Walid, Hisham, al-Ma’mun, Harun al-Rashid, or the remarkable crop of governors they sent to various provinces—that they rose to the cultural and political challenge of their encounter with a series of alien cultures and managed to create something unique in its own right, yet meaningful enough to non-Muslims to be often accepted by them as well. We shall return more than once to this last point, for this double meaning of early Islamic art—an internal, Muslim one and an external one in relationship to other cultures—will be one of the leitmotifs of our study. Suffice it to say here that the art was first formed in the Fertile Crescent, largely because of the peculiar ecological, psychological, and cultural conditions of the Muslim settlement there.

Finally we must turn to the world of Iran as the last major area of early Islamic history. Matters here are both simpler and more complicated. On the one hand, our information is scanty on all but the barest chronology. Except for minor and so far little-exploited excavations, at Jundishapur for instance, and quite recently at Siraf and at Bishapur, no archaeological information exists on the passage from a pre-Islamic to an Islamic culture. The early Islamic monuments in Iran itself are very few when one considers that what we have is scattered all over an area as vast as one-fifth of the United States. Considerable confusion reigns over what the immediately pre-Islamic culture of Iran may have been, for reasons that will be mentioned presently. On the other hand, the case of Iran is particularly complicated, because the later importance of Iran in Muslim culture, and especially in Islamic art, is so great as almost to demand some sort of hypothesis about what happened during the first centuries of Muslim rule.

In order to suggest such a hypothesis it must be borne in mind that the Iranian world was not a single geographical or cultural entity. At least five areas can be defined, each having a different pre-Islamic history and a different kind of islamization. They are: southwestern and western Iran, the main stronghold of the Sassanian empire; northwestern Iran or Azerbaijan, at the frontier between Iran, the Caucasian kingdoms and the northern steppes; northern Iran, an area of wild and inaccessible mountains that became first a sanctuary against invaders and then for a couple of centuries an almost inexhaustible supplier of soldiers for Islam; Khorasan and Transoxiana, the two great northeastern provinces...
on the road to China and to the northern world of Turkic tribes, constantly invaded yet essential for trade; and Sistan and Afghanistan, the little-known provinces of deserts and mountains, closer to India, strongly affected by Buddhism, and populated with strangely obscure tribes and legends.

It is difficult to summarize what is known of the archaeology of Iran in immediately pre-Islamic or early Islamic times. We are now quite well informed on Central Asia, for instance, but Sistan is an almost total blank. The case of Iran is one of those methodologically maddening ones on which it is at this time impossible to generalize, while a full statement of the existing evidence would require a whole book. I prefer to limit myself to four general points, the first two of which can perhaps not be proved in their entirety but seem to me to conform with the available documents.

First, the islamization of Iran was the work of a comparatively small number of Arabs. Most of them were military men who settled in or near older cities and it is primarily in the northeastern provinces that their impact was immediate. Balkh, Nishapur, Merv, and Bukhara—all ancient cities with a rich and impressive Zoroastrian, Manichaean, and Buddhist heritage—became major strongholds of the new faith. The fact that these cities were on or near the frontier as guardians of the Muslim world and as spearheads for the conversion of the heathen greatly affected the character of the faith found there. They are comparable to the North African centers and it is not accidental that here as well we hear of ribats, although no certain instance of the monuments themselves have been preserved. The predominance of Central Asia in the growth of the special religious form of the mausoleum to holy men should probably be explained by the frontier spirit of the ghazi, warriors for the faith. Thus it would appear that the islamization of eastern and northeastern Iran was more rapid, more profound, and more original than that of the western Iranian world. It is in the northeast that the new Persian language developed first, that the first Islamic dynasties of Iran appeared, and that the most important artistic novelties are to be found. It is not possible to provide a clear date for these developments which spread over several centuries, but by the end of the ninth century the rise of the Samanids can serve as a convenient point in time at which a fully formed culture of Islamic Iran can be assumed, at least for the northeastern prov-

inces, and its first masterpieces, such as the Bukhara mausoleums (fig. 128), are of the tenth century. In the western Iranian world this culture does not become clear and ubiquitous until the eleventh century, although certain ceramic sequences and texts suggest major monuments a century earlier.

Second, in Iran even more than in Iraq Islam encountered a wide variety of cultural and religious groups without the comparative coherence of the Christian world around the Mediterranean. Jewish and Christian (mostly heterodox) groups were present of course. A series of different varieties of Zoroastrianism persisted well into the eleventh century. In addition, Manichaism and Buddhism were quite strong in the northeast, and both, but especially the latter, remained powerful for a far longer time than is usually thought. Each of these faiths had developed its own formal and iconographic vocabulary, and those of the last two were particularly rich. Iran was equally complex in its ethnic structure. Next to the majority Iranian stock divided into several groups, there were large Semitic groups, offshoots of various entities from the Fertile Crescent, major Kurdish tribes in the western mountains, and Turkic groups on the frontier. The result of this religious and ethnic variety was twofold. On the one hand, it brought the Muslim world into contact with a far wider set of ways of life, beliefs, and artistic traditions. On the other hand, it meant the Muslim world lacked a single predominant artistic koiné such as the Roman one in the Fertile Crescent and around the Mediterranean, even though certain themes were indeed shared by the whole formerly Hellenistic world. Only for western Iran, in the areas under the direct and continuous influence of the Sassanian empire, is it possible to talk of a fairly clear artistic style, that is, of a commonly shared body of forms and subjects, and its impact was certainly carried all the way to India and Central Asia. But in most other areas, especially the northeast, the variety of forms is impossible to define in unified stylistic terms. Perhaps for these reasons an Islamic style grew more slowly in Iran than elsewhere in the Muslim world.

Third, the archaeological documentation Iran provides for early Islamic times is quite different from that of the areas already discussed. Architecture has been less well preserved and, even in Central Asia where monuments have best remained or at least have been better studied, some uncertainty exists as to which monu-
ments are pre-Islamic and which are Muslim. Soviet archaeologists in fact have tended to classify most architectural monuments other than obviously religious ones under a general chronological category from the sixth to the tenth centuries. On the other hand, Iran is remarkably rich in objects. While considerable problems of authenticity and dating remain around the celebrated silver objects which are generally called “Sassanian” (fig. 99), no such problem exists with ceramics (figs. 107–14). There we have quite clearly an Islamic development in northeastern Iran as unique as it is spectacular. An explanation will have to be provided not only for the themes and techniques of the objects themselves but for the fact of this remarkable growth of a technique for which parallels are found only in Iraq.

Finally, the Arabs who brought Islam to Iran had very little knowledge of the Iranian world, nothing comparable to the situation in the Fertile Crescent or in the Mediterranean area. At the same time, Iran in its entirety became Muslim and there did not remain for its numerous ethnic, religious, and artistic traditions some external center such as Constantinople remained the Christianity of the eastern Mediterranean or, later, Compostello for Christian Spain. In part the past was obliterated, as, for instance, the Arabic alphabet came to replace Pahlavi. But the most common phenomenon was a sort of islamization of the collective memory of the Iranian past. At times it was an arrogant islamization expressing strong resentment of the Arab takeover, as in the assertion found in many literary sources of the superiority of Iranian kingship over nomadic tribesmen. At other times it was a far subtler integration of the Iranian past into a Muslim memory. Only in Iran was the formed Muslim culture able to create a heroic and imperial past for itself without encountering the ghost of a lively and flourishing Christian antagonist. The naturalization of Iran into Islam was not immediate, and it took a protean multiplicity of regional, social, and thematic aspects, whose elucidation still demands investigation. The phenomenon itself does, however, have a number of a priori consequences that are pertinent to our investigations. First, the formation of a regionally identifiable Islamic art of Iran took longer than elsewhere and appeared in very diverse modes. Further, Iranian forms of pre-Islamic times may not have kept whatever concrete associations they had before the arrival of Islam be-

cause there remained no guardians of such associations comparable to the Christian church or to the Byzantine empire. Thus forms of Iranian origin may be imagined as having lost some of their meaning, as having become in a way “free” forms to which new significations could be given. With this point, however, a theoretical question is raised to which it will be easier to return once we have investigated some of the monuments.

Such appear to me to be the major characteristics of the archaeological and ecological setting of the early Islamic provinces from the Atlantic to India. While it is obvious that there is an extraordinary disparity in the kind of knowledge we possess about them, and while it seems hardly fair to compare what is known of Morocco or northwestern Iran with the Syrian evidence, still we must try to summarize our survey in some sort of fashion to be able to evaluate its documents and answer the questions raised in the first chapter.

Four conclusions can be proposed; the first concerns chronology. The earliest definable monuments of Islam are in Iraq, dating from as early as the middle of the seventh century. A larger group of monuments from Syria, Palestine, the Jazirah, Iraq, and to a lesser degree Egypt, North Africa, and Spain illustrate a second moment lasting from 865 to the end of the eighth century. This second period came to an end with the reign of Harun al-Rashid (786–809). In the ninth century a fully formed and fully documented Islamic art appeared in Egypt, North Africa, Spain, and northeastern Iran, and only in the tenth century do we have a sufficiently large series of documents from western Iran. Obviously such a scheme is in large part the result of ignorance, yet it appears to correspond well enough to what is known from nonarchaeological sources that, at least hypothetically, it may be accepted. Its central point is that the relative time for the formation of an Islamic art varied considerably from province to province; and thus is raised the crucial question of to what extent the example of provinces with an earlier development affected those areas that acquired their monuments later. Yet, if we are to propose a time for the likely creation of a first Muslim classical moment, the ninth and early tenth centuries seem to be a priori the times suggested by archaeological history.

The second conclusion, that of the preeminence of the Fertile Crescent in the early stages of the creation of the new art, leads to
two further problems. One is the degree to which the predominantly Mediterranean- and Hellenistic-inspired artistic traditions of the Fertile Crescent affected the art of Islam. Should the latter not then be considered as medieval rather than Oriental art? The other problem derives from the fact that the Fertile Crescent was the seat of power during the first centuries of Islam; did there develop an Islamic “imperial” mode, similar to what can be detected in, for instance, Byzantine art? This question has a number of corol-
laries of considerable importance to any general history of the arts; the one I would particularly like to single out at this stage is that of creative centers. Our brief survey indicated, for example, that Damascus and Baghdad were imperial and political centers, Kufah and Basrah were major cultural and intellectual centers, and Fustat, Kairouan, Cordoba, Bukhara, and Nishapur were regional centers. Most of these cities did not have a continuous importance of equal strength. The problem then becomes to know whether a datable and localized piece of evidence with some novel feature should be related to the major center of its time, regardless of where it was found. This is the way in which we have suggested that the evidence from Egypt be interpreted, but is it always so? And how can one decide? Furthermore, one questions whether political or intellectual and cultural centers predominated in the creation of new forms and new taste, and whether new regional centers tended to be more innovative than older established ones. The very nature of the Islamization of the Muslim empire indicates potentially varied sources of inspiration for the arts: caliphs, recently immigrated Arabs, converted Muslims from different conquered areas, city dwellers, frontier men, and so forth. Is it conceivable that they all shared the same taste and the same aesthetic needs?

A partial answer is provided by our third conclusion, that the available documentation is extraordinarily varied. Although architectural monuments predominate throughout the Islamic world, objects (often the rather prosaic products of ceramicists) appear as our main evidence in Spain, Egypt, or northeastern Iran. In part, our task is to find some sort of common denominator between a mosque and a ceramic plate. But perhaps there did occur in early Islamic times a very wide differentiation of taste which expressed itself in different techniques and which can, at least initially and hypothetically, be connected with the varieties of early Islamic set-
tlements. These settlements were aristocratic and restricted in the Syro-Palestinian countryside, massive and urban in Fustat or in Iraq, military and religiously militant in Central Asia and in North Africa, small and attuned to local needs in Spain. Each pattern created different psychological and emotional reactions and different requirements. Is it therefore justifiable to refer to all of them as Islamic, or does such a definition weaken the term to the point of meaninglessness?

Finally, a more concretely art historical conclusion emerges from our sketch of the archaeological history of early Islam. The Muslim takeover occurred without physical destruction and without mas-
sacres, and one can point out only a small number of instances of major population movements within the conquered area. As a result the sum total of the art and the material culture of the pre-Islamic world remained as such with the functions, purposes, and associa-
tions it had before. But there is more to it than simply forms and meanings attached to forms. Islam also inherited an immensely complex set of collective memories, legends, and myths, some as localized as a village cult, others as wide as the heroic legends of the Iranian hero Rustam or of Solomon, the prophet-king. This all means that the point of departure of Islamic art does not lie merely in a physical or aesthetic reaction to another art—as hap-
pened, for instance, after the French or Spanish invasion of Italy in the fifteenth century—but in the actual utilization by the Muslim world of the material, aesthetic, and emotional order of the con-
quered territories. In theory, of course, one could simply imagine that the earlier system of forms merely continued with a normal life of its own, obeying whatever impulses it had in itself—unless,
of course, there was something new and different demanded by Islam itself. It is to these possible Muslim needs that we shall de-
vote our next three chapters.

In a wider sense, however, the questions raised here lead to an-
other problem, one beyond a specific cultural setting: the problem of the kind of category which is or ought to be used in defining the uniqueness of a given artistic tradition. Is it merely a question of forms? Is it a question of attitudes? And, then, what in a given attitude affects the development of the forms? How effective can new attitudes be when they encounter deeply rooted cultures with highly sophisticated systems of forms and memories? Here the
Muslim case is quite different from that of the French invasions of Italy which created a French Renaissance art in France and not in Italy. Should the Muslim case be considered as comparable to that of the barbarian invasions in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages or to later Mongol invasions in Iran and China, when the intruder adapted himself to the higher culture of the invaded country? Such are some of the questions raised by the setting in which early Islamic art appeared. The ways in which they can be answered depend not only on the documents but also on the more fundamental question whether each artistic development is a unique phenomenon or the illustration of one or more deeper but more permanent structures of man's relationship to his own creations.

3. The Symbolic Appropriation of the Land

Some time in the 630s, when Muslim forces were rapidly taking over the cities and territories of the Fertile Crescent, a curious event is said to have taken place in the small town of Qinnasrin in northern Syria. An Arab force under the celebrated general Abu Ubaydah had signed a truce of one year with the Christians of the city in order to allow those Christians who so desired to leave Syria for the Byzantine-held territories of Anatolia. A line of demarcation was established between the Christian and Muslim territories, the line being symbolized by a column on which the Christians painted a portrait of Heraclius, the ruling Byzantine emperor. There is a sequel to this event, to which I shall return in another context in Chapter 4. For the moment I would like to stop at the point that the rule of a land or an area by a culture, or even the simple presence in a land of an alien or new element, is often expressed through some visually perceptible form. At a most ludicrously simple level the signatures of tourists and visitors which deface most ancient monuments belong to this type of document. At other times these signs are more impressive commemorative statements, as in the series of inscriptions on the cliffs near the Dog River in Lebanon which celebrate the passage of conquering armies from Assyrian times to the French mandate. The Roman empire developed a term for one category of such monuments; they were called *tropaeum* and could be impressive architectural constructions, as in the instance of the two which are archaeologically known. Even contemporary nations are not averse to erecting on foreign soil monumental testimonies to their presence and victories.

Such monuments are of considerable interest because, when they can be properly identified and explained, they illustrate those aspects of the new or conquering culture which appeared most significant in its own eyes, thus making it possible to define at least one aspect of that consciousness about one's self which was set forth earlier as a major component in the formation of a new art. It so happens that three monuments exist from early Islamic times which can serve as examples of a visual symbolization of the appearance of Islam in the ancient world of the Near East.

In the desert bath of Qusayr Amrah (fig. 2), to which we shall
return below, Alois Musil saw in the last decade of the nineteenth century a painting since then almost totally obliterated. Fortunately a copy of it was made by the painter Miélich who had accompanied Musil on one of his expeditions (fig. 3). It is one panel on the side wall of the small throne room attached to the bath proper. The iconographic context of the painting is that of various representations of princely life, mostly the pleasurable pastimes characteristic of Near Eastern aristocratic life. But, as will be demonstrated below, these subjects were not merely illustrations of a private character but were in reality official statements of kingship. In the centralapse the prince for whom the bath had been built was shown enthroned according to a Byzantine iconographic formula. Thus the panel is set in the comparatively formal context of an official imagery.

It shows six standing personages in long robes, three in the first row and three in the back. The figures in front all extend one hand toward the right, in the general direction of the enthroned prince in the back of the room. Not much can be said about their clothes except that they were richly decorated, for on such points of detail Miélich's copies are not always reliable. Only the peculiar arrangement of the central personage's headgear could not have been the copyist's invention; the hornlike elements surmounted by a crescent correspond to a characteristic device of pre-Islamic Iranian crowns. All other heads were too damaged to be described or lacked any otherwise identifiable symbol. What makes it possible to identify most of these personages is a series of inscriptions in Greek and Arabic above each of the heads. Four are certain: Caesar (meaning the Byzantine emperor), Roderic (the last Visigothic ruler of Spain before the Muslim conquest), Kisra (meaning the Sassanian emperor of Iran before the Muslim conquest), and the Næsæus (king of Ethiopia). It has generally been agreed that, since the Byzantine and Sassanian emperors are in front while the Visigothic and Ethiopian kings are only partly visible in the back, the remaining two personages, one in front and one behind, were meant to represent one major and one minor ruler. The former was in all probability the Chinese emperor, while the latter could be the khanqan or ruling prince of the Turks—either, as in the case of Roderic, a very specific Central Asian prince of the early eighth century or, as in the instance of the other personages, merely the abstract personification of the ruler of a precise land (Central Asia) or folk (Turkish tribesmen). It is true of course that the much better knowledge we have today of Central Asian history offers a number of other possibilities than the ones available at the time—some sixty years ago—of the identification of Qusayr Amrah's personages, but further discussion of this particular topic is both unimportant and fruitless here.

The main point is clear: we have a representation of six non-Muslim royal figures arranged in a formal and hieratic composition. Three of the certainly identifiable personages were either personally defeated by Islam or symbolize defeated political entities. There is thus a concretely Muslim meaning to this group which has been often thought to consist of the vanquished enemies of Islam shown as a sort of trophy on the wall of a princely building. This interpretation, however, is not entirely satisfactory because the Negus and the third major emperor in the foreground can in no way be connected with Muslim victories, and especially because the gestures and poses are not at all the signs of defeat that are comparatively well known in the iconographic languages of Rome, Byzantium, and Iran. Admittedly it is difficult to be certain what an extended palm as it appears on a late copy may have meant, but in the earlier art of the Mediterranean or of the Near East this gesture is more commonly to be interpreted as pointing at something or as a sign of deference.

A solution suggests itself if we consider, first, a verse attributed to an early Islamic prince, the short-lived caliph Yazid III who ruled around 744. He wrote, “I am the son of Kisra and my father is Marwan [the ancestor of the second branch of the Umayyad dynasty]; Caesar is my grandfather and my grandfather is the khanqan” (Tabari, Annales, ed. Michael de Goeje, Leiden, 1885–89, vol. 2, p. 1874, among several places). Yazid, who was indeed the son of a princess of Sassanian origin, creates for himself an imaginary ancestry that includes the ruler of the major empires of his time. This claim should not be considered as a presumptuous boast or a meaningless poetic declamation. For the whole history of late antique and medieval thought is permeated with the notion of a Family of Kings, a spiritual (pneumatikós is the term used for it in some Greek texts) or even physical (the kings of the world are all brothers, according to many Iranian sources) relationship between
the rulers of the earth, with a known hierarchy among princes, a continuous exchange of gifts, and, at least in the later Iranian versions of the system, an elaborate symbolism of international banquets and festivities. Thus the Sassanian emperor Khosrow Anushirvan had "erected a platform measuring one hundred cubits to the side and there at a great banquet the emperor of China, the khaqan of the Turks, the rajah of India, and the Caesar of Rum all kissed his hand." Representations of these accounts existed as well, although no actual example has remained. The written descriptions of monuments we do possess are not always clear, and it is possible that they interpreted more or less well preserved ruins through the prism of a literary tradition. The existence of the latter is, however, abundantly proved.

In this fashion, as a translation into visual form of a literary myth, the frozen shapes of Qusayr Amrah's fresco should probably be interpreted. As a subject of Islamic art it is unique, and no text is known to me that would indicate that the theme was ever repeated. Its significance does not lie in its artistic merit, which was probably mediocre, nor is it overly important for our purposes to ascertain whether Byzantium or Iran or possibly Central Asia was more important in the formation of the early Islamic image. What matters is that the image indicates one of the aims of representations in early Islamic times, that of illustrating the new culture's awareness of and sense of belonging to the family of traditional rulers on earth. Yet the Muslim prince is not shown in the midst of his "family" or as their equal, for it is the older princes who accept and honor him as their successor. There is something ironically incongruous in interpreting in this way an image hidden away in the forlorn steppe of Transjordan. But it is often enough that such highly significant images appear in remote places, for their meaning is timeless. The Qusayr Amrah fresco illustrates a certain mood, a psychological setting for the mind of the early Muslim patron and beholder, which will help us in understanding our second monument.

The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, admirably situated on the east side of the Holy City, is undoubtedly one of the most celebrated and most remarkable monuments of early Islam, visited every year by thousands of pilgrims and tourists (fig. 4). Completed in 691–92 and probably begun three years earlier, it is not only the earliest remaining major monument of Islam but in all probability the first Islamic monument that was meant to be a major aesthetic achievement. Much has been written about it and most of the literary or archaeological information is comparatively accessible in several languages. What complicates matters is that it is a building with a continuous history of nearly 1300 years in a city with more numerous and more contradictory emotional, pietistic, and political associations than any other urban entity in the world. So many layers of meanings have accumulated over the building and over its surrounding area, the Haram al-Sharif or Noble Sanctuary, that it is not easy to get to our central question: why is it that a structure consisting of two octagonal ambulatories around a circular center (fig. 6) was built in 692 somewhat north of the center of an immense artificial esplanade of Herodian origin in the city of Jerusalem?

Two explanations are generally given for its construction. The first, which has the apparent merit of agreeing quite well with the historical circumstances of the years 685–92, has been adopted by one group of scholars, especially those with a positivist bent. This interpretation is based on texts of Ya'qubi (who wrote around 874), a heterodox Muslim historian brought up in Baghdad who had traveled widely throughout the empire, and of Eutychius (d. 940), an orthodox priest from Alexandria. Although it is also found in other writers before the Crusades, especially traditional Muslim literate, there are indications (a series of errors with respect to attributions and dates) which suggest that in reality we are dealing with one major tradition, or at best two, which have been passed on through definable historiographic channels. All these writers claim that, since a counter-caliph Ibn al-Zubayr was in possession of Mekkah, the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik built a sanctuary in Jerusalem in order to divert pilgrims from Arabia proper by establishing the Palestinian city as the religious center of Islam. It has also been asserted that the plan of the Dome of the Rock, with two ambulatories around the Rock itself, originated with the liturgical requirements of the tawaf, the formal circumambulation that is one of the high points of Muslim pilgrimage. There are various arguments against this interpretation. For instance, the statements of Ya'qubi and Eutychius are unique in the
annals of early Muslim historiography, and yet as momentous an attempt as that of changing the site of the hajj (the canonical pilgrimage to Mekkah required of all Muslims) could not have been overlooked by such careful historians as Tabari and Baldhuri, and especially not by a local Jerusalem patriot like the geographer Muhammad ibn Ishaq. It can also be shown that the histories of Ya’qubi and Eutychius contain willful distortions of fact which indicate that these writers were highly partisan in their opposition to the Umayyads. Furthermore, it would have been politically suicidal for Abd al-Malik to have made himself into an Unbeliever by modifying one of the clearest tenets of new faith only a generation and a half after the Prophet’s death. He would hardly have been able to win over, as he did, the majority of the Muslims of his time against internal political threats. Then, a comparatively recently discovered text by Baldhuri makes it clear that the Syrian forces operating against Mekkah still considered the latter as the Muslim center for pilgrimage; during the fighting their leader al-Hajjaj requests permission for his troops to make the tawaf, and there appears to have been a fairly constant stream of people going on to their holy duty in spite of the fighting. Nor would al-Hajjaj have taken such pains to restore the Ka’bah to its original shape had it been replaced in the mind of the Umayyads by the new building in Jerusalem. A statement in Tabari to the effect that in 687–88 at least four different groups went on pilgrimage shows that the bitter frictional struggles between Muslims were held in abeyance for ritual purposes. Finally, it is doubtful whether the comparatively small area of the Dome of the Rock could have been conveniently used for the long and complex ceremony of the tawaf; and it may be argued that, had Abd al-Malik wanted to replace Mekkah, he would have chosen a type of structure closer in plan to the Ka’bah (fig. 12) than the Dome of the Rock, since the sacramental and inalterable character of the Mekkan sanctuary is fully apparent in its several reconstructions.

The second explanation for the Dome of the Rock’s construction is still generally accepted by the Muslim faithful, and is involved with the complex exegesis of 17.1 of the Koran: “Gloryed be He who carried His servant [Muhammad] by night from the masjid al-haram [Mekkah] to the masjid al-aqsa [the farthest place of worship].” As early as the middle of the eighth century, the biographer of the Prophet, Ibn Ishaq, connected this Night-Journey (isra’) with the less complex Ascension (mi’raj) of Muhammad, and claimed that the masjid al-aqsa was in fact in Jerusalem and that it was from Jerusalem that the Prophet ascended into heaven. Ya’qubi mentions the fact that the Rock in the Haram al-Sharif is “the rock on which it is said that the Messenger of God put his foot when he ascended into heaven.” Furthermore, all the later geographers describing the area mention a great number of qubbas (cupolas), magams (holy emplacements), mihrabs (niches indicating direction, about which more is written below), and other features associated with the events of Muhammad’s Ascension. It might thus be suggested that the Dome of the Rock was built as a sort of martyrion to a specific incident in Muhammad’s life. The arguments can be further strengthened by the fact that the architecture of the Dome of the Rock is clearly in the tradition of the great Christian martyrion and is closely related to the architecture of the Christian sanctuaries in or around Jerusalem, one of which commemorated the Ascension of Christ.

But this explanation, like the first, leads to more problems than it solves. Many early religious traditionalists, including such great ones as Bukhari and Tabari, do not accept the identification of the masjid al-aqsa with Jerusalem as the only possible one. Both Ibn Ishaq and Ya’qubi prefaced their accounts with expressions which indicate that these are stories not necessarily to be accepted as dogma. In fact, there is little justification for assuming that the Koranic reference to the masjid al-aqsa in its own time in any way meant Jerusalem. Some scholars thought that it was a mystical place in heaven, while others suggested that it applied specifically to a place near Mekkah, where there were two sanctuaries (masjid al-adna and masjid al-aqsa, the “nearer” mosque and the “farther” mosque) and thus was a concrete and immanent reference rather than an abstract and transcendental one. Furthermore, all early writers enumerate a series of holy places on the Haram area, the large platform of Herodian origin which became the Muslim sacred precinct. Many of these sanctuaries still exist in late medieval reconstructions. Next to the Dome of the Rock stood—as it does today—the qubbah al-mi’raj, the domed martyrium of the Ascension. Had the first and most imposing of all buildings on the Haram been built as a martyrion to the Ascension of Muhammad, there
would certainly have been no need for a second martyrium. The Persian traveler Nasir-i Khusrow, one of the first to attempt a systematic explanation of all the buildings of the Haram, still considers the Rock under the Dome simply as the place where Muhammad prayed before ascending into heaven from the site of the qubbah al-mi’raj. It is rather odd that the less important moment in a sequence of commemorated events would have been glorified by a more impressive building, and Nasir-i Khusrow’s statement can best be explained as reflecting a later and not very systematic attribution of meanings to already holy places.

Since the incomplete external textual evidence thus cannot provide us with a satisfactory explanation of the purpose for which Abd al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock, it is necessary to turn to the internal evidence of the building itself: its location, its architecture and decoration, and the 240-meter-long inscription inside the building, which is the only strictly contemporary piece of written evidence we possess. While none of these can alone explain the Dome of the Rock, an analysis of all three can lead to a much more comprehensive and precise explanation than hitherto offered of the reasons which led to the erection of the first major monument of the new Islamic civilization.

Since it can be shown that at the time of construction the Rock was not considered as the place whence Muhammad ascended into heaven, why was it chosen as the obvious center of the structure? To answer this question we must ask ourselves what significance the Rock had at the time of the Muslim conquest and whether there is any evidence for a Muslim interpretation of the Rock or its surroundings either then or between the conquest and the building of the Dome.

The exact function of the Rock in earliest times is still a matter of conjecture. While the Haram was without doubt the site of the Solomonic Temple, no definite Biblical reference to the Rock exists. Whether it was “the threshing-floor of Ornan the Jebusite” (1 Chron. 21.15, 2 Sam. 15.18), whether it was an ancient Canaanite holy place fitted by Solomon into the Jewish Temple, perhaps as a podium on which the altar stood, or whether it was the “middle of the court” which was hallowed by Solomon at the consecration of the Temple (1 Kings 8.63–64) cannot be ascertained. At the time of the Herodian reconstruction of the Temple it would appear from a more or less contemporary text that the Rock was only a few inches above the level of the terrace and that it was used as a cornerstone. But the text is not very clear and nowhere have I been able to find definite evidence of an important liturgical function of the Rock in the Jewish tradition.

In early medieval times, however, Mount Moriah in general and the Rock in particular were endowed in Jewish legend with a complex mythology. Mount Moriah, through its association with the Temple, became the omphalos of the earth where the tomb of Adam was to be found and where the first man was created. Yet another tradition, that of the sacrifice of Abraham, was attached to the Rock through a confusion between the land of Moriah (Gen. 22.2) and Mount Moriah. In other words, in Jewish tradition the Rock and the surrounding area acquired mystical significance as the site of the Holy of Holies and became associated with a series of legends involving major figures of the Biblical tradition, especially Abraham and Isaac. This importance is indicated in early medieval times by the statement of the anonymous Pilgrim of Bordeaux who mentions a lapis pertusus, a perforated stone, “to which the Jews come every year and which they anoint,” probably a reference to the Rock itself which appears here to be thought of as a tangible remnant of the Temple and as a forerunner of the Wailing Wall.

During the Roman and Byzantine period the whole Haram area was left unoccupied, but under Christian rule the Holy City itself witnessed a new and remarkable development in the “New Jerusalem,” the western part of the city. No Christian sanctuary appears to have been built on the area of the Haram, since the prophecy of the destruction of the Temple had to be fulfilled. Although there is some evidence in patristic literature that the Jewish associations were accepted by some Christians, with the building of the Holy Sepulchre the omphalos of the earth was transferred to another hill of Jerusalem, Golgotha, and with it were also transferred the associations between Jerusalem and Adam and Jerusalem and Abraham. Such then appears to have been the situation at the time of the Muslim conquest: the Jewish tradition considered the Haram area as the site of the Temple and the place of Abraham’s sacrifice and Adam’s creation and death, while the Christian tradition had moved the latter two to a new site.
The conquest of Jerusalem by the Arabs in 637 was a major moment in the conquest of Syria. The Christians demanded the presence of the caliph Umar himself for the signing of the treaty of capitulation, and once the treaty was signed Umar, accompanied by the patriarch Sophronius, was led through the city. As this tour of the Holy City was endowed by later writers with a series of more or less legendary incidents, it is not easy to ascertain what happened. Most sources—early or late, Muslim or not—seem to agree on two points. First, Umar was intent on seeing one specific site in the Holy City. All sources agree on that, and, in later traditions his quest and the patriarch Sophronius’s opposition to it were transformed into a dramatic contest. Second, the early sources refer not to the Rock as the main object of Umar’s quest, but to the Haram area in general, which they saw as the site of the Jewish Temple, the mihrab Dawud (“sanctuary of David”) of the Koran (38.20–21) or the naos ton loudaiou (“temple of the Jews”) of Greek sources. The latter mention only Umar’s interest in the area of the Jewish Temple and add that a Muslim sanctuary was built on its emplacement. Although mentioned in the tradition transmitted by the Muslim historian Tabari, the Rock plays no part in the prayer and recitations made by the caliph when he reached the Haram area, and in this tradition Umar rejects the suggestion made to him by Ka‘b, a Jewish convert, that the Rock be on the qiblah side of the Muslim sanctuary, that is, that the faithful at prayer turn themselves toward it, because this would be reverting to a Jewish practice.

In these texts then, the Rock, together with the whole Haram area, appears primarily as the symbol of the Jewish Temple, but the Rock itself was not taken into any particular consideration by Umar. It may be that Umar was merely looking for a large area on which to build a mosque and that Sophronius used the Haram’s Jewish background to persuade the caliph to build the mosque in the empty space of the Haram. But it is perhaps more likely, in the face of the enormous impact of Jewish traditions on early Islam and specifically on Umar at the time of the conquest of Jerusalem, that the caliph was genuinely interested in reviving the ancient Jewish holy site, inasmuch as it had been the first Muslim qiblah. At any rate, the Muslims took over the Haram area with a definite knowledge and consciousness of its significance in Jewish tradition, but with very few clear Muslim associations.

Later chroniclers very clearly point out that Umar withstood pressures to transform the site into a major center of Muslim worship. This fact shows, on the one hand, that Umar was pressured by Jewish and Christian groups to take up their religious quarrels. By wisely remaining aloof, the caliph emphasized the unique character of the new faith in the face of the two older ones. But, on the other hand, in building anew on the Temple area, even though in primitive fashion, the Muslims committed a political act: taking possession for the new faith of one of the most sacred spots on earth and altering the pattern imposed on that spot by the Christian domination, without restoring it to its Jewish splendor. In all these undertakings the Rock itself played but a minor part.

Some sixty years after the conquest of Jerusalem, however, the Rock had become the center of the whole area. What occurred between the time of Umar and the reign of Abd al-Malik? The texts, so far as I have been able to ascertain, are silent on this score and we will have to turn to other sources. If we consider only the location of the building and the traditions associated with it, two possible solutions can be envisaged, since neither the Ascension of Muhammad nor the imitation of the Ka‘bah can be accepted. Possibly Abd al-Malik decided to commemorate the Jewish Temple and therefore built a sort of ciborium over what was thought to be the only tangible remnant of the structure. There is no evidence for this, nor is it likely that Abd al-Malik had such an idea in mind at a time when the Islamic state was fairly well settled. Or the Muslims might have brought back to the Rock and to Mount Moriah in general the localization of some biblical event of significance to them, for instance the sacrifice of Abraham. As such this hypothesis is not impossible. The importance of the “Friend of God” (khālid Allah), as Abraham is called, in the Koran and in the Muslim tradition is well known, and it is equally well known that he was considered the ancestor of the Arabs. In later times the major events of his later life were associated with Mekkah or its neighborhood; and it is interesting to note that the life of Adam was also transferred there, just as Abraham and Adam had moved together from Mount Moriah to the Golgotha in Jerusalem. But is there any defi-
nitive evidence about the localization of the sacrifice of Abraham in the early Islamic period.

Without going into complex details that have been studied elsewhere, it can be shown that the early Islamic tradition was very uncertain about the actual localization of the main events of Abraham's life. At least some Muslim authorities put many of them in or around Jerusalem, and it is plausible that, partly under the impact of the numerous Jewish converts who flocked to the new faith, there was an agreed association between the Rock and Abraham. One might suggest, then, that Abd al-Malik would have islamized the holy place and chosen the one symbol associated with it which was equally holy to Jews and Muslims, that of Abraham. To Muslim eyes this would have emphasized the superiority of Islam, since in the Koran (3.58 ff.) Abraham is neither a Christian nor a Jew, but a hanif, a holy man, and the first Muslim. This suggestion finds support in one interesting feature of the Christian polemic against the Muslims. John of Damascus and others after him always insisted on the fact that the new masters of the Near East were Ishmaelites, that is, outcasts; and it is with this implication that the old term Sarakenoi was explained as meaning "empty [because of or away from] of Sarah" (ek tes Serras Kenous) and that the Arabs were often called Agarenoi, "illegitimate descendants of the slave-girl Agar," obviously in a pejorative sense. While of course the term Ishmaelite goes back to biblical times, with the arrival of the Muslims there seems to appear in Christian writing a new and greater emphasis on the sons of Agar. Whether this new emphasis by Greek and Syriac writers on the posterity of Abraham was the result of Arab claims to descent from Abraham (and the resulting building up of Ishmael) or whether it derived solely from a Christian attempt to show contempt for the new masters of the Near East is difficult to say. But granting Abraham's importance in early Islamic thought and in the traditions associated with the Rock, Abd al-Malik's building would have had an essentially polemic and political significance as a memorial to the Muslim ancestor of the three monotheistic faiths.

The place of Abraham in early Islamic times can also be discussed in a purely Muslim context. One of the most interesting acts of Ibn al-Zubayr, the opponent of the Umayyads in Mekkah, was his rebuilding of the Ka'bah after its destruction during the first Umay-
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form, or diadems surmounted by wings and a crescent. There is also a variety of breastplates, necklaces, pins, and earrings, almost all of which are set with precious stones as incrustations or as hangings. These ornaments can all be identified either as royal and imperial ornaments of the Byzantine and Persian princes, with the former largely predominant, or as the ornaments worn by Christ, the Virgin, and saints in the religious art of Byzantium. They were all, in different degrees and ways, symbols of holiness, wealth, power, and sovereignty in the official art of the Byzantine and Persian empires. In other words, the decoration of the Dome of the Rock witnesses a conscious use of symbols belonging to the subdued or to the still active opponents of the Muslim state.

What can be the significance of such a theme in the decoration of an early Muslim monument? Through texts and images one can reconstruct with some accuracy the ways in which crowns and jewels were utilized in early Christian and Byzantine art and practice; scarcity of information makes it more difficult to decide if the same habits existed in Iran, but there are a few appropriate mostly textual, parallels. In all instances crowns and jewels served to emphasize the holiness or wealth of a sanctuary or personage by surrounding it with royal insignia. This same explanation might be offered for the use of the decorative theme in the Dome of the Rock. Perhaps under the impact of the Christian sanctuaries of Jerusalem, in particular the Holy Sepulchre, the Dome of the Rock was decorated with votive crowns simply to emphasize its holiness. This explanation, which has in fact been proposed for a number of other early Islamic themes as well, would suggest that the general ornamental, beautifying aspect of the crowns and jewels took precedence over their specific, concrete meaning as royal insignia.

Yet such an explanation, if limited to a mere imitation of Christian models and to a generalized significance of the motifs, leads to difficulties. It does not account for the inclusion of a Persian crown within the decorative scheme. Moreover, while agreeing with the purely formal aspect of the decoration, it agrees perhaps less well with the historical and cultural milieu of the Umayyads and of Islam. We must ask ourselves whether there is any evidence in the early Islamic period for the use of crowns and other royal objects in religious building and, if so, for what purposes. A fascinating document is provided by the list of objects sent to Mekkah and kept

ination with the Rock of Jerusalem at the time of Abd al-Malik. Furthermore, the question remains whether the monument should be understood within a strictly Muslim context or within the wider context of the relationship between the new state and faith and the older religions of the Near East. For clarification we must turn now to the other two documents in our possession.

The second piece of contemporary evidence we can use for understanding the Umayyad Dome of the Rock is in the building itself, its decoration and its architecture (figs. 5–9). The Dome is a ciborium or "reliquary" above a sacred place, on a model which was fairly common among Christian martyria throughout the Christian world, and which was strikingly represented by the great churches of Jerusalem itself. In other words, the architecture confirms a symbolic quality of place of commemoration for the Dome of the Rock but does not provide any clue for its meaning at the time of Abd al-Malik. Most of the decorative themes of the mosaics consist of vegetal motives interspersed with vases, cornucopias, and what have been called "jewels" (figs. 8, 9). All these elements, except the "jewels," are common enough and their significance in late-seventh-century art is primarily stylistic; but the "jewels" present peculiarities that may help to explain the meaning of the structure.

The jewel decoration does not appear uniformly throughout the building but almost exclusively on the inner face of the octagonal colonnade and of the drum. Although it has been suggested that this is so the decoration will appear more brilliant when seen against the light coming from the windows, it can be shown that the difference between this part of the mosaic decoration and the rest of it lies not in a jewellike effect but in the type of jewels used. Had the intended effect been purely formal, gems and mother-of-pearl, as used elsewhere in the building, would have served equally well here. It may rather be suggested that these actual crowns, bracelets, and other jeweled ornaments were meant to surround the central holy place toward which they face, and it is in this sense that they contrast with the purely decorative gemlike fragments throughout the building.

Although in most cases the jewels have been adapted to the vegetal basis of the decorative scheme, they are identifiable. There are crowns, either diadems with hangings and encrusted precious stones and in many cases topped with triangular, oval, or arched
prince from Afghanistan, who submitted and became converted in 814–15. His crown seems to have been taken to Mekkah immediately, as is ascertained by an inscription of that date. The throne was kept for awhile in the treasury of the oriental provinces before being moved to Mekkah in 816. The inscriptions that were put up together with these two objects emphasize the victory on the "righteous" prince al-Ma'mun over his perjured brother and the victory of the "Commander of the Faithful" over the unbelievers.

These objects in the Ka'bah can be divided into three categories. Some were merely expensive gifts whose purpose was to emphasize the holiness of the place and the piety of the donors; just as in Byzantium these were preponderantly royal jewels. Another category need not concern us here: the statements of oaths, which were put in the sanctuary not to enhance its holiness but to acquire holiness and sacredness from it. The third group of objects—from Umar's gift acquired in the palace of the Persian kings, to the throne and crown of Kabul-shah—were used to symbolize the unbeliever's submission to Islam through the display of his *Herrschaftszeichen*, or symbols of power, in the chief sanctuary of Islam, and as such had an uplifting value to the beholders.

Returning now to the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock, one can argue, first, that the crowns and jewels reflect an artistic theme of Byzantine origin which in an Islamic context also used royal symbols in a religious sanctuary to emphasize the sanctuary's holiness. But one can suggest too that the choice of Byzantine and Sassanian royal symbols was dictated by the desire to demonstrate that the "unbelievers" had been defeated and brought into the fold of the true faith. Thus, in the case of the mosaic decoration, just as in the problem of the building's location, explanations of the Dome of the Rock occur on a series of parallel levels. There is an internal, Islamic explanation; there is an explanation that relates the building to non-Muslim monuments and functions; and there is what may be called an accidental level, at which the mosaic decoration is simply meant to be beautiful just as the Herodian platform of the Haram may have been chosen simply because it was a large empty space. The third document in our possession, the inscription, will provide us with a possible solution.

The Dome of the Rock is unusually rich in inscriptions, of which three are Umayyad. The major one, 240 meters in length, is found
above the arches of the inner octagonal arcade, on both sides. With the exception of one place where the later caliph al-Ma'mun substituted his name for that of Abd al-Malik, this inscription is throughout contemporary with the building. The other two inscriptions are on copper plaques on the eastern and northern gates. They, too, have been tampered with by the Abbasid prince, but it has been shown that they should be considered as Umayyad. The content of the inscriptions is almost exclusively religious, with the exceptions of the builder's name and of the date, and to a large extent it consists of Koranic quotations. The importance of this earliest Koranic inscription we have lies in the choice of passages and in the accompanying prayers and praises.

The inscription in the interior can be divided into six unequal parts, each of which begins with the basmalah or invocation to the Merciful God. Each part, except for the one that has the date, contains a Koranic passage. The first part has surah 112: "Say: He is God, the One; God the Eternal; He has not begotten nor has He been begotten; and there is none comparable to Him." The second part contains 33:54: "Verily God and His angels bless the Prophet; O ye who believe, bless him and salute him with a worthy salutation." The third passage is from 17:3, the surah of the Night-Journey, but the quotation is not connected with the isra' of the Prophet—a further argument against the belief that at the time of Abd al-Malik the Rock of Jerusalem was already identified with the place whence Muhammad ascended into heaven. Verse 3 goes as follows: "And say: praise be to God, Who has not taken unto Himself a son, and Who has no partner in Sovereignty, nor has He any protector on account of weakness." The fourth quotation, 64:1 and 57:2, is a simple statement of the absolute power of God: "All in heaven and on the earth glorify God; to Him is the Kingdom; to Him is praise; He has power over all things." The last part is the longest and contains several Koranic passages. First 64:1, 67:2, and 33:54 are repeated. They are followed by 4:169-71:

O ye People of the Book, overstep not bounds in your religion; and of God speak only truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, is only an apostle of God, and His Word which He conveyed into Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him. Believe therefore in God and his apostles, and say not 'Three.' It will be

better for you. God is only one God. Far be it from His glory that He should have a son. His is whatever is in the heavens, and whatever is on the earth. And God is a sufficient Guardian. The Messiah does not disdain being a servant of God, nor do the Angels who are near Him. And all who disdain His service and are filled with pride, God will gather them all to Himself.

This quotation is followed by a most remarkable invitation to prayer: "Pray for your Prophet and your servant, Jesus, son of Mary," which is followed by 19:34-37: "And the peace of God was on me [Mary] the day I was born, and will be the day I shall die, and the day I shall be raised to life. This is Jesus, the son of Mary; this is a statement of the truth concerning which they doubt. It beseeches not God to beget a son. Glory be to Him. When He decrees a thing, He only says to it 'Be,' and it is. And verily God is my Lord and your Lord; adore Him then. This is the right way." And the inscription ends with the exhortation and threat of 3:16-17: "God witnesses that there is no God but He: and the angels, and men endowed with knowledge, established in righteousness, proclaim there is no God but He, the Mighty, the Wise. The true religion with God is Islam; and they to whom the Scriptures had been given differed not until after the knowledge had come to them, and through mutual jealousy. But, as for him who shall not believe in the signs of God, God will be prompt to reckon with him."

The two inscriptions on the gates are not so explicit. That on the east gate bears a number of common Koranic statements dealing with the faith (2.256, 2.111, 24.35, 112, 3.25, 6.12, 7.155) and a long prayer for the Prophet and his people. The inscription on the north gate is more important since it contains two significant passages. First, 9.33 (or 61.9): "He it is who has sent His messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth, so that he may cause it to prevail over all religion, however much the idolaters may hate it." This is the so-called prophetic mission which has become the standard inscription on all Muslim coins. But, while it is true that it has become perfectly commonplace, its monumental usage is rarer and this is the first known occurrence of it. Second, the inscription contains an abridged form of 2.130 (or part of 3.78), which comes after an enumeration of the prophets: "We believe in God, in that
which was passed down to Muhammad [not a Koranic quotation] and in that which the Prophets received from their Lord. And we make no distinction between any of them and unto Him we have surrendered” (italics added).

We can emphasize three basic characteristics of these quotations. The fundamental principles of Islam are forcefully asserted, as they will be in many later inscriptions; all three inscriptions point out the special position of the prophet Muhammad and the importance and universality of his mission; and the Koranic quotations define the position of Jesus and other prophets in the theology of the new faith, with by far the greatest emphasis on Jesus and Mary (no Old Testament prophet is mentioned by name). The main inscription ends with an exhortation, mingled with the threat of divine punishment, pointing to Islam as the final revelation and directed to the Christians and the Jews (“O ye people of the Book”). These quotations do not, for the most part, belong to the usual cycle of Koranic inscriptions on monuments. Just as the Dome of the Rock is a monument without immediate parallel in Islamic architecture, so is its inscription unique. Moreover, it must be realized that even those quotations which later became commonplace were used here, if not for the first time, at a time when they had not yet become standard. Through them the inscription has a double implication. On the one hand, it has a missionary character; it is an invitation, a rather impatient one, to “submit” to the new and final faith, which accepts Christ and the Hebrew prophets among its forerunners. At the same time it is an assertion of the superiority and strength of the new faith and of the state based on it.

The inscription also had a meaning from the point of view of the Muslims alone, for it can be used to clarify the often quoted statement of Muqaddasi on the reason for the building of the Dome of the Rock. One day Muqaddasi asked his uncle why al-Walid spent so much money on the building of the mosque of Damascus. The uncle answered:

O my little son, thou hast not understanding. Verily al-Walid was right, and he was prompted to a worthy work. For he beheld Syria to be a country that had long been occupied by the Christians, and he noted there the beautiful churches still belonging to them, so enchantingly fair, and so renowned for

their splendor, as are the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and the Churches of Lydda and Edessa. So he sought to build for the Muslims a mosque that should be unique and a wonder to the world. And in like manner is it not evident that Abd al-Malik, seeing the greatness of the martyrion [mshb:ah] of the Holy Sepulchre and its magnificence was moved lest it should dazzle the minds of the Muslims and hence erected above the Rock the Dome which is now seen there.

It is indeed very likely that the sophisticated Christian milieu of Jerusalem had tried to win to its faith the rather uncouth invaders. And it is a well-known fact that eastern Christianity had always liked to use the emotional impact of music and the visual arts to convert “barbarians.” That such attempts may have been effective with the Arabs is shown in the very interesting, although little studied, group of accounts dealing with the more or less legendary trips of Arabs to the Byzantine court in early Islamic times, or sometimes even before Islam. In most cases the “highlight” of the “guided tours” to which they submitted was a visit either to a church where a definite impact was made by the religious representations or to a court reception with similar results. In the pious accounts of later times the Muslim always leaves impressed but unpersuaded by the pageantry displayed. One may wonder, however, whether such was always the case and whether the later stories should not be considered, at least in part, as moral stories intended to ward off defection. That the danger of defections existed is clearly implied in Muqaddasi’s story. From a Muslim point of view, therefore, the Dome of the Rock was an answer to the attraction of Christianity, and its inscription provided the faithful with arguments to be used against Christian positions. It is of considerable importance to recall, finally, that at the very same time the neighboring basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem was being redecorated by Christians. The new decoration consisted of symbols of the Church’s councils, both ecumenical and regional, and including those councils which condemned the monophysite heresy and asserted the trinitarian dogma of Christianity. The coincidence is certainly not fortuitous.

A priori two major themes had to be present in the construction of the Dome of the Rock. First, the building of a sanctuary on
Mount Moriah must have been understandable—and understood—in terms of the body of beliefs which had been associated with that ancient holy spot, since Islam was not meant as a totally new faith but as the continuation and final statement of the faith of the People of the Book. In other words, the Dome of the Rock must have had a significance in relation to Jewish and Christian beliefs. Second, the first major Muslim piece of architecture had to be meaningful to the follower of the new faith. As we have seen, these themes recur in the analysis of the three types of evidence provided by the building itself. Its location can be explained as an attempt to emphasize an event of the life of Abraham either in order to point to the Muslim character of a personage equally holy to Christians and Jews or in order to strengthen the sacredness of Palestine against Mekkan claims. The royal symbols in the mosaics could be understood as simply votive or an expression of the defeat of the Byzantine and Persian empires by the Muslims. Finally, the inscriptions are at the same time a statement of Muslim unitarianism and a proclamation to Christians and Jews, especially the former, of the final truth of Islam.

But in the inscriptions the latter theme is preponderant and it is in the inscriptions, with their magical and symbolic significance, that we find the main idea involved in the erection of the Dome of the Rock. The inscription forcefully asserts the power and strength of the new faith and of the state based on it. It exemplifies the Umayyad leadership’s realization of its own position with respect to the traditional heir of the Roman empire. In what was in the seventh century the Christian city par excellence Abd al-Malik wanted to affirm the superiority and the victory of Islam. This affirmation, to which joined a missionary invitation to accept the new faith, was expressed in the inscriptions, in the Byzantine and Persian crowns and jewels hanging around the sacred Rock, and most immediately in the appropriation of the ancient site of Mount Moriah. Thereby the Christian prophecy was voided and the Jewish mount rehabilitated. But it was no longer a Jewish sanctuary; it was a sanctuary dedicated to the victorious faith. Thus the building of the Dome of the Rock implies what might be called a prise de possession, on the part of Abd al-Malik, of a hallowed area. The Dome of the Rock should be related not so much to the monuments whose form it took over, but to the more general practice of setting up a symbol of the conquering power or faith within the conquered land. In Umayyad Islam this affirmation of victory was totally bound with missionary zeal.

The formal terms used to express this symbolic appropriation were not new but consisted almost exclusively of the forms of Byzantine and, to a far smaller degree, Sassanian art. The one purely Islamic feature, the inscriptions, were for the most part in places where they were hardly visible. For, regardless of the Muslim associations that appear in the creation of the Dome of the Rock, the building’s primary purpose was to be a monument for non-Muslims. With all the Islam-wide ramifications of its symbolism, it was an immanent building that served precise contemporary needs, the most crucial of which was to demonstrate to a Christian population (especially the orthodox church), which often still thought Muslim rule was a temporary misfortune, that Islam was here to stay. As Abd al-Malik succeeded in checking the dangers of Byzantine intervention and internal dissensions, this timely significance of the Dome of the Rock receded in importance. Purely Islamic religions and piétistic associations began to appear and to transform fairly rapidly the Dome of the Rock and the whole Haram area into the purely Muslim sanctuary it has remained ever since. This, however, is another story. The main point of our demonstration is that, whereas in the Qusayr Amra fresco we have what seems to be an original form illustrating the Muslim prince’s participation in the family of the earth’s rulers, in Jerusalem almost exclusively traditional non-Islamic forms served to show to the Jewish and especially Christian worlds that the new faith was their successor in the possession of the one revealed religion and that its empire had taken over their holiest city.

The third illustration of the ways in which early Islamic monumental activities served, at least in part, to demonstrate the symbolic as well as physical appropriation of the conquered land summarizes all these impulses and needs in a particularly striking fashion, even though nothing remains of it. It is Baghdad, the City of Peace, whose construction began in 762.

All sorts of events contributed to the city’s foundation. Political, economic, strategic, administrative, and climatic reasons can be and have been adduced to explain why the caliph al-Mansur decided to begin a new capital for the Muslim empire. These reasons are per-
fectly acceptable singly and collectively but, as the most recent investigator of early Baghdad has pointed out, practically all of them could apply to several other early Arab settlements in Iraq. It is therefore legitimate enough to suppose that something else was involved here. Fortunately a number of early literary sources and descriptions have survived which make it possible to reconstruct al-Mansur’s city in considerable detail. They indicate that Baghdad was not intended only to be an economically or politically important center or even to satisfy the personal or imperial ambitions of a ruler. It had a unique meaning, which can best be understood by considering the shape given to the city.

It was a round city with a diameter of some 2300 meters (Fig. 10). More important than the metric dimension, however, is the notion expressed by some sources that the diameter corresponded to a single unit of measurement, the mil. The city was surrounded by a heavy, high wall provided with large towers and preceded by a deep ditch; in this sense it appeared as a sort of fortress. There were four gates built on the same pattern: a series of long vaulted halls and occasional open areas with heavy double doors and windows for light. Over the principal door there was a second floor whose main feature was a large cupola, gilded on the outside. Over each dome there was a different “figure” (probably some bronze sculpture) which turned with the wind. Around the cupola reception halls and resting places were provided. The second story was reached through a vaulted ramp wide and high enough for horses, for it served as the main passage to the walls patrolled by horsemen. The four gates—called by the names of Khorasan, the great northeastern province, Syria, and Basra and Kufa, the two new cities in lower Iraq—served as the main axes of the city’s organization. From them one could penetrate into a ring of constructions—probably about 170 meters in width—which was arranged around a partly empty center and where the shops and living quarters were found. The makeup of the population was originally chosen in such a manner that all the various ethnic, tribal, and economic groups of the Muslim empire were represented. In the center the open space was partly filled with a variety of administrative buildings, largely along the inner wall that separated the center from the ring of living quarters. But the center’s most important feature was the dar al-Khilafah, the imperial complex, in the very middle. It consisted of a large mosque of a traditional hypostyle type which will be discussed later, and a palace, about which little is known except that it had a large reception hall (taw) followed by an audience hall covered with a dome. Over this first domed hall there was a second one, surmounted by the celebrated Green Dome on top of which the statue of a horseman was seen. According to tradition its lance would always point in the direction of the enemies of the Muslim empire.

No trace is left of all this. The horseman and the Green Dome collapsed in the tenth century and it is only in a thirteenth-century manuscript depicting little mechanical toys for a second-rate Turkish prince of Anatolia that we have an echo of the imperial Abbasid palace (Fig. 11)—as though the Eiffel Tower were known only through the souvenirs that copy it. A mihrab now in the Islamic Museum in Baghdad may have belonged to the great Abbasid mosque because of the early quality of its vegetal designs, but even this is not absolutely certain and it is a very minor monument anyway. The city itself hardly ever lived in the perfect shape conceived for it; even during the lifetime of al-Mansur suburbs were added, the carefully drawn internal divisions broke down, and the Round City became only a part of the enormous urban complex of Baghdad.

Yet the memory of its original shape and of the ideas behind it lasted for centuries in a way that has no parallel in the history of Islamic cities, even though dozens of new urban centers were founded by the new faith. In one instance even—that of Raqqah in the middle Euphrates valley—another town is said to have copied it. Unfortunately there is considerable uncertainty as to which part of the immense field of ruins visible at Raqqah is the one supposedly imitating Baghdad, and the rapid growth of the contemporary city makes it unlikely that archaeologists will ever find out how closely the earlier model was followed.

It is perhaps just as well that it be so, since for our purposes the true significance of Baghdad lies not so much in the physical character of its forms as in the ideas suggested by the forms. We are in the presence of a walled circular entity with four axial entries leading to a central space in the middle of which there is a palace. In the center of the palace a tall two-storied green dome surmounted by a sculpture is echoed by four golden domes over each of the en-
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trances, also provided with sculptures. This perfect composition is not really an urban one but a palatial one, to which none of the early Islamic cities correspond, with the partial exception of Qasr al-Hayr East as it begins to emerge after recent excavations (fig. 102). There also a palatial significance can be given to the city, although it does not have the symbolic meaning of Baghdad. The fortresslike aspect is that of almost all palaces from late antiquity onward, with Diocletian's retreat at Spalato as one of the first examples. But, like Diocletian's palace, it was not a mere fortress. The high dome in the center was mostly symbolic, but its name was not new, for already the palace of the Umayyad caliph Hisham in Rusafa in northern Syria, the palace of the first Umayyad caliph Mu'awiya in Damascus, and the palace of al-Hajjaj; the powerful and brutal Umayyad governor of Iraq at the turn of the seventh century, were identified by green domes that could be seen from afar. It matters little that the green color can best be understood as the result of bronze oxidation and that, as was common in the Middle Ages, bronze or copper sheets were used to protect the wood of the roofs. Very early the notion of a Green Dome had become a symbol of imperial authority. The smaller domes over the gates did not have so exalted a symbolic meaning; according to one report they served as audience halls when the caliph wanted to look at the countryside—the mighty Euphrates from the Khorasan gate, the gardens and estates from the Kufah gate, various suburbs from the other two. A possible interpretation of these reports, for which fuller justification will be given in a later chapter, is that these domed rooms were primarily for pleasure, for the enjoyment of a setting. While many textual and archaeological documents survive from Islamic or pre-Islamic times for the existence of such formal places of pleasure utilizing some impressive natural setting, the important point about Baghdad is that all parts of the city were both compositionally and functionally united, as though they were but parts of a single palace entity.

At the same time the shape of Baghdad is a city shape. In southwestern Iran a number of Sassanian sites like Shiz or Darabgird are circular; other examples are known in Central Asia for the centuries before the Muslim conquest, and even earlier in ancient Mesopotamia. Unfortunately none of these older sites has been excavated or provided with appropriate literary information to ascertain whether their internal arrangement was in any way comparable to Baghdad's. On the whole it seems unlikely, because none of these cities can one attribute the importance of Baghdad at the time of its foundation and in its later development. Thus, pending the archaeological exploration of some of these comparable monuments, we may be justified in concluding that in the case of Baghdad a city shape was transformed through its internal composition into a symbolic and ceremonial palace, while maintaining a sort of token urban element in carefully measured, mapped out, and selectively settled quarters between the forbidding fortified walls and the abode of the caliph.

The explanation for this phenomenon lies, it seems to me, in a conscious attempt to make an entity that would symbolize the total rule of the Muslim prince. Baghdad became known as the navel of the universe and medieval geographers put Iraq in the central and most favored clime of the world. And in the center of the circular city in the middle of the universe the caliph sat under his double dome. The ring of living quarters was but a sort of symbol of the universe that surrounded its ruler. This interpretation is supported by the peculiarity that the doors in the gates were not necessarily made specifically for the city. One door was brought from Wasit, the Umayyad-created capital of Iraq, and was claimed to have been made by Solomon. Another gate had been carried all the way from Syria and was said to have been made for the pharaohs. Thus Baghdad must be seen not merely as a symbol of contemporary universal rule but also as an attempt once again to relate the Muslim world to the rich past of the Near East.

In this last sense Baghdad illustrates what we have also seen in the fresco from Qusayr Amra and in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Yet it went beyond these monuments in two ways. First, its size and monumentality distinguished it; it was a whole city rather than a single building or a painting lost in an inaccessible desert hideout. Then, it was called Madinah al-Salam, the City of Peace. It exudes a sense of completed and definitive success, as though a sort of millennium had come during which the City of Peace would rule over the universe. It is a world confident in its own achievement that is symbolized by Baghdad. There is nothing surprising about the feeling nor about the fact that it was expressed monumentally. As we shall see later on, a similar interpretation can
be given to the landscapes and buildings with which the mosque of Damascus was decorated. In the latter monument, however, the location of the mosaics restricted their impact on Muslims, as though their main purpose was to encourage the faithful, to give them appropriate self-confidence. Baghdad is there for everyone to see, and some of the earliest anecdotes about it relate to the impression made by the city on a Byzantine ambassador. Furthermore what Baghdad attempted to proclaim was not unique to Islam in its early formative centuries. It belongs to a general category of monuments which from Assyrian relics to Roman or Sassanian relics or to Hagia Sophia and the Byzantine imperial ceremonies forced on the visitor or user a realization of the tremendous power of the monument's creator.

The three monuments we have discussed all seek to demonstrate the presence in a precise physical area of the new faith and of the empire which embodied it. Other such monuments may have existed as well. But the peculiarity of the Qusayr Amrah fresco, the Dome of the Rock, and Baghdad is that they went beyond "presence" into a sort of affirmation of possession or rather of appropriation. Although in each instance this appropriation took different forms, in all cases the forms and symbols used were not new creations of Islam but forms and symbols that belonged to earlier cultures: inscriptions in Greek at Qusayr Amrah, a Sassanian crown in the same palace, the martyrion shape in the Dome of the Rock, Christology in its inscription, its relationship to Abraham and to the Jewish tradition, the circular plan of Baghdad, and so on. This point is important in defining an essential aspect of early Islamic culture, the conscious attempt to relate meaningfully to the conquered world, by Islamizing forms and ideas of old. The process was not limited to these three monuments nor to the first century and a half of Islamic history. Later holy places in Iraq or in Palestine grew on ancient sacred spots, and it is probable that the same phenomenon took place in Iran, North Africa, and later in Anatolia. In Jerusalem itself, where the process can be followed over several centuries—at least until the Crusades—it can easily be shown that most of the Islamic developments brought into the city, and especially to its sacred Haram al-Sharif, were often the result of a reaction—psychological or physical—to the continuous importance of Jews and especially of Christians in the Holy City. It is as though one aspect of the energies devoted by Islam for several centuries to its monumental infrastructure lay in making sure that its work was on a par with that of the older or competing cultures, especially Byzantium (although we may simply be better informed on the relations between early Muslims and Byzantium than on similar relations in Iran or Central Asia). Psychologically this makes sense since for many centuries two emotional attitudes can be detected in the Muslim world, especially in Syria and Palestine, and it is unfortunate that the history of our time can help us understand these attitudes. One is an "occupied" mentality, physically weaker but conscious of its past and its contact with an external power and thus constantly taunting—especially in words—the "occupying" power. The other attitude is that of the "new" force with physical power in its possession but with a mixed feeling of envy and condescension toward the old or alien worlds. These attitudes often appear in many stories about the Byzantine envoy who is critical of new Islamic creations in Baghdad or Damascus but also impressed by the artistic successes of the Muslims. It is to this series of complexes that one can attribute the growth in Islamic historiography of the notion of the Rumi or Christian (Byzantine or not, depending on the context) as a paragon in the arts against whose words all monuments must be measured. But a reverse attitude existed as well, that of despising artistic creativity as characteristic of a non-Islamic, alien world. This attitude, however, is closely tied to other, more specifically Muslim concerns and will be discussed in our next chapter in fuller detail. More important is the conclusion that in all these examples the Muslim world sought to define itself both for itself and in relationship to the contemporary and early civilizations of the Near East.

Thus Qusayr Amrah's fresco, the Dome of the Rock, and Baghdad illustrate more than a visually perceptible appropriation of a land with its traditions or the symbolization of this appropriation. They may also serve as examples of a psychological attitude that affected not only the arts but almost the whole of early Islamic culture. The final aspect of these monuments concerns the history of art. Insofar as the meanings that can be attributed to them are concerned, all three are unique and their forms are very rare in later Islamic art. Yet two of them—the Dome of the Rock and Baghdad
have remained until today in the consciousness of the Muslim world, one in its original form as a sort of symbol of the power and greatness of Islam in its heyday, the other through the slow association with it of one of the most important and most profound mystical events of the Prophet’s life, his journey into heaven. There are several conclusions to draw from these developments. One is that a monumental form tends to survive only if the associations surrounding it continue to be meaningful. When such meanings disappear, wither away, or are no longer important, the form either disappears—as seems to have been the case with the Quasyr Amrah fresco—or acquires new meanings. And, if the monument is unique, as in the case of the Dome of the Rock, then a unique new association is made around it. Thus it is that certain kinds of monuments are not merely the expressive result of various historically definable needs and pressures but also become, so to speak, active themselves in creating new needs and meanings. It is of some significance to contrast such monuments with typologically definable ones like mosques.

It should be added, finally, that the aspects of these three monuments which have been examined in this chapter do not exhaust them, and we shall return to them from other points of view later. What matters at this stage is that one first motivation to be detected in the formation of Islamic art was that of symbolically or practically expressing the appropriation of a given territory with its body of traditions. The monuments that exemplified this expression are among the unique monuments of the new culture, and their importance to history and to our understanding of early Islamic psychology is perhaps greater than their importance to the history of art. Yet one of them is certainly to be counted among the masterpieces of early Islamic art. What makes it a masterpiece is not pertinent to the subject of this chapter, but the fact that it was meant to be one further confirms the importance in the art of any cultural moment of those monuments that identify it in contrast to what preceded it. One aspect of early Islamic art—perhaps of any art—is that which identifies itself as unique and different and, while the forms and the meanings of these uniquenesses vary, the structural fact remains.

4. Islamic Attitudes toward the Arts

Much has been written about Islamic attitudes toward the arts. Encyclopedias or general works on the history of art simply assert that, for a variety of reasons which are rarely explored, Islam was theologically opposed to the representation of living beings. While it is fairly well known by now that the Koran contains no prohibition of such representations, the undeniable denunciations of artists and of representations found in many traditions about the life of the Prophet are taken as genuine expressions of an original Muslim attitude. Scholarly and Muslim apologetic writing since the last decade of the nineteenth century has generally concentrated on this single question of the lawfulness of the representation of living beings. Among orientalists the problem began to appear in the wake of the discovery around 1890 of mural paintings at Quasyr Amrah, and scholars sought to explain what seemed to be an anomaly in the then prevalent impression of the nature of the faith and of the culture issued from it. Or else they sought to define more precisely the philosophical and theological causes and consequences of a presumed prohibition of images. Furthermore, the contemporaneity of the rise of Islam with Byzantine iconoclasm also led to a consideration of the political aspects of a presumed Islamic prohibition. More rarely, attempts have been made to provide secure dates and even specific localizations for the formation of permissive attitudes. Thus Iran was deemed to be more “liberal” than Semitic provinces, the second half of the eighth century more restrictive than the first half or than the twelfth century, and Shii heterodoxy more permissive than Sunni orthodoxy. Among Muslim scholars other reactions occurred, but all were centered on the same question. Some sought to justify the prohibition on various theological grounds, whereas others tended to minimize it as only one facet of a living Islam but by no means a canonically compulsory one nor even a predominant one.

Out of all these studies—the most important of which are listed in the bibliographical appendix for this chapter—a large number of extremely important texts have been brought to light, and many far reaching concepts and ideas have been developed. Significant and important though many of these studies may be, none of them
is entirely pertinent to the questions we are trying to answer: whether at the time of the formation of Islamic civilization there occurred some element of doctrine that directly or indirectly affected the arts, and whether these elements, if they existed, were of sufficient magnitude and originality to impose a unique direction to Islamic art. Can one sketch in the abstract an attitude of early Muslims both toward the artistic creation of the cultures they encountered and toward what they themselves expected of monuments made for them?

However interesting and intellectually important it may be for its own time or for the elaboration of artistic theories, a tenth- or twelfth-century text cannot by itself be used as evidence for an earlier time; yet little of the literary documentation we possess is earlier than the ninth century and by then many classical features of the new Muslim artistic tradition had already been created. Furthermore, as one looks over the numerous texts painstakingly assembled by scholars, two features occur consistently. One is that the texts are usually difficult to find; they are not obvious chapters or sections of the religious or philosophical literature of the medieval tradition. They appear rather as a sort of afterthought in order to elucidate a minor exegetical or legal point, as a diversion in discussions of weightier problems. Concern with a theory of the arts or even of representations was not central to Islam. This is not surprising, for, if one excepts the very precise and highly verbal iconoclastic controversy of Byzantium, the Christian Middle Ages rarely formalized its own view of the arts. Suger’s account of his work at St.-Denis is particularly valuable because of its rarity, as is St. Bernard’s celebrated speech against images in churches. But Thomas Aquinas did not raise problems of representation in his Summa Theologica, and much of what we know of Christian attitudes about the arts derives either from formal panegyrics like Procopius’s description of Hagia Sophia or from incidental references. But if the Middle Ages in general tended to see its arts as an automatic corollary of any sort of cultural existence, are we in any way justified in talking about a specifically Islamic attitude to the arts? Should we not on the contrary de-emphasize the import of a theological system, or concentrate exclusively on those aspects of the specific way of life it fostered which could in some fashion affect material and artistic creation? Should we not conclude that what
did affect the arts was the existence of a social ethos—social being understood in a very wide sense here—rather than of religious or intellectual doctrines, not to speak of aesthetic ones?

The other characteristic of the majority of the texts concerning the arts is that they are usually triggered by a work of art or a representation. They almost never begin with the theoretical question of the relationship between a man-made image and a reality that inspired the image. The most common intellectual procedure of a medieval Islamic text can be summarized in the following manner: “Here is an image, how did it happen to be?” It is never: “How shall one go about making an image of this subject or representing visually this idea?” It is as though there always existed a world of images and representations which occasionally struck observers as somehow anomalous or wrong, as somehow clashing with the world view of the Muslim. Such a reaction is once again not unique to Islam. We have mentioned St. Bernard’s invectives against the figural bestiary of the Romanesque world. Later on, militant Protestantism destroyed the sculptures of churches as did the French Revolution because of a series of religious, political, emotional, or social relationships between these images and some enemy. And in our own day we have witnessed more than once the systematic destruction of visual images, associated for instance with various aspects of the “cult of personality.” All of these activities have acquired a more or less fully formulated theoretical justification, but almost always after the fact, not as an intellectual proposition. In most of these instances it seems as though a “natural” life of representations goes on until something in the culture, a precise historically definable event or a sublimated instinct of some sort, suddenly erupts and destroys images, only to have them come back after the storm is over.

These preliminary remarks and the questions they raise indicate that traditional Muslim culture did not possess a doctrine about the arts, neither formal thought-out rejections of certain kinds of creative activities nor positive notions about the possible instructional or beautifying values of the various existing techniques of art. At best one can assume that the doctrines and ways of life characteristic of early Islam may have directed the culture toward channeling its artistic activities in certain directions rather than in others. Attitudes existed, rather than doctrines and clear needs, and our pur-
pose in this chapter will be to determine what all or some of these may have been. The only obvious exception is that of the mosque which will be treated in detail in the following chapter.

Another point derives from these introductory remarks. It is not entirely an accident or a misplaced scholarly fixation that has led most writers to wonder about the kind and degree of prohibition that may have affected the representation of living things. For reasons yet to be elucidated, the attitudes pertinent to the visual world which developed in early Islamic times appear to have centered on this key issue of artistic creativity. By doing so, however, they escape in part a narrow historical or cultural framework and involve wider, anthropological issues about images and about their relationship to a nature and to a life they presumably copy or influence. For all these reasons we shall begin our investigation with an attempt to define the character of the early Islamic position on the arts by limiting the evidence to such documents as are clearly early and by avoiding the opinions of later theologians and lawyers; and we shall end it with some remarks on the wider implications of the Muslim concern with images and representations.

To sketch a sort of profile of early Islamic attitudes six documents can be utilized: the art of pre-Islamic Arabia, Koranic revelation, the traditions concerning the Prophet’s life and thoughts, accounts of the conquest, early monuments, and coinage.

The living architecture of Central Arabia was not an impressive one. This is especially true of the religious sanctuaries, which were rarely more than roughly mapped out and poorly constructed holy places used for the simplest of ceremonies, most often processions. The Ka‘bah (fig. 12), the holiest of them all, was but a parallelepiped without decoration or formally composed parts like doors or windows. Even more important is that there is no indication known to me in early Muslim writing or in pre-Islamic writing of an aesthetic reaction to the Ka‘bah, of an interpretation of its holiness in terms of visual beauty. Matters were different in later mystical thought, but the emotional and pietistic idealization of the holiest place in Islam hardly appears in early times. The evidence is less clear for secular architecture. It is difficult to imagine that the wealthy merchants of Mekkah did not build for themselves fairly elaborate dwellings. But there is no evidence for it, and the developments of later centuries would tend to confirm the simplicity of the setting of aristocratic life in pre-Islamic Arabia. For instance, almost none of the visible features of Umayyad palace art—which will be discussed in a later chapter—seems to have been derived from pre-Islamic Arabia, and it is perhaps correct to conclude that architectural ostentatiousness was not and is not a typical feature of traditional Arabian society, contemporary Saudi Arabia or Kuwait notwithstanding.

Yet there existed a myth of a grandiose secular architecture. It was recorded in an early tenth-century text translated as The Antiquities of South Arabia, and its best-known example is the fabulous Ghumdan in Yemen, “Twenty stories high the palace stood, flirting with the stars and the clouds. If Paradise lies over the skies, Ghumdan borders on Paradise. Should it the face of the earth inhabit, Ghumdan would be nearby or close by it. If God heaven on earth doth place, Ghumdan would its confines, embrace.” It was decorated with alabaster, onyx, and sculptures of lions and eagles. On its top there was a dome. Several other palaces share with Ghumdan extraordinary size and abundant decoration. Princely constructions were also associated with northern Arabian dynasties, especially the Lakhmid dynasty on the desert confines of southern Iraq, whose Khawarnaq and Sadir were often mentioned in later literature as superb examples of royal luxury. I know of no reference in texts to similar buildings in Central Arabia.

It would be interesting some time to investigate archaeologically the Iraqi monuments of the Lakhmids whose location seems known. But, whatever later explorations may bring to light, the important point is the existence of an architectural palace mythology in pre-Islamic Arabia. This mythology developed primarily around constructions that, justifiably or not, were associated with rulers of Arab origin in the southern and northern edges of the peninsula and not with foreigners. Curiously, almost no memory seems to have grown around the best known and archaeologically well-documented Nabatean and Palmryene architecture, whose monumental funerary forms seem to have passed almost unnoticed. Similarly, while the major monuments of Roman and Christian Syria were certainly known to Arab tradesmen and caravans, there is little evidence that they had a major impact, at least not as artistic monuments.

For the other arts our information is also scanty, but it is perhaps
easier to imagine the nature and extent of their presence. From the paucity of originally Arabic terms referring to most artistic activities, it can be surmised that very little sculpture, painting, or manufacture of other than purely utilitarian objects took place in Arabia itself. The idols that had been assembled in Mecca were most primitive, and the painting of a Virgin and Child found in the Ka'bah was probably the work of a non-Arab or of local folk art. What accounts of aesthetically significant paintings and sculptures do exist refer generally to works found outside of Arabia, mostly in the Christian world of Syria, Egypt, and occasionally Ethiopia. Most expensive objects came from elsewhere and the celebrated textiles and pillows with figures which were owned by A'isha, the prophet's youngest wife and about which much was written later on, were probably Syrian or Egyptian. The craftsmen of Arabia itself were generally non-Arab, mostly Jews, and the practice of crafts was not honored. When the Ka'bah was rebuilt in 605 it was done by a foreign carpenter with the help of a Coptic assistant.

In the light of much recent research which has shown the mercantile aristocracy of Mecca and other Arabian oases to have been a wealthy and economically sophisticated class, and in the light of a rather impressive artistic achievement of Arab kingdoms in Hatra, Palmyra, Petra, and Yemen, there is something slightly incongruous in the minimal information we possess either about the arts of pre-Islamic Arabia or about what pre-Islamic Arabs knew of the arts. Some scholars, in particular Monneret de Villard, have sought to redress the picture by combing literary and archaeological sources about pre-Islamic Arabia. Others have given particular prominence to the Arab kingdoms of Syria and Iraq as possible sponsors of an original pre-Islamic Arab art. But for a definition of attitudes rather than of specific facts, the key point is that, regardless of what pre-Islamic art may have been known to the Arabs, it was largely disregarded in later Muslim tradition. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which is the rather systematic attempt of later times to eradicate the jahiliyyah past, the time of Ignorance, or all the centuries which preceded the Revelation to Muhammad. Whatever the pagan Arabs may have had could only be of negative value; it was something to be rejected. But a curious problem then poses itself. One can indeed accept and understand that the literati of a given culture rejected whatever historical, religious, and even literary past the culture may have had. Our own times have taught us much about rewriting history and sadly enough even about the obliteration of people and events. But can the same process apply to the world of forms? Can one imagine an obliteration of a collective memory of forms when so many of them were the very things that surrounded and accompanied the life of the whole collectivity? Can we assume it when we know of the sizable opposition that existed to the Prophet's activities in the richest and most sophisticated milieu of pre-Islamic Arabia, the very milieu from which many of the leaders of early Islam came? Thus, while it is indeed true that the later Muslim tradition played down the existence of any art in the oases of Arabia, it may be in part because this art was too strongly associated with the hated upper classes of Mecca. Two hypotheses are thus introduced into our considerations. One is that Muslims may have rejected artistic creativity in general or in some aspects because of its associations with certain social groups. The other hypothesis, a corollary of the first, is that a work of art has, at least in some circumstances, a social significance and that this particular aspect may on occasion be the predominant one.

The second document to be examined is the only incontrovertible early Islamic document we have, the Koran. It is a difficult source to use for our purposes, for we must try to separate those passages which were used for post facto justifications of certain theological and intellectual positions from those which appear to have been affected by actual contemporary needs. Some passages are of course significant both in their original context and in later times. In discussing the main ones, I shall try to separate one type from the other.

The first pertinent passage is 34.12–13 and deals with Solomon: "And of the jinn, some worked before him by the leave of his Lord; and such of them as swerved away from Our commandment, We would let them taste the chastisement of the Blaze; fashioning for him whatsoever he would, places of worship, statues, porringers like water-troughs, and anchored cookingpots." The exegesis is particularly complicated one. Outside of its general significance in identifying Solomon as the prophet-king for whom extraordinary works of art are created—a theme of considerable importance in later Islamic art—we can make three observations about this pass-
sage. One is obviously that statues are mentioned among the things made for Solomon. The term used here, *tinathal*, is a confusing one; it may possibly not have had the precise connotation of three-dimensional sculpture suggested by our own term “statue,” but there is little doubt that some sort of likeness to living things was meant. The second point is that statues or whatever they are seem to be associated here with very prosaic, everyday objects like cauldrons and cooking pots. It is possible that some very specific Jewish legend explains this particular passage, but we also have here a first indication of a theme to be developed at some length later on: the provision of aesthetic quality to common daily items. The third and most significant point appears more fully if one recalls that the context of the passage is that of God providing “signs” to the apotropaic succession of prophets; it is interspersed with exhortations to the unbelievers, past, present, and future. The reference to statues or figures then does not identify them as man-made artistic creations but as divinely inspired symbols of the uniqueness of Solomon’s position.

The same context can be given to a second Koranic passage, 3.43, which has been particularly often utilized by both opponents and proponents of images in Islam. It is found in the words pronounced by God to Mary: “God creates what He will. When He decrees a thing He does but say to it ‘Be,’ and it is. And He will teach Him [Jesus] the Book, the Wisdom, the Torah, the Gospel, to be a Messenger to the Children of Israel saying, ‘I have come to you with a sign from your Lord. I will create for you out of clay as the likeness of a bird; then I will breathe into it, and it will be a bird, by the leave of God. I will also heal the blind and the leper, and bring to life the dead, by the leave of God.’” Even more than in the first passage, the emphasis here is on the facts that God alone creates the value to be given to a representation and that such representations belong to the “signs” God sends to man. Furthermore, as so many traditionalists have pointed out, the representation of a bird is significant only if life is provided for it; yet only God provides life. Some doubt may be expressed as to whether this particular meaning was already there at the time of the utterance of the Koranic passage. It had probably a much more metaphoric meaning, inasmuch as the term used for “likeness,” *hiy’ah*, is a very abstract one meaning “shape” and rarely if ever used to refer to representations.

Finally, two closely related passages are pertinent to our purposes. The first one is 5.92: “O Believers, wine and arrowshuffling, idols and divining arrows are an abomination, some of Satan’s work; so avoid it; haply you will prosper.” Then in 6.74 Abraham chides his father Azar for taking idols as divinities: “I see thee and thy people in manifest error.” The words for idols in these two passages are respectively *al-ansab* and *al-asnam*, both of which imply representations, statues or paintings, used for worship. Here again the Koranic meaning is clearly that of opposing the adoration of physical idols, and not of rejecting art or representations as such. Yet these are the very passages which were later used to oppose images. Our problem is to explain why and when a search for Koranic justifications for such opposition took place, even if it meant an extension of the original meaning of the chosen passages.

Before doing so, however, there are still several remarks to be made about the Koran as a document for the arts. It must be obvious that, even if our list of passages is not complete, there are very few of them and their application to an understanding of the arts is incidental, minimal, and often after the fact. There is nothing similar to the concise strength of Exodus 20.4: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven images or any likenesses of anything that is in heaven or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth.” Since the Koran deals otherwise quite concretely with many aspects of life, it may be proper to conclude simply that at the time of the Prophet the problem of artistic creativity and representations simply did not come up as a significant question requiring some sort of pronouncement or legislation. His only clearly documented action involving the arts consisted of the destruction of the idols in the Ka‘bah, and the very fact that Muhammad is supposed to have left an image of a Virgin and Child suggests that representations as such did not constitute a threat to his vision of his faith.

Not only was the Koranic message of little significance to the contemporary or later artistic creativity of Islam, but the book itself was never used as a source for illustrations. This is not surprising, for, as has been pointed out, the Koran was something like a
mixture of the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Leviticus, and the Epistles. Although there is a considerable Christian illustration of psalters, it grew mostly out of the liturgical use of psalms, and their images are among the most problematic of the Old Testament. The Epistles, the Proverbs, and Leviticus are hardly illustrated at all. In other words, and regardless of its theological meanings, the Koran does not lend itself to translation into visual form because it does not have major narrative sequences and because its liturgical and other uses lacked the aesthetic complexities of the Christian use of the Gospels or of the Old Testament. The Koran was and still is recited in mosques at prayer time but its aesthetic appeal lies in the sound of its divinely inspired words. As to its immense significance as a legal document, it can hardly be expected to have received a visual transposition.

The life of the Prophet did acquire a legendary aspect fairly soon after his death and was occasionally illustrated from the thirteenth century onward. There is some doubt, however, that it became immediately a significant aspect of the faith—except in legal matters—and it certainly did not have a formal, sacred character. In a general way the lack of a liturgy in Islam prevented the development of the sort of sacramental, ceremonial, or holy setting in which other religious systems grew irrespective of the specific requirements of the church. And in a way one may wonder whether a holy book by itself does require illustrations. It is rather when a milieu—either a whole culture or one of its parts—demands some sort of visually perceptible version that holy books are used for images and the ingenuity of artists can rise above most textual difficulties, as the history of biblical illustrations well demonstrates. It is perhaps therefore more appropriate to conclude that although the Koran does not lend itself easily to illustrations or to visual interpretations, the reason that such interpretations did not take place lies less in the Koran than in other circumstances with which we shall deal later on.

Finally, it has often been noted that the central theological message of the Koran is that of the total uniqueness, the total power, of God. He alone is a “fashioner,” a musawwar (59.24), the very term used for painter. As the only Creator, he cannot admit of competitors, hence the opposition to idols which by association and by extension could become an opposition to representations. But this last

step was not consciously taken at the time of the faith’s formation. Thus the model we are trying to construct of the early Muslim’s attitude to the arts has acquired a second component. Next to a rather peculiar and largely mythical memory of ancient arts, and next to a partly critical awareness of contemporary arts mostly as useful objects, we have in the central book of the faith a coherent system which, if we understand correctly what it meant in its own time, was totally unaware of a visually perceptible aesthetic need. It asserted God as the single Creator and did not lend itself to obvious translation into visual form. Only incidentally can certain passages be construed otherwise.

The next two sets of documents we possess differ from the first ones both in kind and in the ways in which they can clarify our problem. They consist of the hadith, or body of Traditions describing the life of the Prophet which acquired a quasi-canonical character, and of a variety of early stories involving Arabs and the arts of conquered people. While some of them deal with the Prophet, his time, and his pronouncements, they were put together later and therefore reflect in large part judgments, attitudes, and problems of a later time; and almost all of them originate from the conquered territories rather than from the homeland of Islam. Their value as indicators of widespread feelings, thoughts, and doctrines is difficult to determine. They are individual stories, accounts, or opinions, usually not part of any coherent system of interpretation, and they have usually been discovered by scholars more or less haphazardly in the course of readings. They do not form nor do they lend themselves to a modern scientific reconstruction like a summary of what the Arabs knew of the arts. The conclusions to be deduced from these documents are thus always slightly uncertain. Yet not only are they most frequently cited in literature, but they are also most important in that they reflect the views of the Muslim world after Islam had embarked on its conquest.

On the Traditions—as well as on legal literature analyzed so far only by one scholar, Rudi Paret—we can be brief, for they tend to

* It should be added here that in our own times—and to a smaller degree as early as in the twelfth century—artists or philosophers searched for and found in the Koran many passages which can be construed as justifications not only for representations but also for a glorification of the beauty of man and man’s intricate visual inventions. These passages have been particularly eloquently discussed by the Egyptian scholar and poet Bishr Fârîs but they are not pertinent to our present subject.