


2011

# From the Port of Mocha to the Eighteenth-Century Tomb of Imam al-Mahdi Muhammad in al-Mawahib: Locating Architectural Icons and Migratory Craftsmen

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## Recommended Citation

Nancy Um, "From the Port of Mocha to the Eighteenth-Century Tomb of Imam al-Mahdi Muhammad in al-Mawahib: Locating Architectural Icons and Migratory Craftsmen," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 41 (2011): 387-400.

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**PROCEEDINGS**  
**OF THE**  
**SEMINAR FOR ARABIAN STUDIES**

**VOLUME 41**  
**2011**

Papers from the forty-fourth meeting of the  
Seminar for Arabian Studies  
held at the British Museum, London,  
22 to 24 July 2010

**SEMINAR FOR ARABIAN STUDIES**

**ARCHAEOPRESS**  
**OXFORD**

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ISSN 0308-8421

ISBN 978-1-905739-40-0

## From the port of Mocha to the eighteenth-century tomb of Imām al-Mahdī Muḥammad in al-Mawāhib: locating architectural icons and migratory craftsmen

NANCY UM

### Summary

This article introduces and analyses the tomb of the Qāsimī imam, al-Mahdī Muḥammad (r.1686–1718), in the village of al-Mawāhib north-east of Dhamār. Unlike many of the mosques and tombs associated with the other Zaydī imams of Yemen, al-Mahdī's mausoleum has never been published, but merits close examination. While most historians consider his imamate to have been an era of both religious and political decline, this period was marked by increased cross-cultural interaction and artistic production. In particular, the tomb of al-Mahdī features unique decoration above its *mihrāb* and a remarkable wooden cenotaph. In order to explain the meaning and context of these two individual features, the article posits a strong connection between al-Mahdī's legacy and the lucrative port city of Mocha on the Red Sea coast, which was separated from al-Mawāhib by a considerable distance but in close communication with the imam's court. The projecting box over the *mihrāb* relates to the *rawshan*, or wooden projecting window, which appeared as a key visual icon of Mocha's house facades. Additionally, the ivory-inlaid wooden cenotaph was probably manufactured in Mocha by Indian artisans. In fact, it may serve as the single remaining Yemeni specimen of this provincial woodworking industry mentioned by Prisse d'Avennes in the nineteenth century.

**Keywords:** Imām al-Mahdī Muḥammad, Mocha, *rawshan*, inlaid woodwork, Prisse d'Avennes

With his moniker 'the imam of three *alqāb*' (sg. *laqab* or title), al-Mahdī Muḥammad b. Imām al-Mahdī Aḥmad (b.1637, r.1686–1718) was known as the most perplexing and fickle of the Qāsimī imams of Yemen. Not only did he change his title from al-Nāṣir to al-Hādī and then finally to al-Mahdī, but he also changed the seat of his imamate four times during his thirty-two years as imam. After claiming his *da'wah* in the fortress of al-Manṣūrah in the area of al-Ḥujariyyah and then moving to three different sites around Radā' and Sanabān, he inaugurated the small village of al-Mawāhib, located on a hill north-east of Dhamār, as his final seat in 1698–1699 (Abū Ṭālib 1990: 266). While the ruins of his palace are located at the top of the hill, his mausoleum sits at its foot (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> In this article, I will introduce and analyse the tomb of al-Mahdī Muḥammad, which has never been published before, with a discussion of its unique features, placing them within the context of cross-cultural exchange and heightened commercial activity that characterized al-Mahdī's rule.

The historian and scholar of Islamic law, Bernard Haykel, has demonstrated that the imamate of al-Mahdī

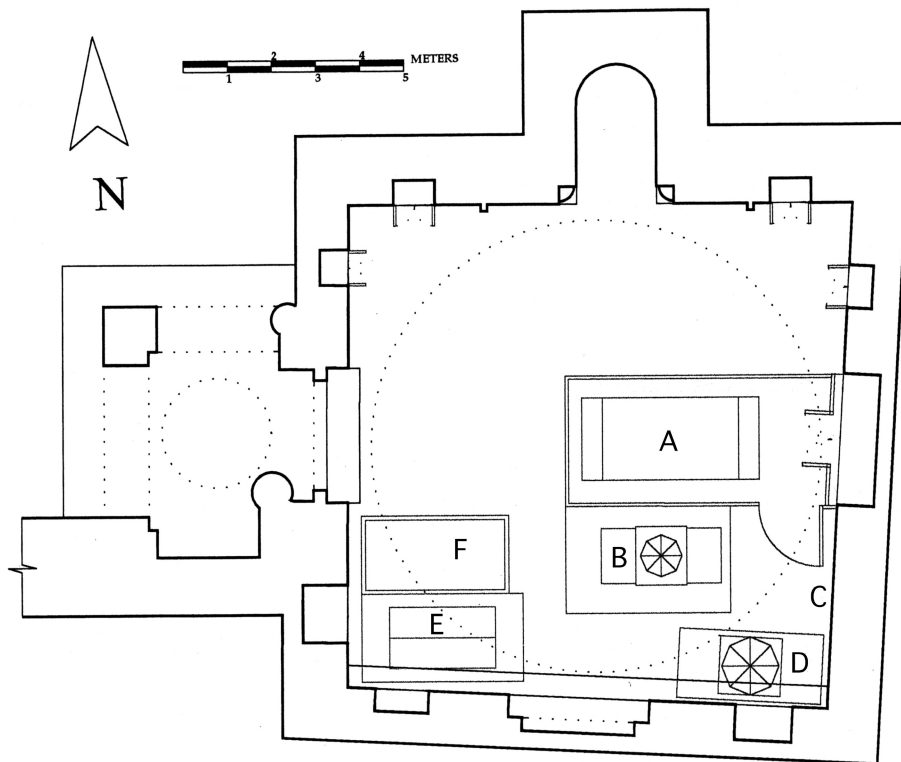
Muḥammad, who was also called Ṣāhib al-Mawāhib, was a crucial turning point in Yemen's early modern history. Lacking scholarly erudition, which was required as criteria for the imamate, al-Mahdī took the title by force rather than by the widespread acceptance of his *da'wah* (Haykel 2003: 44). After his death, the Qāsimī imamate of Yemen transformed into a dynastic succession with the title of imam passing from father to son, as Haykel has eloquently described. While al-Mahdī's rule may have signalled a compromise in the classic formulation of Yemeni Hādawī Zaydism, it was a moment of cultural growth. According to Mark S. Wagner, al-Mahdī was a great connoisseur of poetry who employed eleven poets, a much larger number than any of his predecessors. In fact, his commitment to the patronage of poetry stemmed directly from his shaky legitimacy as imam, for he hoped that this large cadre of poets could 'drown out his opponents' voices through a campaign of panegyric propaganda' (Wagner 2009: 74). Despite the questionable qualifications of the imam, this era was unexpectedly rich in terms of artistic production as well as cross-cultural exchange, thus meriting a closer exploration of its architecture.

The tomb structure was originally built for his son 'Alī (who predeceased his father in 1706 and whose burial is identified by a funerary stone set within the eastern wall

<sup>1</sup> A small chapel mosque, rather than a congregational mosque, sits near the mausoleum. Apparently, al-Mahdī conducted Friday prayers in a tent set up on an open plain (La Roque 1726: 197, 199).



**FIGURE 1.** Exterior of the tomb of Imām al-Mahdī Muḥammad, al-Mawāhib, Yemen, built in 1706. (Photograph by Nancy Um, 2002.)



**FIGURE 2.** A plan of the tomb of Imām al-Mahdī Muḥammad. **A.** The grave of Imām al-Mahdī Muḥammad; **B.** The grave of °Alī b. al-Mahdī; **C.** The funerary stone of °Alī b. al-Mahdī; **D.** The grave of one of al-Mahdī's brothers (unnamed); **E.** The grave of Bint al-Riṣāṣ, one of al-Mahdī's wives; **F.** The grave of one of al-Mahdī's children (unnamed). (Plan drawn by Amin al-Kohli, 2002.)



FIGURE 3. Mihrāb from the tomb of Imām al-Mahdī Muḥammad. (Photograph by Nancy Um, 2002.)

of the building) (Abū Ṭālib 1990: 318) (Fig. 2).<sup>2</sup> It seems that al-Mahdī, who did not prepare a separate tomb for himself despite the fact that he was over eighty years old at the time of his death, intended to join his son in this mausoleum. Additionally, the site of ʿAlī’s grave, which is surmounted by a small wooden canopy, was placed to the south of the tomb’s centre, leaving a large area for his father’s future grave to dominate the structure. Twelve years later, when al-Mahdī’s nephew and successor, Imām al-Mutawakkil al-Qāsim, took al-Mawāhib by siege, al-

<sup>2</sup> The inscription on ʿAlī’s funerary stone clarifies that the month of his death was Rabīʿ al-awwal, but the exact date is unclear because of damage to the bottom of the stone. The area outside the mausoleum was used for burials before ʿAlī’s death. A gravestone in the adjacent courtyard identifies the burial of Bint ʿAlī al-ʿImād, aunt (*khālah*) of the mufti Muḥsin b. ʿAlī, the wazir of al-Mahdī (probably Muḥsin b. ʿAlī al-Ḥubayshī, d.1737) in 1705–1706.

Mahdī finally died. His grave was then added to the tomb, to the north of ʿAlī’s. There are five burials in the tomb, but none, other than ʿAlī’s, carries an associated funerary stone. Local residents have identified the other burials as those of family members of the imam, as indicated in Figure 2.

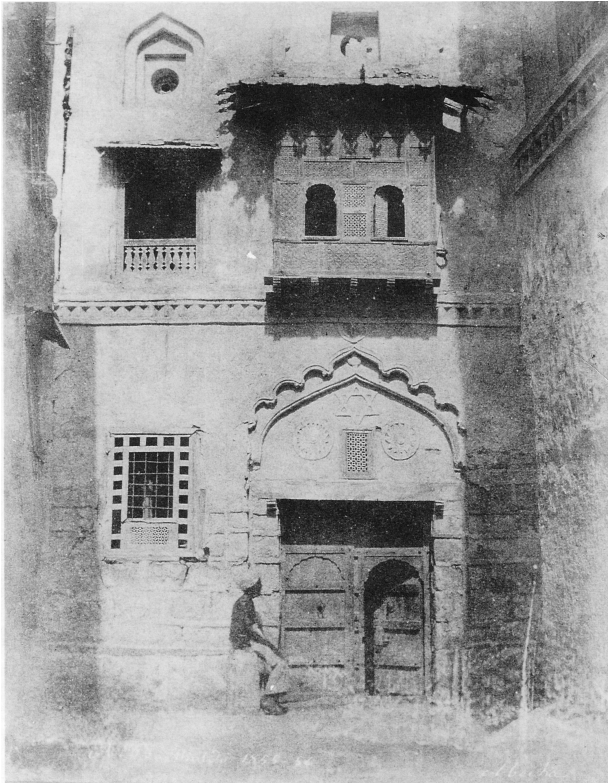
### The *mihrāb* and the *rawshan*

The *mihrāb* of the tomb consists of an arched opening with a deep concave recess flanked by two engaged columns. Bands of geometric, floral, and calligraphic ornament surround the niche. A small rectangular box, about 0.5 m wide, projects over the *mihrāb*, but does not fulfil any function other than a decorative one (Fig. 3). Because this box is unique in the wider context of Yemen’s mosques and tombs, one may relate it to a commensurable visual configuration seen in domestic architecture, rather than to the religious realm.

It is acknowledged that the traditional houses in the Yemeni Red Sea coastal city of Mocha (al-Muḫhā) share a great deal of structural and decorative features with those found in other ports around the Red Sea such as al-Luḥayyah, al-Ḥudaydah, Jeddah (Jiddah), Yanbuʿ, Suakin (Sawākin), and Massawa (Maṣṣawaʿ). Together, these houses have been distinguished from inland types as examples of what has been dubbed the ‘Red Sea style’ (Matthews 1953: 60). This transnational maritime house type is marked characteristically by multi-storey elevations and constructions in stone, brick, or coral coated with layers of white plaster. A notable feature of many Red Sea houses is the *rawshan*, the wooden projecting window, which, like the *mashrabiyyah* of Cairo, extended the interior living space of the house into the street while cool breezes filtered through its open grills.<sup>3</sup>

French travellers documented the presence of the *rawshan* in Mocha textually as early as 1709, but it was likely a much earlier accessory to the city’s houses (La Roque 1726: 87). However, only later visual sources provide details on the shape and placement of the projecting window within the fabric of the house. As pictured in a shot taken by the French sculptor and photographer Auguste Bartholdi in 1856, the visual

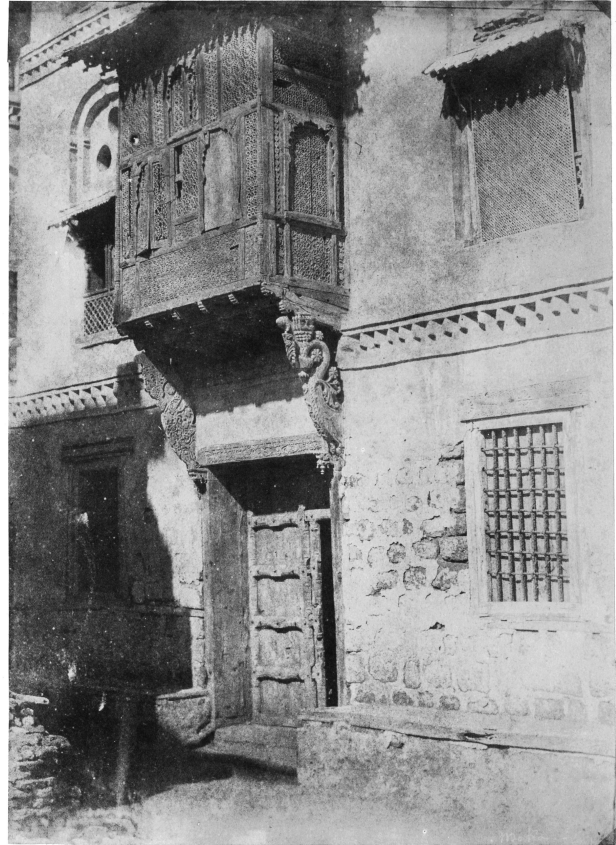
<sup>3</sup> The Red Sea *rawshan* must be distinguished from the smaller *shubbāk* of Sanaa and others places in Yemen. Made of brick or stone masonry or wood, the *shubbāk* is much smaller and shallower than the *rawshan*, with open slats at the bottom to view the street below. The *rawshan* has a closed bottom that serves as a seat big enough for one or two people and visual access to the exterior is made through its shutters.



**FIGURE 4.** A house (now destroyed), Mocha, Yemen.  
(Photograph by August Bartholdi, 1856. Courtesy of the Musée Bartholdi, reprod. C. Kempf.)

focus of the Mocha house facade was on the entrance, which was crowned with a scalloped arch with a second keel-arched niche within (Fig. 4). The tympanum of this now destroyed house featured two plaster rosettes in relief surmounted by a six-pointed star. Jutting out over the street, a *rawshan* with horseshoe-arched openings crowned the doorway. Below its flat bottom, five beam ends with carved tips extended from the external wall of the house, thus supporting the window, and an overhang widened above its top.

Another one of Bartholdi's photographs reveals the diversity of woodwork that could be found in the projecting windows of Mocha (Fig. 5). This house, which has also been destroyed, featured a prominent entrance, with a double wooden door that was recessed from the street. An extensive carved inscription, illegible on the photograph, appeared on the lintel above. The *rawshan*



**FIGURE 5.** A house with bird-shaped brackets (now destroyed), Mocha, Yemen.  
(Photograph by August Bartholdi, 1856. Courtesy of the Musée Bartholdi, reprod. C. Kempf.)

shared many features with the previous one, but included a bird-shaped bracket on each end. In their important study of Yemeni woodwork, French scholars Guillemette and Paul Bonnenfant have shown that some types of carved wood in Yemen are associated with Indian manufacture and the *rawshan* is no exception. However, these references are usually made in a historically unspecific manner, drawing on oral history sources or popular etymology. For instance, a well-known woodworker in Sanaa (Ṣan'ā') in the late twentieth century, 'Abd Allāh al-Darwīsh, claimed descent from an Indian family. According to popular accounts, the woodworkers who crafted the doors of Dār al-Ṭawāshī, the famous but now destroyed eighteenth-century palace of Imām al-Manṣūr 'Alī in Sanaa, were Indian. Additionally, the term *hindī* or Indian is still used to indicate the technique of bevelling in modern Sanaa. The Bonnenfants doubted

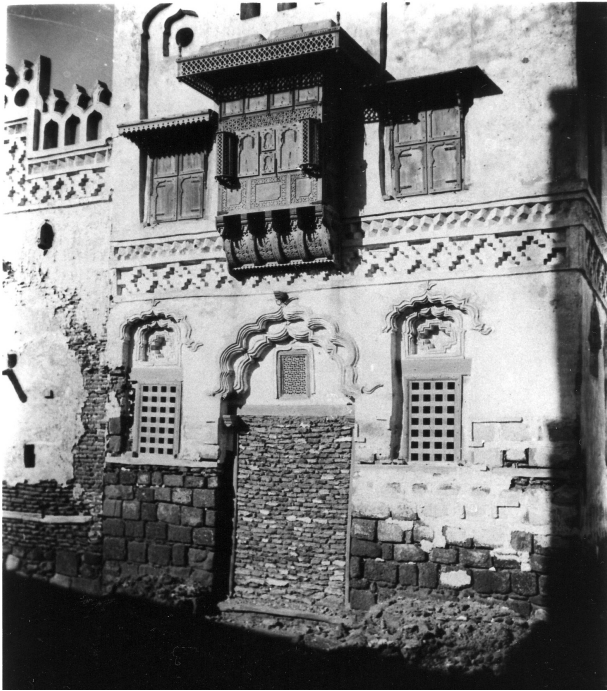


FIGURE 6. *Bayt Sīdī Nūnū (now in ruins), Mocha, Yemen. (Photograph by Hermann Burchardt, 1909. Courtesy of the Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz.)*

that this geographically specific appellation referred to a technique that was traceable to India, but rather surmised that it indicated the level of intricacy of the design and the desire to valorize foreign-inspired workmanship (Bonnenfant & Bonnenfant 1987: 21, 111, 117). In this image from Mocha, the bird-shaped bracket, which may be identified as a peacock or a swan with a serpentine neck, a bulb-shaped pendant hanging from the downcast head, and a rosette nested inside the neck's curve may be traced to Gujarat, the north-west coastal province of India (Bonnenfant P 2000). There, such sculptural forms in both wood and stone proliferated as supports for projecting balconies and windows (Thakkar 2004: 112–114). This particular photograph provides visual documentation of a case in which the specific motifs and structural function of Indian woodwork were transported to the Arabian Peninsula with essentially no modification.

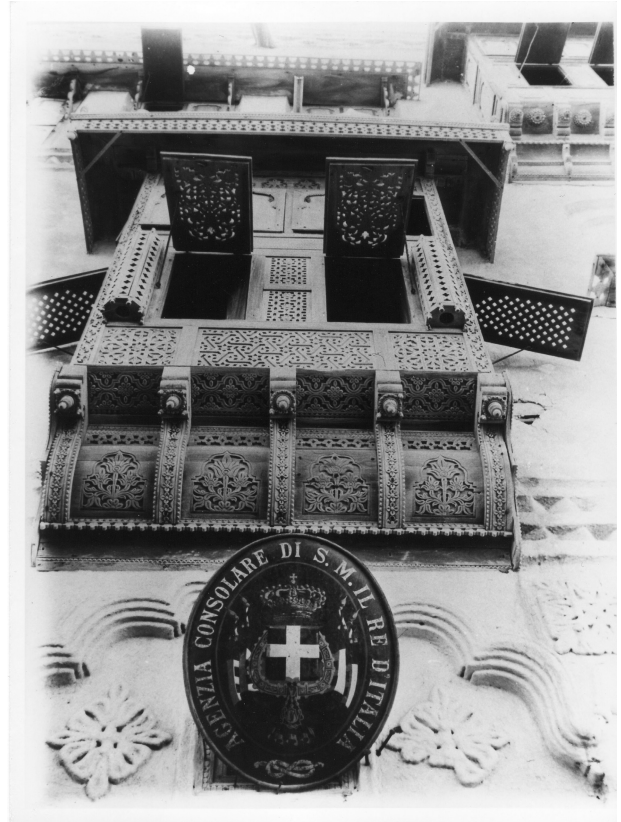


FIGURE 7. *The Idārah building, Mocha, Yemen. (Photograph by Hermann Burchardt, 1909. Courtesy of the Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz.)*

A group of images taken later, in 1909, by the German photographer Hermann Burchardt, allows us to look at the shape of Mocha's *rawshan* more extensively (Figs 6 and 7). Unlike the houses pictured by Bartholdi, which have completely collapsed, these two houses were still standing for most of the twentieth century, but in largely modified form. Bayt Sīdī Nūnū, located in the now uninhabited northern quarter of Mocha, was in ruins in the 1990s. The Idārah building, which served as the temporary residence of the Italian consular agent Gaetano Benzoni at the time of Burckhardt's visit, now houses the municipal government offices and has been repaired using modern materials (Um 2009: 147–149). These two photographs, while post-dating Bartholdi's, also underscore the centrality of the *rawshan* crowning the lobed arched doorway of the house. Ornate medallions in plaster relief filled the tympanum of the Idārah building's



entrance. In both cases, the *rawshan* was not flat-bottomed but featured a characteristic rounded bottom upon which the curved beam ends were articulated in relief, terminating in spherical pendants. It should be noted that the forms of the Red Sea *rawshan* are very diverse. The window is sometimes crowned with an arched hood called *burnaytah* or undergirded with coved, tiered, or undulating bases ornamented with rows of fleur-de-lis. However, the *rawshan* with a rounded bottom and clearly delineated relief-carved curved beam ends was unique to the city of Mocha.

These four photographs have been selected from a larger corpus to provide an initial understanding of the form of Mocha's *rawshan* as well as its central placement on the house facade in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At that time, Mocha had lost its prominence in the global trade and was no longer a central port of call in the Red Sea, irrevocably replaced by British Aden and Ottoman al-Ḥudaydah. In fact, Burckhardt's Yemeni companion and teacher, Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Jarādī, noted that in 1909 only twenty houses were left standing as remnants of the city's prosperous past (Mittwoch 1926: 30). Thus, these four images captured the last gasps of vernacular building in Mocha rather than a thriving tradition that was being pictured during its pinnacle. It is also likely that these four houses were built long before they were recorded in photographs, perhaps during the time of Mocha's heyday in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Although the projecting box above the *mihrāb* in al-Mawāhib is smaller in size than the traditional *rawshan* of Mocha, the form may be linked to it. In al-Mawāhib, the bottom of the projecting box is rounded and raised strips terminating in protruding grooved tips mark each end. These features suggest the unique shape of Mocha's *rawshan* with decorated beam ends curving around the base. In al-Mawāhib, the surface of the projecting box is perforated with a small overhang above, recalling the pierced grills and the shade of the *rawshan*.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the relationship between the mausoleum's small projecting box and the arched niche of the *mihrāb* that it crowns evokes the tightly conceived relationship between the *rawshan* and the arched doorway below. Both use the form of the arch within another arch, along with a lacy scalloped opening. In al-Mawāhib, three relief-carved medallions occupy the space between the two nested

arches of the *mihrāb*, suggesting the same configuration of decorative forms and shapes that appeared above many of Mocha's doorways below the *rawshan*.

It could certainly be argued that the ornate arched lobed doorways of Mocha drew upon the form of the *mihrāb* as an original inspiration.<sup>5</sup> Decorative modes often migrate from religious architecture into the domestic realm and become naturalized there. However, it is significant to see this domestic architectural configuration reappear in the language of religious building in this iconic fashion. When seen in comparison to coastal architecture, the qiblah wall of the tomb of al-Mahdī may be read like a house facade turned inside out, with the detached sign of the *rawshan*, here rendered in plaster rather than wood, recalling the most notable feature of Mocha's domestic architecture. However, in the case of the tomb, this prominent visual feature appears in the building's interior, rather than on its external facade.

The city of Mocha is relevant, not only because of these visual similarities, but also because there was a firm link between the legacy of al-Mahdī and Mocha. During this era, it was considered to be the most important of Yemen's ports (Zabārah [n.d.]: 654). Every year, al-Mahdī sent two ships to Gujarat via Mocha in order to participate directly in the trade. Taxes and duties on goods that were bought and sold at the port produced profits destined for the imam's coffers. For this reason, al-Mahdī sent his most trusted administrators to serve as its governors (Um 2009: 64–68). Additionally, daily records from Mocha indicate that there was constant communication with al-Mahdī's court in al-Mawāhib. Despite the fact that the two cities were divided by a travel distance of around a week, they were closely connected through the movement of people, goods, revenue, and information.

### **The canopy over al-Mahdī's burial and the Mocha woodworking industry**

The wooden canopy, which surmounts the burial of al-Mahdī, further amplifies the association with the city of Mocha. This unique and notable canopy is difficult to view in its entirety because it is tightly encased in a four-sided openwork screen that was added at a later date. With a tall rectangular base topped with a barrel-vaulted hood, the canopy is constructed of individual panels that carry caned grills (many of which have been blocked off)

<sup>4</sup> According to local residents, in the past it was believed that there was a treasure inside this projecting box. Eventually, it was opened up through the small square hole visible on the bottom, but never resealed. Apparently, it was empty inside.

<sup>5</sup> As an example, Paul Bonnenfant called the *mihrāb* the ultimate religious symbol that was frequently used to bring sanctity into the home in Sanaa (Bonnenfant P 1995: 550).



FIGURE 8. Detail of the wooden canopy over the grave of al-Mahdī, tomb of Imām al-Mahdī Muḥammad, al-Mawāhib, Yemen. (Photograph by Nancy Um, 2002.)

in the shape of arches, octagons, squares, and rectangles. The dark wooden strips between the grilled areas are inlaid with small ivory rosettes and medallions (Fig. 8).

Since the thirteenth century, many Zaydī imams and their family members were buried in monumental tombs with stone grave markers surrounded by decorated wooden screens (Khalīfah 1992: 98–129; Bonnenfant & Bonnenfant 1987: 170–185). While the early examples were fairly simple enclosures, the later examples — particularly from the eighteenth century — were increasingly complex with multiple levels and canopies topped by vaulted hoods. Even within the contemporary context of monumental tomb building, the wooden canopy of al-Mahdī stands apart from the wider corpus, which may be exemplified in the canopy over the grave of

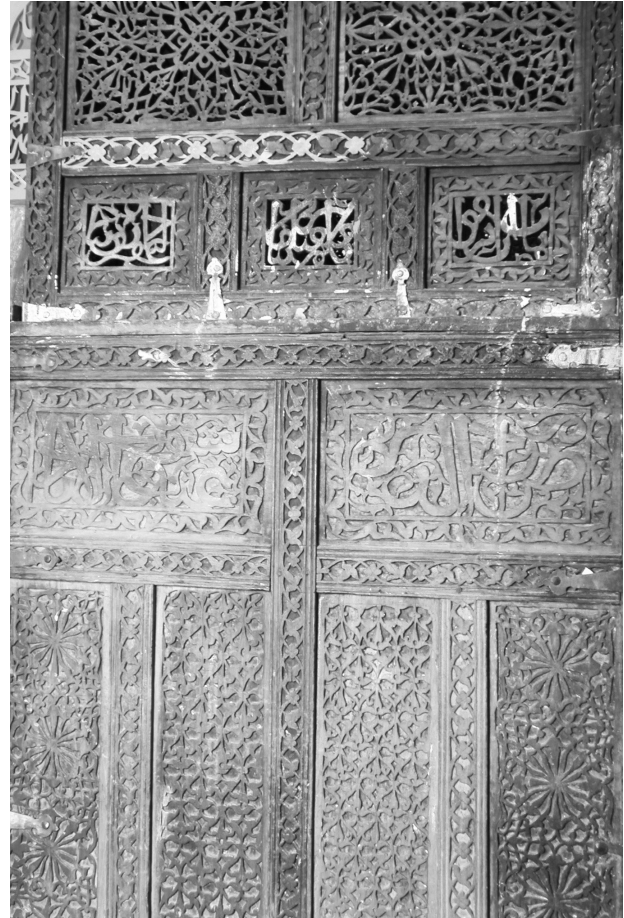
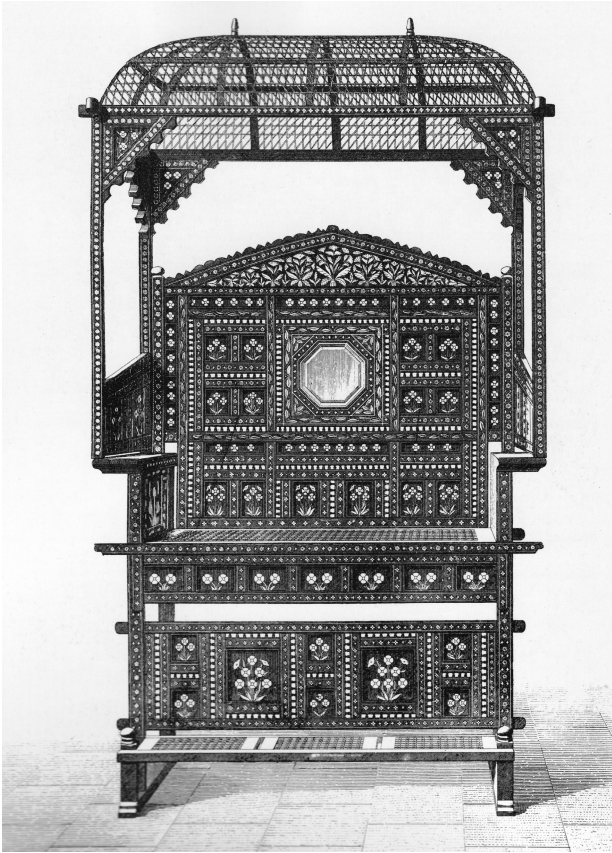


FIGURE 9. Detail of the wooden canopy over the grave of al-Manṣūr; tomb of Imām al-Manṣūr al-Ḥusayn, adjacent to the Mosque of al-Abhar, Sanaa, Yemen. (Photograph by Moammar al-Amri, 2002.)

Imām al-Manṣūr al-Ḥusayn (d. 1748) as a representative example. It features relief-carved and openwork panels with inscriptions, star-shaped centrally oriented designs, and repetitive geometric, floral, and vegetal patterns (Fig. 9). By contrast, the canopy in al-Mawāhib lacks any relief carving or openwork screens and does not utilize otherwise ubiquitous inscriptions or diaper patterns.

Because of the differences between other examples of Yemeni woodwork and the canopy of al-Mahdī, one must look further afield for connections. The north-west coastal region of Gujarat and neighbouring Sindh, which provided a precedent for the bird-shaped brackets of one *rawshan* in Mocha, is again useful as a starting point. Since at least the sixteenth century, the cities of Ahmedabad, Khambhat, Surat, and Thatta have been



**FIGURE 10.** *Kursī al-ʿimmah*, from *L'Art arabe d'après les monuments du Kaire*, by *Prisse d'Avennes*, published in 1877. (From *Prisse d'Avennes*, *Arab Art* [London: Saqi Books, 1983], 181, pl. 25. Credit: Saqi Books.)

known for local industries of mother-of-pearl inlay and overlay, as well as ivory marquetry on wood (Jaffer 2002: 18; Digby 1986: 214). These inlaid and overlaid goods were not only consumed locally, but also exported widely, including to the Red Sea region. For example, a mother-of-pearl inlaid chair that is said to date from the first half of the sixteenth century found its way to Amhara Saynt, Ethiopia (Digby 1986: 214). Additionally, British East India Company documents mention ebony and teak tables and chairs (some with caned backs), which were brought to their factory in Mocha in the first half of the eighteenth century. Although it is not specified, these chairs surely came from India and most likely from Surat, a key British trading hub.<sup>6</sup> While it is possible

<sup>6</sup> Inventory of sundries left in the Mocha factory, 13 August 1740, see Mocha Factory Records, India Office Records, G/17/2 pt. 3, ff. 470r.

that the canopy of al-Mahdī may have been brought to Yemen from Gujarat or Sindh as an imported object there is also evidence, as in the pieces mentioned above, that it was manufactured locally. In his nineteenth-century publication on Islamic art and architecture in Cairo, the French Egyptologist Prisse d'Avennes documented the city's mosques and houses, as well as their furnishings and architectural details. In this monumental text, Prisse d'Avennes pictured and discussed two inlaid wooden chairs, which he declared to have been produced in the suburbs of Mocha and then exported to Egypt (1877, iv: 185–186, pls 25, 26; Bonnenfant & Bonnenfant 1987: 111). These two chairs, which may be differentiated from Egyptian-made examples in their shape and decoration, are extremely important because they represent a tradition of wooden furniture that no longer exists in Yemen.<sup>7</sup>

In an extended discussion about the two chairs, Prisse d'Avennes specified that they were not used for sitting on but rather in marriage rites, as a place to set the turban of the bridegroom or the clothes of the bride upon. For that reason, he labelled one '*kursī al-ʿimmah*' or the chair of the turban (1877, iv: 185–186) (Fig. 10). He labelled the other 'Indian armchair', an attribution that represents his ambivalence about the identity of the artisans, whom he believed to have been either Arab or Indian Muslims. Indian woodworkers living in or outside Mocha might have been responsible for the production of inlaid woodwork, as supported by the many references to Indian artisans in Yemen mentioned above, as well as the fact that Mocha's population was extremely diverse. In fact, Sanaa's oral tradition still attributed ivory and mother-of-pearl inlay work to Indian manufacture during the late twentieth century (Bonnenfant & Bonnenfant 1987: 111). Additionally, the historian al-Jirāfī confirmed that Arab, Indian, and Turkish craftspeople worked in the service of al-Mahdī in his second regnal city, al-Khudrā', during the late seventeenth century (al-Jirāfī 1987: 242).

This detailed reference by Prisse d'Avennes provides an intriguing possibility for the attribution of the wooden canopy at the tomb of al-Mahdī, particularly because one of the two chairs and the canopy share many common principles of design. For instance, both feature caned screens prominently. The chair in Cairo had a caned seat and footrest, as well as an elaborate cage-work top.

<sup>7</sup> The two images appeared in the small monochrome volume of text, which is often overshadowed by the three associated atlas-sized volumes that included the more colourful and often reproduced plates. Two comparable chairs, referred to as 'Indian wedding chairs of inlaid wood', are displayed in the harem room at the Gayer-Anderson Museum in Cairo (Warner 2003: 19).

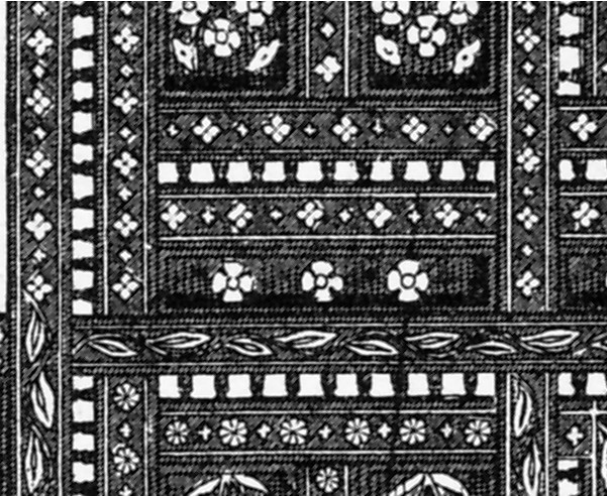


FIGURE 11. Detail of *Kursī al-ʿimmah*, from *L'Art arabe d'après les monuments du Kaire*, by Prisse d'Avennes, published in 1877. (From Prisse d'Avennes, *Arab Art* [London: Saqi Books, 1983], 181, pl. 25. Credit: Saqi Books.)

Also, both use octagons nested tightly within squares and short rows of turned wood to connect some of the panels together (Fig. 11).<sup>8</sup> Although Prisse d'Avennes did not specify if the Cairene examples were inlaid with mother-of-pearl or ivory, in both cases the inlaid segments are oriented in a linear fashion as thin rows that do not exceed the width of a single medallion or rosette, bordered by long straight slivers of contrasting material. Additionally, a shared set of alternating shapes appears, such as diamond medallions with four lobes in two sizes and multi-petalled rosettes, all with small apertures in the centre. Although the chair also included flower arrangements, the canopy is limited to this linear organization, which is markedly different from the centrally organized star-like motifs, floral themes, or repetitive diaper patterns that appear commonly in inlaid doors and window shutters found, for example, in Sanaʿani buildings (Bonnenfant & Bonnenfant 1987: 111–121).

The canopy may also be differentiated from examples of inlaid woodwork produced in Gujarat because of this simple linear patterning. Contemporary eighteenth-century examples of ivory intarsia from the north-western

Indian subcontinent followed Mughal court fashions, featuring naturalistic blooms and figural scenes rather than basic repetitive schemes (Jaffer 2002: 62, 65). Moreover, the inlay method used for the cenotaph of al-Mahdī separates it from Gujarati examples where ivory pieces fit into precisely cut wooden surfaces or veneers to constitute a smooth and undifferentiated surface with no intervening gaps (2002: pls 4, 7–9, 15, 24–25). In the case of the ivory inlay of the canopy, a shallow circular hollow has been carved out, with the shaped piece of ivory inserted using a dark adhesive. For that reason, an intervening outline is starkly visible between each medallion or rosette and its surrounding round void.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, Prisse d'Avennes did not provide details about the method used for the *kursī al-ʿimmah*.

Another comparison could be made between the two pieces and the so-called 'Lamu chairs' from the East African Swahili coast, which feature ivory inlay, wooden sub-sections that are joined together by short pieces of turned wood, and openings that are spanned by interlaced string or cane-work panels. The example featured in Figure 12 is inlaid with ivory pieces in long slender slivers bordering designs composed of vegetal forms, diamond-shaped medallions, and multi-petalled rosettes of varying sizes, some of which are set in round voids. Additionally, the Lamu chair shares with the *kursī al-ʿimmah* an upright profile, a raised footrest, flat armrests, and a pointed back. The Lamu chair's origins are the subject of debate, but an example at the Peabody Essex Museum may date as early as the seventeenth century (Jaffer 2001: 115, fig. 43). While these chairs, known locally as *viti vya enzi* (sg. *kiti cha enzi*), may not be assigned to Mocha manufacture, they represent the possibility of a related tradition. Moreover, they provide another example of the proliferation and the subsequent localization of Indian woodworking techniques around the western side of the Indian Ocean (2001: 114; Meier 2009: 12, 22).<sup>10</sup>

Thus, following the suggestions of Prisse d'Avennes, I propose that the canopy of al-Mahdī as well as at least one of the two chairs in Cairo, were produced in Mocha by Indian artisans who drew on South Asian techniques. However, any scholar who relies on Prisse d'Avennes must take into account the serious errors of fact concerning the

<sup>8</sup> The chair probably had a piece of glass or a mirror set within its back as indicated by the cross-hatching on the octagonal surface. The octagonal openings on the south face of the cenotaph in al-Mawāhib had grilled screens that were later removed, as indicated by small grooves where they would have been secured.

<sup>9</sup> By contrast, there are many examples of mastic-inset mother-of-pearl pieces from Gujarat, but they generally display non-linear all-over patterns that use much smaller inlaid chips (see Jaffer 2002: pl. 5).

<sup>10</sup> Without referencing Prisse d'Avennes, but using other wooden chairs found in Egypt as examples, James de Vere Allen suggested that the *viti vya enzi* may have drawn from Egyptian prototypes with a Red Sea intermediary. However, he refused to admit a debt to Indian traditions (de Vere Allen 1989).



**FIGURE 12.** Chair (*kiti cha enzi*), Swahili (*Lamu, Kenya*), nineteenth century. Wood, ivory, and cotton fibre, 125.7 x 75.6 x 72.4 cm. (Restricted gift of Marshall Field V, 2004.476, *The Art Institute of Chicago*. Credit: Photography @ *The Art Institute of Chicago*.)

attributions, dates, and interpretations that appeared in his publication on Cairo (Williams 1985: 181; Scanlon 1999: ix). But, in this case, Prisse d’Avennes’s claims of a Mocha woodworking industry have added credibility because he visited India early in his career and later travelled along the Red Sea coast of the Arabian Peninsula. Elsewhere, he made a detailed reference to woodworking in the ports of Jeddah and al-Ḥudaydah (Mocha’s northern neighbour), thereby revealing his familiarity with the industry of the wider region. Moreover, he specified that the chairs were made in the ‘cities and boroughs in the area of Mocha’ (1877, iv: 185, 187). This specificity about the suburban locations of the workshops undermines the possibility that he mistook the place of transfer — the port of Mocha — for the site of production. Although his observations about Mocha’s woodwork appeared in print over 150

years after the canopy in al-Mawāhib was produced, it is possible that the chairs that he witnessed in Cairo were made in an earlier era because he did not mention their date of manufacture.

### Conclusion

The tomb of al-Mahdī Muḥammad in al-Mawāhib has not previously received attention from architectural historians, but its unique decorative features merit inclusion in the wider corpus of Yemeni religious architecture and crafts. The presence of the projecting box above the *miḥrāb* and the notable design of the wooden canopy may not be explained by the aesthetic preferences of its fickle patron, but rather relate to the particular geographic dependencies and commercial endeavours that defined Yemen during this time. Both features point to the city of Mocha, with its implicit ties to India and the Indian Ocean trade, but in divergent ways.

The *miḥrāb* was crowned with a miniaturized *rawshan* that invoked the classic facade of the merchant’s house in



**FIGURE 13.** Kushk, facade, *Dār al-Shukr*; Sanaa, Yemen, built in 1933. (Photograph by Nancy Um, 2002.)



FIGURE 14. *Wooden screen surrounding the canopy over the grave of al-Mutawakkil, Mosque of Imām al-Mutawakkil al-Qāsim, Sanaa, Yemen.*  
(Photograph by Moammad al-<sup>ε</sup>Amri, 2002.)

the port city. Because of its distinction from other types of inland domestic architecture, the Mocha house, with its centrally placed and elaborately carved projecting window, served as a sign for this bustling port city. In fact, the distinctive *rawshan* of the Red Sea coast was eventually adopted into the vocabulary of building in the highlands of Yemen as the *kushk*. Larger than the more ubiquitous wooden or masonry projecting window called *shubbāk*, the *kushk* arrived in Sanaa during the second Ottoman occupation of the late nineteenth century, eventually appearing on Dār al-Shukr and other houses of the imams and their families (Bonnenfant & Bonnenfant 1987: 150) (Fig. 13). With its projecting compartments and ornamental brackets borrowed from the distinctive Red Sea *rawshan*, the wooden *kushk* eventually found a significant place in Sanaa's elite domestic architecture. This later migration underlines the *rawshan*'s sustained potential as a mobile architectural motif outside its coastal context.

Located directly in front of the *mihrāb*, the wooden canopy of al-Mahdī probably came from the area around Mocha and was made by migrant Indian artisans. Additionally, its main decorative material, ivory, must have been obtained from the African side of the Red Sea as a product of the maritime trade. This unique piece of woodworking, which is the sole evidence of this export industry that has left no other trace in Yemen, adds to the current understanding of eighteenth-century regional woodworking on the southern Arabian Peninsula, an industry that was dominated by the workshops of Sanaa, but evidently not limited to them. For instance, at Qubbat al-Mutawakkil in Sanaa, the grave of Imām al-Mutawakkil al-Qāsim is, like that of al-Mahdī Muḥammad, surmounted by a vaulted canopy that is surrounded by a second outer screen (Fig. 14). We presume that the inner vaulted canopy was built at the time of al-Mutawakkil's death in 1727. The surrounding screen was added in 1741, as identified by an inscription

that names the place of manufacture as Ibb and the patron unspecifically as an *amīr* and son of Imām al-Mutawakkil. In his study of Islamic arts in Yemen, Rabīʿ Ḥāmid *Khalīfah*, who recorded the inscription and corrected a previous transcription, questioned who the patron of this later addition might have been (1992: 122–123). Clearly, it was not Imām al-Manṣūr al-Ḥusayn, al-Mutawakkil's son and successor, who is mentioned in the lengthy inscription but not named as the patron. I believe that it was Amīr Aḥmad b. al-Mutawakkil, who held a semi-independent principedom in and around Ta'izz at that time, rivalling his brother, the imam. Naturally, he would have patronized woodwork from the area that he held control over, rather than from Sanaa, his brother's domain. Although *Khalīfah* considered the woodcarving to be 'weak' and the Bonnenfants called it 'unsophisticated', together with the canopy of al-Mahdī from Mocha, the carved screen from Ibb provides evidence that provincial wood workshops outside Sanaa were producing objects that were deemed fit for the elite consumption of the imams and their families in the eighteenth century (*Khalīfah* 1992: 122; Bonnenfant & Bonnenfant 1987: 179).

This article has posited a vital connection between the city of Mocha and the tomb of al-Mahdī in al-Mawāhib.

By doing so, historic geographic relationships and economic networks have been plotted along a material trajectory, taking shape in plaster and wood. Implicit in this connection are the politics of cross-cultural exchange, with the port city of Mocha as the central point of transmission by which the material culture of India and the Indian Ocean world filtered into Yemen in the early eighteenth century.

### Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Yusuf Abdullah and Mohamed al-ʿArwosi, both past presidents of The General Organization for Antiquities and Museums (GOAM), who facilitated research in Mocha and al-Mawāhib in 2000 and 2002. A Fulbright fellowship and an American Institute for Yemeni Studies (AIYS) postdoctoral fellowship generously funded research. Amin Jaffer kindly agreed to look at the woodwork from al-Mawāhib many years ago and suggested the East African connection. The Musée Bartholdi (Colmar, France), the Ethnologisches Museum (Berlin), Saqi Books, and The Art Institute of Chicago gave permission to reproduce images from their collections or publications.

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