



## THE ROLE OF THE Umayyad Mosque of Damascus in Conceiving the Pavilion of Niẓām al-Mulk in Isfahan

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### ABSTRACT

The excavations carried out in the South domed hall of the Friday Mosque of Isfahan brought to light several features of this structure's building stage. Three pits were retrieved in the centre of the hall, which once was occupied by the pillars of the grid of the 'Abbasid mosque's hypostyle in 9<sup>th</sup> century. These were identified as probable foundation pits for the building of a domed space arranged as that of the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus during the Saljuq period. This possible connection was analysed from different perspectives using different data (archaeological, epigraphical, art, and historical data) and provide different conclusions. A comparison between the archaeological data and the epigraphical record may highlight the possible liaison between the two buildings. This paper discusses some results of the 1970s excavations to prove how unlikely a layout such as Damascus could ever be adopted in Isfahan. Nevertheless, proven by the epigraphical record, the presence of the pits discovered by the IsMEO mission and the interest shown by Malik Shāh for Syria plead for a connection between the two mosques. Such connection could highlight the role the Damascene prototype could play in conceiving the pavilion the vizir Niẓām al-Mulk in Isfahan demanded.

### KEYWORDS:

Saljuq architecture; IsMEO; Sultania authority; Malik Shāh; *Gonbad Khane*

### INTRODUCTION

The construction of the South Dome of the Friday Mosque of Isfahan – whose epigraphic evidence suggests that it had been ordered by vizir Niẓām al-Mulk around 1086-87 [1] – represents a ground-breaking moment for the Islamic architecture of Iran. The introduction of the domed pavilion over the *mīrāb* area meant that the appearance of an element, which would spread suddenly and widely in Iran, constitutes the distinctive character of this country's mosque architecture for centuries to come. The history of the *Masjid-i Jāmi* of Isfahan has been tackled in several publications which acknowledge the great importance of this feature, discussing the matter from many different points of view. The early studies carried out in the 1930s acknowledged the importance of the dome of Niẓām al-Mulk, emphasizing its value for the history of the whole building [2]. André Godard included the mosque among those structures, proving the existence of the so-called *mosquée-kiosque*, namely a free-standing pavilion surrounding the *mīrāb* that is placed at the end of a walled courtyard which the

Saljuqs adopted in pursuing a typical Iranian way of building [3][4][5][6]. The publication of Godard's theory triggered Jean Sauvaget to respond to it. He harshly criticized Godard, suggesting the unlikelihood of his assumptions. Instead, Sauvaget assumed that the domed pavilion has been conceived as a *maqāūra* integrated with the surrounding structure [7].

The research undertaken by the IsMEO (Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente) provided a new information allowing us to reconstruct this mosque's history more thoroughly [8]. The conclusions drawn by the Italian mission were endorsed by Oleg Grabar, who relied on those in his monograph on the Friday Mosque of Isfahan in 1990 [9].

The role Niẓām al-Mulk's domed hall had, in setting a stylistic standard for central Iran, has been remarked on by R. Hillenbrand, who suggested that the features first introduced in Isfahan were shared by other mosques of the same region (e.g., Zavare [10], Ardestan [10], Barsiyan [11]) [12]. More recently, a new examination of the sources regarding the early stages of this building allowed Federica Duva to propose a

new insight into the stages preceding the Saljuq accomplishments [13][14]. Lorenz Korn has emphasized the importance of the dome of Ni'ām as a free-standing pavilion. This structure represents the prototype for a feature that will be adopted in many other Saljuq Iranian mosques. In fact, it was first conceived without a long history despite the layout, being replaced by the domed hall, attached and integrated into the prayer room in less than a century. It set a new concept of planning and used the space of prayer halls [15][16][17].

## METHODS

The data provided by the excavations carried out by the Italian Archaeological Mission of IsMEO in the 1970s suggest that the pavilion of Ni'ām could have been the result of a change of mind as witnessed by three foundation pits retrieved during the excavations. Their position indicates that the dome of this mosque could have been originally planned to imitate the layout of the Umayyad mosque of Damascus. Besides, the evidence provided by the epigraphic record also suggests that the two ventures are closely related: in fact, Sultan Malik Shāh and his minister named Ni'ām al-Mulk are the figures mentioned in the inscription celebrating the construction of the domes of both congregational mosques (a discussion on the literature concerning these topics is going to be tackled in each paragraph).

In this paper, the archaeological data – as attained by published materials and information from the members of the IsMEO mission – will be analysed by siding those with the epigraphical evidence to show how the Syrian example influenced the building of the Dome of Isfahan. Even though the two constructions differ in many details, it will be argued how a possible "Syrian connection" could have played a role in conceiving the pavilion in Isfahan. Therefore, the information attained by the excavation will be presented to show why a layout like the one in Damascus could not be implemented in Isfahan despite the attempt made. This will be followed by a discussion on the presence of Malik Shāh in Syria, as attested in the epigraphic record, and the similarities between the founding inscriptions of Isfahan and Damascus. The evidence provided by these two kinds of data will be compared to show the possibility that some connection between the congregational mosques of these two cities did exist.

## DISCUSSION

### THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA

The history of the Friday Mosque of Isfahan has been fathomed thanks to works carried out by the IsMEO from 1970 to 1978 (see the archaeological reports mentioned further in the text; the report of the architectural survey and restorations has been published by Eugenio Galdieri in the third volume of his work devoted to the Friday Mosque of Isfahan [8]). The architectural survey highlighted that the South

dome of this mosque, today integrated into the prayer hall, was erected as a free-standing structure (Fig. 1): it was a pavilion whose covering was constituted by a dome sustained by polylobed pillars, surrounded by an aisle running all around it, except on the *qibli* side, and separating it from the rest of the prayer room. In a further moment, the date cannot be ascertained but it is likely in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the pavilion was attached to the prayer hall, and an *iwān* set to its north side, connecting this domed space to the courtyard [18].

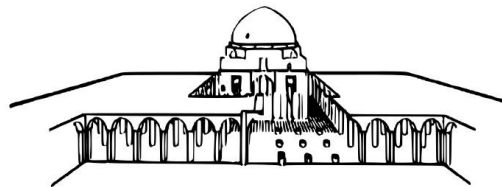


Figure 1. The domed pavilion as originally conceived in 1086-87 [18]

Siding the architectural survey, the mosque also underwent archaeological investigation. The domed hall – labelled area 190, following the numbering provided by Eric Schroeder, who surveyed the mosque in the 1930s [19] – became interest in stratigraphic examination since the first archaeological campaign in 1973, when the Eastern half of the area was dug [20]. Suspended during the following year [21], the digging was resumed in 1975 [22], and it was continued during the following campaigns until 1977 [23][24] before being interrupted by the worsening political situation which led to the Islamic Revolution [25]. Three pits, tackled more in details below, were retrieved in the centre of the domed area during the 1976 campaign [23].

The stratigraphic position of the three pits found in the domed hall allows us to ascribe them to the works for the erection of the Ni'ām pavilion. In regard to the Saljuq period, the archaeological soundings made in the Southern prayer hall brought to light the Saljuq floor, which consists of large square brick slabs measuring ca. 0.40-42 m., and the foundation of the *minbar* [22]. Beneath this floor, it was possible to identify the layers of the Saljuq phases of the then-isolated pavilion construction (Fig. 3). Among the features unearthed during the excavations, the very large foundation trenches of the Saljuq pavilion must be cited: the Saljuq floor covered a thin layer of chalk and ashes, identified as the layer of the working ground (M. V. Fontana [member of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Isfahan, who is responsible for the excavation in the area of the domed hall], personal communication). This latter was cut by the foundation trenches of the domed hall, which represent the major feature belonging to the construction stage of the Saljuq dome, and by the three pits in question here.

Umberto Scerrato – who carried out the excavations in the 1970s as the Director of the Italian Archaeological Mission of IsMEO – was the first to

argue that the area marked by the pits was supposed to be covered by a dome arranged similarly to the layout adopted in the Saljuq period in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus: the three pits found underneath the Saljuq floor of the domed hall could have been dug for setting the foundation trenches of not a so large dome, modelled on the Syrian example [23]. These have been interpreted as the cutting for laying down the foundations of the piers sustaining a dome. The position of these elements suggested that an arrangement such as that of the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus was attempted.

The prayer hall of this latter mosque (Fig. 2) is divided into three aisles parallel to the *qibli* wall, which are divided in the centre by a larger central nave leading to the *miḥrāb*. The central part of this longitudinal nave is covered by a dome, supported by rectangular piers abutting the centre of the nave to provide a square space that can accommodate the dome itself (a thorough description of the mosque is provided by K. A. C. Creswell [26]).

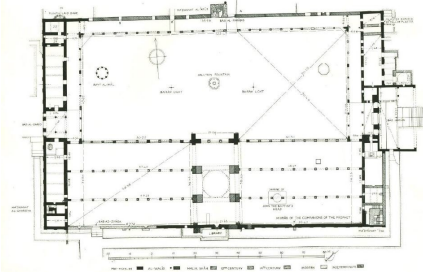


Figure 2. Plan of the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus [26]

In Isfahan, the dome would have, therefore, been placed at the end of the central bay leading from the courtyard to the *miḥrāb*, at a distance of a nave from the niche, fitting its load-bearing piers to the second and third rows of columns. The earlier supports, those of the hypostyle grid of the second Abbasid mosque, could have been removed to make place for the pillars that would have sustained the dome in front of the *miḥrāb*. The dimension of these new piers should have been remarkable if one considers that those in Damascus bearing the dome measured 4.60 × 3.63 m is opposed to the 0.80 m diameter of the columns in the rest of the prayer hall.

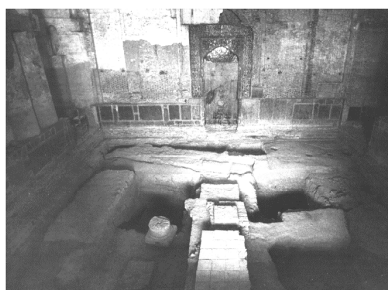


Figure 3. The excavations in the domed hall (190) from the North. It is possible to see the three pits in the centre [50]

The archaeological data suggest that this idea was abandoned fairly early in the building process. The

walls of these pits were much more irregular than those of the foundation trenches of the pavilion, which were dug straight with great accuracy (M. V. Fontana, personal communication). The pillars belonging to the 9<sup>th</sup> century's Abbasid mosque that stood in the place of these pits were removed. In this regard, it must be noted that deep trenches were only structurally dug in demanding spots, leaving the foundations of features that are not laid in these very areas almost untouched. In my opinion, the fact that the pillars in those pits were missing, and a deep trench was dug could be related to an earlier stage of the construction process. I think that the depth of the excavations and the irregularity of the walls of the pits – this latter contrasts to the regular walls of the foundation ditches of the pavilion's structure – may suggest that the digging of these features could be related to spoliation trenches rather than foundation ones. In addition, such an earlier stage of construction can be suggested by the lack of the fourth pits in which the pillar's base was retained. Therefore, this project could have been abandoned in a stage preceding the laying down of the foundations and in its place, the pavilion was erected.

As for the reasons for this change of mind, through an overlay of the excavation plan with that of the Abbasid mosque's hypostyle, a number of considerations can be made. The position of the three pits within the former layout of the hypostyle prayer hall could help in understating what the shape of this domed area could have been and the possible reasons for abandoning this project.

If the pits had to accommodate the foundations of the dome to be placed in front of the *miḥrāb*, this dome would have been of very small dimension when compared to the whole prayer hall, as it encompassed just one bay. The Damascus dome required the addition of buttresses abutting the central nave, which created a smaller space of squared dimension over which the dome could be set [26]. In the case of a similar layout adopted in Isfahan, the buttresses have to abut on the central nave for 1.15 m. That is the difference between the axial nave and the other ones, to make a squared space: if so, the dome could have a diameter at most of 4.35 m (Fig. 4).

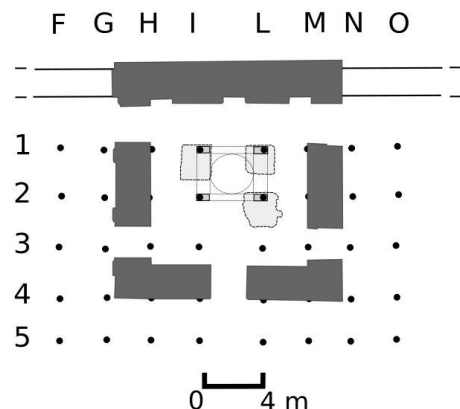


Figure 4. Reconstructive proposal with piers abutting the central aisle (drawings: N. Olivieri, E. Galdieri; reworked by the author)

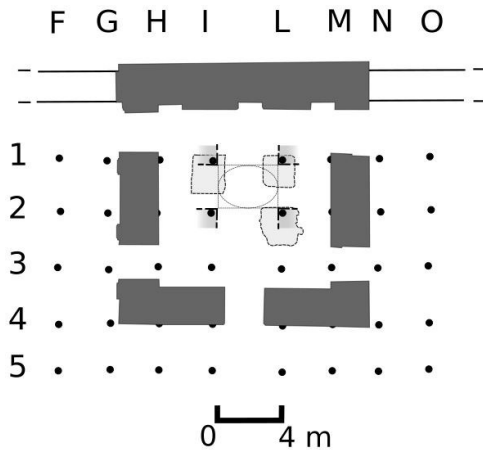


Figure 5. Reconstructive proposal with the dome of oval shape (drawings: N. Olivieri, E. Galdieri; reworked by the author)

Otherwise, the setting of a dome over the hypostyle grid could only be achieved through some proportions that lacked here, meaning that if a dome meant to dignify the area surrounding the *mīrāb* had been set in the hypostyle plan of the second ʿAbbasid mosque as it was, that covering would have an oval shape (Fig. 5). Such a dome would thus have measured at most 5.50 m. That is the span of the axial nave, along the East-West axis, and 4.35 m along the North-South one, i.e., the intercolumn space of the prayer hall. It should be noted that, in Iran, domes with oval shapes are attested in the mosque of Urmia; still, in this case, they are placed in a row in that nave of the prayer hall facing the courtyard [27][28][29].

Accordingly, the adoption of the dome could thus have been prevented by two factors: to have a space of significant size, and that such a space could be suited to the former layout of the prayer hall.

Nevertheless, a dome could be set into the pre-existing grid, but to achieve this, such a dome would have dimensions similar to those of the pavilion. To get closer to a squared space in which the round shape of the dome could fit would have required the action of placing the piers in correspondence of the columns H1, H4, M1 and M4 of the grid set by Galdieri encompassing a space of nine bays (3 × 3 bays) (Fig. 6) [8]. In many cases, the Saljuq architects have proved to be cautious builders, providing more supporting structures than needed [30]. In particular, the case of Isfahan has proved to be challenging in this perspective. The foundation soil of the mosque has proved to be very unstable, as shown by the movement at the base of the supports of the hypostyle halls [8][31]. Faced with the need to provide this support, they likely adopted a similar criterion by opting for a pavilion whose dome stands on much stronger supports than the four pillars adopted at Damascus. It must also be borne in mind that the dimension of the dome of Niʿām in Isfahan finds no parallel in Saljuq architecture [32]: such a big size would have required even more caution. Therefore, one may exclude that a dome like that of Damascus,

despite the attempt made, could be achieved in Isfahan for reasons engendered in a dimensional and static need.

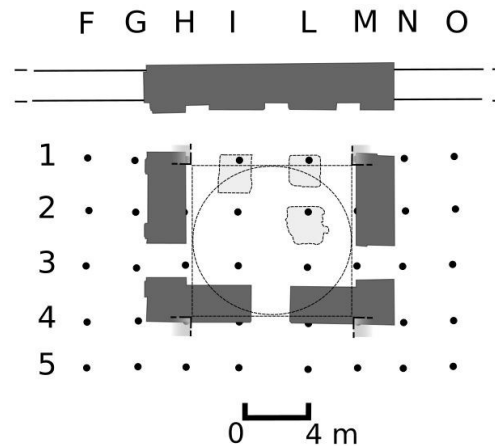


Figure 6. Reconstructive proposal with a larger dome on supports belonging to the hypostyle grid (drawings: N. Olivieri, E. Galdieri; reworked by the author)

The choice of the isolated pavilion for the mosque of Isfahan brought to a completely different layout (Table 1; Fig. 7). Whereas in Damascus, the dome is perfectly integrated within the rest of the prayer hall. It also fits coherently into the grid of supports; in Isfahan, the pavilion is a structure which isolates the area surrounding the *mīrāb*. The massive pillars provide a clear boundary between the domed area and the rest of the mosque. An ambulatory also ran around this structure, detaching this space more preemptorily from the rest of the building.

Table 1. Measures of the domed areas

	Damascus	Isfahan
Diameter of the dome	12.5 m	ca. 14 m
Height of the dome	ca. 9.15 m	7.20 m
Dimension of pillars	4.60 × 3.63m	4.55 × 4.55 m;
Height of crowning from ground	ca. 39 m	26.97 m (ca. 27,87 m from the Saljuq
Area covered by the	156.25 m <sup>2</sup>	ca. 220 m <sup>2</sup>

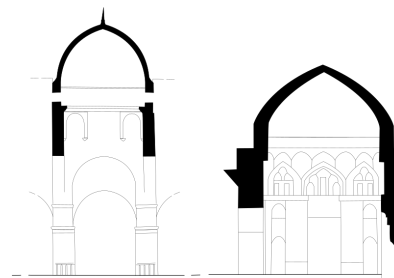


Figure 7. Cross-sections of the two domed areas. Left: Damascus [26]; right: South Dome, Isfahan [28] (both reworked).

## THE EPIGRAPHICAL EVIDENCE

The archaeological perspective is not the only one considered to assess this possible connection between Damascus and Isfahan. In 1991, in her article discussing the value of seriation in the study of inscriptions, Sheila Blair relied on some epigraphs from Syria – more precisely in Damascus, Ani, Aleppo and Diyarbakır – in which the name of Malik Shāh was mentioned regarding some restoration works: through the analysis of historical data provided by Ibn al-Athīr, Blair suggested the possible influence that the mosque of Damascus exerted on the South hall of Isfahan's mosque [1]. In addition, the same assumption was put forward by Finbarr B. Flood, who, relying on the work of Blair, shared the idea that the mosque of Damascus exerted influence on Saljuq's accomplishments [33]. Scerrato and Blair put forward the same suggestion fifteen years apart, relying on different data. As a matter of fact, the excavation reports published by Scerrato are not listed in the bibliographical references of Blair's article [1]. Despite a correlation between the inscription in Isfahan and two inscriptions recording the renewal of the walls of Diyarbakır put forward by Roberta Giunta, who remarked about the affinities in the mentioning of the Sultan as well as his ministers and governors [34], the comparison between the results of the excavation and the epigraphic data of Isfahan is still lacking.

When considering the assumption that the pits could have been realized to build a dome laid out as the Syrian example, the presence of Malik Shāh in that region is of particular interest. A glance at the epigraphs mentioning Malik Shāh is therefore useful to understand the possible adoption of a Syrian template for the mosque of Isfahan.

The epigraphic record of Malik Shāh in Syria has already been gathered, pinpointing the extension of the authority of this Sultan, reaching as far as Syria [1][33][35][36]. Among the inscriptions mentioned by Blair in her article mentioned above, the foundation inscriptions of the two domes of Damascus and Isfahan have many similarities. The latter runs at the base of the South dome and mentions the construction of the dome (*qubba*) as ordered by the minister, Niẓām al-Mulk, during the reign of Malik Shāh (see the *Répertoire Chronologique d'épigraphie arabe* (RCEA) vol. VII, no. 2775 [37][1]). The inscription bears no date, but the titling used for the Sultan allowed Blair to attribute the ordering of the building to 1086-87 [1].

The construction of the dome of Damascus is celebrated on the four pillars that sustain the dome of the Umayyad Mosque. The four inscriptions are repeated with minor variations, differing in the mentioning of the elements of the restoration and, in the case of the South side of the South-Western pillar, lacking the reference to the minister, Niẓām al-Mulk (Fig. 8) (RCEA vol. VII, nos. 2734-37[37]). Before the fire struck this building in 1893, they were placed on four panels on opposite sides of the Southeast and Southwest dome's piers, namely those facing the *qibli*

wall. Blair, while discussing these inscriptions [1], seems to follow what was stated by Max van Berchem, who saw the panels before the fire struck and stated that those were gone after this letter made [38]. Nevertheless, van Berchem added a postscript to that publication, referring to a further visit to the mosque where he could ascertain that just one of the panels was destroyed [38].

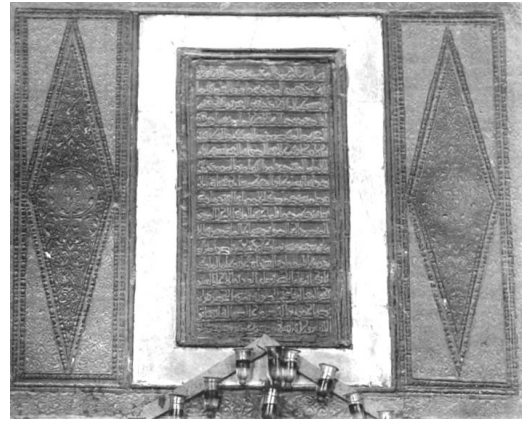


Figure 8. Inscription in the mosque of Damascus portrayed by M. van Berchem [29]

As in Isfahan, the object of the restoration was stated here. In Isfahan, the dome (*qubba*) is what has been built, but in this case, every single element is specified: the dome (*qubba*), the *maqūra*, the roof (*saqf*), the arcades (*ḥāqāt*), and the pillars (*arkān*), which were interested in that restoration campaign.

As regards the mention of patrons, the list begins with the Caliph al-Muqtadī (1075-1094). This makes the Damascus inscription an exception as it is the only instance in which the Caliph is mentioned (another instance is the inscription on the minaret of Save [39] where the Caliph is mentioned on a structure far from the focal point of the building). In Isfahan, despite the fact that the Caliph does not appear explicitly, he is remembered in his titling, where Malik Shāh is acknowledged as the "right hand of God's caliph, the commander of the faithful" (*yamīn khalīfat Allāh amīr al-muʾminīn*). In this regard, it should be pointed out that Isfahan is the only place where the mention is made of the "God's Caliph". The common titling is always "the right hand of the Commander of the Faithful" (*yamīn ʿamīr al-muʾminīn*) (an overview of the titling of Malik Shāh in the inscriptions has been made by Roberta Giunta [36]). In Damascus, after the mention of the Caliph, the name and the much longer titling of Malik Shāh is followed by that of the ruling authority in Damascus, namely Tutush, brother of Malik Shāh, who controlled the city since 1078 [38]. The name of their respective ministers then follows the mention to all the rulers: first, it was Niẓām al-Mulk, the minister of Malik Shāh, then it was Abū Naṣr Aḥmad; afterward, it was al-Faḥr, the minister of Tutush that responsible for the works, whose identification raised some doubts [40][38]. The promoters of the restorations were, in both cases, the ministers of the

ruling authority, Niẓām al-Mulk in Isfahan, and Abū Naẓr Aḥmad b. al-Faḥ in Damascus. In both cases, they are mentioned at the end of the list of authorities. This practice is the most typical one of the foundation or epigraphs restoration. However, it is worth to note that this parallel set of ruler-minister can be found only in Damascus and Isfahan. The actual executors of the works are the prime ministers who celebrate their respective lords through inscriptions placed in the area of the domes; nevertheless, they did not fail to mention themselves. Finally, unlike Isfahan, the Damascus inscription ends by mentioning when the works were done, i.e., in the months (*fī shuhūr*) of the year 475 H (1082-83).

Among the cases mentioned by Blair, the name of Malik Shāh is also recorded in the Great Mosques of Ani (Armenia), Aleppo (Syria), and Diyarbakır (Turkey) [1].

Ani's inscription records the building of the mosque and minaret, but it was different from Isfahan and Damascus. In fact, despite the object of the works here is the mosque and the minaret (*maṣjid wa'l-manāra*) is specified, the sequence of people mentioned in the inscription is different since Minūjīhr, the governor in Ani and the patron of the construction, is the first name recorded, followed by that of Malik Shāh (RCEA vol. VII, no. 2707 [37]) [41].

In Aleppo, we may find a formula similar to that of Isfahan. Here, too, it is reported what work has been done i.e., the renovation of the minaret (*jaddada hadhā al-maḏhana*) and the sequence of the rulers' names Malik Shāh and Abū Saʿīd Āq Sunqur, the governor of Aleppo followed by the one responsible for the restoration, the *qadī*, namely the chief-judge, Abū al-ʿasan Muḥammad b. Yaʿyā b. Muḥammad b. al-ʿashshāb [42].

Malik Shāh is mentioned in the Diyarbakır inscription; his name is placed on the cornice of the arcades surrounding the mosque court. In that case, the work was not specified it is stated that "it" was ordered to be done (*amara bi-ʿamalā-hu*) but it must be noted that it was Malik Shāh who ordered the work at Diyarbakır. Therefore, unlike all other specimens, the mention is made of a direct interest of the Saljuq sultan [43].

As in Isfahan, in these examples, the specific features that underwent the building restoration are mentioned; the other similar thing is the order with which patrons or the actual executer of the works are recorded. Nevertheless, all of these can be only found in Damascus inscription, allowing the establishment of a parallel between this latter and that on the South dome of Isfahan to happen.

## CONCLUSION

### GLIMMERING A "SYRIAN CONNECTION"

The presence of Malik Shāh in the epigraphic records of Syria pleads for the interest of this ruler in a region farther West than the centre of his empire [44]

[45]. The inscriptions always bear the names of those that hold the power in each place, but the presence of the Sultan is overall. Moreover, as shown by the mosque of Diyarbakır, Malik Shāh was directly involved in renovating some of those buildings. Besides this interest, the affinities of the inscriptions in Damascus and Isfahan highlight the connection between the restorations carried out in these mosques: the two ventures are separated by some five years, but they are recalled through some common elements, i.e., the mention of the features built, mentioning the order of the patrons, siding with the ruler and minister, and the direct interest of this latter in building activity.

Lorenz Korn – who dealt deeply with this connection between the mosque of Damascus and that of Isfahan, also examined the historical and art-historical context of the early 11<sup>th</sup> century in which this occurred – convincingly showed how it is very unlikely that Malik Shāh had been in Damascus and so had the opportunity to behold the dome of the Umayyad mosque – let alone be struck by that. He argued that no connection can be established between the domes of Isfahan and the Syrian [46][17]. Among the arguments put forward by Korn, there is the unsoundness of the epigraphic evidence. The inscription in Damascus does not suggest a direct involvement of the Sultan in building the dome, as this is recalled to have occurred during the days of Malik Shāh (*fī ayām*), but it was ordered by the governor of that city [46]. However, given the almost exact way Malik Shāh is mentioned, this assumption must also be true for Isfahan. Indeed, in the inscription at the base of Niẓām's dome, the building is recalled, as in Damascus, to have occurred during the reign of Malik Shāh (*fī ayām*). The only difference was the missing mention of the Caliph before the Sultan (cf. RCEA vol. VII, no. 2775 [37]). So, I think, even if the Sultan had never been in Damascus or involved in the restorations, what should be acknowledged is the will to recognize the authority under which the works were accomplished. What matters and should be used as evidence is not just the direct interest of the ruler but rather his simple mentioning as a way to recognize his authority. Korn deemed the connection with Damascus as "nonsensical"; nonetheless, he suggests how religious politics could better explain the adoption of an element used as a *maqḗura*, identifying the place of the ruler in the mosque [17]. I think that it is exactly in this latter connotation that such a link must be sought.

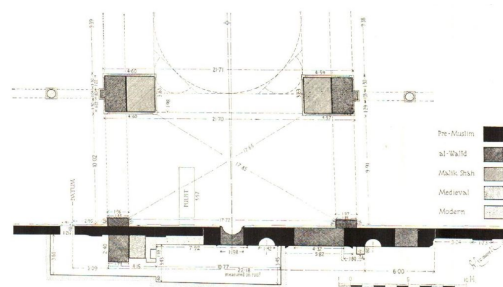


Figure 9. Detail of the area surrounding the mihrab in the mosque of Damascus [26]

The restoration carried out in Damascus involved the reconstruction of the whole building's focal point, and every single part of this accomplishment is specified. Nevertheless, on the actual extent of this work, there are very few elements to ascertain its nature. The Saljuq inscription uses *imāra*, which could mean both a building and reconstruction [18]. The fire of 1893 exposed a joint dividing the pillars sustaining the dome, also showing that the bedding of the bricks on the two sides of this joint is different [26] (Fig. 9). On this basis, K. A. C. Creswell assumed that the dome could not be pertinent to the construction of the mosque carried out by al-Walīd I (705-715) at the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century and that it was added in a further moment [26]. Concerning the inscription mentioning Malik Shāh, Creswell seems inclined to attribute the dome's construction to the Sultan despite some data from literary sources contradicting it [26].

Even though it is impossible to know how Malik Shāh's intervention altered the mosque or in which measure it affected the shape of the dome, it is out of doubt that either the restoration or the building carried out in 1082-83 has the dome exactly at its core. Regardless of the attribution of the Damascus dome to Malik Shāh or the earlier ruler, what matters is the fact that before the undertaking of the works in Isfahan, there was a mosque with a not insubstantial history in which the Saljuq sultan and his prime minister showed interest. The work mentioned in the inscriptions in the Umayyad Mosque was carried out in a building with a four-centuries-long history and was held in great reverence. The mention of the Sultan in the inscription celebrates the actual holder of the power in an edifice that used to be the congregational mosque of the capital of the whole Islamic empire and that the Saljuqs held in great consideration. It has also been proven by F.B. Flood, who discussed some reused Byzantine marble slabs from Damascus [47]. In my opinion, this gives the extent of the reverence in which the building was held, envisaging some historical awareness that consciously dictated the choice of the architectural language – namely a dome dignifying the central nave and the *mīrāb* area. A few years later, it was also adopted in Isfahan and explained the Syrian connection endorsed in this paper. Even though the layout of the Umayyad mosque of Damascus was not implemented in Isfahan, the archaeological evidence suggests that a similar accomplishment was at least tried. The three pits identified by the Italian mission hinted that such a feature may have been initially conceived for this mosque but abandoned in a very early stage of construction. As I argued in this article, the former layout of the Friday Mosque of Isfahan – which, against the opinion of Godard [3][4][5][6], was retained after the Saljuq restoration – prevented the insertion of a dome that could be integrated into the hypostyle grid. Accordingly, no architectural similarity can be found between the two ventures other than the covering: indeed, a dome was chosen to dignify the prayer hall in both cases. The importance of this element for Islamic architecture can be traced back to

the early Islamic period, and it has a strict correlation with kingship and princely contexts [48][49][46][18][17]. The connection with the Syrian precedent should, therefore, be traced in this connotation: the interest shown by the Saljuq rulers for the dome of Damascus (either restored or built), and proven by the mentioning of the Saljuq Sultan and his Prime Minister in the dome founding inscriptions, shows the importance those features could have for them. Therefore, the value the dome in the mosque of Damascus could have been endowed with and its further "adapted" adoption in Isfahan suggest that such an element, despite being well-known in Iran for centuries (as *chahār āq* and *chahār qāpu*), may also have made its appearance into Iranian mosque architecture through a path, different from the traditional Iranian way of building or, as others suggest, the Turkish dwelling habits. The role the mosque of Damascus had in conceiving a domed space in Isfahan could plead for the adoption by the Saljuqs of an architectural *koinè* developed by the Islamic culture: it is, therefore, in this context that the symbolic meaning the dome was endowed with should be sought.

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