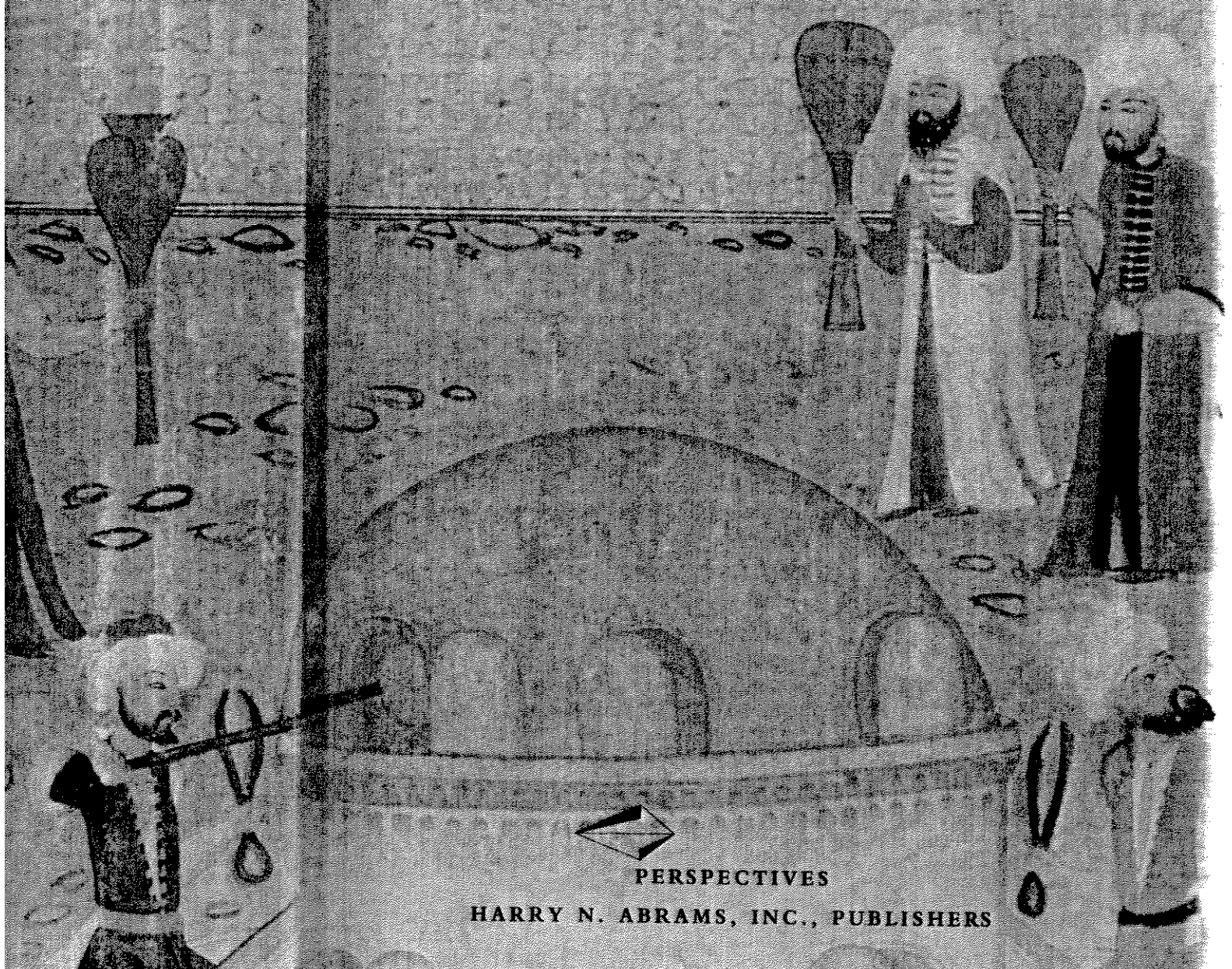


Islamic Art in Context

Art, Architecture, and the Literary World

Robert Irwin



PERSPECTIVES

HARRY N. ABRAMS, INC., PUBLISHERS

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Frontispiece Parade of the Guild of Ottoman Potters, pages 136–37 (detail)

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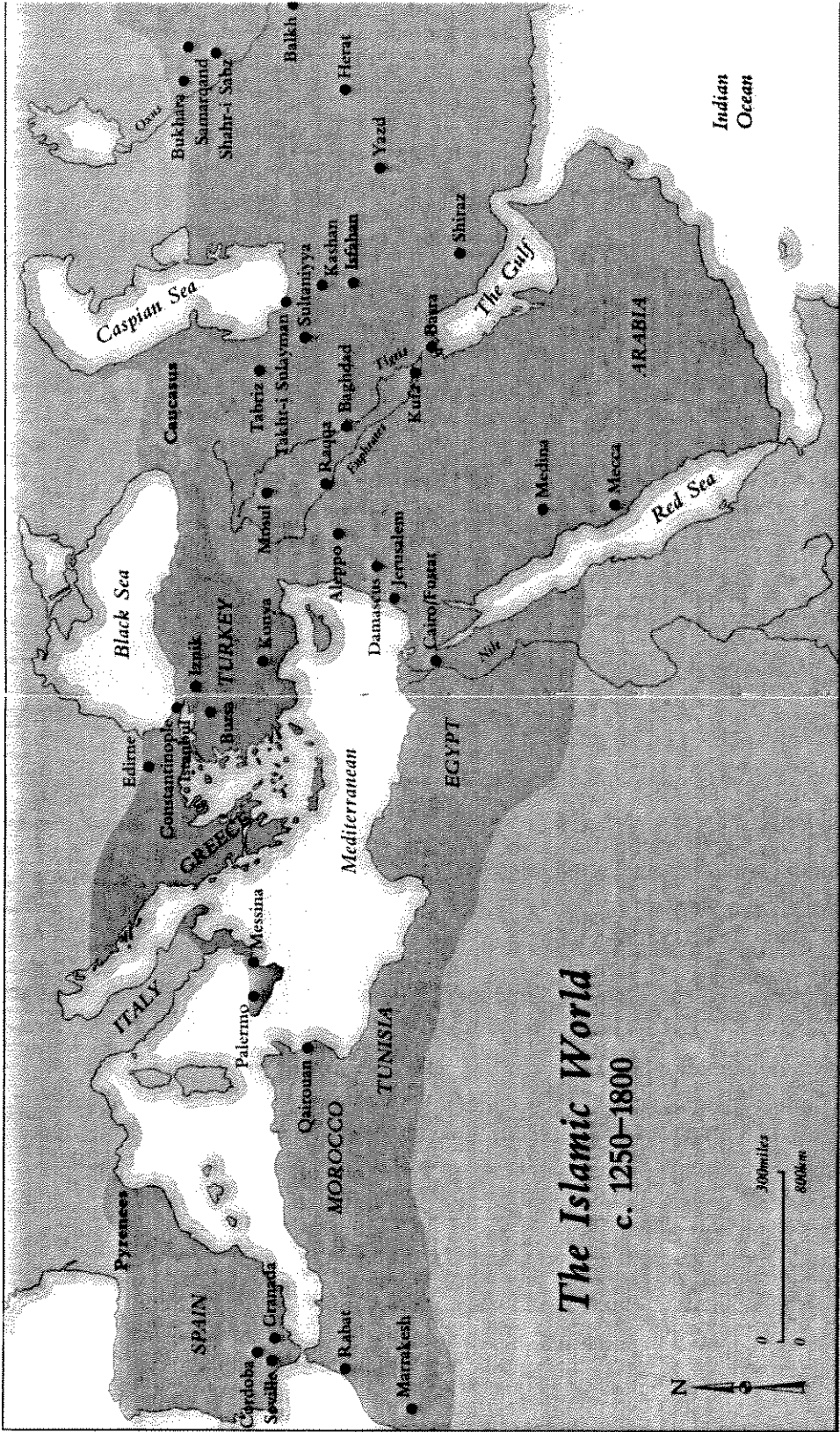
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1. Imaginary portrait of Mānī from Safavid Iran, 16th century. Illuminated manuscript, 27 x 6 7/8" (6.4 x 16 cm). British Museum, London.

It became a convention of Islamic art to compare the most important of the later Islamic miniaturists to Mānī; and the fact that all of Mānī's paintings had vanished was regularly cited by Muslim authorities as an example of the vanity and transience of all art.

Introduction

It should be said at the outset that this book is not a strict chronological survey of Islamic art. Rather, it adopts a more thematic and discursive approach, in order to investigate some important issues which would be difficult to deal with in a chronological framework. It discusses objects produced in the semi-arid zone extending from Spain and Morocco to Afghanistan, but not the Muslim art of India, South-East Asia, or sub-Saharan Africa. The period it covers extends from approximately the fifth century AD to the end of the seventeenth century. Many studies of Islamic art cease at around 1600, a date that certainly represents an important pinnacle of cultural achievement in the Muslim world. However, it seemed desirable to me to extend the coverage of the book to include such matters as the rise of the cult of the individual artist (FIG. 1) and the growing importance of guilds. I also hope that the literature about architecture and painting which begins to be produced in the Muslim world from the sixteenth century onwards will shed some retrospective light on the works of earlier centuries. (The Christian calendar has been used for dates throughout, but the timeline at the end of the book – see pages 258–61 – attempts to redress the balance by giving dates in both the Muslim and Christian calendars.)

Courtiers and intellectuals in the Islamic world loved to debate such topics as poetry, ethics, food, and sex; and the results of their discussions were often written down. However, they rarely if ever discussed the visual arts or the philosophy of aesthetics, nor did they write books about paintings or buildings. Therefore, in order to find written evidence about the way medieval Muslims thought and wrote about their art, I have had to scavenge widely, and in this book I draw upon a varied range of written sources in what must be seen as being a personal and to some extent an eclectic choice. The works from which I quote include poetry, *belles-*



1. Imaginary portrait of Mani from Safavid Iran, 16th century. Illuminated manuscript, 2½ x 6¼" (6.4 x 16 cm). British Museum, London.

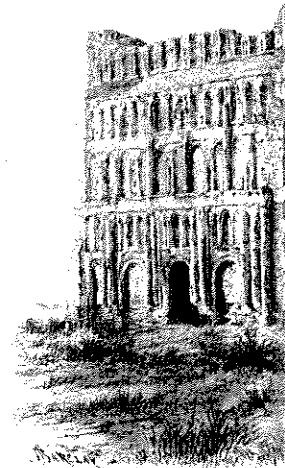
It became a convention of Islamic art to compare the most important of the later Islamic miniaturists to Mani; and the fact that all of Mani's paintings had vanished was regularly cited by Muslim authorities as an example of the vanity and transience of all art.

lettres, travel narratives, chronicles, mystical meditations, treatises on optics, and much else.

It is a convenient, serviceable shorthand to call the subject matter of this book "Islamic art," despite the fact that it begins over a century before the Prophet Muhammad first preached the message of Islam. It should also be remembered that by no means all art to be so conventionally described was produced by or for Muslims. When Western art historians talk or write about "Islamic art," they are not talking about a body of material that is in any sense the equivalent of a like body of material in European Christian art. A book on Christian art in Europe would almost certainly restrict itself to a narrow range of specifically religious material, including perhaps cathedrals, churches, altarpieces, censers, and chasubles. By long-standing convention, books on Islamic art discuss any and all works of art and architecture produced by craftspeople who either lived under Muslim regimes or who were Muslims living under Christian regimes, such as the *mudejars* of Spain. Moreover, students hitherto only familiar with Western art may be surprised to find so much space devoted to what in Europe or America would be classified as "minor arts," such as ceramics and metalwork, but, as will be demonstrated, the Western distinction between major and minor art forms does not apply within the Islamic cultural area.

The idea of an "Islamic art" is itself in many ways a Western construct. Muslim artists tended to think of themselves as Mosulīs, Heratis, or Cordobans rather than as citizens of any religious or dynastic empire. As for the Western word "art," in its fine sense of "the application of skill to subjects of taste," the corresponding Arabic word *fann* does not correspond very precisely. In the Middle Ages *fann* (pl. *funun*) meant a type, a mode, or a manner. By extension it came to mean a type of skill or craft. Only in modern times has the word acquired a more aesthetic sense, as in *al-funun al-mustazrafa*, "the fine arts."

The study of Islamic art in the West is still in its infancy, and our comprehension of it is far less developed than that of quattrocento Italian or seventeenth-century Dutch art. In this book, I attempt to place Islamic art in a social, economic, and intellectual context and, as I said, in order to do so, I draw heavily on various literary sources. Such material provides some evidence, however faint, about what medieval Muslims saw when they looked at their art and how they described that art to themselves. I also discuss works of art including buildings that once existed but have now been lost, rather than threading a narrative around only those works that happen to have been preserved in the museums of



the West. It is frightening to think how much has perished. Very little has been subject to earthquake damage and simple day-to-day wear and tear remain to provide the material for study (FIG. 2). Literary material is also scarce, so, what is proposed here is a study of Islamic art. Much may still be done by a critical analysis.

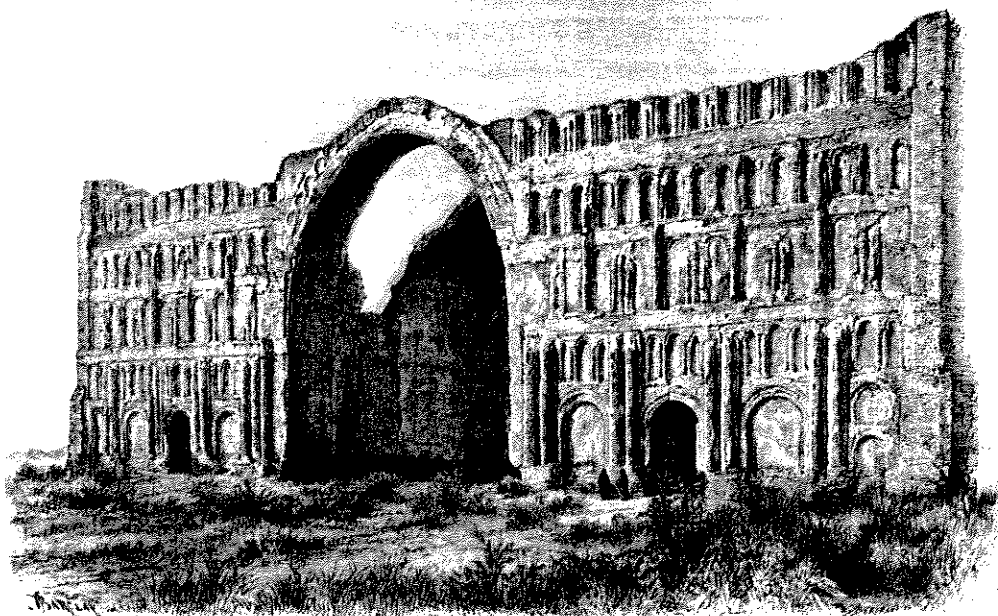
Whilst I have tried to cover a wide field of Islamic art, the book represents a personal selection. I am notably fond of *minai* ware, but other factors are at work. My aim is not to overvalue the figurative or the calligraphic. I have included examples on the basis that they are good examples of materials. However, I have included examples of calligraphy, miniature, and metalwork, which was the most important part of the discipline. Many Western readers to whom the discipline remains difficult

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and to call the subject matter the fact that it begins over and first preached the message that by no means was produced by or for folk or write about "Islamic" of material that is in any material in European Christendom would almost certainly specifically religious material, altarpieces, censers, and books on Islamic art discourse produced by craftsmen or who were Muslim as the *mudejars* of Spain. familiar with Western art may voted to what in Europe for arts," such as ceramics strated, the Western discipline does not apply within

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Western art is still in its infancy, undeveloped than that of quattrocento Dutch art. In this book, economic, and intellectual, so, I draw heavily on various sources, and I cite some evidence, how they saw when they looked at art to themselves. I also that once existed but have been revived around only those preserved in the museums of



the West. It is frightening to discover from literary sources how much has perished. Very nearly the entire corpus of Islamic art has been subject to earthquakes, wars, iconoclasm, cultural looting, and simple day-to-day wear, so that in many cases only fragments remain to provide the material for art-historical conjectures (FIG. 2). Literary materials can fill some of the gaps, but even so, what is proposed here is only a way (not the way) of looking at Islamic art. Much may still be clarified by archaeology and technical analysis.

Whilst I have tried to provide some coverage of the whole field of Islamic art, the objects discussed in detail necessarily represent a personal selection. I know, for example, that I am unreasonably fond of *minai* and *lajvardina* ceramics. But there are other factors at work. Most Western historians of Islamic art tend to overvalue the figurative at the expense of the abstract and the calligraphic. I have gone along with this bias to an extent, on the basis that it is easier to relate figurative works to literary materials. However, I have also included some discussion of examples of calligraphy, mindful that for medieval Muslims calligraphy was the most important art form of all, despite the fact that for many Western readers the appreciation of this somewhat austere discipline remains difficult.

2. Nineteenth-century engraving of the great *iwan* or portal of the palace of Khusraw I at Ctesiphon (early 7th century).

Sasanian architects pioneered the *iwan*, a large vaulted chamber with an open end, which was to become a key feature of Islamic architecture. The engraving is a valuable record of a site where little of what is shown here survives today.

From time to time I make use of topographical terms such as the "Middle East." Many of these terms cannot be used with precision, as the area they refer to has been changed many times. Reference to the map at the beginning of this book (see pages 8–9) will clarify the way in which they are used here; in this case, "Middle East" is used in its current sense of all the countries of Asia west of Tibet, excluding the Indian subcontinent. On the other hand, when I refer to "Syria" in this book, I am referring not just to the territory that forms the present-day republic, but to the medieval region of Sham, a territory that also included Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, and part of south-east Turkey. "Asia Minor" is used to refer to what are now the most western territories of Turkey, and "Anatolia" for the interior plateau of these regions. For transliterated words I have dispensed with diacriticals, and used the most common standard forms adopted in modern texts such as the *Encyclopedia of Islam*. A glossary is included in the endmatter of the book (see pages 262–63). For the purposes of clarity this book uses the common English version of a name rather than the Arabic or Iranian one (for example, Jerusalem, not al-Quds). Iran and Iranian are used to refer to the territory now occupied by the Republic of Iran. Persia and Persian are used to refer to a broader written and visual culture.

Inevitably, there are a number of technical, historical, and political terms in this book that will initially be unfamiliar to some readers. Many of these, such as caliph or emir, are explained in the first chapter, as part of the history of the origins of the Islamic state. The majority of specialised artistic terms are explained in the text at the point where they are first introduced. Again, the glossary at the back of the book provides thumbnail explanations to which the reader is encouraged to refer.

The issue of the non-representational nature of Islamic art is something that any study of the subject needs to address. The one "fact" that people who know little in even general terms about Islamic art think they know is that representational art is forbidden in Islam. This, however, as we shall see, is an oversimplification of a complex issue, but it remains one of the commonest misconceptions about Islamic art. It is true that many devout Muslims opposed the use of any images of a representational nature in art or architecture; and that the preference for decoration of a calligraphic and abstract nature, which is in itself one of the chief glories and achievements of Islamic art, may be related to the widespread opposition to and dislike of figurative art. Some authorities held that figurative art had been explicitly forbidden by the Koran and the Prophet Muhammad, the founder

of Islam. But as we shall see, it is not permissible, in certain circumstances, to use certain representations of living things.

Chapter One of this book deals with the history of Islamic art, particularly with the Hellenistic, Byzantine and Sasanian civilisations, and the early history of Islam and the developing structure of the Islamic world. Chapter Two briefly the main movements of Islamic art, and Chapter Three provides a thematic discussion of Islamic art in the rest of the book. Chapter Four charts the development of Islamic society, its decorative arts, religious foundations and institutions, and some of the most important works of art. Chapter Four continues the discussion of fine and decorative arts, and the role of figurative and non-figurative art, and the role of princely patronage. Chapter Five discusses the cultural and artistic patronage of the Islamic world. Chapter Six focuses on the relationship between art and literature, and the interaction of art and literature in the Islamic world, in particular the way authors used art in their literary texts. Chapter Seven discusses the astrological and "magical" aspects of Islamic art, and the influence of Islamic art on the West and Islam and China. Chapter Eight deals with the hitherto somewhat neglected area of architecture in the Islamic world, in particular the artistic and architectural contributions of the West and Islam and China. Chapter Nine assesses and sums up our knowledge of Islamic art, and indicates which important questions remain to be answered.

topographical terms such as *lands* cannot be used with the same meaning as they have been changed many times. In the Introduction of this book (see pages 8–9) I used here; in this case, “Middle East” covers all the countries of Asia and the eastern part of the continent. On the other hand, in the Introduction of the first book, I am referring not to the modern-day republic, but to the region that also included Palestine and eastern Turkey. “Asia Minor” covers the easternmost western territories of the Anatolian plateau of these regions. The terms are used with diacriticals, and used as they are in modern texts such as those included in the endmatter of this book for the purposes of clarity this time in the use of a name rather than a description (Jerusalem, not al-Quds). The term *territory* now occupied by the region is used to refer to a broader

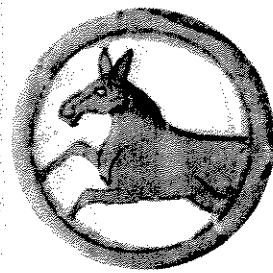
geographical, historical, and political nature of Islamic art, which may be unfamiliar to some readers. The origins of the Islamic art terms are explained in the Introduction. Again, the Introduction is a thumbnail explanation to refer.

The geographical nature of Islamic art and its subject needs to be addressed. The Introduction in even general terms that representational art is what we shall see, is an overstatement; it remains one of the most important forms of Islamic art. It is true that many of the images of a representational art show the preference for decorative art, which is in itself one of the features of Islamic art, may be due to the dislike of figurative art that had been explicitly forbidden by Muhammad, the founder

of Islam. But as we shall see, many Muslims believed that it was permissible, in certain circumstances at least, to paint or sculpt the representations of living things.

Chapter One of this book deals with the pre-Islamic roots of Islamic art, particularly with sources in the cultures of the Byzantine and Sasanian civilisations. Chapter Two focuses on the rise of Islam and the developing structure of the Islamic state, and describes briefly the main movements, periods, and dynasties in the history of Islam to provide a chronological framework for the more thematic discussion of Islamic art and architecture that follows in the rest of the book. Chapter Three begins this thematic approach, charting the development and use of the mosque, its role within Islamic society, its decoration and furnishing, and describing related religious foundations and institutions, before focusing in detail on some of the most important religious buildings in the Islamic world. Chapter Four continues this discussion in the context of the fine and decorative arts, and deals in more detail with the question of figurative and non-figurative art, as well as the history of princely patronage. The palace as a vital centre of architectural and artistic patronage and display is discussed in Chapter Five. Chapter Six focuses on the lives and careers of specific artists, together with the techniques and materials of Islamic art. The interaction of art and literature is discussed in Chapter Seven, in particular the way authors wrote about art and the illustration of literary texts. Chapter Eight looks at the characteristic presence of astrological and “magical” elements in Islamic art as a consequence of the influence of Islamic discoveries in the sciences. Chapter Nine deals with the hitherto somewhat neglected importance of art and architecture in the Islamic world’s contact with other cultures, in particular the artistic traffic between Islam and the Christian West and Islam and China. The Conclusion of this book attempts to assess and sum up our knowledge of Islamic art, as well as indicating which important questions must be considered as still open.

Chapter
ONE *



3. The Hagia Sophia mosque in Istanbul, begun AD 532 by Justinian I, converted into a mosque by Mehmed II (r. 1451–81).

The Hagia Sophia became an object of emulation for Ottoman Turkish architects. The illustration shows the mosque with its recently installed and inspiring lighting scheme.

ONE



The Historical Background

The rise of Islam amongst the largely nomadic Arab peoples of the Arabian peninsula in the seventh century AD was an event that astounded contemporary commentators, and its subsequent emergence as the dominant power across the whole of the area now referred to as the Middle East, and even further afield, was impossible for them to have anticipated. According to a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, "Islam destroys all that preceded it." However, it is not now accepted as accurate to see the teachings of Islam as creating a watershed in the arts and architecture of this immense and diverse region. Modern scholars particularly stress the early influence of the art of antiquity on that which was to be produced in the countries which we now regard as "Islamic." These influences were transmitted to Islamic art chiefly through the cultural heritage of the Sasanian (Iranian) and Graeco-Roman Byzantine empires (FIG. 4). An examination of the background to Islam is therefore essential to any study of its art and architecture.

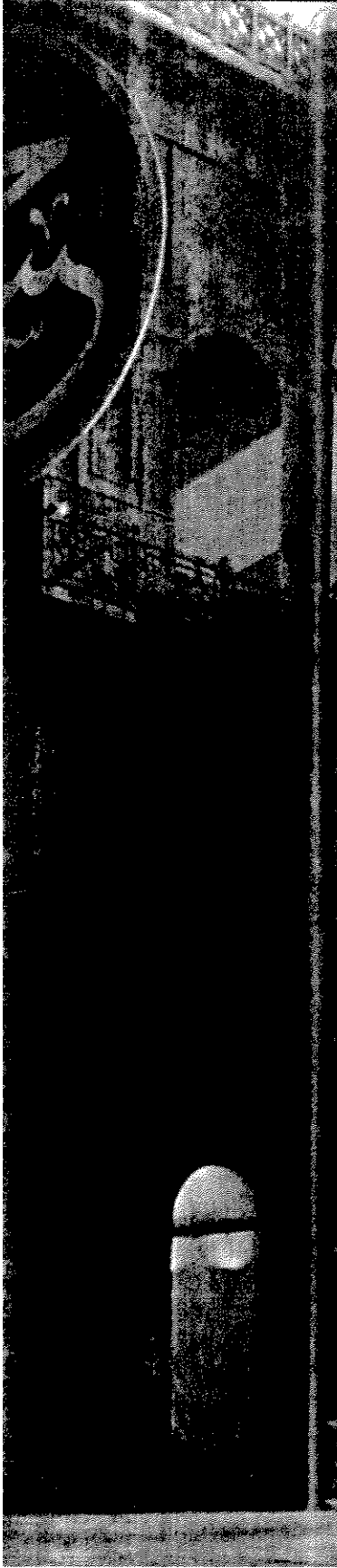
In the fifth and sixth centuries AD, prior to the rise of Islam, the peoples of the Arabian peninsula played only a marginal part in what was already a highly urbanised and sophisticated culture, dominated by the two great superpowers of this era, the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, which sandwiched the peninsula to the north-west and north-east respectively (FIG. 5).

The Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine empire had been created out of the eastern half of the Roman empire, after the decline of the imperial Roman state in the west. Its most important city was Constantinople

3. The Hagia Sophia mosque in Istanbul, begun AD 532 by Justinian I, converted into a mosque by Mehmed II (r. 1451–81).

The Hagia Sophia became an object of emulation for Ottoman Turkish architects. The illustration shows the mosque with its recently installed and inspiring lighting scheme.





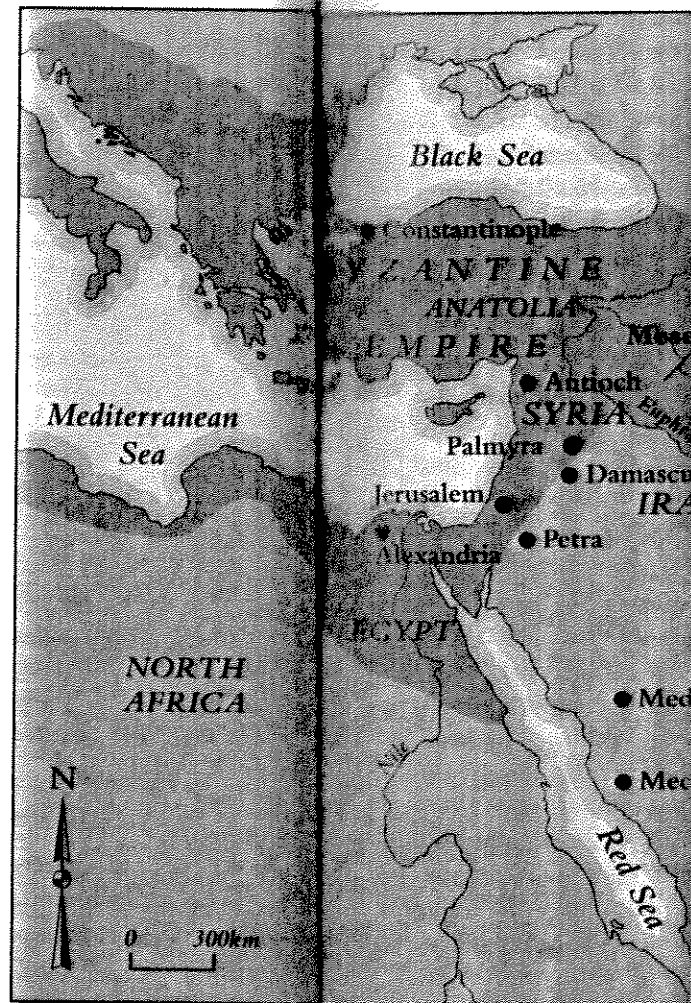
4. Muslim fals or copper coin with the image of a stereotypical Byzantine emperor, 7th or 8th century AD. Copper, diameter $\frac{1}{4}$ " (2 cm). British Museum, London.

5. The Pre-Islamic Middle East.

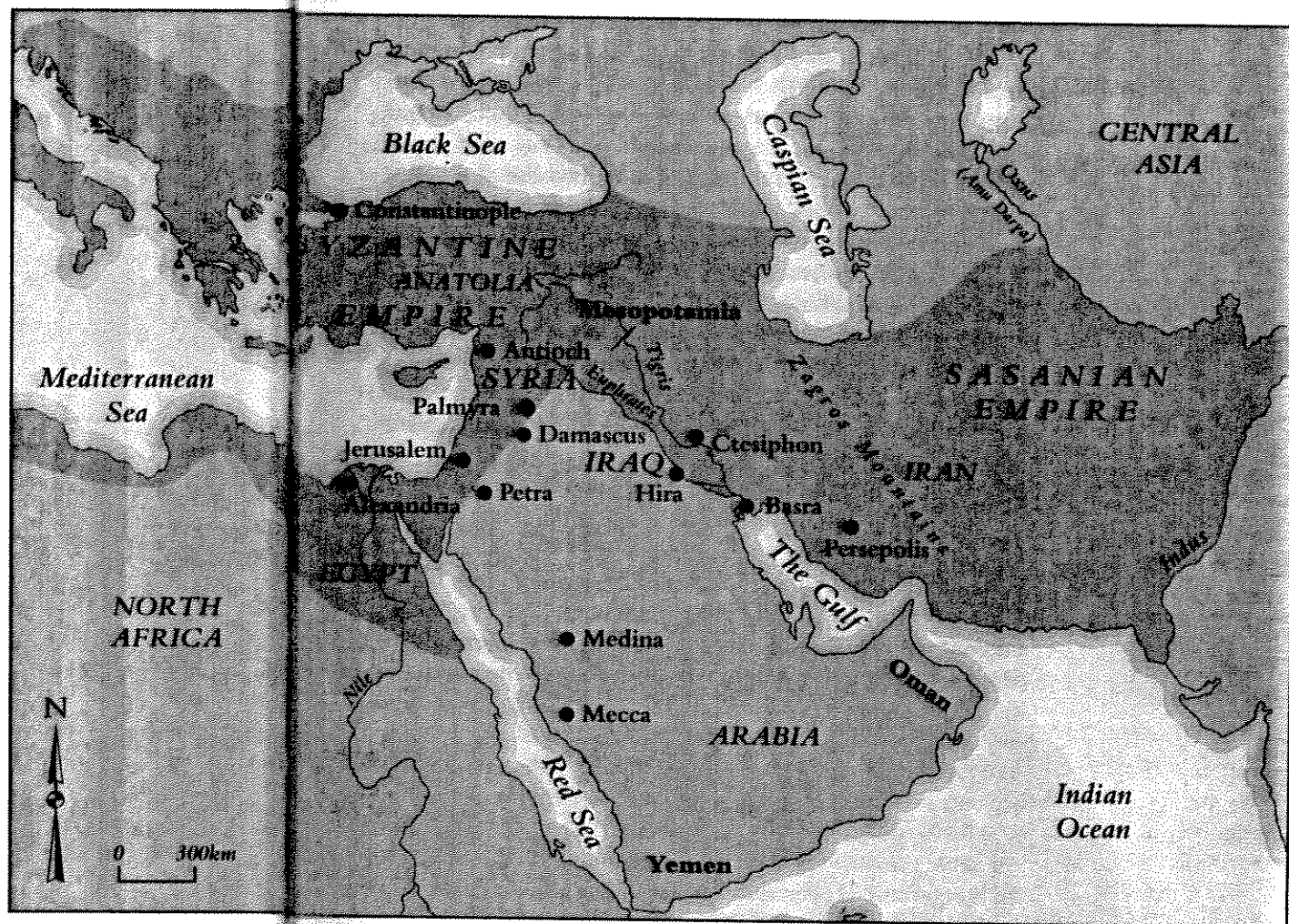
(present-day Istanbul), on the Bosphorus, officially declared the capital of this eastern empire by the emperor Constantine (c. AD 274–337) in AD 330. The Byzantine empire itself comprised at this time most of the Balkans, Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt and was beginning to range westwards as far as areas of the North African coast. The official state religion, ever since the conversion of Constantine in about AD 313, had been Christianity – the Greek Orthodox church. However, the borders of the empire enclosed many other Christian sects and communities, as well as a substantial Jewish population.

As one would expect, with its strong Graeco-Roman roots, what one might call the cultural “currency” of Byzantine art was greatly influenced by its pagan classical inheritance. Byzantine scholars, for example, were steeped in the works of such pre-Christian figures as Homer, Thucydides, and Sophocles. Byzantine silver often features both classical and mythological subjects, and pagan decorative imagery was to be found even in religious contexts (FIG. 6).

Before the rise of Islam, the Byzantine empire had experienced its most recent heyday in the reign of the emperor Justinian (r. AD 527–65). During this period the great church of Hagia Sophia, that most well-known of all Byzantine monuments (and one which was to inspire generations of Islamic architects), was built in Constantinople (FIG. 3, see page 17). Justinian also rebuilt the Syrian city of Antioch after 540: the Byzantine historian Procopius (c. 499–c. 565) relates in his treatise *Buildings* how “he [the Emperor] laid it out with stoas and agoras, dividing all the blocks of houses by means of streets and making water-channels, fountains and sewers, all of which the city now boasts. He built theatres and baths for it, ornamenting it with all the other buildings by which the



6. Byzantine pagan imagery of Silenus and Hermitag.



6. Byzantine silver plate decorated with pagan imagery of a dancing maenad and Silenus carrying a wine skin. Silver. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.



prosperity of a city is wont to be shown." However, the great plague, spreading through Egypt, Syria, and Asia Minor, reached Constantinople late in 541 or early in 542. This, and renewed military conflict later in the century with its powerful Sasanian neighbour, was to lead to a change in the typically urban civilisation of the Byzantine empire. Monumental public buildings were neglected, broad avenues were encroached on by shops and shanties, theatres and forums of the classical past were abandoned. The reasons for the change are not altogether clear, but demographic decline, the fall of urban revenues, and the preference for pack animals over wheeled vehicles may all have had a role in shaping the new ways in which urban space was used. But one can say that the sort of city thought of as typically Islamic – divided into quarters with narrow twisting alleyways – was already coming into being in the fifth and sixth centuries.

The Sasanians

The Sasanian dynasty had been founded by Ardashir I (AD 208–40) when he overthrew the Parthian empire in AD 224. The Sasanians became Rome's (and later, naturally the Byzantine empire's) fiercest challenger in the East. Their empire stretched from the Indus and Oxus rivers in the east to the Euphrates and Byzantine-controlled regions of Mesopotamia in the west. Successive generations of Sasanian rulers had sought to expand their empire, and had once even taken Syria and the Nile Delta from the Byzantines. Conflict between the two superpowers of the region was endemic but never ruinous, and during the reign of the emperor Justinian these areas had been reconquered by the Byzantine army.

The official Sasanian religion was Zoroastrianism, named after the sixth-century BC prophet and visionary Zoroaster. This was a dualistic faith which conceived all creation as a never-ending struggle between the forces of good and those of evil. Like the Greek Orthodox church in the Byzantine empire, Zoroastrianism was not the only religion practised in the Sasanian territories. Its main rival was another dualistic religion, Manicheism, whose importance to Islamic art is that its founder, Mani (AD 216–77; see FIG. 1), was – according to Arab and Persian tradition at least – also the nonpareil of painters and used paintings to illustrate his message.

Relations between the Sasanian and Byzantine cultures were complex. The Sasanians were well acquainted with the themes and techniques of Roman and Byzantine architecture, and in the course of their wars had captured large numbers of Greeks and other

Byzantine subjects. Some of these were employed as artisans, and they were used in many building projects. In addition, the Sasanians employed many Syriac speakers with particular skill, particularly in what is now Syria. Syriac speakers were common in the Byzantine culture, which may help explain the feature of Dionysiac imagery taken from the Romans via Byzantium – rather fleshy and not very decorative – sort of vine scroll would be noted, was the cultural heritage of the Byzantines were fascinated by the peacock, the palm, and the phoenix, which were introduced into the repertoire of Byzantine art.



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Byzantine subjects. Some of their captives seem to have been skilled artisans, and they were used as part of the labour force for grand building projects. In addition, there are frequent references to Sasanian employment of Byzantine architects. There were also many Syriac speakers within the frontiers of the Sasanian empire, particularly in what is now Iraq and north-west Iran, and educated Syriac speakers were commonly familiar with Graeco-Roman culture, which may help explain why Sasanian drinking vessels can feature Dionysiac imagery (FIG. 7). The Sasanians also seem to have taken their characteristic decorative use of the scrolling vine from the Romans via Byzantine art. Sasanian vine scrolls are typically rather fleshy and not very sinuous; in the Islamic period, this sort of vine scroll would evolve into the arabesque. Nor, it should be noted, was the cultural traffic between the two all one way, for the Byzantines were fascinated by such Sasanian motifs as the peacock, the palm, and the winged crown, which were all absorbed into the repertoire of Byzantine decorative motifs.

7. Sasanian plate decorated with the Triumph of Dionysos, 4th century. Silver-gilt, diameter 8 1/4" (22.6 cm). British Museum, London.

An example of the survival of pagan classical imagery on the silverware of both the Christian Byzantines and the Sasanian Persians. Other images from Graeco-Roman culture found on such examples of Sasanian silverware include the winged horse Pegasus, and even figures from the dramas of Euripides.



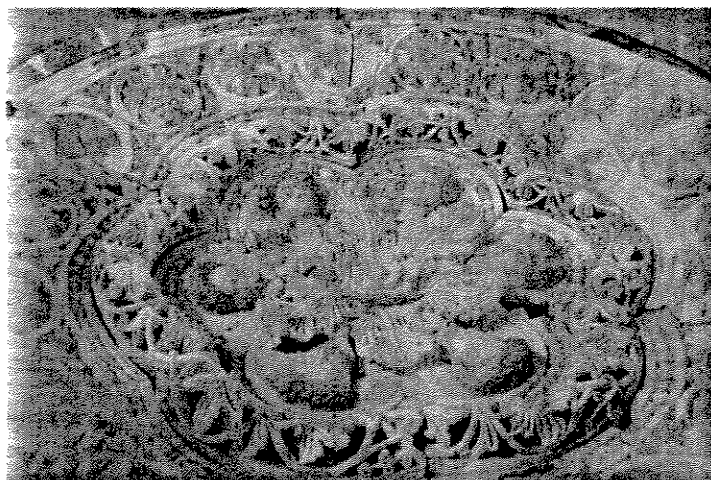
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8. Dome cap from the ceiling of the bathhouse of the Umayyad palace at Khirbat al-Mafjar in modern Israel (AD 740–50). Stucco. Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums, Jerusalem.

The Umayyads were amongst the first dynasties of Islamic rulers, and were in power from AD 661 to 750. The heads and foliage decorating this stucco dome cap clearly show the influence of imagery of the late classical period, filtered through Byzantine art. It also shows how secular art – at least of the Umayyad period – could make free use of representations of the human figure.

The Cultural Heritage

Examples such as the later Islamic use of the Sasanian vine scroll suggest just how strongly the forms and themes of art in the early Islamic period were influenced by, and should be seen as a continuation of, those of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires. It is impossible in this book to give a complete list of all the influences one might trace from these two civilisations in Islamic art, but examples of two or three of the most important in each case are indispensable. Indeed, Islamic art can be seen as being as much an heir to the culture of the late classical period as was the art of Christendom in the West and that of Byzantium itself (FIG. 8).



Opposite

9. Frontispiece to a copy of Ibn al-Mubashir's 11th-century *Mukhtar al-Hikam* (*Selection of Wise Sayings*), showing a group of Greek philosophers, first half of the 13th century. Illuminated manuscript, 9 1/4 x 5 1/2" (25 x 14.2 cm). Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul.

The *Mukhtar* (1053) is an anthology of sayings of the Greek philosophers, though the vaguely oriental dress of this group does not immediately suggest their nationality.

The Byzantine Inheritance in Islamic Art

The issue of the non-representation of living creatures in Islamic art has already been raised in the introduction to this book, but the drift away from representational art and a corresponding preference for geometric and stylised vegetal decoration did not begin with the preaching of Islam. Already in sixth-century Byzantine art there is a steady decline in the use of portraiture, and where human figures in this period are depicted, they seem to embody "types" rather than appearing to be portraits modelled from the life. For example, where portraits appear in manuscripts (FIG. 9), they are plainly shaped more by conventions of suitable physiognomy than by any real concern with replicating the actual appearance of the person. From as early as the fourth century there had also been a decline in the production of freestanding sculptures, and Byzantine sculptors instead began experimenting with various



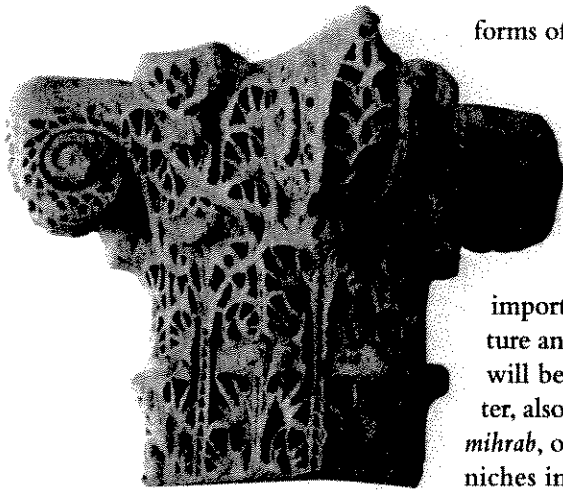
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10. Corinthian capital from Cordoba, 10th century. Marble, height 14 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (36.2 cm). Museo Arqueologico Provincial de Cordoba.

forms of abstract ornament, including a new style of deep-cutting on capitals that gave a lacework effect – strikingly similar to the appearance of the stonework in the much later Umayyad palaces in Damascus and Cordoba (FIG. 10).

In architecture too, the cultural inheritance from the Byzantines was of great importance. The development of the typical structure and furnishings of the Muslim mosque, which will be discussed in more detail in the third chapter, also had Byzantine precedents. For example, the *mihrab*, or prayer niche, had a forerunner in the use of niches in Byzantine secular architecture. The *minbar*, or Muslim pulpit, probably derived from the Byzantine *ambo*, or lectern; while the *maqsura* (a special enclosure in the mosque for the ruler and his entourage) is likely to have been modelled on the Byzantine *kathisma*, or royal box. Byzantine sixth-century experiments with domes were continued by Muslim architects, and the deployment of the dome as an honorific marker over the area in front of a *mihrab*, or over a mausoleum, may have derived from the similar use of the dome as an honorific marker in later Roman palaces. The desert palaces of the early Islamic Umayyad dynasty in seventh- and eighth-century Syria can easily be confused with Roman villas (and nineteenth-century scholars and archaeologists did indeed so confuse them). Islamic architects of the Turkish Ottoman dynasty were using features from Byzantine church architecture as late as the sixteenth century. Finally, we may note that for centuries the Byzantine foot, of 12 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches (31.2 cm), was the standard measure in Muslim architecture.

The Influence of the Sasanians

The Sasanian civilisation also had a great influence on Islamic culture. Sasanian emperors maintained an elaborate court ritual, which was later to be closely imitated by the early Islamic rulers of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. Sasanian silver dishes commonly feature rulers engaged in hunting (FIG. 11) or feasting and drinking (FIG. 12), and Islamic painted and ornamented cups are tangible witnesses of this culture. It was also commemorated in later Arab poetry.

For Islamic architects, the Sasanian palace at Ctesiphon was to have more influence than any other building. It was the yardstick by which all similar grand constructions were judged and in particular furnished the model for many later Abbasid palaces.

Ctesiphon was located of the future site of the M actual date of its construc perhaps begun by the Sasar van or Chosroes I; AD 53 baked bricks, and in the ce ornamental facade was the open, vaulted chamber), s to a deep, barrel-vaulted

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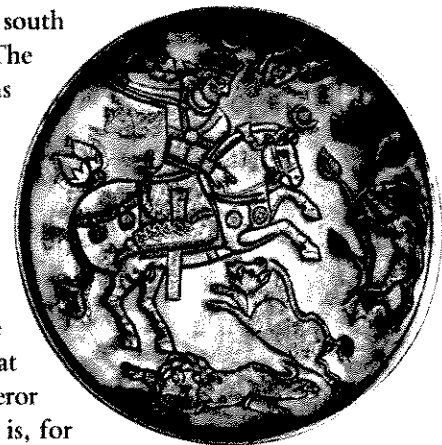
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Ctesiphon was located on the Tigris, a little to the south
of the future site of the Muslim capital of Baghdad. The
actual date of its construction is not certain, but it was
perhaps begun by the Sasanian ruler Khusraw I (Anushir-
van or Chosroes I; AD 531–79). It was built of kiln-
baked bricks, and in the centre of its long, multi-tiered
ornamental facade was the vast arch of an *iwan* (a large,
open, vaulted chamber), which served as the opening to
a deep, barrel-vaulted audience hall (see FIG. 2).

Inside the audience hall there were said to be three
thrones kept permanently ready for the other three great
rulers of the world – the emperor of Rome, the emperor
of China, and the Khagan of the Turks – ready, that is, for
when they should come to submit to the Sasanian emperor.
This aspect of the decoration of Ctesiphon may have influenced
the frescoes of the Umayyad palace at Qusayr Amra (c. 724–43)
near the town of Amman in Jordan, which showed the six great
rulers of the world waiting in attendance on the caliph. Also at
Ctesiphon a jewelled crown suspended on a golden chain hung
over the throne of the Sasanian emperor, and there is an echo
of this in the carved stone chain and crown in the music room



11. Sasanian-style plate showing a royal hunter, 7th–8th century. Silver, diameter 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (19 cm). Staatliche Museen zu Berlin/Preussischer Kulturbesitz Museum für Islamische Kunst.



12. Iranian dish showing a feasting prince, probably 8th century. Silver, diameter 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (19.7 cm). British Museum, London.

The poet Abu Nuwas (c. AD 747–813) describes the Sasanian king Khusraw I at the centre of such a scene: "Let us pass round the golden cup Persia has decked with divers images: Khusraw in the midst and, on the sides, antelopes pursued by riders armed with bows."



13. Reconstruction of a fresco from the Jawsaq al-Khaqani palace, Samarra, 836.

The frescoes for this palace of a Muslim ruler continue the Sasanian style of decoration for audience chambers at Ctesiphon and other pre-Islamic Persian palaces. The figure has been variously identified as a huntress or a bull-dancer.

of the Umayyad prince Walid at the desert palace of Khirbat al-Mafjar.

The audience chamber at Ctesiphon was itself heavily decorated with frescoes (FIG. 13). When in 637 the Muslim Arab general Saïd ibn Abi Waqas entered the palace after the defeat of the Sasanian armies of Yazdagird III, he turned the chamber into a place of prayer, but left untouched the fresco of the conquest of Antioch by the Sasanian emperor Khusraw I. It was still there two centuries later when the poet al-Buhturi (821–97) celebrated it in verse:

When you behold the picture of Antioch, you are alarmed
as between Byzantium and Persia
The Fates there waiting, while Anushirvan urges on the ranks
under the royal banner
Robed in green over gold, proudly flaunting the dye of red
turmeric.

The poet goes on to imagine the palace as it once was, with its singing girls and pavilions.

The characteristic Islamic literary tradition of musing over the ruins of vanished dynasties drew upon verse forms first developed

in pre-Islamic times by poets at desert camp sites. Sasanian art was an obvious subject for later poets, as al-Sharif Murtada (d. 1040) noted. The sovereign Sasanians battered it, tore it down, effaced it, and its ruins lay in ruins, once the canopy of glory was by adversities brought down. In Islamic thought, art and architecture were always closely associated with the theme of the transience of power.

Sasanian artisans' expertise in stucco as a decorative medium was also later to be picked up by the Umayyads. There are clear signs of the Sasanian motifs in the ninth-century Umayyad decorative arts. Sasanian fondness for beautiful animals had a widespread use throughout the Islamic world. Sasanian heavy vegetal scrolls were also used.

Finally, the Sasanian art of Iran, was also of great importance. It influenced the Umayyad practice of using Sasanian motifs as a mark of royal authority. Sasanian motifs were also important as a means of introducing Sasanian motifs into other cultures. Later Islamic art were fabricated from Sasanian motifs (FIG. 17) and the *senmurv* lion and the hindlegs and





in pre-Islamic times by poets lamenting at abandoned desert camp sites. Sasanian Ctesiphon was an obvious subject for later Islamic poets such as al-Sharif Murtada (d. 1044): "Behold what the sovereign Sasanians built,/How time battered it, tore it down, effaced it./ Courtyards, once the canopy of heaven,/ Then by adversities brought down to earth." In Islamic thought, art and architecture were always closely associated with the theme of the transience of life's pleasures.

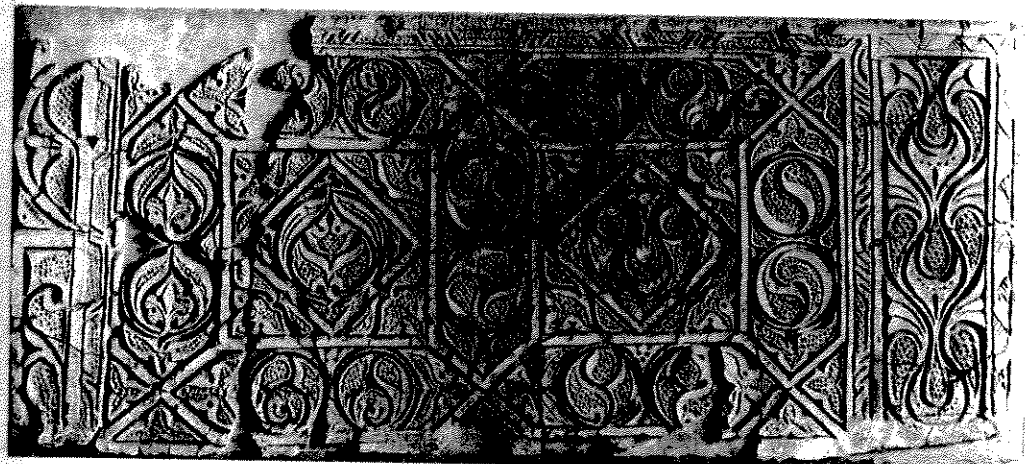
Sasanian artisans' experiments with stucco as a decorative medium (FIG. 14) were also later to be picked up by Islamic architects. There are clear signs of the influence of Sasanian motifs in the ninth-century Abbasid capital of Samarra (FIG. 15). Umayyad decorative schemes also picked up the Sasanian fondness for beaded decorative borders, and there was a widespread use throughout Islamic art of the characteristically Sasanian heavy vegetal scroll and other features (FIG. 16).

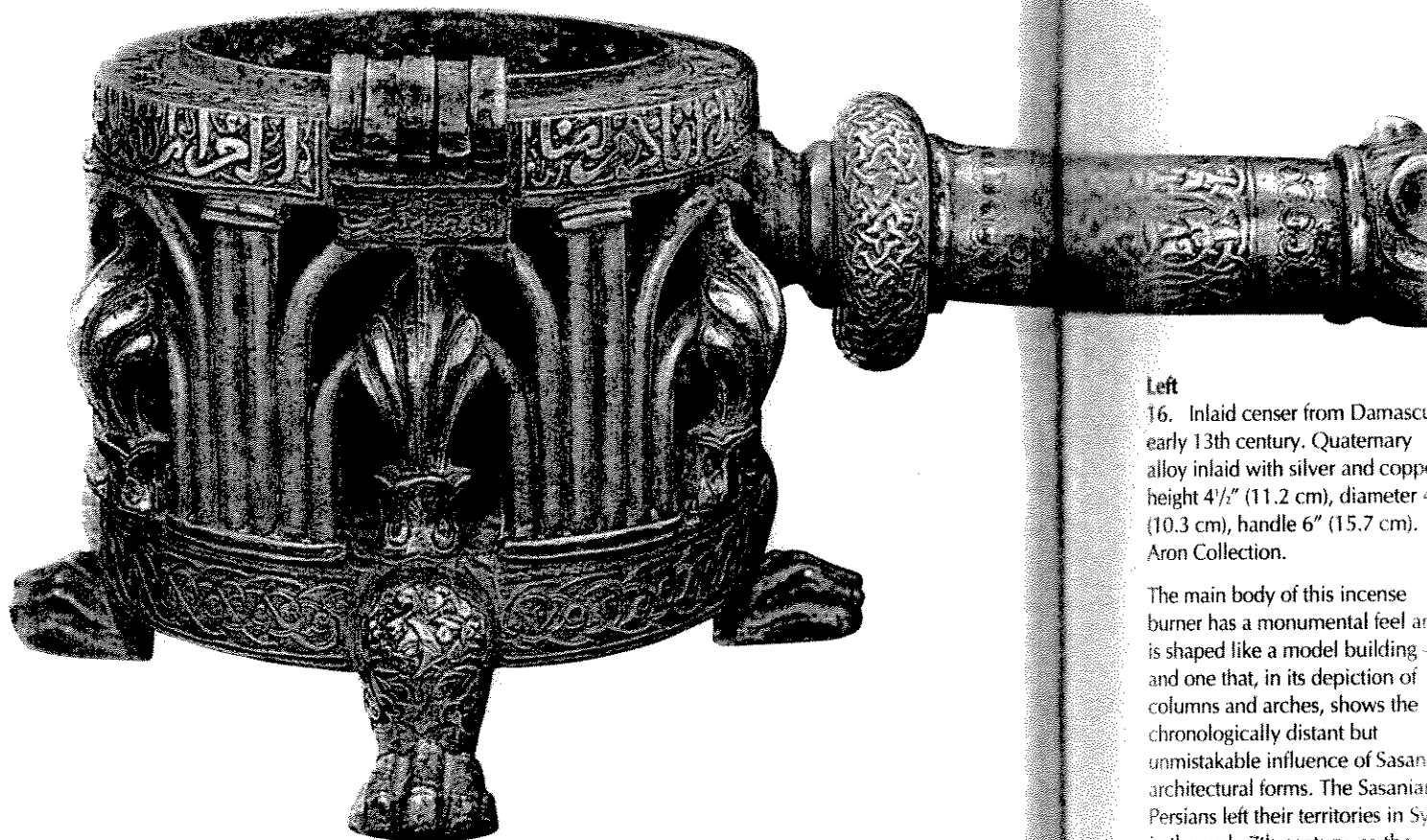
Finally, the Sasanian silk industry, which was established in Iran, was also of great importance to Islamic rulers who continued the Sasanian practice of distributing silk robes to courtiers and officials as a mark of royal appointments or favour. Textiles were also important as a means of transmission for typically Sasanian motifs into other cultures. Amongst the most popular in later Islamic art were fabulous mythical beasts such as the griffin (FIG. 17) and the *senmurv* (which had the forepart of a dog or lion and the hindlegs and tail of a bird).



14. Decorative rosette from Ctesiphon, 6th–7th century. Stucco, diameter 3'3½" (1 m). Islamisches Museum, Berlin.

15. Decorative panel from Samarra, 9th century. Stucco, 3'8" x 8'6½" (1.17 x 2.6 m). Islamisches Museum, Berlin.





Left

16. Inlaid censer from Damascus, early 13th century. Quaternary alloy inlaid with silver and copper. Height 4 1/2" (11.2 cm), diameter 4" (10.3 cm), handle 6" (15.7 cm). Aron Collection.

The main body of this incense burner has a monumental feel and is shaped like a model building – and one that, in its depiction of columns and arches, shows the chronologically distant but unmistakable influence of Sasanian architectural forms. The Sasanian Persians left their territories in Syria in the early 7th century, so the incense burner is a striking example of the persistence of ancient, pre-Islamic motifs in Islamic art. Similarly the handle is Hellenistic in style. The incense burner was made by the 13th-century craftsman Muhammad ibn Khutlukh al-Mawsili.

Right

17. Ewer decorated with a Sasanian-style griffin, from either Iran or Central Asia, 7th or early 8th century. Silver with niello and traces of gilding, height 15" (38 cm). Khalili Collection.

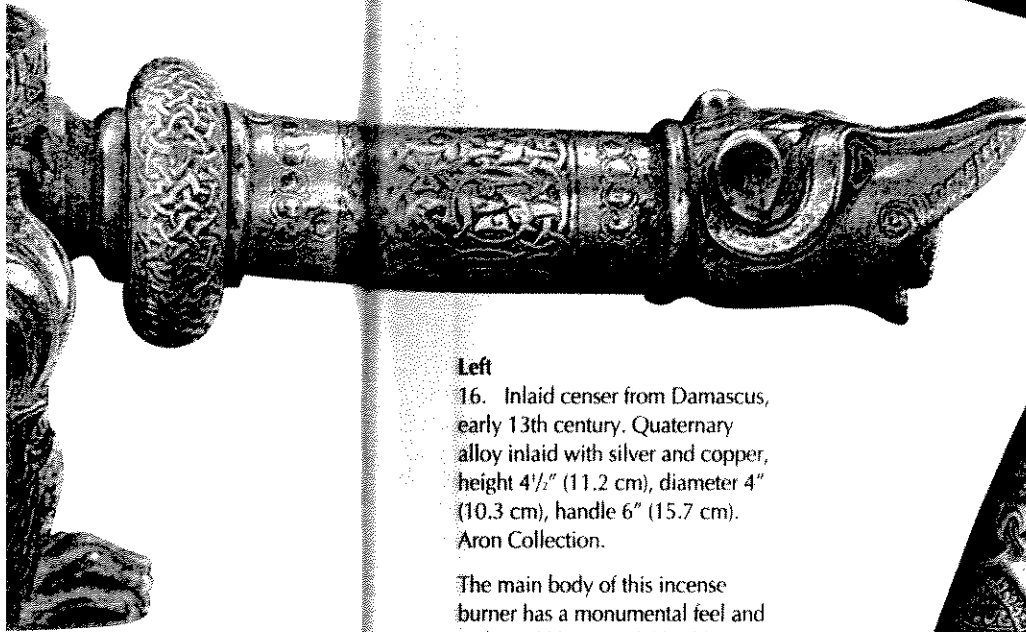
The Sasanian taste for these mythical hybrids was adopted enthusiastically by both Byzantine and Islamic artists.

Pre-Islamic Arab Culture and Legends

Before the rise of Islam, the largely nomadic peoples of the Arab peninsula were already playing a role, albeit somewhat marginal, in relations between the Byzantines and the Sasanians. Both empires, for example, maintained Arab client regimes on their borders, such as that of the Arab kingdom of the Ghassanids, which controlled territory to the east of Damascus in the Syrian desert during the sixth century AD and functioned as a buffer state for the Byzantines against the Sasanians and their allies.

Even in pre-Islamic history, Arab culture was distinctive and well developed, and the peninsula saw the rise of a number of kingdoms, major cities, and artistic styles. Arab culture also flourished outside the peninsula, in Syria. This was especially the case during the early Islamic period.

One of the earliest centres of what was effectively Arab civilisation was the city of Petra, in what is now the Kingdom of Jordan. This was the capital of the Nabataeans, a people who One



Left

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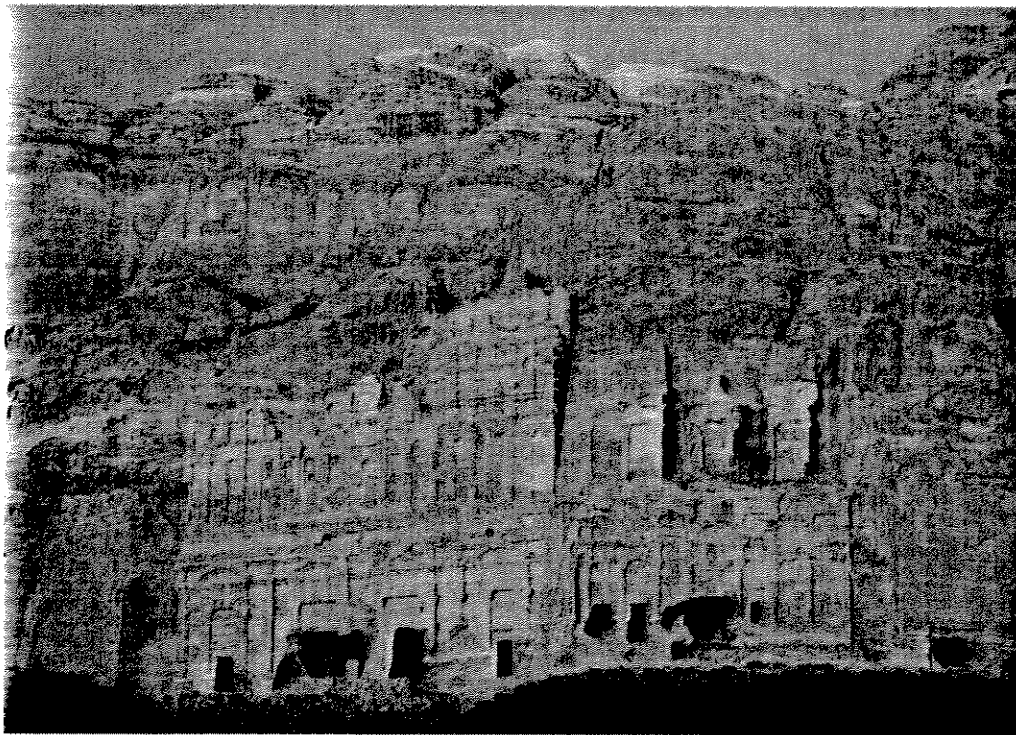
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17. Ewer decorated with a Sasanian-style griffin, from either Iran or Central Asia, 7th or early 8th century. Silver with niello and traces of gilding, height 15" (38.5 cm). Khalili Collection.

The Sasanian taste for these mythical hybrids was adopted enthusiastically by both Byzantine and Islamic artists.





18. The "Palace" tomb (left) and the "Corinthian" tomb (right) cut into the cliffs at Petra in present-day Jordan.

The architecture of the "Corinthian" tomb shows the Arab Nabataeans experimenting with the Hellenistic style of architecture. It may perhaps have been the burial place of a 1st-century king of Petra, which was the capital of the Arab Nabataean empire. Petra was later absorbed into the Roman empire. After it was abandoned in the 6th century, its houses and tombs furnished the fantastic settings for numerous Arabic stories about magic and buried treasures.

One of the earliest centres of what was effectively Arab civilisation was the city of Petra, in what is now the Kingdom of Jordan. This was the capital of the Nabataeans, a people who saw themselves as distinct from their nomadic Arab neighbours, despite many similarities of culture and religious belief. From about 200 BC to AD 106 Petra was an important Arab city in the Near East. Petra's wealth came from its position on the overland trade routes from India and China to the Mediterranean. The influence of Mediterranean culture can be seen in Petra's magnificent Hellenistic architecture (FIG. 18) and funerary sculpture, which demonstrate how pervasive a background Graeco-Roman art was to all cultures of the area.

From the second century AD onwards, Palmyra had replaced Petra as the most important Arab city (FIG. 19). Palmyra lay on the route from Damascus to the Euphrates and had control of the watering places on the caravan routes. In 271 its Arab queen Zenobia had revolted against Roman rule but had been defeated, and much of Palmyra's flamboyant architecture and sculpted tower tombs date from the subsequent period of Roman occupation.

Palmyra, or Tadmur as it was known to the Arabs, was captured by Muslim forces in 634. A city of legend, allegedly built

by Solomon, it was much e
poem by Wuhayb ibn Mut

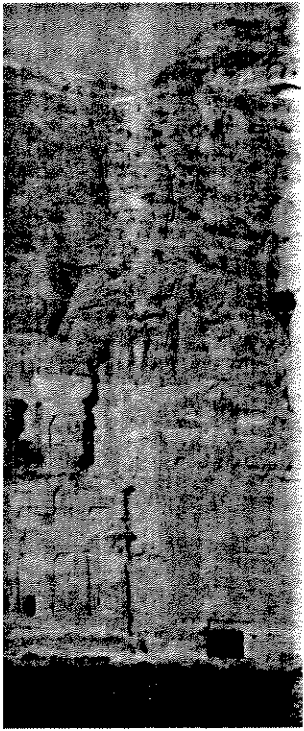
Many a place have I seen
Have I seen so beautiful

A place entirely of chisel
When one looks at it, it

According to the law, ci
And Palmyra is truly hea

The Byzantines maintain
Ghassanids. The Sasanians
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by Solomon, it was much celebrated in Islamic poetry, as in this poem by Wuhayb ibn Mutarrif al-Tamimi:

Many a place have I seen, but nought
Have I seen so beautifully founded and built as Palmyra.

A place entirely of chiselled stone:
When one looks at it, it fills one with awe.

According to the law, cities resemble bodies
And Palmyra is truly head of all of them.

The Byzantines maintained the vassal Arab kingdom of the Ghassanids. The Sasanians too had their client rulers among the pre-Islamic Arabs. The other major sixth-century kingdom was



19. Funerary bust from Palmyra of a lady of the pre-Roman period, AD 150–200. Limestone, life-size. British Museum, London.

The inscription identifies the woman as "Aqmat, daughter of Agago."

that of the Sasanian-sponsored (but Christian Arab) Lakhmids. Their capital was at Hira, in what is now southern Iraq, and the Lakhmid territories were reputed to contain the fabled palace of Sadir. Along with the equally legendary palace of Ghumdan in what is now the Yemeni city of Sana, Sadir was to be used time and time again by Islamic writers and poets as the means of glorifying actual palaces erected in Baghdad, Cordoba, and elsewhere. These mythical monuments of lost civilisations represented to Muslims both magnificence and impermanence, they were subjects of marvel – and of suspicion. Muslims characteristically took warning from the ruins of such buildings and the fates of their creators. According to a *Sura* (chapter) of the Koran (89:5–15), “The Dawn”:

Hast thou not seen how thy Lord did with Ad,
Iram of the Pillars
the like of which was never created in the land,
and Thamood, who hollowed the rocks in the valley,
and Pharaoh, he of the tent-pegs,
who all were insolent in the land
and worked corruption therein?
Thy Lord loosed upon them a scourge of chastisement;
Surely thy Lord is ever on the watch.

The original audience of the Koranic revelation would have been very familiar with the legends to which the Koran was alluding. Ad, Thamood, and the Pharaoh of the tent-pegs were part of the mythology of pre-Islamic Arabia, one of many ancient Arabian myths commemorating lost peoples who were damned because they rejected the messages of God’s prophets, a number of which eventually found their way into the medieval story collection of the *Arabian Nights*.

The Islamic Sense of the Past

Literary evidence and vernacular legends, such as those quoted above, make it clear that medieval Muslims were very conscious of living in the shadow of mighty ruins (FIG. 20). Although it is obvious, it still seems worth stressing that there were then more and better-preserved ancient ruins to cast such shadows than there are now. As the famous fourteenth-century North African thinker Ibn Khaldun worked on his *Muqaddima* (*Prolegomena*), a philosophical introduction to the study of history, the visible presence of the past weighed heavily upon him:



The Yemen where the few cities. Persian civilisation ruined. The same applies to the whole region between had been settled. This fact there, such as monuments, remains of villages and h

As has been said, Arab poet In time, this theme came to Thus al-Umari (1301–47) re- ascus had written on it a po- thou palace, what had be- they that raised high thy wa- ters, the kings/Who made th

t Christian Arab) Lakhmids. it is now southern Iraq, and reputed to contain the fabled legendary palace of Ghumrity of Sana, Sadir was to be writers and poets as the means in Baghdad, Cordoba, and elsewhere of lost civilisations represented impermanence, they were on. Muslims characteristically ch buildings and the fates of chapter) of the Koran (89:5-15),

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20. Syrian miniature of the carved Sasanian relief at Taq-i Bustan in what is now south-west Iran, c. 1570. Illuminated manuscript, 12 x 10 1/4" (30.5 x 26.2 cm). British Library, London.

The miniature comes from a copy of al-Qazwini's *Ajaib al-Makhluqat* (*Wonders of the World*). This fanciful representation of an imperial Sasanian rock carving appears to be based ultimately on a verbal description. Such pre-Islamic monuments stimulated wonder and fanciful speculation in the minds of the medieval Muslims who contemplated them.

The Yemen where the Arabs live is in ruins, except for a few cities. Persian civilisation in Arab Iraq is likewise completely ruined. The same applies to contemporary Syria ... Formerly the whole region between the Sudan and the Mediterranean had been settled. This fact is attested by the relics of civilisation there, such as monuments, architectural sculpture, and the visible remains of villages and hamlets.

As has been said, Arab poets revelled in the sad pleasures of ruins. In time, this theme came to be applied to Islamic buildings too. Thus al-Umari (1301-47) records that an Umayyad palace in Damascus had written on it a poem which began: "Would that I knew, thou palace, what had become of thy people! / And where are they that raised high thy walls? / What hath befallen thy proud masters, the kings / Who made thee strong, then passed away from thee?"



To the Islamic world, Rome were places of occult wonder. In the 10th century, the alchemist Ibn Khaldun's description of the statues at the city of Ashmunayn (then still believed that the ancient Egyptians in order to preserve their knowledge might survive some previous catastrophe like the Deluge. Greek art was functional rather than an aesthetic exercise. Hunayn ibn Ishaq wrote in his *History of the Philosophers*) how the "erected houses of gold, decorated with pictures were to serve to refresh hearing in these picture houses in order to see the pictures found in them."

As often as not, Muslim artists used images of the past creatively. For example, a stone carving at Samarra showing the Sasanian ruler Korymbandak as a representation of the legendary hero of Islamic popular literature. Such images also undergo such strange transformations. Ludolph von Suchem visited Baghdad in 1350, he found that under the name of Blessed Virgin and her pictures had been left untouched. Von Suchem

This painting in my time was explained to the Christian missionaries by the Bagutes. She used to live in the picture of Joachim standing under the trees for Paradise which she referred the whole scene to set it forth with fervour and devotion. The stories of Muhammad were

The earliest generation of Muslims was troubled by the presence of figurative images, or images which had become for them a source of idolatry. For example, the columns of the Iraqi town of Jufa were to



To the Islamic world, Roman, Sasanian, and Pharaonic ruins were places of occult wonder and menace (FIG. 21). In the tenth century, the alchemist Ibn Umail took pains to write a detailed description of the statues and paintings of the ancient Egyptian city of Ashmunayn (then still more or less intact), as it was widely believed that the ancient Egyptians had used symbolic frescoes in order to preserve their knowledge and transmit it, so that it might survive some previously foretold catastrophe – such as the Deluge. Greek art was similarly thought to have an instructional rather than an aesthetic purpose. The ninth-century scholar Hunayn ibn Ishaq wrote in his *Nawadir al-Falasifah* (*Anecdotes of the Philosophers*) how the rulers of the Greeks and other nations “erected houses of gold, decorated with a variety of pictures, which were to serve to refresh hearts and attract eyes. The children stayed in these picture houses in order to be educated with the aid of the pictures found in them.”

As often as not, Muslims who sought instruction from the images of the past creatively reinterpreted those images. Thus, for example, a stone carving at Naqsh-i Rostam in south-west Iran, showing the Sasanian ruler Shapur, was later taken by Muslims as a representation of the legendary strongman Rostam, a favourite hero of Islamic popular literature. Christian iconography could also undergo such strange metamorphoses. When the pilgrim Ludolph von Suchem visited the Church of St. Anne in Jerusalem in 1350, he found that under the Muslim occupation the place had been turned into a teaching college. However, a painting of the Blessed Virgin and her parents, Anne and Joachim, had been left untouched. Von Suchem reported that:

This painting in my time used to be devoutly and religiously explained to the Christians by an old Saracen woman called Bagutes. She used to live next to the church and declared that the picture of Joachim stood for Muhammad and the painting of trees for Paradise where Muhammad kissed girls. And she referred the whole of the painting to Muhammad and set it forth with fervour and would tell many more wondrous stories of Muhammad with tears in her eyes.

The earliest generation of Muslims do not seem to have been troubled by the presence in the art of past civilisations of pagan figurative images, or images of living things, even in what had become for them a Muslim religious context (FIG. 22). For example, the columns of the seventh-century mosque in the Iraqi town of Jufa were topped by Persian capitals, looted from

Opposite

21. Miniature depicting an occult ritual, from the *Kitab al-Bulhan* (*Tract on Astrology, Divination, and Prognostication*), written in Baghdad in 1399.

Illuminated manuscript, 9 1/2 x 6 1/2," (24 x 15.8 cm). Bodleian Library, Oxford.

The miniaturist has depicted here the ancient site of the Temple of Ikhmin. The *Kitab al-Bulhan* was a fortune-teller's book and its illustrations were used to attract the attention of passing customers. In this wholly fanciful depiction, the Pharaonic Egyptian Temple of Ikhmin is represented by the great arch, displaying painted images. The figure is dressed like a Christian monk and is apparently meant to represent some kind of hermit; he seems to be making an offering to some unknown deity or demon. The “saw-horse” is a bookstand or lectern, supporting what would have been a collection of pagan spells.

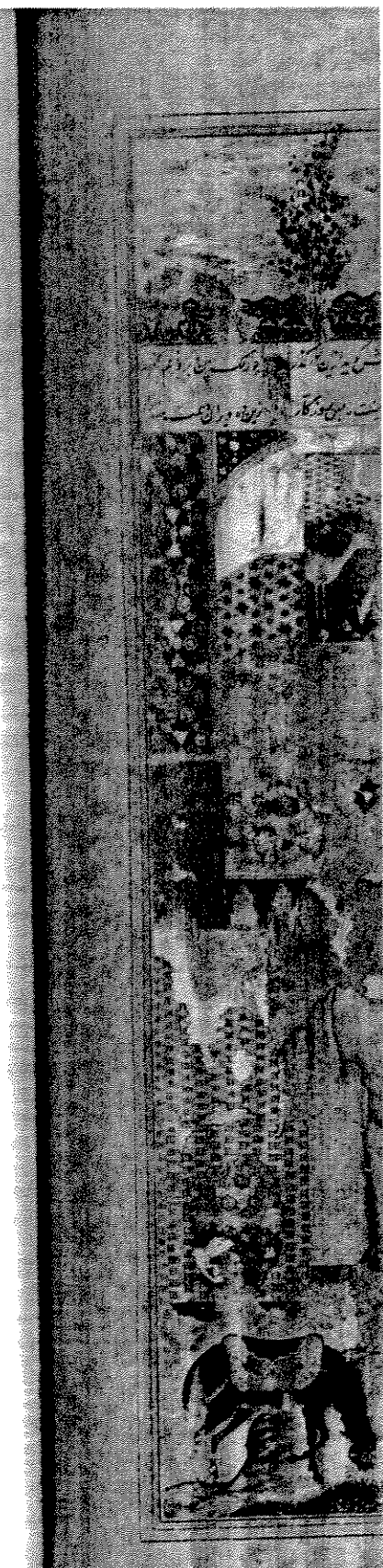
Opposite

22. "King Nushirvan and the owls," from an Iranian copy of Nizami's (d. 1209) *Khamsa (Quintet)*, 1494-95. Illuminated manuscript, 12 x 7 1/4" (30.5 x 19.4 cm). British Library, London.

The *Khamsa* was composed over a period of time and is consequently impossible to date accurately. One of its sections relates how King Nushirvan became separated from his companions while out hunting, and, alone apart from his vizier, passed by a ruined and deserted village. In the village two owls (which in Persian poetry symbolise desolation) are saying that, if King Nushirvan does not mend his ways, his whole land will be as ruined as the owls' nesting site. An Islamic audience not only marvelled at ancient ruins but drew moral conclusions from them on such subjects as transience and pride.

Hira, that featured monsters, heads, wings, and other figurative imagery.

Sites of pre-Islamic worship were sometimes conceived of as possessing mysterious powers. Thus the Umayyads' Great Mosque of Damascus was built on the site of a Byzantine church dedicated to John the Baptist. The church in turn had been built on the *temenos* (sacred precinct) of a Temple of Jupiter, which before that had been the site of the Temple of Haddad, the ancient Ammonite storm god. Similarly, in Jerusalem the Umayyad Dome of the Rock was erected within the Jewish Temple precinct. Much later, in the 1270s, when Abaqa, the Mongol ruler of Iran, built himself a summer palace in the north-east of the country, he was at pains to locate it within a sacred Zoroastrian site with buildings dating from the Sasanian period. The dynasties that preceded the preaching of Islam and the monuments erected by those dynasties served both as subjects of marvel to later generations and as pretexts for pious reflection. Ancient architecture taught Muslims lessons about the transience of all pleasures. As the Koran (3:137) puts it: "Many ways of life passed away before your time/Then, go about the earth and behold what happened."



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