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How to interpret the history of a building or space? The ideal method would be a stratigraphical excavation within the structure. An excavation can reveal infrastructures, construction and renovation phases, evidence for looted elements, and sometimes hints for absolute dating. This is, however, only a wishful thinking for many historical buildings in the Islamic world. In cases where full excavation cannot be conducted, scholars record the existing remains, search for architectural parallels, and look for records made by locals and visitors along history. In this book, Alain George offers the latter methods. He beautifully reconstructs the historical layers of the Great Mosque of Damascus, treating it as a “palimpsest” (pp. 20, 41).

The Damascus Mosque is a famous structure discussed by modern and early authors alike. Archaeological soundings in its courtyard in the 1960s (which George, I believe, is the first to make internationally public) exposed at least two construction phases. The author interprets an early phase of large stone infrastructures as a cella of a Roman temple (46–51). A later phase, pavements of white mosaic and large marble slabs, he interprets as a Christian structure (113–114). This excavation, however, was stopped in its early stage. Moreover, it has never been published, except for several photographs.

George thus employs many more source corpuses for his reconstruction. His first corpus is photos and drawings of the mosque from the 19th and early 20th centuries. By using them (one of the chief contributions of the book), the author observes changes in the mosque within that period and since then. This careful investigation points, for instance, to the gradual replacement of columns and colonettes with pillars or pilasters (122–125). As we learn from the book, alternations are an inseparable part of the structure. Even more so, following its severe destruction in the fire of 1893, substantial restorations took place in the 1950s and 1960s. For example, the mosaics in most of the mosque were repaired using modern techniques and, in some cases, new compositions were created. George clarifies that “these interventions invite particular caution about using the current state of the building and its decoration as a basis of study” (38).

A second source type is 8th-century papyri from Aphroditio. These mention the transportation of labour, food, and artefacts from Egypt for the construction of the Damascus Mosque. The evidence indicates that a mosque was built or furnished in Damascus in year 709/710. A third source an Umayyad Qur’an manuscript from Ṣan‘ā’ that consists of two architectural illustrations. George occasionally compares those with elements from the present mosque (101, 175). The book would have surely benefitted from an alternative interpretation of the illustrations as symbolic (Grabar 1992).

I find the other literary sources George uses problematic. Along the monograph, he inserts three Arabic poems ascribed to poets from the 7th century. He provides the full texts as an appendix as well. He convincingly argues that poetry—even when appears in later texts—
could hardly be modified and therefore is authentic and reflects its time. However, I could not find in the book the contexts of these poems. My main difficulty with this method is the confidence George shows in their relevance to the Damascus Mosque that is never mentioned explicitly. So, although arguing for the multiple interpretations possible for poetry (212), he does not offer the reader words of caution for the poems he employs.

George is well aware of the critique on literary texts but also perceives most of them as holding a “kernel of truth” (e.g. 59, 72, 189). It seems that he accepts medieval texts when the authors: describe their own times, list their sources, or repeat narratives originated in different regions. In contrast, he interprets the narrative about relics in the mosque that belongs to John the Baptist as “invented” (102–109). One of the narratives he accepts relate to a “lost” inscription in the mosque (76). The alleged text declares the construction of the mosque by al-Walīd as well as the demolition of the former church. George considers the inscription an authentic source. Nonetheless, it should be read critically as any other narrative. Manuel Ocaña (1947) demonstrates, for example, the gap between a 9th-century physical inscription from Sevilla and its description by a 12th-century author.

According to George, the complex was initially a Roman temple which was converted into a church. Following the Arab conquests, the church shared its space with an early mosque. In 705, al-Walīd demolished both the church and early mosque. Then he built the mosque we know today. George argues that beside the infrastructure, Roman walls have survived. In addition, columns and capitals from the temple were reused in the mosque. From the Christian structure, several elements have survived: the excavated pavements, an octagonal baptistery later converted into the mosque’s treasury (bayt al-māl), and the basis of the south-western minaret. From the Umayyad period, the plan has survived as well as some walls, columns, mosaics, grille windows, and capitals. The author believes that the Damascus Mosque was built after several Umayyad mosques in Iraq. Its patrons thus tried to repeat a similar typology. Its construction served political purposes.

While I appreciate the attempt George makes to reconstruct the biography of the mosque, I also believe that his readings are often too optimistic. The narrative sources should be read much more critically, searching for the political contexts in which authors wrote and for literary topoi (e.g. the demolition of local sanctuaries). More comparisons to securely dated elements (e.g. 148, 168) might have provided a better dating to the “Roman” wall or the “Christian” pavement.

References

Grabar, O.

Ocaña Jiménez, M.