

Having a Bath in the Desert

Qusayr Amra, about 70 km east of Amman, is one of the most fascinating Umayyad castles (Fig. 1). It is particularly famous for its wonderful painted bathhouse. As one steps out of the glittering sun into the bathhouse, the eye gradually adjusts to the dark interior to spy a dazzling array of figures and scenes painted all over the interior walls in the ancient fresco technique. Some are related directly to the function of the building: dressed and scantily clad figures bathing. Dancers, artistes and alluring figures are added for the pleasure of the bath's guests. Meanwhile, the building's imperial character is alluded to by depictions of the royal hunt which—shown in conjunction with fertile landscapes and representations of crafts, the seasons and zodiac signs—represent the harmony, order and fertility of a ruler's realm. But who might that ruler be?

The many visual references to late Antique themes and techniques are stunning and led to animated discussions when first discovered. In 1898, the Austrian scholar Alois Musil first studied the bath in detail. A few years later, he had some of its elements brought to Vienna, from where they were then sold to the Berlin Museum (Fig. 2). Musil believed that a senior member of the Umayyad family had commissioned the building, employing artists from across the empire. This theory was much contested. Due to the many human depictions and the style of painting, "many scholars argued that these images were in fact painted in the Byzantine or Roman eras", as the co-director of the joint Jordanian, Italian and American conservation project of the bath, Gaetano Palumbo, said in 2012. However, the same expert then asserted that nevertheless "...now we have definitive proof that this is indeed Islamic art", as his team had discovered the following inscription next to the depiction of a princely figure: "O God, make Walid ibn Yazid virtuous." This Walid, in fact al-Walid II (reg. 125–126 A.H. / 743–44 C.E.), was the eleventh Umayyad caliph. Interestingly, the title of "Commander of the Believers", which usually follows a ruling



Fig. 2: Qusayr Amra (Jordan), section of mosaic floor from the western alcove of the reception hall. L: 46cm. ISL-SMB, Inv.-No. I. 1265. Photo: Christa Begall.

Fig. 1: Qusayr Amra (Jordan), the complex as imagined by a contemporary artist. Illustration: Karen Bartram 2010.



Fig. 3: Qusayr Amra (Jordan), depiction of Walid ibn Yazid (upper left) with prophets (above), the six kings (right) and hunting scene (upper right) in the western aisle of the reception hall. Photo: Gaetano Palumbo 2012.

caliph's name, is not mentioned in this instance, suggesting that the paintings may have been commissioned during the many years he waited to access the throne.

At the same time, some questions remain. Al-Walid's figure is surrounded by a series of prophets and six important rulers of the recent past (Fig. 3) indicating that he viewed himself as an integral part of a global world order and history, in which the caliph takes his rightful place in a line of kings and prophets going back to Adam and, ultimately, God. At the same time, the fact that his image is incorporated into an extensive programme of images that symbolises wealth, fertility and cultured living indicates that al-Walid saw himself as both the bringer and guarantor of his domain's overall well-being and prosperity. Given that we still do not have an exact dating for the building, it remains possible to speculate: Was al-Walid already caliph or a caliph-in-waiting who already laid claim to one day being the "Commander of Believers"—in other words, was he reflecting on his future while bathing in the desert?

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