



The Influence of Medieval Byzantine Culture on “Umayyad Mosaics”

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Abstract

Among the wonders of the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, the Umayyad mosaics have attracted historians for their gorgeous appearance and rich cultural connotations. By referring to the Umayyad mosaics on the octagonal arcades of the dome, this paper explores the cultural interaction between the medieval Christian (Byzantine) civilization and the Islamic civilization in the framework of the “cultural representation” theory and the “signifying practices” theory proposed by Stuart Hall in 1997. As the dome’s initial ornaments, the Umayyad mosaic patterns and inscriptions correspond to the political means of Caliph Abd Al-Malik, the funder of the dome’s construction, whose intentions reflect the medieval historical background. In addition, the production regulations and artistic practices of the Umayyad mosaic inscriptions have portrayed the medieval contextual influences on art and art activities. This paper analyzes the symbolic meanings behind the mosaic patterns based on the “Cultural Representation” theory, which is defined as the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture through the use of signs and images. Moreover, through the framework of Hall’s “Signifying Practices” theory, this paper explores how craftsmen construct the mosaic walls following particular rules and regulations, which also reflect the overall environment of cultural interaction.

Keywords

Medieval Mediterranean Culture, Mosaic Art, Islamic Civilization

1. Introduction

The fierce conquest wars and prosperous cultural interactions in the Medieval Mediterranean region profoundly influenced the development of many art forms. The cultural contents of the Byzantine Empire, as the continuity of the ancient Roman civilization, inspired both the Sassanians and the Umayyads. The Umayyads, though proud of their political dominance and unique religious beliefs, embraced the culture of the regions they conquered.

The Dome of the Rock is one of the earliest surviving Islamic monuments. It’s not only a meeting place for the believers of the Islamic religion, but also a monument of the victory of the Muslims in foreign wars. Located at the peak of the Temple Mount, the rock itself is enclosed by a circular arcade and two ambulatories, separated from one another by an octagonal arcade, in which walls and soffits are covered by golden mosaics (Bianquis, Th, 2014). Most of the mosaic designs feature vegetal designs, symbols of jewels and royal regalia, as well as geometric patterns. The uppermost part of the mosaic includes Arabic inscription bands. These inscriptions include Koranic verses, the profession of faith, and so on.

2. Symbolic references to the Byzantine culture in the Umayyad mosaic patterns

The Umayyad mosaics in the Dome of the Rock illustrate the religious and artistic connections between Islamic culture and other cultures that have influenced Jerusalem. Most of the mosaic designs on the octagonal arcade feature vegetal designs, symbols of jewels and royal regalia, as well as geometric patterns. They illuminate the conflicts and interactions between different religions and show us the continuity and change of the Islamic culture itself (George, 2018).

The uppermost part of the mosaic includes Arabic inscription bands. These inscriptions include Koranic verses, the profession of faith, etc. They record the year of construction as 72\691-2, thus verifying the true patron as Caliph Abd Al-Malik¹ (Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2014).

2.1 Byzantine and Sassanian symbols within the Umayyad mosaics

The mosaics on the octagonal arcade consist of a repeating pattern of wings and crowns (See Figure 1). The central round crown decorated with pearls and colored gemstones is directly related to that of the Byzantine emperor Justinian, which was depicted in the sixth-century mosaics of multiple Christian churches (George, 2018). The wings, on the other hand, are carried by plants at their apex. They simultaneously point upward and end by curling inward, reflecting a pre-Islamic crown that was widely featured on Sassanian coins (George, 2018). Additionally, combining symmetrical wings with vegetal designs was also a Sassanian art tradition (Comparison of Figure 1 and Figure 2).



Fig 1². Dome of the Rock.



Fig. 2³. The Tree of Life.

The dome's mosaic designs drew on the arts of both the Sassanian and Byzantine empires, consciously using cultural symbols that belonged to regions that the Muslims conquered. Known by audiences familiar with the Christian culture, Emperor Justinian resembles Christ's vice-regent on earth in Christian churches, and his crown emphasizes his divine political power and his sacred connection with Christ. The Sasanian crown, on the other hand, represents divine kingship (Grabar, 1959).

2.2 Intentions behind the symbolic language

The symbol of the crowns served as a metaphor for the messages of Caliph Abd Al-Malik and the Muslims (Grabar, 1959). Relating to the historical context of the dome's construction, the ambition behind these mosaics was to establish a sacred and dominant sanctuary and to extend the impact of Islamic culture to the region which had long been influenced by the Byzantine culture (Grabar, 1959). For the Caliph himself, the mosaics consolidated his position as the embodiment of God's will on earth and his impregnable kingship.

¹ Abd Al-Malik b. Marwan (644/647-705).

² Mosaic decoration of the drum, Dome of the Rock, 685-691 AD. Photograph from Artstor official website.

³ "The Tree of Life", section of revetment stucco ornament, Ctesiphon, Sassanian period 5th-6th centuries. New York, Metropolitan Art.

The famous Ka'bah⁴ in Mecca contains treasures obtained from the palaces of the Persian kings (Grabar, 1959, p. 52): the Islamic ruler collected them as souvenirs of victory (Kaldellis, 2020). According to historical records, these treasures were also used to shock the audiences, especially non-Muslims, for their submissions (Grabar, 1959, p. 55). Therefore, the royal symbols that displayed Byzantine culture should not be comprehended as simple echoes of a rival culture. They were depicted to show the ruling ambitions of the Islamic rulers, boosting the victory of Islam and bringing "unbelievers" into the "true faith". For the Dome of the Rock, the Muslim's pride and determination to defeat the Byzantine Empire were among the prime metaphors.

3. The influence of the Byzantine mosaic culture on the Umayyad inscriptions

The Umayyad inscriptions on the upper band of the octagonal arcade contain numerous Qur'an quotations, and anti-Christian messages as strong assertions of the Islamic principles. Historical sources indicate that early Qur'an quotations were often used to emphasize or even indicate the purpose of a building (Grabar, 1959, pp. 33-62). It is therefore reasonable to explore the mosaic inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock (Milwright, 2016). By studying the contents of the inscriptions, historians indicated the intention behind the Dome of the Rock is quite radical: the Caliph firmly opposing Christian principles and was eager to exhort people from other cultures to follow their new faith.

However, in the case of the production process of the mosaic inscriptions, the experiences and skills of Roman mosaic art production contributed to non-negligible inspirations. Mosaic masters with Byzantine cultural backgrounds were likely to support the construction process and instruct Muslim apprentices, promoting vigorous artistic interactions (Olaru C, 2018). These speculations are supported by the treatments of the inscriptions, which involve subtle adjustments throughout the circular set of bands.

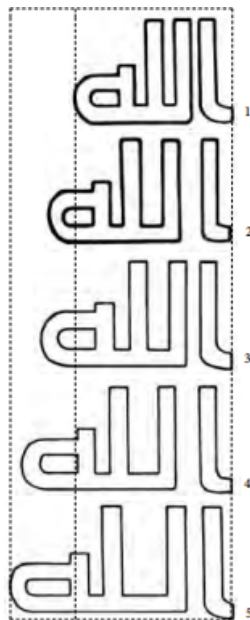


Fig 3⁵. All(â)h.

3.1 Changes of spacial lengths

Looking at the first part of the south side inscription bands of the arcade, an important feature to note is the treatment of spaces between letters within words and between individual words: in many cases, there are no apparent distinctions between the lengths of these two kinds of spaces (Milwright, 2016). The craftsmen who made these inscriptions maintained their adherence to the procedure of laying out inscriptions in the Greek and Roman period (late Greek and Roman inscriptions mostly did not allow the spaces between words to be greater than those between

⁴ The Kabah, also spelled Ka'ba or Ka'bah, first construction date not verified.

⁵ The word "All(â)h" as it appears on the south side of the outer face, detailed mosaic inscriptions, octagonal arcade, the Dome of the Rock. "1" is the first appearance (east end of the south side) and "5" is the last (west end of south side). Drawing: Marcus Milwright.

letters) (Milwright, 2016, p. 145).

However, in the second and third parts, there is a noticeable difference in the space lengths—the spacing of letters and words has been treated more liberally. Accordingly, the craftsmen were committed to the strict regularity of the spaces at the beginning. Then they gradually realized that words with different meanings can be presented in different ways, which inspired them to make the format inconsistent (Vasileios, 2021). They began to squeeze freely the gaps between letters in words, expanding the font size of some words in order to emphasize certain religious content. For example, "All(ā)h", the name of an Islamic god, was repeated five times with increasing letter sizes (see Fig. 3).

In short, craftsmen who made the inscriptions on the south side lacked experience in spreading large-scale Arabic inscriptions on mosaic materials initially, or they might be unfamiliar with the writing rules of Arabic characters. Yet, they were familiar with a Roman (Byzantine) art tradition.

3.2 Changes in the heights of the strokes

Scholar Alain George once divided, in his book about the Dome of the Rock, the mosaic inscriptions in the octagonal arcade into three basic blocks. He contrasts the lengths of the strokes within the three parts (one on the outside of the dome, the second on the south and southeast side of the inner panel, and the third part including the rest of the inner panel) (See Fig. 4). In the first part, the Arabic letters have the same, continuous arrangement. One example is the *ḥād* letter: the thickness (height) of the two horizontal strokes of *ḥād* occupies one unit, and its vertical strokes occupy exactly four units (Milwright, 2016, p. 145).



Fig 4⁶. The Dome of the Rock's script.

In the second and third parts, the vertical strokes are noticeably shorter, especially in the third part where all font heights are within three units (John, 2020). This deliberate design choice reflects a higher level of skill and professionalism in mosaic art, as it restrains the strokes from the mosaic board's accommodation limits to achieve a more refined result.

The reason for this discrepancy may be that the laying of the Umayyad inscriptions was co-worked by a group of people with different levels of experience in mosaic making. Additionally, the artisans might continuously improve their skills in controlling the vertical strokes during the production process (Conor, 2020). Yet, either way, masters and pupils are likely to coexist at the construction site, animating the site with artistic communications.

4. Conclusion

The Sassanian and Byzantine traditions survived and became great inspirations for the Umayyads. Muslim designers invoked these earlier traditions that had once dominated the Mediterranean lands and used them to advocate their faith. At the same time, the technical difficulties associated with the creation of these mosaics promoted the participation of experienced craftsmen from the Byzantine Empire. In an environment of cultural coexistence, Mediterranean civilizations have innovated their cultural contents, and jointly created wonderful art. Looking back at the modern world, the mosaic art of the existing Dome of the Rock evokes the vitality of the past. It inspires a worldview of

⁶ Parts of the script, outer face, northwest side, octagonal arcade, the Dome of the Rock, 685-691 AD. Photograph: Bernard O'Kane.

cultural homogeneity and diversity.

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