

The Complex Roots of the Figures Modellate in Stucco inside the Khirbat al-Mafjar - Some Observations

Siyana Georgieva*

Abstract: *The paper refers to the decorative art made in stucco sculptures in the Umayyad palace at Khirbat al-Mafjar, a significant example of early Islamic cultural heritage in Palestine and worldwide.*

Khirbat al-Mafjar represents the Early Islamic architecture and decorative art as distinctive identity of Umayyad arts and architecture and as cultural interaction. For this reason, it is recommended to highlight the uniqueness of the representation of humans and animals in Umayyad decorative art as well as the identity of this art resulting from the synthesis of native Islamic elements and imported ones: Coptic, Roman and Sassanid.

Keywords: *Islamic Art, Stucco, Modelled figures, Umayyads, Khirbat al-Mafjar, Symbolology*

The Umayyad palace at Khirbat al-Mafjar in Jericho (known as Hisham's Palace) (724-748 AD) is decorated with a complex of stucco sculptures (now in the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem) that had both men and women figures, animals and hybrid creatures and head friezes. The first group includes monumental sculptures depicting people and animals (caliphs, women, lions, horses, etc.); in addition, four sculptures depicting female figures survive from the Khirbat al-Mafjar sculpture complex. They were discovered and restored by Robert W. Hamilton, who excavated the palace between 1936 and 1948. Another has busts, some freestanding, others framed in medallions, including imaginary creatures such as winged horses; and the third can be defined as a combination of people and plants, including a human head on a sofa dome, books and inhabited scrolls.

Figurative art in the Islamic world exists despite condemnation by jurists; one of the privileged areas is the decoration of manuscripts, but in the field of architecture it remains marginal. Moreover, when one tries to trace a connection between the figurative presences in Islamic architecture, they most often appear relatively independent aesthetically, thematically, and functionally.¹

* Ph.D student in Anthropology, Religion and Oriental Civilization-UniToscana, e-mail: siyanageo@gmail.com

¹ Clévenot Dominique, Degeorge Gérard, *Décors d'Islam*, 2017, p.126.

Throughout its history, Islam has often manifested, through the voice of its jurists, a certain skepticism towards figures, based on the interpretation of certain passages in the Qur'an. With reference to the hadiths, or the speeches of the Prophet, according to some jurists, the depiction of living beings would have been contrary to the divine will and therefore it was necessary to be condemned.²

The main accusation was aimed at the painter rather than the work of art, as the painter himself, by making an image, and creating something "that is endowed with real or potential life",³ becomes in fact a competitor of God.

Major archaeological discoveries of buildings from the Umayyad period, such as Qasr Amra, Khirbat al-Mafjar, Qasr al-Hayr West and Samarra have brought to light astonishing evidence of architectural decoration of a figurative nature.⁴ In these monuments, themes with zoomorphic and anthropomorphic elements are depicted, but they are the exception rather than the rule. In fact, they are private monuments for private use and enjoyment and do not represent the official or formal artistic style.⁵

Islamic decorative art draws inspiration from various traditions: Greco-Roman, Near Eastern, Christian and Sasanian iconography. In the Islamic world, a figurative art exists as already mentioned, tracing the links between different figurative presences in Islamic architecture. The result often appears as an accumulation of themes, in which it is difficult to recognize a precise identity, as in the figures modelled in stucco or in the floor mosaics at Khirbat al-Mafjar (Fig. 1).⁶ While a representation of Umayyad power⁷ can be recognized in the mosaic, it is uncertain whether the modelled figures had a symbolic value.

A particular example of this accumulation of images is found in the small Qasr al-Amra palace, where walls and vaults are frescoed with polychrome paintings on plaster illustrating an iconographic cycle whose meaning remains uncertain⁸. Along the axis of the entrance or in the so-called 'audience room', we find, on the back wall, a prince resembling the Byzantine

² Ivi, p.125

³ Grabar Oleg, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, London, 1973, p.99.

⁴ Clévenot Dominique, Degeorge Gérard, *Décors d'Islam*, 2017, p.126.

⁵ Grabar Oleg, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, London, 1973, p.103.

⁶ Clévenot Dominique, Degeorge Gérard, *Décors d'Islam*, 2017, p.129.

⁷ The tree of life represented as the pomegranate is in the center of the floor of the castle reception room, representing the caliphal power and the new order it brought. The lion attacking the gazelle to the right of the tree represents the regal/solar power that dominates and disciplines the lunar power (earth, agriculture). The two gazelles to the left of the tree graze peacefully and are turned one to the left and one to the right to represent the whole known world under the Sun, from sunrise to sunset. The figuration is enclosed by an unbroken skein frame, a symbol of steadfastness against adversity. cf. Spinelli Anna, *Arte Islamica* The measure of the metaphysical, Perugia, 2008, p. 53.

⁸ Fontana Maria Vittoria, *Islamic painting from its origins to the end of the fourteenth century*, Rome, 2002, p.22.



Fig. 1 Mosaic floor with lion and gazelles, 724-43 or 743-46. Reception Room, Khirbat al-Mafjar, Palestinian Territories. Scala/ Art Resource, NY



Fig. 2 Qusayr Amra (Jordan), building/ bathroom, 2nd quarter century. VIII, large entrance hall, “audience hall”, prince on the throne and two personalities; (col. drawing by A. L. Mielich; from

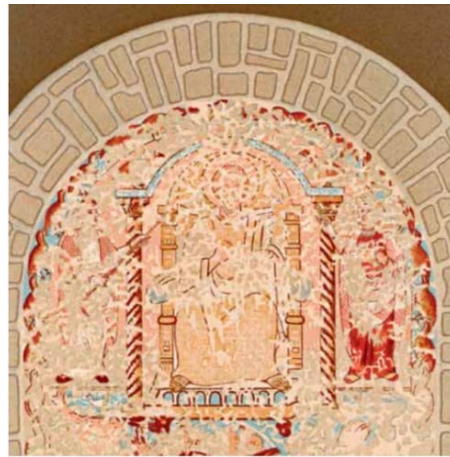


Fig. 3 Drawing of six kings. Fresco, 705-15. West wall, hall, Qusayr ‘Amra, Jordan. Reproduced by Alois Musil. *Kusejr’ Amra und Schlösser östlich von Moab*. Vol. 2, pl. XXVI. Vienna, 1907

iconography of Christ (Fig. 2). On a side wall of the great entrance hall, six kings are depicted, representing a classic Sasanian theme referring to the Kings of the Earth, but as Fontana says: “it fits the Umayyad situation”⁹ (Fig. 3). In the thermal rooms we find scenes of hunting, bathing, nautical games, daily life with the trades of those who built the building, musicians, drinkers, bare-chested dancers, acrobats, erotic scenes, and allegorical figures of Victory.¹⁰

As Maria Vittoria Fontana explains in *La pittura islamica dalle origini alla fine del Trecento*, a particular theme of the caldarium dome is an astronomical image reproducing the celestial constellations¹¹(Fig. 4).

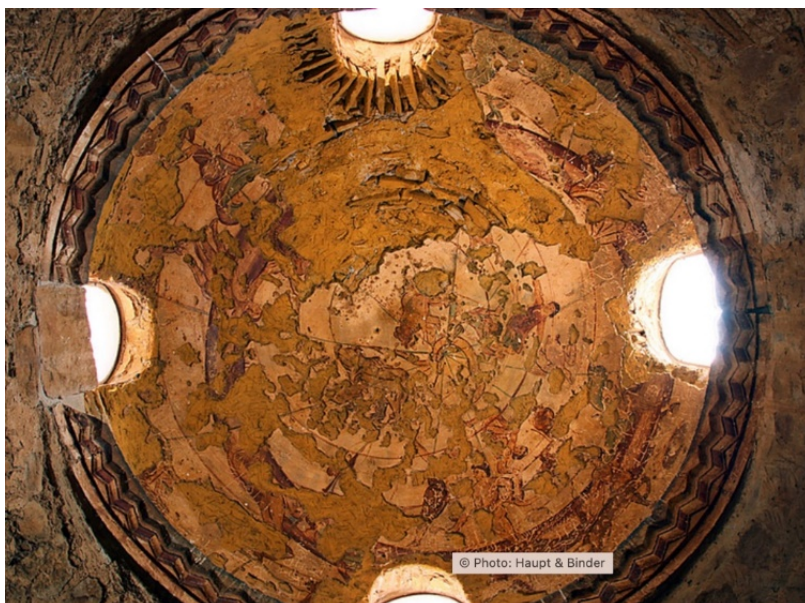


Fig. 4 The Zodiac of Qusayr 'Amra, 1933.
Du Mont Kunstseiseführer Jordanien, 2011, p. 221

We note that the pictorial cycle of Qasr al-Amra appears with different themes and styles within which Islam did not yet seem to have made its choice, remaining as a connection between the Classical and Late Medieval Oriental styles.¹²

Another palace contemporary to Qasr al-Amra and Khirbat al-Mafjar is the Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, near Palmyra, where there is a floor fresco that will have a long continuation in the art of the Islamic court. It depicts a figure of a horseman hunting ibex with a bow (Fig. 5). The composition perfectly

⁹ *Ibidem.*

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*

¹¹ *Ivi*, p.24.

¹² *Ibidem.*

recalls Sasanian imperial iconography, but in this case the crown identifying the king is replaced with the Arab turban. This substitution sums up both the appropriation of power by Islam and the adoption by the new lords with the clothing of defeated rulers.¹³

If the images with figures we have encountered in Islamic architectural ornamental decoration are reminiscent of the representation of power, they may in fact have meanings involving heraldic, astrological symbolism or Ptolemaic or magical beliefs. This explains the presence of angels, eagles, lions, serpents, zodiac figures, dragons, and griffins that we find in civil or military constructions such as bridges and bastions or on the façades of some religious buildings.¹⁴



Fig. 5 Fresco from Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, the iconography of a knight hunting with a bow demonstrating the continuity of Sasanid art in the Umayyad period. (Dominique Clevenot *Décors d'Islam*, 2017, p. 126)

The Khirbat al-Mafjar palace was adorned with a complex of stucco sculptures that are now in the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem, which included male and female figures, animals, and hybrid creatures.

The interest in the representation of animals is found in Khirbat al-Mafjar, where real animals are placed side by side with fantastic creatures. Statues or stucco reliefs of humans and animals were sometimes found

¹³ Clévenot Dominique, Degeorge Gérard, *Décors d'Islam*, 2017, p.129.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, p.130.

independently of the surrounding ornamentation, in niches, on cornices or on spandrels. The sculptures, whose untreated backs were attached to the wall, were painted red, yellow, and black, so that the colored stucco could be seen from afar. Hamilton divides the statues representing various human types, male or female, at about three-quarters life-size; another group he recognizes are the smaller scale equestrian groups and figures of animals and birds.¹⁵

The equestrian figures and the horse's head (Fig. 5) represent fragments of a series of small figures found in the atrium of the palace. According to Hamilton, they were probably located above the cornice that spanned the walls and pillars of the atrium, as well as on either side of a window.¹⁶ In addition, the fragments also depict two horsemen moving to the right and two to the left. Interestingly, although the fragments are scarce, they reveal the way the Umayyad horsemen dressed (Fig. 6). One can see the baggy trousers the horsemen wore over boots created tight at the ankles and made of a patterned material.¹⁷

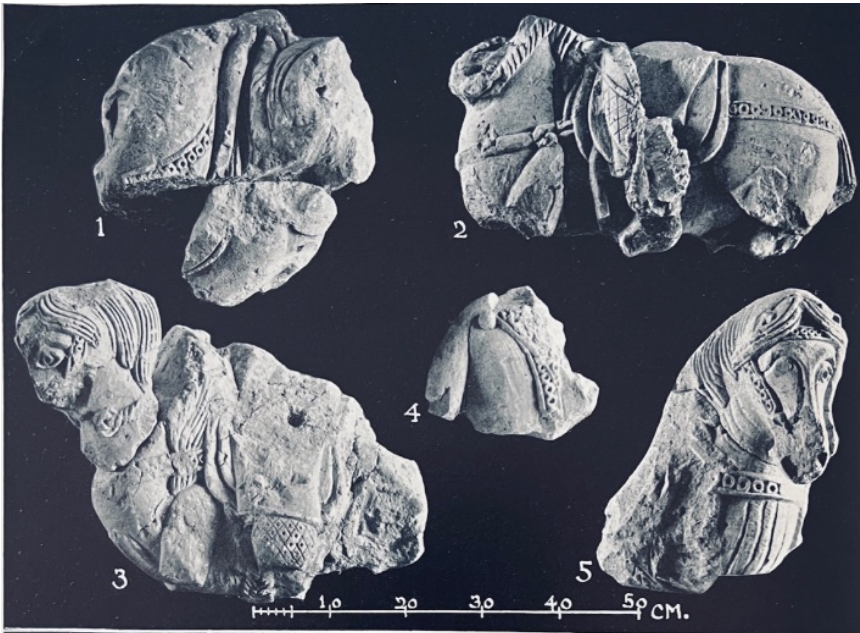


Fig. 6 Figure sculpture, Hamilton Robert William, *Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p.255

¹⁵ Hamilton Robert William, *Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 228.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p.237

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

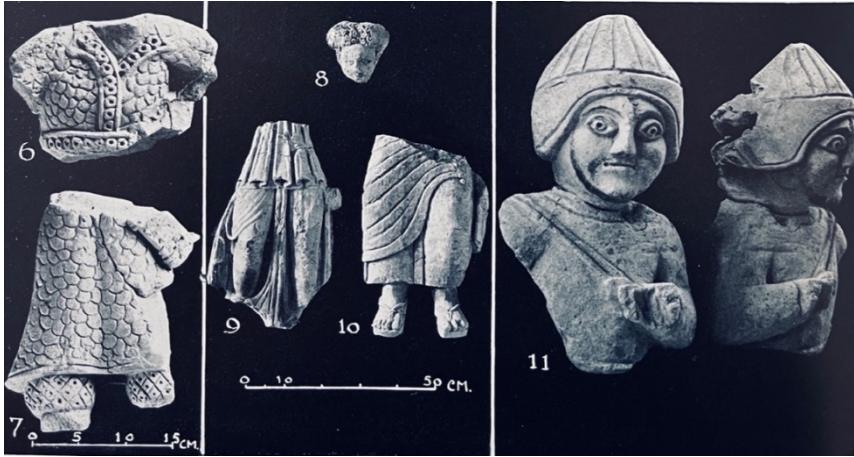


Fig. 7 Figure sculpture, Hamilton Robert William, *Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p.255



Fig. 8 From the bath porch cornice. Horse's head - stucco Hamilton Robert William, *Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 267



Fig. 8.1 Horse's head - stucco, Khirbat al-Mafjar, Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem

Each of these equestrian figures was leaning against the wall with the horse's head turned outwards. Looking at the figure (Figs. 8, Fig. 8.1), we see that in each of these equestrian figures there is the horse's headboard also made with studs where the reins are hidden by the mane. In the figure (Fig. 7), we see that the three riders used a more rounded saddle, which fits a saddle girth

of the same shape with a girth that was, as the stucco figure shows, created from a fabric with chevrons or diamond patterns.¹⁸

Hamilton points out that the Umayyad sculptors were following the example of the tradition of Persia several centuries earlier, where, as he points out:

The incongruity here consisted in the introduction of relief as a substitute for painting and doing it without adjustment of the architectural setting. In this the Umayyad sculptors were following an example of some centuries' standing from Persia, where, as Herzfeld has remarked, the famous rock sculptures and the subsequent dependent works in plaster were an interpretation in relief of the dominant art of painting.¹⁹

The models from which the Umayyad sculptors drew inspiration for the horse fragments are Persian equestrian models from Nizamabad in northern Persia: a partially silver-plated plate with royal hunting subjects and an equestrian figure in the center has come down to us and is now in the Berlin Museum (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9 Partial silver-plated plate with royal hunting subjects, 7th century, Museum of Islamic Art Berlin

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Hamilton Robert William, *Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p.239.

The definition of ornamental details such as the eyes or manes of horses, represented as a novelty in Palestinian or Syrian architectural contexts, is sufficient evidence of a very close cultural-historical relationship between these equestrian figures and the art of stucco relief in Iraq and Persia.²⁰

Hamilton further recognizes the Persian imprint in the winged horse figures found in situ (Fig.10). The main element presents a figure in a circular crown, with a simple outline in the shape of a yellow disc, where the relief of a winged horse was depicted (Fig.11). From the fragments collected (Fig.10) there were originally four horses, two facing right and two facing left. In the figures of the reassembled horses as in Figure 11 we see that they are depicted in full flight with their wings spread forward and backward so that both can be seen.²¹ The crowns of some Sasanian rulers precisely feature a pair of spread wings in addition to the ribbons fluttering used as a support for figurative elements. On top of each horse the scarf of Sasanian royalty flowed in and out like a ribbon from the near side of the mane, passed under the neck and then wound up high at the back. On the rump of each horse was engraved the distinctive seal.²²

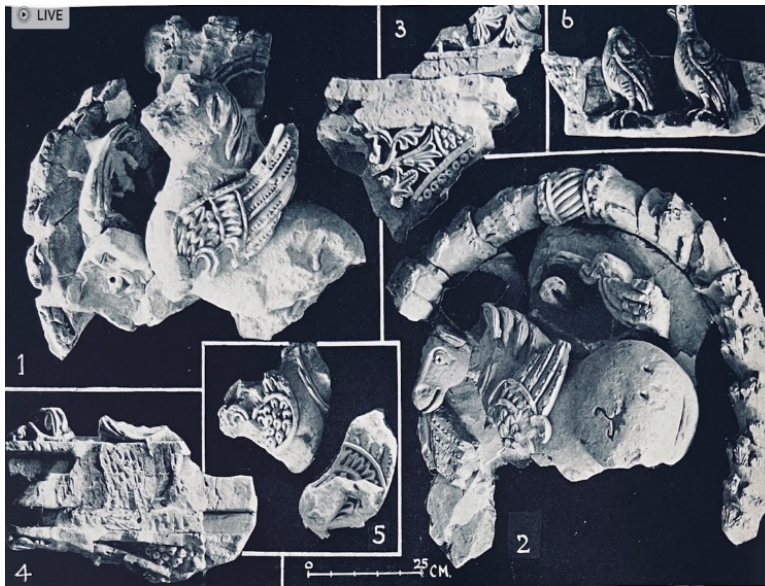


Fig. 10 The diwan, details of stucco from 1-5 winged horses, Hamilton Robert William, *Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 297

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ivi*, p.240.

²² Hamilton Robert William, *Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p.240.



Fig. 11 Winged horse - stucco (Khirbat al-Mafjar) Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem



Fig. 12 Decorative band for clothing with winged horses inside medallions;
Département des Arts de Byzance et des Chrétientés en Orient

Winged horses of this type appear in every branch of Sasanian art, drawn in detail. In the symbolic iconography of the Persian court, their meaning was to “support or lift the royal throne” but as Hamilton explains: “it cannot be assumed that the Umayyad sculptor was vaguely aware of the symbolic aspect of his subject.”²³



Fig.13 8th c.AD Winged horses. Silk serge. Fragment. From Sancta Sanctorum, Byzantine.Museo Sacro, Vatican | Ancient art, Art, Textile art

In Islamic literature, the phoenix or the *buraq*, another mythical otherworldly mount, has the same function of connecting heaven and earth, human and divine, as the phoenix and Persian authors who are clearly connected to the afterlife.²⁴

In seals from the Sasanian period, one finds the figure of *pegasus* with one of its front legs bent forward; in other cases, it is depicted with a type of harness. The main feature of the *pegasus* is the wings with thick plumage

²³ ...but it is not to be supposed that the Umayyad sculptor was more than vaguely aware of the symbolical aspect of his subject. Hamilton Robert William, *Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p.240.

²⁴ Comparetti Matteo and Scarcia Gianroberto, *Notes on the Iconography of the Pegasus and the Bardato Horse in Iranian Art, Ilfalcone di Bistam*. Intorno all'iranica Fenice/Samand: synthesis project for the flight of the Iranian Pegasus between Ponto, Alessandretta and Insulindia, © 2003 Universita Ca' Foscari, Venice, 2003, p. 28.

attached close to the shoulder where the end is also made of longer and curled feathers;²⁵ the division comes from a string of pearls separating the two parts. Another depiction with the same scene of a *pegasus* is found in textiles, mostly made of silk, which were decorated with zoomorphic or phytomorphic figures, contained within circular frames often known as beaded medallions.²⁶ These fabrics with the pearl medallion decoration including the *pegasus* ornaments were typically of Iranian origin, often widespread in Central Asia and Persia, as well as in China and the Byzantine Empire.²⁷ The ornamental motif of the pearl medallions consists of a large flower in the central points, the *pegasus* on the inside has some geometric elements, precisely the ribbons described by Hamilton in Khirbat al-Mafjar. These fluttering ribbons are tied around the neck and a rod on the head often crosses a crescent moon that contains a floral motif at its tip: perhaps this is how astral symbolism is expressed (Fig.12, Fig.13).²⁸

Hamilton advances the hypothesis that the equestrian figures and winged horses of Khirbat al-Mafjar, like other zoomorphic figures, were designed and sculpted by Persian craftsmen.²⁹

In conclusion, according to this hypothesis still valid for other scholars, one could consider the evident versatility of Umayyad sculptors, as well as the uniformity of style in Khirbat al-Mafjar between plaster and stone and even fresco painting. The spread during the Umayyad period of Persian motifs in textiles and other articles of commerce precisely demonstrates this versatility in the Khirbat al-Mafjar region.³⁰

We can group the recurring themes in Khirbat al-Mafjar figurative art in the themes of natural and cosmological symbols in that of the ruler and power.

Among the human figures depicting power is the so-called statue of the caliph (Fig.14).

According to Hamilton, it is probable that the male's lower torso and head were almost full, which was probably on the front porch of a bathhouse (Fig 15):³¹

The conclusion there reached that a single large statue-niche surmounted the entrance archway, the two side niches being much smaller, removes any serious doubt that the head and this body, though not joining, belonged together.³²

²⁵ *Ivi*, p.29.

²⁶ *Ivi*, p.30.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ivi*, p.32.

²⁹ Hamilton Robert William, *Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p.240.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ivi*, p.228.

³² *Ibidem*.



Fig. 14 The ‘Caliph ‘and The ‘Caliph’s’ head, Hamilton Robert William, *Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 299

The statue depicts an upright man, looking forward, dressed in a long cloak, with a belt decorated with ornaments resembling square jewels and diamonds.³³ This masculine, bearded figure carries a sword in his hand. It should be noted that the cloak is raised over the upper back of the two lions (in relief) in a conqueror style that resembles the caliph himself (Fig. 15). His face is reminiscent of the Mongol cast, while his clothing and posture are like Kushano-Sasanian models.³⁴

The pedestal of lions and the ibexes are characteristic of Sasanian royalty, depicting princely rank. Between the lion reliefs is an eight-pointed medallion with palmettes divided around a central daisy.

In Figure 14 representing the head, we can see the total loss of the nose, the eyes and beard, the cheeks protruding abruptly, the large lozenge-shaped eyelids, the prominent eyeballs, and the deeply punctured pupils. An almost Mongolian mark already noted by Hamilton can be seen in the slightly deepened and accentuated corners of the eyes.³⁵

³³ Hamilton Robert William, *Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 228.

³⁴ *Ibidem.*

³⁵ *Ibidem.*



Fig. 15 Caliph standing from the entrance portal of the bath of Khirbat al-Mafjar.
Molded plaster 724-43 or 743-46. Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem

Robert Hillenbrand in *La dolce vita in Early Islamic Syria* offers a description of the caliph's fine clothes: on special occasions he was dressed entirely in gold brocade and used to wear an under tunic (*qamis*). The caliph's preference was for colorful patterned robes in the shade of saffron yellow.³⁶ Hillenbrand recognizes traces of a floral motif on the trousers of a caliphal statue; the fingers, which were adorned with rings, also refer to the caliph of Khirbat al-Mafjar, Al-Walid II. According to historical sources, Al-Walid II

³⁶ Hillenbrand Robert, *La Dolce Vita in Early Islamic Syria. The Evidence of Later Umayyad Palaces*, in: *Art History* 5,1;1-35, Oxford 1982, p. 12.

wore jewelry around his neck that was changed daily, wore wide trousers of heavy damask with a tunic of the material (qasab) and gold brocaded shoes. Such trousers can be glimpsed in the statue of Khirbat al-Mafjar (Fig.15).³⁷

Hamilton explains that the mantle of the stucco figure:

was a pinkish red, perhaps originally crimson, but the depths and edges of the pearl border were black, as were the depths of the jeweled belt. The trousers were a dark red, with a floral pattern of a lighter shade, too faint to be recovered. There were traces of red on the sword, while the sides of the shoes were black.³⁸

To understand whether the stucco statue of the caliph found in Khirbat al-Mafjar belonged to or was the royal symbol of Al-Walid II, Hamilton proposes a comparison with the statue of King 'Uthal of Hatra (3rd century), found in 1951 in the temple of Ba'alshamim. Hamilton sees a real similarity between the caliph and the richly decorated and crowned head of King 'Uthal, as well as in the position in which it is sculpted.³⁹

In his analysis, Hamilton surmises that the statue of King 'Uthal and the other similar statues in Hatra were already ancient monuments when Khirbat al-Mafjar was built:

I would not ascribe or impute to the Umayyad craftsmen any antiquarian research. What we must infer is that a style of personal appearance which had been de rigueur with the Arabic-named aristocracy of Parthian Hatra had survived in Arabia and was more congenial to the Umayyad princes than the very different official style of the Sasanian court, which otherwise the costume of our statue might bring to mind. Thus, it might come about, through the existence of a real historical style of Arabian appearance, that an artist delineating the person of an Umayyad prince could arrive at an expression of character and appearance not very different from the half-Arabian, half-Parthian portraiture of five centuries before.⁴⁰

If the features of the statue of the caliph can be described as 'Arab' and reflect a style in force since at least the 3rd century, the costume had an equally long history; and it too could be illustrated by Hatra. In the 'First Temple', excavated in 1951, the strange figure of Nergal-Ade (Fig. 16) wears just such a tunic as that of the caliph, not very long but draped at the sides, trimmed with embroidery, and folded at the front.⁴¹

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ Hamilton Robert William, *Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 229.

³⁹ *Ivi*.

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p.230.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.



Fig. 16 Ancient Parthian relief of the god Nergal da Hatra from I-II century BC, found in Hatra in Iraq.

We can certainly recognize the slit cloak on a horseman in the hunting scene at Tāq-i-Bustān (Fig.18) and on the aides of Khosrow II presented on a silver cup preserved in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg (Fig.18.1). Hamilton explains that the same king at Tāq-i-Bustan, standing on a boat, wears a similar long cloak, edged with pearls, and folded at the front, held by a belt full of precious ornaments.⁴² A remarkable example with the statue of the caliph at Khirbat al-Mafjar is the enthroned and haloed prince in a long robe under a dais at Qasr Amra (Fig.2). Another similarity we find with the caliph from Khirbat al-Mafjar is found at Qasr al-Hayr West, a standing man dressed in a typical Sasanian garb (Fig.17). In these cases, the symbolic iconography implies an official glorification of the prince. Sometimes, the considerable variations between the images we have analyzed lead one to suppose a borrowing directly from Sasanian and Byzantine princely representations and indicate that the Umayyads did not develop their own royal iconography, at the level in which Umayyad princes wanted to be identified.⁴³

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ Ettinghausen R., Grabar O., and Jenkins-Madina M., *Islamic Art and Architecture, 650–1250*, Yale Press, 2003, p.45.



Fig. 17 Pieces of a stucco figure found in Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi on display at the National Museum of Damascus.

In this context, the stucco statue at Khirbat al-Mafjar probably represented the person of the reigning Caliph himself or the strength and power of the Arab princes.⁴⁴ Due to the coarse modelling of the stucco and the features, we do not actually have an actual portrait of Hisham or any other living person. Likely, according to the conventions of the time, such a relief reproduction was recognized as a representation of the real person indicated by the symbols of his office.

Hamilton also analyzing the origin of the statue brings us back to this conclusion:

If the statue, then, is to be interpreted as an honorific symbol, proclaiming the benign sovereignty of the ruler of Islam, we must choose either to attribute the structure to some other person of high estate in the realm, to whom a gesture of loyalty to the Caliph might without absurdity be ascribed; or to interpret the effigy as a self-portrait of al-Walid himself, depicted by anticipation in the

⁴⁴ *Ibidem.*

sovereign estate he hoped and intended one day to assume. And this second alternative is the one that I personally adopt.⁴⁵

The royal theme, derived from the ancient East via the Iranian kingdoms subjugated by Muslims, finds some correspondence in Umayyad practices, and remains a constant presence in Islamic princely life thereafter. Another theme is the royal pastime,⁴⁶ which includes activities such as hunting, horse riding, athletics and love expressed not in narrative style, but in symbolic figures of original character. In most cases, the protagonist is a prince who is idealized through two aspects of Umayyad art: his earthly character and his great decorative value.⁴⁷



Fig. 18 A knight in the hunting scene at Tāq-i-Bustān, Orbeli, I. A. and Trevor, K. V., *Orfèvrerie Sasanide: Objets en Or, Argent et Bronze* Moscow and Leningrad, Academia, 1935

From the sculptural ensemble of Khirbat al-Mafjar, four sculptures representing female figures have survived. The female sculptures were displayed in the atrium of the palace; only one of the figures, known as the

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*

⁴⁶ Ettinghausen R., Grabar O., and Jenkins-Madina M., *Islamic Art and Architecture, 650–1250*, Yale Press, 2003, p.46.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.



Fig. 18.1. Silver plate with Cosroe II and the nobles Iran, end of the 6th - beginning of the 7th century, The Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg

‘Girl of the Palace’ (Figs.19, Fig.19.1), remains in situ. The others, according to Hamilton, were in the drum of the dome of the bath porch. All the figures of women were in arched niches, facing the viewer.

The girl from the palace, presents a better preservation (Figs.20, Fig.21), we only see the left hand and all that it contained:

...Her costume was not extravagant: a length of loosely crinkled or pleated material wrapped about the legs and held on the hips by a heavy twisted cord; a bangle on each arm, and a pair of anklets; a spade-shaped pendant on her breast, suspended by a cord; and a posy of narcissi to hold. The folds above her girdle are of abundant flesh, not drapery. Her parted hair is coiled in three heavy twists on each side, from which a corkscrew curl depends before each ear. A row of scarcely natural ringlets adorns the brow, and a rosette conceals the lower end of the parting.

The position of the two arms appears to have been the same, and we could probably restore a second posy in the missing hand. The neck was incomplete, and has been restored in plaster, perhaps a little too high.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Hamilton Robert William, *Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p.233.

According to Hana Taragan, the surviving figures display bare breasts, and their clothing is characterized by long, tight-fitting skirts, which cleverly imitate a transparent fabric, and are supported by a thick rope-like belt that hugs the hips.⁴⁹ The figures present rounded shapes and emphasized the female physique. Some are presented with stylized curls on the forehead, but all have the single symbolic curl, known as *love-locks*, in front of the ears.⁵⁰ The richness of the jewellery is noticeable: one of the girls wears a necklace with a crescent-shaped medallion around her neck and bracelets on both arms (Fig.22), another wears a wire necklace and an ankle bracelet (Fig.23). Some have dangling earrings. A bouquet of primroses clutched in one girl's hand expresses happiness; other girls hold baskets of flowers, which enhance the women's beauty. Each figure is different from the other, yet they are connected by their similarity expressed through their decorative motifs and feminine posture.⁵¹ In this way, the beauty of the female world is represented with erotic characters: the plump face, the well-protruding chin, arched eyebrows outlined in black, large eyes with eyelids that curve gracefully over the eyeballs.⁵²

Hamilton explains that:

The figures of all the girls were unnaturally squat and bulky; but as they were to be seen at a great height that defect would not have been so obvious to an observer on the ground, content probably to note the opulent hairstyle, bright colours, confident breasts, and well-appointed bellies."⁵³

According to Myriam Rosen-Ayalon and Richard Ettinghausen, "this naturalistic style in the nude, most likely with roots in the classical tradition, reflects a well-defined taste for plump women, such as those admired in the poetry of the *Jahiliyyah*".⁵⁴

Regarding the figures who carried drinks, the sommeliers mentioned in the anecdotes about Al-Walid II, Hillenbrand suggests that "the statues of semi-nude girls at Khirbat al-Mafjar bore flagons of wine in their outstretched hands, as do their Sasanian predecessors on many a gilded ewer."⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Taragan Hana, *The Female Images in the Umayyad Palace at Khirbat al-Mafjar*, 2001, © Faculty of the Arts Tel Aviv University, 2001 ISSN 0793-8381 Printed in Israel, 2001, p.69.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ Taragan Hana, *The Female Images in the Umayyad Palace at Khirbat al-Mafjar*, 2001, © Faculty of the Arts Tel Aviv University, 2001 ISSN 0793-8381 Printed in Israel, 2001, p.69.

⁵² *Ibidem*.

⁵³ Hamilton Robert William, *Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p.234.

⁵⁴ Rosen-Aylon Myriam, *The Female figure in Umayyad Art*, in: Sarah Milledge Nelson/Myriam Rosen-Aylon (eds.), *In pursuit of gender*, Walnut Creek, 2002, p.293.

⁵⁵ Hillenbrand Robert, *La Dolce Vita in Early Islamic Syria. The Evidence of Later Umayyad Palaces*, in: *Art History* 5,1;1-35, Oxford 1982, p.13.

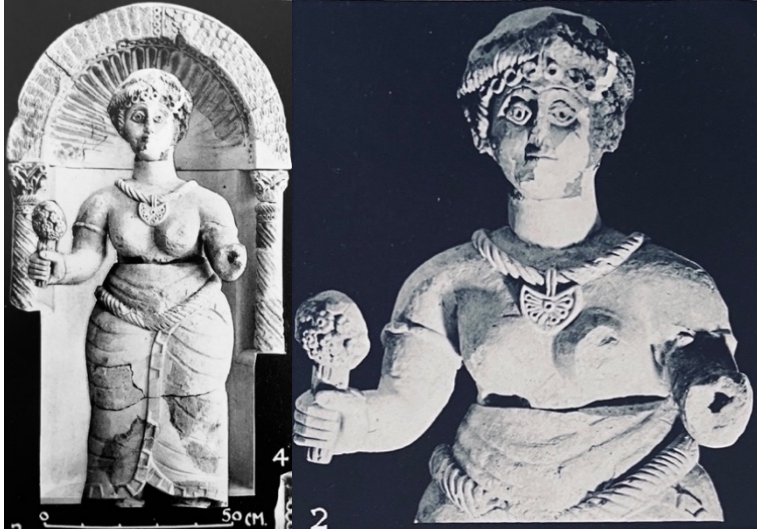


Fig. 19 Female figure from the entrance hall to the main residential building, Hamilton Robert William, Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p.254

Fig. 19. 1 “The girl in the palace” detail, Hamilton Robert William, Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p.301



Fig. 20 Female stucco figures, Hamilton Robert William, Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p.307



Fig. 21 Female figure from the bath, Khirbat al-Mafjar, second quarter 8th century CE, The Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem



Fig. 22 Female figure from the bath, Khirbat al-Mafjar, second quarter 8th century CE, The Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem

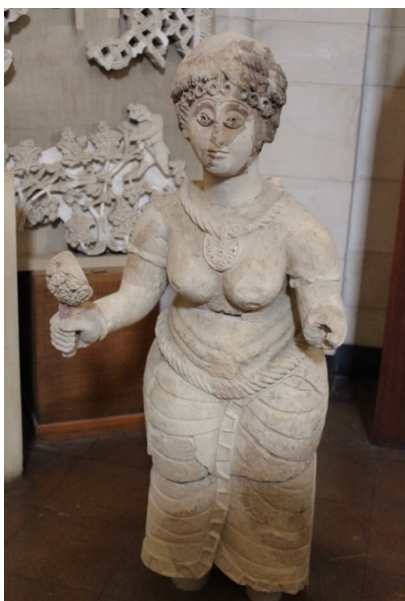


Fig. 23 Female figure from the bath, Khirbat al-Mafjar, second quarter 8th century CE, The Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem

All these features point towards an interpretation, which comes from the archetypal mythological images as of the Great Mother⁵⁶, the Earth or Nature of death and rebirth, who awaits and at the same time encloses in the eternal cycle the constant existence of her perspective with dual character, bringing femininity on the one hand and fertility on the other hand.

Several interpretations have been advanced on these female images of Khirbat al-Mafjar. According to Taragan, their court function is depicted as a royal and ceremonial attribute, an element close to the symbolism of the ruler, rather than as a reflection of a particular activity.⁵⁷

According to Myriam Rosen-Ayalon she sees the origin of Islamic iconography in "Byzantine civilization, the legacy of Western culture up to that time, and Sasanian civilization, the custodian of the legacy of Mesopotamian-Iranian culture in the period of the rise of Islam".⁵⁸

According to Taragan, the erotic aspect of these figures would reflect the personality of Al-Walid II ibn Yazid, who reigned for only one year (744-745 AD) and became famous for his reckless life. Thus, the nude figures could represent girls:

... of the singing-girls (*kiyan*, sing, *kayna*) already known to have appeared in Mecca and Medina, and later at the Umayyad courts in Damascus and Iraq. These girls studied singing at special establishments sponsored by wealthy men and entertained their patrons and visitors to the court with their voices, and sometimes with their bodies as well. The court also included slave girls (*jawari*, sing, *jariyya*), who would appear beside the caliph and prominent members of his court on various public occasions.⁵⁹

Hamilton interprets the iconographic image of the girls as a kind of dance:

In particular, I suppose, they were girls performing a special dance, to which the flowers belonged, and which all who entered could recognize; so that the point would have been to include in the ornament of the palace and baths an allusion to that kind of entertainment with dance and verse, by *jawar* of the palace, that the guests of an Umayyad prince might expect to enjoy.⁶⁰

Taragan looks for meaning in the approaches that have attempted to interpret the appearance in the historical context of these female figures at the Umayyad court. In early Islam, this interpretation raised questions that so often

⁵⁶ Taragan Hana, *The Female Images in the Umayyad Palace at Khirbat al-Mafjar*, 2001, © Faculty of the Arts Tel Aviv University, 2001 ISSN 0793-8381 Printed in Israel, 2001, p.69.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁸ Rosen-Ayalon Myriam, *The Female figure in Umayyad Art*, in: Sarah Milledge Nelson/Myriam Rosen-Ayalon (edits.), in pursuit of gender, Walnut Creek, 2002, p.302.

⁵⁹ Taragan Hana, *The Female Images in the Umayyad Palace at Khirbat al-Mafjar*, 2001, © Faculty of the Arts Tel Aviv University, 2001 ISSN 0793-8381 Printed in Israel, 2001, p.70.

⁶⁰ Hamilton Robert William, *Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p.235.

no one can answer: why was the female body depicted naked? However, the questions continue as Taragan states, about their nudity, the flowers in their hands, their jewelry, their postures; even who was allowed to look at them and for what reason.⁶¹

In Islam, the female body was viewed according to two codes: the legal, controlling code, which urged order against chaos, and the subversive, erotic code, which concerned sensual pleasures and conveyed a predominantly cursed desire, in its various manifestations.⁶²

The Umayyad dynasty, the first Islamic dynasty (661-750AD), sought visual sources for a formal and iconographic mode of representation in various traditions, deliberately chosen from all regions of conquest because they totally lacked their own artistic language. This desire to create one's own tradition was often based mainly on the art of the first centuries A.D. in Syria and Palestine on the one hand, and on eastern art (Iran, India, and Central Asia) on the other.⁶³

From the encounter between classical and oriental styles, we can find the answer for the depiction of the nude body in Umayyad art. Coptic art, especially in textiles, represents the connection reminiscent of the girls from Khirbat al-Mafjar, with the completely nude figures placed under pointed arches (Fig.24). These girls are depicted dancing: by crossing their legs and swinging their arms, they evoke the Bacchae or Maenads, the female helpers of Bacchus, whose rituals were widespread in Hellenistic Egypt due to its identification with the Egyptian god Osiris.⁶⁴

The female sculptures of Khirbat al-Mafjar also show similarities with Indian female sculpture. In fact, this sculpture is often characterized by sensual elements showing the curvilinear, S-shaped body of the female representation. The female figure is always richly adorned with earrings, bracelets, and anklets.

Finally, female representations from the Sasanian period also present similar elements to Coptic and Indian images (Fig.24). In this tradition, women are often depicted naked, with their lower bodies anatomically massive, their female organs are in evidence and their raised hands sometimes hold a veil, objects, or flowers. Some scholars associate the naked women depicted on Sasanian silver vessels with Dionysian ritual, or celestial symbols. In this context, it was noted that the proximity of the nude dancer to the king seated on the throne proves that the dish is Sasanian (Fig. 25). Probably this accurate image is the source of inspiration for the girls of Khirbat al-Mafjar, who, as

⁶¹ Taragan Hana, *The Female Images in the Umayyad Palace at Khirbat al-Mafjar*, 2001, © Faculty of the Arts Tel Aviv University, 2001 ISSN 0793-8381 Printed in Israel, 2001, p.70.

⁶² *Ibidem*.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁴ Taragan Hana, *The Female Images in the Umayyad Palace at Khirbat al-Mafjar*, 2001, © Faculty of the Arts Tel Aviv University, 2001 ISSN 0793-8381 Printed in Israel, 2001, p.72.

Taragan states, “like their Sassanian “sisters” appear close to the “Caliph” and thus endow the representations with a courtly meaning.”⁶⁵



Fig. 24 Coptic fabric, female figures under the arches. V-VI s. A. D.



Fig. 25 Nude dancer, silver cup, VI-VII c. Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery

⁶⁵ *Ivi*, p.74.

As we have seen, some of the images described seem celestial, perhaps derived from goddesses, while others simply emphatic, courtly. In the Umayyad palaces, this nudity may have served as a visual and formal source. One could use the word ‘migration’ of this very world with the images from the region mentioned above to the Umayyad court of Khirbat al-Mafjar. This ‘migration’ is represented directly through objects, booty, or artists, sometimes indirectly, through artistic centers, craftsmen who were ruled by the Umayyads, who were mainly responsible for the transfer of images,⁶⁶ ideas and artistic works from Mesopotamia and Iran to Khirbat al-Mafjar and Qasr Amra (Fig.26).⁶⁷



Fig. 26 Detail of the so-called Dancers frescoed in the castle of Qusayr' Amra (VIII century, Jordan)

⁶⁶ Taragan Hana, *The Female Images in the Umayyad Palace at Khirbat al-Mafjar*, 2001, © Faculty of the Arts Tel Aviv University, 2001 ISSN 0793-8381 Printed in Israel, 2001, p.74.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*

According to Hamilton, Umayyad court life was represented by the girls, the dancing, the sumptuous clothing; indeed, these very elements lead to a pre-Islamic history, "no remote influence or obsolete symbolism is required to explain them."⁶⁸

To return to the subject of the form and body of women and the way they are dressed, we should recall the female sculptures at Mshatta or the frescoes at Qasr Amra with drawn women, which Oleg Grabar interprets as scenes of nomadic life.⁶⁹

It would therefore not be an indication to follow Creswell's point of view in dating Qasr Amra to the reign of Walid I (705-715AD), but Hillenbrand's suggestion is perhaps more correct (743-744 AD).⁷⁰ Both castles are attributed to Al-Walid II. In this regard, if we attribute Mshatta and Khirbat al-Mafjar to Al-Walid II, we must point out the stylistic differences in the female sculptures of Mshatta and those of Khirbat al-Mafjar. This type of criterion does not coincide with the time of creation of the sculptures in the round, nor with the date of construction of the desert castles.

We have seen that the basic stylistic features in the ornamentation of the female sculptures in the round from Khirbat al-Mafjar show connections with Coptic elements in the textiles, with the depiction of Gaia, the earth, and Aphrodite, or in the female figures in India.

Sometimes, the iconography is different, but only the aspects related to nature, fertility and abdication are common to all, and show the same decorative features, presumably in connection with ancient fertility symbols.

In conclusion, the female images of the Umayyad palace, inspired by Coptic, Sassanid, Indian and Central Asian art, can be interpreted in various ways as baccans, dancers, celestial or alternatively simply the girls of the palace; the images of Khirbat al-Mafjar were perhaps there to represent their femininity.⁷¹

The artists created a "world" in Khirbat al-Mafjar, which was occupied as we have seen by human figures, collections of animals in different postures, birds of different sizes represented with plant motifs that are inserted in a playful way one on the other (Figs.27, Fig.27.1, Fig.27.2). Among the images carved in stucco there are also birds of various types, easily distinguishable thanks to the details applied to the figures, such as the graphic declination of the eyes, the soft appearance created by the representation of feathers and feathers as well as the tail. Such types of birds were naturally present in Roman and Byzantine mosaics in Syria and Palestine.

⁶⁸ Hamilton Robert William, *Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p.236.

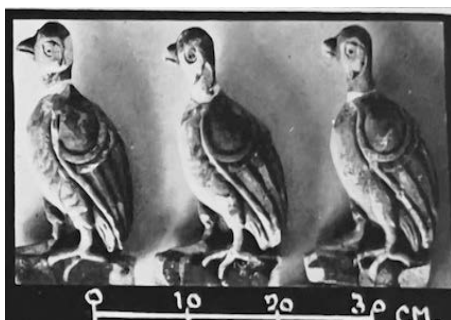
⁶⁹ Grabar Oleg, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, London, 1973, p.20.

⁷⁰ Hillenbrand Robert, *La Dolce Vita in Early Islamic Syria. The Evidence of Later Umayyad Palaces*, in: *Art History* 5,1;1-35, Oxford 1982, p.2.

⁷¹ Taragan Hana, *The Female Images in the Umayyad Palace at Khirbat al-Mafjar*, 2001, © Faculty of the Arts Tel Aviv University, 2001 ISSN 0793-8381 Printed in Israel, 2001, p.77.



Fig. 27 Details birds in stucco, Khirbat al-Mafjar, second quarter 8th century CE, The Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem



27. 1 Stucco details birds, Hamilton Robert William, Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 267



27. 2 Details in putty, Hamilton Robert William, Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 258

The human figures, those of birds and animals, seem subdivided, enclosed in loops or medallions, and present a strong bond in some way with the bunches of grapes. These figures were depicted in the atrium of the palace of Khirbat al-Mafjar, protruding about 10-12 cm from the surface with an almost three-dimensional⁷² appearance and different heights (Fig.28, Fig.29). At present, the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem in Jerusalem contains several portraits, including pigs, cats, a monkey, a camel, and a deer. All represent the stucco

⁷² *Ivi*, p.95.

technique, with long bodies and rounder in the belly. From the stucco engraved strokes, you can notice particular characteristics. We can also see the eyes taking the shape of a round hole for the pupil, and the additional material glued for the face. Let's look at the method by which the palmet ears were glued.⁷³



Fig. 28 Fragments of animals and human figures, the entrance of the palace, Hamilton Robert William, *Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p.259



Fig. 29 Fragments of animals, the entrance of the palace Khirbat al-Mafjar, Hamilton Robert William, *Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959

Despite the anatomical inaccuracies, the group of animals shows a desire to represent their own identity. The artists of Khirbat al-Mafjar testify

⁷³ *Ibidem.*

to the attempt to make a distinction between animals by creating a colorful and wonderful fauna. The winged horses support the throne of the great king and the rams, which symbolize royal power, represent the domino of Al-Walid II.⁷⁴ The best-preserved sculpture of a lion from Mshatta, destined to be placed around the throne, also represents the symbol of royal strength, bearing in mind that the client loved the presence of lion hunters. At the beginning of the 8th century the Syrian steppes were still inhabited by lions.⁷⁵ At the beginning of the 8th century the Syrian steppes were still inhabited by lions.⁷⁶ A lion's paw confirms that Mshatta probably had a second lion with its front legs pointing forward. This shows that the style of these sculptures, such as those of Khirbat al-Mafjar, fits into the simplicity and attention to detail, such as the lion's mane, which were added later.⁷⁷

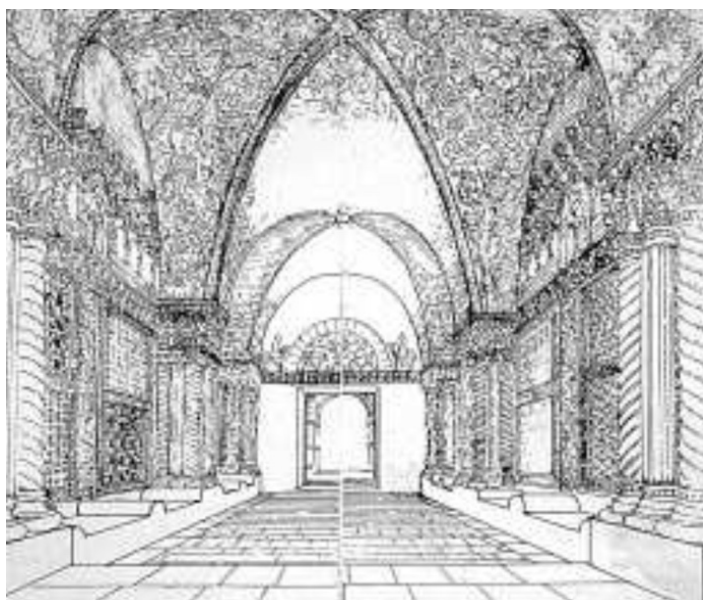


Fig. 30 Khirbat al-Mafjar, the Palace Entrance Hall. A Reconstruction (after Hamilton 1988)

Excavations at Mshatta in 1903 found a complete set of sculptural fragments, including life-size figures of women and men. Here, as in Khirbat al-Mafjar, a sculpture of a woman with a basket of flowers was born. In Berlin museums, on the other hand, there is a sculpture of a woman holding a baby.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Hattestein Markus, Delius Peter, *Islam Art and Architecture*, Konemann, 2001, p.83.

⁷⁵ *Ivi*, p.84.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁷ *Ivi*, p.84.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*.

Both figures are semi-naked with garments sliding down their hips. The figures of dancers with Sasanid veils made of metal take up the same iconography.⁷⁹

The data and analyses provided by Hamilton made it possible to reconstruct the entrance hall of the Khirbat al-Mafjar (Fig. 30), where the stucco figures were located, unfortunately destroyed along with other parts of the building by the earthquake of 748. According to Taragan, the stucco side areas were made of a uniform and homogeneous material that represented a harmonious unity; the covering was reminiscent of an ornament like a carpet, so much so that the textile appearance of the walls, covered with muqarnas in medieval mosques, could be a presence or a hint. Probably, as Taragan points out, the stucco decoration of the ceiling of Khirbat al-Mafjar represents the first stage of this ornamentation:

Does the stucco ed ceiling decoration at Khirbat al-Mafjar mark the first stage of this “textile conception”, which became such a characteristic feature of Islamic architectural decoration?⁸⁰

The Umayyad artists tried not only to convey an idea of decoration by imagining a textile curtain, but perhaps also to represent an embodiment of the abstract idea of Paradise in its various figurative aspects.⁸¹

This idea of paradise continues among reliefs of this kind, sometimes in human heads found in the diwan, on capitals and on cartilages reminiscent of the artistic program followed by other cultural traditions, such as Sasanid, China and India in the Kushan period before Islam.

The famous frieze of heads in a braid is always at the entrance of the palace and precisely represents this way of thinking about Paradise, where stylized drawings of heads are at the center of the braid, surrounded by pearl medallions (Fig.31, Fig.31.1). Similarly, the decoration with human heads with designs of leaves is in the ceiling of the diwan. With a symbol linked to the number eight, it is represented an eight-pointed medallion with palmettes divided around a central daisy (Fig.32, Fig.33): eight points or the symbol of eight which is used five times in the Koran, a number representing eternity or self-destruction. This number indicates the way to the coherence and creation of a new movement or simply the symbol of a new life, towards Paradise. The tendency to occupy the entire surface of the wall and the presence of many decorative elements with different characters are the peculiarities of the Umayyad ornament.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem.*

⁸⁰ Taragan Hana, *The Female Images in the Umayyad Palace at Khirbat al-Mafjar*, 2001, © Faculty of the Arts Tel Aviv University, 2001 ISSN 0793-8381 Printed in Israel, 2001, p.95.

⁸¹ *Ibidem.*



Fig. 31 Part of a wall decorated with sculptures of human heads (Khirbat al-Mafjar), The Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem



Fig. 31. 1 Part of a wall decorated with sculptures of human heads, Hamilton Robert William, *Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 545.

This element is not yet refined with the characteristics that will follow in Islamic decoration, but it has detached itself from the traditions of the Mediterranean and Iran, although as we have seen individual units in ornamental and figurative decoration derive from these traditions.⁸²

⁸² Ettinghausen R., Grabar O., and Jenkins-Madina M., *Islamic Art and Architecture, 650–1250*, Yale Press, 2003, . . . it could be mentioned that many elements of art, which now elude explanation, are comparable to almost contemporary Irish and Northern European art. p. 51



Fig. 32 Rosette with six busts, male and female between stucco acanthus leaves, Hamilton Robert William, Khirbat al-Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 565.



Fig.33 Detail from the rosette, The Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem

The Sasanian impact is frequently mentioned. Rina Talgam emphasizes the use of stucco in Umayyad palaces, which was clearly a novelty in Palestine. There was no stucco in the pre-Islamic buildings.⁸³

According to Hamilton, the use of stucco dates to Sasanian Persia and Iraq. He generally sees the usage of round sculptures and reliefs made of stucco as a replacement for earlier flat paintings.

The amount of research conducted on Umayyad monuments will have a significant impact on future preservation operations. Archaeologists and art historians should look at the little-discussed aspect of Umayyad polychrome revetment. Furthermore, it is critical that the existence, qualities, and quantity of existing stucco repertoires be thoroughly documented.

⁸³ Talagam Rina, *The Stylistic Origins of Umayyad Sculpture and Architectural Decoration*, Wiesbaden 2004. p.52

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