

Chapter XII

Umayyad Palaces Reconsidered*

The latest, most complete, and most authoritative survey of early Islamic architecture – Allan's reworking of Creswell's standard history – contains seventeen partly documented buildings datable between 690 and 750, the main decades of Umayyad rule, and fitting into the general category of palaces. It is a loose category including nearly all foundations with living accommodations for which a reasonable assumption can be made of sponsorship or use by the state (a *dar al-'imara* for instance), by the ruling dynasty, or by members of the Arabian aristocracy associated with the Umayyads.¹

* First published in *Ars Orientalis*, 23 (1993), pp. 93–108. This paper is neither a coherent reevaluation of Umayyad palaces nor quite a repetition of remarks begun some forty years ago for my doctoral dissertation at Princeton University. It is rather a moment in a continuing meditation on the first monuments of Islamic art, perhaps with a different set of questions and interpretations than I and others developed in the 1950s.

¹ K. A. C. Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Islamic Architecture*, revised by James W. Allan (Aldershot, 1989). The buildings are in the order in which they appear in Creswell, and in what is also supposed to be their chronological order: Kufa, Khirbat al-Minyah, Jerusalem, Qasr Kharana, Qusayr 'Amrah, Jabal Says, 'Anjar, al-Muwaqqar, Qasr al-Hayr West, Rusafa, Qasr al-Hayr East, Amman, Qastal, Khirbat al-Mafjar, Mshatta, Qasr al-Tuba, Tulul al-Sha'iba. I have not included in this list places like Qasr Burqu' or Bayir, where there were Umayyad foundations but which are too damaged to allow for significant architectural rather than archaeological or geographical conclusions. Nor does this list include buildings like the Khadra in Damascus which are known to have existed but about which too little can be reconstructed, even though some of these constructions, like the Damascus palace of Mu'awiya or Wasit's palace of al-Hajjaj, in their time or eventually acquired a mythical value. Both of these buildings are mentioned in Creswell–Allan, but there are many places like Fustat, Basra, Merv, and probably other cities for which written sources yield some information. In the absence of a reasonably complete survey of these sources, occasional accidental references would have been misleading. I have also not counted in the list of seventeen "palaces," buildings like Qasr Hallabat in Jordan or Raqqa in Syria, where recent excavations have found significant Umayyad uses and modifications of older buildings or Umayyad secular buildings like the ones being excavated in Aqaba or Humayma in Jordan which may have been palaces, but whose investigation is still incomplete. Finally, I have left aside the full investigation of the long list of possible Umayyad princely establishments made, partly as a heuristic exercise, by Jean Sauvaget, "Observations sur les monuments omeyyades," *Journal Asiatique* 231 (1939). This list contains many places which are

Out of these seventeen buildings, five – al-Muwaqqar, Rusafa, Qastal, Qasr al-Tuba, and Tulul al-Sha'iba – are too poorly known or too poorly preserved to allow for significant conclusions,² two – Anjar and Amman – pose a very complicated set of problems in the interpretation of archaeological evidence, which, in my opinion, does not necessarily lead to the Umayyad dates proposed by the investigators of these sites, and four – Jerusalem, Qasr Kharana, Jabal Says and Qasr al-Hayr East – are not palaces or even royal or dynastic residences, at least not in my judgment, although this judgment is not necessarily shared by all scholars.³

This process of elimination leaves six relatively well-known buildings – Kufa, Khirbat al-Minyah, Qusayr 'Amrah, Qasr al-Hayr West, Khirbat al-Mafjar and Mshatta – which can be reasonably assumed to be dynastic foundations of the Umayyad dynasty. For Kufa the evidence is essentially historical in the sense that written accounts of events from the last decades of the seventh century and the first ones of the eighth justify the interpretation of an excavated building as the *dar al-'imara* of the Umayyad governors.⁴ At Khirbat al-Minyah, Khirbat al-Mafjar and Qasr al-Hayr West (all of which were first thought by archaeologists to be pre-Islamic Christian foundations), inscriptions were discovered which suggest that some aspect of the construction of these buildings was sponsored or ordered by a ruling Umayyad

merely settlements without palatial functions or whose exact dates are still under discussion.

² Actually quite a bit is known about Rusafa and about Qastal, but much of the available information is not easily accessible. For Qastal, for instance, the activities of Patricia Carlier are summarized in her thesis for a Doctorat de troisième cycle from the University of Aix-en-Provence, *Qastal, château umayyade* (Aix, 1984). For Rusafa, the pertinent results of the renewed German excavations have not yet, to my knowledge, been published. I am sure that departments of antiquities and private notes of travelers and archaeologists contain large quantities of useful information.

³ For Qasr Kharana, see the rather complete study and original interpretation by Stephen K. Urice, *Qasr Kharana in the Transjordan* (Durham, NC: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1987). For the other three sites, see the comments provided in Oleg Grabar et al., *City in the Desert* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 151–2. On Jerusalem the only easily accessible source consists in the very impressionistic and personal accounts of Meir Ben-Dov, *In the Shadow of the Temple* (New York, 1982), esp. pp. 273–321. More detailed views on these buildings will appear in my forthcoming book on the early medieval city of Jerusalem. In my view, the date and functions of the Amman citadel have not yet been resolved, in spite of the assiduous and meticulous works by A. Almagro, *El palacio omeyyade de Amman* (Madrid, 1984), and by Alistair Northedge in his unpublished dissertation on the topic completed in 1982 at the University of London. 'Anjar's problem is quite different. Too little has been published of what was discovered there and its size as well as apparently commercial functions do not fit with what is known of Umayyad economic policies in this area as opposed, for instance, to northern Mesopotamia where new trade routes can be assumed. Furthermore, its alleged palace does not look like known Umayyad ones.

⁴ Most of the immediate evidence on Kufa is found in Creswell's larger volumes, pt 1, pp. 46 ff. But, since Kufa remained as a major and very lively city for several centuries, it should be possible to analyze and interpret the continuing use of this building, a possibility which cannot be pursued with the evidence which has been published.

caliph or else that a caliph was alive while the building was being built. But not one of these inscriptions can be considered as a foundation statement or as decorative writing in the manner of later Islamic foundations or ornamental inscriptions.⁵ For Qusayr 'Amrah, as we shall see shortly, there is a valid presumption for an Umayyad dynastic patronage on the basis of the paintings decorating the monument. As to Mshatta, it is primarily its inordinate size and its peculiar decoration that make it reasonable to assume that only princes, and in all likelihood ruling princes, had access to the funds and personnel necessary for its planning and construction, and for a completion which never took place.⁶

In short, we have no direct knowledge of these buildings as palaces built for ruling Umayyad princes, and I shall return in my conclusion to the hypotheses which can be derived from this apparent absence of clearly cut, written or archaeological, external labels. Nor can we really argue that their shape, the functions they imply, or their decoration make it necessary for all of them to be Umayyad creations. In fact, as I reread some of the papers, articles and books I wrote on them over the years, I realize that there may have been a major methodological flaw in parts of my reasoning. Following very respectable masters like Sauvaget, Herzfeld, Stern, and in his own way Creswell, I consistently tried to fit all these buildings into a single pattern by assuming that they all reflected the same architectural and functional type: a villa with living and formal or official quarters arranged around a porticoed court in standard square buildings with a single, usually massive, entrance; a bath, most of the time an independent building; a mosque; a variety of service areas; and possibly formal gardens or orchards. The type would have

⁵ At Qasr al-Hayr West and at Khirbat al-Mafjar fragments of statements written casually on marble plaques mention the name of the caliph Hisham, once as the sender of a message, the other time as the recipient of one. Both statements contain the names of otherwise unknown and unidentified individuals, and it is extremely difficult to imagine the circumstances which would have led to the writing of these messages on marble plaques presumably destined to be used in the buildings. They are correctly interpreted as graffiti, not as inscriptions. See Daniel Schlumberger, "Kasr el-Heir," *Syria*, 20 (1939), p. 373, and R. W. Hamilton, *Khirbat al-Mafjar* (Oxford, 1957), p. 43. The written fragment found at Khirbat al-Minyah is possibly a genuine inscription since it begins with the traditional invocation of God's name and with the words *mimma amara bihi*, "what has ordered," the typical beginning of thousands of medieval inscriptions on objects or buildings. The problem is that the stone with the inscription is reused in the palace and there is no way of knowing to what it referred. See O. Puttrich-Reignard, "Die Palästanlage von Chirbet el-Minje," *Palästina-Hefte des Deutschen Vereins vom Heilige Lande* 17–20 (1939). The three documents are quite different from clear-cut foundation inscriptions like the one from Qasr al-Hayr East.

⁶ Elsewhere I have argued for an early 'Abbasid date for Mshatta (Oleg Grabar, "The Date and Meaning of Mshatta," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 41 [1987]), but it is only slightly later than the one usually given to the palace and does not affect the reasoning of this paper. See now the excellent summary by Volkmar Enderlein and Michael Meinecke, "Mshatta-Fassade," *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen*, 24 (1992), with a discussion of epigraphic information I did not know.

developed within the rich tradition of secular architecture in the late-antique Mediterranean area. And, following primarily Sauvaget but frequently using documentation gathered much earlier by Lammens and Herzfeld,⁷ I further assumed that this particular type could be fitted into a reconstruction or a model of Umayyad aristocratic behavior. But that reconstruction of behavior was based on very different sources: written texts in which an originally orally transmitted poetry predominates; archaeological sources involving the interpretation of excavated spaces and other remains; and finally a more complicated source which may be [94] called “ecological logic” and which consists in apparent changes within the lands ruled by the Umayyads which require significant investments of money and labor.⁸

The resulting hypothesis was a simple one. Umayyad patrons, a *nouveau riche* class of aristocrats from central Arabia, invested in the land they inherited or conquered and in a life of varying but usually considerable luxury. The palaces illustrate the setting for that life. Variations and peculiarities in the model were then seen as aberrations reflecting individual needs or preferences in taste or behavior for which no explanation was likely to be found. A case in point is that of the twin quarters of Qasr al-Tuba for which some romantic or family explanation could always be invented and proposed but no proof can be found.⁹

To the historian of architecture, that is to say, of techniques which require considerable investments of funds and differentiated competencies from specifically trained practitioners, the assumption of types adapting rapidly or slowly to new patrons was then and remains now a reasonable one, for the hitherto unknown sponsorship of architecture by rich aristocrats from northwestern Arabian cities did not necessarily demand new functions or seek to satisfy new needs. This patronage could easily accommodate itself to the prevailing habits of building and of designing within the Mediterranean world, and one or two technical innovations from elsewhere – as, for instance, the covering of stone walls with stucco – easily found a place in an essentially traditional system. A typical problem of design arose from the new requirement for an oriented place of prayer. The mosque became a compositional problem with several early and more or less successful solutions

⁷ There is no statement of Sauvaget’s definitive opinions on the subject of Umayyad palaces. The most important ones are “Remarques sur les monuments omeyyades,” *Journal Asiatique*, 231 (1939); and “Châteaux omeyyades de Syrie,” *Revue des études islamiques*, 39 (1967), published posthumously. But he made remarks on these “palaces” on many other occasions. H. Lammens, “La Badi’a et la ‘Hira’ sous les Omayyades,” *Mélanges de la Faculté Orientale, Univ. St Joseph, Beirut*, 4 (1910); E. Herzfeld, “Mshatta, Hira und Badiya,” *Jahrbuch der preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, 42 (1921).

⁸ One example of ecological studies with implications for Umayyad palaces is A. M. Watson, *Agricultural Innovation in the Early Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1983).

⁹ Such is essentially my position; see Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, 2nd edn (New Haven, 1989), and Richard Ettinghausen and Oleg Grabar, *Islamic Art 650–1250* (London, 1985).

until buildings apparently began to be oriented in order to meet the necessity of fitting a mosque into them. Oratories appear, most commonly to the right of the entrance (Mshatta, Ukhaydir).¹⁰

The more original aspect of these Umayyad secular buildings is how they transformed, or at least modified, the architectural profile of an area by introducing the amenities of a wealthier and restricted private life of "masters" into a simple landscape of farms and villages with their churches and occasional civic buildings such as baths or into old Roman military cities.¹¹ The Umayyads, this hypothesis implied, did not really invent much that is new; they simply put whatever they found in spaces which had not previously been used for these purposes.

There are several other, more specific issues of architectural history, like the technology of building, for instance, which come up whenever there is a combination of a set of buildings from a restricted period of time, in a relatively limited space, and with more or less the same patronage.¹² Beyond elementary measurements and the establishment of the most basic modular principle of designing and with the exception of the question of brick in Syria and Palestine about which a few things have been written, these technical issues have hardly been touched, however important they are for establishing the technological potential of a time.

A more specific approach to the establishments attributed to the Umayyad dynasty can be derived from a number of puzzles in the architecture and decoration of remaining buildings. These puzzles led historians of art, of visual forms, to seek an explanation in the history provided by texts. Such features as the elaborate reception rooms of Mshatta and the rich decoration of Khirbat al-Mafjar did not quite coincide with the simple-minded image created by earlier historians such as Lammens and Creswell of an easy-going, fun-loving, but not very serious life attributed to freely moving and semi-nomadic Umayyad princes and assorted aristocrats. Nor is fancy decoration necessary for landlords in their manorial and private estates. As a result, several studies, whether or not they acknowledge the original inspiration of

¹⁰ A thorough study of early solutions to the problem of finding a place for mosques in a language of planning that did not have them lies beyond my purposes here, but I do want to note that many early Islamic buildings (Ziza, Qastal, Umm al-Walid, Qasr Hallabat, all in Transjordan) have small mosques outside the main residential complex.

¹¹ The landscape of Christian times can best be seen in books such as G. Tchalenko, *Villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord* (Paris, 1959). Much has been accomplished since that time, and numerous excavations and surveys, especially in Jordan, have modified some of the views developed a generation ago, especially around the extent and character of the cultural continuity of the area. Consult the reports found in various archaeological journals. For a recent publication which touches on many of the pertinent problems, see P. Canivet and J.-P. Rey-Coquais, *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam* (Damascus, 1992).

¹² See, as an example, the work of J. Ward-Perkins on vaults in University of St Andrews, *The Great Palace of the Byzantine Emperors*, 2nd report (Edinburgh, 1958). On a much smaller scale similar analyses have been carried out on Palestinian churches and synagogues.

Sauvaget for the method involved, sought to describe an Umayyad ceremonial life and to fit that life within the ruins or reconstructions of whatever remained from alleged palaces.¹³ The best among these studies, notably Hamilton's meditation on al-Walid and Khirbat al-Mafjar, have provided a very tempting and coherent picture, based to a large degree on poetry, of an unstable equilibrium between formality and fun, between rigidity and freedom, all of it bathed in virile sensuality. It is a coherent picture in the sense that the poetry of the time and especially the ways in which this poetry was recited in male gatherings seem to fit with the spaces provided by the ruins.

But there are problems. For instance, too many of the examples of almost anything in these studies deal with al-Walid II, who was in many ways an eccentric hardly typical of his rank and of the office he occupied. And there are always dangers [95] in excerpting examples from literary contexts whose own rules have not been ascertained. In general, there are many theoretical and concrete pitfalls in explaining architecture through poetry, unless, as for instance with much later Persian lyrical poetry, the poetry itself deals with architecture or, as in the Alhambra, *ad hoc* poetry adorns architecture.¹⁴ The danger exists because the sphere of life and of behavior in which poetry appears is the immediate and the evanescent; much of it was not written down at the moment of recitation, but at the moment when the event in which it participated was recorded.

Architecture, on the other hand, is more permanent, unless, of course, we consider decoration separately from building on the grounds that some of its techniques – especially painting and carved or molded stucco – were themselves changeable or could be covered with other materials such as textiles.¹⁵ The skin of architecture, like that of snakes, can be changed, at least in part.

¹³ J. Sauvaget, *La mosquée omeyyade de Médine* (Paris, 1947), is the first book to have used this approach of blending written and visual documentation. For later studies, see Oleg Grabar, "Notes sur les cérémonies omeyyades," in *Studies in Memory of Gaston Wiet*, ed. Myriam Rosen-Ayalon (Jerusalem, 1977); Robert Hillenbrand, "La Dolce Vita in Early Islamic Syria," *Art History*, 5 (1982); and especially Robert Hamilton's admirable *Al-Walid and His Friends* (Oxford, 1988). In reality the historiography of this particular approach is older than Sauvaget, as Lammens in particular and Herzfeld were inspired by buildings to search for texts, but they did not look for ceremonies and for behavior, something which has been forced on a scholarship affected by the decoration which came out of excavations for the most part.

¹⁴ For the Alhambra, see Oleg Grabar, *The Alhambra* (London, 1978). To my knowledge no study has been devoted specifically to the references to architecture in Persian poetry or in Ottoman panegyrics, whether descriptions of buildings or metaphors and images using architecture. I owe to Professor Necipoglu the reference to A. S. Levend, *Türk Edebiyatında Şehrengizlerde Şehrengizlerde İstanbul* (Istanbul, 1957).

¹⁵ A typical early Islamic example of changing textiles is that of the Ka'ba in Mecca, which was covered anew every year with fancy embroideries; al-Azraqi, *Akbbār Makka*, in *Geschichte der Stadt Mekka*, ed. G. Wüstenfeld (Leipzig, 1858), I, 104 ff. Another kind of change using textiles was the temporary modifications made for special occasions, as

A remarkable feature of Umayyad architecture is the quantity as well as the quality of the decoration it exhibits, still in situ, as in the Dome of the Rock and the mosque of Damascus, or through masses of fragments, some in place, others reconstructed into their original compositions, many still hiding in unopened crates in the basements of museums or exhibited as bulk remains in their drawers and galleries.¹⁶ The curious point is that the decoration of the main Umayyad palatial establishments has been less well studied than architecture or planning in that period, probably because Creswell spent relatively little time on the decoration, much of which was discovered after the first edition of his work. The only partial exception is that of classical art-historical issues dealing with genetic sources which have occupied a few scholars, especially in the early decades of the twentieth century.¹⁷

This absence of studies is all the more peculiar since the originality and the variety of decoration in Umayyad palaces are quite astounding. Yet, precisely because of its variety and originality, the study of this decoration leads to a number of methodological problems. Among approaches which have been tried is one I used for the first time some fifty years ago, and which was probably even more dubious than the procedure I used for architectural planning and design. Following the model of Christian and Buddhist art, I sought to find in the decoration of walls, floors and ceilings a set of types, that is to say, of common standards with local variations. The assumption, valid for religious arts with an ecclesiastical patronage, was that models (actual ones on monuments and objects or written ones in manuals) must exist for any visual program to be executed and to be understood. In reality, of course, the secular arts operate quite differently from religious art. It is therefore more fruitful and, in fact, necessary to attempt to understand the individual combinations of themes and forms located in one monument.¹⁸

when the Baghdad palaces were festively transformed through textiles for the arrival of a Byzantine embassy; see, among many places, Grabar, *Formation*, 168 ff. For a more general theory of textile aesthetics, see Lisa Golombek, "The Draped Universe of Islam," in *Content and Context of Visual Arts in the Islamic World*, ed. P. Soucek (University Park, Penn., 1988).

¹⁶ The principal structures with decoration are Khirbat al-Minyah (practically only mosaics), Qasr al-Hayr West (paintings and sculpted stucco), Khirbat al-Mafjar (mosaics, stucco, and sculpture in stone and in stucco), Qusayr 'Amrah (paintings), Qastal (mosaics), and Mshatta (stone sculpture, a few stucco fragments). The basic bibliography on all of these except Qastal can be found in Ettinghausen and Grabar, *Islamic Art and Architecture*, pp. 26–70. For Qastal, see above.

¹⁷ Genetic discussion of the origin of motifs was central to much of what has been written on the façade of Mshatta and on the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock. Most of it derived from the complex ways of analyzing the decorative arts developed out of grammars of ornament on the one hand and the theoretical studies of A. Riegl on the other.

¹⁸ I first approached the subject of a general system in Umayyad art in my dissertation, "Umayyad Art and Ceremonies," Princeton University, 1955. It is outdated in many ways and in error in some, but its impact can be found in most of the works quoted in n. 13.

The establishment of vocabularies and grammars of forms and the definition of typologies are proper endeavors, but because in secular art almost every statement through a given object or monument is a different combination of terms and means something different, typologies must follow rather than precede individual analyses. In a nutshell, system follows syntagm.¹⁹ In the absence of formal manuals and of a doctrine about the arts, the only way one can eventually reach a sense of the language used in the art of Umayyad palaces is first to provide reasonable hypotheses about every monument by itself. Such hypotheses are all the more important since every one of the monuments involved provides a range of information which is peculiarly its own. I shall illustrate the point with two examples.

The first one is that of Qasr al-Hayr West, for which the last written and drawn statements by the excavators, all of whom are now deceased, have recently been published.²⁰ The second one is Qusayr 'Amrah, the first of the Umayyad dynastic establishments to have come to light, and the only one which is not in ruins. It underwent a major overhaul some twenty years ago, but its complete actual appearance today is, rather shamefully, not yet available in print.²¹

I shall be brief about Qasr al-Hayr. In addition to the sculptures and paintings which are well known, have been visible for over a generation in the Damascus Museum, have been mentioned in general books and manuals, and have even been subjected to elementary scholarly analyses, we are presented with painted fragments which were exhibited occasionally but never published and with stone and stucco sculptures of personages known only to visitors to the storerooms of the Damascus Museum.²² It is nearly impossible to reconstruct how these paintings and sculptures fitted anywhere, except for a few fragments on the façade of the palace rebuilt in the Damascus Museum and for two large paintings found on the [96] floor of the staircases.²³ It is, therefore, nearly impossible to propose a program for these images, or even sequences of visual impressions with some iconographic or expressive meaning. This is so even when the sources of a motif are clear. For instance,

¹⁹ The major exception to the rule lies in coinage, where both written sources and existing series of coins emphasize the necessity for a system of forms in order for any one item to be understood.

²⁰ Daniel Schlumberger, *Qasr al-Heir al-Gharbi* (Paris, 1986).

²¹ See M. Almagro and others, *Qusayr 'Amrah* (Madrid, 1984), which unfortunately does not give a complete survey of the restored frescoes. It is also unfortunate that there is no account of the degree of restoration which has been provided in some instances, nor is anything really known about the technical details of the paintings.

²² Bibliographic references will be found in Creswell–Allan, *Early Muslim Architecture* and in Ettinghausen and Grabar, *Islamic Art*. Some pieces have been shown in various traveling exhibitions organized by the Syrian Department of Antiquities, especially the one held at the Musée du Monde Arabe in 1990–91 which focused on Umayyad palaces. Their catalogs provide a few additional pictures and minimal comments.

²³ Daniel Schlumberger, "Deux fresques omeyyades," *Syria*, 25 (1946–48); Richard Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting* (Geneva, 1962), pp. 35, 37.



1 So-called Palmyrene sculpture from Qasr al-Hayr West

two sculptures found at Qasr al-Hayr resemble representations of rulers in Byzantine and Sasanian art.²⁴ But if we argue, as I and others have done, that, because these had been forms for the representation of pre-Islamic rulers, they must now be representations of Umayyad princes, then we also have to argue that a sculpture with obvious Palmyrene funerary associations (Fig. 1) should be connected to some funeral theme in Umayyad times.²⁵ What then is it doing on the façade of the building?

A similar position of iconographic skepticism can be argued for almost every fragment found at Qasr al-Hayr West. But the same skepticism need not apply if one tries to identify, even tentatively, not so much the subject-matter as the sources of inspiration for the images. Within the limits and restrictions of existing information and investigations, the genetic pool from which these images came may be the only kind of meaning or semantic range available for the decorative motifs from Qasr al-Hayr West which can be traced with some

²⁴ Oleg Grabar, "Islamic Art and Byzantium," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 18 (1964).

²⁵ It is, of course, true that as an exercise in pure connoisseurship the Qasr al-Hayr sculpture differs in many details from actual Palmyrene works. Does it matter? How different must an imitation be in order not to be meaningful as an imitation? Conversely, are meanings carried together with forms?

certainty. The most interesting and most unexpected point about this genetic pool seems to be the close relationship between the paintings and sculptures from Qasr al-Hayr and the art of Soghd in Central Asia, and even the Buddhist and Manichean arts found farther east in the Tarim basin.²⁶ The question is how did themes and styles from the northeastern frontier of the Muslim empire (and even beyond) reach Syria, when none of the patrons of Syrian and Palestinian buildings had ever set foot there and the movement of artisans, while not impossible, seems technically unlikely at this time. The answer lies almost certainly in transmission through objects – silver objects sent as tribute or as gifts, textiles, perhaps rugs. Books are not likely to have been important at this time, a few decades before the appearance of paper through the same route, but painted bark and bone could have been among the marvels brought from the east.²⁷ It is also through textiles and works in metal that Mediterranean motifs can be imagined to have reached a remote site like Qasr al-Hayr and through silver objects that Iranian ones would have become available.²⁸

Thus the evidence from Qasr al-Hayr West does not lead one to interpret the decoration on the walls within a social, official, or personal setting, but it does explain how certain combinations of forms ended up in a striking location of the Syrian steppe. We become informed on the movement of works of art and of artistic motifs across western Asia rather than on their meaning in the setting they eventually adorned. This is so because the heterogeneity of the vocabulary of the palace seems to me to be its only characteristic which lends itself to a positive conclusion.

Let me turn now to the bath house of Qusayr 'Amrah, which is only one of a larger group of constructions including now-ruined living quarters, a watch-tower and a hydraulic complex. Its discovery a century ago affected nearly all historians of Islamic culture because of the paintings which adorn

²⁶ There is no convenient access to the immensely rich treasures of early medieval art from Central and Inner Asia. A very general survey is Tamara Talbot Rice, *Ancient Arts of Central Asia* (New York, 1965). Rich and accurate, but geographically more restricted, information is found in the published catalog of an exhibition that never took place, *Culture and Art of Ancient Uzbekistan*, 2 vols, in Russian and English (Moscow, 1991). A little-known and unexpected source of major importance for Qasr al-Hayr as well as Khirbat al-Mafjar is Varakhsha in Uzbekistan, which has friezes of animals strikingly similar to the Umayyad ones; see V. A. Shishkin, "Arhitekturnaia Dekoratsia Dvortsa v Varahshe," *Hermitage Museum, Trudy Otdela Istorii Kultury i Iskusstva Vostoka*, vol. 4 (Leningrad, 1947). For further examples see my comments on the paintings of Mafjar in Hamilton's publication of the palace and A. von Le Coq, *Die Buddhistische Spätantike* (Berlin, 1922–33), 1: pl. 20 and ff.; 5: pls 12 and 33, comparable to fragments from Mafjar and Qasr al-Hayr.

²⁷ It is well ascertained that considerable booty came from the conquest of Central Asia and that taxes were at times paid in objects rather than cash. A complete gathering of all appropriate texts would be a very worthy enterprise.

²⁸ The arguments justifying this position are much beyond the range and purposes of this paper. From a methodological point of view I am trying to distinguish artistic transfers which took place through objects from the ones made by traveling artisans or artists.

the bath and whose subjects seem to reflect the life of princely leisure. Now we have the advantage of possessing all the information we are ever going to get and of having it in situ.²⁹

It is possible to reconstruct the probable models for many of the paintings. Just as at Qasr al-Hayr, objects, mostly from the Mediterranean, but also from the Sasanian world, had a clear impact on the paintings. Moreover, as I have already pointed out elsewhere, there were also many images inspired by a direct perception of the actual setting of the building and of the events which took place in it. This was not done in order to present the illusion of a physical world, but in order to commemorate events which had either taken place or been recalled there.³⁰ In fact, those images which are new, without a clear model, seem often to be more caricatured and more awkward than the conventional representations in the bath. It is as though someone, a patron no doubt, had requested topics that may have been a bit outside the competence of the painters, for the whole place has the appearance of a lively amateur exhibition. The more important point, however, is that even here, where about five-sixths of what had once been there is preserved, no clear sense of what is shown emerges. This may well be an example of the art-historical principle that it takes two to tango, or that a unique building is almost impossible to understand, especially when additional contextual evidence is missing.

It is tempting to give up, just as it is tempting to excerpt something immediately understood like the Six Kings and to elaborate from there on some grand iconographic message.³¹ So far, to my [97] knowledge, none of these approaches has worked, although admittedly so little has been written about this fascinating little place that even methodological judgments are dubious. What can be proposed is something akin to chemical tests used to determine the composition of some product, that is, try possibilities until something works. Here are two examples.

The first one is difficult to illustrate because, when the photographs I used were made,³² I was concerned with recording two-dimensional painted

²⁹ The restoration work was accomplished by a team sent by the Spanish government. The results of its work are rather impressive, as can be seen in the book by M. Almagro and others quoted earlier. There are, however, several places where the paintings visible now differ from the fragments seen by Musil a century ago and photographed by the Reverend Fathers Jaussen and Savignac, *Mission archéologique en Arabie*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1922). While important for the overall interpretation of the bath's paintings, these queries are not particularly pertinent to the point of this essay.

³⁰ Oleg Grabar, "La place de Qusayr 'Amrah dans l'art profane," *Cahiers archéologiques*, 36 (1988).

³¹ Oleg Grabar, "The Painting of the Six Kings at Qusayr 'Amrah," *Ars Orientalis*, 1 (1954).

³² This is an appropriate occasion to recall the help of Fred Andereg, for some time Head of Photographic Services at the University of Michigan, who came with me on so many Syrian and Jordanian trips and who took and often developed his pictures in most unusual places.



2 Qusayr
'Amrah. View
toward right wall

panels on walls. I did not try to record photographically or even to determine on the spot the impressions made on users and visitors from various points of view logical and unique to this particular place: the entrance, doorways, the floors on which one sat, the apse or throne niche in the center of the building, and so on.

Pending verification at Qusayr 'Amrah itself, I propose two visual impressions as correct assessments of the building's impact. One concerns the wealth of pictures hanging on the wall: there are so many of them that one can hardly make sense of them as a whole, and one moves almost automatically to consider them individually. Just as in a museum, one is overwhelmed by the quantity of pictures, and one can only handle them one at a time. I am unclear about the psychological implications of this cascade of ever-present images. The second impression is that the first and richest hall of the bath, usually interpreted as a throne hall, is dominated by the image of an enthroned ruler in the apse and by a series of large panels in the right vault ending at the vault's back wall (Fig. 2). The comparable area in the left vault is cut up into smaller sections and visually less effective from a distance.

The question is whether this visual judgment, if accurate, justifies arguing that the woman by the pool (Fig. 3), the Six Kings, and the "Lady Nike"



3 Qusayr
'Amrah. Standing
nude woman on
right wall in main
hall



4 Qusayr
'Amrah. "Lady
Niké" on back
wall of right vault



5 Qusayr
'Amrah. Standing
women on either
side of ruling
figure



6 Qusayr
'Amrah. Standing
women on either
side of ruling
figure



7 Qusayr
'Amrah. Dancing
woman on arch
in main hall



8 Qusayr 'Amrah. Dancer accompanied by guitar player on spandrel of central vault

(Fig. 4)³³ are, with the prince in the back of the apse, more significant than other images. One could propose several other similar readings of the walls from a variety of points of view corresponding to the likely uses of the building. The result of this kind of investigation would be to establish hierarchies according to the way the paintings are perceived, but I am not sure that such hierarchies would not themselves become arbitrary constructs rather than useful explanations.

My second approach is even more subjective, at least in its premise. A striking feature of Qusayr 'Amrah is the extraordinary number and variety of women represented on its walls in a truly minuscule space: half-dressed

³³ The representation on this wall is of a well-dressed woman in a tent with various figures around her. To the right of the tent, in the upper part of the panel, there is a Greek inscription reading quite clearly *NIKE*, "Victory." In an article published a few years ago, I connected *NIKE* known for a hundred years with a number of Greek letters discovered by the Spanish restorers to have been painted on the left of the tent at the same level as *NIKE*. In "Une inscription grecque à Qusayr Amrah," *Revue des études islamiques* (*Mélanges Dominique Sourdel*), 54 (1986), I argued that there was a single name and proposed that it be read ARIS [TO] *NIKE*. Unfortunately, I no longer believe that this reading is possible for a whole series of reasons. A suggestive alternative will be proposed by Dr Garth Fowden in a forthcoming book which, if acceptable, will be of extraordinary importance for the understanding of Qusayr 'Amrah. I am most grateful to Dr Fowden for having shared his interpretation with me and for many wonderful discussions of Qusayr 'Amrah. See Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth* (Princeton, 1993), pp. 143–9.



9 Qusayr
'Amrah. Standing
nude woman in
central hall



10 Qusayr
'Amrah. Alighting
(?) woman, on
left wall of main
hall

ladies around the prince (Figs 5 and 6), Lady Niké (Fig. 4), the tall lady by the pool (Fig. 3), nude dancers (Fig. 7), a heavily dressed dancer (Fig. 8), another standing naked woman (Fig. 9; now in the Berlin Museum), a woman apparently alighting in front of a man (Fig. 10), meditating personifications identified by Greek inscriptions (Fig. 11), busts of well-dressed women in the central nave of the main hall as though looking at the goings-on below (Fig. 12), a cogitating nude woman in one of the side rooms for bathing (Fig. 13), and partly damaged paintings of totally naked women and children also found in one of the small bathing rooms that seem to depict domestic activities that would have taken place in precisely such a room (Figs 14 and 15).

Almost none of these representations of women finds adequate parallels in comparable or reasonably comparable artistic traditions, except occasionally in details like the stubby and awkward legs so typical of Coptic textiles, poses and gestures clearly belonging to the ways of representation in late-antique art, and occasionally the memory of a classical personification or of a Sasanian symbol.

The point I would like to make, however, is a different one. While the presence of so many women predominates at Qusayr 'Amrah, it is striking that they are so different from each other. Sensuous performances cohabit with highly proper ones, possible narratives coexist with apparent scenes of leisure and domestic life, and trite personifications are found alongside



II Qusayr
'Amrah.
Personifications
on the side of
windows

concrete references. Should one try to argue that what is shown or reflected in Qusayr 'Amrah is the world of the women whose power, both political and cultural, was, in early Islamic times, considerable? Or should one interpret all of this as a men's locker-room view of the world? A preliminary argument can be made for either possibility, and maybe others exist as well. The full appreciation of this strange and fascinating museum of rather mediocre paintings most probably requires the elaboration of a series of categories of understanding, one of which may even be the traditional art-historical one of specific iconographic meanings and of an equilibrium of sources from many origins.



12 Qusayr
'Amrah. Female
figure in upper
part of central
nave

What conclusions can one draw from these remarks? The most important one is that Umayyad [98] palaces, or at least a small number among them, contain a considerable amount of data which should at this time be considered syntagmatically, that is, in terms of the unit in which they are found, rather than systemically, in terms of the separate histories of each example. Before returning to types and to broad vistas, it may be worthwhile to plunge into the depth of each palatial establishment, to study all of its details, to imagine how it was built and what went on in it. This sort of analysis should not stop at information provided by the monument or by written sources about its time, nor even by the sources which can be identified for any part of it. It is perfectly appropriate to bring to bear everything from gender studies to technological analyses which can develop a grip on the monument. Such a monographic approach, like a proper trench in an archaeological investigation, would at least begin to show that each one of some six buildings can bristle with specific references and interpretations, acquiring a full personality of its own.

The acquisition of such precise information together with a range of possible interpretations would allow for the first time three additional discourses. One is the art-historical one of witnessing, in the first half of the eighth century, a series of transfers of forms and of meanings, as new sponsors and new resources contribute to the recomposition of older forms,



13 Qusayr
'Amrah.
Meditating
woman in small
side room



14 Qusayr
'Amrah. Naked
women and
children in side
room

on the one hand, and to the development of new meanings, on the other. The most obvious example of the latter is the ceremonial pastime, which acquires new dimensions with the luxurious baths of Khirbat al-Mafjar or the grandiose composition of Mshatta.

A second discourse concerns the Umayyad phenomenon. It can explain how a new aristocracy from the outside established itself in ancient lands, but the more tantalizing question is whether the specific phenomenon of Umayyad palaces played any significant role in the development of a new art of princes eventually associated with Muslim rulers. One would also be able to return with better information and fuller perception to standard problems of early Islamic art like the formation of a princely cycle and the myths that developed around the Umayyads. At this time, I am doubtful that the Umayyads were as important and innovative in secular art as they were in the art of the mosque, but the matter will be discussed over the years to come, I hope.

Finally, there is a thematic discourse. The Umayyad establishments belong somewhere in one or more schemes of royal and aristocratic living and behaving. Most of them are private palaces which constantly use public artistic triggers – like a decorated façade, for example – to audiences who are impossible to identify. But although their most brilliant features are inside, to be treasured and enjoyed and not to be shared, they lack clear spaces for private and family living. They seem different from anything else and yet



can be related to French Renaissance palaces or to nineteenth-century villas in the West perhaps more easily than to their Roman ancestors. In short they have a significant contribution to make to the broader understanding of what rulers sought to do with their architecture and its decoration: to proclaim and display their glory or perhaps to create places in order to hide and enjoy their wealth.

15 Qusayr
'Amrah. Naked
women and
children in side
room

