

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 tarikh bandar 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

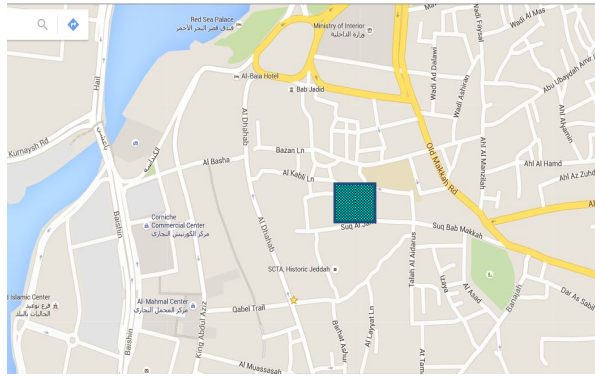


Fig. 1: Location of al-Shafi'i Mosque in a Google Map



Fig. 2: Inscription Mentioning al-Sharif Hasan b. 'Ajlan in al-Shafi'i Mosque



Fig. 3: Inscription Mentioning al-Khawaja Muhammad Ali in al-Shafi'i Mosque



Fig. 4: Inscription Mentioning the Name of Barsbay in al-Shafi'i Mosque

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.⁵ 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.⁶ The souk at this mosque is today known as *souq al-jami* and traditionally, it was specialized in gold and jewellery.⁷ 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."⁸ This mosque is called *al-Shafi'i* because it was dedicated to the *Shafi'i* rite teachings.⁹

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 1426.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.”¹²

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.¹³ 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.”¹⁴ 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.



Fig. 5: Al-Shafi‘i Mosque Exterior: Qibla Wall, During and After Recent Restoration

The mosque is built from the local *mangabi* stone,¹⁵ 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.



Fig. 6: Al-Shafi'i Mosque Small Door on the Southern End of the Qibla Wall, Before and After Recent Restoration

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.

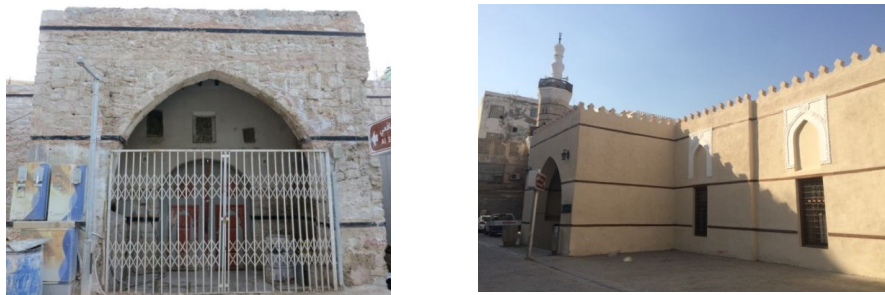


Fig. 7: Al-Shafi'i Mosque Southern Wall, Main Entrance Before and After Restoration. The Entrance's Projection is Shown in the New Picture



**Fig. 8: Al-Shafi'i Mosque Southern Wall, Main Entrance Detail
Right: After Recent Restoration**



Fig. 9: Al-Shafi'i Mosque Exterior Northern Wall



Fig. 10: Al-Shafi'i Mosque Larger Projecting Entrance at the Northern Wall



Fig. 11: Blind Pointed Arch Above the Door



Fig. 12: Blind Trefoil Arch Above the Door

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

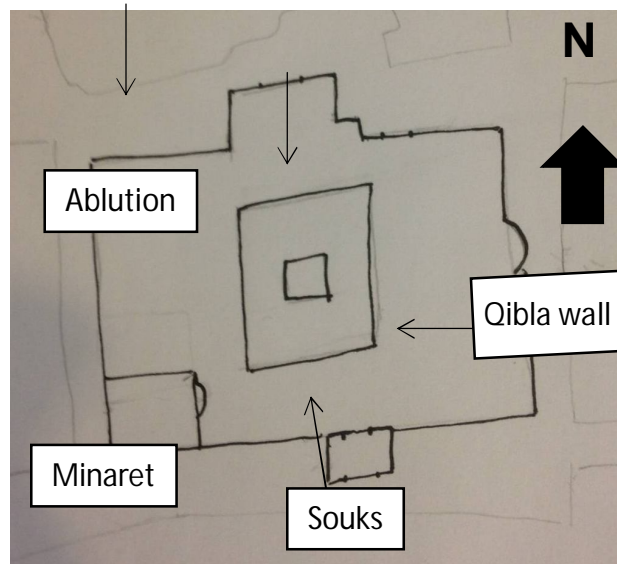


Fig. 13 a: Al-Shafi'i Mosque Layout – See Birdseye View Below

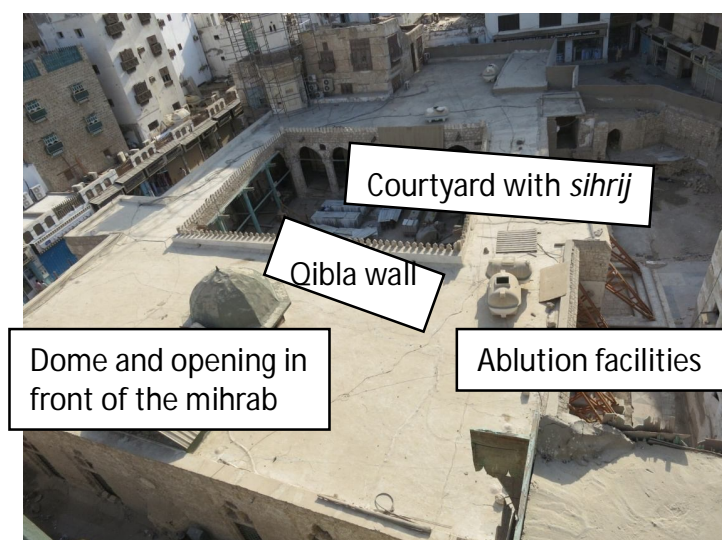


Fig. 13 b: Al-Shafi'i Mosque Birdseye View



Fig. 14: Al-Shafi'i Mosque Enclosures on the Western Riwaq



Fig. 15: Al-Shafi'i Mosque View from the Qibla Riwaq to the Opposing Riwaq



Fig. 16: Al-Shafi'i Mosque Qibla Riwaq During (Above) and (Below) After Restorations

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.¹⁸ Some historians mentioned that the *minbar* was the work of a local carpenter named Abu al-Eid al-Najjar.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: “*fasayakfīkahumAllahuwaHūwa al-Samī‘u al-‘Alīm*” (2:137). The part “*fasayakfīkahumAllahu*” (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 Restoration



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. 22: Al-Shafi'i Mosque First Opening in the Ceiling



Fig. 23: Al-Shafi'i Mosque Dome in Front of the Mihrab, Exterior and Interior



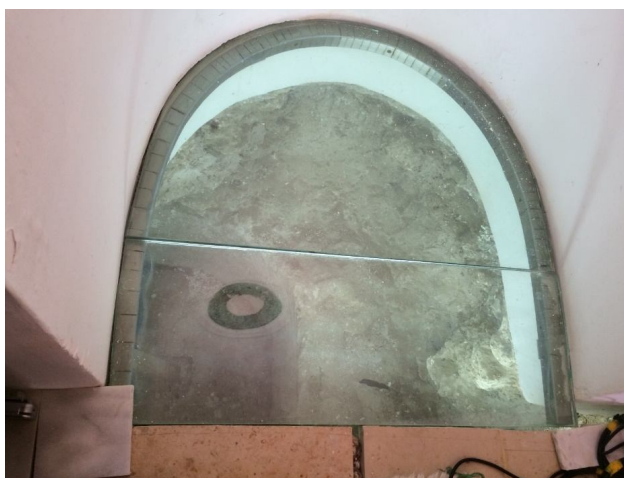
Fig. 24: Al-Shafi'i Mosque Northern Riwaq



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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- ¹³ Ibid. 39.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. 39.
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