Lisa Golombek

ABBASID MOSQUE AT BALKH

The scores of mounds and building remains that make up the present site of Balkh in northern Afghanistan holds out an irresistible enticement to archaeologists of all persuasions. Most of the interest expressed in the site up till now has come from specialists in the Achaemenid, Hellenistic, Kushan civilizations which preceded the Arab conquest of the 8th century A.D. Aside from the handful of standing monuments that date from the 15th and 16th centuries A.D., the traces of Islamic occupation have been ignored. The Islamic occupation of Balkh extends from its conquest by the Arabs twelve centuries ago up to the present.

From the literary and archaeological sources we know that the Islamic city of Balkh was a centre of some importance from its very beginnings. The illustrious family of the Barmakids who served in the court of the caliph Hārān al-Rashid until their demise in 803 originated in Balkh. By the 10th century Balkh was acclaimed as "uwm al-bilād"; the Mother of Cities. This prosperous phase of occupation is well represented among the馴ard found in the Islamic levels at Balkh, which comprise some three metres of unstratified material. Until now, however, all of the standing monuments in Balkh were thought to be of much later date, belonging to a second phase of occupation: Balkh was overrun in 1155 by the Oghuz Turks and in 1220 by the Mongols. The city was virtually abandoned until the beginning of the 15th-century when the Timurids started to rebuild its walls and re-occupy the town. The famous shrine of Khwājah Abū Nasr Pārsā, the Madrasah facing it, the shrine of Khwājah Akāshāh, and the palatial residence excavated on the citadel mound belong to this second phase.

With the intent of visiting these later monuments, the writer, accompanied by Miss Deborah Salter of the Kabul Museum in August of 1966, came across a hitherto unknown mosque belonging to the earlier phase of Islamic occupation. It represents not only the sole standing remains of the first Islamic habitation of Balkh but is also the earliest surviving Muslim religious monument in Afghanistan.

We were led to this monument upon inquiring with the local people about a particular Friday Mosque. According to legend, it had been destroyed by the Mongol conqueror Genghis Khan in his search for buried treasure. It is not clear by what route the destination was reached, but the mosque which we did find was outside the perimeter of the ancient walled city of Balkh. It was situated a good distance from the town in the midst of an open plain. I was therefore inclined not to identify it as the building about which we had originally inquired, for the literary sources report that the Friday Mosque was situated in the city itself.

Nevertheless, from the point of view of its significance, its architecture, and its beautiful stucco carvings the little mosque in the open plain was far from disappointing. Under its present name, "Masjid-i Ta'rikh" (or Tārik), possibly the "Mosque of History" in reference to its obvious antiquity, the building is not mentioned in the literary sources. Nor does the literature take note of an alleged tomb of Ka'b al-Akhbār, the early 7th century prophet who converted from Judaism to Islam, which the local people presently believe is situated in the mausoleum beside the columned mosque. However, the literature does mention a series of mosques other than the Friday Mosque of the city—a Masjid-i Ḥarb, a Masjid-i Maqbarah (Cemetery Mosque), and a Masjid-i Kādīnāh (Friday Mosque). And although there is no reference to Ka'b, some sources report that the tombs of Old Testament prophets (Ezekiel and Job) are to be found at Balkh.

It is difficult to draw any definite conclusions regarding the identification of the mosque on the basis of the present literary evidence. One approach, however, would be to attempt an identification of the site of the mosque. Since it lies outside the ancient walled city, it was probably a suburban settlement. Two such early Islamic settlements are known—the garrison town of Baruqān which was in use before the Muslims actually moved into the city proper in A.D. 736, and the suburb of Nawshād, built by the Arab governor Dāwūd b. 'Abbās in A.D. 848. Some of the mosques mentioned above were in fact built in the suburbs.

It is our purpose here to present the mosque in as much detail as we were able to record on a preliminary visit. Further research at the site should be undertaken, particularly excavation of the floor of the mosque and the area immediately surrounding it. It is hoped that this initial notice on the mosque will generate interest in other scholars to survey the neighbouring territories for further traces of the occupation contemporary with the mosque, perhaps with the goal in mind of locating the early Muslim suburbs.

PRESENT REMAINS

The mosque is part of a complex lying some twenty-five metres south of a grove of trees surrounding a large pool of water (Fig. 1A). The mosque itself (b) occupies a
1. Site of the mosque near Balkh.

square area measuring about twenty metres on a side. In front of the mosque to the northeast lies a ‘forecourt’ enclosed by walls of pisé with a small modern structure built into the north corner (c) (Figs. 6, 8–9). Just west of this structure there is an elevated platform (o), faced on the northeast with panels composed of polygonal buff tiles assembled in geometric patterns (Fig. 9). The tile-work is reminiscent of Timurid remains from the Bállá Ḥiṣár of Balkh. North of the platform and adjoining the northwest wall of the mosque is a cluster of rooms, also constructed of pisé, serving as a mausoleum (e) and believed to contain the tomb of Ka‘b. The only tombstone which could be found in the mausoleum dates from the 16th century. Several metres west of the complex lies a funerary platform (f) with a tombstone dated 886/1481–82. An inscription on the opposite face indicates that the stone was re-used for another burial in 1011/1602–03.

The ruins of the mosque (g) consist of four large pillars of brick standing in the centre of the square (Nos. 6, 7, 10, 11), two fallen pillars (Fig. 6) on the north-east (Nos. 2, 3), three curtain-walls (S.E., S.W., N.W.), and arches springing from the pillars and the coupled columns which are attached to the walls (Fig. 4). The arches which join pillars No. 10 and 11 and pillars No. 6 and 10 stand intact. The others are no longer complete.

In the middle of the south-west wall, between the columns No. 14 and 15, there is a semi-dome which served as the hood of the mihrab, the prayer-niche (Fig. 7). The other two walls are pierced by arched doorways, presently blocked (Fig. 5). The bricks in the masonry of the curtain-wall measure 30 × 30 × 6 cm.

Deeply carved stucco ornamentation occurs on the capitals, impost, and bases of the columns and on the spandrels and soffits of the arches. In the crevices of the stucco carvings traces of blue and red paint can still be seen.

The actual floor of the mosque is buried under about a metre of debris which conceals the lower half of most of the pillars and columns. In the north corner, however, where the floor level is lower, the unusual profile of the column can be observed (Fig. 11). The column is divided into two parts at approximately mid-point. The upper part consists of the brick shaft (height: 1.90 m.) and the lower part, the ‘plinth’, is covered with carved stucco. The two parts are separated by a ‘girth’, a wide band of stucco which is narrower than the diameter of the shaft above and the plinth below. The large pillars in the

2. Reconstructed plan of the mosque.
The original format of the mosque can easily be reconstructed from these remains. The existing curtain-walls mark the south-east, south-west (qiblah), and north-west limits of the building. The absence of an arcade extending north-east of the present north corner (Figs. 8-11) and the continuation of stucco decoration onto the north-east face of the wall behind the column indicate that this was the original north corner of the mosque. The building did not extend beyond this point. The east corner of the building was marked by a similar pier which is no longer in evidence, but a portion of the arch which connected it to the adjoining support to the south can still be seen (Fig. 8). Between the north and east corners were the two fallen pillars, No. 2 and 3. These four supports were linked to each other by an arcade, the beginning of which can be seen above the north pier (Fig. 11). Thus, the north-eastern limit of the mosque was formed not by a curtain-wall, as were the other three sides, but by an arcade. This arcade which served as the facade of the mosque has been reconstructed (Fig. 3).

Along the inner face of the curtain-wall ran a blind arcade, linking the coupled columns to each other and to the single supports which stood in the south and west corners (Nos. 13, 16) (Fig. 5). The interior space was spanned by two intersecting arcades, thrown across the large central pillars. This system of arcades and supports divided the interior space into nine equal bays. Assuming that the metre-deep debris piled up on the floor of the mosque came from the superstructure, we may conclude that the roof was composed of brick vaults, presumably a series of domes.

The Stucco Decoration and the Date of the Mosque

In the absence of epigraphical material we must rely on a stylistic analysis of the stucco carvings to date the construction of the mosque. Characteristic of the style is a vocabulary of motifs consisting of grape-leaves, vine-scrolls, palmettes, and fir-cones. These motifs are grouped in such a way as to fill almost completely the surface occupied by the design. The motifs are separated from one another only by narrow, deeply cut lines. As a result the background against which the relief appears is reduced to a linear pattern of deep, indelible shadow, undiminished in its effectiveness even on close viewing, in muted or in blasting light. The surface of the design is varied through...
4. General view of mosque.

5. North-west wall.
the drilling of holes and the incising of striated and hatched patterns, pearl rings, feathering and other devices.

This technique of stucco carving is well known from monuments of 9th–10th century date. It is often referred to as *Tiefendwzel*, or "deep shadow", and is best represented in the stuccoes of Styles A and B of Samarra. Samarra was the new capital of the Abbasid caliphs, founded by al-Mu'taṣim north of Baghdad in A.D. 836. The city remained the seat of government until the caliphate returned to Baghdad in A.D. 890, at which time Samarra was virtually abandoned. Although it is not clear exactly where and when the technique of carving originated, its most vital period of development coincides with the lifespan of this imperial city. The date of Samarra thus provides an approximate date for the mosque at Balkh.

The point that is of further significance is the relationship of the Central Asian mosque to techniques and styles which originated not in its surroundings but in areas far to the west. One may argue that the Abbasid Imperial Style (of which the "deep shadow" style is one phase) drew on Central Asian sources to some extent, but even if this were true, the actual creation and crystallization of the style took place in the Mesopotamian world. Its evolution has been traced to Sasanian styles originating in that area and to Hellenistic survivals existing on the fringes. The fusion of these traditions, some of which may have come through Central Asian sources as well, took place in and around the capital of the Arab Empire. From there it was dispersed to the far corners of the empire. The westward diffusion of the style is well known from the Tulunid art of Egypt. The mosque at Balkh now serves as evidence for the dissemination of the style as far east as the frontiers of Central Asia.

A brief comparison of the stuccoes of Balkh with material known from pre-Islamic and early Islamic sites in Central Asia will confirm this assertion. Let us consider the designs which occur in the spandrels of the mosque at Balkh (Figs. 4, 12–13). These are made up of freely expanding vine-scrolls, 'free' in the sense that they are not confined to compartments. The undulating stem of the vine-scroll originates in the lower corner of the triangular area of the spandrel, working its way upward toward the crown of the arch. The leaves spring from alternate sides of the main stem, each leaf nearly filling the curve of its individual stem as if the tendril were a circular compartment. The growth of the scroll is relatively free from regularity, yet one cannot say that it is rendered in a realistic manner or that it is organic.

By contrast, the pre-Islamic vine-scroll ornament of Central Asia, as for example, from Varakhsha near Bukhara (5th–8th century), adheres closely to the Hellenistic
8. North corner viewed from west.

9. North corner, showing mausoleums and tile facing of platform.

10. North corner.
canons of style. The vine ornament is rendered as an organic subject with leaves springing naturally and without regimentation. The execution of the leaves and grape clusters is also far more realistic.

The closer parallels for the vine ornament at Balkh are to be found in the West, in Iraq and Iran, among monuments of Sassanian and Abbasid date. Umayyad art of Syria provides some parallels, as, for example, on the bath porch at Khirbat al-Mafjar, but the peculiarities of the vine-scroll at Balkh are best matched by Sassanian stucco from Mesopotamia (e.g., at Kish) and by the early Abbasid monuments of Central Iran—at Nayin, Yazd (Figs. 19a, 20-21) and Buzan. Here one may observe the same tendency toward the formation of compartments by the tendrils and the same regimentation, even more severe than the vine ornament seen at Balkh. In the Iranian examples the leaves are actually aligned in horizontal registers. In spirit these examples are the closest kin of the stuccoes at Balkh.

For the three remaining categories of designs at Balkh parallels can also be found in the West. A few comparisons may help to date the stuccoes of Balkh more precisely and to ascertain its most significant affiliations. The three categories are: (1) the geometric grid designs of the soffits, girths and plinths, (2) the repetitive friezes of the impost blocks, and (3) the palmette frieze of the capitals.

On the soffits, the girths, and plinths, the surface is divided into a series of compartments by a network of intersecting bands (Figs. 4, 12-13, 16). The compartments are then filled with vegetal ornament. This format was quite common in the stuccoes of Abbasid monuments in the west. It was used at Qasr al-Hayr Sharqi (Fig. 22), Siraf, Hira, Samarra, Nayin and in the Mosque of Ibn Tulun (Figs. 20, 23-26). Samarra constitutes something of an exception, for although the stuccoes of Samarra of Styles A and B do involve the use of compartments, few of them show the interlacing of bands which frame the compartments (Fig. 23). Most geometric designs at Samarra are divided into sections by a simple grid (Figs. 25-26).

The strapwork at Balkh, like that of Qasr al-Hayr, Siraf and Hira, is not complex. The patterns are derived from grids of tangent and intersecting circles, circles inscribed in squares, and star-and-cross arrangements. More unusual is the pattern based on intersecting arcades, used for the plinths at Balkh (Fig. 11). A similar design was found in the mosque of Siraf and other examples in House III of Samarra. An intensification of the strapwork tradition can be observed in the Mosque of Ibn Tulun (Fig. 24). In a frenzied multiplicity of knots and interweaves, the strapwork acquires a life of its own. The framing elements come forward and the filler ornament or subject matter recedes. It would appear that these stuccoes represent the later stages of the 'strapwork tradition' and that the other sites (Qasr al-Hayr, Siraf, Hira), including Balkh, would all date from a period prior to the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, that is before A.D. 876.

The arrangement of motifs within the major compartments of the strapwork designs at Balkh are of two types: symmetrical and concentrical. To the first type belong the soffits 6-10, 10-11, and 5-6 (Figs. 4, 12). The compartment is divided in half by an axial stalk and the quadrants are each occupied by a five-lobed leaf. Close parallels are found in House II, room 41, at Samarra (Fig. 26).

The concentrical composition can be observed on the girths of the pillars and columns at Balkh (Figs. 4, 11) and on soffit 9-10 (Fig. 13). On the girths the vine leaf at the centre of a quadrafoil compartment is encircled by a tendril from which emanate additional leaves forming a circle around the centre of the compartment. These leaves are attached to the central leaf in the manner of a pinwheel. Thus they give the impression that the compartment whirls in a clockwise direction. A very similar effect is achieved in the star-shaped compartment of the stucco from Qasr al-Hayr (Fig. 22), and in another medallion from House II at Samarra (Fig. 25).
The arrangement of vegetal ornament in the star-shaped compartments of soffit 9-10 at Balkh represents yet another type of concentric composition. Here a large five-lobed leaf is encircled by a stem sprouting a series of comma-shaped tendrils (Fig. 13). These tendrils too suggest a clockwise motion. An abstract version of the same idea is found in House xi d at Samarra (Fig. 23) and in the Mosque of Ibn Tulun (Fig. 24b).

The repetitive friezes of the impost blocks for the most part utilize the same vocabulary of motifs and compositions as the soffit designs, as for example, on the south-east face of No. 10 (Fig. 13). A few of the imposts carry more unusual configurations. The impost at No. 9 (Fig. 15) has a frieze composed of five-lobed leaves alternating with a paddle-like motif. In its broad outlines this frieze resembles some of the border designs at Samarra found in House xi a, T-shaped room (Fig. 27). The execution of the motifs at Balkh, however, is more precise and detailed and provides us with the probable antecedent for the abstract frieze of Samarra. The paddle-like motif is ultimately derived from the fluttering scarves of Sasanian ornament (see Fig. 19b). Another variant of this motif occurs in the main frieze from the Mosque of Ibn Tulun (Fig. 28). Both here and at Balkh the surface of the scarf is stippled and a series of parallel lines along its edge simulate the movement of drapery.

Although not found in the same frieze of Ibn Tulun, the motif of the arrow slit which occurs in the frieze at Balkh is frequently found in the soffit stuccoes of the Cairene mosque (Fig. 24). Ultimately derived from the architecture of fortifications, the arrow slit, often in combination with the stepped crenellation, was a motif familiar to both east and west long before Islam. It belongs together with the fluttering scarves to a decorative vocabulary which was symbolic of royalty in the Iranian world.

The third category of design at Balkh is the palmette frieze which decorates the capitals of the columns and pillars (Figs. 4, 12, 14-15). There are eight palmette compositions on each of the pillars and four (theoretically) on each of the engaged columns (Fig. 15). The palmette trees alternate and interlock with trefoil lotus stalks. The palmette itself consists of two kidney-shaped leaves arranged on either side of a bifurcated axial stalk.
14. Detail of capital from column No. 9.

15. Columns, capitals, and impost block of No. 9.

16. Soffit 6-7, pillar No. 7.

17. Impost block and soffit 9-10, pillar No. 10.

18. Soffit and impost block of soffit 5-6, pillar No. 6.


22. Stuccoes excavated at Qasr al-Hayr Sharqi (by courtesy of O. Grabar, University of Michigan Expedition to Qasr al-Hayr).

point of bifurcation, the stalk expands to cradle an
ovoid fruit, and at the bottom the stalk is tied by a narrow
ribbon (Fig. 12).

The ultimate source of this design is the Sasanian
winged palmette which we find at Kish tied by a ribbon
and bearing the fruit of the pomegranate (Fig. 19B).
Although there is little variation in the palmettes at
Balkh from one capital to the next, some do show closer
affinities with the winged Sasanian model than do others.
On column No. 9, for example, the kidney-shaped
leaves actually take the form of wings with pearl borders
(Figs. 14-15). The surface of the wings are striated to
appear like feathers.

Sasanian craftsmen never used the palmette in quite
the same way as it occurs at Balkh, however, for in a
frieze the forms were not made to interlock (cf. Fig. 19B).
With the growing tendency toward abstraction in
Abbasid art, the individual parts of the palmette were
modified to achieve the present results. A close parallel
to the examples at Balkh is found in the Bāb al-‘Amma
of Samarra in a frieze applied to the wall (Fig. 29).

One further point of interest regarding the palmette
frieze is that its use as decoration for capitals is not
altogether without precedent in Abbasid monuments. A
representation of a palmette capital painted on a wooden
beam is known from Samarra. 22 Other sites of later date
in Mesopotamia have produced a series of capitals,
identified by Herzfeld as the "Lyrakapitell", which
appear to be derived from 9th century models (Fig. 30).
Thus, one might suggest that there existed in Mesopo-
tamia a tradition for palmette-decorated capitals which
the capitals of Balkh are attempting to imitate. Since the
architecture of the mosque called for extraordinarily
thick, squat pillars it was perhaps impossible to follow
precisely the model by placing one palmette tree on each
face of the column. The use of the palmette 'in frieze'
may represent an adaptation of the Mesopotamian
tradition to the local modes of construction.

The style of the ornament which we have been dis-
cussing may further be classified as realistic or as abstract.
To the first category belong the variety of vine ornaments
found on the soffits, girths, plinths, and imposts. To the
second belong only the palmette friezes of the capitals. Here we must pause to raise an important question, for it is indeed extraordinary that two such styles or modes of representation should co-exist in this way in a single building. The monuments with which we have compared the mosque either show no tendency toward the abstract (Qasr al-Hayr, Siraf, Hira) or exhibit some degree of abstraction throughout the entire scheme of decoration.

There is at least one parallel to the juxtaposition of modes observed at Balkh which may shed light on our problem. This is found in the panels of House II, room 41 at Samarra (Figs. 25-26). The vine ornament which occurs in the octagonal medallions is executed with considerable realism. One can easily recognize the five-lobed leaves just as at Balkh. Yet opposite these compartments are others that contain palmette motifs, rendered in much the same abstract style as the capitals at Balkh. The major difference between the juxtaposition of modes here and at Balkh is that the styles have already begun to mix. The background area of the otherwise realistically rendered vine compositions has become a solid mass. Thus the vine ornament participates in a design which is abstract. There is no such mixing of styles at Balkh.

The significance of the example from Samarra is that although the abstract mode pervades the entire design to some extent, there is still a marked separation between the abstract and the realistic. The terms in which this separation is expressed are very important for they are the same as at Balkh. The realistic is confined to the vine ornament. The abstract is limited primarily to palmette motifs. This persistence of the tendency to link form of ornament with mode of execution leads us to propose the following hypothesis. The debut of the abstract mode in Abbasid style was a modest one. It seems to have been limited at first to certain types of ornament, such as the palmette. From there the idea spread to other classes of ornament until it came to pervade the entire design. Thus the juxtaposition of two modes of representation at Balkh was not an isolated, incidental phenomenon. It was tied to the mainstream development of the abstract style in Mesopotamia. It represents the initial stages of this development, the turning point in a progression from realism toward abstraction.

The comparative material from Samarra permits us to pinpoint the date of this initial stage more precisely than previous comparisons have allowed. The example from House II, room 41 (Figs. 25-26), showing the vestigial distinction made between the representation of the vine ornament and the palmette, belongs to Style B of Samarra. This style is characterized by a noticeable degree of abstraction present throughout the entire design. Style A, however, exhibits little evidence of abstraction, although it must be admitted that the filler ornament often tends to lose its organic quality. Style A is associated with the earliest foundations at Samarra, dating from around A.D. 836. If indeed Style A represents a stage comparable or perhaps slightly more advanced than the stuccoes of Balkh, then the mosque at Balkh should date from approximately the same period, to the first half of the 9th century.

With Balkh representing the turning point in the development of the abstract style, it may be surmised that those sites with stuccoes showing no evidence of the abstract—Qasr al-Hayr, Siraf, Hira—date from the early 9th century or even the late 8th century. The predominantly abstract ornament of Samarra Styles B and C, Nayin, and the Mosque of Ibn Tulun (876-979) form a second group dating to the second half of the 9th century.
ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

Just as the carved stucco on the pillars and arches of the mosque appears to be a Mesopotamian import, the architectural type also seems to have been brought from abroad. The capitals illustrate this point, for they serve no functional purpose and can only be understood as imitative of a foreign idea. As mentioned earlier, the capitals have no substance and were constructed merely as plaster shells wrapped around the shafts of the pillars (Fig. 14).

The failure of the architects of Balkh to reproduce true capitals is understandable in view of the architectural traditions existing in Central Asia in the early 9th century. The architectural complement consisting of column, capital, and arcade seems to have been absent from Central Asian building traditions just prior to the Islamic conquest. Architects used either the wooden column, console, and beam or they employed the brick pillar and arch without the intervention of a capital. The full complement—column, capital, arcade—occurs only in representations of arcades found on objects such as ossuaries, which were closely copied from Hellenistic models. They do not necessarily reflect contemporary architectural styles. In the West, however, in Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt, North Africa, and Spain, the antique tradition of the columned arcade did continue to play an important role down to Islamic times. The columned arcade was in fact given a new lease on life through its incorporation into the Arab style of congregational mosque.

One could argue that the Iranian world before Islam was familiar with the arcade on columns as it was found in the ‘eyvan’. This large, vaulted, ceremonial hall, used in early Islamic palaces as well as in Sasanian complexes, was often divided into three parallel corridors.
by two rows of columns. The columns supported arcades which ascended into the walls of the barrel vaults covering the corridors. The internal arcades of the three-aisle eyvan were therefore not true free-standing arcades. They might better be compared with a series of arches opened in a solid wall, in this case, the walls of the barrel vault. The only point of resemblance between the mosque of Balkh and these three-aisle eyvans was their triple-arch facade. One remarkable example of this was found at Varakhsa near Bukhara. With the facade, however, the resemblance ends, for the internal division of the eyvan is the antithesis of the mosque.

The eyvan was divided into three long naves. Barrel vaults extending the length of the naves accentuated the longitudinal orientation of the hall. Thus, although the eyvan may be said to have used arcades on columns, its internal organization was more like that of a basilica than that of the mosque.

Perhaps closer to the mosque at Balkh with regard to its internal plan was another typically Central Asian building, the 'apadana'. The apadana was a square structure with four columns in the centre to support the four cross-beams of the ceiling. The beams rested directly on consoles set on top of the wooden column shafts. In plan many of these apadanas resemble the mosque at Balkh, but because there were no arcades, the internal space did not appear to be composed of individual bays. Thus, although in the apadana the area was divided into nine equal parts by four central columns as at Balkh, the effect of such a division was entirely different from that of an arcaded hall.

We have yet to mention a third architectural tradition

34. Sharif Ṭabāṭabā Shrine, Cairo. After F. Shahī.

35. Bib Mardum Mosque, Toledo. After Gomez-Moreno.
known to Central Asia before the coming of Islam. The *kushk* was a small square building of dimensions comparable to those of the mosque. Its interior was also divided up into nine squares of equal size, each covered by a cupola. Each cell, however, was sealed off from its neighbour by actual walls. Only the three rooms in the middle section communicated freely, serving as a sort of corridor. The peripheral cells could be reached only from the middle section. The *kushk* and the apadana represent opposite extremes, neither of which could have served as the model for the mosque. The *kushk* was too compartmentalized and the apadana was too open. The mosque, to be sure, was a square conspicuously divided into nine bays, but one whose internal division did not impede free communication.

As we have seen, the decorative elements of the mosque and its techniques of construction were imported from the West. So, too, it would appear reasonable to seek the model for its architectural design beyond Central Asia, perhaps in Mesopotamia as well. None of the autochthonous traditions examined above provide a satisfactory basis for attributing the mosque plan to native ingenuity. If we look westward, however, buildings of similar design and dimensions can be found in relative abundance. The list below indicates that seven such mosques were constructed in Mesopotamia, Egypt, North Africa, and Spain between the 9th and 11th centuries (see Table). It should be borne in mind, nevertheless, that the existence in Central Asia of a tradition for small cubical buildings such as the *kushk*, divided internally into nine sections, and a tradition such as the eyvan, utilizing columned arcades, must have facilitated the adaptation of the foreign mosque-plan to local tastes and modes of construction.

### Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Mosque Name</th>
<th>Approx. Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Susa, Bī Dastān</td>
<td>(Fig. 31, Creswell, EMA, II, pp. 246-248)</td>
<td>838-841</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Qairawan, Tleta Bibān (Mosque of Three Doors)</td>
<td>(Fig. 32, Creswell, EMA, II, pp. 325-326)</td>
<td>866</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Mosul, Shrine of Nabi Jirjis (mosque section)</td>
<td>9th c. (Fig. 33, Sarre-Herzfeld, Arch. Reihe, II, pp. 236-238)</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Cairo, Sharif Tabātabā</td>
<td>(Fig. 34, Creswell, Muslim Architecture of Egypt, Oxford, 1952, I, pp. 11-15)</td>
<td>c. 950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Toledo, Bib Mardum (El Cristo de la Luz)</td>
<td>(Fig. 35, Ars Hispaniae, Madrid, 1931, III, p. 201)</td>
<td>999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Hazarch, Masjíd-i Dingarān</td>
<td>(Pugachenkova-Rempel, p. 196)</td>
<td>c. 1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Aswan, Sai'a wa-Sa'in Wall</td>
<td>(Creswell, MAE, I, pp. 144-145)</td>
<td>c. 1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Toledo, Las Tornerias</td>
<td>(Ars Hispaniae, op. cit., pp. 210-212)</td>
<td>1159</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of the mosques listed in the Table correspond in scale and in plan to the mosque at Balkh. They are all of small dimensions (from 8 to 20 metres square) and all except one (No. 6) have an internal division into nine equal bays. The exception, situated at Hazarch not far from Bukhara, is the only example from Central Asia and is in many respects a provincial rendering, perhaps modelled on the mosque at Balkh which antedates it. At Hazarch the bays are not of equal dimensions.

Other features common to this group of mosques may be mentioned here. Brick was the favoured material of construction for the walls, supports and vaults of most of them. Columns bearing arcades, used along with or in combination with piers, appear to have been an identifying feature of the architectural type. A mosque of nine domes was known to the historian Maqrizi, who refers to it as the "ja'ami' al-fiyalah". In Persian the term for pillar is *pil-pāyah*, literally 'elephant-feet', which, rendered into Arabic as 'elephants', would be *fiyalah*, hence *ja'ami' al-fiyalah*, or Mosque of the Pillars. The alternative interpretation, "Mosque of the Elephants", is possible but makes little sense. Thus the name of this mosque grants recognition to one of its most prominent architectural features.

However, most conspicuous as a feature of construction were the vaults. The nine individual vaults, rendered in so small a scale, must have appeared to the visitor as a proliferation. The miniature ribbed domes of the Bib Mardum (No. 5), each a unique spectacle, could not fail to attract the eye (Fig. 35). The multiplicity of domes in the mosques we have listed appears to be so compulsory a feature of the architectural type that it seems most fitting to call it the "nine-dome mosque".

Another characteristic of the nine-dome mosque was a highly decorative triple-arched facade. It occurs on at least three of the examples listed (Nos. 1, 2, 5). The resemblance between that of the Tleta Bibān (Fig. 32, No. 2) and our reconstruction of the facade at Balkh is striking (Fig. 3) and is a point to which we shall return.

The nine-dome mosque, particularly with facade, tended to be an open building. At Balkh in addition to the three archways of the facade, there were doorways in the side walls, leaving only the qiblah wall sealed to the outside. In the Bib Mardum (No. 5) the arrangement was similar, and in the Sharīf Tabātabā of Cairo (No. 4) even the qiblah wall was pierced by doorways (Figs. 34-35).

The architectural features described above—the size, the floor-plan, the proliferation of domes, and the desirability of optimal communication with the exterior—occur with such consistency in the monuments listed and in the mosque at Balkh that we are doubtlessly dealing with a significant architectural type. The predominance of Arab examples of this nine-dome oratory suggests a Western or Arab origin for the architectural type, possibly Mesopotamia which also influenced the style of decoration in these examples.

The mosque type spread from its point of origin as a complete architectural entity. Its plan, its techniques of construction, and its decoration were inseparable. This can best be illustrated through a comparison of the mosque at Balkh, the furthest eastern extension of the type known, with one to the extreme west, the Tleta Bibān of Qairawan (No. 2). Although the facade of
the small Qairawani mosque (Fig. 32) is constructed of carved stone, its decoration was apparently drawn from the same stock of ornament as the stucco carvings of Balkh. The spandrels are decorated with freely expanding vine scrolls. The remainder of the ornament which has been re-assembled, some of the stones possibly brought from inside the mosque, is of two types: (1) pairs of circles containing vegetal ornament and (2) friezes in double registers. This combination of patterns cannot but remind us of the impost friezes at Balkh, most of which are divided into double registers and at least one of which is composed of circular medallions (No. 10, Fig. 12). It is therefore tempting to suggest that the corresponding stones from the facade of the Tleta Bibän were once used as impost blocks inside the mosque. This would tend to confirm not only a Western origin for the mosque of Balkh, but it would also indicate that in the process of building an architectural form the entire building, complete with its method and style of decoration, was taken over as an indivisible entity.

It was only under the curious combination of circumstances that had brought into being the Islamic Empire that a monument such as the nine-dome oratory could have been built at Balkh in the 9th century. Forging eastward, the Arab armies succeeded for the first time since Alexander the Great to unite East and West under a common political and cultural hegemony. With them they brought to the far-flung ports of the empire distinctive architectural ideas, generated in the interests of Islam. Others, such as the free-standing arcade on columns, were in fact "forgotten shadows" of the Hellenistic past, re-incarnated in new architectural types. The appearance of the nine-dome mosque at Balkh in the first half of the 9th century signals the coming of a new age to Central Asia, one which brought it once again into intimate contact with the Mediterranean and Mesopotamian worlds.

NOTES


5. Khrais has reported to have died in 652 or 654 (P. Hitti, History of the Arabs, New York, 1936, p. 242).


7. Escheil: Die Baute (Schwartz, p. 435); Job the Patient: Foddul bi’Bah, pp. 76, 79.

8. Schwartz, p. 435; Foddul bi’ Bah, p. 82.


10. Funerary platforms such as those were very common in the Timurid period. The one in front of the mosque of Khwajah Abu al-Hasan in Balkh has recently been restored. Others can be seen in Herat, in the shrine of Gusef Gah, and in Khuj. They were occasionally portrayed in Timurid manuscripts (e.g., Coll. Geilen-ki, Nisaa, scene of Maimun mourning at tomb of Layih, published in The Story of Leo and Maimon, trans. R. Greif, London, 1936, p. 205; pl. 12; also in the Atlas of Central Asia, 1928. In the Metropolitan Museum of Art, No. 52.131, 3, published in the Bulletin, 65, 7, 310). The platform has been identified with the term "hizvah" (see The Timurid Shrine at Gusef Gah, Chap. iv, in forthcoming Occasional Paper of the Royal Ontario Museum by the author).

11. In the discussion below we shall use the terminology given by Creswell to Herstfeld’s classifications, i.e., Styles A, B, C, D, E, and F, being equivalent to Herstfeld’s Styles I, II, and F. See and E. Herstfeld, "Architektonische Reze in Einbegriff und Vergleich" (Berlin, 1921-1922); E. Herstfeld, Der Wahrzeichender der Baudenkmale in Samarra (Berlin, 1923); K. A. C. Creswell, Early Muslim Architecture, II (Oxford, 1926). The characteristics of the Styles (ii) are outlined by Herstfeld in his unchipped, pp. 188-182.


13. V. A. Shkikh, Varakhsha (Moscow, 1963), Figs. 66-68.


18. Excavations at Balkh, 1934, pp. 51-52, Pls. 1-22, PI. XIII.


22. E.g. at Nyasa (G. A. Pugachenkova, Pust rassitiia arhitekturny Tezkrovka Turkestana z yazyka i inulodnosti a hodijstv, Moscow, 1921, pp. 66-71; Qafqaz (G. A. Pugachenkova and L. I. Borisskaja, Vostok i Azia (inulodnosti a hodijstv, Moscow, 1951)). Varakhsha (Shkikh, op. cit., 1963, Figs. 16, mm. 14).

23. Varakhsha (Shkikh, op. cit., 1963, Figs. 16, mm. 14).

24. Varakhsha (Shkikh, op. cit., 1963, Figs. 16, mm. 14).
