

## Evaluating the Dominant Theories on the Genesis of the Mosque Type

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### Abstract

The Western interest in studying the artistic patrimony of the Muslim world began as early as the late-nineteenth century. Since then, huge efforts have been made to document, analyse and conserve the gems of Islamic architecture. Nonetheless, mainly drawing on Arabia's slender architectural heritage in pre- and early Islamic times, a majority of Western scholars tended to credit the mosque type to non-Islamic origins. Although most of these theories were put forward about a century ago, they still largely shape the dominant wisdom in Western scholarship. This article tries to look closely into the earliest mosques, particularly those built in the first/seventh century, with the aim of investigating whether and how these mosques were influenced by the local pre-Islamic types. To do so, we will consider the early Arabic sources as well as the findings of the relevant excavation works. It is of interest to note that all hypotheses on the non-Islamic origins of the mosque were too weak to withstand the scrutiny of subsequent research. A typical case in the literature is that a group of scholars adopt a theory which is soon demolished by another group who themselves propose their own that is disproved by a third group and so on. All these views failed to provide convincing answers for such central questions as when, where and how a certain architectural type, or types, inspired the mosque. The stark simplicity of the earliest mosques, and which derived from the simplicity of the Islamic rituals themselves, does not seem to have required, particularly in the earliest phase, the borrowing of any foreign architectural type. Later, the mosque layout, while greatly retaining its distinctive Islamic character, was influenced by some architectural types in the conquered territories. A noted example is the use of transept in the Umayyad mosque in Damascus. The presence of such influences is natural and could well have been dictated by variant climatic conditions, but should not be taken to attribute the mosque type to non-Islamic origins—especially that it was only at a later date when such influences found their way to mosque architecture.

**Keywords:** mosque, pre-Islamic types, origins, *apadāna*, Roman basilica, church, synagogue, theories