**Article:**

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**Online Published:**

Fall 2014

**Article DOI:**

https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.42.02

To cite this article:

Abbas, Hidaya. “Al-Jami‘al-‘Atiq, the oldest Mosque in Jada.” *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 4, no. 2 (2014): 09–20.

**Crossref**

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A publication of the
Department of Islamic Thought and Civilization
School of Social Science and Humanities
University of Management and Technology
Lahore
Al-Jami‘al-‘Atiq, the Oldest Mosque in Jidda

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Al-Shafii mosque was one of the buildings I documented for my MA thesis; titled: “Catalogue of Hijazi Architecture in Jidda and Makkah c. 1850-1920s: Selected Examples,” supervised by: Dr. Bernard O’Kane. The documentation here is elaborated and updated.

Abstract

Old Jidda, which is now a neighbourhood within the Hijazi City Jidda, is a square kilometer area with properties built during different time periods. Al-Jami‘ al-‘Atiq literally means the old mosque. It is also known as al-Shafi‘i Mosque and is considered by many historians to be the oldest mosque in Jidda. This article explores the mosque’s accumulated history that began with the period of the second Righteous Caliph ‘Umar b. al-Khattab. It analyzes the mosque’s different architectural features and influences. The mosque has recently gone through extensive renovation. Therefore, occasional comparisons between the old and new elements in the mosque have been constructed. This article aims to create a full documentation of al-Jami‘al-‘Atiq which is an important historic building in Old Jidda.

Keywords: Jidda, Hijaz, Saudi Arabia, al-Shafi‘i Mosque, al-Jami‘ al-‘Atiq, Religious Architecture

Introduction

According to Ibn Jubayr, a twelfth century traveller, Jidda had two mosques attributed to ‘Umar b. al-Khattab. The first one is what we know now as al-Shafi‘i Mosque, or al-Jami‘ al-‘Atiq, and the second one is called the Abanus or later known as ‘Uthman b. ‘Affan Mosque.1 This article discusses al-Shafi‘i Mosque because it was the best-preserved historical mosque in Jidda at the time of my documentation. Recently, heavy restoration works have been done to the mosque and I was fortunate enough to enter the site and document it before any major alterations were done.

Surrounded by houses and souks, al-Shafi‘i Mosque is located in Mahallat al-Mazlum (Fig. 1). It is believed that this is Jidda’s oldest mosque; many historians mentioned that it was built by ‘Umar b. al-Khattab. However, the mosque was rebuilt in the reign of the Rasulid Dynasty by al-Malik al-Muzaffar in 1251.2 This is mentioned in ‘Abd al-Qadir b. Faraj al-Shafi‘i’s seventeenth century book al-Silahwa al-‘idda fi tarikhbandar Jidda.3 Al-Malik al-Muzaffar Yusuf b. Umar (died in 1295) was the second Rasulid ruler and the first one to give the Kaba its cloth from the Rasulids. Known for his enthusiasm for architectural patronage, al-Malik al-Muzaffar was responsible for significant renovations in the Holy Mosque in Makkah and other mosques in the Hijaz.4
This mosque was restored by al-Khawaja Muhammad ‘Ali, an Indian merchant who visited Jidda in 1533. He brought its wooden columns from India via Yemen and rebuilt the entire mosque except for the minaret. It is believed that the current minaret is the work of the Rasulid ruler. Historical accounts mention that the money brought by al-Khawaja to rebuild this mosque was collected from different Indian viziers; al-Khawaja also built houses and shops surrounding the mosque according to the waqfiyya endowment of the mosque. However, the daughter of al-Khawaja claimed to own these properties after the death of her father. Therefore, the properties were given to her and the mosque was left without proper regulated funds to maintain it. The souk at this mosque is today known as souq al-jami and traditionally, it was specialized in gold and jewelry. The mosque was also renovated during the Mamluk Period according to one of its inscription panels that I will discuss below. “However, in his study of Jidda mosques, Vicenzo Strika treats the Shafi‘i Mosque as essentially an Ottoman reconstruction.” This mosque is called al-Shafi‘i because it was dedicated to the Shafi‘i rite teachings.

The inscription panels in the mosque still exist. One panel (Fig. 2) pertains to al-Sharif Hasan b. ‘Ajlan who was the Amir and Governor of Makkah between 1395-6 and 1426. The other one mentions the name of al-Khawaja Muhammad ‘Ali and the date 944 A.H/ 1538 A.D. (Fig. 3). There is another inscription panel
(Fig. 4) but unfortunately it is badly damaged. However, the name Barsbay, a Mamluk Sultan (r. 1422–1437), can be read in the second line of its text.

Al-Sharif Hasan b. ‘Ajlan was the Amir of Makkah during Sultan Barsbay’s reign. Ibn ‘Ajlan was known for his generosity and architectural patronage of many public buildings in the Hijaz. This might be the one possible link connecting the panel of Ibn ‘Ajlan to the third damaged one bearing the name of Barsbay. Also, it is noticeable that the style of writing, naskh, and the form of the stone in the first and the third panel are very similar. I suggest that they were done during the same era, probably honoring the works of Ibn Ajlan in the reign of Sultan Barsbay. Therefore, the panels of Ibn ‘Ajlan and Barsbay confirm that the Mamluk renovations of the mosque took place before the restoration works of al-Khawaja Muhammad ‘Ali mentioned above.

**Architectural Analysis - Exterior**

The qibla wall on the East is the most interesting among the other walls (Fig. 5). The mihrab projects in the middle, two windows are on the left side, three are on the right and there is a blocked circular window above the mihrab itself. The windows are similar, a rectangular frame with three-opening system above creating a trilobe arch on top of the window. This kind of arch is often found in Jidda’s buildings; “The presence of windows in the qibla wall of the Shafi‘i mosque, recalls the arrangement of the windows in the al-Hanafi mosque.” Furthermore, they are also present at al-Mi‘mar Mosque, both in Jidda. In general, the presence of windows in the qibla wall is a feature seen in many Hijazi mosques. Also, there is a small door near the southern end of the qibla wall with an intertwined design on top and a muqarnas register (Fig. 6). When G. R. D. King visited Jidda during the eighties of the past century, he wrote about the windows on the qibla wall saying: “There were originally windows in the qibla wall, set between the shallow buttresses, but none of them are in use as they have been blocked by rough panels.” As a result of the reconstruction project, these windows have been unblocked and most of the mosque’s elements are back in its original form.
The mosque is built from the local mangabi stone, coral stone brought from the nearby shores, and wooden beams; the decorative elements are in plaster, locally known as nura. These are the typical building materials in Jidda. The main entrance of the mosque is in the southern wall (Fig. 7). It is a wooden projecting entrance which is the largest of all the entrances of the mosque. It directly leads to the interior sahn, courtyard. Also, there are two maksalas, benches, on both sides of this door. The wooden door itself used to be poorly painted; however, recent renovations have brought it back to its original look (Fig. 8). There is a rosette, a polylobed arch and some floral patterns in its spandrel that reminds one of the architectural styles of the Indian subcontinent. The three inscription panels mentioned previously are located above this entrance.

The northern side of the mosque contains two entrances (Fig. 9). One is a larger projection opposite to the entrance on the southern wall (Fig. 10). It is composed of a double arch design; both are round, but the upper one is slightly pointed and framed with the knotted design frame. The other entrance through this wall is on the left side and is smaller. Two identical windows follow this smaller door. These windows are large and rectangular, and they directly open to the interior prayer hall. Above each of these two windows is a blind pointed arch that is also ornamented with knotted lines, which are typically seen in the buildings of old Jidda (Fig 11). The small door next to these windows is of a similar size and configuration. However, the blind niche above it is a trefoil arch which is pointed (Fig 12). This arch is commonly seen in Jidda. On the other hand, the Western wall of the mosque is plain.
Interior

The plan of this mosque is traditional Arab hypostyle; a rectangular space with a flat roofed prayer hall at the qibla side and a sahn, courtyard, in the middle with a sihrij, small pool, to collect rain water (Fig. 13). This sihrij used to be large with a wooden covering supervised by khadim al-masjid (literally meaning the servant or the main person in charge of the mosque).16 The side opposite the qibla contains enclosures that were probably built for teaching purposes or women’s prayer area (Fig. 14). There are two porticos on the sides of the sahn (Fig. 15). The qibla riwaq consists of a stone arcade adjacent to the sahn followed by wooden
arcades (Fig. 16). These are the wooden columns that were brought from India, as mentioned earlier. However, there were also some columns that were of red marble and it was believed that they were brought from Abyssinia in the early Islamic period.17
The qibla wall consists of a late Ottoman style mihrab and a fixed minbar (Fig. 17). Such fixed minbars are found in other mosques in the Hijaz.\textsuperscript{18} Some historians mentioned that the minbar was the work of a local carpenter named Abu al-Eid al-Najjar.\textsuperscript{19} On the other hand, the mihrab is dated 1334/1915 (Fig. 18). At the top, there is a Kufic inscription panel with the shahada and its mirrored image with decorative domes and minaret resembling Sultan Ahmet Mosque in Istanbul (Fig. 19). Below, there is a thuluth panel followed by a row of crenellations. In the spandrels we see a popular Qur’anic verse that is seen in many Ottoman examples: “fasayakfikahumAllahuwaHūwa al-Samī’u al-‘Alīm” (2:137). The part “fasayakfikahumAllahu” (Fig. 20) is on the medallion on the right and “waHūwa al-Samī’u al-‘Alīm” (Fig. 21) is on another medallion to the left.
Fig. 17: Al-Shafi'i Mosque Qibla Wall, Before and After Recent Restoratio

Fig. 18: Al-Shafi'i Mosque Mihrab Detail, the Date

Fig. 19: Al-Shafi'i Mosque Kufic Inscription Panel

Fig. 20 Al-Shafi'i Mosque Right Side Spandrel

Fig. 21 Al-Shafi'i Mosque Left Side Spandrel
There are two openings in the ceiling in front of the mihrab; one is closer to the mihrab, pyramidal, shallower, and looks more recent than the other (Fig. 22). The other opening is a dome on the second arcade from the mihrab and it has windows on its octagonal drum (Fig. 23). Both structures are made of wood.

The northern side has a shallow riwaq (Fig. 24). Its columns are wooden with Indian vegetal designs. The opposing wall has the minaret (Fig. 25). It is located in the south-western corner of the building to the left of the main entrance.

As mentioned above, the minaret is believed to be the work of the Rasulid ruler inspired by contemporary Ayyubid examples (Fig. 26). Many historians suggest that it is the oldest surviving minaret in Jidda.²⁰ Built of carved stone, it has an octagonal shaft; the Ayyubids and Mamluks built octagonal minarets, with two balconies and wooden balustrades supported by rows of muqarnas. The two balconies divide the minaret into three registers, two of which are octagonal and the third is the summit. In the lower register we see large niches or blocked windows with some muqarnas ornamentation. It has a wooden door too. The middle register has smaller windows with circular openings between them forming a trefoil design. The upper register resembles the spherical summits which one would see in Mamluk minarets.

This mosque has gone through drastic restorations very recently. These restorations have discovered an earlier mihrab underneath the current one (Fig. 27).²¹ Furthermore, some features now pertain more to their original style, like the portals and the openings. However, the stone is heavily covered by new plaster altering the historic feeling of the exterior.
Fig. 24: Al-Shafi‘i Mosque Northern Riwaq

Fig. 25: Al-Shafi‘i Mosque Southern Wall
Fig. 26: Al-Shafi‘i Mosque Minaret, Before and After Recent Restoration

Fig. 27 Al-Shafi‘i Mosque Original Mihrab, Recently Excavated, under the Current Mihrab

*All pictures and drawings were taken by Hidaya Abbas unless stated otherwise.
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