CHAPTER EIGHT

KING, POPE, EMIR AND CALIPH: EUROPE AND THE ISLAMIC BUILDING BOOM

Introduction

This chapter speculates that the building activities of Charlemagne (King of the Franks, 768–800, then Emperor of the Romans), Pope Hadrian (772–95), Abd ar-Rahman I (Emir of Córdoba 756–88) and Harun Al-Rashid (Abbasid Caliph, 786–809) are linked, with the Christians emulating Islamic projects in materials if not in scale or in typology. This will help demonstrate a theme of this book, namely that it is inclination rather than availability of materials that governs building with antiquities, including marble. Why introduce Moslems into the usual Hadrian-Charlemagne axis? Because to do so, by examining ambassadorial and cultural exchanges, will help widen the context of 8th century building in the West away from Early Christian revivalism laced with antiquarianism and onto a platform of political rivalry that is inherently more likely. After all, this is an age when Christianity found rivals bracketing them first in the east (Caliph Al-Mansur with his round city of Baghdad, 762–7, to be followed by Harun Al-Rashid) and then in the west (Abd ar-Rahman in Córdoba). Hadrian knew about luxury from Byzantium and Islam, was much engaged politically in southern Italy and (Muslim) Sicily, and it has been estimated he made presents to churches of some 3000 square metres of silk in one seven-year period. Much of this surely came from Islam, rather than from Byzantium, for there were fewer restrictions on the export of such luxuries. In any case, the Muslims took over some of the Byzantine

1 Amari, Musulmani di Sicilia, I.310–14.
production capacity, and were as adept as the Byzantines in integrating its use into court life and ceremonial.

Hadrian was an energetic builder (albeit with Frankish funds), as was Charlemagne; but the Abbasids were far greater, for they built bigger, and were better engineers. Al-Muqaddasi even avers that the Umayyad Mosque could be flooded and then drained for cleaning purposes. Al-Mansur founded a new city, and Abd Ar-Rahman so extended Córdoba that little remains even of its Roman grid (although recent excavations have revealed something of that city’s splendour). Politically, for Charlemagne Baghdad could be a useful but dangerous wedge against the Byzantines. Harun Al-Rashid had marched across Anatolia to the Sea of Marmara in 782, before he became Caliph, killing over 50,000 Byzantines, and exacting tribute and a treaty. This was the latest of a line of Moslem attempts on the City. The cultural and political arguments for such an alliance are supported by an economic one, since they go together as the engine for architectural expansionism. Parallel and successive activities do not necessarily entail emulation, and documentation is lacking; but so much activity in the same period of vigorous ambassadorial exchanges across different parts of the Mediterranean is surely more than a coincidence, especially

5 Lombard, Maurice, Les textiles dans le monde musulman, VIIe–XIIe siècles, (Paris 1978), 91ff., 190ff. For European courts, see Hen, Yitzhak, Roman barbarians: the royal court and culture in the early medieval West, (Palgrave, London and New York, scheduled for November 2007).
7 Charlemagne certainly planned a Rhine-Main-Danube canal—but not much later Al-Mutawakkil (847–61) had canal construction and maintenance as part of the tax bill, and dug canals for drinking water: cf. Shamsuddin Miah, M., The reign of Al-Mutawakkil, (Dacca 1969), 161; and Tabari XXXIV.155.
8 Al-Muqaddasi, Best divisions, 136.
9 Al-Tabari XXIX.221. There were raids and punitive measures in 803: Al-Tabari XXX.238ff.
11 Renzi Rizzo, Catia, “I rapporti diplomatici fra il re Ugo di Provenza e il califfo ‘Abd al-Raman III: fonti cristiani e fonti arabe a confronto,” in Berti, Graziella, et al.,