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## Historical Islamic Architecture in Northwestern Jordan: Heritage Mosques in Irbid Governorate

### Abstract

Mosques are Islamic prayer buildings for the communities of Muslims. Such buildings are called *masjid*, *jāmi'*, or *muṣallā*. This paper discusses “heritage mosques” in religious Arabic terminology. The specific term “heritage mosque” applies to those mosques that pre-date the year 1918 (*i.e.*, the Rashidun, Umayyad, Fatimid, Ayubid-Mamluk, and Ottoman periods). In the present study, a further limitation of material is given by the geographic focus of the study on northwestern Jordan, which is widely congruent with the modern state’s governorate “*muḥafadhah*” of Irbid. The outcome of this research paper is a definition of typological and chronological elements, which determine the grades of religious, cultural, and economic value of these buildings.

The author and her family originate from this area. Therefore, she is a member of the community who created

these buildings. This inspired her to go through such a topic and complete previous work in more detailed manner.

### Introduction

This research paper discusses the architectural attributes of several heritage mosques in Irbid Governorate that were established in the early Arabic Islamic ages. It adopted the mixed method of field study approach and the comparative descriptive method approach.

The paper focuses on mosques characterized by the simplicity of form without complexity in architectural vocabulary, consisting of two major components, the prayer hall and the *mīhrāb*, whereas other mosques also contain other components, such as a minaret and a place for ablution (*wadū'*).

A comprehensive understanding of heritage mosques is achieved through

this paper, as is a catalogue, which provides information about the types of mosques in Irbid Governorate.

### Objectives

The aim of this paper is to identify the periods in which the heritage mosques were built, to reveal aspects of planning, to retrace the history of these buildings in the communities, and to define the traditional construction details.

The characteristics of the building materials and the construction methods served as a guideline for future conservation and renovation. Several buildings have been made accessible in recent years for religious service. The results of the research paper created awareness of the cultural value of these buildings and support the identity of the Muslim communities in northern Jordan.

### Background

#### *The First Mosques in Islam*

Prophet Muhammad responded to the command of his Lord in the building of mosques. The first work he did on his arrival to Yathrib City, as a migrant from Mecca, was to build a mosque. God said of the virtue of the mosque:

*“Do not stand [for prayer] within it-ever. A mosque founded on righteousness from the first day is more worthy for you to stand in. Within it are men who love to purify themselves; and Allah loves those who purify themselves.”* (Holy Qur’an, Surah al-Tawba verse 108.)

This mosque in Yathrib City was the first institution to be built following the Prophet migration in AD 622. The year 622 was the first year of *Hijrah*

(emigration); it signified the beginning of the Muslim lunar calendar.

#### *Area of the Study*

Irbid and its geographical surroundings were occupied by the Greek, Roman, and Islamic civilizations, which left behind them historical and archaeological sites. Roman and Greek cities such as Arabella (Irbid), Capitolias (Bayt Rās), Gadara (Umm Qays), Pella (Ṭabaqat Faḥl), and Abila (Quwaylibah) were established. They were members of the Decapolis, a group of ten Roman cities in the area. Ghassanids established their country in the north of Jordan covering the regions of Irbid, Golan, and Hawrān.

During the Mamluk period, Irbid played an important role as a stopping point for pilgrim caravans coming from Turkey, north of Iraq and south of Russia.

Jordan in general and Irbid Governorate in particular are rich with the presence of many mosques built in the early times of Islam and its expansion, which indicates that the significance of the region’s geographical and political location played a major role at that time in spreading the Islamic religion. (FIG. 1) shows the plan of historical Tall Irbid, and (FIG. 2) shows the conceptual framework of the study.

#### *Methodology*

The mixed method adopted combined the approaches of field study and comparative descriptive methodology. The research focused on mosques characterized by simplicity of form, without complexity in architectural vocabulary, consisting of two major components, the prayer hall and the *mihṛāb*, whereas other mosques also feature other components, such as a minaret and a place for ablution (*wadū*). Despite the obvious

similarity in construction materials and methods, differences are evident in the periods of construction and the natural environment, which affected the production of the different forms and relatively varied architectural styles of these mosques.

### **History of Jordan in Islamic Times**

Jordan has experienced in the last few decades a number of excellent studies and a concentration of research that is unparalleled compared to those of studies undertaken in previous years and regarding neighboring countries. Jordan became one of the most important countries in the Near East to reevaluate our understanding of the early Islamic period, which constitutes a very substantial part of Islamic history (Walmsley 2001: 503). Several excavations have changed the whole idea about Jordan during the Islamic period. The intensive excavations in the last decades especially in Jordan have provided us with a clearer image of the early Islamic period (Whitcomb 1995: 468). This scientific archaeological research, together with historical data, gives us a better understanding of the period of transition from Pre-Islamic Arabia into the early period of Islam.

Starting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European scholars' analysis of Islamic history was based primarily on unsubstantiated Eurocentric perceptions rather than on concrete evidence or objective research (Walmsley 2001: 515). The whole Islamic period was characterized by the idea of a number of "thundering hoards" who invaded highly civilized Graeco-Roman lands and caused much devastation. Some writers even went so far as to say that the Muslims came and built their little dirty houses among the magnificent Roman and Byzantine monuments, that they had no sense of

discipline or cleanliness, and that they stabled their horses and camels in the rich Byzantine basilicas (Macaulay and Beny 1977). Some say that Muslims had never absorbed the concept of the state because their culture stayed attached to Mecca and they were not able to absorb the cultures of the people they invaded (Crone 1983: 26).

Different terms have been used by scholars to define different successive periods of Islamic history. Many of them used the name of ruling dynasties to designate certain eras: for instance, the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Fatimid periods.

Some scholars agreed to divide the Islamic period between the beginning of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and the end of the Ottoman period into three main sub-periods:

1. Early Islamic period: this covers the period between the preaching of Islam by the prophet in about AD 610 to the end of Seljuq dynasty, 1100–1194.
2. Middle Islamic period (or medieval Arab period): covering from AD 1194 to 1500, this encompasses the Crusader and Ayyubid-Mamluke periods.
3. Late Islamic period: this started in AD 1453 with the conquest of Constantinople by Muhammad Al-Fatih and the fall of the Byzantine Empire.

Jordan became integrated into the Islamic Arab world in an early stage of Islam. The role of Jordan in Islamic history has never been marginal, and in many times it played a central role. Therefore, the different successive periods are well represented by rich architectural and material remains.

### Catalogue of Heritage Mosques in Irbid Governorate

Due to the lack of documentation, survey, and observation of the heritage mosques in Irbid Governorate, a large number of them have lost their original features. The catalogue presented here is an attempt to compile a better representation of the existing mosques, which can offer an idea of their architectural style in Irbid Governorate. The study of this catalogue defines a heritage mosque as a mosque that predates the year 1918 (*i.e.*, the Rashidun, Umayyad-Abbasid, Fatimid, Ayubid-Mamluk, and Ottoman periods).

The map of Irbid (FIG. 3) gives the location of all the mosques covered in the catalogue and the nine liwas in Irbid governorate related to them and also gives the names of all the mosques in the catalogue (TABLE. 1).

Each page of the catalogue resulting from this study has many different categories; the original name of the mosque, MEGA-Jordan and JADIS coordinates, the exact location coordinates in Irbid, a description of the mosque's plan, building materials, measurements, construction details, preservation, inscriptions, dates, traveler reports, and bibliography.

In this paper, the author shows by (FIG. 4) one detailed page of the catalogue of the *Hakamā* Heritage Mosque in *Liwā' Qasabat* Irbid as an example.

#### *Catalogue Conclusion*

The historical and architectural elements of the heritage mosques in Irbid Governorate were different in their style, typology, and construction materials.

Despite this diversity, mosques have a similarity of general design due to their religious aspect, which unifies their content and function, and due to the use of natural materials available in or near the surrounding environment.

### Conservation of Heritage Mosques

In the case of these heritage mosques, there is a lack of documentation and a preparation process, so there is no clear direction regarding how their conservation should be conducted.

The local residents in Irbid Governorate conducted limited maintenance for the heritage mosques there, while the Ministry of Endowments (*Awqāf*) has given attention recently to undertake conservation programs and in some cases adaptive reuse processes for these monuments.

#### Recommendations

- The concerned authorities should do precise documentation for such monuments.
- Regarding the best conservation practices, all concerned authorities as well as the local residents should cooperate to retain the spiritual, cultural, and social significance of the heritage mosques in their different contexts.
- Prior to undertaking repairs or alterations to a heritage mosque, there must be a full understanding of its construction, including the materials and technology used. Preservation works must be carried out using materials and methods that are compatible with those already used for the building.
- Because there is not enough documentation of heritage mosques, this may pose a potential threat to the preservation and the sustainability of these mosques. Both local communities and the concerned authorities should participate in the conservation, and involve experts in order to employ the correct strategy in the conservation processes.
- The restoration process and area expansion should be limited to the absolute minimum amount of necessary actions.

- As much as possible, repair of the authentic fabric of such monuments should be undertaken through the engagement of local residents in the preservation processes.
- Several of these heritage mosques can be firmly dated by their inscriptions (foundation or renovation).
- The diversity of the architectural elements of the mosques through time demonstrates that each period has its typology and identity. And with regard to the similarities between the mosques, this is because all these mosques were built for a main purpose, which is “a place for prayers”.

### Conclusions

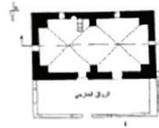
The existence of so many heritage mosques in Jordan in general and in Irbid Governorate in particular built in the early Islamic times proves that the area played a major role in those periods because of the significance of its strategic geographical location.

- The designs of heritage mosques were influenced by the Islamic orders and values, which are derived from the verses of the Qur'an, and responded to *Sharī'ah* following the functional method, according to the needs of the prayers.
- There is an obvious regionalism in plans and construction details, such as transversal arches and cross-vaulted arcades (bays).
- In the northwestern governates of Jordan, from the Ayubid-Mamluk periods, the cross vault prevails, not only in religious but also in domestic vernacular architecture.

Table 1: The names of all the mosques covered in the catalogue of heritage mosques in Irbid Governorate; Source (by the author).

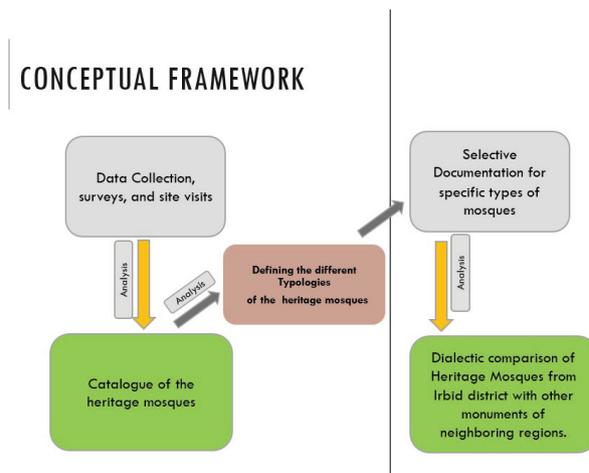
Abū Ehdjēr		Hubrās		Sāl	
Aīdūn		Husun		Samad	
al-Al		Ibdār		Samma	
Bēt Rās		Irbid		Sōm	
Bishra		Jumha		Taybeh	
Burz,al Khirbet		Khanzīreh /Ashrafiyh		Tibneh	

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<p><b>Dēr</b> <b>Abu</b> <b>Sa'id</b></p>		<p><b>Khārja</b></p>		<p><b>Turrah</b></p>	
<p><b>Dēr as-</b> <b>Sā'neh</b></p>		<p><b>Kufr</b> <b>'Asad</b></p>		<p><b>Umm Qēs</b></p>	
<p><b>Fahl</b></p>		<p><b>Kufr Jāyiz</b></p>		<p><b>Zahār</b> <b>Nasāra</b></p>	
<p><b>Hakam</b> <b>a</b></p>		<p><b>Nu'ēme</b></p>		<p><b>Zūbyā</b></p>	
<p><b>Hawār</b> <b>a</b></p>		<p><b>Sahm al-</b> <b>Kufarāt</b></p>		<p><b>Kufr Abīl</b></p>	

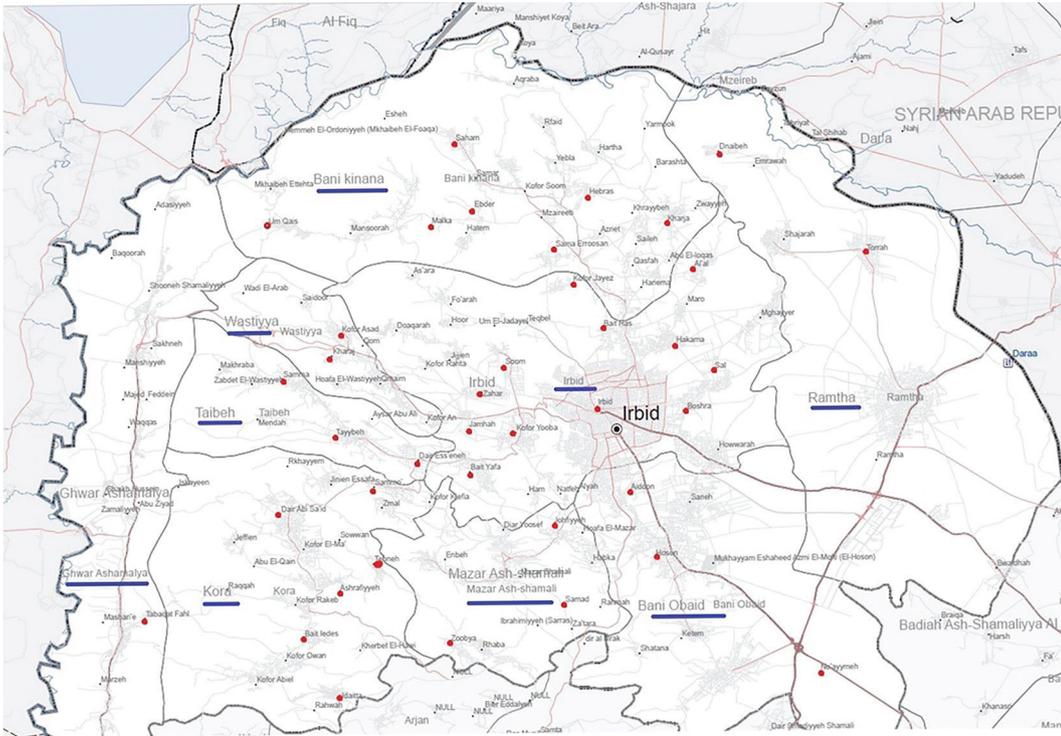


1. The historical Tall Irbid (from Ghawanimeh 1986: 1, fig. 10).



2. Conceptual framework (graphic by the author).

# HISTORICAL ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE IN NORTHWESTERN JORDAN



- The location of all the mosques in the catalogue and the nine *liwas* in Irbid Governorate related to them (map and data from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Jordanian Department of Statistics, Government of Syria, United Nations Security Council, and OpenStreetMap [15 September 2013]; edited by the author).

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**Hakama (Qasabat Irbid)**

Name: Masjid Hakama al Qadima, Masjid Salab Al Deen.  
 JADIS no: 2322012  
 MEGA no.: 56778  
 Coordinates: 35.88431 32.59503

**Plan:** Square, two modern entrances from the W (giving access to an added prayer hall) and one originally decentered entrance from the N in axis to the Mihrab. One central column shaft (today covered by stone tiles) supports the cross vaults of the four bays. Along the N façade, a staircase upon an arch leads to a platform on the NE corner upon which the trunk of the *Minaret* raises.

**Measurements:** 10.25m x 5.5m

**Building Materials:** Limestone masonry in horizontal layers with the occasional insertion of basalt blocks. Above the decentralized entrance on the N façade, a fragment of a Roman basalt sarcophagus (2nd century AD) has been re-used as a lintel. This fragment displays two omphalos-bowts flanking a central wreath.

**Construction details:** The main door in the N wall is reset in a pointed arch and surmounted by a re-used Roman basalt sarcophagus serving as a lintel. The door and arch frames carry modern capitals painted with brown colour.

**Preservation:** Parts of the old mosque preserved but walls and columns covered in modern times. At the NE side lower, part of a minaret of circular cross-section, Ottoman type.

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**Inscription(s):** Modern inscription during the renovation and enlargement of the mosque to H 1343 = AD 1954.

**Date(s):** Ottoman due to typological correspondence to the Zeydani mosque at al-Taibeh, see also the mosque at Hawila.

**Traveler Reports:** Schumacher 1890.

**Bibliography:** Schumacher 1890 (reprint 2010) 187; Glueck 1951, 114; Mümmann 1970, 15; Daese 1988, 69 s.v. Hakama, Khouri 2009, 83 s.v. Hakama.



Fig 3.35: Sketch ground plan (©by the author).



Fig 3.36: Exterior N-elevation with added masonry and lower part of Ottoman *Minaret* at the SW corner (©by the author).



Fig 3.37: Interior W wall with central column (©by the author).



Fig 3.38: Main entrance in N wall with Roman basalt sarcophagus fragment reset as lintel and modern restoration inscriptions (©by the author).

- Sample pages from the catalogue (Taan 2019: 79–89), showing the Hakamā Heritage Mosque in *Liwa’ Qasabat* Irbid.

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