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4.614 Introduction to Islamic Architecture

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Khirbat al Mafjar: A Desert Palace at the Confluence of Power and Passion

Introduction

The desert palaces of Jordan have long captured the imagination of romanticists. Each structure is individual and unique, scattered throughout the desert where it is thought they served as caravanserais, agricultural estates, and physical representations of Umayyad power. One of the most striking is the Khirbat al-Mafjar. Today, its ruins overlook the arid wadi Al-Nuway'ima in the Jordan valley, an echo of the political and cultural prowess once found there. The building is renowned even amongst the desert palaces, or qasrs, both for its wealth of decorative and architectural artistry as well as for its patron, the caliph Walid bin Yazid. There is an incredibly strong resonance between the lifestyle of the caliph and the architecture, a dynamic which gives it personality and character. At Mafjar, the balance a single man once struck between essential state duties and his legendary private passions is as essential a part of the buildings as the stone and plaster constituting its walls.

Form: Gradual Evolution and Adaptation

The structural intent of the Khirbat al-Mafjar has been contested several times since Hamilton's initial study, in part because the chronology of its construction is masked in the

archaeological record of the site. Many of the strata are obscured by the earthquake in 749 CE, which damaged much of the complex, the subsequent Ayyubid-Mamluk occupation in 1100-1300 CE, and the palace's final destruction (Taha). We therefore depend on comparative studies of the plans of the extant ruins with contemporary structures to identify its function. This task, too, is beset with challenges due to the unusual layout of the palace. It is necessary to range broader afield to identify the cultural influences that informed the construction of Khirbat al-Mafjar, which cannot be explained by regional qasr alone. It is currently thought that the function of the building shifted over time, from qasr to official residence, to adapt to Walid II's changing needs following his accession from prince to caliph.

The plan of the Khirbat al-Mafjar seems, at first, to be haphazard. Unlike other qasrs, such as the qasr 'Amra, a number of the units adjoining the palace's northern wall seem to have been added incrementally and as afterthoughts. This is reinforced by the incompleteness of both the mosque and eastern courtyard perimeter wall, which seem too have been under construction at the time of the eighth-Century earthquake (Znidarec). Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes evident that these additions are meditated architectural interventions on a more traditional qasr layout. The qasr typology is defined by Taha and Whitcomb as frequently featuring (a) two stories of rooms, or bayts arranged around a courtyard; (b) a bath, or hammam a short distance to the north; (c) a mosque; (d) supplementary and separate residential structures; (e) a buttressed enclosure, or hayr, that may have been used for agricultural purposes¹ (Whitcomb and Taha). When considered in isolation from the

¹ Tara and Whitcomb also suggest a sixth element of qasr, namely the agricultural estate or day'a (plural diya'). In their analysis "Khirbat al-Mafjar's and Its Place in the

remaining structures, the Khirbat al-Mafjar's palace and bath hall fulfil a large number of these requirements. The two structures are independent and square, their form reminiscent of the architectural tradition established by the builders of the qasr al-Kharana in the early eighth Century (Urice). While they serve no military purpose, the towers and walls are imposing and aesthetically striking, particularly given the dramatic *exedrae* featured by the bath hall², indicating that these were built to fulfil the performative function of all qasr. Mafjar was also located in a productive agricultural setting, their water supply was delivered by canalisation (Znidarec). Finally, the fact that these two buildings were in an advanced stage of completion before their destruction indicates that these were, indeed, the earliest buildings constructed on the site. It stands to reason that the original Khirbat al-Mafjar was initially conceived as a qasr consisting of the palace and bath hall. Later amendments during the residence of Walid II would produce the unique plan we see in the archaeological record today.

The shift from qasr to a structure more closely resembling urban palaces and official residences may have occurred as a consequence of Walid's accession from prince to caliph.

Architectural history of Palestine" they posit the importance of the palatial estate in the Arabs' initial settlement of conquered territories. Since the widespread application of the estate model often led to urbanisation or at least a strong political presence in the region, they had great value to the Arabs, but nevertheless required an economically secure method being sustained. Agriculture was a common solution, and could explain the motivation behind the construction of large, enclosed courtyards we see adjacent to many qasr.

² The *exedrae*, or flanking porticos, are typical of Byzantine architecture, where the apses are used for the repose of the occupants (Britannica). This informal program further supports the nonmilitary intent of the architects of the Khirbat al-Mafjar.

Not only Walid have additional state responsibilities, but he took on the religious duties of imām. Both of these led to dramatic changes in the plan of Khirbat al-Mafjar. The latter, religious duties, resulted in the construction of a new mosque between bath hall and palace. Its two entrances allowed public access as well as private entry through the caliph's quarters, in accordance with contemporary conventions (Znidarec). The mosque's western wall is paired with a perimeter wall that extends northwards from the terminal corner of the palace to enclose a courtyard between palace and bath hall. According to the timeline established previously, this courtyard likely did not exist when the Khirbat al-Mafjar was constructed as a qasr, largely because there was no need for the added degree of privacy it provides the residents of the palace. The division between public and private spaces is reinforced by the covered passageway that connects the palace and bath hall, screening the palace owner's movement between the buildings from any observers. This division between private and public space is characteristic of official buildings in the Byzantine empire. It is possible that the Umayyad architects were inspired by complexes such as the Roman Palazzo Sessoriano and urban official palaces like the Great Palace in Constantinople, which also feature covered passageways and a private-public separation (Znidarec). The Islamic adoption of these architectural features has precedent in the Qubbat al-Khadrā in Damascus, and their association with the state responsibilities of the inhabitant likely influenced Walid II's changes to the existing qasr architecture of Mafjar. Moreover, several of these changes enhance the imposing architecture of the existing structures. For instance the towers on the western perimeter wall are constructed so that they seem like part of the palace when viewed from the outside, increasing its perceived length by half. This dramatic effect would have been especially useful once Walid inherited the caliphate and performed more official duties on behalf of the state. Taking these influences into consideration, we may conclude that the deviation in the plan of the Khirbat al-Mafjar from the archetypical qasr was not the result of

haphazard action or unplanned construction, but a meditated reconfiguration of the original palace and bathhouse. In order to accommodate for the caliph's new duties, Walid's architects enhanced Mafjar's religious functionality, drew a formalised distinction between private and public space, and redesigned the structure so that it would seem more imposing and dramatic to visiting parties.

Function: Dominance, Power, and Satisfaction

It is not known what precise function the Khirbat al-Mafjar served for caliph Walid II, but some key assumptions can be made. The first assumption, based on Mafjar's removal from urban centres, is that Khirbat al-Mafjar was not in fact a primary residence but a winter residence, where the caliph would recuperate. The site is close enough to the urban centre of Jericho, then called Ariha, to allow for rapid diplomatic action and easy commutes (Taha). Simultaneously, it provides a rural context that would have been removed from the immediate pressures of the state. The second assumption is that Walid spent much time at Mafjar; his appreciation for the palace is indicated by the famously elaborate mosaics and frescoes decorating the interior. The continued investment into structural development following his accession to caliph also implies Mafjar's importance. Moreover, the archaeological strata near the bath hall include a layer of burnt wood and charcoal. This indicates that the two hypocaust-heated bath halls were consistently in use for a period of time (Taha). The third, and final assumption is that the Khirbat al-Mafjar probably served multiple functions. Foremost, as the caliph's residence, it was a place of state power, where guests were received and hosted. It was also a place of artistic and cultural prowess, and Mafjar's decorations stand out amongst the desert palaces for their unique beauty. Finally, it was a place of personal power. Walid was known for his sexual extravagances and deep

passions, and it is possible that the Khirbat al-Mafjar was the setting for many of the legends about him (Hamilton).

As the seat of the caliph, Mafjar not only had to be imposing, it also had to demonstrate the cultural superiority of Islam over the peoples it had conquered. At the qasr 'Amra, this symbolism is present in the mural of the "six kings", where the rulers of six conquered peoples are depicted showing deference to the Umayyad ruler (WMF). The Khirbat al-Mafjar also has frescoes, and though many are damaged researchers have been able to identify key points of interest. First, the frescoes are stucco, a technique inherited from Byzantine artists and increasingly common in official structures at this time (Da'adli). There is also no evidence of decoration on the walls of the ground floor, indicating that the paintings were exclusively found on the first story of the palace, where they may have embellished the audience chamber of the caliph, to impress visitors and inspire them with Walid's power. Supporting this are the subjects of the murals. It is thought that the audience chamber itself featured a brightly-coloured triumphal scene. Certainly, there is evidence of military apparel such as helmets, weapons, and armour. Some of these elements seem to stem from foreign cultures, such as a Roman anatomical cuirass and military skirt, and Sasanian yellow-and-pink trousers (Da'adli). The cross-cultural motifs would have served the same purpose as the deferential kings at qasr 'Amra, representing the caliph's power over the known world. as it would have drawn a stark parallel between the caliph's dominance in imagery and his physical dominance and military presence. Not only would the site, visible through the large windows of the audience chamber, have been a reminder of the wide territories the caliph ruled over, but historical literature indicates that the weapons and soldiers depicted in the frescoes would have been matched by real counterparts stationed

throughout the palace (Necipoğlu). The frescoes of Khirbat al-Mafjar were designed to awe the caliph's guests with his power.

Decorative elements at the Khirbat al-Mafjar also demonstrate power in more subtle ways. Walid II is considered one of the best poets of his time, and his love for the arts was renowned (Hamilton). His artistic sensibility is reflected in the exquisite mosaic floor of the bath hall, much of which has survived to this day. Measuring 30m x 30m, it is the largest of its kind, and decorated with a wealth of geometric patterns (Whitcomb and Taha). The mosaic demonstrates a degree of artistry reserved only for those with immense influence over the empire, especially as the necessary talent to construct the mosaics likely had to be sourced as far away as Constantinople (Grabar). The concept of the bath hall itself was also imported, though from Syrian tradition rather than Byzantine. In Umayyad architecture, the Syrian apodyterium, or dressing room, took on an additional level of meaning. At qasr 'Amra, the apodyterium was transformed into a throne room, and at Mafjar into a grand hall used for ceremonial entertainment, where the mosaics are found (Grabar). This is an excellent example of cultural grafting during the Umayyad period. There are thirty-eight different mosaic panels in the bath hall, thought to reflect the original vaulted ceilings that spanned the space. Taken together, they form a fascinating kaleidoscope of colour and pattern. The panels mark a departure from Sasanian vegetable and figural motifs, and may be part of the gradual transition to a uniquely Islamic artistic style (Whitcomb and Taha). Their resemblance to rugs and textiles is striking, and may offer an interesting explanation for the geometric patterns. Indeed, in the adjoining diwan, or bahw, the mosaic floor features tassels on its corners and borders typical of carpets (Whitcomb and Taha). Textiles serve both a functional and artistic purpose in Arabic culture, and it is possible that the Arabs were inspired by patterns and motifs discovered through interactions with foreign cultures. The colour red, for instance,

was often used by Sasanian kings (Taragan). Not only is red present throughout the bath hall mosaic, but it increases in density in the alcove reserved for the caliph³. To visiting foreigners, the sovereignty of the ruler would have been uncontested.

Separated from the official state functions of the Khirbat al-Mafjar are a number of private spaces that would have served entirely different functions. The most notorious of these is the bahw. There has been much academic speculation on the meaning of the Lion-Gazelle mosaic found in that alcove, which adjoins the main bath room. The two most compelling theories are those of the tree of life and of sexual prowess. In the tree of life interpretation, the peaceful gazelles are juxtaposed against the ravaging lion as metaphors for peaceful *dār al-islām*, the Islamic world, and war-torn *dār al-harb*, the non-Islamic world, respectfully (Hartner and Ettinghausen). The hypothesis is supported by mosaics that have been discovered in contemporary structures like *qasr Qastal*, but it does not explain why such an ideologically significant topic should be relegated to a side chamber. This paradox is embraced by the theory that the lion represents the sexual prowess of the caliph. The gazelles therefore represent not his territorial, but his sexual conquests. There is ample textual support for the comparison between gazelles and beautiful women, including in Walid's own poetry⁴ (Behrens-Abouseif). Walid, moreover, is identified with lions in texts and in representation, as in the statue above the porch where he is depicted flanked by two lions. Perhaps the mosaic was a combination of the two influences, where the artist adapted a popular symbol

³ It is possible that the patterns on the ground were picked up by tapestries and frescoes on the walls and ceilings of the building to dramatic effect.

⁴ One of these texts unfortunately being that describing his assassination, where he is compared to a lion pierced by spears (Behrens-Abouseif).

too suit the needs of the caliph and intimate space. Regardless, it is widely considered to be a masterpiece of contemporary mosaic art.

Conclusion

The Khirbat al-Mafjar in the Jordan valley is a perplexing structure. It is a place of dramatic opposites; of isolation and of exquisite artistry; of apparent architectural disarray and of carefully curated symbols of power. At its heart lies the legend of a single man, caliph Walid bin Yazid, whose propensity for excess and pleasure often raised the ire of his contemporaries (Hamilton). Mafjar, a place he spent considerable time at, is in many ways a manifestation of his life and character. It underwent structural evolution and expansion to parallel the expansion of Walid's own powers and influence over the Islamic empire. Moreover, its architecture is at times resplendent and at times stark and imposing, marked by the sharp distinction between state and private life Walid may also have experienced as a man whose heart housed both incredible responsibility and the drive of passions. Ultimately, the fates of building and the man are bound by tragedy, being destroyed by earthquake and by fellow man, hubris overtaking them before either had the opportunity to flourish in its role, be it as palace, or as caliph.

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