THE FORMATION OF

ISLAMIC ART

OLEG GRABAR

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ISBN 0-300-02187-9

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS

NEW HAVEN AND LONDON
The Formation of Islamic Art
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by Oleg Grabar

New Haven and London, Yale University Press
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Introduction

Several impulses led to the writing of this book and, since these impulses dictated its scope and its format, there is a point in defining them briefly. A first one is that in the field of Near Eastern art there are almost no intermediates between the very specialized scholarly study and the very general book. The former rarely elicits much enthusiasm except in rarefied circles, while the latter is often general to the point of meaninglessness or erroneous in too many details because of the inability of even the most industrious scholar to keep up with the field’s literature or to consider thousands of monuments in anything but a very superficial manner. A second impulse is the tremendous range in time and space of Islamic art. It is found in Spain in the eighth century and in India in the eighteenth, and almost all countries and centuries between these two extremes have contributed to its growth. While there may be perfectly valid reasons for considering such a vast area as a single entity over a thousand years, it is equally certain that considerable modifications, regional or temporal, were inevitably brought to it. Thus, it seemed appropriate to devote a study to one period only, thereby opening the way for further investigation based on distinctions of time and area.

A third impulse was that after years of writing, reading, lecturing, and teaching about early Islamic art, a number of ideas, hypotheses, and interpretations grew which never appeared in print but which seemed to deserve elaboration within a more general and more theoretical framework. For, as we will see, early Islamic art raises a number of abstract questions about the nature of artistic creativity and aesthetic sensibility which transcend the exact time and place of its growth. Or at least so it seemed to me. Many of the ideas and answers that follow are, of course, tentative and uncertain in value. Yet their very uncertainty and incompleteness may make them more useful than finished studies and solved problems since they may indicate far more accurately the hazy frontiers of contemporary knowledge and may inspire others to criticize, disprove, or improve their implications. Thus scholarship may become a dialectically creative process.

Finally, as I was asked to give the Baldwin Seminar for 1969 at
Oberlin College, it occurred to me that a subject which led to a variety of ideas and hypotheses might be particularly suitable to an audience of art historians with little knowledge of Islamic art as such. These lectures, much redone, led for instance to the order in which the various topics will be discussed. And at times perhaps the selection of materials and the manner of presenting them reflect what began as a spoken exercise.

All these impulses have shaped the character of this book. It is not a manual of early Islamic art and it does not pretend to discuss all monuments and all problems. It consists of seven essays related to each other through a question defined in the first essay: if it exists at all, how was Islamic art formed? There are no notes, but in a critical bibliography arranged by chapter will be found such justifications and references as seemed necessary. This bibliography should be of help to those who may want to pursue some of the topics discussed in the essays proper. But my main purpose was not to provide another instrument for the gathering of information. Sir Archibald Creswell's great new volumes on early Islamic architecture, J. D. Pearson's Index Islamicus (Cambridge, 1958, with two supplements carrying his survey of periodical literature until 1965), or the more critical Abstracta Islamica of the Revue des Études Islamiques serve well the purpose of information. What I attempted was to suggest the varieties of historical, intellectual, functional, aesthetic, theoretical, and formal concerns which appeared to me to have created Islamic art. In places I have simply repeated what various scholars, including myself, have printed in well-known or obscure—but usually not read—journals. In other places I have introduced new ideas and observations. On occasions unproved—perhaps even unprovable—assertions have been made. Often I have tried to define the limits of our knowledge and the questions which require further investigation. Furthermore, it has seemed to me that a problem like that of the formation of an artistic tradition of more than a thousand years cannot be resolved simply through the continuous, monographic study of single documents. It must also be set in two additional contexts: the general cultural context of its time, the moment when all aspects of a new civilization are formed, and the context of a general theory of the arts and their development. It is my hope that both Islamicists and historians of other artistic traditions will find an interest in what follows, and most of all, I hope that the hypotheses and conclusions which follow will be challenged and discussed.

It would be foolish indeed to claim that some great truth has been discovered in this book. It would be presumptuous to pose as an agent provocateur challenging others to find solutions. What is presented here is an exercise in Problemstellung, in the setting up of categories of learning and investigation through which a series of fundamental questions may be answered. It is also an attempt to demonstrate the intellectual and at times even aesthetic fascination of a peculiarly rich moment of artistic creativity. If at times it appears to raise too many unanswered questions or to withdraw into abstract considerations, the reasons are, on the one hand, that too little attention has been given recently to the theoretical principles by which we interpret existing documents and, on the other, that every piece of evidence—a great monument or a ceramic series—must have its epistemological limits properly defined before it can be used to suggest the growth and evolution of a culture's material and aesthetic creativity.

The pages that follow contain a number of very detailed discussions of single monuments as well as rather abstract considerations of general problems or of whole sets of monuments. This mixture of intellectual genres is largely dictated by the variety of the problems posed and by the great discrepancies in our understanding of and information about Islamic monuments. In order not to overburden the book with unnecessary geographical, historical, or technical details, I have assumed that the reader has an approximate idea of the major political and cultural events of the seventh through tenth centuries in and around the Mediterranean (fig. 1) and that he has some familiarity with the main traditions of Mediterranean and Near Eastern art before Islam. These basic facts are now available in a number of general books.

Like any essay in interpretation which implies that the history of art and even archaeology are largely aspects of a broader history of ideas, this book runs the risk of failing to satisfy either those who will seek in it precise explanations of otherwise known monuments and problems, or those who may expect some coherent theoretical system. It certainly is not supposed to replace much needed monographs and, while I can easily admit to some intellectual preferences over others, it does not seem possible as yet to
work out a totally valid abstract way of defining a priori all aesthetic and archaeological problems. And this is probably as it should be. Yet these essays are based on the belief that most knowledge and all explanations are only working hypotheses, whose constant refinement is the very stuff of intellectual endeavor and whose major criterion of value is not so much their possible truth as the degree to which they can serve to direct further studies, even if the latter end up by abandoning them.

I owe a great debt to many people. The most important one will be found in the bibliographical appendixes, for hundreds of studies by others have made these essays possible. Then various individuals read these pages, and their criticism did much to improve them at an early stage: Professor André Grabar, Professor Terry H. Grabar, and two former students, Dr. Lisa Volow Golombok, and Dr. Renata Holod. In the usual manner none of them bears any responsibility for the pages which follow. Nor can I throw any responsibility on the hundreds of students at the University of Michigan, at Harvard University, and at Oberlin College who over the past fifteen years have heard the slow and often unclear elaboration of the interpretations proposed here. Yet I owe more to their critical questions and comments than I dare to admit.

All works of Near Eastern scholarship face the thorny problem of transliteration. In order to avoid confusing as well as costly systems of diacritical marks, Arabic or Persian words and names have been simplified and a simple apostrophe indicates varieties of glottal stops, while no distinction is made between long and short syllables. Some may regret this decision but I justify it on two grounds. One is that a coherent transliteration tends to frighten nonspecialists away without adding anything significant to their understanding, while specialists can easily figure out what any one word or term was in the original language. And then it has always seemed to me that in comparatively general books the magic of arbitrary signs introduces an useless pedantry.

Finally it is a particular pleasure to thank those who have helped in putting the book through its last stages. I am very grateful to all those who have provided the photographs used in this book or who have allowed me to reproduce plans or pictures from their books and articles. A list of acknowledgments will be found with the list of illustrations. Mr. Howard Crane made the map in figure 1. Robin Bledsoe, of the Yale University Press, did more than anyone else to make my text readable and saved me from a frightening number of inconsistencies and unclarities. Avril Lamb spent many hours writing letters, hunting for photographs, and retyping pages of text or lists of illustrations, all of it with cheerful good humor and critical concern. The book would have been much worse without their help. Finally, I owe a special debt to Mr. Dana J. Pratt, of the Yale University Press, who suggested that I write it all in the first place.

Preface to paperback edition

Except for a few typographical errors, nothing has been changed in the text. On the other hand, quite a few additions were made to the critical apparatus at the end.

Many things could have been changed, because of new information, because of modifications in my own views about early Islamic art, or because of criticisms formulated by generally very kind reviewers, two fascinating exceptions notwithstanding. On the whole, however, I preferred, for a while yet, to stand by most of the ideas and methods developed here, even if I agree that some of the terms used could be improved. For instance the religious-secular contrast could be modified into private-public or open-restricted and the term *arabesque* should perhaps be abandoned. But it is perhaps better to subject the interpretations of this book to more tests and discussions before altering them entirely.
1. The Problem

In a book that is still one of the best short introductions to Islamic art, the late George Marçais proposed that a person with a modicum of artistic culture leave through photographs of major works of art from the world over. He contended that almost automatically a group of works would be identifiable as Islamic, Muslim, Moorish, Muhammadan, or Saracen, because they shared a number of commonly known features—what Marçais called the personality of Islamic art—which differentiated them from masterpieces of other artistic traditions. The ultimate validity of this judgment by a great historian need not concern us at this moment, nor is it important to know what commonly known features may have been in his mind or in the minds of the several writers on Islamic art who preceded or followed him. It is the suggestion itself that may serve as a convenient starting point for a definition of our objectives, for it contains a number of key theoretical and specific assumptions which are at the root of many difficulties and misunderstandings affecting the study of Islamic art, and yet without whose resolution—or at least discussion—neither the historical nor the aesthetic importance of a major artistic tradition can be properly explained.

The first assumption is that of the uniqueness of an Islamic art. But what does the word “Islamic” mean when used as an adjective modifying the noun “art”? What is the range of works of art that are presumably endowed with unique features? Is it comparable in kind to other artistic entities? “Islamic” does not refer to the art of a particular religion, for a vast proportion of the monuments have little if anything to do with the faith of Islam. Works of art demonstrably made by and for non-Muslims can appropriately be studied as works of Islamic art. There is, for instance, a Jewish Islamic art, since large Jewish communities lived within the predominantly Muslim world, and representative examples of this Jewish art have been included in a book on Arab painting. There is also a Christian Islamic art, most easily illustrated by metalwork from the Fertile Crescent in the thirteenth century but known elsewhere as well, for instance in the complex development of Coptic art in Egypt after the seventh century. Finally, even though its problems are far more complex and its pertinent examples much later than
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the period with which we are concerned, there is an Islamic art of India which was certainly not entirely an art of Muslims. The important point is that "Islamic" in the expression "Islamic art" is not comparable to "Christian" or "Buddhist" in "Christian art" or "Buddhist art."

An alternate and far more common interpretation of the adjective "Islamic" is that it refers to a culture or civilization in which the majority of the population or at least the ruling element profess the faith of Islam. In this fashion Islamic art is different in kind from Chinese art, Spanish art, or the art of the Steppes, for there is no Islamic land or Islamic people.

If it exists at all, Islamic art would be one that overpowered and transformed ethnic or geographical traditions, or else one that created some peculiar kind of symbiosis between local and pan-Islamic modes of artistic behavior and expression. In either instance the term "Islamic" would be comparable to those like "Gothic" or "Baroque" and would suggest a more or less successful cultural moment in the long history of native traditions. It would be like a special overlay, a deforming or refracting prism which transformed, at times temporarily and imperfectly, at other times permanently, some local energies or traditions. As in the study of Gothic architecture or Baroque painting, one of the historian's problems becomes then to distinguish what in a given moment is native and what belongs to the Islamic overlay, and to keep some sort of balance between the two components.

In recent decades much research, especially that dealing with North Africa, Turkey, Iran, and Central Asia, has tended to emphasize the local, regional character of the arts, whereas an earlier scholarly tradition had stressed the unity of the arts created under the aegis of Islam. The reason for this modern preference lies perhaps more in the intellectual and practical isolation of scholars in many areas of modern Islam and in exacerbated nationalism than in a fully thought out rejection of the notion of an Islamic art definable in the ways in which Gothic or Baroque art is defined. Yet these new directions of research cannot and should not be easily dismissed; they are in fact quite important in forcing a realization of the danger that exists in interpreting the term "Islamic" as simply a cultural overlay affecting those lands which became Muslim by faith or civilization. It happens, for instance, that with the notable exception of the southern half of Spain, almost no part of the world conquered by Islam between the seventh and the twelfth centuries ever gave up its particular cultural identification. Since it is logically unlikely and demonstrably untrue that a sixteenth-century Persian miniature and an eight-century Syrian wall painting are related to each other in anything but the most remote fashion, "Islamic" either becomes meaningless as an adjective identifying a cultural and artistic moment or must be modified by a series of further adjectives such as "early," "late," "classical," "Iranian," "Arab," "Turkish," or whatever else scientific ingenuity can devise.

Other examples and comparisons could be brought together which would suggest that we are not very clear on what is really meant by "Islamic" except insofar as it pertains to many of the usual categories—ethnic, cultural, temporal, geographic, religious—by which artistic creations and material culture in general are classified, without corresponding precisely to any of them. There is thus something elusive and apparently unique about the adjective "Islamic" when it is applied to any aspect of culture other than the faith itself. One of our purposes in this work will be to try to propose a more precise definition than has hitherto been available for the term "Islamic" as it applies to the arts, and to consider whether there are non-Islamic artistic processes comparable to it or whether it is indeed of its own kind.

In the meantime let us assume, at least hypothetically, an apparent epistemological uniqueness of the term. This uniqueness can consist in a determinable number of differences between the Islamic artistic tradition and other artistic traditions; or, alternately, it can be the internally willed, positively identified decision of a given culture to shape the ways of its materials and aesthetic expressions. In the former case we would end up by defining an art from the point of view of the observer—contemporary foreigner or today's historian. Valid though such a point of view may be, it is incomplete because it is itself intimately bound up with the observer's own intellectual and aesthetic makeup. On the other hand, it is particularly difficult to see a work of art from the point of view of its creator or its first user, for, in most instances of pre-Renaissance art, we can only approximate the conditions which prevailed at the time of a monument's making. Yet, if one is to define the uniqueness of an aesthetic tradition, it is perhaps this internal cre-
ative purpose which must be explained—or at best hypothesized—rather than the external formal, iconographic, or functional characteristics.

Another implication of Marçais’s opening statement derives from his definition of Islamic art as “the last one to have been born in our old world [with] its cradle in Western Asia” (p. 5). Since Islam as a religion or culture is an historical phenomenon that was formed in the third decade of the seventh century and that grew and developed in particularly spectacular fashion, the very possibility of an Islamic art presupposes a change in previous artistic traditions. This implicit change may be defined on two levels. One is vertical in the sense that artistic traditions described through some earlier cultural moment or geographical area from Visigothic Spain to Soghdian Central Asia became Islamic at a certain moment and can be identified as such through precise characteristics. The other, horizontal, level is that of a presumed uniformity in the character of the change which could make, for instance, the art of Cordoba in the ninth century closer to the art of Samarkand than to that of Compostello. If the latter definition proves to be correct, its implications are quite extraordinary. In a.d. 700 Cordoba and Samarkand had probably not even heard of each other; in 800 they belonged together; in 1200 they were no longer part of the same world. Granada in 1200 was still part of the world of Samarkand but no longer of Cordoba. As late as 1450 Constantinople was a Christian citadel of Byzantine art, but in 1500 its art is supposed to be comparable to the art of Delhi or to that of Marrakesh. These are obviously extreme instances, but they do demonstrate that an understanding of whether and how Islamic art may be an intellectually valid concept requires a precise elucidation of those common features which at varying times and in varying regions led to changes in the arts of different cultural entities.

Problems of change are of course neither new nor the unique privilege of the art historian. Social scientists have constructed elaborate models to explain the myriad of evolutionary or revolutionary ways in which changes have been brought about. Valuable though they may be in many details, these models are not easy to translate into more ancient terms and into the area of the visual arts because most of the time our information is too scanty or else of a type which cannot readily be included within the patterns or paradigms developed by the social scientist. To attempt to use them may eventually be worthwhile, but for now the more fruitful approach may be to use the work of art historians dealing with other periods of significant and irreversible change. The history of late antique art in the Mediterranean, with its passage from pagan to Christian art, offers a superb and often discussed instance of change which has the advantage of comparative proximity in time and space to Islamic art. The most recent studies on the subject have, it seems to me, emphasized two points which are crucial to our purpose. One is that change in meaning and change in form are two separate phenomena that depend on each other but do not necessarily coincide. The other is that change consists not only in modifications to the visually perceptible features of form and subject matter but also to an interplay between these features and a feature that is less easy to comprehend, the mind of the beholder. In other words it is likely, or at least possible, that the fact that a Muslim looked at or used a form gave a different sense to that form, and that this difference of visual understanding or of practical use is largely what affected the making of further forms.

By searching for an identification of uses and attitudes, we may indeed be able to discover an essential inspiration of any given artistic tradition. It is certainly not by accident that most historians of late antique and of early medieval art have so often dealt with interpretations of texts, from those of Plotinus to the highly verbal Iconoclastic controversy. In this manner it has been possible to sketch a sort of profile of the verbalizing intellectual relationship to the arts. Similarly, it is the study of ceremonies, religious or imperial, which has provided current explanations of buildings and often of images and decorative designs. In many ways related procedures have been utilized to define other changes, from the Romanesque to the Gothic or from the Renaissance to the Baroque.

It becomes evident then that an identification of the changes brought out by Islamic civilization in order to make an Islamic art possible requires an identification and explanation of three separate elements: the mind of the Muslim user and beholder, the meanings given to his artistic creations, and the forms utilized by him. It is clear as well that the knowledge we need of these elements is local-
ized in time, for it is as they appeared at the formative moments of Islamic art that they effected the changes implicit in the presumed existence of that art.

Thus even a rather simplified consideration of what seems to be meant by the notion of an Islamic art has led us to the important realization that, whatever developments the art of Muslim lands may have had over the centuries, it is essential to understand as fully as possible how it was formed, what primi moti were involved in its creation. It is not merely a question of deciding what features in a number of early monuments illustrate something new that could be explained by Islam alone. It is also a matter of determining whether characteristics were developed which permanently affected the arts of Islam or whether the phenomenon of Islamic art is but a variant, regional or temporal, of other artistic entities. It is finally a matter of defining a mind, an attitude toward the arts, a psychological motivation, and an intellectual understanding.

Having outlined the general purpose of our investigations, we must turn to more specific topics. Here two questions arise, one pertaining to the times with which we will be concerned, the other to the methods we are to follow.

The question of the period or periods with which one must deal in order to explain the formation of Islamic art is not as simple as may first be imagined. In considering artistic and cultural change we have to account for what may be called absolute and relative time. Absolute time consists in those centuries, decades, or even years after which Islamic art was possible and probably existed. It is a time that generally can be defined quite precisely through historical events or through particularly important monuments. Relative time, on the other hand, is defined by the moment when a culture as a whole has accepted and is transformed by changes which in themselves may be dated precisely. For instance, in absolute time the new Gothic spirit is a phenomenon of the third quarter of the twelfth century when Abbot Suger, for example, started rebuilding St.-Denis; but the relative time of the Gothic is just as clearly the thirteenth century, when practically the whole of Western Europe became affected by the new aesthetic and intellectual systems. Or, a Christian art may have been possible and even existed as early as in the second century A.D., but the artistic "landscape" of the time was still that of imperial Rome. It was only two centuries later that the artistic landscape or climate of the Mediterranean became Christian.

Absolute times may be fixed by precise monuments, as in the cases of St.-Denis or in the painting of the Sistine Chapel, or by political or cultural events which can be presumed to have had a major impact of some sort, such as the French Revolution or Alexander's conquest of western Asia. In the case of Islamic art an absolute date may indeed be posited, and it is essentially a political one. There could not have been any Islamic art before the existence of Islam and for practical purposes one can adopt the canonical year A.D. 622 as the basic post quem date for any possible formation of an Islamic art. It was the year of the Hijrah when the Prophet Muhammad established himself in Madinah as the head of the small Muslim community, and it thus became the first year of the Muslim calendar. But the events that took place in west-central Arabia around 622 had only local significance at the time, hardly involving more than a minor area on the edge of vast deserts, themselves at the periphery of the major centers of the day. The events could have had any sort of importance for the arts only if some major monument or idea about the arts were associated with them. Though we will refine this point a bit later, it is generally agreed—and on the whole justifiably so—that no such monument existed and no obviously significant ideology about the arts had been developed. Thus, crucial though it may be as an absolute post quem date, 622 is not a very meaningful one for the arts. For a history and understanding of Islamic civilization this observation is not without significance, for it differentiates the position of the arts from that of religion or institutions in the formation of an Islamic entity. In religion, for instance, the Medinese spirit of the Koranic revelation after 622 is distinguishable in form, content, and impact from the earlier, Mekkan one.

Since almost all the preserved or known monuments of Islamic art are found outside of the precise geographical region in which Islam first appeared, a more appropriate absolute date may be that of the conquest of a given region by Islam. This would be a curiously curved date which would begin in 634 when the first Syrian villages were taken over by Muslim Arabs and would end in the early sixteenth century when the Mughal emperors consolidated into one entity the many sultanates of India, or even much later in
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sort of ink blot with a periodic addition of new ink in the blot's several centers. This conquest was quite clearly and consciously recorded by historical tradition, and a precise date can usually be given to the establishment of Muslim rule in every province, if not, as in Syria, in every city. Each individual date is valid only for a particular city or province, but the span is valid for the whole culture because it identifies the period when a vast area irreversibly changed from something else to Islamic and thus became a unit to which little was to be added for several centuries. This definition of absolute dates is primarily a political one, almost always military in fact, and hardly ever corresponds to major changes in the composition of the population, for Muslim armies were small and for awhile did not constitute more than garrisons. Yet in the subsequent self-understanding and self-consciousness of every Muslim region or city, this date of conquest became the symbol of its new state.

If then we have an historically definable post quem date for our investigation, when should we end it? When can we say that an Islamic art has been formed? This is where the problem of relative time comes in. For, since the creation of an Islamic entity was the result of a cause external to the area in which it was created and since the precise dates we have mentioned identify political or administrative events only, there is no necessity—it is in fact almost erroneous to do so—to consider the time when Damascus, Cordoba, or Samarkand became administratively part of the Muslim empire as automatically the time when all expressions of their aesthetic or material culture can appropriately be considered as Islamic. The Dome of the Rock (fig. 5), the mosque of Damascus (fig. 25), or many an early Islamic building or silver object from Iran (figs. 98, 99) have been considered as monuments of Byzantine or Sassanian art, and every manual of non-Muslim art treats them as such.

Other examples exist that complicate matters even more. We know, for instance, that in 719–20 in the small town of Ma'in in Transjordan mosaic floors of rather mediocre quality were redone in a Christian church, and it has been suggested with considerable justification that these repairs were influenced by the changed political and cultural conditions, for representations of living beings—mostly animals—were replaced with vegetal motifs. A sizable group of thirteenth-century bronzes with Christian subjects can properly
be considered as works of Islamic art. Yet no one has ever called the Ma'in mosaics works of Islamic art, even though they postdate the conquest and are probably under the impact of the rule of Islam in Palestine and Syria. It is essential either to find a reason for this judgment about works done by Christians or to conclude that the prevalent opinion of them is erroneous. An even more complex problem occurs in Iran when one considers the so-called post-Sasanian silver objects (fig. 99) for, as several writers have observed, post-Sasanian means Islamic since Islam took over the Sassanian empire. Yet it has proved extremely difficult to decide by which criterion a given silver object is Islamic or Sassanian. Finally, much has been written about the vexing question of the relationship between Christian Coptic art and the Islamic art of Egypt, but not much has been solved. Inasmuch as the Muslim conquest was very rarely destructive, it can be taken for granted that earlier artistic traditions continued at almost every level of creation and patronage and that their production was used by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Archaeologically, it has so far proved impossible to distinguish late Byzantine from early Islamic ceramics in Syria and Palestine, and Soviet archaeologists tend to consider the material culture of Central Asia from the sixth to the tenth century as an entity. Thus, at least at first glance, there does not seem to be any clear way of deciding how, why, and when a work produced under Muslim rule can properly be thought to be Islamic.

At the root of our problem lies the fundamental fact that the time of events and cultural time do not coincide, not even within the powerful totalitarianism of our own century. A John of Damascus was born and died within the political time of the Muslim empire and probably spoke Arabic in daily life, yet he can hardly be understood as a representative of Islamic culture. On the contrary, he was better informed about what was going on in Byzantium than in the Muslim world. John of Damascus's major contributions to Byzantine theological thought and his total involvement in Byzantine religious life are paralleled by the very remarkable fact that it was under Muslim rule, and possibly as late as the tenth century, that the codification of Zoroastrian religious writing took place in western Iran. In this latter instance, of course, we are not dealing with an involvement with politically foreign entities, but rather with a conscious attempt to preserve and develop a pre-Islamic tradition.

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The parallelism with the case of a John of Damascus lies in the fact that at a time when Muslim rule had been established for some time, major groups or powerful individuals continued to exist as though the Muslim rule were hardly present, or possibly in conscious reaction to it. If a Muslim writer like Muqaddasi could still in the tenth century complain that Jews and Christians had the upper hand in Jerusalem, it is likely indeed that by that time many cities of the Islamic Near East, not to speak of the countryside, had a strong, if not always predominant, non-Muslim population whose degree of cultural islamization is as difficult to assess as it is essential to know. Yet at a certain moment Zoroastrianism became part of a mythical pre-Islamic past rather than a component of contemporary reality, and Christian or Jewish communities became secondary and, with some exceptions, minor units within the Muslim world; their culture and aesthetic merely mirrored with a few peculiarities the views of the dominant Islamic way. It is probably only after this domination was fully established that we can appropriately talk about a formed Islamic art which would have become the art of the various geographical areas ruled by Muslim princes and by the Law of the new faith. It is only then that we can begin to answer some of the questions raised above about the respective importance of regional or pan-Islamic values and characteristics in the arts.

There is another way of defining the relative time we are seeking to establish. We may use a cultural term and say that we are looking for a classical phase in the Muslim world. The term "classical" is obviously a dangerous and difficult one, and we will have occasion to return to it later. At this stage it may be easier to suggest that this classical phase, if it existed for the arts, had to have some of the following characteristics: wide cultural acceptance of certain forms as identifying the culture's functional and aesthetic needs, repetition of standardized forms and designs, quality of execution at various levels of artistic production, clarity in the definition of visible forms. Unfortunately the state of scholarship dealing with Islamic art does not allow us as yet to say when such a classical stage may have been reached, and one of our objectives is to make some suggestions in this direction. The presumption of the existence of a classicism thus defined must, however, be accepted as a premise for our investigations. For another way of expressing the
idea of classicism is that, be it in Islamic culture or in fifth-century Athens, there was developed a more or less idealized typology of forms that was automatically utilized by the culture whenever it made an object or erected a building. Without its existence, it is useless to suggest that an Islamic art can be defined.

Thus, whereas one can be quite precise about the absolute time after which an Islamic art is conceivable, one can reach no such precision about the relative time by which it had actually been formed. The only likely assumption is that this time varied from area to area, and one of our problems will be to determine the index of value any individual region or monument has for Islamic art as a whole. Only through the monuments themselves may we be able to discover the relative time it may have taken for Muslim culture to create an art that can be clearly defined as its own. At the same time, one must constantly recall that it was a political and religious impetus, not an artistic or even material one, which created Islam and so made Islamic art possible. If political history or intellectual history can provide us with “nodal” moments, that is, moments of crystallization of thought or of power, it is legitimate enough to assume a similar crystallization of the arts. At least the question must be raised, even though one must be mindful that the rhythms of the visual arts and of thought or of political and social events need not coincide.

The preceding remarks suggest that a method or methods must be devised which can resolve, from whatever evidence is available, the various problems we have raised. Some sixty years ago a superb article by Ernst Herzfeld was entitled “Die Genesis der islamischen Kunst.” In it and in some of his other works the most versatile of the small group of scholars who, at the turn of the century, set the study of Islamic art on a more or less scientific basis, attempted to answer the question of the originality and uniqueness of Islamic art by raising the problem of its formation. He was the first to recognize that the problems of an art created in the unique historical circumstances of Islamic art cannot be explained in purely formal or purely art historical terms. It has to be seen in what since Herzfeld’s time would have been called its ecological setting, that is in a certain relationship between man and his surroundings. Eventually Herzfeld—much under the influence of Riegl’s idealistic answers to a recently grown materialistic theory of the arts—was drawn to a sort of deterministic position that the conquered lands themselves had “foreseen the coming art of Islam” (“die weerdende Kunst des Islam”). Even though one may easily argue against the likelihood of such an inevitability of artistic developments, it remains true that Herzfeld was the first to realize that a problem existed and that traditional or even novel methods were not entirely suited to it. Yet his solutions, tentative though he himself thought them to be and original though his premises may have been, still suffer from two defects. One is that his information was very limited compared to what is available now; the other is that, because he wrote at the time of the discovery of the Orient—and was much involved in the then virulent battle of Orient oder Rome, a fascinating debate on the sources of medieval art—he tended to resolve too many problems in terms of a contemporary dichotomy between a classical perfection and a recently discovered early medieval and Oriental decorative aesthetic.

It is rather curious that Herzfeld’s last major contribution to the problems of early Islamic art dates from 1921. Other concerns, mainly Iranian ones, occupied him from then until his death in 1948, and he never had a chance or the interest to return to his earlier involvement in the light of new discoveries. We shall see later that in our judgment many of Herzfeld’s ultimate insights were correct, even though most of his specific arguments no longer are. But he was much in advance of his time and of the knowledge available to it. Because of his involvement in the exciting arguments of the newly developed art historical schools in Vienna, he was conscious, especially in his earlier works, of the importance of theoretical and abstract considerations in dealing with the problems of early Islamic art. While one can easily grant the dangers attached to such concerns, the more pragmatic and positivist tendencies of the following generation have perhaps failed in making the monuments and problems of early Islamic art significant to the discipline at large.

It was from a totally different academic and intellectual tradition that new ideas and methods were to come. As after World War I mandatory power was established in the Levant, the aristocratic travels of old—like those of Sarre, Herzfeld, van Oppenheim, de Vogüé, Butler, Gertrude Bell—were replaced by the perhaps more prosaic but academically more fruitful establishment of permanent
schools and institutes which fostered a far more profound involvement in and understanding of the life of the lands in which early Islamic history took place. This new atmosphere fostered the brilliant thought of Jean Sauvaget, whose elaboration was left unfinished by his untimely death. Sauvaget was rather negatively and unfairly caustic about the intellectual value of art historical endeavors and his preference went to what he called "archaeology." In his sense the word should not be understood in its technical meaning of excavations (although it did not exclude them) but rather in its etymological meaning of learning about ancient remains. More precisely, Sauvaget felt that only by studying the total evidence available about a given site, monument, problem, or period can any part of it be understood. Shards have to be the historian, even to the historian of art, the same documentary value as a masterpiece of painting or architecture, perhaps even a greater value for they lead to what Sauvaget called "the silent web of history" ("la trame silencieuse de l'histoire"). To him, only when seen against the unconscious and almost automatic material culture of the time could the conscious, if not even at times self-conscious, work of art be understood properly. While Sauvaget was propounding and developing his views in his teaching, quite independently of his work, the more tragically lonely figure of Ugo Monneret de Villard was putting down on paper an introduction to the archaeology of early Islam which has only recently been made available. Even though it too remained unfinished, it exemplified the same concerns for a sort of total history and the same realization that only through some organized correlation between a mass of very diverse kinds of documents could the art of early Islamic times and the formation of Islamic art be understood, in fact, even identified.

If I have spoken at some length about these scholars, it is in part out of deference to men I have not known, but whom I have read quite often over the past twenty years. As one attempts to synthesize, the sense of what one owes to the dead increases and replaces whatever irritation one may have felt at the unfinished character of their work. For it is unfortunate indeed that not Herzfeld, nor Sauvaget, nor Monneret de Villard was able, through a variety of accidents of history, to put together in any sort of final or systematic form the often brilliant insights he had. While it is presum-

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tuous to suggest that this can be done in the pages that follow, it is still true that, for better or for worse, correctly interpreted or not, the thoughts and ideas of these masters have led to the positions and to the conclusions of this book. It is their pioneering work which in large part suggested the methods which will be used throughout. Even when I depart from their views or introduce documents that did not seem pertinent to them, the large debt scholarship owes to them will, I hope, be apparent.

We have shown that it is not through works of art or monuments but through the unfolding of certain political or other events that the very possibility of an Islamic art can be raised. We must, however, now ask ourselves whether there are monuments or related documents that may make it possible to answer the questions posed by history. Such monuments and documents not only exist but are quite remarkably numerous and varied. Some of them are acknowledged masterpieces of world art like the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Others are still unsolved curiosities like the series of secular establishments which are found over a large area from the celebrated unfinished Mshatta at the edge of the Jordanian desert (fig. 66) to Qasr al-Hayr East way out in the Syrian steppe (fig. 103). They can also be works of the so-called minor arts such as new ceramic types appearing in Iraq or northeastern Iran (figs. 107ff.). They can be huge and imposing, as in the ninth-century Abbasid towns and palaces artificially created over some thirty miles near the Iraqi town of Samarra, or simple and prosaic ruins, as in the many badly preserved estates of Transjordan. Finally, these documents can be texts describing buildings, as in the instance of most early mosques or objects and ceremonies. It is clear that, whatever the questions for which history requires answers, there is a practical problem of dealing with a considerable and immensely varied documentation about the arts, of finding a common denominator for them. The problem is compounded by a number of special difficulties, of which two examples may suffice at this stage. It can be demonstrated—and I will discuss the meaning of this later on—that between 640 and 670 in the newly founded cities of Lower Mesopotamia a type of building was created which has been called a hypostyle mosque. A century later a similar kind of building is found in Tunisia and Muslim Spain and can be reconstructed in
Balkh or Nishapur in northeastern Iran and Afghanistan. Should we assume a spread from Iraq to the confines of the Muslim world? Should we think that similar functions automatically created similar forms in different parts of the Muslim world? Or should we rather imagine that there was a type—in the technical sense of the word, a standard with variations—which was independent of any specific land but was tied to the needs of the faith alone and to the mind of the faithful? In other words, what is the kind of relationship which exists among forms spread all over the Muslim world? Should their history be written from monument to monument set in chronological sequence, as has been done in many basic manuals such as Creswell's monumental *Early Muslim Architecture*? Or should it accord to some underlying idea about forms and purposes which transcends individual monuments?

Or, to take another example, one can identify through the example of the reconstructed façade of Qasr al-Hayr West (fig. 65) a certain type of early Islamic princely residence with an elaborate architectural decoration in which most individual themes and techniques belong to a wide variety of non-Islamic sources. While it may suffice merely to identify these sources, the more important problem is to decide how these themes were understood when they were made, why they were made, and whether they were but accidental collections of motifs or significant and conscious accumulations of subjects in the process of creating a new aesthetic and material vision.

These examples illustrate that, in addition to the comparatively simple problem of ordering and organizing large masses of available archaeological documents, the issues we have raised and the incomplete nature of the evidence we possess about the huge world of early Islam require answers to larger and more theoretical questions. From a practical point of view one could indeed take the monuments one by one, analyze them, and then draw appropriate conclusions. But, outside of the fact that it would be a particularly long and cumbersome procedure in the confines of a short book, this task, which is made all the more difficult since information varies enormously from one monument to the next, is meaningless if it is not associated with the elaboration of hypotheses.

What can we consider an art historical hypothesis to be? And how does one develop it? Here one may again borrow from disciplines other than the history of art and suggest that there are three criteria attached to a hypothesis of the type I will propose. It has to explain a sufficiently high number of perceptible phenomena or documents without being compelled to explain them all; it has to be meaningful both in terms of individual monuments and in terms of the wider historical setting in which they were created; and, it has to be a perfectible statement in the sense that its acceptance is not a final conclusion but one that seeks and leads to further explanations and to further research. It has to be an instrument of work, a step in the asymptotic process of understanding that is characteristic of any science.

To reach such hypotheses we have to make two logical assumptions. One, already sketched in our earlier remarks, derives from the fact that the time and space which created Islamic culture automatically compelled the growth of certain physical and aesthetic needs of an art. But a priori the impulse for a uniquely Muslim art lay not in monuments but in certain identifiable habits and thoughts, which had to be translated into visually perceptible forms. Such a translation could be possible and meaningful only through the existence of underlying structures in all such creations, that is, of regular systems of relationships among individual elements of the monuments, without which no form could be made intelligible to its user. The other assumption is in fact that of the contemporary intelligibility of the forms created by man, that is to say that there was no arbitrarily nonsensical (as differentiated, for instance, from willfully or accidentally misunderstood) formal creation. If one grants these assumptions of intelligibility and of underlying structure, then the way in which the monuments and history can lead to hypotheses clearly lies in extracting from them the conscious or unconscious principles that made the material and aesthetic culture of early Islam possible and then in setting forth these principles as the hypotheses which explain a period.

In the following chapters I have begun with the general premise that there had to be a way in which the new Muslim culture expressed itself visually, and the first four chapters will be devoted to an exploration of this point. They will include considerations of the ecological changes brought into the conquered lands, the symbolic appropriation of the land, Muslim doctrines on the arts, and an art inspired by the faith. Then I will turn to themes derived
from such monuments for which no automatically "Islamic" function can be established. Centered on the palace and the city, these can in a general way be considered as works of secular art, although we shall have occasion to refine the meaning of the term. From these discussions one particular topic will emerge as uniquely Islamic: the fascination with a form of nonrepresentational decoration. In a last chapter I shall attempt to discuss it in some detail and then conclude by proposing various answers to the questions raised in this introduction.

2. The Land of Early Islam

Two subjects discussed above may serve as the starting point for what will be attempted in this chapter. One is the conclusion that in order to define the ways in which Islamic art was formed it is first necessary to identify the subjects, forms, and attitudes that developed over a vast area after 634, the year in which the conquest began to extend beyond Arabia itself. The other is the more complex question of absolute and relative times in the creation of a new artistic tradition, or when we are entitled to use the term Islamic for the monuments of the area taken over by the new faith. It has only been mentioned that in all probability the relative time varied from region to region.

This chapter will provide a sort of archaeological survey of the lands conquered by Islam between 634 and 751, for, in order to know when a work of art or a material object can properly be considered Islamic, it is necessary to be aware of the degree of Islamization of the area in which it is found. This awareness forms at least one aspect of what the founder of scientific Islamic archaeology, Max van Berchem, called "the archaeological index" of a document, that is, the likely extent and value of the conclusions that can be deduced from it or, to use a term borrowed from linguistics, its semantic field.

An archaeological survey of the type needed cannot be limited to Muslim monuments alone or to the nature of Muslim implantation in any one area. It must also include some idea of what was there before Islam and of what was visible or used at the time of the conquest. There was, as mentioned above, a "landscape" or a "climate" of things and monuments against which, or according to which, Muslim creations were made and the degree of uniqueness or of originality of the Muslim element depended on the nature, strength, and vitality of local artistic traditions. To use a biological parallel, Islamic culture in general and Islamic art in particular can be imagined as a sort of graft on other living entities, and the degree to which and ways in which the graft took depended in some part on the body to which something was added.

The state of our knowledge does not make it possible to provide an archaeological profile of early Islamic times which would include
in one full sweep all areas and all problems. Although we shall attempt something of the sort at the end of this chapter, the justification for our conclusions lies, for several reasons, in a rapid sketch of what happened in each of the major regions involved. One is simply the tediousness of partly repetitive enumerations. Another is the difficulty of adequately controlling both the archaeological information scattered from Spain to modern Pakistan as well as the immense amount of written source material. Thus gaps and omissions will be found in the following pages; I hope they will spur others into completing the task begun here. Another problem is that of the preeminence taken by the Fertile Crescent in our sketch. In part it derives from my own greater familiarity with that area as well as from the fact that it has been much better studied. But it must also be admitted (and we shall return presently to some of the reasons) that this area played the most crucial part in the formation of a new Islamic art. Altogether it should be noted that the judgments and conclusions in this chapter are in part value judgments and personal conclusions and that the significance and importance of some of the provinces can be seen in a different light than the one seen here.

Let us begin with North Africa and Spain. Absolute dates are easily provided by the years 669, when the first governor of the new province of Ifriqiyah, the celebrated 'Uqbah ibn Nafi', took over what is now mostly Tunisia and began the slow Muslim conquest of Algeria and Morocco as well, and by 710–11, when the no less celebrated Tariq ibn Ziyad crossed the straits which now bear his name and became the first Muslim governor of Spain. But these dates are no more significant than that of 622. It is comparatively simple to show that in Spain, whatever the nature of the first Muslim occupation may have been, there is no trace in actual monuments or in any texts of original Muslim creation until the formation of the independent Umayyad caliphate in 756. It is only in 785–86 that the construction of the first part of Cordoba's mosque illustrates a building of any sort of significance in Muslim Spain (figs. 26–32). This building is still preserved, though much enlarged and partly modified; yet both archaeological and literary sources can be used to demonstrate the permanent impact of its first form. I know of no information elsewhere in literary sources about the construction of any other building or in fact about any work of other art before 785, nor is any known archaeologically. By then, of course, major developments had already occurred in Islamic architecture, and in many other arts as well, in other provinces of the Muslim world. Inasmuch as the growth of Muslim Spain after 750 coincided with an influx of Muslims from Syria, we may consider the first steps of an Islamic art in Spain as consciously affected by earlier developments elsewhere in the Muslim world. This point is significant when one realizes the poverty of the living artistic tradition which did in fact exist in Spain at the time of the Muslim conquest. Important though Visigothic churches are for early Christian art and perhaps for the eventual revival of a Spanish medieval art, they could not impress the Muslim conquerors in the ways that Palestinian churches did indeed impress them, and on the whole the more significant architectural infrastructure which did exist was that of Roman Spain with its superb civil monuments.

Matters are somewhat more complex with other arts, and in the account of the conquest there are curious references to some extraordinary table known as Solomon's Table, which was captured by the invaders, as well as to considerable treasures of precious metal. Unfortunately one can only speculate about what these were. Insofar as we know them, the other arts of Spain before Islam were also rather limited or, like the celebrated crowns of Guarrizar, accidentally Spanish examples of a much wider art of Germanic princes. Finally it must be noted that, although ruled for several centuries by Muslim princes, Spain in general and even Andalusia remained largely populated by Christians and by an active Jewish minority in the cities. There are no instances of major Muslim towns founded in Spain, and for the most part a pre-Islamic toponymy has been transliterated into Arabic.

These points suggest that the value to be given to Islamic monuments in Spain, within our general definition of an archaeological index of Muslim provinces, was essentially a reflective value: the a priori impetus for Spanish Islamic monuments and the models and ideals which were followed belonged to an alien world. This is true even of monuments of major historical or aesthetic significance, as in the instances of Cordoba, Madinah al-Zahra, ivories, textiles, or much later the Alhambra. For it was the cultural weakness of Christian Spain and a number of accidents in early Islamic history.
that transferred this faraway province into a major Muslim center. Even when uniquely Spanish forms were created—as they were indeed in architecture and in decoration—from the archaeological point of view of defining the formation of an Islamic art, Spanish examples serve primarily as illustrations for conclusions reached from other sources and in other areas.

Matters are different in North Africa, where, at first glance, we meet a curious paradox. North Africa and especially Tunisia had been a very wealthy and superbly exploited agricultural and urban area in Roman times. It became very early a major Christian center, and, although devastated in part by the Vandals, it was still a province to which Byzantium attached some importance since it was one of its main suppliers of olive oil and perhaps of wheat. Although most of its pre-Islamic monuments—cities, country villas, churches, mosaics—cannot be called typically North African since they reflect typologically the Mediterranean-wide art of the Roman empire and its successors, these monuments are of great importance because they are often from periods that are not well represented elsewhere, especially during the key centuries of the fall of Rome and the growth of a new artistic expression. Yet within a few centuries North Africa became a totally Muslim region and one of the very few formerly Christian lands from which Christianity disappeared altogether. Almost all North African cities are Muslim creations, especially in Algeria and Morocco. A priori then it would appear that North Africa, with a weakened local population and culture at the time of the Muslim conquest, is almost a perfect area to investigate how Islamic art was formed.

But in reality North Africa is not very useful for our purposes, mainly because, with the exception of the Tunisian coastal plains and plateaus, it was during the first century of Muslim rule the theater of long and complex battles between the newly arrived Arabs and the native Berbers. Furthermore, during early Islamic times the region was exploited as a source of raw material and of women. In a way that we will encounter in one other area of the new Muslim empire, this dramatic exploitation of a province went together with the development of a frontier spirit in which piety and missionary zeal acquired a militancy rarely found elsewhere. For these reasons North Africa became a haven where all sorts of heterodox movements and groups could find a refuge and a purpose. Thus North Africa in early Islamic times was an unusual region, officially exploited for the Near Eastern centers of the empire and a place of refuge for small groups of alienated Muslims. It is only in the ninth century that a group of small local dynasties—Aghlabids, Rostemids, Idrissids—established semi-independent rule and fostered local interests and arts. By then, of course, just as in the case of Spain, an Islamic tradition had already been established elsewhere, and for our purposes the monuments of North Africa have mostly a reflective value. This is particularly true of architecture, the only technique which is fairly well known, and it is even confirmed by the one apparent exception, the ribat. This uniquely Islamic building, whose formal and institutional characteristics will be discussed in a later chapter, has only accidentally been preserved in a number of Tunisian examples (fig. 51). These monuments may be North African but their function is pan-Islamic. Thus, while for the history of architecture the North African ribat may be considered as a local form, for the formation of Islamic art it is an example, accidentally in North Africa, of a new typology of functions. Its importance for the general history of early Islamic architecture is great, the more so if it has a mostly reflective value.

There are other areas in which North Africa, most particularly Tunisia, has preserved unique features which may be assumed for other Muslim regions. Such is the case, for instance, of monumental cisterns, of which spectacular examples remain near Kairouan. But these are all of the ninth century, and what is known of early Islamic art in both Algeria and Morocco is usually even later, although these two countries have been far less systematically explored. The information from North Africa thus may confirm or modify conclusions reached elsewhere but is not in itself uniquely significant for our general problem. Yet a word of caution is needed. In Spain the cultural and physical circumstances of the transformation of a large part of the Iberian peninsula into a Muslim province and the comparative ease with which it reverted to Christianity make the reflective quality of its Islamic art understandable. This is not so in North Africa. The fact that the latter became totally Muslim indicates that its early Islamic art, however reflective of developments elsewhere, acquired more permanent roots which eventually should also be understood in local terms. To do this
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properly more information is needed than presently exists; no
doubt textual studies and excavations being carried out especially
in Tunisia should, over the next generation, transform much of our
understanding of North Africa.

Geographically the next region to be considered is Libya. Our
information on medieval Libya is almost nil, and it is difficult to
understand why the rather prosperous late classical and Byzantine
Christian Libyan coastline collapsed after the Muslim conquest.
In line with the economic explanation to be proposed below about
the Fertile Crescent, it may be suggested that the new balance of
economic and administrative needs created by Islam no longer re-
quired the utilization of whatever resources Libya had, inasmuch as
its agricultural potential demanded large financial investments. To
argue, as has been done, that the Arab invasion led to an immediate
nomadization of Libya is begging the question, for one would have
to explain why such a nomadization did not take place elsewhere.
It is only in the eleventh century that a fairly destructive nomadic
invasion can be documented. Whatever explanation will turn out
to be correct, communication seems to have been Libya’s only
clear function in early Islamic times.

As one moves east the next identifiable Islamic region is Egypt.
It was conquered rapidly and easily by the celebrated general Amr
ibn al-‘As. Except in Alexandria where the famous Hellenistic
library was burned, probably accidentally, the conquest was ac-
complished without major destruction and without any major loss
of population through emigration or other means. We can there-
fore assume that the Christian population of Egypt, heterodox and
at odds with the main Christian centers of the time, continued
to exist as it had for centuries as a primarily rural one. In all prob-
ability there was then as today a continuous population surplus
since a number of documents indicate that laborers for major early
Islamic programs of construction in the Fertile Crescent came from
the valley of the Nile. In pre-Islamic times the countryside was
dominated by the huge metropolis of Alexandria, the only truly
significant urban entity in Egypt. It remained important in Is-
lamic times, but its preeminence was soon challenged by the purely
Islamic creation of Fustat, the first link in the development of
modern Cairo. Situated just south of the delta in a superb commer-
cial and strategic location, its population consisted primarily of
newly arrived Muslims.

Much textual information exists about Fustat. It has been pos-
sible to establish a sort of profile of the city’s main parts, to some
of which we shall return later. Archaeological information is less
precise. Except for the plan of the first mosque of Fustat which
can be reconstructed with some certainty, almost no architectural
information of any importance antedates the ninth century, and
the excavations carried out in the past and continued until now
have tended to yield architectural documents belonging to the
Tulunid and later periods, that is primarily from the second half of
the ninth century onward (figs. 38, 42). This time corresponds to
the moment when, after two centuries of pure exploitation as one
of the provinces of the huge Muslim empire, Egypt acquired a cer-
tain degree of independence, first under a dynasty of Turkish gov-
ernors sent from Baghdad and then after 969 under the heterodox
dynasty of the Fatimids. From then onward the architectural de-
development of Cairo transformed the city into one of the few major
continuous showplaces of Islamic monuments. For the early period,
however, architectural information is limited to the little we know
about Fustat. It is almost nonexistent for Alexandria, although a
major study in preparation by a team of Polish scholars may alter
the picture somewhat; nor do any smaller centers contribute much.

Matters are more complicated with the other arts, for here infor-
mentation is plentiful, largely because Egypt, provided with a dry
climate and never conquered by destructive invaders, has well
preserved the documents from its past. Large series of carved wood-
work (figs. 126, 127) have remained, as well as hundreds of textiles
which are usually attributed to the first centuries of Islamic rule.
Recently a group of ivories and bone carvings, hitherto considered
to be late antique, have been given an early Islamic date, while
excavations at Fustat have brought to light the earliest datable
(272–23) glass object decorated with luster painting (fig. 115).
There is a major methodological difficulty in properly assessing the
historical and artistic value of most of this material. On the assump-
tion that a given number of technical or formal novelties are first
known in Egypt, should we consider them as created in Egypt? Or
should we instead consider that the peculiar physical and historical
conditions of Egypt preserved documents better and that many of these novelties actually developed first elsewhere? The answer lies in an assessment of Egyptian history in early Islamic times and in the centuries preceding Islam. Our hypothesis in this volume is that, until the second half of the ninth century and perhaps even until the creation of the Fatimid empire in 969, Egypt was a secondary artistic and intellectual center, although the matter is highly controversial when one considers Coptic art or, here and there, for instance in ornament, certain novelties that should in fact be attributed to Egypt. For our purposes Egyptian Christian art will be considered primarily as a derivative one, inspired on the one hand by the higher traditions of Syria, Rome, or Constantinople and, on the other, by a local folk art.

The first source of inspiration weakened after the Muslim conquest, if it did not disappear altogether. The second one continued to make itself felt in many ways, its only new component being the new Islamic tradition. It is uncertain, however, if the latter, in the forms it acquired in Egypt during the first centuries of Islam, is more than a reflection of centers in Syria or Iraq. Even if the earliest examples of lustere work are found in Egypt, the logic of eighth- and ninth-century history tends to give an Iraqi origin to the technique, and a monument like the mosque of Ibn Tulun, regardless of its unique qualities, was inspired by Iraqi architecture (figs. 38, 42). Thus a proper understanding of the evidence provided by the many monuments of Egypt is greatly complicated by the fact that neither the pre-Islamic nor the early Islamic culture of Egypt appears to have been in the mainstream of contemporary developments. It is therefore evidence that must be used, or generalized from, with some caution.

No such doubt exists as one turns to the Fertile Crescent. For our purposes it is more convenient to consider it as a single entity than to break it up into its three major geographical components—Syria-Palestine, Middle and Upper Mesopotamia (or Jazirah, to use the traditional Arab term for a region which includes the northern half of modern Iraq, all of Syria from the Euphrates eastward, and the Tigris and Euphrates basins in present-day Turkey), Iraq—or into the partly arbitrary administrative provinces of medieval Islamic times. Of all the areas conquered by Islam it is by far the best known historically and archaeologically not only for early

Islamic times but also for the centuries immediately preceding the conquest. Since the vast majority of the monuments discussed in the following chapters come from the Fertile Crescent, and since particularly great importance will be given to it in our conclusions, it is essential to define as clearly as possible the nature of its archaeological characteristics. This can perhaps best be done by discussing three aspects of these characteristics and some of their consequences.

The first aspect, essentially an ecological one, is the relationship between man's culture or life and the land on which life is lived and culture enjoyed. At the time of the Muslim conquest the three geographical regions of the Fertile Crescent were quite different from each other. In Iraq recent research concentrated in a small area near Baghdad has shown that the pre-Islamic Parthian and Sasanian empires had created an extraordinary infrastructure of irrigation for the development of agriculture with a comparatively limited urban growth. But the huge palaces of Ctesiphon—parts of which still stand today and remained throughout the Middle Ages as symbols of the power and greatness of the Sasanian dynasty—were there, and many other remains existed of a high pre-Islamic imperial life. A word of caution is needed once again, however: spectacular though the royal reception hall of Ctesiphon may be and numerous though literary sources may be about the activities of Sasanian emperors in Iraq, published excavations of Sasanian remains in Iraq have not been until now as fruitful as one might expect and in many instances have consisted of information about pre-Islamic Arab kingdoms. Even though a slight decline in wealth occurred toward the end of the Persian dynasty, the Muslims inherited in Iraq a viable agricultural system and a complex set of ancient memories, whose actual testimonies in monuments are difficult to estimate, always with the exception of Ctesiphon around which a whole literature grew.

In Syria and Palestine something rather different had taken place. After the full establishment of the Roman empire in the second century a.d., both provinces underwent an extraordinary economic growth which took the form of a large number of small towns surrounded by villages and agricultural establishments fanning out into the steppe or the mountains. Instead of creating a large-scale, complex, and centralized irrigation system, these set-
lements subsisted thanks to a sophisticated utilization of whatever water was available and especially through the extensive growth of those agricultural products—primarily olives and grapes—which were best suited to the land. This agricultural growth was closely tied to markets outside of Syria proper, primarily in Anatolia. The highly organized semi-urban and agricultural economic structure of Syria was controlled and ruled from a number of large cities: Damascus, Aleppo, the coastal ports, and especially Antioch. These were all very ancient urban centers and major showpieces of art and culture, in which Hellenistic and Roman emperors or their local representatives as well as native converts to high Mediterranean culture built temples, forums, theaters, marketplaces, in a particularly luxurious manner, in which a great art of sculpture developed (often with local stylistic peculiarities), and in which a highly speculative intellectual life flourished. Most of these cities had a long and continuous history, but some, like Palmyra, shifted over the centuries from spectacular moments of brilliance to almost total decadence. Much more than in Iraq there was a complex and varied regional history for almost every individual subprovince in Syria and Palestine, but nearly always the crucial moment of development corresponded to the apogee of the Roman empire.

The advent of Christianity did not modify the wealth of the region or its economy except in details that are not pertinent to our purposes but simply added to it a new dimension, that of the Christian faith, which resulted in the intensive developments of the holy cities of Palestine, in the erection of hundreds of churches, monasteries, and sanctuaries, and in the growth of a whole set of pilgrim roads with attendant institutions for the help and comfort of travelers. The steppe and the desert acquired monastic settlements of anchorites and cenobites in addition to military outposts and to commercial stopovers. Thus Syria and Palestine were exceedingly rich provinces, urbanized as well as agricultural, closely related with all the great centers of the Mediterranean and major foci in the intellectual and religious life of the time. Shortly before the Muslim conquest this complex world had been shattered by the Persian invasions and by the destruction of Antioch. While there certainly was no time to build it all anew in its former splendor, it seems that on the whole the basic infrastructure of the two provinces remained intact and that the population did not change in character or in numbers.

Between Iraq and Syria there was, on the other hand, a steppe slowly becoming a desert. The boundaries between the desert and the “sown” were not static, fixed frontiers but variable ones, depending on the respective strength of the settled powers and of the nomads. The latter were to play an important part in the growth of Islam, since they were the main intermediaries between centers of high Mediterranean or Iranian culture and the oases from which the new faith sprung. Although much is still very unclear about the culture of the Arabs on the edges of the Persian, Roman, and Byzantine worlds, it is known that they were organized into elastic kingdoms, of which the most celebrated ones were the Ghasanids and the Lakhmids, and that they often sponsored agricultural settlements and towns. So far, however, the monuments that can clearly be attributed to them—such as some of those at Rusafa in northern Syria or the impressive ruins of Hatra in Iraq—do not appear to be stylistically or functionally differentiated from contemporary buildings in the areas directly under Sassanian or Byzantine control.

Another area between Iraq and Syria was the Jazirah, the middle and upper valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates. This was primarily an area of fortresses in the midst of an impoverished though potentially fertile land, for it was the main frontier area between Iran and Rome or Byzantium. It was by following the Euphrates that Sassanian armies moved toward Antioch, and the occupation, reoccupation, destruction, and rebuilding of fortified cities like Dara, Amida, and Nisibis takes up much of the chronicles from the second to the seventh centuries.

The essential point is that with the arrival of Islam these very different areas became united, for the first time since the early Hellenistic era, in the same administrative and cultural entity. But the ways in which they became Muslim varied considerably. In Iraq the striking phenomenon was that of urbanization. Two cities, Basrah and Kufah, which were created within the first years of the Muslim conquest primarily as settlements for immigrating Arabs and as strongholds for the Muslim armies, became very rapidly major urban centers with a strong religious and intellectual life as well as with a considerable amount of frequently trouble-
some political activism. They were followed by Wasit, primarily an administrative city located between the two, then by Baghdad, whose early shape will be discussed in the following chapter but whose growth into a tremendous urban center is well known. Finally in the ninth century an enormous complex of cities extending for over fifteen miles among the Tigris was built. Although Samarra did not live very long as a great city, precisely because of its short existence as a huge metropolis it can serve as an illustration of the urban development of Iraq in early Islamic times.

It is equally important to emphasize that this urban development began very early. Our earliest references to Muslim monuments are all from Iraq. Furthermore the islamization—or at least arabicization—of Iraq appears to have been particularly rapid. It was made easy because the pre-Islamic population was already to a large extent an Arab population and, more important, because Iraq, even though it harbored major monuments of Sassanian Iranian art, did not have the depth of cultural and religious attachment to Iran that existed between Syria and Palestine and the rest of the Mediterranean. There was a considerable variety in the religious allegiances of the population of Iraq, and the Zoroastrian ecclesiastical order cannot be compared to the Christian one, even with the latter’s dissensions. It does not seem that Iraq was an altogether culturally focused area at the time of the conquest, although perhaps this conclusion derives in part from insufficient information. In any event, Iraqi cities became the major centers of early Islamic culture to which the most militant Arab tribes came, in which the faith was refined and Arabic grammar as a symbol of Arabism written up and codified. This cultural development preceded the transformation of Iraq after 750 into the political, administrative, and eventually symbolic center of the Muslim empire.

One would like to know more about the fate and contemporary importance of non-Muslims in Iraq—various Christian, Jewish, Manichaean or Manichaean minorities, or Iranians whose role was to grow so much in the ninth century. But, except for occasional references in stories or in tax rolls, little appears about them and, in contrast to Egypt, Spain, or, as we shall see, Syria, Iraq appears to have become almost immediately a predominantly Muslim province. It is thus particularly unfortunate that our knowledge of seventh-century art, and even of most of eighth-century art, is based almost entirely on texts. Most of it concerns architecture, and material culture is accessible only through a very small number of accidentally preserved objects from which it is most difficult to draw any sort of conclusion. The archaeology of Iraq, so well studied for earlier times, is only beginning for the period surrounding the appearance of Islam, and we are aware of only a few sites with proper stratification to suggest any kind of differentiation between early Islamic and pre-Islamic times. On the other hand, with Samarra we have a major source of information for the ninth century, even though the study and exploration of the huge site is a Herculean task which has hardly begun. I will return shortly to an evaluation of its importance for our general problem of the formation of Islamic art. Suffice it to say here that Iraq underwent a considerable ecological change in early Islamic times with the foundation of a large number of cities and rapid islamization, and that this change seems to have been superimposed over a highly developed agricultural setting which, for a while at least, continued to function. It is from Iraq that we have our earliest documentation about a new Islamic art, but most of it appears primarily in literary form. It is even more difficult to evaluate the nature and extent of Iraq’s pre-Islamic remains at the time of the conquest, and the nature of the memory about the past that remained attached to the land. The persistance in later Islamic writing of the impact created by the spectacular ruins of Ctesiphon is easy to demonstrate but one would like to know, for instance, how numerous were the Christian monasteries that are often mentioned and, if they were as numerous as they appear to have been, whether they exemplified a high, sophisticated art or not.

Syria and Palestine form an extraordinary contrast to Iraq, although they were conquered simultaneously, in the 630s. But even though in 661 the capital of the Muslim empire moved to Damascus, the actual immigration of Arabs into the cities of Syria and Palestine was limited, and the only new city was Ramleh in Palestine, founded between 715 and 717. Formal Muslim buildings were few: a palace in Damascus which may even have been an earlier palace refurbished for the new owners, and a few mosques. The mosques were not impressive buildings and the west-
ern traveler Arculfus refers to the one in Jerusalem as a “quad-
rangular house of prayer which they [the Muslims] have rudely
built.”

An important change occurred after the accession to the caliphate
of Abd al-Malik in 685 and especially under his successor al-Walid
(705–15), as suddenly a group of major new monuments were
built in the main cities of Damascus, Jerusalem, Aleppo. But of far
greater importance is the change introduced in the countryside.
Known archaeologically rather than through literary sources, it
consists of an enormous number of constructions—nearly fifty can
be identified securely and another one hundred are likely—built
outside of the main urban centers. Although numerous variations
exist among them, they are typologically related in that almost
all of them include a large place for habitation, a mosque, a bath,
and various service buildings. The first of these to have been dis-
covered—Qusayr Amrah (fig. 2) or Mshatta (fig. 66)—were in
areas which, at the time of their discovery, were deserts, and as a
result they were all considered to have been retreats showing the
nomad’s presumed attachment to the desert. More recently, espe-
cially after the spectacular discoveries at Khirbat al-Mafjar (figs.
71 ff.) and at Qasr al-Hayr West (fig. 65), it was demonstrated
that these foundations were just as common in permanently cul-
tivated areas and that all of them—with only one possible excep-
tion, Qasr Kharraneh in Transjordan—were parts of large agricul-
tural establishments. The exploitations themselves have generally
been considered pre-Islamic in origin and illustrative of the agricul-
tural expansion of Syria and Palestine in Roman times. In the
light of some recent research—especially the excavations at Qasr
al-Hayr East—the automatic assumption of a pre-Islamic origin
can no longer be made in all cases, although the several likely in-
stances of Muslim-created agricultural enterprises certainly imi-
tated patterns developed earlier.

The answer to the problem of why the early Muslims introduced
into agricultural settlements amenities of urban living like baths
and at times richly decorated palaces, lies, it seems to me, in the
very nature of the Muslim conquest of Syria and Palestine. It was
accomplished primarily through formal treaties which forbade a
Muslim confiscation of land and thus prevented a major Muslim
settling of cities, while the extensive urbanization of pre-Islamic

Syria made it difficult to create new cities. Treaties made it equally
difficult to take over ownership of the land outside of the cities,
with one exception: all abandoned properties or all state lands were
automatically considered as booty and thus acquired by the Muslim
state. It has been shown quite conclusively that the agricultural
development of the Syrian and Palestinian countryside was suc-
cessful only because it was sponsored by landowners who lived in
cities or by official agencies of the central or provincial govern-
ment, and since these wealthy and powerful groups emigrated at
the earliest possible time their possessions became part of the
booty at the disposal of the caliphs. Our suggestion is that the
caliphs distributed these lands to members of their families and to
important allies and thus transformed the countryside (or part of it)
into latifundia owned by the new Muslim aristocracy. The latter,
rich and ambitious, gave their estates whatever amenities they
wished them to have. Some, such as the owners of Khirbat al-
Mafjar or of Qusayr Amrah, were lavish in the expensive decora-
tion they provided; others were more modest, or, like the owners
of Mshatta, never completed their ambitious projects.

Almost all of these estates were abandoned after 750, partly be-
cause of the vindictive destruction by the new Abbasid caliphs of
the properties owned by the Umayyads or their allies. But, had
these properties been economically useful, the Abbasids might have
distributed them to their own followers or taken them over them-

selves, as they did for instance in Ramleh or in Qasr al-Hayr East.

It appears rather that the operating agricultural system inherited
by the early Muslims was so fully geared to the markets of the
Mediterranean which had been cut off by the conquest that it lost
its purpose fairly rapidly. While the Umayyad princes, thanks to
their wealth, had been able to maintain it artificially, its ultimate
economic aim was no longer feasible and there was no reason for
the Abbasids to continue supporting it. This particular conclusion
is supported by the evidence of the excavations at Qasr al-Hayr
East, where the Umayyad foundation was completed and continued
by the Abbasids because the estate’s economic functions were
geared to the newly developing Jazirah rather than to the older
Mediterranean system.

Our conclusion about the ecological development of Syria in early
Islamic times is thus twofold. First, Muslim involvement was
limited in cities but strong in the countryside, where it occurred as a sort of aristocratic takeover of a rich agricultural organization, somewhat comparable to the development of the Italian countryside by the Roman imperial aristocracy of the first centuries of our era, or of northern Italy in Baroque times, or of the French countryside around Paris by the city bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century. Although the aristocratic character of the Muslim settlements will be quite important in explaining the art which grew there, it is equally important to point out that at first glance most of the elements which made up these country establishments are not original. Many of them have been and still are considered to be Roman. Neither economically nor materially do they appear to represent significant changes in functions or in taste. The second conclusion is that these Muslim foundations in Syria are quite precisely dated between 685 and 750. For the purposes of defining the formation and growth of Islamic styles these dates are of considerable significance.

Finally we must turn to the third region of the Fertile Crescent, the Jazirah, the area which in pre-Islamic times had been mostly an area of fortresses and of military expeditions. Except for its northernmost part—around Diyarbakr, the ancient Amida—which remained a frontier between Islam and the Byzantine empire and its eastern satellites, the whole of the Jazirah became a central province of the Muslim world, the main link between Iraq and Syria. Besides its obvious strategic and commercial significance, one of its major features in early Islamic times was its transformation into an agricultural and urban area. This began in the first decades of the eighth century when the caliph al-Walid, his brother Maslamah, and later the caliph Hisham began to drain the swamps along the Euphrates, to build canals, and to introduce agriculture. Several cities were built there, the most important of which became the large urban complex of Raqqah. This development continued throughout the Abbasid period, and the ninth century in particular was a time of considerable prosperity. The population of the Jazirah was a mixed one. It included Muslim Arabs from Arabia, but a considerable part was probably Christian and in all likelihood heterodox Christian for it is through Christian Syriac sources that we acquire most of our information about the economic and social history of the Jazirah. Although the place of origin of these Chris-