

Chapter IX

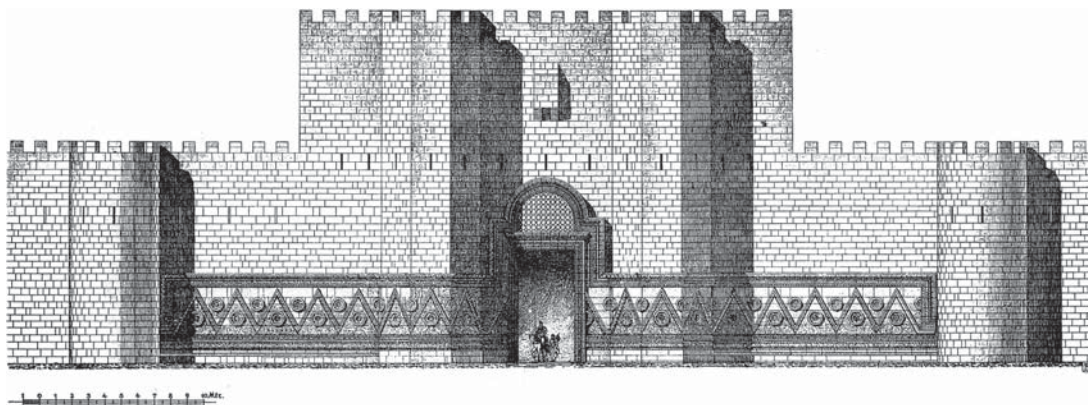
The Date and Meaning of Mshatta*

The unfinished palace of Mshatta, in the steppe of Jordan some thirty miles southeast of Amman, is probably the best-known secular monument of early Islamic times. Its notoriety rests primarily on the unique monumental decorative band of sculpted stone on its façade (Fig. 1), which was transferred in the early part of the twentieth century to the Berlin Museum. But it is also the result of two debates of more than half a century ago. One dealt with the character and significance of this particular decorative ensemble and of ornament in general. It was a debate that extended beyond universities and museums, as it spread to artists, critics and industrial designers. But within the academy it focused a great deal on a set of antinomies (Orient/Rome, representation/ornament, pure art/decorative art, among others) which required a precise date for Mshatta in order to identify the meaning of its forms. The second debate involved a curious group of academics and para-academics: usually wealthy travelers, archaeologists and historians who, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, became, in very different ways and with very different points of view, fascinated by material and visual evidence for the formation of Islamic culture. Ernst Herzfeld, the youngest, most learned and most imaginative scholar of that group, returned to questions about Mshatta more than once, always from a different angle, but ended up by being more concerned with the archaeology of Mshatta and with the confirmation of its Umayyad date than with its decoration.¹ More recent discussions and summaries by Leo Trümpelmann² and K. A. C. Creswell have tended to by-pass the decoration or to deal with it exclusively as the sum of more or less localized motifs. Once the date of the building was securely established, all that was needed, or so it seems, was to identify the sources of its

* First published in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 41 (Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University: Washington DC, 1987), pp. 243–7.

¹ Complete bibliography in K. A. C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, I, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1969), pp. 604–6. Relatively little has been written about Mshatta since then, except in O. Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven, 1973), pp. 197–200, or else in general manuals.

² L. Trümpelmann, *Mshatta* (Tübingen, 1962).



1 Mshatta,
façade

designs. This procedure is a wonderful instance of the common art-historical practice of defining a monument through its genetic pool.

The point of these rapid introductory remarks is, first, to note that the study of Mshatta seems from the very beginning to have led to broad concerns about the history of forms or the methodology of visual analysis. The second point is that there does not seem too much doubt about the date and significance of Mshatta. In reality, however, there still is a “problem” of Mshatta, not only because its decoration has not really been explained, but also because even its date, for which a sort of scholarly consensus seemed to have been established, may be far from assured. A summary of that consensus would run as follows: Mshatta is a palace built toward the end of the Umayyad dynasty, most likely by order of al-Walid ibn Yazid, caliph for a few months of 743–4 (hence its unfinished character), but a longtime resident of this part of the *badiyah* or steppic intermediary zone between the real desert and permanently cultivated areas.

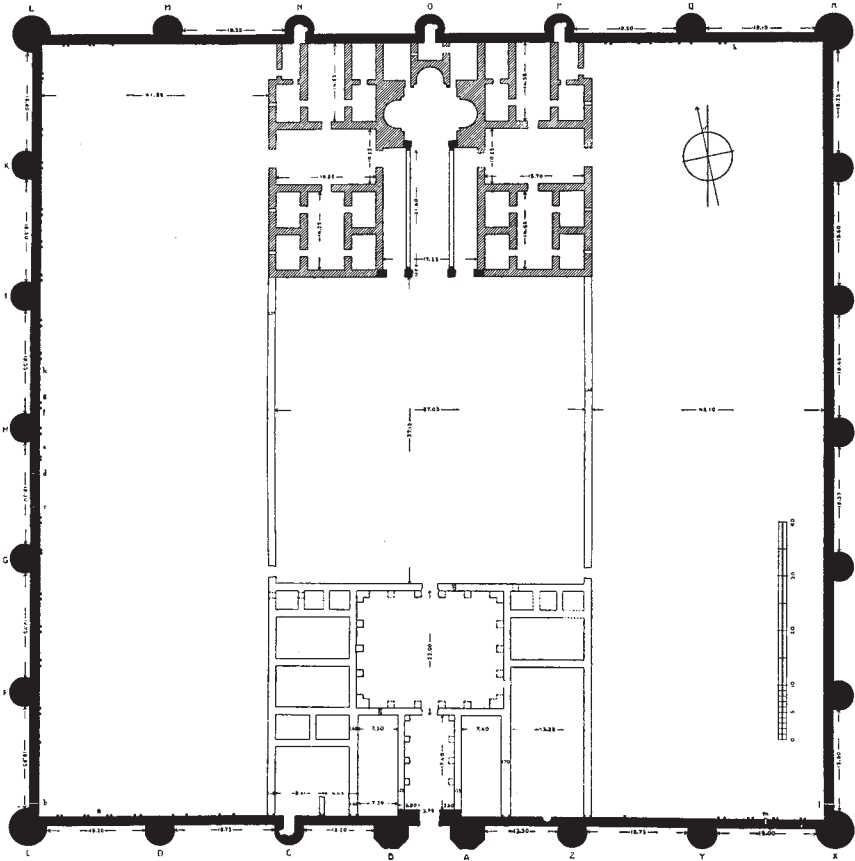
This conclusion rests on the following set of arguments.

First, the late tenth-century Egyptian Christian chronicle of Severus ibn al-Muqaffa contains a passage referring to the building of a “city” by al-Walid in a waterless area which required many workers from Egypt and which was left unfinished. H. Lammens argued that it was a reference to Mshatta; in spite of J. Sauvaget’s rather cryptic doubts concerning the text’s appropriateness for Mshatta, Creswell and nearly everyone else accepted it.³

[244] Second, the alleged combination in Mshatta of Mediterranean themes and techniques (square plan with round towers [Fig. 2], throne room, in the shape of a triconch preceded by a basilical hall, size based on a seventy meters to the side module, technique of relief sculpture, most of the motifs in the decoration) with eastern, Iraqi or Iranian, ones (combination of stone

³ H. Lammens, “La Badia et la Hira,” *Etudes sur le siècle des Omayyades* (Beirut, 1930), p. 348; J. Sauvaget, “Remarques sur les monuments omeyyades,” *Journal Asiatique*, 231 (1939), pp. 31–5.

2 Mshatta, plan



and brick construction, *iwan*-like opening of main hall on court, a relatively small but clearly identifiable number of details in ornament) seemed appropriate to an evaluation of Umayyad art as one of juxtaposing disparate elements available to Umayyad patrons through their conquests.⁴

Third, the combination of a formal core centered on a large reception hall and of living quarters (mostly never built but traceable through bonds in standing walls) on the sides (Fig. 2) seemed to correspond to a typology of functions known in other Umayyad palaces in the *badiyah* or elsewhere and to illustrate an alleged Umayyad style of living which required the coexistence of official rooms and private apartments, even when the building is far from urban centers or other significantly populated areas.

Fourth, the whole Syrian and Transjordanian *badiyah* is covered with structures of very varying dimensions and importance which can be shown, on archaeological, comparative or literary grounds, to have been built or

⁴ Such is essentially the thesis developed by Herzfeld. As an additional item not in Creswell's bibliography, see I. Lavin, "The House of the Lord," *Art Bulletin*, 44 (1962), pp. 3-27.

heavily rebuilt in Umayyad times;⁵ hence any major construction from Islamic times⁶ in that area is assumed to be Umayyad, unless the contrary can be proved.

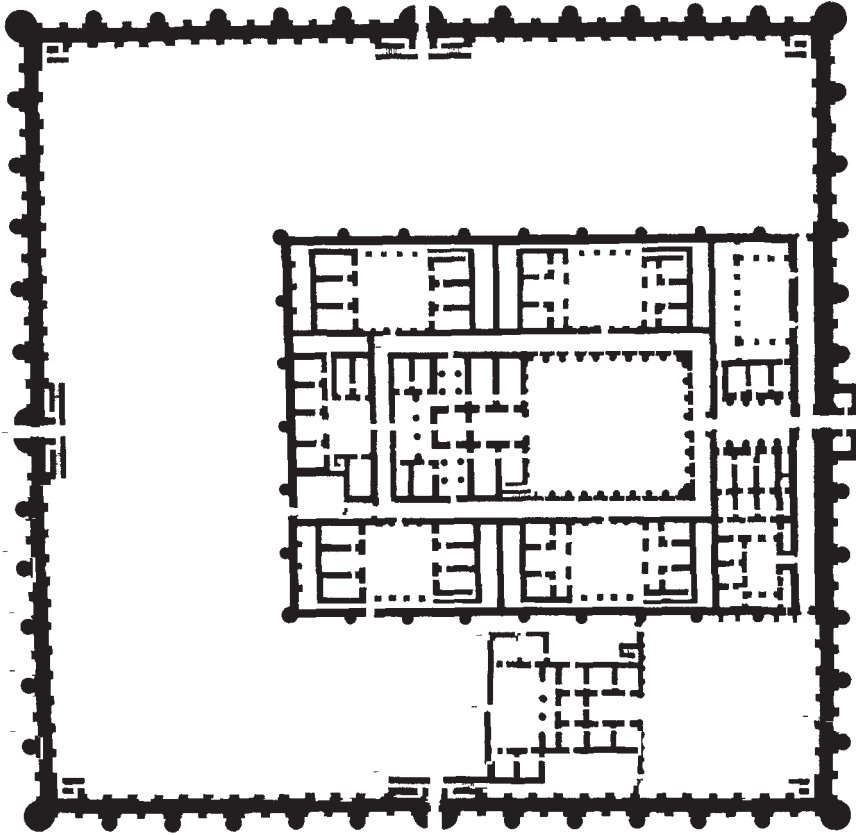
Each of these arguments is open to question. The statement in a Christian chronicle dealing with the ecclesiastical history of Egypt reflected no doubt some conscription of Egyptian labor still remembered over two centuries later, but it can at best be used as evidence to supplement other data, certainly not to identify a specific place in a different province. Umayyad building activities were numerous, and “cities” were built on the Cilician frontier and in the Jazirah. Many of them were left unfinished or, rather, an initial large-scale investment in funds and labor from some central authority was usually followed by slower and more localized construction.

The pseudo-stylistic argument of the juxtaposition of forms of different origins is valid to a certain extent. But one need only compare Mshatta to Khirbat al-Mafjar, Khirbat al-Minyah, Qusayr ‘Amrah, or Qasr al-Hayr West, four definitely Umayyad establishments, two of which are less than a day’s horse ride from Mshatta,⁷ to realize how different Mshatta is from other Umayyad ensembles. The almost geometric rigor of its plan with the diagonals of the square generating the dimensions of the formal part of the building (Fig. 2) contrasts with the seemingly haphazard, additive arrangement of Khirbat al-Mafjar, the contrived composition of Khirbat al-Minyah around its court, the typological simplicity of Qusayr ‘Amrah, or the constructional incongruencies of Qasr al-Hayr West. In Mshatta’s dominant decorative band, as well as in many ornamental fragments still in place, the mass of details is subordinated to a very rigid order – triangles on the façade, simple and sober acanthus leaves or vine tendrils elsewhere. The four other buildings, even the relatively sober Khirbat al-Minyah, have more decoration and, especially, a much greater range of themes and techniques. In construction, design, or decoration Mshatta exhibits none of the exuberance of the other major Umayyad palaces, nor does its façade show the wild festival of motifs that could be reconstructed for the façade of Qasr al-Hayr West, now in the court of the Damascus National Museum. What characterizes Mshatta is, first of all, the logical and technical coherence of its design and, second, that its architectural forms and the organization of decoration on its façade are innovations without clear antecedent in Umayyad art, with one exception to

⁵ There is no complete list of such sites. See Sauvaget, “Remarques” and “Châteaux Umayyades de Sync,” *REI*, 35 (1967); see also O. Grabar, R. Holod, J. Knudstad and W. Trousdale, *City in the Desert* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), pp. 150 ff.

⁶ There is, in my opinion, no point in reopening the debate on a pre-Islamic date for Mshatta, as the presence of a *mihrab* built into the outer wall makes clear. This is not to say that there was no earlier settlement in or around the palace.

⁷ All these monuments are described by Creswell and discussed by O. Grabar. I am leaving out such places as Muwaqqar, Ziza, or Qastal, which are even closer to Mshatta, but about which too little is known.



3 Ukhaydir,
plan

which I shall return later. The fact that Mshatta is so different from other Umayyad buildings does not necessarily make it non-Umayyad. Stylistic coherence hardly characterizes Islamic art in the first half of the eighth century, and, within the confines of an evolutionary theory of formal growth, Mshatta could indeed be seen as the culmination of an Umayyad stylistic progression. These are possible [245] but not necessary conclusions, and my point at this stage is simply that such stylistic characteristics of Mshatta as can be defined do not make the traditional conclusion about its date necessary.

A similar reasoning weakens the third argument for an Umayyad date. The presence of living and formal zones within a single ensemble is not peculiar to Umayyad establishments in the *badiyah*, as witnesses Ukhaydir in Iraq (Fig. 3), usually dated to the late eighth century,⁸ with the same characteristics. More important and, once again, unique within the series of Umayyad palaces is that the official zone in Mshatta is so axial, so clearly the main part of the complex, with presumed living quarters relegated to the

⁸ Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, II (Oxford, 1940), pp. 35–46; in addition, see W. Caskel, "Al-Uhaidir," *Der Islam*, 39 (1964) and reports on recent discoveries in *Sumer*, 22 (1966), pp. 79–110 and *Mesopotamia*, 2 (1967), pp. 195–218.

side. Within Islamic architecture this feature is first known in the urban governor's palace and administrative seat in Kufah. It is as though the message of Mshatta is its visual assertion of power, first through a wide and symmetrical horizontal band across the façade and then through a centrally placed reception hall or throne room. The message is quite different from that of the Umayyad châteaux, where functions of life and of pleasure predominate and reception halls are to the side of a main axis (Khirbat al-Minyah), have to be hypothesized on the second floor (Jabal Says, Khirbat al-Mafjar, Qasr al-Hayr West), or are absent altogether (Qasr al-Tuba).⁹

Thus Mshatta has relatively little in common with other Umayyad buildings in Syria and Palestine. But it is remarkably close to early 'Abbasid buildings from Iraq in composition and in many constructional details. At Ukhaydir, also, a strongly axial formal area ending with a reception hall or throne room opening on a court is separated from living areas relegated to side courts. Ukhaydir did not have a large decorative statement on its façade. But the two-storied domed entrances to the city of Baghdad illustrate at least an 'Abbasid concern for the external broadcasting of its message of power and authority. Only the Dome of the Rock, in Umayyad times, was built and decorated with the intention of affecting those outside the building, and in this case even quite far away. Since it is not possible to explain Mshatta through the Dome of the Rock, the conclusion is that Mshatta is more likely to be an early 'Abbasid building than an Umayyad one.¹⁰ And even the stylistic details of the ornament on the façade are easier to see as the forerunners of the first styles of Samarra than as the more rigidly controlled and more tightly coherent continuations in stone of the stucco ornament found in Qasr al-Hayr West or Khirbat al-Mafjar.

In terms of style, composition, or technique, nothing, it seems to me, makes an 'Abbasid date impossible and much makes it likely. But such a conclusion runs against the fourth argument for an Umayyad date which is that large-scale building in the Syrian and Jordanian *badiyah*, in fact throughout most of Syria and Palestine, was, in early Islamic times, restricted to the Umayyads. This argument, however, cannot be maintained in such absolute terms, even though the maintenance and development of these areas as viable agricultural or commercial enterprises with attendant private villas had often been sponsored by Umayyad princes or by other Arab aristocrats under Umayyad rule. In fact it is precisely the success of these Umayyad or Umayyad-aided activities that attracted the early 'Abbasids. The excavations of Qasr al-Hayr East demonstrated a continuity between the time of the Umayyad foundation and a decline in the late ninth century.¹¹ An Umayyad settlement

⁹ The argument for second-floor reception rooms was first made by J. Sauvaget.

¹⁰ It is rather curious that not one of the 116 opinions as to the date of Mshatta (Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, I, pp. 633–4) lists the 'Abbasid possibility.

¹¹ O. Grabar et al., *City*, pp. 156–9.

in Transjordan was taken over by a son of the caliph al-Mahdi and eventually acquired by a consortium of oil merchants from Kufah.¹² Ramlah was maintained and developed by the 'Abbasids, and, until al-Mutawakkil in the ninth century, nearly every 'Abbasid caliph traveled to Palestine and Transjordan, at times to visit Jerusalem, at others on their way to or from Mecca. Although their exact number is still a matter of debate, there is no doubt about the considerable investments made by the 'Abbasids in restoring the sanctuaries of Jerusalem.¹³ Finally, large estates and whole cities like Humaymah in southern Transjordan were owned by members of the 'Abbasid family even in Umayyad times, and there is no reason to believe that they were given up after 750.

In short, an important 'Abbasid presence can [247] easily be demonstrated in this area at least during the first century of 'Abbasid rule, after which the whole *badiyah* began to decline, especially on its Syrian and Palestinian borders. Historical circumstances, therefore, do not make an early 'Abbasid date for Mshatta impossible, any more than formal comparisons did. For the history and stylistic interpretation of the most celebrated feature of Mshatta, the ornament on its façade, this change of dates by circa half a century is not significant, as it is ultimately not very important or interesting to know whether Mshatta represents the last stage of one style or the first stage of a new one. It does matter, however, in suggesting a different purpose for and ideology behind the building and in explaining perhaps the oddity of the shape of its decoration. Within a radius of some thirty miles from Mshatta are located no fewer than eight major or minor Umayyad foundations, some like Muwaqqar provided with an elaborate irrigation system for agriculture, and therefore particularly likely to have remained in use after the 'Abbasid takeover. In this environment I propose to see Mshatta as the center of the new authority, as a formal building of power rather than as a château. And, like the elongated rectangular *tiraz* bands on official 'Abbasid vestments, a large rectangular band of ornament on the facade was meant to serve as a sign of the presence of a new rule. In later times such ideas will be expressed through inscriptions or through towers and green or, much later, gilt domes.¹⁴ At this time of experimentation with visual signs, an ornamental band of grandiose dimension was deemed sufficient.¹⁵

¹² Baladhuri, *Futuh*, trans. as *The Origins of the Muslim State* by R. K. Hitti (New York, 1916), p. 197. For other examples see Grabar et al., *City*, p. 155.

¹³ See, among other places, R. W. Hamilton, *The Structural History of the Aqsa Mosque* (Jerusalem, 1951) and Guy Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems* (Boston, 1890).

¹⁴ The symbolism of domes as authority already existed; see O. Grabar, "Al-Mshatta, Baghdad, and Wasit," *The World of Islam (Studies in Honor of P. K. Hitti)* (New York, 1960), pp. 99–108. A more sophisticated explanation of these domes will soon be proposed by Jonathan Bloom.

¹⁵ Another such example of experimentation may well be the citadel at Amman. In spite of recent work (A. Almagro, *El Palacio omeyyade de Amman* [Madrid, 1984] and the unpublished thesis of A. Northedge), I still have lingering doubts about an Umayyad date for the celebrated large square pavilion.

