

AN ANALYSIS OF THE EXPANSION
OF THE PROPHET'S MOSQUE
BY CALIPH 'UTHMAN B. 'AFFAN (D. 36 AH/656 CE)

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Abstract

This paper discusses the expansion of the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah by Caliph 'Uthman b. 'Affan. This paper finds that in terms of architectural morphology and structural configuration, the expansion was a historic and ground-breaking event. It set a new architectural standard in the nascent Muslim society, which was used as a benchmark for future trends and comparisons. This discussion revolves around two main thrusts: the expansion between a sentimental penchant and architectural pragmatism, and the expansion as an important phase in the evolution of the identity of Muslim architecture. These are dealt with after the main physical aspects of the expansion were described. This paper provides several essential lessons in their crude form on the significance and meaning of Muslim architecture, especially insofar as such perennial issues as form-function relationship, the role of spirituality, public participation, sustainable development and tradition-versus-modernity dialectics, are concerned. 'Uthman advocated such an architectural philosophy as was anchored in originality, progressivism and pragmatism, and in the process, remained faithful both to his personal spiritual impulses and the pressing requirements of the dynamic evolution of Muslim architecture and civilization.

Keywords: Caliph 'Uthman b. 'Affan; the Prophet's Mosque; expansion; Madinah

Introduction

Prophet Muhammad's Mosque in Madinah is the second most important mosque on earth. It comes second only to al-Masjid al-Haram in Makkah. As per a tradition (*hadith*) of the Prophet (ﷺ), performing a prayer in it is more valuable than doing so a thousand times elsewhere in ordinary mosques.¹

The Mosque was planned and built by the Prophet (ﷺ) himself as soon as he and his companions (*sahabah*) performed the *hijrah* (migration) from Makkah to Madinah in 622 CE. At first, the Mosque was just an enclosure. Its walls, made of mud brick and raised over stone foundations, enclosed in a roofless and unpaved area of approximately 1,200 square meters. There was no roofed section. Three entrances pierced the southern, eastern and western walls. The northern side was the *qiblah* (prayer direction) wall facing al-Masjid al-Aqsa in Jerusalem. After 16 or 17 months following the *hijrah*, the *qiblah* was redirected from al-Masjid al-Aqsa to al-Masjid al-Haram, and so, the simple form of the Prophet's Mosque responded accordingly: the entrance in the southern wall was bricked up since it started to function at once as a new *qiblah* side, while a new entrance was perforated in the northern wall which heretofore functioned as the *qiblah* side.²

The Prophet's Mosque was extremely simple because its initial functions were correspondingly simple. However, as the functions of the Mosque -- which since its inception was meant to operate as a community development center, setting a precedent for all future mosques -- were multiplying as well as intensifying, so did the form of the Mosque respond in a like manner. In the end, at the time of the Prophet's death, the Prophet's Mosque became a dynamic multifunctional community center with its relatively complex form a far cry from what it was ten years earlier. Such was expected, though,

¹ Muhammad b. Isma'īl Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1981), *Hadith* No. 282.

² K.A.C. Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1989), 4. Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function and Meaning*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 39.

on account of a fundamental architectural rule that the form of a building should follow and correspond to its function, enfolding, facilitating and promoting it.

The Prophet's Mosque had numerous religious and social roles and functions. The Mosque thus was a centre for religious activities, a learning centre, the seat of the Prophet's government, a welfare and charity centre, a detention and rehabilitation centre, a place for medical treatment and nursing, a place for certain leisure activities.³ The following is a standard description of the form of the Prophet's Mosque at the time of the Prophet's demise as given by most scholars: "In the construction method a stone foundation was laid to a depth of three cubits (about 1.50 meters). On top of that adobe, walls 75 cm. wide were built. The Mosque was shaded by erect palm trunks and wooden cross beams covered with palm leaves and stalks. On the *qiblah* direction, there were three porticoes; each portico had six pillars (palm trunks). On the rear part of the Mosque, there was a shade, where the homeless *muhajireen* (migrants) took refuge. The height of the roof of the Mosque was equal to the height of a man (with his hands raised)".⁴ About three years before his death, i.e., in the 7th year of the *hijrah* (629 CE), the Prophet (ﷺ), while duly answering the needs created by the rapid increase of worshippers as well as the rapid expansion of Madinah as a prototype Muslim city-state, significantly enlarged the Mosque, making it measure approximately 2,500 square meters.⁵

When the Prophet (ﷺ) died in 10 AH/631 CE, the first Muslim Caliph, Abu Bakr (d. 13 AH/634 CE), neither altered nor enlarged the Prophet's Mosque. The most that has been said about Abu Bakr's involvement is that he replaced the Mosque's old and decaying palm trunk pillars with new ones.

³ Spahic Omer, *The Prophet Muhammad and Urbanization of Madinah*, (Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia, 2013), 68.

⁴ Abbas Hamid, *Story of the Great Expansion*, (Jeddah: Saudi Bin Ladin Group, 1996), 226. 'Ali b. Ahmad Al-Samahudi, *Wafa' al-Wafa*, (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1997), vol. 2, 481., Sulayman Abu Dawud b. al-Ash'ath, *Sunan Abu Dawud*, (Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 1997), *Hadith* No. 451. Muhammad b. Isma'il Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, *Hadith* No. 436.

⁵ Al-Samahudi, *Wafa' al-Wafa*, 338.

However, when Abu Bakr was succeeded by ‘Umar b. al-Khattab (d. 24 AH/644 CE) as the second Caliph, the first *de facto* expansion of the Mosque came to pass. As a result, the total area of the Mosque measured about 70 meters from south to north and about 60 meters from east to west, that is, more or less 4,200 square meters.⁶ Just as during the previous eras, the new walls were of mud bricks of about 5.3 meters in height. Again, palm trunks, which in height were equivalent to the walls, were used for pillars, and palm fronds were used to cover the ceiling.⁷ The floor was covered with matting of inter-woven palm fronds after it had been graded and covered with soft pebbles where necessary. In addition, although its introduction dates back to the Prophet’s era, the use of incense to perfume the atmosphere in the Mosque on Fridays and during the holy month of Ramadan, was maintained.⁸ ‘Umar was the first to provide lights for the Prophet’s Mosque.⁹

Notwithstanding ‘Umar’s Mosque rebuilding and enlarging activities, the structure was yet to undergo any substantial alteration in terms of its building style, building materials and overall outward appearance. Nothing fundamentally changed from the Mosque’s inauguration till the end of ‘Umar’s tenure as Caliph, a period of about 24 years. However, when ‘Uthman b. ‘Affan succeeded ‘Umar as the third rightly-guided Caliph (*al-khulafa’ al-rashidun*) the waiting soon came to an end. Five years into his tenure as Caliph, ‘Uthman embarked on a revolutionary rebuilding and expansion of the Prophet’s Mosque, breaking away from virtually all the earlier major architectural conventions and norms insofar as the building’s form was concerned.

This paper critically analyzes the undertaking of the second expansion of the Prophet’s Mosque at the hands of Caliph ‘Uthman, placing it within the context of the evolution of the identity of both

⁶ Sultan Ghalib Al-Qu’aiti, *The Holy Cities, the Pilgrimage and the World of Islam*, (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2007), 56.

⁷ Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abu Dawud, Hadith* No. 451. Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith* No. 436.

⁸ Sultan Ghalib, *The Holy Cities*, 56.

⁹ Masud-ul-Hasan, *Hadrat ‘Umar Farooq*, (Lahore: Islamic Publications Ltd, 1982), 128.

Muslim architecture and Muslim civilization. After a presentation of the main physical features of the expansion, the discussion of the salient points will proceed as two-pronged, concentrating on (1) the expansion between a sentimental penchant and architectural pragmatism and (2) the expansion as an important phase in the evolution of the identity of Muslim architecture.

The Main Physical Features of the Expansion

The expansion of the Prophet's Mosque by Caliph 'Uthman started in the third month, *Rabi' al-awwal*, of the year 29 AH/ 649 CE. Having lasted ten months, it was completed in the first month, *Muharram*, of the year 30 AH/650 CE.¹⁰ The undertaking was regarded as an outstandingly consequential event in the history of Muslim architecture and civilization. In essence, it was a continuation of the Prophet's high community-building standards. Thus, some of the most authoritative anthologies of the Prophet's tradition (*hadith* or *sunnah*), such as *Sahih* al-Bukhari and *Sunan* Abi Dawud, recorded it. That the details of 'Uthman's expansion were presented in the same accounts as featured in the way the Prophet (ﷺ) built and maintained the Mosque – as well as with the details of the expansion of 'Umar b. al-Khattab – testify that what 'Uthman did was utterly in accordance with the divinely established civilization development paradigms. Moreover, that the account in question was recorded in the section or book (*kitab*) on prayer (*salah*) by al-Bukhari (d. 256 AH/870 CE), and Abu Dawud (d. 276 AH/889 CE) in the book on prayer (*salah*), but the latter in a chapter on "The Reward of Building Mosques". This demonstrates how important the subject matter was, especially in the beginning when a recognizable Muslim architectural identity was yet to be established, and how much spiritual as well as civilizational meaning and substance it contained.

For example, al-Bukhari reported in his *Sahih* from a companion of the Prophet (ﷺ), 'Abdullah b. 'Umar (d. 74 AH/693 CE): "In the lifetime of Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) the Mosque was built of adobes, its roof of the leaves of date-palms and its pillars of the stems of date-palms. Abu Bakr did not alter it. 'Umar expanded it on

¹⁰ Al-Samahudi, *Wafa' al-Wafa*, vol. 2, 502.