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The Possible Influence of Religious Edicts on the Design of Mosques and other Buildings in the Earliest Period of Islam

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Abstract: There is a general perception of buildings that are considered to belong to Islamic architecture, i.e., mosques, as being examples of 'high art' both in their internal and external expressions. This is mainly due to the emphatic use in their design of decorative features in the surface treatment such as, geometric pattern, calligraphy, etc., as well as the presence of structural and functional elements symbolic of the religion and its followers, e.g., arch, dome, minaret, etc.

Nevertheless, during the first two decades of Islam, most of the elements and features mentioned above were absent from the buildings like the mosque, the dar-al-imara and the house, which were simple, purely functional and very basic in their design. Probably no building of significant visual expression was built for nearly 70 years since the inception of the Islamic state until the completion of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem in 692 AD. The first ever mosque of the same standard is thought to be the rebuilt Mosque of Madinah in 710 AD. Yet, during this period the Muslim rule extended to the borders of India in the east, major part of North Africa in the west and almost the whole of central Asia in the north. As such, they were exposed and liable to be influenced by the highly developed architecture of the Byzantine Empire on one side and the Persian architecture of the Sassanids on the other. The reasons for this phenomenon given by early architectural historians, i.e., the simple architectural heritage and appreciation of buildings by the Arabs, have now been found unsustainable mainly as a result of archaeological findings of the last few decades which reveal the fact that traditionally, over the different periods of history, the Arabs had a rich heritage of building design and construction. This article is based on research by the author which shows that there is a possibility of such modest attitude by the early Muslims being developed, at least partly, as a direct influence of the religious edicts which were fresh in their minds. Relevant verses from the Quran and the Hadith are quoted to establish this view.

Introduction

During the last few years there have been a significant number of publications on various aspects of the religion of Islam including its art and architecture. Only in the recent past, however, questions were asked about the proper definition of 'Islamic Architecture' and even about its existence amongst the different expressions of architecture. There have been arguments as to whether there are enough common ground or characteristics in the architecture of Islamic nations of the world to have a collective name as 'Islamic Architecture', posing the question of whether the classification should be confined to the architecture of the original Islamic lands, i.e., the countries of the Middle East and north Africa or include the predominantly Muslim countries of south and south-east Asia together with those of other parts of Africa which have long-standing Islamic heritage and a Muslim population several times greater than that of the original Islamic lands.

However, if we consider the types of buildings that only came into existence with the advent of Islam along with those which formed their distinctive characters in Islam and played a major role in its expression, i.e., the mosque, the madrasa (religious college), the ribat

(fortified frontier hostels for warriors of faith), the dar al-Imara (governor's residence cum administrative headquarters), caravansary (wayside hotel & services), commemorative monuments, etc., we can find a set of buildings which were built to serve only the followers of a particular religion and their designs may collectively be called the 'Architecture of Islam'. These buildings, which formed the core of the programme of public buildings in the early periods of Islam, originated and developed as a direct result of the followers of the new faith practicing their religion. These were needed to fulfil the religious, administrative and social functions of the community whose people were joined together by a religion that provides guidance on all aspects of human life. By far the most significant of these buildings was the mosque.

Some existing buildings of the types mentioned above in various parts of the world and built at different periods of history, e.g., the Dome of the Rock of Jerusalem, the Great Mosque of Cordova, the Alhambra Palace of Granada, the Masjid-i-Shah of Isfahan, the Sultan Ahmed Mosque of Istanbul, etc., seem to create an impression of Islamic architecture as being examples of 'high art' both in their internal and external expressions. The buildings are considered to have been designed with lavishness and luxury through an emphasis on decorative features in their surface treatment such as geometric pattern, calligraphy, etc. and the use of structural and functional elements generally associated with the religion and its followers, e.g., arch, dome, minaret, etc.

Nevertheless, all the available evidence suggest that for the first few decades after the establishment of the Islamic state in 622 AD the Muslims did not build anything other than the very basic and functional buildings devoid of any unnecessary or superfluous elements and lacking significant decorative features mentioned above. The earliest example of a building which conforms to the general perception of Islamic architecture as commonly envisaged nowadays is probably the Dome of the Rock built during the rule of Umayyad Caliph Abd al Malik in 692 AD. The earliest mosque of similar standard is known to have been the Mosque of Madinah reconstructed by his successor al-Walid in 709 AD. Prior to that period of more than seventy years the expansion of Islamic State reached beyond the Arabian Peninsula. The Islamic State extended up to India in the east, a substantial part of North Africa in the west and the whole of central Asia up to the borders of the Black, Caspian and Aral seas in the north (Fig 1).

Throughout their conquered lands the Muslims were exposed to fine examples of Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture in the west as well as Persian Architecture of the Sassanid rule in the east. And none of these seem to have influenced them when they built their mosques and other buildings. They seem to have ignored the visual aspects of the built environment of these highly developed civilisations. The following observations by Professor Creswell about the attitude of the followers of the new religion of Islam confirms the above view: "...In the early days of Islam they brought nothing architectural to the conquered countries beyond what would serve their ritual requirements." [1, p 64]

"This state of affairs lasted for two generations, the Arabs remaining so untouched by any architectural ambitions that they showed not the slightest desire to make use of the developed architectural talent of the conquered people." [1, p 64]

A more recent author on the subject, Professor Oleg Grabar, has also made a similar remark, "While the major monuments of Roman and Christian Syria were known to Arab tradesman and caravans, there is little evidence that they had a major impact, at least not as artistic monuments." [2, p 76]

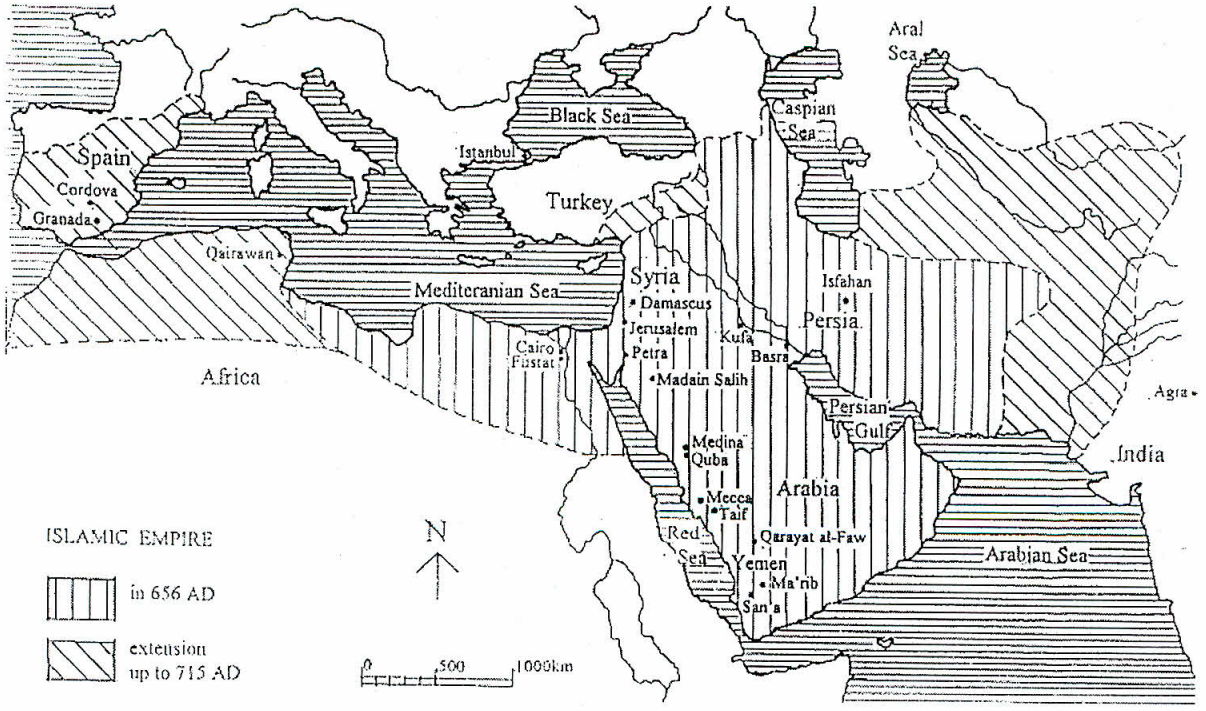


Fig 1: Map showing the Islamic empire, 656 AD and 715 AD, drawn on the basis of information given by Hitti. [4]

Mosques and Other Buildings 622 – 692 Ad

Detailed description of the mosques and other buildings built by the Muslims during the period of first 70 years is not available. However, based on the records of historians, travelers and contemporary writers some basic information has been gathered over the years. Up to the time of hijra (migration of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH)[1] and his followers from Makkah to Yathrib, now known as Madinah) in 622 AD, it is unlikely that the followers of the new religion have been able to build a mosque or any other significant building in Makkah, as they were being relentlessly persecuted by the Qurayesh, the major tribe of Makkah. Although, there is a mention in one of the Hadith [3, p 745] of Abu Bakr, a close companion of the Prophet, 'building a mosque'[2] in front of his house in Makkah, it was very likely to have been an exclusive space for prayer created within the compound of his house.

During the hijra, the Prophet stopped for a few days at a place called Quba in the suburb of Madinah, where he is believed to have founded the very first public place for congregational

[1] 'PBUH' stands for 'peace be upon him'

[2] A part of these Hadith states, "Abu Bakr stayed in that state, worshipping his Lord in his house. He did not pray publicly, nor did he recite the Quran outside his house. Then a thought occurred to Abu Bakr to build a mosque in front of his house, and there he used to pray and recite the Quran. The women and children of the pagan began to gather in great number. They used to wonder at him and look at him."

prayer for the Muslims. Although this place is revered by the Muslims as the very first mosque in Islam, it is unlikely that a building was constructed here on this occasion. In the Holy Quran[3] there is a mention of this mosque (9.108)[4] which does not confirm the presence of a building as the word 'masjid', Arabic for mosque, is used to mean 'a place of prayer' irrespective of whether there is a building in it. Shortly afterwards, construction of the building believed to be the very first public building in Islam was completed in Madinah to serve as the residence of the Prophet's family as well as the community mosque. In the Hadith there are narrations like "he (the Prophet) ordered a mosque should be built" [3, p 177] at one place and "this place, Allah willing, will be our abiding place" [3, p 752] at another indicating that it was probably meant to serve both the purposes. There is no question about the fact that this building was very simple in form and structure and was derived as a practical and straightforward solution to the problem of providing the required spaces in the given environmental conditions and with the available materials and technology.

The building complex (Fig 2) consisted of an approximately square courtyard, 100 cubits (approx. 50m) by 100 cubits in plan, enclosed by a perimeter wall, 7 cubits high, made of sun-dried mud bricks and with three entrances. There was a covered portico on its northern part, possibly about 12.5 cubits deep, made of palm trunks used as columns supporting a roof of palm leaves and mud. Two small rooms were built against the outside of the southern part of the east wall to serve as the living quarters for the Prophet's family. A smaller portico in the southwest corner of the courtyard, similar to and shallower than the one on the north side, was built to accommodate the poor people from Makkah who followed the Prophet.

The deeper covered area was facing the northern boundary wall. This being the direction of the Qibla, i.e., the direction faced by the Muslims while praying, which was towards Jerusalem, it is reasonable to assume that the larger covered area was intended to be the prayer hall implying that the initial purpose of this building was not just to serve as the family accommodation for the Prophet, as believed by some historians, but also to provide a covered space for congregational prayer and other meetings for the new community. This assumption is strengthened by the fact that sixteen months later when the direction of the Qibla was changed from Jerusalem to Makkah, i.e., from northwards to southwards of Madinah, the deeper shaded area was moved from the northern to the southern end of the courtyard. This simple building, which did not look much different from a typical courtyard type dwelling house in the desert oasis of Arabia, gradually turned into the nerve centre of Islam where most of the decisions of the new state were taken. By the time of the Prophet's death in 632 AD the number of living quarters increased from two to nine, four of which were made of mud bricks and the rest made of palm branches plastered with mud (Fig 3).

For another 25 years it continued to be used as the headquarters of the administration by the Caliphs of Islam, first by Abu Bakr who succeeded Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) and then by the three successive Caliphs until the capital was moved from Madinah to Kufa by the fourth Caliph Ali. During this period there were very few alterations to the original building and only minor extensions were carried out as shown by the outline drawings in Fig 4. We get the following narration in one of the Hadith about these extensions:

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3 Quotation from the Quran are as translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali in "The Meaning of the Holy Quran", Amana Corporation, 1991.

4 A part of Verse No. 108 of Surah Al-Tawbah which states "There is a mosque whose foundation was laid from the first day on piety, it is more worthy of thy standing forth (for prayer) therein" is believed to be a reference to the mosque at Quba.

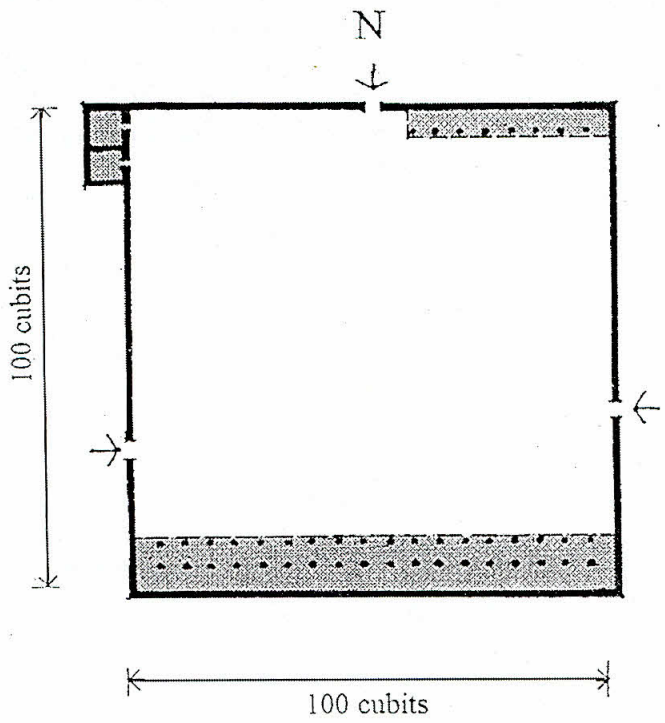


Fig 2: Plan of the Madinah House/Mosque, 622 AD, reconstructed plan as shown by Creswell. [1]

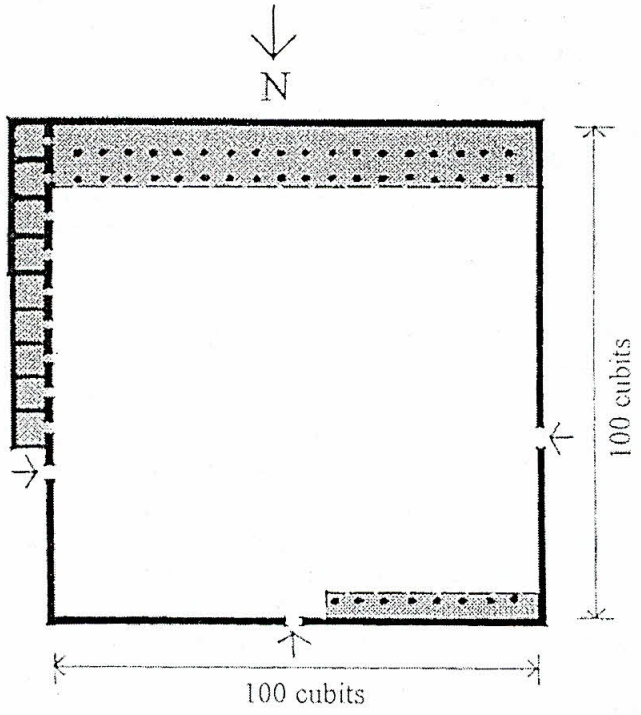


Fig 3: Plan of the Madinah House/Mosque, 632 AD, reconstructed plan as shown by Creswell. [1]

"In the lifetime of Allah's Messenger (PBUH) the (Prophet's) mosque was built of adobes, its roof of the leaves of date-palms. Abu Bakr did not alter it. Umar expanded it on the same pattern as it was in the lifetime of Allah's Messenger (PBUH) by using adobes, leaves of date-palms and changing pillars into wooden ones. Uthman changed it by expanding it to a great extent and built its walls with engraved stones and lime and made its pillars of engraved stones and its roof of teak wood." [3, p 180] The building remained in that state for another fifty years after the capital was shifted away from Madinah and before it was demolished in 707 AD to clear the site for a new mosque built by Caliph al-Walid. Not much is known to have happened in respect of its renovation, embellishment or reconstruction during this period in spite of the fact that it was gradually attaining the status of a highly venerated monument as the Prophet's mosque, nowadays considered by the Muslims as the second holiest place on earth, next to the Ka'ba in Makkah.

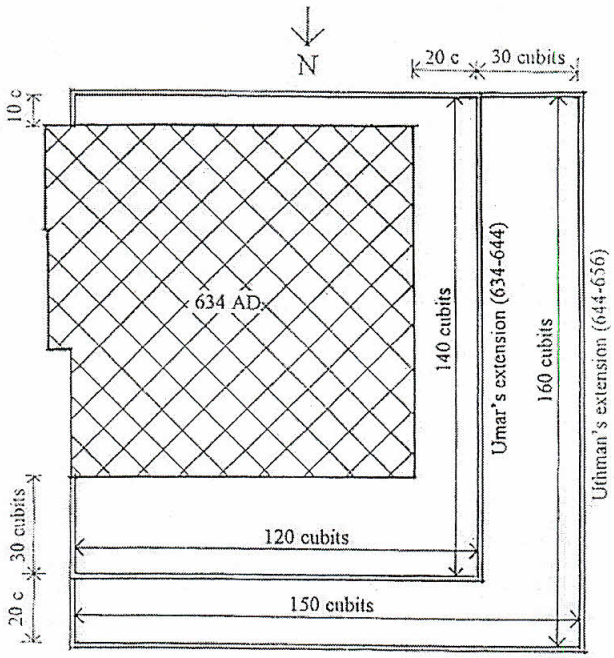


Fig 4: Extensions to the Madinah House/Mosque, 634-644 AD & 644-656 AD, drawn on the basis of outline given by Creswell. [1]

Let us now consider other buildings that are known to have been built during this period of about two generations of Muslims since the construction of the original Madinah mosque. Massive expansion of the Islamic state and, as a result, growth in the number of followers of the new religion necessitated the provision of facilities to carry out one of its most important functions, i.e., the congregational prayer, and hence the establishment of mosques. In the Syrio-Byzantine regions of the conquered lands, north-west of the Arabian peninsula, no new building needed to be built as some of the existing church buildings were available to be used either by converting them into mosques or by sharing with the Christians as places of prayer for both the faiths.

In the northeast, i.e., parts of the former Sassanid Empire of Persia, however, new mosques had to be established on virgin lands accompanying the military camps. The first ever mosque outside of the Arabian Peninsula was in Basra in the Iraqi region where Utbah ibn Ghazwan founded the city in 635 AD as a winter camp for the army. "The first mosque, according to Baladhuri, was simply marked out and the people prayed there without any building, According to another version, also given by Baladhuri, it was enclosed by a fence of reeds." [1, p 22] Three years later Abu Musa al-Ashari, the regional governor during the Caliphate of Umar (634-644 AD) "reconstructed the mosque and the dar al-imara of sun-dried bricks and clay and roofed it, presumably on the Qibla side, with brushwood." [1, p 22]

In 638 AD army general Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas established the other military camp, in Kufa on the north-east of Basra, with a mosque in the centre. Again, like Basra it was initially a simple open space. According to Creswell [1, p 24], quoting Baladhuri, the enclosure was a square whose boundaries were fixed by a man throwing an arrow, from a central position, towards the Qibla (south) and then others towards north, east and west thus forming a square with each side of two arrow-cast in length. It was enclosed by a ditch with entrances on all four sides. The same source also mentions about a covered (but not walled) space on the Qibla side which ran the whole length of 200 cubits made of marble columns taken from a nearby Lakhmid (Arab tribes under the Sassanids) palace (Fig 5). Another source suggests that initially the enclosure of this mosque was "surrounded by a fencing of reeds and later of wall with sun-dried bricks and clay." [4, p 260]

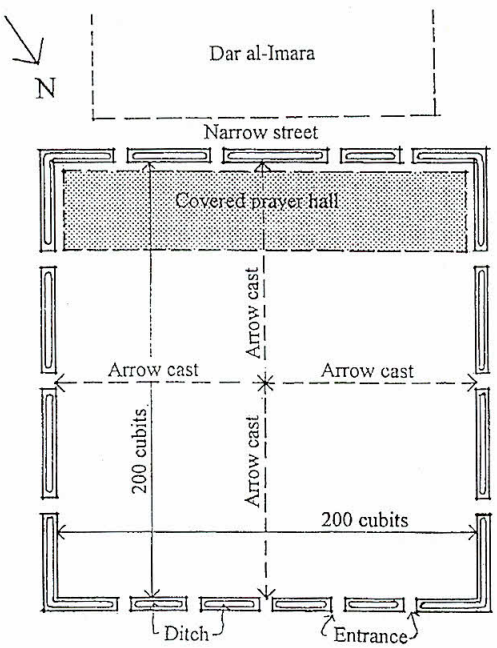


Fig 5: The first mosque of Kufa, 638 AD, based on drawing and information given by Creswell. [1]

The next important camp with a mosque was in Fustat in Egypt, now a suburb of modern Cairo, and was set up during the Caliphate of Umar. His governor 'Amr ibn al-'As built the first mosque in Africa in the winter of 641 AD. While the mosques at Basra and Kufa were square in plan with little or no covered space, this was rectangular in plan and according to the testimony of an eye witness quoted by Creswell [1, p 37], was a small (50 x 30 cubits) covered space without any interior courtyard. Like the Prophet's mosque in Madinah the

surrounding walls were of sun-dried mud bricks and not plastered. The low roof made of palm leaves and mud was supported by palm trunks used as columns and split palm trunks as beams. A possible reconstruction of the plan is shown in Fig 6.

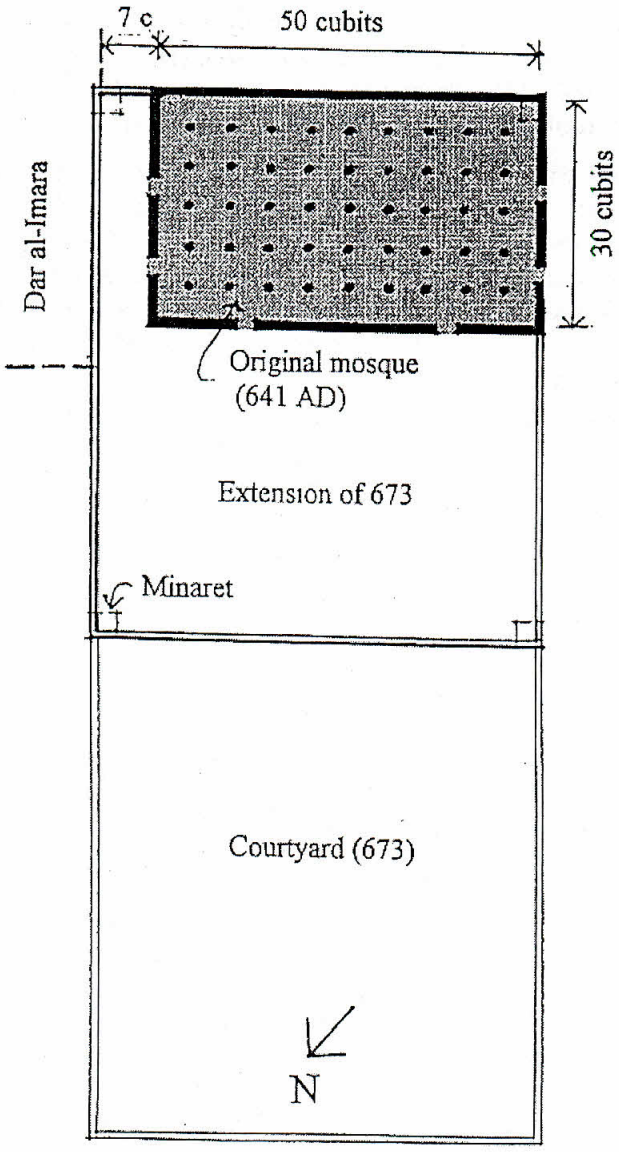


Fig 6: The mosque of Fustat, 641 AD, and the extension of 673 AD, drawn on the basis of line diagram and information given by Creswell. [1]

Information about the other important mosque believed to have been built during Umar's Caliphate, the one in Jerusalem, is sketchy and contradictory. However, the generally accepted version is that the Caliph went to Jerusalem in 638 AD and was greeted by the patriarch of Jerusalem. He then ordered a mosque to be built, which is believed to be the first Aqsa Mosque of Jerusalem. [5, p 10] Like the Prophet's mosque in Madinah these mosques had undergone very little modification, alteration or extension in the next few decades. They remained very basic. Hillenbrand remarked "the constituent elements of the Arab mosque plan are found at their starkest in the earliest mosques built in the generation

after the death of the Prophet". [6, p 66] These constituent elements of an 'Arab mosque', (Fig.7), which developed out of purely functional and environmental requirements consisted of:

- an open central courtyard (sahn) surrounded by covered areas or porticos (riwaq),
- a deeper portico on the Qibla side forming the main prayer hall,
- a solid Qibla wall, and
- hypostyle construction for the covered areas, i.e., series of columns supporting the roof without any arches or domes, believed to be influenced by the Persian Hall of Columns (Apadana).

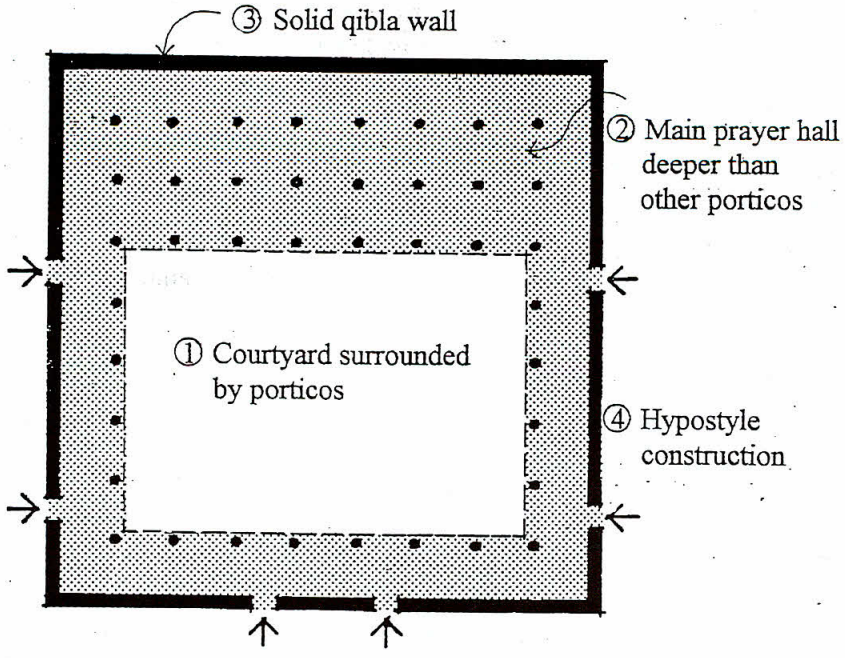


Fig 7: The elements of a typical Arab mosque in the earliest period.

These mosques were approximately square in plan and none of them had any of the features which became almost essential components of a congregational mosque from the beginning of the 8th century, i.e., the mihrab (niche in the Qibla wall), the minaret, the multi-stepped minbar (platform for the Imam to deliver sermon) and the dome above the prayer hall. Most of these buildings were either initially built or later reconstructed with mud bricks which was a traditional practice for building dwelling houses in the vast plains of Central Arabia alongside the use of stones for larger or taller buildings. It is true that when these first set of mosques were built, followers of the new faith did not have a precedent to follow, but it is also true that mud bricks were not the only material available nor was simplicity and frugality in the design of prestigious community buildings the norm of the day in the desert settlements of Arabia. Another observation by Hillenbrand supports this point: "But it is highly significant that their austerity of plan and elevation ran increasingly counter to contemporary taste." [6, p 67]

As described below, Muslims of the next generation, i.e., of the second half of the period under discussion, had some of these mosques increased in size to cater for the growing number of followers by rebuilding them with more durable materials. Also, with the growth

of the empire new mosques were constructed in the conquered lands. However, they still remained very basic with simple plans, modest surface treatment and no superfluous elements in their design. [7, p 30]

Basra mosque was rebuilt by governor Ziyad ibn Abihi in 665 AD. He had to provide a larger congregational space and also create a focal point in the city for the believers converting from different faiths. According to Creswell [1, p 45] quoting Baladhuri, kiln-baked bricks and gypsum mortars were used for the perimeter walls and the mosque was roofed with beams made of teakwood. The prayer hall was made of five rows of stone columns and the earthen floor was spread with pebbles to avoid hands being covered with dust while praying. No further details of this mosque are available but it is generally assumed that its plan was similar to that of Kufa as reconstructed five years later (Fig 8). Baladhuri also suggests that a stone tower was added to the mosque, although it is generally agreed that the first minarets in a mosque are the ones added to the mosque of Fustat during its enlargement in 673 AD.

The reconstructed mosque of Kufa, also built by the order of Ziyad, in 670 AD, was square in plan with a courtyard inside and all the other constituent elements of an Arab mosque. The hall had five aisles with tall and slender stone columns and the riwaqs had two aisles.

The perimeter wall had several openings for entry to the mosque and according to Creswell [1, pp 46-48], the overall dimensions in plan remained the same as the very first mosque in this site, i.e., 200x200 cubits (Fig 8).

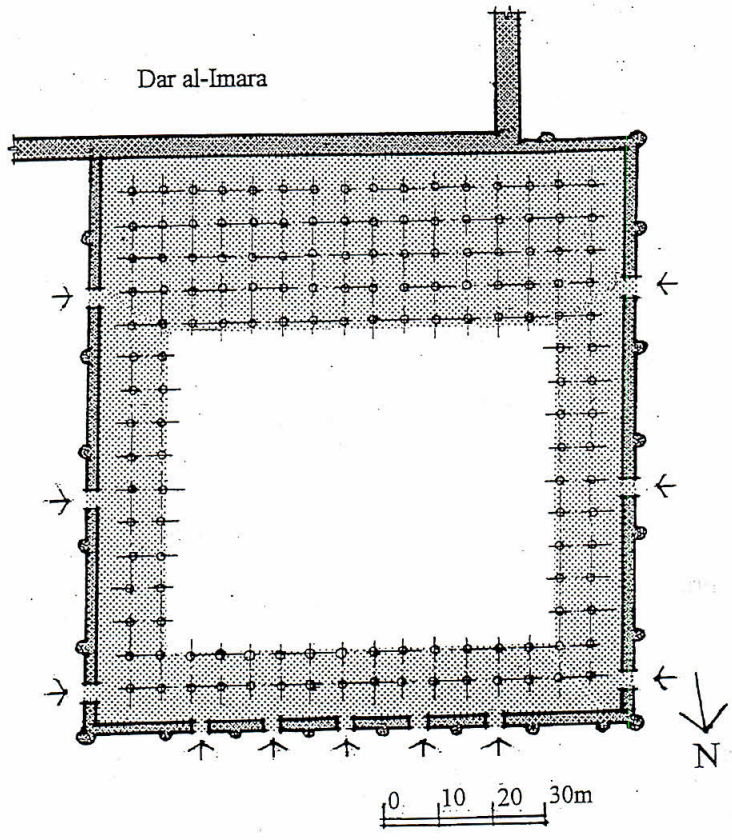


Fig 8: The reconstructed mosque of Kufa, 670 AD, based on drawing by Creswell. [1]

As mentioned earlier, the mosque of Fustat was enlarged in 673 AD by Maslama ibn Mukhallid, the governor of Egypt, by extending on the NE and NW sides - SE being the Qibla side - and a courtyard was added on the NW side (Fig 6). Four short minarets were added at the corners of the enlarged mosque. According to Creswell, these were the very first minarets in a mosque as he did not agree with the existence of a tower in the Basra mosque of 665 AD. He, however, accepted the possibility of there being one in the reconstructed mosque of Kufa in 670 AD. According to some sources the reconstructed mosque of Fustat also had a minbar during the time of Caliph Uthman (644-656 AD) although governor 'Amr, who first built the mosque in 641 AD, was denied one by Caliph Umar on the grounds that only the Caliph is entitled to use a minbar.

As for the mosque of Jerusalem, the simple structure of 638 AD was destroyed by an earthquake and a second mosque on the site was possibly not built before the beginning of the 8th century.

Of the new mosques built in this period, other than the reconstructed ones, the mosque of Qairawan in Tunisia is the best known. It was build by Uqba ibn Nafi who was appointed governor over the Maghrib (North Africa) by Caliph Mu'awiya (661 - 676 AD). According to the suggestion made in a recent study of the mosque, [8, pp 48-53] which now stands mainly as reconstructed by governor Ziyadat Allah (836 AD), the original mosque of Uqba (c.670 AD) was square in plan of which the Qibla side had a covered prayer hall and the rest of the area being open courtyard. It is unlikely that the other three sides had any riwaq at that stage. Fig 9 shows the suggested plan of the original mosque superimposed on that of the existing building. Very little information is available of the other types of buildings, apart from the mosques, built at different parts of the Islamic empire during this seventy year period. It is known that in Mesopotamia the Muslim army usually camped in open lands outside the urban area to avoid contact with the conquered people on a daily basis. In places like Basra and Kufa they lived in tents at first but soon afterwards built houses with reeds and mud. The permanent living accommodations were, however, made with sun-dried or burnt bricks. In Basra "a fire broke out in 17 AH (i.e., 639/40 AD) and many houses were burnt down. Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas, the then governor of Kufa, sent a deputation to seek the Caliph's permission to build brick houses. The permission was given, but with the reservation that nobody should be permitted to build more than three rooms." [9, p 281] The dar al-imaras of the regional administrative heads, which were built adjacent to or sometimes connected to the main mosque, usually on the Qibla side, were larger buildings and sometimes included a bayt al-mal or treasury within it. The first dar al-imara at Kufa (c.638 AD) was separated from the mosque (Fig 5) by a narrow street on the Qibla side. Walls of the building were not strong enough to prevent thieves cutting a hole in it to enter the bayt al-mal and steal money. As a result, Caliph Umar ordered his governor to shift the mosque so that Qibla is formed by the wall of the dar al-imara to provide security against breaking in.

According to Baladhuri the Caliph's letter read: "Rebuild the mosque adjacent to the residence of the governor (dar al-imara) in such a way that the inner portion of the mosque should be built adjacent to the governor's residence, making the treasury safe due to the constant presence of the devotees in the mosque" [10, p 123] After this incident, according to one source, "an Iranian chief constructed the same (dar al-imara) with lime and stone under his supervision. Stone-pillars were also erected, giving it a palatial shape with broad gateway in front of the same. This was disliked by the Caliph. So he sent his special messenger, Mohammed bin Muslimah, entrusted him the following letter with clear cut instruction to burn the gate of the palace that was immediately complied with: 'It has come to my notice that you have built a palace for your residence, known as Qasr-e-Sa'd and have

erected a gate in your palace, thus creating a hindrance between yourselves and the people. This is not your palace but the palace of destruction. Reside in its portion adjacent to the baitul-maal, the rest of the building should be closed. Do not put any gate in between you and the people to enable them to see you without any hindrance. They should have access to you and should have the opportunity to meet you while they are out from their houses'" [10, p 124]. A more detailed account is available of the reconstructed dar al-imara of Kufa along with the rebuilt mosque of 670 AD. This was made of stronger materials like the mosque itself and was sited on its Qibla side (Fig 8).

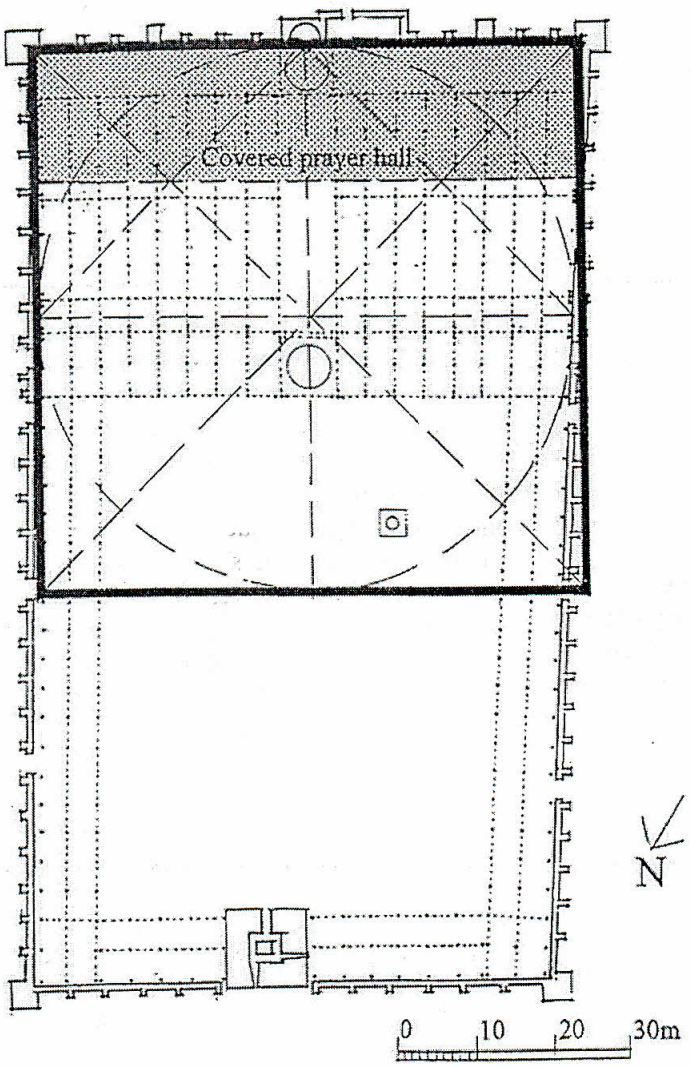


Fig 9: The first mosque of Qairawan, 670 AD, superimposed on the plan of existing mosque as suggested by Gedal. [8]

The original dar al-imara at Basra, built of sun-dried bricks and mud, included a diwan-i-a'am (public audience hall) and a prison. Governor Ziyad removed the dar al- imara from the NE side to the Qibla side (i.e., SW side) of the mosque in 665 AD. He also ordered a door to be provided in the mosque giving direct access from the dar al-imara into the maqsura, which is a screened enclosure for the Imam built at the centre of the Qibla wall,

usually with timber. In the Syrian sector of the new empire, although no large-scale new building programme was necessary for residential accommodation because of the existence of adequate provision of high standard, a new dar al-imara was built in Damascus by governor Mu'awiya during the Caliphate of Uthman. This was constructed of burnt bricks with a timber framework and had some sort of a green dome on its roof for which it was known as 'Qubbat al Khadra', i.e., the Green Dome. It was built on the Qibla side of the main prayer hall of the city where the Great Mosque of Damascus was subsequently built by al-Walid. Mu'awiya's Dar al Imara was so basic in design and unimpressive as a building that the Greek ambassador made the following comment: "The upper part will do for the birds and the lower for rats." [1, p 44]

The descriptions of mosques and other buildings in the preceding chapters clearly show that for a considerable period of time the Arabs did not pay much attention to the aesthetic aspects of the new buildings and restricted their designs mainly to the fulfillment of the basic functions. These also justify the comments, mentioned earlier about the reluctance of the followers of the new faith to be influenced by the existing artistic development of the conquered people. As Creswell was one of the earliest architectural historians to carry out an extensive and extremely valuable study of Islamic architecture, which were published in several volumes of work (1930 - 1965), his views were widely accepted by subsequent researchers as the basis for analysis of the early Islamic architecture.

Architectural Heritage of Arabia

Several authors in the very recent past have demonstrated that the views expressed above about Arabia and its pre-Islamic architectural tradition were erroneous and probably arose from a lack of information and, to some extent, due to the preconceived stereotype image about the Arabian society and culture existing at that time in the western world. While Creswell is not known to have visited any part of Arabia, most of the significant published works on the subject that followed were carried out by non-Muslim authors, having difficulty in visiting Arabia for archaeological purposes, while the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah were totally out of bounds for them.

In his paper entitled "Creswell's Appreciation of Arabian Architecture" [11] published in 1991, King presents a catalogue of evidence and arguments in favour of the existence of a long line of architectural heritage of pre-Islamic Arabia, particularly in its southern, western and northern parts. In the paper he has shown that the various opinions expressed by Creswell about the pre-Islamic Arabian architecture were not sustainable even in 1969 when the second edition of his works were published. About the archaeological findings at Qarayat al-Faw, a desert town on the western edge of the 'Empty Quarter' desert, i.e., on the north of Yemen, he writes, "this site alone tends to undermine Creswell's premise that Arabia lacked architecture in the centuries preceding Islam" and he continues, "the excavation at al-Faw indicates that there was a higher level of skill in architecture and in art in Arabia in the centuries preceding Islam than Creswell supposed". He states "Creswell was far too extreme on this issue. Even now, much of archaeological research remains to be done before we can assess the quality of Arabian building in the centuries immediately preceding Islam. Creswell was in no position to make such a definitive statement, however, and was premature in reaching such a judgement." King also contradicts the other assumption of Creswell about the 'armies of conquest' being chiefly Bedouins from the eastern Arabia - tent-dwelling nomads from the deserts having no knowledge or background on architecture. He writes "the Islamic army that went to Syria in AD 634 ... included contingents from Makkah, Madinah, Ta'if, and also a substantial number from Yemen much

of which was probably settled then as it is now". Although the army that invaded the Sassanian empire was of 'eastern Arabian Bedouin complexion', the leaders of the expeditions were of settled origin from Makkah and Madinah.

In his recent book on Arabian architecture Costa [12, PP 1-2 of Sec V] remarks: "Westerners started considering all Arabs backward and unrefined people and this misjudgment was gradually extended to all past epochs. This devaluation of Arabian civilisation matched a widespread and stereotyped idea of the local environment, ... Too often this (Arabia) was described as a vast desert deprived of natural resources and since time immemorial inhabited by nomads, without urban centres of any relevance..." He then mentions about the findings of the archaeological research of the last few decades which "achieved the rediscovery of the civilisation of sedentary Arabs, as opposed to the nomadic Arabs, the rediscovery of the Arabia of large ancient cities as opposed to the stereotyped image of the Arabia of desert and tent". While accepting the fact that vast majority of the Arabian Peninsula was and still is desert and populated by nomads, he argues that it is also a land of fertile valleys, mineral resources and large capital cities. He then states, "This is the physical and socio-cultural environment where Islam was born, not an inhospitable and backward world, but one of the cosmopolitan societies, of great commercial centres and a long history."

The existence of highly developed societies in the southern region of Arabia, known as 'Arabia Felix' or 'Happy Arabia' dates back to many centuries before Islam. A Quranic verse states: "There was for Saba, aforetime, a sign in their homelands - two gardens to the right and to the left. Eat of the sustenance (provided) by your Lord, and be grateful to Him: a territory fair and happy, and a Lord oft forgiving! But they turned away (from Allah) and We sent against them the flood (released) from the dams ... " (34.15). These descriptions are of the ancient place of Saba, 50 miles from the city of San'a which is identified as the same place as the Biblical Sheba, ruled by the queen known in the Arabian tradition as Bilqis. The dam mentioned in the verse is the famous dam of Ma'rib known to have been destroyed in the early 7th century while the ancient city of Ma'rib, "irrigated by the impounded waters of the dam, has been called 'the Paris of the ancient world' prospering in the trading monopoly of frankincense and myrrh. It had a finely built temple of the moon god and a citadel which stored many inscriptions and statues of the pre-Islamic Sabaean period." [13, p 619]. The Church of San'a built by Abraha, the Abysinian Christian king of the southern Arabia is known to the Muslims through the story surrounding this ruler's failed attempt to invade Makkah in 570 AD as described in a chapter of the Quran[5]. And then there is the legendary castle of Ghumdan which "is celebrated in the Yemen national ethos as an expression of the grandeur and both technical and aesthetic achievement of the ancient pre-Islamic civilisation." [14, p 44]

The inference that the sacred building of Ka'ba being just a cube is the result of Arabs having the 'crudest notion of buildings' is considered as unjustified on the basis of the work published by Barbara Finster [15] in 1992. The shape of Ka'ba and other existing 'cubical mosques' of southern Arabia has been shown as one of the types of pre-Islamic temple architecture maintaining continuity of building forms throughout this region of the Arabian peninsula. Some of the existing cubical mosques in Yemen have been identified as earlier

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5 Surah Al-Fil (the Elephant) is the 105th chapter of the holy Quran which narrates how God dealt with the invading army of Abraha in 570 AD, the year of birth of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), who intended to destroy the Ka'ba which attracted a large number of devotees from all over Arabia compared to the number attending the magnificent church he built in San'a. He had an elephant or elephants at the head of his troops, which were supposed to run over the weak defense of Makkah. However, due to the act of God, as described in the chapter, the attempt failed.

pre-Islamic temple buildings that have been 'restored' and converted into mosques. Similar restoration is believed to have been made in the case of the extant mosque of Solomon in Ma'rib which "was installed on the site of the old temple, complete with its propylons and columns. The inscription states that the mosque of Sulayman ibn Dawud (i.e., Solomon son of David) was restored in the year 487 (1074-75 AD)" [15, p 124]. The existing Great Mosque of San'a, however, is a building constructed by the Muslims and according to early Islamic sources, laid out at the instruction of the Prophet in the first year of the hijra (622-23 AD). While discounting the possibility of this mosque having been built on the ruins of an earlier important building, Costa describes the presence of a large number of pre-Islamic materials, both architectonic and epigraphic, reused in the mosque as concrete example of the existence of highly developed pre-Islamic architectural tradition. With the invading army of Abraha in 570 AD, the year of birth of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), who intended to destroy the Ka'ba which attracted a large number of devotees from all over Arabia compared to the number attending the magnificent church he built in San'a. He had an elephant or elephants at the head of his troops, which were supposed to run over the weak defense of Makkah. However, due to the act of God, as described in the chapter, the attempt failed. [12, p 2 of Sec II]

The Quran also mentions the people who used to live in the coastal areas of south and east Arabia from Yemen in the south-west to the borders of Mesopotamia in the north-east as "the 'Ad people of the (city of) Iram with lofty pillars, the like of which were not produced in (all) the land." (89.6-8) They ruled various parts of the Arabian peninsula and beyond up to the 2nd century BC. In several of its verses "the Quran bears testimony to their unprecedented architectural skills" and "huge mansions and palatial buildings were the manifestation of their artsmanship." [16, pp. 92-93]

Similar references in the Quran relate to the northern and western parts of Arabia. People known as Thamud, whose rule began after that of 'Ad, were based in the area from Hijaz to Syria with headquarters in the town of Al-Hijr (modern Mada'in Salih). Like their predecessors they were also very skilled builders especially in building houses, mansions and tombs by carving stone in the mountains. "Ye build for yourselves palaces and castles in (open) plains, and carve out homes in the mountains"(7.74). The remains of their work can still be seen with inscriptions in Aramaic characters, the latter belonging to the Nabateans who ruled these places with Petra (in Jordan) as their capital before and after the Christ.

While describing the Ghumdan Palace from an early 10th century text translated as 'The Antiquities of South Arabia' Grabar states that "princely construction were also associated with northern Arabian dynasties" and "whatever later explorations may bring to light, the important point is the existence of an architectural palace mythology in pre-Islamic Arabia. This mythology developed primarily around constructions that, justifiably or not, were associated with rulers of Arab origin in the southern and northern edges of the peninsula and not with foreigners." [2, p 76]

All the above accounts indicate the continual existence of civilised society with high quality of built environments in different parts of Arabia throughout the various periods of pre-Islamic history. "The Arab powers did not appear at a wave of the Prophet's magic wand: a long pre-Islamic past in the Arabian Peninsula had produced a well-developed culture, now vestigial and still little-known."[7, p 8] Many authors believe that a similar environment existed at the time of early Islamic expansion. According to Costa, "the Arabia of the 7th century AD appears to be culturally advanced not only in the field of poetry, the traditional heritage of the Bedouin tribe, but also in philosophy, sciences and technology."[12, pp 1-2 of SecV]

Regardless of a such rich heritage, and the consequent knowledge and understanding of the art of building transmitted through the ages, the first two generations of Muslims did not seem to have made any use of them and resisted to be influenced by the architecture of buildings of the conquered people. Apart from the reasoning put forward by Creswell, no other author has suggested any alternative explanation for this phenomenon nor has dealt with the earliest period of Islamic architecture with any further detail. Even in the very recent books on Islamic architecture, authors like Hoag [17], Ettinghausen & Grabar [18], Hillenbrand [6], and Stierlin [7] have not contributed anything new about this period.

Possible Influence of Religion

Considering the fact that the recently converted people of any new religion are likely to follow its guidelines very zealously, it may be worthwhile to examine the relevant edicts of the religion of Islam with a view to find a possible explanation for this attitude of the early Muslims. Islam requires its followers to believe in:

i) God (Allah).

ii) The prophets - from Adam to Mohammed (PBUH) - as the true leaders and guides of the human race.

iii) The Books of God (i.e., the Torah, the Bible and the Quran).

iv) The angels (e.g., Gabriel).

v) The life after death.

The last point extends to the concept of the existence of heaven and hell. Total belief in all aspects of the religion is an essential part of a Muslim's life and in the very early days of Islam people converting to the new religion were very strong adherents of these requirements. During this period the religion was mainly based on the Quran and the sayings and practices of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) as circulated in the community from person to person which were compiled later on to form the Hadith.

The belief in the prospect of eternal life after death in this world and the quality of that life hereafter being dependant on the believer's activities in this life played a very important part in the daily life of Muslims. The following verse of the Quran is one of many, which describes the importance of life after death: "O my people! This life of the present is nothing but (temporary) convenience; it is the Hereafter that is the Home that will last"(40.39). As a consequence, people strongly believed in and practiced a very modest, and even austere, way of living without luxury. Such a life was considered to be the right way to prepare for an affluent life after death.

However, wealth creation in this life was not forbidden. On the contrary, generation of wealth by honest practices is encouraged and wealth is promised as one of the rewards to a believer who follows the path of religion: "Ask forgiveness from your Lord; for He is oft forgiving. He will send rain to you in abundance; give you increase in wealth..."(71.10-11). But it is in the spending of the wealth that there are specific guidelines and one way of spending which is absolutely forbidden is to squander money in vanity or to show off one's wealth. Some relevant verses are as follows: "O ye who believe! Squander not your property among yourselves in vanities; but let there be amongst you traffic and trade by mutual good will" (4.29) and "Allah loveth not ... those who spend of their substance in order to be seen of men..." (4.38). And one verse combines this theme with that of life hereafter: "Exult not, for Allah loveth not those who exult (in riches). But seek with the (wealth) which Allah bestowed on thee, the Home Hereafter" (28.76-77).

One example of squandering money or showing off wealth considered by Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) was to be spending on constructing extravagant buildings. The simple and modest way of a Muslim's life should be expressed in all aspects of his/her living including adherence to basic necessities in respect of provision for all types of accommodation including that for congregational prayer. Four extracts from the Hadith are quoted below to illustrate the religious guidelines that may have influenced the followers of the new religion during this period in forming an attitude towards buildings. As mentioned earlier, collection and compilation of Hadith, which were the sayings and practices of the Prophet as narrated by others, took place much later. But, most of these were common knowledge among the believers and were an essential source in the formation of legal and social guidelines at the time.

"Every building is a misfortune for its owner, except what cannot" - 'except what cannot' meaning except that which is essential. [19, no. 5218]

"All spending is in Allah's cause except that on building, for there is no good in it."[20, no. 5183]

"The Hour (of doom) will not be established till ... the people compete with one another in constructing high buildings..." [3, pp. 1022-1023]

"Of the signs of the Hour, it is that the people will vie one another about the mosques."[21, p 220]

It is also reported by Ibn Sa'd that the Prophet's wife Umm Salamah made an extension to her living quarters during a period when the Prophet was away. On return, when he saw the extension he said: 'the most unprofitable thing that eateth up the wealth of a believer is building'. [1, p 8]

In spite of such clear guidelines about the construction of buildings by a believer in his life in this world we find a number of sayings by the Prophet where rewards in the form of buildings, among other things, in the life hereafter have been used as inducements for pious activities in this life, e.g.,

"A house will be built in Paradise for anyone who prays in a day and night twelve rak'ahs." [22, p 352] and "If anyone prays twelve rak'ahs in the forenoon, Allah will build for him a castle of gold in the paradise." [20, no. 1316]

All the Quranic verses and sayings of the Prophet mentioned above gave the Muslims clear guidelines to follow in their life in respect of the design and construction of all types of buildings which may be summarised as follows:

Life in this world is short whereas the life after death is eternal. So, this life should be simple and lived with modesty. One of the requirement of that is not to have buildings designed for anything more than the basic needs. And for good deeds in this life God will reward a believer with an affluent life in heaven including luxurious buildings.

Apart from architecture, other forms of art were also influenced by these edicts. According to Grube, "The experience of the infinite on the one hand, with the worthlessness of the transient earthly existence of man on the other is known to all Muslims and forms part of all Muslim art." [23, p 11]

Consequent upon such clear guidelines it is not surprising that, in the very early days of Islam, its people stuck wholly to these guidelines and refrained from acting in a way which could have been construed as being against the teachings of the Quran and traditions of the Prophet. As has been shown through the examples so far, these guidelines were followed for all types of buildings in the earliest Islamic architecture, e.g., mosques, dar al-imaras and the houses.

It is only after the establishment of a sizeable empire by the Umayyads, Muslim rulers started to think in terms of monumentality in their buildings. They felt it necessary to construct buildings comparable with those representing other religions existing in the conquered lands. The best known earliest example of this changing attitude is the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (692 AD) which, according to common belief, was Caliph Abd al Malik's way of glorifying Islam to the population of the erstwhile Christian land - the land which had the famous Church of the Holy Sepulchre and of which he was the governor before being elevated to be the Caliph. He was vigorously followed by his successor Al-Walid in a new era of Umayyad architectural splendor, which included the Great Mosque of Damascus and the Prophet's Mosque of Madinah. These buildings, among many other long-standing public buildings, were built by demolishing the earlier structures on the same sites to satisfy the growing need for additional space to serve the increasing number of followers. Unlike the previous practice of adding extensions to the existing buildings, this gave the designers complete freedom to create impressive and attractive forms thought necessary by the rulers. This period shows the beginning of utilizing the elements of a building, even the functional ones, to create a more visually attractive form irrespective of their usage requirements. We can take the example of minarets in a mosque, which appeared more frequently in conquered lands with predominantly non-Muslim population. In sizes and shapes they were beyond the requirement of calling the faithful to prayer and rose high in the sky as a symbolic presence of Islam.

However, even during this period of pomp and grandeur, there were dissenting voices that wanted to continue with austerity and frugality in all spheres of public and private life. During the demolition of the Prophet's mosque of Madinah in 710 AD, "according to Ibn Sa'd's 'Biography of Mohammed', when the dispatch of the Caliph Walid was read aloud, commanding that these houses should be taken down and the site brought within the area of the mosque... One exclaimed: I wish, by the Lord! That they would leave these houses alone just as they are..." [1, p 9] A similar account is available about the Great Mosque of Damascus. "The public treasury was looked upon as the property of the nation, and the right use of money in the eyes of the people was that it should be spent upon men rather than upon bricks and mortar. These ideas remained effective for long, so much so that when Walid ibn Abdul Malik spent a huge sum on building the Jami Masjid of Damascus, it spread much ill feeling in the public, and the people openly said that public funds were not meant for such extravagant expenditure". [12, p 278]

Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be said that although it is unlikely that one particular factor was wholly responsible for buildings of the earliest period of Islam being so simple and modest in spite of the heritage of its people as well as their exposure to the standard and character of buildings in the conquered lands, the influence put forward in this paper, i.e., the effects of religious edicts, was possibly the major one. It has always been the case in history that the immediate followers of a new religion have been willing to make greater sacrifices for the sake of the new faith than their successors. In the case of Islam, converted people, especially those from idolatry, readily accepted one of the main premises on which the religion of Islam was founded, i.e., a belief that many of the practices of the previous period known as 'the days of ignorance' (jahiliya) were wrong. The enthusiasm and fervency with which they embraced the religion made them give up most of these practices, particularly the ones involved with day-to-day life. It is only to be expected that this attitude would be extended to the practice of adopting modesty and austerity in their public and private buildings as advised by the Prophet.

Although this practice of austerity did not last very long, one significant observation may, however, be made about the maintenance of continuity of one aspect of the design of buildings of this early period and that is the simplicity and uncomplicated way in which these were planned. In spite of the buildings of the subsequent periods getting more and more visually attractive with the introduction of decorative features like geometric pattern, calligraphy, muqarnas, etc. along with new structural elements like domes, arches and vaults as well as additional functional elements like the minaret in a mosque, the plans of the buildings retained the same characteristics of using simple squares and rectangles as a generator of their forms. This is not only true about the plan of a mosque where a square or a rectangle is the most functional shape in respect of its use, but also for the design of other types of buildings and for the planning of towns and cities in the Islamic world.

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تأثير التعاليم الدينية على تصميم المساجد والمباني الأخرى في الفترة المبكرة للإسلام

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ملخص البحث: هناك شعور عام أن المباني التي تنتمي إلى العمارة الإسلامية–كالمساجد تمثل "فنا رفيعا" في تصميمها الداخلي والخارجي. ويرجع ذلك الاهتمام في تصميمها أو معالجة أسطحها بالنقوش الهندسية والخط العربي. كما أن وجود العناصر الإنشائية والوظيفية كالعقد، والقبة، والمنارة ...الخ والتي صارت رمزا مهما.

لم تكن تلك العناصر والسمات التي ذكرت أعلاه موجودة في مباني المساجد ودار الإمارة في العقدين الأولين للإسلام, بل كانت المباني بسيطة في تصميمها ووظيفتها. وعند الانتهاء من بناء قبة الصخرة في القدس في العام ٦٩٢م بدأت الأهمية البصرية للمباني التي استغرقت فترة تقارب السبعين عاما منذ تأسيس الدولة الإسلامية. وأول جامع يصل إلى ذلك المستوى هو إعادة بناء مسجد المدينة المنورة في عام ٧١٠م. ومع امتداد حكم المسلمين إلى حدود الهند في الشرق وأجزاء كبيرة من شمال أفريقيا في الغرب وتقريبا كل أواسط قارة آسيا في الشمال جعل المسلمون يتأثرون بالعمارة البيزنطية المتطورة بجانب العمارة الفارسية الساسانية. وكان الاعتقاد السائد عند المؤرخين المعماريين أن بساطة العمارة الإسلامية العربية ناتجة من عدم تقدير العرب لفنون العمارة ولكن هذا الأمر تدحضه الاكتشافات الأثرية في العقود الأخيرة والتي أظهرت أن للعرب ثراء وافر في تصميم المباني وإنشائها على مر الحقب التاريخية المختلفة.

أسس هذا المقال على بحث قام به المؤلف اظهر احتمال أن بساطة المسلم الأول تطورت كنتيجة مباشرة لتأثير الدين الإسلامي الوسط والذي كان حاضر في ذهن المسلمين الأوائل. ونجد ذلك في كثير من الآيات القرآنية والأحاديث التي أيد بها الباحث أطروحته.