Introduction

The rise of Islam amongst the largely nomadic Arab peoples of the Arabian peninsula in the seventh century AD was an event that astounded contemporary commentators, and its subsequent emergence as the dominant power across the whole of the area now referred to as the Middle East, and even further afield, was impossible for them to have anticipated. According to a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, "Islam destroys all that preceded it." However, it is not now accepted as accurate to see the teachings of Islam as creating a watershed in the arts and architecture of this immense and diverse region. Modern scholars particularly stress the early influence of the art of antiquity on that which was to be produced in the countries which we now regard as "Islamic." These influences were transmitted to Islamic art chiefly through the cultural heritage of the Sasanian (Iranian) and Graeco-Roman Byzantine empires (FIG. 4). An examination of the background to Islam is therefore essential to any study of its art and architecture.

In the fifth and sixth centuries AD, prior to the rise of Islam, the peoples of the Arabian peninsula played only a marginal part in what was already a highly urbanised and sophisticated culture, dominated by the two great superpowers of this era, the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, which sandwiched the peninsula to the north-west and north-east respectively (FIG. 5).

The Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine empire had been created out of the eastern half of the Roman empire, after the decline of the imperial Roman state in the west. Its most important city was Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), on the Bosphorus, officially declared the capital of this eastern empire by the emperor Constantine (c. AD 274-337) in AD 330. The Byzantine empire itself comprised at this time most of the Balkans, Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt and was beginning to range westwards as far as areas of the North African coast. The official state religion, ever since the conversion of Constantine in about AD 313, had been Christianity - the Greek Orthodox church. However, the borders of the empire enclosed many other Christian sects and communities, as well as a substantial Jewish population.
As one would expect, with its strong Graeco-Roman roots, what one might call the cultural "currency" of Byzantine art was greatly influenced by its pagan classical inheritance. Byzantine scholars, for example, were steeped in the works of such pre-Christian figures as Homer, Thucydides, and Sophocles. Byzantine silver often features both classical and mythological subjects, and pagan decorative imagery was to be found even in religious contexts (FIG. 6).

Before the rise of Islam, the Byzantine empire had experienced its most recent heyday in the reign of the emperor Justinian (r. AD 527-65). During this period the great church of Hagia Sophia, that most well-known of all Byzantine monuments (and one which was to inspire generations of Islamic architects), was built in Constantinople (FIG. 3, see page 17). Justinian also rebuilt the Syrian city of Antioch after 540: the Byzantine historian Procopius (c. 499-c. 565) relates in his treatise Buildings how "he [the Emperor] laid it out with stoas and agoras, dividing all the blocks of houses by means of streets and making water-channels, fountains and sewers, all of which the city now boasts. He built theatres and baths for it, ornamenting it with all the other buildings by which the prosperity of a city is wont to be shown." However, the great plague, spreading through Egypt, Syria, and Asia Minor, reached Constantinople late in 541 or early in 542. This, and renewed military conflict later in the century with its powerful Sasanian neighbour, was to lead to a change in the typically urban civilisation of the Byzantine empire. Monumental public buildings were neglected, broad avenues were encroached on by shops and shanties, theatres and forums of the classical past were abandoned. The reasons for the change are not altogether clear, but demographic decline, the fall of urban revenues, and the preference for pack animals over wheeled vehicles may all have had a role in shaping the new ways in which urban space was used. But one can say that the sort of city thought of as typically Islamic - divided into quarters with narrow twisting alleyways - was already coming into being in the fifth and sixth centuries.

The Sasanians

The Sasanian dynasty had been founded by Ardashir I (AD 208-40) when he overthrew the Parthian empire in AD 224. The Sasanians became Rome's (and later, naturally the Byzantine empire's) fiercest challenger in the East. Their empire stretched from the Indus and Oxus rivers in the east to the Euphrates and Byzantine-controlled regions of Mesopotamia in the west. Successive generations of Sasanian rulers had sought to expand their empire, and had once even taken Syria and the Nile Delta from the Byzantines. Conflict between the two superpowers of the region was endemic but never ruinous, and during the reign of the emperor Justinian these areas had been reconquered by the Byzantine army.

The official Sasanian religion was Zoroastrianism, named after the sixth-century BC prophet and visionary Zoroaster. This was a dualistic faith which conceived all creation as a never-ending struggle between the forces of good and those of evil. Like the Greek Orthodox church in the Byzantine empire, Zoroastrianism was not
the only religion practised in the Sasanian territories. Its main rival was another dualistic religion, Manicheanism, whose importance to Islamic art is that its founder, Mani (AD 216-77; see FIG. 1), was - according to Arab and Persian tradition at least - also the nonpareil of painters and used paintings to illustrate his message.

Relations between the Sasanian and Byzantine cultures were complex. The Sasanians were well acquainted with the themes and techniques of Roman and Byzantine architecture, and in the course of their wars had captured large numbers of Greeks and other Byzantine subjects. Some of their captives seem to have been skilled artisans, and they were used as part of the labour force for grand building projects. In addition, there are frequent references to Sasanian employment of Byzantine architects. There were also many Syriac speakers within the frontiers of the Sasanian empire, particularly in what is now Iraq and north-west Iran, and educated Syriac speakers were commonly familiar with Graeco-Roman culture, which may help explain why Sasanian drinking vessels can feature Dionysiac imagery (FIG. 7). The Sasanians also seem to have taken their characteristic decorative use of the scrolling vine from the Romans via Byzantine art. Sasanian vine scrolls are typically rather fleshy and not very sinuous; in the Islamic period, this sort of vine scroll would evolve into the arabesque. Nor, it should be noted, was the cultural traffic between the two all one way, for the Byzantines were fascinated by such Sasanian motifs as the peacock, the palm, and the winged crown, which were all absorbed into the repertoire of Byzantine decorative motifs.

The Cultural Heritage

Examples such as the later Islamic use of the Sasanian vine scroll suggest just how strongly the forms and themes of art in the early Islamic period were influenced by, and should be seen as a continuation of, those of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires. It is impossible in this book to give a complete list of all the influences one might trace from these two civilisations in Islamic art, but examples of two or three of the most important in each case are indispensable. Indeed, Islamic art can be seen as being as much an heir to the culture of the late classical period as was the art of Christendom in the West and that of Byzantium itself (FIG. 8).

The Byzantine Inheritance in Islamic Art

The issue of the non-representation of living creatures in Islamic art has already been raised in the introduction to this book, but the drift away from representational art and a corresponding preference for geometric and stylised vegetal decoration did not begin with the preaching of Islam. Already in sixth-century Byzantine art there is a steady decline in the use of portraiture, and where human figures in this period are depicted, they seem to embody "types" rather than appearing to be portraits modelled from the life. For example, where portraits
appear in manuscripts (FIG. 9), they are plainly shaped more by conventions of suitable physiognomy than by any real concern with replicating the actual appearance of the person. From as early as the fourth century there had also been a decline in the production of freestanding sculptures, and Byzantine sculptors instead began experimenting with various forms of abstract ornament, including a new style of deep-cutting on capitals that gave a lacework effect - strikingly similar to the appearance of the stonework in the much later Umayyad palaces in Damascus and Cordoba (FIG. 10).

In architecture too, the cultural inheritance from the Byzantines was of great importance. The development of the typical structure and furnishings of the Muslim mosque, which will be discussed in more detail in the third chapter, also had Byzantine precedents. For example, the mihrab, or prayer niche, had a forerunner in the use of niches in Byzantine secular architecture. The minbar, or Muslim pulpit, probably derived from the Byzantine ambo, or lectern; while the maqsura (a special enclosure in the mosque for the ruler and his entourage) is likely to have been modelled on the Byzantine kathisma, or royal box. Byzantine sixth-century experiments with domes were continued by Muslim architects, and the deployment of the dome as an honorific marker over the area in front of a mihrab, or over a mausoleum, may have derived from the similar use of the dome as an honorific marker in later Roman palaces. The desert palaces of the early Islamic Umayyad dynasty in seventh- and eighth-century Syria can easily be confused with Roman villas (and nineteenth-century scholars and archaeologists did indeed so confuse them). Islamic architects of the Turkish Ottoman dynasty were using features from Byzantine church architecture as late as the sixteenth century. Finally, we may note that for centuries the Byzantine foot, of 12-1/4 inches (31.2 cm), was the standard measure in Muslim architecture.

**The Influence of the Sasanians**

The Sasanian civilisation also had a great influence on Islamic culture. Sasanian emperors maintained an elaborate court ritual, which was later to be closely imitated by the early Islamic rulers of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. Sasanian silver dishes commonly feature rulers engaged in hunting (FIG. 11) or feasting and drinking (FIG. 12), and Islamic painted and ornamented cups are tangible witnesses of this culture. It was also commemorated in later Arab poetry.

For Islamic architects, the Sasanian palace at Ctesiphon was to have more influence than any other building. It was the yardstick by which all similar grand constructions were judged and in particular furnished the model for many later Abbasid palaces.

Ctesiphon was located on the Tigris, a little to the south of the future site of the Muslim capital of Baghdad. The actual date of its construction is not certain, but it was perhaps begun by the Sasanian ruler Khusraw I (Anushirvan or Chosroes I; AD 531-79). It was built of kiln-baked bricks, and in the centre of its long, multi-tiered
ornamental facade was the vast arch of an *iwan* (a large, open, vaulted chamber), which served as the opening to a deep, barrel-vaulted audience hall (see FIG. 2).

Inside the audience hall there were said to be three thrones kept permanently ready for the other three great rulers of the world - the emperor of Rome, the emperor of China, and the Khagan of the Turks - ready, that is, for when they should come to submit to the Sasanian emperor. This aspect of the decoration of Ctesiphon may have influenced the frescoes of the Umayyad palace at Qusayr Amra (c. 724-43) near the town of Amman in Jordan, which showed the six great rulers of the world waiting in attendance on the caliph. Also at Ctesiphon a jewelled crown suspended on a golden chain hung over the throne of the Sasanian emperor, and there is an echo of this in the carved stone chain and crown in the music room of the Umayyad prince Walid at the desert palace of Khirbat al-Mafjar.

The audience chamber at Ctesiphon was itself heavily decorated with frescoes (FIG. 13). When in 637 the Muslim Arab general Said ibn Abi Waqas entered the palace after the defeat of the Sasanian armies of Yazdagird III, he turned the chamber into a place of prayer, but left untouched the fresco of the conquest of Antioch by the Sasanian emperor Khusraw I. It was still there two centuries later when the poet al-Buhturi (821-97) celebrated it in verse:

*When you behold the picture of Antioch, you are alarmed as between Byzantium and Persia*

*The Fates there waiting, while Anushirvan urges on the ranks under the royal banner*

*Robed in green over gold, proudly flaunting the dye of red turmeric.*

*The poet goes on to imagine the palace as it once was, with its singing girls and pavilions.*

*The characteristic Islamic literary tradition of musing over the ruins of vanished dynasties drew upon verse forms first developed in pre-Islamic times by poets lamenting at abandoned desert camp sites. Sasanian Ctesiphon was an obvious subject for later Islamic poets such as al-Sharif Murtada (d. 1044): "Behold what the sovereign Sasanians built,/How time battered it, tore it down, effaced it./Courtyards, once the canopy of heaven,/Then by adversities brought down to earth." In Islamic thought, art and architecture were always closely associated with the theme of the transience of life's pleasures.*

*Sasanian artisans' experiments with stucco as a decorative medium (FIG. 14) were also later to be picked up by Islamic architects. There are clear signs of the influence of Sasanian motifs in the ninth-century Abbasid capital of Samarra (FIG. 15). Umayyad decorative schemes also picked up the Sasanian fondness for beaded decorative borders, and there was a widespread use throughout Islamic art of the characteristically Sasanian heavy vegetal scroll and other features (FIG. 16).*

*Finally, the Sasanian silk industry, which was established in Iran, was also of great importance to Islamic rulers who continued the Sasanian practice of distributing silk robes to courtiers and officials as a mark of royal appointments or favour. Textiles*
were also important as a means of transmission for typically Sasanian motifs into other cultures. Amongst the most popular in later Islamic art were fabulous mythical beasts such as the griffin (FIG. 17) and the *senmurv* (which had the forepart of a dog or lion and the hindlegs and tail of a bird).

**Pre-Islamic Arab Culture and Legends**

Before the rise of Islam, the largely nomadic peoples of the Arab peninsula were already playing a role, albeit somewhat marginal, in relations between the Byzantines and the Sasanians. Both empires, for example, maintained Arab client regimes on their borders, such as that of the Arab kingdom of the Ghassanids, which controlled territory to the east of Damascus in the Syrian desert during the sixth century AD and functioned as a buffer state for the Byzantines against the Sasanians and their allies.

Even in pre-Islamic history, Arab culture was distinctive and well developed, and the peninsula saw the rise of a number of kingdoms, major cities, and artistic styles. Arab culture also flourished outside the peninsula, in Syria.

One of the earliest centres of what was effectively Arab civilisation was the city of Petra, in what is now the Kingdom of Jordan. This was the capital of the Nabataeans, a people who saw themselves as distinct from their nomadic Arab neighbours, despite many similarities of culture and religious belief. From about 200 BC to AD 106 Petra was an important Arab city in the Near East. Petra's wealth came from its position on the overland trade routes from India and China to the Mediterranean. The influence of Mediterranean culture can be seen in Petra's magnificent Hellenistic architecture (FIG. 18) and funerary sculpture, which demonstrate how pervasive a background Graeco-Roman art was to all cultures of the area.

From the second century AD onwards, Palmyra had replaced Petra as the most important Arab city (FIG. 19). Palmyra lay on the route from Damascus to the Euphrates and had control of the watering places on the caravan routes. In 271 its Arab queen Zenobia had revolted against Roman rule but had been defeated, and much of Palmyra's flamboyant architecture and sculpted tower tombs date from the subsequent period of Roman occupation.

Palmyra, or Tadmur as it was known to the Arabs, was captured by Muslim forces in 634. A city of legend, allegedly built by Solomon, it was much celebrated in Islamic poetry, as in this poem by Wuhayb ibn Mutarraf al-Tamimi:

> Many a place have I seen, but nought
> Have I seen so beautifully founded and built as Palmyra.
> A place entirely of chiselled stone:
When one looks at it, it fills one with awe.

According to the law, cities resemble bodies

And Palmyra is truly head of all of them.

The Byzantines maintained the vassal Arab kingdom of the Ghassanids. The Sasanians too had their client rulers among the pre-Islamic Arabs. The other major sixth-century kingdom was that of the Sasanian-sponsored (but Christian Arab) Lakhmids. Their capital was at Hira, in what is now southern Iraq, and the Lakhmid territories were reputed to contain the fabled palace of Sadir. Along with the equally legendary palace of Ghumdan in what is now the Yemeni city of Sana, Sadir was to be used time and time again by Islamic writers and poets as the means of glorifying actual palaces erected in Baghdad, Cordoba, and elsewhere. These mythical monuments of lost civilisations represented to Muslims both magnificence and impermanence, they were subjects of marvel - and of suspicion. Muslims characteristically took warning from the ruins of such buildings and the fates of their creators. According to a Sura (chapter) of the Koran (89:5-15), "The Dawn":

Hast thou not seen how thy Lord did with Ad,

Iram of the Pillars the like of which was never created in the land, and Thamood, who hollowed the rocks in the valley, and Pharaoh, he of the tent-pegs, who all were insolent in the land and worked corruption therein?

Thy Lord loosed upon them a scourge of chastisement;

Surely thy Lord is ever on the watch.

The original audience of the Koranic revelation would have been very familiar with the legends to which the Koran was alluding. Ad, Thamood, and the Pharaoh of the tent-pegs were part of the mythology of pre-Islamic Arabia, one of many ancient Arabian myths commemorating lost peoples who were damned because they rejected the messages of God’s prophets, a number of which eventually found their way into the medieval story collection of the *Arabian Nights*.

**The Islamic Sense of the Past**

Literary evidence and vernacular legends, such as those quoted above, make it clear that medieval Muslims were very conscious of living in the shadow of mighty ruins (FIG. 20). Although it is obvious, it still seems worth stressing that there were then more and better-preserved ancient ruins to cast such shadows than there are now. As the famous fourteenth-century North African thinker Ibn Khaldun worked on his *Muqaddima (Prolegomena)*, a philosophic introduction to the study of history, the visible presence of the past weighed heavily upon him:
The Yemen where the Arabs live is in ruins, except for a few cities. Persian civilisation in Arab Iraq is likewise completely ruined. The same applies to contemporary Syria ... Formerly the whole region between the Sudan and the Mediterranean had been settled. This fact is attested by the relics of civilisation there, such as monuments, architectural sculpture, and the visible remains of villages and hamlets.

As has been said, Arab poets revelled in the sad pleasures of ruins. In time, this theme came to be applied to Islamic buildings too. Thus al-Umari (1301-47) records that an Umayyad palace in Damascus had written on it a poem which began: "Would that I knew, thou palace, what had become of thy people! / And where are they that raised high thy walls? / What hath befallen thy proud masters, the kings / Who made thee strong, then passed away from thee?"

To the Islamic world, Roman, Sasanian, and Pharaonic ruins were places of occult wonder and menace (FIG. 21). In the tenth century, the alchemist Ibn Umail took pains to write a detailed description of the statues and paintings of the ancient Egyptian city of Ashmunayn (then still more or less intact), as it was widely believed that the ancient Egyptians had used symbolic frescoes in order to preserve their knowledge and transmit it, so that it might survive some previously foretold catastrophe - such as the Deluge. Greek art was similarly thought to have an instructional rather than an aesthetic purpose. The ninth-century scholar Hunayn ibn Ishaq wrote in his *Nawadir al-Falasifah* (*Anecdotes of the Philosophers*) how the rulers of the Greeks and other nations "erected houses of gold, decorated with a variety of pictures, which were to serve to refresh hearts and attract eyes. The children stayed in these picture houses in order to be educated with the aid of the pictures found in them."

As often as not, Muslims who sought instruction from the images of the past creatively reinterpreted those images. Thus, for example, a stone carving at Naqsh-i Rustam in south-west Iran, showing the Sasanian ruler Shapur, was later taken by Muslims as a representation of the legendary strongman Rustam, a favourite hero of Islamic popular literature. Christian iconography could also undergo such strange metamorphoses. When the pilgrim Ludolph von Suchem visited the Church of St. Anne in Jerusalem in 1350, he found that under the Muslim occupation the place had been turned into a teaching college. However, a painting of the Blessed Virgin and her parents, Anne and Joachim, had been left untouched. Von Suchem reported that:

This painting in my time used to be devoutly and religiously explained to the Christians by an old Saracen woman called Bagutes. She used to live next to the church and declared that the picture of Joachim stood for Muhammad and the painting of trees for Paradise where Muhammad kissed girls. And she referred the whole of the painting to Muhammad and set it forth with fervour and would tell many more wondrous stories of Muhammad with tears in her eyes.

The earliest generation of Muslims do not seem to have been troubled by the presence in the art of past civilisations of pagan figurative images, or images of living things, even in what had become for them a Muslim religious context (FIG. 22). For example, the columns of the seventh-century mosque in the Iraqi town of Jufa were topped by Persian capitals, looted from Hira, that featured monsters, heads, wings, and other figurative imagery.
Sites of pre-Islamic worship were sometimes conceived of as possessing mysterious powers. Thus the Umayyads' Great Mosque of Damascus was built on the site of a Byzantine church dedicated to John the Baptist. The church in turn had been built on the temenos (sacred precinct) of a Temple of Jupiter, which before that had been the site of the Temple of Haddad, the ancient Ammonite storm god. Similarly, in Jerusalem the Umayyad Dome of the Rock was erected within the Jewish Temple precinct. Much later, in the 1270s, when Abaqa, the Mongol ruler of Iran, built himself a summer palace in the north-east of the country, he was at pains to locate it within a sacred Zoroastrian site with buildings dating from the Sasanian period. The dynasties that preceded the preaching of Islam and the monuments erected by those dynasties served both as subjects of marvel to later generations and as pretexts for pious reflection. Ancient architecture taught Muslims lessons about the transience of all pleasures. As the Koran (3:137) puts it: "Many ways of life passed away before your time/Then, go about the earth and behold what happened."

Source: http://acc.teachmideast.org/texts.php?module_id=12&reading_id=201&print=1