

Islamic Art and Visual Culture

An Anthology of Sources

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§5.3 Ibn Jubayr: A Description of the Mosaics in the Medina Mosque

The Andalusian traveler Ibn Jubayr (1145–1217) made the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1184, a journey which took him across the Maghreb to Egypt, the Arabian peninsula, Mesopotamia, and Syria. In his written account, he described monuments and sights that he saw along the way, providing lively and detailed travel writing that served as a model (and source) for much later travel writing. In Medina in 1184, he saw the venerable mosque and tomb (*rawda*) of the Prophet, giving a detailed description of elements of decoration that are no longer in evidence, such as the representation of fruited trees in golden mosaic (*fusayfisa*). These adorned the mosque's courtyard facade in a manner akin to the mosaic program of the Damascus Mosque. The mosaics, which were added to this mosque during its expansion in the period 705–715, were most likely made by Christian artisans who had gained their skill working on the many mosaic programs adorning Byzantine churches in the eastern Mediterranean.

The lower half of the south wall is cased with marble, tile on tile, of varying order and colour: a splendid marquetry. The upper half is wholly inlaid with pieces of gold called *fusayfisa* in which the artist has displayed amazing skill, producing shapes of trees in divers forms, their branches laden with fruits. The whole Mosque is of this style, but the work in the south wall is more embellished. The wall looking on the court from the south side is of this manner, as also is that which does so from the north side. The west and east walls that overlook the court are wholly white and carved, and adorned with a band that contains various kinds of colours.

(Trans. Broadhurst, p. 202)

References

- R. J. C. Broadhurst (trans.), *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*. London: J. Cape, 1952.
 Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, ed. William Wright, 1852; 2nd edn. revised by M. J. De Goeje. Leiden, 1907; reprint, Bookchase, 2001.

Syria, Jordan, and Environs

§5.4 Dome of the Rock Inscriptions

The Dome of the Rock was built in 691 on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. Oleg Grabar has explained that, in addition to being one of the highest and most visible places in the city, the site had preexisting religious significance as the site of the first and second Jewish Temples and the place where Abraham had prepared to

sacrifice his son Isaac (or, in Arabic, Ishaq). It is the earliest surviving Islamic work of architecture and contains the earliest band of inscription, which is original to the building. The mosaic inscription consists primarily of Qur'anic passages, with the exception of the foundation inscription by the building's founder, the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 685–705), whose name was erased and replaced later by the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun. The inscription, 240 meters in length, runs around the outer and inner faces of the octagonal arcade, above the arches, forcing the visitor to walk first clockwise and then counterclockwise to complete the reading. It contains multiple verses from the Qur'an that seem to have been directed, at least in part, to the "People of the Book," i.e. Jews and Christians, and that clarify the role of Jesus and Mary vis-à-vis Islam. Grabar has interpreted this as an invitation to the *dhimmi* (the Jews and Christians) to join the new correct faith.

The inscription consists of Qur'anic passages (flagged in italics by Grabar) interspersed with formulaic blessings and prayers. According to him, this may reflect the historical moment of the monument's construction, when the Muslim community may not have had a complete and consistent text of the Qur'an.

Outer face:

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, there is no God but God, One, without associate. *Say He is God, alone, God the eternal. He does not beget nor is He begotten and there is no one like Him* (Q 112). Muhammad is the envoy of God, may God bless him. In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, there is no God but God, One, without associate. Muhammad is the envoy of God. *Indeed God and His angels bless the Prophet. O you who believe send blessings on him and salute him with full salutation* (Q 33:56). In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, there is no God but God, One. *Praise to God, who begets no son and who has no associate in power and who has no surrogate for (protection from) humiliations and magnify His greatness* (Q 17:111). Muhammad is the envoy of God, may God bless him and his angels and his envoys and peace unto him and the mercy of God, One and without associate. *To Him is dominion and to Him is praise; He gives life or death and He has power over all things* (combination of Q 64:1 and 57:2).

Verses are repeated, and then on the inner face:

O people of the Book, do not go beyond the bounds of your religion and do not say about God except the truth. Indeed the Messiah Jesus son of Mary was an envoy of God and his word he bestowed on her as well as a spirit from him. So believe in God and his envoys, and do not say "three"; desist, it is better for you. For indeed God is one God, glory be to Him that He should have a son. To Him belong what is in heaven and what is on earth and it is sufficient for Him to be a guardian. The Messiah does not disdain to be a servant of God, nor do the angels nearest [to him]. Those who disdain serving him and who are arrogant, He will gather all to Himself (Q 4:171–2). *Bless your envoy and your servant Jesus son of Mary and peace upon him on the day of birth and on the day of death and on the day he is raised up again.*



Figure 5 Inscription on interior walls of the Dome of the Rock.

This is Jesus son of Mary. It is a word of truth in which they doubt. It is not for God to take a son. Glory be to him when

He decrees a thing. He only says "be" and it is. Indeed God is my lord and your lord. Therefore serve Him, this is the straight path (Q 19: 33–6). *God bears witness that there is no God but He, (as do) the angels and those wise in justice. There is no God but He, the all-mighty, the all-wise. Indeed the religion of God is Islam. Those who were given the Book did not dissent except after knowledge came to them (and they became) envious of each other. Whosoever disbelieves in the signs of God, indeed God is swift in reckoning* (Q 3: 18–19).
(Grabar, pp. 91–2)

Reference

Oleg Grabar, *The Dome of the Rock*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006.

§5.5 Al-Yaʿqubi: On the Dome of the Rock as a Pilgrimage Site

Abu'l ʿAbbas Ahmad b. Abi Yaʿqub b. Jaʿfar b. Wahb b. Wadih was a historian and geographer who lived in the latter half of the ninth century. His *Taʾrikh* (History), written ca. 874, provides the earliest account of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (§5.4). The Umayyad monument was erected in 691–2, a time of deep political strife between the faction in Mecca, led by ʿAbd Allah b. Zubayr, and the faction in Jerusalem, led by ʿAbd al-Malik. This tension gave rise to the story related by