

# Umayyad Mosque



## Where Is Umayyad Mosque Located?

The Umayyad Mosque, also known as the Great Mosque of Damascus, is located in the old city of Damascus, is one of the largest and oldest mosques in the world. In the general style of the structural elements of the Great Mosque of Damascus is reminiscent of grand Byzantine architecture.

On the same ground where the Umayyad Mosque stands today was once a temple that was dedicated to Hadad, an idol from the Aramaean era around 1000 BC. While the Romans ruled the city, they built a temple on the site and dedicated it to the god Jupiter.

It appears that Muslims inherited a large sacred site belonging to Antiquity (Jupiter as suggested by Creswell) and later was partly occupied by the Christians who built St John the Baptist church some time under early Muslim rule . Muslims at first prayed in open air, but by the arrival of Caliph Al-Walid they



erected the mosque in the south eastern part of the complex. Further evidence of this was the discovery of relics belonging to St. John in a crypt in another locality away from the site of the mosque. Such thesis was also endorsed by Sauvaget (1932) and Creswell (1959) who confirmed that the site did not involve St John's Church.

Since then, the mosque has been rebuilt several times due to fire, but its overall design has remained the same. It is one of only a few mosques to keep the same architectural style and design even throughout its history. The mosque is one of the oldest and holiest in the world, and had a huge influence on mosque architecture

One of the features of the Umayyad Mosque is the tomb of Saladin, which stands in a garden that is adjacent to the wall of the mosque. This is the final resting place of Kurdish Ayyubid Sultan Saladin. The mosque also holds a memorial that may contain the head of John the Baptist, who is honored as a great prophet and preacher by both Christians and Muslims.

## Who Built The Umayyad Mosque?

Caliph Al-Walid I of the Umayyad dynasty (705-715) during whose reign the Arabs invaded Spain and reached the Indus River, set his residence in Damascus and decided it needed a mosque which would show the importance acquired by the new religion and by the Caliphs, Muhammad's successors.

The Great Mosque of Damascus is a cornerstone of Islamic architecture and at the same time it is a development of Classic and Byzantine patterns; today it has an Islamic appearance, but the original building would hardly look like a mosque, without additions which were made many centuries later; the current dome was built after a fire destroyed the roof of the prayer hall in 1893; the upper sections of the three minarets were added by the Ayyubids, Mamelukes and Ottomans; in origin the minarets were just square towers, two of which rested upon existing towers of the wall which surrounded the ancient temple.



The *sahn* (courtyard) is a key feature of a mosque, but it was also present in the design of a *temenos*, the sacred space around a sanctuary; in the case of the Umayyad Mosque the length of the sahn is that of the ancient wall which surrounded the *temenos*, while its width is smaller; in origin also the northern portico (that with

the minaret) was supported by columns, but it was greatly damaged in 1400 when [Timur](#) conquered Damascus and almost destroyed it after having massacred its inhabitants.



The central higher section of the façade recalls a church, rather than a mosque, owing to its mosaics and its overall design



The art of mosaic saw a great development during the Late Roman Empire; the villas near Antioch were decorated with large and elaborate mosaics depicting mythological events; fine mosaics have been found also in the region of Apamea which is close to Damascus; the

use of mosaics continued during the Byzantine rule of Syria and the Arabs were impressed by the mosaics they saw in the ancient buildings. Caliph al-Walid decided to decorate the four sides of the courtyard with mosaics. Due to damage caused by the Mongols and Timur, only the western portico and a small section of the northern one retain the original mosaics.

The mosaics depict a heavenly landscape with trees with their fruits, rivers with boats and elaborately designed palaces and pavilions, but because of the Muslim prohibition of representing human beings and animals, there is neither a bird singing on a tree, nor a sailor in control of a boat. Maybe these mosaics inspired



the construction of Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi, a palace in the Syrian Desert, which was built a few years later. The visionary aspect of this landscape is enhanced by the gigantic size of the trees and by their luxuriant foliage.

Similar to Byzantine mosaics (and to those in Ravenna and Rome) the subjects are depicted on a golden background.

A fountain for ablutions was built at the centre of the courtyard, but it was not enough to "fill" that large empty space; for this reason towards the end of the 8th



century two small pavilions were built near the northern corners of the courtyard (their domes belong to a later period); their design, size and location (which is not aligned with the central fountain) show a careful analysis of the issue and a very good solution.

Ancient columns of the same size and classic Corinthian capitals were utilized to

support the Treasury, while for the other pavilion the architects chose coloured columns of different length and Byzantine capitals of different shape; all these materials came from the ancient temple and from the changes made to turn it into a church.



While the interior of the western portico was decorated with mosaics similar to those in the courtyard, the interior of the

eastern portico was faced with marble panels from the ancient temple; some of them were rearranged to form geometrical patterns, while others retained their original juxtaposition which created an optical effect due to the reflection of the same veins.



The prayer hall was built making use of the long southern wall of the ancient structure; this wall faced Mecca and three mihrab (niches) were opened to indicate the direction of prayers; the width of the hall is more than three times its length and it is divided into three naves by ancient columns; a small Ottoman pavilion houses the head of St. John the Baptist (Yahya for the Muslims).

