p. 32).



3 (left) Engraved base metal ewer ascribed to the caliph Marwan II, c. 750, found in Egypt. Its blind arcades (here with solar rosettes) recur in *sura* dividers in early Qur'ans, unglazed clay lamps and jars, and Umayyad architecture; they may, like the cockerel, symbolize light – and even boundaries or protection. Sasanian and Hellenistic elements combine with a distinctively Islamic aesthetic of all-over decoration.

4 (below) Private taste. Bronze and iron brazier from al-Fudain, Jordan, before 750. Probably cast by the lost-wax method. Ceremonial braziers occur on Assyrian reliefs, but the griffins with outstretched wings which form the feet recall Sasanian metalwork, while the frank sensuality of these pneumatic figures owes much to Coptic art and the corner figures recall the Syrian goddess Atargatis.



5 Economic interdependence. Money scarcely existed in the Arabia of Muhammad. For this reason, and to maintain economic stability, the Muslims long forbore to replace the existing coinage. They contented themselves with unobtrusive fine tuning, adding Arabic inscriptions and removing religious symbols.

Another significant expression of Umayyad art deserves brief mention here: the coinage of the period. To a quite remarkable degree this coinage mirrors and encapsulates the artistic tendencies traceable in the much more complex field of architecture. Umayyad coins faithfully reflect the long fallow period which preceded the serious involvement of Umayyad patrons with ambitious works of art. The significant innovations in coinage are almost exactly contemporary with the Dome of the Rock (completed in 691). As in architecture, so in coins the evolutionary trend is clear: an initially slavish dependence on classical models gives way to an increasing preference for themes and techniques inherited from the ancient Near East, and the resultant period of experiment produces some unexpected reworkings of old ideas in new contexts. Finally an originally and distinctively Islamic solution is fashioned from these heterogeneous elements. This entire process of acculturation and innovation was, it seems, telescoped into little more than a decade; perhaps the limited physical scope offered by coinage resulted in Islamic forms being introduced at an accelerated pace. The evolution of coins therefore epitomizes a process which in other media, notably architecture, occurred much more slowly and tentatively.

In Iraq, Persia and areas even further east, Sasanian silver coins were copied with virtually no alteration. The favourite design featured on the obverse a portrait head of Khusrau II, one of the last Sasanian rulers before the Islamic conquest of Persia, and on the reverse a fire altar with attendants. Even the name of the Sasanian ruler in the Persian Pahlavi characters was retained, as were the

Pahlavi mint marks, while the date was given successively in the two Sasanian calendars and then in the Islamic or Hijra reckoning. When the Muslim governor's name was given, it was also written in Pahlavi characters. The only distinctively Islamic feature was the addition of pious expressions in Kufic script, such as 'in the name of God' or 'praise be to God'. Thus presumably Persian die makers continued to work under the Muslims. These Arab-Sasanian coins, then, show the willingness of the Muslims to maintain the status quo.

In Syria, with the spectre of a weakened but unconquered Byzantine state just north of the border, the situation was different. Here the Arabs naturally encountered not Sasanian but Byzantine coinage. They were already familiar with this, since the words *dinar* and *dirham* (from *denarius* and *drachma* respectively) occur in the Qur'an. Despite the Greek derivation of its name, the *dirham* mentioned in the Qur'an, in the chapter of Joseph, is probably a Sasanian coin since this was by far the most widespread silver coin in the Near East – the dollar of late antiquity. The Sasanian economy was based on silver just as that of Byzantium was based on gold. Under the



- 6 A language of symbols. Late 7th-century coins.
 (a) Caliph (?) at prayer with attendants. Muslim adaptation of a standard Sasanian type. Silver *dirham* minted by Bishr b. Marwan, 692–3.
 (b) Bar-less cross on altar steps. Syrian gold *dinar*, c. 692. The cross was modified, by letters, as here (R.I. Rex Ishmaelorum, 'King of the Ismaelites?'), or by a circle, thus creating a Greek *phi*.
 (c) Standing caliph with the Muslim creed around the rim. Syrian gold *dinar* minted by 'Abd al-Malik, 696–7. A response to Byzantine gold issues.
 (d) Aniconic epigraphic gold *dinar*, Syrian, 696–7. The forerunner of almost all later Muslim coinage.

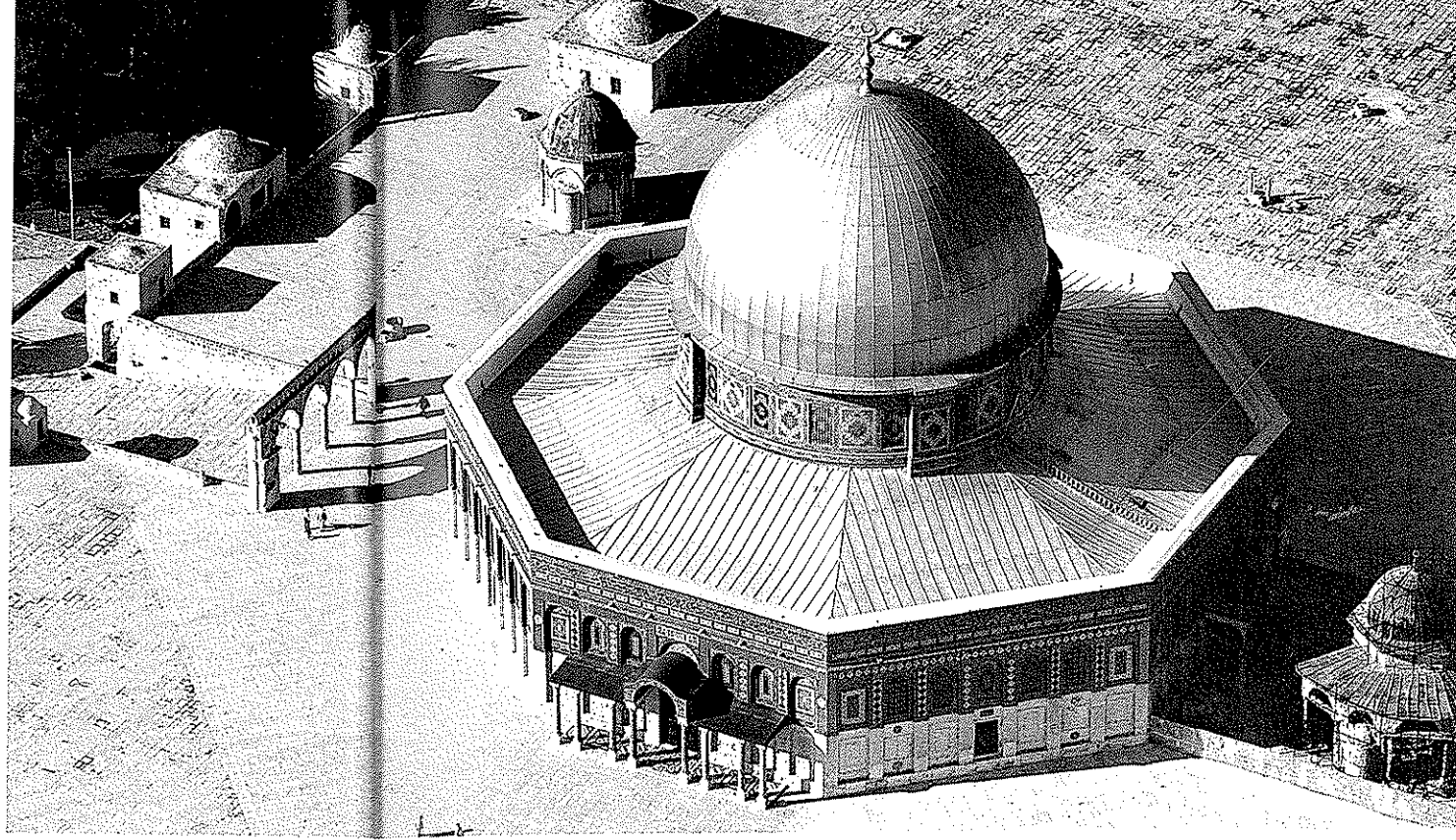
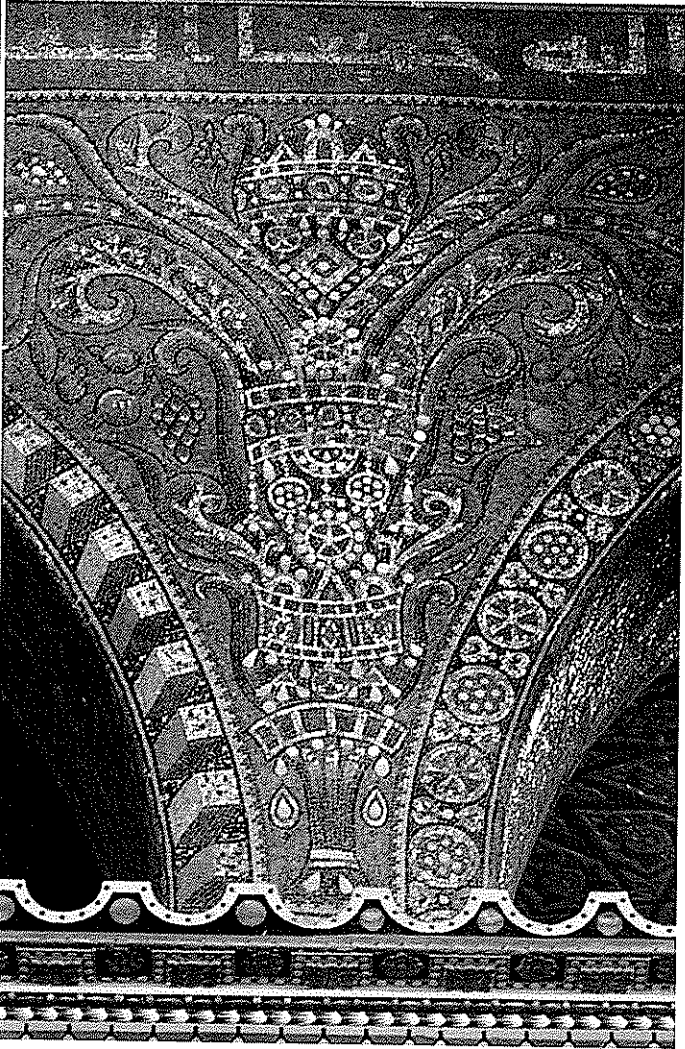


- 7 God's caliph. Silver *dirham*, probably Damascus c. 692. The niche, common in classical and Christian art, here prefigures the *mihrab* and contains the Prophet's lance. The caliph is also metaphorically present through his title.

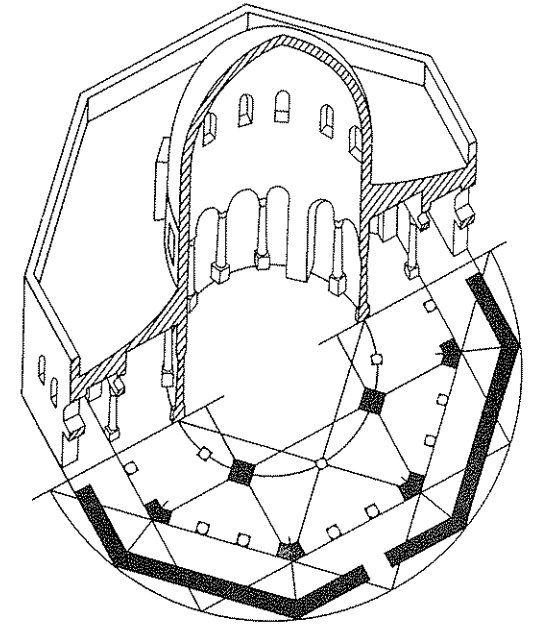
caliph 'Umar I, for example, the Syrians paid their taxes in gold while the Iraqis paid theirs in silver. The Arabic copper coin, the *fals*, is the Greek *folles* in disguise; here, too, the Byzantine designs were copied. At first Byzantine types were used without any alteration; this was sound economic sense, for the Arabs had long been familiar with these coins in commerce. Indeed, a Syriac chronicle records that when in 661 the caliph Mu'awiya minted gold and silver 'the populace did not accept it as there was no cross on it'. Several well-known Byzantine types were copied, some of single standing imperial figures, others showing the emperor Heraclius and his two sons. Soon, however, tiny but momentous changes were introduced; on the reverse, the cross on a stepped podium lost its horizontal bar, the monogram denoting Christ was deprived of its initial letter and hence its meaning, and the crosses surmounting the imperial crowns were removed. The intention behind these changes was clearly to de-Christianize the coins, but to do so as unobtrusively as possible, retaining their Byzantine look.

By degrees the Muslims embarked on bolder innovations, replacing for example the Byzantine ruler with orb and sceptre by a recognizably Arab figure, bearded, wearing the traditional Bedouin headdress, and clasping a sword – a pose evocative of the caliph delivering, as his office demanded, the *khutba* or bidding prayer at the congregational mosque on Fridays. In other experimental issues this 'standing caliph' was replaced by other images with an even more unmistakably Islamic religious significance, such as the caliph

8 (below) Imagery of the afterlife. Dome of the Rock: polychrome and mother-of-pearl mosaic. Motifs of secondary importance in Byzantine tradition are now greatly enlarged and promoted to centre stage. Jewelled vases and celestial plants glorify the Rock and create an other-worldly ambience, employing new symbols of power and Paradise.



9 (above) Islam triumphant. Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, completed in 691. Built on the platform formerly occupied by Solomon's Temple, it reinterprets a standard type of Byzantine centralized commemorative building intended for pilgrimage. Its central rock evokes Arabian litholatry, associations of the Creation and the Last Judgment, and Muhammad's Night Journey to Heaven. Tilework replaced the external mosaics between 1545 and 1552.



10 (right) Dome of the Rock: three-dimensional cutaway view revealing the underlying geometry of the plan.

flanked by attendants and with his hands raised in prayer, or a *mihrab* enclosing the Prophet's lance. Finally, in a far-reaching currency reform which extended to most of the Islamic world and was carried out between 695 and 697, all figural images were expunged, to be replaced by the quintessential Islamic icon: Qur'anic epigraphy. In these coins, which were minted in their millions, inter-confessional rivalries took on a new and explicit edge. A direct attack on the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity can be seen in the words emblazoned on the field of these coins: 'There is no god but God; Muhammad is the Messenger of God. He has no associate; He does not beget, nor was He begotten.' Seldom in world history has the propaganda potential of coinage been so fully exploited.

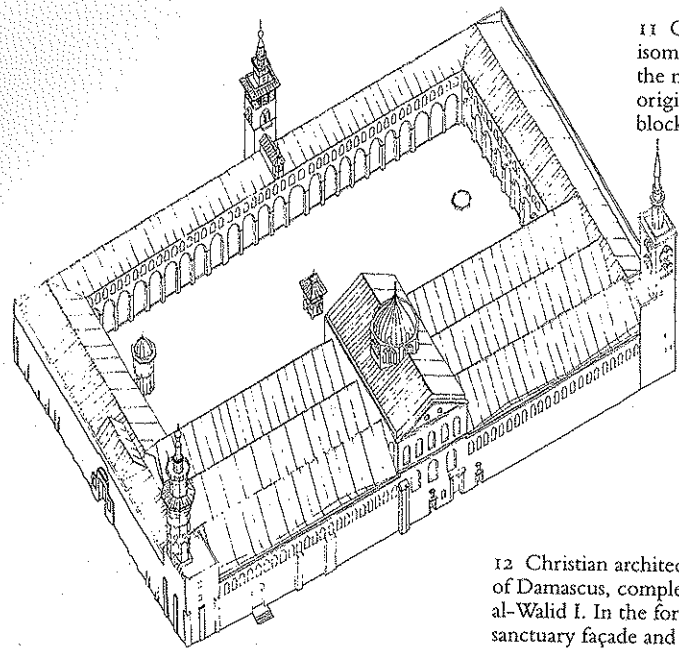
Despite the unquestioned significance of Umayyad coins as historical documents, and the curiosity value of the minor arts datable to this period, there can be no doubt that the intrinsic nature of Umayyad art can be gauged only by means of the architecture of the time. Sadly, some of the finest Umayyad mosques have vanished, like the Mosque of the Prophet at Medina, constructed in 707 on the site of his house (see p. 15) as part of a far-sighted programme of major mosques at sites of key importance; in its time this must have rivalled the very finest of Umayyad religious monuments. Others have been totally rebuilt, like the Great Mosque of Aleppo, built by the caliph Sulaiman, or the Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, possibly founded by al-Walid I. Nevertheless, two supreme masterpieces of religious architecture do survive. They show that, while early Islamic art was still in the thrall of the Byzantine and classical heritage, the Muslims were already developing their own visual language and were well able to use inherited forms for their own ends. These buildings confidently proclaimed that the new faith had come to stay in the formerly Christian strongholds of the Near East.

8-10 The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem was completed after a turbulent decade in which the Umayyads briefly lost control of the Hijaz, and with it the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and survived further serious challenges from religious opposition groups. This particular historical background has prompted some scholars to explain it as a victory monument and even as a place of worldwide Muslim pilgrimage to supplement, if not to supplant, Mecca itself. Yet its site and its form also suggest other interpretations. It stood on what was incontestably the prime plot of real estate in all Jerusalem – the vast high platform on which Solomon's Temple had rested, shunned by Jew and Christian alike since the destruction of that

Temple by Titus in AD 70. It marked an enigmatic outcrop of rock traditionally associated with the Creation itself and with the near-sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, the prelude to God's covenant with man. Later Muslim belief identified this as the place of the Prophet's Ascent to Seven Heavens (his *mi'raj*) in the course of his miraculous Night Journey. In form the building is a domed octagon with a double ambulatory encircling the rock; in essence, then, a centralized structure of a type long familiar in Roman mausolea and Christian martyria. The choice of form probably stems from a desire to upstage the nearby domed church of the Holy Sepulchre, perhaps the most sacred shrine of Christianity, also built over a rock; the diameters of the two domes differ by only a centimetre. Nevertheless, the earlier building was confined within the urban fabric of Jerusalem, while the Dome of the Rock enjoyed, as it still does, a matchlessly uncluttered and highly visible site. In much the same way, the quintessentially Byzantine medium of wall mosaic was used to decorate the interior and exterior of the Dome of the Rock on a scale unparalleled in any surviving earlier Byzantine church. The pervasive motifs of jewelled plants, trees and chalices have been interpreted as references to Muslim victory, Solomon's Temple and Paradise itself, while the earliest epigraphic programme in Islamic architecture comprises lengthy Qur'anic quotations exhorting believers and attacking – as did contemporary coins – such Christian doctrines as the Trinity and the Incarnation.

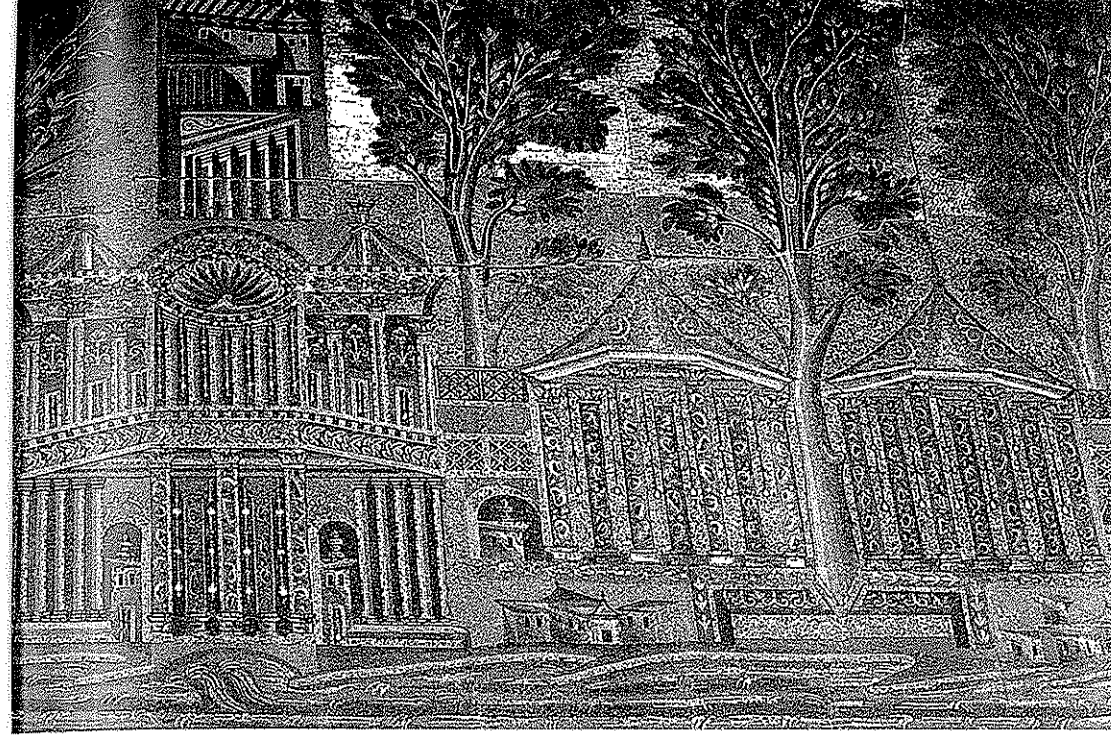
The Great Mosque of Damascus (705-15) offers the natural pendant to this great building – again, a royal foundation occupying the most public and hallowed site in its city. Here too its topographical dominance has clear political overtones. It too is of impressive size and splendour, and uses Qur'anic inscriptions (now unfortunately lost) for proselytizing purposes. The caliph al-Walid I purchased the entire site, comprising the walled enclosure of the temple of Jupiter Damascenus and the Christian church of St. John the Baptist within it, and forthwith demolished that church and every other structure within the walls. The revered model of the Prophet's house in Medina – the primordial mosque of Islam – as refined by slightly later mosques built in the garrison cities of Iraq and elsewhere, seems to have inspired much of what now followed. An open courtyard filled most of the rectangle created by this wholesale demolition, with the covered sanctuary of the mosque on its long south side. Yet this arrangement is not entirely Muslim. It boldly recast the standard components of a typical Christian basilica to

11-14

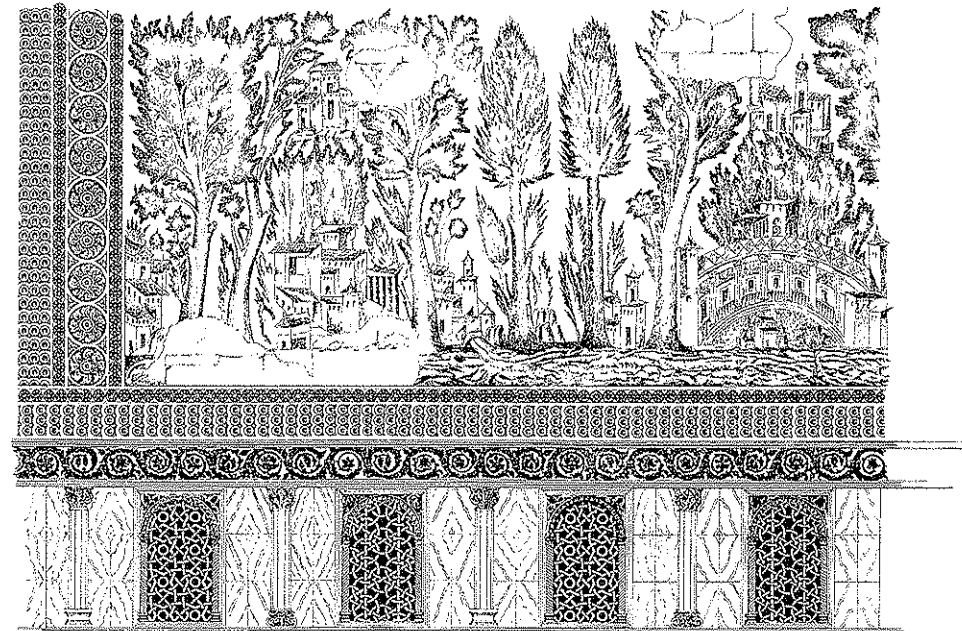


11 Great Mosque of Damascus: isometric view. The superstructure of the minarets is Mamluk and later. An original entrance to the north is now blocked.

12 Christian architecture Islamicized. Great Mosque of Damascus, completed in 715 by the caliph al-Walid I. In the foreground, the treasury. The sanctuary façade and dome were rebuilt after the catastrophic fire of 1893; the original arcade would have been much lighter.



13, 14 (above) The new Rome? Great Mosque of Damascus, mosaic on west wall. This fantasy architecture uses – no doubt for political purposes – a Roman, not a Byzantine, vocabulary. (below) A world transfigured. Drawing of the landscape panorama in the Great Mosque, showing its full context.



secure a new lateral emphasis in keeping with the needs of Islamic worship. The three aisles remained, but the direction of prayer ran at right angles across them and was marked in elevation by a towering domed gable which clove through the pitched roof to form a central transept. Its façade was a free variation on the standard west front of Syrian churches. This T-shaped partition of the sanctuary was destined to have a long posterity in the mosques of the western Islamic world (see p. 186).

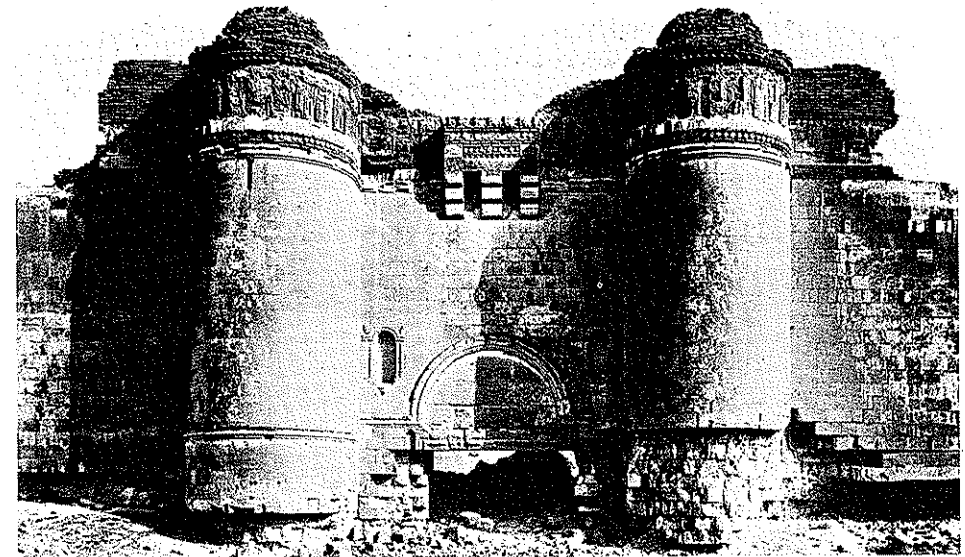
Carved marble window grilles with elaborate geometrical patterns loosely inspired by late antique wall mosaics presage the enduring geometric bias of much Islamic ornament. Quartered marble, so cut that the veining of the stone continues from one slab to the next, formed dados in typical Byzantine fashion. Above them unfolded the glory of the mosque: hundreds of square metres of wall mosaic in the predominantly green and gold tonality already encountered in the Dome of the Rock mosaics. The caliph seems to have obtained artists and materials from Byzantium itself for this great work; certainly the technical standard of the mosaics is beyond reproach. Along the inner wall of the ancient enclosure, above a continuous golden vine-scroll (now lost) which functioned like a religious *cordon sanitaire* for the entire mosque, is unveiled a vast panoramic landscape. Along the banks of a river regularly punctuated by gigantic trees rises a fantasy architecture of villages and palaces in endless profusion. The link with Roman wall-paintings of the type found at Pompeii is unmistakable; but here the idea is put to new and unexpected use, for it strikes the dominant note in a huge monument of religious architecture. Some of these multi-storey structures also evoke South Arabian vernacular architecture. Human and animal figures are conspicuously absent, indicating – as at the Dome of the Rock – that a distaste for figural ornament in a religious context had already taken root. Despite the obvious success of these mosaics as pure decoration, many meanings have been proposed for them: topographical references to Damascus or to Syria in general, wish-fulfilling depictions of a world at peace under Islamic sway, or evocations of Paradise itself. Perhaps such ambiguity is intentional.

Clearly, these two buildings belong together as a considered Muslim response to the splendours of classical and Christian architecture around them, and an assertion of the power and presence of the new faith. The same message issues from the much more numerous desert establishments founded under royal patronage. The Umayyad princes – chafing under the moral and physical restraints of

city life, apprehensive of the plague which recurrently menaced those cities, and perhaps atavistically drawn to desert life – moved restlessly from one of these desert residences to another. With a few exceptions – among them a *khan* or travellers' lodging place at Qasr al-Hair al-Gharbi and perhaps one at Qasr al-Hair al-Sharqi too, and a miniature city at 'Anjar laid out on a Roman grid plan – these foundations fall into a well-defined category. Here, too, pre-Islamic forms are pressed into service.

Yet much more than mere imitation is involved. Where the Dome of the Rock sedulously copied Christian martyria and the Damascus mosque reworked the Christian basilica, the desert residences radically refashioned inherited forms. They combined two familiar building types whose origins are Roman, not Byzantine – and this association with the remoter but more prestigious *imperium* (rather than its still unconquered successor) is surely significant. The two building types in question – the *villa rustica* and the frontier fort – are intrinsically unrelated and are thus quite naturally segregated in their parent culture. This unawaited combination springs from the need, peculiar to this group of patrons, to integrate two essentially dissimilar functions. These residences served at once as the nerve centre of a working agricultural estate, in which the caliph was – so to speak – lord of the manor, and as outward symbols of conspicuous consumption and political power. The shell of the Roman frontier

15 Roman authority. Qasr al-Hair al-Sharqi, main gate of caravansarai or palace(?), c. 728. The projecting towers, arcuated lintel and alternation of stone and brick are all Roman; the central machicolation copies local models.



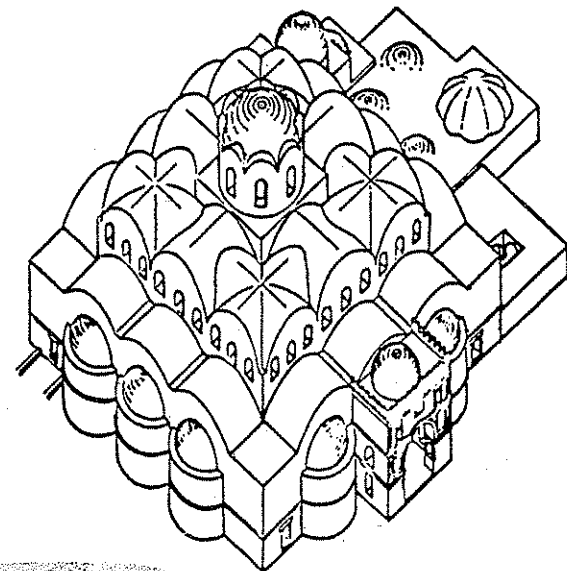


16 Rustic idyll. Qusair 'Amra, hunting lodge and bathing establishment, early 8th century. Vault fresco with human and animal figures in a lozenge pattern adapted from classical floor mosaics.

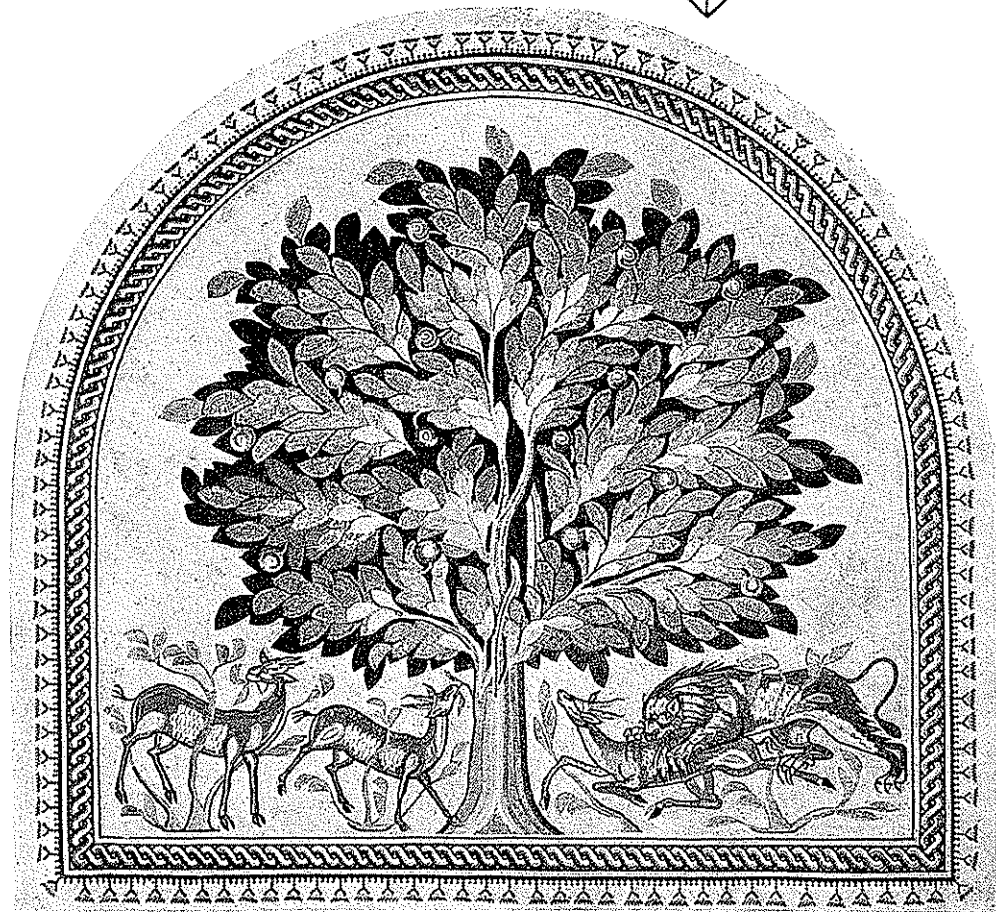
fort, complete with salient gateway, corner towers, battlements, and even its favoured Roman dimensions, was retained. But now it was shorn of virtually all its functioning defensive devices, and contained both luxury royal apartments and service quarters grouped in two stories around a central courtyard. Qasr al-Hair al-Gharbi, Usais and Khirbat al-Minya all attest this type.

A rather different kind of establishment is represented by a pair of sites north-east of 'Amman in the Jordanian desert – Qusair 'Amra and Hammam al-Sarakh. These also make free with a classical building type – in this case, the bath. In approved Roman fashion, cold, warm and hot rooms, all variously vaulted, succeed each other. The novelty lies in adding a ceremonial vaulted hall, complete with royal niche, to this humble ensemble and thereby exalting it to a new dignity. Qusair 'Amra is especially notable for its matchless series of wall-paintings, the most extensive sequence of true frescoes to have survived from the late antique and early medieval world. Shot through with techniques and iconographical allusions of classical origin, they celebrate the pleasures of wine, women and song – to

17 Concert hall? Khirbat al-Mafjar, bath hall, c. 740. The 21 vaulted spaces gave this chamber a magnificent acoustic; its patron, al-Walid II, loved to hear performances of poetry and music. The cross-in-square format and the vaulting system are taken directly from Byzantine church architecture; some parody may be intended.



18 The Umayyad world view. Khirbat al-Mafjar, mosaic in *diwan* (retiring room) of palace, c. 740. A hunting scene linked to late antique floor mosaics by theme and technique alike is transformed into a powerful allegory of a world divided between Muslim and infidel. Here presumably sat the caliph, dispensing justice: reward on his right, punishment on his left.



say nothing of the dance, the bath and the hunt – in a remarkably uninhibited idiom. Among several images in a more serious vein, some of them with Solomonic echoes as at Khirbat al-Mafjar (see below), a scene of six kings in submissive pose, identified by inscriptions as the monarchs of the earth, is especially notable. It symbolizes the entry of the Umayyads into the exclusive club of world leaders, and implies the dominant role of their dynasty in that club. The epicurean lifestyle conjured up by the main body of frescoes has to be seen within the context of this overt bid for imperial status. Thus political concerns infiltrate even the carefree atmosphere of this remote hunting lodge, to which the anonymous prince occasionally repaired for a few days of recreation – there was no provision for him to live at this site permanently.

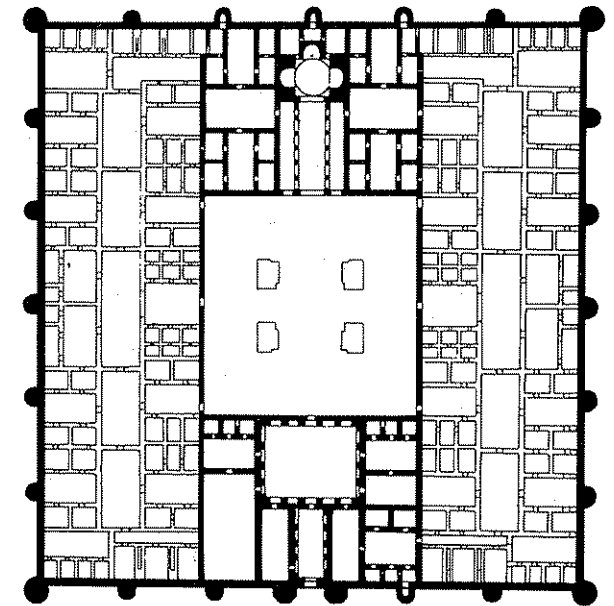
17, 18

At the very end of the Umayyad period, in response to the increasingly extravagant ambitions of the playboy caliph al-Walid II, greatly enlarged multi-functional palaces were built. Khirbat al-Mafjar (unfinished; before 743) is a free variation on the loosely planned agglomeration of discrete units found in the Roman and Byzantine palaces of Tivoli, Piazza Armerina and Constantinople. Here, in the fertile valley of Jericho, and linked by little more than their proximity within an enclosing wall, are disposed a palace, a mosque, an underground bath with shower, a courtyard with an imposing central *tholos* (a circular colonnaded structure) over a fountain, and finally the jewel of the site – a huge domed and vaulted bath hall, a precocious forerunner of the Byzantine cross-in-square church. A peerless array of thirty-nine adjoining panels together create the largest single floor mosaic to survive from the medieval or indeed the ancient world, and provide a fitting match for the spatial subtleties of the elevation. Other amenities include a bathing pool, a plunge bath which held wine, a luxurious royal retiring-room perhaps used for private audiences, for banqueting or as a tribunal, and finally a splendidly appointed latrine designed to accommodate some thirty-three visitors at a time. Fresco and tempera paintings and, above all, stucco carving of unexampled vigour and resource complemented the splendours of the architecture and floor mosaic. The sculptures of athletes and serving girls in particular seem to epitomize the *joie de vivre* which the entire establishment exudes.

19, 20

Mshatta is altogether more sober, not to say gloomy. Its size – 144 m (472 ft) per side – is unprecedented among Umayyad palaces and greatly accentuates its sombre, dominating impact. Though it was never finished, enough survives to reveal the basic principle of its

19 Totalitarian architecture. Ground plan of the palace of Mshatta, Jordan, c. 744. The side tracts are a speculative reconstruction.



20 A petrified textile. Filigree ornament is at odds with the fortified air of the Mshatta palace façade. Solar rosettes – a Sasanian theme – stand proud of a thicket of classical vine-scroll ornament compartmentalized by a zigzag moulding adapted from Christian Syrian architecture.



layout – a sequential subdivision into three parts on an ever-diminishing scale. An iron logic governs the working out of this scheme. While the caliph's own quarters, at the far end of the central tract, were no doubt as lavishly appointed as their counterparts in other Umayyad palaces, they are not enough to explain the overwhelming scale of the ensemble; indeed, they are sufficiently small to underline the fact that this was no mere pleasure palace. The key to the building, therefore, must lie in the side tracts, which were scarcely begun when work on the whole complex was abruptly stopped. Their huge size suggests that Mshatta, unlike the other Umayyad residences, was intended to accommodate large numbers of people – perhaps the entire Umayyad court complete with administration and bodyguard, or even pilgrims returning from the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca, though this is less likely since it would happen only once a year. If Mshatta really was a palace city it would be the natural precursor to the Round City of Baghdad, built barely a generation later (see pp. 40–1). Whatever its function, there can be no doubt that Mshatta draws inspiration from the tradition which produced Diocletian's palace at Split, itself no villa but the apotheosis of the *castrum* or Roman military camp. Once again, then, the source is Roman rather than Byzantine. Yet Mshatta is no mere copy. Its tightly regimented square design is subtly orchestrated to assert the absolute power of the monarch; the language of military architecture is made to serve the ends of political propaganda. Not even the celebrated carved façade which extends along the outer face of the central or royal tract, and that tract only, can mask this grim political message.

What conclusions as to the nature of Umayyad art can be drawn from the material surveyed in this chapter? Three consistent characteristics can be isolated: it is eclectic, experimental and propagandist. The eclecticism is easily explained. The fact that Umayyad art developed in Syria meant that it was open to the influence not only of the local school of late antique art but also to the art of contemporary metropolitan Byzantium, Coptic Egypt and Armenia, and of course imperial Rome, whose monuments were ubiquitous. Borrowings from the East – Mesopotamia, Sasanian Iran, Central Asia, even India – waxed as classical influences waned in response to the increasingly definitive alignment of the Umayyad state towards its eastern territories. Given the relatively primitive stage of artistic expression which characterized much of the Arabian peninsula in pre-Islamic times, there was no question of the Umayyads importing their own ready-made indigenous Arabian art into Syria. Thus they



21 Conspicuous consumption. Qasr al-Hair al-Gharbi, detail of floor fresco, c. 725. Regimented and abstracted floral rosettes frame three scenes: a beribboned prince hunting gazelles, using stirrups and a compound bow; a flautist and lutanist; and a groom in a game park (not shown). All this reflects Sasanian rock reliefs and silverware, with their iconography of pleasure, and the increasingly Eastern orientation of Umayyad art.

had perforce to adopt the initially alien styles of the people they had conquered. Their practice of conscripting labour from provinces outside Syria ensured the meeting of widely divergent styles.

This helps to account for the second hallmark of Umayyad art – its experimental nature. Virtually limitless funds were set aside for architectural projects; and the speed with which they were completed shows that large teams of workmen laboured side by side. Naturally they learned from, and competed with, each other. It is

thus scarcely surprising that, in the heady atmosphere created by a continuous building spree, and in response to the urgings of patrons who delighted in all-over decoration, the sense of restraint integral to classical art and its descendants was soon thrown off. Experiment became the watchword. It has its serious side, as shown in the austere geometric wall-paintings of Hisn Maslama, an Umayyad residence and settlement on the Euphrates in Syria. But in general one is struck by the infectious gusto of Umayyad decorative art, especially its figural stucco and painting, where the effect is heightened by bold, even garish, colours. Unshackled by convention, open-minded, endlessly inventive, artists delighted to turn old ideas to new account, equally ready to trivialize important motifs by dwarfing them and to inflate essentially minor themes so as to lend them an unexpected significance. Umayyad artists were far less inhibited than their contemporary counterparts elsewhere in the Mediterranean world. Hence they freely combined themes and media which tradition had hitherto kept apart; at Mshatta, for example, brick vaults of Sasanian type are found a few feet away from a classically-inspired triple-arched entrance in cut stone. Transpositions are equally common: cornice designs are used for plinths, epigraphy overruns both capital and shaft of a column and patterns normally created by quartered marble are imitated in plaster. In this high-spirited and often vulgar art, parody is never far away.

Yet alongside this robustness, this often wayward originality, Umayyad art consistently strikes a more serious note. Virtually all the significant buildings to survive were the result of royal patronage, and their political and proclamatory dimension cannot be ignored. Sometimes, as in the references to Paradise in the lost inscriptions of the Damascus mosaics, or in the frontal attacks on Christianity in the inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock and later Umayyad coinage,²¹ the message is religious. More often it is political, asserting – as in the ground plan of Mshatta – the lonely pre-eminence of the caliph, or – as in the floor frescoes of Qasr al-Hair al-Gharbi – Umayyad dominance over east and west alike. The apse mosaic in the *diwan* at Khirbat al-Mafjar goes further still in its unmistakable warning of the sudden death which awaits the enemies of Islam. It is peculiarly fitting in this context that it should be Umayyad Syria, not Rome or Byzantium, that can claim the most extensive programme of wall mosaics and the largest single floor mosaic to survive from ancient or medieval times. From 'Abd al-Malik onwards, the masters of the new Arab *imperium* needed no instruction in the prestige value of such glamorous decoration.



22 Types of Islamic writing (top to bottom): simple Kufic; foliated Kufic; floriated Kufic; naskhi; thulth; and nasta'liq.

The historical and geographical setting of Umayyad art made it inevitable that some of the directions it took turned out to be dead ends. Such classical or Byzantine borrowings as figural sculpture and wall mosaic, for example, struck few chords in later Islamic craftsmen. Yet it was the Umayyad period which integrated the classical tradition into Islamic art, which devised some of the basic types of mosque and palace destined to recur repeatedly in later generations, which established the sovereign importance of applied ornament – geometric, floral and epigraphic – in Islamic art, and finally which showed that a distinctive new style could be welded together from the most disparate elements. In so doing it moulded the future development of Islamic art.

The 'Abbasids

The Umayyad ruling class had been a tiny Arab minority, maintained in power only by its military strength and riven internally by religious and tribal disputes which hastened its downfall. Tolerance of other religions and dependence on *mawali*, non-Arabs who had turned Muslim, were therefore political necessities. Victimized by illegal taxation, reduced status in the army and the racist scorn of the Arabs, the *mawali* manifested their social and economic grievances by participating in a series of uprisings that in 749 culminated in a brilliantly orchestrated revolution that toppled Umayyad power and championed the cause of those descended from the Prophet's uncle, al-'Abbas. The new 'Abbasid dynasty vaunted these blood links with Muhammad and claimed to usher in the true Islam based on universal brotherhood irrespective of race.

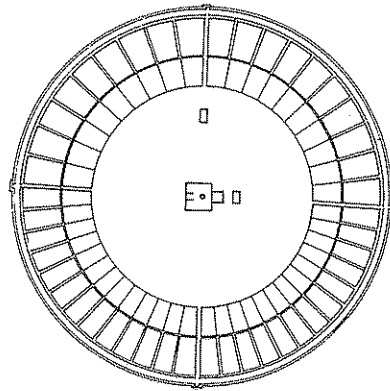
Politically, the change of dynasty marked the eclipse of Syria and a consequent weakening of Greek influence in the burgeoning Islamic culture. It also signalled the end of purely Arab dominion. The foundation of a new capital, Baghdad, at the eastern extremity of the Arab-speaking world, epitomized this process. Its site near two major rivers suitable for sea-going traffic – the Tigris and Euphrates – made Baghdad a much greater mart than Damascus had ever been, and its huge volume of trade opened it to very diverse influences, from China to black Africa. Such trade benefited from the adoption of Arabic as a lingua franca throughout the empire. Nearby, there still stood the palace of Ctesiphon, the Sasanian (ancient Persian) capital whose legendary splendours were now arrogated to Baghdad. Persian costume became fashionable at the 'Abbasid court, the Persian New Year was celebrated and Baghdad became an intellectual centre where the philosophical and scientific heritage of the ancient world was to be translated into Arabic, the prime language of culture as of religion, and thence transmitted via Muslim Spain throughout Europe. Such features of Sasanian government as the court executioner, the intelligence service and the formal periodic review of the

army were now introduced. The new Persianized administrative system hinged on the vizier, a post which was often hereditary and gradually came to erode the caliph's power. But in the first century of 'Abbasid rule that power was absolute, as the chilling anecdotes of contemporary chronicles testify. To the Western world, the figure of Harun al-Rashid – who sent his contemporary Charlemagne an elephant – has always symbolized the oriental potentate, and it is the golden prime of eighth-century Baghdad that is celebrated in the *Arabian Nights*. There can be no doubt of the immense cultural superiority of the Muslim East over western Europe at this time. Court life attained an unequalled peak of sophistication and luxury in manners, costume, food and entertainment.

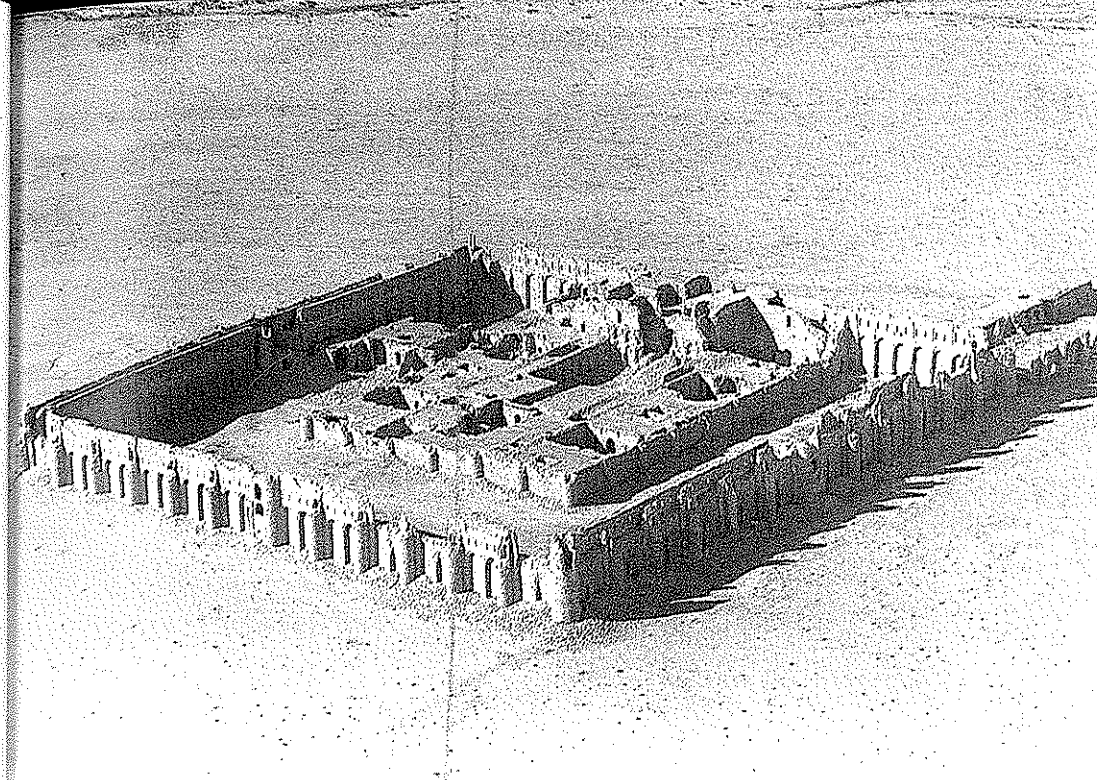
This gilded world was underpinned by a complex financial machine to which capital investment, liquidity and long-term credits were familiar concepts. As late as the eleventh century a Saljuq vizier could pay a boatman on the Oxus with a draft cashable in Damascus. Wars of conquest had now ceased, along with their attendant booty, but the resultant Pax Islamica allowed the collection of revenue and the expansion of trade to proceed smoothly. Perhaps the major distinguishing feature of the early 'Abbasid empire was thus the immense wealth that it commanded. But this idyll was short-lived. Squabbles over the succession pinpointed much deeper rifts, for example between Arab and Persian, and between the various religious groupings. Gradually the extremities of the empire – in Spain, North Africa, Central Asia and Afghanistan – gained autonomy. Iran in particular saw a blossoming of national sentiment which found expression in literary controversies with the Arabs, in heterodox religious movements and – under the Samanid dynasty in particular (819–1005) – in a revival of pre-Islamic Persian culture. Meanwhile, in Baghdad the caliphs' increasing reliance on slave troops of Turkish stock caused so much local unrest that in 836 they moved their capital northwards to Samarra, a move which led to their eventual domination by these Praetorian guards. This situation was formalized in 945 when the Persian Buyid dynasty, whose Shi'ite rulers functioned as mayors of the palace, dealt caliphal prestige a catastrophic blow by assuming direct control of the state. Nevertheless, a cosmopolitan Islamic civilization had been made possible by a basic unity of language, faith and religious institutions which exists in large measure to this day, transcending ethnicity and diverse political systems. It was only after 945 that the political divisions of the Islamic world between east and west began to take final shape.

The shift in the centre of gravity from Damascus to Baghdad involved not merely a geographical adjustment of five hundred miles. It had potent repercussions in politics, culture and art. Baghdad became, in a way that Damascus had not, an Islamic Rome. It absorbed ideas, artefacts, and influences from the East – from the Iranian world, India, China and the Eurasian steppe, and then exported them, transformed, throughout the Islamic world, stamped with its own unique cachet and glamour. Nine-bay mosques in Afghanistan and Spain, Baghdadi textiles laboriously copied in Andalusia, even down to the inscription identifying the piece as ‘made in Baghdad’, Iraqi stucco forms in Egypt and Central Asia – all attest the unchallenged cultural dominance of Baghdad. The cumulative gravitational pull exerted by the eastern territories broke the grip of Mediterranean culture, and specifically of Graeco-Roman classicism and its Byzantine Christian descendant, on Islamic art. Classical forms can still be dimly discerned on occasion – the triumphal arch underlies the portals of ‘Abbasid palaces, and all three styles of Samarran stucco are foreshadowed in early Byzantine art – but they have undergone a sea-change. New contexts and new functions transform them.

23 The caliph as cosmocrator. Round City of Baghdad, 762: reconstruction drawing. The 9th-century historian al-Ya‘qubi calls Iraq ‘the navel of the earth’ and Baghdad ‘the centre of Iraq’; at its heart was the caliph’s palace.



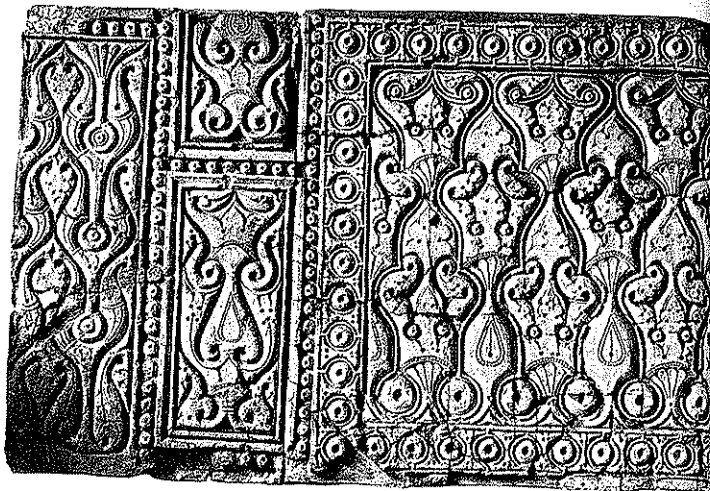
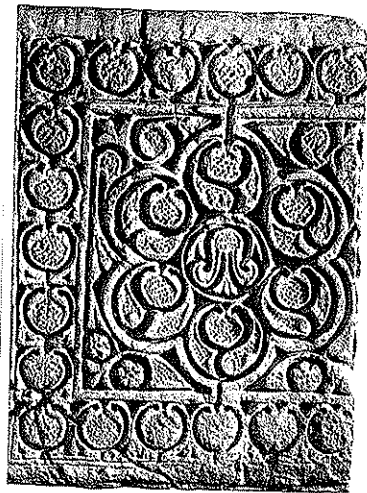
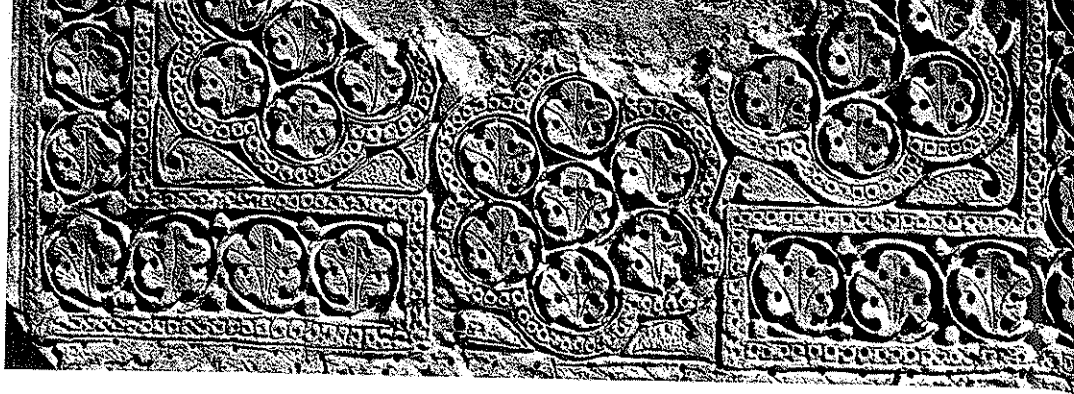
In architecture, the process of change is exemplified in the Round City of Baghdad, founded in 762. This concentric circular design was probably derived from such Sasanian models as Firuzabad, Darabjird and Merv. Housing for the citizens occupied the outer perimeter while the caliph's palace, oriented to the four points of the



24 From villa to palace-city. Fortified residence of Ukhaidir, Iraq, c. 775–6, probably built by the governor of Kufa, ‘Isa b. Musa. Desert now surrounds it, but extensive traces of cultivation explain its name of ‘the little green one’. It betrays a typically ‘Abbasid obsession with security and ceremonial; its design looks both to Syrian and Iranian traditions for inspiration.

compass and dwarfing the Friday mosque beside it – Caesar took precedence to God here – was located at the dead centre of the city and girdled by a largely empty precinct. This powerful symbol of cosmic dominion and royal absolutism owed little to the Graeco-Roman world but had a long pedigree in the ancient Near East. All this splendour has left not a wrack behind.

For surviving ‘Abbasid architecture in Iraq one must turn to the palace of Ukhaidir, generally dated c. 775–6. Flamboyantly isolated, it evokes in equal measure the despotic and the pleasure-loving character of the dynasty. Despite the palace's gigantic size (175 × 169 m, 574 × 554 ft), its living quarters are cramped, thereby perpetuating Arab tradition; but its luxurious amenities and ceremonial aspect are strongly Persian in flavour, notably in the interplay of *iwans* and



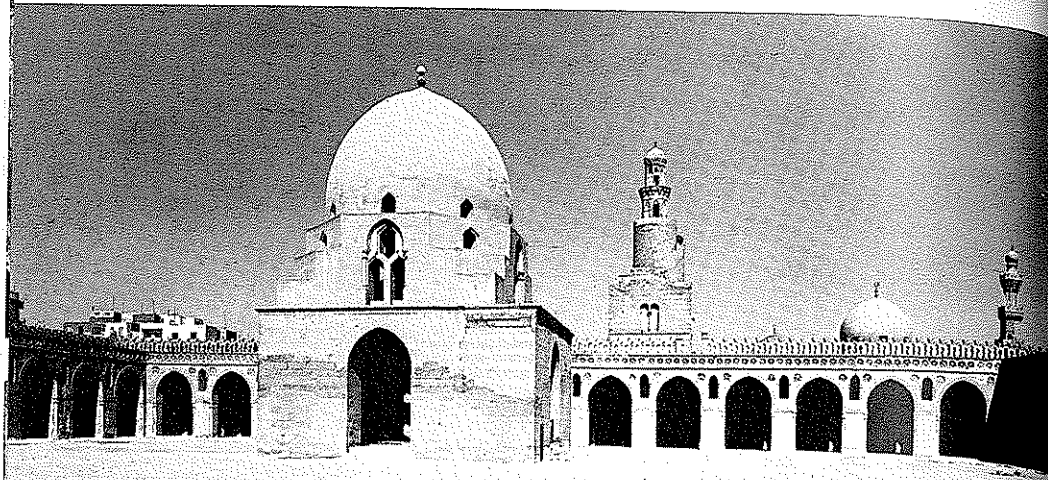
25, 26, 27 An Islamic aesthetic: all-over decoration. Samarra, stucco wall panels, 9th century. Three styles occur contemporaneously, despite differences of conception and technique. The first (*top*) uses a broadly naturalistic classical vocabulary of five-lobed vine leaves and tendrils arranged in rows or circles. The second (*above left*) flattens, abstracts and geometrizes this idiom. The third (*above right*), now moulded, not hand-carved, has a quilted and sculptural quality; its abstract, tactile forms are at once suggestive and ambivalent. In all three, equal attention is given to precise rendering of detail and to the overall design.

large courtyards, and in the use of ornamental brickwork, numerous small domes and ingenious vaults. Although this palace embodied such advanced military features as continuous machicolation and a portcullis, the difficulties of supply and an inherent inefficiency of design make it hard to imagine how it actually functioned. This concept of the palace-city was perpetuated in the following century at Samarra, with its numerous sprawling official residences laid out in

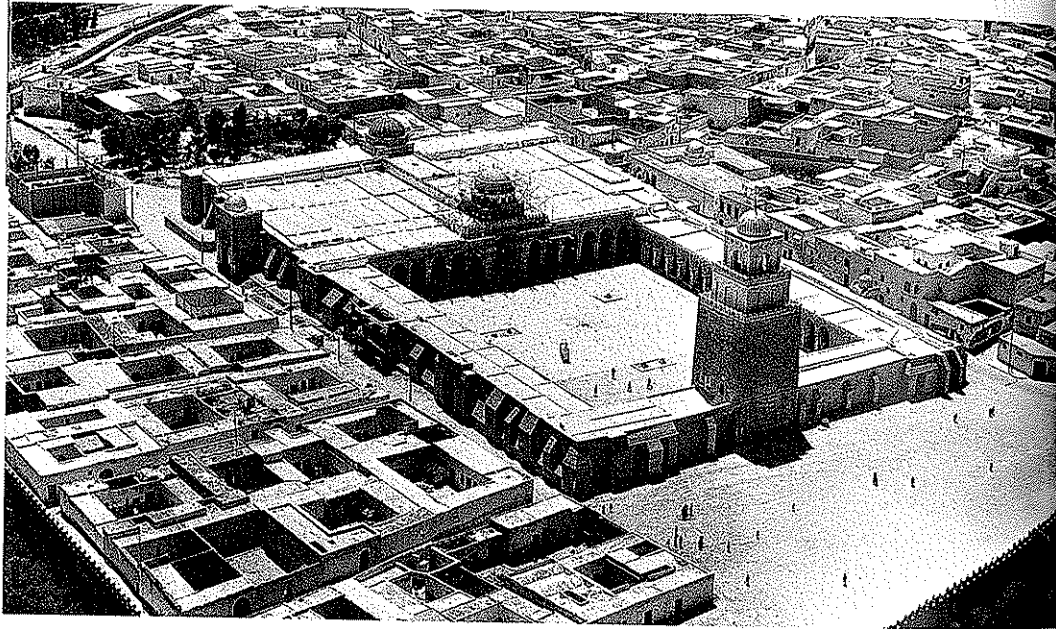
ribbon development and galvanized by remorselessly axial planning, for example by the use of the familiar three-tract design borrowed from Umayyad palaces (see p. 34). Proportional ratios (often 3:2) and strict axiality hold these structures together. Inferior building materials – principally mud-brick – are disguised by lavish revetments, and less important wall surface were covered at top speed with stucco. These palaces were rendered independent of the outside world by integrating gardens, domestic housing, military and administrative quarters and royal compound within a single but vast walled enclosure.

It was at Samarra that Islamic art came of age, and from that centre it spread virtually throughout the entire Muslim world, also influencing local Jewish and Christian art. The new aesthetic is perhaps best expressed by the wall decoration most fashionable in Samarra in palaces and houses alike: polychrome painted stucco, both carved and moulded. Three major styles have been isolated: their chronological order is disputed, but their roots in the transformation of classical naturalism and in the two-dimensionality of early Byzantine art is plain. In the first, the surface is divided into polygonal compartments, with borders of pearl roundels. Each compartment is filled with vine stems bearing lobed leaves or with fancifully curved vegetal elements too stylized to equate with any actual plant. In the second style, this tendency is accentuated to the point where recognizably natural forms disappear. The borders become plain and the compartments themselves more varied. The Chinese motif of *yin* and *yang* appears frequently. Finally, in the third style, the decoration is not painstakingly carved by hand but is rapidly applied by moulds in a rigorously abstract bevelled style capable (like wallpaper) of indefinite extension. The motifs themselves are more loosely and flowingly arranged, and are more varied – spirals, lobed designs, bottle-shaped forms and other motifs no longer dependent on vegetal life. This style established itself rapidly and was still full of life five centuries later. The labour-saving properties of the moulded bevelled style were ideally suited to the mushroom growth of Samarra, and the humble mud-brick of which even the palaces were mostly built was cheaply and effectively disguised by this mass-produced decoration. Its abstraction and its even patterning fitted it for any number of architectural contexts – walls, columns, arches, window grilles – and the ‘Samarra style’, especially in the bevelled technique, soon penetrated the so-called ‘minor arts’ too.

The Samarra palaces show how the secluded, relatively small-scale splendours of the classically-inspired Umayyad desert residences



28 Courtyard of mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo, 876–9 (the foreground dome dates from 1296). Its essence is Iraqi: outer enclosure, brick construction, piers with engaged columns, crenellations, stucco ornament and minaret. The pointed arch serves as a leitmotif. The mosque was connected by a broad road to its patron's palace.



29 The mosque in its urban setting. Great Mosque of Qairawan, Tunisia, mostly after 862, aerial view. The raised and domed central aisle owes something to the Damascus mosque, but the T-shaped plan of the sanctuary is already distinctively Maghribi, while the 2:3 proportional ratio and the huge axial minaret derive from 'Abbasid Iraq.

gave way to vast urban palaces, or rather palace-cities, conceived on the Perso-Sasanian model, where massive scale is the dominant factor. Gigantic scale also characterizes many of the major mosques (Samarra – the largest mosque in the world – and Abu Dulaf in Iraq; Ibn Tulun in Egypt; Tunis and Qairawan in western North Africa). Powerful bastions militarize the mosque, which can even be interpreted (as in the case of Qairawan) as an emblem of *jihād*. Recent research has revealed that certain columns looted from predominantly Christian buildings and reused in the Qairawan mosque were colour-coded and so placed that the red and blue columns respectively outlined in simplified form the ground plans of the Dome of the Rock and the Aqsa mosque, the major religious sanctuaries of Umayyad Greater Syria. Thus in the Tunisian capital worshippers could make a regular symbolic pilgrimage to some of the holiest spots in the Islamic world.

30 The interplay between metropolis and province. Hajji Piyada Mosque, Balkh, Afghanistan, probably 9th century. This diminutive nine-bayed multi-domed mosque without a courtyard may reflect a lost Iraqi prototype; certainly its abundant stucco decoration faithfully mirrors the idiom of Samarra. The stumpy piers have Sasanian antecedents.



In some instances, these 'Abbasid mosques are surrounded by further enclosures which serve to mediate between sacred and profane space. Typically, they were built on the sites of new Islamic towns and thus catered for the whole population – hence their great size, which often brings monotony and repetition in its train. Monumental minarets proclaim the Islamic presence but they often assert an axial and *qibla* emphasis and serve as reminders of royal power. The forms of these minarets have a complex heritage; some derive from Graeco-Roman lighthouses, others (e.g. Harran) from Christian campaniles, and yet others from ancient Mesopotamian ziggurats or temple-towers. They demonstrate both the absorptive and the creative transforming power of 'Abbasid art. These building projects were huge; the historian al-Ya'qubi notes that over 100,000 men were recruited for the construction of Baghdad, and the city of Ja'fariya near Samarra, whose ruins cover 17 square kilometres (6.5 square miles), was completed in a single year (AD 859). Schemes of this magnitude could only have been organized by a corvée system (see p. 14). This system had a significant by-product: native craftsmen learnt the traditions of their imported fellow-workmen. Forms of varied foreign origin were at first juxtaposed and then, within the course of one or two generations, blended. This blend was in turn exported by the new generation throughout the Islamic world. Hence the basic similarity of style which underlies provincial variations in early Islamic art.

31 The figural iconography of Samarran palaces such as Jausaq al-Khaqani attests the gradual consolidation and refinement of a cycle of princely pleasures – music, banqueting, hunting, wrestling, dancing and the like. These are to be interpreted not literally but as a sequence of coded references to a luxurious royal lifestyle that was summarized by the eleventh-century Persian poet Manuchihrī in the rhyming jingle *sharab u rabab u kabab* – 'wine and music and meat'. This cycle was assiduously copied by 'Abbasid successor states or rival polities from Spain (Cordoba and Játiva) and Sicily (Cappella Palatina, Palermo, see pp. 68–72) to Armenia (the palace chapel at Aght'amar) and Afghanistan (the palaces of Lashkar-i Bazar). It occurs on marble troughs and ivory boxes, on brass or bronze buckets and ceremonial silks, on the exteriors and interiors of Christian churches, and of course in numerous palaces. The figural type popular in these paintings – characterized by pop-eyes, over-large heads, curling love locks, scalloped fringes and minuscule feet – had an equally wide dissemination.



31 The courtly ethos. Restored wall painting from the Jausaq al-Khaqani palace, Samarra, 836–9. The early 'Abbasid period saw the apogee of wine poetry (*khamriyya*); many such poems praise the cup-bearer. The kiss-curl, the scalloped fringe and the agitated hem find parallels in Central Asian art possibly brought to Iraq by Turkish slave troops.

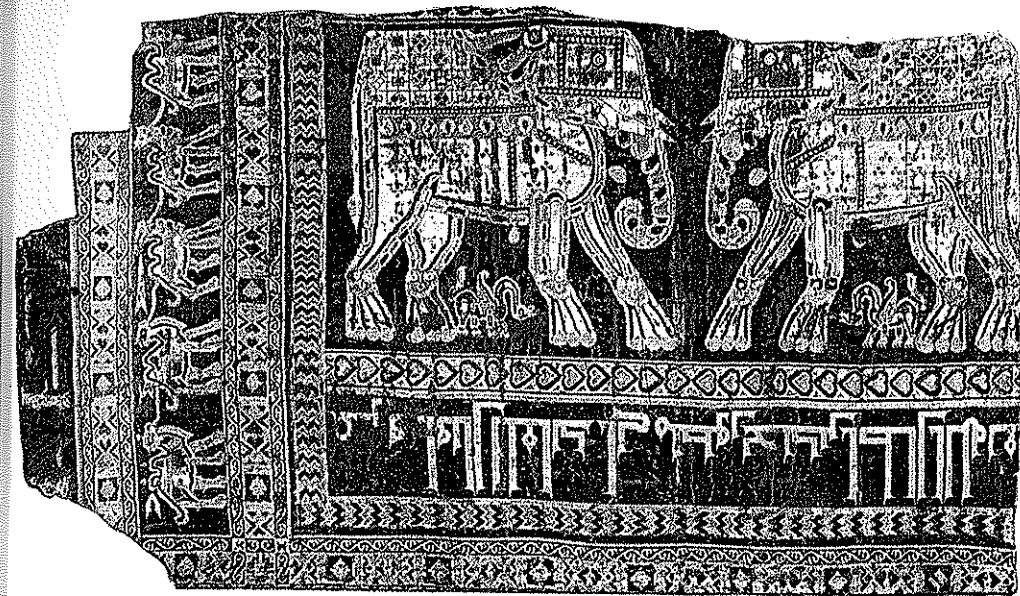
The immense financial resources of the early 'Abbasid empire generated luxury arts galore. Rock crystal workshops flourished in Basra. Gold and silver vessels with figural decoration including hunting scenes and dancing girls are described in the Bacchic poetry of the court laureate Abu Nuwas. Surviving wares, mostly in the form of plates, dishes, jugs and ewers – mainly of base metal alloy such as brass or bronze but sometimes silver, and occasionally even gold – display a somewhat degenerate Sasanian iconography of fabulous beasts, royal *diwan* scenes and princely hunters. Some important bronze sculptures (serving for example as aquamaniles or incense burners) depict birds and beasts of prey. Medieval texts mention



32 (left) The princely cycle. Silver-gilt dish, Iran, perhaps 9th century. Details such as the piled-up cushions, bench throne, musicians, putto, ribbons, and the courtier with hands crossed on his chest, his face masked so that his breath does not pollute the royal presence, derive from Sasanian art but are already coarsened.

33 (below) The word as benediction. *Ikat* cotton cloth with applied gilt decoration, Yemen, 10th century. The text reads 'Glory is from God. (?) In the name of God. And the blessing of God be upon Muhammad'. Such striped cottons (*burud*) were a Yemeni speciality; the Persian 11th-century traveller Nasir-i Khusrau wrote of San'a' that 'her striped coats, stuffs of silk and embroideries have the greatest reputation'.

presentation gold medals of prodigious size minted by the Buyids, but the surviving pieces are much smaller. Their iconography, however, is significant; it includes images of princes seated cross-legged and entertained by musicians, portrait busts of rulers wearing crowns of pseudo-Sasanian type, mounted horsemen and the ancient royal motif of the lion bringing down a bull. Some bear Pahlavi

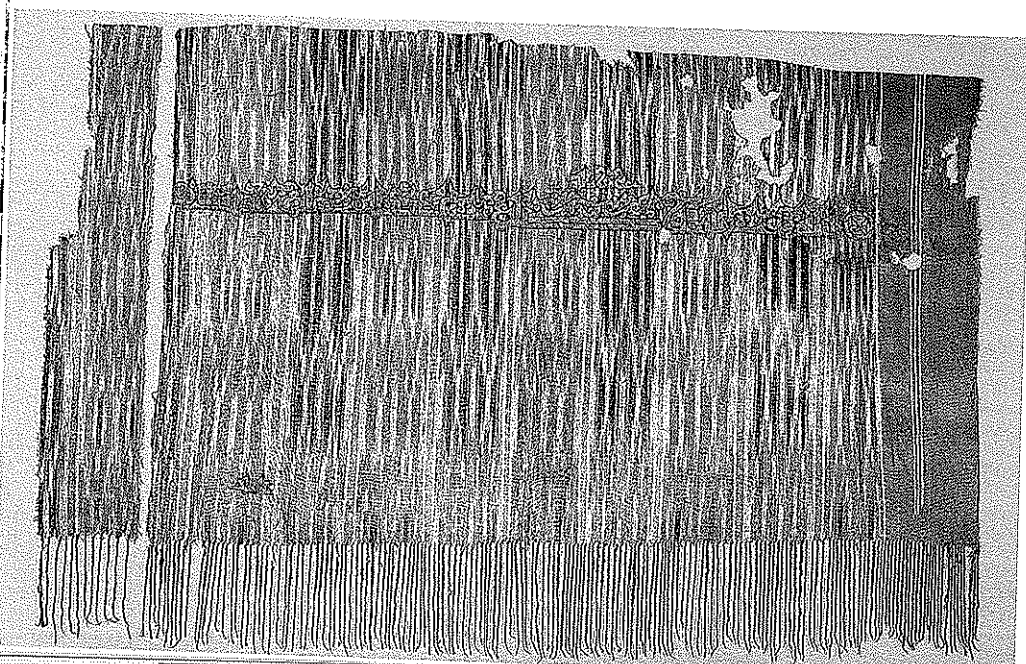


inscriptions and use the ancient Persian title *Shahanshah*, 'King of Kings'. All this indicates a radical departure from the aniconic norms of Muslim numismatics.

But the art form *par excellence* was textiles. Byzantine ambassadors 33 marvelled at the 38,000 precious hangings displayed to them in a caliphal palace. Such textiles played a key role in architecture, for

34 (above) The word as official livery. Part of the St Josse silk, Khurasan, before 961. The inscription wishes 'glory and prosperity to the *qa'id* Abu Mansur Bukhtegin, may God prolong (His favours to him?)'. The two small dragons crouching at the feet of the elephants evoke China, the camels wear Sasanian ribbons, and the patron is a Turk: a remarkable mixture of sources.

35 (right) *Haute vulgarisation*. Slip-painted bowl from Nishapur, Iran, 10th century. Sasanian silverware favoured hunting scenes; that theme is much reduced here, and barely makes sense, thanks to the rearing leopard, the falcon and the farrago of inscriptions, leaves, rosettes and animals that fill the field. But a distant echo of Sasanian majesty is discernible.



they were used not only as wall decoration which could be regularly changed and so transform the spaces thus hung, but also to partition rooms, to curtain off private spaces, and to bedeck key areas like entrances. They formed a crucial element in public ceremonies and parades. Above all, they were a form of liquidity thanks to their portability and their sometimes prodigious cash value. Copious literary references testify to the hundreds of different centres throughout the length and breadth of the Islamic world which specialized in given types of textiles and indicate that this was the most prestigious art form of the time.

34 Palace and other government-run workshops known as *tiraz* produced textiles (also called *tiraz*) bearing laudatory or benedictory inscriptions with the name of the ruling caliph, making the courtiers who wore them walking advertisements for their monarch – an Islamic form of livery. Other silks were pictorial, like the so-called St Josse silk woven in Khurasan before 960 for the Samanid *amir* Abu Mansur Bukhtegin. Affronted elephants whose aberrant form betrays Chinese rather than Indian influence take up the field, while Bactrian camels and cockerels pace the borders, supplemented by a benedictory Kufic inscription in lapidary style. This silk is typical of many formal pictorial silks from Sasanian and Islamic Iran, Iraq, Syria and Byzantium which found their way westward and were preserved in church treasuries because they were used to wrap relics. Foremost among the themes of such Islamic pieces were heraldic images in roundels, among which lions and eagles took pride of place. Moulded cameo glass with relief inscriptions and lustre painting typified the technical advances achieved by Islamic craftsmen. Nearly all the objects in precious materials such as ebony, ivory and alabaster described in medieval texts have vanished, but they must be borne in mind in reconstructing the ambience of 'Abbasid art. Thus it is all the more regrettable that the fullest sequence of any imperial 'Abbasid art form should survive in the humblest material of all – pottery – which thereby, *faute de mieux*, takes on a defining role in modern perceptions of 'Abbasid art. This assuredly leads to a grossly distorted view of what courtly 'Abbasid art was really like, yet this material does provide a paradigm of the radical innovation which characterized this period.

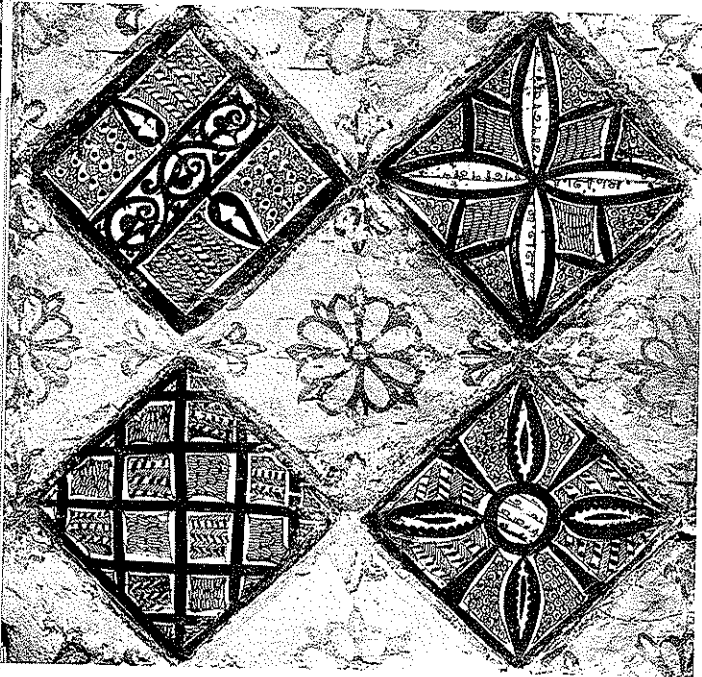
35 Indeed, the ninth century sees the beginning of the long and distinguished tradition of Muslim ceramics. Strangely enough, there is no feeling of hesitation in these early styles; the technique and decoration are equally assured, and several major varieties of ceramics

are encountered in this first century. This immediate maturity is puzzling. It is true that the rather earlier Nabatean painted pottery of the Levant does have some striking connections with 'Abbasid wares (as in the use of the 'peacock's eye' motif), and that lead-glazed wares had already been made in Egypt for a millennium. But the virtual absence of fine Umayyad pottery, together with the fact that glazed pottery – which accounts for most quality medieval ware – though known in ancient Egypt and Parthia, did not achieve the status of a fine art in the ancient world, underlines the lack of immediate precedents for these wares. The earliest Arab pottery, being simply for domestic use, continued this utilitarian bias and was sparsely decorated with simple incised or relief designs.

Under the 'Abbasids, pottery was suddenly promoted to an art form. Why? The impact of Chinese ceramics seems to have been the galvanizing factor. Ample literary references testify that pottery was imported in quantity from China, both overland through Persia – by the celebrated Silk Road – and by the sea route via India; and imported Chinese wares have been found in nearly all excavations on Islamic sites. In the early centuries of Islam, Chinese art had a peculiar cachet: Severus ibn al-Muqaffa' wrote 'The Chinese are a nation of artists but they have no other merits', while al-Baihaqi reports that the governor of Khurasan in eastern Iran sent the caliph Harun al-Rashid 'twenty pieces of Chinese imperial porcelain, the like of which had never been seen in a caliph's court before', together with two thousand other pieces of porcelain. The latter were no doubt the product of the Chinese export industry; as is usual in China, the finest pieces are the ones made for home consumption. In the field of ceramics, then, China was held to be supreme. There alone pottery had been cultivated for many centuries as a fine art. Given the prestige attached to Chinese wares, it would be natural for the 'Abbasids to supplement the always insufficient imports of choice pottery by establishing a local industry. Hence, perhaps, the sudden explosion of the ceramics industry in the ninth century. Theological prohibitions might also have contributed in slight measure, for various *hadiths* (sayings of the Prophet) condemn the use of gold and silver vessels. The development of pottery with a sheen imitating precious metals lends some credence to this view. Finally, the advent of Islam led to a much-reduced output in certain well-established media – notably sculpture – which depended on figural motifs. Perhaps the burgeoning quality-ceramic tradition was an attempt, conscious or not, to develop an alternative means of expression for



36 (above) The lore of the stars. Lustre bowl found in Samarra, 9th century. It depicts Cygnus (the swan), a fixed star from the constellations of the northern hemisphere. The subject-matter implies a cultivated patron. The bird has been transformed into a vegetal design; the busy hatched and squiggly background is typical of lustreware.



37 (left) Images of light. Great Mosque of Qairawan, c. 836: four of the 139 surviving monochrome and polychrome lustre tiles decorating the *mihrab*. Literary evidence indicates that a craftsman from Baghdad was partially responsible for them; perhaps the remainder were made locally. The *mihrab* itself and the *minbar* were also Baghdadi imports.

this type of subject matter. In all 'Abbasid pottery – whose secular bias requires emphasis – the intention of the potter is clearly to devise colourful and stimulating surface decoration. He was able to use figural motifs, often with a pronounced courtly flavour, as well as geometric designs, epigraphy and a whole range of vegetal ornament. With this *embarras de choix* in the field of decoration, it is not surprising that his interest is not focused on technical refinements of body or glaze or on the shape of the pottery itself.

36, 38

Among apparent imitations of Chinese ware, the most common – perhaps because it was also the cheapest – is the so-called splashed ware that recalls the mottled decoration of certain Chinese ceramics of the contemporary T'ang period and also Liao wares (907–1125). The connection is, however, uncertain because T'ang mottled wares seem to have been reserved for funerary use. One must therefore reckon with the possibility of an independent invention on the part of Muslim potters, even though the parallels with Chinese pieces seem to be too close for coincidence. This lead-glazed ware is also known as 'egg and spinach' after its predominant colours; sometimes it was lightly incised. Chinese celadon, much prized because it was thought to shatter when poisoned food was placed in it, was also widely imitated. But Islamic potters were spurred above all to emulate white Chinese porcelain. Lack of suitable raw material

38 Poetry on pottery. Glazed lustre relief dish from Hira, Iraq, mid-9th century. The Kufic inscription is a couplet by Muhammad b. Bashir al-Khariji (d. 846): 'Do not abandon the hope, long though the quest may endure, That you will find ease of heart, if but to patience you cling.'



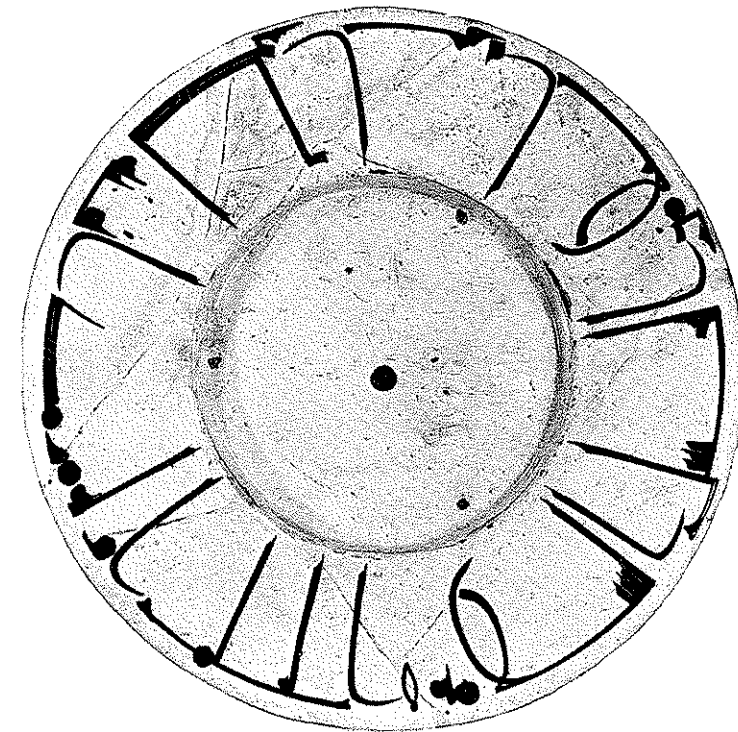
locally meant that the 'Abbasid potters could not reproduce its stone-hard body, but they copied this much-admired and coveted monochrome ware by applying an opaque white glaze to ordinary earthenware. Typically, they did not rest content with this, but began to decorate such tin-glazed ware, which was painted and glazed in one firing. In this technique, the colour is absorbed into the glaze and spreads like ink in blotting paper. This running of the glaze betrays a lack of technical expertise, a deficiency here turned to good account. But the potters were soon able to devise glazes that would not run and so allowed a controlled precision in the application of paint. Much more complex designs were therefore made possible. The Chinese emphasis on form, body, touch – even the sound a piece made when struck – was replaced, at least in part, by applied decoration not encountered in the prototype. This change of emphasis lays bare the profoundly different priorities of Muslim taste.

The major technical breakthrough in this period is the development of a difficult technique entirely new to ceramics (and to glass) – that of lustre. A fragment of Egyptian lustred glass datable as early as 772 suggests that the technique may even have been known in Umayyad times. In such pottery, sulphur and metallic oxides are combined with ochre and vinegar and the mixture is painted on to an already glazed vessel. It is then lightly fired in a reducing kiln in which the metal oxides diminish to an iridescent metallic sheen on the surface, reminiscent of the splendour of precious metals. Such democratization or vulgarization of more expensive art forms and materials became characteristic of Islamic art. The lustre process was difficult: the vessels were liable to overfire, underfire, or crack during the second firing. 'Abbasid lustre has been found as far afield as Samarqand, Sind, Egypt, Tunisia (where over one hundred lustre tiles decorate the *mihrab* of the Great Mosque of Qairawan) and Spain; presumably it was usually the pottery that was exported rather than the craftsmen. The commonest colours are brown and yellow, and at first decoration is extremely simple, consisting mainly of spots, squares and dashes. But after about 900, animal and human figures with a dotted background enclosing the central design become popular. These figures are often grotesquely, almost frighteningly, distorted; often they employ royal or magical themes.

Probably the outstanding achievement of Iranian potters at this time is the Samanid ware associated with Samarqand and Nishapur, though similar wares have been found at numerous other sites in Central Asia, Iran and Afghanistan. The hallmark of this slip-painted

37

39 Restraint. Dish covered with white slip and painted with brown Kufic inscription; Samarqand, 9th–10th century. In the centre, the Chinese *tai-ki* motif. The text is in Arabic, not Persian (the language of daily life) and reads: 'Knowledge: its taste is bitter at first, but in the end sweeter than honey. Good health [to the owner].'



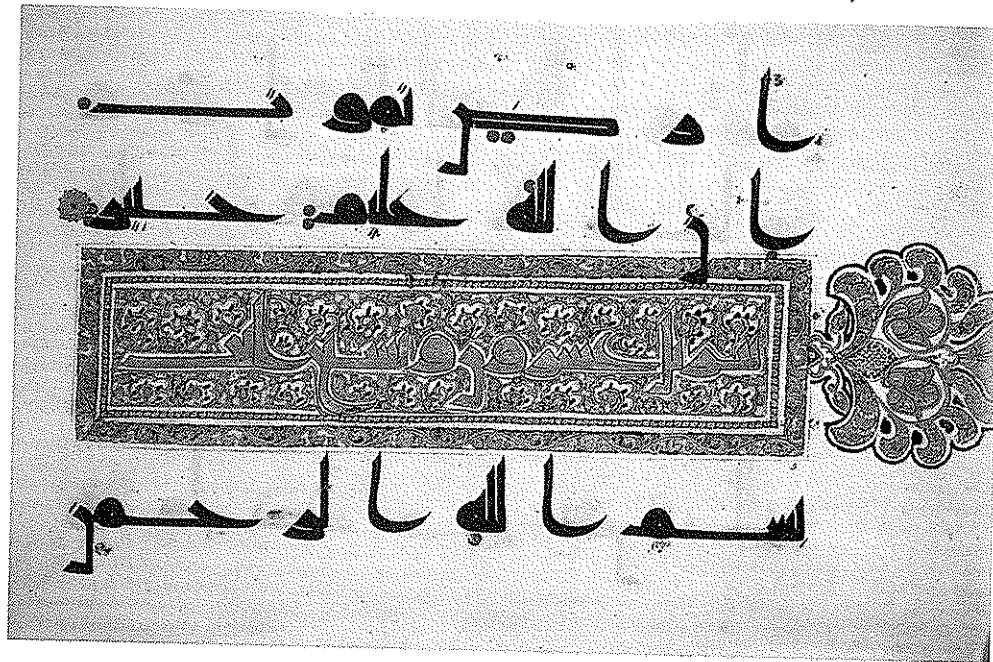
ware is its stylish, often virtuoso epigraphy, which unfolds in majestic rhythm around the surface of the dishes. The inscriptions are all in Kufic, and this choice of hand itself imparts a certain formality to these pieces, implying that they were intended to be displayed as serious works of art. The numerous varieties of script encountered often point unambiguously to professional calligraphers. But the urge to decorate is at war with the desire to inform. These inscriptions share an almost wilful complexity, as if they were meant to elude ready decipherment. The oracular, gnomic quality of the aphorisms that they express is thus entirely appropriate, though many are of a Shi'ite tenor. As decorative ensembles, these wares are remarkable in their appreciation of void space as a positive factor of the design. Human figures are never found, and birds and animals occur only in severely stylized form. A comparable austerity usually restricts the colour range to cream and dark brown, purple or red, thereby heightening the starkness of the inscriptions. A clue to the origin of this decoration may be sought in Chinese Song ceramics and in contemporary Qur'ans. These dishes apparently offer the first examples in Islamic art of Arabic script being used as the major

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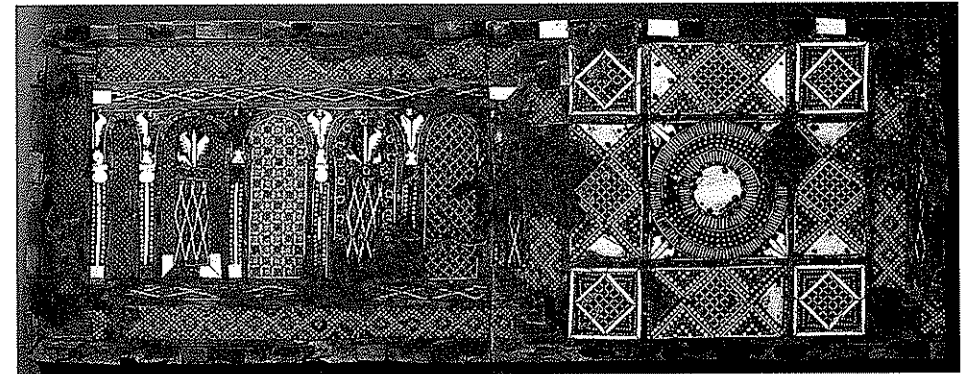
element in surface decoration, if one excepts coins, where the epigraphy has a mainly utilitarian function. In the stark simplicity of these inscriptions one may recognize at once a minimalist aesthetic and beauty of a highly intellectual order.

Other contemporary work at Nishapur did not share this cerebral quality. Of outstanding interest is a group of wares distinguished by sprawling, cluttered compositions and violent colour contrasts, which usually glory in a bright mustard-yellow. Here the designs are simplified almost to the limit of recognition, but they maintain the directness and vitality of an unsophisticated folk art. Birds, rosettes and scattered Arabic inscriptions that seem to call down a hail of blessings on the owner are all used as space-fillers. Sometimes the design is a bastard survival of the Sasanian royal iconography of the banqueting scene or the hunt, and astrological themes are also found. Such pottery belongs to the so-called 'ceramic underworld of Islam', a category represented by wares from numerous provincial centres. Thus, Sari may have been the centre of production for a type of ware closely akin to folk art in the primitive vigour and garish colouring of its stylized animal drawing. But the commonest category of provincial wares is the sgraffito type, so called after the technique of incising the design into the body before or after glazing. It is found

40 The word as icon. Qur'an leaf with *sura* heading in gold; parchment, perhaps 9th-century Iraq. Red dots indicate vowelling, thin black strokes (made with another pen?) diacritical marks. Spacing between individual letters, sequences and whole words can be very wide and thereby privilege certain syllables.



41 The power of the word. Carpet page from Qur'an of Ibn al-Bawwab, Baghdad, 1000-1. The *naskhi* text in interlaced polygons continues on the frontispiece and refers to the Qur'anic word count on the authority of the caliph ('Ali). 42 The book as a holy thing. Wooden cover inlaid in ivory for oblong Qur'an, Egypt, 10th century. In early Islamic art, arcades often denote a boundary or separation, even serving as an augury of Paradise. The solar disc acts as a metaphor of spiritual illumination.



widely distributed throughout north-west Iran. Its decoration frequently apes metalwork, even to the use of the incised lines to prevent colours from running. A particular class of *champlevé* ware, in which the white slip is gouged away to form the design, is associated with the Garrus area in Kurdistan. These varied provincial schools were independent of influences from the court and from abroad, though reminiscences of Sasanian iconography were common. Their subject matter favours single figures of animals and monsters or bold abstract designs.

The other art form which has survived in substantial quantity is calligraphy. It is exercised above all in Qur'ans – the major illustrated secular manuscript of the period is a copy of al-Sufi's astronomical treatise (Bodleian Library, Oxford), dated 1009 and probably produced in Baghdad, with drawings of constellation images in mixed Central Asian and Samarran style. Under 'Abbasid patronage the somewhat haphazard penmanship of the early Hijazi Qur'ans, expressed in irregular letter forms, skewed lines of text, spasmodic illumination and a general indifference to visual effect, was replaced by a solemn discipline appropriate to holy writ and redolent of epigraphy on paper. Horizontal parchment sheets often accommodated

40 no more than four lines of text, thus leading to prodigally expensive Qur'ans of thirty or even sixty volumes. The script would be so spaced, and with letter forms subject to such extremes of stylization, as to slow down recognition of the words themselves: an objective correlative to the awesome enigmas found in the text itself. A supple, flexible system of extension and contraction allowed calligraphers to balance words on a page with the utmost finesse and thus to create striking visual harmonies. Symmetries and asymmetries, echoes, repetitions, and a seemingly endless variety of patterns and rhythms

41, 42 abound. Clearly, therefore, the scribes had ample licence to experiment and were not constrained to limit themselves to a text block characterized by regular, even spacing.

A major benchmark of new developments is the Qur'an on paper which, according to its probably reliable colophon, was copied by Ibn al-Bawwab, the most renowned contemporary master, and written in the *naskhi* (cursive) script which he allegedly invented, in Baghdad in 1000-1 (Chester Beatty Library, Dublin). Its diminutive size cannot mar the well-nigh endlessly varied splendour of its ornamental palmettes, its frontispieces and finispieces conceived like the leaves of doors and structured with a ponderous, recondite rhythm around a theme of interlaced semicircles, perhaps intended to have

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43 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate'. Almost every *sura* in the Qur'an begins with this phrase, known as the *bismillah* from its opening three words. Often displayed by calligraphers, in popular belief it has special power as an amulet. Here it is executed in some major Qur'anic hands: (left, from top) early Kufic, square Kufic, eastern Kufic, *thulth*; (right, from top) *naskhi*, *muhaqqaq*, *rihani*, *ta'liq*.

an apotropaic effect. It should be noted that in manuscripts the so-called 'Kufic' types of script (named after the town of Kufa in Iraq) were restricted to Qur'ans, although they could be used for headings, captions and the like in other manuscripts. This style spread, it seems, throughout the 'Abbasid dominions with only minor local variations. It thus typifies the prestige and paramount authority enjoyed by the art of Baghdad: a fact of life epitomized by the courtier Ziryab, who imported the lifestyle of the Iraqi capital in food, language, clothing and art to far-off Cordoba, the capital of Umayyad Spain, in the tenth century (see p. 175).

In the 'Abbasid period Eastern – including Central Asian, Turkish and Chinese – motifs, techniques and themes begin to infiltrate Islamic art. The political and economic background for this is the shifting of the capital from Damascus to Baghdad, which brought with it a rush of Iranian ideas; the importation of Turkish soldiers who gradually usurped supreme power; and the rapid growth of

long-distance trade with lands to the east, both overland and by sea. Islamic art now largely severed its connections with the classical world, and turned its back on the Mediterranean. In architecture, Sasanian forms were dominant for city plans, palaces and mausolea. Baked brick, mud-brick and even stamped earth often replaced stone. Classical ornament of foliate inspiration became ever more abstract and this abstraction – which led, among other motifs, to the arabesque in its final form – became the basis of much later Islamic art. Such classical materials as carved stone and mosaic were largely rejected in favour of stucco, which was to become the decoration *par excellence* of eastern Islam. The unusually yielding quality of stucco made it an excellent testing ground for new techniques and designs. In certain fields such as Kufic Qur'ans and epigraphic pottery – and perhaps also lustreware – the achievements of the 'Abbasid period were to remain unrivalled; but still more important was the full elaboration of the thematic cycle of court life begun under the Umayyads and destined to be eagerly taken up by later Islamic dynasties. Thus from the point of view of materials, techniques and subject matter, 'Abbasid art was to offer a much richer quarry for later generations than Umayyad art. It is also to be found over an incomparably wider geographical area. Moreover, it still enjoyed the same advantage of a *corvée* system which, by making craftsmen mobile, disseminated the latest developments over a wide area. Within the empire, there were no frontiers, a fact which can be explained by a basic unity of faith and political institutions. The division of the Islamic world between East and West was not to become definitive until the Saljuq period.

The Fatimids

From the death of the Prophet onwards, a body of Muslim opinion held unswervingly – though with many internal divergences of opinion – that supreme power in the Islamic state could be vested solely in a member of the Prophet's own family. The first and obvious such candidate was Muhammad's cousin 'Ali, who by marrying the Prophet's daughter Fatima also became his son-in-law. 'Ali's claims to the caliphate were pressed by the so-called 'party of 'Ali' (*shi'at 'Ali* – whence the term Shi'ite), but after his assassination in 661 the caliphate passed to the Umayyad family. Thereafter, despite frequent and bloody Shi'ite insurrections (of which the most significant, historically speaking, was that of the Prophet's grandson al-Husain, who was killed at Karbala in 680), a pattern that lasted for centuries was established: no Shi'ite ruler wielded enough power to disturb the political status quo. Shi'ite principalities in the Yemen, the Caspian region and elsewhere were protected but also imprisoned by their remoteness.

All this changed with the advent of the Fatimids, who took their name (and claimed descent) from the Prophet's daughter, and who held the belief that the authentic line of *imams* or rightful rulers had ceased with the death of Isma'il, the seventh Imam. This belief caused them to be dubbed Isma'ilis. The dynasty was founded by a certain 'Ubaidallah who proclaimed himself the Chosen One (*al-mahdi*) and from obscure beginnings in eastern Algeria took over the central Maghrib within a few years. In 921 he set the seal on his conquests by founding a city on the Tunisian coast which he named al-Mahdiya after himself. His successors consolidated their hold on the eastern Maghrib before turning their eyes further afield to Egypt. Eventually they conquered its capital, Fustat, and founded their own capital – al-Qahira, 'the victorious' – nearby, in 969. In so doing they hastened the dismemberment of the 'Abbasid state which had begun with the loss of Spain to the Umayyads of Cordoba in 756.

But the Fatimids were interested in more than merely winning