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II The Mosque

GENERALITIES

213 What makes a mosque a mosque? The answer is forbiddingly simple: a wall correctly orientated towards the *qibla*, namely the Black Stone within the Ka'ba in Mecca. No roof, no minimum size, no enclosing walls, no liturgical accessories are required. Indeed, it might very properly be argued that even the single wall is unnecessary. After all, the Prophet himself is recorded as saying, 'Wherever you pray, that place is a mosque (*masjid*)'. Accordingly, to this day and throughout the Islamic world, when the hour for prayer arrives, pious Muslims stop whatever they are doing, orientate themselves towards the *qibla* and then and there undertake the formal ritual of prayer. Technically, therefore, it could be argued that the term *masjid*, normally translated into English as 'mosque', does not necessarily connote a building of any kind.

In fact, of course, Muslims began to build mosques from the very early days of Islam, and as the number of these mosques multiplied, patterns of architecture began to develop. Nevertheless, it is salutary to remember the willed austerity of the arrangements for worship as defined and practised by Muhammad. In the centuries to come Muslims never entirely forgot the starkness of his example, and periodically the forces of revivalism and pietism attempted at least a partial return to the pristine simplicity of the earliest Islamic worship. The mosques erected in Saudi Arabia by the Wahhabis typify the attempt to reconcile early Islamic practice with the accumulated traditions of a millennium and more of mosque architecture. The polarities are virtually irreconcilable, but it is highly significant that such consistent attempts have been made over the centuries to bring them together.

24 The salient fact, however, is that the mosque is the Islamic building *par excellence*, and as such the key to Islamic architecture. Moreover, the medieval Muslim world, like medieval Europe, was a theocentric society, and the mosque was the natural expression of that society. To examine its functions in detail therefore affords insights into the workings of medieval Islamic culture. For historians attuned to material

culture as well as written evidence it is a primary source of the first quality.

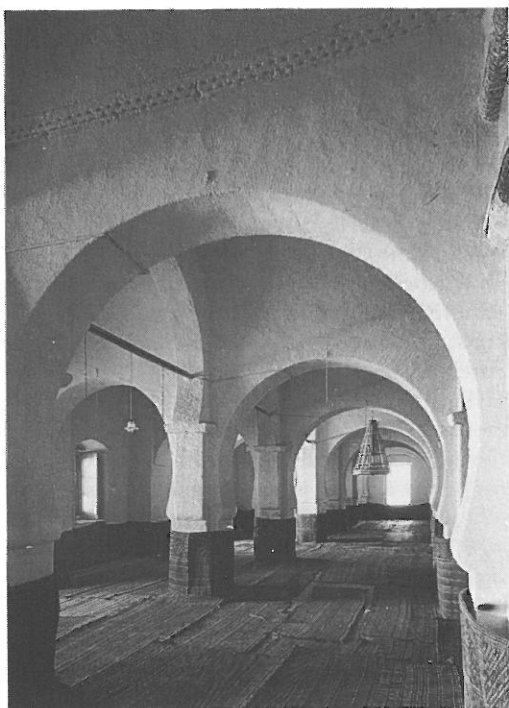
There are other and still more practical reasons for investigating the history of the mosque. This was the building type which by and large produced the finest structures in Islamic architecture; it was built to last, whereas many secular monuments tended to be richly decorated but of flimsy construction. As a result, it has survived in larger quantities than any other type of medieval building. Indeed, the early period of Islamic architecture – from c.80/700 to c.390/1000 – is documented largely by mosques. It was the mosque which embodied the first timid Arab experiments in architecture and it was in the medium of the mosque above all that Muslim builders came to grips with the pre-Islamic architectural heritage. As a result, this is the building type which most frequently reflects – just like the church in the Christian world – the impact of the many distinct local architectural traditions which together shaped Islamic architecture.

DEFINITION

Before proceeding any further, it might be as well to attempt a definition less austere than the one proposed at the beginning of this chapter. The mosque is of course the principal religious building of Islam, and paramount among its many functions is communal prayer. In its simplest and most widespread form the medieval mosque comprised a courtyard 24 bordered by arcades and adjoining a covered hall. Yet this definition, for all its deliberate inclusiveness, gives little idea of the well-nigh endless variety of forms and uses which characterised the most quintessentially Islamic building. Nor does the limited space available here permit even a reasonably detailed inventory of the significant mosque types and of the functions which they discharged. It is imperative rather to distance oneself from this wealth of detail, however alluring, the better to identify the immanent characteristics of the mosque and to appraise its unique role within Islamic culture. Accordingly this chapter will focus less

on close analysis of individual mosques than on how this genre of building expressed the perennial concerns of Islamic religious architecture. These concerns or underlying principles governed and are reflected in the choice of component parts of mosque design, and their interaction; the functions which the mosque was called upon to perform; the role of decoration; and finally all that contributes to the visual and aesthetic impact of this building type. It would pre-empt the ensuing discussion to dilate on these principles at any length at this stage. Suffice it to say that mosque architecture is at base egalitarian, iconoclastic, inward-looking and – above all – profoundly religious in its intent.

The latter aspect deserves particular emphasis because of the much-vaunted identity of the sacred and the secular in medieval Islamic society. This theory, a favourite construction of some trends in modern scholarship, is ideally as true of Islam as of Christianity. It is, however, only a theory and a glance at common practice is enough to dispose of it. To this day no one walking from the bustle of a bazaar to the serenity of a mosque can seriously doubt that Islam clearly distinguishes between the dues of Caesar and those of God. The architecture proclaims that very distinction. The change to an orientation towards Mecca, so frequently noticeable as soon as one enters the building, is conceived in the same spirit. Finally, the believer takes off his shoes to enter a mosque and that simple homely action symbolises the transition from the secular to the spiritual realm. A saying of the Prophet reported by Abu Huraira makes the same point still more sharply: 'most favoured of God in cities are their mosques and most abhorred are their markets'. In just the same way, the physical evidence contradicts another fashionable concept: that all the mosque is equally sacred and that its architecture embodies no hierarchy of importance. In mosques provided with a courtyard – and such mosques are the predominant type throughout the Islamic world – a clear visual distinction is drawn between the courtyard with its surrounding arcades and the larger covered space containing the *mihrab*. Even the Arabic language has at times singled out this area from the rest of the mosque, calling it the *musalla* or 'place of



23 Susa, Great Mosque, original sanctuary

prayer' – though this usage is by no means universal, and indeed is distractingly ambiguous, because the same term is widely used of an enclosed open space, normally outside a town, in which communal prayer is celebrated at festivals and on other special occasions. A common term for this covered area in early texts is *al-mughatta*, a term (like *riwaq*) also used of tents. Similarly, it is in this area that the principal architectural and liturgical elements of the mosque are concentrated: the main dome, the largest continuous covered space in the building, the *mihrab*, the *maqsura* and the *minbar*. These elements will be discussed in more detail later. Finally, it is here that the most lavish ornament which the building can boast is to be found. These remarks are not intended to cast aspersions on the sanctity of the mosque as a whole. Nevertheless they do imply that one part of the mosque – the covered space containing the *mihrab*, conventionally rendered into English²³ as 'sanctuary' – was accorded greater visual emphasis and status than the rest of the building.

So much for preliminaries. Impressionistic as such remarks may appear, they nevertheless help to delineate the background against which the evolution of the mosque over a millennium and more must be seen. Any considered analysis of this building type must, of course, go further than this. Certain crucial aspects of mosque architecture have a particular claim to extended discussion and this chapter will lay special emphasis on them. They are the origins of the mosque; its constituent parts, with their associated liturgical significance; its various functions; and its standard characteristics. Only when these matters have been sufficiently clarified will it be possible to move from the general to the particular and to flesh out the resultant rather stark generalisations with specific detail. The other section of this chapter will therefore be devoted to a discussion of the various types of mosque, illustrated by some of the major examples of the genre, and to the rôle played by the decoration of these buildings.

ORIGINS OF THE MOSQUE

The matter of origins is surprisingly straightforward. Islamic tradition champions the decisive impact of a single building on the evolution of the mosque: the house of the Prophet. Nor is this emphasis misplaced. The briefest acquaintance with Muslim liturgy is enough to explain why the places of worship employed by the other faiths of the time were fundamentally unsuitable for the needs of Islam. It is true that many churches, some fire temples, and on occasion even portions of classical, Hindu or Jain temples, were adapted to serve as mosques. But this was only a matter of expedience, and was never a long-term, deliberate policy. It did, however, have its uses; indeed, several motives could account for these conversions. In newly Islamised territory the pressing need for a place of worship could not always be met as quickly as might be wished. The advantages of using an already existing monument – convenience, cheapness, suitable location, the saving of time and effort and of course the less easily definable proselytising, propaganda and symbolic elements – outweighed the initial disadvantage of using an architectural form not designed to serve as a mosque. Nevertheless, these disadvantages made themselves felt in short order, and

already within the first decade of the Islamic conquests 'custom-built' mosques – if that is not too grand a term for such extremely simple structures – were being erected.

The informality of the earliest arrangements for communal worship in Islam irresistibly brings to mind the comparable situation among the early Christians. There, the first places where the nascent community foregathered for worship were the homes of the faithful, and Christ's words 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there shall I be among them' highlight the lack of outward forms, including architectural forms, in the early Church. The fact that much of Christ's teaching took place in synagogues is of a piece with this simplicity. Much later, when custom-built churches began to be erected in quantity, the basilicas and mausolea of the late antique world provided the models. It was only gradually that the forms of these pagan buildings were altered and refined so that they could discharge their new religious functions more effectively. Even then, there was no question of the word 'church' connoting exclusively one kind of building.

These reflections may help to clarify the early history of the mosque. In several crucial respects, however, the historical circumstances of the rise of Islam were totally different from those of early Christianity. Islam was spread by the sword, at great speed and over vast distances – from Spain to the borders of China. The consequences for the faith and for Islamic society are not relevant here, but the consequences for Islamic architecture could not be more crucial. Developments which in the Christian world proceeded in leisurely fashion over several hundred years were, in the world of Islam, telescoped into little more than half a century. Christianity began, grew and consolidated itself in the Mediterranean world, in the context of a high degree of political, cultural and even linguistic homogeneity. By contrast, the array of political, cultural, ethnic and linguistic entities which succumbed to Islam in such rapid succession is nothing short of bewildering. The range of architectural forms which the Muslims encountered was correspondingly wide. Christian architects had no such input of alien forms to absorb. Not only did the Muslims have to come to terms with the protean expres-

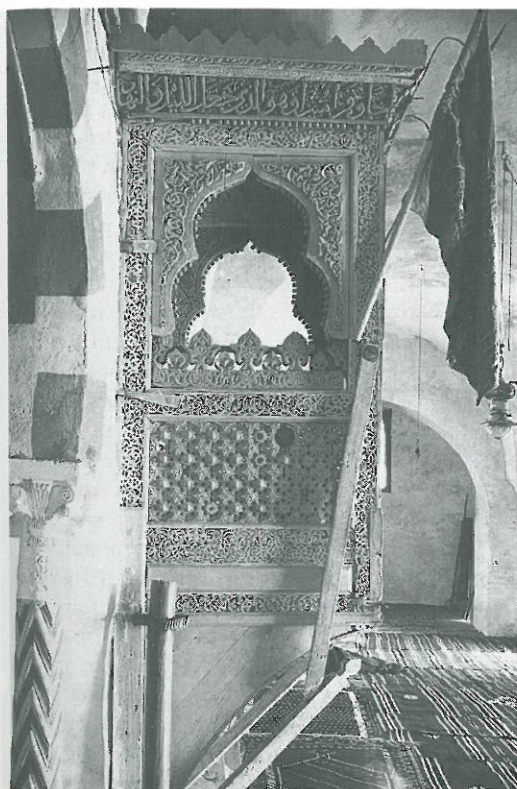
sions of Christian religious architecture which they encountered; Zoroastrian, Jewish, Hindu, Jain and Buddhist religious buildings also challenged them. Finally, the military nature of the Islamic expansion requires emphasis. As the conquests progressed, the major body of Muslims in each new territory was initially the army itself. The need for some serviceable gathering place for these thousands of Muslims was acute, and a simple enclosure best fitted that need. The means chosen to enclose the desired space were not necessarily monumental: a line of scattered ashes, a reed fence, a shallow ditch and the like. In this informal way there arose the ancestors of the great congregational mosques of later times. As early as the year 21/642, after the conquest of Alexandria, a mosque was laid out in a garden where the commander-in-chief, 'Amr b. al-'As, had set up his standard—and he himself lived right next door. The same arrangement was followed at Mosul in northern Iraq. In some carefully selected centres these enclosures seem to have taken on a more permanent form, even within the first century of Islam. Once again, military motives provided the initial

stimulus for this development. The Muslim expansion could not be directed entirely from Mecca and Medina, or even from Damascus, and therefore intermediate headquarters were set up near the major fronts. Thus the invasion of eastern North Africa was spearheaded from Fustat (near modern Cairo), and that of western North Africa and Spain from Qairawan in Tunisia. Similarly, the campaigns against the northern and southern areas of the Iranian world were prosecuted from headquarters in Kufa and Basra respectively. Such settlements became virtual garrison cities which saw the regular coming and going of thousands of troops. The Muslim authorities soon came to feel the desirability of separating such military camps from the symbiotic town which grew up beside each of them, and a separate mosque was an effective symbol of that segregation. With ample free space on which to build, and with the need to accommodate thousands of worshippers, it is no wonder that these early mosques should have been so huge.

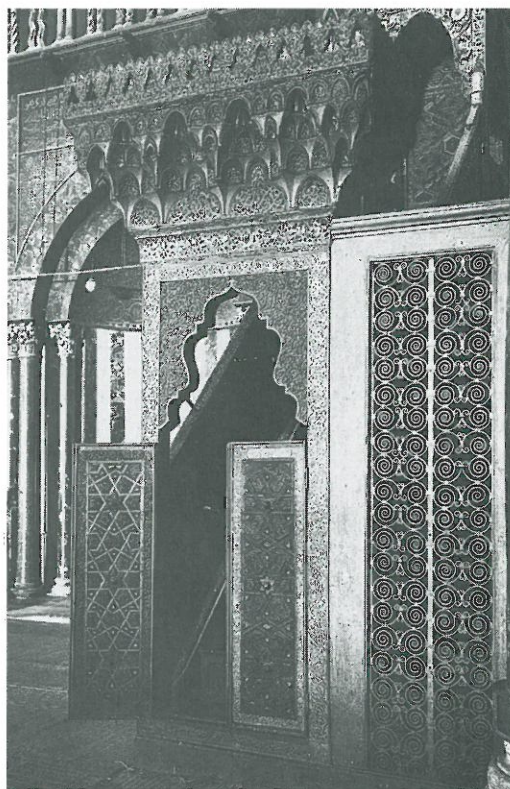
Although no mosque from these early decades survives in anything like its original



24 Damghan, Tari Khana mosque, *mihrab* and *minbar*

25 Hama, Great Mosque, *minbar* of Nur al-Din

state, it is hard to exaggerate the influence of these buildings on the subsequent development of the mosque. As in so much of Islamic religion and culture, the formative experiences in mosque architecture were those of the first century. These huge early mosques established the principle that the Islamic religious building *par excellence* should be fundamentally inclusive rather than exclusive in character. For that reason its single defining feature was an enclosed and orientated space. What was built within the enclosed space differed from one mosque to the next; the key point was that the outer wall of the mosque clearly demarcated holy ground – *haram* – from the secular world outside. Even so, it is worth remembering that the enclosing walls themselves are not liturgically necessary. Pared down to its essentials, the mosque is, in short, not a building at all, but simply a space set aside for prayer. It follows that the entire history of the mosque as an architectural form takes place

26 Jerusalem, Aqsa mosque, *minbar*, entrance

within the secular domain. This may sound an extreme statement, and perhaps an offensive one too. Yet until the absolute simplicity of the Muslim requirements for communal prayer are clearly understood, the subsequent complexity of mosque architecture is liable to be misinterpreted as a response to liturgical needs. Instead, that complexity resulted principally from the adoption of non-Islamic features and their integration into the new context created by the mosque. This point deserves a little further investigation.

Islam was able to draw on a much more varied range of models for religious buildings than was Christianity, which says much for the simplicity of Islamic communal worship and its refusal to be tied down to a narrow range of architectural expression. Its austere simple liturgy meant that Islam could appropriate almost any kind of building for worship. Even so, there was – at least as far as the 7th-century

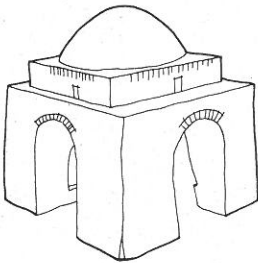
Arabs were concerned – an optimum design for mosques, and it is revealing that its roots should be in domestic rather than public architecture. This is not to say that the mosque is simply the Arab house writ large, for both Christian and Zoroastrian places of worship left their mark upon its design, as did the aulic architecture of late antiquity. These external influences took time to make an impact on mosque architecture, and even at their strongest they were only rarely the determining factor. Mature Ottoman mosques, which cannot be understood without reference to Byzantine churches of the 6th century, notably Haghia Sophia, are the exception that proves the rule. Muslim architects happily plundered, both literally and metaphorically, the religious architecture which they encountered in the Mediterranean, Arabian, Iranian and – nearly six centuries later – Indian worlds. Yet the materials and ideas which they quarried from these buildings were not enough to make the mosque an Islamised church, fire sanctuary or temple. The places of worship used by the adherents of religions which Islam supplanted were basically ill-suited to Muslim needs. Churches emphasised depth rather than breadth, if they were of basilical form, and centrality if they were a variation of the martyrium type. The sanctuaries of fire worship in the Iranian empire were built for ceremonies in-

architects, who looked elsewhere for inspiration.

LITURGY

The fact of the matter is that the Muslim liturgy does not demand any man-made structure for its celebration. When the early Muslims gathered for worship on their holy day – a Friday, not a Sunday – they performed ritual prayer together and listened as the *imam* ('prayer leader' is a somewhat inadequate translation) delivered the *khutba* – part sermon, part bidding prayer, but often with political content too. The various prescribed movements of prayer, involving as they did outstretched arms, kneeling and prostration, meant that each worshipper ideally required a minimum space of 1 × 2 metres. Moreover, prayer was communal. It was thus clearly desirable that its constituent movements should be synchronised. The alternative would be visually chaotic and might even suggest spiritual discord. The functions of the *imam* included the leading of communal prayer, and to this end it was important that he should be as widely visible as could be. Thus there developed the custom of disposing the worshippers in long lines parallel to the *qibla*. In this way it was possible for hundreds, not scores, of people to follow the movements of the *imam*. By contrast, the disposition of worshippers within most Christian churches is in lines perpendicular to the altar. The consequent loss of visibility is only partially compensated for by the raising of the altar. These remarks are not intended to suggest that the *imam* was visible in a large mosque to a congregation of, say, several thousand. But the grouping of worshippers in comparatively few long and well-spaced lines, rather than in many short lines close together, did ensure the easy intervisibility of worshippers and thus facilitated precise timing in the movements prescribed for prayer. A chance remark of Ibn Hauqal *à propos* the Great Mosque of Palermo casts some light on the organisation of the communal prayer: 'I estimated the congregation, when it was full, at over 7,000 persons. Not more than 36 rows stand in prayer, with not more than 200 men in each row'.

This lateral grouping of worshippers, which might fairly be termed a liturgical convenience, but was in no sense a doctrinal imperative,



2.226 Naisar, fire temple

volving a few priests, not large congregations – indeed, the congregation foregathered in the open air – while the temples of Arabia and India also put no premium on housing great numbers of worshippers within a covered hall, let alone ensuring easy visibility between them. For these practical reasons the cultic centres of other religions were of limited value to early Muslim

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27 Jerusalem, Aqsa mosque, minbar, east side

proved to be the single vital factor in the layout of future mosques. At a stroke it forbade the simple transformation into Friday mosques of pre-Islamic places of worship. It forced Muslim architects desirous of making such transformations to rearrange the constituent elements of the sequestered building – lateral thinking, indeed. Such conversions of existing structures, though obviously convenient in the short term, were no adequate solution to the needs of a new, powerful and rapidly growing religious community with its own distinctive forms of worship. Thus the earliest custom-built mosques were erected at the very same time that existing non-Muslim buildings were being converted into mosques, and in them the lateral emphasis is already well-marked. From the very beginning Islamic architects rejected the basilica, and with it the standard Christian church of Western type, as a suitable source of inspiration for the mosque. Nevertheless, the idea of a central nave focused on an altar was eventually incorporated, suitably modified, into numerous mosques, and occasionally – as in the

28 Great Mosque of Damascus – an entire basilical form, once shorn of its telltale Christian axiality, could be integrated into a mosque. Similarly, it seems unlikely – although here the crucial archaeological evidence is still missing – that the

2.225-2.226

Zoroastrian fire temple, a domed square

chamber with four axial openings, was ever accepted as a suitable model for a congregational mosque built from scratch and intended to consist of no other structures. Yet as in the case of the basilica, this alien form – found also in Sasanian palaces – could lend itself very adequately to mosque architecture. Sometimes, it seems, the mere addition of a courtyard was sufficient modification. The domed chamber proved to be a most striking method of singling out the sanctuary of a mosque, or even a particular area of the sanctuary. As with the basilica, it was not a necessary element in the congregational mosque but rather an optional extra.

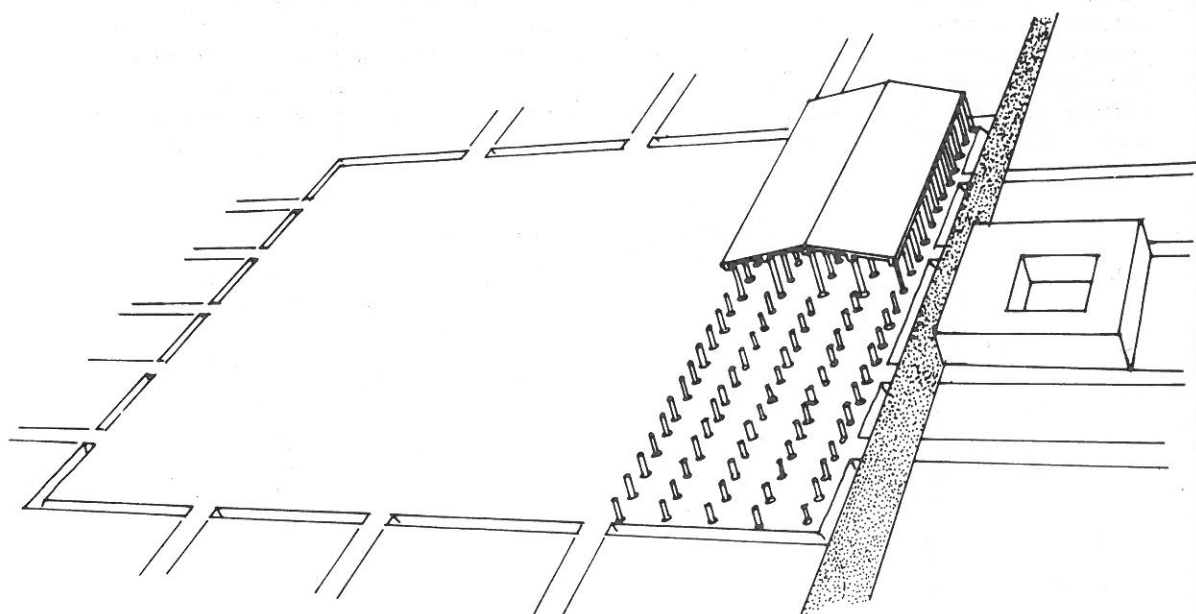
7.46, 7.49

2.12

In this respect the earliest large mosques, which have been convincingly analysed on the basis of the copious literary sources, offer telling evidence. At Basra, Kufa and Fustat the story is the same: the mosque comprises simply a large rectilinear enclosure of which one complete side, varying in scale from a quarter to a half of the entire enclosure, is taken up by a covered area, namely the sanctuary – a space thus rendered architecturally distinct from the rest of the mosque.

2.45, 2.48

The decision to include a covered area in the mosque, and moreover to position it next to the *qibla* and therefore in the place of honour, was fraught with consequences for subsequent



2.48 Kufa, Great Mosque

mosque architecture. Why was this feature included? It is clear from the discussion so far that there was no need for it from the point of view of doctrine or liturgy. It seems justified to invoke such other factors as custom, precedent and practicality – and this inevitably leads to the first mosque of all, Muhammad's house in Medina.

MUHAMMAD'S HOUSE

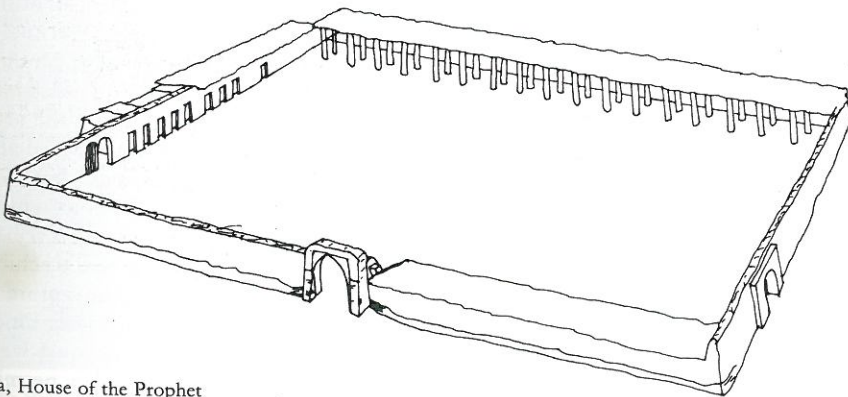
2.52-2.54 The first point to notice about this building, now entirely vanished but described in exhaustive detail in the Arabic sources, is that it was in Medina, and not in Mecca where Muhammad spent most of his life. It was only in 622, ten years before his death, that the hostility of the Meccans to his religious teaching caused him to move for safety to Medina. This emigration (*hijra*) marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. In that same year he began to build a house for himself and his family. But he built that house not as a despised and persecuted religious outcast, which was how he was generally regarded in Mecca, but as the respected leader of a new and dynamic religious community. What could be more natural than that his new house should be designed at least in part to serve this community as well as his own family?

A second striking feature of the house is its very substantial size. It was a largely open square of some fifty-six metres per side. These dimensions speak for themselves. They were probably exceptional for that time and place. Nor did Muhammad keep the kind of state which called for a vast establishment; the *hadiths* on this subject sufficiently emphasise the sim-

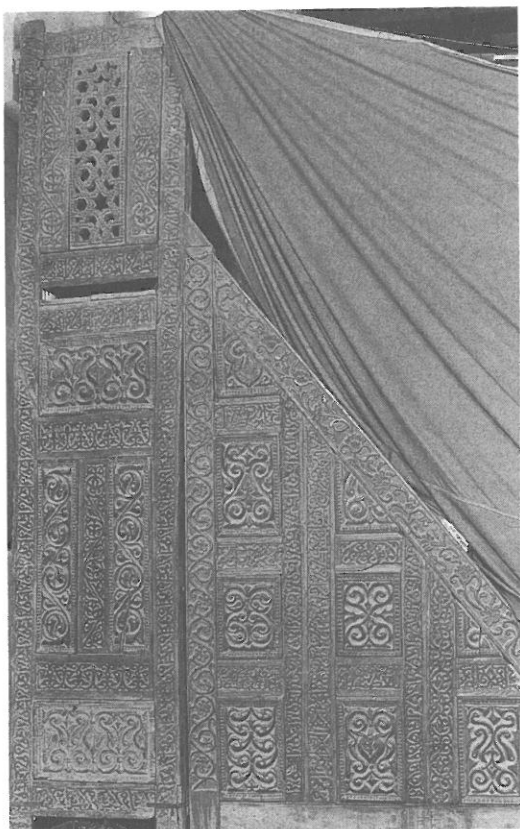
plicity, indeed austerity, of his daily life. A house on this scale was far bigger, in short, than was required for a household as modest as that of the Prophet. Indeed, its domestic accommodation comprised no more than nine small rooms built side by side on the outer side of the east wall.

This last detail is very telling, and highlights the third notable characteristic of the house, namely that it is a house only incidentally. To judge by later domestic architecture, the obvious location for rooms intended to be lived in would have been inside, not outside, the enclosure. Thus the paradox emerges of a building which, though ostensibly intended to function as a house, is apparently designed with quite other ends in view. In other words, the evidence suggests that Muhammad's 'house' was intended from the first to serve as the focal point of the new Islamic community. That definition also includes its role as a mosque. It did not become the first mosque as it were by accident. Consequently the traditional interpretation which emphasises the origin of the mosque in domestic architecture is erroneous. The mosque was custom-built from the very beginning, though it is important to remember that the precise meaning of 'mosque' in the 620s is not readily definable today. The inclusive rather than exclusive nature of the concept at this early date requires emphasis.

These remarks place Muhammad's 'house' in a new light. They indicate that the random element in the building was its domestic rather than its religious appurtenances. For this reason, purely domestic accommodation was banished outside the building. By the same token every-



2.54 Medina, House of the Prophet



28 Abyana, Friday Mosque, *minbar*

thing within the building was deliberately included because it had a function to fulfil in this primitive mosque. The evidential value of Muhammad's 'house' can scarcely be exaggerated – for here, in the very lifetime of the Prophet, were laid down the norms for the central religious building type of the new community.

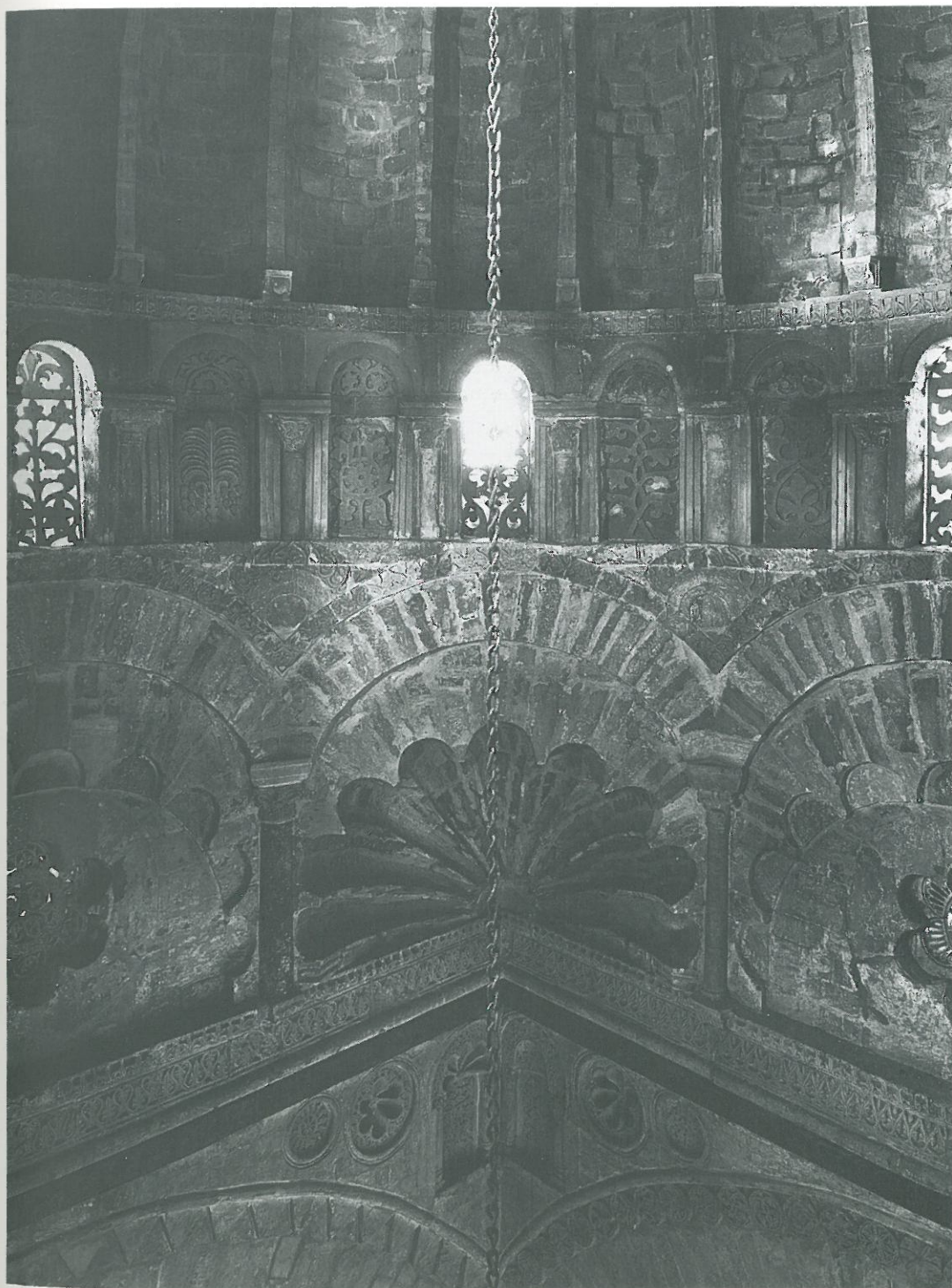
The major features of the building may quickly be summarised. It was essentially a large and almost empty enclosed space. The enclosing walls were plain. Along the inner wall facing the *qibla* was the *zulla*, or shaded place, a double row of palm trunks carrying a roof of palm leaves plastered with mud. This feature was not part of the original design but was added within a year because some of the Companions (*sahaba*) of the Prophet had complained of the discomfort which the sun had caused them during prayer. When, very soon afterwards, a divine revelation caused Muhammad to change the *qibla* from

Jerusalem to the Ka'ba, the *zulla* was pulled down and re-erected alongside the new *qibla*. It was large enough to accommodate at least a hundred people. Opposite the *zulla* was another covered area, half as deep and less than half as long, which was used by the most poverty-stricken followers of the Prophet. The courtyard contained no other structures, and the three gates which gave access to it were little more than openings in the wall.

Before the implications of this layout are assessed, it is necessary to confront the arguments marshalled by Creswell and others to the effect that this building was not intended to be a mosque. The burden of these arguments is that no special sanctity attached to the building in the Prophet's lifetime and that it was indeed used like, and exclusively referred to as, an ordinary house (*dar*). Moreover, on important occasions Muhammad prayed at the *musalla* outside Medina. There is no need to try to discredit these statements, but they fail to invalidate the assertion that the building was primarily intended as the focus of the new community and only secondarily intended as Muhammad's house. The latter assertion, moreover, coincides with the Islamic tradition itself. Above all, there is no inherent contradiction between those who interpret the building as a mosque and those who see it as Muhammad's house. Clearly it served both purposes, and it was fully in the spirit of the earliest Islamic religious practice that it should.

For a full understanding of the mosque in the crucial early stages of its development it is necessary to remember its role as a community centre. It is that role which explains the apparently contradictory reports about how Muhammad's house was used. Both the spiritual and the secular life were pursued there simultaneously. This was the formative period of Islamic society, and so it is not surprising that the architecture which that society generated should also be in a state of flux. In later centuries, the development of specifically Islamic institutions removed from the mosque the functions which it had earlier, if only sporadically, performed: teaching, burial, the care of the sick, and many more. Some of these functions lingered for a long time. Thus in the 9th and 10th centuries mosques were usually open day and night, and the law permitted their

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29 Qairawan, Great Mosque, interior of dome over *mihrab*

use to shelter travellers, penitents and the homeless. As the mosque grew more specialised in its functions, so it naturally developed its own specialised architecture. But in the first century of Islam all this lay in the future. The very informality of early Muslim practice militates against any dogmatic or exclusive interpretation of the mosque in the early decades of Islam. It is bad practice to apply concepts of the mosque derived from later buildings to the earliest structures of this kind, which were built at a time when the very idea of a mosque was not yet precisely defined. Thus the evidence adduced by Caetani as to spitting, sleeping, lounging, arguing, dancing and convalescing in the Prophet's house merely underlines the varied role which this building played in the early Muslim community. That same building was used for prayer on a regular basis by Muhammad and his family, by the Companions of the Prophet and by the impoverished 'People of the *suffa*'. The speedy demolition and re-erection of the *zulla* at the time of the change in *qibla* is entirely consonant with the regular use of the building for worship, and would be hard to explain otherwise.

The essentially multi-purpose nature of Muhammad's house helps to explain both its large size and its architectural design. Had Muhammad wished to live the modest and retired life of a private citizen, it seems unlikely that he would have built his *dar* in the form that he did. His mission of course dictated the public nature of his life-style and his house was a correspondingly public building. The design amply proved its worth during Muhammad's own lifetime and, so long as the mosque remained not only a place of worship but also the focal point of the Muslim community, there was no need for any fundamental reshaping of a plan already hallowed by the Prophet's use of it.

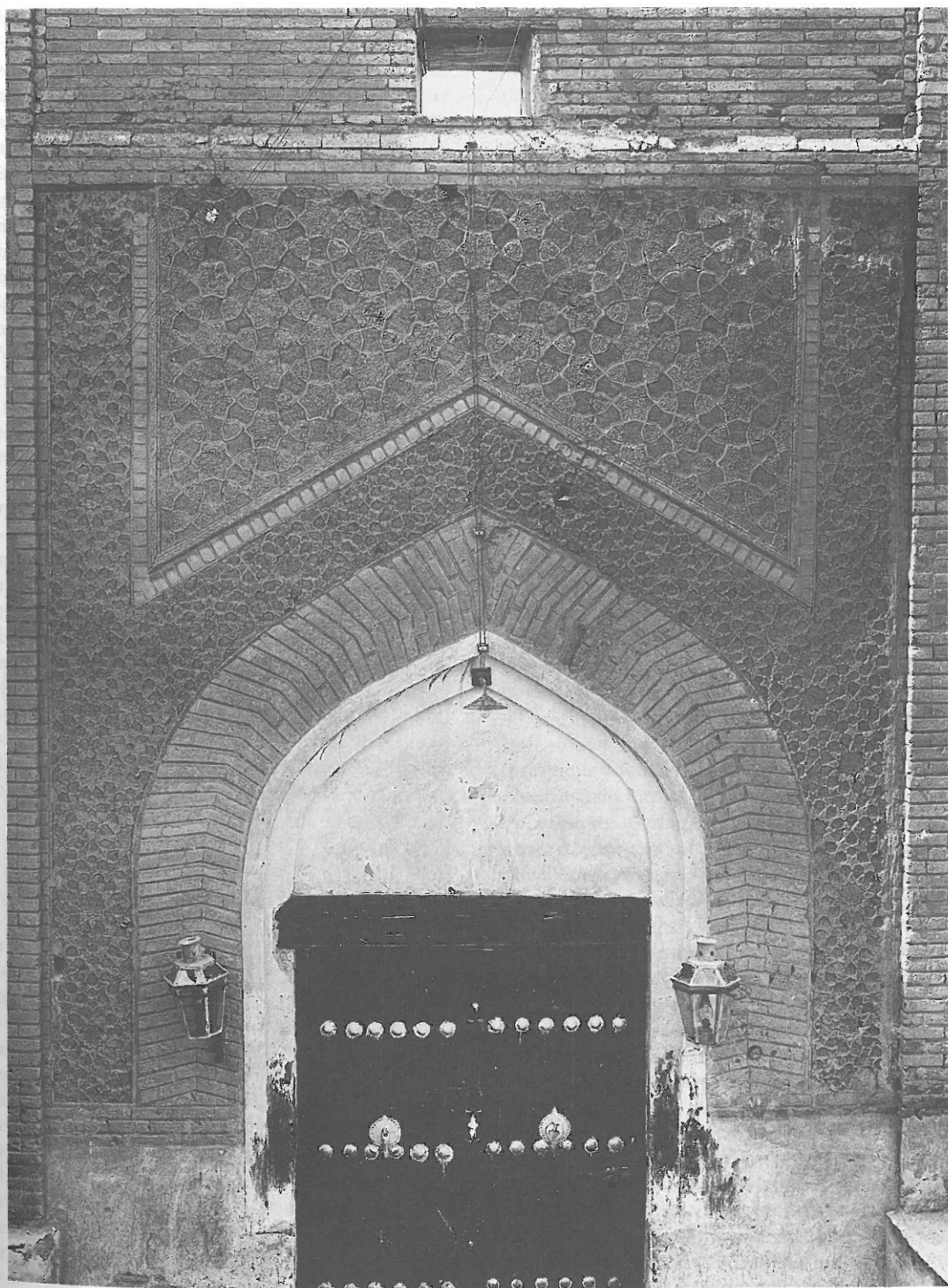
From the standpoint of design perhaps the most significant feature of Muhammad's house was the large empty courtyard. This took up some 75% of the available space even after the final expansion of the building, which involved the provision, outside the courtyard, of a total of nine dwellings for Muhammad's family. In fact, in the original design the 'house' consisted almost entirely of a vast empty courtyard. The austerity of this layout left its mark on subse-

quent mosques, while its flexibility needs no further emphasis.

The trend in subsequent centuries was towards an increasing specialisation of the mosque. The gradual shedding of many of its earlier functions opened the way for quite radical changes in design, and it became the practice to meet a specific function not directly connected to worship by adding an appropriate custom-built element to the nuclear design. This practice explains why so many later mosques seem encumbered by the multiple appendages 2269 clustered around them.

MASJID AND JAMI^c

The foregoing remarks are intended not so much to fuel the long-standing controversy about the role of the Prophet's house as to shed some light on the prehistory of the mosque and to explain the reasons behind that simplicity which has remained its abiding characteristic. The vast courtyard sufficed to proclaim the essentially public nature of the building. It quickly became the nerve centre of the burgeoning Muslim community. Here worship was conducted, public announcements made, ambassadors lodged, meetings held, parades reviewed, cases tried, the treasury housed and councils of war convened. Like the religion of which it quickly became a potent symbol, then, it encompassed both the spiritual and the secular domain. Later mosques in theory maintained this dual allegiance, and the lack of formal urban institutions in the Muslim world, with a corresponding lack of certain types of formal public building such as town halls or law courts, put a premium on this double role. Thus by a natural process it became the community centre of the new faith. Larger mosques in particular continued throughout the medieval period to offer a more or less wide range of facilities unconnected with worship. Smaller mosques on the whole did not. This functional distinction reflects a difference in status and purpose which became established within a century of the Prophet's death, and was formalised by the adoption of two quite separate terms both meaning mosque: *masjid* and *jami*^c. *Masjid*, derived from the root *sajada*, 'to prostrate oneself', is used in the Qur'an itself, though in rather a broad sense, to denote a place of worship. Its meaning was quickly refined,



30 Kufa, Great Mosque, portal

however, to indicate more specifically a mosque for daily private prayer. The simplest architecture, right down to a single unadorned room, sufficed for such oratories, though it was not rare for a splendidly embellished *masjid* to be erected at the behest of some wealthy patron. No Muslim community was without a *masjid*, even if it was no more than a small space set aside in some larger building. In towns it was common practice for each individual quarter to have its own *masjid*, and yet other *masjids* were built specifically for members of a certain tribe, sect, profession or other exclusively defined community. Finally, the growing popularity of joint foundations from the 10th century onwards meant that *masjids* were built in association with a wide range of buildings whose prime emphasis was secular, such as caravansarais, mausolea, and palaces, as well as buildings with an overt religious significance, such as *ribats* – fortified structures which housed warriors for the faith – and *madrasas* or theological colleges. This association of the *masjid* with secondary places of worship ensured that the physical form of the *masjid* became more and more varied.

The *jami'* was an altogether more ambitious kind of building, and this was entirely in keeping with its much grander function. The religious obligation imposed on every adult male and free Muslim to meet for communal worship every Friday for the public service or *salat* created a need for a building conceived on a much larger scale than the *masjid*. The very word *jami'*, which derives from the Arabic root meaning 'to assemble', recalls and perpetuates this crucial function of the building. It had to accommodate thousands instead of scores or a couple of hundred. It had in addition a public role, with undertones of symbol and propaganda denied to the *masjid*. It was in some sense a showpiece for the faith and often for the person, dynasty or area most closely associated with it. Not surprisingly, then, the crucial experiments in the evolution of the mosque, as well as the finest realisations of that type, have been reserved for the *jami'*. The Western term 'cathedral mosque', though obviously a solecism, is thus an appropriate transference of ideas. The building of a *jami'* was no more to be undertaken lightly than was that of a cathedral – indeed, until the 10th century the express

approval of the caliph himself was required before a *jami'* could be erected, and for centuries normally only one such building per city was permitted. This had much to do with the fact that possession of a Friday Mosque conferred upon a settlement the status of a town: 'How the citizens of Baikand tried and tried', notes al-Muqaddasi *à propos* this village in Central Asia, 'until they were allowed to put up a *minbar*'. The Hanafi *madhhab* allowed the Friday *salat* to be performed only in large towns, while the Shafi'ites allowed the Friday *salat* in only one mosque per town. Hence the disapproval which met al-Hajjaj, the Umayyad governor of Iraq, when he built a *jami'* for Wasit, his capital, even though the town²⁴¹ already had one on the other side of the river. Gradually however, the population pressure in the major cities forced a relaxation of this rule.

Despite the clear functional distinction between *masjid* and *jami'*, there was not necessarily any corresponding distinction between the two building types so far as their basic layout was concerned. The generalisations ventured at the beginning of this chapter therefore hold good for both these genres of mosque. True, the *jami'* normally had an extra dimension not only literally, by virtue of sheer size, but also metaphorically through its extra degree of embellishment. Yet often *masjids* were built which yielded nothing in decorative splendour to the finest *jami'*s of the same style.

INNOVATIONS

Certain types of *jami'*, especially in the early centuries of Islam, did develop certain distinctive features not encountered in *masjids*, though it must be emphasised that these features represent only minor modifications to the basic schema of open courtyard and covered sanctuary common to both *masjid* and *jami'*. Their introduction is of key importance to the history of the mosque, however, for it heralds an influx of foreign ideas, techniques and materials which decisively transformed the primitive Arabian simplicity of the mosque. Henceforward mosque architecture evolved against a backcloth of classical, Byzantine and Iranian influences. As a result, from the later Umayyad period onwards the physical form of the mosque was unmistakably rooted, at least in part, in the millennial

traditions of the Near East and the Mediterranean world. The *masjid* in its original form was well able to do without these addenda, but there is no doubt that their incorporation into mosque design substantially enriched the whole subsequent development of the genre.

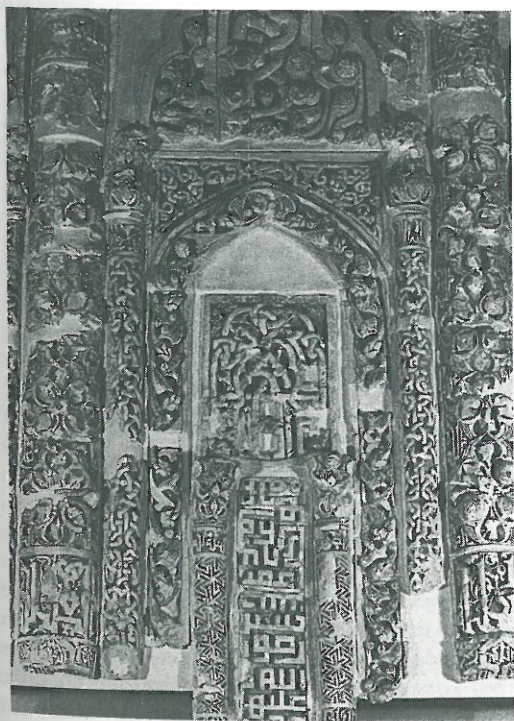
These new features were five in number: the *mihrab* or prayer niche, the *minbar* or pulpit, the *maqsura* or royal box, the raised gabled transept, and the dome over the *mihrab* bay. Not all of them were to remain of equal importance, nor indeed were all five often to be encountered in one and the same building. In the context of the present general discussion it is less their individual evolution than the motive behind their introduction which is relevant. Their origins are unmistakably classical, filtered and in some measure distorted though they are through the medium of Byzantine art. This latter connection is significantly both religious and secular, whereas in classical art proper it was the secular milieu in which these features were most at home. Their final incarnation in a Muslim religious building is therefore simply the logical

fulfilment of a process begun many centuries before. The readiness with which Islam adopted these five features, and the natural way in which they acquired a liturgical *raison d'être*, speaks volumes for the powers of assimilation possessed by the new religion.

The choice of these particular alien features is interesting on quite other grounds too. All of them have a close connection with palace architecture and court ceremonial, an element which was overlaid by an ecclesiastical veneer in the Byzantine period but still retained its original potency. The evocative power of these architectural symbols was thus virtually undimmed when Islam adopted them, as a brief analysis of each will reveal.

The mihrab

The *mihrab* is perhaps the clearest case of all. The deeply recessed arcuated niche could hold a cult statue in a Graeco-Roman temple or the emperor in person in a late antique palace. Writ large, as an apse, it contained the altar of a Christian church; correspondingly reduced in size, it did duty as a *mihrab*, or niche indicating the direction of prayer – though even in the context of a mosque some vestigial memory of its original function lingers, in that at the Friday *salat* the *imam* stands within the *mihrab* to lead the worshippers. The fact that it was part of the caliph's duties to act as *imam* vividly illustrates the capacity of the new faith to reconcile in a new synthesis the hitherto conflicting demands of church and state. The innate interchangeability of this feature is perhaps most revealingly illustrated in the late Umayyad palace of Mshatta. The triconch form of the throne room which terminates the main processional axis finds its closest counterparts in a 6th-century cathedral and bishop's palace in Bosra, in southern Syria. The architectural form is the same in all three cases, even though the great central niche is put to different uses in each – to hold the altar, a bishop's and a caliph's throne respectively. In due course the same form entered the vocabulary of mosque design, with a *mihrab* set within the central niche. Lest it be thought that the *mihrab* was an absolute requirement of any functioning mosque, it should be remembered that the earliest example dates from as late as 86/705, when the rebuilt Mosque of the



31 Mosul, Nuri mosque, *mihrab* façade

2.65-2.66

Prophet at Medina was furnished with one, perhaps to commemorate the place where Muhammad himself had led prayers. There is no question of the earlier mosques which lacked *mihrahs* being regarded as somehow deficient for that reason. In a properly orientated mosque the entire wall which faces the Black Stone in Mecca – the so-called *qibla* wall – serves as a directional indicator. It thereby makes the *mihrab* superfluous. Thus it was no liturgical necessity which called the *mihrab* into being. The evidence suggests rather that a growing desire to secularise the mosque, or at any rate to bring it more into line with the highly developed architecture of the ancient Near East and of the classical and Byzantine world, was the decisive factor. Once 'invented', the *mihrab* was so obviously a signal success as a symbol and as the cynosure of worship that its future was assured. Accordingly, it soon became the focus for elaborate decoration in mosaic, marble and other costly materials. Pious Muslims regarded all this splendour with mixed feelings. The 'just' Caliph 'Umar II wanted to remove the gold mosaic from the *mihrab* of the Damascus mosque because it distracted the mind from prayer. But then the head of a Byzantine embassy visited it and praised it, saying 'whoever built this is a great king'; so 'Umar said 'Let it be left alone, since it annoys the enemy'. The various genres of *mihrab* which were ultimately developed – flat, concave, or recessed so as to form a separate chamber – are so varied as to demand a study in themselves, and therefore fall beyond the remit of this account. So too does its formal and symbolic relationship to the portal.

The minbar

The *minbar* never attained the well-nigh universal popularity of the *mihrab* in Islamic architecture. To begin with, its function is much more specifically concentrated on the Friday *salat*, and thus on the *jami'*, whereas the *mihrab* quickly became an essential component of even the humblest *masjid*, and is frequently to be found also in *madrasas*, mausolea, caravansarais and other buildings. An integral part of the Friday service was the *khutba*, part bidding prayer, part sermon and part formal address. This element of the service had a strong political flavour. Indeed, a ruler's claim to legitimacy depended,

inter alia, on the formal mention of his name in the *khutba*. Like the diptych in Byzantium, the *khutba* thus became an instrument for affirming allegiance. Clearly it was important for the *khatib* who pronounced the *khutba* to be easily visible and audible; hence the development of the *minbar*, which was customarily placed immediately to the right of the *mihrab*, though in Umayyad times its position was within the *mihrab* itself. The obvious analogy to it in Christian practice is of course the pulpit, and in fact the closest known prototype to the *minbar* is the *ambo*, a word used to describe the lectern and pulpit in early medieval churches as well as the bishop's throne in Byzantine ones. Coptic churches in particular had *ambos* with the same striking simplicity of form found in *minbars*: a primitively stepped right-angled triangle set against a wall. No *minbars* securely datable before the early 9th century have survived, however, so that the precise relationship between the Muslim form and its presumed Christian prototype is hard to determine.

This problem is compounded by the existence of alternative hypotheses on the origin of the *minbar*. One of these holds that the later *minbar* is simply a monumental version of the raised chair from which Muhammad was wont to²⁶ address his followers; but no trace of this has survived. The other theory associates the *minbar* with the raised throne from which the Sasanian commander-in-chief reviewed the Persian army. Here again, the lack of physical evidence scotches any extended discussion. The irritating gap of two centuries and more between pre-Islamic Christian *ambos* and the earliest precisely datable *minbar* – generally held to be the teakwood specimen in the Great Mosque at Qairawan – may not be quite the obstacle it³⁴ seems. A comparison of the example at Qairawan with the *ambo* of a typical Coptic monastery like that of Apa Jeremias at Saqqara reveals sufficient basic similarity of form to justify the analogy. The built-in *minbar* in the Tari Khana mosque at Damghan, perhaps as early as the 8th century and scarcely likely to be²⁴ any later than the year 900, provides an even closer parallel to the Coptic *ambo* and is moreover of mud brick rather than wood. Since mud brick is a traditional Iranian substitute for stone, the stepped triangular form used at



32 Jerusalem, Aqsa mosque, main arch with Fatimid mosaics

Damghan can most conveniently be interpreted as a translation of the Coptic stone *ambo* into the most closely related material available. Perhaps the simple stone, brick or mud *minbar* (still known today, for example in Libya) co-existed with a more elaborately developed version

executed in wood. The latter type was sometimes wheeled, and could therefore be brought out into the courtyard when a specially large congregation had foregathered. The link with princely life was already established in the early Umayyad period, for it is recorded that the

caliph Mu'awiya I took his *minbar* with him on his travels. It is tempting to assume that it was a *minbar* of this type which Muhammad himself had used. Certainly the *minbar* served in early Islamic times as a kind of throne from which the ruler could address his subjects or receive their allegiance, often in the form of an oath (*bay'a*). In such situations the mosque functioned essentially in a political way as an appendage to the palace.

The example at Qairawan is typical of the subsequent development of the whole genre, though of course minor modifications and improvements were introduced over the centuries.

²⁵ Thus in order to boost the acoustic properties required by the nature of the *minbar*, a canopy, often polyhedral in shape, capped the upper platform or landing, performing very much the same function as the tester in European pulpits.

²⁶ A hinged gate often gave access to the steps, again somewhat in European fashion though there is no need to postulate any direct influence in either direction. Supplementary *minbars* – and for that matter supplementary *mibrabs* – were sometimes placed elsewhere in a *jami'*, for example in the courtyard, or might be carved out of rock in an open-air mosque or in an '*idgah*, otherwise known as *musalla* – both terms usually denoting a mosque for extraordinary intercessory prayer at the time of the two great '*ids* (festivals) or in times of drought, famine and the

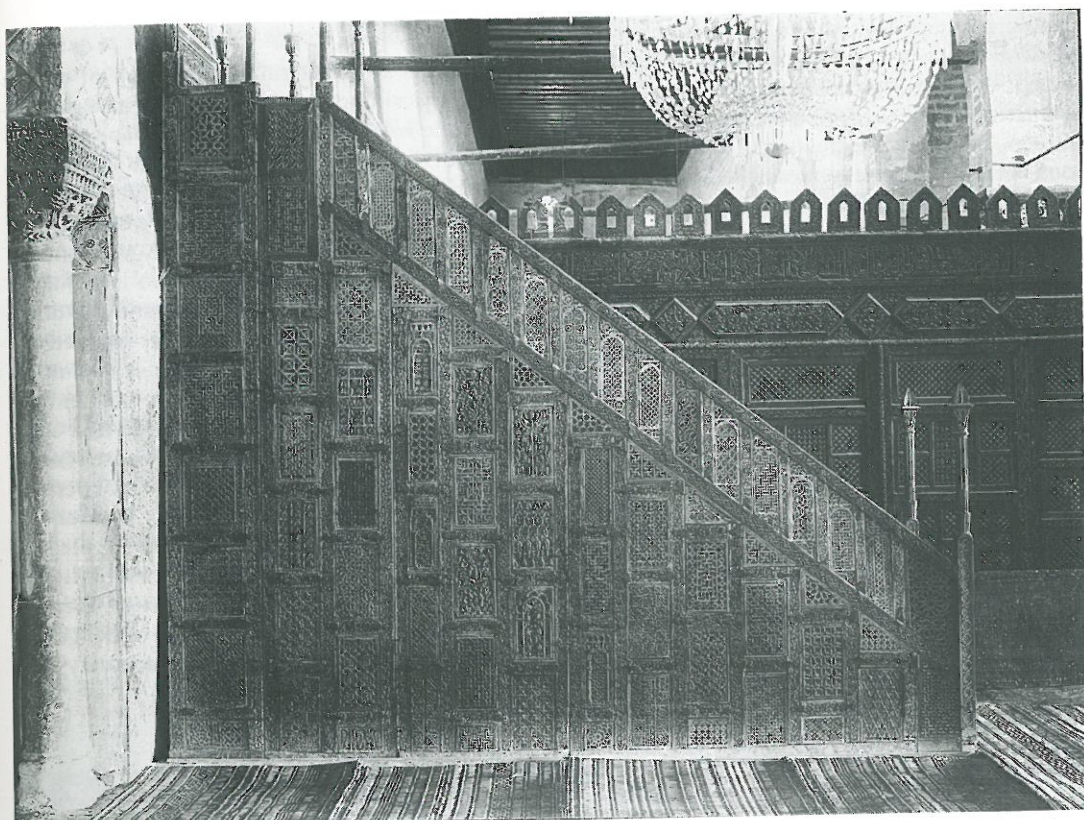
like. The decoration of *minbars* was, by some quirk of tradition, remarkably stereotyped. Their wooden construction laid a premium on the use of many small modular units which on being fitted together created the overall pattern. This was nearly always of geometric type, though some of the early surviving *minbars*, such as those at Fez and Marrakesh, favour floral designs. From the 14th century onwards more varied types of *minbar* appeared. Examples sheathed in tilework were erected in Iran and increasingly in Ottoman Turkey. The latter area also favoured stone or marble *minbars* with banisters of elaborately fretted openwork tracery. *Minbars* in baked brick and iron are also known. In general the use of durable materials brought in its train a markedly simplified design; as late as the 17th century, in Safavid Isfahan, a *minbar* could be built which exactly repeated the shape of the Damghan example of a millennium earlier, but in costly marble instead of mud brick.

The maqsura

Far fewer examples of the *maqsura* survive, and it is likely that this situation reflects their relative scarcity in medieval times. The reason is not far to seek. Much more explicitly than either the *mibrab* or the *minbar*, the *maqsura* implies the presence of a ruler. By contrast, every *jami'* requires an *imam* and a *khatib*. In form, the



33 Cairo, mosque of Baibars, *maqsura*



34 Qairawan, Great Mosque, *minbar* and *maqsura*

maqsura is a separate, usually square, enclosure within the mosque and close to the *mibrab*. Its walls may be of masonry but a lattice-work of wood or metal is more common. This suffices to screen the occupant from the other worshippers but allows him to see and participate in the *salat*. Several reasons may be proposed for this seclusion. One is a desire straightforwardly to adapt the Byzantine practice of housing the emperor in a royal box, the *kathisma*, and thereby to emphasise his high rank and his essential apartness. Another, related motive might have been to secure privacy of worship for the ruler. This might explain the frequent provision, as at Damascus, of a door beside the *mibrab* communicating both with the royal palace and with the *maqsura* or with a suite of rooms reserved for the caliph, as at the mosque of Abu Dulaf. At Cordoba a vaulted passage (*sabat*) serving this purpose is recorded in the texts both for the mosque as it was c.287/900 and for its enlarge-

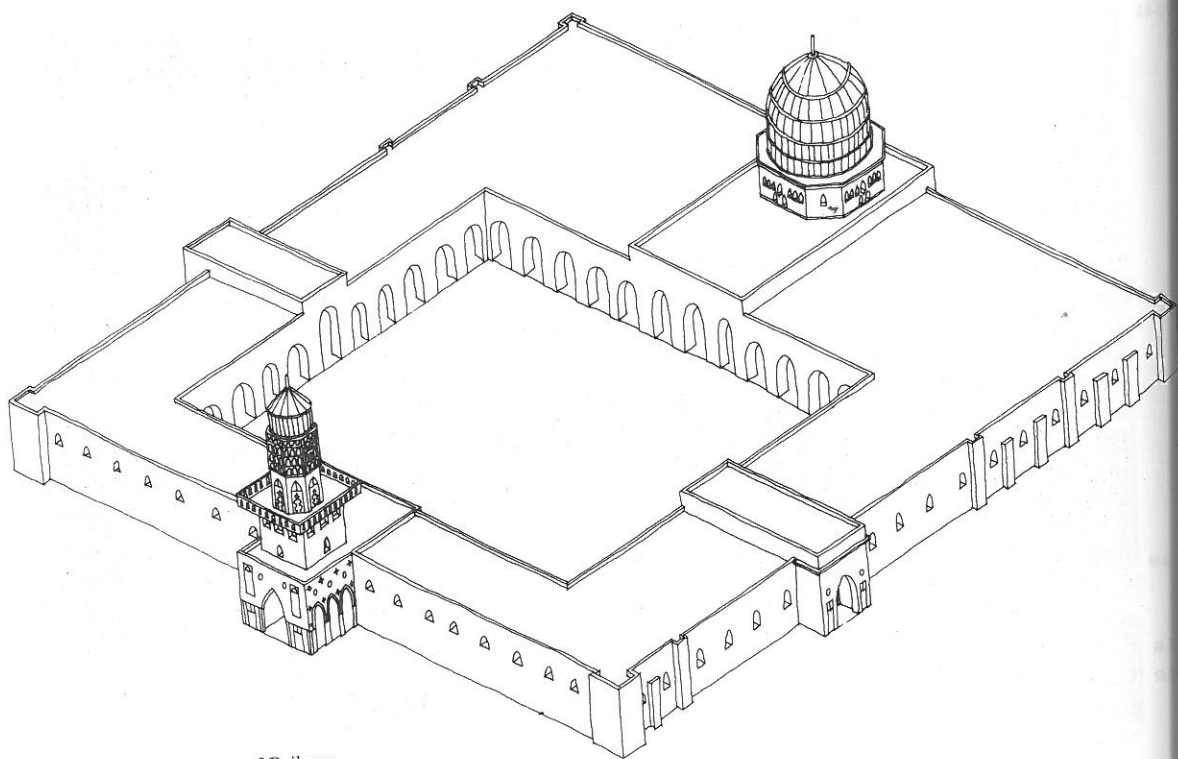
ment in 350/961. Thus the ruler would be absolved of the need to mingle with other worshippers. Such exclusiveness would be of a piece with the growing emphasis in the Umayyad period on the remoteness of the caliph, a far cry from the unpretentious democracy of Arabian practice. A third reason might well have been a naked fear of assassination. Two of the first four caliphs, 'Umar and 'Ali, were murdered in a mosque, and a third, 'Uthman, was killed while reading the Qur'an. Behind the *maqsura* screen the caliph was visible but not vulnerable. The emphasis on openwork screens in the typical *maqsura* opens up the possibility of a formal connection with the choir screens which were so marked a feature of Byzantine architecture. These too were of course located close to the liturgical focus of the building.

Whatever the origins of the *maqsura*, its symbolic function can scarcely be in doubt. It was a visible exaltation of the ruler's rank, and

therefore an integral part of the strong secular element in the early Islamic *jami'* and of its intimate connection with royal pomp and ceremony. The subsequent history of the *maqsura* betrays a weakening of these associations. The word came to mean the detached part of a mosque set aside for communal as distinct from private prayer. As such, its form underwent a major change. From the 11th century onwards, *maqsuras* in the form of large domed chambers incorporated into the sanctuary of a mosque began to proliferate, especially in the eastern Islamic world, as in the Great Mosque of Isfahan. They were usually preceded by an emphasised central aisle. The example of the mosque of Baibars in Cairo shows that this fashion penetrated to western Islam too. As with the *minbar*, the *maqsura* appears in a variety of forms and contexts, among them mobile examples in wood (as at Qairawan) and others in multi-purpose foundations such as the complex of Sultan Qala'un in Cairo.

The raised gabled transept

For all its symbolic importance, and of course the physical impact which its sheer size guarantees, the *maqsura* cannot claim to have any significant liturgical role, even when it came to connote the domed sanctuary itself. The same applies even more strongly to the two remaining features of foreign origin which were incorporated more and more often into large urban *jami'*s: the raised gabled transept and the dome over the *mibrab*. The transept never attained any great popularity, if only because it was not a form which could be imposed on all kinds of mosque. Far from it; to make its desired effect the transept called for a sanctuary whose roofing system extended parallel to the *qibla*, not perpendicular to it. The whole purpose of the transept was to assert an axis at variance with the preponderant one in the sanctuary and thereby to emphasise the *mibrab* which terminated the axis thus highlighted. The extra height of the gabled transept, towering above the sanctuary and



2.97 Cairo, mosque of Baibars