

For other mosques with similar names, see Jameh Mosque.

The Jāmeḥ Mosque of Isfahān or Jāme' Mosque of Isfahān (Persian: مسجد جامع اصفهان *Masjid-e-Jāmeḥ Isfahān*), also known as the Atiq Mosque (مسجد عتیق) and the Friday Mosque of Isfahān (مسجد جمعه), is a historic congregational mosque (Jāmeḥ) of Isfahan, Iran. The mosque is the result of continual construction, reconstruction, additions and renovations on the site from around 771 to the end of the 20th century. The Grand Bazaar of Isfahan can be found towards the southwest wing of the mosque. It has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2012.[1] It is one of the largest and most important monuments of Islamic architecture in Iran.[2]

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History[edit]

Early history[edit]

The first mosque on this site was built circa 771, during the reign of the Abbasid caliph Al-Mansur.[2] This first building was relatively small, measuring about 52 by 90 meters.[2] It was built in mud-brick and had stucco-decoration in the Syro-Mesopotamian style of Abbasid architecture.[2] Its remains were excavated in the 1970s during studies of the present-day mosque.[3]

The mosque was then replaced by a larger one in 840-841 during the reign of Al-Mu'tasim.[2][3] This new building measured around 88 by 128 meters and had a different qibla orientation than the first one.[2] It had a large central courtyard surrounded by an arcade and hypostyle hall of baked brick pillars supporting either a flat roof[2] or a roof of brick vaults.[3] The hypostyle hall, was two bays deep along the sides, four bays deep on the side opposite the qibla (the northwest), and six bays deep on the qibla side where the main prayer hall was. The aisle leading the mosque's mihrab was slightly wider than the other aisles.[3] There is no indication that the new mosque had a minaret, despite the existence of this feature in other mosques of the period.[3]

Under the control of the Buyid dynasty (10th-11th centuries) another arcade of polylobed brick piers was added around the courtyard, in front of the existing courtyard façades. Instead of the earlier stucco decoration, the new additions were decorated with patterns created with bricks laid in circles, diamond shapes, zigzags, and other geometric patterns similar to the brickwork found in other monuments from the Buyid period.[3][2] The exact date of this renovation is uncertain[3] but is estimated by some to be around 975 or the late 10th century.[4][2]

Seljuk period[edit]

The next great modifications of the mosque took place under the patronage of the Seljuks. Isfahan became the first capital of the Seljuk Empire after its conquest in 1050.[2] The Seljuks modified the relatively uniform and egalitarian form of the hypostyle building, first by replacing the columns in front of the mihrab (on the south side of the mosque) with a large domed space in 1086–87.[5][2] This was done under the patronage of Nizam al-Mulk, the famous vizier of Malik Shah.[5] The new dome was the largest masonry dome in the Islamic world at the time.[6] It has eight ribs and is supported on massive piers.[6][5] It also introduced a new type of squinch, consisting of a barrel vault placed above two quarter-domes, which was copied in other mosques shortly afterward.[6] The domed space may have been intended to act as a maqsura, an area reserved for the sultan and his entourage during prayers.[5]

In 1088–89 another dome was constructed on the north side of the mosque by Nizam al-Mulk's rival Taj al-Mulk.[5][6] The function of this domed chamber is uncertain. Although it was situated along the north–south axis, it was located outside the boundaries of the mosque.[6][5] The dome is considered a masterpiece of medieval Iranian architecture.[5][6] Unlike the simpler eight-ribbed dome of Nizam al-Mulk, the north dome has interlacing ribs the form pentagons and five-pointed star patterns across the dome, a significant technical and aesthetic advancement.[6] The lower walls of the chamber have a lighter and more elegant appearance, while the various elements of the wall and dome are also better-aligned vertically, leading one's gaze upward.[5][6]

The next major transformation stage took place by the early 12th century, probably after the mosque was damaged by fire in 1121–22.[5] In order to enhance the approach to the domed chamber of the mihrab, which stood in isolation amidst the older hypostyle hall, the columned space between the dome and the courtyard was replaced by a large iwan (a vaulted hall open to one side). This large barrel-vaulted hall is open to the courtyard on one side and leads to the domed hall through a doorway on the other side. To compliment it, the builders created three more monumental iwans at the middle of each other side of the courtyard. The southern iwan of the courtyard (leading to the mihrab) was distinguished from the other iwans by being larger and embellished with large tiers of muqarnas (a three-dimensional geometrical composition of niches). These transformations resulted in giving the mosque its current four-iwan form, a type of layout which subsequently became prevalent in Iran and other parts of the Islamic world.[5] In addition to the four iwans, the remaining bays of the old hypostyle halls were renovated with cross-ribbed vaults. There are around 200 of these smaller vaults and they all have different designs and display a rich variety of geometric decoration.[5][6] Some of this work was probably done in the late 11th or early 12th centuries, but the chronology of construction here is unclear and many vaults likely date from different periods of repair and renovation.[5][2][7]

South iwan of the courtyard (leading to the mihrab chamber)

Detail and muqarnas vaulting in the southern iwan

West iwan of the courtyard

East iwan of the courtyard

North iwan of the courtyard

Interior and detail of the northern iwan

Example of the variety of smaller domes in the hypostyle prayer hall

Later changes and additions[edit]

After this, the later changes to the mosque were more limited. Nonetheless, nearly every period saw some work done on the mosque, reflecting the changing needs of the community and the changing tastes of new rulers.[2][5] Under the Ilkhanid sultan Uljaytu (r. 1304–1317), the arcade around the sides of the courtyard was vertically divided into two levels, as it appears today.[2] Uljaytu also created another rectangular prayer hall or "winter hall" adjoining the north side of the western iwan of the mosque. This hall is covered by a series of remarkable transverse vaults, while its southern wall features an elaborately-carved stucco mihrab dated to 1310.[5][2] Under the Muzaffarids a madrasa, known as the Muzaffarid Madrasa, was added on the east side of the mosque and another prayer hall on the west, both beyond the former outer wall of the mosque.[2][8] This work was done possibly by Qutb al-Din Shah Mahmud, the governor of Isfahan (r. 1358–1375) who disputed the throne with his brother Shah Shuja.[2][9]

In the 15th century changes were limited to various repairs. The vaulted ceiling of Uljaytu's prayer hall was reconstructed and many of the smaller vaults and domes of the hypostyle hall may date from this time. [2] A new prayer hall was added on the southeast corner. The façades of the courtyard were also progressively decorated with tilework. In particular, the rich tilework covering the façade of the southern iwan today was originally added under the patronage of the Aq Qoyunlu ruler Uzun Hasan in 1475–6.[2]

Most Safavid rulers did work on the mosque, except for Shah Abbas I who was more preoccupied with his new constructions around the Naqsh-e Jahan Square. During this period some parts of the prayer halls were enlarged and new tile revetment were added to the iwans and minarets. The Muzaffarid prayer hall on the west side was replaced with a larger "winter prayer hall" during this time, distinguished by its wide, low arches.[2][8]

Further repairs and restorations were carried out under the later Afsharid and Qajar dynasties and up to modern times.[2]

Ilkhanid prayer hall (early 14th century)

The stucco mihrab of Uljaytu (1310) in the Ilkhanid prayer hall

Details of the mihrab

Transverse vault ceiling in the Ilkhanid prayer hall

Mihrab and prayer space of the Muzaffarid Madrasa (14th century)

Part of the tile decoration in the southern iwan, added by Uzun Hasan in 1475–6

"Winter prayer hall" built by the Safavids, replacing an earlier Muzaffarid hall

Detail of minaret and tile decoration from later periods

Present day[edit]

The mosque today is an amalgamation of different styles and periods coalesced into one building, the details of which cannot always be easily dated.[10] Its perimeter is now thoroughly enmeshed with the surrounding structures of the bazaar and the old city, such that it presents very few clear exterior façades.[8]

One of the entrances to the mosque today, on the west side

Model of the mosque today, showing its various elements from above

See also[edit]

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[History of Persian domes](#)