ARTS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN BEFORE THE CRUSADES

Approaching Christian–Muslim relations through visual representations

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Approaches

Visual and material culture is an integral part of the expression of identity and interaction between Christian and Muslim communities in the Middle Ages. It takes many forms, from the use of figural and aniconic religious symbols in churches and mosques to forms employed in diplomacy and war and the accoutrements of everyday life. Mutual propaganda spawned imagery of hostility on both sides during times of conflict, with the consequence that discussion has traditionally centred on the differences between the art associated with the two faiths. But in recent years scholarship has moved towards the connections and relationships between Christians and Muslims rather than their differences, following the tendency to view historical and geographical congruity among the cultures of the Mediterranean (Hoffman 2007a: 1; Ousterhout and Ruggles 2004: 83). This has been broadened to embrace global and multicultural interests and simultaneously narrowed to focus on the art and religious practices of particular communities (Glass 2016).

This discussion is consonant with recent consideration of Christian–Muslim theological relations, which advocates an approach that highlights what is held in common between the faiths rather than what divides them (Cucarella 2015: 1–26.). It provides the framework for comment here on polemic, the position of Mary between the two faiths, and the nature of figural and non-figural art, with the Dome of the Rock as the major focus. Of course, it cannot be denied that art expresses the ongoing tensions in relations between the faiths or the differences between them in attitudes to the human form. But the approach adopted here seeks to draw attention to the shared architectural and artistic medium in which they express their respective messages. It comprises the use of architectural forms from the Graeco–Roman past, including the dome, mosaic work and marble cladding. This contributes to the basis for the expression of a dialectic between the faiths within the built environment in which, in decorative terms, there is an interplay between word and image and the figural and the nonfigural. It operates within a shared discourse and heritage rather than one of opposing languages of ornament and icon.
The Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem: symbolic authority and polemic

The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem was the first major Islamic building erected after Jerusalem was taken during the Muslim invasions of the mid-seventh century (Figs 15.1, 15.2 and 15.4).

It has retained its importance as a beacon for Islam from that time to the present day, apart from the period of Latin rule between 1099 and 1187. The building proclaims the superiority of Islam over Christianity through its adoption of the architectural styles used for Christian churches in Palestine and Syria. A primary element is the inscriptions, seen as a distinct polemical statement which links Muslim religion with power over others in the world of Islam.

This complicated and enigmatic building has been much discussed by scholars (including Grabar 1959; Grabar 1973: 48–67; Rabbat 1993; Grabar and Nuseibeh 1996; Necipoğlu 2008; Flood 2012a: 244–58; Hillenbrand 2016), because the visual and archaeological evidence for the ways in which it claims its cultural superiority is open to interpretation. It is associated by inscription with the date 691–2, during the reign of the Caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 685–705). Built on the platform constructed by the Jewish King Herod in the century before Christ and associated with the Temple of Solomon (this was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE), it dominates the area that is held sacred by the three monotheistic religions. The building has been interpreted as a ciborium or reliquary (Grabar 1959: 46; Grabar 1973: 58) that marks the rock outcrop where Abraham prepared Isaac (according to the Judeo-Christian tradition) for sacrifice. But there is debate about its original function, and it was only later in its history that it became associated with the tradition of Muḥammad's

Figure 15.1 The Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem.
(Photograph: L.-A. Hunt)
Night Journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and his Ascension to Heaven (Q 17:1). Indeed, the Night Journey, which is referred to in Islamic sources from the mid-eighth century, was only associated definitely with the Dome of the Rock in the later twelfth century (Flood 2012a: 290, n. 31).

**Architecture**

Architecturally, the Dome of the Rock is a double octagon surmounted by a dome (Figs 15.1 and 15.4). Its plan was derived from the tradition of fourth-century Christian concentric memorial shrines (Grabar 1959: 37), especially the octagonal structure over the cave of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the rotunda of the Anastasis in Jerusalem (the Mausoleum of Christ) which was part of the Holy Sepulchre complex (Fig. 15.3), the Church of the Ascension, and the fifth-century Kathisma, the 'seat' or Church of Mary near Bethlehem (Avner 2010).
Figure 15.3  Reconstructed plan of the fourth-century Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem.
(Plan after Corbo 1981, reproduced courtesy of the Fondazione Terra Santa/Franciscan Printing Press, and redrawn)
The relationship between the Dome of the Rock and the Holy Sepulchre is a particularly striking one, with the rounded domes of the two structures dominating the architectural landscape of Old Jerusalem to this day. The Holy Sepulchre also functioned as a reliquary, enshrining both the rock of Golgotha (Calvary), the site of the crucifixion of Christ, and also Christ’s tomb, each separate locations within the architectural complex built by the Emperor Constantine (r. 306–37) in the fourth century (Fig. 15.3) (Corbo 1981: II plate 3 redrawn; Ousterhout 2003: 6–7, with Fig. 5). Indeed, the measurements of the drum of the Dome of the Rock are almost exactly the same as those of the rotunda of the Anastasis in the Holy Sepulchre (Creswell and Allan 1989: 30). Other arrangements also support this association: like the relationship between
the place of crucifixion and the tomb of Christ in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (Fig. 15.3),
the Dome of the Rock exists spatially in relation to al-Aqṣā Mosque, which was begun in the
early eighth century (Flood 2012a: 246–7). Underlining this, the tenth-century Muslim geogra-
pher Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Muqaddasi attributed the building of the Dome of the Rock to
the Muslim ambition to surpass the Holy Sepulchre (Grabar 1973: 64–5).

Not all scholars, it should be said, accept this competitive relationship as the only expla-
nation for the Dome. Some have contended that the claimed derivation from earlier local
Christian buildings cannot be allowed to detract from the primary Islamic significance of the
Dome of the Rock, centred on the Old Testament Mount Moriah and evoking associations
with Abraham, and also with David and Solomon (Rabbat 1989: 16). In fact, one of the super-
visors during its construction was an Islamic theologian who advised on religious matters and
probably chose the inscriptions (Rabbat 1993: 68, 70–1). He was complemented in this role by
a local client of the caliph, who would have liaised with the local communities (Rabbat 1993:
70; Grabar 2006: 63).

Decoration

The decoration of the building displays techniques of marble and mosaic work that originated
in the late antique and Christian worlds, although there is no documentation for craftsmen
from Byzantium being employed, unlike the major Islamic buildings of the later eighth cen-
tury in Damascus and in Mecca (Flood 2012a: 252). The mosaics in the interior of the building
survive more or less intact (see Fig. 15.4), although those on the outside were renewed in
the thirteenth century (Grabar 2006: 184). These were then replaced with tiles in the sixteenth
century, which were in turn replaced in the eighteenth century and later (Necipoğlu 2008: 65;
St Laurent and Riedlmayer 1993) (Fig. 15.1).

The aniconic decoration comprises vegetal motifs and trees, with crowns, cornucopias and
jewels, which have been interpreted as representing the spoils of victory, particularly over the
Byzantine and Sassanian Empires, legitimising the Islamic ruler who was heir to Solomon and
David (Grabar 1959: 47–52; Grabar 1973: 58–9, 61; Flood 2012a: 247). This interpretation is
supported by the documented presence of the crown of the defeated Sassanian king Khusrau sus-
pended by a chain within the Dome (Elad 2008: 182). The inclusion of trees is also suggestive of
Solomon’s palace, and also of Paradise, an eschatological reference held in common with Judaism
and Christianity (Shoemaker 2014).

Inscriptions

The Dome of the Rock’s inscriptions in mosaic work are often regarded as proclaiming Islamic
triumph and domination over the non-Muslim ‘People of the Book’ (Christians and Jews).
The mosaic inscriptions on the outer face of the octagon are striking in their repetition of the
shahāda, the Islamic affirmation of faith (Grabar and Nuseibeh 1996: 78–81), and when they
are taken together they express, according to Jere Bacharach, a specifically Jerusalemite shahāda:
‘In the name of God the Magnificent, the Merciful, there is no god except God alone, He has no
partner, Muḥammad is the Messenger of God’ (Bacharach 2010: 7). ‘Abd al-Malik’s name once
concluded the inscriptions here, as it did on the copper plaques on the east and north gates.

The inscription on the outer face of the octagon, 240 metres long, runs in a narrow band
above the arches of the arcade. The texts here are laid out in six sections, each beginning with
the basmala. One section gives the date and the others are inscribed with qur’ānic passages (Gra-
bar 1959: 53–4, 1973: 62–3). The first is Q 112: ‘Say, He is God, the One; God the eternal. He
did not beget nor was He begotten. None is comparable to Him’, which uncompromisingly asserts the unity of God, a consistent and fundamental tenet of Muslim theology and a fundamental feature of Muslim polemic against Christianity. The final section incorporates several Qur’anic passages which culminate in Q 4:171: ‘People of the Book, do not go to excess in your religion, and do not say anything about God except the truth: the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was nothing more than a messenger of God, His word, directed to Mary, a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers and do not speak of “three” – stop [this], that is better for you – God is only one God, He is far above having a son’. This text reinforces the unity of God and is explicit in condemning the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. There is, furthermore, an exhortation here for non-Muslims, especially Christians, to submit to Islam. Finally, there is an invitation to pray, which is almost an invitation to Christians to see a bridge to Islam through Mary: ‘Pray for your Prophet and your servant Jesus, son of Mary’. This is then followed with words attributed to Mary herself.

Of the inscriptions on the east and north gates, the latter include the prophetic mission of Muhammad which came to be inscribed on Islamic coinage (an amplification of their propaganda value): ‘It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, to show that it is above all [other] religions, however much the idolators may hate this’ (Q 9:33/61:9) – the idolators’ here appear to refer to Christians and Jews. When he inscribed on his coins the anti-Trinitarian texts from Q 9:33 and Q 112, with the added phrase ‘He has no partner’, the Caliph ʿAbd al-Malik appears to have been displaying the strength of text rather than image as the way to differentiate the Muslim from the Christian community (Bacharach 2010: 16–18, 24).

There are various ways of interpreting the overall message of the Dome of the Rock inscriptions. One is to view them purely at face value as setting the agenda for negative propaganda and polemic. But a second, more nuanced, approach is to view the content of the inscriptions as accommodating Christianity within the Muslim state; this follows the acknowledgement within the Qur’ān that Jesus son of Mary was a messenger of God. A third is to view the polemical character of the inscriptions as just one aspect among many in the contemporary political context of this complex building. These other aspects would include rivalry with another claimant to the leadership of the Muslim community, ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr in the Hijāz (Elad 2008: 211), as a result of which the Dome of the Rock would have been erected as an alternative to the Holy Mosque in Mecca. However, it has also been argued that this rivalry was no more than an inter-tribal dispute and that ʿAbd al-Malik’s main concern was to model himself on the precedent set by David and Solomon on Mount Moriah, as this is enshrined in the Qur’ānic Davidic mission of Q 38:26 (Rabbat 1993: 17–18).

Mary venerated in Christianity and Islam

Some inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock refer to the veneration by Muslims of the Virgin Mary, who the Qur’ān presents as the holiest of women (Q 3:42) and the mother of a prophet. An archaeological precedent for the Dome of the Rock was the fifth-century Church of the Kathisma of the Theotokos (seat of the Bearer of God) between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, built in the wake of the Council of Ephesus. The building was destroyed in the early twelfth century (Shalev-Hurvitz 2015: 119). The double ambulatory in this building, wrapping around a rock relic, would have served as a precise precedent for the Dome of the Rock. In the case of the Kathisma, its relic was believed to be the rock on which Mary, suffering from labour pains, sat and rested on the way to Bethlehem, as is related in the apocryphal Protoevangelium of James (17:2–3; Avner 2010: 37–9 with plans, figs 6–7). The church was converted into a mosque in the eighth century, when a niche, presumed to have been a miḥrāb, was inserted into the southern part
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(Avner 2010: 41, with fig. 8; Shalev-Hurvitz 2015: 141). A floor mosaic of the eighth century showing three palm trees has been excavated in a room near this added prayer niche. It has been associated with the passage in Sūra Maryam (Q 19:22–6) which relates how Mary gave birth under a palm tree which provided her with food (Avner 2010: 42, with fig. 9). Archaeological work has also established that there was a well at the church from the sixth century onwards, which corresponds to the reference in the Qur’ān story to water flowing at her feet (Shalev-Hurvitz 2015: 141). The forms of the palm trees in the mosaic were derived from their more sophisticated rendering in mosaics in the Dome of the Rock (Flood 2012a: 249, and compare Figs 47 and 48), but despite these close correspondences the Church of the Kathisma was not regarded by Muslims as the site of the birth of Christ (Shalev-Hurvitz 2015: 141). Instead, Muslims projected their beliefs through the imagery at the Ḥaram al-Sharīf in Jerusalem. The Islamic tradition that the Haram was sacred as the site of the cradle of Jesus, from which he spoke (Q 19:29–33), and the oratory of Mary, where she was believed to have stayed during her pregnancy, postdates the seventh century and was not accepted by all Muslim commentators (Matar 2016: 138–9, with figs 56–7). These sites lie within the recently restored mosque of the Caliph Marwān I (r. 684–5), originally built during the reigns of ʿAbd al-Malik and his son al-Walīd (r. 705–15). The oratory of Mary, which in amplifications of the Qur’ān story would have contained the cradle, is mentioned in ʿAbbāsid sources (Necipoğlu 2008: 34).

Islamic aniconic art

Islam had turned its back on figural representation during the time of Muḥammad himself, in the belief that neither God nor any being created by him could be represented. At the same time, pagan idols were suppressed (King 1985; repr. 2007: 214). Thus, nonfigural art forms that were open to Muslim religious artists were the vegetal, calligraphic and geometric. Just one example of the use of geometry in the Dome of the Rock are the window grilles. The originals of these are no longer preserved, but they can be visualised with the help of the pierced marble grilles in the Great Mosque of Damascus, built in 706 (Creswell and Allan 1989: 24, 55, with Figs 32 and 33), as well as work elsewhere, including in al-Andalus, where a tenth-century carved marble grille from an unknown Islamic building in the Córdoba area (Archaeological Museum, Córdoba no. 3.488) serves as an illustration (Fig. 15.5). It has been suggested that this geometric form, shaped without beginning or end, is particularly appropriate in expressing the oneness of God (Jenkins 1994: no. 33). The completeness of the design reflects the central Islamic doctrine of believing in God as one alone (tauhid) and is conceived through the interpretation of Neoplatonic concepts of the relationship between the immaterial soul and the physical body; as Hooman Koliji explains: ‘In the context of architecture, geometry was primarily conceived as a medium that facilitated or hosted the soul’s faculty of form-making to reach the material world’ (Koliji 2015: 21).

Christian aniconic and figural art

The discussion of the Dome of the Rock demonstrates the Islamic theological, polemical and political uses of aniconic art. Christians had both aniconic and figural forms of representation at their disposal for the same purposes. Instances of both can be cited, from different contexts. The starting point can be an aniconic representation of the Trinity. With the qurʾānic verses and aniconic imagery at the Dome of the Rock in mind, in an influential article Erica Cruikshank Dodd turns to the Christian ‘image of the word’ in nonfigural form depicted in mosaic representations of church councils in the nave of the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem (Cruikshank Dodd 1969; repr. 2007: 195–201, with Figs 11.1–2.). Here, conciliar declarations articulate the official
tenets of the one Christian Church, including the Council of Ephesus of 431, which named the Virgin as the Bearer of God (Cruikshank Dodd 1969; repr. 2007: 198). The Trinity iconography that accompanies each council here is authoritative. The First Council of Constantinople from the ecumenical series can be taken as an example (Fig. 15.6). Here the altar represents the throne.
of God the Father, and the Gospels, each embellished with a cross, represent Christ. Above the text is another cross, suffused with light to form an eight-armed cross which stands for the Holy Spirit.

Each council is separated from the next by vegetal imagery of a similar type to that of the Dome of the Rock. Believing that the mosaics date to the same period as the Dome, Cruikshank Dodd argues that the Christian use of such aniconic imagery predates the Islamic (Cruikshank Dodd 1969; repr. 2007: 195, 199). While it has subsequently been proved that the Bethlehem mosaic programme is, in fact, dateable to the twelfth century, a conclusion reinforced by current (2016 ongoing) conservation work in the church, the determination of the Trinity iconography still stands, as it reflects earlier council iconography. As such, it shows the relevance of both Islamic and Christian aniconic art in the period of the later seventh–eighth centuries to the time of the Crusades in the twelfth century. At that time (1169) the nonfigural imagery of church councils fusing theology and history was brought into play, with inscriptions to compete with and also surpass those of the major Islamic buildings (Bacci 2017: 171-2).

Christians living directly under Islamic rule expressed reticence in embracing figural art. This distinguishes them from Christians of the Greek Orthodox Church in Byzantium. The latter witnessed a significant shift in which icons of holy figures took on the roles and attributes formerly associated exclusively with relics, a result of debates during the period of iconoclasm in

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Figure 15.6  Watercolour of mosaic, First Council of Constantinople. Church of the Nativity Bethlehem, south nave arcade.
(W. Harvey, after Schultz 1910)
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Byzantium (726–843; Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 447). This is less evident in the case of eastern, ‘oriental’, Christians, who even on occasion adapted their own figural imagery to appear acceptable in the predominantly aniconic environment in which they lived (Flood 2012b). There is little evidence that Melkites under Islamic rule in this period, for example, regarded the veneration of icons as a priority, and they were even on occasion hostile to it (Codoñer 2013: 187). For them

Figure 15.7 Watercolour reconstruction (1911) of wall painting of the Exaltation of the Cross, apse wall, Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome. (After de Grüneisen 1911)
and other Christians under Islam the symbol of the cross served as a particularly potent Christian aniconic image, even though Muslim antagonism towards the cross was particularly strong, not least because the cross itself impinged on the Muslim aniconic representational mode (King 1985; repr. 2007: 223) as well as expressing the Christian belief in the death and resurrection of Christ (King 1985; repr. 2007: 215), which the Qurʾān flatly denies (4:157).

The cross remained the ultimate and universal Christian symbol. But the use of figural iconography in the scene of the crucifixion enabled Christians further to explain the Christian belief in the coexistence of the divine and human natures of Christ. One such representation of the crucifixion showing Christ on the cross, dating from only a few years after the construction of the Dome of the Rock, is the wall painting of the Exaltation of the Cross above the apse in the church of Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome, from the time of Pope John VII (r. 705–7) at the beginning of the eighth century. Fragmentary, and recently restored (Andaloro et al. 2016: 26–8, with figs. 22–3), it can be viewed through a watercolour reconstruction made in 1911 (Fig. 15.7). Christ is triumphant over death, alive with open eyes and upright on the cross, dressed in the long sleeveless garment known as the collobium. Flanked by the Virgin and St John the Apostle, he is accompanied by seraphim and worshipped by ranks of angels and humans. It has been argued that this image depicts the theophany of Christ as put into words in a sermon on the Transfiguration by St Athanasios of Sinai (d. after 700), absorbing the apocalyptic visions of the late antique and early Christian periods to express the medieval view of the transcendence of Christ (Bergmeier 2014), possibly in direct defiance of what Muslims and some Christian heretics contended. However, not all imagery expressed this triumphalist belief: contemporary icons in the Greek Orthodox monastery of St Catherine on Mount Sinai show the dead Christ with eyes closed, in a further effort to depict the balance between his divine and human natures (Corrigan 2012: 53–4, with figs 20, 27–8). In this latter case the humanity of Christ is given special prominence, through the graphic depiction of his pain and suffering as a man.

Christian theologians, through the work of artists, employed figural visual imagery to explain doctrine to both their own communities and to Muslims. This was brought out in a decree of the Second Council of Nicea, convened in 787 to try to end the iconoclast controversy. According to this decree, the ‘making of iconographic representations is of equal benefit to us as the Gospel narrative’ (Sahas 1986: 178–9; Corrigan 1992: 136). This had the added value of resisting one of the demands of Muslim detractors who accused Christians of changing and falsifying texts. Through artistic representation, proofs could be shown to be both tangible and visible.

**Polemic in figural visual form**

Islam posed a threat to Byzantium at the time of the restoration of icon veneration in 843. In what can be seen to represent an act of defiance against Islam, figural illustrations in the margins of three illustrated Greek Psalters made in Constantinople after 843, as argued by Kathleen Corrigan, include anti-Muslim visual polemic which is particularly related to that of the Melkite bishop and theologian Theodore Abū Qurra (d. after about 830). However, Byzantine theologians and artists more generally adapted the visual language that was used against Jews and iconoclasts (Corrigan 1992: 94), merely transferring that polemic to suit new enemies, who were usually regarded as heretics and transgressors rather than bearers of a new faith. While Muslims accused Christians of idolatry for their worship of the cross and icons, Byzantine polemicists made the counterargument that Muslims worshipped the Black Stone at the Ka’ba. Furthermore, they defended their own practices by saying that God’s prohibition against graven images (Exodus 20:4) was specifically to counter the tendency of the Jews to commit idolatry, and that he had commanded images of the cherubim to be made (Exodus 25:18–20). The Christian polemicists
contended that it was the person on the cross who was worshipped and not the material substance of the cross itself (Corrigan 1992: 91–3).

The Dome of the Rock was converted into a church in the Crusader period as the Temple of the Lord. The Muslim author Usāma ibn Munqidh recorded that he saw in the church an icon of the Virgin holding Christ as a child, an image as it was explained to him by a Frank. Usāma was unimpressed by this anthropomorphism, retorting that ‘Allāh is exalted far above what the infidels say about him’ (Hillenbrand 2006: 290, n. 62).

References


Further reading