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THE MEANING OF THE GREAT MOSQUE OF CORDOBA
IN THE TENTH CENTURY

The Great Mosque of Cordoba is universally recognized as one of the most singular monuments of medieval architecture. Celebrated for its harmony, balance, dramatic use of light and decoration, and its overall unity and aesthetic sensitivity, the monument belongs to an established functional type, the hypostyle mosque, but amounts to more than a mere variant of this type. Its amalgamation of old, reused, and original architectural elements in new inventive combinations, its system of double tiered arcades with superimposed horseshoe arches supported by slender pilasters on marble columns, and the originality of its overall compositional effect are all factors that enhance its value to the history of western Islamic architecture in particular and Mediterranean architecture in general. The mosque’s architectural importance is matched by its historical significance. As the premier monument of al-Andalus, the Cordoba mosque embodies the history of the Iberian peninsula from its Islamic takeover in 711 through successive stages of Umayyad and post-Umayyad dominion and beyond. Following the fall of Cordoba in 1236, the mosque was preserved as the repository of Castillian Spain’s signs of victory, and became a source of aesthetic and architectural inspiration that was eventually transported to the New World. In Islamic medieval writings of the same era and later, the Great Mosque of Cordoba was transformed from an Umayyad monument into the primary cultural and religious relic of al-Andalus, an Islamic land lost to Islam. While the mosque’s Muslim historians made it the concrete visual representation of a distinct creative culture, its geo-political position in the history of medieval Spain made it the symbol of a national personality forged out of the interaction of two at times ideologically opposed worlds.¹

A similar plurality of identity informs the Cordoba mosque’s creative and material culture. As the primary artifact of an Umayyad dynasty that had fled from Syria to Spain in 756,² the monument belongs to at least two architectural and cultural traditions, and its architectural vocabulary at once points to local Spanish and Syrian Umayyad sources.³ The totality of its final composition, however, is morphologically and aesthetically distinct: a unique reformulation of preexisting architectural details (horseshoe arches, double-tiered arcades, alternating stone and brick voussoirs) within a novel arrangement of universal forms (hypostyle halls, axial naves, domed spaces).⁴ The Cordoba mosque can therefore be situated at different junctures within a larger architectural history. Its connections to the past make it the culmination of an older Umayyad tradition, while its particular creative location in al-Andalus makes it the point of inception for a new tradition with different subsequent histories in Spain and North Africa.⁵

Within its specifically Andalusian architectural context, the Cordoba mosque represents a process of synthesis that reached its apogee under al-Hakam II al-Mustansir (961–976). Al-Hakam’s tenth-century expansion is a visually and morphologically complex configuration of forms that lies at a crossroad between past and future. It exhibits an architectural vocabulary developed over a period of almost two hundred years of Andalusian Umayyad architecture, but reformulates this vocabulary into a new idiom that, though often cited, will never be replicated in its entirety.

Beyond its aesthetic value, this specific moment in the Cordoba mosque’s history will be shown to exhibit an iconographic charge that is born out of a subtle interweaving of historical, cultural, and mythical paradigms. Arising from the context of the recently reestablished Umayyad caliphate, this charge aligned the mosque’s dynastic identity with its new caliphal one by rewriting the past from the vantage point of the present. The story of this historical revision, a critical aspect of the mosque’s tenth-century meaning, culminated in the Cordoba mosque’s rededication as a monument of Umayyad victory. The Great Mosque of Cordoba thus both absorbed and reflected various aspects of the Umayyad past, transcending association with any individual monument from this past. At the same time, the mosque reflected the universality of the Andalusian Umayyad da‘wa through a second level of meaning that re-created it as an iconographic image of a monument.
ate by ʿAbd al-Rahman III al-Nasir (912–961), the Cordoba mosque’s expansion is historically positioned as a completion of an integrated program meant to enhance the image of the Andalusian Umayyad caliphate and fulfill caliphal prerogative. ʿAbd al-Rahman III had in 952 already refurbished the mosque’s courtyard and endowed it with its monumental minaret, when, immediately upon his accession in 961, al-Hakam II ordered the expansion that transformed the mosque’s interior (fig. 1). The speed with which al-Hakam is reported to have initiated this expansion, the ceremony in which he publicly endowed it with a large portion of the private funds he inherited from ʿAbd al-Rahman III, and reports that attribute an extensive enlargement to the earlier caliphal are testaments to the unity of the architectural statement and its importance to the overall ideological program of the Andalusian caliphate. Echoes of this program are preserved in the extant portions of the mosque’s tenth-

Fig. 1. Cordoba mosque. Plan in 965. (After C. Nizet, La Mosquée de Cordoue, p. 3)

whose value transcends temporal boundaries: the Prophet’s Mosque at Medina. This ideological construction aligned the Umayyads with the original source of caliphal authority and represented them as the true caliphs of the Umayyad-Abbasid-Fatimid triumvirate.

Following the 929 restoration of the Umayyad caliph-
Fig. 3. Cordoba mosque. Cross-section of miqura. (After C. Nizet, La Mosquée de Cordoue, p. 25)

Fig. 4. Cordoba mosque. View down central aisle to al-Hakam’s mihrab.
century epigraphic program, in related historiographical accounts, and in allusions to the Umayyad past realized in special myths and ceremonies that were primary tools in the process of transforming the mosque into an eloquent expression of the caliphs' pretensions and intentions.

Occupying the southwest rectangle of the present mosque, al-Hakam's twelve-bay expansion constitutes an autonomous functional space, but one that is emphatically linked to the mosque's larger architectural and historical fabric (fig. 2). The expansion continues the mosque's preestablished architectural vocabulary, but carries this vocabulary to new levels of elaboration; horseshoe arches are broken up into complex intersecting and polylobed designs, and constituent elements are rearranged into a discrete, hierarchically ordered composition (fig. 3). This composition provides the mosque with its southern boundary; a domed space at the northern end of a wide central aisle attaches it to the older section and provides it with an entrance. The aisle itself, with its painted and gilded ceiling, defines an axial approach to the mosque's new maqṣura enclosure where a series of three domes announces the qibla (fig. 4). The domes correspond in size and placement to the deeply recessed, shell-hooded mihrāb niche and its two smaller flanking openings, one of which leads to a series of chambers that once constituted the mosque's treasury and the other to a passage (sabdīf) that linked the mosque with the caliphal palace — most likely by means of a covered bridge that spanned Cordoba's main processional thoroughfare (al-mashrā파 al-kubra). The expansion, and especially the maqṣura-qibla ensemble, is further distinguished by a rich decorative program executed in carved marble, stucco, and mosaic that includes an epigraphic program whose archaizing Kufic inscriptions comprise both Qur'anic verses and historical statements. In its totality, al-Hakam's expansion acts as an independent "mosque within a mosque" that provides visual focus for its larger architectural frame while deriving added significance from the dynastic and historical content of this frame.

Typologically, the Cordoba mosque's tenth-century expansion belongs to the category of urban mosques built by the Syrian Caliph al-Walid between 705 and 715. Distributed in major cities of the older Umayyad caliphate, including Damascus, Medina, and Jerusalem among others, these mosques exhibit individual differences but form a single group that plays an important role in the dynamics of their Andalusian descendant. This architectural heritage is apparent in the Cordoba mosque's minaret, in the composition of its court façades, the lateral disposition of its aisles, the hierarchical arrangement of its architectonic elements, and the use of mosaics as the primary decorative medium of its most important areas, features that occur at one or the other, and in some cases all, of its predecessors, but that are best preserved at the Great Mosque of Damascus. The cultural heritage of the Cordoba mosque is equally evident in historical and mythical accounts that act as reminders of the Umayyad past and, more specifically, of the mosque's own past as it was written in the tenth century. These accounts distinguish certain features of the tenth-century mosque as particularly articulate carriers of meaning. Elaborations upon the mosque's erroneous due-south qibla orientation, its site, its mosaics, and the special rituals revolving around relics of the Caliph Uthman preserved in the mosque's treasury — four bloodied leaves of the mushaf he was reading at the time of his assassination in Medina in 656 — are intertwined in creating the mosque's tenth-century identity.

This identity is defined partly through the Andalusian capital's own association with ʿilm and with Maliki principles of ittīḥād, thereby providing a primary link with Medinean practices and underlining the Andalusian Umayyads' preservation of established Islamic ideals. Later compilations of the merits (fadaʾil) of al-Andalus make it a desirable location for the acquisition of knowledge (dār hijra li-ʿilm) and a land whose Islamization was prophesied by the Prophet. Throughout its various stages, the mosque is presented as the physical embodiment of these qualities and a fulfillment of the prophetic message. The character of the mosque's dynastic founder, ʿAbd al-Rahman I, was extolled by Imam Malik. The mosque's second expansion, undertaken by ʿAbd al-Rahman II in 856, is attributed to the patron's strict adherence to Malikism and his consequent refusal to allow more than one congregational Friday assembly in Cordoba despite a rise in its population. Al-Hakam's own expansion is attributed to identical considerations, and his refusal to correct the mosque's qibla is articulated succinctly in the words, "we are a people of precedent" (madhhabunā al-ittīḥād), to express a similar sentiment. The debate surrounding this issue positions the qibla as a major memento of the mosque's history from the time of its foundation by Musa ibn Nusayr and Hanash al-Ṣanʿani in 711 through its later adoption by "the choice members of this people, and by [al-Hakam's] ancestors the imams." Unlike ʿAbd al-Rahman III's new royal mosque at Madinat al-Zahra, the Cordoba mosque's qibla comes to signify historical and
dynastic continuity. In maintaining it, al-Hakam at once preserves a legacy safeguarded throughout more than two centuries of Islamic and Umayyad presence in Cordoba and reinforces a historical link between the mosque founded during the original conquest and the "new" mosque built after the reestablishment of the Umayyad caliphate of al-Andalus.

A myth that associates the mosque’s site with the church of Saint Vincent acts as an intermediary step in the transformation of the mosque into a monument of dynastic conquest whose history begins with ʿAbd al-Rahman I. On the authority of the tenth-century al-Razi, later medieval historians assert that the original founders of the Cordoba mosque shared the church of Saint Vincent with the city’s Christian population, “following the example of Abu ʿUbayda and Khalid [ibn al-Walid], and the judgment of Caliph ʿUmar in partitioning Christian churches like that of Damascus and other [cities] that were taken by peaceful accord.”17 In 785, thirty years after his arrival in Cordoba as a refugee of the Abbasid takeover of the caliphate, ʿAbd al-Rahman I, later dubbed al-Dakhil, purchased the great church (al-khānīs al-wizma) of Saint Vincent, demolished it, and constructed Cordoba’s main Friday mosque.18 The account posits a parallel with two earlier Islamic paradigms, one established during the first caliphal period and the other by the Umayyad Caliph al-Walid’s reported purchase and demolition of the church of Saint John in Damascus.

However, the church of Saint Vincent is neither archaeologically attested as the major edifice mentioned by the historians and designated al-khānīs al-wizma nor specified by name in accounts of the events following ʿAbd al-Rahman I’s initial arrival in al-Andalus.19 Rather, the anonymous tenth-century Abū Bāhr Majmuʿa on the history of al-Andalus mentions a church, “the site of the present-day Friday mosque,” as the place where seventy Muslims were killed by the Mudarite al-Sumayl ibn Harith — a contestant for control of al-Andalus during the clan war that followed the collapse of the Umayyad caliphate and culminated in ʿAbd al-Rahman I’s establishment of the Umayyad amirate of Cordoba in 756.20 The enhancement of the church’s identity furnishes two interpretive strands, of which one commemorates ʿAbd al-Rahman I’s survival and victory against Muslim opponents and the other amplifies this victory by translating it into one against Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The double victory signals a new conquest that initiates the Cordoba mosque’s history and endows it with a new identity as an Andalusian Umayyad commemorative monument.

Tenth- and post-tenth-century histories of the Cordoba mosque express the symbolic appropriation of the history of Islam in al-Andalus by constructing a mythical identity for the monument that parallels that of earlier Umayyad architectural artifacts. The intent of the myth of the church of Saint Vincent is most clearly revealed through its predecessor, that of the church of Saint John of Damascus, and through the image of the Umayyads as upholders of Islam that is implied by this myth. Contemporary Abbasid histories recognize al-Walid’s demolition of the church of Saint John as an expression of power, and follow with the dialogue between al-Walid and the Byzantine emperor that culminated in al-Farazdaq’s famous response to the Byzantine monarch, likening the wisdom of al-Walid’s actions vis-à-vis those of his predecessors (who had let the church stand) to that of Solomon and David.21 The discovery of a Solomonic tablet on the site is further recorded as the impetus behind the inscription in which al-Walid records, in gold characters, the demolition of the church and the construction of a mosque dedicated to the worship of one God.22 ʿAbd al-Rahman I’s definitive transformation of church into mosque similarly purifies the Cordoba mosque’s site and consecrates it as an Islamic sanctuary. Thus, despite the presence of an earlier mosque, the definite Islamization of Cordoba, as also of Damascus,23 is realized unequivocally through Umayyad intervention.

The twelfth-century Ibn Bashkuwal provides yet another symbolic dimension to this act of purification by interpolating a Solomonic prophecy into the mosque’s history. The mosque’s site had been the great garbage (qumāma) pit of Cordoba until Solomon ordered his jinn to clear and level it for, he observed, “here will be constructed a house in which God is worshiped” (baytun yābuḥadu allahu jinn).24 Ibn Bashkuwal reflects the mosque’s identity by placing it squarely within the established Umayyad cultural koiné through his adaptation of a mythical account pertinent to the Dome of the Rock. He also makes it the subject of a prophecy that is fulfilled by the Umayyad arrival in al-Andalus. The element of predestination, which is also an important feature of the Abbasid and Fatimid daʾwās, is realized in Umayyad historiography through ʿAbd al-Rahman I, who is recognized by his grandfather as the one with whom “the matter is at hand.” ʿAbd al-Rahman’s special destiny is also the subject of a Jewish prophecy.25 His escape and conquest of al-Andalus are portrayed as part of a larger cosmic design that left its imprint on the mosque’s history. This design was completed in 929 when ʿAbd al-Rahman III, in the words of his court poet Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih (d. 940), “conquered al-Andalus anew as his namesake had
conquered it at the beginning," and caused disbelievers "to enter the faith in droves." The second victory commands the re-consecration and rededication of the Cordoba mosque and its site, needs that are fulfilled by the appropriation of earlier conquest paradigms into Andalusian Umayyad history.

The two stages of the Umayyad conquest and Islamization of al-Andalus are represented by the adaptation of the myth of the church of Saint Vincent/Saint John to two phases of the Cordoba mosque's history. At the conclusion of al-Walid's transformation of the church into the Damascus mosque, he "commands" the Byzantine emperor to supply the mosaics and mosaicists required for the decoration of this mosque. Al-Hakam is said to have issued a similar order described by the fourteenth-century Ibn ʿIdhari as "in emulation of what al-Walid had done when constructing the mosque of Damascus." The application of this second power paradigm to the Cordoba mosque's caliphal phase signals a thematic continuity between two moments in the monument's history. As reflections of the tenth-century form and identity of the Cordoba mosque, the adapted power paradigms — whether absorbed as myths or transformed into reality — commemorate the Umayyad role in establishing and re-establishing Islam in the Iberian peninsula by framing the Andalusian Umayyad daʿwa in the familiar mythical and architectural language of the older Umayyad caliphate. Accordingly, the tenth-century expansion of the Cordoba mosque is the physical embodiment of the continuation of Umayyad history, an act of re-consecration that echoes ʿAbd al-Rahman III's reinstatement of caliphal status as the reappropriation of an "immutable designation" and a divinely ordained heritage.

Although the Cordoba mosque's mythical identity signals specific meanings that are derived from Syrian Umayyad history, in the Akhbar Majmūʿa, the mosque's site is identified as the location where seventy Muslims were martyred before ʿAbd al-Rahman I took control of Cordoba, and his battle is compared to the 657 battle of Siffin between Muʿawiya and ʿAli. This comparison takes Andalusian Umayyad historical associations further back in time by recalling an earlier civil war of major importance to Umayyad history. Siffin is famed as the battle in which Muʿawiya's troops raised copies of the Qurʾān on their spears demanding justice for Caliph ʿUthman's murder; it resulted in arbitration (taḥkīm) and eventually in the establishment of the Umayyad caliphate in 661. The comparison evokes an earlier injustice and an earlier victory that began the cycle of Umayyad caliphal history. The Abbasid massacre of the Umayyad Caliph Marwan and of eighty-two members of the Umayyad family, reported in detail in Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih's al-ʿIṣlāḥ, provides the theme and impetus for ʿAbd al-Rahman I's escape to al-Andalus, beginning a second cycle of injustices against the Umayyads that had begun with ʿUthman's murder. Consequently, the symbol of ʿUthman's murder — the muṣṭafā he was reading at the time of his assassination in Medina and through which he sought protection against his would-be murderers — reappears at the Cordoba mosque in the tenth century, where it acts as a reminder of a series of wrongs visited upon the Umayyads while at the same time underlining the justice of their daʿwa.

References to the four leaves from ʿUthman's muṣṭafā, which were carried out of the treasury in a candle-lit ceremonial procession, project these relics as physical objects that are essential to the mosque's consecration to the Umayyad cause. Their symbolic value operates on two distinct but related levels of meaning. ʿUthman's religious authority, embodied in his collecting of the Qurʾān, is manipulated as an Umayyad legacy that allows his heirs to act as guides for the Muslim community. Caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (685–705) provides an early illustration of the Marwanid Umayyad exploitation of ʿUthman's act in a khaṭba to the Medinese in which he rejects the "ahādith that have trickled to us from [your] region," recognizes the Qurʾān as sole source of authority, and exhorts the Medinese to "keep fast to your muṣṭafā, which the unjustly slain (maṣlūm) Imam ʿUthman gathered for you, and follow the rules [faraḍ] that the unjustly slain Imam ordained for you." ʿUthman's memory, embodied in the blood-stained leaves of his muṣṭafā, also provides the Umayyads with certain divinely sanctioned rights. As ʿUthman's heir, Muʿawiya rallied Syrian support by quoting from the Revelations, "If anyone is slain wrongfully, we have given his heirs authority" (wa man qutūl maṣlūman fa qad jaʿalnah li-wāliyyihī sultānān), a statement emphasizing the ḥaqiq (justice/truth) of Muʿawiya's cause and one which Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih attributes to Ibn ʿAbbas, who was thus able to foretell Muʿawiya's success against ʿAli. This cause is also sanctioned by the Prophet who predicted that ʿUthman, well guided (ʿalaʾ al-hudā) during the future schisms, will be killed while reading sirat al-baqara, so that his blood would drip on the words, fasayfikhumu allāhu, wa huwa al-ṣāmiʿu al-ṣālim (“God will suffice thee as against them, and he is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing”). Subsequently, the caliph's cause will be taken up in both the east and the west, and he will become an intercessor on Judgment Day. ʿUthman's historic act, the collecting of
the Qur'an, transfers authority to his family; the justice of their cause and their "well-guided" caliphate are sanctioned by the Prophet and sanctified by the leaves washed in their forefather's blood. The Prophetic message thus asserts Umayyad rights and authority, whether at the battle of Siffin, the comparable 756 battle of Cordoba, or the 929 competition for the caliphate. Accompanied by 'Abd al-Rahman III's revival of an old practice, cursing the 'Alids,11 Uthman's mushaf is once again raised as the instrument of tabkim in the blood feud against the Abbasids who had usurped the caliphate and the Fatimids who had declared their own in 910, both unjustly.

As the architectural reliquary of Uthman's mushaf, the Cordoba mosque reflects concepts of the doctrinal debates that arose after his murder. The schisms within the community that divided support between two competing caliphs were paralleled in the tenth century by the unprecedented reign of three caliphs. Accordingly, the mosque's extant tenth-century inscriptions issue a call for a unified caliphate through a combination of an unusual series of Qur'anic verses and an unusually large number of historical texts that result in a meaningful iconographic program.42 This program incorporates statements that appear to be significantly related to ideological formulations developed by al-Hasan ibn Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya late in the seventh century and originally espoused by Caliph 'Abd al-Malik as a means of unifying the community.43 The inscriptions reflect the earlier dogmas by defining believer status through a minimum of requirements while continuously emphasizing God's choice (tawfiq) in supplying the hudâ (divine guidance) required for the righteous and truthful (haqiq) foundations of the expansion and its accompanying mulk (power, dominion), thus providing the necessary ideological basis for the mosque's historical and mythical associations.44

Inscriptions above al-Hakam's entrance (al-masjâd ilâ musâllâh) begin with verses that enumerate spiritual obligations, promising paradise to those who profess belief, accept the Prophetic message and reject trinitarian shirk, and are steady in their faith. Verses 41:30–32 in the framing arch of the composition state, "Those who say 'our Lord is God', and further stand straight and steadfast, the angels descend on them, 'fear ye not nor grieve, but receive glad tidings of the garden which you were promised. We are your protectors (twâliyyâ'ukum) in this life and the hereafter, therein shall you have all that your souls desire, therein shall you have what you ask for; a gift from One Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful."45 The inscriptions surrounding the grilled window within the arch quote verses 6:101–102, "To Him is due the primal origins of the heavens and the earth, how can He have a son when He has no consort? He created all things and He has full knowledge of all things. That is God your Lord, there is no God but He, the Creator of all things; then worship Him, He has power to dispose of all affairs." These quotations are followed by invocations (du'â') for divine mercy spoken by the believers in part of 2:286, inscribed in the mosaic band framing the horseshoe arch, "Our Lord condemn us not if we forget or fall into error; our Lord lay not on us a burden like that which You laid on those before us; our Lord lay not on us a burden greater than we have strength to bear, blot out our sins and grant us forgiveness, have mercy on us, You are our Protector, help us against those against faith." The quotations emphasize faith (as opposed to actions, a'mâl) as the primary definition of belief (imân) and God's mercy as the predicate of salvation while literally extracting the element of human choice (in committing good or evil acts, the essence of the subtracted part of the verse) as a factor in judgment.46 They are followed by additional statements on predestination that stress the Umayyads' own predilection for success in verse 3:8, "Our Lord, let not our hearts deviate now that You have guided us (idh hadastanâ), but grant us mercy from Your presence for You are the Grantor (of bounties without measure)."47 In asking for constancy in guidance the verse defines a preexisting and consistent condition whose applicability to the Umayyad caliphate is emphatically underscored in the final, non-Qur'anic formula, "The Dominion is God's upon guidance (al-multâhu billâhi 'ala al-hudâ), God's praises upon Muhammad the seal of Prophets." This formula introduces two historical texts that commemorate the construction of the masjâd and the mosaic decoration of "this venerable house."

The emphasis on predestination that appears around al-Hakam's entrance is reiterated in the inscriptions in the maqsura area, which include statements on God's omnipotence and omniscience and list a minimum of obligations, primarily prayer, as the means for fulfilling religious requirements. In the dome (fig. 5), verse 22:57 and part of 7843 issue a universal call, "O you who believe, bow down and prostrate yourselves, and adore your Lord, and do good, that you may prosper. And strive in His cause as you ought to strive, He has chosen you and has imposed no difficulties on you in religion, it is the cult of your father Abraham; it is He who has named you Muslims, both before and in this (Revelation), that the Apostle may be a witness for you."49 In the mihrab niche (fig. 6), verse 2:238 exhorts believers to
"guard strictly your prayers, especially the middle prayer, and stand before God in a devout frame of mind." This verse is followed by a historical inscription commemorating al-Hakam’s order to sheath the mihrab with marble, "after having constructed it with God’s aid," and, finally, by verse 31:22, "Whosoever submits his whole self to God, and is a doer of good, has grasped indeed the most trustworthy handhold, and with God rests the end and decision of all affairs." 50

The mosaic inscription bands that frame the niche (fig. 7), executed in gold Kufic characters on a blue ground, begin with statements on God’s omniscience, and on the believers’ duty of total submission to Him, in verses 32:6 and 40:65, “Such is He, the Knower of all things, hidden and open, the Exalted, the Merciful. He is the Living, there is no God but He; call upon Him, giving Him sincere devotion, praise be to God the Lord of the worlds.” 51 These quotations are followed by al-Hakam’s foundation inscription and a text commemorating the mosque’s tashāh, possibly a reference to the segmented and reticulated vaults. 52 The main foundation text makes al-Hakam’s expansion a pious response to the needs of the Islamic community with the words, “Thanks be to God Lord of the worlds who chose (muwaqqif) the Imam al-Mustansir Billah,  عبد الله الـ Hakam amir al-mu`minin, may God preserve him in righteousness (aslabahu allāhu), for this venerable construction (al-bunya al-mukarrama) and who was his aid (mu`in) in [effecting] his [His] eternal structure (bunya al-khālid), for the goal of making it more spacious for his followers (al-tausi`a li ra`yiyyatihi), . . . in fulfillment of his and their wishes, and as an expression of his grace toward them.” The horizontal frieze directly within this frame, inscribed in blue mosaic characters over a gold ground,
repeats the theme of God’s unity and omniscience with verse 59:23, “God is He, [other] than whom there is no other god, who knows (all things), both secret and open; He, most Gracious, most Merciful.”

The last inscription in this area is located on the impost of the niche mihrab’s horseshoe arch (fig. 8). It introduces a text commemorating al-Hakam’s order to “set up these two supports of what he has founded upon purity and with sanction from God” (nasb hadhayn alminkabayn fimā assasahu ʿalā taqwā min allāhi wa ridyān), with the middle portion of verse 7:43, “Praise be to God, who has guided us to this (hadāna li hadhā), never could we have found guidance (wa mā kurnā linaḥ-taddī) had it not been for God’s guidance (lawlā ʿan hadānā); indeed it was the truth (al-haqq) that the apostles of our Lord brought to us.” The verse accordingly transforms the minbarayn, usually understood as a reference to the two pairs of marble columns flanking the mihrab niche, into the metaphorical supports — the ḥaqṣq and ḥudā — of an “eternal house” whose foundations are piety and divine sanction (taqwa wa ridyān). Together, these foundations uphold a single statement, the universal daʿwā wa inscribed as a call to the Abrahamic millā in the mosque’s central dome, the qubbat al-ʿĀlam to which ʿAbd al-Ḥamīn III led unbelievers by “adjusting the course of the faith.” The “venerated house”, “venerable” and “eternal” construction facilitated by God’s aid, thus amounts to more than the physical structure of the mosque. It implies the caliphate itself, a necessity for the unification of a Muslim community torn apart by the schisms instigated by false caliphs.

The metaphorical meaning and iconographic identity of the caliphal phase of the Cordoba mosque are accentuated by the phraseology and terminology of its epigraphic program. Nowhere do the inscriptions refer to a mosque, but rather to a house of worship that fulfills a series of prophesies and completes the final cycle of Umayyad history. Al-Hakam’s historical inscriptions, which express gratitude for being chosen as the instrument through which the structure was built and completed, follow a protocol that belongs to the language of shrines, evident in inscriptions at Mecca and Medina.

This protocol provides the Umayyad caliphate with an essential, yet inaccessible, prerogative by presenting the dynastic mosque as a universal Islamic shrine. The insistence on the detailed historical record for this shrine, repeatedly listing the names of patron, supervisor, designers, and scribes, follows from the identification and serves to sanctify the enterprise while at the same time providing various constituent elements (the ṭasbīḥ of the domes or maqṣura, the mihrab and its marble revetment, the wasṣra, the inscriptions and mosaics) with an additional charge. The totality borrows the phraseology of verses 9:108–109 which state in part, “There is a mosque whose foundation was laid from the first day upon piety” and “God’s sanction” to transmit a single message: the re-integration of true Islam whose fundamental architectural symbol is the “first house of worship” or, in Umayyad terms, the Prophet’s Mosque at Medina.

The epigraphic program of the Cordoba mosque combines with its mythical and historical dimensions to project the monument yet another step back in time, making it a counterpart of the mosque-shrine founded by the Prophet. Like its prototype, the Cordoba mosque is constructed after exile and hijra. It is a mosque of conquest and renewal that abrogates what came before it, and one that proclaims the ascendency of a new world order and the establishment of God’s caliphate on earth. While the
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prophecies pertaining to the orphaned ʿAbd al-Rahman I, acknowledged as the Falcon of Quraysh by the Abbasid caliph al-Mansur (754–75), borrow from the established paradigms of the Prophetic Sīra. Ibn ʿAbd Rabbiḥ provides ʿAbd al-Rahman III, another orphan, with a portrait that makes him “God’s caliph, whom He chose (istafāhu) above all others,” and likens his battles against heretics and schismatics to the Prophet’s battles at Badr and Hunayn. In the continuing discourse that branded the Umayyads as proselytizers of hell (duʿāʾī at-taʿārār), the Umayyad response was a daʿwa to the pure Islam of the original ahl al-bayt symbolized by a mosque with a purified site, a sanctifying relic, and an iconographic identity that reinvented it as the “first” Islamic house of worship. This identity is imprinted in the tenth-century description of the Prophet’s mosque provided by Ibn ʿAbd Rabbiḥ’s al-ʿIqd.

Al-ʿIqd, compiled by ʿAbd al-Rahman III’s court poet, includes two sections that are considered original to the author: an ʿurjūza in praise of the caliph that constituted the work’s earlier conclusion, and a section on the three holy shrines. Of these three descriptions, that of the Medinese structure stands out as a highly detailed eyewitness account of the Prophet’s Mosque as reconstructed by al-Walid in 707–9. Significantly, though elsewhere in al-ʿIqd Ibn ʿAbd Rabbiḥ mentions the mosques of Medina and Damascus as representative of al-Walid’s work, the description itself is devoid of any names or dates. Al-ʿIqd then presents a portrait of a shrine that is unrestricted by temporal boundaries but one with an unmistakable Umayyad stamp.

This description was instrumental to Sauvaget’s theoretical reconstruction of the Umayyad phase of the Prophet’s Mosque, which survived largely intact through the thirteenth and fourteenth century and into the fifteenth, and which resembled al-Walid’s other urban mosques but accommodated an important hallowed site. However, the description exhibits inconsistencies with its subject and correspondences with the caliphal expansion of the Cor-
doba mosque that question its documentary value and raise doubts about its authorship and the significance of its larger narrative section to the work as a whole. These correspondences and inconsistencies indicate that the description was a critical instrument of iconographic transfer that conflated two monuments in order to re-create one as an image of the other. Unlike the descriptions of the Meccan and Jerusalemite harams, Medina's begins with the interior, specifically with an account of the sanctuary area that in more than one way corresponds to al-Hakam's own expansion at Cordoba. It begins:

On the qibla side, the [mosque's] aisles (balāṭāt) run across from east to west. Each row of its aisles has seventeen columns, the space between the columns being large and wide. The columns of the southern [qibla] aisle are plastered white and very lofty. The remaining columns are of marble. The plastered columns have large square bases and gilded capitals. Above these are [wood] beams that are also painted and gilded, with the ceiling above these beams painted and gilded as well. Opposite the mihrab, in the middle of the [transverse] aisles [emphasis added], is an aisle (balāṭ) that is gilded all over. [This aisle] cuts through the [transverse] aisles [all the way] from the courtyard as far as the [niche] mihrab's aisle (al-balāṭ al-ladhi bi[hi] al-mihrāb), which it does not cross. And in the aisle adjacent to the [niche] mihrab (al-balāṭ al-ladhi yali al-mihrāb) there is much gilding. In its center is a dome (samiṣ) that is round like a large shield (ka al-tirs al-muqaddar), concave like a mother of pearl shell (mujuwuṣf ka al-muḥāb), and gilded. The description presents a T-plan arrangement, with a central aisle cutting through transverse ones as far as the one opposite the niche mihrab. Both arms of the T are marked by heavy gilding; their crossing is accentuated by a dome that is both like a "shield" or "disk" and like a "mother of pearl shell." This fundamental design of the sanctuary area is distinctly at odds with the mosque's reconstructions, where the niche mihrab (which marks the final point of the central aisle in the description) is shifted to the west so as to maintain alignment with the Prophet's original place of prayer (musalla/mihrāb), a critical aspect of the mosque's dual identity and commemorative functions (fig. 9). Sauvaget resolved the discrepancy by interpreting the gilded balāṭ perpendicular to the niche mihrab as a reference to the arrangement of the wooden beams beneath the flat ceiling. The absence of arcades in the sanctuary indicated that these beams are arranged transversely elsewhere in the mosque (in conformity with the east to west specification), but those in the aisle facing the niche (located off the mosque's central axis) are arranged longitudinally "following a line perpendicular to the qibla wall." Accordingly, the aisle facing the niche mihrab marks a direct path from the Prophet's original musalla/mihrab to the niche at ceiling level, but it is neither expressed in the ground plan nor positioned along the mosque's central axis.

Sauvaget's interpretation of this passage coerces it into conformity with other information pertinent to the Prophet's mosque and especially to the location of the shifted niche mihrab. However, while the description imposes the difficulty of leaving the term balāṭ open to interpretation, it is clear in its emphasis on the centrality of both the gilded aisle, which is "in the middle of the aisles," and of the niche mihrab before which it ends. A later passage that concentrates on the niche underscores the point:

The [niche] mihrāb is in the middle of the qibla wall [emphasis added]. At the summit of its arch ('ada qawwuh) is a thick, protruding gold frame (quṣūṣ) in which is inset 'Aʾisha's mirror, may God be pleased with her. The vault (qabī) of the mihrāb is of very large size [emphasis added], with compartments (dārāt) of which some are gold, some dark
red, and some black. Within the vault there is a carved and gilded band, with a row of gilded octagonal plaques (ṣafāt) below it, within which is inset an agate like the skull of a small boy. Below that row is a marble revetment as far as the floor, painted with unguent. In it is inset the stick (wustad) that the Prophet, peace upon him, used to lean on when getting up from his prostrations in the first mihrab (al-mibrīb al-aṣwad), as has been said, and God knows best. On the right of the niche mihrab is a door for the imam to come in and go out. To the left of the niche mihrab is another small door with a grating. Connecting these doors and the niche mihrab is a fine level walk.

In insisting on the centrality of the niche mihrab, the description presents an odd divergence from a major identifying feature of the Prophet’s Mosque. This discrepancy raises the possibility of a faulty transfer of information from observer to redactor or from visual conception to verbal description, depending on whether or not the passages from al-Ṭaqdī are a true eye-witness account. Alternatively, it can be understood as a normative feature of medieval mechanisms of iconicographic transfer in which elements of a shrine are reinterpreted and/or re-arranged to reproduce the essential value and content of the original without re-creating its exact architectural form, a question whose resolution rests in the architecture of the Cordoba mosque itself.

While the design provided in the description is inconsistent with the Prophet’s Mosque, it corresponds to the expansion in the Cordoba mosque in which an emphatic central aisle, distinguished by gilding and by a hierarchical arrangement of supports, cuts through the arcades to end at the bay in front of the niche mihrab, where it is marked by a large central dome (fig. 4). As is the case in the description, the Cordoba mosque’s niche — whose size and depth have made “room-like” its most common designation — is part of a larger ensemble that includes two doors, one of which is the bāb al-imām (al-Hakam’s mashra) and both of which are signaled by subsidiary domes. The large central dome that marks the crossing, described in al-Ṭaqdī as both shield-like and shell-like, finds its dual formal expression in the Cordoba mosque’s segmented central dome and its niche mihrab’s “mother of pearl shell” hood (figs. 5, 10, 11). Further, a glance at the decorative scheme of the Cordoba mosque’s mihrab also evinces resemblances with the specifications in the description, whether in the red, black, and gold “compartments” of the horseshoe arch or in the decorative bands and marble revetment of the niche itself (fig. 8). Additional correspondences with Cordoba’s mosque appear in al-Ṭaqdī’s description of the qibla wall and its decoration:

![Fig. 10. Cordoba mosque. Al-Hakam’s mihrab. Detail of mother-of-pearl shell hood.](image)

The façade of the qibla wall is sheathed with a marble dado (qānr) from the floor to about a man’s height. This revetment is delineated by a marble frieze (fawq) of the width of a finger. Above this is a narrower frieze that is anointed with unguent. Then there is another band like the first one, in which there are fourteen openings (baḥ) arranged in a line from east to west, similar in size to the window openings (ba’aw) of the Friday Mosque of Cordoba, and all carved and gilded. Above there is another marble band, then a blue frieze inscribed with five lines of gold letters as thick as a finger, containing the suras of qāsr al-muṣafās. Above this is another marble band like the first, lowest, one, with round golden shields (ṭiraṣ). Between each pair of shields is a green column (ṣumād) with golden bars (qubbān) on each of its ends. Above this is another band, as wide [high] as an arm, decorated with scrolls and leaves. Then there is a wide band decorated with mosaic, with the ceiling above it.

Decorative elements concentrated in and around the Cordoba mosque’s niche mihrab replicate details of the decorative scheme of the qibla wall at the Prophet’s Mos-
que. The fourteen windows mentioned in the description are represented in two groups at the Cordoba mosque, with seven blind trefoil arches enclosing mosaic scrolls and branches arranged in a line above the large horseshoe arch and seven more (counting the niche mihrab's arched opening) within the niche itself (figs. 6, 7). The medium and Kufic style of the Cordoban inscriptions, distinctive in their thickness and considered to be deliberately archaizing, again conform to the account. In its totality, the organization of the Cordoba mosque's decorative program, with its alternating marble friezes, mosaic bands, carvings, and inscriptions, is a condensed representation of the decoration of the entire qibla wall described for Medina. This "summary" of the hallowed sanctuary and its qibla wall sharpens the meaning of al-Hakam's expansion and especially of the area around the niche mihrab, amplifying its iconographic charge and providing another explanation for the insistence on commemorating specific architectural features and decorative techniques — mosaics, inscriptions, mihrab niche, and marble revetments, the bāb al-imām, and the maqṣura area in general — of the caliphal expansion.

The detailed description in al-Jīd allowed Sauvaget to reconstruct the qibla wall of the Prophet's Mosque in a manner that corresponds to the organization and vocabulary of decorative motifs known from other Umayyad monuments (fig. 12). As is the case with the shifted niche and aisle, however, this section exhibits another inconsistency with its subject: the omission of the subject matter of the mosaic program of the qibla wall, which is known to have included representations of gardens and palaces that have counterparts in extant portions of the mosaic program at Damascus (fig. 13). Sauvaget rationalized this incongruity in what is an otherwise highly detailed account of the qibla wall as a result of the author's Cordoban origins, implying a familiarity with mosaics that led to his blasé attitude about those at the Prophet's Mosque. Though the author exhibits familiar-
concilable with the spirit and detail of the account yet repeated further on in the description and followed faithfully at the Cordoba mosque, or as a conflation of the caliphal phase of Cordoba’s mosque with the mosque of the Prophet. This conflation suggests that the description was written after al-Hakam had undertaken his expansion, but possibly before the last elements, the wood minbar and maqsura (which are mentioned in the description as old and simple), were in place.

The possibility of a later date for the description of the Prophet’s Mosque is supported by internal evidence from al-Iqd. Shafi, who believed Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih to have been in Medina sometime before 929, also noted that the descriptions of the holy shrines differ in style from the remainder of the work, which also includes information about the Abbasid caliph al-Muti (946–974), indicating that the work was updated by a later hand. Further, Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih is absent from medieval lists of travelers to the east and is not known ever to have made the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. As an addition to a work of ādāb that was much maligned by medieval readers for not presenting information about al-Andalus, the description of the three holy shrines heightens the work’s historiographical value by appropriating necessary caliphal responsibilities and prerogatives into the Umayyad domain.

Whether or not the description of the three holy shrines was added to al-Iqd, its value to the iconography of the Cordoba mosque remains undiminished. The description of the Prophet’s Mosque presents a first, and so far unique, instance of documented iconographic transfer that elucidates the means through which a major monument was invested with meaning. Re-created as an image of the Medinese shrine, the authority of al-Hakam’s mosque was enhanced through its prototype, and particularly through association with the “mosque within a mosque” that incorporates memories and relics of the Prophet. As is the case at Medina, al-Hakam’s expansion acts as a historical and architectural focusing device and instrument of commemoration. The emphatic central aisle at the Cordoba mosque enshrones a direct line from the new, charged, qibla wall and the niche mihrab supported by bāqq and ihad to ʿAbd al-Rahman II’s mihrab (whose four marble columns presumably flank al-Hakam II’s niche mihrab), and, in turn, to ʿAbd al-Rahman I and to the mosque’s oldest memories and foundations, the reasons that precluded al-Hakam’s correction of the mosque’s orientation. This line is then extended beyond local Umayyad history to recall and commemorate critical moments and events in

Fig. 12. Prophet’s Mosque, Medina. Sauvaget’s reconstruction of decorative scheme of the qibla wall. (After Jean Sauvaget, La Mosquée omeyyade de Médine, fig. 3)
Umayyad and Islamic history, thereby transcending geographical and temporal boundaries to participate in inter-Islamic discourses on leadership and caliphal authority. By creating a translucent, multifaceted monument charged with the symbolism of authority, the Andalusian Umayyads left a legacy whose multiple layers of meaning were of value to both Spanish and Islamic cultural history. They also left us a legacy of great informative value; one that defines new issues and directions in the investigation of medieval Islamic mechanisms of architectural iconography, of the documentary value of descriptions of the primary paradigmatic and iconographic model inherent in the Prophet’s Mosque at Medina, and of the ways in which the Cordoba mosque itself was transformed into an authoritative source of architectural iconography.

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NOTES


2. Though ʿAbd al-Rahman disembarked at al-Mankab in September 755, he did not begin to consolidate his position until the battle of Cordoba in May of 756, an event of importance to the mosque’s identity. For these events see Aḥḥār Majmūʿa fi
Fath al-Andalus wa Dhihri Umarah\'a, ed. Emilio Lafuente y Alcántara (Madrid, 1987), pp. 75 f.


4. This is not to imply, as has often been stated, that the Cordoba mosque was the first to transform previously amorphous mosque spaces into spatially and architecturally ordered ones. Rather, Cordoba exhibits an individual sense of order that is somewhat different from, yet still related to, its chronological predecessors.


6. All drawings of the Cordoba mosque are from C. Nizet, *La Mosquée de Cordoue* (Paris, 1905).


12. Significantly, Imam Malik is the source for the hadith produced in Ibn Hazm's treatise on *fada'il al-Andalus*, see Fadā'il al-Andalus wa Ahlāb, (Ibn Hazm wa Ibn Sa'id wa al-Shiqandi), ed. Salah al-Din al-Munajjīd (Beirut, 1968), pp. 6-7.


22. Al-Mas'ūdi, Murāj, 3: 158; *Répertoire chronologique d'épigraphie arabe* (Caïro, 1935), vol. 1, no. 18.

23. The major difference being that Cordoba's mosque had in fact been founded under the Syrian Umayyad caliphate.


25. 'Abd al-Rahman's destiny is recognized after his father's death, when he is taken to al-Rusafa and received by his uncle and grandfather; the latter identifies him with words that approximate Abbasid expressions of the onset of a messianic age, tādāma al-2-ezra, hawā haddha 'alayna ... wa al-lahi qad 'arofatu al-alamata wa al-amr mata la wa'ibuhi wa 'urushi ('the matter is close at hand, it is he ... by God, I recognize the signs on his face and neck'). Later on, 'Abd al-Rahman dhī al-qaftratayn (of the two braids) is recognized as the true "son of kings" by a Jewish seer, a prophecy that results in saving his life, since he is to fulfill a manifest destiny, Akhābīr Majmū'a, pp. 51-52; 54-55. Cf. the accounts of the future Abbasid caliphs analyzed in Jacob Lassner, *Islamic Revolution and Historical Memory: An Inquiry into the Arts of Abbasid Apologetics* (New Haven, 1986); E. Kohlberg, "Some Imamī Shi'ī Interpretations of Umayyad History," *Studies on the First Century of Islam*, ed. G.H.A. Juynboll (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill., 1982), pp. 145-59, for Shi'ī "books of destiny."


28. That this portion of the account is detached from a specific narrative context is indicated by the existence of a number of early variants that apply to both the Damascus and the Medina mosques. A Byzantine variant by Theophanes provides a different perspective on the account and applies it to 'Abd al-Malik and the Meccan barat. Three important variants, al-Tabari's in relation to Medina, al-Maqzari's is in relation to Damascus, and the one by Theophanes are in Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1972), p. 132.

The quotation is from verse 2:137, which speaks of shisms and abrogation of belief, and is commonly seen in Shi'i writings and inscriptions.

40. This information, which again originates from Ibn ʿAbbās, is also included in pro-Abbasid compilations such as the anonymous eleventh-century Akhḫār al-Khaḍafī, ed. Peter Grevenovich and Michael Piotrowsky (Moscow, 1967), pp. 38-39.

41. Ibn ʿIthārī, al-Bayān, 2: 330. A summary of the historical and political situation in al-Andalus, in terms both of internal affairs and of relations with the other two Islamic caliphates, is Mahmoud Makki, “The Political History of al-Andalus,” Legacy of Muslim Spain, esp. pp. 34-40.

42. Despite the fragmentary nature of the program, the survival of inscriptions in the most important areas of the mosque allows a reconstruction of its message. For a general interpretation, see Grabar, “Le mihrab,” pp. 116-17. The inscriptions are recorded in two main sources: Manuel Ocaña Jiménez, “Las inscripciones en mosaicos del mihrab de la Gran Mezquita de Córdoba y la incógnita de su data,” in Henri Stern, Les mosaïques de la Grande Mosquée de Cordoue (Berlin, 1976), pp. 48-52, especially for al-Hakam’s western entrance and for the later reconstruction of those around the eastern doorway by Amados de los Rios, considered authentic in F. Levi-Provençal, Inscriptions Arabes d’Espagne, 2 vols. (Leiden and Paris, 1931).

43. That is, concepts of irṣa and muryjʿa ideology as developed in the later part of the seventh century, J. van Ess, “The Early Development of Kalam,” Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society, ed. G.H.A. Juynboll (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill., 1982) pp. 109-23; cf. Wilfred Madelung, “Murjiʿa,” EI 2, 2nd ed. on the paradox between irṣa (deferring judgment to God, particularly in the matter of ʿUthman and ʿAli) and the later Umayyad tradition of cursing “Ali. On al-Ḥasan’s non-partisan position in the war between ‘Abd al-Malik and Ibn al-Zubayr, Ibn Saʿd, Tabaqāt, 5: 92 f., 107-11. This ideology cannot be applied wholesale to al-Andalus where the situation is complicated further by the adoption of Malikī law, on the one hand, and the suppression of the Qadariyya, on the other. In this context, the mosque’s inscriptions provide important documentation for further necessary investigation into Andalusian Umayyad ideologies. Points raised by the inscriptions are discussed, with varying perspectives, in Ibn Hazm al-Zahirī al-Andalusi (994-1064), al-Faqīr fi al-Misl wa al-Nihal, 5 vols. (Cairo, 1964), 4: 106 f. on makhra; ibid. 139 f. on makhra.

44. On faith versus actions in the Umayyad definition of believer status, see van Ess, “The Early Development of Kalam,” p. 117; on makhra, and the opposing argument of predestination toward tyranny, p. 115.


46. While the quoted portion of the verse reproduces the speech of the new believers, it begins with “on no soul does God place a burden greater than it can bear, it gets every good that it earns and it suffers every ill that it earns,” thereby literally extracting a statement through which the Qadariyya defined the Umayyads as jahūdīya; cf. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Raḍī, al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr (aw Mafāṭīḥ al-Ghayb), ed. Ibrahim Shams al-Dīn and Ahmad Shams al-Dīn, 32 vols. (Beirut, 1992), 7: 148.


nez gives 22.76–78, and that his verse numbering system diverges in several cases. The verses have here been checked against the inscriptions and provided with numbers and translations in accordance with Yusuf Ali’s The Glorious Koran, whose numbering corresponds to Levi-Provençal’s in Inscriptions.

49. The verse continues, “and that you may be witnesses to mankind, so establish regular prayers, give regular charity, and hold fast to God. He is your protector, the best to protect and the best to help.” For interpretations of these verses and the designation musulûn, see al-Razi, al-Tafṣīr al-Kabir, 23: 69 f., esp. pp. 72 f. for ḥad as spiritual strike.

50. Levi-Provençal, Inscriptions, no. 10.

51. Ibid., no. 12.

52. The problematic term tashkîb is discussed in Levi-Provençal, Inscriptions, p. 16, where the author rejects its interpretation as decoration and argues that it is a reference to the intersecting arches in the maqṣura area. However, in his twelfth-century description of the Cordoba mosque, al-Idrisi uses the term tashkîb in reference to the niche mihrâb’s hood, which he describes as “a single piece of marble that is mäshšâna, carved, and decorated.” The term may then refer to either the ribbing or the segmentation and reculuation of the domes; see al-Idrisi, Nuzhat al-Mushtâq, p. 210 (Arabic text), p. 260 (French translation, dictionnaire al-Himyarî, Sfuî, pp. 134–55.

53. The piou dimensions of the act are expanded in reports of the mosque’s funding, as witnessed by Cordoba’s religious establishment, from al-Hakam’s private inheritance; see Ibn ‘Idhârî, al-Bayânî, 2: 349–50.


55. Levi-Provençal, Inscriptions, pp. 13–14, again discusses this problematic term and suggests that it refers to the two pairs of columns flanking the mihrâb.

56. Levi-Provençal, Inscriptions, no. 11. The quotation omits the first and last parts of the verse, removing the speakers, whose hearts are cleared of ghil and who dwell in paradise, and the final statement, “and they shall hear thee cry, ‘Behold, the garden before you.’” Al-Razi, Tafṣîr, 14: 78 f. esp. p. 80. records ‘Alî’s wish that he, ʿUthman, Talha, and al-Zubayr are meant by the verse, that is, that they will be among the “people of paradise” whose hearts are cleared of all sedition, indicating specific interpretations of the whole of verse 7:43 in relation to the Umayyads, ‘Alîids, and Khawarij, and the fiṭna in general. Especially important is the balance between qudra and al-ṣu‘na as the underlying determinants of action, and the subtle difference in the phraseology of this verse in masâhib abî al-ḫâṣm, though the Cordoban inscriptions follow standard wording, pp. 80–81.

57. While al-Maqari, Nağî al-Tib, 1: 243, reports that the Prophet’s name was miraculously inscribed on a number of objects in the mosque, he is skeptical of a report about three red columns, one of which was inscribed with the name “Muḥammad”, another had a figure of Moses’s staff, and the last a figure of Noah’s crow, “all created by God, and not by human hands.” While these columns may not be the same as the four near to the mihrâb (which are green and red) they reflect the ways in which the mosque was regarded at later times.

58. Ibn ʿAbd al-Rabbih, al-Ṣiqâl, 4: 499, ʿad wāʿdaka al-lahu ʿilā Isâ ʾalâmi minhajan wa al-ʿâlî qad dakhalhu fi al-dini aqâfijan, implying that ʿAbd al-Rahman III was the instrument through which God effected this adjustment.

59. Despite the paucity of comparable inscriptions, this correspondence is evident in Umayyad and Abbasid inscriptions at Mecca and Medina; compare Abbasid inscriptions at Mecca, Répertoire chronologique, vol. 1, no. 40 and at Medina, no. 38, and the Umayyad inscriptions at Medina, nos. 46, 47, usurped by the Abbasid al-Mahdi. The Cordoba mosque’s denominations further recall verse 24:36, “in houses [bayât] that God has allowed to be raised for the celebration of His name therein,” quoted in ʿAbd al-Rahman III’s own commemorative inscription, Levi-Provençal, Inscriptions, no. 9.

60. Thus the mosque seems to have raised speculations, similar to those directed to ʿAbd al-Malik and the Dome of the Rock, that it was meant to divert pilgrimage; see Taḥâ al-Walî’s objections, al-Masjīd, pp. 605–8.

61. The entire section that includes verses 9:108–110 contrasts two masjids, of taqwa and dîvrîc, which have a variety of later interpretations. The most significant sections include 108, “There is a mosque whose foundation was laid from the first day upon piety; it is more worthy of your standing forth (for prayer) therein; in it are men who love to be purified, and God loves those who make themselves pure”; 109, “Which then is best? He that lays his foundation upon piety to God and his Good Pleasure [sanction]? Or he that lays his foundation on an undetermined sandcliff ready to crumble to pieces? And it does crumble to pieces with him, into the fire of hell. And God guides not (li yahdi) people that do wrong.” The identity of the first mosque and the mosque of taqwa was the subject of much debate, and is often considered to have been the mosque of Quba, an identification that, however, was not supported by the Umayyads. For traditions on the mosque, see M.J. Kister, “You Shall Only Set out for Three Mosques: A Study of an Early Tradition,” Le Musée 52 (1969): 173–87. On the Prophet’s foundation of the first mosque, Ibn Sa’d, Tabaqât, 1: 239–41, and on masjid al-taqwa, 1: 244–46.


64. Memories of earlier Abbasid propaganda against the Umayyads are preserved in al-Ṣiqâl; the specific designation is from the verses recited on the eve of the massacre (4:484) beginning “wamiwa al-dâlî lâ ilâ al-jinîn fihushma wa bainî umayyatâ min duʿa′îtisi al-nâri.”

65. In the edition used throughout this article, the ʿirâjûsh or narrative poem appears at the end of volume 4. The description of the three holy shrines, part of kitâb al-zahrârâdja al-thânisya, is in 6: 255–65, and correctly describes the Abbasid maqṣura with which al-Mahdi (775–85) replaced the Umayyad one. The following analysis of the description of the Prophet’s mosque refers to 6: 260–63, but uses all available editions of al-Ṣiqâl (which show minor differences), as well as translations in Muhammad Shafi’, “A Description of the Two Sanctuaries of

66. The description uses the term balāṭ to refer to aisles, bays, and arcades. Since the Prophet’s Mosque is not known to have had arches beyond those facing the courtyard, the term aisle is used to distinguish transversal or perpendicular disposition in relation to the qibla wall in accordance with the description.


68. Ibid., “Fi al-balāṭat al-ḥadāthi yāri al-mihrāb” can also be understood as “in the bay facing the mihrab.”

69. Sauvaget, La Mosquée, fig. 5; G.I. Bisheh, “The Mosque of the Prophet in Medina,” Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1979, fig. 9; Saleh Lamī Mustafà, al-Madina al-Munawwara (Beirut, 1981), fig. 52, and the studies accompanying these reconstructions. It is important to note, however, that while the mosque survived into the fifteenth century, the shifted niche mihrab is not mentioned in accounts predating the eleventh.

70. Sauvaget, La Mosquée, p. 81.


72. This “mirror” is described with much skepticism by Ibn Jibayr, who mentions both a polished, reflective, yellow stone named mirāt Khayraw, and a Chosroes’s “goblet” above the arch; translated in Sauvaget, La Mosquée, p. 84, and understood as a visual marker for the Prophet’s musalla.

73. Sauvaget, La Mosquée, p. 84, n.1, rejects the terms “original mihrab” as an “erreur d’interprétation de l’auteur”; however, mihrab here designates the space (musalla) occupied by the Prophet in prayer, which is why the term has been rendered as “niche” or “musalla” elsewhere in this analysis. For the etymology of the term and its application to spaces, see Nuha N.N. Khoury, “The Mihrab: From Text to Form,” International Journal of Middle East Studies (forthcoming).

74. Al-‘Iṣḥāq, 6: 261, “buyna ḥaṭṭayn al-bibayn wa al-miḥrābīn muṣṣarāt ba‘īn.” A literal understanding of the sentence is architecturally impossible, and it must be taken to mean that there is a walkway or wider space in front of the mihrab and its flanking doors that acts as a connective.


77. The last five chapters of the Qurʾān; cf. Ibn al-Najjar, al-Durra, p. 575, who mentions inscriptions added by al-Mahdi, but many of which are in fact Umayyad and have fragmentary counterparts at Cordoba.

78. Tawāṣa, can be rendered as “disks,” as per Sauvaget, La Mosquée, p. 78, which would indicate the translation “round shield” is used here to maintain consistency with the description of the dome as also shaped like a disk or round shield.

79. The description uses qubān in this location, specifying “qubān wa waqūn min dhiḥāh.” The translation “scroll” is in line with the floral decoration indicated for this frieze, resulting in a “golden vine” motif that agrees with Sauvaget, La Mosquée, p. 79, where this second occurrence of the term is rendered “vigne.”


81. Sauvaget, La Mosquée, pp. 78–81, fig. 3; cf. the original marble plaques in the western vestibule of the Damascust mosque, Creswell, A Short Account, fig. 34.

82. Though no palaces or gardens are portrayed in the surviving mosaics of the Dome of the Rock, the program includes crowns and trees. At the Cordoba mosque, the motifs most closely resembling representational elements are the crows and branches in the blind trefoil arches above the niche mihrab, reflections of new tastes and ornamental formulations.

83. For the second omission, al-‘Iṣḥāq, 6: 262, wa ḥiṣār al-maṣṣidī kullūhu min dakhilihīa maṣṣahrafatūn bi rukhami wa al-dhahabi wa al-fusali‘ū bi waqalūhū wa ḍīhāhū (“the mosque’s inner walls are decorated with marble, gilding, and mosaics from beginning to end”). Sauvaget, La Mosquée, p. 80, n.3, understands the walls as those of the sanctuary, though the passage indicates that they comprise the courtyard façades. The mosaics at Medina are often described; for example, Ibn al-Najjar, al-Durra, pp. 272–73.

84. Al-‘Iṣḥāq, 6: 261, correctly describes the Abbaseid maqbara that replaced al-Walid’s, “the maqbara screen extends from the western wall, where it abuts the portal, to the vestibule adjoining the eastern wall. From this vestibule one can ascend to the mosque’s roof. The [screen] is an old and simple one, with crenellations and four doors.” This is followed by the mention of the Prophet’s rawda, minbar, and tomb and further on by the courtyard and three minarets, ending with the conduct proper for visiting the Prophet’s mosque-shrine. The description again provides points of correspondence with the Cordoba mosque, particularly the upper galleries of the qibla side.


87. This is in fact a primary reason for Ibn Hazm’s and al-Shiṣqandi’s defense of al-Andalus and its scholars, see n. 12 above.