

that proceeds from essential, universal, proper, actual and proximate causes, while a complete definition is one that fully reflects the internal structure of an essence' (p. 215). Within Part IV, ch. 9, on causal and non-causal demonstration, Strobino explains that, for Avicenna, the proof of God's existence consists in that-demonstration, because God's existence does not have a cause.

Different sciences can provide different demonstrations of the same phenomenon. Still within Part IV, ch. 11 ('The four causes in demonstration and definition') explains how for Avicenna the four causes can be used as middle terms in demonstrations. If the middle term contains the cause, then we have a why-demonstration; if it contains the effect, we have a that-demonstration.

Part V is devoted to the topic of definition and, according to Strobino, Avicenna's approach to definition, in its connections with metaphysics, indicates the essentialist nature of Avicenna's metaphysics. In ch. 12, on the relation between definition and description, he argues that definition remains a central part of Avicenna's theory of science, as opposed to dialectic, which is based on commonplace rules. With regard to the connection between description and definition, Strobino explains that, according to Avicenna, an essence can have several descriptions, but only one definition. In ch. 13, the last before the Conclusion, on epistemology of essence, Strobino discusses other important aspects of Avicenna's theory of science and logic, such as the question of induction and the methods of composition and division.

In the Conclusion, Strobino highlights the main innovations introduced by Avicenna and the difference in his approach to logic from Aristotle and Alfarabi, observing that for Avicenna logic should be applied to science and that Avicenna's discussion presents a greater number of logical forms than those found in Aristotle.

This study constitutes an important and original contribution to our knowledge of Avicenna's theory of science and his logic, complementing current studies on other aspects of Avicenna's philosophy.

*Catarina Belo*

*The American University in Cairo*

E-mail: [cbelo@aucegypt.edu](mailto:cbelo@aucegypt.edu)

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### *The Umayyad Mosque of Damascus: Art, Faith and Empire in Early Islam*

By ALAIN GEORGE (London: Gingko Library, 2021), 264 pp., 150 colour plates. Price HB £60.00. EAN 978-1909942455.

*The Umayyad Mosque of Damascus* is an in-depth analysis of one of the main sacred buildings of the Islamic world. It focuses on the Umayyad phase of the building which, given its repercussions on the mosque foundation, is the reason Alain George devotes a good share of the volume to the pre-Islamic history of the site.

The book consists of an introduction, six chapters, and an appendix section with some primary sources that contribute to a fuller appreciation of the mosque.

The introduction and first chapter discuss the interest sparked by this religious building as reflected in works devoted to it. The fascination with it started very early as a now lost work about the mosque is attested as early as 900. For modern times the overview includes pivotal publications by Creswell<sup>1</sup> and Sauvaget,<sup>2</sup> *The Great Mosque of Damascus* by Barry Flood,<sup>3</sup> and a few works produced by Syrian scholars such as Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Munajjid<sup>4</sup> and Adnan Bounni.<sup>5</sup> The first pages also state the main aims of the book, namely to disclose the process that led to the mosque's foundation and to undress the structure of later accretions in order to reveal the Umayyad phase of the building. The chapter recounts the main events occurring in and around the mosque over the centuries—especially interesting are the contestation of Damascus between the Fatimids and the Seljuks, and George's careful reconstruction of the fires and earthquakes that affected the mosque structure. The chapter also introduces some methodological notions that reappear throughout. The first is the notion of palimpsest, meaning a surface layer which retains some traces from previous (older) layers. The second is the extensive use of the rich photographic—and, to a lesser degree, pictorial—evidence of the mosque produced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The second chapter explores the pre-Islamic history of the site of the Umayyad Mosque. It deals with two different buildings that had an impact on the mosque in a later period. The first is the Roman temple, part of which constitutes the perimeter of the Umayyad Mosque, and the second is the enigmatic church that appeared during late antiquity. George presents a careful review of the few excavations that have taken place in the courtyard of the mosque. A comparative analysis of other temple structures in the region allows George to reconstruct the size of the temple and to argue for the hypothesis that the late antique church was but the conversion of the temple cella. According to George the church stood in the centre-west section of the temenos and was named after John the Baptist only after the Islamic conquest.

The third and fourth chapters contain perhaps the most innovative pages on the mosque offered in *The Umayyad Mosque of Damascus*. In ch. 3, George brings to light what he claims was a traumatic event, a turning-point event for

<sup>1</sup> K. A. C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture, vol. I: Umayyads, A.D. 622–750. Part I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn., 1969).

<sup>2</sup> Jean Sauvaget, *La mosquée omeyyade de Médine: étude sur les origines architecturales de la mosquée et la basilique* (Paris: Vanoest, 1947).

<sup>3</sup> Finbarr Barry Flood, *The Great Mosque of Damascus: Studies in the Makings of an Umayyad Visual Culture* (Leiden, Brill, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Munajjid, *Masjid Dimashq: shikr shay' mim mā istaqarra 'alayhi al-masjid ilā sanat 730 H.* (Damascus, 1948).

<sup>5</sup> Adnan Bounni, 'Du temple païen à la mosquée : note préliminaire sur le cas de la mosquée omeyyade à Damas', *Sacralidad y Arqueología*, 21 (2004): 595–605.

the life of the city and of the early caliphate, namely the destruction of the church that stood on the site of the Great Mosque. In thrilling prose, the author reconstructs the decision of the caliph al-Walīd, in light of changing relations between the Christian community of Damascus and the Umayyad elite and between them and Umayyad rulers and the Byzantine emperor, to pull down the church. Among his sources, George includes some poetical passages that have passed hither to almost unnoticed (except for Nasser Rabbat<sup>6</sup>). The poetic compositions were a direct emanation of the Umayyad court, offering a different perspective than historical texts produced later. In particular, the court poet al-Nābigha al-Shaybānī made an explicit reference to the Byzantine emperor Justinian II, explaining how the decision to take over a site initially granted to the Christian community of Damascus had repercussions well beyond local politics. The chapter fixes 705 as the inaugural date of the building of the mosque. It also shows how the caliphate administration and infrastructure allowed the sourcing of workers and materials from distant regions, sometimes as part of the taxation system. The author's discussion of the evidence offered in primary sources evaluates as reliable the much-debated passages of text that report a direct contribution by the Byzantine emperor to the construction of the Great Mosque of Damascus and the realization of its mosaic decoration (together with the Masjid al-Ḥarām in Makka and the Prophet's Mosque in Madina).

Chapter 4 contains perhaps the most challenging and intriguing parts of George's volume. It states that the new mosque built by the caliph al-Walīd between 705 and 715 included several explicit references to the church that it replaced. The quotations integrated into the mosque range from formal elements to conceptual ideas. While several scholars in the past have commented on the church's legacy in the mosque, none developed this line of inquiry as far as George does.

The transept, for instance, was connected by Creswell<sup>7</sup> to late antique palatial architecture, whereas George makes it directly dependent on local Syrian church facades. The corner towers that inaugurated the practice of having minarets in early mosque architecture were probably a Christian reconfiguration of the corners of the Hellenistic temple. As for the early Islamic invention of John the Baptist relics, George follows the line of reasoning recently exposed by Nancy Khalek.<sup>8</sup> The discussion on the mosque's doors and the treasury structure in the courtyard open the way for a reconsideration of many assumptions about early Islamic architecture. Regarding the treasury, the hypothesis is that the bottom part of the structure was perhaps part of a Christian baptistery once located in situ. The final picture acutely highlights the visible and hidden elements that link the new caliphal building with the church's legacy and the memory of its destruction.

<sup>6</sup> Nasser Rabbat, 'The dialogic dimension of Umayyad art', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 43 (2003): 78–94.

<sup>7</sup> Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture, vol. I: Umayyads*.

<sup>8</sup> Nancy Khalek, *Damascus after the Muslim Conquest: Text and Image in Early Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

It is worthwhile highlighting a consistent approach in Alain George's work. None of the above arguments is in itself original, and he always acknowledges the scholars who were first to push forward an innovative interpretation. The merit of this book is to connect the dots, and to paint the whole canvas with a delicate balance between counterarguments. George presents intuitions first expressed by others with a panoply of subtle observations to substantiate the intuition with possibly more solid arguments. The outcome is often not something incontrovertible but rather the least weak among all the possible hypotheses. Whoever deals with the early Islamic period learns to appreciate such caution in presenting research results.

The early chapters deal more with the site of the Great Mosque and the *longue durée* of its Christian identity than with the building of the mosque. However, as already evident in his previous book on Islamic calligraphy, Alain George is a scholar willing to shed light on early Islamic aesthetics. In the later chapters, he looks beyond mere description of borrowing and adoption of late antique motifs searching for original Islamic interpretation of the reassemblage.

Chapter 5 is therefore devoted to a philological reconstruction of the Umayyad structure of the mosque. It carefully unveils the elements added to the mosque since the time of al-Walid. The extensive use of photographic evidence mentioned earlier here comes into its own: George enriches his analysis with some observations that pertain methodologically to the discipline of the archaeology of architecture. The aim is to bring the Umayyad building back to life with its volumes, rhythms, proportions, materials, and colours. Among the numerous details presented in this part of the book, I note in particular the mention of water channels that allowed the routinary flood of the building pavement, the painstaking study of the panoply of marbles used in the *dado* of the mosque, and the reconstruction of the placement of the Qur'anic inscriptions within the prayer hall. A personal inclination of the author for measures and calculations runs throughout the book, and, in this chapter, doubtlessly helps our appreciation of the original layout of architecture and decoration.

The final chapter addresses the aesthetics of the Umayyad Mosque, and the perception thereof of its beholders. First, the great mosque of Damascus constituted a break from previous mosque architecture. In Damascus, the celebration of the caliph with a prayer place under the dome of the prayer hall reached its zenith. Second, Christian artists and artisans produced something familiar but innovative at the same time. Comparisons point to Edessa and Constantinople as cities offering possible templates for mosaic decoration. In the Syrian area, Antioch and Apamea show something similar as well, while, following Mackenzie, Egypt might stand for a nearby region that throughout late antiquity preserved Hellenistic features that eventually reappeared in the mosque decoration. A formal analysis of the compositional scheme of the so-called 'panel of the Baradā' in the courtyard leads George to compare the alternation between vegetal and architectural elements with the *hemstiches* of Arabic poetry. The overall argument presented in ch. 6 is a sort of correspondence of the building surface with a poetical composition: the building enchants the eyes as poetry composition the ears. The idea that poetry represents a compelling point of

comparison for an Umayyad artwork is not new: Garth Fowden<sup>9</sup> put forward a similar argument about the paintings of the reception hall of Quṣayr ‘Amrah.

The poems brought into the analysis by George—presented in the appendix in both Arabic and English—do not help to resolve the dichotomy between the two current iconographical interpretations of the mosaics. Either they represent a vision of the empire or paradise. However, according to the author, our question might be wrong. Coeval texts describe the mosque as a sensory experience consisting of light, colour, surface, and shapes. The laudatory tone of the text by al-Nābigha uses the building to praise the caliph: the focus is on the impact caused by the perception of the building and not on the meaning of single motifs. The final comparison between the sensory appreciation of the Qur’ānic text and an architectural space like the Great Mosque of Damascus is worth mentioning. To interpret single motifs in isolation from the whole is like the exegesis of isolated Qur’ānic passages. However, also the senses allow an experience of the text/building. The sound of recitation or the rhythm of the ornament give different, though sound and intimate, access to the full enjoyment of the artistic creation.

The book is sumptuously illustrated, enjoyable to read, and not too expensive for the high-quality art history book it is. It enters among the must-haves for scholars and libraries devoted to late antiquity, early Islam, art history, and Islamic studies.

*Mattia Guidetti*

*University of Bologna*

E-mail: [mattia.guidetti3@unibo.it](mailto:mattia.guidetti3@unibo.it)

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*The Administration of Justice in Medieval Egypt: From the Seventh to the Twelfth Century*

By YAACOV LEV (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. Edinburgh Studies in Classical Islamic History and Culture), viii + 301 pp. Price PB £19.99. EAN 978-1474459242.

Islamic legal studies continues to be a productive field in combination with Middle Eastern history. Ever wider conceptions of ‘Islamic law’ and ‘law’ itself have brought once peripheral ideas, practices, and communities onto centre stage. The fecund pressures of social history have induced greater interest in institutions, views ‘from below’, and practice over theory—i.e., the lived experience of most people. The use of non-literary sources (e.g., law court records) along with more traditional literary material has undergirded these developments. The jurisprudential output of the ulema no longer sets the bounds of legal history. Yaacov Lev, an established authority in the field, demonstrates the yield of such trends in this book.

<sup>9</sup> Garth Fowden, *Quṣayr ‘Amra: Art and the Umayyad elite in late antique Syria* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).