

The Craft of Stucco Mihrab carving in Oman in the 13th to 17th AD.

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Abstract

The corpus of research about vernacular architecture in Oman presents some gaps of knowledge about its typologies and their mode of formation and development. The Omani traditional mosques, are among the typologies that deserve to be further studied. The present research aims to contribute to enrich the existing knowledge about this mosque architecture by formulating some interpretations regarding the origins and development of Mihrabs decoration in Oman between the 13th and 17th centuries. 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. It discusses the emergence of the craft of Mihrab carving in Oman, its origins and characteristics.

Keywords: Ibadism; islamic ornaments; Omani mosques; stucco carving.

1. 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: “*Madhab*”. They are also present in some regions of Algeria (Wadi M’zab), Tunisia (Djerba Island) and Libya (Jabal Nafusa) (Benkari, 2019). In the sultanate, they are distributed geographically following the areas of influence of this Madhab. Previous research have detailed the main characteristics of these mosques (Benkari-Boudidah, 2014; Benkari, 2019) and some others have even interpreted these characteristics following the precepts of the Ibadi doctrine and linked them to other examples of this religious architecture in other regions where this Madhab was or still is predominant (Benkari-Boudidah, 2014; Benkari, 2016). The main specificities of the Ibadi mosques consist in their pure volumes, the modesty of their architecture and simplicity of their interior

spaces. 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 their roofs consists in a couplet punctuating one of the corners opposite to the wall of Qibla: “*buma*”, a unique feature characterizing the Mosques of Oman (Benkari, 2019; Costa, 2006, p. 80). Furthermore, the Ibadi mosques in Oman are differentiated from the others by their flat Mihrabs, occurring as a recess within the Qibla wall and with no protrusion in the outer side of the wall (Kanaan, 2014, p. 232). If it was not for the elevated platform where they have been erected, and the *buma* characterizing one of their roof corners, the mosques in the Ibadi regions of Oman cannot be distinguished from the rest of the dwellings in the settlement.

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. It

has been initiated by the work of the Arabist E. Baldissera (Baldissera, 1994) and Archeologist and Art historian M. Kervran (Kervran & Bernard, 1996). These early works were followed by a more comprehensive documentation and descriptive study by Costa (P. Costa, 1997; Costa, 2001), then a comprehensive comparative investigation by Benkari (Benkari-Boudidah, 2014; Benkari, 2016, 2019). The focus on the stucco-carved Mihrabs, has been continued with the research of Bandyopadhyay (Bandyopadhyay, 2008, 2010), Goffriller (Goffriller, Hongjiao, Bandyopadhyay, & Henderson, 2015), Kanaan (Kanaan, 2014) and some Omani writers amateur of the local architecture (Al Hadhrami, 2019). However, none of these research did study the stucco-carved Mihrabs to 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 they belong to. The present research aims at examining this craft of Mihrab carving in Oman by shedding some light on its main formal characteristics and their origins, and the socio-economic context that accompanied the emergence and development of this craft. More specifically, this research will address the following questions:

- 1- How did the craft of Mihrab stucco-carving develop in Oman?
- 2- What are the formal and aesthetic characteristic of this craft?
- 3- How does this “Omani style” of Mihrab carving relate to the wider 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 all decorated 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.

2. Methodology

The present study relied on an extensive literature review about the subject covering the essential related publications in English, French and Arabic. This review has revealed the records of twenty five (25) traditional mosques with carved Mihrabs. However, three (3) mosques were not considered in the present research, as two of them (J. Nizwa and J. Nakhal) have been destroyed (Baldissera, 1994) and the third (J. Hujrat Musalmat) is still standing but, there are no information about its date of construction, its decorator or its patron (Benkari, 2017, 2021). Therefore, the primary data was collected through the extensive architectural and photographic surveys of all 22 remaining decorated Mihrabs and the mosques where they are still standing today.

The first documentation campaign took place during the winter of 2017. It targeted all the concerned mosques in a-Dakhiliya region. It was then followed by multiple short missions to the rest of the mosques in al-Batinah and A-Sharqiya governorates. The primary data collected was also checked against the findings of previous research about these mosques, especially in the work of Costa (Costa, 2001) as well as the recent book of Al Hadhrami (Al Hadhrami, 2019). The present research owes a lot to the meticulous work of the Arabist Baldissera who deciphered the inscriptions embedded in the carvings of the Mihrabs studied here (Baldissera, 1994). 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.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. The art of stucco-carved Mihrabs in the socio-political context of Oman 13th -17th CE (7th-13th H)

The information carved in the decorated Mihrabs studied in this research, reveals that they were produced over a period of more than three centuries and under three different dynasties. The earliest decorated Mihrab in the studied collection is still standing in Jama` So`al (in the city of Nizwa, Interior governorate) with the date of 650H (1252 CE) carved in its frame (Baldissera, 1994; Costa, 2006; Ministry of Justice and endowments and Islamic Affairs, 1995). The different artefacts found in the constructions, dated from this period, reveal the extent of the maritime exchange that prevailed in the region at the time. The same circumstances were behind the flourishing of the Craft of Mihrab carving in the country, probably under the influence of the neighboring regions in both shores of the Arabian Gulf. This idea is even more evidenced by the presence, in the frames of many Mihrabs from this period, of porcelain plates and bowls, probably of Chinese origin, used as colorful decorative elements (Goffriller et al., 2015; Kanaan, 2014; Kervran & Bernard, 1996).

Nevertheless, the core of the Omani decorated Mihrabs, still standing today, was produced in the period 1503-1619 CE. Some of the previous studies agree on the fact that we are in presence of a “decorative style” that is specific to this region (Baldissera 1994; Kanaan 2014). The question is: where did this style come from and to which extent it is possible to identify it as an “Omani style” within the large repertoire of the Islamic decorative arts?

3.1.1 The Omani Stucco-carved Mihrabs and their geographic context

The classification and analysis of the collected data informed the development of a holistic understanding about the geographic distribution of the studied Mihrabs and how this three centuries long phenomenon had evolved in Oman. The timeline represented by the Mihrab studied in this research spans from 1252 (Jama` So`al) until 1829

(Masjid Al Aghbari). It covers the territory of three regions/governorates in Oman: a-Dakhiliya, al-Batinah, and Northern Sharqiyah. However, the core of the carved Mihrab production at its quintessence, covers the 16th century CE only, and the territories of a few cities, predominantly in the a-Dakhiliya (interior) region (such as Manah, Adam, Nizwa, Bahla and Izki), then in al-Batinah (Sama'il and Nakhal) and, more lately in a-Sharqiya (al-Qabil, Sinaw, Wadi Bani Khalid).

It is worth mentioning that this geographic and chronologic contextualization is only based on the still standing Mihrabs that the author could survey. It is highly probable that some mosques have disappeared with their Mihrabs, either destroyed to be rebuilt (Mihrab al Jama` al-Kabeer in Nakhal) (Baldissera, 1994), or simply decayed due to the weathering or urban expansion. Therefore, it is also probable that this craft had a much longer span of expansion in the geography and the chronology than what can be deduced from the remaining Mihrabs studied here (Al Hadhrami, 2019).

3.2. The Characteristics of the Decorated Mihrab In Oman 13-17th Centuries

The comparative analysis of the aesthetic, constructive and architectural properties of the Mihrabs and the mosque where they are hosted generated a set of common characteristics that can be summarized in the following aspects:

3.2.1 The status and location of the mosques containing stucco-carved Mihrabs

It is worth noticing that with their refined carvings, these Mihrabs are confined in mosques with no specific distinction in their location, volume size and forms or architectural details. This peculiar trait could be explained by the fact that the mosque edification usually precedes the Mihrab decoration by several years. In Mihrab masjid Al-`Ali (Manah) for instance, both the date of the mosque foundation and the Mihrab carving are mentioned.

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. Indeed, decorated Mihrabs could be found in mosques with both status (Jama' and Masjid), with clear predominance of masjids (15) over Jama' (8), even if 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'). Only a limited number of them stands isolated, either surrounded by a cemetery (masjid a-Shargah in Nizwa, masjid al-Qasr in Manal (Al Hadhrami, 2019; Ministry of Justice and endowments and Islamic Affairs, 1995) or, not far from the adjoining settlements (Jama' Manah, or Jama' Bahla). Finally, a few other mosques can be found within the meander of the oases (3 mosques in Samail and Jama' al-'Alaya in Rustaq (Al Hadhrami, 2019).

It is worth mentioning that, with the exception of this Jama', all other Friday mosques with carved Mihrabs are located in the interior region (a-Dakhiliya). This confirms the idea, discussed above, about the fact that the interior region is the main land of propagation of the craft of Mihrab carving in Oman. 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 / 1829 CE) after the carving of the last Mihrab in a Friday mosque (Jama' al-'Alaya, 1057H/1651CE).

3.2.2 The common features

As stated in previous research, the stucco-carved Mihrabs in Oman of the 16th CE 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 formal features which consist in:

- Receding concentric arches within a flat framing band
- Pronounced frieze with sort of crenellations
- A small arched Qibla niche, sometimes doubled or tripled in a telescopic succession of decreasing niches

- The receding arches could be supported by short round engaged columns.
- The entire 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 the technique of molded panels was used in addition to the common knife carving method.

The corpus of Mihrabs analyzed in this study reproduce this same scheme with some variations and the addition of other elements on which we will elaborate in the following sections:

The 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 J. Bahla, J. Manah and J. al-Gharidh in Nakhal (923H/1517CE) (Baldissera, 1994; Ministry of Justice and endowments and Islamic Affairs, 1995) or a little shorter (3m in the Mihrabs of Jama' So'al, and Nakhal).

3.2.3 The carved frieze

The top of the Mihrab is usually marked with a frieze finely carved with floral patterns (al-Jannah, a-Shargah, Muqazah, a-Sarooj, Bahla, a-Shawadhna, al-Brashid, al-Gharidh...) or, more rarely with a series of crenellations (J. Manah al-Kabir, J. al-Aghbari). A few Mihrabs do not have this frieze at all (J. So'al, Mukabbarah, al-'Ali, J. al-Bousaid, al-'Awina), although it is possible that it had disappeared for some of them due to the multiple decay and restoration cycles.

3.2.4 Shahada Banner

In addition to the frieze, the top of the Mihrab is usually marked by a horizontal, sometimes imposing, rectangular band where the Islamic profession of faith "Shahada" is carved in a beautiful Kufic script with floral and geometric dynamic patterns covering the spaces between the flat geometric letters. Some Mihrabs present

slight differences with this common image. In the case of Mihrab J. Bahla, the Shahada is coupled with a Quranic verse, and in al-'Ali mosque, half of the horizontal band is occupied by a text in Naskhi script relating the date of foundation of the Mihrab and its patrons. Finally, the latest Mihrabs in the studied corpus did not have the Shahada on the top of their Mihrabs, instead, they have a Quranic inscription in Naskhi script (Mihrab al-Aghbari mosque), or no inscription at all (Mihrab Masjid al-Qabil al-Qadim).

3.2.5 The outer frame

The most dominant feature in the studied selection of Mihrabs is the "Outer frame", composed of a succession of stamp-like tangential circles. Sometimes, the frame is composed of alternating circles with two different diameters. All circles are filled with a variety of 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 circles. In some Mihrabs the wider circles are flanked with even smaller ones on both lateral sides. This "outer frame" continues until the floor and defines the whole Mihrab. This feature can be considered as unifying trait in all stucco-carved Mihrabs of the 10th century Hijri (16th CE) (Kanaan, 2014, p. 233). It is present in the earliest version of this Mihrabs (in So'al), in the mosques of the 16th century CE, and ornate also the later Mihrabs of the 18th century CE (M. Al Aghbari). It can also be observed as a more "abstract" version in the mosques of a-Sharqiya region.

3.2.6 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, and al-Mzar'a in Sama'il after restoration), or rests on short engaged colonnettes with a lozenge capital (Masjid al-Jannah, J. Adam, J. Nakhal), or with a lozenge base in addition to the capital (J. So'al, J. Bahla, Masjid a-Shargah, and a-Shawadhna, al-'Ali). Colonnettes, bases and capitals are also covered with carved floral and geometric patterns.

3.2.7 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. 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). Sometimes some Kufic designed letters spell the name of Allah and prophet Mohamed in the heart of this niche.

The Mihrab niche constitutes the lower concave half of the Mihrab's central rectangle. Its upper half is occupied 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. 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, or incrustated with a beautiful porcelain plate. 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 achievement are transcribed in Naskhi or Thuluth script.

In later Mihrabs, the keel arch transformed into a triangular one, as it is the case in Mihrab al-'Awina (Wadi Bani Khalid, a-Sharqiya) and al-Mukabbarah in al-Ghraidh (Nakhal), or became segmented like in Masjid al-Burashid (Sinaw). 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.

3.2.8 The decorative elements:

- Calligraphic texts

The omnipresence of the banner of the Islamic profession of faith "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). It seems that

the text of Shahada and Quranic verses, carved in the Qibla wall of Jama`a So`al (13th century CE) in large bold Kufic script, has inspired the craftsmen of the 16th century CE, led by Abdullah al Humaymi. Since his first oeuvres in Manah and Bahla, the Kufic Shahada has not left the top of the Omani stucco-carved Mihrabs, until the second half of the 18th century (Mihrab Masjid al-Qadeem in Manal) and first half of 19th century (Mihrab Masjid al-Aghbari in Sama`il).

Another characteristic of this unique Omani craft, consists in the presence, in the small rectangle atop the lunette, of important information about the history of the Mihrab decoration, the artisan who carved it, its patrons, and date of completion. These texts were the source of many of the information presented in this paper (Baldissera, 1994).

The insertion of Quranic texts within the ornamental register of the Omani stucco-carved Mihrabs is not a distinctive feature in itself. However, the exclusive presence of these texts in the Mihrab is an Omani particularity in this matter. If the Shahada written in Kufic script is almost systematically present in the vast majority of the Mihrabs studied in this paper, the Quranic verses, in Naskhi or Thuluth scripts are only present in 10 mosques out of the 22 studied: 6 Jama` and 4 Masjid. 2 Jama` and 11 masjid don't contain any Quranic verses in their Mihrabs or in any other place in the building.

In addition, the number of verses varies from a mosque to the other. 6 of the 10 mosques do have only one verse written in their Mihrabs (2 masjids and 4 Jama`).

- The decoration with embedded "Chinese" ceramic plates

As part of their decorative register, 20 Mihrabs out of the 22 studied here, present a variable number of ceramic plates and bowls 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), J. Bahla (917H / 1511CE), and al-Aghbari mosque from early 19th century CE, (1245 H). 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-Mukabrah (Nakhal) and J. al-Bousaidi (Adam)). Some of these ceramic dishware have been introduced in Oman in the 15th century or even earlier through trading with the Ming China (Baldissera, 1994; Goffriller et al., 2015). They are a recurrent feature in the decoration of Mihrabs and other spaces such as in Suhar fort, or some merchant houses of Ibra for instance (P. M. Costa, 2006). The center of the lunette/tympanum is the most common area in the Mihrab where the ceramic plates are usually found. This 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-Bousaidi, J. al-Gharidh or J. Nakhal). The most common situation, however, is the presence of 4 smaller bowls forming a rectangle framing the central plate (Mihrab Masjid a-Shawadhna, a-Shargah, a-Shurah, a-Sarooj, Mzar`a, J. Manah, J. Muqazah, al-Qasr and al-Brashid). 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 (Mihrab M. al Jannah, al-`Awina). 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).

In addition to their presence in the tympanum, the porcelain plates can be embedded in the Mihrab's outer frame, where they occupy every other round stamp (J. Muqazzah in Izki). Moreover, they could be present in the small lateral circles (M. a-Shawadhna). In the latest decorated Mihrabs, due to weaker carving skills, the porcelain plates became the main feature in the decoration of the Mihrab. Their distribution became freer in the different frames, their size as well as their quality became as much common (M. al-Qadeem in al-Qabil and M. al-Moghrah in Sinaw).

With all these frames and stamps, bands and porcelain dishware, with the profusion of various knife-carved patterns 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 (Baldissera, 1994, p. 49).

It is worth mentioning that 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 plate contain imaginary animals, fish and birds (phoenix). As mentioned in earlier research, this whole practice of Mihrab decoration is not “encouraged” in the Ibadhi jurisprudence related to the mosque architecture (Benkari-Boudidah, 2014; Benkari, 2016, p. 60, 2019, p. 178). But it seems that such practices were tolerated in some regions of Oman (Benkari, 2016). However, this tolerance was not the same everywhere and always. Certainly, the drawings in the porcelain plates might have got a later disapproval and had to be broken or taken away from the mosque. This explains the plates erased in their center in some of the mosques, or those which bowls and plates were simply removed. In other places, (such as al-Qabil), the local community 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 (J. al-Boussaidi in Adam or al-Mukabbrah in al-Gharidh (Nakhal)) where the Mihrab is restored by the ministry, the plates are replaced with recent but more appropriate ones, or the plate is replaced by the calligraphy of the word “Allah” (Masjid al-Mukabbrah in al-Gharidh –Nakhal). This last option as it alters tremendously the stylistic composition of the Mihrab as there has never been such calligraphy in the center of the tympanum before. At this stage of the discussion it is legitimate to question the origin of this practice of inserting the porcelain plates in the walls as a mean of decoration. Bandyopadhyay stated that it has been observed elsewhere without mentioning any example (Goffriller et al., 2015). Our own investigations led us to one case in the eastern

and western minarets of Jama` al-Rawdha in San`a Yemen and which was dated from the Ottoman period (Ghilan, 2019). However, to our best knowledge there was no evidence to establish 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 mosques make of it a specificity to those Mihrabs even if it did not originate in Oman.

4. Conclusions

The present research is a historic and stylistic study of the stucco-carved Mihrabs in the traditional mosques of Oman. Through an extensive literature review and architectural documentation of most of the still standing Mihrabs in different regions in Oman, along with the analysis of the corpus of information collected from primary and secondary sources, this study revealed the following conclusions:

- The corpus of the traditional stucco-carved Mihrabs of Oman was produced in a timeline that spans over a period of six centuries (from the Mid-13th century until the early 19th century). The Mihrabs produced during the 16th century are the most important in number and the most developed in quality of execution and rich in the aesthetic register. Similarly, it has been found that the Dakhiliya region with the city of Manah is the epicenter of the development of this art especially after its revival in the early 16th century.

- The comparative and stylistic analysis has helped in the identification of the different components of the stucco-carved Mihrabs in Oman. It has highlighted the features that are unique in the Omani Mihrabs, their possible origins and their process of evolution until they reached their ultimate forms. In addition, it has been demonstrated that we are in presence of a full-fledged Omani stylistic school of Mihrab stucco-carving which started around the 13th century and reached its peak in the 16th century before fading away around the early 19th century of our era.

This study presents certain limitations in the corpus analyzed, where a few Mihrabs could not be located and a few others could not be dated.

Based on previous research, some assumptions had to be made based on careful comparison and analysis. Moreover, due to the limitation of the publication length, it was not possible to further develop the understanding of the social and professional networks that prevailed in the production of these Mihrabs. Further research is also needed to discuss the practice of Mihrab decoration with figurative images in the light of the Ibadi jurisprudence which clearly prohibits any ornamentation in the construction, especially in the Qibla wall (Benkari, 2016). Finally, this research also opens the opportunity to further explore the practical integration of the identified style and typology in the Mihrab decoration in Oman or the region.

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