

GUIDE TO THE UMAYYAD PALACE AT KHIRBAT AL MAFJAR

THE RUINS are those of a country residence or palace built in all probability for the Caliph Hisham ibn Abd al Malik¹, who ruled the Arab dominions, stretching from India to the Pyrenees, from A.D. 724-743. The establishment included a palace, a mosque, a bath, and a colonnaded forecourt with an ornamental pool (*shadervan*) in the middle. More remains lie to the north, which have not yet been excavated. All these buildings were enclosed in a walled estate or park, containing gardens and possibly a game preserve. This extended nearly two kilometres in the direction of the Jordan, and a certain distance to the north, south, and west. The park wall is now razed to the ground, but parts of the foundations can still be traced on the south edge of the wadi lying north of the ruins. The site is waterless, but the palace and gardens were supplied from a group of springs at Nuwayima at the foot of Jabal Quruntul to the west. The aqueduct which brought the water from there followed much the same line as an irrigation channel now in use and can be traced along most of its length. In its course it crossed two wadis by bridges and filled two reservoirs; while its waters were used at certain points for turning mills. Remains of one of these can be seen 100 metres west of the palace. The name of the site itself means a place where water issues or flows.

So far as can be ascertained, Kh. al Mafjar is not mentioned in ancient literature, but we know of other desert palaces built by Hisham and his predecessors in the Syrian Desert, in Trans-Jordan, and in the Jordan Valley². The early Caliphs of the Umayyad dynasty were Arabians by birth and desert lovers by instinct. They never grew accustomed to the damp winters of Damascus, their capital, or other cities of Syria. They preferred to spend at

¹ Two fragments of marble inscribed in Arabic with letters addressed to Hisham, Commander of the Faithful (honorific title of the Caliph), were found buried in foundation trenches. (Fig. 1.)

² For example, Qasr Mushatta, near Madaba, Qasr Kharrana and Qusayr Amra in the desert, south-east of Amman, Qasr el Heir near Palmyra, and Kh. al Minya near Tiberias.

least the winter and spring months in the drier air of the desert fringes or the Jordan Valley¹. At the same time they could appreciate the material comforts of Greek civilization, of which the Syrians were accomplished exponents. The palace at Kh. al Mafjar represents an attempt to combine the luxuries of town life with the freedom and independence of the desert. It also shows the Arab aristocracy adapting the resources of Syrian and Mesopotamian art to serve the new tastes they had acquired through the conquest of those countries.

The building was never completed, but nevertheless it was occupied. It was overthrown by an earthquake, probably that of A.D. 747², during the final stages of construction. In one of the rooms, III (North), a pile of roof tiles can be seen stacked ready for use by the builders³. The Umayyad regime came to an end three years later. The palace was deserted after that, except for occasional squatters in those parts which remained habitable. In the twelfth century it was poorly reconditioned, apparently by newcomers—could they have been some of the troops of Saladin? Pottery and coins left behind by these passing occupants range from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries.

The palace, the mosque, the forecourt with the pool, and part of the bath have been cleared so far. Some years of excavation lie ahead. The unexcavated part of the bath and the area north of it, now a heap of soil and stones, show what the site was like before excavation.

Forecourt. This was the main approach to the palace. It was entered by a gate at the south end, flanked by two towers. These were first planned as square towers, but were given their present shape as an afterthought during construction. The impressions on the floor of the gateway show that it was paved with flagstones. It had benches on either side.

Although not completely cleared, the limits of the forecourt have been ascertained. It extended as far north as the limits of the buildings adjacent to the palace, and was over 300 metres long. It was enclosed on the south and east sides by an outer wall and a colonnade, of which, except for some remains to the left of the entrance, only the foundations have survived. If it was ever planned

¹ It was a common practice during the Umayyad period for the court to move to the desert for three or four months. Cf. al Aghani, Vol. II, p. 136, Cairo, Dar al Kutub ed.

² The same earthquake caused the destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the churches at Jerash. Cf. Agapius Mabbugensis, pp. 360-1, Beirut, 1907; Cedrenus, ed. Bonn, II, p. 7 [6th year of the reign of Constantine II]; Michel le Syrien, II, pp. 509-11; Theophanes, ed. Bonn, I, p. 651 [A.M. 6238].

³ Or left over after completion of the roof.

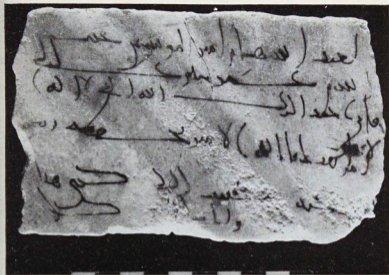


FIG. 1. ARABIC LETTER ADDRESSED TO HISHAM.



FIG. 2. CARVED PLASTER FROM THE ENTRANCE HALL. PANEL OF HEADS.

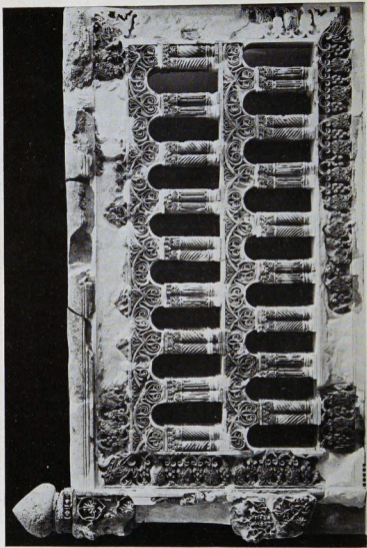


FIG. 3. CARVED PLASTER BALUSTRADE FROM THE PORCH OVERLOOKING THE FORECOURT.

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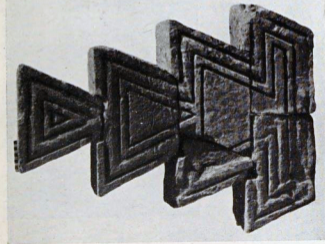


FIG. 4. CRENELLATION.

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FIG. 5. HEXAGONAL MEDALLION.

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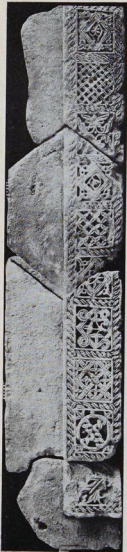


FIG. 6. LINTEL OVER THE DOOR OF THE PALACE.



FIG. 7. VOUSOIRS FROM THE ARCHES IN THE POOL.

to make an ornamental garden in the forecourt the work never reached that stage, for the virgin soil is undisturbed except for drainage channels carrying water away from the palace and the pool.

Palace. The palace overlooks the forecourt on the west. In the middle is the main gate, set in the lower part of a massive rectangular tower. On either side of the tower were arcaded verandas in two storeys, with rooms opening off behind them. The ground floor arcades were supported by clusters of four attached columns resting on rather high pedestals. All the pedestals were found in position, but everything above them had been flung down into the forecourt by the force of the earthquake¹. On the first floor marble and granite columns supported the arches. Between the columns there was a balustrade of carved plaster. Fragments of this were found in the debris and have been reassembled in the Museum at Jerusalem (Fig. 3). The stones of the arches (*voussoirs*) have now been laid out, in their proper relative positions, on the ground along the east side of the forecourt. The other carved and moulded stones lying here belong to the façade of the gate tower and to the gateway itself.

The large stones with bands of ornament in relief must once have formed zones or borders in interlacing pattern on the face of the tower. The carving was emphasized by red paint in the hollows. The triangular stones similarly decorated go together to form hexagonal medallions (Fig. 5) which were presumably grouped in association with the interlacing borders. The wedge-shaped stones composed the arch over the gate itself and a vault covering the porch inside. The front of the arch was decorated with a row of round-headed niches between radiating colonnettes; the latter were carried round under the archway and gave it a lobed appearance as seen from the front. Is this a prototype of the Moorish Arabesque multiple arch?

Other fragments to notice are the zigzag crenellations from the top of the façade, made up of five stones each (Fig. 4).

Entrance. The niches on either side of the gateway had carved spherical niche heads; fragments of these are now in the Museum at Jerusalem.

The ornamentation of the door jambs in square panels was carried over the lintel, which consisted of three stones, the two lateral stones being joggled on their inner ends to fit a hexagonal centre stone (Fig. 6). The lintel is now in the Museum in Jerusalem.

¹ Two of the clustered columns have been reconstructed and some reconstruction of the gate tower and porch has also been found necessary to preserve what remained. A close examination will distinguish the reconstructed work from the old.

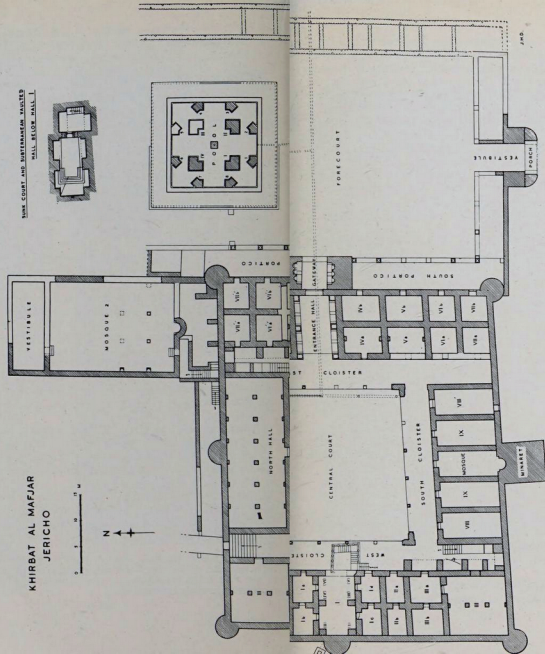


FIG. 8. PLAN OF THE EXCAVATED AREA.

The wide passage with benches inside the door was originally vaulted in brick. Fragments of the vaulting can be seen in Room IVa. Brick has never been used as a vaulting material by the native builders of Palestine or Syria, since stone is abundant; but it is universal in Mesopotamia. It is therefore likely that there were master-builders from Iraq amongst the craftsmen employed on the construction of the palace. The walls of this passage, including the clustered columns on either side, were encased in elaborately carved stucco. Fragments of these are to be seen in the Museum in Jerusalem (Figs. 2, 9-14).

Central Court. In planning the palace as a series of rooms round a square court, the builders followed the traditional arrangement of a Roman or Byzantine frontier fort. They even kept the round towers protecting the sides and corners—but with no thought of their military function.

The court was surrounded by arcaded walks or cloisters in two storeys. The columns supporting the arches lie where they fell; crosses carved on some of them show that they were borrowed from a Christian building, probably one of the ruined churches of Jericho. Between the columns of the first floor there was a balustrade of carved plaster, fragments of which may be seen in the Museum in Jerusalem (Fig. 15).

Since all the rooms on the ground floor communicate more or less directly with the court, it is unlikely that any of them was intended for the domestic use of the Caliph or his family. Probably the private apartments were on the first floor, to which access was provided by staircases in the north-east and south-west corners. The ground floor would then have served for social or ceremonial purposes.

In the middle of the south side there is a room with a niche, which was presumably intended as a mosque for the personal use of the Caliph. Against it on the outside is a massive square tower suggesting the base of a minaret.

Across the court, the whole north side is taken up by a great rectangular room, with a line of piers down the middle and along each of the two sides; perhaps this was a banqueting hall.

In the west side, opposite the gate, is another important room, which may have been designed as an audience hall or for some other official purpose. Like the entrance passage, it was covered with a brick vault. Two smaller rooms on each side connect with it and with the west cloister.

The circular stone window that faces you across the court as you enter has been reconstructed from stones found fallen in the little



FIG. 10 SEMI-NUDE FEMALE CARRYING FLOWERS (CARVED PLASTER).

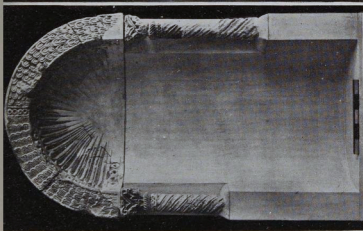


FIG. 9. NICHE (CARVED PLASTER).



FIG. 11. HELMETED WARRIOR
(CARVED PLASTER).



FIG. 12. BRIDLED HORSE
(CARVED PLASTER).



FIG. 13. BEARDED HEAD
(CARVED PLASTER).



FIG. 14. SEATED FIGURE
(CARVED PLASTER).

sunk court in the middle of the west cloister. It must have belonged to the room over the audience hall.

Subterranean Bathing Hall. Near the middle of the west cloister a flight of steps leads down to an area paved with mosaics and giving

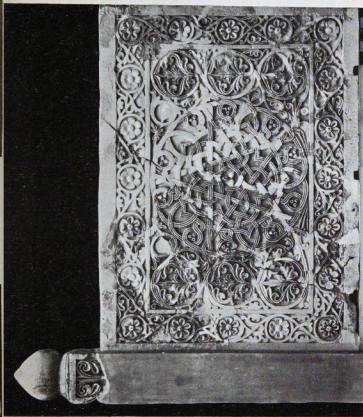


FIG. 15. CARVED PLASTER BALUSTRADE FROM CLOISTERS OVERLOOKING
THE CENTRAL COURT.

access to a subterranean vault. The key of this is kept by the Guard. The internal arrangements of the vault—with a pipe opening high up in the far wall; a water-proofed partition at the far end and water-proofing on the vault and walls beyond it; benches at the sides and a system of outlets for water in the floor—all indicate



FIG. 16. MOSAIC PAVEMENT IN ONE OF THE ROOMS OF THE BATH.

that it was used in some way for bathing. There is a deep drainage tunnel leading away from the vault on the west side which could be cleaned by means of masonry shafts, of which three have been discovered and cleared outside the palace.

The edges of the stair-well were protected by a balustrade composed of stone panels held by grooves in a narrow plinth and in the sides of onion-topped posts. The stone of which these are made (like that of the flagstones in the court) is a soft limestone containing bitumen; it disintegrates on exposure very easily. Being found near the shrine of Nabi Musa it is commonly known as "Nabi Musa stone." The balustrade is precisely similar to the screens which often separate the chancel from the nave in Byzantine churches.

Mosque. The door at the head of a shallow flight of steps in the north-west corner of the building opens on to a paved corridor or passage (not yet completely excavated) which led to the baths north of the palace. To the right, the space between the two buildings is occupied by an external staircase and the remains of a mosque. This had the form characteristic of the earliest known mosques, that is a rectangular enclosure open to the sky except for a roofed space at the south end which sheltered the *mihrab* and a small area in front of it. The stairs behind the mosque lead up to the roof of the palace carried on arches. They also provide a direct means of access from the palace to the mosque; the Caliph could thus enter by his private door, of which the sill remains beside the *mihrab*.

Pool. This was the principal feature of the forecourt. It consisted of a square tank or pool, about a metre deep, sheltered by a ponderously built but lavishly decorated octagonal pavilion. Water was supplied to the pool by a fountain in the centre, and could be drained away by an escape in the middle of the south side. Directly above the fountain was a dome carried by four arches on massive L-shaped piers. The foundations of the piers, protected from the water by a casing of bricks and plaster, can be seen in the middle of the pool; one of them has been partly reconstructed. The arches were decorated on the outer face with deeply carved "wind-blown" acanthus leaves, painted red and yellow. The under side or soffit was plastered and painted to look like marble and porphyry.

The rest of the pool was covered by an open octagonal structure the roof of which rested on eight arches. The piers carrying them stood in the water, and were built against the sides of the basin. One of these piers has also been partly reconstructed.

The fallen stones found in and around the pool raise many unsolved problems as to the appearance of this unusual building. A balustrade of carved stones ran round the roof of the octagon.

The development of the ornamental pool or fountain is chiefly associated with the Persians; but it has always appealed to the taste, as it has suited the climate, of other eastern countries. This is the first example of its kind discovered in Palestine, and indeed the only one known of this period.

The Baths. The paved passage mentioned above leads into the baths attached to the palace. The excavation of these was started two years ago and is still in progress. It is too soon to give a detailed description, but a few general remarks may be useful. The baths are built on a square plan with three semicircular exedrae or recesses on each of the north, south, and west sides. The east side

has not yet been excavated. The internal arrangements resemble those of the underground vault described above.

The pool, which occupies a small area at the south side, is enclosed by a waterproofed barrier reached by steps from the main floor of the building; the inside of the pool is encased in bricks and plastered like the walls of the underground bath. The main floor where seen is paved with coloured mosaics, now covered for safety. The roof appears to have been carried on arches supported by massive piers.

In the north-west corner there is a room to which the Caliph could retire after bathing. The farther part is occupied by a semi-circular alcove, while the forepart consists of a square room with seats along the sides. The alcove is paved with a pleasant mosaic pattern depicting a tree, with two gazelles grazing on the left, and a lion ravaging a third gazelle on the right (Fig. 16).

The square room is paved with mosaics in imitation of a Persian rug with a tassel at each corner.

The walls of the room as well as the ceiling were decorated with carved plaster; some of this remains on the walls, but the bulk was found in fragments mixed with the earth and stones and has been sent to the Museum in Jerusalem for re-assembly and study. So far it has been ascertained that the alcove was roofed by a semidome, and the square forepart by a dome of brickwork. The room was lit by pierced gypsum plaster windows in the drum supporting the dome.

It was found necessary for the preservation of the mosaics to rebuild the walls of the room to some extent and put up a temporary roof. The key of this room is kept by the Guard. Visitors are asked not to step on the mosaics but keep to the rug provided for this purpose.

Some leading dates in the history of the Near East.

A.D.	
335 (c.)	Church of the Holy Sepulchre built by the Emperor Constantine.
531 (c.)	Church of the Nativity rebuilt by Justinian.
614	Jerusalem sacked by the Persians.
638	Jerusalem taken by the Moslems.
691	Dome of the Rock built by the Caliph Abd al Malik b. Marwan.
724-743	Hisham b. Abd al Malik Caliph in Damascus.
747	Violent earthquake in Palestine and Syria.
750	Abbasid Caliphs in Baghdad succeed Umayyad Dynasty in Damascus.
1099	Capture of Jerusalem by First Crusade.
1187	Crusaders defeated by Saladin at Hattin.