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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## BUILDING ORNAMENT IN THE ACT OF CONSTRUCTION: THE UNFINISHED HASSAN TOWER

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### Abstract

Almohad architecture is widely recognised for the coherence of its monumental language across the Maghrib and al-Andalus, expressed through geometric order, proportional control, and a restrained yet powerful ornamental vocabulary. While this architectural corpus has been extensively studied from stylistic, ideological, and political perspectives, the relationship between construction and ornamentation has received comparatively less attention. This article proposes a reading of the Hassan Tower in Rabat, an Almohad minaret whose vertical development was interrupted at the end of the twelfth century. Although unfinished in height, the constructed portions of the tower display fully executed ornamentation. Based on architectural observation this study suggests that, in this case, ornamentation was not conceived as a final decorative layer but progressed in parallel with construction.

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### Introduction:-

The architectural production of the Almohad dynasty occupies a central place in the history of the medieval Islamic world. From the mid-twelfth to the early thirteenth century, Almohad rule extended over a vast territory encompassing the Maghrib and large parts of al-Andalus, giving rise to an ambitious programme of urban foundations, religious monuments, fortifications, and infrastructural works (Bennison 2016). Across this geographical expanse, Almohad architecture is often described as remarkably coherent. Minarets, mosques, gates, and palatial structures share common principles of proportion, elevation, and surface articulation, creating a recognisable visual language that has long attracted scholarly attention (Terrasse 1938; Ewert 2005; Salmon 2018). This coherence has been interpreted in various ways, art-historical studies have emphasised formal characteristics such as geometric networks and the hierarchical organisation of façades (Ewert 2005; Rosser-Owen 2014). Historical and ideological approaches have underlined the relationship between architectural order and the Almohad emphasis on doctrinal unity, "tawḥīd"<sup>1</sup>, understood as both a theological and political principle (Fierro 2012; Bennison 2016). These perspectives have contributed decisively to our understanding of Almohad architecture as a meaningful and intentional system. The present article offers an observation drawn from the material condition of a single monument: the Hassan Tower in Rabat. Although the tower was never completed in height, the parts that

<sup>1</sup>Tawḥīd refers to the Islamic theological doctrine affirming the absolute oneness of God.

were constructed display a fully executed ornamental programme. This condition raises a simple question: what might this suggest about the temporal relationship between construction and ornament in Almohad architectural practice? Instead of treating ornament as a layer applied after the completion of structure, the Hassan Tower invites consideration of ornament as something produced alongside construction, as the building rose. The argument developed here remains deliberately cautious. It does not claim to reconstruct Almohad building procedures in a definitive manner, nor does it present the Hassan Tower as unique or exceptional. Rather, it proposes that careful observation of this monument, placed within its historical and ideological context, allows certain hypotheses to be formulated regarding the integration of ornament into the construction process and the political significance of architectural production in the making.

**The Almohad context:-**

The Almohad movement emerged in the early twelfth century under the leadership of Ibn Tūmart, whose preaching centred on a strict interpretation of divine unity (Fierro 2012). Following his death, 'Abd al-Mu'min transformed the movement into a powerful imperial state, consolidating authority across North Africa and eventually extending Almohad control into al-Andalus (Bennison 2016). By the reign of Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb al-Manṣūr (r. 1184–1199), the Almohad empire reached its territorial and political apogee. This historical trajectory was accompanied by intense architectural activity. New cities were founded, existing urban centres reshaped, and monumental buildings erected on an unprecedented scale (Salmon 2018). Architecture played a crucial role in making Almohad authority visible. Mosques, minarets, and gates did not merely serve functional purposes; they structured urban space, framed collective experience, and materialised political presence.

Almohad ideology has often been understood as a driving force behind this architectural programme. Beyond its theological meaning, *tawḥīd* functioned as a principle of order, coherence, and hierarchy extending to governance and social organisation (Fierro 2012; Bennison 2016). Architecture offered a medium through which such principles could be rendered perceptible. Proportional systems, repetitive geometric structures, and carefully organised elevations may thus be read as visual expressions of unity and control (Hamdouni Alami 2010), though such readings remain interpretive. Importantly, Almohad rulers governed a vast and diverse territory, monumental construction can therefore be understood not only as symbolic expression but also as a practical instrument of imperial cohesion. Building activity mobilised resources, labour, and knowledge, while simultaneously projecting authority. In this context, the act of building itself may have carried political significance alongside the finished monument (Buresi & Ghourigate 2013).

**The Hassan Tower in historical perspective:-**

The Hassan Tower was conceived as the minaret of a vast mosque within the new urban foundation of Ribat al-Fath<sup>2</sup>, present-day Rabat (Terrasse 1938). Initiated under Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb al-Manṣūr, the project formed part of a broader strategy to establish a monumental capital on the Atlantic façade, reinforcing Almohad presence both symbolically and strategically (Salmon 2018). The scale of the planned mosque and the intended height of the minaret suggest ambitions comparable to those of the Kutubiyya in Marrakech and the Great Mosque of Seville. Construction was interrupted after al-Manṣūr's death in 1199. The mosque was never completed, and the minaret remained unfinished. Over the centuries, the tower survived earthquakes, most notably the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, periods of neglect, and several phases of restoration (Salmon 2018). Its current state is therefore the result of long-term material survival rather than a frozen medieval condition. The significance of the Hassan Tower lies precisely in this combination of incompleteness and preservation. While the vertical development of the minaret was halted, the constructed registers were brought to a finished state. This condition provides an opportunity to reflect on the relationship between construction and ornament without if incompleteness necessarily implies unfinished decoration.

**Construction and ornament as parallel processes:-**

The Hassan Tower follows the Almohad minaret typology: a square plan, thick masonry walls, and an internal ramp spiralling around a hollow core (Dodds 1992; Ewert 2005). This configuration, established in Marrakech and later developed in Seville, integrates circulation, visibility, and monumental presence within a single architectural element. In Rabat, the typology is recognisable, yet the monument's truncated height distinguishes it from its

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<sup>2</sup>Ribat al-Fath refers to the Almohad urban foundation established in the late twelfth century on the Atlantic coast, corresponding to present-day Rabat. Conceived as a fortified and monumental capital, it combined military, religious, and symbolic functions within the imperial project of the Almohad dynasty.

counterparts. What is particularly striking is that the ornamental articulation of the constructed portions appears to be complete. Wherever a register<sup>3</sup> was built, its surface treatment, arches, blind arcades, geometric networks, and sebka<sup>4</sup> patterns, was executed. There is no visible indication that ornament was suspended or deliberately postponed in anticipation of the tower's full height. Moreover, early photographic documentation predating modern restoration campaigns shows that ornamental elements were already present when the monument stood abandoned and in a state of ruin, which makes it unlikely that the decoration was added during later restoration phases. Taken together, these observations suggest that ornamental execution advanced in parallel with structural construction, rather than being reserved for a final, subsequent phase.

Such a mode of operation appears plausible from a practical standpoint. Large-scale construction sites required the coordination of multiple teams: masons, stone-cutters, carvers, and specialists in geometric layout (Ewert 2005). Executing ornament parallel with structural work may have allowed different groups to operate simultaneously, potentially accelerating the overall pace of construction. While this remains hypothetical, the fully ornamented state of the constructed registers is consistent with such an organisation. The presence of spolia<sup>5</sup> further supports this interpretation. Several capitals incorporated into the tower are reused elements, likely originating from Umayyad contexts. Their reuse may have served practical purposes, access to ready-made components, as well as symbolic ones, invoking prestigious precedents and reinforcing claims to historical continuity.

From a political perspective, the execution of ornament during construction may carry particular significance. Almohad architecture did not operate solely as a retrospective symbol of authority, activated once a monument was completed, but as a continuous and highly visible process through which power was asserted, staged, and reaffirmed over time (Bennison 2016). Monumental building sites themselves constituted spaces of political display, mobilising labour, resources, and technical knowledge at an imperial scale. In such a context, the presence of completed ornamental surfaces on a structure still under construction would have communicated order, discipline, and mastery long before the monument reached its final form. A construction site already articulated by carved arches, geometric networks, and carefully proportioned surfaces would project an image of control over both material and labour. Ornament, rather than functioning merely as an aesthetic embellishment, may thus be understood as performative: it rendered political authority visible in real time, transforming the act of building into a public demonstration of imperial capacity. The display of ornament during construction could signal not only the anticipated completion of the project but also the legitimacy and permanence of the power that sponsored it, even in the face of contingency or interruption.

This performative dimension gains further relevance when considered against the scale and ambition of Almohad building campaigns. Large mosques and their minarets were conceived as urban anchors, dominating both visual and symbolic landscapes, and were among the most intensively ornamented structures of Almohad architecture. Ensuring that these monuments appeared ordered and visually complete at each stage of their elevation may have contributed to maintaining political presence throughout lengthy construction processes. Ornament, in this sense, does not appear to have been deferred to a final phase, as its communicative function was likely required throughout the making of the monument. A brief consideration of the Kutubiyya in Marrakech supports this reading. Although the monument is fully completed, its ornamental logic suggests a close integration between structure and surface rather than a sequential relationship in which decoration follows construction as a final step (Ewert 2005).

### **Conclusion:-**

The contemporary setting of the Hassan Tower introduces an additional dimension to its interpretation. Facing the unfinished minaret stands the Mausoleum of Mohammed V, designed by the architect Vo Toan (Vo Toan, 1976). While operating within a modern commemorative framework, the mausoleum selectively draws upon Moroccan architectural vocabularies, including forms associated with medieval traditions. Its presence on the same esplanade creates a dialogue between an interrupted medieval project and a completed modern monument, each mobilising architectural form as a vehicle of authority. The Hassan Tower itself does not provide definitive answers regarding

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<sup>3</sup>In architectural analysis, a register refers to a horizontal subdivision of an elevation, often governed by proportional rules and coordinating openings, ornament, and surface articulation.

<sup>4</sup>Sebka designates an interlaced geometric surface pattern, typically composed of lozenge-shaped units, widely used in Almohad and Andalusí architecture to organise large wall elevations.

<sup>5</sup>Spolia denotes the reuse of architectural elements from earlier buildings within a new construction, often for practical or symbolic reasons.

Almohad construction practices. Rather, it invites reflection on architecture as a process rather than solely as a finished object. The combination of an unfinished vertical development with fully executed ornamental registers suggests that ornament was conceived as an integral component of construction, not as a surface layer applied after structural completion.

This reading is consistent with broader interpretations of Almohad architecture as a system in which form, proportion, and surface articulation were closely interrelated (Terrasse 1938; Ewert 2005). It also resonates with the political context of Almohad rule, in which architecture functioned as a medium of authority and visibility (Fierro 2012; Bennison 2016). Building, ornamenting, and displaying order may therefore be understood as intertwined actions, unfolding in parallel as part of a continuous assertion of power. The long material survival of the Hassan Tower further complicates its interpretation. Earthquakes, phases of abandonment, restoration campaigns, and modern interventions remind us that the monument is a palimpsest rather than a static artefact. Any reading must therefore remain cautious, grounded in architectural observation and historical context rather than claims of demonstrable proof. Approached in this manner, the present study does not seek to redefine Almohad architecture, but to suggest that attention to construction in process can enrich our understanding of how ornament, labour, and political intention converged in the making of monumental form. The Hassan Tower thus stands not only as the remnant of an unfinished project, but as a material witness to an architectural logic in which construction and ornament were conceived as inseparable.

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