Books

A groundbreaking study of the Umayyad Mosque, Damascus, uses the surviving structure and texts to reconstruct its original state

The Umayyad Mosque of Damascus: Art, Faith and Empire in Early Islam
By Alain George. 264 pp. incl. 150 col. ills. (Gingko Library, London, 2021), £60.
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by **SEAN W. ANTHONY**

Founded in 705 by the Caliph al-Walīd I (reg.705–15), the Umayyad Mosque, Damascus, also known as the Great Mosque, has an importance in the history of Islamic architecture that is difficult to overemphasise. The aim of the book under review is to trace its history and to analyse its construction. To do so, the author, Alain George, sets out to reconstruct the structure and ornamentation of the mosque in its original state and to examine the responses of contemporaries to its initial construction. Not only does the book achieve these aims, it also offers a pathbreaking exploration of the building's broader history and a model for how to approach the historiography of early Islamic architecture.

The mosque was greatly admired by the geographers of the Abbasid era, among them al-Yaʿqūbī (d. after 908), who wrote that 'there is [no mosque] more beautiful in the whole of Islam' (p.23). In the tenth century, al-Maqdisī declared the mosque to be 'the most beautiful thing that Muslims possess anywhere – their most precious collective asset' (p.226). The revered jurist al-Shāfiʿī (d.820) even placed the Umayyad Mosque alongside the lighthouse of Alexandria as a wonder of the world. The Abbasids themselves, who nearly eradicated the Umayyads and replaced them as caliphs in 750, extolled its marvels. As one story goes, when the Abbasid Caliph al-Manṣūr (reg.754–75) appointed his son al-Mahdī to administer the Levant in 771, the prince travelled to Jerusalem by way of Damascus. Upon entering the city's mosque, the prince allegedly exclaimed, 'the Umayyads surpassed us!'.[1] When he arrived in Jerusalem and caught sight of the Dome of the Rock, built by the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik in 692, al-Mahdī was similarly dumbstruck. Not even the buildings of Baghdad, only recently built by al-Mahdī's father in 767, could hold a candle to the Umayyad monuments of the Levant.

The first chapter discusses the numerous depredations that befell the Umayyad Mosque over the centuries. Several earthquakes endangered its structural integrity and human-made crises threatened its very survival. The outbreak of a war in Damascus between pro-Fāṭimid and pro-Saljūq forces in 1069 caused a fire that spread to the mosque and ravaged its ceilings and mosaics. In the fifteenth century two disastrous fires consumed much of the building, the first on the occasion of the siege of Damascus in 1401 by the Turco-Mongol conqueror Timur (d.1405) and the second in 1479, when a fire in a nearby market spread to the mosque. Most recently, a fire in 1893 was caused by the embers of a hookah carelessly left on the rooftop by a worker entrusted with its repair. Yet, as George meticulously documents, each time these destructions were followed by renovations. The inhabitants of Damascus ensured that the building survived.

The challenges that the current state of the building pose to its study are considerable. One arises from scholarly neglect: the modern mosque has never been properly excavated, although some data survives from archeological soundings and in the form of photographs from a short-lived excavation of the courtyard conducted in 1962–63. The documentation of the restoration work undertaken in the 1950s and 1960s leaves much to be desired. George's second chapter traces, as far as possible, the history of the successive buildings on the site. In fact, his in-depth questioning of the evidence could be compared to the process of an excavation. He compares the current state of the mosque to a palimpsest, an analogy previously applied to the Dome of the Rock by Gülru Necipoğlu in her article on the Ottoman reception and renovations of the mosque.[2] George demonstrates that the structure of the Umayyad Mosque consists of successive layers, going back to a Roman temple with a temenos and cella, which was followed by a late antique basilica that the Umayyads demolished to make place for the mosque, which itself consists of different layers, ranging from the original building to its medieval and modern restorations.

To delve into each successive layer, George adopts an array of sources and methods: art history, philology and epigraphy, and he provides an astute analysis of the evidence, both material and textual. The oldest sources he employs are contemporary with the mosque's construction: a fragmentary leaf from a monumental Umayyad Qur'an, which depicts the mosque probably in an idealised state; Greek and Arabic papyri, excavated in Aphrodito, Egypt, with demands for material and labour to meet the needs for the mosque's initial construction under al-Walīd; and panegyrics by three contemporary Umayyad poets (published in full in an appendix in Arabic and in an English translation by Nadia Jamil). A more recent cache of sources that George exploits is the photographic record of the building, which turns out to be extensive. The earliest known images are two daguerreotypes from 1842 taken by the French photographer Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey and a series of photographs taken in 1862 by the English photographer Francis Bedford, when he accompanied the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) on a tour of the Middle East (Fig.1).[3] These precious images are the best record of the building prior to the disastrous fire in 1893, which prompted major changes to the building's structure, such as the reconstruction of the transept, its dome and the roof of the prayer hall.

The book also offers a penetrating reading of the layered historical accounts of the Umayyad Mosque's construction in medieval Syrian texts. Although George exploits this material to many ends throughout his book, one theme that stands out is his examination in chapters 3 and 4 of the controversy over the legality of the mosque's erection. It required the destruction of a major Christian place of worship, which was protected by the city's conquest treaty, drawn up between the city's bishop and Arab conquerors in

1. *North side of the Great Mosque* [Damascus, Syria], by Francis Bedford. 29th April 1862. Albumen print, 23.6 by 28.8 cm. (Royal Collection Trust; © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2022).

c.635. George's examination offers insights into the surviving remains of the Christian construction, and its imprint on the mosque's structure and integration into the sacred past. He makes a strong case that the association of the site with John the Baptist and his relics is an Umayyad invention and not a Christian one, as often presumed, and that medieval accounts of Caliph al-Walīd's discovery of the head of John the Baptist during the mosque's construction not merely helped to imbue the mosque with a symbolic power in accordance with early Umayyad triumphalism but also to place it within a Muslim vision of the sacred past.

In chapters 5 and 6 George offers a meticulous reconstruction of the original mosque, based on the surviving parts of the building and its ornamentation. He uses it to examine the intentions of its patrons and their designers, who drew from and transformed regional late Roman ecclesiastical architecture and ornament to create a new idiom for Islamic architecture. George's reconstruction posits a mosque that, although recognisable, was far more open and more extensively ornamented than today's building. Its covered prayer hall, now separated from the courtyard by doors, was originally merely separated by curtained arcades. The extant mosaics of the original mosque exemplify the challenges of such reconstructions. Only a few original panels survive, and the restorations of the mosaics undertaken in the 1950s and 1960s remain incomplete. Among the lost sections are the dedicatory inscriptions and numerous qur'anic inscriptions, which once adorned the wall of the arcaded prayer hall. Accounts of what the panels depicted, however, are seemingly contradictory. Did they depict paradise – a theme that would be in accord with the eschatological motifs of the lost qur'anic inscriptions known from written sources – or did they depict the cities that fell under the vast sweep of Umayyad dominion, as other accounts state? George resolves this conundrum by comparing the mosque's mosaics to literary compositions, such as the Qur'an and Arabic poetry, which he reads as polysemic constructions that evoke concrete imagery while simultaneously inviting multiple interpretations.

Although George's book is not the first study of the building, nor likely to be the last, his book achieves a synthesis of earlier literature that is unprecedented in scope. Richly illustrated and handsomely produced, it is testament to the author's creativity and resourcefulness, which have resulted in a landmark study.

1 Ibn Asākir: *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. U. ibn Gharāma al-Amrawī, Beirut 1995–2000, II, pp.246–47.
2 G. Necipoğlu: 'The Dome of the Rock as a palimpsest: 'Abd al-Malik's grand narrative and Sultan Süleyman's glosses', in *idem* and J. Bailey, eds: *Frontiers of Islamic Art and Architecture*, Leiden 2008, pp.17–105.
3 An exhibition of photographs by Francis Bedford, taken during the royal tour made by the Prince of Wales in 1862, was reviewed by Lisa Stein in this Magazine, 162 (2020), pp.887–89.

Romanesque Effigies: Death and Redemption in Medieval Europe, 1000–1200

By Shirin Fozi. 264 pp. incl. 16 col. + 80 b. & w. ills. (Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park PA, 2021), $89.95. ISBN 978-0-271-08719-1.

by **ELIZABETH VALDEZ DEL ÁLAMO**

Two insights frame Shirin Fozi's well-organised, meticulous study of effigies in northern Europe between the years 1000 and 1200: first, that in this period most of the known effigies were not commissioned by the individuals they commemorate; and second, that they represent individuals whose reputations needed rehabilitation following their misconduct or defeat. The emblematic case is Rudolf of Swabia (c.1025–80), who was one of the first to be commemorated with an effigy, made from gilt bronze for Merseburg Cathedral soon after his death, despite the fact that he spectacularly failed in his ambition to become king. The book brings together a corpus of monuments largely unfamiliar except to specialists in German sculpture, with examples mainly from Saxony but including significant works from Switzerland, France and England. Most have been detached from their original locations and are often overlooked in surveys of Romanesque sculpture. The volume is divided into five chapters, which offer a typology of monuments and provide an approximate chronological sequence.

Despite its title, the focus of the book is northern Europe. Regions south of the Pyrenees and the Alps are excluded because they had different traditions with respect to funerary monuments. In Spain and Italy, for example, from the tenth century to the twelfth, the nobility was buried in historiated sarcophagi, either Roman spolia, such as the late antique sarcophagus basin used for Doña Sancha, first countess of