CHAPTER 5

The Columns and Eagle Capitals in the Dome of the Rock

The Dome of the Rock (Fig. 1.3) has been regarded by Muslim tradition for over a millennium as the most sacred structure in the world, after only the mosques associated with the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca and Medina. From the moment of its construction, and according to the tradition before its construction, it was the site of pilgrimage and veneration, and so it has remained to this day. It is not and has never been a mosque, a place of prayer for the Muslim community gathered together. It is well known to scholars and students, featuring in virtually every general book about Islamic art, and has been the subject of many articles and monographs.1 It has recently become a political icon, invoked in differing ways by different sides in contemporary controversies.2 Some have overtly threatened to destroy it, and unabashedly professed publicly their desire to do so. Any Google search will show the widespread invocation of the monument to serve varying political and confessional agendas. To say that the building is a site of controversy is a gross understatement, and I offer no comment related to that controversy, nor will I attempt to address the building in a comprehensive fashion, dealing with all its fascinating aspects and problems. Rather here I hope to focus on two features of the building that have almost entirely escaped scholarly attention, its columns and the three column capitals having images of eagles, now partially erased but still unambiguously identifiable.3

It sometimes passes for common knowledge that the Islamic tradition was hostile to, or at least refrained, from the depiction of living creatures.4

Many contemporary Muslims hold this view, as

3 A much abbreviated earlier form of this chapter was presented in the form of a lecture, as “The Eagle Capitals in the Dome of the Rock,” at the annual meeting of the Southeastern Medieval Association (SEMA), with the theme “Natural, Unnatural, & Supernatural,” in Roanoke, Virginia, November 18, 2010. I would like to thank the organizers for their kind invitation to address the meeting, and my generous audience for their comments. Versions of that talk were subsequently presented, as it evolved, at Harvard University, the University of Minnesota, Sweet Briar College, the University of Notre Dame, and Trinity College in Dublin, and I am also grateful to those audiences for their comments and suggestions.

did many in the past, but the notion of a general “prohibition” in force throughout the long history of Islam cannot be supported. From the earliest times, and in many if not all parts of the Islamic world, depictions of animals, human beings, and sometimes even of the Prophet Muhammad himself, whether veiled, as is more common, or even unveiled, were produced. Muslims can and do hold differing views on this, as on many matters. It is widely understood, although perhaps less widely than one might hope, that this alleged aniconism is restricted to religious contexts, especially mosques and texts of the Qur’an itself. Secular dwellings of the Umayyad period are uncontestedly filled with animal and human figures, but even in the religious sphere there are exceptions to the avoidance of images, notably for example in a famous early manuscript of the Qur’an with decorative paintings that are generally interpreted as “images” of buildings. Among early mosques the images of architecture and landscapes and of plants in the mosaic decoration of the Great Mosque in Damascus, built and decorated by the order of Caliph al-Walid I after 705, are well known, but there are no figures of animals or humans. The Dome of the Rock is not only a religious structure, but one of the highest significance, indeed sanctity, so the presence in it not only of images of animals of any kind, but especially of three-dimensional sculptural images of animals, is thus problematic, and of course also fascinating.

Sources that might help in addressing the eagle capitals in the Dome of the Rock and their possible significance are difficult, because sources, at least in the sense of specific written sources, are altogether lacking. I know of no descriptive or other text from the medieval, or for that matter from the early modern period that mentions or even seems to allude to these figured capitals in the Dome of the Rock. Why this silence should be so, in a building so often described, is itself a matter of some interest, going beyond the fact that people tend to see what they expect, and quite simply not to see what they do not expect. In this case, however, we must reckon with a powerful tradition that there should not be figural art in the Dome of the Rock; the easiest way to deal with the existence of such art is not to explain it but instead to ignore it. As I hope to show, however, the material evidence has a compelling story to tell, and there are indeed also a variety of written and visual sources that can be brought to bear on the question of why eagles are present in the Dome of the Rock, why they may have been installed there, what they may have signified, how they may have functioned, and how they are related to wider traditions in the world of late antiquity becoming the early Middle Ages.

The Dome of the Rock has often been referred to as if miraculously preserved through its long

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6. See in general Grabar, Formation of Islamic Art, pp. 133–169. For a proliferation of birds and beasts throughout the secular structures, on floors and also on walls, see Ghazi Bisheh, “From Castellum to Palatium: Umayyad Mosaic Pavements from Qasr al-Hallabat in Jordan,” Muqarnas 10 (1993), 49–56.

7. On the great Sana'a Qur'an with images of mosques see most recently Alain George, The Rise of Islamic Calligraphy (London, 2010), Figs. 53–54 and pp. 79–89, with earlier literature.
