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Tracing Gigantism through Islamic Architecture

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HIST 338: Mongols to Ottomans

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The colossal buildings that the Islamic empires left behind are some of the most well-preserved artifacts historians have of their reign. Architecture has been an important aspect of Islamic culture since Muhammad's time; however, it was only during the time of the Umayyad caliphate that monumental mosques, madrasas, and tombs began to appear. Yet the Qu'ran condemns extravagant burials—these mausoleums, though prodigious, were against God's word. Monumental architecture still continued to be built for centuries, despite these rules. The development of gigantism and the role it played in society in the Islamic world can be examined through notable buildings such as the Great Mosque at Isfahan, Sultan Husan's Funerary Complex, and Uljaytu's Tomb. Research from scholars such as Creswell, Blair, and Necipoglu suggests that monumental architecture was primarily used as a display of wealth, a dedication of faith, and a method of legitimizing rule in the Islamic World.

Before the Prophet Muhammad brought Islam to the Arabian Peninsula, there were numerous styles of architecture, and structures were not built to the massive scale seen in later empires. Despite the smaller scale, this early architecture still played a role in the development of gigantism in later years. There are two major opposing viewpoints among scholars regarding pre-Umayyad architecture: that it was insignificant to monumental architecture, or that the multicultural styles of buildings paved the way for the massive domes and minarets of the Islamic world. K.A.C. Creswell, a leading scholar on Islamic architecture and the biggest proponent of the former theory, states in his book *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture* that pre-Umayyad buildings were not "worthy of the name architecture."[1] Building new places for worship became necessary with the introduction of Islam, but Creswell describes these first mosques as "primitive."[2] Because of the need for new religious buildings and the chaos of the

[1] K.A.C. Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958), 1.
[2] Creswell, 2.

Fitnas that took up much of the empire's time and resources, decoration was not a priority.[3] The first masjids were camps or open spaces with only enough room to fit the male population for prayer.[4] These small buildings are not nearly as valued as Umayyad buildings and are often left out of Islamic architectural history entirely.[5] Other scholars contend that the architecture of the early Islamic empire played an important role in the development of monumentalism. Historian Beatrice St. Laurent argues that the multi-ethnic diversity of the pre-Umayyad empire—especially influence from the Byzantines and the Persians—resulted in important architectural developments that eventually led to gigantism: the unconventional largeness of structures.[6] Long before the time of Muhammad, Byzantine architecture often included large domes.[7] These massive domes may have been the architectural inspiration or at least the beginnings of the characteristic domes of Islamic mosques. St. Laurent also brings up that, even in the early days of the Islamic Empire, Byzantine buildings from conquered regions, especially Syria, were repurposed.[8] While this rehabilitation began as secular buildings being rebuilt and reused, it eventually developed into churches being converted into mosques. Other precursors to the monumentalism of the Umayyads include several large, though not gigantic, mosques in Cyprus and along the Black Sea built by Caliph Umar in the mid-seventh century– indicating the presence of important mosque architecture before the Umayyads. In contrast to Creswell's idea that monumentalism began with the Umayyads, these pre-Umayyad structures suggest that the road to gigantism started long before. Both sides have merit, but it is more likely that Islamic architects were influenced by buildings from before the Umayyads and from surrounding

[3] The Fitnas were a series of civil wars that occured after the death of Muhammad as a result of power struggle over who should be the next leader.
[4] John D. Hoag, *Islamic Architecture* (Milan: Electaarchitecture, 2004), 10.
[5] Another notable scholar that does not believe that pre-Umayyad architecture was important is Oleg Grabrar.
[6] Beatrice St. Laurent, "From Arabia to Bilād Al-Shām: Muʿāwiya's Development of an Infrastructure and Monumental Architecture of Early Umayyad Statehood," *Journal of Islamic Archeology 6,* no. 2(2019), 170.
[7] The Hagia Sophia was built in 537 CE, when Muhammad was three years old.
[8] St. Laurent, 180.

empires. With Islam established in the region and the diversity of the people they conquered, the Umayyad Caliphate was able to begin building true monuments.

The Umayyad Caliphate was the first dynastic empire after the death of Muhammad. As a result, the caliphs had a lot to prove to the people as new leaders after the Fitnas. Islamic architecture under the Umayyads became a method of consolidating power: As the empire grew bigger, so too did the mosques. One of the first mosques built under the Umayyads was the famous Dome of the Rock. Built in 691 CE, this mosque was a celebration of the Umayyad rule and a monument to the three Abrahamic religions.[9] The building uses late-antiquity Christian techniques, and Christian and Jewish artisans decorated it with mosaics.[10] The unity of all three religions under the building was likely a method of appealing to the newly conquered people in Byzantium.[11] As the majority were Christian, it let the people know that their new rulers would not take away their belief system. The Dome of the Rock not only was one of the first uses of architecture to legitimize Islamic rule, but it also created a new relationship between buildings and decoration.[12] The most notable Umayyad caliph in strengthening this relationship was Caliph al-Walid (r. 705-715). Under his rule, architecture began to feature form as well as function. Local artisans, usually Persians, decorated mosques with mosaics and artwork.[13] The new expansion of the caliphate also meant that power was fragile, and al-Walid used architecture as a way to ground the people under their new rulers—a physical reminder of the caliphate in power. The biggest of his projects was the Great Mosque of Damascus, which was originally a

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[9] Richard Ettinghausen, Oleg Grabar, and Mary Jenkins, *Islamic Art and Architecture, 650-1250* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 15.
[10] Late-antiquity Christian buildings tended to be octagonal with large arches and a cylinder or dome-shaped upper level. The base of the Dome of the Rock is octagonal, and the large dome rests on top; Ettinghausen, Grabar, and Jenkins, 17.
[11] Though primarily Orthodox Christian, Byzantine lands were multicultural and multi-religious due to being on the lands where all three Abrahamic religions began.
[12] Ettinghausen, Grabar, and Jenkins, 19.
[13] Santhi Kavuri-Bauer, "Architecture" in *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World,* ed. Richard C. Martin (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 70.

Theodoran church.[14] The nave, or central area of the building, sits on a long axial and resembles a Byzantine throne room, which became the standard for mosques everywhere.[15] By using their own architectural style to build mosques, the Umayyads gave the Byzantines a symbolic reminder of their new rulers. The long axial also resulted in a grander building, leading to larger mosques than had ever been built before. The typical three-sanctuary structure of most mosques also came from the Great Mosque of Damascus.[16] Due to the rapid growth of Islam, al-Walid wanted to build a large congregational mosque to attract travelers on the Hajj to Damascus.[17] As the Umayyad empire grew, mosques had to become bigger to allow more people to worship at once. Under the Umayyads, mosques became cultural centers as well as places of worship, creating a need for larger buildings.

The Abbasid Caliphate (750-1250 CE) made mosques the main cultural areas for their cities and used mosques as a show of wealth as well as power. The Abbasid Empire typically had the same style of architecture as the Umayyads, using techniques such as the axial nave.[18] The Abbasid Empire allowed gigantism to become a widespread idea in most of mosque architecture. Widely considered the golden age of the Islamic Empire, the Abbasid Caliphate used its newfound wealth to build massive and heavily decorated structures as a way of showing off that they had money to spare and power beyond the empires that came before them.[19] Monumental mosques were built in newly conquered cities as a way of cementing the power of Islam and celebrating its victories.[20] Massive domes outshined any building, creating the iconic silhouette most people today can recognize and reminding conquered peoples, especially non-Muslims, that

[14] Creswell, 50.
[15] Ettinghausen, Grabar, and Jenkins, 24.
[16] Ettinghausen, Grabar, and Jenkins, 24.
[17] Creswell, 53.
[18] Kavuri-Bauer, 73.
[19] Kavuri-Bauer, 73.
[20] Ettinghausen, Grabar, and Jenkins, 30.

Islam was the dominating religion.[21] The biggest mosque in the world was constructed by the Abbasids.[22] Built in the eighth century, The Great Mosque, or Masjid al-Haram, surrounds the Kaaba in Mecca and remains the largest mosque ever constructed.[23] It is not a coincidence that the biggest mosque in Islamic history resides in Islam's holiest city. Not only did the Abbasids likely use this project to protect the Kaaba and show their piety, but they also used it as a show of great wealth. The money it would have cost to build such a massive edifice was inconceivable. This showed the people in and out of the empire how powerful and fearsome they were, as they had gotten much of that money through conquest.[24] The Abbasid Caliphate set the stage for gigantism to become a trend in not only mosques, but funerary and academic architecture as well. Mausoleums and madrasas were not often built during the Abbasids, but they soon became one of the most common architectural projects in the Islamic world.

Under the Seljuks and the Mongol successors, the Ilkhanids, funerary architecture developed from small burials to massive mausoleums.[25] Both the Ilkanids and the Seljuks were empires that came from nomadic clans and used architecture as a way of asserting power and wealth as the Umayyads and Abbasids had before them. However, rather than just mosques, the Ilkhanids and the Seljuks applied monumentalism to other architectural projects. For the Ilkhanids, the most famous and largest of these structures was the Oljeitu Tomb. The tomb, located in the Ilkhanid capital of Soltaniyeh, is one of the biggest in Iran and is well known for its massive teal dome and mosaics. The base of the building is octagonal, showing how Byzantine architectural style carried over from the Umayyads. As the mausoleum is in the city, it

[21] Ettinghausen, Grabar, and Jenkins, 35.
[22] Ettinghausen, Grabar, and Jenkins, 30.
[23] The first walls around the Kaaba were built by Caliph Umar of the Umayyads, but technically the mosque itself was built under the Abbasids. The mosque has since been renovated many times, primarily by the Ottomans.
[24] A lot of Abbasid wealth came from military raids into Byzantium.
[25] Ernst Kuhnel, *Islamic Art and Architecture*, trans. Katherine Watson (London: Reaktion, 2005), 77.

was built taller to make up for the lack of horizontal space.[26] This development in verticality was instrumental to future complexes, as it meant that buildings could be built bigger in all dimensions. The Seljuk dynasty not only experimented with funerary architecture, but also invented the madrasa.[27] A madrasa was built along with almost every mosque and mausoleum, often as a way of justifying building such a massive complex so that the people could use and remember it long after the death of the commissioner. Madrasas resulted in larger architecture in general, as buildings began to incorporate four-barrelled iwan and pillared halls.[28] The Great Mosque of Isfahan was one of the Seljuk's largest projects. Originally built by earlier Iranians, the Seljuks remodeled the mosque in 1051 after moving their capital to Isfahan in order to show the wealth of the new rulers.[29] It towered over the city, once again acting as a physical reminder of who had conquered the people there. The mosque included several social institutions, including a madrasa.[30] The Great Mosque of Isfahan shows the trend of complexes becoming a large part of city culture, justifying their monumental size by creating not only a tomb, but a place for social and economic exchange for the public. The madrasas of the Seljuks and the mausoleums of the Ilkhanids demonstrate the continued advancement of monumental architecture by creating new purposes for larger complexes.

The Timurids, descendants of the Barlas tribe and the Mongol Empire, took great inspiration from the architecture of the Ilkhanids and the Seljuks. Samarqand, their capital city, is home to several massive mausoleums that serve as complexes for several social institutions.[31] Timur kidnapped architects from all over the empire to build massive madrasas and mosques in

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[26] Kuhnel, 100.
[27] Kuhnel, 79; Madrasas were Islamic schools. The first ever madrasa was built in the 11th century in Baghdad.
[28] Rectangular halls; Kuhnel, 81.
[29] Oleg Grabar, *The Great Mosque of Isfahan* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 52.
[30] Grabar, 50.
[31] Sheila Blair and Jonathon Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 6.

Samarqand, many of which were commissioned by his wife Saray Mulk Khanum.[32] A majority of these architects were Persian, often from the Ilkhanid region. As a result, the iconic teal domes and brightly colored mosaics associated with Timurid architecture priginated in Ilkhanid structures, such as Oljeitu's Tomb. By creating mausoleums that resembled Ilkhanid tombs, Timur used physical representation to connect his reign to the Mongol legacy and proclaim that he not only had a right to build such colossal architecture in their cities, but a right to rule. Timur also commissioned several mausoleums for various Sufi shaykhs, including Yasavi.[33] Religious figures played an important role in the justification for mausoleums being built—most mausoleums were not just for the royal family, but also housed a saint or other important religious figure. By doing this, Timur not only showed off his wealth but also his piety and dedication to Islam. The inclusion of hospitals and orphanages in the massive complexes would also have gained him favor from the people. During this time, architects developed the technique of squinch-net building, allowing for larger buildings to be stabilized.[34] The squinch-net resulted in all of the weight of the building being centered to one point. Almost all monuments in the Islamic world built since have used this technique. The ability to stabilize monumental buildings allowed gigantism to thrive in not only the Timurid Empire, but all empires after.

Monumental building as a means of legitimizing power is perhaps best exemplified in the Mamluk Empire. For the Bahri Mamluk nobility, power and wealth could be confiscated at any time.[35] As a result, many families built massive funerary complexes in Cairo in order to keep their family name passed down. Commissioners named these tombs after themselves in order to glorify their families for the people who used their land while they were alive and generations

[32] Blair and Bloom, 37.
[33] Blair and Bloom, 37.
[34] Blair and Bloom, 36.
[35] Blair and Bloom, 70.

after. Most complexes contained several social services, such as hospitals, hospices, madrasas, and more.[36] In order to fit all of these in one building, the complexes had to be expansive. Squinch-net building from the Timurids and the Seljuk verticality allowed many different families to build complexes all over Cairo. The Mamluks also introduced monumental domes into Cairo architecture, which connected their empire to older dynastic rules like the Abbasids.[37] In this way, monumental architecture served to legitimize not only the rule of specific emperors, but also the existence of the empire as a whole.[38] The biggest of all of these complexes, and of any Mamluk building, was the Funerary Complex of Hasan. The building was so massive and so expensive that it was never finished. Monumental architecture to the people was a physical manifestation of a ruler's power. Hasan himself was seen as a weak ruler, so this funerary complex was meant to make his mark on the world in lieu of political or military accomplishments.[39] Inside the tomb was the "Throne Verse" from the Qu'ran, giving Hasan religious legitimization for his rule and the building of the complex.[40] The building had four madrasas, one for every school of Islamic law. In addition, it also had a covered bazaar, a hospital, a hospice, an orphanage, a water tower, baths, and a public kitchen.[41] The complex was not just of use to Hasan, but also to the general public, gaining him their approval. Despite his weakness as a ruler, Hasan's name stayed relevant as a result of his complex, allowing gigantism to continue as a method of legitimizing power in the Islamic world. Establishing a building as the symbol of his right to rule perhaps backfired on Hasan in later years. The portal to the complex was thirty-seven meters high, and, when it fell and killed three hundred people, the accident was

[36] Blair and Bloom, 70.
[37] Blair and Bloom, 71.
[38] This can also be connected to how the Timurids used Ilkhanid mosaics and teal domes. This connected them to the Mongol dynasty, which would justify Timur's idea of "Chingizid Restoration."; Portals are the massive entrance gates into mausoleums that often have a half-dome ceiling to match the silhouette of the building itself.
[39] Blair and Bloom, 84.
[40] Blair and Bloom, 83.
[41] Blair and Bloom, 81.

seen as a sign of the end of Hasan's reign.[42] The Burji Mamluks also built many complexes in Cairo as a result of the nobility's constant power struggle. Because of the centuries of massive complexes taking up space from their predecessors, buildings from then on had to be built upwards rather than outwards.[43] Funerary complexes were a center of urban life in Cairo, both for residents and travelers alike. Many complexes were built to show power to pilgrims on the Hajj.[44] Complexes continued to be a sign of legitimacy for the nobility in Cairo.[45] Qaitbay, a sultan of the Mamluks, was well known for his architectural projects. He had several complexes built in Cairo and, as a result, was seen as incredibly pious. This was also in competition with the growing Ottoman Empire to show Mamluk superiority.[46] Monumental architecture showed off wealth and power to the people in the empire and also to the empires surrounding it. It also was a way of showing the Ottomans that the Mamluks were more dedicated to Islam, as they had many more madrasas and mosques than the newer empire. The Ottomans, however, quickly caught up in terms of architectural prowess.

The Ottoman Empire developed out of a small Turkic clan in Anatolia. Because they were essentially nobodies, they had to prove their worthiness of rule to the people they conquered. Monumental architecture was one of the primary methods the Ottomans used in order to integrate and assert dominance over conquered peoples. One of the most iconic examples of their use of architecture was the conversion of the Hagia Sophia in the 1450s.[47] The Hagia Sophia permanently altered Ottoman architectural style, as all mosques built thereafter resembled the Byzantine church.[48] The Ottomans, after converting many Byzantine churches into mosques,

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[42] Blair and Bloom, 82.
[43] Blair and Bloom, 85.
[44] Blair and Bloom, 86.
[45] Blair and Bloom, 87.
[46] Blair and Bloom, 92.
[47] The Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque shortly after the Siege of Constantinople in 1453.
[48] Kuhnel, 171.

invented their own monumental style, including one large central dome supported by several smaller domes.[49] This combined Byzantine and Seljuk architecture, integrating the Muslim and Christian sides of their empire.[50] The most famous of all Ottoman architects who developed this unique merging of styles was Sinan. Royal patrons commissioned Sinan for their family's funerary complexes, resulting in gigantism being spread to Ottoman architecture.[51] In the Ottoman Empire, religious identity was more important than ethnic identity; therefore, it was important for them to emphasize the dominance of Islam.[52] Sinan designed mosques and Islamic funerary complexes even larger than churches or other religious buildings in order to show the superiority of Islam over all other religions.[53] Piety also resulted in a good reputation among the people, subsequently, many nobility commissioned Sinan for funerary complexes that contained madrasas, orphanages, mosques, and other social institutions.[54] In Architectural Historian Gulru Necipoglu's words, complexes were the nobility's way to "stake out claims to piety and magnificence."[55] Since these complexes were a part of social life, they also left behind a source of income for the commissioner's family.[56] To the Ottomans, gigantism had a similar purpose that it did for the Mamluks: to prove their wealth and power. Massive buildings not only provided a space for religious activities and showed the devotion of the commissioner, but also carried on their legacy. Sinan often codified buildings based on the commissioner's social status and included their name somewhere on the building.[57] Class played a major role in how large of a complex one would commission: the wealthier the family, the more money they could spend on

[49] Kavuri-Bauer, 70
[50] Seljuk architecture typically consisted of many small domes rather than one large one.
[51] Gülru Necipoglu, *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire* (London: Reaktion, 2005), 17.
[52] Necipoglu, 39.
[53] Necipoglu, 32.
[54] Necipoglu, 45.
[55] Necipoglu, 45.
[56] Necipoglu, 45; Commissioner families were responsible for maintaining and supporting their complexes and therefore got the profits from it.
[57] Necipoglu, 20.

a tomb. Gigantism therefore could only be supported by the Ottoman Empire due to the wealth of their nobility and their desire to show off said wealth. The Ottomans used monumentalism to prove their worth to the people they conquered and fully integrate multiple cultures into the empire through building styles while still emphasizing the dominance of Islam.

While the path of gigantism through Sunni Islamic empires seems clear, there is heavy debate among scholars on the Shi'i role in monumental architecture. Shi'ite empires have been credited with having the biggest role in developing Islamic mausoleums, and many early monuments were built for Shi'a saints. The Fatimids, the first large Shi'ite caliphate, created some of the first monumental mausoleums.[58] In the city of Mashhad, the Fatimids built a massive mausoleum for Caliph Uthman's wife Sayyida Ruqayya.[59] The mausoleum was built early in Islamic history and was a model for many mausoleums after. While monumental mosques were built long before, some historians argue that it was the Fatimids who revolutionized Islamic culture with funerary buildings.[60] Large and elaborate burials are condemned in the Qu'ran. However, these rules were bent when building in the name of honoring Muslim saints. This evolved to royal families building their own mausoleums and eventually became common for all nobility. Historian Christopher S. Taylor argues that the Shi'ite role was not as revolutionary as originally thought. Taylor found research from early French historians that concluded there were no conclusive links between the Fatimids and the origins of mausoleums.[61] Rather than just 'Alid saints resulting in funerary architecture, Taylor believes that the rise of all Islamic saints was the cause of monumental mausoleums. Despite condemnation in the Qu'ran, the lines of what was acceptable to build were still blurred in the name of piety. Since tombs for saints were the first

[58] Kaveri-Bauer, 74.
[59] Kaveri-Bauer, 74.
[60] Creswell and Grabar both wrote about the Shi'ite/Fatimid role in monumental architecture.
[61] Christopher S. Taylor, "Reevaluating the Shi'i Role in the Development of Monumental Islamic Funerary Architecture: The Case of Egypt," *Muqarnas 9,* no. 9 (1992), 5.

gigantic mausoleums built, royal families commissioning their own gave them religious legitimacy to rule. Whether or not the Shi'ite saints truly inspired the application of monumentalism to tombs, Shi'a empires still contributed the tradition of using this architecture to solidify their reign.

Monumental architecture in the Middle East today is a source of cultural pride. These massive complexes are not only beautiful, but are still places of worship and religious significance. Massive funerary complexes completed their intended purpose: They carry on the names of their commissioners. Because the names of the royal families are incorporated in their mausoleums, historians can both date and trace the lineage of the family buried there. Mosques like the Great Mosque of Mecca are important stops while on the Hajj. Colossal mosques showed the spread of Islam throughout history and how it grew in power. Monumental architecture today is a source of pride for many people and provides important historical context for the true wealth and power of Islamic empires by documenting the rise of great rulers and great nations with towering domes and decorated walls.

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