

## **Stucco-Carved Mihrabs in Omani traditional mosques (13<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> CE): Compositions and Influences**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The corpus of published research about the Islamic architecture presents some gaps of knowledge about the architecture of the peoples who lived in some of the regions ruled by Muslims. The dynamics of influence that might have operated between the “monumental” architecture in these regions and their popular architectures are insufficiently addressed. Furthermore, the material culture related to the Islamic civilization suffers from some geographic and chronologic gaps. The present research aims to contribute to mend this gap by providing new knowledge about the traditional mosque architecture in Oman. More specifically, it will formulate some interpretations regarding the origins and development process of the practice of Mihrabs decoration in Oman between the 13th and 19th centuries CE. A total of 22 of such Mihrabs has been identified to have been the only remaining examples of this tradition in Oman. The paper presents the outcomes of a systematic survey and analysis of the architecture and artistic features of these Mihrabs and the mosques where they are located. The mosques and their stucco carved Mihrabs are presented within their historic and geographic contexts. The Mihrabs’ main components are detailed, and the origins and sources of influences of this craft discussed.

**Keywords:** Mihrab; Stucco carving; Ibadism; Vernacular architecture; Master builder.

## INTRODUCTION

The Sultanate of Oman is among the few countries where it is still possible to find mosques built following the Ibadi school of thought. They are also present in some regions of Algeria (Wadi M'zab), Tunisia (Djerba Island) and Libya (Jabal Nafusa) (Benkari, 2016). In the sultanate, they are distributed geographically following the areas of influence of this Madhab. Pervious research have detailed the main characteristics of these mosques (Benkari-Boudidah, 2014; Benkari, 2019). The main specificities of the Ibadi mosques consist in their pure volumes, the modesty of their architecture and simplicity of their spaces' architecture. They do not present any minarets nor domes as it is common to see in the mosques of other madhabs. The only prominent volume atop the building consists in a coupolette punctuating one of the corners opposite to the wall of Qibla: *bûma*. It is a unique feature characterizing the Mosques of Oman (Benkari-Boudidah, 2013, pp. 621–622; 630–632; Bonnenfant, Bonnenfant, & Al-Harhi, 1977, p. 113; P. M. Costa, 2006, p. 80; Kervran & Bernard, 1996, p. 152). If it was not for this element and the elevated platform where they have been erected, the Ibadi mosques of Oman cannot be distinguished from the rest of the dwellings in the settlements.

It is probably due to this humble character that the Ibadi architecture of Oman did not attract much of the published research about the Islamic architecture until the end of the 20th century. The interest in the religious architecture in Oman sparked in the last years of the 20th century, with the work of the Arabist E. Baldissera (Baldissera, 1994) and Archeologist and Art historian M. Kervran (Kervran & Bernard, 1996) about the carved Mihrabs in Oman. These initial works were followed by a more comprehensive documentation and descriptive study by Costa (P. Costa, 1997; P. M. Costa, 2001, 2006), then a comparative investigation by Benkari (Benkari-Boudidah, 2014). The focus on the stucco-carved Mihrabs, has been continued with the research of Bandyopadhyay (Bandyopadhyay, 2008, 2010), Goffriller (Goffriller, Hongjiao, Bandyopadhyay, & Henderson, 2015), and Kanaan (Kanaan, 2014). However, none of these research did identify their formal composition, their stylistic typology and origins, and their production process. Similarly, these Mihrabs have never been analyzed from the point of view of their chronology or their geographic distribution or the school of through they belong to. The present research aims at examining the craft of Mihrab carving in Oman by shedding some light on its main formal characteristics, sources of influence, and the socio-economic context that accompanied its emergence and development. This research will address the following questions:

- 1- How did the craft of Mihrab stucco-carving evolve in Oman?
- 2- What are the formal and aesthetic characteristic of this craft?
- 3- Are we in presence of an “Omani style” of Mihrab carving? And how does it relate to the context of the Islamic art and architecture?

The main contribution of the present study consists in providing a holistic understanding of this phenomenon by examining most of the Mihrabs still standing today. The analysis of their physical

components, will identify the main formal and aesthetic characteristics of this style of Mihrab decoration. Finally, this research formulates the historic evolution of this craft, and its geographic expansion. Ultimately, it will provide a corpus of themes and Design options that could be adapted and implemented in contemporary mosques in Oman to give them their local character.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study relied on extensive primary data collected through the exhaustive architectural and photographic surveys of the decorated Mihrabs and the mosques where they are still standing until today. Twenty two (22) buildings, out of 24 identified thus far, have been documented with their Mihrabs. The primary data collected was also checked against the findings of the review of previous research about these mosques.

A comparative analysis between the studied Mihrabs allowed to characterize their style and component and identify the evolution of this craft. The exploration of the available literature about the history of Oman and its architecture, helped understand the sociopolitical conditions where the craft of Mihrab carving has emerged and developed in Oman. Finally, and in order to locate the sources of influence and propagation of the Omani Art of Mihrab carving, a comparative and interpretative approach was used to examine the Omani stucco-carved Mihrabs within the wider context of Islamic Art and Mihrab decoration.

### **RESULTS**

#### **The emergence and development of the craft of Mihrabs stucco-carving in Oman**

##### *a- The socio-political context*

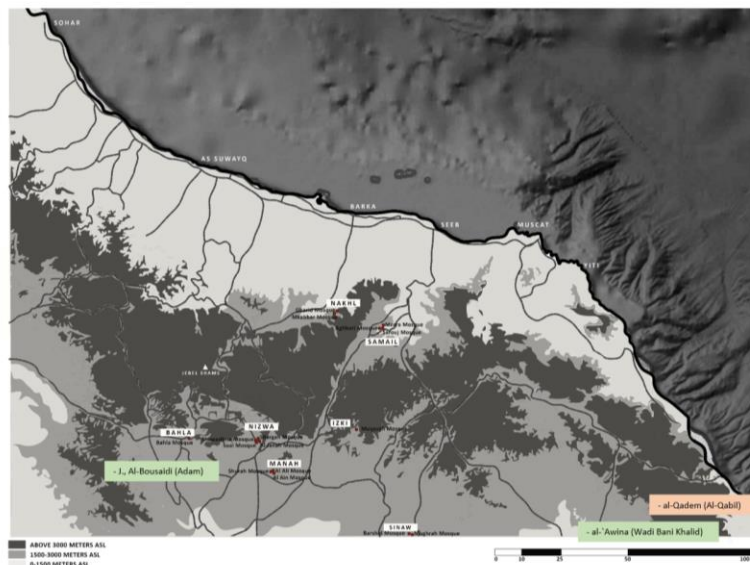
The corpus of decorated Mihrabs studied in this research was produced under three different dynasties, and over a period of more than three centuries. The earliest stucco-carved Mihrab dates back to 650H/1252 CE<sup>1</sup>, and is still standing in Jama` So`al (in the city of Nizwa, Interior governorate) (Baldissera, 1994, p. 23; Paolo Maria Costa, 2006, p. 97; Ministry of Justice Endowments and Islamic Affairs, 1995, p. 187). During this period, Oman was ruled by the Nabahina Sultans, with the exception of the coastal regions, which were under the intermittent control of the king of Hormuz. The country went through some tumultuous political circumstances, but most of the time, Omanis enjoyed stability and their commerce with India, South-east Asia and East Africa flourished. The different artefacts found in the constructions, dating from this period, reveal the extent of this maritime exchange. The same circumstances were behind the flourishing of the Craft of Mihrab carving in the country, probably under the influence of the neighboring countries, in spite the general opposition of the Ibadhi doctrine to such practices (Benkari, 2016). The presence of porcelain plates and bowls (probably of Chinese origin) in the frames of many Mihrabs from this period, reveal the geographic extent of the commercial exchange in Oman at the time (Goffriller et al., 2015; Kervran & Bernard, 1996). Such decorative

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<sup>1</sup> The Gregorian year of completion of the Mihrabs are presented here as mentioned in the reference book of Baldissera which provided all the primary information carved in the Mihrabs (Baldissera, 1994, p. 23) and from where Paulo Costa also took the dates of the Mihrabs he addressed in his book (P. M. Costa, 2006, p. 97).

technique could also be found in other buildings in later periods (Bonnenfant & Le Cour Grandmaison, 1977).

The core of the Omani decorated Mihrabs, still standing today, was produced between 909-1029H/1503-1619 CE) (Figure 2). In this period Oman, was ruled by elected Imams (such as Mohamed b. Ismail 907-943H), then the resurgent Nabahina dynasty, towards the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century Hijri. A number of the later Mihrabs studied here was carved during the al-Ya`ariba dynasty, which started in 1034H/1624 CE. The name of the second Ya`rubi Imam (Sultan b. Seif) is still visible in the Mihrab of masjid al-Burashid (1068H/1658) (Baldissera, 1994, p. 132; Ministry of Justice Endowments and Islamic Affairs, 1995, p. 245). The latest specimens of Mihrabs (al-Masjid al-Qadim in al-Qabil in Northern Sharquiya) 1171 H/1748 CE, and Jama` al-Aghbari in Sama'il, 1252H/ 1829 CE), were carved during al-Busaidi dynasty (1157H-present), as stated in the frame of Mihrab al-Aghbari (Baldissera, 1994, pp. 134–139; 95–99; Ministry of Justice Endowments and Islamic Affairs, 1995, p. 243;191).



**Figure 1.** Location of the mosques cited in this research

### ***b. The Mihrabs production: timeline and geographic context***

The classification and analysis of the collected data informed the development of a holistic understanding about how this three centuries long phenomenon had evolved in the geography of Oman. The earliest still standing Mihrabs was accomplished in 650 H/1227 CE, and is located in Jama` So`al in the city of Nizwa (Baldissera, 1994; P. Costa, 1997; Ministry of Justice Endowments and Islamic Affairs, 1995) (Figure 2). The following Mihrab in date was achieved some 3 hundred years later. It is located in the city of Manah, also in the interior region, at (20 kilometers south of Nizwa) (Figure 1). This city can be considered as the epicenter of the Mihrabs stucco-carving craft, since the 10th century

Hijri. It was also the city of origin of the most influential and prolific Mihrab decorators in the 300 years period that this practice seems to have lasted for. Indeed, the earliest surviving Mihrabs of the 10th century Hijri are mainly in the city of Manah, especially in Harat al-Bilad which counts 4 of them. It is worth noticing that for the two first decades of the 10th century Hijri, only one Craftsman (Abdullah B. Qasim b. Mohamed B. Humaymi al-Manahi) will be remembered today through the Mihrabs he finely carved, first in Harat al-Bilad in Manah (Mosques of al-Ali in 909H and al-Ayn 911H/1505CE) (Baldissera, 1994, pp. 69–71; Ministry of Justice Endowments and Islamic Affairs, 1995, pp. 199–200), then in the Jama` of Bahla, (at 45 Kilometers North-West of Manah) in 917H/1511CE (Baldissera, 1994, pp. 57–61; Ministry of Justice Endowments and Islamic Affairs, 1995, pp. 193–194) (Figure 3).

With the turn of the third decade of the 10th century Hijri, a new master (Mushmil b. Omar b. Mohamed Al Manahi), also from Manah, starts sharing the “Mihrab carving market” with Abdullah B. Qasim al-Humaymi. In this period, the practice expands to reach some Mihrabs of Nizwa mosques, after having been confined in Manah and Nakhla only. In the next decades, other masters will join this expanding profession. Among those are Mushmil’s son (Talib), followed by his grand-sons (Ali b. Talib), as well as four other craftsmen, who will participate, with the Mushmil family and the pioneer Abdullah B. Qasim al-Humaymi, in producing the impressive ensemble of Omani decorated Mihrabs of the 10th Century Hijri (Figure 3). Their works are found in other cities of the Dakhiliya region such as Izki (Masjid Muqazzah 1029H/1606 CE) (Baldissera, 1994, pp. 89–93; Ministry of Justice Endowments and Islamic Affairs, 1995, p. 202) or Adam (Jama` Harat Al Boussaidi: 941 H/1518)<sup>2</sup>, as well as in al-Batinah (Sama’il mosques: Sarooj 970H/1562CE; Mzar’a 974H/1567 CE) (Baldissera, 1994, pp. 101–104; 105–108; Ministry of Justice Endowments and Islamic Affairs, 1995, p. 31), and reach as far as a-Sharquiya governorate (Masjid al-`Awina in Wadi Bani-Khalid, 969H / 1561C<sup>3</sup>, and al-Burashid in Sinaw 1068H / 1658CE). The surviving Mihrabs are confined within the limits of the geographic expansion of the Ibadhi Madhab in Oman. This practice will eventually fade away by the turn of the 11th century Hijri. The latest Mihrabs to be carved are in al Masjid al-Qadim in al-Qabil: 1171H / 1758CE and Masjid Al-Aghbari in Sama’il1245H / 1829CE, though with an altered aesthetic composition and execution quality (Figure 2).

In summary, the Mihrabs studied in this research have a timeline that spans over a period of three centuries (From 650H with Jama` So`al until 1245H with Masjid Al Aghbari). They cover the territory of three regions/governorates in Oman: a-Dakhiliya, al-Batinah, and Northern Sharquiya (Figure 1). The quintessence of this artistic production was during the 10th century Hijri only, in a few cities, predominantly in a-Dakhiliya (interior) region (Manah, Adam, Nizwa, Bahla and Izki), then in al-Batinah (Sama’il and Nakhla) and, more lately in a-Sharquiya (al-Qabil, Sinaw and Wadi Bani-Khalid)

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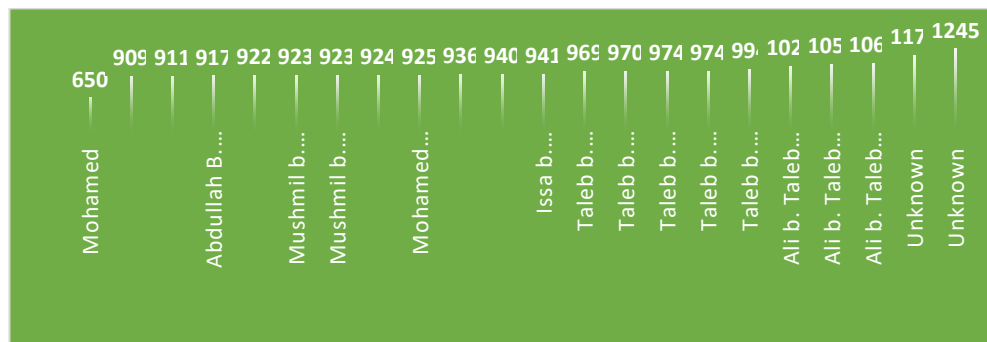
<sup>2</sup> Our assumption is that the craftsman could rather be Issa b. Abdullah b. Yousef.

<sup>3</sup> The date of 969H is assumed by the author based on the remaining words reported by Baldissera from this Mihrab (Baldissera, 1994, pp. 141–144).

(Figure 2). It is worth mentioning that this geographic and chronologic contextualization is only based on the still standing Mihrabs that the author could reach. It is highly probable that some mosques have disappeared with their Mihrabs, either destroyed to be rebuilt as “new” (al Masjid al-Kabir in Nakhal) (Baldissera, 1994, pp. 111–113), or simply decayed due to the weathering or urban expansion. Therefore, it is probable that this craft might have had a wider expansion than what can be deduced from the available literature and the remaining Mihrabs studied in the present research.



**Figure 2.** Studied Mihrabs per year of Completion (in Higri calendar)



**Figure 3:** Mihrab Craftsmen per year of Completion (in Higri calendar)

### The characteristics of the decorated Mihrab in Oman 13-19<sup>th</sup> centuries CE

The comparative analysis of architectural, constructive, and the aesthetic properties of the Mihrabs and the mosques, where they are hosted, generated the following set of common characteristics specific to these Mihrabs:

#### *a- The status and location of the mosques containing carved Mihrabs*

There is no formal or architectural features distinguishing the mosques hosting decorated Mihrabs. In fact, such mosques have the same physical and aesthetic characteristics as any other traditional Ibadi mosque in Oman. Indeed, these finely carved Mihrabs are confined in mosques that have no specific distinction in their location, volume, or architectural details. This peculiar trait can be explained by the fact that the mosque edification usually precedes the Mihrab decoration by several years. This fact is confirmed by the information written by the craftsman Al Humaymi in the Mihrab of Masjid al-'Ali,

where he wrote the date of construction of the mosque, and the date when the Mihrab was finished, with 25 years interval between them.

Similarly, there is no correlation between the status of a mosque, whether a Friday mosque (Jama` ) or a daily prayers mosque (Masjid), and the presence of a decorated Mihrab within its prayer hall. In fact, decorated Mihrabs were built in Jama` as well as in Masjid. However, there is a clear predominance of masjids (15 masjids) over Jama` (8 Jama` ). Nonetheless, the earliest carved Mihrab that reached our times stands in a Jama` (So`al, Nizwa). Furthermore, the mosques containing decorated Mihrabs are mainly found within the settlements (10 Masjids and 5 Jama` ). A limited number of them stands isolated, either surrounded by a cemetery (masjid a-Shargah in Nizwa and al-Qasr in Manal (974H / 1568CE) (Ministry of Justice Endowments and Islamic Affairs, 1995, p. 33)), or on an island not far from the adjoining settlements (Jama` al-kabir in Manah, or Jama` Bahla). Finally, a few other mosques can be found within the meander of the oases (3 mosques in Sama`il and Jama` al-`Alayah in Rustaq (1075H / 1651CE) (Al Hadhrami, 2019, pp. 111–113)).

It is worth mentioning that, with the exception of Jama` al-`Alayah, all other Friday mosques with carved Mihrabs are located in the interior region (a-Dakhiliya). This confirms the postulation, stated above, about the interior region being the main land of propagation of the craft of Mihrab carving in Oman, with the city of Manah as its epicenter. Finally, if this practice has been initiated in the Mihrab of a Friday mosque (Jama` So`al 650H), it has continued to ornate the Mihrabs of Masjids for almost 200 years (Masjid al-Aghbari, 1245H / 1829CE) after the carving of the last Mihrab in a Friday mosque (Jama` al-`Alayah, 1057H / 1651CE).

***b. The common features:***

As indicated in previous research, the 10<sup>th</sup> century Hijri (16<sup>th</sup> CE) stucco-carved Mihrabs in Oman are part of a larger and older corpus of Mihrabs that evolved, in the Ibadhi areas, independently from the carving tradition (Baldissera, 1994; Kanaan, 2014, p. 232). Such Mihrabs share some common features which consist in:

- Pronounced frieze surmounted with a sort of crenellations
- Receding concentric arches within a flat framing band, occasionally supported by short round engaged columns.
- A small arched Qibla niche, sometimes doubled or tripled in a telescopic succession of receding arches.
- The whole surface of the Mihrab is filled with stucco-carved patterns
- The stucco-carved panel protrudes of 50 to 80 cm from the Qibla wall.

The technique used is the knife carved stucco, with the exception of the Mihrabs of J. Bahla and al-`Ali mosque in Manah, where molded panels were used in addition to the common carving method (Figure 4-b).



a- Mihrab al-`Ali mosque in harat al-Bilad, Manah



b- Mihrab j. Bahla (Bahla fort)

**Figure 4:** Mihrabs of J. Bahla and Masjid al-`Ali

The corpus of documented Mihrabs show an average size (of 4m height and 3m width) that is common to most of those measured in this study. The Mihrabs of Friday mosques however, can be much higher (6m or a little less in the Mihrabs of Jama` Bahla, al-Jama` al-Kabir in Manah and J. al-Gharidh (923H / 1517CE) in Nakhal (Baldissera, 1994, pp. 119–123; Ministry of Justice Endowments and Islamic Affairs, 1995, p. 94)), or a little shorter (3m in the Mihrabs of Jama` So`al, and Nakhal).

#### b.1. The carved frieze

It is common that the top of the Mihrab is marked with a sort of frieze finely carved with floral patterns or, more rarely, with a series of crenellations (J. Manah al-Kabir, J. al-Aghbari) (Figure 5. Samples of the upper horizontal bands in some of the studied Mihrabs. However, a few Mihrabs do not have this frieze at all (J. So`al, Mukabbrah, al-`Ali, J. al-Bousaid, al-`Awina). It is possible that it had disappeared for some of them due to the multiple decay and restoration cycles.

#### b.2. The calligraphic profession of faith “Shahada” Banner

The top of the Mihrab is usually marked by a horizontal, rectangular banner, where the Shahada is carved in a beautiful Kufic script with floral and geometric dynamic patterns covering the spaces between the flat geometric letters (Figure 5-a). It seems that the Mihrab of Jama` So`al (13<sup>th</sup> century CE), with its 1meter wide strip of beautiful large Kufic script has inspired the craftsmen of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, led by the creative Abdullah al Humaymi and the Mushmil family. However, the Banner in Jama` So`al was deployed in the Qibla wall, in the lateral sides of the Mihrab, not on the top of the latter.

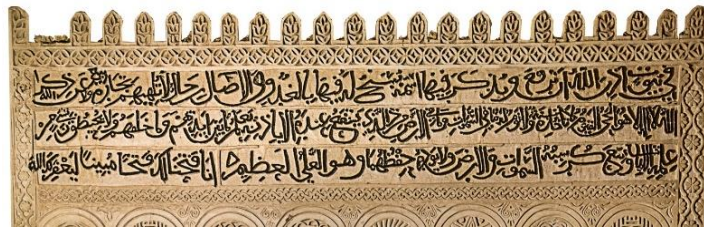
Therefore, the omnipresence of the banner of Shahada in Kufic script at the top of most of the studied Mihrabs is a particularity that distinguishes the Omani style of stucco-carved Mihrabs from any other style in the region (Kanaan, 2014, p. 251). Since the first 16<sup>th</sup> century Mihrabs in Manah and Bahla, the Kufic Shahada has not left the top of the Omani carved Mihrabs (Figure 6). This practice changed in the latest Mihrabs (end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century). The Shahada banner in Kufic calligraphy



has been replaced by Qoranic inscription in Naskhi script (Mihrab al-Aghbari mosque in Sama'il) (Figure 5-b), or no inscription at all (Mihrab Masjid al-Qabil al-Qadim in a-Sharquiya) (Figure 5-c).



a- Horizontal Band showing the shahada in Kufic script filled with floral and geometric patterns (Mihrab al-Jannah Mosque)



b- Inscription of Qoranic verses in Naskhi script at the top of Mihrab Masjid al-Aghbari (Sama'il)



c- Horizontal Band with only floral and geometric patterns (Mihrab al-Masjid al Qadim (al Qabil))

**Figure 5.** Samples of the upper horizontal bands in some of the studied Mihrabs

### b.3. The outer frame

The “Outer frame”, composed of a succession of stamp-like tangential circles, is the most predominant feature in the Mihrabs studied in this article (Figure 6). In some Mihrabs, the frame is composed of alternating circles with two different diameters, where the larger circles present a wider, plain circumference. All circles are filled with carved geometric and floral patterns, or incrustated with blue or green ceramic plates and bowls, creating an interesting diversity within the overall unity of the repetitive pattern of circles. In some frames the wider circles are flanked with even smaller ones on both lateral sides (Mihrabs of Friday mosques of So`al, Adam and Manah, or the mosques of al-Jannah, a-Shargah, a-Shawadhna) (Figure 6).

This “outer frame” continues until the floor and structures the whole Mihrab. This feature can be considered as a unifying trait in all stucco-carved Mihrabs of the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE (Kanaan, 2014, p. 233). It is present in the earliest version of this Mihrabs (J. So`al), in the Mihrabs of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and ornate the later Mihrabs of the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE (M. Al Aghbari). More “abstract” versions of this outer frame can be observed in the later mosques of a-Sharquiya region. This could be due to the fact that they are part of the “later” generation of carved Mihrabs, and their remote location from the epicenter of the Manahi/a-Dakhiliya school of Mihrab carving (Figure 7). It is worth mentioning that

this element, although absent from most of the post 18<sup>th</sup> century Mihrabs, has made some reappearances in some of today' mosques (Jama` Mazoon in al-Khoudh in Muscat Governorate).



a- Mihrab Masjid a-Shargah (Nizwa)



b- Mihrab Masjid a-Shawadhna (Nizwa)

**Figure 6** Samples of outer frames



a- Al masjid al-Qadim, al-Qabil (a-Sharquiya)



b- Masjid al-Moghrah, Sinaw (a-Sharquiya)

**Figure 7:** Samples of Mihrabs with “abstract” versions of the outer frame

#### b.4. The intermediary, interlacing strap-work

The intermediary frame is decorated with a unified pattern of interlacing strap-work and surrounds the rectangle containing the Mihrab niche. It either continues equally ornate until the floor (Mihrab al-`Awina, Al Mzar`a) (Figure 8), or rests on short engaged colonnettes with a lozenge base and capital (J. So`al, J. Bahla, Masjid a-Shargah, and a-Shawadhna, al-`Ali), or with a lozenge capital only (Masjid al-Jannah, J. Adam, J. Nakhal) (Figure 6 and Figure 8-b). Colonnettes, bases and capitals are also covered with carved floral and geometric patterns.



a- Masjid al-Mzar`a in Sama`il



b- Engaged colonnettes with lozenge capital and base (a-Shargah Mosque)

**Figure 8:** Intermediary frame (continuous until the floor / engaged colonnettes)

b.5. The central rectangle and Mihrab niche

The smaller niche of the Mihrab is carved within the width of the Qibla wall and could be framed by two other, smaller, engaged colonnettes, with lozenge or bulb capital. It is surmounted with a ribbed hood, sometimes composed of one or two rows of small Muqarnas (a-Shargah: Figure 8-b). The center of the smallest niche in the Mihrab is slightly concave, divided into vertical panels and extensively carved with geometric and floral patterns (A-Shargah, a-Shawadhna) (Figure 6). Occasionally some Kufic designed letters spell the name of Allah and the prophet Mohamed (PBUH) in the heart of this niche (Figure 9).

The Mihrab niche occupies the lower concave half of the central rectangle. Its upper half is formed by the lunette/tympanum inscribed within an outer keel arch, and the whole plane is covered with a profusion of floral and geometric interlaced carved patterns (Figure 6, Figure 8-b). The lunette presents a specific register of ornamentation, usually divided in concentric petals around a circle. The latter is emphasized with a specific decorative pattern (J. So`al and Bahla) or incrustated with a beautiful porcelain plate, most commonly of Chinese provenance (Masjid al-`Ali and al-Jannah: Figure 9). The upper part of the central rectangle and right above the keel arch framing the lunette, lies the rectangular band where more information about the Mihrab, its decorator and patron, as well as the date of completion are transcribed in *Naskhi* or *Thuluth* script (Figure 9).



a- J. So`al



b- Masjid al-`Ali



c- J. Bahla



d-Masjid al-Jannah

**Figure 9** Samples of central rectangles in the Omani stucco carved Mihrabs

It is worth mentioning that, in later Mihrabs, the keel arch transformed into a triangular one, as is the case in Mihrab al-`Awina (Wadi Bani Khalid, Sharquiya) and al-Mukabbrah in al-Gharidh (Nakhal, Dakhiliya) (Figure 10-c), or became segmented like in Masjid al-Burashid (Sinaw, Sharquiya) (Figure 10-e). The center of the triangular arch is also incrustated with a large porcelain plate, while the sides are punctuated with smaller bowls, in the case of Masjid al-Burashid, or are filled with Naskhi or Thuluth script reporting the information about the Mihrab.

#### b.6. The decorative elements

##### *Calligraphic texts*

The presence of many information, about the history of the Mihrab decoration, the artisan who did it and socio-politic situation during the time it was done, is another characteristic of Omani carved Mihrabs. This important text is usually found in the small rectangle atop the lunette (Figure 9). As stated above, these texts were the unquestionable source of many of the information presented in this paper.

If the Shahada written in Kufic script is almost systematically present in the vast majority of the Mihrabs studied here, the Quranic verses, in Naskhi or Thuluth scripts are only present in 10 mosques out of the 22 studied. The insertion of Quranic texts within the ornamental register of the Omani stucco-carved Mihrabs is not a distinctive feature in itself. In fact, it is common to find, in other Islamic regions, Quranic verses adorning the mosque's walls, but the exclusive presence of these texts in the Mihrab is an Omani particularity.

##### *The decoration with embedded "Chinese" ceramic plates*

As part of their decorative register, twenty Mihrabs (20) out of the twenty two (22) studied, present a variable number of ceramic plates and bowls, of different sizes and styles, embedded in different places of their surface. The only Mihrabs that were originally carved without the use of ceramic plates in their adornment are: J. So`al (650H / 1252CE), the "predecessor" of all 16<sup>th</sup> century Omani carved Mihrabs (Figure 9, a.), J. Bahla (917H / 1511CE), one of the master pieces of Abdullah Al Humaymi (Figure 4), and al-Aghbari mosque (early 19<sup>th</sup> century CE /1245 H), the latest carved Mihrab in the corpus studied in this research. Some of the other Mihrabs have lost their ceramic plates as a result of their advanced decay, or have been damaged and then either cladded over (Mihrab Masjid a-Shurah in Manah) or, more recently replaced by a carved inscription of the name of "Allah" (Masjid, al-Mukabbrah (Nakhal) and J. al-Boussaidi (Adam))<sup>4</sup>. These ceramic dishware, some of which have been introduced in Oman in the 15<sup>th</sup> century or even earlier through trading with the Ming China (Baldissera, 1994; Goffriller et al., 2015, pp. 8, 10) are a recurrent feature in the decoration of Mihrabs and other structures such as in

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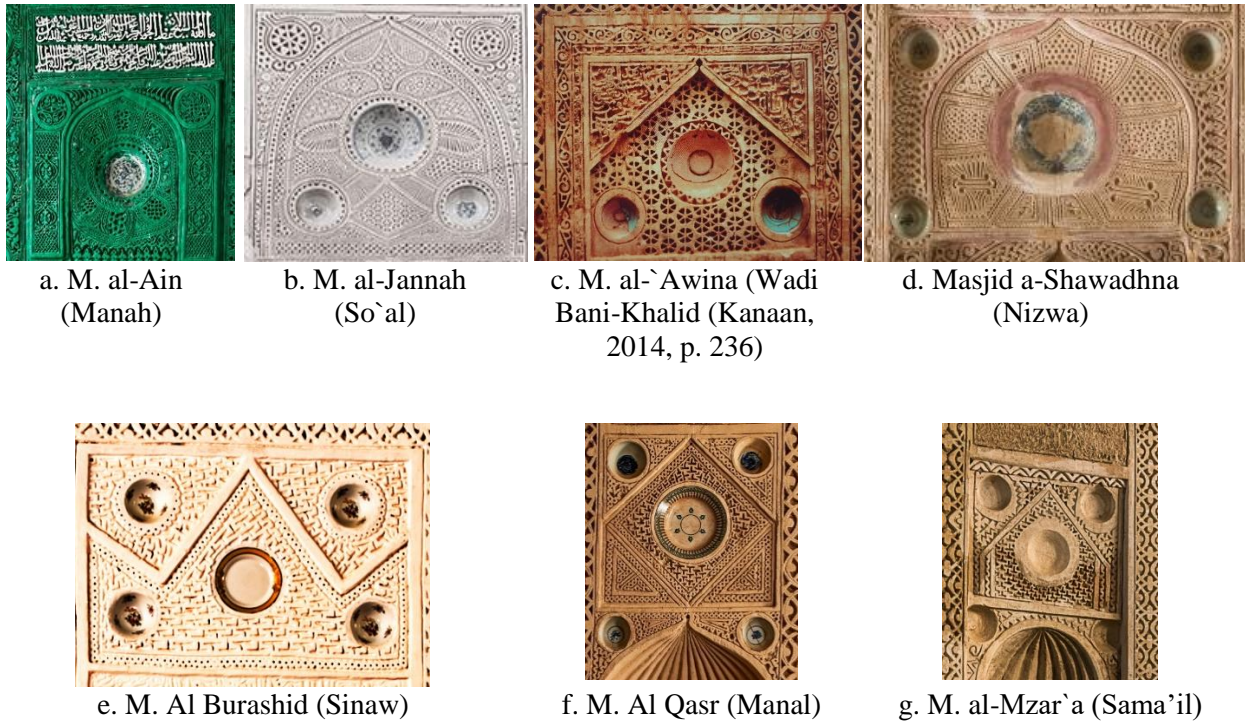
<sup>4</sup> A blue ceramic plate was clearly apparent in a picture of Mihrab J. al-Boussaidi before its restoration, published by Baldisseri in his book (Baldissera, 1994, p. 87)

Sohar fort or some merchant houses of Ibra (Bonnenfant & Le Cour Grandmaison, 1977; P. M. Costa, 2006, pp. 63, figure 30; Le Cour Grandmaison, 1977).

The center of the lunette/ tympanum is the most common area in the Mihrab where the ceramic plates are usually embedded. This central element could be the only one in the central frame or even in the whole Mihrab to be ornate with a ceramic plate (Masjid al-Ain, al-Ali, J. al-Boussaidi, J. al-Gharidh or J. Nakhal) (Figure 4-a & Figure 10-a). However, the most common situation, is the presence of four smaller bowls forming a rectangle framing the central plate (Mihrabs of: a-Shawadhna, a-Shargah, a-Shurah, a-Sarooj, Mzar`a, J. Manah, J. Muqazzah, al-Qasr, and al-Burashid) (Figure 6 & Figure 10-d, e, f, g). In a few other instances, the central plate, which is usually the largest and most beautiful, is emphasized with two smaller bowls forming a triangle pointed to the top of the Mihrab. (Mihrabs of: al Jannah, and al-`Awina) (Figure 9-d & Figure 10-b, c). It is worth mentioning that in the triangular arched tympanum, the ceramic bowls are given similar distribution as those in the Keel arched ones, though the layout seems more dynamic due to the sharp angles of the triangle (M. al-Mzar`a), the lozenge (M. al-Qasr), or the segmented line (M. al-Burashid) (Figure 10-g, f, e).

In addition to their presence in the tympanum, the porcelain plates can be embedded in the Mihrab's outer frame, where they may occupy every other round stamp (J. Muqazzah). Moreover, they could be present in the small lateral circles (M. a-Shawadhna) (Figure 6), giving the impression of small satellites orbiting around a larger planet. Bandyopadhyay saw in such layout a mystic symbolic in the Islamic tradition, related to the hyperbolic reference to Allah's light in Quran (Surah 24, Verse 35 and Surah 6 verse 97) (Goffriller et al., 2015, p. 14). While such assertion needs further scrutiny in the Ibadhi mystic texts, from what is available to us through the studied corpus, this hypothesis seems weak. If such symbolic existed, it would have been present also in the Qoranic texts that adorn the Mihrabs. In fact, there are no verses referring to light in the Qoranic texts used in the corpus of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Mihrabs. The verse 35 of Surah 24 (an-Noor "the light") was carved only once, in the Mihrab of al-Aghbari (19<sup>th</sup> century). Nevertheless, if there was an intentional reference to the stars in the decoration of the Mihrabs in Oman, this would be more related to the interest that the Omanis, and Muslims in general, have to star gazing for the determination of their holy months, finding their way in the deserts and the seas, or defining the time by night for the falaj water management.

It is worth noticing that the porcelain plates became the main "attraction" in the latest decorated Mihrabs. Their distribution became freer in the different frames, their size as well as their quality became as much common (M. al-Qadim in al-Qabil and M. al-Moghrah in Sinaw) (Figure 7). This is probably due to the weakening of Mihrabs' decorators' carving skills.



**Figure 10** The different layouts and distribution of Ceramic plates in in the central rectangle of the Mihrab

The themes of the designs within the porcelain plates are varied even within the same region or within the repertoire of the same craftsman. Most of the time, they depict abstract flowers, plants or fruits. Some porcelain plates contain imaginary animals, fish and birds such as the phoenix (M. Al 'Ain and a-Shurah in Manah and Muqazzah in Izki). It is worth mentioning that even if the two first Mihrabs were made by the pioneer Abdullah b. Qasim al Humaymi, it is less probable that the theme of the phoenix was chosen purposely. Rather it is more likely that this choice was related to the finesse of the designs in these bawls and their aesthetic and color conjunction with the overall design of the Mihrab, or simply they were the most available to him at the time.

## DISCUSSION OF THE CRAFT OF THE MIHRAB STUCCO-CARVING IN OMANI MOSQUES

### Mihrab carving and Ibadi jurisprudence in Oman

With all its frames and stamps, bands and porcelain dishware, with the profusion of various patterns, knife-carved in the thick layer of Sarooj, the creative composition and the systematic filling of any plain surface, the Mihrab incarnates an important aspect of the Islamic art: diversity within unity. It resembles to a refined embroidery as Baldissera remarked about Mihrab a-Shargah (Baldissera, 1994,

p. 49). Nonetheless, earlier research revealed that this practice of Mihrab decoration was not “encouraged” in the Ibadhi jurisprudence related to the mosque architecture (Benkari-Boudidah, 2013, p. 651, 2014, pp. 62–65; Benkari, 2016, p. 60, 2019, p. 178). It emphasizes the observance of modesty and austerity when it comes to the complementary details of construction. In fact, the Ibadhi religious laws discourage any form of decoration in the mosque, especially in the Mihrabs. This was justified by the intention to avoid the risk of distracting the worshippers in their prayer. But it seems that during the Nabahina period, such practices were tolerated to a certain extent and in some regions of Oman (Benkari, 2016).

However, this tolerance was not the same everywhere and always. The drawings in the porcelain plates might have got a later disapproval and had to be broken or taken away from the mosque. Indeed, some of the studied Mihrabs present plates that are erased in their center, or were simply removed from the Mihrab. The successive maintenance and restoration works might have caused these changes in the original porcelains. For instance, the local community in Al Qabil was so keen to perfectly restore their mosque, that they bought a set of vessels from the local market and used them to ornate the Mihrab of their mosque, as a replacement of the old ones that disappeared or simply broke. In some other instances, where the Mihrab restored by the ministry, the lost plates are replaced with recent but more appropriate ones (J. al-Boussaidi in Adam or al-Mukabbrah in al-Gharidh (Nakhal)). Unfortunately, the missing main ceramic in some of the Mihrabs has been replaced by the calligraphy of the word “Allah”. We are less in agreement with this last option as it alters tremendously the stylistic composition of the Mihrab, because there has never been such calligraphy in the center of the tympanum before.

### **The decoration of Mihrabs in Oman: Origins and influences**

At this stage of the discussion it is legitimate to question the origin of this practice of inserting the porcelain plates in the mosque walls as a mean of decoration. Bandyopadhyay stated that it has been observed elsewhere without mentioning any example (Goffriller et al., 2015). Our investigations about this question led us to one case in the eastern and western minarets of Jama` al-Rawdha in Sana’a Yemen<sup>5</sup> and which was dated from the Ottoman period (Ghilan, 2019). However, to our best knowledge there is no evidence about the filiation between the case of al-Rawdha mosque and the Mihrabs studied here. The number and almost systematic use of this technique in the Omani Mihrabs make of it a specificity to those Mihrabs even if it did not originate in Oman.

If the earliest publication about the carved Mihrabs of Oman has described this style as being “*A curious example of conservatism of the Iranian art of stucco carving of the Seljuk and Mongol*”

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<sup>5</sup> Prof. Ghilan Hmood Ghilan from the University of Sana’a, regarding the decoration with incrustated ceramic plates in the eastern and western minarets of Friday mosque of al-Rawdha in Sana’a. Communication through WhatsApp on May 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> 2021.

*periods*” (Kervran & Bernard, 1996), the consecutive works have discussed other possible sources of influences and even finished by recognizing a certain *Omani identity* to this art (Al Hadhrami, 2019, p. 14; Baldissera, 1994, p. 146; P. M. Costa, 2001; Kanaan, 2014, p. 257). In her article about the stucco-carved Mihrabs in Oman, Kervran focused her discussion on Jama` So`al and Jama` Bahla to found her claim that the Art of Mihrab decoration in Oman was a reminiscence of the Iranian Seljuks Art of stucco carving (Kervran & Bernard, 1996). However, she could not explain why the Omanis of the 16<sup>th</sup> century were referring to an almost 2 centuries older decorative art.

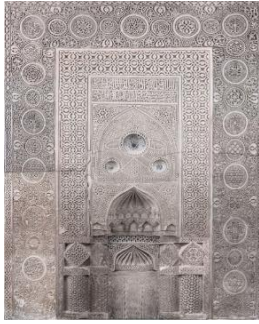
When he thoroughly commented the decorated Mihrabs of the same mosques, and without refuting the claims of Kervran, Costa alluded to the possible presence of other sources of influence that might have participated in the formation of, what he claimed to be an *Omani style of Mihrab carving of the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE*. (P. M. Costa, 2001). However, he argued that Kervran’s theory was only true for a few decorative features and techniques in these two mosques. Most importantly, as later demonstrated by Kanaan, Kervran’s argument fails when it is extended to the remaining majority of the decorated Mihrabs in Oman (Kanaan, 2014, pp. 235–236, 238, 240–241).

As discussed in the section above, those Mihrabs present several features that were unique and unprecedented in other regions in the past. Bandyopadhyay, argues also for a dominantly Iranian origin of the Mihrab stucco carving in Oman (Bandyopadhyay, 2010). However, refuting the hypothesis of Kervran, he claims that the Omanis did not inherit this practice from the Persian Seljuks, rather, they received it earlier, in the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE., when the country was under the Nabahina dynasty, through the multiple incursions of the Buyids, in Sohar then further inland, in Nizwa and Bahla (Bandyopadhyay, 2008, p. 374). He asserts that the tradition of patronage of Art works, such as carved Mihrabs, was also introduced in Oman, under al-Nabahina rulers, with a Persian influence.

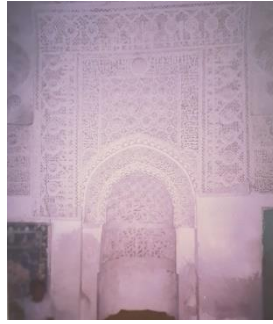
On the other hand, Kanaan shares Baldissera’s opinion, and claims that we are in presence of a *Omani school of stucco carving* that emanated from a local adaptation and application of several influences, from the Buyids and Seljuks, but also from Mamluk Egypt through Yemen, and even the Rustemid Sedrata (Kanaan, 2014, pp. 230, 238, 240). Indeed, the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE. Mihrab of the Zabid Friday mosque and the remaining parts of the stucco panels of Sedrata, the 9<sup>th</sup> Century capital of the Rustemids’ Ibadī Imamate in actual Algeria, present similar organization and aesthetic sensibility in the stucco work, as those of the first Mihrab of Oman’s 16<sup>th</sup> century CE. (Figure 11).

Based on what has been discussed thus far, while sharing this last conclusion, the present research has showed to which extent the local craftsmen, especially the pioneers among them, were in a state of exploration and trial, testing different techniques of carving and multiple forms and means of ornamentation. Such attitude is not uncommon. The Omani builders of the forts and other military structures of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, had a similar approach in forming a local typology of buildings from the techniques learnt from the Portuguese in the coasts (Benkari, 2021).





Mihrab of Masjid al-Jannah (Harat So'al - Nizwa) early 16<sup>th</sup> century CE



Mihrab of the Friday mosque of Zabid (Yemen) Late 15<sup>th</sup> century CE (Bonnenfant, 2004, p. 47)



Mihrab Masjid al-Mzar'a (Sama'il). Late 16<sup>th</sup> century CE

**Figure 11:** Mihrabs from Oman and Yemen

In the light of this discussion, it is possible to claim that, even if the Buyids and Seljuk style had an influence on the early decorated Mihrabs such as the one of So'al, it is not accurate to reduce the origin and the development of this art in Oman to this sole source of influence. In the same period of the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE, Oman was also open to other forms of decorative arts, such as those coming from Iraq which it is most likely the origin of the Kufic calligraphy that became a ubiquitous feature in the Omani Mihrabs since the one of J. So'al. When the art of Mihrab carving witnessed its revival in the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE (10<sup>th</sup> H), the Omani craftsmen employed the artistic repertoire inherited from the earlier Mihrabs, but they also creatively integrated the artistic trends of their time. Those trends came from Egypt, through Yemen, as well as from North Africa. Therefore, the art of carving Mihrabs in Oman was indeed the result of the conflation of all these trends and styles merged and reinvented within a pronounced Omani local language. It would be interesting to investigate whether this Omani decorative language had any influences beyond the Arabian Peninsula. Especially that Decorated Mihrabs in East-African traditional mosques were observed by the historian J. Schacht (Schacht, 1957, p. 2)

## CONCLUSION

The present research is a historic and stylistic study of the stucco-carved Mihrabs in the traditional mosques of Oman. The methodologic approach combined the architectural and photographic documentation, the stylistic and comparative analysis of a large number of the still standing Mihrabs in different regions in Oman, along with the study of the literature collected from primary and secondary sources. The main conclusions that have been drawn from this exhaustive investigation are:

- The corpus of the traditional stucco-carved Mihrabs of Oman was built in a timeline that spans over a period of six centuries (from the Mid-13<sup>th</sup> until the early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.). The Mihrabs produced during the 16<sup>th</sup> century are the most important in number and the most developed in quality of execution and richness in their aesthetic register. In addition, A-Dakhiliya region, with the city of Manah, are the epicenter of the development of this art, especially after its revival in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century CE.
- The comparative and stylistic analysis has helped in the identification of the different components of the stucco-carved Mihrabs in Oman, their common features and their disparities. The study has especially highlighted the components that are unique in the Omani Mihrabs, their possible origins and their process of evolution until they reached their final forms.
- Finally, this research has demonstrated that we are in presence of a full-fledged Omani stylistic school of Mihrab stucco-carving, which started around the 13<sup>th</sup> century and reached its peak in the 16<sup>th</sup> century before fading away around the early 19<sup>th</sup> century of our era. Even if this culminating style was the result of the conflation of several influences from the styles of Buyids and Seljuk Persia, The Ayyubid Yemen and Egypt, the Rustemid Algeria, and the Abbasid Iraq, the Omani craftsmen have succeeded in integrating all these influences within their local taste and know-how. Such integration has generated a peculiar Omani art of Mihrab Stucco-carving with unique and unprecedented features and compositions.

This study presents certain limitations in the corpus analyzed, where some Mihrabs could not be located, and a few others could not be dated nor their artisans identified. Based on previous research, some assumptions had to be made based on careful comparison and analysis of their components. Moreover, it is important to further develop our understanding of the social and professional networks that prevailed in the production of these Mihrabs and whether these networks were confined within Oman or went beyond the country's actual borders. Further research is also needed to discuss this refined art of Mihrab carving, (with figurative images sometimes) in the light of the Ibadi jurisprudence, which clearly prohibits any kind of ornamentation in the mosque architecture. Finally, this research opens the opportunity to further explore the practical integration of the style and typology identified, in the contemporary and future projects of Mihrab decoration in Oman or the region.

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