

Muslim Architecture under The Umayyad Patronage (661-750AD)

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MUSLIM ARCHITECTURE UNDER THE UMAYYAD PATRONAGE

(661-750AD)

The Umayyads established the first Islamic dynasty in Damascus, which is renowned for a number of important accomplishments. Under their leadership, Islam reached most parts of today's Muslim World and by mid eighth century Muslim Caliphate ruled from Damascus to Tashkent in the East and to the Pyrenean mountains in the West. The second major achievement was the organisation of administration and trade and the introduction of coinage. These events engendered greater architectural movements reflecting the Umayyad grandeur as portrayed in their master pieces; the Dome of the Rock and the Great Mosque of Damascus. The present article examines the main flagship construction projects of that period and explores its innovative architectural and artistic elements.

Background

The arrival of Muawiya to the throne of Caliphate after the death of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the 4th Caliph, marked the beginning of the Umayyad dynasty. That period was renowned for its architectural achievement. The relative security and peace that followed the turbulent first few years after the war the Umayyads led against Ali's family, augmented by the newly acquired wealth generated by the annexation of both Iraq, Iran and Syria to Islam contributed to the development of artistic and architectural activities. Signs of this change emerged in religious as well as secular buildings. The development of major architectural components of the mosque is attributed to the Umayyads.

Muawiya introduced the *minaret* in 673 while carrying some enlargement works for the mosque of Amr Ibn-Al-AAs (Egypt, 641-2). He equipped it with four minarets for the call to prayer (*Adhan*). This innovation, according to Creswell (1958, p.14), was imitated from a Syrian Christian practice. According to this story, early Muslims in Damascus prayed initially at a neglected temple¹ which the Christians named as the Church of John the Baptist. It had four small projections at the four Corners on which people climbed to make the *Adhan* and thus inspiring the development of minarets (for example, Briggs, 1924 & Creswell, 1926)². Other theories suggest the influence of the Pharaohs light towers (Mitchell, et al., 1973).

In Damascus Mosque (706-715), the Umayyad innovation also included the use of stone arcades surrounding the court and consisting of horseshoe arches. This is the earliest recorded appearance of this type of arches, a fact which contradicts some claims which attribute its adoption by Muslims to the influence of Visigoth Spain³ (Briggs, 1924 p.42). The first use and appearance of multifoil arches is also attributed to the Umayyad Mosque, in the minaret, then transmitted to the rest of the Muslim world before crossing over to Europe where it has been consistently used in church as well as civic buildings. The other main innovation was the introduction of the dome over the crossing, in the central nave in front of the *Mihrab*. This feature is known to have been used in Christian churches first appeared in the Umayyad Mosque and progressively became a central feature of most mosques. Moreover, according to Ibn Khaldoun (1967), Muawiya was also responsible for the introduction of the *maqsura*, a separate room near the Mihrab for his personal use, as a result of an attempt made on his life by the Kharijite.

When Al-Walid became Caliph, the Prophet's Mosque in Medina was becoming unfit to receive the large crowds of the faithful. He decided (in 707-709) to enlarge it. He erected four minarets and introduced the *Mihrab* in the centre of the *Qibla* wall. The origin of the Mihrab had many explanations which chiefly linked it to the form of the apse in Christian architecture. In Islam it became a symbol of a niche containing God's light placed in front of worshippers helping them to achieve sincerity and devotion during prayers. The other function of the Mihrab was a symbol indicating the direction of the Qibla, the Kaaba (see: Article on the Mosque).

Umayyad Mosques

The Umayyad architectural splendour is experienced in both religious and domestic buildings. At the core of their religious heritage we find the Dome of the Rock, the architectural jewel of Islam and Damascus Mosque, its master piece. According to an inscription found on the building, the Dome of the Rock was built by the Caliph Abd-el-Malik between 691-692 (**figure 1**). The Mosque forms the heart of the complex of *Al-Haram As-Sharif* and covers the rock "*Sakhra*" from where Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) ascended to heaven accompanied by Archangel Gabriel. By building the Dome of the Rock to cover the sacred "*Sakhra*", Abd-al-Malik wanted to match his rival Ibn Zubayr (who rebuilt Kaaba between 683-392) in his devotion to Islam.



Figure 1: Dome of the Rock, the Jewel of Islam (691-692)

The suggestion that the building's main objective was symbolic to celebrate the victory of Islam on other religions especially Judaism and Christianity (Grabar, 1959) should be questioned. The Mosque was introduced there since the days of the second Caliph Omar, when Muslims ruled Jerusalem. A more compatible view with the aspiration of Abdel Malik is that he wanted to glorify the location of Masjid Al-Aqsa as mentioned in the Quran.

The significance of this building can be seen in numerous levels. The geometrical pattern of both plan and elevation, and the relation between dome, arches and columns, all create a sense of harmony and unity greatly emphasised by the rich décor of polychrome marble and colourful mosaics (see forthcoming article on the Dome of the Rock). The exterior walls covered in quartered marble to the window line and above it in Turkish tiles (installed recently in 1554) add a special charm to the visual effect of colours and patterns. The drums of the dome were originally wooden and covered with glass mosaics before being replaced in the 12th century and recently in 20th century after the fire that was set by a Zionist settler. In general, the beauty of the Dome of the Rock has a world wide reputation which challenged all prejudices against Muslim architecture.

The other important mosque the Umayyads built was the Damascus Mosque (**figure 2**). Its construction story shows the great tolerance Muslims have to other faiths, especially Christianity and Judaism. After the spread of Islam in Damascus, Muslims needed to convert the neglected "temple" of John the Baptist, into a mosque. Caliph Al-Walid purchased bought this building from its Christian owners and converted it into the Great Mosque. The Mosque has a rectangular plan orientated towards the *Qibla*. On the qibla side (the southern side), three parallel aisles run from east to west and divided in the middle by a transverse nave with a dome over its middle section (square). The sanctuary opens up to a courtyard (*Sahn*) with a single *Riwaq* on each side providing shelter from climatic conditions. In decoration terms, we find high quality floral and vegetal patterns combined with some landscape ornaments covering the façade and arcades. Such décor recalls that found in the Dome of the Rock indicating the possibility of Syrian tradition to both works rather than Byzantine origins as some Western historians claimed.



Figure 2: The Great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus (706-715)

Umayyad Palaces

In domestic and social life, the Umayyad Caliphs and princes lived a rural (*Badiya*) life in palace complexes pursuing their favourite hobbies of hunting and gardening. For this purpose they built a series of fortresses protected by strong walls and containing all necessary amenities to sustain their luxurious needs. Among these complexes we refer to Qasr Amra (Jordan around 715), Qasr al-Kharanah (Jordan 711), Khirbat al-Mafjar (Jordan 743-744), and Meshatta (750 uncompleted).

In these palaces, the Umayyads showed a considerable architectural and decorative talent. In terms of design, a complex layout containing audience halls, baths, domestic apartments for both males and females, mosques, courtyards, stables and garden enclosures was developed reflecting their luxurious standard of living and their political and tribal power (Mitchel et al. (1978). The structural aspects of these palaces show an elaborate use of the vaulting system involving the dome and barrel vaults (Qasr Amra for example). In decorative terms, these palaces gathered the most exquisite forms of architectural décor extending from mosaic floors (al-Mifjar), to walls tilted with decorated tiles and stucco which consisted of geometrical and vegetal representation (Meshatta). Perhaps the most influential of these is the six lobed (pointed) rosettes and octagons which appeared in Khirbat al-Mafjar and reappeared in Meshatta. With them, the circular rose window found in the latter inspired, through crusaders, Europeans to develop the famous Gothic rose window (Otto von Simson, 1956). Khirbat al-Mifjar and Qasr Amra also represent unique instances where the depiction of human and animal were issued in the Umayyad decorative art.

Concluding Remarks

Under the Umayyads, Islam spread to various lands, generating considerable prosperity and wealth. This engendered growth of new architectural forms and buildings. In that period, the mosque developed its main structural and functional elements such as *Minaret*, *Mihrab*, *Maksurah* and *dome*. Decorative arts slowly established the foundations of what was to become the Muslim art through the use of calligraphy (*Kufic*), glass mosaics and vegetal and geometrical abstracts. After their defeat by the Abbassids in 750, the Umayyads pursued their constructive role in *Andalusia* (Spain) where they produced numerous marvels some of which we can still admire today.

Notes:

- ¹ Muslims purchased this derelict building from Christians and converted into, Great Umayyad Mosque (706-15)
- ² He sees *Sauma* to be derived from the church of John the Baptist, but *Manara* from the Pharaohs light tower.
- ³ Muslims did not reach Spain until 726, suggesting that they were the source of its Spanish adoption.

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