

CUBICAL YEMENI MOSQUES

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This paper will not examine and describe brand new material, but will rather consider known buildings in a general way. Nevertheless, it seems important to trace the long survival of a particular architectural type and to isolate it from its context; this is, after all, as I shall show, a type that has maintained its relevance unbroken from pre-Christian times until the present day. The type I propose to discuss is the mosque of cubic form.

In its perhaps most mature and fully developed form this type is characterised by a longitudinal plan with an axially located entrance to the south and with two rows of three supports each which carries the flat roof. Occasionally a side entrance gives extra access to the interior. In general the architecture is on a small scale 8.50 by 10.50 metres or 9 by 10.50 metres with an average sheer height of about 5 metres or more. The closed, cubic form is characteristic; only seldom does it permit small windows to break the wall surface. The interior correspondingly consists of a cave-like space with scarcely any lighting. The walls are bare of ornament; at most an inscription band or an ornamental frieze may encircle the area immediately below the ceiling. The ceiling itself, on the other hand, can be richly decorated, and its coffered form can lend the space a quality of which the ground plan betrays nothing.

Two excellent examples of this trend may be cited: the Masjid al-^CAbbās near Aṣṣnāf in the Khawlān (Plate 1), dated 1126, and the mosque of Ṣarḥah near Yarīm, which was probably erected 80 to 100 years later (fig. 1-4)¹. Both have more or less identical external dimensions, and in both the interior space acquires

an entirely different articulation by virtue of the way the ceiling is ordered. Two rows each consisting of three high columns divide the interior into three "naves" of equal width, and yet - despite the longitudinal orientation - these naves are not emphasized as such.

The Masjid al-^CAbbās has a central entrance on the south side and a subsidiary entrance on the south-west side that leads to the ablution area. The ceiling is so arranged here that the "central nave" is made to stand out; it terminates in the richly decorated mihrāb bay. In somewhat abbreviated formal language this bay receives a kind of symbolic domical vault; and this is achieved by means of the staggering of the individual coffered shapes of the ceiling (Plate 2). In addition there may be seen here the traditional egg and dart plus console frieze which in early Islamic times were reserved for the mihrāb bay. The adjoining bays to east and west are similarly marked out by a significant increase in height, thus creating a simplified T-shape.

As a whole the ceiling is of extraordinary sumptuousness, so that only additional details - in other words, precisely the systems of staggering the coffers - or still richer ornament, further emphasise certain areas. In the upper regions inscriptions and ornamental friezes terminate the walls. Small windows, high up, and with stepped encircling frames are brought into this scheme of articulation. The windows are so placed as to correspond to the bays, and were originally filled with slabs of alabaster which let in very little light.

The mosque of Şarḥah is altogether different (fig. 3-4). Here the organisation of the ceiling is astonishing enough, planned so as to suggest a kind of central space. Once again, this is an articulation which contradicts the longitudinal emphasis of the plan. The bays around the entrance are treated as a continuous separate space and are roofed with a simple ceiling made up of painted wooden slats laid parallel to each other. In places this decoration is still preserved. The rest of the interior space is treated as a single entity. A central lantern dome is enclosed by four as it were "domed" bays in cruciform

disposition. The central lantern dome is smaller and was clearly intended to carry a fitting for a lamp. The extra height accorded to the other four bays was achieved by means of console friezes which carried slabs of alabaster (Plate 3). These bays constitute - apart from the entrance opening itself - the only source of light, and rather dim light at that. The remaining bays, in the corners, are all given, as it were, neutral coffered ceilings. The quality of the painted ceiling recalls the sumptuousness of the decorative scheme at the Masjid al-^CAbbās. Thus two entirely different concepts of space are imposed on a ground plan which corresponds to neither of them.

The mosque of Qaydān near Ṭawīlah (probably 13th century) with a square ground plan and only two pairs of columns, does however have a roofing scheme which fits in with the ground plan (fig. 6)². Four large coffered areas mark the central way leading to the mihrab, while an axis at right angle to it indicates a cross underlining the western entrance.

So much for what might be termed the "classical ground plan". Numerous variants exist, however, mostly square mosques which - according to their size - contain two pairs of supports, one pair, a single support or even none at all. Their cubic character is correspondingly more marked externally, and most particularly when the length of the side walls is equivalent to their height.

A large number of such mosques are to be found in Jiblah and the area around it. They include the Masjid al-^CArrāf dated 1081 (itself a somewhat problematical building) (fig. 7)³, the Masjid ad-Dār of the 13th century (fig. 8), the Wazīriyyah mosque dated 1341 (which has, however, been comprehensively restored); the Masjid as-Sunnah (fig. 9) and the Masjid an-Nūr. The first two of these mosques stand out by virtue of their rich ceiling decoration (Plate 4,5), whose varied stellar and rosette forms are firmly anchored in the tradition of earlier coffered ceilings.

Directly below the ceilings there generally runs a decorative band - sometimes also taking the form of a console frieze or an epigraphic frieze (Plate 2). The remaining wall surfaces are plain white. Unfortunately later, including quite recent, extensions and restorations have altered much of these buildings and have damaged the layout of the coffered ceilings. And yet it seems as if the ornament on these ceilings had no intrinsic value. Particularly noteworthy is the Masjid al-^CArrāf (fig. 7), which was built six years earlier than the Great Mosque of Arwā bint Aḥmad⁴. Here stellar motifs in vegetal guise covered the surface. Many of these small mosques have lost their ornament, for example the mosque of aḍ-Ḍarbah (fig. 10), which is associated with Arwā bint Aḥmad⁵. But many of them will only have had as simple a ceiling originally as they now possess, so that they seem scarcely worthy of attention.

Perhaps the earliest cubic mosque is that of Tamur (Plate 6, fig. 5)⁶. It has a problematical structural history. Its elevation seems stunted in relation to its ground plan, which measures 8.50 by 10.50 metres. The later addition of three arcades, designed to strengthen the building, disturbs the interior disposition of two rows of three monolithic piers. Their dossier capitals carry stone beams oriented from east to west, and it was on these that the stone flags of the ceiling originally rested. Parts of this original roofing system have survived.

The projection of the corners at the qiblah wall is noteworthy; it appears also on the east side of the building. The western edge of the qiblah wall on the other hand, breaks off abruptly and there is no trace of an abutting wall. In its place we see a row of monolithic pillars which carry the architrave. Thus the building was originally open to the west and was only later walled up. When this happened is not clear; perhaps it was as late as 1039, the date of the building's restoration. As for the south facade with its entrance shoved out of axis it has been thoroughly disturbed. The projecting corners on the north side really demand symmetry, a building complete in itself.

But it will not be possible to solve this problem without detailed researches on the spot. The interior of the mosque is plain, with the mihrāb merely projecting from the wall as an arcuated form. Yet the north facade retains a frieze of regularly spaced projecting blocks, while the east side has a frieze of beams - which does not, however, seem to be functional (Plate 7). Equivalent decoration can be seen in Sabaeen architecture, if of different quality, namely in the Temple at Barāqish (Yaṭīl). There too we find stone roofing as in the "city temple" of Ma^Cīn (Qarnāwu). The mosque of Tamur is thus either a pre-Islamic monument, presumably of the 6th century, which was then converted into a mosque in early Islamic times - in this connection I would like to mention the spolia on the south facade and in the west wall - or an early Islamic structure which was then made fully functional in 1039. Presumably it was at this time that the west side was closed.

The plan of a longitudinally conceived cubic mosque with a double row of supports is to be found, as noted above, in pre-Islamic temple architecture: at Ma^Cīn (Qarnāwu) (fig. 12) at al-Hajrah (fig. 14), at Makaynūn (fig. 17) and Ḥuṣn al-Qays (fig. 15) in the Wādī Ḥaḍramawt as well as in Madhāb (fig. 19) and perhaps Mashqah (fig. 18) near Ḥurayḍah⁷. The area which excavators term the cella is usually surrounded by secondary structures. This cella has varied dimensions, such as 10 by 8.20 metres (Ḥuṣn al-Qays) (fig. 15), 9 by 7.40 m (Makaynūn) (fig. 17), 7 by 6 m (Timna^C) and so on. The excavators of the temples of Raybūn West suggest two rows of four supports apiece, but I think this reconstruction cannot be treated as a certainty (fig. 13).

Whereas the entrance of the "city temple" of Ma^Cīn lies on the north-west side and thus has to depart from the axis in giving access to the interior (fig. 12), the entrances to the temples in Ḥaḍramawt are placed in the axis of the building, directly opposite the podium which was inserted into the building. The off-axial nature of the entrance can be related to the stairs which were situated in the right angle to the entrance (fig. 17, 19, 20). Beyond Yemeni territory the temple of Yeha follows this type of sanctuary and it is of particular interest

in that it was turned into a Christian church, being thus enabled to survive its pagan past (fig. 16)⁸. The requirements of Christian worship were met by means of a crypt, a baptistery and later a built-in haykal. It did however, present a variant in that it probably had a tripartite cella and that only two pairs of supports carried the roof. A staircase built over a sloped socle led to the axially placed entrance.

In the area to the north of the Yemen is to be found the most celebrated example of this type of temple, and to this day it has remained a focus of veneration: the Ka^Cbah in Mecca. Unlike several temples in Wādī Ḥaḍramawt, its four corners are oriented to the cardinal point of the compass. The Ka^Cbah was rebuilt in the lifetime of the Prophet Muḥammad - allegedly around 608 (fig. 22)⁹. Measuring circa 11 by 12.50 metres (the sides were of uneven length) and with a height of some 9 metres, it had an interior articulated by two rows of three columns apiece¹⁰. I take it that already at that time the doors were placed on the southeast side, as they are today, and that consequently the entrance was off-axis. Tradition also has it that at this time the doors were placed somewhat higher. As for the decorative programme, we know only that frescoes, - better paintings - including at least some with Christian subject matter, were to be found on the walls. Evidences of the pagan past are furnished by the horns found there and perhaps by the gazelle¹¹.

Despite the changes wrought by Ibn az-Zubayr around 683 (fig. 23) and the renewed restoration programme undertaken at the command of al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf in 693, the Ka^Cbah retained its cubic form intact¹². With dimensions of 24 by 22 dhirā^C, and a height of 27 dhirā^C, it exceeded the scale of the other temples of this type. The treatment of the interior is recorded with exactitude in Islamic tradition. Within the building the supports were now reduced to three columns placed along the central axis (by this the interior lost its traditional architectural character)¹³. They carried richly carved and gilded beams which were part of the equally richly decorated ceiling. The walls were encircled just below ceiling level by a carved and gilded decorative frieze. At the time of Ibn az-Zubayr, mosaics covered the

walls. He had given orders for these and columns to be brought to Mecca from the church of Abrahah in Ṣan^Cā'¹⁴. At a later stage they were replaced by costly marble slabs¹⁵. The capitals may also have been spoils, perhaps box capitals (karāsī) of Sabaean origin¹⁶. Five alabaster slabs were let into the ceiling, which was now made a double one, and these slabs served to admit a filtered light into the room. Four of them were placed in the corners and one in the middle¹⁷. Such alabaster slabs, which can also be seen in the mosque of Ṣarḥah (Plate 3), justify the deduction that antique Arabian temples were at least partially provided with such "ceiling windows" or skylights which were a means of mitigating the darkness of the enclosed space. One might add that this type of roofing is associated in literary sources with the upper chamber of the castle of Ghumdān in Ṣan^Cā'¹⁸.

Also of cubic form was the church of Najrān, otherwise known as the Ka^Cbah of Najrān, which presumably had the selfsame ground-plan and equally probably was also a pagan temple later turned into a Christian church¹⁹. According to al-^CUmarī this monument too could be entered only by means of a staircase. The roof inside was gilded and the walls were covered with mosaics. There are also reports that Christian sacred images were to be found here.

About the Ka^Cbah of Sindād we have no detailed information²⁰. So we come to a problem. Were the temples destroyed by the Prophet Muḥammad - most of which are described in the sources by the term bayt - also of this type, as for example of Dhū'l-Khalasah in Tabālah or in al-Ṭā'if?²¹ Quite apart from the so-called "classical type" of cubic temple we know of smaller variant versions from Ḥadramawt. Among them we may note an almost square temple (6.50 m by 6 metres) in Bā Quṭfah with two supports in the interior (fig. 21), an entrance that seems to have been axially located but which was reached by an off axial staircase²². The small sanctuary beside the Raṣfum sanctuary in Ḥayd bin ^CAqīl (fig. 18) contains only two supports, a disposition, which could however be extended under certain conditions by two further supports. According to the excavators, the temple of Bā Quṭfah dates back to the fourth century B.C. and its associa-

ted cult can be traced down to the third or fourth centuries A.D.²³.

The question of when and where this type of temple originated remains open. Clearly it could serve for the worship of various divinities, and was therefore not conceived in an exclusive sense²⁴. Perhaps its origins are to be sought in Ḥaḍramawt. But why was the influence of this particular type of temple so extensive? In what fashion did it spread? Did it possess some special function as a shrine or as a centre of pilgrimage, like the Ka^cbah for example? Or was it, as the excavators maintain, used as a simple village shrine?

The cubic mosque found in the Yemen did not serve for the Friday ṣalāt. It is most probable that the Masjid al-^cAbbās, presumably also its predecessor as well as the mosque of Ṣarḥah can be interpreted as memorial mosques, mosques with barakah. The mosque of al-^cAbbās is so regarded to this day. It is this function that may account for their decorative splendour.

Small cubic mosques with only two supports, on the other hand, such as those to be seen in Ibb and Jiblah for example, were also prinked out with coffered ceilings as was only appropriate given the exalted rank of their patrons. But these served only for private devotions.

The cubic mosque was to experience a further floruit as the centrepiece of a madrasah, notably in the area of Ibb. Now, moreover, it was possible to insert windows, as may be seen in the Sharafiyah in Jiblah (13th century) (fig. 11).

The question whether the cubic mosque remained confined to the Yemen - that is, that it enjoyed no more than regional importance - can scarcely be answered on the basis of information provided hitherto. It is true that at first sight we do seem to encounter such mosques in Saudi Arabia - for example in Muqandah and in al-Marmār²⁵. But what of comparable material from further afield? Are the small mosques from sites C and F at Sīrāf on the Persian Gulf (fig. 12) to be related to this type, or where they

an independent, spontaneous creation in response to local needs?²⁶ Since these mosques are an expression of popular piety, little attention has been paid to them, even in the excavations. The question whether such buildings as the Masjid-i Maghak-i ^CAttarī in Bukhara - with its rectilinear plan, its six supports and its lateral entrance - also conform to this type must also remain open for the time being²⁷.

The cubic mosque, whether employed as a village mosque or one for private use, has maintained itself to this day in the mountains and uplands of the Yemen. It is true that the building material nowadays is breeze blocks and not cut stone as in the past. But such a change is only superficial. This mosque type still answers as it has done for centuries, the requirements of private piety.

I want to express my gratitude to Robert Hillenbrand for translating this manuscript.

Notes

- (1) ABADY III (1986), 161, BaM 10 (1979), 229.
- (2) East and West 36, 4 (1986), fig. 59
- (3) Originally the Masjid al-^CArrāf opened up to the courtyard by means of large arches which probably soon after the completion of the building were walled up.
- (4) ABADY I (1982), 232.
- (5) ABADY III (1986), 115.
- (6) ABADY I (1982), 213.
- (7) Breton, Badre, Audouin, Seigne, 1980:16; Schmidt, 1982:

- fig. 46; Doe, 1986:174, 76, 179.
- (8) Doresse, 1956:174, 96, Krencker, 1913:78.
- (9) EMA, I, 1²:1; Wensinck-Jomier, EI²:319; Rubin, 1986:98; al-Azraqī 110, 202.
- (10) al-Azraqī, 110; Ibn Hishām, 2, 822; al-Wāqidī, 834; the structural history of the Ka^Cbah will be published in one of the next volumes of ABADY.
- (11) al-Azraqī, 111, 113, 155; Rubin, 1986:102, 115. According to al-Azraqī the prophets, the angels, Abraham and Mary with the child on her lap were surrounded by trees. The style of these paintings might be of late Hellenistic tradition as in Qaryat al-Faw. - The horns are described as ram's horns but they might be those of an ibex (?). The sun and moon symbols, if sent later on by the caliphs, cannot be considered as evidence of a pre-Islamic cult, EI², 322.
- (12) al-Azraqī, 138, 141, 148, 202; al-^CUmarī, 97; al-Balādhurī, 47; Ibn ^CAbd Rabbihi, 256; through the reconstruction, as carried out by Ibn az-Zubayr, the Ka^Cbah lost the character of a temple and became a symbol.
- (13) Ibn ^CAbd Rabbihi, 6, 84; al-Azraqī, 204.
- (14) al-Azraqī, 204; al-Mas^Cūdī, 5, 192.
- (15) Ibn Rustah, 34; Ibn Jubayr, 93.
- (16) al-Azraqī, 204.
- (17) Ibn Jubayr, 83; al-Azraqī, 205.
- (18) al-Hamdānī, 85.
- (19) al-Bakrī, 603; Yāqūt, 268.
- (20) al-^CUmarī, 358; Kunst des Orients IX, (1976), 96.
- (21) Yāqūt, Dhu'l-Khalasah, Kunst des Orients IX, (1976) 96; note 46; Lammens, H. 17, note 4, 5.
- (22) Breton, Badre, Audoin, Seigne, 1980:17.
- (23) loc.cit. 20
- (24) loc.cit. 21
- (25) King, 1986:75, 81.
- (26) Whitehouse, 1980:30.
- (27) Nilsen, 1956:fig. 31.

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Abbreviations

- ABADY Archäologische Berichte aus dem Yemen, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut San^Cā', (Mainz 1982).
- BaM Baghdader Mitteilungen, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Abteilung Baghdad, (Berlin 1960).

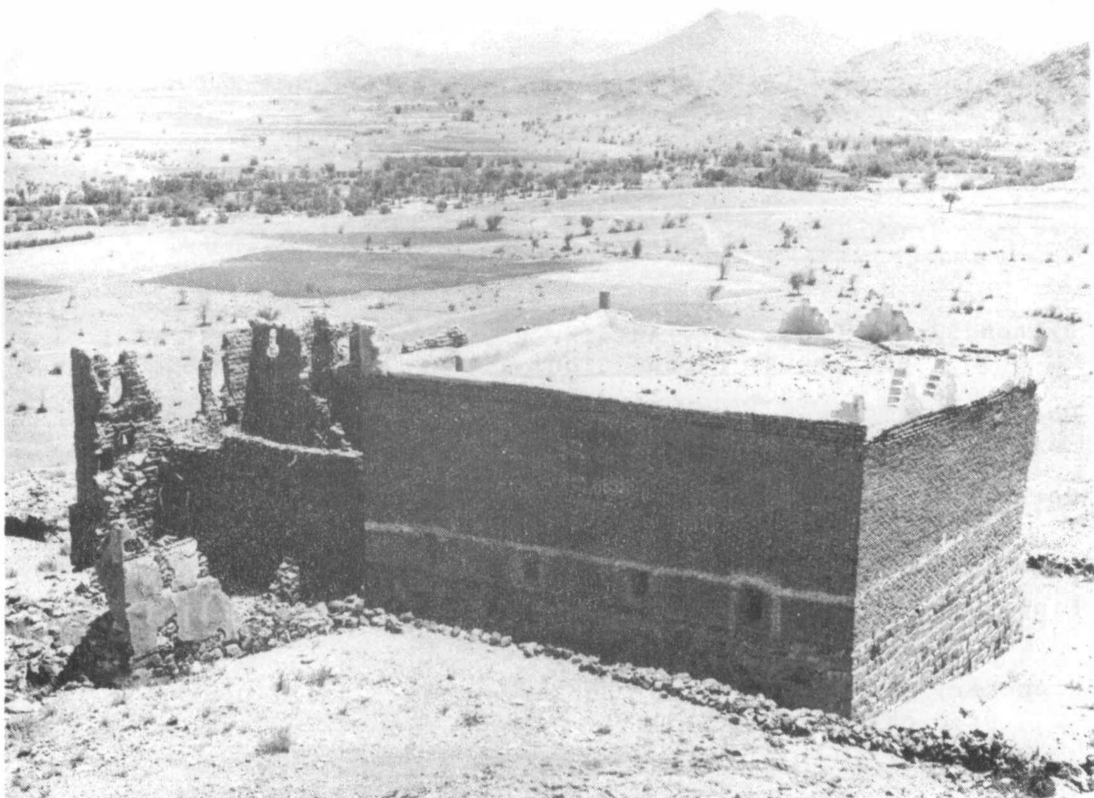


Plate 1

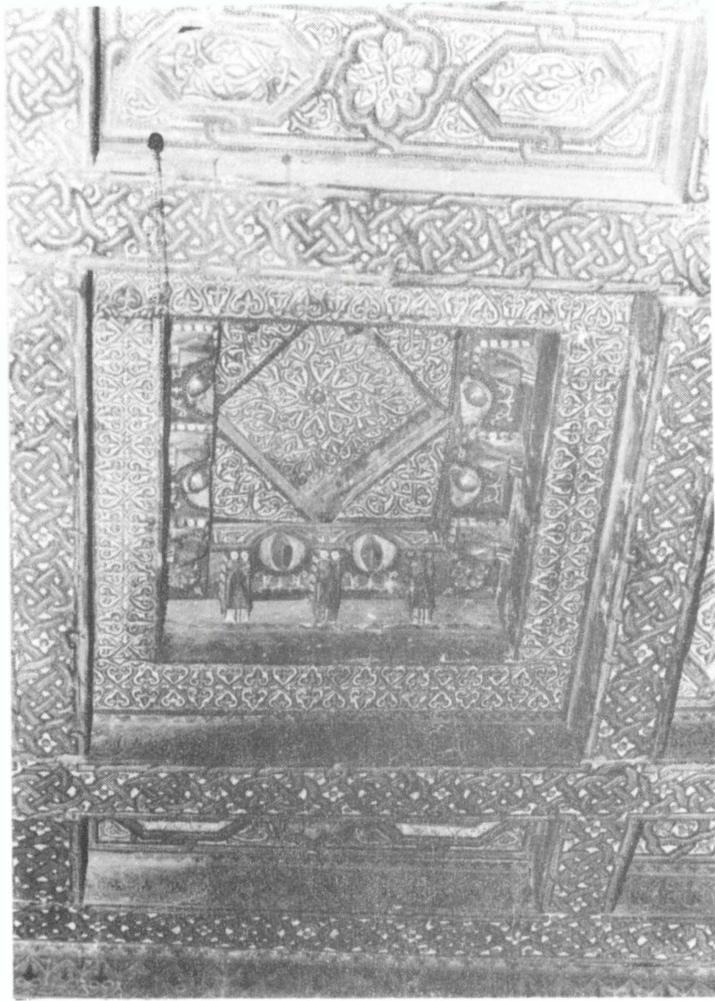


Plate 2



plate 3

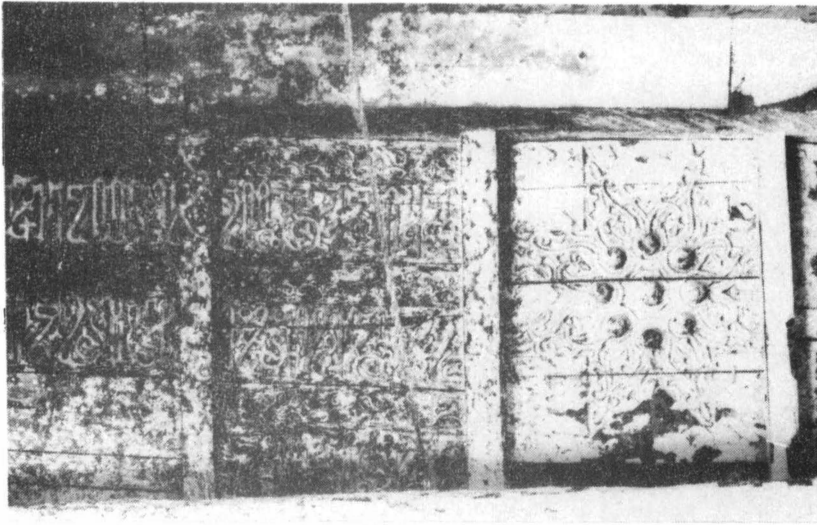


Plate 4



Plate 5

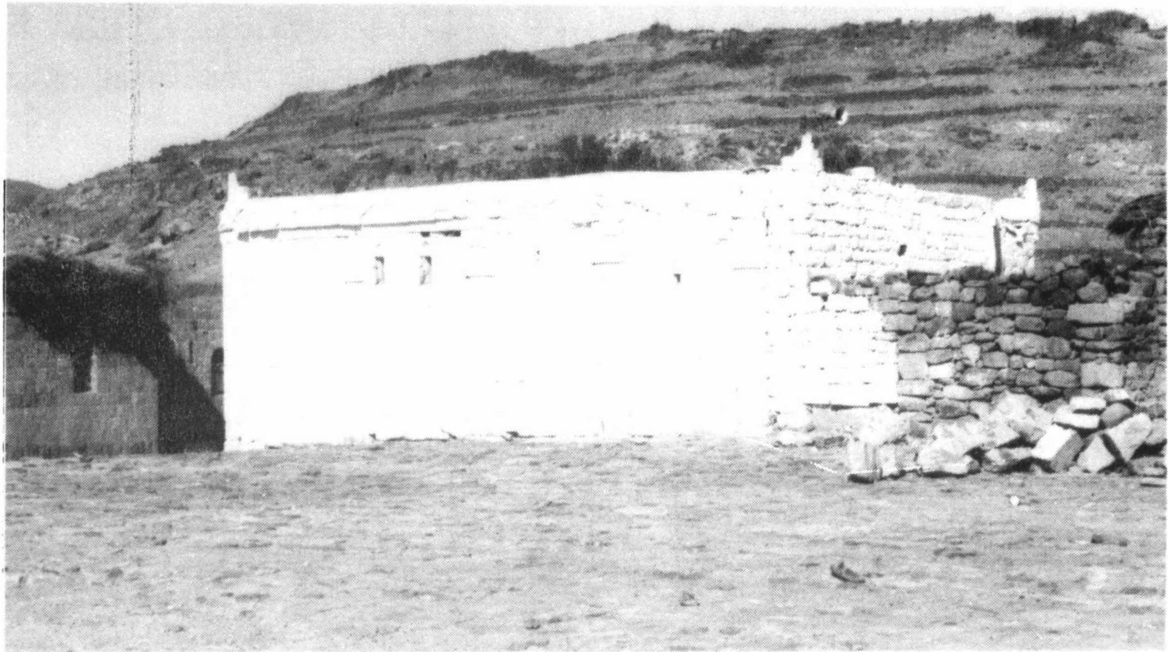


Plate 6

Plate 7



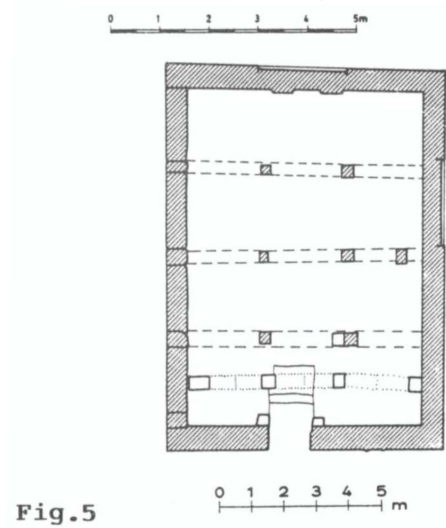
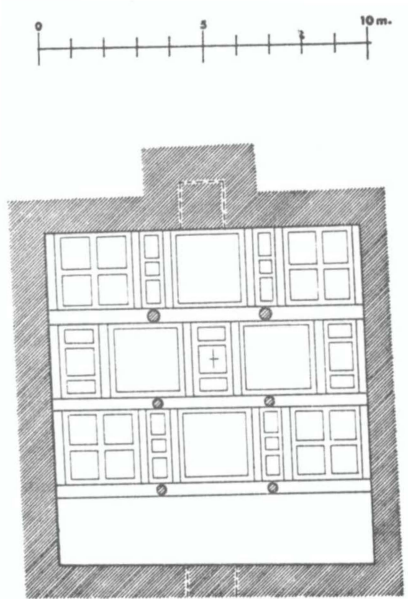
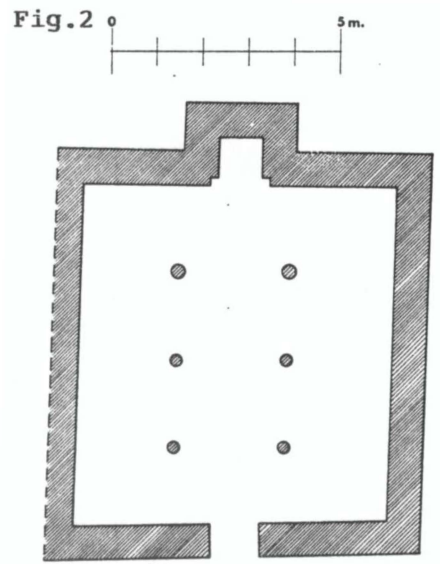
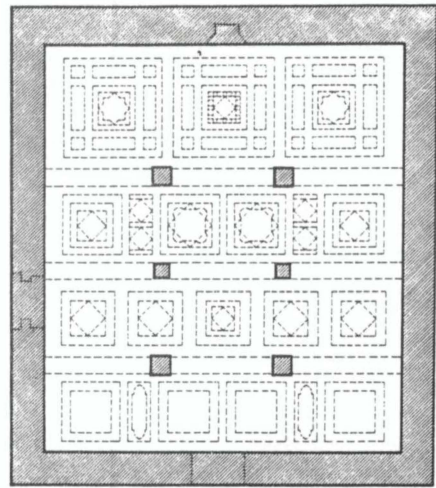
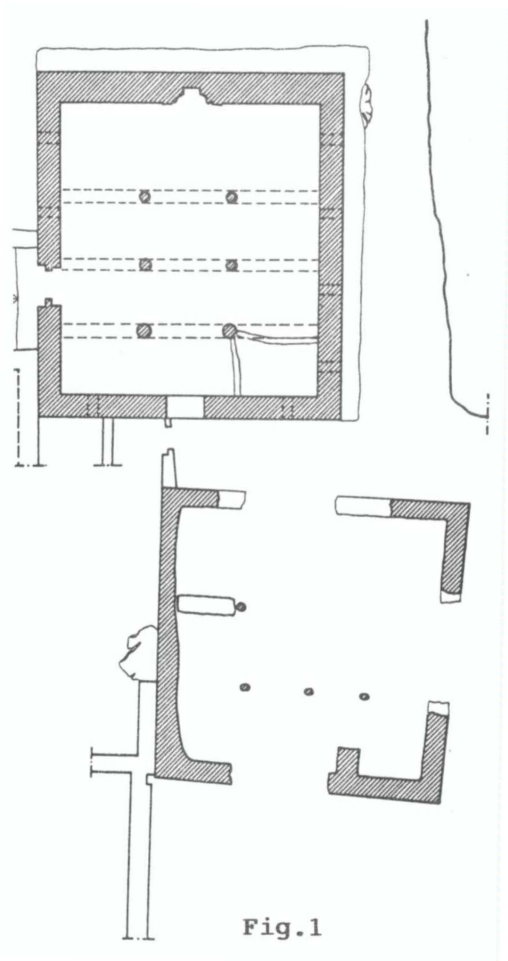


Fig.4

Fig.5

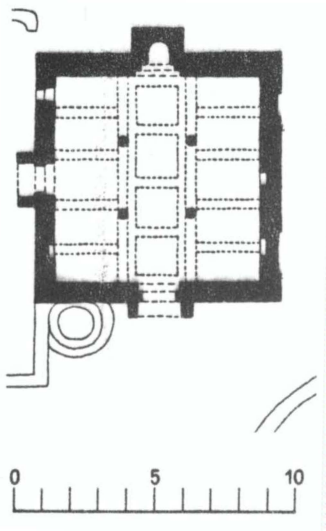


Fig. 6

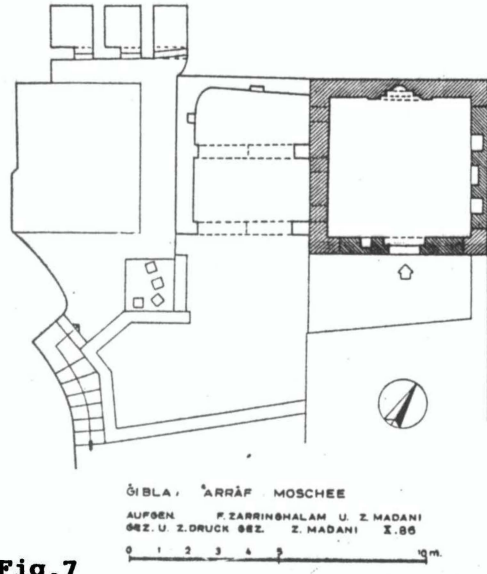


Fig. 7

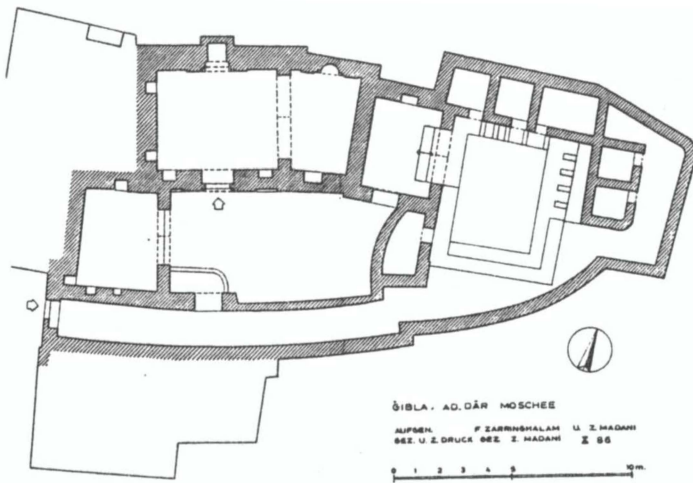


Fig. 8

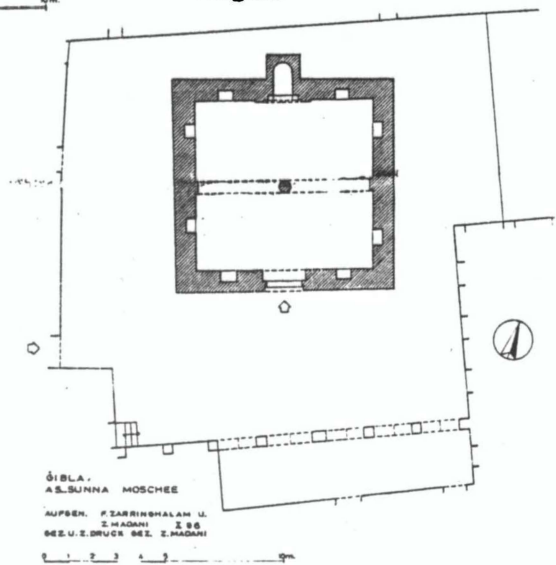


Fig. 9

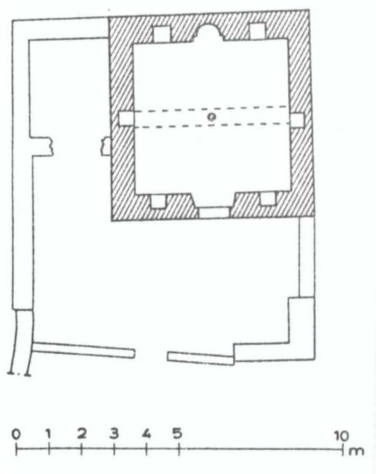


Fig.10

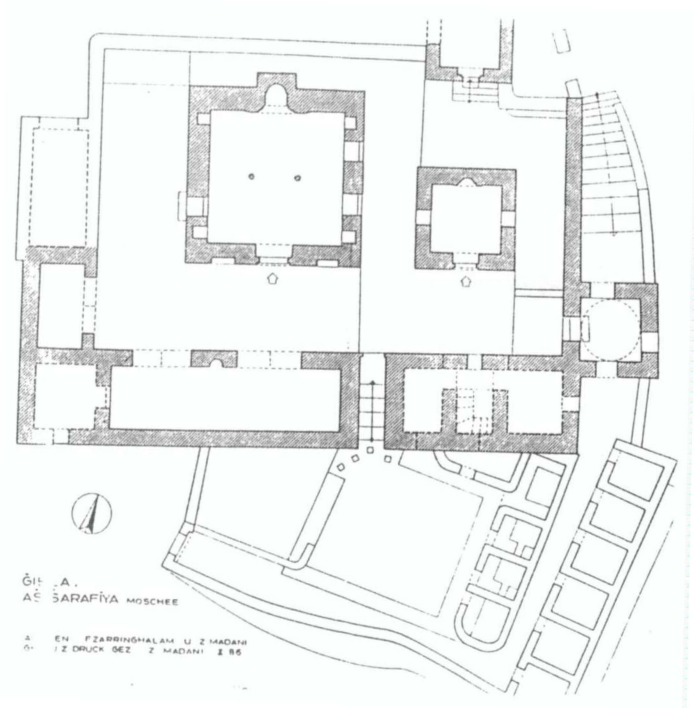


Fig.11

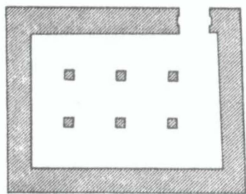


Fig.12

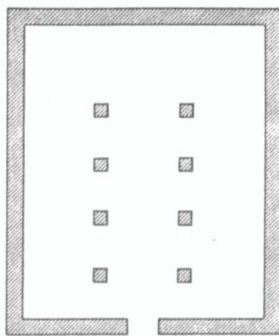


Fig.13

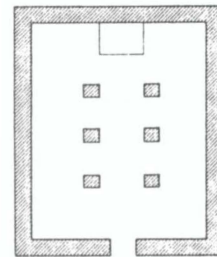


Fig.14

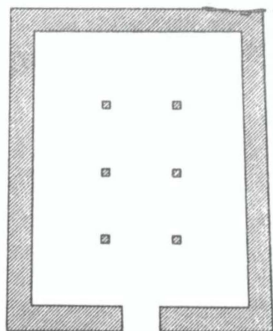


Fig.15

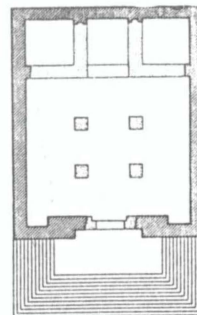


Fig.16

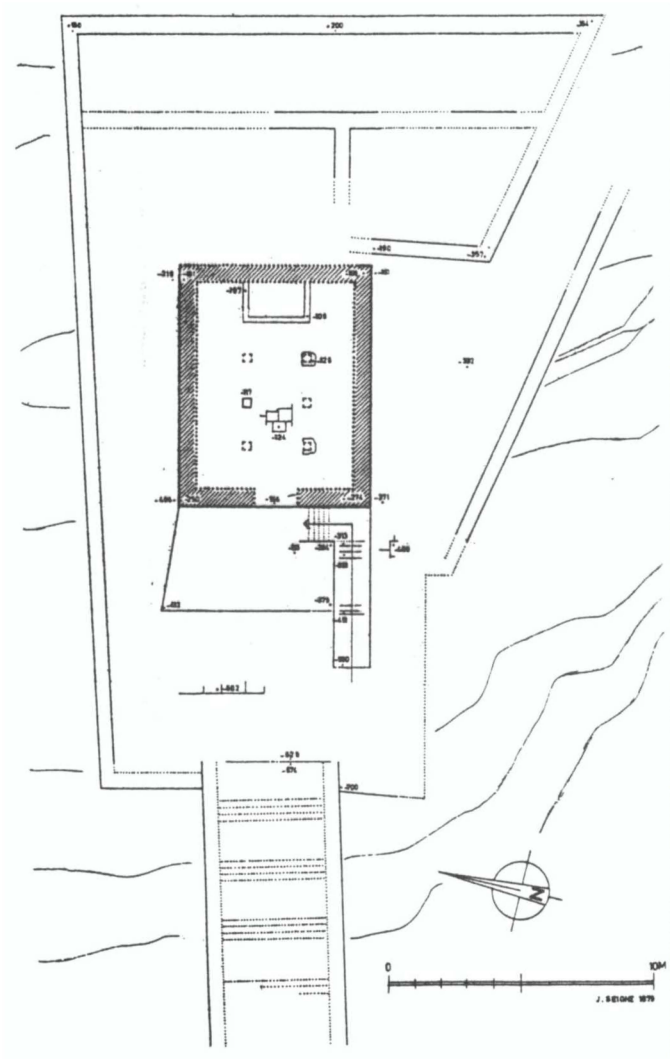


Fig.17

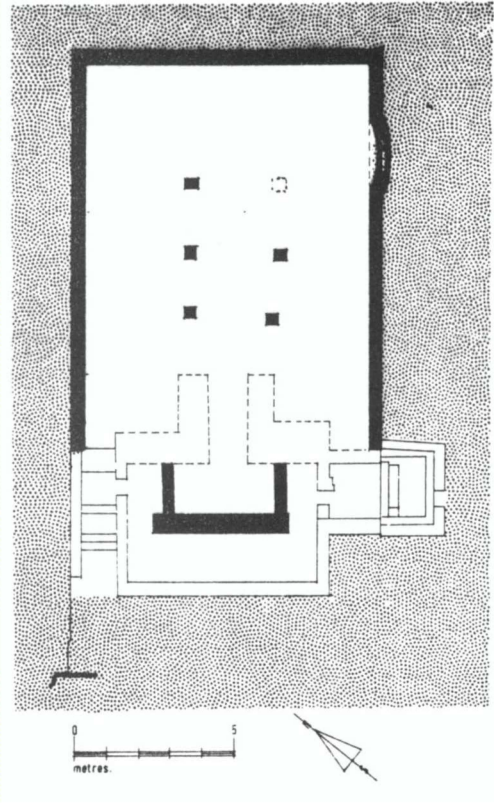


Fig.19

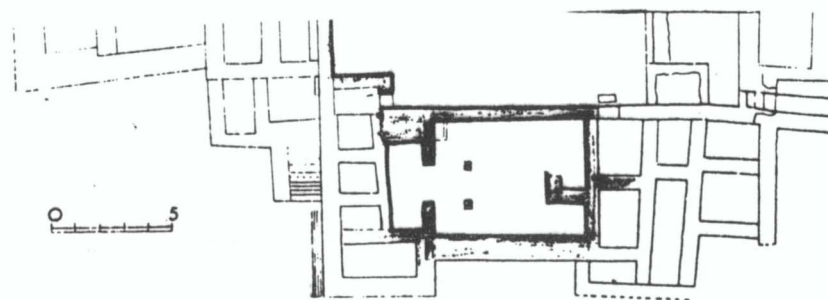


Fig.18

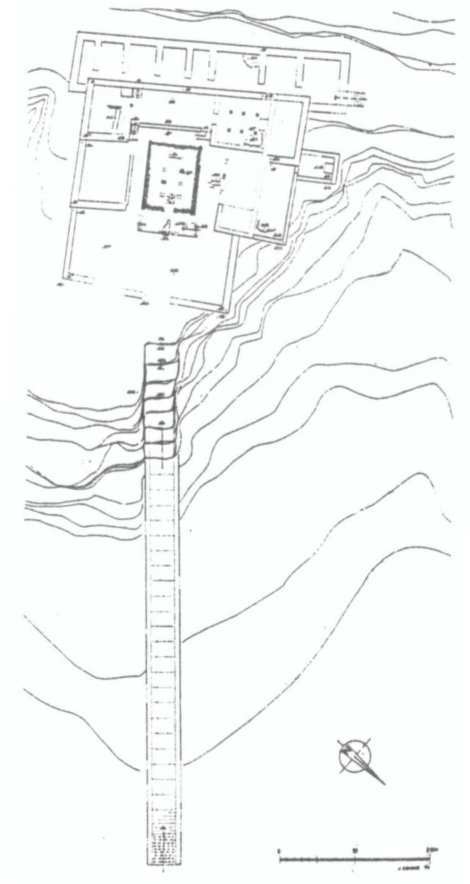


Fig.20

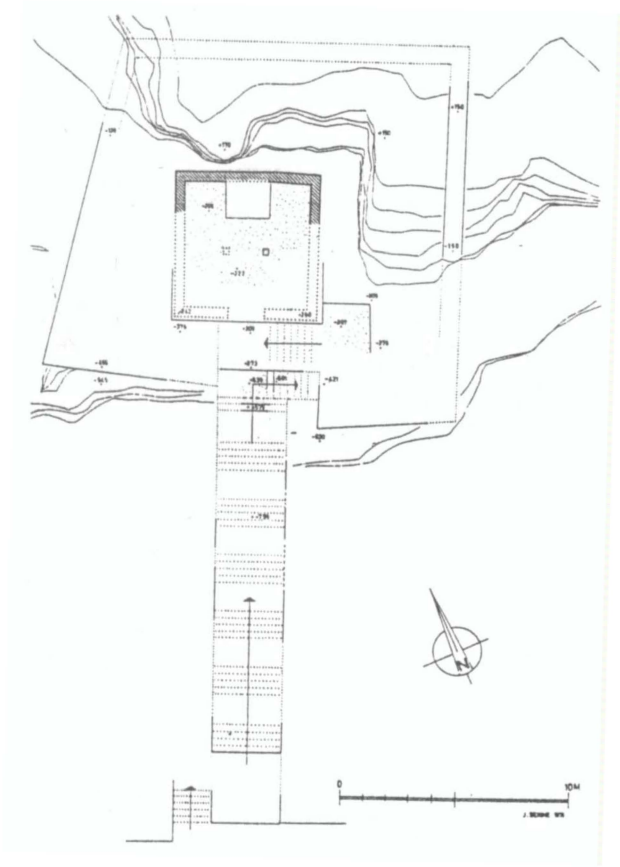


Fig.21

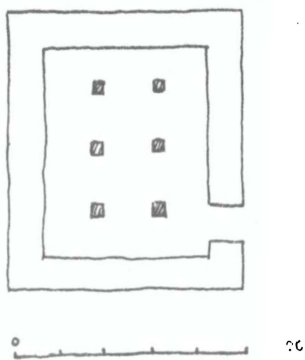


Fig.22

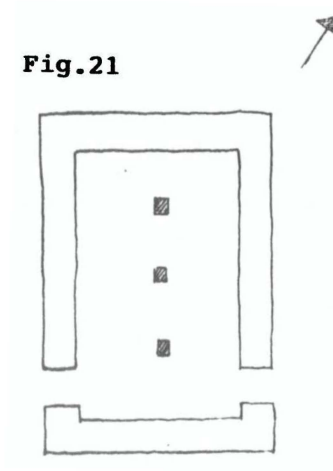


Fig.23