repeat the same point with only minor variations. A most typical and thorough text consists in the following succession of sayings attributed to the Prophet:

“The angels will not enter a house in which there is a picture or a dog.” “Those who will be most severely punished on the Day of Judgment are the murderer of a Prophet, one who has been put to death by a Prophet, one who leads men astray without knowledge, and a maker of images or pictures.” “A head will thrust itself out of the fire and will ask, Where are those who invented lies against God, or have been the enemies of God, or have made light of God? Then men will ask, Who are these three classes of persons? It will answer, The Sorcerer is he who has invented lies against God; the maker of images or pictures is the enemy of God; and he who acts in order to be seen of men, is he that has made light of God.”

It is interesting that the main thrust of blame is directed toward the painter rather than the work of art. For it is the painter making representations who appears as a sort of competitor of God by creating something that has actual or potential life. And in any number of Traditions the painter is threatened with being compelled to breathe actual life into his creations. We cannot be certain when these types of statements were first invented or gathered in official legal texts, but the argument put forward by Creswell that they do not occur before the second half of the eighth century seems convincing enough within the existing documentation.

Whatever reasons led to the growth of this position, it clearly clashed with a considerable body of authentic information about the presence of beautiful objects with figures—mostly textiles and metalwork—in the Prophet’s immediate surroundings. Explanations had to be provided, and thus grew a whole additional body of Traditions that sought to show there were variations in the ways in which images could be used. Permissible in hallways, floors, or baths, they were forbidden elsewhere; in some legal texts headless figures were allowed. We are not to concern ourselves in this work with the casuistic or intellectually valid intricacies introduced in legal and religious thought, nor can we discuss at this stage whether this type of concern affected in any way the forms of Islamic art. What matters is only that at some time around the middle of the

eighth century Islamic religious tradition in part or as a whole developed a hitherto unknown opposition to representations. One of the difficulties with this conclusion is that scholarly interest in ferreting out texts about images may have overlooked other possible aspects of the hadith and the arts. For instance are there in it references to the work of artisans and to objects and buildings? Are there judgments and opinions that may be understood in aesthetic terms? In the search for this kind of information lies an important, if perhaps tedious, scientific task.

It is much more difficult to draw some sort of coherent picture from our fourth type of evidence, historical accounts of early Islamic times that are likely to define something of an attitude toward the arts. Several separate and at times contradictory facets were present, and much additional work is needed before they appear completely or even clearly. In fact, if artistic problems are on one’s mind, the reading of almost any early text yields results, but the problem lies in ordering these results into some sort of coherent system. For instance, while the great chronicles provide minimal but fairly secure information in terms of historical veracity, much more important and interesting documents occur in works of adab or belles-lettres or in poetry, but their specific validity, their “archaeological index,” is not of the same magnitude. A poetical image with a reference to an object or to a monument may indicate something about contemporary taste but may also be a valueless literary cliché. Here again the collection and comparison of appropriate texts should be a major objective of scholarship and should replace the unfortunate tendency of many writers (including this one) to fish out a single text that appears to satisfy some otherwise developed theory or interpretation.

At the risk of continuing a debatable procedure, I shall limit myself to a consideration of only one aspect of the kind of information provided by these early texts: the reaction of early Muslims to an art we otherwise know, the art of the conquered people. I shall leave aside, for lack of sufficiently coherent documentation and because the problem will be considered in part in the next two chapters, such textual information as we do possess about the art made and used by the Muslims themselves. Because the Muslim reaction to the arts is better documented with respect to Christian art, my examples will be primarily concerned with this admittedly partial evi-
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dence. In dealing later on with the evidence of the arts themselves, I shall try to make up for this imbalance, but it must be noted that a thorough culling of the sources describing the conquests of Iran and Central Asia should yield important parallel information.

The Muslim reaction to the art of the conquered Christian world was one of awe and admiration. The brilliance of church decoration was duly noted, and we have already quoted a text describing the powerful impact of the churches of Jerusalem and of Edessa as works of art. In part this brilliance was seen as the result of superior technique. It was probably during the first Muslim century that the notion grew up of a Rumi, Christian if not always specifically Byzantine, superiority in the arts. Awe and admiration can lead to imitation and, especially when accompanied by wealth, to systematic efforts at luring technicians to one's side. It has been clearly shown that the mosaicists who decorated the mosque of Damascus and perhaps even those who worked in Madinah were brought from Byzantium. This successful recruitment, which was probably only the result of the greater Muslim wealth, became legend. Thus in some later accounts the Byzantine emperor is portrayed as compelled by his Muslim suzerain to send mosaicists. The event also became a model, and in the tenth century the Umayyad caliph in Spain was still hiring mosaicists from Constantinople. It is probable if not certain that, in addition to the great mosques whose construction is comparatively well documented, the vast majority of early Islamic monuments, at least in Syria and Palestine, were built, made, and decorated by workers and artists either Christian or trained in the tradition of pre-Islamic Christianity. Their presence lasted probably much longer than the presence of financial and administrative officials. Although we are less precisely informed on what happened in Iraq and Iran, it is likely that the same continuity took place in workmanship.

But initial awe and admiration can also lead to rejection and contempt. The preceding chapter related that, as a treaty had been signed between Christians and Muslims providing for a year's time before a certain town was to change hands, a statue of the emperor Heraclius was set up at the frontier between Christian and Muslim territories. There is a sequel to the story. One day a Muslim rider, while practicing horsemanship, accidentally damaged the statue's eye. The Christians protested and the local Muslim governor agreed that the damage should be repaired. The Christians requested that the statue of the Muslim equivalent—the caliph Umar and not the local commander as he himself had suggested—be similarly defaced. So it was decided, the eye damaged, and then everyone agreed that justice had been done. The point of the story—probably an apocryphal one and, interestingly enough, of Christian origin—is that the Muslim commander, who agreed that a wrong had been committed on a sort of symbolic level, agreed to have the eye of his caliph put out because he did not believe as deeply as his Christian counterpart in the deep significance of an image. To him it was merely a gesture and the account, biased though it may be in favor of the Christian position, portrays his attempt at substituting a representation of himself for that of Heraclius as an expression of amused contempt for use of images he did not understand.

Other examples exist of contempt for what was imagined to be a pagan worship of images and an opiumlike use of ceremonies by the Christian church or by the Byzantine emperor. At times contempt could become destructive, as in a number of stories (admittedly found mostly in Christian sources) relating either wholesale desecration of images in churches or persecutions of Christians. The best known event of this kind was the edict of Yazid in 721, according to which all religious images were to be destroyed. Although the edict is known almost exclusively through Christian sources, it has been accepted as a reality, probably justifiably so, as much as the figurative elements of a number of earlier mosaics in the Christian churches of Palestine were replaced by vegetal ones or entirely removed. The question is whether the edict was an ideologically iconoclastic one and thus whether it expresses as early as 721 a militant opposition to religious or other images. A consideration not only of the many texts about this but also of the precise historical setting of the time suggests that the edict was not so much a manifestation of Islamic iconoclasm as an attempt to persecute Christians, especially the orthodox Christians attached to Constantinople. The more important point is that to a Muslim of the early eighth century images were one of the most characteristic and in part hateful aspects of Christianity.

It was probably during the very same time that a minor incident in the later life of the Prophet—his sending of an emissary to Byzantine-held territories—was transformed into a highly organized
and highly official mission for the conversion of foreign kings and rulers. The main target was the Byzantine emperor who spurned the invitation to conversion, though accounts vary as to the reasons or genuineness of his refusal. It is interesting to note that in at least one account, the emperor who was ready to accept Islam was dissuaded by the clergy and patricians of his entourage. Although these stories are only remotely concerned with images and art, they do establish one aspect of the psychological setting of the relationship between a budding Islam and an established Christianity, a setting that includes an invitation from the new faith contemptuously spurned by the older empire. It is an attitude of self-conscious superiority mixed with a formal rejection by the world one is trying to woo. It would not even be useful for us were it not for the fact that the seventh and early eighth centuries are the very ones during which images and their meaning became one of the cultural hallmarks of the eastern Christian world. But there is more. It was a world that used its images and its dexterity with images in order to define its religious and political positions, and to persuade and to convert. One of the highlights of a visit to Constantinople was a religious service at Hagia Sophia; the Muslim sources relate how Muslim prisoners withstood the impact of the church’s glitter and refused to be converted, whereas Christian sources describe how Muslims accepted Christianity under the same circumstances. In any event images became not merely a characteristic of the Christian world, but one of the most important and dangerous weapons it possessed.

For all these reasons one can describe the Muslim attitude toward the arts of the Christian world as a confused one, in which awe and admiration, contempt and jealousy, were uneasily mixed together. Particular emphasis has been given to this side of the picture provided by early stories because it will be an important one in the general interpretation to be proposed; but it must be repeated that there are many other aspects of the Muslim reaction to the arts that can be detected even from an unsystematic survey of the written evidence. One is the sudden discovery and accumulation of immense treasures of expensive objects by the Arab armies and especially by their leaders. From the frontiers of inner Asia to Spain, Muslim conquerors gathered textiles, gold and silver, ivories, and the like. Some of these were melted but others accumulated in the Near Eastern centers of the empire. Muslim armies also saw many new holy places and palaces; they were received at times with high honors or bribed by local rulers. As a result, not only did luxury objects appear to people who had not seen them before, but there also occurred among the Muslims a new awareness of a life of luxury at a level hitherto unknown to the Arabs. Obviously this life was not shared by all; in fact it created a cleavage in the community between those who enjoyed it and those who saw in it a threat to the purity of the faith. Thus, in yet another sense, one can postulate the formation of what may be called a resentment of the beautiful and expensive, which may tie up with a populist reaction to the arts and to images already suggested in Arabia itself.

All the documents examined so far derive from literary sources and from assumptions about the historical setting of the first Muslim century. Before trying to put it all together it is necessary to turn to the arts themselves and to one particularly telling document, coinage. At this stage it is not so much the stylistic, iconographic, or aesthetic characteristics of early Islamic art that are of significance, but rather whether, seen altogether, they provide some further dimension to the question of a Muslim attitude toward the arts.

If one surveys the many works of early Islamic art, the overwhelming impression is that of the absence of representations of living things. This conclusion may seem surprising in the light of the great discoveries at Qusayr Amrah, Khirbat al-Mafjar, Qasr al-Hayr West, and Samarra, which have raised so many questions about the nature of Islamic art and about which we will have much to say later on. Yet, however much we tend to give particular importance to zoomorphic or anthropomorphic themes, because it is from such themes that our own conception of the arts has tended to derive, these monuments are exceptional rather than the norm. Furthermore, all are private monuments for restricted usage and enjoyment; they are not official or formal art. They are essential for an understanding of the culture as a whole, but they form only one aspect of the ways in which it expressed itself in a visually perceptible manner.

By examining a group of specific monuments it is possible to refine the significance of this general impression. The primary impression of the Mshatta facade is that of a highly thought-out com-
position of vegetal and geometric themes, yet animals are present in fairly large numbers (figs. 121, 122). The large early Islamic ceramic series from northeastern Iran (figs. 107ff.) contains mostly nonrepresentational themes, but occasionally a bird or an animal does occur and a small but celebrated group even has human beings. Similarly, while it is far-fetched to see human and animal elements in the Samarra stuccoes (fig. 125), there were animal friezes in the decoration of the Abbasid capital’s houses, and the carved woods from Egypt contain a certain number of animal themes. It would thus be probably more correct to say that there occurred a balance of thematic units in early Islamic art that did not give a primary or even major place to representations of men and animals. The observer’s impression of a lack of such representations is conditioned by the fact that comparable monuments of late antiquity, Byzantium, India, or the later Christian West had a different balance of themes in which representational elements are predominant. The question is whether this different balance is willful and meaningful, or accidental. An answer is suggested by the mosaics of the Great Mosque in Damascus (figs. 13, 14).

Over the past decade several scholars have shown that the large, partially preserved architectural compositions in the mosaics that decorate this early masterpiece of Islamic art symbolize a paradisiac vision of a peaceful Muslim world. Regardless then of their ornamental value, the mosaics can be legitimately provided with an iconographic meaning just as the decoration of comparable monuments elsewhere, churches for instance, has an iconographic sense. A further curious feature about these mosaics has often been noted. Their main subject matter of buildings is one which in the classical and Byzantine tradition whence it derived usually formed a background—at times meaningful, at other times ornamental—to some other topic. Here the latter is absent; instead, a series of large naturalistic trees is rhythmically set in the forefront. Since it appears unlikely that these trees were the main subject matter of the mosaics, they become the formal equivalents of personages who form the main subject matter in the models used by the Damascus mosaicists, as for instance in the fifth-century mosaics of the church of St. George in Saloniki. A fascinating example of the transfer of formal relationships between the parts of an image occurred here. The desire for a concrete meaning—paradisiac architecture—in an understandable iconographic language—the vocabulary of the classical tradition—led to the mutation of a background motif into the main subject and the transformation of the foreground motif—in the tradition the main subject—into a secondary theme.

In one of the most official buildings of early Islam, therefore, a decoration was created that was meant to have symbolic meaning. We have seen that a symbolic meaning can be given to some of the themes of the Dome of the Rock mosaics as well. In neither the Dome of the Rock nor the mosque of Damascus are there any representations of men or animals. But on the Mshatta façade with its vegetal themes interspersed occasionally with animal ones, no animal motif occurs on the right side of the entrance. The side without animals corresponds to the qiblah wall of the mosque, the wall that faced Mekkah.

The avoidance of figural representations in early Islamic art was thus systematic and deliberate whenever a religious building was concerned, and it led to unusual choices and modifications in the type of imagery borrowed and utilized by Muslim patrons. This avoidance did not, however, mean a similar avoidance of symbolic meaning attached to those forms that were in fact used. Rather, symbolic significance was given to new forms or to forms in older artistic languages for which such a symbolism had not been known. The conclusion that emerges, then, is twofold: there was indeed a consciousness in the ways that early Islamic art reached its avoidance of representations, and this consciousness was less the result of some a priori doctrine than of a response to the formal vocabulary available to the Muslims.

These conclusions can be followed up in the last document to be discussed, coinage. The story of early Islamic coinage has been told many times. Nothing is known about it before the conquest of the Fertile Crescent. The local coins, Byzantine ones in formerly Byzantine territories (fig. 17), Sassanian ones in the East (fig. 16), were continued with an Arabic inscription indicating a variety of possible things—a date, the name of a caliph or governor, the profession of faith, a mint. A number of modifications were then introduced, which on the whole appear more clearly in imitations of Byzantine than of Sassanian coins. Some of these consist simply of removing from the prototype some obvious Christian symbol like the cross and replacing it with a knob on a stand set over three steps (fig. 17).
Other modifications are more curious. Thus, a type of coin appears known as the Standing Caliph type (fig. 18). On the reverse of this coin the typical Byzantine group portrait is replaced by a standing personage with a kufiyah or Arab headgear instead of a crown, a large robe instead of the loros, and a very peculiar and hitherto unexplained cord on the right side (fig. 18). The personage is holding a sword. All these features can be interpreted as attempts at an Islamic imperial iconography using identifying visual signs from Arab life and mores.

This search for an identifying original imagery is further illustrated by an extraordinary coin known through only three examples. It shows on one side a royal representation derived from Sassanian prototypes but with clear modifications in clothes, especially in the headdress. The other side shows a niche around a standing lance (fig. 15). George Miles has suggested that it is the image of a mihrab, the niche in a mosque symbolizing the Prophet's place (which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter), and of the 'anazah, the lance that was one of the formal symbols of Prophetic and caliphal power. There is little doubt about the correctness of the interpretation given to the lance. It is perhaps less certain that the niche represents an actual mihrab, for, as we shall see, the latter did not appear in architecture until ten years later. It could have been simply a motif of honor without concrete Muslim significance. But this point is not of great importance in the present context.

The third example of the iconographic search is an oddity. A group of Sassanian-derived silver coins has on the reverse a standing figure with outstretched arms, like a Mediterranean orans (fig. 19). There is no explanation for this type, which could be considered either as an iconographic confusion or as another attempt at expressing visually some aspect of the new culture. Several other peculiar types exist, especially in the eastern part of the empire, but they still await proper investigation.

These experimental issues came to an end in 696–97 for gold and in 698–99 for silver. At this time Abd al-Malik's reform, so often recounted in medieval chronicles, broke away from types imitating Byzantine and Sassanian themes and replaced them with a purely aniconic, Islamic type (fig. 20) which proclaimed that 'There is no God but God, One, Without Associate.' The Koranic quotation (9.33) announces that 'Muhammad is the Apostle of God whom

He sent with guidance and the religion of truth (that he may make it victorious over every other religion).’ In addition to these standard formulas early coinage contains a number of variants, but all of them emphasize the unique and uncreated quality of God. Except for a number of provincial issues and for occasional peculiar types, Abd al-Malik's purely epigraphic coinage remained the standard Islamic coinage for centuries.

The utilization of coinage, especially gold and silver, by the art historian is both an advantage and a danger. One important advantage of numismatic evidence is that it reflects a highly conscious and official use of visual forms and symbols. Therefore the datable succession of iconographic formulas—minor adaptations of earlier formulas, attempts at an original iconography utilizing representational and other symbols, replacement of such formulas with purely epigraphic ones—can be accepted as a succession of conscious choices by the highest level of the culture and of the empire. At a chronologically clear moment, which corresponds to the time of the Dome of the Rock, the very official art of coinage replaced representational formulas with writing and this change was for practical purposes irreversible. It obviously was the result of a need or of an attitude that can at least be dated, if not yet explained. Furthermore, one can usually assume that numismatic themes received wide currency and, unless otherwise indicated, implicate the culture as a whole. The same index of value cannot so easily be given to a palace or even to a religious building.

But the very fact that gold and silver coins are highly official documents suggests their limitation as such. They reflect only the preoccupations of the center of a culture; they are not necessarily indicative of the total creativity, even at the level of formal symbols, of a given moment. Thus, for instance, the very same Abd al-Malik had a seal made that shows alfonsed lions and birds and a traditional Byzantine alpha together with the profession of faith (fig. 21). The object is a unique one; it may be earlier than the reformed coins, and its possibly more private nature limits its potential significance. Yet it illustrates the crucial points of the multiplicity of themes and their levels of utilization which existed at any one time. This multiplicity is probably true of any one moment in the history of forms, but in our instance of early Islamic times, as in most other times, it appears to possess a quality that made it unique. It is that
the official art of the empire tended to avoid representations of living things, while apparently the culture as a whole seemed indifferent to the problem.

Let us now sum up the historical evidence we have brought out about the Muslim attitude toward the arts and try to suggest an explanation for it. Seen historically, that is in some sort of chronological development, the following scheme can be proposed, without taking into consideration for the moment the limitations attached to the different kinds of information we have. The Arabian cradle of Islam was only dimly aware of the possibilities of man-made visually perceptible symbols; it was not creative itself but “consumed” objects of varying quality from elsewhere and knew that other cultures, including neighboring ones, did erect fancy buildings, paint pictures, fashion sculptures, and at times even gave a certain sacredness to these creations. But these meanings given to forms were either primitive or limited, and more general aesthetic impulses other than those of owning a “pretty” thing were absent. They remained absent from the Koran and from the Prophet’s message, with its emphasis on a unique God forcefully distinct from the Christian divine view and on a certain way of life for the Community of the Faithful. During the first century after the conquest the Muslims were brought into immediate contact with the fantastic artistic wealth of the Mediterranean and Iran. They were strongly affected by a world in which images, buildings, and objects were active expressions of social standing, religion, political allegiance, and intellectual or theological positions. As many recent studies have shown, the Christian world was at that time immensely proud of both its sophistication in the use of the visual and its technical mastery of the beautiful. Matters are less clear for Iran, but, in view of the wealth of religious imagery and luxury objects identified in Central Asia, the same or at least a similar development may be suggested east of Byzantium. That the Muslims were impressed by the artistic complexity of the conquered world goes without saying. To use the term introduced recently by Gustav von Grunebaum, they were clearly “tempted” and we can document the accumulation of wealth together with new habits of luxurious living and the search for visual symbols of their own including representations of personages and things. But then the search stopped, or rather in the official art of mosques and coins a substitution occurred from older themes with a constant use of living things into writing or into conscious modifications of the models used. These substitutions still had iconographic content, but they lacked one element which tended to be de rigueur in earlier or contemporary traditions, that is, representations of living things. Even though notable exceptions exist, this avoidance of or reluctance toward representations spread beyond the realm of official art into private art. By the end of the eighth century Muslim thinkers were asking themselves why they made this shift, and they answered by going back to incidental passages of the Koran and by reinterpreting the life of the Prophet.

Why, historically speaking, did this change from indifference to opposition take place? It has generally been assumed—quite correctly, it seems to me—that the doctrine (or at least the elements thereof) of opposition to representations followed rather than preceded the actual partial abandonment of such representations. It is therefore not through the impact of a specifically Muslim thought that we may provide an explanation. Some have argued for a sort of basic Semitic opposition to images which would have come to the fore with the formation of the Arab empire. Beside being rather unfortunately ethnically focused, this explanation is weakened by the existence of an art sponsored by Semitic entities since Akkadian times. Others have argued for the immediate impact of Judaism, and it is true that converted Jews played a very important part in the formation of many aspects of early Islamic thought. Furthermore, a number of events with iconoclastic overtones, such as the edict of Yazid, were said to have been inspired by Jews. It is indeed very likely that Judaic thought and arguments played an important part in the formation of a doctrine against images, but it seems improbable to me that they would have triggered it, mainly because the doctrine or even most statements about the arts always occur first as a reflection to the presence of a work of art, not as an intellectual position. Then, in the one instance—coins—where images were formally abandoned, and where the process can be followed quite accurately, there is no evidence for a Jewish influence nor is one likely.

It is simpler to argue that the formation of a Muslim attitude toward the arts was the result neither of a doctrine nor of a precise
intellectual or religious influence. It was rather the result of the impact on the Arabs of the prevalent arts. Or, to put it another way, Islam burst onto the stage at the moment when, more than at any time before or after, images became more closely related to their prototypes rather than to their beholder, when religious and political factions fought with each other through images, when Christology of the most complex kind penetrated into the public symbols of coins. In this particular world, the new Islam could choose to compete and it did try, in some coins, to develop a symbolic system of its own. The difficulty was, however, not only that the Christian world in particular had acquired a tremendous sophistication in the use of forms, but also that in order to be meaningful an identifying symbolic system of visual forms has to be known and accepted by all those for whom it is destined. If it used, even with modifications, the terms of the older and more developed culture, Islam would lose its unique quality. On the other hand, the visual weakness of its Arabian past did not provide Arab Islam with visual forms that could be understood by others or with the technical sophistication needed to manipulate existing forms. The reform of Abd al-Malik crystallized and formalized an attitude that had developed in the Muslim community, according to which the prevailing specific use of representations tended to idolatry and no understandable visual system other than that of writing and of inanimate objects could avoid being confused with the alien world of Christians and by later extension of Buddhists or of pagans. It was therefore essentially the ideological and political circumstances of the late seventh-century Christian world that led Islam to this particular point of view. For it is in a complex relationship to the Byzantine empire that early Islam tried to define itself. This point appears clearly in many of the accounts that describe Abd al-Malik’s coinage or the bringing of workers from Constantinople to make the mosaics in Damascus. Most of them describe the two events as respectively a challenge to the Byzantine emperor and his subjection to the caliph. Actual historical truth here is less important than the mood which is suggested.

To conclude then we might say that, under the impact of the Christian world of the time, Islam sought official visual symbols of itself but could not develop representational ones because of the particular nature of images in the contemporary world. Precise
later, matters are different when we turn to writing, which remained as the main vehicle for symbolic signification in early Islamic art. The point at this stage is merely that the rejection of a certain kind of imagery because of its deceptive threat seems to have carried with it considerable uncertainty about the value of visual symbols altogether.

A curious theoretical problem is posed here. One may indeed conclude that some uncertainty exists as to whether the forms of any image can acquire a concrete symbolic meaning unless they use concretely definable imitations of nature. If abstract and nonfigurative signs can indeed acquire symbolic meanings, how can we learn to read them? By what method of investigating visual forms can we discover if they had a sense in their time? But there is more here than a suggestion of modern, epistemological despair. One may in fact wonder whether a purely abstract system of visual symbols can ever be learned even within the culture itself, for, following here Jacques Berque, we may suggest that a nonfigurative art, even if the nonfigurative aspect is not total, contains ipso facto an arbitrary element that somehow escapes the normal rules of communicating a visual message. The historian may be puzzled by the notion of an ars mundi in artistic creation, absurdity at least in the sense that, to paraphrase Berque, it refers to richer and much deeper levels than those of quasi-verbal communication. Yet is it not so, that precision of meaning or of signification is automatically missing as a result of a rejection of the representation of otherwise known features? To answer these questions, theoretical and experimental investigations of a completely different order from the ones we are pursuing here are needed, mostly psychological ones about the manner in which man perceives and takes in forms. It may be just as well to leave them as questions, noting simply that our problem of the formation of an artistic tradition leads us to another series of theoretical puzzles than the ones we have raised at the beginning.

Another point, also with interesting theoretical implications, can be derived from our investigations. We may recall that it is at a popular and folk level that visual symbols are most consistently magical in significance, even if these meanings are used and organized at higher levels. On the other hand, most of the images seen by Islam as models had been sponsored by princes or by the clergy, even when their interpretation was a popular one. This sponsorship gave to the images a connotation of luxury; they were nonessential substitutes for life. Now, as several writers have shown, one of the peculiarities of early Islamic attitudes was what Marshall Hodgson called "moralism," that is, a way of interpreting any experience or need through a small and strict code of behavior and understanding. This code was largely a social one in the Muslim world and theoretically involved the whole social group, the whole ummah, or Muslim community of the faithful, and there was no clergy or liturgy to give it a complex mystical form in early times. In their public life at least, the princes tended (with notable exceptions duly and critically noted by chroniclers), during the formative decades of early Islam to appear as nothing but leaders of equals. The code thus lacked both canonically organized intermediaries and the need for such intermediaries, for it was the result of a small and cohesive social entity. Inasmuch as most artistic creation at that time was seen as a substitute for reality and thus an intermediary between man and that reality, it appeared as evil in a much wider sense than the technically precise one of confrontation between God, the muṣawwir par excellence, and the maker of images, the muṣawwir in stone or in paint. It was evil because it interfered between man and the morally good life, because it was a gratuitous temptation.

To some extent this social code was an abstraction, a body of beliefs and attitudes that did not always find legal and practical expression, inasmuch as there was no ecclesiastical unifying force among the Muslims and the organized system of jurisprudence was only in its infancy, even around 800. Yet by then very different non-Islamic or very recently converted groups had become part of the Muslim community itself. The original social code was subjected to a variety of tensions, two of which are of particular importance.

At one extreme were a number of folk cultures that continued to see images as magic and that were deeply rooted in every part of the Muslim world. These cultures maintained, however remotely and insecurely, an attachment to the pre-Islamic past of the Near East. At the other extreme there came to be an aristocratic culture—the caliphs, their families, high officials—that saw images as luxury and that consciously borrowed forms from earlier Near Eastern traditions, mostly royal ones. Between these two extremes the dom-
inante Muslim code appeared at its best in the early cities of Iraq or in Fustat, which were entirely new creations, rather than in the largely alien cities of Syria or western Iran, although matters were probably far more complicated in detail. This Islamic middle rejected both extremes, the popular world as pagan and the aristocratic one as alien and hypocritical. This rejection may have been supported by the social side of the poverty of aesthetic thought in early Arabian Islam discussed earlier in the chapter. But it is most important to note that it was this literate middle which provided us with most of the texts by which early Islamic culture is defined and which institutionalized into legal terms the moralistic attitude of the early ummah. We shall see later that a precise material culture can be attributed to it as well.

In the meantime one can put forward the concluding hypothesis that there grew in early Islamic times a new social entity whose ethos rejected the complex uses of representations in conquered areas and thereby revived the iconophobia latent in any culture. It became the dominant tastemaker in a system that included much more than itself. But it also went a step further, for, in legalizing its rejection, it also gave it a moral quality. The following passage from the tenth-century moralist and historian Ibn Miskawayh may serve as a concrete illustration of this point. In listing and discussing various vices, he mentions “the seeking of that which is precious and which is a source of dispute for all... When a king for instance owns in his treasury an object of rare quality or a precious stone, he thereby exposes himself to being afflicted by its loss. For such objects are unfailingly destined to be damaged when we consider the nature of the generated world and the corruption which wills that all things be altered and transformed and that all that is treasured or acquired become corrupted. ... Unable to replace [a lost object of quality] with an exact equivalent, the king becomes a prisoner of necessity.” These excerpts go beyond a rejection of representations. They suggest that all aesthetic creativity that is tied to the material world is a vanity and an evil. In this manner Islamic attitudes, conditioned by precise historical circumstances, reach a rejection of art altogether, as almost every puritanical reaction has done.

It is beyond my task to do more than suggest that the full originality of the early Islamic attitude to the arts can best be understood if its reluctance to images and its various attempts at visual symbolism through other means are related to the theoretical problem of the relationships between art and civilization with many intellectual and social connotations. The questions raised in this fashion, however, no longer pertain to Islamic art alone but invoke wider problems of the formal and social natures of visual perception under a variety of circumstances. In the meantime, whatever the attitudes may have been, they did not prevent the creation of monuments, whose survey takes up the next two chapters. The deeper question that remains is whether, in the light of the evidence and hypotheses presented in this chapter, it is entirely appropriate to think of these monuments as works of art.
It is customary to separate secular and religious impulses in the formation and development of an art. It is also often said that the separation is not entirely meaningful in Islam, which did not make a distinction between the realms of God and of Caesar. A word of explanation must therefore be provided to justify our use of the term "religious" in the title of this chapter. From the specific point of view of this book, what we are trying to identify are those elements or sources of inspiration in early Islamic art that could not have existed without the growth of the new faith and of the way of life issued from it or compelled by it. Our initial quest is therefore wider than that of simply looking for those peculiarly Islamic ritual or pietistic needs that could be or actually were translated into works of art. Yet for practical purposes, if we recall the nature of the establishment of Islam over the vast conquered area, most of material life can be assumed to have continued without significant modification. It is only little by little that changes can be detected, and few of them affected the arts until the eighth century, as we saw for instance in the case of an attitude toward representation. Thus, even though it is probably wrong to think in terms of religious needs and requirements in early Islamic times, we shall concern ourselves with those impetuses that became later appropriately defined as religious. At this stage we should think rather of such needs as were by definition limited to the Muslim community.

Foremost among these is the building and institution known as the mosque. The word itself derives from the Arabic masjid (plural masjīd) meaning "a place where one prostrates one’s self [in front of God]." The early history of the term is a peculiar one. It is fairly common in the Koran, but not once does it seem to refer to a specifically Muslim new kind of building. One celebrated passage is 9.17–18: "He shall only tend God’s sanctuaries [masjīd Allah] who believeth in God and the Last Day and observeth proper worship and payeth the poor-duty and feareth none but God." The text also gives an impression that some special function exists of taking care of holy buildings, but recent exegesis has shown that the context of this particular revelation is the masjid al-Haram in Mekkah and that the Prophet was simply indicating that non-Muslims were not to participate in its upkeep. Another verse, in 9.107, reads: "Those who took a masjid by opposition and disbelief and in order to cause dissent among the believers . . . they will swear: we purposed nought but good; but God will bear witness that they are liars." While it is conceivable that the incident recalled an attempt by some splinter group to imitate a Muslim holy place, it is far more likely that the word masjid itself means simply a "sanctuary" without specific connotation as to religious allegiance. The statement in 62.17, "Verily sanctuaries [masajids] are but for God," is too general to lead to any conclusion.

The only rather peculiar passage is 22.41: "Sanction is given [for fighting], . . . to those who have been expelled from their homes unjustly because they said: Our Lord is God. For had God not repelled some people by means of others, churches, synagogues, prayer places [salāwat, a rare word of unclear meaning], and masjids would have been destroyed?" Two of the words used indicate known religious buildings, and it can be thought that the other two also referred to institutions specific to a given faith and that the last one was a Muslim holy place. But this would be rather circuitous reasoning, and it seems to me more appropriate to conclude that in the Koran itself there is no indication for the existence of a new kind of Muslim religious building. The word masjid usually meant any building or place where God was worshipped; alternately it was used in a compound expression with al-haram to refer to the unique sanctuary in Mekkah. Except for the latter, which became quite early the spiritual and physical center of the Community, it would appear that the divine revelation did not introduce a holy Muslim building. In spite of the obvious development of a mosque architecture, it is interesting to note that even in the fifteenth century the great Ibn Khaldun recognized only three masjids, in Mekkah, Madinah, and Jerusalem, following in this the Koranic conception of a sanctuary.

But the Koran did lay down one rule for all Muslims that is of crucial significance to the architectural history of the mosque: the obligation to perform prayers. The act of prayer is a private act, and a celebrated tradition asserts that wherever one prays there is a masjid. But the act of prayer is also a collective act of the whole Community. The actual forms taken by prayer and its transformation into a collective act were no longer Koranic creations, but the
result of the Muslim community's life between 622 and 632. This life is best known through the Traditions and through chronicles, with the usual methodological problems of interpretation attached to these sources. In order to understand the architecture that developed, the following characteristics of Muslim prayer are of particular importance. First of all, a ritual of prayer was created. Once a week, on Fridays at noon, it involved the whole Community and the Prophet or his representative (eventually his successors, the caliphs and their representatives) became imams, or leaders of collective worship. A Khutbah was pronounced, which was both a sermon and an act of allegiance of the Community to its leader. This was the time not merely for a pietistic performance but also for the announcement of news and decisions pertaining to the whole group and even for certain collective decisions. The time for Friday prayer served thus as the time when, as social scientists might put it, the collectivity and its leaders communicated with each other. The leaders were considered as the guardians of the place of prayer and Ibn Khaldun, for instance, discusses what we call mosques in his chapter on the imamate, or the political leadership of Islam. For the formal ceremony of prayer, the imam stands in front of the other faithful near the qiblah wall, the wall indicating the direction of prayer. He pronounces the khutbah from a pulpit known as a minbar. The minbar became the symbol of legal authority in a place of worship, and for several centuries Muslim writers identified those mosques for whose upkeep the central authority was responsible as having a minbar. Both the Friday prayer and the daily compulsory prayers are preceded by a formal call to worship. The Prophet considered using either the Jewish horn or the Christian semantron but settled eventually for the human voice from the roof of the place of gathering. A specific individual, the muezzin, became appointed for this task. Finally, the act of prayer must be preceded by the ablutions of the faithful.

Much discussion has arisen around every one of these aspects of Muslim prayer, and there is little doubt that the canonically standardized prayer of today is the result of a complex but rather rapid development in which singular, accidental events and revealed religious practices interacted. All the events and most of the practices share one feature: they served to strengthen the formal ties of the Muslim community and to separate it from other, Jewish, Chris-

tian, and pagan, communities. These two characteristics, an all-embracing, egalitarian one in relationship to its own members, and a restrictive one in relationship to others, are essential general requirements of what became the mosque. Moreover, the internal Muslim purpose was not only, perhaps not even primarily, religious but included all the activities that made the community function.

The Traditions and the early stories are also quite unclear as to whether these requirements found expression in a building. The textual information is rather confusing on the subject and demands an eventual systematic investigation. For the time being, the following scheme may be proposed. Most of the towns and villages around Madinah, and Madinah itself, seem to have had a place known as a masjid that was used by the Prophet when he visited these settlements. Some became celebrated because an important event took place there, such as the change of the direction of prayer from Jerusalem to Mekkah that occurred at the small village of Qoba. Some seem even to have had a partially commemorative function; thus a masjid seems to have been built at the place where a certain Abu Basir had been buried, or conceivably the man was buried near a masjid. What is troubling about all these masjids is that no information exists about their shape or, in many cases, about the exact time of their construction. Some were in all probability older holy places of pagan Arabia taken over by the new faith; others may have been simple enclosures or houses without identifiable or identified form.

Two exceptions can be made, both of which are specifically tied to the Prophet alone. The first is his private house in Madinah (fig. 22). However much the story of that house has been transformed by later hagiography, it seems clear that it was meant to be simply a private dwelling with a large area for the numerous public functions of the spiritual and political leader of the new community. Its major feature was a large courtyard (probably about fifty meters at the side) with two shaded areas. One, toward the south, consisted of two rows of palm trunks with a thatched roof; although it served to indicate the direction of prayer in all probability its original function—like that of a smaller row of palm trunks on the north side—was that of a zulah, or a "shaded place." On the east side were the rooms of the Prophet's wives which opened directly into the court; in one of them the Prophet was buried. This court-
yard became, for practical purposes, the place in which almost all the official activities of early Islam took place. In the collective memory of the culture, therefore, it became not merely a sanctuary but the second holiest masjid of Islam. Yet there is little evidence that it was built as a sanctuary or even really considered as such during the Prophet's own time; it is the history of what happened in it that transformed it into one.

One may wonder why the Prophet did not develop a uniquely Muslim sanctuary beyond the mystical Haram in Mekkah. It is possible that, just as in the case of his attitude toward representations, the problem and the need did not arise. Moreover, religious buildings were too closely associated with priesthood, a clergy that Muhammad and early Islam strove to avoid. Whatever the Prophet may or may not have tried to do, the events associated with his house made the latter into a holy place. More important, in contrast to what is known of sanctuaries or houses elsewhere in Arabia, we are provided with a form, or at least an embryonic formal arrangement, in that a large open space has two covered areas at two opposite ends. The impulses for the forms were purely practical and we have no information about an aesthetic reaction to the building.*

The house of the Prophet was not the only legacy from early Islamic times to the later history of Muslim religious building. We also know that on certain formal occasions, especially feast days, the Prophet used to lead his community outside the city itself to a musalla, where he performed the necessary prayers and ceremonies. "Musalla" simply means "a place for prayer," and it appears to have been a large open space totally devoid of con-

* A curious story may serve to illustrate an aspect of medieval Muslim historiography about the mosque of Madinah and the difficulties of dealing with it. According to the tenth-century geographer Ibn Rustah, one Uhmam ibn Mus'ud spat in the qiblah, the covered part of the court. It made him so sorry that his wife inquired about the reason for his unhappiness. He answered, "I spat in the qiblah while praying. But I did then go back there to wash it, then I made a paste made of saffron and covered it with it." The geographer's comment is: "It is thus this particular Uhmam who was the first one to cover the qiblah with perfume." While acquiring interesting information about one kind of beautification in the mosque, we cannot determine whether it goes back to the Prophet's time or whether the story was invented in order to make a later practice not so much canonical as ancient. The very nature of the story, its incidental and accidental character personalized through some otherwise little known individual, illustrates the point that, in the Muslim view of Islam and of its growth, there was no preconceived, theoretical notion of a holy place but an accretion of unique and at times trivial events that became accepted. It is as though the culture were psychologically reluctant to interpret abstractly the physical reality of its Muslim life.


contructions, although one can suppose that it had some kind of boundaries. Musallas still exist today, and a fair number are known from more ancient times all over the Muslim world. In the absence of a comprehensive study of these buildings, we can only conclude that, at the very beginning of Islam, the most uniquely religious ceremonies took place outside of the city and that no architectural or symbolic form appears to be associated with musallas. The following, then, appears to be the information available before the Muslim conquest. A very generalized notion existed of a masjid as a place where God is worshipped; the masjid was only identified as specifically Muslim when the term was in grammatical construct with another, as in the masjid al-haram of Mekkah; a ceremony of private and collective prayer was established which, among other things, separated Muslims from non-Muslims by requiring the proclamation of the Profession of Faith; private prayer was associated not with locale but with direction, the qiblah; and collective prayer was associated with a formal call, with an imam speaking from a minbar, with ablutions, with a proclamation of allegiance, with an obligation to attend on the part of the whole community both as a symbolic gesture and because pertinent affairs were discussed and decided upon. Finally, even though it was initially only his private house, the Prophet's dwelling in Madinah became the place in which occurred most of the events that determined the liturgical and political decisions of Islam; a sort of sacralization of this house into the first masjid took place in the collective memory of the followers of the faith; the form of the house can be reconstructed, but no formal definition of the musalla can be given. All these features are very practical and concrete, none of them suggesting either a theoretical notion of a holy place or an aesthetic impulse for any part of the ceremonies of early Islam or for their implements.

Our problem is to determine how this rather amorphous, or at best incomplete, set of requirements with so few physically identifiable features was transformed into a kind of building that occurs in all lands with a Muslim population. As the bibliographical appendix to this chapter introduces most of the pertinent monuments and the most important studies dealing with them, I shall begin with two acknowledged masterpieces of early Islamic architecture, the mosques of Damascus and Cordoba. By their very existence and
part of the walls were marble panels, and the upper part, the soffits and spandrels of the arches, and most of the court façade were covered with the mosaics mentioned in the previous chapter (figs. 13, 14). A curious octagonal building on top of columns is found in the northwestern corner of the courtyard. According to the Tradition, it was the treasury of the first mosque, the place where the Community’s funds were kept, actually or symbolically protected by all the faithful. While the mosque’s dimensions and almost all its elements of construction have been taken from earlier buildings, no completed part of Roman or Christian architecture has remained and, in spite of numerous repairs over the years, what is visible is, in all features but ceilings, the Umayyad building.

The mosque of Cordoba has had a far more complicated history. As it stands today, and disregarding numerous Christian additions, it is a large rectangle, 175 by 128 meters, whose last Muslim construction is dated in 987–88 (fig. 26). On the outside its buttressed walls are pierced by nineteen doors—seven on the west side, two on the north, nine on the east, and one, now blocked, on the south. In their present state all these gates have been restored, but the basic scheme of their decoration, a horseshoe arch set in a square, harks back to a manner that already appears in the 5th Stephen gate of 855–56 on the western side (fig. 29). Near one of the northern gates stands a square minaret. The interior includes a courtyard, 120 by 58 meters, which was probably surrounded on three sides by porticoes, at least after 958, and which is planted with orange trees. Although the trees are obviously modern, there is evidence that a garden-like effect was achieved through trees or water channels already in Muslim times. The southern side of the court opens on a large hall consisting of nineteen naves (figs. 28, 31). These naves are remarkable, first of all, for the variety of their widths. From west to east there are one of 5.35 meters, four of 6.86, one of 7.85, four of 6.26, two of 5.35, and seven of 6.86. The fifth nave ends in a curious room (figs. 30, 32), preceded by three domed units that are heavily decorated with carved marble and mosaics almost exclusively of geometric and vegetal ornamentation, except for some inscriptions. This area is separated from the rest of the mosque by a barrier. The room is identified by an inscription as the mihrab, and the barrier outlines a maqsura, a special enclosure reserved for a prince. Nine bays northward from the maqsura another cu-
pola is found, while the rest of the mosque was covered with a flat wooden roof. The interior supports of the naves consist of 514 columns, all topped by a unique system of two-tiered arches, and thirty-four piers arranged in two rows of seventeen each, one of simple piers, the other of articulated ones. Ten segments of walls run north-south about two-thirds of the way across the covered hall. The variety of the building's constituent elements and the asymmetry of their arrangement, make its internal arrangement unusual, although one would hardly guess it by looking at it from the outside (fig. 28).

Both mosques are a far cry from the house of the Prophet in Madinah, and our purpose is to explain what happened and why. Both buildings are parallelograms of considerable size, and almost all city mosques known from the first three centuries of Islam are of the same shape; two mosques in Samarra (figs. 33, 36) are even larger than the Cordoba one, the largest one being 240 by 156 meters and surrounded by an empty area which makes it almost a square, 350 by 362 meters. It is easy to explain why mosques developed on such a scale when we recall that the masjid was supposed to contain the whole Muslim population of a given city. In the largest cities, like Bagdad and Cairo, several such large mosques are found. While each city had at least one huge mosque, these were not always conveniently located for every collective prayer. Thus, from the very beginning in the early Muslim cities of Kufah and Basrah in Iraq and later elsewhere as well, we hear of smaller, quarter or tribal, mosques, about whose shape almost nothing is known. A terminological distinction was eventually made between a masjid and a masjid al-jami', the mosque of the collectivity, sometimes called a cathedral-mosque or Friday mosque. Only the latter was directly supervised and paid for by the central Muslim authority, even when local governors had achieved considerable political independence. For regardless of political vagaries and misunderstandings, the masjid al-jami' was the place where allegiance was sworn to the successor of the Prophet and not merely to a local governor.

The internal arrangement of our two mosques is somewhat more difficult to define. Both have an open and a covered part. All other early Islamic large mosques—except the Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem (fig. 37), which has certain peculiarities due to its location in a unique setting—share this feature, but not in the same fashion. In most instances there were no doors, at best perhaps curtains, between the supports separating open and covered areas. But in some mosques a composed façade facing the open area developed, while in others there was no distinction between the supports facing the court and the internal supports. The majority of Iraqi, Egyptian, and western Islamic mosques were of the latter type. It is perhaps incorrect to talk there of a courtyard surrounded by a portico on three sides and adjoining a covered hall on the fourth. For initially at least the Muslim builders did not create a composition consisting of two parts, a hall and a porticoed court, but a single, unique space part of which was covered. In fact, early texts rarely refer to the open part of a mosque as a salih or court; in Kufah (fig. 35) the covered part was called a zullah or shaded area, just as in the Prophet's house in Madinah. It is true, of course, that in time mosque compositions increased in complexity and a sense of court façade appeared, often, as in the example of Kairouan (fig. 41), after a reconstruction. The major exception seems to be the mosque of Damascus, whose sturdyl harmonious arrangement, possibly inspired by Byzantine palace façades, does indeed give the impression of a self-contained rectangular porticoed court. The example of Damascus was followed in a number of mosques that were directly influenced by it, for example in Aleppo. From our viewpoint of court and hall or open and covered parts of the same space, it was an exception that became crystallized because of the importance of the Syrian capital.

A clear contrast between the mosques of Cordoba and Damascus occurs in the covered part of the building. The Syrian building is composed in a balanced and organized fashion whereas the Spanish one is peculiarly asymmetrical. The Cordoba mosque, as it appeared at the end of the tenth century, was the result of a historical process which had begun in 784. As the diagram illustrates, a first mosque was built with eleven naves of twelve bays each (fig. 27). This mosque was lengthened twice, in 833–48 and 965–66, creating in this fashion the symmetrical western two-thirds of the present building. In 987–88 a whole additional third was added to the east. All the additions tended to follow the original arrangements of arches and columns of the 784 building, thus maintaining for the whole mosque a striking stylistic unity. Enlargements of this sort
were fairly common in mosque architecture and can be described in some detail in the mosques of Amr and al-Azhar in Egypt, in Kufah, Basrah, and Baghdad, in Madinah, and in Nayin in Iran. The most remarkable instance is that of the Aqṣa mosque in Jerusalem (fig. 37), for which textual and literary sources document additions and eventually also a contraction. In all instances the justification for the modifications is the same: a change in the size of the city's population.

Two conclusions, it seems to me, emerge: first, that the main mosque of a city remained physically attuned to the culture's requirement of a single space for the whole community; and second, that there was no conception of the building as a physical, complete entity. The compositional imbalance of Cordoba did not seem to be a problem. It may thus be suggested that as a type the mosque of early Islamic times tended to be defined in terms of certain social needs and not as a more or less perfect or successful reflection of an ideal composition. This point may find further confirmation in the fact that the mosque did not develop an organized façade or even elaborate gates toward the outside until much later. The number and location of gates were regulated by the city around the mosque, not by an architectural or aesthetic conception of the nature of the building. An exception such as that of Damascus only confirms the rule, for its gateways belonged to the earlier Roman building and it was the overwhelming presence of the classical scheme that prevented in Damascus internal changes of the magnitude of Cordoba's.

To be able to expand or contract, the mosque had to have a flexible and additive system of construction. The early Muslim hypostyle system can be defined as one in which the main internal support consisted of a single element that could be multiplied at will in any needed direction. Two supports were available. In the first Iraqi mosques, in Syria, and in all Muslim regions west of Syria, it was the ancient unit of the column with its base, shaft, and capital. In many instances, for example in Damascus or Jerusalem, these columns were taken from Roman or Christian buildings or ruins. In the very large buildings like some of the Cairene mosques, Kairouan, or Cordoba, new columns were added to the reused ones. In most cases the former imitated the latter in all but the smallest details, and one of the traditional exercises of early Muslim archaeology has been the separation of one from the other. For our purposes here the differences are not pertinent. The other support was the pier, usually of brick. It occurs in Iran, as in Nayin or Damghan where it imitates a column, but its most characteristic form occurs in the great Samarra mosques, in Raqqah, and in the Ibn Tulin mosque in Egypt built under the influence of Iraq (fig. 42). Its shape is most commonly that of a rectangle with engaged colonnettes. In certain cases, as in the Abu Dulaf mosque in Samarra, the piers do not have engaged elements and are so long that they appear almost like segments of walls (fig. 36). Although it is easy enough to explain how and why the brick pier developed in Iraq and Iran with their more limited columnar tradition, it is interesting to note that these piers do not appear in the earliest known buildings and that Sassanian architecture there did not utilize them as fully and as efficiently as early Islam. The brick pier, whose history became so brilliant in later Islamic architecture, seems to have developed primarily because of its usefulness in the mosque and to have acquired there its later versatility. But the original model for the single support seems to have been the column. Texts are fairly clear on this score, even in Iraq, where the first mosque in Kufah utilized columns borrowed from older Christian churches.

To define the hypostyle system as it appeared in early mosques simply as a flexible and easily adaptable way of covering large spaces through the multiplicity of single, repetitive supports would not, however, do complete justice or exhaust all of its characteristics. In its simplest fashion it existed in the earliest Iraqi mosques, in most of the later ones in Iraq, and in most Egyptian buildings. But in Cordoba, Damascus, or the Aqṣa mosque in Jerusalem, something else is involved other than a building consisting of single more or less equal supports over its whole area. In all three examples the unit around which the covered part of the building was arranged was the nave, that is, a succession of supports rather than a single one. In Cordoba and Jerusalem it is clearly by the addition and subtraction of naves, not single supports, that the building grew. In all these buildings the arrangement of naves provided the direction of the form. Thus the multiple directions of the purer hypostyle of early Iraqi mosques are avoided, although the fact that none of the latter has been preserved in its original shape makes a final judgment dangerous. Then in a number of rather peculiar
smaller buildings like a mosque at Balkh (fig. 39) and one near Cairo, the unit of composition seems to have been the square bay, as it would be in later Islamic architecture, especially in Iran and Turkey. We can thus modify our statement about the hypostyle by suggesting that, while the principle of the single, flexible support is consistently present in almost all early mosques, it is not always operative only as a single support but may work at times as a unit of several such supports or even of the space between such supports. I shall propose an explanation for this phenomenon later in this chapter and return to it in more general terms in conclusion, but in the meantime a linguistic parallel may be proposed. It can be imagined that the architectural morpheme of the mosque—that is, the smallest meaningful unit of the building—is at times a single phoneme—a single unit of construction—and at other times either a set of such single phonemes or even a sort of phonemic absence, like the visual or auditory interval between words or sentences.

How did the hypostyle come about in early Islam? There is no point in reviving one older theory that saw in the mosque the reappearance of an alleged traditional Near Eastern hypostyle known in ancient Egyptian or Achaemenid architecture. The latter was gone by the fourth century n.c. and there are no archaeological or cultural reasons to justify a sudden renaissance. A second source could have been the Roman forum, which utilized a number of comparable forms for the similar purpose of gathering large crowds. Although we cannot be certain that imperial fora were still in use in Christian times, the immense number of Roman ruins from the Euphrates westward could easily have served as models. The main difficulty here is that Iraq, the main area where the hypostyle mosque first developed, is one area where the Roman model is least likely.

A third explanation, which seems at first glance far more plausible and has been often propounded in recent years, is that the house of the Prophet with its accidental groups of palm trunks covered with straw at the southern and northern ends of a large open space (fig. 22) can be considered as the model for later mosques; it would have been the first hypostyle building in the tradition enlarged in Iraq and then adapted to whatever techniques of construction were available elsewhere in the conquered areas. Two major facts favor this particular interpretation. First, since the first mosques were built in the newly created Arab cities of Iraq and since these mosques more than any of the later ones were used for the numerous functions of the Madinah one in the Prophet's time, the latter was the only definite model which was available. Second, at that time, in the thirties and forties of the seventh century, the Muslim contact with other architectural traditions was still very limited; yet our first clearly composed hypostyle mosque is the 670 reconstruction of the Kufah mosque (fig. 35). This explanation supposes that by the time of the caliph 'Umar (634–64) the Muslims not only had developed the notion of a masjid as the peculiarly unique building restricted in its use to the members of the Muslim community but had translated the house of the Prophet into an abstract architectural reality, into an idealized type that could be translated into a variety of forms. No evidence for this kind of theoretical idealization is known to me, and altogether it seems unlikely in these first decades. I would therefore prefer to propose a fourth interpretation for the formation of the hypostyle, one that actually incorporates in part the notion of a Medinese impact.

In Iraq, with its purely Muslim new cities, the essential problem was to keep some sort of order and sense of community in the large, recently settled Arabian population. A focal point was required, and this is why the caliph 'Umar ordered the construction of a masjid al-jama'ah, a mosque for the Muslim community. The local architectural tradition had no way of providing the building's central need, a large space, except through expensive and cumbersome means like the large Sassanian vaults that were anything but flexible. What happened there, then, was the spontaneous local invention of an easily erected large space with shade provided by a flat or gabled roof on reused columns. In the very first mosques there were no outer walls, only a ditch; many openings were used to communicate with the outside in all directions, and there was no clear or formal place for the imam. These constructions were simple sheds, not buildings with a formal prototype or a holy meaning. For instance, one of the early mosques was paved only after people complained of the dust raised by the shuffling of feet during prayers. Some sort of organized form was given to these buildings only through a series of reconstructions and consolidations that took place between 640 and 670. Most of these are well documented, and they always had a practical, local purpose. By 670 the house of
the Prophet in Madinah had already been enlarged twice and had begun to acquire a holy character as administrative and other functions were either moved to other buildings or removed from Madinah altogether. Thus the sanctification of the house of the Prophet and the transformation of the early Islamic mosques from disorganized sheds into organized formal compositions using the elements introduced haphazardly at the beginning were approximately contemporary occurrences. They preceded the major constructions of mosques elsewhere in the Muslim world. There, in a few instances, Christian or other religious buildings had been taken over, or, as the Western pilgrim Arculfus said of Jerusalem, a “rudely built” house of prayer was built over remains of ruins. By the time of the great imperial constructions of the eighth century, a formal hypostyle type had been established in the new cities of Iraq—and, it should be added, in Fustat, with a number of peculiar developments of its own—and the house of the Prophet had acquired its holiness as the first masjid. Thus two somewhat accidental, historically definable events based on purely Muslim needs would have led to the creation of the type which, from that moment until the fourteenth century (and in some places even later) became the most characteristic architectural form of Islam. It would then have to be considered also as a Muslim formal invention that is not genetically and historically related to earlier comparable forms.

Within this large hypostyle space, whose limits were determined by the community and whose module was a single support, a nave, or a bay, several features appear that deserve particular mention. In a general sense they may be called symbols or signs; they are architecturally definable entities that acquired a sufficient differentiation from the rest of the hypostyle building to indicate that a special meaning can be attached to them. Most of them are also typologically definable in the sense that they tend to occur in most if not all mosques, and that each is comparable to any other one regardless of its spatial or temporal location. I should like to identify five such features and discuss them briefly, but it must be recalled that the minbar or formal pulpit for the imam already existed in the Prophet’s own time.

The first is the minaret. Its official purpose is that of calling the faithful to prayer, and its shape is that of a high tower either immediately attached to the mosque—as in Damascus, Kairouan (fig.

44) and Cordoba, or standing nearby as in Samarra (fig. 43), Fustat, and most early Iranian examples. In all early Islamic mosques except Damascus there was only one minaret by the building. Its shape varies. Early minarets from Syria westward are square (fig. 44), for their physical shape derives directly from the characteristic square towers of Christian churches, themselves issued from Roman and Hellenistic constructions. A few instances of square minarets are also known in Iraq and Iran, for instance in Damghan, or in the recently excavated ninth-century mosque at Giraf, indicating that the Syrian-created type extended beyond the area of its origins. In Iraq, most particularly in Samarra, there was formed a second, spiral type of minaret (fig. 43), for which one additional example occurs in the mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo. The origin of the spiral minaret is not to be sought in the ancient ziggurats of Mesopotamia, but in a certain kind of spiral tower known in Sassanian Iran for hitherto undetermined purposes. There are no instances known so far in early Islamic times of the cylindrical minarets that developed in Iran from the eleventh century on, although it is likely that they existed. Composite minarets are certainly a much later development. It is thus fairly simple to conclude that a certain function appeared fairly early in Islamic mosques and that the forms used for it were taken from older architectural vocabularies and therefore varied from area to area. But during the first centuries of Islam the formal predominance of the Syrian square minaret over the whole Muslim world is clear.

The main problem of the minaret is when and why this particular function acquired the form of a tower. For the function of calling to prayer is almost as old as the establishment of Muhammad in Madinah and used to be carried out from the roof of his house. It did not then demand an architectural shape. More curious is that none of the early mosques in the purely Muslim cities of Iraq were provided with a structure for the call to prayer. Matters are less clear in Fustat, but the latest discussion of the pertinent texts suggests that there was no structure there either. As far as existing evidence seems to indicate, the first monuments to have been used for the call to prayer were the corner towers of the Roman temenos in Damascus when the area was transformed into a mosque. It was thus in an older city that a pre-existing architectural form, incidentally incorporated in a new mosque some seventy years after the
appearance of Islam, was first utilized for a characteristic Muslim liturgical need that had existed from the very beginning. The most likely explanation for what appears to be a historical oddity lies in the fact that Damascus was at the time primarily a Christian city. Inasmuch as we know that, at the beginning at least, the Muslim population was not concentrated in a single quarter but spread wherever there were houses abandoned by their former owners, the minaret could not have easily fulfilled its technical purpose of calling the faithful to prayer, especially over the noise of a city. I would prefer to interpret it as a symbolic expression of the presence of Islam directed primarily to the non-Muslims in the city. One may also wonder whether the peculiar proliferation of handsomely composed minarets in the later architecture of such towns as Isfahan, Istanbul, or Cairo does not indicate the persistent importance of the minaret as a symbol of social, imperial, or personal prestige or as a purely aesthetic device rather than as the expression of a simple ritual function. The latter, of course, was always present after the beginning of the eighth century, but in practice it was often carried out, as in the beginning, from the rooftops of mosques. Archaic ways of calling to prayer remained in many parts of the Muslim world; in Iran they found a unique architectural feature, the small ciborium known as a goldasteh that often occurs together with handsome minarets. There is therefore a history of the architectural forms given to the call of prayer as well as of the ceremonies attached to it. This history is still to be worked out.

Next to the minaret, the most important new feature in the mosque was the mihrab (figs. 45, 46). In common usage it is a niche, usually concave and generally heavily decorated, found on the wall of the mosque directed toward Mekkah. In most early mosques there was only one mihrab, and one cannot be sure, for instance, that the three medieval ones from Damascus are as early as the 705–10 mosque. Over the first centuries of Islam the mihrab grew enormously in importance. In Cordoba it is actually a whole room that appears as an open door from the interior of the mosque itself. In Kairouan or Samarra it acquired considerable size and, as early as in the Umayyad reconstruction of the mosque of Madina, a cupola appeared in front of it. The cupola, although common, is not consistent, whereas the mihrab became a necessary "sign" in the mosque and obviously an important one. The most common ex-

planation for the mihrab is that it indicates the direction toward which one must turn to pray. This explanation is not acceptable for three reasons. One is again the historical argument that there was no mihrab in any of the early mosques; the second—which will be discussed in some detail later on—is that the whole mosque was in fact oriented toward the qiblah; and the third is that the mihrab is invisible from most of a mosque: its size is obviously not commensurate to its presumed function.

The word mihrab itself has a complex pre-Islamic and folk history, but there is general agreement that it indicated an honorific place in a palace, at times even the whole palace. As a result it has been suggested by several scholars that the mihrab was a royal feature introduced to indicate in the mosque the position of the ruling prince or his representative. While sufficient textual evidence remains to show that the mihrab was at times used by princes, especially under the Umayyads, a major argument against this explanation is that the mihrab became an automatic feature of all mosques, not only of the main, official ones. There is a suggestion therefore that it had a liturgical or symbolic sense in the faith itself. The nature of this sense may be deduced from the time of the first appearance of a concave mihrab in the Umayyad mosque in Madina (fig. 34). It served there to honor the place where, in his original house, the Prophet used to stand when leading prayers or preaching. It might then be proposed that the mihrab grew to commemorate the presence of the Prophet as the first imam, inasmuch as an early coin discussed in the previous chapter indicates there was more than one such attempt. This can explain not only the decoration it so often acquired, but also its shape in a place like Cordoba (fig. 46) where it appears as a sort of door with the possible mystical connotation of the way in which divine grace comes to the faithful. Because of a Koranic passage (24.35–36) it often has a lamp in the middle and its shape or shapes were often copied on tombstones or on prayer rugs. The mihrab is the first and perhaps only symbolic form that can be explained almost entirely through religious, indeed even pietistic, reasons.

The form itself varied from place to place within the general range of the niche. Its origins are fairly clear. One can propose a Jewish prototype, since old synagogues were provided with a holy niche in the back and axis of the building. But a more general ex-
planation seems to me preferable, for the concave niche or the simple arch on two columns were one of the most ubiquitous settings for an honored image throughout the classical world. Early Islam itself used the theme on some of its coins (fig. 15). A common motif of classical art with honorific connotations was taken over by Islam for these very purposes but acquired a uniqueness of its own because of the unique person and event it was made to celebrate. In a way for which parallels exist in Christian art as well, a curious transformation of a general visual term into a highly specific one occurred.

The third and fourth new features that appeared in Damascus and Cordoba are of lesser importance and did not become part of the mosque type. One is the maqsura (fig. 32), the enclosed space reserved for the prince, near the mihrab. Whether it developed because a number of early caliphs feared assassination or whether it was another form of honor bestowed on the prince as imam, it occurred only in very large mosques in capital cities. It has been preserved in Kairouan as a magnificent wooden partition and in Cordoba as a built-up unit occupying three bays in front of the mihrab. The importance of the maqsura is greater for the study of ornamental forms than for an understanding of the mosque.

The other less common feature is the domed unit in the court. Preserved in Damascus, it is generally interpreted as the hajj al-din, or treasure house, of the early Muslim community. Such treasures are known to have existed in the earliest Iraqi mosques, and a well-known story relates that the one in Kufah was robbed by a thief who dug under the wall of the mosque. The presence of a treasure in Damascus is more unusual, since by then the community no longer used and protected its own wealth as it had done during the first decades of its life. But one could imagine that the rather awkward Damascus building—possibly inspired by antique thabi—was a symbolic reminder of early Islamic times. We do not know of treasures in later mosques either archaeologically or textually, and yet in the descriptions of a number of mosques, such as Ibn Tulun's in Cairo, we read of the existence of a domed building in the open area. These buildings have disappeared or have been replaced by fountains in the case of the Ibn Tulun building, and their original purpose or meaning is quite unclear. Were they purely ornamental, perhaps treasures which had lost their meaning? Or did they have a meaning which escapes us?

Other puzzles exist as well. For instance, there is no early information about the place for ablutions in the mosque. It seems fairly certain that ritual cleansing did not take place within the precinct of the mosque until considerably later, and it is only then that a monumental form was given to a patently early liturgical requirement. In the ninth-century mosque at Siraf, excavations have shown that ablutions took place outside and along the building. In Samarra and in the Ibn Tulun mosque the buildings were surrounded on some or all sides by large, walled open areas known as ziyadahs or additions, whose function is not known.

Whatever explanation may eventually be given to these problematic features of some early mosques, the minaret and the mihrab joined the earlier minbar as consistent signs with a variety of functional, symbolic, or aesthetic meanings. In all three instances, however, the functional predominates as one tries to understand the form's genesis. The problem becomes more complicated when one turns to the last important formal feature of a mosque's arrangement.

In the mosque of Damascus the three naves that are parallel to the back or qiblah wall are cut in the center by a single nave, perpendicular to the wall (fig. 25). This has been called an axial nave, and in a variety of ways it occurs in a fairly large number of early mosques. Thus in the Aqsa mosque (fig. 37), in Madinah (fig. 34), and in Cordoba (fig. 26) one nave is wider than the rest, while the Damascus pattern is repeated in Aleppo and in Qasr al-Hayr East. In the mosque of Abu Dulaf in Samarra (fig. 36) and in the mosque of Kairouan (fig. 40), in addition to the axial nave, the nave nearest the qiblah wall is separated from the rest by being wider, and a cupola occurs at the point where it and the axial nave intersect. In the Tunisian sanctuary a number of later reconstructions accentuated these two naves by means of domes at the beginning of the axial nave, at the intersection, and at the two corners. This arrangement became formalized in some of the tenth- and early-eleventh-century mosques of Cairo (fig. 47). Formally the development has been called T-shaped and, out of the traditional hypostyle, there emerged a sub-branch called the T-plan hypostyle.
One explanation has seen the source of this development in the art of the palace. It has been noted that the axial nave, the mihrab, the minbar, and, when it occurred, the maqsura, form a single unit on the axis of the mosque. Taken separately each of these features has a formal and a ceremonial parallel in the architecture of the palace, as will be seen in our next chapter. Taken together they recall a throne room with an aisle for attendants and a place for the throne in a niche preceded by a dome. Existing texts do indicate that, on some occasions, royal guards lined up on the axial nave while the prince performed his function as imam. Yet this explanation does not account for the formal development as a whole. Most of the adduced texts refer to unique, special occasions, such as the inauguration of the mosque of Madinah. And, more important, the internal organization of an axial nave occurred far more frequently than royal ceremonies would justify and at the same time is not found in a number of clearly royal mosques.

An alternate explanation combines formal and religious considerations. However convenient the hypostyle may have been, it was a diffuse system that lacked architectural focus and direction. Yet the sense of a direction is essential to the mosque, since one of the canonical obligations of prayer was that of facing the qiblah. In the earliest buildings, the political and social meeting-hall aspect of the mosque predominated—for which the hypostyle is eminently suitable—and the direction was indicated by the position or size of the covered areas. As the political function of the mosque dwindled, the purely religious one increased, as appears in the rapid growth of the mihrab in size and decoration. The qiblah wall acquired an almost mystical character, and one can explain the axial nave and the T-plan as attempts to emphasize this increasingly cultic and pietistic use of the mosque. But something else may have been involved as well. The axial nave appears first in the great constructions of Walid I, and its best preserved example is in Damascus. Although known in Iraq, the T-plan and most later axial developments occurred in the Muslim lands bordering on the Mediterranean. It could be suggested then that, as the hypostyle idea created in Iraq utilized the vocabulary and composition of classical architecture and its heirs, the simplicity of the idea could not easily be transferred to existing forms. Builders and users could no longer—if they ever did since the Parthenon—consider the single support as the only unit of composition. More complicated arrangements were demanded and adapted to the religious functions of the mosque. This structural development is strikingly similar to that of Christian architecture as it evolved the basilical hall out of classical Roman forms.

Thus at a certain moment and especially in the Mediterranean the composition of the hypostyle mosque acquired a number of formal rather than purely utilitarian aspects. One of these was the search for an axis, for a sort of backbone or skeleton around which the form itself could develop. It is in Fatimid architecture, first in Tunisia and then in Egypt, that one can observe the standardization of the several varieties of the hypostyle tradition, and it is largely in the later architecture of North Africa that the T-plan was destined to develop most fully. It is then perhaps not accidental that exterior façades appeared in mosques also in the Mediterranean architecture of the Fatimids during the tenth century (fig. 47), thereby identifying the century and the area as the time and place of the “classical” culmination of early Islamic mosque architecture.

To sum up on the architecture of the mosque, the most original Muslim creation is that of the hypostyle mosque, best suited to the purposes of the new faith and society. In a general way the manner in which the type was created can be reconstructed. As there was no preconceived notion of the building’s physical nature, the need for a certain kind of space was first met; then this space, partly open and partly covered, was enclosed by walls; finally a series of symbolic “signs” were put in it. Some were religious and ubiquitous, like the mihrab. Others were administrative, like the minbar, or princely, like the maqsura. Some were primarily formal, like the T-plan or the axial nave. Some even altered their meaning over the centuries, like the minaret. Within the standard type, these features are variables, just as the nature of the multiplied unit—single support, bay, or nave—can be a variable. Each of these variables depended on its own set of circumstances: the importance of the mosque’s locality for the minbar or the maqsura, the region in which the mosque is found for certain features of the plan. There is nothing strange or unusual about an architectural form developing as a type with a set of variables, yet there are peculiarities about the formation of the mosque. One is that the type was formed in spite of the absence of a clergy, a liturgy, and a preconception of
the building's physical nature. The Muslim social entity in fact devised its own form. In the early eighth century the systematic building activities of the Umayyads, particularly al-Walid I, helped to standardize certain features, especially the symbolic signs like the minaret or the mihrab. But by then the form of the type had already been created. Its sources were primarily functional, with the need for flexible space predominating; but one other need was important in the transformation of a space into a building—that of having a building which was distinguishable from other religious buildings or from buildings identifiable with other cultural entities, especially Christianity. Here, however, occurs the second peculiarity of the history of the early mosque. The constituent units of buildings like the mosques of Damascus or of Cordoba appear to be the same as those of churches or of other pre-Islamic buildings. What has changed is, first, the sequence of these units—towers, naves, columns, niches—so that three naves parallel to each other, as in Damascus (fig. 23), are no longer a church because they are of the same dimensions and run perpendicular to the orientation of the building. Another change is that the beholder understands these units in a Muslim context. The shape of the tower or niche was not modified to the point where they could no longer be a church tower or an honorific niche in a Roman ensemble. But the context in which they were put by early Islam automatically associated a tall tower or a niche with a building of the new faith and in this way discarded other meanings and associations from these forms. These two changes illustrate principles of architectural transformation valid at other times as well. For instance, one could argue that there is attached to most forms a "vectorial" quality or a certain direction, and that a change in direction, or in position within other forms, can alter the form's significance without altering the form itself. Then also, the attitude of the beholder affects the meaning of certain forms and thus compels the ways in which they develop.

One last conclusion to emphasize is that, as the decades went by and as caliphal power became imperial and remote, the mosque became less an instrument of policy (except symbolically) and more a place for religious practices and for such activities, teaching for instance, as were part of the "ethical" life of the Muslims. There occurred a sort of "interiorization" of the mosque, as though it were a world independent of its surroundings, reserved and restricted to the members of the community. An interesting aspect of this closed entity is the limited number of its own symbols. Only the mihrab appears as a religious symbol of some significance, but, however heavily decorated it may have been, never in the history of early Islam does it appear as the focal point of a mosque's plan, in the way that the altar, the iconostasis, or even certain icons and relics became the focal points of a church's structure. Islam avoided visually perceptible symbols in its early religious architecture, just as it felt reluctant toward images. This may have been once again to avoid entrapment in Christian practices. Or perhaps wider causes may be suggested. It may be proposed that nonhypostatic religious systems—that is, those that emphasize a total monism and reject the possibility of a sharing of divine grace—like Judaism or extreme Christian Protestant sects, reject or avoid even an architectural symbolism of their faith. Only much later, with the growth of a more pantheistic Sufism, of shi'ism, and of cults of saints did Islam, especially in Iran, create a variety of architectural forms to which a religious symbolism and a mystical interpretation can be given.

While the hypostyle mosque with its variants and its implications became the dominant form of early Islamic religious architecture, others occurred as well, and other religious or quasi-religious functions found monumental expression. Inasmuch as some of these forms and functions acquired prominence in later centuries or illustrate interesting if minor aspects of the formation of Islamic art, there is some point in mentioning briefly a few of them.

Next to the large city mosque there existed from the very beginning smaller quarter mosques or typologically abnormal ones. An Umayyad mosque near Qasr al-Hallabat in Transjordan, can be interpreted simply as a miniscule hypostyle. A group that appears to have existed from Spain to Central Asia was divided into bays, usually nine of them (fig. 39). In each instance some local reason probably explained the size or type. Some regions stand out as having developed aberrant types, particularly in Iran. At Nizira a mosque seems to have been based on a single eyvan, a large vaulted unit opening on an open space (fig. 49). In Central Asia the Hazarah mosque consisted of a central dome surrounded by an ambulatory (fig. 50). A number of mosques may have been simply pre-Islamic Persian fire-temples consisting of a single square room taken over
as mosques, or may have reproduced other Sassanian religious buildings. In Syria a number of churches were converted into mosques and, even though the architectural impact of such conversions seems to have been limited, a regional variant existed there as well.

More important is the appearance of new, particularly Islamic functions that acquired a monumental form. As early as the ninth century there were in Iran specifically Islamic schools or madrasahs, although none is known archaeologically. Commemorative buildings, especially mausoleums to holy men, are less uniquely Islamic; but in Egypt, Iraq, and northeastern Iran (figs. 128ff.), the cults of descendants of Ali and of spiritual leaders grew in the tenth century and at times was provided with the monumental form of a centrally planned domed building, whose development cannot be considered architecturally significant before the tenth century. The case of the ribat was brought up earlier. An institution known on almost all the frontiers of Islam, especially in Central Asia, Cilicia, and North Africa, it was dedicated to the monastic and missionary fighters for the faith. A number of early ribats have been preserved in Tunisia, the most celebrated one being at Susa (fig. 51). It is a fortified square building with a central courtyard surrounded by a portico and halls arranged on two floors around the court. One of the halls was a mosque and was provided with a minaret. The form of the building relates it to the secular art we shall discuss in our next chapter, but its function is uniquely Islamic. It is a feature of the Muslim frontier, of the peculiarly fascinating world at the edges of the empire where a Muslim elite sought to convert others and mixed with an astounding variety of ethnic and cultural groups. Although we know very little about the formation and history of a Muslim frontier spirit, it shaped much of the mind and the forms of later Islamic culture, and it is perhaps not an accident that original functions first developed there quite early.

Having sought to define and explain the typology and the composition of early Islamic mosques, we must turn to their construction and decoration to discover whether they exhibit characteristics that would identify a Muslim novelty and originality in building techniques or in ornamentation. Since these aspects of early Islamic art have been studied more often, we shall limit ourselves to a rapid survey of their most important features and to a few comments on their significance.

Walls were almost without exception large and massive, rarely pierced or decorated from the outside. They were primarily the means of separating a space reserved for Muslims from the external world, and there was hardly a symbol or sign on the outside that would indicate the nature of the building. Gates or doors began to appear in the western Islamic world in the latter part of the ninth century, but they are rare. In the mosques of Samarra and in the mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, outer walls acquired a crenellation and an organized system of windows and openings that served to alleviate the monotony of a blank wall. Elsewhere a brick decoration of circular units set within squares appeared between the heavy buttresses typical of brick wall constructions since Sumerian times. Altogether it is not much, and not even in Iran can we discern the fascination with an architectonic treatment of the wall which will be so typical of later religious architecture in Islam.

Free supports were the main means of elevation in the mosque. Columns were either removed or copied from older buildings. Except for an occasional gathering of columns in groups of two or three (as in Kairouan or in the Amr mosque in Fustat), the column with its constituent parts was used in traditional, pre-Islamic ways. Even capitals were generally reused from older buildings. The pier, that is, a supporting unit that does not possess the inner structure and divisions of the column and that tends to merge with the superstructure, was also not an Islamic novelty. Its use in Damascus or in Jerusalem is traditionally Mediterranean. But in Iraq or Egypt the Islamic brick pier, with its occasional articulation consisting of corner colonnettes, is a departure from older types of brick piers and presages the tremendous development of that element of construction in later Islamic architecture (fig. 42). Even the peculiarly medieval Islamic confusion or at least ambiguity between wall and pier begins to appear in the huge (4.03 meters across) piers of the Abu Dulaf mosque. Articulation of the pier occurs only in the very simple form of T-shaped, L-shaped, or cross-shaped piers. Here again, in spite of a definite crystallization of types hitherto less clearly identifiable, it is difficult to attribute to the mosque a major novelty in this particular technique of construction. Nor can a mul-
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titude of small details associated with columns, or capitals, moldings, brackets, bases, be identified as peculiarly Islamic. Yet when one contemplates a mosque like that of Qasr al-Hayr East (fig. 52) with its piers, columns, capitals, and decorative friezes all taken from a variety of older monuments, a further point emerges. Not only is there no consistent sense of an “order” in freedoing supports, it is almost as though such an order was purposefully avoided, as though the specific architectural notion of an order was aesthetically meaningless. Even a great composition like that of the Damascus mosque shows a similar disregard for the traditional relationships between structural and ornamental parts in the mosque’s supports.

The vast majority of supports are surmounted by arches; most of these are semicircular, but, as has been often pointed out, the pointed arch that culminates in the mosque of Ibn Tulun appears in a number of early Islamic monuments. The full architectonic properties of the pointed arch were not fully realized except in the comparatively minor aspect of lightening the spandrels on the arch’s sides. Thus most early Islamic arches simply continued earlier practices without significant change. The same appears to be true of vaults, rarely found in mosques at that time except in a few Iranian buildings, and of ceilings and roofs, which were flat or gabled, usually in wood.

The exception occurs in Cordoba, whose two-tiered arches exhibit a variety of shapes, from simply horseshoe to a number of polylabeled modifications of the horseshoe shape (fig. 31). The pointed arch does not serve here to span variable spaces, as it does in Gothic architecture, but in order to lighten the thrusts carried by any one of its components and thus to make it more easily ornamented. As it became lighter it was less effective as a support, and thus a system of crisscrossing polylabeled arches was introduced, in which the arch appears to be broken into segments. The very same kind of virtuosity occurs in the fourteenth-century cupolas of Cordoba (fig. 30). The only earlier example of a major stone dome is found in Kairouan (fig. 54). What makes the Kairouan example remarkable is not its structural novelty but the robustness and clarity of its movement from square to octagonal zone, sixteen-sided zone to ribbed cupola, and the sobriety of its ornament. In Cordoba, on the other hand, a particularly rich ornament does not overshadow the structural novelty of large ribs cutting across the inner surface of the spherical shape and thus subdividing it into a number of smaller sections while maintaining the cupola’s unity. As with the arches, a certain ambiguity exists between structural and ornamental value, but the originality of these domes is obvious.

Although it is possible that there was a foreign, Armenian impact on the arches and vaults of Cordoba, they can equally well be explained as a result of local needs. Spanish Muslim architects had to be concerned with arches, whereas their Syrian counterparts did not feel the same demand. The Spanish lacked the mass of large columns found in Syria, and the small supports of Visigothic Spain were hardly suitable for the huge space of the mosque. Thus means to heighten the building had to be discovered; this search led to the double-tiered system, and the rest may be understood simply as further elaborations on an initial concern for height. The cupolas can also be explained as reflecting the newly acquired playfulness with arches and the feeling that these traditional units could be broken up into small entities. No iconographic meaning as such can be given to the forms of the arches and domes, but one can be suggested for the existence of more elaborate forms in a certain part of the mosque. They are all found around the mihrab (figs. 32, 45) and on the axial nave, serving thus to emphasize the holiest part of the mosque or its royal part. Thus a major structural uniqueness in the arches and ceilings of Cordoba can be interpreted, because of their elaborate and ornamental character, as the result of an internal need of the mosque. Their origins can perhaps be sought in the art of the court, a point to which we shall return in the next chapter. Yet, however one explains these Cordoban peculiarities, two points about them seem essential: they are unique and thus lose somewhat their indicative value to demonstrate major structural changes in the forms of early Islamic mosques; and, even though the original entity, indeed Vitruvian integrity, of the arch or cupola is broken—and thus one is forewarned of the great Muslim achievements in vaults several centuries later—the Cordoban elements are not revolutionary changes of structure but merely advanced modifications deductible from the nature of the form itself.

The techniques of decoration utilized in early Islamic mosques are remarkable first of all for their variety. Mosaics occur in the Umayyad buildings of Syria (figs. 13, 14) and in Cordoba (fig. 30).
In both instances the workers seem to have been brought from Constantinople. Carved and painted woodwork as well as stucco were used to give emphasis to major architectural lines, as in the Aqsa mosque (fig. 53) or in the mosque of Ibn Tulun (fig. 42). At times whole wooden panels were set on walls, as in the Aqsa mosque. In Nayin in western Iran and in Balkh in northeastern Iran, carved stucco covered columns as well as parts of walls. Wood was also commonly used to make and decorate mihrabs, minbars, and maqsuras (fig. 45). Sculpted stone was somewhat rarer but occurred in the cupola of Kairouan and in Cordoba, where superb marble panels have been preserved (fig. 55). Glass, at times probably of different colors, was used in windows, which often had a stone or stucco grillwork of considerable complexity, as we know from Damascus and Cordoba. In Kairouan there has been preserved a unique decoration of ceramic tiles—in this instance imported from Iraq—that were inlaid in the masonry (fig. 49). Possibly rugs and textiles were utilized as well. Curtains were found in a number of places, as we know from texts, but there is no indication as to whether these were merely utilitarian means of separating various parts of the mosque or whether they had a definable aesthetic intent in the manner of contemporary textiles in Byzantine churches.

The significance of this variety of techniques lies primarily in the absence of the technical automatism of mosaics and painting found in Byzantium or of sculpture and glass in the Gothic. In other words, there was in early Islamic times no formal association between the mosque and certain techniques of decoration. Yet it should be noted that a precise technique of decoration tends to predominate in any one monument: mosaics in Damascus, stucco in Ibn Tulun’s mosque, stone and ceramics in Kairouan. Except perhaps in Cordoba, there does not seem to have existed a building (as there would in later Islamic art), in which a museum of available techniques would have been created. One small point about the techniques is rather puzzling. What we know of Iraqi mosques indicates that they were far less decorated than mosques elsewhere, which is all the more strange since a number of mosques in Egypt, North Africa, or Iran are supposed to have been influenced by an Iraqi decoration we know otherwise from secular buildings. In all probability the new cities of Iraq did not feel as strongly as their Mediterranean counterparts the pressure of imitating the elabo-

rately decorated churches and temples of the conquered territories. The point will acquire further confirmation in the next chapter.

The main problem with this decoration is to ascertain its meaning. Is it simply ornament, that is, designs of whatever nature whose primary purpose is to enhance and beautify whatever part of the building it covers? Or does the decoration or any part of it possess some sort of symbolic significance that would make it an image, related to the mosque because of its location there but independent from it in intellectual purpose and design? The difficulty in answering these questions derives first from the fact that almost all the designs found in mosques can be interpreted simply as ornament. The long inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock, in the mosque of Ibn Tulun, or in Cordoba frame and emphasize certain architectural parts, and their intelligibility as texts may not be pertinent to their utilization in the decoration. The architectural compositions of the mosque of Damascus, when imagined as a sort of sheath covering the whole building, can also be understood as just a sheath of glitter and not with the iconographic meanings we have discussed in our last chapter. In other words, it is not only possible but even correct to see the decoration of mosques as primarily ornamental, as a faithful handmaid of architecture. It has its importance in a history of pure ornament and to this we shall return in our last chapter. From the point of view of the mosque a possible iconographic significance of this decoration lies in two areas.

First, an analysis of its frequency in a given building indicates the respective importance of various parts of the mosque, as we have shown for Kairouan or Cordoba. The use of decoration in these instances would be mainly to accentuate the parts which, for symbolic or practical reasons, were singled out. One might divide almost all mosques with an extensively preserved decoration into a group that sought to identify some parts of the building as more important than others, and into a group (the mosque of Ibn Tulun, for instance) whose decoration on the contrary sought to strengthen the total unity of the monument. One wonders whether in the mosque of Damascus the largely lost mosaics were meant to emphasize the axial nave or to decrease its impact by covering it with the same themes as were found in the secondary porticoes of the court. In the absence of sufficient evidence this particular query is fruitless, but the hypothesis can be proposed that two separate and
contradictory functions of a mosque’s decoration, those of unifying or singling out parts, were found alongside of each other. It is not yet possible to decide whether regional or chronological considerations, or considerations of patronage, were responsible for the choice made in any one instance.

The second aspect of this decoration is that on occasion it is possible to suggest for some of its themes a concrete iconographic meaning. The jewels and crowns in the Dome of the Rock, the architectural landscape in Damascus, perhaps even some of the details of the mosaics in Cordoba or in the Agia mosque can be understood in their times as images of victory, glory, and paradise. The idea of a vegetal and architectural decoration as an expression of paradise is a particularly tempting one, for there are other indications that a mosque’s courtyard or open area was meant to be a sort of paradise. It contained trees and running water in Cordoba and Seville, and the rather mysterious domed buildings known from texts to have existed in Nishapur and in the mosque of Ibn Tulun could be interpreted as the architectural translation of the small pavilions of a paradisial landscape. But, even if these interpretations are acceptable, the main point is that they were soon forgotten or relegated to the background of the culture’s collective memory. With the concrete historical meanings gone, the forms appeared so abnormal that they were hardly ever repeated. If meanings existed originally, then the impetus for their rejection and eventually oblivion did not come from the patrons or the artists of the time but from the beholders, the community that used the mosque. Whether it was already their taste that compelled Abd al-Malik or al-Walid to limit the formal range of the decoration or whether, as was suggested in the previous chapter, the princes themselves made the choices, the meanings originally associated with these forms were rejected by the Muslim beholders, even assuming that the majority had understood them initially. By rejecting them the community affected the shape of future designs and refused, in all but a few architectural features, a visually perceptible formal symbolism of their faith.

On the whole this conclusion seems valid, for the early centuries of Islam and several more centuries passed before a formal religious symbolism reappeared in Iran or in Turkey. Yet one must be aware of actual or possible exceptions, such as popular faith. For what is reflected in most large monuments or in literary sources is the view of princely patrons and of a literate urban Islam. Underneath were the rapidly growing converts from older and often image-ridden religions, and also the partly settled but still half-pagan desert Arabs. The accounts of various heretical revolts, especially in Iraq, often mention the presence of idols or visual symbols in what are presumed to be Muslim heterodoxies; the popular cults of holy places that developed in later centuries often occurred on the spot of pre-Islamic cults; and funerary practices did use a variety of visual symbols, although much of them are unknown or unstudied.

On the basis of what happened later we can assume the existence of a folk Islam that may not have abandoned as rigorously as official Islam the magic or semi-magic of religious symbols.

The other exception is a very official one: writing. One of the fairly common motifs of mosque decoration was the writing of a variety of Arabic texts, mostly Koranic but including as well vital statistics about the building. In an early mosque in Kairouan, the mosque of the Three Gates (fig. 56), a large inscription covers most of the façade and appears as the main subject of decoration. This inscription had an iconographic meaning, as did those for the Dome of the Rock, for coins, and for any number of other examples. Arabic writing on monuments was thus more than decoration; it was a subject matter restricted to the Muslim or Muslim-ruled community and thereby expressing concrete meanings belonging to the members of the faith. It can appropriately be considered as an invention inspired by Islam, and its manipulation on monuments was comparable to the ways in which images were used in Christianity. Next to standard texts repeated over and over again (especially Koranic quotations), one can find fairly often an innovation or a modification that usually reflects some peculiarity of the monument or some unique meaning given to it.

These uses of writing for iconographic or ornamental purposes were not current in monuments at the very beginning. Most early Iraqi and Syrian buildings are devoid of inscriptions, and it is perhaps not before the ninth century that they become almost automatic. Since so many of the formal elements used by Islam at the beginning were those of previous cultures, the Muslims were constantly affected by their properties. And, just as they only removed or rejected older themes when it was essential to the maintenance