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The Reflection of Interreligious Coexistence on the Cultural Morphology of the Grand Omari Mosque in Gaza

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Abstract

Religious monumental buildings testify to ancient history, past civilizations, and different religions. Therefore, many countries are keen to protect their monuments in various ways. History has seen many wars and conflicts among religions to extend their control over one another, reflected in their attempts to destroy religious buildings or obliterate their features. Contrastingly, areas that experienced interfaith coexistence have survived due to the smooth implementation of architectural conservation. The current research investigated the extent to which religious coexistence has affected the preservation of architectural heritage by analyzing the urban and architectural morphology of the Grand Omari Mosque in Gaza. The research applied the descriptive-historical analysis approach to identify the urban and architectural components of the mosque that have changed or have been preserved due to peaceful interreligious relationships. The research found that Islamic, Christian, Jewish, and pagan architectural elements still exist in the mosque. In each era, people preserved these elements due to the coexistence and acceptance among the religions. This resulted in the preservation of thousands of years of architectural heritage, thus preventing it from obscurity or distortion.

Keywords: Interreligious coexistence; architecture; morphology; Grand Omari Mosque; Gaza.

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1. Introduction

Morphology is the study of the evolution of forms within a built environment (Al Tawayha, Braganca, & Mateus, 2019: 47). This concept is often used in reference to a vernacular language of building that describes changes in the formal syntax of cities and buildings as their relationship to people changes (Kobylarczyk, 2019: 23).

The Grand Omari Mosque is a transnational mosque. It was the first mosque in the Gaza Strip and the first mosque in Palestine after the Islamic conquests in the Holy Land (Sykley & Zanoon, 2016: 77). Throughout history, the mosque has seen visits from various rulers and world leaders. It is located in the Zaytun Quarter, an area in the center of Gaza measuring 6,500 m². It was the last part of the mosque area to be fixed after large parts were truncated from centuries of war and natural disasters, such as earthquakes (Shriteh, 2014: 109).

The paper focuses on the importance of interfaith coexistence and mutual respect and how these concepts reflect on the architectural and urban conservation processes, through a case study on the Great Omari Mosque in Gaza City. It begins with a historical narration of the successive periods from BC to the present, dividing the chronology into three stages: the classical period, the medieval period, and the modern period. It then proceeds to monitor the architectural and urban changes that have occurred in the mosque and its surroundings to identify the changes over time. The inscriptions and writings are analyzed to determine their time and the religions to which they belong.

2. Methodology

The research adopted a descriptive-historical methodology to analyze and understand the reflection of interreligious coexistence on the urban and architectural morphology of the Grand Omari Mosque. This methodology enabled the researcher to detect changes in the mosque through observation, analysis, and description. The primary data were collected by field reconnaissance and analyzing manuscripts, texts, and inscriptions, whereas the secondary data were gathered from architectural and historical books, research papers, and websites.

The research methodology started with a historical narration and detailed description of the events and changes that happened to the mosque over time. The mosque developments were divided according to three historical ages: the classical period, from BC to the fourth century; the medieval period, from the fifth to the fifteenth century; and the modern period, from the sixteenth century to the present. Furthermore, the research investigated the urban morphology and architectural components in the mosque to determine the influence of religious tolerance on the mosque's form and function.

3. The classical period

In ancient times, the Grand Omari Mosque area was a large temple of pagans and idolaters. Particularly, it was a site for the monument of the god Marnas, the god of the east, the west, lightning, and thunder, worshiped by the ancient people of the Levant and Egypt (Hilliard & Bailey, 1999: 108). Marnas was erected in the current location of the mosque's minaret and remained there for more

than 2,000 years. Therefore, Gaza was the last Palestinian and Levantine city to practice paganism (Yacobi & Nasasra, 2019: 95). The collapse of the pagan state in Gaza was declared from the temple nave, followed by the rise of Christianity as the official religion proclaimed in AD 400 (Weingarten, 2005: 138). The beginning of these directives was made by Porphyrius, a Roman saint who faced persecution from his Christian supporters in Gaza. He went to Constantinople and met Queen Eudoxia, the wife of the Roman emperor Theodosius I, who then ordered that Gaza be liberated from the pagans (Holum, 1989: 72). Consequently, Marnas was buried in the middle of the strip near the Gaza Valley.

In 1879, the people of Gaza discovered the statue of Marnas in the center of the Gaza Strip, 10 meters under the soil in Tell El-Ajjul. The statue was 15 meters high and considered one of the wonders of the world (Kristensen, 2013: 82). A new church was built and named the Church of Queen Eudoxia, as she funded the construction according to the queen's approved plans. Queen Eudoxia resided in Gaza until her death, and her remains were transferred to Constantinople (Sivan, 2011: 221). In AD 405, Saint Porphyrius died and was buried in the church. Hence, it was renamed the Church of Saint Porphyrius, where the saint's grave remains in the nave (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952: 846).

4. The medieval period

In AD 635, Caliph Omar ibn al-Khattab entered Palestine and accorded the Christians with a pact called the Covenant of Omar:

... He guarantees to them the security of their persons, possessions, churches, and whatever relates to their cult. Their churches will not be transformed into dwelling houses, nor will they be destroyed, nor will anything be taken from the churches or the ground on which they stand or the crosses and possessions of the inhabitants. They will not be constrained in their religion, and none of them will be troubled or hurt ... (Runciman & Essex, 1970: 7).

The Christians in Gaza shared the church with half of the Muslims there, and thus half of the church became the Grand Omari Mosque, and the other half became the Church of Saint Porphyrius (Filiu & King, 2014: 91). Afterward, Caliph Omar ibn al-Khattab worked to restore the current building and built new parts. He then prayed at the mosque, which was his first prayer in Palestine. Consequently, the mosque was named after him (Gibbon, 2018: 111). Then he settled in the mosque for a whole year while preparing a vast army of Muslims to send to Jerusalem. During the Islamic conquest in Gaza, there were two churches, and a multitude of Christians embraced Islam. Subsequently, some Christians approached the Arab leader Amr ibn al-Aas and asked him to judge between them and their brothers who remained Christian (Kamal-ud-Din, Mission, & Trust, 1957: 28). Moreover, they wanted to divide the churches between them and their Christian brothers, considering that the Christians who converted to Islam inherited those temples and churches from their fathers and grandfathers to perform prayers and religious rituals. The Muslim leader accepted their claim (Masalha, 2018: 247). As a result, the Muslims took the big church, and since the Christians were the minority, they took the small church. In AD 1033, Gaza was subjected to a violent earthquake causing great destruction to the mosque. In AD 1100, the Crusaders occupied Gaza (McKenzie, 1995: 208).

In AD 1149, Baldwin III, King of Jerusalem, built a new church on the ruins of the Grand Omari Mosque named Saint John the Baptist, on top of the current construction of the former mosque (Pringle, Pringle, Leach, & Press, 1993: 63). Consequently, it became two closely attached churches. Nevertheless, the Church of Porphyrius refused to unite with the Church of Saint John the Baptist, as it was under the name of the “European occupation” of the Palestinian lands (McKenzie, 1995: 143). Until the Islamic conquest of Palestine by Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi in AD 1178, the Church of Saint John the Baptist remained the same. The first task effected by Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi was to restore the church to the Grand Omari Mosque (El-Attar, Hossam, & Salah, 2010: 104-105). After Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi’s death AD 1228, Gaza was occupied as part of the Sixth Crusade. The Mosque was retransformed into the Church of Mario Hanna (Serageldin, Shluger, & Martin-Brown, 2001: 171). In AD 1244, a new war called the Great Battle of Gaza transpired between the Ayyubids and the Crusaders in Gaza near the Omari Mosque, which inflicted massive damage on the mosque (Shaw & Demy, 2017: 329).

During the Mamluk era, specifically in AD 1285, the first minaret of the Omari Mosque was erected (Shriteh, 2014: 53). At that time, Gaza had become a link between the two Mamluk capitals, Damascus and Cairo, and thus many guests, travelers, and tourists visited Gaza with the intention of either seeking knowledge in al-Kamiliyyah school adjacent to the mosque, trade between Egypt and Syria, or pilgrimage to the Holy Land (Grabar, 1985: 184). These drove the necessity to enlarge the mosque to accommodate further thousands of guests staying in Gaza for weeks or months. During the reign of the Mamluk sultan Seif al-Din Qalawun, the Church of Porphyrius reshared its northern wall with the Muslims. Nevertheless, the 1294 earthquake that struck Gaza inflicted immense damage on both the mosque and the church (Ring, Watson, & Schellinger, 2014: 290). The profound deterioration was impossible to repair, especially in the area where the mosque was enlarged. Consequently, the affected area was converted to a pedestrian street, separating the former mosque building and the newly carved out area of the church (Ambraseys, Melville, & Adams, 2005: 41).

Correspondingly, the site of the Grand Omari Mosque has remained unchanged, whereas the other area that was turned into a mosque was named the Mosque of Katib al-Wilaya (‘the clerk of the state’) (al-Urdunīyah & al-Yarmūk, 1983: 142). Ahmed Bey, the clerk of Gaza, carried the request from the Mamluk sultan Seif al-Din Qalawun, who demanded that the Church of Porphyrius truncate a portion of the land designated for the church to enlarge the courtyards of the mosque (Lowry, 2012: 191). Considering that the Mamluk period experienced the greatest fraternity periods between Muslims and Christians, the deduction was made through mutual consent. Another important fact was that the Mosque of Katib al-Wilaya was still located on lands belonging to Christian endowments (Frontiers & al-Thaqāfah, 2013: 126). In AD 1340, the Mamluks restored the Grand Omari Mosque, and the fourth Mamluk sultan, Zahir Baybars, added an extensive library to the mosque that included over 20,000 volumes of books on science (Tamari, 1982: 468). All the restoration works for the Grand Omari Mosque were completed, making it one of the most beautiful mosques according to the traveler Ibn Battuta, who visited Gaza in AD 1355 (Copeland et al., 2011: 26).



Figure 1: Mosque of Katib al-Wilaya, adjacent to the Church of Saint Porphyrius

5. The modern period

In 1600, during the Ottoman period, the Grand Omari Mosque experienced urban reforms and additions when the Ottomans repaired the mosque and built the northern side. The Grand Omari Mosque's most significant restoration happened in 1895, after a massive earthquake struck the city (Hamimi, El-Barkooky, Frías, Fritz, & El-Rahman, 2019: 381). The old stones and columns that were used remain. In 1917, during World War I, although the British army bombed Gaza with gunboats, causing severe destruction in the Grand Omari Mosque, the High Islamic Council of Jerusalem, in 1926, rebuilt and repaired the destroyed parts and established a new *minbar* (pulpit) for the mosque (Caplan, 2011: 76; Feldman, 2008: 145). A chronology of the Grand Omari Mosque's most prominent events during past historical eras is summarised in the following timeline.

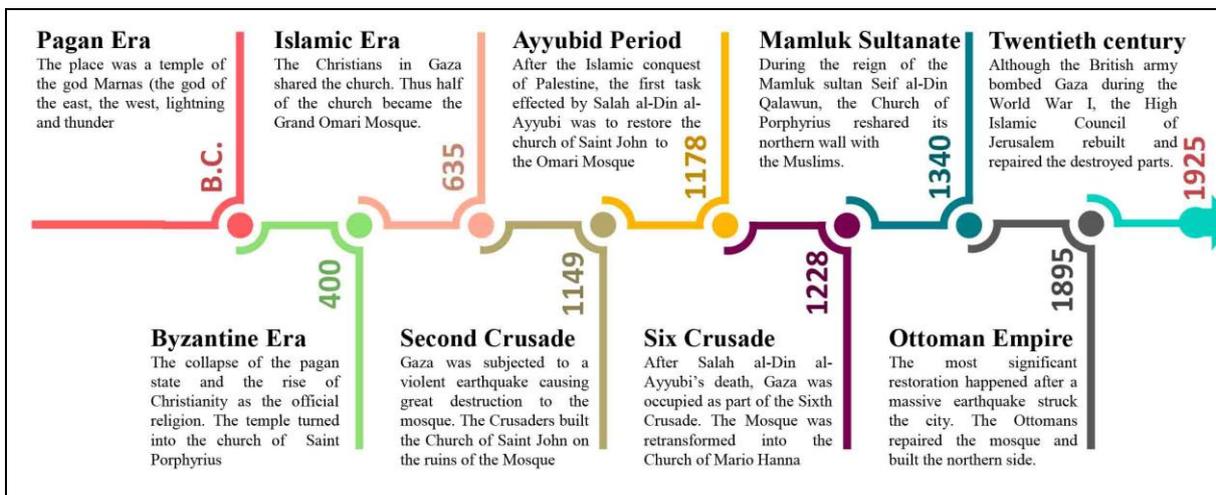


Figure 2: Timeline of important events of the Grand Omari Mosque

6. Urban morphology

Urban morphology means the interaction of shape with function, resulting in the external appearance or the external body of a city (Sedighi & Mota, 2020: 479). The term is used to study the urban history of a city and determine a set of factors and influences behind the formation of the forms and shapes in every period of the city's life. Moreover, it reveals the outer appearance of the city and analyzes the internal elements formed through urban architecture (Fisher et al., 2019: 516). Based on archaeological research, the area designated for worship was 70,000 m² when it was a pagan temple, which began to change on its conversion from a church to a mosque (Ashkelony & Kofsky, 2004: 61). Many factors played a role in the region's morphological change, be they natural, such as earthquakes that struck the city, or man-made, such as World War I.

The above factors changed and formed the area several times, eventually dividing it into small parts. The formation was related to the area and function of the place that experienced many transformations. Notably, most of the temple area is comprised of arenas and atriums. In the classical temples, the exterior, the only important part, was used to hold all the ceremonies and rituals, whereas the interior was used for the priests and to keep God's statue. Contrastingly, the churches focused more on the interior design, where the Christian liturgies were held, and less on the outdoor spaces (Kleiner, 2016: 331). The following list shows the area's urban morphology in eight stages, indicating the coexistence of religions, particularly between Islam and Christianity.

Stage one: A space of 70,000 m² is allocated for pagan worship.

Stage two: The area remained the same and was then converted to a Christian place of worship.

Stage three: The region was divided in half: one half for Muslims, and the other half for Christians. This was after the latter gifted them with the land as an expression of love, peace, and cooperation.

Stage four: The area designated for Muslims was taken by the Crusaders (the indigenous Christians denied this allegation as it amounted to an occupation). Therefore, two adjacent churches existed there for thirty years.

Stage five: The building was returned to the Muslims after its liberation by the Ayyubids.

Stage six: The mosque became narrow and failed to accommodate more people, so it underwent its first expansion after acquiring permission from the Christians.

Stage seven: The second extension, in conjunction with the sultan's request for expansion, was suggested by the church when it discovered many pilgrims, indicating the true meaning of brotherhood.

Stage eight: A tremendous earthquake caused immense damage to the area, so it was re-planned, streets were rebuilt and new buildings were constructed. Consequently, the total area shrunk to the extent that only the mosque and the church remain. Meanwhile, the courtyards have been reused as public facilities.

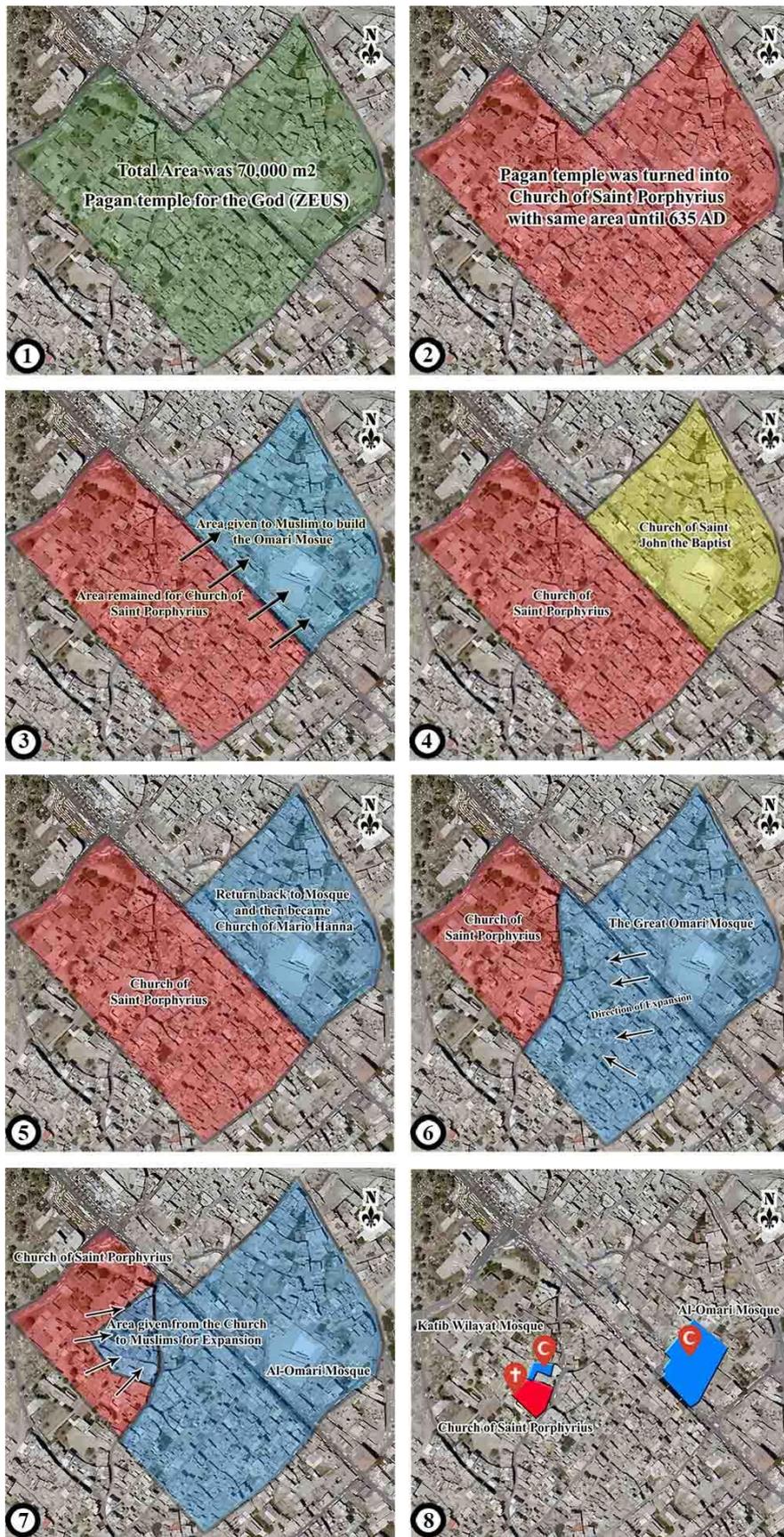
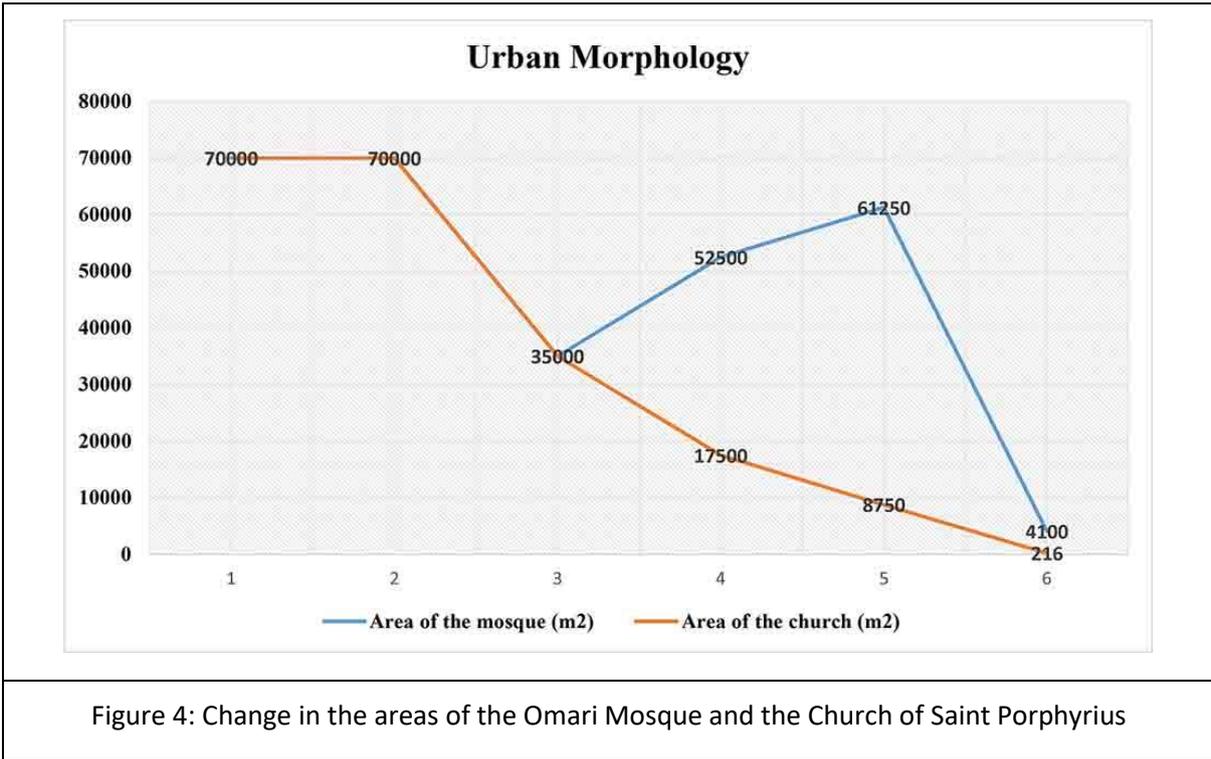


Figure 3: The area's urban morphology

On comparison, the researcher noticed that Muslims and Christians shared the area between the Omari Mosque and the Church of Porphyrius at the beginning of the Islamic era. With time and the growing Muslim population, the mosque area gradually increased, while the church area decreased. The relationship between the two religions was distinctive as well as cooperative. Furthermore, feelings of love, harmony, and coexistence prevailed. The 1294 earthquake was a critical turning point that induced a fundamental change in the region, re-ordering work priorities and focusing on service establishments at the expense of religious ones. Following the event, both the mosque and the church were damaged. Nevertheless, both were completely rebuilt and restored, but with different sizes.



The line chart shows the continuity of the area’s gradual decline from the Islamic conquest to the present. The regression culminated in 1917 with an area of 4,100 m². Consequently, the rest of the area was transformed into residential neighborhoods separated by streets, shops, and commercial markets. The area’s dramatic decrease was intended not only for the mosque, but also for the total area devoted to worship, measuring 70,000 m² in the ancient period. The Grand Omari Mosque, the Church of Saint Porphyrius, and the Mosque of Katib al-Wilaya had shrunk, with the total area of the three buildings combined measuring 4,693 m², which represented only 0.067% of the original space. Therefore, from a philosophical perspective, the morphological change compares to the Matryoshka doll, which holds several other dolls of decreasing sizes: the larger dolls contain the smaller ones. These dolls denote a recognizable relationship of ‘object-within-similar-object’, which appeared in the design of the worship area (Pescosolido, Martin, McLeod, & Rogers, 2010: 61), as with the big building that was a pagan temple and the small buildings inside that were two mosques and a church. This insight represents the importance of knowing the origins of the region to further facilitate its return to its original form. Moreover, each religion was provided with full rights of sovereignty over the region, the summit of justice and equality.

7. Architectural morphology

The total surrounding area of the Grand Omari Mosque is 4,100 m², whereas the building area is 1,800 m². Most of the mosque structure was constructed using marine sandstone, able to accommodate more than 3,000 worshipers as well as boasting a big courtyard surrounded by circular arches (Osheroff & Halevy, 2019: 49). On the first floor, the mosque includes a school for teaching the Holy Qur'an, while the basement contains reception spaces and an antique hall dating back to more than 2,000 years, equipped to be an Islamic museum. The imam of the mosque 100 years ago, Sheikh Othman al-Tabbaa, describes the mosque as the greatest, oldest, most secure, and most beautiful mosque (Ṭabbā', 1999: 231). The mosque has a large house based on thirty-eight pillars of marble and solid cylinders with high domes in the middle, which is the church established by the Bishop of Gaza, Porphyrius, at the expense of Queen Eudoxia (Dowling, 1913: 79). It is rare to find an equivalent mosque in the Levant. The current rectangular shape of the mosque, which follows the basilica style, is due to its origin from a Crusader church. After the battle of Hattin in AD 1187, Salah al-Din conquered Gaza and converted the church to a mosque, and the structure of the building was preserved (Dumper, Abu-Lughod, & Stanley, 2007: 420).

7.1. Internal architecture

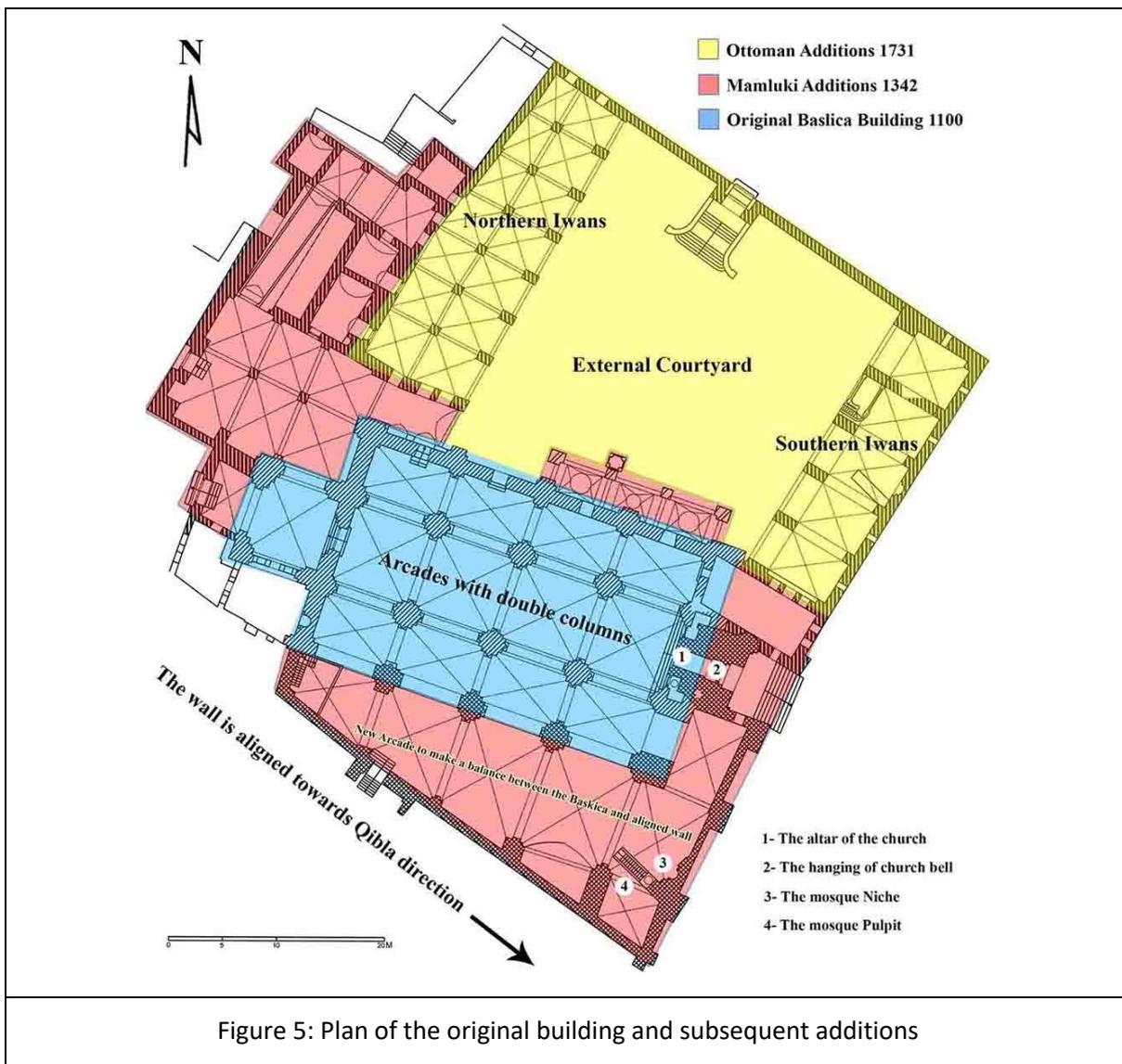
After the emergence of Christianity at the beginning of the fifth century AD, most people in Gaza embraced Christianity. Queen Eudoxia ordered the architect Rufinus to build a lavish edifice to be devoted to the Christian cult. Aiming to construct the church, she sent him forty-two columns from Karystos (a Greek city) by sea (Ashkelony & Kofsky, 2004: 166). The columns were designed according to Corinthian order (the word 'Corinth' originated from the island of Corinth in Greece) with decorative motifs. At that time, the number of columns was unparalleled, with the Grand Omari Mosque being an exception. After the mosque was demolished, the architects incorporated the surviving remains of the original Byzantine church into the construction of the Church of Saint John the Baptist during the Crusader period (Pringle et al., 1993: 181). Additionally, the same old columns were reused and are still erected. The mosque is characterized by an asymmetric gabled structure consisting of three arcades, two of which are part of the Church of Saint John the Baptist. The largest of these arcades are central, emulating the Italian Gothic style extending from east to west. It measures 33 m in length and 16 m in width with two stories, bringing the exterior form to a wide rectangle (Filiu & King, 2014: 138-139). The roof consists of fascinating cross vaults placed on marble columns.

During the reign of Sultan Ahmad ibn Qalawun in the Mamluk era (approximately 700 years ago), the mosque was expanded on the southern side by the addition of a large arcade. The arcade widens when it leans to the east and narrows to the west until it reaches its maximum width in the southeastern corner of the mosque (El-Attar, Hossam, & Salah, 2010: 77). This new arcade created a balance to hide the architectural deviation of the original basilica building, resulting in the general architectural form leaning towards the qibla. A pulpit and niche were added to this arcade, and a new entrance was opened in the southern wall. The arcade has been called 'the arcade of Ibn Qalawun'. The thickness of the walls, built like the other original arcades, ranges from 80 to 120 cm (Pescosolido, Martin, McLeod,

& Rogers, 2010: 89), with pillars that perform two purposes: to strengthen the mosque's main southern wall and to carry arches bearing the cross vaults. In addition to hard rocks and marble stones, the arcade was built of sandstone that was available during that period. The niche and pulpit of the mosque were constructed of white marble decorated with colored motifs, as Ibn Battuta indicated in his memoirs (Dunn et al., 2005: 55). Marble was used for the western door and the dome niche, whereas the floors were covered with glazed tiles.

7.2. External architecture

The mosque consists of several iwans that existed when the mosque was a church, and during the Mamluk era, a new large iwan was added. The iwan, a rectangular space vaulted on three sides with one side open, is commonly associated with Islamic architecture (Stanton, Ramsamy, Seybolt, & Elliott, 2012: 8).



The book *Ithaf al-Aizah fi Tarikh Gaza* mentions that the place of the church's bell became a minaret during the reign of King Nasser al-Din Muhammad ibn Qalawun. Moreover, the northern door

(known as Bab al-Tina), the southern door, and many windows were discovered (Ṭabbā', 1999: 212). The first stones used for these doors and windows were prepared 900 years before. The mosque is distinguished by a sky courtyard surrounded by twenty architectural arches from the Mamluk and Ottoman eras, so the architectural style differs in height and decoration. The five exterior doors of the mosque were opened facing the old Gaza market and the streets of the ancient city. One of the doors overlooked the Qissariya Market (also known as 'the gold market'), small shops added to the Grand Omari Mosque in the Mamluk era and currently used to sell gold. During the Ottoman era, Sheikh Muhammad Kamal al-Din al-Bakri (AD 1731-1782), governor of Gaza, made the largest architectural expansions. He established the northern iwans and arcades with a vaulted roof on the western side measuring 1,190 m² (Maniscalco, 2002: 74). Furthermore, from the ruins of Mamluk buildings and mosques, he brought a marble pulpit and niche to the eastern iwan. Subsequently, an outer courtyard was attached to the mosque, bringing its total area to 4,100 m².

7.3. The minaret

In AD 1187, on the conversion of the mosque into a church, certain expansions were made with new parts that fit the church, including the bell used for the prayer call (Clermont-Ganneau, 2010: 163), hung near the minaret in the inner nave towards the eastern mosque door. Although the church was reconverted to a mosque, this element was preserved during the successive Islamic eras of the Ayyubids, Mamluks, and Ottomans, and remains to this day. The Mamluks opened the eastern entrance and set up a minaret above it during the reign of King Husam al-Din Lajin in AD 1297 (Frontiers & al-Thaqāfah, 2013: 66). Considered one of the most outstanding features of the Omari Mosque, the minaret is a model of Mamluk architectural style in Gaza, consisting of a square body topped by an octagonal floor with arched niches. Some of the niches have holes, and others are without holes, all decorated with stone motifs. The minaret, including the upper half, was constructed from stone and consists of four levels, whereas the top of the minaret is made of wood and tiles. This is like the construction of most eastern mosques in the Levant.

Presently, the minaret stands on the old end of the eastern bay of the Crusader church, three semi-circular apses that turned into the base of the minaret (Pringle & Leach, 1993: 138). Various historical references mention that there was an old minaret for the mosque supposedly built during the Umayyad era, but it was destroyed by a violent earthquake in AD 1033. Due to the Crusader and Mughal invasions, the Grand Omari Mosque remained without a minaret until the thirteenth century (Masalha, 2018: 103). In AD 1308, the Mamluk sultan Abu al-Fath al-Mansouri ordered that another minaret be built on its ruins. The foundations of the minaret were square and larger and higher than the Mamluk and Ottoman counterparts (Weshah, 2018: 111). Appearing from the base size, the original minaret was huge, with a great height. Due to the relatively small size of the Mamluk and Ottoman minaret, it fails to fit with the construction of an octagonal minaret. Nevertheless, both minarets were demolished, and only the foundations remained. After being destroyed in the First World War, the current minaret's body was built in 1926 by the High Islamic Council of Jerusalem (PASSIA, 2001: 38).

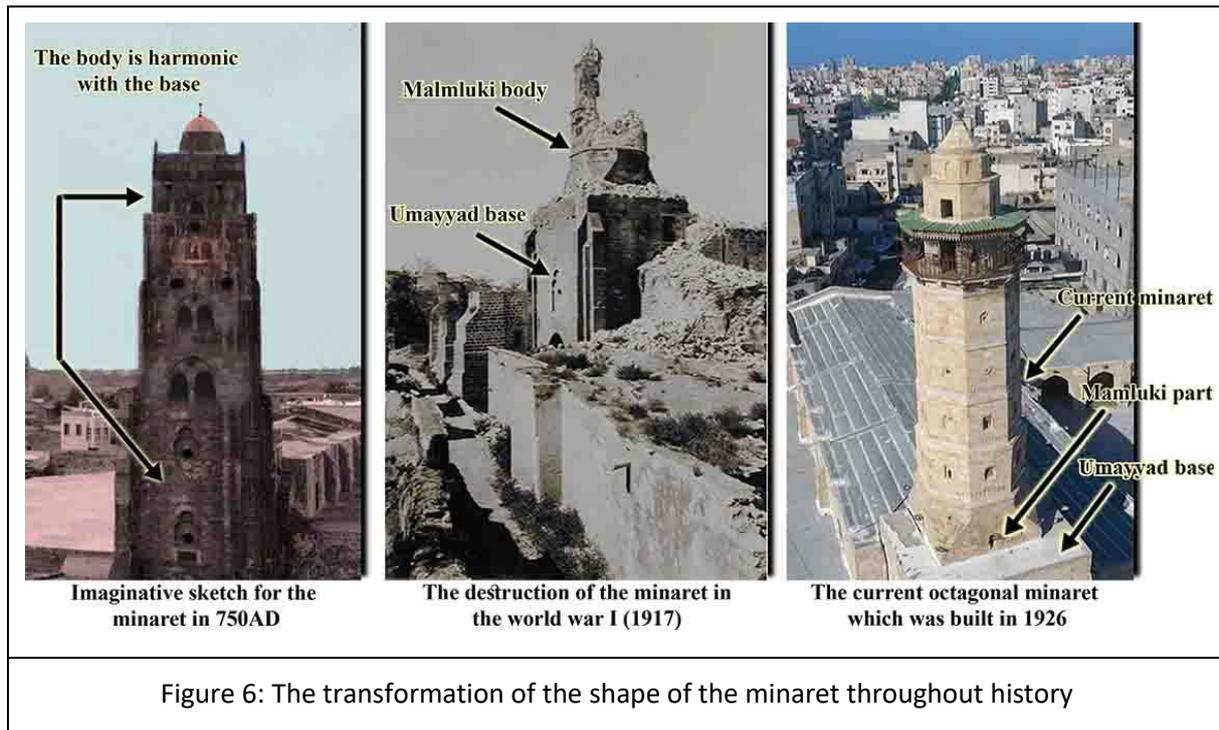


Figure 6: The transformation of the shape of the minaret throughout history

8. Results

The people of Gaza were distinguished by their religious tolerance and respect for others. Thus, they ensured that the religious architectural elements and symbols are preserved, and no obliteration of any relics of another religion occur. Aiming to determine the architectural elements, the study examines the building in an abstract approach, dealing with each religion separately.

8.1. As a pagan temple

The Grand Omari Mosque began as a pagan temple, evident from a large rounded colored hole as a symbol of the previously worshiped sun. The hole was in the northern iwan, measuring more than 12 m high. Although no remains were left of the pagan temple due to natural factors, such as rain, wind, and earthquakes, the rose window was a past symbol and existed within the building when it was a church. The structure of the circular opening on the window was called an oculus, and the window itself was known as a rose window or a wheel window. This type of window design was common in Gothic churches and cathedrals during the twelfth century (Arango, 2016: 42). Furthermore, the window was divided by simple spokes with eight segments of rods that radiated from the center, according to the number of temples in Gaza that worshiped the god Marnas. It was believed that once the light poured through the colored window, the spirit of the Marnas would be illustrated on the floor.

8.2. As a synagogue

On the third top column from the left of the central arcade, a bas-relief was carved in two languages, Greek and Hebrew. The sculpture portrays a crown, trumpet, knife, and seven candlesticks. Below the inscription are three bilingual lines that translate as 'Hananiah, son of Jacob', in reference to Judaism. Archaeologists have offered two opinions about the sculpture. First, the crown is related

to King Theodosius, and the bas-relief was engraved in memory of King Titus’s victory over the Jews (Horbury, 2014: 201). Second, the column was part of an old synagogue in third-century Caesarea (Orosius & Deferrari, 2010: 81). During the late nineteenth century, it was brought from that synagogue due to the church’s appearance in the mosaic of the ‘Madaba Map’, created in AD 600. This Jewish symbol has been preserved throughout the ages, thus demonstrating peaceful coexistence.



Figure 7: The central arcade with colored rose window above the main entrance

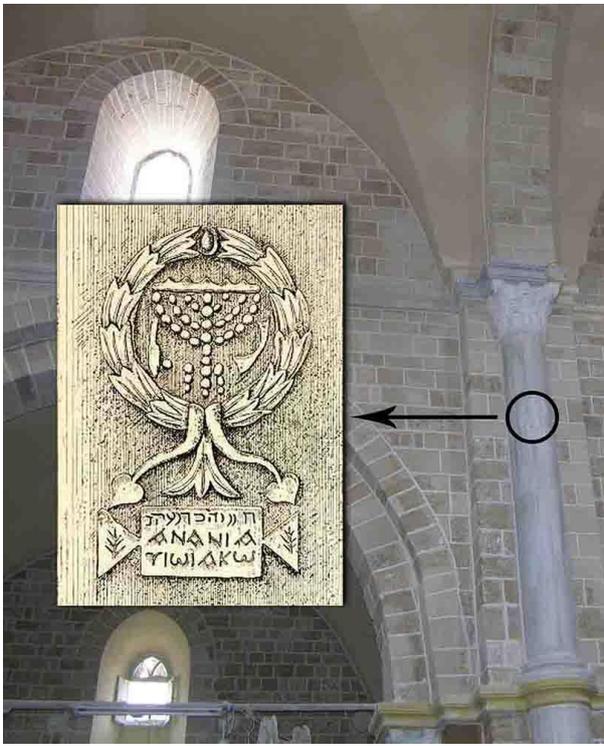


Figure 8: A bas-relief carved on a Corinthian column in Greek and Hebrew languages

8.3. As a church

The Grand Omari Mosque has safeguarded the Christian architectural features considered as historical icons. The preservation of such features indicates the tolerance and coexistence between Islam and Christianity. The urban architectural Christian elements in the mosque are as follows:

1. The mosque’s external coverage is a system of classical gable surface, in contrast with the usual design, which had a dome or group of domes. From the inside, the mosque has a vaulted ceiling along with the principal space of the nave. The superstructure gable roof used in the old architecture implied greatness, strength, and cohesion.

2. The main architectural type of the plan adapted was the Byzantine basilica, distinguished by Roman churches and fundamental to the Byzantine style, especially during the Crusader period. The basilica is defined as a large rectangular hall with double colonnades and a semi-circular apse.

3. The mosque’s nave consists of rib vaults, and severies underneath are detached from one another by the rib vaults hiding the groin vaults. This type of rib vault was commonly used during the

Crusader period in large structures, such as customs houses, monasteries, and palaces. Moreover, the central space is surrounded by a thick wall up to 120 cm thick.

4. Based on the system of ancient eastern churches, the orientation of the mosque is east-west. The apse and altar are in the east, whereas the main entrance and the façade are on the west end. This opposite design is called occidentation (Remery, 2010: 182). The old architectural principle was to turn the churches eastward for prayers to face the rising sun in the morning, evidently an influence of the pagan custom.

5. The nave has a rich finish following the typical Crusader building, with square piers made of marble, rendered in solid black. The supported arcades are on a raised base, a familiar representation in the architectural plans. With aims to make the structure upright and stable, each pier was surrounded by four pillars on all sides, serving also as a vertical load-bearing.

6. The mosque's nave is flanked by three parallel arcades symbolizing the Christian Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). The middle arcade is higher than the others. The arcades are separated from each other by transverse pointed arches with rectangular profiles.

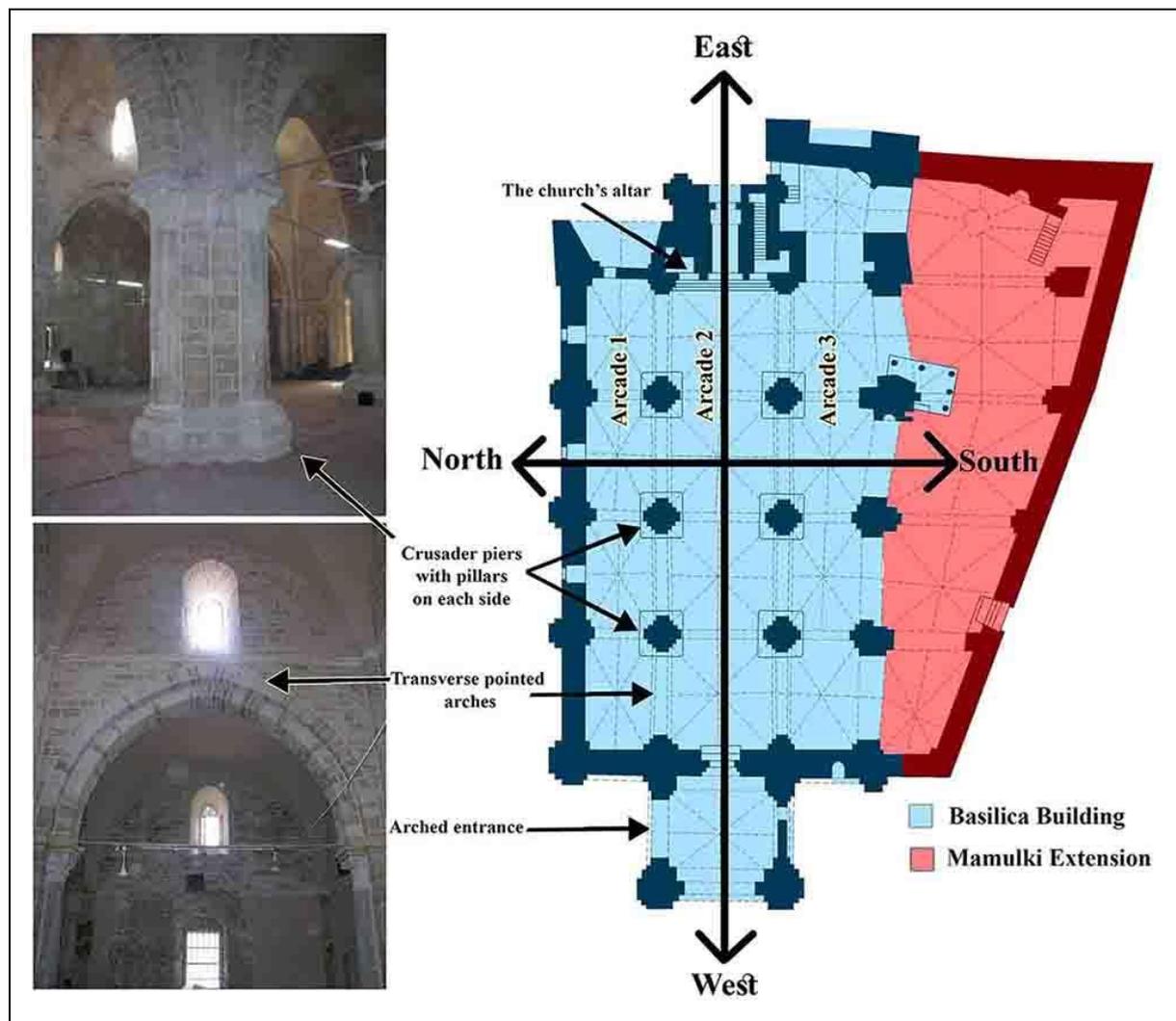


Figure 9: The mosque's Christian architectural features

7. There were bluish grey marble columns on all sides of each pillar, with beautiful capitals of the Corinthian order. The capitals were decorated with remarkable design features, motifs of leaves from the acanthus or artichoke plant, evidence that the columns originated from ancient Greece, which followed the classical conventions, different from the Byzantine capital style. These Greek columns were the same used in the first church in AD 405 and remain in the mosque in good condition.

8. The mosque's main door is under a porch, following the church's Crusader architecture. The door is topped by a pointed arch consisting of three orders that rest on an abacus running along the wall of the façade. All the door parts are made of marble. The pointed arch first appeared in India and was subsequently used in Islamic architecture and later in crusader architecture. The style then spread in Europe and was adopted by Gothic architecture.

9. Near the mosque's minaret is a cavity that was dedicated to hanging the church bell. It was built in 1187 and used to ring for various ceremonial purposes (Ashkelony & Kofsky, 2004: 99). A focal point, the site has remained in the process of restoration to respect the religions.

10. The presence of the church altar relics, on which offerings and gifts were made for religious purposes, was placed beyond the iconostasis (a wall split up the main body from the sanctuary). During the crusader era, this was the prevailing architecture in Eastern churches.

9. Conclusion

The Grand Omari Mosque in Gaza represents one of the most important manifestations of tolerance and religious coexistence. Although the Covenant of Omar stipulated that Muslims should not use Christian places of worship, due to the embrace of Islam by most of Gaza, the church donated part of its land to Muslims to establish a mosque. Thereafter, through mutual consent, the mosque expanded at the expense of the church. During the Crusader period, the mosque was demolished due to natural factors, and a church was built in its place. Later, the church turned into a mosque again, and to satisfy Christians, all Christian elements in the mosque were to remain except for some interior decorations impeding worship. Even Jewish and pagan symbols remain the same. Therefore, the mosque represents an architectural icon combining various religions. The morphological transformation and functional change, as well as geological and natural factors, from BC to today have led to a dramatic shift in the area. The first worship area was 70,000 m² in a combined place and became three separate blocks: The Grand Omari Mosque (4,100 m²), the Church of Porphyrius (216 m²), and the Mosque of Katib al-Wilaya (377 m²). The change is like the morphological-philosophical change in the Matryoshka doll, with a gradual change in size from largest to smallest. Regardless of the space, the focus should be on the sublime meanings of acceptance, an understanding that all archaeologists and restoration specialists should have to preserve the religious symbols and ultimately show the aesthetics, spiritual and philosophical values without distorting the facts, and to avoid any type of disagreement or differences.

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