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Conferenze ISMEO

2

Four Lectures
on the ISMEO Activities
in the Masjed-e Jom‘e of Isfahan

edited by Bruno Genito



ISMEO

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TUTTI I DIRITTI RISERVATI

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PREFACE

Located in the historic centre of Esfahan, the Masjed-e Jom'è ('Friday Mosque') can be seen as a stunning illustration of the evolution of mosque architecture over twelve centuries, starting in 841 CE, and now is one of the major Iranian sites inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage List.

The Italian restoration activities carried out in Esfahan during the 1970s were planned and organised in collaboration with the Service for the Restoration and Preservation of the Historical Monuments of Iran (now Iranian Cultural Handicraft and Tourism Heritage Organisation) (ICHTHO) and the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (IsMEO, afterwards IsIAO). The restoration activities headed by Arch. Prof. Eugenio Galdieri and the excavation activities headed by Prof. Umberto Scerrato in the Friday Mosque were aimed in particular at identifying the earlier constructional phases of the building: amongst them the Abbasid, Buyid and Saljuq.

Historical circumstances did not allow for long time (1979-1998) any Italian team to continue working at Esfahan. Only between 1999 and 2002 an Italian IsIAO team, under the invitation of ICHO (now ICHTHO) and with the direction of the late Prof. U. Scerrato went back to Esfahan, starting again the work in the Mosque jointly with the Iranian colleagues.

Many years after the end of the actual excavations, a joint Iranian-Italian Project named ADAMJI (A.rchaeological D.igital A.rchive M.asjed-e J.om'è I.sfahan) has been aimed at providing a gradual transformation of the whole set of original data and information (written, graphic, photographic etc.) in a digital archive. The Italian/Iranian Project jointly coordinated and directed from the Iranian

side by Dr. Faribah Saeidi Anaraki and from the Italian side by Prof. Bruno Genito, started in 2003 and ended in 2010.

A number of Institutions offered their precious contribution to the realization of the joint work, the Italian Ministero degli Affari Esteri (MAECI), the Sazeman-e Miras Farhangi Sanaye Dasti va Gardeshgari, Tehran, the Sazeman-e Miras Farhangi Sanaye Dasti va Gardeshgari, Esfahan and the Iranian Centre for the Archaeological Research (ICAR), the Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, Rome (IsIAO), the Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale (UniOr).

The idea of realizing a volume to illustrate to a wide public the activities of the Project was first imagined by Ambassador Alberto Bradanini who during the celebration day of 25th February 2010 suggested to publish in the shortest time a collection of papers related to the scientific work done in the Masjed-e Jom'e. IsIAO decided to do that, making use of some papers (never published) devoted to an exhibition held in the National Museum of Iran, Tehran in December 2005, and adding further contributions in order to have a more complete collection of subjects.

The volume, Adamji Project. From the Excavation (1972-1978) to the Archive (2003-2010) in the Masjed-e Jom'e, Isfahan, Tehran 2010, was edited jointly by Faribah Saeidi Anaraki and Bruno Genito, printed in Tehran and jointly published by the Italian Embassy, Tehran, ICHTHO and IsIAO.

Since many circumstances hampered a wide circulation of the book both in Iran and in Italy, ISMEO decided to republish some of the essays (originarily conceived as public lectures), mostly in an updated version, in his series "Conferenze ISMEO," devoted to the dissemination of high level scientific knowledge in Italy, also in the hope to contribute to the knowledge of this monument without equal in all the world.

ADRIANO V. ROSSI
President, ISMEO

ACTIVITIES IN THE MASJED-E JOM‘E, ISFAHAN

BRUNO GENITO

The Restoration Activity 1970-1972

The Italian restoration activities carried out in Isfahan during the 1970s of last century were planned and organised in collaboration with the *Service for the Restoration and Preservation of the Historical Monuments of Iran* (now *Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicraft and Tourism Organisation*) (ICHTHO) and the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (IsMEO, then IsIAO, now ISMEO).¹ The activity headed by Arch. Prof. E. Galdieri (2010: 49-60) in the Friday Mosque was aimed in particular at identifying the earlier constructional phases of the building: amongst them the Abbasid, Buyid and Saljuq. The previous works and studies in the monument made by outstanding scholars such as Gabriel (1935), Sauvaget (1938), Schroeder (1938-39), Godard (1936a, 1936b, 1937, 1938, 1948) and others in the 1930s and 1940s, had, with different touches, allowed one to have a general historical architectonic outline of the building. The Italian team of IsMEO in Iran in the Masjed-e Jom‘e in Isfahan (Galdieri 1972, 1973, 1984) succeeded in clarifying, on an architectural basis, the following significant points:

– 1. The material consistency of an Abbasid Mosque (possibly of the time of the caliphate of al-Mu‘tasim 840-841) through the identification of a large part of the mud brick wall just running along the whole perime-

¹ It started with a restoration and conservation activity in the main buildings of the city (Ali Qapù, Chehel-Sutun, Hasht-Behesht).

ter of the monument and located behind the prayer hall at south and the remained three *ivans*; the consequent identification as well of a pre-Saljuq mosque of the classic “congregational” or hypostyle type (Fig. 1).

– 2. The narrowing of the court during the Buyid period (979-980) with the identification of an additional arcade, built around in the so called “*brick style*” (Fig. 2).

–3. The existence of two different Saljuq phases (1086-89; 1120-1121) evidencing clearly the function of the two domes: the southern, erected by Nizam al-Mulk in 1086-1087 (Giunta, this volume) (Fig. 3) and the northern, by Taj al-Mulk in 1088-1089, both ministers of Malik Shah (*ibid.*). They were built up as isolated kiosks, probably celebrative in character, before being completely integrated in their structure with the new conception of the four-*ivan* mosque (in 1120-1121), typical Iranian.

– 4. The identification of a truncated basis of a “Sasanian” column, under the pavilion of Nizam al-Mulk (area 190), a part of a brick column decorated in stucco (Fig. 4).

These results together with the information by ancient sources as Abu Nu‘aym (Dederig, ed., 1931; cf. Fontana 2010) about the existence of a village in the area of the mosque, led IsMEO to start an archaeological research under the *qibla* area; in particular under the great domed pavilion and, then, in the western part of the prayer hall.

Thus, the archaeological project was aimed at carrying out trial-trenches on the monument and to verify the static condition of the foundations of the building, in order to try to complete the historical, archaeological and artistic knowledge of the monument in itself and of the area on which it stands.

*The Archaeological Activities 1972-1978: an Outline*²

At the end of 1972 the restoration in the Masjed-e Jom‘e was followed by an archaeological activity carried out by IsMEO, Naples and

² In this occasion for the archaeological description I follow almost completely the contents of the short reports of Scerrato, already published (1972, 1973, 1974, 1975,

Rome Universities's teams, headed by Prof. U. Scerrato continuing up to 1978. During those 7 years, trial-trenches and extensive excavations were opened on an ample part of the areas of the Mosque which, compared to the extension of the entire monument (ca. 17.200 sq. m [1.72 ha] about 165 m long × about 142 m wide), covers almost 12 % (about 2100 sq. m) (Fig. 5) (Scerrato 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 2001).

The Mosque, as it is well known, is one of the most important and interesting Islamic buildings of Iran both for its undoubtedly great historical importance (from the Abbasid, Buyid, Saljuq, Ilkhanid, Muzaffarid, Timurid, Safavid and Qajar times), and for other numerous cultural, topographical and archaeological aspects. During the extensive excavations a very important contribution has been given to the historical reconstruction of the different constructional phases of the Mosque.

The presence under the area of the sanctuary (area 190) of a possibly important construction, marked by a column decorated in stucco which had already been identified and dated to the Sasanian period, leads one to think that, most probably, the courtyard of the mosque corresponded to a formerly-existing open space. The excavation has ascertained that the column is certainly *in situ* and that its base rests directly on the foundation plinth. Thus, one factor of considerable interest has come to light:

neither the base nor the foundation of the supposed column of the Arab network, corresponding to I 1 in Galdieri's scheme (Fig. 6), were found in the place of the column, but only a huge fall of unbaked bricks.

The stump of this column, stands on a massive foundation. After having removed part of the northern balk, at an inter axial distance of about 4.15 m one came across a very solid foundation which probably belonged to a similar pillar (Fig. 7). These possible two pillars must have formed part of a building, whose traces of the floor have also

1976, 1977, 1978) in order both to respect the results achieved at the time of the excavations, and to very warmly remember his work. Of course the reader should take in consideration that a complete and updated revision of those results is now under scrutiny by the working team of the ADAMJI Project and will be hopefully shortly published as well.

been recovered. What is missing of this floor, originally tiled, is the mortar. The floor was laid obliquely with regard to the axis of the present mosque (that is to say, it followed the axis of the two pillars), and took up at least the whole central part of the domed hall area; nonetheless anything was found which could be interpreted as the limit of a building or of a room.

The excavation in the northern area was also most encouraging, enabling to ascertain that the round columns which were out of plumb owe their condition to the precariousness of the foundations. These are not very solid and they do not rest on virgin soil. In fact the mosque, as expected, was built on mud-brick structures obliquely oriented (north-east-south-west) with respect to the axis of the *qibla*. It was also possible to ascertain that the foundations rest on fallen remains or on insufficiently solid ground, and never on the natural soil (Fig. 8). This explains how the round columns came to move in every direction and why they are consequently so far out of plumb—not because of possible earth movements, but mainly because of the poor and precarious state of the foundations; for that reason different underground works were made on the construction of a brick network to connect the foundations of the pillars (Fig. 9). This has served the double purpose of achieving an initial phase of consolidation work on the mosque structures and of making the exploration of the deeper archaeological levels easier and safer.

The northern structures in mud brick which were revealed in almost all the places in which trial-excavations were carried out, seem to be attributable in part to the Sasanian period and were built upon and reused, even quite extensively, in the Islamic, and must belong to the ancient town of Yahudiyeh.

Still to the north, in the so-called “Muzaffarid extension,” a construction of considerable interest has been revealed—perhaps a small palace with central courtyard and *ivan* (Fig. 10). This possible building presents a combination of remarkable aspects which are both reminiscent of the Sasanian period, and recall, on the basis of technical grounds, the choice of decorative motifs closely proto-Islamic. Without any doubts, chronologically the building is earlier than the Abbasid mosque. The evidence is given by the walls of the precinct which are in mud brick and which, till now we have good reason to believe belong to the first third of the 10th century since some of these walls have

been incorporated in the large perimeter wall which marks the northern boundary of the mosque. In this area the extent of the trial-trenches has ascertained that the area was occupied by constructions belonging to a period before the Muzaffarids. In a period temporarily dating as between the 11th and 12th centuries the area was occupied, at least on three sides, by what seems to be a portico resting on round, baked-brick pillars (Fig. 11), i.e. smaller than those of the mosque itself. These pillars are not really in alignment with the corresponding in the mosque and are gradually but perceptibly staggered from west to east with respect to the present square. It is very unlikely that the square pillars can be attributed to the Muzaffarid period. In the central area of this zone, which was probably originally open, a large fragment of paving composed of large baked bricks ($47.5 \times 47.5 \times 6$ cm in size) has been found in alignment with the *mihrab*. We believe that they belong to the Saljuq period and that are related to the original level of the flooring of the domed pavilion of Taj al-Mulk (area 476).

The excavations carried out inside the pavilion of Taj al-Mulk 476 in the area to the extreme north, and in the passage area 474 have shown that, from the very beginning, it was definitely closed on two sides. The good foundation work effected in limestone (Fig. 12) is continuous where there is solid masonry, i.e. to the north and west, and is deliberately interrupted where there are the large openings. The air trials carried out by Galdieri had shown that the two main façades of the pavilion presented niches with sculptured inserts and inscriptions (i.e. the south and east façades, as well as the inner façade of the Saljuq entrance, area 374, bearing a Muzaffarid inscription on the outside). Also the foundations of the above entrance structure are made of stone similar to that of the pavilion 486.

Found below the original Saljuq floor level of the Taj al-Mulk pavilion there was a filling containing numerous potsherds of artificial-paste, Saljuq-type pottery and other having painted decoration under lead glaze, the latter being of rather inferior quality. The picture offered by this pottery is basically comparable to that found in the pottery contained in the fillings of the foundation pits dug in the domed room of Nizam al-Mulk. As a variant, in the finds made under the floor of the pavilion of Taj al-Mulk there is a great abundance of monochrome glazed green pottery with rather peculiar shapes, mostly small basins, pots and jugs. Also to be reported there are a few frag-

ments of Min' ai-type pottery of good workmanship coming, however, from an area outside the mosque perimeter (external 178) and much disturbed (Fig. 13).

The trench dug across the courtyard (Fig. 14), 2.50 m wide at the beginning, follows a segmented path in order to avoid the central area occupied by the large square pool. Unfortunately the installation, 90 or so years ago of a flooring composed of large grey limestone slabs which covers the courtyard, except for the two platforms extending into the courtyard in a north-south direction, has cut through. Thus, all the possible connections between the mosque and the courtyard levels were irretrievably destroyed. In the trials effected in the courtyard traces of the pre-existing mosques were not found. It will be remembered that al-Mafarrukhi (Tehrani, ed., 1933), writing during the period of Malik Shah, states that the Masjed-e Jom'e of Yahudiyeh was founded by the Arabs of Tiran in the third quarter of the 8th century, rebuilt during the caliphate of al-Mu'tasim in 840-841 and then extended under the caliphate of al-Mukhtadir (908-932). According to this information the remains of both the first and the second mosque, the latter presumably larger than the first, could be traced, while the mosque corresponding to the time of al-Mukhtadir would coincide with the one having the mud-brick perimeter wall. Without excluding that these events in the history of the monument may be, to some extent, confirmed, the information coming from another important source, at least half a century earlier than al-Mafarrukhi (quoted), i.e. Abu Nu'aym of Isfahan (quoted) (948/1038), must also be taken into the due consideration. The data from Abu Nu'aym roughly agree with those from al-Mafarrukhi. This leads one to consider that the Arab-type mosque reached the limits today recognized in the mud-brick perimeter as early as the caliphate of al-Mu'tasim in 840-841, while the work carried out under al-Mukhtadir, for which the year is given (908), refers mainly to extensions to annexes lying outside the proper mosque. The style of the stuccoes found *in situ* in the north area (Fig. 15) is not in contradiction with this interpretation.

It is interesting to note that in the courtyard a fragment of paving consisting of large, one-cubit bricks ($52 \times 52 \times 6$ cm) has been found, and could belong to the Saljuq time (Fig. 16). As expected, the courtyard area or at least its central portion, must have been relatively free from constructions even in the previous period.

In a trial trench, dug at the foot of the northern end of the eastern *ivan* (area 129) in order to ascertain the state of the foundations, a group of small kilns, one of which, probably dating back to the late Sasanian period, was found, relatively well preserved (Fig. 17). Of considerable interest was a small jar embedded in the floor, connected to one of the kilns and containing the bones of a boy, some of which were still anatomically connected.

Amongst other important results, the activity has put definitely in evidence that the mosque was first built up on an already inhabited area,³ probably in 772, i.e. at the end of al-Mansur (754-772 CE) caliphate.

The wall discovered in the area of the sanctuary and obliquely oriented, belongs to this first mosque differently with regard to the plan of Saljuq time (Galdieri 2002); it presents polychrome stucco decoration comparable with those of the Masjed-e Jom'eh of Nayin and with those discovered in the Siraf mosque. The excavation has given evidence for about the half of the *qibli* of this first mosque, certainly one of the earliest datable, among those up to now known in Iran. The wall in mud bricks was constituted by few rows and contained a square *mihrab*, not very much distant from the modern; in the western side of the prayer hall the *qibli* is kept, at least, in other two areas 204 and 205 for an height of about m 0.90 and goes, then, in the areas 218-219 (Fig. 18).

According to Abu Nu'aym, this could be the original mosque near Yahudiyeh in 156 H./772 CE, i.e. towards the end of al-Mansur caliphate. Its *mihrab* is of the square-niche type and links up with the stump of the wall running slantwise which appeared previously in the eastern part of the domed hall and which could belong to the primitive mosque (Fig. 19)⁴. This discrepancy towards southeast of this wing of

³ Probably it is the famous village of Yahudiyeh, contiguous to that of Yavan, information derived by the historian Abu Nu'aym (quoted) (948-1038) who also locates at Isfahan the building of the mosque in the place of an old Nestorian church; by other sources it is known that in the Isfahan area, a bishop seat existed already in 430 CE.

⁴ A new hypothesis can be advanced now to the light of recent documentation. The Abbasid mosque found in the excavation could be built in 767 CE by governor Ayyūb ibn Ziyād, when he established the new miṣr of Yahūdiyya. This mosque was built in the village of Kušīnān, along the southern border of the latter, contiguous with the old Jewish suburb of yahūdiyya, of pre-Islamic origin and positioned close to the sūq. It was in the

the *qibli* was partly destroyed by the foundation of the back wall of the large domed hall and of the mosque. On the contrary, it was possible to follow the direction of the western part of the *qibli*. It is in a fairly bad shape inside the domed hall, where it was damaged, amongst other things by a foundation trench dug for a pillar that was never erected and that we think is a trace of an early Saljuq project to embellish the *mihrab*. Furthermore, it is clear that the wall is interrupted by the large foundation of the western poly-lobed pillars of the domed hall. However, we have been able to follow it right up to where the southwest corner can be made out, in the adjacent prayer room. Here too the wall has been damaged wherever it came near the foundation trenches of the pillars of the mosque built in 840-841 or where a foundation has gone right through it. So far we have not been able to identify anything that can be attributed to the roof supports, but it is evident that it must have been a hypostyle mosque.

This portion of the *qibli*, though cut off by the massive foundations of the pillars of the second Abbasid mosque of the epoch of al-Mu'tasim and by later interventions, was well visible also in its south-western corner. Considering the location of the *mihrab* at the centre of the *qibli*, one can calculate a width of 52-55 m about (i.e. 100 cubits) and an approximate general dimension for the entire monument of 55 × 75/80 m (Arioli 1979; Fontana 2010; 2014). Originally the whole pavement was in clay and gypsum, as it is evident in the area in front of the *mihrab*, while, in correspondence of the western portion of the *qibli* wall, in the areas 204-205 and 218-219, later there was a brick floor, whose remains are evident in the plaster (Fig. 20).

The *qibli* presented a rich moulded stucco decoration, whose few traces remained in the *mihrab* niche. Its lower part has a small tendril

occasion of this tamšīr that the former suburb was transformed into a real town, as a result of the union of several villages. The town preserved the name of the Jewish suburb, Yahūdiyya, because of the Jewish economic and numeric prevalence, initially at least, and was the seat of the 'Abbasid governor. Instead, the Mašğid-i Ğum'a built in 772 CE by the Banū Tamīm certainly was at Ṭihrān (bi-Ṭihrān, in Abū Nu'aym), a village far from the suburb of yahūdiyya, most likely the homonymous place located 4 km north-west of the nowadays Mašğid-i Ğum'a in Işfahān (F. Duva, *Işfahān: fonti e urbanistica tra VIII e X secolo* (con particolare riferimento alla Moschea del Venerdì). MA Thesis, Sapienza University of Rome 2014-15, especially quoting Abū Nu'aym, Māfaruḥī, Abū'l-Fida).

motif, with thin grape leaves, originating from a sort of a central tree's trunk; on the right side there are remains of a panel decorated by an interwoven band of roundels delimitating small grape leaves.

Very different is the style of the stucco sculptured decoration in sectors 204-205, kept for at least a height of m 0.90. Here the decoration is divided in panels, 52 cm wide, about 1 cubit, in the lower part delimited by a continuous band of perforated pearls, constituting a frame with a very high base, decorated by medallions, enclosing vacuolated leaves distributed in a lozenge way. Each panel is decorated by large-scale vegetal motives, representing small trees, groups of grape and acanthus leaves, realized in their stylization, both to symmetric heraldic scheme, and naturalistic way. Very significant is the particular style of some stylized leaves. This strong and secure style represents the fine and sensible expression of an artistic craftsmanship of an outstanding quality and gives examples of fundamental interest for the art production in Iran (9th century) in pre-Samarra period, the great, though ephemeral and luxurious capital of the Abbasid Caliphs founded in 836 by al-Mu'tasim and abandoned about 50 years later. Amongst those stuccoes documented up to now, these found at the Masjed-e Jom'e of Isfahan constitute a rare, though perhaps not unique evidence of the stucco art in the Iranian territory and are of great importance also for the stucco art in the Syro-Mesopotamian area, relatively less known as far as between the half of the 8th century and Samarra periods are concerned. Most part of the stuccoes models are clearly referable to a Syro-Alexandrine style tradition, but it is evident an early cultural contact with the Iranian Sasanian sensibility. Thus, whether one can easily recognise the Alexandrine iconography within the small folded tree under the weight of its leaves, or the grape with its interwoven branches, the stylization and composition are Sasanian as it is evident in the symmetric composition with the grape or *acanthus* leaves. Not only the naturalistic leaves are accompanying by with stylized and conventional forms but, in some cases, and this is particularly significant, the naturalistic aspect is easily combined with strictly abstract forms. It is useful to compare the panels of the *qibli* at Isfahan with the stucco art of the second half of the 8th century, found in a Raqqa palace and datable to the time of Harun al-Rashid. On the other hand it is also natural to make comparisons with the stucco decorations of the late Omayyad architecture, and with those

of Khirbet al-Mafjar or Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi, which could be easily explained with the diffusion of the Sasanian interpretation of the vegetal Alexandrine motives, through the stucco art, basically belonging to the Iranian artistic culture.

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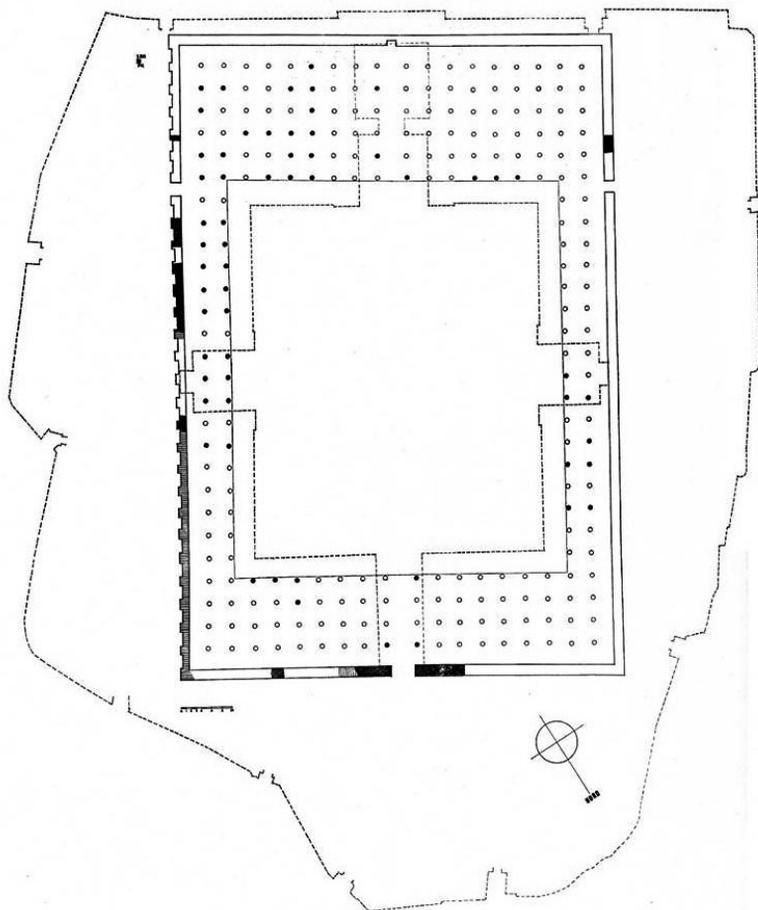


Fig. 1 – Points and areas where the mud-brick wall of the 840-841 Abbasid mosque came to light. After Galdieri 1972.

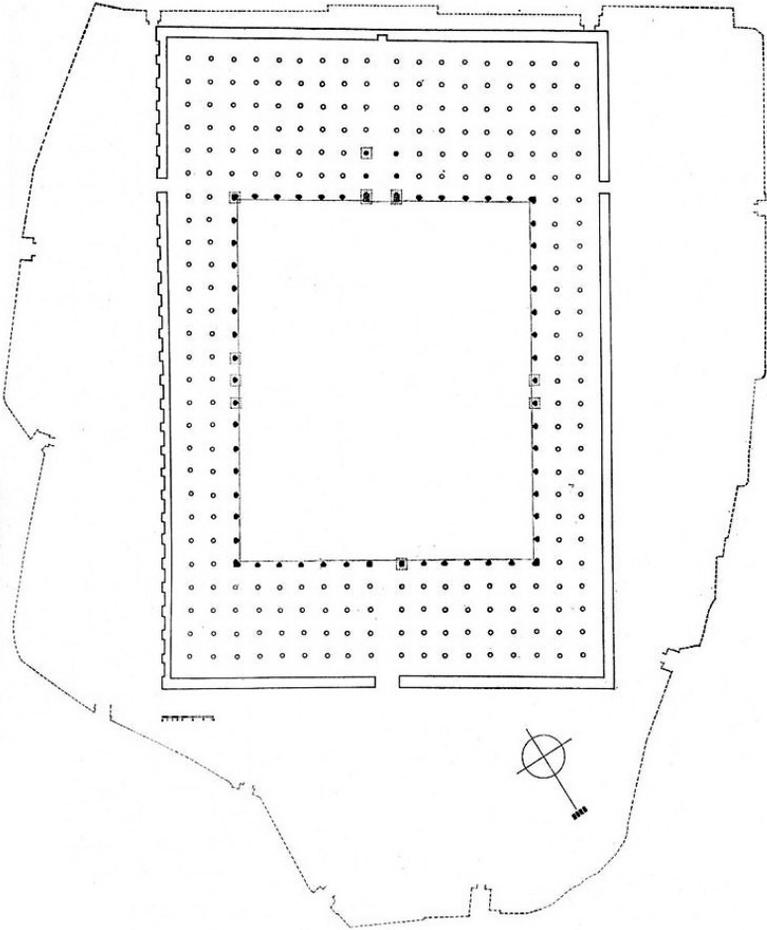
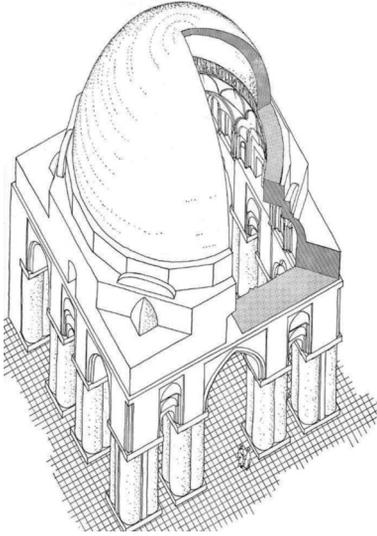


Fig. 2 – Buyid enlargement of the 10th century. After Galdieri 1972.

Fig. 3 – The situational position of the domed hall 190. After Galdieri 1972.



a



b



c

Fig. 4a-c – Sasanian-style column.
After Galdieri 1972.

THE AREA OF ITALIAN EXCAVATIONS

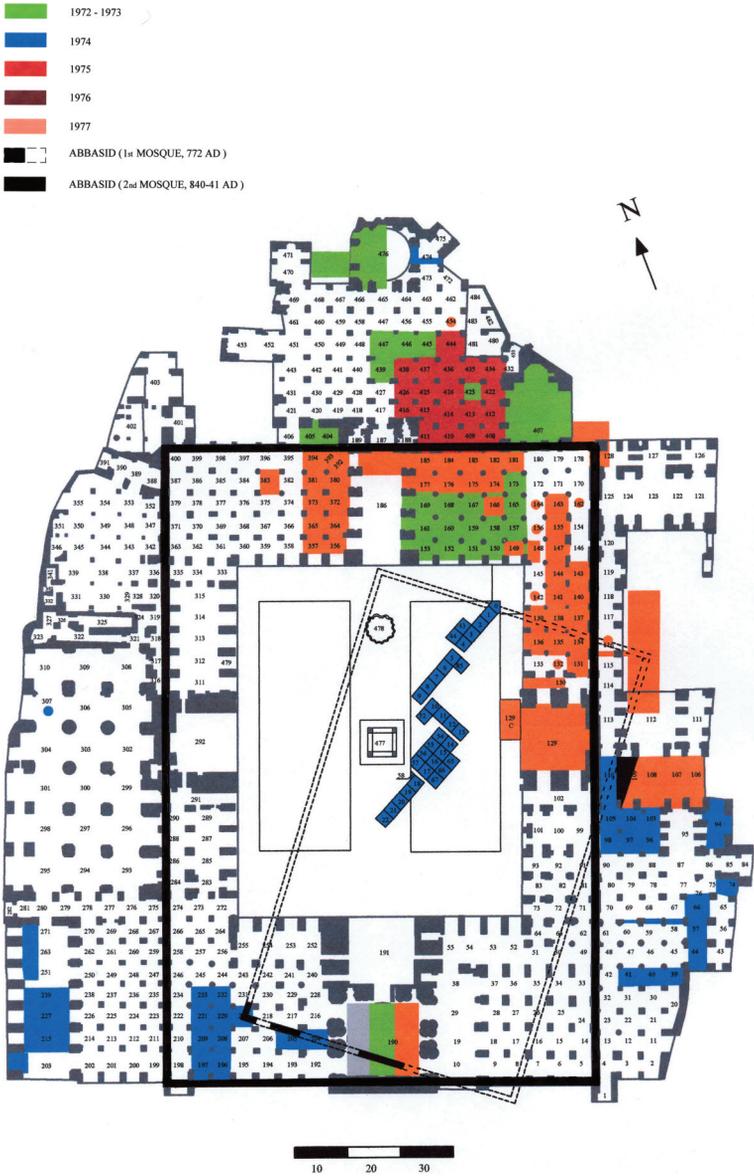


Fig. 5 – Excavation areas from 1972 to 1978, by B. Genito and L. Ricci.



Fig. 7 – Domed hall 190, foundation of a possible second Sasanian pillar, and of the possible pillar I 2 of the 840-841 mosque; the tiled floor of a coeval building can be also seen. IsIAO Archive.



Fig. 8 – Northern portico, areas 160-161, 168-169, foundations of the columns resting on fallen previous architectural remains. IsIAO Archive.



a



b



c

Fig. 9a-c – Different buried brick walls linking couples of columns. IsIAO Archive.



Fig. 10 – Northern portico, small building with central courtyard and *ivan*.
IsIAO Archive.



Fig. 11 – One of the columns of the north side belonging to a probable 12th century layout preceding the so-called Muzaffarid layout. IsIAO Archive.



Fig. 12 – Limestone foundation of the dome of Taj al Mulk. IsIAO Archive.

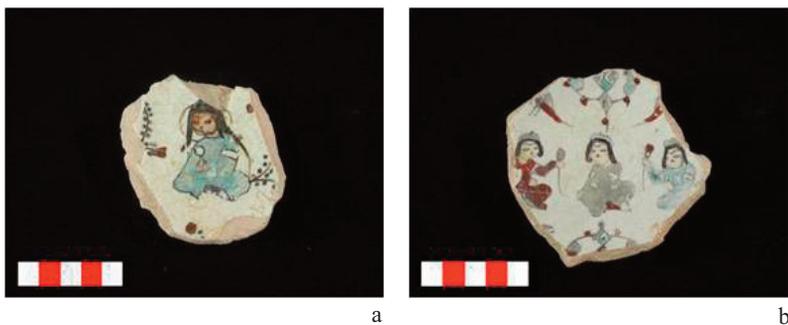


Fig. 13a-b – Fragments of Min'ai-type pottery, inv. nos. 206, 207. IsIAO Archive.

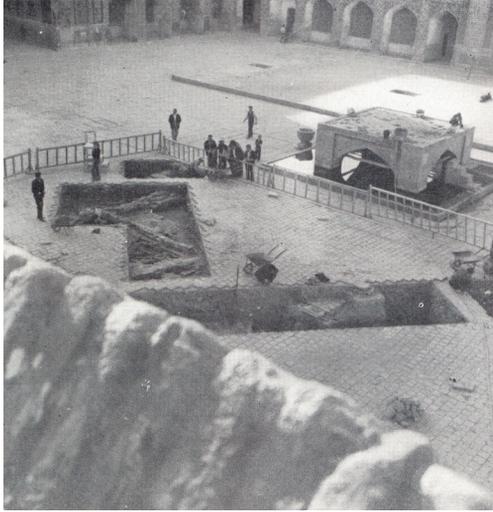


Fig. 14 – View of the trial-trenches dug across the courtyard. IsIAO Archive.



Fig. 15 – Stuccoes found in situ in the north, area 404, probably belonging to the 10th century mosque. IsIAO Archive.

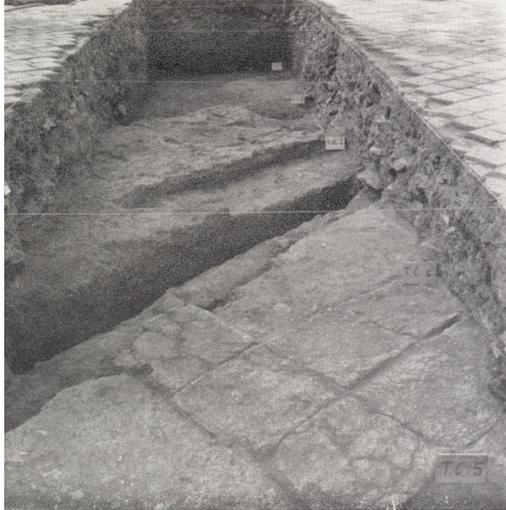


Fig. 16 – Courtyard, part of the paving consisting of a one-cubit large red-bricks kiln belonging to the Saljuq period. IsIAO Archive.



Fig. 17 – Courtyard in front of the pillar of the eastern *ivan*, small kiln probably dating back to the late Sasanian period. IsIAO Archive.



Fig. 18 – Western part of the prayer hall, eastward view of the *qibli* of the 772 mosque in areas 204 and 205; it is damaged near the foundation trenches of the possible pillars of the mosque built in 840-841. IsIAO Archive.

Fig. 19 – Domed hall 190, *mihrab* belonging to the possible 772 mosque with stucco decorations. IsIAO Archive.



Fig. 20 – Western part of the prayer hall, a stretch of the *qibli* of the possible 772 mosque in area 205, where a foundation has gone right through it. IsIAO Archive.

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