The Dome of the Rock: A Confluence of Byzantine (Christian) and Islamic Art Traditions

Kirsten Scheid, Art History
Dr. Olawole Famule, Visual Arts Department

Fig. 1 Dome of the Rock. C. 691. Jerusalem. Photo by Mark A. Wilson, professor, College of Wooster

Abstract
The monumental Dome of the Rock is the product of the new Islamic culture’s adoption and integration of visual iconography to display both continuity from and hegemony over the existing power structures. Adoption is the lifting of forms from an existing culture remodeled to serve new purposes; integration is the acceptance of forms from an external culture. The specific location of the Dome is important in Jewish culture as being the presumed location of the first Jewish Temple. The architecture of the Dome is derived from Christian martyria, although heavily modified. The means of decoration also derives from regional forms, but the widespread and elaborate use of decorations is a new and novel use of the technique.

Introduction
No culture lives in isolation; there is always communication. Without this inter-cultural transmission, if Islam had sprung up in a desert devoid of history, there would be no Dome of the Rock. But there were several cultures, each having its own history and ideas, and symbols used to portray those ideas, and all overlaid with a history of interaction and established lines of communication - through war, yes, but also through trade, and through the simple fact of living next to each other, to seeing each other.

Richard Ettinghausen, in the introduction to From Byzantium to Sasanian Iran and the Islamic World, defines integration and adoption as two of three major principles in the transfer of artistic forms between cultures.
...[A]doption. Just as a child may be adopted and brought up in a milieu entirely at variance with that of his original home so that his whole personality may be thus modified, though biologically he remains the same human being, so may artistic forms transferred from one region to another and remodeled according to novel principles differ so much from their original configurations that their true identities become obscured.

(The) most far-reaching form of cultural reception involves the ready acceptance, owing to special conditions, of major artistic forms from another civilization and their creative combination with indigenous elements, in what might best be called a process of integration; being a form of artistic interchange, it is difficult to say which is the giver and which the receiver (Ettinghausen, *From Byzantium*, p.2).

The monumental Dome of the Rock is a brilliant example of the adoption of existing cultural icons to express new ideas. It was built by Abd al-Malik and dedicated in 692 CE, during the Umayyad Empire. Its location on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem is significant because the specific location was considered sacred by Jews, Christians, and Romans, going back thousands of years. The placement of the Dome of the Rock in that location conveys the idea that Islam is the continuation and natural successor to the previous religions. It is decorated with crown and jewel motifs from both the Byzantine and Sassanid Empires, with garden-inspired motifs, and with inscriptions of quotes from the Quran referring to both Mohammed and Jesus as envoys from God (Ettinghausen, *Art*, p. 28 – 34. Grabar, *Shape*, p. 56).

The Dome dominates the skyline of Old Jerusalem even today. It is argued that the Temple Mount is Mount Moriah, where Abraham was to sacrifice his son. The specific site of the Dome of the Rock is believed by some to be the site of Solomon's Temple, the first Jewish Temple, and the Second Jewish Temple, finished during the reign of Darius I of Persia, in the 6th Century BCE. The Romans destroyed the Second Temple during the siege of 70 CE. The Foundation Stone is considered to be the “Holy of Holies,” the place in the Second Temple where the Arc of the Covenant was kept.

**Overview of Historical Interactions**

The Silk Road was a longstanding route of transmission between cultures, religions and regions. “Road” is a misnomer; there were four primary land routes and several sea routes that were interconnected. Traffic along the Silk Road ran from eastern China through Central Asia to the
Mediterranean in times of peace, its route diverted north or south by conflicts, driven by commerce and carrying material goods including art, textiles, food and technology. Beginning as a local trade route in eastern and central China in about 220 BCE, it eventually stretched westward, bringing China and Southern Asia into contact with Damascus and Alexandria through two major land routes and extensions to sea ports and shipping routes in the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean. Along with tangible goods, the Silk Road carried cultural ideas including language and religion. Certainly political communication between the empires was never silenced, allowing treaties and alliances to be negotiated.

A sample of communication at the highest levels of government, from a letter quoted by Matthew Canepa in his introduction to *The Two Eyes of the Earth*:

> God effected that the whole world be illumined from the very beginning by two eyes, namely by the most powerful kingdom of the Romans and by the most prudent scepter of the Persian state. For by these greatest powers the disobedient and bellicose tribes are winnowed and man's course is continually regulated and guided.

This letter from Kosrow II to the Byzantine Emperor Maurice in the late sixth century illustrates the emerging world view of the two empires. The Roman Empire helped Kosrow II in his struggles with King Bahram VI in fighting for control of the Sasanid Empire. When King Bahram VI was defeated and assassinated, the truce with the Byzantine Empire was concluded, and Maurice regained the Persian provinces of Armenia and Georgia. Maurice and his sons were executed in 602 and after his assassination, Kosrow II attacked the empire, using the excuse of avenging Maurice's murder. This episode destabilized both Persia and the Byzantine Empire, leaving both vulnerable to invasion. After the division of the Roman Empire, the two states developed along separate lines. The Western Roman Empire remained a polytheistic culture synthesized from the many groups that Rome had conquered, but in the Eastern Empire the emphasis shifted to Greek culture rather than Latin. Greek Orthodox Christianity became the primary religion after the conversion of Constantine the Great. Under his rule, the capital of the Eastern Empire was moved to Byzantium, giving the empire its name. The city was renamed Nova Roma, but it was popularly called Constantinople, and is now known as Istanbul.

Alexander the Great conquered lands from the Mediterranean eastward through Central Asia. After his death in 323 BCE, this great region was divided among many of his Greek generals, who eventually became naturalized to the areas that they ruled, bringing with them much of Greek culture, including architecture and sculpture in what is now known as the Hellenistic or Classical style. In sculpture, the
artistic conventions of proportion, beauty, and expression developed and canonized by the Greek are seen in sculptures such as “The Winged Nike of Samothrace (Fig. 2)” were spread, with sculpture being frequently used to ornament public buildings (Kleiner, *Gardner’s*, p. 139-145). The main elements of construction including “columns and piers, vaults and domes, 'basilical' plans and 'central' plans, stone and brick,” were integrated into the local vernacular throughout what would eventually become the Byzantine and Islamic empires (Ettinghausen, *Art*, p.23).

![Winged Nike of Samothrace](image)

Fig. 2 Winged Nike of Samothrace. Parian marble, ca. 190 BC? Found in Samothrace in 1863. Louvre Museum, Paris. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen, 2007

**Byzantine Artistic Conventions**

Early Christian art does not date from the time of Christ, but is the art that refers to the stories of the time of Christ, springing from this background of Hellenistic culture. The earliest art dates from the Third Century CE in Rome and is found in the Catacombs – underground passages and chambers used as cemeteries for Christian dead. Old Testament – that is to say Jewish – people figure heavily in Early Christian art because a large portion of early Christians had converted from Judaism, and they considered the Old Testament as the pre-history of the New Testament. Jonah’s three days and nights in
the belly of the beast were seen as a foretelling of the Resurrection. Abraham's preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac is seen as a foretelling of God's sacrifice of Jesus. The “original sin” of Adam and Eve is seen as leading directly to the crucifixion of Jesus. Characters like the Philosopher and the Good Shepherd borrowed from Classical art became symbols for Christ. (Kleiner, p. 225)

Early Christian art developed stylistically from the rejection of the godlike perfection of Classical art, and developed its symbolism from Biblical sources. The artistic conventions moved from the Classical perfection of human and animal forms to a more abstract representation, developing a rich vocabulary and establishing the icon as a devotional figure. Religious art became a “... visual expression of the carefully formulated doctrine of a mystical connection between the image and its sacred subject” (Trilling, p. 29).

It continued to rely on human and animal forms as its primary vocabulary. An example of this is the sarcophagus of the Church of Santa Maria Antiqua, in Rome (Fig. 3). The central figure of the sarcophagus is a figure holding its hands upraised in a traditional gesture of prayer or supplication. A man is seated, wearing philosopher's robes and reading a scroll. A shepherd is shown carrying a lamb across his shoulders. To the far right is an older, bearded man, with his hand on the head of a young boy. These figures, while seemingly innocuous, were coded representations of Jesus; as offering prayer for souls, as a teacher, as the shepherd of lost souls, and the man and boy standing in a river represents the ceremony of baptism. All these figures are limp-looking, with slightly large heads, a subtle move away from the perfection of the Classical tradition. The only figure in this scene portrayed in the Classical tradition is a young man lying in front of the Leviathan, representing Jonah after his escape from the monster's belly. His portrayal in classical style is a reference to Jonah being pre-Christian (Stokstad, p. 241).

Fig. 3 Sarcophagus of the Church of Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome c. 270 Marble
The technical term, “mosaic,” refers to the creation of decorative patterns and images through the placement of small pebbles or cubes of ceramic or glass in grout. It is an ancient art beginning in Grecian floor mosaics rendered with black and white pebbles. The medium spread throughout the world of the Roman Empire, from England to Egypt. Mosaics were widely popular as home decorations, used as a durable and beautiful floor treatment. As the technique advanced, images (frequently copies of paintings) and abstract designs were developed by pressing small glass cubes called tesserae into grout. The floor decorations were originally created off-site and then transported to the installation. The use of the medium was eventually transferred to walls (Stokstad, p. 215).

Mosaics became a common medium for decoration of church walls in the Byzantine Empire. As part of his political support for the Christian religion, Constantine revoked taxation on the artists who created mosaics for churches. Basil the Great, bishop of the Church in Cappadocia, said that iconographers were equal in honor to those who wrote the Gospels, because of the power of the art to express the ideas of the religion. Early religious mosaics in the Byzantine Empire had a blue background rather than gold. The figures within are presented in a hierarchic order. “In Byzantine iconography the saint is not represented as he was in actual life, that is, naturalistically, but as he is in the heavenly kingdom, as he is in eternity” (Cavarnos, p. 44). In Christian orthodoxy, the act of viewing the icon creates a window or threshold through which the viewer can access sanctity. The icon loses this power when the image is painted over or otherwise obscured (Vikan pp 135-137, Fig. 4)

Fig. 4  Mosaic from the church of Hagios Demetrios in Thessaloniki, late 7th or early 8th century, showing St. Demetrios with donors.

Photo: The Yorck Project.
Islamic Artistic Conventions

What we know as Persia was an alliance of smaller conquered groups swearing fealty directly or indirectly to a central king. The Sassanid Persian Empire was the last empire before the coming of Islam. At its peak it controlled what we know today as Iraq; Iran; Afghanistan; some part of Syria; Armenia; Georgia; Azerbaijan, and Southwestern Central Asia, part of Turkey, the Persian Gulf, and part of Pakistan. After a war with the Byzantine Empire ending in 224CE, the Sasanid Empire agreed to the Tigris River as the boundary between the two empires.

Muslim art is the result of accumulation from a number of sources; Arabic, Persian, Mesopotamian, African, and Byzantine. For Islamic people, the Qur'an is seen as the first work of art. The Muslim artist draws his inspiration from his experience of the Qur'an, with an emphasis on the presence and attributes of the divine. Artists must be believers; that is, doing good works and embracing the remembrance of Allah. Iconoclasm was important especially in the early days of Islam and the depiction of humans and animals was discouraged, because it was seen as a reminder of the “despised idolatrous past” of the people. Allah is described in the Qur'an as the One who is not seen, so therefore there is no reason to depict Him (Saoud, p.5).

“Muslim art is characterised by an analogy between geometrical design and crystal forms of certain minerals. The main difference between it and the art of other cultures is that it concentrates on pure abstract forms as opposed to the representation of natural objects. Prisse d'Avennes, 1878, “L'Art Arabe d'apres les Monuments du Caire,”Morel, Paris] classified them into three types, floral, geometrical, and calligraphic.”(Saoud, p.6).

Vegetal and floral types are representations that are abstract rather than realistic. In Islamic art, plant parts are interwoven into geometric patterns, as is seen in the arabesque. The original use of geometric forms as decorations is in debate, but credit for the development of this style clearly belongs to the Muslim world. Geometric forms are used because they do not conflict with the prohibition on images of living creatures, and because they encourage contemplation.

The development of calligraphy is associated with the importance that Muslims attach to their holy book, which promises divine blessings to those who read and write it down, making calligraphy an act of worship. There is speculation that Islamic calligraphy developed as an imitation of Chinese or Japanese work, but there is no substantiation for this idea. Another school of thought is that the development of calligraphy is a natural response to the power inherent in certain words or phrases,
making the development of calligraphy a sign of respect or devotion.

There are two forms of calligraphy; Kufic, developed in the city of Kufa, is known for its distinctive style of right angles and elongated vertical and horizontal lines. Its rectangular form makes it useful in architectural forms and easy to combine with geometric shapes. It has been used on coins and flags (Fig. 5). Nashki is the familiar rounded and cursive form used in modern Arabic (Saoud, p. 6-10).

![Kufic script](image)

Fig. 5 Kufic script, from an early Quran manuscript showing Sura 7 (Ala'araf) verses 86 & 87, 7th century. National Library, St. Petersburg, Russia.

**The Dome of the Rock**

The biggest questions relating to the Dome of the Rock involve the meaning of the site and whether the true purpose of the Dome's construction was political or religious in nature. The holiness of the city of Jerusalem comes directly from Christian and Jewish traditions. The Fada'il al-Bayt al-Muqaddas of Abu Bakr al-Wasiti is a collection of writings from soon after the construction of the Dome, and are the most contemporaneous writings regarding the religious significance of the site and of the city of Jerusalem. These accounts are transmitted from either Companions of the Prophet or their companions, most of which had direct first-hand knowledge of the Jewish traditions regarding Jerusalem. In these accounts it was recognized that Mount Moriah was a sacred spot designated by God for the building of His Holy House, a job entrusted to Solomon. The Rock itself was considered to be the second place created on earth by God, after the Ka'ba, and is the site from which God ascended to the heavens after the Creation.

Grabar speculates that Umar, the caliph to whom Jerusalem surrendered, felt that the strong connections between Judaism and early Islam should be cemented by the construction of a mosque on the site of the *haram al-Sharif*. Jerusalem was conquered in 637 by the Arabs. As a condition of the treaty, the Christians demanded that Caliph Umar be present at its signing. Umar (with Sophronius) was led through the city. Later sources added many legends to the thing. Sources agree that first, Umar insisted on seeing one specific site. Second, the site was not the Rock, but the Haram area in general,
which was seen as the site of David's temple (*mihrab Dawud*). According to the same sources the Rock was rejected by Umar along with the suggestion from a Jewish convert named Ka'b, that he orient his mosque with the qiblah in the same direction as the Rock so that the faithful would turn also towards the Rock when at prayer, signalling an alliance towards the Jewish community. Sophronius, a Christian, also encouraged the building of a mosque on the site, using the Jewish traditions as a selling point. This shows that the original conqueror of the area was not aligning himself with the Jewish side of the continuing quarrel between Jewish and Christian forces in the area. It is certain that the area was taken over with a clear idea of “its significance in Jewish traditions.” None of the sources indicate that the Rock was the central theme in the discussions (Grabar, Formations, pp. 54-58).

Construction of the Dome was under the rule of Abd al-Malik, the son of Marwan whose short-lived caliphate was Palestine, and it is assumed that al-Malik placed his seat of government in Jerusalem. An account states that al-Malik received his bay'ah, or oath of faith, in Jerusalem, meaning that he was in Jerusalem when his father died. Al-Malik's name is also associated with Jerusalem by a prophecy stating that he was linked to a divine will to build the Dome of the Rock (Rabbat, p. 16).

The focus had changed dramatically by the time of Abd al-Malik and the building of the Dome, although the idea that the Rock was the place from which Mohammed began his Night Journey had not yet been promulgated. In the Quran, Abraham is considered neither Christian nor Jew, but a holy man and the original Muslim. There is some evidence that early Islam had located many of the events of Abraham's life in and around Jerusalem. Perhaps with the encouragement of the converted Jews, Abraham became associated with the Rock, and al-Malik constructed the Dome as a monument to Abraham and the Jewish foundations of Islam. Instead of the later Abayyad contention that the Dome was built as an attempt to strike against the Kaaba in an action against a pillar of Islam, it becomes a political/religious action arising from an uncertainty regarding religious lore (Grabar, Formation, pp. 54-58).

“Another paradox of Jerusalem is that a small number of buildings and of spaces served a large number of hallowed functions—commemoration, pilgrimage, prayer for forgiveness and eternal life. These functions had common themes that differed in their specific associations, as, for instance, the prophet Muhammad's mystical presence came to dominate the places where early kings and prophets were occasionally still remembered. The hallowed history of Islamic Jerusalem, like the Christian and probably like the Jewish one as well, incorporated broad religious themes and specific connections that changed in intensity over time and were even exchanged for one another. We saw this most clearly in the Dome of the Rock, whose early
royal and eschatological meanings turned into associations with Moses and Abraham, and eventually with the prophet Muhammad” (Grabar, *Shape*, p.172).

Some Abbasid documents assert that al-Malik sought to overthrow Mecca as the spiritual center of Islam. There are two very strong reasons to doubt this assertion. First, the Abbasid sought to undermine and discredit their predecessors, the Umayyads. Secondly and more importantly, the importance of Mecca is enshrined as one of the pillars of Islam. For al-Malik to show such disrespect to Mecca would be the same as to forsake Islam.

The sumptuous decorations of the Dome stand in stark contrast to the earliest buildings of the new Islamic regime which were strictly utilitarian, built to meet the immediate needs of the religion and its adherents for congregational space or government offices. There is an apocryphal story of Mu'awiya, the first Caliphate of the Umayyad Dynasty, wherein he ordered the demolition and reconstruction of his government building in Damascus when he heard a Byzantine envoy say that “the upper part will do for birds and the lower for rats” (Rabbat, p.12).

The Dome of the Rock stands out as the earliest still-existing piece of monumental architecture from the earliest days of Islam, and as having no precedent in Islamic architecture. The architecture of the Dome specifically refers to Christian martyriums. As examples, both the Chapel of the Ascension and the Basilica of the Ascension in Jerusalem consist of drums surrounding a protective edicule. Construction techniques as well as proportions are derived from Christian architecture, which in turn derived from Classical Greco-Roman architecture. Even the interior decorations are similar in materials to Christian sanctuaries of the times, although not in style. Wall mosaics and marble facings were also common in Christian sanctuaries (Ettinghausen, *Art*, pp. 28-34).

Grabar's conclusion is that the decorations of the Dome of the Rock used existing Byzantine-Christian symbols and biblical connotations to dramatically assert Islam's presence in the city, and to enhance the idea that Islam was a continuation and completion of the earlier monotheistic religions. Nasser Rabbat cites Priscilla Soucek in saying that the opulence of the decorations of the Dome was an homage to Solomon's Temple, praised for its decorations of jewels and trees. These same images are found in the outer octagon of the Dome (Rabbat, p. 13).

The architecture of the Dome of the Rock consists of a tall dome 25 meters high and 20 meters wide, sitting on a drum which rises to a height of thirty meters. This cylinder is enclosed in an octagonal shape containing two ambulatories, only thirteen meters in height externally, shifting all the focus to the gilt wooden dome, which dominates the skyline. The cylinder is pierced at the top by 16 windows. The drum is supported by an arcade of four piers and twelve columns. A sloping roof rises from behind
the outer wall to meet the drum just below the windows. The two ambulatories around the arcade are separated by an arcade of eight piers and sixteen columns. A continuous band of ties runs atop the columns' capitals and the piers. Each side of the outer octagon is divided into seven panels separated by pilasters, five of which contain windows. These windows are currently covered with grilles dating from the sixteenth century, replacing what probably was interior marble tracery and external ironwork.

The external surfaces of the building have marble slabs covering the lower walls and tiles covering the top of the walls. The original mosaics of the outside walls were nearly completely replaced during the Ottoman Empire by Suleiman the Magnificent with Turkish faience tiles. These tiles were in turn replaced with faithful copies made in Italy in the 1960's during the Jordanian restoration (Fig. 7).
While techniques of construction, scale and proportions, and use of mosaic and slabs of marble as wall coverings are held in common with Christian/Byzantine architecture, the way they are used and what they are used for is not the same.

The mosaics, which are mostly original, are already iconoclastic and do not portray a single human or animal. There is a discouragement of the portrayal of living beings in the Quran, making these decorations unlike Byzantine representations of religious figures and symbolic animals, or the Greek and Roman approach that held the image of man as the source of perfection. However the inner surfaces of the drums and of the arcades are decorated with crowns, jewels, and breastplates, symbols of royal power in Byzantium and Sasanid Persia. This placement would suggest that all kingdoms now look to Islam, as symbolized by the associations of Abraham with the Rock, or that these kingdoms are all defeated by Islam, and their treasures have been taken as trophies. These symbols of power are mounted in and surrounded by vegetal ornamentation – flowers, twining vines hung with fruits. Perhaps this is a reference to the Islamic belief that the earth is a paradise, and that jewels and crowns are no more beautiful than what grows from the earth?

There is a band of Kufic inscription running just below the ceiling in the octagons, working as both a decoration and as a symbol (Fig. 8). It is decorative in that it works as a border separating the ceiling from the rest of the wall. It is symbolic in that, even though it is high up on the wall and difficult to read, it contains all the references to Christ in the Quran, references which refer to Jesus as a prophet, but not as Son of God, emphasizing once again that Islam considers itself as the completion of the Peoples of the Book. The inscription praises Allah, and exhorts Christians to give up the mistaken idea of the Trinity, and to instead celebrate only one God. In the Shape of the Holy (pp. 56-68), Grabar has a long consideration of the possible meanings of the inscriptions and the non-conventional use of diacritical marks, speculating that perhaps the craftsmen were illiterate and were working from drawings. He comes to the conclusion that the diacritical marks were used more for emphasis and decoration than for clarifying the text.
Thirdly, the mosaics present new conventions that will continue in Islamic art. First, the non-realistic representations of natural forms. An example would be that of a tree with a jeweled box for its trunk. A second convention is that of constant variety within a type. There are only a few types of vegetation shown, but each representation of that vegetation is unique. If there is a band of leaves, each leaf, while similar in shape, will be an individual in color and detail.

Another innovation is the changed relationship between the architecture and the decorations, Traditionally in Classical architecture, decoration had been used sparingly to complement the structure. One would hardly use the word “sparingly” to describe the decorations of the Dome of the Rock. Furthermore, some decorations seem to have been placed to break up the flow of the structure, while in other places, the decorations are chosen to fit comfortably on the surface.

One final break from the conventions of Christian edifices is in the use of the dome. From the outside, the gilt dome dominates the skyline of Old Jerusalem. Inside, because of the position of the Rock, the Dome is hardly seen. So while outside the Dome proclaims the dominance of Islam, inside is a luxurious shrine devoted to its own purposes (Ettinghausen, Art, pp 28-34).

**Conclusion**

Continuing the region's history of cultural adoption and integration, the Umayyad Empire used the symbolism, architecture and artistic conventions of the civilizations around it to create the Dome of the Rock, a beautiful and enduring example of repurposing of cultural artifacts to meet the needs of the new religion.


