

## Paradise or Empire?

ON A PARADOX OF Umayyad Art

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UMAYYAD RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE was the earliest expression of Islamic art on a grand scale, and it has continued to exert its fascination upon generation after generation of visitors ever since. To the modern student, it is also a field riddled with elusive meanings and apparent paradoxes. For decades, divergent interpretations have been put forward about its two most emblematic monuments: the Dome of the Rock, in Jerusalem, and the Great Mosque of Damascus. Indeed, the more one reflects about them, the more the same conclusions seem to repeat themselves, with a single referent—the representation of a plant, a precious stone, a building—seemingly evoking both paradise and empire. This puzzling situation is, of course, partly due to the lack of human figures and identifying captions in their iconography, leaving the viewer to construe, after a gap of over a millennium, what may have been obvious to original audiences. What is more, any imperially sponsored sacral building or object is inherently bound to be a manifestation of both spirituality and power. Yet the reality observed in practice goes beyond the level of truisms, reaching a degree of articulation that suggests the possibility of a deliberate choice, a conscious tendency to elude one-dimensional readings and to conflate the spiritual and earthly planes. This possibility and its cultural context form the subject of the present chapter, with a focus

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on the Dome of the Rock, the Great Mosque of Damascus, and Umayyad Qur'an illuminations.

## The Dome of the Rock

The Dome of the Rock was built in 692 by the caliph 'Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705), which makes it the earliest Islamic monument still standing in something close to its original state. Its wall mosaics are concentrated on the inner octagon and drum, covering almost all of their vertical surfaces above column level, as well as their soffits. With a total area of some 1,280 square meters, they are the largest repository of this art form to survive from before the twelfth century.<sup>1</sup> Initially, similar mosaic ornament clad the exterior of the building, thereby proclaiming a message not only to those within its walls, but also to Jerusalem at large.<sup>2</sup> The extant decoration has been the subject of numerous studies.<sup>3</sup> It essentially consists of semi-abstract depictions of plants, fertile, lush and ever expanding, along with more naturalistic trees. These vegetal elements are intermingled with jewels, crowns, and precious stones. In most panels, both thematic strands are blended, with plants carrying jewels, crowns, pearls, and precious stones (fig. 2.1). The resonance of this decoration with the Qur'anic imagery of paradise has been articulated by several modern writers.<sup>4</sup> Yet as one delves into the iconography, unmistakable references to earthly rulership also emerge.<sup>5</sup> As the latter have received less emphasis in recent scholarship, it is with them that I begin.

### *Crowns, Jewels, and Rulership*

In the spandrels of the inner octagon and most of all in the drum, several bejeweled vases with plants carry a pair of wings at their apex (fig. 2.1).<sup>6</sup> These wings reflect a type of pre-Islamic crown widely attested in Sasanian coins, metalwork, and stuccoes from the fifth century onward and perpetuated in Islamic coinage from Iran and Iraq down to the very years in which the Dome of the Rock was built.<sup>7</sup> The correspondence is precise: note, in particular, the geometrical patterning of the bejeweled base of each wing, the transversal line that separates this base from the raised feather tips, and the way the uppermost feather curves into a hook at its tip. Most pairs of wings frame pointed, bejeweled ovals that are themselves adorned with crowns, diadems, and pearls. The two pairs of wings in the inner octagon are

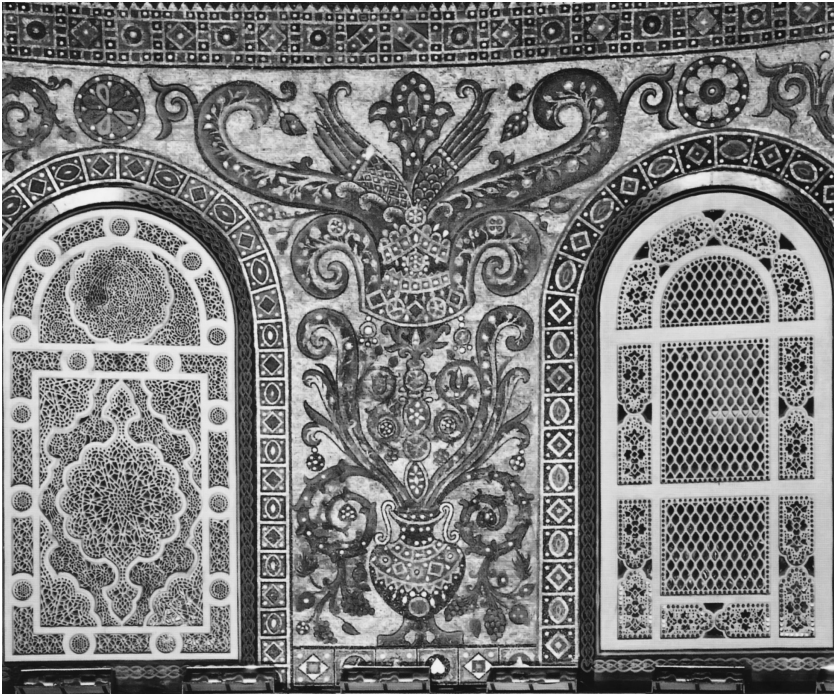


FIGURE 2.1 Mosaic decoration of the drum. Jerusalem, Dome of the Rock, 72 AH/692 AD.

themselves part of a range of other regalia, which makes it clear that they are crowns. In one of them, a pole carrying a moon crescent emerges from the wings, thereby making the analogy with Sasanian crowns complete (fig. 2.2).

It has been suggested that these wings might represent angels.<sup>8</sup> But upon close consideration, this seems unlikely. In its Iranian context, the winged crown signified the ruler's *khvarnah* (an Old Persian term, New Persian *farr*), his good fortune of divine origin, or in the words of the Avestan *Zāmyād yasht* (fifth century BC and later), "the mighty, gleaming glory created by [Ahura] Mazda," the "Wise Lord."<sup>9</sup> The wings conveyed the spiritual dimension of divinely ordained kingship, expressed in different forms that have in common their royal connotations: in some Sasanian stuccoes, silvers, seals, and textiles, the same symmetrical pair of wings thus serves as the base for another motif, such as a moon crescent (like those often seen in crowns; it appears, in fig. 2.3, with the Pahlavi word *nishān*, "[royal] emblem"), or the head of a ram (itself also associated with *khvarnah*), again with a floating ribbon.<sup>10</sup>



**FIGURE 2.2** Mosaic decoration, western arcade of inner octagon. Jerusalem, Dome of the Rock, 72 AH/692 AD.



**FIGURE 2.3** Stucco plaque from the area of Ctesiphon, Iraq, sixth or seventh century. Height 39.5 cm. Berlin, Museum für Islamische Kunst, KtO 1084.

This was thus the clear connotation of the motif in a Sasanian context, and the intention was apparently to retain it at the Dome of the Rock. This is, first of all, a matter of composition: the mosaic wings are shown as a small part of larger arrangements of jewels, crowns, and plants, too small and enclosed to act as primary signifiers for whole beings. For local viewers in Jerusalem, the motif would have been reminiscent of Arab-Sasanian coins still very recently minted in the eastern parts of the Islamic empire, where it capped the head and crown of the ruler, but fundamentally at odds with the Christian iconography of angels, in which the wings are more naturalistic, have a less compact shape, and are typically shown at rest, pointing downward, rather than upward, or extending horizontally if in flight.<sup>11</sup> Such would also have the habitual repertoire of the mosaicists who worked on the Dome of the Rock (indeed, even in Sasanian art, comparable modes of depiction were adopted for celestial beings—mostly *fravashis*, protective spirits).<sup>12</sup> In other words, the wings seem to represent the conscious import of a distinctively Sasanian royal motif into this Umayyad monument. This gesture of appropriation, which finds some echoes in sixth-century Constantinople, would have been all the more potent in early Islamic Jerusalem, at the hands of the polity that had recently brought about the final demise of the Sasanians.<sup>13</sup> Its meaning, as will soon become apparent, probably combined a political and a votive dimension.

Jewels and crowns adorn much of the remaining mosaic decoration at the Dome of the Rock with such abundance as to conjure an imagined treasury. These precious objects could carry spiritual connotations linked to the divine source of earthly rule and to the jewels of paradise, two themes already present in early Christian mosaics. Notwithstanding this possible layer of meaning, to which we shall return, at an immediate level, they evoke kingship, looking west as well as east. The round crowns inlaid with pearls and colored precious stones are reminiscent of the crowns of Justinian (r. 527–565) depicted in sixth-century mosaics at Ravenna, in the church of San Vitale, and possibly Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, while the larger crowns with pearl hangings recall the tiara of Theodora, Justinian's empress, again at San Vitale (fig. 2.4).<sup>14</sup> Both scenes at San Vitale are themselves framed by mosaic depictions of gold columns inlaid with jewels and set within a bejeweled rectangle.

These representations, in turn, reflect real jewelry of the period. Crowns stemming from the Byzantine tradition have survived at the treasury of the Lombard queen Theodelinda in Monza (ca. 600) and at the Visigothic treasury of Guarrazar, in Spain (seventh century). The contents



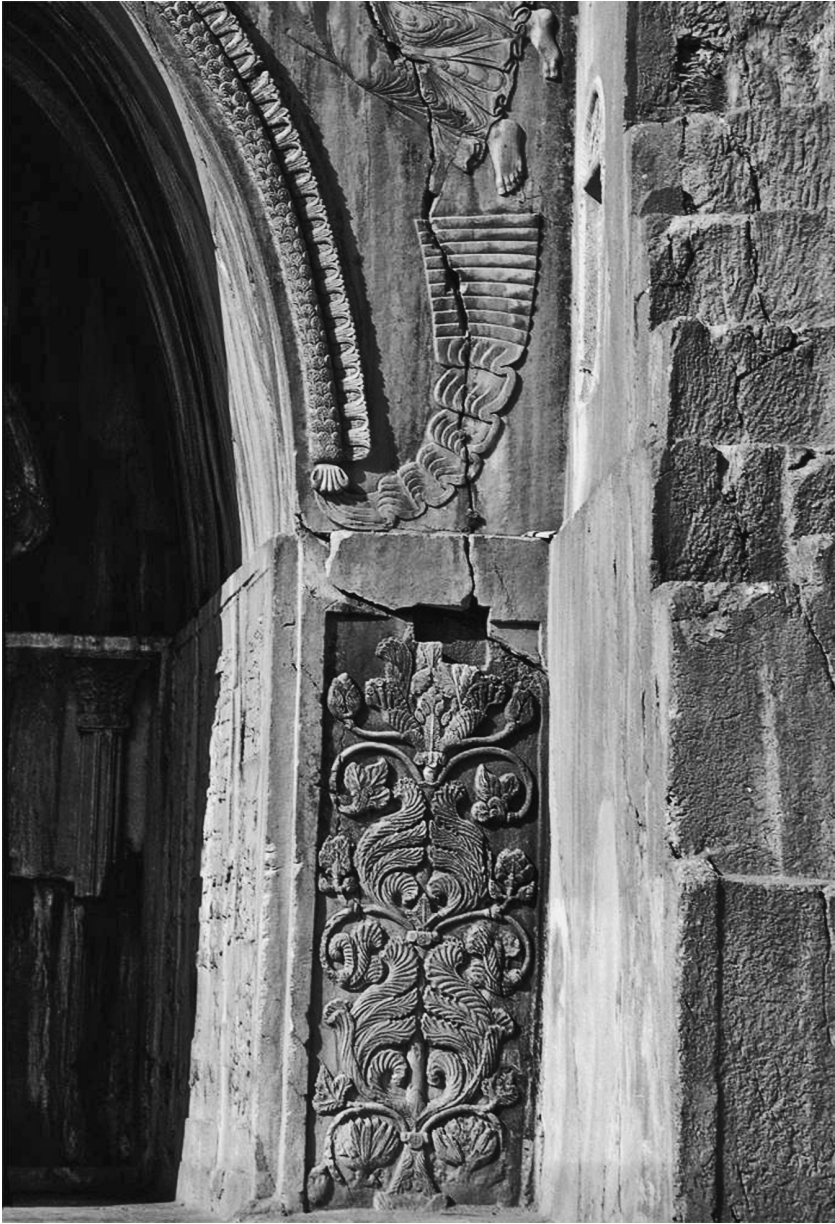


FIGURE 2.4 Mosaic panel showing Empress Theodora with attendants. Ravenna, Church of San Vitale, *ca.* 527–546 AD.

of the latter, in particular, are so close in quality and style to the finest extant Byzantine jewels that they may have been executed by Byzantine craftsmen brought to Toledo.<sup>15</sup> The most lavish crown from Guarrazar, that of king Recceswinth (r. 653–672), is inlaid with rock crystal, pearls, sapphires, and other precious stones (plate 2 in the insert): its form and adornment directly resonate with the mosaic crowns at the Dome of the Rock (compare it, for example, with the crown in the lower register of the spandrel in figure 2.2).<sup>16</sup>

These objects were made not to be worn, but suspended above church altars as offerings from kings and dignitaries. This usage is attested not only at the Visigothic court but also, at least as early as the sixth century, at Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, a few steps away from the Dome of the Rock. In this context, they symbolized surrender of sovereignty to God, the ultimate source of power, a theme also emphasized in the mosaic inscription at the Dome of the Rock; in the same vein, Christ, the Virgin, and Christian saints were often represented with such regalia.<sup>17</sup>

As long ago argued by Oleg Grabar, the mosaic crowns at the Dome of the Rock might likewise have represented votive offerings signifying the



**FIGURE 2.5** Relief sculpture, Tāq-i Bustān, Iran, fifth to seventh century.

submission of rulers defeated at the hands of Islam, on this most sacred spot associated with Creation and Judgement in Syrian Muslim circles.<sup>18</sup> A tradition recorded by al-Wāsiṭī (Jerusalem, wr. before 410/1019) as the narration of a servant (*khādim*) appointed to the upkeep of the Dome of the Rock under the Umayyads adds a further element to this layer of meaning: “During the time of ‘Abd al-Malik, there was hanging on the chain above the Rock under the dome the Yatīma pearl, the horns of Abraham’s ram and the crown of Kisrā [the Sasanian emperor]. When the Banū Hāshim [the Abbasids] took over the caliphate, they sent them to the Ka‘ba.”<sup>19</sup>

This anecdote, like the vast majority of those about the sacred Rock, is derived from an earlier compilation by al-Walīd ibn Ḥammād al-Ramlī (d. 912). It thus existed in written form by the ninth century, and much of this material appears to have entered into circulation in Jerusalem by the late Umayyad period.<sup>20</sup> This is particularly likely for the present anecdote, first of all because of the chain of textual transmission (*isnād*), going from al-Ramlī through one ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad to the latter’s father and grandfather, with his great-great grandfather as the narrator. This makes the story akin to a family memory handed down over little more than a century. Second, the pattern of sending regalia and precious objects to sacred monuments is confirmed, with respect to Mecca, by several independent sources, including the near-contemporary Syriac chronicle of Theophilus of Edessa (*ca.* 695–775), as reconstructed from later citations. According to these sources, the crown of Kisrā, the horns of Abraham’s ram, and two ruby-encrusted crescents from Damascus were kept at Mecca before the days of ‘Abd al-Malik. Crowns, other precious objects, and spoils of war continued to be sent there in subsequent decades.<sup>21</sup> Whether the crown and horns at the Dome of the Rock were different from those in Mecca or were taken from there to Jerusalem upon ‘Abd al-Malik’s defeat of Ibn al-Zubayr in 692 (and eventually brought back to Mecca by the Abbasids) cannot be determined.<sup>22</sup> But the nature of the source and ubiquity of the practice make it entirely plausible that such objects did exist at the Dome of the Rock in the Umayyad period.

Hanging from the dome, they would have found multiple echoes in the surrounding drum, where most of the mosaic crowns are concentrated. This contiguity of real and imagined objects, this juxtaposition of ornaments and colors across different media, is reminiscent of the Late Antique aesthetic mode labeled the “jeweled style” by Michael Roberts.<sup>23</sup>



In sum, the mosaic crowns and jewels at the Dome of the Rock carried incontrovertible connotations of earthly rulership, both Sasanian and Byzantine, expressed in concrete terms, with a votive dimension. Yet this is not the end of the story, for motifs in the same compositions do also resonate with the Muslim imagery of paradise.

### *Touching Paradise, Making the Rain Come*

The Qur'an evokes paradise as a fertile garden underneath which rivers flow, with gushing springs, lush plants, lofty chambers, and precious stones. To cite but one of the many verses about its denizens:

Those—theirs shall be gardens of Eden, underneath which rivers flow; therein they shall be adorned with bracelets of gold, and they shall be robed in green garments of silk and brocade, therein reclining upon couches—O, how excellent a reward! And O, how fair a resting place! (Q. 18:31)<sup>24</sup>

In the mosaics, most of the plants carrying crowns are fantastical scrolls of fruit-bearing vine rooted in precious vases. The theme of the vine stemming from a vase was ubiquitous in Christian art of the period, though at the Dome of the Rock, the schematized, symmetrical form of this opulent growth is also reminiscent of Sasanian art (fig. 2.5). In a Christian context, the motif would have naturally evoked the True Vine, as explicitly shown by a stone carving from Dayr al-Za'farān, in northern Mesopotamia (sixth century), where a cross around which vines scroll is rooted in a vase. A similar motif, with the vase on one panel and the cross on the next, appears on an ivory pyxis probably produced in Greater Syria in the Umayyad period.<sup>25</sup>

At the Dome of the Rock and in the normative context of the Qur'an, these images would have rather resonated with the supernatural fertility of paradise. The otherworldly character of the plants is suggested by their inlaid jewels and the frequent appearance of gold in their nervures, bringing light into their very fabric. The marble paneling below the mosaics, with its wave patterns, might have evoked water sliding down from this fantastical garden, both within and without the monument, a visual impression reinforced by their coolness to the touch. Such associations with marble are, at least, known from numerous Byzantine texts and from rarer Arabic buildings descriptions of the ninth century onward.<sup>26</sup> In this

reading, the monument offers an almost tactile glimpse of paradise on earth, both through its specific motifs and through the overall aesthetic impact of the decoration.<sup>27</sup>

Some of the plants, however, remain free of jewels and gold and appear more earthly in nature. In the Qur'an, God is also lauded as the giver of rain, water sent down from the sky (mentioned twenty-six times, alongside other references to rain).<sup>28</sup> In a world where seasonal irrigation lay at the root of agriculture, the life-giving nature of rain, year after year, was felt more acutely than in modern societies. In the ideological construct of the early Islamic empire, the caliph played a pivotal role in obtaining this divine gift for the community, as intercessor and spiritual pole. In terms familiar from court poetry of this period, al-Akḥṭal thus eulogized 'Abd al-Malik as "the caliph of God through whom men pray for rain," the executor of divine victory, justice, and the light and guidance of the erring.<sup>29</sup>

### *The Qur'anic Art of Polysemy*

Ultimately, two visions emerge from the mosaics: the surrender of earthly power to God combined with God-given fertility (two pillars of caliphal ideology in early Islam), and the ethereal landscapes of paradise. Each is supported by specific elements, so that neither can be dismissed lightly, but each may also be extended individually to the whole decoration. One is thus tempted to ask whether aesthetic sensibilities had any role to play in this puzzling situation. Polysemy was a core value of Arabic poetry, the most developed art form in pre-Islamic Arabia, which retained unrivaled cultural standing in the Islamic era. It is, even more importantly, a fundamental aspect of the Qur'an, where clear admonitions rhythmically alternate, often in the same verse, with words or clauses that have a wide openness of meaning.<sup>30</sup> Far from being accidental, or from solely reflecting semantic difficulties, this was a self-proclaimed value of the Qur'anic text:

It is He who sent down upon thee the Book, wherein are verses clear (*muḥkamāt*) that are the Essence of the Book, and others ambiguous (*mutashābihāt*). As for those in whose hearts is swerving, they follow the ambiguous part, desiring dissension, and desiring its interpretation; and none knows its interpretation, save only God. And those firmly rooted in knowledge say, "We believe in it; all is from our Lord"; yet none remembers, but men possessed of minds. (Q. 3:7)<sup>31</sup>

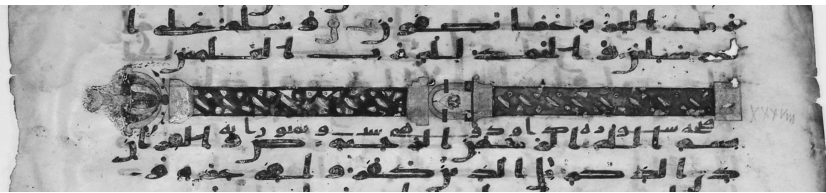
The interpretation of this verse has itself been the subject of much discussion on the part of Qur'an commentators (not unlike the toil of modern scholars seeking to understand the Dome of the Rock). But such ambiguity was perceived, in relation to the Qur'an, as the source of inexhaustible depths of meaning.<sup>32</sup>

## The Umayyad Qur'an of Fustat

An additional piece of evidence should now be considered: the "Umayyad codex of Fustat" (thus labeled by François Déroche after its city of discovery in the nineteenth century; previously also referred to as "Marcel 13").<sup>33</sup> This Qur'an manuscript is closely related to the Dome of the Rock through its illuminations, and previous studies have shown that it was probably produced in Greater Syria around the reign of 'Abd al-Malik.<sup>34</sup> The heading of sura 38 (Şād) carries the image of a green column topped by a niche with a hanging lamp, and, above, a second, red column with a fluted fountain at its apex (fig. 2.6). The lamp conjures associations with divine light, potently expressed in the famous "light verse":

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of His Light is as a niche wherein is a lamp, the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star, kindled from a Blessed Tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West whose oil well nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it. Light upon light, God guides to His light whom He will. (Q. 24:35)

Once again, the verse is fundamentally polysemic. Earth and heaven are not neatly set apart but melded in a succession of images that open onto a boundless spiritual horizon. The lamp in the illumination, likewise, could



**FIGURE 2.6** Illumination band marking the beginning of sura 38. Total page dimensions 37×31 cm. Saint Petersburg, National Library of Russia, Marcel 13, f. 33r.

naturally signify divine light, yet, with its two strings, girdles, and glass casing, it is also a physical object. Thousands of lamps were deployed across the *ḥaram al-sharīf*, the esplanade of Temple Mount. They were reportedly lit all day long; some served to mark out holy spots, while scented lamps suspended on chains were concentrated inside the Dome of the Rock.<sup>35</sup>

The fountain, in turn, resonates with the Qur'an's gushing waters, fountains, and rivers of paradise.<sup>36</sup> According to al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), the early Qur'an commentators Mujāhid (Meccan, d. 104/722) and Hishām ibn al-Kalbī (Kufan, d. 146/763) saw the fount of paradise as pouring its waters downward from higher spheres.<sup>37</sup> Closer to the probable geographical origin of the illumination, traditions from Jerusalem state that the four rivers of paradise flowed beneath the sacred Rock. This vision, being rooted in the Old Testament (Ezekiel 47:1–12), is likely to have emerged at an early stage in the Islamic era.<sup>38</sup> On an earthly level, the image can also be associated with the gushing fountains or springs brought forth by God as sources of human sustenance (as for instance in Q. 36:34). The latter image also resonates with early Syrian traditions according to which all the sweet water of the world and its mountains flowed from beneath the Rock. At the same time, the particular type of this fountain, fluted, standing on a column, with its pistil-shaped spout occurs as a palatial attribute in the Theodora mosaic panel at San Vitale (sixth century, fig. 2.4), in the Rotunda mosaics at Thessaloniki (fifth century), and in a Syriac manuscript at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (sixth century).<sup>39</sup> It is thus, once again, a concrete object.

The red and green columns, with their tiny white specks, also echo a distinctive type of column found at the Dome of the Rock.<sup>40</sup> Numerous early Syrian traditions compiled in the ninth century by al-Ramlī construed the sacred Rock around which the monument is built as an earthly locus that touches paradise, the site of God's Throne on earth, from which He ascended to heaven after Creation, and as the navel of the world.<sup>41</sup> The columns in this Qur'an could thus notionally have conveyed an additional symbolical layer of meaning, for instance as a celestial pole uniting heaven and earth; but the motif is so generic as to preclude any certainties.

Taking the image as a whole, a paradisiacal reading may be put forward, but an interpretation of the illumination as exalting Umayyad architectural programs is equally possible, given the way the latter are outwardly referenced. The latter dimension is even more obvious in the remaining sura headings from the same Qur'an, most of which directly mirror ornaments at the Dome of the Rock and in other Umayyad monuments.<sup>42</sup>



Moving one step further, the very dichotomy on which this distinction rests—between heaven and earth, the spiritual realm and earthly rule—is not entirely self-evident. An Arabic tradition about Temple Mount and the Rock reads: “The sons of Hārūn (Aaron), may God pray for him, used to come to the Rock and call it the Temple in Hebrew, and a fountain of olive oil would descend unto them, and it [the oil] would circle and fill the lamps without [human] contact.”<sup>43</sup> The narration shares with the above illumination the image of a lamp and fountain, although again it is not possible to assert any direct relationship between them. It also dims the boundary between the earthly and heavenly realms in a way often encountered in this period. A tradition recorded by Ibn al-Murajjā (Jerusalem, mid-eleventh century) states that an area on its esplanade known as “the *mihrāb* [prayer niche or space] of our Prophet Muḥammad” stood opposite the “lamp of God” (*qindīl Allāh*), also known as the “lamp of paradise” (*qindīl al-janna*).<sup>44</sup> These names evoke sacred objects set in physical space, while opening onto a spiritual realm of undefined expression. The four rivers of paradise that were believed to flow beneath the Rock were named, in one tradition, as Jaxartes (Sayḥān), Oxus (Jayjān), the Nile, and the Euphrates: in other words, earthly and heavenly rivers were conceptually blended. This particular anecdote again stems from a biblical source (Genesis 2:10–14), which implies the likelihood of an early date.<sup>45</sup> Such traditions could be multiplied. The precise period at which they entered into circulation is subject to interpretation, but at least some of them are early, and they collectively reflect a worldview that cannot have emerged suddenly. It implies that in the physical space of Temple Mount, as often with early Islamic holy sites, both levels of reality, the physical and spiritual, were perceived as conjoined, rather than separate. The conceptual boundary was pliable, as it might likewise have been in monumental mosaics or manuscript illumination. These conflations make the words of Peter Brown resonate with an early Muslim context:

Like their pagan rivals, Christians thought of themselves as enveloped, for good or ill, in a *mundus*, a visible universe shot through with etherial (and so, usually, though not invariably, invisible) benign and hostile powers. Their problem was not to envision a so-called Other World, a world “out there.” . . . What mattered was to bring into their own, perilous existence in this world touches of paradise—a region of delight hauntingly adjacent to themselves.<sup>46</sup>

A kindred perspective is, again, implicit in the Qur'an, notably with the *jinn*, invisible creatures fashioned by God from "smokeless fire" (Q. 55:14) that inhabit the earth and, most of all, through the omnipresence of God himself. As far as man-made images are concerned, however, one is left, as in poetry, with an open field of possibilities: a field that may be mapped but intrinsically resists being narrowed down.

## The Great Mosque of Damascus

ʿAbd al-Malik's son and successor, al-Walīd (r. 705–715), was the foremost patron of religious architecture in the Umayyad era, being responsible for the building, rebuilding, or redecoration of the mosques of Damascus, Medina Mecca, Fustat, Sanaa, and the Aqsa. The Great Mosque of Damascus initially had its whole courtyard and prayer hall covered with mosaic decoration above the level of its marble dadoes and columns. The largest extant sections lie on the western arcade and on the inner and outer façades of the axial nave. They show landscapes with tall trees adjoined by buildings of different shapes and sizes, set against skies of gold with water running in the foreground. The buildings are adorned with jewels, particularly pearls that hang from gates (fig. 2.7).



**FIGURE 2.7** Detail of the western arcade seen from the courtyard. Great Mosque of Damascus, 706–715 AD.

### *A Vision of Paradise and Empire*

An evocation of the Qur'anic imagery of paradise again suggests itself, as articulated by several modern writers.<sup>47</sup> In this perspective, most elements seem to fall into place: the ethereal skies of light, the jewels, and the pearls, themselves also symbols of light in Late Antiquity.<sup>48</sup> The tall buildings might evoke a further facet of the Qur'anic imagery of paradise:

But those who fear their lord, for them await lofty chambers above which are built lofty chambers (*ghuraf min fawqihā ghuraf mabniyyat<sup>um</sup>*), underneath which rivers flow—God's promise, God fails not the tryst (Q. 39:20).

Blessed be He who, if He will, shall assign to thee better than that—gardens underneath which rivers flow, and He shall assign to thee palaces. (Q. 25:10)<sup>49</sup>

The odd proportions of the buildings, which tend to be markedly smaller than the trees and to be shown in logically incompatible perspectives and scales, could be interpreted as contributing to the same otherworldly effect.<sup>50</sup>

One of the earliest preserved historical writings on the imperial mosques of al-Walīd, the (lost) history of Medina by Ibn Zabāla (late eighth century), lends some support to this interpretation. It puts the following statement in the mouth of mosaicists who worked on al-Walīd's rebuilding of the Prophet's mosque at Medina, which had similar decorations to the ones at Damascus: "We made it according to the pictures of the trees of paradise and its palaces."<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, however, the anecdote also asserts that one of these Byzantines (*al-rūm*) tried to urinate on the Prophet's tomb (but died of supernatural causes in the act). A craftsman also drew pigs on arches before being caught out and punished at the order of 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz, who was in charge of the works.

These alleged provocations could imply a tacit rebuke of al-Walīd's employment of Christian workers, and they may arguably be a literary fabrication after the fact. However a polemical intent is not perceptible in the extract as a whole.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, whatever their region of origin (a debated issue), these mosaicists are likely to have been sent to work at Medina against their will, as a form of forced labor. The Aphrodito papyri, a body of administrative documents dating to the very same years in Egypt, shows that people often fled from such assignments.<sup>53</sup> One could thus

equally envisage that some Christians on whom work in distant Arabia had been imposed sought to perform hostile actions. The credibility of Ibn Zabāla's account is not undermined by these details, and if teams of Christian mosaicists were briefed to represent paradise without showing humans, animals, and angels, the extant mosaics would represent one way to do so with the pictorial tools at their disposal.

But once again, this may not be the whole story, for the mosaics at Damascus show an array of different buildings in a way that does also convey a real landscape, from luxurious palaces and pavilions to smaller dwellings reminiscent of country houses.<sup>54</sup> This possibility comes to life as one steps back to view the whole panel on the western arcade, and back again to imagine the entire courtyard adorned with similar decoration (fig. 2.8). A vision of earthly dominion would have been an almost instinctive response to this vast scenery, especially since floor maps showing cities and their buildings were to be seen in church mosaics of the period.<sup>55</sup> This is the impression conveyed by virtually all medieval visitors who wrote about the mosque, starting with the well-known testimony by al-Muqaddasī (tenth century) that “there is hardly a tree or a notable town which has not been depicted on these walls.”<sup>56</sup> Ibn Shākir al-Kutubī (fourteenth century) even cited an account according to which there was a representation of the Ka'ba above a *mihrāb* of this mosque.<sup>57</sup>



**FIGURE 2.8** Courtyard of the Great Mosque of Damascus, looking toward the west. Great Mosque of Damascus, 706–715 AD.



Furthermore, when al-Walīd's court poets Jarīr, al-Farazdaq, and al-Nābigha al-Shaybānī wrote panegyrics to celebrate the construction of the mosque, none of them alluded to a paradisiacal dimension of its decoration.<sup>58</sup> The most detailed description in these poems, that by al-Nābigha, extols the precious materials used in the mosque and the towering height of its dome, but rather than to link the lamps to divine light, for example, he proclaims that their radiance reaches "the Lebanon and the coast." As he turns to the mosaic landscapes, the poet describes the way the courtyard encloses "the rivers and the countryside" (*al-anhār wa'l-rīf*): the second term probably implies that the image pertains to the earthly realm. Al-Nābigha's only allusion to paradise and Judgment arises with respect not to these images, but to the inscription and its "detailed verses containing a promise and an admonition from our Lord."<sup>59</sup>

### *The Lost Mosaic Inscription at Damascus*

This inscription, now lost, has been recorded in textual sources, and its contents provide a further hint at the perspective of Umayyad ruling elites on this building. It was made of gold mosaic against a dark blue ground inscription and originally occupied much of the *qibla* wall. Its text referred repeatedly to Judgment, as well as the fire of hell and the garden of paradise. For example, one could read toward the end:

When heaven shall be stripped off  
 When Hell shall be set blazing  
 When Paradise shall be brought nigh  
 Then shall a soul know what it has produced.

(Q. 81:11–14)<sup>60</sup>

But God was invoked as the sustaining force of this world with just as much vigor. Both of these themes, eschatology and earthly abundance, appeared in conjunction in two long passages that lay at the core of the inscription and formed a large part of its text (Q. 79:1–46; 80:24–42). To cite but one of these:

Let man consider his nourishment  
 We poured out the rains abundantly,  
 Then We split the earth in fissures  
 and therein made the grains to grow

and vines, and reeds,  
 and olives, and palms,  
 and dense-tree'd gardens,  
 and fruits, and pastures,  
 an enjoyment for you and your flocks.  
 And when the Blast shall sound  
 upon the day when a man shall flee from his brother,  
 his mother, his father,  
 his consort, his sons,  
 every man that day shall have business to suffice him.  
 Some faces on that day shall shine  
 laughing, joyous;  
 some faces on that day shall be dusty  
 o'erspread with darkness  
 Those—they are the unbelievers, the libertines.

(Q. 80:24–42)

It is, in other words, as if passages bringing these two themes together had been expressly chosen. The evocation of grapes, olives, dates, enclosed gardens, and lofty trees directly echoes textual descriptions linking the mosaic decoration to earthly landscapes. Al-Walīd was indeed lauded by al-Nābigha as “the caliph of God through whom clouds of rain are sought” and by al-Farazdaq as “the shepherd of God on earth.”<sup>61</sup> But this dimension also leads into the hereafter in these verses, just as in the mosaics. In a possible allusion to the Prophet or caliph as intercessor, the inscription also read: “His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who is there to intercede in His presence except as He permits?” (Q. 2:255). In front of this wall, the caliph would stand and sit atop the *minbar* during the *khuṭba*, the public sermon—a few years earlier, the court poet Ibn Qays al-Ruqayyāt had evoked ‘Abd al-Malik as “the deputy of God on his *minbar*.”<sup>62</sup> During ritual, he would lead prayer in the enclosed area of the *maqṣūra*, facing the *mihrāb*, often protected by armed guards. Heated political arguments could arise.<sup>63</sup>

The mosque at Damascus was inherently related to the person of the caliph, its patron and the central presence in its social and ritual life, who was named at the end of the inscription and whose domed palace stood behind the *qibla* wall. The different messages emitted by the mosaics thus appear to coalesce around the early Islamic concept of the caliphate, in a way that is illuminated by the inscriptional program. The dimension of

paradise does not rule out that of empire, nor was it necessarily meant to: both appear to have been intimately related. Two traditions cited by al-Rabaʿī (eleventh century) assert that the Great Mosque of Damascus would remain a place of prayer for forty days after the end of the world, thereby linking this site to Judgment.<sup>64</sup> In the days of al-Walīd, al-Nābigha also evoked, in relation to the mosque, the “navel of the world” (*surrat al-ard*), the meeting point between heaven and earth,<sup>65</sup> an idea already encountered above in relation to the Dome of the Rock.

## The Umayyad Codex of Sanaa

Probably dating to the same years as the mosque of Damascus, and at any rate to the first decades of the eighth century, is a monumental Qurʾan discovered some four decades ago at the Great Mosque of Sanaa.<sup>66</sup> This manuscript is famous for its three opening pages with architectural illuminations, a theme that seems to have originally existed in other Qurʾans. The first image (fig. 2.9) shows an abstract geometrical design, with a circle surrounded by a double square that forms a star. It is followed by the representation of a mosque, with its *miḥrāb*, *minbar*, corner towers, and mosque lamps (fig. 2.10). The depiction of a central nave, together with the type of decoration on the spandrels and columns, suggests an Umayyad imperial mosque. Corner towers were rare in mosques of this period and might thus reflect a specific reference to the mosque of Damascus or Medina. The trees behind the *qibla*, which are very large in relation to the building, are reminiscent of those in the Damascus mosaics. They bear fruit and are placed behind the *qibla* wall, in an evocation of paradise amalgamated with the direction of prayer. This places the mosque at the conceptual threshold between an actual building and a vision of paradise. The third image shows a more generic mosque, with its *miḥrāb*, lamps, and trees behind the *qibla*.<sup>67</sup>

Returning to the first illumination (fig. 2.9), the geometrical figure of a double square enclosing a circle is the exact same one that served as a basis for the ground plan of the Dome of the Rock. The trees are shown in groups of three: a large central tree flanked by two smaller ones. All of them stem out of the same trunk and thereby replicate a composition with three trees specific to the mosaics at the Dome of the Rock. The trees in the Sanaa Qurʾan are rooted in the circle, whereas they would have been more clearly visible had they been placed on the edge of the double square. This suggests the recurrence of a paradisiacal symbolism linked this time

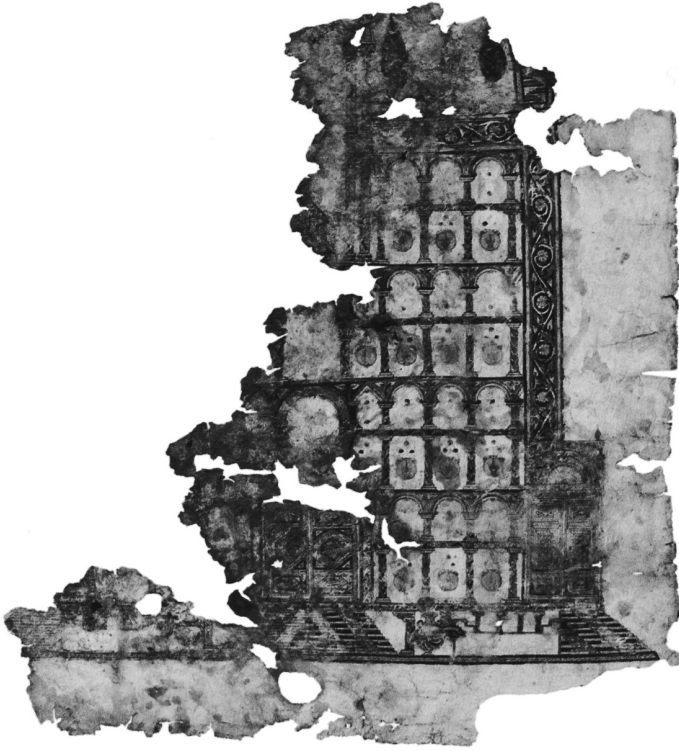


**FIGURE 2.9** First illumination of the Umayyad Codex of Sanaa. Page height *ca.* 41 cm, page width *ca.* 37.1 cm. Sanaa, Dār al- Makḥṭūṭāt al-Yamaniyya, IN 20–33.1.

not to the *qibla* wall, but to the dome of heaven. On one level, these images thus represent a glorification of Umayyad buildings, which they depict schematically. On another level, their paradisiacal symbolism is reenacted with more clarity than in the extant mosaics. These dimensions are conflated into a single pictorial plane, like two images conjured by the same verse in the Qur'an, but also possibly to show them as part of the same reality.

In the original setting, this vision of paradise and empire was articulated on a grand scale, by integrating the mass of architectural structure with surface ornament, objects such as mosque lamps and pearls, and the divine Word in inscriptions and Qur'an manuscripts. Textual sources suggest that Umayyad Qur'ans probably resembling the Sanaa manuscript were placed next to the *mihrāb* of major Umayyad mosques, where they would be read on Thursday evening and Friday.<sup>68</sup> Their pages of calligraphy





**FIGURE 2.10** Second illumination of the Umayyad Codex of Sanaa. Page height *ca.* 41 cm, page width *ca.* 37.1 cm. Sanaa, Dār al- Makḥṭūṭāt al-Yamaniyya, IN 20–33.1.

would have resonated with the inscriptions in gold against a dark green or blue ground, like the illumination echoed the mosaics, with their buildings and plants, as well as the actual lamps, columns, and objects. The trees and lush plants, both in manuscript and mosaic form, may well have represented, at one and the same time, paradisiacal evergreens and lands blooming through the intercession of the caliph. The caliph, through the attributes of his office, represented the connecting point between these two realms, as a celestial pole and a gateway to salvation.

## Conclusion

The Dome of the Rock and the Great Mosque of Damascus were built during crucial years that saw the Umayyad caliphate consolidate its foundations, expand territorially, and seek to firmly establish the standing of Islam as a religion. Among other tools, architecture and iconography

were called upon to impart the sense of a new emerging order on the public's imagination. In both monuments, the themes of paradise and empire are so closely intertwined as to make attempts to disentangle them, or assert one at the expense of the other, seem to be in vain. The same images, the same perceived architectural structures, could emit such different messages partly because the underlying concepts were themselves in proximity: partly, also, because such openness of meaning was a deeply ingrained aesthetic mode notably embodied by the Qur'an. The mosaics thus seem to have conveyed cognate messages about heaven and earth that reflected the early Islamic conception of the caliphate and opened onto a spiritually charged invisible realm. It is perhaps for this reason that both monuments were prone to associations with the navel of the earth, the meeting point of different temporal dimensions and planes of reality. It may be necessary, when studying the art and culture of this period, to leave behind our modern predilection for neatly defined categories: for what appears to us as paradox might have been, in the eyes of its makers, a consciously crafted polysemy based on an overarching sense of the divine.

## Notes

1. Grabar 1996, 71. An extensive set of color images can be consulted in this publication; see also Nuseibeh and Grabar 1996.
2. On the original appearance of the building, see Allen 1999; Van Berchem 1969, 237.
3. For overviews of the main interpretations, see Grabar 2006, 109–119; Shani 1999, 158–165. See also, to cite but some of the most seminal studies, Grabar 1959; Grabar 1996, chap. 2; Rosen-Ayalon 1989; Rabbat 1989; Shani 1999; Necipoğlu 2008.
4. The most detailed discussion of this theme to date is Rosen-Ayalon 1989, 46–69.
5. These have been most thoroughly articulated in Grabar 1959. Grabar's own understanding of the building later evolved to include additional layers of meaning.
6. E.g., Grabar 1996, figs. 29, 30, 32 (drum), 45 (right), 48 (left) (inner octagon). Maria Vittoria Fontana (2012, 97) has counted twenty-six of these occurrences in the drum.
7. See Erdmann 1951; Grabar 1967, Cat. 5, 16, 69, 82u, 82w, 82x; Harper 1978, Cat. 46; Kröger 1982, Taf. 93.5; Demange 2006, Cat. 33, 201–208 (several of the same objects appear in these different publications). For further examples of coins from the Islamic period, see Jamil 1999, fig. 14b; Treadwell 1999, figs. 2–3 and pp. 261–269; Treadwell 2005, figs. 2–3, 7. Cf. also, for a broader discussion of this symbol and its Islamic adaptations, Fontana 2012.

8. Rosen-Ayalon 1989, 54–55.
9. Rose 2011, 28. Cf. also Gherardo Gnoli, art. “Farr(ah),” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/farrah> (accessed November 28, 2012).
10. For a discussion of this association with *khvarnah*, see Soudavar 2003, 19–25; for examples of objects, Grabar 1967, Cat. 61, 70; Harper 1978, Cat. 39, 43; Kröger 1982, Taf. 14.3, 58.2–3, 76.3, 81.3, 83.5, 94.1; Demange 2006, Cat. 10; Evans and Ratliff 2012, Cat. 17. Wings of the same type, but composed as an overlapping pair, often adorn a Sasanian griffin (*senmurv*) or a winged horse associated with the heavens.
11. For some Christian examples, see Deliyannis 2010, figs. 45, 73, 83, 86, 87, 89, 93 and pl. IIIa, V, VIa, VIb; Cormack and Vasilaki 2008, Cat. 21–23; Evans and Ratliff 2012, fig. 19 (p. 53) and Cat. 26–27; Miziołek 1990, fig. 2a.
12. Grabar 1967, Cat. 15; Demange 2006, 40, fig. 2.
13. For Hagia Sophia at Constantinople, see Canepa 2010, 217–221.
14. See Deliyannis 2010, 172–174, 238–243. As noted by Deliyannis, the male portrait at Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo could represent either Justinian or the Ostrogothic king Theodoric.
15. Ripoll López 1993, 53–59; Ager 2010, 80; Conti 1983, 39–42 (not consulted). The Guarrazar treasury was first noted in relation to the Dome of the Rock by Grabar (1959, 49). See also, for links between Byzantine jewelry and its representations at San Vitale, Brown 1979.
16. Cf. also, for example, Grabar 1996, figs. 44 (right), 46 (right and left), 49 (far right), and so on.
17. Lethaby and Swainson 1894, 72–73; Grabar 1959, 48–50; Wilkinson 2002, 139; Necipoğlu 2008, 55. The sacral and paradisiacal dimensions of these representations are emphasized in Rosen-Ayalon 1989, 49, 52; Mekeel-Matteson 1999, 161–162.
18. Grabar 1959, 47–52; Grabar 2006, 113.
19. Rabbat 1993, 71; Wāsiṭī [2009], 339 (no. 120). Cf. also Elad 1995, 52; Kaplony 2002, 349 and n. 2.
20. Elad 1995, 6–22; Mourad 2008.
21. Grabar 1959, 50–51; Flood 2009, 28–29; Hoyland 2011, 136–137.
22. Cf. Rabbat 1993, 71–73.
23. Roberts 1989; cf. Bolman 2006, 18, 20, for early Christian Egypt.
24. See also L. Kinberg, art. “Paradise” (EQ); Schimmel 1976, 13–21. The translation used for all Qur’anic quotations is by A. J. Arberry, unless otherwise stated.
25. See, respectively, Hawkins, Mundell, and Mango 1973, fig. 13; Evans and Ratliff 2012, Cat. 120A.
26. Barry 2007 (where the similar marble panels at the Great Mosque of Damascus are mentioned at p. 639); Milwright 2007, 214; Flood 2001, 67.
27. For a full development of this reading, see Rosen-Ayalon 1989, 46–69.
28. D. Waines, art. “Agriculture and Vegetation” and “Weather” (EQ).

29. Crone and Hinds 1986, 8. Cf. Marsham (this volume); Jamil 1999, 39–40; Necipoğlu 2008, 39.
30. H. Berg, art. “Polysemy in the Qur’an” (EQ). This echoes the conclusions of Gülru Necipoğlu about the Dome of the Rock, which point to “the parallelism between the eternal heavenly kingdom and its earthly counterpart entrusted to the caliph” and the way the monument “blurred the temporal boundaries between the past, the present and the eschatological future” (Necipoğlu 2008, 56).
31. Also cited and discussed in Kermani 2015, 103.
32. See Kermani 2015, esp. 100–106. Cf. also the reflections put forward about this theme, along with many others, in relation to early Islamic architecture in Hamdouni Alami 2011, esp. chaps. 1, 3.
33. The name was coined in Déroche 2014, 76. Cf. Déroche (this volume) for further information and references. The label “Marcel 13,” proposed earlier by Déroche (2004, 242), reflects the shelfmark of one of its fragments held at the National Library of Russia (Saint Petersburg). The other extant fragments are Marcel 11 and Marcel 15 in the same collection and Arabe 330c at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Paris).
34. See Déroche 2004, esp. 242, 253–260; George 2010, 75–78.
35. Elad 1995, 46–47, 51, 56, 64; Kaplony 2002, 52–53, 245, 250–253, 325, 328.
36. Déroche has remarked (2004, 247–248) that the water at the top appears to be a later addition.
37. M. Radscheit, art. “Springs and Fountains” (EQ).
38. Mourad 2008, 93–94. Cf. Kaplony 2002, 242; Livne-Kafri 2006, 389–390. The tradition about the lamp of God also states that the angel Gabriel had suspended in the Jewish Temple the Greatest Lamp (*al-qindīl al-akbar*), the seven-armed Menorah, brought from heaven, which burned day and night “without smoke or impurity” (Kaplony 2002, 234).
39. Thessaloniki: Bakirtzis, Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou, and Mavropoulou-Tsioumi 2012, 82–83, fig. 45; Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Syriaque 33, f. 8v; Leroy 1964, 1:200 (for the date); 2: pl. 41–1 (image). The latter has been mentioned in relation to the present illumination by Déroche (2014, 90). The same type of fountain occurs in another Umayyad Qur’an: Istanbul, Türk ve İslam Eserleri Müzesi, ŞE 321, f. 57v; Déroche (this volume), fig. 2; Déroche 2014, fig. 24 (color image).
40. For some images, see Grabar 1996, figs. 25–27.
41. *al-Wāsiṭī* [2009], 287 (no. 87), 318 (no. 106), 321 (no. 108), 322 (no. 109), 325 (no. 112), 327 (no. 113), 329 (no. 114), and so on. All of the above traditions are based on *al-Ramlī* (see Mourad 2008 for further background).
42. Déroche 2004, 243–259. Cf. Déroche (this volume), fig. 1, for an image.
43. Elad 1995, 107.
44. Kaplony 2002, 234.
45. *al-Wāsiṭī* [2009], 321 (no. 108); Mourad 2008, 93.
46. Brown 1999, 31.

47. Finster 1970, 118–121; Brisch 1988; van Lohuizen-Mulder 1995, 207, 209; Flood 2001, s.v. “Paradise.”
48. Flood 2001, chap. 2.
49. For further references, see Brisch 1988, 16–18.
50. Brisch 1988, 14–16.
51. al-Samhūdī 2001, 2:269–270. Also cited in Sauvaget 1947, 81; Finster 1970, 120; Brisch 1988, 18; van Lohuizen-Mulder 1995, 193, 209.
52. As already noted by Gibb (1958, 228) with regard to related traditions.
53. To give but one example, see Bell 1911, 269–270 (no. 1333).
54. Ettinghausen 1977, 22–28; Rabbat 2003, 90–93.
55. Bowersock 2006, chaps. 1 and 3 (where Damascus is mentioned at pp. 80–81).
56. Van Berchem 1969, 233.
57. Rabbat 2003, 91; Van Berchem 1969, 238. Cf. also, for further accounts along the same lines, Rabbat 2003, 91–92; Van Berchem 1969, 235, 239.
58. These will be studied in full and translated in George forthcoming.
59. al-Nābigha 1996, 103; Rabbat 2003, 90; George forthcoming.
60. The full text of the inscriptions is given in Flood 2001, 247–254 (citing Yusuf Alī’s translation, as opposed to A. J. Arberry’s in the present essay).
61. Crone and Hinds 1986, 9.
62. Crone and Hinds 1986, 8.
63. Sauvaget 1947, 134–153. For an English translation, see Sauvaget 2002, 122–142. Estelle Whelan (1986) has sought to link the concave *mihrāb*, using iconographic and textual parallels, to the commemoration of the Prophet. But this hollow niche was also directly related, in mosque ritual, to the caliph, whether in person during prayer or at other times, when it may have served as a reminder of his presence—a possibility suggested by the work of Sauvaget (1947, 145–149), which emphasized its sociopolitical aspects. A reference to either the Prophet or the caliph—or both, since they are not mutually exclusive—may have been intended.
64. al-Rabaʿī 1950, 38 (Nos. 66, 67); cf. Ibn Kathīr 1966–1967, 9:154.
65. al-Nābigha 1996, 103; Rabbat 2003, 90.
66. The present discussion is based on George 2010, 79–86, to which readers are referred for further detail and references. See also, about this manuscript, Von Bothmer 1987; Déroche 2014, 111–116.
67. Reproduced in Von Bothmer 1987, Abb. 1; George 2010, fig. 53.
68. George 2010, 86.

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