

Meditation on the Past and the Philosophy of Islamic Monuments

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Aleppo Citadel

قلعة حلب بسوريا من أواخر القرن الثاني عشر الميلادي

It is commonly accepted that cultural tourism is one of the most important branches within the tourist industry. The attractions that characterise this type of tourism bear ideal witness to the expression of culture and civilization both within and among the nations, and in the Islamic context in particular, help explain the philosophy and essence of Islam. Moreover, the Holy Qur'an contains many verses that stress the importance of meditation over, contemplation on and study of the monuments of former peoples and civilizations, enabling us to know more about their histories, and allowing us to delve deeper into their cultures.

Monuments as True Reflections of Civilization

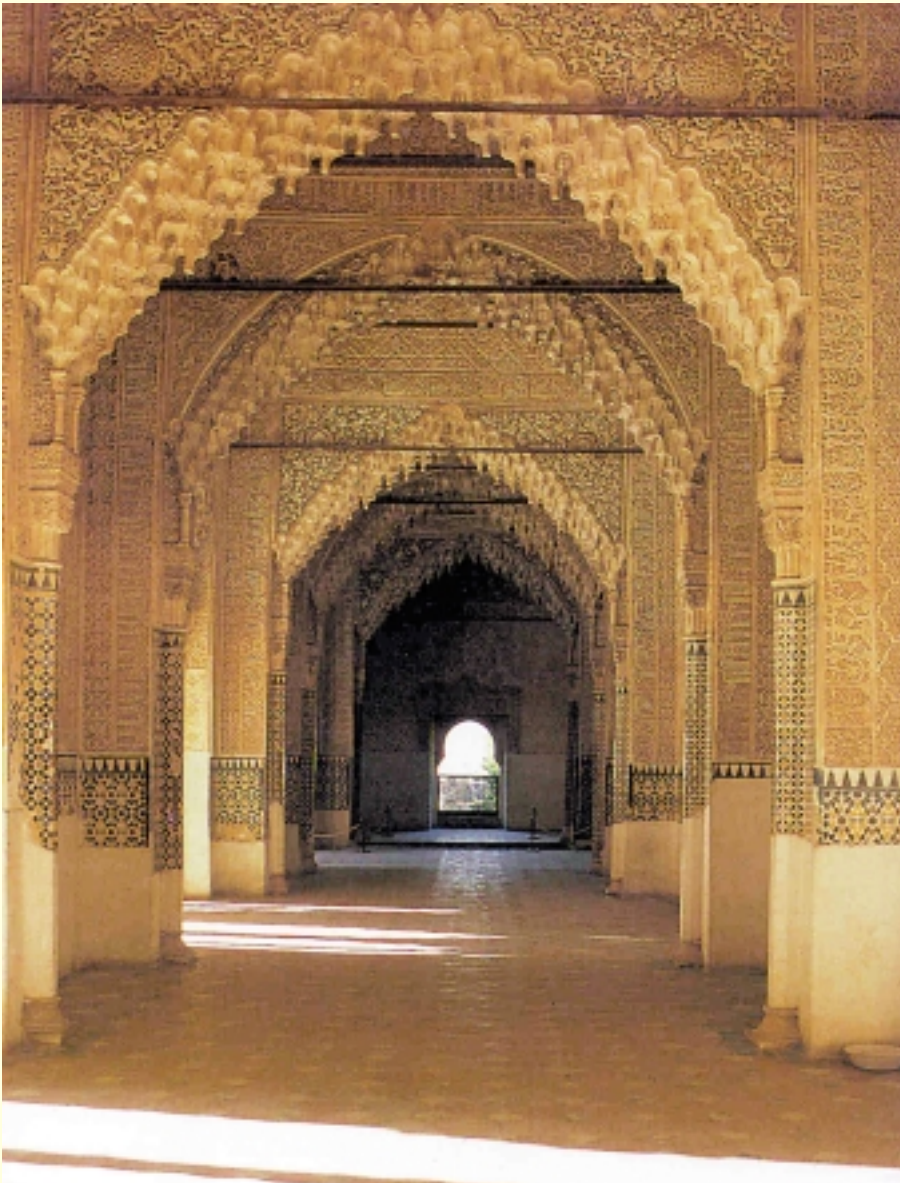
Discussions about civilization, whether specific or general, in relation to philosophy, existence or achievements that have advanced humanity, should always be supported by evidences proving the truthfulness and correctness of the available sources that are used to favour any particular opinion. Moreover, such sources should be effective not only in proving the existence of a civilization but also the role, whether historical, philosophical or cultural,

played by the civilization. This is evidenced by the monuments of a particular nation that still exist and which continue to reflect the civilization in vivid terms, as a living society with its own social interaction. Contemplation on the monuments of any age will no doubt lead us to discover the essence of the civilization to which such monuments belong, as well as deducing the philosophy of that age and those people. Thus, it may be argued that the monuments, which exist to this day, are a true reflection of the civilizations that gave birth to them.

Here, many questions are raised: Why were such monuments ever built? Were they constructed for the benefit of that society wherein they first existed? Did the people of that particular age build them willingly or by force? What were the profits or losses of building such monuments for the civilization and people in question? And finally, if we were to somehow travel back in time to that ancient age and live at that time, would we have accepted to participate in the construction of such a monument? If we did, would we have followed the same ➤



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Islamic Architecture

معمار إسلامي

measures according to which have stood the tests of time? The extent to which the monuments are a witness to the cultural curves of phases in the power and weakness of civilizations is also an entirely relevant question.

Based on the responses to such questions, we may assume that such monuments are either a true reflection of the spirit and essence of the civilization – for example, the pyramids of Egypt – to which they belong, or they are not.

The Holy Qur'an and the Traditions, or sayings (*Ahadiths*) of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (saws) taught us a great deal on how to analyze, interpret and explain

meanings. Many obvious references to former peoples and their monuments are in fact mentioned in the Qur'an. For example, many chapters deal with the annihilation of infidels and violent communities, whilst other parts refer to the limits of power, the ethics of responsible governance, or the lessons of contemplating over the fact that whilst monuments are left behind, the people who produced them have since passed away and no longer exist. In relation to Egypt, which is in many respects a model for the rise and fall of civilizations, the Pharaohs themselves have vanished but the pyramids (one of the seven wonders of

the ancient world), which are a unique style of architecture, both incomparable and enigmatic, have survived.

If we accept the role played by monuments in determining and specifying the importance of the role played by civilization generally in human history, we should perhaps also enquire about the role of the sciences unique to a particular civilization, and their impact on future generations as well as other civilizations. In this respect, do the monuments that remain, truly reflect and actually express or explain civilization? Indeed, we can say that some of the monuments that still exist are mysterious – we do not know how they were built, and their secrets remain hidden, such as the pyramids, tombs, temples and statues of the Pharaohs. There also exist phenomena that cannot be explained even today, such as the perpendicularity of the sun on the face of Ramses – apparent both on his birthday and on the day of his accession to the throne. Such ancient mysteries leave science and technology dumbfounded, as they are as yet incapable of solving their enigmas.

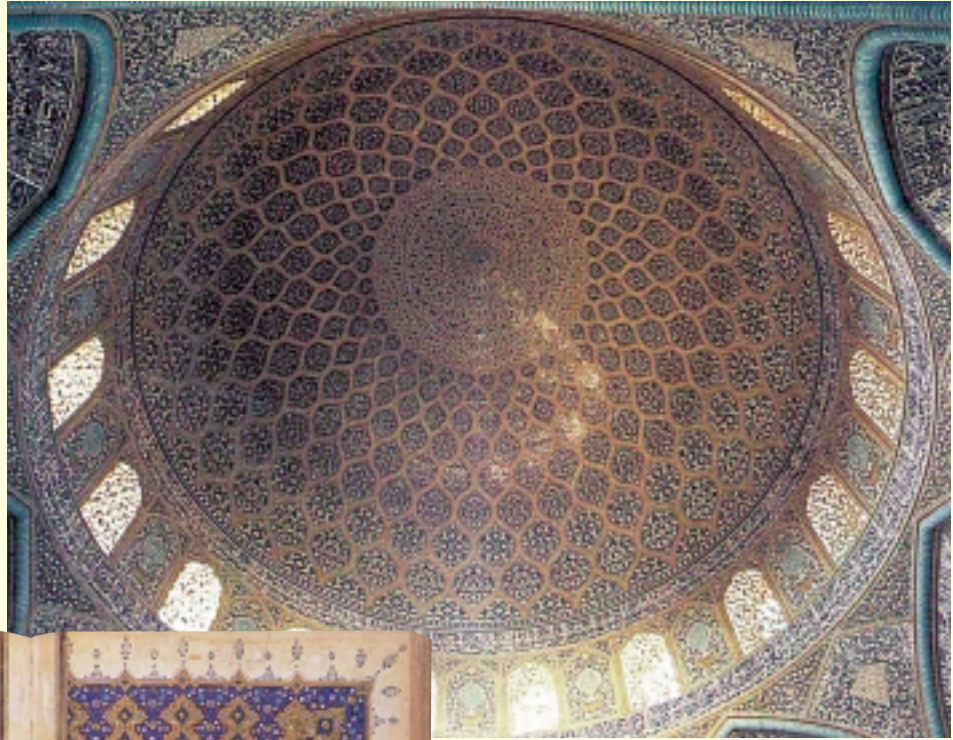
Monuments also attract attention due to the wonderful treasures they may accommodate, which are left behind and later unearthed. A salient example of which are the riches found in the pharaonic tombs of ancient Egypt, as well as Persian and Roman burial sites, which were entombed along with the rulers to whom they belonged. When we look at the magnificent palaces with their myriad of chambers and unique architectural styles, can we reasonably deduce that they belong to the rulers of great civilizations, while there appear to be no trace of other buildings? Were the palaces of rulers built to last forever? And what of the sheer beauty in every corner of these buildings? Did the common people of these civilizations enjoy their lives? Did they benefit and profit from their efforts, their input? Only the monuments that remain can tell us, although they are simply no more than quiet witnesses to an age long past.

Islamic monuments that remain today are witnesses to many great Islamic civilizations, and tell us more and more about the essence and philosophy of Islam, its peoples and civilization. They express the gentle spirit of Islamic civilization through evoking its beauty and wisdom, as well as its power, philosophy, lifestyles, creativeness and imagination, scientific and technological innovations, and plurality. The Islamic monuments ➤



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زخرفة قبة مسجد لطف الله من الداخل في أصفهان / القرن
السابع عشر الميلادي
Dome of the Lutfallah Mosque, Isfahanh 17th century



نسخة مخطوطة من القرآن الكريم من لاهور في القرن
السادس عشر الميلادي.
A Koran Manuscript, Lahore (16th century)



also represent and express the phases of power as well as weakness of Islamic civilizations. They express the influence of religious and spiritual belief, so deeply held among the peoples, in the various arts and styles of architecture.

The Influence of Religious and Spiritual Belief

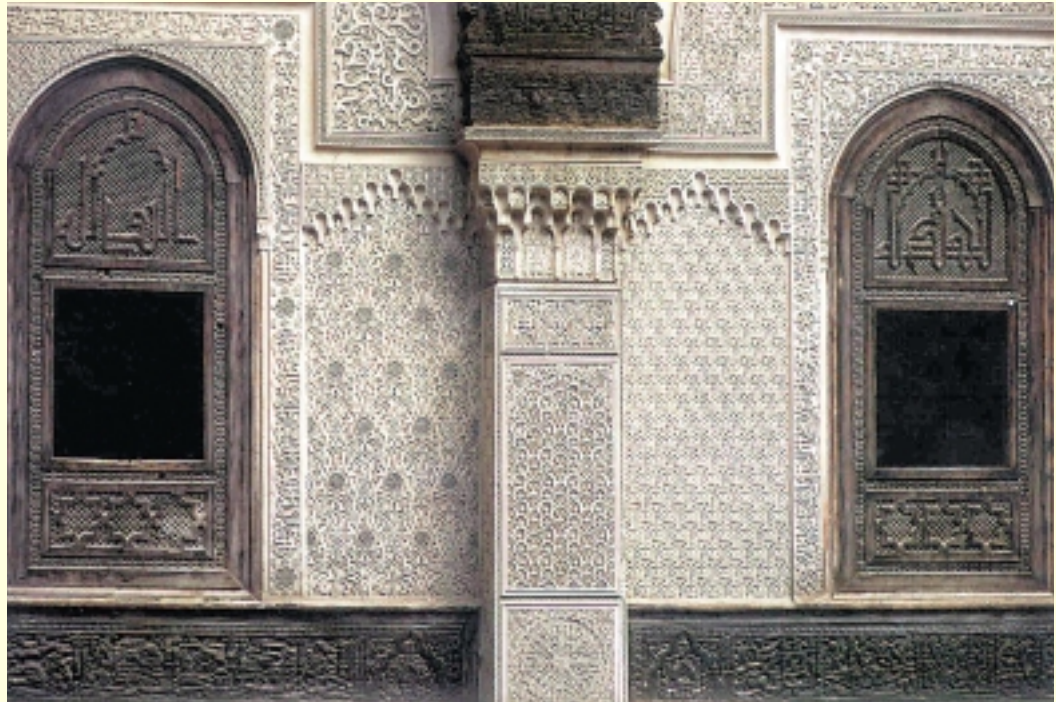
One of the most outstanding and obvious impacts of the influence of religious and spiritual beliefs vis-à-vis Islam was the destruction of polytheism and polytheistic paganism. The Muslim artist is compelled to

adhere to Islamic principles and rules, and thus avoids, whilst sculpting a statue for example, creating physical images of creatures in the form of idols. Thus, Islamic artists and sculptors have always taken into consideration the imperative of simplicity in producing their works of art according to the principles of beauty, avoiding depictions of nudity, for example. Instead, their creative talent was geared towards creating geometric figures and floral forms. This distinguished talent was both unique in its kind and indisputably incomparable. The revelation of the Holy Qur'an in Arabic has enriched the art of Arabic calligraphy

(with its various styles), a process, which has involved the creative talents of Muslims from all over the world. Indeed, Muslims have historically also shown great interest in the construction of mosques, which play an important religious role in the religious life of the followers of Islam. Islamic architecture in itself expresses and reflects the Muslims' interest and desire in establishing mosques. On the other hand, since Islam urges and impels Muslims towards scientific investigation and study, considering such to be a compulsory duty, Muslim artists have shown great dedication in researching and producing manuscripts, including translating and interpreting scientific texts from other civilizations and traditions, which have then been freely offered to the general public in order to benefit everybody. Indeed, Muslims were the first to establish free public schools, and developed the system of university cities when they established the idea of *Khalawy*, or separate rooms for each student. These rooms were originally built either above the mosque or next to it and were financed by "money from home" or else endowments by generous people of wealth. The charming architectural arts throughout the Muslim world expressively reflect the talents of a generous civilization. One example is the unique *Sabeel* which is a building based on a large well providing passers-by with free drinking water. These were established by the magnanimous donations of wealthy ➤

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مدرسة عطارين في فاس
Attarian Madrasa, (Fezh 14th century)



This somewhat selfish tradition no doubt deprived earthly society from benefiting from such things, and probably stunted development too. However, in the case of Islamic civilization, which was based on the belief of an eternal life after death, such materialism was not evident. Indeed, Islam both rejected and completely forbade such practices, of burying one's dead along with their possessions, just as it generally forbade the decorating of graves and cemeteries.

Muslims. The upper floor of these buildings was utilised by the poorer people and orphans for the purposes of learning to read and write, as well as to learn mathematics and recite the Holy Qur'an. The generosity of such good people also paid the wages of teachers as well as those people serving the *Sabeel*.

Unity (of the Islamic Arts)

It is straightforward for people that are interested in observing Islamic monuments to recognize the common features of the Islamic arts, in spite of the varying cultures and civilizations within which these monuments exist. Through such monuments, one can discern how most of these civilizations were invaded by other civilizations before Islam, and how the unity of the Islamic arts preserved the civilization per se. Thus, Islam has managed to unify both artists and builders throughout all the countries upon which Islam has had a decided impact.

Life on Earth

Many ancient civilizations believed in eternal life after death, a belief, which had a negative effect on life before death (in terms of prosperity, construction, development,

and so on)! Kings and elites would bury with them all that they owned (private properties and servants) because, as was believed, such material possessions could be useful in the afterlife of a second existence.

This somewhat selfish tradition no doubt deprived earthly society from benefiting from such things, and probably stunted development too. However, in the case of Islamic civilization, which was based on the belief of an eternal life after death, such materialism was not evident. Indeed, Islam both rejected and completely forbade such practices, of burying one's dead along with their possessions, just as it generally forbade the decorating of graves and cemeteries. On the contrary, Islam urges and impels peoples and societies to benefit from inheritance, which belongs to humanity as opposed to one particular person or society. Thus, Islamic civilization was based not only on fairness and justice, but on simplicity, wisdom and, perhaps most of all, love for humanity.

Phases of Power and Weakness

Phases of power and weakness in relation to civilizations might be described in terms

of a so-called "*Civilization Curve*". As mentioned, the Islamic monuments express the different phases of power and weakness of a civilization. For example, in some phases we see that the Islamic art emphasized a belief in Islamic principles. In other ages, there was a kind of deviation from the Islamic traditions and what one might term the Islamic spirit (such as porcelain figurines of dancers and musicians). In yet other ages, huge fortresses were built as symbols of power and at other times we find that the arts regain Islamic inspiration.

An outstanding example of Islamic civilization is that of the Fatimid dynasty, which witnessed alternating, flourishes in architectural styles and various kinds of arts. Every king at the time tried to establish a mosque greater and more attractive than those built by his predecessors, which of course far from represents the simplicity and tenderness of Islamic civilization. Yet, many other Islamic monuments from this and other periods do represent and express the existence of a grand civilization with notable characteristics such as faith, social etiquette, dignity, genius and skill. ■