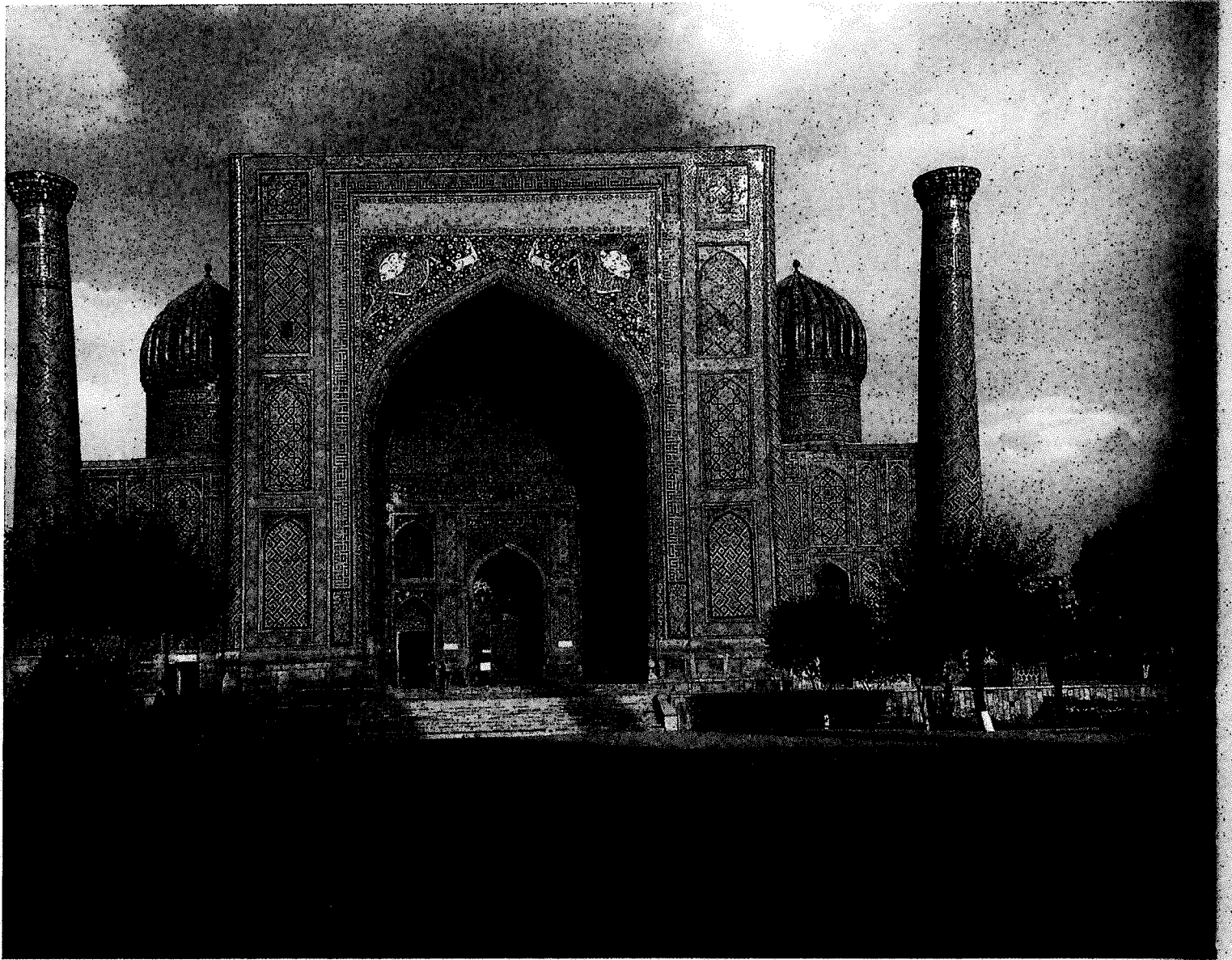


*The Uses of Light in Islamic
Architecture*

للمعمارية والنور في العمارة الإسلامية
روبرت هيلنبراند

Robert Hillenbrand



The theme of light manifests itself in remarkably diverse ways in pre-modern Islamic architecture. To impose order on this potentially chaotic mass of data, one may propose certain basic categories, and it will help to identify these quickly. First, directed light includes oculi, windows, skylights, arcades, and other openings. Second, reflected light invites discussion of water, smooth surfaces, glass mosaic, mirror decoration, and certain kinds of tilework, especially luster tiles. Third, certain materials were particularly favored for their capacity to absorb and to radiate light: ivory, rock crystal, alabaster, gold, white marble, and precious or semi-precious stones come to mind, whether as outer cladding or at selected locations within a building, for example in *muqarnas* vaults, or as grace notes. White and gold were the colors of choice. Fourth, lighting devices were crucial for practical purposes in cavernous interiors, but architects well knew how to make a virtue of necessity in how and where they used them. Fifth, there were also many ways of manipulating light and shade to create forms, whether in strongly contrasted primary tones of black and white, in more subtle shades of those tones, or even in color. And of course, sixth, external decoration in different degrees of relief is found throughout the Islamic world in the most varied forms and is enlivened by direct sunlight.

Finally, the symbolic associations of light must not be forgotten, lest this essay remain mired in the prosaic. Visual puns deserve brief mention here, but the main focus has to be on more straightforward expressions of meaning, from the use of appropriate Qur'anic quotations to titlature, from the finials of domes to the galleries of minarets. A somewhat neglected theme here is the inner designs of domes. In this context the role of the heavenly bodies—sun, moon, and stars—is crucial. The latent punning element in such examples will be discussed in due course; they have a long history in west and east alike (Lehmann 1945; Soper 1947) and Islam inherited much of both traditions (Bloom 1993). It is also worth recalling that a common poetic trope, used for example by the Persian poet Khaqani (1122–90), equated the Kaaba with the sun (Beelaert 1996, 119).

This essay will attempt to investigate these various categories, some at greater length than others. But it may be useful to begin with some general remarks. A seminal article written by Lisa Golombek a quarter-century ago developed the conceit of the clothed building, clad in variegated colors and textures, and rejoicing in extravagant displays (Golombek 1988); the Kaaba is a famous example.¹ This concept is important for the present discussion, since the play of light is an integral element of this conceit. A similar case, given the remarkable popularity of architectural inscriptions in the medieval Islamic world, could be made for the concept of a building that speaks, indeed that preaches. And here too the masters responsible, architect and craftsman alike, take full advantage of the movement of the sun, the play of light and shadow, the contrasts between harsh and soft lighting. But now there is a move from mere metaphor to actual content, and this finds expression in two ways through the medium of light.

First, and most frequently encountered, is the use of writing of religious content as surface decoration both inside and outside a building. Naturally the success of such decoration depends on its visibility, and hence on adequate lighting. Sacred names—Allah,

59 (opposite) Shir Dar Madrasa, Samarkand, 1616–39.



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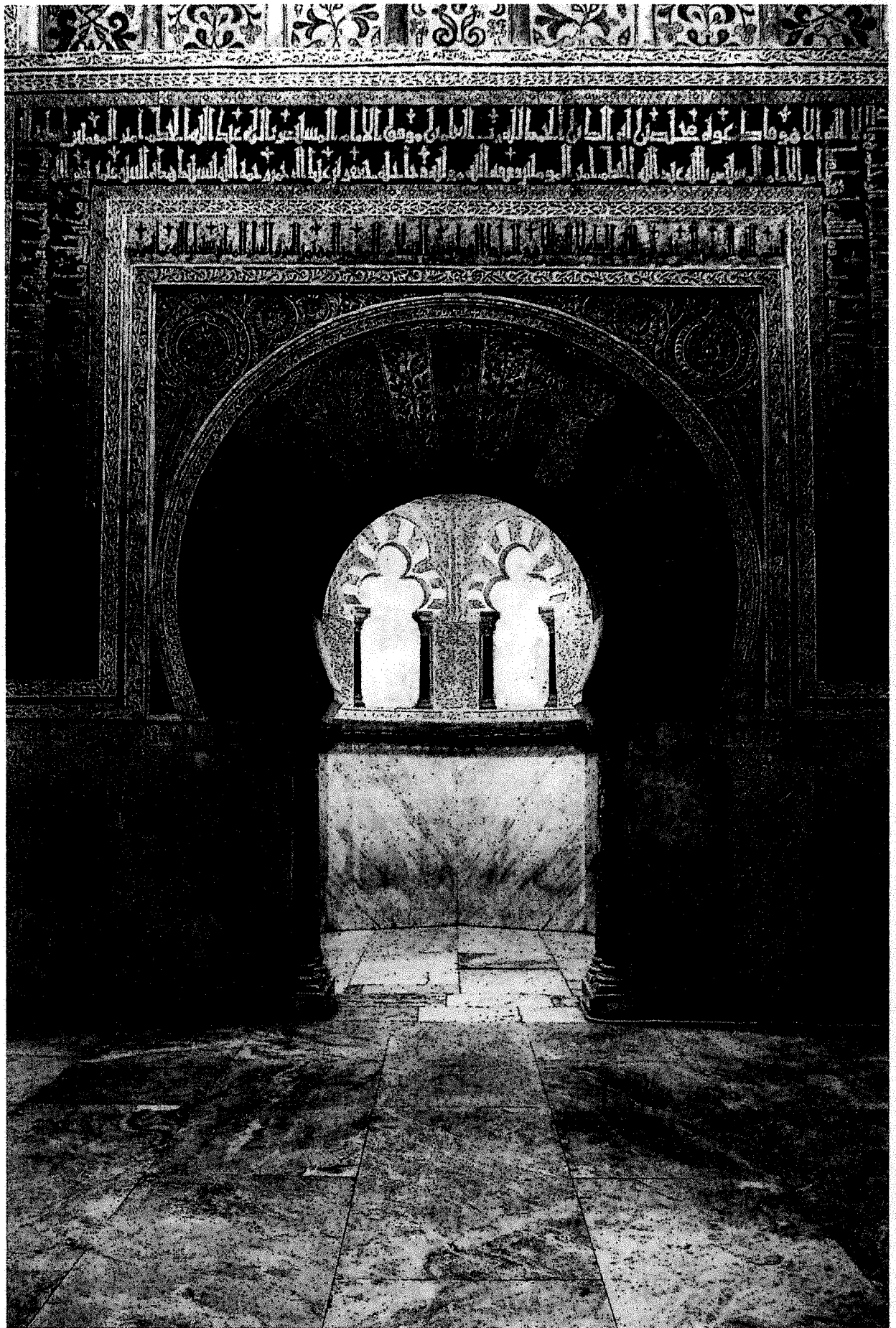
59 (*opposite*) Shir Dar Madrasa, Samarkand, 1616–39.

Muhammad, 'Ali—of gigantic size, sometimes executed in glittering glazed bricks that sparkle in the sun, sanctify the monument from afar, and may indeed, as in the Shir Dar Madrasa in Samarkand (pl. 59), carpet its outer walls in a continuous interlocking design whose knotted character may well have apotropaic associations (Kitzinger 1993, repr. 2003, 802–05). Sometimes much longer Qur'anic inscriptions in square kufic, encased in panels or even covering an entire wall, are used within a building, and here too their surfaces coruscate. This serves to spotlight individual letters or words unpredictably as the viewer moves around. Closer up, inscriptions, whether inside or outside a building, are set in broad or narrow bands, which are far more likely to be of Qur'anic than historical content. They make the building something of a sacred book, and here too light is crucial. The words may be executed in white plaster or tile on a dark ground so as to stand out more clearly, or they may be executed in contrasting colors, or indeed in relief so that light and shadow perform the same function. These devices serve to draw attention to such inscriptions, whether or not they are legible (Blair 1998, 73, 91, 133 and 135; Hillenbrand 2012a, 14, 17, 21, 24–25). After all, they may well be located too high up, or their lettering may be too small, or their style of writing too complex, to be easily understood. But for people who knew much or indeed all of the sacred text by heart, even a couple of words could open the memory bank and make the building an instrument of meditation. Light is crucial to that role.

The second way in which a building can play with ideas of light also has to do with the inscriptions that it bears. But in this case the inscriptions yield not religious but historical information. And they do so in a very particular way: through titulature. In the present context, special interest attaches to titles that evoke associations with light. The key words here, because they were so popular, are *shams*, *qamar*, *badr*, *najm*, *siraj*, and *nur* (sun, moon, full moon, star, lamp, and light respectively). But others could also be cited, such as *baha* (radiance), *diyā* (brightness), *falak* (celestial body, star), *shihab* (shooting star, meteor), *zahir* (shining one),² and *hilal* (new moon; Garcin de Tassy 1854, 45). All the terms listed above are found in all manner of compounds, though sometimes they occur on their own—thus the caliph 'Uthman was known as Dhu'l-Nurayn, “Possessor of the Two Lights,” because he had married two of the Prophet's daughters (Garcin de Tassy 1854, 25). The first four of the really popular terms—*shams*, *qamar*, *badr*, *najm*—are of particular interest in that they have to do with heavenly bodies that radiate or reflect light. The combination of the heavens and light itself allows notions of divinely ordained legitimacy to be exploited. Sometimes this involves the combination of the two celestial colors—gold and blue—as in the inscriptions of the celebrated mihrab in the Great Mosque of Córdoba (pl. 60).

But it is possible to take this notion further, for all six of these common words are frequently conjoined to *din*, especially in the eastern Islamic world (Kramers 1926, 53), so that a ruler links himself by his title not only to light but also to religion, and the title explicitly connects these two concepts. Since it was common practice for rulers to possess—and proclaim—an entire sequence of titles, it should occasion no surprise to find that some rulers bore successive titles harping on light or on religion or on both,³ and thus by sheer dint of repetition embedding these concepts in the minds of

Mihrab of the
in Córdoba, 965.

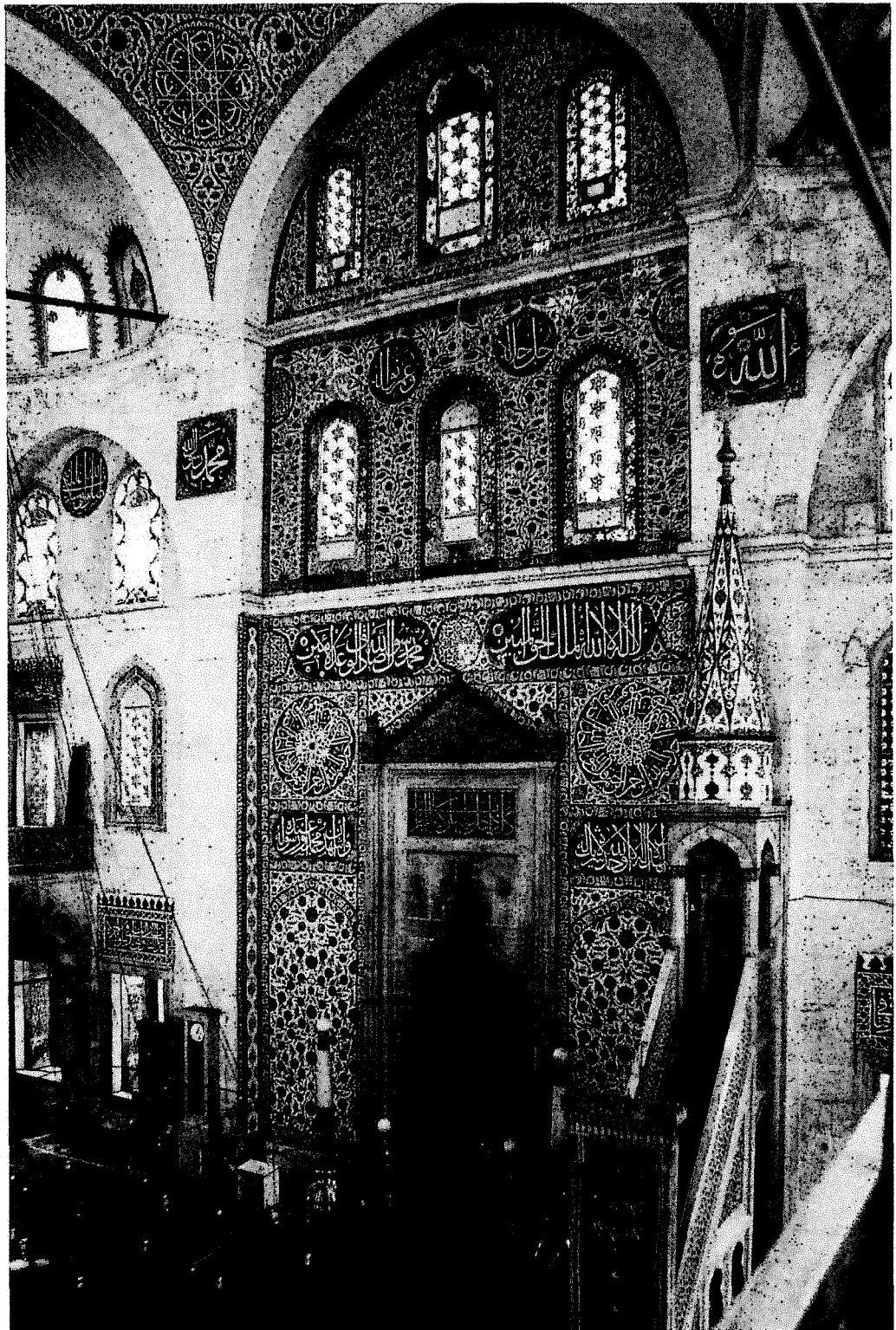


readers. A textbook case is the destroyed minbar of 1168–69 which Nur al-Din ordered for the Aqsa Mosque, Jerusalem, where numerous light-related tonal contrasts and stellar designs complement the messages of the inscriptions (Auld 2005, 58–59; 2009). Nor was the religious theme always announced by the word *din*; other popular components of such titles were *islam*, religious community (*umma*), Muslims (*muslimin*), religion (*milla*), truth (*haqq*), and holy war (*jihad*), all of them preceded by words having to do with light. It is of course a cliché, but one that requires renewed emphasis here, that the inbuilt associations of light with virtue, with knowledge, with the true path, with religious faith, with God's guidance—often in contradistinction to darkness, with all its negative connotations—are of course not peculiar to Muslim belief. They permeate Zoroastrian, Judaic, and Christian thought—to mention only three of the religions with which Islam had most to do. The evidence of titles, then, which were customarily employed in the medieval centuries as part of the historical inscriptions that graced buildings across the Muslim world, is that they often played with concepts of light and faith, sometimes conjoined but more often as successive elements in a sequence of ideas which constantly circled around a few core concepts. For those with eyes to see, then, the theme of light was omnipresent in both literal and metaphorical senses.

Directed Light

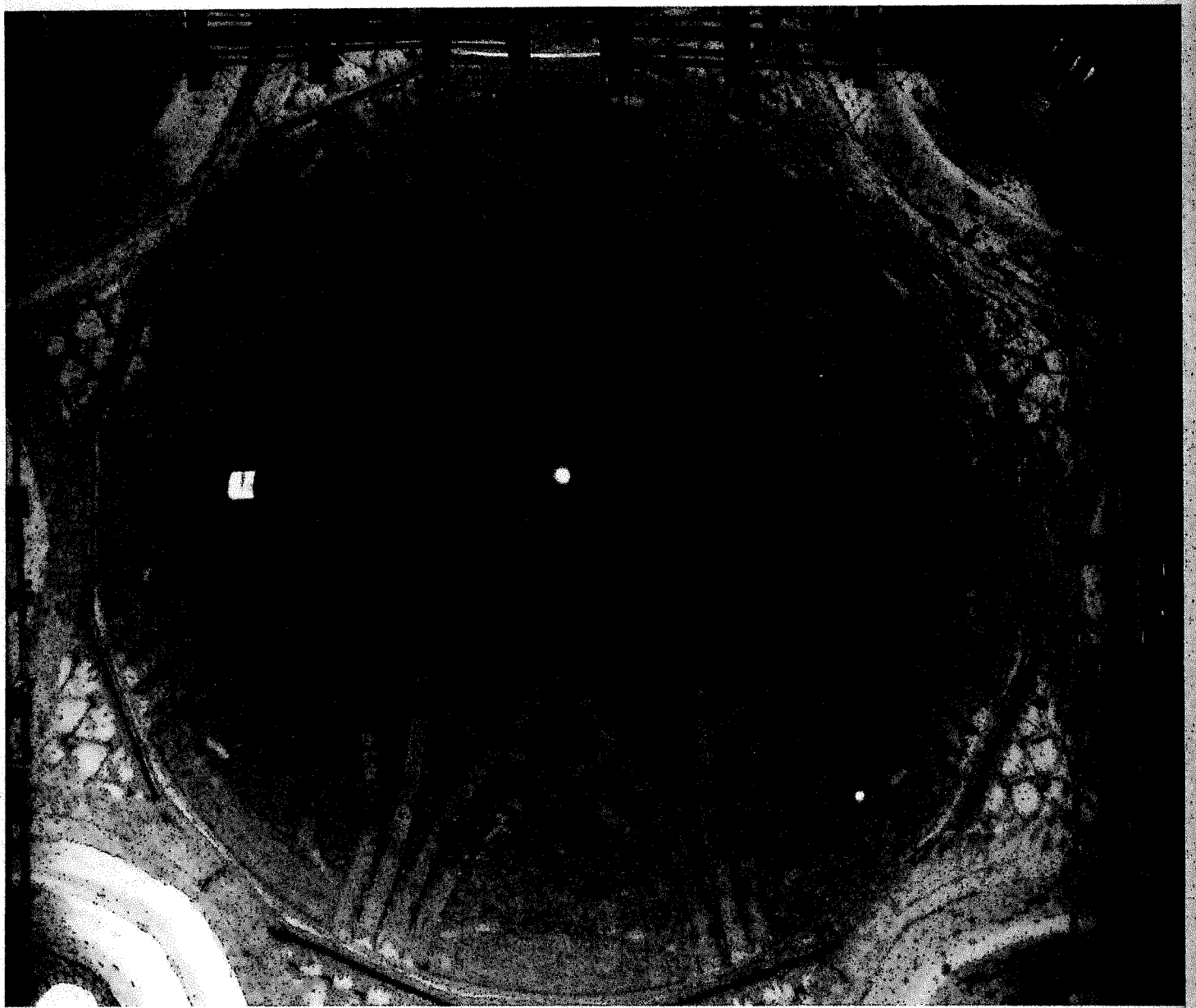
The most immediately apprehensible use of light in Islamic architecture is that which fulfills an obvious practical need, namely openings in the fabric of a building. That is of course a truism; after all, every building that has a functioning interior has to be lit to some degree. But this is precisely where choices are made, and those choices can be very revealing. Contrasts of open and closed spaces made the most of a limited ration of light, and could be used for purposes of surprise, emphasis, and what might be termed stage management. An outstanding example of this is the Alhambra Palace in Granada, which, with its plethora of bent entrances and continually shifting axes and changes in level, contrives to disorientate visitors so that it can spring a succession of surprises on them, often involving views artfully framed and lit that unfold as one rounds a corner.

In the interior of an Ottoman dome chamber, there is no ineluctable practical reason dictating that the qibla wall should be better lit than the other three walls. Yet so it often is. Thus in the qibla wall of the Ismihan Sultan Mosque, Kadırgalimanı, Istanbul of 1571–72, two tiers of three windows apiece direct a flood of light onto the area around the mihrab, making it far brighter than the rest of the interior (pl. 61). Sometimes a modest dome chamber is lit not by axial rectangular or arched windows, as common sense would lead one to expect, but by numerous scattered, small-scale openings in the inner dome. Thus the person inside that building experiences not the steady overall illumination provided by large windows, but rather shafts of light piercing the darkness. The impact is as if man were harnessing the power of the heavenly bodies themselves. An oculus at the very top of a dome, as at the tomb of Sultan Sanjar at



51 Qibla wall in the Ismihan Sultan Mosque, Kadırgalimini, Istanbul, 1571-72.

Merv (pl. 62) or the bath hall of Khirbat al-Mafjar outside Jericho, which is echoed directly below by the center of the Catherine wheel or solar mosaic, can be seen as the eye of heaven and thus as a connection with the powers above. But it does not perform the workaday task of dispelling the dimness of an interior. The skylight marking the climax of certain Timurid vaults of pyrotechnic complexity, which themselves mimic exploding stars and plunging comets (pl. 63), lends a new resonance to the familiar ancient and cross-cultural equation of a vaulted interior, with the sky above,



of Sultan Sanjar,
40.

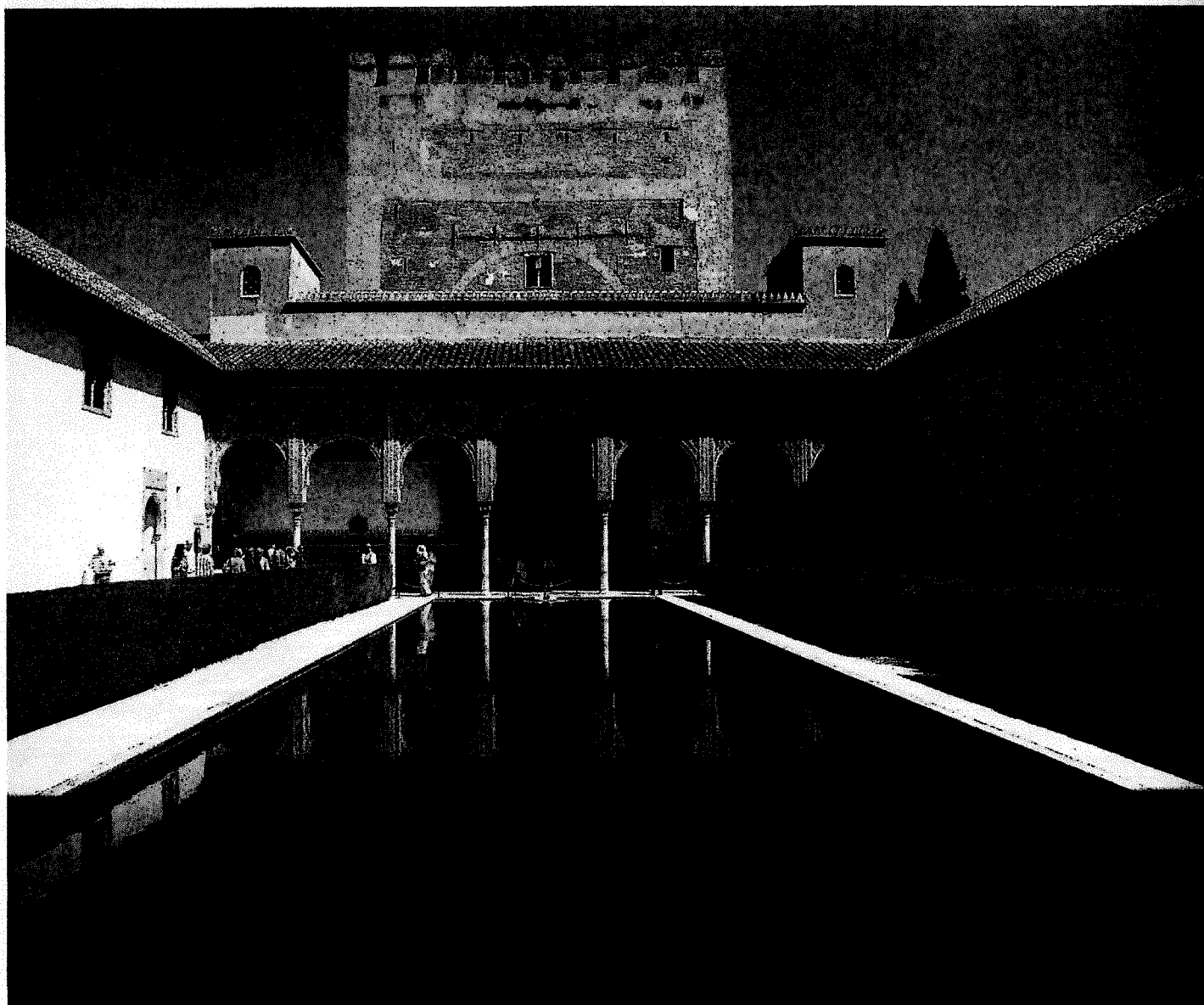
a concept that appears throughout Eurasia over millennia (O'Kane 1979, 101-03). In all these cases, then, it seems that something more than mere lighting is being attempted.

Reflected Light

So much for directed lighting. What of reflected lighting? This is of its very nature harder to pin down, both in how it works and in how it is intended. The use of water in large flat expanses makes it operate (among other things) as a mirror. Such pools are often sited so as to reflect as much as possible the architectural masses that loom nearby, as in the Court of the Myrtles at the Alhambra (pl. 64) or in such Safavid buildings as the Masjid-i Shah and the Chihil Sutun palace, both in Isfahan, and even in modern structures like the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi. Thus they permit the building to replicate itself in a breathtaking though evanescent way—for the slightest breeze is apt to ruffle and then dissolve the clear outlines of the monument

) Ghiyathiyya
hargird, Iran,



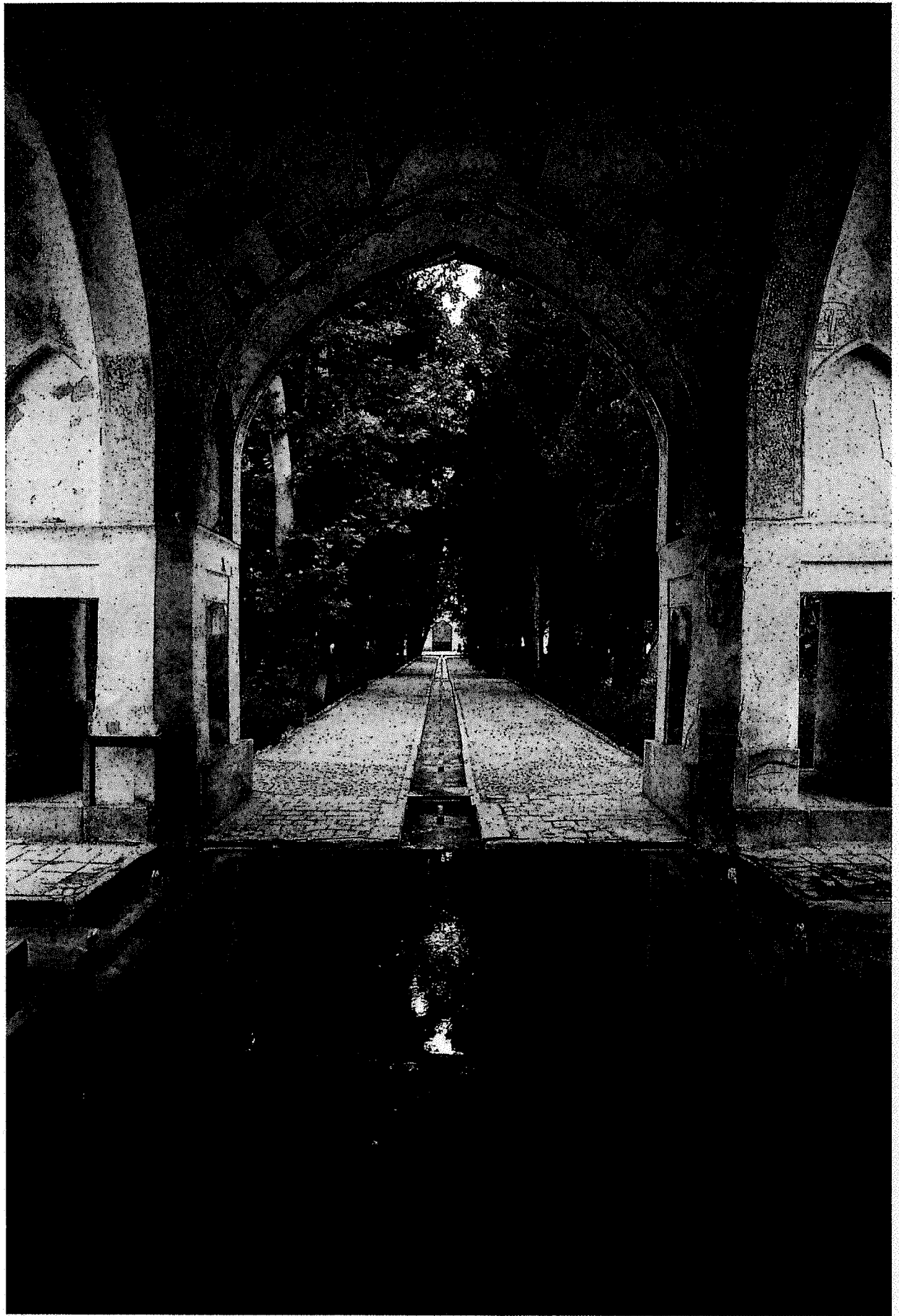


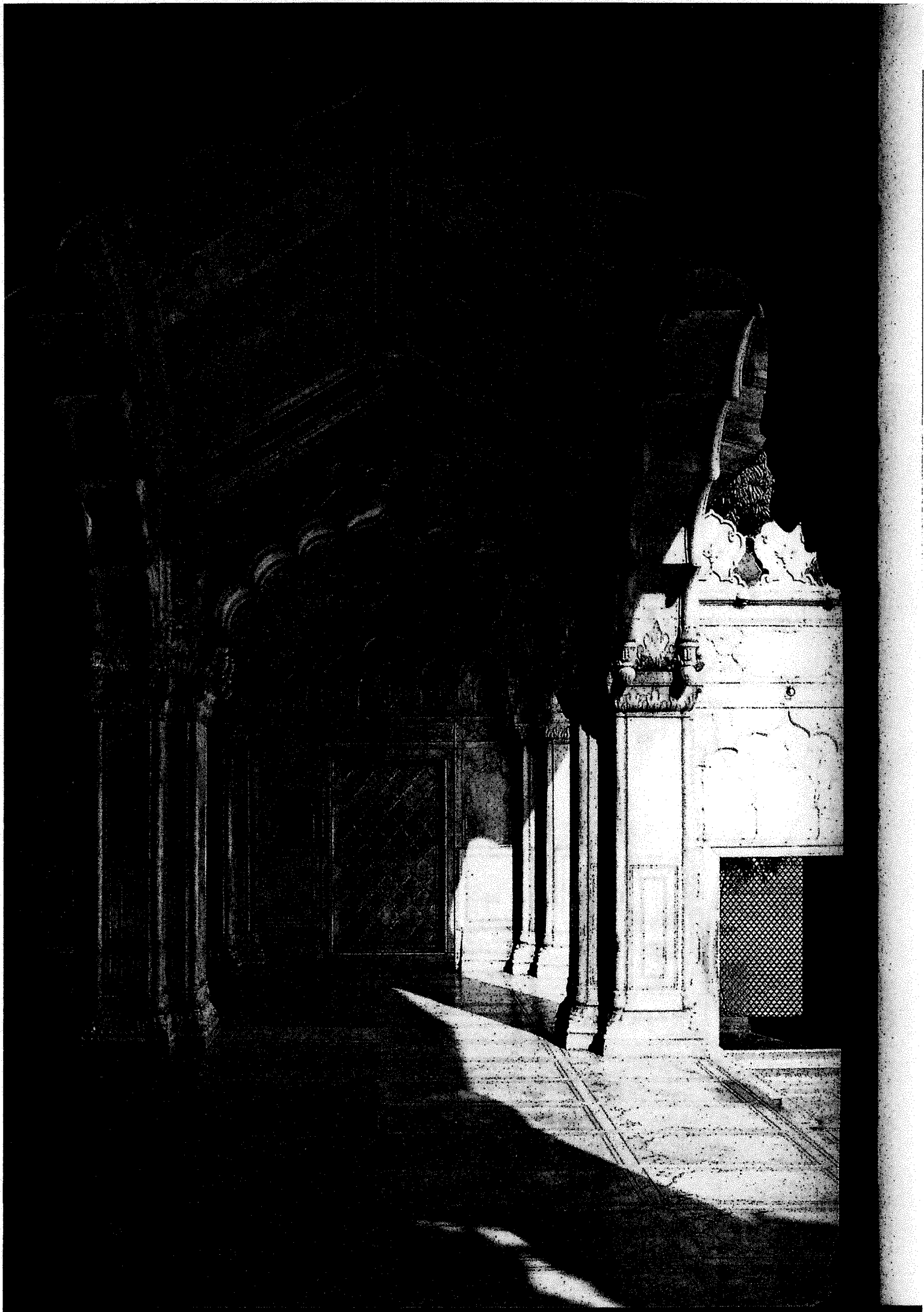
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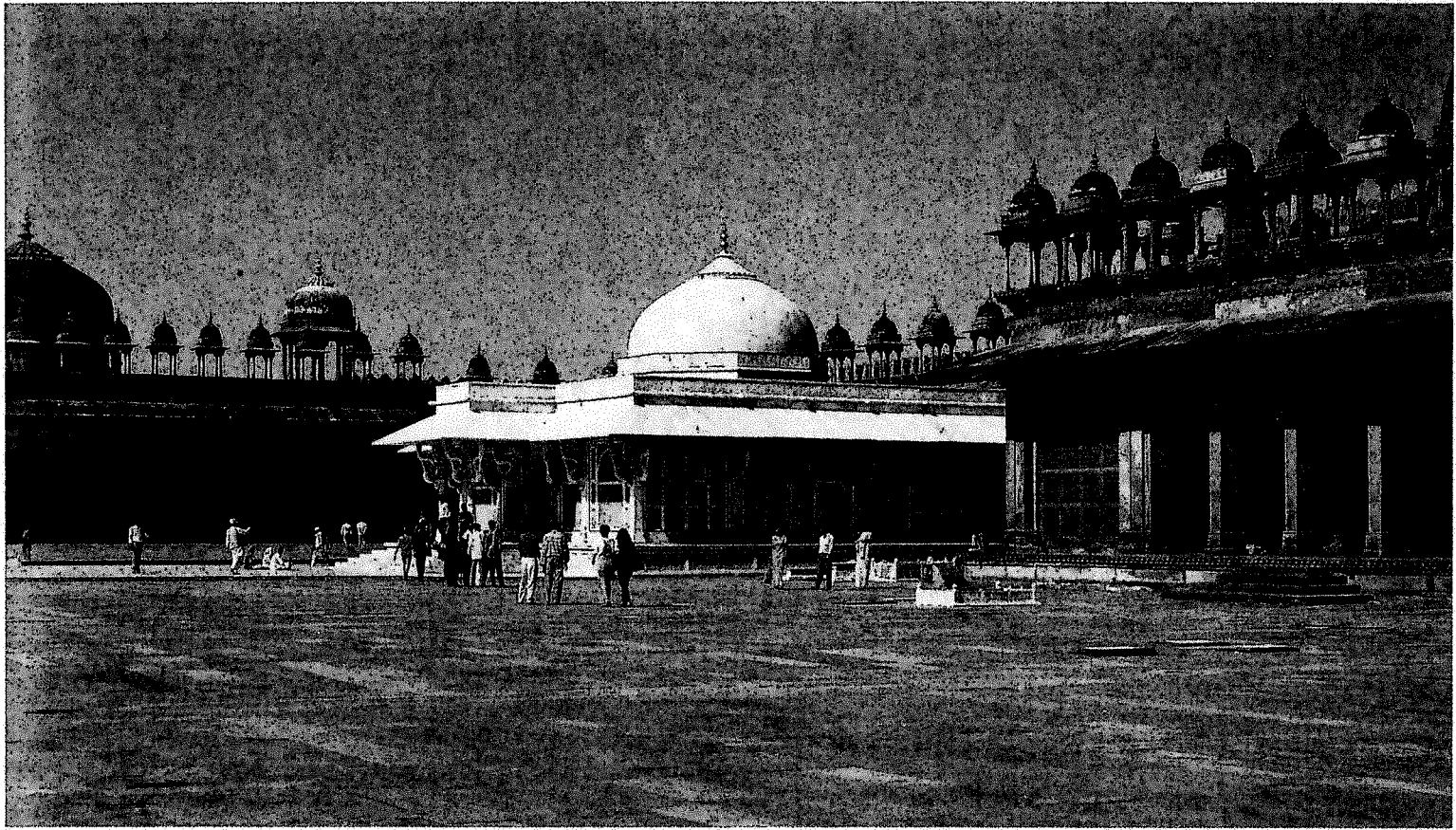
and turn it into a misty mirage of itself. This perennial effect lends itself to sobering metaphorical interpretations concerning the transitory nature of wealth, of rank, and indeed of life itself. Sermons in stones. At the same time, these pools also consistently reflect sunlight. Water in motion—running in channels or cascades or miniature waterfalls, flowing or spurting in fountains—catches light in a sparkling, iridescent, constantly changing way (pl. 65). And so it captures the very essence of mutability. Texts describing medieval palaces in Córdoba, Cairo, and Baghdad speak admiringly of small lakes or ponds filled with a metallic substance variously identified as mercury, quicksilver, or tin which, when struck with a staff, created glistening rolling waves and lightning flashes that awed the bystanders (al-Maqqari 2002, I: 236–37).

Smooth shimmering surfaces, particularly those in white marble, work even more directly on the viewer, especially in strong sunlight. This was surely the intention in such Mughal buildings as the Moti Masjid in Delhi (pl. 66) or the Taj Mahal in Agra. Sometimes the desired effect is intensified by color contrast; thus the shrine of Shaykh Salim Chishti, perhaps the most venerated saint in all of Mughal India, at Fatehpur Sikri is entirely executed in chaste white marble, the epitome of spiritual purity, that

Bagh-i Fin,
century and later.







67 Shrine of Salim Chishti, Fatehpur Sikri, 16th century.

stands out from the russet sandstone of the surrounding buildings (pl. 67). In modern architecture an outstanding example of this effect is the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi, where at midday the power of the sun's rays reflected alike from the white marble elevation of the building and the white marble floor of the courtyard is well-nigh blinding in its intensity. A multiplying factor seems to be at work here. Indeed, light is the enemy in an open courtyard, with an urgent corresponding need for shade—this is a case less of sunlight than of sunblight.

Yet another type of reflected light is a special feature of glass mosaic (pl. 68). This has a unique richness, for the nature of the component cubes, with gold leaf sandwiched between transparent glass so that it has a certain depth yet appears to float, gives the gold background plenty of life and character. This introduces a sense of mobility. Moreover, variations between polished and matte cubes, and also in shades of color tones, in the setting of some cubes at various angles to ensure refracted light, in undulating or projecting beds as a setting for the tesserae, in a scattering of black, brown and silver cubes to lighten the density of the gold surface—all of these devices, often working in concert, impart a living, unpredictable glitter to gold mosaic. The absence of these subtleties in modern restorations of ancient mosaics explains their dead brassy sheen, from which the eye instinctively shies away.

Tilework permits some very varied, and distinct, types of reflection. At the simplest level are the random shafts of light generated by *cuerda seca* tiles, with their smooth unbroken surface and overall glaze, though here—as in all types of reflection—the effect comes and goes as viewers move and thus change the angle of sight. Tile mosaic has much more sparkle when the sun strikes its surface, since it comprises many small pieces fitted together, and the smallest deviation from a plane surface creates refracted

66 (opposite) Moti Mosque, Delhi, 17th century.



with mother of
Dome of the
em, 692.

light. But pride of place assuredly goes to luster tiles, which were usually employed for dados and could thus be studied at eye level by those seated near them. Still photographs do them no justice; indeed, they kill them stone dead. They fix a moment in time, rendering immobile precisely those effects that depend on mobility for their impact. Luster tiles were especially popular in Sufi shrines in Iran in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Such tiles, with their unpredictable iridescent tints glistening in the gloom, and rendered still more changeable by the flickering, living, and shifting light cast by candles or oil lamps, aptly symbolized the sudden flashes of insight vouchsafed to mystics as they strove to approach closer to God through a cloud of unknowing. Sometimes dozens of luster tiles were put together to create a huge, fitfully illuminated mihrab, the focus of prayer, in places of worship; at times they towered over three meters high (pl. 69). Thus the built-in symbolism of the door or gate inherent in the very form of the mihrab (*Encyclopedia of Islam*/2: "Mihrāb", 7-8)—a gate to the world beyond, to the afterlife, and to a higher level of spiritual knowledge—took on still deeper meaning thanks to the medium of luster.

Finally, the mirror-work (*'ainakari*) so popular in nineteenth-century Islamic art in Iran, and still used today, as in the Mashhad Sayyida Ruqayya in Damascus, much visited

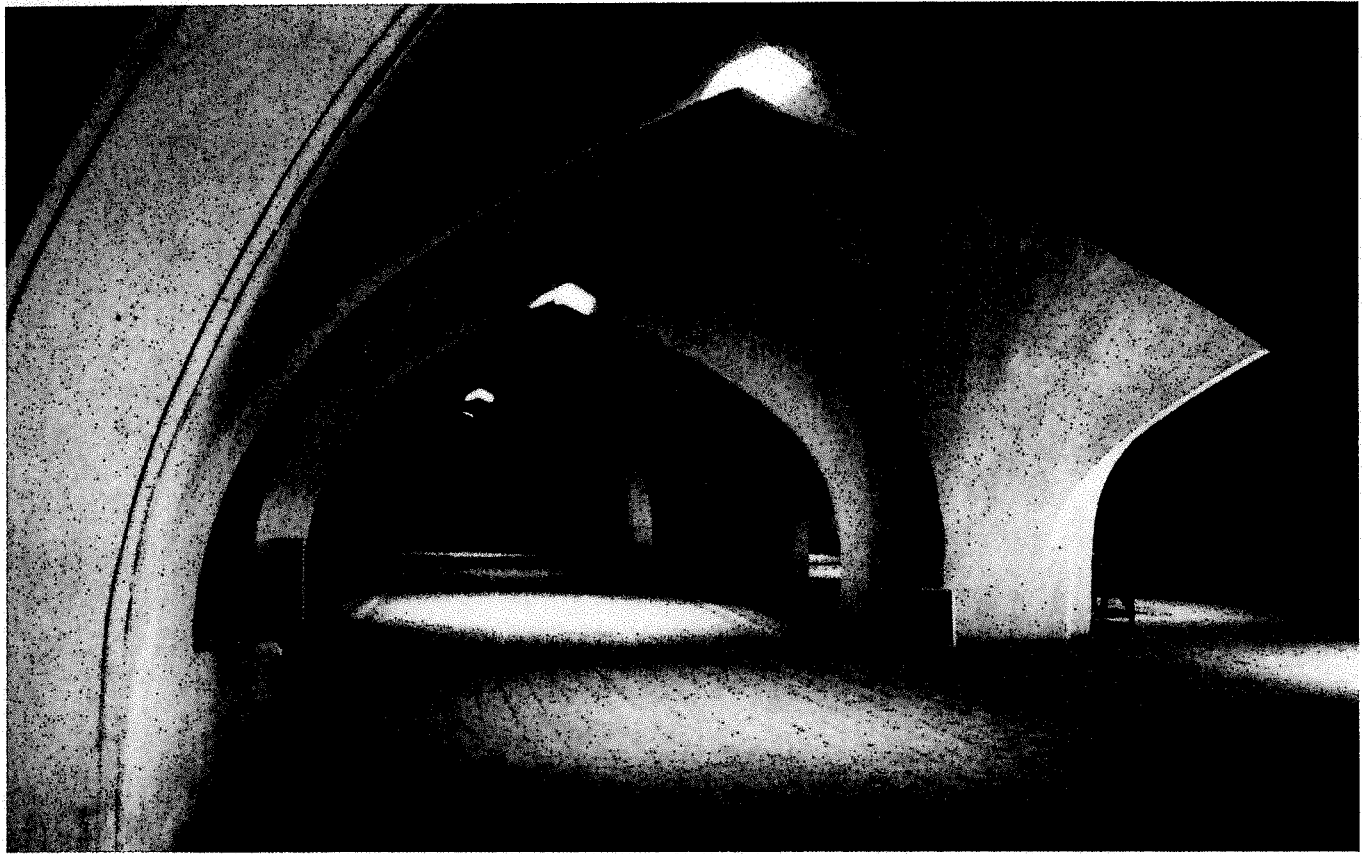


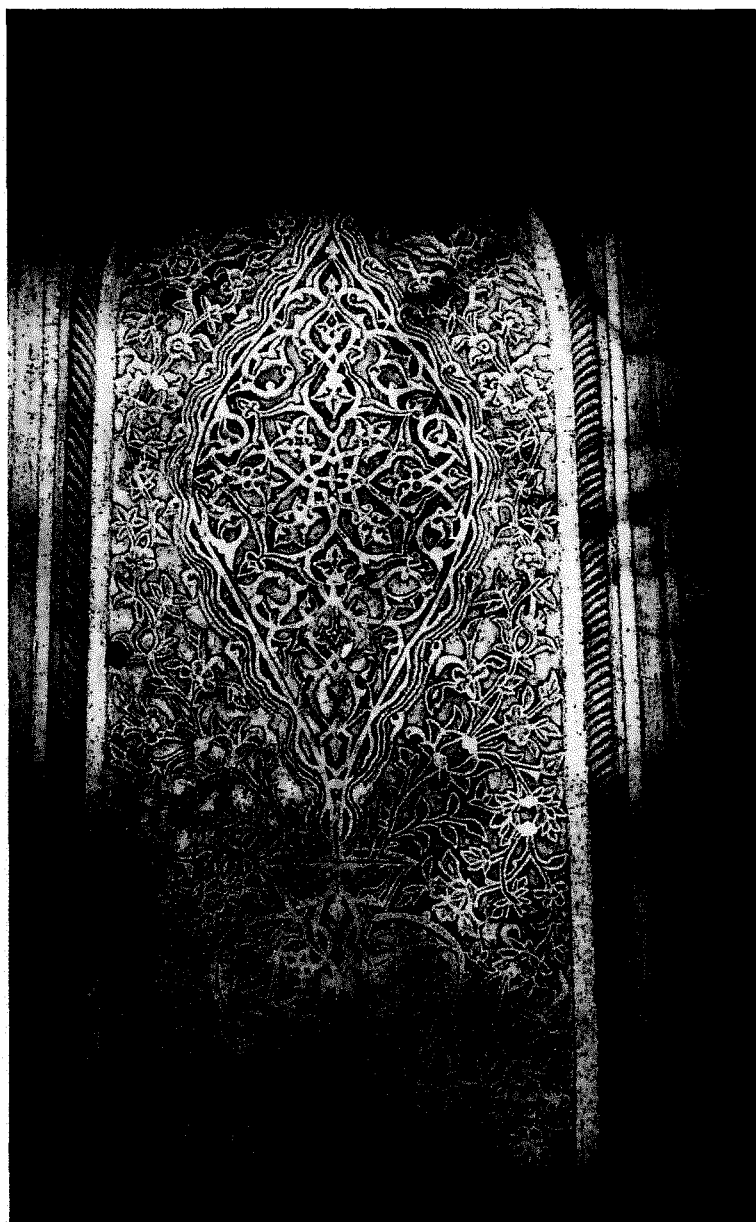
69 Molded stonepaste mihrab overglaze-painted in luster and underglaze-painted in cobalt and turquoise, Kashan, Sha'ban 663/May 1265. Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, Honolulu (48.327).

by Iranian pilgrims (Mulder 2014: 192), deserves brief notice. Interestingly enough, the location of choice for this most dazzling exploitation of light was interior vaults rather than exterior surfaces of any kind. Nevertheless, carefully placed sources of artificial light ensured that the reflective powers of this medium were exploited to the full.

Materials Associated with Light

A subset of this category of reflected light takes us to our third theme, which deals with the power of certain materials or colors, themselves often associated with particular media, to absorb and radiate light. Architects and craftsmen often capitalized on this characteristic in order to secure dramatic visual effects, and occasionally these could be captured in poetry, like the pre-Islamic Yemeni king who built his palace with an alabaster ceiling so that he could lie on his bed and watch the birds disporting themselves (Wightman and Udhari 1975, 8). It is an elaborate, and also totally fallacious, conceit, for while alabaster does indeed let the light in, it is by no means transparent. Instead, it casts a warm radiance that suffuses the immediate vicinity with a golden



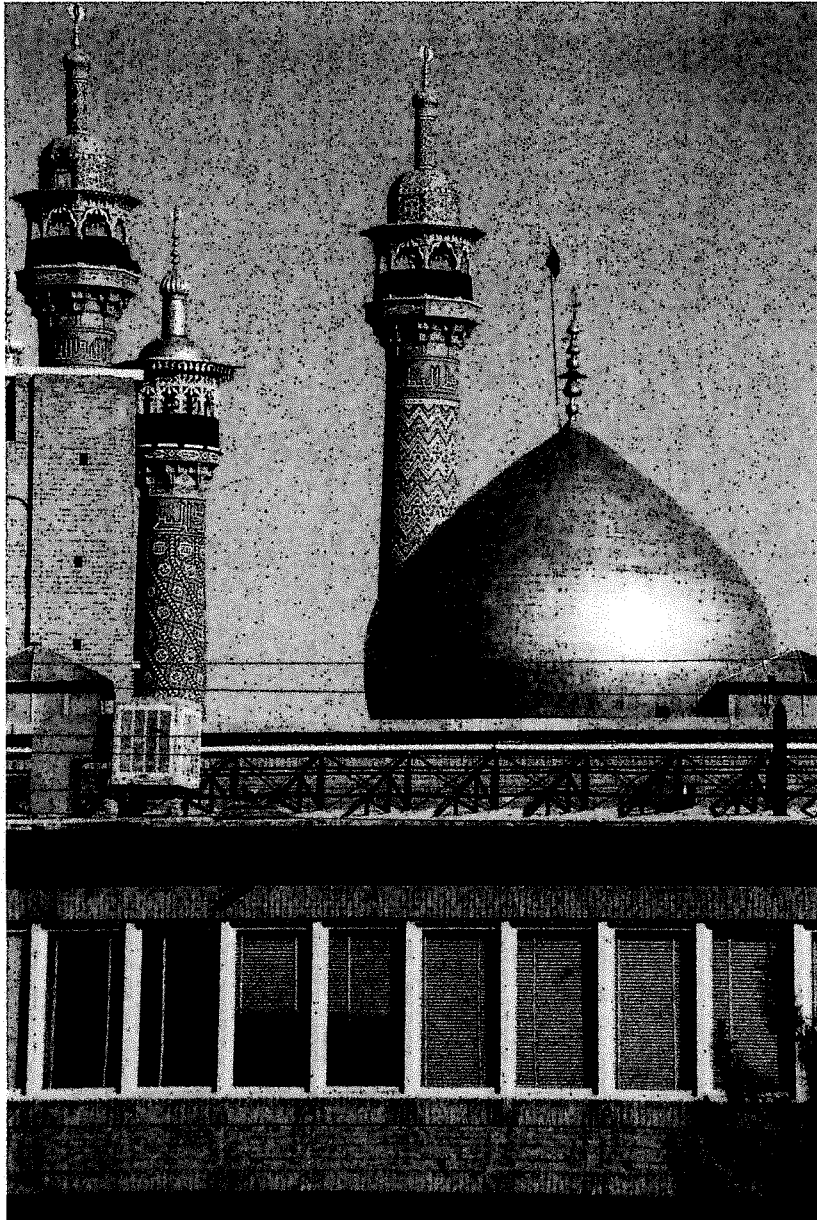


72 Yellow alabaster mihrab in the Shrine of 'Ali ibn Binyamin at Bidakhauid near Yazd, c. 1415.

70 (opposite, top) Alabaster openings in the ceiling of the winter prayer hall behind the west iwan in the Friday Mosque, Isfahan, c. 1444.

71 (opposite, bottom) Transverse vaults in the west prayer hall of the Friday Mosque at Yazd, 1364-76.

light. In a dim interior, this can make an impact over many meters, and even create pools of light amidst the darkness, as in the winter prayer hall of the Friday Mosque of Isfahan, erected *circa* 1444, whose transverse arches are pierced at the apex by square openings fitted with alabaster (pl. 70), a variation on the plain openings of the transverse vaults in the Yazd *jami'* (pl. 71). Perhaps the most dramatic expression of this idea of the mihrab as a source of light is a yellow alabaster mihrab in the shrine of 'Ali ibn Binyaman at Bidakhauid near Yazd, datable *circa* 1415 (pl. 72). Since this huge block of expensive stone fills up the entire thickness of the wall into which it is set, its exterior face can absorb sunlight from dawn to dusk and at the same time reflect that light, muted but full of power, radiating its messages in the darkness across the centuries. At one level, and this is surely the one most readily accepted, this is a mihrab, set in a qibla wall and encouraging visitors to the shrine to engage in prayer. But 'Abdallah Kahil has suggested, following the fourteenth-century exegesis of the Light Verse by Ibn Kathir, that the light generated by the lamp mentioned in that verse represents faith. By that reckoning, argues Kahil, a slab such as this, set in a funerary shrine, can



Shrine of 'Ali in the Shrine of 'Ali, Najaf, Iraq, 16th century.

be understood to represent the faith that will take 'Ali ibn Binyamin to Paradise.⁴ By extension, the depiction of a lamp in a niche on the tombstones of graves (for which a qibla orientation is prescribed) is a similar proclamation of the saving faith of the deceased (Kahil, in this volume; cf. Khoury 1992, 12, 22–23). And it is worth recalling in this context that for the Shia, their Imams both received and emanated divine light (Mulder 2014, 80–81), which adds a third level of significance to such images. The Bidakhavid slab is only one of several contemporary examples, as a similar mihrab in nearby Turan Pusht shows. The same tawny alabaster, probably from Ardistan, was much in demand for dados in Safavid buildings. Placed as they were against a surface that did not admit light, they would rather absorb it.

Mother-of-pearl, with its distinctive iridescence, was a favored element of Islamic glass mosaic as early as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (see pl. 68). It proved especially popular for the many mihrabs in glass mosaic that were produced in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods from the time of the Aqsa mihrab (1187–88) onward, and indeed is found right up to modern times, for example in the minbar of the

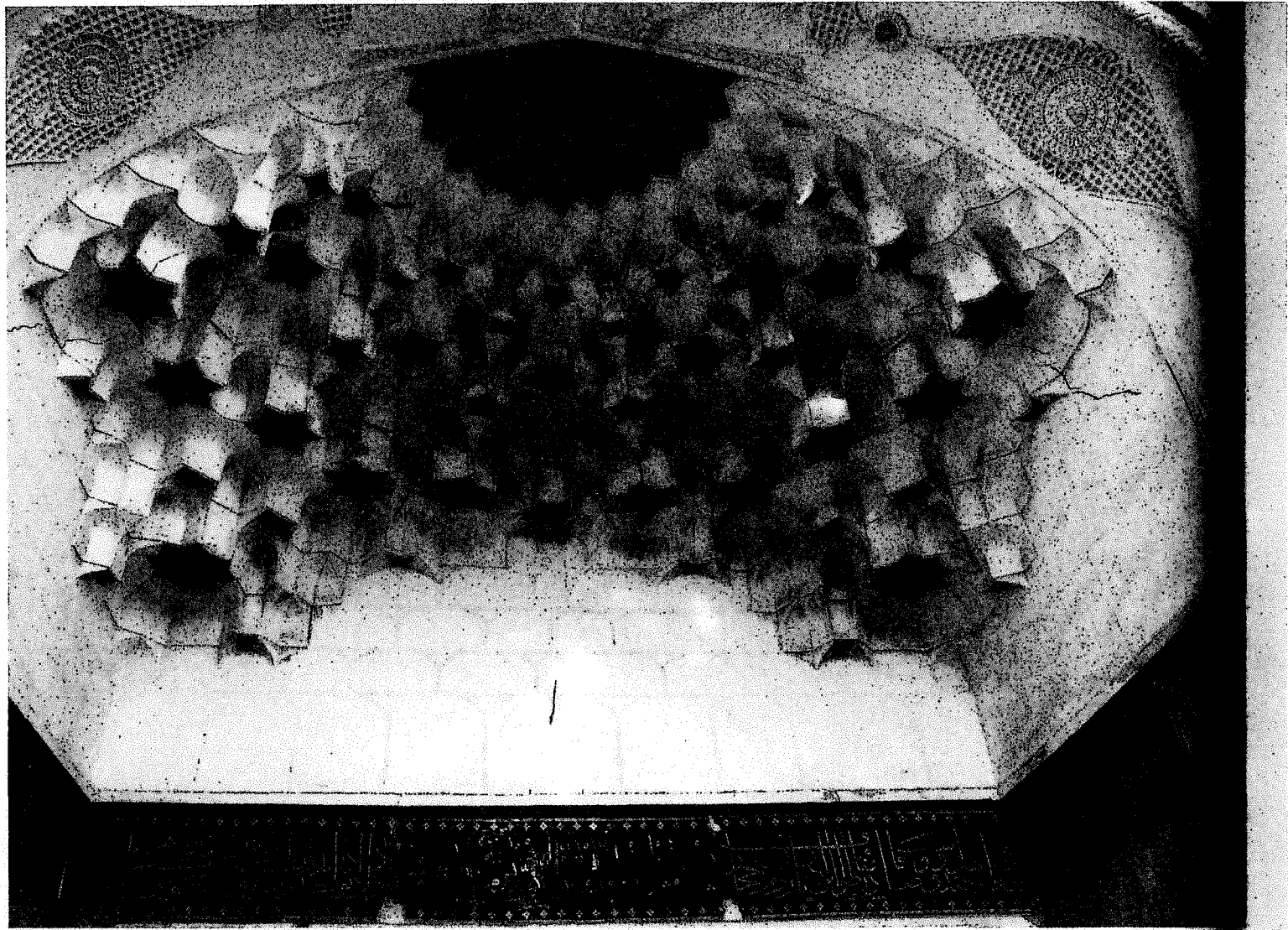
Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi (Hillenbrand 2012b, 126–27). Another rare material popularly believed to hold and transmit light, this time in frozen form, was rock crystal; and piers of crystal are recorded at Madinat al-Zahra in al-Andalus (al-Maqqari 2002, I, 237), though it is a safe bet that only part of a pier would display this excessively rare material. Other piers were studded with rubies and other jewels—still more transmitters of light (al-Maqqari 2002, II: 467). But pride of place belongs to the kiosk of stained glass built for a Dhu'l-Nunid monarch in Toledo in the midst of an artificial lake, so designed that the waters of the lake were piped to ripple over it as the ruler sat inside, untouched by the water, while burning wax tapers lit the kiosk from within (al-Maqqari 2002, I, 239–40).

But of course the principal agent among these varied materials is gold, which is also pre-eminently suited to reflect light. From the very beginning of Islamic architecture, at the Dome of the Rock, the impact of expanses of gold—actually gold leaf on copper—as cladding for domes or for tiles was well understood, despite theological objections (Jairazbhoy 1964, 41–51). The sheer value of such decoration meant that it was liable to be removed in times of dearth, unrest and war, and gradually its use was confined to buildings whose sanctity usually protected them from being plundered. Undoubtedly the Shi'i shrines of Iraq and Iran are the principal examples of this fashion (pl. 73), and the wealthy faithful vied with each other to embellish the mausolea of their Imams in this way, so that gold leaf covered not only domes but also the underside of vaults, including *muqarnas* vaults and even minarets. This lavish decoration was sometimes applied in fulfillment of a vow, in the wake of major conquests or indeed for ecumenical reasons (Allan 2012, 44–45).

And in other media, the unparalleled status of gold as a metal purified by fire and connoting from ancient times connections with the sun, with worship, and with spirituality found many another expression in Islamic art and architecture. Gold backgrounds gave heightened significance to the otherworldly Umayyad mosaics of Jerusalem and Damascus. It could also highlight a name, a title, or a key portion of the design. Gold was not the only means of creating a strong focus of light with potential spiritual associations. The more imaginative architects knew how to concentrate the impact of a burst of whiteness, as in the snowy cascade of *muqarnas* cells in the mosque of Gawhar Shad in Mashhad (Golombek and Wilber 1988, II: pl. 246) or the Safavid transverse *muqarnas* vaults at Mahan (Hillenbrand 1986, 792–93, 829 and pl. 42), or yet other white vaults there festooned with tilework stars (pl. 74).

Lighting Devices

Next, the fourth theme, lighting devices. These were quite varied. Their effect was necessarily limited: less a matter of light, perhaps, than of darkness visible. Candles, either plain or decorated with stellar or solar designs (Gray 1947, pl. 4), were placed on stands, often on either side of the mihrab (see pl. 61), and a similar arrangement of successive niches containing lamps and flanked by candles is depicted on some cenotaphs (Mulder



s vault over the
to the Shrine of
: Mahan, Iran,

2014, 80–81). They could be huge; the museum on the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem preserves two beeswax candles, apparently of medieval date, several meters long, as thick as tree trunks and of a weight that would require several men to lift.

But the main instruments of interior lighting in medieval times were lamps. The medieval sources record that the Córdoba mosque, for instance, had between 113 and 280 lamps. Some lamps were of pierced metal (see pl. 6) and would when lit have radiated complex patterns; the earliest surviving examples are of tenth-century date, and they have remained popular into modern times. Despite their beauty, however, they would have been only moderately successful in fulfilling what was presumably their primary purpose, namely to radiate light. Transparent glass was obviously a much more suitable medium for this purpose, and a unique Qur'anic frontispiece of Umayyad date found in San'a shows just how such lamps were used at that time (pl. 75). High-necked and globular, undecorated and with a floating wick, they were suspended by chains in rows from the tie beams which spanned the arcades of the sanctuary. This system ensured an even spread of light, and it remained standard for centuries to come. The high-water mark of mosque lamps was reached in Mamluk times, especially in mid-fourteenth-century Egypt, where they bore bold *thulth* inscriptions blazing forth in the darkness the name of the patron who commissioned them or, much less frequently, verses from the Qur'an.

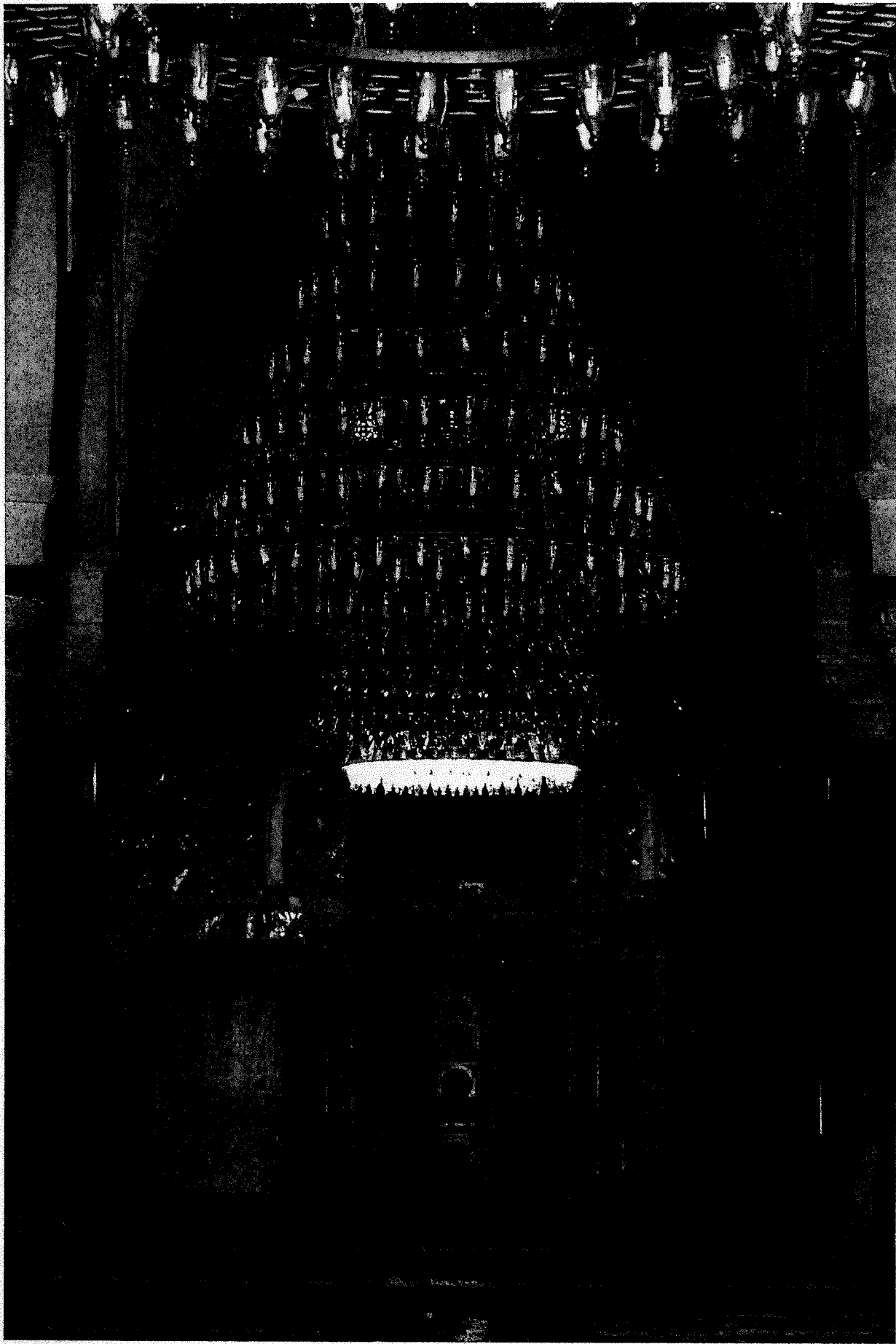
Of special importance were bronze polycandela derived from Byzantine prototypes. These were essentially hanging circular, lobed, or polygonal trays suspended from

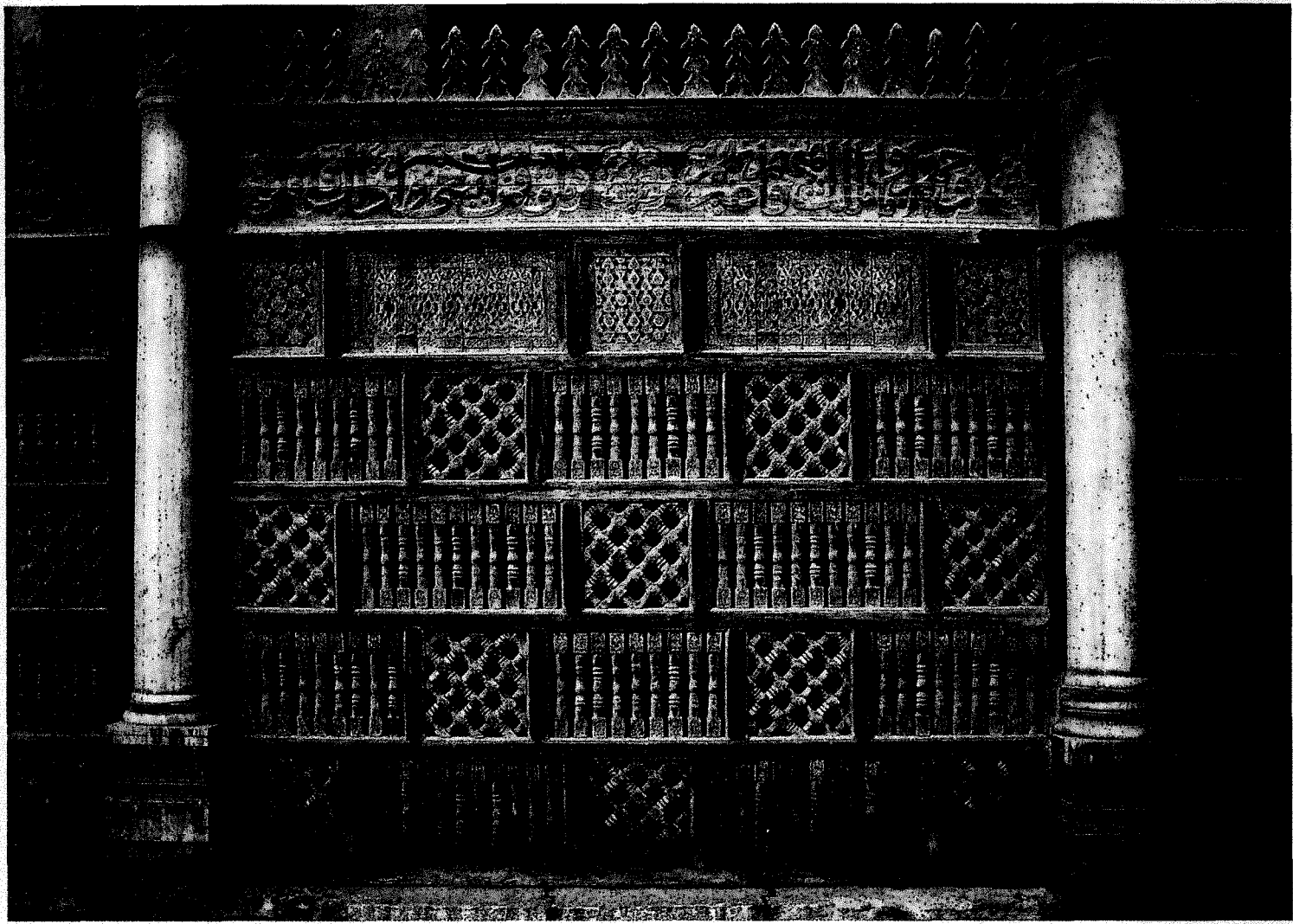


75 Hanging lamps depicted in the left half of the frontispiece to an Umayyad Qur'an manuscript. Sana'a, Dar al-Makhtutat (20-33.1).

chains, with a network of holes, usually circular, for holding small glass lamps with a floating wick. The more elaborate ones were tiered on an inclined plane so that they resembled a pyramid (pl. 76). These are especially popular in the Maghrib—many a Moroccan madrasa or mosque, such as Taza, still has one *in situ*. The empty apertures would project magnified shadows of typically Islamic geometric design. Thanks to the cumulative power of their many tiers of serried lamps, they could transform the impact of a dim interior and were often placed with special care to emphasize given parts of a building, such as the mihrab itself, the bay preceding it, or a long sequence of arcades leading to a vanishing point. Even when they were not lit, the pinpoint of light at the end of a long enfilade of arches would bring the entire arcade to life.

The combined effect of these various kinds of illumination—candles, metal and glass lamps, polycandela—is impossible to recapture in modern times, when such lighting has lost its essential living, flickering, unpredictable nature thanks to the steady, harsh, deadening glare of neon. The words of Paul the Silentiary's *ekphrasis* of Haghia Sophia, delivered in 563, eloquently evoke such vanished splendors: "no words are sufficient to describe the illumination in the evening: you might say that some nocturnal sun filled the majestic temple with light" (Mango 1972, 89). In modern buildings electricity has changed all this, and has opened up a vast range of possibilities for the use of artificial light. These are a study in themselves.





77 *Mashrabiyya* screen in the Mosque of al-Maridani, Cairo, 1340.

The Use of Light and Shade to Create Forms

Transient patterned spaces, in which light and shadow played equal roles, were mostly created by screens or by *mashrabiyya* grilles. Typically, the latter, used as shutters placed in front of windows or other openings, allowed those within to see without being seen. Thus they served a triple purpose, firstly as dense external decoration, secondly as a device for ensuring privacy, and thirdly to filter and tone down strong sunlight. They were made of small pieces of turned wood set into larger designs, mostly of geometric shape—stellar patterns were popular and made it seem as if a window were filled with stars. Some even depict mosque interiors. The Mamluk period in Egypt and Syria saw the golden age of *mashrabiyya* woodwork (pl. 77).

Much larger wooden screens were used from Morocco to Iran as balconies or as dividers between a courtyard and the corridors or chambers adjoining it, and these could yield dramatic floor patterns in slanting sunlight. But similar designs in marble windows inaugurated this fashion in the early eighth century, as can be seen at the Great Mosque of Damascus (Creswell 1969, pl. 59), and imitated at Córdoba (Brisch 1966). Furthermore, an apparently inexhaustible range of vegetal motifs, using the identical *ajouré* technique, but this time executed in carved stucco, filled the *claustra* above the door lintels in Qasr al-Hayr West in Syria in the early eighth century

76 (opposite) Polycandelon hanging in the Great Mosque at Kairouan.

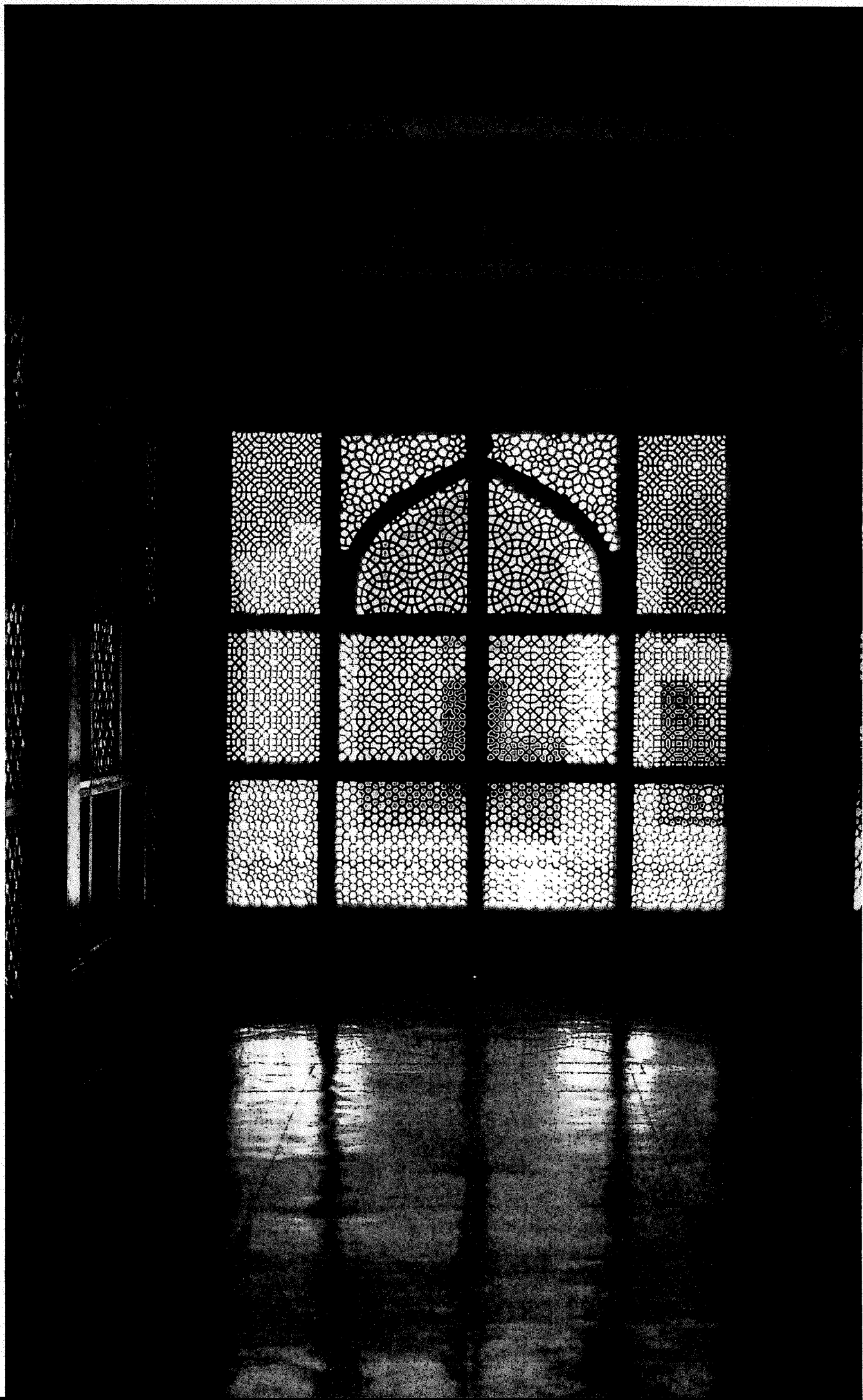
(Schlumberger 1986, pls. 76–80). Clear openings in the walls could translate into strong bars of light patterning walls and floors alike, as in the mosque of Gulbarga (1375) in the Deccan (Hoag 1977, pl. 390).

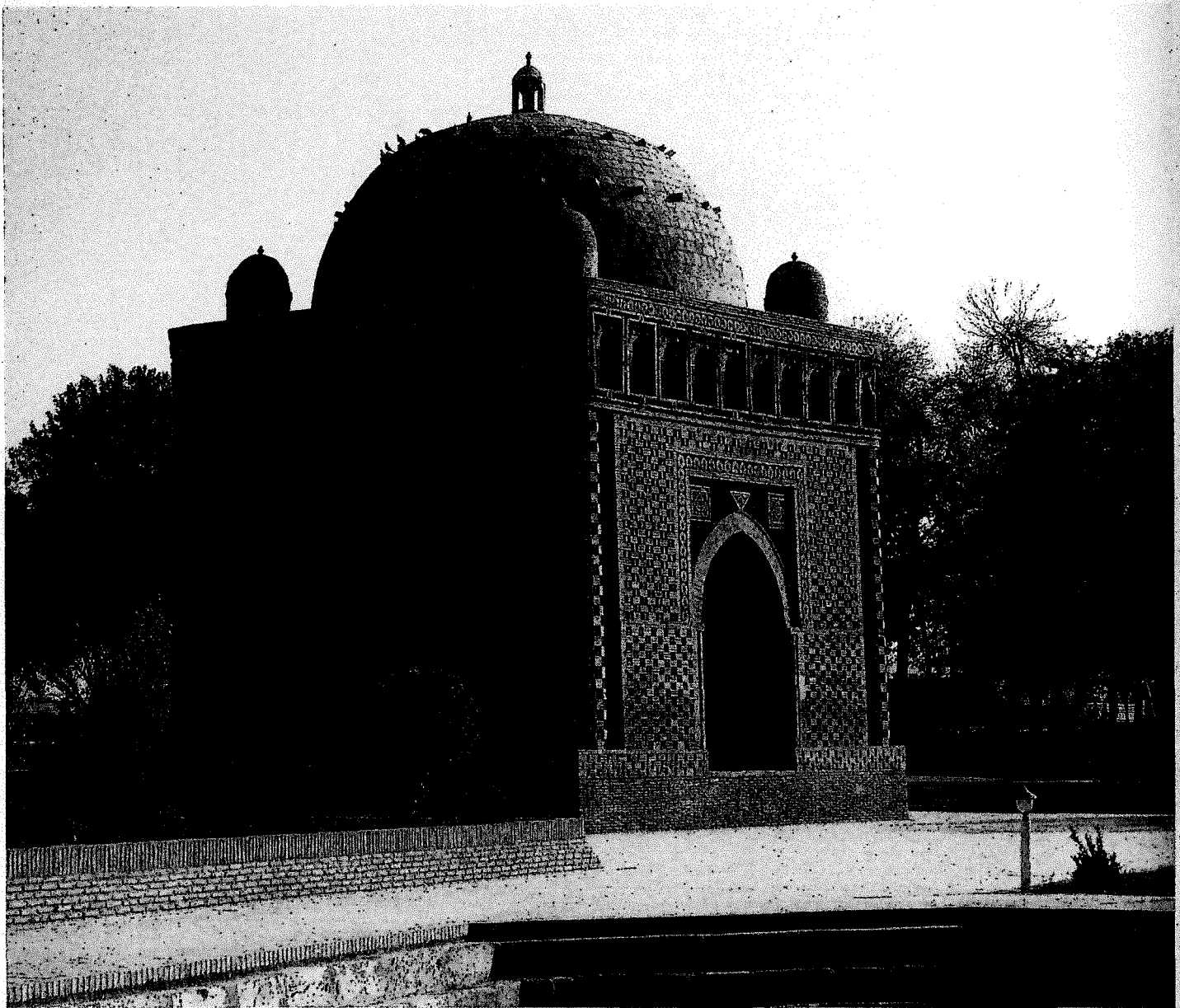
The most widespread use of screens in Islamic architecture is in the Indian subcontinent, especially in the Mughal period. These screens are known as *jalis* and are usually executed in stone or marble (Batley 1954, viii and pl. 20). Their designs are predominantly geometric, but occasionally they bear vegetal designs, as in a celebrated window from the mosque of Sidi Sa'id in Ahmedabad (1572) in Gujarat (Alfieri and Borromeo 2000, 104). They tend to be set closer to the ground than the *mashrabiyya* grilles, which were set within window frames. *Jalis* have very different roles depending on whether they are viewed from the outside or from within a building. Viewed externally, they serve as decorative two-dimensional cladding. But their impact on interior space is much more varied (pl. 78). If one looks up, the light streams in through clearly defined spaces, each of which encloses a pattern. If one looks down, those patterns are replicated on the floor, crisply if the sunlight is strong, but in a blurred and hazy fashion if it is weak. And in certain conditions of sunlight there is a magnifying and perspectival effect, so that a pattern which is relatively small when it fills a window high up in the building covers a much larger surface area by the time it is projected onto the floor (Volwahren 1969, 34–35, 75 and 120). To the person looking out through a *jali* screen, the world takes on a fragmented, unreal quality, as though one were seeing it at one remove, through a glass darkly. And lastly, there is something kaleidoscopic about the effects of multiple different *jali* designs as one moves through a building, in that the patterning on floors and walls changes from one moment to the next. Stained glass set in a window of geometric or vegetal design could add the extra dimension of color to such patterns. Thus light is transformed into decoration.

External Relief Decoration

The role of external ornament in Islamic architecture could scarcely be overestimated. Whatever its nature—whether it is vegetal, geometric, or epigraphic, or indeed whether it depicts living creatures, it depends on making the most of the changing sunlight throughout the day, giving a monument a subtly different character from one hour to the next. The sharpness of early morning light, the blaze of noon, the soft contours of twilight, the differences between raking and direct light—such varied conditions can give a building a distinctively different character from one hour to the next, as shown by numerous buildings with brick decoration in the Iranian world (pl. 79). The use of brick as both a building material and a decorative medium lent such buildings a formidable integration. Polygonal tomb towers lent themselves especially well to such ornament, since even slight alterations of plane would catch the sun at a different angle, and thus allow the viewer to enjoy a whole sequence of differently textured panels at a single glance. Small wonder that such ornament prompted Edwin Lutyens to exclaim “Speak not of Persian brickwork, but of Persian brick magic.” Indeed, a tower at

Jali in the tomb
ti, Fatehpur Sikri,





the Samanids,

Kharraqan (1093) near Qazvin in northwest Iran displays almost 70 discrete patterns in brick, sometimes applied as cladding and sometimes part of the actual structure, sometimes flush, sometimes recessed, and sometimes outset and thus exploiting shadow lines to the full (Stronach and Young 1966, 14–16, 19–20 and pls. XVI–XXIV). In India, Anatolia, Syria, and Egypt the availability of good-quality stone encouraged the development of panels of ornament in vegetal and geometric designs, and in late Mamluk Egypt such ornament, applied in high relief, enveloped the exteriors of domes, making them ornamental landmarks rising from the rooftops.

Symbolism

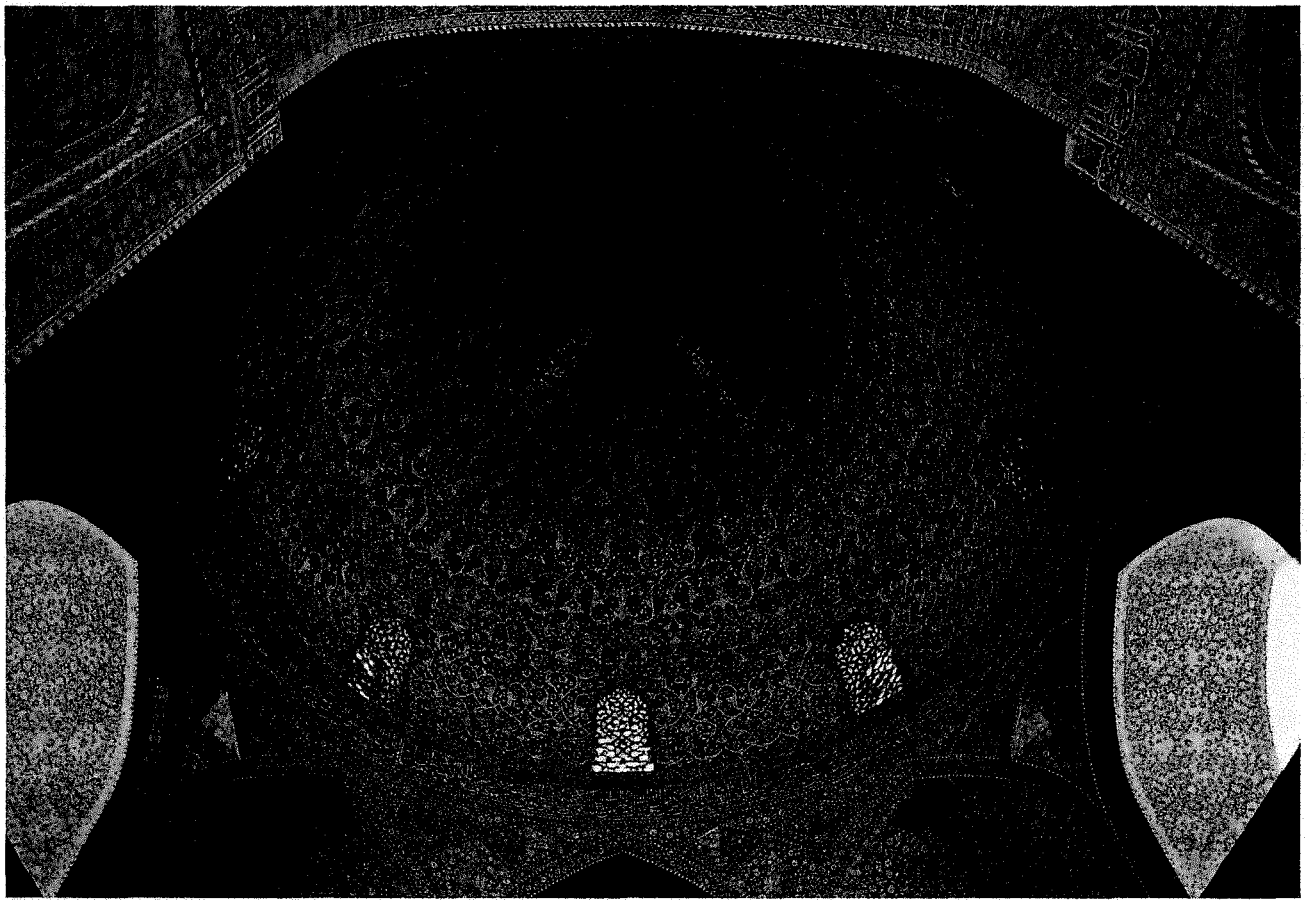
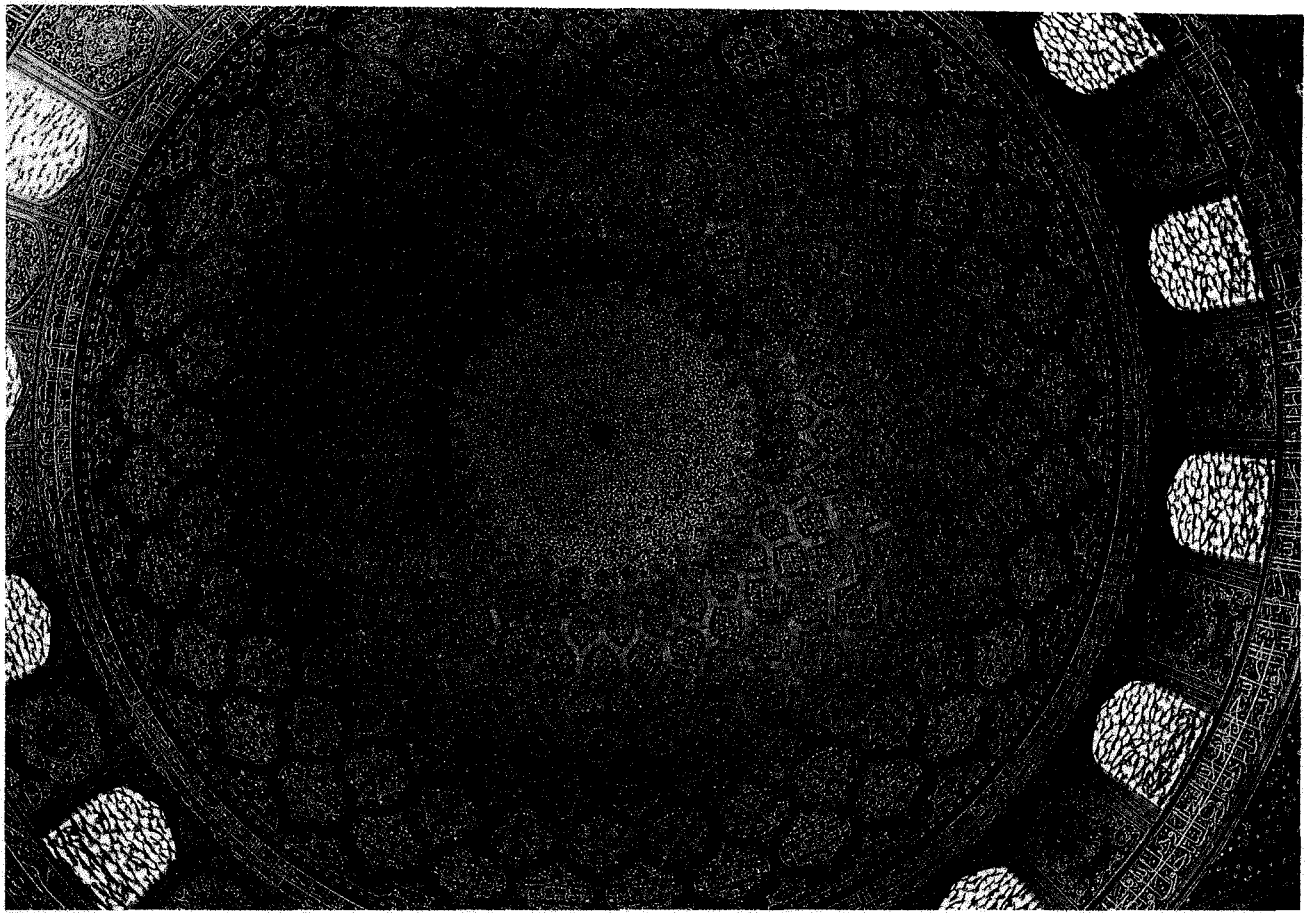
Sometimes visual puns drove home the desired message, and it is a pity that this aspect of Islamic architecture has attracted so little notice to date, especially as such puns proliferate in other media such as book painting. Egypt's only female sultan, Shajar

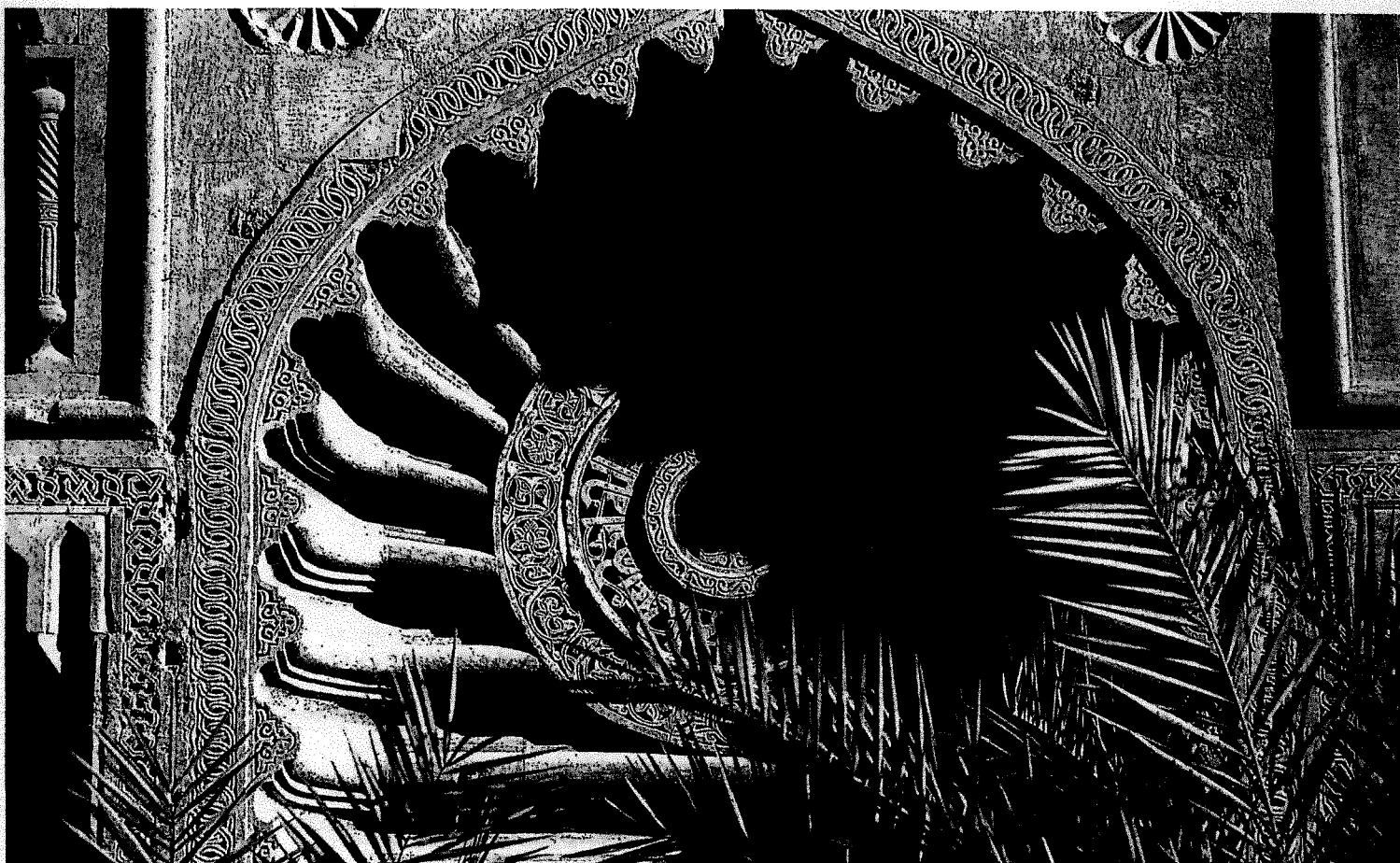


80 Glass mosaic in the Tomb of Shajar al-Durr, Cairo, c. 1250.

al-Durr, whose name means Tree of Pearls, placed an image of a pearl-laden tree in the glittering medium of glass mosaic in the hood of the mihrab of the mausoleum which she presciently built for herself in Cairo in 1250, shortly before her murder (pl. 80). Pearls were widely regarded as bearers of light. Similarly, the crescent or circular finials that are so often placed on domes and minarets are often gilded, so of course they catch the sunlight and thus draw attention to the building which they crown, as at Bijapur (Jairazbhoy 2003, 166; Volwahren 1969, 87). Numerous references to the rising or setting sun, sometimes using an appropriate color scheme, sometimes not, occur in unexpected contexts, and may echo an adjoining architectural form, like the floor and vault of the royal apse in the bath hall at Khirbat al-Mafjar (Hamilton 1959, 90–91, 335–36; Ettinghausen 1972, 33, 38–40; Hillenbrand 1988, 5–13). This same rayed theme found even richer and indeed classic expression in 961–65, in the Córdoba mihrab and in the design of the dome directly above it (Barrucand and Bednorz 1992, 78–79).

The place of honor for solar puns or sunbursts is just where one would expect it—at the inner apex of a dome, sometimes with gadrooned ribs suggesting the rays of the sun (Grabar 1978, 173, pl. 100), sometimes with the solar radiance expressed in a more understated way, as in the inner dome of the Lutfallah Mosque in Isfahan erected between 1601 and 1618 (pl. 81), and at yet other times the effect is intensified by the reflection of actual sunlight, as in the inner dome of the Shah (Imam Khomeini) Mosque, also in Isfahan, datable to 1612–38 (pl. 82). Many more variations in the design of inner domes could be cited, from the riddling pentangle of the north dome of the Isfahan *jami*' (Seherr-Thoss *et al.* 1968, 45, pl. 11), which could be linked to the cosmic themes found in the Qur'anic inscriptions of this same chamber (Grabar 1990, 39–40 and 50), to the sacred names in tiny boxes of white square kufic wheeling in the firmament, as at the Varamin *jami*' of 1322–25 (Kratchkovskaia 1931, 47, fig. 12; Seherr-Thoss *et al.* 1968, 129, pl. 58), or the stellar and solar motifs inside the dome of the





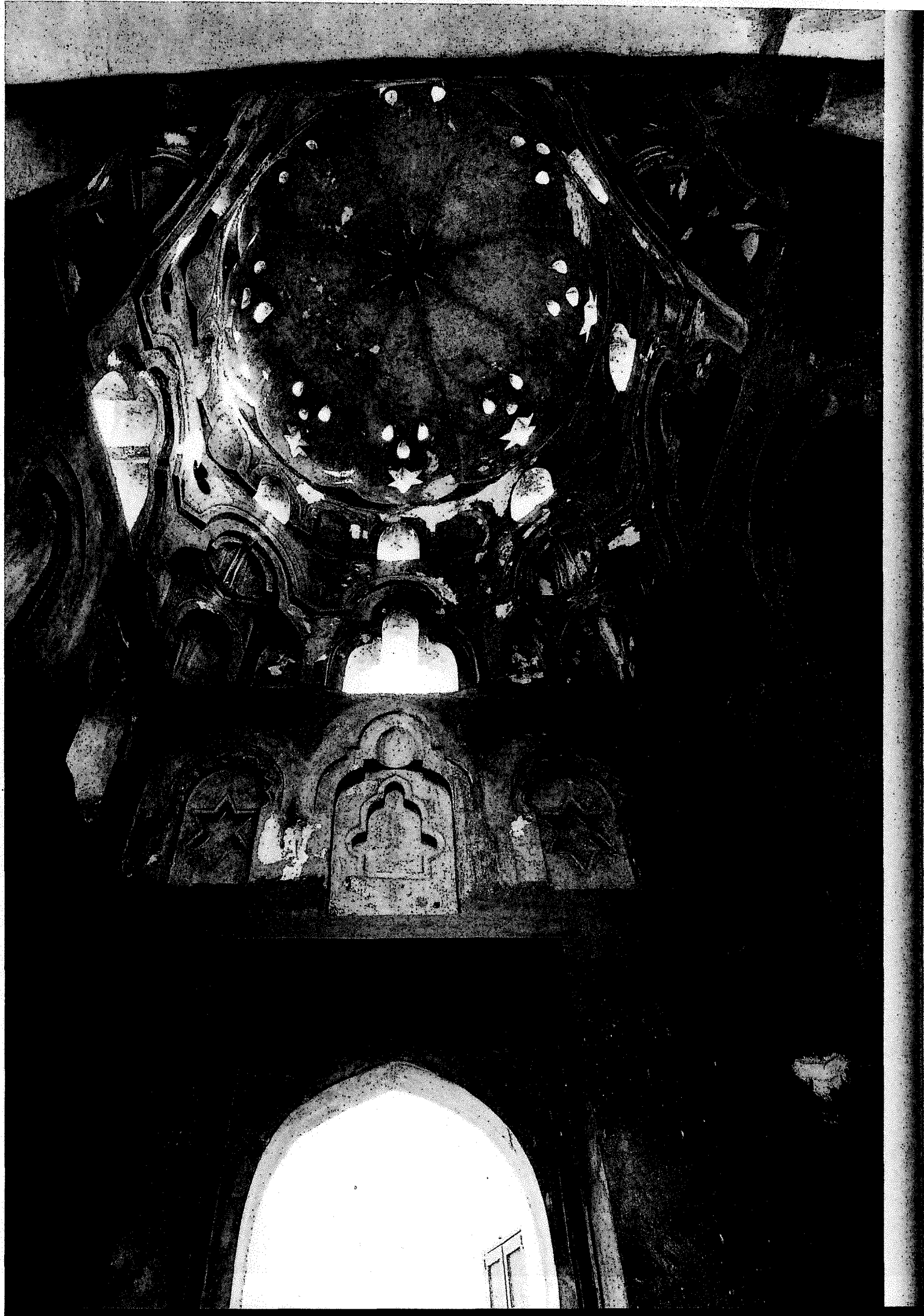
83 Hood on the façade of the Aqmar mosque, Cairo, 1125.

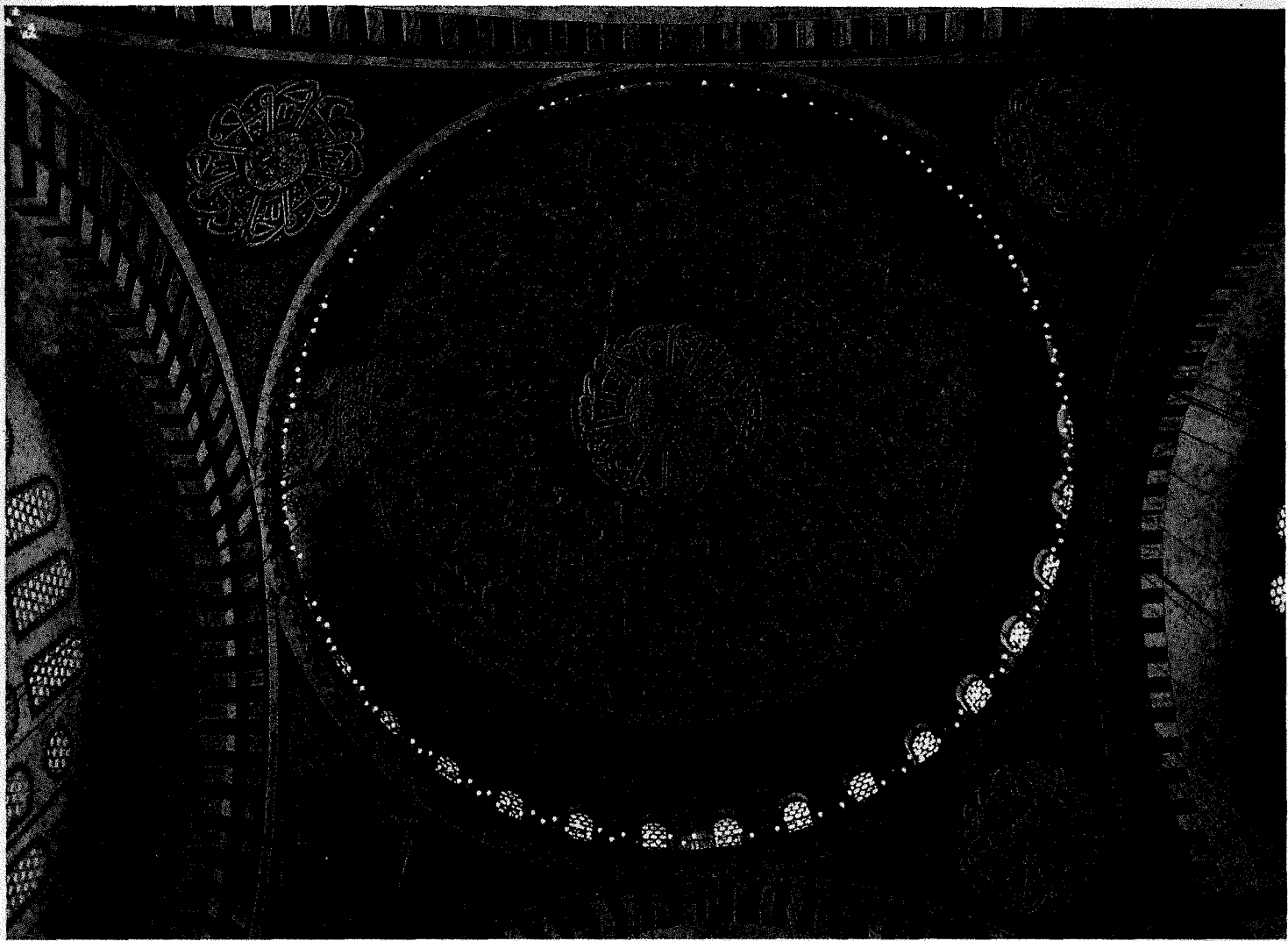
Karatay *madrasa* in Konya (Hill and Grabar 1965, pl. 421; Seherr-Thoss *et al.* 1968, 255, pl. 117). Some have read religious and mystical messages into such designs (Bürgel 2005, 65–69). And an occasional inscription supports the notion that light had symbolic associations. Thus the mosque of Nasmus near Barda in the Caucasus had an inscription dated 720/1320 which proclaimed “mosques are the houses of God on earth; they send light to the inhabitants of the heavens just as stars send light to the inhabitants of the earth” (Khanykov 1864, 146–47).

But the most celebrated pun of all, found in dozens of examples across the centuries and the continents, is solidly anchored in the Qur’an itself—the image of the hanging lamp in a mihrab niche, sometimes accompanied by a star, or indeed with a star—or black sun—instead of the lamp, as in the mihrab in the cave of the Dome of the Rock (Baer 1985; Melikian-Chirvani 1990, 118). Often enough the arch was framed by the very verse (24: 35) to which the image refers, positive proof of the close link between the mihrab and light, which has generated much theological commentary, of which the *Mishkat al-Anwar*, often attributed to al-Ghazali, is among the best known (Gardner 1952). A substantial case has been made on quite other grounds, rooted in Buddhist and Zoroastrian practice, for this connection (Melikian-Chirvani 1990, 112–23). When entire mihrabs with this motif are executed in luster ceramic, the labile play of light invests them with mystery (see pl. 69). This theme is often found on small individual molded turquoise tiles made for a mass market; these could easily serve to mark the direction of prayer, for example as supplementary mihrabs (Pinder-Wilson 1969, pl. 178), as could the more expensive luster mihrab tiles (Watson 1985, 149, pls. 125 and 129 and color pl. N). Many tombstones also have a version of this design; in addition

81 (*opposite, top*) Interior of the dome in the Lutfallah Mosque, Isfahan, 1601–18.

82 (*opposite, bottom*) Interior of the dome over the mihrab in the Shah (Imam Khomeini) Mosque, Isfahan, 1612–38.



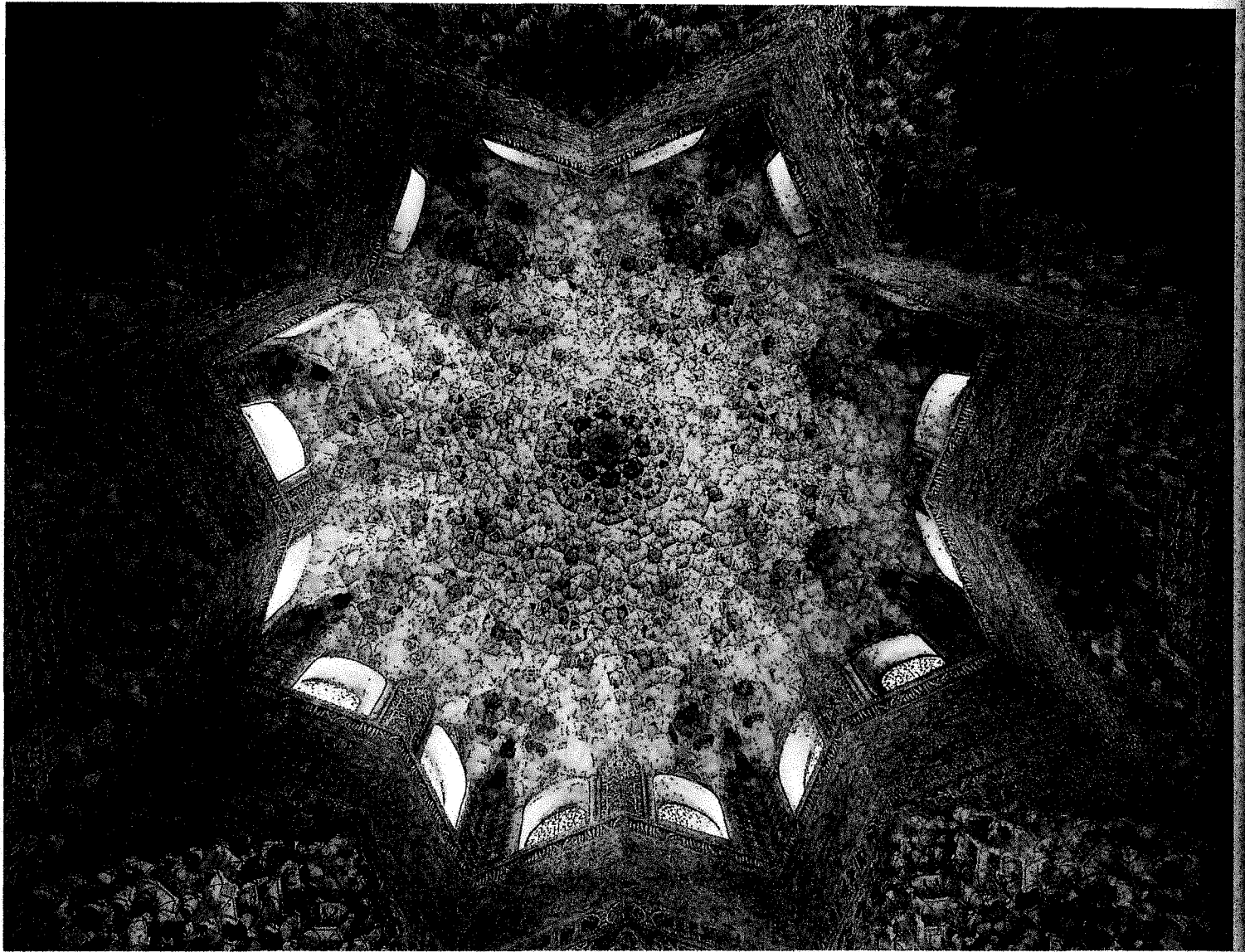


85 Interior of the dome in the Suleymaniye Mosque, Istanbul, 1550-57.

to evoking the Qur'anic text, they indicate the correct orientation for burial (Féhevári 1972). This is not the only symbolic motif associated with mihrabs. A host of variations on the theme of the rayed nimbus, its rays streaming out from a sacred name—usually Allah, but sometimes 'Ali or Muhammad—is found in Fatimid and Mamluk contexts (Hillenbrand 1988, 29-31). The holy name is placed in a semi-circle centered at the base of the mihrab hood with the ribs of the semi-dome performing double duty as solar rays streaming from it. The façade of the Aqmar mosque in Cairo (1125) illustrates several variations on this theme (pl. 83). The taste for inlaid marble in Mamluk times allowed the motif to develop further in quite dramatic ways, with the individual rays resembling forked lightning (see pl. 205a).

Bathroom domes frequently display star-shaped or circular openings that would have offered to those inside a simulacrum of the heavens, an effect intensified by the dimness within and the strongly focussed light streaming from these openings. The selfsame effect is known in certain Fatimid mausolea, such as the example at Qus (pl. 84). Nor should one forget the intimate relationship with the minaret, whose very etymology proclaims its links with light (*nur*) and/or fire (*nar*) (Adle and Melikian-Chirvani 1972, 264-65; but cf. Bloom 2013, 260-61, 263-64). In medieval times, lamps were placed at the summit of minarets in the hours of darkness (Melikian-Chirvani 1990, 109-12; Hillenbrand 1994, 132-33 and 154-55), and today these have been replaced by neon

84 (opposite) Interior of the dome in a tomb at Qus, 11th or 12th century.

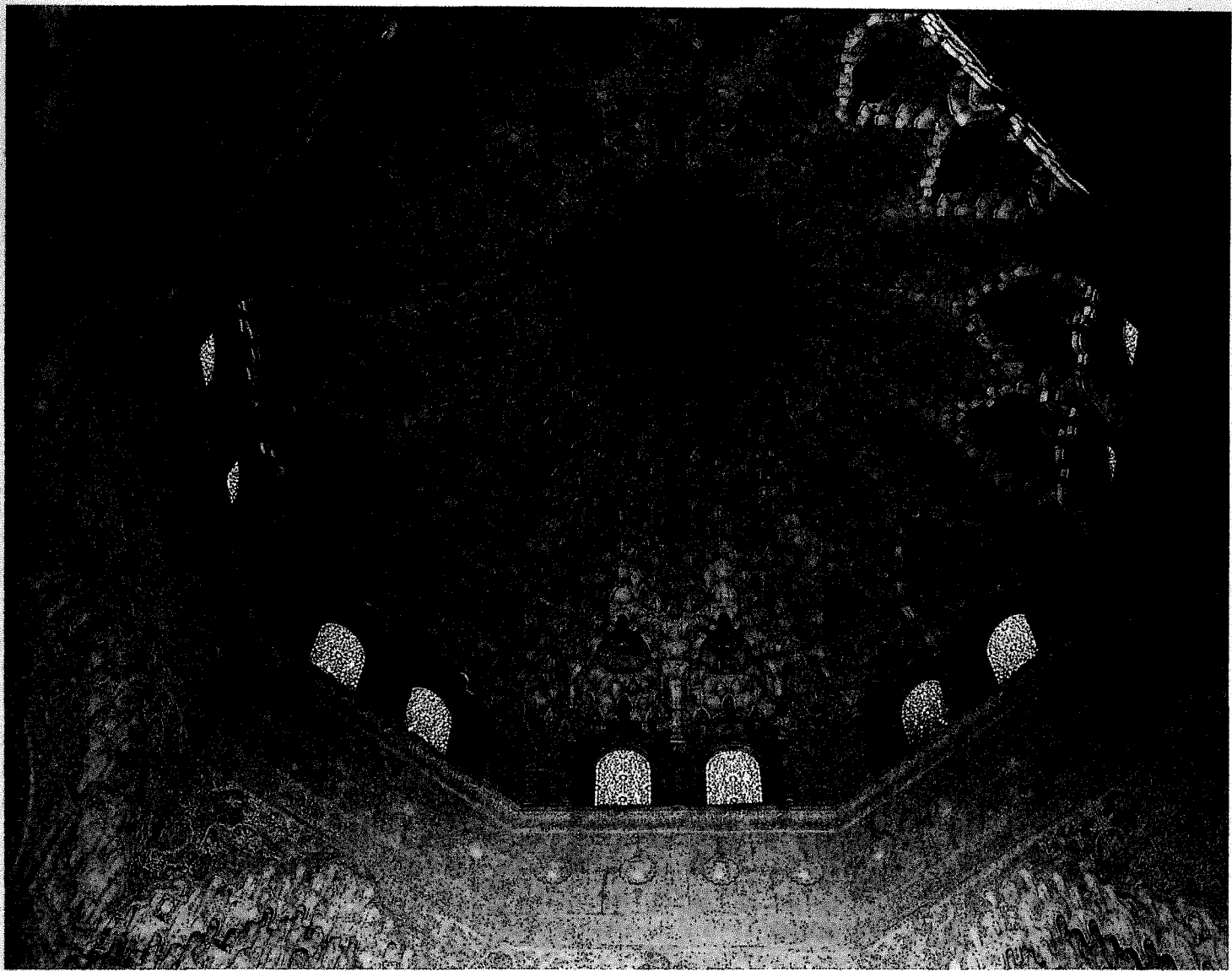


all of the Abencerrajes,
ra, Granada, 14th

lights. The association of the minaret with light is, then, a tenacious Islamic tradition and etymology merely underlines that fact.

Another such pun is the epigraphic roundel, which mimics the rays of the sun—the association with light and indeed enlightenment is no accident—by placing the letters on the outer rim of an imaginary circle with the shafts all pointing toward the center and thus functioning as rays of light. The pronounced verticality of such scripts as *riq'a* and *muhaqqaq* lent itself particularly well to such designs since it stressed the length of these shafts, and thereby emphasized the parallel with the sun. This could be further underlined by the use of gold for the letters, as in many an epigraphic roundel in Mamluk metalwork which trumpets the ruler's name and titles and, in more subliminal fashion, his divinely ordained legitimacy (Hillenbrand 1988, 33–35; Blair and Bloom 2013, 8 and 10, pl. 5). Such roundels became an Ottoman specialty and were used predominantly at the apex of an inner dome (Necipoğlu 2005, pls. 161, 179–81, 183, 185, 218, 257, 273, 310, 329–30, 369, 383, 440, and 443). Thus they had obvious solar connotations (pl. 85).

It seems appropriate to end with some of the most spectacular manifestations of light in Islamic architecture, all of them in the Alhambra. Some contain verse



87 Hall of the Two Sisters,
Alhambra, Granada, 14th
century.

inscriptions (Grabar 1978, 143–48), the longest by the Grenadine court poet Ibn Zamrak, in which these buildings apostrophize themselves, comparing the ruler to the sun, evoking the Pleiades and Gemini, the planets, and Solomon's rotating palanquin. Thus they specifically encourage a metaphorical reading of their signature lofty *muqarnas* domes. The carefully calibrated rationing of light in other medieval *muqarnas* domes, from Natanz (Seherr-Thoss *et al.* 1968, 125, pl. 56) to Sitt Zubayda in Baghdad (Janabi 1982, pl. 9), invites similar speculations. But the examples in the Alhambra stand out from similar experiments in the expressive power of the *muqarnas* precisely by their use of inscriptions to load these forms with extra meaning. They trap and filter, radiate and reflect light in kaleidoscopic fashion. In the Hall of the Abencerrajes the link with the constellations is driven home in that the entire vault rests on a gigantic eight-pointed star (pl. 86), while in certain lighting conditions the still larger *muqarnas* dome of the Hall of the Two Sisters resolves itself into a series of overlapping stars. As one looks upward, the eye darts from one pinpoint of light after another as the sun's rays strike, as if at random. The whole mass of scintillating cells, more than 5,000 of them in this triumph of illusion—for they are not load-bearing—seems to come to life and turn in perpetual motion. This ethereal vision brings to life the verses of Ibn Zamrak



ceiling over the
ambassadors,
Cordoba, 14th

inscribed high above in epigraphic bands: "the stars would gladly descend from their zones of light, and wish that they lived in this hall instead of in heaven" (pl. 87). Similar ideas are embodied, this time without benefit of words or of a *muqarnas* dome, in the upper reaches of the Hall of the Ambassadors (pl. 88). This throne room, ensconced in the massive bulk of the tower known appropriately enough as al-Qamariyya ("the lunar"), boasts a cedarwood ceiling whose sequentially stepped planes may well be intended to echo the Seven Heavens of the Qur'an. Its dark wood is inlaid with white, blue, and gold stars, crowns and circles large and small, a Milky Way in miniature. It is, moreover, some 75 feet high, and the feeble illumination available in medieval times would have ensured that its upper reaches would have remained shrouded in darkness, but for twinkling pinpoints where the inlaid motifs (presumably using bone or ivory, or even paint) caught a glimmer of light, thereby strengthening the analogy with the night sky. This technical tour de force of woodcarving can surely claim to represent the very essence of light in Islamic architecture.

This essay has shown that Islamic architecture, which stretches across half the world, expresses a corresponding wealth of responses to the ways that light can adorn, enliven,

and transform monuments. This is an architecture that is far more religious than secular in function, and therefore it is not difficult to sense that these buildings so saturated in piety, and proclaiming on their walls the sacred text of the Qur'an, are a silent paean to that God who is the Light of the heavens and of the earth.

Notes

- 1 See Beelaert 1996, 149–67, for an extended discussion of the literary trope of the Kaaba as a woman, and especially 156, n. 25 for the colors of the *kiswa*.
- 2 For these five terms, see Kramers 1926, 67; for a much longer tally of titles ending in *din*, none of them listed by Kramers, see Dietrich 1960, 45–53; see also 54, which gives a staggering cumulative list in Arabic script of all the 186 known titles incorporating *din*.
- 3 For the case of Badr al-Din Lu'lu', see van Berchem 1906, 206; for that of Nur al-Din, see Elisséeff 1952–54, 157–58, and 187.
- 4 Personal communication.

p. 122: Detail of rock crystal ewer, early 11th century. Victoria and Albert Museum (7904-1862).

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