

**DOI: 10.7596/taksad.v5i4.607**

## **The Early Islamic Centuries: a Criterion for the Impact of Religious Beliefs on Architecture and Decoration of Iran**

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### **Abstract**

It is asked to which extent the impact of religion and religious beliefs can be influential in architectural works. Historically, it seems that a study on the transformation in religious beliefs can be of great importance to track this impact. Advent of Islam into Iran and change of religion in Iran can be known as one of the most influential transformations in people's beliefs, followed by abundant consequences at social, cultural and art areas. Architecture, as one of manifestations of culture and civilization, indicates many transformations, beliefs and willingness of a community. Thus, hesitation in social events and attention to change of religion at the early Islamic centuries besides study on architectural and decorative features at this period and their comparison with the period of past can help to give response to the raised question. In this study, the relationship between social and religious developments analyzed. The developments at architectural and decorative areas are also examined.

**Keywords:** The Early Islamic Centuries, Architecture, Decorations, Religious Art.

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## **Introduction**

With advent of Islam at Saudi Arabia, extended developmental provisions were appeared in countries around Saudi Arabia. Islam with the motto of equality of humans and Muslims' high motivation was extended so fast. Yet, a large part of this extension was taken place after death of Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him). Muslims at the shortest time extended their influence from India in east to Spain in west. Change of religion and beliefs in all the countries under influence of Muslims has led to massive changes in all the affairs related to the life of communities which have recently populated with Muslims and these changes emerged at various levels of social, political, economic, cultural and art affairs. Sassanid Iran had not autonomy of the past decades at the advent of Islam; on the other hand, due to various reasons such as prevalence of social class and abundant deviations in Zoroastrianism religion, public position of government with famous religious facet had been undermined. Thus, after many struggles between Iran and the Arabs, finally full-scale war broke out between them, resulting in failure of the Iranian Sassanids government against the Muslim Arabs (Pope, 2004). Thus, the Iranian government gradually fell into the hand of the Arabs and the Umayyads and Abbasids dynasties which ruled over Islamic lands took Iran's government in hand. Iranians became Muslims gradually and over two centuries, and thus the common religion of Iranians changed from Zoroastrianism to Islam. This change influenced many dimensions of Iranians' life. Architecture as a sociocultural phenomenon was undergone this major change (Pirnia, 2006).

## **The Beginning of the Islamic Architecture and its Later Developments**

Al-Masjid an-Nabawi can be known as the first manifestation of the architecture presented in new religion. Building of Al-Masjid an-Nabawi can be defined as a pattern for Muslims which this pattern can be known as a beginning of a type of architecture recognized with Islamic architecture. The main features of this mosque can be its apparent and unique simplicity. Low altitude, avoidance from decoration and avoidance from any non-essential elements are considered as manifestations of willingness to simplicity in this building. However, according to Hylbrand, dimensions of courtyard of the building in plan have been bigger than common houses common in Saudi Arabia. Thus, the first work of Islamic Architecture was simple and without decoration. But the Umayyads were not so committed to the principle of simplicity in building magnificent buildings such as mosques and palaces. They built plan based on pattern for Al-Masjid an-Nabawi in their mosques or Byzantine

patterns, but they made mosques and palaces so decorative so as to raise glory and display the power of their rule. Umayyads, especially in building palaces, have been the pioneers in the architecture style and decoration of Sassanian and Byzantine palaces. Examples of decorations in Byzantine and Sassanid styles can be observed in Dome of the Rock and Khirbat al-Mafjar. Abbasid dynasty used the same method of the Umayyads, while the main body of Islamic society according to Islamic beliefs has had a different view. In the early centuries of Islam, based on some beliefs and judgments issued by religious scholars, illustration and sculpture was banned (Mansuri, 2007) yet, there are a variety of theories on ban on Illustration in Islam, but it is obvious that Illustration in Quran has not been banned directly, thus views of the religious scholars in this context have been effective. On the other hand, with regard to view of many scholars, ban on illustration in Islam has been targeted in avoiding from sense of idolatry of Arabs, and there is no restriction for illustration in cases where there is no such doubt. In this case, Titus Burckhardt says: After the conquest of Mecca by Muslims, the Prophet destroyed all the idols outside and inside the Kaaba and tore all the pictures and paintings on the walls and in the meantime only image of Mary was not destroyed. Thus it can be concluded that the ban on illustration was not absolute, and it relates to the period when there is suspicion of idolatry. Some argue that according to the principle of the unity of God in creation; no work should be presented that is considered parallel to God's creation. In this regards, some believed that any painter on the Day of Judgment must give life to his paintings, and since giving life is only in the power of God, the painter who has not the power to give life to his paintings will suffer the torments of hell. During the first three centuries of Islam, a kind of social unrest in Iran is felt that was the result of natural conditions. Over the centuries, Iranians changed their religion and converted to Islam, but chaos in the society has been more likely due to conflict between Islamic teachings and government procedures at two arabic Caliphate periods of Umayyads and Abbasid (Ettinghausen, 1987). They also knew themselves Board of Governors of the Islamic lands, but their governance procedure and administration of society had no coordination with Islamic teachings. On the other hand, change of religion is naturally followed by changing social behaviors in many beliefs and ways of life. This change in Iranian society that has a rich cultural heritage history has been followed by a lot of ups and downs. For example, rich Persian Language and Literature easily refused to give his place to Arabic Language and Literature. The Qur'an and hadith were all in Arabic. Iranian architecture during this period was not significantly led to a good result in integrating special beliefs of new religion and noble traditions. For this, most buildings of this period were later revised and followed a more

established patterns. This architecture is totally clear in architecture. At architecture of this period, a period of uncertainty can be seen that such uncertainty is not evident in any period of the history of architecture before contemporary period of Iran. Iranians have been one of the powers in the context of architecture. They had created unmatched feats such as Persepolis, Taq Kasra, Bishapour palace and many other unique and valuable works of architecture. Iranians witnessed very advanced and higher-level plans to the extent of Bishapour palace and Khajeh Mountain on their experiences. They were familiar with the best construction techniques, succeeded to build the largest arched opening of the world, Taq Kasra. Iranian architects used a variety of roof coverings with appropriate combinations. This is while neither plans nor construction techniques in the Saudi region have never been as Iran. At this point surely it is logical to continue the process of Iranian architecture in the era of Islam. Yet the plan of Medina mosque as the plan of Islamic architecture and emphasis on simplicity in beliefs of early centuries draw Iranian architects' view to new plan. They also wanted to make a work entitled with the plan of Islamic architecture and on the other hand they had been familiar with very advanced techniques. These issues caused confusion and uncertainty in architecture of this period (Nacipoglu, 1995).

### **Humanized Aspect of Madina Mosque in the Greatness and Glory of Sassanid Architecture**

Simplicity in design or execution of the mosque of Medina in the face of the complexity in the design and execution of Sassanid architecture, absence of decoration and additional elements in the mosque of Medina in the face of various decorations at Sassanid era indicate the contradictions presented for the architects of the early centuries of Islam in Iran. Thus, we are facing a stage in which the original works like the masterpieces in the previous periods as well as later periods can be seen cannot be seen.

The impact of religious beliefs as the most important feature and distinction of architecture and decoration of the early Islamic centuries.

### **Change of Urban System From Class System to the New Neighborhood System**

Researchers such as Mohammad Karim Pirnia and Seyed Amir Mansouri believed that the urbanization and neighboring system of cities of Iran removed from class system by entering into the Islamic period. Neighboring was taken place based on new criteria and regardless of social classes. This should be known as the result of egalitarian slogans of Islam in which no

human has no superiority over another except by piety. Further, the focus of architectural experience to build architectural masterpieces on the theme palace oriented to building architectural masterpieces with the theme of mosque.

### ***Humanism and Simplicity:***

Architect of this period should be called with a special period in some ways in architecture of Iran. Humanism and simplicity of the design and implementation of Iranian architecture in this period culminates.

This simplicity and humanism are not evident in any period of Iranian architecture till now. Both of these features should be known the direct influence of the beliefs of Islam.



Simplicity in the Face of Architecture-Jameh Mosque of Fahraj

### **Avoidance of Decoration and in Particular Video Images**

In Iran's pre-Islamic monuments, visual motifs formed the bulk of Iran's architectural decorations. Yet, the use of geometric patterns and especially flowers and plants can be seen to a large extent in that period- but by new ideas - as mentioned above - Illustrations were sanctioned. However, according to the principle of simplicity in Islamic architecture, use of decoration in any way, has been sanctioned at some point in history and by some governments. Perhaps the most obvious limitations can be attributed to Movahedin Dynasty (667-524 AD) in North Africa and Andalusia. They raised heavy limitations on the use of architectural decorations influenced by the thought of Ibn Tumart restrictions. Using the straight-line on simple context and creating large geometric shapes have been the most limit of decorations accepted by them.

While Morabetin Dynasty (448-541) who ruled before Movahedin in this area, built the buildings with extreme decorations influenced by geometric motifs of Islamic East countries.

### **The Mosque: the Main Municipal Building**

In the early centuries of Islam unlike historical periods before Islam, the most important urban buildings changed from palaces to religious building and mosques. The absolute majority of the remaining buildings from this period include the mosques which have been transformed and reconstructed over the history, but what can be said with certainty is that the plan of mosque of Medina has appeared as the main model for construction of mosques at this period. Jameh Mosque of Fahraj, Tarikhaneh Temple, Jameh Mosque of Nain, Jameh Mosque of Isfahan and Jameh Mosque of Ardestan indicate prevalence of a new plan which has an Arabic nature. However, in these buildings, technique of construction and the decoration technique for building have given Iranian nature to the buildings to a large extent. Thus it can be said that Iranian architecture during this period appears with a non-Iranian nature in terms of plan. This will change in the next century, and plans are found with Iranian identity (Burkhart, 1976).

### **The Influence of Sassanid Architecture: Another Feature of the Architecture and Decorations of this Period**

As said earlier, effect of rich architectural experiences at Sassanid period on architecture at this period cannot be neglected. This effect can be summarized in several points as follows:

*-Implementation Technique:* emphasis on advanced executive techniques at Sassanid period can be seen in implementation of curved ceilings with no sharp curves and use of local materials.

*-Decoration:* Use of archs and columns in viewing, use chalk to decorate and attention to the designs of flowers and plants as the most common type of decoration.

A variety of decorations used in architecture of the early Islamic centuries in sake of type of motif.

Motifs of abstract flowers and plants: at these centuries, flower and plant motifs extend to a large extent. History of this type of motifs can be found in the Sassanid era, however, researchers like Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair have introduced it as decoration Style. Their

reason lies on emergence of molded plants and flowers parts at the buildings at the early centuries in this city.

While it can dare to say that Samera'i floral and plant motifs have rooted in Sassanid era. The floral and plant motifs used at this period are called the Eslimi motifs. These motifs differed from arabesque motifs which prevailed after the Mongol invasion in Iran and were perhaps influenced by Chinese designs. In these motifs unlike Chinese floral and plant motifs, text prevailed context, while context prevailed text in Chinese floral and plant motifs. Formless and chaotic elements that convert to each other constantly immerse the viewer in the sense of shape and shapeless in eternity. This sense helps for transfer of spiritual feelings. In these shapes, ambiguous curve lines are witnessed which are found similar to flower, plant and hen often. This style is a response to avoidance from naturalism; use of such motifs, i.e. floral and plant or arabesque motifs were conventionalized at early Islamic centuries in Iran. With regard to evident history of these motifs before Islam, it can know use of these motifs followed by decorations at Sassanid era. Thus, the main features of decorations at early Islamic centuries in Iran should be sought in two origins:

*First:* Effect of new religious beliefs based on limitation in implementation of decorations and sanction on naturalistic motifs

*Second:* Influence from decorations at Sassanid era



Mihrab of Jameh Mosque of Nain-Abstract floral and plant motifs

Geometrical motifs have been less likely take into account at this period, found in service of arabesque motifs. In some cases, arabesque motifs have been put in the boxes decorated with geometric motifs. Umayyad used geometric tangled designs in wooden ceilings, mosaic floors and grille. Yet, geometric motifs used in this period have not the position of geometric motifs at Seljuk era. Yet, at this period, works of popular Islamic geometric motifs worldwide cannot be seen.



Jameh Mosque of Nain-floral and plant motifs enclosed in geometric motifs

There were large sanctions on visual motifs. With regard to what mentioned above, avoidance from illustration especially at religious buildings is evident. Yet, at the Umayyads and Abbasids era, non-iconic visual motifs such as Byzantine landscapes are seen in religious buildings, intertwined to taste of Umayyads to some extent and developed a certain type of extreme decorating, found without any accordance with features of Islamic art and architecture; while adherence to Islamic architectural features can be seen in much more explicit, so that use of naturalistic and visual motifs is not seen at the early Islamic centuries. Just in Jameh Mosque of Nain in Non-transparent manner, the samples are witnessed which induce an aura of a man or birds.

### ***Line Inscriptions:***

During this period, there was a common view about the line and calligraphy art, however, this type of decoration has been being also used in pre-Islamic architecture. Calligraphy art was a means to provide Quranic verses. This issue besides the sanctions on use of the decorations in architecture could be a good motive to use the inscriptions of the quranic verses as the decorative element of religious buildings. At this period, this attention is less likely witnessed, but it is used to large extent in next periods. yet, the origin to use the line inscriptions to large extent should be sought in the less decorations of the buildings at this period, because Iranians used to visit full-decorated buildings before Islam and faced the limitations in use of decorations, found in accordance with their new belief; they sought a way to find the most sacred words besides adherence to new beliefs becoming a decoration on their religious buildings.

## Conclusion

The early Islamic centuries due to pristine Islamic religion in society display apparent manifestations of effect of religion on decorative and architectural patterns. This reveals by comparing architectural and decorative features of this period with other periods. Enhancement of a variety of decorative patterns, significance of line inscriptions and removal of visual motif are the apparent manifestations of this order. yet, relative adjustment with local contexts of various regions seen largely in Islam caused continuity of some patterns as well as follow-up of some executive experiences at this period.

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