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THE MUQARNAS DOME: ITS ORIGIN AND MEANING

One of the most original inventions of Islamic architecture is the muqarnas, and one of the most effective and widespread of its applications is without doubt the muqarnas dome or semidome. Brick vaults and domes have been known in the Near East since Sassanian times, if not before, but the dome in muqarnas is a truly Islamic creation without precedent in any civilization. Whether made of wood, stucco, brick, or stone, muqarnas vaults were among the most characteristic features of medieval Islamic architecture from Iran to Spain. It is therefore not surprising that a good number of studies have been dedicated to the description and analysis of this architectural form. What is surprising, however, is that in spite of all these studies such basic problems as origin, chronology, geographic distribution—not to mention meaning—remain unclear and subject to debate. My intention here is to discuss these problems, though not for all types of muqarnas in all periods. I shall limit myself to muqarnas domes and vaults constructed between c. 1050 and c. 1250, that is, to the earliest known examples.

Limiting the scope of the discussion to the earliest known muqarnas domes requires some explanation. My reasons are two. First of all, any attempt to discern meaning in such a common architectural form faces the danger of falling into a morass of overgeneralization unless it is focused in some way. The problems of interpreting Islamic architecture have been discussed by Oleg Grabar both very recently and in a number of earlier essays. Grabar attributes the disjunction, or at least the weak connection, between form and meaning (or symbol) to the “low symbolic charge” of Islamic architectural forms, a characteristic that ultimately led to “an ambiguous visual system.” While that conclusion is generally correct, it overlooks the point that certain forms in certain specific times and places had a “high symbolic charge” at the moment of their inception. How long these forms continued to be used with full awareness of their highly charged meaning depended on a variety of factors, but generally speaking that awareness was lost, and the concomitant debasement of meaningful forms into mere decoration took place, much more quickly in Islam than in other cultures and religions. It therefore becomes imperative in searching for meaning in any given form of Islamic architecture to begin with the origin of this form and to focus on its earliest development—particularly its first use outside its place of origin.

Because equally early “muqarnas-like” elements have been found in both northeastern Iran and central North Africa, most authorities assume that the muqarnas (and hence the muqarnas dome) either originated in one or the other place or was invented simultaneously in both. Specialists in Iranian architecture postulate a continuous line of development that begins with the tenth-century fragments found near Nishapur and the tripartite squinches of the late-tenth-century Arab Ata mausoleum at Tim, continues with the numerous eleventh-century Seljuq domes, and ends with Ilkhanid and Timurid muqarnas domes and portal vaults. The problem with this theory is that no direct link can be established between Seljuq domes and Ilkhanid muqarnas domes and portal vaults. Large smooth Seljuq domes which spring from a multipartite squinch zone continue unchanged until well into the Ilkhanid period, as a comparison between the domes of the Great Mosques of Isfahan (1088) and Veramin (1322-26) shows. Therefore, although the differentiation of the squinch into muqarnas cells does indeed occur first in northeastern Iran, the total muqarnas dome of the Ilkhanid period is not a product of this development and must therefore be attributed to some other source.

As for the North African development, I doubt if the so-called muqarnas fragments discovered at Qal'at bani Hammad and dated to the late eleventh century are muqarnas at all. They share no properties with true muqarnas cells, and in any case they could never have been assembled to fill the cavity of a dome or even a
niche. Not by any stretch of the imagination could they have led to the well-known twelfth-century muqarnas vaults in a number of North African mosques. Both northeastern Iran and North Africa therefore have to be eliminated as likely places for the origin of the muqarnas dome.

Another possibility is Iraq, since it has provided us with the earliest example of a fully fledged muqarnas dome in the so-called shrine of Imam al-Dawr, located some twenty kilometers north of Samarra in a village called al-Dawr. It is a shrine dedicated to Imam Muhammad ibn Musa ibn Ja'far, an alleged son of the fifth Shi'ite Imam. It was begun by the 'Uqaylid prince Muslim ibn Quraysh, who died in 1085, and was completed before 1090 by officials of his court. The mausoleum consists of an elongated chamber with tapering walls about twelve meters high and a muqarnas dome almost exactly the same height (plate 1). As an early example of its type, this dome betrays certain affinities with the regular squinch dome. The square of the chamber is transformed into an octagon through the use of large and heavily profiled squinches (plate 2). Eight smaller squinches (or, in fact, large muqarnas cells) rest on this octagon and form an eight-pointed star with four windows. The rest of the dome is made up of three more eight-celled tiers with ever-diminishing cells, each with a 45-degree rotation and a little cupola on top (plate 3).