

*A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*

By K. A. C. CRESWELL, revised and supplemented by James W. Allan. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1989. Pp. 435. Price LE 60.00. 977-424-1967.

At last we have a new edition of K. A. C. Creswell's *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*. Originally published in 1958 as a Penguin Book, it remains indispensable for all those with a professional or an amateur interest in art. Such a collection of material, arranged and embedded in its historical context, is not available for later Islamic art history, a fact which emphasizes the value of the present work.

The work is conceived as a developmental history, taking a wide sweep from the primitive beginnings—as they are understood—towards the highpoint of Umayyad and 'Abbāsīd art and covering a period of some 200 years. The form here has remained unchanged, the division of the whole into two large sections being preserved, each of them subdivided chronologically into chapters. The individual chapters have been supplemented or evaluated, or are completely new additions, especially in the second part. Creswell's text, views, and datings remain untouched, differing opinions or more recent interpretations being added in a tactful and judicious manner by J. W. Allan. Indeed, Allan is due deep respect and gratitude for the courage and skill with which these additions have been made. The relevant explanations regarding this process are to be found in the foreword. R. W. Hamilton and A. Northedge have contributed their specialist knowledge in individual chapters, for example with respect to the Aqṣā Mosque or the architecture of Samarra. An index facilitates access to the contents.

The first part contains nine subchapters (3–225), from the beginnings of Islamic art to the end of Umayyad rule. The first chapter discusses the alterations to the Ka'ba, the early mosques, and the Dār al-Imāra in Kufa. For my part, I find it regrettable that the old premiss lives on that it was not until their campaigns of conquest that the Arabs, 'nine tenths nomads', came into contact with advanced civilizations. It is not only that the peninsula had been included in the currents of cultural influence and advanced civilizations since the earliest days, as excavations have demonstrated; independent advanced civilizations also came into being, for example in Yemen, the irrigation systems, temples, and towns of which presuppose an organized social structure. The same is true of the Nabataeans. Nowadays, Qaryat al-Fau is regarded as the capital of the Kinda in central Arabia; even if this were not the case, the finds of glass and pottery are evidence of the import of merchandise from the Parthian-Sassanian and Roman-Byzantine realms. The frescoes reflect the high degree of influence exerted by the art of late antiquity on the peninsula as well. The central sanctuary of Islam, the Ka'ba in Makka, cannot be regarded as primitive. As a community-based religion, Islam also promotes the culture of the community, the first sophisticated achievement being the foundation of the town of Kufa, and presumably also that of Basra. The foundation ritual alone serves to illustrate the confidence and sophistication arising from this religion. Creswell

shows a grave misunderstanding in maintaining that the Arabs cherished the ambition to erect buildings only when political reasons existed: building is directly related to politics. This common realization is also of help for the comprehension of objects in Islamic art.

The order laid down in the structure and presentation seems particularly disturbing when things that belong together continue to be dealt with separately. This can be seen in the case of the Qubbat aṣ-Ṣakhra and the Masjid al-Aqṣā, for example (19 and 73 ff.). Taken together, they form a replica of the Holy Sepulchre structure, as is maintained by al-Maḡdīsī, or the Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives. They represent the last in a series of Palestinian shrines with a rock-cut grotto connected with a centrally planned building and the form of a basilica, such as can be traced back to the time of Constantine.

Allan's comment that Phase I of the Masjid al-Aqṣā should probably be attributed to the planning of 'Abd al-Malik (82) is insufficient for a comprehension of the interrelations, even if purely 'aesthetic criteria' are to be used.

It also is not readily apparent why a ground-plan has not been provided for every building that is discussed, for example for the mosque of Wāsiṭ, or in the second part for the 'Amr Mosque in Fustāt. It would appear to me, for instance, that the arrangement of the *miḥrāb* bays in the mosque of Wāsiṭ or the courtyard bays and the cell-like manner in which they are joined together are of particular importance. Instead, the Great Mosque of Madina is included in the book, as is the Great Mosque of Ṣan'ā', mosques which—along with the Umayyad mosque of Damascus, the mosque of Fustāt, the Aqṣā Mosque, the Masjid al-Ḥarām, and the mosque of Qubā—were constructed by Walīd ibn 'Abd al-Malik. Considerable space is given to the Umayyad mosque of Damascus. It is surely important for the ground-plan that al-Jāhiḡ offers evidence for the existence of the northern minaret as far back as the early period, and that it thus forms an axis with the transept and the dome through the transverse structure. It is equally important that there was only the one *miḥrāb* along the main axis, together with the 'commemoration *miḥrāb*' in the eastern part of the *ḥaram*. The third *miḥrāb*, in the west, was not added until 728/1327–8. The emphasis on the main axis would otherwise be incomprehensible.

Chapters 4–7, which are likewise ordered chronologically, cover the secular buildings of the Umayyad rulers, that is, the so-called desert castles and town palaces. There are some new inclusions here: Qaṣr Burqu', Qaṣr Kharāna, Jabal Usais, 'Ammān, Jerusalem, and the town of 'Anjar. Qaṣr al-Baiḡā continues to be ruled out as pre-Islamic, although J. Kröger describes the Ummayyad origin of the structure as probable.<sup>1</sup> As a result of the chronological organization, it is not possible to list the buildings according to their particular function: quite apart from their rural or urban situation, there can be no doubt that they served different purposes. Accordingly, the question of a model for the *quṣūr* continues to be dealt with in a general fashion by reference to the Roman and Byzantine castles of the *limes*—it is presumably the *quadriburga* which are

<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. Kröger, *Kunst des Orients*, 12 (1978/9), 180.

meant. Since the problem of the function of these 'castles' is too complex, it is merely touched upon; this being the case, however, surely Qaṣr Burqu' should not then be mentioned as the prototype, especially since attempts to date it have yielded differing results. A prototype can be seen in all probability in Qaṣr al-Muqātil near 'Ain at-Tamr, used in pre-Islamic and Islamic times in the *bādiya* and probably having the same function as Khwarnaq and as-Sadīr.

A separate chapter (Chapter 8) is allocated to those buildings only recently recognized as being Umayyad, such as the Great Mosque of 'Ammān (Nortedge), the mosque of Sūsa, Banbhore, and the smaller mosques of Khān az-Zabīb and Umm al-Walīd (without ground-plan). However, the mosque of Sūsa should be dated to the 'Abbāsīd era, while its first phase may be attributed to the foundation period. The structure of ash-Shu'aiba (Tulūl ash-Sha'iba) has fortunately been included; regrettably, it could only be surveyed under emergency conditions.

Chapter 9 presents the concluding observations of the first part, repeating old theories such as can hardly be supported today. It is no longer possible to consider a mosque furnished with wooden supports as representing a direct connection to the Achaemenid *apadana*! On the other hand, the enumeration of architectural forms and construction materials is useful.

Part II, comprising Chapters 10–21, represents the historical continuation of the first part, the early 'Abbāsīd era, from its beginnings to its creative highpoint in the ninth century. However, the uniformity of the concept suffers from the multitude of insertions, necessitated by recent research. The insistence here on maintaining the chronological pattern is particularly irritating: it results in the buildings of Samarra being torn apart, for example, while 'Abbāsīd art is presented in bits and pieces. On the other hand, chapters which occupy themselves with architectural styles seen by Allan—quite correctly—as Umayyad are still included in the second part, following the original plan. Examples here are 'Atshān, Mūjida, and the Tārik Khāna in Damghan. No consideration is given to the corrections of *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 8 (1976) with regard to the ground-plan of 'Atshān.

The reconstructions of Baghdad, based on the fundamental work by E. Herzfeld, are enriched by J. Lassner's observations. It could perhaps be added that the existence of bent-axis gates in Parthian Hatra has been demonstrated; thus, there is an indigenous tradition in this respect. Following the redating of the town gate of Raqqa, Ukhaidir remains the only building still well enough preserved to show something of the art of the early 'Abbāsīd era. For this reason, one might regret the absence in the *Short Account* of a discussion and documentation of the structure's upper storeys. Instead of that, the *qaṣr* and the mosque of Iskāf Banī Junaid are included, opening a new chapter of early 'Abbāsīd architecture together with the palaces of Raqqa and the buildings along the Darb az-Zubaida. The ground-plan variants offered by the palaces are discussed by Allan in the summary on page 418; their general reappraisal is still to come (Ummu Qurūn was published in *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 9 (1978), 63). Similarly, the structures of Heraqla and Qādisiya have been included, both of which document the fondness of the 'Abbāsīd rulers for

circular structures. Chapter 18 has been enriched with the *ribāt* of Monastir, thereby supplementing the history of North African architecture, which is traced in parallel. Allan presents anew the complicated construction history of the Great Mosque of Qayrawān following the surveys by J. Sebag. It was unfortunately too late to take Chr. Ewert's work into consideration.

Chapters 16, 18, and 21 are concerned with the foundation history of the town of Samarra and its surviving buildings. Despite the addition of the ground-plan of Qaṣr al-Jiss and Iṣṭabulāt (Northedge) showing the excavations near the two large mosques, the extent to which research has neglected the town of Samarra is clear. A survey of Qaṣr 'Ashīq has yet to be carried out (cf. the plan in Chr. Ewert, *Madriider Forschungen*, 12/1 (1978), fig. 12). The following are inserted between the chapters on the town of Samarra: the mosque of Iṣfahān, Sīrāf, Balkh, and Sūsa in North Africa, these last two being included under the concept of the 'nine-domed mosque'. Other new inclusions are the town walls of Sūsa (following EMA ii), the minaret of Sūsa, the Great Mosque of Tunis (following L. Golvin), and the mosque of Muḥammad b. Khairūn (following G. Kirchner). The ground-plan of this mosque sheds no light on why it should have been included among those with nine domes. Three naves running parallel to the *qibla* wall can clearly be identified here, and the facade opens out into three arcades, while the side walls remain closed, as is the case with the mosque in Sūsa. The building also has a flat roof.

A complete presentation of the early Islamic irrigation systems, the cisterns, basins, dam walls, and deflection walls, with which we are now acquainted from the Arabian peninsula, has yet to appear.<sup>2</sup> It is for this reason that the cisterns near Qayrawān will not be regarded in future as an isolated phenomenon but will be allocated their position in the history of early Islamic buildings of a practical nature; the same is true of the Nilometer of Rōda or the cisterns of Ramla.

The Friday mosques of Fahraj and Shibām-Kaukabān, together with the small mosques of Sīrāf, have also been included in the period of the ninth century. One feels more sceptical with regard to the reference to the dating of Zibliyāt with the aid of the radiocarbon process.

Chapter 22 contains the final observations of this volume, summarizing the essential points. The 'further observations' by Allan, concerning themselves with the development of the arch and the squinch, are particularly gratifying. One can scarcely praise his contribution sufficiently in working up the old manuscript by means of comments, observations, and additions. At the same time, a gulf between the old conception and the picture presented by more recent research is clearly revealed, one which can only be bridged with difficulty. This conflict notwithstanding, it becomes crystal-clear that a need exists for a handbook of Islamic architecture, one which reflects the architectural content and construction history of a building in a factual and precise manner, without

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Saad A. Al-Rashid, *Darb Zubaydah, the Pilgrim Road from Kufa to Mecca* (Riyad, 1980); M. Solignac, *Recherches sur les installations hydrauliques de Kairouan et des steppes tunisiennes du VIIe au XI siècle*. Annales de l'Institut d'Études Orientales, x, xi (1952, 1953).

the ballast of interpretations. It is precisely in his attempt to record an architecture that Creswell's invaluable service lies. One might even suggest that a further new edition of the book, written and conceived by Allan alone, would be entirely in accord with the author's original intentions.

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