

Early Islamic Architecture in Jordan

Throughout history, as a province or as a state, Jordan has played an important role in Arab-Islamic politics. Jordan's strategic location within the Arabian Peninsula, bordering Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Egypt, ensured many advantages to the new Islamic state. In the past, prior to the spread of Islam, Jordan acted as a crossroad for international trade. As a result, social activities were enriched and exchanged¹.

Midway on the Arab international trade route, Mecca, as an Arab town, witnessed a serious historical event which affected the Arabian Peninsula and the whole of the Middle East as well. Islam was accepted by the Arabs and immediately came to be considered as a blessing². The trade route extended from Oman and Yemen in the Southern corners of the Arabian Peninsula, towards the coast of the Mediterranean in the North. Arabs penetrated from the peninsula to settle in the prosperous land of Syria. Migration from one place to another depended on their knowledge of maps. They were the earliest traders within Southeast Asia, the Gulf Coast, Yemen and Syria. Consequently Arab traders travelled with great experience in international affairs based on a wide spread of cultures³. The Arabs' social relations and their business administration reflected their personal qualities. They were a free-minded, intelligent, active, generous, honest and patient people. Their civilization in the Arabian Peninsula expressed many aspects of their activities. In the north, activities were more aesthetically attractive and bold. The Nabatean civilization is one of their greatest achievements⁴.

The plateau extending from Petra to Damascus has witnessed many important changes throughout the history of the Arabs, from the fourth century BC up to the seventh century AD. The first activities of Islam were demonstrated in the north, in Syria. Accordingly, Jordan was the link between the Arabian Peninsula, Syria, Palestine and Iraq. Those who brought the message of the Prophet Mohammad to Heraclius failed in their mission. That incident led to the liberation of Syria from Christian Roman rule after the Yarmouk battle, in 638 AD⁵. The importance of Jordan was well acknowledged by the citizens of Jordan and their relatives in the Arabian Peninsula. Jordan was the master key for the Arabs, and eventually liberated their brother Arabs through Islam.

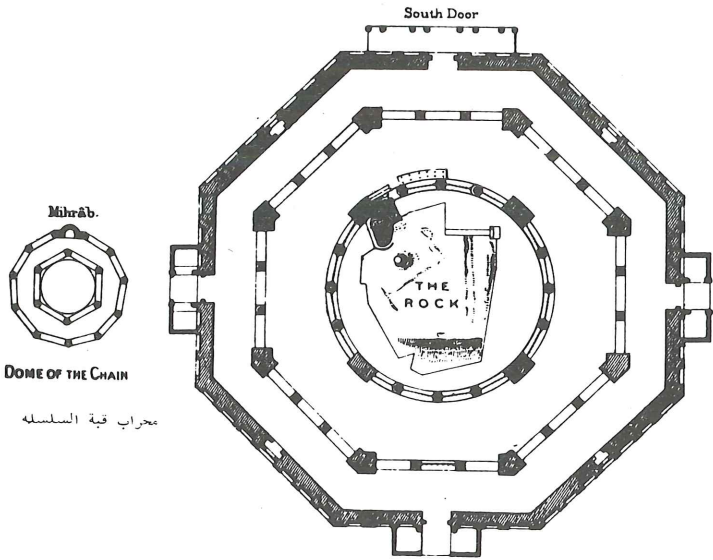
When the first Islamic State established its headquarters in Damascus in 661 AD, the local architectural skills were put to the service of the new faith⁶. Most of the architects, masons, craftsmen, artists etc. were Arab Christian Syrians, or Byzantine Arab Syrians. They extended their services to the Islamic court. Their classical and hellenistic methods in architecture were transformed to fit the new plans and the new philosophy.

In the early eighth century AD, Jordan's plateau witnessed the earliest experience of Islamic architecture. There were a great number of buildings, which presented different styles. The shape of buildings, as a whole, were relatively new although some of the design elements were carefully selected from local architectural examples. The superior ability of the Arabs of Jordan are shown in the cities of Petra, Amman, Jerash and Um-al-Jimal.

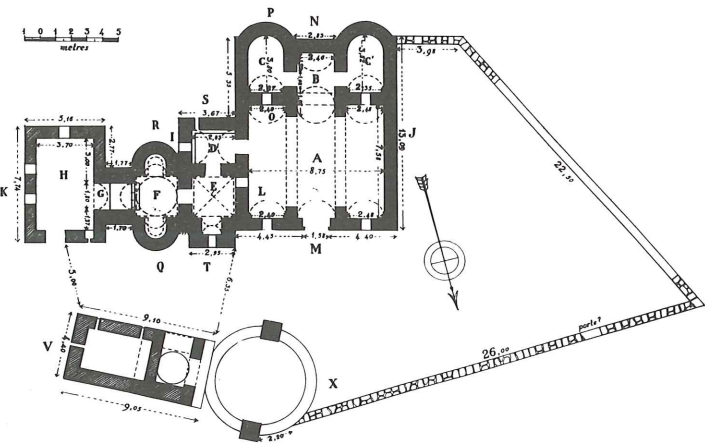
From an early stage Moslems avoided several aspects of their inherited architecture. They moderated their style to accommodate the new faith. For example, brick was used more than stone and buildings of simple outlines were preferred to the more complicated structures. Mosaics, painting, stucco, inscriptions and tiles were used more than stone carving, which was more attractive to Arabs prior to Islam. It is still unclear whether Arabs in Syria disassociated themselves from their heritage immediately, or gradually, after they had adopted Islam. We can trace many traditional elements which survived in the early Moslem architecture. The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, Mashatta Palace in the south of Amman, Qusayr Amra, Qasr Tuba and Khirbat al-Mafjar near Jericho in Palestine, all belong to this transitional period of architecture.

The earliest Islamic monument in the world is the Dome of the Rock. This building was designed to play a political and a religious role. It was established by Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, the Umayyad Caliph in 691 AD. The plan consists of two octagons and the circle in the centre (Tawaf) ensured circumambulating around the Rock, like that usually practiced around the Ka'ba⁷. The monument has four gates facing the four points of the compass (FIG. 1a). The exterior walls were built by using massive stones. The building's interior propor-

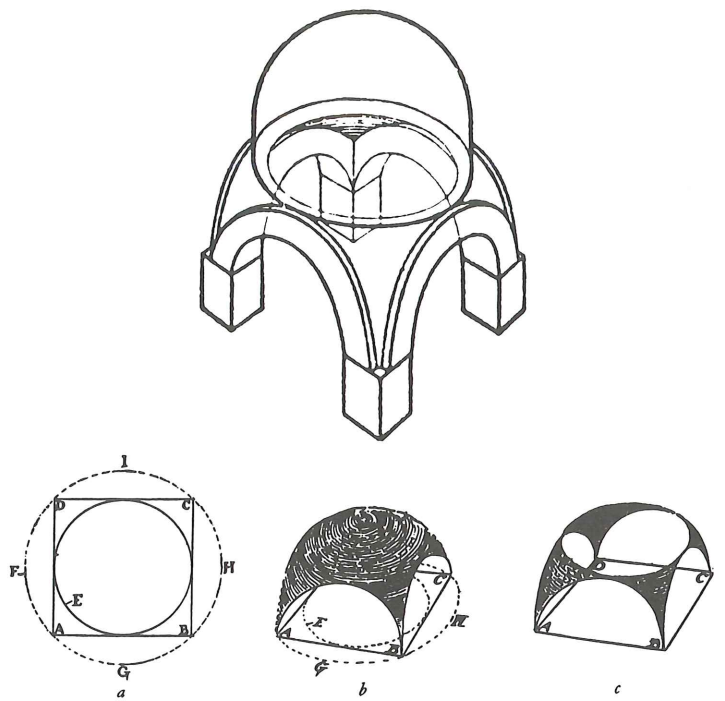
1a. Plan of the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 691 AD.



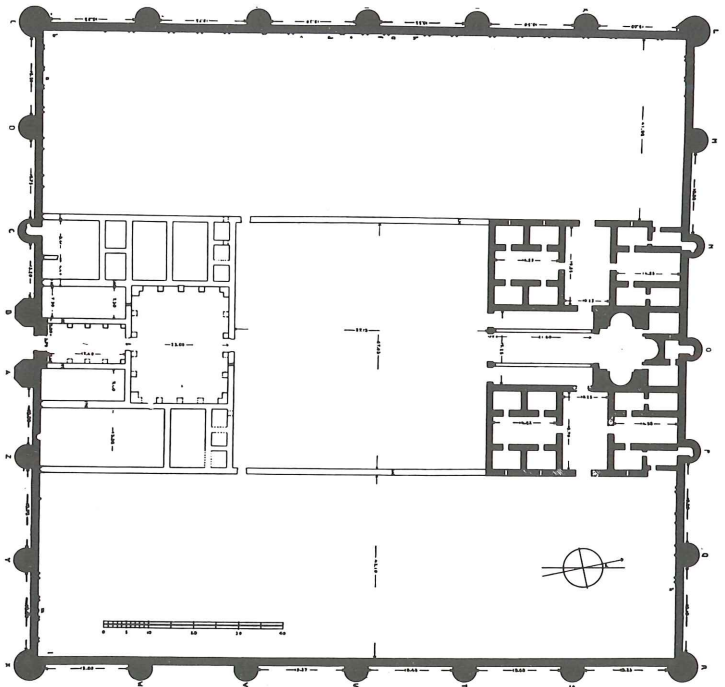
1b. Plan of Qusayr Amra, East of Amman, Jordan, 711 AD.



1c. The Pendentive Dome.



1d. Plan of the Mashatta Palace, Southern Amman, Jordan, 743 AD.



tions and distances are very accurate. We deduce that the masons were very skilful and very well trained. The doubled dome appeared here before any dome elsewhere in architecture. The system of plan and masonry in the Dome of the Rock resembles the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which is located west of the Haram-es-Serif.

The interior mosaics of the Dome of the Rock undertaken by a skilful artist, displayed a new form of subject matter. Moslem art was much more involved with floral and geometrical designs, and fully ignored the pictorial types which had dominated before Islam. 'Arabesque' is the term given by western art historians to refer to Arab decoration (floral and geometrical) through the Islamic period⁸. This type of decoration, which depended on geometry and floral designs, was evident in many Arab Syrian churches, but was not dominant. In the Islamic tradition 'Arabesque' became the special style of Islamic decoration everywhere and on almost every object.

Another building of stone masonry is Qusayr Amra. The building is a small palace or a family sized chateau, which was

built by Caliph al-Walid I about 711 AD. The palace is located about 75 km. to the east of Amman (FIG. 1b)⁹. The building is divided into two major parts: an audience hall of the Caliph, and his sophisticated bathroom. Three different styles for the ceiling were adopted: tunnel-vaulted, cross-vaulted and the pendentive dome (FIG. 1c). The most complicated pendentive

dome system was created in Jordan. The Western Baths (Thermae) at Jerash had one pendentive dome. Prof. Krautheimer attributed it to the second century AD, making it the earliest dome of its kind in architecture¹⁰. Another pendentive dome was also discovered in Petra¹¹. It represents a similar model and fits the first or second century AD. This example, again, reflects the tradition or Arab architecture in Jordan which flourished in the first century and lasted until the eighth century AD.

Frescos covered most of the interior walls of Caliph al-Walid's palace. The subjects and style of the paintings remind us of early Arab work from the Greek and Roman era. We can imagine how Moslem Arabs had selected some mythological views in this Moslem palace. The Goddesses of Wisdom, Poetry and other allegoric items were among the subjects painted. Winged angels, naked ladies and zodiacal scenes were also found in Arabian art through Pagan and Christian epochs¹². In Islamic Imperial art, the same attitudes existed as they did in Imperial Byzantine art which influenced the early Christian style¹³.

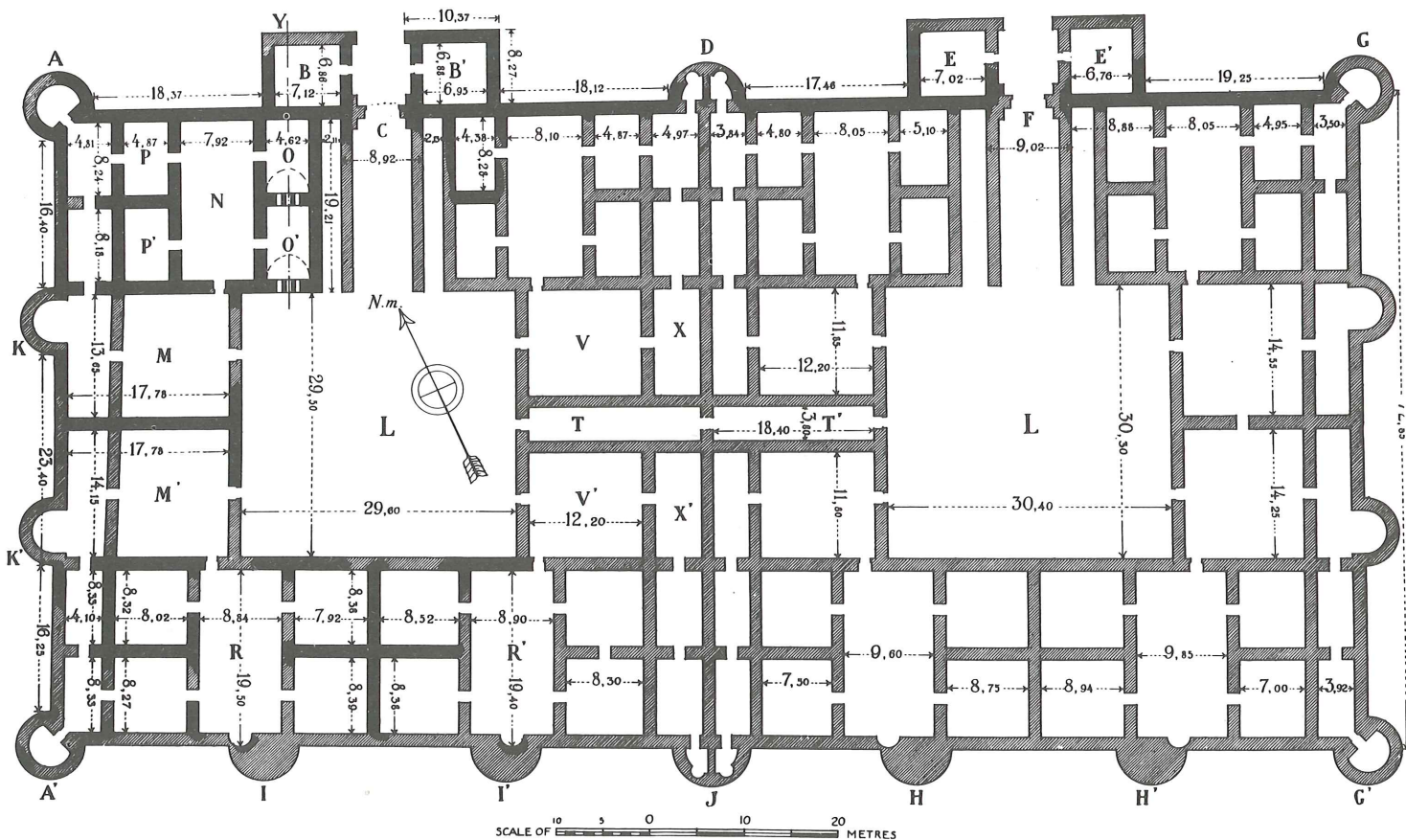
The Umayyad Mashatta Palace is another example of early Islamic architecture in Jordan. It is famous for its interior brick structure and its exterior sculpture. The open-courtyard here is the earliest example in Jordan's Islamic architecture (FIG. 1d). This style of building increased gradually in the

Islamic world. The central open-courtyard plan became common in Jordan in the Umayyad architecture as we witness in the plan of Qasr al-Tuba c. 742 AD (FIG. 2a), Khirbat al-Mafjar c. 724 AD (FIG. 2b) and Qasr Kharana c. 711 AD. Many examples were found in Syria and Palestine, such as Qasr al-Hair 728 AD (FIG. 2c), and Qasr al-Minya c. 705 AD (FIG. 3a). We have several examples of the open-courtyard plan in medieval Islamic architecture. The open-courtyard plan was also practiced in far eastern Islamic states such as Mesjid-i Jami of Isfahan in Iran, 1080 AD¹⁴ (FIG. 4a). The open-courtyard was used again in the middle of the Islamic Empire, such as at the mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo¹⁵, dated 876 AD (FIG. 3b). Again, in the far western corner of the Islamic world, we witness the open-courtyard plan in North Africa and Spain. The most famous example is the mosque of Cordoba, which was built in 785 AD by the Umayyad Caliph, Abd al-Rahman I (FIG. 4b)¹⁶.

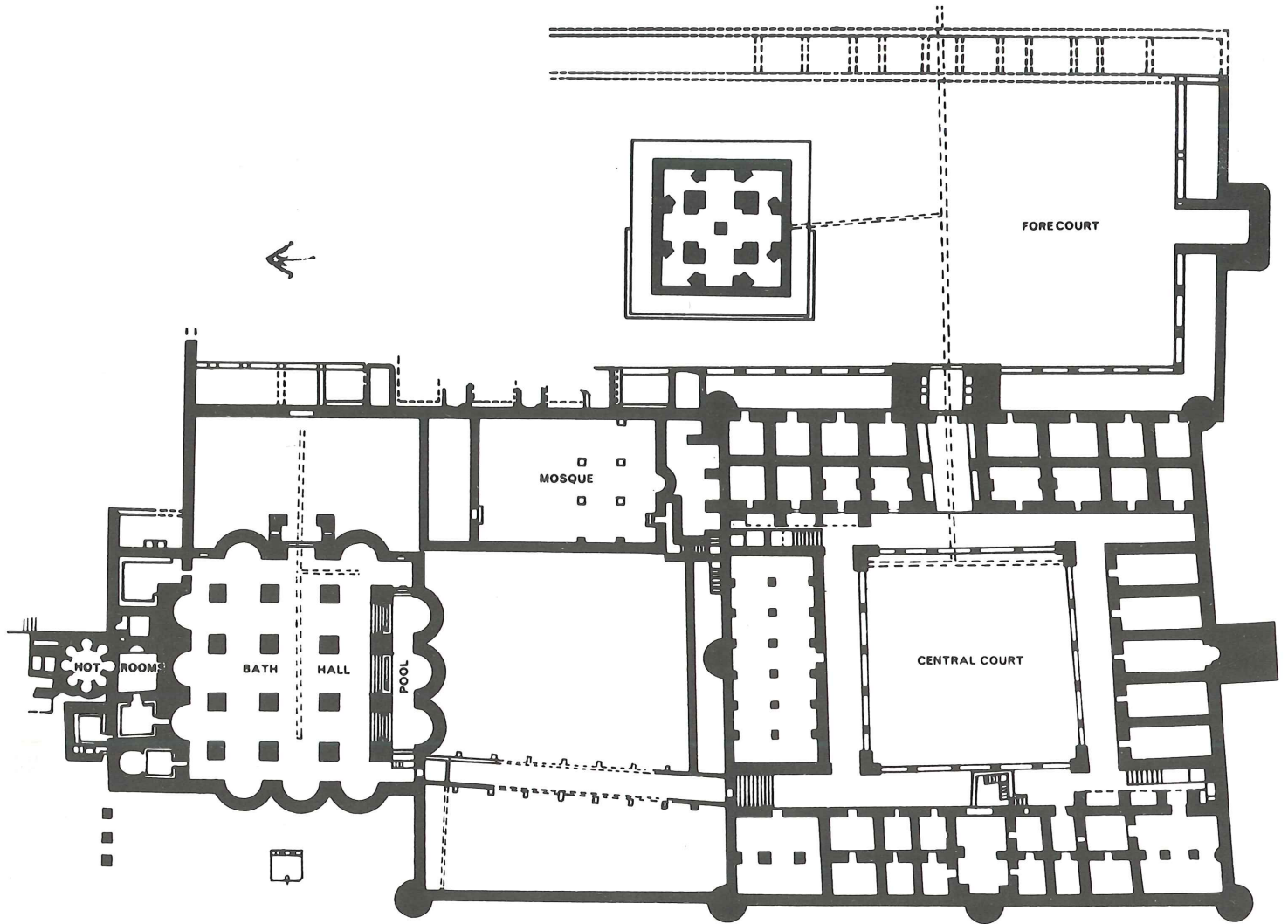
The courtyards mentioned above have been centralized in the middle or at one side of a building complex for several reasons. Arcades and columns were used to surround the court. Light and air could enter all the parts equally.

The Mashatta Palace was the outstanding example of Islamic, secular or religious, architecture. There are further architectural elements in the building, such as the triple-apsed hall. This type of structure was first employed as the throne hall in Bosra, Syria. It is found in the Christian Arab Cathedral of the early sixth century AD. It was clear to

2a. Plan of Qasr al-Tuba, Jordan, 742 AD.



2b. Plan of Khirbat al-Mafjar Palace, near Jericho, 724 AD.



Creswell that the custom of using a triple-apsed plan for a throne room took place in Bosra, which is a few miles north of the Jordan border with Syria¹⁷.

Most early Moslem architecture used bricks in the interior sections. This material was used in Syria and Mesopotamia from the earliest epochs of history. The use of brick in Arab building still needs a great deal of serious research.

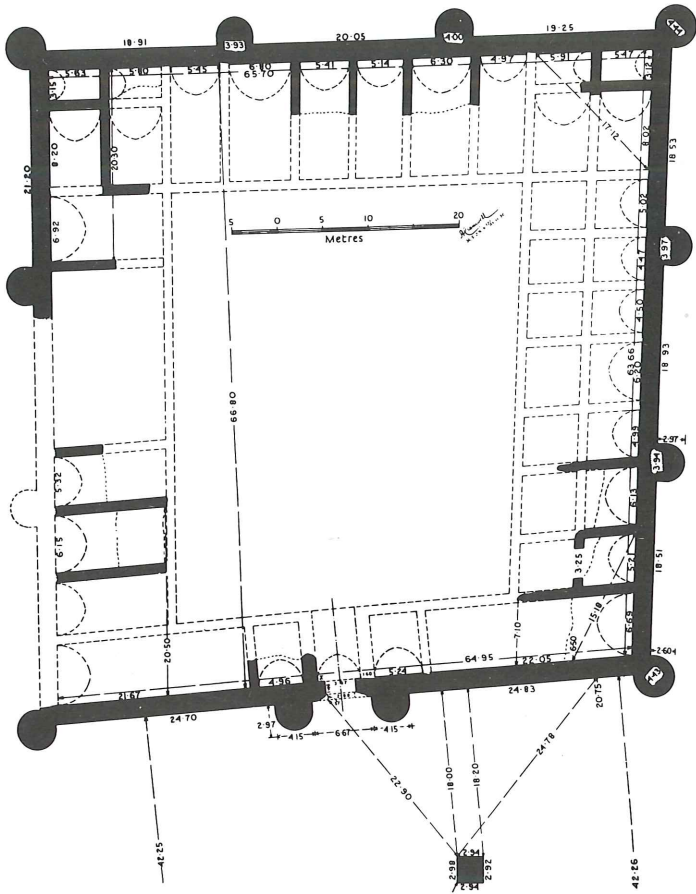
The walls of the Mashatta Palace were 1.70 metres thick and supported by 21 stone towers. The towers were arranged in a symmetrical manner, mainly half-cylindrical in shape. The walls present the most attractive stone carving in the world of Islam. They remind us of miniature decoration or of the stucco mouldings which became popular in later Islamic periods; geometrical and floral motifs, framing animals and birds. The magnificent stone carving of the Mashatta Palace represented an innovative method of sculpture which continued throughout the history of Islamic decoration. The decorated facade of the walls was donated to Germany by the

Ottoman Sultan Abdul-Hamid in 1903. Since then it has been kept in the East Berlin Museum.

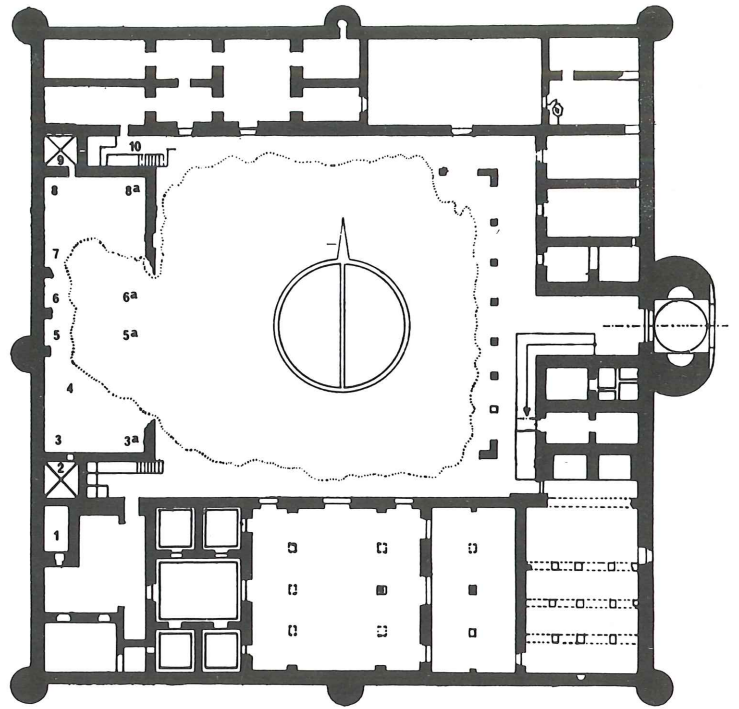
Arabesque design was dominant in mosaics, frescos, wood carvings, stucco and on metal works. The idea of this style may have been encouraged by the bareness of the Arabian desert which resulted in a need to create an atmosphere contrasting to their own¹⁸. In addition, Arabs sought an independent art form by avoiding the pictorial scenes that were common during pre-Islamic times. The symmetrical aspect of the arabesque design, I believe, stems from the traditions of Arabic verse and the rhythm of harmonic poetry.

The construction of buildings in the early Islamic period in Jordan enjoyed both solid workmanship and an excellent choice of materials. Whichever architectural formula was selected depended upon a precise symmetrical plan. The architectural styles which were adopted in early Moslem Jordan contributed many new techniques to Islamic architecture. Design and environmental problems were solved

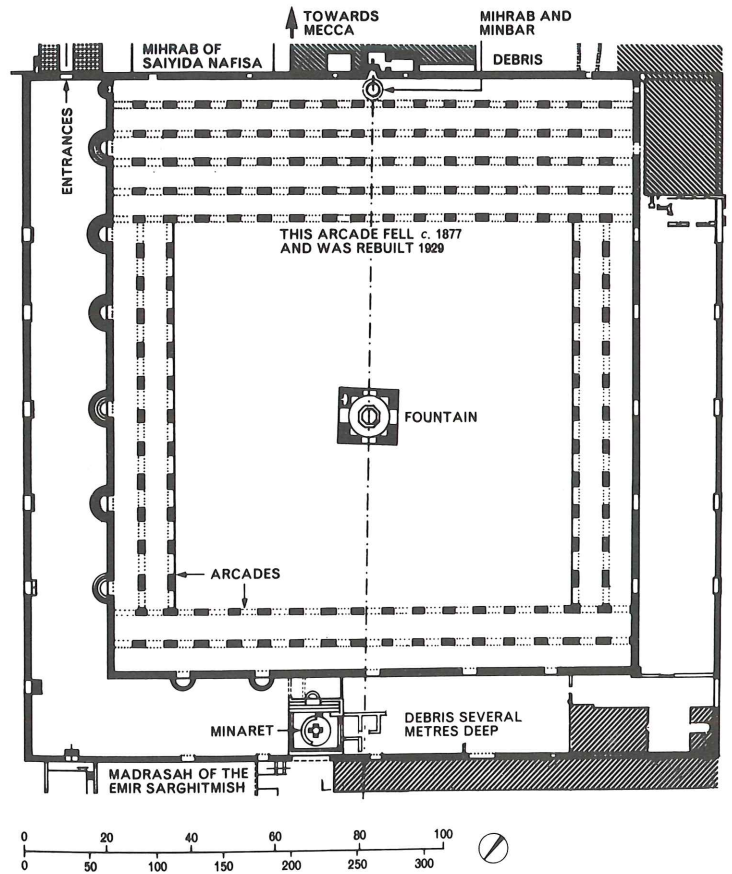
2c. Plan of Qasr al-Hair, Syria, 728 AD.



3a. Plan of the Minya Palace, Palestine, 715 AD.



3b. Plan of the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo, Egypt, 879 AD.

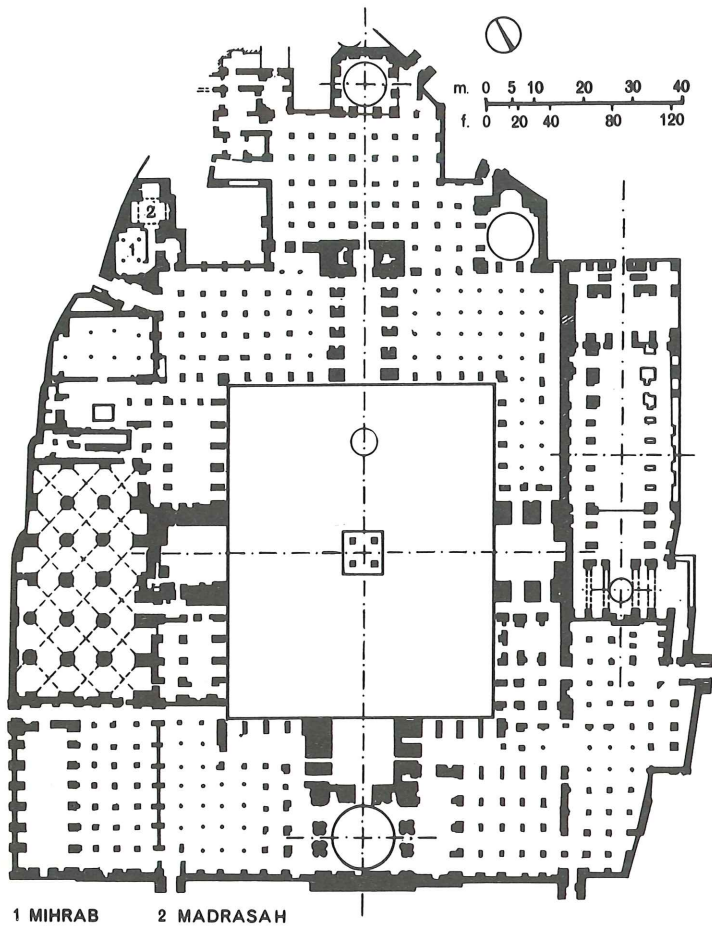


successfully in the structure of the Umayyad desert palaces through the following architectural elements:

- 1 Stone used for the exterior walls and bricks for interior sections.
- 2 Illuminating the interior sections by central open-courtyards.
- 3 One major gate for secular buildings and several for religious ones.
- 4 Ceiling: flat wooden roof, brick tunnel-vaulted and brick cross-vaulted systems.
- 5 Brick pendentive domes.
- 6 Arcades and chains of arches.
- 7 Audience halls: niches or triple-apsed halls; half circle apses in mosques.
- 8 Massive half circular stone towers projected from external walls, and round towers at the corners.
- 9 Inscriptions (Kufic) by mosaic or stone carving.
- 10 Wall and floor mosaics; Arabesque stone, marble or glass tesserae mosaics, gold and polychrome coloured mosaics, fresco, stucco and stone carving.

These early buildings helped the Islamic State in Damascus and later on in Baghdad towards a flourishing Islamic civilization. After studying such examples of early Jordan

4a. Plan of the Masjid-i Jami, Isfahan, 1072 AD.

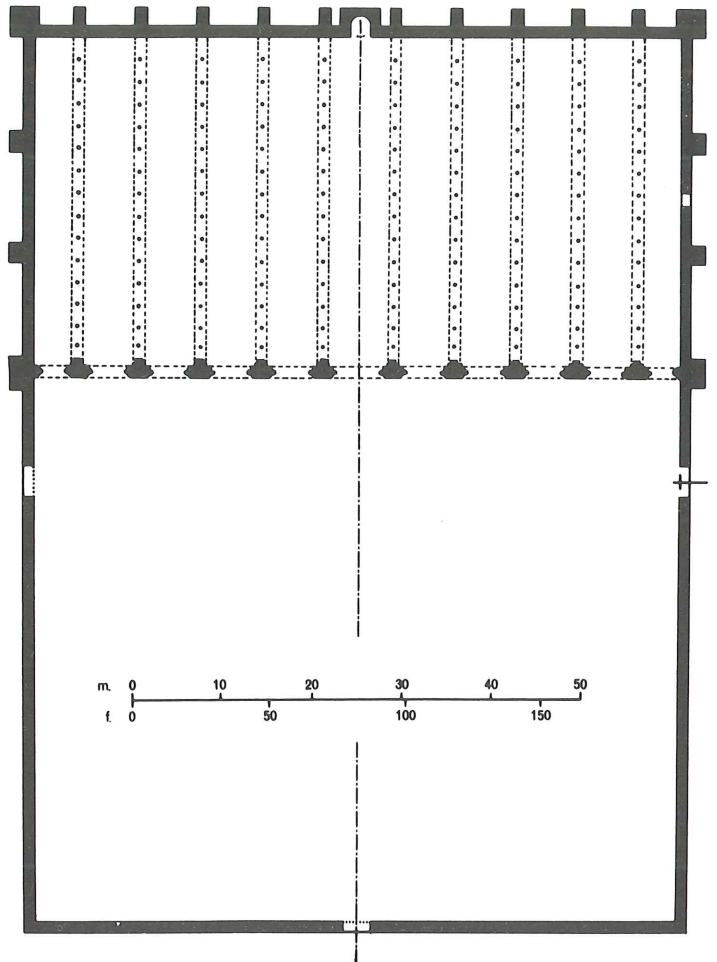


architecture, I have come to the conclusion that Jordan initiated the basic elements and was the most important source of Islamic architecture.

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4b. Plan of the Great Mosque of Cordoba, Spain, 785 AD.



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