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SURVIVALS AND ARCHAISMS IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF NORTHERN SYRIA, CA. 1080–CA. 1150

For Creswell, chronology was “the spinal column of history,” a dogma that permeated his voluminous work and influenced the scholarship of many of his successors. Ultimately based on archaeological documentation, this positivist methodology was designed to create order where disorder had been perceived and to equip a new field with a scientific foundation. Typically, his scheme attempted to fit the monuments — or particular phases of them — into a neat chronological sequence and to provide each with a historical background, an objective description, and a large number of comparisons intended to ascertain its date or determine the various influences impinging upon it. The field of Islamic architecture as we know it today grew out of this artificial scheme, rarely departing from its rigid progression and attempting instead to fit all new findings within its pre-established categories.

But the apparent neutrality and objectivity of Creswell’s chronological evolution are deceiving, for they implicitly endorse a false sense of continuity across the various epochs and geographic regions of early and medieval Islamic architecture. Recalling Riegl’s outmoded concept of Kunstwollen with its central belief in continuous and autonomous evolution of forms and motifs, this method has led to at least two unfortunate tendencies in the field. The first is to assume a rather monolithic picture of Middle Eastern Islamic architecture, in which forms and styles are subject to gradual change and continuous development. The second is to focus scholarly interest on “a central style” of Islamic architecture to the neglect or misunderstanding of those periods which do not directly stem from or contribute to it. On the whole, these “intrusive traditions” were either ignored or artificially brought into accord with the dominant tradition. Also contributing to these centralizing tendencies were non-historical essentialist views — reflecting the field’s earlier association with Orientalism — which, though totally opposed to positivist methodology, were easily and unconsciously incorporated into the discourse.

One could instead view the development and increasing variation of Islamic architecture between ca. 1000 and ca. 1350 at least in part as a series of discontinuous events brought about by geographic dislocation, dynastic change, racial intrusions, sectarian differences, and other factors. With the possible exception of Cairo, which had a uniquely continuous architectural history in the Middle East, Islamic cities — the centers of architectural patronage — prospered and ebbed in fairly rapid succession: one day at the vanguard of Islamic architecture, the next a forgotten backwater. By accepting, instead of ignoring, these basic discontinuities, we may arrive at a different — perhaps less dogmatic and predetermined — view of Islamic architecture. In particular, the flexibility and non-essentialist nature of this approach might more fairly and accurately address and assess those periods which seem to stand apart from the main tradition.

The buildings of northern Syria between the late eleventh and the middle of the twelfth century represent perhaps one of the most intrusive phases of medieval Islamic architecture. Their singularity, in their reliance on ashlar masonry and archaizing motifs, has intrigued several writers, including Herzfeld in 1921 and later, Creswell in 1952, Grabar in 1963 and later, and Rogers in 1971, all of whom characterized it as a survival or revival of classical antiquity. Emphasizing its most non-Islamic features and comparing it with contemporary Persian architecture, Herzfeld saw it as part of an “uninterrupted classical tradition.” Most recently, the problem has been discussed by myself, in 1982 and later, and by Allen, who wrote a book-length study on it in which he proposed to explain it as a conscious and purposeful revival of classical antiquity.

In this paper the archaizing architecture of northern Syria is regarded first and foremost as a consequence of the region’s relative isolation and insignificant architectural activity between the eighth and the eleventh centuries. In addition to dealing with the stylistic and iconographic aspects of this architecture, the paper will address the much more basic problem of the use of stone, a local material which had been supplanted else-
where in the Islamic world by baked brick. Third, every attempt is made to provide a regionally based interpretation for this entirely local production, without resorting to ambiguous art historical explanations such as “influences” or grandiose ideas such as the revival of classical antiquity. Finally, the paper will outline some of the significant changes that were applied to this archaizing architecture, changes that easily and assuredly situate it in its context.

Throughout, the distinction between the creation or perpetuation of an archaistic style and the reuse of salvaged ancient materials is made as clear as possible. I am interested in the former but not the latter, which is so pervasive a phenomenon in the Islamic world that it could not have had a single meaning, and whatever meanings it had derived from the local context. In any case, the two processes are entirely separate and cannot be given the same explanation.

**NORTH SYRIA’S ISOLATION**

The violent end of the Umayyads in 750, the subsequent eastern shift of the Islamic empire, and the vehemence displayed by the early Abbasids in rejecting Umayyad architecture and creating their own brought a glorious phase of Islamic architecture to an end. For over three centuries that followed Syria languished as a backwater between the dominant forces in Iraq and Egypt; invaded and occupied by the Byzantines in the ninth century; subjected to Fatimid rule and tribal intrusions in the tenth and eleventh centuries; and finally devastated by two great invasions, the Crusades and the Seljuq conquest. It is not surprising, therefore, that very little was built there between 750 and 1100, years when elsewhere some of the greatest buildings of early Islamic architecture were constructed.

In the same period Islamic architecture became increasingly independent from its classical sources and shifted progressively toward Perso-Mesopotamian forms and techniques. The overall trend might be adequately